



MANAGING PANIC ATTACKS

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A panic attack is usually described as a sudden escalating surge of extreme fear. During a panic attack, a child typically has sudden and intense physical symptoms that can include a pounding heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, numbness, or tingling feelings. Panic attacks are very scary for parents and children; especially when they occur “out of the blue”. Panic attacks often require professional help, but here are some ideas to help your child manage panic at home.

1. EDUCATE YOUR CHILD ABOUT ANXIETY

- Anxiety is normal and adaptive, it helps us prepare for danger.
- Anxiety can become a problem when our body tells us that there is danger when there is no real threat.

2. TEACH YOUR CHILD ABOUT PANIC

- Panic attacks are the body’s “flight or fight” response kicking in. This response prepares our body to defend itself (for instance, our heart beats faster to pump blood to our muscles, so we have the energy to run away or fight off danger). However, sometimes our body reacts when there is no real danger.
- Panic attacks are harmless, although they can feel very uncomfortable or scary.
- Panic attacks are brief (typically lasting only 10 minutes), although they sometimes feel like they go on forever!

3. FOCUS ON SOMETHING ELSE

- Focus on a non-threatening or visible object, for example, like items in a store window or the moving hands on a clock until you feel the panic reduce.
- If you can, recite something in your head like song lyrics, a joke, or the times-tables. This will distract you from what triggered the attack in the first place.

4. BELLY BREATHING

We tend to take quick and shallow breaths when we are anxious. Deep breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths into your belly (diaphragmatic breathing).

5. USING PERIPHERAL VISION

Try to let your field of vision broaden until you can see from the outside corners of your eyes. Breathe deeply and let your jaw muscles relax. This exercise activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms your body.

6. CHALLENGE FEAR BUT DON'T FIGHT IT

- Don't try to run or escape when you feel panicked. Stay put and stay present.
- Tell yourself that the panic is temporary. Try to figure out what triggered you and remind yourself that your fear will pass. Don't let it get the best of you!
- Don't try to resist the feeling of anxiety. Resisting and fighting might only increase your panic.

7. CREATE COPING STATEMENTS

Write out coping statements on your phone or index cards to help remind you stay calm and use your strategies. Here are some ideas:

- A reminder that physical symptoms are just anxiety
- The name your child has given to anxiety (e.g., “Worry Dragon”)
- Positive coaching statements (e.g., “I can get through this”)
- Some calming skills your child finds helpful

8. MAKE A FAMILY TEAM

Enlist family members to provide support through their positive encouragement and unwavering affection. Be sure to discuss boundaries with siblings, including rules about name-calling and teasing.