Anxiety Attacks: What Happens and What Actually Helps

Name Date Class

Reading

1 The first one often comes out of nowhere. You are sitting in a cafe or waiting for an elevator when your heart begins to race for no reason you can see. Your throat tightens. Your fingers go numb. A voice in your head says, quite calmly, that you are about to die. It is one of the most **unnerving** experiences a person can have, and afterward many people feel almost embarrassed, as if they should have been able to stop it.

2 They could not have, and they are far from alone. A panic attack, the term doctors prefer to "anxiety attack," is a burst of intense fear that peaks within minutes, and surveys around the world suggest that more than one adult in ten will have at least one. Most attacks last between 5 and 20 minutes. For many people the first attack is also the last, though it may leave a **lingering** sense of unease. That is worth remembering, because the real trouble often comes not from the attack itself but from the **dread** of the next one.

3 Here is how the **spiral** works. After a frightening attack, you become **hypervigilant**. You check your pulse and notice every flutter in your chest and every moment of dizziness. Sensations you would once have ignored now feel like warnings, a bit like hearing every creak in the house after watching a horror film. A slightly fast heartbeat on a warm day sets off a worried thought, the worry releases adrenaline, and the adrenaline makes your heart beat faster still. The reaction is completely **disproportionate** to the situation, but from the inside it feels entirely logical.

4 The natural response is to protect yourself, and this is where many people get stuck. They stop taking the subway. They sit by the door in every meeting. Some quietly turn down invitations. They ask friends again and again whether they look all right. Each habit brings a moment of relief, and that is exactly the problem. The **reassurance** that is sought over and over teaches the mind that the danger was real and was only narrowly avoided. Over months, avoidance can become deeply **ingrained**, and a life can quietly shrink around it.

5 What helps during an attack is, strangely, a kind of acceptance. Instead of fighting the sensations, try naming them: this is panic, it is unpleasant, and it is not dangerous. Remind yourself that every attack you have had so far has ended. Then **ride it out**. Breathe slowly and gently rather than gulping air, which can make dizziness worse. Some people find **grounding** exercises useful, such as naming five things they can see and four things they can hear, to pull their attention away from their body and back into the room. None of these tricks makes the fear disappear. Their job is to stop you adding a second layer of fear on top of the first, so that the attack can **subside** on its own.

6 The longer-term work goes further, and it is not comfortable. Therapists who specialize in panic often ask clients to bring on the sensations they fear on purpose: spinning on an office chair, running up the stairs, breathing through a narrow straw. The aim is to teach the body that a pounding heart is just a pounding heart. Clients also return, **tentatively** at first, to the places they have been avoiding, this time without their usual escape routes. Walking straight toward the thing that frightens you can seem **counterproductive**, but it is one of the most reliable ways to loosen panic's grip.

7 Progress is rarely a straight line. A stressful month can bring an attack back, and a **setback** like this does not mean the effort was wasted. After a first attack, it is sensible to see a doctor to check for heart or other physical problems. If attacks keep returning, or you find yourself **braced** for the next one wherever you go, that is the point to look for professional help. Cognitive behavioral therapy has one of the stronger track records for panic, and a course is often measured in weeks rather than years.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**unnerving**	_____	**A**	remaining long after the cause has gone
2	**lingering**	_____	**B**	making a problem worse instead of better
3	**dread**	_____	**C**	a problem that delays progress for a time
4	**spiral**	_____	**D**	get through something hard until it ends
5	**hypervigilant**	_____	**E**	fixed so firmly that it is hard to change
6	**disproportionate**	_____	**F**	ready for something bad you expect
7	**reassurance**	_____	**G**	constantly watching for signs of danger
8	**ingrained**	_____	**H**	strong fear of something that may happen
9	**ride it out**	_____	**I**	something said to make you less worried
10	**grounding**	_____	**J**	become gradually weaker and calmer
11	**subside**	_____	**K**	carefully, without feeling sure yet
12	**tentatively**	_____	**L**	a cycle in which each problem feeds the next
13	**counterproductive**	_____	**M**	much too large for the situation
14	**setback**	_____	**N**	making you feel nervous and uneasy
15	**braced**	_____	**O**	focusing on your senses to stay present

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

counterproductive	**disproportionate**	**dread**	**grounding**	**hypervigilant**	**ingrained**	**lingering**
reassurance	**ride it out**	**setback**	**spiral**	**subside**	**tentatively**	**unnerving**

