



Recovery Notes

Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW

Scientific Recovery

COMPASSIONATE • PRIVATE • PERSONALIZED • PROVEN

For Problems with Alcohol

OUTPATIENT TREATMENT FOR HIGH-PROFILE WOMEN

2011 • ISSUE 1



Social Anxiety & Alcohol

Using alcohol to decrease anxiety in social situations is a common strategy for women with social anxiety disorder. But these short-term fixes can have long-term negative consequences. As women keep trying to blunt their feelings of anxiety with alcohol, they can develop a real alcohol abuse problem.

Most, if not all of us, feel anxious from time to time. But in any given year, about 40 million adults are dealing with a more serious level of anxiety called an anxiety disorder. And in many cases, people with an anxiety disorder also have a problem with alcohol.

A type of anxiety disorder called social anxiety disorder appears to have a particularly strong tie to alcohol abuse. Nearly half of all people diagnosed with social anxiety disorder also meet the criteria for an alcohol use disorder. But women with social anxiety disorder appear to be more likely than their male counterparts to have problems with alcohol.

A recent study that tracked adolescents into adulthood over roughly 14 years found

A recent study that tracked adolescents into adulthood over roughly 14 years found that those with social anxiety disorder at the beginning of the study were roughly 4.5 times more likely to develop alcohol dependence.

that those with social anxiety disorder at the beginning of the study were roughly 4.5 times more likely to develop alcohol dependence.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER?

Many people experience social anxiety. That is, they feel uncomfortable or even anxious in social situations, such as talking in front of a group, talking with strangers, or even talking with friends. Levels of social anxiety exist on a continuum from mild to severe.

People with social anxiety disorder, also called social phobia, have an unusually strong sense of anxiety while they're out in public. They experience fear when faced with a social situation that is unfamiliar or that potentially exposes them to scrutiny by others. The woman with a social anxiety disorder fears that she will act in a way that will be humiliating or embarrassing or that will result in criticism. While a woman with social anxiety disorder recognizes that her fear is excessive or unreasonable, the anxiety nevertheless can interfere with her normal routine, occupational functioning, social activities, or relationships. Usually, women with this disorder feel clear distress about having the phobia.

Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW

333 East Ontario Street Chicago, IL 60611 • (312) 642-4333 • www.scientificrecovery.com

Women with a social phobia often make life choices based on their fears, such as pursuing a career in which they can work alone. Because these kinds of life choices circumvent their underlying social fears, many women with social phobia may be able to function quite adequately for extended periods of time. Once the situation changes, however, the fears may resurface. For example, when a promotion is

People who have social anxiety disorders, plus alcohol problems, are more likely to have more severe symptoms of anxiety, other emotional problems and health conditions, and more difficulty interacting with other people than individuals who only have a social phobia.

offered, she may turn it down rather than encounter the social demands required for the new job. Consequently, for many women with this disorder, life is orchestrated around social fears, even if this results in social isolation or less financial independence and professional achievement.

ANXIETY AND ALCOHOLISM: THE LINK

Women with social anxiety disorder report that aside from totally avoiding anxiety-inducing situations, alcohol use is one of their primary means of coping. Regardless of whether they experience actual benefits from alcohol consumption, the belief that alcohol will reduce social anxiety motivates many socially anxious women to

use alcohol as a chief coping strategy. They expect that alcohol will reduce their social anxiety and once they experience relief after consuming alcohol, they are likely to continue to use alcohol for its purported anxiety reducing effects. This is especially true for individuals who are still engaging in social interactions rather than avoiding them completely.

But, alcohol use can add to women's overall problems rather than relieve them. Over time, women with social phobia may feel a greater need to drink to cope with anxiety. In order to get the same effect, she may have to increase the amount that she drinks and this increased alcohol use can easily lead to alcohol dependence.

People who have social anxiety disorders, plus alcohol problems, are more likely to have more severe symptoms of anxiety, other emotional problems and health conditions, and more difficulty interacting with other people than individuals who only have a social phobia.

ANXIETY AND ALCOHOLISM: GETTING TREATMENT

A variety of therapies are used to treat social anxiety disorder, which may help diminish a woman's inclination to quiet her anxiety with alcohol. Medications commonly used for the condition include the antidepressants paroxetine, sertraline, and venlafaxine. Some patients may also take benzodiazepines, such as clonazepam or beta-blockers, such as propranolol, which can reduce the physical

symptoms of anxiety, such as shaking and rapid heartbeat.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy provided by a mental health professional is often the most recommended and most successful treatment option for people with both social anxiety and problems with alcohol. Cognitive-behavioral therapy can teach patients how to change their ways of

Cognitive-behavioral therapy provided by a mental health professional is often the most recommended and most successful treatment option for people with both social anxiety and problems with alcohol.

thinking about being in public and about self-management options in the face of situations that trigger anxiety. This type of therapy encourages the use of specific strategies to help offset anxiety and reduce alcohol use. In some cases, patients may first need to be treated for alcoholism before addressing the anxiety disorder.

Women with social anxiety disorder often avoid group therapy and self-help support groups for people with substance abuse problems, like Alcoholics Anonymous. Although group meetings can provide much-needed encouragement and inspiration for people struggling with both alcohol abuse and an anxiety disorder, the social anxiety disorder needs to be adequately addressed before these women can make use of this valuable resource.

Women who have severe anxiety combined with alcohol problems need to understand that they shouldn't — and can't — manage these problems alone. Seeking professional help will address both the anxiety symptoms and any additional problems, such as alcohol abuse, and achieve the best possible results.

— Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D.

Scientific Recovery

Scientific Recovery is an evidence-based treatment program for women seeking state-of-the-art, individual therapy for problem drinking. Our focus is on professional women who have recognized that alcohol is a problem they no longer want in their lives. Our goal is to assist women not only to eliminate their alcohol dependence, but also to be happy that they did.



Susan F. Walsh, Ph.D. LCSW

333 East Ontario Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611
(312) 642-4333

www.scientificrecovery.com