

# **A Prescribed Environment**

What are the Spatial Restrictions Experienced by Women Living with Anxiety Disorders?

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**With thanks to F, G, J and L**

Submitted for  
Masters of Research in Creative Practices  
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In the following presentation I will briefly map the research process I undertook a year ago while working towards my Masters of Research qualification. A “Prescribed Environment” asked what are the spatial restrictions experienced by women living with anxiety disorders? Responding to where women’s experiences of anxiety have been underrepresented, this research focused on the accounts of four women living in Glasgow. This small scale qualitative study aimed to communicate the complex experiences of these women, in order to further our understanding of the impact anxiety disorders can have on the mobility of individuals.



F: That's where I'm most happy, that's where I'm at my best. At home.

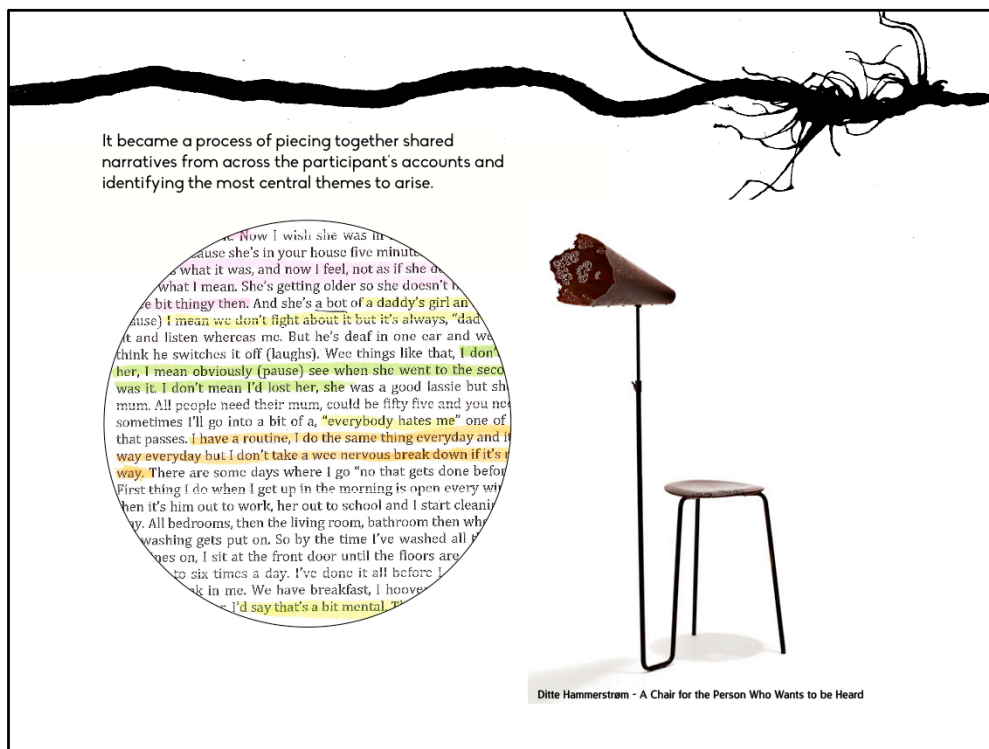
As the subject of anxiety is sensitive, I felt it was important that the women who decided to get involved in the project, wanted to get involved. In Nineteenth Century Europe, when much of the existing literature was written, women were discouraged from walking unescorted in public places. Women who did venture out alone did so to perform charity work but otherwise had little urban freedom as individuals. Inspired by this, I put a recruitment poster up, in a charity organisation, that described the area of enquiry and asked interested parties to approach me. By recruiting participants in this way no one was coerced into participating and got involved because they wanted to share their experiences. At the time, I worked for the charity and knew the women as my colleagues, not as research participants and found myself asking, how do you conduct ethical research when you already know your participants in another capacity? By exposing myself as having an anxiety disorder too we were almost introduced a'fresh, finding common ground outside of a work relationship. As equals I wasn't seen as therapist or analyst but listener.

