



SA Federation for
Mental Health

ANXIETY DISORDERS

PANIC DISORDER

What it is:

Panic disorder is characterised by recurrent and unexpected panic attacks. A panic attack is a sudden feeling of intense fear or anxiety that goes together with physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, chest pain and difficulty breathing. The frequency and severity of the panic attacks can vary. Panic attacks can also increase an individual's stress and anxiety levels for a number of reasons. An individual may worry that the physical symptoms may indicate a heart attack or seizure disorder, or they may worry that the panic attacks show they are becoming mentally unstable. They may also worry about the social effect that having a panic attack in a public place such as the office or at school could have on people's perception of them.

This increased worry about the effects of panic attacks may actually increase an individual's anxiety levels, and make it more likely for them to experience more frequent panic attacks. Depending on the severity and frequency of the panic attacks, panic disorder can be debilitating.

Common symptoms:

1. Recurring and unexpected panic attacks – a surge of intense fear or anxiety that goes together with certain physical symptoms listed below
2. Heart palpitations
3. Sweating
4. Shaking or trembling
5. Feeling short of breath, or like you cannot breath
6. Chest pain
7. Feeling nausea or abdominal pain
8. Feeling dizzy, lightheaded or faint
9. Feeling numb or a tingling sensation in your body
10. Derealisation or depersonalisation
11. Fear of dying

Remember to always consult a mental health or medical practitioner regarding any questions you may have about a mental health diagnosis and treatment options.

This factsheet is based on information obtained from the DSM-5:
American Psychiatric Association, 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition.*



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Causes:

There are a number of factors that are believed to contribute to the development of panic disorder. Temperament plays a role, as individuals with negative affectivity and anxiety sensitivity may be more likely to develop the disorder. Experiencing separation anxiety in childhood may also increase your chances of developing panic disorder in adulthood. Childhood sexual and physical abuse may also play a role in the development of the disorder, as may individual stressors in the months leading up to the first panic attack, for example a traumatic life event such as losing a loved one. There is also an increased risk of developing panic disorder among children of parents with anxiety, depressive and bipolar disorders.

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