



Panic Attacks are Not Harmful

panic Part one

What is a panic attack?

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

Suppose:

- You get the sense that you are being followed on your way home.
OR
- You are sitting a test. You look at the paper and realise you don't know the answers to any of the questions.

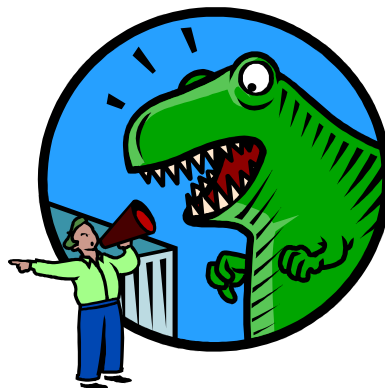
It would be **normal** in any of these situations to feel a sense of panic. The feeling would be understandable and would pass fairly quickly.

Well, a **panic attack** is a bit like '**normal**' panic, but different in certain ways:

The feelings seem to come from nowhere, not from the sort of frightening situation described above.

The feelings are a lot stronger.

**As the feelings are UNEXPECTED and STRONG they can feel extremely frightening.
But you can learn to make them go away.**



panic



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. Some people have only one, others may have more. Panic attacks are very common. They are **NOT** dangerous.

This booklet aims to help you to:

and

- Know if you are having panic attacks

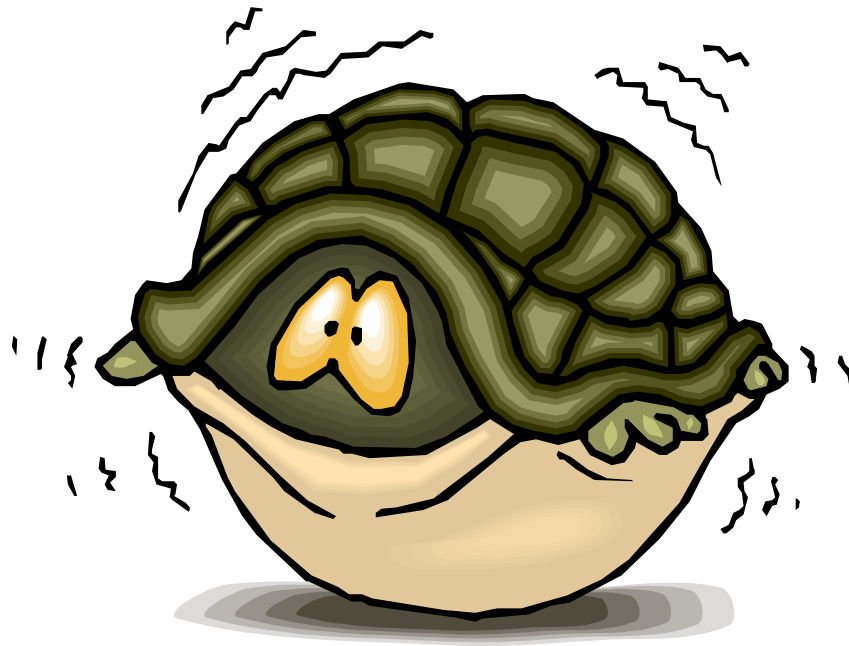
and

- Understand what a panic attack is

- Learn techniques to help.

Recognising panic

Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.



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 suddenly, that people can't quite believe that it's only a panic attack.

They think it must be something more serious.

You may not even realise this is what is happening.

One of the most important first steps in overcoming panic attacks is learning what happens.

Panic affects :
1. your body
2. your mind
3. the things you do.

On the next pages we give you some examples of symptoms you might feel if you are having a panic attack. Some people have all of the symptoms, others just a few.

Your Body

Please look at this list of feelings some people get in their body when they feel panicky. Then tick any that happen to you.

