

# Panic

An NHS self help guide



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## What is a panic attack?

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

- You get the sense that you are being followed on your way home from a party, late at night.
- 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.
- Someone runs in front of your car and you almost hit them.

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.

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

- The feelings are a lot stronger.
- The feelings seem to come 'out of the blue' and are not usually related to the sort of frightening situation described above.
- The feelings often last longer than a few minutes.

As the feelings are unexpected, strong and often very physical, they can feel extremely frightening.

Panic attacks affect people in many different ways, but there is usually a sudden frightening feeling that something really awful is about to happen, with strong physical symptoms. This can cause people to feel that something more serious, such as a heart attack is happening.

## The truth is: nothing awful is going to happen, as panic attacks are not dangerous.

Lots of people have panic attacks, although they can affect people in different ways. Some people have only one, others may have them over many years. Sometimes people have them every day, others only once in a while. If you were to ask all of your friends if they had ever had a panic attack, it is very likely that at least one or two will have had this experience. They are quite common and not a sign of serious mental or physical illness. However there can be some physical causes for panic-like symptoms.

For example:

- certain medicines taken together;
- thyroid problems;
- drinking too much caffeine or alcohol;
- pregnancy;
- hormonal problems;
- asthma;
- low blood sugar;
- heart problems.

If, after reading this leaflet, you are concerned that your problem may have a physical cause and you have not yet had a check-up from your GP, then it may be a good idea to make an appointment.

**Summary:** Panic attacks are very common. They are not dangerous and are not a sign of serious mental or physical illness.

This booklet aims to help you reduce your panic attacks by helping you to:

- **Recognise** whether or not you are having panic attacks.
- **Understand** panic, what causes it and what keeps it going.
- **Accept** that panic cannot harm you.
- **Learn** techniques to reduce panic.

There is a lot of information in this booklet and it may be helpful to read it several times, or to read it a bit at a time, to get the most from it.

### **Recognising panic – 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 "out of the blue", that people can't quite believe that it's only a panic attack, and not something more serious. The feeling of a panic attack can be so unusual that you may not even realise this is what is happening.

One of the most important first steps in overcoming panic attacks is recognising whether or not your symptoms are caused by a panic attack.

Panic affects your body, your mind and the way you behave. The following are some of the most common symptoms experienced by people having a panic attack. Some people have all of the symptoms, others just a few.

#### **Your body (please tick those that apply)**

- Heart pounding, beating fast or skipping a beat.
- Heart seeming to stop, followed by a big thud.
- Chest pains.
- Changes in breathing; for example: gulping air; breathing fast; feeling short of breath; sighing, yawning or panting.
- Pounding in the head.
- Numbness or tingling in fingers, toes or lips.
- Feeling faint, wobbly legs.

#### **Write down any other symptoms**

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Your mind (please tick any thoughts or feeling that apply)

Frightening feelings such as:

- Feelings of utter terror.
- Feelings of unreality, as though you are not really there.
- Feeling anxious in situations where panic has happened before.

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 choking"
- "I'm going to be sick"
- "I'm losing control"
- "I'm going to make a complete fool of myself"
- "I've got to get out of here"

Write down any other frightening thoughts or feelings:

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**Remember: These things never actually happen as a result of a panic attack, but people sometimes think they will. That's not to say that these things won't ever happen of course, but just that a panic attack won't cause them to happen.**

What you do/your behaviour (please tick any of these that apply to you)

- Avoid**  
 situations that have caused panic or that you fear might cause panic, for example going shopping.
- Escape**  
 as soon as you can when panicking, for example, rushing round the supermarket to get out as soon as possible.
- Prevent**  
 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, or lying down if you think you are having a heart attack or scanning your body for evidence of something being wrong. These are often called **Safety Behaviours**.
- Seek help**  
 In one study a quarter of all people having their first panic attack called an ambulance or went to accident and emergency, they were so convinced something dangerous was happening to them. Perhaps you have done this, or called out the doctor?
- Cope**  
 People often try to cope with a panic attack by doing things they have found or have been told are helpful, for example, distracting themselves or trying to relax.

