



## When Anxiety Turns to Panic

You're walking down the street when a sharp pain in the chest causes you to stop. Your first thought is of everyone you know who has suffered a heart attack. Is that what's happening to you?

Your hands feel sweaty, your breathing is rapid, shallow and difficult. You're flushed and can feel your throat tightening up. If the attack is serious enough, you may end up in a hospital. In milder cases, you almost certainly will see your doctor. What you felt was all too real and frightening.

Yet despite everything you experienced, the doctors find nothing physically wrong with you. More tests are ordered. Perhaps you are sent to a specialist. Despite their best efforts, the doctors find no physical problem. That worries you even more. You fear another such attack. When it happens, it's as bad, physically real and emotionally frightening as the first.

What was just described may never have happened to you, but it terrifies millions of people each year. But it's not a heart attack! It's a Panic Attack. And when it happens on a repeated basis, which often occurs, it's known as Panic Disorder, a very real and frightening affliction.

Panic Disorder is a condition that is much more common than most people realize. The Federal government's National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that 2.7 million Americans between 18 and 54 suffer from Panic Disorder each year.

Panic Disorder is a mental health problem with high costs. The first cost is the fear and anxiety it brings to the affected person. On top of that is the very real medical cost. Panic attacks are characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness or abdominal distress. Because the symptoms often mimic those of a heart attack or other life-threatening medical conditions, they usually lead to extensive and costly medical procedures and tests. It's often only after such tests fail to provide a physical diagnosis or relief that the correct diagnosis of Panic Disorder is reached.

Yet despite how serious, widespread and costly this condition is, we still know little about it. We know women are its most likely victims (about twice as many as men are affected). We also know it strikes early, since about half of those suffering from Panic Disorder develop the condition before age 24.

But one of the most frustrating aspects of Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder is that the exact cause is not known. The National Institute of Mental Health is currently conducting extensive research in this area, but has few answers as to why some people suffer from such severe attacks of fear and anxiety.

Many sufferers have had the terrible symptoms of Panic Attacks for years, able to get relief only for short periods of time. Now, however, there are medications used to treat anxiety that can help provide temporary relief or even more extended relief for some people. Unfortunately, some of these anti-anxiety medications are quite strong and can be very habit forming.

Antidepressants also may help some people, but they do not cure the problem. The National Institute of Mental Health now says that some of the best success in treating the condition has been through the use of a program combining appropriate medications with a type of psychotherapy known as cognitive-behavioral therapy. This teaches people how to view panic attacks differently and demonstrates ways to reduce anxiety.

Large scale studies are now evaluating such treatments. They're finding that appropriate treatment by an experienced professional can reduce or prevent panic attacks in 70% to 90% of people with Panic Disorder. Most patients show significant progress after a few weeks of therapy. Relapses may occur, but they can often be effectively treated.

While the symptoms of an initial Panic Attack continue to warrant the medical response usually associated with a heart attack, doctors and patients are being quicker to realize what the real problem may be when the physical threat is ruled out. Panic Disorder is a treatable mental health issue. If someone you know, or you, is suffering from such attacks, don't assume nothing can be done. See a mental health professional and start to get your life back on the right track.

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