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Panic/Anxiety Control Program

Behavioral techniques for controlling panic and anxiety. Help get back in control of your life.

Written by L. John Mason, Ph.D., Author of the Bestseller; Guide to Stress Reduction.

Symptoms of panic and anxiety can be confused with life threatening physical disorders! Please consult your physician to determine the source of your symptoms.

This is an update of specific things you can do to control the symptoms of panic and anxiety attacks. These devastating occurrences can negatively affect your day to day quality of life. But this is not news for anyone suffering from this terrible disorder. Millions of people live in fear of these "attacks." Major transitions, trauma, and stress can lead to feelings of little or no control over one's life! This can affect people in major ways.

A scary symptom which can develop is called Panic (or Panic Attack.") A panic episode can come on suddenly or can awaken you from your sleep with a nasty feeling of apprehension. Some people believe that they are having a heart attack because often there is chest pain, a shortness of breath, neck or arm pain, major stomach upset, an adrenaline rush, lightheadedness, dizziness, and other unpleasant feelings of fear and apprehension. These feelings can be triggered by specific events such as: driving (getting stuck in traffic), shopping, waiting in lines at stores, banks, post offices, etc, feeling trapped in church/movies/classes, travelling distances from home (especially flying, etc.), making a presentation in front of a group of people (drawing attention toward yourself), doing new or unfamiliar activities, meeting new people, basically, doing anything new or seemingly stressful where you may fear "LOSING CONTROL." Loss of control is the main feature that makes this so frightening for the people who suffer from panic and anxiety. We may not know a panic sufferer by looking at him or her because they can maintain such good control that unless we were to look very carefully we might not notice the nervousness below the surface.

Heart problems, chest pain, and respiratory difficulties (hyperventilation and dizziness are common symptoms of panic/anxiety attacks) should be carefully examined by your physician! If no heart related problem exists, but you are still in great fear of these occurrences of panic then the following behavioral program, with practice, will greatly aid you in preventing or at least minimizing the episodes of panic. Also, remember that exciting/positive actions or events can raise your heart rate. This excitement is not bad or life threatening, but you fear of the physical symptoms of excitement can really hamper your enjoyment of life!



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The keys to controlling panic and anxiety are:

- Breathe slowly/diaphragmatically
- Remain in the present... in your body, in a positive way
- Positive self-talk... not negative ruminations
- Avoid caffeine and stimulants
- Regular aerobic exercise
- Regular deep relaxation with Biofeedback Temperature monitoring
- Use relaxation tapes/CD's regularly!
- Learn to warm your hands and feet
- Get support in confronting and then desensitizing yourself to fears/phobias
- Taper your anti-anxiety medication after you have mastered the relaxation-biofeedback

1. Learn to breathe diaphragmatically

- Place a hand over your upper abdomen
 - a) Push it OUT as you inhale
 - b) Let in move IN as you exhale
 - c) Let your chest, shoulder, neck, and back relax as you breathe. Only on a very deep breath should these parts move in the breath.

This may be the most important Panic Control Technique you can learn!

2. Use any of the Stress Management CDs, especially, #205 Stress Management for Controlling Panic and Anxiety, 1-3 times per day for 8-12 weeks.

After achieving a level of controlled deep relaxation, repeat suggestions of "control," especially control of slow, regular breathing and slow regular heart rate. Suggestions of "letting go" to help achieve hand and foot warming, along with any visualizations that can encourage this increase of peripheral blood flow, would be very useful, as well.

Use StressDots (from Jeffers Health Systems 949.837.7771) or some sort of temperature training biofeedback device on your hands to learn how to warm your hands with relaxation. When you can consistently get above 90 degrees Fahrenheit (93-95 degrees is ideal) then you can begin to master warming your feet to 90 degrees.

When you can "let go" by relaxing and warming your hands and feet, you will be able to control if not prevent your panic episodes. Then you must develop the confidence in your control so the fear of panic will not control your life.



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3. Regular exercise will help you to work off the effects of life's stresses

3-5 times per week of regular exercise that can elevate your heart rate for 15-45 minutes would be best. Check with your doctor before beginning an exercise program if you have been inactive for a long while. Even though elevating your heart rate can be a little scary, the release of tensions and the strengthening of your cardiovascular system will have great benefits.

4. Eat regular meals.

Low fat and complex carbohydrates are better than fast foods with lots of sugar. AVOID CAFFEINE and other stimulants. Caffeine is found in coffee, black teas, cola drinks, chocolate, some over-the-counter pain medications, and other foods/drugs. Read labels. Eating as closely as you can to natural foods (lots of: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, etc.) will benefit any one.

5. Practice positive self-talk.

Do not let your fears escalate into you losing control of your body and your mind. By breathing slowly and staying in your body, in present time, you avoid falling into the negative pattern of fear and panic.

6. Get support from your friends, doctor, and a therapist if necessary.

Check your area for panic/anxiety support or treatment groups! Regular use of anti-anxiety medications may be better than just taking your prescription only after the panic has begun. Reduce your medication in a supervised way after you have mastered the relaxation/biofeedback control techniques.

Remember you can get back in control of your body and your life! You must make this a priority so you can avoid being a victim to this set of scary symptoms.

Panic/anxiety is not always your enemy. This reaction is designed to protect you and may teach you something about the stresses and transitions you are going through. Denial of these challenges only creates a more stubborn set of symptoms that can be more debilitating.

Other Good books that can help you:

David Barlow, Ph.D. and Jerome Cerny, Psychological Treatment of Panic, Guilford Press, New York. 1988.

Susan Lark, MD, Anxiety & Stress: A Self-Help Program, Westchester Publishing Company, Los Altos, CA. 1993.