

# OVERCOMING PANIC ATTACKS

IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF  
SOME SUPPORT, THIS  
SELF-HELP BOOK CAN  
HELP YOU COPE BETTER  
WITH PANIC ATTACKS.

A BETTER YOU, FOR A  
**BRIGHTER  
TOMORROW**

  
**wellbeing**  
services south glasgow

# PANIC ATTACKS SELF-HELP BOOKLET

This self-help booklet is divided into seven sections aimed at helping you to gain a better understanding of panic attacks. It gives you a chance to find out what a panic attack is, how it affects you, what keeps it going and how to manage it.

This booklet aims to help you to deal with your panic attacks using techniques from a well-established psychological treatment known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

## CONTENTS

<b>Section 1:</b> · What is a panic attack?	<b>3 - 5</b>
<b>Section 2:</b> · Why do panic attacks happen?	<b>6 - 8</b>
<b>Section 3:</b> · Panic attacks and the body	<b>9 - 16</b>
<b>Section 4:</b> · Panic attacks and behaviour	<b>17 - 23</b>
<b>Section 5:</b> · Panic attacks and thinking	<b>24 - 30</b>
<b>Section 6:</b> · Review	<b>31 - 32</b>
<b>Section 7:</b> · Wellbeing resources	<b>33</b>

There are various exercises throughout this booklet to help you understand your panic and help you learn ways of managing it. Like any new skill, it may take a bit of time and practice before you notice any changes in the way you feel.

The exercises are identified by 'Stop & Think'. To gain the most from these, it is important that you take some time to think about the questions asked and complete the exercises.

It may be that it takes several readings of it before you start to write things down. That's OK, just take your time. It is helpful to read each section thoroughly before moving on to the next.

Praise yourself for every step you take.



## SECTION 1: WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

### Is it a panic attack?

If you think you might be having panic attacks but you are unsure about some of the symptoms you experience try to answer the questions below.

- Do you often experience a fast heartbeat, rapid breathing, muscle tension and sweating?
- Do you often think you are about to faint or have a heart attack?
- Do you often think something bad is going to happen?
- Do you often think you are losing your mind when you are experiencing those symptoms?
- Are you afraid of experiencing those symptoms again?

If you answered 'yes' to one or more of those questions you might be experiencing panic attacks. Take some time to read this booklet if:

- you want to know what a panic attack is
- you want to understand what is happening to you when you are in panic
- you want to know what keeps panic going
- you want to know what changes you can make to manage your panic

### HOW PEOPLE DESCRIBE PANIC?

**John, 55** "I was sitting in my living room watching TV when I noticed pain in my chest and my heart beating faster. My hands and toes were tingling. I didn't understand what it was at the time so I thought that I was having a heart attack. I couldn't move. I had to ask my son to call an ambulance."

**Julia, 35** "I was so scared of having another panic attack. I was doing my usual Sunday shopping in my local supermarket. The shop was really busy and there was no fresh air. Suddenly, I felt trapped and I couldn't breathe. My throat felt so tight that I thought I was going to suffocate. My hands were shaking and my legs were like jelly. I was terrified I would collapse and people will see me like this. Since then I avoid going to the supermarkets if I can or I make sure my husband always comes with me."

**Mike, 21** "There seems to be no reason for my panic. It happens out of the blue. When I go through an attack I get these awful sensations in my body. I am drenched in sweat and I feel sick. I often need to get to a toilet quickly. When it happens I make sure I stay in my house for the rest of the day. I am so scared that one day I will faint and there will be no one around to help me."

### WHAT IS A PANIC ATTACK?

A panic attack is a sudden rush of physical and psychological symptoms. It can be experienced as a period of intense anxiety accompanied by highly uncomfortable bodily symptoms. Panic can change what you do and how you think.

### PANIC AND THE BODY

Panic affects your body. The most common physical symptoms of panic include a fast heartbeat, rapid breathing and muscle tension. The physical symptoms that accompany a panic attack can be quite frightening if you do not understand why they appear. We will discuss the physical changes and why they occur later in this booklet.

### PANIC AND THE BEHAVIOUR

Panic attacks can change the way you behave. Perhaps you started avoiding busy places and shopping in the city centre just in case you have an attack there? You might have also stopped doing things you used to enjoy like reading, walking or meeting friends.



