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Phobias

Mice. Some find them cute. Others find them debilitating. Such was the case with Theresa Cresswell from Tenerife, Spain. Theresa lived in constant fear of coming across a mouse. Real mice, dead mice, photographed mice, even fake mice. One time, she came across an advertisement featuring a cartoon mouse selling cheese. "I felt ill for hours afterwards," she said. "I wouldn't even pick the magazine up to get rid of it, as if the mouse in it would get me. Not logical -I know." Her fear may have been illogical, but to her it was very real.

Everyone has been afraid at some point in their lives. It could have been the unnerving feeling of hitting a patch of turbulence in the sky. Or maybe it was the brief stab of panic that came after the unexpected leg bump while swimming in the ocean. Whatever the situation, occasional fear is to be expected. Fear becomes a problem when it controls someone's life. This irrational fear is defined as a phobia.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) phobias fall into the same category as anxiety disorders; affecting approximately 40 million Americans over the age of 18. There are hundreds of phobias some more known than others. Among the most common phobias are arachnophobia (fear of spiders), claustrophobia (fear of not being able to escape from a confined space), and acrophobia (the fear of heights).

Some less known phobias include pentheraphobia (fear of one's mother-in-law), erythrophobia (fear of the color red), and mycophobia (fear of mushrooms). "My hair stands up on its end to see any mushrooms in "clusters"," said Donna Hutchinson of Hamilton Square, NJ. "Doesn't matter if they are in the ground or on the supermarket shelf." Have a fear of phobias? There's one for that too. It's called Phobophobia.

These common and not-so-common phobias fall into a category known as specific phobia. Phobias are broken down into three categories with specific phobia being the most common. This abnormal fear of a certain thing, place or situation affects approximately 19.2 million American adults each year, according to NIMH.

Ruth Kohut from Hamilton, NJ has spent all sixty years of her life living with her fear of flying. Ruth deals with her phobia as most people do -by avoiding it. "I cope with it by not flying," she said. "I will never see places that I would love to go." Ruth dreams of visiting Hawaii and Italy but her fear will not let her fulfill her dreams. "It does depress me when I would like to up and do something on the spur of the moment and I'm limited to the places that are around me."

While certain specific phobias may be easier to avoid than others, social phobia (sometimes referred to as social anxiety) may not be as easy to avoid. Approximately 15 million adult Americans per year are affected by social phobia, according to the NIMH. Those affected deal with the fear of embarrassing themselves or being put in a situation in which others may judge them. This can cause the individual much stress, sometimes for weeks leading up to an event. Or the individual could completely avoid the event all together interfering with responsibilities at work, school, or even in their personal life.

Christine Keswick, from Trenton, NJ suffers from social anxiety. "I get this overwhelming fear of judgment where I'm constantly wondering what people are thinking about me," she said. One place that she is confronted with her fear most often is at work. "A bunch of people will be going out to lunch and I will never join them. I'd rather eat lunch at my desk by myself," she said. Christine admits that her decision causes her to miss out on professional networking opportunities and the possibility of creating friendships with her co-workers. Christine remembers first becoming aware of her phobia upon entering high school. The average age for onset of social phobia is thirteen.

Occurring around the age of twenty, the final of the three phobia categories is Agoraphobia. Agoraphobia occurs in people who have sudden panic attacks. These attacks are typically brought on when the individual is put in a public situation from which they fear they may not escape.

Such was the case of Kristin Smith of Hamilton, NJ. When she was twenty-two years old she was on a flight that got hit with strong turbulence. "People were screaming and the woman in front of me was tossed from her seat and she hit her head on the overhead compartment. It was very scary," she said. For ten years, Kristin was unable to fly.

Over the years, Kristin's fear has spanned the breadth of public transportation including trains, buses and even taxi cabs. "It's not so much the fear of an accident," she said. "It's the lack of control that makes me uncomfortable. I just can't get out whenever I want - and that causes me severe anxiety." Her panic attacks involve shortness of breath, increased heart rate, sweating, numbness in her hands and feet and an all-encompassing feeling of dread.

According to Oregon Health and Science University, many with agoraphobia let their fear control their life causing them to avoid public places such as shopping malls, and as in Kristin's case public transportation. Kristin admits to being satisfied with the thought of never stepping onto a plane again but she won't let her fear impact her life. "I am very adamant about doing these things anyway even though I am afraid," she said. "I am more afraid that if I don't, then my whole life will be controlled by fear."

This determination has forced Kristin to face her fear and take public transportation. "I don't take it all the time," she said. "But often enough so that I can do it if I have to." By forcing herself to face her fear Kristin is making sure that she is the one in control.

Also taking control back from their fear are various students at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Dr. Linda Rayor, an arthropod behavioral ecologist began teaching a spider biology class at Cornell in 1994. Over the sixteen years that she has been teaching the class, Dr. Rayor has seen a decline in the number of arachnophobic students taking the class. But the number that remains constant is the success rate for those students overcoming their phobia.

Currently about ten percent of the students in the class come in with arachnophobia. By the end of the semester all of these students fall into one of two groups. The first group is made up of students

who either completely lose their fear, or leave with their fear in control allowing them to confront spiders with a certain serenity.

