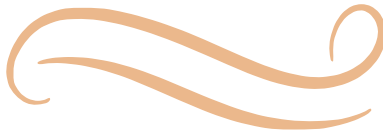


Sixteen methods of dealing with panic attacks and anxious moments



These methods are best for panic attacks as well as bouts of acute anxiety, like the kind a person has before going on stage or walking into the first day of a new job. At the end, I give ideas on using these methods for more generalized anxiety.

Panic attacks. Often they come with no warning, seem to have no triggers, and can completely derail a person. There are as many symptoms as there are people, but they include tightness in the chest, shortness of breath, feelings of doom, nausea, dizziness... lots of bad stuff. Personally, when I'm not in the middle of one I struggle to describe it.

If you experience panic attacks or powerful times of anxiety, here are a few of the most popular methods to cope. Some are my personal methods. I've had panic attacks off and on for most of my life, and I can say from experience that it is possible, in time, to experience the physiological effects of a panic attack without a lot of emotional fear. Try some of these and see if they help.



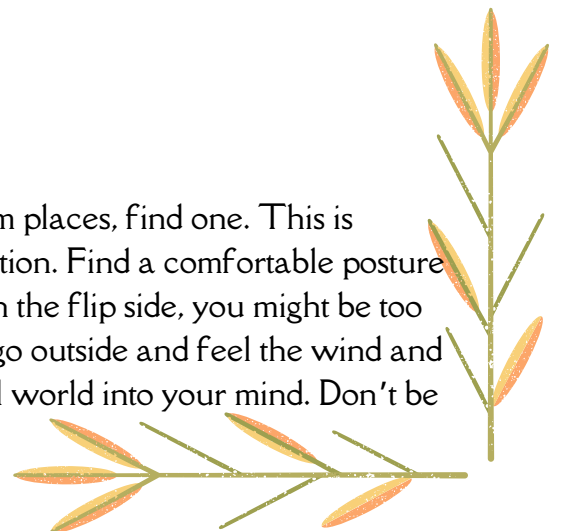
Breathe

Slow, deep breathing is number one on almost every list of panic attack—and generalized anxiety—aids. Breathe deeply from the diaphragm, which means your belly moves in and out more than your chest expands out and down. Everyone has a favorite method—four seconds in, four out; eight in, hold for four, seven out, etc. Personally I can't do any that require holding one's breath more than a second. For some reason I panic worse. But slow, deep belly breathing is my go-to for panic attacks and stressful days. Especially good in the darkness of night.



Remove Chaos

This is not always necessary, but if you do better in quiet, dim places, find one. This is especially helpful if the anxiety was triggered by overstimulation. Find a comfortable posture and a soothing place to stay until you're in balance again. On the flip side, you might be too alone in too silent a place, and when you panic you need to go outside and feel the wind and the sun and hear the birds and let a little more of the physical world into your mind. Don't be afraid to find a locale that makes you feel better.





Connect

Fear is almost always internal, and a lot of internal distress goes away if it's made external. Text or call a friend. Sit on the sofa with a family member. Not being alone can really shorten the duration of anxiety. My husband never knows what to say or do when I have an attack, but he can sit with me and watch TV and wait it out. It helps immensely. If there's something someone can do to help—if you want conversation or silence or a cool rag for your face—letting a close friend know ahead of time can reduce stress when the time comes.



Pray

In the depths of anxiety, I'm not terribly rational, and long, well-thought-out prayers aren't going to happen. But breath prayers are wonderful. Take a phrase from Scripture and pray it in a breath. 'Lord, have mercy'. 'Father God, draw near'. Or link it to the deep belly breathing and speak one phrase on the inhale and another on the exhale. 'When I am afraid' (inhale) 'I will trust in you' (exhale). 'You are my hiding place' (inhale); 'You will protect me' (exhale). Remind yourself that God is close when you hurt, and you are not going through these moments alone.



