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Phobias & Test Anxiety

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Phobias and Test Anxiety are two categories of anxiety disorders that should not be overlooked. Whether you are a student who needs help during finals or someone who lives with an irrational fear and want to alleviate it, this section is for you.

It probably doesn't take much effort to come up with the top 10 things you're scared of. Is it the dark? Airborne illness? Maybe you feel shivers at the mention of spiders or sharks. Everyone has fears specific and unique to them, and millions of people share the same—often irrational—fears.

Or maybe your fear is more specific to a test setting. Are you a student who chokes and trembles at the thought of studying for or taking a test? Perhaps your job includes performance reviews or workplace assessments? In their many forms, tests tend to crop up time and again in the lives of most people.

In this final section of anxiety disorders, we'll take a peek at the mechanisms behind your phobias and test anxiety.



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Definition/Exploration

Phobias are persistent fears ^[1] of specific objects or environments, the nature of which are either non-threatening or the danger of which are statistically minimal. Phobias are different than everyday fears or dislikes—a person who is phobic of something often has extreme

stressful, fearful, or anxious reactions to their perceived phobic threat. They may experience a sudden flood of physical anxiety symptoms (think about panic symptoms [2]) and may not be able to function while their phobia is present or perceived to be present.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), upwards of 6.3 million people [3] in the United States alone have diagnosable phobias. For most people, phobias develop during childhood or adolescence, and phobias disappear on their own in adulthood for around 20% of people.

Test Anxiety is a type of performance anxiety [4], or an anxiety that is prompted by the very specific action of performing a high-evaluative task. Like phobias, a person with test anxiety may come to anticipate and respond to their next testing situation with strong physical and mental sensations. Test anxiety can affect anyone (just as phobias can) and may be crippling for people in routinely performance- or merit-based positions--students, athletes, and performers of every stripe.

Phobia Symptoms

There is virtually no end to the kinds of irrational fears that can become phobias. People can come to be phobic of living and non-living things, specific places or songs, and just about anything else imaginable.

Fortunately, most phobias consistently produce the same set of symptoms [5] regardless of their specific details. This uniformity of pattern can be of great comfort when beginning to treat yourself from a phobia's influence. The symptoms include:

- Feelings of tremendous panic or terror in the presence of phobia
- The compulsive need to avoid your phobia at all costs
- Sweating, trembling, or rapid heart rate
- Psychological feeling that you can't cope/will lose all control
- Extremely anxious thoughts; physical symptoms from even thinking about your phobia
- Children with phobias may throw tantrums or cry

You may recognize many of these symptoms from previous anxiety disorders. Just like the other disorders discussed in this course, phobias are highly treatable [6]. In most cases, medication is not needed. Phobic people respond best to certain Behavioral Therapy [7] techniques, such as desensitization and incremental exposure. Essentially being present with a phobia, little by little, and recording and assessing your thoughts along the way, is the best antidote.

Common Phobias

For the curious, here were the top 10 phobias [8] in America reported in 2014 by NIMH. You can also watch a powerful news piece on phobias here [9].

1. **Glossophobia** – Fear of public speaking (74%)
2. **Necrophobia** – Fear of death (68%)
3. **Arachnophobia** – Fear of spiders (30.5%)
4. **Myctophobia** – Fear of darkness
5. **Acrophobia** – Fear of heights.

6. **Sociophobia** – Fear of speaking to others
7. **Aerophobia** – Fear of flying
8. **Claustrophobia** – Fear of confined spaces
9. **Agoraphobia** – Fear of open spaces, places without "escape" (remember social phobia?)
10. **Brontophobia** – Fear of thunder and lightning

Test Anxiety Symptoms

Many of the symptoms of test anxiety fall in line with phobic and panic reactions. Here is a brief list:

1. **Physical symptoms** – These can range from dizziness, nausea, sweating, racing heart, dry mouth, and shortness of breath. Panic attacks are also commonly reported with test anxiety
2. **Emotional symptoms** – Feelings of shame, anger, disappointment, and/or embarrassment
3. **Cognitive/Behavioral symptoms** – Negative self-talk and social comparisons as well as "stage fright" behaviors

The causes of test anxiety, similar to phobias, are a combination of predispositional reactions to stress ^[10] and anxiety, as well as episodes of exposure and negative mental associations learned in the past. These reactions and behaviors can be unlearned and thought of in more adaptive ways (click here ^[11] for more).

The main thing to remember about test anxiety is that these reactions stem from a **self-appraisal that is wholly negative**. A person may harbor a fear of failure, a perfectionistic attitude, or may be trying to excessively meet the values and judgements of others.

A persistent belief in your own incompetence or inadequacy may also be a sign of self-handicapping ^[12]--that is, any behavior that lets you neatly dodge the bullets of criticism or potentially negative feedback (i.e. test scores). You unwittingly but purposefully "set yourself up for failure" either through lack of preparation or practice. In this way, you can be free from personal blame should your performance not pan out. Cognitive restructuring and self-confidence exercises can work wonders for chronic self-handicapping.

Some of the top things ^[4] you can do to alleviate test anxiety ^[13] include:

- Improve study habits/routines
- Learn relaxation techniques (click here ^[14])
- Get rest; exercise and eat well ^[15]
- Practice a positive outlook
- Prepare
- Seek counseling; don't ignore learning disabilities

There is also evidence showing that mentally restructuring how you approach test-taking ^[16]

(and the anxious ways they make you feel) can help you perform better. Reframing your anxiety as "excitement" rather than a negative reaction, and then practicing/preparing with that mindset, helped test subjects in one study perform better on a speech.

Click here ^[17] to learn more about Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and how many of its techniques can help you reframe your thoughts and reactions to anxiety. Then click here ^[18] and here ^[19] for even more test anxiety reduction tips.

Source URL: <https://explorable.com/e/phobias-test-anxiety>

Links

- [1] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/phobias/basics/definition/CON-20023478>
- [2] <https://explorable.com/panic-disorder>
- [3] <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/specific-phobia-symptoms/>
- [4] <http://www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/children/test-anxiety>
- [5] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/phobias/basics/symptoms/con-20023478>
- [6] <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/sx34t.htm>
- [7] <https://explorable.com/behavioral-therapy-exposure>
- [8] <http://www.statisticbrain.com/fear-phobia-statistics/>
- [9] <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/phobias-mental-health/53eaac5202a76097e9000006>
- [10] <https://explorable.com/what-about-genetics>
- [11] <https://explorable.com/coping-acceptance>
- [12] <http://www.spring.org.uk/2011/11/self-handicapping-why-making-excuses-hurts-you.php>
- [13] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/generalized-anxiety-disorder/expert-answers/test-anxiety/faq-20058195>
- [14] <https://explorable.com/mindfulness-breathing-exercise>
- [15] <https://explorable.com/social-support>
- [16] <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2013/12/performance-anxiety.aspx>
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- [18] https://www.ets.org/s/praxis/pdf/reducing_test_anxiety.pdf
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