

When we are exposed to a physical threat our bodies automatically respond with what is known as the fight-or-flight response. We become more alert, our heart beat speeds up, the muscles get tense and ready for action, sweating increases to cool the body, and our breathing rate speeds up so that we can get oxygen into our bodies more quickly.

With these changes we are able to run very quickly or fight the threat or our 'enemies'. These responses are designed to protect us from danger but sometimes our fight-or-flight response is activated when the response is not actually helpful (i.e., when there is no real danger).

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden spell or attack when you feel frightened, anxious, or very uneasy in a situation when most people would not feel afraid. It occurs when the fight-or-flight response seemingly comes out of nowhere and culminates in symptoms of extreme anxiety including:

- rapid heart rate
- sweating, trembling or shaking
- sensations of shortness of breath or being smothered
- feelings of choking or chest pain
- nausea
- feeling dizzy
- fear of losing control, going crazy or fear of dying
- chills or hot flushes

It is important to realise that these symptoms are part of the response to threat and are not a sign that you have a physical disease. These symptoms do not mean that you will die, go crazy, or lose control, although it may seem that way.

What is agoraphobia?

When people start avoiding places or situations from which escape might not be available in the event of a panic attack, they may have what is called agoraphobia. People with agoraphobia can have their life severely restricted by their fear of a panic attacks and be unable to participate in a range of activities including being in crowds, standing in line or even being outside their home without support

The panic cycle

Anxiety problems originate when the fight-or-flight response is too sensitive, like an overly sensitive car alarm that goes off at the wrong time. Once the fight-or-flight response gets started, we may begin to hyperventilate causing a wide range of unpleasant body sensations. We can see there is no outside danger so we start to assume that the body sensations are a sign that our body is not working correctly and must be dangerous. That is, we may think to ourselves, "I am going crazy", "I am having a heart attack", or "I'm about to lose control". This type of thinking leads to further fear and anxiety.

As people who experience panic attacks are often anxious about the physical sensations of panic, there is a natural tendency to avoid situations where these physical sensations occur. This avoidance serves to maintain 'anxiety about the anxiety symptoms' by preventing opportunities to learn that the sensations are manageable and not dangerous. Despite the fact that anxiety symptoms can feel unpleasant, it is important to tolerate them without becoming more anxious. The more people avoid the sensations and situations that seem to trigger them, the greater the anxiety associated with them becomes.

Getting help

There are effective treatments available to help people overcome their panic and/or agoraphobia. One of the most effective treatments is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – this approach recognises that the way we think and act affects the way we feel. During CBT you will learn:

- to understand your panic reactions and the fight-or-flight response better
- to challenge your fears and worries related to the physical symptoms you experience during a panic attack e.g. fears of having a heart attack or going crazy
- to face your feared situations and physical reactions in a gradual and manageable way relaxation strategies such as breathing retraining.

The therapy may involve 7-14 weekly sessions with a mental health professional but may require longer depending on your needs. Your doctor may also have suggested antidepressant medication which can assist some people to overcome panic and/or agoraphobia.

Self-management resources

Below is a list of internet and other written resources that may complement the treatment plan that you have discussed with your doctor:

Open Arms (<https://www.openarms.gov.au/>) has information on mental health and wellbeing, wellbeing programs, smartphone apps and information booklets.

- Useful materials are available from beyondblue (www.beyondblue.org.au), the Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression (www.crufad.org) and SANE (www.sane.org).
- Mental Health Online (www.mentalhealthonline.org.au) is an internet based treatment clinic affiliated with Swinburne University.
- Open Arms - Veterans & Families counselling can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. Call 1800 011 046.