

Phobias

Definition

A phobia is an unreasonable fear of an object or a situation that compels one to avoid the feared stimulus. Such was the case of a tailor named Blutog Feldsbar who feared crossing Central Park. True, he is not the only one, but Feldsbar would swing so wide to avoid Central Park on his way to his shop on 66th Street, that twice he drove into the East River. The term "phobia" was coined by the Greeks, who, because they ran around clad only in sheets, developed a deathly fear of volcanic updrafts. A person with a phobia perceives a threat, which exists only in their mind, but which triggers real physiological results such as perspiration, trembling, spasms, or one's body changing colors to blend in with produce at the supermarket. A true phobia will result in more than normal discomfort; it must interfere with one's daily life, in much the same way that having a lightning strike fuse your legs together would, or worse, having your child selected to an All-Star Summer League.

Innate vs Learned Fears

It is important to note no one starts out life scared. Research shows that human beings are born with only two innate fears. In other words, babies are only afraid of two things. Okay, three if you count other babies with pointed objects. Ask the average adult and they would guess these two instinctive traits to be a fear of the dark, of strangers, of public speaking, or of other things that might give them the extreme willies. Not so (babies might be afraid of public speaking but knowing that no one expects them to say much for the first year, really takes the edge off). People are born with only the fear of falling and of loud noises. Scientists only know this by spending untold taxpayer dollars conducting controlled experiments on actual babies. In this groundbreaking research, scientists subjected infants to every imaginable catalyst for fear: clowns, ventriloquist dummies, sales calls at the dinner hour, etc, but the only things that rattled the tots were being dropped or launched upward (the quantity of fear, of course, commensurate with the distance) and loud noises (especially shrieking women). Every other fear has to be learned, but not on company time.

Rational vs Irrational Fears

Fear is not always a bad thing. It is good to have healthy respect for certain things in life, such as a Mack truck traveling at 80 miles per hour. While learning lessons of this nature are imperative, parents who induce them upon their offspring are often visited by Child Protective Services. Other individuals tend to search out and participate in such dangerous scenarios on purpose. A given culture often refers to these members of society as "thrill seekers" or sometimes "knot heads." These types of people tend to be in the adolescent stage of life. Sometimes they make it to adulthood and sometimes they don't.

Irrational fears, on the other hand, cause people to be to constantly on guard against something that has a remote chance of actually occurring, such as coughing up their kidneys. In an attempt to avoid the impractical, a sort of blindness is created, which leads the frightened person into very practical danger. For example, an office worker who avoids the photocopier altogether to keep from accidentally feeding herself through the auxiliary paper tray will not copy anything at all, resulting in possible termination. Think of it like a game of chicken on the highway where you only imagine headlights are coming at you, so you swerve to the right to avoid the non-existent vehicle and inadvertently drive through the very real McDonalds, where you order a coffee just so they won't

think you are an idiot, and you wind up getting scalded because, in your haste, you fail to read the warning on the Styrofoam cup. Something like that, anyway.

Causes of Phobias

Nobody quite knows the cause of life's phobias. That doesn't stop a lot of "professionals" from making a heap of money, though, trying to figure it out on your time. What we do know is that all phobias have one thing in common. Fear- hello?

Genetic factors. Sometimes, phobias are passed down from one generation to the next like the family nose or season tickets to the Packer games. A child will have the same intense fear as a parent, although sometimes they are able to work out a time-share arrangement.

Environmental factors. Sometimes people who previously had no aversion whatsoever to a particular object will acquire a phobia by having a close call or "brush" with catastrophe involving that stimulus. Like in the case of Sheila Tootsmacher who was almost massaged to death when her vibrating bed malfunctioned. After that episode, Sheila refused to go anywhere near a bed, either sleeping on the floor or else propped up against a wall.

Spiritual factors. Scriptures speaks of a spirit of fear which, admittedly, is difficult to see without special glasses. Spirits of fear are especially troublesome because they can suggest things to your mind and be difficult to discourage, like your Uncle Vic at Thanksgiving, who keeps trying to get you to turn on the Cowboy game. I have found that the best way to deal with these evil entities is to laugh at them. They are not the scary creatures we suppose. Just the opposite, they are scared themselves and just want company. Laughing works because these spirits almost always have their fly unzipped.

Other factors. A good portion of the population, at least in America, contract fears by watching horror movies, even paying for the privilege. Then they complain about bad dreams and waking fears. It's like the famous joke where the guy goes to the doctor and says, "Doctor, it hurts when I do this." But I've found that not everybody is brilliant in every respect. Like the guy in the half million dollar house who can't successfully direct traffic to his garage sale.

