

# AGORAPHOBIA

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**What is agoraphobia?** Agoraphobia is the fear of being in an enclosed place. Examples of this could be:

- crowds of people
- confined spaces
- public transport
- being away from home
- being home alone

People sometimes feel worried if they are far away from an exit. They might not be able to get out easily, for example if they are on a train and the doors are closed. They worry that they will lose control, faint or collapse if unable to escape.

People may be embarrassed to leave, for example, leaving friends in a busy restaurant, or pushing past people in the cinema or at a concert.

They feel trapped, and begin to imagine what might happen to them if they cannot escape the situation.

For example:

Mary has been asking her husband to get the shopping for the past three weeks. This has been since she collapsed at the supermarket on a busy Saturday. Recently she had been feeling poorly, and suddenly fainted. The experience had been so terrifying and embarrassed Mary so much that she felt great panic every time she thought about going to get the family groceries. Mary stays at home to avoid this happening, as it makes her feel better.

Sometimes people are able to put themselves in the feared situation but will do so with intense dread. They may find it easier to do these things when somebody is with them.

## How this booklet can help

If you think you may be suffering from agoraphobia, this booklet can:

1. Help you understand what keeps your fear and agoraphobia going
2. Show you how you can change this pattern and begin to tackle your fear

## What fear is like for you?

Think about a time when you were very anxious

What I was anxious about:.....

How did it make you feel? (Tick all that apply)

- |                      |                          |                        |                          |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| I was shaking        | <input type="checkbox"/> | My hands were sweating | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I felt faint         | <input type="checkbox"/> | I felt hot             | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My heart was racing  | <input type="checkbox"/> | I felt sick            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My throat felt tight | <input type="checkbox"/> |                        |                          |

## What did you do?

You may have stayed in the situation for as long as you could bear before leaving as quickly as possible. You probably experienced the horrible feelings the whole time as well, perhaps feeling they were getting worse as time went on. When you left this situation (reaching home for example) you probably felt great relief at reaching your 'safe' place.

What I did .....

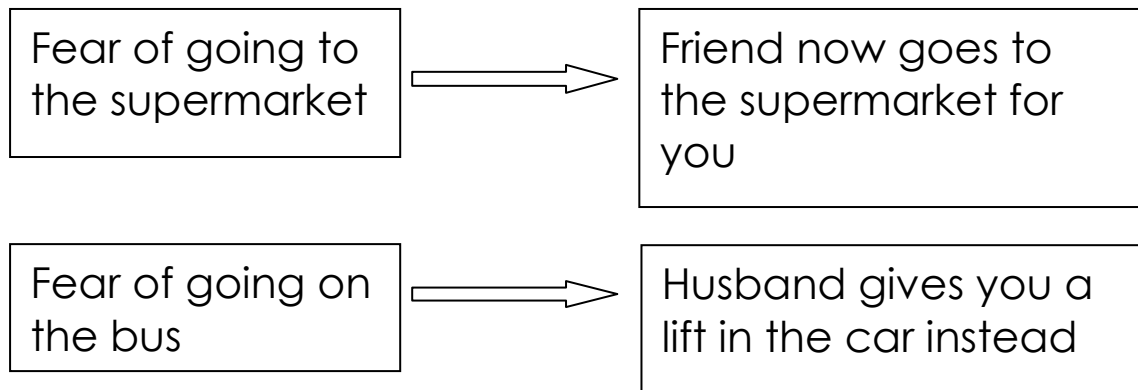
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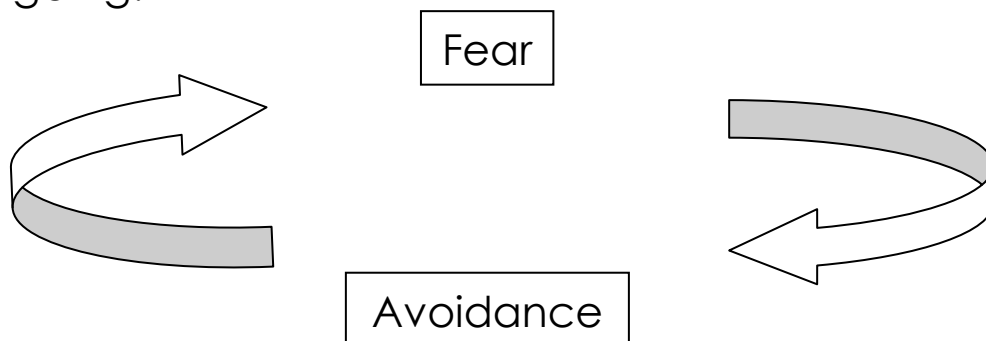
## What keeps your fear and agoraphobia going?

By leaving situations where you feel afraid you are showing yourself how much better it feels to get away. This leads to you wanting to avoid them altogether.

