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Chapter 1

FALLING APART

January 5, 2010: A year ago today, I lost it.

I became so overwhelmed with panic that after several hours of trying every trick I knew to thwart it – breathing, listening to music, watching the movie *Amélie* (who could have a panic attack during *Amélie*?), pacing up and down the sidewalk in the cold night, reading quietly – I told my husband to take me to the emergency room. It was the only remaining solution I could think of to stop the cold sweat, the rushing adrenaline, the numb hands, the rapidly beating heart, and the edgy sensation of needing to jump out of my skin.

This wasn't my first panic attack, but it was my worst.

The back story...

December 1, 1990: I was on my scooter, driving home from a quick grocery run in the middle of writing a grad school paper. I was going through an intersection when a car racing from the other direction to beat the red light piggybacked onto another. That car made a left turn directly in front of me, leaving me nowhere to go but into its grill. Head first.

When I came to, all I could think was, "I have to get out of the street; I'm going to get hit by a car!" Then I heard people yelling at me, "Don't move!" "Stay where you are!" I couldn't see a thing; everything was hazy. I began to hear sirens, and as they came closer, I realized that they were for me – I had already been hit by a car.

I couldn't see because my face was covered in blood, and the only thought in my mind while being transferred to the ambulance was, "My mom and Rudy are going to kill me for not wearing my helmet."

The pictures my mom took later said it all: Left profile, perfect. Right profile, Frankenstein's monster. I'm lucky that now most of the scars from the accident are well hidden in the creases of my face and head, including the one that curves for three inches under my hair, where my scalp was scraped back from the impact.
But the deepest scar of all would turn out to be psychological. Two weeks after the accident they began: the on-again-off-again panic attacks that would soon come to control my life.

The first one took me by complete surprise. I didn't want to miss my workplace Christmas party, two weeks after the accident, so I willed myself to get up and go, scarface and all. My full physical recovery from the accident would take two years, but I was determined to get back to my life as a grad student and teacher's aide as soon as possible.

Sitting at a table in a cozy alcove at Joe's Cafe, I began to feel uncomfortable. There was loud music, Christmas lights were flashing, and I began to feel trapped in my seat in the corner. I felt more and more anxious and the noise and lights seemed to get more intense as the minutes went by. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. I jumped up and ran for the nearest exit. When I got outside, I breathed a sigh of relief. And then, full of fear and confusion, I started to cry.

This was to become a regular pattern for a good year. I couldn't sit in a middle theater seat or in a crowded restaurant. Too many people, too much noise, too much heat. Any situation that made me feel trapped would trigger an attack of claustrophobia and panic.

My biggest fear was the ten-hour plane ride to England – a trip we had planned after receiving my settlement from the insurance company. Here was something positive to look forward to – and I was dreading it.

I began to see a therapist, who gave me tools and taught me how to deal with the attacks as they arose. I gradually started to feel in control of my life again, and I made it to England and back with only a few minor attacks.

The anxiety began to fade into the background, and I started to feel normal again. I was physically and mentally healing. My short-term memory loss, headaches and other aches and pains were dissipating and I felt well again. I stopped bursting into tears whenever an ambulance blaring its siren roared past me. And I could watch Doogie Howser again without freaking out every time a patient was rushed to the emergency room!
Flash forward: 2008. We were at Disneyland, at the top of a tall parking garage. My husband, Rudy, doesn't like heights so we opted for the elevator instead of the escalator. As fifteen or so people crowded into the elevator I began to feel a familiar uncomfortable sensation. I reluctantly stepped in, last. And then, just as the door began to close, I scooted out. "See you at the bottom," I said to my bewildered husband.

Very subtly, the anxiety was starting again. 18 years earlier, during another Disneyland visit, I had taken the emergency exit out of Space Mountain because I felt buried alive in the long tunnels. And here I was again, feeling the sick feeling rise up in my gut.

Over the next six months, my anxiety became more pronounced, but this time the tools taught by my therapist so many years ago were not working. And it seemed as if life was continually feeding my panic attacks.

Rudy had left his job in January 2008 to work on starting a business. But as the economy fell apart several months later there were no business loans forthcoming, even with his excellent credit and vast experience.

In June of that year, Rudy and his dad began renovating our bathroom, a disruptive project that would take three months and drive us all crazy. That same month, we had a freak house fire when gases from a leaking paint can under the sink were ignited by the oven pilot, several feet away, and exploded. Rudy suffered deep burns that took months to heal. After that, we were constantly on edge anytime we heard an unfamiliar sound coming from the kitchen.

