

Disclaimer

This guide is intended to support individuals experiencing fear or anxiety related to swallowing or choking. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you're having difficulty swallowing or have concerns about your health, please consult a healthcare professional.

The information in this guide is based on lived experience and personal healing, not medical expertise. Always prioritize your well-being and reach out to a doctor or therapist for guidance if needed.

A Guide to Overcoming Phagophobia and Pseudodysphagia: Conquering the Fear of Swallowing and Choking, Steps Toward Healing

(These are not rules. They're gentle invitations. Go at your pace.)

Step 1: Start small.

This isn't something you can "fix" overnight, and that's okay. Healing from the fear of swallowing or choking will take many steps. Some will feel messy. Some will feel hopeful. But every single one counts.

Step 2: Accept that this takes time.

You don't need to rush. You don't need to "get over it." You just need to stay with yourself. The panic that comes from believing "this will never end" is a fear loop, and letting go of that belief, even just for a moment, is the very first step toward healing.

Step 3: Say it out loud, this is not forever!

When we believe this Phobia is permanent, it makes everything feel heavier. But the truth is: This can and will go away.

How do I know?

Because I've been there. I lived with this fear for 3 years. And while my healing took time, I now see that it could've happened sooner, if I'd known then what I know now. That's why I'm sharing this with you. So maybe your journey doesn't have to feel as long or as lonely.

Step 4: Relax — seriously!

I know this might sound obvious but hear me out:

Around 80% of this fear comes from your overall state of being. When you're constantly on edge and stuck in a stress response, your body stays tense, and ironically, the area that gets hit the hardest is your **throat**

Think about it, you've probably heard people say: "I feel choked up." "There's a lump in my throat." Those aren't just sayings. They come from real body responses. When we're scared, anxious, or sad, the throat muscles tense. That tension alone can make swallowing feel strange, tight, or even scary, which then feeds the fear even more.

If you're trying to heal while still holding that tension in your body, especially in your throat, it's like trying to run with the brakes on. Come back to calm. Even if it's just for a few seconds. Even if it feels impossible. Breathing slowly, stretching, humming softly, placing a hand on your chest, these small acts of relaxation are not optional. They're essential.

Step 5: Make meditation your medicine.

If there's one tool that can help rewire your fear from the inside out, it's meditation. And no, it doesn't have to be perfect, or even quiet. You just must show up.

Even if it's just 10 minutes, or try it multiple times a day, meditation is like a reset button for your nervous system. Every time you sit, breathe, and let your body not be in panic mode, you're showing your brain: "Hey, we're safe here." You don't have to feel "zen." You don't have to stop your thoughts. You just must be willing. Because this recovery? It's your full-time job. Your peace, your healing, your body, they come first now. And the more you treat your healing like the priority it is, the more things begin to shift.

You are worth that time. That care. That dedication.

Step 6: Check your body, too.

Healing isn't just about mindset, it's also about making sure your body is supported. Sometimes, fear around swallowing or sensations in your throat can be linked to physical conditions that mimic or intensify anxiety.

Take acid reflux (GERD) for example. It can cause:

- A lump-in-the-throat feeling (globus sensation)
- Throat tightness or soreness
- Nausea or discomfort that increases your anxiety

Even an upset stomach or poor digestion can trigger anxiety through the gut-brain connection. And don't underestimate hormones, imbalances can increase stress sensitivity, fear responses, and even heighten physical symptoms that make the fear feel worse.

So, this step is all about being kind and curious with your body.

Ask: "Is there something physical that might be contributing to this?"

Talk to your doctor. Explore gentle gut health support. Look into hormone balance if needed. You deserve full care.

Important note:

If you're reading this, I'm going to assume you've already seen a doctor and ruled out any serious medical conditions relating to swallowing specifically. What you're experiencing is not dysphagia (a physical difficulty with swallowing), but rather a psychological fear of swallowing or choking.

That fear is real, but it doesn't mean your body is broken. It just means your brain is stuck in a fear loop. The goal of this guide is to help you step out of that loop, one calm breath and one small choice at a time body and mind.

Step 7: Ask why this belief exists.

Once you've addressed any underlying medical conditions (like acid reflux or post-nasal drip, which can also cause throat sensations), and you've started practicing relaxation techniques, it's time to dive into the belief system behind this fear.

Why do you believe that swallowing or choking is dangerous?

Where did this belief come from? Is it a memory? A fear that grew over time?

A misunderstanding? Did a certain event trigger it? Or maybe you're unsure.

This isn't about blaming yourself for having the fear. It's about getting curious. Start by noticing the thoughts you have when fear arises.

- Do they sound like: "I'll choke," "I can't trust my body," or "What if this never stops?"
- When did you first notice these thoughts? Did something trigger them?
- Are these thoughts based on evidence, or are they simply beliefs?

The goal is not to get rid of these thoughts overnight, but to become aware of them. To see that they are thoughts, not facts.

When you begin to understand the root of your fear, you start to take away its power.

