

HEALTH >>

Imagine losing the plot every single day for no reason. Good news? You can fight the fear.

What's a PANIC ATTACK?

I was 16 when I had my first panic attack," remembers Vanessa, 21. "I'd

recently been on holiday in Queensland and nearly drowned after being caught in a rip while swimming. I was still traumatised when I got home, and kept having flashbacks, which one day triggered my first panic attack. From then on, the attacks occurred seven to 10 times

a day. I'd get a cold rush from my head to my feet, my vision would go blurry and my heart started to beat really hard. I couldn't stand properly and would have to tell myself to breathe, because I thought I was going to have a heart attack. It was terrifying. The frustrating thing was I didn't know what triggered them – they would happen anytime, anywhere. It got to the point where I didn't want to leave

the house in case one struck. It was incredibly debilitating. No-one understands how frightening it is until it happens to them.

Then one night, I thought I heard voices and saw people in my room, which triggered a massive panic attack that went on for 10 minutes. It was awful. Mum took me to our GP, who referred me to a therapist.

I actually had a few attacks during my sessions with her, which allowed her to teach me the best way to relax and how to get through an episode without freaking. My doctor also put me on medication for a few months which, along with the therapy, made a huge difference.

"I WAS TOTALLY FREAKED OUT – I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE."

Today, I still have attacks, but only one or two a month. I'm off medication and use the techniques I learnt from my therapist to cope. They're something I always have to be prepared for; this has made me quite a paranoid person. But I consider myself lucky that I've got them pretty much under control. Anyone who suffers from panic attacks should seek professional help – there's no point trying to cope on your own; it's too much. Getting assistance was the best thing I ever did."

LOOK FOR THE WARNING SIGNS: NAUSEA, SWEATING, DIZZINESS AND ANXIETY!

The hotel maid's fetish for smelling people's bed sheets was getting risky.

PANIC ATTACKS 101

WHAT: "Panic attacks are intense spells of anxiety that occur in situations where most people wouldn't be afraid," explains psychologist Dr Lissa Johnson (www.lissajohnson.com.au). "They're basically driven by fear of fear."

WHO: People most susceptible to panic attacks tend to be finely tuned to changes in their body.

WHY: Episodes can be triggered by confined spaces, potentially humiliating situations (such as public speaking) or by feelings which mimic

anxiety, like increased heart rate from exercise. But as Dr Johnson points out: "It's the thoughts – conscious or unconscious – which enable them."

DIY THERAPY: "Learn that, although the feelings can be intense and scary, you can't be physically harmed by them or go crazy from them," says Dr Johnson. "Don't fight the anxiety; it will subside if you don't scare yourself with more catastrophic thoughts." For more info, log on to www.anxietyaustralia.com.au