

Social Anxiety and Its Effects on New Students

Raneem

Michigan Islamic Academy

Abstract

The effects caused by social anxiety disorder are permanent and damaging. This paper analyzes the relation between school environments and social anxiety among children and teenagers and examines its treatments and prevention methods. Increasing its awareness among students and staff can lead to less social anxiety among children and teens. References of this paper include articles, books, and online sources.

Keywords: anxiety, youth, school environments

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Social anxiety, as described by the *Anxiety and Depression Association of America* (n.d.), is the intense fear of being judged, rejected in a social or performance situation, or negatively evaluated by peers, coworkers or anyone in general. Affecting approximately 5.5% of adolescents ages 13-18 (Conlon, 2016), it is the second most commonly diagnosed anxiety disorder following specific phobia (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, n.d.). Those who experience social anxiety may often avoid social interactions or performance situations, worrying that their anxiety may be seen and noticed by others; when faced with uncomfortable situations, they may experience feelings of panic and stress. Social anxiety is a valid issue as it makes interactions in the workplace or school a daily struggle. This can especially be true in the case of a student starting a school year at a new school; he/she may resort to excuses in order to avoid contact with peers and teachers. Fortunately, social anxiety disorder can be treated through psychotherapy which is often coupled with biomedical therapy. This paper examines the correlation of bullying and exclusion on a new student with social anxiety.

Social anxiety can be caused by a variety of factors and can start at any age; such factors include: genetics, physical, sexual, mental, or emotional abuse, family conflicts such as divorce or domestic violence, maternal stress during pregnancy or infancy, or bullying/teasing by peers (Bridges to Recovery, 2002). When middle or high school students begin an academic year at a new school, the pressure to socialize and connect with people is generally found to be intimidating. If exclusion or bullying by peers is experienced during this adjustment period, the risk for mental illness increases dramatically (Anxiety and Depression Association of America,

n.d.). Feelings of exclusion can lead to social anxiety disorder which can lead to low-self esteem, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. When schools strive to make their environment welcoming, incoming students feel less stress when initiating conversation, working in groups, and participating in various school activities/clubs.

Social interaction when coming into a foreign school can often come off as a hard task. New students may feel alien to the school as most students at the particular school have already formed their “cliques” or groups of friends. New students may feel shy and often will not be the ones to reach out to these groups causing a feeling of exclusion to form. They support these feelings by sitting alone during lunch time, working separately in projects, avoiding extracurriculars, and other such maneuvers to avoid social interaction. This can also lead to other students taking advantage of those they find alone, perceiving them as “weak”, teasing them, and making the new students feel more apprehensive to attend school. This bullying can then extend from the school grounds to the internet, especially as students get older and form online profiles on social media sites. All these factors play a major role on a child's mental health and ability to socially interact with others as it can make a student not only shy, but also scared to communicate. These fears can last well into adulthood and affect career choices and future relationships as well. This can also cause insecurities to rise as people may begin blaming themselves for other people’s opinions, leading to self-exclusion, anxiety disorders, depression, and feelings of unworthiness.

It is important to recognize how social anxiety can affect the lives of these individuals at all ages as social anxiety typically starts at a young age but can last a lifetime. Since social anxiety incurs nervousness in public situations, it can affect almost every aspect of someone's

life. For a child, this may mean exhibiting extreme shyness at school, having anxiety to reach out for help from teachers and adults, isolating ones-self from peers, and avoiding various school activities such as dances and volunteering in clubs; even if they have the will or interest to do so, the anxiety takes over (Walker, 2001, p.42). For adults, this can include complications in relationships, isolation from friends and activities such as weekend outings, and even declining a job offer that may offer great opportunities. People with social anxiety are also at a high risk for developing major depressive disorder and alcohol use disorders (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, nd).

