

# Panic Attacks

A factsheet highlighting signs and symptoms, and some possible treatment options



A panic attack is a brief episode of intense anxiety. Panic attacks are common. Up to 35% of the population experience a panic attack at some time in their lives. A panic attack can last from a few minutes to half an hour. However, the impact of the attack may last several hours.

For many people, the feelings of panic occur only occasionally, triggered during periods of stress or illness. A person who experiences recurring and frequent panic attacks is said to have panic disorder, which is a type of anxiety disorder. Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can become severely disabling. The person may choose to avoid a wide range of situations (such as leaving their home or being alone) for fear of experiencing an attack. In other words, they panic about panicking.

## Signs and Symptoms

Panic attacks generally cause the same, but more intense fear response as is found in general anxiety including:

- Racing heartbeat
- A feeling of constriction in the chest
- Breathing difficulties
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Tense muscles
- Dry mouth
- Feeling lightheaded or dizzy
- Tingling and chills, particularly in arms or hands
- Trembling or shaking, sweating
- Hot flushes
- Anxious and irrational thinking
- A strong feeling of dread, danger or foreboding
- Fear of losing control
- Feelings of unreality or detachment

## The 'flight-or-fight' response

When the body is faced with immediate danger, the brain orders the autonomic nervous system to activate the 'flight-or-fight' response. The body is flooded with a range of chemicals, including adrenaline, that trigger these changes. A panic attack is said to occur when the 'flight-or-fight' response is triggered but there is no imminent danger.

Some of the factors that can cause our bodies to inappropriately activate the 'flight-or-fight' response include:

- Chronic (ongoing) stress – this causes the body to produce higher than usual levels of stress chemicals such as adrenaline
- Acute stress (such as experiencing a traumatic event) – can suddenly flood the body with large amounts of stress chemicals

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- Habitual hyperventilation - disturbs the balance of blood gases because there is not enough carbon dioxide in the blood
- Intense physical exercise - for some people, this may cause extreme reactions
- Excessive caffeine intake - the caffeine in coffee, tea and other beverages is a strong stimulant
- Illness - may cause physical changes
- A sudden change of environment - such as walking into an overcrowded, hot or stuffy room
- A memory sensory (sight, sound, smell, touch or taste) or otherwise which we associate with a previous dangerous situation or event. This can be in or out of our awareness.

## Coping Exercises

The following exercises may help bring the body and brain back to equilibrium if you are experiencing, or have experienced the signs and symptoms of a panic attack

### Exercise 1

Check your breathing rate.

Count your breathing rate for one minute, where a "breath in and out" counts as one breath. My breathing rate is \_\_\_\_\_ breaths per minute.

The appropriate rate of breathing when calm and relaxed is around 10-14 breaths per minute. Focus on your breathing and regulate it (keep it consistent) until it returns to within normal levels.

### Exercise 2

Avoid negative "self-talk" that focuses your attention on your symptoms - avoid telling yourself "Stop panicking!" or "Relax!"

Remind yourself that the symptoms of a panic attack are uncomfortable, but understandable and not life threatening.

Do tell yourself that you've felt these feelings before and nothing bad or life threatening happened, you survived.

Focus your attention on something outside your own body and symptoms, i.e distract yourself by counting back in threes from 100, recall the words from a favourite song or notice and concentrate on the sights and sounds around you.

Fleeing from the situation will only reinforce the perception that your panic attacks are unbearable. If you sit with the knowledge that the symptoms will pass and allow that to happen, it affirms that nothing bad will happen, increasing your confidence in your ability to cope.



### Exercise 3

Monitoring your symptoms Try keeping a record of when and how you experience panic. If you start to notice recurring patterns, you are more likely to be able to control and manage the symptoms.

| Date | Time | Intensity (1-100) | Main Symptoms | The Trigger-Where were you? What were you doing? What were you thinking? |
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## Treatment

When the body is faced with immediate danger, the brain orders the autonomic nervous system to activate the 'flight-or-fight' response. The body is flooded with a range of chemicals, including adrenaline, that trigger these changes. A panic attack is said to occur when the 'flight-or-fight' response is triggered but there is no imminent danger.

If the panic attacks are due to anxiety, treatment options can include:

- Medications
- Stress management techniques
- Relaxation techniques
- Counselling, Psychotherapy
- Lifestyle adjustments, such as attention to diet, exercise and sleep.