

# Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Anxiety (But Were Too Afraid To Ask)!

By Dr. John Schinnerer

*Anxiety is the third largest psychological problem in the world today but few understand this.*

A young man wastes time sitting in front of the telephone, agonizing because he's afraid to make a call. He's afraid to call a stranger in a business office about the phone bill because he's afraid he'll be imposing and they'll be mad with him. It's very hard for him to take rejection, even over the phone, even from someone she doesn't know. He's especially afraid to call people he does know because he feels that he'll be calling at the wrong time -- the other person will be busy -- and they won't want to talk with him. He feels rejected even before he makes the call. Once the call is finished, he overanalyzes and thinks about the words that were used, the tone it was said in, and how he was perceived by the other person....his nervousness and speeding thoughts concerning the call prove to him that he "screwed" this conversation up, too, just like he always does. Just thinking about the call is enough to call us his anxiety.

A young lady resists going to work since a meeting is scheduled the next day. She knows that such meetings always include her co-workers discussing their current projects. The mere thought of talking in front of her peers spikes her anxiety. Sometimes she loses sleep the night before due to the anticipation of her upcoming nervousness. In other words, she becomes nervous about the prospect of being nervous. When the meeting is finally finished, a huge wave of relief comes over her as she begins to let go of the anxiety. Yet the memory of the meeting remains in the forefront of her mind. She is convinced she embarrassed herself and that everyone present saw how nervous she was when she spoke, and how foolish she acted in the meeting. She recalls that in front of the boss she stammered, paused too long, her face turned red, and she won't remember what to say. The movies are replayed in her mind over and over and over again.

Another individual would like to go to out socially--- and, in fact, he is truly lonely---yet he never goes out as he is unbearably nervous when meeting new people. Groups of people make things worse for him. The idea of talking to unknown people scares the

daylights out of him. He is certain people will stare at him and expose him as an imposter. He is afraid they will reject him and humiliate him. Even if they act nice, they'll surely notice his flushed face, frozen look and stuttering speech. They'll sense his discomfort, mistake it for arrogance and dislike him. He feels he has no way to win. And so he spends the night alone again. He is in his comfort zone at home. Home is the only area in which he feels totally at ease. Home is the only place he can relax. He hasn't gone out in seven years.

In public, people with social anxiety feel that everyone is scrutinizing their every move and judging them, despite the rational knowledge that this is not the case. Socially anxious people cannot relax in public. They cannot enjoy themselves when they are out. They can never truly settle down when others are around. To them, it always seems like other people are negatively judging them. Regardless of their rational thoughts, they still feel extremely self-consciousness while they are in the presence of others. For many, it is nearly impossible to relax and focus on anything other than the anxiety and the fear. The anxiety is agonizing, making it easier to avoid social situations and other people completely.

Social anxiety is an extreme fear of social situations and conversing with other people which creates feelings of self-consciousness, fear of judgment, evaluation, and criticism. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, and depression.

Social anxiety disorder (or social phobia) causes relationship problems for millions of people all over the world every day of their lives. In the United States, studies have recently shown social anxiety disorder to be the third largest psychological disorder in the country. Such anxiety affects approximately 15 million Americans each year. In general, social anxiety is not well understood by the mental health care field. As a result, people with social phobia are frequently misdiagnosed. Socially anxious people have been misdiagnosed as "schizophrenic", "manic-depressive", "clinically depressed", and "personality disordered" to name a few. Often, anxiety exists together with depression or bipolar disorder.

An example of a specific social phobia is the fear of speaking in front of groups. On the other hand, generalized social anxiety makes a person anxious, nervous, and uncomfortable in the vast majority of social situations.

People who suffer from social anxiety disorder typically experience considerable emotional distress in situations such as:

- Introductions to other people
- Criticism and Judgments
- Being the center of attention (e.g., birthdays)
- Having someone watch while doing something
- Talking to people in positions of authority (e.g., doctors, PhDs and police)
- Social encounters, especially with strangers
- Making "chit-chat" at social engagements

The physiological symptoms that are associated with social anxiety frequently include intense dread, a quickening heart rate, blushing face, dry throat and mouth, shaking, difficulty swallowing, and muscle tension. Constant, pervasive, ongoing and intense anxiety is the most common symptom.

