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## **Coping With A Panic Attack Instead of Running Away**

*Question: "How do I cope with a panic attack? How do I stay on the bus, etc. without jumping off and walking home? How do I calm myself down?"*

**Answer:**

I would first like to thank all those of you who commented on the particular installments in the past that dealt with specific thoughts utilizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). It can indeed be helpful to look at examples of thoughts from others so we will continue to include this type of analysis, among other things, throughout the newsletter.

I think the reason it's beneficial to look at other persons' thoughts is threefold: 1. It can be a relief for the panic attack sufferer to see that that other people have such thoughts too. 2. Sometimes it's easier if we imagine ourselves giving advice to someone else (but in this case we can benefit from such advice too!). 3. One can start to see patterns emerging in the thoughts of other sufferers.

For the purpose of the example in this installment let's say that the above questions were made by an individual with the name Jane (obviously the person's true identity will be held in confidence).

Jane's question really deals with two issues: 1. Needing strategies for dealing with panic attacks and anxiety, and, 2. Dealing with one's anxiety in day-to-day tasks.

With the above statement, the thoughts in the background are not that clear so we have to look a little further before doing an analysis with CBT. This is often the case. To do so, one should first ask the question: What could be the thoughts in the background?

I'll show you what I mean.

Well if Jane is concerned about needing strategies for anxiety this is pretty clear. Great news in this regard: there are many things that Jane can do to calm herself. In this case further analysis for distortions on this key point is unnecessary because there really isn't any distortion present. Not to worry I will make some recommendations in this regard at the end of the installment.

However the second part of Jane's question deals with the aspect of conducting day-to-day tasks such as riding the bus. Do you think there might be cognitive distortions

lurking in the background? There certainly is an overall thought that Jane has which is: I cannot take the bus home because I get too anxious. We can work with this.

Before reading directly below, I recommend that you scroll down to the very end and look at the list of Cognitive Distortions and then try to locate what possible distortion(s) might be present in Jane's thinking. Once you've done this, write the distortion(s) down and then come back to this spot.

Okay, welcome back.

If you guessed that the following four distortions are present, then you're right: 1. Disqualifying the positive; 2. Jumping to conclusions – fortune telling; 3. Magnification, 4. Emotional reasoning.

Let's look specifically how each distortion is actually present and then look at some alternative, more realistic, thoughts.

**Let's analyze the thinking behind the question: "How do I stay on the bus, etc. without jumping off and walking home?"**

1. Disqualifying the positive - By asking this question Jane is very likely overlooking many times that she rode the bus or did other tasks and she did just fine.
2. Jumping to conclusions – fortune telling – Jane is predicting in advance that she will not be able to ride the bus or other things – while she may feel anxious it does not necessarily follow that she will be unable to ride the bus.
3. Magnification – This distortion refers to the tendency to exaggerate the seriousness of something. In this case, while Jane stays on the bus she may feel anxious, while she might feel some anxiety, but she will not die of her anxiety or panic attack.
4. Emotional reasoning – While, again, Jane may certainly feel anxious when she rides the bus, just because she feels anxious, does not mean anything really bad will happen.

Now let's try to generate some alternative, more accurate thoughts that Jane substitute in place of the ones containing distortions. Again, before reading on, try to generate some on your own. Once you've done this, write them down or type them out and then come back to this spot.

Okay here are some alternatives:

Just because Jane feels that she cannot ride the bus does not make it so. While she may feel anxious on the bus nothing really bad will happen.

Jane cannot know for certain that she will absolutely have a panic attack on the bus. Again while she might feel anxious it does not follow that she must jump off the bus and walk home.

While it is likely that Jane will feel anxious on the bus, if she can continue to expose herself to fear overtime she will be able to work through her anxiety. This exposure will allow her to work through her panic attacks. The tendency to avoid the bus actually makes her anxiety worse – in the overall grand scheme. So doing some exposure therapy can be helpful.

Jane can continue to learn many strategies that can help her cope with panic attacks. She may also consider the suggestions I've made previously on how to reverse a panic attack. The suggestion I made in a previous installment is available by clicking directly below.  
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As you can see, after we identify the cognitive distortions causing our anxiety we can then generate healthier thoughts that not only make us feel better but can lead to strategies. This line of thinking actually led us into the discussion of some strategies for helping Jane with her panic attacks (and of course any other panic attack sufferers).

Take care,

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#### Cognitive Distortions\*

1. All-or-nothing thinking - Thinking of things in absolute terms, like "always", "every" or "never". Few aspects of human behavior are so absolute.
2. Overgeneralization - Taking isolated cases and using them to make wide generalizations.
3. Mental filter - Focusing exclusively on certain, usually negative or upsetting, aspects of something while ignoring the rest, like a tiny imperfection in a piece of clothing.
4. Disqualifying the positive - Continually "shooting down" positive experiences for arbitrary, ad hoc reasons.
5. Jumping to conclusions - Assuming something negative where there is no evidence to support it. Two specific subtypes are also identified:
  - Mind reading - Assuming the intentions of others.
  - Fortune telling - Predicting how things will turn before they happen.

6. Magnification and Minimization - Inappropriately understating or exaggerating the way people or situations truly are. Often the positive characteristics of other people are exaggerated and negative characteristics are understated. There is one subtype of magnification:

Catastrophizing - Focusing on the worst possible outcome, however unlikely, or thinking that a situation is unbearable or impossible when it is really just uncomfortable.

7. Emotional reasoning - Making decisions and arguments based on how you feel rather than objective reality.

8. Making should statements - Concentrating on what you think "should" or ought to be rather than the actual situation you are faced with, or having rigid rules which you think should always apply no matter what the circumstances are. Albert Ellis termed this "Musterbation".

9. Labeling - Explaining behaviors or events, merely by naming them; related to overgeneralization. Rather than describing the specific behavior, you assign a label to someone or yourself that puts them in absolute and unalterable terms.

10. Personalization (or attribution) - Assuming you or others directly caused things when that may not have been the case. When applied to others this is an example of blame.

\*Cognitive distortion. (2008, July 9). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 00:08, July 15, 2008, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive\\_distortion&oldid=224669620](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive_distortion&oldid=224669620)

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