

## How can I help someone having panic attacks?

If someone you care about has panic attacks, it might be helpful if you know what to do when one starts.

Seeing someone have a panic attack can be a bit scary. Your friend or relative might be:

- Pale and sweating.
- Gasping for breath.
- Preparing to run or telling you "we need to go".
- Frozen or looking terrified.
- Suddenly feeling overwhelmed and acting very agitated.

The first thing for you to remember is to keep calm. The attack will pass and you can help by staying with them and talking calmly.

### **Things not to do:**

- Tell them to calm down or shout at them - they're in the middle of a physical reaction and can't just snap out of it.
- Ask them what's wrong - they might be finding it difficult to talk because their breathing is affected. They might not be able to explain what triggered the attack. You can talk more about it (if they want to) when the attack is over.
- Hug them - they're experiencing the 'flight or fight' response and might push you away.
- Ignore them - the attack will stop eventually, but they might find it easier to cope with your help.

### **Things you could do:**

- Talk calmly and speak in easy, short sentences.
- Remind them that it's a panic attack and that they're safe. Reassure them that you are going to stay with them.
- Say "let's find a quiet space" - moving to a quiet spot can help. The movement itself can help reduce the physical symptoms of a panic attack. And moving somewhere calmer can also help you to manage your symptoms rather than focussing on your surroundings.

- If they're struggling to breathe, count for them and ask them to breathe with you: breathing in through your nose for four counts and out of your mouth for four is a good place to start. Get them to listen to your voice and concentrate on your counting. Carry on until they're breathing regularly again.
- Some people find breathing in while lifting their arms slowly to the sides and breathing out while lowering them helps.
- Help them focus on something outside themselves - you could stand by a window and ask them to count the cars going past or see how many pigeons there are. Having something to focus on might distract their brain long enough for their body to relax.

After the panic attack has gone, they might feel embarrassed or exhausted. Ask what you can do for them: do they want to leave, do they want to go for a walk or would they like a drink of water.

Remember to look after yourself too. Watching someone having a panic attack or feeling distressed can be upsetting. You've done really well to help them and it's OK to need some time out yourself.