How to overcome phobias in the workplace

By Debra Auerbach, CareerBuilder Writer

Few people truly love public speaking. So when you have to give a big presentation to your boss and a room full of your peers, it's normal to feel nervous, get a little sweaty and rejoice once the presentation is over. Yet for some, the idea of public speaking evokes such fear that it's debilitating and renders them unable to participate. That kind of anxiety may be considered a social phobia. Bing: Most common phobias

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, an estimated 5.3 million Americans suffer from a social phobia, an overwhelming anxiety and self-consciousness in social settings. What's more, the institute estimates that more than one in 10 Americans have one or more specific phobias. WebMD defines phobia as "a lasting and unreasonable fear caused by the presence or thought of a specific object or situation that usually poses little or no actual danger."

A variety of phobias -- both social and specific -- could be manifested at work. Psychologist Elizabeth Lombardo, Ph.D., author of "A Happy You: Your Ultimate Prescription for Happiness," names fear of heights, elevators, flying and germs as examples of phobias that could interfere with work. Others may be more specific, such as the fear of making a decision, the fear of computers or the fear of speaking on the phone. So what should a worker do if he has a phobia that may hurt his job performance?

Be upfront in an interview

If you have a phobia that is associated with any part of the job description and you don't think you'll be able to perform that task, you should be upfront during an interview. "The only time you really need to mention your phobia during an interview is if the phobia will prevent you from doing the job for which you are interviewing," Lombardo says. "For example, many people who are phobic of flying still do actually fly. So in this case, there is no need to bring up your fear. However, if you refuse to fly and the job description includes travel that requires flying, you need to mention this during the interview."

Work with human resources

A phobia can be considered a disability if it limits a major life activity, says Scott Barer, a labor and employment law attorney. "For example, if the phobia rises to the level of, or causes, a mental disorder that limits a major life activity, then the phobia could be considered a disability," he says. "In that

situation, the employee has rights under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) and likely under similar state laws."

If the phobia rises to the level of a disability, "then the employer has to engage the employee -- or applicant -- in an interactive process in order to try to find a reasonable accommodation that will allow the employee or applicant to perform the essential functions of his [or] her job," Barer says. "Only in the rare situation where an accommodation would cause the employer an undue hardship is the employer not required to accommodate an employee's disability."

So what does this mean? If you believe your phobia will get in the way of your job performance, say something to human resources, and they can work with you to develop a plan that will work for both you and the company.

Build confidence

If having to deal with a phobia in your workplace is inevitable, Lombardo recommends gradual exposure as a way to build confidence and address the fear. "Take smaller steps to allow you to be more comfortable," she suggests. "For example, if you are fearful of giving a presentation, try speaking in front of a group of three to five people for five minutes, three times a week. As you do, your fear will decrease. Then, increase the number to seven to eight people." Beyond working with co-workers, Lombardo suggests looking into organizations that help build specific skills. One is [Toastmasters International,](#) which is dedicated to helping members improve their speaking and leadership skills.

Attempt to overcome your phobia

Lombardo shares three tips for working to overcome your phobia:

- **Address your stress:** Phobias become stronger when overall stress levels are high. So take steps to reduce stress, such as meditation, exercise or deep breathing.
- **Distraction:** What you focus on gets bigger, so, for example, rather than focusing on your fear that the plane will crash, distract yourself by having a few good movies and magazines available to keep your mind on something else. The topic should be light, not stressful.
- **Exposure:** Ironically, avoiding your fear makes it stronger. A technique called systematic desensitization causes you to couple your fear with relaxation techniques. So, just like how Pavlov's dog salivated at the sound of the bell, people's bodies will relax, or at least not be so tense, when they are exposed to their phobia.

Seek help

The best approach to overcoming a phobia is to seek help. While every phobic person is unique and requires a treatment plan that specifically addresses his phobia, Lombardo says that phobias are very treatable with the right approach. "Sites like [PsychologyToday.com,](#) and many insurance company sites, allow you to search for a psychologist by location and specialty -- in this case, phobias," Lombardo says. "If you are really in a bind for money, community mental health center[s] could be an option. Or look into a local graduate program for psychologists or counselors. Often students, under the supervision of licensed professionals, will work with clients for little or no money."

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