

# ERASING EMBARRASSMENT

People with social phobia fear embarrassment and negative evaluations by others. Among children, 10% to 15% are shy, and 8% to 11% of adults develop social phobia, which usually begins in mid- to late-adolescence.<sup>1</sup>

Rating Social Phobia			
Directions: For a quick check of whether or not you have social phobia, rate how often or intensely you experience any of the following fears on a scale of 0–10, with 10 the most intense fear.			
Fear of	Fear of Being Seen	Fear of	Fear of Being
— Shame	— Choking on food	— Appearing foolish	— Inept
— Ridicule	— Using poor etiquette	— Voice sounding funny	— Inferior
— Rejection	— Spilling something	— Forgetting an answer	— Unappealing
— Criticism	— Shaking, sweating, or blushing	— Not knowing an answer or knowing what to say	— Humiliated
— Disapproval			— Embarrassed

## CAUSES AND CURES FOR SOCIAL PHOBIA

Shyness may be an inherited trait. Studies suggest that genetics account for 22% to 50% of social anxiety. People may have this problem due to worrisome thoughts about how they are being perceived or physical factors: extra blood vessels under the skin (causing blushing) or low levels of the calming or excitement-seeking neurotransmitters (GABA and dopamine). Early identification and treatment of social anxiety is important because it can eventually provoke alcohol abuse, depression, panic disorder, eating disorders, or avoidant personalities. There are several powerful ways to modify it, including taking medications that help reduce any physical causes:

- Beta-blockers, used in the 1960s to reduce high blood pressure, are effective in reducing heart palpitations and shaky hands that can interfere with performance. They are less effective when taken regularly or in less intense social situations.
- Antidepressants that increase the flow of serotonin improve social phobia in 50% to 75% of cases. It may take 8–12 weeks to achieve the full benefit, and gains may be lost if medication is discontinued. Mild side effects may occur initially.
- Tranquilizers such as Valium and Xanax can reduce social jitters for 78% of people. They work in 15 minutes to reduce anxiety, but they can cause drowsiness, forgetfulness, and dependency, and aggravate depression in some cases.

Choose helpful beliefs and dare to take action that changes false thinking:

- “Physical symptoms will . . . cause panic vs. decrease the longer I stay.” Dare to wait 15 minutes before leaving or try making symptoms worse.
- “Everyone is . . . staring at me vs. paying little attention to me.” Dare to look around and make a survey of how many people notice you.
- “If I make a mistake, people will think . . . I’m stupid vs. I’m human.” Dare to intentionally be foolish—ask where the lettuce is in a hardware store.
- “If I shake, sweat, or blush, people will . . . think I’m pathetic vs. be compassionate.” Dare to tell people you shake when you’re nervous and watch their reaction.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics come from *Social Phobia* by David Katzelnick and James Jefferson (Dean Foundation, 1997) and *The Hidden Face of Shyness* by Franklin Schneier and Lawrence Welkowitz (Avon Books, 1996), [www.shyness.com](http://www.shyness.com).

- “If I talk to someone . . . I won’t know what to say vs. questions and comments will naturally come to me.” Dare to ask “nosy” questions to start conversations.

Avoid avoidance to reduce or eliminate social phobia permanently:

- Change body chemistry by exposing yourself to fearful situations. This gives the neurotransmitter that reduces fear reactions (GABA) a chance to build potency.
- Expose yourself to situations you moderately avoid. Pick daily goals and wait for anxiety to lessen. Repeat tasks to neutralize fear and face other tough situations until you can tackle your worst problem. Use positive thoughts (above) during practice.
- Develop hierarchies for difficult tasks. Prepare a speech on shyness. Practice it with a tape recorder, close friends, first-graders, and in your imagination, and then give it.

<b>Rating Avoidance</b>		
<b>Directions:</b> Mark situations you avoid and rate the degree to which you dodge them with people you know and don’t know on a 0–10 scale: 0 (none) or 10 (complete) avoidance.		
<b>Avoidance Situations</b>	<b>Degree Avoided with People</b>	
	<b>I Know Well</b>	<b>I Don’t Know</b>
<b>Occupational or educational activities</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Working while being observed	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Asking or answering questions at classes or meetings	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Attending or speaking up at meetings	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Taking a test or giving an oral report or speech	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking to teacher, boss, or other authority figure	—	—
<b>Interaction</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Asking for information or directions	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Calling someone on the phone	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Leaving messages on answering machines or e-mail	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Meeting people and introducing myself	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking to people of the same sex	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Talking to people of the opposite sex	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Making eye contact	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Expressing disagreement or disapproval	—	—
<b>Social situations</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> Small or large gatherings	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Going out for drinks	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Going to or giving a party	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Asking someone for a date	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Kissing or making sexual contact	—	—
<b>Public scrutiny</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/> People noticing acne, cerebral palsy or other condition	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Making telephone calls	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Eating or writing with others around	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Using a public restroom	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Entering a room when others are already seated	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Being the center of attention	—	—
<input type="checkbox"/> Giving a performance	—	—