In October I was rear-ended by someone talking on a cell phone while driving, and in December I threw out my back. Just days after Christmas, one of our kitties was diagnosed with cancer, the first time any of our animals had a terminal illness. If things hadn't been stressful enough, this was the last straw.

I made an appointment with a new therapist in hopes of getting this current round of panic attacks under control before they blew up into a much bigger problem. I clearly lacked the proper tools to deal with these new triggers and upheavals in my life, and I could feel the problem escalating. But I had no idea to what extent the panic would dominate me.
I scheduled the appointment for December 30, 2008, and we had our first "get to know you" session. But I was too late, and the Big One (kind of like the 100-year storm or the giant earthquake we all dread) was imminent.

**January 5, 2009...**

I was home again, back from the ER. It was four hours after the attack had started, and hours after doctors had injected me with enough sedatives to finally put a stop to the relentless fight-or-flight response I was experiencing. I was up half the night. Then, I fell apart.

For days, and then weeks, I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. My stomach was in knots. I woke up every night with nightmares, and adrenaline rushes that enveloped me in wave after wave of chills up and down my spine. I couldn't bear to leave the house, except for essential errands, our cat's appointments with the vet and the oncologist and my own visits to the therapist. I lost ten pounds in a month. I was constantly terrified.

At the recommendation of the ER and after three straight days of being unable to sleep, eat, leave the house or stop crying, I saw my family doctor. She prescribed two medications. The first was citalopram, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, or SSRI, also known as Celexa. This is an antidepressant used to treat anxiety, among other things. The other drug was a quick-acting sedative called lorazepam (also known as Ativan). The adjustment period for the citalopram would be painful and came with its own raft of side effects, but my doctor asked me to stay on it for a minimum of six months due to the risk of relapse, even after symptoms are gone.

Together with cognitive behavioral therapy, medication is standard treatment for acute panic, and I only ever considered it a temporary solution – not something I intended to continue for the rest of my life. But really, I had no idea how long I would need this. So I agreed to try it for six months. (*Please explore all your options before deciding on medication. You should see a doctor and a therapist before making the decision to use drugs; it is not a decision to make lightly.*)

**And life went on.** I had clients to see, interviews to give and speaking engagements I had committed to. I had a blog to write (thanks to several guest posters who got me through that first month). I had a cat that needed cancer treatment and constant care, while I could barely take care of myself.
I was lucky to have the support of my husband and my closest friends, once I decided to tell them. That in itself was a difficult but necessary step in normalizing my situation. I couldn't imagine going through this on my own.

In an attempt to journal my way through this experience, I wrote a few entries. Here's an excerpt from two weeks after the big attack:

"Couldn't sleep (lack of sleep seems to make this worse). Woke up several times with nightmares. Started crying about Rudy going out of town before he was even out of bed. Tried to keep it together and distract myself, but Baby is puking and not eating, and that just added to the stress. Took lorazepam around 9:00; distracted myself with activity – cleaning cat boxes, organizing videos, clearing Christmas stuff, etc. Finally calmed down.

Movie night with Linda failed after an hour. Freaked out being in her place, and didn't want to have anyone over here. Anxiety still high after breathing and relaxation attempts; took another lorazepam at 6:30.

Set up an appointment with a new client for Monday and agreed to speak on a panel on Tuesday. Can I pull off either one? We'll see.

Kind of feels like one step forward/one step back. Good day, then bad day. Can't get a rhythm going. Don't know if I'm so sleepy right now because of not sleeping last night, second lorazepam or just exhausted from a mentally exhausting day. And my frickin' eyebrow is twitching! Eyebrow! Twitching!"

One day I walked into the overheated, windowless meeting room at a client's office and immediately broke out in a cold sweat. I excused myself for a second to run to the restroom and popped a sedative, hoping it would kick in at the speed of light. It was quick, but not quick enough. I went back to the meeting and squeezed a tissue under the table in my sweaty left palm, discreetly dabbing the perspiration on my upper lip as I powered through the first half of the meeting with the client. And I mean powered. I had to become a machine. The lorazepam eventually kicked in, and the meeting went great.
There's a name for this trick of putting aside distressing or distracting issues in order to focus on something else: **compartmentalizing.**

Compartmentalizing is the act of suppressing certain feelings in the moment in order to get on with the task at hand. Another way to describe this is "sucking it up." I'm lucky that, in my training as a speaker and performer, I learned how to compartmentalize many years ago. It became a valuable tool when anxiety threatened to overtake me. But too much compartmentalizing and not enough recognizing my stress in the moment is what got me into this mess in the first place, I would come to learn through therapy.

