



TIP SHEET: PANIC ATTACKS

Most people will have at least one panic attack at some point in their life, often as a response to a very stressful event. For some, panic attacks become a regular problem. The body's fight or flight response, driven primarily by adrenalin, helps us in situations where our life might be in danger. A panic attack involves the same system--but it is a false alarm. There is no real danger. Unfortunately, our bodies don't know the difference, and a vicious cycle begins for some of us, with panic attacks happening with greater frequency.

What exactly is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden rush of fear and physical symptoms that peaks within 10 minutes. Panic attacks include at least four of the following: Trembling/shaking; dizziness or fainting; heart racing or palpitations; hyperventilating; a sudden rush of cold or heat through your body; fear of losing control or going crazy; fear of dying; feeling you are leaving your body

7 Steps to Beating Panic

Correct any misinformation you might have about panic.

A panic attack cannot cause you to die, to have a heart attack, or to go crazy. Panic attacks are relatively short-lived and will end (although they are very, very distressing, they are not dangerous or eternal). **During an attack**, it can help to read this (try writing it down on a small index card). It is also helpful to try to focus on something outside of your body, such as an object (a clock, a cup, a light switch, etc). Finally, it can help to practice describing your physical panic symptoms in a neutral way ("I notice my heart is beating quite fast right now; it is very uncomfortable but it will pass, I am not having a heart attack").

If you have ever fainted during a panic attack, it is important to purposely tense all of the muscles in your body when you panic. This will help keep you from passing out.

Increase your awareness of your panic attacks. Monitor your attacks. Are they triggered by certain situations, or do they happen out of the blue? What other trends do you find? Figuring out trends helps point to solutions. And some people find their panic attacks become less frequent just because they keep track of them.

Work on thinking realistically about the situations where panic attacks occur, and the anxious thoughts that trigger and/or worsen panic attacks (see our Realistic Thinking Tip Sheet for specific strategies).

Many people start to avoid situations that make them panic. This generally makes the problem worse--your brain never learns that the panic attack(s) was actually a false alarm. Work on gradually facing the situations that you avoid.

If you have developed panic disorder, facing your physical symptoms is critical. This involves making yourself experience the key physical symptoms of your panic attacks (a faster heartbeat for example) in a controlled way. While it sounds quite scary to most people, it works extremely well. Panic disorder is one of the most effectively treated psychiatric problems, and this part of treatment (facing physical symptoms) is the key part of that treatment.

Make sure you rule out physical causes of panic attacks by meeting with your doctor. Common medical causes include hyperthyroidism and certain medications. Excessive caffeine intake can also cause panic attacks.