

OVERCOMING PHOBIAS AND PANIC ATTACKS

Whether you are learning to overcome a phobia and/or panic attacks, or supporting someone who is, these facts and tips will help you

What is a Phobia?

A Phobia is an irrational fear, which cannot be reasoned away, and there is an overwhelming desire to avoid that feared object or situation.

Why can't you talk yourself out of it?

Because reasoning and rationalising is done at a conscious level, whereas the phobic fear has been learned (and is now functioning) at an UNCONSCIOUS level. This type of learning is normal and is usually very useful for survival. For example, a child quickly learns that radiators, kettles and flames can burn, which is painful, and they learn not to touch them. This becomes unconscious knowledge and your unconscious mind will make sure you are quickly aware of anything that may be very hot, so that you can take care.

What is my unconscious mind?

The conscious mind is the part that is aware of its thoughts and actions. It is the tip of the iceberg, representing only about 10% of the mind. The remaining 90%, the unconscious mind, contains information that is not conscious at the moment, but can be easily recalled when needed. Information is also stored in the unconscious mind, including personal past history, which cannot be easily accessed. Your unconscious mind defines who you are, what you think and believe. Every thing you have ever known, learnt, dreamed and experienced is held in the subconscious. It also knows all your unique talents and potentials.

But why is the fear feeling and response so strong and unpleasant?

This is because the experience or learning that caused the phobia was misinterpreted and the level of danger was believed to be much higher than it actually is. As a result, the feared object or situation triggers a strong fight/flight/freeze response.

What is the Fight/Flight/Freeze Fear Response?

This is a response evolved in all humans which was very useful in Stone Age times but is often unhelpful or unnecessary in the civilised world. Stone Aged man lived in dangerous times and his unconscious mind would quickly learn about dangers (such as sabre-tooth tigers!) and alert him to the presence of danger by triggering a strong fear response. This would cause blood and oxygen to be diverted to the muscles, and heart rate and breathing rate to increase to supply more oxygen, and special chemicals would be released into the muscles so that he could use all his energy to club that tiger, run away or stand very still until the danger had passed. After a short burst of energy, those feelings would pass and he would feel calm again.

In the modern world, it is rarely necessary to respond in this way to things which stress us. If we are stressed at work or school, we cannot club people over the head or run away down the corridor, or stand very still and hope they go away; we stay there and deal with the problem. If this fight or flight response is inappropriately triggered, the 'ready for action, fully alert state' feels very uncomfortable as it is not used and released. The chemicals that are unused add to this discomfort. The feeling WILL fade away and no harm will be done but it is unpleasant. To help recovery and feelings of well-being, it is very beneficial to build plenty of exercise into your regular routine, whether it is walking, swimming, dancing, yoga, aerobics or any other sport. Twenty minutes of day light/sunshine on your face and twenty minutes exercise per day will help to lift your mood.

Understanding this process will help you enormously in a very important way. When you experience a fear response, there will be a natural tendency to use your imagination to look for a rational reason to justify it. This just reinforces the fear response. You now know where the fear response is coming from, so there is no reason to imagine anything else. It is coming from your unconscious mind which has learned to believe something is not safe and it must strongly alert you to avoid it; your unconscious mind will always work to protect you. Effective therapy approaches will help you to use your imagination to overcome and unlearn the fear response.

How can phobias be overcome?

'Whatever can be learnt can be unlearnt and something new can be learnt in its place'

People are overcoming and unlearning phobias everyday. The inappropriate learning and belief is held at an unconscious level and so the trick is to work to change this belief at an unconscious level. There are many therapeutic techniques which can be used and they are particularly enhanced by the use of hypnosis, which opens the unconscious mind to suggestion and change. Therapy will focus on changing the underlying faulty belief, changing the sensitivity to the fearful experience(s) and confidence building.

What to do during a phobic fear response/panic attack.

1. Focus on your breathing, to bring in the relaxation response. Breath IN to the count of 7 and OUT to the count of 11. A longer OUT breath is CALMING. The count gets the balance right. After a few deep 7/11 breaths allow your breathing to settle into a natural rhythm e.g. to a count of 3 in and 3 out. And then just forget about it until you feel you need to check it and bring it under control again. (Trigger an anchor if you have one – a therapist will help you install one)
2. Forget about your body and take your focus of attention outside yourself – notice what's around you and describe it to yourself, talk to people about something nice.
3. Think about something relaxing and positive for you, for example, what you will be doing later, afterwards, something you are looking forward to, a favourite place or activity.
4. Keep water with you and have a drink. Make sure you drink 1 litre of water a day. A dehydrated body is a stressed body.
5. Supporters can encourage you to chat, by introducing something interesting to talk about and helping you to focus attention on your external environment. They can help reassure you that you can be in control and everything is going to be fine, by remaining in control and unconcerned themselves