**Write down anything else you do or don't do as a result of having a panic attack:**

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Whilst all of these things can help to stop a panic attack, as we shall see later, they can also become part of the problem.

If you have ticked quite a few of these symptoms, thoughts and behaviours, then it is likely that you are suffering from panic attacks.

**Summary:** Recognising a panic attack.

A panic attack is a strong feeling of terror that comes on very suddenly. Physical symptoms include pounding heart, fast breathing, shaking, 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.**

**Understanding panic – What causes it and what keeps it going?**

All of the panic symptoms described above are nothing more than an extreme form of fear. Fear is our body's natural response to a situation perceived as threatening. Fear can range from mild anxiety (which can be helpful when there is a goal, like passing an exam) through to full blown panic.

But why have fear at all when it's such an unpleasant feeling? In a way, it is a bit like pain. If you were to break your ankle, it would feel very painful, which would be a warning to you not to walk on it. If you heard a noise downstairs at night, you might feel frightened, which is a warning that you might have to deal with a dangerous situation. Fear is very useful. It prepares your body for action. This has been called the "freeze, fight or flight" response. So that when you feel fear, what is happening is that your body is preparing to fight or run away from the thing it feels threatened by, or possibly to stay completely still and wait for the threat to pass.

If we take the example of the noise downstairs. Let us suppose it is a burglar, as you fear. You may wish to stay absolutely still, so as to prevent the burglar from attacking you. You might want to go and challenge him or you might need to run away should he come after you. Your fear response would help with any of these. 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 closes down to allow your body to concentrate 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 usually they occur when there is no obvious physical threat there at all. Your body is reacting as though it was about to be attacked when in reality it is not. In other words it is a false alarm. It is a bit like the annoying smoke detector which goes off at all the wrong times, because it is sensitive to small amounts of smoke. Or the burglar alarm that goes off because of the cat. Or even more annoying, the car alarm that is triggered by the wind. These are all alarms that can be triggered when there is in fact no danger. The same can be the case with your body's "alarm" system. Sometimes it can be set off when there is no real danger.

The problem is that our body's "alarm system" was designed many, many years ago, when people had to cope with dangers in order to survive. Nowadays, we are rarely faced with the sort of life or death threats our ancestors faced. We have very different threats, mainly related to stress. Financial worries, overworking, moving house, divorce for example, can all be stressful, and can raise our anxiety levels to the point where our "alarm system" is triggered. It is a bit like a "stress" thermometer – which when it reaches a certain level results in panic. Whilst a panic attack may be unpleasant, it is not dangerous. Quite the opposite. It is a system designed to protect us, not harm us.

**Summary:** Understanding panic.

Panic is a form of fear. It is our body's alarm system signaling threat. It prepares our body to fight or run away from danger. But as there is no physical danger it is a false alarm.

**Remember:** a panic attack may be unpleasant but it is not dangerous.

**What causes panic attacks to begin?**

Panic attacks can start for a number of reasons.

**Stress**

As mentioned, stressful events can cause anxiety to go up, which may lead to the alarm system being triggered. Are you aware of any stress in your life over the last few years? For example, work stress or being out of work, relationship problems, loss of a loved one, financial difficulties.

**Please list any stresses that you are aware of:**

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If you feel you have had a lot of stress in your life recently, it might be useful to read our booklet 'Stress - a self help guide'.

### Health worries

Panic attacks sometimes begin when a person becomes over-concerned about their health. This can happen for various reasons. Sometimes people with panic attacks have recently experienced the sudden death of someone they know or are close to. They then become very worried about their own health, and look for signs that they may be developing the same illness. They may be aware of medical ‘mistakes’ where serious illness has not been picked up, and so become worried that there is something seriously wrong. This leads to raised anxiety. They then think the anxiety symptoms are evidence of a serious illness, which can result in panic. Think back to when your panic attacks began. Do you know anyone who died suddenly, for example from a brain haemorrhage or an asthma or heart attack? Are you perhaps suffering from health anxiety? If so you may find our booklet “Health Anxiety – A self help guide” useful.

