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SOCIAL ANXIETY FACTORS: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL MECHANISMS OF REGULATION

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In this article, the problem of social anxiety is addressed in the context of current challenges: political, economic, pandemic, social, military, etc. In the analytical part, the concept of anxiety is analyzed from different perspectives and an attempt is made to define the concept of social anxiety. The internal and external factors that cause anxiety are extensively analyzed, with the focus being on psychological and social/external factors. At the same time, the forms and levels of anxiety manifestation are highlighted, and also are presented data of a situational survey of different social groups regarding their reaction to the challenges of contemporary world.

Keywords: *anxiety, stress, fear, danger, situational anxiety, social anxiety, personality traits.*

FACTORII ANXIETĂȚII SOCIALE: MECANISME PSIHOLOGICE ȘI EDUCAȚIONALE DE REGLARE

În articolul dat se abordează problema anxietății sociale în condițiile provocărilor actuale: politice, economice, pandemice, sociale, militare etc. În partea analitică se analizează conceptul de anxietate din diferite perspective și se încearcă definirea conceptului de anxietate socială. Pe larg se analizează factorii interni și externi ce provoacă anxietatea, accentul fiind pus pe factorii psihologici și cei sociali/ externi. Totodată sunt evidențiate formele și nivelurile de manifestare a anxietății, dar și prezentate date a unui sondaj situațional a diferitor grupuri sociale privind reacția lor la provocările lumii contemporane.

Cuvinte-cheie: *anxietate, stres, frică, pericol, anxietate situațională, anxietate socială, trăsături de personalitate.*

Introduction

The problem of anxiety, in general, and of social anxiety, its functions and its role in overcoming extreme situations at the current stage becomes more important than ever. These situations in the last 2-3 years were generated by several external and internal factors: the COVID-9 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy, economic, demographic, political, and also value crises. It should be noted that the whole society and each individual during his/her life has not faced these challenges, and neither were they prepared both psychologically and morally to overcome them. We can note the unique fact, when the whole society and each social group, in part, manifests a state of anxiety, also seen as a mechanism of psychological stress.

The state of anxiety implies a feeling of uncertainty. The danger is not clearly defined, you cannot measure it, you cannot intervene to change it. Precisely because of this, the primary defense reaction is not a motor one, but rather belongs to cognitive processes, which are activated by the cognitive system to defend itself in the face of danger. The result of this process is the way to react to overcome the danger.

Among the basic factors that determine the appearance of anxiety are also some characteristics of temperament, primarily those related to emotional sensitivity. Many specialists in the field consider temperament as the main cause of anxiety (Eysenck, 2001; Merlin, 1986, etc.). It is certain, however, that none of the researchers concerned with the problem of anxiety neglected the role of temperament. Moreover, along with temperament, aspects such as character traits were also addressed.

The successful overcoming of the danger by an individual depends to a large extent on the adequate assessment of the situation. The real appreciation of the situation is determined both by the experience of behavior's self-regulation and by the experience accumulated in solving various life problems. In other words, a successful management of the situation depends on the person's character and on the nature and extent of available resources, on individual typological peculiarities, including cognitive ones [1, p.4-5].

If with reference to overcoming anxiety by the individual, there is more research, then with reference to overcoming collective/social anxiety in the conditions of new unexpected challenges, there are fewer studies relevant to these challenges.

In relation to the fact that the state of anxiety is a destructive one, it is necessary to look for certain ways of regulating, correcting and reducing it. At the current stage, psychological practice has a wide range of effective techniques for reducing the individual's state of anxiety, focused on its emotional sphere and less for reducing social anxiety in different social groups.

The purpose of this article is to address the issue of social anxiety in the context of current challenges and provide some solutions to overcome them.

Anxiety: Updating The Problem

Anxiety is considered by most researchers as the main cause of neurosis. Such disturbances appear following the stabilization of behavioral patterns non-adaptive to stress situations.

We find an approach, in this sense, to anxiety in the works of Karen Horney [2]. He writes that anxiety, like fear, presents an emotional reaction to danger. But unlike fear, anxiety has a vague, unclear character. Even if it is about a concrete danger, anxiety anyway starts from the fear of the unknown. Secondly, referring to N.K. Goldstein, K.Horney states that anxiety is triggered by the

danger that threatens individual integrity. Since people have different values, it turns out that the anxious reaction manifests itself differently, depending on the individual perception of danger. Another characteristic of anxiety, as opposed to fear, is the feeling of incapacity in the face of impending danger. Incapacity can be triggered by both external and internal factors.