	Heart pounding, beating fast or skipping a beat
	Heart seems to stop, followed by a big thud, and your chest hurts
	Changes in your breathing, either gulping air, breathing fast or feeling you can't breathe properly
	Pounding in your head
	Numbness or tingling in fingers, toes or lips
	Feeling as though you can't swallow, feeling sick.
	Feeling as though you're going to faint, wobbly legs.
	Can't see properly
	Feel as if things aren't real
	Pounding in your head

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Write down any other feelings you get in your body when you feel panicky:

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^{panic} **Your Mind**

This is about what you think and how you feel when you are panicky.

Please look at the list and tick any that happen to you.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Feelings of utter terror.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Feelings of unreality, as though you're not really there
<input type="checkbox"/>	You feel anxious in situations where you had a
<input type="checkbox"/>	panic attack before.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Frightening thoughts such as:
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm going to have a heart attack"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I will collapse or faint"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm running out of air"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm going mad"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm choking"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm going to be sick"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm losing control"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I'm going to make a complete fool of myself"
<input type="checkbox"/>	"I've got to get out of here"

Write down any other frightening thoughts or feelings that you get:

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Remember

These things never actually happen in a panic attack, but people sometimes think they will.

The things you do

People having a panic attack usually do things to make them feel better but it is not always the best thing.

Please tick any of these that apply to you.

These things seem like they help. But they don't really.		
	YOU AVOID	situations that <i>have</i> caused panic or that <i>you fear might</i> cause panic, like: going to crowded places
	YOU ESCAPE	as soon as you can when panicking, for example, rushing round the shops to get out as soon as possible.
	YOU STOP	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.
	YOU GET EMERGENCY HELP	Sometimes people feel like calling an ambulance , because they are sure something dangerous is happening
This does help.		
	YOU COPE	distracting yourself from your worries or learning how to relax

Write down other things you do or don't do as a result of
having a panic attack:

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If you have ticked quite a few of these

- bodily symptoms
- thoughts
- things people do

then it is likely that you are suffering from panic attacks.

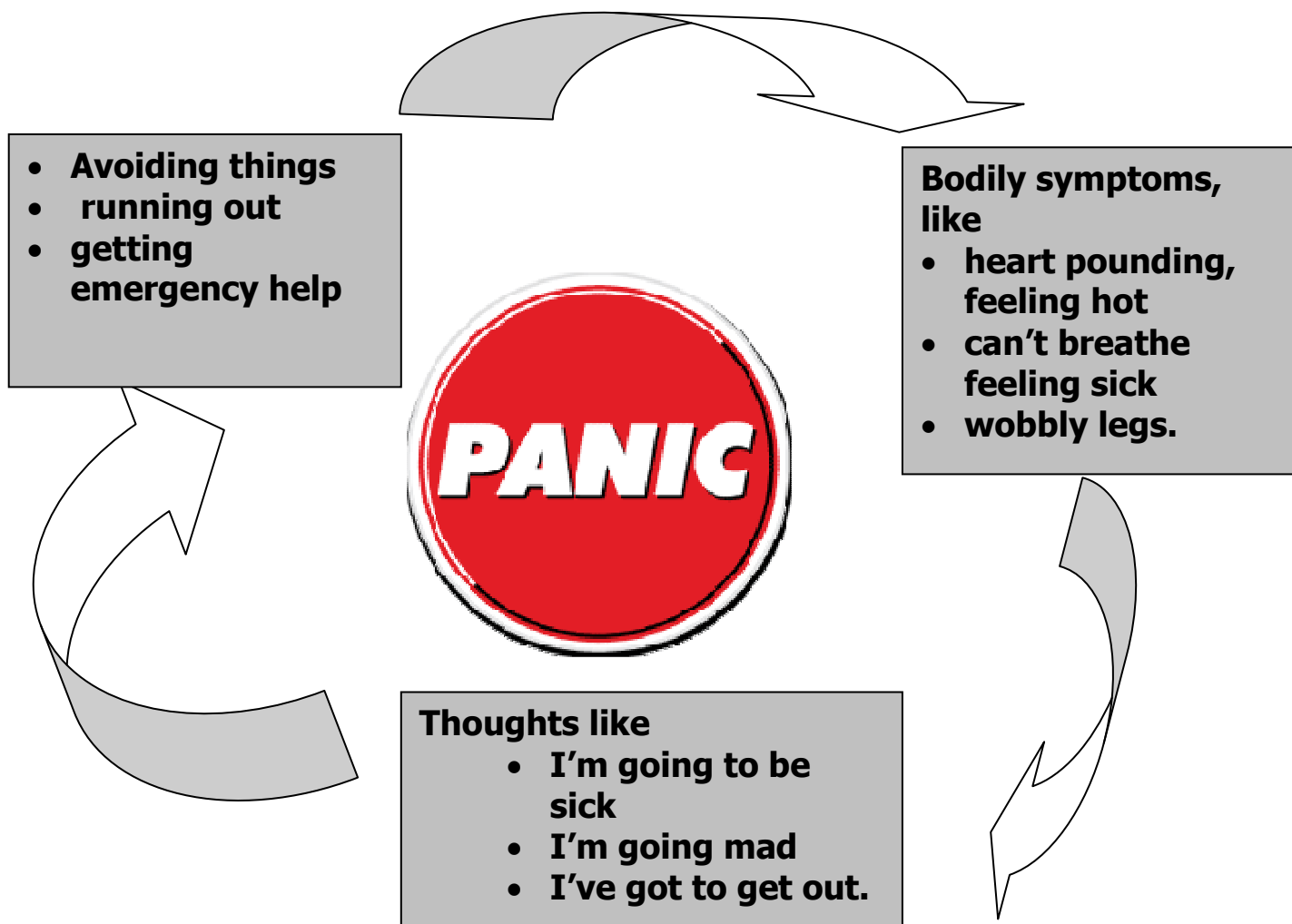
To sum up:

