

Anxiety and Panic Attacks During COVID-19

While living through a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted Black, Latino, Indigenous, and low-income communities, New Yorkers may experience anxiety or panic attacks for the first time. Long-standing impacts of racial injustice and inequity in our city, isolation along with loss of work, illness, death of loved ones and community members, and other stressors may also cause new or old symptoms of anxiety or panic to arise. This document provides guidance about what anxiety and panic attacks are, how to manage symptoms and help others, and how anxiety and panic attacks differ from COVID-19 symptoms.

Experiences of anxiety and panic can look and feel different among individuals as well as across different racial, ethnic, cultural or regional groups. Some people may experience anxiety and describe mostly physical symptoms such as shortness of breath or rapid heartbeat, while others may describe mostly emotional reactions such as worry or fear. Some people may be hesitant to seek care from health care professionals and institutions that have historically discriminated against and oppressed communities of color through harmful practices and policies, some which still occur today. Some people may also be hesitant to seek care due to fears of becoming infected with COVID-19 by going to a health care setting.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety can be experienced as feelings of nervousness, fear, tension, numbness, worry or feeling that something bad is about to happen. It might also be associated with physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, sweating, cold hands, trembling, trouble concentrating and difficulty sleeping. Anxiety is also experienced and described in unique ways across cultures and may be called something different. Reactions to stressful events are a normal human experience. Extremely stressful situations, including the current COVID-19 pandemic, may lead to strong feelings of anxiety, which may become distressing and disabling.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks can be experienced as a sudden spike of anxiety with intense physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, chest pain or discomfort, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, dizziness or feeling light-headed, nausea, or abdominal distress. Many people who experience panic attacks report that it can feel as if they are going to die even if they are not in any imminent danger. Panic attacks might have a known cause (expected) or can happen suddenly, without any warning, and sometimes have no clear cause (unexpected).

Is my shortness of breath anxiety, a panic attack, or COVID-19?

Shortness of breath is a common experience with anxiety, panic attacks and COVID-19, as well as other conditions. To help tell the difference, ask yourself:

- **Have I experienced similar symptoms in the past?** If you have a history of anxiety or other fears, or specifically a history of previous panic attacks, it is possible that is what you are experiencing now.

- **Do my symptoms get better within 10 to 15 minutes?** Panic attacks usually reach peak intensity in about 10 minutes, after which symptoms start to lessen. Shortness of breath related to COVID-19 is unlikely to improve in a short time frame.
- **Do my symptoms improve using relaxation techniques?** Anxiety and panic attacks generally respond well to relaxation techniques, such as taking slow breaths or practicing meditation, or other activities that might help someone feel calm. Shortness of breath related to COVID-19 is unlikely to improve by using relaxation techniques.
- **Do I have shortness of breath in addition to other symptoms such as fever, cough or sore throat?** If yes, it is possible you have symptoms of COVID-19. People with COVID-19 generally experience additional symptoms — such as cough, fever, chills, muscle pain, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell, or gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. For more information, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.

How do I manage anxiety and panic attacks?

Stay connected

- Talk to friends, family, community members, and other support daily by phone, video chat, text or email.
- Help others by reaching out to them by phone, video chat, text or email. This benefits you and the person you are helping.

Use relaxation techniques

- Take slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Notice your stomach expand as you breathe in, and feel it contract as you breathe out. Repeat.
- Practice mindfulness (being aware and present). Ground yourself in the present by bringing your attention to your current surroundings. For example, take the time to notice five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you taste.
- Take part in relaxing activities such as taking a warm bath or shower, resting in a quiet room, walking outside, talking with loved ones or listening to music you enjoy.

Focus on things you can control

- Stay home as often as you can even if you do not feel sick. Wear a face covering when you are outside your home. Maintain physical distance of at least 6 feet between you and others outside your household. Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Do not touch your face with unwashed hands. For more information on how you can prevent the spread of COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
- Try to limit the amount of time you spend watching and reading the news related to COVID-19. Stick to trustworthy information sources for updates, such as nyc.gov/health/coronavirus or cdc.gov/covid19. For real-time updates, text “COVID” to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.
- As much as possible, create and maintain a daily routine that includes movement or exercise, staying hydrated, eating healthy foods, and getting enough sleep.

How can I help someone having a panic attack?

- **Stay calm.** If you remain calm, understanding and nonjudgmental, it may help reduce the other person’s panic.
- **Ask them how they stay calm.** People sometimes know what helps them calm down and relax, so start by asking if they know what might help them. If they do not know, see below.
- **Help them focus on their breathing.** If possible, sit somewhere quiet together and ask the person to join you in taking slow, deep breaths for a few minutes.
- **Do something physical.** Together, raise and lower your arms and lift or stamp your feet. Even small movements can help the body discharge stress.
- **Distract them.** Ask them to name five things they can see or hear around them, or ask them to describe something they enjoy.
- **Encourage them to seek help.** Sometimes when panic subsides, people feel embarrassed. Offer reassurance that anxiety is a natural reaction to stress, and encourage them to seek help:
 - NYC Well is a free and confidential mental health support service available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. NYC Well staff can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For support, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text “WELL” to 65173, [chat online](#), or visit their [App Library](#) to find apps and online tools to help manage health and emotional well-being from home.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 8.26.20