

My Story

Lisa Papa, Jersey City, N.J.

As the city streets gave way to the tree-lined highway, my husband, Steven, smiled, "I can't wait to get to the beach!"

But as we sped past the mile markers, dread crept over me—just as it did every time I was alone or away from home. "What if we get into an accident?" I sobbed.

Steven stonily replied, "Nothing is going to happen."

I'd lost count of how many times in the past year fear had brought me to my knees. Steven had been understanding, but how much more could he take?

I'd never been afraid of anything until I was a teenager, and my older sister moved out on her own. Suddenly, I felt terrified to be alone in the room we'd shared.

Lisa Papa was trapped by her fears: too afraid to go out, just as scared to be alone. How could she ever have a full life with her husband and daughter? Then a special new technique offered her hope in four simple steps...



No longer afraid, Lisa cherishes time alone with her 15-month-old daughter, Sabrina.

Gasping for breath, I thought of Dr. Mastria's four points. I looked at the scenery. I opened the window and felt the air on my face. Each time a scary thought popped up, I pushed it away by thinking of something pleasant that I could see or feel. I held Steven's hand. Gradually, my heart slowed, and when we arrived at our destination, I gushed to Steven, "I wasn't afraid!"

Incredibly, as the weeks passed, whenever I felt afraid, just by looking at my surroundings or touching my baby's soft skin, I'd feel more in control.

Still, I struggled. One day, Sabrina was on the changing table while I dressed her. Suddenly, I thought, "What if she fell? And I lost control."

"Keep practicing," Dr. Mastria encouraged. "It will get easier."

In time, it did. Two months after I started therapy, I shooed Steven out one Saturday.

"Don't rush home," I laughed.

"I'll be okay."

And I was. As I played with

Sabrina, my ears delighted at the sound of her laughter. I'd never realized how much I'd missed by being afraid all the time.

Slowly, my world opened up. I went back to teaching. Steven and I began going out again.

In the six months since then, I

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haven't had one attack. I've got my life back, and I enjoy every day to the fullest. My daughter's sweet laughter in my ears, my husband's spicier cologne tickling my nose... I'm constantly in tune with the wonderful world around me.

The other day, as Sabrina, now 15 months, and I headed out for a walk, Steven teased, "You're never home anymore!"

Smiling, I thought, Life is too good to stay cooped up by fear. Now I'm free—and I don't want to miss a minute!

—as told to Deanna Pease

"I've got my life back!"

Mom took me to a psychologist, who helped me see that I had nothing to be afraid of. After a few sessions, I was fine. I went on with my life, and after college, I became a teacher. By age 25, I was an ecstatic bride-to-be.

Then, a few weeks before the wedding, I got scared when Mom didn't come home from church on time one Sunday morning. What if she's been in an accident? I worried.

My heart hammering, I drove around looking for her. Disastrous images ticked through my mind so

"Don't leave!" I'd tearfully plead with Steven each morning

fast that I felt dizzy and disoriented. I was in my own neighborhood, but nothing looked familiar!

By the time I got home, Mom was there. I was embarrassed to tell her how scared I'd been, but later I sheepishly told Steven.

"It's just wedding jitters," he laughed.

But on our honeymoon, sitting in a quiet restaurant, panic surged through me again. Run! my instincts shrieked.

"What's wrong?" Steven asked.

"I don't know!" I choked. Leaping from the chair, I ran to the restroom, adrenaline pumping.

Even after we settled in our new apartment, I'd be in the car, store or the classroom when the familiar terror would wash over me.

All I knew was the world felt like a scary place where I—or the people I loved—could be hurt.

Things grew worse when a miscarriage five months into our marriage left me so devastated that I quit my job.

"Don't leave!" I'd plead with Steven each morning.

"I have to go to work," he'd insist. Alone, terrifying images would spring to my mind: there could be a fire, or someone could break in.

My fears forced us to move into my parents' house. Whenever Steven went out, I ran downstairs to Mom's.

Hope rekindled when two months after the miscarriage, I was pregnant again. And when I held Sabrina for the first time, I filled with joy.

At first, I fretted about the things all new moms do: Was she getting enough to eat? Was she dressed warmly? But soon, other thoughts crowded in.

What if she chokes? I'd lie awake worrying. I'd dreamed of being a mother, but as I drowned in my fears, it turned into a nightmare.

Am I losing my mind? I wept.

By the time Sabrina was nine months old, the attacks were coming two and three times a week. And now, as I cowered in the car, trembling as images of car wrecks played in my mind, I sobbed, I can't live like this!

Then I remembered the psychologist who'd helped me as a teen. When I called her office, I learned

she was away. But her brother, Ernest Mastria, also a therapist, gently asked, "Can I help you?"

Clutching at hope, I went to see him.

At our first session, Dr. Mastria explained his theory that at the heart of all psychological discomfort is something he called "reflexive attention diversion," a condition that distracts us from the here and now with anxiety.

"If you could replace your worries by focusing on the present," he explained, "you could live a more fulfilling life." He had a new approach to treatment, he explained, described in his book, *The Habit of Living: A Way to Calm Your Symptoms and to Feel Happy*.

All I had to do to, he said, was follow a four-step plan: "Be aware of what's going on around you, use your five senses to stay focused, be active and if you can't see it, don't think it," he said.

That night, Steven, Sabrina and I drove to my sister's for the weekend. As soon as we got on the highway, my heart began to pound.

How you can stop worrying!

Though few of us suffer from the debilitating fear that plagued Lisa, we all spend time worrying. But according to psychologist Ernest Mastria, Psy.D., we can keep those worries at bay. Here's how:

● When you catch yourself worrying, switch your focus to the present—where you are, what you're doing.

● Indulge your senses. Do you feel a light breeze, smell cookies baking, hear children laughing outside?

● Keep your mind on what you're doing—and only that. "Trying to do too many things triggers nervousness."

For more information, log onto www.drmastria.com.



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