

# Overcoming ARACHNOPHOBIA

*Learn How to Conquer Your Fear of Spiders!*



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## Introduction

Arachnophobia is the fear of spiders and is a very real fear for many people. Almost half of all women suffer from arachnophobia and about 10 percent of men share that fear.

The media have made us all increasingly aware of the dangers of brown recluse spiders and the physical damage they can wreak on the human body. Poisonous spiders can be lurking just beneath your house. Even every day spiders can lurk in dark places in your home, finding themselves in your bath tub, unable to get out.... This is probably why some people are afraid of spiders, because they can be everywhere.

The good news is that there are ways to overcome the fear of spiders and in this ebook, we will be taking a good look at how phobias develop, why some people suffer with arachnophobia, and ways to overcome that fear.



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## What is a Phobia?

Phobia comes from the Greek word for “fear” but should not as such be confused with ‘fear’ as fear is much less dramatic than a phobia. According to the dictionary, the word “fear” denotes a painful feeling of impending danger, evil, trouble etc, the feeling or condition of being afraid. While fear is a consequence of a phobia, it is not the definition of it. It is simply a symptom. For example, fearing lions or a hurricane does not classically qualify as a phobia because encounters with either do carry a possibility of harm or death. However, an irrational fear of something that can cause no physical harm or trauma is considered a phobia. Some people have a fear of cotton balls and this would technically be classified as a true phobia since cotton balls cannot cause harm. Phobia is also used in a non-medical sense for aversions of all sorts. These terms are usually constructed with suffix –phobia. A number of these terms describe negative attitudes or prejudices toward the named subject.

Phobias can affect people of all ages, from all walks of life. It is a strong, persistent ‘fear’ of situations, objects, activities, or persons. The main symptom of this disorder is the excessive, unreasonable desire to avoid the feared subject. When the fear is beyond one’s control or if the fear is interfering with daily life then a diagnosis under one of the several anxiety disorders can be made. This can include panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. Such unrealistic or excessive fear of objects or situations is a psychological disorder that can make the sufferers life miserable for years.



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It is possible for an individual to develop a phobia over virtually anything. The name of a phobia generally contains a Greek word for what the patient fears plus the suffix –phobia. Creating these terms can become a type of word game, however, few of these terms are found in medical literature. Still, many people wear their phobic badges around their family and friends. They may be claustrophobic (afraid of closed in spaces), agoraphobic (afraid of wide open spaces or crowds), hydrophobic (afraid of water), or genophobic (afraid of sex). The list goes on and on.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the majority of people have an irrational fear of certain things or situations, without necessarily fulfilling the diagnostic criteria for a phobia. Irrational fear may grow into a phobia when it starts interfering with the persons usual every day activities. The most common simple phobias are those of the insects such as spiders, mice, reptiles and other animals. These phobias usually begin in childhood and can often disappear without treatment.

Although the fear of spiders is real, is it irrational? We as humans are larger than that of our arachnid neighbors, so even though some spiders are poisonous, we could easily squish them to oblivion. Therefore the fear of spiders does qualify as a phobia.

When encountered with the phobic stimuli, people are overcome with a strong and immediate anxiety reaction such as sweating, palpitations, paleness and difficulty with breathing. Gradually, mere anticipation or imagery of the phobic stimulus comes to provoke anxiety symptoms and can lead to avoidance behavior

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and/or significant modification of one's lifestyle. It is at this point when the phobia becomes problematic and treatment should be explored.



## **What Causes Phobias?**

Much is still unknown about what causes phobias. However, there may be a strong correlation between your phobias and the phobias of your parents. Children may learn phobias by observing a family member's phobic reaction to an object or a situation. An example of a common learned phobia may be the fear of snakes. The biggest trigger of fear is the thought of the "unknown" – that is, when we are confronted or experiencing particular situations, we are not exactly sure of what will happen to us and how it will ultimately affect us. Or in some instances, we jump ahead of ourselves and imagine what the outcome of a situation will be, which is usually ten times worse than the actual reality of the situation.

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Phobias often begin with a sudden trigger, a minor or major traumatic event. A phobia can begin because of an unpleasant or frightening experience involving a particular object or situation. This situation generally occurs in childhood and persists through to adulthood, remaining with the person almost as if it's a part of them. While this can be and often is the reason for a person's developing a phobia, it isn't the only way in which phobias begin. Often, people say that a phobia comes 'out of the blue' - it starts one day for no apparent reason and quickly grows into a major problem. This is naturally confusing because the individual concerned has no idea why they have become phobic. So, can this be explained? Yes it can, though not necessarily simply. Perhaps there are latent fears in the mind that aren't in the forefront initially, but become exposed later.

As an example, let's say in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, a boy is the popular kid in school. All the girls swoon over him, all the guys are his friends. He is teacher's pet and a favorite with his friend's parents. All of this overt acceptance could instill in his mind a latent fear of rejection that he isn't cognitively aware of, sort of a "too good to last" mentality. As an adult, he finds himself avoiding social situations and even relationships in an effort to protect his feelings and fend off the rejection he thinks might be coming.

