Panic self-help guide

1. Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate symptoms of panic, or panic attacks that started recently. If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

This guide aims to help you:

- 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 panic self-help guide

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

To type in a graphic or diary, click or tap the part you'd like to fill in and use your keyboard as usual.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

2. 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 your 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.

3. 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?

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 – there'll be more information on those later on in the guide

One example of a safety behaviour is opening a window to make it easier to breathe if a panic attack is making you afraid you're going to choke.

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.

4. What's 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.

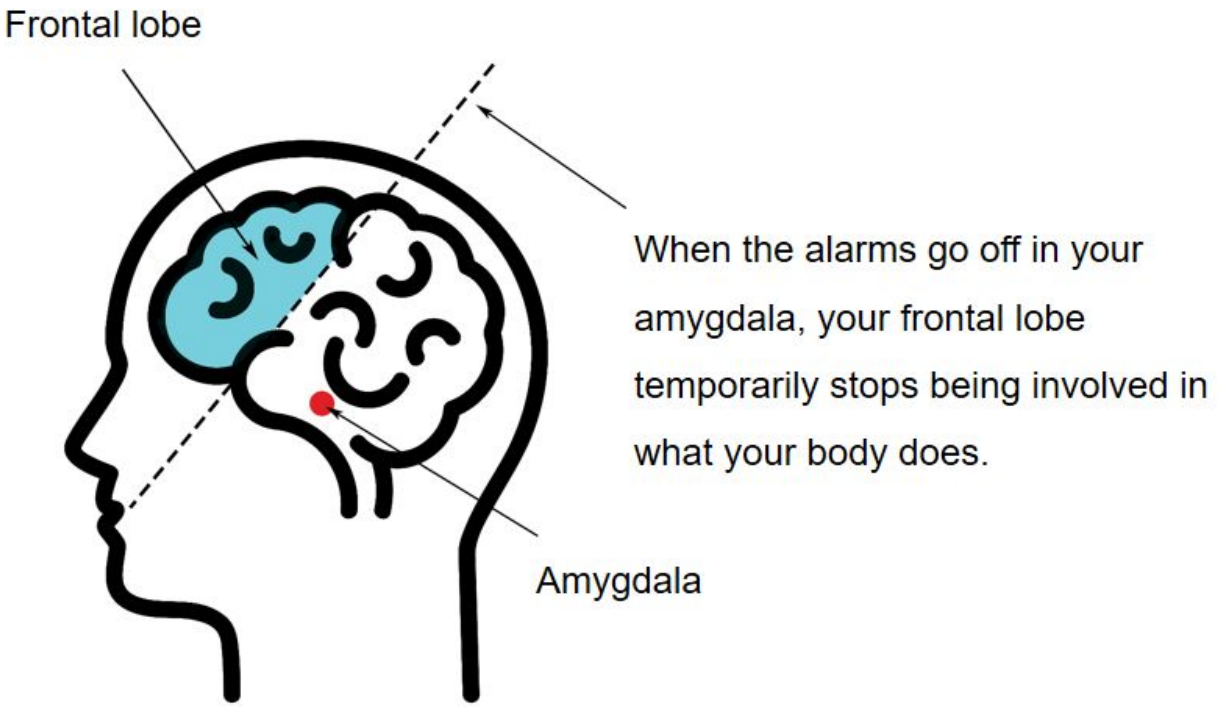
There are 3 reactions to fear: fight, flight, or freeze. Your brain's reaction to a perceived threat – something that scares you – is to make it easier for your body to do one of these 3 things effectively.

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, so 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.

