

Panic Attacks - How to Help



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A panic attack is a sudden bout of extreme anxiety. Someone experiencing a panic attack might feel severe physical symptoms, such as hyperventilation and palpitations (a feeling of abnormal or fast heart rate), as well as being distressed. Panic attacks can happen to anyone, without any obvious cause or warning. They can be extremely alarming both for the person experiencing the attack and anyone trying to help.

Panic is an extreme feeling of fear and dread, and usually the overwhelming need to get away from a distressing situation. Most people have experienced a sense of panic at some time in their life, it is a perfectly normal reaction. Some people have a history of panic attacks and know what can trigger them. For others, they can occur suddenly, with no apparent cause. Certain times of life and occasions can make people more prone to panic attacks. Increased stress and overload can often be a contributory factor. However, there does not need to be any obvious reason, sometimes, they just happen! Read on to learn the signs to look out for and what you can do to help.

Symptoms of panic attacks

Whilst not dangerous the symptoms of a panic attack can be very scary. They can make you think that something disastrous is just about to take place. A panic attack can make you feel as though you are having a heart attack, or that you are going to collapse or even die.

Physical reactions may include the following:

- A pounding and racing heart or even palpitations (feeling your heart is stopping or missing beats)
- Hyperventilation (over-breathing)
- Feeling disorientated

- Muscular tension (producing headaches, backache and/or a feeling of tightness in the chest)
- Shortness of breath or a feeling of choking
- Shaking, tingling or numbness in your fingers and toes
- Feeling sick and dizzy
- Sweating
- Dry mouth
- Aggressiveness (sometimes due to the need to escape)

Difficulty breathing due to panic attacks should not be confused with asthma. Asthma is an extremely common chronic and potentially life-threatening condition.

If someone is having an **asthma attack**, they need their medication and help quickly. Panic attacks on the other hand are usually short lived. Most panic attacks will last somewhere from 5 minutes to half an hour, after which the casualty quickly makes a full recovery. During asthma attacks casualties will wheeze and struggling to breathe out, whereas when someone is having a panic attack large volume of air can be heard entering and leaving the lungs as they hyperventilate.

How to help someone having a Panic Attack

If someone is having a panic attack the aim is to help them regain control. This can be achieved by means of the following methods

- Reassure them that their panic attack will pass and the symptoms are nothing to worry about, your calm your presence should help.
- Speak to them using positive and supportive language, for example “you will be okay, this will pass in a minute” etc.
- Remove any obvious cause of panic or distress.
- Take them to a quiet area.
- Small sips of water may help to calm them.
- Try grounding techniques. Grounding techniques are coping strategies to help reconnect you with the present and bring you out of a panic attack. Grounding techniques can help someone feel more in control.

They are especially useful if experiencing dissociation (a feeling of disconnect or flashbacks) during panic attacks. For example:

- Asking them what can they see, hear, smell, feel or taste
- Asking them to hold something and really focus on it
- Distract them, for example ask them to count backwards in 5's, starting at 100
- Encourage them to focus on their breathing:
 - Get them to breath in as slowly, deeply and gently as they can through their nose.
 - Then get them to breath out slowly, deeply and gently through their mount.
 - Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5 on each in-breath and each out-breath.
 - Ask them to close their eyes as they focus on their breathing. (www.hse.ie)

Paper bags for Panic Attacks?

Do **not** suggest breathing in and out of a paper bag. People used to think breathing in and out of a paper bag was helpful during a panic attack, and the physiology makes sense; breathing out in panic results in the loss of carbon dioxide in the blood and breathing into a bag restores the lost CO₂. The danger with a paper bag is that the casualty may become dependent upon it and can panic if they do not have one to hand. It is extremely dangerous using a paper bag with someone is having an asthma attack and can make things considerably worse. If attacks are persistent and severe, the patient can be referred for specialist help.

If someone experiences panic attacks regularly, if they feel constantly stressed and anxious, particularly about when their next panic attack may be, they may have panic disorder. There is no quick fix but if panic attacks are recurring advise them to see their GP who will be able to recommend further solutions.

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Hope you enjoyed this article on Panic Attacks and how you can help someone facing this.