

Phobias: Feeling Trapped by Fear

Dear Dr Jules

I want to see my family in the UK but I hate boats and I am afraid of flying - I tried someone hypnotising me but it did not work. It makes me feel like a prisoner. Please help.

Hi there,

I'm sorry to hear about your dilemma and understand how trapped you must feel. You are describing the experience of someone with a *Phobia*. A phobia is a strong persistent fear of a situation or object, that is not normally seen as overly dangerous. This fear gives you an overwhelming desire to avoid certain situations, even though part of you knows it is not rational. Phobias can be really disabling and can interfere with normal everyday life, as yours is in stopping you from travelling to be with loved ones.

Symptoms of phobias include classic fear responses such as a rapid heartbeat, trembling, breaking out in a cold sweat, feeling nauseous, all similar to a panic attack. Generally, people try to get away from whatever it is they are afraid of in order to decrease the bad feelings, but repeated 'fleeing' only serves to reinforce the fear in your brain.

It might help you to know that many people have phobias, although they don't often talk about them. People can be fearful of many things such as spiders, heights, flying, public speaking, crowded places, or the sight of blood, to name just a few. When I am flying I often observe the other passengers and notice which ones are holding onto the arm rests that bit more tightly during take-off and landing, as even though flying is now common place, many people remain anxious or even avoidant of travelling in planes. Phobias are generally thought to be a learned fear, for example if a person gets bitten by a dog they may start avoiding dogs to the point where they become phobic about being around them. Sometimes it is a one-off event like this that starts a phobia, or it may be a fear that builds gradually, or that starts during a time of general stress when emotional arousal is already high. It might be helpful to know, though, that we don't need to know the exact cause to treat a phobia successfully.

Treatment of phobias varies according to the type of phobia, but it usually follows a more behavioral path of desensitization where the cycle of fear is broken. Gradually through supportive therapy a person is helped to face the things they fear and re-learns how to deal with them more effectively. Some people find hypnotherapy helpful, but generally a solid treatment plan with a therapist who is experienced in working with anxiety and phobias will yield positive results in a relatively brief number of sessions.

So, to answer your question about your fear of flying or travelling by sea, there is hope and you don't need to remain a prisoner forever. I have successfully worked with a wide variety of phobias over the years, including fears of flying, crowded public spaces and even a client who had a phobia about his local Sainburys! All of these clients were helped to gain control of their fears and move forward with greater confidence. The first step to getting rid of the fear is to make the decision to do something about it, and by writing in you are already on the path to change, so I encourage you to keep that momentum going. Bon chance!

