



West Lothian
Community Wellbeing Hub

Panic 2

A self help guide

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

(adaption of the NHS inform resource)

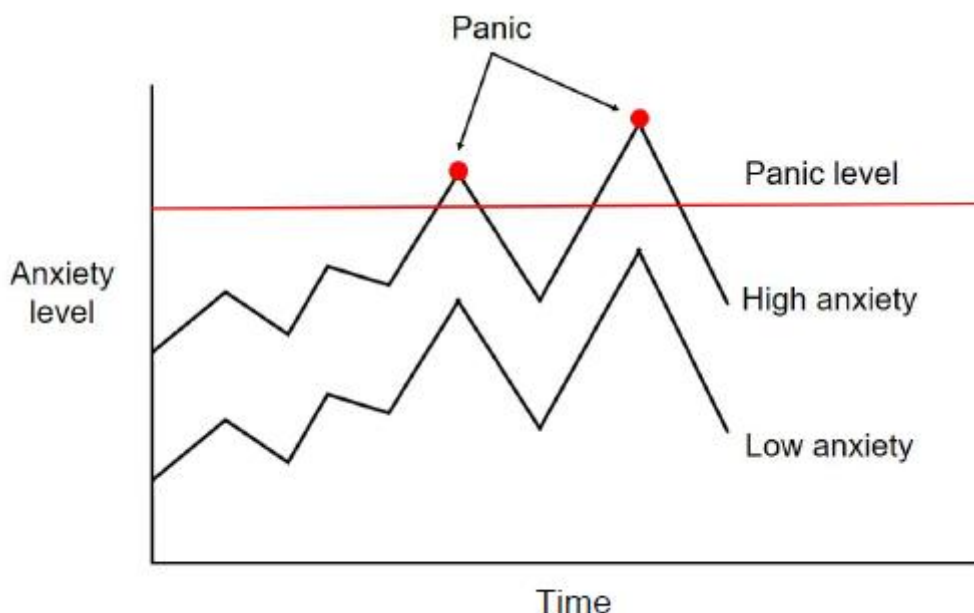


What causes panic?

People usually experience their first panic attack during stressful periods in their lives, or times when their responsibilities increase. This can include times when you experience relationship or financial problems, have to deal with pressure at work, or experience illness or bereavement.

Any stressful time in your life can lead to high anxiety levels – when your anxiety levels are high, you're more likely to experience panic attacks.

Everyone's anxiety levels go up and down, and the amount changes over time and depending on what's happening in your life. There can also be a 'panic level' that would make anybody experience a panic attack, even if they're generally calm. If you're not usually under a lot of stress, you're less likely to get to this level. If you're experiencing high amounts of stress over a period of time, your anxiety levels will go up and you're more likely to reach the panic level.

