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The Internet: home to a severe population of individuals with social anxiety disorder?☆

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Abstract

The current study sought to understand better the psychological characteristics of socially anxious individuals who seek information on the internet about social anxiety disorder and its treatment. Participants were 434 individuals who responded to an internet-based survey linked to the website of an anxiety specialty clinic. Using established cut-off scores, 92% of the sample met criteria for social anxiety disorder. Internet survey respondents who met these criteria reported greater severity of and impairment due to social anxiety than a treatment-seeking sample of persons with social anxiety disorder. Nevertheless, only about one-third of these internet respondents reported having received psychotherapy, and a similar percentage reported having received pharmacotherapy. Those with the most severe social interaction anxiety and who spent the most time interacting on the internet endorsed positive effects of internet use. However, a significant number of negative effects also were endorsed.
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Contemporary cognitive-behavioral models of social anxiety disorder (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) propose that, in the presence of others, affected individuals form negatively biased thoughts and images about their appearance (e.g., overestimate visibility of anxiety symptoms, exaggerate physical flaws) and behavior (e.g., overestimate speech dysfluencies, demean contributions to conversations). These thoughts and images lead individuals with social anxiety disorder to judge negative evaluation from others to be highly likely. Individuals with social anxiety disorder often resolve the conflict between their need for social contact and their desire to avoid painful feelings they anticipate from interpersonal interactions in favor of avoidance and social isolation. Not surprisingly, individuals with social anxiety disorder describe their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners as impaired (Schneier et al., 1994; Turner, Beidel, Dancu, & Keys, 1986; Whisman, Sheldon, & Goering, 2000). For socially anxious individuals, communicating with others on the internet in a text-based manner (i.e., email, chat rooms, instant messaging) may allow them to avoid aspects of social situations they fear (e.g., blushing, stammering, others' reactions to perceived physical or social shortcomings) while at the same time to partially meet their needs for interpersonal contact and relationships.

In the last 10 years, the internet has become increasingly accessible to a sizable proportion of U.S. households. As of March 2003, there were approximately 649 million people globally and 173 million people in the United States with internet access (Global Reach, 2003). The advantages of internet communication are many, such as access to a wider network of people with similar interests or concerns and increased ability to stay in touch with geographically distant friends and family. In one study that demonstrates the potential benefit of internet communication, Cummings, Sproull, and Kiesler (2002) examined participants of a discussion group for individuals with hearing loss. Individuals with less real-world support participated more actively in the discussion group, and active participation was associated with greater reported benefits derived from the group. Additionally, participants who reported having a family member or friend participate in the discussion group, thus integrating face-to-face and online support networks, reported deriving even greater benefits from the discussion group.

Although positive correlates of internet use are numerous, awareness of potential disadvantages of internet communication is growing. Kraut and colleagues (1998) examined the effect of internet usage on 169 individuals in 73 households during their first 1–2 years online. From pre-internet access to post-internet access, greater use of the internet was associated with declines in family communication, decreases in the size of participants' local and distant social circles, and increases in depression and loneliness. Kraut and colleagues speculated that, although most internet usage is devoted to active social communication, internet usage actually might reduce face-to-face contact, such that weaker social relationships supplant stronger ones. A 3-year follow-up study, however, found that these negative effects of internet usage had dissipated (Kraut et al., 2002).

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