

Maria's Story

Just before I graduated from college, I started to get panic attacks. At the time, I didn't know what they were. When I came home from school, I started interviewing for jobs almost immediately. I began having panic attacks on the train on the way to the interview. One was a major, major panic attack. It was so bad that my sister, who was with me because she had to go into the city that day too, had to tell the conductor about me, and they had to make an unscheduled stop at a station on the way so I could get off. It was a terrible experience, and after that I stopped travelling on trains.

Then I started to have panic attacks just doing little things, like going to a shop. I stopped doing that, too. Eventually I didn't want to leave the house at all. The "what-ifs" snowballed and I was practically crazed with anxiety. It got to the point where I wouldn't even let my mother leave the house because she was my "safe" person. That was a horrible time for my family.

After about six weeks, my mother called in a professional and she started to help me get out of the house. Little by little, I began reaching out again. I called up my friends. I wasn't working; I was seeing a therapist, and I functioned as best I could.

A few months later, it was my birthday, and my "then" boyfriend brought me a present. It was The Neurocalm Method Book and MP3's. I leafed through the pages of the book and I could see myself in them. I couldn't wait to read it all and take on the strategies, do the exercises and practise the method. I began to make big changes in my lifestyle and I also started to do all kinds of things that were challenging. I did it because I had a ferocious craving to rid myself of those panic attacks. I began deliberately to put myself into situations that would cause me to panic, so that I could desensitize myself.

There's one experience I'll never forget because it encompassed three of my biggest fears: getting on a train; being in London;

and being in a closed in place with lots of people. I was with my sister and my best friends, and we went to the city to see a West End show. Afterwards, we had to go back to the hotel. We could have taken a cab or we could have walked. But I insisted that we take the underground. I wanted to take a train, where I couldn't get off even if I wanted to. I clearly remember being at the station, standing inside the open door of the underground train. My girlfriend and my sister said, "Let's take the cab." I said, "Absolutely not; we're taking the underground." They kept asking me, "Are you sure? Are you sure?" But I insisted; I made the decision to stay on the underground train. And for me, a person who had for so long avoided any place that might bring on a panic attack, this was an amazing thing to do. But I knew this was a grand opportunity for me to confront my fears. After all, I had my sister and my best friend with me. I just had to do it then and there.

Anyhow, after that train ride, I was ecstatic. I was tickled pink. It had been so difficult for me, and yet I did it!

To sum up where I am in my life today: I've been completely panic-free for about a year now. I have my own apartment. I go, I travel, I do everything. I even drove cross-country a while ago. What's different now is that I really take good care of myself. I listen to my body. I allow myself to feel what I feel. When I'm hungry, I eat. I exercise regularly. I regularly use relaxation aids. When I'm tired, I rest right away; I don't let myself get overtired. I have a very good social life. I have a wonderful boyfriend. I work full-time. I have a very interesting job, I work in a hospital, in the Casualty Department, and I commute to work every day, an hour each way. The interesting thing is that I work in such a chaotic atmosphere, and yet I feel no fear. In fact, people come in all the time, panicked and afraid, they've been in accidents and what-not, and there I am, soothing and calming them!

I'm so honoured to contribute my story to the website. Because I know what it's like to be caught in the throes of fear, and I want to tell you that there is a way out. Panic attacks are not forever. With the right approach, you can recover!

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