

SCARE TACTICS

Many of us are unwilling to face up to our fears, especially irrational ones. *Christopher Paul Jones*, a leading Harley Street expert in overcoming phobias, has some advice.



It is estimated that between 400 and 800 million people globally may suffer from a specific phobia. Studies show that women report

phobias more frequently than men (12.2% versus 5.8%). This discrepancy could be attributed to a combination of genetic, biological, and societal factors.

Genetic predispositions may make some individuals more susceptible to phobias, and hormonal variations could influence fear responses, particularly in women. Additionally, the expectations of society, and gender roles, significantly impact how individuals report and react to fear. Women are generally more likely to seek help for their phobias, whereas men are less likely to report their fears due to stigmas around expressing vulnerability.

When we explore the topic of phobias in men and how they differ from those experienced by women, any comparison might involve generalisations. Despite changes in the perception of traditional male roles over the years, some stereotypes persist.

The manner in which phobias manifest can differ. Typically, when faced with fear, individuals might react with fight, flight, or freeze responses. In the case of a spider phobia, for example, the reactions could range from fleeing (flight), being paralysed by fear (freeze), to killing the spider (fight). Generally, men are more likely to exhibit a fight response when under stress, possibly due to cultural expectations to confront challenges, or biological tendencies linked to higher testosterone levels.

Despite these differences in fear responses and reporting rates, some phobias are definitely more prevalent among men than women:

IATROPHOBIA

(fear of doctors and medical procedures)

Men's anxiety about visiting doctors could be heightened by cultural notions that equate masculinity with a lack of vulnerability. This fear often leads to delayed medical consultations and can be exacerbated by concerns over serious diagnoses. Avoiding medical settings might be an attempt to maintain control over one's health and physical autonomy.

GAMOPHOBIA

(fear of commitment)

In men, this fear may stem from societal expectations to maintain independence and freedom. The 'lone wolf' stereotype contributes to some men's reluctance to engage in or sustain long-term relationships, creating a tension between

personal desires for intimacy and societal expectations of autonomy.

ACROPHOBIA

(fear of heights)

Although a common phobia for many people, the social imperative for men to demonstrate bravery might lead them to underreport or minimise their fear of heights. Ironically, minimising a fear can intensify it, creating a kind of pressure cooker effect. As the saying goes, 'what you resist persists', and the more a person worries about worrying, the more they find themselves ensnared by that exact worry.

THANATOPHOBIA

(fear of death)

Many men mix the fear of death with the pressure to uphold a legacy or fulfil lifelong responsibilities. Concerns about the implications of their death for dependents can magnify this fear, making it about more than just the end of existence. Such fears may also drive men to achieve in various areas of life, partly fuelled by an underlying dread of mortality.

ATYCHIPHOBIA

(fear of failure)

The fear of failure is particularly pronounced in men due to societal roles that emphasise family provision. In male-dominated industries, like technology or finance, the competitive environment can amplify this fear, impacting personal self-esteem and professional standing.





TACKLING THE FEAR

Most phobias can be addressed, and in the majority of cases, can be removed completely. There are seven stages to this process, which I call the Integrated Change System™. The steps are known as the Seven Rs.

Let's take a fear of the doctor as an example and work through the seven stages that can help a man overcome that fear.

Recognise what you're really afraid of

Understanding the roots of any phobia is crucial. Identifying not just the surface-level fear (doctors, in this case) but also the deeper fears it represents (eg, fear of diagnosis, loss of control, or a past traumatic event) is key. Instead of asking, "Why am I afraid of the doctor?" focus on questions that go deeper, like "What specifically about doctors scares me?" or "When did I first feel this fear?" and "What am I believing in order to be feeling this way?"

Relax the conscious mind

Calmness is the key to accessing emotions and letting them go. Achieving a state of relaxation allows us to work with these fears more effectively.

The process is the '4-7-8 Breathing Technique', which involves inhaling quietly through the nose for four seconds, holding the breath for seven seconds, and exhaling forcefully through the mouth, pursed around the tongue, for eight seconds. This breathing pattern, repeated three to four times, acts as a natural tranquilliser for the nervous system. It's particularly effective in reducing anxiety because it increases the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream, slows the heart rate, and stabilises blood pressure – counteracting the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Reward for your fear (secondary gain)

Phobias can serve a hidden purpose, even if it doesn't seem logical. Emotions aren't logical. Things like avoiding situations we

find uncomfortable, receiving attention and care from others, or feeling that fear protects us or keeps us safe, are all hidden gains. Identifying the secondary gains can help us change any blocks that stop us from letting go of our fear.

