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Issue 10, October 23, 2009

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We came through

I conquered my greatest fear'

Meet three women who faced down their phobias and embraced life

For the millions of Americans who suffer from a phobia, certain situations—open or closed spaces, flying, going outside—evoke a paralyzing, irrational fear and can cause major panic attacks. But there are ways to conquer even the most debilitating phobia. These brave women did just that and took control of their lives.

By Melissa Fiorenza

'I didn't want to pass my fear of flying along to my kids'

Reace Alvarenga Smith, 36, Arlington, Texas

My father says that when I was a baby, I jumped so hard in my crib, the whole thing collapsed. I have no memory of the incident, but as long as I can remember, I've feared heights. And nothing has terrified me more than flying.

My first flight was on a private plane at a work party when I was in my early 20s. A pilot was offering tours of the area, which sounded

like fun. But within seconds of takeoff, I was scared stiff. I broke into a cold sweat and gripped the seatrest, too anxious to cry or speak. A woman finally noticed I was white as a sheet and told the pilot, who landed the plane just to let me off. I wasn't even embarrassed, just relieved. I thought, Better you than me, people.

The next time I flew, I was student body president at the University of Texas at Arlington and had to represent our school at a conference in Austin, a short flight away. I was anxious for days, but I couldn't say no. I went, but the only way I could get on the plane was to drink two shots of tequila beforehand (even though it was morning!). After takeoff, I was overcome with fear. For 40 stressful minutes I clutched the hand of the woman flying with me, repeating, "No, I can't do this." After we landed I had to get another drink!

My anxiety grew worse as I got older. As much as I could, I avoided flying, but I couldn't risk being pulled back in my career in public relations. So in order to take flights, I self-medicated with alcohol, and I'd still have panic attacks on board.

When my son, Timothy, was 6 months old, I tried to get out of flying to a wedding across the country with my husband, Eric. He said we couldn't go on avoiding life because of my fears, adding, "You don't want to pass your fear of flying on to your kids, do you?" And I realized he was right—what kind of a role model was I?

That's when I started looking for answers and found the Web site fearofflyinghelp.com, where I downloaded an audio course led by an airline captain. He explains the whole process of flying—what keeps planes in the air, the different sounds, the emergency procedures—and shares relaxation

techniques. It helped when he pointed out that the captain of the plane wants to get home just as much as I do. After doing the exercises for a week, I was able to get back on a plane. I was calmer than I'd ever been on a flight before. I'm still not a fan of flying, but I'm much better now. I don't need a drink anymore, either. A week before I fly, I'll listen to the course. When I have to, I turn to the person next to me and say, "We're landing, and this is the part that scares the heck out of me, so I'm going to talk to you." I've met some interesting people that way. Timothy and my daughter, Helena, are 5 and 2 now, and both go on airplanes without a thought. In fact, we often go to the local airport to watch the planes take off and land, just for fun! If I have my way, they'll embrace a fearless, adventurous life, and I will join them for the ride.



Reace and family at the airport



Reace
found help
online for
her fear of
flying.



'My fear of small spaces got progressively worse'

Suzie Kelleher, 34, Swanton, Vt.

Suzie is no longer afraid to mingle with the crowds at her town's annual maple festival.

When I had what I thought was a heart attack in the middle of my own kitchen, I knew it was time to get help. I was sitting with my husband, when I suddenly felt dizzy, got tunnel vision and felt a stabbing pain—like someone's knee was jabbing my lungs. I remember telling my husband I couldn't breathe as I collapsed to the floor. The rescue squad thought it was a heart attack, too, but when they gave me a sedative at the hospital, the symptoms subsided.

Panic attacks—a racing pulse, sweaty palms, hyperventilating and a desperate urge to flee—were familiar to me. But they had never been this painful, and none of my usual triggers had spurred it on. Small, enclosed spaces, like elevators, were my nemesis; they made me feel like I was suffocating, and I would cry, yell and grip whomever or whatever was near me to get away. I even once walked up and down the 86 flights at the Empire State Building in New York City to avoid using the elevators.

Crowds were just as scary. Too many people getting in my space made even a large area seem too small, and I would feel claustrophobic. One time I went to a Yankees game with my husband, and the crowd was so big that I was completely terrified and silently cried as he led me

through the tunnels, pushing people out of our way to get me safely to my seat. Once seated, I was fine, but I couldn't leave until pretty much everyone had cleared out. After that, I limited myself to less crowded events. But I could never really enjoy myself. One year I flew into a screaming panic attack at my town's annual maple festival—I thought the crowd was crushing me.

