

School Phobia
Counselor's Corner
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Tabby was a pleasant, polite adolescent, all of 14 years old. Her grades were always good, but in the past few months, she was reluctant to attend school. She had always been a bit shy, and when ever she told her father she was ill, he allowed her to stay home from school. Now, her absences were becoming more frequent and school personnel noticed. With recommendations from the school, Tabby's father encouraged her to attend, but she resisted even more. Things got so bad that Tabby would threaten to run away if he continued to insist she go to school. On one hand, Tabby's father knew she should be forced to attend, but on the other hand he felt sorry for her, feeling her pain and agony over the vaguely defined pressures she faced in school.

Tabby's father eventually turned to a professional counselor for advice. After a thorough examination of Tabby, she was diagnosed with school phobia. *Phobia* is the Latin word for *fear*, and fear is exactly what controlled Tabby's feelings and thoughts about school. But because school possessed no real danger to Tabby, the counselor saw her fear as irrational, and set out to teach Tabby and her father that this school FEAR stood for **F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal. With some moderate work on the counselor's, Tabby's, and the father's behalf, Tabby was able to successfully return to school in a few short weeks.

For students with school phobia, even the thought of attending school can cause extreme anxiety with symptoms like sweating, trembling, rapid heart beat, and feeling faint. Scientists have strong evidence indicating that genetics and environment play equally significant roles in developing school phobia. Through counseling, Tabby's father learned that his reaction to his daughter's irrational thoughts reinforced her fear of school. He learned how to help her challenge her fears and model good coping skills when he was under stress. Tabby learned that her fear of school was irrational and she gained the knowledge, skills, and ability to confront and conquer her phobia.

How does adolescent school phobia develop? Extensive research can summarize the typical progression; Teens that are hypersensitive to evaluation of peers tend to not only look for peers watching them, they also tend to misinterpret other's looks and statements as negative criticism. After even a successful social interaction, hypersensitive teens tend to scrutinize their actions, second guess their behaviors, and re-interpret the statements and behaviors of their peers. For example, Tabby was so sensitive to others that she felt everyone was looking at her whenever she was in front of, or near peers. In order to avoid stress, she would go early to classes before most students would arrive, so few if any peers saw her enter. One of Tabby's greatest fears was *the walk* as her therapist labeled it; *the walk* was the path from the end of the cafeteria food line to her lunch table. The thought of peers watching her walk, while everyone else was seated, made her mind think of all the horrible things that could occur. Tabby would think, "What if I spill my tray? I will just die!" Also, after a few minutes socializing with her friends, Tabby would evaluate herself, believe she may have said something wrong, and begin to believe that her friends' statements may mean they dislike her.

Tabby was taught in counseling that her over sensitivity leads to her negative thoughts. Her negative thoughts tended to dominate her thinking and snow balled out of

control, allowing her to think more and more irrationally. This, in turn, made her anxiety worse. In therapy, she learned how she was making herself more anxious and irrational. Tabby was taught many thought stopping techniques that she practiced every time her mind began thinking negative and irrational thoughts. She learned that the thought of embarrassment was ten times worse than actual embarrassment itself. She also learned how to stop negatively critiquing herself after social interactions with her friends.

As mentioned before, genetics may play a part in developing phobias; evidence exists supporting the notion that some children are born with low thresholds for anxiety and fear. Combine this anxiety and fear with sympathetic parent(s) and the situation is prime for developing phobias. This scenario gets bleaker when we examine modern society: school phobia can develop into agoraphobia, which is fear of leaving one's home. In today's society a person can have nearly everything delivered to them via the internet, making it possible to nearly never confront fears outside the home. Without confrontation, conquering irrational fears is nearly impossible. The longer a person goes with a phobia, the more difficult it can become to cure.

The good news is that the cure rate of phobias is actually very good. Cognitive-behavioral therapy has been proven to be very effective in dealing with phobias; exposure, negative thought stopping, relaxation, positive affirmation, and role playing are all safe, effective techniques commonly used by counselors in overcoming school anxiety. Medication, prescribed by a medical doctor can ease the stress; popular anti-depressants have been proven very effective against anxiety, repetitive negative thoughts, and depression. In addition, a most effective technique is the one that does not take place in the counselor's office: it is the parent's behavioral changes in the home that typically give the teen courage to face their school fears.

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