FEARS AND PHOBIAS

The roller coaster hesitates for a split second at the peak of its steep track after a long, slow climb. You know what's about to happen, and there's no way to avoid it now. Terrified, you grip the handrail, palms sweating, heart racing, and brace yourself for the wild ride down.

We've all experienced that sudden rush of fear.

What is fear? What causes it? And why do some people seem fearless, seeking out horror flicks, thrill rides, and extreme sports, whereas other people avoid things that trigger any fear reaction? What can people do to conquer fears? What's the difference between fear and anxiety? When is a fear considered a phobia? Read on for the answers to these questions and more.

What Is Fear?

Fear is a normal human emotional reaction - it is a built-in survival mechanism with which we are all equipped. Even as babies, we possess the survival instincts necessary to respond when we sense danger. Fear is a reaction to danger that involves the mind and body. Fear serves a protective purpose - signaling us of danger and preparing us to deal with it.

A fear reaction happens whenever we sense danger or when we're confronted with something new or unknown that seems potentially dangerous. Fear can be brief - like the startled reaction you have if a balloon unexpectedly pops or if you are surprised by something you didn't expect. This is often over in seconds, as soon as the brain gets enough data to realize there's no danger. If the brain doesn't receive the "all clear" signal, fear can last longer and feel more intense.

Most people tend to avoid the things they feel afraid of. There are, of course, exceptions - some people seek out the thrill of extreme sports, for example, because the rush of fear can be exciting. We all experience fear slightly differently and with more or less intensity. Some people even like it and find it exciting. During the scariest moments of the roller-coaster ride you may be telling yourself, "I'll never get on this thing again - that is, if I make it out alive!" Meanwhile, the friend sitting next to you may think, "This is awesome! As soon as it's over, I'm getting back on!"
Children tend to have more fears than adults because so much of what they experience is new and unfamiliar. Older children tend to have different fears than younger children, but it's normal for kids to have at least a handful of things that are scary to them. Whereas young children tend to fear things like the dark, monsters, loud thunder and lightning, getting lost, or big dogs, older kids are more likely to fear things like being bullied or getting hurt.

Teens have certain common fears, too. Most teens have some social fears like the fear of being embarrassed or rejected or fear of failing. They may also have personal fears, such as a fear of becoming ill or injured. Some may feel afraid of heights, dogs, snakes, or insects or of performing or public speaking. Because teens think about and care about the larger world community, they may also have global fears such as a fear of war or violence.

Some normal fears seem pretty much like a worry, or something you feel generally afraid of or uneasy about. Other times, fear comes as a sudden reaction to a sudden confrontation with danger. It's that sudden fear response that triggers the body's survival mechanism known as the fight or flight reaction. The fear reaction is known as "fight or flight" because that is exactly what the body is preparing itself to do - to fight off the danger or to run like crazy to get away.

What's happening in the body when you experience this reaction? The brain triggers a response that causes the heart rate to increase, blood to pump to large muscle groups to prepare for physical action (such as running or fighting), blood pressure to increase, skin to sweat to keep the body cool, and so forth. The body stays this way until the brain signals that it's safe to relax.

**What's the Difference Between Fear and Anxiety?**

Fear is a reaction to an actual danger signal - it involves physical and mental tension that helps you spring into action to protect yourself from something that is happening. The body suddenly gears up into fight or flight mode when, for example, the car in front of you swerves and you just miss it. Once you know the danger has passed, the fear goes away (though your knees may feel shaky for a few minutes).

The physical and mental tension of anxiety is very similar to fear but with one important difference. With anxiety, there isn't usually anything actually happening right then and there to trigger the feeling. The feeling is coming from the anticipation of future danger or
something bad that could happen - there is no danger happening now.

Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It can be mild or intense or somewhere in between. A little anxiety helps us to stay on our toes and motivates us to do our best. For example, some anxiety about the possibility of doing poorly on a test can motivate you to study a little harder. A moderate amount of anxiety helps the body and mind get prepared to cope with something stressful or frightening.

Sometimes anxiety can get out of proportion and become too intense or too lasting, and it can interfere with a person's ability to do well. Teens who have a pattern of experiencing too much anxiety may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. There are several types of anxiety disorders a teen might experience - each type is named for the symptoms a teen might have or the particular way that anxiety affects him. Many teens with anxiety problems have symptoms that overlap into more than one category.

