

Managing Panic Using Formative Psychology: A Personal Account

Maggie McKenzie, UKCP

Abstract

An account of the effect of using Formative Psychology to influence states of panic.

Keywords

Endings – Formative Psychology Applications – Panic – Self-Management – Stage of Life

I am a 56-year-old Australian woman who grew up in an abusive, alcoholic, critical family situation where I became watchful, constantly active and responsible. I distanced, held warmth, anxiety and fears deep inside and planned for my life to begin in the future when I left the family home. My body as a young adult was upright, stiff, held in the neck, low back and genitals, my pelvis tilted back, with a squeezed forward protruding ribcage. While I was eager to please and looking to others for how to be in the world, I was actually longing for a home and to be recognized and loved. I moved to London, where I now live, in 1974. I met Terry Cooper and Jenner Roth in 1980, and through them, Stanley Keleman in 1983. Throughout the next 15 years of living and working as a therapist and becoming a parent, I learned to lessen the rigidity in my pelvis, spine and neck, to expand my ribcage and to recognize myself, but not to make satisfactory contact. I compressed my chest, rounded my shoulders, pushed my chin forward, tongue to the roof of my mouth and stilled myself. I was holding still, waiting for my life to begin.

In the summer of 1996, I began to experience more fatigue by the end of my day; shorter, heavier and more painful periods; increased levels of anxiety in more and more situations and infrequent but intense hot flushes, heat rising from my feet and spreading upwards. This was beginning of menopause.

In the following years, I responded to high levels of noise or heat, large groups of people, enclosed spaces, busy supermarkets, cinemas, theatres and queues, by producing heat, agitation, panic and an urgency to get out, to move.

In response to increasing internal heat I compressed more, holding in my fears and anxiety. Becoming denser, compressing my chest and gripping my abdomen, clenching my buttocks and squeezing my neck so that my chin came forward and I pressured my head. I worked harder, longer hours, made more mistakes, felt isolated, unloving and unlovable.

By the summer of 1999, I emailed Stanley. I was frightened, my blood pressure was very high (180/110). Stanley telephoned and talked with me about my structure being dense/rigid and my needing to respond to what was swelling and growing within me by lessening my density. With Stanley's response I found courage to continue and looked forward to that summer's workshop in Holland.

During that period of time there were added external demands and pressures on my colleagues and myself, as a person with whom we all worked closely decided to leave our organization in conflict and his leaving would take place over six months. I responded by tightening further and having more experiences of panic and overwhelm. I managed my increasing experiences of overwhelm by reducing all but the necessary activities and sometimes by collapsing. I avoided any crowded, enclosed or highly stimulating situation. I was sleeping four or five hours nightly, was exhausted and had put on weight.

I was determined to attend the 1999 summer workshop in Holland in late August that was titled "Taking Change of Your Life: Intimacy and Gestures." I was relieved and anticipatory and so concerned about over-heating that I sat at the end of the back row. On the first morning, Stanley spoke of intimacy and body proximity going together, and of body proximity generating the warm and wet experience of being at home. He also spoke of the state of intimacy being linked to growth and the presence of the growing edge, where unformedness relies on the base of "what was" to form "what will be"—and that this base is unstable. I thought, as I frequently have, that Stanley was speaking directly to me.

Stanley spoke of how using the five steps, the methodology of Formative Psychology, encourages structural states of closeness and the organization of the experience of being close to oneself. Yes, I thought, this is for me. This year I was experiencing an unstable self that I needed to contain, put structure to. I felt as if I was in a state of flux in each moment.

During the afternoon session, Stanley introduced an exercise of opening and closing the hands. In response to opening my hands I had produced heat, swelling, profuse sweating and a racing pulse. I could just manage to contain this experience with a considerable effort. I put my hand up and having gained Stanley's attention I described my response, by which time my heart and respiratory rates were very high. I felt hot and so liquid I thought I would melt. Stanley asked me to do the panic. I placed my left hand on my chest, my right hand was by my side, both were open and with the fingers over-extended, I pushed down and forward in my neck, my eyes wide, I was holding tight in my torso. Stanley asked me to "do it" and "do it more," then to "undo in the hands and then the neck, repeat and then rest." He gave me a series of statements to make—"I can hold my panic." "Don't panic in response to the panic." "I can hold my heat and swelling." Again, Stanley asked me to do the panic shape, "do it more" then "undo in the hands, the neck."

I became less frightened, as I felt my feet on the floor. He then asked me to bring my hands upwards and forwards one step at a time, holding each position as a frame. I did the first two or three steps tightly and rigidly, then Stanley showed me how to extend my arms. I continued to do the steps more softly, with less muscular pressure inwards and saying at each step "I can contain my heat and swelling." The statement was true, I felt in charge for the first time in months. As I experienced my edges in the boundary of my skin and the presence of my muscles and bones, I became hopeful and more at ease.

Stanley asked me how I felt about dying. I said "fearful." "Yes," he said, "You are dying. We all are. Something is dying, that's the heat, and something else is trying to grow."

I understood that fertility and menstruation were dying, and that the alpha adult with its mesomorphic “can do” principle was beginning to end. Stanley had spoken in the morning about the alpha adult parenting the *second adult* as this latter begins to grow into existence, that we are then unknown to ourselves and confronted with the self not knowing ourselves, the unfamiliar. How am I going to relate to what is showing itself in this strange set of experiences when the mesomorphic confronting approach does not work? These statements reflected my experience, Stanley spoke with me after my experience in the group saying that these experiences were the beginning of disorganizing density and containing swelling and heat; that the panic is the end result of density meeting the swelling of something growing.

I felt relief, warmth, I could feel my limbs on the inside and the outside, I recognized a different style of mesomorphic activity and I had an exercise to work with to grow this new approach.

From this moment in time, I have not panicked in response to panic or to heat or overstimulation.

Over the following weeks and months, I repeated the exercise I had learned with Stanley each morning and each evening and any time during the day when I felt any signal of beginning to produce overwhelm in response to heat or pressure. I made decisions to change how I lived and worked. I saw clients for 50 minutes out of each hour and made other regular pauses to rest and reflect during my day. I learned to organize to sit at the end of a row when visiting the cinema or theatre, to sit on the aisle in a plane.

With further input from Stanley each year and working with Terry and Jenner, I have changed my daily exercise. The theme is the same, I continue to make layers in my density and as I do, I have more fluid, porous experiences.

I now live with more warmth, liquidity, tenderness and have a more meaningful existence.

Biography

Maggie McKenzie is a UKCP registered and Accredited Psychotherapist and co-director of Spectrum Therapy, a Centre for Personal and Professional Excellence in London, England. Email: MaggieMcKenzie@spectrumtherapy.co.uk