

Dialogues with Fear. Active Imagination as Healer of So-Called Panic Attacks

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Artículo

Introduction. States of extreme fear, or so-called panic attacks, are episodes that have a psychic purpose and meaning to people who experience them. The common suggestion for those individuals is “breathe deeply,” which helps to regulate dreadful anxiety in the body. I suggest the idea of facing fear, letting it manifest through the image.

In 1935 C.G. Jung developed a therapeutic method that was born through experimentation with his own images, during the phase of confrontation with his unconscious: active imagination. The technique allows dialogue between the unconscious and the conscious mind, facilitating the integration of the incomprehensible contents in order to uphold the process of individuation. Active imagination might be a significant method to heal extreme fear, allowing for expressions of the unknown, and opening the door to new understandings.

Active Imagination as Healer of So-Called Panic Attacks

Most do not believe that anxiety itself brings meaning. As in many psychic states in which there are plenty of emotions, thoughts, and physical reactions, anxiety, from a general perspective, is an unpleasant moment accompanied by fear, uneasiness, and tension. In life, people find themselves in different situations that put them against dark walls of fear. These experiences are common to humanity; everyone confronts the many diverse challenges that life brings.

There is a natural predisposition to experience new situations with a certain amount of anxiety. However, not all experience the same intensity of anxiety: anxiety will lead individuals to undergo a natural state of anxiety or an extreme depletion of life energy, the latter turning into a strong and deep energy that seems destructive, coming from an unknown source. Whitmont (1991) said, Awe and fear are presumably basic characteristics of human nature; they are part of our instinctual realization of the disproportion between the limited power of man and the immense, overwhelming

might and grandeur of the forever incomprehensible Absolute in nature, life, death and infinity. (p. 93)

Anxiety, in its extreme level of intensity, is not only related to a lack of calmness, but also to the unknown taking control of one's body, mind, and emotions. This bizarre phenomenon comes on its own, without asking permission, revealing itself through the force of nonsensical vibrations. One's body begins the desperate dance to be rid of the unpleasant sensations, one's mind becomes the seat of uncontrollable thoughts, and one's emotions turn into an ocean of courage, resistance, and madness.

There are no words to explain what is happening inside; the only clear thing at the moment is the need to escape. But to where? Some people need to see a doctor to cure themselves from the heart attack that they think they are suffering; others are caught by that inner need of escaping from the noisy, threatening public world, feeling the desperate urge to find a quiet place, where the inner stream is the only threat to face. As one follows the need of the uncanny force, the paradoxical state makes no sense. One wants to fight against the inner energy, while at the same time one is one's own prisoner to it. It is comparable to what Jung (1914/30) described, "Where are you leading me? Forgive my excessive apprehension, brimful of knowledge. My foot hesitates to follow you. Into what mist and darkness does your path lead? Must I also learn to do without meaning?" (p.235)

Being in the grip of an extreme state of anxiety, namely "panic attack," is being in the grip of an unwelcomed antithesis. The "other" is not only a stranger, but the enemy, who places the armament to block one from a calm and serene state. Why is this inner energy so hostile? What is the purpose behind this dreadful illusory and unreal state? Generally, there is an urge to get rid of the adversary. No one wants to be accompanied by insane fears and voices that step on quicksand. But, as Jung (1989) well expressed when he confronted the unconscious, "there was a demonic strength in me, and from the beginning there was no doubt in my mind that I must find the meaning of what I was experiencing" (p. 177). Here, the intruder is expressed as a powerful entity, embracing body, mind, and emotions. It seems as if there is a huge unknown giant coming out from the ocean to release itself on the speechless land.

Freud (1989) mentioned that, "The ego is the actual seat of anxiety" (p. 59), which reflects his idea about anxiety as the manifestation of "a retreat from danger" (Freud, 1989, p. 58). In this context, it appears the seat is the source of the threat; the ego has become the adversary who has been created by "the fear of being overwhelmed or annihilated" (Freud, 1989, p. 51). Anxiety, according to Freud, is born in the past of the individual, in the point where the repression originates the complex.

In one of the letters between Jung and Freud, the latter (1994) wrote, "I own to a strong antipathy towards your innovation . . . I believe we have held up to now that

anxiety originated in the prohibition of incest” (p. 232). The first part of the sentence mirrors the uncomfortable feeling that Freud had toward the differences and disagreements that Jung began to manifest. The second part seems a reminder to take into consideration what happened before, that a state of anxiety is created in the happenings of the castration.

Contrarily, Jung (1970) responded to Freud’s arguments saying, “When the ego has been made a ‘seat of anxiety,’ someone is running away from himself and will not admit it” (p.170). This reflects the position that Jung had toward the idea of the ego, and his own assumptions that the ego is not the psychic whole, but is only a small part of the psyche, of the self.

