

what is panic?



To understand panic, we need to understand fear. You can think of fear as an automatic alarm response that switches on the moment there is danger. Think about what would happen to you if a dangerous animal approached you. For most people it would be panic stations! You, and almost everyone, would go through a whole series of bodily changes, like your heart pumping, breathing faster, sweating, all in order to respond to the danger in front of you. This alarm response would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently 'pumped up' to physically defend ourselves. This alarm response is an important survival mechanism called the fight or flight response.

Sometimes, however, it is possible to have this intense fear response when there is no danger – it is a false alarm that seems to happen when you least expect it. It is like someone ringing the fire alarm when there is no fire! Essentially, a panic attack is a false alarm.



Many people experience some mild sensations when they feel anxious about something, but a panic attack is much more intense than usual. A panic attack is usually described as a sudden escalating surge of extreme fear. Some people portray the experience of panic as 'sheer terror'. Let's have a look at some of the symptoms of a panic attack:

Panic Attack Symptoms

- Skipping, racing or pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Choking sensations
- Chest pain, pressure or discomfort
- Nausea, stomach problems or sudden diarrhoea
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, feeling faint
- Tingling or numbness in parts of your body
- Hot flushes or chills
- Feeling things around you are strange, unreal, detached, unfamiliar, or feeling detached from body
- Thoughts of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying

As you can see from the list, many of the symptoms are similar to what you might experience if you were in a truly dangerous situation. A panic attack can be very frightening and you may feel a strong desire to escape the situation. Many of the symptoms may appear to indicate some medical condition and some people seek emergency assistance.

Characteristics of a Panic Attack

- It peaks quickly - between 1 to 10 minutes
- The apex of the panic attack lasts for approximately 5 to 10 minutes (unless constantly rekindled)
- The initial attack is usually described as "coming out of the blue" and not consistently associated with a specific situation, although with time panics can become associated with specific situations
- The attack is not linked to marked physical exertion
- The attacks are recurrent over time
- During an attack the person experiences a strong urge to escape to safety

Many people believe that they may faint whilst having a panic attack. This is highly unlikely because the physiological system producing a panic attack is the opposite of the one that produces fainting.

Sometimes people have panic attacks that occur during the night when they are sleeping. They wake from sleep in a state of panic. These can be very frightening because they occur without an obvious trigger.

Panic attacks in, and of themselves, are not a psychiatric condition. However, panic attacks constitute the key ingredient of Panic Disorder if the person experiences at least 4 symptoms of the list previously described, the attacks peak within about 10 minutes and the person has a persistent fear of having another attack.

Panic Disorder and Agoraphobia

Someone with panic disorder has a persistent fear of having another attack or worries about the consequences of the attack. Many people change their behaviour to try to prevent panic attacks. Some people are affected so much that they try to avoid any place where it might be difficult to get help or to escape from. When this avoidance is severe it is called Agoraphobia.



Panic Disorder is more common than you think. A recent study reported that 22.7% of people have reported experience with panic attacks in their lifetime. 3.7% have experienced Panic Disorder and 1.1% have experienced Panic Disorder plus Agoraphobia. * These numbers equate to millions of people world wide. If left untreated, Panic Disorder may become accompanied by depression, other anxiety disorders, dependence on alcohol or drugs and may also lead to significant social and occupational impairment.

* Archives of General Psychiatry. 2006; 63:415-424