

Finding Peace

Overcoming Anxiety

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*Important note: This booklet contains reliable medical information but is not intended as a substitute for consulting your physician.
(This booklet was previously printed under the title *Finding Peace When Panic Strikes: Practical Steps for Overcoming Anxiety Attacks.*)*

Ever Feel Like This?

“I began by feeling on edge. Then I was slipping over the edge. Finally, I was falling, falling—with nothing to grab hold of.”

Have you ever felt like this? This person suffered from panic attacks.

Anxiety has become epidemic. Many of us are frazzled by family problems, stress at work, financial woes, quarrels, guilt feelings, urban pressures, information overload, and a thousand other hassles. No wonder millions of people are struggling with

- anxiety;
- panic attacks;
- phobias;
- obsessive-compulsive disorders;
- fear of flying;
- post-traumatic stress disorders.

For the sake of simplicity, we will use the terms “panic attack” and “panic disorder” as umbrella terms for these troubling maladies.

Maybe you don’t know what to call your problem. You only know

- mysterious symptoms are harassing you;
- your doctor checked you out and declared you healthy;
- you wonder if you’ll ever be your old self again.

If this describes your situation, rest assured a cure exists. In these pages, you will hear the true stories of three people who recovered. In addition, you will learn that the basic therapy for panic attacks has been taught in the Bible for centuries.

Ernie's Discovery

Ernie is a professional counselor, but when he developed panic disorder, he didn't know what to do. He tells his own story:

For several months I had been overworking myself. Then I developed a skipped heartbeat and extreme weakness. After several attacks of these symptoms, I nearly collapsed in a meeting at work.

My doctor said I was suffering from nervous exhaustion and recommended that I rest. So I took a week off. When I returned to work, I was slammed by another attack. Then I took a month off, but every week or so, I experienced another setback, complete with burning sensations in my arms and torso. I told myself, "You can beat this thing! Keep on fighting and show it who's boss!" But every time I ended up trembling with exhaustion.

I went to a clinic for a thorough examination. Nothing was wrong with me, yet the attacks kept recurring. My friends said, "You work too hard. Take a long rest and you'll be fine again." So I rested all summer until I was sick of resting. I missed my job and felt guilty about not earning my keep. But repeatedly, after I made a little progress, another attack would come and leave me weak and depressed. Eighteen attacks hit me that summer! Desperate for relief, I guessed at what I might be doing wrong. I stayed home. I didn't drive. Eventually, I hesitated to do anything for fear it would trigger another attack.

One day while rummaging in the attic, I came across an old book, which I decided to read. The book told about a woman who was bitter toward God after her husband had been murdered. She wasn't fully released from her anger toward God until she learned the difference between a prayer of resignation and a prayer of acceptance. A prayer of resignation is just feeling sorry for yourself, while you gripe to God.

In contrast, a prayer of acceptance rejoices, "Lord, in spite of my circumstances, I know You still love me. Therefore, I accept this difficulty even if I have it for the rest of my life."

In response to this story I prayed, "Father, I accept my sickness, even if it exists for the rest of my life." Those last words were hard to get out, but having said them, I felt more at peace than I had for a long time.

The next morning a friend lent me another book. This one was about panic disorder, and it described my condition to a tee. After only half an hour of reading, I knew I had found the answer. I couldn't wait for the next attack to come. Breaking all the rules of caution I had imposed on myself, I worked hard and then drove 200 miles.

When the attack came, a burning sensation blazed all over my body, but I relaxed and calmly said, "Welcome symptoms! Have fun! You're treating me roughly, but that's all right, because now I understand you, and I'm not going to fight you."

Previous attacks had lasted hours and left me exhausted. This attack petered out in 30 minutes. I knew I was on the road to recovery.

If you are curious to learn what Ernie discovered, read on.

How the Nervous System Works

The nervous system consists of the brain, the spinal cord, and a network of nerves extending throughout the body. Small electrical charges travel through this system, ordering different muscles to move.

