

## **Panic attacks and panic disorders**

### **What is a panic attack?**

A sudden surge of overwhelming anxiety and fear. They can strike out of the blue with no clear reason for the attack. They can happen anywhere at any time and although they can be unpredictable and frightening, they are not harmful or dangerous. They can be a one off occurrence or you may experience repeat episodes.

With treatment you can reduce or eliminate the symptoms of panic and regain control of your life.

### **Signs and symptoms of an attack**

These can develop abruptly and reach their peak within 10 minutes. Most will end within 20 to 30 minutes and rarely last more than an hour. A combination of any of the following symptoms and signs can be experienced:-

- Shortness of breath
- Very rapid heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Feeling faint, dizzy or sick
- Choking feeling
- Numbness or tingling

You may feel that you are going to die, going mad or a sense of impending doom.

### **What is panic disorder?**

Panic disorder is when panic attacks are repeated and combined with changes in behaviour or having persistent anxiety over having further attacks. Frequent unexpected panic attacks may not be related to a specific situation and it is common to avoid places or events connected to previous panic attacks. The number of panic attacks can have an emotional impact affecting self-confidence and disrupting everyday life.

Causes of panic attacks and panic disorder are unclear but there often connections with major life transitions such as a new job or loss of job, marriage or divorce and bereavement. They can be caused by medical conditions and it important to see a GP if you are experiencing symptoms of panic.

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## **Treatment for panic**

Cognitive behaviour therapy or CBT can be a very effective form of treatment for panic attacks and disorders. It helps you to look at your fears in a more realistic light.

Exposure therapy allows you to learn coping mechanisms through controlled and safe exposure to the causes of panic.

Medication can help in the short term to control or reduce symptoms but will not fix or resolve the problem.

## **Self-help for panic**

Professional help and therapy as described above can make a big difference, but there are many things you can do to help yourself:-

- Avoid stimulants such as cigarettes and alcohol
- Eat regular healthy meals and take regular exercise
- Look into CBT, consult self-help books or find anxiety management courses. These can be discussed with your GP
- Learn breathing and relaxation techniques
- Accept and face your feelings during an attack – they will become less intense

## **Support organisations**

Anxiety UK- promotes relief and rehabilitation for anxiety disorders through information and provision of self help services. Member ship £23 per year or £30 to include therapy.

[www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk) Tel 08444 775 774

Mind – provides information and advice  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) Tel 0300 123 3393

No Panic – help people with panic attacks and other anxiety related disorders. Specialise in self help through telephone recovery groups. Membership £12 per year

[www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk) Tel 0800 138 8889

BCAP – sets standards for therapeutic practice and information on seeking a counselling therapist.  
[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) Tel 01455 883 300

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