

# Help exists for anxiety, panic attacks

## Support group meets in Plantation

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You're getting ready to go out to a nice restaurant. But when the babysitter rings the doorbell signaling the beginning of your evening, you're struck with seemingly unexplainable fear. Your heart starts pounding, you're breathing heavily and you begin to tremble. It's a panic attack and some people experience them spontaneously while sitting quietly, standing in line or stepping onto a bus. It's called agoraphobia.

Lari Barnick of Sunrise, 43, says she is through with panic but has had a tumultuous life because of it. The onset of her panic occurred when she was a teenager, then hit her again when she was 38 and incapacitated her.

"I couldn't drive, couldn't be left alone, couldn't go anywhere alone," she said. "I couldn't even go in the shower by myself. My fiancé would have to sit in the bathroom."

Agoraphobia means fear of the marketplace, but agoraphobics don't necessarily fear the market or even crowded places. They do experience an exaggerated version of fear that can escalate into a full-blown panic attack. Many wait in anxious anticipation of an attack and they tend to avoid places or situations where they have had one in the past. As more locations and situations are eliminated, the world of the agoraphobic shrinks. Some may become housebound while others continue to function, attempting to hide their discomfort.

A first-time panic attack seems to strike out of nowhere and may be attributed to heart problems or mental illness, neither of which is accurate. Agoraphobics might not pin down the cause of their problem for years and often seek medical attention.

Barnick went to the hospital several times a week because she did not know what was happening to her.

"I went to different emergency rooms so they would take me seriously," she said.

On occasion her fiancé would drive and park near the emergency room and they would sleep in the car in case something happened. "I took his whole life from him," she cried.

After years of living in fear, she explored



**NOT AFRAID ANYMORE:** Therapist William Penzer not only counsels phobia patients, but also went through it himself.  
Staff photo/Lou Toman

## ■ PANIC

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therapy.

"You do not get over it, you get through it," Barnick said. "Now I'm alone all the time, which I absolutely love and I savor every moment."

Psychologist William Penzer of Coral Springs is executive director of the Center for Self Control in Plantation. Not only does he counsel patients with anxiety and panic disorder like Barnick but he is personally familiar with the syndrome.

"Back in the '70s, I went through five years of agoraphobia," Penzer said. "So I understand what they are talking about. I lived the nightmare."

Currently symptom-free, Penzer says the condition can be overcome or managed with or without medication.

"The person who has this feels hopeless, but with effort, persistence and good therapy every person has the potential to return to their calmer, more comfortable state," he said.

Panic disorder is linked to chemical imbalances in the brain involving serotonin or the lack of it. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, it appears to have a genetic basis. Penzer's son also went through a period of agoraphobia. Other anxiety disorders may be linked to environment and experience.

The antidepressants Paxil, Prozac and Zoloft affect panic attacks, making them less severe or stopping them altogether, according to the American

Academy of Family Physicians.

"I had a long, hard road because I was afraid to take medication," Barnick said.

A valuable tool for phobics who don't know where to turn is the Anxiety and Panic Support Group that meets in Plantation. Former phobic Veronica Maseth of Davie now tries to help others by facilitating the group.

"All the doctors have told you there's nothing wrong with you and you're praying there is something wrong so you can fix it," Maseth said. "At the group, you learn about the process of what is happening to you."

Another benefit to joining the group is the relief of meeting people who have had the same experiences.

"Seeing other people who are functioning who can say, 'I was where you're at and now look at me.' That's a big help," Maseth said.

The support group also provides tools for anxiety control, techniques on how to stop an attack and tips like what to tell other people.

To contact the group, call 954-584-9540. The Center for Self Control has offices in Plantation, Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton, Weston and Hollywood and can be reached at 954-475-1371. For emergency help during a panic attack, contact First Call by dialing 211.

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