What Is A Panic Attack?

A PANIC ATTACK IS A SUDDEN ONSET OF INTENSE FEAR (IN A SITUATION THAT DOES NOT INVOLVE REAL DANGER) THAT QUICKLY REACHES A PEAK IN INTENSITY.

Symptoms include:
- sweating
- trembling
- chest pain
- choking sensation
- hot/cold flashes
- shortness of breath
- urge to flee
- dizziness
- increased heart rate
- nausea/upset stomach
- numbness or tingling sensations
- fear of dying, going crazy, losing control
- feeling detached from oneself
- difficulty swallowing

What Is Panic Disorder?

INDIVIDUALS WITH PANIC DISORDER FEAR THAT THE BODILY SENSATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH PANIC WILL CAUSE PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HARM. THIS IS SOMETIMES KNOWN AS THE "FEAR OF FEAR."

- Individuals with Panic Disorder may develop situationally predisposed or situationally bound panic attacks
- Panic Disorder involves recurrent, unexpected panic attacks followed by:
  - persistent fear of having additional panic attacks
  - worry about the consequences of having panic attacks (e.g., loss of a close relationship)
  - or significant changes in behavior as a result of the attacks (e.g., stop attending school)

What Is Agoraphobia?

AGORAPHOBIA INVOLVES FEAR OF EXPERIENCING PANIC IN A PLACE WHERE ESCAPE MAY BE DIFFICULT OR EMBARRASSING OR WHERE HELP MAY BE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN.

- Agoraphobic fears typically involve situations such as the following:
  - being away from home alone
  - being in a crowd
  - standing in a line
  - being on a bridge
  - using public transportation
- Feared situations are
  - avoided
  - endured with a great deal of distress
  - or require the presence of a "safe person

Ultimately we know deeply that the other side of every fear is a freedom.

Marilyn Ferguson
What Causes Problems With Panic?

LIKELY A COMBINATION OF FACTORS

Family experiences
Early loss of a parent, overprotective parents, overly critical parents, growing up in a chaotic family or one where emotion is discouraged or abuse occurred can contribute to anxiety problems (Bourne, 2000).

Stressful life events
Problems with anxiety can develop following periods of significant loss (e.g., significant illness or death of a family member) or life change such as starting university, having a baby (Bourne, 2000).

Heredity
If you have a first degree relative with panic disorder, your risk of developing the disorder increases. Having relatives who suffer from depression, alcoholism or other anxiety problems may also leave you more susceptible to panic disorder (Beckfield, 1994).

Temperament
Were you born shy, cautious or introverted? Being born with a temperament characterized by discomfort with unfamiliar situations may increase your vulnerability to panic later in life (Beckfield, 1994).

Personality
Certain personality features are typical of panic sufferers (Beckfield, 1994):
- Attach deeply to others; extra-sensitive about separation
- Frequent worries about death and disaster
- Excessive concerns about illness
- Strong need for control
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Lack of assertiveness
- Avoidance of emotion

Biology
Symptoms of anxiety can arise from certain medical conditions (inner ear problems, hypoglycemia, hyperthyroidism). Also, research shows that people with panic have highly sensitive and reactive nervous systems. They tend to have “anxiety sensitivity” (perceive anxiety as harmful) and have heightened awareness of, or ability to detect, bodily sensations of arousal (Craske and Barlow, 2001).

THE PANIC PROCESS

Initiating circumstance (internal or external)

Slight increase in uncomfortable physical sensations

No immediate or apparent external danger

Increased focus on the physical sensations

Misinterpretation of intense bodily sensations as dangerous

Escaping, avoiding

Anxious thoughts and feelings about certain situations

Fear of panic recurring

Monitoring for uncomfortable physical sensations
A panic attack causes the fastest and most complex reaction known within the human body. It immediately alters the functioning of the eyes, several major glands, the brain, heart, lungs, stomach, intestines, pancreas, kidneys and bladder, and the major muscle groups.” (Wilson, 1996, p. 5).

Panic may seem to occur “out-of-the-blue.” However, on closer examination, it is connected to certain events, thoughts or feelings. A variety of events may prompt panic, including stress, separation or loss, conflict, and hormonal events such as pregnancy (Beckfield, 1994).

Usually begins between late adolescence and mid-thirties (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) with the peak onset in the mid-twenties (Beckfield, 1994).

In the general population, the lifetime risk of developing panic disorder (with or without agoraphobia) is between 2 and 6% (Craske and Barlow, 2001).

