

Overview - Panic Attacks/Disorder

Panic disorder is a tendency to experience panic attacks (suddenly and for no apparent reason) and sustained anxiety about having further attacks. They usually last five to 20 minutes and are an intense mix of physical and psychological symptoms: the triggering of the 'fight or flight' mechanism and feelings of fear and being out of control. Symptoms can be overwhelming and can even mimic a heart attack. Afterwards, sufferers can feel disorientated and confused.

Coping mechanisms in an attack include consciously regulating breathing, staying in the moment and attempting to define fears, recognising that the attack will soon be over, focusing on something to hand and non-threatening, and visualising something positive.

Students with panic disorder are likely to experience the following:

- A high baseline of anxiety most of the time - anticipatory anxiety or 'fear of fear'.
- Low self-confidence in managing challenging situations and tasks generally which makes these even harder to manage successfully.
- A propensity to panic attacks in transition periods such as on first arriving at university.
- Phobic avoidance - wanting to avoid:
 - Situations associated with earlier panic attacks.
 - Environments where having a panic attack would be embarrassing and difficult to get away from e.g. crowded public spaces such as lecture halls.



Top tips for teaching students with panic disorder:

- When a student is having a panic attack:
 - Make sure you or someone else is with them.
 - Give the student as much calm privacy as possible – move other students away.
 - Reassure the student the attack will soon be over.
 - Encourage more measured breathing.
 - Don't be dismissive, or assume to understand the cause of the attack.
 - Give the student time and space after the attack is over to come down from the experience.
- Be supportive: acknowledge the student and her/his work.
- Offer advice to keep a student from getting stressed about academic tasks: support her/him to pace academic tasks and to have reasonable expectations of achievement.
- Be open to the student talking about her/his health experiences and ask what would be helpful.

Useful links

- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks>
- <https://www.nopanic.org.uk>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/panic-disorder>
- <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk>

