Overcoming Phobias

A phobia is an intense fear of something that, in reality, poses little or no actual danger — such as a butterfly, an elevator, or giving a speech. People with phobias realize their fears are illogical, but they can’t control their reactions. Just thinking about the feared object or situation makes their hearts race and their panic rise. And when they’re actually exposed to the thing they fear, their terror is automatic and overwhelming.

While people may be amused by a friend or family member screaming at the sight of a mouse or paralyzed with fear during a thunder storm, phobias are no laughing matter for those whose lives are being negatively affected. The good news is that phobias are common and treatable and that understanding a phobia is the first step to overcoming it.

Fear vs. phobia

Fear is necessary to our survival. When we’re scared, our primitive, automatic ‘fight or flight’ response is activated. Nerve cells fire in the brain and chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. In response, our respiratory rate increases so we have difficulty breathing. Blood is diverted from our digestive tract to our arm and leg muscles so our hearts pound and our stomachs churn. Our awareness intensifies. Our sight sharpens. Our impulses quicken. We’re now ready to stand our ground and fight or run for our lives.

Our ancestors needed this response to fight invaders or flee wild animals and it’s just as important today. This response helps us make split second decisions to avert things like car accidents, and sharpens our mental acuity so we can do things like meet sudden deadlines.

A phobia has been described as a fear on steroids. For example, it’s normal to fear a snarling tiger. It’s a phobia when you experience the same reaction terror when confronted by a friendly house cat.

Tackling phobias: what works?

There are many strategies to help overcome phobias. Some you can try yourself and others require professional help. If your phobia is so severe that it triggers frequent panic attacks and is negatively affecting your quality of your life, consider professional counselling.
Whether you’re receiving professional help or not, self-help strategies can make you feel more in control and that is the first step to conquering any fear. Here are a few:

- **Relaxation techniques.** Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and muscle relaxation are great ways to help you cope more effectively with any stress and anxiety in your life. With regular practice, they can improve your ability to control the physical symptoms of anxiety, which will make facing your phobia less intimidating.

- **Challenging negative thoughts.** Changing distorted thinking patterns is part of what therapists call Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). The theory behind CBT is that our thinking (cognitive) affects the way we act (behavioural) and that by changing our thinking we can change our behaviour. With phobias this entails identifying and examining negative beliefs that create the distorted thought patterns that make us feel fearful. These thoughts are then challenged and replaced with more realistic ones. For example, “All dogs are vicious and will hurt me.” That thought is analyzed (“what is the evidence?”) and challenged (“that statement is a gross overgeneralization”) and eventually replaced with “Not all dogs are vicious. Most are friendly and won’t hurt me.”

- **Slowly facing your fears.** It makes sense to avoid an object or situation that causes an intense and unpleasant reaction. However, that doesn’t help to conquer a phobia. Slowly facing your fear teaches your brain that your phobia may not be so terrifying after all.

Many simple phobias can be effectively treated using a form of behaviour therapy known as exposure therapy or desensitization, and can be done with a therapist or without. It’s done gradually. Each small step is repeated until the fear and anxiety lessens. Only when you feel in control do you move to the next step. For example, if you are scared of elevators, you might try the following steps:

1. Spend one minute in front of elevator doors.
2. Spend one minute looking into an elevator.
3. Spend one minute in an unmoving elevator with the door open.

For severe and complex issues, desensitization therapy can take a considerable amount of time, but works well for less severe phobias. There are also different medications available to help people cope with anxiety and these are often used in conjunction with other treatments by medical professions. So if your phobia continues to have a negative effect on your life, reach out for help. Phobias can be overcome — sometimes quickly — so there’s no need to live your life in fear.

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

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