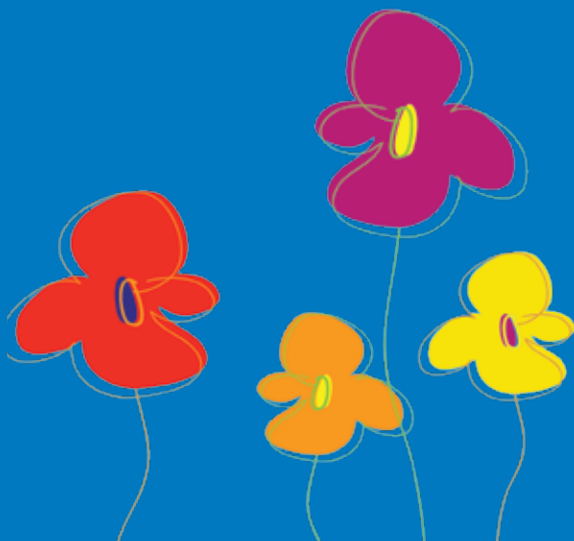


# Panic

## Panic

### A Self Help Guide

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## What is a panic attack?

Everyone knows what panic is, and it is common to feel panicky from time to time:

- You get the sense that you are being followed on your way home from a party, late at night.
- You discover you have had your wallet stolen.
- You are sitting an exam. You look at the paper and realise you don't know the answers to any of the questions.
- Someone runs in front of your car and you almost hit them.

It would be normal in any of these situations to feel a sense of panic.

The feeling would be understandable and would pass fairly quickly.

A **panic attack** is a bit like 'normal' panic, but different in a number of ways:

The feelings seem to come 'out of the blue' and are not usually related to the sort of frightening situation described above.

The feelings are a lot stronger.

**As the feelings are UNEXPECTED and STRONG they can feel extremely frightening.**

Panic attacks affect people in many different ways, but there is usually a frightening feeling that something **really** awful is about to happen.

Lots of people have panic attacks, although they can affect people in different ways. Some people have only one, others may have them for many years. Some people have them every day, some people only once in a while. If you were to ask all of your friends if they have ever had a panic attack, it is very likely that at least one or two will have had the same experience. They are quite common and **NOT** a sign of serious mental or physical illness.

Some non-serious physical conditions can cause symptoms similar to panic attacks. For example:

- Certain medicines taken together
- Thyroid problems
- Drinking too much caffeine
- Pregnancy
- Low blood sugar, etc.,

If, after reading this leaflet, you are concerned that your problem may have a physical cause and you have not yet had a check-up from your GP, then it may be a good idea to make an appointment.

### In summary

*Panic attacks are very common. They are NOT dangerous and are NOT a sign of serious mental or physical illness.*

This booklet aims to help you reduce your panic attacks by helping you to:

- **Recognize** whether or not you are having panic attacks.
- **Understand** panic, what causes it and what keeps it going.
- **Accept** that panic cannot harm you.
- **Learn** techniques to reduce panic.

*The truth is: **nothing** awful is going to happen, as panic attacks are **not** dangerous.*







**Other health-related reasons**

Sometimes panic attacks occur for the first time during a period of ill-health. For example, some viruses can cause dizziness. Pregnancy or the menopause can cause changes in the way our body works that can lead to a first experience of panic. Consuming large amounts of caffeine, or low blood sugar can also lead to feelings of faintness. Can you think of any 'health-related' reasons for your panic attacks?

**Difficult emotions**

Panic attacks often begin when there are feelings from the past or present that are being 'swept under the carpet'. Maybe you have relationship problems, or something from the past you need to deal with?

**Out of the blue**

Sometimes we just don't know why panic attacks begin. Some people even have their first panic attack when they are asleep! It may just be that certain people, in certain circumstances, respond like the over-sensitive car alarm. Their alarm system is triggered when there is in fact no danger.

In some ways it is less important to know what causes panic attacks to begin and more important to know what keeps them going.

**What keeps panic attacks going?**

As you will remember, panic affects your body, your thoughts and your behaviour. All three work together to keep panic going.

**Physical**

Firstly, the physical symptoms can be part of the problem. For people whose breathing is affected by anxiety, something called **hyperventilation** can occur. This just means that someone is taking in too much air and not breathing it out. This is not dangerous, but can lead to feelings of dizziness and is often taken as further evidence that there is something seriously wrong.

