

What's Your Phobia?

By Katie Blasewitz

As kids we see shadows at night from the trees outside, hear noises in the closet that we conclude to be monsters and have scary dreams about falling. Most of the time we grow out of being afraid and realize that the shadows are, in fact, trees, and the noises are a figment of our imagination. The truth is we are all afraid of something, no matter how old we are. Whether you are afraid of the dark, large crowds, small spaces, sharp objects, heights or germs, fear is an unpleasant feeling that no one likes to experience.

Living in Fear

Phobias are considered the highest form of fear. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “fear is the normal response to a genuine danger. With phobias, the fear is either irrational or excessive. It is an abnormally fearful response to a danger that is imagined or is irrationally exaggerated.” People can develop phobic reactions to almost anything including animals, activities, or social situations.

Courtney Yarborough, 19, a Florida native, lived with Astraphobia for many years before eventually growing out of it. Astraphobia or Astrapophobia is the fear of thunder and lightning. “I don't know when I started having a fear of lightning. I didn't like seeing it through my eyelids when I would try to sleep,” said Courtney.

Unfortunately, she lived in the lightning capital of the world, which constantly exposed her to her fear. She was so terrified of lightning that she took drastic measures to prevent from seeing it during storms. In fact, her parents bought her a mask to wear during lightning storms so that she wouldn't be able to see it, even through closed eyelids.

One instance she remembers vividly was moving into a new house. “When we moved to my new house my mom put my bed under the window. I was so scared that I would be able to see the lightning that I slept in my brother’s room the first night in our new house,” she said. “I made my parents move my bed the next day.”

Although she originally made lifestyle changes to accommodate her phobia, eventually, with the help of her parents, Courtney began to realize that her fear was irrational. “My parents used to talk to me about it and tell me I was safest in my house,” she said. “And I actually read up on lightning and would sit on the porch with my parents and watch it.”

Common Phobias

Courtney’s story is certainly not uncommon. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “approximately 6.3 million American adults ages 18 to 54, or about 4.4 percent of people in this age group in a given year, have some type of specific phobia.”

Acrophobia – the fear of heights, Claustrophobia – the fear of small or enclosed spaces, Agoraphobia – the fear open spaces or of being in crowded, public places and Arachnophobia- the fear of spiders, can all be developed as a reaction to a traumatic experience, usually in childhood or at an early age.

Cynophobia, the fear of dogs, is a commonly developed by individuals who are bitten by a dog at a young age. The fear of it happening again interferes with their daily lifestyle and causes irrational fear and panic.

This, and other specific phobias developed from traumatic experiences, can be easily treated by a therapist. Therapists may use virtual reality or imagery exercise to desensitize the patient to their fear. In the case of a dog bite victim, the individual will learn to relax and cope with the fear through graduated exposure therapy.

Unusual Phobias

Although there are many common phobias, there are also hundreds that are rare and unusual. Because phobias can be developed from *any* traumatic situation, there are many unusual phobias that are nearly unheard of. For example, Chronophobia- the fear of clocks or time, Amathophobia- the fear of dust, Barophobia- the fear of gravity, Melophobia- the fear of music and Hypenychophobia or Hypochondria- the fear of responsibility, are all unusual, yet very real phobias that people experience every day.

Symptoms

Phobias are emotional and physical reactions to feared objects or situations. Symptoms of a phobia include the following:

- Feelings of panic, dread, horror, or terror
- Recognition that the fear goes beyond normal boundaries and the actual threat of danger
- Automatic and uncontrollable reactions
- Rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling, and an overwhelming desire to flee
- Extreme measures taken to avoid the feared object or situation

Treatment

It is not unusual for children and young adults to grow out of their phobias, but professionals can help in the process. According to the American Psychiatric Association, “with proper treatment the vast majority of phobia patients can completely overcome their fears and be symptom-free for years, if not for life.”

Courtney still deals with her fear every time there is a lightning storm and says she still gets nervous and jumpy and plans ahead in case something happens. “I’ve come to terms with it now, but I still don’t like it at night or by myself. When I’m home by myself I make sure I know where my car keys are, my shoes, my dog’s leash. I like knowing that I am able to leave if I have to,” she said.

Sidebar:

MOVIE TRIVIA: In 1990, filmmaker Frank Marshall directed the film “Arachnophobia” that played on the audience’s fear of spiders. In fact, the original poster of "Arachnophobia" contained the picture of a spider over the moon, but was later removed due to complaints.