

How to Help Someone Through a Panic Attack

This week a meteorologist stepped away from a live broadcast when he noticed familiar feelings of panic start to arise. We can all learn from how he and his colleagues handled it.



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By **Christina Caron**

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A meteorologist in Australia was delivering the weather report on live television this week when he started having a panic attack.

Nate Byrne, the news presenter, later explained to BBC News that he was heading to the studio's "weather wall" when he realized he was suddenly out of breath.

"The specific position — in front of the wall — is a trigger for me," he said. "My body starts tingling. I start sweating. Just everything in my body is screaming: Run. Go. Get out."

Because he had dealt with on-air panic attacks before, he and his colleagues knew what to do. Mr. Byrne explained what was happening to viewers, then quickly tossed to the anchor of the show while he went off camera to recover.

How can you help if a friend, family member or colleague is having a panic attack? We asked experts for tips.

First, what is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden wave of overwhelming fear and anxiety that is accompanied by physical symptoms.

For some people it can produce the same sensations as a heart attack, including chest pain and tightness, or a racing heartbeat, said Dr. Harmony Reynolds, a cardiologist at NYU Langone Health in New York City.

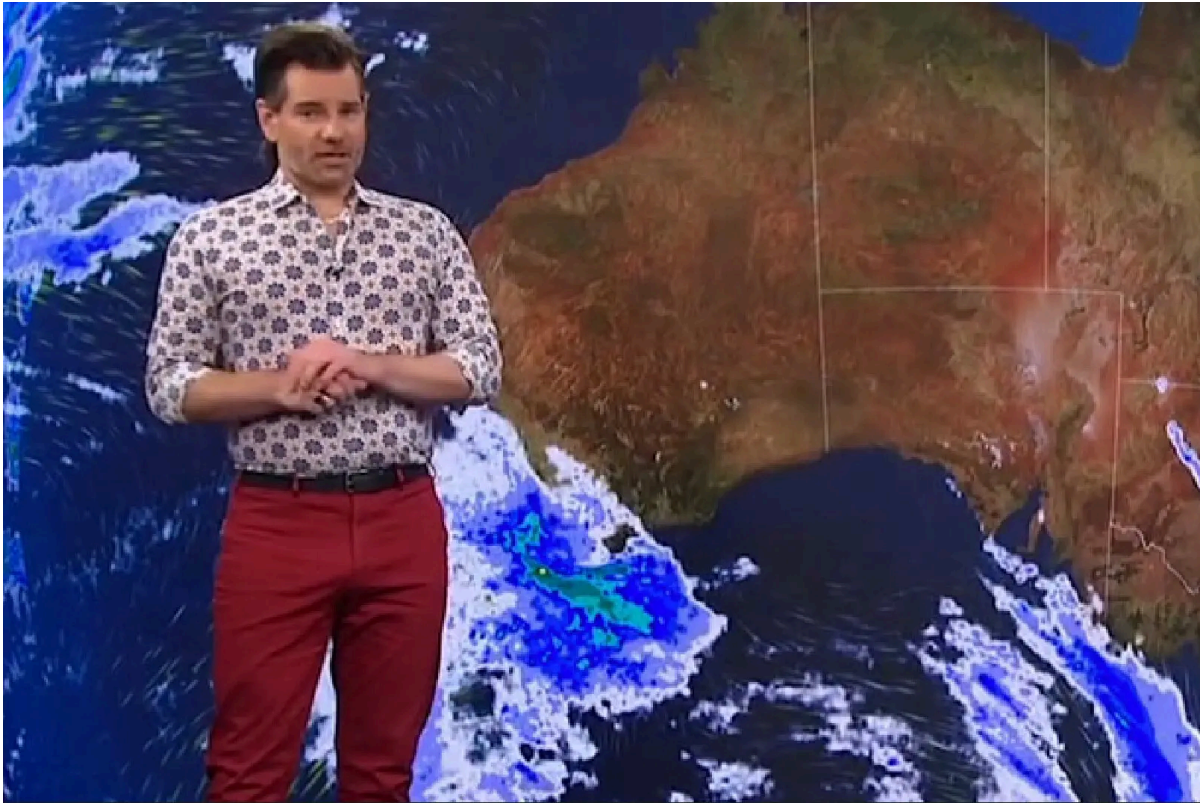
Both panic attacks and heart attacks can also cause difficulty breathing, the feeling that you might faint, nausea, sweating, numbness in the arms and “a sense that something is terribly wrong,” she added.

A person who is having a panic attack may not speak as coherently as they normally would because they’re dealing with high anxiety. But despite the intense feelings happening inside, a person’s outward appearance can mask their distress.

“You often don’t know that somebody is having a panic attack unless they tell you,” said Lynn Bufka, a clinical psychologist and spokeswoman for the American Psychological Association, who has been treating patients with panic attacks and panic disorder for nearly 30 years.

When do you need to go to the emergency room?

It can be hard to distinguish between a panic attack, which typically doesn’t warrant a trip to the emergency room, and a heart attack. If there’s any doubt, or if someone is having thoughts of self-harm or suicide in addition to panic symptoms, then it’s best to go to an E.R. for an evaluation, the experts said.



ABC News Breakfast

Panic attacks usually resolve within about 15 minutes, while heart attack symptoms can last longer or might go away and come back. So if symptoms linger, seek medical attention, Dr. Reynolds said.

If someone is experiencing similar symptoms in specific situations, like being in a crowd or during public speaking, then a panic attack is more likely, she added.

What are the warning signs?

If someone close to you is prone to panic attacks, familiarize yourself with the signs that one is coming on — and encourage them to do so as well.

Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, experienced more than 100 panic attacks when he was in his 30s.

When they first started, he went to the doctor numerous times. “I think I’m dying,” he would say. “Could you check my heart?”

But each time he was given a clean bill of health.

Eventually he learned to observe his body's sensations "in a neutral, nonreactive fashion," he said, so that his physical symptoms didn't overwhelm him. And he often reminded himself that the feelings he was experiencing were transient: "This is fleeting, you've been through this before."

How can you help someone during a panic attack?

"One of the most important steps is to stay with the person to keep them calm," said Dr. Ramaswamy Viswanathan, the president of the American Psychiatric Association. Speak slowly and use reassuring words that will let them know they are safe, and that the panic attack won't last long, he added.

Panic attacks will typically "rise in intensity quickly, often within a few minutes — and stay on peak for several minutes before they fall off in intensity," Dr. Viswanathan said.

Ask the person who is suffering to focus on their breath — you can even do a breathing exercise alongside them. Aim to breathe slowly from the belly, not the chest, to help open up the lungs.

In some cases, Dr. Viswanathan said, it can help to do physical, repetitive movements like lifting their arms over their head or stomping their feet, too.

Panic attacks usually become less challenging once a person learns coping strategies, Dr. Bufka said.

That was the case for Mr. Byrne, the meteorologist, who wrote about his panic attacks in 2022. In the article, he said that he had worked with a psychologist and had also used beta blockers, medications that can ease the physical symptoms of the "fight or flight" response to stress.

When he first had a panic attack on TV, he said, "I thought that my career was over."

But "talking about my anxiety and seeking treatment mean that it's something I can live with and manage," he wrote. "It means I can keep doing the thing I love."

Christina Caron is a Times reporter covering mental health. [More about Christina Caron](#)