WEBWATCH

Self-help for phobias and panic disorders

Miguel Fullana PhD
Honorary Lecturer, Psychological Medicine and Psychiatry
King's College Institute of Psychiatry, London

Isaac Marks MD, FRCPsych
Professor Emeritus

ANXIETY AND PANIC DISORDERS are common in bereavement so this review of websites on these and other phobias may prove helpful.

For many people with such problems, reading about how to deal with them is a key to effective self-management of their disorder. Self-help is achieved alongside varying amounts of professional advice given face to face, by phone, book or internet. In a randomised controlled trial (RCT) carried out two decades ago, people with phobia/panic improved to a similar extent regardless of whether self-exposure guidance was given by a book, a computer program, or face to face by a psychiatrist (Ghosh *et al*, 1988).

Phobia/panic sufferers can find a horde of self-help pamphlets, books, audiotapes, CD-ROMs and internet systems. Reliable self-help materials can lessen stigma and empower and motivate users by showing how others have successfully overcome similar problems. Their ultimate value, however, can be hard to gauge without evidence other than their popularity, which is not always a reliable guide. Different people need varying amounts of guidance with self-help. Fortunately just an ounce of contact can make a ton of difference to adherence to self-help – internet self-help via free, unscreened and non-moderated access tends to have huge dropout rates (Eysenbach 2005), far higher than with systems offering brief personal contact.

Hundreds of people with phobia/panic around the UK now receive self-help computer/internet guidance from **FearFighter (www.fearfighter.com)**, a treatment recommended by NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2006), perhaps the first such recommenda-

tion by any government regulatory agency given to such a self-help device for anxiety (one of the authors, Isaac Marks, shares intellectual property rights in this site). This system gives password-protected guidance on self-exposure therapy for panic/phobias. Its nine steps are largely individually tailored. They describe phobias and panic, and advise on how to start and complete self-exposure, find a co-therapist, identify fear triggers, work out personalised problems and goals, set individualised self-exposure homework tasks, keep homework diaries, do coping exercises during exposure, and prevent relapse. Licensed primary care trusts around England and Wales give passwords to briefly-screened patients, allowing them unlimited access to Fear-Fighter on the internet, plus one hour of phone/email support over three months. The treatment was effective in two RCTs and is widely available.

The Australian password-protected system for self-help of panic disorder, **Panic Online** at **britta.klein@med.monash.edu.au** includes education, self-monitoring, cognitive restructuring, coping strategies, and quizzes at the end of self-assessment sections. Users enter their panic information online weekly and/or email their therapist directly to obtain feedback. In a recent RCT (Klein *et al* 2006) the program yielded positive results, but it is not yet generally available.

Computer-Aided Vicarious Exposure (CAVE) is an Australian, personalised computer game. It teaches users exposure therapy as they direct a phobia-inducing screen figure to approach them and remain in usually avoided, feared situations shown on the screen until that figure's fear score drops. A therapist is present, as an uninvolved observer. Computer-aided vicarious exposure reduced spider phobia in adults in

several RCTs (Marks *et al*, 2007), but is not generally available.

Several UK charities offer guidance for phobia and panic sufferers on their websites. **Anxiety care** at **www.anxietycare.org.uk** gives information on anxiety, resources for people with anxiety disorders, an online support group, and a helpline. Users can also find information about anxiety disorders and a helpline telephone number at **First steps to freedom, www.first-steps.org**; a fee is required for some of the services. **National Phobics Society** at **www.phobics-society.org.uk** gives information about anxiety disorders, with a list of UK self-help groups, and a phone and email helpline; fee-paying members can access an email contact list and a chat room. **No Panic** at **www.nopanic.org.uk** has information about anxiety disorders, a helpline, and a night-time 'anxiety crisis line'. The website for **Triumph Over Phobia (TOP)** at **www.triumphoverphobia.com** describes phobia/panic and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Triumph Over Phobia runs 23 lay-led self-help groups around the UK which teach people with phobia/panic or obsessive-compulsive disorder how to overcome their problem. •

GHOSH A, MARKS IM, CARR A (1988). Therapist contact and outcome of self-exposure treatment for phobias. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 152: 234-238.
EYSENBACH G (2005). The law of attrition. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 7: 11.
KLEIN B., RICHARDS JC. AUSTIN D (2006). Efficacy of internet therapy for panic disorder. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 37: 213-238.
MARKS IM, CAVANAGH K, GEGA L (2007). *Hands-on Help: Computer-aided Psychotherapy* (Maudsley Monograph No 49). Hove, Sussex, UK: Psychology Press.

EVENTS IN 2008

Is all bereavement traumatic? Child Bereavement Charity conference. 26 Nov. London. Speakers: Stephen Joseph, David Trickey, T G Teoh. To apply: tel: 01494 479750; email training@childbereavement.org.uk

Grief in society. 15th international MABF conference. Speakers include: Derek Beeston, Alison Parr. Contact: tel 0161 372 8860; visit www.mabf.org.uk/conference

Supporting traumatised children and families. CHUMS annual conference. 23-24 Oct. Speakers: David Trickey, Mike O'Connor. Letchworth, Herts, UK. Contact Amanda Cullens: tel: 01582 707469; email chums.cbs@luton-pct.nhs.uk