In fact, phobias don't develop for no reason at all, they develop for no logical reason. A long period of severe stress, an unresolved childhood fear, an unrelieved frustration and an insoluble life problem can all lie behind the beginning of a phobia. What's more, knowing the originating problem doesn't always help because the phobia may bear little relation to it. Some people believe that phobias develop from the body's natural desire to protect itself; unconscious



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or emotional learning takes place to keep us safe. In primitive conditions when coming into contact with something dangerous, the mind/body would create the optimum state for survival - a panic attack.

Non-specific phobias can come about either through a 'spreading-out' of panic attacks, or through a person's levels of general anxiety becoming so high that panic is easily triggered whenever stress levels are raised even slightly. Phobias are very real to the people who are experiencing them and should not be taken lightly by those around the phobic.



## **A History of Phobias**

Back in the heydays of philosophy when medicine was not a very organized curative discipline, people were often detected with such fretting disorders. It lay upon the philosophers to unwind the complications and to unearth the exact causes behind them.

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One among the earliest interpretations, the Pythagorean interpretation, was that the phobias were ‘reminiscences’ from former lives and was essentially believed to have a religious association. The second half of the nineteenth century, however, saw a massive change in this sphere. Around this time psychiatry began to flourish as a fully developed medical discipline. These psychiatry professionals uncovered the real causes behind these spectacular mental disorders, putting aside all misconceptions and delusions associated with phobias. This phase of the history of phobias is not only interesting but also exceptionally significant. It is in this phase that having identified the causal factors behind the different phobias, the psychiatrists for the first time attempted cures for them.

The year 1966 happens to be an important year in the history of phobias. It was in this year that the first phobia organization in the world, ‘The Open Door’, was founded. Now the organization has been re-named PAX – a Latin word, which means peace. PAX stands for panic attacks and anxiety disorders and ensures the peace of mind for all.



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## The Symptoms and Reactions of Phobias

Phobics typically panic or become anxious when they encounter the object or situation that makes them afraid, even though they know the object or situation (e.g. a small house spider) is not that dangerous. When this happens, the phobics will have what we know as a panic or anxiety attack.

The general symptoms of phobias include the following:

- Feelings of panic, dread, horror or terror
- Recognition that the fear goes beyond what is considered normal and is out of proportion to the actual threat of danger
- Reactions that are automatic and uncontrollable, and seem to take over the person's thoughts
- Rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling, and an overwhelming desire to escape the situation
- Extreme measures taken to avoid the feared object or situation

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The phobic could also become dizzy, disoriented, be overcome with excessive sweat and feel heart palpitations. They can become nauseous, feel out of control or that they may die, and not be able to speak or think clearly. These are also symptoms of panic attacks, and they can be very, very scary. Phobics will realize that their fear is, indeed, irrational, but they also know that they cannot control it. The fear is a persistent, imbedded part of that person's life, and unless treatment to overcome that fear is taken, the fear will persist.



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## Arachnophobia

Arachnophobia is the extreme, debilitating, and persistent fear of spiders. It is not the rational fear of spider bites, not the sensible caution of avoiding old wood piles where the brown recluse like to lurk, not the refusal to handle a pet tarantula, but the panic attack brought on by the thought of spiders. Heart palpitations and breathing problems are experienced when a spider is in the room, an anxiety level that may require treatment in order to function without debilitating obsessive/compulsive spider clearing or avoidance rituals.

There is a possible cultural basis for the high prevalence of arachnophobia in those of European descent. Spiders were erroneously associated with the Black Plague after the tenth century and were believed to be messengers of it. Europeans believed that spiders were poisonous and that their bites caused many diseases. Although their bites caused discomfort, in reality, they were not a deadly threat. The plague clouded their perception and their fear and disgust of spiders made it easy to believe that spiders were the cause of the plague. This was then passed down through European families adding a cultural basis. In fact, most of these diseases were caused by completely different sources than spiders. Spiders were found in great numbers in the same areas of the house where rats lived. The fleas on these rats were actually the carriers of the plague.

The tendency of Europeans and their descendants to be fearful of spiders does not seem to be shared by people in many non-European cultures. In some cultures, they revere the spider as part of their creation myths or consider them good omens or symbols of prosperity. Others just eat them.



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Arachnophobia can often be triggered by the thought of or sometimes even a picture of a spider. A serious case of arachnophobia is much different than someone who doesn't like spiders. Many people who are afraid of spiders have feelings of panic entering into a situation where spiders may be present. This fear of spiders can dictate where someone chooses to live, go on vacation, work or what sports or hobbies are enjoyed. Often this fear is caused by an incident earlier in life which was frightening. People sometimes have the misconception that such a frightening event would have to be a long-lasting or memorable ordeal however, many people don't even remember the events which led to their phobia. The mind can create a phobia based on an instant of panic.

So why is this phobia so common? No one knows exactly why phobias develop, especially to spiders. There are, after all, plenty of small dark wriggly insects which don't bother most people. What is it about a spider that instills such terrible fear?