## PANIC AND THE MIND

A panic attack can also affect your mind and the way you think. When you are having a panic attack you might be predicting the worst possible scenario. You might think that what you are experiencing means that something bad is going to happen or that you are losing your mind. The intensity of symptoms and unclear reason for the attacks can make you think you are out of control.

## PANIC AND THE FEELINGS

You might have noticed changes in your feelings when you are having a panic attack. You might feel unusually anxious and helpless. You might feel lost. You might be frustrated with the fact that it is difficult to predict when the next attack will happen.

## TYPES OF PANIC ATTACKS

There are three types of panic attacks:

- attacks that can be predicted
- night-time attacks
- out-of-the-blue attacks

Sometimes, panic attacks can be difficult to predict and can happen unexpectedly. If you want to know what brings an attack on, read this booklet.

## HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

A panic attack is time-limited and usually lasts between 5 to 20 minutes. If the attack appears to last longer than 20 minutes it is likely that you are still very anxious following the attack.

## SECTION 2: WHY IS IT HAPPENING?

Is it just me?

Panic attacks are common. They are not a sign of mental or physical illness. Panic can affect anyone at any stage of their life. In fact, some surveys show that one in three people will experience at least one panic attack at some point in their lives. You are not alone.



## WHY ME?

An initial panic attack can occur for a number of reasons. Some people are more likely to experience panic attacks than others due to their unique genetic make-up, background and life experiences.

Many people will have their first panic attack after going through a stressful period in their life such as experiencing problems at work, family breakdown or illness.

It might be that going through panic attacks is not your only problem. Panic attacks are common among people who suffer from anxiety, depression, phobias or sleep problems. Those who overuse substances such as alcohol or drugs are also more prone to the attacks.

It can be sometimes difficult to determine the exact reason behind what is happening to us. If you want to feel better, you might want to focus on gaining a better understanding of what keeps your panic going and how to prevent or stop it. This booklet will help you with this.

## HOW DOES IT START?

Panic attacks can occur in situations you consider to be somehow threatening. For example, you might feel anxious about going on a bus if you believe that you might not cope in a busy environment without an easy exit.

Bodily sensations can also be threatening to you. For example, if you notice your breathing is unusually shallow you might focus on it for a while and think *“What is wrong with me?”* Worrying about your shallow breathing can make you anxious and agitated.

Thoughts, images and memories can also make you anxious.

Look at the picture on the next page. Can you see that an unhelpful evaluation of a bodily sensation can make you feel anxious and panicky? What you think about a sensation in your body can lead to a panic attack.



Once you are in the cycle of panic you might find it difficult to break it. Your physical sensations get worse, you feel more anxious and you want to do something to stop it.

**STOP & THINK**  
Think about the situations in which you feel panicky and anxious. Then, try to think what bodily sensations, thoughts, memories or images make you anxious. Write them down here.

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## FALSE ALARM

A panic attack can be seen as a false alarm, a sudden rush of anxiety and fear without a real physical threat. In other words, you might feel panicky and frightened despite the absence of real danger.



## SECTION 3: PANIC ATTACKS AND THE BODY

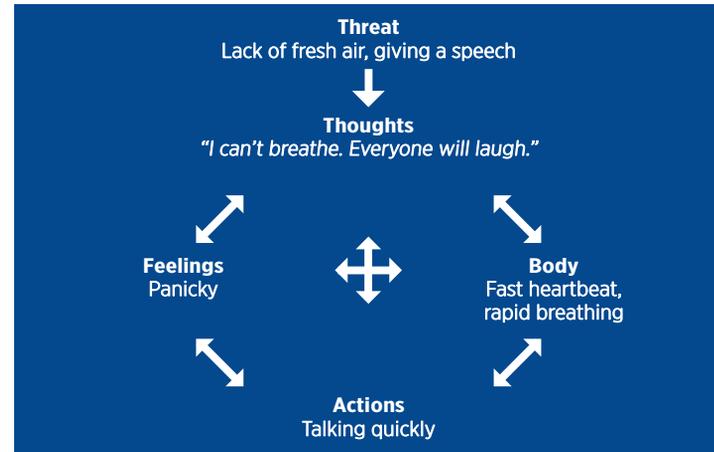
### “Fight or flight”

If you want to understand how panic affects your body, you need to understand what happens when you feel fear. When you are in danger and feel fear, an automatic biological response switches on to help you. This fear response is called the “fight or flight” and it causes a number of changes in your body.

