

Anxiety and Panic Attacks

How to End the Suffering and Regain Control

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotional reaction often triggered by stressful situations. We may feel anxious whenever we are in a vague or ambiguous situation; when performing to our best ability is essential (e.g., taking a final exam); or in situations that have some degree of perceived or actual danger (e.g., standing on the roof of a tall building).

Anxiety is a "total body" experience. It affects how we behave, think, and feel physically. For example, anxiety may produce any of the following reactions:

- Shortness of breath
- Increased heart rate
- Avoiding future anxiety-producing situations
- Hot flashes and perspiration
- Shakiness in hands
- Making negative predictions, "what if" thinking, and other catastrophic thoughts

Although unsettling, mild levels of anxiety actually help us by increasing our alertness with challenging or new tasks and by preparing us to face threatening situations. It is our built-in system for staying focused and prepared when we most need to be. However, high levels of anxiety can actually be a major disruption in our lives and can interfere in our ability to meet the goals we have set for ourselves.

When the frequency and intensity of anxiety becomes debilitating, you may be suffering from an anxiety disorder.

Coping With Panic Attacks:

Panic attacks are an extreme form of sudden anxiety that can leave the sufferer feeling frightened, confused, and helpless. They seem to come out of the blue and often cause someone to feel like they're having a heart attack or losing control. Students often report becoming fearful to venture into public out of worry for another attack and begin to skip classes, avoid friends, or drop out of school altogether.

In most cases, the symptoms of a panic attack peak in about 10 minutes before gradually tapering off.

The symptoms of a panic attack include:

- A period of intense fear or discomfort
- Accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Choking feelings
- Chest pain
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Feeling detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Hot flashes or chills



Overcoming Panic Attacks:

The greatest chance for success in overcoming panic attacks is to work with a mental health professional. However, the following are some simple strategies to help you cope with panic attacks:

- **Remind yourself that the symptoms do not cause you physical harm.** It is a fact that panic attacks do not lead to heart attacks, fainting, or respiratory arrest.
- **Remind yourself that it will all be over quickly** (usually less than 10 minutes).
- **Distract yourself** by thinking about something pleasant and take your mind off your physical discomfort. Panic symptoms become more intense solely by our attention to them.
- **Use relaxation strategies** such as controlled-deep breathing, scanning and relaxing your muscle groups, and imagining a peaceful vacation spot (describing to yourself how it looks, sounds, and smells).
- **Cut out the stimulants** in your life such as coffee, cigarettes, and sugar and take care of your body with sleep and exercise.
- **Talk to yourself and remind yourself of the facts.** Tell yourself that you won't lose control, you're not freaking out, and you're not having a heart attack nor dying. Untrue catastrophic statements such as these are one of the biggest reasons panic attacks build in intensity.

Additional Resources:

The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook (1995) by Edmund J. Bourne. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic II (1994) by David H. Barlow and Michelle G. Craske. Albany, NY: Graywind.

An End to Panic (1995) by Elke Luerchen-White. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

S.T.O.P. Obsessing: How to Overcome Your Obsessions and Compulsions (1991) by Edna B. Foa and Reid Wilson. New York: Bantam.