It used to be said that a pregnant woman would induce a fear of spiders in her unborn child if she reacted when she saw one. It certainly seems to begin in childhood, but it's far more likely that a fear of spiders is a cultural thing. Throughout childhood we come across dozens of unexpected things which can shock or frighten us. We have to learn what we should or shouldn't be frightened of. Our society accepts it as 'normal' for a child to dislike spiders, whereas if a child cried at the sight of a cuddly teddy bear it would be told not to be so silly.

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In a similar way a fear of beetles is all right, while if you paint it red with black spots you're then expected to see it as a sweet and harmless ladybird. Most children grow out of their fear because they learn to act rationally, but sometimes it persists into adulthood.

There are however, plenty of other theories. Some people describe spiders as having particularly scary features - the way they silently creep, move about or simply look. And there does seem to be something odd about spiders - they seem to be aware of us, unlike other insects which seem oblivious to our presence.



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## Overcoming Arachnophobia

Why bother treating a phobia? People with untreated anxiety disorders may be more susceptible to other psychological disorders such as depression according to the American Psychological Association. The group also notes that relationships with family members, friends and coworkers can be strained, and job performance can suffer when a person's anxiety disorders are left untreated.

All fears can be overcome. The key to achieving this is first being able to be strong enough to admit to ourselves, then others that we indeed have a fear. This is where many people can falter because they may be either too embarrassed or too proud to admit that they are afraid of certain things. Sometimes fear can be viewed as a sign of failure and weakness, however it is more courageous to admit your fears than to deny or avoid ever having these feelings. Fear is a natural human emotion and is built in us as a way of protecting ourselves; therefore it is perfectly normal to be afraid.

Acknowledgement of fear puts you in a position to gain control. You are ready to turn the fear into a positive and constructive force by counteracting it with action. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "You cannot run away from weakness; you must sometime fight it out or perish; and if that be so, why not now and where you stand?"

It will be hard and it takes a long time so trustworthy people must be found to help you – people who won't get impatient or misunderstand. There will

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probably be lots of failures but each failure means a small step on the way to success. There's something else that's happening, too. All the time you're challenging fear with action, you are developing problem solving techniques. You're learning a skill that can be applied to your 'life after fear' and there's going to be a lot of that once you make the decision to challenge your condition.

We all have problems to solve at every stage of our lives. From infancy to old-age, we face uncertainties and must apply ourselves to solving the problems those uncertainties bring. Once you learn problem solving techniques, you have an ability that can become the basis for all kinds of success. As previously stated, you need to find a trustworthy person to help you face your fear. They can help you by sharing their own thoughts and assisting you in working through your feelings. After admitting your fears, the next step is to work through and analyze them. There is a reason for everything that happens in life, as there are reasons why we fear certain things. Fears need to be knocked straight on the head and dealt with if we are to have any peace of mind, and this can only be done by locating the root of the problem. Once you can establish what is causing your fear, the easier it will be to solve the problem.

Arm yourself with as much information as you possibly can. One person's account of dealing with their own fear of spiders involved an in-depth investigation of the spider as a creation of nature. He looked at pictures, studied their webs and learned to look at them through different eyes. He deliberately chose to go to places where he knew there would be spiders – old barns, basements/cellars, lakeside cabins, etc. When a spider showed up, he took his initial panic reaction and turned it into a physical study of himself and his

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response as well as studying the spider itself. This was done after extensive research into spiders and their characteristics. Armed with this knowledge, he was able to control his panic and turn it around to work *for* him instead of *against* him – and it worked! By learning more about the creatures he feared, he was able to view them in a different light and heal himself.

Put down your fears on paper. Once on paper they will appear a lot smaller than if they are swimming around inside your head! Write a positive message in response to your fear and keep it beside you either at home, school or work as a mantra to constantly refer to.

On the same piece of paper, you may want to write down the action steps you plan to take to ensure that your fear doesn't consume your entire being. Keep in mind this saying, "Fear is the absence of a plan; action is one of the best antidotes."

Even though you can work on your phobia by yourself, most experts strongly recommend you get specialized treatment by a trained therapist. The treatment is not complicated and can be successfully completed in about 10 sessions. If you do go it on your own, it has to be systematic and the compliance with "homework" is essential. It all really depends on how much the fear is affecting your everyday life. However, before starting any treatment, you will have to identify several important points:



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- Where does the fear come from; how and when it started
- What are the situations/stimuli that trigger the phobic response (make a hierarchical list)
- Who are the people or what are the objects who/that help you to face the stimulus
- What are the thoughts that go through your head before/while facing the stimulus
- What are your reactions/behaviors when you face the stimulus
- What do you really anticipate; what is the worst thing that could happen to you if you faced the stimulus

Write down your responses to these items. The purpose here is to explore the basis for the fear and identify not only the causes, but also the situations that bring about the anxiety. Once you have identified these areas, you can move on to more specific ways to combat your fear.

Let's first look at systemic desensitization and what that entails.

