



What Scares Us the Most

Recognizing some fears are irrational is first step to freedom

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The headlines about a second venomous yellow-bellied sea snake appearing on a Southern California beach recently might have had most

people scrunching up their faces, squealing a half-hearted “ew” — and moving on to the next headline.

For others, though, the concept of seeing a snake, dead or alive, during a relaxing seaside lounge is enough to keep them landlocked forever.

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One such person is Dillon Orr.

Along with one-third of the U.S. population, Orr suffers from ophidiophobia — a fear of snakes. Even the sight of one of these wriggling reptiles can turn his world upside down.

“I get paranoid and experience higher blood pressure,” said the 22-year-old manager at an search-engine optimization company in Phoenix, Arizona. “My face turns red, and I get scared for my safety, even if they’re harmless.”

Guessing his phobia began around age 8 after his mother found a common

garter snake in their backyard, Orr today has no explanation for why his fear snowballed. But he certainly knows it's real.

"Phobias can pop up at any time," said Rachel Grieco, founder of Grieco Psychological Services LLC, in Wilmington, Massachusetts. She treats phobias in children and adults.

"Genetics as well as one's environment, family dynamics and life experiences play a critical role. That being said, it's also common for phobias to stem from a specific life event or trauma, or from a recurring negative theme in someone's life," she told LifeZette.

"Some adults I work with report they remember feeling anxious as a child and identify as a 'worrier.' Others may have their first experience in their 20s or 30s out of the blue, or after a major life transition," said Kelley Kitley, a cognitive behavioral therapist who has treated patients in Santa Monica, California, and Chicago, Illinois. "They report frustration with the phobia because they say, 'I've never been afraid of (this) before. Why now?'"

The American Psychological Association says phobias are *the* most common mental disorder.

While women have a higher rate compared to men, phobias don't discriminate. They can be experienced at any age and tend to run in families (a little nature and nurture at work). But unlike the butterflies most of us feel as we step up to a podium or begin a test, a phobia is longer lasting, causing intense reactions both in mind and body. These reactions can become debilitating, leaving the sufferer feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

"Phobias aren't the same as aversions or quirks, preferences or worries," said Grieco. "The difference lies in the interference with one's life, the avoidance behaviors, and the ability to cope with the anxiety that arises from a particular situation or thing."

The affect on a person's life can range from mildly intrusive to paralyzing. Consider how far you would go to avoid a dog. Would you step a few feet away? Cross the street? When you have cynophobia (a fear of dogs) — you go even further than that.

"A fear crosses the line into a phobia when it becomes excessive and out of proportion to any actual danger, *and* when the presence of the feared object is accompanied by systematic avoidance or extreme levels of fear," said Dave Carbonell, a licensed psychologist who specializes in fears and phobias at Chicago's Anxiety Treatment Center.

"People in general may feel some nervousness when dogs approach them and show signs of aggression or dominance. A person with a dog phobia will feel strong fear at just the *sight* of a dog, even if the dog is wagging its tail and is secured on a leash. The person will make systematic efforts to ensure that no dog ever crosses his or her path," Carbonell told LifeZette.

People like this even go so far as to anticipate worry, even when the object

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isn't present. Instead of wondering whether they'll see a dog on their walk to the bus stop, someone with cynophobia might just drive to work regardless of rush hour and parking costs to ensure this never happens.

"It's common for us to have worries, to avoid certain things because we're being cautious," said Grieco. "That avoidance or vigilance serves a protective purpose. But with phobia, anxiety lies to us and tells us there's danger where there isn't. Phobias shrink your world."

"It's a preoccupation and it's persistent," said Kitley of phobias. "They interfere with daily life skills, eating, sleeping, leaving your home, socializing."

Phobias can be categorized as specific (an object or situation) or social (extreme self-consciousness). And with an entire industry built on tactics to deliver the perfect speech, it's no surprise that glossophobia – a fear of public speaking -- is the most commonly experienced.

"It's not the most commonly treated, however, because many people choose to live with it as best they can, avoiding activities that may lead to it," said Carbonell.

That award goes to agoraphobia — fear of crowds and open spaces — because the avoidance becomes so extensive it's too limiting to live with. This fear is so common it's actually the third category of phobia classifications on

Treatments for Phobias

- Desensitization therapy
- Relaxation techniques
- Flooding, or prolonged exposure
- Medication
- Biofeedback

Source: www.webmd.com

its own.



"If you think about the worst phobias in terms of impact on one's daily life, it varies depending on where you live," added Carbonell. "For people living in large cities with good mass transit, a driving phobia is much less disruptive than claustrophobia (fear of small or confined spaces). The opposite would generally be the case for people living in rural areas."

Other common phobias are arachnophobia (fear of spiders), acrophobia (fear of heights), aerophobia (fear of flying), and trypanophobia or dentophobia (fear of medical procedures or dental procedures).

Then there are the obsessive-based phobias that are even more difficult to overcome because they add a layer of shame, such as a fear of sweating or a fear of public bathrooms. While you snicker at the concept of hotels leaving out the 13th floor on their elevator count, someone with triskaidekaphobia (fear of the number 13) certainly won't.

But fear not. There is hope. Phobias and anxiety disorders "are treatable," said Grieco.

"I find so much hope there. There's nothing like it when someone realizes they don't have to feel powerless. It's such a shame to be robbed of joy or precious life moments away," she said.

"Once someone knows they don't have to be afraid, that they actually can stand up to that bully, they have power to make changes for themselves. Those changes will reclaim the joy that they absolutely deserve."
