



## Social anxiety and self-protective communication style in close relationships

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### ABSTRACT

People with higher social anxiety tend to reveal less information about themselves in interactions with strangers, and this appears to be part of a self-protective strategy adopted in situations in which the risk of negative evaluation is judged to be particularly high. This research examined whether a similar style of communication may be adopted by people with higher social anxiety in their close relationships, and whether it may be associated with decrements in the quality (support, depth, conflict) of these relationships. Over 300 people from the community completed a series of online questionnaires measuring social anxiety and depression, and disclosure in and quality of their close friendships and romantic relationships. After controlling for levels of depression, social anxiety was associated with a paucity of disclosure in both romantic relationships and close friendships in females, but not males. There was an indirect association between higher social anxiety and lower relationship quality (lower support, with a trend towards greater conflict) via lower self-disclosure in women's romantic relationships, but not their close friendships. Addressing disclosure in the context of close relationships may assist socially anxious women to develop more fulfilling and harmonious close relationships.

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### Introduction

At diagnosable levels, social anxiety is characterised by an excessive fear of humiliating or embarrassing one's self (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Over and above the anxiety-related symptoms experienced by people with social anxiety, there are also interpersonal aspects to this disorder. In a recent review, Alden and Taylor (2004) highlighted the need for further research on the specific interpersonal behaviours that are associated with social anxiety, as well as the ways in which these may impact relationship development and treatment outcome. Self-disclosure, or what individuals verbally reveal about themselves (e.g. thoughts, emotions, experiences, etc.), is one avenue of research that appears to warrant further investigation, particularly in the context of close relationships.

A small number of studies has shown that people with higher social anxiety tend not to volunteer very much information about themselves and what they do convey tends to be less personally revealing (Alden & Bieling, 1998; DePaulo, Epstein, & Steele LeMay, 1990; Reno & Kenny, 1992). One explanation for such findings is that socially anxious people suffer from social skills deficiencies and may not have learned how to express themselves in a more personally revealing manner (e.g. Segrin & Flora, 2000). However, other studies have shown that under circumstances in which they do not

anticipate negative social outcomes from being more forthcoming, the manner in which high socially anxious people engage in self-disclosure is not discernable from that of non-anxious people (Alden & Bieling, 1998; DePaulo et al., 1990). These findings suggest that socially anxious individuals do not lack the skills necessary to communicate more openly, but that their performance depends upon their appraisal of the risk of doing so in the social situation. This pattern is consistent with the quality of social performance displayed by socially anxious people in their interactions with strangers (Thompson & Rapee, 2002).

People with social anxiety appear to strategically adopt a communication style that is low in self-disclosure in order to avoid negative social outcomes, much like a safety or subtle avoidance behaviour (Arkin, Lake, & Baumgardner, 1986; Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). High socially anxious individuals report being concerned with self-protective social goals. That is, they attempt to avoid making a bad impression on those with whom they interact by avoiding topics or behaviours that might result in attracting attention and disapproval (Alden & Bieling, 1998; Meleshko & Alden, 1993). In contrast, non-anxious individuals report being motivated primarily by socially acquisitive concerns. That is, they attempt to make a good impression on those with whom they interact (Meleshko & Alden, 1993).

Ironically, this type of self-protective behaviour appears to be self-defeating, increasing the likelihood of the negative social outcomes they are trying to avoid. In situations in which high socially anxious individuals adopt a communication style that is low in

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self-disclosure, they are viewed by their conversational partner as less likeable (Alden & Bieling, 1998; Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Furthermore, their conversational partners describe themselves as less comfortable conversing with high socially anxious individuals (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). However, in situations in which high socially anxious individuals are as disclosing as non-anxious individuals, they are found to be equally likeable (Alden & Bieling, 1998).

Most of the research showing that socially anxious individuals reveal less information about themselves has examined interactions with strangers, typically confederates or other research participants. It is possible that self-protective communication styles may be displayed less in closer relationships since such relationships are generally based on liking or loving, and would, therefore, be expected to be associated with a decreased likelihood of negative evaluation. On the other hand, self-protection may be more important in close relationships since these relationships may be the ones in which the stakes are highest. With regard to romantic relationships, Hendrick (1981, p. 1150) states that “In no relationship is the other more significant, the commitment more profound, or the risk more intense”. Friendships, too, can be highly significant relationships (Hartup & Stevens, 1997) in which one becomes increasingly vulnerable as the friendship becomes closer (Hays, 1988).

A small body of research suggests that socially anxious individuals may employ a self-protective communication style in their interactions with close friends and romantic partners. High socially anxious women (but not men) appear to be less willing to discuss personal information about themselves with male and female friends (Snell, 1989). Research by Beck and colleagues (Beck & Davilla, 2003; Davilla & Beck, 2002; Grant, Beck, & Farrow, 2007) has revealed that high social anxiety is associated with a range of dysfunctional behaviour in relationships with friends, family members and romantic partners, including less assertiveness and more avoidance of expressing emotion. High social anxiety and social phobia have also been found to be associated with a fearful adult attachment style, which tends to be characterised by low self-disclosure (Darcy, Davilla, & Beck, 2005; Wenzel, 2002).

