



Panic Attacks

What is a Panic Attack?

Panic attacks are sudden feelings of intense fear or anxiety.

What causes Panic Attacks?

They can be triggered by a major life event but at times there is no obvious reason why they start. They may be a sign that the student has underlying issues that need to be addressed.

An event or **negative thought** causes an **increase in adrenalin** which is pumped around the body. We are prewired to respond to danger to protect ourselves. In prehistoric times this was to help you run away or deal with a dangerous situation. It is called *the fight or flight response*. A panic attack happens when, although there is no threat or danger the body responds as if there is.

What are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

The symptoms of a panic attack are listed below and can often be very frightening. The student may feel that others will notice that they are anxious or they might be worried that they will lose control, faint, run out of the room, start screaming. They may feel that are going mad, going deaf, going blind, can't breathe, having a heart attack etc. This all exacerbates the panic.

Physical Symptoms

- Racing heart
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Tingling sensation, pins and needles (particularly in hands)
- Blurred vision
- Sound distortion
- Nausea
- Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing
- Sweating or trembling
- Headaches
- Diarrhoea
- Skin rashes or flare ups
- Butterflies in stomach
- Chest/stomach pains
- Loss of appetite

Behavioural Symptoms

- Avoiding places
- Avoiding people and social situations
- Constantly seeking reassurance
- Excessive drinking/smoking/eating
- Difficulty sleeping/nightmares
- Increased irritability

Mental Symptoms

- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Forgetfulness
- Distorted or irrational thoughts
- Excessive worrying
- Thinking negatively

How to Respond if a Student is having a Panic Attack.

Reassure them that:

A PANIC ATTACK CANNOT HARM YOU

A PANIC ATTACK IS NOT LIFE THREATENING

THE PANIC WILL PASS

(Panic attacks can last from a few seconds to 10 minutes).

Intervening during a Panic Attack

- They may want to run out of the room/building to escape the situation but it is important that they stay with the panic

- Get them to acknowledge what is happening, name it **“I am having a panic attack”**
- Repeat calming and supportive statements - *This will pass; It's only anxiety; You are not going to faint, stop breathing, choke etc.* Encourage them to say these statements aloud
- Encourage them to say STOP to their thoughts - take a deep breath and say STOP, repeat several times
- Encourage them to engage in [relaxation techniques](#)
- Abdominal breathing - Breathe in slowly, count to three and breathe out slowly. Do this with them until they start to calm down
- [Muscle Relaxation](#) - Encourage them to tense and relax different muscle groups in your body. Do this with them to engage them
- Get them to do something that requires focused attention like a simple repetitive activity e.g. counting backwards; saying the words of a song; naming as many animals as they can beginning with the letter *d*
- Encourage them to imagine a calming place - [Visualisation](#)

Encourage the student to engage in some of the following general preventative strategies longer term:

- Practice relaxation techniques
- Exercise regularly
- Make an appointment with the Guidance Counsellor
- Learn about the causes of panic attacks
- Learn about the effects of panic attacks