How do your nerves react when you are faced with a crisis situation? Let's say that while crossing the street you barely escape being hit by a speeding car. The near-accident triggers an impulse in your brain that causes a cold sweat, a thumping heart, quickened breath, a tight chest, and an ache in the pit of your stomach. This rapid physical change occurs because your nerves swung into action. Upon sensing the danger, your nerves send a message to some of your glands, which secrete various fluids into the body. The most important glands activated by danger are the adrenal glands. These twin glands,

located near the kidneys, secrete a fluid called adrenaline. This is the substance which places your body on “red alert,” resulting in quick breathing, a rapid heartbeat, and so on.

When we are angry, afraid or excited, these symptoms occur naturally. Their presence indicates our nerves are functioning correctly. Nerves do not malfunction. They respond accurately to crisis situations.

The Symptoms of Panic Disorder

In our high-stress world, many of us live on the borderline of panic disorder. The potential for a panic attack exists when our nerves become oversensitized. This state can be brought on by a long period of living under pressure or by a sudden, extreme problem such as a death in the family or loss of a job. People whose nerves are oversensitized due to constant or extreme anxiety say things like,

- “I’m just a bundle of nerves.”
- “I’m becoming a real basket case.”
- “My nerves are shot.”

A panic attack occurs when so much adrenaline is produced that it triggers alarming physical sensations. Let’s discuss the symptoms in more detail. Not everyone has the same set of symptoms. You may be troubled by one or more of these:

- fatigue that leaves you worn out
- edginess where the smallest thing upsets you
- “pins and needles” in the hands and feet
- burning sensations in the arms, back and shoulders
- muscle cramps and spasms
- churning stomach or indigestion
- diarrhea or frequent urination
- heart pains where your heart may race, bang, skip a beat, or simply hurt
- trembling and shaking or a tight feeling in the throat
- inability to take a deep breath
- dizziness, faintness or nausea
- migraine headaches

The physical symptoms often lead to mental and emotional symptoms such as discouragement and depression. You worry about what in the world is wrong with you. You feel like you will never recover from this mysterious disease. You miss your old cheerful, capable self.

Sufferers gradually withdraw from any activity or interpersonal contact that might trigger an attack. Whenever they step out the door, they experience pangs of anxiety. At a meeting, they sit in the back row to escape quickly, if necessary. For the same reason, they choose a table close to the door at a restaurant. Eventually, sufferers avoid all public activity, becoming imprisoned at home. Psychologists call this “agoraphobia,” which means fear of the market place or public places.

If you are saying to yourself, “I’m experiencing some of these symptoms,” then you are probably suffering from a form of panic disorder. Whether you have endured your symptoms for decades or only a few months, rest assured there is a remedy for what ails you. First, you must understand your problem.

The Problem: The Fear- Adrenaline-Symptom Cycle

In stressful situations, your body pumps adrenaline into the bloodstream, which triggers the physical symptoms listed above. If your nerves are at the normal level of sensitivity, the symptoms are not severe or long-lasting. However, if you are already a bundle of nerves, the reaction to the adrenaline is more pronounced, resulting in a panic attack.

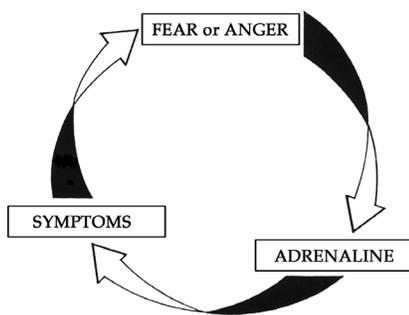
During the attack, many people fall into a subtle trap. They become fearful of the alarming, strange sensations they are experiencing. They wonder how much stronger the next attack will be. Some fear an embarrassing diarrhea mishap will occur in public. Others, suspecting they are on the verge of a heart attack, constantly take their pulse and anxiously await their doom.

