

Fear of Spiders

UNDERSTANDING IT · WORKING THROUGH IT

Clinically known as **arachnophobia** — one of the most common specific phobias, involving an intense, persistent fear of spiders.

Arachnophobia is highly treatable, and there is nothing unusual or embarrassing about it — it is among the most common specific phobias worldwide, and research suggests it may be rooted in something far older than any single bad experience.

SINCE INFANCY

An Unusually Deep-Rooted Fear

A 2017 study from the Max Planck Institute found that six-month-old infants — too young to have learned the association — showed a measurable stress response (pupil dilation) when shown images of spiders, compared to neutral images like flowers. This suggests part of this fear may be an evolved, inherited predisposition, not simply something "learned" or irrational.

HOW COMMON IS IT?

- One of the most frequently diagnosed specific phobias worldwide
- Fear of animals, including spiders, is among the two most prevalent phobia categories
- Often begins in childhood, though it can develop at any age

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO IT

- A possible evolutionary predisposition to notice and react to spiders quickly
- Learned responses — from a past experience, or from a parent's reaction
- Cultural depictions of spiders as dangerous or disgusting

HOW IT SHOWS UP

- Intense anxiety or panic-like symptoms on seeing a spider, or an image of one
- Avoidance of rooms, gardens, or situations where spiders might be
- Excessive checking of corners or spaces beforehand

A GRADUATED APPROACH

EASIEST — LOW ANXIETY

HARDEST — HIGH ANXIETY

1

SAYING THE WORD "SPIDER"

Reading or saying the word aloud, without any image

2

A DRAWN OR CARTOON IMAGE

Viewing a simple, non-realistic illustration

3

A PHOTOGRAPH

Viewing a still photo of a real spider

4

VIDEO FOOTAGE

Watching a spider move on screen

5

BEING IN THE SAME ROOM

Gradually, at a safe distance, with support

EVIDENCE-BASED WAYS TO WORK THROUGH IT

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) — identifying and questioning unhelpful thoughts
- Graduated exposure therapy — the most well-supported approach for specific phobias
- Systematic desensitisation — pairing relaxation with gradual exposure
- Cognitive reframing — shifting how spiders are perceived over time
- Relaxation and breathing techniques to manage the physical response
- Support from a therapist experienced in treating specific phobias

MY EXPOSURE PLAN

Build your own ladder, from least to most anxiety-provoking. Rate expected distress (SUDS 0–100).

#	STEP	SUDS (0–100)
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

WHERE DID THIS FEAR BEGIN FOR ME, IF I KNOW?

ONE SMALL STEP I FEEL READY TO TRY

SOURCES

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