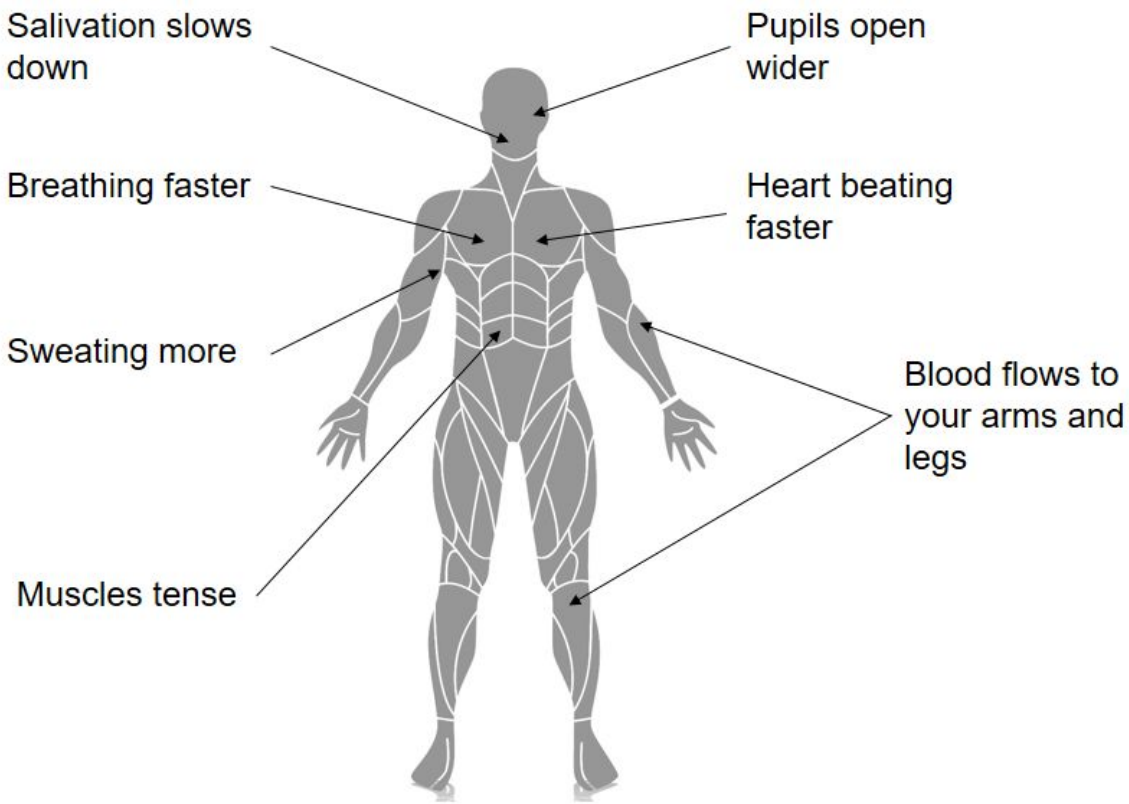
False alarms

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.

5. 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:



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.

Physical response	Purpose	Side effect
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'.

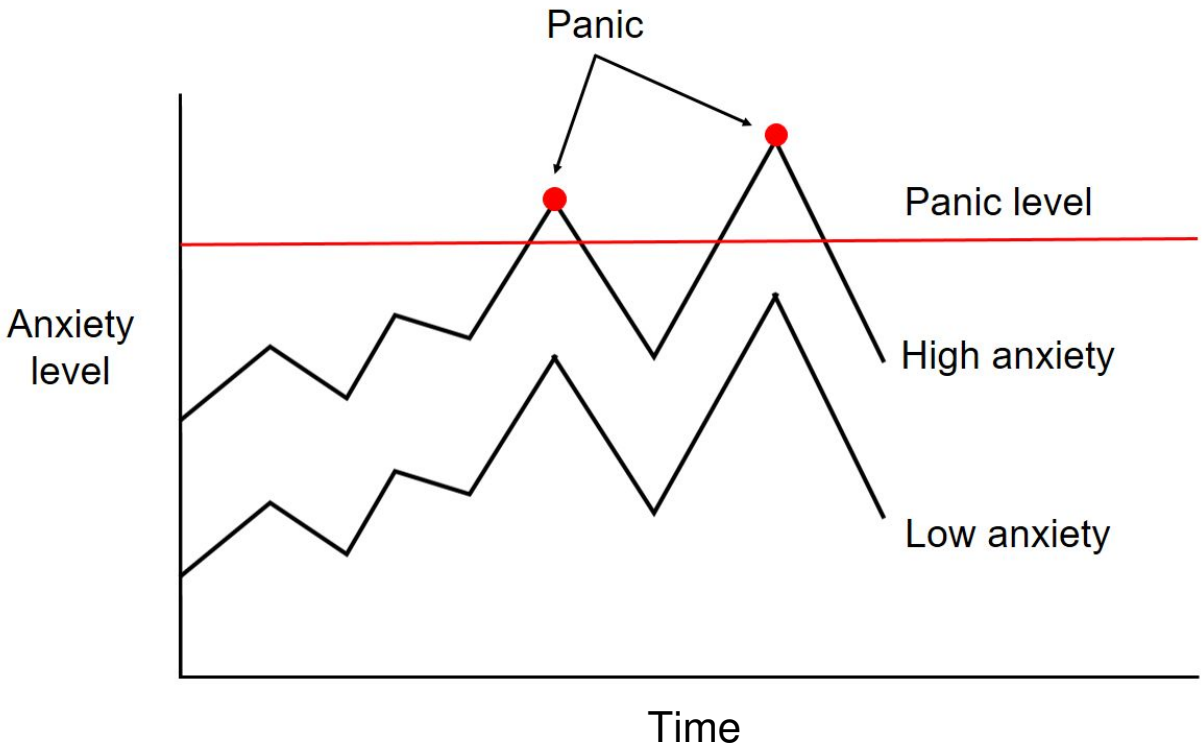
These are all normal, automatic reactions, because fear is designed to help you survive if you’re in danger. After the danger is gone, these feelings and symptoms fade away. However, if you experience panic attacks, your body and mind can need longer to settle. This is because, when there’s no obvious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

