



Phobias

Find information on phobias, including symptoms, causes and how to access treatment and support. Get tips for helping yourself, plus guidance for friends and family.

If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.org.uk.

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What is a phobia?

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It is an extreme form of fear or anxiety, triggered by a particular situation or object.

- **A situation that triggers a phobia.** You may know it's safe to be out on a balcony in a high-rise block, but feel terrified to go out on it. You might not even be able to enjoy the view from behind the windows inside the building.
- **An object that triggers a phobia.** You may know that a spider isn't poisonous or that it won't bite you, but this still doesn't reduce your anxiety.

You may even feel this extreme anxiety when you think or talk about the situation or object.

Phobias and mental health

Many of us have fears about particular situations or objects. This is perfectly normal. A fear becomes a phobia if:

- the fear is out of proportion to the danger
- it lasts for more than six months
- it has a significant impact on how you live your day-to-day life.

"I wish I had a reason to explain to people where my phobia came from, but I don't. I just handle it in the best way I can."

When should I get help for a phobia?

It can be difficult to know when to get help for a phobia. Bear in mind that phobias are a type of [anxiety disorder](#). It may be time to consider treatment for your phobia if:

- avoiding the trigger object, situation, place or activity affects your everyday life, or causes you great distress
- it keeps you from doing things you normally enjoy
- it causes intense and overwhelming fear, anxiety or panic
- you recognise that your fear is out of proportion to the danger

- you've had the phobia for at least six months
- it stops you getting support for other health problems – for example, a phobia that stops you using the phone or seeing the doctor.

For more information, see our pages on [self-care for phobias](#) and [treatment for phobias](#).

"It has taken me four whole years to realise that life doesn't have to be this way. I started psychotherapy. And it was when I discovered that there was another way of living."

Types of phobia

Phobias can develop around any object or situation. Some people may experience multiple phobias. They can be broadly categorised into two groups:

- [Specific phobias](#)
- [Complex phobias](#)

Specific phobias

These are phobias about a specific object or situation, such as spiders or flying. They often develop in childhood or adolescence. For some people, they might become less severe as they get older.

Some fairly common specific phobias are:

- **Animal phobias.** Such as dogs, insects, snakes or rodents.
- **Phobias of the natural environment.** Such as heights, water, darkness, storms or germs.
- **Situational phobias.** Such as flying, going to the dentist, tunnels, small spaces or escalators.
- **Body-based phobias.** Such as blood, vomit, injections, choking, medical procedures or childbirth.
- **Sexual phobias.** Such as sexual acts or fear of nudity.
- **Other phobias.** Such as certain foods, objects or costumed characters.

However, your phobia can be a completely unique experience. There are many more specific phobias than those listed above.

How it might feel to experience a specific phobia

If you're afraid of something you have to see or do a lot, this can start to have a serious impact on your everyday life.

If your phobia is about something you don't come into contact with very often, this can sometimes have less of an impact on you.

However, you may still experience fear and [anxiety](#) even when the object or situation isn't present. This means that your phobia can still affect you on a daily basis.

Complex phobias

Complex phobias tend to have a more disruptive or overwhelming impact on your life than specific phobias. They tend to develop when you are an adult.

Two of the most common complex phobias are:

- [Social phobia](#)
- [Agoraphobia](#)

What is social phobia?

If you have social phobia, you will feel a sense of intense fear in social situations. You will often try to avoid them. You might worry about a social event before, during and after it has happened. It is also known as social anxiety or social anxiety disorder.

A lot of people find social situations difficult, or feel shy or awkward at certain times – this is completely normal.

Social phobia however can completely overwhelm you. You might find it very difficult to engage in everyday activities such as:

- talking in groups
- starting conversations
- public speaking
- speaking on the phone
- meeting new people
- speaking to authority figures, such as [talking to doctors](#)
- eating and drinking in front of others
- regular trips out, to the shops for example
- going to work.

"I have suffered from phobias since I was three years old and couldn't cope with the social demands of a playgroup. I then went on to suffer from School Phobia right through to my teens, then various phobias surrounding college and work, which led to me becoming unemployed, isolated, agoraphobic and severely depressed."

