

understanding



phobias

Understanding phobias

This booklet explains what phobias are, possible causes and how you can access treatment and support. It also includes tips for helping yourself, and guidance for friends and family.

Contents

What is a phobia?	4
What are the different types of phobias?	6
What are the symptoms of a phobia?	10
What causes phobias?	11
How can I help myself cope?	12
What treatments are available?	15
How can family and friends help?	19
Useful contacts	22

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It is an extreme form of fear or anxiety triggered by a particular situation (such as going outside) or object (such as spiders), even when there is no danger.

For example, you may know that it is safe to be out on a balcony in a high-rise block, but feel terrified to go out on it or even enjoy the view from behind the windows inside the building. Likewise, you may know that a spider isn't poisonous or that it won't bite you, but this still doesn't reduce your anxiety.

Someone with a phobia may even feel this extreme anxiety just by thinking or talking about the particular situation or object.

Is a phobia a mental health problem?

Many of us have fears about particular objects or situations, and this is perfectly normal. A fear becomes a phobia if:

- the fear is out of proportion to the danger
- it lasts for more than six months
- it has a significant impact on how you live your day-to-day life.

👉👉 *To live in a world full of fear is not living, it is survival.* 👈👈

When should I get help?

It can be difficult to know when to seek treatment for a phobia. If avoidance of the object, activity or situation that triggers your phobia does interfere with your everyday life, or keeps you from doing things you would otherwise enjoy, it may be time to seek help.

Consider getting treatment for your phobia if:

- it causes intense and disabling fear, anxiety or panic
- you recognise that your fear is out of proportion to the danger
- you avoid certain situations and places because of your phobia
- your avoidance interferes with your normal routine or causes significant distress
- it stops you getting support for other health problems – for example, it stops you using the phone or seeing the doctor
- you've had the phobia for at least six months.

See our information on the self-help (p.12) and treatment (p.15) options that are available to help you manage your phobia.

👉👉 *A phobia is only as big as we make it and only as small as we make it. It is what we choose to make it and it can be beaten.* 👉👉

What are the different types of phobias?

Phobias can develop around any object or situation, and some people may have multiple phobias. They can be roughly categorised into two groups:

- specific phobias
- complex phobias.

Specific phobias

These are phobias about a specific object or situation, such as spiders or flying. They often develop in childhood or adolescence and for some people they will lessen as they get older.

Some of the more common specific phobias are:

- animals (such as dogs, insects, snakes, rodents)
- the natural environment (such as heights, water, darkness, storms, germs)
- situational (such as flying, going to the dentist, tunnels, small spaces, escalators)
- body-based phobias (such as blood, vomit, injections, choking, medical procedures, childbirth)
- sexual phobias (such as sexual acts or fear of nudity)
- other (such as certain foods, objects, costumed characters).

However, there are many more specific phobias.

If you are afraid of something you have to see or do a lot, this can start to have a serious impact on your everyday life. If you have a phobia about something you don't come into contact with very often, this can sometimes have less of an impact on you. However, you may still experience fear and anxiety even when the object or situation is not present, meaning that your phobia can still affect you on a daily basis.

Complex phobias

Complex phobias tend to have a more disruptive or disabling impact on your life than specific phobias. They tend to develop when you are an adult.

Two of the most common complex phobias are social phobia and agoraphobia.

Social phobia (also called social anxiety or social anxiety disorder)

A lot of people can find social situations difficult, or feel shy or awkward at certain times – this is completely normal. If you have social phobia, you will feel a sense of intense fear in social situations, and will often try to avoid them. You might worry about the social event before, during and after it has happened.

Social phobia can be extremely debilitating and can make it very difficult to engage in everyday activities such as:

- talking in groups or starting conversations
- public speaking
- speaking on the phone
- meeting new people
- talking to authority figures
- eating and drinking in front of others
- regular trips out to the shops or bank
- going to work.

You might worry about these social situations because you fear that others will judge you negatively or you will offend others by something you say or do. You may also worry about others noticing you are anxious if you start to blush, sweat or stumble over your words.

Having social phobia can have a huge affect on your daily life. It may affect your self-confidence and self-esteem and can make you feel

Understanding phobias

extremely isolated. It can make it very difficult to develop and maintain relationships and can interfere with your ability to work and perform everyday tasks such as shopping.

