

Panic Disorder: A Teacher's Guide

Transcript

Heather: Panic disorders are when children or young people experience acute levels of anxiety or panic, with the fear that they might experience a panic attack.

Symptoms that might be observed in a child or young person who is experiencing panic disorder may be physical symptoms such as difficulty breathing, perhaps dizziness, headaches, stomach aches and changes within their breathing.

Asha: They also might start to feel under pressure, difficulty concentrating, they might start pacing, as well, difficulties with catching their breath. The young person as well might be starting to express, verbalise that they think they are going to die, so a lot of statements that have concerns. They might feel like they want to escape a room as well; so if they're in a classroom, for example, they might feel like they need fresh air, they might feel like they need space to get out of a confined space as well.

A panic attack can very much feel like somebody's having a heart attack. If a student has a panic attack, but actually you're unsure if it is a heart attack, it's important that you seek medical assistance because they can look very similar. A panic attack can feel really distressing physically and psychologically as well.

So if a student is experiencing a panic attack, for example, it's really important that the young person is coached with breathing techniques, and that they start to regulate their breathing. So if you can mimic breathing and just slowing down their breath. This can be done by just, even when you're talking to that young person, and saying "It's okay. It's a panic attack that you're having." If you slow down your own voice and your tone, naturally that young person will also start to breathe at that tone that you're speaking at.

Heather: A strategy that can help with supporting young people to implement this strategy is imagining a balloon in the stomach, and as they breathe in, the balloon is inflating, and as they breathe out, the balloon is deflating.

Asha: It's also important that you use grounding strategies. When the young person experiences a panic attack, they feel that they have no control over it, and they kind of forget that they're in the here and now. So if you can help to ground that young person by sitting them down and placing their feet on the floor, maybe clenching somebody's hand, for example.

Panic Disorder: A Teacher's Guide

Transcript

Something like progressive muscle relaxation, as well, so that squeezing of their fists and letting it go and re-squeezing again their muscles and releasing them, is another way to help with grounding.

Heather: A grounding item that could be quite helpful is something such as playdough. By having a ball of playdough, the young person can squish it, they can roll it, they can punch it, they can pinch it, and use that item to perhaps relieve any of the emotions that they're experiencing.

Visual safe space exercise. This is using an imaginary space that the young person identifies that they find safe and calming. It could be a certain scene, or a place that they've been before, or it could be an imaginary place that they find safe. You can then encourage the young person to imagine that place, the colours, the smells and textures.

Asha: Sometimes as well, what can happen is that a young person physically might lash out or verbally lash out. It's their way of coping with it, so it's important that a young person is not classified as that they're aggressive; it's actually their way of coping with the anxiety that's occurring. What we do say is aggression isn't an excuse. It isn't okay to be verbally or physically aggressive to somebody because they are experiencing anxiety; it is okay, though, to learn new and healthy strategies to be able to cope with that.