

STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow

Phobias

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Just about everyone has a fear of something - snakes, flying, wasps, lifts, and the dark. As a rule, we can put up with these fears. Problems arise when your reaction to the thing or place is more than you know it should be.

Here are some of the things people say about phobias:

- Fiona is 64 years old and lives with her husband who is close to retiring from his job with the council. She is very scared about going out of the house.
"I wake up each day and I feel I can't face things because I know I'm too scared to go out. I can go to the shops with my husband but doing anything just makes me feel panicky."
- Susan is 36 years old and works in a cool job. She has been scared of spiders since she was a little girl – her mum was scared of spiders too.
"I get really scared whenever I see a picture of a spider!!! People don't understand that a tiny thing could upset me so much – but it does. I feel very hot and sweaty. My tummy turns over and I think to myself – 'I have to get out of here'. I get so bad I feel I can't breathe properly."
- Tom is 26 years old and used to work in a call centre but is now out of work. "I have to avoid any place where I might see blood. I am worried that I will faint. I try to sit down and wiggle my toes when I feel a faint come on because I think this will stop me from fainting"
- Jenny has always been shy but lately it is worse. She makes excuses to avoid going to the pub with her friends and parties are her idea of a nightmare.
"I am very shy and do not like going to big social events. I think everybody is looking at me and can see how badly my hands are shaking. So I don't look at people and try to dive into the kitchen if I can – if I'm busy in the kitchen people don't talk to me."

IMPORTANT:

Though they cause great stress, phobias are not dangerous.

They will do you no harm.

This booklet aims to teach you better ways of coping with such problems. It is in two parts:

PART 1: Finding out about phobias

- What is a phobia?
- What causes a phobia?

Part 2 Fighting the phobia

- Step 1 – Becoming more aware
- Step 2 – Break down the challenges
- Step 3 – Face the situation
- Step 4 - Be prepared
- Step 5 – Come up with a ‘Big Challenge Thought’

PART 3: Dealing with panic

- What is a panic attack?
- Who gets panic?
- Body, Actions and Thoughts
- Panics and heart attacks
- Work out the problem
- Control your stress
- Control your breathing
- How to prevent panic
- What to do in a panic

PART 1

Finding out about phobias

What is a phobia?

A phobia is a dread of certain things or of certain places. Phobias can cause great distress and badly affect the way you are able to live your life.

In theory, it should be possible to become phobic of almost anything but the phobia may lead you to avoid situations that involve it. You might go to great lengths to avoid it. Phobias can relate to one of the following:

ANIMAL PHOBIA	A fear of e.g. rats, dogs, snakes, spiders, cats, bees and wasps. You may avoid places where you think you will see the animal e.g. dogs outside shops, spiders in the loft, and wasps in bus shelters.
HEIGHT PHOBIA	A fear of crossing bridges, going into tall buildings etc. It may also include the fear of flying. You may go out of your way to avoid these places e.g. drive an extra twenty miles a day to avoid having to cross a high bridge, be unable to visit a friend who lives in a high flat. You may fear e.g. getting dizzy and falling, having a panic, acting 'strange' or even feeling that you might jump off (you won't).
CLAUSTROPHOBIA	A fear of going into small, small spaces such as lifts, cupboards, the back seat of two door cars etc. You may find it hard flying due to the anxiety caused when they close over the door leaving you feeling trapped. For example; you may fear that you will lose control if trapped in a lift with other people.

DARKNESS PHOBIA	Fear of e.g. going to bed without leaving a light on or fearing that the lights will go out while you are alone. You may fear walking outside at night. This is a common fear among small children and can be taken into adulthood
BLOOD, ILLNESS AND INJURY PHOBIA	Fear of e.g. the sight of blood, operations, seeing an accident, the smell of hospitals, visiting the dentist. You may fear vomiting (or seeing someone else vomit), cutting yourself, becoming ill. You may go to great lengths to avoid places where you might see these things e.g. pubs at closing time, hospitals
SOCIAL PHOBIA	A fear of not coping with e.g. weddings, parties, talking to certain people e.g. strangers, attractive members of the opposite sex, people in authority etc. You may be afraid of how you are coming across to other people. You may fear making a fool of yourself; other people criticising you; drawing attention to yourself. You may be afraid of eating or drinking in public. You may fear that you might say something stupid in conversation.
AGORAPHOBIA	A fear of being in busy places. The most common places people fear are: cars, buses, trains, planes, traffic jams, shops/supermarkets, queues, crowds, lifts, being alone at home, being far from home, escalators, cinemas/theatres, churches, pubs/restaurants, tunnels, shopping centres, large offices. You may be able to go out in the darkness or when you have someone with you.

