

Spiders and You

A phobia is an irrational, persistent fear of things or situations. It differs from a 'dislike' of something by the intensity and seeming uncontrollability of the response, and can impact significantly on the sufferer's quality of life. Merely thinking about the cause of the phobia can trigger an anxiety response, which may include symptoms such as heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, or sweating.

Arachnophobia, fear of spiders, is one of the more common phobias, and is said to affect 5-10 % of the population. The intensity of some people's reactions in their bid to escape their fear can lead to dangerous behaviours, such as jumping out of windows (before considering how far the fall is), or losing control whilst driving.

Historically, arachnophobia appears to relate to a fear of disease (especially the Black Plague) which was thought to be associated with spider bites. However, whilst spiders were found in large numbers in the Plague-prone areas, it was found to be the fleas on rats which carried the disease. It appears that the importance of disease avoidance has led to a disgust response towards spiders. A number of epidemics that devastated Europe from the Middle Ages onwards appear to have contributed to a fear of spiders being commonly passed down through European cultures since the tenth century. That fact that non-European cultures don't seem to share this fear, supports the notion that arachnophobia is the result of an inaccurate belief that spiders caused the spread of the Black Plague. Anecdotal evidence has indicated that when asked what it is about spiders they don't like, people often mention features such as their big hairy legs or unpredictable movement. However, there is often a shudder, facial expression or accompanying body language that completes the verbal description, supporting the notion of disgust.

This highlights the importance of myth-busting in relation to spiders: Accurate information is an important element of rational thinking. Without this, questions that feed anxiety are like to multiply and reign supreme. In addition, it is important to learn to recognize when one's thinking is veering towards irrationality, and to learn strategies for challenging or redirecting such thought, and managing the anxiety symptoms.

'Spiders and You' is a program presented by the Melbourne Zoo, designed to assist people suffering from arachnophobia. The program focuses on developing awareness and understanding of the psychological constructs underlying anxiety, fear and phobia, combined with the psycho-educational sharing of factual information about spiders by Patrick Honan, the Zoo's invertebrates' specialist. Techniques including hypnosis and deep relaxation are taught to assist in managing phobic responses, and participants are invited to 'meet the spiders' in a graded exposure sequence if they choose.

For further information contact:

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