

# Don't panic - it can be treated

**CONTROL:** Nico Fameliaris has learned to manage panic disorder, despite having had 1 000 panic attacks in nine years.

PICTURES: JACQUES NAUDE



## Facts

- Panic is twice as common in women as in men.
- The average age of onset is early 20s in women and 40s in men.
- The average length of a panic attack is two to four minutes.
- Panic affects people of all races and socio-economic groups.
- Attacks can be triggered by stressful events or occur "out of the blue".
- Panic disorder is frequently misdiagnosed as a thyroid problem, hypoglycaemia or a heart valve problem.
- Up to 30 percent of people with panic disorder abuse alcohol or drugs and up to 20 percent attempt suicide.
- It can also affect children and the elderly.
- Homeopathic treatments and acupuncture may be of benefit.

## Symptoms

- Overwhelming fright or terror.
- Racing heartbeat.
- Difficulty in breathing.
- Dizziness, light-headedness or nausea.
- Trembling, shaking, sweating.
- Chest pains.
- Hot flushes or cold chills.
- A sense of unreality and being disconnected.

With Panic Disorder Awareness Day coming up on Sunday, **Lindsay Ord** speaks to a Durban man who refuses to be overcome by his affliction

**N**ICO Fameliaris is a well-known face at flea markets. A vendor of pet-care products, you'll see him at Durban's South Plaza and Bluff markets chatting to pet owners about pooch accessories.

But on a busy morning in 2002 at the now defunct Point Waterfront market, Nico's jolly pet patter dried up as his heart started to race uncontrollably. He broke out in a sweat and struggled to breathe.

Gripped by fear, he left his merchandise and ran into the nearby ice cream shop shouting: "I'm going to die! I thought I was having a heart attack, so I managed to drive myself to the nearest hospital. It was a nightmare," he says.

Sweating profusely, he arrived at casualty with a racing heart, elevated blood pressure and shallow breathing, but tests showed that Nico was not having a heart attack - in fact his heart was fine.

That was the first of many episodes that doctors failed to diagnose as panic attacks and that left Nico questioning his sanity.

Nico had never heard of a

panic attack, neither had he heard of panic disorder, a condition that affects between 2 percent and 4 percent of the population at some time.

Nor did he know that it would be the start of years of attacks that would have a profound effect on his life.

Like many sufferers of panic disorder, Nico has frequently had his symptoms dismissed with misunderstanding or contempt.

"Many people know nothing about panic disorder and that includes medical professionals," he says.

"I have been to hospital repeatedly over the years and have even been laughed at by nursing staff. I got the feeling they were tired of seeing me."

As panic disorder gripped him, it threatened his livelihood.

"I needed to get out of the house to get to flea markets but I was terrified of having an attack in the car or at the market," says Nico, who lives alone.

"I became agoraphobic - I was scared to be out in crowds in case I had an attack. In nine years, I have had more than 1 000 attacks."

Fortunately, Nico was correctly diagnosed by a

**Sadag's toll-free helpline is 0800 20 50 26, seven days a week from 8am to 8pm**

psychiatrist and prescribed medication. Slowly it started to take effect. He researched the disorder and learned as much as he could. He contacted the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), found that he was one of many suffering with the disorder and was given techniques to help him manage an attack.

"I have also learned which foods and drinks to avoid," he says.

"I can't touch caffeine and have stopped drinking tea, coffee and cola. Cheese seems to be a trigger too, as does any over-the-counter medication that contains caffeine."

"I have a 'survival kit' of medication with me at all times and I know exactly what to do should I get an attack. I

phone Sadag and they talk me through it."

Attacks have reduced from one a day to less than one a month. Among Nico's achievements has been a trip to Greece to visit family, which involved six flights and time in crowded airports.

He has learned that panic disorder cannot be cured but it can be managed.

"I refuse to let a panic attack overpower me - I overpower it."

"I have been through hell and I will not let this disorder control me," he says.

Panic attacks happen when the brain's normal way of dealing with a threat (the "fight or flight" response) gets triggered inappropriately.

Most sufferers say there was no threat, they were going about their daily business when they suddenly felt terrified and were left gasping for air.

