



Driving phobia can develop, or become worse, as a result of road trauma, such as being involved in or witnessing a car crash. It may also affect family or friends of those involved, even if they were not present at the scene of the crash. This fact sheet describes some strategies which may help you with driving phobia.

## What is driving phobia?

A driving phobia is an overwhelming fear of driving which often starts after a road trauma, and causes you to limit or avoid driving altogether. A driving phobia can mean that you also feel very anxious and scared when you are a passenger in a motor vehicle. Being anxious in potentially dangerous situations is normal and helps our bodies get ready to deal with whatever danger may be present. This is often called the Fight or Flight response. The Fight or Flight response is a physiological response to danger or threat. It evolved to help us to react appropriately in order to stay safe, by fighting,

running away (flight) or sometimes staying still (freezing on the spot) to be a less visible target.

Usually, once the dangerous situation is over, our fear reduces and our bodies return to normal. Even if we feel a little nervous the next time we go out on the road, we can tolerate the anxiety and eventually it goes away altogether. Sometimes, just like an alarm that is over-sensitive, we keep reacting to the reminders of the event and it stops us from wanting to face driving again. The more we limit or avoid driving, the more it reinforces the fear and it becomes harder to deal with problem. This is usually when a driving phobia develops.



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When you have a driving phobia, you may experience the following symptoms:

- Trying to completely avoid driving, or avoid driving in particular circumstances e.g. during peak hour, on freeways, to new places. This may include, making excuses to avoid driving, getting upset and angry when people want you to drive, or limiting your travel altogether.
- Going a much longer route to avoid certain roads, even if this is inconvenient.
- Physical symptoms, such as trembling, sweating, racing heartbeat, tingling lips, chest pain, nausea, dizziness, dry mouth and throat, feeling faint, wobbly legs.
- Feeling that things are not real or are not where they should be. For example, you may feel that someone else is driving or that you are on 'automatic pilot'.
- Thoughts or visions of crashing or something bad happening.

## What can I do to overcome a driving phobia?

### 1 Talk about your fear

Being afraid when you feel threatened or when something is dangerous is completely normal. It is okay to admit that you don't feel safe or comfortable driving, rather than struggling to hide those feelings and becoming more stressed. Usually the more stressed we feel, the more anxiety we experience.

If you feel comfortable opening up to friends or family, you may find that you relax a little and that other people are willing to help. You will probably also find that other people share similar concerns, as driving phobia is fairly common. It's important that you talk to people you can trust and that are supportive.

### 2 Challenge negative thinking

After a stressful event or experience our thinking can become negative, fearful and therefore unhelpful. We may tell ourselves "I can't cope", when the reality is that you may be able to cope, but it feels unpleasant.

We might get caught up in 'black and white thinking'- that is thinking in extremes. Try to challenge negative extremes such as "driving is dangerous" with more realistic thinking such as "driving is sometimes risky".

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Look at what you say to yourself about driving and work out some statements which counter the unhelpful thinking. For example: "Although driving is risky at times, I'm a careful driver and I don't take unnecessary risks," or "I will start slowly and when I feel more comfortable, I will try to do more." It is usually helpful to write your thoughts and challenges down on paper, where you can see more clearly what you are telling yourself.

What you think influences how you feel. What you feel often influences how you behave. If you think that danger lurks around every corner, you will feel scared and you will probably want to avoid the perceived danger. This will only serve to strengthen your fear, leading to more avoidance.

### 3 Change your behaviour

As with any phobia, it is important to not only address your thinking, but also change what you are doing in relation to how you think and feel. When we feel scared, we usually avoid what we feel scared of, hoping that one day we will no longer feel scared. Unfortunately, by avoiding what we fear, we never learn that something is not as dangerous as we think and that we can actually cope with the situation. The answer is to do the opposite of what you feel. We need to face up to the fearful situation and practise being able to cope again. Psychologists call this desensitisation. One way to do this is to make a list of the situations you find difficult from least to most. Your goal is to gradually work your way through the list, exposing yourself to driving again in small, manageable steps. This is an example:

- Sit in the car with a friend or family member for support.
- Sit in the car by yourself.
- Sit in the car with the engine running.
- Drive a short distance up the road, park the car and walk back.
- Drive round the block.
- Take a slightly longer trip with a friend for support.
- Take the same trip without the friend.

- Take a slightly longer trip.
- Keep extending the length of the trip until you feel comfortable.
- Take a trip on an unfamiliar road or take a different route to a familiar place.

It is important that you pick steps that apply to you, and that each step is a little bit harder. Keep practising the same step until your anxiety has reduced by at least 50%. Don't rush, even if you have to do a step 20-30 times before your anxiety reduces, that's ok. Reward yourself each time you complete a step and are ready to try the next challenge.

### 4 Practise relaxation

Learn some relaxation techniques and practise these regularly to reduce your stress response. Take a few minutes to practise your preferred relaxation technique before you drive. If you notice that you are getting tense while you are driving – take a few deep breaths and remember to relax again. Do not however, listen to relaxation CDs/downloads while driving, as you may become too distracted. In order to drive safely you need to be calm but also fully attentive.

CDs for relaxation are widely available in shops, relaxation strategies on video or audio are freely available online. Many useful strategies are also at the end of your smartphone or device. See for example:

[www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations](http://www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations)

A driving meditation (to do before you start the car, not while actually driving) is available at:

[www.bloomingminds.com.au/meditations/](http://www.bloomingminds.com.au/meditations/)

## 5 Seek professional help

If driving phobia continues to be problematic, you may want to see a counsellor or psychologist. RTSWA provides a free counselling service to anyone affected by road trauma. You can access our service in person, via telephone or by video call.

Alternatively, you can visit your general practitioner (GP) and ask to be referred to a local psychologist (you may be eligible for a partial Medicare rebate). It is usually better to seek help sooner rather than later, as the problem can become harder to treat the longer it continues.

## Further support services

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**Kids Helpline** 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)

**Crisis Care** 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (free call)

**GriefLine** 1300 845 745

**Rural Link** 1800 552 002

## About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral is required.

### We provide:

- Information and support
- Education and training (costs may apply)
- Counselling

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

Road Trauma Support WA is delivered by Injury Matters with funding from the Road Trauma Trust Account and contract management through the Road Safety Commission.



**Every year in WA, thousands of people are impacted by road trauma.** Losing family and friends, dealing with injuries, caring for those injured, causing a crash or witnessing a serious crash can have a devastating and enduring impact.