

Treatments for Panic Disorder

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Most specialists agree that a combination of cognitive and behavioral therapies are the best treatment for panic disorder. Medication might also be appropriate in some cases.

The first part of therapy is largely informational; many people are greatly helped by simply understanding exactly what panic disorder is, and how many others suffer from it. Many people who suffer from panic disorder are worried that their panic attacks mean they're 'going crazy' or that the panic might induce a heart attack. 'Cognitive restructuring' (changing one's way of thinking) helps people replace those thoughts with more realistic, positive ways of viewing the attacks.

Cognitive therapy can help the patient identify possible triggers for the attacks. The trigger in an individual case could be something like a thought, a situation, or something as subtle as a slight change in heartbeat. Once the patient understands that the panic attack is separate and independent of the trigger, that trigger begins to lose some of its power to induce an attack.

The behavioral components of the therapy can consist of what one group of clinicians has termed 'interoceptive exposure.' This is similar to the systematic desensitization used to cure phobias, but what it focuses on is exposure to the actual physical sensations that someone experiences during a panic attack.

People with panic disorder are more afraid of the actual attack than they are of specific objects or events; for instance, their 'fear of flying' is not that the planes will crash but that they will have a panic attack in a place, like a plane, where they can't get to help. Others won't drink coffee or go to an overheated room because they're afraid that these might trigger the physical symptoms of a panic attack.

Interoceptive exposure can help them go through the symptoms of an attack (elevated heart rate, hot flashes, sweating, and so on) in a controlled setting, and teach them that these symptoms need not develop into a full-blown attack. Behavioral therapy is also used to deal with the situational avoidance associated with panic attacks. One very effective treatment for phobias is in vivo exposure, which in its simplest terms means breaking a fearful situation down into small manageable steps and doing them one at a time until the most difficult level is mastered.

Relaxation techniques can further help someone 'flow through' an attack. These techniques include breathing retraining and positive visualization. Some experts have found that people with panic disorder tend to have slightly higher than average breathing rates, learning to slow this can help someone deal with a panic attack and can also prevent future attacks.

In some cases, medications may also be needed. Anti-anxiety medications may be prescribed, as well as antidepressants, and sometimes even heart medications (such as beta blockers) that are used to control irregular heartbeats.

Finally, a support group with others who suffer from panic disorder can be very helpful to some people. It can't take the place of therapy, but it can be a useful adjunct.

If you suffer from panic disorder, these therapies can help you. But you can't do them on your own; all of these treatments must be outlined and prescribed by a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Much of the success of treatment depends on your willingness to carefully follow the outlined treatment plan. This is often multifaceted, and it won't work overnight, but if you stick with it, you should start to have noticeable improvement within about 10 to 20 weekly sessions. If you continue to follow the program, within one year you will notice a tremendous improvement.

If you are suffering from panic disorder, you should be able to find help in your area. You need to find a licensed psychologist or other mental health professional who specializes in panic or anxiety disorders. There may even be a clinic nearby that specializes in these disorders.

When you speak with a therapist, specify that you think you have panic disorder, and ask about his or her experience treating this disorder.

Keep in mind, though, that panic disorder, like any other emotional disorder, isn't something you can either diagnose or cure by yourself. An experienced clinical psychologist or psychiatrist is the most qualified person to make this diagnosis, just as he or she is the most qualified to treat this disorder.