I feel like I have lost the ability to communicate with people

Dear Alice,

I've been "plagued" with this problem for at least a year now, and it seems to be getting progressively worse. I feel like I have lost the ability to communicate with people. Sure, I can make small talk about the weather and stuff like that, but I feel like I've lost my openness and humor with people. I figure I am changing and learning new things about myself, but this is getting ridiculous because it is affecting my social life drastically.

Whenever I get into a conversation with someone, either on the phone or in person, I become flustered. I have a problem with eye contact and I become very hot and sometimes I turn red in the face. Worst of all, my mind seems to be blank all the time and I can't get past small talk (even with my friends). I put a lot of pressure on myself when it comes to maintaining eye contact and continuing a conversation, but this pressure seems to fluster me more. I also seem to notice long pauses in conversation which I interpret as moments of awkwardness.

I realize that I have nothing to prove to anyone, but this problem still persists. I used to be very social before and now I am not. So what must I do to get by this? I figure, I'll just deal with it and it will go away, but it's been going on for too long. What must I do?

Thanx Alice,
Captain Confused

Answer

Dear Captain Confused,

For some reason, you seem to have become extremely self-conscious in social situations, which can feel awful, uncomfortable, and counterproductive. Well, reaching out, as you have, is a great first step.

Everyone can feel shy; focusing on discomfort or awkwardness in social situations can make a person even more self-conscious. Some manifest their anxiety by blushing, sweating, feeling sick, talking too much, monopolizing the conversation, showing off, or by maintaining an ultra-cool demeanor. Some get tongue-tied and/or withdrawn. And some are better at either masking
or mastering their insecurities. Having those types of reactions are normal, and maybe knowing this might ease some concern.

It might also be useful to see if you can pin this change in your social comfort level on a specific incident, a feeling triggered by an observation or realization, or a humiliating experience. Has anything happened to you in the past year that made you feel very embarrassed in a social circumstance? Have you perhaps gained some new awareness of a characteristic of yours that is making you socially self-conscious? Have you been openly rejected by someone recently? Any of these types of occurrences might set off a physical reaction to the social discomfort you are currently experiencing.

However, since you mention that this problem is having a significant impact on your social life and has lasted for over one year, you may want to see a health care provider about the possibility that you are not simply shy, but have an anxiety disorder — specifically, social phobia. This phobia is characterized by extreme and excessive worry and fear of social situations that affects your personal, academic, and professional life, and impairs your ability to perform day-to-day activities. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, approximately 15 million Americans have a social anxiety disorder, so if this is your diagnosis, you’re definitely not alone.

These questions are often asked to identify the degree of discomfort and to make a diagnosis:

- How do you feel before you go out to meet friends? Do you ever avoid social situations because of your worries?
- Does anyone else in your family feel nervous speaking at social functions, with new people, or at work? Social phobia or social anxiety can run in families.
- Try to describe what about being in social situations scares you. Do you always have this immediate reaction to social situations?
- Has anything significant changed in your life over the last year or so? Do you remember feeling your anxiety increase after a particular conversation or experience?
- Is the fear and anxiety you feel out of proportion or unreasonable compared to the actual situation?

Becoming flustered, hot, red in the face, or feeling as though you want to run away when there is a pause in the conversation are hallmarks of social anxiety, especially if these responses are interfering with your social life. Some people feel nauseated, shaky, sweaty, or have a panic attack when their anxiety is triggered. For some, the fear begins when they anticipate a social situation. The good news is that there are resources available to help you deal with social anxiety. First, getting a physical exam from your health care provider might help determine whether an underlying health condition may be contributing to your feelings of anxiety, such as heart disease, diabetes, thyroid problems, or asthma. Speaking with a mental health professional might also help. One option to manage social anxiety is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), a type of talk therapy that focuses on addressing fears and altering reactions to anxiety-causing circumstances. Psychopharmacological medications are also effective at reducing anxiety and are typically combined with talk therapy.

Check out the National Institute of Mental Health’s Getting Help: Locate Services for more information on finding a therapist in your area. Whether being flustered is a result of a transition
in your life, ongoing social anxiety, or something not yet determined, it is possible to learn to respond differently and feel more empowered when you speak with people. With the support of professionals, you'll be taking another step toward mastering your discomfort. Best of luck!

Alice!

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Related questions

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Services (CUIMC)

Published date:
Oct 06, 2005
Last reviewed on:
Mar 11, 2015

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