There is a genetic contribution to the development of panic. First-degree relatives of individuals with panic disorder have a 4 –7 times greater chance of developing panic disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

The frequency and severity of panic attacks vary widely. Some individuals have frequent attacks (e.g. 4 times/month for many months). Others report short bursts of frequent attacks separated by periods without any attacks. This typical fluctuation of symptoms over time is frustrating and contributes to the feeling that panic is uncontrollable (Beckfield, 1994).

People with panic disorder can become excessively anxious about routine activities, particularly those associated with well-being or separation from loved ones (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Most people who have a panic attack in a particular situation come to dread that situation and so make the decision to avoid it (Beckfield, 1994).

Panic sufferers may avoid in subtle ways. For example, they may adjust the time they shop, adjust the route they drive, hold on to objects for fear of fainting, and develop superstitious behaviors to gain a sense of safety (Beckfield, 1994; Craske and Barlow, 2001).

Women are twice as likely as men to experience panic disorder without agoraphobia and three times as likely to experience panic disorder with agoraphobia (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). In fact, the strongest predictor of agoraphobia is gender. Biological differences and sex role expectations and demands likely contribute to the female predominance of the disorder (Wilson, 1996).

Agoraphobia usually develops within the first year of the onset of recurring panic attacks (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Panic frequently coexists with: depression, other anxiety disorders and substance abuse (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Panic often coexists with relationship problems (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Individuals with panic may be afraid of losing their “safe” person if they assert themselves. Partners of individuals with panic may experience frustration in being the “safe” person.

The longer an individual experiences panic, the more likely depression is to develop (Davies, 2001).

Individuals with panic often misinterpret mild physical symptoms as catastrophic and seek medical reassurance. Frequent visits to healthcare facilities may result in numerous absences from work or school (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Chronic difficulties with panic can contribute to feelings of shame and discouragement. Often, struggles to carry out normal routines are attributed to personal “weakness” and further increase feelings of demoralization (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Individuals with panic disorder may self-medicate in an attempt to manage their symptoms. Problematic use of alcohol, marijuana and cocaine is not uncommon (NIMH, 1999).

There is an increase in panic and agoraphobia during the summer, primarily because heat increases heart rate, dizziness and dehydration. In addition, there are more opportunities to be outside, where people with panic tend to feel more vulnerable (Leahy and Holland, 2000).

During the course of a year, 30-40% of the general population will have a panic attack. However, most of these people will not interpret their panic as a signal of danger, and thus will not develop panic disorder (Leahy and Holland, 2000).

Cognitive-behavioral strategies are widely accepted and an effective treatment for panic (Beckfield, 1994).
Why Me??

PROBLEMS WITH ANXIETY ARE LIKELY THE RESULT OF A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT FACTORS. ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS BELOW CAN HELP YOU TO UNDERSTAND SOME OF THE FACTORS THAT MAY LEAVE YOU MORE VULNERABLE TO EXPERIENCING PANIC.

___ Are you female?  ___ Do you have a first-degree relative who has difficulties with anxiety?
___ Are you in your twenties or early thirties?  ___ Do you have relatives who suffer from depression or alcoholism?
___ Did you experience the early loss of a parent?  ___ Have you always been shy, cautious or introverted?
___ Did you grow up in a chaotic family situation?  ___ Do you attach deeply to others and feel extra-sensitive about separation?
___ Would you describe your parents as “overly protective?”  ___ Do you routinely experience a strong need for control?
___ Did you grow up in a family where emotion was discouraged?  ___ Do you experience chronic feelings of inadequacy and/or difficulties with assertiveness?
___ Did you feel overly criticized as a child?  ___ Do you tend to avoid the expression of emotion?
___ Did you experience childhood abuse?  ___ Do you have a medical condition that produces symptoms of anxiety?
___ Have you been bullied or rejected by peers?  ___ Have you experienced a significantly stressful life event?
___ Have you always been shy, cautious or introverted?

Panic Triggers

KNOWING WHAT TENDS TO TRIGGER YOUR PANIC WILL HELP YOU TO “CATCH” IT BEFORE IT BECOMES A FULL-BLOWN ATTACK.

Some examples of panic triggers include the following:

- Emotions under the surface (particularly anger and grief)
- Chronic stress (particularly related to loss and separation)
- Conflict
- Too little sleep
- Too much caffeine (for some people this may mean one or two cups of coffee!)
- Too much alcohol
- Hormonal changes
- Sensation that holds meaning because of a past trauma
- Situation that has been associated with panic in the past

To identify triggers, ask yourself:

1. “What was I thinking/doing/feeling just before the panic began?”

