

Phobias



What are phobias?

Phobias are irrational and uncontrollable fears triggered by a situation, object or activity. The fear is often overwhelming and intense, causing a person to experience profound anxiety and panic and to avoid the source of the fear. Phobias differ from normal fears in that the fears associated with them are markedly out of proportion to the actual threat and can have significant impacts on a person's daily life.

Phobias are common worldwide. Children can develop phobias, but most phobias usually start between the ages of 15 and 20.

Types of phobias

Phobias fall into one of three categories:

Social phobias. Marked fear or anxiety about one or more social situations in which the individual is exposed to possible scrutiny by others. Examples include social interactions (e.g. having a conversation, meeting unfamiliar people), being observed (e.g. eating or drinking) and performing in front of others (e.g. making a speech).

Agoraphobia. Marked and excessive fear or anxiety that occurs in situations where escape might be difficult or help might not be available, such as using public transport, being in crowds or being outside the home alone (e.g. in shops, theatres or standing in a queue).

Specific phobias. Marked fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation (e.g. flying, heights, animals, having an injection, seeing blood).

Common signs and symptoms of phobias

Someone experiencing distressing reactions related to a phobia may have any of the following symptoms:

- tightness in the chest
- increased heart rate
- choking sensation
- rapid breathing or difficulty breathing
- increased anxiety or worry

- confusion or dizziness
- nausea or digestive problems
- sweating, shaking or trembling
- the need to escape the situation or object immediately.

What causes phobias?

The reason why a person has a phobia is not well understood, but genetic factors and traumatic experiences early in life, such as parental loss or separation, may play a role. Environmental factors that involve interactions with a specific object or situation can cause phobias: for example, being bitten by a dog may develop into a fear of dogs.

When to seek help for phobias

Phobias are longstanding fears that often do not diminish over time. If the phobia is making the person avoid objects or situations in life that cause them recurring anxiety or intense panic that lasts for hours or days, or if the phobia is significantly affecting their day-to-day life, it is important to seek help.

Treating phobias

Psychosocial interventions

Talking to a mental health professional skilled in working with patients who have phobias can be effective. Sometimes sharing your fear with a professional on a regular basis can help relieve some of the symptoms around the phobia. This involves exposure therapy or cognitive behavioural therapy.

Exposure therapy. This involves exposure to the source of the fear in a controlled setting. This treatment can reduce anxiety through focusing on identifying and changing negative thoughts, dysfunctional beliefs and negative reactions to the situation that causes the phobia. New techniques use virtual reality technology to expose people to the sources of their phobias safely.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT can help patients work through their distorted views and replace them with healthier thinking, allowing them to gain better control over their feelings and behaviours. CBT is a common form

of talking therapy based on the belief that thought distortions and maladaptive (harmful and/or unhelpful) behaviours play a role in the development and continuance of many mental health conditions and associated distress. CBT focuses on challenging and changing cognitive distortions (such as thoughts, beliefs and attitudes) and the behaviours associated with them and on developing personal coping strategies.

Medication

For moderate and severe phobias, medications can be helpful to calm emotional and physical reactions to fear.

How can you help yourself if you are diagnosed with a phobia?

Although it may not be easy to deal with a phobia on your own, there are basic relaxation techniques that can help, such as meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, visualization, mindfulness and progressive muscle relaxation, which are also effective in controlling the anxiety that comes with phobias.

- **Breathing techniques.** Breathing techniques can help you control your fear. Sit in a relaxed position, close your eyes and take a deep breath, slowly expanding your stomach like a balloon. Hold it for three seconds, and then exhale slowly for three seconds.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This is a relaxation technique that involves slowly tensing and then relaxing your muscles, one by one, starting from your neck and then moving to your shoulders and chest and then across to your arms, then down to your abdomen, legs and feet.

How can you help a friend or family member who has a phobia?

It is often uncomfortable to talk about phobias to those who do not suffer from them. A fear of spiders can be common but an exaggerated fear of spiders (arachnophobia), which leads some people to overcompensate by either obsessively cleaning or avoiding all areas where they think spiders might live, can be difficult to discuss. Being available to listen without judging the person or pressuring them to talk can be helpful.

Resources

Types of phobias

Specific phobias

Self-help for phobias

Mental health and psychosocial support

Treatment for phobias

Yoga for stress relief

Mental health professionals by country

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.