

# Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

# What Keeps Fears And Phobias Going?



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## Description

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Everyone feels afraid sometimes. Uncomfortable as it is, fear is an unavoidable part of life. In fact, a little fear can help you stay safe and avoid danger.

However, fear can become so intense, or trouble you so often, that it leads to serious problems. When specific objects, animals, or situations cause intense feelings of fear that are out of proportion to the actual danger, psychologists call it a 'phobia'. Common symptoms of a phobia include:

- Feeling extremely scared of something specific.
- Experiencing immediate and intense fear.
- Trying to avoid the thing that scares you, or enduring it with dread.
- Worrying about encountering the scary thing in the future.
- Being much more scared of something than most people are.

Research studies have shown that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective treatments for overcoming phobias and extreme fears (Hofmann & Smits, 2008). CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while a fire is burning, they're not so interested in what started it, but in what is keeping it going and what they can do to put it out. If they can work out what is maintaining a problem, they can address it by interrupting the cycles that fuel it.

CBT models of extreme fears and phobias suggest that several things keep them going once they start. The *What Keeps Fears and Phobias Going?* information handout describes some of these maintaining factors, and illustrates them in a vicious flower format, in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to formulate a model of their experiences is an essential part of cognitive behavioral therapy for extreme fears and phobias. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

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## Instructions

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### Suggested Question



*One interesting way of thinking about extreme fears and phobias is to look at why, for some people, they don't get better by themselves. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people's fears persist. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes what is happening for you?*

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## References

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Eaton, W. W., Bienvenu, O. J., & Miloyan, B. (2018). Specific phobias. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 5, 678-686. DOI: 10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30169-X.

Hofmann, S. G., & Smits, J. A. J. (2008). Cognitive-behavioral therapy for adult anxiety disorders: A meta-analysis of randomized placebo-controlled trials. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 69, 621– 632. Doi: 10.4088/JCP.v69n0415.

# What Keeps Fears and Phobias Going?

It's natural to want to avoid the things that scare you. After all, when something is really dangerous then avoiding it can be safer than confronting it. If you don't avoid, then there may be times when you are able to face your fears, while using certain coping strategies or 'safety behaviors'.

Avoidance and safety behaviors prevent you from finding out what happens when you face your fears (it might be safer than you think). As a result, your fears remain the same, and you continue to believe that the worst could happen.

When you think you're in danger, your thoughts might focus on potential threats and ways you can protect yourself. You might also experience scary memories or mental images at times. Frightening thoughts and images are designed to keep you safe, so they tend to be quick and automatic. This makes them difficult to control.

The thoughts you have when you're afraid may tell you that the situation is much more dangerous than it really is. They can also make you underestimate your ability to cope, or miss the signs that you are safe.

**Avoidance and safety behaviors**

**Frightening thoughts**

What keeps them going?

**Fears and phobias**

**A focus on your fear**

**Negative judgments about your fear**

When you feel scared, you tend to focus on threatening or disgusting features of the thing that frightens you, as well as how afraid you feel. Fear can also affect how you see things. For example, a scary animal might seem bigger, faster, or more menacing than it really is.

Focusing on frightening details, and how you are feeling physically can make situations seem more dangerous than they are. It can also stop you noticing other information, like signs that you aren't in danger.

Living with a phobia is hard. There may be times when you criticize yourself for having these difficulties, think that other people are judging you for them, or believe that the situation won't change.

Nobody chooses to have a phobia. Negative thoughts about living with an extreme fear can undermine your self-esteem and contribute to feeling anxious or depressed. This makes you more vulnerable to the effects of extreme fear.

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