

## Social anxiety and lack of assertiveness

People with social anxiety disorder feel nervous or tense in situations involving other people. Social anxiety is a totally normal feeling. More than 90% of people occasionally feel uncomfortable or nervous in the company of others, it only becomes a social anxiety disorder if it starts to dominate normal life. It is the most common anxiety disorder, affecting approximately 10% of the population at some time in their lives.

Social anxiety is defined as a persistent fear of being judged negatively (fear of failure) by other people in situations in which you have to operate socially, such as project groups, parties, paying at the checkout, conversations with people you do not yet know very well, etc. The fear of a negative judgement may relate to behaviour (e.g. they think I'm clumsy, stupid, weird or boring), certain physical responses (e.g. they can see me blushing or trembling), external appearance (e.g. they find me unattractive or abnormal) or self-image (e.g. they don't like me). All of these can cause embarrassment or a lack of assertiveness. As a result, you may be less likely or unwilling to stand up for yourself despite your better judgement, agree to things that you would prefer not to do, or be unable to set proper boundaries, etc.

It appears that the degree of perceived clarity with regard to expectations and rules of social interaction determine the extent to which behavioural or other problems ultimately develop. Such problems may include difficulty in expressing yourself, blushing, trembling, nerves, negative thoughts or a lack of assertiveness (e.g. inability to stand up for yourself, to set boundaries or even avoiding situations). The clearer the expectations are (e.g. for a presentation), the less likely problems are to emerge. If expectations and social rules are vague or unclear (e.g. in an introductory meeting), people with social anxiety may experience more problems. A series of studies has shown that people with social anxiety are actually judged more negatively by other people after a few minutes of social interaction than those who do not suffer from social anxiety disorder. This increases the likelihood of rejection, leading to a vicious circle that sustains the problem.

### QuickScan

- Do you prefer to avoid social situations?
- Do you find it difficult or scary expressing your opinion?
- Are you scared of failing in your own eyes or those of others?
- Are you often nervous or tense in situations with other people?
- Are you often excessively jovial in other people's company?
- Are you scared that other people will think you are stupid, weird or boring?
- Do you value yourself less than other people?

### Approach

#### What can you do yourself?

If you wish to address these problems, the solution seems to be to focus on the vague, superficial, friendly conversations that often take place at the checkout, the coffee machine, with neighbours, in the lecture room, etc. Learning to deal with these uncertain situations is seen as the most powerful technique in combating social anxiety.

#### What can we do for you?

We offer both individual consultation and courses (e.g. Assertion). We can also help you look for a suitable treatment outside of TU Delft. Visit <http://psychologists.tudelft.nl>.

### More information

- <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/shynesssocialphobia.asp>