



# What is a panic attack?

Kooth's support guide for young people

# What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a feeling of really intense anxiety or fear. Panic attacks can happen very suddenly, and usually last between 5 and 20 minutes.

Although panic attacks can feel really frightening, it's important to remember that you're not likely to come to any physical harm, and there are ways you can help yourself. **In this article, we'll explore:**

1. the symptoms of a panic attack
2. how it might feel to have a panic attack
3. ways to help you cope if you experience a panic attack
4. the difference between a panic attack and panic disorder
5. how to seek professional support
6. overcoming panic attacks and feeling hopeful



## What are the symptoms of a panic attack?

Panic attacks can trigger lots of different symptoms, such as:

- stomach aches or feeling sick
- headaches
- faster heartbeats
- shaking
- sweating
- changes to your body temperature (feeling very hot or very cold)
- dizziness
- needing to go to the toilet
- tingling in your fingers or other body parts
- hyperventilation (where you breathe really quickly and it can leave you feeling breathless)



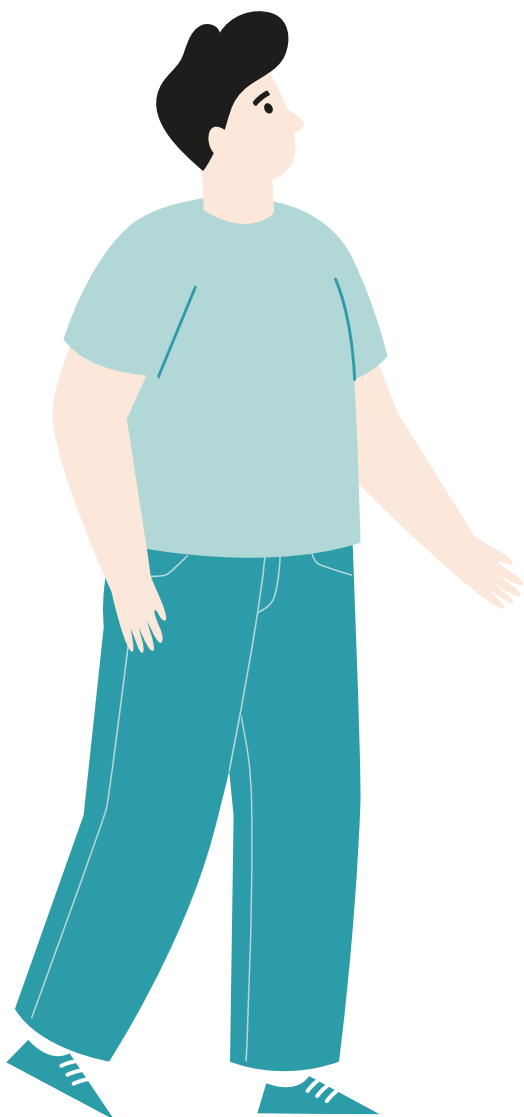
## How does it feel to have a panic attack?

Symptoms of panic attacks can really vary from person to person. We asked a group of people who have experienced panic attacks to share what it was like for them.

*“Panic attacks can feel really scary, especially when you don't really know what's going on. I used to experience a really fast heartbeat, dizziness, stomach cramps, sweating, numb hands, and I had a dry mouth. I remember when I first started having them I had no idea what they were.” - Jo*

*“My panic attacks came out of nowhere and they felt really scary. They made breathing difficult. I would hyperventilate and hold on to something or sit down to keep myself from falling. - Sam*

*“I would feel really sick, get very cold, and would start crying. My panic attacks would sometimes come out of the blue, which felt overwhelming, as I would then start to worry about having them when I was at school.” - Javi*



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## Ways to manage a panic attack

It can be hard to know what to do when you're feeling panicked. Here are just a few simple things that may help you feel more calm.

### Take slow, deep breaths

Panic attacks can lead to really fast breathing. Taking big, deep breaths can help slow down your breathing, and help you feel calmer.

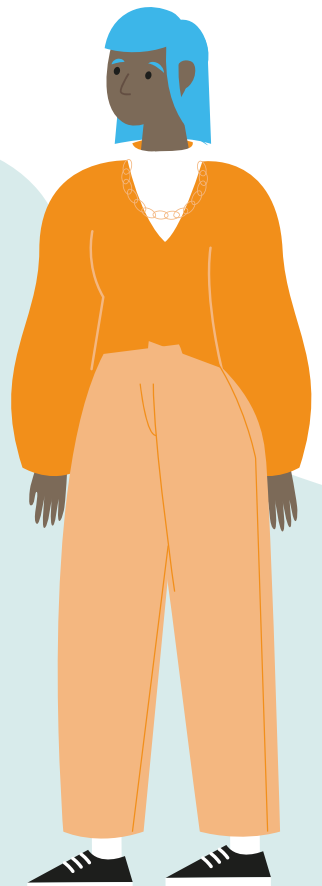
*"Breathing techniques and relaxation have been a huge part of reducing my feelings of panic." - Leni*

It could be helpful to practise some breathing exercises when you're already in a calm state, so that you know which ones work best for you when you're feeling panicked.

### Focus on your senses

When you're experiencing panic, it can be helpful to focus on a particular sense that appeals to you in the moment - for example, a tree that you see, a comforting voice that you hear, or an object you can touch. This can help bring you back into the here and now, so that you're less focused on your feelings of panic.

*"Because I'd get so overwhelmed, wherever I was, I would simply stare at something I could see: a clock on the wall, a crack in the ceiling, a leaf on a tree - anything that helped me to focus. It definitely helped me feel calmer, and it was something I knew I could do wherever I was." - Javi*



## Try to relax your muscles

If you're feeling tense, remind the body how to relax with a simple "tense and relax" exercise.

