

Face Your Thoughts

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. Before trying the practical methods described in this guide.

A Guide to Overcoming Phagophobia and Pseudodysphagia:

Conquering the Fear of Swallowing and Choking, Steps Toward Healing

Go at your pace.

Step 1: Start small.

This isn't something you can "fix" overnight, and that's okay. Healing from the fear that something will go wrong when you swallow will take many steps. Some will feel messy.

Some will feel hopeful. But every single one counts.

And this is important: with this phobia being psychological, we must first and foremost remind ourselves that we've become caught up in thinking about swallowing, being hyperaware of it, and acting as an unnecessary supervisor. Your body already knows how to swallow, but fear makes you feel like you need to watch, check, and control it.

This isn't to minimise what you're going through. I know how real and overwhelming it feels. But you can use the mantra: "The only real problem I have when it comes to this is thinking about it."

This is very debilitating. I would worry and worry, but really, the biggest hurdle for me was just to stop paying attention to it.

Start by noticing when you're doing this. You don't have to force yourself to stop thinking about it. Just recognise that you've stepped into that supervisor role.

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, you can recover!

When we believe this phobia is permanent, it makes everything feel heavier. But remind yourself: you can recover.

How do I know?

Because I've been there. I lived with this fear for several years. And while my healing took time, I now believe it might have 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:

Relaxation was essential for me, and I believe it's essential to your recovery too. When I was constantly on edge and stuck in a stress response, my body stayed tense, especially around my 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 were essential for me.

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.

If you’ve been told that fear and anxiety are contributing to the difficulty, that fear is real. It doesn’t mean you’re making it up. This guide shares what helped me step out of that fear loop, one small step at a time.

Step 7: Ask why this belief exists.

Once you’ve addressed any underlying medical conditions (like acid reflux or postnasal 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 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: “Something will go wrong when I swallow,” “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 several years, I had the same obsessive thoughts around food, that something would go wrong when I swallowed. 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 frightening experience while swallowing, you're still here, aren't you? You're still alive. Your worst fear happened, and you made it out okay. 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 something will go wrong when you swallow 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 notice your thoughts and the patterns behind them. But let me ask you this:

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

When the thought "Something will go wrong when I swallow" comes up, do you find yourself treating it as a fact? Does it feel certain simply because it feels frightening?

For me, that belief felt so real. It showed up in my thoughts, in the way my body responded to food, and in the fear before a meal. But feeling certain about something doesn't make it certain.

Start gently questioning that belief. Is the fear itself becoming your evidence? Are you treating a strange sensation as proof that something will go wrong?

You don't have to work out exactly how this started. Just notice the difference between what you fear will happen and what is actually happening.

Step 10: Remember, your thoughts aren't predictions.

Why does your mind feel so certain that something will go wrong when you swallow?

You don't have the power to predict the future. These thoughts aren't a prophecy. They're thoughts, even when they feel incredibly real.

Maybe this started with a frightening experience or a strange sensation in your throat. Maybe you were stressed or anxious. Or maybe there was no obvious trigger at all.

For me, constantly watching and checking my swallowing felt like a way to keep myself safe. But it kept my attention fixed on the very thing I feared. I had become that unnecessary supervisor.

Ask yourself: "Am I caught up in watching, checking, and trying to control every swallow?"

You don't have to force the thoughts away. Start by recognising them as fearful thoughts, rather than predictions you must obey.

Step 11: Make space for stress and trauma.

Maybe this fear started after a difficult experience. Or maybe it just happened, without any obvious trigger. You don't have to find a hidden reason for it or assume there must be trauma behind it.

But stress and trauma can make it harder. When you're already carrying a lot, it can be difficult to relax, stop monitoring your swallowing, and step out of that fear loop.

If there are difficult experiences or emotions affecting you, give yourself space to talk about them and work through them. That might mean talking to a therapist, journaling, or simply acknowledging how you feel.

You don't have to carry this alone, and you don't need to have all the answers before you can start moving forward.

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

Of course, this is just my experience. Your story might look different, and that's okay.

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. 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.

For me, a small oral syringe helped me measure out tiny amounts of water, starting with 5ml. Having a measured amount felt more manageable and helped me build confidence.

This was my personal approach.

I practised swallowing that small amount over and over. Over time, I built up to 10ml, 15ml, and beyond. Keep your focus on making it manageable, and remember, this is not about rushing. Feeling frightened doesn't automatically mean something will go wrong when you swallow.

Also, I cannot stress this enough: don't get caught up in Googling frightening stories about swallowing. Think about how many times you see people eat and drink throughout the day, both in your immediate environment and worldwide.

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. The mind can latch onto the most extreme scenarios, but reading about them doesn't mean they will happen to you. Getting helpful advice is different from repeatedly searching for something that feeds your fear.

Next, you can apply this same principle to food. For me, something soft and easy to manage, like yogurt, was a starting point. I started with a teaspoon and repeated it, then gradually built up to a tablespoon and beyond.

Do exposure repeatedly, I can't stress this enough. Start with a small, manageable step, using food or drink that is suitable for you, and practise consistently. It's okay if it feels unfamiliar in the beginning. What matters is giving yourself opportunities to build confidence.

Remember, exposure is key. Gradually build up at your own pace. The key is consistency. For me, the more I repeated it, the more eating and drinking began to feel normal again.

Exposure was the main component of my healing.

And this is important: exposure means gradually moving towards eating and drinking, instead of letting fear keep you avoiding them. I know avoidance can feel reassuring in the moment, but for me, it kept the fear going. Each small, manageable step was a chance to practise without letting the intrusive thoughts make the decision for me. This isn't about forcing yourself. It's about building up at your own pace, using food and drink that are suitable for you.

The reason exposure was so powerful for me was that I was showing myself, over and over, that I could eat and drink despite the fear. With each tiny sip or bite, I began to build trust in my body again. It was like a switch that slowly flipped, and over time, I noticed my thoughts about food becoming less negative, less fearful, and less intrusive.

But this takes repetition. Tiny bites, tiny sips, repeated throughout the day, helped me. I know it might feel overwhelming at first, but these small, repeated steps were a huge part of my recovery.

Relaxation helped me, too, but you don't have to be completely relaxed before every attempt. Feeling anxious doesn't mean you've failed.

Consistency is everything. Keep taking those small steps, be patient with yourself, and give yourself credit for the practice. This is not about rushing or forcing yourself. It's about gradually building confidence and stepping out of that fear loop.

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 can overcome 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, repeat manageable steps at your own pace, whether it's taking tiny sips or bites. Consistency helped me build confidence.
- 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, and you can build confidence one small step at a time.
- 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. Your feelings matter. You deserve to be heard, understood, and supported." Kate, Face Your Thoughts

Best wishes, Kate

Please reach out via my website, any feedback would be greatly appreciated:

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