



Don't let an irrational fear stop you climbing

# FACING THE FEAR

Lots of would-be climbers are put off by their fear of heights but can they be 'cured'? **Lissa Cook** does look down...

**W**hat's the best route?' I screamed, panic rising. My palms were sweating, my heart was racing and my breathing was shallow. The mountains on either side heightened my sense of exposure. I didn't dare glance down at my husband below me, but nor could I see a clear way through the rocks to the safety of the ledge above.

No, this wasn't a daring ascent of El Capitan. It was a gloriously sunny, early spring walk with our dog up one of England's most popular Lakeland hills, Kirk Fell. A well-trodden, grassy slope with an easy rock scramble towards the top. Yes, it was steep but there were no ridges, cliffs, or edges. The elderly lady who I'd been shouting at for directions must have thought I was mad as I threw myself flat on the grassy summit making maximum body-to-ground contact like a limpet doing an impression of a starfish.

So it was ironic that my friend (and good climber) Matt Heason asked me to do the PR for the Cliffhanger outdoor pursuits festival and the

Sheffield Adventure Film Festival. When he tweeted that he'd hired a PR girl with vertigo, Will Legon from Sheffield-based Will4Adventure suggested I go on one of his Overcome Your Fear of Heights courses. I'd put it to the back of my mind for six months, but by the week before I was a tearful bag of nerves.

I was sceptical whether the mix of a classroom based session of Neuro-Linguistic Programming and outdoors lessons in abseiling and rock-climbing could conquer a lifetime of fear. I knew it wasn't rational; I'd panicked on the scree slopes of England's highest peak, Scafell Pike, but I'd also frozen on a six foot boulder on the way to a secluded cove in Ibiza as pensioners in flip-flops carrying cans of beer in plastic bags skipped past.

What's worse, I'm married to an adventure sports writer who's climbed the likes of Mont Blanc and Mt Toubkal. He saw every holiday as an opportunity to 'cure' me by pushing me beyond my limits and forcing me to confront my fears. As I'm competitive and stubborn, most of our holidays



# Training Days



Understanding how the gear works helps your confidence



First climb completed: next stop, El Cap

## Further info/contacts

Will Legon runs regular weekend 'Overcoming Your Fear of Heights' (£150 for one day or £200 for two days). He also organises a range of adventure holidays and walking weekends throughout the UK and abroad, as well as first aid training. [www.will4adventure.com](http://www.will4adventure.com)

Brian McHugh runs counselling sessions using NLP techniques from his practice in Glossop in Derbyshire. [www.ai-coachingandconsultancy.co.uk](http://www.ai-coachingandconsultancy.co.uk)

have ended with me in tears having a tantrum.

But for once I wasn't alone. There were six others on the course – all keen hillwalkers who were fed up with being pushed or pitied by well-meaning friends and family. There was none of the normal friendly banter you normally get when a group of outdoorsy types get together on a beautiful sunny weekend in the Peak District. We were all tongue-tied with anxiety as NLP specialist Brian McHugh cheerfully made a brew.

## IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOUR

We started by recounting our worst experiences – Catherine's was the classic lemming-like desire to throw herself off the white cliffs of Dover; Sue's was an exposure shock as the fog suddenly lifted on a ridge walk; Alison had flipped out up a tower on a tourist trip to Heidelberg as a teenager and Andrew had had a bad experience on Snowdon that he seemed reluctant to talk about.

The common theme was that we were all keen walkers who were fed up with having to compromise on days out in the hills. Scout-leader Michael was sick of having to plan 'safe' routes and 60-year old Maureen summed it up – she was tired of feeling 'unreliably erratic'. The tipping point for her was a recent walk with her daughter where there was only one route in the hills surrounding Glasgow that she dared set out on. Too often our love of the countryside was spoilt by crippling and embarrassing fear.

Brian reassured us that we were perfectly normal. We were simply experiencing the present as if it were the past and our anxiety was compounded by the dread of it happening again. He explained that NLP helps break the link between that reaction to previous experiences. It's not brain-washing, but more akin to teaching you to be able to overwrite your own hard-drive or 'rewrite the film-script' of your life story.

After the morning's exercises I was so exhausted I could have curled up and gone to sleep. I couldn't stop yawning – apparently a natural reaction to stress. But I felt calm for the first time all week, and by the time we met Will at Lawrence Field Quarry above Hathersage I was buzzing. For the first time in my life I looked at climbers with detached interest. The old me would have wanted to shout 'Get down from there!' I was even relaxed about testing out the abseil James had rigged up on a gentle slope to familiarise us with the kit.