Guided by a feminist framework, Iris Marion Young's research being particularly influential, the project aimed to provide participants with a platform to communicate their experiences. Employing a selection of methods that aimed to encourage each participants sense of voice, methods included: semi structured interviews, a photographing 'home' exercise, a walking exercise and diary keeping. During interviews all participants were asked questions that covered the same theoretical topics and when participants showed an interest in talking about other aspects of their experience of anxiety, outside my parameters of enquiry, they were encouraged.

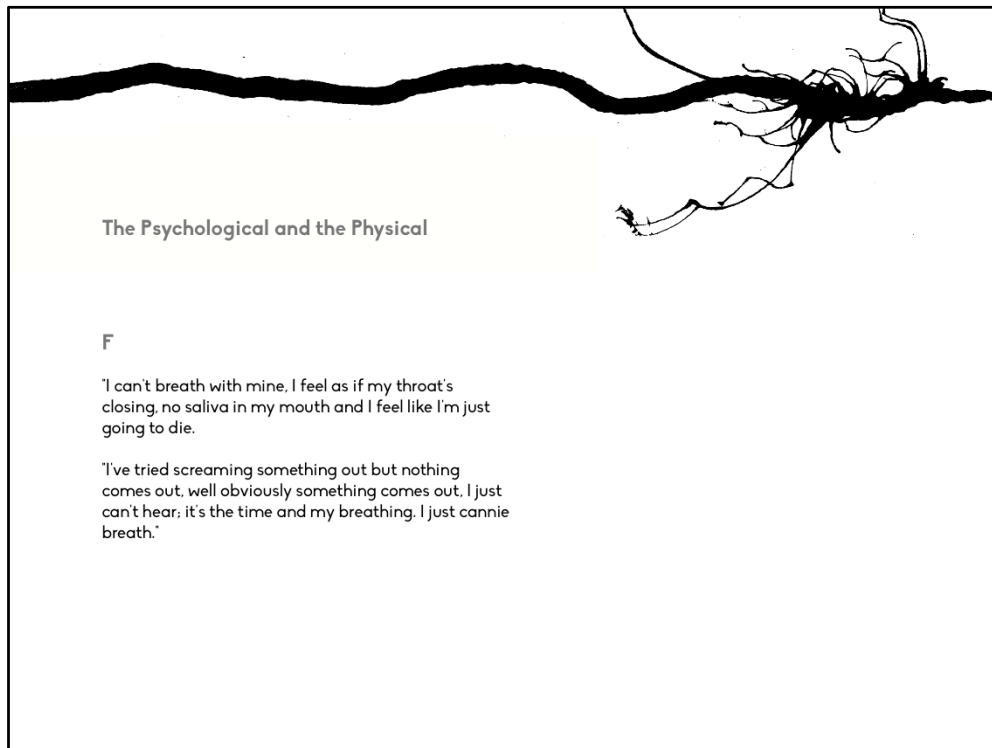


G: Breakfast, having things in the same order means that things should go to plan. The sun, doesn't matter where I am in the world it's a bit of a constant.

Asking participants to keep a diary documenting the journeys they made and providing individuals with a camera to capture places of comfort, gave each woman the freedom to curate their contributions.



