

PHOBIAS

WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Healthcare Community NHS Trust. It forms part of a series of booklets that are designed to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

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PHOBIAS WHAT THEY ARE AND OVERCOMING THEM

WHAT IS A PHOBIA ?

A phobia is a *persistent* and *excessive* fear of an object that is not in fact dangerous.

This fear results in a strong desire to avoid phobic situations, even though one may recognise that this is not rational or reasonable. When in a “safe” place, one may be able to admit that there is nothing to be afraid of, but when faced with what one fears, one believes one is in real danger.

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PHOBIA:

□ *Social Phobias:*

Most people are often slightly anxious in social situations. This is perfectly normal; even prominent public figures have a slight fluttering in their chests before major appearances.

A little anxiety is often regarded as better than none at all since it can help keep the person alert and on their toes. It is only when the fear of social occasions becomes too great that it begins to disrupt activity.

Unlike most other phobias, which are more common in women, social phobias tend to occur as often in men as in women. Most of these begin between the ages of 15 and 25. Generally they develop slowly over a number of months or years with no obvious cause.

A small number do begin suddenly after triggering events. For example, a young man at a dance felt sick at the bar and vomited before reaching the toilet, making an embarrassing mess. Thereafter he became afraid of going to dances, bars or parties.

Someone with a social phobia may have fears about what other people will think of them. They are afraid that other people will criticise and reject them.

Most people who have a social phobia are *very conscious of being observed and are able to do certain things only as long as nobody is watching them*. A glance from someone else will precipitate a pang of panic.

Social phobias of this kind are not uncommon. Sufferers may be afraid of eating and drinking in front of other people; the fear may be that their hands will tremble as they hold their fork or cup, or they may feel nauseous or

have a lump in their throat and be unable to swallow so long as they are watched. As one person said:

“When I go out to eat in strange places I cannot eat, my throat feels a quarter of an inch wide, and I sweat”

The fear is usually worse in smart, crowded restaurants and less in the safety of the home, but a few phobics even find it impossible to eat in the presence of their spouse alone.

Such people become unable to go out to dinner or to invite friends home because they are afraid that their hands will tremble when drinking coffee or handing a cup to a friend

Fear of shaking, blushing, sweating, or looking ridiculous: Some affected persons will not sit facing another passenger in a bus or train, nor walk past a waiting line of people. They are terrified of attracting attention by behaving awkwardly or fainting. Some people avoid talking to superiors. People may cease swimming as it involves exposing their bodies to the gaze of strangers.

People will avoid parties and be too embarrassed to talk to people:

“I can’t have normal conversations with people. I break out in a sweat, that is my whole problem, even with the missus”

In some people, the *fear appears only in the presence of members of the opposite sex*, but more usually it happens equally in front of men and women.

□ ***Other Phobias:***

People can also have *fears of individual objects* e.g. spiders, dogs, aeroplanes and flying, and heights. Psychologists call these monophobia.

THE SYMPTOMS OF PHOBIAS:

□ ***Physical Symptoms:***

The physical symptoms include all the sensations that might be present if, for example, one had just missed being knocked down by a car, such as:

- rapid heart rate
- sweating
- trembling
- fast breathing
- muscular tension and/or weakness
- “butterflies” in the stomach

- nausea
- breathlessness etc.

There is a somewhat different pattern of symptoms with phobias of blood or injury, when there is a sudden fall in heart rate which can lead to fainting.

□ ***Behaviour:***

When someone with a phobia is faced with a phobic situation, they will either want to ***“FLEE”*** or ***“FREEZE”*** - move speedily away or become rooted to the spot.

□ ***Thoughts and Emotions:***

Emotions such as shame, embarrassment, and anger, as well as fear may be experienced; also possibly thoughts about what might have happened had one stayed in the situation, for example, *“That might have killed me”, “People are dangerously careless”, or “I would have looked a fool; everyone would have noticed my hands shaking”.*

People with phobias react in all three of the ways mentioned above - with physical symptoms, behaviour and thoughts and emotions

WHAT KEEPS FEAR GOING?

Once we avoid a frightening situation, we are more likely to steer clear of it again the next time that we meet it. Gradually, the fear of the situation gets bigger and bigger until we develop a phobia.