I did have to cancel a speaking engagement that I had coveted for years. Realizing that I would have to get on a plane, deal with travel and crowds and be out of my comfort zone so soon after the ER visit, I knew I wasn't ready yet. It broke my heart to back out, perhaps never to have this opportunity again. But I realized that if I was going to heal myself mentally and physically, I needed to cut back on work commitments and slow down.

Then, for a short time, I went through a period of strange hyperactivity. I recall attending a friend's small poker party. I mentally prepared myself for being around people, I made a point not to drink, and I had a good time. Unfortunately, I became overstimulated from all the activity and ended up lying awake in bed until 6:00 a.m. the following morning.

When people asked why they hadn't heard from me or seen me in weeks, I said I had the flu, which also conveniently explained the rapid weight loss.

Every day, I asked myself, "**What the **** happened to me?**" I had no answer.

*In Chapters 2 and 3, I'll talk about how I got my life back in order, got off the medications, and kept it together after the initial acute phase. Chapter 4 jumps another year into the future!*
Chapter 2

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Through weekly sessions with a therapist and regular visits with my doctor, I was able to put together a strategy to keep my panic attacks mostly under control. In this chapter, I'll share some of the ways I learned to prevent and manage my anxiety.

During my first round of panic attacks, after my car accident in 1990, the therapist I saw at that time focused on helping me reduce anxiety while in the midst of an attack. These tools mostly consisted of breathing, relaxation and visualization techniques, and they were very helpful.

In several situations since then, such as transatlantic plane rides and the time on the Tube in London when the train stopped for several minutes in a dark tunnel, I was able to use these techniques to keep myself from completely freaking out in the small, cramped space. Visualization has been especially helpful with my head inside an MRI machine! You can find many resources on the Web for these kinds of exercises, and they are an important part of an overall strategy.

This time around though, after The Big One, those tools seemed almost worthless. Trying to use techniques that started in the body, after my body was already in the full throes of the fight-or-flight response, was not working. I was so sensitive to so much: heat, noise, crowds, small spaces, and pain (mine or anyone else's – even on a TV show). Triggers were everywhere. I needed more and better tools. And so I sought out and received further help.

Here are some additional tools I learned from my healthcare professionals, tools that went a step further by creating a system for dealing with all aspects of my physical and mental health, as well as capturing and slaying anxiety in its amoeba state.

Thought stopping

I needed to go directly to the cause of the panic – my thoughts. As I mentioned in a blog post on emotional reasoning, thoughts leading to
feelings can easily take control, whether or not they are based on reality. Thought stopping is simple, but not easy: **Stop thinking that thought!** When I caught myself starting to worry about my sick cat, or feeling hot and oppressed in a restaurant, or wondering if I might get panicky because I felt claustrophobic in the car, or any of a million other worrisome thoughts, I literally told myself to change the subject. It's like changing the station on a radio. And, just as radio music can change your mood, it’s important to be selective about the new station you choose.

If I was with Rudy, I would ask him to tell me what was going on at work that day. If I was alone, I would distract myself by consciously noticing the color of the sky or the trees or feeling the breeze on my face. This helped me stay present in the world and get out of the worrisome thoughts in my head.

If I could stop my thought and stay in the present, I could keep it from escalating into the physical sensations of a panic attack. Once the "danger" was past, I could move on.

*Can you stop your thoughts in progress?*

**Planning to plan... or... avoiding avoidance**

Sometimes I would become anxious just thinking about future anxiety. An upcoming crowded party, a trip away from home, an extra-busy week... just the thought of the possibility that I might have a panic attack (aka "anticipatory anxiety") made me want to avoid any possible trigger.

However, as Shirley Babior and Carol Goldman write in the book *Overcoming Panic, Anxiety and Phobias*,

"The role of avoidance – a type of security move – is complex. It is responsible for perpetuating your fear of certain places because the longer you avoid a place, the more likely it is that you will begin to believe that avoidance is what's keeping your fears under control. So the longer you avoid a place, the harder it becomes to go there again.

