Cognitive behavioral therapy in the treatment of social phobia

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Social phobia consists of a marked and persistent fear of encountering other people, usually in small groups; or doing certain acts in a public place, like eating in public toilets, public speaking or encounters with persons of the opposite sex. Affected individuals fear that they will be evaluated negatively or that they will act in a manner that resulting in their humiliation or embarrassment whenever they are expected to go into the phobic situations; they develop severe anticipatory anxiety. They utilize various excuses to avoid phobic situations. This avoidance usually affects their lives quite adversely. Many of these patients exhibit psychological symptoms of poor self confidence, show anxiety on trifles and may be very conscious of some physical or psychological defect in them; as a result, they may develop secondary depression. Exposure to social situations can produce physical symptoms such as sweating, blushing, muscle tension, pounding heart, dry mouth, nausea, urgency of masturbation, shaky voice or trembling. Social phobia is the third most common mental disorder in adults worldwide, with a lifetime prevalence of at least 5% (depending on the threshold for distress and impairment). There is an equal gender ratio in treatment settings; but in catchment area surveys, there is a female preponderance of 3:2. Affected individuals are more likely to be unmarried and have a low socioeconomic status. Although common, social phobia is often not diagnosed or effectively treated. There have however been a number of developments in our understanding and treatment of social phobia over the past decade. Cognitive and behavioral interventions for social phobia appear to be more effective than wait-list controls and supportive therapy. Cognitive behavioral treatment involving cognitive restructuring plus exposure appears to be an effective treatment and exhibits a larger effect than either exposure or social skills training or cognitive restructuring alone. The sessions of CBT for social phobia are devoted to training clients in the basic tenets of cognitive therapy, especially the link between faulty assumptions or irrational thinking about social situations and anxiety experienced in those situations.