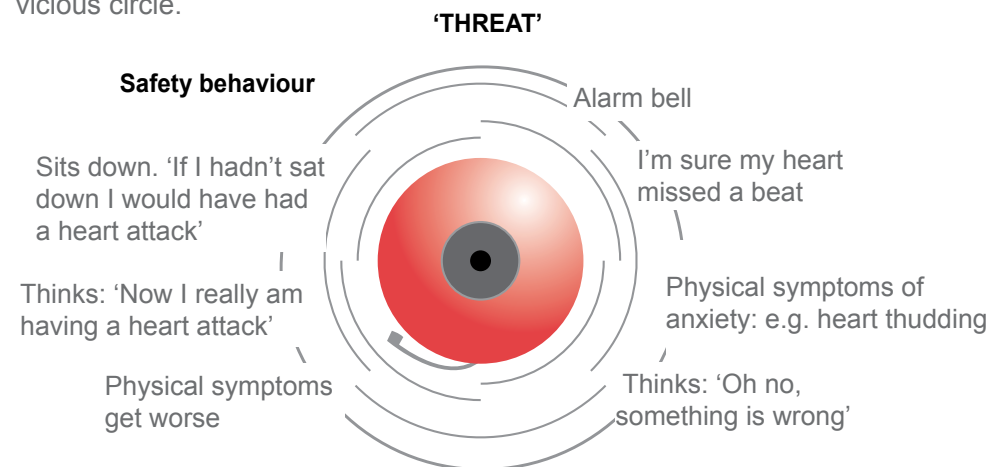
**Thoughts**

Secondly, the physical symptoms and anxious thoughts form a vicious circle that keeps panic attacks coming back again and again. Also, focusing your mind on your body can lead to noticing small changes and seeing this as a threat.

People often find it hard to believe that our thoughts can produce such strong feelings as fear. But if we **believe** something 100%, then we will feel exactly the same way as if it were true.

**Behaviour**

Thirdly, how a person behaves before, during and following a panic attack has a big part to play in whether panic attacks keep happening. The avoidance, escape and safety behaviour described earlier all add in to the vicious circle.



Another way thoughts can affect panic is when someone starts to **worry** that they are going to panic in situations where they have panicked before. This, unfortunately, makes it more likely to happen again. People who have panic attacks often worry that the physical symptoms mean something different from what they really do. Examples of some of the most common misinterpretations are:

What you feel	Reasons this is happening	Common fears
Eyes go funny. Blurred vision. Tunnel vision. Feel unreal	Eyes trying to focus to fight danger	Brain haemorrhage Going mad
Breathing changes	Body trying to take in more oxygen to fight or run away	Choking or suffocating Running out of air
Chest pains	Muscles held tight ready to fight	
Heart pounding	Increased flow of blood through body	Heart attack
Pounding in head Headache	Increased pressure of blood flowing through body for extra energy	Tumour Haemorrhage
Numbness or tingling in fingers or lips	Blood diverted to muscles	Stroke

### In summary

- **Fear** is our body's way of coping with threat – preparing us to fight or run.
- **Panic attacks** can begin for a number of reasons: -
  - stress
  - health worries
  - during a mild illness
  - because of difficult emotions -
  - out of the blue
- **Panic attacks are kept going because of the vicious circle of:**
  - physical symptoms
  - thoughts
  - behaviour
- **By avoiding, escaping or preventing panic attacks, you may:**
  - never find out that nothing terrible was going to happen
  - dread going back into the situation because you fear another attack
  - lose confidence in your ability to cope alone

## 3. Can panic attacks really harm me?

We have spent a lot of time looking at recognizing and understanding panic because this should give you all the information you need to be able to accept that panic attacks are not harmful. If you can do this, then you have come a long way to being able to end your panic attacks.

To what extent, sitting here now, do you believe that your panic attacks mean that something awful is going to happen (0 to 100%); for example, heart attack, stroke, fainting, choking, suffocating?

.....%

Next time you have a panic attack, can you rate at the time how much you believe something awful is going to happen?

.....%

### Summary

*Panic attacks are not harmful.*

## 4. What techniques can help me cope with and reduce panic attacks?

The good news is that panic attacks are very treatable. You may find that your panic attacks have already started to reduce because you have begun to recognize and understand and accept that they are not harmful.

As we have seen, panic affects your body, your mind and your behaviour. It makes sense to try to deal with each of these. You may find some techniques more helpful than others. Not everyone finds the same things helpful. Also, if you have been having panic attacks for a while, it may take some time for these techniques to work. Don't expect miracles straight away, but keep at it and you should see the benefits soon, when you've found the techniques that work best for you.

### Your body

There are at least two things you can do to help with the physical symptoms of anxiety:

- 1 Relaxation
- 2 Controlled breathing

These techniques are helpful for a number of reasons:

- Panic attacks often start in periods of stress. These techniques can help you to deal with stressful situations better and reduce overall levels of anxiety.
- They can 'nip anxiety in the bud', stopping the cycle that leads to full-blown panic by reducing anxiety symptoms and preventing hyperventilation.
- They can be used when avoidance is being cut down to help you cope with situations you fear.
- Being relaxed and breathing calmly is the opposite of panic.

