

# Living with a Phobia

*“Afraid to leave my safe zone which would be my room, my house. And kind of feel helpless if, you know, if I’m taking the bus.”*

*“Elevators were a huge thing for me. I couldn’t take the elevators because I was claustrophobic.”*

*“It’s mostly the idea of pain or someone else being in pain for whatever reason, is kind of unbearable to think about.”*

Three people. Three very different fears. One thing in common: They all suffer from phobias, a type of anxiety disorder marked by an intense, persistent fear of a specific object or situation that poses very little actual danger.

*“We can probably all think of things that we’re afraid of, you know, most in this room would probably say ‘I’m afraid of spiders or snakes or, you know, big thunderstorms’ or something like that. For somebody who has a genuine phobia they’re often not living their lives how they want to out of fear. You know, feeling desperately like ‘I have to avoid going places, being around people or doing things that make me so intensely afraid.’”*

There are many types of phobias. An intense fear of flying or of heights. Fear of a specific animal or insect, such as spiders, is also common. Needles and blood can trigger anxiety in some people. People with a phobia know their fear doesn’t make sense, but they can’t control it. Molly Hass says the mere thought of seeing someone in pain makes her physically ill.

*“It kind of starts with I just feel very warm at first but then it starts to be where I see spots and I can’t see anymore, and my ears ring and I can’t hear. And I’m standing up, then I fall down.”*

Fear of closed spaces, like elevators, is another type of phobia. Annie Olivares knew she needed help as a teenager when the idea of moving into a college dormitory tower made her panic.

*“So, I did therapy until the end of senior year so when I got to the dorm, I could use the elevator.”*

José Carmona suffers from agoraphobia, an extreme fear of open or crowded spaces, using public transportation, standing in lines, being in a place where escape seems difficult.

*“When I try to leave my house, sometimes it’s hard. Not just to leave the house but to get out of bed.”*

*“So, something I do like to keep is a stress ball because it lets me focus on this more than anything. And sometimes I use it when I drive because it calms me down.”*

Anxiety. Panic. Avoidance. All common signs of phobia, but there can be physical symptoms, too. These might include: dizziness, trembling, your heart racing, difficulty breathing, sweating even feeling sick to your stomach.

*“Feels like it’s spinning, like the inside of my head is spinning. It’s like a weird feeling. It’s not like the room is spinning. It’s like I’m spinning. I have nausea. And sometimes there will be times where I have like muscle spasms in my legs where I can’t even control my legs. So, I need help walking.”*

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Not all phobias require treatment. Sometimes just avoiding whatever makes you afraid can work. But if a phobia seriously disrupts your life, it's time to seek help. In most cases, exposure therapy is used to treat phobias. In this type of therapy, a person is exposed to what is causing their fear in a safe, controlled setting.

*“Gradually helping the individual to confront those scenarios with the aim of accomplishing two things simultaneously: one, gradual reductions in that person's fear, you know in confrontation with the scenario. And two, learning that what the individual usually anticipates will go wrong if they encounter the phobic situation is not in fact what happens.”*

Medication to help with anxiety or depression is sometimes prescribed for people with phobias, too.

*“The big thing that a lot of people don't realize is that medication helps you like 50 percent of it. The other 50 percent is yourself and that's what you really have to work on.”*

José has found support in a social club for people with mental illness. He also keeps his bag of stress relievers at his side wherever he goes.

*“Even if it doesn't go away, If I can control it, I'm fine and I can live my life. And I'm living my life right now. I'm able to cope with it in different ways.”*

Phobias can be managed, and, in some cases cured. If you experience intense fear of a situation, location, or object and it's interfering with your life, talk to a mental health professional.