

Phobias

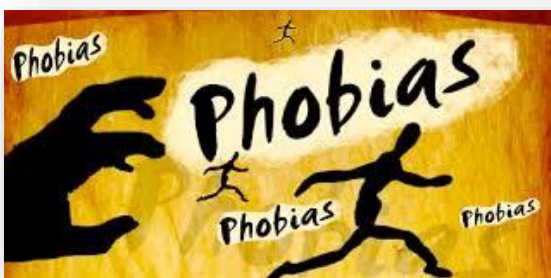
Here at Wellbeing we understand that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic we may experience more worry and anxiety than we usually do. This is a completely understandable and normal reaction to a very stressful and unusual situation. This might mean that if we already struggle with a phobia, the extra stress and anxiety can make it more difficult to manage.

What Is A Phobia?

Most of us are afraid of something, which in reality is unlikely to cause us harm. These fears range from bugs, to small places to busy environments. We can develop fears about anything. For some people this fear can be very intense, and their lives can be disrupted from going to extreme lengths to avoid coming into contact with the thing that they fear. It can be incredibly distressing for some people and have an impact on being able to go out the house, or meet up with people. If you have an intense fear of an object, situation or animal, take severe measures to avoid being confronted by any of these, and get intensely anxious, feel frightened or overwhelmed by nervousness, you may be struggling with a phobia.



What Causes Phobias?



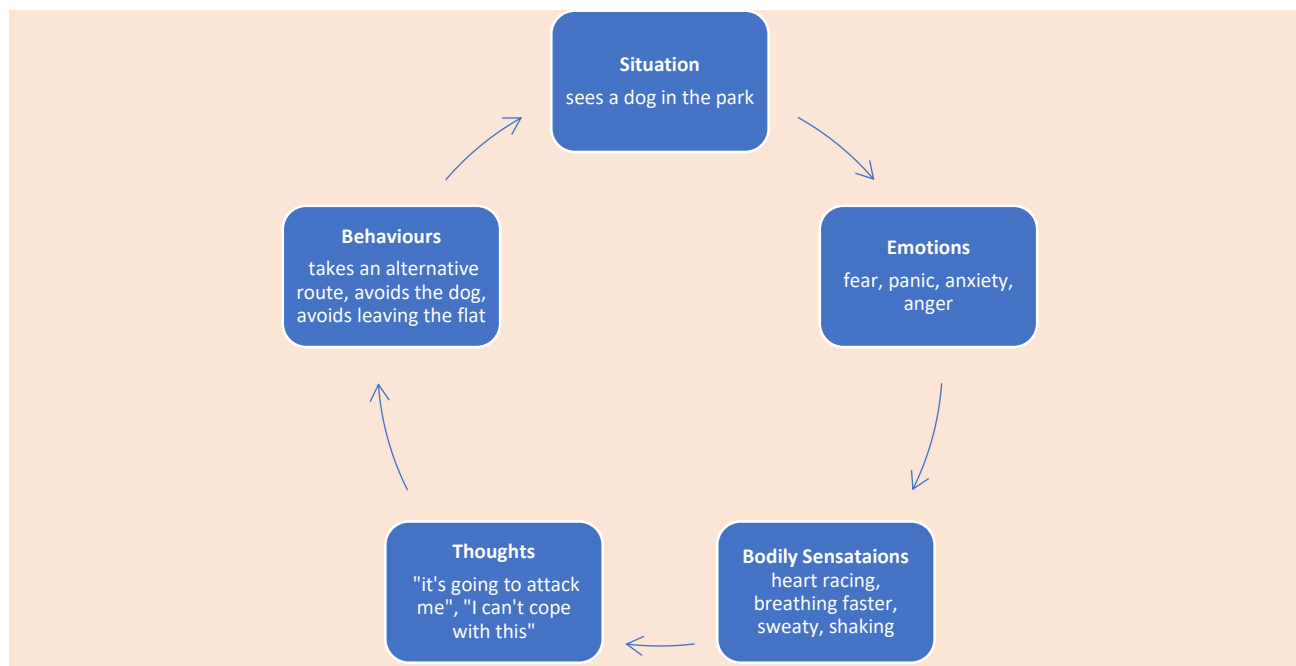
What causes phobias differs from person to person. Some people may have experienced a traumatic event or a specific incident. It may be a learned response from a caregiver or sibling (e.g. if your father was terrified of spiders and expressed this it might be something that you learned to avoid from a young child). Genetics may also play a role if you are prone to anxiety related difficulties.

