

**THE AFIB REPORT**  
Your Premier Information Resource for Lone Atrial Fibrillation  
Publisher: Hans R. Larsen MSc ChE

## VIRTUAL LAF CONFERENCE

Proceedings of 29<sup>th</sup> Session  
June 21st, 2004 –

### SUBJECT: Fear, Anxiety and Afib

Afib--I've been reading this board forever and have tried everything and have experimented with everything. I am currently off of everything and the afib is reasonably under control.

I have found that a combination of fear [unjustified] and anxiety [justified or not] results in afib. When I dream of old anxieties I have afib and in the morning when I wake up, it subsides. During the day, it more or less subsides, and I just have an irregular heartbeat.

I am off sugar and carbs which seems to help. The primary cause, in my opinion, is a nervous disorder, which causes abnormally high activity in the chest which seems to aggravate the heart. This is the routine I've settled into and is acceptable. If I control the anxiety and perceived fear, the afib is minimal.

***Ben***

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Ben,

Thank you for contributing this important subject. I would be most interested in learning the details of how you manage to keep your fear and anxiety at bay - particularly in the wee hours of the morning :~)

***Hans***

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I find that fear and anxiety is part of what triggers my afib, along with acid reflux. I take one Xanax a day now and some days I don't take it at all. Actually when I do take it I take it in two doses or two halves. I did not want to take it at all because of the addiction potential but I never increase the dosage and it really helps with the palpitations which have led to afib in the past. If I get angry or have anxiety I get some palpitations so I try to control these things by staying away from people and places that trigger it.

***Jan***

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I have found that fear, anxiety, and anger can be a trigger for me. I try to control negative thoughts by training myself to change my thoughts to something positive. This will work if I catch the thoughts fast enough. I also use prayer, meditation and slowing down my breathing.

I am also learning to keep my body comfortable. If I tolerate being too hot, too cold, too tired, too sedentary, or working

on something too long I can start an episode. If I listen to my body I sometimes feel like I'm avoiding a pending episode. Sometimes it just takes a short break or even a stretch then I can go back to what I was doing.

I am also avoiding TV programs depicting violence, suspense, or anything that might make me anxious.

I allow myself more time to get to my appointments and if I find myself in a situation I couldn't avoid I try & talk myself out of getting anxious.

### ***Elaine***

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Elaine,

All your preventive measures make a lot of sense. I use most of them myself. I recently experienced another trigger. I was 15 minutes into watching a very exciting soccer match (European Cup), when afib struck. I had felt it coming on but the game was just too exciting to shut off the TV. From now on I guess I'll have to read about it in the newspaper :-(. By the way, another possible trigger for me is watching TV after 9 pm.

### ***Hans***

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When I have a severe feeling pvc, there is a slam bam kind of adrenaline rush that triggers anxiety for anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes. If the pvc's are close together there is a continuing wave of anxiety and then subsides somewhat until another pvc hits.

Back in 1988 I became completely exhausted and stressed out from working 12 to 14 hour days seven days a week for thirty seven months straight. I begin to have feelings like I was going to pass out but never passed out. After nine days and many tests performed in the hospital, five Dr's concluded that I was stressed out and prescribed tranquilizers. I finally got in touch with a Psychologist that happened to be the chairman of the Agoraphobia Center of the Southwest located in Dallas, Tx. President Reagan had appointed him as director of the national Agoraphobia, Panic/Anxiety Commission of the U.S.

Anyway, this psychologist got me over that panic anxiety in short order.

I never was bothered by anxiety anymore until the end of last year as afib and pvc's worsened. I do not have any anxiety until pvc's or afib sets in really bad. I get so aggravated having to 'put up' with it in addition to these dadblasted pvc's especially. Afib is bad enough, but in tandem with pvc's it's reallllly bad.

Oh yes, I still have all the relaxation tapes and play them fairly often. I also have some great relaxation tapes a cardiologist gave me back in 1988. On one of the tapes he takes you on a trip to Oahu, Hawaii, and with word pictures with my eyes closed it almost feels as if I'm there on the beach.

### ***Glenn***

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I just realized recently that in addition to anger it is fear that is a trigger for afib.

It is not having control of the future that causes me to be anxious and frustrated.

In addition, losing contact with some friends/ family because of misunderstandings etc., rejection, and people not notifying you whether they have received a present that you sent them. This absolutely galls me and gets me really angry and exasperated.

