

Panic Attacked
Helping Christians Overcome Worry & Anxiety
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Introduction

This century has been described as the Age of Anxiety. That was the title of composer-conductor Leonard Bernstein's second symphony. It was also the title of a book written in 1947 by the well-known poet W. H. Auden.

I once counseled a man who had horrible bouts with panic attacks. They were so bad that as he drove down a freeway and an attack would come on him, his heart would race, he would freeze up and pull to the side of the road, and he would remain there for hours, hands curled around the steering wheel, until someone would come along. They had to peel his fingers off the steering wheel, pick him up out of the vehicle, and take him home.

I also counseled a woman who worked in the emergency room of the largest hospital in our area. She would see horrible sights of people with mangled bodies every day. While she was on the job, she had no problems, but when she got home in the evenings, she would have horrible panic attacks. Her husband tried everything he could to help her. He really loved her, but he was becoming extremely frustrated with her gradual decline.

It is estimated that 250,000 people in the United States suffer from panic attacks each year.

Normal concern or fear is different from anxiety. Normal fear is spoken of in the Bible, and it is not sinful.

- Fear of a wild beast (Job 41:33)
- Fear of the enemy (Psalm 64:1: "Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint; Preserve my life from dread of the enemy.")

God gave us natural fear so we would be cautious. It is a protection device; it is good!

A certain amount of fear is good for public speakers, for example, because it keeps the adrenalin flowing—which keeps them sharp. It helps the individual to concentrate on the emergency at hand.

However, excessive fear and anxiety have the effect of stifling confusion and paralysis.

Test anxiety—a certain amount of fear is natural when taking an exam, but students can be so dominated by anxiety that they are unable to concentrate on the test.

Typical physical symptoms of fear (normal or natural fear)

- Muscle tension
- Increased heart-rate
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Cold, clammy feeling on the epidermis of the skin

Sometimes these symptoms are part of normal or natural fear. But excessive anxiety and panic cause these symptoms to be greater and to last much longer—beyond the experience of real threat. This is what the psychological world calls a “neurosis”—a condition in which a person experiences emotional distress with no apparent cause (no real threat is present; it is only a perceived threat).

Additional physical symptoms (excessive fear and anxiety)

- Abdominal tension or pain
- General weakness
- Dizziness
- Trembling
- Sweating
- Irritability, extreme tension
- Insomnia
- Difficulty concentrating

Panic attacks (anxiety attacks; a particular type of anxiety problem)

- Along with the symptoms of fear or anxiety, there is an immediate sense of loss of control.
- Often there is a feeling that serious injury or death is imminent and escape is the only option.
- These attacks will happen so suddenly and forcefully that the person actually believes total control is lost. Irrationally takes over.

Four key characteristics of panic

1. Sudden (similar to crisis; Psalm 18:18; Prov. 3:25)
2. Perceived threat (intellectually)
3. Loss of control (emotionally)
4. Seeks quick relief

An average person’s anxiety is focused on

- 40%—things that will never happen
- 30%—things in the past that can’t be changed

12%—criticism from others, mostly untrue
10%—health (which gets worse with stress)
8%—real problems

Case Study: James

To meet James, you'd believe that you had met a ghost. His ashen face with dark, sunken eyes revealed a man in trouble. His hands trembled as he held onto the table in front of him. It looked as though he were trying to keep the room from spinning. Occasionally he would tug nervously at his shirtsleeves while sighing with long, shaky breaths.

"These last two weeks have been a nightmare," he said to me. "I don't eat, I can't sleep. And frankly, pastor, I believe I'd be better off dead."

James was a 42-year-old real estate agent—and a good one, too! In fact, he owned his own real estate company. He was committed to his family and church. And he said that he had given his life to Christ while he was in college. To meet him, you would believe his life was one success story after another. Extremely intelligent, he always wanted to do his absolute best.

But things had changed lately. His life was a living hell.

"Two weeks ago," he told me, "I was watching television, and the most terrible feeling I've ever had came over me. My heart felt like it was going to leap right out of my chest. I had this terrible feeling as if I were choking. Then the chills came over me out of nowhere, and the room started spinning. When I tried to get up, I felt like I was going to faint."

After we had a short discussion of that incident, James revealed that this had happened before!

