

Panic

INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Key Points:

- Panic is not an unusual reaction
- Panic is not harmful
- Panic is characterised by unpleasant and scary physical symptoms
- There are treatments available to help

What is panic?

Most of us experience feelings of panic or anxiety at points during our lifetime. It is a perfectly natural response, particularly when in a dangerous or stressful situation, for example if you realise you have had your wallet stolen or you narrowly avoid an accident on the road. However, for some people feelings of panic occur regularly, they last longer than a few minutes and can come at any time. A panic attack can be extremely scary and overwhelming to experience.

To understand panic, we need to understand fear. You can think of fear as an automatic alarm response that switches on the moment there is danger. Think about what would happen to you if a dangerous animal approached you. For most people it would be panic stations! You, and almost everyone, would go through a whole series of bodily changes, such as your heart pumping, harder breathing, sweating, all in order to respond to the danger in front of you. This alarm response would probably lead us either to run for our lives or become sufficiently prepared to defend ourselves. This alarm response is an important survival mechanism called the fight or flight response. Sometimes, however, it is possible to have this intense fear response when there is no danger – it is a false alarm that seems to happen when you least expect it. It is like someone ringing the fire alarm when there is no fire! Essentially, a panic attack is a false alarm.

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How common is panic disorder?

At least 1 person in 10 experiences occasional panic attacks, these are usually triggered by stressful events and are unpleasant but often manageable.

However, in the UK, approximately 1 person in 100 has panic disorder. Panic disorder is characterised by panic attacks that happen frequently and without an apparent trigger.

Most people first develop the disorder when they are in their twenties. The condition is approximately twice as common in women as it is in men.



What are the symptoms of panic?

The symptoms of panic vary from person to person. However, there are common symptoms that people experience. We can group these into three groups: thoughts, physical symptoms and feelings.

Thoughts:

Common thoughts during a panic attack include:

- "I'm going to die"
- "I'm going mad"
- "I'm choking"
- "I'm losing control"
- "People are noticing/judging me"
- "I'm going to faint"



Physical Symptoms:

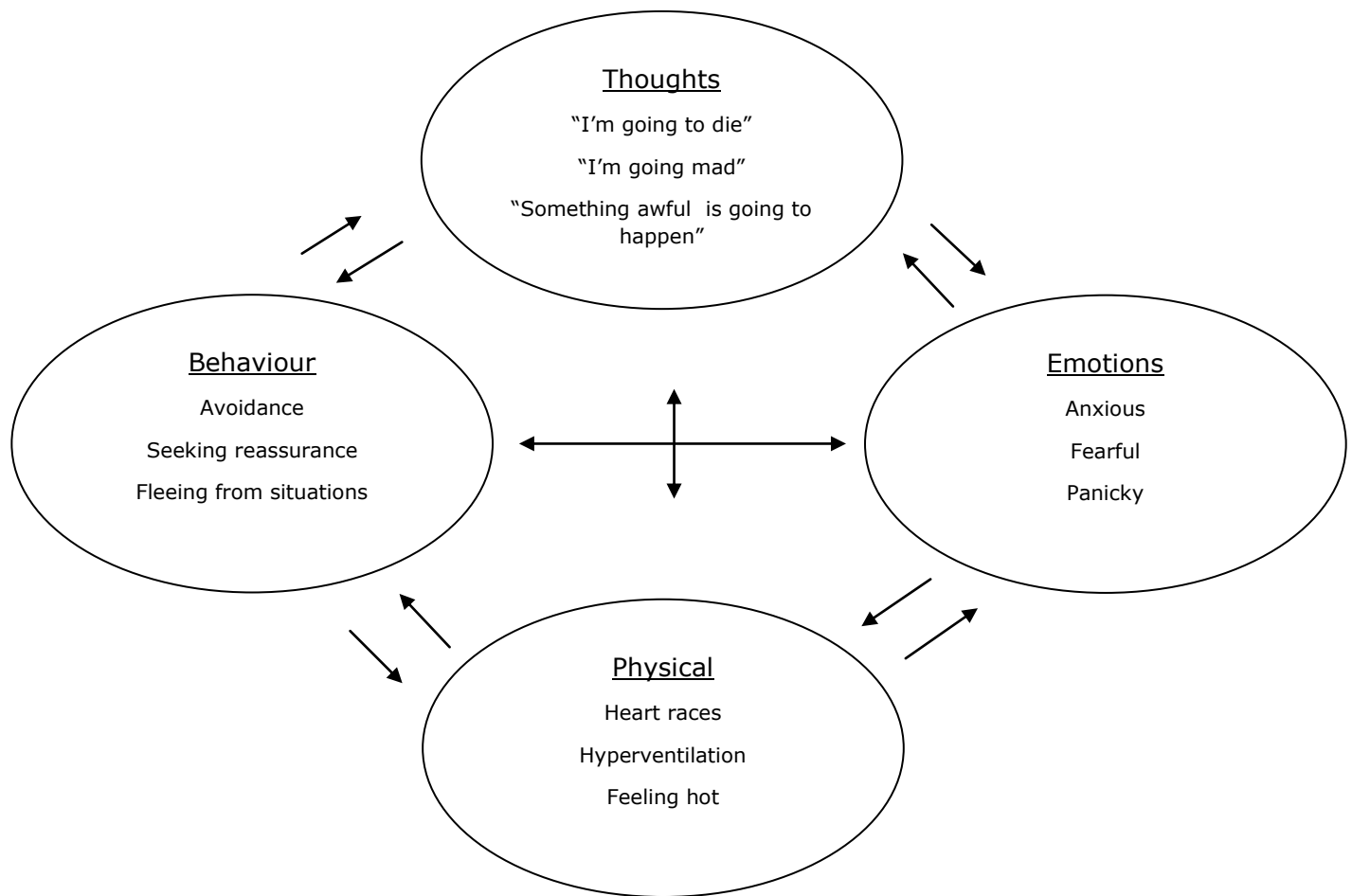
Listed below are some of the most common physical symptoms of panic. Some people have all these symptoms, others just a few.

