



Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky

A LEADER IN PROVIDING ADVOCACY, EDUCATION, AND SERVICES THAT PROMOTE MENTAL WELLNESS

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PANIC DISORDER

Background

Severe panic disorder will affect approximately 1 American adult per 100 in any given year. Panic disorder is characterized by sudden, inexplicable attacks of intense fear and strong physical symptoms such as increased heart rate, profuse sweating, and difficulty in breathing. Fear of these attacks will often prevent people from going to public places or leaving their homes. The disorder is usually chronic, with an average age of onset in the mid-20s.

Causes

Extensive research points to brain chemistry, functioning, and genes as causes of panic disorder :

- One study indicated a modest role for genes in panic disorder. If one identical twin suffered from panic disorder, there was a 31 % chance that the other twin (who has the same genetic structure) was also affected, while none of the fraternal twins shared the disorder.
- Evidence suggests that panic disorder may be associated with increased activity in the hippocampus and locus ceruleus, portions of the brain that monitor external and internal stimuli and control the brain's responses to them.
- Research indicates that too many natural anxiety-producing chemicals in the brain, or a deficit of natural anxiety-blockers, underlies panic disorder.

Treatments

Both medications and psychotherapy are effective treatments for panic disorder :

- Two groups of medications have been proven safe and effective in treating panic disorder ; high-potency anti-anxiety benzodiazepines like alprazolam (Xanax) and antidepressants like Fluoxetine (Prozac), Sertraline (Zoloft), Paroxetine (Paxil), Nefazodone (Serzone) and Venlafaxine (Effexor).
- The combination of antidepressants and anti-anxiety agents often provides relief of symptoms.
- Panic Control Treatment, a kind of psychotherapy, is designed to prevent panic from overwhelming people.

Treatment Success Rates

Both medications and psychotherapy have had success in treating the symptoms of panic disorder

- Medications and / or psychotherapy successfully treat panic disorder 70 - 90 % of the time. Significant improvement is usually seen within 6 to 8 weeks.
- Early treatment can help keep the disorder from progressing to the later stages where phobias often develop

- Psychotherapy not only eliminates or reduces the frequency of panic attacks, it also reduces anxiety before the attacks and the avoidance of feared situations. Panic Control Treatment has helped 50 - 60 % of people attain high overall functioning.

New Treatments / Research Advances

There is a promising new anti-anxiety medication in the research and development stages ; NGD 91-1 is in the early stage of clinical trials. The medication is designed to treat the symptoms of panic disorder without sedating people.