

panic/anxiety attacks

A surprisingly large number (i.e., 35%) of college and university students have experienced a panic/anxiety attack. People who experience panic attacks often describe them as “the worst feeling they have ever had”. People frequently experience their first panic attack in late adolescence

and through their 20s. Panic attacks tend to increase in frequency, severity and duration, without some form of treatment. Approximately 3% of the population go on to develop panic disorder, which includes recurring panic attacks with fears of more attacks.

symptoms

The most commonly reported symptoms of panic attacks include:

- Shortness of breath
- Intense fear, dread, or terror
- Tightening, discomfort, or pressure in the chest, neck, or back
- Racing or pounding heart
- Sweating
- Lump in the throat or choking sensations
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Faintness
- Shaking or trembling
- Tingling in the hands or feet
- Dry mouth
- Nausea or butterflies in the stomach
- Hot flashes or chills
- Needing to urinate or defecate
- A strong desire to escape the situation
- De-realization (i.e., feeling unreal or dreamy)
- Depersonalization (i.e., feeling outside of yourself)
- Irrational thinking and irrational fears

Remember, not everyone experiences the same symptoms or all of the symptoms listed. These vary based on your own individual biological makeup. However, since these symptoms can be very intense, they are frequently misinterpreted and people often think they are dying, having a heart attack, going crazy, suffocating, going to faint, losing control over their bodies, or going to embarrass themselves. Due to these fears, people often

also come to fear that they will have another panic attack and frequently come to avoid either places or situations they believe may trigger another panic attack. Fortunately, these fears are unfounded and people can learn to both reduce and ultimately eliminate their panic attacks. The following strategies will help you better understand and cope with your panic attacks.

coping strategies

1 go for a medical consultation

Before you do anything else, it is very important that you see a physician to rule out any potential medical reasons for your symptoms. In the vast majority of cases there are no medical concerns and knowing this in itself will produce a significant sense of relief. If there are specific medical issues that can explain your symptoms, address the medical conditions and your symptoms will likely resolve without further treatment.

2 know that panic attacks are treatable

Realize that panic attacks are highly treatable if you are willing to educate yourself about the nature of panic attacks and both learn and use the strategies listed in this handout. Statistics indicate that by using these strategies, 80 to 90% of people will experience relief. Some people may need to enhance these techniques with medication if they have not responded to the strategies after a significant trial period.

3 realize that panic attacks can do no harm

Understand that a panic attack cannot and will not cause you any harm or any of the following, even though you may fear it will happen. While panic attacks are very distressing to experience, they are not dangerous. Panic attacks do not cause:

- Heart attacks
- Mental illness
- Respiratory failure
- Suffocation
- Fainting
- Loss of balance
- Loss of bodily control
- Strokes
- Death

Panic attack symptoms have never harmed anyone. Each of these fears are completely imaginary because you simply haven't understood what is happening to your body and the bodily changes feel so intense. Often adding to the confusion is that symptoms can occur for no apparent reason. Panic attacks can even wake you up out of your sleep.

Understanding that panic attacks are a normal bodily response to perceived danger which occur even though there is no real danger in the situation can be very helpful to you. This response is commonly referred to as the stress response or the fight and flight response and has great survival value in that it prepares our body to either fight or flee a dangerous situation. In a panic attack, the changes are physiologically indistinguishable from the stress response but serve no useful function since there is no real danger.

Since the symptoms of a panic attack can be intense, they can also be very frightening. Realize that this response poses no danger to your body and could go on for hours or days without any adverse effect. Each physical symptom you experience can be explained completely when we understand the purpose of the fight and flight response (i.e., to get your body ready to deal with a dangerous situation).

4 don't try to stop all symptoms

Don't try to stop the panic attack immediately since this will prove unsuccessful and lead to more anxiety, fear, and frustration. Do begin to apply the strategies you are about to learn to calm your body and your mind.

Once adrenaline is released into your body, it will take some time to metabolize so you can't stop the panic attack immediately. Some symptoms will be experienced, but it will be short lived if you don't overreact to the symptoms. The symptoms will peak in 3 to 5 minutes and then quickly subside.

5 develop an accepting attitude toward your symptoms

Try to develop an understanding and accepting attitude toward your symptoms, knowing that there is no real danger. Allow yourself to simply accept what is happening in your body with the knowledge that you know how to manage it. Don't try to fight your symptoms. Just give them time to pass.