Think about going home from work and spotting a tiger that escaped from the zoo. Your brain automatically recognises that tigers can be dangerous and switches on the “fight or flight” response. As a result of the “fight or flight” response you go through a series of bodily changes. Your heart starts beating faster, your breathing becomes rapid and you sweat more. Those changes within your body occur to prepare you to fight or flee from the tiger.

The “fight or flight” response also switches on when you experience intense anxiety. It means that if you are in a situation that makes you anxious or you experience bodily sensations that you find alarming the “fight or flight” response is active.

Imagine you are in a meeting room with no windows and you have to give a speech. You notice the lack of fresh air in the room and how it affects your breathing. You start to worry that you will forget your speech. You get anxious about not being able to breathe properly. You believe others will think you are a fool if you forget what to say. The “fight or flight” response becomes active. Your body prepares itself to fight with, or flee, a physical danger that does not exist. You become panicky.



The picture above shows you how anxious thoughts can lead to uncomfortable bodily sensations.





## STOP & THINK

**BODILY CHANGES** - There are number of changes that happen in your body when you feel panicky. Think about the changes you experience and tick the right boxes.

PHYSICAL SENSATIONS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER
FAST HEARTBEAT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
TINGLING & NUMBNESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
LOOKING PALE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BREATHLESSNESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DIZZINESS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FEELING SICK	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BLURRY VISION	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DRY MOUTH	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SWEATING	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MUSCLE TENSION	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SHAKING OR TREMBLING	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The 'fight or flight' response is common to everyone and this is why most of us experience some physical sensations when we get angry. Let's look at the explanation behind some of the physical symptoms of anger.

- **Heart beating stronger and faster** – The heart is pumping more blood to the muscles in arms and legs which are important if you want to fight or flee. More blood carries more oxygen which allows muscles to work harder. Blood pressure increases.
- **Tingling and hot flushes** – The blood supply is limited where it is not needed e.g. in toes or fingers. This is why our skin looks pale, feels cold and our fingers and toes experience tingling or numbness. We might also experience hot flushes as our bodies are working hard and our body temperature increases.
- **Rapid and shallow breathing** – Rapid breathing helps us to take in more oxygen which helps our muscles to work harder. However, when our body is at rest and our breathing becomes rapid, we end up breathing in more oxygen than our body needs. This can cause breathlessness, a sensation of choking and even pains or tightness in the chest.
- **Dizziness** – Rapid breathing means that less oxygen reaches your head. While this is not dangerous, it produces unpleasant symptoms such as dizziness and confusion.
- **Muscle tension/headache** – Muscles tense up in preparation for fight or flight which results in feelings of tension, aches, trembling and shaking.
- **Nausea & dry mouth** – The digestive system shuts down meaning your stomach becomes less active causing nausea and a heavy feeling. You also produce less saliva which causes a dry mouth.
- **Sweating** – Your body works hard to prepare you to attack or run away which causes your body to heat up. Sweating helps you to cool down.



## STOP & THINK

Fear of fainting is quite common among people who experience panic attacks. However, it is very unlikely that you will faint when you have a panic attack. Fainting is caused by a drop in blood pressure. When you feel anxious, your blood pressure rises.



## KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

Sometimes people who are going through a panic attack think they are having a heart attack. The thought of suffering from a heart attack can be very frightening and make you more anxious. This is why it is very important to know the difference between the two conditions. Now, if you experience chest pain frequently and it is long lasting, see your GP. Otherwise, have a look at the table below:

	PANIC ATTACK	HEART ATTACK
<b>Pain</b>	<p><i>Any pain is usually described as 'sharp'.</i></p> <p><i>The pain tends to be felt over the heart.</i></p> <p><i>Pain is usually made worse by breathing in and out and pressing on the centre of the chest.</i></p> <p><i>Pain usually disappears within about 5 - 10 minutes.</i></p>	<p><i>It may or not be present.</i></p> <p><i>If present, you may have a crushing feeling in your chest (like someone standing on your chest).</i></p> <p><i>This pain is usually felt in the centre of your chest and may extend to the left arm, neck and back.</i></p> <p><i>Pain is not usually made worse by breathing or by pressing on the chest. Pain is usually persistent and lasts longer than 5 minutes.</i></p>
<b>Tingling</b>	<i>Tingling is usually present all over the body.</i>	<i>Tingling, if present, is usually in the left arm.</i>
<b>Vomiting</b>	<i>You may feel sick but vomiting is less common.</i>	<i>Common</i>
<b>Breathing</b>	<i>Breathing too quickly or too deeply (hyperventilation) is a very common panic response which comes before an attack.</i>	<i>A heart attack does not cause you to breathe more quickly or too quickly. Panic does. With a heart attack, you may feel a little short of breath.</i>

Adapted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) Guide to Mental Health in Primary Care (2000). Royal Society of Medicine Press.

