

Social phobia among secondary school students: A comparative study between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract:

Objectives: To assess the prevalence and risk factors of social phobia (SP) among Arab secondary school students in Egypt, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). **Subjects and Methods:** This study was conducted in 3 cities belonging to 3 Arab countries, viz, Sohag (Egypt), Abha (KSA) and Abu Dhabi (UAE). In Sohag, adolescents were enrolled from schools of El-Daawa Al-Islamia Secondary Schools. On the other hand, those in Abha (KSA) and Abu Dhabi (UAE) were enrolled through the primary care service of the school health programs in both areas. The study sample from each city comprised 400 adolescents (200 boys and 200 girls). Study tools included The Social Phobia Inventory and the Social Phobia Risk Factors Questionnaire. **Results:** Prevalence of SP is highest in Sohag (13%), followed by that in Abha (9.8%) and least in Abu Dhabi (7.8%). Differences were statistically significant ($p=0.044$). In Sohag only, risk factors for SP included being a female ($p=0.038$), or being a first born child ($p=0.036$). Moreover, in all study settings, other risk factors included punishment by parents or teachers, either physically by battering, or psychologically by humiliation, having a positive family history of mental disorder or, frequent marital conflict among parents. **Conclusions:** SP is a common mental disorder among Arab secondary schoolchildren. Its prevalence is highest among Egyptian schoolchildren, where it affects more girls than boys. Risk factors include physical or psychological child punishment or abuse, having a positive family history of mental disorder and parental marital conflict. **Recommendations:** Physical and/or emotional punishment should be avoided. School health programs should include screening for SP. Diagnosed cases should be referred for psychiatric and behavioral management.

Introduction:

The usual fear of "being stared at" is common to most humans. The ordinary normal social talks usually involve being under the gaze of strangers, friends, and colleagues, interactions that are usually navigated without conscious thought (den Boer, 1997). Most people admit to social discomfort while under public scrutiny (Rosenbaum et al., 1994). Social phobia (SP), however, is the excessive fear that a performance or social interaction will be inadequate, embarrassing, or humiliating. People with SP avert their gaze from their audience and often avoid a feared social setting (Mohammadi et al., 2006). According to DSM-IV-TR, "social phobia" is defined as a "marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). In SP, the individual primarily fears that he or she will act

in a way that will be embarrassing or will show excessive anxiety symptoms (for example, shaking, sweating, blushing). Exposure to a feared social situation typically triggers a heightened level of anxiety or a panic attack (Fehm et al., 2005). The resulting disability severely impairs educational attainment and gainful productivity. Unless the disorder is accurately diagnosed and promptly treated, a burden is placed on society (Judd, 1994). To be diagnosed with SP, the individual must recognize that the fear is excessive or unreasonable and must avoid the feared situations or endure them with extreme discomfort. In addition, the fear and/or avoidance must lead to significant distress or interference with the individual's normal routine or functioning. The social anxiety must not be due to the direct effects of a substance or a general medical condition, nor may it be better accounted for by another mental disorder. If