

4. Panic Attacks

Panic is ...

A form of sudden and intense anxiety. It is the body's alarm system signalling threat, preparing us to fight or take flight from danger.

A panic attack is ...

A strong feeling of anxiety that comes on very suddenly, often out of the blue, when there is no obvious threat or danger. Physical symptoms can include a pounding heart, fast breathing, shaking, numbness or tingling in fingers or toes, feeling nauseous or needing the toilet. 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 although they can be frightening, very unpleasant and impact your day to day life.

Panic attacks can occur for various reasons including:

- Stress and/or because of difficult emotions
- Health worries and/or during a mild illness
- Or just out of the blue

They can be kept going because of a cycle of physical symptoms, unhelpful thoughts and altering your everyday behaviour. Stopping panic attacks is all about taking back control.

Managing a panic attack

- Use controlled breathing. Practice a special type of breathing, not into your chest but deep into your tummy or diaphragm which is below your chest. The important thing is that the out breath must be longer than the in breath.
- Make a conscious effort to relax your muscles.
- Carry on with what you intended to do as normally as possible.
- Remind yourself that this will pass and nothing awful is going to happen. You are not having a heart attack.
- Challenge unhelpful thoughts. Tell yourself to STOP and push negative thoughts out of your mind.
- If possible, ride it out and stay in the situation. This helps 'decondition' the panic response as your mind gets the message that it is not really threatening.
- Regularly practice relaxation, mindfulness and regulating your breathing as well as helpful thoughts 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.

See Counselling and Wellbeing website for helpful online resources on Panic: students.leeds.ac.uk/counsellingandwellbeing