## Systemic Desensitization/Exposure Therapy

This is the oldest and most well-known treatment for phobias and conquering fear. The aim is to make you gradually comfortable in the phobic situation by using relaxation training to systematically decreasing the anxiety-provoking effect of the stimulus. The basic principles are that:

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- phobias are learned and can thus be unlearned
- relaxation and anxiety are basically incompatible, so that when you engage in relaxation, your anxiety drops

Systemic desensitization is also known as exposure therapy and is a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy which shows success in about 75 percent of patients, the National Institute of Mental Health reports.

Exposure therapy is suggested to be one of the best ways to overcome your anxiety. To master something in life it is necessary first to think about it, and then actually practice doing it. Remember when you first started to learn how to drive. The more you practiced the better you became. This is the basis of exposure therapy. You actually need to go into the situation and think about it in a different way, implement the other skills and knowledge you have to manage your anxiety, and then reflect on how it went. There is a word of caution here. Some research suggests 'facing the fear and doing it anyway'. For some people this may work however, for others it doesn't. Learning the skills and techniques of cognitive therapy and educating yourself on where your anxiety is actually coming from in the first place, prior to exposing yourself to the situation, can often have a better outcome as you can feel more in control before you enter the situation, rather than going in feeling absolutely terrified.

When you feel anxious, it is suggested that you go through it firstly in your mind (realistic thinking/skills of cognitive therapy), and secondly, put yourself in the situation that you fear. This part is called exposure therapy. In general, exposure therapy with response prevention is probably one of the most effective

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treatments. Exposure therapy is what it sounds like, exposing the person to whatever it is that causes their fear. The process usually begins by gradually introducing the patient to the feared situation and works towards helping them develop constructive responses to their fear. For example, a patient with severe arachnophobia may begin by talking about "creatures with eight legs" and end up being able to sweep spiders away when they see one.

The therapy is very systematic. You first write down the situations with spiders that scare you and then categorize them from least frightening to most frightening. You will also have to learn an effective relaxation technique to employ when in these situations.

The next step is to imagine coping with the situations at the lowest levels on your list while engaging in relaxation. Gradually, the anxiety will subside. You stay at the same level until the anxiety provoked by the stimulus becomes tolerable. Then you move on to the next level and you work your way up to the top of the hierarchy. These exercises can be done in imagery as well as in reality.

The final step is gradual exposure. This is done without relaxation. With a trusted person's guidance, you expose yourself to real phobic situations. Again, you proceed step by step, from the least to the most frightening, and remain in the situation until the anxiety subsides.

You can involve pictures of spiders in your exposure therapy when you practice the exposure steps. Starting with a picture of a spider can be a very non-threatening way to at least be able to look at the spider and imagine how you will

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cope when it's the real thing! Patients also learn how their thinking patterns contribute to their anxiety and how changing their thoughts can help minimize symptoms. At the same time, anxiety management is often a component of exposure therapy, wherein patients learn deep breathing and relaxation techniques.

If you continue to avoid situations because you are feeling anxious, it only makes it harder to overcome your anxiety. When you avoid doing something, you often convince yourself that there is a very good reason why you are not doing it. If you continue to avoid situations, no amount of thinking about it in other ways will help you overcome your anxiety. The more often you do something, the easier it becomes each time.

Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind when practicing exposure therapy:

1. Take everything one step at a time - don't jump in the deep end first. Take a small step and work your way up to the most uncomfortable situations.
2. Stay in the situation and try not to leave if you suddenly feel anxious. Implement some of the other techniques such as rational thinking, focusing, breathing and relaxation. Of course, if you absolutely have to leave, then do so. It is suggested however that you try and do it again as soon as possible. Alternatively, try and back away a little bit, instead of leaving the situation completely.

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3. Doing something once can be interpreted as a fluke. The more often you do something, the more you will start to feel more comfortable. The more techniques you implement, the greater the ability you will have to control your anxiety.
4. There will be ups and downs. These are a part of life, and some days you will have good days, and some days you will have not so good days. Try not to beat yourself up on the not so good days by engaging in negative self talk. Rather, accept it for what it is - a not so good day! Go back to the drawing board and set your goals a little lower until you are feeling stronger and more confident again.
5. Try and be aware of all your avoidances. By not doing something that you fear, you are only making it harder for yourself. Avoidance is only an excuse and keeps your fears going. If you have engaged in some anxiety education, you will be more aware that it is you who is controlling your anxiety, so it is you who can decrease and manage it as well. It just takes some practice and patience.

It is also important to try and be aware of subtle avoidance when overcoming high levels of anxiety. For example, you might go to a party and talk to only a few people you know well, avoiding meeting new people. Or you might travel 10 miles to go to a shop rather than visit the large shopping center just around the corner from your home.



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## Flooding

One simple form of exposure treatment is that of flooding, where the person is immersed in the fear reflex until the fear itself fades away. The key is keeping the patients in the feared situation long enough that they can see that none of the dreaded consequences they fear actually come to pass. This type of treatment is very intense and cannot be handled by all phobics. Flooding should only be conducted by a trained therapist to counteract any reaction the patient cannot handle.

