



# InfoSheet

Panic Disorder Support Group • Fort Lauderdale

Number: 4

Tuesday, February 19th, 2002

## Anticipatory Anxiety

For many people who suffer from panic disorder, anticipatory anxiety is what occurs before the event and promotes the numbing, agonizing fear reactions they experience.

Anticipatory anxiety includes: becoming hyper-vigilant, building up your reactions, rehearsing the phobic reaction, and having anticipatory thoughts that take on a life of their own, separate from the fear itself. Learning to control your thoughts will decrease your anticipatory anxiety and allow you to cope more successfully when you find yourself in the feared situation. You can do this by thought stoppage, thought switching and success rehearsal.

Anticipatory thoughts can be very persistent and can produce a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. One way to break the habit of fear is to stop your thoughts. First chose a single thought to focus on. As soon as you begin to form the thought, break it by giving yourself the command: STOP! Then say: "Calm," and deliberately relax your muscles and divert your thought to a pleasant or neutral topic. The STOP! Command should produce at least a momentary break in the anxiety thought. During each self-training session, repeat the procedure: Thought – STOP! – "Calm" – Muscle Relaxation – Diverting Thought – five times. You must use this process in life situations as soon as and every time your anticipatory thoughts start to escalate your anxiety.

When you have anticipatory anxiety you give yourself a set of instructions that become habits and ensure that you behave in a phobic manner. Thought switching helps you replace your fear instructions with competent self-instructions. First recall the anticipatory anxiety connected with your fear area. Then list the self-instructions you give yourself. For example: "As I walk into the building, I will start thinking about all the terrible things that can happen to me on the elevator. I will look around to make sure there is a staircase – What if I get stuck up there and I can't get back down. I will pay attention to the slightest of sounds and deliberately make myself think

of them as signals that things might go wrong. For each of these self-instructions, set up a list of coping self-instructions to put in place the opposite habit of thinking that you will be able to handle whatever comes along. Here are some coping self-instructions: "As I enter the building, if I start thinking about the terrible things that might happen, I will tell myself that very little chance exists that anything bad will happen. If I find myself searching for the staircase, I will tell myself that even if I'm nervous about coming down in the elevator, I will be able to cope with it. If I hear an unusual noise, I will tell myself that even if something goes wrong, at most, it will be a minor inconvenience." Put each of the new self-instructions you prepared for yourself on a separate card. Carry the cards with you. Take a class of actions you perform relatively frequently every day: drinking water or soda, combing your hair, or washing your hands. Each time, just before you do one of these high-frequency activities, take your topmost card, read it carefully, and say the instruction to yourself. Then do your activity. When you are in the real life situation, deliberately read the instructions and try to follow them. It may take several weeks, but your anticipatory thoughts should change and your anxiety should decrease. After using your self-instructions for a while you may think of better statements.

With anticipatory anxiety, you imagine yourself being overwhelmed by the feared situation. Success rehearsal is a technique that helps you change your anticipation of helplessness by replacing your imagined feared rehearsals with imagined coping rehearsals. Make up twelve to fourteen scenes showing a model in the feared situation. The model should be roughly your age and of the same sex. In each scene you should have the imagined model face some anxiety and cope with it. Each scene must have a positive outcome.

This material is based on information from the book: "How to Conquer Your Fears, Phobias, and Anxieties" by Herbert Fensterheim, Ph.D. and Jean Baer, published by Wildcat Publishing Company, Inc.