Conquering Fears and Phobias

There are ways to deal with things you're afraid of.

By Melissa Abramovitz

Darla jumped when the "ghost" popped out of the bushes. "I can't believe I'm scared," she thought, heart pounding. "It's Halloween! That's just someone dressed up like a ghost!"

Everyone gets scared sometimes. It's a normal reaction. You need that reaction to survive. When faced with a threat, it's useful to be afraid and get out of the way so you won't get hurt.

You can also learn fears through experience. Greg, for example, once fell off a ladder. After that, he was afraid to climb a ladder. He finally realized all he had to do was be careful when using one.

As you get older, you may outgrow some fears. Maybe you used to be afraid of the dark or of spiders. Different people are afraid of different things over time.

Fear or Phobia?

Fears can be mild or severe. Mild fear just makes you feel slightly nervous. But intense fear can make you sweat. Your heart may beat faster. You may even have trouble breathing.

Sometimes fear becomes extreme and unreasonable. This is known as a phobia. Phobias are fears that make the person feel out of control. Sometimes the person feels sick. Some people get headaches, high blood pressure, ulcers, skin rashes, nausea, or other medical problems.

Ken had a phobia about dentists. He felt ill if he had to see one. He got sweaty, threw up, and had trouble breathing. He would do anything to avoid going.

The National Institute of Mental Health says that 5 to 12 percent of Americans have some sort of phobia. Doctors believe that most of these phobias, like Greg's, are learned. But in some cases, a phobia follows an unrelated trauma, such as a death in the family. And the tendency to develop some phobias may run in families.

Extreme Fears

Phobias can be about things, activities, or situations. For example, people can have phobias about cats, storms, or heights. These are called specific phobias.

Other people may be afraid of going to parties or being with other people. Such phobias are called social phobias or social anxiety disorder. People with social phobias are not just shy. They are deathly afraid of doing or saying something embarrassing. Tess, for instance, would not play with other kids. And she sweated, blushed, and stammered if she had to speak in school.

Still other people have a type of phobia called a panic disorder. They suddenly feel very frightened for no reason. They may sweat, tremble, faint, have trouble breathing, or get very sick. Worst of all, they never know when a panic attack will strike.

Phobias often have weird names. Some examples are arachnophobia (fear of spiders), brontophobia (fear of thunderstorms), claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces), myophobia (fear of slime), and arachibutyrophobia (fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth).

Taming the Fear

If a phobia interferes with daily life, it's time to do something about it. Psychologists have several suggestions for dealing with phobias.

• Talk about the phobia with someone you trust.
• Breathe deeply, and try to relax when you think about the thing you fear.
• Try to visualize what you fear to lessen the phobia.
• Try to think positive thoughts. Replace "I'm so scared" with "I'm going to be OK."
• Slowly count to 10. Tell yourself you will be all right when you reach 10.

If these things don't help, see your doctor. He or she may refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist. These experts can help you learn to overcome a phobia. Sometimes they use a method called systematic desensitization (sis-tuh-MATH-ee dee-senz-uh-ZAY-shun). This involves getting used to something one step at a time. Hannah saw a psychologist about her fear of dogs. The psychologist had her face her fear in stages. First, Hannah relaxed. Then, she imagined she was near a friendly dog. Third, she looked at pictures of dogs. Finally, she went up to a real dog and patted its head.

Another useful technique is virtual reality exposure. Carl overcame his fear of flying this way. He sat in a computer-controlled "virtual plane" that never left the ground. He "experienced" takeoffs, landings, and flying in all kinds of weather.

It's important to realize that phobias can be treated. "Most people who seek treatment completely overcome their fears for life," according to the American Psychiatric Association. This is true even if your fears are worse than the usual Halloween jitters.

Dealing with Fears About War and Terrorism
Fears about war and terrorism are common, especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. People worry about our country being attacked again. When our soldiers go to war, we are fearful for their safety. Psychologists say that building resilience (re-ZIL-yuntz) can help us manage these fears. Resilience is the ability to cope with unexpected changes and events.

Here are some tips from the American Psychological Association for developing resilience:

• Keep family connections strong.
• Help others by volunteering.
• Stick with a daily routine.
• Eat well, exercise, and get plenty of sleep.
• Do not watch the news on TV constantly.
• Have a family plan to deal with emergencies.
• Participate in activities that make you feel good about yourself.
• Focus on the positive things in your life.

Review/Discuss

• Why do people have fears?
• How are fears different from phobias?
• What can happen when fears are out of control?
• How do people get phobias?
• What are specific phobias?
• What are social phobias?
• What is a panic disorder?
• What can you do if you suffer from a phobia?
• What techniques do psychologists or psychiatrists use to help people overcome phobias?
• How can you build resilience to cope with unexpected events in your life?

Answers

• Fears can be learned, or they can be one way that the body protects itself from things that could cause harm.
• Phobias are extreme and cause a person to feel out of control; fears only make someone feel nervous.
• A person can suffer from headaches, high blood pressure, ulcers, skin rashes, nausea, or other problems.
• They may be learned as the result of a bad experience. A tendency toward phobias may run in families.
• fears of things like animals, storms, or heights
• fear of being with or around people
• a sudden, unexpected fear that strikes at any time, causing sweating, trembling, faintness, trouble breathing, or suddenly feeling sick
• Talk to someone you trust, try to relax and breathe deeply, think positive thoughts, slow count to 10. See your doctor if these methods don't help.
• They use systematic desensitization, in which a person is slowly exposed to the thing that frightens him or her, and virtual reality exposure, in which the individual "experiences" a situation through the use of a computer.
• Maintain strong family connections, volunteer to help others, keep a regular daily routine, eat well, exercise regularly, and get plenty of rest. Have a family plan for emergencies. Do things you enjoy that make you feel good about yourself. Don't watch the news constantly, and remember to focus on positive things in your life.

Citations

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