

Panic Attacks

What happens in your body during a panic attack?

Your amygdala consists of two small almond shaped parts of your brain that play a major role in processing emotions. It also plays a role in managing behavior, emotional control, learning, and your senses. The amygdala is part of a larger network in your brain called the limbic system. When it comes to survival, your amygdala and limbic system are extremely important. These are parts of your brain that automatically detect danger. The amygdala is responsible for activating your fight-flight-freeze-fawn response. When you encounter a threat, whether it is a grizzly bear or a swerving car, your amygdala sends a distress signal to your hypothalamus - a tiny command center that sits atop the brainstem and coordinates involuntary bodily functions such as breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate. Your hypothalamus then fires messages via the autonomic nervous system to the adrenal glands, prompting them to flood your bloodstream with hormones including adrenaline and cortisol. These chemical messengers engage your body's survival reflexes and prepare it to take defensive action.

During a panic attack, your amygdala activates your fight-flight-freeze-fawn response. Panic attacks may be activated by a feared object or situation, or they may occur for no apparent reason. Researchers do not understand why this happens, but the physical effects are real. During a panic attack, the adrenaline levels in the body can spike to 2.5 times or more. Panic attacks can include several of the following symptoms:

- Heart palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Sensations of shortness of breath or smothering
- Feelings of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed, or faint
- Chills or heat sensations
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Feeling like things are not in reality or feeling detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying

It is important to know that panic attacks are *not* life-threatening. They usually pass after several minutes (typically within 20 minutes), but they can linger longer than that. Afterward, you may feel drained and exhausted.

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Strategies to Help Yourself Cope with Panic Attacks

Talk Yourself Through the Panic Attack

- Recognize what is happening. Tell yourself, “This is just a panic attack. I know what this is. It’s going to pass.”
- Know that panic attacks will not harm you. Tell yourself, “I’m safe. I’m going to be okay.”
- Know that most panic attacks resolve within approximately 20 minutes or less.

Identify Colors Grounding Technique

- Ask yourself or have someone else ask you to identify items around you that are a specific color. Go through as many colors and questions that you need to until your body starts to calm and relax. For example:
 - What are 4 things around you that are brown?
 - What are 3 things around you that are blue?
 - What are 2 things around you that are black?
 - You can also ask questions about things that are not around you. For example:
 - Name 2 animals that are yellow.
 - Name 3 things that sparkle.
 - Name 4 things that are silver.
- The specific numbers you choose are not important, as long as they are 5 or below.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique

Identify:

- 5 things you can **see**
- 4 things you can **feel**
- 3 things you can **hear**
- 2 things you can **smell**
- 1 thing you can **taste**

TIPP Skills

T – Temperature (Cold)

- Splash cold water on your face, or put your face in a bowl of cold water and keep it under water for as long as you can tolerate
- Drink cold water
- Run your hands and wrists under cold water
- Take a cold shower
- Put an ice pack or zip-lock bag of cold water over your eyes and cheeks or on the back of your neck

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I – Intense Exercise

- Do 20 seconds of intense exercise followed by 1-2 minutes of moderate exercise. For example, run in place as fast as possible, do jumping jacks, run up and down stairs, etc., followed by 1-2 minutes of the same activity at a moderate level/slower pace. Repeat as often as needed.

P – Paced Breathing

- Take slow deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Completely fill your lungs down through your diaphragm. This should cause your belly to expand when you inhale.
- Be sure to **exhale longer** than you inhale. Ideally, your exhale should be twice as long as your inhale. This engages your parasympathetic nervous system which slows your heart rate and breathing, lowers your blood pressure, and relaxes your body.
- Some people find it helpful to use the 4-7-8 breathing technique:
 - Breathe in through your nose for the count of 4
 - Hold your breath for the count of 7
 - Exhale through your mouth for the count of 8

P – Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Starting at your feet, progressively go up your body tensing each major muscle group one group at a time for a few seconds and then fully relax that area.
- Notice the tension in your body/muscles when you tense your muscles.
- Then release the tension and notice the difference in how your body feels.
- When you have finished going through each muscle group, tighten the muscles in your entire body all at once. Then fully relax your entire body. Take a slow deep breath in and out, and pay attention to how relaxed your body feels.

Identify Items in the Room, Animals, or Things that Start with Letters of the Alphabet – ABC Game