



# **Panic Attacks:**

**What they are and how you can help yourself**

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# What is a panic attack?

It is perfectly normal to occasionally feel anxious in certain situations. Sometimes the experience of anxiety can be sudden and strong, this can lead to a person feeling 'panicky'. Examples of situations that might normally cause you to feel panicky include:

- Experiencing a 'near miss' in a car when someone runs into the road
- Having a sense that you are being followed when walking home at night
- Being on a flight and suddenly experiencing significant turbulence

A panic attack is quite different however from the types of situations listed above in that they seem to come 'out of the blue' and are usually associated with much stronger psychological and physiological feelings. They may be triggered by a stronger fear of a particular situation or by thoughts about a situation that may or may not happen.

Panic attacks can be very frightening, and it is not unusual to get the feeling that something awful is going to happen, but this is not the case. **NOTHING AWFUL WILL HAPPEN, PANIC ATTACKS ARE UNPLEASANT, BUT THEY ARE NOT DANGEROUS**

# How will a panic attack affect you?

Usually a panic attack will affect you in 3 different ways; physically (in that you will experience real physical symptoms), psychologically (in that you will experience a change in your thought patterns) and behaviourally (in that you will find yourself behaving differently). In short, panic attacks can affect you in a variety of ways. The table below explains just some of the ways that panic attacks can impact on you:

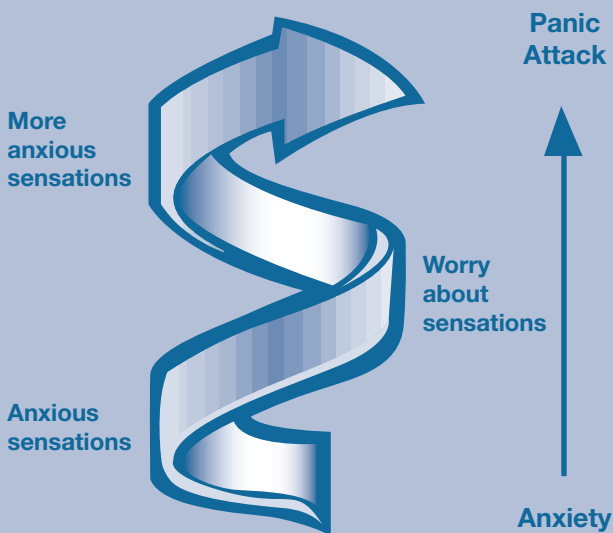
What will it affect?	Impact on you
Body	Panic attacks can result in you experiencing very real physical affects. For example, your heart rate can almost double. You may feel dizzy, sick or feel you can't get your breath. You may feel tingling or numb or that you are choking. You could shake and feel unreal or get chest pains.
Actions	You may find it hard to stay in one place, feel the need to escape, or sit down. You may snap at people, or avoid places where you think you will panic. You may fear exerting yourself or be afraid to be alone in case something bad happens.
Thoughts	In experiencing a rush of fear you will find frightening thoughts running through your mind. These could be: that you are losing control and going to make a fool of yourself; that your physical health is in danger by having a heart attack/stroke; that you are losing your mind or going 'mad'. Finally you may have the thought that something awful is going to happen, even if you don't know what that is.

# Why do panic attacks happen?

Our bodies have been programmed with an inbuilt system called the *fight, flight or freeze response*. This response was designed to keep us safe 10,000 years ago where we may have had to fight or run away from danger at a moment's notice. Alternatively it may have been better to simply stay still - frozen to the spot. The fight, flight or freeze response causes a surge in adrenaline, which is what causes your heart rate to increase and the majority of your physical symptoms.

## Panic Spiral

- A panic attack can happen for a number of reasons. It may begin from internal triggers such as increased stress/worry at the time or from external triggers such as entering a stuffy room, getting on a train or any situation where a person may feel apprehensive.
- When a person begins to feel anxious they may focus on anxious bodily sensations. During the upward spiral of panic these symptoms are misinterpreted as something more serious.
- This increases anxiety and therefore increases these sensations.
- This upward spiral leads to a panicked state.



# Panic attacks Versus Heart attacks

Some of the signs of a panic attack are similar to those of a heart attack, which is why people frequently mix them up. If any pain that you experience in your chest area is frequent or long lasting then it is advisable to see your GP. If the doctor has ruled out any heart problem, then it is unlikely that any further pain is due to a heart attack.

If you experience another panic attack then it may be useful to sit quietly and use the calming technique (described below) and ask yourself “did I die or have a heart attack the last time I experienced these symptoms?”

