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Caged by the Fear of Being Seen: Case Study of an Adolescent Living With Social Anxiety

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Abstract: Social anxiety disorder has been defined as a mental health condition wherein an individual experiences intense, enduring fear and feelings of anxiety surrounding interpersonal situations and social scenarios because they are afraid of being humiliated, embarrassed or judged in a critical way according to DSM 5 – TR. Adolescents are particularly impacted by social anxiety due to neurocognitive abilities like self – consciousness developing during this period in one's life. Adolescents who live with social anxiety disorder are constantly torn between wanting to avoid social situations and be a part of interpersonal bonds. This paper revolves around the case of Ms. S, who is a 14 years old girl living with social anxiety. Upon exploring the struggles being faced by Ms. S through a psychological interview, she shared feeling scared about being judged for her thoughts and emotions. She often felt like people would make fun of her if she expressed herself without holding back. The adolescent also opened up about how many a times, she has wanted to take up an opportunity, answer a question and talk to a peer but has been held back by similar beliefs. The paper seeks to explore possible therapeutic interventions for her case along with providing research evidence for the same.

Keywords: *Social Anxiety, Adolescence, Adolescents, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Somatic Experiencing, Internal Family Systems Therapy, Expressive Arts Therapy*

1. Introduction

Social anxiety disorder has been defined as a mental health condition wherein an individual experiences intense, enduring fear and feelings of anxiety surrounding interpersonal situations and social scenarios because they are afraid of being humiliated, embarrassed or judged in a critical way according to DSM 5 – TR. Social anxiety disorder's DSM 5 – TR criteria also highlights how it is characterised by an avoidance of situations which might give rise to anxiety and negative evaluations, along with making it through such social situations with a lot of nervousness and fearfulness. Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is the third most commonly occurring mental health condition, affecting 2% to 5.7% of adolescents around the world. SAD has a global prevalence of 5% to 10% and females are more impacted by it as compared to males (Koyuncu et al., 2019). A research conducted by Kessler et al. (2005) found that the onset of social anxiety disorder mostly takes place by the age of 13 years amongst adolescents. Adolescence is a challenging period in an individual's life as they are developing emotionally, cognitively and physically. Adolescence is marked by people exploring novel environments and social groups along with navigating a new set of responsibilities as they transition out of childhood. People start experiencing more independence and have a greater level of autonomy (Larson and Richards, 1991).

Kilford et al. (2023) highlighted that adolescents are particularly impacted by social anxiety due to neurocognitive abilities like self – consciousness developing during this period in one's life. Their research elaborated upon how social re – orientation is taking place during this time and because of the same reason, social interactions and one's interpersonal environment becomes especially significant. The nature of relationships formed by an individual become more complex during adolescence. Adolescents have also been found to experience higher levels of sensitivity towards rejection and acceptance by their classmates, friends and peers. There are important changes taking place in the reward system processing of individuals as well, due to which social interactions are seen as a valuable reward. Social rewards such as being able to share things and experiences with a friend, see people smiling and being liked by their peers (Foulkes and Blakemore, 2016). The public component of self – consciousness develops further during this period which leads adolescents becoming more aware of how they are being perceived and evaluated by others in the environment. This awareness guides adolescents as they interact and form long - lasting relationships. However, this self – consciousness is accompanied by an increased susceptibility towards developing social anxiety (Mallet and Rodriguez- Tome, 1999). Adolescents who live with social anxiety disorder are constantly torn between wanting to avoid social situations and be a part of

interpersonal bonds. The fear of being rejected and humiliated is increased along with their desire to be a part of fulfilling relationships with friends, classmates and peers.

Ms. S is a 14 years old girl who lives in a joint family and is the youngest amongst her three siblings. The adolescent's parents decided to seek mental health support for her as they noticed Ms. S being fearful, socially withdrawn and not being able to share much with others. Her hesitation to open up and form social relationships was a concern for them. Upon exploring the struggles being faced by Ms. S through a psychological interview, she shared feeling scared about being judged for her thoughts and emotions. She often felt like people would make fun of her if she expressed herself without holding back. The adolescent also opened up about how many a times, she has wanted to take up an opportunity, answer a question and talk to a peer but has been held back by similar beliefs.