### Other physical reasons

Sometimes panic attacks occur for the first time during a period of ill-health. For example some viruses can cause dizziness. Pregnancy or the menopause can cause changes in the way our body works that can lead to a first experience of panic. Consuming large amounts of caffeine, or low blood sugar can also lead to feelings of faintness. Can you think of any physical reasons for your panic attacks?

### Difficult emotions

Panic attacks often begin when there are feelings from the past or present that are being “swept under the carpet”. Maybe you have relationship problems, or something from the past you need to deal with? Have a think about this and jot down any problems you might need to deal with.

### Out of the blue

Sometimes we just don’t know why panic attacks begin. Some people even have their first panic attack when they are asleep! It may just be that certain people, in certain circumstances respond like the over-sensitive car alarm. Their alarm system is triggered when there is in fact no danger.

In some ways it is less important to know what causes panic attacks to begin and more important to know what keeps them going.



## What keeps panic attacks going?

As you will remember panic affects your body, your thoughts and your behaviour. All three work together to keep panic going.

### Body

Firstly, the physical symptoms can be part of the problem. For example, for people whose breathing is affected by anxiety, something called hyperventilation can occur. This just means someone is taking in too much air and not breathing it out. This is not dangerous but can lead to feelings of dizziness, and is often taken as further evidence that there is something seriously wrong.

### Thoughts

Secondly, the physical symptoms and anxious thoughts form a vicious circle that keeps panic attacks coming back again and again. Also, focusing your mind on your body can lead to noticing small changes and seeing this as a threat.

People who have panic attacks often worry that the physical symptoms mean something different from what they really do. Examples of some of the most common misinterpretations are:

What you feel	Reasons this is happening	Common fears
Eyes go funny Blurred vision Tunnel vision Feel unreal	Eyes trying to focus to fight danger	Brain haemorrhage Going mad
Breathing changes	Body trying to take in more oxygen to fight or run away	Losing control Choking or suffocating Running out of air
Chest pains	Muscles held tight ready to fight	Heart attack
Heart pounding	Increase flow of blood through body	
Pounding in head Headache	Increased pressure of blood flowing through body for extra energy	Tumour Brain haemorrhage
Numbness or tingling in fingers or lips	Hyperventilation	Stroke

People often find it hard to believe that our thoughts can produce such strong feelings of fear. But if we believe something 100% then we will feel exactly the same way as if it were true.

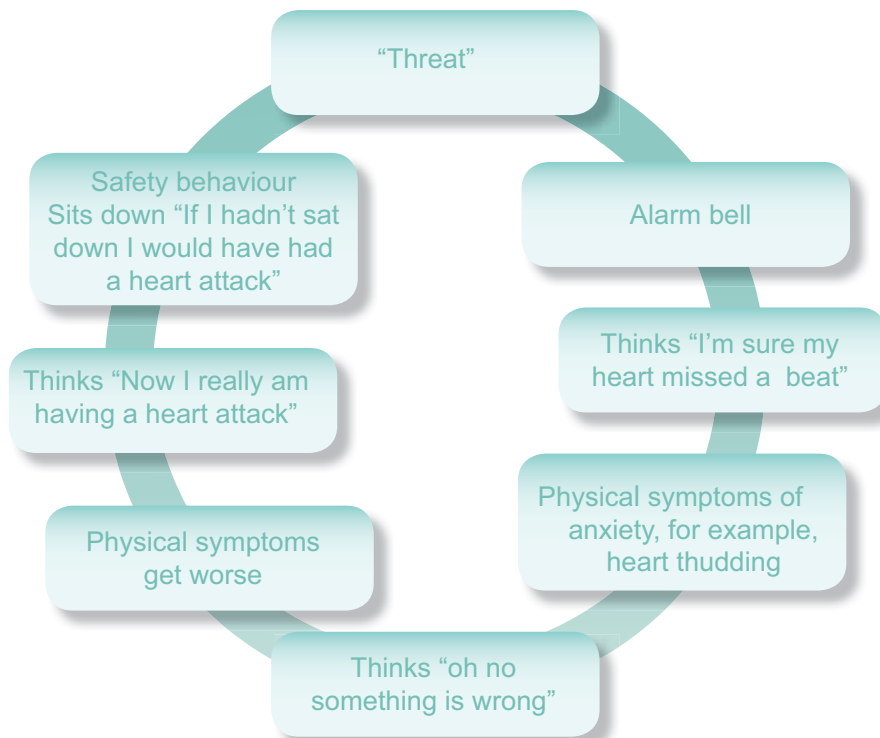
Another way thoughts can affect panic, is when someone starts to worry that they are going to panic in situations where they have panicked before. This, unfortunately, makes it more likely to happen again, and often leads to avoidance.

