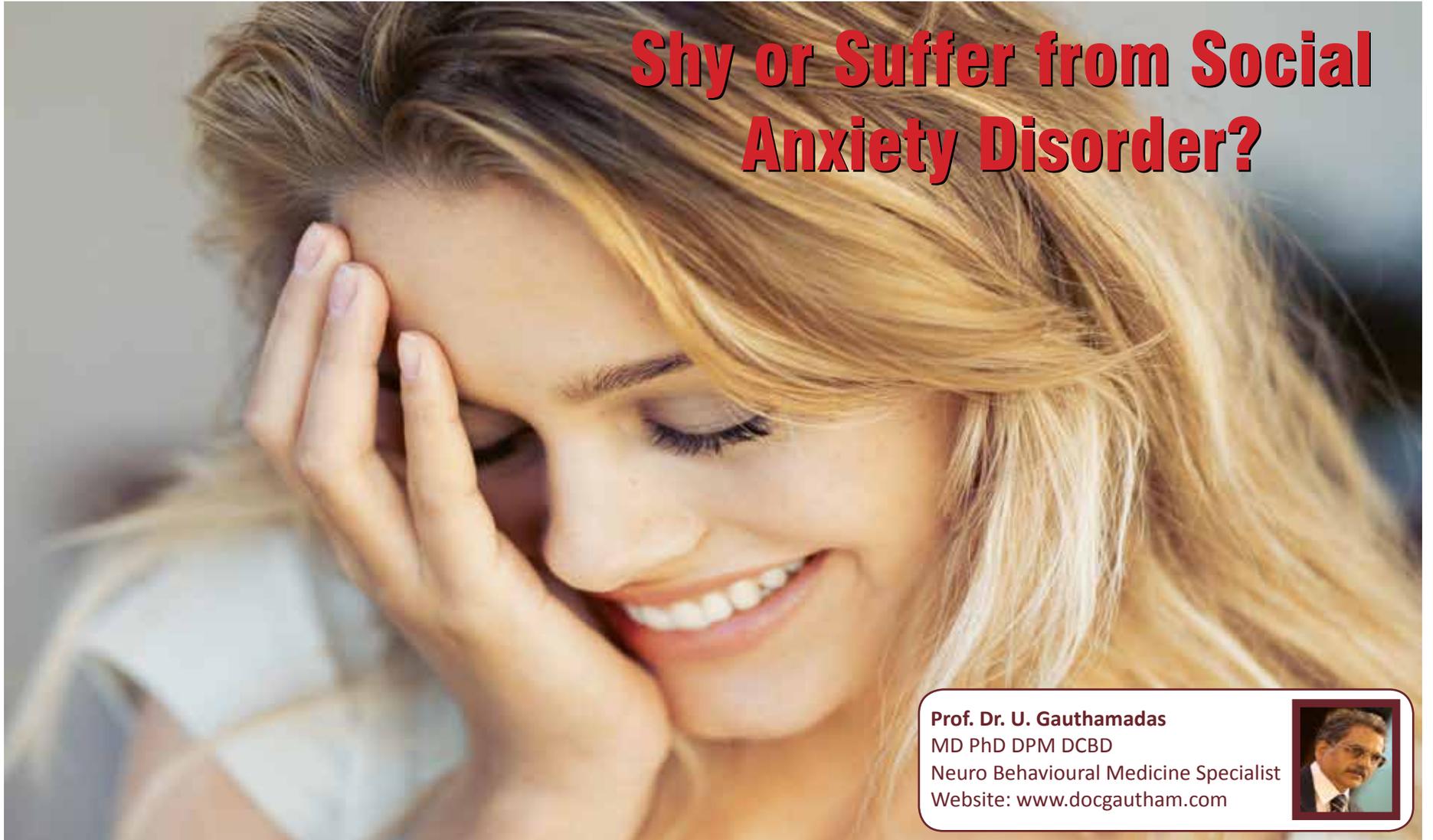


## GUEST COLUMN

# Shy or Suffer from Social Anxiety Disorder?



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Many people are shy and have trouble speaking up in front of others. Many people claim they have social anxiety. This brings up an interesting question: Are you suffering from social anxiety? Or are you simply a shy person?