## KEEP IN MIND "FIGHT OR FLIGHT"

You might wonder how understanding your bodily sensations can help you with your panic. When you experience uncomfortable physical symptoms of anxiety you might think that something really bad is happening to you. Once you start focusing on that thought, you are likely to notice more symptoms which might make your anxiety worse. Finally, you might get anxious about being anxious.

The first step you could take to overcome your anxiety is keeping in mind the "fight or flight" response next time you feel anxious. When you feel panicky again, you can say to yourself:

*"I am experiencing bodily symptoms of anxiety. Those sensations are normal and they are not dangerous. They will go away soon".*

## RELAXATION

Learning how to relax can help you to turn down the volume of these sensations. Two relaxation techniques can be particularly useful: controlled breathing and progressive muscular relaxation.

## CONTROLLED BREATHING

When we get panicky our breathing becomes rapid and shallow. We take in too much oxygen for our needs which we call "hyperventilation".

Hyperventilation is very common and it often keeps panic going. It can also cause you a number of unpleasant sensations.

### To check if you hyperventilate answer the questions:

- Are you short of breath?
- Is your breathing shallow?
- Does your breathing speed up?
- Do you often yawn, sigh or gulp in air?
- Do you feel light-headed or dizzy?
- Do you feel you are going to faint?
- Do you feel chest pains?

If you answered yes to one or more questions the chances are you hyperventilate. When this happens you may feel you do not have enough air to breathe. In fact, it is the opposite - you have too much. Try not to take deep breaths, yawn, sigh or gulp air as this will only make you feel worse.

You might want to learn how to calm down your breathing in order to turn down the unpleasant sensations which you might experience in panic. Calm breathing involves taking slow, regular breaths through your nose.



## Steps to calm down your breathing

- Sit in a comfy chair and relax as much as you can.
- Breathe in through your nose and count 1 2 3.
- Allow your breathing to slow down.
- Breathe out through your nose and count 1 2 3.
- To help you focus, imagine the numbers in your mind's eye.
- Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute).
- Repeat for at least 5 minutes.
- Practise twice daily.

## TIPS FOR PRACTICE

- If possible, breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your nose. If you find it too difficult, you can breathe out through your mouth.
- If you breathe out through your mouth, pucker or 'purse' your lips (as if you are about to whistle).
- Use your belly when you breathe rather than your chest. Imagine you have a balloon in your belly; as you breathe in, fill the balloon with air; as you breathe out, let the air go.
- You might find this exercise easier when lying down, but after a while you should be able to do it in any position. Practise it many times before you use it to turn down the symptoms of panic attacks.

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCULAR RELAXATION

A strategy that can help you to ease tension in your muscles is called progressive muscle relaxation. It involves tensing specific muscles in your body for about 5 seconds and then relaxing them. Muscle relaxation can help you to lower the overall tension in your body which often makes your panic worse.

Sit or lie down. You can work from your head to toes or toes to head. Take your time, tense each muscle group for about 5 seconds. If you begin to notice your mind wandering, bring attention back to your body. Practise it daily.

### Steps to relax your muscles

- Make sure you are comfortable. Drop your shoulders.
- Start by raising your eyebrows as high as you can and hold them in that position for about 5 seconds. **Notice the tension. Then, release and notice the relaxation.**
- Shut your eyes as tightly as you can. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Open your jaw as widely as you can and make a grimace on your face. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Now, bring your shoulders to your ears. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Bend, first your right, then your left elbow tensing the muscles in your arms. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Make a fist with your left and right hand. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Squeeze the muscles in your upper and then lower back. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Suck your stomach in. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Push your thighs against each other. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Tense the muscles in your calves by pulling your toes towards you. **Notice the tension. Relax.**
- Finally, curl your toes. **Notice the tension. Relax.**

You might want to practise the controlled breathing and progressive muscular relaxation techniques using a relaxation track. Download a free relaxation audio file from our website [www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk](http://www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk)

## STAND YOUR GROUND

Next time you feel the panic coming on, stand your ground and don't let the panic make you run away! You don't need to run for help or run away from your panic. You can be in control of your panic using the relaxation techniques from this booklet.



