



Puncturing needle phobia

Fear of needles can be hazardous to your health, but you can overcome it

BY KENYA MCCULLUM

My anxiety began the minute I woke up the morning of my appointment. Actually, that's not entirely accurate: My nerves began to tense up as soon as my doctor mentioned that she wanted me to take a blood test. Since I had already declined a flu shot and a tetanus shot (what are the chances of me actually getting tetanus, I rationalized), I thought I had dodged a bullet—or rather, a needle. You see, I have an extreme fear of needles, and just the thought of getting a shot or a blood test is enough to raise my blood pressure through the roof.

Needle phobia is hardly an exclusive club. In fact, medical professionals have seen it so frequently that in the early nineties, it earned a name in the DSM-IV: trypanophobia.

If you're like me, you get extremely nervous as soon as the tourniquet comes out, and there's a momentary spike in your blood pressure while you're getting a shot or having blood drawn. You clench your teeth and push through your fear. But in extreme cases, people with needle phobia have such an intense fear that they can't even force themselves to undergo any medical procedures that involve needles—which can be disastrous if they have conditions that require the use of needles for treatments that can improve their health, or even save their lives.

FIGHTING THE FEAR OF NEEDLES

The fear of needles can be a prickly pain that's very difficult to deal with. But the good news, says Dr. Larry Kubiak—a psychologist at Tallahassee Memorial

HealthCare's Behavioral Health Center—is that, like any phobia, it can be overcome with some work.

“If you had a bad experience getting a shot or having your blood drawn—like if someone extremely incompetent poked you several times—then you may develop a phobia to having that done in the future,” he said. “We tend to be our own worst enemy because of the thoughts that go through our mind, but you learn those thoughts. You weren't born fearing needles, so the good thing about that is, anything you can learn, you can unlearn.”

Getting over needle phobia is definitely easier said than done, but the following tips can help.

Talk about it. If you have a blood test scheduled, let medical professionals know upfront that you are afraid of needles, and ask if they can bring in someone who has experience with needle phobic patients. This can save you from being used as a pin cushion by someone who isn't skilled at taking blood from patients.

Ask for medication. When you schedule a medical procedure that involves needles, ask your doctor if you can be given topical treatments—like anesthetic creams or patches—that will numb the area where the needle will go. This can be especially helpful when you need to get an IV.

Use relaxation techniques. Strategies like deep breathing, imagining a relaxing place—like your favorite vacation spot—or distracting yourself by listening to your favorite music or reading a funny book, can go a long way toward relaxing you while you have your procedure. And when you relax your mind, you also relax your body, which can make the process easier because it's easier for medical professionals to insert a needle.

Get therapy. If your fear of needles is so intense that your health may be put at risk, going to a licensed psychologist with experience in this phobia can help you get through your fear once and for all. ❖



Acupuncture and Needle-Phobes

Have you considered getting acupuncture, but your fear of needles has scared you away?

Licensed acupuncturist Tony Burris of Eagle Acupuncture says that he sees this all the time in his practice, and the needles rarely keep patients from coming back.

One reason for this, says Burris, is because the needles used in acupuncture are a lot different from the ones you generally see in your doctor's office. In fact, acupuncture needles are generally no thicker than a hair on your head.

Also, in addition to the health benefits of acupuncture, patients tend to enjoy the actual experience. Acupuncturists strive to create a relaxing atmosphere—Burns gives his patients a lot of pillows to rest on and plays soft music during their sessions—that even needle-phobes can appreciate.

“You'd be surprised; many of my patients fall asleep,” he said. “A lot of the people that are the most nervous are the ones that actually conk out the quickest because they have all this pent up energy anticipating a terrible event, and then once the treatment is being done, it's usually very pleasant.”