It is the lack of response plus salty, laden with MSG food in restaurants that may trigger afib.

The world as it is now reminds me of the terror and my suffering in Belgium during World War 11. I try to avoid

watching any news or movies with violence. Yet, I can't escape it totally.

Thanks, Hans for having such a great board.....I will be able to buy one of your books within a week.

**Isabelle**

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Kevin

You may be like me. Vagal AF seems to get better when under stress. However, once the stress has passed that is when the AF hits you. So in a round about way stress will lead to AF.

**Fran**

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Yes Fran, I am convinced that it seems to be that A/Fib follows periods of excitement and exercise, I used to do a lot of running/road cycling/going to the gym etc., but A/Fib did not always hit me afterwards and I have tried to isolate how I felt prior to getting an attack.

I think that I have learnt to recognise the "signs" and slow down as best I can but you just can't "Turn Off" your inner feelings if you are a Type A person and it is taking a lot of training.

Some times it is frustrating when you are with friends and you are trying to slow down and stay cool and they keep on insisting that you have a glass of wine or something with them but you know deep inside yourself that something like that will set you off and it is almost impossible to try and explain to them what goes on inside your body and you don't want to bore them with your problems.

Best wishes,  
**Kevin**

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Hi Hans,

It is interesting that you think that anxiety plays a large roll in bringing on A/Fib and I do agree but the interesting thing is that I play in a reformed classic rock band (I am 59) and I have never had a bout while on stage or during a gig although I have had some ectopic beats while on stage and I am the Lead singer, but I do worry sometimes that it might bring it on.

I have got home from a gig at 1am and gone to bed and then woken up with a/fib so I think that tiredness is a big factor and I wonder what I could do when I get home before I go to bed.

Regards,  
**Kevin Stent**  
**New Zealand**

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Hi Hans, Further to my previous letter it is also interesting to note that I did a tandem parachute jump from 15,000 ft last year and the biggest fear I had was getting A/fib before/during/ or after but interestingly I got neither and I felt like I was on an adrenaline high for about 24 hours afterwards.

I even had two glasses of wine afterwards to celebrate!

Regards,  
**Kevin**

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Fear, anxiety and stress are high on my lists of triggers. I can go weeks and weeks, sometimes months, without an afib episode, but right before I go for a check up, I almost always get some palpitations and start worrying about going into afib.

**John**

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I have had only 3 episodes of afib in the past 12 years, the last being about 4 months ago. (I know that I am very lucky compared to most on this board). When my last episode occurred, I went into total anxiety for over a month, not driving, no going to my children's games, it was horrible and drove my family nuts. I am doing much better after reading Hans book and reading this board, it is all so helpful and I feel that I have learned so much.

Now only when I get a pvc do I go into a feeling of terror, say I am out somewhere such as a store do I feel as if I have to get out of where ever I am, like the pvc brings on an anxiety attack. It is such a helpless feeling. I don't think anxiety brings my afib on, I think that if it did I would of been in it much more often (especially raising four teenagers) even though I have always been a very anxious person. I wish that I had some concrete answer to what does bring mine on. Thank you every one and that you Hans for your book.

**Kathy**

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Kevin,

You might try 0.5 mg of sublingual Ativan (lorazepam) as soon as you get home from a late night gig. I have no idea whether it would work in your case, but it may be worth a try.

**Hans**

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Thank you Hans,

Would clonazepam do the same?, my doctor has given me these to take if I need them to quieten me down when I get a bout of A/Fib? I have only ever taken a half tablet .025 mg (Clonazepam 0.5mg).

There is no doubt in my mind that tiredness is a trigger.

Many thanks for your kind help.

**Kevin Stent**

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Kevin,

Sorry, I don't know if clonazepam (Klonopin) will have the same effect. It may if you use the sublingual wafer, but it does seem to have more serious side effects than does Ativan.

**Hans**

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My first afib episode arose out of a lot of background anxiety and fear. I hope that this doesn't sound funny, but we lived for a short time in a country house that had ghosts. I kid you not. My son, husband, a house painter, a carpenter, several guests and I all independently had frightening experiences in the house. I found out that the previous owner, whom we hadn't met, had figured out that the footsteps that she first thought was an intruder, were, in fact, a ghost. (We found bolts on her bedroom door.)

I was left alone in the house with no neighbors nearby for five days, when my husband went on a fishing trip. I have never been so terrified as I was night after night. It was bad enough during the day, but nighttime was the worst. I was so afraid that I couldn't even get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom that was in the middle of the house.

