

Chapter One

Is this book for you?

“Courage is not the lack of fear. It is acting in spite of it.”

Mark Twain

Fear is a normal emotion. We can all experience fear when we are in danger, but it usually subsides when we have reached safety. However, fear can also be so extreme and persistent that it disrupts people’s lives and prevents them from doing what they want to do. In this book, I will try to provide you with enough information about fear itself, and how to cope with it, so that you can begin to reclaim your life. I am going to approach this topic both in my role as a health professional with experience in treating anxiety disorders, and just as importantly, as a fellow human being. Fear can blight all our lives and often returns when you don’t expect it. Yet, I have seen that it is possible for people to learn to cope better with it each time.

Many people learn to cope better with their phobias and some will even fully recover from them. However, the path can be slow and include setbacks. This book will not rush you into doing things quickly. It will not force you to confront all of your worst fears. It is important for people to change at a pace they are happy with, and the process of learning to cope with fear is no different. You are in control.

What are fears and phobias?

I will say it again: fear is a normal emotion. It is a vital way for us to protect ourselves. We all experience fear from time to time. Some people experience fear much more than others, often for very understandable reasons. It is normal to try to escape from danger and seek safety, and people often do it for very good reasons. Looking both ways before you cross the road is a good example. I will explain in more detail later exactly what fear involves, including the way it affects your thinking, behaviour and physiology. The more that you know about fear, the better equipped you will be to deal with it.

There are many ways that people have tried to define a phobia. In essence, a phobia is a fear that disrupts a person’s life. For example, nearly everyone fears being physically injured, but only some people alter their lives because of this fear, for example by not going out of the house or avoiding crowded places. The amount of disruption is what distinguishes a phobia from a fear, but what causes this fear is complicated and varies between different people. I will try to explain this later.

Some people have proposed that phobias are ‘irrational fears’. However, this way of defining a phobia has proved to be unreliable and not particularly helpful. Who is to say what is rational or irrational? I wouldn’t like to make that kind of judgement about somebody else. I’m fully aware that I’m not rational all the time, and happy not to be. So, this book will focus

on the most important target – reclaiming your life from the phobia, regardless of whether people believe that the phobia is irrational or not.

Experiences you may have had

People who suffer from problems with their anxiety have often had some unusual or frightening experiences that they cannot explain, such as trembling or heart palpitations. Other examples include distressing thoughts about future dangers, memories that come back to you over again, and physical sensations such as aches, pains, light headedness and exhaustion. Many more of these experiences are listed in Appendix 1 of the book. They are placed here so that you can refer to them when you need them, and when you feel comfortable about reading about them. Alongside each experience is an explanation for what it is, and an everyday explanation for why it might occur. If you have had any of these experiences then you are likely to find this book helpful.

Who could benefit from this book?

Fear works in the same way for everybody because we all have the same basic biology. So there is good reason to expect that this book can help anyone who wants to cope better with their fears. I would expect that people with a very specific phobia, or people with many different phobias and anxieties, will pick up useful information and techniques from this guide. People with anxiety conditions that are caused by trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may also find it helpful, in addition to people whose anxieties come out as obsessive thoughts or rituals. Also, it provides help to cope with anxiety regardless of whether a phobia is your main difficulty or not. In particular, I would expect people with a diagnosis of a serious psychological disorder reading this book to learn as much about how to cope with their anxiety as a person with no diagnosis at all. Appendix 2 lists the kinds of problems that may be helped by the approach of this book.

There are, however, some essentials needed to benefit from this book. First, appropriate reading skills are necessary. People with difficulties with reading, for any reason, may find it helpful for a friend, family member or health professional to work through the book with them. Second, you need to identify a fear, phobia or anxiety as a cause of problems in your life. Although this book would be helpful to anyone with other more serious difficulties, it does mainly tackle fear, phobias and anxiety, and so effects would be expected mainly in this area. Third, learning to cope with a fear needs to be one of your current priorities. For example, it would not be helpful for a person to start reading this book when having to deal with an immediate emergency. However, as soon as there is some space in your day to focus on and read a short section, even if it is just 10 minutes, it may begin to provide some help.

Finally, it is worth saying that nearly everyone who experiences a phobia or distressing anxiety seems to have had the thought at times: “I am different – what works for other people will not work for me!” It is very likely that you will get this thought when you read this book. Now, I certainly cannot guarantee that everything in this book will be directly relevant to you.

In fact, this would be very unlikely – the book is written with all kinds of fears and phobias in mind. One person with a phobia rarely understands another person who has a different phobia; to each of them the other person's fears seem illogical or unbelievable. Yet, this book will try to point you to the similarities between different people who are anxious, rather than the differences. In my experience, many people who have managed to cope with their fears have at one time had the thought that they are somehow the exception. If you were to believe this thought it would certainly be an easy way to not bother having to read any further or to put off trying to face your fears for another day. But how helpful would this be in the long run? Is it worth thinking that you cannot be helped, if you don't know whether or not it is true and this thought makes you feel worse about yourself? What have you got to lose by reading on and seeing if some of the ideas in the book might apply to you? My suggestion is to try them out, and then you can make your own mind up.

This book is just one of many sources of support. It is not a substitute for other support in any way. I encourage you to look into different ways of getting support, information or treatment. Chapter 12 provides advice about accessing local sources of support and treatment, and the last sections of the book provides a list of self-help groups, websites, and other useful contacts. It is up to you to draw on what you think might be helpful for you. No treatment is likely to be perfect, but the more you can find out about what is available, the better judgements you can make about what might be helpful for you.

