

Coping with Panic Attacks



“Now is the age of anxiety.”

W.H. Auden, Anglo-American poet (1907-1973)

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified, terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 32nd President of the United States (1882-1945)

“I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

Frank Herbert, Dune (1965)

Imagine walking down your street in the middle of a perfectly normal day. As you get closer to your house, you begin to feel a certain nausea in your stomach, followed by a strange numbness across your body. Your breathing becomes laboured and as you reach for your keys, you break into a heavy sweat.

You stumble into the house, short of breath now with a stabbing pain in your chest. You feel dizzy and light-headed, feeling at first very hot, then very cold. Gradually these terrifying symptoms begin to subside and you slump exhausted on to the sofa.

As you begin to regain your composure, you realise you haven't had a heart attack or a nervous breakdown, but you can't find anything to account for what you've just been through. If any of these symptoms sound familiar, it is highly likely that you have had a panic attack, and it's one of the most frightening experiences there is.

According to the National Health Service (NHS), at least one in ten people will experience a panic attack at some point in their lives. But one in a hundred will also suffer from what is known as panic disorder, which can involve regular and recurring attacks.

Although much is known about panic attacks, they can still be almost impossible to predict, involving a broad and variable range of psychological and physical symptoms, triggered by often random events and circumstances. In short, they can be difficult to understand, which makes them even more frightening. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the **CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline** is available for practical and emotional support.

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is basically a highly exaggerated version of your body's natural response to stress, fear, threat or excitement. In the normal course of events, these types of stimulus will trigger what is known as the Fight/Flight response. This releases a range of hormones and chemicals into our bloodstream, including adrenalin, that primes our body to either fight off the threat or run away from it. The response in itself is crucial to our survival. If we did not respond in any way to external threat, we would not live that long.

The Fight Flight response is triggered in a very primitive part of our brain, known as the limbic system, which reacts with enormous speed but not very much accuracy. When all is working as it should, another part of our brain, the pre-frontal cortex, kicks in soon after the limbic system has fired, and basically gives us the opportunity to rationally evaluate what's going on.

It is thought that a panic attack is triggered when our stress response gets stuck in the primitive part of the brain. We then get flooded with adrenalin, which pushes us into a vicious circle. The more anxious we feel, the more anxiety gets triggered. And once a panic attack has happened once, your body becomes increasingly tense and alert, fearing that it might re-occur.

Without the rational part of our brain to help us out, we become incapable of discriminating between real threats and imaginary ones. So to take an example, someone who is very afraid of flying can be driven into panic simply by the sound of the aircraft engine starting even though there is rationally nothing to fear.

What can be even more frightening is when attacks are triggered simply by the fear of another attack. This can occur, for instance, when someone feels short of breath, which then sets off the response and pushes them into hyper-ventilation.

Symptoms

When the body is flooded with adrenalin, it can set off a number of sensations. Physical symptoms can include:

- Irregular heartbeat or shortness of breath
- Sweating or trembling
- Hot flushes or chills
- Chest pains or choking sensations
- Nausea or dizziness
- Tingling or numbness



On an emotional level, the most terrifying aspect of a panic attack can be the feeling that one is going to die. Another common feeling is what is known as depersonalization, when one feels literally detached from one's own body, as if this is all happening to someone else. Unfortunately, this feeling of detachment does not make it any easier to bear. It often actually does the opposite, making the experience more confusing and destabilizing.

Along with these symptoms, panic attacks are often characterised by the following conditions:

- They occur without warning and without any way of apparently stopping them
- The level of fear is completely unrelated to the actual situation
- They normally last between five minutes and 20 minutes, but repeated attacks can recur for hours.

If panic attacks persist over time, sufferers get stuck in a state of almost permanent arousal. This can begin to put increasing restrictions on their movements as they begin to avoid the people, places and things that they worry may trigger an attack. This can lead to agoraphobia if people spend too long indoors. It can also lead to depression as activities that create enjoyment in life become increasingly limited.

What causes panic attacks?