## SECTION 4: PANIC ATTACKS AND BEHAVIOUR

When you feel anxious you act in a way that helps to reduce your anxiety. Unfortunately, some of the things you might do can be quite unhelpful.

### AVOIDANCE

One way to reduce your anxiety is to stay away from the situations which make you feel panicky. Avoiding those situations decreases anxiety you might experience as you do not have to face up to the situations you fear.

Avoiding certain situations or activities might help you in the short-term. You might feel relieved that you decided not to go shopping on a busy Saturday afternoon. Unfortunately, if you keep avoiding situations you fear you will not have a chance to prove to yourself that anxiety symptoms are not dangerous and that, in fact, you can cope with the situations that cause you anxiety.

What situations, places or activities did you start avoiding as a result of panic attacks?

#### **Did you start avoiding:**

- situations where you have had panic attacks in the past?
- situations where it might be difficult to get help, such as places far from your home?
- situations from which it is difficult to escape such as shopping at busy times or using public transport?
- activities such as exercising, watching scary movies, drinking coffee because they cause you sensations similar to physical symptoms of anxiety?



### STOP & THINK

Imagine you were able to do things you are avoiding?  
How would that make you feel?

Answer the questions below.

**How would you feel differently?**

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**How would you think differently about yourself?**

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**What would people notice about you?**

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### SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Another unhelpful way to reduce your anxiety is to rely on "safety behaviours". Safety behaviours are behaviours that make facing anxiety easier in the short-term. Unfortunately, they make you feel worse in the long run.





## STOP & THINK

Has your behaviour changed since you started experiencing panic attacks? Ask a friend or relative if they noticed any changes in your behaviour? Use the questions below to help you think about safety behaviours you might use.

### Do you:

- make sure you take the seat that is nearest to the exit on the bus?
- always carry your anti-anxiety medication with you?
- constantly seek reassurance?
- always leave the house with someone else?
- drink alcohol to reduce your anxiety?
- take drugs to reduce your anxiety?

Safety behaviours may help you deal with the situations in the short-term but they can be very unhelpful in the long-term. Safety behaviours can stop you from getting better. For example, imagine that since your first panic attack you decided always to carry your mobile phone with you just in case you needed to call for help. You believe that to be safe you need to be able to call someone. You think you would not cope without your mobile and it worries you. What you might not notice is that by doing this you do not give yourself a chance to see if you could cope without a mobile or assistance. The picture below shows you how safety behaviours can keep the cycle of panic going.



If you want to take control over your panic and anxiety you need to challenge your avoidance and safety behaviours.

## FACING UP TO SITUATIONS

If you want to prove to yourself that you can manage your anxiety you need to learn how to face up to some of the situations you fear. You can do this by gently confronting those situations and slowly getting used to symptoms of anxiety.

Facing what you fear is a very important step in overcoming your panic attacks. It will help you to build your confidence back bit by bit. The first time you try spending time in the feared situation you will most likely experience some anxiety. Next time you enter the same situation your anxiety should reduce. With time you will feel you are gaining control over your panic and you will feel better.

Think about the situations, places and activities you are avoiding due to fear of having a panic attack and write them down in the table below. Start from the situation, place or activity that causes you the **least anxiety** and build up to the one that causes you the **most anxiety**.

SITUATION/PLACE/ACTIVITY	ANXIETY RATING (from the lowest to highest)



If you want to overcome your panic you need to face up to the situations you fear. Start from the top of your list. Choose a time and place for you to go into that situation. Think about anything that might stop you and try to plan for that. Once you enter the situation use the techniques from this booklet and stay in the situation until your anxiety drops by half. If your anxiety does not reduce the first time, repeat the same step as many times as you need, before moving on.

### TIPS FOR PRACTICE

- Overcoming panic takes time and practice. Plan what you want to do in advance and leave yourself enough time to do it.
- Set yourself daily goals. Be specific and realistic.
- Accept it can be difficult at first; it will get easier.

