Holiday Social Anxiety: Practical Tips for Coping
By, Sheila Josephs, PhD

The holidays can be a time of joy, but for many that joy is overshadowed by social anxiety. Do you worry that others are looking at you negatively? Do you wonder if you will meet social expectations or instead will be perceived as “boring” at holiday events? It is perfectly normal to feel nervous about meeting new people or attending parties. But, if you feel very self-conscious and dread everyday social situations, you may have a social anxiety disorder. If so, you are not alone. According to the Anxiety Disorder Association of America, 15 million people in the US suffer from significant social anxiety and have a disorder that interferes with their everyday social and emotional functioning.

The hallmark of this condition is a strong fear of others’ negative evaluations. Often people with this condition will avoid social interactions, particularly ones that involve taking the social risk of “performing” in public. Giving parties, attending parties, talking with someone new, attempting to appear “interesting” all can evoke strong feelings of anxiety.

If you suffer from social anxiety during the holidays, here are some tips for minimizing your misery and maximizing your festivities:

- **Avoid social isolation.** Skipping dinner parties and social occasions while temporarily relieving your anxiety will, in the long-term, serve to worsen your fearfulness. Set small social goals for yourself. Then pat yourself on the back when you achieve them. Some realistic goals might be talking to someone new at a party or calling up a friend you haven’t spoken to in a while.

- **Stop Comparing!** Avoid comparisons between yourself and others at social events. You will tend to exaggerate negative comparisons about yourself and minimize positive ones. People with social anxiety often severely attend to and exaggerate their social deficits. It may feel like you are doing a horrible job in conversation, when to others you have been a wonderful companion.

- **Coat-Check your perfectionism at the door!** Try not to be too hard on yourself during the holidays. It is okay if you are not the life of the party. Pauses in conversations are normal and sometimes conversations are not always exciting. Events can even be dull! This is a normal part of social interaction.
• **Prepare in advance.** Have a few easy ways to describe yourself at social events. Discussing current events is always a good way to continue a conversation.

• **Be Curious!** It is useful to focus on learning about the person you are talking with. This helps to remove your focus on yourself and your perceived inadequacies. Try coming to social events with several questions to ask others. For example, you can ask, “How are you spending the holidays?” “How are your children?” or “What type of work do you do?” Remember, questions do not need to be elaborate or interesting to be effective conversation starters.

• **Avoid using alcohol** to mask your physical symptoms of anxiety. It can be dangerous to find “courage” in a bottle. Being “tipsy” may make you feel more at ease, but will impair your ability to interact with others.

• **Focus on others.** The negative judge in your head is always turning the focus inward that you are not “clever-enough, exciting enough or good enough.” Turn the focus outward by doing positive acts such as volunteering, providing social support to a friend in need, or just being a good listener.

• **Be “mindful”** to stay in the moment and enjoy festivities as much as possible. Remember that when you let go and allow yourself to feel carefree and spontaneous, you can feel the true joy of the holidays and true joy in being yourself.

If you are experiencing significant symptoms of social anxiety, consider seeking help and support from a psychologist. A type of therapy known as “cognitive-behavioral therapy” has well-researched, effective treatments for social anxiety. This therapy will teach you how to change ingrained patterns of negative thinking, decrease avoidance of social situations and practice new social goals. With a therapist’s support, your New Year’s Resolution can be to behave in ways that are less socially anxious – a true new start to the New Year!

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