

Spinning

Mary's* mind was spinning like a high-tech top on crystal meth. Her neck felt like a concrete lined steel pipe and the knots in her shoulders felt like they would snap if they got any tighter. Her palms were sweating. She was struggling to breathe. She felt like she was about to die. She was having a panic attack. She wanted to lock herself in a closet, curl up in a tiny ball and cry but she was driving so this wasn't an option. Mary did the next best thing. She pulled over, parked her car and hugged herself. When she could manage it, she dug her cell phone out of her bag and called her friend, Claire.

Claire's voice felt like a life line. Mary spilled her guts into the phone. Claire didn't freak out. She didn't try to diagnose or fix Mary. She didn't try to change the subject. She just listened and empathized. When Mary was done spilling her guts, Claire reminded her that this state was temporary -- that it wouldn't last forever. She also reassured Mary that she wasn't going crazy. "It makes sense," Claire said, "that you feel like you're flipping out. You have post-traumatic stress and the man who made your childhood a living nightmare, who did unspeakable things to your body and worse things to your soul, is in town." Claire added, "It's like those Vietnam Vets who still dive to the ground when they hear helicopters flying overhead. It doesn't matter that there's no risk now. The neural pathways remember the danger and set off a series of alerts to send the body into fight, flight or freeze mode. Your system tried to do all three at once and apparently blew a few circuits in the process."

As they talked, Mary could feel herself calming down. She could breathe. Her neck and shoulder's softened. Her thoughts slowed down. By the end of the call, she was actually able to laugh.

Like Mary, many people, especially those who have witnessed some sort of trauma, experience or have experienced panic attacks. If you find yourself in the middle of a panic attack, be gentle with yourself. Remind yourself that what your experiencing is simply the body's response to a powerful trigger and that it won't last forever. Try to find a way to comfort yourself. If you want to curl up in a tiny ball and hide in a closet and it's an option and, let yourself do that. If a walk in the park sounds soothing, take a walk in the park. If snuggling with your dog, cat, parrot or teddy bear feels comforting, by all means snuggle.

Reaching out to others can also be helpful. If you do call someone, try to be directive and ask for what you need. If the person on the other line takes your plea as an invitation to tell you how stressed out *they* are, be honest. If it feels overwhelming (and if you are having a panic attack, it probably will), tell them that you are feeling overwhelmed and just can't listen in this moment. Try to tell them, as specifically as possible, what you need them to say or do. For example, you might tell them, "I need you to remind me that I'm safe." Or "I need you to remind me that even though that happened then, it's not happening now. There's no way that that can happen again." It's also a good idea to tell them what you need them to do. For example, you might say, "I need to be held." Or "I

need you to not touch me.” Or, “Don’t try to fix me or give me suggestions. I just need you to listen to me and remind me that I’m OK.”

Another option is to call a crisis line and talk to the anonymous volunteer who answers the phone. While this can be a bit of a gamble, you can always hang up if you don’t find their help helpful. The crisis line to call for sexual abuse related issues is: SARNCO - (614) 267-7020. For domestic violence, you can call BRAVO: 614-294-STOP (7867) (for same-sex domestic violence) or Choices: (614) 224-4663. BRAVO: 614-294-STOP (7867) also offers support for people who struggling with trauma related to anti-GLBT violence.

If you’re partner or friend has a panic attack, try to take Claire’s approach. Don’t diagnose. Don’t fix. Just listen. And breathe. Breathing will help you from getting sucked into someone else’s panic vortex and will help them breathe as well.

If you’ve experienced some sort of trauma or suffer from anxiety, prevention is key. As with all other emotional issues, you are more likely to fall prey to panic attacks when you get out of balance. To get and stay balanced, you need to make sure you get enough sleep. Diet is also important. You are more emotionally vulnerable when you’re hungry, so make sure you get enough food. What you put into your body is also important. Caffeine (and all other stimulants including chocolate, speed, crystal meth. and cocaine) can set off panic attacks. Processed sugar and other simple carbohydrates can also knock the body out of balance by driving it up and down like a yo-yo. Instead of sugar, give your body complex carbohydrates (like potatoes and whole grains) and protein.

Yoga, meditation and journaling are also helpful ways to prevent panic attacks. Yoga and meditation help the body calm down by stilling the mind. When done daily, they actually help train the body and mind to be calm. Journaling helps because it gets the thoughts out of you and onto paper (or a computer screen).

Even with careful attention to diet, sleep and other forms of self care, sometimes people still have panic attacks. If/when this happens to you, be gentle with yourself. Remember that this state of fear is temporary. Even if you can’t imagine a light at the end of the tunnel that isn’t a train coming at you at 120 miles and hour, know that other people have worked their way through the mire of panic inducing thoughts and come out alive and in a state of calm.

*I changed the names to maintain confidentiality. Anecdotes in my columns are not based on clients.

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