You might worry about these social situations because you fear that others will judge you negatively. Or maybe you fear that you'll offend others by something you say or do. You may also worry about others noticing that you are anxious.

Social phobia can hugely affect your everyday life. It might:

- affect your self-confidence and [self-esteem](#)
- make you feel extremely isolated
- make it very difficult to develop and maintain relationships
- interfere with your ability to work, or do everyday tasks like shopping.

Lots of social phobia, but no friends

"When I walked through the door and was amongst other people, I couldn't even open my eyes."

[Read John's story](#)

What is agoraphobia?

Many people think that agoraphobia is a fear of open spaces, but it is more complex than this.

Agoraphobia is feeling anxious about being in places or situations:

- that could be difficult to get out of
- that could be embarrassing to get out of
- where you might not be able to get help if you have a [panic attack](#).

You're likely to experience high levels of anxiety about everyday situations. You may also try to avoid these situations.

Some examples include:

- being outside alone
- being in open spaces
- being in a crowd of people
- travelling by car, bus or plane
- being in enclosed spaces, such as a lift or in a shop.

Having agoraphobia can have a serious impact on the way you live your life. Many people with agoraphobia find it hard to leave the place they live.

How does agoraphobia develop?

Agoraphobia can develop due to various reasons. One example is panic disorder, but not all people with agoraphobia have panic disorder.

Agoraphobia can sometimes develop after a panic attack. You may start to feel extremely anxious and worried about having another one. In turn, you may feel your symptoms returning each time you're in a similar situation.

To manage your anxiety, you may start to avoid that particular place or situation. Avoiding particular situations may help in the short term. But this can affect the way you live your life and may make your phobia worse.

If you experience agoraphobia, it's also common that you might:

- dislike being alone, or monophobia
- become anxious in small confined spaces, or claustrophobia.

Escaping my agoraphobia

"I was scared to go out into public because I associated it with having panic attacks."

[Read Ellie's story](#)

Common symptoms of phobias

On this page:

- [Physical symptoms of phobias](#)
- [Psychological symptoms of phobias](#)

Phobias can feel different for everyone. The symptoms of phobias can also vary in severity.

Generally, the symptoms involve experiencing intense fear and anxiety. This occurs in face of the situation or object you're afraid of. If your phobia is severe, even thinking about it can trigger symptoms.

Below you will find a list of some common symptoms of phobias.

Physical symptoms of phobias

The physical symptoms you can experience may include:

- feeling unsteady, dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- feeling like you are choking
- a pounding heart, palpitations or accelerated heart rate
- chest pain or tightness in the chest
- sweating
- hot or cold flushes
- shortness of breath or a smothering sensation
- nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
- numbness or tingling sensations
- trembling or shaking.

Psychological symptoms of phobias

The psychological symptoms can vary. Some experiences may include:

- a fear of fainting
- a fear of losing control
- a fear of dying
- feeling out of touch with reality, or detached from your body – known as [dissociation](#).

If your symptoms are very intense, they could trigger a panic attack. See our pages on [anxiety and panic attacks](#) for more information.

This type of acute fear can feel extremely unpleasant and very frightening. It may lead to feelings of:

- [stress](#)
- a loss of control
- being overwhelmed
- embarrassment
- [anxiety](#)
- [depression](#).

As a result, many people with phobias avoid situations which might trigger their phobia. This solution might feel effective at first. But avoiding phobias can sometimes cause them to become worse. This may start to have a significant impact on how you live your daily life.

"I am disabled and have had medical treatments my entire life. When I was little, I used to fight people trying to take my blood, so I would have to be held down. The people raising me were completely unsympathetic to my feelings. All of this compounded to create the intense fear I experience when I'm getting my blood drawn today."

What causes phobias?

There doesn't seem to be one particular cause of phobias. There are various factors that might contribute to developing a phobia. But there is not often a clear reason why it starts.

