

Working with Phobias

There is a need to obtain a specific diagnosis via a thorough professional clinical interview and diagnostic guidelines. There are various diagnostic criteria – but these are not necessarily the best forms. The best (acknowledged) form of treatment is one or another form of psychotherapy, like exposure therapy: other forms or the use of some medication.

Understanding the cause of the phobia is less important than on focussing on how to work with the ‘avoidance behaviour’ that develops as a form of protection to the phobia. The goal of any treatment for phobia is – essentially – to improve the quality of your life, basically - so that your phobias do not limit your life.

As you learn how to better manage and relate to your reactions, thoughts and feelings, you'll find that your anxiety and fear are reduced and no longer in control of your life. Treatment is usually directed at one specific phobia at a time (it is quite common to have several phobias).

Talking with a mental health professional can help to manage your specific phobia. Exposure therapy – combined with relaxation therapies – is thought to be one of the most effective treatments:

- **Exposure therapy** focuses on changing your response to the object or situation that you fear. Gradual, repeated exposure to the source of your specific phobia and all of the related thoughts, feelings and sensations may help you learn to manage your anxiety. For example, if you're afraid of elevators, your therapy may progress: from simply thinking about getting into an elevator; to looking at pictures of elevators; to going near an elevator; to stepping into an elevator. Next, you might be able to take a one-floor ride; then ride several floors; and then – maybe – even ride in a crowded elevator.
- **Relaxation Therapies** are designed to be able to help the person to relax. They can be used, in conjunction with the above, to lessen some of the effects of the phobias.
- **Medications** can be used – initially or occasionally – to help the person cope with some of the extreme situations that might trigger their phobias. Sometimes, events like: flying on a plane; or public speaking; or going through a difficult medical procedure; are so terrifying that the person with the phobia cannot function properly. These medications are “beta blockers” or “sedatives”.
- **Physical activity** – combined with relaxation – helps to re-balance the person’s autonomic nervous system (ANS). This means that you are more in balance, more relaxed than normal, more resilient. This is the start of a better way of life.

There are some other quite useful techniques that can be used:

- (a) Trying to avoid fearful situations:** you can try to practice staying **near** to various fearful situations, as frequently as you can, rather than avoiding these completely. Try to keep yourself near to this sort of edge: this helps you to get acclimatised to your anxiety or fear.
- (b) Use family and friends** to create a good support system. There are also ‘specialist’ support systems, like a self-help group, or a support group, or an internet chat room. Talk openly about fears; don’t trivialize any problems; talk about thoughts and feelings; listen properly.

- (c) **Take care of yourself:** Take time out; get enough rest, eat healthily; try to be physically active on a fairly regular basis; try to avoid substances like caffeine, alcohol, sugar, etc.; and celebrate successes as things get better.
- (d) **Don't reinforce any specific phobias:** Don't allow the phobic person to 'control' their situation. Take opportunities to 'challenge' (or reduce) the person's phobic tendencies. Look for different strategies. For example, you might offer to be your child's "home base", waiting and offering support while your child looks at their phobia a little closer and then returns to you for safety. It is a little like their first day at nursery. They want to leave you; they are scared to leave you.
- (e) **Model positive behaviour:** Because children learn by watching, you can demonstrate how to respond when confronted by something that your child fears or that you fear. You can first demonstrate fear and then show how to work through the fear.

If your child's fears seem to be excessive, persistent, and interfere with your daily life, talk with your child, your child's doctor, educational psychologists, for advice on whether professional diagnosis and treatment are indicated.

Try to establish clearly:

- **Symptoms that you're experiencing**, even if they seem unrelated to your anxiety. Specific phobias may cause both physical and psychological distress.
- **Triggers, such as places or things that you are avoiding** because of your anxiety and fears. Include how you've tried to deal with these triggers, and factors that make the situation better or worse.
- **Key personal information**, including any major stresses or recent life changes.
- **All medications**, vitamins, herbal products or other supplements that you take, and the doses. Include alcohol or other drugs you may be using to reduce your feelings of anxiety.