6. 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.

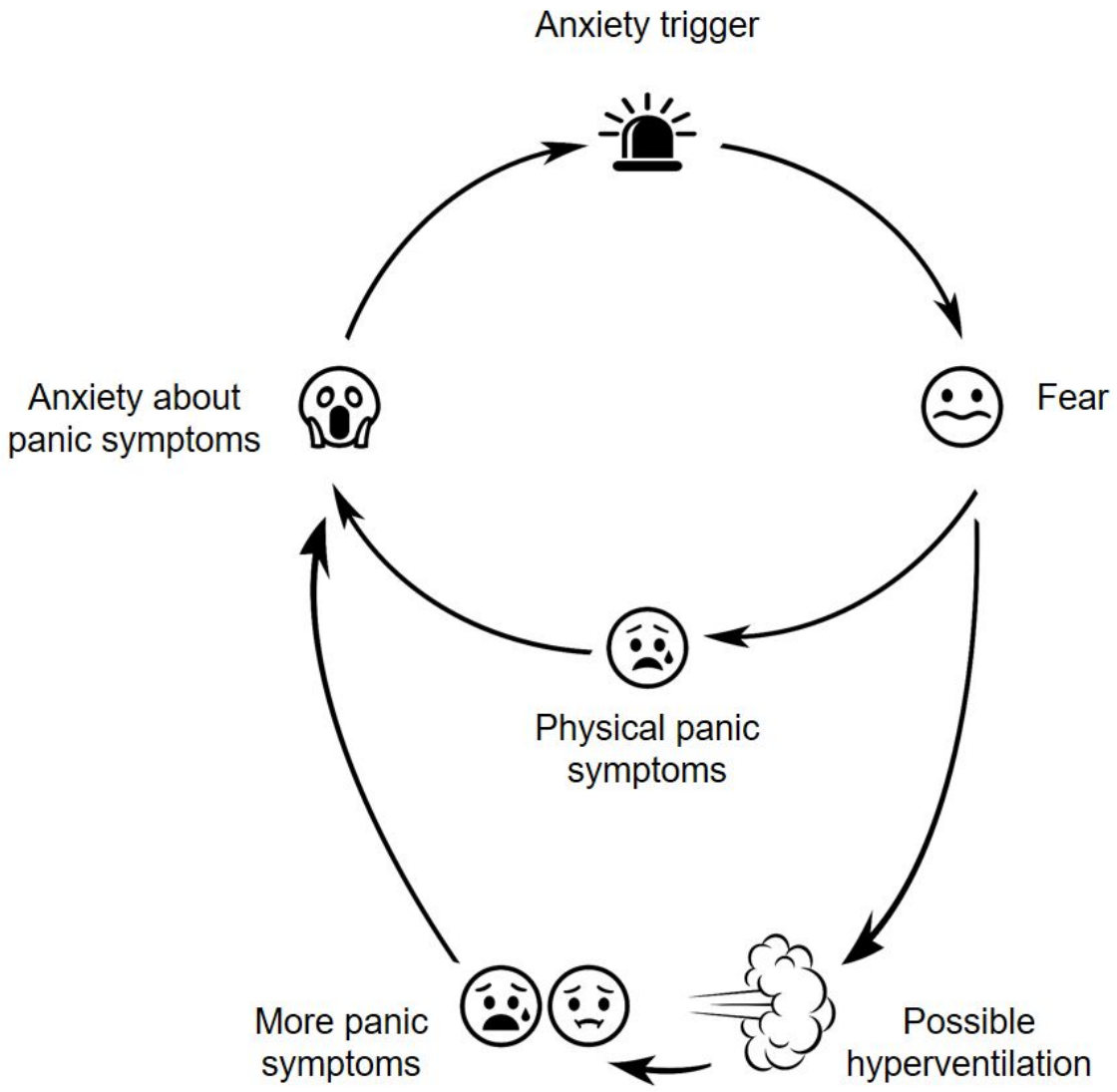


Many people who have panic attacks find they're more likely to have one when something else is bothering them – for example, relationship difficulties or periods of emotional upset.

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.