Social Anxiety and the Brain

Along with one's social life being affected due to the disorder, social anxiety disorder (SAD) leads to detrimental effects on the brain. According to “Bridges to Recovery” (2019), brain scans have shown that people with SAD suffer from complications in two major regions of the brain: the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex (Bridges to Recover, 2002). The amygdala, located in the emotional part of the brain (Gadye, 2018), is a set of neurons responsible for making the body able to respond to perceived threats, real or imagined (Bridges to Recovery, 2019). The prefrontal cortex, located in the cognitive brain (Gadye, 2018), is in charge of calming spurges of anxiety by assessing them rationally and calmly. Certain actions trigger the amygdala and a wave of emotions or symptoms occurs (for example: rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, and freezing of the brain) that leaves a person unable to think or reason clearly and it is usually the responsibility of the prefrontal cortex (cognitive side of the brain) to calm these emotions. If there is no real threat present, it should send a message to the amygdala to defuse the anxious symptoms. However, people with damage to the prefrontal cortex experience anxiety

and, instead of doing its job to calm the amygdala, the prefrontal cortex amplifies the activity of it (Gadye, 2018). This is caused by an intense fear of other peoples' reactions that the brains of these anxiety sufferers interpret social interactions as legitimate threats, making it very difficult to soothe those fears (Bridges to Recover, 2002).

Treatment Through Medication and Therapy

SAD is treatable through therapy and medication, however, about half of all adults with the disorder seek treatment only after experiencing symptoms for 15 to 20 years (The British Psychological Society & The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2013). The first treatment often provided is psychotherapy, more commonly known as talk therapy. CBT is typically used to help patients understand their anxiety. CBT is a psychological treatment known to be effective in improving mental health (Bridges to Recover, 2002). This kind of therapy focuses on specific problems occurring in the present rather than all of the stressors in one's life. The therapists help identify negative thinking patterns and beliefs by using different techniques such as journaling or visualization and replacing them with more accurate, productive, and positive alternatives that help promote both immediate and long-term change (Tartakovsky, 2019). For example, a therapist may take their patient to a grocery store and intentionally make them ask an embarrassing question such as "Why is blue cheese moldy?" After the experiment, the therapist and the patient will discuss what happened along with the anxiety and emotions felt during the process and what the patient learned—that the predictions placed by social anxiety did not happen (ex: "“Yeah, it was weird to do that, but the woman did not bite my head off for asking about the blue cheese”") (Tartakovsky, 2019). This helps teach people different and healthier coping skills to use in times of distress, such as how to replace damaging and negative beliefs

with more realistic and productive approaches, gain control over emotions by practicing self-healing strategies, and develop long-lasting tools to help deal with the stressors met on a daily basis.

Along with therapy, many patients need the help of medications; the most commonly prescribed being paroxetine (Paxil) or sertraline (Zoloft), and venlafaxine, all of which are of a specific class known as the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) medications. They are commonly prescribed because their symptoms are well-tolerated and received (Cunic, 2019). These medications (serotonin reuptake inhibitors) work by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain, a chemical messenger (neurotransmitter) that carries signals between brain nerve cells (neurons). This suggests that dysregulation of the serotonin and dopamine neurotransmitter systems may play a role in the causes of social anxiety (The British Psychological Society & The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2013). A doctor may start by prescribing a low dosage and slowly increase the amount over time to ensure the patient reacts well, meaning that improvement may take time as every patient is different in their response. All SSRIs are thought to work in similar ways causing comparable side effects, though some people may not experience any. These side effects include: sleep problems (drowsiness, fatigue or insomnia), sexual dysfunction, physical ailments (headache, nausea, or skin rashes), eating problems (weight gain or loss), and anxiety-like symptoms (shaky hands and irritability) (Cunic, 2019). Many of these side effects may go away after the first few weeks of treatment, while others may lead to a change in prescription. SSRI's typically work for most people, however, for others they may cause problems. For example, high doses of citalopram (Celexa) and escitalopram (Lexapro), (both are types of SSRI medications) may cause dangerous abnormal heart rhythms,

so doses over 40 milligrams (mg) a day should be avoided according to the FDA and the manufacturer (Mayo Clinic, 2019). Along with the side-effects, patients taking any SSRI may develop an increased level for suicidal thoughts, especially during the first few weeks, and should be watched carefully by doctors and family members. Although these medications are not addictive, abruptly stopping the medication can cause withdrawal-like symptoms (sometimes called discontinuation syndrome), such as lethargy and nausea, which is why it is encouraged to work gradually to safely decrease the dosage to avoid any complications (Mayo Clinic, 2019).

