

# Specific Phobias

A specific phobia is an intense 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. You may be able to ski the world's tallest mountains with ease but be unable to go above the 5th floor of an office building. 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.

Specific phobias affect an estimated 6.3 million adult Americans<sup>1</sup> and are twice as common in women as in men.<sup>10</sup> The causes of specific phobias are not well understood, though there is some evidence that these phobias may run in families.<sup>11</sup> Specific phobias usually first appear during childhood or adolescence and tend to persist into adulthood.

If the object of the fear is easy to avoid, people with specific phobias may not feel the need to seek treatment. Sometimes, though, they may make important career or personal decisions to avoid a phobic situation, and if this avoidance is carried to extreme lengths, it can be disabling. Specific phobias are highly treatable with carefully targeted psychotherapy.

## Symptoms of a Phobia

Phobias can interfere with your ability to work, socialize, and go about a daily routine. They may focus on something as common as germs, or they may arise whenever you venture from home. A phobia that interferes with daily living can create extreme disability and should be treated.

Phobias are emotional and physical *reactions* to feared objects or situations. Symptoms of a phobia include the following:

- Feelings of panic, dread, horror, or terror
- Recognition that the fear goes beyond normal boundaries and the actual threat of danger
- Reactions that are automatic and uncontrollable, practically taking over the person's thoughts
- Rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling, and an overwhelming desire to flee the situation—all the physical reactions associated with extreme fear
- Extreme measures taken to avoid the feared object or situation

Another common symptom experienced by people with phobias is **anticipatory anxiety**. Anticipatory anxiety can cause people to avoid situations in which they might have a panic attack or to avoid the objects that trigger a response of intense fear and anxiety.

When avoidance causes distress or interferes with the ability to work, socialize, or care for day-to-day needs, a psychiatric evaluation should be sought.

### ***Treatment of Phobias***

Fortunately, phobias are very treatable. In fact, most people who seek treatment of phobias completely overcome their fears for life. Effective relief can be gained through cognitive-behavioral therapy. If you suffer from a specific phobia, or several specific phobias, you are not alone. Seek out a qualified counselor and begin the journey back to life free of fear.