

## How is Panic Disorder Treated?

Treatment usually involves a combination of medicines, behavioral changes, and psychological counseling of some kind. Here are the goals of this treatment approach:

### 1. Reduce anxiety intensity and frequency

This can require medication, but in mild attacks people can learn to stop them by relaxing or doing something like taking a drink of water or splashing water on their face. This seems to cut off the alarm.

### Psychological Treatment

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has been proven to reduce symptoms of anxiety in children in 75-80% of cases. When the family is involved in treatment, more impressive gains can be seen. CBT is offered by specially trained professionals using a standardized model of therapy. Active components of treatment include challenging the frightening thoughts of physical harm or embarrassment and getting used to the physical sensations of anxiety by either purposely bringing them on (e.g., spinning to induce dizziness) or naturally (e.g., exercising to increase heart rate) and finally entering previously avoided situations.

### Medication Treatment

◆ “Minor tranquilizers” [alprazolam (Xanax) and klonazepam (Klonopin)]

These sedative medicines seem to tone down the alarm system. They act quickly, within a few days, and may even be used while a longer acting medicine is being started. The main side effects are being sleepy and not able to concentrate. There is some risk of addiction with these medicines, so they should be used carefully with a doctor’s monitoring.

◆ “Antidepressants” [paroxetine (Paxil) and citalopram (Celexa)]

These medicines seem to re-set the alarm system so that it doesn’t go off as easily, but they are not generally sedatives and are definitely not addictive. Some have some side effects such as dry mouth and weight gain, and the dose needs to be monitored at higher levels because they may affect heart electrical activity if the dose is too high. The newer antidepressants have fewer side effects but may be more expensive, and may still cause upset stomach. Any of these antidepressant medicines can temporarily worsen the attacks in the first week so that the dose is raised slowly and often sedatives are used to prevent this.

### 2. Overcome the anxiety and avoidance

Stopping the panic attacks is in fact often easier than clearing up the behavioral problems that result. These include temper tantrums and separation anxiety in younger children, refusal to go to school, phobias, worrying and general loss of confidence. These difficulties often take months to sort out, while the attacks may be shut down in a few weeks. Here are some things that can help:

#### Basics

- Get enough sleep and eat regularly
- Establish a regular routine
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and drugs
- Parents must set consistent, confident limit-setting with fair consequences and rewards for successes

#### Face the fears

“Practice” going into feared situations, starting with a short period of time (15-20 min) and working up. Having a trusted person along at first can help. It is important to stay there if a panic attack does occur, as running away will worsen the avoidance problem in the future.

#### Re-build confidence

Develop assertiveness and social skills by joining activities, practicing calling friends, becoming more physically active, and taking some risks.

#### Change “Self-Talk”

When people have panic attacks, they tend to develop “worst case scenario” thinking about everyday stresses. Practice more encouraging ways of talking to yourself.

#### Control the worries

Learn tools to control worries such as locking them up in a “worry box”, writing them down, or talking them over with someone.

#### Choose a healthy environment

This includes hanging around with people who make you feel more confident, not people who put you down. Making these changes can be a lot of work, but it pays off.

### Does Panic Disorder Go Away?

Usually it does. Sometimes it goes away on its own, but generally it takes some professional help. It may come back again at another time, even ten or twenty years later. But what you learn in dealing with it this time can help you tackle it quickly if it ever does come back.

### What Are Some Other Resources?

Start with your family doctor or local Mental Health Centre for more information or to have the problem assessed. They may also suggest some books to read which can help you understand panic disorder better. Other strategies are described in the booklet “Taming the Worry Dragons: A Manual for Young People and Their Families”. To order, phone (604) 875-3549.

## Panic Disorder In Young People



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Adapted from Children’s Mood and Anxiety Disorders Clinic, Children’s and Women’s Health Centre of B. C.

## Panic Disorder in Young People

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Our bodies have an alarm system, just like houses and cars. This alarm goes off to tell us that there is danger and we had better get ready for action. It probably worked very well in situations where we were confronting wild animals on a daily basis. In our modern world, we shouldn't need to use this system very often, except in real physical danger. But sometimes this alarm system goes off anyway, just like a "false alarm" in your house or car.

Panic disorder is like having an overactive alarm system. Panic attacks seem to occur for no good reason. The problem is, just like a loud alarm system, the attack itself is very frightening.

Treatment for panic disorder focuses on resetting the alarm system to be less sensitive, and teaching people how to overcome the fears that the attacks create.

### Panic disorder is puzzling to families.

When panic occurs in young people, they often can't explain to anyone what is happening, and may become very upset, angry, withdrawn, or refuse to go to school without being able to say why. Adults may become frustrated because they cannot understand why the child is behaving so differently.

### Panic attacks are not just in your head.

In many cases, panic symptoms are so dramatic and physical that children or teens are investigated for all kinds of medical problems with their heart or stomach, or are even thought to be having seizures, until someone figures out that the real cause of these symptoms is a panic attack.

## What are panic attacks?

◆ A panic attack is a sudden, terrifying feeling of fear and physical anxiety symptoms.

### Physical symptoms that might occur:

- Racing heart or fast breathing
- Choking feeling
- Dizziness, sweating
- Chills or flushing
- Upset stomach
- Changed vision or hearing
- Tingling in hands and feet

### Thoughts and feelings that might occur:

- Terrified feeling
- Fear of losing control
- Fear of fainting or dying

This whole experience can last for 5 to 20 minutes, but may leave an anxious feeling behind even after its gone. The most common result of having panic attacks is that people **avoid** the situation in which an attack occurred. This can lead to **phobia**.

## What is the difference between panic attacks and panic disorder?

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Panic attacks are quite common, with a third of people having an attack at least once in a lifetime, usually in a stressful situation or when they are overtired or have had too much caffeine.

Panic disorder is much less common, occurring in about 2 per 100 people. In panic disorder, recurrent panic attacks occur frequently for no apparent reason, or they cause such anxiety that people can't go on with their usual activities. They may feel afraid to leave the house, be fearful of being alone, withdraw from school or other activities, or lie awake at night worrying.

## What causes panic attacks?

◆ The tendency to have panic attacks runs in families.

### Factors that can trigger panic attacks:

- Lack of sleep and not eating regularly
- Caffeine in soft drinks, coffee or tea
- Alcohol and marijuana
- Overwhelming stress
- Certain situations or phobias
- Certain times such as the onset of adolescence
- Medical problems such as overactive thyroid
- Some medications, especially for asthma

Although stress may play a role by upsetting sleep or increasing the sensitivity of a "panic alarm", panic attacks occur even when people are not particularly nervous or stressed.

## How serious is panic disorder?

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Panic disorder is not physically serious (although it can feel very dangerous for your body to have these reactions), but it is serious in the sense that it greatly interferes with daily life. Here are some of the complications of panic disorder:

- Agoraphobia (fear of going out alone)
- Reluctance to go to school
- Separation anxiety (fear of being away from parent)
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Drug and alcohol use in teens
- Unnecessary investigations for physical abuse

## How does Panic Disorder relate to other anxiety problems?

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**Social Phobia** is the fear of speaking in front of a group of people, and sometimes of meeting new people. This may be associated with panic attacks in these situations.

**Specific Phobias** are fears of things like elevators, heights, dogs, or flying. Sometimes the phobias were triggered by having a panic attack.

**Separation Anxiety Disorder** occurs in younger children and is a fear of being separated from parents. We now think that this is often triggered by having a panic attack that leads the child to fear being alone.

People suffering from **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder** or **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder** may have some panic attacks. Young people with clinical depression may also develop panic symptoms.