Preventative Mental Health

A shift in trajectory is required in order to effectively manage social anxiety disorder. One should aim to prevent a problem before the problem starts by recognizing stressors and taking initiative to reach out before things get worse. Anxiety disorders are most often caused by exposure to trauma during childhood (Behere, 2017). Reducing the occurrence of these events can help suppress the rates of people experiencing anxiety. This can be done through effective safety measures and legislation in traffic, workplaces, and neighbourhoods. School-based programs that aim to effectively reduce aggressive and delinquent behaviour and bullying may contribute to such a reduction.

Although there are several ways the public can intervene to help prevent and reduce the numbers around social anxiety disorders, there are also steps that can be taken by individuals and families at home to help prevent social anxiety. Improving nutrition is a major way to increase one's quality of life. The World Health Organization states that "There is strong evidence that improving nutrition and development in socioeconomically disadvantaged children can lead to healthy cognitive development, improved educational outcomes and reduced risk for mental

ill-health, especially for those at risk or who are living in impoverished communities”

(Prevention of mental disorders: Effective interventions and policy options: Summary report, 2004, p. 24). Monitoring growth, providing food, and promoting a balanced diet combine both nutritional intervention as well as counselling and psychological care *(Prevention of mental disorders: Effective interventions and policy options: Summary report, 2004, p. 24)*. Housing and one’s home lifestyle can also have a major effect on one's mental health *(Prevention of mental disorders: Effective interventions and policy options: Summary report, 2004, p. 25)*. Stable and safer households attribute to happier couples and children which ultimately leads to positive mental health *(Prevention of mental disorders: Effective interventions and policy options: Summary report, 2004, p. 25)*.

Along with stable home environments, connecting oneself to the larger community gives a sense of self-belonging, ownership, social responsibility, and purpose. There are many programs worldwide that aim to bring communities together and help create a feeling of unity in various cities. An example of such is the Communities that Care (CTC) Program, which has been implemented successfully in several hundred communities in the USA and is currently being adopted and replicated in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, Wales, and Australia. It aims to implement community violence and aggression prevention systems to help locate possible risk factors and take action *(Prevention of mental disorders: Effective interventions and policy options: Summary report, 2004, p. 26)*. Taking responsibility in a community can cause a greater feeling of self-worth because one can be a part of several communities at once. There are communities based on the neighborhood or apartment complex in which one lives, communities in schools, areas of interests, and communities based on faith.

Faith can play a key role in improving one's mental state as most people may feel more vulnerable when speaking of God or a higher power ("Religion and Mental Health", 2017). As mentioned, involving oneself in their religious community can give a sense of purpose and ultimately bring happiness. A Korean study exploring the relationship between mental health and religiosity showed that individuals that experience depressive symptoms have a stronger tendency to place importance on spiritual values ("Religion and Mental Health", 2017). When battling a mental disorder, seeking help through a greater power exerts peace in oneself and brings comfort. Several studies have shown that meditation, praying, or weekly religious activities, such as going to church on Sunday mornings or attending congressional prayers on Fridays, may contribute to combatting depression and other mental illnesses ("Religion and Mental Health", 2017).

Bullying and Islam

In the Islamic religion, Muslims are taught to treat each other with kindness and respect. In a hadith narrated by Anas, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessings Upon Him), it is stated that "None of you will have faith till he wishes for his (Muslim) brother what he likes for himself" (Sahih Bukhari, Sunnah.com). This hadith (narration) elucidates the importance of treating one another kindly in Islam, to the extent that the Prophet says one will not have complete faith until he/she does so.

Throughout the Prophet Muhammad's mission to spread Allah's (SWT) true message, he dealt with many groups and people who mocked him and called him a liar and a fabricator, such as the Quraysh (a tribe of disbelievers who had ruled the city of Makkah). For instance, an incident occurred at the city of Taif in Makkah in which a group of disbelievers began throwing

stones at the Prophet, who then took shelter in the garden of two men. While in this garden, the Angel Jibreel was sent to Prophet Muhammad and asked him if he wished for Angel Jibreel to bury the city of Taif between two mountains. Although these people had caused the Prophet much suffering during his stay at the city, the Prophet replied that he did not wish destruction upon the people as he had hoped that their offspring would follow the religion of truth. This incident shows the compassion and Akhlaq (manners) of the Prophet towards everyone, including people that humiliated and went against him.

