

Counselling &  
Learning Support  
North Vancouver Campus

# PANIC ATTACKS



Capilano University

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[www.capilanou.ca/student-life/support-wellness/health-counselling-services/](http://www.capilanou.ca/student-life/support-wellness/health-counselling-services/)



## Panic Attacks

### Some Useful Information

### What is a panic attack?

You're standing in line at the supermarket, or you're sitting in a movie theatre, or on a bus. Suddenly, you start to feel fearful and panicky for no reason. Your heart starts to beat rapidly, you have difficulty breathing, and you start to feel dizzy. The feeling gets worse. You start to wonder if you're having a heart attack - or if you're going crazy. **You may be having a panic attack.**

In *Overcoming Panic Attack* (1990), Barbior & Goldman define panic attacks as "*physical symptoms of extreme fear triggered by an anxious or panicky thought, occurring when the fear reaction is inappropriate because there is no real danger present.*"

In **Panic Disorder**, there is a recurrence of these attacks and the person becomes extremely worried about having another attack. This fear (anticipatory anxiety) of a repeat attack can seriously affect a person's life, as they may find themselves avoiding many situations. In extreme cases, they may avoid all public places (a condition known as **agoraphobia**).

### What are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

In a panic attack, your body reacts, and you display some of the same symptoms as when you are in real danger. It seems as if the body is preparing its usual response to deal with threat: to either "fight or flight." In addition to the symptoms listed above (heart palpitations, dizziness, breathing difficulty), other symptoms may include:

- faintness
- shaking or trembling
- fear of losing control
- fear of dying
- chest pains
- feelings of unreality
- choking sensations
- skin tingling
- hot or cold flashes
- sweating
- nausea

It is important to understand and realize what is happening, as it seems that this very understanding is a help in reducing both the frequency and intensity of attacks.

*Birch Building, Room 267, Phone 604.984.1744*  
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## Who Gets Panic Attacks?

If you have ever experienced a panic attack, you are not alone. According to some estimates, between 9 and 14% of adults (at least in Germany and North America) have had full-blown panic attacks, and as many as 1/3 of all adults have experienced some form of panic attack. For some reason, women are twice as likely as men to have panic attacks.

Panic disorder typically begins in young adulthood. Roughly half of all people who have panic disorder develop the condition before age 24.

## What Causes Panic Attacks?

People often report that panic attacks seem to happen spontaneously, "out of the blue," and for no obvious reason. It is this apparent suddenness and randomness that makes the experience so scary for people.

The exact cause of panic disorder is unknown. There has been a suggestion that heredity and biological factors play a role as panic disorder does tend to run in families, but the research results so far are inconclusive. There is some evidence that panic attacks tend to occur initially after a person has experienced a series of stressful events (interpersonal loss, illness, endocrine changes) in their life. What does seem to be fairly well established is the fact that the duration and frequency of attacks are related to how well (or whether) a person is able to correctly interpret bodily reactions. For instance, if you feel that any increase in heart rate is cause for alarm, rather than a normal response to a certain situation, than you will probably be more prone to panic. *In other words, panic attacks are more likely to occur as a direct result of your thoughts and feelings.*

## Is There a Treatment for Panic Attacks?

It has been found that treatment has been successful with 70-90% of people with panic disorder. Early treatment is, of course, recommended. Before undergoing any treatment, however, you should first arrange an appointment with your physician. A medical examination may be necessary to rule out any underlying physical causes for the symptoms.

Effective treatment may consist of either medication, or (more likely) a form of psychotherapy called **cognitive-behavioral therapy**, or a combination of the two. The aim of cognitive therapy is to modify or eliminate thought patterns that may be contributing to client's symptoms or general level of anxiety. (Remember, a person's beliefs or thoughts or interpretations of bodily reactions can themselves increase the likelihood of a panic attack). The behavioral component of cognitive-behavioral therapy focuses on helping people change their behavior, often by learning breathing or relaxation techniques.

## What Can You Do if You Have a Panic Attack?

- ❖ Remember that panic attacks are directly linked to the sufferer's thoughts and fears that an attack might occur.
- ❖ Remember that as frightening as your feelings or symptoms may be, a panic attack is not life-threatening or dangerous.
- ❖ Remember - no one is calm all the time!
- ❖ Remember that what you're expecting is just an exaggeration of your body's normal response to a threatening situation.
- ❖ Do let your feelings run their course. Remind yourself that there is nothing to fear.
- ❖ Do practice slow, even, gentle breathing.
- ❖ Do notice the thoughts that increase your feelings of panic and try to come up with alternative messages to yourself. So, instead of saying, "*I'm going crazy*" or "*I'm going to die*", tell yourself, "*I'm just experiencing some physical symptoms. If I stay calm, they'll go away*".
- ❖ Do give yourself other calming messages: "*Just relax*", "*It will pass*", "*It's just my heart beating*".

***If your best efforts don't work, or if you have recurrences of attacks, consider one of these options:***

- Speak to someone in Counselling & Learning Support here at the University. We are located in BR 267 (Phone: 604.984.1744).
- Check with Counselling & Learning Support about resources in the Community.
- Contact one of the Resources listed on the next page.

## Where to Go For Help

### ***Anxiety Disorders Association of BC***

Phone: 604.525-7566

<http://www.anxietybc.com/>

### ***Vancouver Health Assessment & Treatment Services***

(North Shore residents only – requires a doctor’s referral)

#250 / 350 – 145 West 17<sup>th</sup> Street, North Vancouver

Phone: 604.904.3540

### ***Mental Health Information Line:***

604.669.7600 or 1-800.661.2121

### ***Canadian Mental Health Association***

[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

### ***BC partners for mental health and addictions information***

[www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

### ***Agoraphobia and Panic Foundation***

[www.paniccure.com](http://www.paniccure.com)

***For online cognitive-behavioural self-management programs, see the following websites:***

[www.paniccenter.net](http://www.paniccenter.net)

[www.anxieties.com/panic.php](http://www.anxieties.com/panic.php)