Do you know what your nerves do when you respond with fearful alarm? They send a message to the adrenal glands: “Produce more adrenaline.” The glands do as they’re told. So then,

- you experience even more symptoms;
- you worry even more;
- consequently, your body produces even more adrenaline.

During a single attack, you may whirl through this cycle many times. It is like throwing gasoline on a fire—again and again!

The results are even more disastrous when you fight the symptoms. You tense up, battling courageously, but your efforts only make the attack longer and stronger because your body keeps ordering up more adrenaline. The diagram illustrates the fear-adrenaline-symptom cycle.



Step One: In reaction to a symptom, you respond with fear, anger or the determination to fight back. This reaction produces more adrenaline.

Step Two: The presence of more adrenaline increases the symptoms.

Step Three: If you respond with more fear or fury, the whole process will repeat itself, until you are exhausted. Only then will the body’s adrenaline level diminish.

This is the dangerous trap of panic disorder. Unwittingly, you feed the very fire you so desperately long to extinguish.

The Cure: Breaking the Cycle

Since the cause of *prolonged* panic attacks is our own faulty thinking, this four-step remedy is amazingly simple.

Recognize what you are doing to yourself.

Now you understand how your nervous system functions. You have learned that fear, anger and resistance will merely trigger the release of more adrenaline. So tell yourself, “This is how my body works. I just need to react more appropriately.”

Welcome the symptoms as friends.

To break the fear-adrenaline-symptom cycle simply welcome your symptoms as friends. They are not signs of a fatal disease or an impending heart attack. They can do you no lasting harm, so don’t fear or fight them. Soon your body will run low on adrenaline, and the attack will end. The symptoms are merely a reflection of your mood. So let your mood be *acceptance*.

Relax throughout each attack.

When an attack arrives, sit or lie down and just relax. Tell each muscle from your scalp to your toes, “Loosen up, lay back and take a rest.” No matter what symptoms arise, ignore them. Don’t watch for problems. Don’t take your pulse. An accelerated heartbeat is uncomfortable at the moment, but it can’t hurt you. Your heart will stop racing if you stop revving it.

Take note of your breathing. Avoid short, rapid breathing in the upper chest. Instead, take slow, deliberate, deep breaths. Concentrate your thoughts on something else. Imagine yourself in a comfortable situation or scene.

Relaxing breaks the fear-adrenaline-symptom cycle.

Allow time to pass.

Recovery is a process. Be patient for a few weeks while the sensitivity of your nerves subsides. You will continue to have attacks, but when you respond to them calmly, they will diminish in frequency and strength.

If you can control your attacks by yourself, that is great. However, some people are too debilitated by excessive levels of adrenaline in their system. Others struggle with severe depression mixed with anxiety. In such circumstances, seek the help of a physician who can prescribe an appropriate anti-anxiety medication to get you over the hump and on the road to recovery.

Get proper rest and exercise. Stay busy, setting reachable—not stressful—goals for yourself each day. You will be getting better every day, but don’t try to measure your progress. After you plant a seed, you don’t dig it up each morning to check how it’s growing. In the same way, simply allow time to pass. Within months you will be your old self once again.

These are the four steps to freedom from panic attacks. The goal is to shut off the production of adrenaline. Victory is attained by calm acceptance. Although the remedy is simple, it works.

Ernie’s Second Discovery

Let’s pick up Ernie’s story again.

After I calmly endured my abbreviated panic attack, I went into the living room to tell my wife the good news.

“The book cured me,” I said, as I hugged her.

“Which book?” she asked.

Surprised by the question, I looked at the coffee table where two books rested: the book about panic disorder, and the book about the prayer of acceptance.

“I meant the book about panic disorder,” I said, “but now that I think about it, they both taught the same thing in different ways. The remedy for anxiety is acceptance.” Noting this parallel, I decided to study the Bible to discover what it teaches about this matter. Although the Bible does not mention panic attacks specifically, several passages describe how to deal with fear, anger and worry. Here are three such passages.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

It sounds crazy, but James advises us to rejoice when we endure trouble. This is a lot like welcoming my symptoms rather than fighting against them. If I trust that God is in charge and knows what He is doing, I can accept any difficulty that comes my way.

“Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

“Be still, and know that I am God. ...” (Psalm 46:10a).

The remedy for worry is prayer. I don’t have to let my thoughts run wild and rule me. I can tell my problems to God and let Him worry about them. When I do, I know the peace that only God can give.

The Bible verses Ernie found encourage us to draw close to God and trust Him. However, many people consider this difficult and even dangerous advice. They may have doubts like these:

- Does God even exist?
- If God does exist, does He care about us? Could He possibly love us as much as these Bible verses imply?
- Can God be trusted? Isn’t He the one who can punish us for the wrong things we do? It sounds risky to cozy up to someone like that.

Maybe these doubts express your own reservations about getting too close to God. Recognizing these reservations, let’s hear the stories of two other people. From them, we will learn better how to overcome panic disorder and the fear of drawing close to God.

Case Study: Bill

Many people assume that anxiety attacks plague weak people who don’t know how to deal with life. Bill’s story proves otherwise.

Bill was a burly guy whose physical strength was matched by his supreme self-confidence. Accustomed to leading others, he became a successful businessman. Yet, although Bill feared no one, eventually he was beaten down by panic disorder. Here’s how it happened.

While Bill was working 70 hours a week in his business, he became overtired and developed severe headaches and heart pains. Being husky and strong-willed, Bill decided to fight back. But every time he fought the symptoms, they descended in waves. Finally, the attacks paralyzed his life. He would order a meal in a restaurant and then have to leave without eating it, when ambushed by panic and weakness. Totally baffled, he sold his business, and stayed at home for two years fighting his mystery problem.

Meanwhile, Bill was befriended by some Christian people who told him how to have peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. They explained to Bill how no one can make himself right with God. Only Christ can do this, and He had already done so by offering His life on the cross as the payment for all our sins.

Bill told his friends: “That’s a lot of bunk! Even if there is a God, it’s up to each person to tow his own weight, to do what he can to please God and maybe earn a place in heaven.”

Bill continued to fight his illness alone, until one day he went to see Ernie, who was a counselor. Ernie explained, “Adrenaline is causing your headaches and heart pains. You just need to calm down. Accept the symptoms as normal. When the adrenaline is all used up, the attack will end. Eventually, the attacks will subside, and you’ll live a normal life again.”

Bill tried what Ernie recommended and it worked. After a couple months, he went back to work and began to live a normal life again. A year later, however, the panic attacks returned. So he went back to see Ernie.

“How many hours have you been working?” Ernie asked.

“I try to keep it under 70.”

“I see,” Ernie said with a note of sarcasm. “And when do you kick back and rest?”

“I run off to play tennis and lift weights over lunch.”

“So you produce as much adrenaline when you exercise as when you work. Your body doesn’t consider that relaxing.”

“I get the picture,” Bill admitted. “I’m working myself back into the same rut, aren’t I?”

Ernie counseled Bill to join a support group for folks who wrestle with stress and workaholism. Eventually, he learned the art of not overextending himself.

But that’s not all Bill learned. After reflecting on this entire experience, one day he told Ernie, “Believe it or not, my nerves taught me that the message of Jesus Christ is true. I had fought my panic attacks for years, and all my efforts and determination couldn’t save me. Meanwhile, the cure for panic disorder was there all along: stop fighting, stop trying to cure yourself. I would have been a fool to ignore the cure just because it was simple. Then it dawned on me that God’s way of saving people is also simple. We only need to turn from our pride and sin and believe that Jesus died for us. I was a fool to reject this before, but now I realize I can’t earn God’s favor and save myself. I’m not strong enough. But Jesus is!”

Case Study: Rhoda

In today’s fast-paced urban world, many stressed-out people experience panic attacks. Rhoda knew all about stress from her job as a checkout clerk in a supermarket. When the line of customers lengthened, some of them would gripe about what a hurry they were in and urge Rhoda to get a move on. But she was already working as fast as she could.

