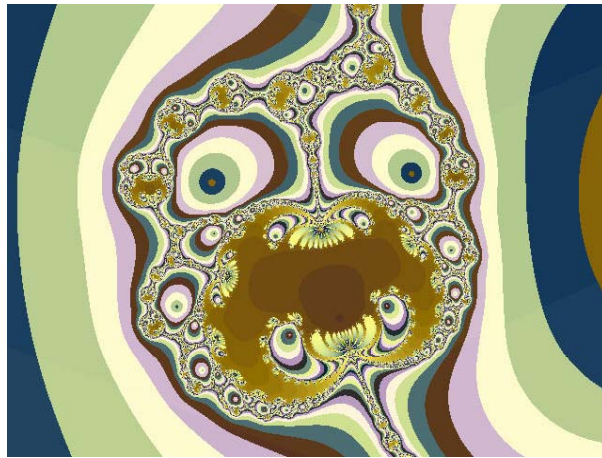




LawCare Ltd.
Health Support and Advice for Lawyers

Panic Attacks



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What is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is an inappropriate response of the sympathetic nervous system which manifests as a sudden attack of fear and anxiety. It can come on without warning, very suddenly and for no apparent reason. It can be intensely frightening and upsetting for the sufferer, and whilst experienced sufferers can often deal with the panic attack without anyone around them even noticing, first time sufferers have been known to mistake the symptoms for a heart attack and seek emergency medical help.

The body is flooded with adrenaline despite there being no threat, and this leads to hyperventilating which then results in a build-up of carbon dioxide, triggering further frightening symptoms. A panic attack typically lasts between five and ten minutes, but in rare cases can last for up to two hours.

Panic attack symptoms are as follows:

- Shortage of breath and smothering sensations
- Choking, either actually or emotionally
- Palpitations and/or accelerated heart rate
- Chest discomfort and/or pain
- Sweating and/or feelings of heat
- Dizziness, unsteady feelings and faintness
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Depersonalisation – a feeling of being out of the body, or derealisation – a feeling of unreality
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Flushes/chills
- Trembling/shaking
- Fear of dying or having a heart attack
- Fear of going crazy or doing something uncontrollable

Any four of these symptoms together constitute a panic attack.

What causes Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks they are associated with certain illnesses or conditions (such as Wilson's disease) and can occur as a known side effect to certain medications and drugs such as caffeine, marijuana and amphetamines. The tendency to suffering from panic attacks has been found to run in families, and they are more common in those of a passive, rather than assertive, nature. Those with phobias typically experience them as a result of being exposed to the phobic object, and they are also common in those suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder. People under severe stress or in states of emotional distress, such as bereavement, can experience panic attacks. However, in many cases it is not clear what causes it. Around one in ten people suffer from occasional panic attacks, and they are more common in women than in men. They are not physically harmful, however alarming the symptoms may seem to be.

How can I deal with a Panic Attack?

IMPORTANT: It is absolutely vital to get a medical check-up and diagnosis before starting treatment for panic attacks. This is especially so where the major symptom is chest pain.

A quick way of stopping a panic attack or reducing its severity is to adopt the Ratio Breathing Technique. As you do so, reassure yourself that your symptoms are not harmful, you are not going crazy, and that you are not in any danger.

- Stop what you are doing and close your mouth (stop hyperventilating).
- Place your hands over your face
- Breathe in for a count of six
- Hold your breath for a count of six
- Breathe out for a count of six
- Then for ten or twelve times
 - Breathe in for a count of three
 - Breathe out for a count of six
- Be sure to keep your mouth closed at all times.

Then repeat the process again. After this the symptoms of the panic attack will have abated.

If you suffer from regular panic attacks there are other things you can do, as well as learning to control your breathing, to deal with these frightening episodes and prevent them happening in the future.

Discover The Power of Positive Thinking

As a panic attack develops it is often made worse by your thoughts. “My heart is racing – I’m going to die!” “What’s wrong with me – am I going crazy?” These “negative predictions” have a strong influence on your body by bringing about an adrenaline rush and making the attack worse.

To combat this, focus on calming positive thoughts, like “I’m learning to deal with this” and “These feelings are uncomfortable but they won’t last forever.” Concentrate on the Ratio Breathing Technique or distract yourself by doing something relaxing which you enjoy – perhaps gardening or chatting to a friend on the phone. Reassure yourself with the following facts:

- A panic attack cannot cause heart failure or a heart attack
- A panic attack cannot cause you to stop breathing
- A panic attack cannot cause you to faint
- A panic attack cannot cause you to “go crazy”
- A panic attack cannot cause you to lose control of yourself.

Imagine yourself somewhere where you are truly happy and peaceful. Perhaps lazing on a beach at your favourite holiday spot, or in a warm Jacuzzi, or walking through beautiful countryside. Feel the sensations, smell the flowers, enjoy the warm sun and let your mental imagery relax you.

Another relaxation technique is to scan your entire body, tensing and relaxing each muscle in turn, feeling the tension flood away as your muscles relax. Don’t forget your facial muscles – open your mouth and eyes wide, stick out your tongue as far as it will go – and then laugh at yourself!

Change your habits

If you are prone to panic attacks then it may help to look at your daily routine. Perhaps adding some exercise will help you to burn off excess tension. Try cutting out caffeine, which is a stimulant, and sugar. Give up smoking and be wary of relying on alcohol to relax you. If you are in the habit of using illegal drugs, then stop doing so.

Are you someone who bottles up your feelings? Learn to acknowledge your emotions and perhaps even talk about them with a trusted friend, or just write them down in a journal. Stop blaming yourself, criticising yourself or telling yourself that you have to be perfect. Get plenty of sleep, take time to relax and indulge in activities you enjoy, eat a healthy diet and take plenty of exercise.

Look for a Cause

If you can identify the cause of your panic attacks, it may help to prevent them occurring.

- Do you have frequent panic attacks on crowded commuter trains? Pay extra to travel first class or change your hours so that you travel during quieter times.
- Is your anxiety worse after a stressful day at the office? Learn to delegate, prioritise and say No to alleviate some of the pressure of work.
- Do you have underlying concerns about your health or finances? See a specialist and get thoroughly checked out to set your mind at rest, or see an independent financial adviser and address the issues which are worrying you.

If you suffer from frequent panic attacks, this may be diagnosed by your GP as anxiety disorder. The Ratio Breathing Technique can help, but it may be advisable to seek specialist help from a counsellor or other therapist.

Helpful Organisations

No Panic

Helpline: 0808 808 0545

Ireland: 01 272 1872 website: www.nopanic.org.uk

National Phobic Society

Helpline: 0870 770 0456

website: www.phobics-society.org.uk

Saneline

Helpline: 0845 767 8000

website: www.sane.org.uk

No More Panic

website: www.nomorepanic.co.uk

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Helpline: 0870 44 35 252

website: www.bacp.co.uk