



Understanding Panic Attacks

Anxiety can range from mild through to moderate and severe, and in most cases is part of the healthy spectrum of human experience. You may like to read our self-help section “Anxiety - Improve your mood” to find out more about generalised anxiety. This section will focus specifically on panic attacks.

A panic attack is a form of anxiety where you may typically experience:

- **Physical sensations:** A racing heart; feeling faint or dizzy; shortness of breath; nausea; needing the toilet; hot flushes; numbness or tingling in fingertips or toes; feeling disconnected; sweating; feeling shaky
- **Behaviour:** An overwhelming need to escape from where you are and return to a place of safety; avoiding places or situations where you have previously felt anxious; engaging in “safety behaviours” that you feel will reduce the risk of having a panic attack (for example having to take a bottle of water with you when you go out, or sitting near an exit)
- **Thoughts:** “I’m suffocating; I’m about to choke to death; I’ll make a fool of myself; I’m going mad / crazy; I’m out of control”

What makes panic different from generalised anxiety is:

- Feelings of intense fear or terror
- Sudden onset of panic symptoms with little warning
- Episodes of panic with intense symptoms that pass quickly, usually within 5-10 minutes (Although you may be left feeling drained for some time afterwards)
- Thoughts or beliefs whilst having the attack that something terrible may happen. Typical thoughts may include: “I am having a heart attack, I am going to die”. When panicking you may also fear that you will vomit or lose control of your bladder or bowels

Once someone has experienced a panic attack, they can become fearful of having another. They may then become more sensitive to the normal physical symptoms of anxiety, and this can set up a “vicious cycle” of being hyper-aware of physical symptoms and interpreting them as something terrible about to happen; which in turn makes the anxiety worse and increases the likelihood of a panic attack.

At least one in ten people will experience an occasional panic attack. If you experience panic attacks recurrently or frequently, and these are followed by a period of being worried about having another attack, you may have panic disorder. Seeking support with panic attacks is important, as they respond to treatment very well: The sooner you speak to somebody, the more likely it is that you will find a way of feeling better. CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) has been shown to be very effective in managing panic disorder.

Ways to support yourself though panic:

Remember that a panic attack is not dangerous: One of the most important things you can do when having a panic attack is try and remember that, however alarming the symptoms may feel, you are not in any danger. Even if you do nothing, the panic will eventually subside.

Stay where you are: If you are able to do so safely (for example, if you are not driving a car or operating machinery) when you have a panic attack try and stay where you are instead of leaving the situation. This will help your body to realise in time that there is no external danger, and that what you are experiencing is a reaction to normal symptoms of anxiety.

Learn to control your breathing: When we panic we start to take short, shallow breaths from the top of our lungs as our body goes into “fight or flight mode”. Becoming aware of this and deliberately breathing deeply, gently and slowly can help to ease physical symptoms. Try sitting with one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest. Imagine that you are inflating a balloon as you inhale and deflating it as you exhale. You can close your eyes and hold this image in mind. Alternatively, you can count your breath in for 6, pause, out for 6, or whatever count works for you. Try to use all the space in your lungs and see if you can feel the breath moving into your back. Most people find that practising controlled breathing when they are not actually panicking helps them to identify anxiety earlier: They can then use controlled breathing to help prevent a panic attack from occurring.

Need More Help?

If you have been struggling with panic for a long time you may need the support of an organisation like Oasis-Talk. We offer 1:1 CBT and workshops to help you manage panic attacks.

You can also try the following websites:

Mind, a national mental health charity, has some useful information about anxiety and panic:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/#.Vtb5WuZCxCQ>

The Centre for Clinical Interventions provides a free workbook for you to learn more about panic and strategies for coping:

http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=44

You could also try using an app to help you cope. The following may be useful:

Panic Attack Aid:

<http://www.panic-attack-aid.com/>

Stop Panic and Anxiety Self-Help on Android:

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.excelatlife.panic&hl=en_GB