A form of fear. It is the body’s alarm system signalling threat, preparing us for fight or run away from danger. See card 1 (Dealing with Stress and Anxiety).

**A PANIC ATTACK IS …**

A strong feeling of terror that comes on very suddenly, often out of the blue, when there is no obvious threat or danger. Physical symptoms include pounding heart, fast breathing, shaking, numbness or tingling in fingers or toes. You might have frightening thoughts or think that something awful is happening. For example, many people think they are having a heart attack and may even call an ambulance.

**Panic attacks** are very common. They are not dangerous and are not a sign of serious mental or physical illness. They are not harmful and, although very unpleasant, are self-limiting.

**Panic attacks** can occur for various reasons including:
- Stress or because of difficult emotions.
- Health worries or during a mild illness.
- Or just out of the blue.

**They can be kept going because of a vicious circle of physical symptoms, frightening thoughts and avoidant behaviour.**
MANAGING A PANIC ATTACK

• Use distraction, relaxation and slow breathing to help you to get the panic to subside. If you are hyperventilating, breathe into a paper bag, or breathe in for a count of 4 and out for 7.

• Remind yourself that this has happened before and nothing awful is going to happen. You are not having a heart attack. It will pass.

• Challenge unrealistic thoughts, using more realistic ones.

• Try and stick with it and test out what really happens.

• What underlying worries or troubles do you have? Address them.

• Practice relaxation, slow breathing, distraction and thought challenging when you are feeling OK, so that you can master the techniques to use during a panic attack.

Remember that by avoiding or running away from panic attacks you may:

• Never find out that nothing terrible was going to happen.

• Dread going back into the situation, because you fear another attack.

• Lose confidence in your ability to cope alone.