

STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow

Agoraphobia (the fear of busy places)

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Some people can get really scared about going out of the house. It can be hard going to the shops, making visits to friends, or even simple things like taking out the rubbish to the bins.

Here are some of the things people say about agoraphobia:

- Fiona is 64 years old and lives with her husband who is close to retiring. She is very scared about going to the shops. "I can go to the shops with my husband but doing it on my own just makes me feel panicky."
- Susan is a 42 year old mum who is scared about going out of the house. She can't use buses and it is costing a fortune using taxis to take her kids to school. She can go on the bus locally if her sister takes her in the morning before it gets too busy. "I hate being up so close to so many people, I feel I can't breathe!"
- Jenny is 19 years old and has been starting to feel anxious whenever she goes to the pictures with her friends. She can still go and see films as long as she gets the aisle seat and can get out quickly if she starts to feel panicky. "I can't stand the way it gets so dark. I start to panic if I think I won't be able to get out in a hurry if I need to"
- Bill is 33 years old and can hardly put a foot across the front door. He was out with some friends when one of them was stabbed. Now he finds it hard to go out anywhere. "I wake up each day and I feel I can't face things because I know I'm too scared to go out. I seem to be the only person that feels like this

IMPORTANT:

Agoraphobia can cause great stress, but it is not dangerous.

It will do you no harm.

This booklet aims to teach you better ways of coping with such problems. It is in two parts:

PART 1: Finding out about agoraphobia

- What is agoraphobia?
- What causes agoraphobia?

Part 2 Fighting agoraphobia

- Step 1 – Becoming more aware
- Step 2 – Break down the challenges
- Step 3 – Face the situation
- Step 4 - Be prepared
- Step 5 – Come up with a ‘Big Challenge Thought’

PART 3: Dealing with panic

- What is a panic attack?
- Work out the problem
- Control your stress
- Control your breathing
- How to prevent panic
- What to do in a panic

PART 1

Finding out about agoraphobia

What is agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is a fear of busy places. It can also be a fear of going into places where escape is difficult. It can cause great distress and badly affect the way you are able to live your life.

AGORAPHOBIA	A fear of being in busy places. The most common places people fear are: cars, buses, trains, planes, traffic jams, shops/supermarkets, queues, crowds, lifts, being alone at home, being far from home, escalators, cinemas/theatres, churches, pubs/restaurants, tunnels, shopping centres, large offices. You may be able to go out in the darkness or when you have someone with you,
CLAUSTROPHOBIA	A fear of going into small, small spaces such as lifts, cupboards, the back seat of two door cars etc. You may find it hard flying due to the anxiety caused when they close over the door leaving you feeling trapped. For example; you may fear that you will lose control if trapped in a lift with other people.

We must take this one step further: You are not afraid of a shop, a bus, the post-office queue:

You are afraid of what might happen to you there

You are maybe afraid that something awful will happen; such as fainting, having a panic attack, losing control, being sick, losing control of your bladder/bowels, acting in a 'strange' way, making a fool of yourself, getting self-conscious, going mad or maybe even dying.

Your fear will usually be worse if you feel that escape from the place is difficult or that you would draw attention to yourself. Usually when you feel anxious your blood pressure rises. You might feel like fainting, but your blood pressure rising will stop this happening.

Avoiding going to places is a common way of coping. You may be able to go when the places are quieter or if someone you can rely on is with you. Often people say that even having the children with them helps. They may help distract attention away from the fear. You may feel that you can control your stress better when you have to be responsible for your children's safety.

Sometimes there will be a fear of staying alone in the house in case something happens to you as there would be no-one there to help you. So it isn't just a problem you have when outside the house.

Related problems - It is common for people to have agoraphobia at the same time as stress, depression, panic attacks. You can find out about help for these other problems at the end of this booklet.

What causes agoraphobia?

Agoraphobias are a specific form of stress; the things which can cause it are often the things which cause any form of stress. It is not clear why people develop a particular form of stress. They may be caused by:

- ✚ **DIRECT CAUSES** - Sometimes bad things happen to you like being mugged in the street.

