Characteristics of Phobias

THE DSM SYSTEM

There are a number of systems for classifying and diagnosing mental health problems. Perhaps the best known is the DSM. This stands for Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder and is published by the American Psychiatric Association.

The DSM is updated every so often as ideas about abnormality change. The current version is the 5th edition so it is commonly called the DSM-5. This was published in 2013.

- ## DSM-5 categories of phobia

  Phobias fall under the category of **anxiety disorders.**All **phobias** are characterised by excessive fear and anxiety (often **irrational**) , triggered by an object, place or situation e.g. **ophidiophobia** (fear of snakes), situations (e.g. **aerophobia**, fear of flying) or concepts (e.g. **athazagoraphobia**, fear of being forgotten) which trigger extreme **anxiety** in the phobic person . The extent of the fear is out of proportion to any real danger presented by the phobic stimulus. The latest version of the DSM recognises the following categories of phobia and related anxiety disorder:

  • **Specific phobia** (of objects or situations): phobia of an object, such as an animal or body part, or a situation such as flying or having an injection e.g.:

    - **arachnophobia** (fear of spiders)
    - **trypanophobia** (fear of injections)
    - **claustrophobia** (fear of enclosed spaces)
    -

- • **Social phobia** (social anxiety disorder): phobia of a social situation such as public speaking
  or using a public toilet.
  • **Agoraphobia**: phobia of being outside or in a public place.
-

Behavioural characteristics of phobias

- We respond to things or situations we fear by **behaving** in particular ways. We respond by feeling high levels of anxiety and trying to escape. The fear responses in phobias are the same as we experience for any other fear even if the level of fear is irrational – out of all proportion to the phobic stimulus.

- **Behavioural characteristics** of phobias include the ways in which the phobic person responds to the **phobic stimulus.**
- A common response to a phobic stimulus is **panic**
- **Panic**
  A phobic person may panic in response to the presence of the phobic stimulus. Panic

may involve a range of behaviours including crying, screaming or running away. Children may react slightly differently, for example by freezing, clinging or having a tantrum.

- Panic tends to result in:
    - a state of high **stress** and anxiety
    - 'freezing' on the spot
    - crying, screaming or shrieking
    - running away
    - passing out/fainting
- Another commonly experienced behavioural response to a phobic stimulus is **avoidance:**
    - Going out of one's way to avoid the phobic stimulus (e.g. by never booking a holiday which involves a flight)
    - Taking steps to ensure that one is not going to be confronted by the phobic stimulus (e.g. by refusing all invitations to social events)
    - Informing other people of the phobia so that they are aware (e.g. friends and colleagues are asked not to talk about illness in the presence of the phobic person)
- **Endurance**

  The alternative to avoidance is endurance, in which a sufferer remains in the presence of the phobic stimulus but continues to experience high levels of anxiety. This may be unavoidable in some situation, for example for a person who has an extreme fear of flying.

.

Cognitive characteristics of phobias

The **cognitive** element is concerned with the ways in which people process information. People with phobias process information about phobic stimuli differently from other objects or situations.

- **Cognitive characteristics** of phobias involve **Irrational beliefs, cognitive distortions** and **selective attention** e.g.:
    - how the phobic person thinks about the phobic stimulus
    - the ways in which the phobic person **processes information** about the phobic stimulus
- **Irrational beliefs**

  A phobic may hold irrational beliefs in relation to phobic stimuli. For example, social phobias can involve beliefs like 'I must always sound intelligent' or 'if I blush people will think I'm weak'. This kind of belief increases the pressure on the sufferer to perform well in social situations.

    - '*If I touch cotton wool it might get into my bloodstream and cause a heart-attack'*
    - *'What if I talk to a new person at a party and they laugh at me and tell*

everyone that I'm stupid?'
    - *'If I use this escalator I could get my clothes caught up in the machinery and be horribly injured'*
- **Cognitive distortions**

The phobic's perceptions of the phobic stimulus may be distorted. So, for example, an *omphalophobic* is likely to see belly buttons as ugly and/or disgusting, and an *ophidiophobic* may see snakes as alien and aggressive looking.

- **Selective attention to the phobic stimulus** involves the phobic person becoming **fixated** on the phobic stimulus and unable to draw their attention away from it. If a sufferer can see the phobic stimulus it is hard to look away from it. Keeping our attention on something really dangerous is a good thing as it gives us the best chance of reacting quickly to a threat, but this is not so useful when the fear is irrational. e.g.:
    - staring at someone's shirt buttons at a party due to the fear that the buttons will choke them.

Emotional characteristics of phobias

Anxiety

Phobias are classed as **anxiety disorders**. By definition then they involve an **emotional** response of anxiety and fear. Anxiety is an unpleasant state of high arousal. This prevents the sufferer relaxing and makes it very difficult to experience any positive emotion. Anxiety can be long term. Fear is the immediate and extremely unpleasant response we experience when we encounter or think about the phobic stimulus.

Example: arachnophobia

Matt has a phobia of spiders (*arachnophobia*). His anxiety levels will increase whenever he enters a place associated with spiders – this may be the spidery bit of a zoo or his own garden shed! This anxiety is a general response to the situation. When he actually sees a spider he experiences fear – a very strong emotional response directed particularly towards the spider itself.

Emotional responses are unreasonable

The emotional responses we experience in relation to phobic stimuli go beyond what is reasonable. The phobic person generally knows that their response is **disproportionate** to the phobic stimulus but they still feel fear when they are confronted by it.So, for example, Matt's fear of spiders involves a very strong emotional response to a tiny and harmless spider. This is wildly disproportionate to the danger posed by any spider Matt is likely to meet in his shed.

A phobic response is an **extreme** emotional response which is usually out of proportion to the threat posed by the phobic stimulus, e.g.:**xanthophobia** is the fear of the colour yellow (it is difficult to think of many situations - if any at all - where the colour yellow poses a threat to life).