

## - Phobias

Mind

# Face your fear of claustrophobia

If small spaces make you anxious, here's how to breathe easier.

BY MADELEINE HAASE

**F**ear of enclosed spaces is very common – about 13 per cent of people have claustrophobia. It may stem from a distressing moment in your past, such as getting stuck in a lift, says psychotherapist Dr Michelle Di Paolo. This kind of experience can activate your brain to sense danger even when you're actually safe.

People with claustrophobia can experience sweating, dizziness, shortness of breath, and feelings of helplessness in small spaces, says psychologist Dr Nadia Teymoorian. The irrational fear is especially a problem when it interferes with daily tasks or healthcare, such as making someone avoid an MRI scan.

Exposure therapy, in which a therapist helps a person take gradual steps to face the fear, can help. A variation of this therapy uses virtual reality (VR) goggles, says clinical psychologist Dr Chandler Chang. “[The VR experience] conveys to your brain those same feelings of being trapped, so you can practise coping strategies while knowing you're safe,” she explains.



## Overcoming your fear

Here are a few ways to calm yourself when you feel as if the walls are closing in on you.

### \* Take a sniff of a favourite scent

Sensory cues can help shift your focus away from perceived danger, says Dr Chang. Try carrying a calming essential oil with a scent, such as lavender or jasmine, and when you start feeling claustrophobic, take

some deep whiffs of it to help yourself feel centred, relaxed and safe.

### \* Change your self-talk

Switching the conversation in your head can help dial down the anxiety, says Dr Di Paolo. If you have to, say, ride on a crowded train, start by telling yourself, I'm in control of this situation, she suggests. Then focus on your breath, keeping your

inhalations and exhalations long while feeling your feet planted on the ground.

### \* Find a happy distraction

For longer periods of being enclosed, distraction is key, says Dr Di Paolo. Close your eyes and listen to a podcast or audiobook. “The more intensely engaged your mind is on something else, the less anxious you'll be,” Dr Chang adds. **P**