

panic attacks and panic disorder

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panic attacks and panic disorder | [help and info](#)

panic attacks

A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear, accompanied by four or more symptoms from the following:

- palpitations or rapid heart rate
- breathlessness
- feeling unsteady, dizzy, light-headed or faint
- trembling or shaking
- sweating
- having a hot flush or chills
- chest pain or discomfort
- numbness or tingling sensations
- feeling as if you or surroundings are unreal
- nausea or churning stomach
- choking
- fear of dying
- fear of losing control or going crazy.

Different people have different combinations of symptoms, but the general pattern is usually the same:

- a sudden increase in anxiety
- a range of unpleasant sensations in the body
- fear that something terrible is going to happen. Often people are afraid that they may collapse, lose consciousness, have a heart attack, lose control, go mad or even die.

Panic attacks usually come on very suddenly and reach their peak within 10 minutes. The peak generally lasts for 5-10 minutes, but it can take much longer for all the anxiety to subside. In a panic, normal fear reactions are happening at the wrong time: the body's 'alarm system', which is designed to help you deal with emergencies, gets triggered off, exactly as if you were in real danger.

limited symptom panic attacks

These are panic attacks with less than four symptoms. For example, a sudden episode of intense dizziness or nausea, accompanied by fear that something terrible is about to happen. Many people have a mixture of full and limited symptom panic attacks.

panic disorder

This means having repeated, frequent panic attacks. People with panic disorder are often very apprehensive about having more attacks, and may change their behaviour or lifestyle as a result of the attacks.

Between one and four people in 100 have panic disorder at some stage in their life. It is twice as common in women as in men. It usually starts between the ages of 15 and 19 or between 25 and 30 years of age.

panic disorder with agoraphobia

Together these create anxiety about being in places or situations for fear of having a panic attack or panicky feelings. Situations may include being away from home, queuing, travelling on public transport or using lifts. Some people avoid these situations completely. Others force themselves into feared situations, but feel anxious and panicky throughout.

agoraphobia?

The word agoraphobia is derived from fear of the 'agora' - the marketplace. People with agoraphobia typically fear being out in crowded places where it may be difficult to escape or find safety. The fear of being embarrassed also features, although this is also a feature of social phobia. Agoraphobics usually, but not always, fear crowded places; some may also fear being alone, because they are concerned that they may panic when no-one is there to help them. Most people suffering from agoraphobia also feel anxious about or avoid public transport, because they feel it is difficult to escape. For some people their car can become an extension of home and allows them to travel greater distances. Again, most people with agoraphobia prefer to be accompanied if they go out, usually with someone they know well and trust. The avoidance typically interferes with the person's ability to work and socialise, often to the point of being housebound.

Although agoraphobia commonly occurs in people suffering from panic disorder, there are many people who suffer from agoraphobia alone. Some may have other problems which make them fear leaving their house, including irritable bowel syndrome, epilepsy and osteoporosis.

what happens during a panic attack?

In a panic attack people typically become frightened of the sensations of anxiety itself. For example, a person walking down the street may notice that their heart is beating quickly and pounding. This, or other physical sensations, although harmless can trigger off ideas such as 'I'm having a heart attack'. Not surprisingly, that kind of thought increases anxiety which in turn increases bodily sensations which seem to confirm the idea that the person is having a heart attack further increasing anxiety and so on in a vicious circle.

Notice that a panic can be triggered by physical sensations but also by feeling anxious or upset and by the thoughts themselves. The type of things which people typically fear in a panic vary from ideas of losing control over your behaviour through to more physical catastrophes such as having a heart attack, a stroke or fainting. Once the panic attacks begin, a number of things can keep them going. Particularly important is the things that people do; the person who is in the supermarket when they have their panic attack rushes out thinking that they 'just got away with it'. In fact, by rushing out what really happened is that they didn't get the opportunity to discover that the thing they are afraid of didn't happen!

These understandable behaviours such as avoidance, or more subtle behaviours which occur during a panic attack, can become very prominent and indeed sometimes become the problem itself. Thus, in agoraphobia the avoidance can often become more of a problem than the panic attacks.

