

# Ask Dr. K®: Writings For Your Mental Health

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## SOCIAL ANXIETY

Dear Dr. K.,

I have just started college and have found out that I must take a public speaking class. I get paralyzed with fear just thinking about it. Is there anything I can do?

P.M.S., Miami

Dear P.,

I think you would believe this. Someone did a survey on people's fears and found out that they were more afraid of speaking in public than dying.

It is true that most of us would rather blend in than be the center of attention and risk making ourselves look foolish. Anything from public speaking, as in your case, to simply coming late to a movie and be looked at can bring horror to folks.

As with anything in psychiatry, and medicine in general, if a problem impacts on your life and happiness, it becomes something that needs to be addressed and eliminated. This is true of being anxious out in public. There are various degrees of it and it depends on how much it impacts on your life as to what has to be done. People can go through life being shy, for example, it just depends on how shy.

Social anxiety is a severe and persistent fear of social or performance situations where embarrassment can occur. In psychiatry, this only becomes an issue if the dread of the situation interferes significantly with someone's daily routine, occupation or social life. So, if your public speaking class is a requirement for you and you avoid it and cannot get your degree, I would consider that a 'significant' problem. Someone who has the option of taking that kind of course and decides not to because of anxiety does not get the diagnosis. There are many people who are shy. That does not make a problem. Staying at home through your teens and never dating out of a fear of being embarrassed and becoming a recluse is a problem.

Some people avoid going out to eat for fear of getting ketchup on their shirt. They imagine the whole restaurant pointing at them and laughing. So they stay home. This is a problem. Sometime people with this problem do go out, but they are filled with dread for the entire time. They usually have severe anxiety even anticipating the event. It gets really bad when people are nervous ahead (anticipatory anxiety) and then behave badly because they are so nervous. That becomes a vicious cycle.

Social anxiety can become crippling. It can curse someone to a lonely life restricted due to the fear. A person may not develop social skills in his or her teens because of avoiding people. Imagine a life without conversations with others, without having a group of friends or being unable to speak with anyone in authority (like going to the post office or asking a policeman for directions). You are

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hypersensitive to criticism and think badly of yourself. You not only fear rejection but expect it. People with social anxiety often underachieve in school due to test anxiety or avoidance of classroom participation. They may then underachieve at work because they fear talking in groups, in meetings, with colleagues or with their bosses. They may not even get work for fears of the interview. They can be unemployed, alone, living at home and disabled because of how this problem evolves.

Social anxiety frequently runs in families. Generally, women are affected more than men. The problem often is present in young children. They may appear very shy and timid with non-family members, be very clingy, refuse to take part in games with other children and generally stay on the periphery in social activities. Once this starts happening, the child stays suspended in an isolated world that only gets worse because he or she never overcomes the terror of dealing with others. Every situation is imagined as one in which you will be judged and found wanting. So it is best to avoid these situations.

Part of social anxiety is what has been termed "performance" anxiety. This includes not only public speaking but eating, drinking or writing in public or things like using a public restroom. "Stage fright" is also included here with many professional performers plagued with this problem that may threaten their careers.

To answer your question about what you can do, it all depends on how severe your anxiety is. Paralyzing fear sounds pretty severe.

There are a number of non-medical treatments including behavioral modification relaxation techniques or imagery (that is picturing yourself somewhere else). There are a few groups that help people learn how to speak in public. These include "Toastmasters" and the Dale Carnegie courses. We psychiatrists also have used medication to lessen the pronounced anxiety. Zoloft and Paxil have been approved for use but it seems that most of the medications in that family can be helpful (Celexa, Lexapro, Prozac). Some performers use, as needed, anti-anxiety medicines like Xanax or Ativan or Inderal (a medicine more used for high blood pressure) for the more rapid effect. I want to keep stressing in these columns that people do not have to live missing out on the joys of life because of fear, depression or other emotional problems. There is help available.

Dr. K.

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