👩👧 *I have suffered from phobias since I was three years old and couldn't cope with the social demands of a playgroup. I then went on to suffer from School Phobia right through to my teens, then various phobias surrounding college and work, which led to me becoming unemployed, isolated, agoraphobic and severely depressed.* 👩👧

Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is widely thought to be a fear of open spaces, but it is more complex than this. The essential feature of agoraphobia is that you will feel anxious about being in places or situations that it would be difficult or embarrassing to get out of, or where you might not be able to get help if you have a panic attack.

If you have agoraphobia you are likely to experience high levels of anxiety and may avoid a variety of everyday situations such as:

- being outside the home alone
- being in open spaces
- being in a crowd of people
- travelling by car, bus or plane
- being in enclosed spaces such as a lift or in a shop.

Having agoraphobia can have a serious impact on the way you live your life, and many people with agoraphobia find it hard to leave their house.

Agoraphobia can sometimes develop after a panic attack. You may start to feel extremely anxious and worried about having another panic attack, and may feel your symptoms returning when you're in a similar situation. To manage your anxiety, you may start to avoid that particular place or

situation. Avoiding particular situations may help in the short term but it can affect the way you live your life and may make your phobia worse.

Agoraphobia can develop due to a number of different causes, such as panic disorder – but not all people with agoraphobia have panic disorder.

If you experience agoraphobia, it is common to also dislike being alone (monophobia) or to become anxious in small confined spaces (claustrophobia).

What are the symptoms of a phobia?

Phobias can feel different for different people and the symptoms can vary in severity. Symptoms involve experiencing intense fear and anxiety when faced with the situation or object that you are afraid of. If your phobia is severe, even thinking about the situation or object can trigger these symptoms.

Common symptoms of a phobia include:

Physical symptoms	Psychological symptoms
feeling unsteady, dizzy, lightheaded or faint	feeling out of touch with reality or detached from your body
feeling like you are choking	a fear of fainting
a pounding heart, palpitations or accelerated heart rate	a fear of losing control
chest pain or tightness in the chest	a fear of dying
sweating	
hot or cold flushes	
shortness of breath or a smothering sensation	
nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea	
numbness or tingling sensations	
trembling or shaking	

If these symptoms are very intense, they could trigger a panic attack. (See Mind's online resources on anxiety and panic attacks for more information.)

Experiencing this type of acute fear is extremely unpleasant and can be very frightening. It may make you feel stressed, out of control and

overwhelmed. It may also lead to feelings of embarrassment, anxiety or depression.

As a result, many people with phobias avoid situations where they might have to face their fear. While this can be an effective strategy to start with, avoiding your fears can sometimes cause them to become worse, and can start to have a significant impact on how you live your daily life.

What causes phobias?

There doesn't seem to be one particular cause of phobias, but there are several factors that might play an important role:

- Particular incidents or traumas. For example, someone who experiences a lot of turbulence on a plane at a young age might later develop a phobia about flying.
- Learned responses, picked up in early life. Factors in the family environment, such as parents who are very worried or anxious, can have an effect on the way you cope with anxiety in later life. You might develop the same specific phobia as a parent or older sibling.
- Genetics. Some research suggests that some people are more vulnerable to developing a phobia than others.
- Responses to panic or fear. If you have a strong reaction (or panic attack) in response to a particular situation or object, and you find this embarrassing or people around you react strongly, it can cause you to develop more intense anxiety about being in that situation again.
- Long-term stress can cause feelings of anxiety and depression, and reduce your ability to cope in particular situations. This can make you feel more fearful or anxious about being in those situations again and, over a long period, could lead to you developing a phobia.

You might find it helpful to try to work out the specific causes for your own phobia, but you might equally feel that there is no simple explanation.

Understanding phobias

If you avoid the object or situation that is making you phobic, this will often make your fear worse over time. However, it can be extremely difficult to face your phobia, and you may need professional help to enable you to do this.

See the treatment section on p.15 for more information.

👤👤 *I am disabled and have had medical treatments my entire life. When I was little, I used to fight people trying to take my blood, so I would have to be held down. The people raising me were completely unsympathetic to my feelings. All of this compounded to create the intense fear I experience when I'm getting my blood drawn today.* 👤👤

How can I help myself cope?

