

"This is a book that supports women's authority over our own health and gives us the facts that inform."

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WOMEN'S ENCYCLOPEDIA



of HEALTH & EMOTIONAL HEALING

*Top Women Doctors Share Their Unique
Self-Help Advice on Your Body,
Your Feelings and Your Life*

By DENISE FOLEY, EILEEN NECHAS and the Editors of **PREVENTION** Magazine



ANXIETY

Being afraid of the Big Bad Wolf is one thing. But having an anxiety attack—sudden sheer terror for seemingly no reason at all—is something else altogether.

“It was a tidal wave of anxiety and fear that just came out of the blue,” is how Philadelphia native

Marian Baker recalls her first attack. “I was in college at the time, and a group of friends had gotten together in one of the dorm rooms to have a few beers. Suddenly my heart began racing for no apparent reason, and I was having trouble breathing. I bolted from the room and ran outside to try and get some air.

“I didn’t know what was happening to me,” adds Marian, “but I was terrified. I felt like I was dying.”

Marian’s anxiety attack—actually a particular kind of anxiety state called a panic attack—lasted less than an hour. But for the next few days she still felt light-headed and dizzy. “Every day I lived in fear of another attack,” she says. “And eventually I had one. I felt like I was going crazy.”

Marian is not alone in her experience. Repeated

FROM FEAR

TO PHOBIA

panic attacks—a condition known as panic disorder—are twice as common among women as among men, possibly, researchers suspect, because fluctuations in the female hormone progesterone may help trigger the brain mechanisms involved in the attack.

LIVING ON HOLD

We all feel anxious on occasion, says Paula Levine, Ph.D., a psychologist and director of the Agoraphobia Resource Center in Coral Gables, Florida. Anxiety is a normal part of living. But anxiety that escalates into a panic attack is not normal. In fact, in some women, it can become so severe that it *interferes* with living.

“If you picture a violin or a bass fiddle, we’re all strung in the same way,” explains Dr. Levine. “We all have the same nervous system, the same adrenaline pump and the same heart that can race too quickly. It’s that old fight-or-flight response that kicks in when we perceive ourselves to be in mortal danger.

“Back in caveman times,” she adds, “it happened when we were being chased by bears. Today our hearts might race, our palms sweat and our stomachs churn when we’re about to give a speech in front of 200 people. Or when we have to take an exam. Or if a police car pulls up behind us and signals us to the side of the road. But that’s all part of the normal response to a stressful event, which every human being is capable of feeling.”

Those symptoms can occur before, during or after a feared or dreaded event, says Dr. Levine, but as long as you can identify the situation that precipitated the symptoms and they are not incapacitating, they remain normal responses.

“Symptoms of normal anxiety usually subside within a few minutes, too,” she says. Fifty seconds into your piano recital, for example, your heart slows down and you’re feeling fine. Or three minutes into your exam, you’re sailing along with no problem.

ARE YOU A NERVOUS NELLIE?

But some women don’t settle down once the cause of a particularly anxious moment is gone. Instead, they seem to stay anxious, experiencing what psychologists call a generalized anxiety disorder.

“It’s a constant feeling of excessive fear, worry and apprehension that’s unfounded,” explains Constance V. Dancu, Ph.D., an anxiety disorder specialist at the Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

It’s normal, for example, to be concerned if your teenager is late getting home from a date. Who wouldn’t worry at least a little? But a woman who has a generalized anxiety disorder would have images of her daughter being in a car crash every time she went out, when in reality, the probability of that happening is relatively low.

“What’s considered normal anxiety becomes an anxiety disorder when even

simple, benign events elicit the fight-or-flight response," Dr. Levine explains. "In other words, the response is not appropriate to the situation." There is no bear there—there is no exam two minutes away, no police car signaling you to pull over, no imminent threat to anyone's safety—and yet your body reacts as if there were.

IN A PANIC

A panic attack is an intense type of anxiety disorder in which your body seems to be *trying* to fight a bear.

A full-blown panic attack occurs when—seemingly without cause—your anxiety levels shoot through the roof and trigger at least 4 of the following 12 symptoms: racing or pounding heart, breathing difficulty, dizziness, tingling fingers and feet, chest pain or tightness, a smothering sensation, faintness, sweating, trembling, hot or cold flashes, a sense of unreality and the ultimate whopper, a fear of dying. Symptoms typically last from 5 to 20 minutes, doctors report, during which time many women feel as though they're going crazy.