About a year before, his wife had found him out on the patio screaming, "I'm dying! I'm having a heart attack!" She called an ambulance, which took him to a nearby hospital. He was told by an emergency-room doctor that he had suffered from a panic attack. The doctor's advice to James was to "calm down—learn to relax." Then he wanted to refer James to a local psychoanalyst.

James had refused, believing he could handle it on his own. But now he was worried. "What if this happens when I am driving? What if it happens in front of one of my clients? I really worried about that," he confessed.

Further discussion with James revealed other, milder incidents of panic attacks happening more frequently. As a Christian, James wanted to know what to do.

If you were James's counselor, would you know what to tell him?

I. Does the Bible say anything about panic?

A. Deuteronomy 20:3–4

When Israel went to battle, the priests would speak to the people and say, “Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be *fainthearted*. Do not be *afraid*, or *panic*, or *tremble* before them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.”

B. 1 Samuel 5—panic because of severe fear or terror of God!

- Verse 9—the Philistine city of Gath *panics* because of the ark of the Lord.
- Verse 11—*fear of death* sent the Philistine city of Ekron into panic.
- 1 Samuel 14:15—a *panic* sent by God in the Philistines, the whole army panics. “And there was a *trembling* in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. Even the garrison and the raiders trembled, and the earth quaked so that it became a great trembling.”

C. Ezekiel 7:7

God’s anger against Israel poured out in sudden wrath, causing panic. “Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come, the day is near—*tumult* rather than joyful shouting on the mountains.” Note that panic is contrasted with joy.

D. Zechariah 14:13

All the nations will rise up against Jerusalem in the last days, and the Lord will go forth and throw them into panic so that they attack one another.

II. Lessons we learn from Scripture about panic

A. Idolatrous desires often dominate the panicked mind and body.

- Like “I need relief immediately,” “I’ve got to get out of here,” or “I know I’m going to die.”
- Ezekiel 14:1–11

These idolatrous desires are an inversion of what you want most in life. They are dreaded expectations, worse-case scenarios. People who experience panic attacks are frequently people who live on the edge of their worst expectations coming

true. They have trained their bodies and minds to live in a subtle but constant state of dread. This is so subtle that overwhelming feelings of impending evil can seemingly come out of nowhere.

B. Important truths that help to end the domination

1. Panic has its root in the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).
2. Panic is lack of trust in God's protection (Prov. 3:25–26).
3. Panic is used by God against His enemies and His sinning children (Psalm 112:1, 7–8; Matt. 10:28).
4. Panic knows no joy (Psalm 34:4).

Case Study: Joyce

Joyce was a 35-year-old mother of two children. She and her husband had just moved from a small Midwestern town to take a new job in a much larger city. The move was a stressful one. Joyce had never lived very far from her family and friends, and although she enjoyed being a homemaker, she found herself very lonely. Yet she was still very excited and optimistic about her new life and her husband's new job.

One evening about eight months after the move, Joyce and her husband were at a local dinner theater when suddenly, out of nowhere, Joyce was jolted by a wave of fear and dread so intense that she had to struggle to keep from screaming in the quiet theater. Her pulse skyrocketed, pounding more furiously than she'd ever felt during her brisk morning jogs. She felt her throat constrict, and had to gasp for breath. There was numbness and tingling in her arms and legs and a suffocating tightness in her chest.

Unable to fight off the terror, Joyce bolted from her seat and took refuge in the ladies' room. Slumped in a stall, she tried to calm herself, but it did no good. The terror grew worse and worse. She was sure she was going to die. The attack lasted about ten minutes and then passed. She sat there exhausted and confused.

It was the second attack that week. The previous attack had occurred in church but had not been as severe. Joyce knew she needed help. No one could go on like this.

What was going on in Joyce?

III. Additional Explanations in Counseling Panic

A. Is this a physiological problem?

1. It could be a treatable medical condition.

By physical diagnostic testing, Joyce can determine if her problem is organic. *People with chronic panic attacks should have thorough physical!* She could

have a condition, an endocrine disorder (pheochromocytoma) that secretes hormones that may spontaneously trigger an anxiety response. Early symptoms of this disease are indistinguishable from the classic description of a panic attack.