Symptom	Heart attack	Panic attack
Pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May or may not be present</li> <li>• If present, the pain is a crushing feeling</li> <li>• It is usually located in the central chest and may extend to the left arm, neck and back</li> <li>• Pain is not made worse by breathing or by pressing on the chest</li> <li>• Pain is usually persistent and lasts longer than 5-10 mins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pain is usually described as 'sharp'</li> <li>• Pain tends to be localised over the heart</li> <li>• Pain is made worse by breathing in and out and pressing on the centre of the chest</li> <li>• Pain usually disappears within about 5-10 mins</li> </ul>
Tingling	Tingling, if present, is usually in the left arm	Tingling, if present, is usually all over the body
Vomiting	Common	You may feel sick but vomiting is less common
Breathing	A heart attack does not cause you to breathe too quickly or too deeply (hyperventilation) whereas panic does. With a heart attack you may feel a little short of breath.	Breathing too quickly or too deeply is an extremely common panic response, and precedes most panic attacks

Source: Andrews G & Jenkins R (1998) Managing Mental Disorders, Sydney, World Health Organisation

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# How can I help myself?

There are 2 stages for overcoming panic; one could be considered 'first aid' which helps you manage a panic attack, for example distracting yourself (e.g. by counting things or completing a task) and calming techniques like the one below, the second stage would include longer term strategies for overcoming panic, such as those outlined below. These techniques affect your body, your actions and your thoughts.

## **Your Body**

There are 2 ways you can help yourself to deal with the physical symptoms of anxiety. These are relaxation and controlled breathing. People use a variety of techniques to relax, but common ones include; going to the gym, yoga, meditation, swimming, reading and walking. There is also a calming technique you can use in the short term during a panic attack.

### **Calming Technique**

1. Ensure you are sitting on a comfortable chair
2. Take a breath in for 4 seconds (through nose if possible)
3. Hold that breath for 2 seconds
4. Release the breath, taking 6 seconds (use mouth if possible)

## **Your Mind**

There are a number of things you can do to help with the way your mind fuels a panic attack.

- Stop focussing on your body. Find a method of distraction such as counting objects in the room or try and picture a pleasant scene in your mind (such as a holiday where you felt completely relaxed)
- Say to yourself: "I'm having a panic attack. I feel awful but nothing bad can happen. I know what to do. I can control this. It will pass"
- Try and work out whether something else is making you tense- talk about your worries and work on improving your overall wellbeing.
- Challenge any unrealistic thoughts- can escaping from a situation really make it less likely you will faint/ have a heart attack?

## **Your actions**

The most important thing you can do when in a panic is stand your ground. You may feel an overwhelming urge to run away, but avoidance keeps the panic cycle going. If you can stay then you can prove that nothing bad will happen if you do.

# Where can I get help?

There are a number of sources of support in your area, and it can be useful to talk to someone about how you are feeling. Your local Primary Care Mental Health NHS service has a number of workers who can provide support and self help techniques based on cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). You can access this service through your GP. Alternatively you could consider attending a self help group, through Self Help Services (a voluntary sector organisation based in Manchester), or accessing therapy through Anxiety UK. The numbers for these organisations are included in the list below.

## Local sources of support

### Anxiety UK

For information and advice about anxiety, panic and phobia problems, contact Anxiety UK on 08444 775 774 or visit the website at [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

Additionally, Anxiety UK has a fact-sheet available which has more detailed information on panic attacks.

### Self Help Services

Self Help Services run 2 self help support groups; one for anxiety and one for depression in the Trafford area call 0844 477 9971 or visit [www.selfhelpservices.org.uk](http://www.selfhelpservices.org.uk) to find out more information.

**Samaritans** 0845 790 9090

**MIND Information Line** 0161 272 8205

**42nd Street** (Helpline for young people)  
0161 832 017

**[www.traffordhealthyminds.com](http://www.traffordhealthyminds.com)** – This is an online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) based, free to use package which is available via Trafford Primary Care Trust.

**[www.bluesci.org.uk](http://www.bluesci.org.uk)** – a not-for-profit organisation based at Broome House, Trafford which promotes wellbeing through social engagement and creative opportunities.

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.

### Books on prescription:

GPs and other professionals (such as mental health workers and counsellors) have a list of self help books recommended by specialists and can issue an appropriate 'book on prescription' to you. Once you have your prescription you can take it to one of the Trafford libraries or get someone else to get it for you. A member of the library staff will exchange your prescription for the book that has been recommended.

### Libraries participating in the scheme:

Urmston: 0161 912 2727  
Davyhulme: 0161 912 2880  
Stretford: 0161 912 5150  
Old Trafford: 0161 912 4650  
Partington: 0161 912 5450

### Medication

Sometimes people find that medication can help when they are experiencing panic attacks, particularly if they are having a lot of attacks, and/or if the attacks are very severe. Your GP can help you decide whether medication would be of help to you.

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