

39 managing fears and phobias

for you to know

A phobia is a strong, persistent fear of a specific object or situation that causes anxiety to rise quickly when one is exposed to it. Some common phobias are claustrophobia, or fear of closed spaces; acrophobia, or fear of heights; agoraphobia, or fear of crowded public places; aviophobia, or fear of flying; and hemophobia, or fear of blood. People usually try to manage phobias by simply avoiding the object or situation that causes the anxiety. Phobias can also be reduced or completely eliminated by using a technique called systematic desensitization.

Haley was apprehensive about her commitment to be a junior counselor at summer camp. As much as she wanted to help with the younger girls, swim, sail, and do crafts, she didn't know if she could handle her extreme fear of spiders. Last year at camp, a spider had gotten into Haley's suitcase and into her T-shirt. When she put the shirt on, the spider had crawled onto her bare skin, and she screamed. Haley had been so upset she had left camp two days early.

Her mother made an appointment for Haley to see a counselor who specialized in helping people with anxiety, fears, and phobias. The counselor told Haley she could help her, using systematic desensitization. It was a technique that could help her feel peaceful instead of fearful when she thought about or encountered spiders. First, Haley had to make a list of situations with spiders that made her feel afraid. Next, she had to put them in order of how strong the fear was. The counselor called this list a "hierarchy." Haley's hierarchy looked like this:

Least fearful to most fearful situations with spiders

A spider crawling outside my tent

A spider crawling inside my tent

A spider crawling near my cot

A spider crawling on my cot

A spider crawling on me on top of my clothes

A spider crawling on my bare skin

A spider crawling near or on my face

At the next session, the counselor had Haley sit comfortably, close her eyes, and rate her anxiety level on a 0 to 10 scale, 0 being completely peaceful and 10 being highly anxious. Haley said it was at a 5. The counselor helped Haley relax all of her muscles one by one. Then she had Haley visualize a very safe and peaceful place in her mind. Haley's anxiety level went down to 0. Then the counselor told her to picture a spider crawling outside her tent. Her anxiety level rose to 3. Haley relaxed her muscles and pictured her safe, peaceful place again. She continued to focus on relaxing until she could picture the spider outside her tent and keep her anxiety at a 1. Then she moved on to the next situation, a spider crawling inside her tent.

Haley continued to go back and forth between relaxing and visualizing the spider. She had to repeat the exercise a number of times over the course of a few counseling sessions, but eventually Haley was able to picture a spider crawling near her face and keep her anxiety level at a 1. Haley kept practicing the exercise at home and soon became confident that she could go to camp again.

activity 39 * managing fears and phobias

directions

Planning and carrying out a systematic desensitization exercise is often done best with the help of another person. Think of someone with whom you feel comfortable talking about it, and if possible, ask that person to help you complete this exercise.

Draw a picture or write about your fear or phobia in the box below.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to draw a picture or write about their fear or phobia.

more to do

Tell why you think you developed a fear of this particular object or situation.

Describe what it was like for you to go through the relaxation part of this exercise.

Tell what might help you to relax even more.

Describe what it was like for you to visualize your fear or phobia.

Which step on your hierarchy was the hardest to relax with?

Which step was the easiest to relax with?

Tell how your life might be different if you could overcome this fear.

Remember that you may have to do this exercise a number of times before you find your fear diminishing. Be patient with yourself and realize that is normal.