

Social & Evaluation Anxiety

One of the core fears in social anxiety is being evaluated by others. This can cause people to avoid being seen in public, especially in situations where they may stand out or make mistakes. The mind gets flooded with thoughts of every possible negative thing that others could see in us, making it difficult to even think straight in social situations.

The fear of evaluation is so intense that one psychotherapist refers to the problem as *Evaluation Anxiety*, as described below:

“A person entering a socially threatening situation is like someone walking a tightrope. They feel vulnerable to a serious mishap if their performance is not adequate. For safety’s sake, they must conform to a rigid set of rules regarding appropriate actions and movements. The greater their confidence in their skills the less likely it is that they will make a potentially fatal misstep. Their performance may be sabotaged by primitive reflex reactions: their body may freeze, their muscles may shut down, and shakiness, sweats and dry mouth may overcome them.

Smooth performance reaffirms their self-image and maintains status. Failure would shatter this image. Finally, every action is observed by a crowd of evaluators and appraised as clumsy or skillful, and they are judged according to their confidence and competence.

As in the case of the tightrope walker, errors, awkward silence or inappropriate actions feel as though they have fatal consequences – in the case of social anxiety such missteps can result in damage to the whole self – or so they fear.”

—Adapted from Aaron Beck, M.D., *Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective*



Public Speaking is the #1 fear in America

Treatment

While medication can help social anxiety, therapy is often more effective and brings about more lasting changes. Good therapy for social anxiety helps people build skills and experience with social encounters. This is hard work, but it pays off: research has found that such skill-building brings about real changes in the brain.

Sometimes anxiety around other people is due to another cause, such as depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress, panic, autism and paranoia. In those cases it is always best to address the underlying cause first.

Read more about social anxiety at: www.anxieties.com.

—Chris Aiken, M.D., 11/13/2014