

Don't Panic!

Understanding Panic Attacks

You may have seen someone in the throes of a panic attack. Chances are she was sweating, her heart was racing, she felt dizzy and had a tough time catching her breath. It's a frightening situation to witness, let alone experience.

Panic attacks are extremely frightening, and they plague about 1 in 75 adults. Usually, they first occur between the ages of 20 and 30. Though many people who experience a panic attack will not have another one, some will develop what is known as Panic Disorder, which causes frequent attacks and, in some cases, an unwillingness to do activities or go to places the person associates with them. Luckily, when a person recognizes her condition and seeks help, the therapy for Panic Disorder is highly effective in eliminating or greatly decreasing attacks.

Signs of a Panic Attack

- ✓ Rapid heart rate
- ✓ Sweating/hot flashes
- ✓ Trembling
- ✓ Shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- ✓ Tingling in fingers or toes
- ✓ Nausea
- ✓ Chest pain
- ✓ Headache
- ✓ Dizziness
- ✓ A sense of impending death

Many people go to the emergency room after they feel these symptoms due to the similarity to those of a heart attack. It is important to remember that although they are terrifying, panic attacks are not physically harmful.

Panic attacks start abruptly and often last about 10 minutes. They are almost always completely unrelated to the current situation the person is experiencing, and seem to come out of nowhere.

Causes of Panic

If your student experiences a panic attack, something is triggering it. Encourage her to talk with someone in the counseling center to work through her trigger points. Sometimes having an objective party to discuss things with can be a huge help. And the counselors are here on campus, ready to help!

What Causes Them?

Panic attacks are elusive—there are no sure answers as to what causes them—but researchers have found that people who are related to someone who experiences panic attacks are more likely to experience them themselves. There also seems to be a link to major life transitions: going to college (particularly if it is far from home), graduating from college, getting married, having a child, etc.

They can happen at any time, anywhere – they can even awaken sufferers from their sleep. Panic attacks occur more often in women than in men, and the anxiety that is caused by them is overwhelming. The terror is often so acute because of the feeling of a loss of control and the surprise of the attack.

Stopping Recurring Attacks

Students should seek medical advice if their panic attacks are frequent, especially if they cause consistent apprehension or if they begin to interfere with regular behaviors. Panic Disorder is serious and can worsen over time. It can even develop into phobias of places or activities where attacks have happened in the past.

Panic Disorder sufferers are more likely to be clinically depressed, have suicidal thoughts, and abuse alcohol or drugs. This is why, when someone begins to notice a pattern of attacks, they should get professional help as soon as possible. Those diagnosed with the disorder may be prescribed an anti-depressant or an anti-anxiety medication.

Also helpful and often recommended by doctors are regular psychiatric visits. With help from a psychologist or psychiatrist, sufferers will learn how to deal with their attacks—often through breathing and relaxation techniques—and also what triggers them, so they can have a better understanding of their condition. These methods have very high success rates.

So, don't panic if your student seems to be suffering from panic attacks. Work with her to get help. In the process, you'll be helping her reclaim a semblance of balance and control over her world.

Sources: www.mayoclinic.com/health/panic-attacks/DS00338; www.anxietypanic.com/; www.apa.org/topics/anxietyqanda.html