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Question: “How do I stop them or at least lessen the severity of a panic attack? Also what is the difference between a panic attack and an anxiety attack?”

Answer:

First of all, there is no difference between a panic attack and anxiety attack; they both refer to the same thing.

Now let’s look at the question of how to stop or lessen a panic attack.

You may recall from a previous installment that I discussed the notion that people have behaviours that are tied in with their anxiety or panic attacks, in other words certain reactionary tendencies that get activated when they feel anxious.

For example, some people when they feel anxious will speak more quickly or loudly, some will talk faster, some people pace back and forth, some cover their head with their hands, some will continually sigh with anxiety, some will cry, etc. This is not an exhaustive list as there are many different behaviours associated with anxiety or panic, but I think you get the idea.

The key is locating your own specific behaviours associated with your anxiety or panic attacks.

You might be asking: “How can I do this?”

You can do this by monitoring yourself during a panic attack and immediately writing down your behaviours in a journal.

Of course this is may be quite difficult to do when you’re in the middle of a panic attack, but there are a couple of points I need to make here:

If you monitor and write down your tendencies during an attack you’ll be getting your mind off the continual circular thoughts that haunt you during a panic attack and will thus be lessening your panic attack symptoms.

Even if it is not feasible for you to do this because you feel so overwhelmed, you can do it later. The key is writing these things down as soon as you’re able to do so.

Now once you have this information, what do you do with it?

You now need to look at all your tendencies and think in terms of their opposites and write down what these opposites would be.

The easiest way to do this is by writing down your typical behaviour on one side of a page and then writing down the “opposite behaviour” once you’ve figured it out.

Let’s quickly look at some examples.

If you’ve written down on one side of the page that you tend to speak quickly during a panic attack, then once you think about it, you’ll realize that talking slower would be the opposite so you would then write that down on the opposite side of the page.

Another example: if you’ve written down that you tend to pace back and forth when feeling anxious, you’d write down that remaining still or perhaps walking in one direction is the opposite.

Now, you’re not done yet:

The key (once you’ve figured out and written down all the opposite behaviour(s)) is actually implementing your opposite behaviour(s) when you either begin to feel anxious or feel the onset of a panic attack.

Please note that you will feel a resistance when you begin doing things on your “opposite list.” If, for example, your typical reaction is to speak quickly during a panic attack, and you begin to speak slowly, it will not at first feel comfortable to speak slowly. This is normal.

Your natural reaction is to default back to your habitual behaviour and you are breaking this habit so it’s natural to feel resistance.

However over time as you continue to do things on your “opposite list,” your physiological symptoms will begin to dissipate because instead of contributing to the “fight or flight response,” that occur with the anxiety cycle your new “opposite” behaviours are moving you more in the opposite direction of a “relaxation response” – which I’ve discussed in previous installments.

If your reflex is to speak quickly then speak slowly and softly. Initially you’ll probably resist this approach. However over time you’ll notice that you are able to reduce your physiological symptoms and regain control.

The key is to consistently follow through with these new opposite behaviours each time you feel anxious and to not give up. If you persevere with these new behaviours you will eventually move in the opposite direction of the anxious physiological symptoms of anxiety.

Take care,

Matthew Wagner
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