People with social anxiety know that their anxiety does not make rational sense. We know now that each one of us has two "types" of brain – the emotional brain and the thinking brain. These account for our emotional intelligence and traditional intelligence. Therefore, knowing something is not the same as feeling it. Sometimes we have feelings that are inconsistent with our thoughts. This is frequently the case in anxious people. They feel anxious despite their rational knowledge that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Here are a few tips to help alleviate your anxiety...

- 1) Think of the brain as a computer. In order for a computer to run any program at peak efficiency, it must have sufficient memory, disk space and processing speed. Many individuals with problems of impulsivity, disorganization, and distractibility do not have sufficient RAM (i.e., short-term memory), disk space (i.e., long-term memory) or processing speed in their brains due to underactivity in the prefrontal and temporal lobes of the brain. To best run the programs, the hardware (the brain) must be first optimized and then the programs (the information) need to be reinstalled (as it wasn't properly received the first time through). Once the brain is running efficiently, strategies need to be introduced to help them be more effective at home, at work and in social relationships. It is essential to im-

prove the brain (biological), the outlook of the individual (psychological), and the intersections between the person and their environment (social) (Amen, 2001). One particular part of the brain has been shown to be involved in shifting from one thought to another – the anterior cingulate gyrus. When the anterior cingulate is too active, it results in people getting stuck in certain thought patterns and behaviors. Many difficulties with anxiety and depression have to do with a lack of flexibility of thought (or obsessing on certain negative thoughts) and may be related to an overactive anterior cingulate. If the rigidity of your thoughts and behaviors are causing difficulty in your relationships, you may want to discuss with your doctor the possibility of a serotonergic medication such as Prozac, Zoloft or Paxil which has been shown to be helpful in calming down the anterior cingulate gyrus (Amen, 2001).

- 2) Eliminate all toxic elements from your lifestyle. This includes caffeine, alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamines, nicotine, and sugars. For instance, marijuana use damages the physiology of the brain decreasing blood flow to key areas and reducing overall effectiveness. Marijuana use is especially harmful to the temporal lobes, which play an important role in memory, emotional stability, learning and temper control. Substance abuse of all kinds is particularly harmful to brain functioning. For example, a study done at UCLA demonstrated that cocaine addicts had 23 percent less brain activity overall compared to a group of people who had never used drugs (Amen, 2001).
- 3) The recommended diet according to many experts, including Barry Sears, PhD (author of *The Zone*) is a higher protein – lower carbohydrate diet with a minimum of sugars. This helps promote a more even mood, better focus, and improved cognitive ability. However, this is precisely the opposite form of diet that most of us are on currently.
- 4) All of us benefit from intense aerobic exercise 30-45 minutes 5 times a week. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain. It also improves the availability of serotonin in the brain which provides a calming effect and allows individuals to shift their focus from one area to another more easily. This helps those who tend to obsess on certain thoughts or ‘overfocus’ on areas of interest.

5) Work on correcting Automatic Negative Thoughts, or ANTs. Negativity haunts us all at different times. This habit, when particularly strong, can lead to depression and social withdrawal. There are seven primary types of ANTs as laid out below:

| <b>ANT</b>   | <b>Type of ANT</b>         | <b>How to counter the ANT</b>  |
|--|----------------------------|--|
| "I'm the worst at sports."                           | "All or nothing" thinking. | This is not a rational thought. I'm not the worst. I just need more practice. Then, I'll improve.  |
| "She is always mad at me."                           | "Always" thinking.         | Watch for words like "always," "never," "no one," "everyone," "every time," and "everything."  |
| "Others will just laugh at me and I'll look stupid." | Fortune telling.           | Predicting the worst possible outcome. Replace negative thought with a positive image in your head ("They might like what I have to say."). Learn deep breathing techniques (e.g., diaphragmatic breathing). |
| "I know she doesn't like me."                        | Mind reading.              | Belief that you know what someone else is thinking. Remind yourself you can't know another's thoughts. Reframe the situation more positively. "She might like me. Maybe she is having a bad day."            |
| "I'm worthless."                                     | Labeling.                  | I may do some dumb things, but I'm not worthless. Similar to 'All or nothing' thinking.  |
| "It's all my the fault of my boss."                  | Blaming.                   | What part did I play in creating the problem and how can we best solve it?   |
| "I should do better in school."                      | Guilt obsessions.          | Watch out for the words "should," "ought," and "have to." Reframe thought as "I want to...," "It would be helpful to...," or "It's in my best interests to..."   |