- Heart racing, pounding or skipping a beat
- Chest pains
- Sweating
- Feeling hot
- Feeling light headed
- Shaking
- Numbness or tingling in hands or legs
- Changes in breathing—gulping air, breathing fast, feeling short of breath or hyperventilating

Feelings:

- Feelings of fear
- Feelings of utter terror
- Feelings of impending doom
- Feeling anxious in situations where a panic attack has happened before.
- Feeling anxious about being anxious

What keeps panic going?



The image above shows a maintenance cycle of panic. Physical symptoms, thoughts, emotions and our behaviour are all interlinked and can drive and influence each other. We can see this as a vicious cycle. Vicious cycles are easy to get into. For example if you feel panicked and hot and think you are going to die then it is natural to leave the situation you are in, perhaps to get outside and get more air and not go near it again!

As panic becomes more and more a feature in your life it is all the more likely that one or two of the symptoms described above will trigger off a full blown panic attack. It is not unusual to feel out of breath due to physical exercise and then misinterpret this as "I can't get enough air" or "I'm going to have a heart attack".

Vicious cycles are something that can be overcome. The first step is understanding more about panic, which you are doing by reading this. It is possible to break the cycle by targeting one of the areas listed above. So for example avoiding less or learning to challenge your thoughts. When we change one area it breaks the cycle and has a positive impact upon the other areas. On the next page we will see what treatments are available to break the vicious cycle of panic.



What treatments are available?

At TalkPlus we offer Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This is an evidence-based treatment, which means it has been proven to help people who suffer with panic. CBT aims to help people better manage or overcome their panic by learning ways to cope.

There are several steps involved in treating panic. The first one involves understanding more about panic, what it is, what symptoms you are experiencing and how these are connected. What keeps it going and what triggers are involved. This understanding is important to start tackling panic as the symptoms of panic are often misinterpreted as dangerous and life threatening. It is also much easier to change things when we know why we are doing it and how it can help us.

Once you have learnt more about your panic you can start to tackle it by learning techniques. This is done using two different treatment approaches. Some people need to use both techniques, for other people one is enough. The two different techniques are:

Graded exposure

Many people find feeling anxious or panicked is maintained by avoiding situations that evoke fear. Although escaping from a situation temporarily relieves panic, continual avoidance makes it even more frightening to experience the same situation again.

Exposure therapy is a highly effective treatment that reduces panic through habituation. Habituation is a natural decrease in anxiety that occurs when people remain in a feared situation.

Cognitive Restructuring

Some people find that panic and anxiety is maintained by a bias towards negative thinking about the future based upon threat. Cognitive restructuring involves learning how to challenge negative thinking (E.g. "I'm going to have a heart attack") and develop a more balanced way of thinking.

The above treatments can be explained in much more detail with your therapist.

Useful contacts:

- No Panic: 0800 138 8889
- Anxiety UK: www.anxietyuk.org.uk
- Anxiety Care: www.anxietycare.org.uk
- Anxiety BC: www.anxietybc.com
- Mind Info Line: www.mind.co.uk
- Rethink: 0300 500 0927
- Royal College of Psychiatrists: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/problems/anxietyphobias/anxiety,panicphobias.aspx>