



Anxiety and Panic

A **Panic Attack** is a sudden feeling of intense disabling anxiety. Signs and symptoms of a panic attack usually appear abruptly but tend to peak within a few minutes (although in some more severe cases they can last longer). ***A panic attack is the primary feature of Panic Disorder***

One definition of **Panic Disorder** is: *A psychiatric disorder in which debilitating anxiety and fear arise frequently and without reasonable cause*. Someone with panic disorder is prone to experiencing panic attacks.

The term **Anxiety Attack** is not an “official” diagnosis or nor is it formally defined in psychiatry (according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM)

However “unofficially” speaking, some of the differences between a **panic attack** and an **anxiety attack** are:

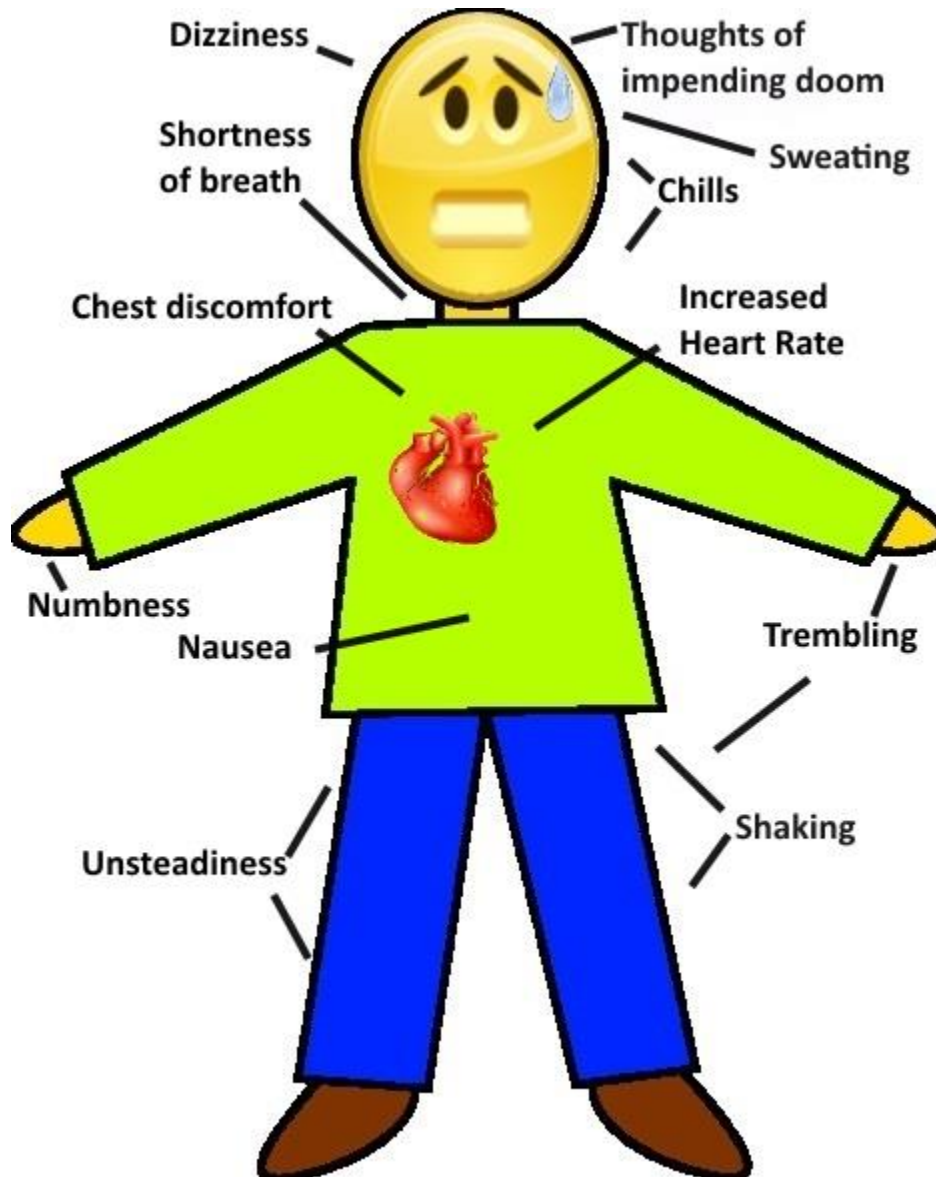
- A panic attack usually describes a more intense and crippling surge of fear and dread which can be so extreme that people often feel like they are dying or “going crazy” during a panic attack. It is not uncommon for someone experiencing a panic attack to feel like they may be having a heart attack, even though they aren’t. Panic attacks are a common reason for visits to the emergency room. Anxiety attacks on the other hand, are unpleasant but usually refer to a surge of anxiety without the more intense and disabling state of impending death and demise that can come with a panic attack. Simply put, a panic attack is more severe than an anxiety attack
- A panic attack can be associated with a specific situation, however often panic attacks can come out of nowhere with absolutely no warning. An anxiety attack is usually in direct response to some kind of stressor. Therefore, panic attacks tend to be more unpredictable. Consider the following two examples:
 - *‘Today at work I had an **anxiety attack** when my boss told me that I was going to have to stand up in front of everyone at the staff meeting and give a presentation so I first had to go get a drink of water and calm myself down in the hallway for a few minutes’*
 - *“I was at the supermarket last week and halfway through my shopping trip, out of nowhere I had a **panic attack** that caused me to leave my half-full cart of groceries right there in the aisle and get out of there immediately and I have not been back there since.”*

