



Panic Attacks

This leaflet will help you to understand
what causes panic attacks and how you
can try to control them



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What is a panic attack?

Panic attacks are common, occurring in up to 5 per cent of the general population. They are defined by a sudden onset of apprehension, fear or terror accompanied by physical symptoms such as difficulty in breathing, dizziness, palpitations, chest pains, tingling sensations, shaking, sweating, and feelings of unreality.

The thoughts that accompany these symptoms often include 'I'm going to lose control', 'I'm going mad', 'I'm going to die', 'I'm going to have a heart attack' or 'I'm going to embarrass myself'.

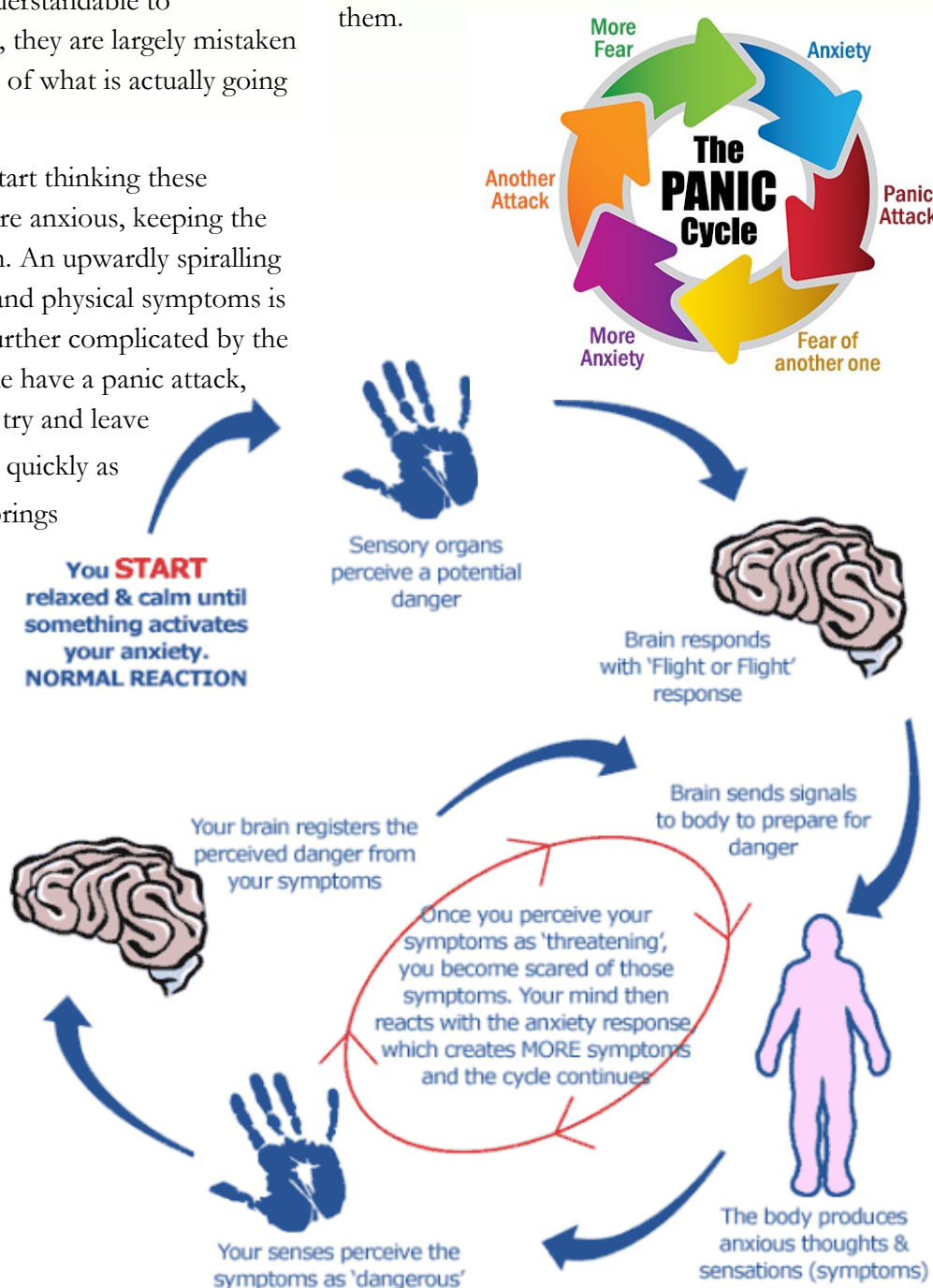
Although it is perhaps understandable to experience these thoughts, they are largely mistaken and are misinterpretations of what is actually going on.