And from there, it's all about baby steps — small moments of trusting your body again. These tiny acts, repeated over time, will gently start to rewire the beliefs that have been keeping you stuck

Step 8: Understand the role OCD plays

Once you've started to acknowledge the thoughts, instead of blindly obeying them, you'll notice a pattern.

Ask yourself:

- Are these thoughts intrusive?
- Are they repetitive?
- Do they feel urgent or like they must be true?

If you answered yes to any of these, then you're likely experiencing OCD-like tendencies. These thoughts aren't random; they're obsessions. And because they're so intrusive, they can easily feel like a guarantee of what will happen. I know, because I lived this for years. For three years, I had the same obsessive thoughts around food, that I would choke, or my swallow would fail. But here's the thing: Not once did it happen.

And let's face it, if you're here thinking, yes, but I had a choking incident, you're still here, aren't you? You're still alive. Your worst fear happened, and you made it out ok. Your body is doing what it was made to do, swallowing. In fact, your body is pretty good at it.

So, we need to categorize these thoughts as they are:

Intrusive. Obsessive. Unwanted.

They aren't accurate. They don't have a special meaning. They're just "what ifs."

This is the exact same pattern that happens with OCD. We obey these thoughts, they become fixations, and they fuel irrational fear.

It's not rational to think you will choke every single time you eat.

So, stop. Listen to your thoughts. Ask yourself:

- Why am I thinking this?
- Where is the evidence?

The more you question these thoughts, the more you'll realize they're just fear-driven, obsessive thoughts, not facts.

Step 9: Start reflecting, ask yourself, "Why?"

By now, I hope you've started to reflect on your thoughts and the patterns behind them. But let me ask you this:

Did you ever stop to ask, "Why do I believe this?"

Maybe, deep inside, even if you're not fully aware of it, there's a belief you've been holding onto, a belief that, without a doubt, you will choke.

That belief can be sneaky. It's not always obvious, but it shows up in your thoughts, in the way your body responds to food, and in the fear that creeps in before every meal. It's a fear-based belief that has taken root somewhere along the way, and, for many, it can feel like a truth.

But remember, this belief isn't reality. It's just a belief. And beliefs can be shifted.

Now is the time to challenge that belief.

Is there evidence that you will choke every time?

Or could it be that this fear has taken over, creating a false narrative that just feels real but isn't?

Reflect on this. Give yourself space to understand where this fear started, and whether it's truly aligned with your experiences.

Step 10: Ask yourself, why you?

Why, out of all the people in the world, does your mind believe that you are the one destined to choke?

You don't have the power to predict the future.

That's a core truth. These thoughts aren't a prophecy. They're just thoughts. And one day, somewhere along the line, something happened. Maybe you felt tension in your throat, maybe you were anxious or stressed, and the idea of choking crept in. It may have felt real, and so your mind held on to it, repeating it over and over.

In my experience, this often happens after some form of trauma or intense anxiety. It's like the mind grabs onto the fear, thinking it's a way to protect you. If you're always on high alert about choking, your mind believes it's keeping you safe, but all it's really doing is keeping you stuck in a loop of fear.

Think about it this way:

When you're obsessively focused on the fear of choking, you can't feel the full extent of the emotional pain you're trying to avoid. It's a distraction, a way to shift your attention away from the real feelings that might be lurking underneath.

This is why I believe this fear is so like other types of OCD. It's a way for the mind to say: "I need to focus on this specific thing, so I don't have to feel something else."

But here's the key: The fear isn't keeping you safe. It's keeping you stuck.

Step 11: Address the trauma — it's time to deal with it.

Now that you've started to see how the mind has attached to the fear, it's time to address the root cause, the trauma, the stress, or whatever might have triggered this fear. Even if it feels like that event happened a long time ago, it's still there. And it's time to confront it.

Healing doesn't happen until we decide it's time to deal with what's been buried.

It could be a from a past experience, a difficult emotion you've been avoiding, or a fear that's attached itself to something that felt uncontrollable. Whatever it is, it's important to acknowledge it.

You may have buried it or thought it was long gone, but if it's still showing up in your mind in the form of intrusive thoughts, then it's still affecting you.

The first step is deciding that it's time to talk about it, to process it, to release its grip. Whether that means talking to a therapist, journaling, or simply allowing yourself to feel it's time to face what's been holding you back.

You don't have to carry this alone anymore. Healing begins when you choose to confront what's been silently shaping your fear.

Step 12: Acknowledge your story, and the emotional healing ahead.

Of course, this is just my experience. Your story might look different, and that's okay. But if what I'm saying resonates with you, then you're likely carrying some deep emotional weight that's still in need of healing.

You might feel alone, as if no one understands what you're going through. You may ask yourself, "Why me?"

You've fought so hard, and yet, you can't seem to find your way out. You're searching for answers, hoping that something will click, but you haven't given up.

Let me tell you this, that is strength. You are still here, still searching, still reaching for healing. And if these words feel true for you, it's a sign that there's emotional healing to be done. Healing may not be quick or easy, but it's possible, and you have the power to move through this.

Step 13: Start small, and be patient with yourself.