Questions that you might want to ask yourself about your phobia might include:

- What might have caused me to develop this fear?
- Will this phobia go away on its own?
- Is there anything I can do to improve the symptoms?
- What treatments are recommended for this disorder?
- How could 'Exposure Therapy' (or CBT) or any other therapy help me?
- What are the side-effects of any medications that are used for this condition?
- If I take these medications, what symptoms might improve?
- How much improvement can I expect, if I follow this recommended treatment plan?
- I have several other health conditions. How can I best manage these together?
- Are there any brochures, or other printed material, that I can have?
- What websites might be recommended?
- How do I get rid of this phobia?

‘Systematic Desensitization’ Can Help One to Overcome One’s Fears and Phobias

“Systematic desensitization” is an ‘evidence-based’ form of a therapeutic approach that combines various relaxation techniques with a gradual exposure to the actual phobia in order to help you – slowly and safely – overcome a particular phobia (i.e. school phobia; arachnophobia, etc.).

During systematic desensitization (which is also called “graduated exposure therapy”), you can work your way up through various levels of anxiety or fear, starting with the least fearful exposure.

This approach also involves the use of various relaxation techniques. Both of these features make it different from other “desensitization” techniques, such as “flooding”.

How does it work?

“Systemic desensitization” involves three main steps: **First**, you must learn and practice a few relaxation techniques, so that they work for you. **Then**, you will be able to create a list of your fears, ranking them in terms of intensity. **Finally**, you’ll begin to start working on yourself, learning to challenge what you fear and then find a way to deal with this.

“Classical conditioning” (Pavlov) – sometimes called “associative learning principles” – is the underlying theory behind this sort of process. The goal is to overcome a phobia, by replacing your feelings of anxiety and fear, with a better state of peace and calm.

As you work your way through your list of possible fears, you will continue to focus on “relaxation” to counteract the fear or anxiety when facing any new situation until this causes discomfort no longer.

Learning Relaxation Skills

You might want to learn a few different relaxation exercises, as well as systematic desensitization. These exercises could be used on their own, or in combination with each other. One of these is called the “Autogenic Therapy Technique” (see later).

Relaxation Techniques that You Might Want to Include:

- **Diaphragmatic breathing:** With this simple technique, you learn to regulate your breathing by: **(a)** breathing in slowly and deeply through your nose; **(b)** holding your breath for one to two seconds; and then **(c)** breathing out slowly through your mouth: making sure that your shoulders and chest first expand and then lower and soften.
- **Visualizations:** In this exercise, you need to focus on a relaxing scene, picturing it in your mind, and concentrating on a number of sensory details, such as sights or smells. This exercise also includes “guided imagery”, which involves someone else describing a scene for you to be

able to help you relax more properly. The imagery needs to work for you! If you were once lost in a wood, or cut your foot on a shell on a beach, means that a guided imagery concerning a wood, or a beach, might not work so well for you.

- **Guided imagery** is a type of meditative practice. It involves the use of visualizations, words, or music, to evoke positive images in your mind. This may help to create desired effects in your body. For example, it might help to calm or even energize you. It may also help you release some of the negative emotions and focus more on positive thoughts. Some people believe the practice of guided imagery can also be helpful for treating depression.

