

HEALTHY LIVING

Face your **PHOBIA**

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Cox News Service

Time (and her family) flew right by as Kathy Heart kept her feet planted firmly on the ground.

"I told myself that I could fly anytime I wanted to, but I just didn't want to," said the Atlanta woman, who did not see her relatives in New Jersey for 20 years. "Then I had to realize that I really couldn't."

The irrational, uncontrollable fear of certain situations, places or objects, coupled with physiological reactions such as intense breathing, pounding heart and sweating, paralyzes about 6.3 million people in the United States. Phobias can disrupt daily routines and alter lives as sufferers avoid the triggers, which include:

- Animals. The most common specific phobia includes dogs, snakes, insects or mice.
- Situations such as flying, riding in a car

Common fears

- **Arachnophobia.** Fear of spiders. (Half of women and 10 percent of men have a fear of spiders.)
- **Aviophobia.** Fear of flying.
- **Agoraphobia.** Fear of any place or situation where escape might be difficult or help unavailable.
- **Claustrophobia.** Fear of being trapped in confined spaces.
- **Acrophobia.** Fear of heights.
- **Brontophobia.** Fear of thunder.
- **Necrophobia.** Fear of death or dead things.

Do you have a phobia?

Take this test to see. Are you troubled by:

- Powerful and ongoing fear of social situations involving unfamiliar people?
- Fear of places or situations where getting help or escape might be difficult, such as in a crowd or on a bridge?
- Shortness of breath or a racing heart for no apparent reason?
- Persistent and unreasonable fear of an object or situation, such as flying, heights, animals, blood, etc.?
- Being unable to travel alone, without a companion?

If you answered yes to any of the questions, talk with your doctor.

Source: Anxiety Disorders Association of America

or on public transportation, driving, going over bridges or through tunnels or being in a closed-in place.

- Natural environment such as storms, heights or water.
- Blood/injection/injury. These involve a fear of being injured, of seeing blood or of invasive medical procedures, such as blood tests or injections.

Other phobias include fear of falling down, a fear of loud sounds and a fear of costumed characters such as clowns.

"Perfectly high-functioning, rational people can have an irrational fear of something," says Jeannie Ingram, a licensed counselor with Decatur Psychotherapy Group in Decatur, Ga.

The key is not to let the phobia take over your life, she says.

A rational fear of snakes is healthy, says Raymond Crowel of the National Mental Health Association, referring to someone walking in the woods or working in their yard. "But if you're on a city street downtown looking for snakes, that's a preoccupation and a phobia," he says.

While some phobias develop during childhood, most occur during adolescence and early adulthood in response to a stressful event associated with a place or object.

Practice these techniques so that when you're in an uncomfortable situation, you can use these to relieve your anxiety.

- Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on a flat surface.
- Place one hand on your stomach, just above your navel. Place the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little.
- Hold your breath for one second.
- Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down. Make your exhalation slower and longer than your inhalation.
- Do this for five to 10 minutes.

One day during church, Terrie McSorley felt like the walls were caving in around her. Her heart began to race, her palms became sweaty and she could not catch her breath.

Panicked, the Dunwoody, Ga., woman hurried to the back of the sanctuary for relief. The anxiety dissipated but returned each time she entered the building.

Eventually, McSorley stopped attending service, and within two years, her fears had escalated to where she could not leave home without a companion.

"I was not living my life; I was just surviving," says the mother of six, who later sought treatment with a psychologist. Now, "I can do everything that I want and need to do." ■



Treatment options

Phobias are highly treatable, said Rebecca Beaton, director of the Anxiety & Stress Management Institute in Atlanta. Here are some treatment options:

- **Cognitive-behavior therapy.** Irrational beliefs are addressed as clients think through situations and draw conclusions based on facts. They use reassuring words, such as "I can do this," "Anxiety is normal, and it will pass," or "I've made negative predictions before, and nothing bad has happened." Clients construct a hierarchy of fears from least to greatest and are gradually exposed to what frightens them (starting with an imagined or virtual setting and moving into the real environment) until fears diminish. Prolonged exposure desensitizes clients to feared objects or situations as self-talk helps work through them.
- **Meditation/deep breathing.** Slow, deep abdominal breaths reduce the production of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol and reduce blood pressure and heart rate. Anxiety is tied to a physical response, so the body cannot be anxious when it is relaxed.
- **Workbooks** raise awareness of the origin of fears, introduce the concept of rational self-talk and typically include a journal.
- **Support groups** help to remove isolation and should be facilitated by a therapist.
- **Medications.** For short-term treatment, low doses of tranquilizers such as Valium and Xanax may be prescribed. They can be very addictive and should be used sparingly. For more generalized anxiety, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (such as Lexipro, Zoloft or Paxil) or selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors may be effective.

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