Dear Alice,

I need some information about panic attacks. My partner moved with me to NY and, at the time of moving, experienced several attacks of extreme fear.

This has paralyzed her to the extent that she no longer goes to work, her career is on hold, and she requires help traveling, if she travels at all. As well as being incredibly distressing for her, it’s not helping our relationship either.

My question relates to my role in helping her recover from this. At present I frequently "overlook" the problem by going everywhere with her and being as supportive as possible. Am I an "enabler"? Should I make her "tough it out," or will she just get better?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As you’ve noticed, panic attacks can be distressful and debilitating for those who experience them. Additionally, they may take a toll on people who support those with panic attacks. How to best support your partner depends on you and your partner’s unique situation, but there are a few steps you may take to help light the way. In addition to learning more about panic attacks, you may want to consider having a conversation with your partner about your concerns and seeking professional help together.

First, a bit of information about panic attacks: they can happen out of the blue, causing sudden, intense discomfort or fear without any obvious reasons. They usually reach their peak within minutes and are accompanied by marked physical, mental, and emotional distress. Sometimes, panic attacks are triggered by significant but stressful moments in a person’s life. For example, graduating from college, starting a new job, or moving to New York — all potentially exciting but nerve-wracking situations — may lead to panic attacks for some people. Likewise, for some, a family history or genetic predisposition may be a risk factor for having panic attacks. Furthermore, fear of traveling or being outside alone is common with panic attacks.
During a panic attack, people usually experience at least a few of the following symptoms:

- Pounding heart or rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Difficulty breathing or sensations of smothering
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea
- Abdominal distress or cramping
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling sensations, especially in fingers and toes
- Chills or hot flashes

List adapted from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. [2]

If these seem familiar, they’re the same reactions that accompany the “fight or flight” response — a physical response that people experience when they’re confronted with what they believe to be a real threat. Alternatively, panic attack symptoms may appear seemingly out of nowhere, rather than due to a specific threat or danger. Some people may have a panic attack only once or twice in their lifetime, but when panic attacks are frequent and interrupt daily activities, it’s wise to seek professional support.

Talking about your feelings, concerns, and experiences related to the panic attacks may be beneficial for both you and your partner. For example, how did you feel about moving to New York? How did your partner feel? Were you both comfortable with the idea of change, the move, the new neighborhood? Was there a support structure in New York for you: a job or school, perhaps? For your partner? Questions such as these may help the two of you learn more about the impact of the relocation, the panic attacks, and other sources of stress in your lives. This could also be an opportunity to identify potential changes to make to create additional comfort and a safe, happy environment for both of you.

In addition to what you and your partner can do by yourselves, you may also want to consider seeking professional help [3] together. People who experience repeat panic attacks and live in fear of anticipating more panic attacks may have panic disorder, which a health care provider or mental health professional can help properly diagnose and treat. Some common approaches to help manage and alleviate panic attacks and panic disorder include cognitive and behavioral therapy and certain medications. If supporting your partner through panic attacks is a lot to handle, it may be a good idea to seek professional help for yourself.

Here’s to hoping these tips help point to a future direction for your supporting role,

Alice!

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Related questions

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
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