

Social Anxiety_mixdown.mp3

Voice Over [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to a special episode of our BeWell Podcast. This episode is being recorded at our University of Aberdeen Doha campus as part of our BeWell activities. I'm Bekah Walker, your host, and I'm joined by a lovely new panel of guests today for today's episode that will discuss social anxiety and how to live with it. I'm going to hand it over to our guests to introduce themselves to our listeners and tell them who they are and what they do here at AFG College with the University of Aberdeen.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:00:37] Thank you. My name is Dr Nadia deGama and I'm one of the senior lecturers here at AGF College with University of Aberdeen. I'm also the undergraduate programme leader for Business Management and joint programmes.

Manahil Sabir Ali [00:00:51] Hi, my name is Manahil and I'm a fourth-year Accountancy and Finance student here at the University of Aberdeen.

Amal Ameen [00:00:56] Hi, my name's Amal Ameen I'm a fourth-year Accounting and Finance student as well at the University of Aberdeen.

Yara Abughaidah [00:01:06] Hi everyone, I'm Yara. I'm a fourth-year Business Management student. I'm also the student ambassador for the University of Aberdeen Doha campus. I'm very, very interested in wellbeing. Two years ago I was in AUSA as a wellbeing officer and so obviously when I was given the opportunity to jump on this podcast I was like, absolutely let's do this. So very, very excited to be here.

Bekah Walker [00:01:30] Awesome, thank you so much, guys. I'm really looking forward to our discussions today. Thanks so much for joining me for this episode. I'm sure it's going to be fabulous. So since the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of people have feeling nervous about socialising and enjoying seeing each other again. Many people can possibly worry about social situations that can affect their everyday activities of confidence, relationships, and even their work and study lives. So what do you guys feel are the main differences and similarities between general anxiety and social anxiety? What are your thoughts?

Dr Nadia deGama [00:02:03] I mean, I guess from a very pragmatic just from a definition perspective, obviously the social element is huge. We can't escape the fact that it's anxiety related to interacting with people that are actually being put in a situation where we are perhaps in a larger crowd or situations that we're not familiar with. And I think what you said about the COVID-19 pandemic, we were literally put indoors and then catapulted quite overnight to say everything's back to normal. Now we're doing it once again. And I think when you think about it, with respect to high school students transitioning to university, I'll leave you guys to talk about that. There wasn't that room for that growth. It was all assumed that because we did it before, you just knew how to do it. But it was a very our world has changed massively in that time.

Yara Abughaidah [00:02:55] So, yeah, I mean anxiety comes in a lot of different shapes and forms. Social anxiety in particular I feel has become a lot more common since the pandemic and a lot more frequent. There's a lot more talk about it just because it is a very, very sudden change from being forced to be indoors, being forced to be comfortable, to having to go out and go back to normal again.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:03:32] But I think, Yara, you raised a really interesting point because, you know, we talk always about, I guess, the negatives of the COVID-19 pandemic but what I've noticed is while perhaps people are feeling social anxiety more, I get the sense that people are also a bit more comfortable to say actually, yeah, I have that. Maybe it's the camaraderie of feeling the same angst together. Whereas in the past and in my own experiences knowing people who are suffering from anxiety, not necessarily social anxiety, it was sort of like an alert. It was a feeling that they had alone. So, in an ironic way, social anxiety is experienced socially, if that makes sense, that people feel comfortable discussing it. I mean, today's a prime example of that, which I like to think of as a good thing and an awareness of it. Podcasts like this are helping the symptom of that.

Manahil Sabir Ali [00:04:25] I think that anxiety is something you feel in general on a day to day, you're experiencing it daily. Social anxiety, however, is restricted to social situations. And like Dr. Nadia and Yara mentioned earlier, it has skyrocketed because of the pandemic. Yes, we were quarantined for a pretty long time. We were only interacting with our parents or, you know, the people we were in quarantine with. And right after that, we, for example, as university students, we came back to our universities and we didn't know how to act, you know, even though it's something we've been doing our entire lives. We were going to school, we were going to do it as normal. But right after the pandemic, a lot changed. We were just kind of expected to know, but we didn't. So for me personally, I can say that it has definitely skyrocketed.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:05:21] I think that's the key, right? Apologies for the system, I guess, what you said was that we were expected to. And I think that the idea of being expected to puts extra pressure on us. So whether you already suffer from anxiety, as I said, pushed into a social context that's just going to exasperate this resistance from us.