## Behaviour

Thirdly, how a person behaves before, during and following a panic attack has a big part to play in whether panic attacks keep happening. The avoidance, escape, and safety behaviour described earlier all add in to the vicious circle.

### The vicious circle of panic

These physical symptoms, thoughts and behaviours form a vicious circle which keeps the panic attacks occurring over time.



### Understanding panic - summary

- **Panic is a form of fear.** It is our body's alarm system signaling threat. It prepares our body to fight or run away from danger, but as there is no danger it is a false alarm.
- **Panic attacks** can begin for a number of reasons:
  - stress
  - health worries
  - during a mild illness
  - because of difficult emotions
  - out of the blue
- **Panic attacks are kept going because of the vicious circle of**
  - physical symptoms
  - thoughts
  - behaviour
- **By avoiding, escaping or preventing panic attacks, you may**
  - never find out that nothing terrible was going to happen
  - dread going back into the situation, because you fear another attack
  - lose confidence in your ability to cope alone

## Are panic attacks harmful?

We have spent a lot of time looking at recognising and understanding panic, because this should give you all the information you need to be able to accept that panic attacks are not harmful. If you can do this then you have come a long way to being able to end your panic attacks.

To what extent, sitting here now do you believe that your panic attacks mean that something awful is going to happen (0 -100%), for example, heart attack, stroke, fainting, choking, suffocating?

.....%

Next time you have a panic attack, can you rate at the time how much you believe something awful is going to happen?

.....%

The aim of treatment is to reduce your belief that something awful is going to happen to 0%.

**Summary:** Panic attacks are not harmful.

## What techniques can help to 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 them as not harmful.

As we have seen, panic affects your body, your mind and your behaviour. It makes sense to try to deal with each of these. You may find some techniques more helpful than others. Not everyone finds the same things helpful. Also, if you have been having panic attacks for a while, it may take some time for these techniques to work. Don't expect miracles straight away, but keep at it and you should see the benefits soon, when you've found the techniques that work best for you.

It is really important to remember that these techniques are about managing panic and anxiety so you can ride it out, not about trying to stop it altogether. If you try to force yourself not to panic because you are frightened of it, this can make you more anxious. Whereas if you can learn to cope with the symptoms, gradually they will be much less frightening, and as a result will reduce.

## Your body

There are at least three things you can do to help with the physical symptoms of panic:

- 1. Relaxation and deep muscle relaxation**
- 2. Controlled breathing**
- 3. Exercise**

### **These techniques are helpful for a number of reasons:**

- Panic attacks often start in periods of stress. These techniques can help you to deal with stressful situations better, and reduce overall levels of anxiety.
- They can “nip anxiety in the bud” stopping the cycle that leads to full blown panic, by reducing anxiety symptoms and preventing hyperventilation.
- They can be used when avoidance is being cut down, to help you cope with situations you fear.
- Being relaxed and breathing calmly is the opposite of panic.

To begin with it is best to practise regularly when you are not anxious. Look on it as getting into training. You would not enter a marathon without training for a while first!