Unfortunately, once you start thinking these thoughts, you become more anxious, keeping the bodily symptoms going on. An upwardly spiralling vicious cycle of thoughts and physical symptoms is created. The situation is further complicated by the fact that when most people have a panic attack, their natural reaction is to try and leave the situation they are in as quickly as possible. This avoidance brings temporary relief, but increases the likelihood of further apprehension, negative thoughts, bodily symptoms and the development of a phobic reaction.

A symptom of stress

Panic attacks are one of the symptoms of a build up of stress. This symptom is perhaps more frightening than nausea, headaches, or diarrhoea but in some ways it is a similar reaction. People who experience panic attacks seem to be those who experience stress in their respiratory and cardiovascular system rather than in their muscular or gastrointestinal system.

Very often the symptoms of panic produces such worry and stress that these symptoms become more of a problem than the stress originally caused them.



The body's fear reaction and how it becomes oversensitive

The symptoms are in fact an exaggeration to a fearful situation. Imagine what would happen if you were up a ladder and felt it slip from under you. Your heart would pound, your breathing would alter, you might turn very pale or break out in a sweat. But as soon as you climbed down the ladder and recognised that you were safe, but nearly had a nasty accident, your anxiety would die down. You would understand the symptoms as being quite natural, and you would not worry about those symptoms.

But what if you experienced exactly those symptoms pushing a trolley around a supermarket or sitting at your desk at work? Your mind would immediately try to make sense of the situation and would come up with a number of very frightening thoughts.

The problem with panic attacks is that your fear reaction has become oversensitive and its being triggered in a variety of apparently normal situations.

This over sensitivity of the fear reaction is more likely if you are tired or under a lot of stress.

Sometimes this stress can be caused by worrying about having another panic attack. If you have had one bad attack you can become over vigilant, an expert at detecting the normal changes in your body which you would usually ignore.

You are constantly on the look out for slight changes that may indicate that something is amiss. Once you begin to imagine something is wrong, you become slightly frightened, triggering the body's reaction and the vicious cycle of panic takes off.

Can panic feelings harm me?

No, No one can die of fright. Though panic feelings are unpleasant they cannot in any way harm you. The feelings themselves are quite normal. It is just that they are happening in an ordinary situation, rather than in an obviously dangerous or frightening one.

Summary of main points about panic attacks

- A panic attack is the same as the body's normal fear reaction, but it is happening in an ordinary situation.
- Your body's normal fear reaction has become oversensitive and has become easily triggered. This happens particularly if you are tired or under stress.
- The feelings themselves are not harmful and do not indicate that there is anything seriously wrong with you.
- The feelings can be caused and maintained by a combination of worrying thoughts and hyperventilation or overbreathing.
- Once you understand what is going on, half the battle is won.




10 rules for coping with panic




Remember panic feelings are only normal reactions that are exaggerated.




They are not harmful and nothing worse will happen.




Notice what is happening in your body now. Stay with the present. Slow down, relax but keep going.



Thinking about what might happen is unhelpful. Only now matters.



Accept the feelings. let them run through you and they will disappear more quickly.



Monitor your level of anxiety; 10 (worst) to 0 (least). Watch the level go down.




Stay in the situation. If you run away, avoid or escape, it will be more difficult in the future.



Take a few slow, deep breaths.



Consciously relax your tense muscles. Feel yourself relaxing.