- ✚ **INDIRECT CAUSES** – Sometimes people don't know why agoraphobia started when it did. This is the usual picture in stress. Life events in previous years may be important. It may be triggered by one small event which acts as the straw that breaks the camel's back. In itself it may not seem important but coming at the end of a host of stresses and strains, it may be the final straw.

- ✚ **"PREPAREDNESS"** - One explanation is 'preparedness' which says that we can, when under stress, develop fears of things which might involve danger to the human race. So it is useful to have a built-in fear that you might be attacked if you live in a dangerous place.

- ✚ **SAFETY SIGNALS** - Related to 'preparedness' is the idea that we look for 'signs' which send out signals saying that we are near safety. Common 'signs' are your own house, the house of friends or relatives, maybe even things like toilets in the shops - anywhere that you might run to in a panic and feel safe there. So when you leave home, you are moving away from 'signs'. When you return, you are moving closer to your safe haven. You will then feel more secure. You may feel better in certain streets if you know that you can knock a friend's door if you feel too tense. Try to work out where your safety signals come from.

**There is no magic cure - don't be impatient. It takes time to control stress.
Believe in yourself - you can do it.**

PART 2: Fighting agoraphobia

Step 1 - Becoming more aware

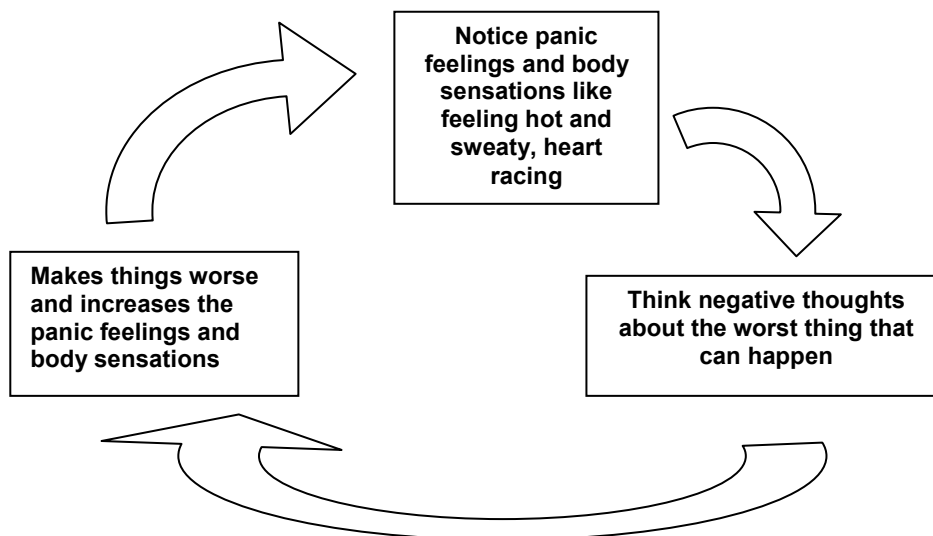
Keep a diary – It is a good idea to keep a diary of situations you find difficult or scary. It will help you understand the things that are happening to you. Then you can fight the agoraphobia. You can watch your own progress and notice what you are doing well. Sometimes when we are stressed we only remember the bad days and not the good ones. Make a diary like the one below. Fiona has filled in the first line and has rated her anxiety in a difficult situation (0 = not at all frightening, 10 = very frightening). As you progress you will see your anxiety rating for difficult situations go down. Have a look at Fiona's example below.

Diary Card			
Date	Doing What? Where?	How did you feel?	Anxiety rating Rate on a scale of 1- 10 1 = not anxious at all 10 = extremely anxious
<i>10 Sept</i>	<i>In Asda</i>	<i>Terrible panic</i>	<i>9</i>

Step 4 - Be prepared

We need to think about how you can prepare for going into the difficult situations on your list. There are 2 things you can do to help with this:

- **Relaxation** – You might start to feel anxious about going into difficult situations. You need to notice when you first start to feel panic. Part 3 of this booklet tells you how to ‘Fight the Panic’. Controlling your breathing will help you relax. Try out the exercise on ‘Breathing Retraining’. Notice the difference it makes to how you feel.
- **Positive thinking** – when we are anxious and panicky our thinking can go out of control. Scary thought like “I am going to die”, “I am going to lose control” and “I might faint” feed our anxiety and make it worse. They are not true but it is difficult not to think like this when you are in a scary situation. The most common scary thought is to think that the worst thing is going to happen. You end up in a vicious circle



Step 5 – Come up with a ‘Big Challenge Thought’

A big challenge thought is one that you can use to fight the negative thoughts. The next worksheet shows you how Fiona came up with a Big Challenge Thought. She uses it along with her breathing exercises whenever she is in a difficult situation.