There are various things you can try to address your phobia and reduce the impact it has on your life. Some people find these ideas useful but they may not be for everyone – only try what you feel comfortable with.

Talk to someone you trust

You might find that talking to someone you trust about your phobia can help. It may be that just having someone listen to you and showing they care can help in itself.

Learn to manage panic and anxiety

Learning to manage the panic and anxiety you feel as a result of your phobia can be really difficult, but it can help you feel more in control and less anxious about facing the situation or object you fear.

- Try some relaxation techniques. These can help you to manage the anxiety you feel as a result of your phobia. There are many different

relaxation techniques available, ranging from meditation to breathing control and stretching. (See Mind's online resource *Exploring relaxation* for more information.)

- Learn to manage panic attacks. If you experience panic attacks, learning to manage these can help to reduce the anxiety you feel about facing the situation or object you have a phobia of. (See Mind's online *Tips: panic attacks* and *Understanding anxiety and panic attacks* for more information.)

💡💡 *Instead of trying to prevent myself from being afraid, I accept that I will be, and try to cope with the fear as it happens. This is less exhausting and in general it's helped me better cope.* 💡💡

Join a support group

Join a peer support group. A support group gives you the opportunity to share common experiences and methods of coping with others who are facing similar challenges. It is sometimes very comforting to know that you are not alone, and other people may be able to suggest different ways of coping. Mind Infoline or No More Panic can help you find a suitable local group (see 'Useful contacts' on p.22).

Try online support groups. This can be particularly useful if there are times when you can't leave the house or if you find it hard to talk to people on the phone or face-to-face. Websites of national support organisations – such as Mind's Elefriends community or Anxiety UK's forum – can offer support, and are monitored to make sure they are safe. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.22 and Mind's online resource *How to stay safe online* for more information about how to use these resources safely.)

💡💡 *Find the best support network you can – whether that's friends, family or people you meet online. Having the right people backing you can make all the difference in the world!* 💡💡

Use self-help resources

Some people find self-help books or online programmes helpful for coping with phobias. They are often based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and will help you develop your own programme to reduce anxiety and make it easier to face your fear. There are many available – search online or contact an organisation like Anxiety UK or No More Panic for more information

Reading Well Books on Prescription are self-help books that your doctor might prescribe for you. You are also able to buy them online and they may be available in your local library.

You could also try online self-help programs, which you may have to pay for or you may be able to access free through your GP. For example, the program FearFighter has been recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and has been shown to be an effective self-help method for treating panic disorder and phobia.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.22 for further information.

Courses to help people with specific phobias

Some organisations across the UK run courses to help people overcome specific phobias. For example, some airline companies and airports hold courses to help people overcome their fear of flying, and some zoos help people reduce their fear of spiders or snakes. These courses vary in how they are run but many are based on hypnosis or CBT principles such as exposure therapy. Courses vary in price and availability.

If you think you might benefit from something like this, talk to your doctor about whether this would be a good source of help for you.

👉👉 *Always remember that phobias are not life threatening and you are bigger than your phobias. A phobia is only as big as we make it and only as small as we make it, and it can be beaten.* 👉👉

What treatments are available?

If you want treatment for your phobia, the first place to go is normally your GP. They can provide an assessment and explain what treatments are available.

Your GP should explain all of your options, and your views should be taken into account before starting any treatment.

What if my phobia prevents me from seeking help?

It can sometimes be very difficult to seek help for a phobia, especially if making or attending an appointment with your doctor involves experiencing the situation or object that you are fearful of, such as talking on the telephone or leaving the house. If you are worried about visiting your GP you could try:

- Asking the doctor if they offer home visits or telephone assessments. If not, they might be able to book you an appointment at a time when the surgery is normally at its quietest.
- Some GP practices will allow you to give consent for someone you trust to ring up and book appointments on your behalf, and sit with you during consultations. If your GP practice won't allow this, it can sometimes help to just have someone walk with you to your appointments and wait for you in the waiting room.
- If you are worried about talking to your GP, it may help to see Mind's online guide *Find the words* to help you express your feelings and experiences in your appointment.

See Mind's online resource *Seeking help for a mental health problem* for more information.

