

Anxiety and Panic Attack Management

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks result from our body's natural fight-flight-freeze response, and such a response occurs when our brain interprets situations, thoughts, or feelings as threatening. Generally speaking, individuals who experience anxiety/panic attacks may overanalyze threats and interpret them as more severe or threatening than they may really be. Students might express physically feeling as though they're having a heart attack or dying, as they feel tightness in their chest, rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, and a sense of their heart pounding out of their chests. They may feel numbness in their extremities, trembling hands and legs, the sensation of their throat closing, dizziness or lightheadedness, and so on. Psychological reactions that often accompany these physical sensations include feelings of unreality, an intense desire to run away or escape, fears of "going crazy" or of dying, and fear of doing something uncontrollable. For some individuals, panic attacks are so intense and initially traumatic to the point of causing anxiety about future panic attacks. Following panic attacks, it's not unusual to feel a "panic hangover" such as feeling drained or "keyed up" for the remainder of the day.

Anxiety Attacks versus Panic Attacks

Students often use "anxiety attack" and "panic attack" interchangeably, but they're not the same. Anxiety attacks tend to be less severe and intense than panic attacks, as individuals having anxiety attacks don't usually feel as though they're having a heart attack or dying as those with panic attacks often feel. Those with panic often feel seized by unexplainable fear and terror. Anxiety attacks usually occur in the context of a clear trigger or stressor and build over time, whereas panic attacks can and often do occur out of the blue and come on suddenly. Unlike panic attacks, the symptoms of an anxiety attack may persist for days, as anxiety attacks are more correlated with significant worry and specific stressors.

A Note on Supporting Students with Panic/Anxiety Attacks

Students often want immediate relief from their emotional distress and panic attacks. Skills are helpful, and it's also important to remember that panic attacks *usually need to run their course*. Skills can provide relief and potentially deescalate panic more quickly than otherwise, but a significant aspect of managing panic attacks is learning to sit with emotional distress. This is important not only for students, but for those individuals supporting a student having a panic attack. Like many difficult emotions, panic attacks come in waves – they eventually crest and fall, and students need to float with the wave of panic rather than fight against it. Fighting against an on-the-verge panic attack will often only make them worse. When it comes to skills, effectiveness relies on practice and mastery of such skills. Students often feel it's easier to call a friend to sit with them during their panic attack than it is to practice and hone their anxiety/panic management skills. However, this overreliance on peers for support tends to exhaust and push support people away, and students miss out on a significant opportunity for developing independent coping skills and resilience. Encourage your students to practice their skills, both when anxious and not anxious, and to not rely solely on you for support during moments of panic and anxiety.

PANIC AND ANXIETY ATTACKS

There is a six-step approach to self-control when dealing with an anxiety attack:

- FIRST:** ACCEPT – recognize that you are feeling anxious. Accept your body feelings as a symptom of your anxiety and a sign that something is bothering you.
- SECOND:** PERMISSION – give yourself permission to feel anxious about whatever it is that is bothering you. *“Of course I feel anxious because...and it’s okay to have anxiety. I know what this is and why I feel this way.”*
- THIRD:** BREATHE – first, inhale through your nose slowly for two-seconds, mentally counting one, one-thousand, two, one-thousand. Then exhale through your mouth to mental count of four-seconds, again by one-thousands. Do this for at least 60 seconds.
- FOURTH:** INNER DIALOGUE – use truthful, positive dialogue to talk yourself through the anxious time. It WILL pass. Examples of dialogue might be, *“It’s just anxiety. It will go away. I will not lose control. I can still go about my business feeling spaced-out. It won’t hurt me.”*
- FIFTH:** DISTRACT – get busy. Do something to release some of this self-induced stimulation. Your body is like a car in high gear with the brakes on. Don’t just sit there! Walk, jog, clean closets; but do something. Distract yourself from the way you are feeling.
- SIXTH:** LET TIME PASS – and try to see a little humor in the way you feel. You may *feel* weird, you don’t *look* weird. Give yourself permission to feel weird for a little while. It’s no big deal. Try to figure out what is really bothering you. Is it some type of conflict that you don’t want to deal with? Is it a scary thought? Is it a ridiculous expectation you have about yourself? How about the television program you watched last night? What is bothering you?

It takes time and lots and lots of practice. But the only way to stop fearing panic and anxiety attacks is to experience them. Then, work your way through them and begin to see that they won’t hurt you.

There is no need to avoid or fight.