Examples of causes of phobias

- **Past incidents or traumas.** Certain situations might have a lasting effect on how you feel about them. For example, if you experienced a lot of turbulence on a plane at a young age, you might develop a phobia of flying. Or if you were injured by a dog some years ago, you might develop a phobia of dogs.
- **Learned responses from early life.** Your phobia may develop from factors in your childhood environment. For example you might have parents or guardians who are very worried or anxious. This may affect how you cope with anxiety in later life. You might develop the same [specific phobia](#) as a parent or older sibling. If they have a severe reaction to something they fear, this might influence you to feel the same way.
- **Reactions and responses to panic or fear.** You might have a strong reaction, or a [panic attack](#), in response to a situation or object. You may find yourself feeling embarrassed by this. Especially if people around you react strongly to your response. You could develop even more intense anxiety about the idea of this happening again.
- **Experiencing long-term stress.** Stress can cause feelings of [anxiety](#) and [depression](#). It can reduce your ability to cope in particular situations. This might make you feel more fearful or anxious about being in those situations again. Over a long period, this could develop into a phobia.
- **Genetic factors.** Research suggests that some people are more vulnerable to developing a phobia than others.

You might find it helpful to try to work out the causes for your own phobia. But you might equally feel that there is no simple explanation.

Some people avoid the object or situation that triggers their phobia. But this can make your fear worse over time. Being in a scenario involving your phobia can be very difficult though. You may need professional help to enable you to do this.

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See our page on [treatment for phobias](#) for more information.

Living with my phobia of bananas

"I know bananas can't hurt me but for some reason I am full of fear whenever I see or smell them."

[Read Vix's story](#)

Self-care tips for phobias

On this page:

- [Talk to someone you trust](#)
- [Learn to manage panic and anxiety](#)
- [Look into support groups](#)
- [Use self-help resources](#)
- [Take a course for your specific phobia](#)

There are some things you can try to address your phobia. They may help reduce the impact it has on your life. Some people find these ideas useful, but they may not be for everyone. Only try what you feel comfortable with.

Talk to someone you trust

You might find that talking to someone you trust about your phobia can help. Having someone listen to you and showing they care can help in itself.

If you find it hard to talk, try writing things down. You could try writing a letter to help you set out your thoughts more clearly.

It might be useful to show them our page on [how to help someone experiencing phobias](#).

Learn to manage panic and anxiety

Learning to manage the panic and anxiety you feel from your phobia can be really difficult. But by doing this, you might feel more in control around your trigger situation or object.

- **Learn relaxation techniques.** There are many different relaxation techniques available. They range from meditation, to breathing control and stretching. See our pages on [relaxation](#) for more information.
- **Try coping methods for panic attacks.** During a panic attack, try focusing on your breathing or senses, and stamping on the spot. For more details about panic attacks and how to cope, see our page on [panic attacks](#).

"When I begin to feel 'weird' in public now, I breathe in for four seconds (through my stomach, not my chest). I pause for four seconds. Then I exhale (pulling my stomach back in) for four seconds. This kind of breathing is hard to master, but it's the same kind of breathing we do when we are sleeping."

Look into support groups

- **Join a peer support group.** In peer support, you'll share experiences with others facing similar challenges. It can feel comforting to know that you're not alone. Other people may also be able to suggest different coping methods you can try. The [Mind Infoline](#) or [No More Panic](#) might be able to tell you more about suitable local groups. See our pages on [peer support](#) for more information and available services.
- **Try online support groups.** Online support can be particularly useful at times when you aren't able to go out. Or if you find it hard to talk to people on the phone or face-to-face. Online communities like [Mind's Side by Side](#), can offer support and are monitored for your safety. See our pages about [online mental health](#) for more on how to use these resources safely.

"I love helping others in a similar position. I have gained considerable amounts of knowledge, and am trying to share it."

Use self-help resources

Some people use self-help books or online programmes to help cope with phobias. These are often based on principles of [cognitive behavioural therapy](#) (CBT). They will help you develop your own programme to reduce anxiety and make it easier to deal with your phobia triggers.

- **Books and written resources.** A healthcare professional might prescribe you a self-help book from the charity [Reading Well](#). These resources are called Books on Prescription. You can also buy these online or borrow from your local library. You can find many other resources available to read. Try contacting organisations such as [Anxiety UK](#) or [No More Panic](#) for more information.

