



CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE
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Fact Sheet

PANIC ATTACKS AND AGORAPHOBIA

Although this Fact Sheet was created with input from consumers of mental health services, psychologists and psychiatrists, the information is of a general nature. More comprehensive information can be obtained from libraries, including Ontario Division, and your local CMHA branch.

1 in 10 Canadians experiences anxiety problems, including panic disorder, agoraphobia, post traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, all of which can lead to serious consequences, if left untreated. When you experience a panic attack, it is important to remember that although your feelings and symptoms are frightening, they are neither dangerous nor harmful, and will always pass. What you are experiencing is an exaggeration of your normal reactions to stress.

WHAT IS A PANIC DISORDER?

Imagine you are waiting to pay for groceries at the supermarket and suddenly you experience unfounded terror - the kind of feeling you would have if your car brakes failed and you thought you were going to die. You begin to sweat, and you feel short of breath, your chest hurts and your heart pounds. You think you are having a heart attack. After several minutes you calm down and wonder what happened. You may believe the attack will never occur again, and many people go on with their life as if nothing has happened until another attack occurs. Some people go to an emergency room in a general hospital because they believe they have suffered a heart attack. If a "panic disorder" is not detected and treated, it can progress and cause more distress. Some people may develop a more serious complication known as "Agoraphobia."

WHAT IS AGORAPHOBIA?

Agoraphobia means "fear of open spaces" but it is often a behavioural response to panic attacks. Agoraphobia is the most common phobic disorder, and it is also the most disabling. A major factor of agoraphobia is "fear of fear itself" and an individual may become panic stricken when confronted with his/her fears. There may be avoidance of public places such as streets, stores, public transportation; some people may be afraid to remain alone.

WHAT CAUSES AGORAPHOBIA?

Typically agoraphobia begins in early adulthood, between the ages of 18 and 35. For many individuals

it begins suddenly with an unexpected “panic attack” which is not triggered by a major life event. However, some people can pinpoint the overt onset of their disability to some incident or situation, such as losing a baby, the death of a parent or spouse, or fears at work or at home.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The symptoms of panic are caused by adrenaline surging through the body, the same physical response that would occur if an individual were confronted with some terrible physical threat.

A panic attack may develop “out of the blue” and individuals may be struck by a wave of awful terror - weak legs, pounding heart, cramps, dizziness. They may become convinced that they are having a heart attack or are about to die. As the attacks become more frequent, more and more time is spent thinking about them and waiting with fear for the next one.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS?

Mental health professionals are becoming much more knowledgeable about this disorder, and are now better able to diagnose it. Once diagnosed, agoraphobia is treatable.

To overcome a phobia one has to face up to the situation that is causing the fear. Fear of a panic attack can cause as much anxiety as the attack itself. Individuals can develop anxiety reduction skills and new ways to express emotions. They are taught to learn how they are contributing to the development of the symptoms. Exposure therapy is a common treatment for those people whose lives are dominated by the avoidance of fearful situations. In this therapy, the individual is generally exposed to the feared situation and taught how he or she can cope. Cognitive therapy attempts to change the negative patterns of thought that cause and maintain anxiety: the individual is taught to identify and examine the thoughts and feelings that trigger his/her fears.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR HELP?

Remember you are not alone. If you or someone you know appears to suffer from panic attacks or panic disorder you may want to contact your family physician, or your local branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association for information and referral.