



PANIC

What is panic?

Panic is a sudden sense of fear triggered by our internal alarm system when we think we are in danger. It is a normal reaction in many situations. For example, imagine that you are walking home in the dark and sense someone following you. For most people this would trigger strong feelings of anxiety, leading them to run away or become ready to physically defend themselves. In this situation the feelings of panic are necessary in order to stay safe. This reaction is called the '**Fight or Flight**' response.

Sometimes our internal alarm system is oversensitive and goes off when there is no danger. We get the same 'Fight or Flight' response but there is no 'real' danger. This can cause us to have a panic attack. When you suffer a panic attack you feel the same level of fear or uneasiness you would experience in response to a physical danger, but the feelings will occur in situations that most people would not fear, for example in a supermarket or being out in public.

Sometimes people can find it difficult to identify if they are having a panic attack. This is because panic attacks can come out of the blue, and feel so unpleasant that people often think there must be something more serious wrong.

It is important to remember that the feelings associated with panic are **normal** and **not dangerous**.

How do I know if I am having a panic attack?

Lots of people experience panic attacks, but they can affect everyone in different ways. Panic affects your body, the way you think and the way you behave. Sometimes, the feelings of panic can be so bad that it is difficult to accept that it is just a panic attack and that there is no real danger.

On the next page is a list of some of the most common symptoms experienced by people having a panic attack:

Your body

- finding it hard to breathe
- pounding, racing or skipping heart
- feeling dizzy or faint
- trembling or shaking
- sweating
- stomach pains/chest pains
- hot flushes or chills
- chest pains
- numbness or tingling in parts of your body

Your mind

- feelings of terror
- beliefs you are going to die
- feelings of unreality, as though you are not really there
- fearful thoughts such as:
 - “I’m losing control”
 - “I am going to be sick”
 - “I am choking”
 - “I will collapse”
 - “I will have a heart attack”

Your behaviour

- A panic attack can be very frightening and you may feel that you want to **escape** the situation you are in.
- You may **avoid** situations that have caused you to panic before, or situations that you fear might cause you to panic.
- **Safety behaviours** are strategies that we believe will prevent what you think is going to happen. These often involve doing something you think will keep you safe. It could be holding a trolley to stop you fainting, or lying down to prevent a heart attack.

What causes panic attacks to start?

Panic attacks can start for a number of different reasons:

- **Difficult emotions** about the past or present can lead to panic attacks. Relationship problems or events from the past that are difficult to cope with can lead to feelings of panic.
- **Stressful events** can cause an increase in anxiety which may trigger the alarm system.
- **Health worries** can also cause panic attacks. Sometimes people become over-concerned about their health. This causes them to look for signs that they may be developing an illness, causing an increase in anxiety. They then believe the anxiety symptoms are evidence of a serious illness.
- **Other health-related reasons** such as viruses can cause dizziness triggering a panic attack. Pregnancy or the menopause cause changes to our body that can lead to a first experience of panic. Consuming large amounts of caffeine or low blood sugar levels can lead to feelings of faintness.
- Sometimes **we just don't know** why panic attacks begin. The alarm system just goes off with no obvious reason.

Rather than focussing on why the panic attacks started, it is important to know what keeps them going so we can learn to manage them better.

What keeps panic attacks going?

Panic causes changes to our body, our thoughts and our behaviours. These work together to keep panic going.

Your body

Physical symptoms of panic can be part of the problem. For example, when you panic you may start to hyperventilate (see booklet on hyperventilation). This means you are taking in too much air and not breathing out enough. This can lead to feelings of dizziness, which you may take as further evidence that something is wrong.

