Coping with Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a sudden increase in physical stimulation of the body's systems that can often occur out of the blue or in response to simply thinking about a fearful situation. Panic attacks are incredibly uncomfortable and overwhelming because they have a physical component (heart palpitations, tightening in the chest or shortness of breath, choking sensations, dizziness, faintness, sweating, trembling, shaking, and/or tingling in the hands and feet) as well as a psychological component (feelings of terror and dread, feelings of unreality, fears of going crazy, dying or doing something uncontrollable). The most natural and common response to experiencing a panic attack is to want to avoid ever having one again, but the precipitating factors for a panic attack can be quite random and impossible to pin down and trying to avoid or control panic can be the very factor that increases the chances of having one.

The good news is that you can learn to cope with panic attacks so well that they will no longer have the power to frighten you. Over time you can actually diminish the intensity and frequency of panic attacks and for many people, panic attacks stop happening all together. The sorts of changes you can make that are beneficial in reducing panic include both practical strategies:

• Regular practice of deep relaxation and/or mindfulness
• A regular program of exercise
• Elimination of stimulants (especially caffeine, sugar, and nicotine) from your diet and increasing consumption of water, fresh fruits and vegetables

As well as behavioural/psychological strategies:

• Learning to acknowledge and express your feelings, especially anger and sadness
• Working on developing a calmer and more accepting attitude toward yourself and toward life
• Understanding panic and defusing the fear associated with panic attacks
• Having a contingency plan that helps you cope when panic attacks do arise (rather than trying to avoid them all together.

Some useful things to do when you experience panic attacks:

Deflate the Danger:

Whilst a panic attack is a very frightening and uncomfortable experience, it is absolutely not dangerous. It is a natural bodily reaction that simply occurs out of context. In other words, the natural "fight or flight reaction" that all mammals have in the presence of danger (an instinctual response to physiologically prepare to fight or flee when survival is threatened) is the foundation of difficulties with anxiety. This response is designed to ensure our survival and protect us and in a real danger situation, it does exactly that – gives us the strength and power to get away or defend ourselves. However, when this response occurs out of context (not in the face of danger), it is hard to make sense of why you are feeling such intense feelings and this only heightens fear. No one really knows why this happens to some people although there are some clues (for example, fearful thoughts, an imbalance of the body's systems, experience of prolonged stress may all be triggers for panic attacks) but what tends to happen when we can't explain the way we feel is that we misinterpret what is happening as evidence that something is wrong with you (for example, "I'm going to have a heart attack"; "I'm going to stop breathing and suffocate"; "I'm going to pass out"; "I'm going crazy"; "I'm going to fall"; "I'm going to lose complete control over myself").

However, it will help if you can learn to refute all of these misinterpretations by remembering the following:

• A panic attack cannot cause heart failure or cardiac arrest.
• A panic attack will not cause you to stop breathing or suffocate.
• A panic attack cannot cause you to faint.
• A panic attack cannot cause you to lose your balance.
• You won't fall over or cease to walk when you feel "weak in the knees" during a panic attack.
• You can't "go crazy" during a panic attack.

*This self help tip sheet was adapted from the chapter titled “Coping with Panic attacks” from the Edmund. J. Bourne Ph.D, “Anxiety and Phobia Workbook” New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 1995
• A panic attack cannot cause you to "lose control of yourself."

All of the body sensations you feel are natural sensations that all humans feel in response to danger, they are not life threatening but designed to be protective. Panic attacks are simply the experience of these sensations out of context.

Don't Fight Panic:

Resisting or fighting initial panic symptoms is likely to make them worse. It's important to avoid tensing up in reaction to panic symptoms or trying to "make" them go away by suppressing them or gritting your teeth. This doesn't mean "doing nothing" or being helpless in the face of panic, but rather thinking about your coping in a different way:

• **Face the symptoms-don't run from them.** Calmly tell yourself "this will pass", "I have been through this before and nothing bad happened, it was just uncomfortable", "I can allow my body to go through its reactions and handle this, I've done it before". These are helpful coping statements.

