

## WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

A panic attack is an abrupt surge of intense fear or discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes. During the attack, some of the following symptoms will be present:

- Palpitations, pounding heart, or rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Dizziness, light-headedness, feeling unsteady or faint
- Chills or heat sensations
- Numbness or tingling
- Feelings of unreality (derealization) or being detached from oneself
- Fear of losing control or 'going crazy'
- Fear of dying.

*Adapted from DSM-5, APA 2013*

The symptoms of a panic attack can differ from person to person, and from occasion to occasion.

The duration of a panic attack also can differ from one person to another, and from one occasion to another, although usually the symptoms will peak within several minutes. Most panic attacks last between 5-20 minutes and they can subside as quickly as they start. It is possible to experience more than one panic attack in succession.

Panic attacks can be triggered by everyday experiences, e.g. leaving home, being in a noisy or crowded area. However, not all panic attacks have a trigger and they often occur unexpectedly.

After experiencing a panic attack, a person may feel drained and exhausted. The physical and emotional effects following a panic attack may last for a few hours.

## What should I do if I think someone may be having a panic attack?

If you think someone is having a panic attack, you should first ask them if they know what is happening and whether they've had a panic attack before. Identify yourself if they don't know you. If they appear disoriented or confused, reassure them that they're safe. If they appear unable to communicate verbally or are not answering questions, you should ask yes/no questions and encourage them to answer non-verbally, e.g. thumbs up or nod head for 'yes'.

## What if I am uncertain whether someone is having a panic attack?

The symptoms of a panic attack can resemble the symptoms of a heart attack or other medical condition. The person may be frightened by what they're experiencing and may want to seek medical attention.

Ask the person if their symptoms are related to a medical problem or check if they're wearing a medical alert bracelet or pendant, or have a medical alert tattoo. Follow any instructions on any alerts found.

# PANIC ATTACKS: MHFA GUIDELINES

If the person has not had a panic attack before, and doesn't think they're having one now, you should follow physical first aid guidelines.

**Call emergency services if you're concerned that there might be a medical reason for the person's symptoms, or if they lose consciousness or appear to be having severe difficulty breathing.**

## HOW CAN I SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS HAVING A PANIC ATTACK?

### Consider their safety

If the person is unsafe due to potential hazards, encourage them to move to a safe space. Don't stop them from what they are doing unless it puts them or others at risk of harm. If they're driving when the panic attack occurs, ask them to pull over to the side of the road as soon as it is safe to do so, as they may not be able to drive safely.

If at any stage you need to leave, try to find someone else who can check on the person.

### Reassure the person and find out what they need

Reassure the person that they're safe and that you're there to help them through what they're experiencing. Tell them that a panic attack, while very frightening, is not life threatening, and that although they cannot control their symptoms right now, the panic attack will pass.

If the person feels like they're 'going crazy', reassure them that they're not. If they express feelings of shame, let them know that there's nothing to be ashamed of.

Ask the person directly how best to assist them. If you know that they've had a panic attack in the past, ask them what helped. If they don't know what they need, reassure them that it is okay. Look at their body language to guide you on what they want to do (sit still, move around) and support them with this preference.

### Do:

- Acknowledge that what they're experiencing is uncomfortable, terrifying and stressful.
- Acknowledge that their terror feels very real to them.
- Speak to them in a reassuring but confident manner.
- Give them some space, so that they do not feel crowded. Try to create a space around them if there are other people present.
- Remove anything that is obviously causing the person distress.
- If there are people present who are not being helpful or respectful, or are causing the person discomfort, ask them to leave.

### Do not:

- Do not dismiss or ignore the person's panic attack.
- Do not minimise their symptoms or what they're experiencing, e.g. "Don't panic", "Don't over-react", "There is nothing to worry about", "Just calm down".
- Do not criticise them for having a panic attack or for their behaviour during the panic attack.
- Do not express pity to them.

# PANIC ATTACKS: MHFA GUIDELINES

- Do not overwhelm the person with too much talk because this may increase their level of panic. Only ask questions that will guide how best to assist them.
- Do not pressure the person to explain what has caused them to panic. They may not be aware of the cause.
- Do not grab, hold or restrain them, and do not touch them without their permission.

## What if the person doesn't want to talk or refuses your help?

If the person does not wish to talk, respect this. If they seem unfriendly or rude, try not to take it personally. If they refuse your help, or wish to manage the panic attack on their own, respect their wishes. Ask them if there is anyone they would like you to call for help.

## Communicate calmly and clearly

Try to remain calm and avoid becoming caught up in the panic. Speak clearly and slowly using short sentences and be patient with the person. Speak to the person in positive and supportive terms, e.g. "You will be okay, this will pass soon".

## Coping strategies that might help during a panic attack

If the person is using coping strategies that are working for them, encourage them to continue using them. After they've engaged in the coping strategies, tell them that they're doing a good job.

Encourage them to try to slow their breathing down gradually by taking slow, even breaths. You can help them get their breathing under control by demonstrating and talking them through how to do this.

It is important that you do not pressure the person to do something they do not want to do.

## WHAT SHOULD I DO AFTER THE PANIC ATTACK HAS ENDED?

After the panic attack has passed, check with the person if they feel okay on their own before you leave.

Ask them if they know where they can seek help and advice. If they don't know, offer some suggestions, e.g. GP or family doctor or an appropriate health professional.

Tell the person effective professional help is available for panic attacks and there are a range of treatments that work. These include:

- Behaviour therapy
- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)
- Computer-aided psychological therapy (CAP)
- Antidepressant drugs
- Bibliotherapy
- Relaxation training.

*Source: Reavley NJ, Jorm AF, Wright J, Morgan AJ, Bassilios B, Hopwood M, Allen NB, Purcell R. A guide to what works for anxiety: 3rd Edition. Beyond Blue: Melbourne, 2019.*

Encourage the person to see their GP or family doctor or an appropriate health professional if:

- they have panic attacks in the future,
- they say they've had recurring panic attacks, or,
- they've changed their life to prevent panic attacks occurring.

## PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

These guidelines are designed to help members of the public to provide first aid to someone who is having a panic attack. The role of the first aider is to assist the person until appropriate professional help is received or the crisis resolves.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THESE GUIDELINES

These guidelines are based on the expert opinions of people with lived experience of panic attacks (consumers and carers) and mental health professionals (clinicians, researchers and educators) who are from Australia, Canada, France, New Zealand, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

## HOW TO USE THESE GUIDELINES

It is important to tailor your support to the needs of the person you are helping. These guidelines are a general set of recommendations only, and most suitable for providing mental health first aid in high-income countries with developed health systems.

These guidelines have been developed as part of a suite of guidelines about how to best assist a person with mental health problems. These other guidelines can be downloaded from:

[mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines](https://mhfa.com.au/resources/mental-health-first-aid-guidelines)

Although these guidelines are copyright, they can be freely reproduced for non-profit purposes provided the source is acknowledged. Please cite these guidelines as follows:

Mental Health First Aid Australia. Panic attacks: MHFA Guidelines. Melbourne: Mental Health First Aid Australia; 2021.

Enquiries should be sent to: [mhfa@mhfa.com.au](mailto:mhfa@mhfa.com.au)