Fear of Movies: Is It Phobia, a Panic Attack or ... Normal?

By SYDNEY LUPKIN

When Emilie Yount was in her 20s, she used to spend five days a week huddled in Chicago movie theater seats, "banging out" film reviews and blogs for publications like Reel Reviews and TribecaFilm.com. Being alone in a darkened theater with hundreds of strangers facing the same direction never fazed her.

But on Saturday, Yount, 30, gave away her tickets to see "The Dark Knight Rises" even though she'd bought them in advance because she loved the second Christopher Nolan "Batman" film so much. She said she couldn't face going to the theater in the wake of the Colorado shooting on Friday morning that left 12 moviegoers dead at the hands of a stranger.

"My nerves have peaked," she told ABCNews.com. "To have something like that happen... I can't think of anything worse, to be honest."

Yount said she has no history of anxiety or problems with small spaces, but she thinks it will take her a few months to head back to the cinema.

And psychologists say Yount isn't alone.

"I'm sure there will be people who the horror of that situation will indeed lead them to be afraid of going to the theaters," said Dr. Phillip Levendusky, director of the Psychology Department at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts and a professor at Harvard Medical School. "Do I think it's going to be a crisis in the movie industry? Probably not, but it wouldn't surprise me if some people have a reaction."

Levendusky told ABCNews.com that he has treated phobias from fear of snow to fear of fish, and even to fear of butterflies. He defined a phobia as being afraid of something though conventional wisdom suggests there's no threat.

To be a legitimate phobia, however, the fear has to impede day-to-day activities and last at least six months.

"Being afraid doesn't equal a phobia," Levendusky said. "I would have a second thought today going to the theater," he said, but he doesn't think he has a phobia.

If Levendusky still can't go inside cinemas a year from now, however, he probably has a problem with movie theaters, he said.
Dr. Fred Neuman, who directs the Anxiety and Phobia Treatment Center in White Plains, N.Y., said he's already heard from patients who said they're uncomfortable going to the movies. In fact, one patient told him he's afraid of seeing the new "Batman" movie in particular.

"The usual thing that happens whenever calamity like this occurs is that people who are already nervous tend to get more nervous, and people who are not nervous in the first place tend to ignore it," Neuman said.

Neuman said a lot of his patients avoid movie theaters because they have anxiety disorders – not theater phobias. These patients fear having an anxiety attack and not being able to leave the crowded theater. They're afraid of screaming out, falling to the ground, having a heart attack, soiling themselves or vomiting. Usually, none of these things occur, and these reactions are not the same as the fear of the theater itself.

Dr. Donna Pincus, director of the Child and Adolescent Fear and Anxiety Treatment Program at Boston University, told ABCNews.com that the uneasiness some people feel about movie theaters right now is normal.

"When such a tragedy occurs, it focuses our attention on our vulnerabilities rather than control and safety," she said. "Fear is just a natural human emotion...It wouldn't be human not to feel those feelings when you're watching things like this."

But when a fear interferes with a person's ability to function, it's classified as a phobia. According to the National Institute on Mental Health, 8.7 percent of Americans in 2008, or 19.2 billion people, suffered from a phobia of some kind. It's not clear how many people are specifically afraid of theaters.

Pincus said that children and adults should understand the difference between possibility and probability.

"How many movies have you ever been to in your life and how often have you ever had trouble or danger present?" Pincus said. "The news does not show us...thousands of people went to the movies tonight and they all had a wonderful time and all got home safely."

Yount says she knows she's more likely to be struck by lightning than to be shot at a movie theater, but she can't stop herself from reading news coverage of the shooting in Aurora. Although Yount was an avid Harry Potter fan who attended midnight showings of the films, she said she doesn't think she'll ever go to another midnight release.

"When you really enjoy anything and it kind of gets marred, it's never a nice thing," she said. "It will be months [before I return to the cinema], I can just tell. It's not something I'm going to rush to do."