This is because we don't give ourselves the chance to learn that the feared object or situation is not in fact dangerous or is at least not as dangerous as we had thought it was.

ESCAPE and *AVOIDANCE* keep fear going [see diagram on next page].

This fear will not disappear by magic. It usually takes time and perseverance to overcome a phobia.

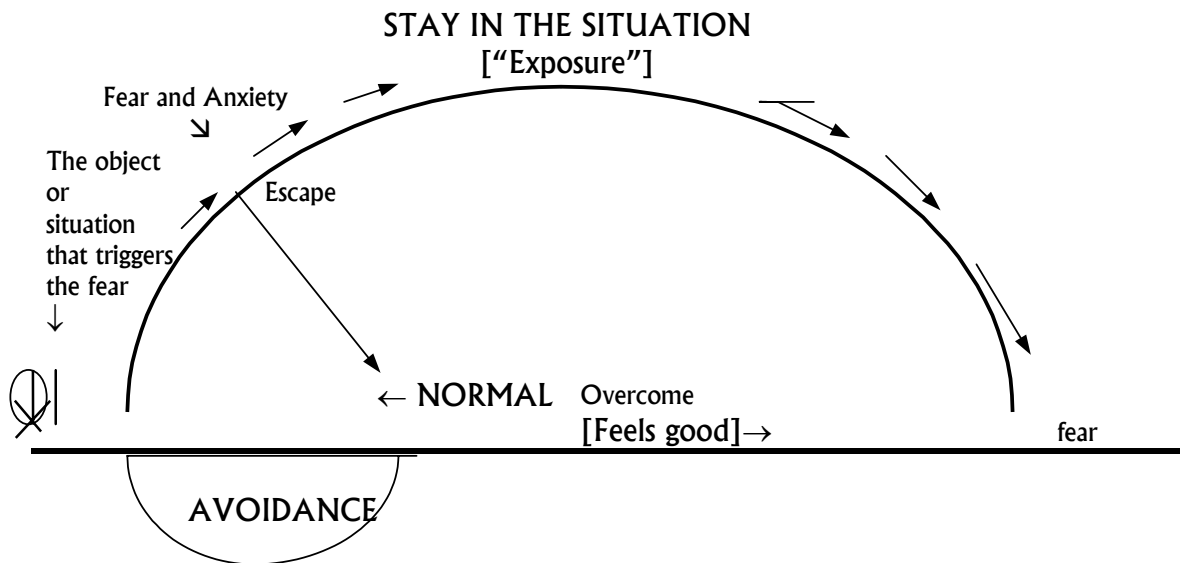
TREATMENT:

Treatment of these sorts of phobias is usually carried out by a gradual exposure to the feared object, e.g. a spider or a situation like talking to the boss at work.

During each session you have to approach the feared situation and stay in the situation until your anxiety subsides. This takes time and you need determination and patience to conquer the fear that has built up.

Research shows that provided exposure continues for long enough the anxiety eventually goes down [See diagram below]

This means if you put yourself into situations that make you anxious the anxiety will eventually go down.



[Temporary relief but takes you back to square 1!]

The curve is more usually like this but it does come down eventually

This may be hard to believe at the moment, but if you think of your own experience you usually avoid the situations that make you anxious and if you are exposed to them you tend to “run away”.

Basically you have not learnt that the anxiety will eventually decrease on its own. This self help treatment will help you learn this and therefore help you to cope with your anxiety and phobia.

BEFORE YOU START:

Before you start the treatment it is a good idea to ask yourself a few questions just to see how appropriate this sort of treatment will be for your particular situation:

- Is your anxiety triggered by specific situations ? i.e Parties, dogs, meeting someone in authority.
- Can you define the problem in detail ? i.e. “I am terrified of aeroplanes and always avoid flying”, or “I can’t bear the thought of talking to a group of people”.

Write down the situations and/or object that makes you anxious:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

For each situation and/or object write down a specific goal you would like to achieve, i.e. "I want to fly from London to Paris and back. [Well defined and clear goal].

I want to lose my fear of air travel [too vague].

Doing these two exercises will have helped you clarify that your problem is and what you would like to change.

