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ABN: 62 406 997 428

Supporting someone experiencing an anxiety attack, panic attack or flashback

The terms anxiety attack and panic attack are often used interchangeably. They are not the same but do have similar symptoms, causes, and risk factors. **Anxiety attacks** are typically related to something that is perceived as stressful or threatening and can be mild, moderate, or severe. **Panic attacks** aren't always cued by stressors, most often occurring out of the blue and without warning.

Flashbacks are when a traumatic experience surfaces and feels like the event is happening in the present. Triggers or cues to flashbacks can be external, something that is a reminder or an association, or internal such as a thought, memory or sensation. Flashbacks can be a full re-experiencing or disjointed images, emotions, bodily sensations, smells, sounds or tastes that may not make sense to the person.

When people are experiencing panic, anxiety or a flashback, the '**thinking brain**' is slowed down and the limbic system is activated. The '**fight-flight-freeze**' response takes over. The following steps will help calm the limbic and autonomic nervous systems.

Step-by-step support for an anxiety or panic attack or flashback



Encourage taking slow deep breaths

Breath in through the nose to a count of 3 and out through the mouth to a count of 4

Repeat until breathing slows down

Press feet into the ground or hold an object

Focus attention to surroundings – notice the room, furnishings, colours, sounds

Remind them what is happening, "It's an anxiety, or panic attack or a memory"

Reassure them the symptoms will pass and you're with them "you'll be OK, I'm here"

Offer a glass of water, take a break, reassure and normalise

Once calm invite to talk about the experience or not as they prefer