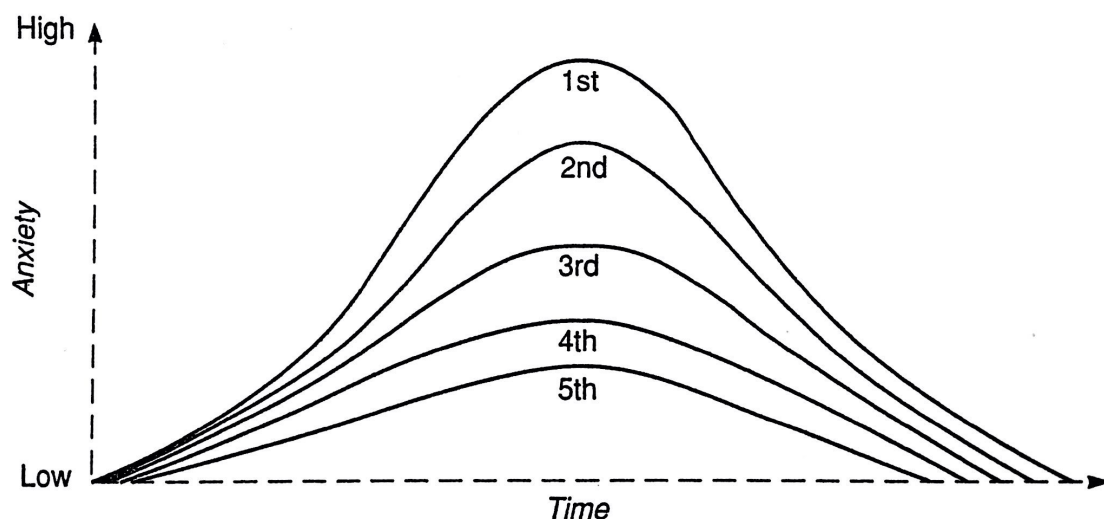
Now begin to concentrate again on what you were doing before.

Dealing with avoidance and facing fear

Avoiding anything that makes us anxious is in some ways a natural reaction. However, avoiding some situations that create anxiety can lead to the development of phobias and loss of confidence. Once we begin to avoid things, we may find our mobility becomes increasingly restricted.

When you either stay in the situation you fear, or deliberately put yourself in that position, your anxiety will go up, reach a plateau and then go down again. The first time you do this the anxiety will take time to subside.

The second time you face the situation you fear, your anxiety will be less severe and fall in a shorter time. Each time you put yourself into that situation your anxiety will progressively be less severe and die away more quickly. The diagram below shows how this anxiety hill gets smaller and smaller.



The best way of overcoming avoidance and loss of confidence is by tackling your fears one step at a time in easy stages. This technique is called graded practice or systematic desensitisation. By identifying situations which you avoid, and gradually confronting them time and again, you can reduce the anxiety associated with those situations. It is important to practise easier tasks first, so as to build up your confidence before tackling more difficult situations.

Graded target practice sheet

1. List a number of situations which you avoid because of your anxiety.
2. Describe the situations in as much detail as possible. Be specific. Rather than saying 'Going on a bus', say 'Travelling alone on the number 29 bus, into town, on a weekday afternoon'.
3. Rate how much anxiety you anticipate each situation will create on a scale of 01-10 where 0=low anxiety, 5=moderate anxiety and 10=extreme anxiety.
4. Rearrange the situations in ranked order with the most difficult at the top.
5. Start with the easiest situation and practise it. If practise is to be helpful it must be (a) regular, (b) frequent, (c) prolonged– you must go on practising until the anxiety has died down.
6. If something is too hard, look at ways of breaking it down into intermediate stages.
7. Do not be put off by feeling anxious. Remember you are learning to master anxiety rather than avoid it.
8. Reward yourself for your successes.

Example

Going into a life in a department store, on my own, on a weekly afternoon.

6

Catching the no. 29 bus to the station, on my own, on Saturday morning.

5

Your Targets

Anxiety rating 1 to 10

1. (Most difficult)	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Common questions about anxiety

Q Why do I feel good one day and bad the next?

Everybody's moods go up and down. Sometimes we have a good day, sometimes we have a bad day. Very often these changes in mood are so small we don't notice them. When you have been feeling anxious or depressed you are sensitised to your own reactions. You are on the look out for any minor changes that might occur. When normal fluctuations occur, which you may have paid little attention to previously, you notice them.

This attention with its associated worrying thoughts means that those minor changes become exaggerated and magnified. Your mood tends to go up and down like a roller coaster with high peaks and low troughs.

To counteract this tendency, first you have to recognise that it is happening. 'They watch out for your thoughts. Are you allowing 'all or nothing thinking' or 'catastrophizing' to take place? Do you think when the day starts badly, 'on no, today's going to be terrible, I might as well not bother. I'm not getting any better'? Challenge that thought and change it to, 'It's just a bad day, no more, no less. Everybody has them.'

Q How long do I need to keep practice going?

Sometimes when people confront a fear or phobia they expose themselves to the anxiety provoking situation once or twice and say 'I'm cured, I've cracked it', and then stop putting themselves back into that situation.

