How to Help Someone Having a Panic Attack

1. **Understand what a panic attack is.** A panic attack is a sudden attack of extreme anxiety. It can occur without warning and for no obvious reason. The symptoms are listed under the tips sections of this article. In extreme cases, the symptoms may be accompanied by an acute fear of dying. Although they are quite distressing, panic attacks are not usually life-threatening and can last from 5 - 20 minutes. It is important to note that the signs and symptoms of a panic attack can be similar to those of a heart attack.

2. **If this is the first time the person has had something like this, seek emergency medical attention.** When in doubt, it is always best to seek immediate medical attention. If the person has diabetes, asthma or other medical problems, seek medical help.

3. **Find out the cause of the attack.** Talk to the person and determine if he or she is having a panic attack and not another kind of medical emergency (such as a heart or asthma attack) which would require immediate medical attention. Check that the cause of poor breathing is not asthma, as asthma is an entirely different condition and requires different treatments.

   **WARNINGS**
   - Panic attacks, especially to someone who has never had one before, often seem like heart attacks. But heart attacks can be deadly, and if there's any question as to which one it is, it's best to call emergency services.
   
   - It should be noted that many asthma sufferers have panic attacks. It is critical that these people re-establish control of their breathing. If a person fails to restore their breathing to a normal pattern of respiration and they do not seek emergency medical attention in a timely manner, the resulting asthma attack can have dire consequences and in some cases may lead to death.

4. **Establish if there is a cause for the fear and either try to remove it or consider taking the person away from the source of distress to a quiet area.** Sometimes a person with panic disorder will already have techniques or medication which they know will help them get through the attack, so ask them if there is anything you can do.

5. **Speak to them in a reassuring but firm manner.** Be prepared for the possibility of the person having an intense desire to escape. Try and get them calm down (and in order to do this, you need to remain calm yourself). Ask the person to remain still, but never grab, hold, or even gently restrain them; if they want to move around, suggest that they stretch, do jumping jacks, or go with you for a brisk walk.[1]

6. **Do not dismiss their fears in any way by saying things like "there's nothing to worry about" or "it's all in your mind" or "you're overreacting".** The fear is very real to them at that moment, and the best you can do is help them cope - minimizing or dismissing the fear in any way can make the panic attack worse. Just say "It's OK" and move on to breathing.

7. **Stay calm and don’t pressure the person. This is not the time to force the person to come up with answers or to do things that will make their anxiety worse.** Minimize the stress levels by being a calming influence and let them get into a relaxed state. Don’t insist they figure out what caused their attack as this will just make it worse.

8. **Encourage them to try to control breathing.** Regaining control of their breathing will help eliminate the symptoms and will help calm them down. Many people take short, rapid breaths when they're panicking, and some people hold their breath. This reduces the oxygen intake which will cause the heart to race. Use one of the following techniques to help bring their breathing back to normal:

   - Get them to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth, making the exhale in a blowing fashion like blowing up a balloon. Do this with them. to help them focus.
   
   - **Try counting breaths.** One way of helping them to do this is to ask the person to breathe in and out on your count. Begin by counting aloud, encouraging the person to breathe in for 2 and then out for 2, gradually increase the count to 4 and then 6 if possible until their breathing has slowed down and is regulated.

   - Get them to breathe into a paper bag.

   If the person is receptive, offer a paper bag (see warnings next page first).

   This should be done by alternating around 10 breaths into and out of the bag, followed by breathing without a bag for 15 seconds. It is important not to overdo the bag breathing in case carbon dioxide levels rise too high and oxygen levels fall too low, causing other more serious medical problems.
**WARNINGS**

- If using the paper bag method, the bag should only be placed around the nose and mouth sufficiently to ensure the expired breath is re-breathed. Do not ever place the bag over the head and plastic bags should never be used.

- Breathing into a paper bag causes the re-breathing of carbon dioxide, which can result in respiratory acidosis. Respiratory acidosis is a dangerous condition which disrupts the binding of oxygen to hemoglobin (blood). Any such attempts to control panic attacks using a paper bag should be closely monitored, or not used at all.

- Be aware that for some people, the paper bag itself may be a trigger of fear, especially if they've had negative experiences with being pushed into it during previous panic attacks.

- Since this is done to prevent hyperventilation, it may not be necessary if you're dealing with someone who holds their breath or slows their breathing when they panic.

9. Keep them cool. Many panic attacks can be accompanied by sensations of warmth, especially around the neck and face. A cold object, ideally a wet washcloth can often help minimize this symptom and aide in reducing the severity of the attack.

10. Don't leave them alone. Stay with them until they have recovered from the attack. Never leave someone who is struggling to breathe. A person with a panic attack may seem like they're being unfriendly or rude, but understand what they are going through and wait until they're back to normal. Ask them what has worked in the past, and if and when they have taken their meds.

10. Remember that the feelings are real and that their thoughts may be racing. Reassure them that you will get them help, do not leave them alone but do not hesitate to seek immediate medical attention including an ambulance. They may be acting on feelings, but they can act in ways that put the person in immediate risk of serious harm.

11. Seek medical help. If the symptoms do not subside within 15 minutes, consider seeking urgent medical advice. Some panic attacks, however, may last for hours, and bringing the person to a hospital could make things worse. If this is the first time he or she has had a panic attack, they may want to seek medical attention because they are frightened of what is happening to them. If they've had panic attacks in the past, however, they may know that getting emergency care will worsen their state. Ask them. This decision will ultimately depend on the individual's experience and your interactions with him or her.

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**Panic-Attack-Symptoms include:**

Dizziness/Lightheaded/Feeling like you're going to pass out. (This is usually from hyperventilating.)

- Palpitations or chest pain
- Speeding up of the heart rate
- Rapid or over-breathing

- Headaches
- Backaches
- Trembling

- Tingling in fingers or toes
- Sweating
- Dry mouth

- Difficulty swallowing
- Nausea, abdominal cramping
- Hot flashes or chills

**Less frequent symptoms include:**

- Disturbing or negative thoughts
- Racing thoughts
- Feeling of unreality

- Feeling of impending doom
- Feeling of impending death
- Blotchiness