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“I’m not crazy”

My battle with panic disorder

by Amy Haynes, as told to Andrea Cooper

In September 1998, I was on vacation with my husband, Chris, and our 2-year-old daughter, Emily, at Sunset Beach, North Carolina. One afternoon, we decided to take a drive and got stuck in a big traffic jam. While sitting in the front passenger seat, I suddenly felt like I was going to be sick. My chest tightened, and I had a desperate urge to bolt from the car and run away. The feeling was so overwhelming, I would have clawed through the dashboard if I could have. I was having a panic attack.

I'd exhibited signs of panic disorder before. During adolescence, I was always nervous about being away from home, even just to go to a friend's house. I was afraid something terrible would happen while I was gone. So I'd turn down invitations to parties and sleepovers.

As an adult, I'd sometimes feel the same nervousness while sitting in traffic, but the sensation was usually fleeting. This time, the feeling was unrelenting. Chris finally turned the car around and drove us back to our beach house. Within minutes, I was in tears. "I don't want to be like her," I sobbed. Chris knew who I meant. My mother suffers from panic attacks, too.

spinning out of control

Once I returned from vacation and settled back into a routine, the symptoms subsided. It (Please turn to 56)

"I'M NOT CRAZY"

Continued

was easy to think, "I was just tired and stressed. It won't happen again." I read a few books my mother suggested and looked up some information online, but decided not to see a doctor. I figured that I knew my triggers—traffic jams, long lines, big crowds—and thought I could handle them. I did have a few minor attacks, but they lasted only seconds.

I convinced myself that I was managing, although I began to gain weight thanks to constant stress eating. As the pounds piled on (52 in all), I became even more self-conscious and anxious. It was a horrible cycle. The turmoil took a major toll on my life, and Chris and I separated in 1999.

About four months after the separation, I started having more severe attacks. I was working as a supervisor at a phone reservations center, and nearly every hour I'd have an attack that lasted about 10 minutes. In addition, I often experienced an attack before work and another major one during my commute home. Soon it felt like the anxiety was never-ending. To keep my coworkers from realizing what was happening, I'd make an excuse to leave my desk whenever I felt a panic attack coming on.

an initial stab at treatment

Sick of not being able to function, I finally decided to see a doctor in the

MY ADVICE

- Not all doctors know how to diagnose and treat panic attacks. If the first physician or therapist you see isn't helpful, make an appointment with someone else.
- Don't give up if the first medication you use isn't effective. Your doctor can help you find a drug that works.
- Know that having this disorder doesn't change your worth as a wife, parent, daughter or friend. You're a person, not a condition.
- Find support. The Anxiety Disorders Association of America has a message board where you can find others who are going through similar experiences at adaa.org.

fall of 2000. My mother recommended her general practitioner, but it took me six months to get up the nerve to see him. I was afraid he'd dismiss my symptoms or tell me that I was crazy. But he understood my family history and immediately diagnosed me with panic disorder.

We discussed treatment possibilities. My mother had taken Zoloft, an antidepressant, and my doctor also recommended the drug for me. He didn't mention therapy, and I didn't give it much thought, since I knew that my health insurance wouldn't cover it and I couldn't afford to pay for it on my own. I was just eager to see how the Zoloft would work for my symptoms.

Within a few weeks, I was noticeably less anxious. The medicine helped me deal with situations that normally caused me a lot of stress, like taking phone calls from angry customers. I stayed on the drug for about two years. Although it managed my symptoms, one side effect was that it made me very sleepy,

which is not a good thing when you're a single parent. In addition, in August 2002 I achieved my dream of becoming a teacher through an alternative entry program. To deal with a classroom full of rowdy middle-schoolers, I needed all the energy I could muster.

Gradually, the side effects worsened. I was constantly exhausted and suffered from chronic insomnia. I tried to talk to my doctor about my concerns, but he just recommended increasing the dose. I was scared that if I did that, the side effects would never end. Frustrated, I stopped seeing him.