Research suggests that for a fear to be truly banished, you have to return regularly to the avoided situation, otherwise there is a tendency for the fear to return.

So keep practice going. Watch out for subtle avoidance when you say to yourself 'I've done it once again, I'm ok now, I don't need to do

■ Dealing with setbacks

Expect setbacks and you won't be disappointed. Be aware of saying to yourself: 'I'm fine now, everything is OK;'. Even when you are doing well expect a setback, Plan for it. When it occurs don't be demoralised; it is likely to be one step back but three steps forward. Setbacks come to instruct.



Stress control

Stress is the result of an imbalance between the demands made on us and our personal resources to deal with these demands.

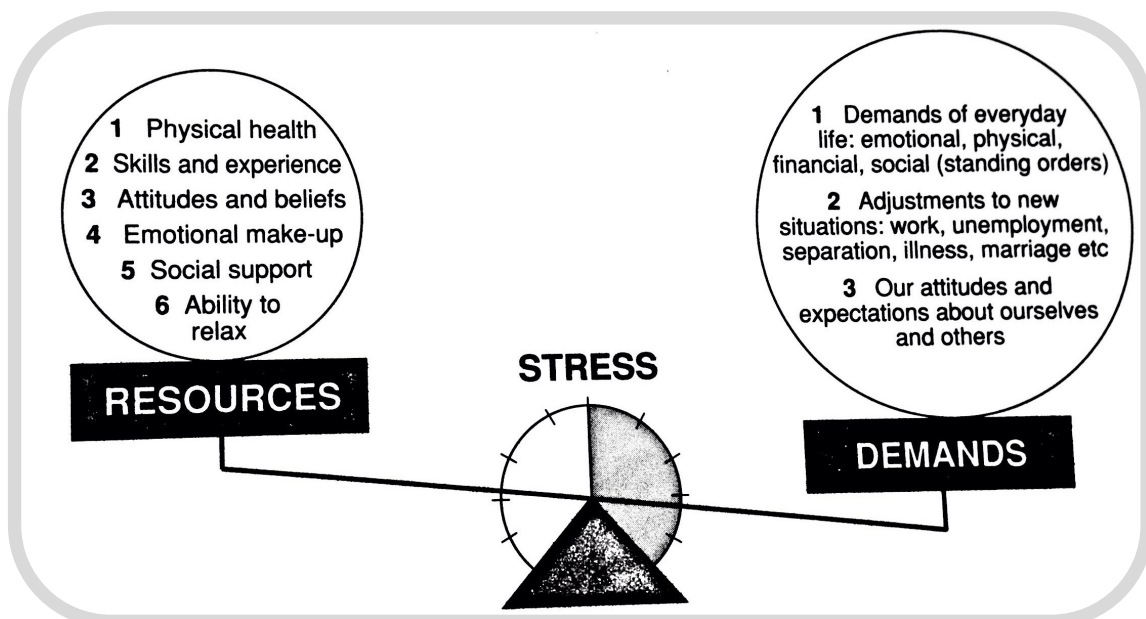
The balance between a person's resources and the demands being made on them can be compared with a bank account.

If too many demands are made on the account, we go into the 'red' and become overdrawn, which is comparable to being under stress. In normal circumstances we can cope with the everyday demands of life such as maintenance of a job and relationships, which is comparable with the way routine standing orders regularly diminish our financial account.

It is only when extra stresses or demands come along that we can tip over 'into the red'. Sometimes a crisis may be the result of a 'last straw' which just tips the balance and we fall 'into the red' or stress.

Recommendations

1. Some stress is good for you. Identify your own resources and situations which you find stressful. Learn to identify your own optimal level of stress and do not be pressurised beyond it.
2. Anticipate stress by balancing your demands and resources in advance. Decide what is important— have priorities.
3. When experiencing stress make sure that you:
 - Do not withdraw from social support
 - Keep communicating—ventilate your feelings
 - Keep areas and times for relaxation
4. Reduce demands:
 - Do not expect too much of yourself
 - Do not feel that you have to live up to others' expectations of you
 - Think twice about how important tasks are. Try saying 'No'



Coping with sleeping problems

Useful Information about sleeping

- There is no such thing as an ideal length of sleep. Some people need 10 hours, others need three. Napoleon, Churchill and Margaret Thatcher are all reported as only needing between three and four hours sleep a night.
- As you grow older you require less sleep. A person who had 10 hours at 20 years old may require five or less at 60.
- There is no danger in losing a few nights sleep. People often assume they will become ill, or their performance will be impaired. Both fears are usually groundless.
- Your body will take all the sleep it needs unless forcibly prevented.