### DROPPING SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

If you want to gain control over your panic attacks think about the safety behaviours you have been using to help you face up to the feared situations. Make a list starting from the behaviour easiest to reduce.

The next step is gradually to reduce that behaviour until you are ready to drop it. For example, if you have been carrying your medication with you at all times, try to leave it in the house next time you go to the shops. You can start by leaving your medication for 1 hour, then 2 hours, half a day, a day, 2 days. Or, if you have been using alcohol to be able to cope with your anxiety try to reduce the amount of alcohol you drink. If reducing your safety behaviours makes you anxious, use the techniques described in this booklet to help you cope with your feelings.

MY SAFETY BEHAVIOUR	PLAN TO REDUCE IT

### GETTING USED TO BODILY SENSATIONS

People who experience panic attacks can be anxious about uncomfortable bodily sensations associated with anxiety, such as a fast heartbeat, dizziness or chest pain. If you want to be less anxious when you experience those sensations you can try to bring on the sensations yourself. This will show you that there is no need to be afraid of those uncomfortable sensations.

**You can bring on some of those sensations by doing exercises such as:**

- running on the spot for 30 seconds to 1 minute
- quick, deep breathing for 30 seconds to 1 minute
- shaking your head from side to side for 30 seconds
- putting your head between your legs for 1 minute and then sitting up quickly
- staring at the blank wall for 2 minutes

After you try each exercise rate your anxiety level from 0 (no anxiety) to 10 (severe anxiety). Then, make a list starting from the exercise that caused you the **least anxiety** and build up to the one that caused you the **most anxiety**. Write them down in the table on the next page.



## PHYSICAL EXERCISE

## ANXIETY RATING (from the lowest to highest)

PHYSICAL EXERCISE	ANXIETY RATING (from the lowest to highest)

- Once you have made your list, you can start doing the exercises again. Start with the exercise that is the least scary. Do the exercise for long enough to experience the unpleasant sensations. Rate your anxiety once again from 1-10 with each exercise. Repeat the exercise until your anxiety rating drops by half. Once you experience little or no anxiety move to the next exercise from the list.
- Remember that bodily sensations are not dangerous. They are quite normal and each one of us experiences them from time to time. Do not be afraid to experience them.

## TIPS FOR PRACTICE

- You can always break each exercise into smaller steps. For example, quick deep breathing can last 30 seconds at first, then 45, then a minute.
- You might need to do the exercise several times for a few days before the anxiety reduces. Overcoming your panic takes time and practice. Plan your exercises in advance and leave yourself enough time to do them.

## SECTION 5: PANIC ATTACKS AND THINKING

Our mind comes up with new thoughts and ideas all the time, but this happens so quickly that we do not notice it. Most of our thinking happens automatically, just like walking or driving.

We are not used to slowing our mind down and observing how it works.

Yet, how we think can have a great impact on how we feel. This is why it can be helpful to train yourself to notice your thoughts, as they appear and to be more aware of how they make you feel.

Thoughts that come to our mind can be:

- neutral e.g. *"I will call my auntie today."*
- positive e.g. *"I dealt with that problem so well today."*
- negative e.g. *"If I go to that party I will make a fool of myself."*

Negative thoughts can make us feel low or anxious and this is why they can also be called unhelpful thoughts. Often, we believe our unhelpful thoughts as they seem very reasonable at the time. They can be very difficult to stop.



## WHAT HAPPENS TO MY THOUGHTS WHEN I AM ANXIOUS?

When you are anxious the way you think changes and you experience more unhelpful thoughts than usual.

Firstly, as a normal part of the "fight or flight" response your mind starts scanning the environment for threats. Now, this would be helpful if you were in danger, however it is not very helpful otherwise. As a result, you may find it difficult to concentrate and you might feel distracted.

When your mind cannot find any danger in the environment it starts focusing on your body. This is when you notice your heart pounding and your body sweating. You might start thinking that those uncomfortable sensations mean there is something wrong with you.

Thoughts you experience when you feel panicky often fall under two unhelpful thinking styles: **jumping to conclusions** and **catastrophising**.

### JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

We jump to conclusions when we make assumptions about what is happening based on little information. Take a look at some examples:

- "My heart is pounding, I must be having a heart attack!"
- "My mind is racing, I must be going mad."
- "I feel terrible, I must be getting seriously ill."
- "I find it hard to breathe. I'm not getting enough oxygen."