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a strong FEELING of terror that comes on very suddenly.

BODILY symptoms include, pounding hearts, fast breathing, shaking, and wobbly legs.

People often have lots of frightening THOUGHTS and think something awful is happening. They often try to avoid or escape the panic.



But panic is not dangerous or harmful.

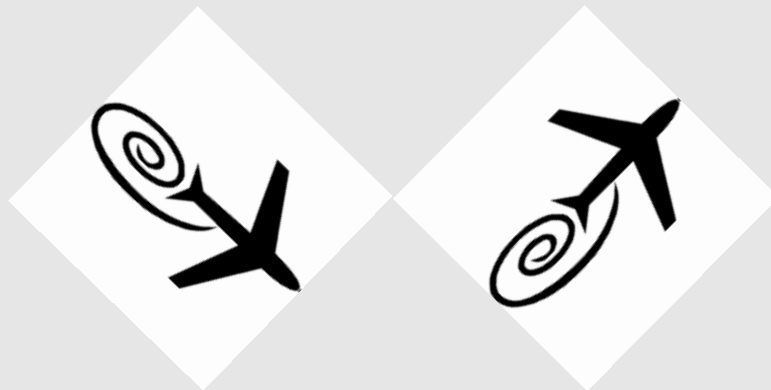
Facts about panic

What is panic?

Panic is a form of fear. It is our body's alarm system signalling threat. But it is a false alarm.



A panic attack may be nasty.



But it is not dangerous.

What causes panic attacks to begin?

Panic attacks can start for a number of reasons, like:

stress
health worries
difficult emotions

STRESS



Stress can cause anxiety to go up, which may lead to the alarm system being triggered.

Maybe something is stressing you?

If you want to, you can write down any stresses that you have got:

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HEALTH WORRIES



Panic attacks often begin when a person becomes too worried about their health, and keep looking for signs of serious illness.

The worry causes more of the bodily symptoms we have talked about.

Then they think the symptoms are real evidence of a serious illness, and this can cause a panic.

Do you worry about your health?

If you want to, you can write down your health worries.

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panic

Sometimes other things can make you feel as though you are having a panic attack.

For example:

- If you have had an illness that makes you feel dizzy



- Too many drinks with caffeine in, like coke, tea or coffee.



- Not eating for a long time (you get low blood sugar).

