



SOS Digital - Providing Support to Students in Distress

Panic Attacks

Self-Help Guide for Staff



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PANIC ATTACKS: HOW TO RESPOND AND PREVENT THEM

1. How to recognize a panic attack?

The panic attack is a sudden, intense and brief crisis of fear of imminent danger, going mad, losing control or dying. These attacks can occur for no apparent reason or triggered by some stimulus or situation. They are very distressing and can be accompanied by dizziness, nausea, palpitations, tremors, sweating, abdominal distress, etc. It is important to note that signs and symptoms of a panic attack can be like those of a heart attack. When in doubt, it is always best to seek medical help immediately. This is particularly important if the individual suffers from diabetes, asthma or other medical conditions.

The panic attack can be sporadic or recurrent. This episode quickly reaches its peak in ten minutes and does not usually last more than twenty minutes, but it is such an intense discomfort that it causes great concern and can condition a person's life.

2. Risk factors

The causes of panic attacks can be very different. Usually, the first attack occurs during a particularly stressful period for the individual. The stress can be due to an acute event (i.e., important changes in life, losses, periods of overwork or lack of rest) or to the accumulate of several concomitant negative events. Many attacks do not have a clear cause or, at least, the person is not consciously aware of what it might be. For this reason, determining the cause may not be easily reachable, especially in the immediate future.

HOW TO HANDLE STUDENTS' PANIC ATTACK?

How to approach the person?

- ✓ Speak to the person in a calm tone, using short, simple sentences in order to reassure them and make them feel that they are not alone. Simple sentences like, "I'm here with you," can be fine.
- ✓ Use encouraging statements to help the person tell them: "It's hard, I know you're very scared", "It lasts a few minutes but it ends".

What to do?

- ✓ Accompany the person to a quiet place, possibly away from other people and make them take a comfortable position by asking if they prefer to stand, sit or lie down.
- ✓ Help the person to undertake a simple physical task, whether it is to walk or to breathe rhythmically and deeply. The goal is to divert the person's attention from "his/her" panic.
- ✓ Invite the person, guiding them if necessary, to gradually breathe more slowly, doing it together with them.
- ✓ Try to comply with any practical requests, such as sitting on a bench, drinking a glass of water, making a phone call to someone who might be able to help.

What not to do?

- ✓ Do not to leave the person alone. Even if you feel that you are not being helpful, always remember that we are at least a distraction for the person. If, on the other hand, the person expressly requests it, it is good to leave the person alone.
- ✓ Avoid being hectic or unpredictable. If you feel that you are unable to intervene, ask another person to do so.
- ✓ Never touch a person who is having a panic attack without asking and obtaining his/her permission to do so. In some cases, this may increase the panic and make the situation worse.
- ✓ Do not deny or belittle his/her fears, saying phrases like "there's nothing to worry about", "it's all in your mind" or "you're overreacting" will only aggravate the problem. Although it seems clear to us that there is no real reason to be afraid, in these specific situations, this is very real for the individual.

USEFUL CONTACTS

- ✓ If you are a staff from UMinho please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a staff from UniTrento please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a staff from USC please click [here](#)
- ✓ If you are a staff from AMU please click [here](#)

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