

## Overcoming Medical Phobias:

### *How to Conquer Fear Of Blood, Needles, Doctors, and Dentists*

Medical phobias are common, often unrecognized, and potentially fatal.

How many times have you heard a person say that the sight of blood makes them ill, that hospitals creep them out, or that they can't give blood because just seeing the needle made them feel faint? It's really fairly common - so what's the big deal?

The fact is, some people experience such an intense fear when confronted with hospitals, doctors, and needles that they will avoid medical or dental treatment as much as possible - in some cases at the expense of their health.

Written by anxiety expert and psychologist Martin Antony and Mark Watling, MD, this easy-to-read and practical guide will teach readers who experience extreme fear in situations involving blood, injections, surgery, physicians, and dental procedures how to understand and overcome their medical phobia using both exposure and cognitive therapy.



### Surviving The Waiting Room

The first big hurdle for patients with medical phobias is the waiting room — let's face it, they're no fun for anyone. How does someone with a medical phobia cope without bolting for the door? Here are some tips from the authors of *Overcoming Medical Phobias* for making to your next visit to the doctor.

- If you are feeling faint, try tensing all the muscles of your body for 10 or 15 seconds. Repeat the exercise a few times (with a 15 second rest between each trial). The tensing exercises will increase blood flow to your head and prevent fainting.
- Think of it as a small, necessary step. Going through with the doctor's visit will be uncomfortable, but it is the first step in overcoming the problem. If you practice frequently, it will get easier each time.
- Identify what it is you are afraid will happen. Think about the evidence. Is your prediction realistic?
- Focus on the big picture. The whole procedure will be over soon. The worse thing that will happen is that you will feel very uncomfortable. If you are prone to fainting, even that is not the end of the world. For most people, fainting is perfectly safe (ask your doctor if you think you may have a medical condition that may make it unsafe for you to faint).

## 5 Ways Medical Phobias Can Affect Your Life

*For as long as she could remember, Lucy was terrified of getting injections. Her fear began as a child, after fainting while getting stitches for a cut on her hand. Over the next few years, she fainted several times during blood tests, vaccinations, and other situations involving needles. As a young adult, she would worry about visits to her doctor for weeks before her appointment. Eventually, she started avoiding doctors completely. She also avoided going to the dentist for fear that she might need a filling or some other procedure requiring numbing. Even watching an injection on television or in a movie was enough to make Lucy feel faint...*

As you can see from the above example from *Overcoming Medical Phobias*, hospital-related anxiety can start small and then grow out of control. "Lucy" is forced to avoid all situations that aggravate her fear, even at the expense of her health. Here are some things that medical phobias can prevent you from doing:

- \* Seeking medical treatment in a timely manner.
- \* Maintaining healthy teeth.
- \* Visiting friends or family in the hospital.
- \* Donating blood.
- \* Giving yourself shots of insulin or other prescribed medication.

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**Next: Q & A With Dr. Martin Antony**



## Q&A With Dr. Martin Antony on Medical Phobias

**Q: What are the most effective treatments for phobias of blood, needles and other medical situations?**

**A:** In the case of blood and needle phobias, exposure to the feared situation is the treatment of choice. For people who have a history of fainting in the situation, combining exposure with exercises involving tensing muscles has been found to temporarily raise blood pressure and prevent fainting, thereby making the process of treatment much easier.

**Q: Doesn't the phobia prevent people from being able to do exposure?**

**A:** When overcoming phobias, exposure practices are designed to be manageable. People begin with situations that are only mildly frightening and gradually work their way up to the more difficult situations. Exposure practices are designed to be predictable (with no surprises), and the individual is always in control so he or she can stop the exposure if necessary. Exposure also works best when the practices are frequent and prolonged.

**Q: How soon can readers of the book expect to see changes as the therapy begins to help?**

**A:** In most of the research on phobias of blood or needles, individuals are able to overcome their fear in as little as one long session of exposure under the supervision of a trained therapist. In cases of more general medical phobias or dental phobias, treatment may take several sessions. Depending on how frequently people practice, they can expect to see changes quickly.

**Q: How common is it for patients to experience relapse after the use of these methods? Is there something that readers can do to reduce the chances of relapse?**

**A:** Relapse rates tend to be fairly low in the treatment of phobias. Many studies follow people up for up to two years following the end of treatment and generally people maintain their gains over time. To reduce rates of relapse, the best thing that people can do is not to fall back into their old patterns of avoidance. In other words, they should take advantage of opportunities to confront situations they fear when available. Stress can also increase the risk of relapse; so finding ways to manage general stress in one's life may help to protect individuals from experiencing a return of their fear.

**Q: Are medical phobias more problematic for sufferers than other phobias, and if so, how?**

**A:** Medical phobias can be quite problematic. For example, we have seen people who have avoided getting necessary surgery because of their fear of surgery or their fear of blood work needed before the surgery. We have also seen women who wanted children avoid getting pregnant for fear of having to deal with various medical situations during their pregnancy. Many people with dental phobias have serious problems with their teeth as a result of their fear. However, medical phobias are not necessarily more problematic than other phobias. Almost any phobia can cause extreme problems in a person's life depending on the severity.