During guided imagery, an instructor, an audio recording, or other guide, will direct you to focus on a set of specific images. These are designed to help you enter into a calm and focused state of mind. Guided imagery helps to exercise the right side of your brain, which controls creativity, spatial abilities, and more. This can also help you to relax your critical-thinking faculties, allowing your emotional senses to come more to the fore. Some proponents of guided imagery believe it can also help alleviate symptoms of depression: it may help you to combat negative thoughts and emotions. For example, alienation and loneliness are common feelings among people with depression. During guided imagery, you can visualize yourself surrounded by loved ones in an elevated situation, which may help you feel less alienated or lonely.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** You can learn this (or another) physical relaxation technique quite easily. **First**, tense up all the muscles – in a particular part of your body (like your hands and arms) – and then hold that tension for about 30-45 seconds; **then** release those tense muscles, as well as all the other muscles throughout your body. Then do the same for a different set of muscles (legs, knees and feet) – and relax. Then repeat this exercise again, increasing the extent of the tension and also the time (maybe now for a full minute). Do this a third time, increasing the tension even more tightly, and sustaining this for about 90 seconds. That is it! This technique can reduce muscle tensions and can also help you to recognize the difference between your ‘naturally’ tense and also relaxed muscles. That way, you’ll be able to better recognize when your muscles start tensing up in response to any anxiety or fear.
- **Simple techniques:** There are a number of relatively simple relaxation techniques like: **(a)** a long, hot, bath, with some smelly stuff from last Christmas, lights out, a lit candle, and some gentle background music; **(b)** phone off, a cup of tea, a good book, a warm fire, contact with a pet, etc.; **(c)** regular “Me Time”, like with a girlfriend (or two), a hot tub, a bottle of wine, some pizza, a view of mountains, a little bit of raunchy gossip, etc.; **(d)** getting away from it all: a Greek island; a sail boat in the Caribbean; a

good week-long retreat with Zen (or silent) space; etc.; **(e)** a really good in-depth spa, sauna, Turkish Hammam, massage (hot-stones, essential oils), etc.

➤ **Meditation and mindfulness techniques:**

Learning a form of meditation could help you to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, whenever you face a fearful situation. There are a great number of Christian, Buddhist and other types of meditation. You would need to find one that works for you. The simple ones are probably the best.

Mindfulness practice helps you to focus on, and notice, what you're experiencing in any exact present moment, which can reduce help to anxious thoughts. A good example is: "The Felt Sense of Self". Also, there is a small book to help mindfulness, "*Peace Is Every Step*" by Thich Nhat Hahn, which helps one to focus on exactly what one is doing (and feeling) at any moment in normal everyday activities. This leads one more towards a sense of "being" rather than "doing".

Creating a Hierarchy of Fears

After learning various relaxation techniques, you'll develop a hierarchy of fear for the phobia, or the feared situation. This hierarchy typically involves 10 levels of fear. You'll likely go through the following steps to do this:

1. First, you'll identify the most frightening level of your fear, or the "level 10" fear: this might involve the possibility of death.
2. Next, identify the least frightening level of your fear, or the "level 1" fear: maybe something like: "I feel quite anxious".
3. Then, you can list the levels in between and rank them by the amount of fear they might trigger. For example, seeing a photo of what you fear might be a level 3, but actually touching the thing you fear could be a level 8 or 9.
4. Next, you can start to develop ways to expose yourself to each level of fear. This is usually done with the help of a therapist. "Exposure" might mean developing strategies to cope with anxiety or fear.
5. Finally, you will begin by exposing yourself to your fears, starting with the least frightening items on your list. This is somewhat similar to the 12-Step system.

Slowly Exposing Yourself to Your Own Fears

Once that you have tried various relaxation techniques and exposed these to the hierarchy of fears, you can gradually start exposing yourself – gently – to the various levels of your fears.

A typical first step might be thinking about the thing you fear. Once you begin feeling afraid or anxious, use the relaxation techniques to regain a sense of calm. Repeat this process, until you no longer feel anxious.

When you can comfortably address a particular level of fear, move on to the next level. In this way, you can work your way through your fear hierarchy in therapy, or in a therapeutic situation, but you can also do this on your own.

Some Examples of Systematic Desensitization

The process of systematic desensitization varies for each person, according to their various phobias. Some people move through low levels quite quickly and then have a hard time overcoming higher levels. Others may take a long time to work through lower levels, but they find the fear easier to face once they've succeeded at the lower levels.