Ms. S shared her struggles to form friendships as she often felt deeply vulnerable in a bond as close. She feels that her interests, ways of interacting and communicating are seldom appreciated and reciprocated; which has made her hesitant to reach out. Ms. S expressed how she has lost friendships in the past as a result of this difference in communicating and all those experiences, have made her really wary of reaching out to people. Ms. S finds a lot of comfort in drawing and exploring her love for the arts. She shares how art has been like a companion for her. The adolescent also recognises how her lack of confidence and experiences surrounding rejection in friendships have made her withdraw emotionally. Ms. S shared that it takes some time for her to open up and experience the reassurance that she can be herself without being criticised for it. She often feels self - conscious and full of fear when it comes to interpersonal interactions. Further exploration of Ms. S' life story and narrative, help in making meaning of how these beliefs took shape. The adolescent shared that nobody in her family expresses how they feel - openly. As someone who experiences emotions deeply and is a sensitive by nature,

Ms. S often feels like her emotions are too big and overwhelming for her family members. Therefore, she prefers keeping them to herself or writing about them in her diary. Ms. S is a bright, curious and creative individual with a lot of ideas and a wish to explore them. One of her hopes for the future include not feeling overwhelmed by fear and being able to feel confident in herself.

2. Suggested Treatment Interventions

Ms. S is seen to experience heightened levels of social anxiety and self – consciousness along with lowered confidence, lack of self – esteem and emotional inhibition. The following psychological interventions would meaningfully support her as she navigates these challenges:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is one of the most effective and widely used treatment interventions for social anxiety. It is an evidence based psychological therapy modality which focuses on identifying an individual's maladaptive thought patterns and irrational beliefs. It also encourages reframing these faulty narratives through cognitive restructuring and experimenting new behaviours. Ms. S will benefit from this approach as it employs various techniques behavioural and cognitive to reduce the fear and anxiety one experiences in social situations along with reducing avoidance behaviours and nurturing one's self – confidence by carrying out behavioural experiments. Exposure therapy which is a part of CBT will also support Ms. S build trust in herself and her abilities. Breathing and mindfulness related techniques along with attention tracking will help her feel more centred, regulated and grounded during social situations.

Internal Family Systems Therapy

Internal family systems therapy is built on the understanding that our psyche is made up of various parts or sub – personalities. One of the most prominent parts is the anxious part which wants to protect the individual by doing everything possible which keeps criticism, judgement and anxiety at bay. Approaching Ms. S's case through the lens of IFS therapy will support her to name, identify and recognise these parts, the roles they are essaying, what their needs, fears and wishes are. IFS therapy propels individuals to nurture self – compassion and process their emotional experiences more deeply. It aims to establish harmony between these parts and resolve the internal conflicts taking place. IFS therapy will help Ms. S form a compassionate relationship with her social anxiety and really understand it's roots.

Somatic Experiencing

Somatic experiencing is a meaningful, bottom - up therapeutic approach which incorporates body awareness and nervous system regulation to work with social anxiety. It is a trauma – informed approach which acknowledges the dissociation and hyperarousal faced by individuals living with social anxiety. Somatic therapy combines techniques such as tracking sensations, breathwork and grounding to process, regulate and become more aware of these responses. It focuses on building an individual's tolerance for interpersonal situations along with a sense of safety.

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy will support Ms. S by helping her externalise and make meaning of her experiences surrounding social anxiety. Narrative therapy is based on the belief that the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem. It helps in separating the person as a

whole from the social anxiety they are experiencing. Narrative therapy entails an exploration of dominant stories and how they are influencing the individual whilst helping them re – author those dominant stories according to their preference. It will help Ms. S break free from self – critical stories and exercise greater levels of self – compassion and autonomy.

Expressive Arts Therapy

Ms. S's inclination and love for arts will make Expressive Arts Therapy an ideal approach as it combines creative modalities like music, drama, writing, movement and visual art to explore an individual's emotional world in a non – threatening and safe way. It gives individuals the opportunity to get in touch with their emotions, process them and make meaning of experiences. Expressive Arts Therapy supports individuals by helping them foster a greater level of self – awareness and self – esteem. It is an approach that supports emotional release and decreases the level of shame experienced by individuals. It helps them access thoughts, vulnerabilities, fears, dreams and needs which are difficult to put into words.

Psychoeducation

Learning more about her social anxiety through a sensitive approach will help Ms. S become aware of her condition. The self – awareness will also help her in fostering a greater level of self – compassion. Being able to name and work with her social anxiety instead of avoiding it will greatly fuel her confidence and help her form a closer relationship with herself. Managing and navigating situations wherein she experiences overwhelming levels of social anxiety will becomes a little easier to get through with that awareness and understanding.