Understanding phobias

There are no treatment guidelines specifically about phobias, but three main types of treatment are recommended for anxiety and panic disorders by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). These should be included in your options:

- advice and information about self-help – such as self-help books or online programmes, support groups or relaxation (for more information, see 'How can I help myself cope?' on p.12)
- talking treatments
- medication.

Talking treatments

Mind's online *Talking treatments* section has full details on these therapies, and information on how to access them – through the NHS, charities or privately.

Your doctor or mental health professional can explain the options available in your area and help you find the right talking treatment for you. Unfortunately, sometimes NHS waiting lists for talking treatments can be long.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) aims to identify connections between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and to help develop practical skills to manage any patterns that might be causing you problems. When CBT is used to treat phobias, it can include a range of techniques, including exposure therapy (or desensitisation). See Mind's online CBT section for further details.

You may be offered a programme of CBT using a workbook or a computer, which you can follow either by yourself or in addition to sessions with a therapist. This might be particularly helpful if you experience social phobia or agoraphobia, as you can complete the therapy in your own home.

👉👉 *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy changed my life. Through using self-help books, to having professional CBT from my local Community Mental Health Team, I slowly learned how to change my negative thoughts to more realistic ones, and to finally overcome some of my deeply entrenched phobias.* 👉👉

Exposure therapy

Exposure therapy involves gradually exposing you to the object or situation you fear, in a safe and controlled way. For example, if you have a phobia of going to the dentist, you might read about the dentist, then look at a picture of a dentist's chair, sit in the waiting room and talk to the dentist, before finally sitting in the dentist's chair. You will agree each of these steps with your therapist.

Through repeated experiences of facing your fear, you may feel an increasing sense of control over your phobia. This technique needs to be carefully managed to avoid causing distress and anxiety, so it is important that you understand the treatment fully and feel comfortable with your therapist.

Hypnotherapy

Many people who have phobias find hypnotherapy helpful for relieving their symptoms. The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) has a register of hypnotherapists who have trained to national standard level.

Medication

If your phobia causes significant anxiety, you may be offered medication. Currently, there are three classes of drugs considered useful in managing anxiety. These are:

- antidepressants
- tranquillisers (benzodiazepines)
- beta-blockers.

Understanding phobias

These are only available through your GP and are not available over the counter.

Antidepressants

The most commonly prescribed drugs to treat anxiety are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants. These drugs can be helpful but may cause side effects such as sleep problems and increased anxiety. If SSRIs don't work or aren't suitable, you may be offered a tricyclic antidepressant. (See Mind's online *Antidepressants* resource and our *A-Z of antidepressants*.)

If you have social phobia, you may be offered the reversible MAOI (monoamine oxidase inhibitor) antidepressant moclobemide (Manerix). MAOI antidepressants interact dangerously with certain foods and a warning about which foods to avoid is given with the drugs in the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL).

Tranquillisers

If you experience very severe anxiety that is having a significant impact on your day-to-day life, you may be offered a benzodiazepine tranquilliser, such as diazepam (Valium), to reduce anxiety. Benzodiazepines can be addictive so they should be taken at a low dose and for a short period of time, preferably as a one-off dose and for no longer than four weeks. (See Mind's online resource *Sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers* for more information.)

Beta-blockers

Beta-blockers such as propranolol are sometimes used to treat the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as a rapid heartbeat, palpitations and tremors (shaking). However, beta-blockers are not psychiatric drugs so they don't reduce any of the psychological symptoms. They may be helpful in certain situations if you have to face a phobia, such as going on an aeroplane.

Beta-blockers can cause side effects, such as sleep problems and nightmares, but they don't have withdrawal symptoms and are not addictive. Due to the effects they have on the heart and blood pressure, you should stop taking them gradually, by slowly reducing the dose. (For more information, see Mind's online resource *Coming off psychiatric drugs*.)

How can family and friends help?

This section is for friends and family members who want to support someone who has a phobia.

Take their phobia seriously

It can sometimes be difficult to understand why a person has a phobia of a particular situation or object, especially when their phobia seems irrational. However, it is really important that you take their phobia seriously and understand that it can cause them severe anxiety, panic and distress, and can affect their daily life. You may not understand why they are so afraid of something, but the anxiety and fear they feel is very real.

