



# PHOBIAS

## **How this booklet can help**

This booklet can:

- help you to understand what a phobia is, what causes it and what keeps it going
- provide advice on how you can overcome your phobia

## **What is a Phobia?**

A phobia is a specific and persistent fear of a situation, object or animal. There are many different types of phobias, some common examples may be a fear of heights, spiders, vomit, flying, dogs or needles. When this fear causes high levels of distress and impacts on a person's daily functioning then this is called a Phobia. Phobias can affect anyone at any time in their life.

## **What causes a phobia?**

- phobias may develop as a result of learning from other people's responses to the feared situation, object or animal
- some people may recall a particular traumatic incident that resulted in the development of their phobia
- some people do not know how their phobia developed

## **What keeps the phobia going?**

### **Anxiety**

When we are faced with a fearful situation our body releases adrenaline which helps us to either run away or stay and fight the threat. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response and is a natural response to danger.

This adrenaline response may lead us to feel a number of symptoms such as:

- breathing faster to get more oxygen to your muscles
- heart races to pump blood faster around your body
- digestive system slows down causing a butterfly feeling in your stomach
- sweating to cool your body down
- you may become tense
- you may scan your environment for potential danger

This adrenaline response can be triggered at times when it is not actually needed. For example, when a person with a phobia comes into contact with their fear this adrenaline response is triggered when in fact there is no actual danger.

This anxiety can lead people with a phobia to act in a certain way such as escaping, avoiding or using safety behaviours.

### **Avoidance and escape**

When a person comes into contact with their phobia they may feel high levels of anxiety. This may result in the person avoiding or escaping, which reduces the person's anxiety.

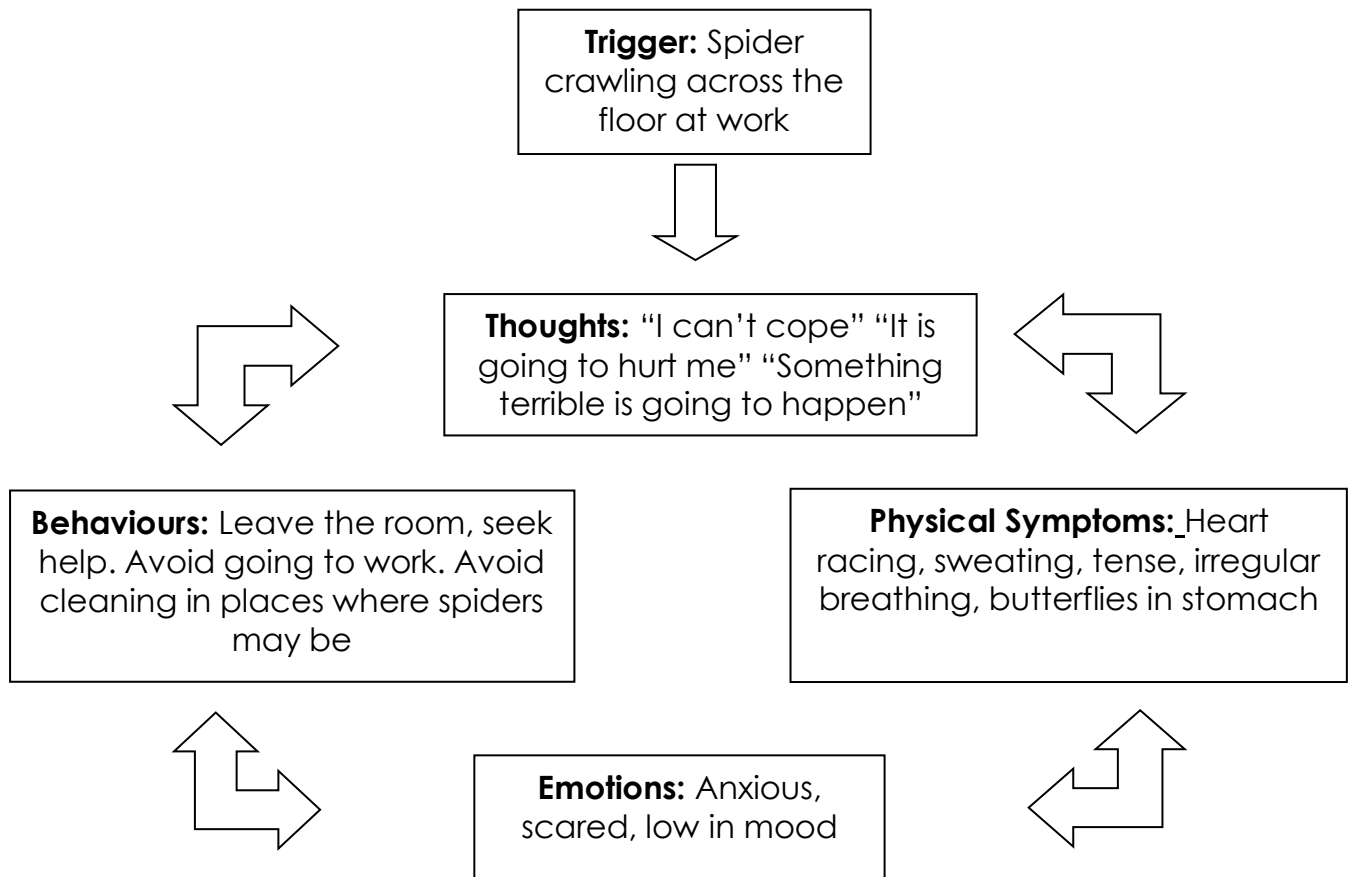
The person learns that the only way to reduce their anxiety is to escape or avoid and in the long term the person never learns how to overcome their phobia.

