

DYSTONIA & SOCIAL ANXIETY

AT A GLANCE

- Individuals with dystonia often struggle with social anxiety.
- Social anxiety can be disabling and isolating.
- Treatment is available and can dramatically improve quality of life.

Dystonia is a neurological disorder that affects the physical body, but the impact goes far deeper. The hallmark signs of dystonia are excessive, involuntary muscle contractions that cause abnormal postures and/or repetitive movements. Individuals diagnosed with dystonia also commonly experience symptoms that affect more than how the body moves.

Social anxiety disorder, sometimes called social phobia, is an intense fear of being judged or negatively evaluated in social situations. A person is concerned they will say or do something that results in embarrassment or humiliation. This anxiety can affect work, school, relationships, and daily life. Individuals with social anxiety disorder tend to avoid social situations, and when a social situation cannot be avoided, they experience significant physiological symptoms of anxiety such as increased heart rate, nausea, or hyperventilation.

Estimates suggest 7% of the general population has social anxiety disorder. For individuals with dystonia, the percentage may be up to 10 times higher.

Social Anxiety Disorder: Signs & Symptoms

When faced with situations that require interacting with other people, individuals with social anxiety disorder may:

- Flush, tremble, sweat, feel a rapid heart rate, or feel their 'mind going blank'
- Feel nauseated or sick to their stomach
- Have a rigid body posture, make little eye contact, or speak very softly
- Find it scary and difficult to be with other people, especially those they don't know
- Have a hard time talking to people even though they wish they could
- Feel very self-conscious in front of other people and feel embarrassed and awkward
- Feel very afraid that other people will judge them
- Avoid places where there are other people
- Drink too much or abuse drugs

Common Social Anxiety Triggers

Individuals with social anxiety disorder may have fearful feelings in a variety of situations. These can include:

- Meeting new people
- Going somewhere new
- Speaking on the phone
- Eating or drinking in front of other people
- Speaking to a group of people
- Talking to strangers
- Dating
- Job interviews
- Going to work, school, or appointments
- Making eye contact
- Using public restrooms

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Untangling Dystonia & Anxiety

Researchers are working to understand the complex relationship between dystonia and anxiety. In some cases, individuals develop social anxiety before the onset of dystonia. Social anxiety often begins in childhood.

Social anxiety may also develop in reaction to developing dystonia. Individuals may feel self-conscious about the appearance of their dystonia symptoms.

Individuals with dystonia may spend significant time alone, missing out on opportunities for normal social interaction at work, school, or other activities. The isolation increases if they begin to intentionally avoid situations where they anticipate feeling embarrassed or humiliated because of the disorder.

Untreated social anxiety disorder can be devastating to quality of life, even if the movement symptoms of dystonia are well controlled.

Help is Available

Evaluating for and addressing anxiety is an essential part of a comprehensive dystonia treatment plan. In most cases, treatment can dramatically reduce or eliminate social anxiety disorder symptoms, and the benefits are long lasting.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) provided by a certified professional is typically the most

effective type of psychotherapy for social anxiety disorder. CBT may be used in combination with oral medications. Relaxation techniques, such as meditation and deep-breathing exercises, can reduce physiological symptoms of anxiety.

Is it Time to Ask for Help?

It may be time to consult a mental health professional if:

- Your anxiety feels overwhelming.
- You can't do the things you need to do or like to do.
- Friends and family have expressed concern about you.
- You feel out of control of your emotions.
- You feel like you need help.

To locate a mental health professional, ask your doctor, health insurance provider, or a professional organization such as the Anxiety and Depression Association (<https://adaa.org>). Or ask for recommendations from family and friends.

Individuals who experience heart racing, shortness of breath, nausea, or sweating may consider consulting a primary care doctor to assess for any physical or metabolic problems contributing to the symptoms.

This content is adapted from "Eyes on Me: Dystonia & Social Anxiety," an article published in the Summer 2019 issue of the Dystonia Dialogue newsletter.

