

Panic attacks

A panic attack is an episode of overwhelming fear and anxiety that is accompanied with intense physical symptoms. These attacks usually last anything from a few minutes to half an hour, and can happen completely out of the blue. A panic attack is a series of automatic reactions in our body that are activated by the nervous system. Because it is an unconscious reaction of our body, a panic attack cannot be stopped on command. Although panic attacks are very unpleasant and may seem life-threatening, they are not. Therefore, it is important to try to calm the child, or yourself, and allow the symptoms to subside.

The most common manifestations of a panic attack

- difficulty breathing
- pressure in the chest
- the sensation of fainting
- abdominal pain – stomach clenching, nausea
- tingling and trembling of the limbs
- feelings of confusion and loss of control
- an overwhelming fear of death
- the need to escape (e.g. from crowded places)
- depersonalisation (the feeling of being outside your body, your thoughts and emotions)



Remember : Younger children may have difficulty describing their feelings and experiences. Adolescents often tend to be more reluctant to share what they are going through. Some, on the other hand, may experience and express symptoms very intensely.

What causes a panic attack?

The nervous system is responsible for panic attacks and the defensive response known as "fight or flight". This response is an important survival mechanism that we all have - whenever we are in danger, our nervous system sends a signal through the body to either run or fight, thus protecting us from harm. However, panic attacks often occur at times when there is no real threat to our person. At times when we are under a lot of stress for long periods of time, when we feel exhausted or have experienced a highly stressful event in the past (e.g. the death of a relative, our parents' divorce, war), our body may start to feel threatened and repeatedly trigger the "fight or flight" response. In such a situation, the brain can find it difficult to distinguish between real and perceived danger.

You can read more about how and why the "attack or flight" response occurs in **The brain, the nervous system and stress.**



Remember: Although there is no immediate danger to the child, the child experiences intense fear as if they were actually in danger. Seeing a child scared and out of control can trigger unpleasant emotions and feelings, which is completely natural. Keep in mind that a panic attack is temporary and will eventually pass. Stay with the child, try to remain calm, breathe deeply and slowly and speak to the child in a soothing and quiet voice. There are a number of techniques you can use to help a child (or yourself) during a panic attack; you can read more about these in [How to help a child who is experiencing a panic attack or intense stress](#).

And what happens after?

During a panic attack, the body consumes large amounts of energy. Therefore, after the symptoms have passed, a great deal of fatigue and exhaustion occurs. Stay with the child, reassure them that you are there for them and treat yourself to something nice together (chocolate or a favourite movie, for example). The child may also feel great fear that the attack will happen again, which can lead to them deliberately avoiding the places they might associate with the panic attack. This fear of another panic attack can limit the child (and the adult) in their daily activities. If the panic attacks occur regularly, or the fear of another episode is negatively interfering with your child's daily life, don't be afraid to seek professional help. Read more in [Where to seek help for children and adults](#).

