



## **What Is A Panic Attack?**

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Each year, millions of Americans experience episodes of sudden and intense fear that seem out of all proportion to the situations around them. A situation as simple as riding an elevator, eating in a restaurant, or sitting in a meeting might trigger an experience of absolute terror and an irresistible urge to flee. These experiences, known as panic or anxiety attacks, often cause people to wonder if they are having a heart attack or a “nervous breakdown.” Their intensity leaves a lasting impression.

We don't know for certain what causes panic attacks. Like many other disorders, they seem to involve elements of genetic, biological, and situational factors. Although the person often experiences the panic as having come out of nowhere, it can sometimes be associated with recent major life events that have contributed to gradually increasing levels of stress.

### **What a Panic Attack Feels Like**

Panic occurs when the mind/body alarm system goes off for no readily apparent reason. This alarm triggers a series of physical responses which prepare the individual to either fight or flee from a threat. The heart beats faster, breathing becomes more rapid, and muscle tension increases. The individual might experience a variety of symptoms that include sweating, shaking, a sensation of shortness of breath, chest pain, lightheadedness, a fear of losing control, chills, hot flashes, and other equally unpleasant sensations. Typically, these symptoms are far more terrifying than they are harmful.

Most people respond by trying to either fight or flee. Unfortunately, trying to fight the sensations only makes them worse. And fleeing, though it may ease the immediate anxiety, can lead to a pattern of fear and avoidance. Individuals begin to fear situations similar to the one in which they felt the anxiety, and also come to fear the anxiety itself. They begin to live at a high level of alert, always fearing that the panic will return.

## The Good News: Help is Available

Effective treatments are available to help individuals manage panic attacks. It is usually a good idea to begin with a physical examination by a primary care physician to rule out any medical cause for the symptoms. Sometimes the physician will prescribe anti-anxiety or antidepressant medication to provide temporary relief from the distressing symptoms of a panic attack.

Psychologists and other mental health professionals can help people to develop skills and learn strategies for long-term management of panic. In many cases, people benefit most from a combination of counseling and medication. Self-help books can provide valuable information about panic attacks and how to control them. In-person and online support groups offer an opportunity to share resources and lessons learned from experience.

The bad news about panic attacks is that they are intensely terrifying. The good news is that they are treatable. For more information about anxiety and panic disorders, including free online support groups, contact the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#).

*Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.*