



**Do You  
Have  
Panic  
Attacks?**



KAISER PERMANENTE®

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**Suddenly** out of nowhere, your heart starts pounding. You feel short of breath, and your throat and chest tighten up. You feel dizzy and lightheaded, your palms are sweaty, and your hands and feet feel numb or tingly. Intense feelings of fear and dread come over you. You panic. You think, “What is happening to me? . . . I’m having a heart attack! . . . I’m about to faint! . . . I must be going crazy!”

Do you recognize these sensations? Have you had an experience like this? If your answer is yes, you may have been having a panic attack, sometimes called an anxiety attack.



## *Recognizing ...*

**P**anic attacks seem to come out of nowhere. They occur suddenly for no

apparent reason. Or, they may occur only in certain situations, such as in crowds, shopping malls, restaurants, movie theaters or while driving. Attacks can even occur at home. You may awaken from sleep with panic.

After having attacks like this, it is natural to believe that they are dangerous. But there is good news. Panic attacks feel overwhelming and uncomfortable, but they are not dangerous. They do not cause heart attacks or any kind of medical problems. Panic attacks do not indicate any weakness in your mental or emotional health. Properly handled, they will become less frightening, last for shorter periods of time, and occur less often. They often disappear altogether.



## *Questions to ask yourself*

**F**irst, it is important to find out if the symptoms you are experiencing are really panic attacks. Ask yourself a few key questions:

- Has my doctor told me that my symptoms are not caused by medical problems?
- Have I been under a lot of stress lately?
- Do the attacks occur suddenly, “out of the blue?”
- Am I avoiding certain situations out of fear?
- Do I worry about having another attack?

Most people who are experiencing panic attacks will answer yes to at least three of these questions

## *Panic attacks: a helpful explanation*

**P**anic attacks are like a fear response, but they occur when there is no physical danger. Imagine a fear response, for example, a mean-looking dog charging towards you: What sensations would you feel?

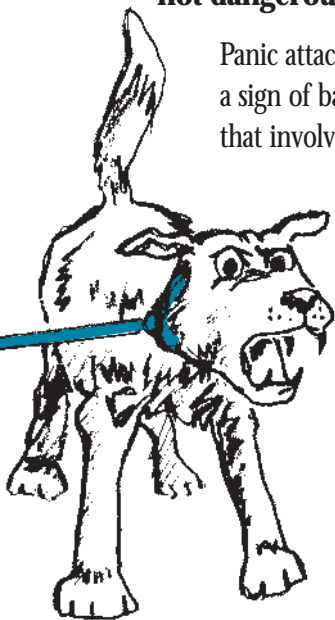
- Rapid heart beat?
- Dry mouth?
- Heavy breathing?
- Trembling?

These physical sensations are all part of your body's normal reaction to fear. Now imagine that the owner of the dog appeared and took the dog away. How would you feel? Most likely you would feel relieved and your physical symptoms would slowly go away. In panic attacks, your body reacts with exactly the same symptoms as a fear response, but without any physical danger being present. **The panic attack is no more dangerous to your physical well-being than a fear response. In other words, panic attacks are not dangerous.**

Panic attacks are not a disease, a ghost within, or a sign of bad genes. Look at panic attacks as a process that involves:

- Physical symptoms
- Scary thoughts
- Feelings of dread or being trapped

This often leads to behavioral changes (going to the doctor or emergency room, or avoiding certain situations).





## *Developing panic disorder or phobias*

**A**fter experiencing several panic attacks, some people become afraid of having future attacks. Research has shown that this fear itself can cause more attacks or make the symptoms worse. This may lead to **panic disorder**, and the attacks can become more frequent and severe. Some people become afraid to drive, to go to crowded places, or to be home alone. Although avoiding feared situations is a natural response, experts warn that this makes the problem worse. The person avoids more and more activities but continues to have attacks and to live in fear of them. This condition is called **agoraphobia**.

## *How to overcome panic attacks and phobias*

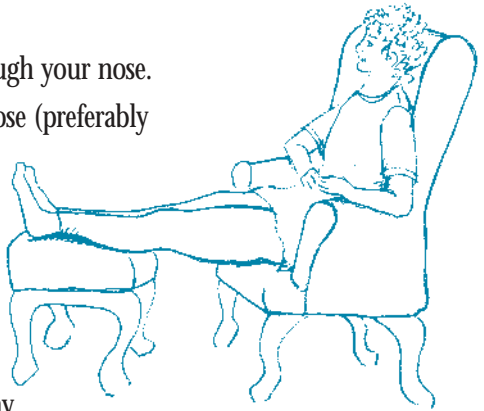
You cannot expect to lead a life without anxiety, but you can balance it with other emotions. You can learn:

- Breathing techniques to help you cope with the panic sensations and make them less intense
- To change your “self-talk” and challenge frightening thoughts
- To reduce your phobias by slowly exposing yourself to them