7. 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

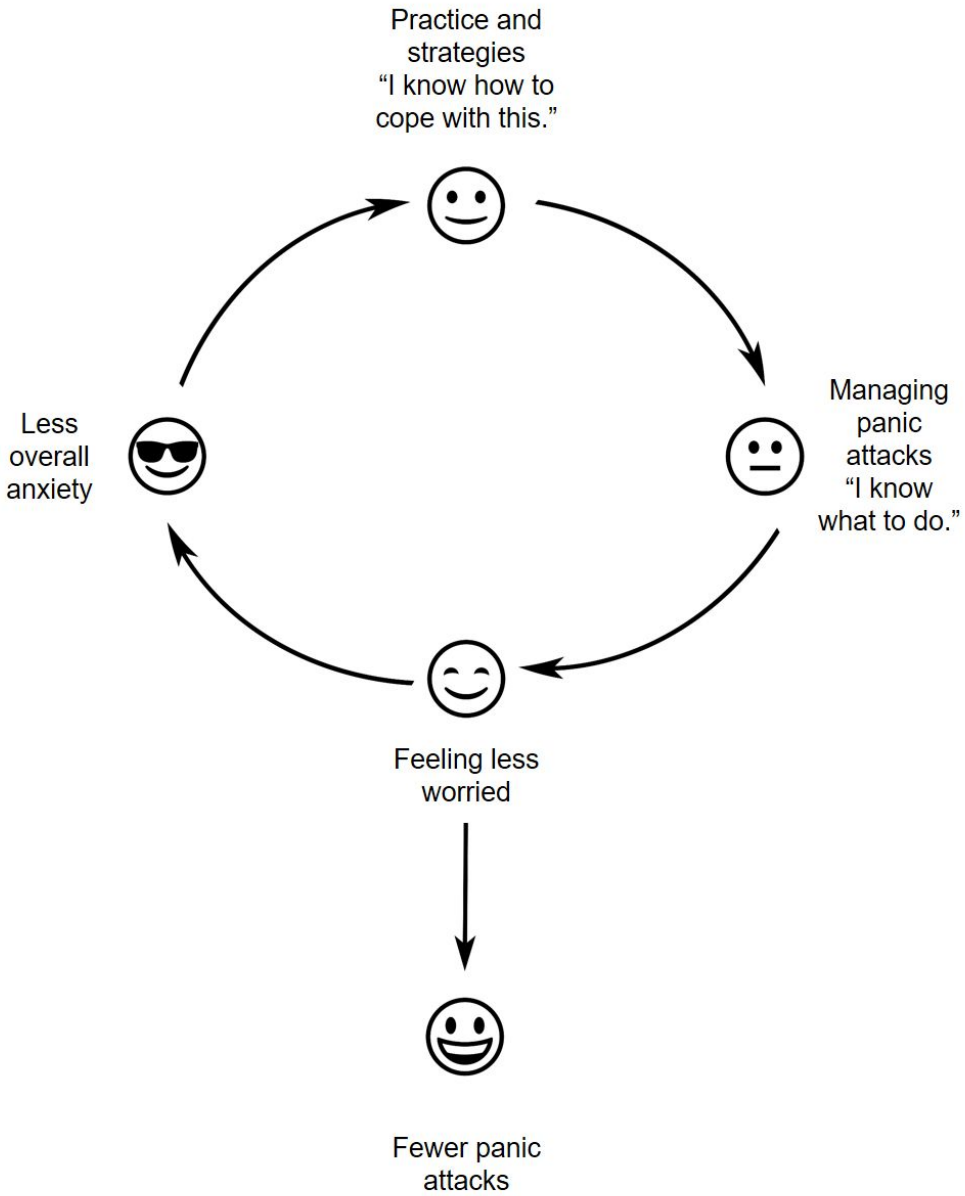
The things you eat and drink can make you more likely to have a panic attack. Drinking a lot of caffeine or sugary drinks, or eating a lot of sugar, can make a panic attack more likely.

