

What is a panic attack?

Information for patients



WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

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

- ❖ You discover you have had your wallet stolen.
- ❖ You are sitting an exam. You look at the paper and realise you don't know the answers to any of the questions.

It would be normal in either of these situations to feel a sense of panic. This feeling would pass fairly quickly.

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

- ❖ The feelings seem to come 'out of the blue' and are not usually related to the sort of frightening situation described above.
- ❖ The feelings are a lot stronger.

It is because the feelings are UNEXPECTED and STRONG that they can be extremely frightening.

THE TRUTH IS: NOTHING AWFUL IS GOING TO HAPPEN, BECAUSE PANIC ATTACKS ARE NOT DANGEROUS.

Lots of people have panic attacks. They are not signs of serious mental or physical illness. Panic affects your body, your mind and the way you behave, but in different ways for different people.

Here is a list of some of the things that can happen to people having a panic attack. Some people have all of the symptoms, others just a few.

Your body

- ❖ Difficulty in breathing
- ❖ Dizziness
- ❖ Racing heart
- ❖ Chest pains
- ❖ Tingling sensations
- ❖ Shaking
- ❖ Sweating

Your mind

- ❖ Feelings of utter terror
- ❖ Feelings of unreality, as though you're not really there
- ❖ Frightening thoughts such as:
 - "I'm going to have a heart attack"*
 - "I will collapse or faint"*
 - "I'm running out of air"*
 - "I'm going mad"*
 - "I'm losing control"*
 - "I'm going to make a complete fool of myself"*
 - "I've got to get out of here"*

Your behaviour

- ❖ You try to leave the situation as quickly as possible
- ❖ You avoid the situation in the future

All of the panic symptoms described above are simply an extreme form of fear. Fear is our body's natural response to a situation we see as dangerous.

Fear is very useful. It prepares your body for action. This has been called the 'fight or flight' response. When you feel fear, your body is preparing to fight or run away. When you are frightened, you:

- ❖ Breathe more quickly so that you can get lots of oxygen to your muscles.
- ❖ Your heart beats faster to pump the blood faster round your body.
- ❖ Your digestive system slows down so that your body can focus on the more immediate threat.

This is your body's normal healthy reaction to situations where your body feels under threat. It is your body's alarm system.

The problem with panic attacks is that they usually occur when there is no clear physical threat at all. Your body is reacting as though it was about to be attacked when in reality it is not.

What causes panic attacks to begin?

Panic attacks can happen for a number of reasons:

- ❖ Stress
- ❖ Health worries
- ❖ During a mild illness
- ❖ Because of strong emotions
- ❖ Out of the blue

What keeps panic attacks going?

Panic affects your body, your thoughts and your behaviour. All three work together to keep panic going.

What techniques can help me cope with and reduce panic attacks?

The good news is that panic attacks are very treatable. You may find that your panic attacks have already started to reduce because you have begun to recognise and understand, and accept that they are not harmful.

Panic affects your body, your mind and your behaviour. By learning to change in each of these areas you can learn to cope with panic attacks.

For more detail, please see leaflet PANIC: A Self Help Guide.

Further help

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.

Helplines

- ❖ No Panic - Free Helpline
(daily 10am-10pm).....Tel: 0808 808 0545
- ❖ Breathing Space Free Depression Helpline
(daily 6pm-2am).....Tel: 0800 83 85 87
- ❖ Depression Alliance.....Tel: 0845 123 23 20
- ❖ Samaritans - confidential support for anyone in a crisis
24hours.....Tel: 08457 90 90 90
Textphone:.....Tel: 08457 909192
- ❖ SANEline.....Tel: 08457 67 8000
- ❖ Lanarkshire Links.....Tel: (01698) 265 232

Websites

- ❖ <http://www.lanarkshirementalhealth.org.uk/>
Lanarkshire Mental Health and Wellbeing Information Site.
- ❖ <http://www.joepanic.com>
Information and advice on coping skills; introduction to cognitive therapy and worksheets that can be downloaded and completed; explains importance of good breathing and gives exercises to try; comprehensive links and resource pages.
- ❖ <http://www.panic-attacks.co.uk>
A “panic attack course” that can be completed online or can be emailed to complete in your own time; explains what panic is, why people have panic attacks and how thoughts cause panic; explains how to change the way you think and how to control panic through breathing and relaxation.
- ❖ <http://www.nopanic.org.uk>
Comprehensive help for panic and associated conditions. Includes telephone and written recovery programmes.
- ❖ <http://www.glasgowsteps.com/self-help.jsp>
Self help booklets on psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, etc
- ❖ <http://www.livinglifetothefull.com>
A general self help site offering advice on a wide range of issues. It helps you to understand your behaviour and thoughts, and offers help on healthy living, better sleep, relaxation, etc.
- ❖ <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk>
Offers information and advice to those experiencing troublesome thoughts, feelings and actions.

Useful Books

The following books are available to buy or can be found in your local library:

- ❖ Butler, G and Hope, T (1995) *Manage Your Mind*. Oxford ISBN: 0192623834 (Chapter 19: Dealing with Panic: Controlling the Alarm System)
- ❖ Ingham, Christine "Panic Attacks" (2001) ISBN 0007106904
- ❖ Jeffers, Susan (1987) *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* Vermilion (reprinted 2004) ISBN: 0712671056 (Easy to read. Encourages acceptance and a change in attitude.) Also available in audio format
- ❖ Silove, Derrick & Manicavasagar, Vijaya (1997) *Overcoming Panic*. Constable & Robinson. ISBN: 1854877011
- ❖ Trickett, S. (1992) *Coping Successfully with Panic Attacks*. Sheldon Press. ISBN: 0859696464
- ❖ Weekes, Claire (1995) *Self Help for your Nerves*. Thorsons ISBN: 0722531559 (Emphasises coping with physical aspects of anxiety and panic. A little old-fashioned in style, but clear.)

To cut out and keep:

Coping with Panic

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ The feelings are normal bodily reactions; they are not harmful
- ❖ Do not add frightening thoughts, describe what is happening
- ❖ Wait for the feelings to pass
- ❖ Plan what to do next, then start off slowly

Booklets/leaflets available on the following:

- ❖ Anger
- ❖ Anxiety
- ❖ Bereavement
- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Hyperventilation
- ❖ Panic (short version and long version)
- ❖ Relaxation
- ❖ Self-Harm
- ❖ Self-Help websites
- ❖ Sleep
- ❖ Stress
- ❖ Trauma
- ❖ How to solve problems: a simple DIY technique
- ❖ Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available free of charge from:

Helplines

- ❖ No Panic, Free Helpline
(daily 10am-10pm) Tel: 0808 808 0545
- ❖ Breathing Space, Free Depression Helpline
(daily 6pm-2am)Tel: 0800 83 85 87
- ❖ Depression Alliance Scotland – helpline
(Mon, Tues, Thurs & Fri: 10am-2pm)Tel: 0845 123 2320
- ❖ National Debt-lineTel: 0808 808 4000
- ❖ Samaritans - confidential support for anyone
in a crisis 24 hoursTel: 08457 90 90 90
Textphone:08457 909192
- ❖ SANelineTel: 08457 67 8000
- ❖ Lanarkshire LinksTel: (01698) 265 232

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