

# Panic Attacks

A panic is a sudden, intense surge of fear that reaches a peak. While fear is a normal response to stress, a panic attack is an exaggerated form of the fight or flight response to a perceived threat. This may be due to an overworked stress response system or may be occurring in the context of an anxiety or panic disorder, or can occur for no reason at all. Anyone can experience a panic or anxiety attack.

## Symptoms of Panic Attacks Can Include

- Being detached from oneself (depersonalization)
- Blurred vision
- Chest pain, tightness, or pressure
- Chills
- Concentration problems, “foggy mind”
- Dizziness, lightheaded or faint
- Dry mouth
- Fear of going crazy or losing control
- Feelings of unreality (de-realization)
- Headache
- Muscle tension
- Nausea or worsening IBS symptoms
- Numbness, tingling, trembling in arms/legs
- Pounding heart or palpitations
- Ringing in the ears (tinnitus)
- Shaking or trembling
- Shortness of breath, sighing, hyperventilating
- Sweating, heat sensations, or shivering
- Tearfulness
- Uncontrollable crying or emotional outbursts

## Immediate Panic Attack Relief

- **Breathe.** Take a slow breath in, tense all parts of your body, and exhale slowly. Then continue breathing slowly by inhaling through your nose for 5 seconds and gently exhaling through your mouth, as if you are blowing out a candle, for 5 seconds. Breathe this way for 5-10 minutes until you feel more relaxed. Another version of this is to hold your index finger about 5 inches from your mouth, pretending it is a candle and gently exhale as if gently trying to blow the flame without putting it out
- **Raise both arms above your head.** This in effect causes you to breathe diaphragmatically and allows you to breathe more slowly. Another strategy is **to inhale and then hold your breath for 10 seconds or more,** then slowly exhale through your mouth.
- **Learn and Practice Mindfulness.** Mindfulness includes being aware of the present moment and being nonjudgmental of it. Practice being aware of your stress levels and physical symptoms, then learn to observe them rather than react to them. Practicing relaxation strategies on a daily basis can teach you how to keep your daily stress level down. The more knowledge and coping skills you have, the more prepared you will be to understand how to manage your mind and body.
- **Use Grounding.** Grounding is a set of simple *strategies to center yourself during moments of deep emotional pain* (for example, anxiety, panic attacks, anger, drug cravings, self-harm impulses). This detachment works by focusing outward on the external world—rather than inward toward the self. You can also think of grounding as a “taking a step back”, “looking outward”, or “centering”.



# Grounding

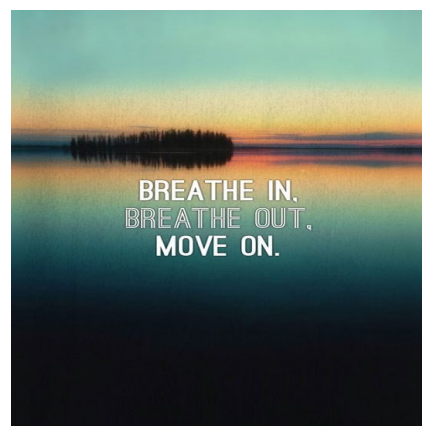
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When you are overwhelmed with emotional pain, you need a way to connect with yourself so that you can gain control over your feelings and stay safe. Grounding ‘anchors’ you to the present and to reality; you attain balance between being conscious of reality and being able to tolerate it.

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*Anchor yourself to bring gentle awareness back to your surroundings*

- Picture people you care about (look at photographs of them if you have one).
- Remember a safe place. Describe the sounds, colors, shapes, and objects of a place you find very soothing (beach, mountains, a favorite room).
- Say a coping statement: “I can handle this,” “This feeling will pass.”
- Think of things you are looking forward to next week.
  
- Count to 10 or say the alphabet very slowly.
- naming something you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste.
- count backwards
- speak in a foreign language you know
- organize or clean your room,
- notice the ground beneath your feet or the sounds around you
- rubbing your feet or hands on a carpet, chair or put an ice cube in a paper towel and squeeze it hard for over a minute.
  
- Focus on your breathing. Notice each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (for example, a favorite color or a soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”).
- Notice your body: The weight of your body in the chair; wiggling your toes in your socks; the feeling of your back against the chair. You are connected to the world.
- Touch objects around you: Notice texture, color, weight. Is one colder? Lighter?
- Run cool or warm water over your hands.
- Walk slowly noticing each footstep, saying “left,” “right” with each step.



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## A Few Tips:

- Grounding can be done anytime, any place, anywhere and no one has to know.
  - Use grounding when you are faced with a trigger, having a flashback, dissociating, or having a substance craving. Grounding puts a healthy distance between you and these negative feelings.
  - No talking about negative feelings or journal writing. In grounding, you want to distract away from negative feelings, not get in touch with them. Try to stay neutral instead of making judgements of “good” or “bad.”
  - Rate your emotional pain (0-10) before and after to understand if grounding is helping you.
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