



West Lothian
Community Wellbeing Hub

Panic 1

A self help guide

- What is panic?
- Symptoms of panic
- What is the purpose of panic?
- Panic and your body

(adaption of the NHS inform resource)



Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate symptoms of panic, or panic attacks that have started recently.

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or need emotional support you can phone Samaritans for free on 116 123.

If you're ill and feel it can't wait until your GP practice reopens you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance, phone 999.

Guide aims

- Understand panic and panic attacks
- Understand symptoms of panic attacks and their purpose
- Cope with panic attacks and make them less severe

This guide is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It aims to help you understand the link between thoughts, behaviour, feelings, and the physical symptoms of panic. These techniques can help you to gain more control and potentially reduce the effects of panic.

How to use the guide

Working through this guide can take around 30 to 40 minutes, but you should feel free to work at your own pace.

What is a panic attack?

You can identify a panic attack if it has 3 key features:

- You feel overwhelming fear and anxiety
- It happens suddenly and feels like it's out of control
- The worst feelings only last for a short time, but you'll likely feel upset and unsettled for some time after.

If you're having a panic attack, or about to have one, you'll likely experience a feeling of dread – as if something terrible is about to happen, or it's already happening.

For some people, panic attacks can be predicted – there are signs that an attack is going to happen. For others, it seems to come 'out of the blue'.

There are certain situations that commonly trigger panic attacks – these include driving, going into busy public places, or speaking in front of people. Everyone is different, so you might find, for example, that you have no issues with public speaking but become anxious in a crowd.

As many as one in 10 people will have at least one panic attack in their lifetime. It's nothing to be ashamed of, or feel embarrassed about, and it doesn't mean you're weak or unable to cope with daily life.

Symptoms of a panic attack

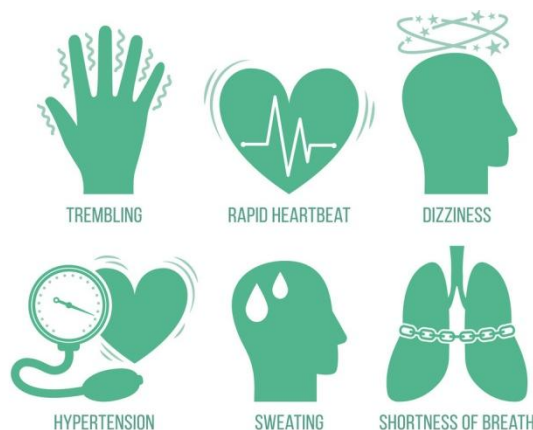
Most panic attacks have similar symptoms. It can be helpful to learn to recognise them.

Do I have panic attacks?

- Do you often experience uncomfortable physical symptoms such as a fast heartbeat, breathlessness, shaking, dizziness, and sweating?
- Do you avoid going places because you worry about having a panic attack?
- Do you often feel like you're going to faint or have a heart attack?
- Do you worry about being unable to cope in public places?
- Do you feel anxious if you're far away from home?
- Do you find it hard being in crowds or busy places?
- Do you make sure you have someone with you when you leave the house?
- Do you find yourself looking around a lot to find ways you can 'escape' if you need to?

Because panic attacks feel so unpleasant, people often worry that they're a sign of a serious physical or mental health problem, or that having panic attacks is damaging their health.

Worrying about this creates more anxiety, which can lead to a cycle of panic.



Common symptoms of panic attacks

Thoughts you might have:

- “I’m having a heart attack”
- “I’m going to faint”
- “I’m going to collapse”
- “I won’t be able to breathe”
- “I’m losing my mind”
- “Everyone knows I’m having a panic attack”
- “I’m going to make a fool of myself”
- “I’m going to die”
- “I’m going to pee/poo myself”

Emotions you might have:

- Anxious
- Panicky
- Scared
- Vulnerable – as if you can’t cope
- Helpless
- Dread – as if something terrible is going to happen.

Things you might do

- Leave situations where you feel panic, or are worried you’re going to have a panic attack
- Avoid situations where you expect to have a panic attack
- Use safety behaviours (e.g. opening a window to make it easier to breathe if a panic attack is making you afraid you’re going to choke) – there’ll be more information on those later on in the guide

What is the purpose of panic?

It might not feel like it, but panic is actually a normal reaction. Panic and fear are survival tools – the way the brain responds automatically to a frightening situation is designed to keep you safe. Your brain does this by ensuring that you respond to a situation in a way that will allow you to escape or defend yourself.

There are 3 reactions to fear:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze.

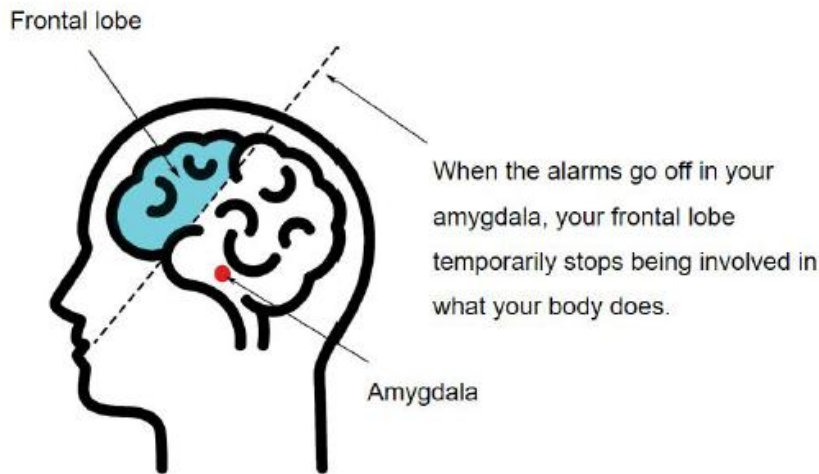
Your brain's reaction to a perceived threat – something that scares you – is to make it easier for your body to do one of these 3 things effectively.