To begin with, it is best to practise regularly when you are **not** anxious. Look on it as getting into training. You would not enter the Great North Run without training for a while first!

### Relaxation

People relax in many different ways. It may be that looking at your lifestyle would be helpful. What do you do to relax? Write down six things you do or could do to relax. For example: swimming, reading, walking. As well as finding everyday ways of relaxing, there are special **relaxation techniques** which can help with the specific symptoms of panic. We have already seen that one of the things that happens when you panic is that your muscles tense up. To help yourself, you should try to relax your muscles whenever you start to feel anxious. Relaxing in this sense is different from the everyday ways of relaxing like putting your feet up and having a cup of tea (although that is just as important). It is a skill

to be learnt and practised. There are relaxation tapes, and sometimes classes, which can help. Yoga classes can also be helpful. Your doctor may be able to lend you a relaxation tape, **so please ask.** [Please contact the Psychological Therapies Service on 01706-261940 – classes and CDs are available.) Relaxation CDs teach you to go through the main muscle groups in your body, tensing and relaxing your muscles. The CD will come with instructions and some people find them very helpful. For further details on relaxation, please see the booklet, 'Stress: a self-help guide'.

**Remember:** *Relaxation can help to reduce symptoms of panic, but it is not preventing something terrible happening – because nothing terrible is going to happen, whether you relax or not.*

### Controlled breathing

As we saw earlier, when someone becomes frightened they start to breathe more quickly so that oxygen is pumped more quickly round the body. However, breathing too fast, deeply or irregularly can lead to more symptoms of panic, such as faintness, tingling and dizziness. If breathing can be controlled during panic, these symptoms may be reduced and so the vicious circle described earlier can be broken. You must breathe more slowly.

If you breathe calmly and slowly for at least 3 minutes, the alarm bell should stop ringing. This is not as easy as it sounds. Sometimes, in the middle of a panic attack, focusing on breathing

can be difficult. One of the effects of over-breathing is that you feel you need more air, so it is difficult to do something which makes you **feel** as though you are getting less!

Again, practise while you are not panicking to begin with. This technique will only work if you have practised and if it is used for at least three minutes. It works much better in the very early stages of panic. Practise the following as often as you can.

Fill your lungs with air. Imagine you are filling up a bottle, so it fills from the bottom up. Your stomach should push out too.

Do not breathe in a shallow way, from your chest, or too deeply. Keep your breathing nice and slow and calm. Breathe out from your mouth and in through your nose.

Try breathing in slowly saying to yourself: *1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4.*

Then let the breath out slowly to six: *4 elephant, 5 elephant, 6.*

Keep doing this until you feel calm. Sometimes looking at a second hand on a watch can help to slow breathing down.

**Remember:** Even if you didn't control your breathing, nothing awful is going to happen.

### Your mind

There are at least four things you can do to help with the way your mind fuels a panic attack:

- 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. Again, you need to keep distracting yourself for at least three minutes for your symptoms to reduce. 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 your 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 onto something else. Use what works best for you.

Distraction really does work. Have you ever been in the middle of a panic attack when something happened that totally took over your attention; for example, the phone ringing, or a child falling over?

**Remember:** Distraction breaks the vicious circle, but it is important to remember that distraction is not preventing something terrible from happening. In fact, as distraction works, this is evidence that nothing awful was going to happen after all. For example, could the fact that the phone rang really have prevented a heart attack?

### Question your thoughts

Sometimes, rather than distracting yourself from your anxious thoughts, it is more helpful to challenge them. In the long run it is most helpful to challenge your worrying thoughts so that you no longer believe them.

**For thought challenging, you need to do two things:**

- 1 Work out what your anxious thoughts and worst fears are. Everyone's are different, you should already have a good idea from the work done so far.
- 2 Start to challenge these thoughts and come up with more realistic and helpful thoughts.

Once you are aware of your thoughts and pictures in your mind, ask yourself:

- What is the evidence for and against them?
- How many times have you had these thoughts and has your worst fear ever happened?
- Do your experiences fit more with panic or with something more serious. For example, if thinking about panic brings a panic attack on, is it likely that a stroke or a heart attack could be caused in this way?

If you can come up with more realistic helpful thoughts, write them down and keep them with you. It is often much more difficult to come up with these thoughts when you are actually panicking.

