

Agoraphobia

What is Agoraphobia?

The term agoraphobia originates from the Greek word **agora**, meaning “open space” or “marketplace” and from the English word phobia, meaning “fear”. Often, when we hear the term agoraphobia, we tend to view it as a fear of open spaces; however, it is actually much more complex. Agoraphobia can be defined as a **fear of being in a situation where escape may be difficult or that help may not be available if things go wrong**.

Examples of this are:

- leaving the house
- being alone
- being in crowded places
- being in an elevator
- being on public transport

Agoraphobia is a type of anxiety disorder and is characterised by the individual holding the belief that certain situations are out with their control, which in turn induces feelings of fear and panic. When faced with these types of situations, they are typically accompanied by panic attacks¹. This can often increase the fear of going outside, as they are fearful of losing control, having a panic attack in public and it being noticed by others. As a result, to help manage these feelings, the individual usually adopts “safety or avoidance behaviours”. Example of safety behaviours are; only leaving the house when accompanied by somebody they trust or using substances or alcohol. Example of avoidance behaviours are; avoiding specific situations altogether (i.e. lifts), avoiding crowded places and in severe cases the agoraphobic sufferer may become housebound.

As you can imagine, agoraphobia is detrimental to the overall wellbeing of the individual as it prevents them from doing the things that they love. It can prevent them from seeking medical support and can lead to the development of other mental health difficulties such as depression.

Symptoms of Agoraphobia

When faced with situations which are perceived as frightening or overwhelming, the individual will experience a range of symptoms. These can be placed in the following categories: **physical sensations, unhelpful thoughts, feelings & behaviours**. Please note that in some cases, the agoraphobic sufferer may not experience panic attacks.

Physical Sensations – physical symptoms are changes that occur in the individual’s body in relation to the activation of the fight, flight or freeze system. This is our in built alarm system warning us of danger. Whether this is a real or perceived threat, the physiological response will be the same. Physical symptoms will include; rapid heartbeat, rapid breathing, increased sweating, nausea, shaking, dizziness and chest pain. Remember if you experience these types of symptoms, it is your body trying to protect you from harm.

Unhelpful Thoughts - this is when the individual overestimates the potential danger they are likely to face as well as underestimating their ability to deal with the situation. Examples of unhelpful thoughts are; “something awful will happen” or “I won’t be able to get out and I will be trapped”, “I can’t cope without the support of others” or “substances will give me the courage to go out”. The individual may also believe that they will be perceived negatively by



others, for example, “if I go out I will have a panic attack and people will laugh”, “people will look at me and think that I am weird”.

Feelings - feelings are like messages, they tell us how we feel about situations. Individuals who suffer from agoraphobia are likely to experience emotions such as, fear, anxiety, distraught, frustration and possibly even anger.

