

CASE STUDY

A life lived in fear is a life half-lived!

Whether it's a terror of insects, dread of the dark or cramped spaces, a large number of people are crippled with phobias. But help is at hand. Therapists and sufferers explain how fears can be treated and transformed

Michaela Brady lost her
fear of lizards through
self-hypnosis
Picture: Ronan Lang



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For some it's a fear of the dark, for others a terror of spiders or even going outside. Phobias take many weird and wonderful forms, but they all have the potential to seriously ruin a day (or quality of life) for sufferers. But for those burdened with overwhelming fears – an estimated one in nine people – it's comforting to know that you're in good (and very eminent) company.

Children's writer Hans Christian Andersen, for instance, had anything but a fairytale life. He feared not only dogs and crowds, but also being robbed and poisoned. Whenever he stayed in a hotel, he brought along a rope so that he'd have a means of escape if a fire broke out. And because he lived in terror of being buried alive, he kept a note by his bed that read: "I only appear to be dead."

Hollywood actress Natalie Wood had a horror of dark water, and ironically died by drowning. Composer Robert Schumann was terrified of metal, and even Sigmund Freud, for all his brilliance, dreaded trains.

Meanwhile, billionaire industrialist Howard Hughes became so obsessed with hygiene and germs that he became a veritable recluse. However, not everyone

"Buried emotions often manifest themselves as phobias"

Zak Powers, hypnotherapist (below)



avoided their fears: in the 18th century Queen Christina of Sweden had a pathological horror of fleas. But she tackled it head-on by ordering a four-inch cannon to fire at her tiny leaping persecutors.

Most of us don't have such devices to battle our terrors. But we do have the likes of Michael McDonough, a consultant psychiatrist and cognitive behavioural therapist, who is an expert in the treatment of phobias at St Patrick's Hospital in Dublin.

"Originally, phobias developed as a means of protection for people living in environments which posed a real threat to survival," he says. "Patients should recognise them for what they are: an evolutionary hangover from times past, not an indication of a flawed personality."

"Most often, treatment via cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) will suffice. But if a patient is very distressed, then sometimes drugs such as Xeroxat and Prozac can be quite effective but only while the tablets are being taken. The difficulty is that CBT is not always readily available; at St Patrick's Hospital we have waiting lists of over a year.

"However, while awaiting treatment, it can be good to read self-help books such as those in the *Overcoming* series, and *Living with Fear* by Isaac Marks. Family members can also help so long as they don't force anyone to do



The FEAR factor

Karl Sugrue, 48, (pictured above right) is a health worker and he developed a phobia of being a passenger in a moving vehicle. "I was fine until 10 years ago when I began to get panicky, agitated and fearful whenever I was a passenger in a car. I had the same reaction when I travelled by train or plane. I also felt claustrophobic. "It really bothered me and made life difficult, especially as I was living in London and I often had to cross the city by tube. I remember counting off the 26 stops ashen-faced and longing to get out. Taxis, too, were a frequent method of transport, and it was always the same – another blighted journey, filled with dread. "I don't know why I put up with it for so long, but two years ago I decided to seek help. I visited

Conor McCaul at the Alpha Clinic and had three sessions of hypnotherapy with him. He gave me CDs to play when I was at home and introduced me to a 'tapping' method, where I would tap my forehead, cheekbones, nose, chin and chest to induce a feeling of calm.

"My final visit was in September last year. For some time after the sessions ended, I continued listened to the CDs and doing the tapping exercises, but that need has now gone. I suppose you could say I'm cured."

Michaela Brady, 28, (pictured above), is a psychotherapist and clinical hypnotherapist. She started to have a phobia of lizards as a teenager.

"I developed a phobia of lizards when I was 13 and holidaying in Spain. I saw one scurry along the wall, and became terrified. After that, whenever I thought of them or saw them, I became fearful and stressed. Ten years later, one ran over my shoe and I became so agitated that I nearly fell under a car. It was then that I decided to deal with it.

"At the time I was training to become a psychotherapist so I asked my tutor to treat me for the phobia. I practised self-hypnosis, concentrating on conjuring up images of lizards and changing the pictures from distress and fear to relaxation. In time, I felt easier about it.

"Then a couple of years ago, I was staying in a beach hut in Thailand and out came a lizard from underneath my pillow. Immediately I felt deeply upset; my worst nightmare had happened and I was sure my phobia had come back.

"But then I remembered that I had the power to calm myself. So I concentrated on regaining control until I felt able to cope. These days, I still don't like lizards but they no longer bother me so I guess I'm over it."

anything that they're not ready for. By pushing someone too far too quickly, there's a real danger of driving them into reverse."

Repressed fear and upset can be factors in the development of phobias, according to Dublin hypnotherapist Zak Powers. "Often these feelings are buried or pushed aside, but the emotions have to be released in some way and so they often manifest as phobias," he says.

For those under the impression that hypnotherapy entails watching a swaying pendulum, Conor McCaul, a therapist at the Alpha Clinic in Dublin, assures us that, "It's a process where the client drifts into a relaxed, focused and mentally aware state, but at no time are they anything other than fully conscious".

You can never be too young to overcome your fears, it seems.



Hypnotherapist Conor McCaul.

Picture: Tom Burke

“It was always the same when I took a taxi – another blighted journey, filled with dread”

Karl Sugrue (above)

Hypnotherapist Bryan Ryan, of the Milton Clinic in Wicklow, taught a father to help his three-year-old daughter overcome her fear of playschool.

“I told him how to teach her to create her own feeling of happiness, by recalling happy, relaxed times and the good feelings associated with these memories. Then I explained how she could call up that feeling at will, by pressing her thumb and index finger together. She learned to do that and got over the school phobia,” he says.

Not everyone can afford therapy or is physically capable of travelling to a phobia therapist. Also, many people are too anxious to even leave their homes to seek help for phobias.

But help is at hand in the form of a new ‘virtual’ treatment, currently being developed by specialists at the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research (ACT) in Scotland.

Professor David Alexander is one of specialists behind this innovative idea. By using virtual reality software similar to what is used in computer games, he believes patients can access therapy over the internet. They can have their progress monitored online by therapists.

The therapists mentioned in this article can be contacted as follows: Michael McDonough, St. Patrick's Hospital, 01-2493200; Conor McCaul, Alpha Clinic, Goatstown, Dublin, 01-2109777; Zak Powers, Hypnosis & Health Clinic, Dublin, 01-6705016; Bryan Ryan, Milton Clinic, Greystones, Co Wicklow, 01-2016216; Michaela Brady, Aspire Counselling & Psychotherapy, Dublin, 01-2721350 and the Aberdeen Centre for Trauma Research (ACT), Scotland, 0044 1224-262000.



Psychiatrist Michael McDonough.

Picture: Tom Burke