Despite the fact that Prophet Muhammad was strong in his faith and handled the Quraysh, he was still human like anyone else and at times their harrassment became too much and he would worry that these disbelievers would never follow him. In Surah Al-An'am, Ayahs 33-36, Allah said:

“(33. We know indeed the grief which their words cause you; it is not you that they deny, but it is the verses of Allah that the wrongdoers deny.) (34. Verily, (many) Messengers were denied before you, but with patience they bore the denial, and they were hurt, till Our help reached them, and none can alter the Words of Allah. Surely, there has reached you the information about the Messengers (before you).) (35. If their aversion is hard on you, then if you were able to seek a tunnel in the ground or a ladder to the sky, so that you may bring them a sign. And had Allah willed, He could have gathered them together upon true guidance, so be not you one of the ignorant.) (36. It is only those who listen, that will respond, but as for the dead, Allah will raise them up, then to Him they will be returned.)”.

These Ayat were revealed to the Prophet as a source of comfort in times he thought he was alone. They relieved his anxiety, reminding him that many messengers and prophets before

him also had to endure the criticism and judgement of others when spreading the word of Allah. The Ayat show how Allah (SWT) comforts His believers in times of need as He has given them many more Ayat in the Quran reminding them not to lose hope nor be sad (Surah Al-Imran, Ayah 139).

Allah (SWT) repeatedly mentions in the Quran the importance of brotherhood and community in Islam. For example, “The believers are but a brotherhood. So make reconciliation between your brothers” (Surah Al-Hujraat Ayat 10). This Ayah explains that the Muslim Ummah is one family, a whole community bound together by the message of Allah (SWT). Since they are a community, any two Muslim brothers or sisters should constantly put in an effort to resolve any conflicts that may occur between them, whether that be in marriage, friendships, colleagues, or any relationship. This also applies to school environments and relationships among peers and classmates. When someone sees a fellow classmate bullying or pressuring someone else into doing something they may not be comfortable with, they should step in and help resolve the issue. Just as the Prophet (Peace and Blessings Upon Him) once said to the companions “Shall I not tell you something that is better than the status of (voluntary) fasting, prayer and charity?” They said: “Yes.” He said: “Reconciling in a case of discord, for the evil of discord is the shaver.” Al-Tirmidhi said: It was narrated that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “It is the shaver, and I do not say that it shaves hair, but that it shaves (i.e., destroys) religious commitment. (Narrated by Abu Dawood, 4273; al-Tirmidhi, 2433)”.

Allah has also made clear the punishment of backbiting and spreading rumors in Islam when He says in Surah Al-Hujraat Ayah 12 “O you who have believed, avoid much [negative] assumption. Indeed, some assumption is sin. And do not spy on or backbite about each other.

Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his brother when dead? You would detest it. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is accepting of repentance and Merciful”. This is also shown when the disbelievers and even some of the Muslims accused Aisha (RA), the wife of the Prophet, of adultery. Allah says in Surah Al-Noor Ayah 11 “...Unto every man among them (those who spread rumors) will be paid that which he had earned of the sin, and as for him among them who had the greater share therein, his will be a great torment”. This hadith connects to ones daily life by reminding them that backbiting and spreading rumors about others does more harm than good and that Allah (SWT) will punish those who do so. Using the hadith as a reminder can help urge people to only speak good of others, instilling in them the fear of Allah’s punishment and understanding of the importance of community and acceptance. With these concepts in mind, Muslims should strive to be inclusive and positive in their interactions, reducing anxiety and stress within the ummah and outside of it.

Islam gives many examples through hadiths and Ayat that highlights the importance of good manners and kindness among one another. This applies to all Muslims, of any age, any race, and any background, and shows that in classrooms and school environments, young children and teenagers should strive to help one another and refrain from bullying and exclusion. Islam shows that Allah looks down on those who purposely hurt others and refuse to embrace individuals, leading to worsened mental health and anxiety. He reminds the believers that He is their ultimate protector and safe haven in this life.

There is nothing new about social anxiety, being as it is, nothing has been offered as a solution as a means to solve it. Promoting preventive mental health strategies is crucial to solving this situation, increasing awareness, precision in detecting symptoms of social anxiety disorder,

reducing stigma, and offering treatment. However, the backbone to all these key components lies within the school environment; as that is where the child spends the entirety of their week, it can significantly affect their mood and behavioral patterns. It is crucial to emphasize the disparity between social anxiety disorder and general anxiety, as this is a diagnosable disorder, that can be developed and cause distress on its sufferers if not properly acknowledged and treated.

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