

What Just Happened?!

Panic Attacks

■ by Melinda Hammond, MA, LCPC



Imagine that you're Christmas shopping, worried about how you're going to pay for these gifts. A family member calls, reminding you of the family Christmas party (of course, the same day as your work party!). A voice comes over the loudspeaker, "we are closing in 5 minutes!" Suddenly, your heart is pounding, your chest hurts, and you're dizzy. Your mind is going a mile a minute, and you fear you're going crazy. Then the nausea starts, and you begin to worry that you are having a heart attack. 10 minutes later, you're safe in your car and those feelings are gone. What just happened?!

It's likely that what you experienced was a panic attack. The holidays can be an intensely stressful time for many people. Up to a third of the population will have a panic attack at some point in their life, and holiday stress can trigger an attack in some of those people.

God designed us to react to stress in order to keep us safe. When we're confronted with stress, our bodies go into "fight or flight" mode, releasing adrenaline into our bloodstreams. As this adrenaline is released, our heart rate speeds up, breathing becomes more shallow, and blood is pulled from our brain to our limbs in preparation for fighting or escape.

In our modern society, there are no saber toothed tigers to fight, or woolly mammoths to escape. Instead, our bodies respond to modern stresses (like planning a party, dealing with finances, or visiting family) with the same response. And instead of running or fighting, we're left wondering why our thinking is clouded, our heart is beating fast, and we can't breathe. This is a panic attack.

There's good news. First, our bodies have a limited amount of adrenaline, so this is not a permanent feeling! Furthermore, this shot of adrenaline can't kill you, make you go crazy, or cause a heart attack. No one dies from panic! Finally, calming a panic attack is quite simple.

Take a moment to step out of the room. Take deep breaths, exhaling slowly. Get a drink of water. If you're still feeling anxious, step into a darkened room, and focus on relaxing each muscle in your body, one by one. You can also look up relaxation exercises on YouTube.com, and turn them on when anxiety starts.

If your panic attacks are becoming difficult to stop, reoccur often, keep you from the things you enjoy, or you find yourself worrying about having a panic attack, it's time to seek help. Your therapist will help you figure out your triggers, and the thoughts and feelings that accompany your panic attacks. He or she can also help you deal more effectively with stress this holiday season, and for the rest of your life. Have a safe and healthy Christmas! ■



Melinda Hammond is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and sees clients in our New Lenox and Orland Park locations.

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