**What Is a Phobia?**

A phobia is an intense, unreasonable fear of a thing or a situation that is far out of proportion to the actual danger or harm that is possible. The fear and distress lead the person to avoid the object or situation they fear.

Most people tend to avoid certain things they fear. If a person is afraid to jump from an airplane, he'll probably always avoid signing up for skydiving lessons. One could argue that this fear is somewhat reasonable and that skydiving is actually a risky activity. And not skydiving probably won't interfere much with the person's life. But if a phobia is related to an everyday object or situation, steering clear of it would cause greater disruption in someone's life. And if that fear is unreasonable - that is, most people would agree that there's not actually much, if any, danger - then the fear would probably be considered a phobia.

With a phobia, a person's fear is so intense that they do whatever they can to avoid coming into contact with the object of their fear, and often spend time thinking about whether they're likely to encounter it in a given situation. For a fear to be considered a phobia it has to be so extreme and cause so much distress that it gets in the way of a person's normal activities.

Phobias interfere with a person's life because the need to avoid the object of the phobia limits what what a person feels comfortable doing. A teen with a phobia of dogs, for example, may avoid going to friends'


homes because they have dogs or to the park because there might be a dog there. So although it may be totally normal for a teen to be somewhat afraid of a large growling dog he doesn't know, a teen with a phobia of dogs may be so fearful that seeing any dog is very frightening and merely thinking about encountering a dog might be distressing.

**What Causes Phobias?**

Some people may be more likely to develop phobias than others. Anxiety problems often run in families, and a phobia is one type of anxiety problem. Kids and teens who tend to be fearful and who worry a lot often have parents who have these traits. Anxiety that runs in families can partly be explained by biology and genetics. Certain biological traits passed down in families may affect the brain's chemical regulation of mood and can affect how sensitive someone is or how strongly they react to fear cues.

Some people are born with a natural tendency to be more cautious and inhibited; others have an inborn tendency to be more bold and uninhibited. Having a cautious style may make it more likely for someone to develop phobias or anxiety.

Learning also plays a role in helping phobias develop and linger. Children learn by watching how their parents and others react to the world around them - this is part of how kids learn what's safe and what's dangerous. If parents are overcautious or overemphasize danger, children may more easily learn to see the world this way, too.

When someone develops a phobia, they quickly learn that they feel anxious when they are near the object or situation they fear - and that they feel relief when they avoid it. Learning that avoidance can reduce their anxiety (at least for the moment) and increases the likelihood that they will avoid the feared situation or object next time. The difficulty is that these avoidance behaviors have to keep increasing and happening even sooner to provide the same relief. Pretty soon, a person finds himself spending time worrying about the possibility of encountering the feared situation and avoiding anything that might bring him into contact with it. With a phobia, the pattern of anxiety, avoidance, and worry about the possibility of contact tends to grow bigger and interferes more with life over time.

**What Are Specific Phobias?**

The term **specific phobia** is used for an intense unreasonable fear of a
specific object or situation. Someone may have a specific phobia of snakes, heights, elevators, or blood, for example.

Specific phobias may develop when a person has an encounter with an object or situation that involves or provokes fear. A brain structure called the **amygdala** (pronounced: uh-mig-duh-luh), which keeps track of memory and emotions, remembers when that person encounters the object the next time that it provoked fear in the past. The amygdala then signals that the object might be dangerous.

**How Are Specific Phobias Treated?**

Gradual exposure to the object or situation is a very effective way to help people overcome specific phobias. Exposure is a technique based on certain principles of learning and behavior. The idea is that the brain can learn to adapt to something that seems dangerous at first, but isn't actually dangerous, by gradually having time to encounter that thing in a controlled, gradual, supported way. Just as kids can learn to overcome their fear of the dark by gradually getting used to it with the right support and reassurance of safety, gradual exposure can introduce someone slowly to the feared object or situation, allowing the brain to adjust. With this gradual exposure, anxiety decreases as the person faces the fear - first from a distance, then gradually closer and more fully. Exposure may even begin by having the person simply imagine the object or look a picture of it because with phobias this can be enough to trigger the intense fear.

Exposure is usually combined with techniques that help people to relax while they are imagining or encountering the object. Relaxation techniques may include things like specific ways of breathing, muscle relaxation training, guided mental imagery, or soothing self-talk. Pairing a relaxing sensation with an object that has triggered fear can help the brain to neutralize the fear the object used to be associated with.

This information was compiled by [http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/phobias.html](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/phobias.html)