Counselor's Corner: February 2022 – Panic Attacks

Picture it… you're driving home from work one sunny afternoon – just like you've done a thousand times before. When all of a sudden a strange and frightening feeling takes over your body. You notice your heart racing, extreme dizziness, nausea, sweating, chills, a feeling of impending doom, trembling hands, blurred vision, and a fear that you might be dying or having a heart attack. This is exactly what happened to me the first time I experienced a panic attack.

At the time, I had no idea what was happening to me. And there was no logical explanation for this experience. Luckily, after only a few minutes the feeling subsided and my body's functioning returned to normal. I was able to continue on my way home safely. But, the whole ordeal was terrifying. After some quick internet research – I was able to identify it as a panic attack, and confirmed my self-diagnosis with my doctor a few days later.

Common Symptoms

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| Shortness of breath | Numbness | Chills |
| Nausea | Overwhelming fear | Dry mouth |
| Racing heartbeat | Chest pain | Shaking/Trembling |
| Feeling of impending doom | Feeling hot/Sweating | Tense muscles |
| Dizziness/Spinning | Headache | Ringing in ears |

Causes

Panic attacks often come on suddenly and without warning. We aren't always able to identify a trigger. However, there are risk factors that might increase the likelihood of panic attacks. This could include things like: family history of panic attacks, a traumatic event, social situations, major life changes, use of drugs or alcohol, depression, sensitive temperament, excessive caffeine intake, a history of childhood abuse, or other conditions like OCD or PTSD.

Treatment

1. Don't run – stay present and acknowledge the panic attack
2. Reassure yourself that you are safe, this is temporary, you will survive, and this will pass in time
3. Focus on your breathing – striving for long, deep breaths. Sometimes calm counting can help regulate breathing
4. Work to relax your muscles – tighten and relax the various muscle groups throughout your body
5. Practice grounding techniques (Example: 5,4,3,2,1)
6. See your doctor if you're concerned or if panic attacks are happening regularly
7. Medication if prescribed by your doctor
8. Talk with a therapist if you'd like to explore your panic attacks further

YouTube Video: What is a Panic Attack?