However, it is not a matter of 'just pull yourself together'. Everyone who suffers from an anxiety disorder tends to think this kind of thing. The reality is that nobody wants to suffer from an anxiety problem and if the sufferer knew how to pull themselves together they would do so. Very often what the person needs is guidance on how best to set about 'pulling themselves together'.

an example of how panic attacks work

Susan has panic attacks whenever she goes into places where there are a number of people that she doesn't know, such as supermarkets or shopping centres. She had a panic attack just thinking about going to her local supermarket.

The panic started with her thinking about a particular supermarket where she had previously had several panic attacks. That thought triggered feelings of being short of breath which, as it started to build up, made her think 'I'm going to pass out'.

Not surprisingly she became frightened at this idea and the fear increased the physical symptoms she was experiencing so the shortness of breath became worse and she started to experience palpitations, chest pain, she felt shaky and hot which reinforced the idea she was going to pass out. Again, the strength of this idea strengthened her fear and, as her chest pains and palpitations became worse, a new thought came to her mind which was 'perhaps I'm going to die and the anxiety will kill me'. This was even more frightening than the previous thought and she became so frightened she described it as 'feeling petrified'. That very intense fear and panic made the symptoms worse and round it went in a vicious circle that became a downward spiral making it impossible for her to leave the house. The details of panic vary from person to person but the basic vicious circle is always pretty much the same which is physical symptoms seeming to indicate that some terrible thing is going to happen (having a heart attack, fainting, losing control, going mad and so on). Those very scary thoughts increase the fear which in turn increases the physical sensation reinforcing the belief and so on in the vicious circle that we call panic.

practical advice

Here are some important facts about panic attacks:

- no matter how bad it feels, panic attacks cannot actually harm you or make you go mad
- panic attacks do not last forever, they always pass after a while
- how you think will affect how bad the panic is and how long it lasts
- if you run away from a panic attack, you are making life harder for yourself in the longer term and your life will become more and more restricted
- during a panic, remind yourself that you are not going to die, go mad or lose control
- try and just let the panic attack wash over you, without fighting it – just wait for it to subside by itself

relaxation

Being able to relax is particularly important. It enables the body to renew its energy and the mind to feel calm and refreshed. Although underlying problems will remain, you will probably feel more able to deal with them.

However, it is often very hard to relax when you are distressed. In this case, learning a relaxation technique or a therapy such as yoga may help. Ask your GP or find out from your library what exists locally.

All relaxation techniques combine breathing more fully using your diaphragm and relaxing your muscles. In the process, your mind will become calmer. Once you have learnt a relaxation technique, you need to practice it regularly. You may then find it's easy to use it to make yourself relax in stressful situations.

The Key to Overcoming Panic Attacks

The surest path to overcoming panic attacks is to train yourself to respond to panic in accepting and calming ways.

This article will show you a specific, simple, and powerful set of tips for overcoming panic attacks. You can also listen to a [radio interview](#) in which I discuss these steps.

As you read the steps described below, think about how they compare to what you usually do during a panic attack. The [Panic Trick](#) tells us that your gut instinct of how to respond to a panic attack will likely be to do something that **makes the problem worse** rather than

better. The path to overcoming panic attacks requires responses that are quite different from what you usually do. If you keep doing the same thing, you'll probably keep getting the same result. If you seek anxiety relief, you need to look for different methods.

Here's a five step process you can use to guide your responses during a panic attack. The regular use of this approach will go a long way towards your goal of overcoming panic attacks. I have adapted this, with some modifications of my own, from Anxiety Disorders and Phobias: A Cognitive Perspective, an excellent professional text by Beck, Greenberg, and Emery.

The Five Steps of AWARE

The five steps to overcoming panic attacks are:

Acknowledge & **A**cept

Wait & **W**atch (and maybe, **W**ork)

Actions (to make myself more comfortable)

Repeat

End

Let's take a look at what each step entails.

Acknowledge & Accept

All progress starts here. This is the most important single step to overcoming panic attacks.

Acknowledge

Here I acknowledge the present reality, that I'm afraid and starting to panic. I won't try to ignore it, or pretend it's not there. I won't struggle to distract myself, tell myself to "stop thinking about it!", or snap any rubber bands on my wrist.