In the meantime I was trying to hold my own with my older, very domineering, bossy sister about the division of my mother's estate. I felt totally confused and anxious that I would not make the right decisions. She had me spinning. The anxiety was extreme.

In retrospect I realize it was the setting of anxiety and fear that set the stage for my afib attack. I have always been slightly fearful and anxious as the result of a very unsupportive childhood, but it took that combination of events for afib to begin.

And, yes, as some have already posted, I think that anxiety is aroused during an afib attack, even though we are supposedly used to the episodes and know in our conscious minds that afib can't kill us. Anxiety is there at a subconscious level. The mind/ body senses that something is wrong, no matter how much we try to reassure ourselves.

### **Carol**

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Although I have had ectopic activity since the mid-80s, my first for-sure AF episode of 5 to date came in 1999 whilst I was trying to sort out my late (and estranged/mentally-ill/alcoholic/abusive/adoptive) father's estate: I was WELL stressed out..... Wow - just had a run of three ectopics as I wrote that..... coincidence??

Kathy, I'm pleased to learn that you have 'only' had 3 episodes of AF in 12 years..... well done! I'd accordingly like to know a little more about you and your episodes:

1. Your age (if you don't mind)
2. When the episodes strike (are you vagal or adrenergic?), how long they last - I'm assuming they self-convert to NSR with no intervention.
3. What you have done to improve your overall health since the AF first struck - if anything?
4. Do you drink, smoke, eat out a lot etc.?
5. Are you a stressed/anxious/perfectionist type of lady?

### **Mike F.**

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Mike

I am 40 and yes I am stressed/anxious and a perfectionist. I have done nothing in the past 12 yrs to change my lifestyle. I was an occasional drinker /non- smoker. Honestly, I have been trying to figure out if I am vagal or adrenergic, my first 2 episodes were when I was sleeping, the last while eating ice cream all with rates over 200. I was medically cardioverted at the hospital every time the last after 17 hrs.

I am wondering, are most with afib type a personalities? Could years of stressing just bring the afib on occasionally?

### **Kathy**

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Kathy,

Thanks for the additional info.

"I am wondering, are most with afib type a personalities? Could years of stressing just bring the afib on occasionally?"

Good questions - particularly in the context of the current discussion here in the CR. I'd say that type As are particularly prone to developing AF since they frequently experience anger/hostility owing to their intolerance and impatience both with themselves and others. I do personally think that years of severe stressing CAN bring on - amongst other things - AF. I have for all my adult life been an anxious and stressed person: I am very intolerant and impatient - nothing is ever good enough. I have a first class degree, a Masters with distinction, and a PhD (all done between 1990 and 2002 as a mature student) and I was always punishing myself for not been good enough as a student! I'm the same with anything I do - I invariably do anything I decide to undertake extremely thoroughly and well (in the opinion of others around me), but I have a hard time being satisfied with the results.....

As regards your own AF episodes - they sound to me like they are vagal since they occurred whilst you were asleep and or after ingesting COLD foodstuffs/drinks - all classic vagal traits. I am also vagal - all 5 episodes in last 5 years have occurred whilst I was asleep (except for one which occurred just before bedtime).

**Mike F.**

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Hi Mike/Kathy,

Your observations and experiences are interesting and I can see myself in both of you. I too am a classic type A who always wanted to be the best and everything had to be done properly and perfectly in all my years of sport /study and running my own business etc I have always placed a lot of pressure on myself and now on reflection I can see the errors of my ways.

I now "Try" and take a more laid back approach to life but every now and then the old bad habits creep in and my wife has to remind me of what I am doing and warns me to slow down. When I do get a A/fib episode I can reflect and see to some degree why I have got A/fib.

I am a 59-year-old male, 90 kg and still fit but I do not thrash myself anymore as far as exercise goes, I just do a lot of power walking and tramping in the hills when I can.

This forum has been a great help to me, keep it up Hans and everybody!

Best wishes,  
**Kevin**

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I never realized that I was a perfectionist till about 3 years ago my daughter was helping me prepare for a family dinner, when it came to cutting carrots for steaming, she said " Mom you better do this as I will probably not cut them the right way" ? My gosh!! it's just cutting carrots!  
Can anyone relate to that? Then I realized my backspace button is almost worn out because I have to make sure there are no typo's when I write.

