Agoraphobia is a type of anxiety disorder. A person with agoraphobia is afraid to leave environments they know and consider to be safe for fear of having anxiety or a panic attack. Agoraphobia responds well to treatment.

Agoraphobia usually begins with a stressful event. For example, a person loses a job or a relationship ends. They feel distressed and limit their contact with the outside world (this is called ‘avoidance behaviour’). As time passes, the person may consider more and more public places as ‘out of bounds’ until they are eventually confined to their home.

In other cases, a stressful life event triggers a panic attack. Since panic attacks are so unpleasant, the person may avoid any situation or place that they think might trigger another attack until many situations and places are eventually feared and avoided.

Complications of agoraphobia
Untreated, agoraphobia can severely reduce a person’s quality of life. For example:

- Activities outside of the home such as work, school, socialising, hobbies and many forms of exercise are out of reach.
- Financial hardship, isolation, loneliness and boredom may lead to greater feelings of distress and increase the

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risk of depression.

- The person may recognise that their fear is irrational, but feel powerless to do anything about it. They may feel angry and frustrated with themselves. These negative feelings damage self-esteem and contribute to depression, and other anxieties and fears.
- The person may try to cope using unhealthy methods (such as comfort eating, drugs or alcohol), which in turn can cause or contribute to further health problems.

**Diagnosis of agoraphobia**

Diagnosis is usually based on the person’s reported symptoms. However, the doctor may run a series of medical tests to make sure the symptoms are not caused by an underlying physical illness. The doctor may suggest referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist for further evaluation and treatment.

**Treatment for agoraphobia**

Agoraphobia responds well to treatment. The treatment options suggested by your doctor or therapist will depend on your circumstances and preferences, but may include:

- a course of medications, such as antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications
- cognitive behaviour therapy and desensitisation
- counselling and self-esteem therapy
- relaxation training
- support group
- instruction in self-help methods.

**Self-help methods to manage agoraphobia**

The key to conquering agoraphobia is learning to control anxiety symptoms and progressively going into the situations that you fear.

Be guided by your doctor or therapist, but general self-help suggestions include:

- **Breathe slowly** – hyperventilation (breathing too fast and too shallow) will make the symptoms of a panic attack worse. Consciously slow your breathing. Concentrate on expanding your abdomen, not your chest, with every inhalation.
- **Use relaxation techniques** – learning to relax may include methods such as meditation, hypnotherapy or regular exercise. You may need to experiment to find the relaxation method or methods that work best for you.
- **Find out about your condition** – overcoming agoraphobia involves understanding how anxiety affects the mind and body.
- **Change your lifestyle** – it may help to limit or avoid caffeine, alcohol and certain medications. Regular exercise burns off stress chemicals and is known to reduce anxiety levels. See your doctor for further information and advice.
- **Gradually increase exposure** – this involves facing the feared environment in a controlled way. This will help you to see that nothing bad is going to happen. Typically, you choose the least threatening environment first, take along a trusted friend or your therapist as support, and use slow breathing and the other coping methods you’ve learned to control your anxiety. With regular practise, the fear of the place or situation will ease. This technique is also known as desensitisation.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Clinical psychologist
- Psychiatrist
- Your local community health centre
- ARAFEMI (Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill) Tel. (03) 9810 9300
- **Mental Health Foundation of Australia (Victoria)** Tel. (03) 9427 0406

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