excessively when expected to interact with others and continuously watching for signs of judgement.

One of the most obvious symptoms of SAD is that people fear scrutiny from others, and may then use an avoidance tactic. This means that if a situation makes you feel uncomfortable, you will avoid it altogether or enlist a friend or family member to do the task. This habit may become entrenched.

The experts say that SAD is not just something you can live with and pretend everything is okay. It has serious effects on your health and wellbeing, with a risk of reduced self-esteem as well as physical symptoms such as elevated heart rate (palpitations), profuse sweating, muscle tension, stuttering, dry mouth, trembling, fidgeting and light-headedness.

Hartman adds that the disorder is usually accompanied by catastrophic and negative beliefs about oneself; for example, “Everyone is staring at me. I’m making a fool of myself.”

Professor Scedat warns that SAD is a serious condition and it’s important to realise this and not to trivialise the symptoms and behaviour.

While the direct cause is unknown, some studies show that adults who are living with this social disorder have come from a childhood where parents were less affectionate or caring, and perhaps more rejecting and controlling.

SAD can disrupt family life and limit work efficiency. It can be socially and economically disastrous, making it difficult for sufferers to complete school, go for interviews, obtain jobs, create friendships or even build romantic connections. Depression and suicide are common results of this anxiety-provoking condition and that’s why it’s so important to seek the correct help.

However, with the right kind of psychotherapy, and possibly pharmacotherapy (medication), many can experience a dramatic improvement.

Treatment includes Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which involves gradual exposure to some feared situations. Professor Scedat says anxiety management and relaxation techniques may also be effective.

Even though the period of treatment and recovery may be stressful, it is essential in helping sufferers live as normal a life as possible – one in which the little things no longer cause major stress, and they will be able to hear the phone ring without the fear.

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**COPING WITH AN ANXIETY ATTACK**

Here are some tips from the South African Depression & Anxiety Group:

- Sit upright, if possible – this increases the capacity of your lungs to fill with air.
- Control your breathing – breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth in a steady rhythm. Try to breathe out twice as long as you breathe in. This will help to empty your lungs of old air and make room for fresh air. You may find it helpful to count as you are breathing.
- If possible, mainly use your diaaphragm (lower chest muscle) to breathe – this will pull the lungs downwards to expand the airways and allow air to flow in. When we feel breathless, we tend to forget to use this muscle and often use the muscles at the top of the chest and our shoulders instead. Each breath is shallower if you use these upper chest muscles. So, you tend to breathe faster and feel more breathless if you use your upper chest muscles rather than your diaaphragm.
- How do you know that you’re using your diaaphragm? Feel below your breastbone at the top of your abdomen. If you cough, you will be able to feel the diaaphragm push out.
- Try to relax your shoulders and upper chest muscles when you breathe – it is best to take the weight off your shoulders by supporting your arms on the side-arms of a chair, or your lap. A gentle massage of your shoulders by a friend or relative will help you relax.
- Try to relax your mind – anxiety can make breathing problems worse. If possible, try to distract your mind when you are short of breath. Close your eyes and think of something pleasant. If your anxiety persists and you are having trouble breathing, it is important that you visit your doctor.

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**AT A GLANCE**

- Two to four percent of people suffer from panic disorder at some point in their lives.
- Social anxiety is the third-largest psychological problem in the world and many sufferers experience depression as a result.
- Public speaking is one of the most common fears for people suffering SAD.
- Panic is twice as common in women as it is in men.
- Up to 30 percent of people with an anxiety disorder abuse alcohol, 17 percent abuse drugs and up to 20 percent attempt suicide.

If you or anyone you know suffers from an anxiety disorder, remember that there is help available. The South Africa Depression & Anxiety Group (0800 70 80 90 or www.sadag.co.za) is a good place to start.