



## How to help someone who is having a panic attack

***Whether it's a pupil, your own child or a friend, watching someone else have a panic attack can be terrifying and leave you feeling completely helpless, but there are several things you can do to support.***

### **Just be there**

Having a panic attack is a terrifying feeling and one that can make you feel very alone. Just being present can make a huge difference to the person who is suffering. It will make them feel a little less out of control of the situation which is likely to shorten the duration of the attack. Unless it's absolutely necessary, don't leave someone alone whilst they're having a panic attack. Call for help or send someone else, but remain steadfast by the sufferer's side and remind them that you are there and that you will not leave them.

### **Assert control**

There are several feelings that accompany a panic attack, but one universal feeling is a loss of control, both of the general situation and of the sufferer's own body. When your heart is racing, your breathing is out of control and you feel like you might die, it's hard to feel in control of things. Try to gently assert control of the situation as this can feel deeply reassuring for the sufferer. You might not feel very in control but it's time to employ your best acting skills. Talk in a calm, measured manner, explain simply and carefully what is happening now,

what you are doing to help and what will happen next. It almost doesn't matter what you say so long as you say it with some authority and you are apparently in control of the situation.

## Don't panic

Panic fuels panic so it's most important that you control your own anxiety when responding to someone else's panic attack. If necessary, you may also need to take active steps to calm down others too; it's possible for one panic attack to trigger a kind of mass hysteria as people set each other off. This is a moment to really assert your control and appear authoritative. Be polite but firm in telling other people to move away from the sufferer, to give them some space. Encourage people not to crowd, run, scream or otherwise panic.

## Don't make assumptions or be dismissive

Don't assume that you know what has caused the panic attack, don't assume to understand and don't be dismissive of the cause if it becomes clear. This is not a time for platitudes... Panic attacks can often be an extreme reaction to a relatively minor trigger but that does not make them feel any less terrifying to the sufferer who will often feel like they are dying. Being told not to be silly, or that there's nothing to worry about is insensitive at best and panic fuelling at worst.

## Move away from the cause

If the cause of the attack becomes clear, move away from it, or have it removed. It may be irrational and you may not understand why this trigger is fuelling such panic, but that is irrelevant right now. What is important is to put some distance between the sufferer and the trigger so that they can begin to gain some control.

## Focus on breathing

It can really help a panic attack to pass if the sufferer is able to take control of their breathing. Some people advocate the use of breathing into a paper bag, others try to slow the sufferer's breathing by counting with them as they breathe in and out and another strategy is to imagine blowing bubbles. It doesn't really matter what strategy you use, but sit with the sufferer, talk to them about their breathing, encourage them to actively think about it and really focus on slowing it down and taking control of it. This may take some time and you may have to repeat yourself frequently. Stick with it. You will get there. Taking quite a

physical approach can help too. Holding the sufferer by the shoulders and talking to them face on can help some people, others like to have their hand held whilst you talk to them from their side. You will soon get a feel for what is working.

## Give the sufferer space and time

Once the immediate signs of the panic attack have passed, many people assume that the sufferer should be able to continue as normal, but this is not the case. It can take quite some time to 'come down' from a panic attack and if possible the sufferer should be given space and time to recover before being expected to continue with e.g. lessons at school. During this time it's helpful if they can be accompanied and be somewhere where they feel safe without feeling they have to talk about anything unless they want to. Some people find walking is helpful whilst other like to watch TV or listen to music to help take their mind off whatever it was that triggered the attack.

## Afterwards, identify the trigger

A few hours later, or the next day, when the sufferer is fully recovered and ready to talk about things, it is worth gently exploring what triggered the attack and thinking about ways that this trigger might be avoided in future. It is also worth discussing what was helpful to them in terms of helping them to overcome the attack, this will enable you to support them better if you are with them on another occasion that they have a panic attack. It is worth ensuring that friends and family are made aware of anything specific the sufferer finds helpful when trying to overcome an attack.

## Don't be afraid to talk about it

Panic attacks are horrible experiences and sufferers often feel embarrassed or ashamed by them. Ensure that the sufferer does not feel stigmatised by their attacks by being willing to talk about it with them and trying to understand more about how they feel and how you can help. The more we talk about these things the more we understand and the better we are able to help. Additionally, the more open a sufferer is able to be about their panic attacks, they more likely they are to be able to feel confident telling someone when they feel the early signs of an attack coming on which can be a good way of preventing attacks from escalating in the first instance.

## About the Author

*Dr Pooky Knightsmith is a mental health and emotional wellbeing consultant, author, speaker and trainer. Pooky is known for her passionate, engaging and highly practical teaching style and has run many courses particularly for teachers, parents and students on a wide range of mental health topics.*



*Pooky completed her PhD in child and adolescent mental health at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, where she specialised in developing practical strategies for supporting self-harm and eating disorders in schools and other non-clinical settings. The strategies that Pooky advocates are all developed as a result of direct consultation with school staff and students and she also seeks inspiration from her clinical colleagues at the world famous Maudsley Hospital, adapting and simplifying evidence based approaches for use in school and other non-clinical settings.*