

AKRON MAN FIGHTS FREE FROM FEAR'S GRIP

Fear can be a powerfully debilitating feeling. Just ask the reality show contestants faced with being tied in a pit with 400 hungry rats, or asked to dine on an animal's eyeball.

For Donald, this kind of fear was a daily experience.

With his trendy sense of style and energetic effervescence, Donald appears fit to challenge for a spot on *Survivor*, *Fear Factor* or *The Amazing Race*. You'd never guess that until just a few months ago, fear kept him prisoner in his own home, afraid to step foot into the outside world.

"I first started having panic attacks at the age of 13, but I didn't truly realize what I was going through. For a while, I just figured that it was part of puberty," recalls Donald in soft tone that hints of embarrassment.

According to Donna McDonald, a psychologist at Portage Path Behavioral Health, people can acquire panic disorder at various stages; however, it most often begins in the late teens to early thirties. Many individuals seem to have their first symptoms when they are under a lot of stress.

Panic disorder is an anxiety-related disorder that is characterized by sudden, repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that mimic a heart attack, such as heart palpitations, tingling sensations in the fingers and toes, and difficulty breathing. These episodes are commonly called panic attacks.

The stress Donald experienced in his early teens was being generated by his extremely strict father, who wouldn't let him leave the yard. "I think my father's strictness affected me greatly, because I was, and still am always worried about doing things the right way."

As a teenager, Donald attended Springfield High School and found ways to deal with the mysterious attacks, hoping that maybe one day they would stop. He never imagined that for the next fifteen years he would experience intense fear on a daily basis.

In those fifteen years, one episode stands out.

"The worst panic attack I ever had was two years ago when I was at home watching the movie *Titanic*. All of the sudden, out of nowhere, I became completely hysterical. My heart began to race very rapidly, and my body was shaking uncontrollably. I started screaming because I felt as if I couldn't breathe. All I wanted to do was run, but unfortunately there was nowhere I could go."

As time went on, Donald's condition worsened, and he began to experience the attacks more frequently. "I was at my worst about five months ago. My wife wanted to divorce me because I wouldn't leave the house, and refused to do anything about it. I had a constant attitude problem. At the time I just wanted everyone to leave me alone."

According to the Anxiety Disorders Association of America, panic disorder can progress to a more advanced stage in which the person becomes afraid of having an attack in a place or situation where escape might be difficult, or help unavailable, which explains why one-third of all those diagnosed with panic disorder acquire agoraphobia.

Agoraphobia, a Greek word meaning "fear of the marketplace," is a type of anxiety disorder that affects up to five percent of the American population, and is characterized by the fear of experiencing a panic

attack or panic-like symptoms in a place or situation from which escape may be difficult or embarrassing. These types of situations can include those which require a person to deal with people, crowds, or places they find uncomfortable.

The one person who refused to leave his side throughout his illness was his 7 year old daughter, who one day whispered in Donald's ear, "Daddy, you need help."

"My daughter was used to me playing outside with her, but when my agoraphobia set in, I stopped playing outside, and went to any length to avoid being around people, even her," says Donald, his face slipping into a faraway look.

It was then that Donald realized that something needed to be done. He found his way to the Portage Path Behavioral Health Akron Clinic where he has been receiving counseling for the last five months.

"As part of my treatment for agoraphobia and panic disorder, I had to go into a public place for a brief period of time and then leave to build-up my tolerance," Donald explains. "I did this at Chapel Hill Mall, which worked out great for my family. My wife would shop, and I made a game out of walking in and out of the mall for my daughter. My daughter thought it was fun, and it eased my mind knowing that she was there with me."

"The most common treatment for people with agoraphobia in addition to panic disorder is exposure therapy," says Sam Haramis, a licensed professional clinical counselor and anxiety disorder specialist at Portage Path Behavioral Health. "It involves a gradual introduction into the client's feared situation and educating them a variety of different coping methods."

Donald is now able to function independently and has resumed his normal life, as 90 percent of those who seek treatment for anxiety disorders do. He is currently working a full-time job, regularly attends his daughter's sports practices, and is trying to get the ten to twelve books he has written published.

"I think my writing is the only good thing that came out of my agoraphobia," muses Donald. "Throughout the three months I stayed inside my home, I wrote about 10 - 12 books. I think it is because I kept everything inside, and I would take my experiences and feelings at the time and write about them."

Donald now feels as if he is back to the way he was before the panic disorder and agoraphobia began taking over his life. "I now realize that there are somethings that you just can't deal with on your own."

If you would like to learn more about
agoraphobia or panic disorder,
click on the
Anxiety Disorders Association of America
web site at www.adaa.org,
or call Portage Path Behavioral Health
at 330-253-3100.