

Tackling Panic Attacks

With the high-speed pace of day-to-day life constantly accelerating, everyone faces anxiety from time-to-time. It's not only part of life but also a by-product of nature: when facing a frightening or stressful situation, the brain releases adrenaline, causing a sudden rush of energy and attentiveness. And while a small amount of anxiety is useful—giving you the strength to escape a life-threatening situation or the energy to meet a tight deadline—for people who suffer from panic attacks, the effects can be devastating.

What is a panic attack?

Usually triggered by an embarrassing social situation, or a flashback to a traumatic event, panic attack sufferers are overwhelmed by physical symptoms such as hyperventilation, a fast heartbeat, sweating, nausea, loss of voice, sweating and trembling. During the attacks, which usually peak at around 10 minutes, the sufferer often feels a loss of control and may even think he or she is having a heart attack or seizure. If left untreated the sufferer can develop agoraphobia, a fear of being in a place where a panic attack might occur.

Why does it happen?

While symptoms vary, most sufferers share some common traits: they tend to think about themselves, and the world around them, negatively and often interpret small problems as potential catastrophes. As a result, their reactions are usually out of proportion to the events that trigger the attacks. Panic attacks can also cause sufferers to change their lifestyle, avoiding situations and places where attacks have occurred.

Panic disorders afflict about 13 per cent of the population from all walks of life, although first-time sufferers are generally between age 18 and 35, and are twice as likely to be female.

As with any psychological condition, panic attacks can be caused by several different factors. While research suggests the disorder often runs in families, there are several other possible causes including: exposure to a traumatic event, a high-pressure or unhealthy lifestyle, and the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

What causes a panic attack?

Social anxiety: For some, the pressure of being watched by others can trigger an anxiety attack. Often, these people had a negative social experience when they were young, likely at school, and have never felt comfortable surrounded by others. Parties, events and public places like shopping centres and grocery stores can trigger attacks.

General anxiety: Among the most common of all psychiatric illnesses, sufferers of general anxiety often feel like things are going wrong, or a catastrophe is waiting to happen. In some cases, seemingly small problems, such as getting stuck in a traffic jam, can set off a severe attack.

Post-traumatic stress: Victims involved in or witness to a traumatic event—such a robbery, or a natural disaster—can be plagued by flashbacks, which trigger sudden panic attacks.

Do I have an anxiety disorder?

- Do you often worry everything is going wrong?
- Do you tend to make every small problem into a major catastrophe?
- Does worrying interfere with your sleep?
- Do you often have a sudden and intense fear for no explainable reason?
- Did you experience a traumatic event, which you still constantly think about?
- Have you changed your lifestyle or daily routine because of fear or worrying?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, seek out support from a professional who can help you determine the best course of action.

What should I do when I feel an attack coming on?

Breathe slowly. During a panic attack, most sufferers take short, shallow breaths, often to the point of hyperventilation. This type of breathing only makes the anxiety worse, because it prevents oxygen from travelling to the brain, causing light-headedness and nausea. Taking long, slow, deep breaths is often enough to slow or prevent a full-blown attack.

Find a calm place: Look for a quiet area with as few distractions as possible, and stay there until the attack subsides.

Talk to yourself. What you say to yourself strongly affects how you feel. For panic sufferers, thoughts such as, “I’ve completely lost control of myself,” or, “There’s no way to escape,” can trigger or worsen an attack. But the opposite is also true: positive words can boost your mood and offset feelings of panic. Examples of a ‘positive self-pep talk’ include:

“This has happened to me before, and I’ve always gotten through it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me—I’m just feeling stressed”

“These attacks always pass after a few minutes.”

What treatment is there?

While anxiety disorders are some of the most common psychiatric illnesses, they are also the most manageable. Treatment options include:

CBT: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is one of the most successful treatments for dealing with anxiety. Together with a certified therapist, the panic attack sufferer discusses why and how attacks start – sometimes even deliberately triggering one – and work through effective techniques to keep anxiety and panic attacks at bay.

Medication: Anti-anxiety medications are a common form of treatment. Over the short term, drugs can curb symptoms that lead to panic attacks. But because they work by blocking the symptoms rather than treating the cause, drugs alone rarely offer a long-term solution to anxiety.

A healthy lifestyle: Eating excessive amounts of ‘junk food’ (e.g., high fat, high sugar, over-processed) can raise your anxiety. The same goes for recreational drugs, including nicotine, caffeine and alcohol. On the flip side, regular exercise—whether a stroll in the park, pick-up sports or gardening—helps burn off stress and boost your mood.

Relaxation techniques: Because most panic attacks stem from high-pressure situations, relaxation techniques may diffuse an attack before it even happens. One of the most effective exercises begins by tensing all the muscles in your body, then slowly relaxing each, one by one. Many also find courses in yoga, tai chi or Pilates to be helpful in reducing stress.

Taking ‘me’ breaks: In the daily rush to “get everything done,” many people are left with very little time to relax, causing a build-up of mental and physical stress. By taking thirty minutes out of your day to kick back and relax, you’ll reduce stress, and your potential of having a panic attack.

If you’ve ever had a panic attack, you understand firsthand how confusing and frightening they can be. It can feel like the world is coming to end, and there is little you can do to stop it. But effective treatment is out there. With the proper medical support, you can easily learn not only to control panic attacks but also to relax and enjoy life again.