



How to Find a Therapist for Emetophobia

Even if they don't know what it is

By Lori Riddle-Walker, EdD, MFT

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Emetophobia, also known as specific phobia of vomiting (SPOV), is a chronic, complex disorder that can have a severe impact on quality of life.

Common avoidances such as staying away from children; refusing to attend social or family events where there is drinking; staying away from ill family members, fellow students or coworkers; avoiding public transportation; or avoiding starting a family due to the potential for morning sickness are examples of how emetophobia can interfere with relationships, work productivity, and overall life satisfaction.

Disturbed eating to the point of significant weight loss or avoiding medical treatments that cause nausea or vomiting are some ways SPOV can even be life-threatening.

Specific phobia of vomiting (emetophobia) has not been given significant attention by the research and treatment community. Many doctors and therapists are unfamiliar with emetophobia, leaving sufferers feeling misunderstood. We are trying to change that unfortunate reality.

In the meantime, how can you get help?

Symptoms of Emetophobia

Emetophobia is a complex disorder with multiple symptoms that must be addressed for successful treatment.

For example, sufferers often have traumatic memories from childhood, or other earlier experiences of vomiting, that become mentally intrusive flash-backs, especially in the face of vomiting triggers. Obsessional fear can also become intrusive, leading to catastrophizing or “what if” scenarios that are experienced as “flash forwards.”

Cognitive processes that maintain fear are also common. These processes include certain thoughts, beliefs, or thinking patterns that keep fear in place by encouraging avoidance and limiting corrective experiences. Safety behaviors such as planning escape routes, carrying nausea medication, or limiting movement when experiencing nausea also maintain fear.

Emetophobia can also include multiple somatic complaints such as co-occurring gastrointestinal issues or symptoms of anxiety such as nausea, dizziness and diarrhea, which can exacerbate fear.

How Emetophobia is Treated

Each person seeking help should be assessed individually and the treatment plan created with the sufferer's specific goals and symptoms in mind.

The following elements must be assessed for, and be addressed in the treatment plan, when appropriate.

Traumatic memories.

Early traumatic memories related to vomit are often present in those suffering from emetophobia. These memories can reoccur as flashbacks, haunting the present with images, sounds, smells, and emotions from the past.

Dr. David Veal, a London-based psychiatrist who specializes in emetophobia, recommends **Imagery ReScripting**, a process for altering past memories which decreases emotional reactivity.

Hypnotherapy has also been used successfully in addressing traumatic memories.

Cognitive processes that maintain fear.

These cognitive processes often include an overinflated belief in the ability to stop oneself from vomiting, over-responsibility for events, exaggerated beliefs about the awfulness of vomiting, the need for certainty, the need to have control over thoughts and feelings about vomiting, meta-cognitions about worry that may be safety-seeking but dysfunctional, and attentional biases toward risk (focusing on danger and risk verses more positive aspects of a situation).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can be very helpful in reducing these mental processes that keep fear alive.

Avoidances and safety behaviors.

It has been clearly established that avoidance of triggers related to vomiting and engaging in behaviors, in an attempt to reduce either anxiety or uncertainty about vomiting, *actually maintain fear*.

Reducing safety behaviors and avoidance is critical to recovery from emetophobia. Gradual exposure to triggers over time can reduce anxiety.

Somatic symptoms.

It is common for emetophobia to include a vicious cycle of nausea, or other gastrointestinal symptoms, and anxiety. Education about how anxiety affects the body, increasing arousal management skills, and normalizing bodily sensations can be very helpful.

Obsessional fear.

These can include frequent worry and rumination, or flash-forwards of imagined catastrophic events. These types of fears typically respond to very gradual exposure to related triggers. Triggers could be words related to vomiting, sentences or paragraphs about vomiting, pictures or images, videos, sounds, or representations of vomit.

Exposure should be planned jointly with the treatment provider and the emetophobic, and only implemented with the permission of the sufferer.

Therapists Who Have the Skills to Provide Treatment

Finding the right therapist may take work, but help is available.

Even if a therapist has never heard of emetophobia, they may have training in addressing the aspects discussed above that are common to emetophobia.

Imagery Rescripting or other techniques that address traumatic memories, and **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**, which includes exposure therapy, psychoeducation and skill-building, are basic therapeutic skills.

Finding a therapist who has the basic skills and who is open and willing to learning the basics about emetophobia is possible.

Here are some tips to help you find the right therapist.

- Anxiety disorders clinics using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, that treat Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), other phobias, health anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and are experienced with exposure-based therapies, will be able to treat emetophobia.

- Anxiety disorders clinics with well-established, reputable therapists with these treatment skills are often found in hospital or university settings.
- If you use a private-practice therapist, make sure they are a cognitive-behavioral therapist and specialize in only anxiety disorders. (You may want to check the provider list at <http://ocfoundation.org> or other anxiety disorders organizations and then interview potential therapists carefully.)

It is not advisable to see a generalist who does not specialize in anxiety or a psychodynamic (talk) therapist.

Helpful Resources for Your Therapist

Once you identify an appropriate therapist, if they are not familiar with emetophobia, refer them to the following article by Dr. David Veal:

Veal, D. (2009). Cognitive behaviour therapy for a specific phobia of vomiting. *The Cognitive Behaviour Therapist*, 2, 272-288. Available at <http://www.veale.co.uk/>

Additional information for your therapist can be found at:

<http://www.veale.co.uk/resources-support/public-information/vomit-phobia/>
<http://www.emetophobiahelp.org/>
<http://www.emetophobiahelp.org/therapist-list.html>

These information sources will help them adapt their already-present skills to treat emetophobia. You may also give the therapist a copy of this special report.

Lori Riddle-Walker, EdD, MFT
Escondido, California
vphobia.com