## Relaxation

People relax in many different ways. It might be that looking at your lifestyle would be helpful. What do you do to relax? Write down six things you do, or could do to relax. For example, swimming, reading, walking. As well as finding everyday ways of relaxing, there are special **relaxation techniques** which can help with the specific symptoms of panic. Relaxing in this sense is different from the everyday ways of relaxing like putting your feet up and having a cup of tea (although that is just as important!). It is a skill, to be learnt and practised. We have already seen that one of the things that happens when we panic is that our muscles tense up. **Deep muscle relaxation** can help you learn to relax your muscles whenever you start to feel anxious or when you become aware you are tense. There are relaxation CDs, downloads, and sometimes classes, which can help. Some suggestions of where you can obtain these for free are suggested at the end of this booklet but to get you started you may find the following useful.

## Deep muscle relaxation

It is helpful to read the instructions first and then gradually learn them off by heart. Start by selecting quite a warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. To begin with choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed. Lie down, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax.

Starting with your hands, clench one fist tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Now do the same with the other hand.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop. Now do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

- **Hands** – clench fist, then relax.
- **Arms** – bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension, especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- **Neck** – press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- **Face** – there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.
- **Chest** – take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.

- **Stomach** – tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.
- **Buttocks** – squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- **Legs** – straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.

You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practise daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly.
- Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.

Remember relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

If at first you find relaxation exercises make you feel a little more tense and anxious, don't worry. This is quite common. It may be you have got quite used to distracting yourself from your bodily feelings, Try to learn relaxation techniques at first when already quite relaxed and gradually this will feel more natural to you.

**Remember: relaxation can help to reduce symptoms of panic, but it is not preventing something terrible happening – because nothing terrible is going to happen, whether you relax or not.**

### Controlled breathing

As we saw earlier, when someone becomes frightened they start to breathe more quickly, so that oxygen is pumped more quickly round the body. However, breathing too fast, deeply or irregularly can lead to more symptoms of panic, such as faintness, tingling and dizziness. If breathing can be controlled during panic, these symptoms may be reduced and so the vicious circle described earlier can be broken. You must breathe more slowly.

If you breathe calmly and slowly for a few minutes, the alarm bell should stop ringing. This is not as easy as it sounds. Sometimes in the middle of a panic attack, focusing on breathing can be difficult. One of the effects of over-breathing is that you feel you need more air, so it is difficult to do something which makes you feel as though you are getting less!

Again, practise while you are not panicking to begin with. This technique will only work if you have practised and if it is used for a few minutes. It works much better in the very early stages of panic. Practise the following as often as you can.

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.

Do not breathe in a shallow way, from your chest, or too deeply. Keep your breathing nice and slow and calm. Breathe out from your mouth and in through your nose.

Try breathing in slowly for about 4 seconds saying to yourself: 1 and, 2 and, 3 and, 4.

Then let the breath out slowly for about 4 seconds again saying to yourself: 1 and 2 and 3 and 4.

Keep doing this until you feel calm. Once you have the rhythm nice and regular it may help to say to yourself as you breathe in 'calm' and as you breathe out 'relax'.

**Remember: even if you didn't control your breathing, nothing awful is going to happen.**

### Exercise

There is a great deal of research to suggest that exercise works really well as a way of managing stress. Exercise helps to release tension in our muscles and uses up the stress hormones produced as part of the fight and flight response. There are also other great health benefits to regular exercise, including improved mood.

### Your mind

There are at least five things you can do to help with the way your mind fuels a panic attack:

- Stop focusing on your body
- Learn to be more mindful
- Distract yourself from frightening thoughts
- Question and test your frightening thoughts
- Try to work out whether something else is making you tense

### Stop focusing on your body

Try to notice whether you are focusing on your symptoms, or scanning your body for something wrong as this can sometimes trigger a panic attack. Practice shifting your focus away from your body and focus on other things around you, for example try hard to focus on what someone is saying, or what you are doing rather than what is going on inside you.