If Joyce has this organic problem, a distinct physical disease, then neither counseling nor psychiatric drugs will help her. But in more than 90% of cases, surgery can!

2. If there is no organic problem, then Joyce is facing a spiritual battle.

She is manifesting all four classic symptoms of panic attacks.

- The attacks come on suddenly and unexpectedly.
- Joyce is suddenly seized by *fear*—a perceived threat (e.g., death).
- She feels out of control (emotionally).
- She finds herself quickly running for relief.

We learned of several examples of panic in the Bible.

- The root of panic is the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).
- Panic is a lack of trust in God’s protection and provision.
- God sends panic to teach us to trust in Him (Psalm 112:1, 7–8; Matt. 10:28).
- Panic strips a life of joy.

B. Why would God allow one of His children to experience panic attacks?

1. Panic reveals what you really are trusting in (Prov. 24:10; Luke 6:46–49).

The counselor gets to see the inner person during a panic situation.

2. You find out in a panic situation how much you can endure.

- Prov. 18:14—Who can endure a crushed spirit?
- 2 Cor. 4:16—Paul said that outwardly he was wasting away, but day by day he was being renewed in spirit. A panic attack will loosen up our lifestyle. Somehow we don’t feel as self-assured.
- Prov. 10:25—When the winds come, the wicked are swept away, but the righteous are still standing.
- Prov. 1:24–28—When distress and trouble overwhelm the unbeliever, God laughs!

3. You must learn to endure distress in order to grow.

James 1:2–4

People run from emotionally upsetting circumstances, they will lie about them and even take medication instead of confessing sin. It is wrong to mask the feelings of anxiety and panic with psychosomatic drugs because we will never derive the full benefit from those times of distress. The ability to handle sudden panic attacks is evident in the ability of the panicked person to endure the experience.

Heb. 12:3—“Consider Him, who endured such agony...”

Psalm 119:67, 71—The distress of panic becomes a hammer to drive you back to the Word of God.

C. Where does this intense fear and panic come from?

The fuel of panic is fear! People have fear of heights (acrophobia), enclosed places (claustrophobia), water (hydrophobia), blood (hematophobia), childbirth (tocophobia), being naked (gymnophobia), dirt (mysophobia), germs (spefophobia), ect!

Louis Pasteur is reported to have had such an irrational fear of dirt and infection that he refused to shake hands. President and Mrs. Benjamin Harrison were so intimidated by the newfangled electricity installed in the White House that they didn't dare touch the switches. If there were no servants around to turn off the lights when the Harrisons went to bed, they slept with them on.

1. Ungodly fear has its origin in original sin (Gen. 3:8).

Adam and Eve feared that God was holding back something good, so they disobeyed. “The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety.”—George Mueller.

2. Ungodly fear lacks trust in the Lord (Psalm 112:7–8).

Psalm 112:1

“Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who *fears the Lord*, Who greatly delights in His commandments.”

3. Ungodly fear is self-focused.

The focus is on me and what is happening to me.

4. Ungodly fear wants human approval.

Fear of man, not of God; loving the praise of men—John 12:42–43
Don't fear those who kill the body (Psalm 56:3–4; Luke 12:4–5).

(Witnessing, taking a moral stand, etc., at the risk of isolation, exclusion, and scorn)

5. Ungodly fear believes that we are at the mercy of things and circumstances.

They do not believe in the sovereignty of God.

6. Ungodly fear sometimes reveals a guilty conscience.

Prov. 28:1—“The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

1 John 4:18—perfect love casts out fear.

Sometimes the best way to understand something is to look at it in an antithetical fashion. Fear and panic can be understood this way in Scripture. Note the contrast between the opposite.

| Fear | Love |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Is self-protecting | Is self-giving |
| Asks, “What will I lose?” | Asks, “What can I give?” |
| Runs away from the problem | Asks, “What can I give to others?” |
| Asks, “What will happen to me?” | Moves to solve the problem |
| Secludes itself | Risks itself; reaches out |
| Hesitates | Starts |
| Can be cast out | Overpowers fear |

Two major questions

1. Are panic attacks caused by organic or genetic abnormalities?
2. What is the help and hope the Bible gives for people who experience panic attacks?

