



Panic Disorder

What is it?

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense anxiety symptoms that tend to peak within 10 minutes. People usually experience symptoms like shortness of breath, heart palpitations, dizziness, fear of going crazy, sweating or shaking.

Repeated panic attacks can create a concern about having future panic attacks which often results in the person changing their behaviour to reduce the likelihood of another panic attack. For example, some people will carry a bottle of water or keep their phone close as a safety mechanism while others avoid exercise due to fear of the physical sensation that an increased heart rate produces.

While safety and avoidance behaviours are usually effective in the short term, they maintain the anxiety in the long run. People suffering from panic attacks often fear that the physical sensations they experience will lead to a catastrophic event such as a heart attack. These thoughts further fuel the fear of physical symptoms of anxiety.

While panic attacks can occur out of the blue, some people find these attacks strike in situations that are difficult to escape, like driving through a tunnel, being on a train or in the midst of a large crowd of people. This can create a fear and avoidance of these situations, a phenomenon called Agoraphobia.

How common is it?

According to the 2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health, it is estimated that 1 in 38 Australians experienced panic disorder in the 12 months before the survey.

People with panic disorder frequently also meet criteria for other disorders, most commonly other anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar disorder, alcohol use and certain medical conditions, including dizziness, cardiac arrhythmias, hyperthyroidism, asthma, COPD and irritable bowel syndrome.

What can I do about it?

If you are concerned about your symptoms, particularly if they are affecting your quality of life, we recommend to make an appointment to discuss your concerns with a qualified mental health professional, like a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist. In some cases, a combined approach of seeing a psychiatrist and clinical psychologist has been found to be most helpful.

Professional Help

Because people suffering from Panic Disorder usually fear the symptoms of anxiety, therapy tends to involve purposely eliciting and gradually confronting patients with these symptoms within a controlled environment which allows the body to habituate and reduce its false alarm response. A careful analysis and reduction of any avoidance or safety behaviours is also critical.

Contact Us

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