



CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Elevators, MRIs, windowless rooms...they're all a nightmare for people with this condition.

Break Free From FEAR

Do you panic at the very idea of being enclosed in a small space or getting on an airplane? Phobias are surprisingly common—and debilitating. Here's how four women learned to control their terror, and what you can glean from their struggles.

EVERYONE KNOWS HOW IT FEELS TO BE panic-stricken—say, when you sense someone is following you or a car nearly hits you as you're crossing the street. Now imagine having that stomach-dropping sensation on a regular basis, in seemingly harmless settings. That's what life is like for the estimated 12.5 percent of the population who will cope with a phobia at some point in their lives. The good news is that there are proven methods for managing this anxiety disorder. The bad? They involve exposing yourself to the very thing that frightens you. But as the four women on the next few pages can attest, that temporary discomfort is a small price to pay for regaining your freedom.

by Chryso D'Angelo • photography by Ian Spanier



GINGER GARNER, 38
Emerald Isle, NC
CONQUERED CLAUSTROPHOBIA
(fear of small spaces)

Ginger had detested tight quarters for as long as she could remember. “Whenever I stepped into an elevator, I’d get anxious,” she says. When she needed an MRI (which entails lying in an enclosed tube) after a car accident 10 years ago, Valium helped her through it—but it was still an unsettling experience. **THE TURNING POINT** In 2003, Ginger starting dating Jeff, a caving enthusiast. When he asked her to join him on an underground adventure, she reluctantly said yes. “At the time, I was ending a bad marriage and thought, ‘If I’m strong enough to leave this relationship, I can handle a cave,’” says Ginger.

WHAT WORKED BREATHING TECHNIQUES

To prepare for the big day, Ginger called upon her training as a holistic physical therapist and yoga educator and began practicing deep breathing. But when Jeff showed her the small, cramped space through which they needed to crawl, her throat began to tighten. She blurted out, “I can’t do it! What if I get stuck? I’ll completely lose my mind!” Jeff assured her that they could leave whenever she wanted. She closed her eyes, took five deep breaths, and slowly moved forward. “I felt like I was inching into a coffin, but Jeff helped keep me calm by playing his harmonica,” she says. When they resurfaced above ground, Ginger felt triumphant.

Ginger and Jeff have since married, and they often go caving with their two young sons. When nerves crop up on occasion, she uses deep breathing to get through it—especially a technique called Ujjayi, which mimics the sound of the ocean. “While my claustrophobia will never be completely gone,” Ginger admits, “I have the tools to help me cope.”



JUSTINE RANDAZZEZE, 32
Queens, NY
CONQUERED GEPHYROPHOBIA
(fear of bridges)

Growing up, this New York native dreaded visiting relatives in New Jersey because it meant crossing the 4,260-foot-long Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. “I’d close my eyes and just pray that it wouldn’t collapse,” says Justine. As an adult, she avoided bridges as much as possible, often taking roundabout routes when making deliveries for her bakery business. “Whenever I had no choice but to drive over one, my heart would pound and I’d roll down the windows



GEPHYROPHOBIA
Fear of bridges is often closely related to a terror of heights.

because I couldn’t breathe,” she says. “I was terrified that I would lose control of the car.”

THE TURNING POINT Six months ago, Justine was driving home with a friend after a night out in the city. When she pointed her car toward the Midtown Tunnel, her friend asked why they weren’t taking the bridge—which would be quicker. She swallowed her embarrassment and admitted her fear.

WHAT WORKED POSITIVE THINKING

Justine started reading about how negative thoughts reinforce anxiety. One book in particular, *You Can Create an Exceptional Life*, resonated with her. The main message: You have everything inside you that you’ll ever need, no matter where you are. Encouraged by that concept, Justine consciously began adjusting her thinking by making positive statements like, “Bridges are great because they get you places fast.”

She also believed that a closer look at a bridge would help the fear subside, so she decided to mark her 32nd birthday in March by walking across the Brooklyn Bridge with her family. “As we approached the footpath, I said, ‘I can do this. I have everything inside of me to walk onto this bridge.’” Her brother gave her an

“I kept picturing the oxygen masks coming down and my luggage floating in the ocean.”

encouraging nod as she moved toward one of the huge stone stanchions and touched it.

“It felt so solid. I realized that even if I lost control while driving, there’s no way I’d barrel through it.” Midway across, she stopped to snap some pictures of downtown Manhattan.

While most bridges no longer cause Justine any distress, the Verrazano still makes her woozy. “I’ve yet to be the driver, but I recently rode over it as a passenger,” she says. “I looked out the window and saw an amazing view of the skyline—one that I never knew existed because my eyes had always been closed.”



ALICIA HUNTER, 44
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
CONQUERED AVIOPHOBIA
(fear of flying)

Alicia hated flying so much that for years she took a 20-plus-hour train ride from Florida to New Jersey to visit family, and once she even turned down a free trip to Mexico. Yet when she married in September 2001, she was determined to fly to Boston for her honeymoon. “I got on the plane, but every sound and bump freaked me out,” says Alicia. “I kept picturing the oxygen masks coming down and my luggage floating in the ocean.” She was dreading the return trip when news hit of the 9/11 terrorist attacks; both jets that hit the World Trade Center had departed from Boston’s Logan International Airport. “No way was I getting

back on a plane,” says Alicia, who rented a car with her new husband and drove 1,400 miles back to Florida.

THE TURNING POINT In 2005, Alicia was working at a beauty salon frequented by several flight attendants and pilots. Naturally, the conversation often turned to travel, and one day she finally confessed that she had a phobia of flying. One of the pilots offered to help.

