

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a nation-wide, charitable organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. For more information about the CMHA and our services, please go to [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

# Phobias and Panic Disorders



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# What are Phobias and Panic Disorders?

Phobias and panic disorders are included in a group of mental illnesses known as anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders are among the most common type of mental health problems, affecting one out of every ten Canadians. In spite of this startling statistic, anxiety disorders are not well understood, and those experiencing these conditions are often regarded as “weak, self-indulgent or undisciplined”.

For an overview of anxiety disorders, please see the Canadian Mental Health Association pamphlet, “Understanding Anxiety Disorders” available at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

Fear is a natural part of our lives; it is an instinctive human reaction that protects us from danger. However, when fear becomes a dominating force, overwhelming our ability to function on a day-to-day basis, it may be the result of a phobia or panic disorder. Even though people who are having a panic attack know that their reaction is disproportionate or even unrelated to a situation, they cannot stop the terror that paralyzes them.

Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, people with these disorders are often called “overreacting or hysterical” by others. Coupled with their own feelings of embarrassment and guilt, these individuals often do not seek help for a condition that is treatable.

## Symptoms

The physical symptoms of phobias and panic attacks include:

- Racing pulse, heart palpitations, possibly even chest pain
- Shortness of breath, panting, dry mouth
- Blushing
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Trembling, shaking, muscle tension
- Dizziness
- Hot flashes and sweating, or chills
- Difficulties with sleep
- Inability to concentrate

The symptoms can be so overwhelming that the person may believe that they are going to die. In fact, it is not unusual for these individuals to

end up in the hospital emergency department numerous times, convinced that they are having a heart attack.

## Panic Disorders

Panic attacks may be totally unpredictable, last ten to thirty minutes and are unrelated to any specific “trigger.” They can strike at any time, in any place and cause incredible, overwhelming fear. In fact, the fear generated by a panic attack can be so intense, it actually causes people to become anxious about the possibility of future attacks; this is called a panic disorder. Panic disorders cause so much anxiety for people, they avoid any situation where they might have a panic attack, and are terrified to leave their homes (agoraphobia).

Panic disorders affect approximately two million Canadians. Statistics show that of the people seeking treatment, two-thirds of them are women. The disorders often first appear in teenagers and young adults.

The cause of panic disorders is not known, however it is believed that genetics (a family history), stress and biological changes in the brain contribute to the illness. In addition, traumatic life events such as the death or serious illness of a loved one, an accident or rape, childhood abuse or even happy events such as the birth of a child, can increase the risk of developing panic disorders.

## Phobias

Unlike panic disorders, phobias have “triggers” that are identifiable. People with phobias have an

overwhelming, irrational fear of “things,” such as objects, situations or animals.

It is believed that phobias develop from events or people that influenced the person in their developmental years. A history of family break-up, parental aversion to socializing, another influential adult’s phobias or a traumatic event can be linked to phobia in a young person.

Generally there are two different categories of phobias:

### Specific Phobia

As the name suggests, people with this type of phobia are terrified of something very specific. Examples include fear of heights, flying, certain animals or insects, water (hydrophobia), weather conditions (such as thunder and lightning), public transportation, needles, tunnels, bridges and open spaces. There are many other examples of specific phobias, each as unique as the individual who experiences them.

### Social Phobia

Social situations provoke tremendous fear and self-consciousness for those with a social phobia; included in this category is the fear of performing in public. To avoid the feelings of terror and humiliation, or the potential of having a panic attack in public, those with a social phobia will go to great lengths to avoid being in any situation where they will be surrounded by other people.

## Treatment

If you, or someone you care about, show the symptoms of a phobia or panic disorder, the first thing you need to do is talk with your family doctor. An initial medical examination should be done, to rule out any underlying physical causes for the symptoms. For example, anemia and thyroid problems mimic the symptoms of anxiety.

If your family doctor identifies a phobia or panic disorder, there are a number of different treatments available to help you. Psychotherapy, relaxation and breathing techniques, and medication have proven to be very effective. If you have a phobia, behaviour therapy could also be recommended, to help you become desensitized to the “thing” that causes your fear.

## Lifestyle Choices

You need to be an active member of your mental health team. Take a proactive role in your well-being and make lifestyle choices that are mindful and healthy.

Do:

- **Join a support group if your community has one:** It is important for you to network with others who are looking for solutions to their illness and coping strategies for their disorders;
- **Eat a healthy diet:** A well-balanced, nutritious diet is important for overall health;
- **Avoid alcohol, caffeinated beverages and illegal drugs:** While it is tempting to

seek emotional relief from substances, they often increase your anxiety and can trigger panic attacks;

- **Exercise:** Get active and stay active. Physical activity has been proven to improve mood and a sense of calm;
- **Stress management:** Find a course on stress management and seek ways to reduce your stressors and your perception of them;
- **Try meditation and other activities that calm the mind:** Sitting or moving meditations such as tai chi and yoga are beneficial to calming the mind;
- **Get a good night’s sleep:** You need sufficient sleep to help you feel good the next day, so be sure to get enough rest at night.

## Community Organizations

Organizations such as the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and other community mental health agencies offer services, information and support to people affected by mental illness.

To contact the Canadian Mental Health Association, go to [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) and find a branch close to you.

Don’t let fear overwhelm your life. We can help you manage your phobias or panic disorder. Pick up the phone and call us before another day of fear threatens to control your life.