

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding and Addressing Phobias

It's not uncommon for people to develop fears about certain things. In fact, almost all children at certain stages of development have irrational fears about commonplace things, like darkness or spiders or dogs. And many teenagers can develop fear and anxiety about their future, their physical appearance or sense of self. These early fears tend not to endure—children and young people often outgrow them.

But for a certain number of people, and under certain circumstances, a fear may remain and grow to become a phobia. A phobia is described as an excessive or persistent fear in a specific situation, or of an identifiable object, that is out of proportion to the inherent danger and that interferes with normal living.

There is some evidence that social and specific phobias may run in families. Even without a family history of phobias, some people have a tendency toward anxiety, making them vulnerable to phobias. Others develop irrational fears with no obvious trigger.

Some people develop a phobia in response to a stressful period or a traumatic occurrence, which is known as post-traumatic stress disorder. Twice as many women appear to be affected as men, and tend to develop their fears in childhood or early adolescence, with the phobias persisting into adulthood.

Seeking Treatment

Recognizing that the phobia is interfering in day-to-day functioning is an important first step for people suffering from a phobia. This can be difficult to do, or to act on, because living with a phobia can be an isolating and difficult experience. Acknowledging that the fear they're experiencing may be irrational, an adult may not be comfortable admitting they can't control it. And talking about it—with either friends or professionals—is often the last thing they're prepared to do.

But there is every reason for someone with a phobia to reach out for help. There are a variety of effective treatments available. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is one process that many people have found to be helpful in dealing with anxious situations.

Once the problem is understood and some coping strategies are developed, such as changing thinking patterns and behaviors and incorporating relaxation techniques, a person can, together with the support of a professional, significantly reduce the anxiety associated with the phobia.

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