

Don't Panic!

Taking Control of Your Anxiety

by Larina Kase, PsyD, MBA

Do you frequently find yourself worried, wound-up, and on edge? Do you experience physical symptoms like a pounding heart, feeling out of breath, or dizziness? Do you fear that something horrible could happen to you? If you answered yes to these questions, then, like 40 million adult Americans, you may be experiencing panic attacks.

What is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is a particular type of anxiety in which you experience a sudden rush of physical symptoms that peak relatively quickly, usually in about 15 minutes. These intense sensations are accompanied by fears such as worrying that you're losing control, going crazy, or having a heart attack. But how do you know if you have anxiety? Anxiety and panic show itself on four different fronts: mentally, physically, emotionally and behaviorally. Typically, people experience most, if not all, of these symptoms:

1. Mentally: A nervous, anxious, apprehensive mood, and general feelings of nervousness and panic.
2. Physically: A rapid or pounding heartbeat, sweating, trembling, muscle tension, dizziness, breathlessness or headaches.
3. Emotionally: Fearful, upsetting thoughts like, "I'm going to mess up!" or "I'm having a heart attack!" A general feeling that something is wrong.
4. Behaviorally: Avoidance behaviors, such as procrastination and trying to keep yourself from experiencing anxiety, or the urge to run, or pace.

The physical part is the worst, because it tricks us into thinking something is physically wrong, and makes us think we are having a heart attack. When people have repeated panic attacks and worry about when the next one may strike, they may have panic disorder. Panic disorder affects 6 million adult Americans or about 2.7% of the population. Many describe having a panic attack as terrifying, scary, and potentially embarrassing. Some worry that they'll have an attack during something important, that could be dangerous (like driving a car) or embarrassing (like speaking in front of people). Panic attacks often occur out of the blue and can be surprising. Many people say that they experience panic when they're actually relaxed or trying to relax.

Why do we get Panic Attacks?

There are many theories as to why panic attacks occur. Some believe that people who are perfectionists are prone to attacks. Another theory is that those who tend to control will distrust any situation which they cannot control, and are then prone to attacks. Others feel that adults who have panic attacks were the children of overbearing or controlling

parents who discouraged their children from showing emotion. However, all theories tend to agree that the physical sensation of a panic attack stems from our natural instincts of "fight or flight." When our body perceives danger, our fight or flight mechanism actually releases chemicals into the blood stream that trigger physical responses and prepare us to either fight or run.

Stopping Panic Attacks

If any of this sounds like you, rest assured, there is help. We'll go through the steps to ending panic attacks and if you'd like more help, there are great self-help books and cognitive behavioral therapies available.

#1: Spot the Cycle

It's easiest to recognize the cycle of panic as its happening. It can begin by an upsetting thought, a mild physical sensation, (like feeling light-headed a few hours after a meal or your heart fluttering), a situation (especially one where you've had a panic attack before) or an emotion. You then become nervous about this thought, sensation, situation, or emotion, which, in turn,

triggers the thought, "What's wrong with me?" This type of thinking increases your physical symptoms of anxiety. Your heart pounds. You get short of breath, dizzy, or light-headed. You feel like someone has turned up the temperature by twenty degrees and you begin to sweat or feel clammy. All these horrible physical feelings lead to the thought, "I must be having a heart attack or going crazy!" And of course this thought intensifies the feeling even more. The earlier that you can catch yourself getting into this cycle, the easier it is to break.

#2: Know the Facts

Realize that anxiety is not dangerous. It's your body's natural defense system designed to protect you. During a panic attack, your body is, in effect, responding to a false alarm. It feels threatened by something that isn't actually harmful, such as a thought, situation, or physical sensation. The fear can certainly feel very uncomfortable, but know that it won't hurt you. And remember that your body has a natural system built in to reduce those intense sensations. The adrenaline rush you feel with a panic attack is your sympathetic nervous system going into fight or flight mode. After a short period of time, your parasympathetic nervous system will kick in, reducing these physical symptoms. The parasympathetic nervous system always kicks in. It's impossible to be intensely anxious forever.

#3: Rationalize and Question

Question those fearful thoughts. How many times did you really *have* a heart attack? When you start to worry that you're having a heart attack or that you'll be committed to a mental institution, ask yourself how many times your fears have come true. Are you really having a heart attack each time? Probably not. Think about other times you experienced an uncomfortable physical sensation and got through it. For example, I had a horrible side-stitch and felt out of breath while trying to run with my dog! The biological processes of panic are the same as every day situations such as this one. This new type of

thinking will help you to remember the "false alarm" idea. Realize that you're simply experiencing anxiety and the resultant adrenaline rush, and it isn't harmful, and that it will pass.

#4: Know that You're In Control

You can control anxiety. The key to handling anxiety lies in how you respond to it. If you experience intense anxiety or a panic attack and you conclude, "Oh my gosh, that was the worst thing ever. I hope that never happens again. I'm not going in elevators or anywhere else that might make me panic!" then you'll probably continue to experience intense anxiety. If, however, you



conclude, "That rush of anxiety was uncomfortable but it wasn't dangerous and it went away quickly. I can handle it if it happens again" then you probably won't continue to experience intense anxiety. You do have complete control over your anxiety. You have the power to choose how to react and interpret situations.

#5: Bring It On

Did you know that one of the main reasons people experience intense anxiety is that they try not to? They tell themselves to relax, but as we all know, it can be impossible to relax on cue, and sometimes telling ourselves to do so can make us more anxious. Have you ever had someone tell you to relax when you're worked up? It's annoying and not helpful! Instead, embrace the anxiety. Now that you know it isn't dangerous and you're probably not going to have a heart attack or lose control. Accept it.

Tell yourself that anxiety is a helpful thing that might feel uncomfortable for a few minutes, but will soon go away.

Bring on those awful symptoms so that you can fully experience them when you are "in" control. Through rigorous exercise, like running or jumping rope, your heart will pound and you'll feel out of breath. Allow yourself to experience dizziness by riding on amusement park rides. Sit in a sauna and realize that you can be hot and sweaty and you'll be fine. As you get used to these physical sensations, they'll feel less threatening. It's like watching a horror movie that terrifies you. If you watch it just once it will be pretty darn scary. But if you watch it twenty times, it will be less scary and may even be funny or boring. You need to consciously and purposefully experience anxiety to overcome it. Once you stop trying to fight off the symptoms of anxiety and allow yourself to be nervous, you'll actually find that you're having less anxiety, less intense, and less frequent panic attacks.

The Anxiety Disorders Assoc. of America estimates that 18.1% of the adult U.S. population is adversely affected by severe anxiety. This means that you're not alone, but it doesn't make it any easier to manage the anxiety that interferes with your work, relationships, mood, and leisure time. Excessive anxiety can hold you back from success and happiness, and can adversely affect every area of your life. When you reduce anxiety your work performance increases. Your relationships improve. Your sense of humor and spontaneity come out.

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Note: Any person who suffers severe, recurrent panic attacks should consult a doctor since the symptoms of a panic attack can mask other physical problems. This article is for information only and is not offered as a treatment.