### Mindfulness

This is a slightly different approach to managing panic. Mindfulness is a form of meditation that involves being totally in the present moment. It involves observing what is happening with a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on what is happening in the here and now, not the past and not the future. When we panic, often it is because we have had a panic attack in a similar situation in the past, so have been worrying beforehand. Or we may have frightening thoughts about what our symptoms mean. By practicing Mindfulness regularly, we can become more accepting of our bodily feelings, which in turn makes us calmer and less anxious.

The following mindful breathing exercise may be useful:

- Find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or lowered and your back straight.
- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Notice the natural, gentle rhythm of your breathing as you breathe in and out, and focus only on this.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. Just notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You may notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, but again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.

- Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts and feelings to be there. Just notice them, and let them drift on by; bringing your attention back to your breathing.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note this has happened, and then gently bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Thoughts will enter your awareness, and your attention will follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. If you are very distracted it might help to say 'in' and 'out' as you breathe.

**The more you can practice this exercise the more it will help you to manage your panic attacks. At least 15-20 minutes a day is recommended. Some suggestions of where you can find more information about mindfulness can be found at the end of the booklet.**

### Distraction

Mindfulness can take time to learn. Distraction is a quick very simple but effective technique to manage panic in its early stages. You need to keep distracting yourself for a few 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 job. Count the number of red 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, or an object, like a flower or your favourite car. 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.

It sounds very simple but distraction really does work. Have you ever been in the middle of a panic attack when something happened that totally took over your attention, for example the phone ringing, or a child falling over? What happened to the panic?

**Remember: distraction breaks the vicious circle, but it is important to remember that distraction is not preventing something terrible from happening. In fact, as distraction works, this is evidence that nothing awful was going to happen after all. For example, could the fact that the phone rang really have prevented a heart attack?**

### Question your thoughts

Sometimes, rather than distracting yourself from your anxious thoughts it is more helpful to challenge them. In the long run, it is most helpful to challenge your worrying thoughts, so that you no longer believe them.

### For thought challenging you need to do two things:

1. Work out what your anxious thoughts and worst fears are. Everyone's are different, you should already have a good idea from the work done so far.
2. Start to challenge these thoughts and come up with more realistic and helpful thoughts.

Once you are aware of your thoughts and pictures in your mind, ask yourself:

- What is the evidence for and against them?
- How many times have you had these thoughts and has your worst fear ever happened?
- Do your experiences fit more with panic or with something more serious. For example, if thinking about panic brings a panic attack on, is it likely that a stroke or heart attack could be caused in this way?

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

Some examples of unrealistic and unhelpful thoughts, with more realistic alternatives are given below.

Unhelpful/unrealistic thoughts	More realistic thoughts
I am having a heart attack	I have had this feeling many times and am still here.
I am going to faint	People having panic attacks are unlikely to faint. I have not fainted before.
I am going mad	The feelings I am experiencing are panic – they are nothing like going mad.
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.
I am going to lose control	Panic is designed to keep me safe so it wouldn't make sense that I would lose control.

Whilst it is really useful to challenge thoughts in this way, it may also be helpful to look at one other way in which your mind may be contributing to panic. Not through unhelpful anxious thoughts, but because there may be other things bothering you, as mentioned earlier.

**Is there something on your mind?** Remember that panic can arise as a result of difficult feelings not being dealt with. It may be helpful to work out whether anything like that is bothering you. Is there anything from your past that you haven't sorted out that is preying on your mind? Are there difficulties in your relationship? 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 emotional difficulties, either through talking to a friend or a professional (for example your doctor, counsellor or psychological therapist).

## Behaviour

Finally, challenging what you do is probably the most helpful way of overcoming panic. We have already talked about how avoidance, escape and safety behaviours keep panic going. It makes sense then that to reduce panic you need to reduce these behaviours.

Put simply, what you need to do now is test out the situations you fear most to prove to yourself that what is written here is true: **a panic attack cannot harm you.**

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 little by little is to 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.

