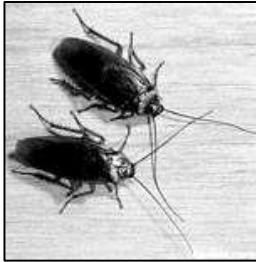


Phobia: Clinical Characteristics



Symptoms of Specific Phobia

According to DSM-IV (the manual of psychological disorders), the essential feature of Specific Phobia is 'marked and persistent fear of clearly discernible, circumscribed objects or situations'. The following specific diagnostic criteria are reproduced verbatim (except for codings and page references) from the DSM-IV TR (where 'IV TR' indicates fourth edition, text revision), pages 449-450.

Diagnostic Criteria for Specific Phobia

- Marked and persistent fear that is excessive or unreasonable, cued by the presence or anticipation of a specific object or situation (e.g., flying, heights, animals, receiving an injection, seeing blood).
- Exposure to the phobic stimulus almost invariably provokes an immediate anxiety response, which may take the form of a situationally bound or situationally predisposed Panic Attack. **Note:** In children, the anxiety may be expressed by crying, tantrums, freezing, or clinging.
- The person recognizes that the fear is excessive or unreasonable. **Note:** In children, this feature may be absent.
- The phobic situation(s) is avoided or else is endured with intense anxiety or distress.
- The avoidance, anxious anticipation, or distress in the feared situation(s) interferes significantly with the person's normal routine, occupational (or academic) functioning, or social activities or relationships, or there is marked distress about having the phobia.
- In individuals under age 18 years, the duration is at least 6 months.

Differential Diagnosis

The anxiety, Panic Attacks, or phobic avoidance associated with the specific object or situation are not better accounted for by another mental disorder, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (e.g., fear of dirt in someone with an obsession about contamination), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (e.g., avoidance of stimuli associated with a severe stressor), Separation Anxiety Disorder (e.g., avoidance of school), Social Phobia (e.g., avoidance of social situations because of fear of embarrassment), Panic Disorder With Agoraphobia, or Agoraphobia Without History of Panic Disorder.

Prevalence & Prognosis

Phobias are one of the commoner types of psychological disorder and, depending on the criteria applied, affect as many as 11% of the population at some time in their lives. In most cases the sufferer recognizes that their feelings and behaviour are irrational and seek assistance in overcoming the problem. Phobias are quite amenable to treatment, and in 90% of cases significant improvement is reported.