

The following information supports the treatment book *Fix Your Phobia in 90 Minutes*.

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a strong fear reaction to a specific object or situation which is out of proportion to the real danger that the object or situation actually presents. A phobia will cause you to avoid the object or situation that you fear - for example, a spider phobic can't look at a picture of a spider or touch a plastic toy one. Added to this, if you have a phobia you will know that your fear is irrational, but no matter how much you tell yourself this you just can't seem to shake it.

How common are phobias?

Phobias are the most common psychological disorder affecting 1 in 10 people. Even though phobias are the most easily treated of all psychological disorders, they often go undiagnosed as people seldom seek treatment. It's for this reason research suggests that the real figure of people suffering from a phobia is more like 1 in 4. Unlike other psychological disorders, people with a phobia usually lead normal lives and it's only when they come in contact with their phobic stimuli do they over-react e.g. the lawyer scared of fish-tanks.

How are phobias classified?

Phobias are classified in 3 groups:

- 1) Social phobia - fear of negative judgment from other people
- 2) Agoraphobia - fear of how one's body will react in certain situations
- 3) Specific phobia - fear of a particular object, thing or situation e.g. fear of spiders, heights, or needles.

The following information relates to specific phobias, though much of it still applies to social phobia and agoraphobia.

How do you know if you have a phobia?

Many people believe they have a phobia, when in fact they have more a strong fear toward a specific object or situation. To have a phobia it needs to meet certain criteria set out in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual Edition 4 (DSM IV) - the bible for psychologist. The classic signs that you have a specific phobia are:

- 1) Exposure to the phobic stimulus almost invariably provokes an immediate anxiety response
- 2) The person recognises that their fear is excessive or unreasonable.
- 3) The phobic situation is avoided or else endured with intense anxiety or distress.
- 4) The avoidance, anxious anticipation, or distress in the feared situation(s) interferes significantly with the person's normal daily functioning e.g. fear of heights prevents a person going to a job interview on the 5th floor of a building or driving over bridges.
- 5) In individuals under 18 year-of-age, the duration of having the fear is at least 6 months.
- 6) And finally, the anxiety, panic attacks, or phobic avoidance associated with the specific object or situation are not better accounted for by another mental

disorder, such as Obsessive-Compulsive-Disorder, Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder, Separation Disorder (e.g. avoidance of school), Social Phobia, Panic Disorder, or Agoraphobia.

Who sufferers more - men or women?

Women show a higher incidence of having phobias. However, an important point need to be kept in mind - it's far less socially acceptable for a man to have a phobia. Think back to movies and cartoons where the woman stands on the chair and screams for the man to get rid of the mouse or spider. Therefore psychologists aren't sure if men suffer less because they are forced by society to face their fears so as to avoid being seen as weak, or if women are more honest about admitting they have a phobia.

Are people born with phobias?

No! Specific phobia are learned. This is very exciting because it means they can be unlearned. Often phobias are learned in childhood and never outgrown. Phobias are often associated with a traumatic experience. For example, a person being bitten by a dog and then later developing a phobia of dogs.

Phobias are learned in one of three ways:

1. Direct experience - for example, being bitten by a dog and then later developing a phobia of dogs
2. Other people - learning through other people is a very powerful form of learning. You may witness someone being bitten by a dog and this leads you to developing a phobia of dogs. Likewise, you may have had a parent who constantly reminded you about the dangers of dogs with things like: Never look a dog in the eyes, Never pat a dog on the head, a dog can smell fear. Likewise phobias are often passed on from parents to children. This is because the child watches and learns to fear what their parent fears.
3. Sharing information - This final form is extremely powerful. People can develop phobias by sharing information in forms such as: watching tv or movies, reading books and magazines, gossip, to hearing someone else recount a terrible experience they had. For example, the movies that have helped produce phobias in people include: Jaws, The Birds, and Arachnophobia. The horrifying footage of September 11 with planes crashing into the World Trade Centre has since caused many children to develop various fears and phobias. Nursery Rhymes can also help to develop phobias in children - for example, Little Miss Muffet, Insy Winsy Spider, The Pied Piper and his rats.

Why do phobias have such strange names?

Phobias are derived from ancient Greek and Latin words. The word Phobia translates to mean fear of. The actual fear is placed before the word phobia - for example, Cyno-phobia. Cyno = dog. Therefore Cynophobia is fear of dogs. Actual phobia names are rarely used by psychologists today and instead will use current words - for example, spider phobia instead of Arachnophobia. Added to this, there are modern day fears that struggle to be explained using ancient language - for example, fear of DVD players or computers.

Disgust vs Fear

In some cases people with a phobia may not be fearful of their phobic object, but rather be disgusted by it. For example some spider phobics find spiders disgusting and dirty than just scary.

Types of phobias

Specific phobias are broken up into 5 categories:

1. animal phobias: spiders, snakes, dogs, birds, insects (such as bees, moths & butterflies),
2. Situational Phobias: Heights (eg bridges), enclosed spaces (e.g. elevators and tunnels), driving, flying,
3. Environmental phobias: Thunder, lightning, hail, water,
4. Blood/injury/injection phobias: seeing blood, an injury, or someone getting a needle (including yourself)
5. All other phobias: Clowns, balloons, vomit, buttons, cotton-wool balls

Can phobias be treated, and if so, how?

Yes! If you have a phobia then rest assured you're very normal. Phobias are the most easily treated of all psychological issues, with successful treatment being achieved within 90 minutes (this is for specific phobias). See the book *Fix Your Phobia in 90 Minutes*. The way phobias are successfully treated is through exposure to the phobic stimuli (this applies for both social and agoraphobia too). This can be done in vivo (real life), imaginal (facing your phobia in your mind), or with virtual reality (computer aided programs that let you confront your phobia in a computer based virtual world). It's a common myth that treatment of a specific phobia has to be extreme. For example, if a person has a phobia of spiders, then they will be thrown into a tank full of them. This couldn't be any further from the truth. For treatment to work successfully, you have to know exactly what is happening the whole time and be able to end the therapy session at any stage. This is vital because having a feeling of control is what fixes phobias. Having a feeling of no control is what keeps phobias alive. If seeking professional treatment, always ask a psychologist what their experience is with treating phobias. It will vary from psychologist to psychologist.