

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

# Understanding and Treating Panic Attacks

Many of us have at some point in our lives experienced a moment of extreme terror when faced with a dangerous situation—even if only in nightmares. Typically we experience a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, tightened chest, sweating and perhaps even shaking. Multiply these symptoms 10 fold, and you have some idea of what it feels like to experience a panic attack.

Unlike normal fear, which is an appropriate response to genuine danger, panic attacks can initially arise out of the blue or as a spontaneous response to irrational or imagined fears such as speaking to strangers or taking a bus. Attacks can be so debilitating that they themselves become the focus of exaggerated fear, leading to a cycle of terror-panic attack-terror.

If this sounds familiar, it's time for a chat with your doctor. Panic syndrome can usually be successfully treated. Get help and get back to living.

**Tips and Tools You Can Use**

Panic syndrome is a relatively common condition. Treatment may take a while, but is usually highly successful, particularly when medication and behavior therapy are combined. Symptoms may include:

- Trembling or shaking
- A choking sensation or difficulty breathing
- Racing heart beat
- Dizziness or disorientation
- Tight chest
- Profuse sweating or blushing
- Numbness or tingling
- An urge to flee
- The fear that a heart attack or death is imminent

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Some of these symptoms may also be signs of more serious illness. It's important to check with your doctor.

**Treatment**

Your physician will give you a thorough physical examination to rule out any physical medical conditions and will recommend an appropriate course of action.

Cognitive Behavior Therapy is proving highly effective. Depending on your situation, this may be through a group therapy program or through individual counselling sessions. Highly effective medications are also available, which form a crucial part of the recovery process for many. A combination of medication and therapy is reported to be achieving the highest success rates.

**Helping Yourself**

There are many simple things that can be done to help manage panic disorders through decreasing stress and increasing general health. Here are some tips to help you start enjoying life to the fullest again:

- Lifestyle changes can help compliment treatment recommended by your doctor
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine, nicotine and alcohol
- Exercise regularly
- Follow a balanced, nutritious diet
- Follow a healthy sleep pattern—go to bed at the same time each night
- Consider whether you are carrying too much stress—could a relative or colleague share some of your responsibilities?

Panic attacks can be frightening, and left untreated can become part of a devastating cycle. The first step towards recovery is recognizing the problem. Panic disorders can generally be easily treated over time through a combination of lifestyle changes and medical treatments. If panic is affecting your quality of life, seek medical advice.