By avoiding specific places you are attempting to avoid the frightening sensations and thoughts you predict you will experience. By trying to eliminate the sensations of anxiety or panic at all costs, your fear of having these feelings ultimately intensifies."
Instead of avoiding scary situations, I made plans for how to deal with panic, should it arise. Drinking water calms me, so I made sure I had a bottle of water on hand. Going away for the weekend with friends made me nervous, so I took my own car in case I felt the need to leave. If I had a lot of commitments in a week, I made sure to plan some quiet downtime. I always told myself there was a Plan B. I faced my fears, but in a prepared and organized way. This helped me feel less trapped by a lack of options.

*How can you plan better for unanticipated situations?*

**Talking**

Keeping my anxiety a secret just made it worse. Of course, I talked to my therapist once a week, but in between those sessions I still needed an outlet.

My closest friends knew what was going on. If I started to panic on a car ride or at someone's house, I didn't have to explain. Even a tiny moment of panic that passed quickly was worth sharing with my husband, so I could acknowledge it and acknowledge getting past it. And he was understanding and listened when I needed it. I was lucky that I didn't have any friends or family members who thought I should "just snap out of it."

*Who can you talk to about what's happening in your life?*

**Healthy lifestyle**

I needed to identify the ways I was living my life that led me to a state of heightened stress and aggravation in the first place. And then I needed to make some changes. Why wait until I'm having a panic attack to deal with it, when I might be able to make my life panic-free?

Four simple changes have made an enormous difference:

- **Eat better.**
- **Get more sleep.**
- **Exercise.**
- **Don't overdo it.**
I'm not kidding you. It sounds ridiculously and deceptively simple, but how many of you are paying attention to these things every day?

It's easy to grab whatever's most convenient when we're hungry; it's easy to stay up late and keep working; it's easy to avoid exercise! And, especially in our American business culture, it's really easy to overwork, overschedule, and overcommit. It's even considered a badge of honor to be extremely busy. It makes us feel important and needed.

However, ignoring physical and mental self-care is what destroys our health, not to mention our relationships and our happiness.

When you're tired, it's harder for your mind and body to handle difficult situations. When you're tired, it's easy to overload your circuits. And overloaded circuits can lead to the panic cycle.

Our bodies need nutritious fuel and water. How can we expect to feel healthy, strong and energetic if we are fueling ourselves with nothing but sugar, fat and caffeine all day? In fact, caffeine and alcohol can exacerbate anxiety all on their own, so cutting back can have a huge benefit in reducing your anxiety.

These days I get up in the morning when I'm rested, not when the clock tells me to. I have the luxury of working for myself and making my own hours, but anyone can make the effort to get to bed at a time that allows for a full night of sleep – whatever that looks like for you.

I am conscious of what I'm eating and why, although it can be hard to cut down on treats. I try to stay hydrated. I work out regularly. I take downtime and "funtime" whenever I need some. And I don't feel one bit guilty about it! I'm not perfect and I am human, so I fail at some of these some of the time. The consequences simply remind me that my physical and mental health are more important to me than my job or what anyone else thinks of me.

How can you take better care of your body?

Cultivate a positive outlook on life
When I was going through this rough time, I started seeing people differently. I started realizing that I was interacting with people every day who might be going through their own rough times. Maybe they were sick, maybe they were in pain, maybe they were also living in fear, maybe their cat (or mom, or child) had cancer. I realized if I was walking around looking "normal" so were other people. I realized that people who seemed like jerks might be feeling the same way I was feeling inside. I wanted to be more open to people, more friendly, more accepting. I wanted to see the good in people and in life.

I admit it: I'm an optimist. I was born this way. But even optimists can sometimes let our experiences jade us and turn our minds dark with worries, anger, fear and negativity, instead of focusing on the good in the world and the abundance of good things in our lives.

Sometimes it's not easy, but it's worth it to let go of the negative, feel the weight lift from my shoulders, and truly enjoy the life I've been given.

If you're a chronically negative person (negative people frequently call themselves "realists," by the way), imagine how your life could be better by letting go of the dark thoughts. What more could you accomplish if you always believed you could? How much more could you enjoy life if you allowed yourself to enjoy life? How much time do you waste on fear, anger, melancholy, worry and drama?

I started my Yay Life! blog halfway through 2009 just for the purpose of focusing on the positive, and on the things that make me happy in life. Maybe it's a little (or a lot) corny, but as part of my healing process and lifestyle rearrangement, it has been like additional therapy.

What's one small thing you can do daily to focus on the positive in your life?