Amal Ameen [00:05:26] I think social anxiety has become a lot more common now, I think a lot of people are just starting to speak up now. Before the pandemic, I feel like a lot of people just tried to hide it because we faced social events on a daily basis. But now that we understand each other, even have actually come up and actually started to speak and be vocal about it. So I think that's the best part about it, that we're talking and actually sharing a lot of experiences.

Bekah Walker [00:06:13] Yeah, absolutely. I think that has been one of the positives of the pandemic. Although they felt super alone and isolated during the pandemic, it has now been normalised a little bit more. It's okay to talk about how you're feeling, and once you can open up about how you're feeling to your friend or your colleagues or whoever, they're likely to have felt something really similar. Certainly, I didn't feel like I suffered from anxiety until the pandemic and after the pandemic. We'd like to stay indoors and have to quarantine and isolate and suddenly it's like, well, come back to campus. And I remember, I think it was last year we had our big welcoming activities for students and we meant to be on campus, you know, welcome all the students into Aberdeen. And suddenly like I was like, you know, I had some stuff to do, I was walking to work and just really, really nervous about loads of people being there. You know, from not seeing anyone the previous year. So, I think it manifested in a lot of people since the pandemic. And it can be really difficult to open up about how social anxiety affects us and it will affect all of us in slightly different ways and of course different severity. So I wonder if any of you guys feel comfortable sharing your own experience of how social anxiety has impacted your life personally?

Yara Abughaidah [00:07:41] Well, again, social anxiety is very different for each and every person. One thing that, not only just for me, but with all my friends and everyone is talking about it because like everyone said, the conversation started to become a lot more common, a lot more normalised. Social anxiety to me is being in a social situation and feeling like you don't fit in or feeling like you're too into your own head, too hyper-fixated on what I look like, and what I sound like, if my clothes are bit weird or if I'm acting strange, if I'm smelling strange and all these thoughts kind of happen in your head or a big one is what if the conversation you're having with someone is not interesting enough, what if they just want to leave? What if I'm annoying for instance, to talk about something that's not fun? But one thing that I like to remind myself, which really does calm me down, is that nobody is really paying as much attention to you as you think. So everybody's too fixated on what they look like, what they're saying, what they want to do, and as for conversations being interesting, I feel like humans biologically are just interested in what the other person has to say. So that's why we listen to podcasts. That's why we talk to people. That's why we watch YouTube. That's why we are obsessed with social media. We like to know what humans are thinking and feeling, we're interested in it. So, that's really comforting for me when I feel really anxious or uncomfortable in a social situation. It's really not that serious. I try to remind myself and maybe that's a comfort to other people, but it's not as much of a big deal as you make it seem in your own head.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:09:24] So I think from my perspective, I mean, of course, my job requires me to stand up in class every day and act like I know what I'm talking about. And I think like, yeah, piggybacking, like Yara said, in the sense that we are probably our worst critiques in that way, in the sense that, you know, and I engage in what we call mental rehearsals, not necessarily what I would say, but how the lecture will take place or whatnot. And at the end of the day, if for whatever reason, that lecture didn't perform or I didn't perform in the way that I wanted to, and I think, yeah, this is a great point. Students are not going to know. And I think that I'm sort of my own worst enemy in that way because I was like, oh yeah, that was an important study I forgot to say. What's the worst that can happen? I can post it on Blackboard. We constantly are interrogating ourselves. And I think what you said is just being a little bit more gracious to ourselves, kinder to ourselves. A colleague of mine said this. They're like if we were how we were to ourselves to our best friend, chances are that best friend would not be our best friend. Because if, for example, I said, Oh, my God, look at my hair this morning, look at whatnot. But if I said that to you as my best friend, why are you so mean to me? So I think why are we that unkind to ourselves if we're so much kinder to others?

Manahil Sabir Ali [00:10:46] If we treat ourselves the way we treat the people we love, it would make a lot more difference. So we would treat, for example, our best friends the way we treat ourselves, or we wouldn't talk to them, the way we talk to ourselves. Like what Yara said, in most situations, we're just into our heads a little too much. We're thinking too much. We're talking to ourselves too much. Other people aren't even noticing what we're noticing. They're just there and they're honestly just enjoying the conversation.

Amal Ameen [00:11:17] I really think social anxiety is a form of self-torture where it's like telling yourself new things that you shouldn't be saying, and then it just hurts a lot and you end up doing stuff that you shouldn't be doing. But I feel like people handle social anxiety differently. For example, some people just put it out so confidently, but some people just have a breakdown. If everyone would just need to tell themselves that it's fine, it's okay to feel uncomfortable. But we're all doing good.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:11:50] I think it's paradox that we're in our heads too much, because on one hand, yes, we're in our heads too much but we're also taught about the importance of reflecting on an experience to learn from that. But if that idea of that reflection ends up being destructive, you know, it's that circle of destruction versus using that reflection to say, it wasn't that bad, maybe there were elements I could have learned from. I think the main thing of that is us reminding ourselves that we are okay, we're alright.

