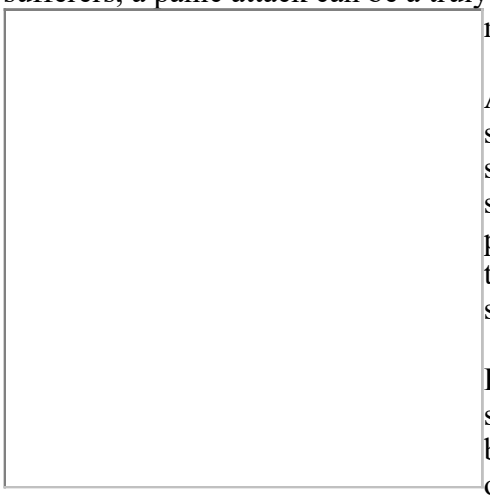
Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping with panic attacks

In our stressful, fast-paced environment, panic attacks are an increasingly common phenomenon. For sufferers, a panic attack can be a truly frightening experience. But there are things that can help a person manage.



A panic attack is often brought on by a situation of general or social anxiety and can be common in sufferers of post-traumatic stress. Attacks can bring on hyperventilation, a fast heartbeat, sweating, nausea, loss of voice, or trembling. A person suffering a panic attack usually feels a profound loss of control and may even think they are having a heart attack or seizure. If you feel yourself slipping into an attack, here are some strategies to help you cope:

Breathe slowly. During a panic attack, most sufferers take short, shallow breaths, often to the point of hyperventilation. This type of breathing only makes the anxiety worse, because it prevents oxygen from travelling to the brain, causing light-headedness and nausea. Taking long, slow, deep breaths is often enough to slow or prevent a full-blown attack.

Find a calm place. Look for a quiet area with as few distractions as possible, and stay there until the attack subsides.

Talk to yourself. What you say to yourself strongly affects how you feel. Positive words can boost your mood and offset feelings of panic. Examples of a "positive self-pep talk" include:

- “This has happened to me before, and I’ve always gotten through it.”
- “There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m just feeling stressed.”
- “These attacks always pass after a few minutes.”

What Treatment is Available?

While anxiety disorders are some of the most common psychiatric illnesses, they are also the most manageable. If self-management techniques are not enough, treatment options can include:

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is one of the most successful treatments for dealing with anxiety. Together with a certified therapist, the panic attack sufferer discusses why and how attacks start —sometimes even deliberately triggering one—and work through effective techniques to keep anxiety and panic attacks at bay.

Medication. Anti-anxiety medications are a common form of treatment. Over the short term, drugs can curb symptoms that lead to panic attacks. But because they work by blocking the symptoms rather than treating the cause, drugs alone rarely offer a long-term solution to anxiety.

A healthy lifestyle. Junk food, nicotine, caffeine and alcohol may all contribute to an increase in anxiety. On the flip side, regular exercise, whether a stroll in the park, pick-up sports or gardening, helps burn off stress and boost your mood.

Relaxation techniques. Because most panic attacks stem from high-pressure situations, relaxation

techniques may diffuse an attack before it happens. One of the most effective exercises begins by tensing all the muscles in your body, then slowly relaxing each, one by one. Many also find yoga, tai chi or Pilates to be helpful in reducing stress.

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Taking "me" breaks. In the daily rush to get everything done, many people are left with very little time to relax, causing a build-up of mental and physical stress. By taking thirty minutes out of your day to kick back and relax, you'll reduce stress, and your potential of having a panic attack.

If you've ever had a panic attack, you understand how confusing and frightening they can be. It can feel like the world is coming to an end, and there is little you can do to stop it. But effective treatment is out there. With the proper medical support, it is possible to learn not only to control panic attacks but to relax and enjoy life again.