

Introduction

New Frontiers in the Management of Social Anxiety Disorder: Diagnosis, Treatment, and Clinical Course

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Social anxiety disorder is the most prevalent anxiety disorder and among the most common psychiatric disorders overall. Characterized by an intense and persistent fear of being scrutinized by others, social anxiety disorder has 1-year and lifetime prevalence rates of approximately 8% and 13%, respectively.¹ Social anxiety disorder typically emerges in childhood or adolescence and has a chronic course. Approximately 70% of patients with social anxiety disorder also have a lifetime history of depression, and as many as 49% have comorbid panic disorder; 32%, generalized anxiety disorder; and 11%, obsessive-compulsive disorder.² Patients with social anxiety disorder frequently self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs in an attempt to lessen the anxiety associated with social interaction. The reported prevalence of comorbid alcohol abuse ranges from 24%³ to 35%.⁴

In addition to comorbid psychiatric disorders, social anxiety disorder is associated with other complications including diminished educational and vocational achievement, financial dependence, and impaired relationships with family and friends. The risk of suicide is also increased, particularly in patients with other comorbid psychiatric disorders.⁵

A number of effective treatments for social anxiety disorder are now available. Clinical studies and anecdotal reports have demonstrated that selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, and benzodiazepines are effective in the treatment of this disorder. In addition, cognitive-behavioral therapy, alone and in combination with medication, is markedly effective in the treatment of social anxiety disorder.

The availability of effective treatments for social anxiety disorder should lead to an increase in timely recognition and treatment of this disorder as well as to a reduction in associated complications and chronicity. The articles presented in this supplement review the current state of our knowledge about social anxiety disorder, discuss cutting-edge pharmacologic and cognitive-behavioral therapies, and suggest future directions for research and clinical practice of this distressing and often disabling condition.

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