IV. Are there genetic or organic causes for panic attacks?

In the medical field, a panic attack is defined as an “intensely distressing feeling of apprehension, impending doom, or loss of self-control that is often spontaneous and unexpected, develops within minutes, generally lasts 20 to 30 minutes and is associated with somatic (bodily) symptoms suggestive of autonomic (involuntary) arousal.” (George E. Tesar and Jerrold F. Rerenbaum, “Recognition and Management of Panic Disorder,” *Advances in Internal Medicine* 38 [1993]: 125.)

Criteria for diagnosis: If you have four panic attacks that occur within a four-week period, or if one or more attacks lead to 30–35 days of fearful anticipation, then medicine will diagnose you as having a panic disorder.

Dr. Don Wickert, a Christian physician, has done extensive research on the question of whether there are genetic/organic causes for panic attacks. He writes, “The cause of panic attacks remains unproven. There is no specific diagnostic test for panic disorder...the diagnosis of panic disorder is based solely on symptoms reported by the patient.”

He goes on to say, “Often Christians in both the medical and non-medical community accept these symptoms giving credence to defining panic disorder as a disease...however careful review of the medical literature does not indicate absolute proof for a neurochemical alteration as the causes of panic disorders...the scientific literature is filled with words like ‘suggests, theoretically, postulated, implicated, seems like, potential role, trends, and preliminary evidence.’”

An article entitled “Panic Disorder: A Biological Perspective” appeared in a medical journal (*European Neuropsychopharmacology* 2:15 [1992]). The article says, “Although panic disorders can be treated, their pathogenesis (underlying reason that the disease develops) is still unknown.” There is no scientific proof that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between a biological disorder and a panic attack.

If there is no biological effect, should a Christian use psychosomatic drugs or anti-depressants to deal with a panic attack? Dr. Wickert has shared a personal example from his medical practice:

Drugs can cause one to feel differently, but they *don't solve the underlying problems*. Thus drug therapy and biblical counseling are at odds because the goal of biblical counseling is to help the counselee solve problems biblically, regardless of the feelings involved. While improved feelings generally follow right behavior, *change in feelings is not the goal*. Because this is true, *drugs may actually hinder the process by changing feelings enough to cause the counselee to dismiss the more important biblical issues and change that needs to be made*. Since unsolved problems tend to multiply, the present may be rosy but the future is bleak.

At the completion of an otherwise normal and healthy yearly exam, Jane (fictional), a forty-four-year-old mother asked if I could help her with “negative feelings that were periodically plaguing her.” Her trouble occurred at night and felt like what she had heard others describe as “panic attacks.” During these episodes, she experienced difficulty breathing and an increased heart rate. Though these attacks only lasted for a short period of time, she reported a growing fear that they would increase both in frequency and intensity. She hopelessly summarized her plight by, “Doctor, I don't know what's taken over my body, but *I need some medicine!*”

When I asked for additional information regarding the attacks, she stated that they primarily occurred when her teenage son was out late at night while she was waiting for him to come home. She dismissed this line of questioning as irrelevant however and impatiently reasserted, “Doctor, I’m sick. Can we talk about my prescription?”

Dr. Wickert later says, “Drugs can cause one to feel differently, but they *don’t solve the underlying problems*. Thus drug therapy and biblical counseling are at odds because the goal of biblical counseling is to help the counselee solve problems biblically, regardless of the feelings involved. While improved feelings generally follow right behavior, *change in feelings is not the goal*. Because this is true, *drugs may actually hinder the process by changing feelings enough to cause the counselee to dismiss the more important biblical issues and change that needs to be made*. Since unsolved problems tend to multiply, the present may be rosy but the future is bleak.”

According to Dr. Don Wickert and Dr. Bob Smith, who both practice in the medical field, long-term therapy is not a lasting answer for people with chronic anxiety attacks.

What is the answer?

