

Specific Phobias



The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501 (c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment and cure of anxiety disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them. Help ADAA help others. Donate now at www.adaa.org.

For information visit www.adaa.org or contact

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“ Everyone thinks that once I’ve driven on the highway, I’ve conquered it. They just don’t understand... I don’t understand. It’s a day-in and day-out struggle. ”

What is a Phobia?

We all have things that frighten us or make us uneasy. New places, insects, driving over high bridges, creaky elevators. And, although we sometimes try to avoid things that make us uncomfortable, we generally manage to control our fears and carry on with daily activities. Some people, however, have very strong, *irrational, involuntary* fear reactions that lead them to avoid common everyday places, situations or objects even though they logically know there isn't any threat of danger. The fear doesn't make any sense, but nothing seems to be able to stop it. When confronted with the feared situation, they may even have a panic attack — the abrupt onset of intense fear or terror in which individuals feel like they are losing control, unable to breathe or having a heart attack.

People who experience these seemingly out-of-control fears have a phobia. There are three types of phobias – agoraphobia, social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder) and *specific phobias*. This brochure focuses on *specific phobias*. For information about agoraphobia and social phobia go to www.adaa.org.

What is a *Specific Phobia*?

People with a *specific phobia* have an excessive and unreasonable fear in the presence of or anticipation of a specific object, place or situation. Common *specific phobias* include animals, insects, heights, thunder, driving, public transportation, flying, dental or medical procedures, and elevators. Although the person with a phobia realizes that the fear is irrational, even simply thinking about it can cause extreme anxiety.

About Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a normal part of living. It's the body's way of telling us something isn't right. It keeps us from harm's way and prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger. However, for some people, anxiety is persistent, irrational and overwhelming. It may get in the way of day-to-day activities and even make them impossible. This may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" describes a group of conditions including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder (SAD) and ***specific phobias***. For information on all of the anxiety disorders visit www.adaa.org.

What's the difference between normal anxiety and a phobia?

Normal Anxiety

Feeling queasy while climbing a tall ladder

Worrying about taking off in an airplane during a lightening storm

Feeling anxious around your neighbor's pitbull

Phobia

Refusing to attend your best friend's wedding because it's on the 25th floor of a hotel

Turning down a big promotion because it involves air travel

Avoiding visiting any homes of your neighbors for fear of seeing a dog



“ I was so relieved when my doctor put a name to my problem. To discover that there are other people like me. To learn that there is hope. ”

How can *specific phobias* affect your life?

The impact of a phobia on one's life depends on how easy it is to avoid the feared object, place or situation. Since individuals do whatever they can to avoid the uncomfortable and often terrifying feelings of phobic anxiety, phobias can disrupt daily routines, limit work efficiency, reduce one's self-esteem and place a strain on relationships.

What causes *specific phobias*?

Specific phobias are the most common type of anxiety disorder, affecting 19 million American adults. Most phobias seem to come out of the blue, usually arising in childhood or early adulthood. Scientists believe that phobias can be traced to a combination of genetic tendencies, brain chemistry and other biological, psychological and environmental factors.

What treatments are available?

Fortunately, most individuals who seek treatment for phobias and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life. A variety of treatment options exist including cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, anxiety management, relaxation techniques and medications. One, or a combination of these, may be recommended. Details about these treatments are available on the ADAA website at www.adaa.org.

It is important to remember that there is no single “right” treatment. What works for one person may or may not be the best choice for someone else. A course of treatment should be tailored to your individual needs. Ask your doctor to explain why a particular type of treatment is being recommended, what other options are available and what you need to do to fully participate in your recovery.

How can ADAA help you?

Suffering from a *specific phobia* or any anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. You may feel alone, embarrassed or frightened. ADAA can give you the resources that will help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing and assist you in finding mental health professionals in your city who can help. Visit the ADAA website at www.adaa.org to locate doctors and therapists who treat phobias and other anxiety disorders in your area, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms and best treatments for all of the anxiety disorders, review questions to ask a therapist or doctor and find helpful books, tapes and other materials to help family and loved ones. ADAA is here to help you make the best decisions so that you can get on with your life.

Take Five & Manage Your Anxiety

You are not alone. Talk to someone – a friend, loved one or doctor. Get help. Anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable.

Whether you have normal anxiety or an anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

Exercise.
Go for a walk or jog.
Do yoga.
Dance. Just get moving!

Talk to someone ... spouse, significant other, friend, child or doctor.

Keep a daily journal.
Become aware of what triggers your anxiety.

Eat a balanced diet. Don't skip meals. Avoid caffeine which can trigger anxiety symptoms.

Contact ADAA at www.adaa.org.
Let us help you help yourself.

Specific Phobias Self-Test

If you think you might have a *specific phobia*, take the test below. Answer “yes” or “no” to the questions and discuss the results with your doctor.

Yes or No?

Are you troubled by:

Y N

Fear of places or situations where getting help or escape might be difficult, such as in a crowd or on a bridge?

Y N

Shortness of breath or a racing heart for no apparent reason when confronting certain situations?

Y N

Persistent and unreasonable fear of an object or situation, such as flying, heights, animals, blood, etc.?

Y N

Being unable to travel alone, without a companion?

Y N

Have your fears continued despite causing problems for you and/or your loved ones?

Y N

Does your fear interfere with your daily life?

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Conditions that sometimes complicate anxiety disorders include depression and substance abuse, among others. The following information will help your healthcare professional in evaluating you for a *specific phobia*.

Yes or No?

In the last year, have you experienced:

Y N

Changes in sleeping or eating habits?

Y N

Feeling sad or depressed more days than not?

Y N

A disinterest in life more days than not?

Y N

A feeling of worthlessness or guilt more days than not?

Yes or No?

During the last year, has the use of alcohol or drugs:

Y N

Resulted in failure with work, school or family?

Y N

Placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving under the influence?

Y N

Gotten you arrested?

Y N

Continued despite causing problems for you and/or your loved ones?