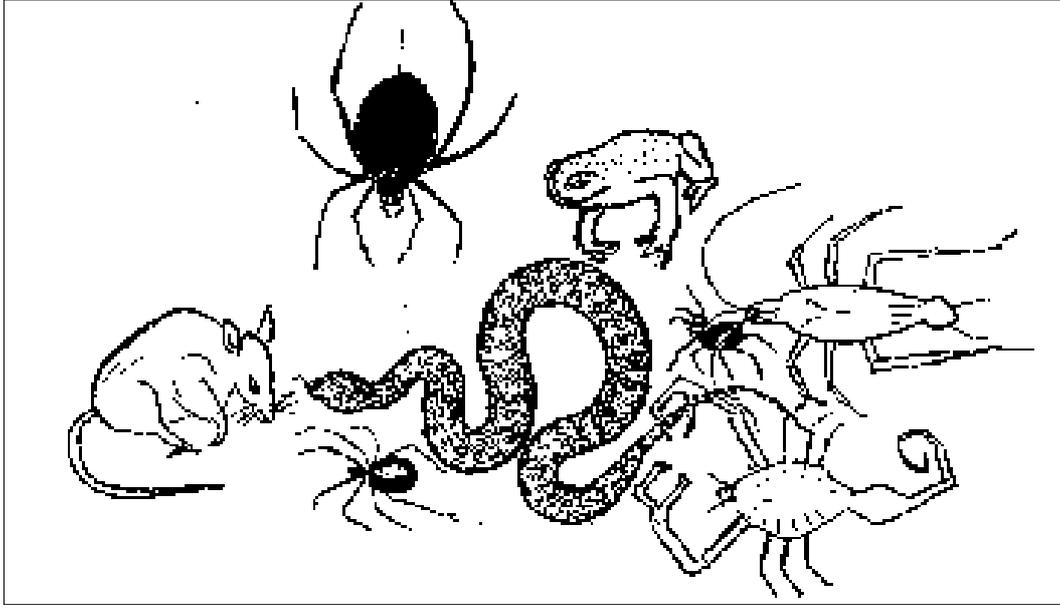


Phobias



What is a phobia?

A phobia is an abnormal fear of a specific object or a certain situation. It is a type of anxiety disorder which can precipitate a panic attack. People with phobias tend to avoid these situations or objects and become anxious when they anticipate having to meet them.

For example, people may dread the sight or touch of a spider (arachnophobia) or have a morbid fear of heights (acrophobia). These types of fears do not usually prevent people leading a normal life; the feared objects or situations are largely avoidable. On the other hand, fear of confined spaces (claustrophobia) or open spaces are more serious problems to cope with.

What are the three classifications of phobic states?

1. Specific phobias, for example, spiders, snakes, dogs, toads, thunder.
2. Agoraphobia — fear of open spaces or public places.
3. Social phobias — fear of anxiety-provoking social gatherings.

What are the most common phobias?

The 10 most common phobias (in order) are spiders, people and social situations, flying, open spaces, confined spaces, heights, cancer, thunderstorms, death and heart disease.

What is agoraphobia?

Fear of open spaces or public places is one of the most serious phobic disorders. Avoidance includes situations involving the issues of distance from home, crowding or confinement. Typical examples are public transport and shops.

For some people, anywhere outside the house is a threat. They feel they may lose control, faint or suffer embarrassment. Agoraphobia is commonly associated with depression and marital or family disharmony.

What are the terms for other specific phobias?

| Name of phobia | Fear of: |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| Acrophobia | heights |
| Aichmophobia | needles/sharp objects |
| Ailurophobia | cats |
| Androphobia | men |
| Anthropophobia | people |
| Apiphobia | bees |
| Aquaphobia | water |
| Astraphobia | lightning |
| Aviophobia | flying |
| Brontophobia | thunder |
| Bufonophobia | toads |
| Cancerophobia | cancer |
| Cardiophobia | heart disease |
| Cynophobia | dogs |
| Dentophobia | dentists |
| Genophobia | sex |
| Gynophobia | women |
| Herpetophobia | creepy, crawling things |
| Homophobia | homosexuals |
| Hypnophobia | going to sleep |
| Iatrophobia | doctors |
| Musophobia | mice |
| Mysophobia | dirt, germs |
| Necrophobia | death |
| Neophobia | anything new |
| Noctiphobia | night |
| Nyctophobia | darkness |
| Ophidiphobia | snakes |
| Pyrophobia | fire |
| Taphophobia | being buried alive |
| Sociophobia | social situations |
| Theophobia | God |
| Xenophobia | strangers |
| Zoophobia | animals |

What is the outcome?

The problem is not as serious as you may believe. It can be treated readily. Most people, especially those with a specific phobia, lead a

normal life. One of the most distressing problems, panic attacks, can also be treated.

What is the treatment?

Self-help

To counter a phobia it is good to discipline yourself to adjust to it gradually. This is called desensitisation or graded exposure.

For example, if agoraphobia makes you dread shopping, begin by visiting small local shops and then gradually move to larger shops until big shopping centres no longer seriously upset you.

Cognitive behaviour therapy

This counselling technique for more difficult problems is the method favoured by professionals. Cognitions are thoughts and cognitive therapy involves the process of knowing or identifying, understanding or having insight into your thought process.

The first step is to be educated about the phobia — its cause, its outcome and how it can be handled. For example, the cause may be an unpleasant childhood experience based on misinformation, a scary movie or book, a painful accident or bullying at school.

The behaviour component involves desensitisation in which an experienced therapist guides the person through the mechanism of coping with their fear. It usually involves slow exposure to frightening places or circumstances and then positively reframing distressing thought processes. It can be compared with entering a cold sea gingerly, which is preferred to the shock tactic of plunging quickly into it.

Therapy includes relaxation techniques and group therapy where people share their experiences. Positives are reinforced and negatives discounted. Sometimes specific medication may be prescribed. Discuss these issues with your doctor.

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