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## Navigating Panic Disorder: Understanding, Coping and Supporting

We regularly encounter stressful and challenging situations that can heighten our anxiety or fear. But sometimes, an experience can be particularly overwhelming, and our bodies react instinctively with a physical and emotional intensity that kickstarts our fight-or-flight response. Because of intrusive thoughts, it's suddenly hard to breathe; we feel our heart racing or that we're having chest pains and start sweating. Detached from our surroundings, while consumed by racing thoughts and a sense of impending doom, we feel like we've lost control. Panic attacks are highly distressing and disruptive.

When panic attacks begin to occur repeatedly, however, the person experiencing them might start to be consumed with worry about the potential and unpredictable nature of future episodes, so much so that the fear of that possibility begins to affect their behaviour and lifestyle significantly. This is known as panic disorder. In these situations, where a pattern of recurring panic attacks develops, it is essential to seek professional help.

In this article, we'll look at the concept of a panic attack versus panic disorder. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will have panic disorder, but those with panic disorder will often experience repeated panic attacks. Panic attacks can occur with any anxiety disorder as well as other mental disorders (e.g., PTSD, substance use disorders, depressive disorders) and some medical conditions (e.g., cardiac, gastrointestinal, respiratory, vestibular). We'll explore the relationship with agoraphobia, discuss some treatment options and coping strategies that can help support someone with greater empathy and understanding. From there, we'll also address how veterans can be at increased risk of developing panic disorder and share resources that are essential to creating a supportive environment and helping to destigmatize mental health concerns.

Anxiety	Panic Attack	Panic Disorder
Feeling uneasy	A sudden, intense surge of fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeated, unexpected, and unpredictable panic attacks.</li> <li>• Constant worry about having future panic attacks can heighten anxiety.</li> <li>• Intense and overwhelming feeling of losing control.</li> <li>• Persistent fear that something terrible will happen during a panic attack.</li> </ul>
<p>Example:</p> <p>You might feel anxious before a test or a presentation.</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>You might feel a sudden surge of fear during a panic attack.</p>	

Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
A single panic attack.	Frequent panic attacks (without depression).	Regular and recurring attacks with the gradual development of additional symptoms such as anticipatory anxiety, general anxiety, or agoraphobia.	Recurring panic attacks with additional symptoms, including depression.

## Treatment Options

There are a few treatment approaches that are effective to help with panic disorder. Working with a doctor is the best place to start, as they can help you understand what might work well and consider combinations that could provide relief more rapidly.

Psychotherapy	Medication	Complementary and Alternative Therapies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps identify symptoms and triggers, plus develop ways to cope and change behaviours.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Exposure Therapy                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps address associations between fears and bad outcomes to help manage anxious feelings.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depending on which medications your doctor might recommend, relief can happen within a few weeks. Some medicines may take longer to see improvements.</li> <li>• Your doctor will discuss possible side</li> </ul>	

## Coping Strategies

Meditation and lifestyle choices such as prioritizing better sleep, regular exercise, a balanced diet and limiting alcohol intake, plus maintaining social connections, are always good ways to cope with life's stressful situations. Some specific techniques can be helpful to try when experiencing anxiety or panic attacks:

- Breathing and relaxation techniques can help regulate the body's stress response by introducing a rhythm that helps calm our automatic nervous system responses and reduce anxiety.
- The 555 breathing technique involves inhaling for a count of 5, holding the breath for a count of 5 and then exhaling for a count of 5.
- Box breathing is similar in that it involves inhaling for a specific count, holding the breath for the exact count, and exhaling for the same count. With box breathing, you add a counted pause before starting the cycle. Practitioners sometimes suggest envisioning a box shape to complete the technique.
- Mindfulness practices that help focus on sensory awareness and other grounding can also help during a panic attack and promote overall well-being. These exercises can help shift attention away from anxious thoughts.
- The 333 sensory awareness technique involves identifying and acknowledging three things you can see, three things you can hear, and three things you can touch in your immediate surroundings.

- The 54321 technique is similar but includes even more sensory awareness. You focus on naming five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste.

## How to Support Someone During a Panic Attack

1. Understand the nature of a panic attack and remember you are there to support someone experiencing one.
2. Remain calm and provide reassurance, emphasizing that the panicked feelings will pass. Talk using short sentences.
3. Encourage the person to use coping strategies that they may have learned in therapy or that you are aware of, like mindful breathing and grounding techniques. Even simply helping them count slowly aloud to ten can help slow their heart rate and make them more responsive.

Developing awareness and understanding of panic disorder is crucial to fostering compassion, being supportive and eliminating stigma around mental health. Knowing some signs and symptoms can help all of us create a better sense living in a supportive community.

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