Supporting employees with social anxiety

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Many of us get a bit socially nervous

For example, before meeting new people, going to an interview or speaking in public. But if someone has social anxiety, that shy feeling doesn't go away. Instead, it can lead to an intense fear of social situations. As a manager, it's important to support employees with social anxiety, so that they feel comfortable and are able to thrive in the workplace.

Click the home icon at any point in this guide to return to this page.

What is social anxiety?

Social anxiety is a type of phobia (an extreme fear that can cause significant distress). It can also be called social anxiety disorder or social phobia. Up to 15 in every 100 people are affected by social anxiety, especially women.

Social anxiety is much more than simply being shy – it can stop people doing the things they enjoy and affect their working life. They may feel like they're being judged, even though they're not. If their anxiety is very bad, it may lead to physical symptoms, problems with sleeping and panic attacks.

Someone with social anxiety may struggle with almost all social interactions, including everyday conversations or activities such as shopping. Or they may only struggle in certain situations when they're the centre of attention. They may dislike being introduced to strangers or find it hard to talk in meetings, answer the phone or eat and drink in public.

People with social anxiety may avoid seeking treatment. But there are treatments available.

Social anxiety is more common in women than men

Social Anxiety Disorder. Patient. patient.info, last updated April 2023

Recognising social anxiety

If someone in your team has social anxiety, they'll usually feel very self-conscious when they have to interact with other people.

They may:

- think everyone's watching them
- avoid direct eye-to-eye contact, especially with people they don't know
- think someone will criticise what they're doing
- be reluctant to bother people
- worry they'll seem boring, stupid, or incompetent
- find it hard to be assertive enough to do or say what they want to
- worry a lot before a meeting or event, sometimes for weeks beforehand
- analyse the situation obsessively afterwards, thinking they said something wrong or could have done something better
- smoke, have an alcoholic drink or use drugs before an event to help them cope.

Social anxiety can cause physical symptoms too, including:

- trembling
- sweating
- blushing
- a pounding heart (palpitations)
- a very dry mouth
- needing to go to the toilet a lot
- pins and needles in their fingers or toes (caused by breathing too quickly)

If your employee is worrying about their symptoms, and whether other people can notice them, this may make their social anxiety worse. Very bad anxiety can end in a panic attack, which causes sudden, intense anxiety symptoms lasting for a few minutes.

Only around half of adults with social anxiety seek the help they need

Social Anxiety Disorder. Patient. patient.info, last updated April 2023.

What causes social anxiety?

No one knows exactly why some people have social anxiety, although it can run in families. People with social anxiety tend to have high standards for their behaviour in public. Shyness is normal in childhood, but people may never grow out of it and develop social anxiety. They may have had a stammer too. People with social anxiety may have had traumatic event in childhood such as bullying and abuse.

Others may be able to pinpoint exactly when their social anxiety started. For example, when they moved to a new school, felt embarrassed during a public performance, or were being teased. Some people with social anxiety may have other anxiety disorders or depression as well.

Social anxiety in the workplace

Employees with social anxiety may be able to mix and socialise with people they know, but they may find it much harder to socialise with strangers. So there are some work situations that can make social anxiety worse, such as leading meetings or meeting new clients.

You may notice some employees:

- suddenly get very anxious and start to stammer if they have to talk or perform in front of other people
- struggle to speak in public at all
- won't ask a question in a meeting
- may not be able to sign important documents in front of witnesses
- stay quiet or hover at the edge of a group of colleagues
- don't want to talk about themselves
- avoid promotions at work
- avoid going to work social events, such as dinner and drinks, or the annual Christmas party

People with social anxiety might not know that it can be treated

Social anxiety disorder: recognition, assessment and treatment. NICE Guideline. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, last reviewed May 2024.

How can you support socially anxious employees?

As an employer, you can learn to recognise signs of social anxiety and raise awareness of this common problem. Social anxiety affects people differently, but here are some ways you can support employees and colleagues in the workplace.

Organise social skills training

It's natural for people to feel anxious in social situations. Social skills training can help employees to feel more confident and relaxed while they're interacting with other people. It focuses on simple skills we often take for granted, such as:

- how to start a conversation with a stranger
- increasing eye contact

Regular role play with other members of the team may help, too.

Communicate clearly

Some people get very anxious before a meeting or event. Good communication may help, so that they don't need to ask any questions beforehand. It may help to provide clear, concise information on the:

- timings
- agenda
- list of participants
- details of the venue, including relevant directions
- where to go when they arrive
- location of toilets and other facilities

Be understanding and empathetic

Some people with social anxiety may be prone to panic attacks if they're forced into an uncomfortable situation. So it's important not to put pressure on them. If you're holding long meetings, include regular breaks so that staff can take some time out if they need it.

Know your team

If you notice any signs of anxiety, ask your team member how they are, giving them time and space to tell you, and offer additional support. Make sure they have regular one-to-ones to identify any potential problems early on.

Signpost them to support that's on offer in the workplace. If Employee Assistance Programmes or Occupational Health Services are available, make sure these are easy to access.

If an employee's social anxiety seems to be affecting their work or daily life, encourage them to speak to their GP or speak to a counsellor. They may be referred for cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This is a type of talking therapy that is used to treat social anxiety. CBT aims to challenge your negative thought patterns and beliefs, helping you to face your fears and learn to cope.

Encourage good mental health

If your employees feel that they can talk openly, problems are less likely to build up. Encourage a supportive environment with regular training, workshops, and mental health 'champions.' Signposting and sharing useful resources with employees will help to promote a culture of good mental health in your workplace.

Ask your team member how they are

If your employees feel that they can talk openly, problems are less likely to build up.

Supporting mental health in the workplace. ACAS. acas.org.uk, last reviewed August 2024

How can you support socially anxious employees?

For more information on supporting good mental health at work, visit Bupa's
Workplace Mental Health Hub

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