

Living with Panic Attacks

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As we are adjusting to new normal in light of the Coronavirus outbreak, I have heard reports from clients about increased feelings of anxiety and increasing frequency of panic attacks. It is expected that anxiety is heightened during this seemingly out-of-control situation. And when efforts to gain control are not met with the expected results, sometimes panic attacks can ensue.

A panic attack is characterized by a sudden surge of fear that is accompanied by physiological symptoms such as chest pain, dizziness, shortness of breath, throat tightness, irregular heartbeat, tingling or numb sensations, nausea, feeling excessively hot, and increased perspiration (Morrison, 2017). Some attacks can be triggered by a specific stimulus and some can be onset spontaneously.

Coping with panic attacks can vary from person to person. Working with a trained mental health professional can help uncover what skill is most effective for you. Below is a list of coping skills to consider:

- Acknowledge the panic attack: recognizing a panic attack for what it is can be a reminder that the moment is temporary.
- Controlling breathing: hyperventilation, or rapid and deep breathing that leads to low levels of carbon dioxide in the blood, is common with panic attacks. It is uncomfortable and could lead to other physical symptoms (tingling sensations, dizziness). [This video](#) may be helpful in practicing guided breathing. If you are prone to hyperventilating, breathing into a paper bag is an old and effective trick.
- Practice self-affirmation: is there a mantra that speaks to you? In the moment, try to repeat an encouraging saying that you believe. (“This too shall pass.” “I will be okay.”)

- Increasing sleep quality: a changing schedule is expected during this time. Prioritizing the amount and quality of sleep could make a difference in decreasing anxious feelings.
- Being present by grounding: some clients have found the 5-4-3-2-1 method of grounding approachable and effective. In an anxious moment, challenge yourself go through all five points.
 - **5 things that you can see** and say them out loud, if you can. (“I see a soft pillow. I see a blue carpet.”)
 - **4 things that you can feel.** What physical sensations are happening for you right now? (“I feel the hard chair against my back. I feel a cool breeze on my face. I feel the hair on my neck.”)
 - **3 things you can hear.** Pause and listen closely to what noises are around you. (“I hear the fan humming. I hear the wind outside my window.”)
 - **2 things you can smell.** If you cannot identify any scents with you, consider two comforting scents. (“I smell the laundry detergent fragrance on my clothes. I like the smell of lavender.”)
 - **1 thing you can taste.** If you cannot taste anything, think of something you enjoy the taste of. (“I taste the peppermint gum in my mouth. I like the taste of sweet orange juice.”)
- Talk to your counselor: let them know what’s going on for you. Candidly process your anxious feelings and describe the symptoms that you are experiencing. We are here to help!

References

Morrison, J. (2017). *Dsm-5 Made Easy: The Clinicians Guide to Diagnosis* (pp. 173-177). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.