

# *Drivers - Do You Suffer From Vehophobia?*



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*This article examines Vehophobia which is the fear of driving. Vehophobia can impact on one's daily life, especially since most of us is dependent on driving to get around. In this article, the causes and symptoms of Vehophobia are examined. Also, coping strategies and other coping techniques are looked at and advice given on how to deal with them. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its effects are dealt with. Research studies into the fear of driving by Nissan are covered and also a research study by certified hypnotherapist Ted Moreno looks at the causes of Vehophobia. Also, looked at is a study by psychologist Joshua Clapp who suggests that individuals suffering from driving-related fears may engage in exaggerated safety/caution behaviours and anxiety-based performance deficits. Finally, a summary is given.*

# **Drivers - Do You Suffer From Vehophobia?**

***Tom Harrington LL B F Inst. MTD (December 2019)***

***“The longer that fear, worry and angst remains rooted, the more adaptive our brain becomes to such fears, ultimately conditioning us to accept those behaviours as the new norm”.<sup>1</sup>***

**V**ehophobia is a fear of driving and can impact on one’s daily life, especially since most of us are dependent on this activity to get around. It can affect one to the extent that he/she refuses to go shopping, visit a doctor or even drive to work. Individuals with the extreme fear of driving prefer public transport or request friends or family members to drive them wherever they wish to go. This is fine, so long as these options are available. However, this might not be the case always affecting the individual’s education, job or other activities negatively. There are varying degrees of Vehophobia. Some individuals are only anxious about driving on motorways or certain dreaded routes. Some are unable to pass their driving tests or acquire a driving licence. A few might have valid driving licences but they pose a danger to themselves as well as other drivers. They can have a panic attack while driving and freeze up to an extent that they are unable to apply the footbrake or change gears. In extreme cases, a person may even be terrified of being a passenger in the vehicle. This fear is called amaxaphobia. The word Vehophobia comes from the Latin word Veho meaning ‘drive’ and the Greek word ‘phobos’ which means ‘fear’. There are also similar forms of phobias that may relate to or be in addition to Vehophobia, such as Amaxaphobia – the fear of being a passenger in a vehicle or Hodophobia – the fear of travelling. Phobias can be divided into specific phobias – social phobias and agoraphobia. However this article will focus on Vehophobia which is the fear of driving.

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<sup>1</sup> Caila Smith. *Vehophobia is the fear that drives me to stay parked*. Scarymommy.com (Last accessed 11/12/2019)

### **Nervous Pupils or Vehophobia?**

Driver trainers will at one time or other has encountered a pupil who was extremely nervous about driving. They were so nervous to the extent that they were petrified when the car moved, albeit a few feet and they wanted to get out. However, with an understanding and patient trainer, and over time, their fears subsided, their skills and confidence grew and they became much more relaxed. They then continued to learn and drive as a normal learner driver would. Their early fears were not Vehophobia as such, but a normal nervousness of driving a car for the first time. A large number of drivers experience a sense of fear or anxiety the first time they drive a car. Their first experience in a car is very important so, that their skills are developed methodically in an achievable order without overwhelming them. Being overly critical can destroy a learner driver's confidence. Also, putting a learner in a situation where they feel totally out of control is not going to nurture a driver into making good steady progress. A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder defined by persistent and excessive fear of an object or situation. The phobia typically results in a rapid onset of fear and is present for more than six months. The affected person goes to great lengths to avoid the situation or object to a greater degree than the actual danger posed. If the feared object or situation cannot be avoided, the affected person experiences significant distress. Agoraphobia is often associated with panic attacks and usually a person has phobias to a number of objects or situations.

### **Causes of Vehophobia**

A person with extreme phobias of driving has likely had a negative experience in the past. He/she might have been involved in a crash or witnessed a particularly bad accident and also, having overly strict driver trainers or sponsors when learning can also lead to Vehophobia. Having experienced a particularly dangerous scary journey through fog, rain, snow, sleet or other adverse weather conditions or having large animals such as deer or a horse dart suddenly in front of one's car can cause this phobia. Also, seeing anxious parents panic while driving can lead a child to have a fear of driving.

Road rage from fellow drivers or a passerby where one has shouted or provoked the individual can also lead to this phobia. If experiencing stress due to traffic congestion; this can cause the brain to develop panic/anxiety response each time one gets behind the wheel. People prone to panic attacks or nervous situations or those with adrenal deficiencies are likely to develop the fear of driving. Hearing or reading news items about bad accidents or watching bad films that depicts violent car crashes can create negative thoughts about driving. Often, people confuse normal anxiety symptoms with phobias. Millions of people experience butterflies in their stomach, sweaty palms, a pounding heart at the thought of making a presentation or meeting someone etc. However, some individuals literally become ill at the mere thought of being in such a situation. For those people, even making a phone call, ordering food or encountering other seemingly non-threatening situations/objects can seem sickening and may cause a full-blown panic attack.<sup>2</sup>

### **Symptoms of Vehophobia**

It's important for those suffering from Vehophobia to understand its symptoms, then, they can identify when they are experiencing it. When driving, the physical symptoms of Vehophobia are similar to anxiety and include:

- Trembling
- Sweating
- Shallow breathing
- Having a dry mouth
- Increased heart rate
- Tense muscles
- Chest pain
- Nausea
- Panic attacks

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Olsen. *Fear of driving phobia – Vehophobia. The ultimate list of phobias and fears.* Fearof.net. (last accessed 11/12/2019).

