



San Diego's Voice On Mental Illness

Phobias are divided into three types:

Specific (simple) phobia: an unreasonable fear of specific circumstances or objects, such as traffic jams or snakes.

Social phobia: extreme fear of looking foolish or stupid or unacceptable in public that causes people to avoid public occasions or areas.

Agoraphobia: an intense fear of feeling trapped in a situation, especially in public places, combined with an overwhelming fear of having a panic attack in unfamiliar surroundings. This word means, literally (in Greek), "fear of the marketplace."

Open Your Mind



***Mental Illnesses
Are Brain Disorders***

1-800-950-NAMI

What Is Panic Disorder?

Imagine you've just stepped into an elevator and suddenly your heart races, your chest aches, you break out in a cold sweat and feel as if the elevator is about to crash to the ground. What's happening?

What's happening is a panic attack, an uncontrollable panic response to ordinary, non-threatening situations. Panic attacks are often an indication that a person has panic disorder.

A person who experiences four or more panic attacks in a four-week period is said to have panic disorder. Panic disorder may also be indicated if a person experiences fewer than four panic episodes but has recurrent or constant fears of having another panic attack.

Doctors often try to rule out every other possible alternative before diagnosing panic disorder. To be diagnosed as having panic disorder, a person must experience at least four of the following symptoms during a panic attack: sweating; hot or cold flashes; choking or smothering sensations; racing heart; labored breathing; trembling; chest pains; faintness; numbness; nausea; disorientation; or feelings of dying, losing control, or losing one's mind.

Panic attacks can occur in anyone. Chemical or hormonal imbalances, drugs or alcohol, stress, or other situational events can cause panic attacks, which are often mistaken for heart attacks, heart disease, or respiratory problems.

What Are Phobias?

Phobias are irrational, involuntary, and inappropriate fears of (or responses to) ordinary situations or things. People who have phobias can experience panic attacks when confronted with the situation or object about which they feel phobic. A category of symptoms called phobic disorder falls within the broader field of anxiety disorders. Many people with phobias or panic disorder "fear the fear," or worry about when the next attack is coming. The fear of more panic attacks can lead to a very limited life.

What Causes Panic Disorder?

No one really knows what causes panic disorder, but several ideas are being researched. Panic disorder seems to run in families, which suggests that it has at least some genetic basis. Some theories suggest that panic disorder is part of a more generalized anxiety in the people who have panic attacks or that severe separation anxiety can develop into panic disorder or phobias, most often agoraphobia.

Biological theories point to possible physical defects in a person's autonomic (or automatic) nervous system. General hypersensitivity in the nervous system, increased arousal, or a sudden chemical imbalance can trigger panic attacks. Caffeine, alcohol, and several other agents can also trigger these symptoms. Researchers have found that sodium lactate, when injected into the bloodstream of some people who are predisposed to panic attacks, will induce such attacks. This suggests that people who experience panic attacks may have trouble metabolizing lactate, a substance usually produced by muscles during exercise

Is Panic Disorder Treatable?

Recovery from panic disorder appears to be most successful when a combination of treatments is used in fighting the disorder. Most often, medication is used to block panic attacks, and when it is used in combination with cognitive or behavioral therapy, it allows people to overcome their fears and return to normal, functional living. About 75 percent to 90 percent of the people treated have significant improvement, but only about one-fourth of those who have this disorder ever seek appropriate treatment.

Treatment

Cognitive therapy is used to help people think and behave appropriately. Patients learn to make the feared object or situation less threatening as they are exposed to, and slowly get used to, whatever is so frightening to them. Family members and friends help a great deal in this process when they are supportive and encouraging.

Medication is most effective when it is used as part of an overall treatment plan that includes supportive therapy. Antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications are the most successful medications for this disorder, although beta blockers, which limit neuron activity in the brain, are helpful with social phobias. Ask your doctor about these medications or others that may help you. Exercise, a proper and balanced diet, moderate use of caffeine and alcohol, and learning how to reduce stress are all also important.

NAMI San Diego

NAMI San Diego, a non-profit organization, provides education, support services, and advocacy to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by mental illnesses. It is an affiliate of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and NAMI California. Its membership includes persons with brain disorders, their families, friends, mental health professionals and supportive members of the community.

NAMI offers monthly informational meetings, a monthly newsletter, free educational programs, a lending library of books and video-tapes, and support meetings for consumers and families throughout the county.

For information and support call:
NAMI San Diego
Helpline
(619) 543-1434
(800) 523-5933
www.namisaniego.org
information@namisd.org