- **Online programmes and resources.** You could also try online self-help programmes. You may have to pay for these, or you may be able to access free through your GP. For example, there are several app-based CBT courses recommended on the [NHS apps library](#).

"Always remember that phobias are not life threatening and you are bigger than your phobias. A phobia is only as big as we make it and only as small as we make it, and it can be beaten."

Take a course for your specific phobia

Some organisations run courses in-person to help people overcome [specific phobias](#).

For example, courses may be run by:

- airline companies and airports, to help people overcome their fear of flying
- zoos, to help people reduce their fear of certain animals or insects.

Take care when researching these online, as you might come across photos that trigger your phobia. It might be a good idea to ask a friend or family member to look them up for you.

These courses vary in price, availability and how they are run. Many courses are based on hypnosis or CBT principles such as exposure therapy. You can talk to your doctor about whether you think a course like this could benefit you.

Treatment for phobias

On this page:

- [If your phobia prevents you from seeking help](#)
- [Talking treatments for phobias](#)
- [Hypnotherapy for phobias](#)
- [Medication for phobias](#)

To get treatment for your phobia, usually the first place to go is your GP. They can assess you and explain what treatments are available.

There are very few treatment guidelines specific to phobias. The [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence](#) (NICE) recommends three main types of treatment for [anxiety and panic disorders](#). These should be included in your options:

- talking treatments
- medication
- self-help advice and information – this includes self-help books, online programmes, support groups or relaxation techniques.

Your GP should explain all your options. They should consider your views before starting any treatment.

If your phobia prevents you from seeking help

It can sometimes be very difficult to seek help for a phobia. Especially if your triggers include doctors, medical settings, phone calls or leaving the house.

If seeking help involves the situation or object you fear, try some of the ideas below:

- **Book a different type of appointment.** Try to find out if your doctor offers online or phone assessments, or home visits. If not, request an appointment at the quietest time of day.
- **Get someone you trust to help.** Some practices allow you to give consent for someone to book appointments on your behalf. Or they may be able to sit with

you during consultations. If your practice won't allow this, it still might help to take someone along. They can wait for you in the waiting room.

- **Prepare what you want to say in advance.** You might be worried about speaking to your GP. Try reading our [Find the words](#) guide to help you express your feelings and experiences.

For more information, see our pages on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#).

Talking treatments for phobias

During a talking treatment, you'll talk to a professional about your thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Your doctor or mental health professional can explain the options available to you. They can help you find the right talking treatment. Unfortunately, there is often a long waiting list for NHS talking treatments.

For information on how to access them – through the NHS, charities or privately – see our pages on [talking treatments](#).

See our page on [phobia self-care](#) for ideas you can try while you're on the waiting list.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) aims to:

- identify connections between thoughts, feelings and behaviour
- help develop practical skills to manage any patterns that are causing you problems.

CBT can include a range of techniques when used to treat phobias. It may include [exposure therapy](#) (known as desensitisation).

For more information, see our pages on [CBT](#).

You might follow a programme of CBT using a computer or workbook. You can do this as well as sessions with a therapist, or by yourself at home. This might be suitable if you experience [social phobia](#) or [agoraphobia](#).

For [specific phobias](#), NICE recommends that computerised CBT should not be used routinely for treatment.

"Cognitive behavioural therapy changed my life. Through using self-help books, to having professional CBT from my local Community Mental Health Team, I slowly learned how to change my negative thoughts to more realistic ones, and to finally overcome some of my deeply entrenched phobias."

Exposure therapy

Exposure therapy means gradually exposing you to the object or situation you fear. This is carried out in a safe and controlled way.

For example, if you have a phobia of the dentist, in exposure therapy you might:

- read about the dentist
- look at pictures of a dentist's chair
- sit in the waiting room
- talk to the dentist
- finally sit in the dentist's chair.

It's important that you fully understand the treatment and feel comfortable with your therapist. You will agree each of the steps in advance. This technique must be carefully managed to avoid causing distress and anxiety.

Through repeated exposure, you may start to feel more control over your phobia. Exposure therapy may even be carried out using virtual reality (VR) tools. However, this type of treatment is largely still in its pilot stage.

VR therapy and me

"I remember taking the headset off and starting to cry. I'd made it! It was a true breakthrough."

