

Panic attacks and panic disorder in adolescence: improving treatment outcomes and support in schools

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Panic attacks are common in adolescents, occurring in up to two thirds of adolescent community samples. They are also experienced within panic disorder, which affects 1-3% of adolescents. Better understanding of the experience of panic attacks and panic disorder is required to improve treatments both in clinical and community settings, such as schools.

Panic disorder in adolescents is poorly understood (Baker & Waite, 2020) and there is currently no NICE guidance for clinicians around best practice for the treatment of panic disorder in adolescence, or guidance for teachers around how to manage panic disorder symptoms in schools. We are completing a feasibility study evaluating cognitive behavioural treatments for panic disorder in adolescence (Waite, in prep). Consequently, we have a large amount of data that can be used to better understand the clinical characteristics and potential moderators and mediators of treatment outcome for panic attacks/panic disorder in adolescence. Our research (Hewitt, Tomlin & Waite, 2021; Baker, Hollywood & Waite, submitted) has shown that panic attacks and panic disorder in adolescence are associated with a range of difficulties. Participants have described particular difficulties managing panic attacks in the school environment, and that teachers and school staff have difficulty knowing what to do, often inadvertently making the problem worse. This can lead to adolescents avoiding lessons and in some cases, attending school more generally.

In order to improve outcomes for adolescents with panic attacks and panic disorder, the following questions are important to address:

- What are the clinical characteristics of adolescents with panic disorder?
- What mediates/moderates treatment outcome for adolescents with panic disorder?
- How can adolescents be best supported by school staff when they have panic attacks at school?
- Can a brief intervention be delivered in schools to improve the management of panic attacks?
- What is the best way to implement a brief intervention in schools?

There is the potential to apply mixed-methods to address these questions.

For more information please contact polly.waite@psych.ox.ac.uk.

References

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