

# Panic attacks and relaxation strategies



While everyone experiences anxiety at times, it is generally short-lived and does not interfere with daily functioning. However, for some people, symptoms of anxiety can be severe, persistent, and overwhelming. Panic attacks can feel especially debilitating. During a panic attack, there is an abrupt and inappropriate surge of adrenaline that results in a rush of intense fear and/or very distressing physical symptoms. Other symptoms can include a rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, chest pain, nausea, and dizziness. The after effects of a panic attack usually leave people feeling physically and mentally exhausted.

On a positive note, panic attacks respond very well to treatment, which often involves cognitive behavioural therapy and/or medication. But what if you're in the midst of a panic attack? What can you do to mitigate the acute symptoms, as well as the fatigue that often follows?

- **Deep breathing exercises.** Utilize the 4-7-8 breathing technique, whereby you inhale through your mouth for four seconds, hold your breath for seven seconds, and exhale through an open mouth for eight seconds. This method of breathing helps to counteract the effects of the adrenaline surge, decreasing your heart rate and allowing more oxygen to flow to your brain and muscles.
- **Engage in mindful awareness.** Activating your senses helps to ground you in your immediate environment. Directing your attention to the sights, sounds, and smells around you will help you to stay anchored to the present moment.
- **Utilize distraction techniques.** Listening to music, or reading a book or news article, will similarly shift your attention to something unrelated to your current anxious state, allowing your body to more quickly decompress.
- **Practice and repeat.** The above techniques can be utilized for all types of anxiety, not just panic attacks. The more these techniques are practiced, the more they will become second nature as soon as you begin to feel anxiety creeping in.