

Graham Russell is a Lecturer in Health Psychology at the University of Plymouth. This article has been adapted from, 'Social Anxiety: The elephant in your classroom' by Graham Russell, Education and Health 2008, 26:3, 50-53.

For communication please email: graham.russell@plymouth.ac.uk

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Social Anxiety and its affect on students

Social anxiety is ranked as the third most common mental health problem in adults and young people. However, it often goes undetected by teachers, parents and GPs, where it may be mistaken for shyness, which is generally regarded as a benign personality trait. A recent prevalence survey carried out on 865 students at the University of Plymouth and its Partnership (FE) colleges found that approximately 10% of students registered marked to severe levels of social anxiety and similar results were found in a Swedish University and it is likely to be present in secondary schools.

An intranet survey was designed to gather information about the impact of social anxiety on students in higher education. Students with social anxiety were asked how they felt during seminars and lectures, etc. The data showed that the most challenging activity was taking part in presentations with over 80% of students reporting anxiety, inhibition and embarrassment. Most of the distress was directly linked to fear of public speaking, and many students reported avoiding distress by making themselves inconspicuous and sitting wherever they thought it unlikely they would be asked questions. Others coped with presentations by rehearsing extensively to avoid looking foolish. This did not always work and, for some students, anxiety on the day led to poor performance and anger as some students believed that style rather than substance was being assessed.

Some students believed their marks had suffered through an inability to concentrate or due to stammering or stuttering during public speaking. However, a number of students said that, although doing

presentations was really hard, they were pleased they had persevered. Hence, we cannot assume that students with social anxiety will necessarily do less well than their peers as the rehearsing strategy may have led to some students doing very well.

Research shows that people with social anxiety are often reluctant to seek help, because it conflicts with their need to present a favourable public image and avoid ridicule. Indeed, rates of help seeking were found to be correspondingly low with the personal tutor being the most common source of help (18%).

The students were asked what sorts of support the University might put in place and several discrete themes emerged. These included: enhancing opportunities for making friends and social networks; raising awareness about social anxiety and developing support services. Students were split between wanting the right to opt out of presentations and acknowledging that confidence in public speaking was an important skill to master (with appropriate support to facilitate confidence).

Recommendations

Information about recognising social anxiety is available via the Anxiety UK website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Students with generalised social anxiety are most likely to benefit from one-one support from a counsellor or psychologist. However many specific social interaction difficulties (e.g. being assertive or engaging in public speaking) may benefit from self-help approaches, for example websites such as 'Shy no Longer':

www.ccl.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=40

and 'Mood Gym': <http://moodgym.anu.edu.au>