



Panic stations

WORDS by HANNAH VANDERHEIDE

Debilitating and misunderstood, panic attacks among women are increasingly common. Here's what you need to know.

Nine years ago, onstage in a theatre in Melbourne's Brunswick, I felt my heart climb into my throat. I was an actor playing a psychiatrist, and when it came time for my co-star's monologue I couldn't keep still. I was under attack, but from what? And how could a full house staring back at me have no idea?

Over on a very different stage, three years later, marketing consultant Megan Barrow was about to undergo a similar reckoning. As an ambassador for R U OK?, a mental health charity focusing on suicide prevention, Megan stood in front of 80-odd corporate types covering familiar ground.

"It was my second speech of the day, and I was feeling exhausted, but somewhat calm," she recalls. "I was in the middle of telling my story, and all of a sudden I felt an adrenaline rush and was gasping for air."

Megan knew what was happening.

By then, she had lived with panic disorder for 25 years, but this time she really couldn't catch her breath. "I announced to the audience, 'I think I'm having a panic attack'."

Anatomy of a panic attack

Dr Adrian Allen is an anxiety researcher, clinical psychologist and Director of Sydney's Healthy Mind Clinic. He explains that, while a lot is happening internally, a panic attack is a very embodied experience.

"Basically, a panic attack is this very sudden and brief period of really intense physical anxiety," he says.

"There's a peak that tends to come within 10 to 15 minutes and during that intense period, people might notice a really rapid increase in heart and breathing rates, tension, trembling, shaking – they feel short of breath or have a choking sensation, and nausea." Often, these physical sensations are accompanied by a sense of dread and acute distress.

According to Beyond Blue, while 40 per cent of people might experience a panic attack in their lifetime, only 5 per cent will meet the diagnostic criteria for panic disorder. Dr Allen explains that while anyone can experience a panic attack, it's when they regularly interfere with daily life

that you might receive a diagnosis of panic disorder.

In Megan's case, panic attacks became part of her daily routine, shrinking her world until eventually, she could no longer leave the house. She recalls her lowest point as "three years of complete fear, constant panic attacks and, at my worst, unable to get off the couch without panicking".

It's common for people to drastically change their behaviour in hopes of preventing an attack, says Dr Allen. "They might do things like avoid getting their heart rate up, so they cut back on exercise, they might cut out coffee, they might even limit how far from home they go," he says. "It actually starts to affect what jobs people do, and whether or not they go for promotion."

What this means for women

According to the Australian Psychological Society, women are more likely to be diagnosed with panic disorder than men.

Earlier this year, presenter Carrie Bickmore shared her experience with long-term anxiety on air with radio co-host Tommy Little on the *Carrie & Tommy* show.

"Every time I did my 'Carrie at the News Desk' segment I was on the verge of a panic attack. In fact, pretty much every single time I went on air in any capacity on TV and radio for a good decade, I was on the verge of a panic attack," she told Tommy. And while Carrie's career has

"Every time I went on air for a good decade I was on the verge of a panic attack." – *Carrie Bickmore*

gone from strength to strength, she revealed, "There were so many jobs over the time that I've said 'no' to and I look back and I think, where could that have taken me?"

While the lifelong rates of both anxiety and panic disorder are markedly higher for women, the risk of experiencing mental health challenges can be especially high for women in peri/menopause. The Liptember Foundation's 2024 Women's Mental Health Research study names menopause as the top trigger for mental health issues among 50 to 59-year-olds.

First RESPONSE

3 tips for managing a panic attack

1. Observe

Become an objective observer. Instead of, 'my heart is racing, I'm panicking' be descriptive and objective about what's happening, e.g. 'I notice my heart rate is faster'.

2. Breathe

Breathing quickly knocks out the balance between oxygen and CO₂. The imbalance can contribute to uncomfortable physical sensations during panic. Try 'box breathing': Inhale for 4, hold for 2, exhale for 4, hold for 2.

3. Remember

Panic is a survival response activating at the wrong time. It's designed to help you survive, so panic alone won't kill you.

Hang on, help is on its way

On stage after announcing "I'm having a panic attack" it became clear to Megan that no one was going to help her. "The entire room just stared at me. The lack of support stays with me," she says.

And while everyone is different, knowing how to support someone having a panic attack can feel life-changing to the person experiencing it.

When Nate Byrne, weather presenter for *ABC News Breakfast*, had an on-air panic attack back in August, his colleagues did exactly that. Nate paused mid-report, saying, "I'm actually going to need to stop for a second," before explaining he was mid-panic attack and

handing over to his colleague, Lisa Millar, who seamlessly took over, praising Nate for his courage.

Dr Allen says the cause of panic attacks is not always psychological, which is why he recommends that anyone experiencing sudden panic symptoms consult a GP.

In my case, it was undiagnosed Graves' Disease (also known as hyperthyroidism) triggering symptoms nearly identical to panic disorder.

Once properly diagnosed, Dr Allen says there are treatments to help manage panic symptoms, including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). And it won't take years on a therapist's couch to see results.

"Usually, to help people get on top of the concerns around panic and panic disorder, that can be done within eight to 12 or so appointments," he says. For Megan, the most effective tool has been distraction. "Counting, writing, reading, concentrating on what's going on around you – they all help," she says.

And if professional support isn't an option, there are other resources available. Dr Allen contributed to *This Way Up*, an online resource developed through Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital offering programs to improve mental health. He also recommends Macquarie University's *MindSpot* and Swinburne's *Mental Health Online*.

Recovering from agoraphobia and learning to manage panic symptoms led Megan to other challenges.

"I'm not saying I'm going to jump out of a plane," she laughs, but as part of her roles with R U OK? and Beyond Blue, she now speaks to packed audiences about her worst moments – something that would terrify the bravest of us.

"It was a long recovery process, but I did it. You learn to embrace it. You know the feelings are going to be icky, but you do it anyway." **AWW**