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## **The Panic Attack: syndrome and symbol (A Psychosynthesis approach)**

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With this paper I would like to outline the main principles of the therapeutic approach to panic attacks based on the psychosynthesis model. The paper draws upon my private counseling practice and my extensive research on panic attacks for my upcoming book.

Psychosynthesis was formulated in 1910 by the Italian psychiatrist and great thinker Roberto Assagioli. It is a psychology and psychotherapy which addresses Man's every dimension – the physical, emotional, mental and transpersonal. Its central purpose is to foster a person's inner growth and Self-realization.

Today, psychosynthesis centers and institutes are spread throughout the world.

Psychosynthesis considers panic attacks from two different perspectives. From one perspective, it sees the panic attack as a syndrome, defined by its pattern and a set of symptoms. From another perspective, it considers panic attacks in a broader context, as a symbol for an inner obstacle which obstructs personal growth and Self-realization. According to these two perspectives, the therapy process can be divided into two phases, which often overlap during therapy.

### ***The first phase of therapy***

The first phase of therapy is focused mainly upon the actual experience of a panic attack.

The person who seeks therapy is usually in a state of high stress: he feels frightened of panic attacks and is totally unprepared to deal with them, because he does not understand them. Therefore, our first task is to help the person to understand panic attacks and take control over them, as soon as

possible.

The easiest way to explain a panic attack is by dividing it into its four components: physical sensations, feelings, thoughts and behavior. The actual panic attack can be described as a feedback loop made up of these four components.

According to the psycho-dynamic laws (as defined in psychosynthesis) our body states, emotions, thoughts and behaviors constantly interact and influence each other. Their interaction can lead to a feedback loop which can have positive or negative results. In the case of a panic attack, the outcome is negative.

The psycho-dynamic laws, which are at the base of a panic attack, also provide the basis of the method for controlling panic attacks. By choosing the right technique, the panic attack loop can be broken in one or several places, and the person can then take control over the dynamics of a panic attack.

To do this, common coping techniques can be used, such as breathing or cognitive-behavior techniques, as well as some of the psychosynthesis techniques. Among them, the psychosynthesis technique of dis-identification plays a central role. It prepares the ground for the other techniques and makes them more effective.

The technique of dis-identification is based on one of the main psychosynthesis principles, which says: 'We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we dis-identify ourselves.'

This principle is very much applicable to the experience of a panic attack. As we know, a panic attack is a very fast and unconscious process. When it occurs the person is so overwhelmed by the experience that he becomes unconsciously absorbed and lost in his sensations and feelings, which at that point dominate and block his consciousness, and therefore limit his awareness. He can become so identified with the experience of a panic attack, that he is unable to do anything.

The technique of dis-identification helps the person to develop an inner observer. It helps him to acquire the ability to observe his inner processes without being involved with them, which is essential for taking control over a panic attack.

The procedure for using this technique consists of directing our attention sequentially to our body, feelings, and thoughts, without trying to change anything. The objective observation of our inner processes leads to the awareness that while our body states, feelings and thoughts are constantly changing, there is someone – an inner observer – who observes this flow of sensations, feelings and thoughts.

According to psychosynthesis the inner observer, called the 'I', is not just a passive spectator. It is the most elementary and distinctive part of our personality. It is the core of the personality, a permanent, stable center different from all the other ever-changing elements of the personality such as sensations, feelings, thoughts, desires, and so on. Once found and fully

experienced, the 'I' acts as a reference point, an inner stronghold to which we can always refer in order to regain a sense of inner balance and stability.

For that reason, the person is encouraged to practice the attitude of calm observation regularly. By learning to observe his inner processes calmly, without interfering with them in any way, he begins to experience a sense of inner stability and freedom. He becomes aware that when he is anxious, he can observe his anxiety, he can see that the anxiety is not him, that it is a thing outside himself which he can observe without getting caught up in it.

From the perspective of the inner observer, the person gains psychological distance from his inner processes, which in turn allows him to become aware of the typical pattern followed by a panic attack. Instead of being identified with the experience, he can now see how physical sensations, anxious thoughts, his fear and defensive behavior influence each other and how their interactions lead to a panic attack feedback loop. This is something which the person was not aware of before.

But the 'I' is not only the inner center of awareness: it is also the center of choice and will. By learning to observe his inner processes the person becomes aware that he can not only observe, but also influence and change his sensations, feelings, thoughts and behaviors. From the place of the observer, he can actually choose an appropriate response – one of the coping techniques – to turn a panic attack negative feedback loop into a positive one. In that way he learns to take control over the panic attacks, which is the main goal of the first phase of counseling.

