

Chapter 3.5 Cure of Panic Attacks

This chapter describes the process for curing panic attacks. Billy's panic attacks resulted from his distorting the mental image in various situations so that what he saw was more frightening than the actual happening.

He reported frequent panic attacks in a variety of situations. He said that he had had two car wrecks recently. No one was hurt and the only damage was to his car. The accidents were the result of having a panic attack while driving. He said that when he panicked, images would jump out at him, and he would steer to avoid the image and would run over the curb.

Billy described one of his panic attacks: "I had a panic attack in a department store. There were so many people there. When there were a few people there, I could feel some ability to monitor conversations, but with so many people, I was confused. This reminded me of when I was in Germany, and I went to the bathroom by myself and had a panic attack. I felt the room spin, and I was confused. I had felt secure in the room with Dahmer. Also, in the store I saw people bigger than they really were. People did not have any faces, just hair and mouths. They all looked at me and were talking directly at me."

Billy needed to have his son or someone else shop for him at large stores, or he would have a panic attack as soon as he tried to go inside. To help him with this problem, I asked him to compare his mental image of several people at a family reunion with his mental image of the people in the store. He was comfortable with a family reunion. The mental image of the people in the store was that they were very large and had big eyes looking down at him. The conversations he heard became loud, jumbled, and incoherent. I used the technique called "bridging over." Specific details of the mental image and the sounds, particularly voice tones, of the symptomatic state are elicited. Then an analogous situation in which the person doesn't have the symptoms is visualized. The goal is to find the differences between the two images and then make the symptomatic image like the nonsymptomatic image. The difference between the image of the store and the family reunion was that the people in the store were bigger than life size and had big eyes. He was asked to make the people in the store life-sized and to have normal eyes. The conversations in the store all blurred together, and those conversations were made like the conversations at a family reunion. After this, Billy was able to go into that store without having a panic attack.

Related to the panic attacks was the feeling Billy had that people were always watching him; this resulted in the feeling he always had to be on guard. It is usually easier to change an unwanted image than to get rid of it, so I asked him to make several changes in the mental picture of people watching him. He reported that when he made them smaller, there wasn't much change. When he made the mental image distant and in black and white, that made it better. I then

asked him to make them look like paper doll figures. He really liked that, and thought they looked kind of funny. Once he found out that this worked, he began using this technique as a tool in a variety of situations.

A few months later Billy reported that he realized he was no longer afraid of having a panic attack. This is quite interesting because one of the frequent stimuli causing a panic attack is the fear of having one.

Emotional Management Suggestions

The bridging over procedure is useful with a variety of undesired emotions, such as panic, anxiety, embarrassment and resentment. The suggested procedure is the same as described in the chapter on resentment. The first picture is the mental image you have of the person as you feel the anxiety. Be aware of the location of the image. How close is it? Is it at eye level or above or below—center or to the right or the left? How big is the person? Is the person life sized or smaller or larger than life? The second picture is an analogous situation in which you didn't feel any anxiety. If you are anxious around certain people, what people are you not anxious around? Find out all the details about the second picture that you did for picture #1. Except in rare instances, the mental images will be in different locations. As you start to move picture #1 to the location of picture #2, be aware of any objections that you feel. If you have trouble moving the picture, stop and figure out what objection you have. Then move picture #1 to the location of picture #2, and, if there was a difference in size, change that. Give yourself a few minutes, and then check the results by remembering the situation in which you were previously anxious. Be delighted at the power you now have over your emotions. Feel the difference this is making in your future, and see the freedom that it is giving you.