- Excessive fear of losing control
- Fear of getting into an accident and
- Always finding excuses not to drive

Vehophobia can lead to various symptoms that can be characterised as emotional and physical. Such a panic attack can occur each time the individual gets behind the wheel. It can cause one to freeze up so that he/she is unable to change gears or apply the footbrake. Emotional symptoms include refusing to drive, avoiding situations that encompass driving, feeling panic, terror or extreme dread at the thought of driving, or experiencing terrifying images about driving. The individual also feels detached or removed from reality, in that he or she feels the events are happening to someone else. Some drivers may try to avoid motorways or take longer routes so that they do not have to drive on dreaded roads. Others may get into arguments or fights with loved ones and come up with excuses when faced or compelled to drive.<sup>3</sup> Phobias are distressing emotions initiated by out-of-proportion-fears, both real and imaginary. To the sufferer, a phobia can seem unbearable or even life-threatening, while others might find these strange and bizarre phobias quite fascinating. Fear is an emotion and is generally induced when the subject perceives a threat. Phobia is a Greek word for ‘fear’ and can be defined as excessive or unreasonable fear of an object, place or situation. So, does this mean that fear and phobia are one and the same? The answer according to experts is no. There is a subtle difference between what fear is and what can be termed as phobia. The main difference lies in the intensity and severity of the emotions experienced in fear and phobia. In short, phobia is the heightened form of fear. The phobic person often tries to fight his phobia leading to greater form of anxiety and also experiences extreme fatigue in the process. There are several types of phobias. The common types can be divided into ‘simple phobias’ or ‘social phobias’.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob Olsen. *Fear of driving phobia – Vehophobia. The ultimate list of phobias and fears.* Fearof.net. (last accessed 11/12/2019).

Simple phobias mainly include fear of specific types of objects, insects or situations such as the fear of flying or travelling in a car. Social phobias include the types of phobias like marked fear of social or performance situations.

### **Hypnotherapy – Most Effective**

President Roosevelt in his famous inaugural speech stated that “*the only thing we need to fear is fear itself*”. In some individuals this actually rings true as they fear becoming anxious or get extremely overwhelmed at the thought of allowing themselves to become afraid of an object or situation. The fear of fear is called Phobophobia. One of the most effective therapies for overcoming the fear of driving is Hypnotherapy. It gets to the cause of the fear, traces why it has taken root and helps provide a solution to overcome it. Facing one’s fear is one of the best ways of getting over Vehophobia. It is important to reduce tension and stress of any kind when getting behind the wheel. Imagining positive thoughts and visualizing ideal situations are some ways of accomplishing this. A therapist can also help one re-learn or ‘unlearn’ negative things the brain has taught itself. Talking about one’s fears and taking defensive driving lessons, or joining special groups to help one overcome such a phobia are a few other methods of dealing with Vehophobia. Cognitive behaviour therapy and gradual desensitization are some other options to help one overcome this phobia. There are various therapies available to overcome a fear of driving, but it is important to choose one that you are most comfortable with, in conjunction with a medical practitioner’s advice. Understand that you are not alone, and they may be many like you who have dealt with this phobia. It is very possible to overcome Vehophobia and to successfully continue driving without this insidious fear. There are other ways to help with Vehophobia like gradually building up exposure to driving. Although this is best done with a therapist, if your Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is moderate, you could start to face it on your own. This starts with realizing you are not alone and that this fear is not weird or odd. Once you have confronted the idea, you can start to take small steps towards facing your fear completely.

Every step you make to confront your PTSD is a good thing. When you face setbacks, experience fear, or avoid driving, don't be discouraged. Facing this sort of thing will take strength and time. As mentioned earlier, Vehophobia can be costly to one's daily life. Remember what you will gain if you can get over this fear. Don't think of your PTSD as severe or permanent. It probably isn't. Just remember that this is just one of the many bumps in life's road – you will overcome it.<sup>4</sup>

### **Other Coping Techniques**

Regardless of the reason that some people fear driving after an accident, the results can be debilitating to their lives and anyone who suffers from anxiety, or who has had a panic attack before, knows just how scary the whole situation can be. In addition to the uncomfortableness of the phobia, it is also extensively limiting to their everyday routines. Imagine if you can't pick up your kids from school, drive to a restaurant for a meal or run to the supermarket to pick up some groceries – all because of a crippling fear. Luckily, the disorder is taken very seriously by healthcare and safety professionals. For this reason, there has been much research into effective ways to help people overcome their fear of driving. The following are some real techniques that can help get accident victims back on the road:

- Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) is a form of behaviour and cognitive therapy designed to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorders and obsessive - compulsive disorders.
- Hypnotherapy, (mentioned above) most commonly referred as hypnosis, uses guided relaxation, intense concentration and focused attention to help keep a person process specific thoughts or tasks.
- Medication can be a useful tool for reducing the impact of traumatic anxiety, although most therapists prefer the more permanent, behavioural therapies be attempted first.