I still remember the incident that first set off my claustrophobia. I was playing hide-and-seek when I was 5 years old, and the door to my hiding spot in a pop-up camper locked behind me. It took about 30 minutes for my dad to find me, but I couldn't shake that trapped feeling. The only other time I played that game, I was 11. When the door to the closet I was hiding in jammed, I freaked out and kicked it until it came off its hinges.

The panic attack in my kitchen was the last straw. It came out of nowhere and made me realize that fear and anxiety were taking over my life. I was sick of it—I wanted to play hide-and-seek with my kids, ride elevators and enjoy crowds. When a friend suggested a certified hypnotherapist, I thought, Why not?

During my first visit, the hypnotherapist explained that one phobia leads to another, so my big panic attack was likely an extension of my claustrophobia. She also taught me an

exercise called the emotional freedom technique, a therapeutic approach that can be used to help people get rid of negative emotions and fears. She showed me how to tap certain points on my body—eyebrows, cheekbones, above my upper lip, chin, collarbone and then wrists—while repeating, "Even though I'm afraid of small spaces, I fully and completely accept myself."

After doing the first few rounds, I felt a sense of calm wash over me. It was good to do something that allayed my fear and gave me focus. I reviewed the technique with the hypnotherapist and put it into action the first time I had to take an elevator. I started tapping before I got in and kept doing it during the ride. I may have looked nutty to the people around me, but after two rounds, I thought, Wow, this is actually working.

After that, I used the technique every time I needed it, which was often at first. But today, I don't even need it in elevators. Sometimes in crowds, I may just tap my collarbone or wrists a few times. But I need to tap less and less. It is so empowering, because it's really effective!

A few years ago, my husband convinced me to go back to Yankee Stadium, and we brought the kids along, too. The opposing team was the Red Sox, so, as you can imagine, the crowd was enormous. But this time, I had a ball.

'I was terrified to leave my house'

Jeanie Character,
63, Lakeland, Fla.

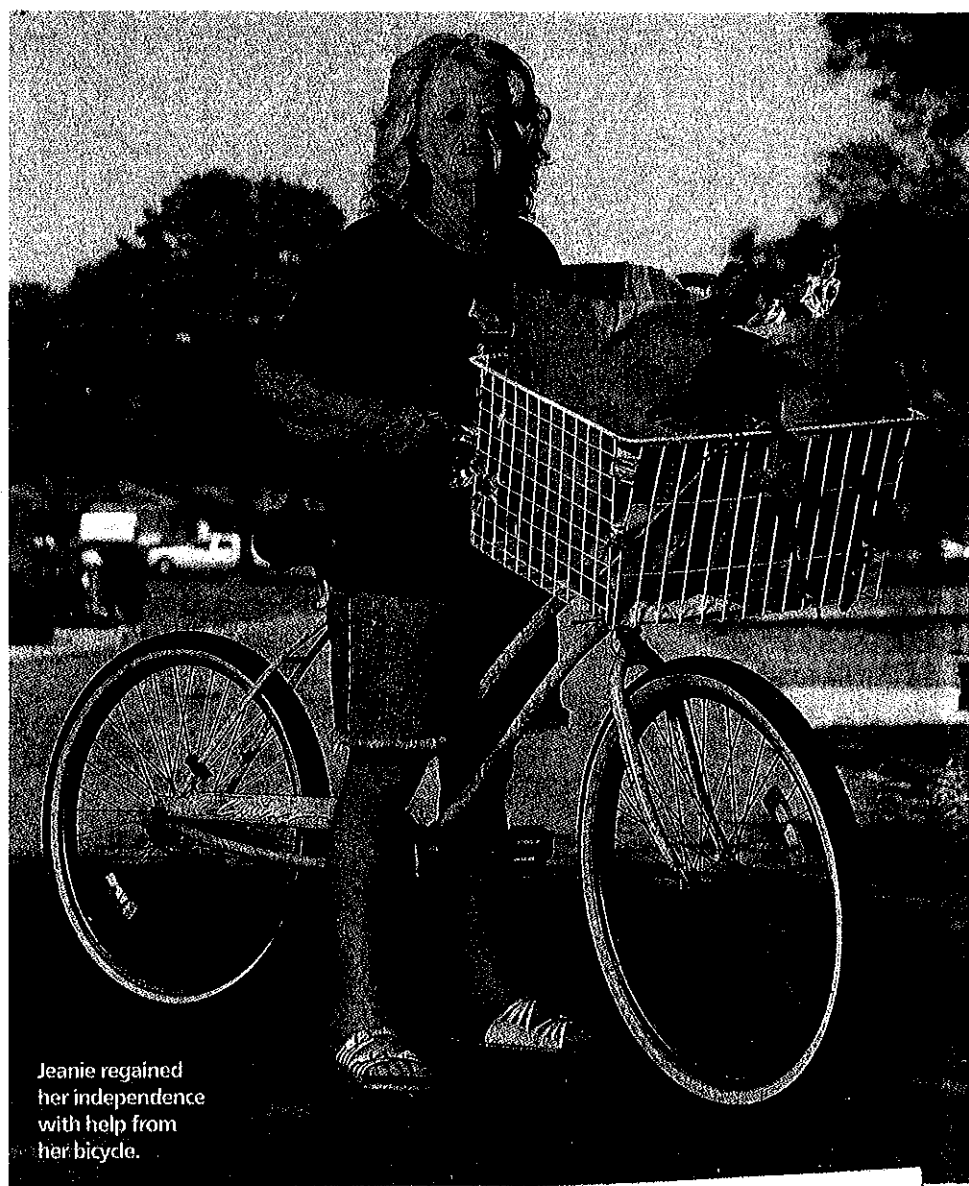
All my life, family has surrounded me. Even after I divorced and my kids left the nest, I took care of my ailing mother. After she died in 2001, I lived alone for the first time. Around that time my health insurance ran out, and I couldn't afford the medication (Ativan and Ritalin) I'd been prescribed for over a decade. The day my doctor took me off it, my world changed.

