

Highland
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Support

H.A.P.I.S.



Scottish harebell
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DEALING WITH PANIC ATTACKS

Many women who suffer from postnatal depression also experience panic attacks sudden feelings of overwhelming panic and fear accompanied by racing heart, breathlessness and dizziness. This can be very frightening, especially if you don't understand what is happening to you. Half the battle is learning to cope with panic attacks is understanding them. If you can recognise the early signs of an impending panic attack and can learn a few basic deep breathing and relaxation techniques you will soon be able to cope with them and gradually the frequency and severity of the attacks will diminish.

What is a Panic Attack?

There are many life events which may be regarded as stressful. Obvious examples are:

- Bereavement
- Marriage
- The birth of a baby
- Christmas
- Exams
- Public speaking
- Entertaining
- Shopping queues
- Traffic jams

But the list is endless. Something which one person finds stressful may not necessarily be stressful for another, a great deal depends on the individual. We respond to stressful situations by producing the so-called *stress hormones*, adrenaline and noradrenaline. These are also known as the *flight and fight hormones* as they ready us to deal with potentially life-threatening situations by:

- Increasing heart rate
- Increasing respiration
- Slowing down the digestive process
- Tensing the muscles

It is the sudden surge of these hormones which enables people to perform sometimes superhuman feats in escaping or rescuing others from danger and a certain amount is necessary for peak performance. Athletes *psyching themselves up* before a race are deliberately increasing the level of their stress hormones, actors and public speakers find that they perform better if they are nervous before their appearance. If the level of stress hormones rises too high, however, they can interfere with performance. Concentration and memory go, the person may feel faint, or physically ill and shaky.

Once the event for which the person has been preparing - the race, exam or whatever - is over, the level of stress hormones will usually revert to normal quite quickly. For most modern stresses, however, like those experienced by a new parent, this reaction is not appropriate. Shopping queues, traffic jams or a baby's continual crying, for example, are not situations from which we can either fight or flee, so the effects of the

hormones continue. In prolonged stress the body is continually pumping out adrenaline and noradrenaline and is therefore in a continual state of *flight or fight* readiness and will react to anything and everything. The result is a panic attack. The symptoms include:

- Rapid heart beat (palpitations)
- Breathing difficulties
- Nausea
- Fear
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Shaking

Many of these symptoms are caused by hyperventilating - breathing very rapidly and shallowly. This leads to a rapid increase in the amount of oxygen in the blood and corresponding decrease in carbon dioxide. To overcome this the sufferer needs to rebreathe his/her own breath into and out of a paper bag, but if a paper bag is not available, cupping both hands over both mouth and nose and breathing into and out of the cupped hands can work just as well.

Panic attacks are a vicious circle which needs to be broken. A parent who is feeling tired and stressed after a bad night and difficult morning with a crying baby or demanding toddler may have a panic attack in the supermarket. The next time she/he goes to the supermarket he/she may remember the previous panic attack, and this memory can promptly trigger a panic attack and it may reach the stage when even leaving the house can cause a panic attack.

Preventing Panic Attacks

Understanding what is happening will remove some of the fear. The next step in preventing panic attacks is to learn deep breathing and relaxation techniques.

To learn to breathe deeply, place both hands on the diaphragm, between naval and ribs and breathe in deeply, preferably through the nose, watching the stomach rise, hold for a count of five and then breathe out slowly through the mouth trying to empty the lungs as completely as possible of air. Try to hold as long a possible before allowing air to flow back into the lungs again. This should be repeated about ten times. At the same time consciously try and relax, starting with the muscles in the neck and shoulders, working down into the arms and hands, stomach, legs and feet.

Learning to relax is not easy and takes a great deal of practice. If you say to someone who is very stressed *you must relax* they will probably reply *I try, but I just can't do it*. Obviously if you only try a relaxation technique in the middle of a panic attack you won't be able to do it. It is best to set aside ten minutes a day, during a quiet time when you are unlikely to be interrupted, to practise. The best time is just before going to bed or when in bed before going to sleep. A separate sheet on relaxation techniques is available from HAPIS but you can also obtain a relaxation tape to listen to. There are commercial ones available - Boots do a good one - or try your library or ask your GP if the surgery can lend you one.

Once this deep breathing and relaxation has been learned it should be used before any situation which has been known to cause a panic attack and also at the first signs of an attack whenever you feel tense or anxious.

A panic attack can be extremely frightening, but remember, it will pass:

NO ONE HAS EVER DIED FROM A PANIC ATTACK

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