

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCA, NCC

Panic Disorders



Panic Disorder is an extreme form of anxiety that comes on unexpectedly, and sometimes repeatedly. It is characterized by intense fear because you don't know what is happening to you, and because of the physical symptoms that accompany it. They may include heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal pains, or even chest pains. You may think that you are going to die. You may find yourself in a state of terror, and you may feel sweaty, dizzy, or faint; you may feel nauseous, or flushed, or chilled. Your hands may feel numb or have a tingling sensation. You may feel like you are losing control, you may have a sense of approaching doom and that nothing is real anymore.

Sometimes, people with panic disorder have a fear of their own unexplained physical symptoms and can think they are having a heart attack, ready to die, or going crazy. The attacks cannot be foretold, and many with this disorder often fear the next attack, which can come even during sleep.

Episodes usually reach their peak in about ten minutes, although they may last longer. It usually begins late in adolescence or older and afflicts twice as many women as men, about six million people in the U.S.A. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop the disorder, and some people have only one. It is widely believed by mental health professionals to be an inherited tendency.

Panic order can become disabling; people will avoid places where they have had an episode, to the point they will stay away from normal activities such as shopping or driving or going to school, or to the movies or to a restaurant, and so on. When it advances this far it is called agoraphobia, or fear of open spaces.

Panic disorder is an authentic illness, but it can be treated with some medication, and with various forms of psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavior therapy, which serves to change thought patterns that produce fear and anxiety.

Sometimes, individuals with panic disorders have other mental or emotional problems, such as substance or alcohol abuse, or depression.

TIP OF THE WEEK: I have heard much worry and sometimes hysteria from various friends and acquaintances, concerning the state of our economy, despite the temporary, pre-election lowering of gas prices. As the financial uncertainty grows not only locally, but nationally and worldwide, anxiety about our future is rising. Many of us are in debt; others are on fixed incomes which stay put as prices rise. Our retirement funds are threatened or, in some cases, wiped out. Stores and factories are closing, and people are

losing part or all of their incomes. Many banks are in trouble, and worries about food prices and even food availability are becoming more widely spoken of. We cannot stop the process but we can do a few things to make ourselves feel more secure. Stop all unnecessary spending. Put up some non-spoilable food in the eventuality of a food crisis (you can always eat it later). Take your money out of the big national banks and put it into our local ones, and keep some cash on hand.

Use your upcoming vote wisely and don't support anyone who got us into this situation in the first place by their support of big banking and big business instead of supporting "we the people" who put them there in the first place to represent us.

Plant a winter garden. It is not too late to grow greens. A little garden on your lawn is prettier and more functional than grass, and takes not much more effort. Drive less, wear those old clothes a bit longer, cook more home-cooked meals, join or start a buying club. Buy locally. It is most important to get on good terms with your neighbors and friends, because in hard times, more than ever, we need to stick together and help each other out. Taking positive action is the best thing we can do to keep our anxiety down in these times.