

Dance in Mind

Panic attack fact sheet for dancers

A panic attack is an exaggerated version of the body's normal response to fear, stress or excitement.

Physical symptoms can be very intense and include racing heart rate, difficulty breathing, sweating, shaking, feeling faint or dizzy, and nausea. Symptoms typically last 5-20 minutes.

You may have an overwhelming sense of impending doom, fearing that you will faint, lose control, have a heart attack or even die.

Dealing with panic attacks

Panic attacks can feel frightening, but they cannot physically harm you. Try some of the following strategies to help you manage a panic attack:

- ✓ **Focus on your breathing.** Try to control your breathing by taking slow, deep breaths, counting to 4 on the inhale, and 5 on the exhale. Try to breathe into your belly rather than your chest.
- ✓ **53421 technique.** Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch or feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.
- ✓ **Ground yourself** using your senses: focus on a relaxing scent; cuddle or stroke something soft; listen to something calming. If you experience panic attacks frequently, make a small kit with grounding objects that you can take with you.
- ✓ **Use a mantra** to remind yourself that panic attacks cannot physically harm you. For example, "I am safe, this will pass".
- ✓ **Visualise a safe place** and imagine you are there. It could be a meadow, a beach, a cosy room with a roaring fire – whatever works for you.
- ✓ **Distraction**, for example: count backwards from 100 in 7s, or count the number of blue items around you.
- ✓ **Use cold water or ice** if your symptoms are very severe. You could splash your face with cold water, hold an ice cube, or hug an ice pack to your chest.

What to do after a panic attack

- ✓ **Listen to your body:** do you need a rest, food or drink? For example, have a soothing drink, as breathing very rapidly may give you a dry mouth or sore throat.
- ✓ **Self-soothe** by using items that calm the nervous system (this [blog](#) gives advice on making a self-soothing box).
- ✓ **Talk to someone** if you think it would be helpful, such as a mental health first aider if one is available. However, try not to over-analyse what has happened.

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Preventing panic attacks

It is not always possible to prevent panic attacks from ever occurring. However, panic attacks are associated with anxiety, so taking steps to reduce your this can really help. Consider some of the following:

- ✓ **Work with a coach or therapist.** For example, cognitive behavioural therapy and dialectical behaviour therapy can be very helpful for anxiety.
- ✓ **Try the Anxiety SOS course from Dance in Mind.** This will help to reduce general anxiety, and while it was designed for students, the techniques taught in the course can be used by anyone. You can access it [here](#).
- ✓ **Practice breathing techniques** such as box breathing, where you breathe in for a count of 4, hold for 4, breathe out for a count of 4, and hold for 4. Continue for at least 2 minutes.
- ✓ **Use relaxation techniques** such as yoga and guided meditation.
- ✓ **Exercise to reduce stress hormones.** Find something fun that you enjoy, which is unrelated to your anxiety or panic attack triggers.
- ✓ **Eat regularly** to avoid drops in blood sugar, which contribute to anxiety and irritability.
- ✓ **Reduce or avoid stimulants** like caffeine, alcohol and nicotine, as they can make symptoms worse.
- ✓ **Get enough rest** and sleep.
- ✓ **Identify triggers** and make a plan to help you deal with them. For example, if you often experience panic attacks before going onstage, create a pre-performance plan to keep you occupied right up until you step out of the wings. This could include some yoga and deep breathing, and repeating a mantra to yourself. If you cannot identify triggers, or experience panic attacks very frequently, this could indicate that you have panic disorder, so it's worth talking to a mental health professional.
- ✓ **Don't avoid triggers** as this will make your anxiety around them worse. Instead, build up to them by taking small and manageable steps.