

Panic Attacks and how to deal with them

Panic attacks are a sudden attack of anxiety. A panic attack can be a very frightening experience because it mimics some of the symptoms associated with having a heart condition.



A panic attack starts when we feel threatened. If you have a panic attack you may experience a strong sense of impending doom or fear that something bad is going to happen. This feeling often comes out of nowhere with no prior warning. A number of changes then occur in your body that increase the feeling that something awful is about to happen. You might feel dizzy, short of breath, begin to sweat and shake and experience palpitations and a tight chest. These symptoms can make your panic even worse because they are typically related to signs that there is something wrong with your heart.

Once our body starts to respond in this way a vicious cycle is set up where we misinterpret our panic symptoms as a sign that there really is something wrong with our heart. The more we think there is something wrong, the more our thoughts take over. We focus on our physical symptoms and what they mean which increases our feelings of panic. It is not uncommon to have thoughts such as “I’m going to die”, “I’m having a heart attack” and “I will stop breathing”. Eventually the anxiety reaches a peak and slowly starts to subside. There is a large sense of relief once the panic attack is over.

Once we have had a panic attack we are often on the lookout for any signs that we are going to have another one. We tend to become more attentive to any physical symptoms similar to those we experienced when we had a panic attack. We become more focused on watching out for these symptoms and when they do occur we misinterpret them as a sign that something bad is going to happen. This leads to increased anxiety which produces bodily symptoms which then set off another panic attack.

Most people get into a habit of avoiding or running away from situations that make them anxious. This reduces anxiety and they immediately feel better but the problem is they don’t learn their panic could subside if they stayed with it. Just like people say you have to get back on a horse after a fall, it’s not a good idea to escape and avoid.

Often panic attacks seem to come out of the blue and it can feel like there is no way to cope with them. However being in control of your panic attacks is one of the best ways to manage them. If you can manage your anxiety by using the strategies below you will overcome your panic attacks:

- **Know your triggers.** Panic attacks are often set off in particular situations. Is there a common situation/location that sets off your panic attacks? Try and think about what might help you keep calm and not let your anxiety take over. For example if you know that when you attend hospital for procedures you tend to become quite anxious, think about what might help your anxiety at these times. Is there someone who you can bring along to appointments with you? Could you let the hospital staff know in advance that you are nervous so that they can be aware and offer you an appointment time in the morning where they may be less waiting?
- **Look for evidence.** When we panic we often have lots of catastrophic thoughts flying around our mind e.g. “I’m going to have a heart attack” or “This is never going to end”. After a panic attack it can be helpful to try looking for evidence for and against the thought. Often people find that although they thought they would collapse or even die there is very little evidence to suggest this. Instead it is more of a feeling than a fact.

- **Slow down your breathing.** Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe out try to count to 5. This will help you begin to control your breathing and help with feeling out of control during a panic attack.



- **Breathe deeply.** When we are anxious we tend to breathe very quickly and take shorter breaths. This can lead to feeling dizzy and light headed. Learning to take deep breaths and breathing from your diaphragm will slow down your breathing and make it more regular and controlled. Practice placing one hand on your diaphragm and breathe in deeply – you should notice that when you inhale your diaphragm fills up and expands like a balloon and as you exhale it contracts.
- **Learn about the natural pattern of anxiety.** Anxiety is a horrible feeling. However it will not go on forever. When we panic, our anxiety initially rises very, very quickly; it then hits a peak before gradually slowly coming down. Once you have experienced a few panic attacks you can look back and see that although it didn't feel like it would ever stop eventually it did and you calmed down. Reminding yourself of this can help to make panic attacks feel less scary and overwhelming.
- **Try not to avoid.** The more you avoid situations that trigger your panic attacks, the more your anxiety is maintained and you never give yourself an opportunity to learn that the feared consequence doesn't happen.

- **Coping Statements.** If you're prone to panic attacks try to come up with some short statements you can repeat during a panic attack to help calm your worries and to distract you from fears that something bad will happen. You could repeat to yourself statements such as: "This is not a heart attack, this is anxiety", "My anxiety will come down, and this will end".

There is no doubt about it, panic attacks are unpleasant and can be a very frightening experience. However, knowing what triggers them and practising coping strategies will help you feel more in control when they occur. Often the key to managing panic attacks is learning to be in control of them rather than feeling they are controlling you.

Written by Isabel Foster, Trainee Clinical Psychologist for GUCH News 2010.

Further Resources

Panic Attacks! What they are and how you can help yourself a pdf from Anxiety UK

For more information on relaxation see *Ways into Relaxation* on The Somerville Foundation Website.

If you are having panic attacks and would like to talk through helpful breathing exercises and relaxation techniques please contact Anne Crump Mental Health Support Worker for The Somerville Foundation.

anne@thesf.org.uk / 020 8240 1165

Quick fix breathing exercise

When getting panicky or anxious, it can help to slow down your breathing. Try this when you start to feel anxious or panicky:

- *Breathe in for a count of four*
- *Pause*
- *Breathe out for a count of six*
- *Repeat for a few moments until your breathing feels calmer and under control*