Eventually, whenever more than four people got in line, she would get so dizzy and nauseated she could hardly continue.

These attacks made Rhoda confused, uncertain and anxious. She worried she might lose her job, that the next attack would be so bad she would scream. Would her symptoms get worse? Was she going crazy? Was she going to die? She didn’t know, but she bravely struggled through every day, gritting her teeth and hanging on to the cash register when dizziness and nausea gripped her.

Then Rhoda met Bill, whom we met in the previous case study. He explained how to calmly accept the symptoms until the adrenaline level subsides. Greatly encouraged, Rhoda said, “I’ll try it!”

A week later Rhoda phoned Bill and told him she was having difficulty applying his advice. So, he came to the supermarket and observed Rhoda as she worked.

During her break Bill asked, “Do you pay attention to your breathing?”

“Should I?”

“Yes. You’re taking short, quick breaths. That kind of breathing leads to hyperventilation and dizziness.”

“So, what should I do?”

“Inhale slowly and deeply. Then exhale slowly. You’ll find it much more relaxing.”

Rhoda leaned back in her chair and took a deep, deliberate breath. “Oh, that feels good!”

“Is that your normal snack food?” Bill pointed at the chocolate bar Rhoda had bought from a vending machine.

“Either this or a cola.”

“A more healthy diet—like an apple, for instance—will also help you ease your tension.”

“That’s a good idea. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“And do you get regular exercise?”

Rhoda laughed. “Isn’t standing all day at work exercise enough? When I get home, a brisk walk around the park is the last thing on my mind.”

“We all feel that way at the end of a workday, but if you push yourself to start exercising, in a week or so you won’t feel so tired.”

“And I’ll do better with my panic attacks?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“Breathing, healthy food, and exercise,” Bill summarized. “Those ought to help you get over the hump.”

“Thanks for the help, Bill.”

“My pleasure and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to share one other piece of advice.”

“Shoot.”

“Well, as a result of my panic disorder, I have discovered I can face the future better when I am trusting in Jesus Christ.”

“What good would that do?” Rhoda wondered.

“Why do people become stressed out? Why do we have panic attacks? It’s because we’re all carrying around a load of fears, worries and guilt. Jesus Christ is God’s solution to all that. Rhoda, do you know why Jesus died on the cross?”

“Hmm,” she thought, “even though I don’t go to church, I remember my mother teaching me Jesus died for the sins of the world.”

“That’s right,” Bill said. “I used to think that was a nice fairy tale, but now I believe it’s true. Jesus died for me and He died for you.”

“What makes you so sure, Bill?”

“When I read the Bible, I hear God inviting me to rest in Him and not get so stressed out about things. This advice is similar to the recovery method for panic disorder. To be cured you only have to relax and accept the strange symptoms. To live above stress and anxiety, we only need to relax and rest in God’s forgiveness and care.”

Since Bill’s other advice had been so helpful, Rhoda seriously pondered this advice further. She joined a Bible study group, and eventually God led her to believe the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One day, she explained her new perspective to Bill: “All my life I lived in a fog of confusion and doubt. I worried and fretted about everything, and why? Because I didn’t know God loves me and cares for me. Most of all I feared the future and death. I didn’t know what would happen to me after I died. Now I’m at peace, because I’m resting on the certainty of the promises of Jesus. I’m confident because He said, *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life”* (John 5:24).

Now that I’ve come out of the fog into the sunlight of God’s love, the Lord helps me with all my worries and stresses.”

Comparing the Two Cures

In our case studies we have seen two recovery processes at work: one for panic disorder, another for the “disorders” of sin, guilt and fear. Let’s compare the two closely.

Don’t deny the facts.

Some victims of panic disorder refuse to admit they are contributing to their problem. Instead, they imagine they are suffering from a rare disease.

