

## What is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is a brief episode where a person experiences intense anxiety, which causes the physical sensations of fear. A panic attack can last a few minutes or longer. The physical and emotional effects of an attack may last longer still.

Panic attacks are common. Up to 35 percent of the population experiences a panic attack at some time in their lives. A panic attack can also be called an anxiety attack.

Without treatment, frequent and prolonged panic attacks can be debilitating. The person may choose to avoid a wide range of situations (such as leaving their home or being alone) for fear of experiencing an attack.

## Some People May Develop Panic Disorders

For most people, the feelings of panic occur only occasionally during periods of stress or illness. A person who experiences recurring panic attacks is said to have panic disorder, which is a type of anxiety disorder. They generally have recurring and unexpected panic attacks and persistent fear of repeated attacks.

## Physical Symptoms

- Shortness of breath
- Fast heart rate / palpitations
- Pains or discomfort in the chest
- Feeling smothered or as though you are choking
- Feeling faint, dizzy or unsteady
- Feelings of unreality
- Tingling in the extremities or numbness
- Hot and/or cold flushes
- Sweating
- Trembling muscles or shaking
- Feeling nauseous
- Wanting to go to the toilet

## Thoughts and Feelings

- A sudden overwhelming feeling of fear, terror or apprehension
- An awful sense of impending doom
- Being frightened you might die
- Being scared you might go crazy or lose your mind
- Fearing you might lose control completely

*This fact sheet has been developed to provide general information to victims of crime. It is not intended as a replacement for medical, therapeutic or legal advice. If you have particular concerns please contact your general practitioner, counsellor or Victim Support Service.*

## The “Flight-or-Fight” Response

When faced with imminent danger or threat, the “flight-or-fight” response is activated by the brain. The body is flooded with chemicals, including adrenaline, that trigger physiological changes. For example, the heart rate and breathing are accelerated and blood is shifted to the muscles to prepare for physical combat or running away. It is an automatic defence response, which means we have no control over it happening or not. If we can’t escape or fight-off the danger, another automatic defensive response that gives us a chance for survival – freeze – will be activated.

Panic attacks are said to occur when the “flight-or-fight” response is triggered but there is no imminent danger. A person may experience the symptoms of a panic attack in harmless and apparently stress-free situations, such as watching television or while asleep.

Some of the factors that can cause the body to inappropriately activate the “flight-or-fight” response include:

- Chronic (ongoing) stress
- Acute stress (such as experiencing a traumatic event)
- Habitual hyperventilation – over-breathing
- Intensive physical exercise
- Excessive caffeine intake – drinking too much coffee or Coca-Cola
- Illness
- A sudden change of environment – such as walking into an overcrowded, hot or stuffy environment

Remember to always seek professional advice because illnesses can sometimes cause physical panic-like symptoms. These can include diabetes, asthma, inner-ear complaints, hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid gland) and cardiac (heart) complaints.

## Treatment Options

### Self-Help Suggestions:

- Avoid “self-talk” that puts your attention onto your symptoms – don’t tell yourself to relax and stop panicking.
- Distract yourself – this will take your attention away from your body and the symptoms you are feeling. You might like to count numbers, think of a favourite song or look at what is around you.
- Tell yourself that the symptoms of a panic attack while uncomfortable are not life-threatening.
- If you’ve had these feelings before, tell yourself that nothing bad has happened to you and you are not in any danger.
- Remember – if you flee from the situation, it will only reinforce the perception that the situation is dangerous and your panic attacks are unbearable. If you stay in it and let the symptoms pass, you will gain confidence in your ability to cope.

### Where to get help:

Your doctor  
Psychologist  
Counsellor  
Your local community health centre

## **Medical Treatment Options:**

If the physical anxiety symptoms are caused by physical illnesses, (see above) the panic-like symptoms should stop if they are treated properly.

