

Rocky reporter Kevin Vaughan is chatting now about 'The Crevasse.' [Click to join](#)

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Which of these would scare you most?

- A. Looking down into the Grand Canyon from the edge.
- B. Having a big, hairy spider land on your shoulder.
- C. Giving a 20-minute speech to an auditorium full of strangers.

If the thought of doing any of those things gives you the creeps, you have lots of company.

Nearly 15 million Americans have irrational fears of something specific, ranging from acrophobia (fear of heights) to zoophobia (fear of animals).

Most of our fears have a rational basis. Even people without arachnophobia (fear of spiders) know that some spiders are venomous. But when fears become irrational, they can hinder our lives.

Few people, for example, have suffered physical harm from giving a bad speech. Yet, according to *The Book of Lists*, the No. 1 human fear is the fear of public speaking, also known as glossophobia.

About 40 percent of us will make New Year's resolutions today, according to surveys from both the University of North Carolina and Washington University. Among the usual quickly forgotten resolutions to quit smoking, lose weight and get organized will be many to overcome irrational fears.

They can be conquered, says J. Randy Penn, a Westminster tax accountant who says overcoming his fear of public speaking turned his life around.

"I was one of those geeks in high school who never raised my hand," he said. "In my early career, I didn't advance at nearly the rate I could have. I missed opportunities because I was shy."

Then he wandered into a meeting of Toastmasters International and realized that the club, which develops public-speaking skills, offered something he needed.

"When I gave my first speech in front of the club, I held on to the lectern so tight that my knuckles turned white," he said. "After a six-minute speech, I had to pry myself off."

Today, Penn is a Toastmasters district governor and uses his hard-won communication skills to negotiate with the IRS on behalf of his clients. He believes Toastmasters works because newcomers start slowly, proceed through prescribed steps and are supported by other members.

Those same steps are key to overcoming any anxiety, says Erie psychologist Stephanie Smith.

"If you're afraid of heights, for example, try approaching the edge of a balcony slowly," she said. "Take deep breaths, think pleasant thoughts. Move a few inches closer to the edge each day until you can get all the way to the rail and still feel good."

If a fear is just a nuisance and doesn't interfere with daily life, Smith says, it should be possible to handle it on your own. But watch out, she says, if you're changing your behavior to avoid something you're afraid of.

"If a fear is keeping you from doing the things you need to do, it's time to look for professional help," she said.

Home remedies

- Educate yourself. If you're afraid of riding something mechanical, such as a plane or an elevator, learn how it works.
- Adjust your perspective for a realistic - rather than catastrophic - view of the thing you fear.
- Learn relaxation techniques or meditation to use when you encounter your phobia.
- Set progressive, attainable goals that let you experience success. For example, before getting on a plane, look at a picture of a plane, go to an arcade and play a flight-simulation game, play a computer flight game or walk around the airport.
- Recruit a phobia pal. Find a friend to go with you as you work on your goal. *Source: Psychologist Stephanie Smith, 303-828-3080, frontrangepsychology.com*

Resources:

- Colorado Psychological Association, 303-692-9303, www.colopsych.org
- Mental Health Association of Colorado, www.mhacolorado.org, 720-208-2220, 1-800-456-3249
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.namicolorado.org, 303-321-3104, 1-888-566-6264

• Toastmasters International of Colorado, d26toastmasters.org, 303-954-3001
simonsj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-2547

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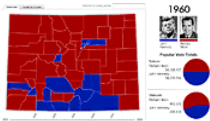
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