

A serious case

My friend is afraid of spiders. This isn't very unusual; a lot of people are afraid of spiders. But my friend isn't just afraid of spiders, she is totally, completely and utterly terrified of them ...



I have a friend who is afraid of spiders. This isn't very unusual; a lot of people are afraid of spiders. I don't really like spiders much myself. I don't mind them if I see them outside in the garden, as long as they're not too big. But if one comes in the house, especially if it's one of those really big spiders with furry legs and little red eyes, then I go 'Yeeucch' and I try to get rid of it. Usually I'll use a brush to get rid of the spider, but if I feel brave then I'll put a glass over the top of it, slide a piece of paper under the glass and then take it outside.

This is quite normal, I think. But my friend isn't afraid of spiders in any normal way. She isn't just afraid of spiders, she is totally, completely and utterly terrified of them. When my friend sees a spider, she doesn't just go 'Uurgghh!' or run away or ask someone else to get rid of the horrible creepy-crawly. No, she screams as loud as she possibly can. She screams so loud that her neighbours worry about her and think about calling the police. When she sees a spider, she shivers all over and sometimes she freezes completely – she can't move at all because she is so terrified. Sometimes she even faints.

But my friend had a surprise for me when we met for coffee last week.

'Guess what?' she asked me.

'What?' I said.

'I've got a new pet!'

'Great,' I said. 'What is it? A dog? A cat?'

'No.'

'A budgie?'

'No.'

'A rabbit?'

'No.'

'What then?'

'I've got a pet spider.'

'I don't believe you!'

'It's true! I decided that it was time I did something about my phobia, so I went to visit a doctor, a special doctor. A psychiatrist. This psychiatrist specialises in phobias – helping people who have irrational fears to get better and live normally. He told me I suffered from "arachnophobia".'

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'It's an irrational fear of spiders,' he said. 'About one in fifty people suffer from a severe form of arachnophobia. It's not very uncommon.'

'Thanks,' said my friend. 'But that doesn't help me much ...'

'There are lots of different ways we can try to cure your phobia,' said the psychiatrist. 'First, there is traditional analysis.'

'What does that mean?' asked my friend.

'This means lots of talking. We try to find out exactly why you have such a terrible fear of spiders. Perhaps it's linked to something that happened to you when you were a child.'

'Oh dear,' said my friend. 'That sounds quite worrying.'

'It can take a long time,' said the psychiatrist. 'Years, sometimes, and you can never be certain that it will be successful.'

'Are there any other methods?'

'Yes – some psychiatrists use hypnosis along with traditional analysis.'

My friend didn't like the idea of being hypnotised. 'I'm worried about what things will come out of my subconscious mind!' she said. 'Are there any other methods?'

'Well,' said the psychiatrist, 'there is what we call the "behavioural" approach.'

'What's the behavioural approach?' asked my friend.

'Well,' said the psychiatrist, 'it's like this ...'

The psychiatrist got out a small spider from his desk. It wasn't a real spider. It was made of plastic. Even though it was only a plastic spider, my friend screamed when she saw it.

'Don't worry,' said the psychiatrist. 'It's not a real spider.'

'I know,' said my friend. 'But I'm afraid of it just the same.'

'Hmm,' said the psychiatrist. 'A serious case ...' He put the plastic spider on the desk. When my friend stopped screaming, the psychiatrist told her to touch it. When she stopped screaming again – the idea of touching the plastic spider was enough to make her scream – she touched it. At first she touched it for just one second. She shivered all over, but at least she managed to touch it.

'OK,' said the psychiatrist. 'That's all for today. Thanks. You can go home now.'

'That's it?' asked my friend.

'Yes.'

'That's all?'

'Yes, for today. This is the behavioural approach. Come back tomorrow.'

My friend went back the next day, and this time the plastic spider was already on the doctor's desk. This time she touched it and held it for five minutes. Then the doctor told her to go home and come back the next day. The next day she went back and the plastic spider was on her chair. She had to move the spider so she could sit down. The next day she held the spider in her hand while she sat in her chair. The next day, the doctor gave her the plastic spider and told her to take it home with her.

'Where do spiders appear in your house?' asked the psychiatrist.

'In the bath, usually,' said my friend.

'Put the spider in the bath,' he told her.

My friend was terrified of the spider in the bath, but she managed not to scream when she saw it there.

'It's only a plastic spider,' she told herself.

The next day the psychiatrist told her to put the spider in her living room. My friend put it on top of the television. At first she thought the spider was watching her and she felt afraid. Then she told herself that it was only a plastic spider.

The next day the psychiatrist told her to put the spider in her bed.

'No way!' she said. 'Absolutely not!'

'Why not?' asked the psychiatrist.

'It's a spider!' replied my friend.

'No, it's not,' said the psychiatrist, 'It's a plastic spider. It's not a real one.'

My friend realised that her doctor was right. She put the plastic spider in her bed and she slept there all night with it in her bed. She only felt a little bit afraid.

The next day, she went back to the psychiatrist. This time, she had a shock ... a big shock. Sitting in the middle of the doctor's desk there was a spider. And this time it was a real spider.

My friend was about to scream and run away, but she didn't. She sat on the other side of the room, as far away as possible from the spider, for about five minutes, then she got up and left the room.

'See you tomorrow!' shouted the psychiatrist to her as she left.

The next day she went back, and this time the psychiatrist let the spider run around on his desk. Again, my friend stayed about five minutes, then left. The next day she stayed for ten minutes, and the day after that, fifteen. Eventually, the psychiatrist held the spider, the real spider with long furry legs and little eyes, in his hand. He asked my friend to come and touch it. At first she refused, but the doctor insisted. Eventually she touched the spider, just for a second. The next day she touched it for a few seconds, then for a few minutes, and after that she held the spider in her own hand.

Then she took the spider home and let it run around in her house. She didn't feel afraid. Well, OK, she did feel afraid, but only a tiny bit.

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'So now I've got a pet spider!' she told me again.

'Well done!' I said.

'There's only one problem,' she said, and as she spoke I noticed that she was shivering all over. Then she screamed and climbed up on the chair. She was pointing to something on the floor.

'Over there!' she screamed. 'Look! It's a beetle!'