Bible Go-Tos

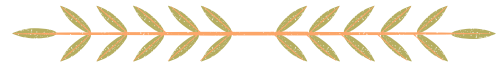
Read a favorite Psalm. Have a few verses on cards pinned here and there just for anxiety moments. Maybe they're about fear. Maybe they're about God as a refuge or about Jesus' compassion. Whatever they are, having a few verses ready that are very special to you can help you tap into God's peace while your body rages.



Widen your Vision

This one is new to me. Tunnel vision is a problem for some experiencing panic, so widening the field of vision is supposed to help. Extend your arms to your sides and wiggle your hands or fingers, trying to see both sides at once. This will stop that walls-are-closing-in feeling. It also feels a little silly, and strangely, that can help, too.





Waste Time

A panic attack usually peaks within ten minutes of the start, and then the body slowly winds down to normal. During those first minutes, I'm not good for much. That's when time wasters are my thing. An internet jigsaw puzzle. A few pages of a good book. A game of Sudoku. Have a few ideas for ways to waste times until you find equilibrium again. Make it something fun and distracting that doesn't take a lot of critical thinking skills. Give yourself permission to take these minutes off and be unproductive.



Walk

When I am in the darkest moments of a panic attack, I have to walk. I have wandered in circles in my back yard in the pitch darkness of night to calm down. It works. They say panic is a fight or flight response, and when I'm walking my body is quite willing to believe I am fleeing, and then all will be well. However, if you tend to hold your breath and pass out during panic episodes, sit down and don't wander. There are those who say a sitting or reclining posture is helpful. This has never been the case for me, but it may be exactly what you need.



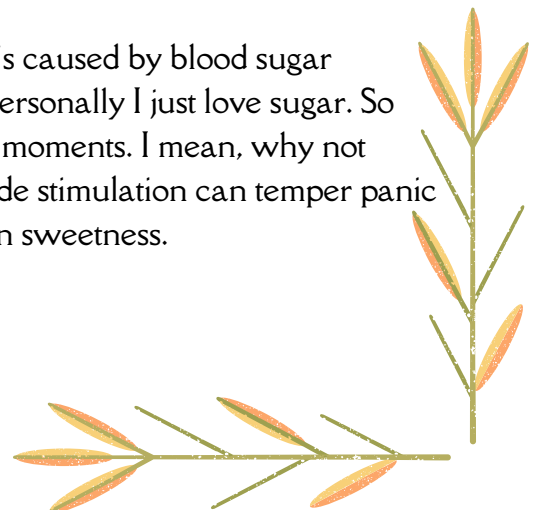
Grounding

Also called Mindfulness (which includes the next few, too), this has to do with focusing on the present moment and present location. Find a physical object to focus on during the attack. Or name five objects around you in one color. Then switch to five objects of another color. Tense and loosen each set of muscles, one at a time. Some add touch to breathing exercises, touching or holding objects while focusing on their breaths. The goal is to focus outside yourself and be aware of your surroundings.



Sugar

A little Dove chocolate or a swig of soda can calm anxiety if it's caused by blood sugar fluctuations. Apparently this also helps with serotonin levels. Personally I just love sugar. So maybe it's okay to keep a stash of little candies just for anxious moments. I mean, why not throw a little joy into a difficult moment? Also, sometimes outside stimulation can temper panic attacks, and there might be no more wonderful stimulation than sweetness.





Use your Senses

If your anxiety has to do with overstimulation, then find someplace with as little sensory stimulation as possible, but for many of us, focusing on and surrounding ourselves with sensory stimulation helps. The 5-4-3-2-1 method is an easy one to carry out. Name five objects around you. Identify four sounds. Touch three items. Identify two smells. Find one thing that would taste (or, if you've got your panic-attack-candy-stash handy, actually taste one thing.) A soft blanket, a soothing spritz of a favorite perfume or essential oil, a soothing noise, the gentle breeze from a ceiling fan—all of these can pull you back to the present and out of the anxiety.