The most helpful relaxation technique can also vary. You might find that a visualization helps you relax more easily, for example. One of the more physical exercises might help. Listening to your 'special' "chill-out" play-list on your iPod or MP3 player. Reading or listening to an audio-book can also help.

Regardless of your fear, or the length of time that you spend working through each level, the main principles remain the same. Here is how a course of systematic desensitization might look for different conditions:

Social Anxiety

You might be a college student with social anxiety: with a fear of being in crowds, or in a group. When you think about giving the wrong answer in class, or having to ask to use the restroom, you might start to feel sick and then your heart starts to race. Thus, you may avoid speaking in class, or participating in college activities, in order to avoid imagined embarrassing situations.

When you decide to give 'systematic desensitization' a try, you might determine that talking to someone who you don't know is a 'Level 1' fear. You might begin to imagine yourself greeting people vocally "How-do-you-do?", and then practicing deep breathing whenever you feel anxious, until you can regain a sense of calm. Next, you might move on to meeting just a couple of strangers in real life. After a week of doing this daily, you may start to feel more at ease.

Then, you could start to work on the next fear — making eye-contact during conversations. You could then start to work your way through the next stage in the hierarchy of fears, eventually managing to introduce yourself in class and then just nodding along. You can continue to use deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises to get through any periods of discomfort.

The final level of your fear hierarchy might involve standing up and sharing something in class. It might take a few tries, but eventually you will be able to answer questions in class, even though your heart might still begin to race, once you put your hand up. You take a deep breath, release the tension in your muscles, and then begin to speak.

Dog Phobia

When you see a dog coming towards you, even in the distance, your palms might sweat, your heart might race, and you may have trouble breathing. Your phobia probably relates specifically to being bitten, but – being around dogs – also makes you feel afraid and anxious.

To get started in on your hierarchy of fears, you can begin by imagining first, that you can see a dog on a leash, maybe in a passing car. The next day, you imagine that, in a car, you drive by a dog park several times. It doesn't seem to affect you that much, so you might imagine that you can park somewhere, where you have a full view of the park.

You can possibly feel yourself tense up every time a dog starts barking. To combat this, you can concentrate on relaxing your muscles and imagining yourself on a beautiful beach, or in a lovely field — one without dogs. You can then open your eyes and then repeat this process for (say) the next 30 minutes.

Next, you might spend time with a friend, who keeps a dog, but it is confined in a different room of her home, whilst you're visiting. You can practice relaxation exercises every time that you think about the dog being able to get out.

As you prepare to conquer your 'Level 10' fear — walking through a park with lots of dogs running free — you might decide to spend some time in the "puppy area" of your local animal shelter.

Puppies are much less frightening, but the thought of them being so close might still make you feel anxious. You may have to step outside a few times in order to do some deep breathing and visualization exercises.

Finally, after (perhaps) some months of work, you can try heading back to the dog park. This time, you park your car and walk through the gates. Stop there, breathe, and then take a few steps further. You can sit on a bench and practice deep breathing, as you watch the dogs playing over there, or walking by, safely on a leash, with their owners.

Even though you might feel somewhat frightened, you can still focus on the fact that you have taken several steps towards facing your fear.

School Phobia

Your child is experiencing school phobia, but you don't know why. The first thing is for you to try to reassure your child that this does not mean that there is something / anything wrong with them. Yes, you may feel that you have a problem; but you (the child) are **not** the problem.

Secondly, whilst you may have got on very well at your previous school, things might have got wrong at the start of this new school. You may need to realise that you were a "big fish" in a "small pond"; but now, you are a "small fish" in a "big pond" – and (this is what you don't know) so is everyone else. All the other kids are trying to struggle to find their place in the "pecking-order" and to succeed in the new "power games".

Anyway, something "bad" might have happened in those first couple of weeks, even though you (the child) have not told anyone about it, it is actually quite obvious. You may have even forgotten about it, or repressed the

memory; but the fear is still there. Maybe you were even ‘told’ – by some snotty kid (or someone else) – that you shouldn’t tell anybody, ever: or else ...