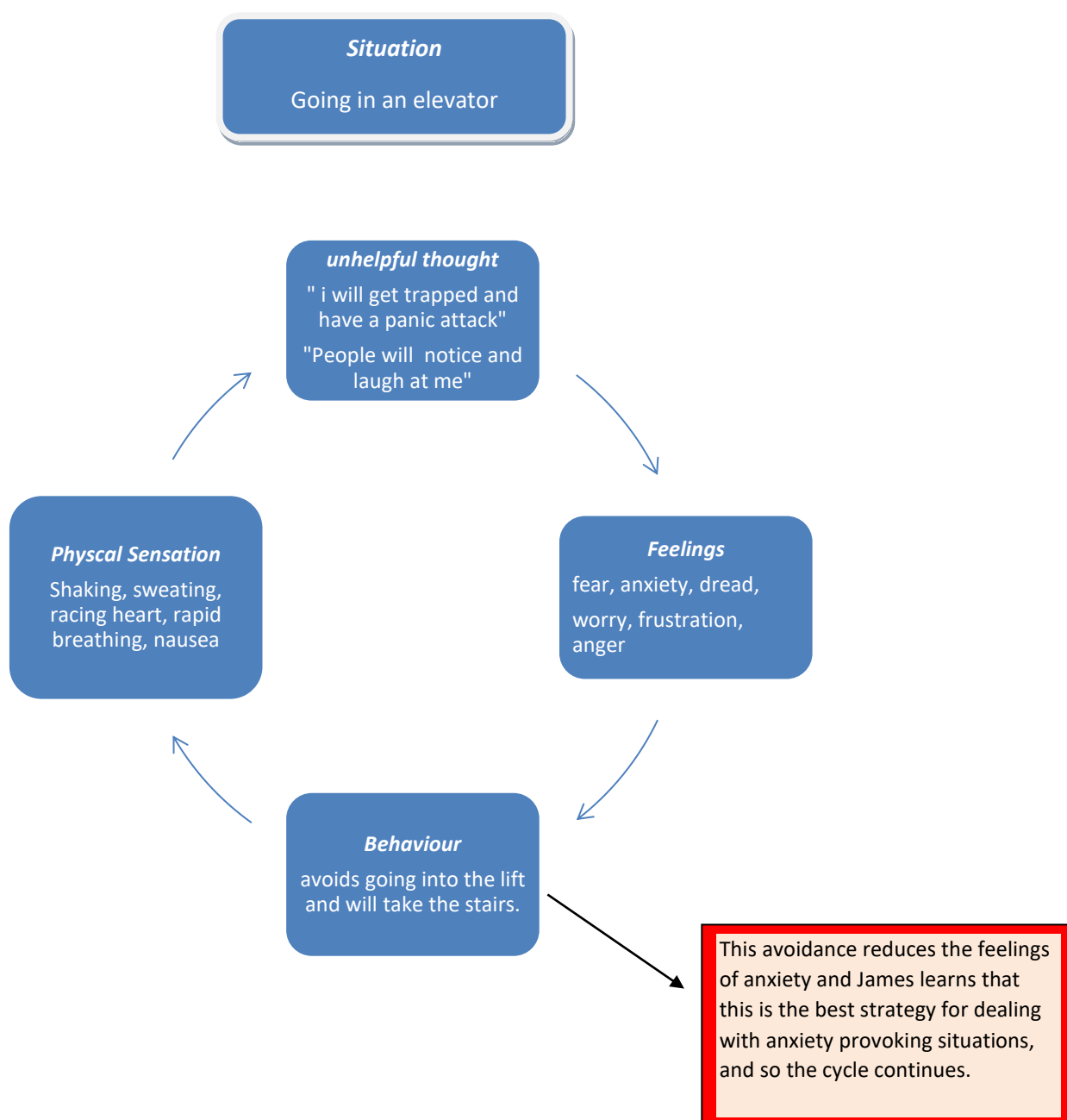
Behaviours – these are the actions which people will adopt in order to keep them self safe. As stated above these generally take the form of avoiding situations which they believe could lead to a panic attack. It can also include getting others to do things for them, using online services in order to stay in the house or relying on medication to leave the house. Due to the effectiveness of avoidance in reducing the symptoms of anxiety, people unfortunately, do not have the opportunity to learn that the fearful situations are manageable and that they can overcome their fear.



The Vicious Cycle

Your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours are all interconnected and it is these symptoms, which can keep you in a vicious cycle of agoraphobia. Let's take a look at an example.

When he was a young boy, James was trapped in an elevator, this caused him to experience intense feelings of fear and as a result, he experienced his first panic attack. James now avoids going into elevators as he has developed the belief that once again, he will become trapped and have a panic attack.

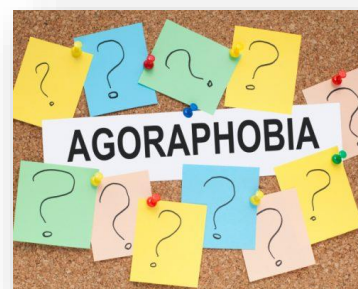


What Causes Agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia tends to develop from panic disorder and occurs when individuals associate panic attacks with certain places, people and situations where they originally occurred. As a result, they develop a fear that a panic attack will reoccur in the same or similar situation and will therefore avoid that situation.

Whilst the exact cause of agoraphobia is unknown, there are several other factors, which could increase the likelihood of the condition developing, for example:

- *Learned experiences* where the behaviours have been observed and learned from significant others.
- *Genetics* - it may be that there is a family history of agoraphobia, or that your temperament places you at a higher risk of developing it.
- *Traumatic incidents* such as bereavement can trigger agoraphobia.
- *Lifestyle and environmental stress* can also increase the risk of developing agoraphobia.