[Read Rochelle's story](#)

Hypnotherapy for phobias

Hypnotherapy uses hypnosis to try to change habits or treat certain conditions. Hypnosis involves putting you in a state of deep relaxation in order to access:

- subconscious beliefs
- thoughts
- memories.

These are all factors which may affect the way you act.

Hypnosis might help you to change unwanted thoughts and behaviours. It aims to do this through suggestion and by increasing your self-awareness.

Some people with phobias find hypnotherapy helps relieve their symptoms.

The Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) has a register of hypnotherapists. They are trained to national standard level. To find a hypnotherapist, you can [search the CNHC register](#) by therapy type.

See our [list of complementary and alternative therapies](#) for more information.

Medication for phobias

If your phobia causes you severe [anxiety](#), medication may be offered. There are currently three types of drugs considered useful in managing anxiety:

- [Antidepressants](#)
- [Tranquillisers](#)
- [Beta-blockers](#)

These are only available through your GP, not over the counter.

Antidepressants

To treat anxiety, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants are most commonly prescribed. These drugs can be helpful, but may cause side effects like sleep problems for example. Unfortunately, you might find increased anxiety is another possible side effect.

If SSRIs don't work or aren't suitable, you may be offered alternative medication.

For social phobia, you may be offered a reversible monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) antidepressant. It may be called moclobemide, or Manerix.

Some foods can have a dangerous reaction with MAOI antidepressants. A warning about which foods to avoid is given with the drugs in the Patient Information Leaflet.

For more information, see our pages on [antidepressants](#) and our [A-Z of antidepressants](#).

Tranquillisers

To reduce severe anxiety, a benzodiazepine tranquilliser may be offered. Severe anxiety means it has a significant impact on your day-to-day life.

The tranquilliser you may be offered might be called diazepam, or Valium.

Benzodiazepines can be addictive. They should be taken at a low dose, for a short period of time. Preferably they should be a one-off dose and for no longer than four weeks.

See our page on [sleeping pills and minor tranquillisers](#) for more information.

Beta-blockers

Beta-blockers are sometimes used to treat the physical symptoms of anxiety, such as:

- a rapid heartbeat
- palpitations (a sudden irregular heartbeat, or flutter)
- tremors (shaking).

You may be offered a beta-blocker called propranolol.

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Beta-blockers are not psychiatric drugs, so they don't reduce psychological symptoms. But they might help in certain situations which trigger your phobia.

Beta-blockers are not addictive. However they can cause side effects such as sleep problems and nightmares. If you decide to stop taking them, slowly reduce the dose. As they affect the heart and blood pressure, you should stop taking them gradually.

See our pages about [coming off medication](#) for more information.

How to help someone with a phobia

This section is for friends and family who want tips to support someone who has a phobia.

On this page:

- [Try to understand phobias](#)
- [Take their phobia seriously](#)
- [Don't put pressure on them](#)
- [Find out what helps them](#)
- [Support them in seeking help](#)
- [Remember to look after yourself](#)

Try to understand phobias

- **Find out as much as you can about phobias.** Doing this will help you understand what someone might be experiencing. Our [information on phobias](#) is a good place to start. Reading personal experiences from the [Mind blog](#) can help too.
- **Try to learn about their experience of living with a phobia.** You could ask them how their phobia affects their life, or what can make it better or worse. Listening to their experience might help you empathise with how they feel.

Take their phobia seriously

It might feel hard to understand why someone has a phobia of a certain situation or object. Especially when their phobia seems irrational.

However, it's important that you take their phobia seriously. Try to understand that their phobia can:

- cause severe anxiety
- cause panic and distress
- affect their daily life.

You may not be able to see why they are so afraid of something. But the anxiety and fear they feel is very real.

"I never complain because I see no point in doing so, but I get very tired of being politely mocked for my fear."

Don't put pressure on them

Avoiding a situation can make a phobia worse over time. But it can also be very distressing if someone is forced into situations they're not ready to face.

It's important to be patient with them. You should work at a pace that suits them.

- Try not to pressure your friend or family member to do more than they feel comfortable with.
- Don't try to force them to be in a situation that triggers their phobia.

