Healthy fear or phobia? We have the scoop.

By Leah Paulos

Every time Lamont B., 16, of Brooklyn, N.Y., goes near a window inside a high building, his heart begins to pound and he starts sweating. “I’m terrified of heights,” he explains. “I can’t go on rooftops or terraces or near cliff edges without getting dizzy and needing to get away.” Lamont has a common fear that doctors call acrophobia.

But don’t assume that Lamont is a fearful person in general. And don’t call him a scaredy-cat! Lamont has plenty of friends and does well in school. He regularly performs his own raps at school talent shows. That kind of activity makes many people choke up! In fact, stage fright and the fear of speaking in public are among the most common teen phobias.

What causes a person to have a phobia of one thing and not another? And what’s the difference between a true phobia and an ordinary, everyday fear?

Fear: Keeping You Safe

Fear, which helps keep us out of danger, is a complicated feeling. Need proof? People dislike fear and try their best to avoid it; yet many line up for roller coasters and horror movies. TV shows such as Fear Factor are also very popular. Experts say there’s a fine line between fear and phobia.

Fear is a normal, and an important, human reaction to danger. “[Fear] kicks into effect when we feel threatened, to help us either fight off the danger or run away,” says Dr. David Fassler, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Burlington, Vt.

When a person is scared, he or she goes through physical changes known as the fight-or-flight reaction. Both blood pressure and heart rate speed up to pump blood to the large muscles that are used to run away. The sweat glands produce perspiration to cool the body. This all helps you run away more easily if, for example, you’re walking home from school and a big dog growls at you. Ashley, 11, of Radnor, Pa.,
Does anything in this picture spook you? If so, you're not alone.
knows the feeling: “I got scared when a car drove too close to me on my bike. It felt like my body took over and made me swerve out of the way so fast!”

Sometimes fear is triggered by a loud noise, such as the pop of a balloon or a loud clap of thunder. Often, a new or unknown situation makes our bodies think there is a chance of danger. Young people experience more fear than adults do because they face unfamiliar events and circumstances more frequently. Teens in particular often fear being embarrassed in front of friends or classmates, speaking in public, or being rejected. Fear can be more severe when a person feels out of control or unable to escape. That is why many people enjoy haunted houses, horror movies, and bungee jumping. They feel the physical sensations of fear, which can be thrilling, but they’re in control. They know that the event will end and that no one will really get hurt.

**When Fear Gets Out of Hand**

Lamont’s fear of heights causes him to feel a normal fight-or-flight reaction in a situation that’s not actually dangerous. That is

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**Name That Phobia**

Can you match each phobia with its definition? (We hope you don’t develop *hellenologophobia*, a fear of complex scientific terminology, before getting to the bottom of the list!) Your teacher will provide the answers.

1. arachnophobia ___
2. agoraphobia ___
3. potamophobia ___
4. taphephobia ___
5. gephyrophobia ___
6. claustrophobia ___
7. lachanophobia ___
8. chronomentrophobia ___
9. ablutophobia ___
10. pogonophobia ___

A. fear of bathing
B. fear of running water, especially rivers
C. fear of spiders
D. fear of clocks
E. fear of vegetables
F. fear of beards
G. fear of crossing bridges
H. fear of enclosure
I. fear of being buried alive
J. fear of open spaces

Do you think beards are super creepy? There’s actually a name for your fear.
considered a *phobia*. “A phobia is a persistent fear of a specific object or situation that’s strong and irrational,” says Fassler.

James, 15, of Sherman Oaks, Calif., suffers from *arachnophobia*, the fear of spiders. “Even if I see a picture of a spider in a book, I tense up, my heart starts beating fast, and I feel like I have to get away,” James says. “I know a photo of a bug can’t hurt me, but I still get freaked out. I also imagine spiders in my clothes sometimes.” People with phobias commonly spend a lot of time thinking about the feared object and try hard to avoid it.

Why do otherwise calm, cool, and collected teens get so bent out of shape by things that are usually harmless? Phobias are often caused by something scary that happened earlier in a person’s life. “When I was really little, I saw [the movie] *Arachnophobia*, and that might have been the start,” James says. Experts claim that it’s also common to develop a phobia after observing a parent’s fear.

Doctors consider phobias a type of *anxiety* disorder. Anxiety refers to a feeling of nervousness, worry, or stress about something that’s happening in the future. “Some anxiety in life is normal,” says Jerilyn Ross, director of the Ross Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders. It can even be beneficial. If you feel anxious about a final exam, for example, you might study extra hard and ace it. But if anxiety “gets too intense or you have obsessive worries, talk to an adult,” Ross says.

About one in 10 teens suffers from a phobia that’s strong enough to affect his or her daily life. “Phobias can be treated,” Ross says. “The biggest problem is that teenagers don’t ask for help.” If a phobia is preventing you from going to school, hanging out with friends, or doing other daily activities, it’s time to seek help. Treatment can combine relaxation exercises and a gradual exposure to the object of the phobia with the help of a psychiatrist or psychologist. That helps your brain understand that something that seems scary actually isn’t so bad after all.

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Want to learn more about phobias and fear? Check out these Web sites.

- **KidsHealth**: [www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/phobias.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/phobias.html)
- **Mindzone**: [www.copecaredeal.org/deal/anxiety_kindsof.asp](http://www.copecaredeal.org/deal/anxiety_kindsof.asp)