

REATTRIBUTING¹ CAUSES OF PANIC

Adrenaline has many triggers—Studying them helps stop my jitters.

A surge of adrenaline produces all symptoms of panic and anxiety. But, you may wonder, what causes the surge of adrenaline? Whether your symptoms started all at once or developed gradually, you can reattribute their source to one or more of the following factors:

- **Your physical predisposition:** Each person has his or her own unique chemical balance. Research shows that people who suffer from panic have other family members with the same problem. This suggests that they may inherit a body chemistry that makes them prone to anxiety. People with a sensitive temperament have low levels of the neurotransmitter GABA that inhibits reactions of the nervous system. When people have too little GABA, they are on alert, overreact, and have difficulty calming down. Sensitive people can be nervous, cautious, and shy and may abuse substances (such as alcohol) that increase levels of GABA. By contrast, people who “go crazy” or have psychotic breaks have a completely different chemical balance. They may have high levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine and low levels of MAO.² Worry and panic will make you feel miserable but cannot drive you crazy.
- **Stress:** Pronounced anxiety often occurs first during a period of high physical or emotional stress. Physical conditions such as broken bones, long illness, operations, and strenuous dieting can “shock” the nervous system. Constant conflict, doing things you dread, or trying to accomplish too much in too little time places demands on the body. Under such conditions, the nervous system is persistently alerted and nerves “fire” all the time. During this state of sensitization, usual emotional responses are intensified. Ordinary fears feel like panic. Old conflicts rise to the surface. Typical ways of coping may no longer work. Once you become sensitized, the condition often perpetuates itself unless you understand what is happening. Thus, people who are not sensitive by temperament can become sensitized during stressful times.
- **Past experience:** Your upbringing and early experiences can give you personality characteristics that make you more vulnerable to the demands of life:
 - Overprotected children can develop vivid and fearful fantasies. Imagination is usually worse than the truth. A habit is developed of anticipating, dwelling on, and reacting to imaginary dangers. These thought habits might not be obvious until the first panic attack.
 - Overcontrolled children may be raised with constant criticism, standards for perfection, and expectations to conform. As adults, they strive to appear “normal,” calm, unperturbed, and perfect. Any situation that triggers “deviant” reactions is particularly upsetting.Both types of people approach life with a controlling attitude. They need to manage their surroundings and their own internal reactions in a way that reduces “danger,” “differentness,” or “failure.” Often, people who develop panic attacks have been very competent or outgoing, but can no longer live up to their own standards in the face of overwhelming stress.
- **Emotional difficulties:** When emotional disorders go untreated for long periods of time, they can lead to panic disorder. Often, people are not even aware that they have a problem until they start having anxiety attacks. They may think it is normal to be fearful of giving speeches, (obsessively) tidy, or moody.

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

² See *Mastering Your Mood* by Melvyn Kinder (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

- Social phobias make people have excessive, unreasonable fear that others will notice some particular action of theirs. They may imagine that everyone is scrutinizing them and that people will notice all their flaws. When socially phobic people cannot avoid situations that cause them difficulty (talking in public or being in large gatherings), they may have panic attacks.
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) causes people to have repetitious, uncomfortable thoughts that are hard to turn off. Common fears are of harming others, threats to self or loved ones, being immoral, not having enough, disorder, germs, and making mistakes. Panic can occur when anxiety-reducing rituals cannot be used or fear triggers avoided.
- Depression is often linked with panic. The major symptoms of (biochemical) depression include loss of energy and interest, withdrawal, poor concentration, and indecisiveness. The simplest tasks can seem overwhelming. During times when life becomes so difficult, a person can be prone to having an anxiety attack.

— **A physical problem:** Because panic feels so awful, sufferers imagine they have serious illnesses. Doctors can easily conduct tests to find out if dull, radiating chest pains are caused by heart disease. Other very rare conditions are also readily diagnosed: (1) epileptic seizures preceded by an “aura” or strange aroma can cause attacks of immense fear; (2) strokes may be the cause anxiety if it is accompanied by confusion, difficulty speaking, or loss of movement; and (3) growths on the adrenal glands can cause anxiety during mild exercise, cold weather, or minor upsets. If any physical problem is present, it much more likely to be one of the following nonthreatening conditions. Seek diagnosis, get treatment, and reattribute anxiety to:

- Inner ear problems when loud noises, fluorescent lights, freeway driving, steep hills, or cloudy days seem to cause tension, dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, blurred vision, or headaches.
- Hypothyroidism when tension is due to fluid retention from reduced thyroid activity.
- Hyperthyroidism when shakiness, palpitations, breathlessness, chronic tension, perspiration, and restlessness are accompanied by increased appetite with weight loss.
- Allergies when panic attacks seem more likely to occur during certain seasons or after eating particular foods. Allergens both stress the inner ear and cause a surge of adrenaline, which leads to tension, shakiness, and palpitations.
- PMS when symptoms occur before menstruation. The female hormone progesterone rises to its greatest levels a week before menstruation and can increase the sensitivity of certain chemical receptors, causing tension, restlessness, jitters, and irritability.
- Low blood sugar when fatigue, palpitations, trembling, dizziness, blurred vision, or sweating happens before breakfast or a few hours after meals and eating something with sugar relieves symptoms.
- Anemia when increased respiration and heart rate are due to the body’s effort to produce more (iron-carrying) red blood cells.
- High blood pressure when occasional palpitations, tension, dizziness, and fatigue are caused by clogged arteries that require the heart to use more pressure to pump blood.
- Mitral valve prolapse (which may not even need treatment) when dizziness, chest pain, faintness, and palpitations are caused by a ballooning of a valve during heartbeats.