



SA Federation for
Mental Health

ANXIETY DISORDERS

SPECIFIC PHOBIA

What it is:

Specific phobia is characterised as an intense fear or anxiety relating to a specific object or situation. This can include examples such as an intense fear of flying, a fear of heights, a fear of spiders etc. This fear is always out of context with relation to the level of danger that the object or situation actually presents. The fear or anxiety is so great that it causes impairment in the individual's ability to function in day to day life. Typically an individual will try to avoid the object or situation that causes them fear. They may even reorganize or plan their lives in such a way as to try and minimise or prevent any contact with the object or situation of their fear.

Common symptoms:

1. An intense fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation
2. The specific object or situation always provokes this intense reaction
3. The fear or anxiety is out of proportion with the level of threat actually present
4. The individual may go to great lengths to try and avoid or minimise contact with the object/situation
5. This avoidance may cause impairment in the individual's ability to perform everyday tasks
6. The fear of the object/situation lasts at least 6 months

Causes:

There are a number of factors that contribute to the development of specific phobias. Temperamental risk factors include negative affectivity as well as behavioural inhibition. Environmental risk factors include parental overprotectiveness, parental loss or separation, and physical and sexual abuse. There may also be genetic and physiological factors involved, as an individual with a first degree relative who has specific phobia may be at greater risk of developing an anxiety disorder.

Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*