Mind Troubleshooters

A fold-out factfile on panic attacks

A panic attack is an exaggerated form of the body's natural response to fear, stress or excitement. It's caused by adrenalin being released to prepare the body for 'fight or flight'. But it can happen when no danger is present.

- Attacks may be frightening, but they are not harmful or dangerous.

- One in three people can expect to have a panic attack at some stage. It is common for healthy, young adults to have occasional panic attacks.

- People who are depressed, or who have anxiety disorders, asthma or diabetes may be more prone. So is anyone taking stimulants (e.g. caffeine or amphetamines) or withdrawing from tranquillisers.

- An attack may be as short as a few seconds or as long as an hour. Anything longer is likely to be a series of short attacks.

What happens during a panic attack?

How your body may react:

very rapid breathing or breathlessness
feeling faint or dizzy
tingling or numbness
feeling sick
perspiring

very rapid heartbeat (palpitations)
pains in the chest
ringing in the ears
hot or cold flushes
wanting the toilet
choking feeling

How you may feel:

absolutely terrified
that you are going to die
that you are going mad

that the world is going to come to an end
'unreal' or cut off from the world
Ten tips to prevent panic

• **Change your lifestyle.** Keep blood sugar levels stable by eating regular meals, and avoiding processed foods and drinks. Cut down on nicotine and alcohol. Get plenty of exercise and fresh air.

• **Learn to relax.** First close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply. Locate any areas of tension and try to relax those muscles; imagine the tension disappearing. Then relax each part of the body, a bit at a time from the feet upwards. Focus on each part as you do so, thinking of warmth, heaviness and relaxation. After 20 minutes, take some deep breaths and stretch your body.

• **Reduce unnecessary stress.** Find ways to express your needs and assert yourself more successfully (see How to find out more).

• **Confide in someone.** Don’t keep your emotions bottled up.

• **Get appropriate help.** Join a support group. Look for an anxiety management course. Talk to your doctor about getting counselling or psychotherapy. Cognitive behaviour therapy is a good way to re-educate thought patterns that trigger panic, to think more positively and to build up your self-esteem.
• Improve your breathing. Breathe from your diaphragm. To learn how, place your hands on your stomach and slowly breathe in through your nose to a count of four. Your stomach should expand. Breathe out to a count of four and your stomach should collapse. Repeat four times.

• Focus on the positive aspects of your life. Do not focus on how bad you feel. If you feel an attack coming on, try to distract yourself with a pleasurable task to stop it getting worse.

• Reassure yourself when you have an attack. Tell yourself you’re going to be fine – whatever your fears, you are not going to die, or go mad.

• Don’t fight your feelings. Accept and face them, and they will become less intense. With panic attacks, the core of the problem is fear of fear.

• Don’t depend on others for reassurance. It’s better to start relying on yourself and your own coping strategies.
First aid for panic attacks
Rapid, shallow breathing can make you breathe out too much carbon dioxide, which may cause your symptoms. If you start to hyperventilate, breathe in and out with a brown paper bag over your nose and mouth (or use your cupped hands) until you feel better. But don’t breathe in too deeply.

How to find out more
British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies
tel. 01254 875277, web: www.babcp.com

First Steps to Freedom
advice line: 01926 851608, web: www.first-steps.org

National Phobics Society
tel. 0870 7700456, web: www.phobics-society.org.uk

No Panic
helpline: 0808 8080545, web: www.no-panic.co.uk

Further reading available from Mind Mail Order
To order books or a complete catalogue of publications send an SAE to Mind Mail Order at the address below.

How to Assert Yourself (Mind 2000) £1
How to Cope with Panic Attacks (Mind 2001) £1
How to Increase Your Self-esteem (Mind 2001) £1
The Mind Guide to Managing Stress (Mind 2002) £1
The Mind Guide to Relaxation (Mind 2001) £1
Understanding Anxiety (Mind 2001) £1
Understanding Depression (Mind 2002) £1
Understanding Talking Treatments (Mind 2000) £1