



How to Halt and Minimize Panic Attacks

By [Margarita Tartakovsky, M.S.](#)

Experiencing a panic attack can be scary. While panic attacks vary among individuals, attacks tend to share similar symptoms.

People feel as if they have zero control over their bodies. Their hearts pound, they feel dizzy or faint, and they suffer from an intense sense of nervousness. They become short of breath, start to sweat, shake or feel uncomfortable in general. Many people report thinking they're "going crazy." People may also mistake the symptoms of a panic attack for those of a heart attack.

There are ways you can prevent a panic attack from escalating or minimize attacks in general. Below, John Tsilimparis, MFT, director of the Anxiety and Panic Disorder Center of Los Angeles, shares the anti-anxiety techniques he uses with his clients.

- **"Don't believe everything you think."** Tsilimparis uses this motto with his clients. That's because when you're having a panic attack, it's common to experience racing thoughts that feel intense and catastrophic. Remembering that these thoughts are simply a symptom of the panic attack — like a cough to a cold — can help to de-escalate it, he said.
- **Ground yourself.** Another common symptom of a panic attack is derealization, an unnerving feeling of being disoriented. People feel like they're floating, and things just don't seem real, says Tsilimparis, who's also one of the therapists on A&E's *Obsessed*, a show about severe anxiety disorders. He suggests that readers "ground themselves in something that feels tangible," such as running your fingers along your keys or grabbing the doorframe.
- **"Be reflective, not reactive."** This is another motto Tsilimparis uses to help clients stop letting irrational thoughts overwhelm them. It's common to experience phobic thoughts that further accelerate your attack. For example, many people have thoughts such as, "I'm going crazy," "I'm going to die" or "everyone will leave me," Tsilimparis notes. Writing these negative thoughts down on paper helps your mind switch "from victim to observer." It gets people outside their minds, he said. After recording their thoughts, Tsilimparis has clients "write up more rational and grounded statements," such as "that phobic thought is just part of my panic attack" or "I have a loving family."
- **Practice positive self-talk.** People can feel ashamed about their panic attacks and become very self-critical. Instead of pointing fingers, talk to yourself in positive ways. Remember that there's no shame in experiencing panic attacks. You can say a statement such as "I'm going to be OK."

- **Use ice cubes.** This technique can help you divert your attention away from a panic attack, especially if you're in the throes of a particularly intense attack. Take out an ice cube and hold it to your hand for as long as you can (you can put the cube in a paper towel). Then, place the ice cube on your other hand. This focuses your mind on the discomfort, de-escalating your symptoms..
- **Know the “anatomy of a panic attack.”** Remember that the sensations you experience are simply symptoms of a panic attack, which occurs when your body's fight or flight system is triggered, although there's no real danger. For instance, even though you feel like you're about to faint, chances are that you won't. There's a lot of catastrophic thinking that typically never occurs.
- **Stimulate your mind.** Engage in activities that stimulate your brain and keep you busy, such as getting outside, exercising or taking a shower. In fact, a recent study analyzing 40 randomized clinical trials of 3,000 people with various medical conditions found that people who exercised regularly experienced a 20 percent reduction in their anxiety symptoms compared to non-exercisers.
- **Learn deep breathing.** Shallow breathing can cause hyperventilation, but deep breathing helps to slow down a panic attack. Learn how to practice deep breathing.

General Practices to Help with Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be debilitating and cause a lot of distress, but they're very treatable, Tsilimparis says. “If you begin to look at your anxiety like you would diabetes or another condition, you start to get better quicker,” he asserts. “Understand that you have a condition and not a weakness.”

Psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is highly effective for treating panic attacks. If a person experiences regular and intense panic attacks that impair daily life, medication also can help.

Making lifestyle changes is critical. That includes getting enough sleep, minimizing stress, being active, cutting down on caffeine (not just in coffee, but in other caffeine-packed foods, such as chocolate, tea and soda) and avoiding alcohol and drugs. For example, once alcohol's sedating effects wear off, “the panic usually comes back much stronger because your defenses are done,” Tsilimparis says.

Finally, don't isolate yourself. People with panic attacks may feel ashamed, keep to themselves and avoid seeking help. Again, anxiety is not a weakness, and having social support is vital to your getting better

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