

Phobias

A phobia is an irrational, involuntary fear of a place, an object, or a situation. Some common examples include fear of closed-in spaces, fear of darkness, fear of crowds, fear of animals, fear of heights, or fear of public speaking, to name just a few. Symptoms of a phobic reaction may include a rapid or pounding heartbeat, nausea, diarrhea, a desire to urinate, a feeling of choking or suffocation, perspiration, dizziness, or feeling faint.

While experts once thought that phobias were an indication of deeper emotional problems, current thinking suggests that this may not be true. For instance, experts do not necessarily believe that phobias are a sign that someone is mentally unstable. In fact, many experts believe that almost anyone can develop a phobia; however, they also contend that phobias are more likely to develop in very sensitive or highly emotional people—or in people who have lived through an earlier traumatic experience.

Here are three general tips for preventing a phobia from developing:

1. Be nice to your body. Exercise regularly, seek massages, practice relaxation techniques, and get enough sleep. Use alcohol and caffeine in moderation. Limit caffeine to one or two drinks a day. You can occasionally have one glass of wine or another drink, only **if** you have never had a problem with excess use of alcohol. If you smoke, consider quitting. Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for help.
2. Stay occupied, but don't get overwhelmed. Try to plan your schedule so you don't have either too much or too little to do, and take the time to do the things you enjoy.
3. Recognize and accept that you become anxious in certain situations, and then tell yourself that you're going to deal with the situation, even though the anxiety is present.

Currently, treatment for a phobia focuses on increasing your ability to deal with the feared situation by learning to control the thoughts that precede the phobic reaction. Here are five examples of some of the techniques that are used in treatment today:

1. When entering the phobic situation, expect to experience the anxious symptoms of a phobic reaction. Then try to recognize the negative, irrational thoughts when they come and reframe them so that they more accurately reflect reality. For example: Someone with an elevator phobia might hear herself think, "What if the elevator door gets stuck and won't open?" She should then try to reframe this irrational statement by saying to herself, "Elevator doors rarely get stuck,

and if they do, it's only for a short time. There's plenty of air in there. I've never heard of anyone getting stuck in an elevator forever." This sort of reframing, or restructuring of your "self-talk" is a technique that will need to be practiced, but can be very effective.

2. As you practice the reframing method just described, mentally monitor your current anxiety levels by using a scale from 0 to 10. Try to observe how your levels go up and down in relation to what you're thinking. When you make irrational statements to yourself, you'll notice how you will rate your anxiety level higher; conversely, when you reframe this sort of self-talk, you'll notice how your anxiety drops.
3. Learn to use tensing and relaxing exercises wherever you are.
4. When fearful thoughts come to mind, clap your hands or imagine a stop sign and say, "stop"—to yourself or out loud.
5. Practice deep breathing. This allows chest muscles to relax and can also bring a supply of oxygen to the brain. Exhaling slowly will allow carbon dioxide to be absorbed into your bloodstream and will work as a natural tranquilizer. If you become lightheaded or dizzy, cup your hands over your mouth and nose and rebreathe some of the air you breathe out. You can also breathe into a closed bag for a brief period of time.

If you aren't able to ward off your phobic reactions by yourself, seek help. You might want to call the Department of Psychiatry at your local Kaiser Permanente facility. A therapist can help you with these and other techniques and support you while you conquer your phobias.

Sometimes certain medications can be helpful in addition to psychotherapy. Also, many medical centers have special programs specifically designed to help people with phobias.

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Use these Kaiser Permanente resources for reliable health information:

- ❖ Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, health classes, and much more.
- ❖ Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- ❖ Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, or other resources.

- ❖ With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Directory* from your Health Center or Department or download a copy at members.kp.org. (Search “Healthphone”.)

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.