

Anxiety & panic attacks:

The term anxiety can mean many things to many people. For some, it can relate to feelings of general stress and distress. For others, it can be a specific feeling in the pit of the stomach. The ways in which we experience anxiety are vast. Though the experiences of anxiety can be diverse, the root of it is common to all of us.

Anxiety is our body's reaction to a threat to our well-being. It is a completely normal reaction to stress. Without anxiety, we would not be able to react when we are in danger, and we likely wouldn't be alive today without it. Fear is a similar emotional response. It is the body's response to a real or perceived imminent threat. Anxiety is our body, and mind, anticipating a future threat. All humans experience anxiety when they experience stressful events, such as receiving an upsetting medical diagnosis, relationship problems, stress at school or work, and financial worries.

However, we also feel anxiety about imagined threats that may or may not be meaningful or real. In a sense, our minds have evolved to be extra careful about threat detection. Our minds are more likely to evaluate things as threats than not. This way we do not miss anything that might harm us. Unfortunately, our minds do not come with an immediate "off-switch." This means that sometimes anxiety becomes a problem because it doesn't give us useful information and contributes to our distress and avoidance.

Some people are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder if they are in a perpetually elevated state of anxiety or if they easily become anxious in certain contexts. When anxiety stops being temporary fear or worry, it may be a sign that help is needed. If the feelings associated with anxiety linger, they can continue to worsen over time. Having anxiety or being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder does not mean someone is weak. With the right support, they can become more able to cope with their anxiety and lead happy, successful lives. Through understanding the condition and seeking the right treatment, anxiety can be managed.

PANIC ATTACKS AND ANXIETY:

Unlike more general anxiety, which often has more clear and gradual triggers, panic is typically a sudden, uncontrollable fear or anxiety. This can often cause impulsive behaviour.

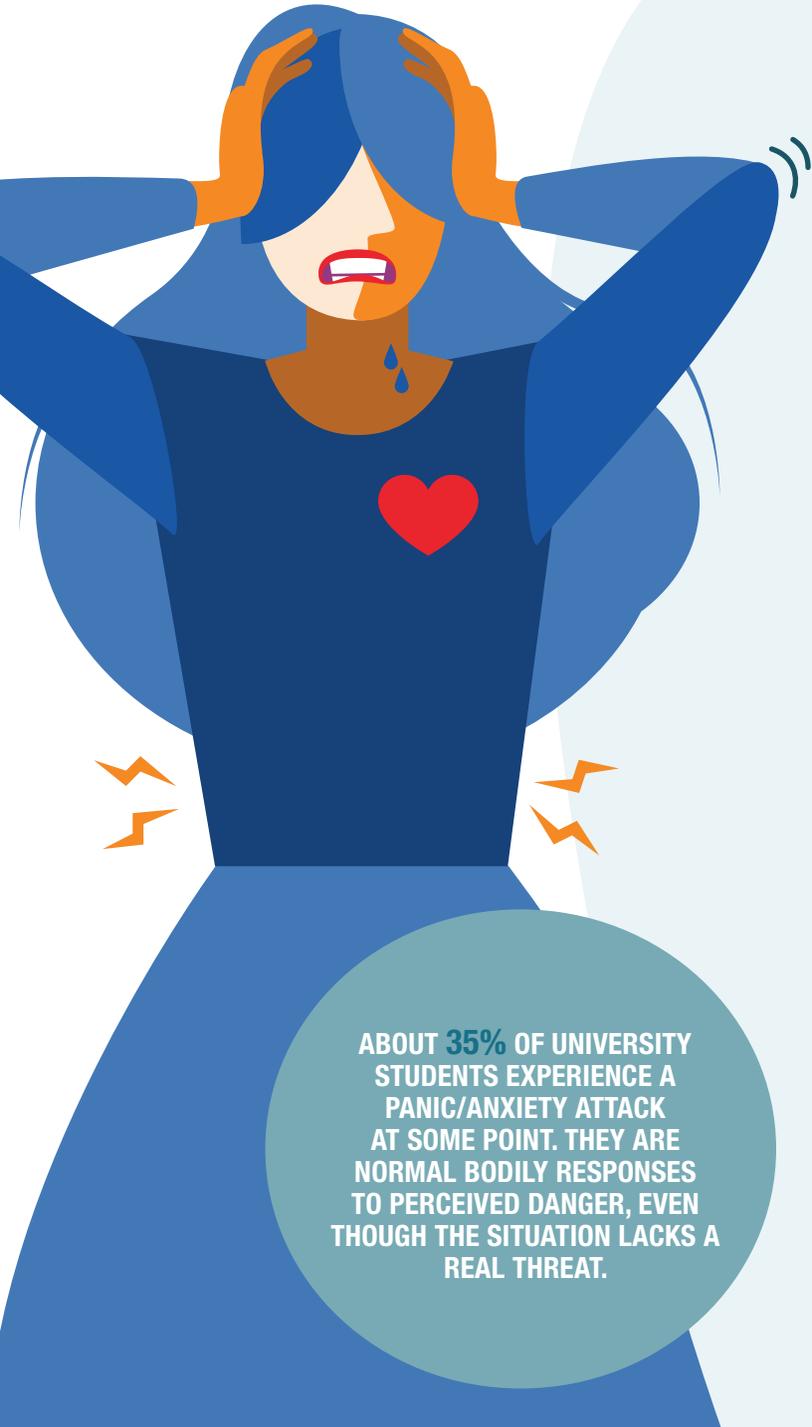
The fear response is one of the largest differentiators between panic attacks and other anxiety-related experiences. During a panic attack, a person is fearful of the fear they are feeling, rather than external factors. Many individuals who experience panic attacks have explained that their panic feels like they are losing control. Panic attacks happen quickly and unexpectedly and typically last a few minutes. Anxiety, on the other hand, tends to appear gradually and can last for extended periods.

