

PANIC ATTACKS

A Readers Story

It would be hard to believe that a famous person who has performed in front of a huge audience on numerous occasions would ever experience a panic attack. The reality is we are all human and fame does not make you exempt from the stresses and strains that we can all experience at some point in our lives. Many celebrities have shared their experiences and candidly talked about times in their lives when they felt afraid and unable to cope.

It is sometimes easy to pinpoint an event in your life that may trigger a panic attack. For some people it remains a complete mystery and they find themselves looking for something to blame or revisiting the past to try and make sense of it all. Medical experts have identified that major events in your life can be connected to panic attacks. Events like getting married, having a baby, leaving college or starting a new job as well as a bereavement, divorce or loss of a job have all been known to trigger an attack.

When I experienced panic attacks my GP asked me if they ran in my family, after further investigation I discovered they did but because of the stigma attached to mental health my family members had been reluctant to acknowledge their panic attacks or talk about them.

I suffered from heart palpitations, nausea and a upset stomach with the overwhelming fear that wherever I went I would become unwell and not be able to locate a toilet, which would then lead to a horrendous, unmanageable situation.

Medication can sometimes be a temporary measure but a more common treatment is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, this is where you are encouraged to think more realistically about your fears and look at how they trigger or elevate an attack. It may be helpful to think "What's the worst thing that can happen". In my experience "The worst thing" usually turned out to be a manageable situation that could have but did not involve a slight bit of embarrassment on my behalf. Once I had identified what I "feared" may happen I could put things into action to allow for pending disasters. I would often take medication for an upset stomach if I was planning a long day out and I would sometimes carry a change of clothing with me (that I never had to use!). Feeling that I was fully prepared for a situation stopped me from worrying and my anxiety levels were kept to a minimum.

It has been ten years since my last panic attack and I have concluded that we put too much emphasis on why we suffer anxiety and panic attacks. In most cases we cannot change the past let alone change who we are and how we were made.

What we can change is the present and the future. Understanding and recognising panic attacks, talking about them, sharing our experiences and research is vital.

My coping strategies were:

Relaxation- Aromatherapy baths are a good way to relax. Try some herbal tea (I drank peppermint tea for my stomach and camomile for my anxiety)

Breathing- Controlled deep breathing up through the nose and out of the mouth or breathing into a paper bag.

Distraction- If possible try to focus on something else, on a bus journey I started counting backwards in threes. Wearing an elastic band and snapping it on my wrist was recommended to me and the sharp pain counteracted my anxiety.

Talking- Sharing your thoughts and talking about panic attacks can help. I was surprised how many people admitted they had also suffered once I started to talk. Once you identify panic attacks as an everyday, normal occurrence the fear of them diminishes.

