



Deborah Gibson on ANXIETY & ATTACKS

PANIC

Most teens spend their time shopping, partying, or going out with friends. But not singer Deborah Gibson. At only 16, she was already enjoying fame as one of pop music's most successful singers of the late 80s. She was the youngest person ever to write, produce and perform a No. 1 single. Her album *Electric Youth* was No. 1; her single "Lost in Your Eyes" was rising on the charts; and she was employing close to 50 people on a road tour.

But only a year after coming onto the music scene, she experienced a life-changing event. While sitting in a restaurant with her mom, Diane, and a radio program director, she felt a tingling in her toes that spread through her body, and she had trouble breathing. Before she knew it, the restaurant staff was giving her smelling salts and she was rushed to the hospital. Gibson was overcome with stress and anxiety. "I remember resenting that my mealtime was being taken over by business," she recalls. "I got short of breath and pretty much blacked out. It's scary. You think you're going to die."



While that was the first and last time a panic attack took Gibson to the hospital, it sparked a three-year struggle to find the right diagnosis and treatment.

Pressure points

Panic attacks—sometimes called “panic disorder”—often force your body into a flight-or-fight response. You may feel dizzy, flushed, and even experience chest pain.

Looking back, Gibson says her feelings of anxiety were in her head long before she was in the public eye. “In hindsight, I think I was always prone to these problems, even before the fame. I remember getting what felt like hot flashes in school. I was always in a slightly hyper-heightened state.”

The singer gives lots of credit to her mom (and manager) for being her rock when she was going through bad times. “My mom was always the first one who, if I flew up the white flag, would say I needed a break.” She was the “bad guy” to the record company executives or the publicist, says Gibson, now 37.

Gibson also describes having frequent out-of-body experiences that she now relates to a dissociative disorder. “I felt disconnected, like words were coming out of my mouth, but they weren’t coming from me,” she says.

The real problem, however, started when she tried to get treatment, at a time when going to a therapist was considered taboo and medication for what seemed like just stress, was out of the question. “It was very hard to explain this, because people think anything mental is within your control. ‘Get over it. Mind over matter,’ they say.”

At first Gibson turned to “at-home” treatments. She started yoga and acupuncture; she changed her diet.

These remedies would “take the edge off” but never fully resolve her anxiety. “It wasn’t until therapy and medication that I started to feel like myself again,” she says.

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear that develops for no apparent reason. Panic attacks trigger severe physical reactions—they can make your heart pound and cause you to feel short of breath, dizzy, nauseated, and flushed. If you have any symptoms of a panic attack, seek medical help as soon as possible. Panic attacks are hard to manage on your own, and they may get worse without treatment.

Source: Mayo Clinic

Road to recovery

Since the 1980s, Gibson has continued to release albums. She’s also spent the last 16 years on Broadway in the productions of *Les Misérables*, *Beauty and The Beast*, and *Cinderella*.

Gibson counts several doctors on her wellness list, and she advises others to not feel ashamed to see a therapist.

“The regular therapist I see is phenomenal,” Gibson says. “He helps me

All about anxiety

- Generalized anxiety disorder, sometimes called GAD, is diagnosed when a person worries excessively about a variety of everyday problems for at least six months.
- People with GAD can’t seem to get rid of their concerns, even though they realize their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants.
- The physical symptoms of anxiety can include: fatigue, headaches, muscle tension and aches, difficulty swallowing, trembling, twitching, irritability, sweating, nausea, and lightheadedness.
- GAD affects about 6.8 million adult Americans and about twice as many women as men. The disorder comes on gradually and the risk is highest between childhood and middle age.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health

with the way we always sabotage ourselves. I’m a big advocate of therapy.”

She hasn’t given up on her clean-living approach either. Gibson does yoga about four times a week, meditates, and doesn’t use drugs or drink. She’s learned several life lessons along the way too: Gibson believes in the importance of taking time for yourself.

“On your lunch break you have to be able to close the door, put on a meditation CD, and regroup,” she advises. “People have no problem going to the gym to take care of their bodies. But they still find it taboo to say, ‘I need to take care of my mind.’”

Just learning how to say no is also important. “I used to get anxious about pleasing people all of the time,” she says. “But these days, I have no problem saying no to people.”

She may be telling more people no, but Gibson isn’t slowing down. Earlier this summer, she got great reviews for her show at Harrah’s in Atlantic City called *Pop Goes Broadway*. Next she’s off to Singapore for a production of *Superhero Diaries*, producing a musical, hosting an online talent competition, and starting a performing arts camp: Camp Electric Youth.

Gibson’s panic attacks and anxiety are certainly not gone completely, but she has learned to take life one day at a time.

“All anxiety is related to worrying about things that haven’t happened yet,” she says. “That’s not reality. The only reality you have is whatever is happening today.” — MEREDITH STANTON