The origin of “panic”

Few individuals know the origin of the word “panic.” Its roots lie in Greek mythology, namely the legend of the Greek demigod Pan. Pan was a mischievous forest sprite, inhabiting the lonely stretches of wilderness that separated the Greek city-states.

Legend has it that one of Pan’s favorite diversions was to torment ancient Greek travelers traversing the byways of that once-forested land. Pan would lie in wait, concealed in the bushes, awaiting his unwitting victims. When a traveler passed by his hiding place, Pan would gently rustle the bushes, engendering a sense of apprehension in the person walking by. The traveler would pick up his pace, and Pan would then scurry ahead through the forest to intercept his quarry at the next dark turn of the path. There, he would rustle some more vegetation, and the traveler would make even greater haste as Pan’s amusement grew.

By this time, the traveler would begin to breathe heavily, and his heart would begin to pound, and the sounds of his own quickening footsteps would be magnified in the stillness of the forest to resemble those of a pursuing wild animal. One more rustle of the bushes from Pan and the traveler would be hurtling as fast as he could run along the dark and narrow forest path. It took no more provocation from Pan to keep the human interloper in Pan’s forest kingdom from fleeing as quickly as possible. Never would the unsuspecting traveler re-enter the forest without experiencing a wave of apprehension. Thus did the term panic originate.

There are modern lessons to be drawn from this ancient legend. First, it suggests even the Greeks recognized the phenomenon of “fight-or-flight” reactions prompted by illusory triggers. The physiology of the panic episode is predicated on hyperventilation, a form of maladapted breathing. A “time-out” or reality check can help sufferers reduce symptoms. The nervous system can be tuned with appropriate diet and supplementation. Patients with adrenaline overload are ideal candidates for balancing using metabolic typing. Exercise is helpful, but beware of stressful bursts of exertion because they mimic the physiology of the panic reaction.