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NEWSLETTER

Prevail Over Your Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are a set of mostly **physical symptoms** that are triggered by **worry, fear or dread**. The intensity of the physical symptom adds fuel to an overwhelming sense of anxiety. You might have thoughts like this: "I'm having a heart attack. . .I'm choking to death. . . I'm going crazy. . . I can't breathe." In this article, you will learn how your body and mind create a panic attack. You will even learn how to use your body to create the symptoms of panic, proving to yourself that those symptoms are not dangerous. Finally, you will also learn a strategy that can help you stop a panic attack before it flares out of control.

Emotional Triggers of Panic

Your panic attack will probably follow an encounter with one or more experiences in life that provoke you to have intense and visceral emotions. Are you reactive to *social fears* such as rejection, disapproval or losing someone's love? Do you have *fears of objects*, such as dogs, spiders, or people? Might you be fearful of *environmental circumstances*, such as heights, closed spaces, or riding in an airplane?

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Fear of experiences is a trigger that is acquired after an initial attack. You can become fearful of having another panic attack, or what you think might happen if you have another attack: choking, dying, or heart attack. If you are expecting an emotional reaction, the intensity and unpleasantness of the physical symptoms can catch you



off guard, and can easily cause sufficient alarm to initiate calling an ambulance or seeking emergency care. Certainly, you should seek emergency care any time you fear that your life is in peril. Many panic attack sufferers have had the experience of seeking emergency care for a heart attack, only to find out their experience was panic.

The Physical Symptoms of Panic

All fears have a common component: **The Perception of Threat.** When we feel threatened, the hypothalamus, a tiny organ or organelle in of our brain, sends a signal to the autonomic nervous system (ANS) to prepare our body to survive the attack. The autonomic nervous system controls our internal organs: our heart, lungs, bladder, sweat glands, and digestive system. It is the activation of the body's internal organs that creates the physical symptoms that define a panic attack. During a panic attack, the heart speeds up in order to pump more oxygen into the system, causing

sensations of pounding or racing of the heart. Palpitations, or a strong or irregular heartbeat, may be present. Panic may trigger shakiness or trembling in the hands, heads, voice, legs, or trunk.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS OF PANIC ATTACKS

- #1 Heart palpitations, heart pounding or racing.
- #2 Sweating
- #3 Trembling or shaking.
- #4 Shortness of breath.
- #5 Sensation of choking or fear of choking.
- #6 Chest pain or discomfort.
- #7 Nausea or upset stomach.
- #8 Feeling dizzy or light-headed.
- #9 Numbness or tingling.
- #10 Fear of dying.

Panic Attacks...

...CREATE YOUR OWN!

You can cause physical symptoms of panic in your body by doing this simple exercise:

#1

Set a timer for 90 seconds.

#2

During the 90 seconds, breathe three times harder or faster than normally. Don't stop until the end of the 90 seconds.

#3

Take a few minutes and scan your body for any of the signs or symptoms of panic attacks.

You may be able to feel your heart beating, pounding or racing (a palpitation). Perhaps you are short of breath, feeling dizzy, or experiencing some tingling or numbness in your extremities or any of the other physical symptoms of panic attack. The physical sensations you created by trying this breathing exercise are identical to the symptoms that your autonomic nervous system creates when you experience a panic attack. The only difference is that the breathing exercise was done consciously; the autonomic nervous system works unconsciously, or from a place in your mind and body that cannot be accessed by your awareness.

LEARN TO CONTROL PANIC

Dr. Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps Score: Brain Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, said, "In order to change, people need to become aware of their sensations and the way that their bodies interact with the world around them." One way you can tame an oncoming panic attack is to shift your mind away from worry and stress and onto whatever is going on around you at the present moment. This strategy is called grounding.

Simply put your feet squarely on the floor or lie down on the floor. Sense the ground under your feet or your body. Take some deep breaths. Imagine the weight of your body, the weight of your troubles surrendering to gravity and sinking deeply into the ground beneath you. Think of five things that you see, four things that you hear, three things you can touch, and two things you can smell. Notice how it feels to relax. Explore if you can feel safe or protected as you let the weight of your body or the weight of your trouble just drain off of your body into the ground. Continue relaxing until the sense of threat that is pushing your fears goes away. Welcome any sensations of warmth, heaviness, tingling or numbness in your hands or other places in your body, as such signals that your body is relaxed, and hence are called relaxation signals. While the sense of panic tells you that the autonomic nervous system is on alarm; the sensations of relaxation tell you that the autonomic nervous system is at rest. Panic no longer controls you, but you control panic.

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