**Nearly 50% of people are Shy:** The shy are excessively self-conscious and overwhelmingly preoccupied with what others think of them. While everyone else is meeting and greeting, they stay aloof and are constantly thinking about how people are viewing them. They also have negative opinions about themselves and are consumed by the misery of the social setting, which they are in, thinking, "I'm having a horrible time at this party because I don't know what to say and everyone seems to be staring at me". All the while their hearts are pounding, their pulses are racing and they have butterflies in their stomach. Most shyness is hidden. Only a small percentage of the shy appear to be obviously ill at ease. But all suffer internally. Some people are born with a shy temperament. Others may acquire it along the way. But either way it is programmed into their brain.

**The brains of shy people are different:** The brains of the shy, process the world differently than their more extroverted coun-

terparts. About 20 % of people are born with excessive activity in parts of their brain responsible for fear and anxiety, when trying to process visual information. This is called Sensory Perception Sensitivity or SPS. Children with SPS are more bothered by noise and crowds, more easily startled, are very sensitive to pain and are generally more sensitive than other children.

They grow distressed when faced with unfamiliar people, objects and events and also show signs of distress in the form of excessive fretting and crying. As they grow older they cling to their parents in a new play situation, cry easily and ask unusual questions about the situation. They are "slow to warm up" in play or social situations, but eventually join in. These children have especially deep thoughts and take longer to make decisions. They are more conscientious and need more time to themselves in order to reflect. They are highly sensitive and need little punishment. All this is due to an inborn preference to pay more attention to sensory experiences through visual processes.

The sensitive individual's strategy comes in handy when danger is present, opportunities are similar but hard to choose between, or a

clever approach is needed. However, it is not so advantageous when resources are plentiful, or quick and aggressive action is required.

**Are such inhibited infants preordained to become shy adults?** Not necessarily. Only 20% of shy individuals are overtly shy. They use every excuse in the book to avoid social events. If they are unlucky enough to find themselves in casual conversation, they can not quite manage to make eye contact to reply to questions without stumbling over their words or to keep up their end of the conversation; they seldom smile.

They are easy to pick out of a crowd because their shyness is expressed behaviorally. The other 80% are privately shy. They feel their shyness in a pounding heart and pouring sweat. While they may seem at ease and confident in conversation, they are actually engaging in a self-deprecating inner dialogue, chiding themselves for being inept and questioning whether the person they are talking to really likes them. Even though these people do fairly well socially, they have a lot of negative self-thought going on in their heads. But, some shy individuals develop their own individual strategies to deal with their shyness and turn it to their advantage.

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**Shyness is also acquired:** If only 20% of infants are born shy and nearly 50 percent of us are shy in adulthood, where do all the remaining shy adults come from? The only logical answer is that shyness is acquired along the way. A lot has to do with how children are raised by their parents. In general, those who are over-protected, never get a chance to find a comfortable level of accommodation to the world; and they grow up anxious and shy. Those whose parents do not shield them from stressful situations overcome their inhibition and become outgoing.

**Childhood:** Children form attachments to their parents and other care givers from the routine experiences of care, feeding and caressing. When parenting or caretaking is inconsistent and unreliable, parents fail to satisfy the child's need for security, affection and comfort, resulting in insecure bonds. Because of this difficult relationship to their parents, children internalize a sense of themselves as having problems with all relationships.

They generalize the experience and come to expect that teachers, coaches and peers won't like them very much. This wound to the self is early and deep and easily evoked. They are quick to become disappointed in relationships, quick to feel rejection, shame, ridicule. They are relentlessly self-defeating, interpreting even success as failure. As a result they have negative perceptions of themselves and of themselves in relation to others that they hold onto at all costs.

