



Phobias - Strange But Simple, Terrible But Treatable

IF you have a **phobia**, or know someone who has, you may have been baffled by it, or feel helpless in its grasp. This article will tell you what phobias are, how they are created, and most importantly, how to get rid of them.

Phobias... a quick definition

A phobia is a high anxiety response to an object, situation, or even a thought. Because the phobic trigger can be absolutely anything (we've had balloons, belly buttons and goldfish among the more unusual ones!), phobias can seem ridiculous, absurd or even funny.

For the phobic person however, the intensity of terror can be disabling and horrific. The good news is that phobias are simple to understand and usually easy and quick to treat.

Types of Phobia - Specific or Not

About one in ten people have a **specific phobia**. A specific phobia is an intense fear triggered by a particular object or situation. This can be literally anything - from spiders to balloons, buttons to fish.

A **non-specific phobia** is a more generalised fear such as agoraphobia (fear of open spaces). They work in a similar way to specific phobias, in that the fear appears to be 'attached' to something less discrete.

Surely That's Irrational?

Since often phobias cause people to be scared of non-threatening objects, they are often seen as irrational.

And, in a way, that's right. A phobia has nothing to do with the thinking, rational part of the brain.

A phobic response is simply a survival mechanism 'gone wrong'. The phobic is otherwise perfectly normal and can often see the irrationality of their phobic reaction. This, however, rarely helps the sufferer. Well meaning attempts to talk someone out of a phobia nearly always end in failure.

How do phobias happen?

Unconscious or emotional learning takes place to keep us safe. In primitive conditions when coming into contact with something dangerous, the mind/body would create the optimum state for survival - a panic attack.

This type of learning is not of the intellectual or rational type. If you had to think, "Yes, I think this would be a good time to have a panic attack", our species would have died out long ago. This type of learning takes place at an emotional level so that the response can bypass the 'thinking brain'. In the past, an immediate phobic response to a predatory or poisonous animal would have been exceedingly useful.

We therefore evolved with the ability to become phobic. In today's complex world however, this learning mechanism often works in an inappropriate way. To become phobic, all you need is a high anxiety state paired with an object. The object does not have to be causing the anxiety. Robert Graves the poet, for example, had a phobia of phones because he was using one when a bomb went off near him during the war!

You can also generate a phobia through the misuse of the imagination. Children often get phobias this way, or by seeing a phobia parent.

Non-specific phobias can come about either through a 'spreading-out' of panic attacks, or through a person's levels of general anxiety becoming so high that panic is easily triggered whenever stress levels are raised even slightly.

What can be done about phobias?

In order to cure a phobia (which is usually surprisingly easy and painless) we need to change the experience on an unconscious level.

Simply put, the person needs to be able to treat the phobic object in the same way as they would any other everyday object. The best way to do this is to keep the person relaxed whilst they imagine the phobic object. Hypnosis is extremely useful to keep the person relaxed whilst doing this.

This process is called 'de-conditioning', and it simply changes the association a person has with the phobic stimulus.

When dealing with **non-specific phobias**, the person often needs a combination of de-conditioning, cognitive anxiety management techniques, ongoing relaxation and gradual exposure to the problem situation, such as going out of the house.