



ARC Young Adult Mental Health Information Series

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Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia involves fearing and avoiding places or situations that might cause panic and feelings of being trapped, helpless or embarrassed. This involves the avoidance of at least two of the following situations:

- Using public transportation
- Being in open spaces
- Being in enclosed spaces
- Standing in line or being in a crowd
- Being outside of the home alone

Agoraphobia can begin in childhood, but usually starts in the late teen or early adult years. Females are diagnosed with agoraphobia more often than males.



Symptoms

Agoraphobia is not simply the inability to leave your home but involves situations that cause anxiety because you fear you won't be able to escape or find help if you start to feel panicked. You may fear having other disabling or embarrassing symptoms, such as dizziness, fainting, falling or diarrhea. Your fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual danger of the situation.

In addition:

- You avoid the situation, you need a companion to go with you, or you endure the situation but are extremely upset.
- You have major distress or problems with social situations, work or other areas in your life because of the fear, anxiety or avoidance.
- Your fear and avoidance lasts six months or longer.

Physical Symptoms of a panic attack

- Rapid heart rate.
- Trouble breathing or a feeling of choking.
- Chest pain or pressure.
- Lightheadedness or dizziness.
- Feeling shaky, numb or tingling.
- Sweating too much.
- Sudden flushing or chills.
- Upset stomach or diarrhea.
- Feeling a loss of control.
- Fear of dying.





Causes and Risk factors

The likelihood of developing anxiety involves a combination of life experiences, psychological traits, and/or genetic factors. Agoraphobia occurs in 1.3 % of people and 61% who develop agoraphobia have a family member with also suffers- which makes it the phobia the most strongly linked to a genetic predisposition. Environmental factors that are known to be associated with the development of agoraphobia include experiencing stressful events (such as the death of a parent, being attacked or mugged) and being raised in a household characterized by little warmth and high levels of overprotection.

Treatment

The goal of treatment is to help the person with agoraphobia to be able to complete their tasks of daily living with little difficulty. The most effective remedy is systematic desensitization - also called exposure therapy. It is a behavioural technique in which the sufferer, under expert guidance, is gradually exposed to the feared situation and comes to understand that the feared outcomes do not materialize. Techniques such as relaxation and breathing are used while being exposed to the perceived danger in order to reduce anxiety and fear. Other types of therapy such as biofeedback, hypnosis, meditation, or relaxation have been found to be helpful for some patients. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) can help patients modify or eliminate thought patterns contributing to the symptoms and help them change behaviour. Patients who experience panic attacks as part of their agoraphobia may benefit from prescription medication to prevent panic attacks or reduce their frequency and severity, and to decrease the associated anticipatory anxiety.

Resources available

Aire Ouverte for youth 12-25 years of age. 5811 Taschereau Blvd., local 30, Brossard, QC J4Z 1A5
Drop-in services: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 1:00-8:00 p.m. and Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. By appointment from Monday to Friday. (450) 445-4474.

AMI-Quebec – www.amiquebec.org, (514) 486-1448

Friends for mental health – www.asmfmh.org, (514) 636-6885

www.anxietycanada.com

Relief – www.relief.ca, (514) 529-3081

Psychosocial support available at your local CLSC and through your primary care physician.

CLSC St-Hubert (450) 443-7400

CLSC Brossard (450) 445-4452

CLSC St-Jean-sur-Richelieu (450) 358-2572

CLSC Richelieu (450) 658-7561

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