

PANIC

What is a panic attack?

Panic attacks are very common – one in ten people will experience panic symptoms at some point in their lives. They are not dangerous and are not a sign of serious mental illness. Understanding how to respond to symptoms of panic will help them pass more quickly. This leaflet has been prepared with this in mind.

A panic attack is a terrifying experience.

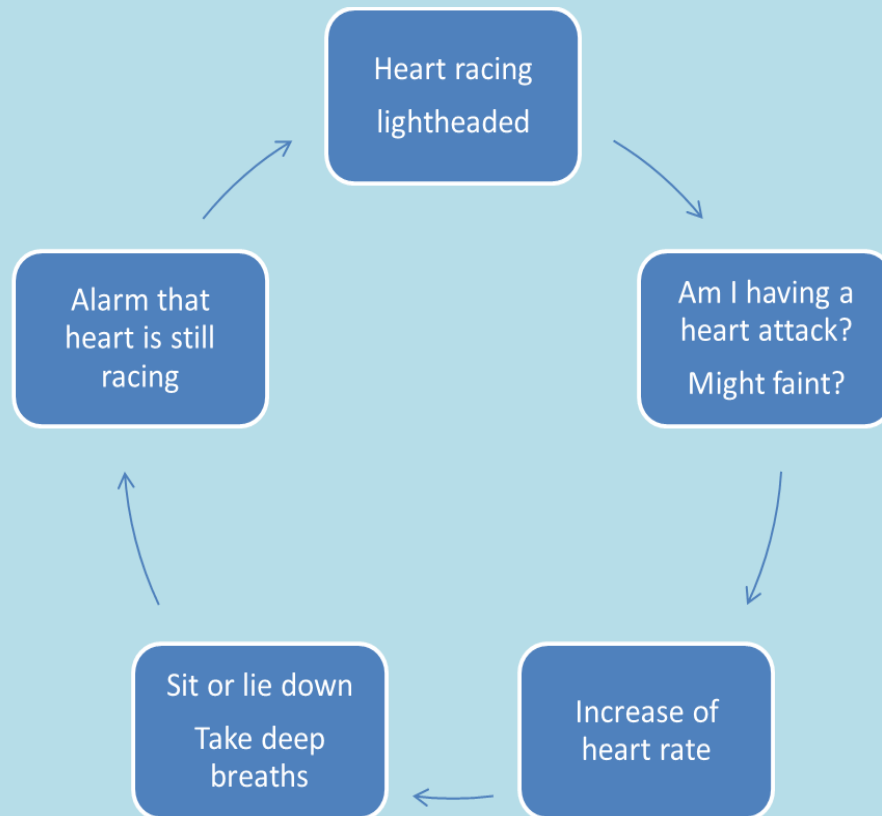
Panic attacks occur when there is a strong and imminent sense of threat or danger. Intense fear can arrive as if from nowhere leaving people feeling hopeless, helpless and out of control. Panic attacks can involve a range of alarming **physical symptoms** including:

- breathlessness
- palpitations
- dizziness
- choking sensations
- pins & needles
- feeling faint
- visual disturbances
- feeling hot or cold
- sweating
- numbness or tingling in the hands or feet
- feeling sick
- trembling or shaking
- tightness or pains in the chest

The experience can vary from individual to individual but generally the symptoms are alarming and it is not surprising that we interpret these symptoms as evidence that we are in imminent danger. It is not unusual for people to conclude from this that that something terrible and catastrophic is about to happen. Typical **thoughts and beliefs** can include:

- *I will collapse or faint*
- *I'm having a heart attack...I'm going to die.*
- *I can't catch my breath/ I'm choking...I going to suffocate*
- *I'm losing my mind..... going mad.*
- *I can't see properly...I'm going blind*
- *I'm going to be sick*

These thoughts and beliefs compound the fear that we experience leading to an escalation of the symptoms panic.



It is important to note that nothing dangerous can happen as a result of a panic attack. The symptoms always pass, nothing terrible can happen.

Why me? Some possible reasons why people experience panic attacks.

Panic attacks are very common. They can occur when we are under stress and are a version of the body's normal alarm reaction except that they occur in the absence of real threat or danger, a bit like a faulty burglar alarm which goes off in the wind. When we are faced with danger adrenaline floods into the body to prime the fight or flight system to enable us to take swift action to keep us safe. It is this adrenaline which causes the sensations that we misinterpret as dangerous. It is important to remember that adrenaline can cause no harm, the symptoms whilst unpleasant, **always** pass.

Catastrophic misinterpretations of harmless sensations are the main triggers of panic.

Ways in which people typically cope:

It is entirely understandable that when we feel under threat, we take measures to protect ourselves with the aim of keeping safe. Ways that people typically cope include:

- Leaving the situation which has triggered the alarming sensations as quickly as possible e.g. abandoning a queue in the supermarket.
- Avoiding returning to that situation again.
- Only doing things if accompanied by someone else like a friend or family member since this helps us to feel safe
- Planning such events carefully – only going when it is likely to be quiet, taking a bottle of water with you, making sure someone is available at the end of the ‘phone and having your mobile with you.
- Walking slowly if you believe your heart is vulnerable, try to park close by.
- Walk quickly to try to get the experience over with as quickly as possible which paradoxically can lead to greater breathlessness.

Although these coping strategies are all very understandable in the circumstance, there is a very real danger that they can compound the sense of anxiety and further fuel the fear. It becomes **imperative** to do things in a certain way and through this we never get a chance to see that anxious feelings subside, that nothing terrible can happen and that we can in fact cope.

More helpful coping!

- The key to overcoming panic is to re-set your alarm system so that it does not go off when there is no real danger.
- Aim to reassure your thinking. Tell yourself calmly that nothing terrible can happen; remind yourself gently that the sensations will pass.
- Practice calm and mindful breathing - this one act alone will help reduce the physical sensations and steady out racing thoughts – downloadable podcasts are available on our website.
- Visualisation: Breathe in blue (for calm), breathe out red to a count of three.
- Exercise - Go for a walk, run or cycle—this will help to burn off the adrenalin that is triggered by the panic.
- Guard against avoiding situations that you fear may trigger an attack along with the other coping strategies outlined above. The aim is to work towards building confidence through greater risk taking, trying things out, and finding that you can cope, that nothing terrible will happen and that symptoms pass the less we are alarmed by them.

See the Counselling Service website for details of web links & podcasts that are helpful in understanding and overcoming panic attacks.