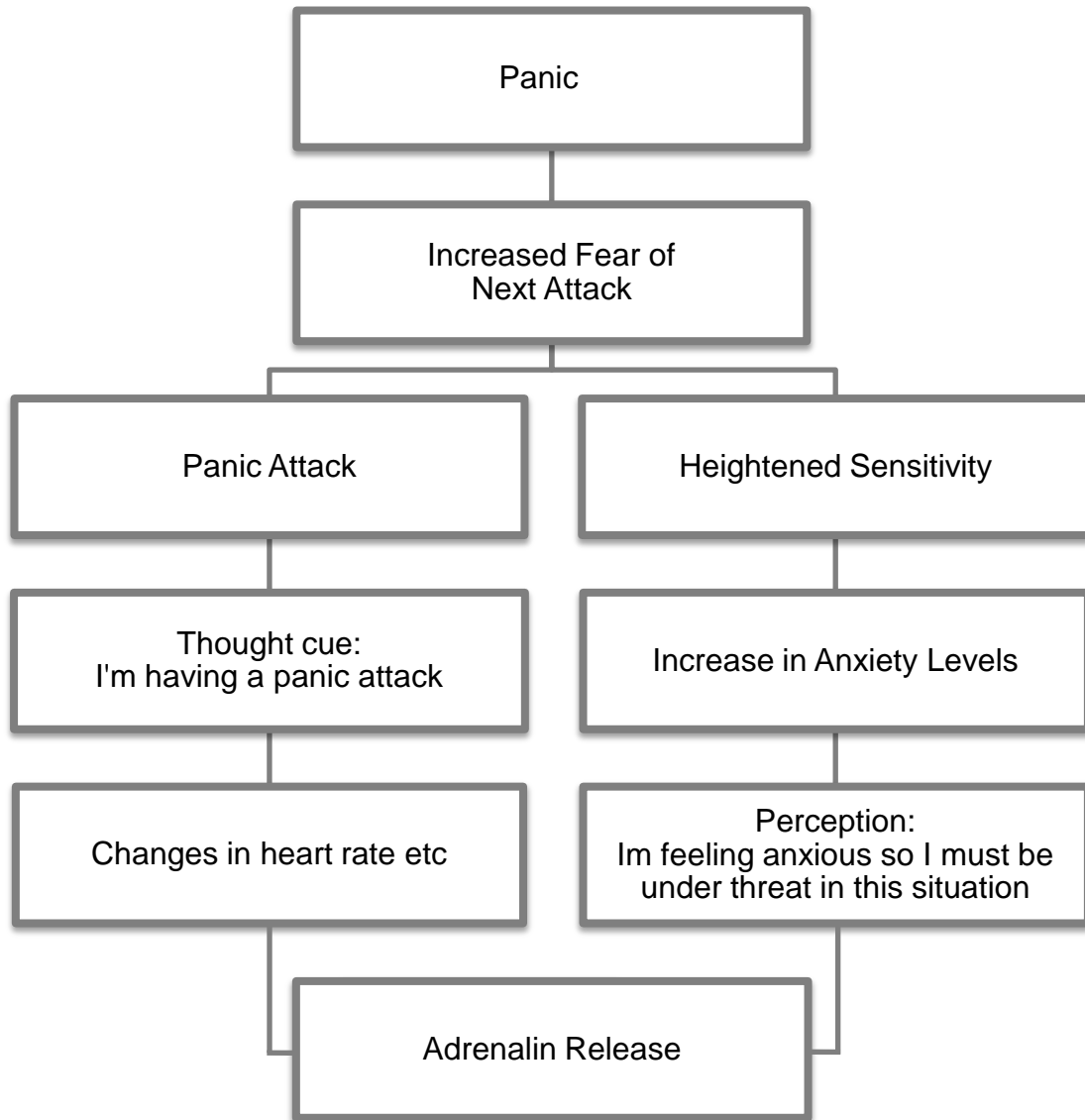
If the panic attacks are due to anxiety, then the following treatment options are available:

- Medications
- Psychotherapy, including cognitive behaviour therapy
- Stress management techniques
- Proper breathing techniques
- Relaxation techniques
- Learning problem solving skills
- Lifestyle adjustments – e.g. diet, exercise & sleep

## **Some things to remember:**

- A lot of people experience panic attacks. You are not on your own.
- The sensations you experience during the panic attack are due to sudden large amount of adrenaline in your system in preparation for your body to protect itself. So ask yourself, what is there to fear about being protected?
- Symptoms of a panic attack include extreme anxiety and physical sensations of fear, which include increased heart rate, shortness of breath, muscle tension and difficulty swallowing etc.
- Triggers can include over-breathing, long periods of stress, exercise, excessive drinking of caffeine drinks (coffee or Coca-Cola) and physical changes occurring after illness or a sudden change of environment.
- Panic attacks can be treated with a range of therapies including medications, psychotherapy and stress management techniques.

## Cycle of Panic Attacks



## Acknowledgements

Source: Better Health Channel – [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)

Ingham, Christine Panic attacks: what they are, why they happen and what you can do about them London, United Kingdom 2000