

Phobias

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “a phobia is a disabling and irrational fear of something that really poses little or no actual danger for most people. This fear can be very disabling when it leads to avoidance of objects or situations that may cause extreme feelings of terror, dread and panic.”¹

A. Social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder)

It has only been two weeks into Asha’s summer vacation and Asha is already dreading the start of her senior year of high school, which is two months away. Asha dislikes interacting with peers and teachers. Whenever a classmate tries to strike up a conversation or whenever a teacher calls on her in class, her face turns bright red and she feels too self-conscious to speak more than a few words. Asha also feels too embarrassed to eat in front of others in the school cafeteria during lunchtime, so she always takes her food into a bathroom stall. She has a hard time making friends.

Someone with **social phobia** may have an experience like the one above.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “social phobia is a strong fear of being judged by others and of being embarrassed. This fear can be so strong that it gets in the way of going to work or school or doing other everyday things. Everyone has felt anxious or embarrassed at one time or another. For example, meeting new people or giving a public speech can make anyone nervous. But people with social phobia worry about these and other things for weeks before they happen. People with social phobia are afraid of doing common things in front of other people. For example, they might be afraid to sign a check in front of a cashier at the grocery store...to eat or drink in front of other people, or use a public restroom.”²

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, **signs and symptoms** of social phobia can include:

- Anxiety about being with other people and having a hard time talking to them, even though they wish they could
- feeling very self-conscious and embarrassed in front of other people
- fear that other people will judge them
- Worrying for days or weeks before an event where other people will be
- Staying away from places where there are other people
- Having a hard time making and keeping friends
- Blushing, sweating, or trembling around other people
- Feeling nauseous around other people²

B. Agoraphobia

Abel is a real estate agent who hates crowds, elevators, and traveling via public transportation. Whenever he is in one of these situations, he experiences debilitating anxiety and feels like he is about to have a panic attack. Because he hates elevators, Abel walks up 12 flights of stairs every morning to get to his office. One morning however, the stairs are blocked off due to construction and Abel needs to be up in his office in 5 minutes for an important meeting with a client. Abel

has no choice but to take the elevator. During the 40-second elevator ride, Abel feels extremely dizzy, nauseous, and helpless.

Someone with **agoraphobia** may have an experience like the one above.

According to Psych Central, “the essential feature of agoraphobia is anxiety about being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult (or embarrassing) or in which help may not be available in the event of having a panic attack or panic-like symptoms. Agoraphobic fears typically involve characteristic clusters of situations that include being outside the home alone; being in a crowd or standing in a line; being on a bridge; and traveling in a bus, train, or automobile. A person who experiences agoraphobia avoids such situations (e.g., travel is restricted) or else they endure with significant distress or with anxiety about having a panic attack or panic-like symptoms. People with agoraphobia often require the presence of a companion.”³

According to the Mayo Clinic, **signs and symptoms** of agoraphobia can include:

- “Fear of being alone in any situation
- “Fear of being in crowded places
- “Fear of losing control in a public place
- “Fear of being in places where it may be hard to leave, such as an elevator or train
- “Inability to leave your house for long periods (housebound)
- “Sense of helplessness
- “Overdependence on others
- “A sense that your body is unreal”⁴

C. Specific phobia

Nadia has had an extreme fear of dogs since childhood. At a friend’s backyard BBQ she hears a dog barking in the distance. She is immediately filled with anxiety and dread. Her heart starts racing and she drops her glass of wine. Nadia looks over and sees that the dog is barking from a neighbor’s backyard. Despite the fact that the neighbor’s backyard is fenced around and that there is no way the dog could jump over it, Nadia feels like she is going to have a panic attack.

Someone with a **specific phobia** may have an experience like the one above.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, “a specific phobia is an intense, irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger. Some of the more common specific phobias are centered around closed-in places, heights, escalators, tunnels, highway driving, water, flying, dogs, and injuries involving blood. Such phobias aren’t just extreme fear; they are irrational fear of a particular thing...While adults with phobias realize that these fears are irrational, they often find that facing or even thinking about facing the feared object or situation brings on a panic attack or severe anxiety.”⁵

Bibliography

- ¹ Duckworth, Ken, and Jacob Freedman. National Alliance on Mental Illness, "Anxiety Disorders." Last modified April 2012. Accessed July 25, 2013. http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=142543.
- ² The National Institute of Mental Health, "Social Phobia (Social Anxiety Disorder)." Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/social-phobia-social-anxiety-disorder/index.shtml>.
- ³ Psych Central, "Agoraphobia Symptoms." Last modified 2013. Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/agoraphobia-symptoms/>.
- ⁴ Mayo Clinic, "Agoraphobia: Symptoms." Last modified April 21, 2011. Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/agoraphobia/DS00894/DSECTION=symptoms>.
- ⁵ The National Institute of Mental Health, "Anxiety Disorders." Accessed July 25, 2013. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml>