

Living with... Claustrophobia

Soon after the July 2005 bombings, Londoner Jenny Connelly, 42, was hit by a crippling fear of enclosed spaces

I was at work on Oxford Street when I first heard about the explosions that rocked London in July 2005. Watching the news that night, I realised just how lucky my boyfriend and I were to be safe, and I was very thankful for it.

I didn't think much more about it, but around three weeks later, I started to feel nervous about taking the Tube. It didn't make any sense – I'd always used it in rush hour – but suddenly the idea of being in a busy carriage with no way out made me feel faint.

After a few days, I was drenched in sweat before I even reached the Underground station, and there was no way I could bring myself to get on it. I'd never experienced this before, so I just put it down to stress. I took a week off work in the hope the anxiety would wear off, but avoiding the problem just made it worse. I couldn't help thinking about crowded public transport, and it made my body seize up and filled my stomach with fear.

I know now these were panic attacks, but at the time it just felt as though I had no control over my

body. I realised just how quickly the claustrophobia had taken hold when my sister suggested a shopping trip in central London, and I burst into tears because we'd have to take the Tube.

My family knew something was very wrong, so they persuaded me to see my GP. He said I was probably suffering from stress, and as the waiting list for counselling was five months, he prescribed beta-blockers to reduce the severity of my feelings. These didn't help, though – I just felt disconnected, when all I wanted was to feel more in control again.

Feeling trapped

I knew there was no way I could get on a Tube or bus now, so I left my job in a boutique in the West End and found work in a supermarket within walking distance of my house. But the fear of feeling trapped still took over everything I did. I started having recurring nightmares where I was locked in a tiny space – I couldn't even close the door when I went to the bathroom in case it locked behind me. The need for control became



Hypnosis allowed Jenny to live life to the full again

overwhelming, and my relationship seriously started to suffer.

In a last-ditch attempt to save things, my partner booked a trip to Paris. I hadn't been on a plane since the bombings, but the moment the door closed, I was terrified. I was shaking with fear and cried the whole way there. The holiday was ruined and I couldn't bring myself to get on the plane back, so I got an aisle seat on Eurostar and travelled home alone. We ended the relationship soon after.

Finding new hope

Then, in July 2007, I saw a TV show about how hypnosis can cure phobias. One woman was talking about feeling trapped, and it was like watching myself as she described how she felt – finally, someone understood what I was going through. I thought if hypnosis could work for her, it might work for me, so I looked around on the internet and found London-based hypnotherapist Ursula James.

During our first session, she explained that, although my body would go to sleep, my mind would stay alert and I'd be in control. She

explained how the hypnosis would help break the connections my mind was making between all enclosed spaces and panic, and how it would let my subconscious release past anxiety, so I could deal with the fear in a calmer way. The hour flew by and afterwards, as a test, my sister and I headed to the nearest Tube station. For the first time in so long, I didn't feel the panic, and I managed to travel the five stops to our destination without any effort at all. It felt amazing – after just one session, I was cured.

Six weeks later, I booked a flight to France to see if I was really free of my fear. I was so relaxed, I started chatting to the man sitting next to me and he asked for my number – we've been together ever since!

Now I feel more confident than ever, and I dread to think where I'd be without hypnosis. I'm engaged to a wonderful man, I'm learning French and I believe anything is possible. □

For an appointment with Ursula James or to discover her self-help CDs and books, visit www.ursulajames.com. For a therapist in your area, log onto www.thehypnotherapyassociation.co.uk.

Phobias: The facts

What are they? A range of anxiety disorders where the person feels a constant, extreme or irrational fear of something. Even the thought of coming into contact with the cause can bring on panic.

What causes them? Phobias can develop at any time, and while they can be in response to an event or situation, many seem 'irrational'.

Where can I find out more? Leading charity Anxiety UK provides information, support and therapy services for those affected by anxiety disorders. Visit www.anxietyuk.org.uk or call 08444 775774.