- V. What is the help and hope that the Bible gives for people who experience panic attacks?
- A. Understand that non-organic panic attacks are imagined fears!
- Picture the way your body would react when confronted with a life-or-death danger (e.g., a house fire or an airplane headed for a crash landing). Your heart begins to race, your stomach becomes tense, and you may sweat or shake. This event has triggered the “fight-or-flight response” in your body. It prepares you for battle or helps you to escape from danger.
 - When a person has a panic attack, the same reactions occur—only *there is no real danger!* It is only imagined. It is a false alarm!
 - Many things can trigger these false alarms. Typically, they start after an illness, a pregnancy, a drug experience, intense relational or family problems, the loss of a loved one, moving your home, or a period of prolonged stress or tension.
 - Let’s say that you have one of these attacks in a grocery store. Your heart starts to race; you instantly become tense, and fear seems to seize your whole body. Something has triggered this bodily reaction, even though there is no immediate danger or threat. From that time on, just thinking about going to

the grocery can raise your anxiety level and cause your heart to race. You have associated fear and danger with that place. But carefully note this: It is not the grocery store you fear—it's *the possibility of having a panic attack while you are there that you fear!* You feel vulnerable because of your previous experience. But it is crucial to understand that what you have really developed is *a fear of your own sensation of panic!* It is often called "anticipatory anxiety."

The physical symptoms are followed by gripping fear, which leads to catastrophic pagan thinking, which leads to greater fear, which leads to more intense physical symptoms! Soon, your whole life is caught up in the current of these unproductive, fear-filled thoughts. Anxiety dominates! And it coils around you like a boa constrictor.

When does panic becomes sinful?

1. When you choose to believe a lie (your feelings) over reality
2. When your focus is on your feelings and not on God's promises (1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Peter 2:9; a high opinion of feelings and a low opinion of God).
3. When it robs your mind of God-honoring, productive thoughts

This is thinking like pagans, in futility of thinking (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:17).

1 Cor. 14:20—The type of tongues-speaking the Corinth church was used to was immature, emotional, and childish. Paul warned them, "Stop thinking like children...but in your thinking, be adults." A person who is a prisoner of panic thinks as a fearful child does.

4. When your desire to feel better becomes the functional god you worship rather than the Lord Jesus Christ

B. Understand that panic attacks are cycles of thinking and behavior that can be broken!

How can they be broken? Philippians 4:6–9

1. Right praying (vv. 6–7)

Instead of praying full of doubts, discouragement, and discontentment, we are to approach God with a thankful heart, committing every situation to God's sovereign control. 1 Peter 5:10—He is able to "perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish us in the midst of our suffering." Jonah 2:1–9, thankful prayer

2. Right thinking (v. 8)

Put off panic, but put on praiseworthy thoughts.

Prov. 23:7—We are products of our thinking. “As [a person] thinks within himself, so is he.”

Since we live in a fallen world, our renewed minds need ongoing cleansing and refreshment.

- Truthful things—the Word is truth (John 17:17)
- Noble things—whatever is worthy of awe and adoration
- Righteous things—right thinking is holy thinking
- Pure things—morally clean and undefiled
- Gracious things—lovely, pleasing, or amiable, kind or gracious
- Praiseworthy things—something worthy of the praise of God’s people

“People with panic attacks are generally people who have not controlled their minds with God’s truth.”—Bob Smith

3. Right practice (v. 9)

Violin practicing—working to improve a skill
The peace of God—Phil. 4:7

Conclusion

“I would recommend you either believe God up to the hilt, or else not to believe at all. Believe this book of God, every letter of it, or else reject it. There is no logical standing place between the two. Be satisfied with nothing less than a faith that swims in the deeps of divine revelation; a faith that paddles about the edge of the water is poor faith at best. It is little better than a dry-land faith, and is not good for much.”—C. H. Spurgeon

Additional resources for counseling “panic attacks” and their related problems

Books

Anxiety Attacked, John MacArthur

Christ and Your Problems (booklet), Jay E. Adams

Counsel from Psalm 119, Jay E. Adams

Fear Factor (workbook), Wayne Mack and Josh Mack

Overcoming Fear, Worry and Anxiety, Elyse Fitzpatrick

The Christian Counselor’s Medical Desk Reference, Robert Smith

The Joy of Fearing God, Jerry Bridges

Worrying: Pursuing a Better Path to Peace (booklet), David Powlison

Periodicals

Journal of Biblical Counseling

Journal of Modern Ministry

Websites

www.ccef.org

www.nanc.org (see recommended resources)

www.soundword.com (see downloadable workshops on panic disorders at the National Association of Nouthetic Counselors collection)