



Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is an intense fear of being in public places. This includes places like buses or bridges. Some people fear crowds. These fears may make a person feel trapped. They may not be able to leave their homes.

Agoraphobia is hard to live with. People with this illness may avoid other people. They keep to themselves.

Agoraphobia often develops after a person has had a panic attack in a public place. A person having a panic attack may have trouble breathing. They may have chest pain and a pounding heart. The person may feel dizzy. They may feel like they are choking. They may also fear dying or losing their mind. The person may feel the need to flee.

Once panic attacks begin, a person may link them to the places where they happened. Some people avoid places where they had an attack.

A person may have more panic attacks over time. They may occur in more places. Then it can become harder to leave home. A person with the illness starts to depend more on others. They might not even travel without a friend or family member.

How common is it?

One or two people out of a hundred have agoraphobia. It tends to begin in early adulthood. It can also appear later in life. Most people with it do not seek treatment until about 10 years after it starts. It can be treated. Treatment works best when a person begins early.

Symptoms

These are some of the common signs of agoraphobia.

- Misreading symptoms. An example is when a person's heart races from anxiety. He fears dying on the spot. Or a person has a sense of being cut off from others. She fears she's going crazy. The sources of the fears are not real. But they can bring on more panic attacks. They can cause the person to avoid things.
- Relying too much on a "safe" place or person.
- Fear of certain places. These could be bridges, elevators, shopping malls or crowded highways.
- Fear of what might happen in a place that is hard to get out of. This could be an airplane, bus or movie theater.
- Worrying about physical problems. This may be dizziness, fainting, vomiting or breathing trouble. This happens at one of the feared places.

Agoraphobia can limit people's lives. It can cause depression. A person with the illness may have alcohol and drug problems. Bad habits may appear. People with the illness often think most things will turn out badly. They only see the worst.

A person with the illness may find it hard to keep a job. They may have marriage and sexual problems. They may want family members to limit their activities out of fear for them. This can cause strain in the family.

Identifying agoraphobia

A healthcare provider must assess the person. Providers look at these things.

- A person's history of mental health problems.
- A person's physical health.
- Other conditions. Examples are depression or substance abuse.

Treatment

Agoraphobia can be treated. Providers may combine mental health therapy and medicines. It rarely goes away without treatment.

- **Therapy** – People with the illness should find a provider who treats panic attacks. Therapy usually works in reducing them. This therapy may involve homework. The provider works with the person on ways to reduce anxiety.

A spouse or partner can help in the treatment. Here are ways they can help.

- Be actively involved.
- Show support.
- Give encouragement.

- **Medicine** – Some drugs help reduce the symptoms. Doctors often prescribe antidepressants. They may also use anti-anxiety medicines. But these only help in the short term. They can be addictive too. So they are just meant to be used for a while.

Medicine does not help a person learn how to cope with anxiety. Therapy does help change thinking patterns. So therapy may have more lasting results.

To learn more:

Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

www.adaa.org.

Freedom From Fear.

www.freedomfromfear.org.

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