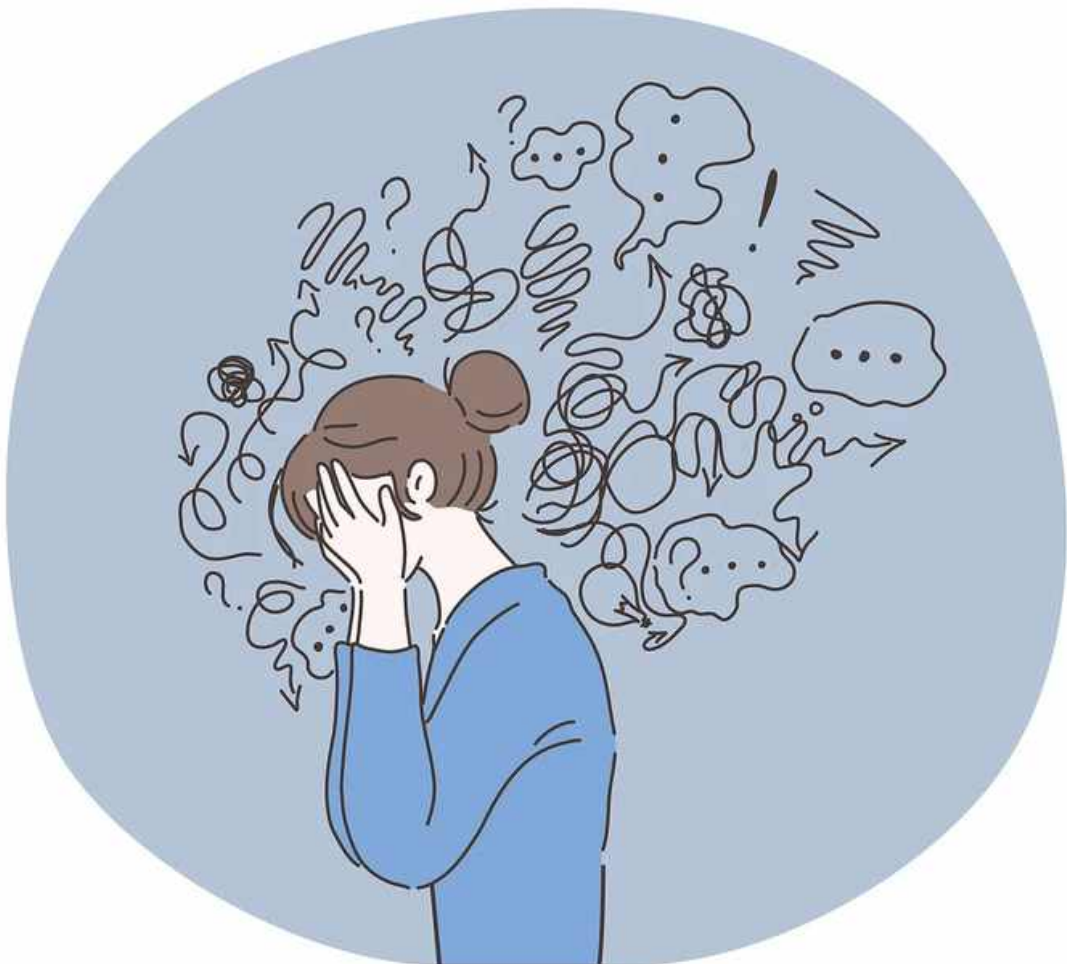


A guide to **UNDERSTANDING PANIC ATTACKS**



Developed as part of
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

UNDERSTANDING PANIC ATTACKS

Ever had one of those days where stress feels like it is sitting on your chest like a big block? Maybe it is the pile of homework staring at you, a test that is way too soon, or just that constant anxious feeling that will not go away.

Stress and anxiety are natural, but sometimes, our brains go into overdrive and hit the panic button. When that happens, it can feel really scary, like something is seriously wrong. This is what we often call a panic attack.