The second group, which makes up about sixty to seventy percent of the arachnophobics, become converts. "They've gone to the dark side," she said with a chuckle. "They are now really excited about spiders when at first, they were scared."

One of her success stories involved a student in her advanced class. "Every time she looked under a microscope at a spider she would squeal," she said recalling her students fear. "By the end of the semester it was one of her favorite classes, and she was pretty calm and had basically gotten over it. I was so proud."

Dr. Rayor credits the success of her class to two things. "I am really passionate about spiders and the students respond to that," she said. "One of the things I do is bring in lots and lots of live animals and the students are seeing that they are pretty and that they don't attack."

The second thing is knowledge. Dr. Rayor believes that people are afraid of them because they don't understand them. "Spiders move oddly," she said. "They have eight eyes instead of two." And the worst thing they have going for them? "It's their silk." She believes the thorough education on these arachnids plays a big role in the students overcoming their fear. "Knowledge gives you calmness," Rayor said.

Another alternative that uses knowledge to help overcome phobias is cognitive behavioral therapy. This traditional approach is one of the most effective when it comes to reducing or getting rid of phobias, according to the department of psychology at University of Houston. Using a three step process, a therapist first educates their patient. This education includes understanding the facts about their phobia and why they should overcome it, along with letting the patient know they are not alone.

The next step is challenging the way the mind perceives the threat of the phobia. This is done by having the patient question the irrationality of their fears. Once the patient understands and can identify this they are taught the actuality of the danger, if there is any.

The final step in this process involves repeated exposure to the phobia. Since this is the most stressful part of the therapy, the therapist will begin with the part of the fear causing the least anxiety, building up to the fear at its worst.

Throughout treatment, the patient is given homework assignments such as thought records, surveys and journaling. These assignments reinforce what was learned during the therapy sessions and also help the therapist identify any errors in thinking that may be occurring within the patient.

Dr. Nancy Yaeger, Clinical Psychologist in Freehold, NJ not only helps her patients through cognitive behavioral therapy, but she has also helped herself. Since childhood Dr. Yaeger had a fear of riding and driving over large bridges. "I would either cower in the back seat, or drive across white-knuckling the steering wheel -over focused, tense and terrified the whole way," she said.

"I taught myself to figure out what visual cues made me afraid and I taught myself to relax, calm down and take a deep breath. I also figured out all the crazy things I would think that helped keep me afraid," said Dr. Yaeger. Once she realized all the components that triggered her fear, she forced herself to tackle different bridges. "I would make myself rethink every fearful thought, and challenge the visual perceptions while I was on bridges and calm myself down while going over them. Eventually it began to sink in and I erased my fear over the course of a few years."

Normally this whole process takes twelve to twenty weeks, but for more advanced cases it could take up to one year, according to the University of Maryland medical center. For Dr. Yaeger it took two years. The area of Virginia that she was living in at the time didn't have many large bridges. "Once you get past being afraid of one, you have to go find another to continue practicing," she said. So for her, it was a gradual process.

For those looking for a quicker alternative, hypnosis offers phobics the ability to desensitize their fear in as little as one to two sessions. Instead of making changes in the patient on a cognitive level, "we're changing a behavioral pattern at a subconscious level," said Dr. Jonathan Walker, Board Certified Hypnotherapist and owner of QiSsage Body Systems in Eastampton, NJ.

The reason hypnosis works so quickly is because it bypasses the conscious mind. The conscious is responsible for the irrational fear associated with the phobia. By talking directly to the subconscious Dr. Walker performs a technique called Phobia Theater where he has the subconscious envision a past phobic event. While having the patient replay the event like a movie, he is able to desensitize the phobia.

“Over time they will become more desensitized –if not completely desensitized,” he said.

“There’s really nothing more the patient has to do. Just be willing to have the session work and after the session just go live their lives.”

Dr. Walker has a 100 percent success rate with his phobia patients. He explains this is partly due to screening people before taking them on as clients. “Hypnosis is the power of suggestion, but only based on the fact that a person is open to suggestion,” he said. “They have to want it.” As a result, Dr. Walker will only take on patients who want to make changes.

Someone who wanted to make a change was Theresa, the mouse phobic woman from Spain. She and her husband had made the decision to move to the country and buy a small farm. She knew that by owning a farm, her chance of coming into a mouse greatly increased. For years she had thought about getting treatment, but dreaded the thought of being forced to face her fears. Though skeptical of hypnosis, her family and friends encouraged her to give it a try.

"I left feeling different," she said. "But I couldn't put my finger on what it was." Upon returning home her husband put on a television show he previously recorded about rat catchers. This was his test to see if it worked. Well- it did. "My husband sat there with his mouth wide open. He couldn't believe the transformation could be so total," she said.

She had her treatment over a year ago and has since come in contact with fake mice, photographed mice, cartoon mice, and yes- even real mice. In fact, she even came in contact with a live rat in a neighboring town and found herself poised and calm. "I'm sure that if I could be helped, anyone can," she said about the phobia that held her hostage for forty-five years. "You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I've got my life back and that's priceless."