



Panic Attacks

Panic attacks occur when the body reacts as if it is in immense danger in a situation where most people would not be afraid.

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Symptoms of a panic attack

The symptoms of a panic attack include elevated anxiety, heart palpitations, hyperventilation, muscle pain, dizziness and sweating. There is often a fear of totally losing control or dying. These can develop into a panic disorder, where the attacks are intense and frequent. If untreated, a panic disorder can be a debilitating condition, which severely restricts quality of life. Panic attacks can occur at any time, repeatedly and without warning.

The physical symptoms of a panic attack are extreme versions of our body's normal responses to danger. Adrenaline causes the heart to beat faster, and the breathing rate to increase in order to supply major muscles with more oxygen.

Blood is diverted away from non-essential areas, including the stomach, brain and hands, often causing digestive problems, dizziness and tingling or numbness in the hands. Pupils dilate for more acute vision and this can cause difficulty with bright lights or distortion of vision.

Sometimes it may appear that the walls are closing in, or inanimate objects may even appear to move. It is common to think the symptoms are due to a major health problem, such as a heart attack, brain tumour or mental illness. This fear causes more adrenaline to be released and can lead to a worsening cycle.

Panic attacks and associated disorders

Panic attacks can be accompanied by other conditions such as depression, or they can give rise to the development of phobias. For example, experiencing a panic attack in the supermarket may cause someone to associate the supermarket with anxiety, leading them to avoid going the future. Some people's lives become very restricted in this way. Panic attacks can develop into an anxiety disorder such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) where repetitive activities are used to prevent anxiety from occurring.

Treatment for panic attacks

There are various treatments for panic attacks, with research showing cognitive behavioural therapy to be the most effective. It is common to combine several treatment options:

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

While not always effective for those with a cognitive deficit, CBT shows a person how to identify their anxiety and change anxiety-generating thoughts. The premise is that it is not the events that cause anxiety, but more what we think about them.

Medication

Anti-anxiety drugs and similar medications can provide short-term relief but can also have side effects. It is important that other strategies are used as well, including counselling and learning more about the condition.



Complementary therapies

The use of herbs, vitamins and homeopathy can be effective for some people as complementary therapies.

Diet and exercise

Good diet and exercise are essential for emotional wellbeing. Exercise often stops the 'keyed up' feelings associated with anxiety. Caffeine in coffee, tea and chocolate can increase panic attacks for some people.

Relaxation techniques

Relaxation and meditation can be useful to reduce stress or provide relief during an attack.

Tips for managing a panic attack

Don't fight panic. When experiencing a panic attack remember the following:

- symptoms are just an exaggeration of normal reactions
- the feelings are frightening but not dangerous
- face the symptoms, don't run from them
- don't make things worse with scary thoughts about where it might lead
- allow time to pass and for the fear to fade away.

You can also use one or all of the following positive statements:

- 'this feeling isn't comfortable or pleasant, but I can accept it.'
- 'I can be anxious and still deal with the situation.'
- 'I'll just let my body do its thing – this will pass.'
- 'this anxiety won't hurt me, even if it doesn't feel good.'