



RESPONDING TO PANIC AND ANXIETY ATTACKS

Strategies on How to Identify, Support, and Respond

Symptoms

Panic Attack

- Racing heart
- Shaking
- Choking feeling
- Trembling
- Hyperventilation (Shortness of breath)
- Hot or cold flashes
- Upset stomach
- Feeling lightheaded or faint
- Fear of losing control or dying
- Overall, panic attacks look as if the person had just been sprinting.

Anxiety Attack

- Increased heart rate
- Shortness of breath
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Racing thoughts
- Poor concentration
- Worry, ruminative thinking

Key Phrase

"This is anxiety, and it will pass."

Panic and Anxiety Attacks

Though your response to someone experiencing a panic or anxiety attack is similar, the fundamental experience for the sufferer is quite different. During a **panic attack**, the symptoms are sudden and extremely intense. These symptoms usually occur "out of the blue" without an obvious, immediate triggering stimulus. The symptoms peak within 10 minutes and then subside over the course of 30 minutes or so.

Anxiety, on the other hand, generally intensifies over a period of time and is highly correlated to excessive worry about some potential "danger." People use the term **anxiety attack** to reference those times when anxiety is seemingly overwhelming, such as related a specific issue like failing a class, disappointing family, fear about the future, or present threat. See the sidebar for typical symptoms for both panic and anxiety.

Responding to Panic and Anxiety Attacks

If someone is having an attack, acting quickly may help reduce the severity and duration of the attack. Here are some helpful tips:

1. Assist the individual to place where he/she can experience the symptoms away from others. Fear of embarrassment can escalate the symptoms.
2. Encourage the person to sit down. Let him/her know that this is an anxiety or panic attack (no need to correctly diagnose which specifically it is). One important line to say is: "This is anxiety, and it will pass."
3. Encourage him/her to breathe, and if possible, slow down the rate of breathing. During panic, there can be a tendency to hold one's breath, which can worsen the physiological experience.

Cautions to consider when responding to anxiety / panic

Some interventions can make matters worse. Avoid these:

- Do not tell him/her to calm down and relax.
- In the moment, do not ask why he/she is panicking.
- Do not brush off or minimize the experience, even for someone who experiences these frequently.
- Avoid cheesy interventions that may indirectly minimize the distress. "Look in my eyes for 10 seconds." "Try to picture Jesus holding you right now."
- Do not come across as irritated or judgmental. This may be inconvenient for your schedule, but stay as present as you are able, even if it is an inconvenience for you.

Slowing breathing to 4-second inhale / 4-second exhale can be beneficial. However, do not pressure the person. He/She may say, "I CAN'T," and that is okay.

4. Provide assurance that there is nothing to be afraid of and the experience will pass. During intense episodes, people experience a fear of impending doom. Inform that you will be there him/her through this.
5. Monitor your own anxiety. Breathe. Remind yourself this is just someone having a panic attack. Intense anxiety can unknowingly be contagious in the moment for you as the responder. If you escalate, so will the other person.

A Conversation After the Attack

After the individual has calmed, if possible, take a few minutes to check in. The person may feel quite embarrassed for the seemingly uncontrollable display of emotion. Acknowledge that elevated anxiety and panic is increasingly common these days, and normalize the intense pressure facing college students. Below are questions to consider:

- Do you typically feel high levels of stress or anxiety? What are some of the main things in your life that cause you stress?
- How often do you experience moments like this?
- How do you tend to cope with stress? What helps you manage? What in your life helps you relax?
- Do you have anyone you meet with to support you? Are you familiar with the resources that the Counseling Center offers for stress and anxiety?

Following up

If possible, reach out to the individual at a later time about how he/she is doing. Inquire about whether he/she has had additional intense episodes of anxiety. Not everyone who experiences a moment of high anxiety needs a referral to the Counseling Center; however, these symptoms tend to recur. The following questions can help frame this conversation if further support is needed: "Have you thought about seeking support at the Counseling Center for stress?" and "Would you like help connecting with the Counseling Center?"