



peak district

ENGLAND

Emily-Jane Cave faces her fear of heights on a course designed to combat acrophobia at Stanage Edge, Derbyshire

WHERE: Bamford and Stanage Edge, the Peak District

WHAT: Fear of heights course

HOW LONG: One or two days

DIFFICULTY: Stay positive!

LOOK OUT FOR: Strange head-tapping techniques, fellow acrophobics and the ability to surprise yourself



Vistas, views, breath-taking scenery... whatever you call them, it's often the promise of a stunning natural spectacle that spurs adventurers on to new heights; that and the satisfaction of reaching a tricky vantage point. But what if the climb or hike isn't your only challenge?

As a kid, I never had a problem with heights. In fact I'd go as far as to say I loved them. If there was a tree within 50 metres, I was like a rat up a drainpipe. I'm not sure when this all changed, but as I got older I became increasingly uncomfortable at height. Not only that but I was anxious watching other people high up. My stomach would flip, my palms would get sweaty and all logic would give way to a sickening, crippling dread that drove me to act like a nutter in public.

Big glass shopping centres were among the worst offenders, with their perilous see-through escalators and bottomless drops. Then there was the incident up the Stratosphere, 350m over the Las Vegas strip. The clincher, though, came in February when I had a full-on meltdown in a bubble lift in Courchevel. Having never skied before, I had no idea my acrophobia would be an issue, but hanging off the side of a mountain, it got me good and proper, turning me into a screaming, snivelling five-year-old in front of a bunch of strangers.

I loved skiing, but hated being up in the lifts and mountains. Determined not to let this ruin a second season of snow sports, I signed myself up to Will 4 Adventure's Overcome Your Fear of Heights course in the Peak District, run by outdoor guru Will Legon.

Saturday morning dawned sunny as I met my group of nine fellow acrophobes at the Bamford Institute – basically the village hall. As with most phobias, fear of heights is rooted in the mind, so we began tackling ours with Brian McHugh, an expert in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Emotion Freedom Technique (EFT). There's not enough space in this magazine, let alone these two pages, to go into what NLP is and does, so let's just say on a basic level it uses a variety of therapeutic techniques that work with a subject's subconscious to establish a new relationship with the thing that's troubling them.

First off, Brian taught us a deep-breathing exercise, to help us all relax. We then spent the next four hours working on a variety of mental exercises using a memory of being in a stressful situation at height. I went with my Courchevel-bubble experience.

Part of the NLP process involved scoring the recollection of our chosen experience from 1-10, as in, 'on a scale of 1-10, how frightening is it thinking about it now?' Mine was a 15, I decided. We then continued to score how scary our experience felt after each mental task, and for everyone in the group, this figure dropped with each round of exercises. By the end of the session some people even rated their experience as 0.

We then tried some EFT, which involves tapping various places on the body where there are a lot of nerve endings, like the temples and chin, while repeating certain phrases. The technique is rooted in eastern medicine and works on smoothing energy channels in the body that have suffered disruption from negative experiences. If all this sounds like mumbo-jumbo, you're not alone, but whether you believe it or not, it works.

Now it was time to put our therapies to the test! Abseiling was our first challenge. After practising lowering ourselves down a steep slope, we were presented with a four-metre drop off a narrow ledge. This was OK, and aside from leaning back into nothing, well within my comfort zone. Next up was the biggie: a 15m drop into a quarry. This made my bum pucker and my legs shake a bit, but my reaction

was nothing like as vehement as it would usually have been. After my second abseil I was beginning to enjoy myself and by the third, the challenge wasn't the length of the drop but how to negotiate it with something like style and panache.

Day-two was an introduction to climbing, designed to reinforce what we'd already achieved. Stanage Edge was our destination, and after practising some basic techniques, like smearing, on low boulders, our first climb was about five metres. Although not high, it was good opportunity to try out our new skills. I loved the challenge of getting to the top and felt a bit of the old tree-climbing chimp in me emerge. I was hungry for a bigger rock.

This came in the form of Martello Cracks, a well-known climb, graded medium. Will first showed us the climb from the top, and looking down, the view made my stomach flip. I didn't freak out, though. So far so good. My first attempt at getting to the top was a scrabble, but I did it, shaking a bit as I hauled my traumatised carcass over the ledge. On second glance, the drop down didn't seem that bad and safely secured to a boulder I even managed to sit on the edge.



Emily hitting new heights

Ever the perfectionist, though, I wanted another crack at Martello. This time I was able to make better choices about where to put my hands and feet; I actually felt quite calm as I reached the top and a victory pause to take in the view confirmed this. I was sad it was my last climb of the weekend and I'm planning to book myself on to the Will 4 Adventure Introduction to Rock Climbing course. Courchevel, here I come! ■

need more info?

» ACROPHOBIA

Acrophobia is an extreme, irrational fear of heights. Although a certain respect of heights is healthy, acrophobics find their fear of heights debilitating as it can limit everyday activities and even begin to control people's lives. Acrophobia can develop as a result of a negative first-hand experience at height, or as a learnt behaviour passed on from a parent to a child. A fear of heights is often wrongly known as vertigo – vertigo is actually the sensation that everything around you is spinning or moving, regardless of whether you are at height.

» GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Will 4 Adventure's Get Over Your Fear of Heights courses are run in at Stanage Edge, near Hathersage, in the Peak District. NLP sessions take place at the Bamford Institute (basically a village hall), in the village of Bamford. The nearest train stations are Bamford, Hathersage and Hope. Having your own transport is a bonus as there's some driving involved on the course, but friendly fellow attendees are bound to offer you a lift if you get stuck.

» STAY THERE

Causeway House (www.causewayhouse.co.uk, 01433 623 291) is like discovering a second home you never knew you had. Staying with Janet (your mum with a lovely South African accent) and Nick (cooks a mean full-English breakfast), it's in the lovely village of Castleton, Derbyshire, where there are pubs aplenty. A single room with wi-fi, a TV and a shared bathroom can be had for £35 a night and if you're planning on travelling solo, I thoroughly recommend this option as you won't feel lonely for long.

If you plan on doing the course in the summer months, the area offers a multitude of great camping spots, with Pindale Farm (www.pindalefarm.co.uk, 01433 620 111) being the most convenient. As well as camping the centre offers self-catered accommodation for groups of up to 12 in its converted barns, and B&B facilities too. Camping costs from £7 per person per night.

» EAT THERE

You'll be spoilt for choice as far as decent pub grub in the evenings goes, but you'll need to make your own packed lunch to take with you on the course.

» WILL 4 ADVENTURE

Run by outdoor guru Will Legon, the company offers a variety of outdoor skills courses in the Peak District and abroad, covering everything from climbing and scrambling to hill walking, navigation and first aid. The Get Over Your Fear of Heights course is a one- or two-day course that runs on various weekends throughout the year. Prices start from £150 and private bookings are also available. For dates, more information or to book your place, see www.will4adventure.com, or call 07791 860163.