



Treating Panic Disorder With Exposure Response Prevention (ER/P) Therapy

Expert Contribution | [Francine Rosenberg, Psy.D](#)

Posted 07/30/2014



Learning How Not To Avoid Your Fears

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

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.

According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH), **six million American adults suffer sudden and repeated panic attacks in any given year.***

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. Some people have just one attack and never have another. But many suffer frequent, repeated attacks, a condition known as panic disorder. 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 Rooted In Anxiety

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. Patients usually suffer from intense anxiety about having an attack and avoid situations in which they might occur. In fact, according to the NIMH, **one-third of people with panic disorder also have agoraphobia** – fear of being in places where escape might be difficult – and avoid public places, crowds and travel or even leaving the house. Fortunately, panic disorder responds well to treatment, especially if caught early.

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. **One of the most effective therapies for panic disorder is a form of cognitive behavior therapy known as Exposure Response Prevention (ER/P).**

Exposure Response Prevention “Reprograms” The Brain

ER/P therapy is based on the premise that a primary problem with panic disorder is the patient's fear of attacks and avoidance of situations that might trigger them. **It is comprised of two components: exposure to the anxiety-producing thoughts or situations and prevention of the typical avoidance response.** In ER/P therapy, the patient and therapist work together to identify the patient's feared outcome then devise a careful plan of graduated exposure. For example, they can identify the patient's fear as fainting when trapped in a crowded bus, then slowly work towards exposing the patient to more crowded buses. Response prevention means that during exposure, the patient does nothing to avoid, escape or reduce her anxiety. By recognizing the fear that drives the anxiety and providing exposure in a safe, controlled manner, ER/P therapy gradually neutralizes the fear and its ability to cause anxiety.

ER/P counteracts the avoidance behavior that characterizes panic disorder. **While avoidance or escape may provide temporary relief, they reinforce dysfunctional patterns of behavior and do nothing to improve the patient's quality of life.** ER/P works through the natural processes of habituation and extinction. For example, as the patient becomes used to the anxiety-provoking experience, the fearful thoughts and emotions associated with it dissipate and disappear. Over time, the brain is rewired and the patient learns that the feared outcome won't occur and that avoidance or escape isn't necessary.

Anxiety Is Not Harmful

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 makes you feel as if a potential disaster lurks around every corner, **it is important to get help early**—before anxiety overwhelms your life and disrupts work and personal relationships. With therapy, stress reduction, lifestyle changes, and possibly medication, you can overcome panic attacks and open yourself up to a new life full of great possibilities.

Francine Rosenberg, Psy.D



Name:

Francine Rosenberg, Psy.D

Biography:

Francine Rosenberg is a licensed clinical psychologist in New Jersey, practicing at Morris Psychological Group PA in Parsippany. Her journey in mental health began at Lafayette University. There she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. She then went on to achieve a Masters of Science and her Doctor of Psychology degree at Nova Southeastern University. Dr. Rosenberg has also had the opportunity to take part of the New Jersey Psychology Internship Program.

Transitioning from the academic life, Dr. Rosenberg moved on to working with patients at Marlboro Psychiatric Hospital, Fair Oaks Hospital, and the Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. At Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, she worked closely with adolescents in the Behavioral Health Services department. She also ran a psychoeducational program for the staff and community of Newark, alongside working with the patients.

Dr. Rosenberg primarily works at the Morris Psychological Group PA, but is also on the medical staff at Morristown Memorial Hospital and on the Craniofacial Team at Goryeb Children's Hospital. When not with patients, she lectures on topics such as depression, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, stress management, and much more. She was a past president of the Morris County Psychological Association. Other associations she is affiliated with include the New Jersey Psychological Association, New Jersey Affiliate of the National Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation, National Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation, and the New Jersey Association of Cognitive Behavior Therapists.

Contact:

Morris Psychological Group

50 Cherry Hill Road Suite 305

Parsippany, NJ 07054

Email: drfrosenberg@morrispsych.com

Tel: (973) 257-9000 ext. 207