

# AGORAPHOBIA

## A Guide to Helping Yourself

This booklet was produced by the Clinical Psychology Service of Northampton Health Authority. It forms part of a series of booklets that are deigned to provide people with information that will reassure, advise and encourage them.

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**This booklet is designed for people suffering from agoraphobia. It has been written to provide information about the problem and to suggest ways for you to help yourself overcome your difficulties.**



## WHAT IS AGORAPHOBIA ?

An agoraphobic is someone who has a fear of going far from home, a fear of being alone or far from help, and a fear of crowded public places such as streets, stores and buses.

Most agoraphobic people also fear that they will lose control and lead to a panic attack or something worse.

Because of this fear, they tend to avoid places that could trigger it and this avoidance tends to become a habit. Often they feel better with someone they know well, and so they come to depend on having a companion when they go out. Once a person regularly avoids going out alone or avoids many different places for this reason he/she is said to have agoraphobia.

Agoraphobia is quite a common problem: about 1 in 160 people suffer from it. More than two-thirds of agoraphobics are women.

Sunday dinner at my in-law's house  
Was a nightmare, as the feelings  
started to build up even before we sat down  
at the table. I would feel sick and dizzy at  
the thought of having to sit still until the  
end of the meal – after all there are only a  
few excuses one can have to leave the  
table..... the family began to think I was  
anorexic because I just could not eat when I  
felt so trapped, but eventually I managed  
to explain to my mother-in-law how I felt and  
the whole situation was resolved. When I  
knew I could leave the room for a few  
moments whenever I needed to do so, the  
anxiety just subsided. I think my family  
were more relieved than I was !  
*Margaret [24] married*

Those who suffer from agoraphobia are  
inclined to think that they are unique; no-one  
has ever experienced these frightening  
sensations before; nobody can possibly  
imagine how much they are suffering. So  
what **are** these strange and frightening  
feelings which the agoraphobic experiences ?

I sat on the pavement heaving and gasping for  
breath. I felt sick and dizzy, certain I was having  
some sort of fit or heart attack. I was conscious of  
a number of people hovering around me offering  
advice and though I hate making an exhibition of  
myself in public, at that moment I couldn't have  
cared less. An ambulance arrived and I was  
whisked off to hospital where to my intense relief  
and even more intense embarrassment the  
symptoms immediately disappeared. The episode  
was diagnosed as an acute anxiety attack ..... I was  
never so mortified in my whole life.

*Marion [26] housewife with one child*



**HER CAR IS AN EXTENSION OF HER HOME**

Many agoraphobics are free of symptoms when in a car because the family car feels like an extension of the home; like a snail or a tortoise, these sufferers would like to carry with them a permanent shell into which they could retreat at any time.

### **WHAT CAUSES AGORAPHOBIA [I] ?**

Agoraphobia is not connected with serious mental disease [such as schizophrenia] nor is it connected with any known physical illness. It is caused, in the first place, when the body reacts to everyday situations as if they were dangerous and frightening. In the second place, it is caused by the worry caused by these strange feelings and in the third place by the fact that agoraphobics tend to avoid places connected with these feelings.

To understand this, think about the way your body reacts at a time of real danger – say, a near miss in what could have been a fatal accident. Your heart may beat hard and fast, your stomach may churn, you may sweat and tremble and so on. The exact reaction varies from person to person, but it is usually strong enough to cause a feeling of "shock" after an accident. In agoraphobia, it is as if this bodily reaction has become oversensitive so that it tends to be triggered automatically, by quite ordinary situations that are not dangerous.

### **WHAT CAUSES AGORAPHOBIA [II] ?**

It is not always possible to say what started the over-sensitivity that leads to the first panic reaction. Sometimes it follows a physical illness or pregnancy, when physical resistance is low; sometimes it follows an emotional shock and in some cases it happens at a time of prolonged tension that has come other reason.

Whatever the cause, once it has taken place a few times, it starts to happen fore frequently in certain places.

The reason for this is a special kind of learning called *conditioning*. To understand this, think of the reaction of a child when it meets a dog for the first time. If by bad luck the dog barks loudly and frightens the child, then the next time the child sees a dog, he/she may feel nervous and even run away.

*Conditioning* is the name given to the way that fearful reactions come to be associated or connected with particular things or places. This association is learned in a completely *automatic* way – it happens whether you want it to or not.

