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## The web of fear for arachnophobes

Rebecca Atkins

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**A fear of spiders is commonplace and with many prepared to put their lives at risk to avoid arachnids, more and more people are seeking to overcome their phobia.**

Cognitive behavioural therapy, counselling, psychotherapy and **hypnotherapy** are a few of the treatments on offer to arachnophobes.

One programme which endeavours to encompass a range of these treatments is Bristol Zoo's 'Living with Spiders' course.

Created 12 years ago, course organiser Simon Garrett said the majority of students signing up for the three-hour sessions are women.

Among the men, who Mr Garrett believes sign up in fewer numbers due to embarrassment, is James, a 28-year-old electrician from Devizes in Wiltshire.

### Spider bite

Although James claims he is not overly scared of spiders, he has a fear of them running up his arm when he is working in loft spaces.

His fear stems from being bitten by a spider at the age of eight.

"The majority of work I do is in loft spaces where there are a lot of cobwebs and I often have to put my hand into areas where people seldom go," he said.

"One time I was using a head-torch because the lights had to be off but when they came back on there was a large spider just one foot (30cm) away from me.

"The spider started moving and because of the way the light was shining in the attic, the shadow it cast was huge - the thought of it losing its grip and falling on my head was awful."

### Sofa sanctuary

Arachnophobes Natalie Turner, 38, and her mother, 61-year-old Anne, from Yate in South Gloucestershire, also attended the course.

Their shared fear of spiders has led to them relying on Anne's 90-year-old mother to come to their rescue on occasions and even climbing on chairs to reach them.



Ms Turner, who enrolled on the course in preparation for a year living in Sri Lanka as a VSO volunteer, said one of her most frightening experiences involving spiders was when she was living in London.

"I spotted one and ended up standing on top of a sofa for three hours before plucking up the courage to leap from one piece of furniture to another to try to get someone to help me," she said.

Amanda McAndrew, a 33-year-old nurse from Bolton, Greater Manchester, has even called upon patients to help get rid of spiders.

"I have to check every corner of the room before I go to the loo and when I go to bed I have a routine which involves checking under the bed, under the pillow and the duvet and around the windows - it's exhausting.

"I live in absolute fear and it's almost as if as soon as I am on my own they smell the fear and come out."

Mr Garrett, who runs the course at Bristol Zoo together with counsellor and **hypnotherapist** Mary Ison, says there are theories that arachnophobia could be a learnt response from others, a re-emergence of primeval feelings from a time when spiders were widely feared or just an inability to cope with their jerky movements and alien looks.

The course focuses on people taking control of their lives and their environment, rather than the spider being in control.

### **Shed skins**

It begins with a general talk on phobias followed by a group discussion on how arachnophobia has impacted on the lives of those attending.

A relaxation session and a talk on the world of spiders is followed by **hypnotherapy**.

The session concludes with an optional meeting with spiders securely kept in tanks and pots along with shed spider skins.

For many who have tried numerous therapies to overcome the fear, this course is often seen as last chance saloon but its success will only be tested when they come across their fear in a natural environment and an unsuspecting manner.