At the base of all types of neurosis, as Karen Horney argues, is the "basal anxiety", which she describes as a "overwhelming and insidious sensation of loneliness and helplessness in a hostile world. The man feels small, insignificant, helpless, abandoned, in danger, in a world that is overly deceptive, hostile, humiliating and treacherous" [3].

Rollo May [4] has the following explanation for the anguish: anxiety is the feeling of fear in the situation that the individual perceives as a danger to his/her vital values. The state of uncertainty and confusion refers to that level of personality on which the potential danger is directed. For this reason, R. May concludes that the person cannot take a certain attitude outside anxiety, cannot materialize the danger. Anxiety does not depend on something concrete, but more on the unconscious, because it affects the personality at the psychological level, where its own "I", different from the real world is formed.

The individual, who cannot monitor his/her restlessness, feels powerless, retreats to a narrow corner of the real world, inhibits, gives up the fight, without resorting to his/her forces. May also adds that a person's ability to go through anxiety is not learned, and the qualitative characteristics and specific forms of anxiety develop in the process of forming the individual.

Therefore, *"anxiety (or anguish) is an emotional state that consists, on a phenomenological level, from three fundamental elements: the perception of an imminent danger, an attitude of waiting in the face of this danger and a sense of disorganization related to the consciousness of a total powerlessness in the face of this danger "[beside 5].*

A series of researchers examines anxiety as a feature of the personality determined by the social factor. N.V. Imedadze calls anxiety "... specific socialized emotion". The results of his experiments denote that the socialization process, which derives intensively in children's kindergartens, substantially influences the appearance of anxiety in children [6]. From the same aspect is analyzed anxiety by V.P. Kislovskaia. Based on the research, she shows that the level of anxiety correlates closely with social status. Kislovskaia states: "... anxiety, to a certain extent, is a social function of communication." In her studies conducted in Georgia schools, the clear connection between the characteristics of the individual's behavior is also revealed in an alleged environment and anxiety levels [7].

The state of anxiety is the first situational emotional reaction to various stressors and therefore it is an indispensable part of the emotional stress of all the people involved in any significant activity, especially under natural conditions [8].

The analysis of different approaches, definitions of anxiety allows us to find that anxiety is a psychological phenomenon and psychological concept with a great diversity of significations/meanings. At the same time, in most approaches anxiety is regarded as an affective state of anxiety, fear, stress and as a feature of the personality to perceive the surrounding world as a threat. Therefore, anxiety as a feature of the personality to react to threats and danger and as a state related to a certain context or situation manifests itself differently during a limited time, being determined by several internal and external factors.

Factors Generating Social Anxiety

In the specialized literature we find two approaches to the causes of anxiety: *anxiety - personal acquisition; anxiety - feature of temperament.*

Carl Rogers [9] considers that anxiety is the result of the body's reaction to the subliminal perception of the contradiction between the concept of individual self and the relevant experience. According to his opinion, stable anxiety is caused by the conflict between I-conception or I-real and I-ideal. By performing the signaling function, the anxiety, in the author's opinion, appears when the person, arising from the usual image of himself/herself, begins to perceive the reality. We must not forget that the very deformed perception of reality can be caused by the presence of anxiety, for example, in the case of intraversity.

In a string of works [10; 11; 12] as a cause of anxiety, the conflict between self -esteem and the level of requirements is considered. It is considered that this inconsistency prevents the choice of behavioral and activity models, suitable for their own possibilities. This fact leads to inner tension, to discomfort, which means high personal anxiety.

People with a high degree of anxiety have similar features. Usually, they are restless, inclined towards a cyclical thinking, possess an analytical mind and are tortured by obsessive fears. In the character of these people we observe the tendency to have a clear picture in all and exaggerated requirements towards themselves and to others. The approval from those who surround them and the attempt to constantly self-control are the main self-esteem criteria. The permanent state of waiting, caused by the fear of negative events, occupies a central place in their consciousness and, at the slightest threat or in unusual situations, it turns into a violent reaction. Such type of consciousness of man gives rise to biochemical reactions that cause anxiety.

