

Researchers develop better treatment for social fears

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While just about all of us would admit to being shy from time to time in social situations, about one in 20 Australians suffer from an extreme form of shyness known as social phobia.

Social phobia is one of the more chronic and perplexing disorders a person can have. Current treatments including cognitive therapy, the common-sense system of teaching people practical skills to manage their fears, can achieve good results. However, researchers have been trying to refine the process even further to improve outcomes.

A recent study, led by researchers from Macquarie University, published in the US Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, showed that with a few adjustments to existing cognitive behaviour therapy, outcomes for people with social phobia can improve dramatically. Improvements to existing treatment included giving sufferers clear, detailed feedback about their social performance and teaching them how to better focus their attention when feeling frightened.

Participants in the study were divided into small groups. After learning some basic anxiety management techniques, they were gradually encouraged to face their fears over 12 weekly sessions. At the end of treatment, over 40 per cent of participants showed large and dramatic changes in how they coped with their fears while many others showed good improvements.

Professor Ron Rapee, Director of the Centre for Emotional Health at the

University, who led the study, says people with social phobia have high levels of shyness, and worry other people will think badly of them.

“When a shy person feels they are the centre of attention, they immediately assume that the attention is negative and they are being judged and found lacking in some way. As a result, they avoid social activities most of us take for granted such as meeting new people, going on dates, talking to authority figures, and speaking in public,” he says.

Professor Rapee says that while no one knows entirely what causes social phobia, it’s clear that the people who suffer from this disorder have lives that are dramatically limited by their fears.

“In extreme cases, social phobia can interfere with relationships, work and social life,” he says.

Provided by Macquarie University

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