### **Safety behaviours**

A safety behaviour is when the person with a phobia attaches significance to something which they think protects them from the fear and prevents bad things from happening.

The person may believe that they can't cope without using these safety behaviours. Examples could be carrying a bottle of water or mints around with them. The use of safety behaviours prevent the person from finding out what would have happened had they not used these safety behaviours, therefore maintaining the phobia.

Here is a cycle of how a phobia can affect the way that a person thinks, feels, reacts physically and behaves.



## Overcoming a phobia and breaking the cycle

Research suggests that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) may help in overcoming phobias. Phobias are learned responses and can be unlearned through repeated and frequent exposure. Exposure involves facing your phobia without avoiding, escaping or using safety behaviours.

Exposure to the phobia should be done gradually in small, manageable steps. You should start with exposure to tasks that provoke a small amount of anxiety and working up to more difficult exposure tasks that provoke increased anxiety. This is known as an exposure hierarchy.

### Example of an exposure hierarchy

<b>Step</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Level of Anxiety 0-100</b>
Step 12 (most feared situation)	Hold the spider in your hand	100
Step 11	Let the spider out of the jar and touch it	95
Step 10	Hold the sealed jar with the spider in it	90
Step 9	Be in the same room as a spider that is sealed in a jar	85
Step 8	Touch a spider web	80
Step 7	Hold a plastic spider	70
Step 6	Look at a plastic spider	60
Step 5	Touch real life pictures of a spider	50
Step 4	Look at real life pictures of a spider	40
Step 3	Touch cartoon pictures of spiders	30
Step 2	Look at cartoon picture of spiders	20
Step 1 (least feared situation)	Say the word spider	10

When starting exposure you will notice an increase in anxiety. This anxiety will begin to reduce the longer you stay in the feared situation.

Start with exposure to the least feared situation until there is a significant reduction in anxiety.

For example, if a step has an anxiety rating of 40, continue with exposure until the anxiety has halved i.e. 20 or below before moving onto the next step. You may find that taking slow, deep breaths during exposure will help you to stay in the feared situation.

It is important to carry out exposure as often as possible and, when moving up the steps in your hierarchy, continue to expose yourself to previously accomplished steps.

## **How to create your own exposure hierarchy**

I have a fear of .....

.....

My goal is.....

.....

Decide what gradual steps need to be taken for you to achieve your goal. 12 steps is a guide, you can have more or less steps depending on what pace works for you.

Use the next page for writing out your hierarchy.

<b>Step</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Level of Anxiety 0-100</b>
Step 12 (Most feared situation)		
Step 11		
Step 10		
Step 9		
Step 8		
Step 7		
Step 6		
Step 5		
Step 4		
Step 3		
Step 2		
Step 1 (Least feared situation)		

## Tips for carrying out your exposure hierarchy

- increase the amount of time that you spend on each step
- go at a pace that you are comfortable with
- if you find a step too difficult try and break that step down into a more manageable task
- carry out the exposure **frequently** and **repeatedly**
- each step is an achievement so praise yourself at each step

## Further Information

[NHS inform](#)

[Phobias self-help guide | NHS inform](#)