



Anxiety and Panic Disorders

Job interviews. Oral presentations. Final exams. First dates. Public speaking. Meetings with your professors. What do all of these situations have in common? For most of us these seemingly different situations produce similar reactions: the heart pounds, palms sweat, muscles tighten, and the senses go on full alert. We feel apprehensive, uneasy, and even dizzy. In a word, we experience ANXIETY. "Normal" anxiety helps us flee from danger or conquer stressful situations. It is perfectly natural and beneficial; however, severe, recurring anxiety can impair performance and interfere with decision making. Take C.J.'s case for instance...

C.J., a 21-year-old female student, made numerous visits to the Student Health Center over several months, complaining of episodes of severe chest discomfort, heart palpitations, extreme fear, and tremulousness, each lasting 20 to 30 minutes. C.J. showed great concern for these episodes, expressing a fear that something was seriously wrong with her heart. She described them as "the most terrifying experiences of my life" and was beginning to avoid placing herself in situations where friends or medical help were not readily available to her.

C.J. is not experiencing normal anxiety; she is most likely experiencing a series of panic attacks. Her situation is one of numerous cases of anxiety disorders prevalent in an estimated 10 to 13 million adult Americans. Panic attacks can occur suddenly and without warning, instilling paralyzing fear. Physical symptoms vary, ranging from shortness of breath, dizziness and sweating, to a fear of impending danger such as losing control or having a fatal heart attack. Typically beginning in young adulthood, with 65% of cases starting between the ages of 15 to 29, panic episodes may last as little as a few seconds or as long as a few hours.

Why do people have panic attacks? There are many different opinions as to why panic attacks occur; however, one culprit is agreed upon...stress. Studies indicate that in a majority of panic disorder cases, a major contributing factor was personal stress. Other research suggests biochemical imbalances or genetic vulnerability as underlying causes. Victims of recurring panic episodes should seek treatment as soon as possible. If left untreated, victims may develop agoraphobia - a complex mix of anxieties, disabling fears, and social avoidance. Soon, victims become apprehensive of the next occurring episode, which may help trigger the attack itself. Consequently, the vicious cycle begins: anticipating an attack, having an attack, and experiencing more intense anticipatory anxiety. Other complications can include substance abuse in an effort to control the anxiety.

If you suspect any problem regarding anxiety or panic attacks, the first step to treatment is awareness. The **Counseling Center** provides workshops, personal counseling, and psychiatric treatment for anxiety and panic disorders. For more information, please call **974-2831**.

For more information or assistance:

USF students may call 974-2831;

Faculty and staff may call 974-5469