Agoraphobia

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance | Health*

Why in News?

In the popular psychological thriller The Woman in the Window, Amy Adams plays Anna Fox, a woman who spends her days watching life outside, but the idea of stepping out herself feels terrifying.

- **Agoraphobia** – It is an *anxiety disorder* in which a person fears situations where escape may be difficult or help unavailable, if they experience panic or intense anxiety.
- These fears commonly involve crowded places, shopping centres, public transport, or leaving home alone.
- **Close Link** – The condition is closely linked to panic disorder, although the two are considered distinct diagnoses.
- **Prevalence** – Globally, it has an estimated lifetime prevalence of *1.2% to 1.3%,* with a 12-month prevalence rate hovering between 0.8% and 1.7%.
- **Symptoms** – It can vary widely in severity.
    - **Physical –** Rapid heartbeat, sweating, hyperventilation, dizziness, nausea, chest pain, trembling, diarrhoea, and feeling faint.
    - **Cognitive** – Fear of losing control, embarrassment, inability to escape, or dying during a panic attack; Some fear being left alone, they cannot function independently without support.
    - **Behavioural** – Avoidance of public spaces, reliance on companions, or complete housebound lifestyle.
- **Causes** – It develops through a combination of biological, psychological, and environmental factors.
    - **Biological** – Genetic predisposition, neurotransmitter imbalances.
    - **Psychological** – Panic attacks, trauma, existing anxiety disorders.
    - **Environmental** – Stressful life events, prolonged isolation.
- **Risk** – It can affect anyone, but it usually begins in late teens or early adulthood - w*omen are diagnosed more often than men*.
- People with panic disorder, anxiety, depression, or past trauma face higher risk.
- **Diagnosis** – There is *no single medical test* for agoraphobia.
- Doctors diagnose it by discussing symptoms, their severity, and how much they affect daily life.
- They check if it is linked to panic disorder or another mental health issue.
- Sometimes physical exams are done to rule out other illnesses that look like anxiety.
- **Treatment** – It depends on the severity of the condition, but both psychotherapy and medication have been shown to be effective.
- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)** – It is one of the most effective methods, teaching patients to face and challenge their fears.
- **Medication** – For severe cases, doctors often prescribe selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) (e.g., sertraline, escitalopram)
- Other medications, including serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), tricyclic antidepressants, benzodiazepines (short-term use only).

- **Combination Therapy** – CBT & medication often most effective.

Reference

The Hindu | Agoraphobia

