

# WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF A PANIC ATTACK

PANIC ATTACKS AFFECT UP TO 40% OF AUSTRALIANS AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES, BUT WHAT EXACTLY IS A PANIC ATTACK, AND WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU EXPERIENCE ONE?

## WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed) (2013, p214), panic attacks refers to a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort, that peaks within minutes, with four or more of the following symptoms present:

- Palpitations, pounding heart
- Trembling or shaking
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Chills or heat
- Tingling or numbness
- Feeling that things are unreal or feeling detached
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Dizziness/lightheadedness
- Fear of dying
- Fear of losing control or going crazy

Panic attacks can occur unexpectedly (e.g. in the case of Panic Disorder), or have clear triggers including social situations, performance situations, heights, enclosed spaces, flying, blood, injections, spiders, etc.

Several factors can contribute to panic attacks, including family history, underlying medical conditions, thoughts, the use of stimulants, and the degree of stress experienced.

## TAKING ACTION

### IMMEDIATELY

- (1) **SLOW DOWN YOUR BREATHING** in order to calm down the physical symptoms. Hold your breath and count to ten, then breathe in and out over eight seconds (In-2-3-4; Out-2-3-4). Breathe from your diaphragm rather than your chest. Continue for 5-10 minutes, then repeat if necessary.
- (2) **CHECK YOUR THOUGHTS** in case they're escalating your panic symptoms. Catastrophising about the worst case scenario is a sure-fire way to dial your panic right up. Instead, look to test if the thoughts are true, or try to let the thoughts come and go without getting caught up in them.
- (3) **KNOW THE PANIC ATTACK WILL SUBSIDE.** This may make it easier to sit with the uncomfortable symptoms.

### A LITTLE BIT LATER

- (1) **CONSULT WITH YOUR HEALTH PROFESSIONAL** to rule out any underlying medical conditions that may contribute to panic symptoms
- (2) **SEE A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL** to learn skills to help you cope with anxiety and panic. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) has been shown to be highly effective in the treatment of panic attacks. Other effective treatments include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT).
- (3) **MAKE LIFESTYLE CHANGES** to keep overall stress levels down. Focus on limiting the use of stimulants that produce panic-like symptoms (e.g. caffeine, nicotine), exercise to manage stress, and look at developing skills to streamline your life and decrease your daily hassles (e.g. stress management, time management).

### SOURCES

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