

More about Understanding Panic and Anxiety Symptoms

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Taken from the book <u>Overcoming Anxiety and Depression and Breathing Correctly in</u> <u>COPD/Emphysema: A Self Care Book for People with COPD and a Psychosocial Manual for Professionals</u>

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The best thing you can do to understand your body's defense system is to honor it and try to work with it. It's true that panic symptoms are an enormous nuisance, still their purpose is to ensure our survival! You were born with an essential "emergency/rescue system" or "fight-flight" response. Thank your body for doing what it's supposed to do, but learn what to do when it is operating in overdrive and receiving false signals.

With this attitude of mind, you might just be able to counter such catastrophic thoughts as, "Am I losing my mind?" or, "I have lost total control over my body!" and superimpose assuring and calming thoughts such as, "This will be lot better as I calm down and do my pursed-lip breathing," or "This too shall pass when I focus on exhaling and relaxing."

Handling Catastrophic Thoughts

Note that I didn't suggest that you try to "avoid" or "not think" catastrophic thoughts. I am asking you to "counter" the catastrophic thoughts and "superimpose" more helpful thoughts. This technique is different from the more common advice you might receive such as, "Don't think those morbid thoughts!"

Why should you counter catastrophic thoughts? Because, those thoughts can produce massive fear, and trigger or aggravate the fight-flight response. Some would say, "Well, those are just thoughts. Thoughts come and go. Why do you need to do anything about them?" The problem is that thoughts are also physical in nature. Thoughts release real chemicals and hormones and thus have a real effect on the body, breath and mind. Watch those negative thoughts. Remember most people tend to think negative and worrisome thoughts over and over again, but they don't do the same thing with positive and encouraging thoughts!

Thoughts can be as real as real things. For example, one doesn't have to actually see a tiger; just the thought of meeting a tiger in the lonely woods can trigger a real fight-flight response. The thought of a tiger attacking you or your tiger-like boss attacking you can set off your emergency alarm.

Some don't believe they had any thoughts before they panicked, "I wasn't thinking of anything, it (panic attack) just came out of the blue." By understanding and cooperating with the body's defense system, you can modify the symptoms of a panic attack.

Suppose you *suddenly* notice rapid breathing, chest heaving up and down, hot flashes and heart racing. But it might not have been so sudden. Your anxiety or concern might have been building up all day below your level of awareness. Perhaps, you were worried all day about your more-than-usual wheezing or tightness in the chest you noticed that morning. As you noticed it, maybe thoughts crossed your mind about a possible flare up of COPD symptoms or pneumonia. As the pneumonia thought crossed your mind, perhaps you saw a "flash" in the mind's eye of being in the ICU of your local hospital.

And, from that point on, to continue with the example, perhaps your breathing speeded a little, heartbeat quickened and chest tightened. You took all that on the chin without making a big deal of it, until the panic symptoms loudly knocked on the door and the "emergency alarm" went off.

Not being aware of the relationship between your anxious thoughts and rapid breathing, you might feel you've lost all control over yourself. The adrenaline "rush," the fuel for the "fight-flight motor" wants you to flee but you can't because someone is right there in the room. You don't want to look like you're doing something "crazy" right in front of your housequest. You become more tense up

and ever more breathless!

This takes you right to the panic state and you start hyperventilating. You begin to think catastrophic thoughts such as, "My breathing could get out of control, "I am going crazy," "I'm losing control (or losing my mind)," or "I won't make it to the hospital!" and this can increase the anxiety severely.

Now, the panic attack has reached the "Point of No Return" and you experience a full-blown panic attack.

Forestalling a panic attack - a scenario with better ending

Let's now draw a scenario with a better ending! Say, you had completed an author's workshop on "Panic Attacks in Medical Patients." Were you to experience wheezing or chest tightness that morning, you would've halted, or at least

ameliorated, those worrisome thoughts and focused on taking proactive steps such as checking your breathing function, blood pressure, pulse and oxygen level, and the recommended medication.

Say, you were still anxious during the day lest your symptoms escalate. As soon as you were to notice shallow breathing, accelerated heart rate or rapid breathing, you would've right away taken such corrective breathing measures as slowing down your breathing, pacing the breathing or doing pursed lip breathing before it could escalate to the point of hyperventilation.

To continue with the "happy-ending" example, instead of catastrophic thoughts, you would've given yourself positive messages such as, "My breathing is slowing down," or "I am going to calm down," or "Pursed lip breathing will help me to get the excess air out of my lungs. I'll feel better in a short while!"