I'm acknowledging simply that I am afraid, not that I am in danger. The thought that I am in danger is just another symptom of panic, not an important or useful thought.

Accept

Here I accept the fact that I'm afraid at this moment. I don't fight the feeling; ask God to take it away; blame myself, or anybody else. I accept, as best I can, that I'm afraid in the same way I would accept a headache. I don't like headaches, but I don't bang my head

against the wall in an effort to get rid of them, because that makes them worse. Overcoming panic attacks begins with working with, not against, my panic and anxiety symptoms.

How Can I Accept a Panic Attack?

What makes a panic attack acceptable (not desirable, but acceptable) is that, while it feels awful and fills me with dread, it isn't dangerous. It won't kill me or make me crazy. Someone pointing a gun at me, that's not acceptable. I might get hurt or killed. If someone points a gun at me, I have to do whatever I can to change that: run, hide, fight, yell, bribe, or beg, because the consequence of being shot is so terrible that I must try to avoid it.

Accepting the symptoms, not resisting, is a powerful step to overcoming panic attacks.

What Can a Panic Attack Do to Me?

It makes me feel afraid, that's what a panic attack does. And, if I'm having a panic attack, I'm already there! I'm already experiencing [the worst that will happen](#). I just need to ride it out. That's the surest path to overcoming panic attacks.

Why should I accept a panic attack? Because the more I resist panic, the worse it gets. The more I develop the habit of acceptance, the more progress I make toward my goal of overcoming panic attacks.

That's Acknowledge & Accept. How does that compare to what you usually do during a panic attack?

Wait & Watch (and maybe, Work)

Wait

What I mean by "Wait" is this: don't just do something, stand there. It's similar to the suggestion "count to ten before you get mad".

One of the hallmarks of a panic attack is that it temporarily robs you of your ability to think, remember, and concentrate. This step will buy you a little time to regain those abilities before you take any action.

When you react before you have a chance to think straight, what do you do? If you're like most people, you probably flee, or struggle. You do things that actually make it worse. This is what people mean when they say things like "I know I'm doing it to myself" and **the harder I try, the worse it gets**.

Jumping into action too quickly is a big obstacle to overcoming panic attacks.

So, even though you have a powerful urge to leave, postpone that decision for a little bit. Don't tell yourself you CAN'T leave - keep that option open so you don't feel trapped - but put off the decision about whether or not to leave. Stay in the situation. You don't need to run away to get relief. Let relief come to you.

Watch

Use the occasion to observe how the panic works, and how you respond to it. The best way to do this is to fill out a [panic diary](#). The diary is a questionnaire which helps you notice important aspects of a panic attack, so you can respond more effectively over time. Feel free to download and reproduce it for your own personal use. You can also download a set of [instructions](#).

My patients often report that just filling out a diary helps them to calm down. How does this work? It's not that they're distracted from the subject of panic, because the diary questions are all about panic. It helps you get a little distance from your emotions. It works because, while you complete a diary, you're in the role of an observer, rather than feeling like a victim.

The best way to use the diary is to fill it out **during** the attack, rather than after. If you're in a situation where writing is impractical, perhaps while driving a car, you can: use a digital recorder; have your support person read the questions to you and record your answers; or pull over for a few minutes to write.

What About "Work"?

If you're in a relatively passive situation during the panic attack - a passenger in a vehicle, getting your hair cut, or waiting in a waiting room - "Wait & Watch" is all you need. If you're in a more active role - driving a car or giving a presentation - then you also need to attend to the "Work" of conducting that activity. Do "Wait & Watch", but also remain engaged in your task.

That's "Wait & Watch (and maybe, Work)". How does that compare to what you usually do during a panic attack?

Actions (to make myself more comfortable)

At this point, you've already gone through the two most important steps to overcoming panic attacks.

These steps, and all the steps necessary to overcome panic disorder and phobia, are covered in much more detail in my [Panic Attacks Workbook](#).

What's Your Job During an Attack?

It's not your job to bring the panic attack to an end; that will happen no matter what you do.