Although the panic attack is usually short-lived, lasting for only a few minutes, it leaves a nerve-racking residue of anxiety that can last for hours or even days. And even though an attack can actually be an isolated event and never occur again, you can become so frightened of having another attack that the appearance of even one symptom—maybe you feel faint while you're gardening, for example—can trigger a full-blown attack.

Psychologists estimate that 2 percent of American women and 1 percent of men will experience panic disorder during their lifetime. Dr. Levine believes that figure grossly underestimates the prevalence of the problem.

Unfortunately, no one knows for sure what causes panic attacks, says Dr. Levine. But current evidence suggests that it runs in families and that heavy-duty stressors such as major life transitions—job changes, bereavement, surgery, illness, separation from a loved one, difficulty at school—seem to trigger the initial attack.

OF MICE AND WOMEN

Then there is another kind of fear that most women know something about. A fear of creepy, crawly things. If you shiver every time you walk near the snake display at the local zoo—and flatly refuse to get too close—you could very well have a simple phobia about snakes.

Scientists say a simple phobia is a persistent, unrealistic fear that will disrupt normal activity. You may never want to go to a zoo or for a hike. It's not clear how phobias develop. One idea is that this type of fear is a learned response: Something terrible happened in your past—your brother put a snake under your pillow, for example—so now every time you go near a snake, you're afraid.

Another idea is that since many of us have the same phobias—snakes, small

skittery animals and insects are the top three for both men and women—a phobia may actually be genetically inherited. It may be that at some time in our past, it was beneficial for us to fear something like a snake so intensely that we avoided it like the plague. We didn't inherit the fear itself, scientists emphasize, but we were somehow prepared on a biological level to learn it very easily.

Wherever it comes from, a phobia can be so mild that it hardly affects your life or so intense that it controls it. "Suppose that you're afraid of heights and bridges," says Dr. Dancu. "If you lived in a place where you never had to cross a bridge, it would never become debilitating. But if you had to cross several high bridges to get to work or go shopping, then your phobia would present a severe problem: It would interfere with your social and occupational functioning."

GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Fortunately, anxiety disorders, including panic attacks and phobias, are very treatable, says Dr. Levine. "Sometimes counseling is all that's needed. Sometimes a combination of counseling and a limited course of medication works best. Whichever, any woman with one of these problems will usually feel much better within three to six months, give or take a little."

With panic disorder, for example, the prescription medication alprazolam (Xanax) has been so successful that your doctor will likely give you a prescription right away. It's probably the reason Xanax is the most popularly prescribed drug on the market today. Another medication used successfully in panic disorder is small dosages of the antidepressant Elavil. Drug treatment has not been successful for most phobias, however.

But for the long term, counseling is your best bet. "We can't promise women that they'll never feel anxious again, because some anxiety is normal," says Dr. Levine, "but a psychologist can teach you how to control it—instead of it controlling you."

Counseling may include learning coping strategies to better understand and manage your anxiety symptoms, says Dr. Dancu. "I ask my patients, 'What is the evidence that you're going to die during a panic attack? You've had 20—or maybe 100—and you haven't died yet.'

"It's a way of examining what's based on fact and is logical," she explains, "and what's based on faulty beliefs or myths and is not logical."

In fact, logic may be a major weapon. "Even if you are never able to identify what triggers a panic attack, you can still change your response to it," says Dr. Levine. "You don't have to think it's going to blind you or make you faint or drive you insane. You can break that catastrophic spiral of thinking and examine the symptoms for what they are—symptoms of an anxiety disorder, not a life-threatening illness."