## WHAT CAUSES AGORAPHOBIA [III] ?

The child's first reaction of fear to a dog is not abnormal since some dogs may be dangerous and it is best to learn caution. In time, provided the child meets friendly dogs and is not bitten, the automatically "conditioned" fear will die away. But if dogs are avoided after the first frightening encounter, the fear may persist. If this happens it can lead to a permanent fear of dogs – a "dog phobia".

In the case of agoraphobia, panic reactions become attached to particular situations [and ideas] by the same process of conditioning. Even after the "over-sensitive" state that caused the fear reactions in the first place has died away, the *conditioned* fear keeps on. Since this fear results in the avoidance of places associated with these reactions, there is no reason for the phobia to get better.

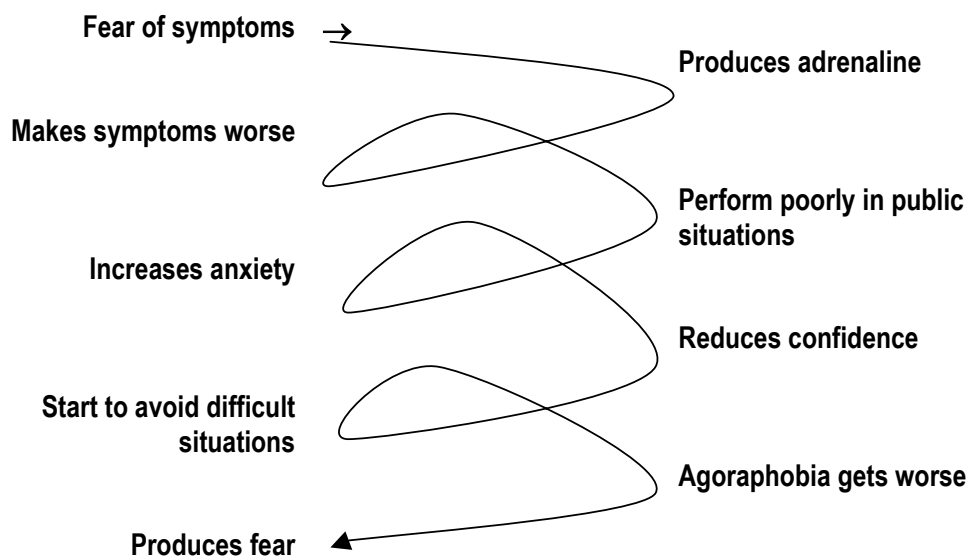
## WHAT KEEPS THE AGORAPHOBIA GOING [I] ?

You might expect that if conditioned fear reactions were ignored and the person kept on going out, the reactions would gradually fade away. Why does this not happen in agoraphobia ?

The main reason is that the natural reaction to feelings of panic that cannot be understood is to avoid the places in which they happen. Unfortunately, this seems to have the effect of actually *strengthening* the conditioned fear. The longer the avoidance goes on, the stronger it can become.

People often feel that they can help by getting things for an agoraphobic so that he/she doesn't have to go out. However, this only makes the habit of avoidance stronger.

It is very common to find that people with agoraphobia depend, for going out, on other people who are close to them. This is because a familiar, reassuring person can make frightening situations seem safer. The trouble is that depending on other people tends to become a habit, just as avoiding places does.



## WHAT KEEPS AGORAPHOBIA GOING [II] ?

When you are frightened by a real danger, your whole mind is usually occupied with doing something about it. In the case of agoraphobia the same feeling of fear seems to start and keep on, for no reason at all. There seems to be nothing that can be done about it. For this reason, there is a tendency to dwell on the feelings themselves. This just makes them worse.