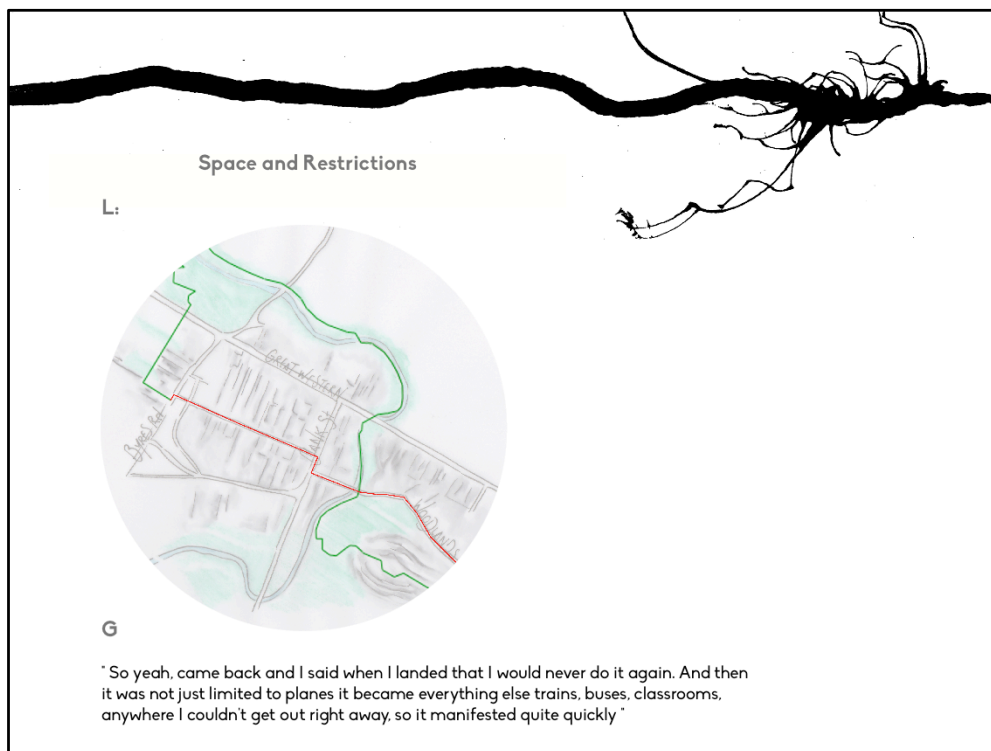
Initially I began analysis by looking at the interview transcripts and identifying where a spatial restriction had occurred. I soon realised that this analysis would not reap the desired output for participants, who had approached me ambitious to share their experiences. It wasn't enough to simply identify what happened but it was important to participants that the complexities of their experiences were articulated. How does this spatial restriction impact on their daily lives and relationships? My analysis shifted. It became a process of piecing together shared narratives from across the participant's accounts and identifying the most central themes to arise. Emerging patterns and common themes were communicated with participants A) in a hope to gauge how accurate my reading of their experience had been and B) to provide participants with an opportunity to disagree and correct inaccuracies. The agreed abstracted themes became chapters in the extended essay.



## Chapter one: The Psychological and the Physical

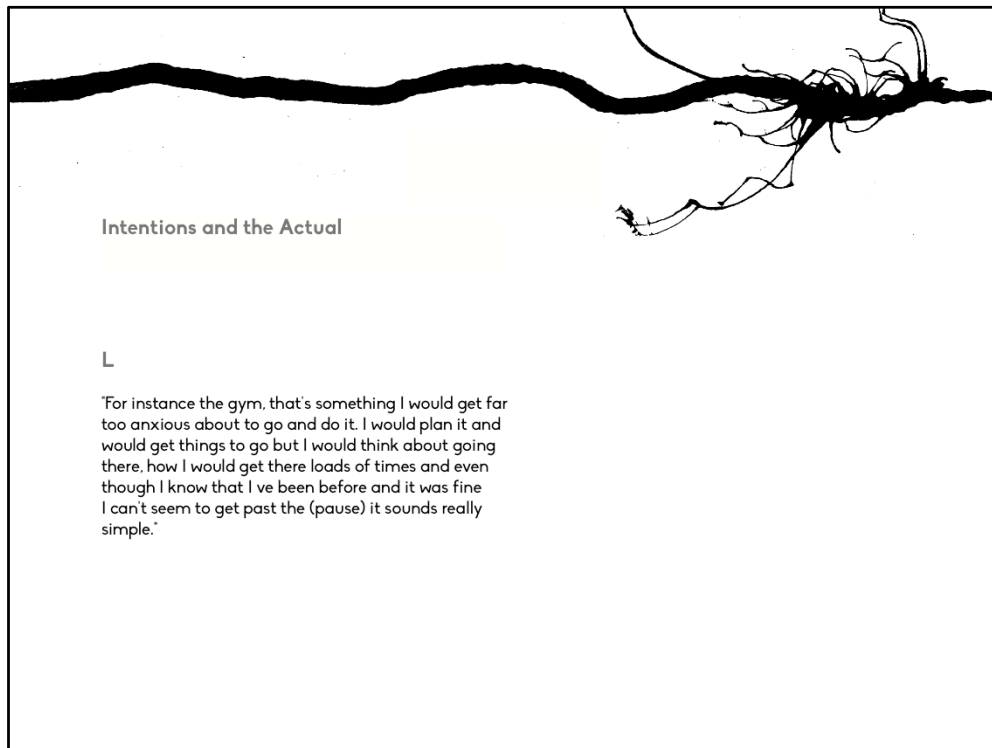
Psychologists suggest that those people that experience excessive or exaggerated physical stress responses will endeavour to avoid such symptoms by altering their behaviour.

