

# For those with phobia, the Tappan Zee Bridge is a monster to cross

Many drivers joke that they fear driving over the Tappan Zee Bridge, but there are some Lower Hudson Valley residents literally afraid of making the trip.

Their fear of bridges is among the more common phobias, along with the fear of confined spaces or heights, clinical psychologist Christine Ziegler said.

"The Tappan Zee has a special fear associated with it because it's so long and it has no shoulders," said Ziegler, who is the director of the Hudson Valley Center for Cognitive Therapy in Upper Nyack.

A couple of months ago, nearly a third of the 15 people attending a phobia support group at the Anxiety and Phobia Treatment Center at White Plains Hospital reported a bridge phobia, specifically a fear of the Tappan Zee Bridge.

Lots of people sometimes get

jittery when driving over a bridge, even a familiar one. But someone with a panic disorder — those who experience repeated panic attacks, physical symptoms similar to a heart attack, and the belief that they will occur again — changes their behavior for fear of what might happen to them. They might have their spouse drive over the bridge or take the long way to avoid crossing it.

There are even more extreme examples.

Louis Dargin moved to Clifton, N.J., from Detroit about a year ago. He brought his 10-year-old bridge phobia with him, and has continued to experience intense fear, a racing heart, erratic breathing, muscle tension and the overwhelmingly sense of losing control as he navigates the region.

"I just have this feeling that the



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car is going to swerve away," said Dargin, who is 64 years old. "That I'm going to lose control, maybe sail off the side of the bridge."

People who suffer from phobias have a "fear of fear, a fear of being anxious," Ziegler said. Their anxiety plays out "like a movie going through their minds," she said.

Often, the issue isn't the bridge itself. It's the perception of being in a place that's seen as threatening or dangerous, or from which there's no escape. So a person who has a panic attack on a bridge

associates the bridge as the cause.

Ziegler said there has been a notable increase in people reporting panic attacks and panic disorders since the 9/11 attacks.

Last August, Dargin had to pick up his wife from John F. Kennedy International Airport. To get there, he had to cross the George Washington Bridge. He couldn't.

"I just hung around Fort Lee for a while," Dargin said of his two-hour drive in the New Jersey borough.

Dargin tried to find a taxi to take him to the airport. Finally, he said, he got so angry at himself, he just drove over the bridge.

Like others with bridge phobia, Dargin maps out his routes carefully. He checks the Internet for pictures of bridges he'll have to cross, methodically calculating if he'll be able to do it.

## Where to get help

**Anxiety & Phobia Treatment Center at White Plains Hospital**

914-681-1038

E-mail: [questions@phobia-anxiety.org](mailto:questions@phobia-anxiety.org)

[www.phobia-anxiety.org](http://www.phobia-anxiety.org)

**Hudson Valley Center for Cognitive Therapy in Upper Nyack**

845-353-3399, Ext. 12

E-mail: [info@hvcct.com](mailto:info@hvcct.com)

[www.hvcct.com](http://www.hvcct.com)

How long is the bridge, he wonders. How high is the railing? How steep is the span's incline?

Dargin also belongs to an online support group on Google.

His biggest nemesis is the Delaware Memorial Bridge — the world's longest twin suspension bridge, at 3,650 feet — which connects New Jersey and Delaware.

When his wife needed to go to a job fair in Maryland, Dargin debated whether to travel by car. Since his wife doesn't drive, crossing the bridge would fall on him.

"We ended up taking the bus," Dargin said, costing the couple \$92, more than if they drove.

Ziegler uses cognitive behavioral therapy to help people get over their phobias. Goal-directed and short-term, the therapy helps people change their thinking and behavior by progressively exposing themselves to what they fear.

"Once you're not afraid of the fear, the monster doesn't have teeth anymore," Ziegler said.

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For example, she might have a patient with a strong bridge phobia first drive the causeway over Lake DeForest in Congers with her in the car, then by themselves. They might eventually graduate to crossing the Bear Mountain Bridge, which is short and flat, then too longer bridges.

"If you face the fear, over time you desensitize yourself to it," Ziegler said of such repeated exposure. The technique, which lasts about three months, has a 70 percent to 80 percent success rate,

she said.

"Anxiety is all about tolerating some degree of uncertainty," Ziegler said.

In the event a panic attack does strike as you're approaching the Tappan Zee Bridge, fear not.

The state Thruway Authority will dispatch one of its workers to drive your car over the bridge.

Getting There runs on Wednesdays. Reach Khurram Saeed with your ideas or comments at [ksaeed@lohud.com](mailto:ksaeed@lohud.com) or 845-578-2412.