**Q: Can exposure therapy be used in conjunction with other types of therapy such as hypnosis, in order to increase the patient's chance of overcoming their fears?**

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## Q & A with Dr. Antony (continued)

**A:** In the case of blood and needle phobias, there is almost no evidence supporting any other kinds of therapies in the treatment of these problems, except for the muscle tension exercises described earlier for people who have a history of fainting in these situations. In addition, it is possible that the cognitive strategies described in this book may be a useful addition to exposure-based treatments. There is some evidence supporting the use of cognitive strategies and relaxation based strategies in the treatment of dental phobias, for example. With respect to hypnosis, there have been no well-controlled, properly conducted studies to evaluate whether this treatment approach is effective for medical phobias.

## About the Authors of *Overcoming Medical Phobias*

**Martin M. Antony, Ph.D.**, is professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University, and he is chief psychologist and director of the Anxiety Treatment and Research Centre at St. Joseph's Healthcare, in Hamilton, ON. Dr. Antony is actively involved in clinical research in the area of anxiety disorders, teaching, and education, and he maintains a clinical practice. Dr. Antony's previous books include: *10 Simple Solutions to Shyness*, *10 Simple Solutions to Panic*, and *Overcoming Animal & Insect Phobias*. Visit his website at [www.martinantony.com](http://www.martinantony.com).

**Mark A. Watling, MD**, is staff psychiatrist at the Anxiety Treatment and Research Centre at St. Joseph's Healthcare and assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences at McMaster University, both in Hamilton, ON.

## Praise for *Overcoming Medical Phobias*

"This book brings hope and help to a lot of people who are suffering needlessly from fears of blood, injections, or medical procedures. It not only explains why these fears are there in the first place, but also gives the reader clear and solid solutions to the problem. Antony and Watling have done a tremendous job of synthesizing the best available scientific data and presenting it in a straightforward, reader-friendly format. They take the reader step-by-step through the process, showing them why they feel the way they do and how to get better by facing their fears gradually."

—**David F. Tolin, Ph.D.**, director of the Anxiety Disorders Center at The Institute of Living and assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine

"Of all phobias, medical fears are the most serious because they can stop people seeking life-saving medical care. Fortunately here is a book that outlines in a clear, stepwise manner a plan to help people with medical phobias. Drawing on the best available scientific knowledge of evidence-based therapies, the authors translate these treatments into a straightforward and potentially life-saving program. In an easy-to-read style, the authors explain where medical fears come from and then what to do about them. For anyone who avoids medical or dental care because of fear or because they may faint, there is no better place to begin treatment than with reading this book and then doing what it says. For psychologists and other mental health professionals, this book provides an excellent workbook to use when working with people suffering from medical phobias."

—**Andrew Page**, associate professor of psychology at the University of Western Australia in Crawley, Australia

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# EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 4

## Exposure ideas for blood phobias

Exposure practices for blood phobias typically include looking at photos and videos of blood and related triggers, as well as confronting blood-related situations in real life. Here are some ideas for images, items, and settings you might use for your exposures.

## Blood-related images, photos, and videos

There are a number of TV shows now that show fairly graphic scenes of blood. TLC's *The Operation* is one suggestion. Videotape an episode and find scenes that are particularly anxiety provoking. You can then play back the scenes as many times as you need to. Check out your local video rental store for movies that have scenes with blood. Ask the video store clerk for some suggestions.

There is no end to such films. There are also many video games now available that have fairly realistic scenes involving blood that you could consider using as an exposure item. On the Internet, search Google's images site (<http://images.google.com>) using keywords such as "bloody," "blood," "wound," "surgery," "knife wound," or "cut." Some of these images may be quite distressing to start with, so you may want your helper to screen them ahead of time.

## Settings for blood-related exposures

There are a number of settings or situations that provide opportunities for exposure to blood. For example, go with a friend when he or she donates blood or has a blood test done. Donate blood yourself. Have blood drawn at a medical lab (this will require a doctor's requisition). As you try to generate ideas, consider exposures to real blood (buy a steak and drain off the blood or prick your finger with a lancet, available in pharmacies) or to theatrical blood (available at joke shops, theatrical stores, costume shops, and Halloween supply stores). These places will often also supply other blood-related items and materials to create fake cuts and wounds. Consider filling a syringe or some other small container with theatrical blood to carry around with you.

## Fake Blood

Recipe found at

[www.shades-of-night.com/painneck/blood.html](http://www.shades-of-night.com/painneck/blood.html)

1 tablespoon cocoa powder  
1/2 cup water  
3 to 4 tablespoons corn syrup  
1/2 to 1 teaspoon red food coloring  
2 drops yellow or green food coloring

Thoroughly mix the cocoa powder into the water. Using warm water may help. Then add the remaining ingredients, blending the mixture well. Skim the bubbles and chocolate "scum" off the top with a tissue. Wiped onto a cloth or article of clothing, this theatrical blood looks very realistic. (It may stain clothing, so be careful.) It splatters like real blood, and when it dries, it even looks like real dried blood.

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