

Panic Conditions

Panic Attack

A panic attack is an extremely unpleasant experience of fear when the fear is out of proportion to the event that is occurring. The symptoms can frighten the person so much that they think they are dying. Symptoms include: breathing difficulties, confusion, dizziness, nausea, shaking, sweating, and extreme fear. The person may think they are having a heart attack, intensifying the panic and loss of control.

Panic attacks can occur suddenly, following a frightening incident or after prolonged or multiple stresses in a short amount of time. The person may be in serious danger or think that they are. The attack may last up to 10-minutes and may then subside or linger on for some time, even a few hours. If a person has one or two attacks and does not get help, they may start to expect them. This can generate unnecessary fear and cause the person to avoid situations that could cause an attack.

Conditions such as agoraphobia (fear of being in places where there is no easy escape route, especially public places or places with people) or social anxiety (fear of being with other people because they will judge you negatively) could result. Sufferers can become 'hypervigilant' – constantly in a heightened state of awareness and fear, which becomes the norm, rather than only when real danger is present.

These 'side effects' make life more difficult, and the sufferer more miserable. It is important to get help if you have begun to experience panic attacks. Don't leave it too late until you find you are avoiding situations. Help in the early stages can prevent panic attacks from developing into 'panic disorder.'

Panic Disorder

Panic Disorder is the condition of having regular or intermittent panic attacks over a period of time. Isolated incidents are 'panic attacks,' whereas a sustained condition of having panic attacks is 'panic disorder.' A panic attack does not necessarily develop into a disorder, but if not managed, it could do.

Managing Panic Attacks

Self-help practices and counselling can help manage panic attacks. Counselling gives the opportunity to explore and discover the causes of the attacks and discuss ways to either eliminate the cause, if that is practical, or give you strategies to manage your feelings so that you don't react so strongly.

Self Help Practices when In a Crisis

Using the Senses to Calm Yourself

Say 5 things you can SEE around you
Say 5 things you can HEAR around you
Say 5 things you can FEEL touching the outside of your body
Say 4 things you can SEE around you
Say 4 things you can HEAR around you
Say 4 things you can FEEL touching the outside of your body
Say 3 things you can SEE around you
Say 3 things you can HEAR around you

Say 3 things you can FEEL touching the outside of your body
Say 2 things you can SEE around you
Say 2 things you can HEAR around you
Say 2 things you can FEEL touching the outside of your body
Say 1 things you can SEE around you
Say 1 things you can HEAR around you
Say 1 things you can FEEL touching the outside of your body

Self-Help Practices When not in a Crisis

Relaxation

If the body is relaxed, it is less likely to go into a panic reaction than if it is tense. A tensed body has less to do to get into the panic stage.

Technique: Practice noticing your body throughout the day. Observe whether you are physically relaxed or tense. If you find you are habitually tense, practice consciously relaxing your body. Focus on each part in turn and mentally say: 'Relax.' Practice relaxing sitting or lying. Do progressive muscle relaxation regularly. We can show you how.

Slow Breathing

Slow breathing helps relieve the symptoms of a panic attack, especially the tendency to over-breathe (hyperventilate). Practice when you are **not** having an attack so that you can do it immediately you feel an attack starting. You may prevent the attack.

Technique: Take an ordinary breath through your nose. Hold for about 6 seconds. Then breathe out slowly, mentally saying (calmly) to yourself: 'Relax.' Repeat the process several times until the symptoms of the attack have gone.

Physical Exercise

Physical exercise helps alleviate stress reactions. Exercise regularly - something you enjoy. Walking, Yoga and Tai Chi are especially helpful, as they are calming as well as exercising.

Facing the Fear

Find out what is causing the panic attacks. It is usually something of which we are afraid. The more we avoid it, the less we will overcome the fear. A little exposure at a time will help manage the difficulty. For example, fear of driving can be overcome by driving a small distance at a time and gradually increasing it.

It is the same with other kinds of fears, such as phobias. Most fears are unfounded or exaggerated. Take baby steps, but make sure they are going in the right direction. Get help and support from a trusted friend or a mental health professional such as a counsellor.

Professional Help

Visiting a psychologist or a professional counsellor will help. They can talk things through with you and offer you strategies, for both in the moment of the attack, and to practice when you are not having the attack. Practicing ahead of time will give you a head start. A therapist can show you how to change your thoughts so that the cause of the attack is less scary and your response is more realistic.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) helps to identify and change the thoughts, behaviours and feelings associated with panic attacks. Even when the cause cannot be found, CBT assists clients to form positive beliefs and practices, bringing relief and encouraging positive, happier feelings.

Mindfulness-integrated-Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (MiCBT) teaches Mindfulness practices to calm the mind and feelings. Clients learn skills to manage panic attacks when they occur, and skills to help prevent them. Contact us below if you would like to know more about MiCBT or any of the above.

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