

Medication

Only in some cases can medication be used to treat panic disorder, the so-called SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors). These are used when someone absolutely does not want psychotherapy, when psychotherapy has no effect, or when someone has too many symptoms to take part in psychotherapy.

Benzodiazepines (tranquilizers) are actually contraindicated for the treatment of panic disorder. This is because research has shown, in the mean time, that this type of medication can maintain and even worsen the panic disorder on the long run. This is also because this medication often becomes a form of safety behavior. This medication is also addictive.



More Information

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PANIC DISORDER

General Information



Panic Disorder

The group of anxiety disorders consists of several diagnoses. Panic disorder is a fairly common anxiety disorder and is therefore frequently seen in Aruba and at Respaldo. Each year, approximately 2% to 3% of the population in the United States and in many European countries will experience panic disorder. In some countries this number is lower.

Symptoms

People with panic disorder will have regular panic attacks. A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear that reaches a peak within minutes and during which people experience four or more of the following symptoms:

1. **palpitations**
2. **sweating**
3. **trembling**
4. **shortness of breath**
5. feeling like you have to **gasp for breath**
6. **chest pain** or pressure
7. **nausea** or **abdominal distress**
8. feeling **dizzy**, light-headed or fainting
9. chills or rather **hot flashes**
10. numbness or a **tingling sensation** in the skin
11. **derealization** (feeling of unreality) or **depersonalization** (feeling detached from oneself)
12. **fear** of losing control or '**going crazy**'
13. **fear** of **dying**

Behavior of People with Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder then do things to deal with those panic attacks. Roughly speaking, they do two things:

1. **avoidance:** they avoid all situations that could trigger a panic attack. For example, they do not leave the house, go to crowded places, drive, do exercise or drink coffee anymore, etc.;
2. **safety behavior:** certain tricks people use to reduce the risk of having a panic attack. For example, they only go to the supermarket with someone else, they always have a tranquilizer in their bag, they keep in touch with someone by phone, they always check their car before leaving, etc. Sometimes people do not even realize what type of safety behavior they are employing.

Types of Panic Disorders

In the case of panic disorder, a distinction is made between panic disorder with and panic disorder without agoraphobia. Agoraphobia means a fear of crowded places. Actually, it is a fear of places where escape is impossible or difficult.

Treatment

Panic disorder is usually very treatable. The first choice of treatment is a form of psychotherapy, namely cognitive behavioral therapy. During cognitive behavioral therapy, a therapist works together with the client to reduce the panic disorder through exercises and homework assignments. The cognitive behavioral therapy consists of the following components:

1. **interoceptive exposure:** this means that you have to do exercises to learn that the physical discomfort that you feel during a panic attack is actually not a reason for anxiety. Repeatedly doing this makes it easier to cope with these feelings;
2. **cognitive therapy:** this will teach you that the frightening thoughts that you have about the panic attacks make no apparent sense (for example thoughts like "I am dying from a panic attack" or "I am losing control over myself during a panic attack"). The therapist will work with you to find out exactly which thoughts play a role in your situation and then help you to change them into more realistic and healthy thoughts;
3. **in vivo exposure:** (together with the therapist) you will look for the situations you are most afraid of in order to learn that the fears you have about those situations are often unjustified. In this way, avoidance behavior is dealt with, and safety behaviour is also reduced and stopped.