

TOOL KIT Panic Attacks

A self-help resource to help people experiencing panic attacks

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense anxiety or fear together with a surge of frightening physical sensations and thoughts. These can include a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath, dizziness, trembling, chest pain, sweating, shaking, and muscle tension. Thoughts can include feeling like you may be out of physical or emotional control, dying, having a heart attack or stroke, or going to pass out. Panic attacks are usually brief but may be terrifying while they last. They can often come on unexpectedly, which makes them even scarier, and are often not related to any external threat.



What are panic disorders and agoraphobia?

Panic disorders develop when people experience recurring and unexpected panic attacks. People with panic disorder will sometimes begin to restrict their lives because of the attacks. They may stop going to public places or stop using public transport because they fear having an attack there. This problem is referred to as agoraphobia.

What causes panic attacks and panic disorder?

Factors that increase the risk of developing panic attacks and panic disorders include: family history, major stress or a traumatic experience. Following the first attack, people with panic disorder start to pay more attention to their physical symptoms. They often start to become afraid of their own physical reactions. Once this happens, any change that produces a similar physical reaction such as exercise, strong emotion or even a change in the temperature, can trigger a panic attack.

What to do during a panic attack

1 Try not to fight what you are feeling

It is important to remind yourself that you are experiencing intense anxiety that is most likely out of proportion to any actual danger. Often fighting the feelings or pushing them away can actually increase your fear of panic and give it more power. Some people find success in distracting themselves by counting the things they see, naming their feelings out loud, chewing gum, or slowly dancing around the room. Either way, it is important to remind yourself that panic is never permanent and most panic attacks will pass in a few minutes.

2 Control your breathing

Controlling your breathing can be very effective when used at the first signs of a panic attack. It needs to be continued for around four minutes to allow the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to return to normal.

An example of breathing control is slow breathing;

- Breathe in slowly, counting silently to yourself:
1...2...3...4...5...
- Hold your breath for a moment
- Breathe out slowly, counting silently to yourself:
1...2...3...4...5...

3 Challenge your fear

Try to be aware of what you are thinking and see if you can challenge these fears. Ask yourself:

- “Given what I now know about panic, and a recent medical check-up has ruled out any physical explanations, am I really having a heart attack, stroke, or being irrational? Is what I fear actually occurring, or is it more likely these symptoms are part of my anxiety response?”
- “What do I know from my past experience with panic attacks? Have I had these feelings before and did they kill me, or did they turn out to be a panic attack?”
- “If someone I know was experiencing these symptoms, what would I say to them to reassure them these are just anxiety symptoms?”

4 Give yourself time

Try not to rush yourself through the panic attack. Don't try to distract yourself or pretend you are not feeling anxiety – this will often make the anxiety worse. Acknowledge your symptoms as “just symptoms” - remind yourself that you can separate how you feel from what you think or fear is happening. Some people find it helpful to think of panic as similar to ‘surfing a wave’ – it builds up, peaks, and then washes up on the beach. When you are ready, simply go back to what you were doing.

In the long term

It is important not to let a few panic attacks become a bigger, long-term problem.

Some key points to remember are:

1 Don't avoid usual activities or situations

Try not to avoid situations or activities that are linked with panic. For example, try not to avoid exercise, public transport, or driving. If you find yourself starting to fear or avoid certain situations, you need to ease yourself back into them. This is the best way to learn that your panic does not need to prevent you from your usual activities and that you can get through it.

2 Avoid 'self-medicating'

Alcohol will not help feelings of panic and in the long term will make them worse. Tranquilisers sometimes have a very short-term use, but they are not useful in the longer term and it is easy to become addicted. Be aware that some medications for anxiety can be addictive as well – always get medical advice about any medications.

3 Avoid developing unhelpful habits

Some people with panic attacks begin to use lots of superstitious behaviours to protect themselves.

For example, they may carry bottles of water or a particular book in case they panic or they may only follow certain routes because it makes them feel safer. If you find these habits creeping into your life, try to reverse them. While they may seem harmless, they can stop you learning that panic is not dangerous and that you can cope yourself.

Getting Help

There are two main types of treatment that have been shown to work. These are:

1 Cognitive Behaviour Therapy:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is usually delivered by a clinical psychologist and teaches you practical skills to help manage your panic attacks.

2 Medications:

There are some specific medications that have been shown to reduce panic attacks. These usually need to be taken over a significant period of time and must be prescribed.

Seeing your doctor is a good first step in identifying what treatments may be best for you and your situation.



Places to go for help:

Seeing your doctor is a good first step if you feel that you may be experiencing panic attacks.

They can assess whether you are experiencing panic attacks and can rule out any other physical causes for your symptoms. If you are experiencing panic attacks, your doctor may provide you with a referral to see another health professional such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

There are also a number of specialised clinics for panic disorder and agoraphobia. These can usually be found through your local hospital or university.

Lifeline volunteers are available 24 hours a day on 13 11 14 or online every night at www.lifeline.org.au if you require support or need information about services in your local area.

Utilise hard copy and online resources like the ones listed below:

- Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria www.adavic.org.au/PG-fact-sheets-panic-disorder-and-agoraphobia.aspx
- Beyondblue <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/types-of-anxiety/panic-disorder>
- Centre for Emotional Health, Macquarie University <https://www.mq.edu.au/research/research-centres-groups-and-facilities/healthy-people/centres/centre-for-emotional-health-ceh>
- Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression, St Vincent's Hospital <https://crufad.org/>
- Panic Disorder & Agoraphobia. Clinical Practice Guidelines for Consumers & Carers.
- Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists <https://www.ranzcp.org/home>

There are also books and internet sites that provide treatment programs that you can try yourself:

- Baillie, A. & Rapee, R. Panic Surfing: A self-treatment workbook for panic disorder (1998). <https://shop.centreforemotionalehealth.com.au/product/panic-surfing/>
- Page, A. Don't Panic: Anxiety, Phobias & Tension. (2002). The Australian Women's Weekly Health Series, NSW, Australia
- Silove, D. & Manicavasagar, V. Overcoming Panic: A Self Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques. (1997) Constable and Robinson Limited, London
- Swinburne University. Panic Online. www.swinburne.edu.au/lss/swinpsyche/etherapy/programs/registration/main.html

For 24 hour telephone crisis support call 13 11 14. For more information visit www.lifeline.org.au

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