Imagine this: You are in class, minding your own business, when suddenly your heart starts racing like you just ran a marathon (but, you did not). Your chest feels tight, your palms are sweaty, breathing seems like a task and your brain is screaming, "Danger!" But there is no actual danger.

So, what is happening? You might be having a panic attack.

Don't worry, you are not alone, and this guide is here to help you understand what is going on and, more importantly, how to deal with it.



What is a Panic Attack?



A panic attack is like your brain hitting the emergency alarm button—even when there is no fire. It is an intense rush of fear or discomfort that comes out of nowhere, making you feel like something terrible is happening. When this happens, it is common for the heart to race, the chest to feel tight, and breathing to get shallow. Sometimes, you might even feel dizzy or detached from reality, as if you are watching yourself from the outside. Panic attacks can last anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour, peaking at 10-20 minutes, but they always pass.

Even though a panic attack can feel terrifying, it is not dangerous. It does not mean you are losing control, going “crazy”, or having a heart attack. It is simply your body reacting to stress in an intense way.

Signs and Symptoms of a Panic Attack



Racing heart
(fast heart
beats)



Shortness of breath (feeling
out of breath or not being able
to take a deep, full breath)



Dizziness or feeling
faint or trembling



Sweating or
chills



Nausea or
stomach
discomfort



Feeling detached
or like things
aren't real



A strong urge to
escape (not knowing
from what)

Early Warning Signs

Sometimes, your body gives you a heads-up before a panic attack kicks in. Watch out for:



Feeling unusually restless or on edge



Your mind racing with "what if?" thoughts



Tension in your muscles



A sense of dread without knowing why



Sudden stomach aches or nausea



Difficulty concentrating or feeling spaced out



Feeling like you need to leave a situation, even if there's no real reason



Feeling unusually sweaty or flushed without physical exertion

Why Do We Experience Panic Attacks?

Our brains are wired to protect us from danger. Imagine our ancestors out in the wild—if they saw a lion, their brains would instantly trigger a fight-or-flight response. This means their heart would beat faster, their muscles would tense up, and their breathing would quicken to prepare them to run or fight. This response helped them survive.

Now, fast forward to today- we are not facing lions, but our brains can still have the same intense reaction when in danger—even if the “danger” is a big test, public speaking, or a stressful situation. This misinterpretation of a stressful event as extreme danger can sometimes trigger a panic attack.

Remember, panic attacks, while terrifying, are not harmful. They do not make one faint (our blood pressure actually rises!), they do not mean we are losing our mind, and they always pass. Your body simply needs time to realize that there is no real threat and slowly return to feeling calm and in control again. Understanding this can help make panic attacks feel less overwhelming.

So, what can cause some people to have more panic attacks than others?

Apart from the way one's brain may be interpreting stress, factors like genetics, past stressful experiences, and even caffeine can make some people more prone to panic attacks. The key thing to remember is that a panic attack is just your body overreacting to stress—it doesn't mean something is actually wrong.



Here is a list of common events and things that can cause students to have a panic attack. Read through the list and reflect of whether any of these sometimes trigger panic attacks for you:

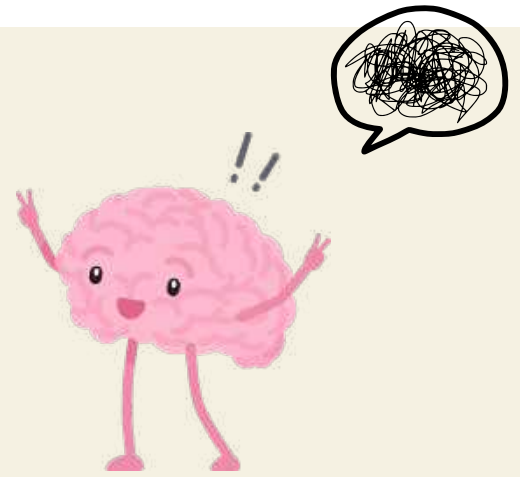
- Tests and exams: especially if we are expecting ourselves to be 'perfect'
- Public speaking
- Social situations like meeting a new group of people
- Big changes such as new school, new friends, new schedule
- Conflict or argument with friends or family
- Loud sounds or crowded places
- Trying something new



source:bettermeme

Are Panic Attacks and Anxiety the Same?