- Clench your fist, and hold it for a few seconds.
- Slowly release your fist and relax your hand.
- Repeat this as many times as you like and notice if it makes a difference.

*"Because I feel so tense when I have a panic attack, I try to relax my body as much as possible. It's almost like persuading my body to be calm. It really works for me." - Jo*

## Repeat a mantra

A mantra is a word or phrase we repeat to help bring us focus, gives us confidence, reassurance, or change our thinking. During a panic attack, the reassurance of repeating a mantra might be useful, like "This shall pass".

*"Over the years I've learnt rather than trying to fight the wave of panic, to just go with it. I tell myself, no matter how powerful the storm may be, it will pass and there will be calm again." - Leni*



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## What's the difference between a panic attack and panic disorder?

If you're having lots of panic attacks, and they happen randomly without a clear cause, you may be diagnosed with panic disorder. If this is happening to you, we encourage you to talk to your GP, as they can help you get proper support.

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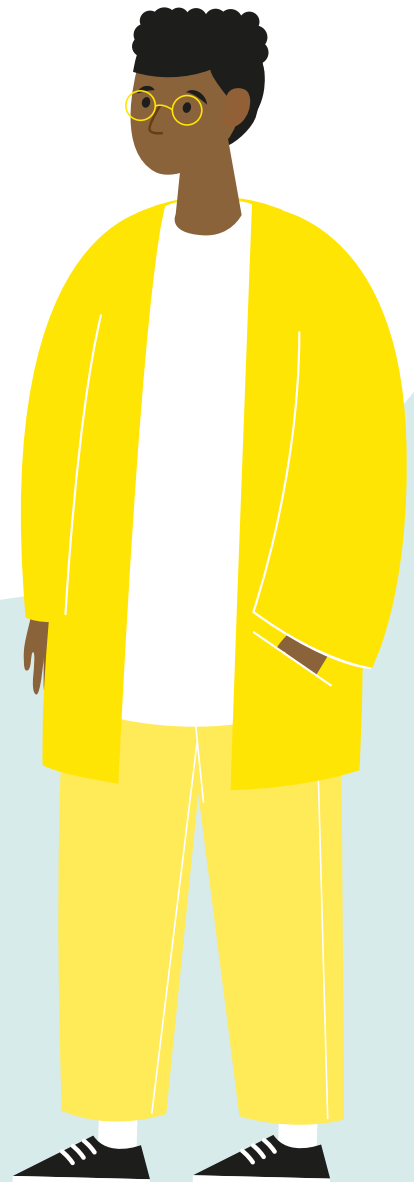
## Seeking professional help

Getting some professional support is a great way to help yourself. Not only can your local GP suggest helpful techniques to help you, but they might also be able to signpost you to local services, too.

Leni told us, *“I had a very supportive GP who really helped me. It was through them I was able to access some talking therapy, which was a great way to find new ways to cope, and explore how I was feeling about all sorts of things.”*

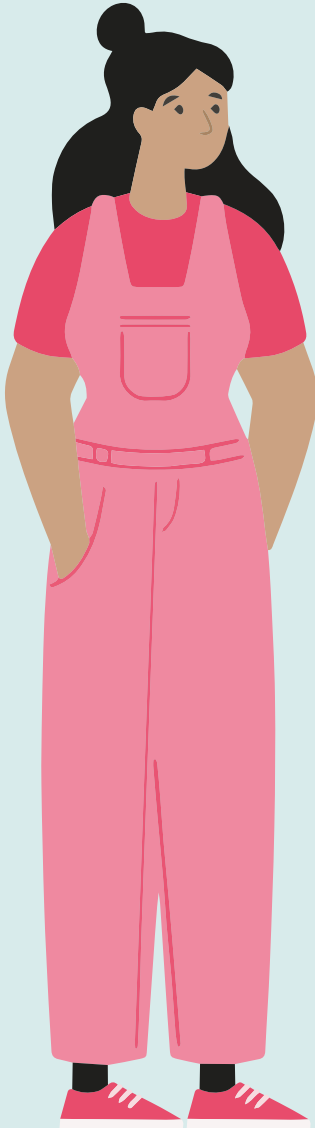
If talking to your GP is something you think might help, try writing down your symptoms and everything you want to tell them before your appointment. Keeping a diary of your panic attacks might also help to identify patterns and triggers. For example, you could record things like:

- **where you were** - for example, work, home, out with friends
- **what was happening at the time** - for example, you were just about to give a presentation, you were talking to friends, or you working on a project
- **what your symptoms were** - for example, fast breathing, dizziness, and headache



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## Overcoming panic attacks and feeling hopeful



If you're experiencing panic attacks, it can feel like things will never get better. We thought it would be helpful to share how the people we've spoken to have learned how to manage their panic attacks.

*"I used to have loads of panic attacks a day, and now I only get them every so often. When they do happen, I know exactly what works for me to move through it quickly!" - Jo*

*"Sometimes I do still get that feeling of anxiety and panic, but I'm able to manage these times differently now, rather than being overwhelmed. I no longer view my panic as the 'enemy', but instead, I see it as a really protective friend that wants me to be safe." - Sam*

*"I still get anxious and at times have a panic attack, but I know that it will pass, and just acknowledging it can reduce the fear of it and how intense it feels." - Leni*

*"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I haven't had a panic attack for years. But if I did have one now, I feel like I'd know what to do. I continue to practise all the calming techniques I learned. They help me with everyday stresses, and help me feel more in control." - Javi*