

REVALUING¹ PROBLEMS

With a little change in attitude, fears loose all their magnitude.

Symptoms of panic can be subdued and eliminated with knowledge about how your body responds to an adrenaline surge and with practice refocusing on something pleasant or floating past anxiety during episodes. However, recovery will not be complete until you have changed your attitude toward panic by revaluing it. In the following example, insecurity became an intoxicating experience:

One young man began imagining a beautiful peaceful place when he first started to feel his heart pound. He was surprised that this actually made him feel euphoric. Of course, as soon as he began looking forward to symptoms of anxiety so he could get “high,” he no longer had panic attacks. His recovery continued as long as he remembered that he could turn a frightening adrenaline rush into a pleasant experience.

With practice, anyone can minimize panic reactions and adopt a whole new viewpoint about them. The first step to changing your attitude is to identify the self-defeating thoughts you currently have about panic. Then, you can compute opposite, positive beliefs that will help you recover by revaluing your symptoms. Notice that the difference between destructive and helpful beliefs can be very subtle:

Change Thoughts That Hurt into	... Beliefs That Reduce Panic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I put up with symptoms of panic and hope they pass as soon as possible. • My goal is to stop having panic attacks. • Getting through one panic attack without difficulty will make the next one easier. • Once I’ve faced a situation without panic, I no longer need to practice it. • Recovery means that I have to face every situation that is hard for me. 	<p>I welcome symptoms of panic as opportunities to retrain reactions by floating or refocusing.</p> <p>My goal is to become an expert at minimizing panic reactions.</p> <p>Getting through one panic attack prepares me for any future, more severe, episodes.</p> <p>I give panic opportunities to surface by facing situations that used to be or still are hard.</p> <p>I find new situations to practice without having to master everything that is hard for me.</p>

The first statement in each pair stresses “success” and suggests that you have to try to prevent or avoid panic. The second statement shows that you have revalued anxious symptoms as opportunities to practice making peace with panic. When you have truly changed your outlook, you will not have a problem if panic returns after a period of being symptom-free. Therefore, it is very important to practice affirming *Beliefs That Reduce Panic* (above) until they are true for you.

¹ This term is one for Jeffrey M. Schwartz’s “4-R’s of recovery” for OCD found in *Brain Lock* (HarperCollins, 1996).

SETBACKS

Although many people stop adding the second fear of panic after understanding what is happening to them, others have more difficulty retraining their reactions or find their symptoms return after a period of doing well. This can happen for several reasons:

- Success can be frightening. After a good period, people often think: “I hope I never have to go through that again!” “I wonder if this will last.” “Am I cured?” “What if I start having problems again?” Any of these thoughts can invite panic!
- Success allows fewer opportunities to practice dealing with panic. People can fall into old patterns of thinking scary thoughts or trying to control symptoms.
- Coming back from a vacation or being in the hospital can cause people to feel stressed by the demands of their daily routine. Brief retraining may be necessary to again become desensitized to certain situations. Even people without panic disorders often feel anxious on Mondays or when coming home from vacations.
- Underlying emotional problems of depression, social phobia, obsessing, and perfectionism that have not been addressed can cause panic to return.
- Symptoms from undetected minor medical problems such as inner ear dysfunction, allergies, PMS, low blood sugar, thyroid dysfunction, anemia, high blood pressure, or mitral valve prolapse can trigger anxiety after periods of doing well.
- Multiple factors contributing to problems with anxiety (sensitive temperament, chronic illnesses, traumatic experiences, family or work conflicts, perfectionistic or avoidant traits, depression, phobias, or obsessions) will create many challenges to not add the second fear of panic to stress.
- Relying solely on medication for recovery can cause symptoms to return when drugs are discontinued. Although some use of medication may be helpful, it is important to gradually replace medication with behavioral techniques, such as refocusing on pleasant activities and floating past anxiety to desensitize panic reactions.

The return of panic is almost a necessary part of full recovery. You need to show yourself that you can deal with symptoms if they do return to lose the fear of problems recurring. Because you may reexperience panic from time to time, it is essential to adopt a final attitude that revalues any “setbacks” in your life.

Change Thoughts That Hurt into	...	Beliefs That Reduce Panic
A setback means that everything I’ve tried in the past does not work.		If I’ve desensitized myself to triggers of panic in the past, I can easily do it again!