# Panic attack signs, and what to do if you have one

September 1 2020, by Jenn Cooper

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

We are living in scary and uncertain times, so it's hardly surprising that a new study has found the number of Google searches for "anxiety" and "panic attacks" has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Some degree of anxiety about the current situation is normal. After all, anxiety is one of the most functional human emotions we have. It's like our very own built-in alarm system that keeps us safe, warns us of danger and sends signals to our body to get ready to respond.

The global pandemic has seen a rise in threat and danger in the outside world. As a result our alarm system is switched on more than ever. We rarely get the opportunity to feel completely safe, as even in our own homes we are constantly reminded of the threat outside with the news, limits to socializing and local lockdowns.

While some anxiety is normal and helpful, it can become a serious difficulty for some, taking over every aspect of day-to-day life. In these instances, our brain tells us that everything is dangerous—making even the most normal of tasks, like going to the supermarket, or even leaving the house, seem impossible.

Anxiety can also lead to panic or anxiety attacks for some. These happen when we misinterpret something as being dangerous. It may happen when we're bombarded with messages of threat and danger, or simply when we have to leave the house. They can happen when our anxiety levels are high, and when we don't feel in control. These intense "false alarms" may make our body think we're in real danger.

Our bodies are primed for action, adrenaline pumps through our body, and our heart rate and breathing become faster to pump extra oxygen to our muscles. Our brain is telling us we are in danger and we experience sudden, intense anxiety in the form of a panic attack, in an attempt to keep us safe.

During a panic attack you might notice some common physical sensations including racing or pounding heart, feeling sick or having an upset stomach, sweating or feeling hot, shaking, hyperventilating and feeling faint.

You may also notice intrusive thoughts, such as thinking you're going to die, that something terrible is going to happen, that you may faint or lose control, that you're going crazy or that you can't cope with the current situation.

Your behavior may then change as a result, such as avoiding certain places, running to the loo, running away to get to safety, and getting angry.

These intense experiences are frightening, so it's no wonder people are looking to Google, to understand what is happening and to find ways to cope.

## Triggers

Many things can cause a panic attack, and sometimes it feels as though there's no obvious cause. Often panic attacks are triggered by feeling unsafe, either while in particular situations, or when being faced with something we have a phobia of. Some people struggle with public transport, flying or social situations—while for others it could be going to the supermarket or being in a lift that triggers one. Changes in our body can also trigger a panic attack. For instance, drinking a lot of caffeine can cause heart palpitations, which may lead to a panic attack.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic also has many triggers. For example, wearing a mask may trigger a panic attack if a person begins to feel they cannot breathe. Social distancing may make us begin to see other people as "dangerous", so being close to people, or in busy places, could trigger a panic attack.

Panic attacks can come on really suddenly, and sometimes without warning. If you start to feel like you're having a panic attack, here are five things you can do to get through it:

1. Breathe. Breathe slowly in through your nose for a count of four, and out through your mouth for a count of four. Do this several times.
2. Find distractions. Count back from 3,000 by six. Pull up a webpage and count all the "Ts" on the page. Focus on a picture or painting and count the colors or shapes. It's important to get your brain really distracted.
3. Reassure yourself. We often just trust our thoughts, but remember, during a panic attack we are misinterpreting the world as dangerous. Talk to yourself. Tell yourself you are safe and you will be OK.
4. Grounding. Ground yourself into the here and now. What is the date and time? What do you notice around about you? What can you hear, smell, touch and see?
5. Soothe yourself. Listen to some music, suck on a candy, carry a nice smell around on a handkerchief, or keep an object with you that you can focus all of your attention on. These are especially helpful to use before you go into a situation that makes you feel anxious to help keep you feeling grounded and prevent the panic attack from happening.

If you find that you've been experiencing panic attacks for the first time, or if they're becoming more frequent, there are plenty of self-help materials you can access to help you with anxiety and panic attacks including from Get Self Help, the NHS and The Center for Clinical Interventions.

However, if you find that you are really struggling, speak to your GP. They can refer you for cognitive behavioral therapy or counseling to help you manage your anxiety and panic.

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