Social phobia: a biopsychosocial disorder?

Social phobia, also known as social anxiety disorder, consists of an excessive fear of/or avoidance of social situations. The individual feels that he or she is being subjected to intense examination and fears negative criticism by others.

It is often discovered in the history of other severe mental disorders, such as major depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, that social phobia has its onset during adolescence or earlier. This comorbidity of social phobia is linked to serious social incapacitation, substance use, suicide attempts and a serious degradation of the quality of life.

The aetiopathogenesis of social phobia depends on genetic and environmental factors. Parental psychopathology such as major depression or bipolar disorder in combination with overprotective rejection has been found to constitute the biopsychosocial substratum of social phobia. Its biological basis has recently been the subject of investigations.

Bruder et al (2004) support the hypothesis that patients with social phobia have a deficit in the processing of words and syllables in the left hemisphere of the brain. It seems that this dysfunction contributes to the communication anxiety that the patients experience in social situations.


The epidemiological incidence of social phobia during the course of life is estimated to fluctuate between 7-12%. Given its incapacitating effects, it is considered to constitute a serious public health problem. The early onset of social phobia in bipolar disorder has been found to be linked with chronic family tugs of war. In these cases, parallel to treatment with psychopharmaca, individual psychotherapy and family support are needed.

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REFERENCES

1. Bruder GG, Schneier FR, Stewart GW, McGrath DJ, Quirkin F. Left hemisphere dysfunction during verbal dichotic listening tests in patients who have social phobia with or without comorbid depressive disorder. Am J Psychiatry 2004, 161:72-78.