

MENTAL HEALTH GUIDES

UNDERSTANDING

# PANIC ATTACKS

by Alexis Burling



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# AT A GLANCE

- Panic attacks are uncontrollable feelings of intense fear and anxiety.
- There are two types of panic attacks. Uncued panic attacks are unexpected. Cued panic attacks are expected.
- Cued panic attacks are triggered by a frightening situation. They may also be triggered by stress.
- Most panic attacks peak after about ten minutes. They generally last less than thirty minutes.
- Panic attack symptoms may include fast breathing and sweating. A person's heart rate increases.
- Some people suffer from frequent panic attacks. They live in fear of these attacks. This fear affects their daily lives. They have panic disorder (PD).





***Panic attacks are scary and can be painful. But most last only twenty to thirty minutes.***

# WHAT ARE PANIC ATTACKS?

**C**ertain life events can cause anxiety.  
These events are called stressors.

They make people feel worried and tense.

For example, an exam can be a stressor.

People might worry they will do poorly on the test. This feeling is normal.

But some people react more strongly to stressful situations. Barbara O. Rothbaum



*Stressors such as tests make most people anxious. However, stressors can cause some people to have panic attacks.*

is a professor of psychiatry. Psychiatrists treat people who have mental health issues. Rothbaum explains, “We all physically respond to **stress**. . . . But someone who suffers from panic disorder may react

to those same . . . pressures with an exaggerated physical reaction.”<sup>2</sup> People who have PD have a strong emotional reaction to stress. They feel intense fear. Their senses are heightened. Rothbaum compares it to the fear someone might experience if he were to come face-to-face with a tiger.

## **TYPES OF PANIC ATTACKS**

Not all people suffer from the same types of panic attacks. Some panic attacks are expected. They are called cued panic attacks. A cue is a sign that something will happen. People may know a certain situation will **trigger** a panic attack.





***Panic attacks can be cued or uncued. Predicting when an uncued panic attack will strike is harder than predicting a cued one.***

For example, people who have phobias may have panic attacks. A phobia is a strong fear of something. Some people fear enclosed spaces. They might have a panic attack in an elevator. Aerophobia is

also common. It is a fear of flying. People who have aerophobia might have a panic attack on an airplane. Just thinking about a phobia could cause a panic attack.

Some people have uncued panic attacks. These attacks are unexpected. For example, someone might be asleep. Or she might be reading a book. A minor change takes place in her body. Her heart rate may increase. She does not notice this change. But it triggers a panic attack. The attack seems to happen without warning. However, there were signs that an attack

might happen. The person just did not detect them.

Other people experience situationally predisposed panic attacks. This means they are more likely to have a panic attack in a frightening situation. But it does not always happen. For example, many people have a

### **NIGHTTIME PANIC ATTACKS**

Some people experience panic attacks at night. These panic attacks wake them up from sleep. The attacks have no obvious trigger or cause. The symptoms are the same as panic attacks that happen during the day. People may sweat and shake. They may be short of breath. Nighttime panic attacks usually last only a few minutes. But it can be hard to go back to sleep afterward.

# GLOSSARY

**diagnose**

to identify an illness or condition based on its symptoms

**disorder**

a physical or mental condition that affects a person's ability to function and causes distress

**prescribe**

to write a prescription, or an official recommendation that tells someone which medicine to take

**stress**

a feeling of pressure or tension

**survey**

a questionnaire that helps researchers understand people's ideas and beliefs

**symptoms**

the signs of an illness or disorder

**trigger**

to cause or set in motion

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