

Agoraphobia

Key Points

- approximately 2 to 5 out of every 100 people report symptoms of agoraphobia without a history of panic disorder
- in clinics, over 95% of people presenting for treatment for agoraphobia also have panic disorder
- panic disorder seems to be a risk factor for agoraphobia
- the longer people live with panic disorder, the more likely they are to develop symptoms of agoraphobia
- more women experience agoraphobia than men

What is Agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia without history of panic disorder is associated with avoidance of places or situations due to a fear of what may happen if escape is not possible (e.g. having an attack of diarrhea).

Agoraphobia is when an individual has excessive fear of being in a situation in which escape may be difficult or assistance unavailable if one experienced a panic attack or panic-like symptoms (e.g. sudden attack of diarrhea).

This fear typically leads people to avoid a variety of situations including restaurants, waiting in lines, traffic jams, shopping malls, parks, isolated places, being out of town, driving situations, elevators, tunnels, small crowded places, buses, airplanes, trains, boats, health care visits, being at the hairdresser/barber, movie theatres, sports arenas, being alone at home or being away from home.

Some people with agoraphobia are able to enter these situations but do so with extreme dread and discomfort. Some individuals with agoraphobia also find they are able to enter feared situations when someone else is with them (e.g. family member, friends, or even the presence of strangers) but they are unable to enter the same situations when they are alone.

Related Anxieties

Most people with agoraphobia also meet criteria for panic disorder (see the section on "panic attacks and panic disorder" for more information).

Individuals with both agoraphobia and panic disorder tend to fear having a full panic attack and other anxiety symptoms in the situations they fear or avoid.

However there are some individuals with agoraphobia who do not have panic disorder (even though they may have had some full blown panic attacks).

Individuals who have agoraphobia without panic disorder tend to fear having incapacitating or embarrassing panic like symptoms (e.g. loss of bowel control, feeling dizzy and falling over) or they fear limited symptom panic attacks (.e. one or two symptoms of panic only).

The rate of agoraphobia without panic disorder is a controversial issue as different studies have found different rates. Among the general population approximately 2 to 5 out of every 100 people report symptoms of agoraphobia without a history of panic disorder. However in most anxiety disorder clinics over 95% of people presenting for treatment for agoraphobia also have panic disorder. Having panic disorder seems to be a risk factor for agoraphobia.

The longer someone lives with panic disorder the more likely they are to eventually develop symptoms of agoraphobia.

It is possible that people with both agoraphobia and panic disorder are more likely to come forward for treatment than individuals with agoraphobia without panic disorder. If this is true studies may have underestimated the amount of people suffering with agoraphobia without panic disorder.

More women experience agoraphobia (either with or without panic disorder) than men. It is important to note that in some cultures the movement of women away from the home is restricted and this is not the same thing as agoraphobia. Interestingly, people who have to leave their house for work are less likely to have agoraphobia. Many people with agoraphobia experience significant interference in their lives. For example, some people are unable to travel, work, complete homemaking responsibilities (e.g., getting groceries, running errands, etc.) or attend appointments (e.g., doctor or dentist visits, parent/teacher interviews