

# Dealing With Panic Attacks

A panic attack is a sudden feeling of fear that triggers strong physical reactions when there is no real danger or cause. Panic attacks can be very frightening.

When panic attacks happen, you may think you are losing control, having a heart attack or even dying. You may have had a panic attack if you had 4 or more symptoms listed below that started suddenly and peaked at about 10 minutes.



## Panic Symptoms

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling of choking
- Chest pain
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady, lightheaded, or faint
- Feeling things are not real or being detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control, going crazy, or dying
- Upset stomach or feel like throwing up
- Numbness or tingling
- Chills or hot flashes

Sometimes when people have panic attacks, they try to stay away from some places. These are often places that are hard to get away from or where there is no one to help. Examples include crowded stores, public transportation, restaurants, or driving.

## Why Panic Attacks Happen

**Panic attacks are the body's alarm system gone wrong.** All of us have a built-in alarm system that responds to danger. This includes a faster heart rate, breathing, and blood flow. But, for some people, these responses come without any real danger or stress.

For example, you may be walking in the woods and see a bear coming your way. Many changes happen in your body to get you ready to fight the danger or to run away.

- Your heart rate will get faster to get more blood flow around your body
- Your breathing will get faster so you get more oxygen
- Your muscles will get tight to be ready for fighting or running
- You may feel sick as blood flows from your stomach into your arms and legs

After the danger is gone, your body will go back to working normal. This is because your body also has a system for recovering that brings your body back to normal.

Your body's emergency response system is helpful when there is a real danger.

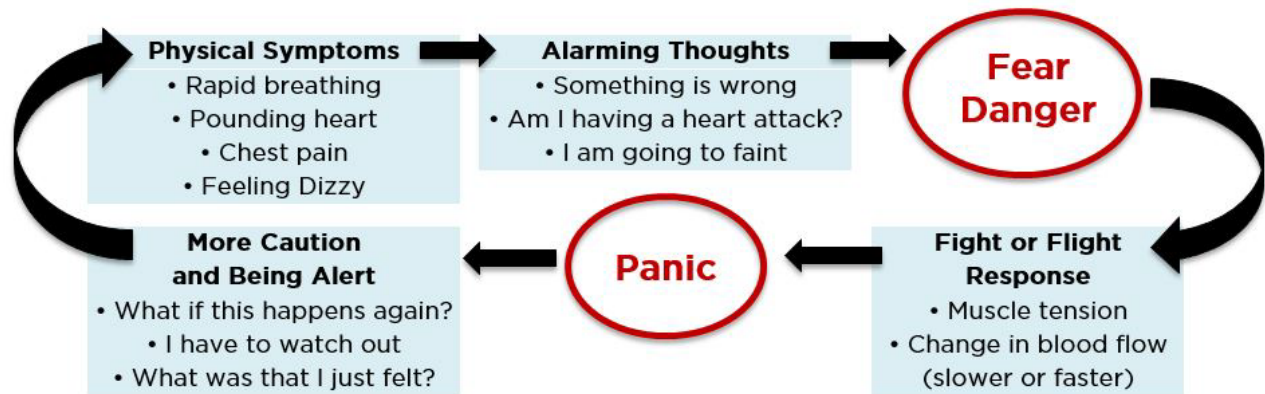
However, sometimes our emergency response system is triggered in everyday situations when there is no real physical danger such as in a meeting, in the grocery store or when driving in normal traffic.

# Dealing With Panic Attacks

## Things That Trigger a Panic Attack

**Sometimes very stressful events can trigger a panic attack.** For example, an argument with your spouse or problem at work can cause a stress response.

This is because you think there is a threat or feel overwhelmed even when there is no direct risk to your life.



**Sometimes panic attacks are not triggered by any one thing. They may just suddenly happen.** The fight or flight response system is activated and the body can go into emergency mode when there is no real danger.

People with panic attacks are often scared or alarmed by the physical feelings of the emergency response system.

1. Sudden physical feelings happen (tightness in your chest or shortness of breath).
2. Feel fear in response. You feel something is wrong, think you may be having a heart attack or you are going to faint. **The mind thinks there is a danger even when there is no real danger.**
3. Emergency response system turns on (fight or flight), leading to a panic attack.



Panic attacks happen when we think physical symptoms are signs that we may die, are going crazy, have loss of control or are embarrassed.

