Panic Attacks

Introduction

This information is intended for people who are suffering sudden, acute anxiety. It can be overwhelming in intensity and very frightening.

There are a number of simple things you can do to alleviate the problem and then manage yourself so the anxiety does not return to the same levels. However, our experience is that without some understanding of why they are asked to do certain things most people will not do them with the determination and consistency which makes them work. So this information is laid out as follows:

- A brief description of symptoms
- A brief explanation of the physiological processes behind the symptoms
- A list of the actions which will change these processes to relieve the symptoms.
- The basics done and calm restored, the remainder of the information elaborates what has been said with the intention of preventing a recurrence of the panic attacks.

Basic Anxiety

We are built by evolution to run away from danger. For example, a lion jumps out of the bushes; we 'freeze' for a moment, then run, get away and heave a huge sigh of relief. Good! This is what we are designed for. We tense, run, and then relax.

The 'freeze' is actually an automatic reaction to prepare the body to run by tensing muscles in the abdomen which mechanically push blood out (not needed immediately for digestion) and direct it to the main circulation where, mixed with sugars and fats (released from the pancreas and liver) the blood provides energy to the leg muscles for running away.

The first tension triggers adrenalin to boost circulation and the final relaxation provides a muscle contrast (from tense to relax) picked up by the brain to stop the adrenalin being produced. This is all as it should be. Because it works so quickly and so automatically we have survived dangers over a long evolutionary period.

But nowadays we seldom have lions as the trigger.

Instead it is a thought that we give ourselves. For example, 'Everyone will despise me if I fail my exams!'

Unfortunately, the body does not know the difference between a real lion as trigger and a 'lion thought' as trigger and reacts just the same. That is, your body prepares to run away from your thought. Mostly, we don't.

It is embarrassing to run in the middle of a social situation, so the preparation to run builds and builds in our bodies with no release. If at any point we run, or engage in a relieving physical action, the tension is released. If the preparation does not build excessively, all is well. But if the preparation 'overbuilds' we develop a syndrome called "hyperventilation."
Hyperventilation:

Hyperventilation is what most people call a 'panic attack.'

It happens like this:

- When we automatically tense the muscles of the abdomen, but they are never released, the tension begins to spread to other muscles in the chest.
- These tighten much of the lower chest cavity.
- We begin to breathe in a high and shallow way rather than fully with the entire lung.
- This means we breathe out too much carbon dioxide and build up too much oxygen in the blood.
- The typical symptoms of this are, (some or all of the following): Tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing, fast shallow breathing, light headedness (almost dizzy), pins and needles in the fingertips and other extremities, loss of co-ordination with a gradual sense of physical paralysis - except for the lungs.

Simple as this cause may be, many people feel that they are about to die. To repeat, it is very frightening once it begins to build up. Fortunately, the solution is simple.

What to do: For a short-term cure

- Breathe in the air you have just been breathing out.
- This is rich with carbon dioxide. You need to get more carbon dioxide into your blood. You could use a cylinder of carbon dioxide and a mask; you could put a paper bag (not plastic) over your head to capture and concentrate carbon dioxide so it’s available for you to breathe back in.
- You could cup your hands over your mouth, making a natural mask, and breathe back in your previously expelled air.
- Do this for a few minutes and the worst of the symptoms will disappear.
- You may feel quite shaken up however, as if in shock, so it may help to sit down for half-an-hour with a cup of sweet tea, or similar.
- It is easy to recreate the problem. Don’t!
- You can prevent the problem building again by relaxing your abdomen so the lower lung has plenty of room to take your full breath.
- Breathe slowly and fully.

What to do: for short-term Prevention

It is preferable not to need the cure above.

Far better to prevent like this:

- At the first sign of trouble - stop whatever you are doing
- Sit or lie down.
- Tense and release all the muscles in your body - several times if necessary.
- Breathe in and out slowly.
- Concentrate on breathing in.
• If you can get that right, breathing out will take care of itself.
• Place your fingertips together on your abdomen - make sure that every time you breathe in your fingertips are forced apart.
• Breathe as if into your stomach, in fact into the lower part of the lung, with the muscles so relaxed the lower part of the lung has plenty of room to expand and your fingertips come apart.
• Breathe slowly. If you do this, you will not hyperventilate. That is, you will not alter the gas mixture in your blood (through incorrect breathing) to trigger the symptoms you experience as so distressing.

With this calm window of opportunity, you can now think about thinking processes.

You will need to continue practising relaxation in order to ensure that tension does not build up again. There are many relaxation CDs and tapes on the market which can help. Find one which suits your personality style.

Alternatively, the Counselling Service has produced their own version with breathing and relaxation exercises to help with clinical practice and it can be purchased from reception at the Carrington Building (room 106) for £2.

Thinking about Thinking

Short-term prevention also needs to address the fact that thinking about unpleasant symptoms will tend to make them even worse. The cycle of fear spirals like this:

Experience symptoms/ Think about them and worry they will get worse/ Increase in Fear/ Increase in symptoms/ Back to Experience symptoms again.

In the short-term, try distancing yourself.

• Do mental games such as crossword puzzles, anything to divert attention from the symptoms. Without your interference, your body will settle down. It is good at looking after itself if only you will allow this.
• Focus on other people – try to recall everything you know about them. Focus on a photograph or a precious bracelet or watch - and recall the happy times to which they relate. Do something physical – take a walk around the campus and notice your surroundings or of course do sports if appropriate.
• Meditate - focus on a lighted candle, or the bud of a flower etc., and see it, really see it in every detail so you block out everything else.
• Think realistic thoughts, (not artificial 'positive' ones). For example, if you are in a panic taking an examination, focus on the fact that the love your family or friends feel for you is unconditional - regardless of whether you pass or not, or do well or not, they will love you just the same.
• Repeat over and over to yourself: "Love is not conditional on performance" while you visualise getting hugs from those who care for you.
How to practice realistic thinking:

You need to identify what it is you need to change before you try to change it!

- Many thoughts flash through our heads so quickly (and automatically out of habit) we are only fractionally aware of them. So, keep a diary. Monitor your thinking. When you feel stressed, anxious, or panicky, note the place, time, and the thoughts that preceded and accompanied those feelings. After a week or so you will be able to review this data and find only a few main themes of concern running through them.

- Question the assumptions. You may need a friend to help you see your assumptions. Replace existing thoughts with new realistic ones.

- Bear in mind we are talking about thoughts which maintain the problem so you will need to repeat to yourself over and over again the more realistic thoughts to get them to take effect, as well as the old habitual thoughts which are on automatic, but are now being disrupted.

What to do: For a long-term cure

You need to understand a bit more of what is going on, and then use this knowledge to change the way you behave and react.

In particular, you need to change the way you think and assign meaning to things. This is not easy and you will need professional help from a counsellor, psychologist, psychotherapist, or your GP.

Medication

Sometimes people are so overwhelmed by panic attacks that they wish for or need medication to calm them down in order that they take full advantage of psychological treatments available. If you are so panicky you cannot concentrate it is difficult to take advantage of psychological treatments!

An outline of pharmacological treatments for Panic Disorder can be found at: [www.dr-bob.org/tips/panic.html](http://www.dr-bob.org/tips/panic.html) but a conversation with your GP about how medication may affect concentration (especially for examinations) is crucial.

It is important you permit your psychologist/counsellor and your medical adviser to work together to help you so you do not depend on medication alone. The evidence is that medication alone leads to a high rate of relapse.

Therapy, or medication plus therapy, (along the lines discussed above, called CBT) leads to a high rate of permanent cure.

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