Social Anxiety vs Shyness

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Recognizing the Differences Between Social Anxiety and Shyness

It may seem like every trait or characteristic outside of the norm is a major mental health disorder. If you are not like everyone else, you *must* be significantly flawed. Every child who has trouble following the rules *must* have oppositional defiant disorder. Every person who ever feels sad or disappointed *must* have major depressive disorder. And every person who ever feels timid or quiet around others *must* have some type of anxiety disorder.

Obviously, these conclusions are not true. There is a wide range of behaviors, traits and characteristics that are normal and healthy for people to exhibit. Problems arise when people hear about the newest trend in mental health conditions, research the condition and begin diagnosing themselves or others with the disorder. They lack the expertise to apply the information correctly, and this leads to over diagnosis in the public eye and a distortion of the actual diagnosis.

Take the example of social phobia, social anxiety disorder and shyness. Social phobia became a recognized term in 1980. Mental health professionals use a book called the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to understand and diagnosis mental health issues. This text undergoes revisions over the years to reflect the newest findings and research in the field. In the third version of the DSM, social phobia officially became a diagnosis. People began to wonder if professionals were taking a personality trait like shyness and pathologizing it.

If professionals make shyness a disorder, what would be next? Would left-handedness be a disorder? What about being an extrovert?

Luckily, this was a misunderstanding at the time. No one was trying to make shyness into a disease, but still, a lack of solid information continues to breed uncertainty and confusion regarding the difference between shyness and social phobia/social anxiety disorder.

This article will attempt to clear the air by explaining what shyness is, what social anxiety disorder is, how they are similar and how they are different. Hopefully, this will add clarity to your quest of understanding yourself and the people around you.

What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

As mentioned earlier, the idea of an anxiety disorder being related to socialization came about in 1980 in the DSM-3. With the arrival of the fifth addition of the DSM (DSM-5), social phobia was renamed to be social anxiety disorder.

A person with this disorder is extremely fearful, worried and anxious about social situations in general or one specific type of social situation. Some situation types include social interactions, meeting new people, being watched or having to perform in front of others. People with social anxiety disorder are impaired with clinical levels

of stress and anxiety that last for periods of time longer than six months.

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What is Social Anxiety Disorder?

In social anxiety disorder, the person fears that they will be embarrassed or humiliated by their behaviors or by their anxiety. They are convinced that others will judge them harshly or be overly critical of them. They believe this exposure will inevitably end with them being rejected by others and there is no hope of acceptance. Usually, there is no real-life reason for the fear to be present in the sufferer.

When faced with the anxiety of the situation, some people will shut down and be very quiet while others will become very loud, outgoing and expressive. People with social anxiety disorder will take extreme measures to avoid or escape the triggering situations.

Additionally, they may utilize a list of negative coping skills like use of alcohol and other drugs excessively to reduce symptoms.

What is Shyness?

Because of the level of confusion between social anxiety disorder and shyness, the team behind the DSM added information related to shyness in the DSM-5. They call it normative shyness to distinguish it from social anxiety disorder.

It begins by stating that shyness “is a common personality trait and is not by itself pathological.” This alone is great news for anyone thinking that the world of mental health is trying to give everyone a diagnosis.

When you think of someone that is shy you may think of someone that is quiet or uncertain in new situations. They may seem awkward or uncomfortable when meeting new people. Many times people view shyness as associated with low self-esteem, but this is not always the case. Not everyone who is shy will have low self-esteem just as not everyone who is shy will have social anxiety disorder. In fact, reports state that only 12% of people that consider themselves shy will meet criteria for social anxiety disorder.

Similarities and Differences

The similarities between social anxiety and shyness are clear. Though they are not the same, there is a fair bit of overlap between the two. They both involve a change in thoughts, feelings and behaviors when confronted with a new social situation. People with shyness and people with social anxiety disorder will view social situations in a negative way and take some action to avoid when possible.

The differences may seem few, but they are important. A major difference between the two is how people with each view their condition. People who are shy commonly see this as part of their personality. They tend to be comfortable with their shyness and accept their state.

People with social anxiety usually are very frustrated with their condition. They hate their symptoms and how overwhelming they can be. People with social anxiety seek out positive and negative coping skills to lessen the influence while shy people adapt to life with shyness.

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Similarities and Differences

Another difference is that shyness is something that a person will have experienced throughout their life. Many

parents may have observed their children being shy even as babies, and aside from some minor peaks and valleys, their level of shyness has been relatively constant throughout life.

The opposite is true for people with social anxiety disorder. Many times, there is an event that triggers social anxiety. Symptoms usually progress and intensify overtime when there is not adequate treatment.

The last difference is that some people with social anxiety disorder are not shy at all. They manage their anxiety through attention-seeking behaviors. They try to be the center of attention and the life of the party in an effort to control the perceptions and judgments of other people. Shy people are happy to be the wallflower or spend a Friday night at home.

Treatment Options

If your issue is shyness, consider yourself lucky, no professional treatment is warranted. But that doesn't mean that you can't improve you social skills. Challenge yourself to engage in more social opportunities and to use more assertive communication. This might lead to increases in your comfort in new situations.

If social anxiety disorder seems to be your condition, seek professional treatment. Therapy and medication management can do well to improve your symptoms by changing your thinking and behavior patterns. Finding treatment early will be key since social anxiety symptoms will continue increasing until it is extremely difficult to leave your home. Early intervention will yield great results.

Your therapy will focus on ideas related to relaxation, cognitive restructuring, systematic desensitization and social skills training through role-playing. These interventions are proven to be highly successful with anxiety disorders.

The process will seem uncomfortable because your therapist will challenge you to step outside of your comfort zone.

Conclusion

Nobody is perfect. Nobody can live up to the exceptionally high expectations of themselves or others. Because of this, it is important to know which traits and characteristics are typical and which ones are pathological.

Shyness and social anxiety disorder share some commonalities, but their differences are extreme enough to illustrate the normalcy of one and the danger of the other. If you have gained the awareness that social anxiety is a part of your life, take the steps to improve you state.

Anxiety in your present doesn't mean it has to be in your future.