Thus, by recognizing the signs early on, you can nip a panic attack in the bud. When you try to regulate your breathing and change anxiety-provoking thoughts as they show up, panic attack symptoms are less likely to escalate to the point of no return. As the saying goes, "A stitch in time saves nine," you might experience symptoms that are uncomfortable but you might just be able to avoid a full-blown panic attack.

At any rate, with practice as you get better in recognizing the symptoms pretty early on and bring your breathing to normal, panic attacks might become a thing of the past.

Note: When you acquire skills in slowing and normalizing your breathing and in changing your hot thoughts to cool thoughts, you may also be able to reduce the severity of your breathlessness.

Panic attack symptoms, despite their unpleasantness, are proof that your emergency system works! Biologically speaking, panic symptoms perform a very vital function. Panic symptoms occur because the body is preparing itself to deal with an emergency. Therefore, panic symptoms show that the body is doing its job, even though in a bizarre way. It's weird to think that we should be grateful for having a fight-flight system in our body that gives us so much trouble. But the fight-flight system shows that our body and mind are working normally and logically. That is exactly how we are supposed to react in case of an emergency.

The problem is that once the alarm falsely goes off, it keeps going off. I like to draw the analogy of a house alarm. Suppose the two wires in the house smoke alarm come loose. They might start touching each other and accidentally setting off the alarm. For instance, you walk on the floor in your house that causes vibrations/ tremors in the wall on which the house smoke alarm hangs. As a result of the vibrations, wires touch each other and the alarm goes off! We have to be able to tell when it's a false alarm. We must also learn to shut it off at will by using the techniques I will discuss later.

Logical Explanation of Specific Symptoms

Here is the explanation of how and why the following symptoms take place.

Shortness of breath or rapid breathing is intended by nature to help us run, or fight (notice when runners run or fighters fight, they are breathing rapidly). The heart beats fast and strong because it's the heart's job to rush the blood to the arms and legs. After all, we need our arms and legs to run or to fight.

The reason you feel **lightheaded**, **faintish or dizzy** is because the blood is being diverted from the head and rushed to the peripheries, that is, your arms and legs.

Some panic attack patients feel as if they are **in a dream** or that panic attack events are happening to someone else. This is called a state of dissociation. Anxiety can cause dissociation from the normal level of awareness. Such experiences also result from blood/oxygen being diverted from the brain.

Since you need the "fuel" for your "fight-flight engine," adrenaline is being pumped into the blood. Adrenaline is **sheer energy**, which creates excess heat in the body. The heat can sometimes cause hot flashes all over the body or in parts of the body. Since blood is being diverted to some areas of the body, you may experience cold chills in other parts of the body. Sweating also serves an important function, so the body's engine doesn't get too heated. In a panic attack, you may start sweating which occurs to cool down your body after excessive heat has been generated in the system.

Trembling or shaking in the arms and legs, or numbness or tingling

sensations in parts of the body or the whole body can result from oxygen-carbon dioxide imbalance and the nervous system firing off. I like to explain to myself that my engine is "racing" but the vehicle is not going anywhere. By that I mean, that all the chemicals and hormones, *the fuel*, is rapidly pouring in to prepare me to fight or run but I am not actually fighting or running. I am just sitting there huffing and puffing.

If I were to actually run, I would view my rapid breathing, heart racing and leg shaking as very normal result of my running. Runners don't think they are having a panic attack. They are just running!

Experiences such as, **rubbery legs, jelly legs, or wobbly feeling** can result from expanded blood vessels in the legs. Legs are supplied with plenty of blood to make them extra efficient for fighting or fleeing.

The rumor (or fact) is that Elvis Presley, the king of the rock, invented the gyrating movements as part of his singing because his legs would constantly shake as a result of stage fright. Presley acted on the age-old wisdom "when you can't fight them, join them." So, constant shaking and moving of the legs became a part of his rock music.

You might also experience 'butterflies,' upset tummy or even diarrhea. Anxious patients also commonly report the need for **frequent urination** which is not due to prostate or bladder problems. So, abdominal discomfort or urinary urgency are undoubtedly a nuisance but still a part of Mother Nature's clever design! Think about it — Why would you want to carry excess weight when the house is on fire? You want to run out of the house as fast as you can. In order to "travel light" or more appropriately accomplish a "fighting / fleeing operation, the body intends to empty the bowel and bladder during the emergency operation.