How to Manage Nocturnal Panic Attacks

by ERIC PATTERSON

Responding to Nighttime Panic

Panic attacks are terrible and uncomfortable; they disrupt your home life, your work life, your relationships, and your outlook on the world. They lead to unwanted physical reactions like:

- Feeling your heart pound
- Feeling sweaty
- Feeling shaky
- Feeling like you can’t breathe
- Chest pain
- Feeling dizzy or numb

As if these physical symptoms weren’t bad enough, panic attacks also trigger mental symptoms like:

- Fear you are going to die from a sudden illness like a heart attack or stroke
- Fear you are losing your mind or going crazy
- Fear you are losing control of your body and grasp on reality

During the day you fear the next attack and how bad it might be. By the time night comes, you may look forward to the rest and recuperation that sleeping provides. This feeling can be short-lived if nocturnal panic attacks are a part of your life.

As the name suggests, nocturnal panic attacks are unexpected periods where the above physical and mental health symptoms of panic are expressed. Nocturnal panic attacks occur in between 44 and 71 percent of people with panic disorder.

The difference is these attacks occur while you are sleeping. Initial attacks may lead to the additional consequences of confusion and anger towards your symptoms or yourself for having them.

It is important to note what nocturnal panic attacks are *not* to avoid confusion. Nocturnal panic attacks are not:

- Sleep terrors
- Sleep apnea
- Nightmares
- Responses to dreams

The investigation into these panic attacks is young, so there is not a great deal of information explaining how they happen, why they happen, or why they happen for some but not others.

Immediate Response

All people need a certain quantity of quality sleep to function well in life. If you are someone with anxiety and panic, chances are good that sleep is even more valuable as people with anxiety tend to be drained of their resources during the day. If you can manage your response to your nocturnal panic attacks, you will put yourself in a position to lessen the impact and fall back asleep. Here's how:

Avoid Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing is the mental act of making your situations or feelings more negative than they actually are. Of course, panic attacks are extremely negative.

Nocturnal attacks add another layer of frustration, but labeling these as "the worst thing ever," or thinking they have control over you, limits your ability to endure the process. If the situation is viewed irrationally, it will be much harder to return to sleep. With rationality and relaxation, there is opportunity.

Next page: steps you can take to decrease your likelihood of having a nighttime panic attack

Immediate Response

Change the Venue

If you are still groggy and sleepy, try to lie back down for a few minutes. If you find yourself fully awake following a nocturnal panic attack, force yourself up and out of bed.

Going to a different room will change your environment, which will aid in changing your thoughts. Consider having a drink of water or decaffeinated tea to occupy yourself. Having a small snack or even splashing water on your face can do enough to break the feelings of fear and discomfort.

Reduce Stimulation

People who wake up in the night errantly tend to pick up their phone or turn on the TV. These acts stimulate you — they will keep you alert and more awake.

Avoid sleeping or trying to sleep with the TV on. You may think it assists in your attempts for sleep, but it actually reduces the quality and quantity of your rest. Instead, grab a book or magazine if you find yourself bored. Doing a jigsaw puzzle or a craft could make falling back to sleep more of a reality.

Set a Time Limit

Having a nocturnal panic attack should not be a sign that you cannot sleep for the remainder of the night. Once you wake, take note of the time and set a timer for 20 minutes. During that time you can focus on completing the steps above in your quest to return to sleep. Once the time has expired, return to bed with the goal of getting good rest.

Daytime Interventions

Improving sleep and reducing nocturnal panic attacks does not have to be a nighttime activity only. By preparing and planning during the day, you can build strategies to positively influence your anxiety, panic and sleep. You may not be able to completely improve all symptoms, but a few simple steps can make a big difference. Here's how:

Practice Relaxation

Anyone with panic and anxiety should be doing relaxation techniques daily, both when symptoms are high as damage control and when low as prevention. Have you tried anxiety coping cards or found another technique that

works well for you? Has your go-to technique lost any of its benefit over time?

Consider expanding or modifying your relaxation skills. With a range of options and limitless variations of each, it is unreasonable to think that you will not find positive effects from the exercises. As always, practice will be needed to get the most out of relaxation.

Seek Enjoyment

Too often people become overly focused on their anxiety. They spend all of their time and efforts towards reducing anxiety and avoiding situations that might trigger panic. This leads to living life in a box with fewer opportunities for pleasurable experiences.

You can accomplish more by adding positives to your life than you can by reducing the negatives. Do this by contacting friends and trusted family supports. Go new places and do new things. Being active is a fantastic coping skill with many rewards.

Change Your Views of Sleep

The way you think about sleep greatly influences your success with it. If you try to force or demand sleep you hinder the process. Wondering what will happen if you don’t sleep or when your next good rest will be only adds anxiety and feeds your panic disorder.

Allow yourself to sleep when your body is ready. Believe that your body will do what it needs to do. It is very unlikely that you will go days without sleeping. Letting go of control will lead to better results.

To some, the idea of a nocturnal panic attack is a new concept. To others, it is something to be feared. In either case, preparation is key. By knowing the signs and the responses that help, you leave yourself in a position of power. Power leads to fewer attacks and better rest.