Other research has examined disclosure in the context of existing, although not necessarily close, relationships. Consistent with findings regarding the association between higher social anxiety and avoidance of expressing strong emotions in close relationships (e.g. Beck & Davilla, 2003), a study by Kachin, Newman, and Pincus (2001) identified a subsample of socially phobic individuals who reported overly friendly-submissive interpersonal behaviour, including difficulty making their needs known and expressing anger towards others. Erwin, Heimberg, Schneier, and Liebowitz (2003) also found that people with social phobia were more likely than non-anxious controls to report suppressing their anger (i.e. harbouring grudges, sulking and remaining secretly critical of others). Research by Turk, Heimberg, Luterek, Mennin, and Fresco (2005) found that people with high social anxiety reported being less expressive of emotions, although in this study the finding was particularly in relation to positive emotions, and having greater difficulty describing their emotions, than either controls or individuals with generalised anxiety disorder.

Self-disclosure is an intrinsic component of the process by which strangers become acquaintances and then close others (Reis & Patrick, 1996). As such, a self-protective communication style would be expected to impact upon the frequency or quantity of close relationships that socially anxious individuals are able to establish. Indeed, in both community (Lampe, Slade, Issakidis, & Andrews, 2003; Schneier, Johnson, Hornig, Liebowitz, & Weissman, 1992) and clinical samples (Wittchen & Beloch, 1996; Wittchen, Fuetsch, Sonntag, Muller, & Liebowitz, 2000) individuals with social phobia are less likely to be married. Half of unmarried people with social phobia report that their heterosexual functioning is limited, for

example, by their inability to establish a level of intimacy conducive to long-term relationships (Turner, Beidel, Dancu, & Keys, 1986). Individuals with high social anxiety are also less likely to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, and have fewer close friends (Montgomery, Haemmerlie, & Edwards, 1991).

There is some evidence to suggest that aspects of the quality of close relationships, such as intimacy, support and conflict, are also compromised in people with social anxiety. Compared to non-anxious controls, the romantic relationships of socially phobic individuals are lower in emotional intimacy, a construct that reflects feelings of being neglected, lonely and distanced from one's partner, and feeling as though one's partner does not listen well or understand (Wenzel, 2002). High socially anxious people also experience emotional closeness and security less frequently with each of the non-kin people in their social network (Montgomery et al., 1991). Furthermore, this research found that people with high social anxiety receive less in the way of “social provisions”, for example, less assurance that they can count on others for assistance under any circumstances. Torgrud et al. (2004) also found that, compared to healthy controls and other clinical and non-clinical samples, people with social phobia perceive less support from friends and significant others, and are less satisfied with available social support. Finally, Davilla and Beck (2002) interviewed undergraduates about their relationships with friends, romantic partners, and family, with regard to aspects such as the extent to which they were close, supportive, and appropriate in conflict resolution. Higher social anxiety was found to be associated with lower interviewer ratings across this domain, which the authors referred to as ‘overall interpersonal chronic stress’.

The present study examined the extent to which individuals with higher social anxiety adopt a communication style that is characterised by low self-disclosure and low disclosure of positive and negative emotions in close friendships and romantic relationships. It also investigated the ways in which the quality (depth, support, conflict) of these close relationships is associated with social anxiety, and whether differences in relationship quality may, at least in part, be explained by differences in disclosure. Unlike previous studies, both close friendships and romantic relationships were assessed in order to allow analysis of both of these two types of important relationship. In providing a more detailed understanding of the nature of socially anxious people's communication in their close relationships, the results of this research may shed light on the ways in which the quality of these close relationships may be improved.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 312 adults (75 males, 237 females) drawn from the community whose ages ranged from 18 to 74 years, with an average of 34 years. Males ( $M = 37.1$ ,  $SD = 12.4$ ) in the sample were significantly older than females ( $M = 32.6$ ,  $SD = 10.1$ ),  $t(310) = 3.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . All participants were currently in a committed heterosexual romantic relationship. Forty-nine percent (49%) were currently married, 25% in a de facto relationship (in Australia, this refers to a relationship in which partners are not married, but have lived together as a couple for at least one year) and 26% in a committed relationship, but were neither married to nor de facto with their partner. The majority of participants (females: 88%; males: 76%) indicated that their identified closest friend was of the same sex as themselves.

All of the participants had lived in Australia for at least 1 year, with the majority (73%) of the sample Australian-born. Almost all (96%) of the participants reported that English was the main language spoken in their home. The sample was highly educated,

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