



Mental Health

What is a panic attack, and what should you do if you have one?

In the midst of one, some say they feel like they're dying. Others experience a destabilising fear. Many feel that they're losing control of their mind and body.

But the one thing they all agree on is that going through a panic attack is an enormously traumatic experience. It's estimated that between 15% and 30% of individuals will experience a panic attack at some point during their lifetime. And in a world with rising stress and anxiety, and poor mental health, panic attacks are likely to become more frequent occurrences.

What causes a panic attack?

The Mayo Clinic describes a panic attack as an unexpected episode of intense anxiety or fear, despite the absence of danger or a clear cause. Usually a panic attack occurs following the onset of a varied set of stressors, but sometimes it happens out of the blue. It may occur when the brain struggles to send messages between the prefrontal cortex (which deals with logic) and the amygdala (which deals with emotions, specifically fear and anxiety).

Your heart will race, you'll start sweating or shaking, feel out of breath, or your fingers or lips will start tingling, and you may feel as if you're about to throw up. This is due to the release of adrenaline and norepinephrine in the body, in response to the activation of the body's fight-or-flight response.

Panic attacks usually don't last very long. Symptoms build for around 10 minutes, and they're normally over in about 30. Some individuals may experience the effects for a while following the episode, however.

How should you deal with a panic attack?

It's important to first establish that it is, in fact, a panic attack, and not related to a cardiac condition. The symptoms can be similar: chest pain and shortness of breath.

There are several things you can do:

- Identify someone who can talk you through the episode.
- Find something cold to touch, as cold sensations can help your mind to settle on something tangible, and regulate the whirlwind of emotions.
- Focus on your breathing: breathe in for four seconds, hold for seven seconds, exhale slowly for eight seconds. Repeat several times.
- Count colours, to keep you fixed on your reality.
- If you can, remove yourself from the surroundings and go somewhere else, or visualise a safe space.

How can you help someone experiencing a panic attack?

- Find a medical professional, to determine whether it's a panic attack or a cardiac event.

- Guide the individual to a quiet spot and try to stay calm yourself. Stay with them until the attack has passed or, if they prefer to be alone, stay close by where you can see them.
- Provide gentle reassurance.
- Guide them through breathing.
- Avoid telling them that there's nothing to be afraid of and they should just calm down.

What can be done to prevent panic attacks?

- Speak to your doctor about managing stress.
- Take care of your body and mind, with regular exercise and a well-balanced diet.
- Spend time in nature.
- Get enough sleep.
- Monitor your caffeine and alcohol intake.

While panic attacks can be tough to handle, they're very treatable. Having a plan in place is a good place to start.



24/7 Support Available:

Toll-free: **0800 111 011**

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