👉👉 *I never complain because I see no point in doing so, but I get very tired of being politely mocked for my fear.* 👉👉

Try to understand

- **Find out as much as you can about phobias.** This will help you understand what they are going through. Reading personal experiences can help too.
- **You can try to find out about their personal experience of living with a phobia.** You could ask them how their phobia affects their life and what things can make it better or worse. Listening to their experience might help you to empathise with how they feel.

Don't apply pressure

While avoiding a situation can make a phobia worse over time, it can be extremely distressing if someone is forced to face situations when they are not ready.

Try not to put pressure on your friend or family member to do more than they feel comfortable with, or force them to face their phobia. It is really important to be patient with them and work at a pace they are comfortable with.

Find out what helps

Ask your friend or family member what you can do to help. For example, it might help to take them out of the situation, talk to them calmly or do breathing exercises with them. Often knowing that there is someone around who knows what to do if they start to feel frightened or panicked can help them feel safer and calmer.

💬💬 *I feel better if I have someone with me who knows about my anxiety and how to calm me down. It helps if I just focus on that person talking.* 💬💬

Support them to seek help

If you think your friend or family member's phobia is becoming a problem for them, encourage them to seek appropriate treatment by talking to a GP or therapist.

- **Offer to help them arrange a doctor's appointment.** See Mind's online resource *Seeking help for a mental health problem* for more information on taking the first steps to getting help. If they are scared of leaving the house, you could suggest they ring their GP to find out if they will do home visits.
- **Offer support when they attend appointments.** You could offer to go with them to their appointments and wait in the waiting room. If they are scared of leaving the house, it can sometimes help just to

have someone to walk with them. You can also help them plan what they'd like to talk about with the doctor. Mind's *Find the words* online resource has some useful tips on how to talk to your GP about your mental health.

- Help them seek help from a therapist. See Mind's online information on how to access talking treatments.
- Help them research different options for support, such as community services or peer support groups. See 'Useful contacts' on p.22 for more information. You could also look for your local Mind.

Look after yourself

It can sometimes be really challenging to support someone with a mental health problem – you are not alone if you feel overwhelmed at times. It is important to remember to look after your own mental health too, so you have the energy, time and distance you need to be able to help your friend or family member.

For example:

- **Set boundaries and don't take too much on.** If you become unwell yourself you won't be able to offer as much support. It is also important to decide what your limits are and how much you are able to help them. (See Mind's online resource *How to manage stress* for more information.)
- **Share your caring role with others,** if you can. It's often easier to support someone if you're not doing it alone.
- **Talk to others about how you're feeling.** You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you're supporting, but talking about your own feelings with someone you trust can help you feel supported too.

For further suggestions see Mind's resource *How to cope when supporting someone else*, which gives practical suggestions on what you can do and where you can go for support.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
 (Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
 email: info@mind.org.uk
 web: mind.org.uk
 Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

Anxiety UK

tel: 0844 477 5774
 web: anxietyuk.org.uk
 Information and counselling. Offers a helpline and online support for people with anxiety and phobias.

Be Mindful

web: bemindful.co.uk
 Explains the principles behind mindfulness, and gives details of local courses and therapists.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304
 web: babcp.com
 Lists accredited CBT therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300
 web: bacp.co.uk
 Information about counselling and therapy. See sister website itsgoodtotalk.org.uk for details of local practitioners.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

tel: 020 3178 2199
 web: cnhc.org.uk
 Lists hypnotherapists and other complementary healthcare practitioners.

Elefriends

web: elefriends.org.uk
 Mind's safe, supportive online community where you can listen, be heard and share your experiences with others.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

tel: 0845 003 7780
 web: nice.org.uk
 Guidance on phobias, anxiety and panic disorders.

No Panic

tel: 0800 138 8889

web: nopanic.org.uk

Information and support for people with phobias, panic attacks and anxiety disorders.

No More Panic

web: nomorepanic.co.uk

Information and online support for people experiencing anxiety disorders, panic and phobias.

Reading Well

web: reading-well.org.uk

For information on Read Well Books on Prescription.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

web: rcpsych.ac.uk

For information on phobias.

Triumph over Phobia (TOP UK)

tel: 01225 571740

web: topuk.org

Help for people with phobias.

Time to Change

web: time-to-change.org.uk

Campaign to help end stigma around mental health problems, run by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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