• **Accept what your body is doing-don't fight against it.** Fighting it only makes you tense which increases the anxiety and the intensity of a panic attack. Practice the attitude of letting go, allowing your body to have its reactions. Try to step back and just observe yourself without judgement without reacting to it with further fear or anxiety. Float with the wave of panic rather than trying to force your way through it

• **Allow time to pass.** Panic is caused by a sudden surge of adrenalin and most of this adrenalin will metabolise and be reabsorbed in three to five minutes. As soon as this happens, you'll start to feel better. Panic attacks are time limited. In most cases, panic will peak and begin to subside within only a few minutes. It is most likely to pass quickly if you don't aggravate it by fighting against it or reacting to it with even more fear by saying scary things to yourself.

Coping Statements:

Below are some useful suggestions for positive coping statements that can help you to cultivate attitudes of accepting, "floating," and allowing time to pass during a panic attack. You may also want to do deep abdominal breathing in conjunction with repeating a coping statement. Experiment with several statements and move from one to another until you find one that works for you in that moment.

• "This feeling isn't comfortable or pleasant, but I can accept it"
• "I can be anxious and still deal with this situation"
• "I can handle these symptoms or sensations"
• "This isn't the worst thing that could happen."
• "I'm going to go with this and wait for my anxiety to decrease."
• "This is an opportunity for me to learn to cope with my fears."
• "These are just thoughts-not reality."
• "This isn't dangerous."
• "I'll just let my body do its thing. This will pass."
• "I've survived this before and I'll survive this time, too."
• "This anxiety won't hurt me-even if it doesn't feel good."
• "This is just anxiety-I'm not going to let it get to me."
• "Nothing serious is going to happen to me."
• "Fighting and resisting this isn't going to help-so I'll just let it pass."

If you have frequent panic attacks, write your favourite coping statements on a wallet sized card or paper and carrying it with you at all times. Read it whenever you feel panic symptoms coming on.
Explore the Antecedents of Your Panic Attacks:

It is very helpful for you to understand the types of circumstances that tend to precede your panic attacks. Ask yourself:

- Were you under stress?
- Were you by yourself or with someone? If with someone, was it family, friends, or a stranger?
- What kind of mood were you in for several hours before panic came on? Anxious? Depressed? Excited? Sad? Angry? Other?
- Were you engaging in negative or fearful thoughts just before you panicked?
- Did you feel tired or rested?
- Were you experiencing some kind of loss?
- Were you feeling hot or cold?
- Were you feeling restless or calm?
- Had you consumed caffeine or sugar just before panic came on?
- Are there any other circumstances that correlate with your panic reactions?

Understanding this can help you to begin to alter the circumstances of your daily life in a direction that significantly reduces the odds of having panic attacks.

Learn To Discriminate Early Symptoms of Panic:

With practice you can learn to identify the preliminary signs that a panic attack may be imminent. This is usually a physical sensation that precedes the full blown panic attack. With practice you can learn to "catch yourself"-abort a panic reaction before it reaches this point of no return by using your coping strategies (for example, using coping statements, deflating the danger, using a deep breathing relaxation exercise).

Examples of some helpful Coping Strategies To Counteract Panic at an Early Stage:

1. **Retreat** – in other words, simply exit the situation until your anxiety subsides and then re-enter the situation when you feel calmer. This is different from avoidance or escape – retreat is a temporary stepping back with the intention of returning when you feel better. Returning to the situation is very important – it lets you know that you can cope with that situation rather than believing that it is intolerable and the only way to manage is to escape completely.

2. **Talk to Another Person** - Talking to someone nearby will help you get your mind off your panic symptoms and anxious thoughts.

3. **Move Around or Engage in Physical Activity** - Moving and doing something physical lets you dissipate the extra energy or adrenalin created by the fight-or-flight reaction. Instead of resisting the normal physiological reaction that accompanies panic, you can move with it.

4. **Stay in the Present** - Focus on concrete objects around you in your immediate environment. Staying in the present and focusing on external objects will help minimise the attention you might give to your physical symptoms or catastrophic thoughts. If possible, you might try actually touching objects nearby to reinforce staying in the immediate present.

5. **Engage in a Simple Repetitive Activity** - There are many simple, repetitive acts that can distract your attention from your panic symptoms or anxiety-provoking thoughts. These might include observing your
environment (e.g. spotting all the blue cars), counting, squeezing a stress ball, thinking of words that start with a certain letter, singing etc.

