

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be frightening and demoralizing. Sufferers are troubled by unpredictable bouts of terror, strong physical symptoms and fears of dying or going crazy, so many reduce their activities more and more to try to avoid the "cause" of these attacks. Moreover, because there is no bandage, splint or any visible sign of anything being wrong with them, they receive scant sympathy from friends and family.

The Experience

Imagine a farmer being chased across a field by a bull. His heart is hammering, his breath coming in short gasps, his stomach churning, every muscle tense and he is thinking "I must get out of here as far as I can - what if it catches up?" Imagine also somebody standing in a queue at the check-out in a supermarket experiencing the same symptoms thinking "I must get out of here as fast as I can - what if I faint in front of these people, or even worse, have a heart attack?"

In both cases body and mind are reacting strongly, but the farmer knows what has triggered his reaction. He knows that the fear and uncomfortable bodily sensations are natural and expected responses to his situation and that his reactions will be understood by anyone who sees him. However, the person in the supermarket cannot understand why they are experiencing these symptoms. As far as they can see, there has been no danger to trigger these responses, therefore they must arise from some internal condition, such as a physical illness or impending loss of control signifying a mental illness. So they rush from the supermarket and subsequently are convinced that they must avoid supermarkets in future. If they had realised that the symptoms (or consequences of these) would get no worse and were only produced by anxiety, they could have waited for the symptoms to subside. They therefore need not have feared a recurrence or have built up an avoidance of supermarkets (in similar situations).

The key factor therefore in the emergence of panic attacks is the misinterpretation of the bodily symptoms. The important factors in this misinterpretation are the thoughts and images that go through a person's mind before and during a panic attack.

What People May Think

"I'm going to have a heart attack." "I'm dying." "I'm heading for a nervous breakdown." "What if I faint in front of these people." "I feel so dizzy - perhaps I'm having a stroke." "My breathing is getting difficult. If this gets worse, it might stop."

These represent most of the fears that people experience in panic. Even before a panic attack begins, thoughts are experienced such as "what if I have a panic attack while I am driving" or "I hope I don't have a panic attack in this supermarket like I did last time". This is sufficient to start the alarm reaction, and the bodily sensations which accompany this are a panic attack is coming on, so we get a vicious circle of panic.

You may ask why a person who has had several panic attacks per week for the last two years has not learned by now that nothing catastrophic is going to happen to them. What seems to keep them from learning from this experience that nothing is to be feared from panic attacks and the symptoms of anxiety will gradually recede? If you question them closely, you will find that they have developed "safety behaviours" which have prevented them from disproving the feared catastrophe. For example, you may find that a person who fears he/she will faint has developed a habit of holding on to the nearest object or sitting down. The tendency then is to think - "I just sat down in time! I almost went then", and they never give themselves an opportunity to see that nothing would have happened to them anyway.

Diagnosing the Condition

Physicians generally diagnose a panic attack when four or more of the following symptoms develop suddenly and peak within 10 minutes:

- Sweating, trembling or choking feelings
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea, stomach ache, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Pounding heart or heart palpitations
- Chills or hot flushes
- Tingling or numbness
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Fear of going crazy or losing control
- Fear of dying
- Feelings of detachment from self or reality

While most panic attacks last just a couple of minutes, in rare cases they can recur over an hour or more. They can also recur abruptly at any time, within hours, days, months or longer. You may continue to live your life in fear, worrying about when the next panic episode may come and developing a chronic anxiety in between attacks.

Doctors do not know exactly what causes panic attacks, though many experts believe that they are provoked by biochemical factors, unresolved stress and unconscious psychological conflicts. Certain substances, including illicit drugs and caffeine, can trigger panic attacks in some people.

Panic disorder can develop at any age, although it usually appears first during late adolescence, and it is twice as common in women as in men. The disorder may be accompanied by other conditions such as alcoholism and depression. Panic-attack symptoms may also encourage phobias, which can occur in places or situations where past panic attacks have taken place.

Overcoming a Panic Attack - Some Helpful Tips

- If you understand that the reactions of your body are normal responses' to anxiety and that they themselves are not to be feared, this may help you feel less panicky.
- How we think influences our perception of the situation. Instead of thinking negatively we should try to think of an alternative way of looking at the problem.
- Try to allow the panic to subside while you are in the situation - thereby proving to yourself that nothing dreadful will happen.

Some Useful Ways of Coping in the Short Term

- **Distraction.** If you distract yourself by taking attention away from what is happening in your body, you will find that the feelings of panic subside. For example, you can pay close attention to what you see around you or what someone is saying; you could recite a poem or a saying in your head; you could use a mental exercise like saying the alphabet backwards.
- **Positive Self-Talk.** Tell yourself you know nothing disastrous will happen, that it is only a normal response to anxiety and that you have coped before.
- **Breathing.** Sometimes in panic attacks people "over-breathe". This may lead to unpleasant sensations of dizziness, shortness of breath and possibly tingling sensations in the hands and fingers. This can be counteracted by breathing into your cupped hand held over your mouth and nose. If you cannot do this because you are in a public place, or with other people, just try covering your nose or mouth with one hand. This can be done without drawing attention to yourself. Alternatively, if you cannot do even this, for example because you are in the middle of a meeting, you can slow down your breathing by saying something in your head slowly on each breath out to encourage a slow rhythm, e.g. one thousand cope. This does reduce the feelings of panic in the short term, but does

not help the person cope in the long term. Sometimes tranquilizers have been prescribed but these carry the risk of becoming dependent on them and withdrawal can be accompanied by unpleasant side effects which the person often mistakes for a return of their anxiety. It is best to come off slowly using a pre-arranged timetable to minimise side effects. If you have been receiving any medication, ask your doctor for advice on how slowly to reduce it.

Remember: More effective in the long term than any coping technique is the knowledge that you are misinterpreting what is happening to your body and nothing is going to happen. If you wait a little while, the anxiety will start to lessen. Try to avoid the situation, avoidance will only increase the anxiety and convince you that it was the cause of the panic. Instead, try going back into the situation to prove to yourself that your anxiety will diminish of its own accord. If these feelings have been going on for a long time or are severe, don't be afraid to get professional advice. Your GP will be able to advise you.

Otherwise, Relaxation For Living may be able to help:

- Contact a teacher in your area and attend classes if possible.
- Invest in a book, tape or pack of leaflets which may help.

Resources

- NO PANIC (National Organisation For Phobias, Anxiety, Neuroses, Information & Care): <http://nopanic.org.uk>
- The Stress Management Society: www.stress.org.uk
- First Steps to Freedom: www.first-steps.org
- Anxiety UK: www.first-steps.org
- International Stress Management Association UK: www.isma.org.uk
- Mind for Better Mental Health: www.mind.org.uk
- National Health Service: www.nhs.uk

Here when you need us.

Call: 0800-917-5320

Online: guidanceresources.com

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