A PANIC ATTACK CAN HAPPEN TO ANYONE AT ANY TIME, WHEREAS PEOPLE WHO HAVE A FORMALIZED PANIC DISORDER HAVE RECURRING ATTACKS THAT CANNOT BE EXPLAINED BY OTHER MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS.



SIGNS OF PANIC ATTACKS

Panic attacks occur suddenly and unexpectedly, and typically last only a few minutes. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms, but the list below summarizes some of the most common ones.



PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Dizziness, unsteadiness, or light-headedness
- Trembling or shaking
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Tightening, discomfort, or pressure in the chest, neck or back
- Chest pain
- Rapid heartbeat or a pounding heart
- Shortness of breath
- Stomach distress

MENTAL SIGNS

- Feeling detached from oneself or reality
- Fear of losing control
- A powerful desire to escape the situation
- Irrational thinking and irrational fears
- Intense fear, dread, or terror
- Fear of dying
- Feelings of impending doom

The signs each person experiences are dependent on a variety of factors, including our unique biological makeup. Since these signs can be very intense, they are frequently misinterpreted as other serious physical health episodes. Fortunately, people can learn to both reduce and eliminate their panic attacks. The following coping strategies will help you better understand what steps to take.

MANAGING PANIC ATTACKS: STEPS TO EXPLORE

Evidence-based treatments for panic attacks are like those for anxiety and involve exposure-based treatment. Mindfulness and meditation can also be useful to curb stress and promote increased psychological flexibility. Sometimes medications are used to augment behavioural treatments. Some helpful considerations for individuals who are experiencing panic attacks include:



KNOW THAT PANIC ATTACKS ARE TREATABLE

With our current understanding of anxiety/panic attacks, it is reassuring to know that they are highly treatable. Research has shown that 80-90 per cent of people will experience relief based on exploring the various strategies listed in this document.



GO FOR A MEDICAL CONSULTATION

Before doing anything else, it is important to see a physician to rule out any potential medical reasons for your symptoms. Most cases do not involve any medical concerns and knowing this can provide a sense of relief. If there are specific medical issues that can explain the anxiety/panic attacks, addressing these directly will likely resolve the issue.



LEAVE THE ANXIETY-PROVOKING SITUATION TEMPORARILY

When a panic attack becomes overwhelming, leaving the situation temporarily can help reduce the severity. However, it is important to return to the anxiety-provoking situation as soon as you feel more in control.



IDENTIFY YOUR EARLY SIGNS OF PANIC

A panic attack typically involves an escalation of physical and mental signs, progressing from subtle to overwhelming. If you can develop awareness of the more subtle early signs, it will provide more opportunity to utilize some coping strategies before escalating. Some early signs might include sweaty hands, increased heart rate, tightening muscles or dizziness. Over time, noticing these early signs will help you gain more control over your panic attacks.



WORK WITH HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROFESSIONALS TO LEARN HOW TO MANAGE AND REDUCE PANIC ATTACKS

Health and wellness professionals ranging from doctors and mental health therapists to fitness and nutrition consultants can offer a variety of techniques and lifestyle considerations to help manage panic attacks. Psychotherapy, breath-work, exercise, muscle relaxation techniques and dietary considerations are helpful interventions for signs associated with panic attacks.



