

FACE *your* FEAR

Christopher Paul Jones used to suffer from phobias.

He explains how his own experience led him to develop a seven-step model for change

I have suffered from multiple phobias, including flying, public speaking and a fear of insects. I would avoid flying at all costs, following a frightening incident in a helicopter. I was also unable to face an audience, without hearing in my mind the taunting laughter of my classmates. My experiences led me to explore various therapeutic techniques, which eventually led to the creation of the Integrated Change System (ICS).

The ICS is a seven-step intervention that uses specific techniques – in a particular order – to change fear, phobia and anxiety. It is the culmination of more than 20 years of research across Europe, North America and Asia.

The ICS is an integrated model that combines mainstream approaches, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), with techniques such as mindfulness, clinical hypnotherapy, neurolinguistic programming, bilateral stimulation, timeline tools, self-soothing and somatic methods.

I also look at external influences that can affect fear, phobia and anxiety, including environmental stress, work and relationship pressures, diet and exercise. The emphasis is on rapid desensitisation, rather than gradual reductions in sensitivity.

Step 1: recognise what you're really afraid of

You cannot get to where you want to be without first knowing where you are. So, the first step aims to pinpoint what's really going on for a person with a phobia. For example, a fear of flying could be broken down into many different phobias. It could be a fear of heights or turbulence. It could also be a fear of being trapped, far from home or losing control.

It's important to identify the fears, so that we can identify the best techniques and tools to help the client. The different fears will also each have a different root cause, which we will need to address.

People often ask 'why' questions to try to identify a phobia. But why questions tend to be logical and analytical. And fears, phobias and anxiety are rarely logical. Instead of asking why, it can be more helpful to consider the how, when, where and what of the fear. How does somebody 'do' their phobia? If a client were to teach someone how to do their fear, what would the person need to picture in their mind? What would they need to feel and believe? How would they need to hold themselves?

Step 2: relax the conscious mind

In order to really understand a phobia, the client needs to learn how to turn off their logical, conscious mind and connect with their emotional, subconscious mind. Relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and various mindfulness tools can help. I also use an open awareness technique, which can reduce internal chatter. I ask a client to stand straight, with their feet shoulder-width apart, and smile. They should then stretch their arms forward, touching index fingers, and focus on a spot above eye level. Next, slowly move the fingers apart, while keeping the gaze fixed. They should maintain focus as they stretch their arms out to the sides. Then, lower the arms, take a deep breath and hold the wide awareness.

Step 3: reward for your fear

There was probably a time in the past when the fear response was the best resource the brain had at its disposal. In other words, what is now a problem was once a solution. It can therefore be difficult to overcome a fear or phobia, often because the person believes it keeps them safe or protected.

So, the third step considers barriers to change. What need does the phobia meet? We can then think how to allow the emotional mind to find better ways to meet the need. So, it becomes easier to let go of the phobia.

For example, let's consider a phobia of heights. If you have fallen while climbing a tree as a child or have witnessed someone fall from a high building, your emotional brain might activate a fear of heights. The fear response fulfils a need for safety – and can be protective.

But it can also restrict someone's daily life or activities: they might avoid hiking or refuse to enter a tall building. The logical brain understands there is no real risk, but you have to teach the emotional mind that it's safe. Therapy can help the person to find more rational ways to feel secure, without avoiding heights.

I find it's effective to ask the client to:

- identify the phobia and resistance: recognise the part of them that clings to their phobia and feel where the resistance manifests in their body
- visualise the resistance: imagine removing the resistant part from their body and placing it on their hand

- personify the resistance: visualise the resistant part as a person, object or other entity, with a distinct appearance and colour
- understand the intent: acknowledge the resistant part has a positive intent
- engage in a mental dialogue with the resistance: what positive outcome does this behaviour aim to achieve? Continue this inquiry, asking the same question after each answer, until no further answers emerge, revealing the highest positive intention
- assess and challenge: reflect on whether the highest intention, such as safety, is met by maintaining the phobia, especially in moments of acute anxiety. Consider how the original intention might be undermining the true desires
- enter a dialogue for alternatives: discuss with this personified part how it might better achieve its positive intention
- witness transformation: observe as this part changes in appearance, indicating a readiness to let go of its old role
- integrate and move forward: reintegrate the transformed part back into the body, feeling the shift. Visualise moving forward with a new, healthier approach to achieving the highest intention.

Step 4: recipe (deconstructing your strategy)

How we feel in the moment is a combination of what we picture in our mind, what we say to ourselves in our head, what we feel, what we believe, our posture and how we breathe. Step four covers ways to identify and change the strategy, developed by the subconscious, which creates the phobic response.

Imagine someone with arachnophobia, a fear of spiders. When they see a spider, they might imagine it to be overwhelmingly large and menacing. They might tell themselves, in a terrifying internal voice, that the spider will harm them. Their body tenses, their breathing quickens and they feel tension in their gut. All these responses are part of their fear 'recipe'.

'The third step considers barriers to change'

The fourth step is about understanding and then changing the mental recipe that the subconscious uses to produce fear. The person can start by altering how they visualise the spider. Instead of seeing it as large and threatening, they might picture it as tiny and cartoonish, perhaps even dancing humorously.

