Cop ing with social phobia

DESHNIE NAI DOO

HAVE you ever been so terrified of speaking in front of a crowd that your heart races, your hands tremble and sweat drips from your forehead? All of this combined with the sudden urge to go to the toilet?

Congratulations for taking the big step to acknowledge all that because you are just about to discover that you don’t actually have to let a social phobia control your life or better still you don’t have to live it for the rest of your life.

According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), a social phobia is defined as an intense fear of becoming humiliated in social situations and two or three out of every one hundred people are affected by social phobia.

More specifically, a social phobia is the fear of becoming embarrassed in front of other people. While the most common social phobia is the fear of speaking in public, it may also present itself as a fear of being around other people, talking to a authoritative figure or even eating in public.

Chelsea Morgan, a communications specialist who suffers from a social phobia, says that her problem manifested at a very young age.

HELP AT HAND: Anxiety support groups assist with fear.

I stood there in front of them, stumbling over the words I so carefully prepared and left out nearly half the speech. Afterwards, my hands still trembled.

FEAR FACTOR: Social phobia can ruin your life if not controlled.

FACE THE FEAR: Don’t let social phobia control your life.

I once had to give a speech in front of the entire school. I had it written out and memorised but by the time I had to face them, my heart was racing and I felt light-headed.

“I stood in front of them, stumbling over the words I so carefully prepared and left out nearly half the speech. Afterwards, my hands still trembled,” Morgan said.

Now that she works in a field that requires her to talk to strangers almost everyday, she says that her fears have slightly abated.

“I still get nervous when I have to do presentations.

“...My heart thumps, my hands shake and I sweat a lot,” she said.

The disorder is often associated with shyness but the two should not be confused.

Shyness occurs when someone is confronted by a new situation but once the person becomes accustomed, they are able to relax and communicate with those around them.

They are also able to successfully control their physical reactions to the situations.

While people with social phobia understand that their reaction to such situations is irrational they are unable to control their body’s responses, which can often lead to full-blown panic attacks.

Sadag states that social phobia can be inherited or learned in early life. Although the average age of onset is between 15 and 20 years, almost 40% of it occurs before the child is 10 years old.

The good news is that social phobia can be treated and responds well to drug therapy, but it is important to know that it is a chronic condition that requires long-term management.

Cape Town based clinical psychologist David Rosenerstein said that up to 80% of individuals achieve a significant improve-