



West Lothian
Community Wellbeing Hub

Panic 3

A self help guide

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

(adaption of the NHS inform resource)

Coping with panic

Now you have a better understanding of what causes and triggers panic attacks, you're better prepared to deal with them. Having this understanding and knowing that panic is common, is helpful for many people.

The next step is learning techniques to help you cope with panic attacks, so they have less of an impact on your life. You can also learn skills to help bring down your overall anxiety level so panic attacks are less likely.

This guide will cover a number of techniques for coping with panic attacks. These include:

- Coping statements
- Relaxation exercises
- Exercises to help you feel more in control
- Coping strategies for getting through a panic attack
- Techniques to deal with worry and reduce your overall anxiety.

Developing these skills can take time and practice, so don't worry if you have difficulty with them in the beginning. It's important to practice these techniques regularly when you're not feeling anxiety or panic, so when you do need to manage a panic attack you know exactly what to do.

Coping statements

Coping statements are great way to remind yourself about what anxiety and panic actually are, and can prevent the development of a negative cycle where you panic about panicking.

You can make up your own coping statements, or use ones like this:

- “Anxiety is normal”
- “Panic is just high levels of anxiety.”
- “Everyone experiences anxiety and panic at times”
- “Anxiety and panic aren’t dangerous”
- “Fear is designed to protect us- it’s not harmful”
- “I’ve gotten through this before, I can do it again”
- “Slowing down my breathing will help”
- “My anxiety and panic levels will reduce with time”
- “I don’t need to escape or use safety behaviours”
- “I’ve never fainted, choked, or had a heart attack through panic before”
- “Other people can’t tell how anxious I feel”.

Relaxation and distraction

Breathing exercises can help you feel calmer and reduce your anxiety. The controlled breathing technique involves focusing on and slowing down your breathing. It’s particularly helpful if you feel dizzy or light-headed when you get anxious.

1. Get into a comfortable position – you could lie on your bed, or sit on a comfortable chair.
2. Try to breathe in a steady rhythm. Perhaps try to breathe in for three seconds, hold this breath for two seconds, and then breathe out for three seconds. It can be helpful to count as you do this – for example, “in, 1,2,3... out, 1,2,3”.
3. Repeat the steady breathing for a few minutes.
4. You should soon begin to feel more relaxed. If you were feeling dizzy then this should also get better after a few minutes.

We have a number of other breathing and relaxation exercises on NHS inform that can help with anxiety and stress. Try doing these as often as possible, even when you're feeling calm, so you can get used to them and use them automatically when you start to panic.

Distraction

Another good approach is to focus on what's going on around you, instead of what's going on inside your body. Here are some useful distraction techniques:

- Try counting backwards from 100 in threes – for example, “100, 97, 94, 91...” and so on
- Listen to music
- Try counting all the red objects you can see
- Repeat the words of a song, in your mind or out loud
- Do something you enjoy that needs you to focus – for example, knitting, sewing, reading, or watching a TV show
- Go outside for a walk, if you can, and try to really experience the world around you - feel the air on your face and the ground under your feet, look around at everything that's going on, and listen to all the sounds
- Picture something or someone that makes you feel happy and relaxed – picture your favourite place in your mind, and imagine yourself there with your favourite person, or your pet.

Grounding

Grounding is a helpful technique to reduce feelings of anxiety and panic when they feel overwhelming.

Grounding involves changing your focus from uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, which are internal, to the external and the here and now.

Exercise 1

You can use the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 method to ground yourself.

Start by sitting in a comfortable place and taking a deep breath. Then try to focus on the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can feel
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Exercise 2

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position
2. Imagine you have an empty balloon in your stomach
3. Try to inflate the balloon by breathing through your nose - breathe in while counting to 3
4. Now slowly deflate the balloon by breathing out through your mouth
5. Inflate and deflate the balloon a few times until you feel calmer.

Worry time

Often when people are dealing with emotional upset or stressful periods in their lives, people try to avoid thinking about what's bothering them. This can cause these worries to pop up at times when your mind is less active, such as when you're going to bed at night, and trigger a panic attack.

You can feel more in control of these worries by setting aside a specific time in the day to allow your mind to focus on them, and give yourself time to acknowledge them. This doesn't mean trying to think of solutions – it's more of a chance to take control of how and when you think about your worries, so they're less likely to pop into your mind and cause you to panic.

Worry time:

1. Decide a time in the day that's worry time – this should last about 10 to 15 minutes.
2. At other times, remind yourself that you have worry time put aside already and you can worry about things then.
3. Try to make sure worry time doesn't go on for longer than 15 minutes.
4. During worry time, let yourself worry – don't even try to come up with solutions. Focus entirely on allowing yourself to go over these worries.
5. Stop as soon as your worry time is finished – or earlier, as you might run out of worries before the 15 minutes is up.

After worry time, do something completely different – for example, you could talk to a friend, go for a walk, or just make a cup of tea. Do something that signals to you that worry time is over. This changes your focus back from the internal to the external here and now.

Getting through a panic attack

It's not always possible to prevent a panic attack – although that doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile to practice relaxation and ways to de-stress.

