

Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder

Symptoms, Treatment, and Tips for Overcoming Panic

A panic attack is a sudden surge of overwhelming anxiety and fear. Your heart pounds and you can't breathe. You may even feel like you're dying or going crazy. Left untreated, panic attacks can lead to panic disorder and other problems. They may even cause you to withdraw from normal activities. But panic attacks can be cured and the sooner you seek help, the better. With treatment, you can reduce or eliminate the symptoms of panic and regain control of your life.



What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is an intense wave of fear characterized by its unexpectedness and debilitating, immobilizing intensity. They often strike out of the blue, without any warning. There may be no clear reason for the attack. They may even occur when you're relaxed or asleep.

A panic attack may be a one-time occurrence, but many people experience repeat episodes. Recurrent panic attacks are often triggered by a specific situation, such as crossing a bridge or speaking in public—especially if that situation has caused a panic attack before. Usually, the panic-inducing situation is one in which you feel endangered and unable to escape.

You may experience one or more panic attacks, yet be otherwise perfectly happy and healthy. Or your panic attacks may occur as part of another disorder, such as panic disorder, social phobia, or depression. Regardless of the cause, panic attacks are treatable. There are coping strategies you can use to deal with the symptoms and there are also effective treatments.

Signs and symptoms of panic attacks

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| Shortness of breath or hyperventilation |
| Heart palpitations or racing heart |
| Chest pain or discomfort |
| Trembling or shaking |
| Choking feeling |
| Feeling unreal or detached from your surroundings |
| Sweating |
| Nausea or upset stomach |
| Feeling dizzy, light-headed, or faint |
| Numbness or tingling sensations |
| Hot or cold flashes |
| Fear of dying, losing control, or going crazy |

Panic attacks often strike when you're away from home, but they can happen anywhere and at any time. You may have one while you're in a store shopping, walking down the street, driving in your car, or sitting on the couch at home.

Self-help tips for panic attacks

When it comes to panic attacks, professional treatment and therapy can make a big difference. But there are many things you can do to help yourself, too:

Learn about panic and anxiety. Simply knowing more about panic can go a long way towards relieving your distress. So read up on anxiety, panic disorder, and the fight-or-flight response experienced during a panic attack. You'll learn that the sensations and feelings you have when you panic are normal and that you aren't going crazy.

Avoid smoking, alcohol, and caffeine. These can all provoke panic attacks in people who are susceptible. As a result, it's wise to avoid alcohol, cigarettes, coffee, and other caffeinated beverages. If you need help to kick the cigarette habit, see [How to Quit Smoking](#). Also be careful with medications that contain stimulants, such as diet pills and non-drowsy cold medications.

Learn how to control your breathing. Hyperventilation brings on many sensations (such as lightheadedness and tightness of the chest) that occur during a panic attack. Deep breathing, on the other hand, can relieve the symptoms of panic. By learning to control your breathing, you develop a coping skill that you can use to calm yourself down when you begin to feel anxious. If you know how to control your breathing, you are also less likely to create the very sensations that you are afraid of.

Practice relaxation techniques. When practiced regularly, activities such as yoga, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation strengthen the body's relaxation response—the opposite of the stress response involved in anxiety and panic. And not only do these relaxation practices promote relaxation, but they also increase feelings of joy and equanimity. So make time for them in your daily routine.

Connect face-to-face with family and friends. Anxiety thrives when you feel isolated so regularly reach out to people who care about you. If you feel that you don't have anyone to turn to, explore ways to meet new people and build supportive friendships.

Exercise regularly. Exercise is a natural anxiety reliever so try to get moving for at least 30 minutes on most days (three 10-minute sessions is just as good). Rhythmic aerobic exercise that requires moving both your arms and legs—like walking, running, swimming, or dancing—can be especially effective.

Get enough restful sleep. Insufficient or poor quality sleep can make anxiety worse, so try to get seven to nine hours of quality sleep a night.

**If you need to talk to someone confidentially,
please call EAPworks on 0800 SELFHELP – 0800 735 343**