Phobias flourish among the elderly

One in ten old people might expect to have a phobia which is serious enough to be diagnosed as a mental issue, according to Swedish research.

Over half the population aged 70 to 80 had one or more phobias. One in ten had a phobia which was strong enough to qualify as a mental diagnosis. The research was conducted in a doctoral study at the University of Gothenburg among the Swedish west coast city’s elderly. Persons known to have dementia were excluded from the survey and thus do not impact these statistics.

Some of the common phobias were arachnophobia (spiders), acrophobia (heights), aerophobia (flying), odontophobia (dentists) and the fear of elevators, which is thought to be triggered by acrophobia and claustrophobia (the fear of enclosed spaces).

The Swedish study found that around 40 percent of the elderly had excessive fears of heights, thunderstorms or water. About 24 percent had problems with phobias involving specific situations, like riding elevators or being in cramped spaces.

The research did not test for all phobias that have a name, such as arachibutyrophobia (the fear of having peanut butter stick to the roof of one’s mouth). Among the least common phobias found in the survey, however, were trypanophobia (the fear of hypodermic needles and injections) and the fear of dentists. Less than ten percent had these problems, according to the doctoral dissertation by Robert Sigström, a researcher at Sahlgrenska Academy.

There are now effective treatments for such phobias such as cognitive behavioural therapy. But few who have phobias seek help for their problems, particularly among the elderly.

Multiple phobias

The research among the elderly denizens of Gothenburg showed that an individual would often have several phobias, especially those who suffered from the most serious phobias.

More than half the persons in this study who were followed up from the age of 70 to the age of 80 also suffered a certain degree of depression. Nearly one in ten were diagnosed by the researchers as having a major depression.

Doing something about it

The study showed that the phobias of these elderly persons often diminished as they aged from 70 to 80. But depressions got worse as time passed.

“Four in ten with major depression at the age of 75 to 79 had minor depressions at the age of 70. This means that initiatives to help persons with minor depressions could potentially prevent more serious depressions.
among the elderly,” said Robert Sigström in a press release from Sahlgrenska Academy.

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A Swedish study found that some 40 percent of the elderly have an excessive fear of heights, thunderstorms or water. (Photo: Microstock) [9]


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