

Maybe Clowns Are Just Grumpy Old Men
L.J. Bowling

I grew up scared to death of my great-grandfather. He was a gruff, bow-legged, square of a man, with a croaking voice like the starting up an old truck. My great-grandmother used to make me go to the Shriner's circus when I was a child because he was a clown. William was a clown for decades before he died, so all his friends were clowns and whenever the show was over, my Weez would take me back to see him and all the others. Some children grow up afraid of clowns because of a creepy one at a birthday, or the bright colors—even the constant smiling, but I grew up with a different perspective entirely. I never had a phobia of clowns. There was nothing irrational about the fear itself or the way I coped with it. I saw the Shriners in their element. I saw rough older men, smoking cigarettes, and talking to one another as if they didn't have on face paint or giant shoes. They pinched my cheeks and got right up in my face to ask me how old I was or if I enjoyed the show, while stinking of booze and cigar smoke. I was not afraid of their red noses or water-squirting flowers. I was afraid because I knew they were just mean old men like my great-grandfather, men whose real faces I couldn't see.

In my adolescence, I learned about phobias of all sorts. Common ones like the fear of spiders, open spaces, and of heights seem simple enough, but what about people who fear numbers—or the color blue? I cannot count how many times a week I kill a spider or stand in a chair high off the ground. I use simple math every day and I cannot begin to guess how many blue things I see daily. I was shocked to see how common the fear of clowns is in America and to know that it was not just me who felt the color drain from my face in the presence of one. There are people living with phobias of all sorts, like fear of the dentist's office. My dentist is a tiny Asian woman named Dr. Mao, who loves shoes and makeup and always asks me where I got my boots when I go to her for a visit. Why do all dentists expect you to be able to answer their questions when they have most of their hand in your mouth? I cannot imagine being paralyzed with fear to have my teeth cleaned, no matter how uncomfortable that sharp little hook under my teeth is. Dr. Paula Barrett of Griffith University in Australia specializes in clinical child psychology and she writes, "Intense fear can paralyze those with a phobia to the point that their quality of life is affected markedly" (Barrett 273). Living with a phobia must be the most loathsome condition imaginable. Can you imagine living out each day in perpetual fear of a dentist? Most people go to the dentist once a year, but what about people with phobias of things they see every single day?

Practically every child is afraid of the dark for some length of time, albeit days, months, or years. The most common way parents handle it is to get a nightlight and call it a day. Eventually, children grow out of the fear of the boogeyman in the closet, and the fear of the unknown in the dark, but sometimes this irrational fear persists for years and becomes debilitating on into adulthood. Nyctophobia is the fear of the dark, and it is one of the most common phobias in adults seeking treatment. You might think it seems silly for an adult to feel afraid of the dark while safe at home, but everyone who has turned out the lights and stands alone in a dark room has felt that tingling sensation on the back of the neck that feels like someone's eyes are on you. Most people can dismiss these thoughts and irrational instincts to be on their guard, but there are some who cannot control it, and seek therapy from psychiatrists, like Dr. Peter Tyrer who specialize in phobias. He writes, "On the negative side, we do not have as much evidence as we should like that our interventions are effective over the course of a phobic disorder" (Maj 92). Exposure therapy is where psychiatrists attempt to cure a patient of a phobia

by surrounding the patient in an environment of their specific phobia. Using the current example, if a patient is afraid of the dark, the psychiatrist would submerge the patient in the dark and talk through the fear with him or her. Exposure therapy is proven to be the most effective treatment available for those with phobic disorders and nervous conditions. The theory is that once a person is exposed to what he or she fears for long enough, the phobia dissipates because the patient realizes how irrational the persistent fear really is.

Although exposure therapy is the best known method for treating and curing most types of phobias, it is not always entirely effective. Millions of people are terrified of spiders, perhaps not to the degree of developing a phobia of them, but still enough to be afraid and uncomfortable in their presence. Because of this, psychiatrists use a method designed to restructure the patient's perspective of spiders. The therapy is designed to make the patient feel as though he or she has control over the situation. "The most frequently used symptom reduction method for spider phobia is cognitive behavior therapy" (Leutgeb 293). Chances are, unless you happen to be from a country where tarantulas are regularly on the menu, you or someone you know is irrationally afraid of spiders. My best friend is terribly afraid of them and her house is old, dark, and made of wood. Her five years of living symbiotically with everything from giant grass spiders to spindly brown recluses have not dulled her fear and loathing of anything of the eight-legged persuasion. She kills at least one spider every day, like many other people who live with the paralyzing fear of spiders. Arachnophobia is one of several phobias that the exposure form of therapy does not always help to relieve. No amount of bombing or sticky traps eases her mind, nor do they dull her panic whenever she stumbles upon a poisonous pest in her favorite shoes or hiding in a dark corner in her room along with two other creepy-crawly guests.

The exposure method is more suitable for curing phobias of a situational origin such as, the fear of the dark, enclosed or tight spaces, heights, and even the fear of clowns. All of these phobias can be cured by taking baby steps toward the end result of the cure, eventually resulting in total immersion in the situation that the patient fears most. Phobias, especially in young people, can be very detrimental to a person's development, as said by Maj, "phobic disorders may interfere with the development of personal, sexual, social, and intellectual functioning..." (xiii). Social phobic disorders are among the most detrimental to a person's development. They can affect the way a person is perceived by his or her peers as well as hinder that person from making necessary social connections, such as friends or acquaintances.

Living with a phobia can be as simple as the childhood discomfort I have of clowns, or the way my little sister has slept with a night light for most of her life. It can be as life-altering as being afraid of people or afraid of numbers. Most people use the word phobia loosely, so it has lost some of its significance as a real disorder. Although some phobias are rare, they are still serious and can be horribly detrimental to a person's social development because of the extreme fear and anxiety the phobia produces. Phobias are almost always uncontrollable, crippling fear which most of us never experience, sometimes the only therapy we know as effective for treating them is invalid. Psychiatrists do not have all the answers any more than they all have thick, German accents.

Works Cited List

Barrett, Paula M., and Ollendick, Thomas H. *Handbook of Interventions that Work with Children and Adolescents: Prevention and Treatment*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. (UK), 2004. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 30 Jan. 2012.

Leutgeb, Verena, Axel Schäfer, and Anne Schienle. "An Event-Related Potential Study on Exposure Therapy for Patients Suffering from Spider Phobia." *Biological Psychology* 82.3 (2009): 293-300. Web. 29 Jan 2012.

Maj, Mario. *Phobias*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2004. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 29 Jan. 2012.