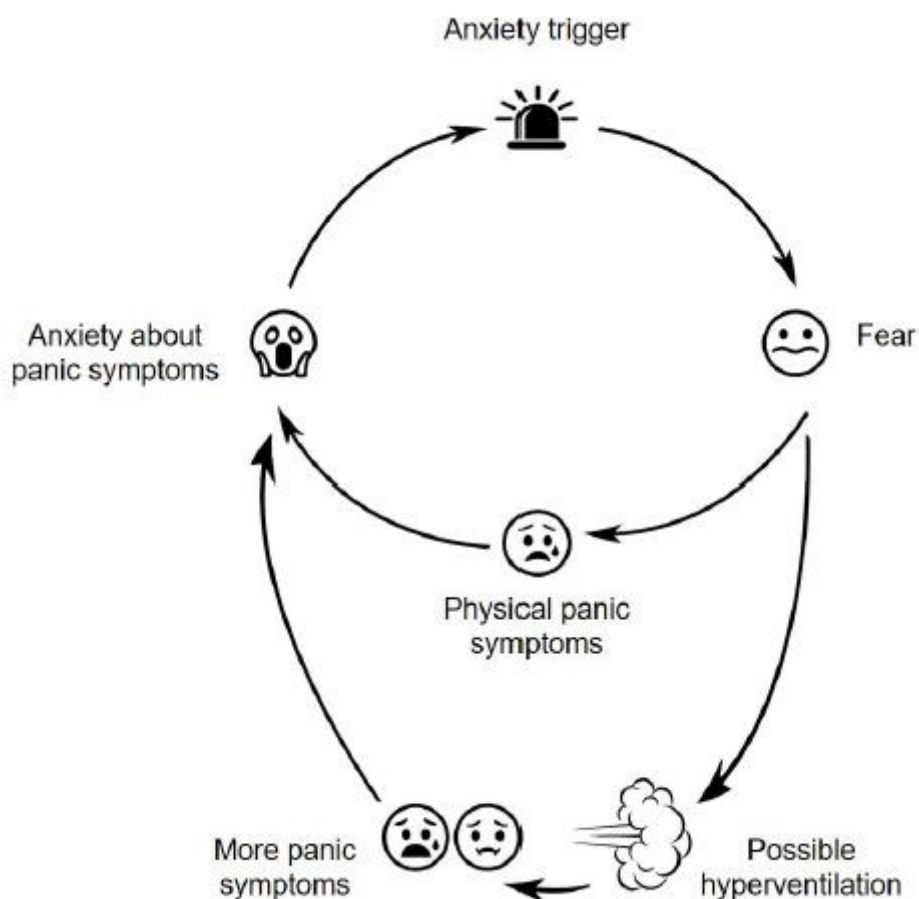


Many people who have panic attacks find they're more likely to have one when something else is bothering them – for example, relationship difficulties or periods of emotional upset.

Dealing with frequent concerns about things like your health, safety and wellbeing can make you more vulnerable to panic, because your anxiety levels are consistently higher and closer to the panic level.

What triggers panic attacks?

Triggers are different for everybody, but some are more common than others.



These include:

Higher levels of tension or anxiety: Whatever the reason behind the feeling, becoming tense or anxious can trigger a panic attack. This is why worrying about having a panic attack can often trigger one.

Feelings: Emotions that cause a reaction in your body, like anger, worry, or distress.

Exertion: Anything that puts your body under strain can trigger a panic attack.

Physical changes: These can include illness, being tired or hungry, and pre-menstrual tension (PMT).

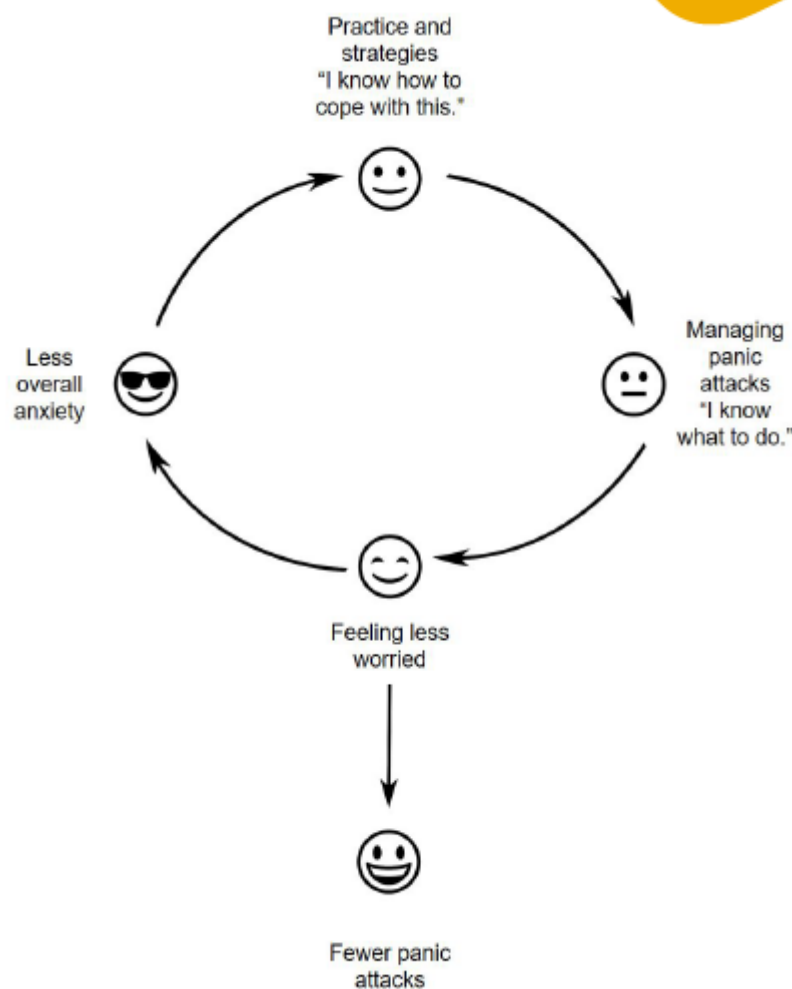
Alcohol and drugs: Alcohol, and many non-prescription drugs, can increase your heart rate and change your mood. This makes a panic attack more likely.