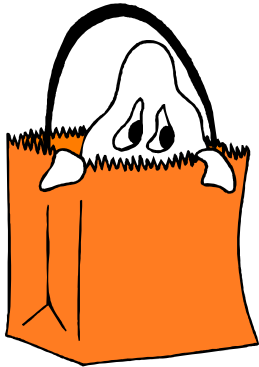


Can you think of any health reasons for your panic attacks?

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DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

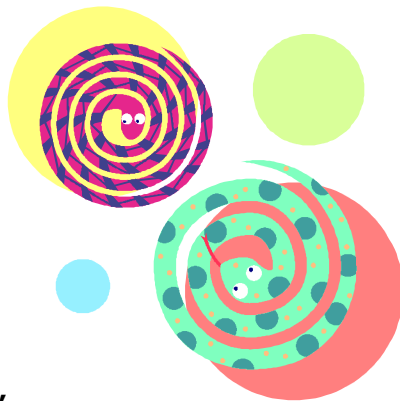


Panic attacks often begin when you have feelings that you can't cope with. It could be something to do with your past or something that is happening now. If you want, you can write down what you think might be causing the panic.

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Sometimes,
we just don't know why panic attacks begin.



panic

Some people even have their first panic attack when they are asleep! The most important thing is to know what you can do about it.



What keeps panic attacks going?

Your body, your thoughts and the things you do all work together to keep panic going.

Your body

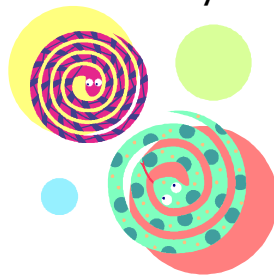
Firstly, the bodily symptoms can be part of the problem. For example, if your breathing goes funny, you might feel dizzy and get more worried.

Your mind

The things that happen with your body when you are panicking give you more things to worry about. This makes everything worse.

The things you do

Thirdly, what a person does before, during and after a panic attack, has a big part to play in whether panic attacks keep happening. It is a vicious circle- but you can change it.





MORE FACTS ABOUT PANIC



Panic attacks are kept going because of the vicious circle of

- **bodily symptoms**
- **thoughts**
- **things you do**



Can panic attacks really harm me?

NO. If you can accept that they **cannot** really harm you then you have come a long way to being able to end your panic attacks.

panic

An activity for you to try

Sitting here now, how much do you believe that your panic attacks mean that something awful (like fainting, choking, suffocating) is going to happen?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
→
not at all **completely**

Next time you have a panic attack, try to find this page and mark down at the time how much you believe something awful is going to happen.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
→
not at all **completely**

panic



What can help with panic attacks?

There is a lot you can do to help panic attacks to go away.

You may find that your panic attacks have already started to reduce because you have you understand them better and accept that they are not harmful.

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Panic affects your body, your mind, and what you do. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the next section, we talk about some things you can do to help |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not everyone finds the same things helpful. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't expect miracles straight away, but keep at it. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You should see the benefits soon, when you've found out what works best for you. |

panic



Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

Here is a list of the techniques we will explain in the rest of this leaflet. There are three types, to do with your bodily symptoms, your thoughts and the things that you do:

Things you can do to help

Your body:	
	Practice relaxing
	Control your breathing
Your mind:	
	Distract yourself
	Challenge your thoughts
	Sort out your feelings
The things you do:	
	Stop avoiding things

panic Your Body

There are at least two things you can do to help with the bodily symptoms of anxiety:

1. Learn to relax.

2. Control your breathing

Why should this help?

Panic attacks often start in periods of stress.

These techniques can help you to deal with stressful situations better.

Being relaxed and breathing calmly is the opposite of panic.

To begin with it is best to practise regularly when you are **not** worried.

Look on it as getting into training.

You would not enter the Great North Run without training for a while first!



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1. Relaxation

People relax in many different ways.

What do you do to relax?

Write down six things you think might be relaxing for you, like listening to music, playing about, reading, or watching TV.