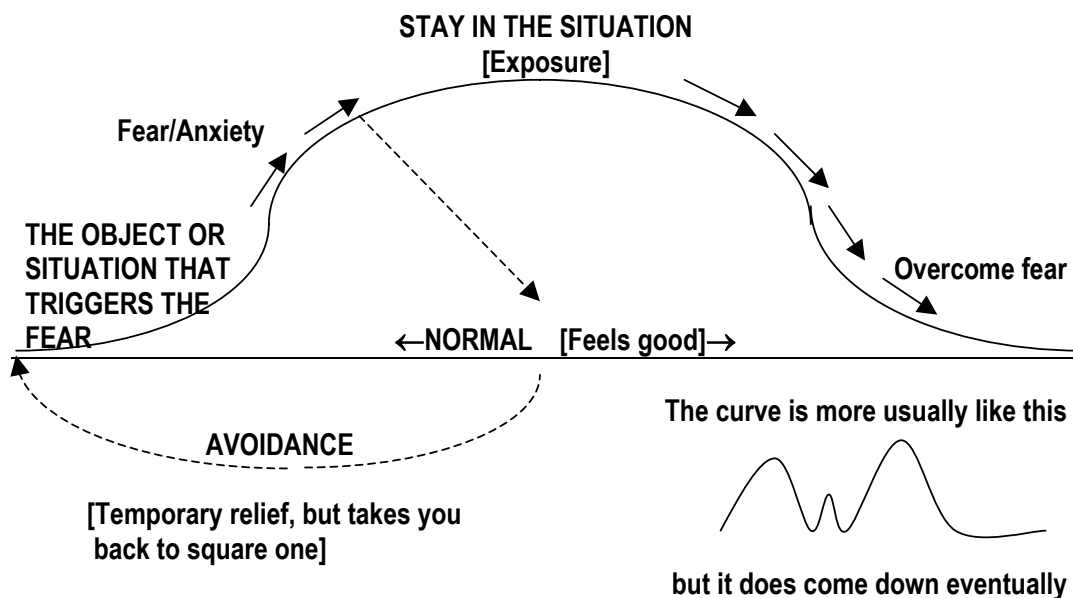
Agoraphobic people may feel dizzy or breathless, get a feeling of weakness in their legs or experience their heart pounding. Some feel that everything seems unreal, like a dream. Worrying about these feelings tends to get them more firmly fixed, like a habit. It is only too easy to get into the vicious circle of worrying and being afraid of the feelings of fear themselves. Some people think that they might make a fool of themselves in public, that they might faint or be sick, or collapse and perhaps injure themselves. Some even fear permanent loss of control or insanity.

In actual fact, agoraphobics run no more risk of any of these things than anyone else does.

## HOW CAN AGORAPHOBICS BE TREATED [I] ?

If you have followed so far, you already have some idea of how agoraphobics should be treated – it is just the opposite of the way it is kept going.

The most important step is to stop avoiding the feared places. It is only by gradual practice in these places that the fear will be overcome. And because the fear has been developing for a long time, you will need a long time to get rid of it. This means that you will have to practice facing the feared situations over and over again until your confidence returns. In other words, a person with agoraphobia must get into the daily habit of leaving home to practice walking, going into stores, travelling on buses or facing the feared things, whatever they are. Of course, you cannot expect all these things to be done at once; each situation has to be practised in stages, one step at a time. You build up confidence by doing the easier things first before gradually doing more and more difficult ones.



## HOW CAN AGORAPHOBIA BE TREATED [III] ?

Practice in facing situations that have been avoided for a long time is often frightening. Therefore you will have to expect some fear and try to find ways to cope with it. This does not mean forcing yourself to the point of total panic all the time, but it does mean that the main point of practice is to experience some fear without overreacting and making it worse. Given time and provided that you don't run away from it the fear will always fade away.

When doing something difficult for the first time, it occasionally helps to take a tranquilliser [if one has been prescribed] just beforehand. However, it is usually better to manage without pills. If you do use them, it should be only the first time you tackle something that you have been avoiding.

Similarly, it is not a good idea to rely on help from others, if this means that they are doing things for you. This can only lead you to depend on them. Equally, well-meaning sympathy only encourages you to dwell on your problems. Instead you must do something about them.

### TREATMENT IN PRACTICE STEP 1:

To begin with you will have to decide exactly what you are aiming for. In other words, what are the treatment targets? This is not as easy as it sounds. It is no good saying something like "I just want to get better" you must decide on specific descriptions of behaviour.

Examples could be:

"Going by myself to the supermarket for groceries"

"Going alone by bus to the school to meet the children"

Make a written list of all the things that you would like to do if you were completely recovered. Do not forget difficult things [such as long trips] that you have avoided for many years. Anything you think you want to do someday and cannot do now because of your phobia can be put in the list as a long-term target. Lastly, you must put all the items on the list in order, from the least difficult to the most difficult. Make a careful note of this order – you will be using it later.

Everyone will have a different situation hierarchy to their own particular problem, so let us take as examples two such situation ladders which are drawn up by two people with agoraphobia.

