
Claustrophobia

Summary

- A phobia is an intense and irrational fear of certain objects or situations.
 - A person who has claustrophobia may panic when inside an enclosed space such as a lift, aeroplane or crowded room.
 - With appropriate treatment, it is possible to overcome claustrophobia or any other phobia.
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A phobia is a form of anxiety disorder in which someone has an intense and irrational fear of certain objects or situations. Anyone suffering from high levels of anxiety is at risk of developing a phobia. One of the most common phobias is claustrophobia, or the fear of enclosed spaces. A person who has claustrophobia may panic when inside a lift, aeroplane, crowded room or other confined area. The cause of anxiety disorders such as phobias is thought to be a combination of genetic vulnerability and life experience. With appropriate treatment, it is usually possible to overcome claustrophobia or any other phobia.

Symptoms of an anxiety attack

If a person suffering from claustrophobia finds themselves in an enclosed space, they may have an anxiety attack. Symptoms can include:

- sweating
- accelerated heart rate
- hyperventilation, or 'overbreathing'
- shaking
- light-headedness
- nausea (feeling sick)
- fainting
- fear of actual harm or illness.

Specific symptoms of claustrophobia

When in an enclosed space, the signs of claustrophobia may include:

- inside a room – automatically checking for the exits, standing near the exits or feeling alarmed when all doors are closed
- inside a vehicle – avoiding travelling when traffic will be heavy
- inside a building – preferring to take the stairs rather than the lift
- at a party – standing near the door in a crowded room, even if the room is large
- in extreme cases – for a person with severe claustrophobia, a closed door will trigger feelings of panic.

The catch-22 of avoidance as a coping technique for claustrophobia

Once a person has experienced a number of anxiety attacks, they can become increasingly afraid that they might experience another. They start to avoid the objects or situations that bring on the attack. However, any coping technique that relies on avoidance can only make the phobia worse. It seems that anticipating the possibility of confinement within a small space intensifies the feelings of anxiety and fear.

Fear of treatment for claustrophobia

For someone with a disabling phobia, the realisation that this fear is irrational and that treatment is needed can cause further anxiety. Since most treatment options depend on confronting the feared situation or object, the

person may feel reluctant.

Support and encouragement from family and friends is crucial. A person trying to overcome a phobia may find some treatment methods particularly challenging and will need the love and understanding of their support people. The therapist may even ask the family members or friends to attend certain sessions, in order to support the person seeking treatment.

Treatment for claustrophobia

Treating phobias, including claustrophobia, relies on psychological methods. Depending on the person, some of these methods may include:

- **flooding** – this is a form of exposure treatment, where the person is exposed to their phobic trigger until the anxiety attack passes. The realisation that they have encountered their most dreaded object or situation, and come to no actual harm, can be a powerful form of therapy
- **counter-conditioning** – if the person is far too fearful to attempt flooding, then counter-conditioning can be an option. The person is taught to use specific relaxation and visualisation techniques when experiencing phobia-related anxiety. The phobic trigger is slowly introduced, step-by-step, while the person concentrates on attaining physical and mental relaxation. Eventually, they can confront the source of their fear without feeling anxious. This is known as systematic desensitisation
- **modelling** – the person watches other people confront the phobic trigger without fear and is encouraged to imitate that confidence
- **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** – the person is encouraged to confront and change the specific thoughts and attitudes that lead to feelings of fear
- **medications** – such as tranquillisers and antidepressants may also be helpful in addition to psychological treatment.

Length of treatment for claustrophobia

The person may be treated as an outpatient or, sometimes, as an inpatient if their phobia is particularly severe. Generally, treatment consists of around eight to 10 weeks of bi-weekly sessions.

Where to get help

- **SANE Australia** Tel. **1800 18 SANE (7263)**
- Need Help? Chat live with a **SANE Helpline Advisor** (Available Monday-Friday, 10am-10pm AEST).
- **SANE Forums** are full of people who want to talk to you and offer support.
- Your **GP (Doctor)**
- **Psychologist**
- **Psychiatrist**
- **Lifeline** Tel. **13 11 14**
- **Kids Help Line** Tel. **1800 551 800**

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