Recognize warning signs

I had six months or more of warnings in 2008 that I failed to heed. Sure, I knew I was having panic attacks, but I waited way too long to do anything about them. More importantly, I was experiencing extreme stress in my life without acknowledging or even recognizing it.
Now I know that ignoring stress will not make it go away, nor will ignoring panic attacks make them go away – and will likely cause them to build up again to a massive proportion. I will never make that mistake again. I try to be fully aware of what’s going on in my mind and body, recognizing stress when it hits, and being proactive about using the mental and physical remedies mentioned above.

How will you identify warning signs indicating that you are pushing yourself to the brink of a panic attack?

These are a few of the tools, techniques and strategies that have helped me manage my anxiety and get my life back to normal – if there is such a thing!

What will you do to change lifestyle behaviors that may be contributing to your panic attacks? How will you take better care of yourself? What is working for you right now?

In Chapter 3, I’ll talk about getting off the meds, and tell the rest of the story.
Chapter 3

Meds and Moving On

In this chapter, I will talk a little more about my experiences with medication, and how things were going for me a year after what I affectionately refer to as "the breakdown."

(Again, please note: I am not a therapist and I cannot guarantee that what worked for me will work for you. I hope you can learn a thing or two from my experiences, and that some of my tips will help you keep anxiety and panic at bay. If your experiences are debilitating, it’s important that you talk to both a medical doctor and a therapist to get to the root of the problem.)

How about some statistics?

"Panic disorder affects about 6 million American adults and is twice as common in women as men. Panic attacks often begin in late adolescence or early adulthood, but not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder. Many people have just one attack and never have another. The tendency to develop panic attacks appears to be inherited....

Early treatment can often prevent agoraphobia, but people with panic disorder may sometimes go from doctor to doctor for years and visit the emergency room repeatedly before someone correctly diagnoses their condition. This is unfortunate, because panic disorder is one of the most treatable of all the anxiety disorders, responding in most cases to certain kinds of medication or certain kinds of cognitive psychotherapy, which help change thinking patterns that lead to fear and anxiety." (Read more on the National Institute of Mental Health site.)

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, my doctor prescribed two anti-anxiety medications in January 2009. The one that I could feel working was the lorazepam, because it's meant as a quick-acting sedative. For the first two weeks, I took it every day, especially at night to ward off the 3:00 a.m. adrenaline rushes. However, there is a risk of dependence with this drug, and my doctor reminded me to use it only sparingly.
After those first two weeks, I stopped taking it at night and used it only in acute situations where my own tools weren't working. I would occasionally take a preventive dose before going into a potentially triggering situation. By March I wasn't using it at all. I took one in May as a preventative before taking my first plane ride after the big attack. A few minutes after boarding, I realized I didn't need it. I didn't know how to tell if I was getting better or if my citalopram was actually working, but I didn't care!

By April, I was starting to feel like myself again. I had more energy, I was eating better, sleeping better and even starting to put weight back on (darn it). I was still shaky and experiencing side effects from the citalopram (which I'll share in more detail below), but was getting back to my old routine. Unfortunately, we had to put down our sick kitty that month. This was devastating to us after four months of cancer treatment and high hopes for her recovery. It was a big stressor. But with her illness no longer a factor, it also meant that a big anxiety trigger in my life was gone.

Like clockwork, I decided to start tapering off the citalopram at the six-month mark in July, as my doctor had told me I could. I experienced powerful side effects during the uptake period, and I feared the same if I reduced the dosage too quickly, so I very gradually reduced the dosage a few milligrams at a time.

Here are some of the more pronounced side effects I experienced while on the medication:

- Weight loss
- Hyperactivity
- Jaw clenching
- Coughing and asthma
- Nausea
- Shakiness
- Acid reflux
- Nightmares and night sweats
- And more…

I want to make it clear that **taking an SSRI is not fun**. Your body gets used to it after a couple of months, but some of those side effects, like the coughing and asthma, lingered the whole time I was on it. I also found it hard to determine (as did my healthcare professionals) which side effects
were from the drugs and which ones were from the anxiety itself. I will never know.

By October, I was finished taking the citalopram, and had experienced no additional side effects through the tapering-off process.

I had plenty of anxiety about going off the medications. "What if I have to go to the hospital again?" "What if I'm really crazy and need to be on meds my whole life?" "What if...?" Here’s how I addressed those questions, with the help of my doctor and therapist.

What if I have to go to the hospital again?

