



Talking Therapies

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a marked or persistent fear of a particular object or situation. This fear can include anything from heights, modes of transport, food items or animals: the list is endless. There are some phobias that are more common than others and we may know other people who experience a range of different phobias that we may consider to be more unusual.

The fear associated with a phobia can be extreme and make us feel anxious if we have to face our phobia. This anxiety can be felt in anticipation of the phobia and may lead to panic attacks in some people. Often, because a large amount of anxiety is experienced, we will avoid the phobic object or situation and put a lot of effort into doing this.

Sometimes we may not come into contact with our phobia very often and it can be easy to avoid, other times it may be part of our day-to-day life and cause increased anxiety on a regular basis. Often we know that the fear is irrational but we feel like we can't do anything about it.

Why do we experience phobias?

For some, phobias can stem from a specific experience that may have been traumatic or had a negative meaning attached to it. A common example is a child being confronted with a large dog that seems very frightening and may shock or surprise them. This could lead to a phobia as an adult. However, not everyone develops phobias from frightening experiences such as these. Positive experiences with dogs after that event may prevent a phobia from developing.

For others, there may not have been an experience associated with the phobia and it could be for reasons such as other people's perception of that object or situation. For example, a fear of heights is a common phobia and we may have spent a lot of time with someone who 'taught' us to be afraid without realising it. The phobia may not have stemmed from a frightening or 'learnt' experience and we may have no recollection of how we acquired it. It doesn't matter whether we can remember the cause or not, the important thing is that we focus on the here and now and are willing to face our fears. We don't need to know the cause of the phobia to recover from it.

Which symptoms are related to phobias?

Anxiety is the most common symptom associated with phobia. When we think about or come into contact with our phobia, we will experience this almost every time.

Our behaviours can have a large impact on how we feel emotionally and physically. Typical phobic behaviours include avoiding the object or situation which is aimed at controlling the fear. As a result, because the phobia is always avoided, we can never confront the fear, which is often out of proportion to the actual danger. It might make us feel better in the short term by providing relief that we don't have to be scared or anxious but in the long-term it reinforces the idea that our phobia is scary and should be avoided. This leads us to always avoid our phobia and keeps the vicious cycle of avoidance going, meaning that we feel increasingly anxious and less confident each time and we remain fearful.

Some of the thoughts that we have in response to our phobia are also unhelpful. These kinds of thoughts can involve thinking that something awful will happen such as fainting or losing control if the phobia is faced (also known as catastrophic thinking).

In summary, by using avoidance behaviours and catastrophic thinking, our anxiety worsens and we never get the chance to overcome our fears.