

Anxiety Attacks vs. Panic Attacks

By [Sheryl Ankrom, MS, LCPC](#) Medically reviewed by [Steven Gans, MD](#)
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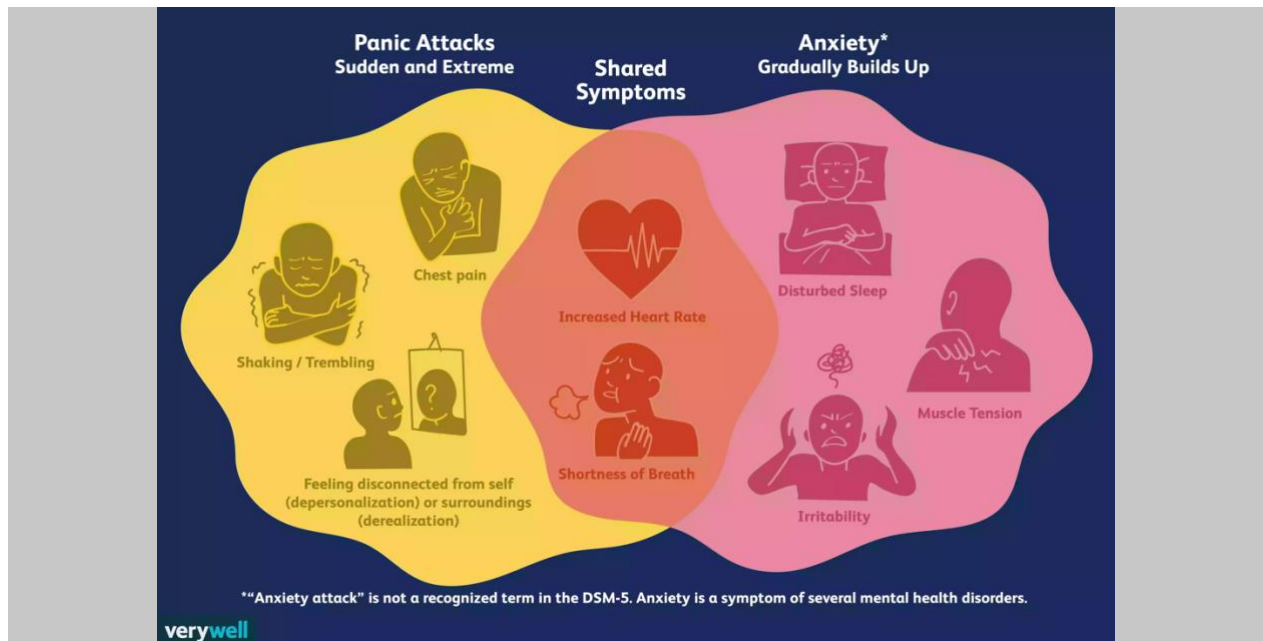
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You might hear the terms "anxiety attack" and "panic attack" used interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. This is understandable given that some of the [symptoms of panic attacks and anxiety](#) are similar, including a rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, and dizziness.

In practice, however, panic and anxiety have different features, and behavioral health professionals use these terms for specific symptoms and disorders.

Panic attacks are an abrupt surge of intense fear or discomfort accompanied by other physical and mental symptoms.¹ Anxiety, on the other hand, is part of the emotional and protective responses hardwired into the human body. It is when anxiety is excessive or gets in the way of your life that there is [cause for concern](#).

If you experience significant anxiety or panic, it's important to understand their definitions, symptoms, and treatments.



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Clinical Differences

Professionals who treat mental health conditions base a diagnosis on definitions found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th edition)*, known as the [DSM-5](#). Though anxiety and panic attacks may feel the same at times, the differences outlined in the DSM help identify and distinguish them. The definitions in the DSM-5 guide your health provider to make a diagnosis and classify your condition.

