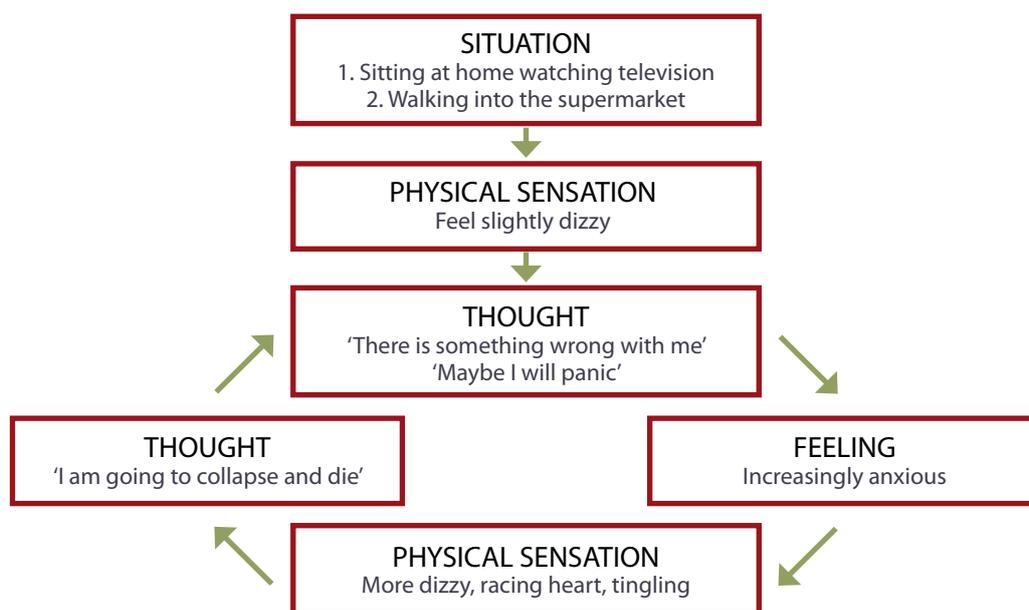


Panic Attacks – What They Are & How to Cope

What are panic attacks?

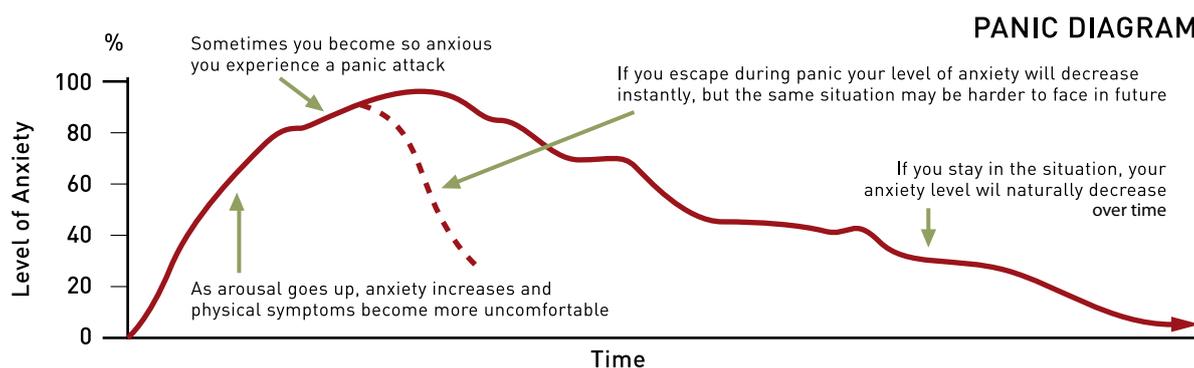
At times we can become so anxious that we feel a sense of panic. In these situations we feel suddenly overwhelmed and out of control. We may fear that something terrible is happening or is about to happen, for example we may believe we are having a heart attack or that we will suffocate, or faint or make a fool of ourselves in some way.

In a '5 Areas' diagram, a typical panic attack might look something like this:



Panic attacks are good examples of how our physical symptoms, thoughts and feelings all affect each other. The more anxious we feel, the more physical symptoms we experience. The more symptoms we experience, the more we are likely to interpret them as serious, for example, "I'm having a heart attack". This then makes us feel worse, and so on. This is known as a vicious cycle (see 'Fear of fear diagram' over the page). It is therefore not surprising that the vicious cycle of symptoms and thoughts influence our behaviour by, for example, trying to escape the situation. However, the relief this 'escape' provides is only temporary and it is often harder to re-enter that situation later. Therefore, although it may be difficult to follow, the best advice is to stay in the situation and let the panic pass by itself.

The diagram below shows what happens to our anxiety levels when we experience a panic attack.



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Contd.

How can I cope with panic attacks?

Although panic attacks may appear to come out of the blue, they are actually triggered by a combination of frightening thoughts and physical symptoms. As with anxiety, unhelpful or frightening thoughts such as “I can’t cope” or “I’m going to pass out” are an important component of panic attacks. Unhelpful thoughts or images may make physical symptoms worse, which in turn leads to more unhelpful thoughts and physical symptoms as shown in the ‘Fear of Fear’ diagram below:



An important first step in controlling panic attacks is to feel more confident that we are capable of controlling them. Although escaping or running away from the situation makes us feel better at the time, it makes us more likely to feel anxious and panicky in that situation in the future, or even to avoid the situation altogether. The most important piece of advice about panic attacks is to stay in the situation, using techniques described later, allowing the panic to happen and pass. Panic will naturally decrease (see ‘Panic diagram’ overleaf), and by staying in the situation we can find out for ourselves that nothing terrible will happen. This will help to lessen our anxiety next time we enter the same situation. It will help us feel more in control.

Unfortunately, whilst experiencing a panic attack it is often very difficult for us to think clearly and sensibly. You may find it helpful to write the following six tips on to a small card and keep it with you as a reminder of how to help yourself cope with a panic attack. This can be used to help you stay in the situation and cope effectively with feelings of panic.

Ask your guide for a diary to record your panic attacks and how you cope.

1. Wait – don’t run away! Stay in the situation and allow the panic to decrease naturally.
2. Remember that your feelings of panic are simply an exaggeration of normal responses to threat.
3. Also remember that—although the physical symptoms you experience may be very unpleasant and uncomfortable—they are not dangerous. **YOU CANNOT DIE FROM A PANIC ATTACK!**
4. Try to see each panic attack as an opportunity to practice your coping skills. With practice you will learn how to cope with and control your feelings of panic.
5. Focus on the here and now, not what you think will happen.
6. Once your feelings of panic have started to decrease, give yourself a pat on the back for staying in the situation. Well done!