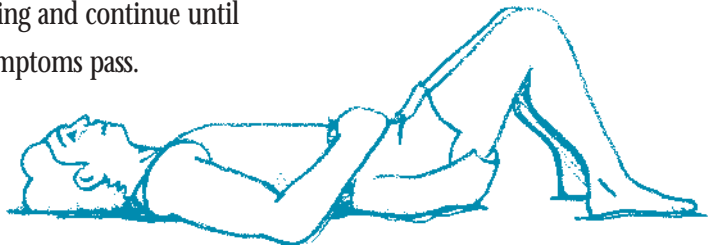
## *Get control of your breathing*

Many people have rapid breathing during panic attacks. The faster you breathe, the more short of breath you feel. You might even feel dizzy and lightheaded as a result. You can slow your breathing and stop these sensations by practicing relaxed breathing when you are not feeling anxious. Follow these easy steps:

- 1.** Get into a comfortable position. In the beginning, you might find it helpful to practice while lying down.
- 2.** Place both hands gently on your stomach, then breathe in so that the incoming air expands your stomach and gently pushes against your hands.
- 3.** Inhale deeply and slowly through your nose.
- 4.** Exhale slowly through your nose (preferably slower than you inhale).
- 5.** Relax your shoulders, chest, and stomach muscles as you exhale.
- 6.** Practice steps two – five for five minutes at least twice a day.



Use this breathing pattern whenever you feel panic symptoms starting. At the first sign of anxiety, tell yourself: “I’m starting to feel anxious. I’ll use my relaxed breathing pattern and it will pass in a few minutes.” Begin your relaxed breathing and continue until the anxiety symptoms pass.



## *Change your “self-talk”*

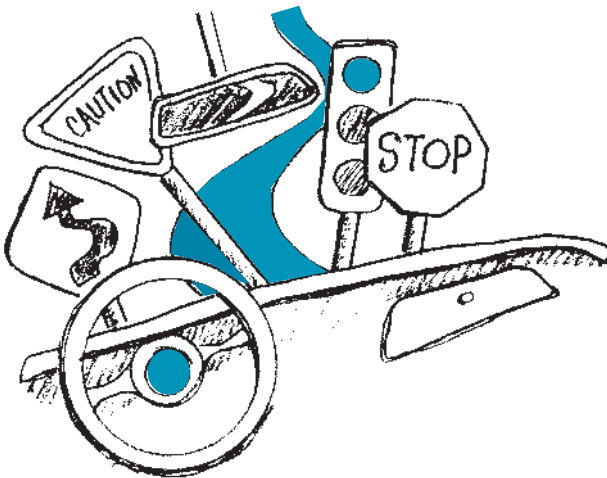
While you are having a panic attack, your thoughts can frighten you even more by predicting “catastrophes,” such as heart attacks, losing control, fainting, or even going crazy. You can help yourself by learning to change your self-talk. Follow these steps:

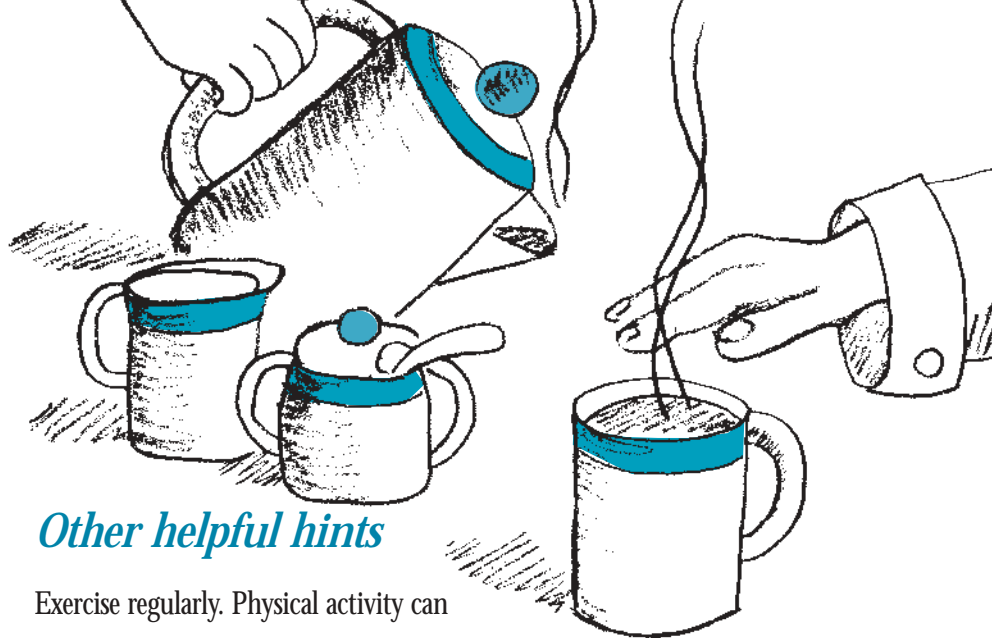
- 1.** Identify your anxiety thoughts as soon as they begin.
- 2.** Ask yourself, “What proof do I have to support these thoughts?”
  - Has this ever happened before?
  - Is my fear based on fact?
  - If it did happen, would it be the end of the world?
- 3.** Look for other explanations. What other explanation can there be for your symptoms? Remember, anxiety or rapid breathing can cause dizziness, chest pain, shortness of breath and other physical symptoms.
- 4.** Learn to “re-label” anxiety symptoms and use a positive coping statement. Tell yourself:
  - “I’m starting to feel uncomfortable and have those heart attack thoughts. This means I’m having an anxiety attack. These attacks are unpleasant, but they will pass in a few minutes. I can handle this.”
  - “I feel uncomfortable, but I am not in danger.”
  - The symptoms *will* go away because anxiety and panic do not last forever.