Simply put, they're not the same. Anxiety is like a slow-burning fire—it builds gradually, filling your mind with worry and tension. A panic attack is like a firework—sudden, intense, and over almost as quickly as it began. One drains you over time, the other overwhelms you all at once.



Anxiety

Panic Attack

Duration and Intensity

It builds up slowly over time, like a pot of water gradually heating up. It can last for hours, days, or even weeks.

It hits suddenly and intensely, like someone turning the heat up to full blast in seconds.

Trigger

It is often linked to a clear worry or stressful event—like an upcoming test, a big social situation, or a conflict with a friend.

Can come out of nowhere, even when you are not feeling particularly stressed. Your body suddenly goes into "emergency mode", often without an obvious reason.

Physical Sensations

Can cause restlessness, muscle tension, headaches, stomachaches, and trouble sleeping. You may feel on edge but still in control.

Brings intense physical symptoms like racing heart, dizziness, sweating, trouble breathing, and sometimes feeling like you are outside your own body.

Thoughts Involved

Anxiety is like an overthinking spiral. You might think, "What if I mess up?", "What if they judge me?" and keep replaying worst-case scenarios in your mind.

A panic attack often comes with more extreme thoughts, like "I am dying", "I am having a heart attack", or "I am going to faint." The fear is immediate and overwhelming.

Aftermath

It can linger for a long time and affect daily activities.

It is short lived but might leave you feeling drained or exhausted. Some people fear having another attack that can lead to more anxiety.

Coping with Panic Attacks

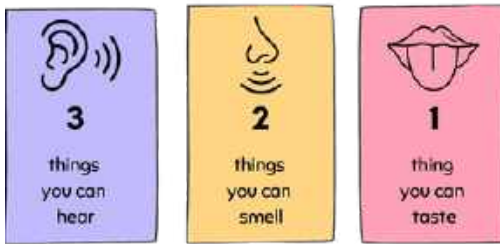
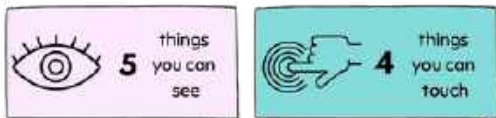
Immediate Coping Strategies

When panic attacks strike, you can try a few doing the following to make them manageable or pass faster:

1 Grounding Techniques: Often used to help one reconnect with the present moment; often involves using our senses to focus on pleasant or comfortable sensations.

5-4-3-2-1 Method:

Name



source:zenful

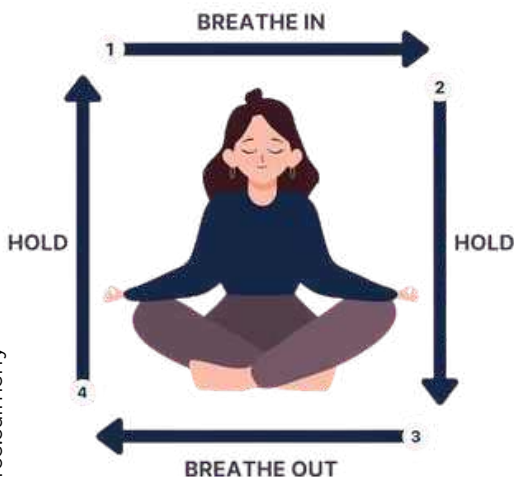
It helps bring you back to the present.

Hold something cold or comforting:



Holding an ice cubes or a cold water bottle – feeling something icy can snap you out of panic mode. You can also try holding something comfortable and pleasant – like a soft toy, soft pillow or a smooth and cold surface. This can help us focus on a pleasant sensation and reduce the feeling of overall discomfort.

2 Relaxation Exercises: Simple and quick exercises that can help the body and mind relax, thereby reducing the feeling of panic and extreme worry.



source:calmerry

Box breathing: Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4. Repeat.

