

Panic Attacks (Adapted from MH First Aid USA for Higher Education)

Symptoms:

- Palpitations, pounding heart, rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling and shaking
- Shortness of Breath, sensations of choking or smothering
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Abdominal distress or nausea
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, feeling faint or unsteady
- Feelings of unreality or being detached from oneself
- Fears of losing control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Numbness or tingling
- Chills or hot flashes

What should I do if I think someone is having a panic attack?

- Introduce yourself
- Ask if the person knows what is happening or has previously had a panic attack.
- If they have had one previously and believe they are having one now, ask if they need help, and give it to them.

What if I am uncertain whether the person is really having a panic attack and not a serious health condition?

- Call 911
- Ask the person, or check for a medical alert bracelet or necklace

What should I say and do if I know the person is having a panic attack?

- Remain Calm
- Be patient
- Speak clearly and slowly and use short, clear, sentences.
- Ask the person what they think might help.
- Do not minimize. Acknowledge that their terror feels very real, but reassure them that a panic attack, while scary is not life-threatening or dangerous.
- Reassure them that they are safe and the symptoms will pass.

What should I do if the person is breathing rapidly?

- Model a normal breathing rate.
- Invite the person to close their mouth and breathe normally through their nose, matching their breathing to yours.
***A common myth is to recommend having the person breathe into a paper bag in order to slow their breathing. Breathing into a bag causes the person to inhale their own carbon dioxide, which may cause the person to become unconscious.

What should I say and do when the panic attack has ended?

- Invite the student to talk about their experience either with you, a professional staff member or a counselor
- Follow up later to check in to see how they're doing.
- Reassure the student that there are effective treatments available for panic attacks and panic disorder, and that if they recur or cause them distress, they could see a professional