

'To a man who is afraid everything rustles'

– *Sophocles* –

■ What is agoraphobia?

Agoraphobia is a condition characterised by a complex mixture of fears, anxieties and avoidances. The syndrome has occurred throughout history; the word *agoraphobia* comes from the Greek and literally means 'fear of the marketplace'. More recent research indicates that people with agoraphobia have a fear of panic or anxiety, regardless of where they occur. The secondary fear is the fear of situations, such as a crowded place, or a situation of entrapment.

The agoraphobic person usually experiences unpleasant physical symptoms of anxiety, mainly panic attacks. Some people have nervous systems which are more prone to having panic attacks. The person is inclined to worry about these attacks and to misinterpret their significance. Common thoughts are: 'I'm going to die', or 'I'm going to have a heart attack', 'I'm going to faint', 'I'm going to lose control of my bowels or bladder', 'I'm going mad'. Following this experience, the person starts to avoid situations associated with these attacks. Situations which tend to be avoided are those that have an element of 'entrapment', and those that are a long way from a place of safety.

■ A vicious circle

The initial panic attack or experience of anxiety usually comes out of the blue, but behind it there are often a number of underlying stresses. The person may be tired, or run down, or may just 'have a lot on their plate'.

After the first panic attack, a familiar vicious circle is likely to occur. The individual worries about having another attack, and is naturally inclined to avoid certain situations. This worry and avoidance makes future attacks more likely. The result is a loss of confidence and a feeling of insecurity. The more insecure the individual feels the more he or she is likely to avoid situations; thus, the vicious circle gets

established. Often the person can feel trapped within a 'spiders's web' of avoidance.

Very often the person with agoraphobia is in an environment where people allow them to avoid. These significant people may think that they are being kind but they are not. Sometimes the partner or relative may be getting something positive from the situation. They might feel stronger and more needed as the agoraphobic feels weaker and more dependent.

The key features in reversing this vicious downward spiral are:

- ① Understanding what is really going on.
- ② Learning to gain some control over anxiety symptoms by acquiring new skills, such as relaxation, breathing exercises, distraction, and positive self-talk.
- ③ Progressively confronting the situations previously avoided, in a graded manner.
- ④ Notice your confidence growing as you successfully manage more difficult situations. Build on this confidence – change your lifestyle.