Breathe in through your nose like you are smelling cookies, exhale through your mouth like you are blowing out birthday candles.

Turtle Retreat Exercise

Sometimes, when panic overwhelms us, our body shifts into a “freeze” state. According to research, the Turtle Retreat Exercise helps activate the dorsal-vagal system, promoting relaxation and safety.



How to Do It:

- Sit in a comfortable position and gently tuck your chin toward your chest, like a turtle retreating into its shell.
- Wrap your arms around yourself in a gentle hug, creating a sense of security.
- Slowly roll your shoulders forward and take a deep breath in, imagining yourself in a cozy, protective shell.
- As you exhale, roll your shoulders back and lift your head slightly, like a turtle peeking out.
- Repeat this movement a few times while focusing on slow, steady breaths.
- Afterward, stretch your arms out and take a deep, releasing breath, signaling to your body that it is safe.

This exercise combines gentle movement, breath control, and self-soothing to activate the dorsal-vagal system, which helps shift the body from a state of panic to calm. It mimics the body's natural response to safety—like a turtle retreating, resetting, and then re-emerging with awareness.

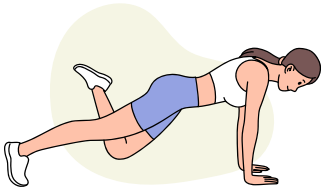
Tension and Release

Imagine you are a robot that suddenly turns into a ragdoll. Tense different muscle groups one by one (like clenching fists or scrunching shoulders), then release to feel the tension melt away. Draw or describe how your body feels before and after.

This is based on a widely-effective strategy called Progressive Muscle Relaxation. You can follow guided scripts for the same.



3 Physical Techniques: Activities that involve movement or body awareness to help reduce anxiety and bring focus back to the present moment.

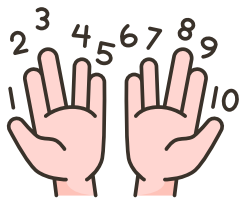


Stretch or move: Shake out your hands, roll your shoulders, or do a few jumping jacks.

Splash cold water on your face: This can activate your body's calming response.



4 Distraction Techniques: Methods that shift your attention away from distressing thoughts or feelings by focusing on something else.



Count backward from 100

Keeps your brain busy with a complex task and gives the mind something neutral to focus on.



Squeeze a stress ball/playdough/clay:

Give your hands something to do. When we engage ourselves in a simple activity and do it slowly, mindfully — we often help our bodies to relax, slow down and gain a sense of control and security.



Hum your favorite song/Listen to Music:

Engaging with music can help shift focus. Dancing to music will help to dissipate the pent up energy too!

5 Positive Self-Talk: Using kind, realistic, and encouraging inner dialogue to calm yourself and counter negative thoughts.



Remind yourself:
"This will pass.
I am safe."

"My body is just
reacting, but I am
in control."

"I have survived
this before, and I
will again."



Create a "**Calm Jar**":

Write positive reminders on small pieces of paper and put them in a jar. When panic hits, pick one out and read it. (especially helpful for people who experience "what if?" questions.)

Picture your panic attack
like a wave—ride it out,
and it will fade.



Long-Term Coping Strategies

① **Identifying and Managing Triggers: Recognizing the situations or thoughts that cause distress and learning ways to reduce or cope with their impact.**



Keep a journal to track when panic attacks most commonly happen. Patterns might emerge!

Reduce caffeine and sugar—these can amp up anxiety.



Set realistic goals to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

The Panic Survival Map

Draw a “map” of the panic experience and navigate to a safe place (real or imaginary). You can use symbols, colours and words to show what happens before, during and after a panic attack. You can also add warning signs to recognise early symptoms.

Next, add “safe zones” like reminders, quotes, calming strategies that work for you. Whenever you feel anxious, look at your map and follow the path to calmness.

2 Reframing Thought Patterns: Changing the way you think about a situation to see it in a more balanced or helpful way.



Challenge negative thoughts: Ask yourself, “Is this thought really true?”

