

Panic attack tip sheet

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden surge of overwhelming fear, often with strong physical sensations. Panic attacks often peak within about 10 minutes and can last up to half an hour, and some people feel very tired afterwards. They can be frightening, and they are common: around 40 per cent of Australians have a panic attack at some point. Having a panic attack is a common experience and does not by itself mean an ongoing condition.

Common signs

During a panic attack, people may notice:

- A racing or pounding heart
- Feeling short of breath or choked
- Sweating, trembling or shaking
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Nausea or stomach discomfort
- Hot or cold flushes, numbness or tingling
- Feeling unreal or detached
- Fear of losing control or dying

Things that may help

Some people find these ideas helpful during and between panic attacks.

Slow breathing

Panic often makes breathing fast and shallow. Some people find it helps to breathe in slowly for a count of three, then out slowly for a count of three, with a long out breath.

Letting the wave pass

Fighting panic can make it stronger. Some people find it helps to remember the feelings are uncomfortable but tend to peak and pass.

Grounding

Gently noticing what you can see, hear and touch around you may help bring attention to the present.

Relaxing the muscles

Some people gently tense and then release each muscle group, from the toes up to the head.

Small steps

Avoiding places or activities because of panic may bring short term relief, but can make fear grow. Approaching situations gradually, in small steps, may help.

Looking after the basics

Regular exercise, enough sleep, and less caffeine, alcohol and other drugs may help reduce physical tension.

Things that **may help** (continued)

Looking at thoughts

Panic can make danger feel bigger and coping feel harder. Some people find it helpful to ask: what are the facts? Have I got through this before?

Getting to know your panic

A simple diary of when panic happens and what seems to help can be useful to share with a GP or psychologist.

When to get **more support**

If things are becoming unmanageable and affecting your social, family, work or study life, you may want to see your GP or a psychologist. You do not need to wait until things feel serious to reach out.

A GP can talk with you about what you are experiencing, including your physical health, and about options. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and online therapy are among the approaches research supports for panic. If you have chest pain or are unsure whether symptoms are medical, 000 or urgent medical care can help.

Benefits of **seeking support**

- Talking with a GP or psychologist may help you make sense of what is happening.
- Support might help you feel less alone with what you are going through.
- A psychologist could offer new ways of coping that suit you.
- Support might help panic feel less frightening and more understandable.

Need help **right now?**

If you or someone else is in danger or thinking about suicide, please reach out now.

000

Emergency services, if life is in danger

13 11 14

Lifeline crisis support, 24 hours, 7 days

13 92 76

13YARN, run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 24/7

Trusted **Australian resources**

Beyond Blue beyondblue.org.au

THIS WAY UP online programs (St Vincent's Hospital and UNSW) thiswayup.org.au

This tip sheet offers general information only and does not replace advice from your GP, psychologist or other health professional.