

Panic Disorder

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Panic



ADAA
ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Panic Disorder

We've all experienced that gut-wrenching fear when suddenly faced with a threatening or dangerous situation: crossing the street as a car shoots out of nowhere, losing sight of a child on the playground, or hearing someone scream in a crowd. Momentary panic sends chills down our spines and causes our hearts to beat wildly, our stomachs to knot, and our minds to fill with terror. When the threat passes, so do our symptoms. We're relieved that something bad did not take place, and we move on.

But imagine shopping in a grocery store when, out of the blue, you feel as if you're in the throes of an impending disaster. Your heart is pounding out of your chest, and you feel tingly, sweaty, and lightheaded. You're convinced you're going to pass out, lose your mind, make a fool of yourself, or even go crazy or die. Then as quickly as those feelings came on, they pass. You've had a panic attack. You're exhausted and confused, and you wonder, "What if this happens again?"

Panic attacks occur unexpectedly, sometimes even during sleep. People who experience such attacks and are preoccupied with the fear of another or alter their behavior to avoid places or situations may have panic disorder, a serious but highly treatable condition.

Panic disorder typically develops in early adulthood, and it affects about 2 to 3 percent of adults and adolescents. Women are twice as likely as men to develop panic disorder.

Many people suffering from panic attacks don't know they have a real and treatable disorder.

A panic attack is the abrupt onset of intense fear or discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes and includes at least four of the following symptoms:

- ▶ Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- ▶ Sweating
- ▶ Trembling or shaking
- ▶ Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
- ▶ Feelings of choking
- ▶ Chest pain or discomfort
- ▶ Nausea or abdominal distress
- ▶ Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- ▶ Chills or heat sensations
- ▶ Paresthesia (numbness or tingling sensations)
- ▶ Derealization (feelings of unreality) or depersonalization (being detached from oneself)
- ▶ Fear of losing control or "going crazy"
- ▶ Fear of dying

AGORAPHOBIA

To receive a diagnosis of agoraphobia, a person invests more time and attention to avoiding specific places or circumstances where a panic attack or panic-like symptoms took place, fearful of a recurrence. Often these are public places where immediate escape would be difficult, such as shopping malls or sports arenas, as well as public transportation, stores, theaters, and similarly enclosed places. The world may shrink as someone with agoraphobia remains on guard for the next panic attack or distressing symptom.



About 1.8 percent of adults and adolescents develop agoraphobia. Some cope by sticking to a fixed route between home and work or school or by always having a "safe person" accompany them. In extreme cases, people with agoraphobia may not leave the house, or they do so only if absolutely necessary.

dizzy • chest pain • nausea

panic

heat • numbness

chills • trembling

...4 symptoms

fear

Panic Disorder

shortness of breath

A black and white photograph of a man in a light-colored shirt, holding his head with both hands, appearing to be in pain or distress.

ANXIETY AND PANIC

In addition to panic disorder, panic attacks, and agoraphobia, the term “anxiety disorder” includes generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder, selective mutism, separation anxiety, and specific phobias.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are closely related to anxiety disorders; anxiety is one of the symptoms.

Each disorder has specific symptoms. For more details, visit the ADAA website at www.adaa.org.

NORMAL ANXIETY VS. PANIC DISORDER

An important part of living, anxiety is a normal emotional reaction to stress, which is a biological response to a threat. Anxiety helps us get out of harm’s way and prepare for important events, and it warns us when we need to take action.

When anxiety is persistent, excessive, seemingly uncontrollable, overwhelming, and disabling or when it interferes with daily activities, you may have panic or another anxiety disorder.



NORMAL ANXIETY

Panicking when the school nurse says your child was injured on the playground

Being scared about driving on the highway at night during a snowstorm

Nervously anticipating news about a job interview or evaluation

PANIC DISORDER

Suddenly feeling as if you’re going to lose control and start screaming in a crowded place

Preoccupation with the fear of having a panic attack and passing out while driving

Relentless and overwhelming fear of experiencing another panic attack, even without apparent threat or danger

EFFECTS

From the terrifying and confusing symptoms of the attacks themselves to the constant fear of having another attack, panic disorder can be frightening, disruptive, and debilitating.

Many of the symptoms mimic those found in heart disease, thyroid problems, breathing disorders, and other illnesses. People experiencing panic attacks often make numerous visits to the emergency room or to doctors’ offices, convinced they have a life-threatening illness.

In the past it might have taken months or years and lots of frustration before getting a proper diagnosis. Some people are afraid or embarrassed to tell anyone, including their doctors or loved ones about what they are experiencing for fear of being seen as a hypochondriac. Instead they suffer in silence, distancing themselves from friends, family, and others who could be helpful. We hope this pattern is changing.

Effects
Causes
Treatments

Many symptoms mimic those of other illnesses.

Panic disorder often occurs along with other mental and physical disorders, including other anxiety disorders, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, and substance abuse. This may further increase the difficulty in getting a proper diagnosis and treatment.

CAUSES

While the exact cause of panic disorder is unknown, research suggests that a combination of a person's biology or genes, personality, and environmental factors all contribute to the onset and development of the disorder.

TREATMENT

Most people who seek treatment for panic disorder and agoraphobia see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life.

A variety of treatment options are scientifically proven to be effective. These evidence-based treatments include psychotherapy such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). This short-term treatment actively involves you in learning skills to help change your thinking and behavior patterns. In addition, medications called benzodiazepines and SSRIs may be prescribed. One or a combination of treatments may be recommended. Relaxation and breathing techniques may also prove effective along with these treatments.

Learn more about these and other effective treatments on the ADAA website at www.adaa.org/finding-help/treatment.

There is no single "right" treatment. What works for someone else may not be the best choice for you. Your course of treatment should be tailored to your individual needs. Ask your treatment provider to explain why a particular type of treatment is recommended, what the other available options are, and what you must do to fully participate in your recovery.

FINDING HELP

Suffering from panic disorder or experiencing panic attacks can interfere with many aspects of your life. Visit ADAA at www.adaa.org to find qualified mental health professionals using the *Find a Therapist* directory.

ADAA also provides resources and connections to help you and your loved ones better understand anxiety disorders and depression. Look over the questions to ask a mental health provider as you explore treatment, find resources and books, and locate support groups in your area.



ADAA serves as a comprehensive resource for education about the causes, symptoms, and treatments of anxiety, depression, and related disorders. We are here to help you find answers and make the best decisions for your health care so you can move forward with your life.

HELP ADAA HELP OTHERS.

You can make a difference by helping ADAA expand its efforts to reach those with anxiety disorders, depression, OCD, PTSD, and related disorders. Your contribution supports ADAA's efforts to increase awareness and provide education that improves the lives of all people who suffer from anxiety or depression. Your donation also supports research and allows ADAA to advocate for improved treatments and access to care.

Donate *online* at www.adaa.org,
on the *phone* (240-485-1001),
or by *mail* to ADAA,
8701 Georgia Avenue, Suite 412
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Let us help
www.adaa.org you find
treatment.

All donations are tax-deductible.

About ADAA

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, OCD, PTSD, depression, and related disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them.

Help ADAA help others. Please donate at www.adaa.org.

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