Social phobia

What is social phobia?
Social phobia is an abnormal fear of social gatherings where the affected person feels anxious about being subject to public scrutiny.
It is sometimes referred to as social anxiety disorder and it is much more than shyness. It can vary from a predictable fear of a new social experience to an extremely morbid fear that significantly affects a person’s life. The basic fear is that of being regarded unfavourably by others and feeling embarrassed or humiliated.

How common is it and who gets it?
It is the most common of the anxiety disorders. Studies indicate about one in seven people have social phobia at some time in their lives. Anyone can develop it. It is usual to have an early age of onset. Almost 100% of eventual sufferers develop it by the age of 20 and many of these by age 10.

What are typical situations?
- Speaking engagements.
- Meeting people, especially for the first time.
- Dealing with authority figures or professionals.
- Sitting for examinations.
- Dating.
- Eating and drinking in public.
- Negotiating with others.
- Staff meetings.
- Using public toilets.
- Writing while being watched.
- Receiving visitors.
- Entering a room where others are seated.

A common factor in these situations is that people feel they are in the “limelight” and are being judged by others.

What is the cause of social phobia?
We often hear the term “an adrenaline rush” when people in a stressful or exciting situation describe how they experienced adrenaline pumping around the body. This can be a normal response and be used to advantage such as in a sporting event. It indicates the brain and other parts of the CNS are responding to such stimuli. We call it sympathetic activity because it involves the sympathetic component of the autonomic nervous system.

In people with social phobia there is sympathetic overactivity as the responsible chemicals, particularly adrenaline and serotonin, are released in large amounts. The person cannot be blamed because the body goes into “automatic” mode as a conditioned response.

What are the symptoms?
- Palpitations.
- Sweating.
- Tremor or trembling.
- Hot and cold flushes.
- Light-headedness.
- “Butterflies” in the stomach.
- Nausea.
- “Lump in throat” or difficulty swallowing.
- Diarrhoea.
- Muscle tension or aching.
- Tension headache.
- Restlessness.

What is the outcome?
The symptoms can interfere with a person’s life and make them miserable. A panic attack can occur. When a person experiences these symptoms it tends to affect their self-image. This response aggravates the problem so a vicious cycle develops.
Serious consequences include relationship breakdown, depression, substance abuse and loss of employment opportunities.

What is the treatment?
Self-help is difficult because the phobia does not usually go away on its own. Some people may be able to cope by avoiding stressful social situations but this does not solve the basic problem.
Professional help should be sought. This includes counselling techniques and medications which can be used separately or in combination.

Counselling
The main psychological technique used is cognitive behaviour therapy. Cognitions are thoughts, beliefs or perceptions and cognitive therapy involves the process of knowing or identifying, understanding, or having insight into these thought processes.

The thought processes in social phobia reinforce the belief that people are watching and judging you. The techniques try to identify and break these patterns and help you feel more comfortable with other people.

The therapy then aims to help you change your behaviour, gradually face up to social situations and find them less threatening.

Other techniques may include relaxation techniques and group therapy.

Medication
Sometimes your doctor will prescribe medication to treat social phobia, especially if anxiety and depression are involved.

Social phobia with performance anxiety
A beta-blocking agent taken 30-60 minutes before the social event or performance can be beneficial. Check with your doctor before taking them but remember they are not permitted in some competitive sporting events.