Another cause that causes anxiety can be the inner conflict of person, the

disagreement with himself/herself, his/her inconsistency. The tendency to somatize the contemporary person or the tendency to suffer psychic stress at the physiological level also has, in our opinion, certain cultural sources.

The problem regarding the causes of anxiety is not exhausted. Currently, the opinion predominates, according to which anxiety is based on natural factors (the properties of nervous and endocrinological system), are formed throughout life, as a result of social activity and personal factors.

As soon as the state of anxiety appears, the person "connects a whole series of mechanisms", which "process" this situation by changing it into a new one, also unpleasant, but not so unbearable. This fact changes the whole picture of anxiety. Some "hide" in a muscular shell, others learn to hold back their emotions and then are proud that they can hide the "storm in their soul" from the eyes of others. Sooner or later, these people will "explode", to the astonishment of those around them. It is very bad, if this explosion will be internal, because it can be complicated with hypertensive crises, myocardial infarction, insults, etc.

A large part of the researchers consider the totality of some objective elements of the environment (events, conditions, circumstances, etc.) as the cause of anxiety. This totality of elements directly influences the subject, stimulates and corrects his/her activity, dictating, at the same time, some time and space limits for the achievement. At the same time, the external environment represents not only a concrete object or a functional environment (for example, the work activity), but the totality of social and interpersonal relations.

Another category of factors that determine the appearance of anxiety are the social-psychological ones. This category includes all the socio-affective, socio-cultural and educational factors within the human groups in which the person must integrate or of which he/she is a part.

From this category of factors we highlight the following: the environmental factor, the current complexity factor, the relational factor.

R. Cattell and A. Prihojan highlight the following forms of anxiety:

- *manifested, accentuated anxiety* - it is felt consciously and has direct expressions in behavior and activity;
- *veiled, hidden anxiety* - it is unconscious, it manifests itself through excessive silence, insensitivity in the face of threats and even through denial, non-recognition of anxiety. Also, this form manifests itself through certain specific means of behavior [13].

Another important aspect concerns the establishment of anxiety manifestation levels. Researchers B. Cociubei and E. Novikova outline, with reference to activity, two levels of anxiety:

- *the constructive level* - increases the originality of solution, the uniqueness of idea, contributes to the mobilization of emotional, volitional and intellectual resources of the personality;
- *the destructive level* – is a deformation of constructive anxiety, which manifests itself through a state of alarm, hopelessness and loss of control capacity. The individual begins to doubt his/her own abilities. It should be emphasized that destructive anxiety not only disrupts the activity in which the subject is involved (learning activity, professional activity), but can also be devastating, destroying certain personality structures, dominating his/her existence [14].

In the specialized literature there are also classifications of the types of anxiety: *anxiety - state, anxiety - trait* (R. Cattell); *school anxiety, academic anxiety, self-esteem anxiety, interpersonal anxiety*.

In this context, we try to approach anxiety from a social perspective - social anxiety, which can also be seen as situational, moral, social-psychological. The highlighting of this type of anxiety is related to the new social, economic, value challenges and, first of all, those generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, etc.

These challenges generated and generate states of anxiety both at the individual level and at the level of entire society. It is important to note that the manifestation of anxiety at the social group level is not equal to the sum of individual manifestations of anxiety.

Social groups can include individuals with different temperaments, with different studies, professions, but they have similar manifestations of anxiety, as a rule, destructive. Their state of anxiety "pushes" towards the search for those responsible for this state outside. In this case the reasoning is "disconnected".

So, social anxiety is related to the reaction of individuals, social groups to different situations of stress, danger, including for personal life, of families, but also of society as a whole. In this situation when society is practically under the influence of current challenges, which generate situations of stress and anxiety, individuals, in part, and/or social groups can have constructive, but mostly destructive, panic behavior, which can be easily manipulated by other destructive forces.