6 use positive self-statements

Write out and, at the initial stages of the panic attack, begin to repeat some positive coping statements in your mind. You can use a single phrase or combination of statements, depending on what is successful for you. Use those statements that are most relevant to you and your symptoms. Some common positive coping statements include:

- "I know what is happening to my body. I just need to begin my breathing."
- "I can accept the changes in my body because it poses no threat to me."
- "The worst that can happen is I'll feel uncomfortable. I can live with that."
- "I know what to do. I've handled this effectively before."
- "This never lasts long if I use my strategies."
- "This is good practice to apply what I've learned."
- "I can't stop the symptoms this second and I don't need to."
- "I can survive this. I've done it before."
- "This is only anxiety. I'm not going crazy."
- "I need to just go with the flow."
- "This isn't a heart attack. I've had it checked out medically."
- "Nothing serious can happen to me. It's just unpleasant."
- "This is just the fight and flight response. There is nothing to fear."

7 learn and practice diaphragmatic breathing

In conjunction with your positive coping statements, begin to do some diaphragmatic breathing. Since the fight and flight response is what we refer to as an all-or-none response, all you need to do is change one component of it to get control of the other symptoms. Since our breathing is under our conscious control, this is the first and often best place to start to induce the opposite response, i.e., the relaxation response in our body.

Diaphragmatic breathing involves slowly breathing in through your nose to the count of 4 or 5 and exhaling through your mouth again to the count of 4 or 5. If you're

breathing properly, your stomach will rise at the end of each inhale. Put your hand on your stomach to assess whether you are breathing properly. Also remember that learning to do diaphragmatic breathing is a skill and therefore, the more you practice it when you're not having a panic attack, the better you will be able to apply it when you need to. Diaphragmatic breathing will also prevent you from hyperventilating, which would only exacerbate a panic attack.

8 use distraction techniques

Engage in a wide variety of distraction techniques to alter the focus of attention away from the bodily symptoms you are experiencing. The range of potential distractions is truly limitless and can involve anything from simple repetitive activities to those that require very focused attention.

Examples of some of these activities include:

- Counting backwards in threes from 100
- Playing with the ring on your finger
- Watching the seconds ticking off on your watch
- Chewing gum
- Working on your computer
- Putting together a puzzle
- Talking to a friend
- Playing a musical instrument
- Focusing on your academic or work tasks

9 become physically active

Once adrenaline is released into your body, you will have a significant surge of energy. Rather than have this energy manifest itself as anxiety or anxious symptoms, you can dissipate it through physical activity. This physical activity can take almost any form, including:

- Running
- Cycling
- Doing household chores
- Gardening
- Swimming
- Weight training
- Stretching your body
- Yoga
- Any sport

10 engage in a pleasurable activity

Doing anything pleasurable during a panic attack will both distract you from your symptoms and produce positive feelings that are incompatible with anxiety. Again, the list of

pleasurable activities is endless and depends on your time and interests but could include:

- Going to a movie
- Eating a snack or meal
- Watching TV
- Playing a board game or cards
- Getting romantic with your partner
- Having a shower or bath
- Playing a video game
- Going to a concert

11 keep a log of your panic attacks

By keeping a log of your panic attacks, you can learn to understand what triggers them and thus learn to better control them. Focus your record on what conditions were present prior to the panic attack. Possible triggers include:

- stress (acute or chronic)
- negative thinking
- fatigue
- hyperventilation
- temperature changes
- strenuous exercise
- stimulants (e.g., coffee, nicotine)
- sugar
- changes in your environment
- particular people
- mood changes
- significant losses
- subtle internal changes (i.e., in heart rate or muscle tension).

Research indicates that people who are prone to panic attacks are overly focused on subtle changes inside their body and perceive these changes as indicative of something catastrophic happening in their body. For example, they feel a slight constriction in their chest and believe that it means they are going to suffocate.

12 identify your early symptoms of panic

Panic attacks typically involve an escalation of symptoms, starting with those that are very subtle to those that feel overwhelming. If you can develop an awareness of these more subtle early symptoms and apply coping strategies at this stage, it is much more likely that you will be able to prevent a full-blown panic attack. Some of the early symptoms might include sweaty hands, an increase in your heart rate, tightening of muscles in your body, or dizziness. The more skilled you become at identifying these early warning signs, the more control you can gain over your panic attacks.

13 learn to rate your anxiety level

Since your level of anxiety and the intensity of your symptoms change over the course of the panic attack, it can be very helpful to rate your level of anxiety. A rating scale from 0 to 10 is adequate, where 0 is no anxiety and no other symptoms, and 10 is extreme anxiety with fears that you're going to die or go crazy and multiple symptoms.

