
Understanding Agoraphobia

If you have an intense fear of being out in public places alone or otherwise, you may have an anxiety disorder called agoraphobia. This can include being afraid to ride the bus alone or to go to the store. It can even include being frightened by the thought of being out in public places. But you don't have to live in fear. Treatment is available. Talk to your healthcare provider or a mental health professional. They can help.

What is agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is an intense fear of being in a situation that you think would be difficult to escape from if needed. For many people, it is a fear of leaving the safety of home to go out in public. But it can also be a fear of being in a car, on a bridge, or home alone. Crowded buildings, such as malls and theaters, and busy streets can also cause anxiety. As a result, you may be less likely to leave the house. After a while, you may never leave home. This can make it hard to go to work or school. You may even have trouble taking care of your basic needs. And you may abuse alcohol to help you cope with your fear.

What causes it?

You may develop agoraphobia after having one or more panic attacks. These are surges of intense fear that have no known cause. During a panic attack, your heartbeat races. Chest pain, nausea, or trouble breathing may also occur. You may feel as though you are about to lose control, or like you're going to die. Because these attacks can be terrifying, you may be scared of having more of them. As a result, you avoid places where they occurred. In time, you may stop going out at all.

Who does it affect?

Agoraphobia affects more women than men. It can start at any age, but for most people, it begins between adolescence and the early 20s. Some people have agoraphobia all the time. For others, it comes and goes.

What can be done?

Treatment can greatly relieve your symptoms. Behavioral therapy can help you understand and manage your anxiety. In time, you may even conquer your fear for good. Also, certain medicines can help reduce or remove the panic and fear associated with agoraphobia. So don't wait for help—ask for it before symptoms get worse.

To learn more

For more information on anxiety disorders, see the National Alliance on Mental Illnesses (NAMI) website at www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Anxiety-Disorders