Treatment also includes reassuring women that they are not going crazy, emphasizes Dr. Dancu. So many patients have been told that their symptoms

<p>AGORAPHOBIA: HOUSEWIFE'S DISEASE</p>	<p>Panic attacks can be so frightening that any woman who experiences them may begin to avoid situations or places where they've occurred. That's how agoraphobia—literally a “fear of the marketplace”—begins.</p> <p><u>It's the number one phobia among women, says Paula Levine, Ph.D., director of Agoraphobia Resource Center in Florida. And, despite its name, it's really a fear of being alone in any public place from which you think escape may be difficult during a panic attack. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that nearly 8 percent of American women will experience it during their lifetime—more than double the rate at which it affects men.</u></p> <p><u>“At first any woman who's had several random panic attacks over a number of months tries to make sense of what's happening,” explains Dr. Levine. “The woman looks around and says to herself, ‘I've had attacks in the car. This must happen when I drive’ or ‘I've had attacks at the supermarket. This must happen when I shop.’ So the woman stops driving and shopping. She slowly restricts where she thinks it's safe to go, until eventually she becomes completely housebound. That's why it's known as the housewife's disease.”</u></p> <p>Fortunately, agoraphobia is highly treatable, doctors agree. Psychotherapy and returning to any place you've experienced a panic attack can eliminate the entire problem.</p>
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are all in their minds. But just because there isn't a physical ailment causing their symptoms doesn't make them any less real.

“Panic attacks are a documented physiological phenomenon,” stresses Dr. Levine. “Your heart really does race, your vision really can blur, your stomach really churns. This is not psychosomatic. It's not all in your head. Just understanding that something real is indeed happening to your body is a great relief. Sometimes it's all the education people need.” For others, muscle relaxation techniques, deep-breathing exercises, imagery or even hypnosis can help reduce anxiety to manageable levels.

FACE-TO-FACE WITH FEAR

Once you can mentally get a handle on your fear, your psychologist will likely want you to put it to a test. “It's the old get-back-up-on-the-horse

COOL, CALM
AND COLLECTED

If you're experiencing an excessive amount of anxiety, and particularly if you're experiencing panic attacks, here's how the experts say you can lessen anxiety's impact on your life.

Burn up the adrenaline. Excess adrenaline brought on by a fight-or-flight response is what causes some of the most distressing symptoms of panic attacks. To dissipate that adrenaline, try going for a short, brisk walk, running in place or dancing, says Paula Levine, Ph.D., a Florida psychologist.

Slow your breathing. Cool it down to 8 to 12 breaths per minute: Take a deep breath, hold for a count of 4, then exhale slowly.

Distract yourself. Instead of focusing on your physical symptoms, start talking with somebody or start people-watching. Or try splashing cold water on your face or applying a cold washcloth.

Look up. Research indicates that we have more intense feelings, positive or negative, when we are looking down, according to Ruth Dailey Grainger, R.N., Ph.D., clinical director of the Therapy Research Institute in Miami. Looking up can be a powerful interrupter of anxiety.

Lower your shoulders. When you are tense, you almost always raise your shoulders, according to Dr. Grainger, and lowering them can trigger instantaneous relief. If this seems unnatural to you, you might want to practice it.

Slow the pace of your thoughts. Anxious thoughts are usually fast and scattered. By slowing thoughts and making them complete sentences, you may help diminish anxiety in some cases and give yourself a greater feeling of control.

Alter your voice. Making your voice slower, lower in pitch and softer will signal to others and to yourself that you are in control.

Change your facial expression. If you tend to furrow your brow when anxiety strikes, then try smoothing out your forehead and turning the corners of your mouth up instead. Even though you may not be smiling at the moment, says Dr. Grainger, a turned-up mouth sends a physiological message to your mind to lighten up.

theory,” says Dr. Levine. That is, you must not allow yourself to avoid situations where heightened anxiety or panic attacks occur. On the contrary, you must face them. Doctors enlist a therapy called graduated in vivo exposure; it very slowly reintroduces you to the feared places or situations while you learn to talk yourself through whatever symptoms crop up.

“Suppose, for example, that you haven’t been able to go to the grocery store because you’re afraid of having a panic attack and embarrassing yourself,” says Dr. Dancu. “First, we would have you go to the store with a friend with whom you feel safe. Maybe you’d just walk around the store for 30 minutes or so. After you can accomplish that with little or no anxiety, the next step is to have your friend walk one aisle away from you. After that, perhaps your friend would wait outside for you, and then in the car. With each exercise you build up your courage, and ultimately, your freedom from fear and anxiety.

“The most important thing to remember,” adds Dr. Dancu, “is that if you start to get anxiety symptoms, *you must stay in the situation and let that anxiety decrease on its own*. By not running away to a ‘safe’ place as soon as symptoms appear, you will learn to manage your anxiety and fears.”