

# Panic Attacks

## What is a Panic Attack?

Panic is extremely common and occurs equally in both male and females; with no particular type of personality being susceptible. Panic attacks often happen at random



when it is least expected or when you meet or simply think about some scary situation. Thousands of years ago panicking was very useful. We led much more physically challenging and dangerous lives then. We didn't have sharp teeth or claws and so we had to be able to react very quickly to threat, we either ran or if we desperate enough we stood our ground and fought. This evolutionary response hasn't had long enough to adapt to a modern world so we are essentially stuck using ancient tools.

## The Fight, Flight or Freeze Response:

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense fear. The experience of panic is often referred to as a 'fight, flight or freeze' response, in which the body is mobilised to facilitate immediate escape from a perceived threat or to meet the threat head-on with an aggressive response or to access what specific course of action should be taken. During panic, the body releases hormones such as adrenaline, your blood pressure rises and the heart races to get blood to the large muscles that may be needed in the event of an escape. Breathing becomes more rapid in order to increase the flow of oxygen to the bodily tissues and perspiration increases to cool off the body so it can perform more efficiently. Your legs may shake as they are prepared for running. Your hands may also shake as the large muscles of your arms are prepared to fight. Your palms and feet may become sweaty to give you a better grip. Another change that occurs during a panic attack is that the pupils dilate to let more light in..

Being able to respond in this way was very useful to our ancestors who were faced with often very dangerous animals or members of an enemy tribe which is why the mind of a human being can trigger a panic attack fast and unconsciously. This is really important and why people who suffer from panic attacks often report that 'they came out of nowhere', it is an essential part of the 'fight, flight or freeze' response.

## Are there any strategies for Coping with Panic Attacks?

1. Remember that although your feelings and symptoms are very frightening, they are not dangerous or harmful.
2. Understand that what you are experiencing is just an exaggeration of your normal bodily reactions to stress
3. Do *NOT* fight your feelings or try to wish them away. The more you are willing to face them, the less intense they will become.
4. Do *NOT* add to your panic by thinking about what 'might' happen. If you find yourself asking 'What if?' tell yourself 'So what!'.
5. Stay in the present. Notice what is really happening to you as opposed to what you think might happen.
6. Rate your fear level from 0 - 10 and watch it go up or down. Notice that it does not stay at a very high level for more than a few seconds.
7. When you find yourself thinking about the fear, change your 'what if' thinking. Focus on and carry out simple and manageable tasks such as counting backwards from 100 in 3's or snapping a rubber band on your wrist.
8. Notice that when you stop adding frightening thoughts to your fear, it begins to fade.
9. When the fear comes, expect and accept it. Wait and give it time to pass without running away from it.
10. Be proud of yourself for your progress thus far and think about how good you will feel when you succeed this time.

### **Is there any treatment for dealing with Panic Attacks?**

Early treatment of Panic attacks can bring significant relief to 70-90% of people who suffer from them. Psychotherapy, relaxation skills, breathing techniques, homeopathy, massage, acupuncture, yoga and meditation, are amongst some of the treatments for panic attacks. Breathing slowly through your nose, slowly counting inwardly from 1 to 4 to hold the breath for 1 - 2 seconds and then breath slowly out through the mouth counting slowly from 1 - 4. Repeat the process a few times while also deliberately lowering your shoulders and imagining feeling supported by the ground if standing, or the seat if sitting.

Through gaining the skills of controlling your thoughts and your physical reaction to them, avoidance is no longer your only option Success of any

treatment for dealing with panic attacks is measured on how you manage your panic not what you do to avoid it.

## How is Panic Diagnosed?

A positive answer to any four of the questions below will indicate you are experiencing panic attacks (based on DSM IV classification)

Do you sometimes feel short of breath like you can't get enough air in, making you take short panting breaths or big deep sighs, or want to throw open a window?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your heart race at times so that you are uncomfortably aware of it thumping in your chest, maybe even making you afraid you could have heart disease, or need to call a doctor?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you ever feel discomfort or pains in your chest, a tight or aching feeling?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you occasionally felt sensations of choking or smothering where every breath feels like it could be your last, and getting outside where you can breathe becomes a matter of survival?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you ever feel wobbly or unsteady on your feet, with a dizzy feeling or a pressure in your head, as though you might faint, and wonder if your 'jelly legs' will support you as far as the nearest exit?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you experienced sensations of tingling, numbness or 'pins -and- needles' usually in the arms or legs, or blurring and double vision making it hard to focus normally?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you ever get a queasy 'knot' in your stomach and a feeling that you might vomit, or have a sudden urge to empty your bowels?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you ever tremble or shake, so that it could be hard to write a cheque or hold a cup steady?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you feel waves of heat or cold chills pass over you, or sweat profusely at times so that you might need to rapidly undo buttons and peel off clothes? Does it ever make you want to splash cold water on your face or plunge your hands into the freezer? Have you woken up at night with the sheets soaked in sweat?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your perception of your surroundings change so that you feel out of touch with your body or detached from things around you?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you feared that you were going to die while experiencing any of these symptoms, say from a heart attack, ceasing to breathe or some other medical emergency?

☐ Yes ☐ No

At any time did you fear losing control, or that you were going crazy?

☐ Yes ☐ No

TOTAL 

## Always remember -

- All the sensations of panic are harmless; no matter how intense the response is protective in nature.
- You will never stop breathing because of a panic attack
- Your heart is not at risk during a panic attack
- Nobody has ever gone mad, died or lost control as a result of a panic attack
- All panic attacks end - they are time-limited.
- Be still - resist escaping
- Go with your body's sensations - don't fight it
- Stay in the present - don't futurise
- Deflate the anger - tell yourself the facts
- Dampen down the reaction :  
Breath slowly into your belly  
Relax your muscles  
Ground your energy



Be consistent - don't resort to bad habits!

See also information leaflets on Stress Management and Relaxation techniques.

## Some more help?

The following reading may also be helpful:

When Panic Attacks: Dr. Aine Tubridy (2007), Newleaf.

Remember the Counselling and Personal Development Service is here to help, so if you need us, simply phone 01 700 5165 or email [counselling@dcu.ie](mailto:counselling@dcu.ie) to make an appointment.