Your job now is to see if you can make yourself a little more comfortable, while you wait for the attack to end.

Here are a few techniques that my patients have found particularly useful in overcoming panic attacks.

Belly Breathing

Regardless of what else you do, do [belly breathing](#). It's also known as diaphragmatic breathing, but I think "belly breathing" is more descriptive. Many people think they know how to do deep breathing, but don't do it correctly, so they don't get good results. A good belly breathing technique is a very powerful tool in the work of overcoming panic attacks!

How to Talk to Yourself

Talk to yourself (silently!) about what is happening, and what you need to do. One question my patients find very helpful is this: **is it Danger or Discomfort?**. Some of the other responses my patients like include the following:

1. Fine, let's have an attack! It's a good chance to practice my coping techniques.
2. Answer your "what if...?" fears by saying "So what? I'll get afraid, then calm down again."
3. It's okay to be afraid.

Get Involved in the Present

People don't panic in the present. People panic when they imagine something bad happening to them in the future or in the past. This is why your panic attacks are almost always accompanied by some "what if...?" thought. If a dog just bit my leg, I don't say "what if a dogbite?". The reason you say "what if...?" is because what you fear is **not actually happening!**

Get back into the activity you were engaged in prior to the attack, and become involved with the people and objects around you. If you're in a store, resume shopping, reading labels, comparing prices, asking questions, etc. It will move you closer to your goal of overcoming panic attacks when you bring your focus and energy back to the present environment. By this I mean, work with what is around you.

Work with Your Body

Identify, and relax, the parts of your body that get most tense during a panic attack. This typically involves first tensing, and then relaxing, the muscles of your jaw, neck, shoulders,

back and legs. Do not allow yourself to stand rigid, muscles tensed, and holding your breath. That just makes you feel worse! If you feel like you "can't move a muscle", start with just one finger!

That's "Actions (to make myself more comfortable)". How does that compare with what you usually do during a panic attack?

Repeat

This step is here because you might start feeling better, then feel another wave of panic. Your first reaction might then be to think "Oh No, it didn't work!". The Repeat step is here to remind you that it's OK if that happens. **Just take it from the top again.** It's not unusual or dangerous. You may go through several cycles, and you just need to repeat the AWARE steps again, as often as you need.

How does that compare with what you usually do?

End

This is here to remind you that your panic attack will end; that all panic attacks end; that they end regardless of how you respond; that it's not your job to make the attack end; and that your only job is to make yourself as comfortable as possible while waiting for the attack to end.

Hasn't those statements been true for you? Don't try to take my word for it. Review your own history of panic attacks and see.

And maybe the next time you panic, when you notice yourself thinking, once again, "Will this ever end?", you'll find yourself answering, "YES!"

A Breathing Exercise to Calm Panic Attacks

Here's a simple breathing exercise that will restore your comfortable breathing and soothe many of the physical symptoms of a panic attack.

You may have already tried deep breathing and not had much success in soothing your panic symptoms. The reason for that is that most descriptions of deep breathing leave out a critical step. I'm going to show you how to do it right.

A simple, but powerful, technique

If you have [Panic Disorder](#) or [Social Phobia](#), this deep breathing exercise may be the single most important coping technique I can show you. It's also useful with other anxiety disorders in which the physical symptoms are less prominent, but still present. Comfortable, deep breathing is the key to relaxation. All the the traditional relaxation methods (yoga, meditation, hypnosis) place a central emphasis on breathing.

I can't catch my breath!

Feeling like "I can't catch my breath!" is probably the most common of all panic symptoms. Your breathing feels labored, you strain to take a deep breath, you fear you're not going to get it - and **the harder you try, the worse it feels!**

When you feel short of breath, it doesn't mean you're not getting enough air. In fact, people will often say "I can't catch my breath", and this shows that they're getting air, because we talk by making air vibrate. If you're talking, you're breathing! It's not a dangerous symptom.

But it does get people very scared, and it produces other uncomfortable physical symptoms, so it's worth your while to be able to correct it.

