

Symptoms of Panic

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A panic attack is a sudden surge of overwhelming fear that comes without warning and without any obvious reason. It is far more intense than the feeling of being 'stressed out' that most people experience. Symptoms of a panic attack include:

- racing heartbeat
- difficulty breathing, feeling as though you 'can't get enough air'
- terror that is almost paralyzing
- dizziness, lightheadedness or nausea
- trembling, sweating, shaking
- choking, chest pains
- hot flashes, or sudden chills
- tingling in fingers or toes ('pins and needles')
- fear that you're going to go crazy or are about to die

You probably recognize this as the classic 'flight or fight' response that human beings experience when we are in a situation of danger. But during a panic attack, these symptoms seem to rise from out of nowhere. They occur in seemingly harmless situations--they can even happen while you are asleep.

In addition to the above symptoms, a panic attack is marked by the following conditions:

- it occurs suddenly, without any warning and without any way to stop it.
- the level of fear is way out of proportion to the actual situation; often, in fact, it's completely unrelated.
- it passes in a few minutes; the body cannot sustain the 'fight or flight' response for longer than that. However, repeated attacks can continue to recur for hours.

A panic attack is not dangerous, but it can be terrifying, largely because it feels 'crazy' and 'out of control.' Panic disorder is frightening because of the panic attacks associated with it, and also because it often leads to other complications such as phobias, depression, substance abuse, medical complications, even suicide. Its effects can range from mild word or social impairment to a total inability to face the outside world.

In fact, the phobias that people with panic disorder develop do not come from fears of actual objects or events, but rather from fear of having another attack. In these cases, people will avoid certain objects or situations because they fear that these things will trigger another attack.

Please remember that only a licensed therapist can diagnose a panic disorder. There are certain signs you may already be aware of, though.

One study found that people sometimes see 10 or more doctors before being properly diagnosed, and that only one out of four people with the disorder receive the treatment they need. That's why it's important to know what the symptoms are, and to make sure you get the right help.

Many people experience occasional panic attacks, and if you have had one or two such attacks, there probably isn't any reason to worry. The key symptom of panic disorder is the persistent fear of having future panic attacks. If you suffer from repeated (four or more) panic attacks, and especially if you have had a panic attack and are in continued fear of having another, these are signs that you should consider finding a mental health professional who specializes in panic or anxiety disorders.