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What To Do When A Panic Attack Hits At Work



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Leadership Strategy

Having a panic attack at work can be extremely stressful, to put it mildly. Not only do you have to deal with symptoms that make you feel like you are dying, but now they are happening in front of your coworkers and employer. Here's how to cope if you feel a panic attack coming on.

Find Some Privacy

In today's open-plan offices, it can be difficult to find a place where you can be alone. The next best thing to a nearby empty office (without glass walls) is to go into a bathroom stall or go outside. Remind yourself that panic attacks are temporary, and take deep breaths. Name three things you can see, three things you can hear, and three things you can feel. Repeat as needed. This practice brings you into the present moment and can help you return to "baseline" more quickly. A quick "if you could please excuse me," is sufficient when you need to find a safe place quickly.

Go Home If You Need To

Some panic attacks are more intense than others. If you feel it is difficult to continue working, take the rest of the day off. It is better for you to go home and take extra care of yourself rather than try to "tough it out." Panic attacks are exhausting, and staying at work afterward rarely results in any work getting done. If you are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you cannot be fired or demoted for needing to take time off due to having panic disorder, with some exceptions. To learn more about the ADA, continue reading.

Consider Getting Covered By The ADA

Contact an attorney that is knowledgeable about the ADA. **If you have a diagnosed medical condition and your workplace has at least fifteen employees, you may be covered by ADA.** Panic disorder, along with other brain-based disorders, is seen as an “invisible disability,” and may require you to disclose your panic disorder diagnosis to your employer. Consult with an attorney first — disclosing a medical condition to your employer can have side effects. Disclosing to your employer that you have panic disorder may make you protected by the ADA, meaning that they cannot fire or demote you due to issues related to panic disorder. You may also qualify for accommodations, such as taking more frequent breaks than your colleagues. **Be aware that an employer may deny accommodations if the accommodation would interfere with an essential part of the employee’s job.**

A stigma still remains with brain-related medical disorders including panic disorder, other anxiety disorders, and mood disorders. You may be treated differently by people word gets around the office that you have panic disorder. It’s an unfortunate reality the employees have faced. Although information about your medical condition is supposed to be kept confidential, you can’t guarantee that someone in the office isn’t going to gossip to someone else. Contact an attorney to see if you can be covered by the ADA and if the benefits of doing so outweigh the risks.

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Know Your Triggers

While many panic attacks come on with no known trigger, some are precipitated by an event at work. One of the most common triggers for panic attacks at work is giving a presentation. An accommodation for panic disorder is to be teamed up with someone where you do the research and they do the presentation. The quickest step is to avoid what triggers panic attacks, and the next quickest is being aware of when a panic attack is starting and excuse yourself immediately, implementing deep breathing as you do so

Getting Through The Next Day

When you have a panic attack at the office, going back to work the next day can bring up a variety of feelings, including embarrassment, shame, and awkwardness. People tend to be more understanding of someone having a heart attack at work than a panic attack.

Again, a stigma still exists around brain-based medical disorders. You have a couple of options when you return to work. You can avoid talking about it and go about your day as if nothing happened, or you can be open with your coworkers and employer. If a coworker asks you if you are okay, he or she is most likely doing it with your best interests in mind. Your coworker may even have panic disorder too.

Go Easy On Yourself

Panic disorder is a highly heritable disorder. In other words, you most likely inherited the genes for it. It did not come about through any fault of your own. Everyone is dealt different genetic hand, and unfortunately, panic disorder was in your cards for reasons we may never know. Your coworker may have inherited diabetes; another may have inherited a high risk for heart disease. Everyone has something, even if they don't talk about it. Now is the time to be extra-gentle to yourself.

It's Not A Reflection Of Your Ability

Having a panic attack at work doesn't mean that you are any less of an employee than anyone else in your office. It is not a reflection of your ability, nor is it a reflection of who you are as a person. You have a medical disorder, and you are one of several people at your office that deals with a medical issue on a daily basis. And while it feels like everyone knows that you are having a panic attack, you would be surprised at how many people can't tell when someone is having one. The chances are that not as many people noticed as you thought.

Keep Up Your Treatment

It's very important to practice self-care when you have panic disorder, including being compliant with your medication and attending psychotherapy on a regular basis. If you are experiencing side effects to your medication, address this with your prescriber as soon as possible.

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I am a Ph.D., licensed, board-certified mental health counselor in practice for over 20 years. I am the best-selling author of several books, including *Gaslighting: Reco...* **Read More**

