

Living with Social Anxiety Disorder

“The more I have to interact with other people, the more anxious that I feel.”

Molly Hass is among the 15 million Americans who suffer from social anxiety disorder. For her, like most, it started in her teenage years with an intense fear of being embarrassed, rejected, or humiliated when dealing with other people. It's not a matter of just being shy.

“I'm not shy. Like I like people, I like to talk to people it's just the anxiety gets in the way, and I feel like I can't do the things that I want to do.”

To be diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, symptoms have to last at least six months and interfere with daily living, work, school, going out with friends.

“To the point where the person is maybe literally completely isolated from society. Holed up and you know in an apartment or a single room all day.”

“I get trembly, my hands will shake, or like my voice will shake. I get upset stomach a lot. I start to stutter my mouth gets dry. Very similar to people that have like stage fright. It's, it's very similar. If it's really bad I might feel like I'm going to pass out or it's hard to stand up.”

Molly knew she needed help when, a few years ago, the depression and anxiety had her completely worn out.

“I was feeling anxious and I didn't know how to stop. And I did become suicidal and that was kind of a point where I decided that this wasn't something, I could take care of myself.”

For some people with social anxiety disorder, medication can help, but with or without that, therapy is highly recommended.

“Really the gold standard treatment for social anxiety disorder is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or CBT.”

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can give people suffering from anxiety tools to help them cope with whatever is causing their distress.

“You can change the way you think, and you can change the way you behave before you go into those situations so that you can go in there and not be anxious.”

One tool that helps Molly with her social anxiety is “Cognitive Reframing,” essentially thinking about the best and worst things that could happen in any given situation.

“And then you focus on what's most likely going to happen because it's probably not going to be the best. It's probably going to be in the middle. Or it will be like, you know even if the worst does happen, how is that going to affect you three years from now? Is it going to make a difference?”

Another CBT “tool” is Exposure Therapy.

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“What CBT must include is helping individuals gradually confront or do what we call exposure to feared situations, social situations where the individual might be faced with potential scrutiny or embarrassment.”

“So, like I have to make a phone call because that makes me anxious. Or I have to go meet somebody new. I have to talk to somebody new in a coffee shop. And so part of my continued therapy is ‘OK, I have to continue to do things that make me anxious and I’m not allowed to not do things because they make me anxious.’”

Molly has also discovered calming activities, along with getting enough sleep, help her deal with her anxiety.

“So, I have things that I can do whether that’s like playing the piano, like baking. I also like color that’s very relaxing for me. I’m just doing things right away that kind of help bring me out of it.”

People with social anxiety disorder are at a greater risk of developing other mental health issues, such as panic attacks, depression or alcohol abuse. That’s why it’s particularly important to find help.

“No matter how dark and how distorted it becomes, and you can regain your life. Treatment is worth it.”

“I didn’t realize how much better my life could be until I went to therapy and I learned these skills that helped me kind of manage it day to day.”