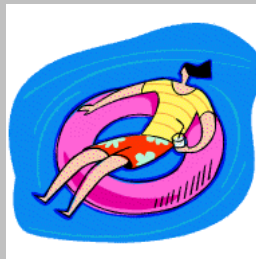
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	

As well as everyday ways of relaxing, here is a **relaxation technique** which can help.

panic

Relaxation technique

- When you panic your muscles tense up.
- To help yourself you should try to relax your muscles whenever you start to feel anxious.
- Relaxing like this is a skill, to be learnt and practiced when you have some time to yourself.
- Some people find a certain piece of music or picture helps them to remember to relax their muscles.



Don't worry- even if you can't do relaxation very well, it does not mean that something bad will happen.

Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

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2. Control your Breathing

This is something else you can practice.

When someone becomes frightened they start to breathe more quickly.

But panicky breathing can lead to more symptoms of panic, like faintness, tingling and dizziness.

You must breathe more slowly.

**If you breathe calmly and slowly for at least 3 minutes
your other feelings should calm down.**

This is not as easy as it sounds. Sometimes in the middle of a panic attack, concentrating on breathing can be difficult.

Practise 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.

Try to follow the instructions on the next page.

panic

Practise the following as often as you can.

Breathing technique
1. 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.
2. Do not breathe in a shallow way, from your chest, or too deeply.
3. Keep your breathing nice and slow and calm. Breathe out from your mouth and in through your nose.
4. Try breathing in slowly saying to yourself: <i>1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4.</i>
5. Then let the breath out slowly to six: <i>4 elephant, 5 elephant, 6 elephant.</i>
6. Keep doing this until you feel calm. Sometimes looking at a second hand on a watch can help to slow breathing down.

Don't worry -Even if you didn't control your breathing, it does not mean that something bad will happen.

Using your mind

There things you can do to help with the way your mind fuels a panic attack: The first two are quite simple:

1. Stop focusing on your body

A TECHNIQUE to stop focusing on your body

- **Try to notice whether you are focusing on your symptoms, or scanning your body for something wrong.**
- **There really is no need to do this and it makes the problem far worse.**
- **Focus on what is going on outside rather than inside you.**

2. Distract yourself from frightening thoughts

**A TECHNIQUE to distract yourself from frightening thoughts
(thinking about something else)**

- **This is a very simple technique.**
- **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 hobby.**
- **Count the number of 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.**
- **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.**

panic

Distraction really does work.

Have you ever been in the middle of a panic attack when something happened that totally took over your attention, like the phone ringing?

Remember - Distraction breaks the vicious circle, but it is important to remember that distraction is not preventing something terrible from happening, because

**whether you distract yourself or not
a panic attack is not dangerous,.**



Don't worry: even if you can't manage these techniques very well, it does not mean that something bad will happen.

Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

panic



Here are two more techniques.

3.Challenge your frightening thoughts by questioning and testing them.

Sometimes, it is helpful to challenge your thoughts so that you no longer believe them.

Thought challenging can be useful, but it also can be a bit harder to understand than some of the other techniques.



Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

Technique for thought challenging

Thought challenging has two steps:

Step 1 Everyone's worries and thoughts are different and sometimes they are not very realistic. Write down three of your anxious thoughts and worst fears in the first column, headed 'My worries'.

Step 2 Once you are aware of your thoughts and pictures in your mind, ask yourself: Are my thoughts and fears realistic? There is a good chance that they are not realistic or helpful ways of looking at things.

For each thought, try to come up with more realistic and helpful thoughts. Write them in the table, in the second column, which is headed 'My more realistic thoughts'.

Your table might look like this now

My worries	My more realistic thought
e.g. If I panic now I will make a fool of myself	I have panicked before and no-one has even noticed. People are busy getting on with their own thing
1	
2	
3	

If you can come up with more realistic helpful thoughts, write them down on a separate piece of paper and keep them with you. It is often much more difficult to come up with these thoughts when you are actually panicking.

panic

Thought challenging can be tricky.

