



UNDERSTANDING PANIC ATTACKS

5 STEPS TO ASSIST IN REDUCING PANIC

What Is A Panic Attack?

A panic attack is a distinct episode of high anxiety, with intense fear or discomfort. It develops abruptly and has its peak within 10 minutes. A person who is having a panic attack will experience a sudden onset of several physical sensations. See the list below for common symptoms of a panic attack.

To understand how and why a person experiences a panic attack, it is important to understand the brain's mechanism for responding to fear. Fear is a common, and very useful response that humans have to danger and harm. The fear response is automatic, and very fast! This response is useful when we are in a life threatening situation (imagine a grizzly bear approaching you), allowing us to protect ourselves using either a "fight", "flight" or "freeze" response. The physical sensations that we experience during panic are the result of the brain preparing the body for the appropriate reaction to danger. However, it is possible for a person to experience a "false alarm", whereby this same fear response is triggered and panic occurs even when we're not in a life threatening situation. This can happen when a person least expects.

Experiencing a panic attack when there is no real danger can be extremely distressing and can lead to a fear of experiencing additional panic attacks. This is often accompanied by fearful thoughts and avoidant behaviours, which begin to maintain a vicious cycle of fear and ongoing panic attacks.

Several of the following symptoms are present during a panic attack. A panic attack is classified by at least four of the following symptoms occurring together:

- ❖ Palpitations, pounding heart, or rapid heart rate
- ❖ Sweating
- ❖ Trembling and shaking
- ❖ Shortness of breath, sensations of choking or smothering
- ❖ Chest pain or discomfort
- ❖ Abdominal distress or nausea
- ❖ Dizziness, lightheadedness, feeling faint or unsteady
- ❖ Feelings of unreality (derealisation), or being detached from oneself
- ❖ Fears of losing control or going crazy
- ❖ Fear of dying
- ❖ Numbness or tingling
- ❖ Chills or hot flushes

Adapted from DSM-V, APA 2013

What Does Psychological Intervention Involve?

It is important that you first see your GP, to make sure medical causes for panic symptoms have been examined and ruled-out. Such medical illness include: hyperthyroidism, caffeine addiction, mitral valve prolapse, postural tachycardia syndrome (PoTS), or other causes.

A psychologist aims to work with you to understand your individual experience of panic. This will include assessing symptoms and establishing the factors that may be triggering and maintaining your panic attacks.

Following this, the psychologist will work with you to better understand fear and anxiety, what parts of the brain are involved, and skills you can use to reduce panic attacks. Think of this as the part where you can finally “make sense” of it all, especially when it feels overwhelming!

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy is an evidence-based treatment that is effective for overcoming panic. It involves techniques that aim to help the mind understand that panic sensations do not need to be feared, and therefore the overwhelming feeling of them reduces.

5 Steps To Reduce Panic (Panic First-Aid, Rossouw 2014)

1. Stabilise yourself by sitting or laying down.
2. Focus on your out-breath. Breathe out as anxiety typically makes the body inhale too much and too quickly.
3. Begin to slowly control your breathing into a comfortable, slower rhythm. See if you can notice your stomach gently rising and falling.
4. If possible, have some small sips of water and remember that panic will go away and won't last forever.
5. Wait 5-10 minutes, and continue to focus on your breath. The body has the capacity to naturally regulate stress responsible for panic.

In addition to the above steps, try and use accurate and specific coping statements. E.g, “Anxiety will pass”, “I cannot faint from panic”, “I’ve dealt with this before, I will get through it again”.

If you continue to experience panic attacks, a psychologist can assist. We encourage you to consider the impact and distress that panic may be having on your life, or the life of someone close to you. The team at Mind Potential Psychology are here to answer any questions and/or guide you through the process to a panic-free life.

About The Author



PSYCHOLOGIST

AMBER VONHOFF

- Children (incl. ADHD & behaviour problems)
- Adolescents
- Grief/Loss
- Anxiety (Generalised, Social, Separation, Phobias, OCD)
- Depression
- Substance Use

Amber is invested in seeing her clients thrive. She has clinical experience providing evidence-based psychological treatment and has an interest in anxiety and mood-related conditions. Amber also works with children, adolescents and their families, and values the importance of supporting young people to be their best selves.

References

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.)
2. Rossouw, P. J. (Ed.). (2014). Neuropsychotherapy: Theoretical underpinnings and clinical applications. Mediros Pty Limited.
3. Salkovskis, P. M., Clark, D. M., Hackmann, A., Wells, A., & Gelder, M. G. (1999). An experimental investigation of the role of safety-seeking behaviours in the maintenance of panic disorder with agoraphobia. Behaviour research and therapy, 37(6), 559-574.