



Breaking Free of Panic Attacks

Cool, calm, collected: these women get their lives back—so can you!

by NATALIE HAM, ND

IMAGINE TRULY BELIEVING THAT SOMETHING LIFE-THREATENING IS WRONG WITH YOU... OR experiencing the grief of something horrible happening to a loved one... or coming to terms with your own mortality. If you suffer from anxiety attacks, such thoughts can be reality on a daily basis. These are not thoughts that you can ignore or “just snap out of”—this is your life.

About 6 million of the 40 million Americans with disabling anxiety have recurrent, unexpected panic attacks. Symptoms vary but may include a speeding heart, lightheadedness, sweating, and a feeling of doom. Panic attacks often go undiagnosed as people visit multiple doctors and emergency rooms thinking their symptoms are due to heart, neurological, or endocrine disorders.

As a naturopath who practices homeopathy, it can be extremely stressful treating someone who has severe anxiety or is going through a panic attack. It can feel as urgent as assessing and treating a high fever in a child, a heart problem, or severe pain. Those of us who treat anxiety on a regular basis understand that for our patients, and our peace of mind, an accurate homeopathic prescription is a must! Thankfully, this is also an area where homeopathy can

really shine—providing safe, effective, and often quick relief that far surpasses most conventional treatments, as illustrated in the following examples.

ERIN'S EXTREME CANCER FEAR

Erin, age 40, came to me in 2008 for help with daily anxiety that controlled her life, and periodic panic attacks that made her feel that her death was imminent. She had previously been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder and had been treated by other naturopathic and medical doctors with limited results. She had always struggled with anxiety, she said, but over the past ten years it had progressively worsened, and with the advent of frequent panic attacks in the past year, it was the worst it had ever been.

Erin's anxiety manifested as fear that she had a life-threatening illness, such as

cancer. Actually, it was more than a fear with Erin; it was a conviction. “I am certain I have cancer,” she explained to me. “It's probably colon cancer, but I suspect other cancers as well.” Erin had no symptoms to suggest cancer and no family history of cancer. Blood tests, physical exams, and imaging tests had shown no evidence of cancer either. Even so, she was convinced she had the disease.

Erin's ongoing fear of cancer led to overwhelming thoughts that she was going to die, which in turn could trigger a panic attack. Her panic attacks came several times a month. During an attack, her thoughts would race, her extremities would get numb, and her heart would beat faster; she would perspire, be unable to catch her breath, feel extremely cold, and be certain that death was imminent. She had gone to the hospital several times convinced she

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was having a heart attack or stroke, only to find once again that her anxiety had gotten the best of her. As Erin described these symptoms, she began to cry. She recognized how much they had impacted her life—to the point that she could not enjoy living anymore. The fear of another panic attack was always looming in the shadows.

Constantly checking the children

Erin had two young children. She feared for their safety and constantly checked on them, especially to make sure they were breathing while they slept. “This is no way to live,” she moaned, “and I don’t want my kids growing up clouded by the same fears that I have!” Her husband was very supportive, but he was at his wits’ end, having tried so often to reassure her that everything was going to be okay.

Erin’s anxiety about her health would often wake her from sleep with heart racing at midnight or 1 a.m., and she wanted her husband nearby. If he was not there, her anxiety grew. “What if something happens and there is no one to help me?!” she feared. Erin was an extremely chilly person, but during an anxiety attack, her intolerance to cold would get stronger still; she would shiver and have to cover herself with a jacket or blanket.

Erin considered herself a thirsty person; she preferred her water with ice, taking small sips throughout the day. She also described herself as a “neat-freak. My home is always spotless. Clutter and mess make me anxious,” she said. She once had to leave a cousin’s house “because the clutter there was just too much to bear.” She admitted being critical of her friends or family if they didn’t do something just the way she wanted. She also suffered from fatigue and irregular and painful menstrual periods.

Clinching the prescription

At this point in the intake, I was pretty confident that *Arsenicum album* was the remedy that could help Erin. Its indications matched her great anguish about health, her fear of death, her fear of being alone, her racing thoughts, her fastidiousness, and her exacting/fault-finding nature. *Arsenicum* also fit her worsening of symptoms after midnight, her chilliness, and her thirst for cold drinks in small sips. But I still had one symptom I wanted to confirm before I would be certain of

Erin is no longer paralyzed by fear—she is free to truly live again!

her prescription. People who need *Arsenicum* are likely to be very restless and may even pace to alleviate their restlessness, yet Erin had not reported much of this kind of behavior with her anxiety.