Common Fears

Fear of death. This granddaddy of all phobias is very common and very understandable considering not everyone is confident in what lies on the flip side of life. It could be like the Beatles hit *Come Together* that had an equally famous hit *Something* on side B, or it could be like the Beatles smash hit *Let It Be* that, on the back, had the Beatles just farting around in the studio for four minutes. Imagine that for an eternity.

Fear of spider and snakes. It is not certain why, but these two phobias top many people's list. These reptiles and arachnids are just average members of the animal kingdom, trying to meet their basic needs and avoid predators, like every other species. Sure, they are poisonous and can cause you to bloat and die, but all you have to do is avoid them. Any animal will defend itself. Live and let live. I think maybe it's because they look so nasty that we imagine snakes and spiders are out to get us, that they derive some insidious pleasure from finding us and injecting their venom into our bodies. Ehh, maybe they do.

Fear of heights. It's not the actual height that causes anxiety in its victims, but the potentiality of falling from that height. It is a person reverting back to their infancy. Or maybe they were actual subjects in that groundbreaking research (Incidentally, a few of those babies grew up and later tracked down some of those scientists and launched them upward.)

Fear of small or crowded places. Or worse, fear of being in a crowd crammed into a small place, such as a bar on Saturday night with no cover charge and a 10 foot square dance floor. Although this is a good way to get your clothes pressed for free, the downside is, in the event of a fire or some other catastrophe, no individual would be able to run to safety; the whole crowd would have to coordinate its escape in short, bunny hops.

Less Common Fears

There is a phobia for everything under the sun. If it exists, somebody somewhere is afraid of it. Don't believe me? Fine, do this: open up the encyclopedia and stick your finger on an entry at random, then dress up like that, wander around downtown, and I guarantee you it's only a matter of time before somebody wets their pants. [Disclaimer: this could possibly have hazardous effects. Just as there is a phobia for everything, so there is a "rage" for everything, like road rage. Wander around downtown dressed as a giant yam and run into the wrong person, you'll see what I mean. I'm from Austin, Texas though; this might not hold true in Albuquerque.] Here is a sampling of some of the more obscure fears in life:

Rahrahphobia. The fear of cheerleaders. Does the mere sight of a cheerleader make your palms sweat and cause you to break out in a rash? It does me too, but probably not for the same reason.

Aracknophobia. Pronounced just like the classic fear of spiders, this is actually the fear of being buried face down with your bottom sticking out above ground level and being used as a bike rack.

Parkerbrophobia. This is the fear of being incarcerated for an entire Monopoly game, having to watch all the other players move freely around the board snapping up properties, improving them, and collecting exorbitant rent.

Rudolphobia. This is the fear of being unprepared should Santa ask you to guide his sleigh because you left your glowing nose in the other pair of suit pants.

Treatment

Facilities which are prepared to address both the psychiatric and physiological aspects of phobias abound. Licensed technicians usually combine time-tested, research-driven practices with the latest in hare-brained ideas. One Aimee Weizenhunt volunteered to be a subject at just such an outfit- the Acme Mental Treatment Center- in hopes of getting over a severe case of paranoia. Aimee was deathly afraid that everyone was out to get her. Her anguish was compounded by the fact that she taught an English composition class and could not stand the thought of so vague a demise as being "got," especially by an unspecified person. Hoping that desensitizing Ms. Weizebhunt by exposing her to the source of her fear, but under controlled circumstances, would affect a cure, her doctor gave her the liberty of roaming around the Center's grounds, but planted technicians throughout the complex, who would jump out when she came by and yell, "Booga-booga!" Aimee's condition,

unfortunately, never improved, but the Center was awarded "Psychiatric Treatment Center of the Year" by *Acme Psychiatric Review* magazine for discovering a new phobia, which they dubbed "technoboogaphobia." With this malady, the delusional sufferer reports seeing a technician behind every bush, when the truth is, there is a technician only behind, maybe, every three-to-four bushes. Ms. Weizenhunt was committed long term.

A veritable cornucopia of prescription drugs are available to treat almost every imaginable anxiety disorder. If you feel you need a prescription, or if you would like to suggest a new drug to cover your unique phobia, contact your doctor or your local pharmaceutical executive. You can usually find them together at the country club on the 12th green.

Beware of oversimplified solutions from unreliable sources, especially on the internet or on social media. Avoid even well-meaning friends and loved ones who think that all of the world's ills can be cured with just a good slap to the face. Ignore insensitive souls who offer flippant advice such as, "Aww, come off it!" unless they are willing to specify what "it" is, such as, "Aww, come off The Dr. Phil Show," or, "Aww, come off hot tub sessions with piranha." Steer clear of "funny boys," who may criticize you because for getting nervous in certain situations. Know that they are just masking their own phobia, which others might judge as unmanly, such as the fear of someone pinning you on the ground and braiding your ear hairs.