One of the main differences between Freud and Jung is that the latter conceived emotional illness in an individual as a facet that needed to be seen within the whole, without setting apart the psychic life. Jung (1933) wrote, “The ego is ill for the very reason that it is cut off from the whole and has lost its connection with mankind as well as with the spirit. The ego is indeed the ‘place of fears,’ as Freud says . . . but only so long as it has not returned to the ‘father’ and ‘mother’” (p. 123).

From this perspective, extreme state of fear expressed as a huge destructive giant, comes not from incest prohibition, but from a psychic reality that is asking for recognition.

This giant is a real energy, showing up overexcitedly in the body, paralyzing the mind away from clear thoughts, and pursuing a state of vulnerability in a world that threatens the whole integrity of the person, which is not more than its own underworld. Hillman (1979) complemented this perspective pointing out that, “Underworld fantasies and anxieties are transposed descriptions of psychic existence. . . . To know the psyche at its basic depths, for a true depth psychology, one must go to the underworld” (pp. 46, 47).

What is the best way to deal with those minutes that seem an eternity, in which fears have reached their peak? If these states of extreme anxiety, namely panic attacks, are released physically by the connection with life through breathing, it is important to consider a way of connecting the psyche with its own breathing. In other words, breathing deeply helps calm the body and the mind from the turbulent waters produced as an effect of the giant discharge. However, the destructive giant is still there; its existence has a purpose. The individual cannot remove it without facing it; action allows integration, self-knowledge, and liberation. It is not easy to confront what is unpleasant, but fighting the intense episode is probably not the best action to take. As Jung (1970) wrote,

...what it means, what it has to teach, what its purpose is. We should even learn to be thankful for it, otherwise we pass it by and miss the opportunity of getting to know ourselves as we really are. . . We do not cure it-it cures us. (p. 170)

Although an extreme moment of anxiety does not last forever, the fear to live it again generates an inner tension manifested in similar conditions, where the episode has happened before. Unfortunately, it becomes a powerful string, associating the external world to the origination of the intense episodes and with the most powerful of fears.

It could happen in the loudest place, or in the most peaceful room; it could take place when one is stuck in traffic, or on the emptiness of a road; it might occur when one is with loved ones, around a group of strangers, or in frightening loneliness. It could happen once or many times. The point is that the moment originates from an explosion of fiery energy, producing a senseless chaos in consciousness. Extreme anxiety or intense fears do not have an external threat, and should be recognized and embraced; otherwise, their uncomfortable and painful effects continue. According to Jung (1929), "Wherever we are still attached, we are still possessed; and when one is possessed, it means the existence of something stronger than oneself" (p. 38).

The idea of embracing one's fears when one is feeling so much desperation might sound complicated, but the reality is that when one gives energy to fight against one's own giant there is no winner, only a temporary calmness that results in the fear of the fear. In other words, a panic attack is not only an extreme fear "attacking" one, but it becomes an attack towards one's own self, resulting in a short-lived peace. It is important to consider what the giant wants to communicate, to find a creative meaning that allows for integrating a blind and dark spot within a present context. The dreadful state that an individual might experience is not, as Jung (1970) wrote, "a gratuitous and therefore meaningless burden; it is his own self, the "other" whom, from childish laziness or fear, or for some other reason, he was always seeking to exclude from his life" (p. 169).

But, how does one include something that has been excluded, especially when it has a demoniac force? If breathing is one of the main channels through which one's body connects with life and physical serenity, psyche should have its own breathing channel that bridges the dark and autonomous life of the unknown: unconscious, with the light of conscious mind. With this, the channel connects rather than separates. The chief point is, as Jung (1969b) stated:

...getting rid of the separation between conscious and unconscious. This cannot be done by condemning the contents of the unconscious in a one-sided way, but rather by recognizing their significance in compensating the one-sidedness of consciousness and by taking this significance into account. (p. 73)

From this perspective, an episode of extreme fear should be looked through the lenses of the unconscious and the conscious, which means that the giant not only comes to generate an echo in the waters of the unconscious, but also it has the purpose of meaning, an aspect with which the conscious mind helps to facilitate acceptance and integration. One of the valuable psychological approaches Jung made, especially to depth psychology, was to recognize the importance of embracing the other side of ourselves: the unconscious, through a third factor that he named "Transcendent Function." Transcendent Function allows communication between the dynamic of the opposites within the psyche, making "the transition from one attitude to another organically possible, without loss of the unconscious" (Jung, 1969b, p. 73).

This function does not refer to metaphysical or supernatural phenomena, but rather denotes the dialectical movement from the unconscious to conscious, and the gap that exists "in between," where the movement is produced. In other words, it represents the breathing channel that connects darkness with light, and vice versa. Joan Chodorow (1997) interpreted well when she stated the idea of the 'transcendent function' as encompassing "both a method and an inborn function of the psyche. . . Both combine conscious and unconscious elements. Both are creative, integrative functions that shape and transform the living symbol" (p. 5).

