

PANIC ATTACKS

July, 2021

What is a panic attack?

You may have had a panic attack if you experienced four or more of the symptoms listed below coming on abruptly and peaking in about 10 minutes.

Panic Symptoms

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling of choking
- Chest pain
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- Feelings of unreality or being detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling
- Chills or hot flashes

Panic attacks are sometimes accompanied by avoidance of certain places or situations.

Why do panic attacks occur?

Panic attacks are the body's alarm system gone awry.

For example, if you are walking in the woods and see a bear coming your way, a variety of changes occur in your body to prepare you to either fight the danger or flee from the situation. Your heart rate will increase to get more blood flow around your body, your breathing rate will quicken so that more oxygen is available, and your muscles will tighten in order to be ready to fight or run. These bodily changes are all essential to helping you survive the dangerous situation.

After the danger has passed, your body functions will begin to go back to normal. This is because your body also has a system for "recovering" by bringing your body back down to a normal state when the danger is over.

What triggers a panic attack?

Sometimes panic attacks are triggered in "everyday" situations where there really is no true physical danger. For example, an argument with your spouse or stressors at work can cause a stress response (activating the emergency response system) because you perceive it as threatening or overwhelming, even if there is no direct risk to your survival.

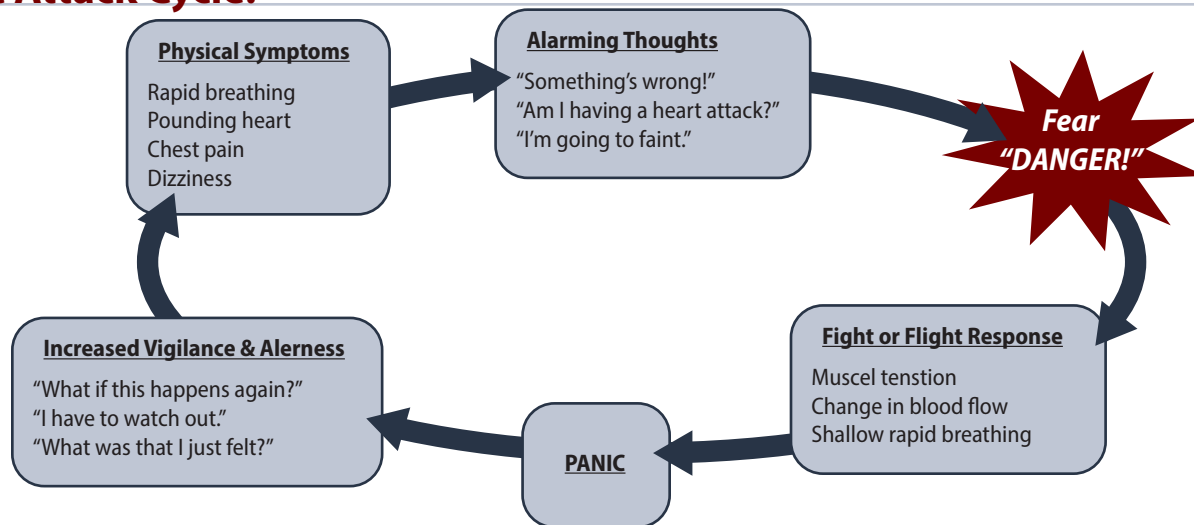
Sometimes panic attacks don't seem to be triggered by anything in particular – they may "come out of the blue." Somehow, the natural "fight or flight" emergency response system has gotten activated when there is no real danger.

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Panic Attack Cycle:



After having had one or more panic attacks, you may also become more focused on what is going on inside your body. This makes it easier for panic attacks to happen again because you pick up on sensations you might otherwise not have noticed, and misinterpret them as something dangerous.

Overcoming Panic Attacks

An important part of overcoming panic attacks involves re-interpreting your body's physical reactions and teaching yourself ways to decrease the physical arousal.

Behavioral Interventions

Breathing Retraining

Panic attacks are often accompanied by hyperventilation or over-breathing, which can cause:

- Dizziness
- Confusion
- Lightheadedness
- Numbness or tingling in the hands or feet

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- Cold, clammy hands.
- Heart Palpitations.

Although these symptoms may be frightening and feel unpleasant, hyperventilation is not dangerous.

You can overcome the unpleasantness of over-breathing by practicing Breathing Retraining.

Practice this basic technique three times a day, every day:

- Inhale. With your shoulders relaxed, inhale as slowly and deeply as you can while you count to six. If you can, use your diaphragm to fill your lungs with air.
- Hold. Keep the air in your lungs as you slowly count to four.
- Exhale. Slowly breath out as you count to six.
- Repeat. Do the inhale-hold-exhale cycle several times. Each time you do it, exhale for longer counts.

Initially, this technique should be practiced when not having a panic attack in order to develop the skill necessary to effectively reduce symptoms during an attack.

Cognitive Interventions

Identify your negative self-talk

Anxious thoughts can increase anxiety symptoms and panic. The first step in changing anxious thinking is to identify your own negative, alarming self-talk. Some common alarming thoughts:

- I'm having a heart attack.
- I'm going to pass out.
- I must be going crazy.
- Oh no – here it comes.
- I think I'm dying.
- I can't stand this.
- People will think I'm crazy.

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- I've got to get out of here!

Use positive coping statements

Changing or disrupting a pattern of anxious thoughts by replacing them with more calming or supportive statements can help to divert a panic attack. Some common helpful coping statements:

- This is not an emergency.
- I don't like feeling this way, but I can accept it.
- I can feel like this and still be okay.
- This has happened before, and I was okay. I'll be okay this time, too.
- I can be anxious and still deal with this situation.
- I can handle these symptoms or sensations.

Overcoming Avoidance

Places where you initially have a panic attack often become triggers, leading to avoidance of those places. Over time, the individual may begin to avoid more and more places, thereby decreasing their activities and often negatively impacting their quality of life.

To decrease avoidance:

- Choose an avoided location or situation that you would like to target first
- Create a list of actions that make you feel anxious in this situation
- Rate the list of action from least to most anxiety-provoking
- Expose yourself to the least anxiety-provoking action while using the breathing and cognitive interventions above
- Remain in the situation until the anxiety has decreased to a tolerable level
- Practice this several times during the upcoming week
- Once you have mastered the item associated with the least anxiety, move on to the next higher item on your list

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