

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF PANIC AND ANXIETY

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At the famous Battle of

Marathon in 490 B.C., the outnumbered Athenians, led by their brilliant general Miltiades, took the Persians completely by surprise, sending them into a fit of terror thought to have been brought on by the god Pan—a *panic*—leading to a remarkable victory. The Athenians lost 192 men to Persia's 6,400.

Panic and panic attacks—anxiety that seems to hit you out of the blue—can be extremely debilitating. It can make it difficult to function, and its unexpected nature can lead to a general feeling of anxiety, wondering and never knowing when we might get hit by it.

Though we usually think of panic and anxiety as psychological phenomena, most of the symptoms of panic anxiety are actually physical: dizziness, shortness of breath, hot flashes, chest pain, racing heart, sweating, trembling, choking, nausea, and numbness.

Only three symptoms are psychological: fear of dying, fear of losing control, and feelings of unreality. That so many symptoms are physical may turn out to be more important than we have thought.

Sometimes panic can seem to have a cause, like a phobia. I experienced this level of anxiety years ago, when my family and I were on a winter dog-sledding and camping trip with *Wintergreen Lodge* in Ely, Minn. (which I highly recommend if you're ever inclined).

The first night I had made sure that my wife and kids were all settled in our tent before I closed it up and went to get in my sleeping bag. Our sleeping bags were provided by the folks who were guiding us, so this was the first time I'd used this bag. When I got in, I found that it was a very snug mummy bag—so snug, in fact, that it gave me the willies.

But then after a few minutes, it became more than the willies; I started to feel a genuine sense of panic. We were in the middle of nowhere, miles out, camped on a frozen lake. I got out of my bag, opened the tent, and sat outside for a few minutes, just looking at the comforting expanse of the sky, breathing, and letting myself settle

down.

When I went back in, I thought to look at the size of my sleeping bag. It said “Small.” Hmmm. I looked over and saw that one of our kids was sprawled out comfortably in their great expanse of a sleeping bag. I looked at the size on their bag: “Extra-Large.” I immediately felt relieved, pointed this out to them, we all had a good laugh, and after trading bags, I settled in for a very comfortable sleep and a great adventure.

I was lucky. There was an objective reason for my feelings, and there was an easy solution, too. But some people experience this same kind of fear for seemingly no reason whatsoever, which means that there’s no clear action to take to relieve the panic— adding an element of helplessness to the already troubling mix.

Now it looks like there may be something predictable about such panic after all. Dr. Alicia Meuret and her colleagues of Southern Methodist University used 24-hour physiological monitoring of people who suffer from panic, to see exactly what happened during and around the time of the panic events.

They found that while these people weren’t consciously aware of anything happening before the onset of the panic, there were actually subtle but significant changes in breathing and autonomic nervous system elements as early as 47 minutes before the panic set in.

One of those changes is a person’s carbon dioxide level, which likely occurs through changes in breathing. It also may be that people who experience panic have a higher sensitivity to CO₂ levels in general, so that small changes in CO₂ can have a larger effect than for other people.

That fear of dying that people can experience with panic may actually be the fear that accompanies trouble breathing, which can be among the most terrifying of feelings.

This brings us to some things we can do when faced with panic or anxiety. One of the things that I teach people that can help them deal with anxiety is to look at the experience as purely physical. What are the sensations in your body? Don’t label it as “anxiety.” Don’t think of it as some psychological problem.

Back up from that diagnosis and look at what you’re experiencing purely as a phenomenon of benign physical sensations. “Hmm, fascinating, look at those butterflies in my stomach, that tension in my chest; look at how shallow my breathing is; that’s interesting.”

This does two things: It takes you one step away from the experience and it gives you something tangible that you can focus on: your body. Once you notice the sensations, you can do things about them. Deepen your breathing a bit (not too much). Stretch your chest out a bit. Focus on the sensations, watch them, and allow them to settle down.

When we think of anxiety as psychological, it becomes mysterious, and it can feel too big—or too abstract—to do anything with. Boiled down to physical sensations, it becomes a set of concrete, manageable tasks.

Once you start taking note of your physical sensations, you may even be able to identify those subtle sensations that precede the panic. Then you may be able to lessen or preempt the panic entirely.

I have had clients who have suffered from panic attacks for years, who were able to greatly decrease the amount and severity of their panic by simply checking their breathing 15 to 20 times per day. Whenever they notice that their breathing is shallow, they gently deepen their breathing, and in so doing they prevent the physical onset of panic. This understanding is not the whole story. It’s a beginning—a resource and a possibility, not a cure-all.

Perhaps one day we'll be able to leave Pan and his effects entirely to the Greek Mythology texts where he belongs.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible.

And I'm now offering both at a lower price.

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