



Understanding and Managing Panic Attacks

**A Self Help Guide for Students
and Parents**

Understanding a Panic Attack

If you suffer from panic attacks, then you've been there before. You experience difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, muscle tension, and dizziness. These physical sensations are often accompanied by negative and frightening thoughts. You may fear losing control of yourself and quite possibly your sanity.

Despite these overwhelming feelings, there are ways you can regain a sense of control when panic strikes. Below are some simple tips you can use to help ease common symptoms of a panic attack.

Take a Breath

Panic attacks can literally feel like they are taking your breath away. You may feel like you are hyperventilating, choking, or experiencing shortness of breath. Managing your changes in breathing can be the key to reducing panic symptoms. During an attack, try to bring your attention to your breath.

How to Direct Your Breath

- Start by breathing slowly and purposely. This will counteract the shallow breathing characterized by most attacks.
- If possible, place your hands on your stomach and fill your belly with breath. When you inhale, you will feel your centre rise and expand.
- As you exhale, it will then contract inward. These deliberate breaths will assist in soothing your body and mind.

It may also be helpful to count each breath. Such as counting your first full breath in and out as one, then next breathe in and out as two, and so on. This will not only help you breathe better, but it will also help you feel calmer by distracting your mind.

Loosen Up

When panic sets in, you may notice pain, numbness, and overall tensions throughout your body. By spending a few moments trying to relax your body, you can start to improve some of your physical discomforts. Letting go of this strain will also help relieve your anxious thoughts.

Work your way up your entire arm, tightening and loosening each set of muscles, moving from the forearm up to the shoulder. Then switch to the left side. Do the same for your legs, starting with your right foot.

Continue to focus on separate muscle groups, including your back and shoulders, until you have worked your way all the way up to the top of your head. Don't forget to relax your facial muscles, as there is often a lot of tension held there. Try to soften your forehead, relax your jaw, and ease your neck.

Change Your Mind

Even when in full-blown panic mode, you may logically recognize that your fears are exceeding what it warranted by the situation. Despite wanting the panic to stop, your thoughts may be keeping you from feeling calm. When faced with negative thoughts associated with a panic attack, try to distract your mind and refocus.

As the panic attack takes its course, divert your attention to more pleasant thoughts. Instead of fearing the situation you are in, try thinking about the positive aspects of your life, such as a loved one, a beloved pet, or a favourite leisure activity. It may be helpful to think about something that

makes you laugh or to visualize a tranquil scene. You can try to think of a funny joke or imagine a beautiful sunset. Affirm more positive statements to yourself. For example, repeat to yourself, "I am okay," "I am safe," or "This will pass." Over time your negative thinking pattern will begin to give way to more encouraging views.

Confront Panic

One of the most effective ways to start managing panic attacks is to persistently face your fears. If your attacks are situational, such as being in crowds, try not to avoid these situations. Such exposure will help you to work through panic and will send the message to your fears that you are ultimately in control of them.

If your panic attacks are unpredictable, meaning that no particular triggers bring them on, you will also need to tackle the panic as it comes. Remember that by becoming self-aware during a panic attack, even when it comes on unexpectedly, can help you cope with its symptoms. Remain aware of how you're feeling and remind yourself that it will not overtake you.

What Helps to Manage Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks can be frightening, but there are things you can do to help yourself cope. It could help to keep print these tips out and keep them somewhere easy to find.

During a panic attack:

- **Focus on your breathing.** It can help to concentrate on breathing slowly in and out while counting to five.
- **Stamp on the spot.** Some people find this helps control their breathing.
- **Focus on your senses.** For example, taste mint-flavoured sweets or gum, or touch or cuddle something soft.
- **Try grounding techniques.** Grounding techniques can help you feel more in control. They're especially useful if you experience dissociation during panic attacks.

After a panic attack:

- **Think about self-care.** It's important to pay attention to what your body needs after you've had a panic attack. For example, you might need to rest somewhere quietly, or eat or drink something.
- **Tell someone you trust.** If you feel able to, it could help to let someone know you've had a panic attack. It could be particularly helpful to mention how they might notice if you're having another one, and how you'd like them to help you.

10 Things That Can Make a Real Difference.

- 1. Food and mood** Changes in blood sugar levels are linked to changes in mood and energy. Eating regularly maintains blood sugar levels. Not eating regularly can make you tired, irritable, anxious and cause poor concentration. Good tips include eating breakfast, eating every 3-4 hours, avoiding junk foods, eating plenty of fruit and veg and drinking lots of water.

- 2. Keep active** Physical activity helps release endorphins which can improve your mood. When you feel low in mood you might stop doing the things that can improve your mood, almost without realising it. Making sure you do some physical exercise, even if you don't feel like it at first, can give you quick results in improving your mood.
- 3. Drink sensibly** Alcohol can cause depressive feelings, heightened anxiety, or feeling out of control in a way that feels unpleasant. It can also increase risk taking behaviours, so you need to know what your reactions might be. Remember to make your own decisions about what is right for you and not to bend to peer pressure around drinking.
- 4. Express yourself** Some people like to read to learn about the world, or escape into other worlds. Some people like to express their feelings through art, some like talking things through with others. Whatever your style, make sure you do express yourself - it will help you to stay connected, to discover more about you, your identity, and the person that you want to become.
- 5. Distract yourself** When you are feeling immersed in a problem, let yourself switch off from it and go and do something completely different. When you return to it at a different time it may seem more manageable. Distracting yourself is not a cop-out, but can be a reliable way to stop overthinking a problem when you are feeling stuck.
- 6. Ask for help** How would you feel if a friend asked for help, advice or just wanted to talk things through? Many of us would be pleased to be chosen to confide in, it might make us feel valued. When you are feeling low in mood, or anxious, it is easy to think negatively about yourself and be less likely to seek support from others. Try and beat this feeling and approach people that you trust to talk to. You may be surprised at how much better you might feel and how they have responded positively to you, as you would if the situation were reversed.
- 7. Learn to take time out and relax** People have lots of different ways of relaxing or having downtime from the stresses of life. These can be the things that you stop doing when you start to feel low in mood, or stressed, as you forget to be kind to yourself. A hot bath, listening to music, watching a film, keeping social arrangements and hobbies going, whatever it is, think about the things that help to keep you calm or more content, and make sure they are still in your routine.
- 8. Do something you enjoy** We are all unique and enjoy different things. You may not have found the thing that you enjoy yet, so try some different things out. You may have lost touch with activities that have given you pleasure in the past. Doing things you enjoy can help you to stay connected with some of the more positive aspects of life.
- 9. Remember your good points** We all have them, and none of us is perfect either. It can be easy to think that others are more talented, more successful, have more opportunity than us, when you are feeling low in mood. But it is impossible to know how someone else is feeling inside, whatever they seem like on the surface. Remind yourself about the things you do well, and looking for evidence of this can help to balance out critical thoughts about yourself, which tend to increase when we are stressed.
- 10. Self-help** Use online resources and books that offer help and support, information and advice, or just give another perspective. Some people like books with information, some people like reading about other people's experiences. Some people like novels with a particular theme. Some people prefer films. Whatever works best for you? Why not pop into your local library and check out their Shelf Help books.