

NHS Fife Department of Psychology

A photograph of a green tree with dense foliage, set against a clear blue sky. The tree is positioned on the left side of the page, with its branches extending towards the center.

Needle Phobia: Overcoming your fear of injections

Help Yourself @ moodcafe.co.uk



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This leaflet aims to give you information on “**needle phobia**” and what you can do to help you cope better when having an injection or blood taken if you have a needle phobia.

If you think you may have a needle phobia and are pregnant then it is important that you speak to your Midwife or GP about this. It may be possible for you to overcome your fear with the support of your Midwife. Or you may decide you need more support and want to be referred to a therapist or psychologist. Your Midwife or GP will be able to arrange this for you.

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a very powerful fear of a particular object (e.g. insects, dogs) or situation (e.g. crowded places, enclosed spaces). The fear is extreme – i.e. much stronger than what most other people would experience in a similar situation.

When someone is suffering from a phobia they usually feel very anxious if they have to face the object or situation they fear. They usually try to get away from the source of their phobia as quickly as possible. They also feel anxious when they are going to come into contact with the particular feared object or situation, and often will go to great lengths to avoid it.

A “needle phobia” is a type of phobia whereby the person has a fear of injections. When someone has a needle phobia they usually find it very difficult to have an injection or come into contact with anything associated with injections, such as needles.

What are the symptoms of a needle phobia?

When people have contact with the object or situation they fear, in this case an injection, they experience symptoms of anxiety.

Common symptoms of anxiety include: difficulty relaxing, butterflies in the stomach, shakiness, palpitations (heart beating quickly), difficulty breathing, feeling faint, tense muscles, excess sweating or blushing, needing to go to the toilet more often, panic attacks, worrying thoughts that seem out of proportion, feelings of fear, avoidance of situations that make you anxious.

Many people become frightened of their anxiety symptoms and worry that they are going to have a heart attack or faint. It is important that you understand what anxiety is and that you can, in fact, learn to control your anxiety symptoms once you understand what it is.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal healthy reaction. It happens to everyone in times of danger or in worrying situations. When you are anxious, your body system speeds up. In certain circumstances this can be an advantage (e.g. if you are in danger). It means you are ready for action and enables you to respond quickly if necessary.

Anxiety and your body. When we feel anxious a chain of automatic responses happen in our bodies, which prepare us for action. This is called the “fight or flight” response and can be traced back to our evolutionary past. Imagine the primitive caveman threatened by a wild animal. He needs to be prepared for vigorous action: either to fight or run away from the threat. We still possess this survival reaction although nowadays it is often triggered by situations that are not actually life threatening.

The physical symptoms of anxiety include: difficulty relaxing, butterflies in the stomach, shakiness, palpitations (heart beating quickly), difficulty breathing, feeling faint, tense muscles, excess sweating or blushing, needing to go to the toilet more often.

When a person anticipates or encounters a dangerous situation a hormone called “adrenaline” is automatically released into the bloodstream. This causes a number of changes in our body which are designed to prepare us to respond to the danger (i.e. by fighting or running away). Our breathing rate increases because we need more oxygen in the body in preparation for increased physical activity. Our heart rate increases to

pump the additional oxygen and adrenaline round the body quickly. With all this increased activity, our bodies' heat up so we sweat more, which is how the body cools itself down when it is overheating. We need to go to the toilet more frequently and the function of this is to eliminate excess weight so that we can be ready for action. In other words, these changes are anxiety symptoms. Anxiety symptoms are the body's automatic response to being in a threatening situation, and are designed to prepare us to fight the perceived danger or run away from it. The problem is that sometimes the fight flight response switches on in situations that are not actually physically dangerous. When the fight flight response switches on in a normal situation, such as in the supermarket, or in a meeting with someone, it can become problematic.

Disturbing thoughts. Very often when people have bouts of anxiety they experience disturbing thoughts. For example, they may think something terrible is going to happen, that they will lose control, or that they will somehow embarrass themselves in front of other people. Many people are unaware that they are having these thoughts until they begin to look out for them. These thoughts tend to be very negative and make you feel more anxious or frightened. They are not useful or even true and once you begin to recognise this type of thoughts you can learn to challenge them. Concentrating on what is actually happening rather than what you think might happen will help you feel less anxious.