3. Research Evidence

The usefulness of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in treating social anxiety disorder (SAD), especially when paired with medication, was examined in a study by Samantaray, Kar, and Singh (2021). Two groups of persons with SAD were compared in the study: one group received CBT and the antidepressant paroxetine, whereas the other group received PX alone. The study, which lasted 16–20 weeks, evaluated therapy outcomes at baseline, right after treatment, and again two months later using standardised instruments such as the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale, Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, and the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale. Significant symptom improvement was shown by both groups, but the group that received combination treatment showed noticeably larger decreases in social anxiety and was better able to sustain these gains at follow-up.

Hunger-Schoppe et al. (2022) investigated Integrative Systemic and Family Therapy (ISFT), a novel treatment for Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) that emphasises the patient's interactions with family and social networks in addition to themselves. The authors emphasise that SAD is not only one of the most prevalent mental health disorders, but it also has a significant impact on people's social networks, including friends, family, and coworkers, necessitating a more comprehensive therapeutic approach. ISFT incorporates social network diagnostics, genogram work, and multi-person therapy sessions to involve significant others in treatment, in contrast to typical Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approach. A relatively small pilot randomised controlled experiment with 38 participants was used to compare ISFT with CBT. The findings indicated that while both therapies significantly reduced symptoms, ISFT had a greater effect. In particular, patients in the ISFT group experienced a higher decrease in social anxiety symptoms than those in the CBT group (effect size d = 1.67 versus d = 1.04). Additionally, although the difference was not statistically significant, the ISFT group's remission rate was higher (78%) than the CBT group's (45%). The authors further explained this finding by stating how ISFT may be particularly beneficial since it enables clients to address familial factors and relational patterns that frequently sustain anxiety.

Ravan and Esfandeyari (2016) examined how effectively narrative therapy works to improve social relations and lessen social anxiety in Shiraz middle school students. There were two groups of 90 students: the experimental group and the control group. Eight sessions of narrative therapy were given to the experimental group. In comparison to the control group, post-intervention data demonstrated a significant decrease in social anxiety and an improvement in social interactions. The study emphasises how narrative therapy assists teenagers in developing more positive self-narratives, externalising problems, and reframing negative ideas. Their social skills and confidence are improved by this method. The results provide credence to narrative therapy as an effective, non-pharmacological strategy for fostering emotional growth and addressing social anxiety in adolescents.

The efficacy and essential elements of Somatic Experiencing (SE), a body-oriented trauma therapy, were studied in depth by Kuhfuß et al. (2021). The authors reviewed 16 research and discovered early evidence that SE can enhance emotional, physical, and well-being outcomes in both traumatised and non-traumatized people while also reducing PTSD-related symptoms. Clients with trauma-induced cognitive deficiencies may benefit from SE's emphasis on interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness rather than cognitive processing. Two method-specific characteristics that therapists and clients liked were resource orientation and the use of touch to regulate and ground oneself in the moment.

Zhang et al. (2024) investigated the effectiveness of expressive arts therapy in reducing anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents. Based on six randomised controlled trials with 422 individuals, the study concluded that art therapy considerably reduced anxiety, especially state anxiety. When conducted twice a week, the intervention was particularly successful. Among the art therapy techniques were jewellery-making, sand play, painting, and music. The results support art therapy as a low-risk, non-pharmacological treatment for youth anxiety, despite significant variation across trials and methodological constraints. The authors illustrate how, similar to mindfulness - based therapies or relaxation techniques, the creative process in expressive arts therapy encourages emotional expression, self-reflection, and the formation of flexible coping strategies.

In order to assess the efficacy of psycho-educational therapies in adults with formal diagnoses of anxiety disorders, Rodrigues et al. (2018) carried out a comprehensive review. The review analysed therapies for social phobia, panic disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, and related illnesses based on five studies with 490 individuals. These interventions were made accessible through booklets, online modules, and in-person meetings, have continuously shown promise in lowering symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Additionally, the interventions improved quality of life related to mental health, interpersonal functioning, and pain management; these improvements persisted at 3-, 6-, and 9-month follow-ups. Cognitive-behavioural principles served as the foundation for the majority of programs, which included self-management techniques, coping mechanisms, and symptom education. Overall, participant satisfaction and therapist assessments were favourable.

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