

Survivor for over 10 years now

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Posted by: RedbeardNC on Wednesday, August 08, 2007

I am a 34 year old male, about 225 pounds, in decent but not the best shape. I suffered my first panic attack at age 23 - I didn't know what it was then. I was a music teacher who was invited (translated: set up for disaster) to conduct a supposedly-all-arranged community orchestra for an upcoming musical, and at the first rehearsal only two musicians showed up.

After the rehearsal, during the hour drive home, I became suddenly aware of my heartbeat and that it was stopping, skipping, making beats that were suddenly stronger than others. I called 911 and they deduced I was having a panic attack. I did feel better when the paramedics arrived...but horrible when they left. What if it happened again?

This started the horrible spiral of my own bout with hypochondria. In retrospect, for every second that I feel a bodily event/strange sensation that happens I spend a month obsessing about it happening again. Usually this would happen when my mind was free to wander - when I was relaxed enough to feel my heart beat. So much time (and money) with general practitioners and specialists - my insurance is out the roof. I feel so much better at the doctor's office that I sometimes fantasize about working or even living there.

My "spells" come in phases. They all start when I experience an unfamiliar sensation in my body (usually my abdomen or chest). I obsess and obsess and panic to the point where I am afraid to be alone and can hardly focus on work or other normal "distractions". I feel many times that I put all my faith in Xanax (the only thing that seems to work).

Since that first time, I have had many, many physical feelings that I was sure were heart attacks, stroke or aneurysm symptoms. Specialists convince me that they are all anxiety-related. I want so much to believe them. On the other hand, I don't understand why my body can't just do its job - why does my mind have to get all involved and louse it all up? Sometimes I go for a long time without having any alarming giant heartbeats, left jaw and arm pain, bizarre headaches - then when one thing happens, my house of cards has fallen, I panic, I'm afraid to be alone at almost any time - especially at night.

In all this, I HAVE discovered some things that have helped me and may help others. 1) Make a log in a journal (or even just a computer Word file) of the sensations that happen, then put it down. Note what you were doing physically at the time, and also what you may have been worried about during the past 5-10 days or so. Maybe you can log this type of thing too. An hour later, make a note in your journal that no, you did not drop over dead when you had that sensation. Months later, if that sensation comes back, you can recall that it came and went. Doing this gets the thought OUT OF YOUR BODY and into/onto somewhere else for storage. You don't need to hold onto it any longer. 2) Distractions. 3) When something happens, make yourself to say aloud "I am having an anxiety attack" rather than hoping/dreading your body does "that thing" again. Just thinking it, rather than saying it, adds to the swirling vortex of confused mental trauma that is sucking all your energy out of you. 4) Distractions. 5) Say aloud "Thinking about this always causes my (body part) to react when it doesn't need to be involved." You know this to be true. 6) Distractions. 7) Talk aloud to yourself (if you are alone) about the things in your immediate environment. This pulls your mind into a different state. "The lamp on the desk is red. It needs dusting. Pen, water, dictionary, printer...." 8) Distractions, distractions, distractions. 9) Make a

conscious effort to eat a little better and exercise a little more. Pent-up guilt about NOT doing these things causes many anxiety symptoms to find places to be, in your body. Even just a walk after dinner will alleviate the guilt, at least for a day.

10) Distractions. 11) Sign up for an Anxiety forum! You need to feel connected to the many, many others who deal with this. It will help you be stronger when others are weak, and vice versa. 12) Distractions. 13) Become aware of tensions that your body is holding in. If you sit at a computer all day (like I do, you can develop cramping of muscles in your abdomen, loss of pelvic floor muscles (bladder control), strange headaches, many things. You must consciously go through all your limbs and relax them o&A-ne by o&A-ne. You will be amazed to learn that you were scrunching your shoulders to type all day....then be able to dismiss your neck pains (which you were sure was your carotid artery weakening!) 14) Distractions. 15) Set aside 30 minutes a day (and no more) to worry about the stressful things that you would normally obsess all day over - that haven't happened yet! Such as - the possibility of losing a job, running out of money, what will happen when I die. Force yourself to spend no more than that per day. This frees you up and empowers you to be more aggressive with the things that you know you can do. Do them - if you don't, you end up with guilt o&A-n top of guilt which as you know, makes your body react at some calm random time after dinner when you're watching a sitcom. 16) Distractions. 17) If you get meds from your doctor for anxiety, you must BELIEVE that they will work, though you will always have the urge to question the use of a "mind" drug for a physical symptom. Sometimes just knowing you have them (the meds) is enough. I am glad to say that I am not out of Xanax (which we all know is the best o&A-ne though o&A-nly psychiatrists feel comfortable prescribing it). 18) Distractions. 19) Go to a massage therapist. It is worth any money you can scrape together. I have found that anxiety stores itself in places in my body (my neck or abdomen), just waiting to screw something else up (chest pains, left arm and neck pain, the usual heart attack symptoms) 20) Distractions. 21) Set up 30 minutes a day, every day, where you can take a hot bath and an old book that you've read a million times. So what if you have 3 kids? You can't care for them if you can't care for your sanity!!!! The rituals you set for yourself DO HELP. 22) Distractions. 23) Each day, pinpoint o&A-ne thing that you obsess over. Either change it immediately in some way (if it is in your power) OR if you can't, then say "I can't change this situation right now. It is what it is. "I am done thinking about this right now. I will now think about something else that I can change, or that I did that was good today". It doesn't matter what that is, it can be "I got up this morning and didn't fall over dead!

"What does NOT help: 1) Telling a friend of your physical symptoms. Instead tell them that you are suffering from an anxiety attack (which is of course more likely). If they are a real friend, they will know that all they need to do is be with you, and to assure that they will get medical attention IF NEED BE. Knowing that they are there is usually enough for me to get through it. 2) Searching o&A-nline medical blogs for your symptoms, UNLESS you put the word "panic" or "anxiety" along with your search. I have always found that at least o&A-ne person (if not many) has had this exact same symptom, and was as scared as I was. 3) Naps. You will o&A-nly feel cranky and guilty afterwards for taking them. Just relax, take a bath or something. You'll feel rejuvenated soon enough. 4) Eating less than 2 hours before bed. This can cause so, so many freaky digestive events that you don't want to put yourself there. This will also help keep weight down, which I learned quickly helps you become LESS AWARE of your missed heartbeats and things like that. 5) If you are coerced into meditations that involve focusing o&A-n your breathing or your heartbeat, you are a goner, mentally speaking. You know that you will suddenly forget how to breathe and your heart will start to skip. To counteract this, you must realize that your breathing is being done FOR you, and that your heart is being beaten FOR you. You are not in control of these things, even if you try to stop them by sheer will power to shock yourself (I know you do!) If you're reading this and have found any connection to it whatsoever, you too are a survivor of hypochondria. You have had weird sensations that have scared you! But, they have not killed you. Your mind is the guilty party here, not your body. You know this to be true. So when these "body things" happen, go ahead and have it out with your mind, and let your body take it upon itself to do what it will.