Johannesburg clinical psychologist Dr Colinda Linde says it is an anxiety disorder and can be treated effectively, particularly with cognitive behavioural therapy.

"Panic is learned and you can unlearn it," she says. "It is a learned fear of internal sensations and a fear of physical symptoms. Avoidance

perpetuates the panic and the sufferer starts to avoid situations where he or she may have a panic attack."

Cassey Chambers, operations director of Sadag, says many people assume that panic is just a matter of feeling a little nervous or anxious, but the symptoms experienced by those living with panic disorder are so overwhelming that, even though they are not life-threatening, they can make the person believe they are going to die, lose their mind or be totally humiliated.

"Those who suffer from panic disorder don't easily seek help, as they feel they are going mad or that no one will understand," she says. "Sadag deals with numerous calls relating to panic each day on its toll-free helpline. Most callers have no idea what is happening to them."

Panic disorder is highly treatable and for 90 percent of people, treatment is very effective. The aim of therapy is to help people live a full and productive life.

But a diagnosis is not always easily arrived at and most sufferers visit 11 doctors and spend more than R20 000 on medical investigations before they are diagnosed.

## What to do if someone in the family has panic disorder

- Do not make assumptions about what the affected person needs. Ask.
- Be predictable. Do not surprise the person.
- Let the person set the pace for recovery.
- Find something positive in every experience. If the affected person is only able to go part of the way to a particular goal, such as a movie or party, consider that an achievement rather than a failure.
- Do not enable avoidance. Negotiate with the person with panic disorder to take one step forward when he or she wants to avoid something.
- Do not sacrifice your own life and build resentments.
- Do not panic when the person with the disorder panics.
- Remember that it is okay to be anxious yourself. It is natural for you to be

concerned and even worried about the person with the disorder.

● Be patient and accepting but do not settle for the affected person being permanently disabled.

● Say: "You can do it no matter how you feel. I am proud of you. Tell me what you need now. Breathe slowly and low."

● Also say: "Stay in the present. It is not the place that is bothering you, it is the thought. I know that what you are feeling is painful, but it is not dangerous. You are courageous."

● Do not say: "Relax. Calm down. Do not be anxious. You can fight this. What should we do next? Do not be ridiculous. You have to stay. Do not be a coward. Let me see if you can do this (which sets up a test for the affected person)."

Sadag is hosting a free workshop on August 3 at 6.30pm at Westville Boys' High School, Wandsbeck Road, to help people

understand the disorder and how to overcome it.

A psychologist will discuss symptoms, treatment and self-help

techniques, and answer questions from the audience. To attend, call Sadag at 0800 20 50 26. See also [www.sadag.org](http://www.sadag.org)

## Keep your body's acid levels in check: research

**LONDON:** Nothing gives a diet regimen a higher profile than the endorsement of super-svelte Hollywood celebrities. The latest weight loss craze, the acid/alkaline diet, claims to have the backing of Gwyneth Paltrow and Kate Moss.

The diet is based on the idea that eating certain foods, such as meat and dairy, can increase the body's acid levels to dangerously high readings, dubbed "hyperacidity".

Supporters of this theory not only believe this can build fat, but longer term it can lead to an increased risk of cancer and osteoporosis.

The diet is based on the theories of US naturopath Robert Young, who has written a series of books promoting the idea that hyperacidity is a common health problem and can be fixed with the right diet.

He advocates living almost entirely on foods that will supposedly make the body's internal environment less acidic, such as vegetables, fruit, beans and pulses.

The diet also involves cutting out foods that make the body more acidic, such as meat, dairy, sugar, white flour and pasta.

Devotees undergo regular blood or urine checks to make

sure acid levels are controlled, and to measure the balance between acid and alkalis in their blood.

So should we all start measuring our acid levels and ditching bacon for breakfast? Though there is science to support the reasoning behind this regimen, experts caution the diet is a mix of fact and fiction.

It is true that the body does contain natural acids and alkalis, and that a balance of these is crucial to create the right conditions in which the body's hormones and enzymes can function properly.

"However, you can't just eat a bit more of a particular food and hope it will reduce your acidity," says Catherine Collins, chief dietitian at St George's Hospital in London.