## Cognitive Behavior Therapy

Exposure therapy is a part of cognitive behavior therapy which is the umbrella term for the type of treatment this is. What cognitive behavior therapy does is allow the sufferer to gain more information both about what frightens them and how to overcome it by using facts and reality based techniques. Cognitive behavior therapy combines two very effective kinds of psychotherapy — cognitive therapy and behavior therapy.

Behavior therapy helps you weaken the *connections* between troublesome situations and your habitual reactions to them. These reactions can include fear, depression or rage, and self-defeating or self-damaging behavior. It also teaches you how to calm your mind and body, so you can feel better, think more clearly, and make better decisions.

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Cognitive therapy teaches you how certain *thinking patterns* are causing your symptoms by giving you a distorted picture of what's going on in your life and making you feel anxious, depressed or angry for no good reason, or provoking you into ill-chosen actions.

When combined into CBT, behavior therapy and cognitive therapy provide you with very powerful tools for stopping your symptoms and getting your life on a more satisfying track.

The two most powerful levers of constructive change, apart from medication in some cases, are these:

- Altering ways of thinking, a person's thoughts, beliefs, ideas, attitudes, assumptions, mental imagery, and ways of directing his or her attention, for the better. This is the *cognitive* aspect of CBT.
- Helping a person approach the challenges and opportunities in his or her life with a clear and calm mind and then taking actions that are likely to have desirable results. This is the *behavioral* aspect of CBT.

In other words, CBT focuses on exactly what traditional therapies tend to leave out - how to achieve *beneficial change*, as opposed to mere explanation or “insight”. It is the general consensus that CBT should be administered by a trained professional as it's mainly used to treat depression and anxiety but can be applied with arachnophobia as well as other phobias. Here are a couple of techniques to try:

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1. Distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Make a list of your thoughts with regards to spiders and then next to each thought write down the feelings that accompany that thought (ie. Thought: The spider will bite me; Feeling: Scared, panicky). Your thoughts can create your feelings and even intensify a feeling even more. By distinguishing between the two, you will have a better chance at identifying ways to control your feelings and overcome your fear
2. Learn to change your reactions. Again, we need a list! In one column write a situation (There's a spider in the bathtub). Then write down how you feel about the spider (afraid). In the third column, write what your normal reaction would be (run away). The fourth column is for an alternative behavior (remove the spider or leave it be). You might be surprised at how many alternative behaviors you'll be able to come across when you have to deal with a spider. With these in mind, you can start trying to use those behaviors.
3. Learn that a thought does not constitute a fact. Some people believe that their thoughts are the last word on the truth. Some thoughts are truth, but not all – not by a long shot! First identify the thought (that spider is poisonous). Well that very well could be, but it bears a little more investigation before jumping to conclusions. Look at the spider and try to identify it using any resources you have available. When you are more calm and equipped with more information, you might see that it's a harmless spider instead of a brown recluse. Then the fear should go away.

As we've said before, cognitive behavior therapy usually works best when under the advisement of a mental health professional. It really depends a lot on how

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intense the fear is and how much it is affecting your life as to whether or not a therapist is necessary. Try some of the techniques above and see how you do with them and make your decision after that.

## Hypnosis

While hypnosis was once considered a “new-age” treatment, today, it is gaining in popularity to help overcome many things such as smoking, weight gain, and stress.

In mild cases, where a person recognizes the triggers but would like help controlling their reaction, posthypnotic suggestions can help them control their breathing, slow their heart rate, and achieve a relaxed state of mind. This permits them to deal with the problem in a calm and rational manner. More severe cases are often the result of a traumatic childhood event. Most of the time, the event can no longer be recalled by the conscious mind, but is still retained in the subconscious. In these cases, the hypnotherapist will often apply age regression. Age regression is one of the most powerful tools available to the hypnotherapist. The hypnotherapist can guide the person back in time, and help them reexamine the event that initially triggered the fear from an objective point of view. Once the cause is revealed, the fear of losing control is eliminated.

## Medications

Using pharmacology to treat phobias isn't generally a widespread phenomenon. Most therapists prefer to explore some type of cognitive behavior therapy in

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order to combat the stressors that preclude an anxiety producing situation. There are times when medications can be beneficial, but this is usually in situations that produce extreme anxiety all the time and can be treated effectively with anti-depressants – such as agoraphobia or generalized anxiety disorder.

Another situation where a medication might be appropriate is with a nerve-reducing drug such as Valium or Ativan. This type of medicating would be used, for example, with people who are afraid of social situations or fear of flying. With arachnophobia however, the most effective fear reduction tool is with therapy. Very, very rarely will an arachnophobe be given medication to treat their phobia.





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## Beating Panic Attacks

Panic attacks very often accompany a person's exposure to the thing they most fear. The simple sight of a spider can send an arachnophobe into a full blown panic attack. Understanding what is happening can help you better cope with your body's response to that spider. Anyone who has had a panic attack can tell you it is no fun at all! It can be very, very scary for the sufferer and even make them think they are dying.

