

Panic Disorder & Agoraphobia: Suggestions For Loved Ones Who Want To Help

Common Reactions of Loved Ones:

- **Bewildered**

“How can this be ‘only’ anxiety?”

“This makes absolutely no sense!”

- **Fearful**

“What if she/he really is dying or going crazy?”

“What if the doctors really have missed something?”

- **Angry**

“Will she/he ever be well again?”

“This is not the person I married!”

- **Helpless**

“I don’t know how to be of any help!”

“Nothing I say or do is right!”

- **Resentful**

“What about my needs, feelings and anxieties?”

“She/he is exaggerating--She/he is trying to control me!”

- **Trapped**

“I can’t leave when she/he is so ill.”

“She/he smothers me--I have no freedom.”

- **Depressed**

“We never have any fun any more.”

“We are never really happy.”

- **Guilty**

“Is it my fault that she/he got like this?”

“Is there something seriously wrong with our relationship?”

- **Worried**

“Will she/he want to leave me after recovery?”

“Will our children turn out like this?”

- **Lonely**

“I can’t burden her/him with my feelings.”

“I can’t tell others what we’ve been through.”

Guidelines for loved ones who want to help:

Strive Not to Say:

"Relax! Calm down!"
"Control yourself!"

"Think of something else!"
"Do something to distract yourself."

"Don't be anxious!"
"Don't be a coward!"

"You can fight this!"
"Let's see if you can do *this* yet. (test)"

"Don't be ridiculous!"
"You're just being a hypochondriac!"

"Are you *okay*?" (checking)
"You *have* to stay!"

"It's no big deal to get anxious--
I get anxious, too!"

"Don't embarrass me!"
"*When* are you going to _____?"

"What are you going to do next?"
"Aren't you sick of living this way?"

Remember to Say:

"You can do it no matter how you *feel*."
"Slow down and think of your options."

"Tell me what you need now."
"Face the fear and it will disappear."

"Go ahead and have the panic now--
I'm here for you."

"Stay in the here-and-now."
"Don't anticipate."

"Don't add the second fear."
"It's not the place, it's the anxious thought."

"I know it *feels* dangerous but it is
not dangerous."

"Don't fight it."
"Don't what-if."

"Remember your coping skills."
"Breathe low and slow."

"I'm proud of you."
"You're courageous."

Other suggestions:

- Don't make assumptions what she/he needs--ask!
- Be predictable.
- Let her/him set the pace for recovery.
- Strive to find something positive in every effort.
- Don't enable avoidance--negotiate one step forward.
- Don't sacrifice your own life and build resentments.
- Don't panic when she/he is having panic.
- It's okay to be anxious yourself and to say so.
- Be patient and accepting, but don't settle.
- Reassurance has its limits.
- Setbacks are an integral part of recovery.
- Although she/he may feel miserable during a setback, people don't go "back to square one."
- Nothing is learned about coping if there is no anxiety; but, little can be learned when anxiety overwhelms. Practice should aim for moderate levels of anxiety.
- Remember that she/he is usually giving a best effort:
She/he is trying to survive, not control.
She/he is not resisting recovery--she/he is afraid.
She/he is not being selfish--she is self-focused.
She/he is much angrier at herself/himself than at you.
- New assertiveness may offend you or mix up the status quo. Distinguish between support and co-dependency. Take care of your own "stuff."
- Seek counseling for yourself or for you and your partner jointly if needed.
- Participate and support when asked, but don't get involved unless wanted.
- Try to avoid motivating with guilt.
- Read about panic disorder to further your understanding.
- Remember that your partner is the authority on what she/he feels.

The Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland, LLP: www.anxietyandstress.com