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PHIDIPHOBIA AND OPHIDIPHOBES

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Everyone who wants or has a snake has, at some time or another, encountered someone who is ophidiphobic - afraid of snakes. One of the key things to understand is that fear and loathing of snakes is usually a totally irrational fear. The times it is not totally irrational are those times where there is some basis for the fear, but the fear has expanded beyond all proportion to the causative incident.

First, never, ever belittle anyone, adult or child, for his or her fears. We all fear something at sometime, and fears, once ingrained, will not be changed by chiding or teasing. Find out why the person is afraid of snakes. From talking to many people who are afraid of snakes, I have found that most started fearing snakes as a result of one of the following events:

- Someone shoved a snake into their face or into their clothing, often when they were very young (since boys are more likely to shove snakes at girls or down a girl's shirt, it confuses me as to why these girls grow into women who hate snakes instead of men...).
- The person had a scary (to them) experience with a snake, such as getting bitten, or seeing someone freak out after being bitten.
- Their parent(s) was morbidly afraid of snakes and drilled into them that snakes were dangerous. (Parents or other authority figures respected by the child who jerk the child away from even controlled, neutral encounters with an educator holding a snake, nonverbally tells that child that all snakes are scary and dangerous.)
- Catholic upbringing. (I have a friend who keeps visualizing one of the saints cards she had as a child of the Virgin Mary pounding on snakes with a staff - she doesn't even remember what the card was trying to portray, just that snakes "must" be evil. She has since come around. Sort of.)

- Completely irrational fear (one person I know became afraid after seeing the B (or was it a C?!) movie Hssssss when a kid).

If I can, I try to start with a small albino (amelanistic and anerythristic), with a preference for corns. The size is not threatening, and it is so different looking from any image of a snake that the person has in their head or seen in movies or tabloid television shows that it makes it a little easier for the person to look at it. If I don't have such a snake on hand, or am already holding another snake, I just work with what I have.

The reason for finding out what triggered the original fear is to try to address the fear by talking about it a bit. Ask them what it is specifically about snakes that bothers them. While you are going through this stage, let them see you handling the snake, letting it move around in your hands, see you pet it or gently manipulate it as you both try to get more comfortable. Keep the whole snake as much in the open as possible, however, so the person doesn't get nervous about the parts he can't see.

Some people raise objections to touching snakes for reasons which have no basis in reality. Address those objections quietly and reasonably as you try to focus their attention on the parts of the body discussed, the snakes markings, etc.:

- They're slimy. Gently stroke the snake, asking them to look carefully at the section of skin you are stroking. Explain in a somewhat perfunctory fashion that, since snakes live in trees and on the ground, they would get all covered with leaf litter and dirt and bits of decomposing animal if their skin was slimy. [Ignore for the moment frogs. Your ophidiphobe is certainly not thinking about them!] Snake skin is therefore very dry. The scales on different snakes may be different depending upon the environment the snake lives in. Some have





small soft scales, some have larger ones. Some have large slightly overlapping scales, some have scales that are keeled like the bottom of a ship. Explain that, especially after they shed their skin, snakes often have an iridescent gleam to their skin, which sometimes makes people think that their skins are wet, or slimy. Also explain that since snakes are cold blooded, when they are cold, their skins are cold, and may at first feel wet to someone who is giving them a quick touch with a warm finger.

- They don't blink. Ask them to look at the eyes. If it is a boa or similar snake, point out how the color of the skin continues through the eye itself to help perfect the animal's ability to camouflage itself. While they are looking at the eye, let them know that when, about 120 million years ago, certain species of lizards began to live exclusively underground, not only did they lose their legs, but they lost their eyes as well; at most, they had just a vestigial remains of an eye in the form of a darkened scale. When environmental conditions or whatever it was changed, and these snakes (the former lizards) began to spend more time at the surface, they re-evolved their eyes. But, unlike amphibians, lizards or turtle/tortoises who spend most of their time above ground, snakes still spent much of their time underground, and so needed to protect their emerging eyes. One way they did this was to fuse the upper and lower lids together, forming a sort of hard lens, like a contact lens. At the same time, the eyelid skin became more and more translucent, until finally it was completely transparent.
- In the many of the mammals, a dead-on stare is an aggressive behavior, one engaged in when trying to make a competitor to go away, or to establish the individual's place in the group's hierarchy (wolves, for example, and cats). We are not so far away from our own ancestral forms that we do not react to being stared at. But the snake really isn't

staring - he can't close his eyes. He even has to sleep with his eyes open. This doesn't mean that they are looking around them all the time, even when asleep. Even though a sleeping snake may have one or both eyes facing you, you can still scare the bejeezus out of them if they don't "hear" you coming! (Which is how I think a lot of off-trail hikers get bit.)