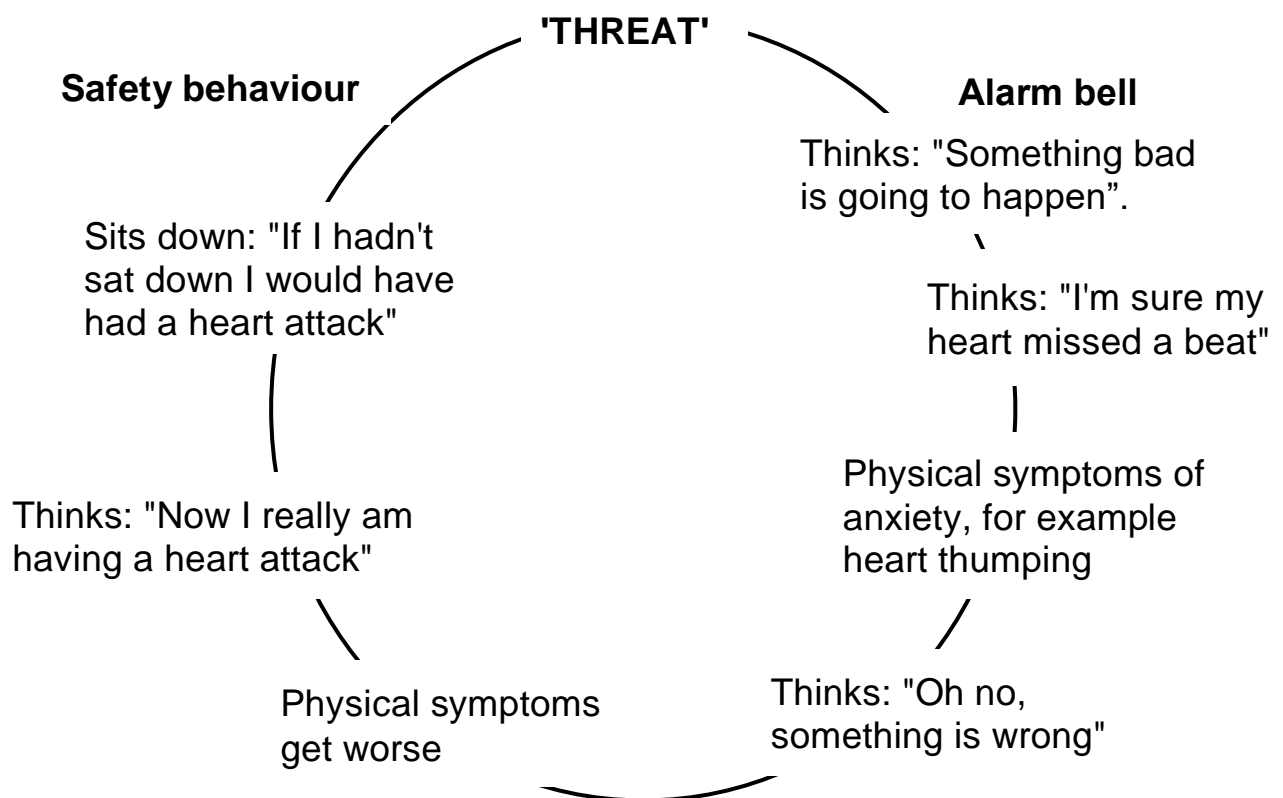
Your mind

If we believe something 100% then our body and emotions will react as if it were true. People often find it difficult to believe that thoughts can impact so strongly on our emotions.

Your behaviour

How a person behaves before, during and after a panic attack can keep the panic going. Often after one panic attack, people will worry that they are going to panic in situations they have panicked before. This can make it more likely for panic attacks to happen again. This can lead to avoidance. Behaviours such as escape, avoidance and safety behaviours mean you are unable to teach yourself that there is no 'real' danger.

'The Vicious Cycle'



How to break the vicious cycle

The good news is that there are a number of strategies which can help you to cope with panic. You may find that your panic attacks have already started to reduce because you have begun to recognise, understand, and accept that they are not harmful.

Not everyone finds the same things helpful so it is useful to experiment with different things in order to find what works best for you. Remember that self-expression can be verbal or non-verbal through use of images or writing down feelings and thoughts. If you have suffered from panic for a long time, it may take a while for the strategies to work. If you keep at it though, you should see the benefits.