Avoidance behaviour. The most common method of coping with anxiety is to avoid situations that make us feel anxious. This may seem like a good solution in the short term, but it is not a good long term solution because the more you avoid a situation or problem, the more frightening it then becomes and the harder it is to face up to the future. Many anxious people fear that if they put themselves in the feared situation then something dreadful would happen. They often fear that they would “crack up”, collapse or have a heart attack. In fact, what usually happens when the person faces their fear is that although they may become anxious initially, the anxiety reaches a peak and then fades away. Facing up to the feared situation is called “exposure”. Over time, repeated exposure has the effect of lessening the fear.

Getting started – but first some facts!

1. People often worry that the physical sensations of anxiety might cause a serious physical or mental problem (e.g. they believe they are having a heart attack or are going to lose control) – but **this is not true**. Anxiety is a normal reaction, which is not dangerous and does not lead to serious health or mental health problems.

2. It is common for people with phobias to worry that if they confront the object or situation that they fear, their anxiety will keep getting worse and never stop. This **does not happen** – when you confront your fear, your level of anxiety may go up initially but it **will always come back down again**.

3. The first time you face your fear it is likely that you will feel anxious. However, if you stay in the situation long enough, your anxiety levels will come down, as you begin to realise the situation is not as dangerous as you thought. The physical symptoms of anxiety will not go on endlessly – this is because our bodies are designed to “**calm themselves down**” after a short time (usually 20 minutes or so).

4. **Practice is really important!** The more you practise the exercises in this leaflet, the more you will notice you feel less anxious and that your anxiety levels come down quicker each time. You can learn to manage your anxiety – and the more you practice you do, the better you will get at it.

Techniques for overcoming your needle phobia

Face your fear

The main way a phobia is kept going is **avoidance** behaviour. We often get into a bad habit of avoiding the situation or object that we have a phobia of because it causes anxiety. It is natural to want to avoid something that frightens you or makes you feel physically uncomfortable, but avoidance is unhelpful if your fear is out of proportion to the actual level of danger of the situation.

The most effective way to overcome a fear is to **face it**. Having to face a particular situation you find difficult or have avoided for years may seem like an impossible task at first. However, this task can be made manageable by breaking it down into small steps and confronting your fear gradually, starting with the easiest step first. This is called **graded exposure**. You can make up a list of steps to work through to overcome your fear, starting with the easiest and working up to the hardest. For example, if you have a needle phobia your steps might look something like this:

- Step 1 (easiest): look at pictures of a needle
- Step 2: hold a needle
- Step 3: practice injecting water in to an orange
- Step 4: watch injections taking place on the TV
- Step 5: watch someone else having an injection
- Step 6: (hardest) have an injection

Learn techniques to reduce your anxiety symptoms

It is very important to learn how to control your anxiety symptoms using techniques such as deep breathing, relaxation, distraction and positive coping statements. These techniques will make it easier to work through your graded exposure steps and overcome your phobia.

It is important that you learn the relaxation techniques when you are calm. Do not try to learn relaxation techniques for the first time when you are having the injection done. We do not learn well when we are anxious. It is important that you prepare in advance by learning relaxation techniques. Once you are good at doing the relaxation techniques, you will be able to use them when you are actually getting an injection.

Deep Breathing Techniques

The following steps explain how to control your breathing and help you feel relaxed:

- Sit comfortably and place your hands on your stomach
- Let your stomach move out and fill with air as you breathe in deeply through your nose/mouth
- Hold that breath in for 3 seconds
- Breathe deeply out through nose/mouth while letting the stomach move back in.
- Breathe in again through nose/mouth while allowing the air to push the stomach out and gently hold for 3 seconds
- Breathe out again, as your stomach moves in
- Repeat this, trying to get a deep and gentle rhythm going

Muscle Relaxation Techniques

This technique involves tensing and relaxing the different muscle groups in the body. The aim is to notice the difference between muscles when they are tensed and when they are relaxed. It works by tensing the muscles in each part of your body for about 5 seconds, and then relaxing them for 20 seconds.