Whatever you are afraid of, you may have found yourself asking a partner, friend or relative to help you. For example:



The problem with this is that it becomes a comfort zone for you. It makes you feel better at the time but means you continue to avoid doing the thing(s) you are afraid of. The avoidance will keep on going.



It is in this way that your fear keeps going.

## How can you break the cycle?

If the avoidance is taken away, then gradually the fear will subside.

**The aim is to break the vicious circle**

## **How this can be done**

There are techniques you can use to cope with your fear instead of escape. Firstly try to be more aware of your thoughts and feelings when you feel panicky. When you are aware of them beginning you can calm yourself down by using the following:

### **1. Deep breathing**

When we are anxious or panicking, we tend to take lots of fast, short breaths of air. This only adds to our panic and makes us worse. Just by taking long, slow breaths, you are a long way towards coping in any stressful situation. This helps to relax your muscles, for example your shoulders, telling your body that you are okay in the situation.

### **2. Realistic thinking**

Try not to worry about all the possible things that could happen. You will just get yourself worked up, which is the habit we are trying to break. A realistic thought would be, "if I get off the bus now, I'll have to walk for ages to get to where I want to be."

### **3. Distraction**

To distract yourself, you might find it useful to try counting or doing some sums in your head. Another example would be to try clenching/unclenching your fists tightly, giving you something else to focus on.

By using these methods of coping you will gradually find you are able to stay in the feared situation for longer. This breaks the habit of avoidance and shows you that the feared situation is not so frightening or dangerous. It is the avoidance that builds it up and makes it seem this way.

## How to begin

Whether your agoraphobia is a specific fear of one thing (lifts, for example) or of many areas of life (for example supermarkets, buses and other confined spaces) your tackling of it should be exactly the same – in **small manageable steps**. It is important that you tackle one area at a time and at one stage at a time.

It will be most helpful to be honest with yourself about all areas of life that your agoraphobia is affecting. Think of the following examples and place a number next to them, showing how scary each situation would be for you (1 being the least scary and 10 the most)

Going to the supermarket	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sitting in a meeting or lecture	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sitting in a cinema/theatre	<input type="checkbox"/>	Walking alone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking a bus	<input type="checkbox"/>	Going on a train journey	<input type="checkbox"/>
Eating in a café/restaurant	<input type="checkbox"/>		

All that you have scored higher than 1 or 2 could probably do with being looked at. However, as mentioned before – **only deal with one at a time**.

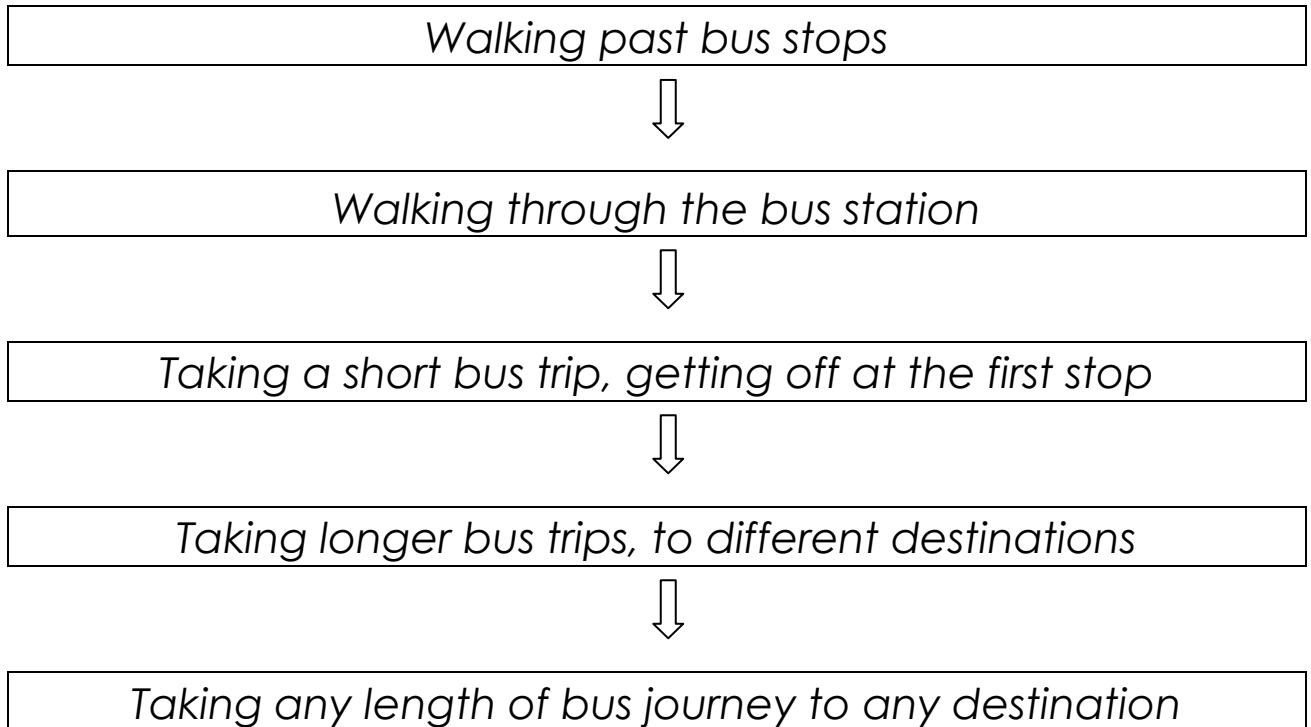
### Example: Fear of travelling on a bus