Once you have learned to rate your anxiety, you can either simply observe the rise and fall of the rating or learn to apply different coping strategies depending on the ratings.

14 reduce your overall stress level

A few simple changes to your daily routine can reduce your overall stress level and thus make you less susceptible to panic attacks. These could include:

- Daily exercise
- Eliminating stimulants (e.g., caffeine, nicotine) and sugar in diet
- Maintaining a healthy diet
- Slowing down your life
- Building up your support system
- Doing some form of daily relaxation
- Finding solitude

15 tell others about your difficulties with panic attacks

By telling other people about your panic attacks, you will often experience a significant reduction in anxiety because you will no longer fear being discovered in the midst of your panic attack. As well, if other people know, they can be both understanding and supportive. Remember, everyone in the world experiences periods of significant anxiety and has to learn to manage it. Statistics indicate that up to 30% of the general population have experienced a panic attack at some point in their lifetime.

16 do progressive muscle relaxation exercises

Progressive muscle relaxation is a very concrete way to induce a state of relaxation in your body. It simply involves progressively tightening and relaxing various muscle groups in your body. Tighten the muscle group for about 8 to 10 seconds and then focus on relaxing it for 15 to 20 seconds. Repeat this throughout every muscle group in your body or focus only on the muscles that usually tighten up during a panic attack.

17 use thought stopping techniques

Thought stopping is a commonly used strategy to interrupt a negative thought pattern that is unhelpful. Since panic attacks often involve a lot of catastrophic thinking, it is very helpful to interrupt this kind of thinking. To use thought stopping, you would simply yell "stop" or something similar, either out loud or in your head. In addition, snap a rubber band against your wrist to help physically alter the focus of your attention. Finally, replace the unhelpful thoughts with some of the positive coping statements previously discussed.

18 express your feelings

Pent up feelings that have not been expressed can elevate your overall stress level and make you more prone to panic attacks. Openly expressing your feelings to other people in ways that respect their feelings can reduce a lot of stress and make you more immune to panic attacks. Writing out your feelings can also be another healthy way to express them, in a journal, log, or letter.

19 leave the anxiety-provoking situation temporarily

If your panic attack is becoming overwhelming, you have the option of temporarily leaving the situation that is inducing the anxiety to reduce your symptoms. However, because you don't want to reinforce this avoidance behavior in the long term, you do need to go back into the anxiety-provoking situations as soon as your symptoms feel in control.

If you are able to manage the panic attack without needing to leave the situation, this is the preferred strategy to ultimately achieve true control.

20 use symptom induction techniques

Symptom induction means purposefully arousing some of the symptoms of a panic attack with the ultimate goal of perceiving them as harmless on an experiential level. Often, symptom induction techniques are done with the assistance of a psychologist but can be used given some guidelines on your own.

Before you apply any of the strategies, please ensure there are no medical contraindications (e.g., heart problems, asthma, etc.) in using them. Use the induction techniques for approximately 30 seconds after you notice anxiety or any unpleasant symptoms. Then repeat the technique once per day until it no longer makes you anxious. As outlined by Bourne (2000) in *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, these induction techniques include:

- Hyperventilating for two minutes
- Holding your nose while breathing through a straw for one minute
- Stair climbing for 90 seconds
- Spinning around in a desk chair for one minute
- Tensing up one of the muscle groups in your body for one minute

After completing any of these symptom induction techniques, practice some of your previous coping strategies to reduce your anxiety. This whole process will help you see symptoms like rapid heart beat, sweating, dizziness, or tension in your body as innocuous rather than a sign of impending doom (e.g., you're having a heart attack or going to suffocate).

21 make an appointment with a psychologist

Although you can develop many of the self-help strategies in this handout on your own, you may benefit from the additional support and expertise of a psychologist at Counselling and Clinical Services. We can help you both learn the skills outlined here and use some additional techniques to help you develop mastery over your panic attacks. Symptom induction techniques can be particularly helpful if done with a psychologist to challenge any irrational thinking.

22 try medication if all else fails

Medication may be helpful to relieve your symptoms, but it is considered a last resort because the other strategies discussed are so potentially effective and medication has several drawbacks. Some of the medications used include anti-anxiety, anti-depressant, and beta-blocker drugs. Each of these classes of medications, however, has many potential side effects. As well, by relying on medications you may not develop the feeling that you have learned to control the panic attacks through your own actions. Some research has indicated that once medications are stopped, panic attacks return (i.e., up to 80% of the time).