Seeing all these neatly divided categories can be misleading. Things are usually more messy - people often have more than one phobia and there is no strict cut-off point when a common fear becomes a phobia.

We must take this one step further: You are not afraid of a shop, a bus, the post-office queue:

YOU ARE AFRAID OF WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO YOU THERE

You are maybe afraid that something awful will happen; such as fainting, having a panic attack, losing control, being sick, losing control of your bladder/bowels, acting in a 'strange' way, making a fool of yourself, getting self-conscious, going mad or maybe even dying. Your fear will usually be worse if you feel that escape from the place is difficult or that you would draw attention to yourself. Usually when you feel anxious your blood pressure rises. This stops you from fainting (although you often feel you will faint) but with blood, illness and injury phobia, your blood pressure often drops so people with this phobia may be prone to fainting when they see the things they fear.

Avoiding going to places is a common way of coping. You may be able to go when the places are quieter or if someone you can rely on is with you. Often people say that even having the children with them helps. They may help distract attention away from the fear. You may feel that you can control your stress better when you have to be responsible for your children's safety.

Sometimes there will be a fear of staying alone in the house in case something happens to you as there would be no-one there to help you. So it isn't just a problem you have when outside the house.

Related problems

It is common for people to have phobias at the same time as stress, depression, panic attacks. You can find out about help for these other problems at the end of this booklet.

What causes a phobia?

Phobias are a specific form of stress; the things which can cause it are often the things which cause any form of stress. It is not clear why people develop a particular form of stress. They may be caused by:

DIRECT CAUSES - Sometimes bad things happen to you like being mugged in the street.

INDIRECT CAUSES – Sometimes people don't know why a phobia started when it did. This is the usual picture in stress. Life events in the previous year or so may be important and the phobia may be triggered by one small event which acts as the straw that breaks the camel's back. In itself it may not seem important but coming at the end of a host of stresses and strains, it may be the final straw.

"PREPAREDNESS" - In theory, you can become phobic of anything but, in practice, you are very likely to have one of the phobias noted earlier. One explanation is 'preparedness' which says that we can, when under stress, develop fears or phobias of things which might involve danger to the human race. So it is useful to have a built-in fear of a spider which may be poisonous (even though your common sense tells you it isn't).

SAFETY SIGNALS - Related to 'preparedness' is the idea that we look for 'signs' which send out signals saying that we are near safety. Common 'signs' are your own house, the house of friends or relatives, maybe even things like toilets in the shops - anywhere that you might run to in a panic and feel safe there.

So when you leave home, you are moving away from a 'signs'. When you return, you are moving closer to your safe haven. You will then feel more secure. You may feel better in certain streets if you know that you can knock a friend's door if you feel too tense. Try to work out where your safety signals come from.

There is no magic cure - don't be impatient. It takes time to control stress.

Believe in yourself - you can do it.

PART 2

Fighting the phobia

Fighting the phobia

Step 1 – Becoming more aware

Keep a diary – It is a good idea to keep a diary of situations you find difficult or scary. It will help you understand the things that are happening to you. Then you can fight the phobia. You can watch your own progress and notice what you are doing well. Sometimes when we are stressed we only remember the bad days and not the good ones. Make a diary like the one below. Fiona has filled in the first line and has rated her anxiety in a difficult situation (0 = not at all frightening, 10 = very frightening). As you progress you will see your anxiety rating for difficult situations go down.

