

Women are slightly more socially anxious than men

April 9 2014, by Gary W. Lewandowski Jr.



Making the first move. Credit: Laura Smith, CC BY-NC-ND

Many social situations can provoke anxiety. Be it a networking event for work or having unannounced guests, these kinds of interactions can cause even the most outgoing among us to feel unsettled. But do these feelings differ between the sexes?

A study in the journal of [*Personality and Individual Differences*](#) tries to answer that question by surveying more than 31,000 participants across several countries – 16 in Latin America, as well as Portugal and Brazil.

The results of their analyses demonstrated that overall, [women](#) reported

more [social anxiety](#) than [men](#). This was true of many individual social contexts including interacting with strangers and when reacting to criticism.

For some, social anxiety may arise only in specific situations (such as public speaking) and may simply lead to nervously holding a drink in two hands or a bit of fluttering uncertainty in your voice. But for many others, it can be much more debilitating and pervasive across many different situations.

Mutually awkward

In the study, participants came from all age groups, with an average age of 25. They completed a social anxiety questionnaire that assessed their uneasiness or discomfort across a variety of situations including interacting with strangers, interacting with members of the opposite sex, public speaking, expressing displeasure, reacting to criticism and speaking to authority figures. A separate measure assessed participants' anxiety in specific [social situations](#) such as eating or drinking in public, working in small groups, working while being observed or going to a party.

Of the different social situations that researchers analysed, the greatest difference between men and women's reported anxiety was for talking to the opposite sex. This suggests that women experience greater uneasiness and stress when talking to men than men experience when talking to women.

These [differences](#) existed across all 18 countries and were consistent across [age groups](#). The reasons for the gender differences are not conclusive. As the authors point out, feelings of nervousness about talking to the opposite sex may be rooted in gender roles that encourage women to adopt a more passive role when interacting with men. Of the

five social settings measured, women and men both rated interactions with the opposite sex as the second most anxiety provoking, trailing only dealing with criticism or embarrassment – in other words, being reprimanded for doing something wrong.

Look before you leap

There are limitations. First, the differences between men and women were relatively small. Second, the data was self-reported, which means the differences in the study may merely reflect women and men's willingness to report social anxiety rather than actual differences in their experience. In this case, it may simply be that it is more socially acceptable in each of the studied countries for women to admit uneasiness or uncertainty in social settings.

Cultural influences also need to be considered, because it can create power differentials, such that women may experience greater anxiety not because they are women, but because they have less power in their society. All were Catholic societies so there may be an element of patriarchy at play, influencing responses.

The existing literature on men and women's social anxiety has produced mixed results. The present study helps clarify sex differences in social anxiety by collecting a large sample taken from many countries. This data suggests women experience more social anxiety than men, and that this difference is especially prominent when talking to the opposite sex.

Though women experienced anxiety when talking to the opposite sex more than men, it is clear that both genders experience anxiety on this front – more so than most other [social settings](#). So take heart, if you're a little nervous or unsure about approaching or interacting with someone of the opposite sex, you're not alone.

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