

## PANIC DISORDER

Dear Dr. K.,

I'm in my twenties and have always been a bit high-strung. But the other day while I was in line to check out at the grocery, I freaked out. I thought I was going to die. It was so bad, I had to run out of the store. What happened to me? It can't just be 'nerves'?

Sharon, Arcadia

Dear Sharon,

It sounds like you had a panic attack. They often occur in crowded places like classrooms, churches, large stores or markets. These little devils classically make you feel so bad that you think you're going to die; or that something awful is about to happen. When they occur, your chest gets tight, it's hard to breathe, your heart races and you can feel dizzy. Frequently, there is chest pain. People think they are having a heart attack and head for an emergency room where one of two things usually happens. The staff is either up on this problem and after making sure there is no medical problem (for example, heart, asthma or low blood sugar), they tell you about panic disorder and send you to a specialist or they tell you, "Nothing's wrong." and send you out feeling like an idiot and puzzled as to what happened.

Panic attacks occur twice as much in women as they do men. They start to happen sometime in the mid-twenties. Of course, you can experience the problem anytime in life. I have had older patients with this disorder as well as children as young as ten years old. Since panic disorder can run in families. My younger patients usually have a Mom who sees the symptoms she had as a child in her daughter and gets help. One Mom told me, "I saw my daughter going through the same thing I did when I was her age. My parents were afraid to get help. I was determined that she wouldn't suffer like me."

Panic attacks come on suddenly and usually without warning. You can dizzy or light-headed, your chest gets tight, it's hard to breathe and you can feel flushed or chilled. Some people feel like everything is unreal around them ("It was like I was watching a

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movie"). The significant symptom, however, is that severe sense of panic-something really terrible is going to happen if you do not get away from wherever you are.

Panic disorder is body chemistry gone awry. What seems to happen in the body is that there is like a surge of adrenaline going off. It gets overly stimulated with the person having these awful feelings.

When you come to associate the attacks with certain places, you begin to avoid those places and phobias begin. Some of my patients have had panic attacks so severe that they had become housebound, a slave to their problem.

Unfortunately, many people suffer from panic disorder but tell themselves "just forget it." This often does not cut it. They get double nervous. They are either worrying about having a panic attack or they are having an attack. Of course, some stay at home and avoid life altogether. No worries, but also no life.

Treatment can rid you of this problem. Lesser degree panic symptoms can be helped with treatments like relaxation techniques, biofeedback or behavior modification. Sometimes, just being more aware of what is occurring and having a plan of action helps. Without doubt, you eliminate caffeine from your diet.

We psychiatrist use various medications to counteract the body's chemical imbalance. The medications used fall into two types: anti-anxiety medicines like Ativan, Klonopin or Xanax or antidepressants called SSRI's like Lexapro, Zoloft or Celexa.

A combination of medicine and education about this disorder is an excellent approach. For more information online, go to: [www.apa.org/pubinfo/panic.html](http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/panic.html)

Dr. K.