**Linda:**

**As time has gone on I have found it more and more difficult to go out at all. The very thought of going out makes me feel ill and sometimes I just can't do it. I rely heavily on my husband, and he now does most of the shopping, though I go with him as often as I can. What I would like to be able to do is to go to the supermarket by myself and just do my shopping. I suppose my least difficult task would be going for a walk with the dog in the evening when it's quiet.**

**This is Linda's Ladder: start at the bottom and work up**



- Shopping alone in the supermarket**
- Going to the supermarket at a busy time, accompanied**
- Going to the supermarket at a quiet time and staying a short time**
- Going down the main street to the Post Office**
- Going to McCrae's shop at a busy time and buying a few items**
- Going into McCrae's shop at a quiet time and making a purchase**
- Going for a walk by myself to the shopping centre**
- Going for a walk with the dog in the evening**

**John:**

**Things are getting worse. My social life is beginning to suffer and people are beginning to notice. I get so panicky at parties and I have just stopped going to discos. I can't stand the noise. I just get tearful and upset and very shaky. I used to go to the theatre a lot and to the cinema. I have stopped that now because when it gets quiet, even in the cinema during a tense scene, I feel terrible. I get all the symptoms including a feeling that I might shout out which is awful. I've lost all confidence. My easiest thing would be going into a bar at a quiet time and I think my worst is a formal concert, particularly during the slow movements.**

**This is John's ladder: start at the bottom and work up**



- Going to a classical music concert**
- Going to the theatre or an event on a busy night with friends**
- Going to a theatre or concert locally on a quiet night**
- Going to the cinema at a busy time, usually Saturday**
- Going to the cinema at a quiet time, with a friend**
- Going to a bar at a busy time**
- Going to a bar or the club in the evening**

### **TREATMENT IN PRACTICE : STEP 2 [I]**

It is very important that you set aside adequate time for practice every day. Start with the easiest item on the list that you cannot do at the moment. Let us suppose that this is "Walking alone to the supermarket for groceries". Begin practice in walking towards the supermarket every day. Never mind whether you actually get there or not at first. Make a careful note of how far you get each time. It is not so very important to reach the supermarket right away. However, it is important to get into the habit of daily practice in trying to get there because this is the opposite of avoidance.

### **TREATMENT IN PRACTICE: STEP 2 [II]**

Repeat each exercise several times to find out if you can gradually do more each time. You must expect some ups and downs from day to day, depending on how you feel. So keep going for several days before deciding whether there are any signs of improvement. To know this, you will have to keep a careful check of how far you get and how long you are out. If you succeed in completing the item, do not assume that it is finished. Try it a few more times to make sure. If you continue to be successful, move on to the next, more difficult item. If you do not seem to be making any progress, despite honestly trying your hardest, you should move to Step 3 in these instructions.

### **TREATMENT IN PRACTICE: STEP 3 [II]**

These in-between items will not necessarily be useful for their own sake. It might not be useful, for example, to travel on a bus for just one stop. However, the point is, of course, that they build the confidence you need to practice later items [which are useful and which will seem much too difficult at first]. It is obviously very important to choose in-between items carefully, as well as to decide how many might be needed and how many times to practice them. However, you will have to be prepared to be flexible about these items. If you experience persistent difficulty in making progress with the in-between items chosen at first, try alternatives. Once the target item has been successfully completed a few times, it will probably not be necessary to practice the in-between items any more. However, at regular intervals, the target item must be practised. Better still, make it a part of everyday life – a habit.

### **TREATMENT IN PRACTICE: STEP 3 [I]**

If your progress has come to a halt, try to find out why. It may be that the item you have chosen is too difficult at the moment, or it may require too big a jump from what you have been doing. First check to see whether the original order of difficulty of your list has changed for some reason. You may find that some items that seemed very difficult at first are now easier than the one you have been attempting. If you find that this is not the case and that the easiest item not yet done is still the one you have been trying, you will have to invent some practice items in-between where you are now and the next target to bridge the gap. Suppose that after [1] “Walking alone to the supermarket” has been done successfully the next one should be [2] “Going by bus to the school”. Your job is to invent some items in-between [1] and [2] in difficulty.

### **COPING WITH FEELINGS OF PANIC [I]**

As was mentioned earlier, panic feelings at the beginning of the phobia seem to come “out of the blue”. Later on, panic is often triggered by the [conditioned] fear reaction to some places or situations. These reactions die down quite quickly – if they are allowed to. Usually they are kept going by the alarming thoughts they cause [fear of the feelings of fear] and by attempts at avoidance. The best advice – and the most difficult to follow – is “Let it happen and wait for it to pass”. Practising in stages and the occasional use of tranquillisers make attacks of panic unlikely, but of course some fear must be expected. After all, everybody gets twinges of fear and other unpleasant feelings sometimes. More than this, it is part of recovery from agoraphobia to accept these unpleasant feelings for what they are and to cope with them – without running away or giving up.

