DRUM (English)
22 Nov 2012, p.48

OVERCOMING SOCIAL PHOBIA

Crippling anxiety is a sign you need professional help

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VUSI Tshabalala* is a self-confessed "social phobe" who has felt anxious for most of his life. As a result he often avoids social events or finds himself the worker bee instead of the social butterfly.

"I'm happiest interacting with people while doing something so I'm the one who washes dishes at parties, while others chatter and mingle," he explains. "I clear the plates, offer to serve food and generally help where I can.

"I feel least comfortable sitting across the table from someone I don't know well. I often duck out of functions, parties and dinner dates for a calming breather, just to keep my anxiety at bay."

For Palesa Motaung* it's even more severe. She's unemployed as she can't deal with the stress of going for interviews.

"I am overcome with fear during interviews and when meeting and interacting with people," she says. "As a result I can't keep a permanent job. I went through six temporary jobs last year."

IF THOUGHTS of social get-togethers, being introduced to strangers or being judged and evaluated by others fills you with dread and anxiety, you could be suffering from social phobia, also known as Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD).

There's a difference between shyness and social phobia, says Pretoria-based clinical psychologist Suzette Heath.

"With normal shyness you can get on with your life, but when it gets so bad it affects your interactions with people, your work and other interests it becomes a phobia," she says.

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent phobia in the country, according to a study conducted from 2002 to 2004 – and SAD is the most common of them all.

People living with the disorder are seen as shy, withdrawn, inhibited, unfriendly, nervous and aloof. Yet, deep down, socially anxious people want to belong. They want to engage socially but fear and anxiety prevents them from connecting with others. Therapy is often essential to overcome these feelings.

The key to overcoming social phobia is to recognise negative thoughts, question whether they reflect the truth and replace them with positive ones – this can ultimately help change your behaviour.

See the box below for some practical tips to try out in social settings.

* Not their real names

THINGS YOU MAY FEAR

If you suffer from social phobia, these situations may fill you with dread:

* Being introduced to other people
* Being teased or criticised
* Being the centre of attention
* Being watched/observed while doing something
* Having to say something in a formal, public situation
* Meeting people in authority (important people/authority figures)
* Feeling insecure and out of place in social situations
* Being easily embarrassed (eg blushing, trembling)
* Making eye-contact with people
* Writing, talking, making phone calls in public

HOW TO COPE WHEN YOU'RE OUT

Focus on the positive. Instead of looking at what can go wrong, focus on the fact that people want to talk to you.

Don't sweat the small stuff. If you focus on making mistakes you won't be able to follow the conversation. Try and focus on one person and listen to what they're saying, nod your head from time to time and keep your comments short. You'll forget about saying the wrong thing and become absorbed in the topic.

Practise, practise, practise. It is normal to feel some anxiety when you have to speak or perform in front of others. Role playing can help you become more comfortable in a social situation.

Ask for information. Focus on what you need to know and listen to what the person is saying instead of predicting disaster.

Get out there. Look at your life: do you exercise and eat healthily? Do you have creative outlets for your energy? Try and join a church, interest or support group. That will help you get out without worrying about proving yourself.

Savour each victory. It takes lots of practise to become accomplished in social settings and you can expect setbacks. Appreciate every victory and see relapses as chances to try again.

* Call a health care provider or mental health professional if your fear affects your work and relationships.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

To speak to a counsellor call SADAG on 011-262-6396 or visit their website at www.sadag.org for more information.

Visit www.health24.com/mind/Anxiety/1284-1295.asp for more info on SAD.