Yara Abughaidah [00:12:31] One thing I like to say to myself after I had a critique or a bad thought like, that conversation was really boring - and? Somebody thought you look weird in that dress - OK, and? Because there are worse things that could happen.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:12:48] Because that's what your best friend would say to you. Why are we not doing it to ourselves?

Yara Abughaidah [00:12:55] We kind of have to look at it from a bird's eye view. Is this really that big of a deal, is it in the grand scheme of things?

Dr Nadia deGama [00:13:01] But I think that also takes time. For example say you were at a career networking event, which you guys were in last week, just doing speed dating with companies, which of course is high intensity, trying to make a good impression. I also would say that there's beauty in not trying to do that bird's eye view straight away. I think that there's a lot of value in pause and time because time also provides perspective, right? Let's not get into that analysis so quickly and eat ourselves up about it. Instead, reflect in the morning when we are not so tired.

Bekah Walker [00:13:47] And I think, as we kind of said before, social anxiety and anxiety in general, can affect everyone in different severity. And certainly, with social anxiety, people can be worried about the situation. They can be worried about being laughed at or judged harshly while standing up, and presenting their work to their classroom. You worry that you've got it wrong. You're going to come across really silly and stupid and people might laugh at you. And some people can feel really uncomfortable being stuck in a room with strangers or in large crowds, meeting new people. It can also make you feel anxious about eating in front of people, some people might, and some other people might not. So I think it is really important to be aware of how that affects me and how it affects you. Might be quite different on the severity as well, and I do agree with what you were saying about it can change over time as you get your own techniques and what works for you, and how you manage to calm yourself down from a situation. And in the most extreme cases of social anxiety, people might actually avoid the situation altogether. So I think certainly if you are suffering social anxiety and you're putting yourself in that situation, that's something to be so proud of because it's very easy just to be like, I'm not going to come or I'm not going to do that. And then you build up more and more in your head and you know, you're not going to want to face that. It's much easier to not go to the next thing and before you know it you're not going to do ten things. And then you know that it's really, really serious and these are people that are going to university to work, and that can obviously quite quickly escalate. But putting yourself in that situation from, like you said, being kind to yourself like no one is going to think as badly about you as you do of yourself. But it's so hard to change that perspective and mindset because it's natural to be critical of yourself. Of course, it is. I think it's important to acknowledge that feeling anxious at times is normal and it is okay and it's great that we're doing things like this, you know, that we are openly talking about it. You know, a few years ago this podcast probably wouldn't have happened

and I just wondered if you guys have any tips for our listeners about managing anxiety in social settings and what has helped you get through it?

Manahil Sabir Ali [00:16:14] I think what has helped me get through it is constantly putting myself in situations where I don't want to be in terms of social situations, and social gatherings. I'm not a huge fan of social gatherings, but I think when you start going out with the people you're comfortable with and to the places you're comfortable with, it helps a lot. You can start small. You can just hang out with a friend or two friends, go to a place you really like, and have your normal conversations. And then from there we gradually move on to bigger gatherings and then a proper social event. I think that has helped me a lot. Constantly putting yourself out there is what gets you going because like you said, if you say no to one thing and then the other then to another, and then it escalates to a point where you just want to avoid everything in general. And that's not the way to go about it. It's okay to feel what you're feeling, but you also have to know how to identify it and how to kind of get around the problem.

Yara Abughaidah [00:17:21] I feel like as human beings, we're most comfortable on autopilot, on doing things that we're just used to doing, the same routine in the same sort of situations. So when something is uncomfortable or something is new, your brain instantly goes into panic mode, into anxiety, and just thinking, okay, what do I do now? I don't have time for this. That's why I feel like it's important to keep putting yourself in that situation, obviously, with limits, taking your brain out of autopilot every once in a while, and making sure that you are getting new experiences. You're getting to know yourself, you're getting to know others at the same time. I think it's really important to sort of keep your brain stimulated like that because it is very comfortable to stay on autopilot and just stay there and stay at home and not want to go out and not want to meet new people. It's so easy to do that, so actively moving forward and doing things that make you uncomfortable is I feel the best solution to overcoming it.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:18:26] There's no stigma on getting help. I think that's something that needs to be normalised a bit more in the sense that, you know, sometimes I've had students who are doing all of that, but they still can't figure it out themselves or manage themselves. And, you know, if it means speaking with somebody that's perhaps more of an expert in the field to give them these smaller strategies or even a sounding board of confidence and whatnot. I think that there are two things, that's A, as I said, these initiatives are great because it's just making it seem like it's not as uncommon and it's not a stigma. Look, if we broke our leg, we're not going to sit at home and just hope it gets better or, you know, rock around. We go to the doctor. So why shouldn't that apply to something that we're feeling in our heads and we can get these resources?

