

What Are Panic Attacks?

A Guide for Young People

WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF A PANIC ATTACK?

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT PANIC ATTACKS?



Anxiety and fear are feelings we all experience. There are times when we can identify the sources of these feelings, such as having to give a presentation or being in a busy crowd. Sometimes the source of these feelings might not be so clear and may seem to come out of nowhere, even when we were feeling relaxed.

These feelings might seem like they don't serve much of a purpose but they're an important survival strategy. They make us more aware of risks and prepare us to act in a dangerous situation by either fleeing or fighting (you may have heard this called the 'fight or flight response'). However, our brain doesn't quite recognise the difference between having to outrun a predator like our ancestors did and having to sit an exam.

A panic attack is a sudden and intense experience of these feelings, often with physical signs. If we have experienced this before in a situation, we may find that being in the same situation again causes another panic attack.

It's important to remember that we aren't choosing to feel or behave this way. Sometimes our brain may need some help in making these feelings and reactions more manageable for us.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF A PANIC ATTACK?

There are several signs of a panic attack. You may notice that you experience several of these or that you only experience some. These signs happen quickly and can be very frightening or alarming but they won't cause you physical harm. Most panic attacks last between 5 and 30 minutes.

Physical signs include:

Rapid heartbeat
Sweating
Trembling or shaking
Feeling sick
Feeling numb or tingly
Feeling faint, dizzy or light-headed
Finding it hard to breathe
Feeling hot or cold
Chest pain

Cognitive (mental) signs include:

Feeling disconnected from yourself
Feeling a loss of control
Feeling like you're having a heart attack
Feeling like you're going to die
Feeling like you're going to faint
Feeling a sense of doom

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT PANIC ATTACKS?

Working with a trained, qualified counsellor or therapist can help you manage panic attacks. Talking through your feelings can help you recognise and understand them more, and your counsellor or therapist can help you find ways to make them less overwhelming.

A counsellor or therapist can also suggest creative ways you can use, such as journaling or drawing/painting your feelings.

There are also strategies you can use to help manage panic attacks.

During a panic attack you can:

- Recognise and name your experience with a phrase such as "what I'm feeling right now is anxiety/fear. I'm having a panic attack but it won't hurt me." You could also ask someone who may be with you during an attack to repeat your phrase to you.

- Think of your feelings and experience as a wave - the wave goes up and may be frightening or out of control but it will come down again.
- Remember your breathing. It is a powerful tool we can use for calming our mind and body. Take slow, deep breaths. It may also be helpful to try breathing exercises such as shape breathing or body breathing. Try practising these when you feel calm and relaxed so you become familiar with them.
- Try grounding techniques. These can help make you feel more in control and help you feel more connected to your body and surroundings. You can find some grounding techniques on the YPCS UK YouTube channel.

After a panic attack you can:

- Talk to someone you trust to let them know you've had a panic attack. It may be helpful to let the people close to you know the signs of a panic attack and any strategies you find helpful so they support you.
- Take time to rest. You may feel tired after a panic attack or just need some quiet time. It may be helpful to identify a calm, quiet place you can go after you've had a panic attack.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. These can reduce our stress levels and relax both body and mind.

There are many strategies you can try. You might find that some work better for you than others. It may be discouraging to try something and find it doesn't have the effect you had hoped for but the key is finding what is effective for you.

Working with a counsellor or therapist can also help you identify some of these techniques. Your counsellor or therapist is here to support you and find the most helpful strategies for you, not to try and make you fit the strategies.

If you feel like you might need help with panic attacks, our team is here for you. You can call us on 0800 634 4395, email admin@ypcs.uk or visit our website at www.ypcs.uk.