In line with the cognitive behavioural therapy model, Ian Fleming, a psychologist at the University of Manchester, explained that people will often avoid events associated with anxious feelings. He continued to say that such avoidance strategies can appear helpful in the short term but may become unhelpful in the long term. This research argued that the construction of protective avoidance tactics, in response to physical symptoms, has the potential to become spatially restrictive for the anxiety sufferer.



## Chapter Two Space and Restrictions:

The protective restrictions constructed by these women, bring comfort in the short term but in the long term form restrictive environments that limit the sufferer's freedom of experiences. We see here L's avoidance route. She takes me on a walk and describes the route choices available to her and the decisions she makes whilst walking. Identifying points on her journey where she makes the choice to isolate herself from other more populated walkways, we see how she removes herself from a specific environment.



### Chapter Three Intentions and the actual

It was important to highlight that 'choosing' to avoid certain places or situations was not really a 'choice' as such. Anxiety can be felt as a reluctance that is at odds with the ambitions of the sufferer. Each participant taking part in this research described a conflict between their intentions/desires and their actions.

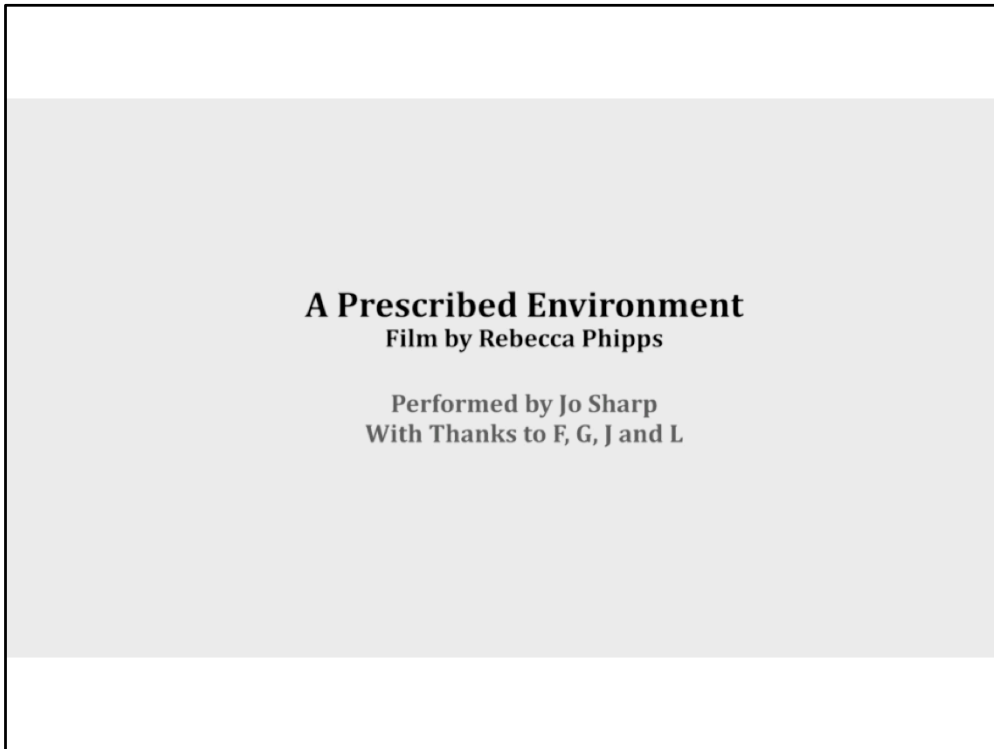
Despite having a desire to do one thing the participants anxiety convinces her of the opposite. You would describe the women taking part in this research as sociable, what is interesting however, is the power each participants anxiety holds, to distance each person from their natural sociable selves. Anxiety dictates that these women seek isolation but this is in conflict with the ambitions of these sociable beings. Social avoidance has the potential to define a person's environment.