First, although I was still in the process of developing my tools to help me both prevent and manage panic attacks, with all the work I had done to change my thinking and lifestyle, I realized that it was unlikely I would get to the point where I would need to go to the emergency room again. But I also knew the hospital was there if I needed it, which was a comforting thought.

What if I'm really crazy and need to be on meds my whole life?

The issue of my sanity was harder to deal with. Do I have a mental illness? Is my brain chemistry messed up? Will I ever be fully free of panic? What does it all mean?

The truth is, I don't have all the answers to those questions, but I do know that if I need to go back on medication in the future, it doesn't make me a bad person, or a weak person, or a failure.

I've put a lot of pressure on myself in my life to be "perfect" and "strong" and "together" and "tough." Now I see where that pressure led me. I see the result of trying to power through difficult times with a smile and a gung-ho attitude instead of taking the time and space to deal with them. I am who I am. I'm imperfect and I'm human, and that's life.

I'm grateful that I don't need daily medication to "keep it together" as it stands right now. And maybe I'm lucky, too. But I don't want to dwell on what the future might bring.
What about setbacks or relapses?

I wrote a blog post in February 2009, about setbacks. Here’s what I said then:

Sometimes we overcome a physical or mental challenge only to be faced with setbacks. We believe we’ve left the problem in the dust only to have it return at a later date, maybe unexpectedly, or maybe triggered by a similar situation that created the first challenge.

I want to let you know that you can overcome it again! You beat it once, and you still have the skills and determination to beat it again.

It's scary to feel like you're not in control of your mind or body. It's scary when the feelings in your body and the thoughts in your mind seems to override all logic.

Don't give up, and don't give in. Get support if you need it. You're strong, you're powerful, and setbacks are only temporary. Keep fighting and you'll see what I mean.

I was writing this to myself as much as to my readers. I was taking on the challenge of positive thinking and self-care, knowing that I was down and the only way to go was up.

Even as I felt fully myself again and mentally as strong as ever, the process of writing the original blog series that inspired this e-book started out with a big setback, when I tried to incorporate some content about my car accident. I had a very intense emotional and physical reaction to what I was writing, and I couldn't even look at it for three weeks.

There was a time I believed I had beaten the panic attacks, and I would never have them again. I had a 19-year reprieve after the first round, so why would I expect them to return? They came back, however. How could I have known that would happen? I certainly can't predict the future.

But I've done everything to concentrate on living the life I want, staying healthy, staying positive, and not letting this experience drag me down into some permanent dark, sad place. I’ve remained focused on growing my business and helping others grow as speakers and entrepreneurs, which also has kept me from constantly dwelling on my own problems. And I know I'm
not the only one who has ever gone through something like this, and that there are much worse problems I could have.

I've had great support from my doctor and therapist, and from my family and friends, with no judgment and no (visible) shock or horror on their parts. And my blog readers, colleagues and clients have offered nothing but positive responses to my story.

I don't ever again want to experience what I went through in 2009. But if I do find myself ramping up to a panic again, I hope that everything I've learned will have prepared me to deal with it and move past it.

I'm not fragile. I'm not delicate. I'm not broken.

In sharing my story with you, I hope that you will feel inspired to take the necessary steps to start your own process of managing your anxiety and panic. If there's nothing else you do, please talk to someone. Therapy doesn't have to be permanent. But what could become permanent is your anxiety, as chances are it will not go away on its own.

Chapter 4 picks up my story one year later, in January 2011.
Chapter 4

TWO YEARS LATER

This chapter is an update from January 2011, two years past the date of "the breakdown." How have I incorporated all these tools into my daily life? Are the panic attacks gone for good? Read on to find out!

My current frame of mind is all about acceptance. Or resignation? Let's go with acceptance.

I’ve accepted that I still have panic episodes. There was the presentation I gave where, as the conference room doors closed behind me, I was suddenly overcome with the urge to flee. I started to jump out of my chair. For what? To run away? Perhaps to pop a quick sedative? Problem was, the host was already introducing me and my purse was directly behind him. Instead of bolting, I turned around and quietly asked the person who had closed the door if he could open it a little "for some air." I took a sip of water. I managed to get up – like I always do – and knock down the presentation.

There was that time when seven of us crammed ourselves into a minivan for a ride from the hotel to the conference. I became overwhelmed with panic and used all my tools, mentally and physically, to keep from leaping out of the car. I silently ran down the list of my calming measures:

Bottle of water? Check. Do something so I'm not cramped by the others around me? OK, I can lean forward. Check. Tell myself there's plenty of space and it's only a short drive? Check. Distract myself with conversation? Check. Breathe? Check.