As we noted earlier, the specific causes of panic attacks remain surprisingly mysterious, given the vast body of literature on the subject. Some people experience panic in response to particular situations, but for others, the onset of an attack is horribly random. Despite the uncertainties, however, several physical and psychological factors have been identified as having an impact, but please note that this list is by no means exhaustive:

- **Childhood difficulties.** Recent developments in neuroscience have confirmed that children who experience either unpredictable parenting or prolonged neglect are more vulnerable to anxiety and panic in later life.
- **Previous experiences of stress and trauma.** People who have undergone intensely stressful events in their life (such as accidents, bereavement or assault) can have more sensitive stress responses to future events. This is particularly true when people find themselves in a situation which in some way reminds them of an earlier trauma.

- **Family history.** Panic disorder has been found to run in families, and this may mean that inheritance plays a role in determining who will get it.
- **Use of stimulants.** Drugs such as caffeine, nicotine and cocaine often cause anxiety symptoms to worsen.
- **Lack of assertiveness.** Research is increasingly suggesting that a passive style of communication can contribute to panic attacks. People who cannot clearly state their needs will often be susceptible to high levels of anxiety.
- **Chronic pain or illness.** Both of these can wear down your sense of resilience to the point where the fear of not being able to cope becomes overwhelming.
- **Hyperventilation** – Breathing from the chest as opposed to the diaphragm and breathing too much through the mouth can both lead to hyperventilation, which can play a significant role in bringing on a panic attack.

What can you do about panic attacks?

As scary as panic attacks are, it is vital to remember two things. First, they are not in themselves life-threatening, no matter how much they may feel like it. Second, there is a tremendous amount you can do in response, regardless of how helpless they can make you feel.

Don't fight them. The paradox of taking control of your panic attacks is that the more you fight them, the worse they will get. If you can accept that a panic attack is unpleasant and frightening, but that it will pass, you immediately reduce its power to paralyse you.



Learn to relax. This may sound like a statement of the obvious, but many people who are vulnerable to panic attacks are often people who live in a state of constant tension. Relaxing, it may surprise you to learn, requires practice, especially in our high-speed, 24-hour connected world. Many people use guided visualisations or meditation techniques to help them unwind. Others enjoy yoga or pilates. But it can be just as effective to take a long bath or watch something that really makes you laugh. No one can tell you what will work for you. You have to get out there and try something out!

Get some exercise. Regular exercise, particularly aerobic exercise, will help you to combat stress and release tension. It can also encourage your brain to release the chemical serotonin, which can help to improve your mood. People often get put off because they feel they have to get into some kind of extreme activity. This is just not true. Taking regular strolls, for instance, can have a dramatic effect on your sense of wellbeing and fitness.

Get some support. It is widely held that anxiety and panic disorders can stem from unprocessed feelings and phobias from childhood. Talking to a therapist or psychotherapist can help bring these feelings into conscious awareness and provide a safe space for them to be thought about and worked through. Cognitive therapies can also be helpful in that they help sufferers counteract the negative and distorted thinking that can fuel a panic attack.

A practical response

When you are actually experiencing a panic attack, the following calming technique is recommended by Anxiety UK, one of Britain's leading charities supporting those affected by phobias and anxiety disorders.

1. Ensure you are sitting on a comfortable chair
2. Take a breath in through the nose for 4 seconds
3. Hold that breath for 2 seconds
4. Release the breath through the mouth for 6 seconds

Once you have established a regular rhythm of breathing, your body will begin to calm down. The following techniques can then help restore a sense of equilibrium to your mind.

- Stop focussing on your body. Find a method of distraction such as counting objects in the room or try and picture a pleasant scene in your mind (such as a holiday where you felt completely relaxed)
- Say to yourself: 'I'm having a panic attack. I feel awful but nothing bad can happen. I know what to do. I can control this. It will pass.'
- Challenge any unrealistic thoughts, especially the idea that you have to run away.

Don't suffer in silence

Panic attacks can be frightening and isolating, but you must remember that you are not alone. There are many resources out there, both medical and psychological, that can support you through whatever it is that you have to deal with. If you call the **CiC Confidential Care Adviceline**, a consultant will listen non-judgmentally to your experiences and help you think about the best way forward.



Books

Don't Panic: Taking Control of Anxiety Attacks

by Reid Wilson

Panic Attack, Anxiety and Phobia Solutions Handbook

by Muriel K. MacFarlane

Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway

by Susan J. Jeffers

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