The following techniques are helpful for reducing the intensity and length of panic attacks:

Use the coping strategies in the previous sections of this guide when you first start to panic – try to catch the attack early. Breathe more slowly and work on shifting your focus away from yourself and onto an external positive distraction. Page 4 of this guide has a list of ideas for distractions that can help.

Reassure yourself using coping statements – panic attacks feel terrible, but they don't cause anything bad to happen. Remind yourself that you've had panic attacks before and survived, so you will survive this time as well.

Make an effort not to run away or use safety behaviours – it's important to stay in the situation you're in, if you can. This shows you that you don't have to escape for the panic to stop.

Remind yourself of what's happening in your body and mind:

- This is your brain's alarm system trying to protect you
- Your body and brain are built to cope with this
- While you're panicking, you're at your most prepared to deal with danger –even if it doesn't feel like it
- Your brain's alarm system will switch itself off – you can wait for that to happen

Reducing avoidance and safety behaviours

Avoidance and safety behaviours can make it difficult to overcome panic attacks. As mentioned in the 'What keeps panic going' section of *Panic 2*, if you avoid situations that make you feel anxious, or where you worry you'll have a panic attack, it can make the problem worse.

The longer you avoid something, the more intimidating it becomes. Also, if you always avoid situations that cause anxiety, it's harder to prove to yourself that you can manage them – as a result, you may lose confidence.

Safety behaviours, as mentioned in previous sections 'Symptoms of a panic attack' (in *Panic 1*) and 'What keeps panic going' (in *Panic 2*), can make you feel less anxious at the time, but actually make things worse in the long term. Safety behaviours can make you think a situation only went well because you used them – this makes you think you need to keep using them.

Here are some examples of safety behaviours:

- Avoiding particular situations, such as public or crowded places, in case you have a panic attack
- Only going out, or to certain places, if you have someone you know with you
- Always carrying things with you that make you feel safer, like anti-anxiety medication, or a paper bag in case you have to be sick.

If you keep using safety behaviours, you never get the chance to prove to yourself that you can cope without them. This makes it harder to manage panic and feel in control.

One of the most helpful ways to deal with panic attacks in the long term is to identify and challenge unhelpful thoughts. You can do this through 'behavioural experiments' – this means going into situations where you think you might panic and proving to yourself that you can cope.

Trying these frightening activities will give you important information that you can use to manage feelings of panic. For example, you might be scared that you will have a panic attack if you go into the supermarket alone – then once you do it, you find that it was easier than you expected. This makes it much easier to challenge negative thoughts in the future and build self-confidence, which in turn reduces the chances of having another panic attack.

In the next section, you'll find an activity that will help you start reducing avoidance and safety behaviours.

Activity 2

There are 7 steps to a behavioural experiment:

1. Decide on your overall goal – for example, going to the supermarket alone on a Saturday afternoon.
2. Make a list of smaller steps towards this goal – for example, walking to the end of the road alone, or going to the supermarket when it's not busy.
3. Rank the steps based on which ones make you most anxious, and sort them in order from the one that causes the least anxiety to the one that causes the most anxiety.
4. Try out the first step.
5. Think about how the first step went – what went well? What could have gone better?
6. Repeat the first step until you feel comfortable.
7. Move onto the next step and repeat the process.

Here's an example:

Goal: going to the supermarket alone on a busy Saturday afternoon	
Step:	Difficulty score 0= no distress, 10= extreme distress
Leaving your house alone and waiting outside for 5 minutes before going back in	2
Walking down the street alone	4
Going to a smaller shop alone	5
Going to the supermarket alone but not going in	7
Going to the supermarket alone at 9pm on a Monday	9
Going to the supermarket alone at 2pm on a Saturday	10

Your turn:

Goal:	
Step:	Difficulty score 0= no distress, 10= extreme distress

Making the most of behavioural experiments

Here are some tips that will help you to benefit from this activity:

Remember that these steps will make you feel anxious and panicky, but those feelings are part of the experiment and it's important to 'push through' them. Keep in mind that anxiety and panic are not dangerous, even though they feel terrible.

When you're working through your list, try your best to avoid engaging in safety behaviours. The aim of these tasks is to expose you to situations that make you feel anxious and panicky and give you the chance to overcome those feelings, so using safety behaviours can make it harder for you to feel better in the long term. Safety behaviours take away your chance to find out you can face these situations without them.

You might find it helpful to add an item to your list that focuses on avoiding safety behaviours – for example, you could say "I'm scared to go out without listening to music on my headphones", and challenge yourself to overcome that fear.

Some situations that make you feel anxious are ones that go on for a long time – for example, shopping or going to a party. Try to remain in these situations for as long as you can, and your anxiety will begin to reduce. If you can increase the amount of time you stay every time you're in the situation, it'll help build your tolerance - you'll find it easier to cope for longer as time goes on.

Try to avoid monitoring your body or anticipating a panic attack. Use the techniques from sections 'Coping with panic', 'Relaxation and Panic', and 'Grounding' of this guide to help you stay calm.

Next steps

Keep using the techniques you found helpful from this guide – they should continue to benefit you. If there are some things that you didn't find helpful to begin with, stick with them for a few weeks – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can take a little time to work.

Further help

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 feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area.

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone Breathing Space on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phoneline is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday)

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, Living Life offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. They're open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655.



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