

Chapter 8

Fear That Stops You in Your Tracks

(Panic Attacks)

Maybe you've had something like this happen: You're at school or outside and, all of a sudden, your heart starts pounding and you have trouble catching your breath. You start shaking, and you're afraid that you're either going crazy or having a heart attack and about to die. You don't know what's happening to you, so it's even scarier. After a few minutes, your body returns to normal but you're still upset and confused afterward.

What happened? It's called a panic attack, and it can happen to people of all ages—both kids and adults.

When you have a panic attack, the anxiety is so strong that it seems to take over your whole body. You may feel short of breath or have trouble understanding everything you're feeling at that moment. Even if the feelings don't last long, they can be terrifying.

Panic attacks are more likely to happen during stressful times, such as when you're going to a new school or have to perform in front of others. But sometimes, one of these attacks just happens; one minute you're

feeling fine, and the next you're in a total panic. Most panic attacks don't last too long—usually ten minutes or less.

How do you know if you're having a panic attack? Here are the main signs:

- You feel your heart pounding hard, and your chest hurts.
- You may get sweaty all over.
- You begin to tremble or shake.
- You have trouble catching your breath (also called *hyperventilating*).
- You feel like you're choking on something.
- Your stomach hurts.
- You get dizzy or lightheaded; you feel like you're about to faint.
- You feel as if everything around you is unreal, or like you're watching yourself.
- You're scared that you're losing control or going crazy.
- You feel tingly or numb in your fingers or toes.
- You start feeling too cold (the chills) or too hot (hot flashes).
- You feel as if you're about to die.



There's also something called *panic disorder*, which means you have panic attacks over and over. Some people have panic attacks every week; others have them every day for a week, and then have no attacks for months. Sometimes, people have "mini-attacks," where they panic but have only a few of the symptoms. With panic disorder, the fear of another attack is often the worst part. You may start avoiding people and places, because you're scared that you'll panic again.

If you've had what you think is a panic attack, be sure to get a check-up with your doctor. He or she can make sure your symptoms aren't related to an illness.

Five Causes of Panic Attacks

There's no doubt about it: panic attacks are frightening. They won't hurt you, but knowing that doesn't always make them less scary. So, what causes panic attacks? A few things, such as:

Only a doctor or therapist can say for sure if you have panic disorder. That's why it's so important to talk to an adult and get some expert help.

1. Family history. Panic attacks run in families. If you have panic attacks, chances are another one of your family members has the same problem.

- 2. Problems with a brain chemical.** People with panic disorder may have less of the important brain chemical called *serotonin*. Medicines that help serotonin work harder often help lessen anxiety and panic. (These medicines have to be prescribed by a doctor or another expert first.)
- 3. Fearful situations.** Being scared about going to a new school or moving to a new neighborhood can cause a panic attack. Also, worrying about having a panic attack can sometimes bring one on.
- 4. Feeling stressed out.** When you're worried that you can't handle things in your life, your stress level goes up. This extra stress can lead to a panic attack.
- 5. Adrenaline reaction.** Any of the above causes may bring on an increase in adrenaline, which is a hormone your body uses to give you energy. The adrenaline makes your heart beat faster and speeds up your breathing. During a panic attack, your body reacts as if you're in danger (even if you aren't).

