4 Things You Can Do to Safely Overcome an Anxiety Attack

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How to Stop an Anxiety Attack

Anxiety attacks are more commonly referred to as panic attacks, especially when it comes to medical classifications of this manifestation. The most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines panic attacks, categorizing them as either unexpected or expected. In this article, we'll cover how to stop an anxiety attack and how to tell if one is coming on.

What is an Anxiety Attack?

Anxiety attacks, also known as panic attacks, are defined as episodes of intense and overwhelming feelings of panic or fear. These episodes are referred to as "attacks", as they often come on suddenly, accompanied by frightening physical symptoms, including a racing heartbeat, shortness of breath, or nausea.

As defined by the DSM-5, unexpected panic attacks occur with no obvious cause for the attack. In contrast, expected panic attacks occur as a result of an external stressor, such as a phobia.

These "unexpected" versus "expected" classifications define the underlying cause of a panic attack (i.e. known versus unknown causes), but it is important to note that anxiety attacks have an intense and sudden onset, no matter which type you are dealing with.

Most anxiety attacks are short, generally no more than 10 minutes, although some symptoms may persist for a longer time before fading. Generally, those who have experienced panic attacks are at a greater risk for having subsequent attacks than those who have never experienced one.

Causes of Anxiety Attacks

Anxiety attacks can be triggered by certain conditions:

- Social phobia
- Agoraphobia (i.e. fear of inability to escape, including flying in an airplane or being in crowds)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Mitral valve prolapse
- Hypoglycemia
- Hyperthyroidism
- Heart attacks

Those with generalized anxiety disorder (defined by excessive and unrealistic worry for a period of at least six months) and phobic disorders (defined by persistent and recurrent fear of certain objects or situations) may also experience periodic panic or anxiety attacks, when exposed to triggers.

Panic disorder involves recurrent and frequent panic attacks, as well as the constant fear of having a future attack. This leads to the avoidance of situations that may trigger an attack or will remind someone of a previous panic attack.

What Happens to Your Body During an Anxiety Attack?

Anxiety attacks cause intense feelings of fear in a concentrated amount of time and are associated with at least four of the following:

- Sudden, overwhelming fear or panic
- Heart palpitations
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath or hyperventilation
- Dizziness
- Nausea or stomach cramps
- Sense of choking
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling (limbs or entire body)
- Chills or hot flashes
- Feeling unreal or detached from the world (derealization)

For many, the terror experienced during an anxiety attack can be so severe that it feels like you are having a heart attack, a stroke, or are about to die.

Can You Stop an Anxiety Attack While Experiencing One?

It is difficult to stop an anxiety attack in the midst of experiencing one, but there are a few methods that may help you regain control or at least reduce your symptoms.

1. Deep Breathing

Regaining control of your breathing by using long, deep breaths can prevent hyperventilation, which often makes other symptoms of anxiety attacks worse. Breathe in for a count of four, hold for a moment, then breathe out for a count of four.

2. Close Your Eyes

If you are in a triggering environment, simply closing your eyes can help you to regain control and block out the stimuli that may be causing your panic. Once you’re able to, focus on your breathing.

3. Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness will teach you how to ground yourself in reality. As anxiety attacks cause many people to become detached from reality, mindfulness can help you to focus on the sensations around you, giving you something objective to focus on.

4. Medication

Benzodiazepines have been used to treat panic attacks and are most beneficial if you take one as soon as you feel an anxiety attack coming on. Medications used to stop anxiety attacks are often highly addictive and should be used sparingly, only in cases of extreme need.

Preventing Anxiety Attacks

Practicing mindfulness, meditation, and deep breathing techniques on a regular basis can help you easily access these tools when you need them most. It is difficult to stop an anxiety attack as it is occurring, so the more practice you have with these methods prior to having an attack, the better equipped you will be to put a stop to them, should they happen.

When practiced regularly, relaxation techniques including mindfulness meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, visualization, and deep breathing can reduce the symptoms of anxiety and increase overall emotional well-being.

Mindfulness meditation is an effective relaxation technique that brings your awareness back to the present moment. Mindfulness is an effective way to counteract many of the cognitive and physical symptoms of anxiety and panic disorder.

As the mind wanders or intrusive thoughts enter during mindfulness practice, we are taught to acknowledge these thoughts, then allow them to pass. Mindfulness allows you to detach from negative thinking by facing thoughts without reaction.

By regularly practicing mindfulness meditation, you will be prepared for the worst, which may actually help you prevent an anxiety attack from occurring.