

What is panic disorder?

Panic attacks are the defining feature of panic disorder. Panic attacks are episodes of extreme anxiety and/or bodily discomfort that come on quite suddenly and unpredictably. Panic attacks are much more intense and upsetting than "regular anxiety" that we all experience. In fact, during a panic attack, most people feel a profound sense of danger that their physical safety or their capacity to control themselves is threatened.

Symptoms of panic disorder:

Not every person has the same pattern of symptoms. However, every person with panic disorder has some combination of the following symptoms:

1. Shortness of breath or smothering sensations
2. Dizziness, unsteady feelings or faintness
3. Palpitations or accelerated heart rate
4. Trembling or shaking
5. Sweating
6. Choking sensations
7. Nausea or abdominal distress
8. Depersonalization or derealization (feeling outside yourself, strange, unreal)
9. Numbness or tingling sensations
10. Hot flashes or chills
11. Chest pain or discomfort
12. Fear of dying, going crazy, fainting, losing control, becoming confused, causing an embarrassing "scene" or being unable to get to a "safe" place.

Panic attacks often lead to "catastrophizing"

Individuals with chest pain, palpitations, rapid heart rate and tingling in their fingertips may feel quite certain they are having a heart attack and may make repeated visits to emergency rooms or to cardiologists. Those with dizziness, sensations of unsteadiness, "jelly legs" and numbness may feel quite certain they are having a stroke or a neurological problem and may persist with many related consultations. If depersonalization and derealization are the primary symptoms, the individual is likely to fear "going crazy" or losing control and is likely to be both terrified and secretive about such fears. Some people become very preoccupied with all bodily sensations, as if they were potential signals of an illness that all the doctors have missed.

Do people recover from panic disorder?

For most people, effective treatment requires some combination of efforts to help change catastrophic thinking, training in techniques to accept and manage anxiety, and efforts to practice those skills repeatedly in real-world anxious situations. Treatment is sometimes supplemented with one of several possible medications, individual therapy focused on other contributing factors and/or therapy for the couple or family, as indicated. Medication can sometimes be very useful; however, for most people without other complications, medications are rarely the heart of treatment. With commitment to acceptance, treatment, and practice, you can reasonably expect to recover. Our estimates are that 75-80% of those who seek treatment recover to the point where panic and avoidance are not significant factors in their everyday life.

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