



### Contact Information

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# Understanding Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a sudden surge of overwhelming anxiety and fear. Your heart pounds and you can't breathe. You may even feel like you're dying or going crazy. Left untreated, panic attacks can lead to *panic disorder* and other problems. They may even cause you to withdraw from normal activities.

Although the exact causes of panic attacks and panic disorder are unclear, it may run in families and/or be triggered by major life transitions and stress such as graduating from college and entering the workplace, getting married, death of a loved one, divorce, or job loss.

Panic attacks can also be caused by medical conditions and other physical causes. If you're suffering from symptoms of panic, it's important to see a doctor to rule out an underlying medical condition.

Panic attacks and disorder is a very treatable condition. Cognitive Behavioral talk-therapy and Exposure Therapy have been proven to help. In addition, Antidepressants and Benzodiazepines are medications that may also help a great deal.

### Self-help Strategies

- **Learn about panic.** You'll learn that the sensations and feelings you have when you panic are normal and that you aren't going crazy.
- **Avoid smoking and caffeine.** Also be careful with medications that contain stimulants, such as diet pills and non-drowsy cold medications.
- **Learn how to control your breathing.** Hyperventilation brings on many sensations (such as lightheadedness and tightness of the chest) that occur during a panic attack. Deep breathing, on the other hand, can relieve the symptoms of panic. By learning to control your breathing, you develop a coping skill that you can use to calm yourself down when you begin to feel anxious.
- **Practice relaxation techniques.** When practiced regularly, activities such as yoga, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation strengthen the body's relaxation response.

Symptoms of a panic attack usually reach their peak within 10 minutes. Most panic attacks end within 20 to 30 minutes, and they rarely last more than an hour.

- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations or a racing heart
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Trembling or shaking
- Choking feeling
- Feeling unreal or detached from your surroundings
- Sweating
- Nausea or upset stomach
- Feeling dizzy, lightheaded, or faint
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Hot or cold flashes
- Fear of dying, losing control, or going crazy



City of Milwaukee Employee Assistance Program (EAP)