It can also help to change the sound of the internal voice. Imagine the squeaky voice of Mickey Mouse – and notice how the fear feels less intense when the voice is less serious. The client can also consciously relax their body and slow their breathing, which counters the physical tension and rapid breathing associated with fear.

The process is akin to editing a movie. Just as filmmakers can create different emotional responses in an audience by altering music and visuals, we can change our emotional response to spiders by editing the 'mental movie' we play.

Step 5: release the past

Phobias are often the result of a single, traumatic event in the past that gets 'generalised' every time you think of it, see it or experience it again. So, if you see a spider, you rely on the past event to determine how you feel about it in the present and the future. If we can get to the root cause of the fear, we can try to change the emotional charge of the original event – and hopefully change the response.

To release the past, I use dissociative processes, which enable the client to revisit a traumatic event, without re-experiencing the associated emotions. I also use bilateral and self-soothing techniques, including eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) and the rewind technique.

Step 6: recondition your emotions

In this step, we create positive associations to replace the old, negative stimulus responses. Imagine you're sad and somebody makes you laugh. If you keep laughing, you will likely forget what you were sad about. The result is similar when you successfully change your stimulus response.

I often ask a client to think of a powerful, positive memory. When the memory and the positive feelings are really strong, they should squeeze their hand into a fist. We then create a link between squeezing a fist and feeling good, which is strong enough to reduce or remove negative feelings.

Another exercise that can help a client to recondition their emotions involves a circle. I ask a client to find a quiet, comfortable place and to imagine a circle on the floor. They should think about how they'd like to feel when they come face to face with their phobia – perhaps calm, confident, unafraid.

I then ask the client to recall a time when they felt this desired state strongly. It doesn't have to be related to the phobia. It might be a time when they felt particularly confident, calm or in control. The client should immerse themselves in this memory. What do they see, hear and feel? Then, amplify these sensations and emotions until they are very strong.

When they're feeling this powerful state, they should step into the circle. Anchor this feeling to the circle. Imagine the circle glowing with a colour that represents this state. Spend some time experiencing this state in the circle.

When they're ready, they should step out of the circle, leaving the powerful feelings inside it. Then, shake off the state, move around a little and clear their mind. Next, step back into the circle. They should feel the desired state return. If it doesn't, repeat steps three to five.

Now, add a piece of motivational music that resonates with the state they want to embody as they step into the circle. They can also imagine a person they admire for their courage or calmness in the face of adversity and visualise the person offering advice and support as they face their phobia.

Finally, they should visualise a miniature version of their circle in the palm of their hand. The circle represents their ability to access this powerful state, wherever and whenever they need it.

Step 7: realise a powerful future

In this step, we process the 'what ifs' that are common when someone has a fear or phobia. We then replace them with positive self-talk and images. We also plan for the choices the client can make in a fear-free future.

For example, if a client has a phobia of public speaking, they might imagine walking up on stage with their head bowed, fearful that something will go wrong. We can imagine a different outcome – the celebration, the round of applause at the end.

Another exercise for the client is to say the what ifs out loud, repeatedly, while performing a tapping sequence. Take two fingers of one hand and tap on the side of the other hand for about five seconds, on the part you would use if you were going to chop wood, karate-style.

Then, tap for about five seconds in each of the following positions:

- on either side of the nail on each finger
- just above and to one side of the nose, at the start of the eyebrow
- on the bone, bordering the outside corner of each eye
- on the bone under each eye, about one inch below the pupil
- on the indentation between the bottom of the nose and the top of the upper lip
- midway between the point of the chin and the bottom of the lower lip

- on the junction where the breastbone, collarbone and the first rib meet
- on the side of the body, about four inches below the armpit.

Then, hold the fingers together, back-to-back, and tap round the top of the skull. The process is repeated with the second what if on the list, then the third and so on, until there are no more what ifs. As the what ifs and tapping are repeated, the emotions attached to them should get weaker.

'I often ask a client to think of a powerful, positive memory'

Most people spend their time focusing on negative what ifs. I also encourage clients to focus on what ifs that make them smile, feel joyful and are fun, even if they seem unlikely.

I ask them to make a list of the positive things they'd like to say to themselves the next time they face their fear and rate them from 0% to 100%, according to how true they feel.

Now, repeat the tapping exercise, focusing on the positive what ifs. After each round of tapping, check in on the positive what if and notice if it feels truer. Keep tapping until it reaches a percentage that feels OK, then move on to another positive thought.

Sometimes, there might be some resistance. Don't worry if this happens; it just means there might be a few unhelpful beliefs and thoughts still left. If so, the client can loop back and tap on the negative what ifs.

In my experience, the seven steps help clients to identify and understand their fear, so they are better able to change their phobic response. They can then hopefully break free from a past traumatic event to live fully in the present – and the future.

Christopher Paul Jones is a phobia expert, who developed the *Integrated Change System™*. Christopher's book, *Face Your Fears: 7 steps to conquering phobias and anxiety*, is out now.