There was the time, standing in line on a hot day and waiting for an event to begin, that I thought I would flip out if I didn't get out of the heat and find something to drink. After a brief respite in a shady spot, I headed to the women's restroom to splash water on my face. On the way, I found a vending machine with bottled water. Saved.

By the way, I totally get how silly this probably sounds to someone who doesn't have panic attacks. Anxiety from being too hot? Believe me, I get it. It seems like a ridiculous amount of overreaction to a minor discomfort. Yep, that's exactly what it is. Completely
irrational and extremely difficult to reason away. And that's why panic sucks so much.

There was also the time when I sat at a table in the middle of a hot, noisy, crowded restaurant (the kind of place that first set me off 20 years ago), testing myself: "Gee, it's hot in here," I told myself. "It's awfully crowded." Knowing that these are typical triggers for me, I poked and prodded myself mentally. "Are you hot?" Yes. "Are you claustrophobic?" No. "Can you stand the noise and the crowd?" I asked myself. The answer was yes. I felt completely fine and in control.

2010 was all about discovering who I am now, acknowledging myself as a person with panic attacks. I deal with that reality and live my life knowing there could be a trigger around every corner – but I also get on with life and don’t think about my anxiety every minute!

There was a period of months in 2010 when I thought I might have licked the attacks for good. But that just wasn't the case. When I found myself too busy, too stressed, with too little sleep and exercise, it was almost a guarantee that I would, with the right trigger, get punched in the gut with that familiar electric jolt that makes me want to jump out of my skin.

Once, I found myself in nearly the same state as I had been during my big attack. In an overheated hotel room at 4:00 a.m., I was abruptly wide awake, sweating, anxious and feeling trapped but unable to leave – in San Francisco, in pajamas, in the middle of the night. I proceeded to start my calming regimen by drinking water and cooling down (I was extremely thankful the windows weren't bolted shut), as well as taking a lorazepam. It still took two hours until I was relaxed enough to go back to bed. Rudy turned on the TV as a distraction, and we finally closed our eyes at 6:00 a.m. A not-so-pleasant reminder that I always need to take care of myself and I always need to be prepared.

So now I test myself. As in the restaurant example above, I check in with myself when I'm in a situation that would be a typical trigger: hot, noisy, crowded, enclosed. How do I feel? Am I going to be caught off-guard by my circumstances and freak out? What are my options? Can I go outside? Can I drink some water? Can I find a space to clear my head? This has proven to be a successful tactic, and 99% of the time, when I check in with myself this way, I prevent an attack.
But there are still those times when I'm hit with that unexpected body blow. And this is enough of a threat to keep my anxiety quietly revving in the background (sometimes the anticipatory anxiety – the anxiety about potential anxiety – is worse than the panic attack).

Once, in a heavy rainstorm, hubby made an offhand joke about our water-damaged ceiling caving in. Something about the idea of the ceiling, water pooled into a small reservoir waiting to burst, sent me flying into a familiar pattern of agitated pacing, looking for escape. Fear of drowning? The burdensome image of heavy water over my head? I don't know, but once again I was startled by the intensity of the physical reaction, before my brain even had time to think.

This is the "lizard brain" at work, the part of the brain that processes emotions and controls autonomic (involuntary) responses associated with fear. **Here's a little science for you:**

"The brain is a profoundly complex organ. More than 100 billion nerve cells comprise an intricate network of communications that is the starting point of everything we sense, think and do. Some of these communications lead to conscious thought and action, while others produce autonomic responses. The fear response is almost entirely autonomic: We don't consciously trigger it or even know what's going on until it has run its course.

Because cells in the brain are constantly transferring information and triggering responses, there are dozens of areas of the brain at least peripherally involved in fear. But research has discovered that certain parts of the brain play central roles in the process:

**Thalamus** – decides where to send incoming sensory data (from eyes, ears, mouth, skin)

**Sensory cortex** – interprets sensory data

**Hippocampus** – stores and retrieves conscious memories; processes sets of stimuli to establish context

**Amygdala** – decodes emotions; determines possible threat; stores fear memories

**Hypothalamus** – activates “fight or flight” response
The process of creating fear begins with a scary stimulus and ends with the fight-or-flight response." (Read full article on Discovery Health.)