Coping Statements

Use any or all of the following positive statements to help you cultivate attitudes of acceptance, "floating," and allowing time to pass during a panic attack. You may find it helpful to repeat a single statement over and over the first minute or two when you feel panic symptoms coming on. You may also want to do deep abdominal breathing in conjunction with repeating a coping statement. If one statement gets tiresome or seems to stop working, try another.

- This feeling isn't comfortable or pleasant, but I can accept it.
- I can be anxious and still deal with this situation.
- I can handle these symptoms or sensations.
- This isn't an emergency. It's okay to think slowly about what I need to do.
- This isn't the worst thing that could happen.
- I'm going to go with this and wait for my anxiety to decrease.
- This is an opportunity for me to learn to cope with my fears.
- I'll just let my body do its thing. This will pass.
- I'll ride this through—I don't need to let this get to me.
- I deserve to feel okay right now.
- I can take all the time I need in order to let go and relax.
- There's no need to push myself. I can take as small a step forward as I choose.
- I've survived this before and I'll survive this time, too.
- I can do my coping strategies and allow this to pass.
- This anxiety won't hurt me—even if it doesn't feel good.
- This is just anxiety—I'm not going to let it get to me.
- Nothing serious is going to happen to me.
- Fighting and resisting this isn't going to help—so I'll just let it pass.
- These are just thoughts—not reality.
- I don't need these thoughts—I can choose to think differently.
- This isn't dangerous.
- So what.
- Don't worry—be happy. (Use this to inject an element of lightness or humor.)

If you have frequent panic attacks, I suggest writing your favorite coping statements on a three-by-five card and carrying it in your purse or wallet. Bring the card out and read it when you feel panic symptoms coming on.

Diaphragmatic Breathing

The diaphragm is the most efficient muscle of breathing. It is a large, dome-shaped muscle located at the base of the lungs. Your abdominal muscles help move the diaphragm and give you more power to empty your lungs. Diaphragmatic breathing is intended to help you use the diaphragm correctly while breathing to:

- Strengthen the diaphragm
- Decrease the work of breathing by slowing your breathing rate
- Decrease oxygen demand
- Use less effort and energy to breathe

Diaphragmatic breathing technique



1. Lie on your back on a flat surface or in bed, with your knees bent and your head supported. You can use a pillow under your knees to support your legs. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.



2. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible.



3. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.

When you first learn the diaphragmatic breathing technique, it may be easier for you to follow the instructions lying down, as shown on the first page. As you gain more practice, you can try the diaphragmatic breathing technique while sitting in a chair, as shown below.

To perform this exercise while sitting in a chair:

1. Sit comfortably, with your knees bent and your shoulders, head and neck relaxed.



2. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.

3. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should remain as still as possible.

4. Tighten your stomach muscles, letting them fall inward as you exhale through pursed lips. The hand on your upper chest must remain as still as possible.

Note: You may notice an increased effort will be needed to use the diaphragm correctly. At first, you'll probably get tired while doing this exercise. But keep at it, because with continued practice, diaphragmatic breathing will become easy and automatic.

How often should I practice this exercise?

At first, practice this exercise 5-10 minutes about 3-4 times per day. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend doing this exercise, and perhaps even increase the effort of the exercise by placing a book on your abdomen.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Many studies have shown that relaxing one's muscles markedly reduces anxiety. Over time, people *learn* to be anxious and tense; in the same way, people can teach themselves how to relax. One way of learning how to relax is through Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR).

1. In order to learn to relax, it's important to practice at least 20 minutes a day, *every day*. Find a regular time (after waking, before bed, before meals) when you're sure not to be distracted. You may want to start with a longer (30 minute) relaxation period. As you get better and better at PMR, it will take less and less time to achieve the relaxation effects.
2. Before beginning relaxation, make sure you are in a quiet place, preferably with dim lighting. You may recline in a chair or lay on a couch or a bed during the relaxation, as long as you are comfortable (and won't fall asleep!). Turn on the fan or the air conditioner, close your eyes, and give yourself permission to shut out all the distractions of the day.
3. Practice relaxation on an empty stomach. Food digestion after meals will tend to disrupt deep relaxation. Wear comfortable clothes and take off shoes, glasses, jewelry, etc.
4. Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow taking care of yourself and having peace of mind to take precedence over any of your other worries. (Success with relaxation depends on giving peace of mind high priority in your overall scheme of values.)
5. Assume a detached attitude. Do not *try* to relax. Do not *try* to control your body or your thoughts. If you find your mind wandering, guide yourself gently back to the sensation in your muscles. The point is to allow yourself to let go, not to worry about your performance.
6. Be aware that PMR involves both tensing and relaxing your muscles. During this process, you may experience unusual sensations, such as tingling, warmth, or heaviness in your muscles as they relax. This is a normal process, and is generally a sign of increasing relaxation. However, if you are injured in any part of your body, you may want to avoid tensing that body part, and instead just focus on loosening and relaxing the muscles.
7. When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously for 7-10 seconds. Envision the muscle group tensing, and focus on feeling the buildup of tightness and strain.
8. When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15-20 seconds.
9. Allow all the other muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.

