

Panic Attacks

Relevant to: Depression:  Anxiety:  Irritability/Anger:  General emotional control: 

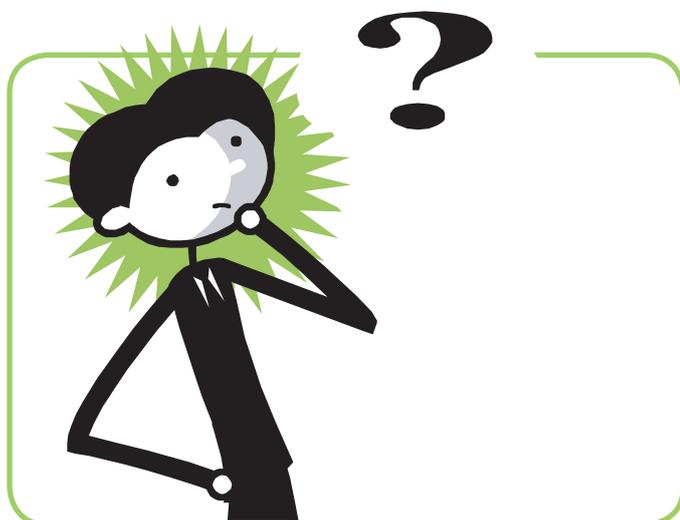
'Panic attacks are almost always an extremely unpleasant experience for the person who has the panic attack but, fortunately, may be easily eradicated.'

People who have panic attacks experience symptoms such as palpitations, sweating, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath, feelings of choking, chest pain, nausea, dizziness or light-headedness, feelings of unreality, feelings of losing control or going crazy, fear of dying, numbness or tingling, chills or hot flushes. Unsurprisingly, there is often concern about having additional panic attacks, and about going out alone or venturing far from home alone, or even being at home alone. In essence these latter fears are fears of being far from help.

The 'Vicious Circle'

There is often a 'spiral' or a 'vicious circle' that lies behind panic attacks. For example: headaches/pains in the head ... fearful thoughts ("that's a stroke") ... increase in anxiety ... headaches/pains in the head ... fearful thoughts ("that's a stroke"), and so on.

After a while, that spiral can become a much faster short-circuit version as in: "I'm going to have a panic attack" ... anxiety ... "I'm going to have a panic attack" ... more anxiety ... and so on.



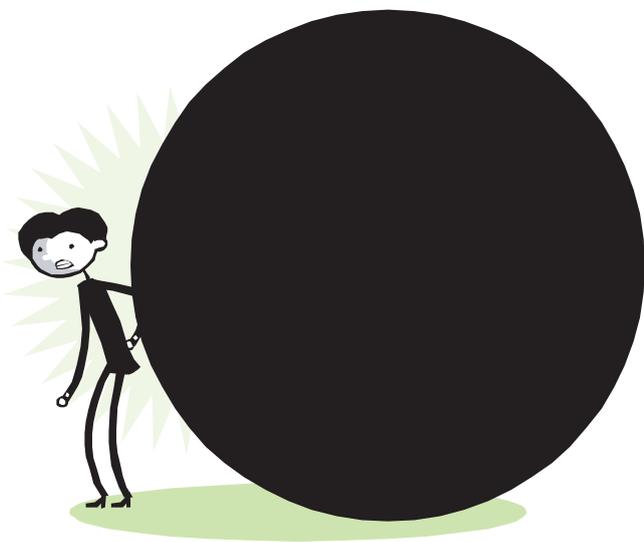
In either case the key factor is the spiral 'feeding on itself' and rapidly becoming out of control. This is almost always associated with (a) hyperventilation (over-breathing, resulting in too much oxygen in the bloodstream) and (b) 'amygdala hijack', whereby the emotional part of the brain completely 'hijacks' the rational part.

The net result is always an extremely unpleasant experience for the person who has the panic attack but, fortunately, may be easily eradicated by learning to (a) avoid hyperventilation and (b) stimulate rational-brain activity to counteract the amygdala hijack. What this means is simply (a) to learn deep, slow breathing and (b) to learn to 'focus' or 'distract yourself' by concentrating on whatever is going on in the environment – conversations, scenery going past, or whatever.

Slow deep breathing, and distraction

Importantly, these two rather simple techniques completely disrupt the vicious circle of panic if learnt properly – and they are not difficult to learn. However, it is important to practise often and regularly, because, when you feel impending panic, it is not quite so easy to use the techniques unless you are thoroughly practised in them. Importantly again, however, the knowledge that one now has 'answers' in one's armoury is normally of terrific benefit to panic sufferers who previously, were able to spot impending panic without having any means of avoiding it.

So, in summary, the very good news is that although panic attacks are very distressing events, the solution is relatively simple and easy. These techniques do, however, need learning properly. Happily, panic attacks tend to be 'discrete', meaning that they do not indicate any underlying psychological difficulties – in fact they say absolutely nothing about the person's psychological health otherwise.



Agoraphobia

Moving on to the associated fears of venturing far from safety, it is well worth taking these seriously and gradually. Although they are caused by the panic attacks (and it is well worth realising that once you have resolved the panic attacks then there is no reason to be fearful of being on your own) the best strategy is to take things gradually and slowly. It is however important to 'push the boundaries' but not in a way that makes you significantly fearful. The most common mistake that people make is to 'key themselves up' to make a big effort which then frightens them. The right way is 'little and often' – very frequently to push the boundaries just a little bit further out. Happily the 'little and often' motto can lead to very quick results.

Three 'good news' facts about panic attacks:

1. They gradually diminish, whatever you do. So, if you 'stick with it' you will find that – usually after 10 minutes or so – the attack wears off, whatever you do.
2. Although people worry about fainting, this is not a characteristic of panic. Fainting is associated with too little oxygen in the bloodstream, whereas the unpleasant effects of panic are associated with too much.
3. Although highly unpleasant, panic attacks are not dangerous: no-one ever died of a panic attack.