And here's more:

"According to the Public Health Service, about 50% of mental problems reported in the U.S. (other than those related to substance abuse) are accounted for by the anxiety disorders, including phobias, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and generalized anxiety. Research into the brain mechanisms of fear help us understand why these emotional conditions are so hard to control.

Neuroanatomists have shown that the pathways that connect the emotional processing system of fear, the amygdala, with the thinking brain, the neocortex, are not symmetrical – the connections from the cortex to the amygdala are considerably weaker than those from the amygdala to the cortex.

This may explain why, once an emotion is aroused, it is so hard for us to turn it off at will. The asymmetry of these connections may also help us understand why psychotherapy is often such a difficult and prolonged process – it relies on imperfect channels of communication between brain systems involved in cognition and emotion." Read full article on LeDoux Laboratory site.

As time went on and I became familiar with this new reality, it finally dawned on me that I was done trying to fix it. I'd done all the work I could do, I've got more tools than ever, I've researched the heck out of this thing, I'm healthier and stronger than I was in 2009, and infinitely more self-aware thanks to the excellent work of my therapist. It occurred to me that maybe my panic attacks will never go away. And you know what? Lots of people have physical and emotional baggage and "issues" – and this is mine.

I realized that it was time. Time to stop therapy, time to stop analyzing every instance of anxiety, and time to acknowledge that this is the way it's going to be.
I had my last visit with my therapist almost two years to the day from my emergency room visit.

I don't avoid the places or situations that trigger my attacks (oh, how I wish I could avoid the MRI machine...). **Avoidance just makes anxiety more powerful.** I keep going back, keep testing myself, keep pushing myself to use my tools.

There are successes to report, panic attacks averted. For example: Freaked out in Pirates of the Caribbean in 2009... conquered it in 2010. Avoided elevators in 2009... piece of cake in 2010.

I hate crowds, but I immerse myself in them. I spent several hours packed with a hundred people into a hot, crowded room with only one exit, and I nailed it. I'm still uncomfortable in hot stuffy rooms, but half of my presentations take place in them!

My prevention tools are:

- Plenty of sleep
- Healthy eating
- Exercise
- Positive attitude, and
- Reducing stress

My in-the-moment tools are:

- Compartmentalizing
- Drinking water
- Cooling down
- Finding space
- Moving my body
- Thought-stopping
- Distraction, and
- As a last resort, lorazepam

It's been a fascinating learning experience and a window into my own psyche and the brains of so many others who share this condition.
I'm no longer in any kind of treatment for panic attacks, and I don't foresee needing treatment in the future. It would be heaven to be completely free of them and maybe I will be one day. But for now, I'm happy, I'm healthy, and I'm in control of my life – and I'm okay with this one minor annoyance that pops up now and again.

Again:

Sometimes we overcome a physical or mental challenge only to be faced with setbacks. We believe we've left the problem in the dust only to have it return at a later date, maybe unexpectedly, or maybe triggered by a similar situation that created the first challenge.

I want to let you know that you can overcome it again! You beat it once, and you still have the skills and determination to beat it again.

It's scary to feel like you're not in control of your mind or body. It's scary when the feelings in your body and the thoughts in your mind seems to override all logic.

Don't give up, and don't give in. Get support. Take care of yourself. You're strong, you're powerful, and setbacks are only temporary. Keep fighting and you'll see what I mean.

I'd like to share a quote with you that I heard recently for the first time:

"We cannot escape fear. We can only transform it into a companion that accompanies us on all our exciting adventures... Take a risk a day -- one small or bold stroke that will make you feel great once you have done it."
~ Susan Jeffers

Her understanding, first, that fear is a part of our lives, just like sadness, anger, joy and love, is profound. No matter how much we would like never to be afraid again, we know it's impossible. The fear of fear, and the fear of a negative reaction to fear is what makes people like me and you suffer from anxiety and the occasional panic attack. Wouldn't it be great if we could accept the inevitability of fear?

What risks are you afraid to take? What challenges are you avoiding? I hope that reading my story will inspire you just a little bit to face your fear head-
on and, if not conquer it entirely, learn to appreciate how it helps you gain strength from the fight.

Stay strong – fight on!
About the author

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Sign up for the Presentation Pointers newsletter or a free consultation at http://www.coachlisab.com. And check out the Speak Schmeak blog for daily tips on public speaking:


For more information on services and products, or to book Lisa as a speaker, visit http://www.coachlisab.com/services.html.