



Panic Disorder



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What is Panic Disorder ?

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorders, characterized by repeated 'panic attacks', which are discrete periods of intense fear and its associated physical symptoms such as palpitation, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, chest discomfort, and dizziness etc. People with panic disorder often worry that these symptoms are indicative of severe illnesses such as heart disease or losing control, and would thus prevent the occurrence of panic attacks by avoiding certain places or situations. Such avoidance can increase feelings of fear and anxiety, resulting in a vicious cycle of panic and anxiety.

What are the causes of Panic Disorder ?

A number of factors may be involved in the causes of panic disorders. Stressful life events and major life transitions, such as long-term unemployment, loss of a loved one can trigger panic disorders. Initially, when people are under considerable stress, the brain's normal mechanism for reacting to a threat is activated. This is the so-called "flight-or-fight" response. Nonetheless, as such attacks seem to come "out of the blue", they are usually interpreted as signs of life-threatening disease or "going crazy". Subsequently, when mild bodily responses to external triggers (like exercising, caffeine consumption) were realized, some people develop an intense apprehension of having another attack and such heightened anxiety then could actually bring on a panic attack.

There is no single cause of panic disorder, some of the contributing factors include:

a. Biological factors

Heredity, chemical imbalances of neurotransmitters, overly sensitive sympathetic nervous system

b. Psychological factors

People who are anxiety-prone, pessimistic, and lack sense of security

c. Environmental factors

Negative childhood experiences, stressful events (e.g. experience of disasters, accidents), other daily life stressors (e.g. changing jobs, interpersonal problems)

How Do I Know if I have Panic Disorder ?

If you experience a sudden and intense period of fear or discomfort that lasts for several minutes when there is no obvious danger, with 4 or more of the following symptoms, you may be experiencing a panic attack. If you experience repeated attacks, and worry about the possibility of having another attack in the future, you may be suffering from panic disorder. The symptoms of a panic attack include:

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1. Palpitation	2. Sweating	3. Trembling
4. Difficulty breathing	5. Nausea	6. Sensations of choking
7. Chest pain or discomfort	8. Dizziness or fainting	9. Hot flushes and chills
10. Tingling sensation or numbness in limbs	11. Fear of dying	12. Fear of losing control or going crazy
13. Derealization (Feeling in dream-like state where the environment seems unreal) or depersonalization (feeling of being outside of yourself without any sense of control)		

What is the Course of Panic Disorder?

After experiencing the first panic attack, some people will start to develop many worries relating to these attacks. For instance, they may worry that they are suffering from a serious heart problem, worry that they may not be able to get help when they faint on the street, or worry that they are going mad and lose control. These worries would cause people to prevent panic attacks from occurring, by heightening their awareness of their bodily symptoms, avoiding places or situations where escape would be difficult or help would be unavailable (e.g. long bus rides, elevators, crowded places), or avoiding travelling alone. These avoidance behaviours would lead to further anxiety, and could eventually develop into 'agoraphobia' (fear of public places), which severely restricts an individual's activities, and impacts on one's work, relationships, and quality of life.

What are the Treatments for Panic Disorder ?

1. Medication - Prescribed medication can be taken to alleviate severe symptoms of panic disorder.
2. Psychotherapy - Cognitive-behavioural therapy is an effective treatment for panic disorder and agoraphobia. It is designed to help individuals modify their irrational anxiety-provoking thoughts, and confront the feared objects or situations in a gradual manner (e.g. take a long bus ride), with the aim of reducing one's anxiety and expanding one's comfort zone. Initially, individuals will feel uneasy when facing feared objects or situations in therapy, but with repeated exposure anxiety will be reduced gradually. Also, individuals can learn relaxation techniques to help reduce their anxiety. Active participation in therapy from individuals with panic disorder and from their family members (e.g. by providing supervision and support) are essential for effective treatment.