## MOMENT OF TRUTH

I was still nervous as I stepped backwards off the 15 foot abseil wall Will had roped up, but I wasn't paralysed with fear – I was able to listen to his instructions and even to smile for the camera.

Later that afternoon we graduated to a 50 foot quarry wall. As I tipped myself backwards off the top



## TOP TIPS

for fear of heights

of the cliff face the nerves returned. Perhaps I'd been over-confident? But after a chat with Brian I realised that it was not fully understanding how the belay device worked that was bothering me. Once I realised that if I let go I wasn't going to plummet to my death I was able to rationalise my fears and step off the ledge.

The next day on Stanage was a revelation. James and Will taught us how to transfer our weight and use the gritstone for friction to climb with ease. But the ultimate challenge remained - a 50 foot high rock face. Andrew and Michael made confident ascents but three of the group didn't feel they were ready to tackle it yet. That left Maureen and me. I hoisted bum up onto the first ledge and stood up. Though I wasn't nervous, I had a mental block. How could I haul myself up? What would happen if I fell off? I asked James to let me deliberately drop off to convince myself the rope would hold. It did. But my nerve didn't. I took a breather and cheered on Maureen as she made a confident first climb.

## MORAL SUPPORT

Thoughtful friends were texting to see how I was getting on, then Matt and his wife Sophie and their two little boys arrived to take photographs. The natural show-off in me kicked in. Sophie assured me it was well within my capabilities - a 'leg climb' that would be easy for a strong runner like me.

It was a novel, exhilarating feeling being 30 foot up and still being able to look down to talk to James and to check my footing. The old me would have been hyperventilating, clinging on for dear life to the rope. It wasn't that I wasn't scared - simply that I was able to think clearly. With adrenaline coursing through me I was overjoyed and hugely relieved to 'top out' on my first summit. I grabbed hold of Will as I got to the top. I'd done it. And then I did it again and actually *enjoyed* it.

In retrospect I wonder if the course title 'Overcoming Your Fear of Heights' isn't a misnomer. Fear is a natural and sensible reaction to being high above the ground. What the course has done is transform the way I see the world. Grasping the simple concept that gravity works downwards holding you to the ground, not diagonally pushing you forwards is a revelation. It's removed the dread that used to escalate to panic. My fell running's improved. I'm still wary but I'm confident of my capabilities. Unexpectedly I feel calmer and more in control about other pressures like work. And I've already booked my a rock climbing course and asked for rock shoes for my birthday.

If, like me, you've always wanted to climb but have been put off by 'the fear' then confronting your fears like I've done could be the best thing you've ever done. After all, why shouldn't you enjoy the unique pleasures of climbing like everyone else? **TMM**

**1** Don't avoid the problem. It generally won't go away on its own. The ideal is to have an initial session (or sessions) with a therapist to resolve the underlying cause then test yourself in situ with an experienced climber.

**2** You can also use visualisation techniques to prepare for a climb you're worried about. Imagine yourself successfully completing a task, getting as much detail into it as possible. Step into the vision of yourself and *feel* how good it is to go through the task confidently. When you feel your most confident during the visualisation, press your thumb and middle finger together. This creates an anchor/trigger. Repeat this process ten times. When you are in the real situation and feel afraid press the fingers together again and you will get a rush of confidence.

**3** If on the crag and you get a panic attack it's important to calm your mind. Clarity of thought allows for good decisions. Practise breathing before going on a climb. Close your eyes, breathe in slowly and deeply through nose and exhale through mouth. Concentrate on counting these rounds of breath up to a count of 5 or 7 then start back at one again. Give yourself five minutes to relax your body, via your breathing, and the mind will follow.



You can then decide whether to continue or head back. You can use this in conjunction with Tip 2 to develop temporary calm and confidence.

**4** Take responsibility for yourself. Don't be coerced into doing a walk or climb that you are not sure about or that you know you do not have the skill level to deal with.

**5** Attend a formal climbing course to get the practical skills that will give you added confidence. Be sure the course is not one that *forces* you to do anything you are not emotionally equipped to deal with. Gung-ho tactics will usually reinforce your fear.

## Vertigo vs fear of heights?

NLP expert, Brian McHugh explains the difference between vertigo and a fear of heights, also known as acrophobia. "The majority of vertigo experiences are the result of physical symptoms as opposed to emotional responses. Vertigo tends to be caused by problems with the inner ear and can usually be resolved via medical intervention. A fear of heights needs to be dealt with at an emotional level initially and the results tested in a real situation preferably."