Agoraphobia

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Agoraphobia: Fearing Fear Itself

Do you worry about almost everything or you tend to overthink your problems? Are you constantly nervous without a reason? Have you ever felt a sudden rush of adrenaline and the feeling that you are losing control? If your answer is yes then it’s very likely that you suffer from anxiety. People with anxiety often experience panic attacks (also called anxiety attacks).

Panic attacks happen as if out of nowhere, and can actually happen anywhere. In most cases people experience panic attacks in crowded places, in public transport, planes, in places where they feel that it’s difficult to escape or even at their homes.

The leading feeling during a panic attack is fear – fear that you might die, that something is wrong with you, that you'll lose control. Because you feel like you are in danger, your brain actually sends your body a clear signal that something is threatening you. As a result your body is filled up with adrenaline, prepared to save you from the possible dangers. We can divide the symptoms of panic attacks into two groups: physical and psychological.

Physical symptoms

- Palpitations
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Cold and warm waves all over the body
- Heavy breathing
- Dizziness

Psychological symptoms

- Feeling that you are losing control
- Feeling that you are dying
- Feeling that you are out of your body (derealization)
- Feeling that you will be embarrassed in front of other people
- Feeling that you lose your connection with reality
- Feeling and fear that you might be insane

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What's Agoraphobia and How Is It Related to Anxiety?

People who occasionally experience panic attacks try in any possible way to get rid of them. In many cases

people who are suffering from anxiety attacks notice that they occur at certain places like in the cinema, at the supermarket, in crowded places etc. As a result they may decide that these places actually trigger their anxiety and avoid visiting them. This behavior is actually the first step towards agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is a condition in which a person is extremely cautious and afraid of having another panic attack and avoids certain activities and places.

A typical example of a person who has developed agoraphobia in response to panic attacks is someone who has experienced panic attacks while using public transport several times, and as a result decides not to use it all. Unfortunately these efforts to protect yourself from anxiety attack just lead to greater problem – agoraphobia.

In many cases people with agoraphobia as a result of panic disorder believe they have some “safe zones” where they are completely protected from having another panic attack. They believe that as long as they avoid the certain places and activities that they think trigger the attacks, the problem will be solved. However, the harsh reality is that this behavior not only doesn't solve the problem, it actually aggravates the condition.

The main problem is that people with agoraphobia will avoid any situation and place that they think of as a “trap”. That means they will avoid places from which they think will not escape easily if they have a panic attack – crowded places, trains, public transport, job interviews, supermarket, shopping mall – the list can be really long. This can and will dramatically change your life, as it makes you not capable of enjoying normal daily activities.

Very severe agoraphobia can make a person fearful of leaving their home. This happens when a person believes that his or her home is their only safety zone and outside of it they will immediately have another panic attack. In these cases people can refuse to leave their homes with months and even years.

Overcoming a Fear of Your Fears

Overcoming panic attacks and agoraphobia is not an easy task, but they are highly treatable conditions. Since your agoraphobia comes from your attacks, you will have to deal with the problem in depth. The solution here is both simple and difficult: you have to face your fears. When you avoid certain places and activities in order not to have another anxiety attack it’s the attack itself that you fear. It is vital to learn how to get control over your panic attacks. In order to overcome the condition and your fears you will have to practice a lot, and you will have to do this in an actual situation where you are experiencing a panic attack.

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Overcoming a Fear of Your Fears

Let’s say that you have panic attacks and you are afraid that it’s most likely to happen on a bus. Because of your agoraphobia, you are not using the bus anymore. The key here is to keep trying. Go out and get on a bus. It’s likely you'll have a panic attack but that’s ok – that is exactly what you want. You need to figure out exactly what is causing your panic.

Ok, you are on a bus and you have the first symptoms of a panic attack – now what? There are a few things that you can do during your panic attack in order to take control over it:

- **Breathe –** One of the most important things is breathing. Often during a panic attack your breathing will be quick and shallow. Inhale deeply through your nose and count to five, hold your breath for two seconds, and exhale again counting to five. Repeat this several times and you will see how your heartbeat is calming and you don’t have the feeling that you are suffocating.
- **Name Your Fears –** In the basis of every panic attack is fear. Name that fear. Think for a second and name the exact thing that you are afraid of – you are afraid that you will have a heart attack, you are afraid that you will be embarrassed, you are afraid that you can’t escape the place. Think of the fear and give it a real shape. When you do that, look around you. See the situation and you will see that your fear is so big because you make it so. You can definitely escape the bus and get out, people actually are not looking

at you and there's no reason to be embarrassed.

Conclusion

There is a number of techniques that you can use to manage your fear and get control over your panic attacks. Maybe it will not happen from the first time but be patient and keep trying. As long as you can manage your anxiety attacks you can try to put yourself in more and more challenging situations that you have avoided before due to your agoraphobia. This way finally you will see that you are actually overcoming your fears. When you know how to manage your panic attacks and learn some techniques there is no a reason to be afraid of another panic attack.

When you are not afraid of another panic attack you will not be afraid of going out of your home, going to the supermarket, traveling on a plane or being in a crowded places. And this is how you actually eliminate agoraphobia from your life.