## *Phobia exposure*

Phobias are fears of certain situations, such as driving, going to stores, malls, movies, restaurants, or staying home alone. The way to overcome phobias is to expose yourself to the feared place or situation a little at a time until it becomes comfortable. You can try this by yourself, with a coach, or under the guidance of a therapist. Some basics of exposure are:

- Do the exposures as often as possible, at least three times a week. The more you do them, the faster your progress will be.
- Start small, then work up steadily.
- The key is to expose yourself to a small enough part of your fear that you can endure it, and then outlast it.
- Once you have mastered the smaller steps, work toward bigger ones. You can use a coach when you try a new step, but do it alone as soon as possible.



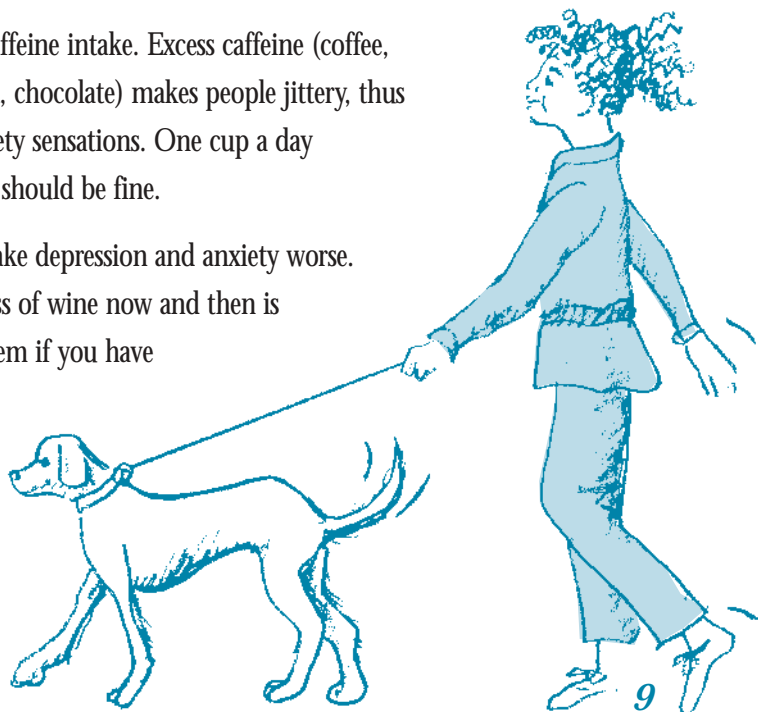


## *Other helpful hints*

Exercise regularly. Physical activity can help reduce stress and anxiety, and it can improve your mood. A 20 to 30 minute brisk walk, three times a week, is an excellent way to keep in shape. Walk quickly enough so that you sweat a little, but you can still hold a conversation easily. Going with a friend can add to the fun.

Reduce your caffeine intake. Excess caffeine (coffee, sodas, black tea, chocolate) makes people jittery, thus increasing anxiety sensations. One cup a day of coffee or tea should be fine.

Alcohol can make depression and anxiety worse. However, a glass of wine now and then is seldom a problem if you have *never* abused alcohol.



## Resources

If you continue to have panic attacks, become fearful of panic, or start avoiding situations out of fear, do not hesitate to call your doctor, behavioral medicine specialist, Mental Health or Psychiatry Department at Kaiser Permanente. All of these medical professionals are there to help.

Most people gain relief from anxiety and panic symptoms by learning new behaviors and thinking techniques. In some cases, medications can help. The sooner you get help, the sooner you will feel better.

Books on panic attacks and phobias help many people feel less alone. Reading one of the following may give you information and the confidence you need to conquer your panic.

*The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, By E. Bourne  
New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 1995

*An End to Panic: Breakthrough Techniques for Overcoming Panic Disorder*, 2nd Edition, By E. Zuercher-White  
New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 1998

*Anxiety, Phobias, and Panic: A Step by Step Program for Regaining Control*, By R. Peurifoy  
Warner Books, 1995

### ***Other resources include:***

Anxiety Disorders Association of America (301) 231-9350

National Institute of Mental Health 1-800-64-PANIC

Your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department of Psychiatry/Mental Health.

*This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional.*

*If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor.*

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