

Specific Phobia

Specific phobia is an excessive and unreasonable fear of an object (e.g. dog, needles) or a situation (e.g. heights, seeing blood) and is often associated with avoidance.

Many people in the general population fear some kind of object or situation. For example, commonly reported fears include snakes, spiders, heights or flying on planes. For most of us these fears do not create ongoing distress or get in the way of our lives. In comparison, approximately 9 to 11 out of every 100 adults will experience significant distress and interference in their lives due to excessive and unreasonable fear of an object or situation. Mental health professionals refer to this as specific phobia. People with specific phobias experience excessive and persistent fear of a specific object or situation when actually seeing it or when anticipating seeing it. Some people with specific phobia get so upset they experience a panic attack that is triggered by their fears. Many people with specific phobia avoid the object or situation as well as anything that reminds them of it (e.g. thoughts, conversations, pictures, etc.). Other people with specific phobia may endure coming face to face with the feared object or situation with extreme dread and discomfort. A person is only diagnosed with a specific phobia if the fear, dread or avoidance of the object or situation leads to significant interference in school, work, social or daily functioning. For this reason most of us do not meet criteria for a specific phobia even if we have a very strong fear of something. Most adults and teens with specific phobia realize their fear is excessive or unreasonable (i.e., their sense of danger is out of proportion to the actual risk) but some children may not. It is important to remember that it is very normal for many children to experience fears that do not reflect a specific phobia. For example, fear of "monsters under the bed" or fear of the dark is very common and normal in young children. Fears in children are only considered specific phobias if they persist past an appropriate age, last for at least 6 months and create significant distress and interference in the child's functioning.

Types of Phobia

Mental health professionals have broken down specific phobias into five general categories:

- Animal/Insect types (e.g. dogs, snakes, spiders, bees, birds, cats, horses, mice, etc.)
- Natural Environment types (e.g. storms, heights, water, etc.)
- Blood-Injection-Injury types (e.g. blood, injuries, injections, medical procedures, etc.)
- Situational types (e.g. bridges, elevators, flying, driving, enclosed places, etc.)
- Other types (e.g. situations that may lead to choking, vomiting or contracting an illness, loud sounds, people in costumes [may be specific phobia for children] or any other situation or object that creates a phobic response that is not included in the other categories).

Situational type phobias are the most commonly diagnosed, followed by natural environment, blood-injection-injury, and animal types respectively. In general, 75 to 90% of individuals with animal, natural environment, and situational types of specific phobias are women. The only exceptions are heights and blood-injection-injury phobias of which 55 to 70% are women. Many people with specific phobia have more than one fear within the same subtype (e.g. fear of enclosed places and elevators, fear of snakes and spiders, etc.). It is important to note that the list above does not mention every single type as there are many objects and situations that could potentially become the focus of a specific phobia. For example, people from different cultures or ethnic groups may develop a specific phobia with themes of magic or spirits (in this case the fears would have to be excessive in comparison to other people of their same group to be considered a specific phobia).

People with specific phobias sometimes fear harm due to the object or situation. For example someone with a phobia of flying may fear dying as a result of a plane crash. Someone with a bee phobia may fear dying from a bee sting. Someone with a height phobia may fear falling over the edge of the building and being injured or killed. Other individuals with specific phobias may fear losing control. For example a person with a bridge phobia may fear losing control of their car and crashing. Others with specific phobia fear panicking. For example someone with a phobia of water may fear having a panic attack if they enter deep water. Fear of fainting is also a common fear among those with specific phobias. Many people with specific phobia of blood, injections or injuries fear passing out if they see or hear about any of these three things. Studies show that approximately 75% of people with blood-injection-injury phobia do have a history of fainting in the past when exposed to these kinds of situations (unlike those with other types of anxiety disorders where actually fainting is very rare). Fortunately there are simple techniques that easily prevent a person from fainting including a technique called "applied tension" that can be taught very quickly to a person with blood-injury-injection phobia. Interestingly, fears of blood and injury do seem to run in families at higher rates than other types of fears.

When do Phobias Develop?

Specific phobias can develop at any age including childhood. Some people develop a specific phobia after being exposed to a traumatic or frightening event. For example some individuals develop a driving phobia after being in a motor vehicle accident while others develop a dog phobia after being bitten by a dog. It is important to remember that most people exposed to these types of events do not tend to develop a specific phobia. Other individuals develop a specific phobia after experiencing a panic attack or observing someone else in the feared situation. For example some people fear heights after watching someone else fall from a high place while others fear water after watching someone drown or almost drown. Other times people develop a phobia after being told or instructed to fear the object or situation. For example some children may develop a phobia of an animal or insect after an adult repeatedly tells them the animal or insect is dangerous. Many people with specific phobias can trace their fears back to childhood but there are also some people with specific phobia who developed their fears as an adult (typically this occurs during early adulthood).

How do Phobias Affect Daily Life?

Most people with specific phobias experience a restricted lifestyle or limitations in their functioning as a result of their excessive fear and related symptoms. For example, having a flying phobia can interfere with taking certain jobs, taking certain vacations, or visiting out of town family and friends. Other times the specific phobia may actually lead to a health

threat (e.g. avoiding necessary invasive medical procedures such as surgery or not being able to receive proper treatment via injections).

Related Disorders

People with a specific phobia are often dealing with at least one other anxiety disorder. It is not uncommon for people seen at anxiety disorder clinics to be diagnosed with panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder in addition to at least one specific phobia. The most common disorder associated with specific phobias is panic disorder with agoraphobia.