

Confronting phobias.

Relevant to: Panic: 

The best way of overcoming phobias is to – very, very gradually – get used to whatever it is you're frightened of. It seems like common sense, and indeed it is, but there are some very definite do's and don'ts.

People who have panic attacks usually become agoraphobic. This is because they quite naturally don't want to leave the safety of their home, unless they are with somebody they trust to look after them in a crisis.

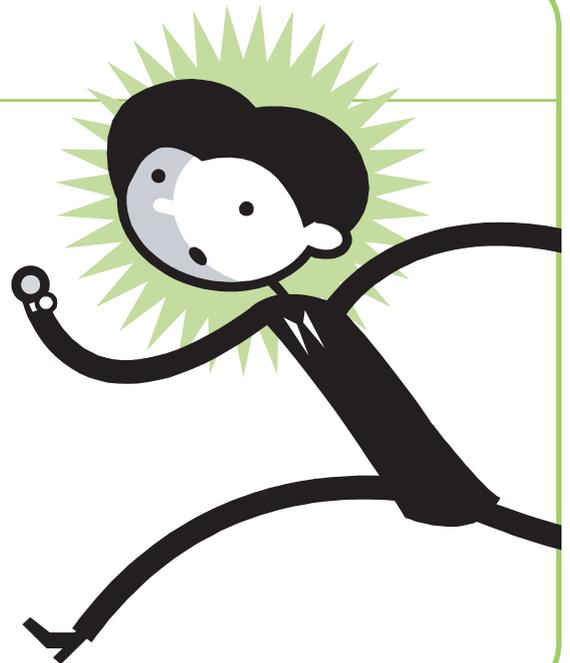
However, as you overcome your panic, the agoraphobia doesn't necessarily disappear, so many people are left with agoraphobia even though they are no longer having panic attacks. So the question arises, how to get over the agoraphobia?

The answer is: very gradually. We have to teach our deep brain that there is nothing to fear in going out of the house, and the only way to teach the deep brain things is through experience.

Little and often.

Little and often is the key. So a program to overcome agoraphobia might look something like this:

1. Get used to going to the window and looking out.
2. Get used to opening the front door, standing in the doorway, and looking out.
3. Get used to standing on the drive, just outside the front door.
4. Get used to walking a few steps down the drive and standing looking at things.
5. Get used to walking to the end of the drive and looking up and down the street.
6. And so on.



How do you get used to things?

Answer: by doing them lots of times and finding out that nothing bad happens. This is the only way the deep brain finds that there is nothing to worry about.

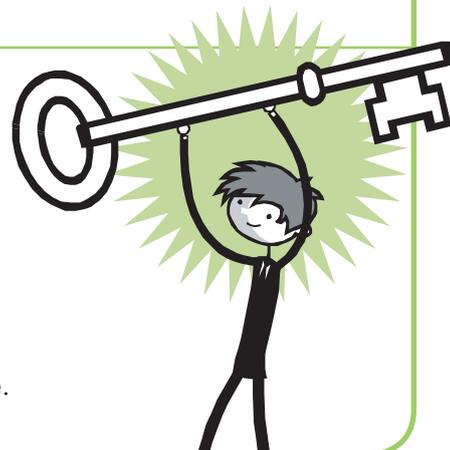
What does "often" mean?

It means as often as you possibly can. So, in the examples above, you might do each one several times a day before you get used to it and want to move on to the next.

Where do people go wrong?

People go wrong in two ways: by taking steps that are too big, and by not doing steps repeatedly. So, what happens very often, is that the agoraphobic person feels "silly" and feels they "should make a real effort to get over it" and they push themselves too far. So they key themselves up, take themselves out of the house to further than they are comfortable with, feel frightened and maybe have a panic attack, and head back to the house again confirmed in their view that leaving the house is frightening and they just can't do it.

Once again, "little and often" is the key. Just like in the earlier example.



But surely, if you don't push yourself, you're never going to make progress?

This is true, but you must only push yourself to the point where you know you will be able to get used to it. And then, once you have got used to it, you push yourself slightly further, and so on. Just like in the example earlier.

In session discussion.

If there are people in the group who have phobias, how would this information apply to you? Do you think you would be able to construct a step-by-step, "gradually getting used to it" programme for yourself or would you need discussion with somebody else?

What experience has anybody in the group had of overcoming fears and phobias? What did you find worked for you? Established "best practice" is as described on this sheet, is this what you did?

Post-session projects.

If you have a fear or phobia, have a go at working out the small steps, like we described on this sheet. If you can make the steps small enough you can get used to each one quite quickly. For example, the steps in the example on this sheet might only take some people a day or two to get used to each one, so progress can be quicker than one might think.

Myth Buster.

Myth: When you have fears and phobias you just have to grit your teeth and get on with it.

In reality, although this sounds convincing, it doesn't work long-term: the deep brain will always win out unless you slowly get it used to the situations.