I had not had a chance to check on this before I was interrupted and had to leave the room for a moment. When I returned, prepared to ask my final questions, Erin was nowhere to be found! I searched the area and finally found her outside, sitting on the edge of a bench just beyond my office. “As soon as you left the room, I got so scared and hyper that I just had to move!” she explained. “Sometimes walking or moving around to different places helps me calm down...” Although I felt awful that Erin was experiencing so much anxiety at that moment, this was the confirmation that I needed to give her *Arsenicum*!

Erin received a single dose of *Arsenicum album* 200c. I asked her to come back in two weeks and to call before then if her condition should grow worse.

Greater ease & mental freedom

Two weeks later when I met Erin in the waiting room, I could hardly believe the complete turnaround in her! Rather than seeing a fidgety, hunched over, weepy and scared woman, I observed a calm, cool, and smiling one—with no look of fear in her eyes. Before I even closed my office door behind us, she exclaimed: “I am so much better!”

This reminded me of something I learned in my student/resident days under the mentorship of Dr. Stephen Messer at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine teaching clinic. Whenever we doctors-in-training noticed this kind of obvious improvement right in the waiting room before we even spoke to the patient, Dr. Messer would refer us to paragraph 253 in *The Organon of Medicine* where Hahnemann says: “In all diseases, especially in quickly arising ones, of all the signs that indicate a small beginning of improvement..., the psychic condition of the patient and his general demeanor are most certain and revealing. The very beginning of improvement is indicated by



a sense of greater ease, composure, mental freedom, higher spirits, and returning naturalness... which can easily be seen and pointed out if one is attentive but cannot be described in words.” This certainly applied to Erin!

Even better than how she appeared, she reported no panic attacks and almost no anxiety since she had taken that dose of *Arsenicum*. This was an incredibly good result, since she had experienced persistent daily anxiety for the past 10 years! She said she now felt “refreshed and patient. I feel like I’m seeing the world without fear... it’s been so long that I cannot even remember the last time I felt this way.”

Erin could hardly believe that such change was possible. “I was afraid I was going to be an anxious, scared worrywart forever,” she remarked. “It was like being in the darkest of nights—now I feel like I’m in the sun!” She reported mild soreness in her leg after a day of physical overexertion; in the recent past, this would have warranted a trip to the ER to rule out a bloodclot but now she just passed it off. In addition, her fatigue was improved, her menstrual cycle was less painful, and she had decided to start volunteering. Clearly, this was a positive whole-person reaction to the homeopathic remedy!

Erin continued to take *Arsenicum album* 200c, as needed, for the next 3 months; if she felt any anxiety at all or an increase in her other symptoms that the *Arsenicum* had helped previously, she would take another dose.

A new “short fuse”

Several months later, at a follow-up visit, Erin confided that she had become increasingly irritated in the past few

weeks. Her anxiety was still well controlled, however, and she reported no other significant changes. She wondered if there was anything I could do to help her with this new symptom. If new symptoms are covered by the remedy that the person previously reacted to, it's prudent to increase the potency rather than leave the original remedy. (I believe that one of the biggest prescribing mistakes I make, as do many others who practice homeopathy, is switching to a new remedy too soon.) Since irritability is a strong *Arsenicum* symptom, I gave Erin a single dose of *Arsenicum album* 1M.

When she came in for her follow-up appointment the following month, she reported about 20% improvement in the irritability. Given her remarkable first reaction to *Arsenicum* 200c and the limited reaction to *Arsenicum* 1M, I suspected there may be a better remedy to treat her. So I retook her case and discovered that her irritability was about things that would normally not bother her. People were not doing things exactly the way she wanted them, which was exceedingly irritating to her. "I've got a short fuse," she said. "I'm impatient with my kids...when I went shopping at the mall, people in the stores were so slow and annoying!" Although Erin was not rude to me, she confessed that my questions were, in fact, making her feel frustrated and irritable: "I don't feel like I have enough time to go through all these silly questions." This change in her made her feel sad; she did not want to be mean, she just couldn't help the way she was feeling. Her sleep had become worse, she would wake between 3 and 4 a.m. and have trouble falling back to sleep. Lately, she craved Mexican food, especially the fatty, cheesy, fried kind. Although she was not as cold as she had been when I took her case three months

earlier, she still was easily chilled and much preferred being warm. These symptoms revealed that I did indeed need to change Erin's remedy. Her symptoms of irritability (especially when questioned), easy anger, impatience, feeling that time passed too slowly, insomnia from 3 a.m. onward, craving for spicy, fatty food, and chilliness fit the remedy *Nux vomica*. Since it was a busy summer season for her as she juggled increasingly demanding volunteer work with caring for her children who were home from school, I felt her irritability would continue to be stressed and decided to give her a daily dose: *Nux vomica* 30c, 3 pellets a day.