It is significant to grasp the meaning of Jung's idea and its powerful value to understand more deeply so-called panic attacks. The consideration of the transcendent function as a method refers us to active imagination, a technique that was developed by Jung, and that was mentioned for the first time in 1935, "when he delivered the Tavistock Lectures in London" (Chodorow, 1997, p. 3). Here, he told the story of one of his patients, who during a period of time was not able to grasp the meaning of active imagination as a method. The patient eventually grasped the meaning, and as Jung (1935) mentioned, he was able to "rely on his imagination, and so he learned to use it" (p. 144). Active imagination is an interesting method used to come to terms with the contents of the unconscious. It allows the possibility for the psyche to breathe.

The production of images as a psychological function is the source of psychic breathing. An image becomes active when one is not in control of it, such as in dreams, but also, when one is aware of its movements as a spectator and not as its creator. The active image has a dynamic quality when one is actively engaged with its movements and meanings. Jung (1935) called this the process of active imagination, denoting that, "the images have a life of their own and that the symbolic events develop according to their own logic – that is, of course, if your conscious reason does not interfere" (p. 145). Here Jung brought up the value of letting the image be, without judgments, questions, and impertinences from the conscious mind. However, active imagination is a powerful method, not only for looking at the images dancing "in front"

of oneself, but also for considering consciousness as the meticulous light to see, comprehend, and get the meaning of that symbolic language. Jung (1969b) pointed out that,

Aesthetic formulation needs understanding of the meaning, and understanding needs aesthetic formulation. The two supplement each other to form the transcendent function. The first steps along both paths follow the same principle: consciousness puts its media of expression at the disposal of the unconscious content. (p.85)

From letting the image be emerges the materialization of the unknown, which in a moment is surrounded by the role of consciousness. In states of extreme fear, it could be helpful to go into the images and emotions that the painful moment brings, instead of fighting with its episodic strength. It is true that being in the grip of extreme anxiety is uncomfortable, but if one makes it a creative and meaningful experience, it is possible to calm down the inner storm.

To face the giant, one needs preparation. The idea is to, firstly, "let it be," observing its movements and developments without allowing oneself to be at the mercy of its powers. In other words, the task is to witness its manifestations, not to be trapped by them; the essence resides in "keeping your objectivity despite the temptations of the mood, and in making the mood your object, instead of allowing it to become in you the dominating subject" (Jung, 1928b, p. 64).

Taking into account that one's rational mind jumps from one thought to another during states of extreme panic, and makes the moment worse, it is important to breathe deeply and open the channel through which the psyche breathes: the image. There are some ways through which the method of active imagination is viable, allowing one to face episodes as active spectators of the performance. Some people dance, paint, sing, draw, or write; the matter is to contemplate spontaneously what the extreme fear is expressing, allowing the hazardous psychic energy to materialize. According to Jung (1929), "the way of getting at the fantasies varies with individuals. For many people, it is easiest to write them down; others visualize them, and others again draw or paint them with or without visualization" (p.17).

The process through which fear is able to speak through movements, paintings, songs, drawings, or written words, contains the material of the unconscious, brought to consciousness with the purpose of making room for differentiation, meaning, and individuation. The method by which Jung worked, and to which he gave the name "active imagination," is significant to developing a wider understanding and knowledge of the self.

For instance, moving extreme fear into written text is extremely powerful, not only because one makes room for darkness, contemplating it through the body, thoughts, and emotions, but also because one can grasp its meaning and purpose in life.

Bringing active imagination is an important method of healing that includes conscious and unconscious data, and gives birth to transcendental function. The process is:

...a kind of enrichment and clarification of the affect, whereby the affect and its contents are brought nearer to consciousness, becoming at the same time more impressive and more understandable. . . At all events, it creates a new situation, since the previously unrelated affect has become a more or less clear and articulate idea, thanks to the assistance and co-operation of the conscious mind. (Jung, 1969b, p. 8)

Jung stressed three possible risks to embarking on active imagination without preparation: firstly, moving in circles around the same content; secondly, getting stuck in the images, losing the value of consciousness and losing the method's purpose as Jung described it; and, the third danger that may have serious consequences, becoming possessed by the contents of the unconscious taking the personality as their expression, which gives rise to schizophrenia and psychosis (Jung, 1969b, p. 68).

Being under supervision of a therapist is essential to the method's success, as well as: a "well-developed ego standpoint is needed so that conscious and unconscious may encounter each other as equals" (Chodorow, 1997, p. 12).

In the journey to understand the purpose and meaning of uncomfortable and painful fear episodes, it is important to lose the fear to the fear, allowing for the flow of psychic breathing to give birth to the dialogue between the dreadful unknown and consciousness.

Conclusion

Panic attacks are extremely powerful in their intensity, making one feel as if it is impossible to think and act clearly. Panic is a synonym for losing "reality:" The reality of the conscious mind. However, extreme fears have meanings needing to be deciphered through the panic itself and consciousness. Active imagination is a meaningful method through which Jung explored and confronted his own unconscious more deeply. The technique helps give form to the unknown through symbolic language, and organizes the contents of the "other." Panics or extreme fears find expression and meaning through active imagination, and the method allows one to have a deeper understanding of oneself.

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