

Panic Attacks

Dr Lois Dodds (Part 1 of 2)



I want to share some thoughts today on how you can behave, or what you can do, when you experience a panic attack, or when you have some kind of spiritual attack, or maybe even an attack of conscience, because the process is the same. I talk to a lot of people who work abroad and when you work under high stress environments - especially where there's war or terrorism or frequent crime – it's very easy to get into a state of mind where you don't feel safe and you feel much pressured.

My own daughter, Catherine, worked in a country where terrorism was very strong during the 12 years that she was there. She did OK when she was there because she could compensate, but when she came back to the States, she started having panic attacks, and of course at first she didn't know what to call them. But she telephoned one day and said, 'Mum, I just don't know what's happening. My heart starts racing; my hands get sweaty; I'm shaking all over; I feel nauseated. I just feel terrified, but I don't know why. I don't know what this is about.'

And so we began to talk about her experiences in Peru. She was actually having a delayed reaction to many of the situations of danger that she had been in when she lived overseas. For instance, she had been robbed at gunpoint by a man who said he was one of the terrorists and that he had people watching her. When she finally walked away from him he said, 'Don't look back, because I have 8 people watching you. So you go straight down the street and don't stop and don't talk to anyone.' She actually ran past several groups of friends in her neighbourhood and she didn't let on that anything was wrong. She just ran, pushing the baby stroller with her little boy in it.

That was one of many experiences. She coped while she had to, while the pressure was still on, but afterwards, it was as if all that delayed reaction began to come out in panic attacks. She said, 'Mum, what can I do? What am I going to do when these things happen?' So one day I wrote down for her the steps to go through that would help her to deal with these panic attacks, because they were so frightening. If they happened when she was in a social setting, she especially felt very embarrassed because she didn't know how to explain what was happening. Here's what I suggested, and it's turned out to be helpful to other people besides my daughter.

1) The first thing we have to do when we experience an attack, whether it's panic or something else, is to say, 'What am I feeling?'

We might name that feeling and say, 'I feel terrified that I might just jump out the window right now. I feel panic.' I might feel accused. I might feel as if Satan or someone is saying to me, 'You are an awful person. You have sinned and God will never forgive you. You can't help other people.' Or I might have to name the feeling of doom. 'I feel doomed - I just have this sudden sense that I'm going to die and I have no power to resist it.' Sometimes we need to name what we feel, and sometimes, we'll call it crazy. 'I feel crazy; I'm out of control; I don't know what's happening to me.' Sometimes our attack is like another voice speaking to us, rather than just our own voice.

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It may say, 'You know, you're not a child of God. You're just a wicked person and you could never be good enough for God.'

2) After we name what we feel, we need to recognise the lie that's inherent in what we're thinking and we have to quickly act to put it in truth.

With Catherine, I could ask her to say, 'I am not in this country any more, I'm right here in Albuquerque, and I am safe.' So she had to identify the lie that was causing her feeling of insecurity, of being in danger. For instance, one day, she just saw the figure of a man on a billboard. The billboard was dark and so she just saw the profile of a man with a gun. She hit the floor in the car - fortunately she was the passenger and not the driver - but she had to say to herself, 'Wait a minute, that's not a terrorist. I'm in Albuquerque and that's just a billboard.' She had to identify the lie that created that feeling of panic. We have to identify the lie if Satan or our conscience is saying, 'You're a bad person.' And we have to say, 'No. Wait a minute. Whatever I've done, I'm not a bad person. God has forgiven me, and he *will* forgive me.' The lie and temptation is to think that we're helpless, that we can't do anything about it or take control. We need to speak the truth to ourselves and say, 'I don't have to give in to sin. God has given me his spirit, so I can always resist sin or temptation.' If it's a spiritual attack we can resist the lie by saying, 'I don't have to be afraid. God has given me the spirit of love and power and a sound mind. I'm not going crazy. I'm just having a panic attack or some spiritual attack.'

3) I like to visualise the third step, which is that we take that thought captive to Jesus.

Because I'm a very visual person I like to visualise things. When I was a child and I played with my big brothers they would sometimes let me play cops and robbers. If I was really lucky, they would let me be the calf and one time they lassoed me. (My mother was *not* happy with that, because I got a rope around my neck!) But I imagine sending out a lasso and capturing that thought and winding it up in the rope like the cowboys did, then bringing it to Jesus and laying it at his feet. I can say to Jesus, 'Please take this thought or feeling. I'm giving it to you; it's not worth me thinking about. I'm rejecting this thought as unfit for your child.' I want to encourage you to memorise the scripture which speaks of God's power, because Jesus gave you and me power to bind up things on earth that he would bind in heaven. Is it fear? Bind it up, wrap it in the lasso and take it to Jesus. It's not fit for you. Is it panic, the sudden feeling that you're in danger? Remind yourself that you are safe in God's keeping; wind up that rope and take that thought to Jesus and lay it at his feet.

4) The fourth step is that you can calm yourself whenever you're afraid.

Physically, you can take these steps: stop, breathe slowly, take a long deep breath. If you've ever given birth, you know what that's like. You can take a cleansing breath and as you breathe in, imagine that you are breathing in God's spirit and his power. As you breathe out, imagine that you are breathing out his peace. Pray that God will calm you like a baby is stilled and quieted on its mother's breast or its father's chest.

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Breathe in God's love; breathe out his peace; feel his presence. Then bring to your memory passages of scripture that reassure you about the situation which you're afraid of. For example, the scripture says, 'When I am afraid I will trust in you.' It doesn't say we will *never* be afraid, but it says, 'When I am afraid I will trust in you'. My favourite one in our Jungle Camp days was, 'I sought the Lord and he heard me and delivered me from all my fears.' This was very real to me because I was afraid of the snakes, I was afraid of drowning, I was afraid of all kinds of things, but I wrote them all down and I put them before the Lord and he delivered me from all my fears. So I did almost drown, but I didn't die. I did step on a cross snake, but I didn't die, and God delivered me from the fears. Or another passage, 'When you pass through the waters, or the river, or the fire, I will be with you.' Then thank God out loud for his presence, his power, his protection; thank him for his purpose in your life, even though right now you've been feeling afraid, or guilty or tempted.

Now, next time we can talk about another step that you can take in this process to help you overcome the panic attack or the spiritual attack.