Treatment

Recommended treatment for agoraphobia is:

Self-help - it is helpful for you to learn techniques such as relaxation and breathing exercises which will help you manage the situations.

Lifestyle changes - for example, trying to reduce any environmental stressors (relaxation techniques may also help with this). Regular exercise can help relieve stress and tension avoid alcohol and substances as whilst these may help in the short term, they make symptoms worse in the long run. Avoid caffeine as these have a stimulant effect and can make symptoms worse.

Psychological treatment such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help teach you how to challenge the unhelpful thoughts, manage the distressing emotions and develop the appropriate coping strategies and behaviours.

Medication – certain medications can be used in the treatment of agoraphobia; this should be discussed with your GP.



Most people find a combination of the above options to be helpful in the treatment of agoraphobia. If you feel that you would benefit from support with your agoraphobia, either contact your GP and discuss available options or alternatively we, at the wellbeing offer group CBT aimed at supporting individuals to effectively manage their agoraphobia. The wellbeing service website also has a variety of helpful free resources and information that can easily be accessed.

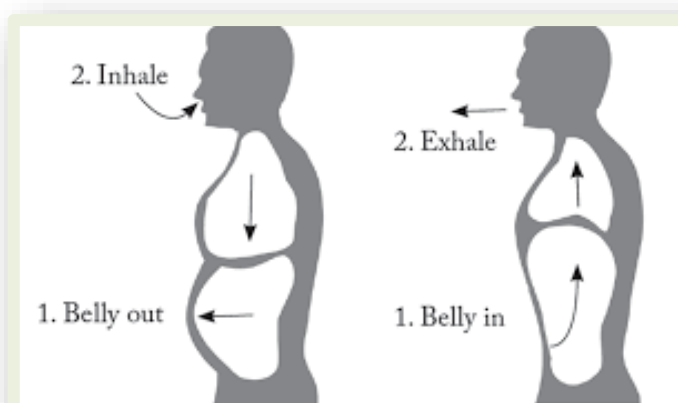
Helpful ways to help you begin to cope and manage symptoms:

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 or flight response. It is therefore important to try and slow down our breathing as this signals 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).



Mindfulness

Is a technique where we learn to pay attention in a specific way; on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgement. Mindfulness is a practical way to notice your thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds and smells. We can often do daily tasks being miles away without realising it. In this state, we are more likely to have our "buttons pressed" as our environment may trigger old, unhelpful thinking patterns. By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, we give ourselves more opportunity to challenge and change our old thoughts and habits that might cause us problems.

Mindfulness Activity

- Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day, for one or 2 minutes. For example: Drink a cup of tea. Walk. Wash the dishes.
- Whatever you are doing, be in that moment, right now. Describe what you see, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.
- Other thoughts will come to mind, simply notice when they and sensations occur and then then re-focus on your chosen mindful activity.
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself.
- Describe... rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.



Visualisation

Safe place imagery

If it is safe to do so, try to think of a place or situation that makes you feel peaceful, relaxed or at ease: once you have this image in your mind, try to focus your attention on it.



Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful and safe.

It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamt about going to, or somewhere you've seen a picture of.

Focus on the colours in your peaceful safe place.

Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence.

Think about any smells you notice there.

Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you, the temperature, movement of air, anything else you can touch.

Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to.

You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now.

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.

Challenge Your Thoughts

When we are anxious or stressed, we tend to view things through a negative filter, which makes our thoughts unhelpful. We also presume that because we have thought something then it must be factual and accurate- this is not true, just because you think something does not mean that it is true. When faced with an anxiety provoking situation it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- “Is what I am thinking fact or an opinion?”
- “Am I viewing the situation unrealistically, do I have my negative filter on?”
- “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?”

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.

You might find it helpful to develop some “coping statements”, that you can say to yourself to help you cope with stressful situations, e.g. “i can do this” “these (physical) symptoms are here to protect me, they will pass”.




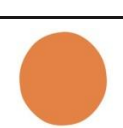
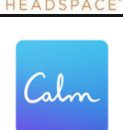
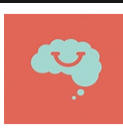
Stay where you are:

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/passes. Use the thought challenging, breathing and relaxation techniques to help you manage the situation. Focus on something that is visible and nonthreatening, e.g. items on the supermarket self.

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.

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**.