Vicious Cycle

Often a mixture of people's thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours results in a vicious cycle. This makes it difficult for a person to manage their phobia. Let's have a look at the example below.

Susan was bitten by a dog when she was a child. As a teenager she avoided going to her friends' houses if she knew that they had one, for fear that she would be bitten again. Now as an adult, she experiences intense fear and will go out of her way to avoid dogs. [Vicious cycle on next page:](#)

Having suicidal thoughts? Discuss with a loved one, call Samaritans on **116 123** or access your **G.P.** or **Crisis Service** via **NHS** on **111**.



Physical Sensations

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. Therefore, people will often experience physical sensations of anxiety when they come into contact with their phobia. These can include shortness of breath, increased heart rate, sweating, shaking and dizziness. These sensations in themselves can be very distressing and, in turn, may exacerbate the feelings of fear that the person has toward their phobia.



Unhelpful Thoughts

People can often experience a range of unhelpful thoughts that keeps their phobias going. Often people tend to underestimate their ability to cope with certain situations and overestimate the threat that is facing them. Examples of unhelpful thoughts might be "I won't be able to cope" or "I will pass out if I go outside". This often increases feelings of anxiety that they already have, and often results in people participating in avoidance behaviours to cope.

Behaviours

People can go to extreme lengths to avoid their phobias. They might take long routes back home from work, avoid meeting up with people, or avoid leaving the house at all. Unfortunately, by doing so, we are never able to learn that we might be able to manage our fears more effectively than we think. We might also use safety behaviours to help us cope e.g. only leaving the house with a friend. Avoidance and safety behaviours stop us from learning that we can cope when we are faced with our phobias and that they're not as dangerous as we think. Therefore, the best way to manage our phobias is often to confront them.

Treatment

Commonly used treatments include:

- Relaxation techniques - as coming into contact with our phobias can often elicit symptoms of anxiety utilising relaxation techniques is a useful way of them learning to manage phobias (please see relaxation information sheet and breathing scripts available on the Wellbeing website).
- Talking therapies (including Cognitive Behavioural Therapy).
- Medications.

People often find a combination of these approaches is helpful. Talking therapies often utilise exposure therapy, whereby you gradually expose yourself to the phobia in small, manageable chunks. Here at wellbeing, we offer a group Cognitive Behavioural Programme aimed at helping individuals to manage their phobias more effectively.

Helpful ways to help you begin to cope and manage symptoms:

Belly Breathing

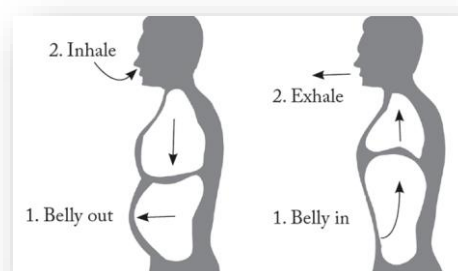
The way we breathe is strongly linked to the way we feel. When we are relaxed we breathe slowly, and when we are anxious we breathe more quickly, this allows the body to take in more oxygen and prepare for fight, flight or response. It is therefore important to try and slow down our breathing as this signals to the body that it is safe.

Breathing is far more effective when we use our diaphragms, rather than our chest muscles. Sit comfortably in a chair and place a hand on your belly. Take two or three large breaths and imagine that there is a balloon in your belly. It should inflate when you breathe in. Practise so that it is the lower hand on your abdomen that moves as you breathe in and out. People often think that their tummy goes in when they breathe in - but the reverse should be the case. As you breathe in, your belly should move out.

When you're feeling tense or trying to relax, try breathing out a little bit more slowly and more deeply, noticing a short pause before the in-breath takes over (don't exaggerate the in-breath, just let it happen). You might find it useful to count slowly or prolong a word such as "one" or "peace" to help elongate the out-breath a little (to yourself or out loud).

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Our bodies respond automatically to stressful situations and thoughts by becoming tense. The opposite relationship also works: a good way of relaxing the mind is to deliberately relax the body. In a progressive muscle relaxation, each muscle group is tensed in turn, and the tension is then released. This relaxes the muscles and allows you to notice the contrast between tension and relaxation. Relaxation should be enjoyable so if any part of the exercise is too difficult skip it for the moment. If you have any injuries, you may wish to leave out that part of the exercise.



