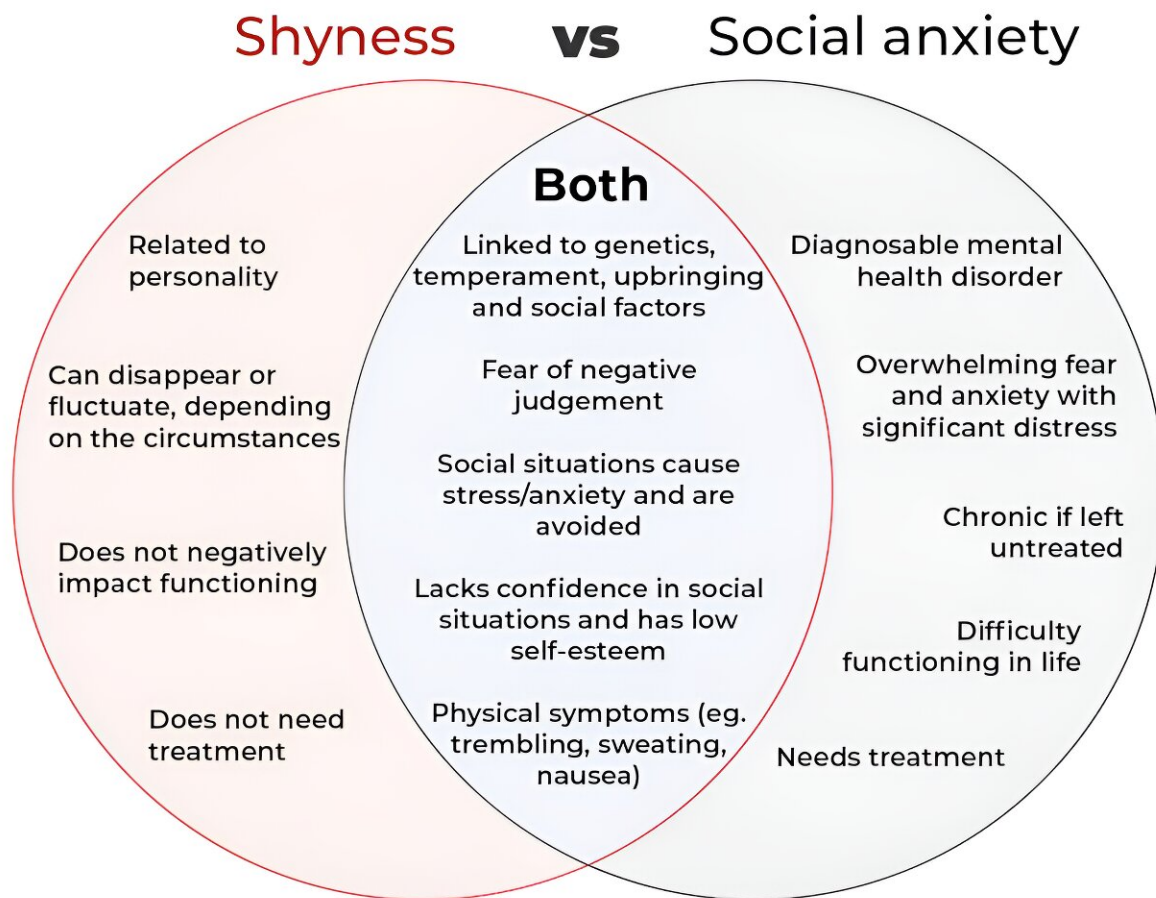


What's the difference between shyness and social anxiety?

May 30 2024, by Kayla Steele and Jill Newby



Credit: The Conversation

The terms "shyness" and "social anxiety" are often used interchangeably

because they both involve feeling uncomfortable in social situations.

However, feeling shy, or having a shy personality, is not the same as experiencing social anxiety (short for "[social anxiety disorder](#)").

Here are some of the similarities and differences, and what the distinction means.

How are they similar?

It can be normal to feel nervous or even stressed in new social situations or when interacting with new people. And everyone differs in how comfortable they feel when interacting with others.