**You may be aware of thoughts that start up your emergency response system** (like thinking you are having a heart attack when you feel chest pressure or increased heart rate). Other times you may not be aware of such thoughts. The panic or fear may just happen without telling yourself anything.

After having one or more panic attacks, you may pay more attention to symptoms that may be the start of a panic attack. This makes it easier for panic attacks to happen again because you are aware of feelings that before you did not notice, and now think they are dangerous.

# Dealing With Panic Attacks

## Behaviors to Deal With Panic Attacks: Breathing Retraining

An important part of overcoming panic attacks is **learning new ways to lessen your body's response**. This can be done by practicing these new behaviors.

Over 50 percent of people who have panic attacks show some signs of over-breathing (or hyperventilation). This can lead to a panic attack or make symptoms worse.

Over-breathing causes some blood vessels in the body to become narrower (thinner). The brain and some body parts may get less oxygen and this can lead to:

- Feeling dizzy, confused, and light headed
- Numbness or tingling in the hands or feet
- Cold and clammy hands.
- May cause the heart to pump harder



These symptoms may be scary but it is important to know that over-breathing is not dangerous. You can help stop the over-breathing by practicing **breathing retraining**.

**Practice this basic breathing method 3 times a day, every day:**

- **Breathe in.** With your shoulders relaxed, breathe in as slowly and deeply as you can as you count to 6. If you can, use your diaphragm to fill your lungs with air.
- **Hold your breath.** Keep the air in your lungs as you slowly count to 4.
- **Breathe out.** Slowly breathe out as you count to 6.
- **Repeat.** Do this again several times. Each time you do it, breathe out for longer counts.



**Like any new skill, breathing retraining takes practice.** At first, do not try this when you are scared or having a panic attack. Begin by practicing in a quiet place to build up your skill level so that you can use it later in time of emergency.

# Dealing With Panic Attacks

## Behaviors to Deal With Panic Attacks: Less Avoidance

**The places where you began having panic attacks can often become triggers.** It is common for people to try and keep away from the places where they have had panic attacks. Over time, they may begin to avoid or stay away from more and more places. This lessens their activities and often hurts their quality of life.

**To break the cycle,** it is important to first know the places or difficult times that you avoid. Then learn some new ways or behaviors.

1. Make a list of places and times that you tend to stay away from
2. Choose a place that you want to focus on
3. Make an **exposure hierarchy** for this situation or location. An exposure hierarchy is a list of actions that make you feel anxious in this place or time.
4. Put these actions in a list from the least to the most in how much anxiety they give you. It is often helpful to have the first item be just thinking about the place or time.

Below is **an example of an exposure hierarchy** for someone who stays away from the grocery store. It is ordered from the least amount of anxiety (at the top) to the most anxiety (at the bottom):

- Think about going to the grocery store alone
- Go to the grocery store with a friend or family member
- Go to the grocery store alone to pick up a few small items (5 to 10 minutes in the store).
- Shopping for 10 to 20 minutes in the store alone.
- Doing the shopping for the week by myself (20 to 30 minutes in the store).



Allow yourself to think about or do the lowest item on your list and use your breathing relaxation and positive statements (see below) to help you stay where you are.

**Practice this several times.** When you feel comfortable with that item, move on to the next one on your list.



# Coping with Panic Attacks

## Positive Thinking to Deal With Panic Attacks

**Know your negative self-talk:** Anxious thoughts (feeling very worried and stressed) can increase anxiety symptoms and panic. The first step in changing anxious thinking is to know your own negative self-talk. Some common thoughts include:

- I am having a heart attack
- I must be going crazy
- I think I am dying
- People will think I am crazy
- I am going to pass out
- Oh no, here it comes
- I cannot stand this
- I have to get out of here

**Use positive statements to deal with anxiety:** Change anxious thoughts by replacing them with more calm and supportive statements. Some helpful statements include:

- This is not an emergency
- I do not like feeling this way, but I can accept it
- I can feel like this and still be okay
- This has happened before, and I was okay. I will be okay this time, too.
- I can be anxious and still deal with this situation.



## More Information and Some Things to Read

- Barlow, D., and Craske, M. (2006). *Mastery of your anxiety and panic workbook*, 4th Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bourne, E. (2000). *The Anxiety and phobia workbook*, 3rd Edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publication.