

NHS Fife Department of Psychology

A photograph of green tree foliage against a clear blue sky, positioned on the left side of the page.

Facts about Phobias

Help Yourself @ moodcafe.co.uk



This leaflet should be read alongside the leaflet “Understanding anxiety” also produced by Fife Clinical Psychology Department and available on www.moodcafe.co.uk

What are phobias?

Phobias are one of the most common anxiety conditions.

When someone has a phobia, it means that they have an uncontrollable and irrational fear of an object or situation. Many people have such fears even although they know that there is no real danger.

The most common phobias are:

- Agoraphobia – fear of public places e.g. buses, shops
- Social phobia – fear of social situations e.g. meeting people
- Specific phobias – fear of a specific thing e.g. animal or insect
- Height phobia – fear of heights e.g. tall buildings, bridges
- Claustrophobia – fear of enclosed spaces e.g. lifts

The person with a phobia usually only experiences severe anxiety when faced with a particular object or situation. E.g. a person who is afraid of spiders might have a panic attack when they see a spider but not in other situations. This is different from people who suffer from generalised anxiety, another of the anxiety conditions. (See the leaflet Generalised anxiety and panic attacks).

Often just thinking about the object or situation, that they are frightened of, can make someone with a phobia feel anxious.

Agoraphobia

A person with agoraphobia will experience severe anxiety symptoms, such as panic attacks, when in busy, public places. This might include supermarkets or on buses or simply on busy streets. The person may have specific fears that something awful will happen e.g. that s/he will faint or lose control in some way. They usually feel much safer at home and so begin to stay in more and more. This can mean that they can get isolated and become depressed.

Social phobia

It is not unusual to feel anxious, occasionally, in social situations. But a person with social phobia can get so anxious or worried that they find it hard to get on with their day to day lives. Someone with social phobia has a fear of doing something embarrassing or humiliating. The fear may be particularly bad in certain situations e.g. eating in public or at social occasions, or may be felt more generally.

People with social phobia believe that other people are thinking badly of them. They may find themselves blushing, sweating or shaking. Sometimes they may have a panic attack.

Social phobia is similar to shyness, although it is much more severe.

Other phobias

Some people only experience severe and irrational anxiety in very specific situations. Some of the most common of these are animal or insect phobias e.g. of dogs, cats, snakes or spiders. Others are a fear of heights or confined spaces.

Many people might feel a little nervous in some situations involving the above things. E.g. if faced with a large and unfamiliar dog that is barking at them. But a person with a specific phobia will be very anxious and might even panic in a situation that most people would think was quite safe. E.g. when they see a small, quiet dog that is ignoring them. People with specific phobias are not anxious when away from e.g. the dog or spider or when on ground level of a tall building. Many people manage their particular phobia so that it does not affect their lives too much. E.g. they get someone else to remove spiders or they use stairs rather than lifts. It is easier to do this with a specific phobia than with either agoraphobia or social phobia. However, sometimes a specific phobia can be very severe or the person cannot avoid what s/he is frightened of. In these cases, the phobia can cause problems for the person's day to day life.

Causes of phobias

Agoraphobia usually develops after someone has experienced a panic attack in a public place. The person fears that this will happen again and so starts to avoid busy places. Sometimes a traumatic event, such as being bitten by a dog when young, can spark off a phobia. Some people with social phobia have had experiences such as being teased or bullied at school. However, for many people there is no obvious reason to explain why their phobia began. Fortunately, this does not matter as a phobia can be treated successfully without needing to know why it began.

Overcoming Phobias

Having a phobia is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. It can sometimes be hard for friends and family to accept that sufferers do have a "real" problem. But overcoming phobic anxiety is not simply a matter of "pulling yourself together". There are books and leaflets that can advise you on things to try yourself and there are self-help groups where you can get support.

Books that can help

- **Overcoming Anxiety** by H Kennerley
- **Overcoming Loneliness and Making Friends** by M Csoti
- **Overcoming Panic** by D Silove
- **Overcoming Panic, Anxiety & Phobias New Strategies to Free Yourself from Worry and Fear** by C Goldman & S Babior
- **Overcoming Social Anxiety and Shyness** by G Butler

These books are also available through the fife book prescription scheme. More information is available at moodcafé - www.moodcafe.co.uk/books-that-can-help.aspx

Self-help leaflets/courses

- Living Life is a free telephone service that offers guided self-help. More information is available on the NHS 24 website - www.nhs24.com/UsefulResources/LivingLife
- There are leaflets that cover other types of anxiety disorders on moodcafé – www.moodcafe.co.uk.
- Help Guide provides expert resources designed to help you to overcome health issues. Their section on phobias contains some treatment tips - www.helpguide.org/mental/phobia_symptoms_types_treatment.htm

Relaxation

Relaxation can help relieve and prevent anxiety.

- Relaxation exercises are available to download on moodcafé - www.moodcafe.co.uk/download-relaxation-exercises.aspx.
- A free relaxation CD and booklet are available from Steps for Stress - www.stepsforstress.org.

Organisations that can help

There are lots of organisations out there that can help. Some have helplines that you can contact to have a chat about your anxiety.

- Anxiety UK - www.anxietyuk.org.uk, helpline – 08444 775 774 (Mon-Fri 9:30am-5:30pm)
- No more panic - www.nomorepanic.co.uk. Includes a forum where you can chat to people who are having similar problems.
- For more national helplines and organisations check our moodcafé - www.moodcafe.co.uk/national-helplines/national-helplines-and-groups-in-fife.aspx.

How to access further help

If you find your phobias are getting worse, or think you might need further help overcoming your phobia, speak to your GP.

Visit moodcafe.co.uk
for more helpful resources

