

# Understanding panic attacks



A panic attack is a brief episode of intense mental and physical anxiety symptoms.

They can come on suddenly and feel overwhelming, even when there's no real danger. You might feel out of control, disconnected, or like something is seriously wrong.

While panic attacks can be frightening, they aren't life-threatening, and with the right support, they can become easier to manage.

**Around 40% of Australians have a panic attack once or twice in their lives.**

## Signs & effects

Panic attacks can feel different for everyone, but common experiences include:



### Physical sensations

Racing heart, fast or shallow breathing, sweating, trembling, dizziness, or feeling like choking.



### Overwhelming emotions

Sudden fear or sense of dread without any clear explanation.



### Distressing thoughts

Worry you're losing control, having a heart attack, or that something bad is about to happen.



### A strong urge to escape

Feeling the need to leave the situation, even if there's no real danger.



### Difficulty thinking clearly

Brain fog, trouble concentrating, or racing thoughts.



### Disconnection

Feeling detached from surroundings or like watching things from outside your body.

# Causes

There's no single cause of panic attacks. They often happen as a result of different experiences and feelings building up, such as:

## Stressful events

Big life changes like exams, moving house, a relationship breakdown, or grief.

## Ongoing stress

Long-term pressures from work, money, or feeling overwhelmed over time.

## Past experiences

Difficult or traumatic events, like abuse, bullying, or childhood stress.

## Family history

Growing up around someone who experiences anxiety or panic attacks.

## Specific triggers

Situations like crowds, conflict, or feeling out of control or unsafe.

## Health factors

Things like chronic pain, certain medical conditions, or substances like caffeine, nicotine, or alcohol.

Experiencing panic attacks is never your fault. Whatever the cause, there are ways to navigate what you're feeling. And remember, support is available every step of the way.

# Recognising how and when panic shows up

Having a plan like the one below can help you notice patterns, understand what triggers panic, and find ways to manage it.

## Panic attack management plan

<b>Anticipate</b>	<b>What situations or thoughts lead to panic?</b> e.g., crowded places, stressful events, feeling out of control
<b>Identify</b>	<b>How might I feel or respond?</b> e.g., racing heart, dizziness, feeling disconnected
<b>Manage</b>	<b>What can I do to care for myself?</b> e.g., grounding techniques, talking to someone I trust, splash cold water on my face



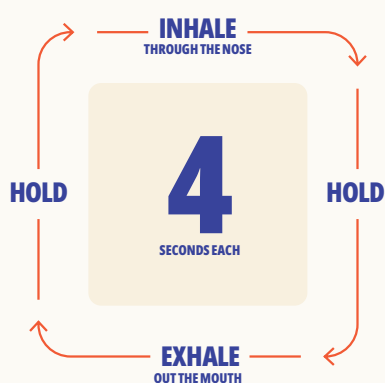
# Practical management strategies

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**Use grounding techniques**  
 Activities that get you to focus on your breathing or five senses can help ease physical sensations.
- 
**Remind yourself it will pass**  
 Panic attacks often peak within 10 minutes. You can repeat to yourself, 'This is temporary. I've felt this before, and I can get through it.'
- 
**Adjust substance use**  
 Cutting back on caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or other substances may help reduce the chances of triggering panic symptoms.
- 
**Focus on something reassuring**  
 Hold onto a meaningful object or picture, or repeat a calming phrase.
- 
**Talk about it**  
 Sharing what you're feeling with someone you trust, like a friend, family member, or health professional, can help you feel supported and understood.
- 
**Prioritise rest and movement**  
 Getting enough sleep and moving your body through gentle activities like walking or stretching can help you manage stress.

## Want to try something now?

If you're feeling distressed or unsure where to start, a grounding technique like **box breathing**, **reciting something in order**, or **using your five senses** can help ease physical sensations and take your focus off what's causing you to feel overwhelmed.

### BOX BREATHING



### RECITING TECHNIQUE

You can try reciting:

- the alphabet
- the months, backwards
- what you did yesterday



### 5 SENSES TECHNIQUE

Look for...

-  5 things you can **see**
-  4 things you can **feel**
-  3 things you can **hear**
-  2 things you can **smell**
-  1 things you can **taste**



Everyone is different, so what works for someone else might not work for you, and that's okay.

The key is to keep experimenting until you find what helps you most.

Wherever you are, help is at your fingertips with the **Support Toolkit**

 [lifeline.org.au/toolkit](https://lifeline.org.au/toolkit)

# When to seek help

You may want to speak to a health professional if:

- ✓ Panic attacks are happening often or feel like they're getting worse.
- ✓ You're avoiding people, places, or activities because you're worried about having another attack.
- ✓ Your anxiety is affecting your daily life, including work, school, or relationships.
- ✓ You feel constant fear or dread about when the next attack might happen.
- ✓ You're struggling to cope, feeling hopeless, or experiencing thoughts of self-harm.
- ✓ You're experiencing ongoing physical symptoms like dizziness, chest tightness, or trouble breathing.

## Reaching out can feel difficult, but it's a sign of strength.

Support is always available to help you feel more in control and hopeful for the future.

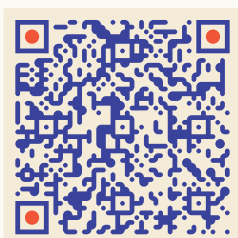
# Support is available

Understanding and managing panic attacks isn't something you have to do on your own.

Head to our **Support Toolkit** to find more practical strategies and discover national and local support services that can help.

The Support Toolkit also offers information on a wide range of mental health and wellbeing topics you can explore at your own pace, whenever you need.

Visit [lifeline.org.au/panic-attacks/services](https://lifeline.org.au/panic-attacks/services) or scan the QR code to get started.



**If you're feeling overwhelmed right now, Lifeline is here to support you.**

You can reach us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

☎ Call 13 11 14

✉ Text 0477 131 114

💬 Chat online at [lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat](https://lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat)

**If your life is in danger, please call 000.**

Wherever you are, help is at your fingertips with the **Support Toolkit**

➔ [lifeline.org.au/toolkit](https://lifeline.org.au/toolkit)