



This is what panic feels like

I always assumed that if you lost your mind, you'd lose all of it. Like losing your purse in a movie theater. I figured you'd wake up one morning and walk outside in your underwear—perhaps with a mangy cat or two weaving in between your legs—blissfully unaware that your Functioning Member of Society card had just expired. But to feel and see your insanity, as plain as you can see a spinach leaf stuck between your two front teeth? Now that is just cruel. I know, because I went through it three years ago.

Up until that fall, I thought I was like everyone else: a little high-strung, but nothing a regular date with yoga couldn't solve. Then, one night, as I drove home from my Vinyasa class in a typical San Francisco fog, everything abruptly changed: my mouth went dry like chalk, my heart hammered fast, my palms began to sweat. The flashing lights on a nearby police car transformed into something from a fun house, distorted and menacing. The

usual tunes from my favorite indie-rock station were now a screeching sound, and with each chilling reverberation coming from the speakers, my panic deepened. I turned off the radio, but my feeling of dread was still paralyzing. My car seemed to drive itself home.

The fear was still palpable as I walked through the front door, but it ebbed a bit at the comfort of my husband's sweet face. "Jay?" I managed to say. "Something is not right with me." He tried to convince me that I was just sleep-deprived, overwhelmed by the demands of mothering two children under the age of 2. "After a couple nights of solid sleep, you'll be fine," he reassured me. I nodded, and pretended to believe him. But inside, I was still freaking out.

I was afraid to be alone, especially with my 2-year-old daughter and 8-month-old son. But I had no choice, so I continued the daily routines: early-morning preschool drop-offs, trips to the pediatrician, dinner dates with my husband and friends—hiding, even from my closest confidants, that I was plagued with a persistent fear that something bad was about to happen.

It seemed as if anything could trigger me. Just a few days after that scary ride home from yoga class, I was in the kitchen grabbing an early evening beer—which I was reaching for

more and more often—when I heard Brian Williams share the news that Patrick Swayze had died. I watched the details of Swayze's death splash across the screen, and I heard myself say, aloud, "Oh, that is so sad." But an internal voice grabbed my shoulders, shook them hysterically, and yelled "Dead!? Patrick Swayze is dead? I can't take it!"

This kind of overreaction quickly became the norm. Standing in line at Starbucks, my son on my hip, I checked my iPhone and saw an email from my brother. He had sent me a photo of a flood-swollen Nancy Creek, the winding river in Atlanta that bordered the house we grew up in. As I stared at my phone, panic gripped my throat as though the apocalypse was coming. Dizzy, confused, and hot, I wondered if I might faint.

As the weeks passed, I continued to feel like an overwound toy. Loud sounds made me jump. Too much stimulation—a crowded store, my kids darting in and out of the aisles—unnerved me. I'd see someone taking a nap on a lawn in the park and assume they were dead. Acute insomnia jolted me awake every 90 minutes in a pool of sweat. Soon, I found myself failing, embarrassingly so, at everyday tasks: I missed appointments, wore mismatched earrings, asked the waiter for a check when I'd already paid it.

"I feared everything—even being alone with my 2-year-old daughter and 8-month-old son."



The author, in 2008, a few months before the attacks began.

At my first session, I said, "So, will this be gone by the weekend? I'm going to New York to visit some girlfriends." She wrote the word *acceptance* in all caps on the whiteboard. "Make room for your anxiety, Jackie," she said. "Denying an emotion only strengthens its hold over you."

Calling off that trip was one of the hardest things I've ever done. "Babysitter canceled," I explained in an email. I couldn't bring myself to tell my friends the real reason I wasn't coming.

Veronica was adamantly opposed to medication, so I took none. Instead, I inhaled herbs, chugged vitamins, and saw an acupuncturist. "Fake it till you make it," she told me. After three months of seeing her—and not one full night's sleep—I was tired of faking it. I decided to switch therapists, hoping that a different doctor could bring what I felt I needed most: rest. My new shrink, Julie, also a mother, put me at ease right away. She was warm and understanding, and someone I sensed I could trust. Julie explained that lack of sleep and low blood sugar from not eating regularly are common triggers for anxiety, making new mothers particularly susceptible. Alcohol only worsens anxiety—a fact I'd begun to deduce on my own—so

Veronica, an anxiety specialist I started to see, asked about my family history and about the anxious state that had become my default setting. By the end of our first meeting, I had good news: I was not going crazy. But also bad news: She suspected I had panic disorder, an anxiety disorder that affects 2.4 million people and is characterized by repeated and unexpected attacks of intense fear, coupled with physical symptoms that feel much like a heart attack. And losing your mind.