Diary Card

[illegible]

Step 2 – Break down the challenges

The next step is to make a list of difficult things. Each thing will have a different rating (1 = no anxiety, 5 = fairly anxious, 10 = very anxious). Put the most difficult thing at the top, then the next most difficult one, and so on, all the way to the bottom – just like Fiona’s example below.

Break down the challenges

Situation	Rating
In busy supermarket	9
In other shops	7
On the bus	7
In a restaurant	6
In the pictures	5
Driving on the motorway	4
At the local newsagent	3
At home alone	2

Use the challenge sheet below to make your list

Break down the challenges

[illegible]

Step 3 – Face the situation

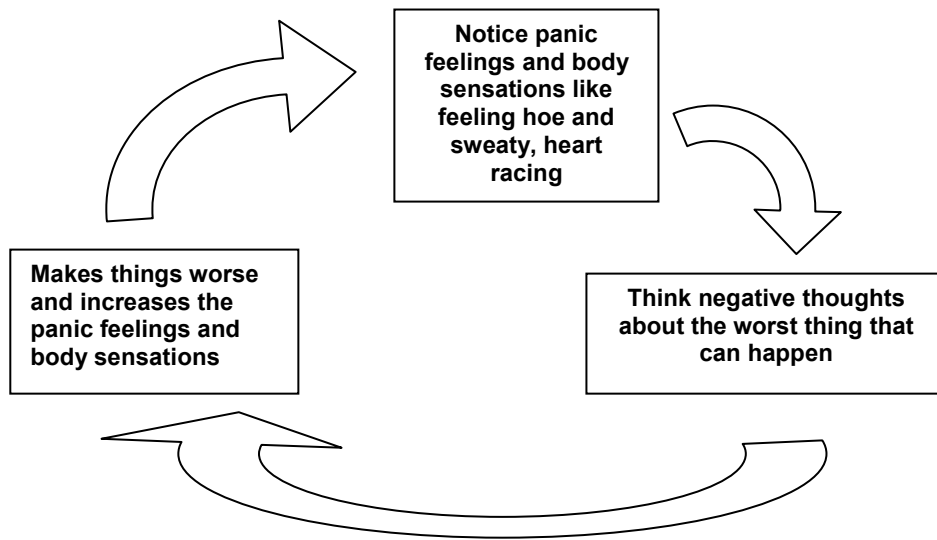
The best way to fight a phobia is to go back to the difficult situations – slowly.

Go back to your 'Breaking down the challenges list' of situations or places you find scary. Start with the easiest at the bottom of the list. Practise going into this situation until you may feel able to cope with it and you notice your anxiety rating drop. Choose a more difficult thing and practice this. Do not be tempted to try any scary difficult things until you find the easier ones less scary.

Step 4 - Be prepared

We need to think about how you can prepare for going into the difficult situations on your list. There are 2 things you can do to help with this:

- **Relaxation** – You might start to feel anxious about going into difficult situations. You need to notice when you first start to feel panic. Part 3 of this booklet tells you how to 'Fight the Panic'. Controlling your breathing will help you relax. Try out the exercise on 'Breathing Retraining'. Notice the difference it makes to how you feel.
- **Positive thinking** – when we are anxious and panicky our thinking can go out of control. Scary thought like "I am going to die", "I am going to lose control" and "I might faint" feed our anxiety and make it worse. They are not true but it is difficult not to think like this when you are in a scary situation. The most common scary thought is to think that the worst thing is going to happen. You end up in a vicious circle



Step 5 – Come up with a ‘Big Challenge Thought’

A big challenge thought is one that you can use to fight the negative thoughts. The next worksheet shows you how Susan came up with a Big Challenge Thought. She uses it along with her breathing exercises whenever she is in a difficult situation. She does this in three stages:

1) Write down your worrying thought. Decide how much you believe it using a 0 – 10-scale with ‘10’ being you totally believe it

<i>If I see a spider I will not be able to cope.</i>	<i>10</i>
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2) Try to find a more balanced view then ask yourself what reasons you have for this thought

<p>It might help if you think of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What would you say to yourself if you were not feeling so worried?• What might you say to someone else if they said this to you?• What might your partner or friend say to you about your worries?• What could you say to yourself that is more helpful and less worrying	<p><i>I have felt like this since I was little and there is nothing thatk has ever worked</i></p>
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3) Big Challenge Thought and a new rating of worry (0 -10)

<i>I can learn to deal with this</i>	<i>3</i>
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Here are some tips from people that have been through these problems themselves

- Fiona tackled getting out to Asda and says 'You will have good days, and you will have your bad days. Don't let a bad day set you right back'.