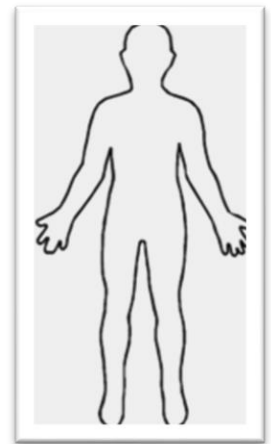
Preparation

Lie down flat on your back, on a firm bed, a couch, or on the floor. Support your head and neck with a pillow or cushion. Alternatively sit in a comfortable chair with your head well-supported. Close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so.

Instructions

Focus your attention on different parts of your body in sequence. Go through the sequence three times:

- 1) *Tense & release: Tense that body part, hold it for a few moments, then relax*
- 2) *Lightly tense & release: Tense that body part with just enough tension to notice, then relax*
- 3) *Release only: Just pay attention to each muscle group and decide to relax it*



Recommended sequence

1. Right hand & arm (clench the fist & tighten the muscles in the arm)
2. Left hand & arm
3. Right leg (tense the leg, lifting the knee slightly)
4. Left leg
5. Stomach & chest
6. Back muscles (pull the shoulders back slightly)
7. Neck & throat (push the head back slightly into the pillow/surface)
8. Face (scrunch up the muscles in your face)

Remember, if relaxation is new to you then these techniques may feel a bit strange at first. It is important to practice these techniques regularly and at a time when you are feeling less stressed as this can help you apply the technique more easily when feeling stressed or anxious. Remember practice makes perfect. Remind yourself that the physical symptoms you are experiencing are your body's natural response to the fight or flight response and are simply trying to protect you and keep you safe. These will eventually pass.

Challenge your Thoughts

When we are anxious or stressed, we tend to view things through a negative filter, which makes our thoughts unhelpful. We often assume that because we have thought something then it must be true- this is not the case. When faced with anxiety provoking situation it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- “What is the evidence for and against this thought?”
- “Is what I am thinking, fact or an opinion?”
- “How likely is it, that what I believe is going to happen, actually is going to happen?”
- “Is there another way for me to view the situation?”
- What would I say to a friend if they were in a similar situation?”






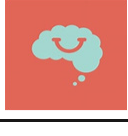
Reduce Avoidance

Try to resist the urge to run to a place of safety as this will only reinforce the vicious cycle. Instead, try to stay in the situation until the anxiety reduces or passes. Use the thought challenging, breathing and relaxation techniques to help you manage the situation.

Our recommended resources (click for direct access):

NHS Inform	Offers the most up-to-date advice on dealing varying mental health difficulties, including the 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing. Please visit: NHS Inform
Wellbeing	Our website offers a variety of self-help materials, groups, and courses for all sorts of problems that you may be facing. Anyone can download the self- help materials. Please visit: Wellbeing Website Glasgow
Mental Health Foundation	A range of content designed to give you more information about mental health and to help you to look after your mental health. Please visit: Your Mental Health - Mental Health Foundation
NHS Every Mind Matters	Interactive website providing you the opportunity to complete a short quiz which creates a Mind Plan of what you can do to improve your mental health. Please visit: Every Mind Matters
Psych Central	Run by mental health professionals offering reliable, trusted information to individuals struggling with a mental health. There is also an excellent quiz section allowing you to find out more about your symptoms and how to manage these. Please visit: PsychCentral for Mental Health
MIND	Information hub provides advice on how to support your mental wellbeing. Please visit: MIND Information Hub
SAMH	Hub of information and guidance about looking after mental health. Please visit: SAMH Guidance for Mental Health

Useful Apps:

	Mind Shift	Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. It can encourage you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions, and face challenging situations
	SAM	SAM might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behaviour over time and learn 25 different self-help techniques.
	Happify	Need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training program, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts
	Headspace	The Headspace app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus.
	Calm	Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.
	Smiling Mind	Smiling mind is a way to practice daily meditation and mindfulness exercises from any device. This is helpful during times of stress and is a fun and unique way to help you put a smile on your mind.