

## **Anxiety Disorders and Panic Attacks Co-Occurring with Borderline Disorder**

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Anxiety is a common symptom of borderline disorder. Anxiety disorders occur in almost 90% of people with the disorder. If you have borderline disorder, you may experience heightened levels of anxiety, especially at times of stress. For example, this may occur when you feel you are personally criticized and rejected, or during periods of separation from people who are very important to you. Moderate to severe anxiety may also lead to physical symptoms, such as migraine headaches, abdominal pain and irritable bowel syndrome.

### **Panic Attacks**

A panic attack is an acute and severe form of anxiety that occurs in about 50% of people with borderline disorder.

Panic attacks are characterized by a discrete period of intense fear in which four or more of the following symptoms develop abruptly and reach a peak within 10 minutes:

- palpitations, pounding heart, or increased heart rate
- sweating
- trembling or shaking
- sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
- feeling of choking
- chest pain or discomfort
- nausea or abdominal distress
- feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself
- fear of losing control or going crazy
- fear of dying
- numbness or tingling sensations
- chills or hot flushes

Symptoms can appear unexpectedly and suddenly, for no apparent reason, and disappear either rapidly or slowly. People who suffer from panic attacks may also be fearful of placing themselves in circumstances from which escape may be difficult or embarrassing such as elevators, shopping malls and movie theaters. This is referred to as *agoraphobia*.

## **Treatment of Anxiety Disorders and Panic Attacks in Borderline Disorder**

Effective treatment of disabling anxiety and panic attacks in people with borderline disorder should be initiated promptly when these disorders occur. Such treatment usually consists of the use of medications and behavioral techniques.

The use of medications to treat anxiety and panic attacks in patients with borderline disorder must proceed with care. This is so because these disorders are commonly treated with benzodiazepines (Xanax, Klonopin, Valium, etc.), that have been found to be harmful in most patients with borderline disorder because they increase impulsivity and have addictive potential. Therefore, in borderline disorder, other classes of medications are often required, such as a temporary increase in the neuroleptic, atypical antipsychotic or antidepressant medication being used to treat the disorder. Initiating the use of an antipsychotic agent or an antidepressant may prove effective for moderate to severe anxiety or panic attacks if one is not already prescribed.

In addition, a course of cognitive behavioral therapy, or of biofeedback, specifically tailored to target the symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks is often considered as part of the long-term treatment of these problems.