6. **Do Something That Requires Focused Concentration** - These activities are harder to initiate when you’re feeling anxious or panicky but work very well as distracters from worry and once you’re involved in them, they have a greater and more lasting capacity to distract your attention. They include activities like read a good novel or magazine, doing a puzzle (e.g. a crossword), knitting or sweing, a card or board game (e.g. solitaire), paint, play a game on the computer etc.

7. **Express any anger you might be feeling** – sometimes panic happens when we have trouble expressing our anger and so expressing it (talking about it, hitting a pillow, going for a run) can help to prevent panic. Getting angry at the symptoms you are experiencing can work too!

8. **Experience Something Immediately Pleasurable** – doing something pleasurable can help to abort a panic attack. For example, getting a hug from a loved one, having a bath, getting a massage etc.

9. **Visualize a Comforting Person or Scene** - try imagining a safe person or a peaceful scene. When you visualise a safe person, see him or her standing right there with you, offering you support and reassurance. Imagine yourself in a safe and calming place – try to invoke all five senses in conjuring this place in your imagination (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations).

10. **Try Thought Stopping** - Take a deep breath and then shout "Stop!" "Stop It!" or "Get out!" (if there are other people around, you might want to do this silently or just visualise a huge stop sign). You might also try something like washing your face with cold water to disrupt negative thoughts.

11. **Practice Abdominal Breathing** - Breathing slowly, fully and deeply from your abdomen can help reduce the bodily symptoms of panic. Put a hand gently on your upper abdomen and try to fill your lungs so that you can feel your hand moving gently up and down with your breath. Don’t over-inflate or gulp the air in quickly – think Slow, Even, Long and Full (SELF) – gentle breaths that are full and deep.

12. **Practice Muscle Relaxation** – Tensing and then deliberately releasing all the muscles in your body while breathing deeply (as above) can help to reduce the muscle tension that exacerbates panic. Concentrate especially on your problem areas of tension. For most people this is the jaw, the shoulders and the fists.

13. **Repeat Positive Coping Statements** – (as listed above), this is especially helpful in combination with breathing or relaxation exercises.

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**Learn To Observe Rather Than React to Bodily Sensations of Anxiety:**

You can take a major step forward by learning to detach emotionally from the first physical symptoms of panic: simply observe them. To the extent that you are able to watch the intense reactions your body goes through when aroused without interpreting them as a threat, you will be able to save yourself considerable distress.

By doing deep abdominal breathing or the calming breath exercise, you can slow down the physiological mechanisms responsible for panic, giving yourself time to gain some detachment. By using positive self-talk, you replace the scare talk which can aggravate your anxiety with coping statements specifically designed to foster an attitude of detachment and "flowing" with the experience.

You'll find that it takes some practice to learn how to use breathing (or relaxation) techniques and positive self-talk. Consistently working with them will, in time, enable you to reach a point where you can observe and "go with" the bodily reactions associated with panic rather than just reacting. This kind of detachment is the key to being able to master your panic.

During an intense panic attack, you may feel very confused and disoriented. Try asking yourself the following questions to increase your objectivity (you may want to write these out and carry them with you at all times).
1. Are these symptoms I’m feeling truly dangerous? (Answer: No)
2. What is the absolute worst thing that could happen? (Usual answer: I might have to leave this situation quickly or I might have to ask for assistance.)
3. Am I telling myself anything that is making this worse?
4. What is the most supportive thing I could do for myself right now?

Putting It All Together

To sum up, there are three approaches you can use to deal with the oncoming symptoms of panic:

1. Retreat
2. Distraction
3. Breathing (or muscle relaxation) and positive self-talk

For many people, these are the most powerful strategies for counteracting panic.

Sharing About Your Condition

A very important way to minimise the likelihood of is simply to inform someone who is in a position to help that you have a problem with panic attacks and/or agoraphobia. Letting others know about your experience will help you to worry less about what others might think if you panic and will allow you to work on your coping strategies with another person- this will help you feel less trapped and overwhelmed. It is important to remember that panic is nothing to be ashamed of. Most people find that when they confide in others about their panic that others respond with either understanding and compassion or recognition and will tell you that they experience panic too or know someone close to them that does. If you take the risk of sharing something about your condition you’ll be surprised at the support and acceptance you’ll receive.

Further Reading


Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.