

Activity 6.1

Assessing Evolutionary Explanations of Specific Phobias

Some explanations of specific phobias argue that the rather limited set of fears that become the focus for clinical phobias (e.g. spiders, snakes, heights, water, blood and injury, confined spaces, and suchlike) are the result of evolutionary selection pressures. They argue that those of our ancestors who feared and avoided these stimuli survived, and so passed on their fear and avoidance tendencies to their offspring. Evolutionary-based accounts such as these assume that those things that are the focus of phobias today did pose a real threat to the survival of our ancestors.

Have a look at what is shown in the following pictures and take a few minutes to write down as many reasons as you can think of why each one might be a threat to the survival of a human being. Then read on.



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You were probably able to think of a number of reasons why each of these might be a threat to the survival of a human being. Of these six stimuli, the spider and the snake are typical phobic stimuli; the tiger and the bear are potentially life threatening but are rarely the focus for phobias; and we would not normally consider the bathtub or flowers to be any threat to survival. However, it is still not difficult to think of reasons why a bathtub or flowers *might* be dangerous if we are pressed to do so. This is known as the **adaptive fallacy** (McNally, 1995): that is, you can usually think up reasons why any stimulus or event might be dangerous. Given that you were able to do this with all six of these stimuli:

1. Why is it that only two of them are the focus for phobias?
2. Why are two of them clearly dangerous, yet not the focus for phobias?

These are questions that evolutionary accounts of phobias need to address.