The first step is to work out what you feel most scared of and what might not be so bad. For example, the thought of walking through the bus station might not be as terrifying as being on a bus on a long journey. Next, think about what you would like your goal to be. What would you like to be able to do, so that your agoraphobia was no longer affecting your life? In this example,

*Goal: to be able to take a bus to Edinburgh without experiencing great anxiety.*

Next, think of steps that could lead to your goal and put them in order. This means you can start by trying to achieve the less difficult task first, and in time you will be ready to move on to the next stage.

For example:



You might also want to try each step with a friend first before doing it on your own.

After each stage you should reward and praise yourself for what you have achieved.

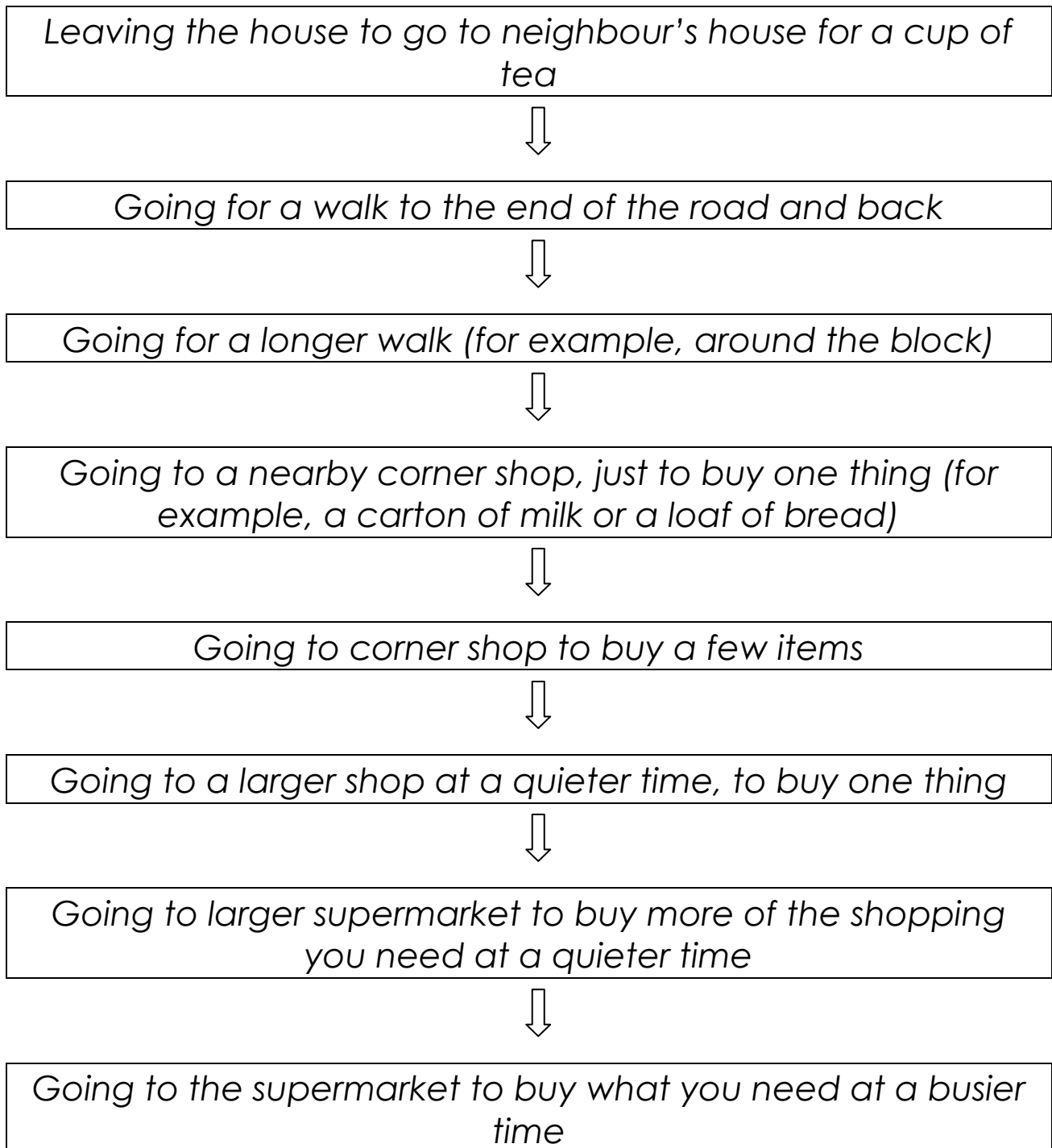
**Example: Fear of leaving the house to go to the supermarket**