Now, as you begin this journey, remember: start small. When it comes to food, even the tiniest steps matter.

If you need to, start with just 5ml of water from a syringe, practicing swallowing that small amount over and over. You will be safe with 5ml, no matter what. It's crucial to understand that this is a controlled way to begin the process, your body will get used to taking in fluid while relaxed. Just let it go down, and nothing bad will happen. If you cough a little, that's okay, it's part of the process.

This is guaranteed safety in your heightened state of fear. I repeat, you will be safe with any amount of water, and this step is about reassurance. Over time, you'll see that for yourself. You can even build up to 10ml, 15ml, and beyond. A child's Calpol syringe is perfect for this. Keep your focus on making it comfortable, and remember, this is not about rushing.

Also, I cannot stress this enough: Don't Google stuff about swallowing. I believe it's rare to choke, and if that were common, we wouldn't have so many people around us eating and drinking every day without incident. Think about how many times you see people eat and drink throughout the day, both in your immediate environment and worldwide. The fear you're feeling is not the norm.

Yes, there will always be exceptions, and you might find them on the internet, but that's what happens when you go looking for them. It's like how people sometimes read about someone being killed by a random event or accident, but it doesn't mean it's likely to happen to you. The mind can latch onto the most extreme scenarios, but they aren't your reality.

So, focus on the fact that you're safe right now. And with time, you'll see that nothing bad will happen as you practice this.

Next, you can apply this same principle to food. If you're ready, start with something soft and easy to swallow, like yogurt. Do exposure repeatedly, I can't stress this enough. Start with a teaspoon of yogurt and take it as many times as you can manage, while staying completely relaxed. It's okay if it feels forced in the beginning, what matters is the repetition. You are safe with this small amount of food, and as you continue, it will get easier.

Remember, exposure is key, so keep repeating it as often as you can handle. Gradually build up, once you're comfortable with a teaspoon, move up to a tablespoon, and so on. The key is consistency. The more you repeat it, the more your body will learn that this is safe and normal.

Exposure is the main component of healing.

The reason exposure is so powerful is that you are telling your body, over and over, that it's okay to eat and drink. With each tiny sip or bite, your body begins to relax, and your fear response will start to fade. It's like a switch that slowly flips, and soon enough, you'll notice your thoughts about food becoming less negative, less fearful, and less intrusive.

But this takes repetition. I'm telling you, hundred times a day if you must, do it! Tiny bites, tiny sips, all day long. The key is to stay relaxed. I know it might feel overwhelming at first, but the more you do it, the more your body will realize that there is nothing to fear. Consistency is everything. The more you expose yourself to these situations without panic, the faster your body and mind will click into a new state of calm.

Final Thoughts & Summary

I truly hope these steps have been insightful for you. Writing down everything that worked for me is difficult, as I know how overwhelming it can feel to take in so much information at once. But ultimately, these are the main components of your recovery.

Remember, it's okay to take things at your own pace. Every step you take, no matter how small, is progress. By focusing on relaxation, exposure, and challenging the thoughts that feed your fear, you are laying the foundation for recovery.

Don't rush the process, be kind to yourself, and trust that you are capable of overcoming this. It may take time, but it will get easier, and you will find your way to feeling free and calm around food and swallowing once again.

Summary of Key Steps to Recovery

- Healing is a journey, take it one step at a time, and don't rush the process
- Start small, begin with tiny sips of water or small bites of food, and practice exposure consistently.
- Relaxation is key, stay as relaxed as possible during each step. This helps your body respond calmly.
- Exposure works, repeat small exposures to food and liquids throughout the day. The more you do it, the more your body will learn that it's safe.
- Challenge irrational thoughts, recognize that the fears and intrusive thoughts are not based on reality. They are part of the process, not a prediction of the future.
- Medical conditions, make sure to address any underlying health conditions, like acid reflux, that might be contributing to your fears.
- OCD and phobias, understand that this fear can be related to obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours. By challenging these thoughts, you can break the cycle.
- Consistent practice, do exposure as many times as you can handle each day, whether it's taking tiny sips or bites. Consistency is crucial for rewiring your brain.
- Be kind to yourself, healing takes time. Celebrate small victories and remember that setbacks are normal. Be patient and gentle with yourself.

- You are not alone, recovery is possible. With time, effort, and dedication, you will overcome this fear and feel at ease again.
- I'd love to help you one-on-one on your journey to recovery.
- If you need more help implementing these steps, or if you're looking for a more in-depth guide, I'm here to provide a safe space to talk, explore, and work through other issues such as OCD, anxiety, and trauma. You don't have to go through this alone, together, we can make real progress.

There's so much more to say and so much more I could write, so look out for more in the future. I want to remind you not to be hard on yourself if progress is slow. Remove the panic and just keep saying, 'I will get over this.' I never thought the day would come, but it did. Hang in there.

"Sometimes we long to be heard, to be understood, but our feelings were never acknowledged. That's okay. I see you now. You are heard. You are safe. You are loved."
—Kate, Face Your Thoughts

Best wishes, Kate

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