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## Fighting your fears

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### Summary

- Fear can be healthy. It is programmed into your nervous system, and gives you the survival instincts you need to keep yourself safe from danger.
  - Fear is unhealthy when it makes you more cautious than you really need to be to stay safe, and when it prevents you from doing things you would otherwise enjoy.
  - A phobia is an irrational fear of a certain thing or situation. Someone with a phobia can experience intense anxiety when they are exposed to this thing or situation – or sometimes if they just think about it.
  - If you experience feelings of anxiety that are severe or happen often, or if they affect your day-to-day life, talk to your GP.
  - There are ways to manage fears, anxiety and phobias.
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Fear is a natural human emotion, and it is something that everyone experiences in their lifetime. What matters most is how you fight your fears, and whether you let them affect your life.

You may not call your feeling 'fear'. You might call it stress, worry or panic, but often, when we use these words, we are talking about the same emotion.

When you feel fear, you can experience three types of symptoms:

1. Unhelpful thoughts, such as thinking everyone in the room is having critical thoughts about you, or that something bad will happen.
2. Physical symptoms, such as a rapid heartbeat, faster breathing, sweating and higher blood pressure (your body's 'fight or flight' response).
3. Changes in your behaviour, ranging from simple things such as avoiding a fun activity, to more serious issues like being afraid to leave your home.

The good news is there are lots of ways to help manage your fears. And lots of places to find help. Let's start by exploring the differences between healthy and unhealthy fears.

### The difference between healthy and unhealthy fears

Fear is programmed into your nervous system, and it works, instinctively, from when you are a baby. It gives you the survival instincts you need to keep yourself safe when you feel like you are in danger.

Some fears are healthy. If you see a poisonous snake in your back yard, and your fear prompts you to run back into the house and close the door, that is a healthy fear. The feeling of fear is natural and helps keep you safe.

But other fears are unhealthy and unnecessary. Sometimes, your fear makes you more cautious than you really need to be. For example, the fear of meeting new people. It may be intimidating, but meeting new people does not pose any real threat to your safety. This fear is unhealthy because it stops you doing things you might otherwise enjoy.

### Fear, anxiety or phobia?

Feelings of fear, worry or stress can be upsetting, but they usually pass when the cause of your stress is gone. You won't need too much help fighting your fears here, because they don't last long.

Anxiety is a more serious condition. It is common to be anxious in a high pressure situation; for example, before you make a speech or sit an exam. You might also experience anxiety after a stressful event, such as an accident.

An anxiety disorder is different, because those anxious feelings are there even when there is no obvious cause.

If you experience feelings of anxiety that are severe or happen often, or if they affect your day-to-day life, you

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could talk to your GP. You might have an anxiety disorder. Many people suffer from anxiety for years before seeking help, but your GP can discuss a variety of treatment options with you if you've had these feelings for a month or more.

A phobia is an irrational fear of a certain object or situation. Someone with a phobia can experience intense anxiety when they are exposed to this particular object or situation – or sometimes if they just think about it.

Common phobias include:

- flying
- leaving familiar environments
- enclosed spaces
- spiders and other animals
- injections.

### **Managing your fears, anxiety and phobias**

There are several ways you can try to fight your fears. If you have mild symptoms, your GP might suggest you try changing your lifestyle first. Simple changes, like **exercising regularly**, can reduce your stress levels. So can eating healthy meals, getting enough sleep, and reducing or avoiding stimulants like caffeine and alcohol.

If your symptoms are more serious, your GP may suggest seeing a therapist for treatment such as **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)**. CBT is a type of psychological therapy that can help you to change unhelpful thoughts and behaviours that contribute to your anxiety.

CBT involves working with a therapist to look at your patterns of thinking (cognition) and acting (behaviour) that are making you more likely to have problems with anxiety, or are keeping you from improving once you feel anxious.

When you recognise those patterns, you can make changes to replace unhelpful patterns with new ones that help reduce your anxiety and help you to cope. CBT is a common treatment for **anxiety disorders**.

Strategies you might employ with your therapist as part of CBT include:

- problem solving
- exposure therapy (learning to fight your fear of something by understanding it and gradually being exposed to it, in a safe environment)
- cognitive restructuring (learning to recognise your negative thoughts, dispute them, and think of more helpful ways to respond to a situation)
- mindfulness (focusing on the present moment – acknowledging and accepting your thoughts, feelings, and the physical sensations of your body, without labelling them as good or bad)
- relaxation.

E-therapies (also known as online therapies or computer-aided psychological therapy) can be an effective option for people with mild to moderate anxiety. Most e-therapies follow the same principles as CBT or behaviour therapy. They teach you how to identify and change patterns of thinking and behaviour that contribute to anxiety or stop you from overcoming your anxiety.

You can work through an e-therapy program yourself, although many provide some kind of support – via the telephone, email, text or instant messaging. E-therapies are easy to access and can be done from home. And you don't have to visit a doctor first. The Australian Government's **mindhealthconnect website** has a **library of online programs**. These strategies are useful if you have a specific fear or phobia too.

You can also use **exposure therapy**, where you learn to fight a fear by giving yourself the chance to learn about, and gradually get used to, whatever it is that you are afraid of.

Some people find it useful to develop a fear ladder – identify your fear, set a goal and then work out the incremental steps to achieve it. For example, if you are afraid of flying, your fear ladder could look like this:

1. Look at photographs of aeroplanes.
2. Watch videos of aeroplanes.
3. Visit the airport with your partner or a friend.

4. Visit the airport by yourself.
5. Sit in a plane simulator with your partner or a friend.
6. Sit in a plane simulator by yourself.
7. Take part in a simulated plane trip with your partner or a friend.
8. Take part in a simulated plane trip on your own.
9. Take a short flight with your partner or a friend.
10. Take a short flight on your own.

Whatever your fear, anxiety or phobia, there is always help at hand. Your GP can help you get started on a treatment plan to fight your fears.

### **Where to get help**

- Your GP
- Psychologist
- Counsellor
- **Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria** Tel 1300 269 438
- Australian Psychological Society – **Find a Psychologist service**

**This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:**

Anxiety Recovery Centre Victoria

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