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.

8. 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."

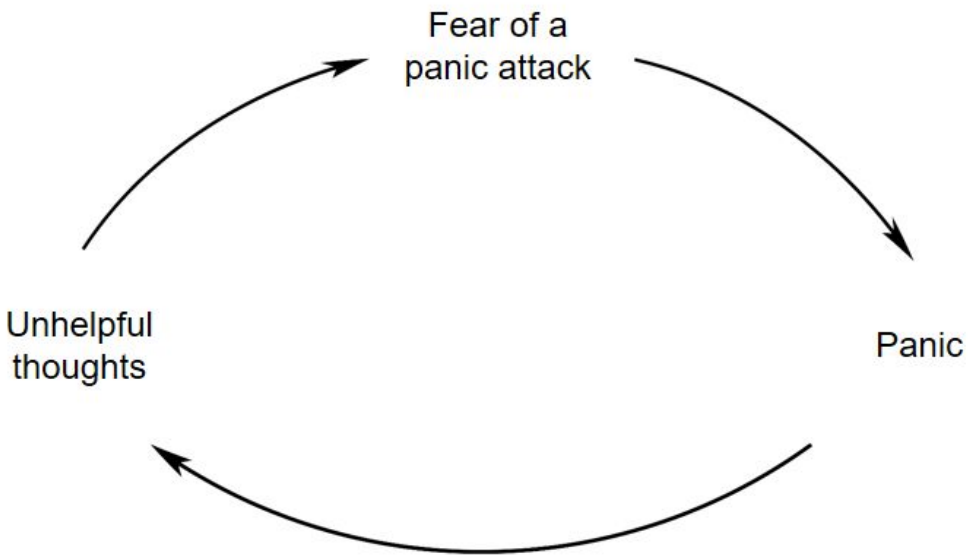
Worrying about anxiety

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.



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

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.

There's more information on avoidance and safety behaviours later on in this guide.

9. 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.

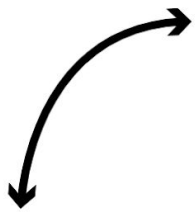
Describe the situation. You could write where you were, who you were with, and what was happening.

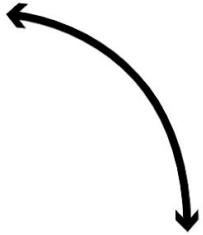
Your feelings

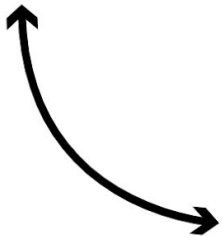
How your body felt

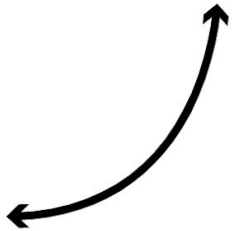
What you did

Your thoughts









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.

10. 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.

The next parts of the 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.”

11. 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.

Try more breathing and relaxation exercises on NHS inform

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

12. 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

13. 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.

14. 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. Section 11 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

15. Reducing avoidance and safety behaviours

Avoidance and safety behaviours can make it difficult to overcome panic attacks. As mentioned in Section 8 of this guide, 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 Sections 3 and 8, 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.

16. Behavioural experiments – 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

Step	Difficulty score (0 = no distress, 10 = extreme distress)
Going to the supermarket alone at 9pm on a Monday	9
Going to the supermarket alone at 2pm on a Saturday	10

You'll find a table you can fill out yourself on the next page.

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 10, 11, and 12 of this guide to help you stay calm.

17. 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 – CBT can take a little time to work.

Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111. For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

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.

Learn more

To learn more about coping with panic and related issues, you can visit some other parts of NHS inform:

Learn about panic attacks

Read about dealing with panic attacks

Complete a self-help guide for anxiety

Complete a self-help guide for social anxiety

Learn more about anxiety and your mental wellbeing

Find out about stress

Read our 10 stress busters

Try some breathing and relaxation exercises to help you feel more relaxed day to day