### CATASTROPHISING

We catastrophise when we imagine the worst possible scenario and we believe we will not be able to cope once it happens. Look at some examples:

- "I'll definitely have a panic attack if I go shopping at the weekend."
- "If I have a panic attack in public I'll make a fool of myself."
- "If I have another panic attack I won't be able to cope."
- "Next time I have a panic attack I might die."

Look at the picture below illustrating how unhelpful thoughts can lead to panic and also keep it going.



### STOP & THINK

What do you think when you become panicky?  
Write it down.

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It can be difficult to know what your thoughts are when there are so many of them racing through your mind. When you are anxious your thoughts can become muddled up and very unclear. In fact, you might be under the impression that you think nothing at all. The key here is observation and practice. Try to stop, step back and observe your thoughts as they appear, in order to make sense out of them.



## MAKING POSITIVE CHANGES

So far, we have seen that what we think about the situation can not only lead to a panic attack, but also make it worse. In order to take a closer look at your unhelpful thoughts, you might want to use a thought diary.

## THOUGHT DIARY

A thought diary provides a way of recording your thoughts. In order to fill in a thought diary you need to remember the last time you felt panicky, then think about what you were doing, what you were feeling and what you were thinking. At this stage, you might be unsure of your thoughts. Do not worry, you will get better at noticing your thoughts with time. Try to complete the thought diary below using these questions:

**DATE/TIME:** When you had the thought? Think about when your mood got worse? What day, what time?

**SITUATION:** Where were you? What were you doing?

**MOOD:** How did you feel at the time e.g. happy, nervous, or irritated?

**THOUGHT:** What was going through your head? What did you think about your bodily sensations or the situation? What did you think would happen?

DATE/TIME	SITUATION	MOOD	THOUGHTS
4th July, 4PM	Cleaning in the house	Panicky, anxious, frustrated	"I'm dizzy again, what if I faint?"

Over the next two weeks, try to write down any anxious thoughts you might be having throughout the day. Imagine you are a detective and you want to put the pieces of a puzzle together. What thoughts make you anxious and what thoughts make your anxiety even worse?

Carry a pen and a piece of paper with you and write your thoughts down as they occur. If that is not possible, write them down later on the day they appear. Be patient if you find it difficult at the start. Use the questions from the previous page to help you notice your thoughts. Talk to a friend or a relative, they might help you to discover what you were thinking in particular situations.

## DEALING WITH UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Unhelpful thoughts can be very powerful. When we are anxious we tend to focus on the negative aspects of our experience and ignore all the things that are going well. We may feel hopeless. One way to overcome that feeling is to examine our unhelpful thoughts by looking at evidence for and against them. Looking at our thoughts in this way will help us to come to a more balanced point of view.

To find out how to weigh up evidence for and against your unhelpful thoughts look at the example below.

THOUGHT	EVIDENCE FOR	EVIDENCE AGAINST	BALANCED THOUGHT
I am going to faint.	I feel dizzy and nauseous.	I've never fainted during a panic attack. I also know that fainting is caused by a drop in blood pressure, when I feel panicky my blood pressure rises.	I feel bad, but I never fainted before and I know it will pass.
If I have a panic attack in the shopping centre I won't cope.	I had a panic attack in the shopping centre before and I was terrified.	I now know how to cope with panic. I coped with my anxiety before.	If I get panicky I will know why it happens and how to cope with it.

Imagine you are a judge in court and you are trying to get the facts right to be able to make the right decision. Similarly, in order to challenge your unhelpful thoughts you need to look for hard facts, not opinions.



**Evidence for** your thought would be something that seems to support your thought like the way you feel physically or your previous experiences. **Evidence against** your thought would be something that shows that your thought might not be true. Perhaps, the scenario you imagine has never happened or you coped with it when it happened in the past. **Balanced thought** is a realistic, accurate thought that you can rely on.

It can be quite difficult to come up with evidence against your own thoughts. If you strongly believe your unhelpful thoughts, it might take some time, or even another person, to find evidence against those thoughts.

Try to fill in the diary below over the next few days. If you need more space, take an extra piece of paper.

THOUGHT	EVIDENCE FOR	EVIDENCE AGAINST	BALANCED THOUGHT

### WHY ARE DIARIES HELPFUL?

Being aware of your unhelpful thoughts might not be easy for you. Keeping a diary might help you to pay attention to your thoughts and look at them from a different point of view.



