

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW AS A YOUTH LEADER PANIC ATTACKS

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks happen when you're hit by a wave of anxiety that pushes you over the edge into the emergency alert mode of your mind. If you think of anxiety as a scale from 0-10 there's a moment around the top of that scale where your brain has an emergency mode - where it literally stops you thinking and triggers such a strong sense of anxiety and dread that your every instinct tells you to run. In this mode the physical symptoms feel incredibly powerful - thumping racing heart, breathlessness, feeling light-headed - and even more unusual symptoms like chest pain, tingling fingers, or feeling like you might be sick. Lots of people think something REALLY serious is happening and they might be about to die, or pass out, or even be having a heart attack.. Most panic attacks last between 5 and 20 minutes.



What causes panic attacks?

Panic attacks are triggered by different things for everyone but they can occur at times where life gets a bit more stressful like the lead up to exams or if you are put in a position where you feel under pressure such as public speaking. However for some people there's no clear and obvious trigger.

Panic attacks can look really dramatic and it's not unusual for people to call an ambulance, because they look so awful. But actually, they are not as dangerous as they may seem. A lot of the weird stuff you feel during a panic attack is because your breathing goes haywire, and the levels of important things like oxygen and carbon dioxide in your blood change. Once you calm your breathing down and drop that anxiety level everything will go back to normal.

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How to help- immediate help

Stay calm- panic attacks can look frightening but your main job is to stay calm and reassuring. Encourage others in the immediate area to move away and then help the young person to breath slowly and deeply - it may help to breath along with them to help set the rhythm. Talk to them, telling them that they are safe where they are and don't need to move anywhere and that you are there. Also remind them that they won't feel this way for much longer and the feelings will begin to fade soon.

Don't try and reason with them or see if they can verbalise why they think this is happening, that is a conversation for another moment once the attack has passed.

How to help- longer term

The trouble is when your mind is in emergency mode it decides it isn't really the time for a deep analysis of what is going on, so when you are in the grip of panic it is hard to rationalise, or think through what is happening. If you can encourage a young person to learn to intervene BEFORE it gets that bad they can learn to dampen down the response before they hit panic - and feel much more in control. Then if they do feel anxiety bubbling up you can deal with it before it gets as far as a panic attack.

Encourage young people to think through the following ideas so they are armed with some practical steps they can take when they feel a panic attack coming on...

Get out - When you feel your anxiety rising and are worried that an attack may be triggered, move out of the space you are in. A change of scenery often really helps, so maybe step outside for some fresh air, grab a quiet moment alone or nip to the loo. Remember - as your anxiety level rises and your head goes into emergency mode you'll find your thinking gets less helpful - so once you feel your mind starting to close down and thoughts like 'I need to get out' or 'I can't do this' - that's a sign you need to take a break.

Hum- Humming is a really good way of calming down your breathing - and it takes your mind off what is going on too. Got a favourite song or playlist? Grab your headphones, find a quiet space, and put it on. Hum along, or you can belt out the words to the song if you're on your own. If you practice with the same songs in safe calm spaces like your own bedroom then you'll find listening to them when you're out and feeling anxious even better for dropping the panic level.



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How to help- longer term (continued)

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Grounding- Grounding exercises can help your mind re-focus on the present and calm you down using your 5 senses to distract you. There's lots and lots of ways you can do this and you can find some great suggestions just by having a search on line but the most common grounding exercise is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique where you run through the following, concentrating on identifying each:

- five things you can see
- four things you can touch
- three things you can hear
- two things you can smell
- one thing you can taste

Seek help- If a young person is frequently experiencing panic attacks then it could be a sign of panic disorder which is a longer-term anxiety diagnosis. Encourage them to make a GP appointment and if appropriate then help them to get this organised or go along with them as support.