- Susan came up with a big challenge thought and says 'Try to think positively if you can'

- Tom can cope with his daughters cuts and bruises and says 'Take things a step at a time'

- Jenny is going out with her best friend for lunch and says 'Don't try too much on a bad day'

- Bill says 'Give yourself credit when you do something you are proud of, give yourself a treat.'

- Claire says 'Don't pick difficult situations that are too scary'

The next part of this booklet tells you more about panic and how to fight it.

You might feel very panicky when you try to 'Face your Fear'.
The next part of this booklet tells you more about panic and
how to fight it.

PART 3: Dealing with panic

What is a panic attack?

Sometimes when people go out they have a panic attack. You might feel you can't breathe, or your heart starts racing, shake, sweat and feel sick. You might be scared of fainting or not coping. Maybe you feel you want to get to a safe place or leave the situation you are in. Sometimes people freeze to the spot.

Body, Actions and Thoughts:

Body:

Panic hits your body hard. Your heart rate can almost double. You might sweat, feel dizzy, feel sick, or feel you can't get a breath. You may get tingling or numb feelings; you may feel you are choking. You may shake and feel 'unreal'. You may get chest pains. You may be very aware of your body and get stressed at the slightest change in it.

Actions:

You may find it hard to stay still. You may snap at people. You may avoid places where you think you will panic. You may escape from places as soon as you feel your stress rise. You may fear exerting yourself as you feel this could cause a panic. You may be afraid to be alone in case something bad happens to you.

Thoughts:

You will feel a rush of fear. You will feel that you are losing control. You may fear you are going to faint. You may feel you are dying. You may feel you are going mad. You may feel you will do something stupid. You may feel that something awful is about to happen to you even though you might not be able to say what that thing is.

Here are some of the ways people describe panic attacks:

1. "I am so scared that another panic hits me. I thought I was going to die when I had the last one. It came right out of the blue - I couldn't get a breath, my heart felt like it was going to burst. I felt that I was going to faint. I was drenched in sweat and I felt sick. At its worst point, I thought I was dying. It was the worst feeling I have ever had"
2. "When I feel panicky, my throat gets all tight. It feels like I've got a ball stuck there. I feel I can't get a breath. It feels like I can't get enough air in my lungs. I even get like this in the shower – as soon as the water hits my face, I feel I can't breathe and have to get out"
3. "I go through each day with a dread that I might panic. I had a panic last week and I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't move. I was like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights"
4. "My panic seems to start for the no reason. I can be soaked in sweat in seconds and my head spins. I think my heart is going to burst out my chest. I can shake from head to toe and I often have to get to a toilet quick. I get this surge right through my body. That scares the hell out of me. I get these pins and needles in my fingers and arms and, if it is a bad panic, round my mouth. I try to sit down when I feel it come on. I think this will stop me from fainting"

IMPORTANT:

Though they cause great stress, panics attacks are not dangerous.

They will do you no harm.

1) Work out the problem

Answer these questions about the panic you have just had (and other panics you may have had):

1) Where and when did you have the panic?

2) Was there a reason for the panic?

3) What body symptoms did you have? (Body)

**4) At its worst point, what went through your mind?
(Thoughts)**

5) What did you do? (Actions)

6) What can you do to prevent another panic?

