

Diagnosing Panic Disorder

Rakesh Jain, M.D., M.P.H.

Associate Clinical Professor
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
University of Texas Medical School
Houston, TX

A Patient's Description of a Panic Attack

"I am so scared that another panic will hit me. I thought I was going to die when I had the last one. It came right out of the blue — I couldn't get a breath, my heart felt like it was going to burst. I felt like I was going to faint. I was drenched in sweat and I felt sick. At its worst point, I thought I was dying. It was the worst feeling I have ever had."

DSM-IV Criteria: Panic Disorder (With and Without Agoraphobia)

Panic Disorder (with and without Agoraphobia)

Note: The DSM-IV distinguishes Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia from Panic Disorder Without Agoraphobia. In the summary below, see criterion B:

A. Both (1) and (2):

1. Recurrent unexpected Panic Attacks
2. At least one of the attacks has been followed by 1 month (or more) of one (or more) of the following:
 - a. Persistent concern about having additional attacks
 - b. Worry about the implications of the attack or its consequences (e.g., losing control, having a heart attack, "going crazy")
 - c. A significant change in behavior related to the attacks

B. Absence of Agoraphobia / Presence of Agoraphobia.

C. The Panic attacks are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., a drug of abuse, a medication) or a general medical condition (e.g., hyperthyroidism).

D. The Panic Attacks are not better accounted for by another mental disorder, such as Social Phobia (e.g., occurring on exposure to feared social situations), Specific Phobia (e.g., exposure to a specific phobic situation), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (e.g., on exposure to dirt in someone with an obsession about contamination), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (e.g., in response to stimuli associated with a severe stressor), or Separation Anxiety Disorder (e.g., in response to being away from home or close relatives).

Diagnostic Criteria for a Panic Attack

A discrete period of intense fear or discomfort, in which four (or more) of the following symptoms developed abruptly and reached a peak within 10 minutes:

- palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated HR
- 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
- derealization or depersonalization
- fear of losing control or going crazy
- fear of dying
- paresthesias (numbing or tingling sensations)
- chills or hot flushes

Clinical Pearls

To make a diagnosis of panic disorder:

- A set of symptoms is needed (at least 4 out of the 13 symptoms listed)
- The panic attacks must be recurrent and unexpected
- There is distress /impairment present for ≥ 1 month
- Agoraphobia may or may not be present
- Cannot be as a direct result of another psychiatric condition, medical condition, or substance misuse