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Facts about Phobias and Older Adults

"My heart starts beating so fast that it feels like it's going to explode. My throat closes and I can't breathe so I start to choke. My hands start sweating and I get so dizzy I have to hold onto the furniture or the wall to keep from falling or fainting. I know I'm going to die." These words describe what a person who has a phobia feels when faced with an object or situation that he/she fears. People can develop phobic reactions to animals, social situations and activities. Phobias are the most common form of anxiety disorders, which are the most common mental health concerns in the United States.

Symptoms

A phobia can be so mild that it hardly affects the older adult's, or it can interfere with daily living and create extreme disability. In that case, it should be treated. A phobia is defined by the psychological and physical reactions to the object or situation feared rather than the object itself.

Symptoms include:

- ▶ Continuing and irrational panic, dread, horror or terror when in a situation that is harmless.
- ▶ Fear that goes beyond normal boundaries and the actual danger.
- ▶ The phobic reaction is automatic, uncontrollable and extensive.
- ▶ The person feels all the physical reactions linked with extreme fear: rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, trembling and overwhelming desire to flee the situation.
- ▶ The person flees the feared object or situation and go out of their way to avoid it. When avoidance causes distress or interferes with the ability to socialize or carry out day-to-day functions, they should seek evaluation.

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Categories of Phobias

A phobia may develop as a result of panic attacks that seem to appear out of nowhere. Panic attacks may push older adults into fearing and avoiding the situation or object linked such an attack. However, other people with phobias never experience a panic attack, even when confronted with the feared object.

Agoraphobia – The most common phobia is the fear of being alone in public places from which escape would be difficult or help unavailable. Most people develop symptoms between the ages of 18 and 35. People with agoraphobia are also likely to develop depression, fatigue, tension, spontaneous panic and obsessive disorders.

Simple phobia – People who experience simple phobia generally have irrational fear of specific objects. If the feared object rarely appears in the person's life, the phobia may not create serious disability. If the object is common, the disability can be severe. The most common phobias are claustrophobia, or fear of closed spaces and acrophobia, or fear of heights. Most simple phobias develop during childhood and eventually disappear. Those that continue into adulthood rarely go away without treatment.

Treatment

The vast majority of people with a phobia improve significantly or completely overcome their fear with treatment. The most effective and long-lasting treatment for phobia is a behavior therapy called exposure which relies on exposing the person to the feared object or situation. The two most common methods are systematic desensitization and "flooding", where the person is exposed directly and immediately to the most feared object or situation. The person stays in that situation until anxiety is markedly reduced.

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