- It's trying to sting me with its tongue They are, of course smelling with their tongue. Most animals rely on their Jacobson's (vomeronasal) organ to sort out chemical reception, not their nasal passages; man is about the only mammal who has lost the use of this highly specialized organ. The J.O. is in the roof of the animal's mouth, where the soft palate would be in humans. The tongue is filled with microscopic receptors—picture them as tiny pits in different shapes. Each type of shape can receive only one kind of chemical; many chemicals may go into the making of a single odor (think about how complex an odor the skunk spray is). The tongue is pushed out through a small specialized opening in the snakes "lips" and waves it around in the air (the flicking), capturing chemicals in the tongue's receptors. The tongue is then whisked inside the mouth and the forked tip is stuck into the opening to the Jacobson's organ. While the organ goes to work making sense out of the first batch of chemical receptors delivered, the tongue goes back to work again. The amount and frequency of tongue flicking is in direct proportion to changes in the snakes environment - new people, new place, etc. In the mean time, the Jacobson's organ is transmitting information to the brain. This information, plus the information from the infrared sensors (which may be visible as pits or lateral openings in some snake's faces) and their limited vision (can see some color; the degree of acuity varies depending upon the type of snake, with arboreal bird eaters having the best vision) all

help the snake to "see" what is going on around it. Kind of like Geordi's visor [for you non-Trekker's out there, that's Commander Geordi LaForge of the Starship Enterprise].

- All snakes are poisonous. Well, actually, no snake is poisonous. There are, however, some venomous snakes. The poisoning of a predator is a passive act on the part of the prey (and plants, too, are prey). Venom, however, is transmitted by the direct action on the part of the predator. There are only about 20 types of venomous snakes in the U.S., out of over 110 species. More people die each year from bee stings than die from being bit by rattle and other venomous snakes. But all other snakes are not venomous. If they bite, it's like being grabbed by a bunch of fish hooks (and probably cleaner because the snakes teeth aren't all full of fish and worm guts). But snakes will only bite when very disturbed (such as when they are being mishandled, or some before earthquakes or major storms) or when they smell warm prey. So, as long as you don't hassle the snake (do let it get comfortable in your hands or lap; don't pull on it's tail; don't try to force the head to go somewhere it doesn't want to go - just be steady and gentle) it won't be thinking about biting you.
- Where do snakes, uhm, "do it?" This isn't exactly in the "why people are fearful" category but it does seem to preoccupy many such people when they start focusing on a snake as an potentially innocuous animal rather than a scary beast. Show the vent. Everyone is secretly curious about where snakes "do it" - go poop (many people are surprised that they do!), where they mate and where babies come from. If it is a male, show how you can tell (length of the tail; hemipenal bulge; large spurs). If female, show how you can tell. Do let them know that, while most snakes lay eggs and leave, some lay eggs and stick around to protect them (pythons, gaboons vipers), while others actually have live babies.

By this time, the person should be pretty well relaxed and interested, if still a bit leery. You will, of course, have answered any questions they might have asked. If you see, during the course of your discussion, that there is some breaking through of the fear (if you are a good observer of people, you can usually tell when someone has decided that maybe they do have enough nerve to reach out and touch the snake with a single finger tip), ask if they would like to touch. Tell them that you will control the head if that will help. Ask them if they would feel better just touching the tail. Be neutral when giving the options: to someone who has spent a good portion of their life terrified of snakes, briefly touching a pinkie to a tail is a major accomplishment. Be encouraging, but not overwhelming, praise any change of mind, and let them know they are welcome to come back again and talk or look some more if they like.

And that's about it. At this point, the person is either touching or holding the snake, or they've asked for me to place it around their neck. If I do it around the neck, I drape it down the back a bit, with the rest of the body over the shoulders, explaining that that gives the snake's body better support, and so they will both feel more comfortable. If someone holds it and I see that they are shaky, or getting nervous as the snake starts constricting around their arm because it is feeling the person shake, I tell the person that the snake can feel the nervousness, and is just trying to get a better grip so it won't fall.

If the person still can't touch or hold the snake, they are still now more comfortable with the whole idea of snakes, having met one as an individual, then they were before they started talking to you (or, you to them). That is why I think it is important to have a snake present when working with someone (well, someone unlike my aunt, who requires tranquilizers just to be able to look at the word "snake" printed on a piece of paper!)



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I have been at all day education events where it has taken some people three or more hours, and several returns to my exhibit area, before they were actually able to touch or hold a snake. I've even received phone calls days, weeks, even months, later from people who were still too afraid at the event but who later were able to build upon what they learned and observed and were thus able to bring themselves to touch or hold a snake, some even going on to become wonderful and caring snake keepers themselves.

Once you have converted someone like a spouse or parent, it may still take some time, however, before the converted person is truly comfortable with a snake around, and s/he may never become more than just tolerant of its presence under the same roof. Keep that in mind if you are thinking you can get out of town for weekend or summer, leaving the snake in their care!

