

# Panic attacks

Human beings have a built-in ‘flight-or-flight’ mechanism, fuelled by a surge of adrenalin, as a response to stressful situations.

**Extreme anxiety can trigger panic attacks**—brief periods of intense anxiety or fear along with a surge of frightening thoughts and physical sensations. Some panic attacks are physiological (caused by a biological trigger), but most are psychological (caused by the mind).

Physiological causes should be checked out by a doctor: a GP is a good starting point.

Whether a panic attack has a trigger—a conversation, something on TV, a stressful event—or comes out of the blue with no apparent trigger, it is a most unpleasant experience, and can be genuinely terrifying.

These **physical sensations are common** in panic attacks:

- shaking
- pounding heart/palpitations
- breathlessness or hyperventilation
- chest pain (constriction)
- dizziness, feeling faint
- numbness, tingling
- sweating
- nausea.



**People can experience thoughts that they are:**

- dying
- having a heart attack or stroke
- going to pass out
- out of control and going crazy.

The panic response is the ‘fight-or-flight’ response referred to earlier—the body suddenly floods with adrenalin. **Panic attacks don’t kill people but they are way out of proportion to the situation and with no danger present.**

They are **relatively short-lived**, lasting a few minutes to half an hour, but are **frightening** while happening. Ignoring or **suppressing an attack is almost impossible**. Try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds. Once the thought is planted, the rest is history.



## Mastering the panic attack

If there is no medical (physiological) reason, these suggestions could help.



### *Talk sense to yourself*

**Fighting a panic attack focuses only on the unpleasant symptoms** and increases the amount of adrenalin causing those symptoms. Trying to will oneself out of an attack compounds **the fear of panic**. It is better to **acknowledge the anxiety**.

A person can **say these things** to themselves about the panic attack:

- it can be overcome
- it won't last long
- it never killed anyone
- FEAR is an acronym for False Evidence Appearing Real.

It can be hard to believe these during an attack, but they're still worth saying.



### *Someone who cares*

If they can, **the person should try to talk to a person they trust who cares for them**, face to face, on the phone, by Skype, Facetime, whatever. If that's impossible, they might imagine a friend with them, offering encouragement. Pets can be therapeutic and calming.

### *Shift focus*

Another strategy for coping with an attack is for the person to stop what they are doing, slow down, **focus on the things around them**; to observe the shape, colour and texture of things, the sounds they can hear, a smell.

**Focus on a small action.** Here's a simple example: ever so slowly reach out to pick up a small object like a pen or a cup or a book; watch your arm, how your fingers curl to pick up the item; notice its weight, its texture; slowly put it down again, trying to 'unrepeat' exactly what you did in picking it up.

# NOSSAL WELLBEING NOTES

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Download the app **Let panic go** to a tablet or smartphone and use it as a distraction.

## **Breathing**

**Hyperventilation is a breathing pattern**—too fast or too deep—that we revert to when anxious. It alters the **balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen** in the bloodstream, causing some of the unpleasant physical sensations of a panic attack.



**The 4-2-6 relaxation technique** can be done anywhere and is good both to ward off hyperventilation—use it when you feel anxiety coming on—or to reverse the effects of hyperventilation. Here's how.

**Sit comfortably**, sigh deeply, slowly stretch the neck, arms, back and legs, then flop back. Now sit up, take a breath in through the nose for **four** seconds, hold it for **two** seconds, and release it from the mouth over **six** seconds. Repeat this 4-2-6 pattern.

## **Exercise**



**Gentle exercise can be a good antidote for panic.** If it's not the middle of the night, go for a walk. Take the dog if it's not a wild, silly creature. This is part one. Part two is to **take careful notice of your surroundings:**

check out people's gardens, what types of cars are in driveways, what clouds are passing overhead. It's about getting back **control of your mind**, reducing the severity and length of the attack.

## **Last word**

**There is no quick fix for a panic attack**, but the five things listed above are all **simple things a person can do** to relieve the symptoms and the length of an attack.