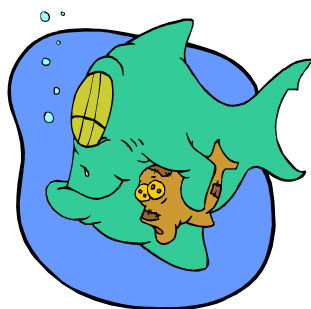
Don't worry, even if you can't challenge your thoughts, it does not mean that something bad is going to happen.

4. Sort out your feelings- try to work out whether something else is making you tense.

Sorting out your feelings

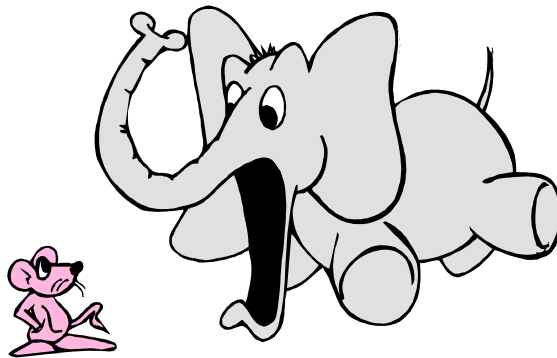
It is useful to look at one other way in which your mind may be contributing to panic. There may be other things bothering you. Panic can come from difficult feelings not being dealt with. It may be helpful to work out whether anything like that is bothering you. Is there

anything on your mind? Do you feel angry or sad? Has someone or something upset you or is something troubling you? Panic is less likely to happen if you face up to tough feelings and find someone to talk to about them.



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Challenging what you do



Finally,

**challenging
what you DO
is probably
the most helpful way
of overcoming panic.**

To reduce panic you need to stop doing things that **feel** as though they might help but **really** make things worse.

Put simply, what you need to do now is test out the situations you fear most, to prove to yourself that:

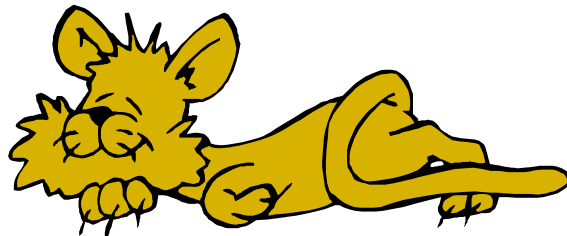
a panic attack cannot harm you.

Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

panic

challenging what you DO

- 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 is 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.



Remember: panic attacks are not harmful.

TECHNIQUE FOR CHALLENGING WHAT YOU DO

First of all, work out what behaviours you need to tackle:

Avoiding things

For example, if you are frightened of being alone, try gradually spending a little bit more time on your own.

Does the disaster you fear actually happen? Yes/No

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 shop without getting your things? 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.
Do you stand absolutely still to stop yourself having a heart attack? Walk about instead. What happened? What did you learn?
Write down some experiments you could try, and afterwards what you found out, using a table like the one below.

Experiments

Old Safety behaviour	What you could do instead	What did you learn when you tried it out?

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By testing out your fears in this way, and finding out that your worst fear never happens you will gradually become more and more confident. Your panic attacks should become fewer and fewer and less strong when they do come.

SUMMARY: Coping with Panic.

Practise relaxation, slow breathing, distraction and thought challenging when not anxious until you have learned the techniques.

Remind yourself during a panic that just because you are panicking it does not mean that something awful is going to happen.

Use distraction, relaxation and slow breathing to help you get the panic to go away.

Challenge your unrealistic thoughts during a panic, using some more realistic thoughts you have written down.

Try not to avoid, escape or use safety behaviours, instead test out what really happens.

Try to sort out any worries or troubles that you have. Talk about them; don't sweep them under the carpet.

panic

Further help

Whilst the techniques in this book should help you to get better by yourself, sometimes you may need other help too.

If you feel you may need more help, talk to an adult you trust who might be able to provide this, or who may refer you on to someone else who can.

Designed by Sarah Kendal with The Department of Design and Communication

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Mental Health NHS Trust (Revised June 2001)

