

Specific Phobias Fact Sheet

What is a Phobia?

A phobia is an excessive and persistent fear of a situation or an object. The focus of an individual's fear is generally anticipated harm or danger related to the situation or object (e.g., having an accident while driving, being bitten by a dog, etc.) or fear of losing control and having anxiety related physical sensations (e.g., fainting upon seeing blood, panicking in an enclosed place, etc.). The fear is considered excessive because it is out of proportion to the actual level of danger associated with the situation.

- There are four main types of phobias:
 - Animal type (spiders, dogs, rodents, etc.)
 - Natural environment type (storms, lightning, water, etc.)
 - Blood-injection-injury type (seeing blood, getting a needle, medical procedures, etc.)
 - Situational type (enclosed places, flying, driving, etc.)
 - "Other type" are phobias that do not fit into these four categories (fears of choking, vomiting, etc.)

What are the symptoms of a Phobia?

- Exposure to the phobic stimulus triggers an excessive fear or anxiety reaction
- In children, the anxiety response may manifest as tantrums, crying, and freezing or clinging behavior
- Exposure to the feared stimulus is avoided or endured with intense distress
- The fear or anxiety is excessive or out of proportion to the realistic danger posed by the phobic stimulus with consideration of the sociocultural context
- Fear is present for at least 6 months
- The fear causes significant distress to the individual or interferes with daily social and/or occupational activities

What causes Phobias?

- May be triggered by experiencing, witnessing or hearing about a specific traumatic event (ex: getting stuck in an elevator)
- May develop more gradually over time
- Our own unique personality factors (such as a disgust reaction to certain stimuli) and our stress levels at the time of a traumatic event can also lead to the development of a phobia

Treatment of Phobias

- The treatment of choice for specific phobias is cognitive behavior therapy (CBT)
 - Focuses on gradually exposing a person to the feared situation or stimulus
 - This is called an exposure-based treatment, which involves repeatedly approaching the fear-provoking situation or object until it no longer produces a strong fear reaction
 - This form of treatment has been used for adults, adolescents, and children
- Medications are **not** considered effective for the treatment of specific phobias
 - However, it is not uncommon for individuals with phobias to be prescribed low dosages of benzodiazepines to be taken in the phobic situation (ex: when flying). Although this will not eliminate the fear, it allows the person to function in the situation
 - Situational phobias (ex: claustrophobia) that share many features with panic disorder may also respond to antidepressants proven useful in treating panic attacks