The book provides information to take in, and techniques to try out. In this way, it tries to balance changes in thinking with changes in behaviour. The two are intertwined. First there is some background information on phobias and how to deal with them. Then, in Chapter 3, I provide some practical techniques to get started. The following chapters then provide more information on the nature of fear, the way that 'vicious cycles' develop, and how to prepare for change. Then, subsequent chapters describe how to go about putting self-help into practice and encourage you to begin to try out some techniques. I also focus on dealing with the consequences of phobias, what to do when you feel that the techniques are not working, and some more general advice on how to move your life forward in the way you want. The book has several appendices that you can refer to when necessary, including record sheets, exercises, a list of diagnoses, and a list of fears with non-threatening explanations. Many of the chapters include personal accounts to illustrate the main points, and there is a self-check at the end to consolidate what has been covered. Finally, there is a companion website to this guide that you can access any time: www.oneworld-publications.com/series/cognitive-behaviour.htm

There is no need to rush in reading this book. It is more important to check that you have fully digested what you have read and decided whether you agree with it. At first, just read through and think about whether you agree with what is being said. See if some of what you read prompts you to think about your fears in a different way. Then, when you are ready, you might choose to try out some of the recommendations in the book and see if they work for you. It is not a problem if they don't work the first time round. You may have to try them out a few times before they work for you. You are likely to find that new ways of thinking or behaving take time to 'click', maybe the third or fourth time you try them out.

It is probably better to try to work through this book from start to finish, but there may be certain sections you want to focus on, because they are more relevant at the time. It may be worth preparing yourself for the fact that not all of the elements of the book will apply to you, and to all of your experiences. Everyone is unique. But hopefully a large part of it will. Please try to move on when you feel a section does not apply to you until you get to a section that does. You can always come back to that section later if you want. I would hope that you could maximise the usefulness of the book by focusing first on the things that definitely ring true for you, and then maybe revisit the other sections later.

When you do read the book, try to focus all your attention on it, but don't get too immersed in it either. Probably half an hour a day is the most you would want to read it, but ten minutes is enough. It is probably better to read for a short while at a time over many days or weeks than to read it for several hours all at once and then not return to it. At the end of the day, it is only a book, and you need to get on with your everyday life without reading the book interfering too much.

Clearly it is not possible for you to have a very real relationship with the author of a self-help book. I can't respond in writing to what you are thinking right now. However, the style of this book is designed to be collaborative. I am aiming to introduce you to certain ideas and techniques, but leaving it up to you to decide whether they apply to you or are helpful. I am trying to share my own experiences and those of some of my clients, to make the point that many of us have similar experiences and we can learn from each other. I have put the work in to writing this book (but not lost sleep over it!), but you need to put the work in to read what it says, evaluate it, and try out what it says (again in a reasonable way – you have plenty of other things to read and think about!). The idea is that the work is roughly equal and the balance of power is roughly equal – don't believe anything written here until you have considered it and tried it out.

“Coping with anxiety” versus “overcoming anxiety” - are they the same or different?

This book is part of the “Coping with...” series by Oneworld Publications, and so its emphasis is on ‘coping’. Other books emphasise ‘overcoming’ or even ‘triumphing’ over anxiety. What is the difference? I prefer ‘coping with anxiety’ as a goal for this book, because it reminds us that some amount of anxiety can be normal. Eliminating anxiety completely is certainly not a goal of this book. So, getting better is about coping with anxiety better. Nevertheless, it would be possible for some people reading this book, or through other means, to ‘overcome’ their anxiety problems eventually – meaning that their anxiety no longer plagues and preoccupies them, nor has a significant impact on the way they want to live their lives. My hunch is that some readers of the book will want to take a ‘coping’ approach and some will want to take an ‘overcoming’ approach. It is up to you. However, whichever approach you wish to take, the general message is the same: people can learn to cope with anxiety over time and, despite setbacks along the way, many of them will overcome the negative effects of anxiety on their lives.

A note on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

You have probably heard about CBT. Like any new treatment that has been shown to be effective, it can generate a lot of opinions, both good and bad. The fact is that CBT is not perfect, and it is not always the same when it is carried out by different people. You may have had CBT and already benefited from it. You may have been trying to get CBT and be frustrated that it is not available locally. Or you may have had CBT and not feel that you have benefited. All of these experiences are common. This book takes a CBT approach because there are more studies showing its effectiveness than other treatments available for anxiety and phobias. However, this might change in the future. Also, my approach here will be slightly different from other people practising CBT, as will theirs be slightly different from one other. So, I encourage you to have an open mind and see what there is in this book that you can use to your advantage, and don't feel that you have to agree with everything. Again, you are in control and only you can decide what is going to be helpful for you.

Self-check

This section is designed to help summarise and consolidate what has been covered in the chapter. If you find that you don't agree with some of the statements, or they are unclear, then it may help to go back through the chapter. Other points may become clearer as you read further.

1. Fear is a normal emotion.
2. Many people learn to cope better with their phobias.
3. It is important for people to change at a pace they are happy with.
4. The more that you know about fear, the better equipped you will be to deal with it.
5. Fear works in the same way for everyone because we have the same fundamental biology.
6. Ultimately, only you can decide what is going to be helpful for you.