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

### Avoidance

For example, if you are frightened of being alone, or visiting a supermarket, try gradually spending a little bit more time on your own, or going to a small shop. Does your feared disaster actually happen? 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 supermarket without your shopping? 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. If you normally sit down to stop yourself fainting, try staying upright. What happened! What did you learn?

Write down some experiments you could try, and afterwards what you found out, following the example below.

Safety behaviour and purpose	What you do instead	What did you learn?
Lie down when panic comes on to prevent heart attack	Run up and down stairs	I did not have a heart attack even though I ran up and down the stairs
Lean on shopping trolley to prevent fainting	Walk without trolley, use basket instead	I did not faint even without the trolley

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, mindfulness, distraction and thought challenging when not anxious until you have learned the techniques.
- Remind yourself during a panic that you have panicked many times before and nothing awful is going to happen.
- Use distraction, relaxation and slow breathing to help you manage the panic.
- 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.

### **Further help**

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

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. In addition, anxiety and panic attacks can sometimes be successfully treated by medication; usually in combination with the techniques described here. Discuss this with your GP who will be happy to give you more information.

### **Useful organisations**

- **Anxiety Care UK**  
[www.anxietycare.org.uk](http://www.anxietycare.org.uk)  
Provides information and support to those suffering from anxiety. For emotional support please contact [recoveryinfo@anxietycare.org.uk](mailto:recoveryinfo@anxietycare.org.uk)
- **Anxiety UK**  
Infoline: 08444 775 774  
Text service: 07537 416 905  
[www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)  
Provides information and support to people suffering from anxiety disorders.
- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**  
Tel: 01455 883 316  
[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
Offers an information service providing contacts for counselling in England and Wales.
- **CRUSE Bereavement Care**  
Helpline: 0808 808 1677  
[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)  
Offers advice and support for those affected by bereavement. Helpline for bereaved people and carers offering support from trained volunteers.
- **Healthwatch**  
[www.healthwatch.co.uk](http://www.healthwatch.co.uk)  
Healthwatch England is the independent consumer champion for health and social care in England. Working with local Healthwatch networks, we ensure that the voices of consumers and those who use services reach the ears of the decision makers.

- **Mental Health Matters**  
Tel: 0191 516 3500  
[www.mentalhealthmatters.com](http://www.mentalhealthmatters.com)  
A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.
- **Mind Infoline**  
Tel: 0300 123 3393  
Text: 86463  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.  
Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.
- **National Debt Line**  
Tel: 0808 808 4000  
[www.nationaldebtline.org](http://www.nationaldebtline.org)  
Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.
- **NHS Choices – Your health, your choices**  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.
- **No Panic**  
Helpline: 0844 967 4848  
Youth Helpline: 01753 840 393 (13-20 year olds)  
[www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)  
Support for sufferers of panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, general anxiety disorder and tranquilliser withdrawal.
- **Relate**  
Tel: 0300 100 1234  
[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)  
Help with marital or relationship problems.
- **Rethink**  
Helpline: 0300 500 0927  
[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)  
Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.

## Mindfulness downloads

- **Franticworld.com Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World** – Free meditations and mindfulness resources.
- **[www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)** – A free taster of mindfulness, with an opt-in to buy further sessions
- **[www.freemindfulness.org](http://www.freemindfulness.org)** – A collection of free to download meditations

## Relaxation downloads

- <http://wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk/audio-resources/>
- [www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/relax.php](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/relax.php)