Three weeks later, Erin reported 95% improvement in her mood and sleep, adding: "My husband is extremely grateful, too!" Erin stayed on *Nux vomica* 30c, daily for several more weeks.

At that point, Erin's *Nux vomica* symptoms largely subsided, so we switched back to *Arsenicum*, using it occasionally for small spikes in her anxiety, which never reached more than 10–15% of the level of her original anxiety symptoms. Over time, she has taken increasingly higher potencies, up to *Arsenicum* CM. Since Erin's first visit three years ago, she has had only one panic attack, for which she needed *Phosphorus* (a remedy related to *Arsenicum*). In 2010, I began seeing her less frequently—every three months just to make sure she was stable. After two appointments and six months where she remained on an even keel with no changes, I felt it was time to let Erin come in on an "as needed" basis, or just to stop in and say hi!

Free to truly live again

Erin will be forever grateful that she tried homeopathy. "My whole life has changed!" she exclaims. She went from living in constant, disabling fear of cancer and of the terrifying, nightmarish panic attacks—to being able to nurture her family again and fully participate in her volunteer interests.

ety had masked for so long. Erin continues to be one of the most pleasant people I have had the pleasure of treating. Because of the effectiveness of homeopathy, Erin is no longer paralyzed by fear—she is free to truly live again!

HOLLY'S HAVOC & FIRST PANIC ATTACK

Mary, a third-year student at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine, was thrilled to start her homeopathy rotation in the teaching clinic. That morning, she was assigned her first patient—"Holly," who was new to the clinic and seeking help for "anxiety." Mary was to meet and interview the patient, then report back to her fellow students and me, the supervising doctor, before a remedy was prescribed.

Not more than 10 minutes after Mary left, excited and determined, she returned, obviously shaken. "Um... Dr. Ham? The patient is having a panic attack... *right now!*"

Broken-down car sparks "nervous breakdown"

I went in with Mary to find a woman bent over, red-faced and sobbing, holding her husband's hand. Holly, age 50, could barely speak, so her husband explained that they had moved to Arizona from Kansas two days earlier to live with extended family. He had been laid off and out of work for quite awhile and Holly's job could not support them both, so they had packed up their possessions and their dog and set out to make a fresh start in Arizona. They were supposed to have jobs lined up before they left, but unfortunately those fell through at the last minute. The couple had taken two vehicles on their journey—his truck and her car—but the car conked out half way to Arizona. Although they desperately tried to fit the entire contents of the broken-down car into the truck, many of their belongings had to be left behind or thrown away.

FACTS about Panic Attacks

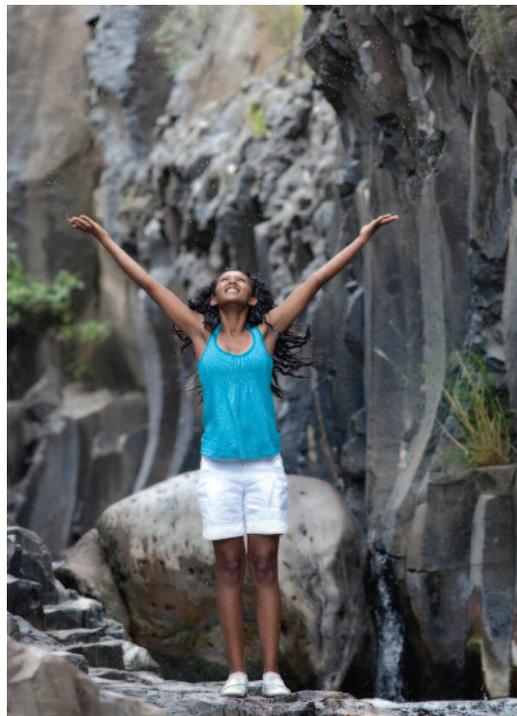
Panic Attacks...

- ▶ are twice as common in women as in men.
- ▶ run in families—half of sufferers have a close relative also affected.
- ▶ may lead to phobias as people avoid things they fear may trigger another attack (e.g., crowds, enclosed spaces, driving).

