

# Frozen at the wheel

> Here are some ways to overcome driving anxiety

Empowering  
your life

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**D**RIVING anxiety is a common form of anxiety that ranges in severity from a hesitation to drive, to a total refusal to drive at all, in which case it becomes 'driving phobia'.

A phobia is a fear that is paralysing but irrational. Driving phobia is a form of agoraphobia, defined as the fear of open spaces. But what people really fear is the loss of control.

People with a driving phobia fear getting trapped in a traffic jam and being unable to escape. Likewise, they also fear passing out, losing control of the vehicle, throwing up or getting into an accident.

For many, driving next to big trucks can be nerve-racking, as is merging on the highway or driving in the fast lane.

Symptoms of driving anxiety or phobia are similar to those of most other forms of anxiety: heart palpitations, perspiring and sweaty palms, disorientation, confusion, dizziness, dry mouth and shortness of breath.

This is the classic "fight or flight response".

Obviously, this can seriously impact a person's ability to function on a daily basis if they need to drive to work or drive for a living, especially here in Malaysia.

Driving anxiety can start in many ways. Usually, a person has experienced either a car accident or a "close call", and that memory is still causing the subconscious mind to be "protective".

If you are a person that is prone to anxiety or fear, then driving may be one activity that triggers it. Also, low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) can cause anxiety which can become associated with driving, especially for those with family histories of diabetes or hypoglycemia.

Driving anxiety can turn into a phobia though avoidance. If you have a fear of driving and you decide to stop altogether, it



can become a full-blown phobia.

The good news is, fear of driving is a learned behaviour, so you can learn how to overcome it. Here are some tips to help you get back on the road feeling safe, comfortable and confident.

### ▶ Avoid driving on an empty stomach

Pay attention to how you feel after eating certain foods, especially those high in sugar or simple carbohydrates (bread, pastries, soft drinks).

Drinking alcohol the night before can also trigger blood sugar imbalances. Also, if you are driving while sleep deprived, you are asking for trouble.

### ▶ Consider car pooling

If you engage in conversation, you are less likely to think anxious thoughts. But think this one over carefully, as some people are more distracted talking while driving.

### ▶ Manage your stress

A common cause for anxiety is extended periods of overwhelming stress.

Do what you can to lower your stress level such as exercise, taking more breaks, meditation, yoga, etc.

### ▶ Use affirmations

Write down with a pen some positive affirmation about your ability to drive calm, comfortable and relaxed.

For example: "I'm calm, comfortable and relaxed while

driving and enjoying listening to music (the radio, audio books)"

Read them right before you go to bed and right after you wake up. Say them out loud and imagine yourself driving while feeling calm and relaxed.

Don't underestimate the power of this simple exercise.

### ▶ Desensitisation

This is a therapeutic technique to help you become more comfortable with what is fearful. It involves taking small steps to put yourself in situations that trigger anxiety.

For example, if you can't even drive your car, then you might start by sitting in the parked car with the engine on but not moving. Do that until you do not feel anxious.

Then slowly drive around the block. If you feel anxiety, just pull over until it goes away, then continue driving.

Remember, it is your reaction to the feeling of anxiety that can make it manageable or not.

Instead of fighting anxiety, just allow it to be. Take deep breaths and try to remain in the present moment.

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