Shyness can also be acquired later on, instigated at times of developmental transition when children face new challenges in their relationships with their peers. This is even more pronounced when such children are put into day care centers or play school at a very early age. Teachers label them as shy and treat them as such, and the label sticks. They begin to see themselves as shy and act it.

**Adolescence** is another hurdle that can kick off shyness. Not only are adolescents' bodies changing but their social and emotional playing fields are redefining them. Their challenge is to integrate sexuality and intimacy into a world of relationships that used to be defined only by friendship and relatives. A complicated task!

**Adults** are not immune to becoming shy. Shyness may result from tail-spinning life upheavals such as a failed relationship. For highly successful, career-defined people, be-

ing fired from a long-held job can be similarly debilitating, especially in the interviewing process.

**Culture** can have a major influence in breeding shyness. In India, if a child tries and succeeds, the everyone - parents, grandparents, teachers and coaches get the credit. But if the child tries and fails, the child is fully culpable and cannot blame anyone else. In such a cultural melting pot, an "I can't win" belief takes hold, so that children never take a chance or do anything that will make them stand out. The result is a low-key interpersonal style. Indian kids are expected to be and likely to become modest and quiet. In fact, in studies of the individuation tendency of college students, Asian students tend to score the lowest.

**The costs of shyness can be high:** A shy childhood may be a series of lost opportunities. Shy kids also have to endure teasing and peer rejection. Shyness also predisposes to loneliness. Without a circle of close friends or relatives, shy people are more vulnerable to risk. They become prone to paranoia. Shyness also brings with it a potential for abusing, alcohol and drugs as social lubricants and is linked to sexual difficulties. Shy people also tend to waste time deliberating and hesitating in social situations that others can pull off in an instant.

They also find difficulty in meeting people and making new friends, which may leave the shy woefully isolated and subject to loneliness and depression. There are cognitive problems; unable to think clearly in the presence of others, the shy tend to freeze up in conversation, confusing others who are trying to respond to them. They can appear snobbish or disinterested in others, when they are in fact just plain nervous. They live trapped between two fears: being invisible and insignificant to others and being visible but worthless.

**But it is not all negative:** On the positive side, shy people are often gifted listeners. If they can get over their self-induced pressures for witty repartee, shy people can be great at conversation because they pay more attention. The electronic age is a double edged weapon for the shy. On the one hand work encounters are information-driven, problem-oriented, solution-based and have become barren of social interaction. Shy people no longer get to practice social skills within the comfort of daily routine. Mobile and video games played solo now crowd out



the time-honored social games of childhood. But, such an environment is also the perfect medium for the shy. The Internet is a conduit for the shy to interact with others. Electronic communication removes many of the barriers that inhibit the shy. The danger, however, is that technology has become a hiding place for those who dread social interaction.

**So do all shy people have social anxiety?** Whereas social anxiety disorder and shyness have similarities, there are distinct differences between the two. Only 50% of those diagnosed with social anxiety disorder report having been shy prior to developing the disorder. And less than 25% of shy persons meet the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder. People who are shy may view their condition as a positive quality, whereas a person with social anxiety disorder would not describe their condition positively.

**Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)** produces a significant amount of fear, embarrassment or humiliation on a daily basis, in social performance-based situations. The amount of anxiety experienced is enough to inflict great emotional pain and cause people to avoid situations, rather than facing them and experiencing fear and anxiety. Thinking about a social function causes anxiety, even before one is there. Interacting with anyone causes extreme fear and doubt.

Any perceived mistakes may lead to shame, depression and further negative emotions. SAD causes one to feel very negative, and may make life much more difficult. If you are practically disabled by social situations, chances are you have SAD. If you are generally fine but very quiet around other people and only a little bit prone to embarrassment, chances are you are simply shy.

Social anxiety disorder requires to be treated with a combination of medication and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, with the goal of eventually discontinuing medication over time. Shyness may not need treatment or, when required, can be overcome with behavior modification and counseling.