

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE EXPERIENCING A PANIC ATTACK

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The set of instructions written below is intended as a role playing group training exercise for participants in the Mentors for Mental Health one-week training program by Adolescent Advice and Assistance. Participants will gain experience in handling emergency situations when a student is having a panic attack. For these instructions, at least one of the participants must be comfortable with acting like he or she is experiencing a panic attack. A panic attack is when a person experiences psychological distress, like intense fear and apprehension, and physical distress, like shortness of breath and accelerated heart rate. These instructions may not apply to everyone or every situation, because every person experiences and handles a panic attack differently, and this exercise is based on a specific type of situation. In real situations, if the victim of the panic attack seems to need more serious aid, these directions may not apply, and it is highly advised to contact professional assistance immediately.

Items needed include:

1. Two people
2. One working cell phone

Steps:

1. Assign which person will be the Helper and which person will role play being the Victim of a panic attack. (The Helper will have the cell phone.)
2. Lay down on the floor in a fetal position. (The Victim does this.)
3. Ask the Victim gently “Are you okay? How can I help you?” (The Helper does this.)
4. Do not respond. Act like your whole body is shaking. (The Victim does this.)
5. Observe and evaluate if the person is having a panic attack. (The Helper does this. Look for symptoms of physical distress. Reference Image 1-4 to see some symptoms.)



Image 1:
Profuse
sweating

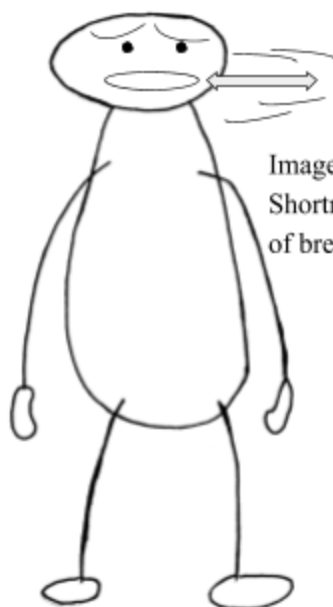
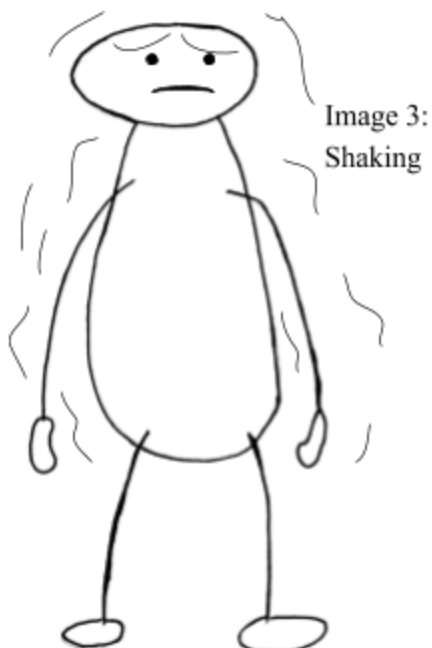


Image 2:
Shortness
of breath



6. Ask the Victim gently “Do you want me to hold your hand?” (The Helper does this. Sometimes victims need physical contact and some do not. **WARNING: DO NOT TOUCH WITHOUT ASKING BECAUSE IT MAY CAUSE MORE DISTRESS IN REAL SITUATIONS.**)
7. Do not respond. Act like you are having trouble breathing by taking short, fast breaths. (The Victim does this.)
8. Do not touch the Victim. Say to the Victim gently “Let’s practice breathing together. Can you try that with me?” (The Helper does this.)
9. Get up to sit in a normal sitting position and nod your head to agree. (The Victim does this.)
10. Breathe in slowly at the same time. (Both people do this.)
11. Breathe out slowly at the same time. (Both people do this.)
12. Repeat Steps 10-11 five times.
13. Ask the Victim gently “Do you want to stand up now?” (The Helper does this.)
14. Stand up and pretend to sway and be dizzy. (The Victim does this.)
15. Say to the Victim gently “I need you to drink some water.” (The Helper does this. Drinking water can help physically calm victims.)
16. Refuse and yell “You can’t make me!” (The Victim does this.)
17. Say calmly and gently to the Victim “I know, but I would appreciate it if your drink some water.” (The Helper does this. You have to be patient and remain calm because the Victim may be uncooperative for some time.)
18. Repeat Steps 16-17 five times. The Victim must increasingly be more uncooperative.
19. Take out the cell phone and dial an emergency number and state your location and the situation. (Call if the situation seems difficult for you to handle. Mentors for Mental Health provided a list of contacts for emergency situations.)

20. End the phone call and remain with the Victim. (The Helper does this.)
21. Supervise the victim and repeat Steps 8-12 to attempt to calm the Victim until professional assistance arrives. (Helper does this.)

Conclusion: You have now learned a few techniques in comforting a person having a panic attack. In some situations, you do not need to call a professional because the victim is able to recover from it. After the victim recovers from it, it is helpful to ask him or her if he or she needs anything. It is important to be calm and understanding, because panic attacks are difficult to experience. There are many other instances where the victim is in extreme distress and is showing different symptoms from this exercise, but Mentors for Mental Health will continue to train you to be prepared for different settings.