

What Are the Underlying Causes behind Phobias?

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A phobia is an unreasonable, irrational, or overwhelming fear of a situation, object, or experience. It is a subset of anxiety disorder. The object of fear typically poses no danger or very little danger; however, the person experiencing the phobia struggles with intense anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, and avoidance issues around the phobia. This condition can affect the person's ability to go to work or school, or attend social events. A phobia can develop in childhood or adulthood, and it can be caused by an illness, injury, or other experience.

There are two basic types of phobias: simple or specific, and complex. A simple phobia involves one specific thing, such as fear of heights, fear of clowns, or fear of spiders. Complex phobias involve larger social experiences, such as agoraphobia or social phobia/anxiety disorder. The understanding of the specific causes underlying complex phobias is limited at the moment, although it is likely to be a combination of genetics and experience. Between 4 percent and 5 percent of Americans struggle with a phobia of some kind, although around 9 percent of Americans are believed to have a specific phobia.

Many specific phobias are due to childhood experience or trauma. For example, a fear of dogs is likely due to being bitten by a dog as a child. Surviving a plane crash early in life can lead to an intense fear of flying throughout adulthood. Fear of heights could develop if a child witnesses a person falling off a building or out of a tree. These are cause-and-effect relationships between a traumatic event and a phobia's development, and they can sometimes be resolved by exposure therapy. However, if the phobia is not life-limiting, few people seek out help for phobias.

Adults can also develop phobias due to trauma. This is especially the case if a person experiences something very negative while in a specific space. For example, if a person has a serious panic attack in an elevator, they may develop a phobia of small spaces or elevators that they did not have before. The brain associates the elevator with panic attacks, which puts the person in a position where they are more likely to suffer a panic attack in an elevator a second time.

Simple or specific phobias can be transferred from adults to children. If an adult is afraid of spiders, for example, their fear reaction can impact their child, who is more likely to display some phobic reaction to spiders into adulthood. It is important to note that, although people

who struggle with anxiety disorder are more likely to be related to someone with an anxiety disorder, there is not a genetic link that causes the transmission of specific phobias between parents and children. The specific fear is a learned reaction.

Complex phobias are divided into social phobias and agoraphobia. These two types of phobias appear in adolescence or early adulthood, although they are sometimes diagnosed in children. Although trauma or illness could trigger these disorders, they are complicated and have no one specific cause. Most medical researchers believe that complex phobias are linked to a combination of genetics and environmental triggers. Adults in a child's life who struggle with anxiety disorders are more likely to pass those disorders on, through genetics, an unstable environment, and learned behaviors.

Social phobias have various symptoms, such as:

- Fear of being judged by others
- Fear of being in front of a crowd
- Fear of meeting new people
- Fear of making a bad impression
- Difficulty with authority figures
- Trouble eating or doing other normal activities in public
- Difficulty leaving the house and Avoidance of social situations

Agoraphobia has specific symptoms, such as:

- Fear of being alone in a home or office
- Fear of being in a crowd outside
- Fear of traveling in a vehicle and Fear of being in an unfamiliar area

People who struggle with substance abuse issues may also experience a mental health issue, such as an anxiety disorder or a phobia. The phobia could have been caused by brain chemistry changes due to the substance abuse, or substance abuse could be a method of self-medicating for people who struggle with intense anxiety and obsessive thoughts. When both conditions occur at that same time, treatment for co-occurring disorders is needed. Through specialized treatment, and the help of professionals with expertise in treating both substance use disorders and phobias, those who suffer from both disorders can go on to live healthy lives and manage both disorders on a long-term basis.