2. “What was happening around me/in my life?”
Understanding My Panic

USE YOUR RESPONSES TO THE STATEMENTS BELOW TO HELP YOU GAIN AN INCREASED UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR PANIC.

How it began
1. The first panic attack was ________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

2. My symptoms included ________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

3. At that time in my life, I was experiencing _________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

4. I think the reason I have panic is _________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

My Panic Now
1. I'm afraid this will happen during a panic attack: ___________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

2. I'm afraid this will happen if I can't leave a situation when feeling panicky: __________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

3. Panic worsens when ____________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

4. My triggers are: __________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

5. Because of the panic I don't _______________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

6. Panic has affected my relationships by _____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

7. The worst time in my life in terms of panic was _____________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

Coping
1. Some of the strategies I use to cope are: ____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________

2. When panic is no longer an issue, I will _____________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________________________
Self-monitoring

Recalling episodes of panic after they have occurred tends to inflate estimates of their intensity. This, in turn, contributes to anxiety about future episodes. Hence, learning to accurately monitor the frequency, intensity and symptoms of panic is important to reducing anxiety.

Use this sheet to record information about each episode of panic you experience. Record this information immediately after experiencing panic, with a focus on obtaining a more objective picture of what is happening for you. A more objective perspective will provide you with useful information and, ultimately, help lower your anxiety.

Date_________________      Time panic began_____ maximum_____ended _____

What prompted the panic? __________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________________________

Rate the intensity  0-----1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7-----8-----9-----10
NO ANXIETY WORST ANXIETY

Symptoms Experienced:
___ sweating
___ trembling
___ chest pain
___ choking sensation
___ fear of dying
___ fear of going crazy
___ dizziness
___ increased heart rate
___ nausea/upset stomach
___ numbness or tingling sensations
___ shortness of breath
___ feeling detached from oneself
___ urge to flee
___ difficulty swallowing
___ hot flashes
___ cold flashes
___ fear of losing control

To identify triggers, ask yourself:
1. Avoidance behavior ___________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. Misinterpretations/catastrophic thoughts _________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Eliminating Catastrophic Thinking

We all have a running monologue that goes on in our mind everyday. Self-talk (the things we say to ourselves about immediate, past or future situations) is a critical factor in how we feel. Panic sufferers share a belief that physical symptoms signal some kind of danger. Studies show that panic sufferers associate bodily symptoms with perceived danger more strongly than those without panic (Craske and Barlow, 2001).

Panicky thinking can be characterized by “what if” worrying. Examples of “what if” worrying include the following:

- “What if I pass out?”
- “What if I have a heart attack?”
- “What if I can’t get help?”
- “What if I look like a fool?”

Panic attacks accompanied by many catastrophic thoughts are likely to be more severe (Beckfield, 1994).

My Misinterpretations

Because anxious thinking breeds anxiety, addressing the specific misinterpretations you make when you experience anxiety symptoms is crucial to better managing panic. Identify the misinterpretations you tend to make.

- “I’m going to have a heart attack.”
- “I’m going to die.”
- “I’m going to suffocate.”
- “I’ll stop breathing.”
- “I’m going to pass out.”
- “I’m going to throw up.”
- “I’m going blind.”
- “I’m going crazy.”
- “I’m going to fall.”
- “I can’t walk.”
- “I’m having a stroke.”
- “I’m going to lose control of myself.”
- “I’m losing my mind.”
- “I won’t be able to get out of here.”
- “I’m going to scream.”
- “Something is really wrong with me.”
- “Something terrible is going to happen.”
- “I’m going to make a scene.”

Eliminating catastrophic thinking is crucial to overcoming panic.

The wind was against them now, and Piglet’s ears streamed behind him like banners as he fought his way along, and it seemed hours before he got them into the shelter of the Hundred Acre Wood and they stood up straight again, to listen, a little nervously to the roaring of the gail among the tree tops.

“Supposing a tree fell down, Pooh, when we were underneath it?”

“Supposing it didn’t.” said Pooh after careful thought.

