



## 2GetHelp Wellness Center

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# Panic-Anxiety Attacks

Mary lived in Sanger and worked at a bank. Over the last four months she noticed it had become more and more uncomfortable to get into her car and drive from home to work. As she sat behind the wheel, the world around her whirled and blurred. Her heart pounded as though it wanted to come right out of her chest. She found herself breathing faster and faster until she felt dizzy and had to pull over to the roadside to keep from wrecking her car. Soon it became apparent that it was no longer safe for her to drive at all.

One day as Joyce sat in a restaurant with her husband, she suddenly found herself choking, unable to swallow or breathe. By the time the paramedics arrived, she was turning blue. They rushed her to the hospital and decided that a tracheotomy was necessary since her throat had become so constricted. Fortunately, adrenaline injections caused her throat to relax only moments before the knife touched her throat. Even today, she is still afraid to eat in public for fear it might happen again.

Mike worked for years as an executive in a corporation. He was well respected as a man who could handle any emergency. Whenever there was a crisis, people assumed Mike would take care of it. Far more responsibility was heaped upon him than he felt he could bear. Yet he kept on trying. After several years, Mike began to find it increasingly difficult to be in groups of people, perform his everyday duties, or even go to a movie. Often his blood pressure was as high as 200, his head throbbed, his heart pounded, he broke out all over in a sweat, his knees shook, and at times he even collapsed. Days in bed could not relieve his exhaustion. No longer able to work, he had to go on disability.

Jean was a talented concert pianist who was always afraid that her next concert would be a flop. When the night of a concert arrived, she spent several hours in such tremendous anxiety that her heart pounded. She experienced dizziness and flu symptoms, which often caused her to throw up. On stage, she never knew when her symptoms would become so bad she would have to stop playing and rush backstage for fear she might throw up.

What do each of these people have in common? These are all examples of a syndrome called Panic Disorder. The symptoms vary, but in each case the consequences are debilitating and invariably add to the anxiety of the person who has it. Who gets these attacks? It has been said that as many as one person in five has experienced some form, or will experience some form, of panic-anxiety attack in their lifetimes.

In each of the above case histories there are three common elements necessary to produce panic-anxiety attacks:

1. First, the person has some kind of kinky thinking. That is, they have bought into a belief systems that are in conflict and does not allow their bodies to relax. An example of this would be a belief that says "If you can't do a job right, don't do it at all," while at the same time believing, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again." Or the person may believe he is no good, not important and unable to do things. Yet, on the other hand, he believes he is smarter than the average person and could really do anything if he set his mind to it. Still a third belief that can create conflict is the belief that he has to prove himself. He feels he must prove that he has value, is worthwhile, talented, skilled or attractive. The problem is: If he believes he must prove something, there must be some doubt in his mind already. The harder he tries to prove it, the more he will doubt his own value, talents, skills, and/or looks.

Still another common conflicting belief is that you should never hurt anyone, yet at the same time, you want open and honest relationships. This is a contradiction. You can't have both values on an equal level. Joyce, the woman who had her throat collapse, is an example of someone who kept her feelings "locked up" inside. She did not want to "rock the boat." Her feelings eventually became so intense they soon screamed to be expressed. However, since she believed them to be unacceptable, she psychologically choked herself to the point that none of her feelings could get out. The conflict created a physical constriction of her throat until she could not breathe. It was as if she were strangling herself to keep her feelings inside.

The bottom line in kinky thinking for all panic-anxiety sufferers is: "I have to be in control or something terrible will happen to me." This belief almost always comes from some past event or events. We often see this in people who have been molested or raped, veterans coming home from military conflicts such as Iraq or Vietnam, and individuals who were victims of robbery or some environmental disaster. Their experience has led them to conclude that the world is not a safe place and "I can never let my guard down or I will be hurt."

2. The second element involved in creating the panic disordered person is an unconscious body response to any tension or anxiety that is experienced. When he is tense, he tenses his body more in an attempt to stay "in control" or "regain control." Most people who feel tension in their bodies will take a deep breath and relax. A panic disordered person who feels tension, tenses more because he is afraid of losing control. Tensing the body more creates more anxiety. Most people with panic anxiety are not aware they are doing this.

3. The third element is a habit of thinking in the future. Most anxiety is the result of living in the future and is called "stage fright anxiety." The person lives and worries about all the "what ifs" of life. "What if I have an attack when I'm on the freeway?" "If I tell anybody they will think I'm crazy." "What if I have an attack when I'm at church or the grocery store?" "What if there is really something physically wrong with me and the doctors are wrong?" The person with panic anxiety has been living in the future for some time. However, since the attacks began, he has lived more and more in fear of their reoccurrence. Anytime you think in the future, your body automatically tenses, preparing to act. Since these thoughts are in the future, there is nothing that can be done to channel the adrenalin produced. The result is: nerves and muscles become more and more stressed and tense.

To deal with your panic attacks, the very first step is to know that you are not alone. You are not the only one who has this disorder and your body is reacting to whatever your mind believes is true. Yes, his mind can create disabling, physical symptoms so that at times you cannot work or function in the world. Accepting that your body can really create the physical symptoms you are experiencing is difficult. Because you don't want to believe your mind can do this to your body you may delay treatment for months, or sometimes years, looking for a physical cause. You can spend thousands of dollars doing brain scans and going to psychiatrists for medication. Certainly all physical symptoms should be checked out, but once the medical doctors have told you it is not physical, don't delay getting counsel with a therapist who knows how to work with panic anxiety. The longer the symptoms continue, the harder they are to change. (An excellent website to check out is: [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).)

The second thing to know that can help you recover is: panic anxiety is not an illness (something caused by a bacteria, virus, or physical damage). It is an environmental disorder. You are not mentally ill. If you walk into a room and it is disordered, what do you need to do? Get it back in order!

A number of years ago, I had a client who woke up at 2:00 one Monday morning with her face swollen and her lip extended out to the end of her nose. She believed she must have some sort of fast-growing cancer.

She was rushed to the hospital. The doctor's diagnosis was "angioneurotic edema." He told her that it was something her mind, feelings, and emotions had created. He gave her a shot of cortisone and told her it would be at least two to three weeks before the swelling went down. She came into group therapy Monday evening and said that when the doctor had said this she thought, "Oh, that's wonderful because if I created it, I can uncreate it." For her, it was a real relief to know it was not a physical problem such as cancer. I worked with her in group therapy that night. She went home and confronted her husband using non-threatening "I Am" messages/statements. She let him know she wanted their relationship to be better and needed to share her feelings with him. She was able to express her feelings in constructive ways and he was willing to listen. She said she could actually feel the liquid draining from her face as she talked. She said that the fluid leaving her face and running down her neck felt the way it does when a person takes a cold drink of water and feels it running down the back of the throat. Within 25 minutes, her face had shrunk back to its normal size.

The pain of panic-anxiety attacks can be physically excruciating, but once you accept that you are not alone and that you really do create the problem, then you are ready to take steps to uncreate it. Then you can work on the three areas mentioned above. In therapy, you will need to deal with your belief systems and your body's reaction to stress. Only then can you learn to live in the "here and now" rather than the future.

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