

When scared goes beyond Halloween: Phobias are fears that overwhelm, affect behavior

October 18 2013, by Pamela Knudson

What started out as a quiet evening at home last fall turned into a nightmare when Orianah Fast discovered an intruder in her Grand Forks, N.D., apartment.

She was watching TV, when she heard noises from her bedroom. Her two "super mellow, lazy cats" were hissing and running around, she said, likely playing with catnip toys.

"It sounded like they were pulling pages from a comic book and jumping from wall to wall," she said. When she investigated, she saw the cats had knocked a bed pillow to the floor. Sprawling on the bed, she tried to get the larger cat to play.

From a distance, the cat just stared at the pillow. So, Fast picked it up and found a coiled "ball python," several inches in diameter and about 4 to 6 feet in length.

"I jumped up, screaming at the top of my lungs and crying," she said. "I wasn't able to control my emotions."

She ran for help - "all the while hyperventilating and freaking out" - pounding on neighbors' doors. Eventually, a man answered and came to her aid. He scooped the snake into a plastic bag and told Fast it was probably sleeping.

"That obviously didn't make me feel any better, but he tried."

Like many Americans, Fast has a [phobia](#) that she can't necessarily understand but that is nonetheless real. Whether it's snakes or heights or an uneasy feeling when the elevator door closes, phobias can range from mildly embarrassing to completely debilitating.

Fast later learned that the snake, which belonged to her next-door neighbor, had escaped its cage and slithered through a heating vent system. Even though it was removed from her apartment, Fast was unable to sleep there for the next three nights.

"I was beyond creeped out. I just couldn't calm down. I just didn't want to be there."

When she did return, she moved the bedroom furniture, so her bed would be further from the spot where she found the snake. That "deep [fear](#)" lingered for about three weeks, she said.

Since her "discovery," when she enters the room, "I always look in that direction. But I tried to ignore it."

But phobias may stem from something we have no [memory](#) of - rooted in "unconscious memory," said Dr. Ric Ferraro, Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of North Dakota.

"We have what's called 'infantile amnesia.' When you ask someone what's the earliest memory they can think of and ask their age (then), most people will say 3 or 4 years old. If someone tries to recall an earlier memory, even back to their birth, that's a hazy area."

Fear - like happiness - is an emotion we are born with, he said.

A fear rises to the level of phobia "when it starts to restrict behavior," he said, "even to the point when it's harmful to oneself."

Fast has no idea what caused her intense fear of snakes. Her earliest related memory is when, at age 7 or 8, she was walking with her mother near their rural home and they came across a snake.

"She picked it up, as though to teach me about it," she said. "I freaked out. I don't know what happened. I have no idea why I freaked out. It was only a garter snake.

"I don't know what made me so fearful - maybe because snakes can squeeze (the life out of a creature), their bite can be poisonous or they can crawl in anywhere they want," she speculated.

Fanning her phobia growing up, "my brothers would tease me about it," she said. "Our dog would drag snakes home, and they would toss them at me to get a rise out of me."

"Phobias typically affect us negatively," said Ferraro. "They can cause people to alter or restrict their behavior.

"For example, if you're afraid of water, you can probably drink it or bathe in it, but you may not swim for fear of drowning."

"If you fear the color red and you come to my office, and it's painted red, you'll have a very distinctive reaction: you may be sweating, you may have to sit down - much like PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

"In some cases, you don't need the actual (fear) stimulus. For example, if war veterans (who suffer from PTSD) hear a car backfire, they'll respond accordingly."

"Many things can trigger many behaviors," he said. He told of a case about a smartphone that had been left on a conference table; it showed an image of a [spider](#). Someone beat the device with a shoe.

Some phobias are driven by superstition, such as fear of the number 13, he said. People with this fear may not drive on 13th Avenue.

"If a person has an appointment on a building's 13th floor, they'll just leave. They may not leave the house on days with the numbers 1 and 3 in them."

"If something bad happens on the 13th, they attribute it to (the date)," he said, as a way "to explain things they don't understand."

Phobias are often paired with something negative, he said. "It's often tied to something that's happened.

"If, as a child, you were bit by a German shepherd, you may be afraid of (that breed). It's an association that we've made. Even if the German shepherd is friendly, you're still afraid."

Among the several treatment approaches, "exposure therapy is very popular," Ferraro said. "If you were afraid of spiders, you'd be exposed to them gradually, in a piecemeal way.

"You might be given a picture of a spider, then see a spider in a cage. Somebody would hold out a spider for you to touch. It's done incrementally.

"It sounds ironic: you're exposed to the thing you hate."

If a phobia is causing someone "to alter or restrict behavior, they should at least go get it checked," he said.

Fast said she has no plans to seek treatment for her phobia.

"I don't think I'm going to get over it," she said. Until she recently, she says she "didn't realize how shaky and upset I got about it. It really shakes me up just talking about it."

She has "no interest in getting over the fear," she said. "It doesn't limit me. It's not something I'm interested in. I have no desire to touch a [snake](#)."

It's something she can live with.

"I don't think it affects my life too much - other than the fear that it might happen again," she said.

"It's one of those phobias I think I can avoid. If I were to go into a pet store or a zoo, I would purposely avoid it."

Having fulfilled her one-year apartment lease agreement, she's moving to another place this month.

"I'm glad we're moving," she said. "If I could have moved (after the incident), I definitely would have."

UNCOMMON PHOBIAS

-Air: Anemophobia.

-13 (the number): Triskadekaphobia.

-Beds (or going to bed): Clinophobia .

-Clouds: Nephophobia.

- Clowns: Coulrophobia.
- Dolls: Pediophobia.
- Dust: Amathophobia.
- Everything: Panophobia.
- Halloween: Samhainophobia.
- Peanut butter sticking to the roof of the mouth: Arachibutyrophobia.

COMMON PHOBIAS

- Fear of confined spaces.
- Fear of dentists.
- Fear of going to the doctor.
- Fear of death or dying.
- Fear of failure.
- Fear of fire.
- Fear of heights.
- Fear of injections.
- Fear of spiders.
- Fear of pain.

©2013 Grand Forks Herald (Grand Forks, N.D.)
Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: When scared goes beyond Halloween: Phobias are fears that overwhelm, affect behavior (2013, October 18) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-halloween-phobias-overwhelm-affect-behavior.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--