

The official diagnostic criteria of specific phobia symptoms states the individual must have an irrational marked fear about the specific object or situation and that the anxiety or fear is provoked instantaneously. It's also noted that the object or situation is repeatedly avoided and this fear and avoidance is persistent over a period of 6 or more months. It must also cause significant distress within everyday life and also must not be explained by another type of mental disorder with similar panic symptoms such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

When discussing the causal mechanisms for specific phobia, psychologists have researched theories which could explain the reasons for an individual acquiring specific phobia, and it is recognized that learning mechanisms and developmental process play a vital role in the etiology (Merckelbach, de Jong, Muris & van den Hout, 1996).

In the 1920's through to the late 1970's, the etiology of specific phobia was explained through the use of learning models with initial theories assuming that the development of specific phobias could be enlightened through a fear conditioning-based approach (Coelho & Purkis, 2009). Watson and Rayner (1920) professed that it was possible to teach a child to respond to a harmless conditioned stimulus with fear when paired with a frightening unconditioned stimulus. They showed this through their experiment on a young boy who they named Little Albert and conditioned him to fear a white rat, and in turn generalise this fear to other objects such as Smith and rabbits. When first presented with the rat, Little Albert showed no signs of fear. Next in their experiment, Watson and Rayner hit a steel bar with a hammer behind Albert's head to create a loud sound which made him cry whenever he came into contact with the rat. After several trials, Albert made the association between the rat, the loud noise and a fearful response. Therefore, introductions of only a rat, resulted in fear and therefore proving, through conditioning stimulus, a phobia can be learnt (Watson & Rayner, 1920). Although this hypothesis has valuable evidence, arguments against this classical conditioning theory state that many individuals don't remember a conditioning event and that not all individuals develop a phobia following the stimuli (Fyer, 1998).

Rachman (1977) argued that the fear conditioning-based approach was too basic and proposed that specific phobia is a result of three prime pathways, the first being direct conditioning and secondly vicarious conditioning. The third pathway introduced the concept that a phobia can be influenced by the information and instruction from parents and close peers. Research into the three pathways has been explored, for example Ollendick and King's