The steps of this relaxation are:

- Get comfortable and begin the deep breathing technique described above
- Focus your attention on one body part, for example, your feet, and tighten the muscles in this body part for 5 seconds, noticing this sensation
- Release this tension, and focus on the now relaxed sensation in the muscles for 20 seconds
- Now focus your attention on another body part, repeating the tense-for-5-seconds and relax-for-20-seconds cycle
- Repeat this for your legs, abdomen, chest, hands and arms, neck, shoulders, and face

You can get relaxation CD's which are available in shops or local libraries. These talk you through the various relaxation techniques. It is helpful to use a CD for instruction until get good at doing the exercises and then you can do it without the CD.

The Fife Clinical Psychology department has recorded relaxation and breathing exercises available to **download for free** at www.moodcafe.co.uk (click on 'Self Help Material' – 'Relaxation'). Your GP should also be able to give you a copy of this on a CD.

Imagery and Distraction Techniques

In situations where we feel anxious, it can be helpful to distract our attention away for a short time (usually during the most worrying bit). This can help us feel more in control and keep our anxiety levels manageable.

Some examples of distraction techniques you can try are:

- focusing on an object and describing it in as much detail as possible
- activities that occupy the mind like counting back from 1000 in 7s, thinking of animals beginning with each letter of the alphabet in turn
- thinking of a place you find relaxing and feel safe – what can you see, hear, smell and feel?

You might find at first that you need some help to distract yourself at times when you feel anxious (like when your Midwife is about to give you an injection) – why not ask your Midwife to help you with one of the above exercises? You could take turns thinking of animals beginning with the letter “R” as quickly as possible, ask her to tell you an interesting story, or you could tell her about what you have planned for the rest of the day.

Coping statements & praise

At times when we feel anxious, it can help to **talk positively to ourselves**, using encouraging statements. Below are some examples of statements that other people with a fear of needles and/or injections have found helpful.

You may find it helpful to make a “**coping card**” with a few encouraging statements on it. You can keep it in your bag or purse to refer to when you need it.

Here are some examples of what you might put on your coping card:

Preparing for/before my appointment

- It's not going to be as bad as I think.
- It won't last long and I can cope with it.
- It's better to go than not to go - worry doesn't help.

Positive coping statements

- Just concentrate on trying to keep my breathing relaxed and steady.
- Relaxing my muscles will help this go better.
- I'm doing this for my baby and for myself.

Praising statements

- I coped with that!
- I can be pleased with the progress I'm making.
- I'm getting better at managing this fear.

Further Help

There are a few ways you can go about overcoming your needle phobia:

Talk to your midwife about taking small gradual steps towards having an injection/blood taken, for example, easier steps might involve looking at the equipment together, with later steps being “pretending” to have an injection.

A **therapist from the Clinical Psychology department** can help you to overcome your fear. Ask your Midwife or GP if you would like to arrange a referral.

Self Help Books:

The following books are available in all Fife libraries or can be purchased from most good book stores. The books below are also part of the Fife book prescription scheme. This means that your GP or Midwife can 'prescribe' you a self help book which you can then get out of the library. Further details are available at www.moodcafe.co.uk or you can ask your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor.

Bourne, E. J. (2001) *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, 3rd Edition. New Harbinger Publications. ISBN: 1567310745. Available as a book prescription.

Goldman, C. and Babior, S. (1995) *Overcoming Panic, Anxiety and Phobias: New Strategies to Free Yourself from Worry and Fear*. Whole Person Associates, ISBN: 1570250723. Available as a book prescription.

Other Organisations:

Other organisations that offer help and advice on phobias are:

Anxiety UK (formerly National Phobics Society);

Tel: 08444 775 774

Email: info@anxietyuk.org.uk

Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Triumph Over Phobia

Tel: 0845 600 9601

Email: info@topuk.org

Website: www.topuk.org

Visit moodcafe.co.uk
for more helpful resources

