

Panic Disorder

An overwhelming fear of an imminent catastrophe



Dr Aju Abraham ■

A 46-year-old businessman was rushed into Accident & Emergency with a fear that he was having a heart attack. 30 minutes ago he was experiencing a sudden onset of palpitation, sweating, shaking, chest tightening, chest pain, throat tightening, dizziness and a general feeling of weakness. On arrival at the hospital he was extremely anxious and could not be reassured by the medical team. He was convinced that he was having a heart attack and was afraid that he was going to die. In the emergency room he was examined and investigated thoroughly for physical causes of chest pain. However, all the investigations turned out to be normal. On enquiry, he gave a history of anxiety for the last few years. On checking with him further he reported that he had a few similar emergency visits to the hospital in the past few months. The emergency doctor reassured him that everything was okay and that he was just having a panic attack. He was given some medication to relieve his anxiety and within 10 minutes he started to feel much better. After 2 hours of further observation he was sent back home and was advised to see a psychiatrist.

This is a typical presentation of a person experiencing a panic disorder. In fact, nearly a quarter of the people who attend the Accident & Emergency department with chest pain have panic attack as a cause of their presentation. Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder which has recurrent attacks of severe anxiety and a feeling of impending doom occurring in an unpredictable manner. These attacks are not restricted to any particular

situation and occur suddenly and spontaneously. The symptoms vary from person to person, but the most common ones are sudden onset of palpitations, chest pain, choking sensations, dizziness and feelings of unreality. There is almost invariably a secondary fear of dying, losing control or going mad. An individual attack usually lasts for a few minutes & reaches the peak in about 10 minutes or less. In some cases it can be prolonged, lasting several minutes. The frequency of the episodes varies from once or twice a year to several times a day.

An individual experiencing a panic attack often experiences an overwhelming fear of a catastrophic event occurring. They often feel like escaping from which ever situation they are in. It commonly occurs in crowds, public transport systems etc. where they are likely to feel trapped. Subsequently, they tend to avoid such situations all together. Similarly, individuals with frequent and unpredictable panic episodes tend to form a fear of being alone or a fear of going to public places by themselves. They often insist on someone being present with them all the time. The subjective experience of fear during a panic attack is so severe that quite often a person experiencing a panic disorder lives with a persistent fear of having another attack. Partners or close relatives of such individuals often have to adjust their lives around these fears to avoid catastrophic reactions in these individuals.

Quite often individuals suffering from a panic disorder are prone to be anxious due to genetically determined factors. They seem to have a tendency

to misinterpret the physical symptoms of anxiety as a dangerous physical condition such as heart attack or stroke or impending death. The treatment of this condition is by addressing the underlying cognitive distortion and dysfunctional behavioural patterns. This is most effectively done through cognitive behavioural therapy. Medications such as antidepressants are also very effective in the treatment of a panic disorder. It is important for these individuals & their carers to be educated about the condition as they often fail to understand why they experience such heightened fear during an episode. This lack of understanding worsens the dysfunctional behaviour patterns exhibited by the individuals, maintaining the illness through a vicious circle of anxiety, avoidance and formation of certain unhelpful safety behaviours. Finally, whilst a panic disorder is an extremely debilitating condition, it is possible to treat it very effectively within a period of 4-6 weeks. It is important to know that once treated these individuals are able to lead a normal life and the impact of their illness on their family's lives is dramatically reduced.

Dr Aju Abraham is a Consultant Psychiatrist running his own exclusive psychiatry clinic in Doha. For further information or any questions related to emotional problems, you can email him at editorthewoman@gulf-times.com

