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**Agoraphobia**

**Session 1: Understanding Agoraphobia**

The term agoraphobia originates from the Greek word ***agora,*** meaning “open space” or “marketplace” and from the English word phobia, meaning “fear”. Often, when we hear the term agoraphobia, we tend to view it as a fear of open spaces; however, it is actually much more complex. Agoraphobia can be defined as a ***fear of being in a situation where escape may be difficult or that help may not be available if things go wrong.***

Examples of this are:

* leaving the house
* being alone
* being in crowded places
* being in an elevator
* being on public transport

Agoraphobia without a history of panic disorder, can be triggered by irrational fears such as:

* Becoming infected by a serious illness if they were to leave the house
* Being a victim of a serious crime or terrorists attack if they were to leave the house
* Doing something by accident that will result in them embarrassing themselves in front of others.

**What causes Agoraphobia?**

It tends to develop from panic disorder and occurs when individuals associates **panic attacks** with certain places, people and situation where they originally occurred. As a result, the individual develops a fear that a panic attack will reoccur in the same or similar situation and they learn to avoid that situation.

**What is a panic attack?**

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense mental and physical changes in the body. Symptoms of a panic attack are similar to symptoms of anxiety, however, they are more intense, frightening and happen suddenly, often for no obvious reason. Whilst they are frightening, they are not dangerous and will not cause you any physical harm.

According to some surveys, one in three people will experience at least one panic attack at some point in their life. Many people get over this with no need for treatment and when treatment is required, it is usually short and often successful.

**Exercise 1.1: How does Agoraphobia affect me?**

**(What are you, thinking feelings, any behaviours?)**

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Symptoms of agoraphobia can be placed into 4 categories

* **Body** – the physical sensations you experience when you are anxious
* **Thoughts** – what goes through your mind when you are anxious
* **Feelings** – the emotions that you feel when you are anxious
* **Behaviour** – how you act/what you do/what you avoid when you are anxious

These four areas (body, thoughts, feelings and behaviours) are all tied to each other and each can affect the other. The following diagram illustrates what we call the **‘vicious cycle’.**

**Andrew’s Example**

Andrew experienced his first Panic attack when he was riding a bus to college. Now Andrew feels very uncomfortable when going on bus journeys. He worries that if he were to get on the bus he will have another panic attack. As he is stood in bus shelter, he can feel the symptoms of panic and anxiety starting. He can feel his muscles tensing, he becomes sweaty, shaky and his breathing becomes rapid. He starts to feel weak and dizzy. He starts to think “**What if I can’t get off the bus?” “everybody will look at me and laugh” “I can’t cope” What if I****collapse?**He starts to worry that he will collapse or faint, and is finding it hard to concentrate and focus. Andrew decides to leave the bus shelter and goes home. He notices that when he leaves he immediately starts to feel better.

In this example, we can see that agoraphobia affects Andrew’s:

**Thinking**

* ‘what if I can’t get off the bus”
* ‘What if I collapse or faint?’
* ‘What if people look and laugh at me?’
* ‘I can’t cope’

**Feelings**

* Anxious
* Worried
* Dread

**Body**

* Increased sweating
* Shaking
* Increased heart rate
* Muscle tension

**Behaviour**

* Difficulty concentrating
* Leaves the bus stop immediately and goes home. He does not make it to college.

**CBT Vicious Circle**

The diagram below shows us that what we think about a situation affects how we feel physically and emotionally and changes what we do, (behaviour). If we begin to identify and recognise our unhelpful patterns (what keeps our vicious circle going), we can start to make changes and by doing so hopefully we can begin to weaken the cycle. An “Agoraphobia diary” can help us to recognise patterns in our thoughts, feelings and behaviours when we feel anxious.

**Agoraphobic Situation**

Standing at the bus stop waiting to go to college

**Thoughts**

What if I can’t get off the bus?

What if I collapse and faint?

What if people look at me and laugh?

**Physical Sensations**

Increased sweating

shaky

increased heart rate

muscle tension

**Feelings**

Anxious

worried

dread

**Behaviour**

loss of focus and concentration

leaves bus stop

goes home

**Exercise 1.2**

**Complete your own cycle of panic.**

**Situation**

**Agoraphobia Diary**

**Physical Sensations**

**Thoughts**

**Behaviours**

**Feelings**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Date/Time** | **Situation (What happened, where were you, what was said etc** | **Thoughts**  **(What thoughts were you having at this time)** | **Feelings (physical and emotional)** | **Behaviours (How did you act, what did you do or not do)** |
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**Getting started on controlling Agoraphobia**

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is an ancient eastern practice, which is very relevant for our lives today. Mindfulness is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally. It increases our awareness so we can react with greater choice.

**Mindfulness Activity**

Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day, for one or 2 minutes. For example: Drink a cup of tea. Walk. Wash the dishes.

Whatever you are doing, be in that moment, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.

Simply notice whenever other thoughts and sensations come to mind, then re-focus on your chosen mindful activity.

Be patient and compassionate with yourself.

Describe… rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.

It is as it is.

It will pass.

For more information on mindfulness contact:

Lifelink on 0141 552 4434 or info@lifelink.co.uk.

**Home Practice**

* Use your Agoraphobia diary to record times when you feel particularly anxious over the next week – what happened? What *thoughts, feelings,* and *behaviours* did you experience?
* Complete your vicious cycle
* Practice the Mindfulness activity.