

Counseling Corner

It's Frightening and Painful - It's A Panic Attack

from the American Counseling Association

It can happen at any time. When you're walking down the street, sitting at your desk, even resting in bed at night. You experience a sharp pain in your chest, your hands become sweaty, you feel your throat tightening up and you have trouble breathing.

Your initial thought may be "heart attack" and even if the pain soon passes you should see a physician for a check-up. Sharp chest pains should never be ignored.

But in many cases, a check-up may reveal not a heart issue, but that what occurred was a "panic attack," something that happens to millions of people each year.

When this occurs on a repeated basis it's known as "panic disorder" and it's more common than most people realize. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that about 6 million Americans suffer from panic disorder and it affects twice as many women as men.

For many people, a panic attack may be a one-time thing and never occur again, although that single experience can be extremely frightening. But when panic attacks happen repeatedly they can be a life-changing affliction. Not only do they bring fear and anxiety, but the physical symptoms also can mean high medical expenses because they so closely mimic those of a heart attack.

Scientists still do not know exactly why some people suffer from panic attacks and panic disorder. It appears to sometimes run in families, but not always. Researchers are looking for ways in which stress and environmental factors may play a role. Doctors have found that panic disorder is often accompanied by other serious problems, such as depression, drug abuse or alcoholism.

Without treatment, panic disorder can be quite serious. Those suffering from it tend to avoid normal activities, such as shopping or driving a car, out of fear that they could have an attack at such times. It's estimated that about one-third of those suffering from panic disorder become housebound or will only go out when with a trusted relative or friend.

That's unfortunate because panic disorder is one of the most treatable of anxiety disorders. Most cases respond well to certain types of cognitive psychotherapy, to medication, or a combination of both.

If you or someone you know regularly suffers from panic attacks, consulting with your doctor or a professional counselor can bring relief. It is a problem that can be treated.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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