

CHAPTER 1

What Are the DSM Criteria for Panic Disorder?

Diagnosing Panic Disorder

The defining feature of *panic disorder* is recurrent, unexpected panic attacks. *Recurrent* refers to more than one. *Unexpected* means there is no obvious external provoking stimulus.

A panic attack is a discrete period of intense fear or discomfort, in which four or more of these thirteen symptoms are developed abruptly and reach a peak within ten minutes. Most of these symptoms represent sympathetic nervous system symptoms (those involved in the fight or flight response), but some are fears related to the experience.

CRITERIA FOR A PANIC ATTACK

Discrete period of intense fear, reaching peak within 10 minutes, and involving four or more of the following symptoms:

1. Palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
2. Sweating
3. Trembling or shaking
4. Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
5. Feelings of choking
6. Chest pain or discomfort
7. Nausea or abdominal distress
8. Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
9. Feelings of unreality (derealization) or of being detached from oneself (depersonalization)
10. Fear of losing control, going crazy
11. Fear of dying
12. Numbness or tingling sensations (paresthesias)
13. Chills and hot flushes

2 The DSM Criteria for Panic Disorder

The term *panic attack* refers to the symptoms and the quick, intense way they arise. Panic attacks can be situational, situationally predisposed, or unexpected.

- *Situational panic* means that the panic attacks occur reliably upon exposure to a phobic object or situation. Specific phobias are characterized by situational panic.
- *Situationally predisposed* means that the attack is likely upon exposure but may not occur every time. This type of relationship characterizes social anxiety.
- Of course, *unexpected* panic attacks are what characterize the onset of panic disorder.

In diagnosing panic disorder, it is important first to rule out that the panic attacks are not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance, for example a drug of abuse or use of a medication, or due to a general medical condition such as hyperthyroidism.

In addition to recurrent unexpected panic attacks, panic disorder involves one or more of the following features:

- A persistent concern about having additional attacks
- Worry about the implications of the attack or its consequences, for example: having a heart attack or “going crazy”
- A significant change in behavior reflecting fear of the attacks or their implications (for example, quitting a job or stopping exercise to avoid sensation associated with exercise)

Agoraphobia

Many individuals who suffer from panic disorder develop agoraphobia, and hence, receive a diagnosis of panic disorder with agoraphobia. Agoraphobia refers to anxiety about being in places or situations from which escape might be difficult (or embarrassing) or in which help may not be available in the event of having a panic attack or panic-like symptoms.

Common themes of agoraphobic fear and avoidance include:

- Escape is not readily available (e.g., restaurants, theaters, stores, public transportation).
- Help is not immediately available (e.g., being far away from home, being without someone who can help).
- Places where danger or embarrassment could be a consequence of suffering a panic attack (e.g., driving or social gatherings).

These situations are avoided or else endured with great distress, endured with anxiety about having a panic attack, or require the presence of a companion.

Chapter Review

1. What is the defining feature of panic disorder?
2. What are the criteria for a panic attack?
3. What additional features are common in panic disorder?
4. What is agoraphobia?
5. What are common themes of agoraphobic fear and avoidance?

Chapter Review Test Questions

1. Which of the following meets the criteria for a panic attack, assuming the symptoms peak within 10 minutes:
 - A. Chest pain, shortness of breath, fear of dying, and calling for help
 - B. Chest pain, shortness of breath, fear of dying, and avoidance of help
 - C. Fear of dying, losing control, going crazy, or embarrassment
 - D. Palpitations, chest pain, sweating, and fear of dying
2. Susan has had several unexpected panic attacks. Now she has begun avoiding several situations, such as using public transportation, driving, and shopping for fear that she might have another panic attack, become incapacitated, and embarrass herself. The most likely diagnosis in the case is which of the following?
 - A. Agoraphobia
 - B. Panic disorder
 - C. Panic disorder with agoraphobia
 - D. Social anxiety disorder

Chapter Reference

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text revised). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.