As soon as I got home, a switch flipped inside me. Normally an outgoing, competent person, I collapsed in tears, suddenly afraid to be alone. My daughter, Sandra, then 25, was visiting, and I implored her to stay, but she had her own life to return to. Over the next few days, my fear grew into an all-consuming terror of everything outside my front door. I became convinced that if I exposed myself to the world, someone out there would hurt me.

For the next month I couldn't leave my house. Nor would I answer my phone—anyone could be on the other end. Sandra delivered food a couple of times, but no one else was in contact with me. I subsisted on the canned soups and vegetables in my pantry, and spent a lot of time on the computer, researching my symptoms. I also joined an online support group for depression, which I thought was my problem. As irrational as I knew my fear was, it felt absolutely real and overwhelming, so it was a lifesaver to find people online who related to what I was going through.

One day I looked out the window and noticed that the mailman was having trouble fitting mail into my overstuffed box. It occurred to me that there might be an important letter inside, so I resolved to go get it all. The next morning, my heart racing, I took a deep breath, opened the door and walked slowly down the driveway. Nothing jumped from the bushes to attack me, as I had imagined so many times. But by the time I made it back inside, I was so tense, I broke down and cried. Still, I had done it. I knew I needed to get back out there again, so I came up with an idea.

I managed to place some lawn chairs at the end of my driveway, along with a couple of plants to make it more welcoming. The chairs also blocked the driveway, so no one could pull in. Every afternoon, I would go get the mail and sit in a chair to read the newspaper. When neighbors passed by, they would honk and wave, or stop and chat.



Jeanie regained her independence with help from her bicycle.

After weeks alone, I relished the company and began to feel a little less anxious. Every week or so, I felt emboldened to move the chairs a few feet closer to the house. In my own way, I was letting people in.

After a couple of months, I was ready for a larger piece of the world. Since I couldn't afford to fix my car, I dusted off my old bike and started riding around the neighborhood. Soon enough, I was using it every day to do all my shopping in town, and my life began to feel normal again. Now I ride it everywhere. I'm in great shape, and I can strike up a conversation with anybody.

My new doctor has confirmed that I was experiencing agoraphobia, brought on by the abrupt end to the medication, my mother's death and living alone for the first time. What ultimately got me back in the world, though, was the strength I mustered to open my front door. My faith in God and the friends I met on the Internet bolstered me to take that first step, and my trusty bike took me the rest of the way. To other people, it may not be much to look at. But to me, it's my independence.

Get control of your anxiety
Face your fear with these tips from the pros,
then learn more at psych.org and adaa.org.

- * **Take baby steps.** If you can't face your fear head-on, break it into smaller steps. "Today I will open my door. Tomorrow I will go 5 feet."
- * **Replace negative images.** Visualize a positive outcome after doing what you're afraid of. What does it feel, smell, sound or look like? Picturing the moment brings you closer to it.
- * **Nix "safety behaviors."** Afraid of the dark and keep a night light on? Behavior meant to assuage your fear can actually perpetuate it.
- * **Get centered.** Taking a few long, slow breaths will help calm you, keep you in the present and quiet the "what ifs" in your head.
- * **Have a role model.** Imagine the bravest person you know, and become him or her.
- * **Laugh.** Finding humor in most events, even when you're afraid, can be the best method.

Sources: Craig April, PhD; Penny Donnenfeld, PhD; and Simon Rego, PsyD

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