

# Understanding Panic Attacks

What they are, why they happen,  
and how to help.

## WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort that peaks within minutes and often involves strong physical sensations as well as distressing thoughts. Panic attacks can feel overwhelming and frightening, and many people describe them as feeling like they are having a heart attack, losing control, or about to faint, collapse or die.

However, panic attacks are not dangerous, even though they can feel intense and overwhelming.

Common symptoms include:

- Rapid or pounding heartbeat
- Shortness of breath or chest tightness
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Sweating, shaking, or trembling
- Nausea or stomach discomfort
- Tingling or numbness
- Feeling detached, unreal, or “not quite here”
- Vertigo or a feeling a sense of imbalance

Some people may experience panic attacks once or twice in their lives, while others can experience them more frequently.

## HOW DO PANIC ATTACKS START?

Panic attacks often begin with a physiological (body-based) sensation, rather than a conscious thought.

For example:

- A sudden change in breathing

- A skipped or rapid heartbeat
- Light-headedness from standing quickly
- Fatigue, dehydration, caffeine, or stress
- Vertigo or a sense of imbalance

For many people, the body sensation is misinterpreted as a sign of danger which can trigger a sense of vulnerability, such as:

- “Something is wrong with me”
- “I’m not safe”
- “I’m about to lose control”

Once the brain perceives a threat, it activates the fight-or-flight response, releasing adrenaline. This causes further physical sensations, which then reinforce fear, creating a self-perpetuating cycle:

**Body sensation → fear interpretation → adrenaline → more sensations → more fear**

This cycle can escalate quickly, even when there is no real external danger.

## WHY PANIC ATTACKS FEEL SO INTENSE

Panic attacks are driven by the body’s survival system. When the brain thinks there is danger, it prioritises protection over logic or reassurance. This is why:

- Reasoning with yourself can feel difficult in the moment
- The sensations feel sudden and out of nowhere
- Reassurance alone may not stop the attack immediately

Understanding that panic is a false alarm, not a failure, is a key



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1300 687 327

0800 666 367

+613 8620 5300

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step in reducing your fear of future attacks; and training your body, using strategies, to recognise the difference between a physiological and cognitive symptom can help.

## WHAT HELPS DURING A PANIC ATTACK

The goal during a panic attack is not to stop it instantly, but to help the nervous system settle and allow the wave to pass.

Helpful strategies

- Slow your breathing — Box Breathing
  - Breathe in through your nose for 4 seconds
  - Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds
  - Longer exhales signal safety to the nervous system
- Ground yourself in the present — 5 sensory meditation
  - Name 5 things you can see, hear, feel, smell and taste
  - Feel your feet on the ground or the chair supporting you
- Use calm, factual self-talk
  - “This is uncomfortable, but not dangerous”
  - “My body is trying to protect me”
  - “This will pass”
- Allow the sensations
  - Fighting panic often increases it
  - Letting the sensations rise and fall reduces the fear cycle
- Reduce stimulation
  - If possible, move to a quieter space
  - Sip water

Panic attacks typically peak within minutes and resolve on their own, even without intervention.

For preventing future panic attacks, progressive muscle relaxation exercises can help. Work on your main muscle groups

from the tip of your head down to your toes. Squeeze each muscle for 5 seconds, relax and repeat.

**Always seek professional support if your panic attacks recur or impact daily life.**

## HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE HAVING A PANIC ATTACK

If you are supporting someone during a panic attack, your calm presence matters more than what you say.

### Do:

- Stay calm and grounded
- Speak slowly and gently
- Validate their experience:
  - “I can see this is really distressing”
  - “You’re safe right now”
- Encourage slow breathing by modelling it yourself
- Ask simple, non-demanding questions:
  - “Would it help to sit or stand?”
  - “Can you feel your feet on the floor?”

### Avoid:

- Saying “calm down” or “it’s all in your head”
- Arguing with their fear
- Overloading them with questions or instructions
- Panicking and communicating your own anxiety about their symptoms
- Leaving suddenly unless they request space

Remember that you don’t need to fix the panic attack. Helping the person feel safe and supported allows their nervous system to settle naturally.



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## WHEN TO SEEK ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Professional support may be helpful if:

- Panic attacks are frequent or worsening
- Fear of panic is leading to avoidance of activities or places
- Panic is occurring alongside ongoing anxiety, trauma, or stress
- The person feels unable to cope or is distressed by the impact on daily life

Converge can help people understand their triggers, reduce fear of sensations, and build confidence in managing panic and associated symptoms and their causes.

Converge offers 24-hour, 7 day a week counselling support. Contact us via the Converge App, our website or phone - it's easy!



Download our **App** to book an appointment.



Visit **convergeinternational.com.au** to Live Chat with a counsellor.



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