In the above examples, the anxiety attack was less severe and came in response to a specific anxiety-inducing stressor. In the second scenario the panic attack came without warning, was more severe and led to a more drastic response (the need for an immediate escape)



Signs and Symptoms of Anxiety and Panic Attacks

There are physical and psychological signs and symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks, many of which are in the following diagram:



Question for discussion:

- Have you ever witnessed or yourself had an anxiety or panic attack? If so, discuss with the group what that was like.



Coping with Anxiety and Panic Attacks

As with most other more serious mental health issues, there are no quick fixes or easy answers for anxiety and panic attacks. There are some basic areas to consider and focus on when working toward recovering from issues with anxiety or panic attacks:

- **Accept and Acknowledge (Ride out the Wave):** If you are having an anxiety or panic attack, one of the biggest mistakes you can make is to try to “fight” against the attack. A good way to illustrate this is to view one of these attacks as a powerful wave coming at you in the ocean. If you try to struggle against the wave it will knock you down and overpower you. Instead, accept the wave and let it take you, while riding it out until it breaks down with time.
- **Relax, Slow Down and Breathe** – When having an attack, try to breathe slowly and deeply to avoid hyperventilation. Taking deep breathes into the pit of your stomach can have a calming effect whereas fast, shallow chest-breathing can make anxiety worse
- **Positive Self Talk** – Don’t buy into those false fears that may be ruminating in your head during an attack. If you feel convinced you are dying, tell yourself “I am NOT going to die”. Try to learn a calming phrase that works for you during attacks: “I am going to be OK once I ride this out”. Remember though, do not just tell yourself to “Calm Down” instead you want to accept what is happening and remind yourself that you can ride it out.

P.S. You're not going to die. Here's the white-hot truth: if you go bankrupt, you'll still be okay. If you lose the gig, the lover, the house, you'll still be okay. If you sing off-key, get beat by the competition, have your heart shattered, get fired...it's not going to kill you. Ask anyone who's been through it.

- Daneille LaPorte

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FINAL EXERCISE: How Did I (or Would I) Cope?

Materials Needed: Make a half a deck of cards. Take a deck of cards and remove the red cards leaving only the black cards (clubs and spades) so that you have a total of 26 cards in the deck.

Directions: Pick a card randomly and read the potentially anxiety-inducing situation associated with the card (listed below). Choose one of the following responses:

- A - "I've done this before ...and I think I could do it again"
- B - "I've done this before...but never want to again"
- C - "I've never done this... but I think I could handle it if I had too"
- D - "I've never done this... but I think I would have a tough time with it"

When answering, add **extra detail** about your thoughts and experiences and try to share your **anxiety level** about that situation. **How would you cope?** Or, if you were successful with a situation: **How did you cope?**

Pick a Card:



CLUBS

- 2 – You have to stand up in front of a large crowd and give a presentation
- 3 – You are in a situation where a bunch of people are going to watch you dance
- 4 – You have to sing in front of others
- 5 – You are going to be alone around a group of new people at a social event for an extended period
- 6 – You are going to be in a situation where you are very high up with little support (like walking a path along a mountain cliff)
- 7 – You have to walk alone through a known dangerous neighborhood you are completely unfamiliar with
- 8 – You are going to be in a situation where it is likely that bugs might end up crawling on you
- 9 – You have to spend a night in a situation where there are wild animals (in the woods, for example)
- 10 – You are going to be in a confined area for a while (like an MRI machine)
- Jack – Something went wrong at work and you are going to get grilled by your boss about it
- Queen – You are going to be in a situation where strangers will see you in your underwear
- King – You are going to be in a situation around someone who bullied, teased or abused you as a child
- Ace – Someone passes out in front of you and you need to do CPR on them



SPADES

- 2 – First day on a new job and you don't know anyone and you aren't sure what you are doing
- 3 – You are in a situation where you are the center of attention and you will be stared at (like a party for you)
- 4 – You are in a situation where it's likely you will be criticized and scrutinized by an intimidating authority figure
- 5 – You have to wear an embarrassing outfit in front of others all day
- 6 – You are going to be in a huge, tightly packed crowd for an extended period
- 7 – You are at a comedy club and the comedian singles you out in front of everyone
- 8 – You are the passenger in a car with a driver who you just don't trust
- 9 – You have to ride a huge roller coaster
- 10 – You go to the bathroom and notice afterward there is nowhere to wash your hands
- Jack – You are in situation where you have to clean someone else's blood or vomit
- Queen – You have a once in a lifetime job interview with someone very prestigious, influential and important
- King – You have a long list of shopping to do and the stores are insanely crowded, hot and understaffed
- Ace – You have to find your way through a strange, complicated place like a foreign airport

Final Question for Discussion: *Based on this activity, what are some of the coping skills for anxiety that you heard from others that stood out to you as effective for you to try?*