

How to Help an Individual During a Panic Attack: Job Aid

Note: You may need to assess for suicidal ideation

Panic Attack definition: a sudden episode of intense fear that triggers severe physical reactions when there is no real danger or apparent cause. Signs of a panic attack might be a feeling of terror/dread, hyperventilation, shortness of breath, choking feeling, pounding heart, dizziness or shaking. If someone has a panic attack, they may become very anxious and not be thinking clearly. You can help the person by:

- Stay in communication with the person; speak calmly and gently in short, simple sentences.
- Build rapport. Ask the help seeker for their first name; refer to them by name throughout the connection. Reassure them that you are here for them. Offer helping phrases such as: “You can get through this”, “I’m here with you”, or “Tell me what you need in this moment”
- Ask if there is medicine the person usually takes during an attack.
- Help the person gradually slow their breathing by breathing with them. Speaking slowly in a reassuring tone: “We’re going to focus on your breathing now. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Hold that breath for a moment. Slowly exhale through your mouth. Now another slow, deep breath in. Hold it. And again, slowly exhale through your mouth.”
- If the panic attack continues, ask the help seeker: “Has this happened to you before? What has helped you in the past?” Don’t assume what the person needs; refrain from sharing your personal experience with panic.
- If the help seeker is unable to say what has worked in the past, offer help in a way that gives them agency. Ex: “I know a technique that helps with panic attacks. Would you like to try the technique with me?”

8 Self-Help/Grounding Strategies for a Help Seeker Experiencing a Panic Attack

NOTE: use one intervention at a time; move through it slowly & calmly, allowing some time for each step to take effect

- Consider asking the help seeker if a certain kind of technique has been helpful in the past
- Some people prefer not to focus on their breathing; if so, try a strategy related to movement or visualization
- Panic attacks start rapidly but resolve more slowly. Commit to a technique for a period, rather than jumping rapidly from one to the next. Your goal is to create a feeling of serenity and calm during the interaction.

Counting Slowly count backwards from 10

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique This method uses the 5 senses to create mindfulness & calm anxious thoughts. Try this script:

- **Vision.** Describe **5** separate objects you can see nearby (color, shape, etc.), one at a time.
- **Hearing.** Name **4** distinct sounds you can hear nearby. Describe where each one came from. What sets each one apart? (Ex: wind blowing, passing cars, conversations, dog barking)
- **Touch.** Touch **3** nearby objects, one at a time. For each one, describe its texture, temperature, and what it’s used for.
- **Smell.** Identify **2** different things you can smell (ex: soap, car exhaust, coffee, laundry detergent on clothes).
- **Taste.** Name **1** thing you can taste (ex: coffee, something you recently ate, or try drinking a glass of cold water).

Ice Ask if they can place an ice cube against their wrists or face for a few moments

Movement Ask if they can take a walk outside, or stretch

Numbers Try a few simple math problems (1+1 is..., 1+2 is...) or recite times tables (2x1 is..., 2x2 is...)

Fist Clench This method uses visualization to calm anxious thoughts. Try the script below:

“Clench your hands into fists. As you do this, visualize gripping all the negative and nervous energy in your hands. Squeeze as hard as you can, then let go, and notice how your body feels as you release the tension. *(If the help seeker seems to be responding, continue)* “Let’s try this a few times in a row.”

Grounding Chair This method uses visualization to calm anxious thoughts. Try this script: “Think about where you’re seated right now. Think about how it feels as you sit, and how your body fits into your seat. Lightly press the soles of your feet against the floor as you relax into your seat, allowing your seat and the floor to support you. Visualize all the negative and nervous energy flowing out through your feet and onto the floor.”

Happy Place This method uses visualization to calm anxious thoughts. Try this script: “Visualize your favorite place: Use all your senses to create a mental image. Think of the colors you see, sounds you hear, and sensations you feel on your skin. Remember the last time you were there. Who were you with, if anyone? What did you do there? How did you feel?”

Wrap-up with an encouraging message: “I’m grateful that you reached out today.” “I’m glad you’re doing better.”