Amal Ameen [00:19:27] I feel like opening up to someone about having social anxiety or having some of the issues helps. Being part of social events could actually help as well. Whenever I have a social event to attend, I go to a doctor and I'm like, look, I have an event coming up and I'm actually anxious about it and she helps me, she encourages me, she thinks it's fine. You have to push yourself to this and I know that you can do it and those words are just calming yourself down, it actually helps.

Bekah Walker [00:20:03] I really liked what you said about maybe breaking it down into small chunks, doing something really small and it can gradually become something bigger. And before you know it, you've overcome the situation all on your own. Something that I personally find very helpful, is, like you said, opening up to someone and having a conversation with someone that you trust. Having that safe space where you can talk to

your best friend or whoever it is, and even getting them to come along to the event with you and almost having them to help you and make sure you're okay during the situation. I find that really helpful and it's comforting that you know, like maybe if you're in a room of like ten people that you don't know but you know that one person that you really, really trust. With them, you can get through that situation, and then hopefully you had a positive experience. And then the next time a situation like that arises, hopefully, you feel a little bit less nervous and anxious about it. But I think it's so important to remember that certainly at the university, you are never alone. There are so many services and people that want to help you have the best experience at university. We have the University's Counseling service that's open to all of you guys here in Doha as well. We also have a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week Helpline for students to reach out to someone and the Wellbeing support on campus as well. And it's really important that if you do feel alone at any point just not be afraid to speak to someone, it can sometimes be easier to speak to someone you don't know. But sometimes it can also be easier to speak to someone you do know so knowing what works best for you.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:21:48] One thing that is important to mention is how this anxiety manifests. So someone of you mentioned this could include that big breakdown, a panic in a situation but it can also be hidden. I'm not actually from a social anxiety perspective and anxiety. I have the desire to want to be in control and that might be somewhat linked to perfectionism. And whether that's anxiety in the workplace that I feel that there's something I need to have control over or as I get very anxious, like you don't see that. And a student said to me the other day, as I was hinting at feeling quite anxious, she said, I would have never guessed because of, I guess, the way that we either hide it or whether, as I said, it's a form of high functioning anxiety, but it still is still within us. I think that when we talk about anxiety, yes, it's important because there are outworking behaviors, but there are also internal struggles because nobody sees them we have to be our own check to know, you know what, this is getting a bit too much. Irritability can be a big one of that. I need to pause. So in that way, I guess we have to manage that a little bit because nobody else will say, you know, what is your feeling because we're putting it off so well. So I think just to be mindful of that.

Bekah Walker [00:23:18] It can often be the people that come across the most confident are suffering the most waves of anxiety and as you say, like people in your life, she said openly, people would have never guessed and that can be a comfort to people as well. And that's empowering for them to feel that once you've opened up about your experience, then they feel empowered that this person is someone I can talk to about their experience. And I think that's just really, really valuable for everyone to have, speak openly about it as much as we can, that we can be difficult to speak openly about things that we're personally struggling with. But by having that open conversation, you can help not only yourself but others around you.

Dr Nadia deGama [00:24:00] From a classroom perspective, you know what you just wrapped up in the sense of we feel if you're still coming to class or you stop coming in the sense whether it's, as you know, services we provide if you don't feel comfortable to speak to your class coordinator, whether it's your personal tutor who's not teaching you. And baby steps, as you said, to come to class, but don't speak, come to class, maybe say I wasn't comfortable speaking today, but I found this really interesting link that can help. And I think as course coordinators we value that. Participation does not need to be oral. And some students are amazing at it. They love it. Others are still doing the work. And so I think just if your course coordinators are aware of that, they would know you're still participating.

Bekah Walker [00:24:43] Absolutely. Thank you guys so much for taking part in this episode and sharing your personal experiences. I know that sometimes it's really tricky and you guys have been amazing I'm sure it will help people who listen to this episode, and hopefully, they will feel a little bit less alone and have some tips that they might be able to implement in their own lives that will help reduce the anxiety that they have. I just like to say to our listeners that we will provide information about the support and wellbeing information in the episode description. Thank you guys so much for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed the episode as much as I have. Take care and bye for now.

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