*Goal: To be able to do weekly shop in local supermarket*

*Felt most scared at the thought of: being in a large busy supermarket with really long queues*

*Might not be so bad to: walk to the neighbour's house two doors down.*

Suggested steps that could lead to goal:



It would be helpful to slow down as you walk around the shops. It can be tempting to rush, so that you can leave faster, but this only heightens the feelings of panic and tension. Again, you would probably find it helpful and supportive to try each of these stages with a friend first, before trying it on your own.



## How to create your own steps

Fear of: .....

My goal: .....

Feel most scared at the thought of: .....

.....

Might not be so bad to: .....

Next, decide what your gradual steps to achieving this will be. (Although there are 4 numbers here, you should split your goal up into as many steps as you can think of).

1.



2.



3.



4.

You have now developed a plan for tackling your agoraphobia. Remember to treat yourself to a reward when you achieve each stage.

## How family and friends can help

The support of others in the treatment of agoraphobia is very helpful. Family and friends may know what can be difficult for you and so can help support you in doing day-to-day things. It might be helpful for friends/family to read this booklet also.

You may also find it helpful to keep a record of your practice, for example, listing the lengths of journeys you take and the specific destinations. This is both for you to see what progress you are making and to help in identifying any stumbling blocks.

## Things to remember

If you feel panicky

- sit down somewhere/find somewhere to rest
- use your 3 methods of coping – breathing, realistic thinking and distraction

The important part here is to try to **stay as near the place where these feelings started as possible.**

Practice is likely to be frightening, boring at times, and hard work. It is very important, however, to stick at it and praise and reward yourself for all your achievements. If this can be done then the vicious circle can be broken.

## Further help

**Breathing Space** – mental health helpline

(Weekdays: 6pm – 2am)

(Weekends: Fri 6pm – Mon 6am)

Tel: 0800 83 85 87

**Samaritans** - confidential support for anyone in a crisis

National Helpline (24 hours a day)

Tel: 116 123

E-mail Helpline           jo@samaritans.org (answer within 24 hours)

Visit Local Branch

21 West Port, Selkirk, TD7 4DG

## Websites

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/anxiety-type/agoraphobia/>

This site focuses on anxiety-related conditions. A free self-help manual for agoraphobia can be downloaded from the 'Recommended Resources' section at the bottom of the agoraphobia page.

[www.nomorepanic.co.uk](http://www.nomorepanic.co.uk)

A site that looks specifically at phobia, anxiety, panic and related problems. Detailed page on agoraphobia.

[www.topuk.org](http://www.topuk.org)

A site with short, to-the-point links covering phobias, the effects of them and what can help.

[www.lltff.com](http://www.lltff.com)

A general self-help website offering advice on a wide range of issues. It helps you to understand your behaviour, thoughts and offers help on healthy living, better sleep and relaxation.

## **Books**

Bourne, Edmund (2015) *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* New Harbinger ISBN: 978-1626252158 (A practical guide to facing fears associated with anxiety-related conditions. Based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)

Marks, Isaac (2005) *Living with Fear* McGraw-Hill Professional ISBN 978-0077109820 (A self-help book giving some practical advice on phobias. Also covers areas such as panic and stress following a traumatic event)

Silove, Derrik & Manicavasagar, Vijaya (2009) *Overcoming Panic and Agoraphobia* Robinson ISBN: 978-1849010023 (A step-by-step guide on how to manage symptoms of Agoraphobia. Based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)

## **Apps for mobile phone and tablets**

A range of self-help apps are available for your mobile phone and tablet. Some of these apps are free of charge, whilst others have a cost attached depending on the developer. Please use the link below to view some suggested self-help apps for different mental health problems:

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

## **Booklets/leaflets available on the following:**

Anger  
Anxiety  
Bereavement  
Depression  
Hyperventilation  
Loss  
OCD  
Panic (short version and long version)  
Phobia  
How to solve problems: a simple DIY technique  
Relaxation  
Self-Esteem  
Self-Harm  
Self-Help Websites  
Sleep  
Stress  
Trauma  
Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available to download and print at:

E-mail – [wellbeing@borders.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:wellbeing@borders.scot.nhs.uk)

P Mills, M Henderson, J Hastings 2006  
NHS Borders

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