

## DEALING WITH PANIC ATTACKS

Article by: Cheryl Sol

Whether they are frequent or infrequent, panic attacks are always unexpected. The body becomes physiologically prepared through a range of reactions to alert and enable you to react in the best way possible. This flight or fight reaction is an instinctual response in all mammals to prepare one to fight or escape when survival is threatened or when we perceive it to be.

In a panic attack the body responds in exactly the same ways as it does to real danger but it is *totally out of context*. There is no actual threat even though it is a very frightening experience. If you have a very real fear of dogs and you see one and panic, that is a phobia. Panic attacks are not attached to any specific fear which makes them difficult to predict.

### Dealing with panic attacks

1. Once you have had one or more panic attacks, **learn to recognize the warning signs** so that you can do something to stop them from escalating
2. If it is a situation that you associate with anxiety i.e. you are claustrophobic, try and **leave the situation**.
3. Do things to try and **calm yourself** down  
For example:-

#### a) **Control your thinking**

As the symptoms are the same as those you would experience in a situation of danger, your body is telling you that you are in a life threatening situation. Dizziness, heart palpitations, difficulty breathing and disorientation lead to these kinds of thoughts: -

- "I am having a heart attack"
- "I am going to pass out"
- "I am suffocating"
- "I am going crazy"
- "I am going to fall over"
- "I am going to lose complete control over myself"
- "I won't be able to get out of here"
- "I won't be able to breathe"
- "I am dying."

Despite its discomfort your panic attack will not cause heart failure, suffocation, fainting, falling or craziness. You can make the symptoms worse by interpreting them as catastrophic.

It is important then to soothe yourself with coping statements, if necessary repeating the same one over and over to reframe the feelings e.g. "I am going to be okay", this will pass, etc.

b) At the same time, **focus on your breathing**. Try and change it from shallow and rapid breathing to deep and slow abdominal breathing. This starts to shift the body away from the emergency response to a calming response.

c) **Distract yourself** by talking to another person or explaining to them what is happening so they can support you.

d) **Stay in the present.** Notice things around you, the details and colours or things and take the focus off your symptoms or catastrophic thoughts. Tell yourself what you are noticing.

e) Engage in a **simple repetitive activity** e.g. sing.

f) Place a **wet facecloth** on your face

g) **Think of something you are angry about** even if it is the fact that you are having a panic attack. Anger and anxiety are usually not compatible. You can also express this by punching a pillow.

h) Do something that requires **focused attention** eg a card game, your usual hobby, a puzzle like sudoku if your anxiety is just starting.

i) **Visualize** a comforting scene or person

j) Take **prescribed medication** to calm you down and prevent it from getting worse.

4. If, despite your best efforts, the panic attack increases in intensity, **go with the wave**, don't fight it and allow time to pass. At the same time it is important to use coping statements, deep abdominal breathing and use medication if you have not taken it until now.

#### 5. Lifestyle changes

These can reduce the severity and frequency of panic attacks i.e. increase your resilience.

Examples are:-

- elimination of stimulants e.g. caffeine, nicotine etc
- regular exercise
- regular deep relaxation exercises or meditation
- learn to express your feelings
- deal with any losses
- adopt beliefs that enable a calmer and more accepting attitude towards yourself and life
- live in the now
- recognize and deal with your fears.

6. **Psychotherapy** may be necessary if you are not able to manage panic attacks through the above methods. There are several well researched therapies for dealing with panic and anxiety disorders.