"My mother always brings up the discussion about me facing my phobia and maybe getting treatment for it. But for me, right now, I don't want to face it. I feel I am not ready and I don't feel it is impacting my life enough that it needs to be faced."

Find out what helps them

Ask your friend or family member what you can do to help. For example, it might help to:

- take them out of the situation
- talk to them calmly
- do breathing exercises with them.

This might help them feel safer and calmer when they start to feel frightened or panicked. Knowing that you are around, and know what to do, can feel reassuring.

"I feel better if I have someone with me who knows about my anxiety and how to calm me down. It helps if I just focus on that person talking."

Support them in seeking help

If you think their phobia is becoming a problem for them, encourage them to seek treatment.

- **Suggest to help arrange a doctor's appointment.** If they're unable to leave the house, try to find out if their GP does home, online or phone visits. See our pages on [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) for more information.
- **Offer support when they attend appointments.** You could offer to come along to their appointments and wait in the waiting room. It can sometimes help just to have someone accompany them. You can also help them plan what they'd like to talk about with the doctor. Our resource [Find the words](#) offers tips on talking to your GP about your mental health.
- **Encourage them to seek help from a therapist.** You can help them research different options. See our page on [how to find a therapist](#).
- **Help them look into different options for support.** Try finding out about community services, peer support groups or your local Mind. To find your local Mind, you can use our [interactive map of local Minds](#). For more information, see our [useful contacts for phobias](#).

Remember to look after yourself

It can feel challenging to support someone with a mental health problem. You are not alone if you feel overwhelmed at times.

It's important to try to look after your own mental health. If not, it can feel hard to find the energy and time you need to be able to help someone else.

- **Set boundaries and don't take on too much.** If you become unwell, you won't be able to offer as much support. Decide what your limits are and how much you are able to help. See our pages on [how to manage stress](#) for more information.
- **Share your caring role with others, if you can.** It's often easier to support someone if you're not doing it alone. Reach out to other friends and family, if the person is comfortable with you doing so.
- **Talk to others about how you feel.** Talking about your feelings with someone you trust can help you feel supported too. Try to be careful about how much you

share about the person you're supporting.

For more ideas, see our pages on [how to cope when supporting someone else](#). This information gives practical suggestions on what you can do and where to find support.

Useful contacts for phobias

Mind's services

- [Helplines](#) – our Infolines provide information and support by phone, email and text.
- [Local Minds](#) – provide face-to-face services across England and Wales. These might be talking therapies, peer support and advocacy.
- [Side by Side](#) – our supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Other organisations for phobia support

Anxiety UK

[03444 775 774](tel:03444775774) (helpline)

[07537 416 905](tel:07537416905) (text)

anxietyuk.org.uk

Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

babcp.com

Information about cognitive behavioural therapy and related treatments, including details of accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

bacp.co.uk

Professional body for talking therapy and counselling. Provides information and a list of accredited therapists.

Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)

cnhc.org.uk

Lists complementary healthcare practitioners.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

[nice.org.uk](https://www.nice.org.uk)

Produces guidelines on best practice in healthcare.

No More Panic

[nomorepanic.co.uk](https://www.nomorepanic.co.uk)

Provides information, support and advice for those with panic disorder, anxiety, phobias or OCD, including a forum and chat room.

No Panic

[0300 7729844](tel:03007729844)

[nopanic.org.uk](https://www.nopanic.org.uk)

Provides a helpline, step-by-step programmes, and support for people with anxiety disorders.

Reading Well

[reading-well.org.uk](https://www.reading-well.org.uk)

A series of self-help books to help you understand and manage your health and wellbeing.

Royal College of Psychiatrists

[rcpsych.ac.uk](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

Professional body for psychiatrists. Includes information about mental health problems and treatments.

Time to Change

[time-to-change.org.uk](https://www.time-to-change.org.uk) (England)

[timetochangewales.org.uk](https://www.timetochangewales.org.uk) (Wales)

National campaign to end stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems in England and Wales.

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Triumph Over Phobia (TOP UK)

topuk.org

Provides self-help therapy groups and support for those with OCD, phobias and related anxiety disorders.

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References are available on request.