

## What Are Panic Attacks? How Do I Stop Them?

Panic attacks are intense feelings of fear and anxiety that can come on suddenly. They can be associated with one or more physical symptoms, including rapid heart beat, shaking, rapid breathing (shallow breathing), tingling sensations in the arms or face (pins and needles), and feeling dizzy or light-headed, like the world is "closing in on you."

Many people fear that they will pass out or die during a panic attack, but the attacks are not physically harmful and often fade away within 10-30 minutes.

But even though panic attacks are not considered physically harmful, they are certainly emotionally harmful, often causing a fragile state of mind, wherein the sufferer obsesses over the possibility of another attack occurring. Unfortunately, this obsessive "loop" often leads to more panic attacks, producing a "cycle of panic and anxiety" that can be difficult to break.

There is also much evidence to suggest that the elevated stress levels associated with panic attacks weaken the immune system; so learning to deal with them effectively is in fact a health issue, not just an emotional health issue.

Medication is sometimes used to "cover up" symptoms of panic attacks, but in my experience, there are only two proven methods of stopping them: breathing exercises and cognitive stress reduction techniques (thinking yourself out of a panic attack). A combination of these two often produces the best results.

You can find a lot of information about breathing exercises online, but a good basic technique is to sit quietly and concentrate on slowing your breathing, making sure that you exhale longer than you inhale. This reduces slightly the amount of oxygen you are taking in, and has a calming effect that is noticeable within minutes.

We normally think of more oxygen to our system is good thing, but too much oxygen can lead to hyperventilation, which is known to produce an anxiety. You've probably seen the old "breathe into a paper bag" technique. This operates on the same principle: reduce the oxygen intake (slightly) to calm the central nervous system.

Cognitive stress reduction techniques are also effective and can be used in conjunction with breathing exercises to reduce anxiety and panic symptoms. Taking the time to learn a few of these techniques can improve your ability to deal with stress and anxiety and even stop panic attacks from occurring in some cases.

An easy but effective technique is one I call "Questions and Answers." To begin, be seated comfortably with your eyes closed, and begin mentally asking yourself the following questions:

What does it feel like to be calm and relaxed?

How would it feel right now if I were at peace with myself and the world?

How would it feel to be \_\_\_\_\_ right now? (Fill in the blank with the name of someone calm, relaxed and in control. It could be a friend, a celebrity or anyone who represents these qualities to you)

Ask the above questions calmly and slowly to yourself, pausing between each question to consider the answer. You can repeat these questions to yourself many times--just remember to ask the questions slowly and pause each time to consider the answer.

Using a cognitive technique like "Questions and Answers," combined with simple breathing exercises is one of the most effective ways of stopping panic attacks, and preventing them in the future. The more you practice these exercises, the better you will get at it, and the less panic attacks will be a part of your life.

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### About the Author

Jon Mercer recovered from a 20 year struggle with anxiety to become a successful personal development coach and author. Today he helps others

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