

Panic Attacks

ARE ANY OF THESE EXPERIENCES FAMILIAR TO YOU?

- Maybe you found yourself in the hospital's A&E because you thought you were having a heart attack only to be told later it was anxiety?
- Do you ever fear you might stop breathing because your chest feels tight and your breathing erratic?
- When you drive do you fear the idea of getting stuck in traffic, on a bridge, or at red lights?
- Do you ever feel nervous and afraid you might lose control or go insane?
- Have you struggled with anxious thoughts that will not stop?
- Do you ever feel uncomfortable in enclosed spaces such as supermarkets, cinemas, public transport or even sitting at the hair dressers?
- Are you nervous and on edge in normal situations that never bothered you before?

DO YOU FEEL ANY OF THE FOLLOWING BODILY SENSATIONS?

- Dizzy spells leading to panic?
- Tightness in throat and chest and possibly shortness of breath?
- Racing heart with tingling sensations?
- Hot flushes followed by waves of anxiety?
- Obsessive worries and unwanted thoughts?
- Not feeling connected to what is going on around you?
- Overwhelming fear that the anxiety will push you over the edge?

Very often, experiencing one or more of the above symptoms could indicate you may be having a panic attack.

There is much written about anxiety and panic attacks. Why? - because they are an essential part of being human. Panic attacks and anxiety are abilities that have kept us safe for millions of years, allowed us to survive, evolve and succeed as a species. And this is why ...

When the world was a dangerous place, without anxiety and panic attacks we would not have carefully scanned the environment for danger and so may have died out as a species.

What Panic Attacks are for...

Many thousands of years ago, a woman was walking through a gorge with rock walls that stretched up towards the sun, shrouding the gorge floor in shade. She was making her way to a spring near where she and her tribe lived. As she rounded a corner, she found herself face to face with a huge bear.

Surprised by her, the animal attacked, swinging a massive paw. It knocked her off her feet, cutting her badly with its sharp claws and breaking three of her ribs. Despite her injuries she sprang to her feet feeling no pain and ran back the way she had come.

Over the following months, her body healed and she was able to contribute once again as a member of her tribe. She started on light work and was gathering twigs one day when she came to a stone cliff that stretched up above her, shading her from the sun. She suddenly began to feel very uneasy and looked around. There was nothing to be seen but still the feeling increased. She dropped her bundle, turned and ran back to the safety of her tribe.

'Man the hunted'

We have long referred to man as 'man the hunter'. In evolutionary terms, and with regard to anxiety and panic attacks, this is highly misleading. We did not survive in hostile environments by being over-confident, brash, loud animals. We survived by learning how to be quiet, timid and very, very careful.

In a world where most large animals were stronger, faster, more vicious and armed with teeth or claws, the best way for humans to survive was avoidance.

Panic attacks are good for you!

The highest level of anxiety, often called a panic attack, or the 'fight or flight' response, is a fantastic emergency mechanism which puts your body in the perfect state for tackling your aggressor or getting out of there fast.

All the adrenaline, the alterations in blood flow, the changes in the digestive system and so on, are designed to give you the best chance to stay alive.

For survival purposes, once we have 'learned' that a certain situation is dangerous by panicking, the mind 'remembers' this fact to ensure that the next time it experiences a similar situation, it can give you the necessary anxiety or panic to enable you to run or fight, just like the woman in the story.

This is not the normal type of 'remembering' like remembering a name or telephone number, it is the sort that makes you feel good when you hear a particular piece of music, or feel happy when you look at holiday photos, or maybe feel a bit like a kid again when you walk into school as an adult.

'Sloppy' Unconscious pattern matching

We call this type of remembering 'unconscious pattern matching' because it is the 'back part' of your mind, the unconscious mind, that causes you to react in a certain way when it spots a particular situation or other 'trigger'.

So if you have a panic attack in a car, you might feel anxious next time you are on a bus or train, because the situation is roughly similar. As far as survival goes, it is much better for us to 'err on the side of caution'.

When a cliff becomes a gorge

The woman in the story above came to a cliff that roughly matched her terrifying experience in the gorge. She had 'learned unconsciously' that high rock walls = danger.

Despite the fact that she knew consciously that this was a different situation, her unconscious mind, looking out for her survival, 'erred on the side of caution' and gave her the necessary resources to get out of there fast.

What does this tell us about **treatments for anxiety and panic attacks**?
It tells us:

- that we have to take into account the unconscious aspects when treating these problems.
- that they are natural responses that can become habitual ones.
- that this can look like a problem with body chemistry, but that this not true in the vast majority of cases.
- that new skills, approaches and understandings can show us how to be calm again in situations that previously caused anxiety and panic.

Although an 'anxiety cure' is not possible or desirable, new, more appropriate patterns and associations can replace unhelpful ones, leading to an effective cure for panic attacks..

There is plenty of reason for hope. With a combined approach of thinking strategies, relaxation and visualisation techniques, knowledge and lifestyle alterations, even the most severe of panic and anxiety disorders can be cured.

Anxiety is a permanent ability that can get out of hand, particularly in today's complex and highly stimulating environments.

Safety in the modern world

If you're thinking, 'Well what does this have to do with my life today?' then you're right. This heritage has left us with the ability to be scared, to scan our environment for danger and to panic. The important thing to realise is that this ability can be used habitually and inappropriately.

A permanent 'problem' needs a long-term solution

What we need is the ability to use our anxiety well. We need to become a little bit anxious when we are going to do a presentation. We need to be able to become a little bit anxious in unfamiliar surroundings. We need to be able to panic if attacked and we need to be able to relax when anxiety is unnecessary.

You can re-educate your mind and body to deal with stress and anxiety in various ways. You can learn to identify 'triggers' and stress provoking situations, and review and modify your way of responding to these situations. You can take control - and stop the worrying and anxiety controlling you.

EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique) can help you nip anxiety in the bud and bring you back to a state of calmness, putting you back in control.

Hypnotic sessions are also useful in dealing with panic attacks; they will re-educate your unconscious mind to respond more appropriately, banishing panic and high anxiety for good.