Lifestyle factors: The things you eat and drink can make you more likely to have a panic attack. Drinking a lot of caffeine or sugary drinks, or eating a lot of sugar, can make a panic attack more likely.

Being focused on your body: If you have time to sit and think about your body and your mood, this can raise your anxiety levels and trigger a panic attack.

It's important to be aware that – apart from drugs and alcohol – none of these triggers are dangerous, so there's no reason to avoid them. In fact, trying to find out what your triggers are and avoid them can be a waste of time and energy. It's often more helpful to focus on learning how to manage feelings of panic when they happen.

As you learn how to deal with panic attacks, you'll feel less worried about having one. In turn, feeling less anxious overall means you'll be less likely to have a panic attack.



There's information about dealing with panic attacks further along in the guide.

What keeps panic going?

Some ways of thinking and behaving can keep panic going. The same as with triggers, these are different for everybody, but some are more common than others.

Monitoring your body

The sensations in your body are always changing - for example, it's normal to feel breathless after running for the bus, or to feel your heart 'skip a beat' when you're excited. If you're concerned about having a panic attack, you can find yourself monitoring your body for anything that you think might signal an attack is coming.

This makes it more likely that you'll notice normal changes in your body and misinterpret them – think they mean something more than they do. These thinking errors can then trigger a panic attack, because you become afraid you're about to have one and your anxiety levels rise.

Unhelpful thoughts about panic

Many people who have panic attacks experience unhelpful thoughts that keep panic going. These can include:

Believing you can't cope:

- “I won't be able to deal with this.”

Catastrophising: Where you believe something terrible is going to happen.

- “If I do this, I'm going to die.”

Worrying about what other people think: Worrying about what people think of you and fearing that you'll look foolish in front of others.

- “Everyone can see I'm panicking and they think I'm weak.”

Worrying about anxiety: Worrying about anxiety symptoms and interpreting them as dangerous

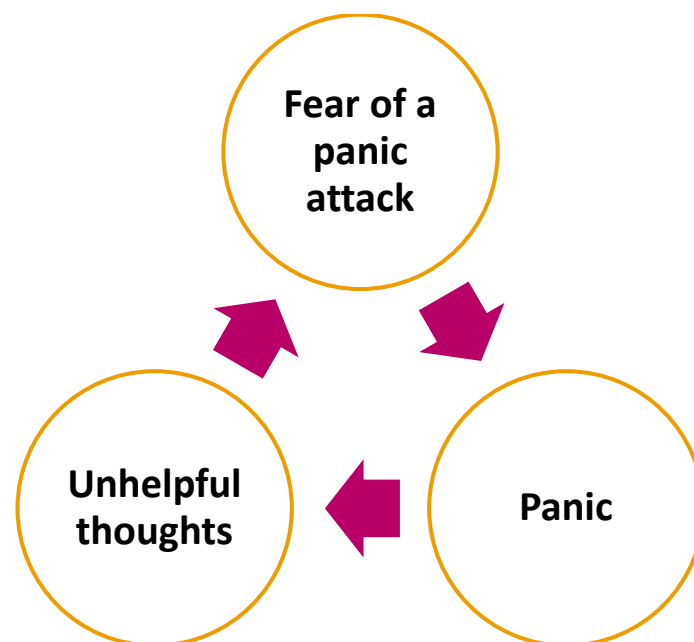
- “If my heart doesn't stop racing I'm going to have a heart attack.
- “I can't breathe, I'm going to choke.”

Anticipating an attack: Anticipation (waiting for something) can keep panic going. In situations where you've had a panic attack before, you might find yourself expecting it to happen again when you return to that situation. This means you become afraid of being in situations where you had an attack before, because you're scared it'll happen again.

Avoidance and safety behaviours: People often get into the habit of avoiding situations that make them feel anxious. This can, unfortunately, make life harder in the long run. There are 2 reasons for this:

- One is that the longer you avoid something, the more intimidating it becomes.
- The other is that if you never challenge your fears, you never get the chance to find out that you can cope.

As a result, you may lose confidence in your ability to deal with situations that make you feel anxious. The less you do, the less you'll feel able to do.



