

UNDERSTANDING PANIC ATTACKS

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You are driving along and all of a sudden your chest feels tight, your heart is beating wildly, you are shaking and you have shortness of breath. You feel dizzy and out of control. It may even feel as if you are having a heart attack or dying.

Panic attacks are anxiety disorders. They are usually spontaneous and there is no clear predictable trigger that sets them off.

This is different to a fear or phobia about something specific eg dogs, spiders or social situations. You know that you fear them, try to avoid them, are filled with anxiety and want to run away when faced with them.

The unpredictability of panic adds to the sense of loss of control. Once you have had one or more panic attacks you may fear future episodes. Some people even limit their lives e.g. don't go out in public in case they have a panic attack.

Causes of Panic Attacks

(Ref E Bourne: The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook)

Your anxiety is usually caused by a combination of these listed below:-

1. Long Term Causes
 - heredity (genetics)
 - childhood circumstances
 - cumulative stress over time
2. Biological Causes
3. Medical Conditions
4. Short term triggering causes
 - significant personal loss
 - significant life changes
 - stimulants and recreational drugs
 - trauma

Factors That Maintain and Reinforce Panic Attacks

1. Anxious self talk that winds you up e.g. what if
2. Mistaken beliefs about life e.g. I have to be perfect else nobody will like me
3. Withheld feelings
4. Lack of assertiveness
5. Lack of self nurturing skills
6. Muscle tension
7. High stress lifestyle
8. Stimulants and dietary factors
9. Lack of meaning or sense of purpose

Physiology of Anxiety/Panic Attacks

Whatever the cause, the main symptoms of panic are physiological. It therefore becomes important to learn to reduce symptoms of anxiety and keep your body and mind in a calmer state on a day to day basis. This has a lot of other benefits, as research increasingly shows very specific links between how you manage stress/anxiety and the major illnesses of our time.

The body releases a range of chemicals and sets off physiological reactions rapidly and intensely with the specific purpose of enabling us in crisis situations. This is the fight/flight or freeze response.

This originates from the primitive part of our brain and is geared towards maximizing our survival. This is for situations when we have to act immediately and can't ponder on the situation.

Adrenalin is released in large quantities to alert you and motivate you to deal with the crisis. This is felt as a jolt or surge which comes with a feeling of dread or terror, racing heart rate and changes in breathing.

Other flight/fight responses include

- inhibition of digestion,
- increased release of stomach acid
- release of red blood cells by the spleen
- release of stored up sugar by the liver

You become geared to be very mentally focused on the situation at hand and physically more able to deal with it.

These and other responses all occur to some degree when you are excited or emotional but in panic, they peak to such an extreme level that you feel overwhelmed and terrified.

If you are tense, stressed or anxious most of the time, your body stays in this state and does not have a chance to return to normal and regulate itself.

You are likely to become more anxious as the panic attack starts. This will make the reaction more intense. It is important to talk yourself through it, learn the right breathing and let the adrenalin be reabsorbed into the body.