

Pre-empting panic attacks

Paul Bress suggests being proactive so your client might not need CBT for help with anxiety

The prevalence of anxiety in advanced capitalist societies has been well documented. Moreover, treatments are also quite widely known by the layperson – usually antidepressants, together with either cognitive behavioural therapy or possibly psychodynamic therapy – depending on whether or not the client wants to focus on deeply embedded problems.

But what I want to do here is explore what the person prone to anxiety can do for him/herself to *pre-empt* a panic attack. Let's say that we can divide the anxiety sufferer's experience of the world into three types, depending on the degree of vulnerability:

Type 1: no vulnerability

Type 2: beginning of vulnerability

Type 3: total vulnerability.

In Type 1 there is *no chance* of a panic attack (so if it ain't broke, why fix it?); in Type 3 a panic attack feels *inevitable* (so the client can't do anything anyway). But in Type 2, the person in question feels as if s/he *might* have a panic attack. This may be expressed by unnecessary thoughts crowding the consciousness, the beginnings of fear, and some physical sensations, such as difficulty breathing. In this Type 2 situation then, *things could go either way*. The incipient anxiety could develop into a full-blown panic attack (Type 3), or the feelings could settle down and the person might then return to a less vulnerable state (Type 1).

So what can the client do? Let's look at this in the form of a flow diagram (*right*). This means that if one strategy fails, then the client should proceed to the next one. For each strategy I explain why I think it's necessary, and I suggest some sample 'internal' language.

Perhaps the biggest problem facing the anxiety sufferer is how to cope with everyday life before the full effects of therapy and/or medication have taken place. In particular, the client needs strategies for situations in which there is incipient vulnerability. In this case, if the flow diagram above is followed, the panic attack may well be avoided. In fact, a negative association with a situation might well be replaced by a positive one. ■

Be aware of the here and now

Why? Anxiety is normally propelled by our taking ourselves away from the here and now. We torture ourselves by our preoccupation with the past and the future (and the connection between the two). Being aware of the here and now is less likely to result in veering from the here/now.

Internal language: 'Mm..this is a comfortable chair...that's a nice breeze...what an attractive voice.'



Remind yourself of your positive qualities

Why? We can all get into a vicious circle of thinking/feeling if we aren't careful. But we have the power to turn this round 180 degrees – by creating a virtuous circle.

Internal language: 'I am a highly intelligent, articulate and insightful person.'



Remind yourself that a panic attack is not inevitable

Why? We tend to associate certain situations with feelings and these feelings become fixed in our consciousness and appear as if they are immovable. The reality is that we have free will and have some power to determine how we behave in different situations

Internal language: 'I have the freedom to think and feel whatever I like.'



Think of the best scenario (in the situation to come)

Why? By visualising what may happen we are more likely to make that positive scenario happen. The visualisation process affects our subconscious in some way – and creates a reality of our choosing.

Internal language: 'I am going to speak loudly, clearly, and confidently throughout.'