

## **ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS**

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October is the month I have come to associate with anxiety. At 5:04 p.m. on October 17, 1989, I was on the Bay Bridge during the Loma Prieta earthquake, stopped less than a mile from where the bridge broke; and on October 20, 1991, the Oakland Hills firestorm came within a mile of my home. For months after the earthquake, I was nervous every time I had to cross the bridge; and I still get anxious when I see news articles about the impending “Big One”, or when those hot, dry “Diablo winds” come blowing in from the Central Valley around this time of year.

I don't worry that I'm going crazy at those times, because I know it's normal to have anxiety about things like earthquakes and fires. But I've also experienced severe anxiety that seemed to come “out of the blue”, which made me fear I was either going crazy or dying, until I learned that I was having an anxiety attack, or panic attack, and that it's actually nothing to worry about!

An estimated 10% of the U.S. population suffers from panic attacks, phobias or other anxiety disorders *each year*. More than a third of us will experience at least one panic attack in our lifetime, typically between the ages of 15 and 24, or during middle age (40 – 55).

A panic attack may start with a tightness in the throat or chest, a racing heart, and/or dizziness. Other symptoms may include sweating, shaking, hot flashes or chills, nausea, and tunnel vision. Because these symptoms can mimic a heart attack, it can be frightening, but before you call 911, take a deep breath – or several. Deep breathing is one of the best things you can do.

If you're having trouble breathing, you might be hyperventilating, so try breathing into a paper bag, or splash ice water on your face. If you're driving, try to pull over; if you're indoors, try to get outside for some fresh air. Usually the physical symptoms of a panic attack will pass within a few minutes. But if your heart won't stop racing, or if you feel a sharp or intense pain in your chest, shoulder or neck, you should go to the ER just in case.

While it's not always clear what causes panic attacks, anxiety disorders in general tend to run in families, and may indicate a more sensitive sympathetic nervous system. People who have panic attacks are more likely to have experienced phobias, like claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces) or acrophobia (fear of heights). Agoraphobia (fear of crowds or public places) often develops along with, and may trigger, panic attacks. Because panic attacks often begin after a period of stressful life events involving loss or major change, one logical explanation is that your body is acting out physically what your mind is worried about subconsciously: that you're losing control, or losing the people or things that are most important in your life.

The good news is anxiety and panic attacks can be effectively treated. Medications like Ativan or Xanax can provide immediate symptom relief; while the best treatment approach is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. To learn more about the CBT approach to anxiety, read “Calming Your Anxious Mind”, or “The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook”, or “10 Simple Solutions to Panic”, all available through New Harbinger publications ([www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)), or contact me!