There's more information about how the survival reaction works in the next section. When it comes to the fight, flight, or freeze response, the problem for people dealing with panic attacks is this reaction is bigger than it needs to be in normal daily life.

The symptoms you experience would have been very helpful thousands of years ago, but they aren't as necessary or useful in the modern world.

Another problem is that this reaction can be in response to something that seems frightening, but actually isn't dangerous – like being in a busy place, or getting trapped in a lift. These things might be unpleasant, but they aren't life-threatening. Unfortunately, the human brain's 'alarm system' is designed to react as if they are, in order to protect you. This causes a physical reaction known as a panic attack.

Panic and your brain



It can be helpful to understand what's going on in your brain when these reactions are happening in your body. You don't have to remember all the information below – just keep in mind what's happening in your body and mind. This gives you an 'early warning system' to let you know you might have a panic attack, so you can take steps to feel calmer.

Frontal lobe

Your frontal lobe is the rational part of your brain – the bit that's designed to help you manage your daily life, fit in with others, and do things like work and study. It's responsible for planning, problem solving, and rational thinking. The frontal lobe also handles impulse control and thinking about consequences – it's the reason people usually think before they act.

Amygdala

This is part of what's called the limbic system. The limbic system is designed to do all the things in your body that you don't think about, like breathing and digesting food. If your frontal lobe is your 'thinking' brain, your amygdala is your 'instinctive' brain. This part of your brain continually takes in and processes information from your senses. Even when you aren't thinking about it, it's scanning for threats and interpreting what you see, hear, feel, touch, taste and smell.

As well as watching out for threats, the amygdala is responsible for setting off your brain's 'alarm system' when it detects danger – even if it's a false alarm. When the alarms go off in your amygdala, it creates a shortcut between your amygdala and your body.

This means your frontal lobe – the rational part of your brain – temporarily stops being involved in what your body does. As part of this, your limbic system releases chemicals (including adrenaline) that have strong and immediate effects on your body. These effects are the physical symptoms of a panic attack – there's more detail on these in the next section.

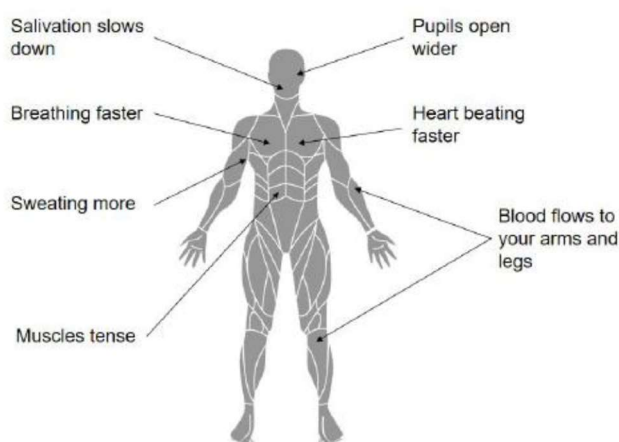
False alarms

This system responds in the same way to an imagined threat as it does to a real one. When the alarm system is triggered your rational brain goes 'offline', so to bring it back 'online' you have to do things to calm it down

Panic and your body

As discussed in the last section, your body reacts to threats – or what your brain thinks are threats – in a way that allows you to fight, run, or freeze. The chemicals released by your brain to prepare your body in threat situations cause a number of side effects. These are the symptoms you experience during a panic attack.

You might experience some or all of the following side effects:



- Salivation slows down
- Pupils open wider
- Breathing faster
- Heart beating faster
- Sweating more
- Blood flows to your arms and legs
- Muscles tense.

Physical response	Purpose	Side effect
Breathing faster	This is to give your muscles more oxygen, making it easier to fight or run.	Dizziness, feeling breathless, and chest pain.
Heart beating faster	This is to pump more blood around your body, to supply your muscles with more strength for fighting or running.	Heart pounding and feeling very aware of your heartbeat.
Blood flows to your arms and legs	This is where your blood would be needed most in a fight, or if you had to run away.	Feeling numbness, tingling, or coldness in your fingers, toes, face, or scalp. You might feel 'pins and needles' in your fingers.
Muscles tense	This is so you're ready to fight or run away instantly.	Feeling tense, having aches and pains, and trembling.
Sweating more	If you have to fight or run, your body will get hotter, so it tries to cool itself down.	Feeling sweaty.
Your digestive system, including salivation (creating saliva) slows down	This is so your body can use the energy elsewhere if needed.	Having a dry mouth, feeling sick, and a heavy feeling in your tummy.
Your mind focuses on looking out for danger, and your pupils open wider to let in more light	This is so you can see and react to threats more quickly.	Feeling anxious. You may get more sensitive to light. You might also experience disturbances in your vision, like 'tunnel vision'.

These are all normal, automatic reactions, because fear is designed to help you survive if you're in danger. After the danger is gone, these feelings and symptoms fade away. However, if you experience panic attacks, your body and mind can need longer to settle. This is because, when there's no obvious danger, there are also no obvious signs that you're safe.



In guide 2:

- What causes panic?
- What triggers panic attacks?
- What keeps panic going?



West Lothian
Health & Social Care Partnership
www.westlothianhscp.org.uk



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