

# Understanding panic attacks and finding ways to cope



**Student Counselling**

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## What is happening to me?

Panic attacks often start without warning and can last for minutes or hours. They arise as a natural consequence of extreme stress, anxiety or fear, when adrenalin is released into the bloodstream, preparing you for 'fight or flight'.

Symptoms can be intense; you may experience:

- rapid breathing
- racing heart
- light-headedness or dizziness
- sweating
- dry mouth
- feeling sick or wanting to go to the toilet
- tingling or numbness in face and hands
- weakness in the limbs
- exhaustion
- feelings of unreality (known as depersonalization or derealisation)

The symptoms themselves can be very frightening. A person often fears they might do something uncontrolled or that they are going mad (they are not) and, once a panic attack has occurred, they may feel panic at the thought of one reoccurring!

There are a number of reasons why people have panic attacks which range from stressful life experiences to problems with diet or breathing. Chronic pain, unstable blood sugar levels and dietary allergies, reactions to caffeine, cigarettes, alcohol or street drugs, for example, may all bring on panic attacks.

If you are having panic attacks you are sending a powerful message to yourself: something is wrong and you can no longer avoid noticing. Panic symptoms become easier to manage if you can understand why they are happening.

This is not always easy to do alone and it can be helpful to get support from someone you trust or someone whose professional role it is to offer calm, understanding and unbiased help.

If your panic attacks stem from psychological or emotional factors, the symptoms may be telling you that you have been pushing aside painful thoughts or strong, conflicting feelings: anxiety, trauma, loss of confidence, disappointment, anger, rage, frustration or fear over some time. Perhaps these thoughts and feelings have become 'unthinkable' and now you are experiencing them in a different way, a way you can no longer ignore.

Unfortunately, we often come to associate the anxiety with particular situations, which we then try to avoid at all cost, creating a cycle of self-limiting behaviour and panic reaction. Avoidance is counter-productive. The most helpful way to take control is for you to start to look at when and where panic attacks happen. What were you thinking? Are there particular triggers? Panic attacks are unpleasant and can feel embarrassing but they are not life-threatening. Most attacks last for between five and twenty minutes. Can you sit with the anxiety and watch it subside?

## **There are things you can do to help yourself**

You will need to practice and be patient with yourself. When the panic feelings begin, try to focus away from the symptoms. Breathe deeply and slowly. Find something that distracts you: it may be through noticing your surroundings, the feel of the ground or the chair beneath you, or the background sounds. Alternatively, you may find it helpful to count in your head or clench and relax your fingers or toes, or focus on examining or holding a textured object.

For a few people, focusing on breathing or bodily reaction makes things worse, not better. If this applies to you, try other things that might be more effective. Try not to 'catastrophise'. Instead, you might say some comforting and encouraging words to yourself. Some people are helped by imagining a place that is safe and secure and they then call this image to mind when feelings of panic arise.

## **1. Practice deep, slow breathing**

Panic sufferers have found the following technique very useful: put one hand on your upper chest and the other on your tummy (at navel level) and breathe in such a way that only your lower hand is moving as you breathe slowly and deeply. Focus on the out-breath, letting the in-breath follow naturally.

Hyperventilation is a major symptom of panic. Breathing into cupped hands or a paper bag for a few minutes will increase carbon dioxide levels and may help reduce symptoms.

## **2. Exercise**

Go for a brisk walk, run on the spot or up and down the stairs a few times. This will help deal with the 'fight or flight' adrenalin in your blood stream. Don't forget to breathe deeply while doing this. Try to build regular exercise into your life.

## **3. Learn relaxation**

There are many good commercial tapes available. Learning relaxation techniques is an invaluable skill, useful in all kinds of stressful settings. Be conscious of developing a relaxed manner: walk, talk and eat more slowly. Take up Yoga, dancing, Tai-chi or mindfulness meditation and practice it regularly.

## **Listen to yourself**

This is important and worth spending a little time on. A panic attack is an extreme form of communication and if no-one else is listening to you, at least you can begin to listen to yourself. Can you find it in you to be kind to yourself? It is OK to feel good about even the smallest achievements and important to reward yourself as well as trying not to give up too easily.

## **Develop your assertiveness**

Learn to say 'no'. Avoid taking on things that will create extra pressure: protect yourself. Are you plagued by 'oughts' and 'shoulds'? Stop, think and check out if you really want to say 'yes' before you say it.

## **Important for panic sufferers**

Remember, we cannot always change what happens to us but we can change how we perceive and think about the things that happen to us. Try to control the urge to keep thinking 'What if' or 'if only' and focus your attention on the small manageable steps that you can take in the present.

And finally, please remember, **do seek help for problems you cannot cope with.**

## Other sources of help

Samaritans National 24– hour helpline 08457 909090

<http://www.samaritans.org.uk/>

NHS Direct [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

0845 4647

## Further Reading:

Ingham, C. (2000) *Panic Attacks: What are they, Why they happen and What you can do about them*. London:

Thorsons

Kennerly, H. (1997) *Overcoming Anxiety*. London Robinson

Leahy, R.L. (2009) *Anxiety Free: Unravel Your Fears Before They Unravel You*. London Hay House

Leahy, R.L. (2006) *The Worry Cure: Stop Worrying and Start Living*. London: Piatkus

Marks, I.M. (2005) *Living With Fear: Understanding and Coping with Anxiety*. Maidenhead: McGraw–Hill

Silove, D & Manicavasagar, V. (1997) *Overcoming Panic Attacks*. London: Robinson

Silove, D & Manicavasagar, V. (2009) *Overcoming Panic and Agoraphobia*. London: Robinson

Williams, C. (2003) *Overcoming Anxiety: A Five Areas Approach*. London: Arnold

## Websites

Further sources of self-help leaflets on a variety of topics can be found on the web at:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/Information/Factsheets>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation.aspx>

<http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/guide.html>

A useful interactive self-help website is:

<http://www.livinglifetothefull.com>

This booklet has been produced by  
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For details of our service visit the website:

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