Dear Alice,

I need some information about panic attacks. My partner moved with me to NY and, at the time of moving, experienced several attacks of extreme fear.

This has paralyzed her to the extent that she no longer goes to work, her career is on hold, and she requires help traveling, if she travels at all. As well as being incredibly distressing for her, it's not helping our relationship either.

My question relates to my role in helping her recover from this. At present I frequently "overlook" the problem by going everywhere with her and being as supportive as possible. Am I an "enabler"? Should I make her "tough it out," or will she just get better?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Panic attacks can be absolutely frightening, even disabling. As your partner's support, the situation can start to weigh on your patience and ability to deal with stress, making the relationship more difficult. Learning more about panic attacks, however, can make you more knowledgeable, understanding, and able to help your partner. Due to the level of disruption this is causing in both you and your partner's lives, it is recommended that your partner see a health care provider as soon as possible.

Panic attacks can happen out of nowhere, causing sudden, intense discomfort or fear without any obvious reason(s). They begin abruptly, usually reaching their worst within ten minutes, and are accompanied by feelings of danger, death, and a desire to escape.

Sometimes, panic attacks are triggered by important but stressful moments in a person's life. For example, graduating from college, getting married, or moving to New York? all potentially exciting but nerve-racking situations? can lead to panic attacks.

In order to recognize a panic attack, it's helpful to be familiar with its signs. Usually, these episodes have at least a handful of the following:

- Pounding heart or rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Difficulty breathing or sensations of smothering
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress/cramping
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations, especially in fingers and toes
- Chills or hot flashes

These signs may seem familiar since they are the same changes in the body that go along with the "fight or flight" response - a physical response that people experience when they are confronted with what they believe to be a real threat. Furthermore, fear of traveling or being outside alone is also common to see with panic attacks.

Fortunately, panic attacks can be dealt with successfully. People who were once terrorized by panic attacks can go on to lead normal lives. Psychotherapy can reduce or eliminate panic attacks and/or other fears, and sometimes medication is a useful adjunct.

While your support may be comforting to your partner, her panic is affecting her ability to function and be independent. It is also negatively affecting your relationship. In order to be the best source of support for your partner, it's a good idea to make sure you are taking care of yourself as well. In addition to maintaining healthy habits, you might also think about speaking with a therapist.

Even before your partner makes her first visit to a health care provider, or maybe before you see one yourself, it may be helpful for you both to talk about some things together. Think back to the time before you moved to New York. How did you feel about moving? How did she feel? Were you both comfortable with the idea of change, the move, the new neighborhood? Was safety an issue? Was there a support structure in New York for you: a job or school, perhaps? For her? Would moving to New York mean losing support from family or friends? In exploring questions like these, maybe you both can learn more about how each of you feel. Only by talking together and by listening can the two of you begin to learn about the impact this move has had on the two of you, and how you both are feeling about it or are reacting to it. You may even begin to uncover the cause of her distress. This is an opportunity for both of you to learn, deepen your intimacy, and to see what changes need to be made to create additional comfort and a safe, happy home for both of you.

Alice!
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