Results of Express Study on Manifestation of Anxiety by Different Social Groups

In order to obtain some data, *interviews* and *discussions* with arbitrarily chosen people were applied. The interview and discussions were aimed at obtaining answers to the following *question: What factors caused stress, anxiety, danger for you?*

Table 1. Factors that caused anxiety, stress

No. crt.	Factors Causing Anxiety	People with Higher Education	People without Higher Education	People of Retirement Age	Students
1.	COVID-19 Pandemic	60%	50%	100%	40%
2.	War In Ukraine	100%	100%	100%	100%
3.	Energy Crisis	60%	90%	100%	50%
4.	Economic crisis	60%	90%	100%	50%
5.	demographic crisis	80%	50%	50%	40%
6.	political crisis	80%	50%	30%	60%
7.	Crisis of values	90%	50%	40%	30%

The general analysis of the obtained data allows us to note the following:

1. The war in Ukraine generated anxiety, stress, uncertainty in the entire population. But opinions were divided regarding the causes of this war.
2. In second place was the factor of the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. It should be noted that the most affected or proven to be retirees and people without higher education, and the least affected are students.
3. It is worrying that the political crisis and the crisis of values are not the primary factors causing anxiety among students, pensioners and people without higher education.
4. People with higher education placed the value crisis factor in the second plane, what is a signal for the whole society.

Some Psychological and Educational Mechanisms for Regulating and Reducing Social Anxiety

The regulation and reduction of anxiety through psychological and educational mechanisms should be focused on:

- typology of social groups;
- level of manifestation of anxiety by different social groups, but also by individuals;
- psychological characteristics of those who show a high level of anxiety.

The following mechanisms for regulating and reducing social anxiety can be effective:

(1) Regulation and reduction of anxiety in different social groups by means of the reflexive mechanism.
(2) Regulating and reducing social anxiety in different social groups by developing motivational potential.
(3) Regulation and reduction of social anxiety through different forms of information and training of different social groups, taking into account their particularities and needs.

Reducing Social Anxiety: ***Reflexive Mechanism***

Reflection is not just a simple mechanism that helps us to correctly assess the situation and choose the optimal solution to act, but a mechanism that forms our behavior patterns that shapes our way of life. The specificity of self-development, self-organization of the individual is determined by the fact that during development the person's activism, initially caused by social influence, then turns into an individual activism, oriented to explain the meaning of his/her activity in general.

A person always tends to develop, to improve himself/herself. It is important to find that key moment that determines the changes in structure and quality. Such a moment, in our opinion, is the phenomenon of reflection. Usually, reflection represents the individual's awareness of the means and foundations of one's activity. Awareness is an important moment of reflection, but it does not sufficiently explain its essence. The essence of reflection consists in changing the means and foundations of the activity in order to control the situation, to improve it, to obtain optimal results. Awareness, in this case, is only a necessary premise for change. Reflection has an active character, a fact emphasized by several psychologists.

We define reflection as a mechanism of thinking, of activity, of self-knowledge and as one of regulating and reducing anxiety, including that generated by current challenges [15, p.89-90].

Reducing Social Anxiety: ***Motivational Mechanism***

The primary causes of a person's activity are consistent with his/her vital functions in society, with his/her degree of involvement in social relations. "At any moment the person is tried by different stimulating factors, which sometimes can be in contradictory relations with each other or in contradiction with personal goals and tasks. In the given situation, there is a need to regulate these incentives, to bring them to a common agreement and to organize them in a certain system of incentives, which constitutes the reason", which is closely related to the person's emotional sphere [16 , p.50].

Anxiety, in this sense, is determined as an "emotional state", as "the property of reaching a maximum state of tension... in social relations", etc. The authors explain the notion of anxiety through reactions, states, relationships. Emotional reactions, emotional states, emotional relationships are part of the structure of emotions.

Emotions express the meaning (significance) of phenomena and situations and, being a mechanism of internal regulation of mental activity and behavior, contribute to the satisfaction of current human needs.

V.G. Leontiev states: "Motive represents a close connection between the regulatory functions of emotions and the motive itself" [17]. In other words, anxiety, being a manifestation of the emotional sphere of the personality, can be regulated with the help of motivation.

Reducing Social Anxiety: *Educational Mechanism*

The education system at all levels, including the level of learning and adult education, depends on the opportunities to valorize on the psychological, but also pedagogical tools to reduce the anxiety of those who learn (*special trainings, psychological counseling, psychopedagogical counseling, information lessons*, etc.).

General Conclusions

The current context, the emergence of new external and internal challenges have generated a high level of anxiety's manifestation at the level of society, which in turn has generated the distrust of many people in the future. This study comes to address the problem of social anxiety and draw some directions of action, regarding the regulation and reduction of this phenomenon.

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