



# shock tactics

It's the thought that counts, and it's how we think that lies at the heart of our phobias. Watching out for spiders and snakes, **JULIE MILTON** investigates

**F**eel anxious before making a presentation to clients? Get sweaty palms as your plane takes off for a holiday in the sun? Heart beats a little faster before you have to make an important phone call? Don't worry, it's a normal dose of anxiety.

In fact, a little anxiety is good for us, it keeps us focused and alert, ready to face a challenge and react accordingly. But if anxiety intensifies to the point of full-blown fear, where your lifestyle is inhibited because of it, you could be suffering from anxiety disorder or, more commonly, a phobia.

A phobia is an overwhelming, irrational fear of an object, animal or situation. Sufferers are usually aware their fear is unrealistic, yet still experience inner terror at the thought or sight of their fear, in addition to outer physical signs of their anxiety, including quickened heartbeat, sweating and weak limbs. But while many of us may not relish close encounters with spiders or snakes, for example, what makes someone become mentally overpowered and physically hindered by them?

## trauma trigger

Although it's uncertain exactly how phobias are triggered, it seems that a traumatic episode experienced during childhood, or even witnessing an adult's frightened response as an impressionable child, could be a cause.

Lynda Hudson, a hypnotherapist with her own practice in South East London and a senior lecturer at the London College of Clinical Hypnosis, believes

phobias are often the consequence of an original frightening experience.

"The brain makes an association between something subjectively frightening and a fear response; a scream, for example," she explains. "From then on, the brain always remembers to respond in this way to the object or situation. Sometimes a child picks up a frightened response from a parent. Children aren't usually afraid of spiders unless they see an adult frightened by them. If a child sees an adult scared over something, he'll take it on as his own fear."

There are three basic types of phobia: specific, social and agoraphobia...

Specific phobias focus on a particular object or circumstance. Examples of common specific phobias would include the fear of spiders (arachnophobia), confined spaces (claustrophobia), or the dentist (dentophobia).

Social phobias are arguably more distressing than specific types, with people experiencing a panic

attack at the thought of taking part in social activities and engagements. They fear they may be laughed at or criticised and become increasingly self-conscious, leading to feelings of paranoia.

Sufferers may shy away from starting conversation with strangers, attending parties or even using the telephone within earshot of colleagues to avoid what they perceive as potential socially embarrassing situations.

## panic stations

Even more debilitating than the social phobia is agoraphobia, the fear of being in a public place or situation and being unable to escape to safety. Agoraphobia is a complex problem, often beginning with a person having a panic attack outside for no apparent reason. If the person had the panic attack while in a supermarket, they associate panic with the store and avoid going there for fear of similar episodes taking place.

Left unchecked, some sufferers find they have

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more panic attacks outside, eventually not wanting to leave the comfort zone of their home.

But why would someone have a panic attack in their local supermarket? More than likely, the store has nothing to do with the problem. "Sometimes an emotionally stressed and vulnerable person experiences a fear reaction in a particular place," says Lynda Hudson. "Their brain then makes a strong association between the place and the fear response, even though that place wasn't the original source of fear. You could be driving and have a thought that triggers your fear response at the same time you drive through a tunnel. Suddenly your brain learns that it's afraid of tunnels, falsely associating the fear response with the tunnel instead of the original triggering thought."

But if sufferers know their phobia is illogical why do they continue to feel terror at the thought of it? Experts say that, in cases of extreme fear, the memory and pattern response involved is stored in the emotional area of the brain and doesn't pass to the level where logic comes into play.

## breaking the code

When a fear becomes so intense that it is labelled a phobia, professional help is the answer.

Hypnotherapy, a safe, natural treatment where people are put into a relaxed, light, hypnotic state, is one way of dealing with phobias. Once a patient is completely relaxed, the unconscious mind becomes more alert and receptive to the power of suggestion, with thoughts about a particular object or situation faced and dealt with positively.

Lynda Hudson works with phobia sufferers on a regular basis, with common problems including agoraphobia, claustrophobia, fear of flying, using the Underground, dirt, heights, spiders, snakes and speaking in public.

Breaking the memory code of the traumatic episode – the image, sounds and feelings that come into play resulting in anxiety – can be helped through hypnotherapy's imaginary visualisation techniques, with the sufferer encouraged to imagine the fear in a different, non-threatening way. The person "sees" themselves coping with the fear until it finally disappears.

After imaginary exposure sessions patients should face their phobia in reality so they're convinced they've overcome their personal demon – by travelling on the Tube or using a lift, for example. And the theory behind the treatment is simple: "Thought precedes action," explains Lynda Hudson. "Change the thought and the change in action follows."

Mo Shapiro, author, counsellor and neuro-linguistic programming specialist, is another believer in the power of thought. With Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), people analyse how the likes of their environment, beliefs and behaviour affect both them and others. Through understanding what makes them tick at a deeper level, people can learn how to adapt their thoughts and behaviour, resulting in them being more happy and successful.

The principles of NLP can be applied to a range of subjects both professionally and personally, including dealing with phobias. "Phobias are debilitating and can ruin people's lives," says Mo Shapiro, "but the way you think, affects the way you feel, which in turn affects how you behave."

It really is the thought that counts. So, whether you're afraid of dogs, the dark, needles, fire, speaking in public or hospitals, can phobias be cured? The good news is yes, they can. Lynda Hudson says the majority of people with phobias respond positively to treatment. Some may find their fear disappears completely, others admit they still don't like their feared object or circumstance but are able to deal with it calmly.

We all know the importance of looking after ourselves both physically and mentally. And you're not going to let a spider interfere with all your hard work, are you?

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## Suzanne's story

Many people hide their phobias from others by avoiding situations that trigger their anxiety. We can usually assume we won't see a snake on a daily basis, but what if you can't use a lift or travel on the underground? Suzanne, 35, from Mitcham, London, suffered a stroke when she was 29. She was in hospital for two weeks. She believes it was this confinement that triggered her phobia of being in enclosed places. "I can't go into a lift, be driven through a long tunnel or go on the Underground because I panic," Suzanne explains. "I think that everyone else is using my air, that I won't be able to breathe and I'll die. My palms sweat and my breathing gets faster. I need to 'see' air before I feel OK again." Suzanne's phobia, she admits, inhibits her lifestyle. "I may have to walk up 10 flights of stairs to visit a friend rather than use the lift, and I travel by bus, so I can see outside," she says. Although Suzanne feels it may be time for professional help, there is a more disturbing element to her plight. "My two children, Lauren, 12, and George, 10, know I don't like going into lifts or using the Tube. But I encourage them to use the lift and tell them I'll meet them at the top, while I take the stairs. I don't want them to feel threatened by lifts or inherit my phobia."

• Suzanne is currently reading books on dealing with phobias to help with her problem.

■ Lynda Hudson, Beckenham Clinical Hypnosis  
Tel 0208402 1928.

■ The National Phobias Society is a registered charity run by sufferers and ex-sufferers of various anxiety disorders including phobias. For details on membership and counselling services, contact The National Phobias Society, Zion Community Resource Centre, 339 Stretford Road, Hulme, Manchester M15 4ZY.  
Tel 0870 770 0456.

■ Further reading: *Way of NLP* by Joseph O'Connor and Ian McDermott, Thorsons, £7.99.

■ *Understanding Neuro-Linguistic Programming in a Week* by Mo Shapiro, Hodder & Stoughton, £6.99.

■ For a little light relief, check out Fredd Culbertson's list of phobias and phobia-related info at [www.phobialist.com](http://www.phobialist.com).