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Dealing With Panic Attacks In The Workplace

Monday, February 19, 2007

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How to Recognize the Signs and Help Your Employees
 By Dr. Nancy O'Reilly

Morty had been the star furniture salesperson at Smith's Furniture for almost 30 years. He was a trained designer and often worked closely with clients to furnish their large, upscale homes. He was used to being in contact with "Type A" clients and the deadlines they imposed. But business had been soft and he was under pressure from his sales manager to boost his closing rates. He was also having some trouble mastering the new computerized design tools embraced by some of his younger co-workers. All this as his third daughter was entering an expensive private college. Now, in the midst of closing on two deals, Morty received an alarming phone call. His mother was ill - she had just suffered a stroke and was in the emergency room.

Morty felt like his world was falling apart. In his office, his body started to react. His breathing became labored and his heart raced, while his actions seemed to be slowing down. His manager had no idea what to do - so he took Michael outside for some fresh air. That seemed to calm him. Finally when Michael had a chance to talk, he quietly explained to his boss that he had a history of panic attacks and this had been one of them.

Panic attacks affect the behavior, the body and the emotions and can paralyze the person. If left untreated, these attacks can lead to a more chronic medical condition such as substance abuse, depression or ulcers. Unfortunately, panic attacks can happen anywhere, at any time. In the workplace, the results of panic attacks may include poor job performance, possible termination or the loss of a valuable employee.

The symptoms include:

- Racing heartbeat
- Difficulty breathing, feeling as though you can't get enough air
- Terror that is almost paralyzing
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or nausea
- Trembling, sweating, shaking
- Choking, chest pains

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- Hot flashes or sudden chills
- Tingling in fingers or toes ("pins and needles")
- Fear that you are going crazy or about to die

One in about 75 people is diagnosed with panic disorder. In addition, these symptoms are not warranted and there are no particular reasons or circumstances that they should be occurring (no danger exists).

The attacks can occur without warning. It is also important to understand the level of fear experienced is way out of proportion to the actual situation; often, in fact it is completely unreal to what the person is doing or the location they are in. Lastly, an attack passes within a few minutes; however other attacks can be repeated and can recur for hours.

A panic attack is not dangerous, but to the person experiencing the attack, it is terrifying and very real. The person describes feeling "crazy" or feels like they are losing control. The social impairment for a person(s) with panic attacks can also lead to complete social withdrawal. The avoidance of these persons becomes a paramount issue as they try to avoid all social and physical settings that may trigger future attacks. (APA 2007)

The workplace can be impacted when an employee has panic attacks. Talented and successful workers may leave jobs that are perceived as possible triggers for future attacks. A staff member may be passed over for a position because travel is required and they are fearful of flying or driving a car because of past panic attacks. It is not unusual for a person with panic attacks to be embarrassed of their condition and therefore keep it from co-workers and supervisors. Often, the condition is hidden until a situation arises when the attacks can longer be ignored.

When a panic attack occurs in the workplace, here are some steps you can take:

1. Deal with the situation quickly. If an employee is having what looks to be a panic attack remain calm and do not overact. If the panic attacks persist you may want to call 9-1-1 for professional help. During the attack, some helpful coping strategies include:

- Breathing exercises
- Visualization techniques
- Muscle relaxation exercises
- Appropriate labeling of emotions

Remember that any stressful situation can trigger a panic attack. In the future, the employee experiencing the panic attacks may need to take slow down or take time off from work. Supervisors should consider the situation carefully and offer support. Working together with other staff members and sharing the workload is an option.

The employee suffering the panic attack may need to see a doctor/mental health professional, or they may need some time off from work to have appropriate treatment.

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2. Be supportive and empathetic. Do not jump to conclusions. People with panic attacks often fear telling others of their disorder, because they are afraid they will be viewed as "crazy" or abnormal. Remember that the person experiencing panic attacks cannot make them go away. These attacks are not a sign of weakness or poor character. They are very real to the person experiencing them and their bodies react to these fears as if they are real.

3. If you are a supervisor, encourage the employee to talk about the situation with you in private. This may be a first-time panic attack, or the employee may have them frequently. There may be stressors at work causing the attacks, or the attack may have been triggered by something that happened in their personal lives.

4. Many companies have an Employee Assistance Program on-site or contract with a mental health organization, which provides help for employees and their families. These programs are in place so that co-workers and supervisors do not take on job responsibilities they are not qualified nor licensed to do. Supervisors should make appropriate referrals to insure the employee receives needed help and that his or her job performance is not compromised. Fitness for duty is an issue for all supervisors when faced with an employee with a medical or mental health condition. If there is no such program in place, you may want to ask your supervisor or upper-level manager about establishing one.

5. The very best assistance for any person with panic attacks is to understand they are not going crazy, nor will they die. Panic attacks should be taken seriously and the person should be seen by a qualified medical or mental health professional as soon as possible. Proper diagnosis and treatment are the keys for recovery.

For more information about Panic Disorder and other related anxiety-related conditions please contact your local or the National Mental Health Association or the American Psychological Association (APA). These associations will be able to get you more information about panic attacks and will also offer referrals for treatment if asked. Panic attacks can affect an employee's productivity, as well as the morale and effectiveness of the workplace. By recognizing the signs and understanding what kind of help can be offered, you can be better prepared to deal with a panic attack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy D. O'Reilly, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist and founder of the WomenSpeak Project, which is based on a decade of research about aging in a youth-driven society. Dr. Nancy has more than 25 years of experience helping others on: women's issues, aging, mental health, victimization, workplace violence and stress. A member of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Nancy is the author of, "You Can't Scare Me: Courageous Women Speak About Growing Older in a Youth Oriented Society."

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