When overcome with anxiety, the body will react by doing a semi-shutdown. Breathing becomes very rapid and shallow. Eventually you will not be able to catch your breath and will be gasping for air. The world will take on a different view and you will almost feel disconnected from it. This can be accompanied by dizziness and even fainting. Your heart will beat very fast and you will feel pressure in the chest area. Many people who have panic attacks think they're actually having a heart attack. You may also feel very warm and sweaty and you will probably shake noticeably. It's very difficult to think straight during a panic attack, so it's very important to identify that you may be going into panic mode and start procedures toward combating the fear that began the attack in the first place.

First, keep in mind that your life IS NOT in danger. As we have already noted, during a panic attack, the sufferer is often convinced that he or she is having a heart attack or a stroke and is dying. This is not the case. The symptoms of heart attacks and strokes are quite different from those of extreme fear.

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A panic attack is not a sign that you are going crazy. It is true that you are in the grip of something and therefore 'out of control' of yourself, but the symptoms and feelings are very different from those of any mental illness. They are exactly the same as those of a person in extreme physical danger. They occur in response to a signal you are misinterpreting. The fear is maintained by what you think about your feelings in response to it. The fear is real. It is not an illusion or a hallucination. Neither is a panic attack a sign of weakness. Anyone can have them. With phobias, they are brought on by specific situations. With some people, they can be brought on for no rational reason and in no specific situation. Remember that you can control it. Just knowing the facts can help a person get rid of panic attacks even if they have been a problem for many years. When you feel the next panic attack coming on, say to yourself:

*"This will be uncomfortable, but it cannot kill me. It's not a sign that I'm going crazy. If I can stop being scared, it will never come back. Anyone can have a panic attack"*

Also try "stopping statements" such as:

*"STOP! These thoughts are not good for me. They are not healthy or helpful thoughts, and I have decided to move in a better direction and learn to think differently."*

By doing this, you are reminding and reinforcing your brain each and every time you make this rational and realistic statement. There are some other positive self-affirming statements you can also use to try and combat your panic attacks.

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When you feel yourself just beginning to become panicky, try telling yourself one of the following:

1. I'm going to be all right. My feelings are not always rational. I'm just going to relax, calm down, and everything will be all right.
2. Anxiety is not dangerous - it's just uncomfortable. I am fine; I'll just continue with what I'm doing or find something more active to do.
3. Right now I have some feelings I don't like. They are really just phantoms and because they are disappearing, I will be fine.
4. Right now I have feelings I don't like. They will be over with soon and I'll be fine. For now, I am going to focus on doing something else around me.
5. That picture (image) in my head is not a healthy or rational picture. Instead, I'm going to focus on something healthy like \_\_\_\_\_.
6. I've stopped my negative thoughts before and I'm going to do it again now. I am becoming better and better at deflecting these automatic negative thoughts (ANTs) and that makes me happy.
7. So I feel a little anxiety now, SO WHAT? It's not like it's the first time. I am going to take some nice deep breaths and keep on going. This will help me continue to get better.

If you are preparing to enter a stressful situation that you think might trigger a panic attack, one of the following phrases might work:

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1. I've done this before so I know I can do it again.
2. When this is over, I'll be glad that I did it.
3. The feeling I have about this doesn't make much sense. This anxiety is like a mirage in the desert. I'll just continue to "walk" forward until I pass right through it.
4. This may seem hard now, but it will become easier and easier over time. I think I have more control over these thoughts and feelings than I once imagined. I am very gently going to turn away from my old feelings and *move in a new, better direction*.

Finally, when you are overwhelmed with a situation, remind yourself you are in control:

1. I can be anxious and still focus on the task at hand. As I focus on the task, my anxiety will go down.
2. Anxiety is an old habit pattern that my body responds to. I am going to calmly and nicely change this old habit. I feel a little bit of peace, despite my anxiety, and this peace is going to grow and grow. As my peace and security grow, then anxiety and panic will have to shrink.
3. At first, my anxiety was powerful and scary, but as time goes by it doesn't have the hold on me that I once thought it had. I am moving forward gently and nicely all the time.

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4. I don't need to fight my feelings. I realize that these feelings won't be allowed to stay around very much longer. I just accept my new feelings of peace, contentment, security, and confidence.

5. All these things that are happening to me seem overwhelming. But I've caught myself this time and I refuse to focus on these things. Instead, I'm going to talk slowly to myself, focus away from my problem, and continue with what I have to do. In this way, my anxiety will have to shrink away and disappear.

There is a drastic measure that people can take to try and face their panic attacks and the fear that they instill. You must be a brave soul, but it can go far in learning to overcome your fears and your body's reaction to that fear. It is called paradoxical intention. A panic attack is maintained by fear. All you have to do is to **WILL** the panic attack to hit you. Invite it. Dare it. This is particularly effective for people whose panic is predictable and occurs in particular circumstances. Go into the feared situation and say within your head: "Come on, panic: hit me! Go on! I'm not afraid of you!" If it helps, have a trusted friend with you for support. If the panic does show up, use coping techniques to tell your brain that you **CAN** deal with it. The panic will be helpless against you; it will not be able to touch you, **AS LONG AS YOU REFUSE TO BE AFRAID OF IT!**



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When undertaking exposure therapy or really anytime you need to de-stress and relieve anxiety, it's a good idea to know effective relaxation techniques to minimize your body's reaction to the situation.