1) Write down your worrying thought and decide how much you believe it (1-10) with '10' being 'totally believe it'

<i>If I go to the shops ... I will not be able to cope.</i>	10
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2) Challenge the thought

Try and find a more balanced thought.	Ask yourself what reasons you have for the thought.	Ask yourself what reasons you have against the thought.
<p>It might help if you think of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you say to yourself if you were not feeling so worried? • What might you say to someone else if they said this to you? • What might your partner or friend say to you about your worries? • What could you say to yourself that is more helpful and less worrying 	<p><i>I feel like this when I go to Asda.</i></p> <p><i>I have tried taking deep breaths but nothing that I have tried has ever worked</i></p>	<p><i>I can still go out into my garden to hang up the washing. I can cope with this.</i></p> <p><i>I can cope with going to the shops with my husband.</i></p>

3) Come up with another way of looking at it

Big Challenge Thought	New rating (0 – 10)
<i>If I can cope with going into the garden and shopping with my husbandI can cope with this</i>	3

You might feel very panicky when you try to 'Face your Fear'.
The next part of this booklet tells you more about panic and
how to fight it.

PART 3: Dealing with panic

What is a panic attack?

Sometimes when people go out they have a panic attack. You might feel you can't breathe, or your heart starts racing, shake, sweat and feel sick. You might be scared of fainting or not coping. Maybe you feel you want to get to a safe place or leave the situation you are in. Sometimes people freeze to the spot.

Body, Actions and Thoughts:

Body:

Panic hits your body hard. Your heart rate can almost double. You might sweat, feel dizzy, feel sick, or feel you can't get a breath. You may get tingling or numb feelings; you may feel you are choking. You may shake and feel 'unreal'. You may get chest pains. You may be very aware of your body and get stressed at the slightest change in it.

Actions:

You may find it hard to stay still. You may snap at people. You may avoid places where you think you will panic. You may escape from places as soon as you feel your stress rise. You may fear exerting yourself as you feel this could cause a panic. You may be afraid to be alone in case something bad happens to you.

Thoughts:

You will feel a rush of fear. You will feel that you are losing control. You may fear you are going to faint. You may feel you are dying. You may feel you are going mad. You may feel you will do something stupid. You may feel that something awful is about to happen to you even though you might not be able to say what that thing is.

1) Work out the problem

Answer these questions about the panic you have just had (and other panics you may have had):

1) Where and when did you have the panic?

2) Was there a reason for the panic?

3) What body symptoms did you have? (Body)

4) At its worst point, what went through your mind?
(Thoughts)

5) What did you do? (Actions)

6) What can you do to prevent another panic?

Use what you have learned to spot patterns with your panic. Use it to build up a plan to stop the next one. Use it along with these ideas:

Control your stress (in 10 words)

- **Face your fears (if anxious)**
- **Be more active (if depressed)**
- **Watch what you drink**

Control your breathing

When you have a panic attack your breathing might make it worse. You might start to breathe too quickly – taking in more air than you need. To see if this happens to you, answer these questions:

When you feel panicky:

Do you feel light-headed or dizzy?	YES	NO
Do you feel you are going to faint?	YES	NO
Do you yawn, sigh or gulp in air?	YES	NO
Do you feel short of breath?	YES	NO
Do you feel your breathing is shallow?	YES	NO
Do you feel your breathing speeds up?	YES	NO
Are you aware of chest pains?	YES	NO
Do you get a numb or tingling feeling around the mouth and nose and/or in your fingers and toes	YES	NO

The more **YES** answers you give, the more over-breathing may play a part in your case.

When you over-breathe, you may feel that you do not have **enough** air in your lungs. It is the opposite - you really have **too much**. You have to fight against the desire to take deep breaths, as this will make things worse.

