

What are phobias?

Most of us have an irrational fear of something, for example going to the dentist or public speaking. For most of us these are unpleasant but not debilitating. But, when fear of something becomes severe and causes serious anxiety and panic, interfering with our normal lives, they are called phobias. A phobia is an intense and debilitating fear of an object, situation, place, feeling or animal. This is an intense fear of something that, in reality, poses little or no danger. We can develop phobias of virtually anything.

Key points:

- Phobias are common.
- They involve an intense fear of an object, situation or place.
- There are two different types: specific and complex.

There are two types of phobia:

Specific phobias
Complex phobias

Specific phobias are a fear of a single object, activity or situation. E.g. flying. The two complex phobias are agoraphobia and social phobia.

Social phobia is possibly the most common phobia. When we have a social phobia we become very anxious about what other people think of us, we fear judgement. We often fear that we will act in a humiliating way, and that other people will then think that we are inadequate, weak, stupid, crazy, etc.

Many people think that agoraphobia means a fear of public places and open spaces. But this is just part of it. If we have agoraphobia we tend to have a range of fears about various places and situations. Common fears in agoraphobia include using public transport, entering shops, being in crowds and public places, being on a bridge or in a lift, being somewhere such as a cinema or restaurant, where there is no easy exit. These all come from one underlying fear, a fear of being in a place where help will not be available, or where we feel it may be difficult to escape to a safe place, which is usually to our home. When we are in a feared place we become anxious and distressed, and have an intense desire to get out.

Inside this issue:

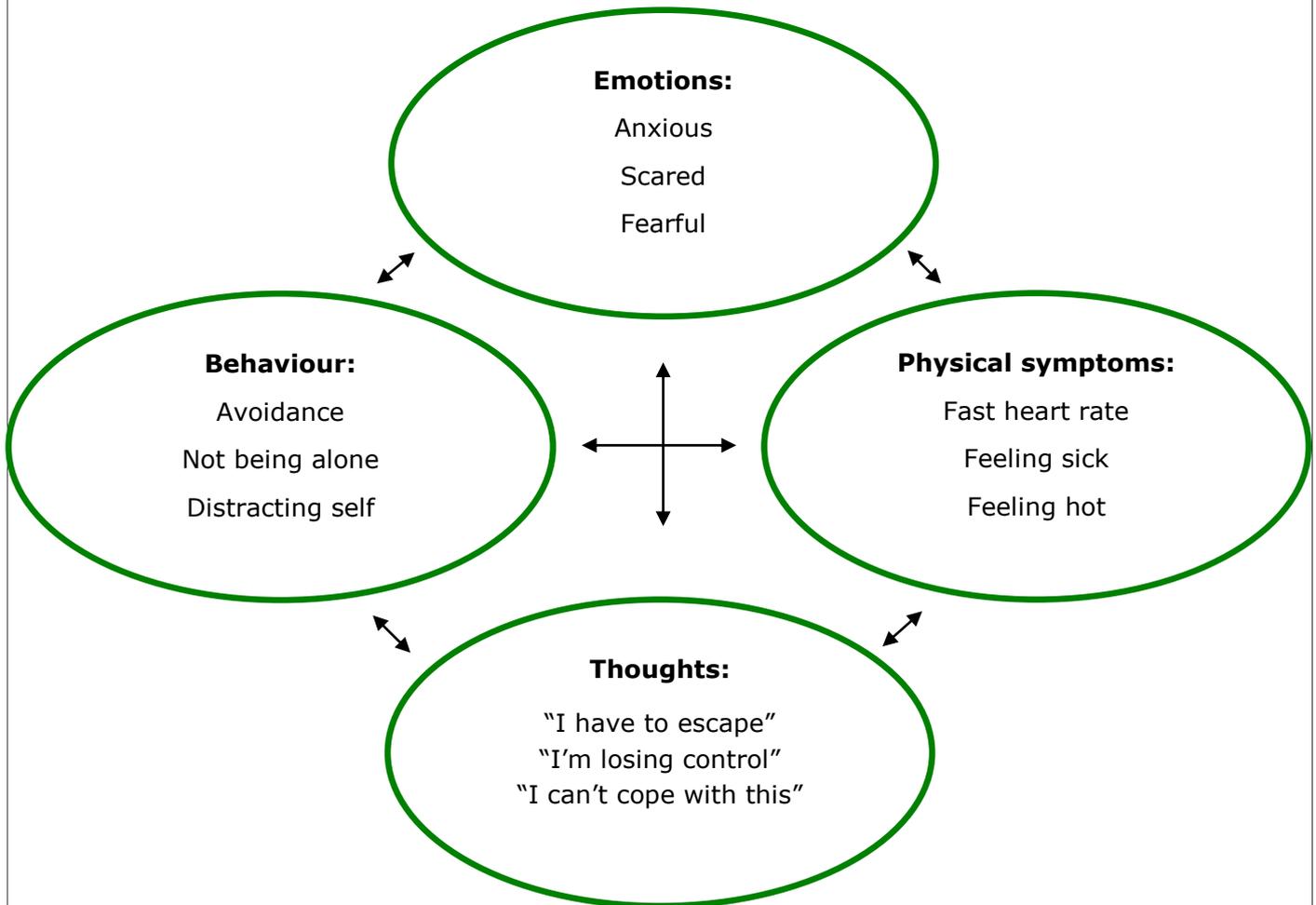
What are phobias?	1
How common are phobias?	1
What are the symptoms of phobias?	2
What keeps phobias going?	3
What treatments are available?	4
Useful Contacts	4

