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PSYCHOTHERAPY
WOMEN'S ISSUES

Panic Attacks

What is going on with me?

A panic attack is a very scary and very real experience. A panic attack is a sudden surge of bodily symptoms that can occur with or without a trigger. Some people experience panic attacks while in a feared situation or even just thinking about the feared situation. Other people experience panic attacks without having a trigger – or they cannot define what caused it.

So what is a panic attack? Well, it is your body's response to a *perceived* danger. Our bodies are programmed to have a “fight or flight” response to danger. Our bodies release adrenaline in the face of danger that help us to fight or flee. A panic attack is what happens when your body responds to a *perceived* danger—one that isn’t really even there. But your body’s response is exactly the same as if the danger were real. Your heart races, you begin to sweat, feel dizzy, experience rubbery legs and all sorts of other very intense physical feelings. In the face of real danger, such as being attacked by a lion, a surge of adrenaline in our bodies acts to help us get out of a dangerous situation.

The physical symptoms of a panic attack vary from person to person. But all people who experience them agree that it is incredibly uncomfortable. In response to the intense physical symptoms of a panic attack a person often experiences thoughts that escalate the feelings of panic. Many people will tell themselves, “I’m having a heart attack!” “I am going to pass out!” “I am going to lose complete control over myself!” and other really scary thoughts.

It is very important to know that you can learn to manage your panic attacks. Managing panic attacks is most successful when you approach recovery holistically—mind, body and spirit. You can learn to reduce stress and relax, vocalize your thoughts and feelings, improve your assertiveness skills, increase your self-esteem, reframe distorted thoughts, take better care of your health, and let go of control. In many cases working with a therapist is very helpful.