

## Enslaved by Felinophobia

**Understanding people who fear cats is the first step toward freedom. Learn how you can help a person with felinophobia.**

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"People suffering with a phobia will totally avoid any circumstance relating to their fear, or approach those circumstances with intense anxiety, stress, dread and fear," said Reid Wilson, Ph.D., a psychologist who directs the Anxiety Disorders Treatment Program in Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C., and author of "Don't Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks."

"In the case of felinophobia, it's not about disliking cats. It's about having a tremendous fear of them. Typically, people with this problem avoid cats and eventually avoid anything that even reminds them of cats," Wilson said.

The anxiety can be overwhelming when a person with felinophobia finds him or herself in the presence of a cat. "A person with this problem can experience mild to severe anxiety and apprehension when they are either exposed to a cat, or simply anticipating exposure to a cat," said Lucinda Bassett, founder of the Midwest Center for Stress and Anxiety in Oak Harbor, Ohio, and author of "From Panic to Power."

"Symptoms vary for each individual," Bassett said, "but can include difficulty breathing, feeling that one is choking, panic feelings, heart palpitations, sweating and nervous discomfort, and unreasonable, fearful feelings that something bad will happen as a result of being near the cat. It is common for the sufferer to experience avoidance behaviors such as staying away from the area, room, or even the house where the cat is present."

"Walking down the street and seeing a cat can cause people with this phobia extreme discomfort," Wilson said. "Even knowing a cat is in the same building can be too much for them."

Because felinophobia is not rational, it is not based on the assumption that the cat will actually cause physical harm, according to Wilson. "It's not usually a fear of being scratched or injured, or a fear based on superstition or old wives tales," he said. "People with this phobia are simply terrified that the cat will touch them or even look at them. Often, their greatest fear is that the cat will suddenly leap up on them. It's about contact with the cat, and sudden contact is the most traumatic."

Understand the PersonCat lovers are often baffled by people with felinophobia, and often struggle to understand where this irrational fear comes from. According to Wilson, mental health experts don't completely understand the basis for felinophobia either.