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## Relaxation Techniques

There are several techniques that you can use to relax effectively. They can be used all the time whenever you feel stressed out and need to “come down”. Relaxation is especially effective when dealing with phobias and how you react to them. Here are just a few:

### Jacobsons Progressive Relaxation

Edmund Jacobson created a practice known as Progressive Relaxation back in the 1920s. Jacobson reasoned that since tension accompanies anxiety, one might be able to reduce anxiety by learning to relax the tension.

You could, in other words, reduce your psychological tension by reducing your physical tension. It was a revolutionary idea at the time. Jacobson thought that muscular tension might even *cause* anxiety and that contracted, tight muscles were actually at the root of many emotional problems, not merely a by-product of them. By careful training, he helped people learn to voluntarily relax certain muscles in their body, and sure enough, it greatly reduced their anxiety symptoms, even for people who had a serious anxiety disorder. He found the procedure effective with ulcers, insomnia, and hypertension too.

Progressive Relaxation is still greatly respected and widely practiced by therapists today. References to the practice are strewn throughout literature on anxiety. Why? Because it is simple and it works. The procedure teaches you to relax your

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muscles through a two-step process. First you deliberately apply tension to certain muscle groups, and then you stop the tension and turn your attention to noticing how the muscles relax as the tension flows away.

Through repetitive practice you quickly learn to recognize and distinguish the associated feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. With this simple knowledge, you can then induce physical muscular relaxation at the first signs of tension that accompanies anxiety and with physical relaxation comes mental calmness, in any situation. In Progressive Relaxation, first you learn to relax your muscles laying down with your eyes closed, but the ultimate goal is to learn to relax throughout the day while you're working, walking, talking, eating, etc. If you would like to use this method, you don't need any training to begin. Right now, locate one muscle in your body that is tensing for no good reason. Relax that muscle. It's as simple as that. Get in the habit of doing that relatively often, and a general calmness will slowly develop in your life.

A good way to get in the habit of relaxing muscles regularly is to do it at certain routine times of the day. Every time you get behind the wheel of your car, for example, every time you sit down at your desk or every time you step into the shower. Choose one place for now and concentrate on it until it becomes habitual. Then add another place. This way you can make it a habit to check your body for unnecessary muscular tension and relax it.

You can also get in the habit of relaxing muscles whenever you have an anxious feeling. When you feel a wave of anxiety, get in the habit of immediately scanning

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your body and trying to locate a tense muscle. Then relax it. Locate another tense muscle. Relax that too.

As your muscles relax, your heart rate and breathing slow down and you begin to feel calmer. Even though terrorism still exists, your body is in a calmer state, you are more capable of thinking clearly and taking intelligent, purposeful, constructive action. Relaxing your muscles prevents you from becoming paralyzed by fear.

Pay particular attention to the muscles in your face, upper back and neck. Memorize that short list: Face, upper back, and neck and observe those places first. Your face is the best first place. Relax your forehead and jaw and the muscles around your eyes. Already your body begins to calm down. It is recommended that you practice full Progressive Relaxation twice a day for about a week before moving on to the shortened form. Of course, the time needed to master the full procedure varies from person to person. Because you are using this to combat phobia anxiety, you will need to become proficient at it before putting it into full use in an anxiety producing situation.

Here are some suggestions for practice:

- Always practice progressive relaxation in a quiet place with no electronic distractions, not even background music.
- Remove your shoes and wear loose clothing.

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- Avoid eating, smoking, or drinking. It's best to practice before meals rather than after, for the sake of your digestive processes.
- Never practice after using any intoxicants such as alcohol.
- Sit in a comfortable chair if possible. You may practice laying down, but this increases the likelihood of falling asleep.
- If you do fall asleep, give yourself credit for the work you did up to the point of sleep.
- If you practice in bed at night, plan on falling asleep before you complete your cycle. Therefore, consider a practice session at night in bed to be in addition to your basic practice.
- When you finish a session, relax with your eyes closed for a few seconds, and then get up slowly. (*Orthostatic hypotension*—a sudden drop in blood pressure due to standing up quickly—can cause you to faint.) Some people like to count backwards from 5 to 1, timed to slow, deep breathing, and then say, “Eyes open. Supremely calm. Fully alert.”

You will be working with mostly all the major muscle groups in your body, but for convenience you will make a systematic progression from your feet upwards.

Here is the most popular recommended sequence:

- Right foot
- Right lower leg and foot
- Entire right leg
- Left foot
- Left lower leg and foot



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- Entire left leg
- Right hand
- Right forearm and hand
- Entire right arm
- Left hand
- Left forearm and hand
- Entire left arm
- Abdomen
- Chest
- Neck and shoulders
- Face

## Step One: Tension

The process of applying tension to a muscle is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are using. First, focus your mind on the muscle group, for example, your right hand. Then inhale and simply squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 8 seconds. In the example, this would involve making a tight fist with your hand.

