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Fear of Driving: How Psychologists Can Help

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One possible consequence of being in a motor vehicle accident is the development of a motor vehicle phobia.

A motor vehicle phobia is defined as an excessive or unrealistic fear of driving that significantly interferes with one's life. There may be a fear of driving, of riding in a vehicle as a passenger, or of both. Fortunately, psychologists can help with this problem. When people participate in psychotherapy for a motor vehicle phobia, they learn that there are four components of the problem.

The first component is the emotional component. In a phobia, the emotion that is primarily triggered is that of anxiety. People with a motor vehicle phobia feel anxious in driving situations. The second component is the physiological component. When we're anxious, some of our physiological processes increase. As a result of this increase we may experience bodily sensations such as an increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, muscle tension, numbness or tingling, light headedness, stomach upset, trembling, and sweating. Most people, when they're anxious, experience some of these sensations. Several of these sensations occurring suddenly and at the same time, are referred to as a panic attack.

The third component is the thinking or cognitive component. The word cognitive refers to the thoughts and images that go through our minds. When we're anxious our

thinking tends to become negative in nature. In a motor vehicle phobia, the sort of negative thoughts we experience concern the possibility of getting into an accident. Moreover, we tend to over-estimate danger, meaning that we view an accident as more being more likely to happen than it really is. The fourth component is behaviours or actions. The main way that a motor vehicle phobia affects our behaviour is that it causes us to avoid feared driving situations. Some people avoid specific situations that are particularly anxiety-provoking for them, such as driving at night or making left-hand turns against traffic. People with a very high level of anxiety may avoid driving completely.

To summarize, the four components of a motor vehicle phobia are the emotional, physiological, cognitive and behavioural. And each of these components influences the others, leading to a vicious circle. The way it starts is that people with a driving phobia begin to think that they might get into an accident. The more they think about having an accident, the more anxious they feel. The more anxious they feel, the more physiological sensations they experience. Furthermore, the more they think about getting into an accident and the more anxious they feel, the more they avoid driving situations. Avoidance of driving helps to lower anxiety in the present situation, but keeps the anxiety going in future situations. The reason the anxiety continues in the future is because avoidance prevents us from learning that the

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likelihood of an accident is lower than we think it is (i.e., we continue to over-estimate danger). Also, we fail to learn how to better manage these situations. The more we avoid driving, the more our anxiety about driving continues, and the more of a tendency there is to avoid.

In therapy, we treat the phobia by targeting each of these components. To help reduce the physiological sensations, we teach people a relaxation exercise, that of controlled breathing. Controlled breathing helps to reverse bodily arousal and in so doing lowers our anxiety. On the cognitive level, we teach people how to decrease the tendency to over-estimate the likelihood of getting into an accident. Of course, it's important to remain aware of realistic threats on the road so that we can respond to them. But we also want to reduce the tendency to think that an accident is always just about to happen. Finally, on the behavioural level, we teach people ways of managing difficult situations on the road. This may be done in conjunction with a professional driving rehabilitation service. The driving service helps people improve their defensive driving skills so that they can reduce their risk on the road. Generally, we find that when people feel better equipped to manage feared situations, their anxiety comes down.

We also work on eliminating any avoidance patterns that are maintaining the phobia. This involves repeated driving, particularly in situations that we're presently avoiding. We call this part of treatment exposure, because we're exposing ourselves to certain situations.

Exposure is the most pivotal part of treatment. The more we drive, the more we come to reduce our over-estimations of danger, and the more our anxiety decreases.

Exposure usually sounds scary to people, since it involves confronting our fears. But there are a few things we do to make it a little less scary. Before we begin the exposure part of treatment, we work on anxiety management and defensive driving skills, which helps to reduce the anxiety to some degree. And when we do the exposure, we start with easier situations, and only once they've been mastered, do we move on to progressively more difficult ones. So we proceed in a gradual way, and at the person's own pace. Finally, we encourage people to do the exposure practices regularly. Regular driving practices, incorporating the anxiety-management and defensive driving skills, over time leads to the reversal of the phobia.

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