



GET-A-GRIP GUIDE TO Conquering Your Worst Fears

Spiders, small spaces and airplanes, oh my! What's behind five common phobias—and how to beat yours for good.

By Jessica Brown

I can pinpoint the exact moment when my dislike of flying became a full-fledged phobia. Five years ago, I was returning from a business trip on a perfectly clear day when we suddenly hit turbulence so severe that even the flight attendant seated next to me clutched her chest. It was the most terrifying moment of my life, and I felt certain I was going to die. Once my heart started beating again, I vowed I would never, ever set foot on a plane again.

My phobia—and how it developed—is hardly unique. Phobias affect as many as 12 percent of all Americans and are the most common anxiety disorder in

women. They're characterized by symptoms such as a pounding heart, nausea, sweating, shaking, shortness of breath and dizziness. Though phobias often stem from a bad personal experience, particularly in early childhood, there may also be a genetic link, according to Brian Doyle, M.D., a clinical professor of psychiatry and family medicine at Georgetown University Medical School in Washington, D.C. "Some people are just predisposed to anxiety, which makes them more susceptible to developing a phobia," he explains.

If an irrational fear is holding you back or preventing you from enjoying

your life to the fullest, it's time to take action. About 20 percent of phobias resolve on their own. For the rest of them, there are things you can do to minimize their hold on you. Here, experts explain what's behind the five most common phobias and how to put your fears to rest—or at least diminish their intensity. As a bonus, we asked pros such as a flight attendant and a speech coach for practical ways to manage panic in the moment.

Public speaking

What's behind it Yes, you're worrying about forgetting your speech, being boring and looking foolish. But what also has you on edge is a need to be liked, says Harold Steinitz, Ph.D., codirector of the Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland in Towson. "Since there's no one-on-one feedback when you speak to a crowd, you have no way of knowing what anyone's thinking. Part of overcoming your fear is accepting this uncertainty."

But consider this reassuring fact: Researchers who have studied what's on the audience's mind during speeches have found that people want you to succeed. "When you're comfortable, they're comfortable," says Steinitz. "Rest assured that no one is picking out your flaws." If you slip up, move on quickly: The crowd will notice only if you overreact, says Steinitz.

Pro tip *Till K. Kahrs, consultant on public speaking to top CEOs and cofounder of thetrainer4u.com*

In his former career as a country singer, Kahrs regularly performed in front of 25,000 fans. Nonetheless, he still sometimes gets anxious in front of a crowd. "The secret is to manage and focus your nervous energy," he explains. His suggestions: As you speak, look at one person at a time; then, every sentence or thought, pause and shift your gaze to someone else. "Most people make the mistake of letting their eyes roam constantly around the room, but this builds tension because the brain can become overstimulated," says Kahrs. If you're still nervous, try using hand gestures as you speak; they can release tension and make you appear to be a more dynamic presenter.

For a complete—and quirky—list of phobias (like gelophobia, or fear of laughter), go to phobiatist.com.