Your body

Both relaxation and controlled breathing have been found to help with the physical symptoms of panic. These techniques can prevent feelings of anxiety turning into full blown panic. They can also prevent hyperventilation.

Being relaxed and breathing calmly is the opposite of panic and they can be used when you are facing the situations you fear to keep you calm.

It is a good idea to practice these techniques when you are not anxious. This will give you a chance to learn the techniques which you can use in situations you fear.

- **Relaxation**

There are different types of relaxation and it is important to find out what works best for you.

There are formal types of relaxation such as Progressive Muscular Relaxation and Visualisation. More information can be found in the Wellbeing Booklet 'Relaxation'. Each type of formal relaxation is a skill that needs to be learnt and practised.

The best way to practice these initially is when you don't feel anxious. There are also lots of activities that people find relaxing. For example, having a warm bath, listening to music or practising yoga.

- **Controlled breathing**

When someone becomes frightened they often find they will start to breathe more quickly. This response is automatic, and occurs in preparation for 'Fight or Flight'.

However, fast, deep or irregular breathing can make the symptoms of panic worse. For example, it can make you feel faint or dizzy. Controlling your breathing during a panic attack, might reduce some of the symptoms and break the vicious cycle.

If you can manage to breathe more slowly for a few minutes, this should slow everything down and your alarm system will switch off.

Controlling your breathing during a panic attack can be very difficult. During a panic attack you may feel you are not getting enough air, so trying to do something that feels like you are getting less is hard work.

Step 1. *Breathe out*

Step 2. *Breathe in slowly* for the count of four, 'one elephant, two elephant, three elephant, four elephant'

Step 3. *Hold your breath* for the count of four

Step 4. *Breathe out slowly* for the count of four

Again, it is important to practice when you don't feel anxious. Try to practice regularly, and keep going for at least three minutes. This technique works better in the early stages of panic.

Important: These techniques will help the symptoms of panic, but will not prevent something bad happening. Even if you don't use these techniques, nothing bad will happen.

Your mind

There are a number of techniques you can use to help with the thoughts that keep panic going:

1. Stop focusing on your body
2. Distract yourself from frightening thoughts
3. Question and test your frightening thoughts
4. Try to work out whether something else is making you tense

Stop focusing

Try to notice whether you are focusing on your symptoms, or scanning your body for something wrong. There really is no need to do this and it makes the problem far worse. It may be helpful to use the next technique to help you stop the habit. In particular, focus on what is going on outside rather than inside you.

Distraction

This is a very simple but effective technique. There are lots of ways you can distract yourself. For example, look at other people, and try to think what they do for a job. Count the number of red doors you see on the way home. Listen very carefully to someone talking.

You can also try thinking of a pleasant scene in your mind, or an object, like a flower or your favourite car. Really concentrate on it. You can try doing sums in your mind, or singing a song. The important thing is that your attention is taken off your body and on to something else. Use what works best for you. Distraction really does work. The symptoms of panic should start to fade after about 3 minutes, so keep at it!

Distraction breaks the vicious cycle but it is important to remember it didn't prevent something bad from happening. Nothing bad would have happened whether you distracted yourself or not. Could the phone ringing really prevent a heart attack?

Question your thoughts

When people are anxious the thoughts they have can be very unhelpful and not truly reflect the situation. By challenging these thoughts, you may be able to reduce how much you believe them.

In order to challenge your thoughts, you first need to figure out what your anxious thoughts and fears are. Ask yourself – what's the worst that could happen? What will this mean about me, or my life if this does happen?

Once you are aware of these fears, you can start to challenge them by asking yourself a number of questions.

When we challenge thoughts it is not about thinking positively but about thinking in a balanced manner based on a true reflection of the situation you are facing.

Questions it might be helpful to ask yourself include:

- what is the evidence for and against this thought?
- based on past experience, what is the chance your worst fear will come true?
- do your symptoms fit with a panic attack or something more serious?
- if thinking about panic has brought on a panic attack, is it likely that a stroke or heart attack could be caused in this way?