She adds that the link to cancer and weight loss is unproven. Furthermore, urine tests to see if you need to alter your eating habits could be a waste of time.

That is because urine is used by the kidneys to transport excess acids or alkalis out of the body, so a high reading means the body is doing what it is supposed to - flushing out the chemicals it does not need.

In fact, the body has a sensitive and sophisticated method of keeping acid and alkali levels in check.

Acid levels are measured using a scale called the pH

balance. The letters stand for "power of hydrogen" because it measures the concentration of hydrogen, and the scale goes from one to 14, with one being acid and 14 alkali.

In the blood, acids and alkalis need to be balanced for cells and tissues to function properly, so the pH needs to remain within an extremely narrow range of 7.35 to 7.45, which is slightly alkaline.

"The body has become clever at maintaining blood pH within tight limits," says Professor Susan Lanham-New, head of nutritional sciences at the University of Surrey.

The lungs and kidneys are two of the main methods for controlling this acid/alkali balance.

When we

breathe out, our lungs expel carbon dioxide, one of the body's main sources of alkaline material. If the blood starts to become slightly too acidic, breathing slows down to retain some of that carbon dioxide and restore the pH balance.

In fact, major fluctuations in pH balance occur only when there is a serious illness, such as kidney failure.

According to Lanham-New, research has shown certain foods do produce acid or alkali when they are digested by the body.

This means the body must then restore the pH balance back to normal.

The foods that produce acids are meats, hard cheese, bread and pasta, while the foods that create alkali are fruit and vegetables.

While this doesn't mean any foods should be avoided, as recommended in the hyperacidity diet, it does mean that balance in the diet is crucial, otherwise our bones could pay the price, says Lanham-New.

Recent research has shown one source of alkali in the body is alkali salts found in the bones.

Specialised cells "munch away at our bones", says Lanham-New, to remove these



**BALANCE:** Foods that create alkali are fruit and vegetables.



**SOURCE:** Foods that produce acid include meat.

## Leave a little dirt behind, study shows it's beneficial

**LONDON:** When it is visible, we wipe, wash and sluice it away. But the truth is, most dirt - more than 99 percent of the stuff - is invisible, odourless and unnoticed.

While we clean the obvious places, such as our baths and toilets with rigour, few of us pay much attention to more apparently blameless items in our homes - our computers, mattresses, rugs and curtains.

Yet countless studies show that places and objects we assume to be "clean" are often breeding grounds for potentially harmful bacteria and parasites.

Last week an investigation by scientists at London's Barts Hospital found that a pillow is full of dust mites, allergens and bacteria.

Evidence suggests that, after two years' use, more than one third of the weight of a pillow is comprised of dust mites, skin cells and bacteria.

Even your washing machine isn't safe. A study this week published in the journal *Fungal Biology* showed that dishwashers, washing machines and coffee-



**WARFARE:** Cleaning surfaces will not remove all the germs in your home, many of which lurk in unlikely spots.

makers are full of potentially lethal germs, fungi or mould. The moulds are heat and salt-tolerant and thrive in the warm creases of the rubber seals around dishwasher doors.

The average home contains several kilos of skin cells, dust mites, spores, eggs and the faeces of parasitical insects and crustaceans.

The good news is that most of this "dirt" is harmless. Indeed, there's evidence to show it may, in fact, be a good thing.

The argument is that if we make life too sterile, especially for children, our bodies won't develop efficient immune systems at an early age. The result: the epidemic of asthma and allergies that blights modern living.

Even if you could make your home totally clean, you would be unwise to do so. Dirt, in moderation, is part of life. - Daily Mail

# TAKE THE EISH OUT OF tax {eish}ion

**Pronunciation:** {aysh; eesh} — interj.  
{Origin: South African colloquialism; slang}

1. An expression describing the *overwhelming desire* to put off submitting your tax return until the very last minute.

**Tax Season is here.**  
Eish, bru! Don't turn it into a drag - submit your tax return early. Go to [www.sarsefiling.co.za](http://www.sarsefiling.co.za) or visit your nearest branch where we'll help you take the eish out of tax-eish-ion.

**SARS**  
At Your Service