

Breaking Free of Anxiety, Part I

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What Is Anxiety?

If you, or someone you know, suffers from anxiety or panic disorder, this ten part series should prove both insightful and beneficial. In this series I will address both cause and treatment options for breaking free of anxiety and panic. I hope, as you benefit from this series, you will make others aware of this information, so they can benefit as well.

Let's begin with an overview...What Is Anxiety?

By understanding what anxiety is and isn't, we move one step closer to coping with, and eventually breaking free, of the potentially crippling effects of an anxiety and/or panic disorder. Realize that anxiety is a natural reaction to a perceived threat or danger. As such, everyone feels anxious at one time or another. Because anxiety is a fear in reaction to a perceived threat, it activates the fight or flight response and serves as a valuable survival function. The key word is "perceived" threat. Chronically anxious individuals tend to perceive the world as more threatening and dangerous than do non-anxious individuals. The chronically anxious person has learned (usually quite unintentionally) how to utilize their imagination to scare themselves (i.e., trigger a physiological fear reaction which quickly escalates into anxiety and panic).

As fear escalates to the point of anxiety, heart rate and muscle tension increase, as adrenalin is released into the body. Common symptoms of anxiety include pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, panic and sometimes can lead to a blackout. Anxiety sufferers can also experience feelings of agitation, worry, decreased concentration or a heavy sense of dread with no specific cause (referred to as generalized anxiety).

Experiencing anxiety is not life threatening, but can be quite terrifying. Many describe the experience as believing they are having a heart attack or even dying. As a result, secondary anxiety can quickly develop. Secondary anxiety is a fear of fear (i.e. the fear of experiencing another anxiety or panic attack). Unfortunately, secondary anxiety serves to trigger more fear, which results in even more anxiety and eventually panic. A vicious cycle is created that leaves one feeling helpless and out of control. As this cycle continues, many sufferers find themselves restricting their lifestyle and activities in an attempt to control (avoid) future episodes. In extreme cases, agoraphobic individuals become unable to venture outside their homes without experiencing anxiety and panic.

Sometimes anxiety is not general, but specific, such as a specific fear of heights, public speaking, or social interactions. Whether anxiety is general or specific, the sooner one seeks treatment, the better, before secondary anxieties become highly conditioned.

In part two of this series, I will address, more specifically, the causes of anxiety and panic disorder. As you will discover, it is far too simplistic to attribute anxiety and panic purely to biochemical or genetic factors.