

STOP PANIC ATTACKS

If you or a loved one are among the millions of people who have experienced a panic attack, you know that the experience is uncomfortable, if not downright terrifying. And for the many people who experience daily panic attacks, regaining control of the mind and body becomes a struggle so difficult that their daily lives are fractured. If you are of the people who experience paralyzing panic attacks, you may not be able to work, enjoy social outings, or even go out of the house to shop for groceries or drive for fear that a panic attack may take hold. This is the first part of a series of informative articles designed to help you learn about and cope with anxiety and panic, be it for yourself or someone else.

The fear of having a panic attack is called *anticipatory anxiety*. Anticipatory anxiety can be even more disabling than a panic attack itself. While an actual panic attack may only last a few minutes, anticipating when the next 'attack' may be a constant state of mind. It can last for long periods of time, and may result in a chronic state of anxiety.

Anticipatory anxiety may impair your relationships with others, since you are often preoccupied with the thought of panic. You may be so distracted by your fear of having another panic attack that you may not be able to focus on your family, your friends or your children. Your ability to concentrate is also affected, which may prevent you from working to your full potential, or enjoying favorite activities.

Your body may be habitually tense, waiting for the 'next one'. This is also a disabling effect, since having a tense body may actually lead to health problems such as hyperventilation, chest pain and muscle spasm. Take a moment to think about when you, or even a pet or animal is scared. For example, when a small animal is scared, he often 'freezes' holding in his breath and becoming motionless. This would be a natural reaction to an immediate threat, such as a nearby predator. But if the animal were to remain in a motionless, tense position after the threat of danger has passed, he may develop problems such as stiff joints or lack of oxygen to the brain (leading to dizziness). Likewise, if you are in a constant state of 'threat patrol', or what is called *hypervigilance*, your body will begin to feel the effects!

So how do you control the state of anticipatory anxiety? First and foremost, you should understand that while the state of anxiety and panic can be natural, as in *fight or flight response*, anticipatory anxiety is a completely useless and often damaging state of mind. Some people may actually enjoy the feelings associated with anticipatory anxiety, such as thrill seeking roller coaster riders or skydivers. However, these people are able to shed the anxiety once the task or event has passed. How do they do that? To stop anxiety or panic, the body engages the *parasympathetic nervous system*. This is the body system that shuts down the responses to danger. It releases chemicals that induce the muscles to relax, the lungs to take deeper breaths and the heart to slow down. People with panic and anxiety must often kick start their own parasympathetic responses. Ways to do this include:

Deep, I mean DEEP breathing. The kind of breathing that raises your chest skyward. Remember to exhale as deeply, deflating your chest completely

Consciously relax your muscles, starting with the head. You may notice your forehead is furrowed, or your hands are clenched. Take a moment to identify the body parts that are physically tense. Then simply let that body part 'go'. Let go of any control you have over it. Your face may droop and your shoulders may sag, but you will begin to relax.

Eat or drink something! When in danger, animals' digestive systems often shut down, so more energy can be spent on fleeing or planning escape.

- Recognize it is a Panic Attack and say it aloud. It is not some diagnosis but a fleeting moment of anxiety. Tell yourself that it will not kill you but it will pass.

- Recognize that you are engaging in negative thinking of fear based thoughts and change them to the positive. Goal is to reduce anxiety and begin to replace with positive ideas for change or pleasant, pleasing thoughts.

- Breathe in through the mouth and out through the nose. Make these strong breaths in order to flood the brain with oxygen. Now you are starting to control your panic attack rather than just coping.

- Now ask yourself why you are worrying about things so much. Most of the things we worry about rarely happen. Or it is a falsehood we are entertaining and creating fear.

- Feed yourself with a pep talk and say it aloud, better yet tell yourself in the mirror and repeat it again and again.

- Write down positive affirmations that you can look at through the day. Stop the criticism of yourself and stop being a victim. Write the good things people tell you about yourself. Stop dwelling on the negative.

- Do something physical, get up every hour at work and take a break. Take a walk, do yoga but do something that keeps you motivated.

- Find a safe place for you to decompress. Maybe a favorite chair, a room or even in your mind when you think of things have been pleasing to you.

- When you are not in a panic attack, write down worries that did not ever happen and discover all the worries that did not occur but you wasted precious time on.

- Realize that your panic attack will go away and this will pass. Stay Calm.