I agreed to see her once a week, but to say that I had unrealistic expectations for recovery is an understatement.

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With a little help—and a lot of breathing space—you can keep your head above water.

I cut back on that too, as she suggested. Julie also handed me a business card for a psychiatrist I will affectionately call Dr. Feelgood. She prescribed a pill to help me sleep, and a low-level antidepressant to soothe the panic attacks. *Ahhh, drugs.*

The insomnia abated, and Julie helped me create an “exposure plan.” We made a list of the situations I most feared on a scale of 1 (least scary) to 10 (terrifying). One: Attend a concert. Eight: Take a solo trip to the playground with my kids, an outing that my panicked brain told me might leave one of them with a spinal cord injury. Nine: Return to yoga class, where I’d gone right before my initial panic attack. Over a period of a few months, I checked off every item on my list and slowly regained my confidence. The anxiety began to loosen its death grip. I’d gotten myself to a place where the attacks were triggered only every few weeks or so, if I went too long without food or sleep.

“Lack of sleep is a common trigger for anxiety, making new mothers particularly susceptible.”

Although I didn’t experience my first panic attack until age 33, therapy taught me that it had been simmering beneath the surface for 25 years—since my mother’s sudden death from a brain aneurysm when I was 9. I’d tried to run from the pain of that shocking loss by blocking her out of my mind. When my husband and I moved back to San Francisco from Washington, DC, into a house where both of our children would be born, I couldn’t bring myself to put her photo on the mantel. But as the panic attacks waned, and I searched for their root cause, the memory of my sweet mother eased into the place where the fear had once been. I wrote her letters. I cried for her. I called her friends and asked my family about her. I told her grandchildren about her.

Eventually, almost one year to the day of my first attack, I told Julie I thought our work was finished. She agreed, and said that session could be our last. I felt nervous stopping cold turkey, but empowered, too. Several months later, Dr. Feelgood gave the okay to taper off the meds. Now, my tolerance for stress, uncertainty, and chaos is much stronger than it has ever been. I feel lighter, like I’ve shed a heavy weight. The worry machine that had been incessantly churning in my mind—telling me things like, *What if something happens to one of the kids? How could I go on?*—has finally shut down. And my yoga practice is center stage again; it brings me happiness, ease, and a profound sense of appreciation for my life.

Hey Ma Durga, Hey Ma Durga, Hey Ma Durga Jai, Jai Ma. The class chants together from seated cross-legged poses. The mantra means: *Oh, beautiful divine mother, bring me from the darkness toward the light.* “Sing it like a child calling out to its mother,” my yoga teacher, Stephanie, advises. And so I do. **R**

WESTEND 6/GETTY IMAGES.

Is it a panic attack—or stress?

It’s a common refrain in our go-go-go world: “I’m having a panic attack!” But *are you?* The answer might be yes if it comes out of nowhere, feels most intense 10 minutes in, and has these characteristics:

PHYSICAL A panic attack triggers your body’s fight-or-flight response, resulting in a racing heart, chest pain, dizziness, sweaty palms, and rapid shallow breathing, among other potential symptoms, says Glenn Berger, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in New York City. It can feel much like a heart attack would. You should always call 911 if you suspect a heart attack, and tell the operator if you are also feeling extreme anxiety.

MENTAL Along with the scary physical symptoms come excessive worry or fear and an impending sense of doom, Berger says. If your heart is racing because of something real, not imagined, that’s stress. For example: The elevator stops, it’s unnerving, and you don’t know what to do. But if you’re opening mail and suddenly your heart pounds, you feel nauseous, you can barely breathe, and you think, *I’m going to die right here in my kitchen,* that’s a panic attack.

If you have a panic attack, try to remind yourself there’s no immediate danger, and breathe deeply until calm returns. Then, seek support. “A panic attack is the universe’s way of saying you’ve got to get help, and there is no shame in that,” Berger says.

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