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Panic Attack or Going Mad

Question: “My fear is whether I’m having a panic attack or just going mad. I feel as if there is no way out of this fear. I could be driving home and I get a feeling over me and I get very scared. I have not been told by docs that I suffer panic attacks but had blood tests and all come back fine. What tests are there for panic attacks anxiety...will I ever get my life back to normal?”

Answer:

The first question asks is whether there is a test for anxiety now that they have learned that blood tests are normal. I assume the doctors would have also done a physical exam. This is very reassuring news.

This person should now proceed to a psychologist who can diagnose the panic attacks and anxiety. He/she will do an assessment as part of their process and can then make the diagnosis.

For the purpose of a learning example let’s say that the above statement was made by an individual with the name John (obviously the person’s true identity will be held in confidence). What we are going to do is use Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to analyze the thoughts behind the statement to locate the cognitive distortions and then substitute healthier thoughts that can make us feel better.

The key points of the statement are:

“I feel as if there is no way out of this fear. I could be driving home and I get a feeling over me and I get very scared.”

First I recommend that you scroll down below and look at the list of Cognitive Distortions and then try to locate what possible distortions might be present in John’s thinking before continuing to read directly below. Hint: There is more than one distortion present. Once you’ve done this, write them down or type them out and then come back to this spot.

Okay, welcome back (I hope you have really given this a try yourself)

If you guessed that the following four distortions are present then you’re right: 1. All-or-nothing thinking, 2. Overgeneralization, 3. Emotional reasoning, 4. Making should statements.

Let's look specifically at how each distortion is actually present in this statement and then we will look at some alternative more realistic thoughts.

1. All-or-nothing thinking - By stating that there is no way out of the fear (or feeling this way) John is making an absolute statement – which is exactly what All-or-nothing thinking refers to.
2. Overgeneralization – John is taking this episode and generalizing it to the rest of his life, thus making a wide generalization.
3. Emotional reasoning – Notice one key word that John uses “feel.” This is significant because emotional reasoning is making an argument on the basis of how one feels not on objective evidence.
4. Making should statements – The premise behind John's argument is that he shouldn't feel this way when driving home. The truth is that by beating himself up by stating he shouldn't feel this way he is actually exacerbating his anxiety. (Should statements refer to the way one thinks a situation should unfold rather than the actual situation one is faced with.)

Now let's try to generate some alternative, more accurate thoughts that we can substitute in place of the ones containing distortions. Again, before reading on, try to generate some on your own. Once you've done this, write them down or type them out and then come back to this spot.

Okay here are some alternatives:

Just because at the present time John cannot think of techniques to deal with his panic attacks, in reality, it does not mean there is no way out of them. There are many techniques out there and many people that have indeed gotten over panic.

Rather than John concluding that there is no way out of the fear, he can acknowledge that while he is definitely feeling anxious, there is no real evidence to suggest that he will always feel this way.

Just because John “feels” that there is no way out of the fear does not make it so. He is reasoning on the basis of his emotions not according to objective reality.

John has a “should” rule in his mind that he should not feel anxious doing simple tasks like driving. However the truth is he is feeling anxious and that's okay. This does not mean he is inadequate in any way nor that he will always be anxious doing routine tasks. The truth is: by “buying into” the belief that he shouldn't feel anxious, he feeds his anxiety. Simply by learning to accept his anxiety, it will lessen.

As you are probably starting to see the cognitive distortions in your thinking, you can see that they represent a “locked-in” belief that can be changed – and for the better!

Now it’s certainly not realistic to think that you can do this once and instantly get better, but over time this process can definitely be a great way to deal with anxiety and panic attacks.

A great thing about doing cognitive behavioral therapy is that it tends to draw your thinking into the present instead of racing into the future. This can be very relaxing and beneficial and is perfectly complemented by doing activities that induce relaxation. Over time this combination can not only help with panic attacks but it can improve the quality of one’s life!

Cognitive Distortions*

1. All-or-nothing thinking - Thinking of things in absolute terms, like "always", "every" or "never". Few aspects of human behavior are so absolute.

2. Overgeneralization - Taking isolated cases and using them to make wide generalizations.

3. Mental filter - Focusing exclusively on certain, usually negative or upsetting, aspects of something while ignoring the rest, like a tiny imperfection in a piece of clothing.

4. Disqualifying the positive - Continually "shooting down" positive experiences for arbitrary, ad hoc reasons.

5. Jumping to conclusions - Assuming something negative where there is no evidence to support it. Two specific subtypes are also identified:

- Mind reading - Assuming the intentions of others.

- Fortune telling - Predicting how things will turn before they happen.

6. Magnification and Minimization - Inappropriately understating or exaggerating the way people or situations truly are. Often the positive characteristics of other people are exaggerated and negative characteristics are understated. There is one subtype of magnification:

Catastrophizing - Focusing on the worst possible outcome, however unlikely, or thinking that a situation is unbearable or impossible when it is really just uncomfortable.

7. Emotional reasoning - Making decisions and arguments based on how you feel rather than objective reality.

8. Making should statements - Concentrating on what you think "should" or ought to be rather than the actual situation you are faced with, or having rigid rules which you think should always apply no matter what the circumstances are. Albert Ellis termed this "Musterbation".

9. Labeling - Explaining behaviors or events, merely by naming them; related to overgeneralization. Rather than describing the specific behavior, you assign a label to someone or yourself that puts them in absolute and unalterable terms.

10. Personalization (or attribution) - Assuming you or others directly caused things when that may not have been the case. When applied to others this is an example of blame.

*Cognitive distortion. (2008, July 9). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 00:08, July 15, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive_distortion&oldid=224669620

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