

Panic Attacks

A brief guide

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Feeling nervous?

It is important to remember that anxiety is at its root a natural reaction. Inside our bodies the sympathetic nervous system works in response to our fears and anxiety. It is what triggers our “fight or flight” response and gets our heart racing when we think danger is imminent. The parasympathetic nervous system responds by turning off the stress reaction, allowing the individual to return to peacefulness again. It is sometimes referred to as the “rest and digest” system as it slows our heart rate and increases activity in the intestines and glands.

In other words, the sympathetic and autonomic nerves work us up, and the parasympathetic nerves calm us down. However, sometimes our sympathetic nervous system can malfunction, leaving you with that feeling of dread, panic and fear associated with anxiety.



What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is simply an exaggeration of the body's normal 'fight or flight' reaction. You may experience an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety. Although panic attacks can be very alarming, it is important to remember panic attacks usually last between 5 and 20 minutes. Panic Attacks are not permanent and are not dangerous (even though they may feel so).

Panic attacks can affect you in 3 different ways. These are:

- Physical (e.g. sweating, fast heart-beat)

- Psychologically (e.g. panic related thoughts)

- Behaviourally (e.g. behaving differently)

Panic attacks can occur randomly, however it is important you understand if there are any 'triggers' which may cause the attack, and find techniques to help you with your anxiety.

Physical Symptoms

Physical symptoms of panic attacks are often most easy to identify. Symptoms you may experience include:

- Nausea
- Sweating
- Trembling
- A sensation that your heart is beating irregularly (palpitations)
- Muscular Tension
- Tension
- Irregular Breathing too fast or deeply
- Heightened senses
- Shortness of breath
- A choking sensation
- Dizziness
- Tingling fingers



Psychological symptoms

Psychological symptoms are the thoughts you experience during a panic attack. They can include:

- Intense feeling of fear
- Frightening thoughts
- Feel you are losing control
- Feel you will make a fool of yourself
- Worry about your physical health
- Fear something awful is going to happen (even if you don't know what that is)

Behavioural symptoms

Behavioural symptoms are the acts you may carry out during a panic attack. Behavioural symptoms can include:

- Finding it difficult to stay in one place
- Needing to escape
- Needing to sit down
- 'Snapping' at people
- Avoid places you

The Panic Spiral

A panic attack can happen for a number of reasons. It may begin from internal triggers such as intense stress or worry, or from external triggers such as entering a crowded space or recalling a traumatic event.

When a person begins to feel anxious they may focus on their bodily sensations such as a racing heart. During the upward spiral of panic these symptoms are misinterpreted as something more serious.

This only increases the anxiety already being experienced as we start to panic that there is something wrong with our bodies. The more focussed you are on your bodily sensations the more heightened your anxiety, leading to a “spiral of panic”.

But What If I Am Having A Heart Attack?

Some of the signs of a panic attack are similar to those of a heart attack. If any pain in your chest is frequent and lasts a long time, it is advisable to speak to your GP.

Symptom	Heart Attack	Panic Attack
Pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May or not be present• Pain is a crushing feeling• Usually located in the central chest and may extend to the left arm, neck and back• Pain is not made worse by breathing or pressing on your chest• Pain lasts longer than 10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pain is usually described as “sharp”• Pain tends to be localised over the heart• Pain is made worse by breathing and pressing on the chest• Pain usually disappears within 5 to 10 minutes
Tingling	If present, tingling is usually in the left arm	If present, tingling is usually all over the body
Vomiting	Common	You may feel sick but vomiting is less common
Breathing	You may feel a little short of breath	Breathing too quickly or deeply (hyperventilating) is a common panic response

Managing Panic Attacks

There are three main types of techniques for coping with panic attack; breathing, relaxation and distraction.

Panic attacks cause an increase in adrenaline so it is important you reduce your adrenaline and anxiety levels.

As everyone is different it is important you find the right techniques for you.

Breathing

When people feel stressed and anxious, they tend to breathe too quickly, which can lead to a panic attack. Breathing techniques can help reduce and control the breathing when required however, which can subsequently calm you down and reduce anxiety levels.

