

Scientists want to help you kick your phobia

Psychiatrists at the University of Michigan have expanded their treatment of phobias—the unreasonable fears some people have of everyday things or situations.

For several years, U-M doctors have tested treatments on a few selected phobic patients as part of research projects at the University Medical Center.

The expanded program is available to all persons desiring treatment for any phobia, such as fear of animals, high places, riding in automobiles or airplanes, small enclosures, insects, spiders, crowds, being away from home, and many others.

Clinics are available at the U-M Hospital in Ann Arbor and at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit.

Head of the program and director of both clinics is Dr. George C. Curtis.

According to Curtis, one of the common phobias for which people seek treatment is "agoraphobia"—the fear of the market place. It is now understood to cover a variety of fears centering around being away from home or away from a familiar companion.

"This is probably not the most common phobia, but more agoraphobics seem to seek treatment because it is more disabling. It is often possible for

persons with other phobias to organize their lives so that avoiding insects, high places or tunnels is almost as routine as getting dressed or going to work," he said.

The key to all treatment is what psychiatrists called desensitization.

Desensitization takes advantage of the principle that fear and anxiety tend to disappear if a person accumulates enough experience near a frightening situation without anything bad happening.

Simply knowing that nothing will happen is not enough, since phobics usually know this already. Still, they do not allow themselves the direct experience which would ordinarily eliminate

the fear, Dr. Curtis said.

The cause of phobias is largely unknown, as is the reason why desensitization therapy works to "cure" it, Dr. Curtis said.

The doctors also will use drugs on an experimental basis with consenting patients to see if therapy can be improved or speeded up.

"We suspect that some drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, and some minor tranquilizers might reduce the immediate anxiety in the phobic situation, but also might interfere with the therapeutic desensitizing effect of staying near it," Dr. Curtis said.

Vodka, which contains ethyl alcohol, the most widely self-prescribed anti-

anxiety drug," is now being studied with patients to see if it helps in desensitizing phobias.

"We're already pretty sure it will reduce the immediate anxiety in the treatment situation," Dr. Curtis said. "If our guess proves wrong, and it does not also interfere with the desensitizing effect of the treatment, then it will be not only popular, but also clinically useful."

Although many types of psychotherapy have had some success with phobias, Dr. Curtis said U-M offers real-life desensitization therapy because there is a growing consensus among the profession that it is the most consistently effective of the available methods.

In the instance of fear of heights, treatment could mean the patient would stand on one of the lower steps of a fire escape until he became comfortable doing it. Then he would move up a step or so and do the same thing again. Getting comfortable at one level actually reduces the fear of the next steps. Without this phenomenon the therapy would not work, Dr. Curtis said.

Dr. Curtis said the patient is always in control and is never forced to move ahead until ready and willing.

The therapy takes effect quite quickly, Dr. Curtis said. Many patients can be "cured" or are improved to the extent that their phobia is no longer a

life-style problem in less than 10 sessions.

Those who are willing to tolerate more anxiety and move more rapidly up the approach gradient can usually complete their treatment sooner, the U-M psychiatrist said.

The fastest "cure" in his experience required only 15 minutes of treatment.

Standard psychotherapy fees are charged, with adjustments for those who are unable to pay. For those who are asked and are willing to participate in the research projects, the treatment is either free or the fee reduced, depending on the nature of the project.

OCC hosting debate tourney

Oakland Community College (OCC) isn't the Oxford Union, but its Orchard Ridge campus in Farmington Hills will be Michigan's debating center this weekend.

The Orchard Ridge campus in Farmington Hills will host the 1979 Winter Michigan Intercollegiate Speech League Tournament Feb. 2-3. It is the first time an OCC campus has played host to the annual event.

Debating teams from colleges throughout the state, including Eastern Michigan University, Wayne State University, Ferris State College, Henry Ford Community College and Macomb Community College, are expected to compete.

The competition begins at 2 p.m. Friday and continues to 7 p.m. The tournament resumes Saturday at 8:15 a.m. Competition will take place in room 293 of Orchard Ridge's "J" Building.

Defebaugh 2d on house panel

State Rep. James Defebaugh (R-Birmingham) was recently named vice-chairman of the House corporation and finance committee. He was also named to the elections, house policy and conservation committees.

The corporation committee deals with legislation specifically affecting businesses in the state. "Our challenge here is to guard against too much government regulation while taking an imaginative and innovative approach toward business and financial problems," Defebaugh said.

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