

# PANIC ATTACKS

*A Mental Health Educational Series brought to you by:  
Innovative Psychological Consultants*

## Description

A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear that has with it many physical symptoms discussed below. For most people panic attacks seem to come out of nowhere and are very intensely disturbing and strike at any time without warning. There are variations of intensity, but most last between 10-30 minutes. Many people who have panic attacks feel they are losing control, dying, or having a heart attack. It is common for people to go to the emergency room thinking they are having a heart attack and receive a normal EKG reading. They are then told that they most likely had a panic attack. Some people have only a few panic attacks sporadically across their life. Other people have regular and consistent panic attacks and develop a persistent fear of having more panic attacks, which is known as panic disorder.

## Symptoms & Features

Many symptoms of panic attacks resemble life threatening conditions, so it is important to seek medical attention and rule out physical conditions and causes of the symptoms. A panic attack can have many different symptoms. These are some of the common symptoms associated with a panic attack: 1) chest pain, 2) heart racing (tachycardia), 3) sweats, 4) shakes or trembling, 5) shortness of breath, 6) chills or hot flashes, 7) nausea, 8) dizziness, 9) fear of dying, 10) numbness or tingling, 11) fear of losing control or going crazy, 12) feeling of choking, 13) derealization (feeling of unreality) or depersonalization (being detached from one's body).

A thorough mental health diagnostic evaluation should be sought if you have had panic attacks. Panic attacks that are left untreated can turn into panic disorder. If you have had 3-5 panic attacks and spent more than a month worrying about more attacks, you may have developed panic disorder. Often times people begin to avoid places where they have had attacks previously or where they feel danger (driving) or embarrassment could result (malls). This fear of result in fear of leaving one's home (agoraphobia) as no place feels safe. It is not known what causes panic disorder, but genetics, stress, changes in brain chemistry, or obsessive worry are all thought to play a role.

## Treatment

Panic attacks are typically treated with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of both. Both have been shown to be effective. The best course of treatment for each person is something that should be discussed with your physician or mental health therapist. Medicinal treatments include: Anti-depressants, Anti-anxiety medications, or Benzodiazepines, which are often given in limited circumstances for short term relief of symptoms.

Benzodiazepines are used cautiously because they are habit forming and cause side effects such as drowsiness and reduced balance or coordination.

Behavioral Therapy and Cognitive Therapy have demonstrated through research to be especially effective in treating panic attacks. Behavioral therapies are designed to help people learn how to manage some of the physiological reactions inherent to panic attacks. Relaxation and breathing techniques are often used in conjunction with other methods to reduce the frequency and intensity of panic attacks. Cognitive therapy teaches people how to identify thoughts and distortions in thinking that may be driving panic attacks.

## What Can I Do To Help Myself

If you have panic attacks, you should get assessed by a physician and a one of the psychologists at I.P.C. to assist in making a diagnosis and figure out the best course of treatment. In addition, you can make a list of symptoms, track and log triggers or thoughts occurring at the time of the panic attack, as this will help your therapist develop treatment strategies to help you. You could learn stress management, relaxation, get exercise, and sleep. Caffeine, certain illicit, and over the counter drugs can cause or worsen panic attacks and should be avoided.