The Second International Anxiety Congress
Shefa Neuroscience Research Center, Tehran, Iran, 1-3 October, 2014
The Neuroscience Journal of Shefaye Khatam
Volume 2, No.3, Suppl 1

Poster Presentation Review

Differential Diagnosis of Panic Attacks: Using a Decision Tree

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Published: *1 Oct 2014*

Abstract

Panic attacks are discrete episodes of intense fear or discomfort accompanied by symptoms such as palpitations, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, derealization and a fear of losing control or dying. Although panic attacks are required for a diagnosis of panic disorder, they also occur in association with a host of other disorders listed in the 5h version of the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. This paper presents the steps in making a differential diagnosis of panic attacks. Detailed explanations with appropriate examples are provided to illustrate each of the decision-making process. The first step in the differential for a panic attack is to rule out the presence of etiological substance or medication use. When taken in high enough doses or during substance withdrawal, a number of substances and medications can lead to a panic attack. Next, possible etiological general medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism or pheochromocytoma, should be considered. Once it is clear that panic attacks are not the direct physiological consequence of a substance or medical condition, the next step is to determine the relationship between the panic attacks and a possible situational trigger. Finally, panic attacks triggered by a realistic event do not warrant a diagnosis of a mental disorder. An illustrative flow chart which will facilitate the differential diagnosis of panic attacks is provided in this review.

Keywords: Differential Diagnosis, Panic Attacks, Anxiety, Decision Tree.

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