LADDERS AND HIERARCHIES:

The first thing that you need to do is write a hierarchy or "ladder" of situations that cause you to feel anxious.

This may sound complicated but it is quite simple to do and will help you to keep a guide on which situations you have learnt to cope with.

The ladder has rungs scored from 1 – 100. These are equal to the level of anxiety that you feel when in a situation that you fear. 0 is no anxiety at all, calm, and 100 is complete panic.

What you have to do is to rate the problems that you have listed in order from least anxiety to most anxiety. You will have about 20 rungs on your ladder.

The aim is for you to gradually "walk up the ladder" and at each rung learn to cope with the anxiety that you experience. This is done by exposure to each step at a time, still staying with the feared situation until you don't feel any anxiety. When you have mastered one "rung"/situation, you are ready to go on to the next. It may be helpful for you to have a friend to help you with the treatment and to encourage you to stay with the fear until the anxiety gets less and less.

[PLEASE SEE AN EXAMPLE OF A "LADDER"/HIERARCHY ON PAGE: 9]

In order to change the way you react in these situations *YOU NEED TO INVEST TIME AND EFFORT IN OVERCOMING ANXIETY BY:*

1. Setting aside a *REGULAR TIME* to do your “homework”
2. Promising *NOT* to *RUN AWAY* when you feel fear
3. *KEEPING A RECORD* of what you have achieved
4. *MAPPING OUT WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO FOR NEXT TIME*
5. Keeping a *DIARY* of the progress that you are making. Fill this in at the end of each session. Make notes and try to use your coping strategies to help you.
6. Using your *COPING STRATEGIES*
7. Doing *RELAXATION*
- 8.
9. Thinking *HELPFUL THOUGHTS*
10. Accepting that the fear is there but that the *LONGER* you stay in the situation the *LESS* frightening it will become
11. *Not letting setbacks get you down:*

We all have good and bad days so if you find that you are stuck on a particular rung don't give up. See if you can break the situation down into smaller parts and do each part bit by bit. Gradually, you will see that your anxiety is decreasing and that you are able to cope with the first step in the ladder with ease.

A POSSIBLE HIERARCHY FOR FEAR OF HEIGHTS

- 13 Eat a meal in post office tower
- 12 Drive along mountain roads
- 11 Walk along cliff path
- 10 Church Tower: Walk up and out onto roof
- 9 Drive over a suspension bridge
- 8 Walk across bridge over river, close to rail
- 7 Use step ladder to change light bulb in centre of room
- 6 Look down from top of “down” escalator
- 5 Look down from plate glass window in office, up to 6th floor
- 4 As below, at friends, and second floor windows
- 3 Lean out of first floor window
- 2 Look through closed first floor window
- 1 Look over banisters on upstairs landing

↑ FINISH ↑
13
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
↑ START ↑

People sometimes think when they see a hierarchy:

“I’ll never be able to do that”, but the best way to tackle a hierarchy is to START AT THE BEGINNING AND TAKE IT ONE STEP AT A TIME. The decision to continue with the next step is up to you. You may decide that you have overcome enough fear. You’ll decide.

SUMMARY

We established that a phobia is not a rational fear in that the fear is out of all proportion to the facts, that is, the feared object or situation is not dangerous or at least nothing like as dangerous as the person with the phobia believes it to be.

The different types and characteristics of phobia were discussed, namely social phobia and other phobias of individual objects [monophobias].

Symptoms of phobias include physical sensations, behaviour thoughts and emotions.

The way to overcome a phobia is to face the object or situation that one fears, in gradual steps/stages of the ladder/hierarchy. Once one no longer feels any anxiety at one stage, one is ready to move on to the next stage. It takes time, courage, determination and perseverance to triumph. Ten ways in which one can invest time and effort in overcoming a phobia were mentioned.

The rule is:

**THE MORE PRACTICE YOU GET FACING FEARED
SITUATIONS, THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO OVERCOME FEAR**

This means usually that dozens of hours of practice will be necessary. The time taken varies from one person to another depending on the extent of their phobia and on their motivation

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO GET OVER YOUR PHOBIA ?



**KEEP GOING AND YOU WILL
CONQUER YOUR FEAR**

