

## Social phobia

Social phobia, also called social anxiety disorder, is fear of social situations where you may be embarrassed or judged. If you have social phobia you may be excessively self-conscious and afraid of humiliating yourself in front of others. Your anxiety over how you will look and what others will think may lead you to avoid certain social situations you'd otherwise enjoy.

Fear of public speaking, an extremely common phobia, is a type of social phobia. Other fears associated with social phobia include fear of eating or drinking in public, talking to strangers, taking exams, mingling at a party, and being called on in class.

## Normal fears in children

Phobias in children are common. According to The Child Anxiety Network, 90% of children between the ages of 2-14 have at least one specific fear. The following fears are shared by many children and are considered normal:

- 0-2 years – Loud noises, strangers, separation from parents, large objects.
- 3-6 years – Imaginary things such as ghosts, monsters, the dark, sleeping alone, strange noises.
- 7-16 years – More realistic fears such as injury, illness, school performance, death, natural disasters.

If your child's fear is not interfering with his or her daily life, then it is unlikely that treatment is needed. However, if the fear is interfering with your child's social activities, school performance, or sleep patterns, you should seek professional help from a qualified therapist.

## Signs and symptoms of phobias

People with phobias experience many anxiety-related symptoms when they're exposed to the object or situation they fear. The symptoms are both emotional and physical. The symptoms of anxiety and fear can range from mild feelings of apprehension to a full-blown panic attack. Typically, the closer you are to the thing you're afraid of, the greater your fear will be. Your fear will also be higher if escape from it is difficult.

## Common phobia signs and symptoms:

- Shortness of breath or smothering sensation
- Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Trembling or shaking
- Feeling of choking
- Sweating
- Nausea or stomach distress
- Feeling unsteady, dizzy, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of unreality or of being detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying

- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Hot or cold flashes
- Fear of fainting

## Consider getting treatment for your phobia if:

- It causes intense and disabling fear, anxiety, and panic.
- You recognize that your fear is excessive and unreasonable.
- You avoid certain situations and places because of your phobia.
- Your avoidance interferes with your normal routine or causes significant distress.
- You've had the phobia for at least six months.

## Treatment for phobias and fears

The most frequently used treatment for phobias is a type of cognitive-behavioral therapy called systematic desensitization or exposure therapy. This treatment is very effective. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 75% of people are able to overcome their phobias through cognitive-behavioral therapy.

## Exposure therapy for phobias

In exposure therapy, also known as systematic desensitization, you are exposed in a safe and controlled way to the object or situation you fear. The most commonly used exposure therapy involves gradual encounters with the fear-producing object, first in the imagination and then in reality. For example, if you have a dental phobia, you might first sit in the waiting room of a dental office, then talk with the dentist, and then sit in the dentist's chair. These exposures are combined with relaxation techniques and a therapist or friend at your side to provide support.

Through repeated experiences facing your fear, you begin to realize that the situation, while possibly unpleasant, is not harmful. With each exposure, you feel an increasing sense of control over your phobia. This sense of control over the situation and yourself is the most important benefit of exposure therapy. The phobia begins to lose its power. Another type of exposure therapy called participant modeling is also helpful. In participant modeling, your therapist models healthy ways of interacting with the object you fear.

In the case of a driving phobia, you would watch while a therapist drives a car in a relaxed state and without fear. Then you would be encouraged to do the same. ☺