This is a skill that takes a while to learn! The first few times you go through PMR, you might not feel very different. However, over time you will find it easier and easier to let go of your tension, and will begin to feel more and more relaxed.

PMR SBS

(Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Step By Step)

Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the instructions for each muscle group below (or just listen along to your recording):

- 1) To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
- 2) Clench your **left fist**. Hold for 7-10 seconds, and then release for 15-20 seconds. Repeat with the **right fist**. (Use the same time intervals for all muscle groups.)
- 3) Tighten your **forearms** by straightening your fingers and pointing them at the ceiling, then back towards your body. Hold...and then relax.
- 4) Tighten your **biceps** by drawing your forearms up towards your shoulders and "making a muscle." Hold...and then relax.
- 5) Shrug your **shoulders** up towards your ears, tightening the muscles. Hold...and then relax.
- 6) Wrinkle up your **forehead** and brow, focusing on the tension in the muscles...and then relax.
- 7) Squeeze your **eyes** shut as tightly as you can, feeling the tension in the muscles around the eyes. Hold...and then relax.
- 8) Clench your **jaw**, hard, flexing the muscles in your jaw and cheek. Hold...and then relax.
- 9) Press your **lips** together tightly, pursing them so the muscles around your mouth tighten...and then allow them to relax.
- 10) Press your head back against the chair or bed, hard, feeling the tension in the **back of your neck**. Hold...and then relax.
- 11) Allow your head to fall forward, as though trying to bury your chin in your chest, and feel the tension in the **front of your neck**. Hold...and then allow your head to fall back, very naturally.
- 12) Arch your back, sticking out your chest, and feel the tension in your **upper back**...and relax.
- 13) Take a deep breath and hold it, feeling the tightness in the muscles around your **chest**. Hold it...and then relax, breathing deeply from the abdomen.
- 14) Tighten the muscles of your **stomach**, making the stomach very hard. Hold...and relax.
- 15) Stretch both of your legs, straight out in front of you, until you can feel the tension in the backs of your **thighs**. Hold...and then relax.
- 16) Tense both **calf** muscles by stretching your feet and pointing your toes up toward your head. Hold...and then relax.



From: Goldfried & Davison, *Clinical Behavior Therapy*

Grounding Techniques

Grounding is a technique that helps keep someone in the present. They help reorient a person to the here-and-now and in reality. Grounding skills can be helpful in managing overwhelming feelings or intense anxiety. They help someone to regain their mental focus from an often intensely emotional state.

Grounding skills occur within two specific approaches: Sensory Awareness and Cognitive Awareness

1. Sensory Awareness

Grounding Exercise #1:

Begin by tracing your hand on a piece of paper and label each finger as one of the five senses. Then take each finger and identify something special and safe representing each of those five senses. For example: Thumb represents sight and a label for sight might be butterflies or my middle finger represents the smell sense and it could be represented by lilacs.

After writing and drawing all this on paper, post it on your refrigerator or other safe places in the home where it could be easily seen and memorize it.

Whenever you get triggered, breathe deeply and slowly, and put your hand in front of your face where you can really see it – stare at your hand and then look at each finger and try to do the five senses exercise from memory.

Source: www.stardrift.net/survivor/senses.html

Grounding Exercise #2:

- Keep your eyes open, look around the room, notice your surroundings, notice details.
- Hold a pillow, stuffed animal or a ball.
- Place a cool cloth on your face, or hold something cool such as a can of soda.
- Listen to soothing music
- Put your feet firmly on the ground
- FOCUS on someone's voice or a neutral conversation.

Sensory Awareness Grounding Exercise #3:

Here's the 54321 "game".

- Name 5 things you can see in the room with you.
- Name 4 things you can feel ("chair on my back" or "feet on floor")
- Name 3 things you can hear right now ("fingers tapping on keyboard" or "tv")
- Name 2 things you can smell right now (or, 2 things you like the smell of)
- Name 1 good thing about yourself

(Source: www.ibiblio.org/rcip//copingskills.html)

2. Cognitive Awareness Grounding Exercise:

Re-orient yourself in place and time by asking yourself some or all of these questions:

1. Where am I?
2. What is today?
3. What is the date?
4. What is the month?
5. What is the year?
6. How old am I?
7. What season is it?