

Easing Social Anxiety During The Holidays: Tips From Harvard Women's Health Watch

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For most people, family gatherings, parties, and other social activities are part of the fun of the holiday season. Not so for those with social anxiety disorder, who dread-or even avoid-social situations, reports the December 2008 issue of Harvard Women's Health Watch.

It's perfectly normal to feel nervous about meeting new people or attending parties. But if you feel inordinately uneasy and self-conscious in such everyday social situations, and sometimes find yourself skipping them, you may have social anxiety disorder. The thought of proposing a toast, socializing with people you don't know well, or just making small talk may be terrifying. You may experience palpitations, sweating, confusion, or other symptoms of anxiety. Even if you make yourself socialize, you may feel miserable before, during, and afterward. The problem isn't limited to parties, but may affect your life at school and work, too.

Certain types of psychotherapy can help treat and manage social anxiety disorder. Cognitive behavioral therapy, the most widely studied intervention, aims to correct ingrained patterns of negative thinking and the behaviors they cause by helping people face their social fears directly. Medication may also be helpful.

If you suffer from social anxiety disorder, try to avoid isolation during the holidays, suggests Harvard Women's Health Watch. That only serves to reinforce social anxiety. If small religious or family events are the least threatening, stick with those. Be careful with alcohol-there are serious pitfalls in using it to ease your worries or boost your courage. Leave time for relaxation, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and avoid caffeine. Finally, keep in mind that social anxiety is likely to get worse if left untreated.

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