Replace catastrophic thoughts with balanced ones: “Even if I feel anxious, I can handle this.”



You can create thought clouds — create clouds of worrying thoughts or of things that stress you out, and then try to replace them with calming/reassuring thoughts.

Becoming a Thought Detective!

Write down a panic-related thought (e.g., “I am going to faint”). Then, investigate it like a detective! Look for evidence proving it wrong (e.g., “I have experienced this before and was okay”).

Create a comic strip/journal/map where a detective helps “solve” your anxious thoughts, or simply learn from the evidence you find and see your anxiety and panic reduce!



3 Self-Care: Regular practices that support your physical, emotional, and mental well-being to build resilience over time.



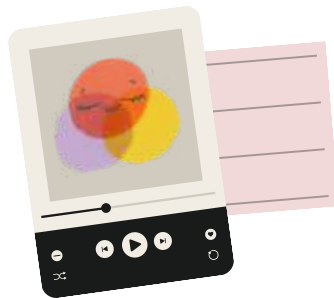
Get enough sleep — Sleep deprivation can make anxiety worse.



Exercise regularly—it helps burn off stress hormones.



Do activities that make you happy: music, reading, drawing, or anything that helps you relax.



Make a playlist of songs that help you calm down.



Try meditation or mindfulness exercises to help stay present.

Mindfulness Walk

Take a slow walk and sketch or write about five things you notice using all your senses. Describe colors, shapes, or textures in detail. This brings your focus to the present moment and reduces stress.



What to do After a Panic Attack?

Once a panic attack has passed, it's important to take care of yourself and allow your body to reset. Here are some helpful steps:



Drink water

Panic attacks can be exhausting, and hydration helps your body recover.



Move your body gently

Stretching or walking can help release leftover tension.



Do a calming activity

Listen to music, doodle, or take a warm shower to relax your nervous system.



Check in with yourself

How do you feel now? Journaling about the experience can help you recognize patterns and triggers.



Remind yourself that you are okay

Panic attacks are intense, but they always pass. You made it through, and you will again if it happens in the future.

What to Do If Someone Else is Having a Panic Attack



If a friend or classmate is experiencing a panic attack, you can help by staying calm and being supportive. Here is what you can do:

- Stay with them and remind them they are safe.
- Encourage slow breathing by breathing with them: “Let’s breathe in for four seconds, hold, and breathe out for four.”
- Offer grounding techniques, like asking them to describe five things they see, four things they feel, etc.
- Avoid saying things like “just calm down” or “it’s all in your head.” Instead, try: “I am here for you. This will pass.”
- Ask if they want space or a quiet place to sit. Some people prefer to be alone, while others need support. Respect their choice.
- Help them focus on something neutral—a song, a funny memory, or a random object nearby.
- After the attack passes, check in with them. A simple “Do you want to talk about it?” can go a long way.

When and Where to Get Help

If panic attacks are frequent and intense, talking to a school counselor, teacher, or mental health professional can help.





How to Talk About Panic Attacks

It can feel scary to bring it up, but here are some ways to start the conversation:

"Hey, I have been having these episodes where I can't breathe or I feel like I am losing control. I need someone to talk to."

"I have been feeling overwhelmed/scared and having panic attacks. Can you help me figure out what to do?"

You don't have to go through it alone. There are people who care and want to help.

B Breathe deeply (Use box breathing: Inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold for 4) 	R Recognize reality (Remind yourself: "This will pass. I am safe.") 	E Engage your senses (Use the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding method) 	A Activate movement (Stretch, shake it out, or try a "Turtle Retreat") 	T Talk to yourself kindly (Replace panic thoughts with reassuring ones) 	H Hold something cold (Ice, a cold bottle, or splash water on your face) 	E Escape the cycle (Distract yourself with music, or counting) 
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Remember

Panic attacks can feel overwhelming, but they do not define you. You are strong, capable, and not alone. With the right tools and support, you can handle whatever comes your way. And remember: Your mind may be telling you there is a fire, but you hold the extinguisher.



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