

Press Release

For immediate release

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Trapped Chilean miners highlight fears of thousands of claustrophobia sufferers

As the Chilean miners reach the end of being trapped nearly five miles underground for the past two months, their prolonged entrapment highlights the fears of thousands of claustrophobia sufferers. Claustrophobia is the irrational fear of confined spaces, which may arise from a one-off trauma at any age, developed when the person was a child (for example growing up with one or more claustrophobic parents) or emerge as someone gets older. Around 10% of the population may experience claustrophobia during their lifetime.

Susan, 62 from Lancashire, has suffered with anxiety and claustrophobia all her life. Her worst fears were realised when working as a chamber maid and waitress at the Strand Palace Hotel in her twenties. "The girls and I were going for a night on the town. We were all very giddy about being in the 'big city' and crammed into the lift. The lift door closed with a bang and started to drop really fast. Then, it just stopped. The fire brigade had to come and pull us out, one by one, between two floors. It's was terrifying and I think about it every time I have to go in a lift. To this day, if a lift has too many people in it, I have to get out."

While it can be rational to fear being trapped when circumstances carry genuine threat, in claustrophobia people experience fear even when there is no obvious or realistic danger. People who experience claustrophobia generally go out of their way to avoid a long list of confined spaces, including lifts, tunnels, tube trains, revolving doors, public toilets, MRI scanners, and don't even like to wear crash helmets. Unfortunately, avoidance may reinforce the fear.

Susan will avoid crowded places, such as supermarkets, because she feels too enclosed. The mere prospect of using the London Underground fills her with dread, after she had to come off her train last year in a total state of panic. "I just had to get out. I came off miles from where we needed to be because it was so crowded, dark and stuffy. It was unbearable."

"There are a number of ways people with claustrophobia can overcome their fears," explains Catherine O'Neill, services manager for Anxiety UK. "One way is to face their fears in something called 'gradual exposure.' This asks the person to confront their fear at varying degrees by breaking it down into steps. For example, a claustrophobia sufferer may start by sitting in a small room for 10 minutes and then move onto taking a lift. The point is to go beyond what you would normally do and to move forward, step-by-step."

Susan did just that when she went on the Channel Tunnel with a friend on a recent holiday to Belgium. “I was terrified but I knew that I had to do it. When you are on the tunnel, there is no way of escaping so you are forced to face your fear. I coped by walking up and down and by the end of the 30 minute journey, I felt like I’d really achieved something. While I still suffer from claustrophobia on a day to day basis, having survived the Channel Tunnel has told me that I *can* face my fears.”

Anxiety UK has a number of resources available for those struggling with claustrophobia, including *Claustrophobia: finding your way out*, by Andrea Perry and a variety of relaxation CDs. Claustrophobics can also get in touch to become a member of Anxiety UK, where they will have access to a variety of therapies and a community of 6,000 anxiety sufferers throughout the country.

Ends

Contact

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Please let me know if you cover this story, as we are a small charity unable to afford media monitoring.

Images/ Case studies/ Interviews with spokespeople available.

Notes to Editors

Anxiety UK is a national registered charity formed in 1970 by a sufferer of agoraphobia for those affected by anxiety disorders, and today is the leading authority on anxiety disorders and phobias in the UK. We are still a user-led organisation, run by sufferers and ex-sufferers of anxiety disorders.

Anxiety disorders are common and treatable, and Anxiety UK works to relieve and support those living with these conditions by providing information, support and understanding via an extensive range of services, including fast access to reduced cost 1:1 therapy services. The Anxiety UK helpline alone receives over 16,000 calls a year from people suffering from phobias and anxiety disorders.

We provide support to people with any anxiety condition, or specific phobia such as fear of spiders, blushing, vomiting, being alone, public speaking, heights - in fact, any fear that stops people from living their lives to the full.