ANXIETY OR PANIC ATTACKS

Whenever our wellbeing is threatened it is common to experience one, or more of the following symptoms of fear, anxiety or panic:

(1) Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate,
(2) Sweating,
(3) Trembling or shaking,
(4) Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering,
(5) Feeling of choking,
(6) Chest pain or discomfort,
(7) Nausea or abdominal distress,
(8) Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint,
(9) Derealization (feelings of unreality) or depersonalization (being detached from oneself),
(10) Fear of losing control or going crazy,
(11) Fear of dying,
(12) Paresthesias (numbness or tingling sensations),
(13) Chills or hot flushes.

It is even possible to experience several, or more, of the above symptoms in the absence of any readily perceived threat. This in itself can be quite frightening. By reacting fearfully to these bodily sensations we can scare ourselves into a much more intense reaction which may include negative self-talk such as “I’m losing control”, or “I’m going to have a heart attack”. This intensified reaction is commonly referred to as an Anxiety Attack or a Panic Attack.

The development of an anxiety or panic attack can be outlined as follows:
(1) Initiating circumstances, either internal or external, that are not always perceived, (2) Slight increase in unusual or unpleasant body symptoms (e.g., heart palpitations, shortness of breath, faintness, dizziness, sweating),
(3) Internalization—an increased focus on the symptoms making them more
noticeable and easily magnified, (4) Catastrophic Interpretation—telling yourself the symptom is dangerous (“I’m going to suffocate”), (5) Panic.

The cause of such attacks is not readily clear; however, the tendency to experience them is greater under prolonged stress or the recent experience of a significant loss. Please see the reverse side of this resource for some suggestions as to how to deal with an anxiety or panic attack.

Suggestions For Dealing with Panic Attacks

1. See your medical doctor first in order to rule out any physical causes for the symptoms.
2. Be an informed consumer: caffeine, nicotine and pot can increase anxiety and panic.
3. Do not fight the symptoms. Remind yourself that they are not life threatening and will pass.
4. Try to breath slowly, and regularly, from your abdomen, and through your nose.
5. If necessary, leave the situation temporarily and return when feeling better.
6. Talk to someone, as this can help shift attention off of panic symptoms and thoughts.
7. Move around and engage in physical activity.
8. Stay in the present and focus on the external objects around you.
9. Engage in some simple repetitive activity.
10. Do something that requires focused attention, like reading.
11. Experience something immediately pleasurable.
12. Visualize a comforting and peaceful scene.
13. Practice thought stopping.
14. Practice progressive muscle relaxation.
15. Repeat positive coping statements like “I’ve been through this before, it is not dangerous and it will pass.”
16. Get a copy of The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook by Edward Bourne (New Harbinger Pub) and work through the chapter on “Coping With Panic Attacks”.

Taken from DSMIV & The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook, E. Bourne