Music

In my twenties I had my worst, longest bout of anxiety, days of nearly non-functional fears interspersed with several full-on panic attacks every day. This lasted about a month. During that month I found a cheap mood music tape at Wal-Mart with soothing music and nature sounds. For me, those sounds were peace. To this day, if I hear music like what was on that tape, I feel an instant calming. Make a playlist just for anxious, stressful moments. (My college-aged son has a "Calm and Peace" playlist on his phone and computer for crunch weeks at school. I love it.)



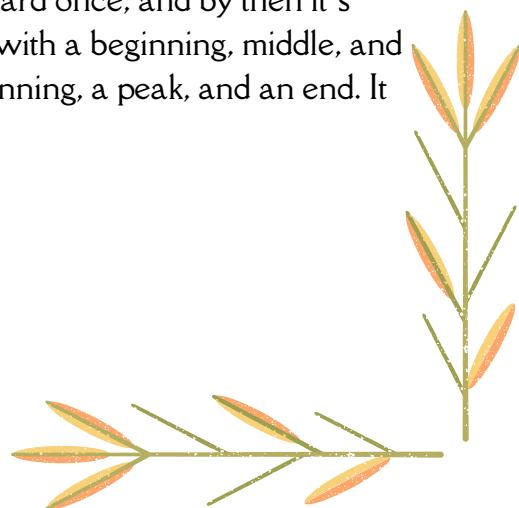
Visit your Happy Place

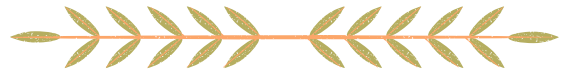
It sounds trite, I know, but it can help to visual something peaceful. I love Psalm 23, so I love to visualize that place of green pastures and cool waters. Look up soothing, peaceful landscape images on the internet or keep a coffee table book of beautiful images around if visual calming helps you with emotional calming. (When I work my jigsaw puzzles, I choose beautiful sunrise photo puzzles.)



Routine

For some, a routine during a panic attack helps. Start with belly breathing, say a breath prayer, recite a verse, play a Sudoku puzzle, walk around the yard once, and by then it's almost over. Or whatever works for you. Somehow, a routine with a beginning, middle, and end helps remind me that the panic attack will also have a beginning, a peak, and an end. It isn't fun, but it's also temporary.





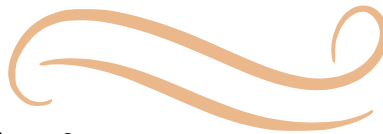
Out of the Box

On the flip side, for some people a little outside-the-box stimulation will jar them back to themselves. A quick, cool shower. A short YouTube video on something new. A little boogie through the kitchen. Not taking yourself entirely seriously can short-circuit the fear part of the anxiety attack.



Accept It

This is the ultimate trick. I am almost there. I hate panic attacks, but they don't scare me much anymore. I have a few routines, a few workarounds, and give myself permission to work internet jigsaw puzzles until the attack runs its course. No shame, not much fear, and the ability to let it go and move on. Fighting the attack, pouring more emotion into it, doesn't help.



What about general anxiety?

A lot of these are about balance, and that balance can help with lesser moments of anxiety or long bouts of mild anxiety. Do you have soothing smells in your home? Soft, comfortable furnishings? A fan, a window with a bird feeder outside, a house plant? Do you occasionally indulge in yummy food or a wasted moment of reading or games? A short walk; a drive to a brightly-lit store during dark, rainy days; or coffee with a friend after a bout of isolation or a busy week can all help keep the mind and body balanced and fend off mild anxiety. It never hurts to stop and breathe, speak a quick breath prayer, or recite a well-known Bible verse. Besides helping in the moment, practicing some of these during the lesser moments of anxiety can make them more useful should true panic hit.

I hope you find ideas here to help you during moments of acute or mild anxiety. It's taken me decades to move panic attacks from terrifying experiences to annoying experiences. I hope you can find ways to calm your mind and body much more quickly than I did.

