



For better  
mental health

# **Sunderland Mind**

# **Panic**

## **A self help guide**

## What is a panic attack?

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

- You discover you have had your wallet stolen.
- You are sitting an exam. You look at the paper and realize you don't know the answers to any of the questions.

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

**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.

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

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 had ever had a panic attack, it is very likely that at least one or two will have had the same experience. Some non-serious physical conditions can cause symptoms similar to panic attacks.

For example:       certain medications taken together;  
                          thyroid problems;  
                          drinking too much caffeine;  
                          pregnancy;  
                          low blood sugar; etc

## **1. Recognising panic – How do I know if I am having a panic attack?**

This may sound obvious, but it isn't. Sometimes panic feels so awful, and comes so "out of the blue", that people can't quite believe that it's only a panic attack, and think it must be something more serious. The feeling of a panic attack can be so unusual that you may not even realize this is what is happening.

One of the most important first steps in overcoming panic attacks is recognising whether or not your symptoms are caused by a panic attack.

Panic affects your body, your mind and the way you behave. The following are some of the most common symptoms experienced by people having a panic attack. Some people have all of the symptoms, others just a few.

### **Your body**

Heart pounding, beating fast or skipping a beat

Heart seems to stop, followed by a big thud, chest pains.

Changes in your breathing, either gulping air, breathing fast or feeling short of breath

Pounding in your head

Numbness or tingling fingers, toes or lips

Feeling as though you can't swallow, feeling sick

Feeling as though you're going to faint, wobbly legs.

### **Your Mind**

Feelings of utter terror.

Feelings of unreality, as though you're not really there.

You feel anxious in situations where you had a panic attack before.

### **Frightening thoughts such as:**

"I'm going to have a heart attack"

"I will collapse or faint"

"I'm running out of air"

"I'm going mad"

"I'm choking"

- “I’m going to be sick”
- “I’m losing control”
- “I’m going to make a complete fool of myself”
- “I’ve got to get out of here”

What you do/your behaviour (Please tick any of these that apply to you)

- You avoid**  situations that have caused panic or that you fear might cause panic, for example going shopping.
- Escape**  as soon as you can when panicking, for example, rushing round the supermarket to get out as soon as possible.
- Prevent**  what you think is going to happen, by doing something to make yourself safe, for example, gulping air if you think you are going to suffocate or sitting down if you think you are going to faint, or lying down if you think you are having a heart attack or scanning your body for evidence of something being wrong.
- Cope**  People often try to cope with a panic attack by doing things they have found or have been told are helpful, for example, distracting themselves or trying to relax.

## 2. Understanding panic – What causes it and what keeps it going?

All of the panic symptoms described above are nothing more than an extreme form of fear. Fear is our body’s natural response to a situation perceived as threatening. Fear can range from mild anxiety (which can be helpful when there is a goal, like passing an exam) through to full blown panic.

But why have fear at all when it’s such an unpleasant feeling? In a way, it is a bit like pain. If you were to break your ankle, it would feel very painful, which would be a warning to you not to walk on it. If you heard a noise downstairs at night, you might feel frightened, which is a warning that you might have to deal with a dangerous situation. Fear is very useful. It prepares your body for action. This has been called the “**fight or flight**” response. So that when you feel fear, what is happening is that your body is preparing to

fight or run away from the thing it feels threatened by, or possibly to stay completely still and wait for the threat to pass.

If we take the example of the noise downstairs. Let us suppose it is a burglar, as you fear. You may wish to stay absolutely still, so as to prevent the burglar from attacking you. You might want to go and challenge him or you might need to run away should he come after you. Your fear response would help with any of these. When you are frightened you breathe more quickly so that you can get lots of oxygen to your muscles. Your heart beats faster to pump the blood faster round your body. Your digestive system closes down to allow your body to concentrate on the more immediate threat. This is your body's normal healthy reaction to situations where your body feels under threat. It is your body's alarm system.

The problem with panic attacks is that usually they occur when there is no obvious physical threat there at all. Your body is reacting as though it was about to be attacked when in reality it is not. In other words it is a false alarm.

The problem is that our body's "alarm system" was designed many, many years ago, when people had to cope with dangers in order to survive. Nowadays, we are rarely faced with the sort of life or death threats our ancestors faced. We have very different threats, mainly related to stress. Financial worries, overworking, moving house, divorce for example, can all be stressful, and can raise our anxiety levels to the point where our "alarm system" is triggered. It is a bit like a "stress" thermometer – which when it reaches a certain level results in panic. Whilst a panic attack may be unpleasant, it is not dangerous. Quite the opposite. It is a system designed to protect us, not harm us.

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

### **What causes panic attacks to begin?**

Panic attacks can start for a number of reasons.

#### **Stress**

As mentioned, stressful events can cause anxiety to go up, which may lead to the alarm system being triggered. Are you aware of any stress in your life

over the last few years? For example, work stress or being out of work, relationship problems, loss of a loved one, financial difficulties. Please list any stresses that you are aware of:

### **Health Worries**

Panic attacks often begin when a person becomes over-concerned about their health. This can happen for various reasons. Sometimes people with panic attacks have recently experienced the sudden death of someone they know or are close to. They then become very worried about their own health, and look for signs that they may be developing the same illness. They are often aware of medical ‘mistakes’ where serious illness has not been picked up, and so become worried that there is something seriously wrong. This leads to raised anxiety. They then think the anxiety symptoms are evidence of a serious illness, which can result in panic. Think back to when your panic attacks began. Do you know anyone who died suddenly, for example from a brain hemorrhage or an asthma or heart attack?

### **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. Consuming large amounts of caffeine, or low blood sugar can also lead to feelings of faintness.

### **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.

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

### **Physical**

Firstly, the physical symptoms can be part of the problem. For example, for people whose breathing is affected by anxiety, something called **hyperventilation** can occur. This just means 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.

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, and often leads to avoidance.

### **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.

- **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 recognising 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.

### **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 recognise and understand, and accept that they are not harmful.

As we have seen, panic affects your body, your mind and your behavior. 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 practice 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 might 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 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 practiced. 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**. Relaxation tapes teach you to go through the main muscle groups in your body, tensing and relaxing your muscles. The tape will come with instructions and some people find them very helpful. For further details on relaxation please see the booklet in this series on “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 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, practice while you are not panicking to begin with. This technique will only work if you have practiced 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 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 the 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 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. 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 heart attack could be caused in this way?

### **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 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.