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Health Tips

Tips for Coping with Panic Disorder

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Psychologist Dr. Francine Rosenberg Emphasizes Importance of Early Treatment



(HealthNewsDigest.com) - Parsippany, NJ, February, 2014 - According to the National Institute of Mental Health, six million American adults suffer sudden and repeated panic attacks in any given year, a condition known as panic disorder. Panic attacks generally first occur in late adolescence or early adulthood but not everyone who has a panic attack develops panic disorder. Some have just one attack and never have another. "We don't know precisely why some people develop panic disorder," says clinical psychologist and anxiety specialist Dr. Francine Rosenberg of Morris Psychological Group.

"But we know that women are more than twice as likely as men to suffer from it. And we know that untreated panic disorder can become disabling. As people try to avoid places and activities that they fear might trigger an attack, their lives become more and more restricted. Panic disorder is also often associated with other serious conditions, reinforcing the importance of treatment to improve health and quality of life."

What are panic attacks and panic disorder?

Panic attacks occur suddenly and often without an obvious trigger. Symptoms include sweating, chest pain, fast heart rate or palpitations, difficulty breathing or a feeling of being smothered, dizziness or faintness, and an intense feeling of dread. While the typical panic attack lasts about ten minutes, symptoms may last longer and it is not uncommon for a panic attack to be mistaken for a heart attack. When panic attacks occur repeatedly, a person is said to have panic disorder.

"Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder," says Dr. Rosenberg. "Patients usually suffer from intense anxiety about having an attack and avoid situations in which they might occur. In fact, one-third of people with panic disorder also have agoraphobia - fear of being in places where escape might be difficult - and find their lives becoming more and more constrained as they avoid public places, crowds and travel or even leaving the house."

Panic disorder is often accompanied by other psychological problems, most notably depression and drug or alcohol abuse. And many medical professionals believe that anxiety disorders contribute to the development of heart disease by putting extra strain on the heart. "Panic disorder has serious health implications," says Dr. Rosenberg. "That's why treatment is important before the condition gets worse. Fortunately, panic disorder responds well to treatment, especially if caught early."

Tips for Coping with panic disorder

Panic disorder is generally treated with medication or psychotherapy or a combination of the two. The most commonly used medications are antidepressants such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and benzodiazepines. The therapy that is most effective is cognitive behavior therapy, which helps patients change the thought patterns that cause panic.

"As part of the therapeutic process, we also recommend lifestyle changes and coping strategies that will help patients relax and manage their stress and anxiety," says Dr. Rosenberg. For example:

- Exercise regularly as an outlet for anxiety
- Learn breathing techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, which have a calming effect and can counteract the tendency to hold one's breath when anxious.
- Try yoga or meditation, which can help you relax.
- Avoid alcohol and stimulants such as caffeine.
- Eat nutritious meals at regular times.
- Get plenty of sleep.

"A single attack is not necessarily indicative of panic disorder and not all anxiety is harmful," says Dr. Rosenberg. "Occasional anxiety is a natural reaction to life's stresses and strains. But when it begins to take on a life of its own and potential disaster lurks around every corner, it is important to get help early, before anxiety overwhelms your life and disrupts work and personal relationships. Medication, psychotherapy, stress reduction and lifestyle changes can help you manage the situations that trigger panic."

Francine Rosenberg, PsyD., practices cognitive-behavior therapy, specializing in treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder as well as stress, depression, anxiety disorders, behavioral disorders and relationship problems.

Morris Psychological Group, P.A. offers a wide range of therapy and evaluation services to adults, children and adolescents. www.morrispsych.com