

Fact Sheet: Panic Attack, Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia

Panic Attack

Definition: A panic attack is the abrupt onset of an episode of intense fear or discomfort that peaks in approximately 10 minutes and includes at least 4 of these symptoms:

- ◆ a feeling of imminent danger or doom
- ◆ the need to escape
- ◆ palpitations
- ◆ sweating
- ◆ trembling
- ◆ shortness of breath or a smothering feeling
- ◆ a feeling of choking
- ◆ chest pain or discomfort
- ◆ nausea or abdominal discomfort
- ◆ dizziness or lightheadedness
- ◆ a sense of things being unreal; depersonalization
- ◆ fear of losing control or "going crazy"
- ◆ fear of dying
- ◆ tingling sensations
- ◆ chills or hot flashes

There are **3 types of panic attack**:

- 1) Unexpected: the attack "comes out of the blue" without warning and for no discernable reason.
- 2) Situational: situations in which an individual always has an attack (e.g., when entering a tunnel).
- 3) Situationally predisposed: situations in which an individual is likely to have a panic attack, but does not always have one (e.g., one who sometimes has attacks while driving).

Panic Disorder

Description, diagnosis, onset: 6 million Americans age 18 and older, or about 2.7%, are estimated to have panic disorder, diagnosed when an individual suffers at least 2 unexpected panic attacks followed by at least 1 month of concern over having another attack. Sufferers are also prone to situationally predisposed attacks. The frequency and severity of the attacks varies from person to person. One individual might suffer from repeated attacks for weeks, while another will have short bursts of very severe attacks. Sufferers often worry about the physical and emotional consequences of their panic attacks. Many become convinced that the attacks indicate an undiagnosed illness and will submit to frequent medical tests. Even after tests come back negative, people with panic disorder will remain worried that they have a physical illness. Some individuals will change their behavior patterns, avoiding the scene of a previous attack, for example, in hopes of avoiding another attack. Age of onset of panic disorder varies from late adolescence to mid-30s. Relatively few suffer from the disorder in childhood.

Agoraphobia

Description: Agoraphobia often, but not always, coincides with panic disorder. Agoraphobia is characterized by the fear of having a panic attack in a place from which escape is difficult. Many sufferers refuse to leave their homes, often for years at a time. Others develop a fixed route, or territory -- the route between home and work, for example -- from which they cannot deviate. It becomes impossible for these people to travel beyond what they consider to be their safety zones without suffering severe anxiety.