

Claustrophobia

Understanding the Fear of Enclosed Spaces

What is Claustrophobia?

Claustrophobia is the **intense fear of confined or enclosed spaces**. While many people feel slightly uncomfortable in tight spaces, claustrophobia involves a **much stronger response** that can trigger **significant anxiety or panic**.

People with claustrophobia may feel **trapped or unable to escape** when in enclosed environments. The fear is often linked to the brain **interpreting limited space as a potential threat to safety**.

Claustrophobia is considered a **situational specific phobia**, meaning the fear is triggered by **particular environments** rather than objects or animals. Although the experience can feel overwhelming, research suggests that many people can **reduce their fear** through **gradual exposure** and **supportive coping strategies**.

How Common Is Claustrophobia?

Claustrophobia is one of the more common situational phobias. Research suggests approximately **5–7% of people** experience clinically significant claustrophobia and **up to 12% of people** report some level of discomfort in enclosed spaces.



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Claustrophobia often develops during **adolescence or early adulthood**, although it can appear **at any age**. Research has also shown that people with claustrophobia are more likely to experience **distress during medical procedures such as MRI scans**, where confined spaces are unavoidable. In these situations, the combination of **limited movement, enclosed surroundings, and unfamiliar equipment** can heighten feelings of vulnerability. This can sometimes lead to **avoidance of important medical investigations** or the need for **additional support during procedures**.

Sources: Rachman & Taylor, Analyses of Claustrophobia (1993), National Institute of Mental Health research on anxiety disorders

Why Do People Develop Claustrophobia?

Claustrophobia can develop through a range of **psychological and physiological pathways**. These experiences shape how the brain **interprets enclosed or restricted spaces**, often linking them with a sense of **threat** or **discomfort**.

1. Previous Distressing Experiences

A **past negative experience** in a **confined space** can strongly influence **future reactions**. The brain may begin to **associate similar environments with danger**, even when **no real threat is present**.

Examples include:

- Being trapped in a lift
- Getting stuck in a small room
- Feeling overwhelmed in crowded environments



2. Learned Fear

Fear can also be **acquired through observation**. Seeing others **respond with anxiety or panic** in **enclosed spaces** may lead an individual to **internalise similar fears**, even without **direct personal experience**.

3. Sensitivity to Bodily Sensations

Some individuals are more **attuned to physical sensations** such as **breathing, temperature, or spatial awareness**. In enclosed environments, this **heightened sensitivity** can become **overwhelming**, increasing **discomfort** and **triggering anxiety responses**.

How the Brain Responds

When a person with claustrophobia enters a **confined space**, the brain may activate **the fight-flight response**. This survival mechanism prepares the body to deal with **perceived danger**.

Common reactions include:

- rapid breathing
- increased heart rate
- sweating
- dizziness
- feeling unable to escape
- urge to leave immediately



Research using brain imaging suggests **increased activity in the amygdala**, the part of the brain involved in **detecting threats**.

Situations That May Trigger Claustrophobia

Claustrophobic reactions can be **triggered by environments** that feel **enclosed, restricted, or difficult to leave**. These situations may create a sense of **being trapped** or **overwhelmed**.

Common examples include:

- Elevators
- Tunnels
- Crowded trains or underground transport
- MRI scanners
- Small rooms without windows
- Tightly packed crowds



Because these environments can feel **intense** or **uncomfortable**, some people begin to **avoid them altogether**.

The Cycle of Avoidance

Avoidance can bring **short-term relief** from anxiety. However, over time, it may unintentionally **reinforce the fear response**. The brain does not have the opportunity to learn that the situation may be safe, which can cause the fear to persist or even increase.



Evidence-Based Treatment

Research shows that claustrophobia is **highly treatable**, with strong evidence supporting **psychological approaches**.

Exposure-Based Therapy

Exposure therapy is one of the most **effective treatments** for phobias. It involves **gradually** and **safely** introducing the **feared situation** in a **controlled** and **supportive** way.

Over time, this process helps the brain **relearn** that the environment is **not dangerous**, reducing the **intensity of the fear response**.

Research Insight

A review by *Craske et al. (2014)* found that **exposure therapy significantly reduces phobia symptoms** by helping individuals **build tolerance** and **confidence in previously feared situations**.

Self-Support Strategies

Gradual exposure

Instead of avoiding confined spaces completely, some people begin with small steps:

- standing in a small room with the door open
- riding an elevator for one floor
- sitting in a train carriage near the exit

Gradually increasing exposure can help retrain the brain's fear response and build confidence over time.



Controlled Breathing

Slow, steady breathing can help regulate the nervous system and ease physical symptoms of anxiety.

Example:

- inhale for 4 seconds
- exhale for 6 seconds

A longer exhale helps signal safety to the body. Repeating this for a few minutes can create a sense of calm.

Focus on Control

Having a sense of control can reduce anxiety in enclosed spaces. Small choices can make the situation feel more manageable.

Examples include:

- choosing a seat near an exit
- standing close to a door
- keeping a clear view of exits

Focusing on what is within your control can help reduce the feeling of being trapped.



When to Seek Professional Support

If claustrophobia interferes with daily activities such as travel, medical procedures, or work environments, professional support may be helpful.

Therapists trained in anxiety treatment can guide individuals through structured exposure exercises.

A Gentle Reminder

Claustrophobia is a common and understandable fear response. With gradual steps and supportive strategies, many people find their confidence in enclosed environments improves over time.

Try This

If you find yourself feeling anxious in an enclosed space, gently pause and notice:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

This can help bring your attention back to the present moment



Reflection

What helps you feel most supported when anxiety shows up?
You might want to make a note of this for future situations.

