

Panic Attacks



Symptoms of panic:

- fast, shallow breathing
- thumping, rapid heartbeat
- feeling dizzy or faint
- chest pain or tightness in the chest
- sweating profusely
- ringing in the ears
- feeling, or being, sick
- feeling very hot or very cold and shivery
- tingling or pins and needles in hands or feet
- feeling distant and disconnected from what is going on around you.

Causes of panic

Panic attacks often come unexpectedly. If you don't know what is happening to you, or if you have never had one before the experience can be very frightening. You may think that you are 'going mad', that you are having a heart attack or going to die. None of these are likely because of a panic attack, but see your GP if you are worried about your health and need some reassurance.

A panic attack may have an identifiable trigger or cause; if you are terrified of spiders and one falls on your head you may panic. Usually the cause is more complex and less obvious. A panic attack is the most severe form of acute anxiety and what happens in your body is in response to, not the cause of, a sudden, excessive amount of adrenaline and other hormones in your bloodstream. The trigger is usually psychological (your belief that a situation is threatening) but may be physical (intake of a substance that disturbs your body's equilibrium in some way) or a combination of the two.

If you wait the symptoms of panic subside and you will return to normal. As this can take between 5 and 20 minutes most people find it extremely difficult to just wait. Your own fear of what is happening sets off further panic and more adrenaline is produced. This fear of fear means you are hypersensitive to your own body's sensations and as soon as you feel anything that reminds you of a previous panic you tense up, thus making a further panic attack more likely. Remember that feeling very hot or a bit dizzy can be because of other things, such as sitting in an overheated, stuffy room, being hungry or dehydrated.

One of the most common causes of a panic attack is hyperventilation, or over-breathing. We do this to meet extra demand from our muscles for oxygen (the fight or flight response). As the body tries to take in more oxygen our breathing rate increases as it would if we were running. However when anxious we tend to tense up, making our breathing shallower and faster. Our lungs can't fully inflate with each breath when our chest muscles are tight. Shallow, rapid breathing and over-breathing disturb the balance of carbon dioxide in our bodies and can bring on symptoms of panic. The same physiological reactions can happen after taking certain drugs.

What can you do?

Keeping your general anxiety levels as low as possible will minimise the likelihood of panic attacks.

If you begin to feel panicky stop what you are doing and try to regulate your breathing. Fairly slow, steady breathing will rapidly reduce the horrible sensations. Concentrate on your breathing rather than on the bodily sensations. Practice this method of breathing when you are not panicking so that you find it easier to do when you need it. Breathing slowly and regularly in and out of a paper bag held over your mouth and nose for about 10 minutes works very well. Carry one around in your pocket. Even cupping your hands over your mouth and nose can help raise the levels of carbon dioxide in your blood and reduce the sensations. Try running on the spot, or doing something else physical to use up the adrenaline. Some people find that shouting or singing very loudly is effective. Eating or drinking something sweet can also help if you think that your panic is associated with low blood sugar. If you think that your (or someone else's) panic attack is because of taking drugs seek medical help at once.

If you have tried all the self-help methods without success or your life is being disrupted by panic and anxiety do seek help. Doctors and counsellors are very familiar with these difficulties and will be ready to help you