It's important to really feel the tension. Done properly, the tension procedure will cause the muscles to start to shake, and you will feel some pain. Be careful not to hurt yourself. Contracting the muscles in your feet and your back, especially, can cause serious problems if not done carefully, meaning gently but deliberately.

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## Step Two: Releasing the Tension

This is the best part because it is actually pleasurable. After the 8 seconds, just quickly and suddenly let go. Let all the tightness and pain flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. In the example, this would be imagining tightness and pain flowing out of your hand through your fingertips as you exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, and the tension flowing away like water out of a faucet. Focus on and notice the difference between tension and relaxation. The point here is to really focus on the change that occurs as the tension is let go. Do this very deliberately, because you are trying to learn to make some very subtle distinctions between muscular tension and muscular relaxation. You should stay relaxed for about 15 seconds and then repeat the tension-relaxation cycle. You'll probably notice more sensations the second time.

## Cue-Controlled Relaxation

Use the same tension-relaxation procedure as full Progressive Relaxation, but work with the summary groups of muscles. The four summary muscle groups are as follows:

- Lower limbs
- Abdomen and chest
- Arms, shoulders, and neck
- Face

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In addition, focus on your breathing during both tension and relaxation. Inhale slowly as you apply and hold the tension. Then, when you let the tension go and exhale, say a cue word to yourself (below). This will help you to associate the cue word with a state of relaxation, so that eventually the cue word alone will produce a relaxed state. Many people find that cue-controlled relaxation does not have to depend on only one word; it may actually be more helpful in some situations to use a particular phrase. Some suggestions for cue words/phrases are:

- Relax
- Let it go
- It's OK
- Stay calm
- All things are passing
- Trust in God

## Deep Breathing Relaxation

Deep breathing is a simple, but very effective, method of relaxation. It is a core component of everything from the "take ten deep breaths" approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and Zen meditation. It works well in conjunction with other relaxation techniques such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation, relaxation imagery and meditation to reduce stress. By concentrating on our breathing, deep breathing allows the rest of our body to relax itself. Deep breathing is a great way to relax the body and get everything

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into synchrony. Relaxation breathing is an important part of yoga and martial arts for this reason.

Lie on your back and slowly relax your body. You can use the progressive relaxation technique we described above. Begin to inhale slowly through your nose if possible. Fill the lower part of your chest first, then the middle and top part of your chest and lungs. Be sure to do this slowly, over 8–10 seconds. Hold your breath for a second or two then quietly relax and let the air out. Wait a few seconds and repeat this cycle.

If you find yourself getting dizzy, then you are overdoing it - slow down. You can also imagine yourself in a peaceful situation such as on a warm, gentle ocean. Imagine that you rise on the gentle swells of the water as you inhale, and sink down into the waves as you exhale. You can continue this breathing technique for as long as you like until you fall asleep or begin to feel relaxed.

## Guided Imagery

In this technique, the goal is to visualize yourself in a peaceful setting.

Lie on your back with your eyes closed. Imagine yourself in a favorite, peaceful place. The place may be on a sunny beach with the ocean breezes caressing you, swinging in a hammock in the mountains or in your own backyard. Any place that you find peaceful and relaxing is okay. Imagine you are there. See and feel your surroundings, hear the peaceful sounds, smell the flowers or the barbecue, feel the warmth of the sun and any other sensations that you find. Relax and enjoy it.

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You can return to this place any night you need to. As you use this place more and more you will find it easier to fall asleep as this imagery becomes a sleep conditioner. Some people find it useful to visualize something boring. This may be a particularly boring teacher, lecturer or co-worker.





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## Conclusion

Even though the thought of opening a book with a picture of a spider in it might turn your stomach and tie it into knots, you will be making a critical step to overcoming your arachnophobia.

Spiders really are fascinating creatures when you begin to learn more about them. No one is saying you have to get a spider as a pet or let them crawl all over you. The aim of overcoming your fear is to not allow it to grasp your life and affect your everyday living.

Phobias are common – arachnophobia being one of the most common. You're not alone in this fight! This book has given you some valuable information to help get you on your way to overcoming your fear and being able to live without panic. Try the relaxation techniques and practice them faithfully. Do expose yourself to pictures of spiders as it really will help desensitize you in the long run.

When you see a spider and you notice the dread that lives in the pit of your stomach, know that you have a great opportunity to practice shifting your perception. So the next time you find yourself face to face with a spider, rather than running away or calling for reinforcements, try to stop and breathe for a moment and become an explorer of your inner world. If you need to catch the spider and place it in a hermetically sealed container in order to breathe, that's fine and then see if you can observe that spider with the objectivity of a scientist.

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Become a neutral observer of your own life. When you discover the source of your fear, you may be surprised to find that the reality is much less scary than the perception.

Good Luck!