You should try not to yawn, sigh and gulp air for the same reasons. Keep a grip on your breathing. Check every ten minutes that your breathing is nice and slow (about 10-12 breaths a minute). A good way to stay in control is:

Breathing Retraining

Take a breath in and think "1"

Breathe out and think, "*relax*"

Take a breath in and think "2"

Breathe out and think, "*relax*"

Repeat up to *10* and then back down to *1*

Concentrate only on breathing and on the
number and "*relax*" in the minds eye

Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute)

Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out
slowly through your mouth

Practise twice a day in different places

Quick control:

Use a paper bag

Hold a paper (not plastic) bag tightly around your mouth and nose so that no air can get in from outside. If you don't have a paper bag, cup your hands over your mouth and nose. Breathe normally (10-12 breaths per minute) into the bag until you feel better. The bag will go (slightly) in and out as you breathe in and out.

This will help because:

Bear in mind that even though you feel you need *more* oxygen in your lungs, you really need *less*. Using the paper bag helps get your breathing sorted. This will calm your body and you should feel more in control.

Of course, you can't just pull out a paper bag in a lot of places. At these times, use the breathing skills you have just learned.

How to prevent panic

Now let us look at some of the risk factors. Knowing about these might help you *prevent* panic. You can find out more information in the panic booklet.

Rapid body change	Take it easy. Don't jump up out of chairs or beds.
Tiredness	Make sure you get enough rest, as panic is more likely if you are tired.
Low normal blood sugar	Some people are more prone to panic if their blood sugar level is low – so eat every few hours.
Alcohol	Hangovers can make you more prone to panic – so watch what you drink.
Illness	Fighting a flu bug can make you feel weak – take things easy and let yourself get better.
Caffeine	Too much caffeine can be linked to panic – cut back on coffee, tea, fizzy drinks such as Coke and Irn-Bru, pain killers such as Askits, energy drinks and tablets such as Red Bull and Pro Plus.
Pre-menstrual phase	There are changes in the oxygen levels in the blood before a period. So you can be more likely to over-breathe.
Stress	This is the most common risk factor for panic. Control stress and you are on the road to controlling panic.

Knowing what your risk factors are can help you prevent panic.

Important note

Do not avoid situations to prevent panic - this only makes things worse in the long run

What to do in a panic

If you feel a panic come on, put this advice into action as quick as you can. Nip the panic in the bud. It may help if someone can run through these steps with you. If you are alone, say them aloud.

ACTIONS

- If you feel the panic coming on - stand your ground - don't let it make you run away.

BODY

- Keep your breathing under control - slow, normal breaths.
- Each time you breathe in; say, "*I'm in control*".
- Each time you breathe out, say "*relax*"
- Relax your body - drop your shoulders, let your muscles go loose.

THOUGHTS

- Imagine pushing the panic from the top of your head, down through your body and out through your toes.
- Keep your thoughts under control.
- Say - "I'm having a panic attack. I feel awful but nothing bad can happen. I know what to do. I can control this. It will pass"

Fight the panic all the way. Rule it - don't let it rule you.

How did everyone get on?

Here are some tips from people that have been through these problems themselves

- Fiona used her 'Big Challenge Sheet' and step by step she tackled getting out to Asda.

Fiona's advice is 'You will have good days and bad days. Don't let a bad day set you right back'.

- Susan came up with a big challenge thought and says "I can cope with being on the bus for a couple of stops, it's just a matter of staying on a bit longer".

Susan's advice is to 'Try to think positively if you can. Give yourself credit when you do something you are proud of, make a note of it somewhere and give yourself a treat.'

- Jenny came up with a 'Big Challenge Thought' that helps her going to the pictures, "If I focus on the movie, I'll enjoy myself more and won't notice how panicky I feel."

Jenny's advice is; 'Don't try too much on a bad day'

- Bill used the challenge sheets and used the breathing exercises to help him cope with going out and about. "I realise there is very little chance of me getting hurt, but the bad thoughts are not going to keep me in forever".

Bill's advice is "Don't pick difficult situations that are too scary to start with"

Tackling other problems

Many people find that having a problem with agoraphobia is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, depression, low self-confidence, etc., then the STEPS services might be able to help.

This booklet gives some advice about panic. You can get *more* information in the panic booklet.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site (www.glasgowsteps.com) to find out more.