These people don’t care about you; they are dominating your life; they shouldn’t have any power over you. You need to get over this fear, this phobia – and get your life back: and you can only do this by yourself.

First, you need to try getting closer to the school: maybe, in the car park, but staying safe in the car with your mum. You don’t need to go into the school; you just need to breathe, to relax, and feel reasonably calm within yourself.

This is like a “Level 1” fear. You can overcome this fear fairly easily. Your mum can drive you away whenever you ask her. But, by doing this, you have just overcome a “Level 1” fear.

Next, you might ask your mum to try to arrange for someone from the school to come and meet you in the car park and then help you walk into the school – into a quiet place – with the teacher and your mum. And that might be you overcoming your ‘Level 2’ fear – already. Easy, peasy!

Then you will need to establish what the other Levels are and what the fears are that you need to overcome. This is possible, and you can start to work with these.

For example: you might go – with your mum – to the school on a Thursday, meet with the teacher, and hand in whatever homework you have managed to do (at home) over the last week; and then go in again (on Friday) to get their comments, and also pick up next week’s homework: to be handed in next Thursday. Now, you are already on ‘Level 2’, or ‘Level 3’. No problems!

How can I try this on my own?

It is more than possible to try a form of “systematic desensitization” on your own, but remember that it is the **slow, gradual exposure** that is the key (successful) component of this approach. If this sort of low-level exposure makes you feel anxious at any time, keep on practicing your relaxation techniques, and keep on working on exposing yourself to that type of fear.

There is no right pace (or time schedule) for working through your own particular hierarchy of fears. You might spend months on a single one, only to blast through the next two over the course of a few weeks.

Take as much time as you need. If you move too fast, you may put yourself through some unnecessary discomfort and possibly even sabotage whatever progress has been made already.

If you’d like to try this approach on your own, then the following tips can help:

- Familiarize yourself with the various different relaxation techniques. If you’re already feeling tense and anxious, then thinking about relaxing might become harder, so it’s important to learn these techniques properly first and be able to practice them without stress.

- List at least two ‘fear’ items to deal with, for each level of fear on your hierarchy. This allows for more exposure to your phobia(s) and thus a better chance to deal with at least one of them.
- Practice exposing yourself to your fear each day; maybe even two or three times per day: even a few minutes, every day, can help.
- Remember to stop – and then use a relaxation exercise – whenever you begin to feel anxious. The goal is to replace your anxious feelings with a much more relaxed state. You are essentially “re-programming” your anxious feelings. You might have to try each step multiple times, before it becomes habitual, and that is – of course – OK.
- Try to continue with the ‘exposure’ exercises until you feel about half the fear or anxiety that you typically would feel. This can be a bit hard to gauge to begin with, but it is likely that you will become better able to track your anxiety, as you become more familiar with these exposures.

If you’re unsure about trying **systematic desensitization** on your own, a therapist (or other mental health professional) can answer any questions that you might have, and maybe even offer additional support. Whilst this approach is often successful, it (of course) doesn’t work with everyone, and it might not work well for you, therefore it becomes possible to explore some of the several other therapeutic approaches.

Finding a therapist can feel daunting, but it doesn’t have to be. Start by asking yourself of a few basic questions:

- What are the actual issues that you want to address? These can be specific or vague: they may also involve another family member.
- Are there any specific traits you’d like to see in a therapist? For example, are you more comfortable with someone who shares your gender? Is ethnicity an issue? How about location and ‘ambiance’ – hospital out-patient, private clinic, etc.
- Do you have any access to (family) health insurance, who might pay for some sessions?
- How much can you realistically afford to spend per session? Do you want someone who offers sliding-scale prices, or payment plans?
- Where and how will therapy fit into your schedule? Do you need a therapist who can see you on a specific day of the week? Or someone who has night-time sessions? Or someone who can work by telephone or skype?.