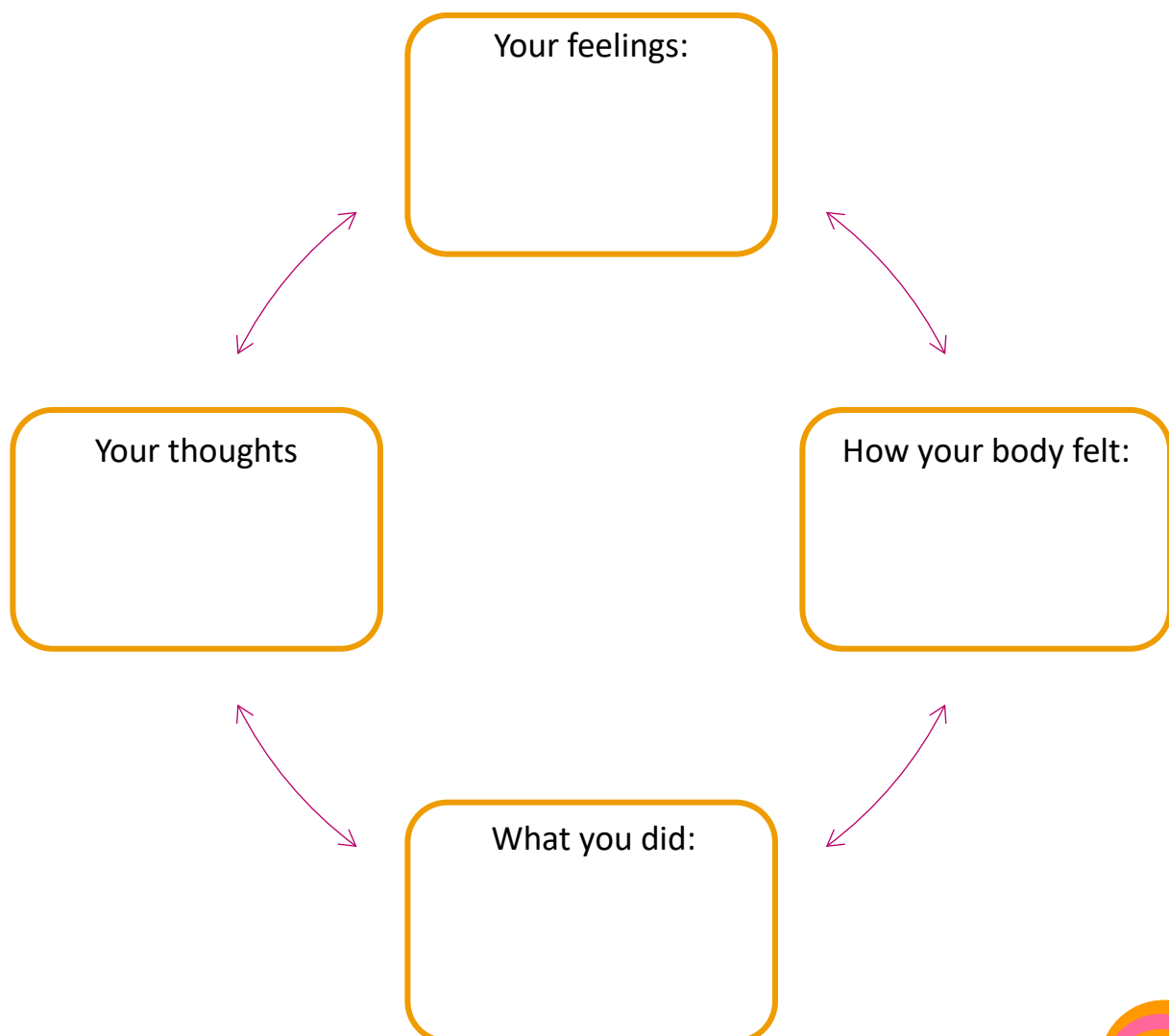
Unfortunately, this fear can trigger a panic attack, creating a vicious cycle (as you can see in the graphic above).

Activity 1

As discussed in the previous section, the things you think, feel, and do can keep panic going. Once you can recognise this is happening, it'll be easier to change these habits and take steps to feel more in control. Fill in the boxes below about a situation when you felt panic.

Filling this in helps you see how your feelings, thoughts, behaviour and how your body feels are all linked, and can all affect each other.

Describe the situation:



On the infographic you can see how thoughts, feelings and actions affect each other. You can see how doing things to try to avoid a panic attack, like leaving a situation where you feel anxious, strengthens your belief that you can't cope. This makes panic attacks more likely to happen in similar situations in the future.





In guide 3:

- Coping with panic
- Grounding
- Getting through a panic attack
- Reducing avoidance and safety behaviours
- Next steps



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