Facing your fear: overcoming a phobia

A quickened heartbeat, clammy hands, rapid breathing; if you experience these symptoms every time you get on an airplane, see a spider or go to the doctor for a needle, you might have a phobia. As the most common mental issue faced, phobias affect all types of people, from all walks of life. Fortunately, they are treatable and curable.



While this kind of all-consuming fear is shared by 10 per cent of the population, most sufferers don't take steps to address the issue. Whether you or a loved one suffers from a mild or major phobia, support is available. The information that follows will uncover common fears, root causes and the most-used treatment options available. Remember: When it comes to phobias, knowledge—about triggers, coping techniques and support—is your first and best line of defence.

What is a phobia?

Phobias are exaggerated, irrational and excessive fears that occur when you encounter, or think you will encounter an object or situation you're afraid of. They differ from regular fears because, though the sufferer is aware of the fear, he or she can't control or cope with the situation and becomes physically and mentally powerless. You might be afraid of spiders, but will easily squash one that crawls into your bed. A person with arachnophobia—the fear of spiders—however, would experience nausea, panic and intense anxiety at the mere thought of a spider in the bed.

There are two main categories of phobias.

- **Specific phobias.** These are the most common and include things like airplanes, dogs or a situation such as going on a date. People with specific phobias are intensely fearful and anxious when they deal with a particular situation or come upon an object that they are scared of.
- **Social phobias.** These are based on the fear of being humiliated in public. People who experience social phobias avoid public speaking, parties and even talking on the telephone. If left untreated, a person with a social phobia can withdraw and experience severe social problems.

Because phobias are categorized as an anxiety disorder, other mental health problems are closely related. Often, people experience panic disorders along with their phobia. Depression, alcohol use and substance abuse are also common with severe phobias.

Causes of phobias

Some phobias can be traced to traumatic events early in life. If you were bitten by an animal—or were constantly warned that they were dangerous—you might develop zoophobia, the fear of animals. Maybe you witnessed an event that caused panic attacks or extreme fear in a loved one as a child. If you saw your parents become anxious or panic around certain objects or events, you too may have developed the same fears.

The origins of most phobias, however, are unknown. The sufferer may not have had any exposure to others' phobias and may simply be inherently anxious. While discovering the root of the problem can help with treatment, for many people the source of a phobia is unclear.

Signs and symptoms

People with phobias not only experience intense fear, but also tend to avoid the object or situation that causes panic and anxiety. This can become extreme and interrupt daily life. Those affected by cynophobia—the fear of dogs or rabies—might stop taking walks to avoid coming across an animal. With social phobias, most sufferers have an extreme fear of being watched, judged or embarrassed. If it becomes severe, they may withdraw from public life altogether and become a recluse.

The object or situation that causes the fear doesn't even need to be present to create a panic response. Sometimes, the simple thought causes a reaction. Physical responses include:

- **Anxiety reactions.** These include sweating, trembling, rapid heartbeat, nausea, worry or terror.
- **Panic attacks.** These can cause difficulty breathing, dizziness, chest pain, chills or hot flashes, intense fear and a feeling of losing control.
- **Alcohol or substance abuse.** These will mask anxiety or other mental conditions such as depression.

Treatment Options

The majority of people with phobias don't seek treatment. This is unfortunate since there are a variety of treatments available that have a positive success rate.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). A form of psychotherapy that teaches sufferers to stop their phobic inner dialogue by challenging irrational behaviours and tracking thoughts, feelings and actions. Little by little, the affected person is exposed to the object of their phobia and taught how to better manage reactions.

Relaxation exercises. Help the sufferer learn to stay calm when encountering the phobic object or event. Treatment involves deep breathing, muscle relaxation, meditation and positive affirmations.

Medications. Sometimes used in conjunction with CBT or other forms of behaviour therapy. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications can be prescribed by a medical doctor to help ease anxiety and panic.

Support groups. Can be extremely helpful in the treatment of phobias. Knowing that other people are experiencing the same fears as you can offer comfort. Groups also provide helpful tips for relaxation and fear confrontation.

How to help yourself

No one wants to experience the stress and anxiety that comes with intense fear. But there are steps you can take toward living a phobia-free life:

Become an expert. Scared of flying? Panic when you see needles? Most phobias are irrational, so understanding why your fear is exaggerated can be a huge and important step in the recovery process. Learn all there is to know about your fear. Read books, talk to your doctor, attend seminars or search online. Research, together with the help of a professional, will also help you figure out your best treatment option(s).

Set goals. Taking small steps toward conquering your phobia allows you to build confidence and relax. If you have a fear of talking in public, try speaking up briefly during a group discussion. Once you feel comfortable doing that, you might try gradually contributing more and more to conversations.

Live a healthy life. Whether you have a phobia or not, good health helps you deal with anxiety and stress. Exercise regularly, eat well-balanced meals, avoid caffeine and get the proper amount of sleep. Never use alcohol or drugs to mask your fear and anxiety, and seek support immediately if this is an issue.

Adopt a warrior mentality. A phobia can take over your life and prevent you from doing the things you love. Don't accept a loss in this battle. Speak to health professionals and support groups for ideas on coping with your phobia until you find something that works for you.

Find an outlet. When you begin to feel anxious, use this energy to do something enjoyable. If you love to draw, carry a pencil and art pad with you. Does music soothe your soul? Invest in an MP3 player. The distraction will help you to relax when panic or fear sets in.

Many people affected by phobias never seek treatment, leaving them open to a lifetime of fear and anxiety. Take the first step to helping yourself or a loved one by acknowledging the phobia(s), seeking support, and taking it one day at a time.