

A Phobia is an intense dread of a certain situation or an object.

What to look for

Phobias are anxiety disorders. Three main types of phobias exist:

1. **Specific phobias** - a fear of an individual object or situation
2. **Social phobia** - fear of social situations in which you may be scrutinised
3. **Agoraphobia** - fear of being away from home

If you feel compelled to avoid an object or situation in which you feel threatened or fearful you may have a phobia. You may understand that your fear is irrational and extreme but you can't stop feeling this way and the pressure of knowing this may make you more anxious.

The most common type of phobia from the list above are specific phobias. They can include such objects or situations as parties, school, dentists, driving, water, flying, snakes, fat, age, high places, and enclosed spaces. Even though a phobic person will acknowledge that their fear is extreme, this knowledge does not lessen their fear. It is usually not the object or the situation that they are fearful of, it is the possible outcome.

A person with agoraphobia can be fearful of three main things...

1. fear of leaving home,
2. of being alone, and
3. of being in a situation where one cannot suddenly leave or obtain help.

A person with social phobia has a fear of being humiliated, examined or condemned in public. They avoid public speaking, parties, and any social event. Possible physical side effects may be blushing, palpitations, sweating, tremors, stuttering, or faintness. A person whose phobia is left untreated may become withdrawn, depressed, and socially incapacitated.

CAUSES

Some specific phobias can be explained by early traumatic events, but the majority have no obvious cause. Most are thought to be produced when an underlying fear is displaced onto an unrelated object. Agoraphobia may develop in response to repeated panic attacks. Social phobia may develop in childhood, but the cause is unknown.

Traditional Treatment

Depending on the severity of the person's phobia, the condition can usually be treated so that the person can eventually be able to live normally and be able to control their fears.

For specific phobias, treatment by systematic desensitisation therapy is highly successful. This usually happens step by step and in the safety of a known and safe place. The person will be able to eventually accept the 'fearful object or situation' if exposed to it gradually.

Treating social phobia usually involves slow exposure to social situations. The person may become actively involved in role playing and rehearse their actions and reactions. Individuals are taught to lower their anxiety and are encouraged to be less self-critical.

The best treatment for agoraphobia is to gradually move out into the places and situations that trigger anxiety. It must occur slowly and gradually and in the company of a professional therapist or a trusted friend. The person will gradually reduce their anxiety upon being exposed to triggers.

Alternative Choices

Personal Care

By taking one small step at a time, most phobic people can eliminate their fears.

- Feel free to ask for questions about a feared object or situation: Is it safe? Will it hurt me?
- Practice shifting your thoughts in a positive direction.

Prevention

- Do regular deep breathing and relaxation exercises, especially when anxiety starts to rise.
- Regular exercise helps burn up adrenaline, which accompanies panic attacks.
- Avoid alcohol, barbiturates, and anti-anxiety drugs whenever possible. Also avoid caffeine.

When to seek further professional advice

- you have a phobia that interferes with a normal social or working life.