

Imagine you have a phobia of heights

by Joyce Linnenbach

Webster's New World dictionary defines "phobia" as an irrational, excessive, and persistent fear of some particular thing or situation.

Imagine you have a phobia of heights.

Now, I mean REALLY imagine it. Put yourself there. The thought of you climbing a ladder terrifies you. The very notion of going up a ladder or climbing a tree or going on the roof makes you lightheaded. Your hands sweat, your heart pounds, your stomach turns. You get irrational about it.

Imagine thinking, worrying, fretting, that life would be fine *if only* nothing existed high over your head...if you never had to fly in a plane, or ride on a roller coaster, or shingle your roof, or get your cat down from a tree. If only you never, never, never had to go up high.

Now imagine that you just turned three or four or five. You start school. Everyone tells you how great school is, how fun it is. You get new clothes, new shoes, a new backpack! Gramma calls you to wish you good luck on your first day. You're soooo excited thinking of all the new activities, new friends, learning. You can't wait!

Your mom and dad drive you to school, being your first day and all. You get to the school grounds. You look around.

Oh my heavens! It can't be!

Your classroom is twenty feet up...in a tree house...in a tree school! You see your new friends are all up there, happily playing, singing, and putting their crayons away in their new desks. The teacher is smiling, introducing herself. She's writing neat things on the board. There are toys and snacks and books and fun things everywhere...up there in your tree-classroom.

You are frozen. You stand at the bottom of the tree, staring at the ladder with twenty rungs. Twenty steps just to get to the doorway of your classroom. You want to cry. You can't move your feet. You turn to mom and dad. Surely they will take you back home—they'll find you a classroom on the ground.

"Come on dear—go up—you'll love school. The first day is hard for

everyone—you'll be fine."

You are immobile. You so *want* to be a school-goer. You *want* to learn and make friends and be a part of the class. But your feet *won't* take you there. They *won't* budge. Your heart is pounding too hard. Your eyes fill with tears. Your tummy hurts. Then you hear, from above, the teacher calling for you, her hands cupped around the sides of her mouth:

"Come on up, honey, join the fun! School is great up here in the tree classroom!"

You can't move; your legs feel like they are gone, you can't go up the ladder. It gets worse. All the kids up there, hearing the teacher, turn, look down at you and start waving you on, their arms motioning for you to come on up.

No. Can't move. Afraid to go up. Too high. Can't breathe up there. Why are all those people looking at me? Stop! Stop! Turn your eyes away! Put your arms down!

You cross your legs and sit squarely on the ground.

This is where I'll stay. The classroom is out of my reach.

Your parents take you home. You tell them that you can't go up the ladder. You don't know why. You just know that it's impossible. They are, of course, very concerned. They explain how easy—even fun—it is to climb a ladder high up into a tree. Why, they did it all the time when they were kids! You tell them again that you don't know why, but you can't climb a ladder and you can't get to your classroom.

So, your parents call all their friends to talk about this. They call the school principal. They call the doctor, the school nurse and their priest. They call strangers from all over the place. They're all baffled. Some tell you to practice climbing trees, or maybe a jungle gym. Or fly in an airplane. In fact, some suggest they put all your toys up in a tree...AND you only get to play with them if you go up there *yourself* and get them. Yes, you *surely* would *decide* to go up in a tree to get your toys!

Mom and dad continue to take you to school every day. And every day you get there and every day you sit at the bottom of the tree.

Then one day, the teacher, or maybe her helper, walks down the ladder to where you're sitting. She brings down a chair and a desk and a few books and a snack. She says,

"Well, dear, if you can't come to me up in my tree-classroom, then I will come to you with your class work. I don't want you to miss out on the

joy of learning. You deserve to learn and to love school, just like all the other children."

Day after day, the teacher or her helper comes down the tree. She smiles and teaches you neat things. You sit together and read and write and play and imagine. Sometimes the other kids come down too—to join you on the ground. You sing and dance with them. You play T-ball and turn summersaults.

Then one day, you notice something. The ladder leading up to the tree-classroom seems different. You're not sure how or why. But some how, the first rung of the ladder seems magical. It glows and glitters. It's your friend. You stand up and your right foot lifts up and goes on the rung. Your hands go to the sides of the ladder. But your palms are so sweaty that you can't grasp the ladder well. You cross your legs. You sit squarely on the ground.

*Oh, they'll all be staring again, telling me to go up. That I can do it!
They'll all start waving their arms again!*

You dread looking around to see the class' reaction. You wish you were invisible and you wish your heart would slow down. But you look around and you see that your teacher and friends are sitting quietly, working on an art project.

Thank heaven.

A while later (the next day, the next week, the next month), you go to the ladder and try again to get on the first rung. You ask mom and dad to take you to school on Saturday so you can try the ladder when no one's around.

Then one Saturday you notice something amazing. There were some hugs sitting on the rungs of the ladder. Hmm. They weren't there yesterday. You put your hands on the ladder and your right foot on the bottom rung...and you take a step up. Your left leg follows. You're on the first rung and you're...OK. You go up another step, then another. The hugs surround you with each step. The hugs feel warm and steady. Mom and dad gently hug you when you get back down.

Finally, a long time, maybe forever, goes by and you make it to the top of the ladder. School's in. You look around. The kids are working on some painting. You slip quietly into the chair behind the desk with your name on it, beside your friends and among the bright, beautiful, colorful books and toys. The teacher is helping one of the kids with their brush strokes.

The clouds are puffy up here! The sun shines so bright up here! The

world is...very OK up here! I'm so close to heaven up here! Thank you God.

Why did I write this story?

Our daughter has a social phobia, Selective Mutism. She has a phobia of talking. When it started, it pertained only to the school setting. She currently does not speak in any setting.

We are working diligently to get her help. Unless you have been affected but this disorder, it is difficult to understand how a phobic person feels. Many people have heard of having a fear of heights. Somehow that is easier to understand, to relate to. I hope my illustration will help you understand what our daughter is experiencing. Children with Selective Mutism deserve our support and admiration for their courage to carry on everyday. They are surrounded constantly by tree climbers in high places.

An update from the author:

Joyce Linnenbach has given permission for the Selective Mutism Group~Childhood Anxiety Network to distribute this story in the hope that it will help others understand what it feels like to have Selective Mutism. Her daughter has made significant progress in her recovery!

Ms. Linnenbach is a parent advocate with no formal training in the treatment of Selective Mutism.

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