How common are phobias?

Phobias are the most common type of anxiety disorder. It is estimated that around 10 million people in the UK have a phobia. Common examples of simple phobias include:

- **Animal phobias** – such as spiders, snakes, dogs or rodents.
- **Environmental phobias** – such as heights, deep water, food or germs.
- **Situational phobias** – such as flying, visiting the dentist or driving.
- **Bodily phobias** – such as vomit, blood or having injections.
- **Sexual phobias** – such as performance anxiety or fears around getting a sexually transmitted infection.

What keeps phobias going?



Above is an example of a maintenance cycle, or vicious cycle of phobias. Vicious cycles are very easy to get into. If we feel scared, think that we cannot cope and experience unpleasant physical symptoms then it is understandable that we will avoid the situations or thing of which we are scared. Fear of the effects of fear we feel when we come into contact with the scary situations is another way that anxiety can perpetuate itself, we may worry about this unpleasant reaction and this in turn creates more fear.

Avoidance is a large part of what maintains phobias, it functions as a short term coping mechanism to avoid anxious and unpleasant feelings. However, as we have read, the things we tend to be phobic about are often not dangerous in themselves.

When we avoid these things it often ends up making life difficult and inconvenient, when we avoid things we also miss out on meaningful activity. This can lead to other problems such as depression. Avoidance often creates a lack of confidence in us, when we avoid what we fear, not only do we teach ourselves that these things are not safe, we also teach ourselves that we cannot cope with them. This leads to more worries about dealing with the things we are scared of, which may create feelings of insecurity or low self esteem and in turn feed back into the vicious cycle of phobias and make them worse.



What treatments are available?

At TalkPlus we mainly offer Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This is an evidence-based treatment, which means it has been proven to help people who suffer with a phobia. CBT aims to help people better manage or overcome their phobia by learning skills and ways to cope.

There are several steps involved in treating phobias. The first one involves understanding more about it and how it relates to you; what is a phobia, what symptoms are you experiencing and how are these connected? What keeps it going and what triggers are involved? This understanding is an important step to start tackling your phobia as it is much easier to change when we know why we are doing it and how the change can help us.

Once you have learnt more about your unique experience of your phobia you can start to tackle it by learning ways to manage it better. This is achieved mainly using graded exposure. With complex phobias, cognitive restructuring may also be needed.

Graded exposure

Many people find feeling fearful and anxious is maintained by avoiding the situation or object about which they are phobic. Although escaping from that situation temporarily relieves the anxiety and fear, continual avoidance makes it even more frightening to experience the same situation again and makes the fear worse.

Exposure therapy is a highly effective treatment that reduces anxiety and fear through habituation. Habituation is a natural decrease in anxiety that occurs when people do not avoid and remain in the feared situation, in gradual and manageable steps.

Cognitive Restructuring

Some people find that panic and anxiety is maintained by a bias towards negative thinking about the future based upon threat. Cognitive restructuring involves learning how to challenge negative thinking (e.g. "I'm going to have a heart attack") and develop a more balanced way of thinking.

The above treatments can be explained in much more detail with your therapist.

Useful contacts:

- Anxiety BC: www.anxietybc.com
- Mind Info Line: www.mind.co.uk
- <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/anxiety,panic,phobias.aspx>
- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Phobias/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>
- <http://www.topuk.org/>
- <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/phobias-treatments.aspx>