

Some bullies are just the shy type: New research shows a darker side to social anxiety disorder

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When you think of people suffering from social anxiety, you probably characterize them as shy, inhibitive and submissive. However, new research from psychologists Todd Kashdan and Patrick McKnight at George Mason University suggests that there is a subset of socially anxious people who act out in aggressive, risky ways -- and that their behavior patterns are often misunderstood.

In the new study, "The Darker Side of Social Anxiety: When Aggressive Impulsivity Prevails Over Shy Inhibition," published in *Current Directions in [Psychological Science](#)*, Kashdan and McKnight found evidence that a subset of adults diagnosed with [Social Anxiety Disorder](#) were prone to behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, [unprotected sex](#) and other risk-prone actions. These actions caused positive experiences in the short-term, yet detracted from their quality of life in the longer-term.

"We often miss the underlying problems of people around us. Parents and teachers might think their kid is a bully, acts out and is a [behavior problem](#) because they have a conduct disorder or antisocial tendencies," says Kashdan. "However, sometimes when we dive into the motive for their actions, we will find that they show extreme social anxiety and extreme fears of being judged. If social anxiety was the reason for their behavior, this would suggest an entirely different intervention."

Kashdan and McKnight suggest that looking at the underlying cause of extreme behavior can help us understand the way people interact within society.

"In the adult world, the same can be said for managers, co-workers, [romantic partners](#) and friends. It is easy to misunderstand why people are behaving the way we do and far too often we assume that the aggressive, impulsive behaviors are the problem. What we are finding is that for a large minority of people, social anxiety underlies the problem," says Kashdan.

The researchers suggest that further studies of this subset group can help psychologists better understand and treat the behaviors. "Recent laboratory experiments suggest that people can be trained to enhance their self-control capacities and thus better inhibit impulsive urges and regulate emotions and attention," says McKnight. "Essentially, training people to be more self-disciplined—whether in physical workout routines or finances or eating habits—improves willpower when their self-control is tested."

Provided by George Mason University

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