

Panic and Phobia are both different types of anxiety disorders but do have some things in common. One thing they have in common is fear.

Fear can be rational; it is quite normal to have some fear of crossing a busy road with lots of traffic.

Fear can be irrational – this is when the chance of risk is thought to be very high when it may not be. For example, someone may fear spiders and dreads they may lose control, or fears something really catastrophic may happen even if the spider is a really small house spider.

Early life experiences can have a part to play in how our fears develop. For example, someone may develop a fear of driving after witnessing a car collision or being involved in one.

Sometimes it may not be so obvious. Over time this can lead to avoiding such situations and develops into a longer term problem.

What are phobias?

Phobias are an intense fear of a trigger or anticipating a trigger which results in high levels of anxiety symptoms like changes in breathing and heart rate. There are many types of phobias. We divide them up into 3 easy to understand groups.

Specific phobia: Specific phobias are the fear of specific objects or situations. For example, driving, blood, heights, or spiders. People who have specific phobias generally are okay as long as they are nowhere near their specific trigger or anticipate being near it.

Social Phobia: This is a fear of social situations where the phobic person feels they make a fool of themselves, embarrass themselves, receive criticism from those around them, or be rejected by people. Such thoughts and feelings make it difficult to speak or eat in front of people. Social phobia can really restrict someone's social life, interfere with work or anything that involves being in front of other people.

Agoraphobia: Agoraphobic fear is related to space and safety. This may be open spaces like parks, shopping centres, or other public spaces, or enclosed spaces like tight roads or walkways. Many sufferers feel most safe at home and the further they travel from their place of safety, the worse the fear becomes. There is a strong feeling that they may have a panic attack, lose control of their mind and body and find themselves in an embarrassing situation in public. That's why many agoraphobics avoid such situations and places or may be on the look out for a quick escape route to safety. This can be disabling and restrict the things they do.

When we're faced with a trigger, this affects our thoughts: we feel that something terrible is about to happen or the chances of it are very high. It affects our feelings: we feel fear, feel scared, angry. It causes uncomfortable physical sensations, like our heart racing, tight chest, or trembling legs. It affects our behaviour too. We may escape from the situation, call for help or avoid eye contact. All factors interact with one another. When the fear reaches very high levels it can result in panic. This is called the "Phobic Cycle".

What is panic?

Panic attacks are sudden and come on with little or no warning. If we think closely we may be able to identify the triggers that bring it on. When we're faced with triggers that cause panic we "feel frightened". This causes different physical sensations like "our heart racing, shortness of breath". We often think these symptoms mean something terrible or catastrophic is about to happen to us "our heart racing means we are about to have a heart attack, legs trembling means we are going to faint". As our feelings, bodily symptoms and thoughts of disaster go round and round, we finally reach the point where our fear mounts to panic. Remember that feelings, bodily symptoms and thoughts can all influence each other in any order. This is called the "Panic Cycle".

With panic and phobias, frightening feelings and thoughts make us avoid our triggers, or we run away from our triggers to stop having those feelings and thoughts. By avoiding or escaping from our triggers we never learn that if we just face our trigger for long enough without running away, our fear, panic, bodily symptoms and terrifying thoughts will gradually become less and less.