1 It was _____ to walk through the dark forest alone.

2 A _____ smell of paint remained in the room for days.

3 Many students feel a sense of _____ before an important exam.

4 One bad week started a _____ of stress and poor sleep.

5 After the robbery, the shop owner was _____ about every stranger who came in.

6 Critics said the huge fine was _____ to the small mistake.

7 The doctor's calm explanation gave him the _____ he needed.

8 Her habit of saving money was deeply _____ from childhood.

9 The market was falling, but the investors decided to _____ and wait.

10 She tried a _____ exercise, naming things she could see and hear.

11 The pain began to _____ about an hour after he took the medicine.

12 He _____ suggested a new idea, unsure how his boss would react.

13 Punishing students for asking questions is _____ if you want them to learn.

14 The bad weather was a _____ for the building project, which is now two weeks late.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What happens in the body and mind during the first attack described in paragraph 1, and how do many people feel afterward?

2 Which term do doctors prefer, and how common are panic attacks according to the reading?

3 Why does the writer say the dread of the next attack can cause more trouble than the attack itself?

4 Explain the spiral described in paragraph 3 in your own words.

5 Why can habits such as sitting by the door or asking friends for reassurance make panic worse over time?

6 What does the writer suggest doing during an attack, and what is the purpose of these strategies?

7 What do therapists ask clients to do in longer-term treatment, and why might this seem counterproductive?

8 According to paragraph 7, when should a person see a doctor, and when should they look for professional help?

9 Paragraphs 5 and 6 both describe ways of dealing with panic. How are the strategies in paragraph 5 different from the treatment in paragraph 6?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Panic attacks are more common among women than among men."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that avoiding places where attacks have happened helps people recover."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with information about how long cognitive behavioral therapy usually takes? Is the aim to advertise therapy, to warn readers, or something else?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** A first panic attack usually comes with a clear warning.

2 **T / F** Panic attacks usually peak within minutes.

3 **T / F** Most panic attacks last between 5 and 20 minutes.

4 **T / F** For most people, a first panic attack leads to many more.

5 **T / F** Adrenaline released by worry can make the heart beat faster.

6 **T / F** Seeking reassurance again and again weakens fear over time.

7 **T / F** Grounding exercises make fear disappear immediately.

8 **T / F** Therapists may ask clients to spin on an office chair on purpose.

9 **T / F** A setback means the effort to recover was wasted.

10 **T / F** The writer suggests seeing a doctor after a first attack.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Before reading, did you think anxiety attack and panic attack meant the same thing? Which term is more common in your language?

2 What words or expressions does your first language use for sudden, intense fear? Do any of them refer to a particular part of the body?

3 Have you ever misread a normal body sensation, such as a fast heartbeat after coffee, as a sign that something was wrong? What happened?

4 Many people feel nervous before exams, interviews, or presentations. What do people you know do to calm down, and which methods seem to help?

5 Would you feel comfortable telling a friend, a teacher, or an employer that you had had a panic attack? Why or why not?

6 If a friend had a panic attack in front of you, what would you say or do? What would you try not to say?

7 The reading says that asking again and again whether you look all right can backfire. When does comfort from friends help, and when might it get in the way?

8 Many people carry a lucky object or always sit near the exit. Are small habits like these harmless, or can they limit a person's life?

9 Have you ever overcome a fear, such as heights, dogs, or public speaking, by facing it step by step? How did it go?

10 Which of the strategies for getting through an attack seems most practical to you, and which seems hardest to use in a real moment of panic?

11 How are anxiety and mental health talked about in your country's media, schools, or workplaces? Has this changed in recent years?

12 Why might a person be more willing to see a doctor for chest pain than for fear or worry?

13 Some people argue that talking openly about anxiety helps reduce stigma, while others worry it can make normal nervousness seem like an illness. Which view is closer to yours?

14 If a smartphone could detect the early signs of a panic attack from your heart rate and breathing, would you want it to warn you? What could go wrong?

Language Focus: Defining Relative Clauses

A defining relative clause comes right after a noun and tells us which person or thing we mean. It usually begins with who, which, or that. When the relative pronoun is the object of the clause, it is often left out: the sensations (that) they fear.

In the reading:

- "Sensations **you would once have ignored** now feel like warnings…"
- "The reassurance **that is sought over and over** teaches the mind that the danger was real and was only narrowly avoided."
- "Remind yourself that every attack **you have had so far** has ended."

Practice: Combine each pair of sentences with a defining relative clause. In which answer can you leave out the relative pronoun, and why? *"Some people avoid places. They fear these places." "Many people have friends. The friends always tell them to breathe deeply."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/anxiety-attacks

Notes