

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My wife has suffered from agoraphobia for more than twenty years and won't leave the house without me. I work more than 60 hours a week and then have to drive her to the grocery store, dry cleaner, bank, and on dozens of other errands. I love her dearly but I'm exhausted and am becoming increasingly resentful about being responsible for everything. What do you advise? -- Ernie

Dear Ernie,

With symptoms enduring for more than two decades, your wife needs professional help in overcoming her problem. Agoraphobia is often described as a fear of open spaces or "fear of the marketplace," but this is a literal interpretation of the Greek root of the word and is a bit misleading. Agoraphobia is really the fear of experiencing panic attacks and "losing control." These fears become more intense when an agoraphobic person gets farther from a safe place (usually home) or in specific situations from which escape might seem to be difficult or embarrassing.

Generally, anxiety levels and phobic symptoms increase in situations like shopping, driving, standing in line, crowded places, meetings, and, quite often, being alone. Fear gives rise to a pattern of avoidance behavior and, before too long an agoraphobic finds herself (more than 90% are women) unable to enjoy life and to move freely even around her own neighborhood or town. Understandably, depression, deterioration of self-esteem, and diminishing self-confidence follow on the heels of this withdrawal from everyday life.

The bad news is that agoraphobia is a crippling anxiety disorder and, if untreated, can last a lifetime. Some people become literally housebound. I'm glad to know that you wife is able to venture out when she is with you. But both your lives are restricted and nothing in your letter indicates that anything is improving.

The good news is that there are many effective therapeutic and pharmacological treatments for this disorder and full recovery is both a realistic and attainable goal. I highly advise your wife to seek professional help. She might begin by talking with her family physician. He or she can refer her to a psychotherapist. Medication is often indicated as a part of a comprehensive treatment plan but changing cognitions and behavior are also integral parts of healing.

As a former agoraphobic myself, I can assure you that panic attacks are horrible and terrifying. No one wants to go through the racing heart, difficulty breathing, dizziness, tingling hands, shaky knees, and sweating palms that are part of this experience. Panic attacks cause people to think they are going crazy, dying, having a heart attack, or smothering because they can't catch their breath. Panic attacks are emotional and physical nightmares but are not uncommon.

Once you've had a severe panic attack, a great deal of mental activity is filled with the anticipation that you might have another one.

According to The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), about 6% of American adults experience agoraphobia. Reliable sources mention that many famous people have suffered from panic attacks or agoraphobia including: Carly Simon, football

player Earl Campbell (Heisman Trophy winner), Aretha Franklin, actors Nicolas Cage and Laurence Olivier, Barbra Streisand, writer Isaac Asimov, and, of course, poet Emily Dickinson.

It is quite possible for your wife to learn to overcome panic attacks and take back her life. Ernie, I know you love your wife but, honestly, your behavior is “over-helping” and serves to enable her symptoms. I suggest you have a conversation about how her anxiety disorder is affecting your life. Tell her that you are feeling overwhelmed with responsibility and that it makes you sad to see her miss so many opportunities to live fully and joyfully.

The two of you can start by learning more about agoraphobia. Go to a bookstore or library. Surf the Internet – just type in “agoraphobia” in any search engine. Next, make an appointment with your family physician and then a psychotherapist who understands this anxiety disorder. It’s past time to make changes that will transform both your lives.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2002 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com