



Is It Anxiety, a Panic Attack, or COVID-19?

Many New Yorkers are experiencing anxiety or panic attacks for the first time. Others are experiencing more anxiety than normal. This is understandable and these are natural reactions to a stressful situation. This document will help you understand what anxiety and panic attacks are; how to manage symptoms and help others; and provides guidance on how to tell the difference between anxiety, panic attacks, and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) symptoms.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety refers to feelings of nervousness, fear, tension, worry and the feeling that something bad is about to happen. It is also associated with physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, sweating, cold hands, trembling, trouble concentrating, and difficulty sleeping. Anxiety is a normal human experience. Extremely stressful situations, including the current COVID-19 outbreak, may lead to excessive feelings of anxiety, which may become distressing and disabling.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are a sudden increase of anxiety with intense physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, chest pain or discomfort, difficulty breathing, dizziness or feeling lightheaded, nausea or abdominal distress. To the person experiencing it, it can feel as if they are going to die even if they are not in any imminent danger. Panic attacks often strike out of the blue, without any warning, and sometimes have no clear trigger.

Is what I'm experiencing 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 you tell the difference, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Have you experienced similar symptoms in the past?** If you have a history of anxiety, other fears, and specifically previous panic attacks, it's possible that is what you are experiencing.
- **Are symptoms getting better in 10 to 15 minutes?** Panic attacks usually reach peak intensity in about 10 minutes, after which symptoms begin to subside.
- **Do symptoms improve using relaxation techniques?** Anxiety and panic attacks generally respond well to relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or mindfulness. COVID-19 related shortness of breath is unlikely to improve with relaxation techniques.

If you answered "yes" to these three questions, you are likely experiencing anxiety or symptoms of a panic attack. We encourage you to reach out for help. NYC Well offers a number of well-being and emotional support applications (apps) and information on community

resources: Visit nyc.gov/nycwell. Trained counselors are available 24/7 to provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. Call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text “WELL” to 65173, or chat at nyc.gov/nycwell. The New York State (NYS) COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline at 844-863-9314 is staffed 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week. The phone line is staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and refer if needed.

- **Do you have shortness of breath with fever, cough, or sore throat?** If yes, it’s possible you have symptoms of COVID-19. People with COVID-19 generally experience other symptoms in addition to shortness of breath such as fever, cough, or sore throat.
 - **If you have mild to moderate symptoms, stay home. You should not seek medical care or try to get tested.** By staying home, you reduce the possibility of infecting others, including health care workers who are needed to care for the more seriously ill. You can save the life of another New Yorker by staying home to ensure health care resources go to those who need them the most. **Take care of others by staying home.**
 - If you are 50 years of age or older or have other health conditions, including chronic lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, cancer or a weakened immune system, consult your health care provider. They may want to monitor you more closely.
 - If your symptoms get worse or do not go away after three to four days, consult with your provider. Call, text or use your patient portal before visiting your provider. Use telemedicine instead of an in-person medical visit, if possible.
 - If you have severe symptoms, such as difficulty breathing and very high fever, go to an emergency department. Call **911** if you need help right away.

How do I manage anxiety and panic attacks?

1. Focus on things you can control

- Stay home even if you do not feel sick. 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 to prevent COVID-19, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus.
- Limit the amount of time you spend watching and reading the news. Stick to trustworthy information sources such nyc.gov/health/coronavirus or cdc.gov/covid19. For real-time updates, text “COVID” to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.
- Create and maintain a daily routine, including exercise, healthy eating, and enough sleep.

2. Stay connected

- Talk to friends, family, and other supports daily by phone, video chat, text, and email.
- Help others by reaching out to them. This benefits the person being helped and the helper.

3. 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, which is the practice of 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 a warm bath or shower.
- Rest in a dark, quiet room.

How can I help someone having a panic attack?

- **Stay calm yourself.** Being calm, understanding, and nonjudgmental may help reduce the individual's panic.
- **Help them focus on their breathing.** Find a quiet place for you both to sit. Guide them to take slow, deep breaths for a few minutes.
- **Do something physical.** Together, raise and lower your arms or stamp your feet. It can help to burn off some of the individual's stress.
- **Distract them.** Ask them to name five things around them or talk soothingly about something you both enjoy.
- **Encourage your loved one to seek help.** Once the panic attack is over, they may feel embarrassed. Reassure them and encourage them to seek help. For well-being and emotional support, they can reach out to NYC Well by calling 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), texting "WELL" to 65173, or chatting at nyc.gov/nycwell. The NYS COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline at 844-863-9314 is staffed 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week. The phone line is staffed with specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and refer if needed.