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For me, the best part about treating her was that homeopathy revealed the true beauty of the person that panic and anxi-

Once they arrived in Arizona, the relatives they were planning to stay with told Holly and her husband that they could not



stay unless they could help pay the rent—and gave them a week to figure out their situation. Since then, Holly was hyperventilating, trembling, sobbing, and unable to calm down. She felt dizzy and nauseated. “It all seems so unreal,” she said. Although she’d had chronic low-level anxiety, she’d never experienced anything like this before and feared she was “going crazy.”

After determining that Holly was not in immediate physical danger, I asked Mary to please stay in the room and finish taking Holly’s case before returning to report to the group. We were about to see what our student Mary was made of...

Homesick, disappointed, betrayed

Mary returned 45 minutes later, and it was clear that she had done an excellent job of hanging in there in a difficult situation with a distressed patient—because she provided us with very complete case information. Mary reported that Holly had been extremely unsure about moving in the first place. Holly was attached to her hometown, and while her husband was excited at their new adventure, she had begun to feel homesick the moment they pulled out of the driveway. Losing her personal belongings was tragic for her. She could not stop picturing the car filled with their possessions sitting on the side of the road. She wept as she described having to throw away precious mementos and belongings she had grown up with. She could not get over the disappointment of their jobs falling through and then the “betrayal” by their family. She had locked

herself in the guest bathroom weeping for the past two days. Being around anyone made her anxiety much worse; as soon as Mary and I had walked into the room, she had wanted to hide.

“I feel like I can breathe again!” she said. “I began to feel better instantly—as soon as I took that stuff!”

Holly’s heart was racing, and she could not calm her thoughts. She felt like she could not take a deep breath, and when she did, she had to force a deep sigh. She also felt like she was choking, as if her stomach had risen up into her throat, and she was continually trying to swallow it down.

A remedy for the shock

If you are familiar with the homeopathic remedy *Ignatia*, you will recognize that Holly’s symptoms correlate well with it. *Ignatia* is indicated for the ill effects of grief, shock, or disappointment, especially a “hysterical,” inconsolable reaction with prominent sighing and sobbing—and sometimes even vomiting and hiccoughing. *Ignatia* symptoms include the feeling of a lump in the throat that cannot be swallowed, which may also include a choking sensation. People who need *Ignatia* tend to want to be alone during moments of crisis or sadness; they are typically worse from sympathy and company. Therefore, it makes sense that *Ignatia* appears in the repertory rubric, “Mind: Hiding himself.” Also, *Ignatia* is strongly indicated when homesickness is prominent. People needing this remedy can dwell on the disappointment and may feel sentimental over their loss, whether that is a person, a job, a hometown, or their possessions.

After hearing Mary’s report on Holly, I would normally have given the students time to study the symptoms and select a remedy before discussing the case as a group and eventually prescribing a remedy. In this instance, however, I felt that Holly didn’t need to wait and suffer any longer, so I whispered to my resident to go give a dose of *Ignatia* 200c to Holly while the students worked on the case.

After they had discussed what remedy they wanted to give and why, I told them that 30 minutes earlier Holly had taken a dose of *Ignatia* 200c, and if it was the right remedy, we would know by now. I sent Mary to check on Holly and her husband.

What a difference a dose makes!

Less than five minutes later Mary returned exclaiming: “Oh my goodness! She is totally better!”

I followed Mary into the room to find

Holly sitting upright, calm, and no longer sobbing. I could hardly believe the difference half an hour had made. Holly was looking me in the eye, her face was no longer red, and she was able to speak without weeping or shaking. Her husband was looking at her in amazement.

“I feel like I can breathe again!” she said. “I began to feel better instantly—as soon as I took that stuff!”

Holly could swallow again without feeling like her stomach was in her throat. She was no longer nauseated, dizzy, or “going crazy.” She no longer had the urge to hide from people. She had calmed down enough to be able to talk to her husband about formulating a plan for their future. “I am so glad we came here!” he kept repeating.

I asked Holly to come back in the next two weeks, so we could treat her chronic anxiety, because although *Ignatia* had worked well for this acute flare-up, it might not be the correct remedy for her underlying chronic anxiety. I never saw Holly again because before those two weeks were up, she had already moved back to Kansas with her husband. But I do know, from a follow-up phonecall, that she brought her *Ignatia* back with her, and she has used it at least one more time to good effect!

Note: See “Alleviate Your Anxiety: Top 12 Tranquility Remedies” on page 31 for more information on some of the remedies used most often to help people with anxiety—Ed.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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