

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

Understanding Panic Attacks

With the high-speed pace of day-to-day life, everyone faces anxiety from time-to-time. When facing a frightening or stressful situation, the brain releases adrenalin, causing a sudden rush of energy and attentiveness. It's part of life and part of nature.

While a small amount of anxiety is useful—giving the strength to escape a life-threatening situation or the energy to meet a tight deadline—for people who suffer from panic attacks, the effects can be devastating.

What is a Panic Attack?

Panic attack sufferers are overwhelmed by physical symptoms, often triggered by an embarrassing social situation or a flashback to a traumatic event. These can include hyperventilation, a fast heartbeat, sweating, nausea, loss of voice, and trembling. During an attack, a sufferer often feels a loss of control, and may think he or she is having a heart attack or seizure. Attacks generally peak at around 10 minutes long.

Why Does It Happen?

Panic disorders afflict about 13 per cent of the population. Research suggests the disorder often runs in families, and that first-time sufferers are generally between age 18 and 35. Women are twice as likely as men to be affected.

Along with a genetic predisposition, other possible causes can include: exposure to a traumatic event, a high-pressure or unhealthy lifestyle, and drug or alcohol abuse.

Most sufferers tend to interpret small problems as potential catastrophes. As a result, their reactions are out of proportion to the events that trigger them. Panic attacks can also cause sufferers to change their lifestyle, avoiding situations and places where attacks have occurred.

What Causes a Panic Attack?

Social anxiety. For some, the pressure of being watched by others can trigger an anxiety attack. Often, these people had negative social experiences in their youth. Parties, events and public places like shopping centres and grocery stores can trigger attacks.

General anxiety. Among the most common of all psychiatric illnesses, general anxiety often causes people to feel like things are going wrong, or a catastrophe is waiting to happen. Seemingly small problems, such as getting stuck in a traffic jam, can set off a severe attack.

Post-traumatic stress. Victims involved in, or witness to, a traumatic event—such a robbery, or a natural disaster—can be plagued by flashbacks, which can trigger sudden panic attacks.

If you suspect that you have an anxiety disorder, the condition leading to panic attacks, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you often worry everything is going wrong?

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- Do you tend to make every small problem into a major catastrophe?
- Does worrying interfere with your sleep?
- Do you often have a sudden and intense fear for no reason?
- Did you experience a traumatic event, which you still constantly think about?
- Have you changed your lifestyle or daily routine because of fear or worrying?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, seek out support from a professional who can help you determine the best course of action. Panic attacks can be a strange and frightening experience. But once recognized and understood, they can generally be managed.