

Superhero movie could cure arachnophobia

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Movie superheroes Spider-Man and Ant-man can help people conquer their fear of creepy crawlies.

Seeing the superheroes on the screen for just seven seconds can help reduce symptoms of insect phobia and arachnophobia, according to new research. The finding may lead to the films being used to treat those who suffer from the extreme and irrational sense of danger.

Showing clips of Spider-Man was more effective at curing arachnophobia than film of real spiders, reducing people's fear of spiders by 20 per cent. The idea of treating phobias by exposing sufferers to the same thing that triggers the fear — called exposure therapy — has been studied before but never using fictional characters.

In the study, 424 people with relevant phobias were split into two groups, with one group shown a video with scenes from the Spider-Man and Ant-Man movies. The other group — called the control group — only saw the Marvel opening credits along with film of actual ants and spiders.

Professor Menachem Ben-Ezra, of Ariel University in Israel, said the results could lead to treatment to help people get over their phobias in a way that didn't make them feel frightened or embarrassed.

“Reduction in phobic symptoms was significant in the Spider-Man and Ant-Man group in comparison to the control group,” he said. “Seven-second exposure to insect-specific stimuli within a positive context reduces the level of phobic symptoms.

People with ant phobia (myrmecophobia), also benefited from watching seven seconds of Ant-Man. The researchers explained that in exposure therapy people with phobias are gradually exposed to the thing they fear until they eventually stop fearing it. They believe this is the first time treatment using fictional characters has been tried.

Prof Ben-Ezra said the results suggest a fun film may be a very powerful tool against phobias as people will be more willing to complete the treatment and can do it at home, just by watching a film.

The researchers are planning to broaden their research to use these and other superhero films to treat problems such as nightmares and depression linked to upsetting things people have experienced in the past.

PHOBIAS

It's believed insect and spider phobias evolved when our early ancestors lived in nature alongside deadly insects. Those who stayed away from deadly creatures were more likely to stay healthy and alive. This is an example of natural selection, which is how plant and animal species evolve over thousands of years to survive in their environment.

Phobias, however, are not helpful as they are an extreme and irrational fear, which means the sufferer is very frightened when there is no actual danger.

<https://www.kidsnews.com.au/health/scientists-discover-superhero-movies-are-a-cure-for-phobias-of-spiders-and-ants/news-story/e618f48de3c6a0042f575b3d7e3f613d>