

cure that phobia

04may03

Don't let phobias hold you back. Hypnotherapy has come a long way since swinging watches, reports Claire Bayliss.

Terrified of tall buildings? Paralysed by panic when you're asked to address the board meeting? Get sweaty at the mere thought of stepping into a tiny office lift? If you suffer from a phobia, chances are you will know all about it.

But if you think fear is something you really can't shake, think again. Hypnotherapy has been around for 5000 years, but it's still a good way to kick phobias. Often in just two sessions.

Dr Tracie O'Keefe says hypnotherapy is enjoying a resurgence because it delivers fast results in a society that loves a quick-fix. "It's the quickest therapy for curing phobias," says Dr O'Keefe, a Sydney-based clinical hypnotherapist, therapist, counsellor and author of several hypnotism books. "Alternatives such as analysis and medication can be long-winded, often without producing the results."

fear of the future

Dr O'Keefe says a phobia is basically an "inappropriate reaction" to a stimulus, which can be anything you see, hear, feel, smell or taste. Certain phobias, including fear of flying, small spaces or large crowds are more common than others and some are a modern phenomenon.

"Since September 11, there have been a lot of clients suffering from fear of planes," says Dr O'Keefe. "Public speaking is another very modern phobia; a lot more people, especially in the major cities, are required to give presentations these days."

And with more of us working at home or dealing mainly with computers, Dr O'Keefe says social phobias are on the rise, too. "As a result, some people may lose social skills and become afraid of going out," she says.

Whatever it is you're frightened of, hypnotherapy may help.

"Hypnotherapy is particularly fast at treating phobias because we access the root cause of the phobia, rather than talk around it," says Dr O'Keefe.

"Hypnotherapists are trained to put people into trances," explains O'Keefe.

"We lower the resistance of the conscious mind where defensive mechanisms live and access the unconscious mind where the programming lives. Then we help clients change the internal programming at a deep-rooted level."

In other words, if you are claustrophobic, you will be "retrained" to feel

and react differently when you step into small places. Arachnophobes will learn to like spiders, if only from a distance.

The best thing about hypnotherapy, when it comes to getting rid of phobias, is its success rate- although this does depend on your commitment to the process.

strange habits "I had one lady who suffered from agoraphobia, so her boyfriend did the shopping, took her everywhere in the car, did everything for her," says Dr O'Keefe. "Now, if she lost her phobia, she'd have to take care of herself and run the risk of losing the boyfriend. It was safer to keep the phobia, stick to the status quo." She claims others clients who have been genuinely dedicated to moving on have become classic success stories.

"I had one guy who had a phobia of flying. He got it cured. Last I heard he was flying as a commercial pilot."

If you are keen to give hypnotherapy a try, it's wise to shop around. Dr O'Keefe, for example, charges \$165 per hour but fees vary dramatically.

Ensure your therapist is well-qualified and belongs to a respected professional association such as the International Association For Doctors of Clinical Hypnotherapy.

Remember it's legal for people to advertise as therapists without any training; not the safest of mind-altering options. But find the right therapist and you could come away smiling.

"Phobias can hold you back," says Dr O'Keefe. "And that's no good, you could be out there having fun!"

n hypnotherapy: tried & tested

While researching this story I tried some hypnotherapy to cure my own phobia.

For as long as I can remember, I've had a phobia about pythons and other large snakes. As a UK-based journalist, this didn't pose too much of a problem; you don't encounter too many red bellied black snakes on the streets of central London. But all that changed when

I moved to "snake-ridden" Australia.

Within three months of arriving I'd had three terrifying encounters with snakes.

I was left feeling nauseous and too terrified to move. Within 10 days of meeting Dr O'Keefe for

a hypnotherapy session, I had a date with the Australian Reptile Park and a large boa constrictor. All I could do was hope the therapy did the trick...

the treatment

After arriving at Dr O'Keefe's Coogee-based practise, I was told to sit in a large comfy red chair and relax as she took a detailed personal and medical

history. She then handed me a big book of snakes which I had to flick through, rating each picture according to how disturbing I found it: small worm-like ones got a low three while three big ones registered a resounding 10 out of 10.

Dr O'Keefe says this meant my phobia was "snake specific". While she couldn't cure me of my phobia for all snakes, I could develop more "appropriate reactions" so I'd know how to act depending on which snake I encountered and in what location.

The actual hypnotherapy meant being taken into a trance state then completing a series of exercises. First, I had to think back to the earliest awareness of my phobia. I was about six and it involved handling my brother's pet glow worms - harmless but distinctly snake-like creatures that I couldn't stand.

I had to play this scene on a cinema screen in my mind, rewinding and repeating it on a loop, finishing with the incident blown up to IMAX size. Next, I had to imagine 10 snakes of various sizes, name them and then, incredibly, have a conversation with each one.

Finally, Dr O'Keefe took me into a state of deep relaxation and talked at length about how I should feel about and approach snakes (with a sense of intrigue and respect). She also discussed how I should react in an appropriate, safe way.

Brought back to a total "waking state" I could remember every word and it all seemed completely logical to me. I was then handed a therapy tape to listen to twice daily and told to learn as much as I could about snakes.

During my follow-up appointment, 10 days later, I rattled off my new snake knowledge then looked at the same picture book. This time, the snakes in it only rated twos, threes or fours. I was fairly confident the process had worked and I was ready to put it to the test.

the big boa test

The staff at The Australian Reptile Park in Gosford, NSW, do a lot of phobia work. If you're battling a snake or spider fear, it's the perfect place to do hands-on work and the staff can arrange a personal program to suit you.

During my session, I was told I would be handling two snakes. The first was a small corn snake, a popular pet with kids, apparently. There was no panic, no stomach-churning, I held the snake without the slightest shudder. The keeper then replaced the corn snake with eight kilos of boa constrictor, draped around my neck and over my shoulders.

I wouldn't describe my initial reaction as blissed-out, but once I stopped wriggling, so did the reptile in question. With us both relaxed, I even began to enjoy myself, amazed at how this creature felt, looked and moved. Ten days earlier, I wouldn't have gone anywhere near it. Now I didn't want to hand him back, but did so with a real sense of satisfaction. My phobia

had been well and truly blasted, hopefully for good.

To find out how The Australian Reptile Park can help your phobia, call (02) 4340 1022 or go to www.reptilepark.com.au For more information on Dr O'Keefe's work, visit www.tracieokeefe.com.

hypnotherapy- other uses

- pain relief If you're allergic to anaesthetic, hypnotherapy can ensure dentistry and even surgery remains pain-free.
- hypno birthing Want to stay awake when you have your baby? Hypnotherapy means you can remain conscious and yet deal with the pain.
- healing: Burns victims are put into deep trances via hypnotherapy, believed to raise the immune and cellular repair system.
- bad habits A 40-a-day fag habit will cost more than the sessions to get rid of it. Hypnotherapy can also be used to help combat eating disorders including over-eating and bulimia.