



## **Shyness or Social Phobia?**

By Dr. Linda Hancock

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email [office@drlindahancock.com](mailto:office@drlindahancock.com)

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A few years ago, an Administrative Assistant at the mental health clinic opened a large box of books and resources that I had ordered. Everything inside was designated to my attention and the title of each item either had the word "Shyness" or "Social Phobia". With a shocked expression she turned to a co-worker and said, "What on earth is Hancock doing?" The other lady wisely replied "Think about it. She's never had a shy day in her life!"

She was correct! I had been assigned to work with a number of clients who were experiencing difficulties in social settings and I didn't really have a clue about where to start. As a result, I decided to begin a study of the topic and actually spent a year in the process.

The first thing that I learned is that using the term "shyness" implies a helplessness that cannot be resolved whereas using the term "social phobia" offers the hope that comes with learning strategies to improve.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV-TR) outlines the criteria which would assist professionals in diagnosing Social Phobia including:

- a) A marked and persistent fear of one or more social and performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others. The person fears acting in a humiliating or embarrassing manner.
- b) Exposure to the social situation provokes anxiety or may have a Panic Attack.
- c) The individual recognizes that the fear is excessive or unreasonable.
- d) The situation is avoided or endured with intense anxiety or distress.
- e) Avoidance, anxious anticipation or distress interferes significantly with the individual's routine, functioning, activities or relationships.
- f) Duration is at least 6 months in individuals under 18 years of age.
- g) The fear or avoidance is not due to substances or medical conditions or another mental disorder.

Social phobias often begin with adolescents who are afraid of scrutiny by other people. They therefore avoid social situations. Fear of criticism and low self-esteem may also be present.

Often the person who experiences Social Phobia can experience relief by learning skills and making cognitive adjustments to their thinking.

Psychologists are trained and experienced in working with individuals who have a Social Phobia. You will likely be thankful to not only learn how you can deal with this in a healthy manner, but also to practice techniques that will allow you to conquer the fear associated with it.