

Responding to a Panic Attack

Supporting a young person through a panic attack can feel terrifying and you can often feel completely helpless – but there are several things you can do to help.

Just be there

Having a panic attack is a terrifying feeling and one that can make you feel very alone. Just being present can make a huge difference to the student. It will make them feel a little less out of control of the situation which is likely to shorten the duration of the attack.

Unless it is absolutely necessary, don't leave someone alone while they are having a panic attack. Call for help or send someone else if you need to but stay steadfast by the student's side and remind them that you are there and that you will not leave them. Phrases that might help include:

- I'm not going anywhere.
- You're not on your own.
- I'll stay with you until you feel better.
- I'm here to help you.
- You're safe, it's okay.

Assert control

There are several feelings that accompany a panic attack, but one universal feeling is a loss of control, both of the general situation and of the student's own body. When your heart is racing, your breathing is out of control and you feel like you might die, it is hard to feel in control of things.

Try to gently assert control of the situation as this can feel deeply reassuring for the student. You might not feel very in control but it's time to employ your best acting skills. Talk in a calm, measured manner; explain simply and carefully what is happening now, what you are doing to help, and what will happen next. It almost doesn't matter what you say so long as you say it calmly and with authority. Phrases that might help include:

- You're having a panic attack, it will pass with time.
- We're going to walk over there where it's a little quieter.
- I've sent Ahmed to get Ms Benjamin who will be able to help us.
- Jasmine will tell your history teacher you're with me.

Don't panic

Panic fuels panic so it is important that you control your own anxiety when responding to someone else's panic attack. If necessary, you may also need to take active steps to calm down other students too. This is a moment to really assert your control and appear authoritative. Be polite but firm in telling other people to move away from the student, to give them some space. Encourage people not to crowd, run, scream or otherwise panic.

Phrases that might help include:

- The best way you can help is to give him some space, he's going to be fine.
- Aida, please can you stand here and encourage your friends to move away.
- I understand that you're worried about your friend, she'll be just fine.
- Please walk calmly, that way, to your next lesson.

Convey calm

As well as asserting calm authority, if you are able to proactively think about conveying calm, this can help the student to calm as their body will mirror yours. Think about your body language and breathing. Try to adopt calm, open body language – this will say “I’m here, and I’m not scared” and try to slow down and deepen your breathing. Breathing slowly in and out tells our bodies that we are safe which can help to calm the panic. You can proactively encourage the sufferer to breathe with you once they have calmed a little. You could try this script or a variation of it:

- You’re safe, let’s help your brain realise that by taking control of your breathing.
- Close your mouth and breathe in through your nose for four: 1,2,3,4.
- Now hold that breath for seven: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7.
- Now breathe out slowly through your mouth for eight: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8.
- And again, in through your nose; 1,2,3,4.

As the student’s breathing calms you can lose some of the script and simply lead them by breathing alongside them to this pattern.

Give the student space and time

Once the immediate signs of the panic attack have passed, many people assume that the student should be able to continue as normal, but often this is not the case. It can take quite some time to “come down” from a panic attack and if possible the student should be given space and time to recover before being expected to continue with the rest of their day.

During this time, it is helpful if they can be accompanied and be somewhere where they feel safe without feeling they have to talk about anything unless they want to.

Some people find walking is helpful while others like to read or listen to music to help take their mind off whatever it was that triggered the attack. A school library, wellbeing space or outdoor space can all work well here.

Don’t be afraid to talk about it

Panic attacks are horrible experiences and sufferers often feel embarrassed or ashamed by them. Ensure that the student does not feel stigmatised by their attacks by being willing to talk about it with them and trying to understand more about how they feel and how you can help.

The more we talk about these things the more we understand and the better we are able to help. Additionally, the more open a student is able to be about their panic attacks, the more likely they are to be able to feel confident telling someone when they feel the early signs of an attack coming on which gives us a better chance of being able to prevent attacks from escalating in the first instance.

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