

A Panic Attack?



A panic attack can appear to come out of the blue, causing a person to feel out of control and very frightened. However, it is no more than a series of bodily reactions to a perceived threat. Anxiety and fear are important for survival as they actually act as a mechanism to protect the body against stress and danger.

A panic attack is an extreme form of anxiety characterised by a rapid build up of overwhelming physical sensations - a reaction that is sometimes out of proportion to the threat or danger.

What causes Panic Attacks?

Adrenaline is released into the blood stream that prepares the body for fight or flight and prompts the following reactions:-

- Raised blood pressure and increased heart rate which can make the heart pound
- Faster, shallower breathing making the person feel light-headed and shaky
- Possible giddiness, numbness in the arms and legs, chest pains, tingling and difficulty breathing

These sensations lead the person to feel out of control. Some people have such powerful symptoms that they feel they are going mad or having a heart attack.

What can a person do when a Panic Attack seems close?

Take charge by acknowledging that they have the power within them to take control of the symptoms. Say the word STOP and repeat it slowly to themselves. Sit down if possible. Breathe slowly:-

- Draw breath deeply into the lungs, keeping the upper chest still, counting up to 6
- Breathe out slowly, counting to 8 at the same time

The person should focus on an object outside themselves or a peaceful scene. They should concentrate on their breathing pattern or on describing the object or scene to themselves.

A person should work out what works best for them and continue this behaviour until they feel in control, calm and relaxed.

It can be very frightening but will not cause permanent harm and will pass.

Can a person's thoughts help them?

Thoughts can have an enormous influence on our feelings. If, when a person feels anxious, stressed or afraid they tell themselves that a panic attack is close, the panic will inevitably increase. What they tell themselves at this stage is vital to determining the severity of the attack. To reduce the probability of a panic attack a person can try:-

- Counting to 10
- Listening to what they are saying to themselves - they are probably winding themselves up
- Stop exaggerating an unpleasant situation - pulling it into a disaster
- Thinking of some useful messages 'Take it easy', 'I don't need to panic', 'Stay calm' to induce calm
- Stopping the chain of negative thoughts by doing something else - move around, eat or drink

Taking these steps will decrease the likelihood of having an attack.

What can a person do to control Panic Attacks?

A person can bring panic attacks - and the fear of attacks - under their control.

If a person has had an attack or several attacks, they will be able to identify the triggers. Understanding this will help them to take control. It may help them to talk this through with someone they trust. Consider also:

A change in diet - cutting down on caffeine and sugar - ensuring stable blood sugar by eating complex carbohydrates - bread, pasta & rice - avoiding processed foods - cheese & chocolate that may produce allergies that encourage panicky feelings

Change thoughts

encourage self belief and one's ability to cope

Change life style

take exercise, have interests and a social life but not so much that it induces stress - reduce or give up smoking

Relax

learn and practise relaxation exercises, including the breathing exercise that you use to manage panic attacks