

1st Interviewee: Tia Lee

Occupation: Artist, Sophomore in high school

Interview date: March 18, 2022

Location: Los Altos

(0:04) Lindsey: Okay, so what is your name and what grade are you in?

Tia: My name is Tia and I am in high school.

(0:13) Lindsey: Okay, so can you remember when your social anxiety first began to develop?

Like, when was your very first time experiencing social anxiety and can you describe to me what that was like?

Tia: Yeah so, I think I first began having social anxiety when I was in middle school, like, seventh grade. I wasn't always like this. When I was in elementary school I used to have a lot of friends and hung out with the popular kids. But starting junior high, I started feeling really self-conscious about everything about myself. Over time, I pushed away all the friends that I had and became friendless. In elementary school, I would wear the exact same neon green jacket everyday and that's what I showed up in on my first day of seventh grade. Let's just say that I stuck out quite a bit and not in a good way. I think it was my first time disliking or feeling uncomfortable with the attention I got from other people.

(0:39) Lindsey: And this story, this experience is what gave you social anxiety?

Tia: Yeah, I believe so. From that day forward, I became a lot more socially aware until the only thing I ever thought about was what other people thought of me. My assumptions of what other peoples' opinions of me were just consumed my mind.

(2:12) Lindsey: And how did this way of thinking make you feel? In other words, what did it feel like to have social anxiety?

Tia: Well, my thoughts made me feel incredibly insecure of myself. I felt like I was always being judged by the people around me and I constantly worried about how other people perceived me. Sometimes when I was out in public, I would just look at someone and automatically assume that they thought I was ugly or stupid or something even when they probably didn't even know I existed. This made me feel like I wasn't good enough for others and I started to believe that my self-worth was less than everyone else's and I had no confidence. This led to self-doubt which made me feel like I couldn't do anything right, or like, I wasn't capable of doing anything at all and my grades started to drop. Basically, things just kept getting worse. One bad thing led to another even more bad thing and I was just out of control in this self-destructive cycle. It was like spiraling down in a void of self-imposed loneliness and misery and hitting the bottom meant ending my life. But I knew I would never hit the bottom because I was not, and I am not suicidal. The worst part about it was that it was all my fault. It was my decision to put myself in an endless void of self-imposed misery. I'm always trapped in my own thoughts. I'm constantly thinking about what other people could be thinking about me. I always think everyone is watching me and judging me, because I'm different in the worst way possible. But who knows, maybe it's all just puberty.

(4:11) Lindsey: And how did these feelings affect your life?

Tia: *pause* Okay, this might be, or, this is gonna be a long answer.

Lindsey: That's totally fine.

Tia: So, I started to obsess over my image and what I looked like and this eventually led to body dysmorphia which caused me to develop an eating disorder. I had convinced myself that everyone hated me and this made me hate myself. My grade in English dropped because I never spoke during the Socratic discussions. In general, I was just horrible at talking to people, I had no social skills, and because of this, I had no friends at school and I was a complete loner and loser. There was this- uh or -Near the end of eighth grade, my middle school held a party for all the graduating eighth graders. My parents forced me to go even though they knew that I didn't have anyone to hang out with at the party. I hated it and I completely regret ever going to it. All I did at the party was switch from staying in the bathroom for some time and then walking around in the actual party room for some time, and then going back to the bathroom, and finally, after like an hour of doing that, I decided to leave. But like, there were so many parent chaperones at the party which is one of the reasons why I kept switching from the bathroom to the party so that I wouldn't look suspicious but doing that probably made me look even more suspicious, but anyway, you weren't allowed to just leave the party, you had to let one of them know. But, I mean like, I wanted to leave in secret because I didn't want to talk to anyone and I was too embarrassed and ashamed, so I literally had to ninja my way out so that I wouldn't get caught leaving and I walked home in the dark. My middle school also had a day for all the eighth graders to go to Great America. And again, I didn't have any friends. So for the first, like, hour, or what felt like an hour since I didn't have any watch or phone with me, I just stayed locked up in a bathroom stall. I was too embarrassed to walk around and ride the rides on my own because then everyone would've known I was a loner who had no friends to hang out with. But eventually, I got really bored and decided it was worse to stay in a bathroom stall for the entire day than to look like a loser out in public. Actually, I was lucky and I spotted a girl that I kind of

knew and I hung out with her for the rest of the day. My life is governed by several daily rituals. But I consider them as my art forms. One is my food preparation routine. I only eat one meal a day. But there are a series of foods that I have to consume, and in a specific order. I am very meticulous with the way I prepare my food. I go through this routine because it calms me down, makes me feel like I'm in control of something in my life. I start by chopping a quarter of an apple into cubes. I take a white bowl, and flatten out two tablespoons of plain yogurt. I put the apple cubes on top, followed by chia seeds, almond slices, granola with all the raisins taken out, and finally 7 walnut halves. The result is... yogurt art, and I eat it while watching TikTok which is my only connection to the outside world since I'm too afraid to own a phone. At night I go through another routine. I check to make sure all the drawers in my closet are closed or else... something bad could happen, I lay my seven hair pins out in a semicircle and I don't even wear them, I brush my teeth twice, I brush my hair three times, etc. And this whole routine usually takes 45 to 60 minutes. and it's all a part of my OCD. Like, I don't want to do this, I don't want to have all of these routines but I have to. It's not really a choice.

(7:07) Lindsey: Did you ever try to seek help?

Tia: No not really. But obviously my parents noticed my social anxiety and they made me go to therapy. It didn't work.

(7:20) Lindsey: Did the pandemic affect your social anxiety in any way?

Tia: Oh, so, actually, I loved the pandemic, and at the time I wished it would never end. Social distancing was like a dream come true for me because no socializing meant no social anxiety. I

feel like the pandemic really helped me get past the peak of my social anxiety and gave me the time and space I needed to learn and grow and change as a person.

(7:54) Lindsey: So the pandemic allowed you to overcome your social anxiety?

Tia: Well, so, no. I still struggle with social anxiety. But it has definitely improved, and I think that maybe if the pandemic never happened, it would never have improved as much as it did.

(8:14) Lindsey: And how did your social anxiety affect your relationship with your family?

Tia: So, home was like the only place that I could be completely alone and because of that, I never really felt the need to talk to or like to be around my family at all. And this definitely worsened my relationship with my parents. I just, for no reason, I was just always angry at them. Like, whenever they knocked on my door to check up on me, I would get super pissed at them and I would have a really bad attitude. Like, in general I was just always in a bad mood. I would yell at my parents to leave me alone, and, looking back, I really regret doing that and I wish I didn't act like such an ungrateful brat. But now, my relationship with my parents is a lot better and they are very supportive and I am really grateful for that.

(9:15) Lindsey: What about your sibling?

Tia: Oh, my older sister was an absolute help. She was the person that I relied most on for support and comfort. In a way, she was my therapist because she would always be willing to listen to what I had to say and she always gave me really good advice. Sometimes we would stay up for hours just talking about everything and she would listen to all of my annoyingly long

rants. Like, I basically told her everything I wanted to say that my social anxiety prevented me from saying.

(9:55) Lindsey: So do you have any hopes or goals for the future regarding your social anxiety?

Tia: Well, I am still trying to grow and change, of course. I really hope that I'm just going through an awkward phase in my life and that this is all just part of being a teenager and going through puberty. I have hope that life, in general, and socializing will get easier as I mature. But, I also hope that in the future, I will be the social butterfly that I once was in elementary school. But for now, I'm still, like, trying to learn how to love myself and just figure out who I am as a person.