I have since lightened up and tell myself it's ok to make mistakes, I don't post much because I am afraid of sounding stupid, and my heart is racing right now just from posting this. Is it any wonder that I am hooked on Xanax. This is a great topic for the forum, Thanks Hans

Thanks to all of you

**Ella**

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I can tell you in my case stress, and anxiety has played a big role as to when I get an attack with afib. When I was going through a lot with my son this last year, drugs, arrested and then jail and rehab. That's when I started getting these attacks and now that things are better with him I don't have as many episodes. They are milder than they were but I still have them intermittent. The doc said it was athletic induced I think stress induced? Anyway I'm a newbie to this so I'm learning a lot just reading all these accounts. Thanks.

**Teresa**

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Hi Hans,

I meant to ask, what do you mean by Sublingual wafer? Could you please advise the side effects of Clonazepam (Klomopin)? I have heard it is addictive, what do you think?

It certainly calms me down. What is Ativan ?

Cheers,  
**Kevin**

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Kevin,

A sublingual wafer is a small tablet that you put under the tongue and leave it there until it dissolves. It gets into the system much quicker than a tablet that you swallow.

You are absolutely right, clonazepam is considered to be quite addictive. Other possible side effects include drowsiness, confusion and depression.

Ativan (lorazepam) is a member of the family of benzodiazepines as is clonazepam. The reason I suggested sublingual Ativan is that it acts almost immediately, it is less addictive than clonazepam, and it has been proven in clinical trials to reduce vagal tone.

**Hans**

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Hans, this is interesting. When I was admitted to ER in March and they determined it was Afib they first gave me an aspirin and then gave me Ativan. Maybe I should take Ativan instead of Xanax when I get palpitations.

**Jan**

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One of the theories that explains "perfectionism," type A personalities and "control freaks" is that perfectionists subconsciously feel inferior from a lack of attention, love, support (neglect) in early formative childhood years and feel that if they just perform super well, they will somehow find that love and attention. They are always striving to gain that long lost love and support.

**Carol A.**

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Wow---what a bunch of responses----I was first in this conference room thread with the fear/ anxiety stuff and I feel I should respond in more detail.

As I've said, I've tried everything and have given up everything. I've come to the conclusion that, when trying something new [Erling water, for instance], things seem to get better, but I've realized it is psychological, And that, later, when I stop doing whatever it was that 'seemed' to improve things, the afib never got worse.

As I stated in the beginning, dreams with fear had me in afib during the night. The dreams were always of work situations, I am retired now, from a job where I was promoted into, what I believed to be incompetency, a job that I always had to put on a show to keep from being exposed. All perceived, but these were the years that my afib recurred more and more often. I believe in mapping, and I believe that is the problem now. Only at night do I have problems, as

during the day I'm so busy that I don't have time to be concerned about afib and it is, more or less non existent during the day.

In the final analysis I have found that if I ignore the afib, it seems to ignore me. This perceived fear of times past seems to be a key.

### ***Ben***

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To continue with the previous post, as I had to depart for supper, the fear thing has become the key ingredient. Being on a low carb diet, I am hypoglycemic, has helped, in that the lower insulin seems to keep the anxiety down. But, if I'm confronted with a situation that I, for a very brief moment, believe that I can't solve, I get a run of afib, and I attack the problem and solve it and realize it was the old fear of 'fear of non-performance' and it was not real as the problem always gets solved. It seems like a cycle as each new task during the day has its 'unknowns' which I am challenged by and calls up my doubts which triggers some afib. Mostly, I have found that, if I press on with all the daily tasks and ignore all the doubt crap, I do pretty well.

### ***Ben***

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Ben - There is a book I used to control the fear thing you mention. I found the information invaluable for me because I was always so fearful and anticipating the what-if's of an AF event.

Actually, the practice works for every situation and it teaches you how to control fear or doubt or panic no matter what the origin. It's extremely helpful. I highly recommend you get it.

From Panic to Power by Lucinda Bassett ISBN 0-06-092758-5  
\$9.49 - online from [www.overstocks.com](http://www.overstocks.com) It's a bargain and a lifesaver.