One way to find the secondary gain is to ask, "Does this fear keep me safe from situations I perceive as dangerous?" or "Do I receive comfort or attention because of this fear?" or "What might I lose if this fear were to disappear now?" Trust the first answer that comes; you might find some things you had never thought about before.

Recipe (deconstructing your strategy) Everything we do, including phobias, operates according to a subconscious 'recipe' – a sequence of thoughts, behaviours, and feelings that reinforce, in this case, the fear. By getting clear on our recipe for fear, it becomes easier to change it. A highly effective technique involves changing the internal representation of the fear.

Visual changes: Imagine the doctor that triggers your phobia. Now, in your mind's eye, start to shrink that image, make it lose its colour until it's black and white, and then let it play backward like a film reel running in reverse. This process helps to diminish the emotional impact the image has on you.

Auditory changes: Pair this altered visual with a change in any sounds associated with your fear. If the doctor's voice is a trigger, imagine it becoming high-pitched, like a cartoon character, or even overlay it with a ridiculous sound effect. Incorporating humorous or nonsensical auditory elements further breaks down the fear's intensity. This is similar to the 'Riddikulus' spell used against Boggarts in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

RELEASE THE PAST

This step addresses the root of the fear, often buried in past experiences, by finding the first event and changing the mind's link to fear. This can then have an effect on how somebody will feel about that fear in the future.

One way to release the past is through tapping. Begin by clearly identifying the fear or specific event related to your phobia. This might be a past incident where you felt scared or made uncomfortable by a doctor. Hold this memory in your mind.

Start by tapping on the karate chop point (the outer edge of your hand) with the fingertips of the other hand. As you tap, verbalise your fear and your acceptance of yourself despite this fear. For example, "Even though I have this fear of doctors, I deeply and completely accept myself."

Proceed to tap lightly but firmly on the sequence of points: the eyebrow, side of the eye, under the eye, under the nose, the chin, the collarbone, under the arm, and top of the head. While tapping each point about seven times, briefly state your fear to maintain focus on the issue.

After a few rounds of tapping, begin to introduce a positive reframing of your fear. For instance, "I choose to release this fear" or "I am open to feeling safe around doctors."

RECONDITION YOUR EMOTIONS

The essence of emotional reconditioning lies in recognising that our responses to any fear-inducing stimuli are learned behaviours. The good news? Just as a response can be learned, it can also be unlearned or modified.

One way to do this is an exercise known as 'emotional anchoring'. This technique is all about replacing the fear response with something more positive, switching our automatic fear of doctors to a calmer or even positive reaction. Here's how:

Choose a positive emotion: First, decide on the positive feeling you'd want instead of fear.



One way to release the past root of a fear is through tapping

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This could be calm, happiness, or courage. Think of this emotion as your new reaction when you think about or see doctors.

Find a memory: Select a memory where you felt this positive emotion strongly. It could be any happy or calm moment from your life. The key here is that the feeling should be powerful and clear.

Create your anchor: While immersed in this memory, do a simple physical gesture, like pressing your thumb and forefinger together. This gesture is your anchor. It's a physical action tied to your positive

emotion. Now find a new memory and do the same again keep doing this till the act of squeezing your fingers takes you straight to a positive feeling.

Now start thinking about doctors and using your anchor. Notice how you feel. What we're doing here is creating a new pathway in the brain. Every time you use your anchor and feel that positive emotion, you weaken the old fear response and strengthen the new, positive one.

REALISE A POWERFUL FUTURE:

This is about crafting a future where fear doesn't dictate our choices, transforming 'what-ifs' and 'yes, but's' into new positive possibilities.

Start by jotting down the most frequent 'yes but' and 'what if' thoughts that bubble up when you think about the doctor. These might be thoughts like, "Yes, but last time didn't go well" or "What if I get bad news?"

Now challenge them: For each 'yes but' and 'what if', ask yourself, "Is this thought helping me or hindering me?" Challenge the validity of these thoughts. How many of these imagined scenarios have actually happened?

Now for the fun part – flipping the script. Rewrite each 'yes but' and 'what if' into a positive statement or question. For example, "Yes, but last time didn't go well" becomes "What if this time, I feel more prepared and confident?" Transform "What if I get bad news?" into "What if I can be reassured by a simple diagnosis?"

After following these steps and repeating them as needed, you may find your fear of doctors becomes reduced. **S**
Christopher Paul Jones is the author of Face Your Fears, available now on Amazon. christopherpauljones.com