- 6) Deep breathing is essential in reducing temper flare-ups, anxiety, impulsivity, restlessness, insomnia, and lack of focus. Diaphragmatic breathing is a method of deep breathing where you breathe into the stomach or diaphragm. The emphasis is on exhaling all air in your lungs with each breath. The purpose of exhaling is to rid your body of waste products in the lungs, such as carbon dioxide. This allows the lungs to fill more completely with new air, which increases the flow of oxygen to all cells in your body, particularly the brain cells. Brain cells are among the most sensitive to oxygen deprivation. Slight variations in oxygen availability can change the way an individual thinks and behaves. When you get angry or anxious, your breathing becomes shallower, and oxygen content in the bloodstream is reduced. Less oxygen is then available to the brain, possibly resulting in increased irritability, impulsivity, anxiety, or confusion. To account for this, you must learn to breathe slowly and deeply with your stomach, not your chest.
  
- 7) Smile. When we are happy we smile and when we smile, we feel happier. One of the most significant emerging principles in the neurology field in the 1990's is the idea that the feedback between levels of the brain is *bi-directional*. In other words, messages travel both ways between various levels within the brain. So if you activate a higher level, such as the cortex, you will be priming a lower level, such as the cerebellum. And vice-versa. Thus, smiling, even when you don't feel like it, can improve your mood!
  
- 8) Socialize with other intelligent and interesting people. This is one of the best ways to keep expanding the networks in your brain, in your social life and in the business world. The verbal interaction with other capable individuals challenges your brain to create new connections and pathways.
  
- 9) Challenge your brain daily with vocabulary exercises, quizzes, puzzles, cross-words, debates, anagrams and brainteasers. Attend current events seminars. Write in a journal. Axons and dendrites (i.e., neural pathways), which would normally shrink with age, branch out and make new connections. Given enough intellectual stimulation, you create an increased backup capability in your brain. In other words, the intellectual stimulation creates alternate pathways by which chemical messengers can communicate. Thus, if old pathways fail or are dam-

aged, you are more likely to be able to reroute the necessary messages to essential parts of the brain. Studies have shown that people who taught, continued learning and constantly challenged their brains into old age lived longer and resisted Alzheimer's better than those who did not.

### **About John Schinnerer, Ph.D.**

Dr. John Schinnerer coaches men to perform at their peak from the boardroom to the bedroom. Dr. John is the host of The Evolved Caveman - to assist men to evolve to their potential. He graduated from U.C. Berkeley with a Ph.D. in educational psychology. He was an expert consultant for Pixar's Inside Out. He has spoken to organizations such as Stanford Medical School, entrepreneurs in Hebei, China, U.C. Berkeley, Kaiser Permanente, Sutter Health and UPS. He has been featured in national media such as U.S. News and World Report, Readers Digest, and SELF Magazine. Dr. John has worked with Army Rangers, Navy Seals, first responders, entrepreneurs, and executives from dozens of Fortune 500 companies. He wrote the award-winning book, "How Can I Be Happy?" His areas of expertise range from high performance, to stress management, to positive psychology, to anger management, to creating happy, thriving relationships. Over 10,000 people have taken his online anger management course. He recently recorded 2 mini-courses on anger management and forgiveness for Simple Habit; they have been listened to over 90,000 times. Visit [GuideToSelf.com](http://GuideToSelf.com) or [TheEvolvedCaveman.com](http://TheEvolvedCaveman.com) to learn more about Dr. John.