



Pergamon

Anxiety Disorders
15 (2001) 203–215

JOURNAL
OF
**Anxiety
Disorders**

Social anxiety in college students

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Received 7 October 1998; accepted 14 June 1999

Abstract

Individuals with social phobia often hold erroneous beliefs about the extent to which others experience symptoms of social anxiety and the ways in which others evaluate people who appear to be anxious. The purpose of this study was to: (a) provide normative data on the frequency with which individuals in a nonclinical sample experience particular symptoms of social anxiety (e.g., sweating, shaking, etc.); (b) to examine how the perception of anxiety in others influences participants' immediate impressions of various personal characteristics (e.g., intelligence, attractiveness, etc); and, (c) investigate the relationship between social anxiety and perceptions regarding others who appear to be anxious. Eighty-one undergraduate students completed self-report measures of social anxiety and social desirability, and then rated the degree to which their impressions of various personal characteristics were influenced when another individual was perceived to be anxious. Results suggested that the vast majority of individuals experience symptoms of anxiety in social situations from time to time. In addition, individuals who themselves reported elevated social anxiety were more likely than individuals less socially anxious to judge others who appear anxious to have less strength of character and to be less attractive and more compassionate compared to others who do not appear anxious. Clinical implications of these results are discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social anxiety; Anxiety symptoms; Social phobia

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0887-6185/01/\$ – see front matter © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

PII: S0887-6185(01)00059-7

1. Introduction

Social phobia is an anxiety disorder that is characterized by the strong desire to make a favorable impression of oneself on others, in conjunction with a marked insecurity about one's ability to do so. Individuals with social phobia avoid situations in which there is potential for negative evaluation by others, or endure such situations with great anxiety and distress (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). According to cognitive-behavioral models of social phobia, social anxiety is maintained by excessively high standards for social performance (e.g., "I must not let anyone see I am anxious"), a tendency to assume that others view oneself as inadequate (e.g., boring, peculiar, unattractive, etc.), and a tendency to assume that others' beliefs about oneself are true (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). As a result of these beliefs and assumptions, individuals with social phobia tend to: (1) report a high frequency of negative self-statements, (2) negatively evaluate the quality of their social performance, (3) notice what went wrong in a social interaction rather than what went right, (4) be preoccupied with how others are evaluating them, and (5) engage in excessive self-monitoring of their presentation to others, including attention to physiological symptoms of their anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Mattick, Page, & Lampe, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Scholing, Emmelkamp, & van Oppen, 1996; Wells, 1997). According to Clark and Wells (1995) individuals with social phobia also tend to rely on internal "feeling states" as a means of judging whether or not a social interaction is going well. That is, such individuals tend to assume that if they feel anxious in a social situation, it is because they are not performing well. Nonphobic individuals, on the other hand, will often test their interpretation of a social situation by various strategies, such as seeking out further eye contact to determine if another is genuinely uninterested in what they are saying, for example, and are thus able to appraise their performance more realistically.

Socially anxious individuals, then, tend to construct highly negative images of their performance in social situations which contribute substantially to anticipatory anxiety as well as negative postevent processing (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Wells, 1997). This anxiety results in the use of safety-seeking behaviors in social situations (e.g., mentally practicing what one is going to say next in a conversation, wearing high collared sweaters to mask signs of blushing, gripping a glass tightly with one hand to avoid spilling) that can actually cause or exaggerate the feared symptoms (e.g., planning one's next sentence makes it hard to keep up with the conversation itself, wearing sweaters makes one hot thereby increasing flushing, a tight grip can actually increase tremor). In combination with information processing biases in evaluating social performance, such behaviors prevent learning of new information about the consequences of the feared event (e.g., spilling something does not result in widespread social rejection). At the same time, concern about the importance of not showing anxiety results in excessive monitoring of bodily sensations, and

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