

# PANIC ATTACKS

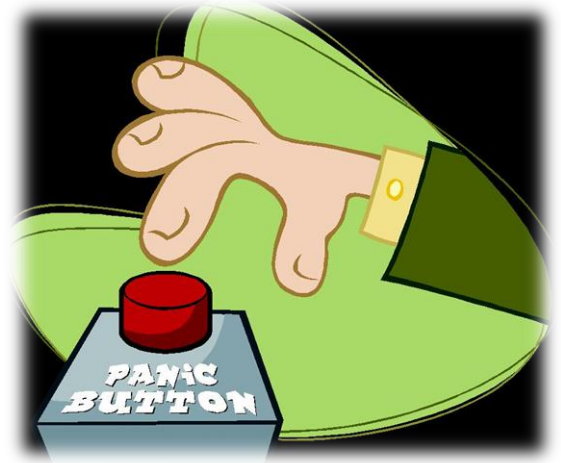
## What Is a Panic Attack?

There are few experiences in life that can be compared to the raw power and intense discomfort of a panic attack. The heart palpitations, chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness and muscular weakness often associated with these attacks are frequently accompanied by feelings of distorted reality and impending doom. With an attack can also come the fear of losing control and embarrassing oneself, or even having a heart attack.

Despite being very frightening, these attacks are definitely not life threatening. During a panic attack the body is reacting to danger in an entirely appropriate and natural fashion. The problem lies in the perception of danger when none truly exists.

The famous words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, from his Inaugural Address, *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself* are particularly applicable for those suffering with panic attacks. Those who have already experienced an attack often have anticipatory anxiety (the fear of an attack in the future) which only increases the likelihood of another attack.

Compounding the difficulty is that at the first signs of panic this fear of an attack compels the individual to resist and fight their symptoms with a vengeance. The energy and effort expended to resist the panic only serves to intensify its impact.



## Learning to Control Panic Attacks

As a first step in learning to control panic attacks an individual is encouraged to complete an attack analysis designed to document the precipitating circumstances. This record of antecedents provides valuable information useful in creating opportunities to avoid the onset of panic.

For some, the onset of a panic attack is clearly associated with specific situations such as public speaking, social gatherings or work deadlines. For others, the onset of panic may initially seem unpredictable, but they may discover that the antecedents are related to stress, mood, a lack of sleep, or the consumption of caffeine. With this awareness, an individual has taken the first step towards mastering their fears by exposing and understanding them.

Although many individuals who experience panic attacks have much in common, the strategies to cope with and eliminate attacks will be individualized. While learning to identify and understand your fears you may discover that assertiveness training, anger management or time management skills would significantly contribute to your progress. For others, success is linked to dealing with self-esteem issues or learning to handle stress in a more positive manner. Individuals may learn to calm themselves and increase their energy through a program of good nutrition and exercise.

Along the road to recovery, sufferers are strongly encouraged to evaluate their progress and congratulate themselves for even small steps taken toward their goals.

## Coping Strategies

Having identified the preliminary signs of panic (such as a shortness of breath or increased heart rate), the next step is to implement one or more of the following coping strategies.

- **Relax** To cope with panic attacks an individual must learn to respond to the initial symptoms of panic calmly and confidently. They must recognize and acknowledge their feelings of panic while not being afraid of them.
- **Self-Talk** Reacting to these initial symptoms with a sense of fear is self-defeating. Negative self-talk suggests that the individual is not able to handle the situation, and undermines their self-confidence which encourages the panic. This then leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A beneficial use of positive self-talk would focus on positive statements such as

*Okay here it is again...I know what's going on...I've handled it before...*

*I will get through this or this isn't fun but it's not an emergency...this will pass.*

*Relax stay calm...this is an opportunity to experience and learn about my fears...I'll discover more ways to defeat these fears.*

- **Distraction** During the onset of panic it is often helpful to seek out distractions to discourage focusing on these feelings. Appropriate distractions may include initiating a conversation with someone, changing their immediate surroundings by going to the washroom or for a drink of water, concentrating on the performance of a simple repetitive activity, or engaging in some form of exercise.

With proper planning and attention to safety, coping with the source of the anxiety may require behaving assertively with a relative, colleague or workplace supervisor. At other times, simply constructively venting their frustration and anger may diffuse the panic.

- **Thought Stopping** Thought stopping is a simple procedure designed to interrupt the escalation of panic and anxiety by taking a deep breath and shouting **stop** or **quit it**. This may be done silently or aloud, and should be repeated as frequently as necessary. In conjunction with this, an individual may find it helpful to visualize a stop sign or flashing warning lights. Thought stopping provides the opportunity to use distraction, positive self-talk or relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.
- **Retreat** If the panic remains uncontrolled the individual needs to get out of the situation as best they can. It is wise to use the idea of retreat as opposed to escape because the individual is leaving the situation temporarily with the intention of returning when they are prepared. Adhering to the idea of escaping serves to reinforce fears and contributes to their perceived lack of control. The goal for the individual is to face their fears and clearly demonstrate that they are the one in control.

## What If the Attacks Continue?

If a self-help approach to resolving this underlying problem fails to produce the desired recovery, an individual would likely benefit from the assistance of a mental health professional.

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