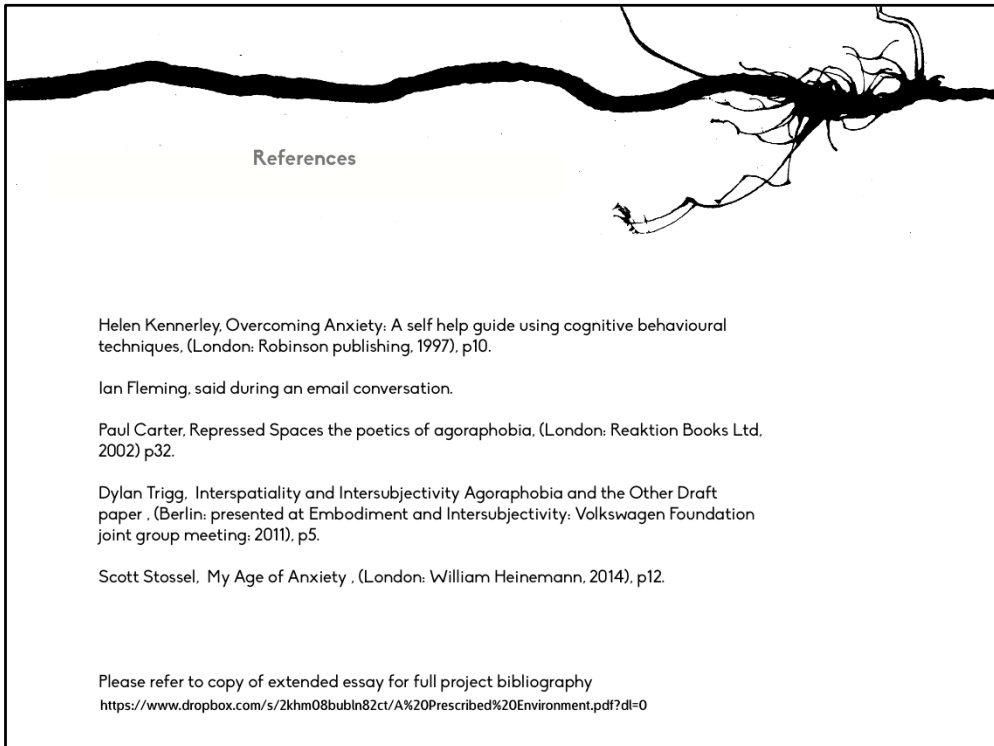


#### Chapter four Control Conflict

Each participant spoke about their loss of control to their feelings of anxiety and described their actions to counteract this. Each of the women has developed particular routines of behaviour that provide a sense of comfort from feelings of anxiety. Participants were asked to capture their “routines of behaviour”, each person was given a camera and was asked to take pictures of places or objects that provided comfort to them. As expected the content of the photographs was diverse, however many of the places captured by these women could be described as locations of solitude. Places where these women have the option to retreat from the presence of others: their home, their car, their bed and the park. Participants took me along on a regular journey they made, describing the decisions made whilst on that journey.



After identifying a common narrative between each of the participants experiences and returning to individuals to hear what they thought of the findings, I then made a film.



## References

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Ian Fleming, said during an email conversation.

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Scott Stossel, *My Age of Anxiety*, (London: William Heinemann, 2014), p12.

Please refer to copy of extended essay for full project bibliography  
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/2khm08bubln82ct/A%20Prescribed%20Environment.pdf?dl=0>