



PHOBIAS

Phobias occur in several forms. A *specific phobia* is a fear of a particular object or situation. *Social phobia* is a fear of being painfully embarrassed in a social setting. And *agoraphobia*, which often accompanies panic disorder, is a fear of being in any situation that might provoke a panic attack, or from which escape might be difficult if one occurred. Most people experience these fears with mild to moderate intensity, and the fear passes. For people with social phobia, however, the fear is extremely intrusive and can disrupt normal life, interfering with work or social relationships in varying degrees of severity.

SPECIFIC PHOBIAS

Many people experience specific phobias, intense, irrational fears of certain things or situations—dogs, closed-in places, heights, escalators, tunnels, highway driving, water, flying, and injuries involving blood are a few of the more common ones. Phobias aren't just extreme fear; they are irrational fear. You may be able to ski the world's tallest mountains with ease but panic going above the 10th floor of an office building. Adults with phobias realize their fears are irrational, but often facing, or even thinking about facing, the feared object or situation brings on a panic attack or severe anxiety.

Specific phobias strike more than 1 in 10 people. No one knows just what causes them, though they seem to run in families and are a little more prevalent in women. Phobias usually first appear in adolescence or adulthood. They start suddenly and tend to be more persistent than childhood phobias; only about 20 percent of adult phobias vanish on their own. When children have specific phobias—for example, a fear of animals—those fears usually disappear over time, though they may continue into adulthood. No one knows why they hang on in some people and disappear in others.

If the object is easy to avoid, people with phobias may not feel the need to seek treatment. Sometimes, though, they may make important career or personal decisions to avoid a phobic situation.

When phobias interfere with a person's life, treatment can help. Successful treatment usually involves a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy called desensitization or exposure therapy, in which patients are gradually exposed to what frightens them until the fear begins to fade. Three-fourths of patients benefit significantly from this type of treatment. Relaxation and breathing exercises also help reduce anxiety symptoms.

SOCIAL PHOBIA

Social phobia is an intense fear of becoming humiliated in social situations, specifically of embarrassing yourself in front of other people. It often runs in families and may be accompanied by depression or alcoholism. Social phobia often begins around early adolescence or even younger.

If you suffer from social phobia, you tend to think that other people are very competent in public and that you are not. Small mistakes you make may seem to you much more exaggerated than they really are. Blushing itself may seem painfully embarrassing, and you feel as though all eyes are focused on you. You may be afraid of being with people other than those closest to you. Or your fear may be more specific, such as feeling anxious about giving a speech, talking to a boss or other authority figure, or dating.

Social phobia disrupts normal life, interfering with career or social relationships. For example, a worker can turn down a job promotion because he can't give public presentations. The dread of a social event can begin weeks in advance, and symptoms can be quite debilitating.

About 80 percent of people who suffer from social phobia find relief from their symptoms when treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy or medications or a combination of the two. Therapy, may involve learning to view social events differently; being exposed to a seemingly threatening social situation in such a way that it becomes easier to face; and learning anxiety-reducing techniques, social skills, and relaxation techniques.

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE A PHOBIA . . .

Remember, this problem is not your fault and it can be effectively treated. There is no reason to suffer in silence. Contact us for help. We provide private assessments for individuals and families. During this appointment, you'll learn more about the signs, symptoms and treatments for your illness. Take the next step. Reach out for help. Relief and recovery are the rewards.

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