

Facts about Phobias

What are phobias?

Phobias are one of the most common anxiety conditions.

When someone has a phobia, it means that they have an uncontrollable and irrational fear of an object or situation.

Many people have such fears even although they know that there is no real danger. Because of this fear they try hard to avoid the object or situation that frightens them.

The most common phobias are:

Agoraphobia – fear of public places, e.g. buses, shops

Social phobia – fear of social situations, e.g. meeting people

Specific phobias – fear of a specific thing, e.g. animal or insect

Height phobia – fear of heights, e.g. tall buildings, bridges

Claustrophobia – fear of enclosed spaces, e.g. lifts

Usually, a person with a phobia only experiences severe anxiety when faced with a particular object or situation. For example, a person who is afraid of spiders might have a panic attack when they see a spider, but not in other situations. This is different from people who suffer from generalised anxiety, another of the anxiety conditions. (See the leaflet *Generalised anxiety and panic attacks – the facts*).

Often just thinking about the object or situation, that they are frightened of, can make someone with a phobia feel anxious.

Agoraphobia

A person with agoraphobia will experience severe anxiety symptoms, such as panic attacks, when in busy, public places. This might include supermarkets, or on buses or simply on busy streets. The person may have specific fears that something awful will happen, e.g. that s/he will faint or lose control in some way. They usually feel much safer at home and so begin to stay in more and more. This can mean that they can get isolated and become depressed.

Social phobia

It is not unusual to feel anxious, occasionally, in social situations. But a person with social phobia can get so anxious or worried that they find it hard to get on with their day to day lives. Someone with social phobia has a fear of doing something embarrassing or humiliating. The fear may be particularly bad in certain situations, e.g. eating in public or at social occasions, or may be felt more generally.

People with social phobia believe that other people are thinking badly of them. They may find themselves blushing, sweating or shaking. Sometimes they may have a panic attack.

Social phobia is similar to shyness, although it is much more severe.

Other phobias

Some people only experience severe and irrational anxiety in very specific situations. Some of the most common of these are animal or insect phobias, e.g. of dogs, cats, snakes or spiders. Others are a fear of heights or confined spaces.

Many people might feel a little nervous in some situations involving the above things. For example, if faced with a large and unfamiliar dog that is barking at them. But a person with a specific phobia will be very anxious and might even panic in a situation that most people would think was quite safe. For example, if they see a small, quiet dog that is ignoring them. People with specific phobias are not anxious when away from, e.g. the dog or spider, or when on ground level of a tall building. Many people manage their particular phobia so that it does not affect their lives too much. For example, they get someone else to remove spiders, or they use stairs rather than lifts. It is easier to do this with a specific phobia than with either agoraphobia or social phobia. However, sometimes a specific phobia can be very severe or the person cannot avoid what s/he is frightened of. In these cases, the phobia can cause problems for the person's day to day life.

Causes of phobias

Agoraphobia usually develops after someone has experienced a panic attack in a public place. The person fears that this will happen again and so starts to avoid busy places. Sometimes a traumatic event, such as being bitten by a dog when young, can spark off a phobia. Some people with social phobia have had experiences such as being teased or bullied at school. However, for many people there is no obvious reason to explain why their phobia began. Fortunately, this does not matter as a phobia can be treated successfully without needing to know why it began.

Getting help

Having a phobia is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. It can sometimes be hard for friends and family to accept that sufferers do have a “real” problem. But overcoming phobic anxiety is not simply a matter of “pulling yourself together”. There are books and leaflets that can advise you on things to try yourself and there are self-help groups where you can get support.

If you feel that you need more help, speak to your GP or to the Practice nurse or health visitor. She or he will be able to offer advice and reassurance and, if necessary, can refer you to the Clinical Psychology Department. You will then be offered an appointment with the clinical psychologist or cognitive-behavioural therapist attached to your Surgery. She or he will help you learn the skills you need to overcome your anxiety.

Books about phobias include:

Overcoming panic, anxiety and phobias: New strategies to free yourself from worry and fear
By C Goldman and S Barbior (Whole Person Associates)

The panic attack, anxiety and phobia solutions handbook
By M MacFarlane (United Research Publishers)

The anxiety and phobia workbook 3rd edition
By E J Bourne (New Harbinger Publications)

Overcoming social anxiety
By G Butler (Constable Robinson)

Overcoming shyness and social phobia: A step-by-step guide
By R Rapee (Jason Aronson)