Some examples of unhelpful thoughts with more realistic alternatives are given below:

Unhelpful or unrealistic thought

More realistic and helpful thought

I am having a heart attack

I have had this feeling before and I am still here

I am going mad

The feelings I am experiencing are panic – they are normal and not dangerous

I will make a fool of myself

When I have panicked before nobody even noticed. People are busy getting on with their own thing

I am going to faint

People having panic attacks are unlikely to faint. I have never fainted before

Practice challenging some of your thoughts and fears when you are not anxious and make a note of more realistic thoughts. This will give you something to look back on when you are panicking.

Directly challenging the thoughts you have about panic can be useful. However, the best way to challenge these unhelpful thoughts is indirectly, through challenging our behaviours. How to do this is described in the next section.

Remember: Panic can arise because of difficult feelings that are not being dealt with. It may be that you are thinking a lot about your past, a difficult relationship, or an incident that has upset you. If you face up to the difficult emotions that these thoughts can cause, panic is less likely to occur. Talking to a friend or professional (e.g. doctor, nurse, counsellor or psychologist) may help you to deal with these emotions and think in a different way.

Your behaviour

Challenging what you do is probably the most effective way of overcoming panic. We have already mentioned that avoidance and escape can keep the symptoms of panic going. In order to reduce panic symptoms, you need to reduce these behaviours.

It is important to test out the situations that you fear most in order to learn that there is no real danger and that panic attacks cannot harm you. This works best if carried out in small, planned steps.

Avoidance

Rather than avoiding situations you fear, you need to gradually face your fears step by step. It might be helpful to begin by writing a list of the situations you are avoiding, and then begin with the easiest. For example, if you are frightened of visiting a supermarket, you could start by going to a small shop and spending a few minutes in there.

Once you feel less anxious about doing this, the next step would be to go to a small shop and spend an increased amount of time in the shop. You then might visit a bigger shop for a short amount of time, and so on. You will probably be quite anxious at first, especially if you have been avoiding situations for a long time.

It is important to remember that the anxiety **will** go away because it is a false alarm.

Escape

First of all note which situations you are escaping from. For example do you leave the supermarket without your shopping? Do you leave the cinema before the film has finished? Try staying in the situation until your anxiety reduces.

Safety behaviours

Try to notice which behaviours you have developed to keep yourself safe.

Write down some of the behaviours you are carrying out and set up small experiments for yourself. For example, you might lean on a shopping trolley to stop you from fainting in the supermarket. To test out your beliefs about doing this behaviour you could try walking without a trolley and use a basket instead. Try to reflect on the outcome of your experiment. For example, I learned that I do not faint, even without a trolley.

By testing your fears in this way, and finding out that your worst fear never happens you will gradually build up confidence. As a result your panic attacks should become both less frequent and less intense.

Important: whatever you do or don't do, panic attacks will stop just like any other alarm. The resources that our bodies use to prepare to fight or flight will run out, stopping the physical sensations associated with panic attacks.

Summary: coping with panic

Panic is a form of fear. It is our body's alarm system signalling threat. It prepares our body to fight or run away from danger. But as there is no physical danger, it is a false alarm.

A panic attack may be unpleasant, but it is not dangerous.

- Practise relaxation, slow breathing, distraction and thought challenging when not anxious until you have learned the techniques.
- Remind yourself during a panic attack that you have panicked many times before and nothing awful is going to happen.
- Use distraction, relaxation and slow breathing to help you get the panic to go away.
- Challenge your unrealistic thoughts during a panic attack, using some more realistic thoughts you have written down.
- Try not to avoid, escape or use safety behaviours, instead test out what really happens.
- Try to sort out any worries or troubles that you have. Talk about them; don't sweep them under the carpet.

Ten rules for coping with panic

- the feelings are normal bodily reactions
- they are not harmful
- do not add frightening thoughts
- describe what is happening
- wait for the fear to pass
- notice when it fades
- it is an opportunity for progress
- think of what you have done
- plan what to do next
- then start off slowly

Further Information

[Panic self-help guide | NHS inform](#)