The DSM-5 uses the term "panic attack" to describe the hallmark features associated with the condition known as [panic disorder](#). However, panic attacks may occur in other psychiatric disorders and it is also possible to have a panic attack if you have no disorder.²

The term "anxiety attack," on the other hand, is not defined in the DSM-5. Rather, "anxiety" is used to describe a core feature of several illnesses identified under the headings of [anxiety disorders](#), obsessive-compulsive disorders, and trauma- and stressor-related disorders.²

Some of the most common disorders under these three headings include:

- [Panic disorder](#)
- [Agoraphobia without history of panic disorder](#)
- [Specific phobia](#)
- [Social anxiety disorder \(SAD\)](#)
- [Separation anxiety disorder](#)
- [Obsessive-compulsive disorder \(OCD\)](#)
- [Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#)
- [Generalized anxiety disorder \(GAD\)](#)

The differences between panic and anxiety are best described in terms of the intensity of the symptoms and length of time the main symptoms occur.

Panic Attack

A panic attack is an intense and sudden feeling of fear, terror, or discomfort accompanied by several other mental and physical symptoms. The [symptoms of panic attacks](#) are often so extreme that they cause severe disruption.¹ According to the DSM-5, a panic attack is characterized by four or more of the following symptoms:

Mental

Feelings of unreality
(derealization)
Feeling detached from oneself
([depersonalization](#))
Fear of losing control or going crazy
Fear of dying

Physical

Heart palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate
Excessive sweating
Trembling or shaking
Sensations of [shortness of breath](#), difficulty breathing
Feeling of choking
Chest pain
Nausea or abdominal distress
Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
Numbness or tingling sensations (paresthesias)
Chills
Hot flashes

Panic attacks usually occur out of the blue without an obvious, immediate trigger. In some cases, they are "expected" because the fear is caused by a known stressor, such as a phobia.

Panic attack symptoms peak within 10 minutes and then subside. However, some attacks may last longer or may occur in succession, making it difficult to determine when one attack ends and another begins. Following an attack, it is not unusual to feel stressed, worried, out-of-sorts, or on edge for the remainder of the day.

Anxiety

In contrast, anxiety generally intensifies over a period of time and is highly correlated with excessive worry about some potential danger—whether real or perceived.³ If the anticipation of something builds up and the high amount of stress reaches a level where it becomes overwhelming, it may feel like an "attack." The symptoms of anxiety may include the following:

Mental

Difficulty concentrating
Irritability

Physical

Fatigue
Muscle tension

Restlessness

Disturbed sleep
Increased startle response
Increased heart rate
Dizziness

While some of the symptoms of anxiety are similar to those associated with panic attacks, they are generally less intense. Unlike a panic attack, the symptoms of anxiety may be persistent and very long-lasting—days, weeks, or even months.

Diagnosis

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions, affecting an estimated 19.1% of U.S. adults each year.³ While anxiety can have a significant impact on a person's life, only around 20% of people who experience symptoms seek treatment.

Effective treatments are available that can improve outcomes and well-being, so it is important to talk to your doctor if you are having symptoms of anxiety or panic attacks. Because women are twice as likely as men to experience symptoms of anxiety, the Women's Preventative Services Initiative now recommends anxiety screening for all women over the age of 13.⁴

During an evaluation, your doctor will take a medical history, a physical exam, and may run lab tests to help rule out any medical illnesses that might be contributing to your symptoms.⁵

A doctor or mental health professional will also ask questions about your symptoms including their intensity, duration, and impact on your normal daily functioning. Based on your evaluation, your doctor may then make a diagnosis based on criteria found in the DSM-5.

Treatment for Panic and Anxiety

Whether you're dealing with panic, persistent anxiety, or both, effective treatment is available. Some of the most common treatment options include therapy, prescription medications, and self-help strategies.¹ You may decide to try one or a combination of these methods.

- **Psychotherapy** can help better you understand your symptoms, develop ways to manage them, work through past pain, determine your path for the future, and gain a clearer perspective that will allow for a more hopeful outlook.
- **Medications** can assist you in reducing your symptoms. They sometimes may only be needed for a short period of time to control symptoms while you work on the other strategies.
- **Self-help techniques**, such as breathing exercises and progressive relaxation, can be beneficial in allowing you to work through symptom management at your own pace.