For people who are shy or socially anxious, social situations can be very uncomfortable, stressful or even threatening. There can be a strong desire to avoid these situations.

People who are shy or socially anxious may respond with "flight" (by withdrawing from the situation or avoiding it entirely), "freeze" (by detaching themselves or feeling disconnected from their body), or "fawn" (by trying to appease or placate others).

A complex interaction of biological and [environmental factors](#) is also thought to influence the development of shyness and social anxiety.

For example, both [shy children](#) and [adults with social anxiety](#) have neural circuits that respond strongly to stressful social situations, such as being excluded or left out.

People who are shy or socially anxious commonly report physical symptoms of stress in certain situations, or even when anticipating them. These include sweating, blushing, trembling, an increased heart rate or

hyperventilation.

How are they different?

Social anxiety is a diagnosable mental health condition and is an example of an anxiety disorder.

For people who struggle with social anxiety, social situations—including social interactions, being observed and performing in front of others—trigger [intense fear](#) or anxiety about being judged, criticized or rejected.

To be diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, social anxiety needs to be persistent (lasting more than six months) and have a significant negative impact on important areas of life such as work, school, relationships, and identity or sense of self.

Many adults with social anxiety report feeling shy, timid and lacking in confidence when they were a child. However, not all shy children go on to develop social anxiety. Also, feeling shy does not necessarily mean a person meets the criteria for social anxiety disorder.

People vary in how shy or outgoing they are, depending on where they are, who they are with and how comfortable they feel in the situation. This is particularly true for children, who sometimes appear reserved and shy with strangers and peers, and outgoing with known and trusted adults.

Individual differences in temperament, [personality traits](#), early childhood experiences, family upbringing and environment, and parenting style, can also influence the extent to which people feel shy across social situations.

However, people with social anxiety have overwhelming fears about embarrassing themselves or being negatively judged by others; they experience these fears consistently and across multiple social situations.

The intensity of this fear or anxiety often leads people to avoid situations. If avoiding a situation is not possible, they may engage in safety behaviors, such as looking at their phone, wearing sunglasses or rehearsing conversation topics.

The effect social anxiety can have on a person's life can be far-reaching. It may include [low self-esteem](#), breakdown of friendships or romantic relationships, difficulties pursuing and progressing in a career, and dropping out of study.

The impact this has on a person's ability to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life, and the distress this causes, differentiates social anxiety from shyness.

Children can show similar signs or symptoms of social anxiety to adults. But they may also feel upset and teary, irritable, have temper tantrums, cling to their parents, or refuse to speak in certain situations.

If left untreated, social anxiety can set children and [young people](#) up for a future of missed opportunities, so early intervention is key. With professional and parental support, patience and guidance, children can be taught strategies to overcome social anxiety.

Why does the distinction matter?

Social anxiety disorder is a mental health condition that [persists](#) for people who do not receive adequate support or treatment.

Without treatment, it can lead to [difficulties](#) in education and at work,

and in developing meaningful relationships.

Receiving a diagnosis of social anxiety disorder can be validating for some people as it recognizes the level of distress and that its impact is more intense than shyness.

A diagnosis can also be an important first step in accessing appropriate, evidence-based treatment.

Different people have different support needs. However, [clinical practice guidelines](#) recommend cognitive-behavioral therapy (a kind of psychological therapy that teaches people practical coping skills). This is often used with exposure therapy (a kind of psychological therapy that helps people face their fears by breaking them down into a series of step-by-step activities). This combination is effective in-person, [online](#) and in [brief treatments](#).

For more support or further reading

Online resources about social anxiety include:

- This Way Up's [online program](#) for managing excessive shyness and fear of social situations
- Beyond Blue's [resources](#) on social anxiety
- a guide to [looking after yourself](#) if you have social anxiety, from the Western Australian health department
- social anxiety [online program for children and teens](#) from the University of Queensland
- inroads, a [self-guided online program](#) for young adults who drink alcohol to manage their anxiety.

We thank the Black Dog Institute [Lived Experience Advisory Network](#) members for providing feedback and input for this article and our

research.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: What's the difference between shyness and social anxiety? (2024, May 30) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-difference-shyness-social-anxiety.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.