Use what you have learned to spot patterns with your panic. Use it to build up a plan to stop the next one. Use it along with these ideas:

Control your stress (in 10 words)

- **Face your fears (if anxious)**
- **Be more active (if depressed)**
- **Watch what you drink**

Control your breathing

When you have a panic attack your breathing might make it worse. You might start to breathe too quickly – taking in more air than you need. To see if this happens to you, answer these questions:

When you feel panicky:

Do you feel light-headed or dizzy?	YES	NO
Do you feel you are going to faint?	YES	NO
Do you yawn, sigh or gulp in air?	YES	NO
Do you feel short of breath?	YES	NO
Do you feel your breathing is shallow?	YES	NO
Do you feel your breathing speeds up?	YES	NO
Are you aware of chest pains?	YES	NO
Do you get a numb or tingling feeling around the mouth and nose and/or in your fingers and toes	YES	NO

The more **YES** answers you give, the more over-breathing may play a part in your case.

When you over-breathe, you may feel that you do not have **enough** air in your lungs. It is the opposite - you really have **too much**. You have to fight against the desire to take deep breaths, as this will make things worse.

You should try not to yawn, sigh and gulp air for the same reasons. Keep a grip on your breathing. Check every ten minutes that your breathing is nice and slow (about 10-12 breaths a minute). A good way to stay in control is:

Breathing Retraining

Take a breath in and think "1"

Breathe out and think, "*relax*"

Take a breath in and think "2"

Breathe out and think, "*relax*"

Repeat up to 10 and then back down to 1

Concentrate only on breathing and on the
number and "*relax*" in the minds eye

Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute)

Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out
slowly through your mouth

Practise twice a day in different places

Quick control:

Use a paper bag

Hold a paper (not plastic) bag tightly around your mouth and nose so that no air can get in from outside. If you don't have a paper bag, cup your hands over your mouth and nose. Breathe normally (10-12 breaths per minute) into the bag until you feel better. The bag will go (slightly) in and out as you breathe in and out.

This will help because:

Bear in mind that even though you feel you need *more* oxygen in your lungs, you really need *less*. Using the paper bag helps get your breathing sorted. This will calm your body and you should feel more in control.

Of course, you can't just pull out a paper bag in a lot of places. At these times, use the breathing skills you have just learned.

How to prevent panic

Now let us look at some of the risk factors. Knowing about these might help you **prevent** panic. You can find out more information in the panic booklet.

Rapid body change	Take it easy. Don't jump up out of chairs or beds.
Tiredness	Make sure you get enough rest, as panic is more likely if you are tired.
Low normal blood sugar	Some people are more prone to panic if their blood sugar level is low – so eat every few hours.
Alcohol	Hangovers can make you more prone to panic – so watch what you drink.
Illness	Fighting a flu bug can make you feel weak – take things easy and let yourself get better.
Caffeine	Too much caffeine can be linked to panic – cut back on coffee, tea, fizzy drinks such as Coke and Irn-Bru, pain killers such as Askits, energy drinks and tablets such as Red Bull and Pro Plus.
Pre-menstrual phase	There are changes in the oxygen levels in the blood before a period. So you can be more likely to over-breathe.
Stress	This is the most common risk factor for panic. Control stress and you are on the road to controlling panic.

Knowing what your risk factors are can help you prevent panic.

Important note

Do not avoid situations to prevent panic – this only makes things worse in the long run

What to do in a panic

If you feel a panic come on, put this advice into action as quick as you can. Nip the panic in the bud. It may help if someone can run through these steps with you. If you are alone, say them aloud.

ACTIONS

- If you feel the panic coming on - stand your ground - don't let it make you run away.

BODY

- Keep your breathing under control - slow, normal breaths.
- Each time you breathe in; say, "*I'm in control*".
- Each time you breathe out, say "*relax*"
- Relax your body - drop your shoulders, let your muscles go loose.

THOUGHTS

- Imagine pushing the panic from the top of your head, down through your body and out through your toes.
- Keep your thoughts under control.
- Say - "I'm having a panic attack. I feel awful but nothing bad can happen. I know what to do. I can control this. It will pass"

Fight the panic all the way. Rule it - don't let it rule you.

Tackling other problems

Many people find that having a problem with agoraphobia is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, depression, low self-confidence, etc., then the STEPS services might be able to help.

This booklet gives some advice about panic. You can get *more* information in the panic booklet.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site (www.glasgowsteps.com) to find out more.