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<sup>4</sup> Dolman Law Group. Dec. 2016. *Auto Accidents Treating Post-Accident vehophobia – The Fear of Driving.*

- Take a Defensive Driving Course with an ADI who understands your problem. Have someone in the car that will make it a more comfortable environment.
- Drive during the daytime, in low-traffic areas.
- Allow extra time to get to destinations to avoid additional stress.

### **Massive Anxiety**

The fear of driving after a car accident is technically a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). People suffer from PTSD for all kinds of reasons, including motor vehicle accidents. This can be set off by the trauma of almost dying (or thinking you might die), the trauma of injuring your children, or just the violence of the event in general. It really can be caused – and triggered - by a multitude of things. The fear of driving persists for many reasons, each one often as unique as the driver. But there are some general ideas that prevent people from driving, or create massive anxiety while driving. They are:

- The driver's anxiety and fear they will get into another accident, even if they have driven for years accident free.
- The thought of driving causes them to suffer extreme and crippling anxiety, which prevents them from even attempting to get behind the wheel.
- The fear that they will suffer a panic attack while driving, which they think will harm them or other road users.
- The fear they may harm or kill another person, their own children or their entire family.

### **Research Studies**

Millions of British people feel anxious when driving on motorways, new research suggests. A poll of 2,000 drivers by Nissan found that 23% of drivers were uncomfortable on multi-lane roads. More than half said they were nervous when hemmed in between cars and lorries on motorways; while 43% cited a dislike of overtaking lorries or other large vehicles.



The survey found 39% of drivers felt scared, nervous, uneasy or uncertain behind the wheel in general. <sup>5</sup>According to certified hypnotherapist Ted Moreno in a 2012 research article:

*“People with a driving phobia fear being trapped in traffic queues and are unable to escape if they experience a panic attack. Likewise, they also fear passing out, losing control of the vehicle, throwing up or getting into an accident. For many people, driving next to a big truck can be very nerve-wracking, as can merging on the freeway or driving in the fast lane”.* <sup>6</sup>

A study conducted by psychologist Joshua Clapp at the University of Bluffton suggested that individuals suffering from driving-related fear may engage in “*exaggerated safety/caution behaviours, anxiety-based performance deficits and hostile aggressive driving behaviours*”. But what causes these fears? Considering 51% of participants from Clapp’s study experienced multiple accidents over their lifetime, researchers believe a form of PTSD following the aftermath of vehicle collisions is likely to engage such driving-related fear and anxiety.

### **Conclusion**

Vehophobia or driving anxiety is a very common form of anxiety suffered by many people that can range in severity from a hesitation to drive, where anxiety is always present, all the way up to a total refusal to drive at all, in which case it becomes a driving phobia. In fact, it is quite common both in people who have been involved in serious accidents and sometimes in those who have not. A phobia is a fear that is paralysing but irrational. Many people who suffer from Vehophobia choose not to drive altogether because of the anxiety and fear is so overwhelming. The problem can be extremely disruptive to one’s life. Driving phobia is one of the most common phobias and is a form of agoraphobia, literally defined as the fear of open spaces.

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<sup>5</sup> Ahern, Adrian 22 August 2018. *Nearly a quarter of British drivers feel anxious driving on motorways*, study claims. Independent. independent.co.uk

<sup>6</sup> Caila Smith. *Vehophobia is the fear that drives me to stay parked*. Scarymommy.com (Last accessed 12/12/2019)

But it's not the fear of open spaces that scares people; it's the fear of loss of control. People with a driving phobia fear being trapped in a traffic jam and unable to escape if they experience a panic attack, likewise, they also fear passing out, losing control of the vehicle, throwing up or getting involved in an accident. For many people, driving next to big trucks can be very nerve-wracking, as can be merging onto the motorway or driving in the overtaking lane. Some people overcome driving –related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or vehophobia by taking defensive driving lessons in order to learn new skills to help them combat the fears of driving. This approach can help give those suffering from Vehophobia a greater sense of control and restore their faith in their own driving abilities. It also gives them comfort in the idea that if some unwanted situation was to occur on the road, they would have the skills to avoid it. Mitigating your feelings and fears can be accomplished by removing each obstacle that is causing the fear. For learner drivers, it's natural to be anxious when starting to drive. Good driver trainers will methodically build a driver's skill to improve confidence without overwhelming them. Therefore, for a learner driver, getting a driver trainer (or a different driver trainer) could solve the problem. Experienced drivers usually develop a fear of driving through having had a bad experience in some kind of crash. Purchasing a safer car might be all it takes to assure the person they are safe, or it might take advanced driving lessons to give them strategies to improve their confidence. In some cases, the fear never goes away but the person simply learns to manage it; they might avoid driving at specific times unless absolutely necessary, for example at night or on motorways. Finally, if you are concerned about the fear of driving, talking to a health professional is a good first step to get some input and advice, followed by some driving lessons from an understanding and supportive driver trainer who has the requisite skills for dealing with the insidious fear of driving called Vehophobia.