

# Claustrophobia

How do you feel when you think of yourself within an enclosed space? Some of you might not think much of it but for others, it could act like a nightmarish hell with no means of escape.

Claustrophobia comes from combining two words - claustum, a Latin word for 'a closed-in place', and phobia which means fear. Therefore, claustrophobia represents the fear of confined or enclosed spaces. A rational fear of something differs from a phobia of the same thing. The way phobias work is that they induce intense fear within the person, rendering their abilities to almost an unusable level and presenting a situation that might not even match the actual level of danger. This kind of fear can often lead to overwhelming panic attacks and elevated levels of anxiety. In the case of claustrophobia, the victim might feel extremely anxious about being enclosed in a tight-fitted space and become further overwhelmed leading to a loss of concentration and functioning.

## Causes

A phobia or an irrational fear of anything can never be explained completely through a fixed set of causes, however, there are a few factors that can be considered as a potential cause or at least as an inducer of the said fear.

- **Traumatic Experience** - Most of the people who suffer from claustrophobia claim to have had some sort of traumatic experience/accident regarding enclosed spaces which eventually led them to develop a phobia.
- **Genetic Factor** - If your parents were/are afraid of confined spaces, it could very well be a reason for your claustrophobia development.
- **Brain Function** - Studies suggest a possible link between claustrophobia and dysfunction in the amygdala, the part of the brain that processes fear, making it overactive.
- **Triggering Event** - A phobia doesn't necessarily need to develop during childhood, and so a triggering event even as an adult can lead to the development of claustrophobia.

## Triggers

There can be several triggers or places that can immediately activate the sensation of claustrophobia within a victim. These can include situations where a person might not even be within a directly closed space however something might act as a trigger and could lead to overwhelming fear. Following is the list of both physical and psychological triggers which might lead to claustrophobia -:

- Elevators

- Tunnels
- Rooms with no windows
- Airplanes
- Trains
- Cars
- MRI Machines
- Dental/Operative Chairs
- Crowded rooms with limited exits
- Traffic Jams
- Dense forests or caves
- A setting with loud noises

Something that should be kept in mind is that triggers can vary from person to person. Some people with claustrophobia might be more bothered by small, enclosed spaces, while others might experience anxiety in crowded environments even if there's technically more room. Additionally, the intensity of the fear response can vary depending on the severity of the phobia and the specific trigger.

## **Symptoms**

The effects of a phobia are similar to that of an anxiety or a panic attack, therefore the victim goes through a lot of physical and emotional distress when claustrophobia takes over. Following can be the effects -:

- Sweating
- Shaking
- Increased Heart Rate
- Dizziness
- Tightness in Chest
- Difficulty in Breathing
- A feeling of being Choked
- Numbness
- Muscle Tension
- Intense Panic
- Suffocation
- Feeling Helpless
- Urge to Escape
- Fear of Dying (In extreme cases)

According to [WebMD](#), You may also feel a sense of doom, like you're going to die or the world is going to end. These feelings can be very frightening, even if you're not really in danger. And though you might realize that the fear isn't rational, you may not be able to stop it.

## **How Can Claustrophobia be diagnosed?**

A person who suffers from claustrophobia is already aware of their condition due to past events and how they go to great extents just to avoid being in a closed-up space. A medical professional would then want to confirm that what you are dealing with is indeed a phobia and not just a regular fear while also making sure that it is not a medical condition or a psychiatric disorder.

The following steps would either include a questionnaire filling or a one-on-one session with the medical professional to assess the situation. The questions in this step would inquire about certain details regarding your phobia including the time duration, specific triggers, history with anxiety, and more to provide a broader picture to plan the treatment.

## **Treatment**

Without an effective treatment, the issue of claustrophobia cannot be dealt with. If one continues to avoid enclosed spaces then chances are that their claustrophobia will continue to get worse, therefore it is important to seek professional help regarding it.

The sources of [Cleveland Clinic](#), claim that there are two main treatments for claustrophobia, i.e. Exposure Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

### **Exposure Therapy**

Exposure therapy is a form of psychotherapy where the patient is exposed to their feared situation in a gradual and controlled manner. The goal of this therapy is to get the patient comfortable with the situation which might induce fear. This form of therapy works on the principle of extinction which states that if a conditioned response (fear) is repeatedly presented without the expected negative reinforcement (danger), the response will eventually weaken and disappear.

The therapy takes place in a safe and controlled environment with the medical professional providing support and guidance to the patient at every step. It begins with exposure to less anxiety-inducing situations or triggers which help the patient ease into the setting. With gradual progression, the patient learns that the situations they fear aren't dangerous and thus helps them develop a coping mechanism to manage their anxiety.

Exposure therapy can be uncomfortable at times but is a tried and tested method to get over phobias and several anxiety issues safely and effectively.

### **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on identifying and changing negative thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to emotional distress.

This form of therapy emphasizes how our thoughts are connected to our emotions and how our emotions influence our behavior. This form of therapy aims to establish certain goals for the patient to achieve, in regards to how they feel and think. Several techniques are used to challenge the existing negative pattern of thoughts and develop more of a balanced and realistic perspective.

CBT is a well-researched and evidence-based approach that uses different tools and strategies to combat difficult emotions and situations. It is a solution-oriented therapy that can work against not just claustrophobia but many other anxiety disorders.

## **The Outlook**

It might seem difficult from the looks of it but claustrophobia can be cured and treated. About 12.5% of the world's population live with this fear so there is no shame in talking to your close ones if you suffer from something like this. What you should remember is that many people suffer from a wide range of phobias and so there are people who are ready to help you. The transition and journey regarding this might not be easy but help is just around the corner.