

Panic Attacks

This week I want to talk about panic attacks and panic disorder. A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense feelings of fear and impending doom or danger that typically lasts for a fairly short time (about 15 minutes or less) but it can feel as though it lasts forever. You know you are having a panic attack when you feel symptoms such as the following:

- Your heart pounds or seems to beat irregularly
- You feel yourself struggling to breathe
- You get a feeling of detachment from yourself and your surroundings
- You get dizzy
- You feel nauseous
- You get tingling in your hands and feet
- You feel yourself sweating
- You might start to feel faint

Doesn't sound like fun does it? Panic attacks tend to be sudden and unexpected, and can leave you feeling you are possibly having a heart attack or losing your mind. Sometimes people just have one panic attack, while others may have several a week that seem as though they are taking over their life.

Perhaps you have suffered from panic attacks, or you know someone who has? Surveys suggest that in a 12-month period anywhere from 2 to 6% of the general population will experience panic attacks, and they often start in your 20s, so they might be more common than you think.

A panic attack is different from a normal reaction to something frightening or anxiety provoking, as it usually happens without there being an apparent real threat to your wellbeing. Unfortunately, if you go on to have recurrent panic attacks you can develop panic disorder, which is where you begin to worry when the next attack will happen, or you start changing your behavior or routines to try and avoid an attack happening. I once had a client, for example, who avoided shopping in a certain supermarket because he had a panic attack there, but gradually what happens is your world starts to shrink as you plan your life around the possibility of an attack. At worst people can develop agoraphobia, which is a fear of the world outside their home. This fear of fear can take a toll emotionally on the sufferer and those around them.

The causes of panic attacks are unclear. Some believe there could be a genetic predisposition to being more anxious, but what I have seen is it often seems to be maladaptive thinking patterns that drive the panic reactions, or a reaction to trauma or ongoing stress in your life. I experienced panic attacks in my 20s when I was going through a stressful period of a long commute to a job I hated every day, but the attacks went away when I finally took back control of my life.

Panic attacks can be helped in the first instance by giving strong reassurance to the person you know who is suffering. Help them to slow their breathing down and focus on something in front of them, and eventually the panic will subside. If the attacks have happened more

than once or twice then it is a good idea to visit your general practitioner. They are easy to diagnose but your doctor needs to rule out the possibility of health concerns such as low blood sugar or a reaction to another medication you might be taking. After that the treatment of choice is usually a series of visits to a good counsellor or psychologist, possibly with some medication to help you get over the worst of the symptoms.

While panic attacks can seem terrifying, the good news is that therapy alone (particularly cognitive behavioral therapy) is successful in 85% of cases. Supplementing your therapy with lifestyle changes and treatments such as mindfulness training, yoga, regular physical exercise and a good diet can help to bring lasting relief from panic disorder.