REALIZE THAT PANIC ATTACKS DO NOT CAUSE SIGNIFICANT BODILY HARM

While panic attacks are very distressing, they are not dangerous. Panic attacks do not cause heart attacks, mental illness, respiratory failure, suffocation, loss of bodily control or death. By taking the time to explore and understand what is happening in our bodies and what triggers a panic attack, we can gradually build comfort and acceptance of these experiences when they do happen.



CULTIVATE AN ACCEPTING ATTITUDE

By understanding that the experience of a panic attack is rooted in a physiological process and that there is no real danger, we can start to accept what is happening in the body. The combination of some grounding techniques and giving them time to pass is all we can hope for.



DON'T TRY TO STOP THE PANIC ATTACK

Attempting to stop or control a panic attack will lead to more anxiety, fear, and frustration. Once adrenaline is released into your body, it will take some time to metabolize so you can't stop the panic attack immediately. The symptoms tend to peak in three- to five minutes and quickly subside.



REDUCE YOUR OVERALL STRESS LEVEL

Taking time to explore opportunities for stress reduction in your daily routine and overall lifestyle can be helpful. These can include exercise, eliminating stimulants such as caffeine, dietary changes, slowing down your life, building up a support system, and/or building in daily relaxation time.



TRY MEDICATION IF OTHER SOLUTIONS DON'T WORK

It is true that medications can be helpful, but other non-medication-based strategies can be equally as effective. Medications come with potential side effects and may lead to dependence. By working with other non-medication-based strategies first, we can cultivate a belief that we are able to control our panic attacks ourselves.



SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS EXPERIENCING A PANIC ATTACK

It can be scary to witness someone having a panic attack. Many of the signs resemble life-threatening medical conditions. If you know someone is experiencing a panic attack:



TRY YOUR BEST TO REMAIN CALM

If you can stay calm and composed, it can be very reassuring to the person who is experiencing a panic attack. Try your best to be understanding and non-judgmental.



HELP THE PERSON FOCUS ON THEIR BREATHING

By encouraging the person experiencing a panic attack to breathe slowly, it can help calm and stabilize their nervous system. It may help to model the slow and deliberate breathing that you are encouraging them to focus on.



HELP THE PERSON CONNECT WITH THEIR SURROUNDINGS

Focusing on something outside of the internal experience of a panic attack can help reduce its severity. Ask the person experiencing a panic attack to look around and name five different objects in the distance.



LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Whatever it is you ask the person to do, try to do the same thing. A person experiencing a panic attack is likely to follow your example more intently than just your words. It is important to remember that many people feel embarrassed if they experience a panic attack in a public setting. Reminding them that there is nothing to be embarrassed about can be helpful. Every person who experiences a panic attack may be at various stages in exploring the root causes. Exploratory conversations to understand if they are taking steps to prevent future attacks may be useful.

REFERENCES:

1. Derrick, K., Green, T., & Wand, T. (2019). Assessing and responding to anxiety and panic in the Emergency Department. *Australasian emergency care*, 22(4), 216-220.
2. Fowles, D. C. (2019). Motivational approach to anxiety disorders. In *Anxiety: Recent developments in cognitive, psychophysiological, and health research* (pp. 181-192). Taylor & Francis.
3. Hamm, A. O. (2020). Fear, anxiety, and their disorders from the perspective of psychophysiology. *Psychophysiology*, 57(2), e13474.
4. Hovenkamp-Hermelink, J. H., Voshaar, R. C. O., Batelaan, N. M., Penninx, B. W., Jeronimus, B. F., Schoevers, R. A., & Riese, H. (2019). Anxiety sensitivity, its stability and longitudinal association with severity of anxiety symptoms. *Scientific reports*, 9(1), 1-7.
5. Kim, Y. K., & Yoon, H. K. (2018). Common and distinct brain networks underlying panic and social anxiety disorders. *Progress in Neuro-Psychopharmacology and Biological Psychiatry*, 80, 115-122.
6. Lattari, E., Budde, H., Paes, F., Neto, G. A. M., Appolinario, J. C., Nardi, A. E., ... & Machado, S. (2018). Effects of aerobic exercise on anxiety symptoms and cortical activity in patients with panic disorder: a pilot study. *Clinical practice and epidemiology in mental health: CP & EMH*, 14, 11.
7. López, D. R. C., & Reyes, B. M. A. (2020) Delimitation of Anxiety Disorder with Panic Attacks and Therapeutic Considerations for Approach.
8. Palardy, V., El-Baalbaki, G., Fredette, C., Rizkallah, E., & Guay, S. (2018). Social support and symptom severity among patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder or panic disorder with agoraphobia: a systematic review. *Europe's journal of psychology*, 14(1), 254.