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Social phobia

Sarah S. Cosley
University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract

Social phobia is a common diagnosis for people of all ages. In the United States alone millions of people suffer from Social Phobia. People who suffer from social phobia can have problems in many areas of their life including: work, school, relationships, and daily functioning. Symptoms associated with social phobia can range from general fears to specific fears. A discussion of the definition of social phobia, symptoms, treatment, and application will be explored in the following paper.

SOCIAL PHOBIA

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Sarah S. Cosley
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J. Bartlett

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Michael D. Waggoner

UHead, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling and Postsecondary Education.

Abstract

Social phobia is a common diagnosis for people of all ages. In the United States alone millions of people suffer from Social Phobia. People who suffer from social phobia can have problems in many areas of their life including: work, school, relationships, and daily functioning. Symptoms associated with social phobia can range from general fears to specific fears. A discussion of the definition of social phobia, symptoms, treatment, and application will be explored in the following paper.

Overview

Social phobia is a commonly diagnosed problem among people seeking counseling. It is estimated that in the United States alone over 3.7 percent of the population aged 18-54 have been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder. This means approximately 10.1 million Americans suffer from the disorder (Scott, 2006). Social anxiety is the third biggest mental health problem in the world (Social Anxiety Association). Social anxiety is commonly addressed as social phobia. For the purpose of this paper I will be using both social anxiety and social phobia terms. Social anxiety can be debilitating to those who have it. Problems can range anywhere from work performance, to relationship problems. Although social anxiety can significantly affect daily functioning it is said that about 20% of those suffering from the disorder do not seek help. In addition only six percent of those who do get help report using medications to treat the disorder (Curtis, Kimball, & Stroup, 2004). It is important to understand this disorder or phobia as many clients may have mild to severe symptoms.

Social anxiety or phobia is a marked and persistent fear of social situations in which embarrassment may occur. (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Some professionals think that social phobia can be seen on a continuum from shyness to severe social anxiety (Curtis, 2004). Social phobia can be severe enough to cause suicidal ideation and attempts. It is estimated that 60% of people with social phobia experience other disorders such as depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder (Curtis, 2004).

Symptoms

Social anxiety has many symptoms associated with it. Some of the symptoms are trembling, twitching, rapid heart rate, feeling faint, dizziness, difficulty speaking or swallowing, and sweating. Some of the common fears experienced by people with this disorder are situations like public speaking, eating, compliments, seeing someone they know, making eye contact, and talking to new people (Curtis, 2004).

Scott (2006) suggests that social phobia or social anxiety disorder are severe form of shyness. Shyness is considered normal, everyone has moments or situations that they respond to in a shy way. Scott suggests that when a person strongly identifies with the shy label, and is constantly anxious, it interferes with their daily lives and may become a mental illness. Scott discusses the label of social phobia or social anxiety disorder and how it can be harmful. Scott points out that shyness is not accepted in western culture, and therefore should be carefully treated.

Rowa and Antony (2005) describe social phobia as intense fear of embarrassment, humiliation, or scrutiny by people in social or performance interactions. Some of the situations that people with social phobia fear are parties, speaking in public, attending meetings, meeting strangers, or talking to authority figures. People with social anxiety or social phobia can have many fears, or one specific fear such as eating in public (Rowa and Antony, 2005). Social phobia can significantly affect the quality of a person's life as well as the fulfillment of personal goals. The fear experienced by those with social phobia can stop them from doing things they enjoy, or even things they must do to function properly.

People with social phobia place a lot of importance on the impression they give other people, and they often believe that they won't act competently in social situations (Rowa and Antony, 2005). Many people who have social phobia develop behaviors to protect themselves from acting in undesirable ways. These behaviors include: intensely focusing on one's self, thinking about others' perceptions of them, safety behaviors, and post event processing. These behaviors actually make the situation and the feeling about themselves worse (Rowa and Antony, 2005). Many people who engage in these behaviors have poor social skills because they are so focused on themselves. They also have poor self esteem, are judgmental of themselves in social situations, and beat themselves up over the situation after it occurs.

Treatment or Interventions

People experiencing social phobia may not get help because they fear the social interaction it takes to seek help. There is also a lack of understanding of the disorder or phobia and the seriousness of it. Some treatments available are cognitive behavioral therapy and medications for anxiety. Many people experiencing social anxiety may also have other problems such as depression (Rowa and Antony, 2005).

Cognitive behavioral therapy and exposure therapy have proved to be effective ways of treating social phobia (Curtis, 2004). Cognitive behavioral therapy uses four different stages to help clients with social phobia. These four stages are: educating clients on identifying and disputing irrational thoughts, role playing the fearful situations, cognitive restructuring before and after the role playing, and homework that applies to the fearful situation. Most people with social phobia realize their fear of social situations is irrational, but despite this they still have fear of the situation.

Cognitive behavioral therapy helps the client learn to think differently about the situation, as well as report their findings after the situation.

Exposure therapy is used to help clients be exposed to the feared situation. For example; if a client is afraid to eat in public, exposure therapy is implemented by having the client go to the restaurant and encouraging them to just sit there. The next time the client will be encouraged to increase the interaction until finally the client is comfortable enough to eat a meal at the restaurant.

Medications are available for clients suffering from social phobia. Some medications found to be helpful for adults suffering from social phobia are phenelzine, clonazepam, and paroxetine (Curtis, 2004). Studies suggest that not only medication, but behavioral treatments are needed to help those suffering from the disorder. More research to determine the efficiency of medication and behavioral treatment is needed to conclude what is best for those who suffer from the disorder. The social anxiety association recommends that clients seek a specialist in the area for therapy as well as an active behavioral therapy group.

Rowa and Antony (2005) discussed many different psychological treatments for social phobia. Some of these treatments include: cognitive behavioral therapy, group therapy, exposure therapy, associative therapy, medication, social skills training, applied relaxation, attentional focus training, and combination of therapies.

Implications for Counseling

Counselors need to be aware of the need to educate the general public about social anxiety. Many people suffering from social anxiety are misunderstood and afraid to get treatment. Curtis, (2004) suggested that screenings be done for social phobia

much like the ones done for depression. By gaining more knowledge and exposure to the disorder, more people may seek treatment because it becomes less scary to them. Counselors need to be aware of the fear of some clients to seek treatment because of the social interaction it requires. Counselors can create a warm and inviting atmosphere in their office and be sensitive to the anxiety the person may be experiencing while in therapy.

In counseling people with social phobia, I think it is important to understand the severity and type of social phobia the client has. For example, a client may just have one form of social phobia or may be afraid of many or all social interactions. I think that social skills training and applied relaxation can be valuable ways to help clients in the counseling session. For example, a client may feel anxious about an upcoming wedding they are a bridesmaid in. To help the client I could spend the session talking about the perceived social skills needed to get through the wedding and the anxieties about it. I might use relaxation techniques to help the client feel more comfortable when walking down the aisle. Many treatments could be used to help a client who is experiencing social phobia. I think a key strategy is being open to using different techniques.

Social anxiety is a serious condition that many people experience, but few seek out treatment. I think as a counselor it is important to be aware of the sensitivity of the problem, and to educate the general public about the disorder.

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