### ***Jackie***

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Kathy, I am thinking that years of stress can bring on afib. In 1996 my father started going downhill. I moved both my mother and father near me. I helped my mother take care of him and it was a big job and very stressful. After he died my mother went downhill. I am taking care of her and she is almost 90. My brother died a few years ago and my grandson died 3 months after that. I have had nothing but lots and lots of stress since 1996. I think my afib is a combination of adrenalin and vagal. I have to control my reflux and if I control that I don't get as many palpitations when I get angry or anxious. The palpitations will lead to afib if I don't get them under control quickly. But anger and severe anxiety (that I get with every crises) will bring it on. Being over tired also contributes to it. I have had my mother in the hospital many times and had to call 911 each time. I think I have just had too much stress. It has finally gotten me. When I get so upset I start having palpitations I take one Xanax. This doesn't happen often. I take one Xanax a day all the time. Actually I break one in half and take it in half doses, once a day and sometimes I take both doses. I will take the second half if I wake up in the night and can't get back to sleep. This will happen if something more stressful than usual happens. I am very careful not to increase the dosage of Xanax because the potential for addiction is very high. I live with a lot of stress every day of my life. I am also an elderly person although I don't think of myself as elderly but I am 66.

### ***Jan***

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Ben and all....

I'd like to share some fear/anxiety experiences and observations I've had as they relate to the normal physiologic response to stress... the fight or flight reaction in the body which triggers the release of adrenaline (epinephrine).

My observation is that I always had a magnified response to these situations which either brought on fear, anxiety or great stress, or a shock of some type. In these situations, I realize now, that the magnified response or reaction and the resultant adrenaline surge would eventually trigger AF because there was too much of the stimulating hormone and it did not dissipate rapidly enough.

I can confirm this with the bad-dream events some people have mentioned. I learned the best thing to do is wake myself up and get out of bed and take steps to calm down – maybe eat something to prevent the resultant hypoglycemia which accompanies a surge like that.

I've had it with a near miss while driving and some crazy driver does something stupid. The fear/shock/ startle response often set off AF within minutes of the event.

I've experienced it while watching a suspenseful movie with a sudden shock.... I feel the clutch in my chest/heart area and then the pulsing in the carotid artery just as the AF begins. ]

I've experienced it with a severe startle response.... someone coming in a door or a room when I thought no one was home.

On the other hand, some responses are delayed response to stress. Early in my AF career – in fact, during the second year when events were not very frequent, I had the unfortunate experience to leave work during a thunderstorm and I unwittingly rode the primitive elevator down three flights to the first floor...or so I thought. I only reached the second floor when the power went off and I was trapped in the elevator. It was pitch black. No emergency phone in the elevator and no emergency light. It was before I began carrying a cell phone.

Fortunately, there were still people in the building and I made enough racket for them to come to the elevator and tell me they had called the police/fire department. What made it worse is the fact that I am claustrophobic in elevators and being in total darkness made it worse.

I was only in there for about 20 minutes and I had plenty of reassurance from the people outside but my big fear was going into AF while inside. I tried to think of other things.

I was assisted out and walked to my car...feeling foolish for having reacted so dramatically. I was pretty shaky, though, and as I started to collect my thoughts and think about driving home, AF hit with a huge impact. I knew I was totally depleted in blood sugar from the incident.

I was worried I would not be able to drive the 10 miles home, but I did, and immediately began to eat to get the blood sugar elevated. In about an hour and a half, the AF converted. That was back in the days when that remedy would almost always convert AF. That changed with time.

As an aside.... one never appreciates the gift of sight until an experience like that. I was totally helpless to find anything I was carrying with me in my purse to help me. In retrospect, I felt I had gained some insightful knowledge as a result. Take care your sight at all costs and do whatever you can to make life better for the blind. The loss of sight is the most devastating of all the senses.

In my journey to find a cause of my afib, I was frequently told by doctors – not cardiologists – that they felt the transition I experienced from parasympathetic to sympathetic nervous systems or the reverse was not a smooth transition and the jolt, or ragged conversion set off AF.

I think this is what happens when we experience fear, anxiety, sometimes, stress, shock and other rude intrusions on an otherwise tranquil state of being. We have an exaggerated response. It is real.

The remedy would be to be sure blood sugar is always balanced and that we don't become hypoglycemic and tip the scale which facilitates going into AF. Take lots of the B vitamins which help control stress.

Always eat something non-starchy carb before bed to stabilize blood sugar so bad dreams don't trigger.

And, of course, the whole study of controlling the stress hormone, cortisol, enters into this as well.

That's my take on this based on many, many experiences during my AF career.

***Jackie***

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Jan,

This would certainly be worth a try since Ativan is far less addictive than Xanax.

***Hans***

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