

WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

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.



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.

The signs and symptoms of a panic attack develop abruptly and usually reach their peak within 10 minutes. Most panic attacks end within 20 to 30 minutes, and they rarely last more than an hour.

A full-blown panic attack includes a combination of the following signs and symptoms:

Shortness of breath or hyperventilation, Heart palpitations or a 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

Causes of panic attacks and panic disorder

Although the exact causes of panic attacks and panic disorder are unclear, the tendency to have panic attacks runs in families. There also

appears to be a connection with major life transitions such as graduating from college and entering the workplace, getting married, and having a baby. Severe stress, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or job loss can also trigger a panic attack.

Panic attacks can also be caused by medical conditions and other physical causes. If you're suffering from symptoms of panic, it's important to see a doctor to rule out the following possibilities:

- **Mitral valve prolapse**, a minor cardiac problem that occurs when one of the heart's valves doesn't close correctly.
- **Hyperthyroidism** (overactive thyroid gland)
- **Hypoglycemia** (low blood sugar)
- **Stimulant use** (amphetamines, cocaine, caffeine)

Self-help tips for panic attacks and panic disorder

Panic Stations: Coping with Panic Attacks – Self-help series of workbooks offers strategies, exercises, and activities that teach you how to manage panic attacks. (Centre for Clinical Interventions)

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