


ANXIETY ATTACKS AND PANIC

We use the terms ‘Panic’ and ‘Anxiety attack’ to refer to a sudden episode of feeling very scared & overwhelmed by physical sensations. Panic attacks involve several physical reactions or feelings. These reactions tend to happen very quickly and often come “out of the blue” – in situations where most people don’t usually feel afraid.

COMMON REACTIONS IN PANIC ATTACKS

Physical	Feeling	Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short of breath, feeling like you can’t breathe • Dizzy or lightheaded • Tingling in face or limbs • Tightness or pain in your chest • Feeling faint • Sweating • Hot or cold flushes • Dry mouth • Butterflies or nausea • Trembling and shaking • Visual disturbances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of dread – like something awful is about to happen • Feeling things around you are unreal – like you are in a dream • Feeling trapped, and an urge to escape the situation you are in • Feeling you cannot get your thoughts together or speak 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Something must be wrong – am I having a heart attack or stroke or something? • Thinking you might lose control or go mad • Thinking you might collapse 

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ANXIETY ATTACKS

1. They are common
Many people from all backgrounds and age groups get panic attacks. They are one of the most common things that bring people in to see psychologists.
2. They *feel* horrendous and alarming
People feel so out of control and unwell that they dread another happening. It feels so serious and scary that many people consider an ambulance or go to hospital.
3. They *are* safe.
You cannot collapse or faint or stop breathing from an anxiety attack. They feel bad but they always pass and your body will cope.
4. These reactions are part of the normal ‘fight-flight reflex’.
This reflex is a natural response when we feel threatened: our heart beat increases, our breathing rate speeds up, our muscles get tense and ready for action. These changes in our body help us to run quickly or fight. The ‘threat’ can be stressors in our life – like relationship or work hassles. They are a normal, natural response to threat and our body is designed to be able handle them.

Unfortunately, if the fight-flight response gets started and we can't work out a reason why, some people interpret these physical reactions as being dangerous. It is easy (but wrong) to think that our heart beating or the chest pain means we'll have a heart attack, or that feeling dizzy means we are fainting, unable to breathe, or going crazy.

Remember – attacks FEEL horrendous but ARE harmless.

HOW IS PANIC TREATED?

Psychological

- The most important and effective treatments help people to really believe that these physical reactions are not dangerous. This is called Cognitive Therapy.
- It is also vital that you learn not to fear activities or places that you associate with anxiety attacks – a fully trained clinical psychologist can show you how in just a few consultations.
- You can learn some relaxation and de-stressing strategies. Slowing down your breathing can also help when you feel anxious.
- These strategies help you to learn not to overreact to your physical reactions and let them pass.

Medical

- Anti-anxiety medications can be very helpful but must only be taken in the short-term because they are addictive and can prevent you from benefiting from some psychological treatments. You can talk to your doctor about this.
- For people with persisting panic attacks, you can also take an antidepressant, which seems to help over time but is non-addictive. One class of antidepressants (the SSRIs) are known to help with anxiety disorders generally, as well as anxiety attacks.

If you want to speak with a qualified psychologist to see if that helps you can call
Basten & Associates, Clinical Psychologists on 9891-1766.
Westmead Chatswood Sydney CBD