### STOP & THINK

You can use a number of questions to help you reach more balanced thoughts. Pick one unhelpful thought you experience and try to challenge it using one of the questions below.

- **Is my thought a fact or an opinion?**
- **Is this thought helpful to me? What would be a more helpful way to think?**
- **If a friend had that thought, what would I say to him/her?**
- **What would others say about my thought?**
- **What is the worst that can happen?**
- **How could I cope if the worst happens?**
- **In 5 months time will that thought matter much?**

Noticing and challenging negative thoughts is a skill which needs to be learned and practised. It might not come to you naturally. It might also take some time before you will see the benefit of looking at things from a more balanced point of view. The good news is that if you practise challenging your thoughts on a regular basis your mood will most likely improve and you will feel in control.

### COPING CARDS

You might want to write down some positive helpful statements on a piece of paper and read them when you are anxious. They can be your “*coping cards*” which you can keep in your pocket or wallet. Statements you write down should be easy to read. For example:

- **My anxiety will pass away. It always passes.**
- **Panic is not dangerous. I won’t die, faint or go crazy.**
- **I know how to cope. I am in control. I don’t need to be anxious.**



## SECTION 6: REVIEW

Practise, practise, practise. There are a number of things you can do to overcome your panic attacks. However, if you want to make a change, you need to practise the techniques from this booklet. So, plan ahead and make some time for change. Start with small steps and repeat the steps if needed. Practise in different situations at different times. You will eventually get better.

Do not be discouraged if you do not get better straight away. Be patient. Overcoming panic attacks can take a lot of hard work. Also, if you notice you are going back to your old behaviours after improving, do not worry that can happen. All you need to do is to refresh the skills you have learned and use them again.

### Reward yourself

Remember it is important to motivate yourself. Talk to your friends or family about what it is you are trying to achieve and share your experience with them. You might also want to reward yourself every time you do hard work. You can take a nice bath, go for a walk or see a film. Be proud of what you have achieved so far.

## WHAT TO DO TO PREVENT PANIC?

- **FIND TIME TO RELAX YOURSELF.** Panic attacks are more likely to happen when you are tired. Do something enjoyable every day. Practise muscle relaxation. Get enough rest and sleep.
- **DO NOT CHANGE YOUR BODY POSITION TOO QUICKLY.** If you have been sitting down for a while, get out of the chair slowly. If you have been lying in bed, do not jump out. Quick movement can result in a swimming feeling in your head and lead to panic.
- **PRACTISE CONTROLLED BREATHING.** If you keep your breathing slow and calm, you will be less likely to experience uncomfortable physical symptoms.
- **FACE YOUR FEARS.** Face up to the situations you fear. Start from taking small steps. You can do it.
- **KEEP A THOUGHT DIARY.** Noticing and challenging your unhelpful thoughts on a daily basis will help you to think in a more accurate way.
- **STAY HEALTHY.** Watch what you eat and drink. Do not skip meals. Cut down on caffeine and alcohol.
- **FIND TIME FOR REGULAR EXERCISE.** This will help you to relieve stress and feel better. Exercising will also make you feel more confident.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN IN PANIC?

- **STAND YOUR GROUND.** You don't need to leave the room, go to the bathroom or call for help. You can cope by yourself.
- **SLOW DOWN YOUR BREATHING.** Take slow, regular breaths. Breathe in and out through your nose.
- **RELAX.** Drop your shoulders and try not to tense up.
- **SAY TO YOURSELF:** *"Panic attacks are not dangerous. My body is preparing to fight or flee. I know what to do to cope and I know it will not last forever".* Read what you wrote on your "coping cards".
- **STOP AND LOOK AT YOUR THOUGHTS.** Learn how to notice and challenge your unhelpful thoughts. Come up with more balanced, realistic thoughts.
- **FOCUS ON SOMETHING OR SOMEONE ELSE.** Bring your attention to what is going around you. What and who can you see? What can you smell? What can you hear? What are others doing? Take 5 minutes to notice things around you.



## Further help and information

For more information or advice please contact Wellbeing Services on **0141 232 2555** or visit the website **[www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk](http://www.wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk)**

Wellbeing Services is a Primary Care Mental Health Team based in the South of Glasgow. Wellbeing Services offer a variety of services to assist people with common mental health problems and helps them see a brighter tomorrow.



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