Hints for getting to sleep

1. Prepare yourself before going to bed;

- Take exercise early in the day;
- Avoid spicy or heavy food and caffeine in the few hours before you retire;
- Have a milky drink before bed;
- Take time to relax by having a warm bath or listening to restful music, or complete a relaxation exercise.

■ Make sure your bedroom is quiet and your bed is comfortable.

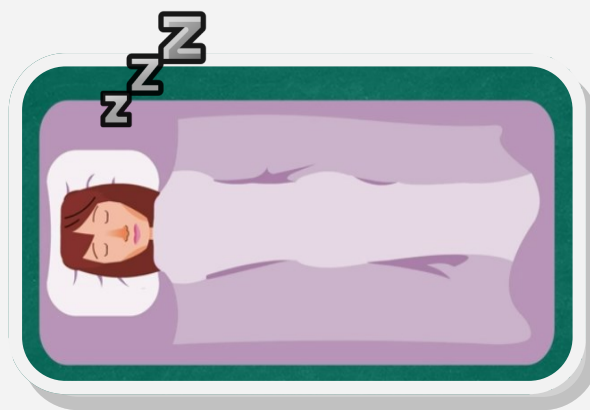
2. Go to bed only when you are sleepy; do not try to get more sleep by going to bed early.

3. Use your bed only for sleeping. Do not read, watch TV or eat in bed unless you are sure by your past experience that these activities help you sleep.

4. When you are in bed, relax and do not think about worrying issues. If there is a problem, identify all of your worrying thoughts by writing them down on a piece of paper earlier in the evening, and leave that piece of paper downstairs. When in bed, use relaxation and distraction exercises to help you.

5. If you have not fallen asleep in about 15 to 20 minutes, or if you wake up and cannot get back to sleep, then get out of bed and do something else until you feel sleepy. Don't lie there tossing and turning. Go to a different room and do something which is different and unstimulating like reading or ironing. Return to bed after a break when you feel sleepy.

6. Set your alarm and get up at the same time each morning regardless of how much sleep you received during the night.



Agoraphobia

Agoraphobia is a condition characterised by a complex mixture of fears, anxieties and avoidances. The syndrome has occurred throughout history, the word *agoraphobia* comes from the Greek and literally means ‘fear of the marketplace’.

The agoraphobic person usually experiences unpleasant physical symptoms of anxiety, mainly panic attacks. Some people have nervous systems which are more prone to having panic attacks. The person is inclined to worry about these attacks and to misinterpret their significance. Common thoughts are: ‘I’m going to die’, or ‘I’m going to have a heart attack’.

Following this experience, the person starts to avoid situations associated with these attacks. Situations which tend to be avoided are those that have an element of ‘entrapment’, and those that are a long way from a place of safety.

The initial panic attacks or experience of anxiety usually comes out of the blue, but behind it there are often a number of underlying stresses. The person may just be tired, or run down, or may just have ‘a lot on their plate’.

After the first panic attacks, a familiar vicious circle is likely to occur. The individual worries about having another attack, and is naturally inclined to avoid certain situations.

This worry and avoidance makes future attacks more likely.

The result is a loss of confidence and a feeling of insecurity. The more insecure the individual feels the more he or she is likely to avoid situations; thus the vicious circle gets established. Often the person can feel trapped within a ‘spiders web’ of avoidance.



The key features in reversing this vicious downward spiral are:

1. Understand what is really going on.
2. Learning to gain some control over anxiety symptoms by acquiring new skills, such as relaxation, breathing exercises, distraction and positive self-talk.
3. Progressively confronting the situations previously avoided, in a graded manner.
4. Notice your confidence growing as you successfully manage more difficult situations. Build on this confidence—change your lifestyle.

Look within,
and listen to your heart,
you can do it.
You can reach your goal.
You can make that new reality
instead of accepting things
the way they used to be.

You can do it

All of your highest hopes are with you.
Nothing will hold you back but your own fears,
and if those fears were created
by you, they can be
dealt with by you,
and said good - bye to.

You can do it

Say it to yourself, and believe it
in your heart.
Make every single day
a positive start
leading to a better and
brighter tomorrow.

You can do it

You really can

