



**SOS Digital - Providing Support to Students in Distress**

## ***Panic Attacks***

### ***Self-Help Guide for Students***



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## PANIC ATTACKS: HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

"Suddenly, without real danger, you feel a strong sense of fear, your heart beats fast, your breath gets stuck in your throat, you start shaking and you think you are going to die." It is a panic attack: a sudden irrational fear. The danger is invisible, the physical sensations are real: palpitations, sweating, trembling of legs and hands, sensation of warmth in the head. You are afraid of dying, you think you are alone and that no one will help you, that others will laugh at you, you think you are going crazy. Panic is related to the feeling of being stuck and with no way out. It is a strong feeling that lasts a few minutes, and when it ends you might feel exhausted, powerless and scared.

### Has this ever happened to you?

People who experience a panic attack often feel uncomfortable and prefer to not talk about it. However, talking about it with someone is important because it helps to reduce shame and restore calm. Please, remember that many have experienced a panic attack at least once in their life and, more importantly, they have found a way out. **Remember, it is essential to always consult a mental health professional and NOT make self-diagnosis.**

### What is a panic attack?

People who have experienced a panic attack describe it as a brief but very intense episode of fear of losing control, going mad, dying, having a heart attack or having a stroke. 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.

In most cases, the panic attack is accompanied by physical symptoms like feeling of suffocation, palpitations, sweating, tremors, pain or discomfort in the chest. In addition to the physical symptoms, there are also cognitive symptoms like fear of dying or "going crazy". The symptoms of this intense fear or discomfort appear suddenly (or develop suddenly), can be triggered by a certain situation (such as fear of enclosed spaces or during a car trip, occur at night causing awakenings) or appear without a prior signal.

After the first panic attack the individual can develop a strong concern and he/she might live in a constant state of apprehension. "If the first attack was unexpected then it could reoccur again without any warning", this thought is very common among those who suffer from panic attacks and leads subjects to remain in a state of constant tension, in a sort of anticipatory anxiety, of "fear of fear" that leads to increase the level of stress and, thus, encourage future attacks. A vicious circle is then established, where it is the "fear of having a panic attack" that fuels the anxiety enhancing the possibility of having a new panic attack.

### Why do you develop a panic attack?

The causes of panic attacks can be very different. Usually the first panic 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 accumulation of several concomitant negative events.

### Risk factors

People who have panic attacks tend to experience negative emotions and have the disposition to believe that symptoms of anxiety are harmful. Also, they can have a distorted perception of themselves and the environment, as follow:

**Perception of the self** > The most frequent fears are related to the inability to face the world and self-manage. It concerns one's own physical and mental health (e, g., being psychologically vulnerable, being physically weak, being particularly vulnerable to external problematic situations such as tensions in the family or at work, fear, finally, loss of control).

**Perception of the environment** > The world is perceived as threatening, hostile, unpredictable, uncontrollable. Those who suffer from panic attacks do not tolerate change and would like to keep everything still and under control.

### How to cope with a panic attack

How do you handle a panic attack, scale back emotions out of control and return to focusing on finding effective solutions to problems?

### What is important to know

- ✓ Panic attacks are not uncommon
- ✓ You do not go crazy
- ✓ During an attack you suffer but you do not die, it is a psychological problem not a heart attack/stroke.
- ✓ The attack lasts a few minutes and then passes

### If you have a panic attack, you can try handling it this way:

- ✓ **Reach a quiet place** to eliminate excessive external stimuli and encourage concentration on yourself.
- ✓ **Breathe out slowly**, throwing the air out with your mouth in a controlled manner. Try to concentrate on your breathing, which can become irregular due to anxiety (for example, it may increase the frequency of your breathing and cause hyperventilation).

- ✓ By making the rhythm of your breathing more regular (10/12 breaths per minute while slowly inhaling and exhaling) you can **control your breathing**; it helps you to focus your attention and recover a sense of calm.
- ✓ Try to **relax your muscles** by walking slowly.
- ✓ Try to **slow down the flow of thoughts**, for example by focusing on one thing or counting calmly, trying to visualize the numbers that count one second at a time.
- ✓ Learn to recognize your possible fragility and the emotions that make you feel this way (for example you may be unable to face a train trip at the moment but this does not mean you are a failure, you may have a moment of discomfort, you may need more time to deal with changes).

### Myths and prejudices about panic attacks

<b>Myth:</b> People who suffer from anxiety are weak.	<b>Reality:</b> Many people think it is unacceptable to feel fearful or weak, but this is not the case.
<b>Myth:</b> Anxiety issues must be kept hidden	<b>Reality:</b> Anxiety and negative emotions are not something we can or must hide: the more we want to hide them, the more disruptive these emotions might become.
<b>Myth:</b> Anxiety is not so common	<b>Reality:</b> Anxiety is an emotion not only common but also desirable because it alerts us when it is necessary. Many of the clinical characteristics of anxiety are manifested by all people.
<b>Myth:</b> People who suffer from anxiety should stop having illogical and irrational fears	<b>Reality:</b> Underestimating a person's fears is not a good strategy. The more you try to reduce it, the more the person feels that he/she is not understood, enhancing the fear and the sense of being problematic.

### Important recommendations:

Panic attacks can be managed in a number of different ways. In general, when faced with frequent panic attacks, it may be necessary to rule out organic causes (for this reason it is advisable to refer to your general practitioner in the first instance).

The first essential step is to get help. A panic attack is a wake-up call, it is a symptom that should be analysed in-depth. You should **seek professional help** to understand its meaning and find the most effective strategies to manage it. Treating a panic attack, asking for help as soon as possible, prevents the problem from becoming chronic.

## USEFUL CONTACTS

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

## REFERENCES

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