Some example of unrealistic and unhelpful thoughts with more realistic alternatives are given below:

Unhelpful/unrealistic thoughts	More realistic thoughts
I am having a heart attack	I have had this feeling many times and am still here
I am going to faint	People having panic attacks are unlikely to faint. I have not fainted before
I am going mad	The feelings I am experiencing are panic – they are nothing like going mad
I will make a fool of myself	I have panicked before and no-one has even noticed. People are busy getting on with their own thing

Whilst it is really useful to challenge thoughts in this way, probably the best way is to challenge the thoughts through the things we do, which is in the next section. Before looking at how we can alter our behaviour to help reduce panic, it is useful to look at one other way in which your mind may be contributing to panic. Not through unhelpful, anxious thoughts, but because there may be other things bothering you, as mentioned earlier. Remember that panic can

arise as a result of difficult feelings not being dealt with. It may be helpful to work out whether anything like that is bothering you. Is there anything from your past that you haven't sorted out that is preying on your mind? Are there difficulties in your relationship? Do you feel angry or sad? Has someone or something upset you or is something troubling you? Panic is less likely to happen if you face up to emotional difficulties, either through talking to a friend or a

professional counsellor (for example, your doctor, nurse, practice counsellor or psychologist).

### Behaviour

Finally, challenging what you do is probably the most helpful way of overcoming panic. We have already talked about how avoidance, escape and safety behaviours keep panic going. It makes sense then that to reduce panic you need to **reduce** these behaviours.

Put simply, what you need to do now is to test out the situations you fear most to prove to yourself that what is written here is true: **a panic attack cannot harm you.**

This is best done, not all at once, but in a planned way. It's probably best to start off with a small experiment. It's difficult to believe something just by reading it, what you really need to do little by little is to prove to yourself what is really going on.

It is important to remember that whatever you do or don't do, the panic attack will stop. Just like any other alarm would.

First of all, work out what behaviours you need to tackle:

### Avoidance

For example, if you are frightened of being alone, or visiting a supermarket, try gradually spending a little bit more time on your own, or going to a small shop. Does your feared disaster actually happen? Now you have some evidence that you didn't die/go mad/faint. The next step is to spend a bit longer, more often. You will probably feel anxious to begin with as you have learnt to be anxious in certain situations and you may have been avoiding them for some time.

### Escape

Note which situations you are escaping from. Do you stop eating a meal half way through in case you are sick? Or leave the supermarket without your shopping? Try staying in the situation **until your panic** starts to go down. What will you have learnt?

### Safety behaviours

Try to notice all the things you do to keep yourself safe, big and small, and gradually cut them out.

Do you stand absolutely still to stop yourself having a heart attack? Walk about instead. If you normally sit down to stop yourself fainting, try staying upright. What happened? What did you learn?

Write down some experiments you could try, and then afterwards, what you found out, following the example below.

Safety behaviour and purpose	What you do instead	What did you learn?
Lie down when panic comes on to prevent heart attack	Run up and down stairs	I did not have a heart attack, even though I ran up and down the stairs
Lean on shopping trolley to prevent fainting	Walk without a trolley, use a basket instead	I did not faint even without the trolley

Try testing out your fears in this way, and finding out that your worst fear never happens you will gradually become more and more confident. Your panic attacks will become fewer and fewer and less strong when they do come.

### Summary: Coping with panic

- Practise relaxation, slow breathing, distraction and thought challenging when not anxious until you have learned the techniques.
- Remind yourself during a panic 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, 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.

## 5. Further help

Whilst the techniques in this booklet should help you to get better by yourself, sometimes you may need professional help too.

If you feel you may need professional help, talk to your GP who might be able to provide this or who may refer you on to someone else who can.

### The following organizations and help lines may be useful:

#### NHS Direct

Telephone helpline/Health Information Service. Talk confidentially to a nurse or information officer. Calls are charged at a local rate.

Tel: 0845-4647 (24 hour line)

Samaritans Linkline (local rate).

Tel: 08457-909090. Confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

#### MindInfoLine

Confidential help on a range of mental health issues. Tel: 0845-766-0163 (9.00am to 5.00pm)

#### Association for Post Natal Illness

For women who are experiencing depression following the birth of their baby.

Tel: 02073-860-868

#### Addiction Dependency Solutions (ADS)

Free counselling service Assessment, advice and information, individual and group counselling. Tel: 01706-860033

#### CRUSE

Bereavement Line Help line for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people.

Tel: 0870-167-1677

#### National Debt Line

Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.

Tel: 0645-500-511 (local call rate)

#### Relate

Help with marital or relationship problems.

Tel: 0161-764-4113

#### HYPe

Healthy Young People.

Tel: 01706-746766

Websites

[www.moodgym.anu.edu.au](http://www.moodgym.anu.edu.au)

[www.livinglifetotheull.com](http://www.livinglifetotheull.com)

#### Psychological Therapies Service

Provides interventions for common mild to moderate mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, panic and depression for people aged 16 and over and living in Rochdale, Heywood and Middleton. Please ask your GP for a referral.

#### Some useful books which you may like to buy or borrow from your local library:

**Panic Disorder**, the Facts.

Rachman, S and De Silva P. Oxford (1996)

**Panic Attacks.**

Breton, S. Vermilion (1996)

**Coping Successfully with panic Attacks.**

Trickett, S. Sheldon (1992)

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