You've probably already had it told to you, and you've probably also read it as well, that what you need to do is "take a deep breath". If you're like most people, that advice hasn't helped you much. It's good advice, but it's incomplete. It doesn't tell you **how** to take a deep breath. A good breathing exercise should tell you **how** to take a deep breath, and that's what I'm going to do.

Here's the Key

When you feel like you can't catch your breath, it's because you forgot to do something.

You forgot to exhale.

That's right. Before you can take a deep breath, you have to give one away. Why? Because, when you've been breathing in a short, shallow manner (from your chest), if you try and take a deep inhale, you just can't do it. All you can do is take a more labored, shallow breath from your chest. That will give you all the air you need, but it won't feel good.

Go ahead, try that now and see what I mean. Put one hand on your chest, the other on your belly. Breathe very shallowly from your chest a few times, then try to take a deep breath. I think you'll find that, when you inhale, you use your chest muscles, rather than your diaphragm, or belly.

When you breathe in this shallow manner, you get all the air you need to live, but you can also get other symptoms which add to your panic.

You get chest pain or heaviness, because you've tightened the muscles of your chest to an uncomfortable degree. (The chest pain people feel in a panic attack isn't from the heart, it's from the muscles of the chest). You feel lightheaded or dizzy, because shallow breathing can produce the same sensations as hyperventilation. You also get a more rapid heartbeat, and maybe numbness or tingling in the extremities as well.

All from breathing short and shallow!

One of the very first things I ask my patients with panic disorder to do is to learn and practice **belly breathing**. I recommend it to you as well. Here's the breathing exercise.

Belly Breathing Exercise

1. Place one hand just above your belt line, and the other on your chest, right over the breastbone. You can use your hands as a simple biofeedback device. Your hands will tell you what part of your body, and what muscles, you are using to breathe.
2. Open your mouth and gently sigh, as if someone had just told you something really annoying. As you do, let your shoulders and the muscles of your upper body relax, down, with the exhale. The point of the sigh is not to completely empty your lungs. It's just to relax the muscles of your upper body.
3. Close your mouth and pause for a few seconds.
4. Keep your mouth closed and inhale **slowly** through your nose by pushing your stomach out. The movement of your stomach precedes the inhalation by just the tiniest fraction of a second, because it's this motion which is pulling the air in. When you've inhaled as much air as you can comfortably (without throwing your upper body into it), just stop. You're finished with that inhale.
5. Pause. How long? You decide. I'm not going to give you a specific count, because everybody counts at a different rate, and everybody has different size lungs. Pause briefly for whatever time feels comfortable. However, be aware that when you breathe this way, you are taking larger breaths than you're used to. For this reason, it's necessary to **breathe more slowly than you're used to**. If you breathe at the same rate you use with your small, shallow breaths, you will probably feel a little lightheaded from over breathing, and it might make you yawn. Neither is harmful. They're just signals to slow down. Follow them!
6. Open your mouth. Exhale through your mouth by pulling your belly in.
7. Pause.
8. Continue with Steps 4-7.

Many people find it easier to learn from watching a demonstration, rather than just reading a set of instructions. So here is a video I have on my YouTube account which explains and

demonstrates the belly breathing exercise. If you like, have a look at the video before doing the practice.

Now Try the Breathing Exercise

How does my video demonstration compare to how you usually breathe?

If you've been struggling with panic for a while, it's probably the **opposite** of how you usually breathe. That's because you've become a chest breather. You can live that way, but it will make it harder to overcome panic.

Go ahead and practice the breathing exercise for a few minutes.

You may find it awkward at first, because it's very different than your present habit. But you used to breathe the way the video shows, because all of us come into the world breathing this way. If you want to see some world class belly breathers, visit some newborns or infants!

Let Your Hands Be Your Guide!

Your hands will tell you if you're doing this correctly or not. Where is the muscular movement of the breathing? You want it to occur at your stomach; your upper body should be relatively still. If you feel movement in your chest, or notice your head and shoulders moving upwards, start again at Step 1, and practice getting the motion down to your stomach.

After you've practiced for a few minutes, continue on to [Deep Breathing: Part 2](#) for further discussion of this breathing exercise, including suggestions of how often to practice, and for how long.