These folks are like people who deny the true seriousness of human sin and guilt before God. They claim we will not be held accountable to God for every wrong we have thought, said and done. However, the Bible states emphatically:

(Jesus said) “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matthew 12:36).

“Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you. ...” (Isaiah 59:2a).

The barrier between people and God is real. The barrier is our disobedience. Because of it, we fear getting close to God. So we struggle through life, missing out on His love and care.

Realize there is a cure.

Many who are trapped in the fear-adrenaline-symptom cycle, assume there is no way out. They resign themselves to a life of fear and pain. How relieved they are to discover the remedy!

When it comes to the “disorder” of our broken relationship with God, is there a cure? The Bible says,

“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. ...” (1 Peter 3:18a).

(Jesus said) "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. ... No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. ..." (John 10:11,18a).

God has removed the debt of our sins because Jesus Christ willingly lay down His innocent life in payment for every sin we have ever committed. When Jesus spoke about taking His life up again, He was foretelling that He would rise from the dead. And that is exactly what He did!

The saving works of Jesus Christ are God's cure for the most harmful ills afflicting you and all people. The question that remains is this: How can I receive this healing?

Trust the cure.

The cure is Jesus Christ. You receive Him by means of two steps:

1. Admit you are a sinner, welcoming God's correct diagnosis of your problem.
2. Rest on the sure fact that Christ shed His blood to save you from the punishment you deserve.

Don't ignore this cure because of its simplicity. It is the sure and certain remedy for the deepest disorders of life. You don't have to heal yourself. You don't have to add your own efforts to what Christ has done for you. Simply trust Christ's saving work on your behalf by having faith in Him alone.

If you sincerely desire to receive Christ's cure, tell God so in your own words. Or if you wish, you may use the thoughts of this prayer:

Heavenly Father, I have failed to love You or others as I should. Clearly, I am infected with sin, and all I deserve is Your eternal punishment. For all these wrongs, I humbly plead for Your mercy.

I thank You for removing all my sins from Your record. This You accomplished through Jesus Christ my Savior. He suffered for my sins, and I am forgiven. Just as Christ rose from the dead, so You shall raise me up on the Last Day to live with You forever. In this Good News I find forgiveness, joy and confidence for the future.

I thank You Lord that the Holy Spirit has given me the faith to trust in You as my Savior. Continue to strengthen my faith, so I may never fear drawing closer to You. Amen.

Enjoy life free from oppressive anxiety.

As time passes, people who calmly accept their panic attack symptoms are gradually healed. They have a new lease on life. Their anxieties and fears are replaced by joy and confidence in the future.

In the same way, when you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and death, you will experience joy and confidence in the days ahead. You will still have problems, stresses, and even heartache at times, but they no longer need to tie you in knots. Instead, you can calmly rest in God's daily care.

The Bible promises: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in You" (Isaiah 26:3).

"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ... Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:4, 6-7).

“I will lie down and sleep in peace, for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Psalm 4:8).

When faced with daily pressures that might stress us out, we only need to tell ourselves the truth of God’s constant love and care. Since the Lord has been faithful to solve our biggest problems— sin, guilt and death—He surely will prove capable of handling all the other troubles that come our way.

Share the Cure

Did you notice how Ernie told Bill and Bill told Rhoda about the cure for panic disorder? People who find the truth share it with others, forming a chain of concern that extends from person to person to person.

Meeting and trusting in Jesus Christ makes a similar impact. When you discover the joy of His salvation, you will be eager to pass on His Good News to others.

Helpful Resources:

The Anxiety Cure by Archibald D. Hart, Word, ISBN: 0849915325.

Hope and Help for Your Nerves by Claire Weekes, Signet, ISBN: 0451167228.

Pass Through Panic: Freeing Yourself from Anxiety and Fear by Claire Weekes, Penguin Audiobooks; ISBN: 1565113209.

Don’t Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks by R. Reid Wilson, Harper Collins, ISBN: 0060951605.

Notes

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for a variety of ministry resources*

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