Breathe in through nose for 4 seconds

hold for 2 seconds

breathe out through mouth for 6 seconds

repeat 10 times

place hand on chest to feel chest rise and fall with each breath

Say in your mind “in 2 3 4, hold 1 2, out 2 3 4 5 6” repeat

Relaxation

Tense then relax

Feet – tense and relax 5 times

Legs – tense then relax 5 times

Abs – tense then relax 5 times

Hands – tense and relax 5 times

Arms – tense and relax 5 times

Shoulders – tense and relax 5 times

Distraction

Remember 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

- Count 5 things you can see
- Count 4 things you can hear
- Count 3 things you can touch
- Count 2 things you can smell
- Take 1 deep breath.

Count your environment

- Count bricks in the wall.
- Count passing cars/people/footsteps.
- Count backwards from 100

Positive Affirmations

I am here. I am breathing. I am breathing in and out. I am feeling my chest rise and fall. I am calm. I am safe.

Acknowledge to yourself that anxiety is uncomfortable. Panic attacks are scary but you are in control, it will not last forever, and you will get through it.

You might find it useful to adopt a mantra to repeat to yourself during moments of heightened anxiety and panic. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Open your eyes and say out loud:



Activities to help prevent panic

Regular exercise

Exercising creates endorphins which will improve your mood, and release some of the tension you may be carrying in your body.

Going for a walk

It might be a cliché but getting some fresh air really does work wonders for removing yourself from a triggering situation and focussing on your environment rather than your thoughts

Reading

Absorbing yourself in a story in a comfortable environment to distract yourself.

Arts & Crafts

Repetitive, creative tasks such as painting help distract and give you a purpose. Plus, you've created something nice from your panic!

Yoga and Meditation

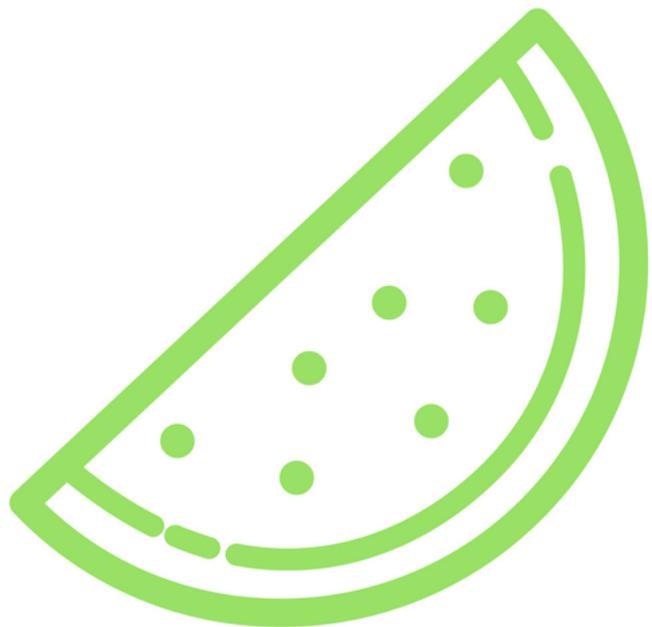
Yoga teaches us to focus on the body and remain in the present, rather than letting ourselves be controlled by our fears and worries

Diet

Studies have shown a link between our diets and our mental health. Adopting healthy eating habits as eating regularly will keep us nourished and stabilise our blood sugar levels.

- More water, less caffeine—try not to have coffee after lunchtime and instead replace it with camomile tea
- More greens, less processed foods
- Have a good breakfast
- Limit alcohol
- Avoid smoking

Remember to always consult your doctor before making any major dietary changes or seek advice



Sources Of Support

Anxiety UK

For information and advice about anxiety, panic and phobias, contact Anxiety UK on 03444 775 774 or email support@anxietyuk.org.uk

Headspace

A guided meditation app to learn self-relaxation and mindfulness skills. You can get a year's free subscription with an Anxiety UK membership.

Samaritans

A free and confidential listening service. 116 123



For a range of self-help guides for managing anxiety
and panic disorders, visit our website at
www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Anxiety UK offers a wide range of services and support for those living with/affected by all types of anxiety, stress and anxiety-based depression.

For information visit:

www.anxietyuk.org.uk

Call: 03444 775 774

Email: support@anxietyuk.org.uk

Anxiety UK

Nunes House, 447 Stretford Road

Old Trafford

Manchester

M16 9HA

Established 1970

Registered Charity No: 1113403

