

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AS A YOUTH LEADER SOCIAL ANXIETY

What is social anxiety?

Social anxiety (or social anxiety disorder) is a type of anxiety disorder that causes people extreme fear of social settings. People with this disorder have a fear of social situations where they feel they are being scrutinized and judged by others or are the centre of attention with all eyes upon them. They have a deep fear of being humiliated in public.

It can impact their life in many situations including stopping them going out with friends and meeting new people, talking to strangers, going to interviews, speaking in public, talking on the phone or even using public toilets.

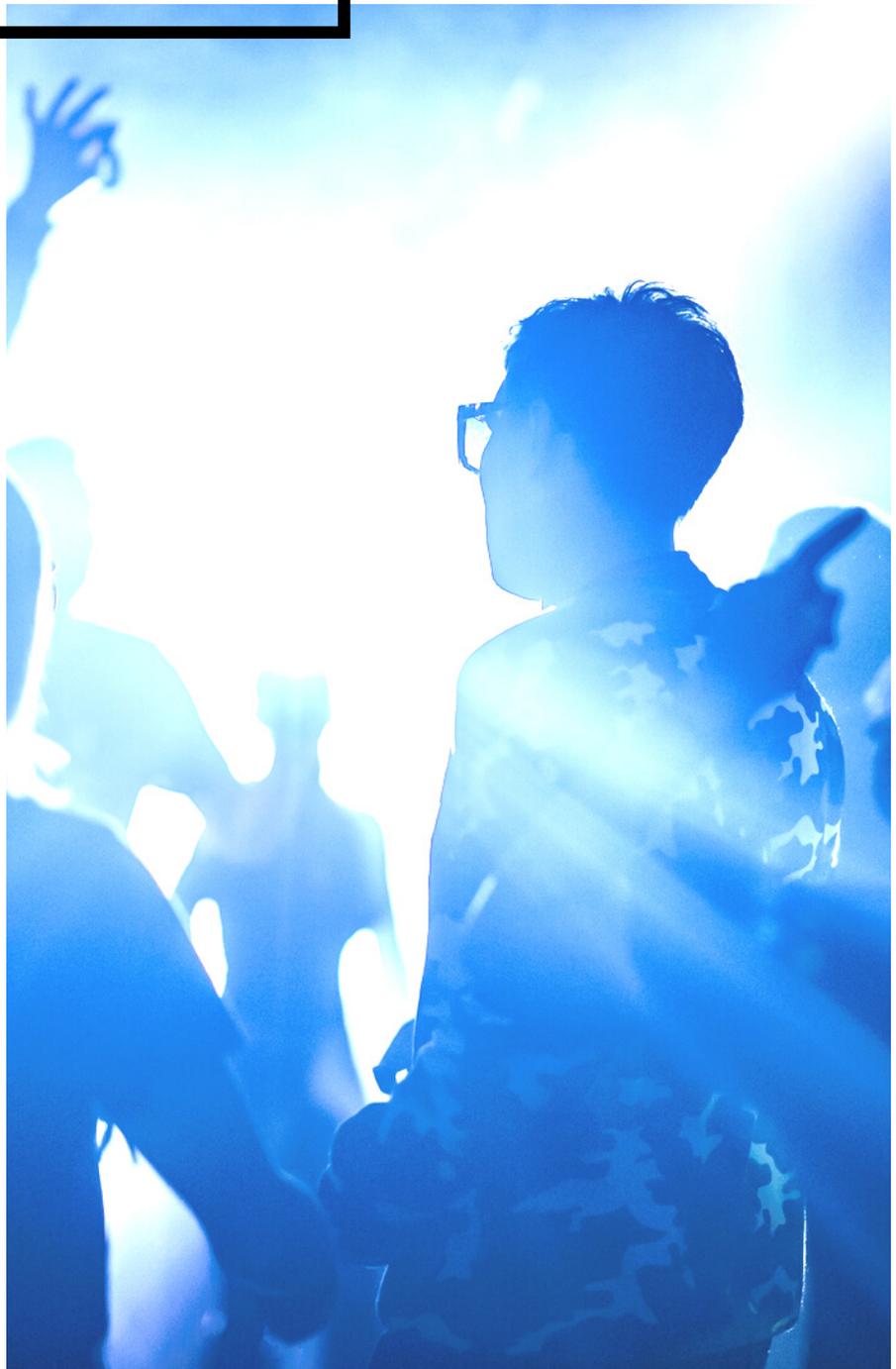
Social anxiety is more than just being shy. Shyness is usually short-term whereas social anxiety is persistent and life changing for young people as it can prevent them from attending school or developing close relationships.

What are the physical symptoms?

- Excessive sweating and blushing
- Nausea (feeling sick)
- Trembling or shaking
- Difficulty speaking
- Dizziness and or feeling like you will faint
- Racing heart

What are the psychological symptoms?

- Excessive worry ahead of social situations
- Fear of embarrassing yourself
- Avoiding school or other events
- Spending weeks worrying ahead of an event
- Needing alcohol to face a social situation



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How to help- immediate

If you're concerned that a young person you know is struggling with social anxiety that is preventing them living a normal life then the best place to start is to encourage them to see some help from their GP. There is no test as such but a diagnosis will be made on their patterns of behaviour and the duration of their anxiety. There's lots of ways you can practically support them as a youth leader, but the first step is to get some professional advice. There are then various options of treatment available depending on the needs of the person, a GP can refer into these.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be really helpful in changing the patterns of thought around facing social situations- it helps to change negative thoughts with positive ones and teaches some really practical skills around breathing to lower anxiety levels and reduce some of the physical symptoms.

Exposure therapy gradually helps to face social situations again rather than completely avoiding them. It gives a person the skills they need to slowly attempt entering onto situations that they were unable to before.

Group therapy is another really helpful treatment for social anxiety as it helps build skills around interacting with others in social settings.

How to help- longer term

As a youth leader you can support a young person by encouraging them to look after themselves and introduce the following ideas into their lifestyle.

Be aware- Group scenarios will potentially be daunting for this young person, so think through activities that you run to see if there are any changes you can make that would help them still feel part of the wider group as and when they felt able.

Stay in contact even if they have had to step away from the main sessions at this time, just a text or a card can make such a huge difference in making someone feel valued and this will in turn help their self-esteem.

Food and drink- Trying to avoid caffeine, chocolate and fizzy drinks is recommended as these are all stimulants that can increase anxiety levels

Getting plenty of sleep- Try and encourage them to prioritise sleep as lack of sleep can raise anxiety levels and increase symptoms of social phobia. Perhaps you could support the young person in getting a good bedtime routine in place and finding things that really relax them.