## Useful books

- **Coping successfully with panic attacks**  
S. Trickett  
Sheldon 2009  
A self-help book which covers physical causes, such as low blood-sugar, and also psychological triggers.
- **Panic disorder: the facts (3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition)**  
S. Rachman and P. De Silva  
Oxford University Press 2009  
Includes valuable new information on treatment and discusses the relationship between panic disorder and other anxiety conditions.
- **Mind over Mood: Changing how you feel by changing the way you think**  
Christine A Padesky and Dennis Greenberger  
Guilford Publications 1995  
Draws on the authors' extensive experience as clinicians and teachers of cognitive therapy to help clients successfully understand and improve their moods, alter their behaviour, and enhance their relationships.
- **Overcoming Panic and Agoraphobia: A Self-help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**  
Derrick Silove, Vijaya Manicavasagar  
The Perseus Books Group 2008  
A step-by-step management programme which provides the necessary skills for overcoming and preventing panic attacks and associated agoraphobia.
- **Self help for your nerves**  
Claire Weekes  
HarperCollins 2000  
Guide for everything you need to know to keep relaxed through every day life. Offers comprehensive insight and advice into coping with nervous stress.
- **Understanding Panic Attacks And Overcoming Fear**  
Roger Baker  
Lion Books 2011  
A practical book which helps toward an in-depth understanding of panic. It describes a psychological self-help programme for panic sufferers that has been tried and tested over many years.

## References

A full list of references is available on request by emailing [pic@ntw.nhs.uk](mailto:pic@ntw.nhs.uk)

## Rate this guide



Share your thoughts with other people and let them know what you think of this guide at [www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp)

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Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust provides a range of mental health, learning disability and specialist services for a large part of the North East of England and beyond. You may not think these services have very much to do with you, but mental health problems affect 1 in 4 people and there are a growing number of people with both learning and other disabilities.

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 [ntw.nhs.uk/getinvolved](http://ntw.nhs.uk/getinvolved)

 0191 245 6827

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- ⇒ Give your views on the Trust's plans and any issues that interest you
- ⇒ Vote in the Governor Elections or stand as a Governor yourself
- ⇒ Receive regular information about the Trust

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## Membership Application Form

**Public**       **\*Service User**       **\*Carer**  (please ✓ only one)

**\*Service User/Carer** *I currently use or have cared for someone who has used, the following service in the last six years: (please ✓ service used below)*

Adult                                       Neuro Disability                                       Older People's  
 Children and Young People's                                       Learning Disability

Mr       Mrs       Miss       Ms       Other: .....

First name: ..... Surname: .....

Address: .....

Postcode: ..... Date of birth: .....

How would you like us to contact you? (please ✓/complete)

Post       Email  .....

Tel  ..... Mobile  .....

Signed: ..... Date: .....

Free self help guide  
(choose from the list overleaf)

Please send me a free copy of

# Mental Health Self Help Guides



Northumberland,  
Tyne and Wear  
NHS Foundation Trust

The self help guides have been written by NHS clinical psychologists with contributions from service users and healthcare staff.

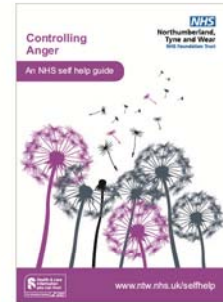
The guides offer users the opportunity to find out more about the causes of mental health issues and provide tools to work through feelings and emotions.

They are available in a range of formats including Easy Read, BSL and audio.

## Titles include:



Bereavement



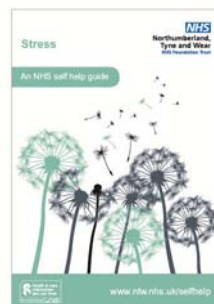
Controlling Anger



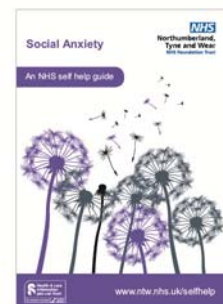
Anxiety



Depression  
and Low Mood



Stress



Social Anxiety

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Written by Dr Lesley Maunder and Lorna Cameron, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Many thanks to local voluntary sector groups, service users and healthcare staff who have contributed to the review of this guide.

Further information about the content, reference sources or production of this leaflet can be obtained from the Patient Information Centre.

This information is available in audio, larger print, easy read and BSL at [www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp) It can also be made available in alternative formats on request (eg Braille or other languages). Please contact the Patient Information Centre Tel: 0191 246 7288

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