

I am okay.

I have panic attacks.

I will be able to talk in a minute.

Thank you for your patience.



## Another Day, Another Panic Attack

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Published on Stories Space on 16 Jan 2017

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The difficulties of living with anxiety, and how something little can make a huge difference

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/musings/another-day-another-panic-attack.aspx>

I was awake at 4am (after dreaming of panicking), worrying about going to Painsburys for 7am (when it tends to be quiet), when it occurred to me that Stressco might already be open! It was, and so I went down there. There were lots of workers doing the online shopping rounds, but they were all polite and friendly, and got out the way if I needed things, and got on with their work as I mostly just kept to myself and avoided them.

I didn't have my earplugs in, and was doing alright. The noise bothers me, so earplugs help to shut it out and make shopping manageable. I made it to the yoghurt section to get dairy-free stuff for my niece, Little Wiggle, when whaddaya know, the fizzin' fire alarm went off! I was frozen to the spot worrying what to do, unable to get my earplugs out of my bag, when one of the lovely staff let me follow her out.

So, there's me, now unable to keep the anxiety under wraps, shaking and sweating, standing in Stressco carpark with ALL the multitudes of staff and some other shoppers. I hadn't realised there were so many when they were all spread around the store, but suddenly, there we were, a mass of disjointed groups and collections of early birds, squawking about the cold and alarms.

I was stood by Mother's car. I couldn't get in. One, they would see me get in, which would mean they would look at me. Two, if I got in, I would drive off and leave a trolley of special Little Wiggle food and Next-Door-Frank's flowers in the fridge section (it's two years today since he lost his beloved wife, Jean). Not only would a worker have to put it all away, but they had seen and talked to me and would know it was me, and I'd never get the guilt out of my head. Plus, I still needed some flowers, so I'd have to go out again anyway, and which shop would I go to, and what if, and why is the alarm still going, and why can't I just get in the car and go home?

All these uncontrollable thoughts were whizzing round my head, and I couldn't move to get the earplugs out. My breathing was approaching "dirty old perv doing summat nasty in his trousers" gasping, and the sweat was beginning to trickle down my head and back. One of the side effects of my current meds is craniofacial hyperhidrosis (Google it), which, for me, is characterised by a really odd smell that I'm very paranoid about.

That was making it worse, as now I was not only fighting the inner symptoms, but I also had to battle with the extremely apparent-to-others physical symptoms. And that makes the anxiety all the worse, as my social anxiety is to do with the people around me, looking at me, seeing me, being aware of me, and generally, being there.

At this level of suddenly extreme panic, it was all I could do to follow the staff back in the store when the all-clear was given, and I was fighting the lead in my feet, and the weight of sixteen elephants on my chest. I couldn't breathe because of the worry that people would think I'm just too fat to walk without sweating and getting out of breath, when the reality was so different, but I couldn't go round saying that to them.

"Hiya, yes, I know I'm fat and sweating like a stinky pig and gasping like a tired, landed cod on the pier, but I'm in the midst of a social anxiety-induced panic attack, so you are currently observing the effects of an outpouring of craniofacial hyperhidrosis, hyperventilation, paresthesia, depersonalisation, palpitations, and other associated issues. If you could just note that it's nothing to do with my weight, and then wipe all memory and visual disturbances to do with my existence, that would be perfect, thanks."

I mean, it's just not practical.

So, back to work for all of us.

I was aware that one of the workers was speaking to me pleasantly about it being cold, and her coat, but I could only muster some sort of nod and grimace smile. I found my trolley and tried to calm down by wandering up a couple of empty aisles. By this point, I was reeling and giddy, arms shaking, ready to faint (another horrible side effect feeling of the meds), and I knew I had to get out of there.

I crept along (trying to avoid people and get a look at whether or not there was a queue at the check-out), trying to keep my breathing as slow and quiet as possible. It's IMpossible to do that!

I can't remember when I started crying. But I did, obviously. There is another symptom of panic attacks that draws attention to you, that makes people look at you, that makes you panic...

And there was nobody on any of the tills.

You'd think that with social anxiety, using the self-service check-out is the best option. But it isn't for me. One thing is a matter of principle. I want a person who is employed to do a job, not a machine. I'm happy to queue (pretending the anxiety isn't an issue) for a person.

Another reason is, those stupid machines ALWAYS go wrong, meaning I have to wait for somebody to help me, and then I have to talk to people anyway, and worry about other people around me using other machines and am I too slow, and now I have to wait for help AGAIN because there is an unexpected item in the bagging area, which can't be true, as it's just been yelling at me to put my item in the bagging area, and now I have to wait for somebody to help me when they've finished helping that crowd of giggling teenagers (are they giggling at me?) and then that couple having an argument next to me and standing in front of my unexpected expectant bagging area...

Do you see my point?

So, back to the sweating, hyperventilating paranoia-ridden crying stinking hot mess of a 6:30am panic attack, and there are no workers at the normal tills. I had no other choice but to head for the self-service, the smell of fear emanating from my shirt and the burn of vomit in my throat.

There were two workers stood chatting as I entered the section, and I knew I couldn't go any further.

Now, when I go shopping, especially on my own, I have come to rely on my Panic Card. Sometimes I just show it to the assistant when I'm only mildly anxious, as it calms me down to know that they now know I might struggle. It's amazing what a tiny handful of words can do. When I am in full-on panic attack mode, it tells people that I'm not dying or having a heart attack. Often, people think you are, and you can't talk to tell them otherwise.

I thrust the crumpled, sellotaped card towards one of the ladies, feeling my brain automatically shutting down (a symptom exacerbated by my meds, called dissociation).

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There is a smiley face at the bottom. Nice people like smiley faces.

It was like I was suddenly transported to Heaven, as I heard words penetrating the thick fog that was closing in around my screaming ears and crawling eyes. "Open," "Serve," "Rolling check-out."

Wonderwoman to the rescue! I was shown to an actual check-out with an actual person, who was so kind and gentle. Just her manner and patience calmed me down enough to have a stilted conversation with her about her daughter who was going through a similar issue.

I don't remember bagging up, only that I was trying to talk through the heavy mantle of this inexplicable, unbearable, intrinsically evil fear. I don't remember that staff member's face (or the other lady), or what she said. I remember there was somebody behind me in the queue who was standing WAY too close to me. I don't remember paying, although the coppers haven't been round to arrest me (yet). I don't remember going out of the store, although I have a fleeting memory of trying to smile at the other lady as I left (probably another grimace).

I remember having to wait a few minutes before being able to drive (I normally calm down straight away in the car), and I only remember part of the way home.

And now, over twelve hours later, I am still very anxious, grumpy, and shaky. I've had one shower and washed my hair, had a nap (dreamed of not being able to breathe on a hospital trolley on a one-way system road in a town), taken Next-Door-Frank's flowers and a picture of Jean round to him, and am back in bed waiting for my next shower before a sleeping pill and gathering up the gumption to go for another art therapy session tomorrow.

This morning was a fizzin' disaster, until I remember a small, warm feeling of comfort breaking through into my chest as that wonderful Stressco lady served me, even though I don't remember most of it except the fear. I somehow think that perhaps I was meant to go there this morning, for reasons I may never fully know. If it was only for that tiny light in that loathsome darkness, then it was worth it (if we forget about the whole exhausting evilness of suffering from anxiety and panic attacks, obviously).

And I've just realised, I never got Little Wiggle's dairy-free yoghurt...

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