



SA Federation for
Mental Health

ANXIETY DISORDERS

PANIC ATTACKS

What it is:

A panic attack is seen as a symptom of a mental disorder and not as a disorder on its own. Panic attacks can occur in a number of mental health disorders, for example anxiety disorders, depressive disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Panic attacks are sudden and intense surges of fear or anxiety that go together with physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, difficulty breathing and chest pain. Panic attacks can take place with varying degrees of frequency and intensity.

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

Causes:

Negative affectivity (being prone to experience negative emotions) and anxiety sensitivity (believing that symptoms of anxiety are harmful) are risk factors for the development of panic attacks. A history of “fearful spells” (limited symptom attacks that do not meet the full criteria for panic attacks) may also be a risk factor for later panic attacks. Identifiable stressors are often reported in the months leading up to the onset of panic attacks, for example a death in the family, loss of a job or other traumatic event.

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.*