

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID



What is a Panic Attack

A panic attack is a sudden onset of intense anxiety, fear, or terror that often occurs for no clear reason. Panic attacks can occur at any time—even in your sleep. Panic attacks peak around 10 minutes, but the physical symptoms can extend for a longer period of time. Panic disorder is when a person experiences recurring panic attacks and is persistently worried—for at least 1 month—about possible future panic attacks and the consequences of panic attacks. Some individuals with panic disorder go on to develop agoraphobia: avoiding places due to the fear of having a panic attack. [Learn more.](#)



What Do Panic Attacks Look Like

The physical signs and symptoms that accompany panic attacks look very similar to those of a heart attack: racing heart, sweating, shortness of breath, chest pain, and dizziness. In fact, up to 25% of people who visit emergency departments for chest pain are actually experiencing a panic attack. Other symptoms may include terror, upset stomach, nausea, hot flashes, chills, trembling, feelings of needing to escape, and fear of dying. [Learn more.](#)



3

How Should You Respond

Here are some reminders for administering Mental Health First Aid to someone who you suspect is having a panic attack (pg. 110 in adult manual; pg. 147 in youth manual):

- Ask the individual if they need help. If you don't know the person, introduce yourself.
- Ask if the person knows what is happening or if they have previously had a panic attack.
- If you are unsure whether the event is a panic attack or a heart attack, seek emergency medical assistance.
- If it is a panic attack, reassure the person of what he or she is experiencing, and that while frightening, a panic attack is not life-threatening and the symptoms will pass. Be patient, speak slowly and clearly, and use short sentences.
- Ask the individual how you might be able to help, and try to accommodate as best you can (i.e. help them sit down or find a non-public place).

Once the panic attack has ended:

- Offer information about where the person can learn more about panic attacks. Try the [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) and [HelpGuide.org](#).
- Tell the person that if the panic attacks persist, he or she should speak to a health professional