### ***The second phase of therapy***

While the first phase of counseling is focused to a greater extent upon the symptoms of a panic attack, the second phase considers panic attacks in a broader context with regards to the person's life and growth. In psychosynthesis, panic attacks are not seen as a problem to be eliminated, but rather as a symbol for the person's deeper need for growth, which has for some reason been obstructed. This type of approach, in general, is a key component in psychosynthesis counseling.

Psychosynthesis assumes that each of us is born with qualities and capacities which tend to be expressed and realized according to our unique inner pattern. A tendency towards growth and Self-realization is inherent in us. It is a natural process, which can be either helped or inhibited by life circumstances. If the conditions are right, we grow and our potential unfolds spontaneously, in the same way that a plant grows out of a seed, according to the pattern hidden within the seed. However, if something obstructs our path of growth and Self-realization we experience stress and psychological pain.

Essentially, the main goal of psychosynthesis counseling is to help a person to get in touch with himself, with his individual and unique inner

pattern, so as to set off again upon his path of growth and Self-realization. That is the reason why the second phase is focused on broadening the person's awareness about himself and his life in general.

Although the process of therapy is unique for each person, there are always three main stages in this phase of therapy:

1. The first stage is orientated towards the past: towards the assessment of the unconscious. It involves analytical work and an exploration of the unconscious, which is carried out in a focused way, without indiscriminate delving into the past. Through dialog and with the help of various psychosynthesis techniques and exercises the person learns about his life patterns and roles, his beliefs and attitudes, and how these may have inhibited him in the past. That understanding helps him to recognize the life circumstances which have caused panic attacks.
2. The second stage involves work with the present: the person's existential reality. A longer-term goal of psychosynthesis therapy is the fostering of a stable sense of identity. The technique of dis-identification plays a central role during this stage too. It helps the person to become more centered and more in touch with himself. As a result of this greater centeredness, he is able to better recognize and avoid unconscious identifications with aspects of his personality, with his conditioned behaviors, and with his roles linked to family and work. This allows him to easier recognize his real needs and resolve inner conflicts, to express himself more fully and develop a stronger sense of who he really is.

He also develops a receptive attitude towards his experiences. He learns to really listen to his body, feelings and mind – something which does not frighten him anymore, but rather helps him to notice the early signs and triggers of a panic attack. As a result, he begins to learn how to prevent a panic attack by changing his attitude.

3. The third stage is orientated towards the future: the exploration of potential by addressing the higher unconscious (the transpersonal dimension of the psyche).

Psychosynthesis assumes that each person has a personality and that he is a soul – in psychosynthesis called the Self. The Self is our true essence beyond all masks and conditionings. Through the personality we express our unique qualities emanating from the Self.

While the previous stage was more concerned about the integration of the personality around the 'I' - a center of awareness and will; in this stage, the content of the sessions is focused on helping the person to discover his unique potential and find ways to express it in daily life and work. Transpersonal work includes identifying desired changes, discovering and transforming inner blocks, and developing desired transpersonal qualities

such as will, courage, optimism, persistence or trust. For that purpose the whole range of psychosynthesis techniques and exercises can be employed, including imagery, inner dialog and visualization.

As the person becomes more conscious of his potential, he gradually and increasingly becomes more aligned with his inner pattern, with Who he really is, with the Self. As a result, he begins to see the panic attacks in a new, positive way. Rather than seeing a panic attack as something frightening which must be avoided at all costs, he begins to see it as a signal warning him each time he is off his path and out of touch with his real needs.

The outcome of this therapeutic approach is that, seeing panic attacks in the broader perspective in relation to his life as a whole – including his past, present and future – the person begins to accept panic attacks with a new attitude. He does not experience an occasional panic attack as a set-back or personal failure anymore, but rather as a signal that he has to change something in his life; that he has to stop and ask himself: What is the message in this experience? What can I learn from it? What is my next step? Which quality do I need to develop in myself? Working on these questions and looking for the right answers, the person broadens even further his awareness about himself, his true identity and his potential, and gains a greater vision of his possibilities and options for the future.

With such attitude, the person is on his path, living a fuller life - he is on the way to freedom from panic attacks. He takes responsibility for his growth process and begins to actively participate in it in daily events and life choices.

Helping the person to learn to take responsibility for his growth process and to actively participate in it is the main purpose of counseling based on the principles of psychosynthesis.

In conclusion, my personal view is that panic attacks are very complex, and that there are no simple solutions. However, I believe that we must not look at them only from a pathology-based point of view, and that we must not treat only the symptoms: it would be an easy and very superficial approach to panic attacks. Nature is wise. Fear and pain have their role in survival; and panic attacks have their purpose too. We should consider them in a positive way and address them creatively by looking to find their real, deeper meaning, so as to advance the person on his path of growth and Self-realization.

## References

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