## **COPING WITH FEELINGS OF PANIC [II]**

At the beginning agoraphobia was described as a fear of going out alone. Just as important it is a fear that the symptoms of fear will themselves get out of control. For this reason, an essential part of practice must be to deliberately do things that produce some fear in order to practice coping with it. This does not mean getting into a total panic, but it does mean that the most useful practice involves doing things that bring on the feelings, coping with them and going on. Practising things that don't cause any fear at all – to make sure of them – is also helpful. However, this is not how real progress is made. It is important to remember that one of the purposes of practice is to learn a new attitude of mind toward panic feelings. This attitude means no longer trying to avoid them at all costs, but going out to meet them. You must deal with these feelings as much as possible and also accept the remaining feelings as natural, if unpleasant, bodily feelings.

## **COPING WITH FEELINGS OF PANIC [III]**

Suppose you are out practising when suddenly you feel frightened by a strange feeling. Do not immediately go home. Try to find somewhere to rest, sit down somewhere, walk back a little way – do anything that will help you stay in or near the place where the feeling started. Remind yourself that these are just unpleasant bodily feelings that you had expected anyway. They cannot harm you. They do not mean that something awful will happen. It won't. Don't be fooled into thinking that way. In time, the feelings will go down. Although you can then go back home, it would be better to go on practising for a little while before doing so. Fortunately, once panic has come and gone, it is unlikely to come back again for a while. For this reason, you can sometimes make a panic attack an occasion for more progress. The golden rule is to try never to leave a situation until the fear is going down. When panic starts, sensible thinking stops. You cannot depend on being able to think very clearly at the time. For this reason, you should read through the 10 rules that follow very carefully before practising, so that they are clear in your mind. When you feel panicky, run through them again. It is a good idea to make a copy of the shorter list below to carry with you to read at the time. If you find other ideas that help, add them to the list.

Below is a shortened version of the rules that follow. These are designed to act as reminders. First read the rules in full, then read the shortened form and see if you can remember when using the reminders to prompt you.

1. The feelings are normal bodily reactions
2. They are not harmful
3. Do not add frightening thoughts
4. Describe what is happening
5. Wait for fear to pass
6. Notice when it fades
7. It is an opportunity for progress
8. Think of what you have done
9. Plan what to do next
10. Then start off slowly

## **TEN RULES FOR COPING WITH PANIC:**

- 1. Remember that the feelings are nothing more than an exaggeration of the normal bodily reactions to stress**
- 2. They are not in the least harmful or dangerous – just unpleasant. Nothing worse will happen**
- 3. Stop adding to panic with frightening thoughts about what is happening and where it might lead.**
- 4. Notice what is really happening in your body right now, not what you fear might happen.**
- 5. Wait and give the fear time to pass. Do not fight it or run away from it. Just accept it**
- 6. Notice that once you stop adding to it with frightening thoughts, the fear starts to fade by itself**
- 7. Remember that the whole point of practice is to learn how to cope with fear – without avoiding it. So this is an opportunity to make progress**
- 8. Think about the progress you have made so far, despite all the difficulties. Think how pleased you will be when you succeed this time**
- 9. When you begin to feel better, look around you and start to plan what to do next**
- 10. When you are ready to go on, start off in an easy, relaxed way. There is no need for effort or hurry**

## **SETBACKS:**

Hardly anyone recovered from agoraphobia without having at least one “set-back”. Feelings vary, sometimes from day to day, and what you did successfully yesterday may seem impossible today. Even then, you could make real progress. What counts is how you cope with whatever feelings you experience. So, a little done on a bad day can be worth more than a lot done on a good day.

Most people feel that they have their worst set-backs after severe panics, especially if they ran away before the fear started going down. If this happens and you feel that you are back to “square one”, do not give up. Simply try again the next day. If you do this you should find that the lost ground can be made up quite quickly. Provided that you do not give up when things look black, your chances of eventual recovery are very good indeed.

## **PLANNING FOR THE LONG RUN:**

Many people find that their difficulties in going out have progressively cut them off from friends, social activities and other outings that they used to enjoy. For this reason they settle into a routine that centres on the home, leaving no time for anything else. An essential part of recovery is to change this routine completely and to make time for developing interests outside your home. You must start to visit friends, join clubs or classes and best of all, find a job. These are not things to do later on, they are important ways of helping yourself now. They provide regular opportunities for practice in going out and meeting people, quite apart from the satisfaction that they will give you in themselves.

Always try to use visits or outings as practice, by varying and extending what you do. You may do anything from going to a further store or going off alone when out on a trip with others.



