



# Panic Attacks: A Guide for School Staff

## Introduction

Covid 19 has caused disruption to our lives. Many young people have coped well but, some may find the change in routine stressful. Young people will not all respond to this change in the same way, each young person will have their own unique coping mechanisms. During this time it is especially important that they pay attention to and take proactive steps to promote their wellbeing. Staying active, getting enough sleep, eating healthily, limiting their use of technology will help. However if they become more stressed and fearful the following information may be helpful.

**What is a Panic Attack?** Panic attacks are sudden feelings of intense fear or anxiety. They can sometimes happen during very challenging times but it is important to remember they do pass. The key is to stay calm and breathe.

**What causes Panic Attacks?** They can be triggered by a major life event, but sometimes there is no obvious reason why they start. There are things we can do that will help. Panic Attacks develop as follows:

### Internal or external trigger

*(an event or a negative thought)*



### Slight increase in body symptoms

*(palpitations, sweating, shortness of breath)*



### Focus on symptoms

*(heart beating faster, difficulty breathing)*



### Catastrophic Interpretation

*(“I can’t breathe”; “I am having a heart attack”)*

An event or negative thought causes an increase in adrenalin which is pumped around the body. Our body will respond to danger to protect us. This is called the “fight or flight” response. A panic attack happens when, although there is no threat or



danger, the body responds as if there is.

### **What are the Signs of a Panic Attack?**

There can be physical, behavioural and/or cognitive signs, examples of which are listed in the following tables:

#### **Physical Signs**

##### **(How the body reacts)**

Dizziness	Blurred vision
Sound distortion	Nausea
Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing	Sweating or trembling
Headaches	Diarrhoea
Skin rashes or flare ups	Butterflies in stomach
Chest/stomach pains	Loss of appetite
Tingling sensation, pins and needles (particularly in hands)	

#### **Behavioural Signs**

##### **(Things we do)**

Avoiding places	Avoiding people and social situations
Constantly seeking reassurance	Excessive drinking/smoking/eating
Difficulty sleeping/nightmares	Increased irritability

#### **Cognitive Signs**

##### **(The way we think)**

Difficulty concentrating	Difficulty making decisions
Forgetfulness	Distorted or irrational thoughts
Excessive worrying	Thinking negatively

Panic attacks can last from a few seconds to 10 minutes. An individual experiencing one may feel that they are going mad, going deaf, going blind, can't breathe or are having a heart attack. They may be worried that others will notice that they are anxious or that they might lose control and faint or start running or screaming. This might make them feel more panicked. This is the most important message for them to remember:



**A PANIC ATTACK CANNOT HARM YOU.  
IT IS NOT LIFE THREATENING AND IT WILL PASS.  
THE KEY IS TO STAY CALM AND BREATHE.**

## How to Deal with Panic Attacks?

### Things you can do to help the pupil:

- Look at *Managing Stress and Anxiety a Guide for School Staff*
- Practice relaxation techniques. Identify which ones work well for them.
- Learn about the causes of panic attacks.
- Learn about the effects of panic attacks.
- Try to figure out what triggers a panic attack in them.
- Try to identify and challenge their negative thoughts by using a 'Thoughts Log' (see below)

### During a Panic Attack

- They should not try to escape the situation.
- They might try using a paper bag to breathe into - this can help to regulate breathing.
- They should reassure themselves about what is happening by naming it "*I am having a panic attack*".
- They should repeat calming and supportive statements to themselves – "*This will pass; It's only anxiety; I am not going to faint, stop breathing, choke*" etc.
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- They may also practice deep breathing or muscle relaxation. Breathe in slowly, count to three and breathe out slowly. They should continue to do this until they start to calm down.
- They can do something that requires focused attention like a simple repetitive activity (e.g. counting backwards).
- They might distract themselves by moving around or doing something physical e.g. walking, stretching.
- They could try imagining themselves in a calming place. This is sometimes called visualisation.

It is important to remember that this takes practice. Children and young people need to stick with it. It will be very helpful if they take the time to practice these techniques when they are not feeling panicked or anxious.

Remind them that they are not alone. Talking through some of the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing, with someone they trust, will ease their stress and anxiety – it always helps to "get things off your chest".



If their panic attacks continue, they should talk to an adult and/or visit their GP for additional ways to manage them. Their GP will be able to tell them about Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

See [here](#) for list of services providing supports for young people.

## Thoughts Log

When we are anxious we engage in faulty and irrational thinking which affects the way we feel and behave. Writing down your thoughts can be a starting point in identifying your unhelpful thoughts. The next step is to challenge these unhelpful



thoughts by asking “Is this really true?” and the last step is to replace these unhelpful thoughts with positive, more reassuring ones.

<b>Unhelpful Thoughts</b>	<b>?</b>	<b>Helpful Thoughts</b>
	?	
	?	
	?	
	?	