



# Surviving panic attacks

“In a Nutshell”

---

People can be frightened by the experience of panic attacks. If it were not for anxiety and fear, a panic attack would not happen. The difficulty is that, at the time, it seems impossible to believe that such severe effects could be due to anxiety, and not something life-threatening like a heart attack. It is common for a panic attack sufferer to report that they thought they were dying and many are so worried about their heart that even having an ECG, which says that there is nothing wrong, is not entirely convincing. Reassurance is very important, the more you understand about seemingly uncontrollable effects the more you can reduce the fear and start to regain control.



## Who has panic attacks?

Anyone. It is not a sign of mental instability or weakness. In fact, it is often people who previously thought of themselves as strong and have coped well with past pressures who, for no apparent reason, are suddenly overwhelmed by the experience. Not being able to account for and use reason to link it with stressful experience contributes to the fear.

## What causes a panic attack?

Anxiety, a normal amount of which is necessary and familiar, is the energy which at some point can no longer be contained – the panic attack is like a safety valve, not a sign of fault or weakness, but a sign that you cannot go on ‘coping’ as you have been.

## What is happening?

Panic attacks involve both mind and body. If you were threatened by real life danger you would not be surprised to notice that your body reacts in a way that enables you to best meet the threat, usually by physical activity such as fighting, or running away. That is the way our ancestors, from whom we’ve evolved, learned. It is sometimes helpful to view a panic attack as a fear response without the actual event being there to trigger it off.

Reactions begin in the brain which sends messages to the gland which releases adrenalin into the bloodstream. Due to glucose substances being released by the liver, the blood sugar level can drop in response – leading to a feeling of weakness. Blood leaves the parts of the body where it is not immediately needed, to go to the muscles, especially in the arms and legs. In particular, it leaves the brain and stomach causing dizziness and *butterflies*. The oxygen content of the blood is increased by breathing faster and shallower and the heart beats faster in order to increase the quantity of blood getting to the muscles. With such activity your temperature increases so that the body sweats to aid cooling. You might go ‘red’ adding embarrassment, which fuels further feelings of anxiety. Muscles become tense and rigid in order to be ready for action. Add to this the fear that you are about to have a heart attack or that you are going crazy or are about to die and it isn’t surprising that the attack spirals out of control.

## What can be done about it?

It is important to combine several approaches. Start to recognise and understand the emotional and psychological causes e.g. through ongoing counselling. Understand the physical reactions listed above which interact to produce an ongoing cycle of fear. If you can begin to understand these and start to exert some control over your body, you can break the cycle. This can be done by becoming aware of your breathing. It is important to focus on this and begin to exert some control on how your breathing changes during attacks. It takes time to develop this ability but find time to relax and practice breathing exercises. This involves abdominal breathing – that is, to breathe deep down in the stomach rather than high in the chest. You can learn to breathe and expand the stomach, slowly regulating each breath. There are various cassette tapes and books that teach this technique. Many people give up after a short time, believing it isn’t working or it’s too boring or that they don’t have the time to practice. However, persistence

pays off and it need not take too much time each day to learn. Regular practice helps in two ways. It decreases your general level of tension and it introduces skills to use at the onset of a panic attack to override the instinctive shallow breathing.

Dietary changes can contribute to your ability to overcome the attacks.

- Avoid getting hungry between meals so that blood sugar levels stay even.
- Avoid sweet foods.
- Increase the amount of less processed carbohydrates – pasta, brown bread etc.
- Cut down on caffeine – this is a stimulant.
- Avoid alcohol. The sense of ease produced by alcohol is an artificial way of coping and hampers the development of other coping skills. Alcohol dependency can develop through a persistent use of alcohol taken to help with coping.
- Develop confidence. No one has ever died of a panic attack. Tell yourself that it cannot hurt you and that armed with this knowledge you can begin to cope.
- Do not be afraid to tell other people. Trying to hide it can make the feelings worse.

### **What can I hope for?**

As you begin to gain control over the attacks they start to lose their power. Confidence is the opposite to fear. Once they have gone there is no reason why they should return. And remember – they are not signs of weakness or insanity – anyone can develop them.