In January 2003, I decided to stop taking Zoloft on my own. I knew it wasn't smart to quit like that, but I was desperate to feel like my normal self again. When I didn't have an immediate relapse, I started to hope that maybe the panic attacks were behind me for good.

For almost three years, I managed to keep the attacks at bay. When I'd feel anxious in traffic, I would stop at a gas station, splash water on my face, and walk around until the feeling went away. But I was reaching a breaking point. In addition to teaching, I was taking classes to complete my certification requirements and working part-time at a local tutoring center. My mom helped out with Emily, but mentally and physically I was stretched thin.

a frightening relapse

Around Thanksgiving 2005, I had a full-blown attack (Please turn to 59)

is it a panic attack?

An attack typically includes at least four of the following symptoms. If you experience signs of panic disorder, see a doctor or therapist.

- Nausea
- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Dizziness
- A fear of losing control
- Shortness of breath
- Tingling sensations, chills or hot flushes
- Chest pains
- Overwhelming feelings of imminent danger or doom, and the need to escape

"I'M NOT CRAZY"

Continued

in the car on the way to work. The setting was horribly familiar: a traffic jam at a highway interchange with nowhere to go. I text-messaged a friend at school, who covered my classes until I could get to work. I had to pull off at exits and gas stations a few times just to step outside and catch my breath. Later the same week, it happened again in the parking lot of my favorite store. I felt trapped—I couldn't make myself go inside because of the crowds.

I knew I needed to see a doctor again, but I was afraid. I couldn't even imagine being in the small examination room, because it could trigger another attack. Finally, I decided to go a nearby ur-

the Zoloft and Lexapro. He listened to my concerns, then took me off the Klonopin and prescribed a new medicine, Effexor, that's working well.

I've also come to realize the importance of therapy. More than anything, it's helped me cope with the anxiety. In traffic, I've learned to focus on music or find alternate routes to avoid traffic jams.

There's no doubt that the panic has affected my relationships. Chris and I ultimately divorced in April 2003, although we continue to stay friends. My daughter is now 10 and has grown into a wonderful young lady. There are days when my condition frustrates her. For example, she wanted to go to the movies one weekend, but I was nervous about being in a theater

If I feel an attack coming on, I talk my way through it, telling myself that it will be over soon.

gent care center. The doctor there gave me two drugs, Klonopin (an epilepsy drug that is also used to treat panic disorder) and Lexapro (an antidepressant). He also urged me to undergo therapy and seek a doctor's long-term care.

I started both medicines in early December. Though the Klonopin helped my symptoms, it left me feeling drunk. The Lexapro made me weak and caused tremors. One morning, about three weeks after starting the drug, I found myself literally shaking from head to toe. I stopped taking Lexapro immediately. But unlike the last time, I knew I had to find another treatment that worked.

finally, help arrives

Through a friend's recommendation, I found another doctor who I hope will be with me for the long haul. During my first visit, we talked about why I stopped taking

full of people. Emily was disappointed, but she's learned to roll with it. My biggest fear is that she will inherit the condition.

Above all, I'm not letting panic attacks prevent me from living. When I went back to earn my teaching certification, it was intimidating to set foot on a college campus, but now I feel right at home in my middle school classroom. I'm even considering graduate school.

I've also been able to drop 32 of the pounds I gained when the panic attacks began. These days, I no longer turn to food for comfort. I think it's because I've gained so much self-confidence, and have learned to judge myself by my successes, not by my setbacks. I have panic attacks and probably always will. But they don't define who I am. **wd**

Do you have panic attacks? Join our support group at womansday.com/forum/panicattack.

Is it really depression?

Are there ever periods of time when you:

- Have racing thoughts?
- Fly off the handle at little things?
- Spend out of control?
- Need less sleep?
- Feel irritable?

You might have more than depression. It could be bipolar disorder.

Find out more. Go online and take a mood questionnaire. Regardless of your answers, be sure to share them with your doctor.

Take a mood questionnaire at isitreallydepression.com

