

Holiday Insight

By Suze Hargraves

The holidays are right around the corner. That's good news for some of us, but others, who suffer from social anxiety disorder, can find the holiday season to be nothing more than months of agony. There is something we can all do to help though; educate ourselves and build understanding. With the right knowledge and some helpful tools we can make the holidays as enjoyable as possible for everyone.

Social Anxiety Disorder (social phobia) is intense fear of certain social situations particularly ones where a person is unfamiliar with either the group or the setting or situations in which they feel judged. What happens to someone who suffers from social anxiety who is put into one of these situations? Intense worry can start months before an event to the point where mental health or physical health is compromised. There is fear of judgment, embarrassment and extreme self-consciousness. Physically a person can experience a pounding or racing heart, breathing problems, stomach upset, dry mouth, shaking hands or voice, loss of voice, changes in body temperature, headaches and muscle tension. Isolation (avoidance) and it's seeming opposite, the intense need to control, are both (although not always) manifestations of social anxiety.

So what is the best way to help a friend or loved one with social anxiety to enjoy the holiday season? Understanding. Recognize that participation in social events takes great effort, personal energy and commitment on the part of someone with social anxiety. Include someone with isolationist tendencies by providing opportunities to participate in smaller groups or alone by working on a task in the kitchen or by helping with children or pets. Give the controller a specific aspect of the event to manage. Sometimes social anxiety sufferers will use alcohol to relieve their symptoms. If you see this type of behavior, try to redirect the person toward more constructive activities. Remember, understanding is the key. Once you see a behavior for what it really is, it's a lot easier to deal with someone who otherwise might simply appear to be difficult.

If you or someone you know suffers from social anxiety, therapy is an extremely effective way of overcoming the problem. There are medications that can help as well. Here are a few things a person can work on independently to begin overcoming social anxiety:

- Learn to use relaxation techniques and controlled breathing.

- Work on replacing negative thoughts with positive ones.

- Face fears a little at a time instead of avoiding them totally.

The Mayo Clinic has more information at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/social-anxiety-disorder/DS00595>.

The holidays are a time of year which requires us to see and accept people for who they are. By learning to understand and respond in a positive way, we can all enjoy the holidays with a lot less anxiety.

Suze Hargraves is a staff member and writer for White Mountain Community Health Center, a non-profit health care provider serving the Mount Washington Valley. Call (603) 447-8900, Ext. 1, for an appointment or information.