WHAT WORKED DEMYSTIFICATION

The pilot showed Alicia his flight manual and gave her a brief primer on aerodynamics. “Once I understood how that hunk of metal stays airborne, I started to feel better,” she says. A year later, when a friend invited her on an hour-long sightseeing tour in a six-seat Piper Seneca plane, Alicia nervously accepted. “As the aircraft taxied faster, the lump in my throat got bigger and I wanted to scream, ‘Let me off!’” she recalls. But as she listened to the air traffic controllers and other airplanes’ pilots talking to each other, Alicia began to relax. “They were so calm and responsive that I realized I was safe in their hands,” she says.

Soon after, Alicia started flying more often. “The first few times, my heart was racing, especially during turbulence,” she says. “But I’d watch the flight attendants, and if they looked unconcerned, it put me at ease.” Today she travels bimonthly for work—and she’s actually started to enjoy it. “I still have my little rituals,” Alicia confesses. “I kiss the palm of my right hand and place it on the outside of the plane as I enter for good luck, and I kiss a picture of my kids. Then I sit back and look forward to a few hours of downtime.”

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PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR PHOBIAS

Although some people do conquer phobias on their own, many need a mental-health expert to guide them through the process. Here’s how one might help:

• **COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY**

The most common treatment for phobias, this focuses on identifying thoughts and behaviors that prompt panic and then

changing the way you respond to them. Your therapist will help you tackle a list of stressful situations, from the least to the most anxiety-provoking. “You inch toward the thing you’re scared of, and soon those fearful thoughts and feelings will subside,” says Sally Winston, codirector of the Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of

Maryland. Most patients need 12 to 16 sessions.

• **MEDICATION**

Short-term sedatives like Valium and Xanax or beta blockers like Inderal are useful for specific phobias, such as fear of flying, caves, bridges, and so on. While these may help in a given situation (like when you have a flight next week), experts caution that they won’t cure you. However,

if you’ve started restricting your normal daily activities because of a broader anxiety disorder—such as social phobia or agoraphobia, a fear of having a panic attack in a situation in which you feel trapped—you may benefit from taking an SSRI like Prozac or Zoloft daily. Visit adaa.org (Anxiety and Depression Association of America) to learn more.

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Jerk Chicken Jibarito Burger

SERVES: 4

PREP TIME: 15 MINUTES

COOK TIME: 25 MINUTES

- 1 mango, cut into ¼-inch cubes
- ½ habañero pepper, minced
- 1 lime, zested and juiced
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh oregano
- 1 pound lean ground chicken
- pinch allspice
- pinch ground cinnamon
- pinch ground nutmeg
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce
- 2 scallions, roughly chopped
- salt
- 2 plantains, halved lengthwise, then sliced in half
- 1½ teaspoons vegetable oil

1. In a small bowl, combine mango, habañero pepper, lime zest, lime juice, and oregano. Mix and set aside.

2. In a medium bowl, combine ground chicken, allspice, cinnamon, nutmeg, garlic, thyme, hot sauce, scallions, and a pinch salt. Divide mixture into four equal portions and form into patties. Set aside.

3. Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add the plantain slices, then lower to a simmer and cook for 8 minutes. Cover a work surface with plastic wrap or waxed paper and top with the cooked plantains and another sheet of plastic wrap or waxed paper. Use a cutting board or the bottom of a pan to gently press down on the plantains until they double in width.

4. Heat a pan over medium and coat with vegetable oil. Once hot, sauté plantains for 2 minutes per side or until golden brown. Remove to a paper towel-lined plate and add salt to taste.

5. Heat a grill or grill pan over medium and cook burgers for 6 minutes per side or until a thermometer inserted into the center reads 165°F.

6. Place a burger patty on each of four plantain slices, then top each with 2 tablespoons of the mango salsa and another plantain slice. Serve immediately with additional salsa on the side if desired.

NUTRITION SCORE PER SERVING:

326 calories, 18g fat (5g saturated),
38g carbs, 22g protein, 3g fiber,
50mg calcium, 3mg iron, 170mg sodium

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KATE BALOG, 27
Philadelphia

CONQUERED
ARACHNOPHOBIA
(fear of spiders)

Kate's parents told her they think her arachnophobia began when they found her in her crib with a horrible spider bite. "Since then, whenever I saw a spider, my heart raced and I'd cry and shake," says Kate. One night in college, she found one in her bed and called a friend at 1 a.m., begging her to come pick her up.

THE TURNING POINT Five years later, Kate decided to volunteer on an organic solar-powered farm in the jungles of Hawaii. She knew the experience would entail facing some spiders, so she researched the local species to prepare herself. Still, she was overwhelmed when she arrived. "They were in the shower, outhouse, gardens—everywhere," says Kate.

WHAT WORKED MEDITATION

Since arriving at the farm, Kate had been delaying doing laundry because hundreds of spiders lived in the barn rafters above the washing machine. Eventually, she ran out of clean clothes. "When I finally went into the barn, there were about 10 of them directly over the washer," says Kate. She reminded herself of how strong she felt when she did a Mountain pose in yoga class—and then put down her basket. Standing tall with her feet hip-width apart, Kate inhaled, spread her toes, relaxed, and let her arms hang by her sides as she exhaled. "I focused on being present, acknowledged how uncomfortable I was, and waited for the feeling to pass," she says. It worked.

Kate returned to that pose time after time, and her anxiety slowly diminished. "If I do get nervous, I remind myself, 'You've done this many times before; you are okay.' And within a few seconds, I am."