Helping someone through a panic attack

A one-page sheet for partners, parents, friends, colleagues and anyone nearby

A panic attack is frightening to watch but not dangerous in itself. It usually peaks within ten minutes and passes in five to twenty. Your calm company is the help.

Call emergency services if

- chest pain that is tight, crushing or squeezing, or spreads to an arm, the neck or the jaw
- they are struggling badly to breathe, faint, or become confused
- it is their first attack like this, or it feels different from before
- they have a heart or lung condition, diabetes, are pregnant, or have taken something
- it is not easing after about twenty minutes, or you are in doubt

Ireland 112 or 999; UK 999 or 112; rest of the EU 112; US and Canada 911; Australia 000; New Zealand 111; elsewhere, your local emergency number.

While it is happening

1. Stay, and slow yourself down first. Your calm is the most useful thing in the room.
2. Ask what they want. “Do you want me close, or a bit of space?” Do not grab or crowd them.
3. Name it gently, once. “I think this might be a panic attack. It will pass. I’m staying with you.”
4. Keep words short, voice low. “You’re safe. Breathe out slowly. We have time.”
5. Let the breathing settle. Breathe slowly with them, longer out than in, counting to five together. No forced deep breaths, no bag.
6. Something ordinary to do. Feet flat on the floor. Name five things they can see. Stamp on the spot. Sip water.
7. Wait it out with them. You do not have to fix it. Sitting beside someone for ten minutes is the help.

Say

- “I’m here.”
- “You’re safe with me.”
- “This will pass.”
- “Breathe out slowly, with me.”
- “No rush. We have time.”
- “What usually helps you?”

Try not to say

- “Calm down.”
- “There’s nothing wrong with you.”
- “Just breathe.” (over and over)
- “You’re being dramatic.”
- Questions that need long answers

Afterwards

Water, a seat, a little time. No need for an account of what happened. Later, on a calm day: ask what helped, and suggest a check with a doctor after a first attack or if attacks keep coming. Repeated panic attacks are very treatable.

It can be very helpful to talk to someone: for the person who had the attack, and for you. Someone to listen, day or night: Samaritans 116 123 (Ireland, UK); text HELLO to 50808 (Ireland); call or text 988 (US, Canada); Lifeline 13 11 14 (Australia); call or text 1737 (New Zealand); elsewhere, findahelpline.com lists free helplines.

Sources: NHS, HSE, Mind, NIMH and healthdirect, checked 7 November 2026. Educational, not first-aid training or medical advice. Full guide and more free sheets: jonathanhaverkampf.com/mental-health-help/free-mental-health-resources/

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