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Panic Attacks and Phobias

You're driving along on a crowded bridge and suddenly your heart starts pounding and your head is spinning. You can't breathe and you feel like you are being choked. You lose control of the car and hit the guard rail. You are terrified because you don't know what is happening to you. You are sure you must be having a heart attack and that you are going to die. After you are rushed to the emergency room and checked out, you are shocked to hear that you just had a *panic attack*.

Panic attacks occur when anxiety peaks abruptly and is intolerable to the sufferer. A myriad of physical symptoms such as pounding heart, trembling, faintness, dizziness, chest pain, choking sensations, fears of dying, going crazy or being "detached" may occur within the span of a few seconds or minutes. Panic attacks alone do not imply a diagnosis of panic disorder because they can occur in the context of many different anxiety disorders. Children with OCD, SAD, GAD or social anxiety can have panic attacks when they are exposed to triggers for their specific fears.

To have *panic disorder*, which is rare in children, the child must have repeated, *unexpected* panic attacks that are unrelated to fears stemming from another condition such as OCD, separation, or generalized anxiety. In panic disorder, there is persistent apprehension in anticipation of an impending panic attack—the fear of fear itself.

Signs and symptoms of Panic Disorder

- ❑ Repeated, unexpected, "out of the blue" panic attacks
- ❑ Dreaded anticipation of another attack or its outcome
- ❑ Avoidance of perceived triggers of attacks
- ❑ Reluctance to venture outside the home for fear of possible attack and inability to cope

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Indications of Panic Disorder in school:

Children with panic may have intense, seemingly unprovoked and abrupt episodes of overwhelming fear that is focused on their physical symptoms. They may be afraid of dying because they cannot breathe or because they don't know what is happening to them. During a panic attack, a child may cry hysterically and be difficult to soothe.

Phobias

Or perhaps, you cannot apply for the best jobs because you are terrified to work in a high rise building and therefore limit yourself to jobs only on the ground floor. You cannot ride elevators or will not fly... I can tell you how to overcome the fear of another panic attack, to drive on that bridge fearlessly again, to ride elevators to skyscrapers or enjoy flying again.

Phobias involve intense fear of one or more specific events or objects such as insects, thunderstorms, heights, elevators, needles, bees, snakes, etc. Although the object of the phobia may be one that poses some threat for most people, the phobic reaction is at the level of panic. For instance, whereas the threat of a bee sting may make most people cautious around bees, a child who has a phobia of bees may have an overly dramatic reaction to the mention of bees, even when none are within sight. She may refuse to go outdoors even when no bees are present. Unlike other types of anxiety, phobias are very specific and are usually accompanied by strong avoidance of the feared object. Children do not generally display any anxiety or fear if they can avoid the feared stimulus. They do not have undue anxiety in other situations.

Signs and symptoms of Specific Phobias

- ❑ Unreasonable and persistent fear of an identifiable object or situation such as animals, insects, the dark, medical procedures, thunderstorms
- ❑ Anticipation of or exposure to the feared object triggers intense fear
- ❑ Exposure elicits panic, freezing, crying, clinging
- ❑ Strong avoidance or endurance of the feared object with great distress

Indications of Specific Phobias in school:

Children with phobias do not present as anxious or nervous in routine school settings. Extreme fear, panic or avoidance occurs only if the child encounters the object of his phobia. For instance, a child with a phobia of bees and insects may refuse to go to the playground and become hysterical if pressured but is otherwise unperturbed.

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