



■ What is a panic attack?

Panic attacks are common, occurring in up to five per cent of the general population. They are defined by a sudden onset of intense apprehension, fear or terror accompanied by physical symptoms such as;

- ◆ difficulty in breathing
- ◆ dizziness
- ◆ palpitations
- ◆ chest pains
- ◆ tingling sensations
- ◆ shaking
- ◆ sweating
- ◆ visual difficulty
- ◆ feelings of unreality
- ◆ jelly legs

The thoughts that accompany these symptoms often include; 'I'm going to lose control', 'I'm going mad', 'I'm going to die', 'I'm going to have a heart attack' or 'I'm going to embarrass myself'. Although it is perhaps understandable to experience these thoughts, they are largely mistaken and are misinterpretations of what is actually going on. Unfortunately, once you start thinking these thoughts, you become more anxious, keeping the bodily symptoms going. An upwardly spiralling vicious circle of thoughts and physical symptoms is created.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that when most people have a panic attack,

their natural reaction is to try and leave the situation they are in as quickly as possible. This avoidance brings temporary relief, but increases the likelihood of further apprehension, negative thoughts, bodily symptoms and the development of a phobic reaction.

■ A symptom of stress

Panic attacks are one of the symptoms of a build-up of stress. This symptom is perhaps more frightening than nausea, headaches or diarrhoea but in some ways it is a similar reaction. People who experience panic attacks seem to be those who experience stress in their respiratory and cardiovascular system rather than in their muscular or gastrointestinal systems.

Very often the symptom of panic produces such worry and stress that these symptoms become more of a problem than the original stresses that caused them.