A.A Milne Winnie the Pooh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS MISINTERPRETED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racing heart ✰ “I’m going to have a heart attack.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choking sensations ✰ “I’m going to suffocate.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizziness ✰ “I’m going to pass out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queasy stomach ✰ “I’m going to throw up.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blurry vision ✰ “I’m going blind.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorientation ✰ “I’m going crazy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak legs ✰ “I’m going to fall.” or “I can’t walk.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tingling sensations ✰ “I’m having a stroke.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense symptoms ✰</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m going to lose control of myself.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This will never end.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m really scared.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I won’t be able to get out of here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m going to scream.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Something is really wrong with me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Something terrible is going to happen.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m going to make a scene.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m going to die.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Panic Facts

- **Panic attacks are NOT dangerous.** Panic is an entirely natural bodily response that simply occurs out of context. Panic is “the right response at the wrong time.”
- **Panic attacks are NOT hazardous to your heart and do NOT cause heart failure.** During a panic attack an electrocardiogram shows that there are no abnormalities in heart rhythm – only rapid heart rate. Rapid heart rate during panic does not damage the heart.
- **Panic attacks ALWAYS end. ALWAYS.** Panic is caused by a sudden surge of adrenalin. Much of the adrenalin will metabolize and be reabsorbed in your body in about 3 – 5 minutes. As soon as this happens, you will begin to feel better. While successive panic attacks are possible, panic attacks are always time-limited.
- **You will NOT fall during a panic attack.** The adrenalin released during panic can dilate blood vessels in your legs, causing blood to accumulate in your leg muscles. This produces the sensation of weakness. In reality, your legs are as strong and able to carry your weight as ever.
- **There is NO association between panic and psychosis.** No one has ever “gone crazy” from a panic attack. Mental disorders such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive psychosis develop gradually over a period of years and do not arise from panic.
- **Panic will NOT cause you to lose control of yourself.** During panic, your senses and awareness are focused on a single goal: escape. Leaving the situation (or looking for a way to) is the only way in which you might “act out.”
- **Panic attacks will NOT cause you to suffocate.** Your brain has a built-in reflex mechanism that will force you to breathe if you’re not getting enough oxygen.
- **You will NOT faint during a panic attack.** When you panic, your heart pumps harder and increases your circulation. Your blood pressure rises. When people pass out their blood pressure has fallen. The one rare exception to this is fainting associated with a blood phobia.
- **Outcome studies for cognitive-behavioral treatment of panic and agoraphobia are extremely favorable.** This treatment requires active involvement on the part of the individual with panic.

### My Beliefs That Fuel Panic

*Listed below are some examples of self-talk that tend to increase stress and tension, thereby contributing to panic. Do any of these statements sound familiar?*

- Anxiety is bad.
- Anxiety symptoms should be avoided.
- I can’t trust my body.
- I’m helpless (e.g. “I can’t do anything to control this.”).
- I must always be on guard.
- Others should not see my anxiety.
- Everyone will disapprove of me.
- The consequences of others’ disapproval will be severe.
- Anxiety is a reflection of inadequacy and worthlessness.
- I must avoid risk.
- I must be perfect.
- I must avoid displeasing others.
- I have to be perfectly in control at all times.
- I believe I can never do as good a job as others.
- No matter how stressed I am, I must be there for others.
- I have to take care of others before myself.
- I am unable to manage on my own.
- I’m undesirable.

*Wilson (1996)*

---

**What you say to yourself has a powerful impact on the amount of anxiety you will experience.**
Challenging Anxious Thinking

**Step #1: Identify negative self-talk**
- “What if” worrying (“What if I pass out?”)
- Harsh self-criticism (“I’m a loser.”)
- Helplessness (“I need someone to go with me.”)
- Perfectionism (“I have to get it right.”)

**Step #2: Examine the evidence “for” and “against”**

**For**
- What makes me think this?

**Against**
- What are the odds?
- Is there another explanation?
- Is there another perspective?
- Is this way of thinking helpful?
- Would I talk to a friend this way?

**Step #3: Generate self-talk that discourages anxiety**
- Supportive
- Believable
- Acknowledges feelings

---

### Examples Of Challenging Anxious Thinking

**EXAMPLE 1**
Misinterpretation of a physical symptom

**Step #1: Identify negative self-talk**
- “I’m going to pass out!”

**Step #2: Examine the evidence “for” and “against”**

**For**
- “I’m sweating.”
- “I feel really dizzy and lightheaded.”
- “It’s really hot in here.”

**Against**
- “I’ve never passed out during a panic attack before.”
- “During panic my blood pressure goes up, not down.”
- “Fainting is not a symptom of panic.”

**Step #3: Generate self-talk that discourages anxiety**
- “I’m feeling some strong anxiety symptoms, but I know they are not dangerous.”
- “Even though I feel like I will pass out, I know I won’t.”
- “My body knows how to handle this.”
- “This will pass.”

**EXAMPLE 2**
Negative belief about oneself

**Step #1: Identify negative self-talk**
- “I’m so scared that I’ll panic while driving. I’m such a loser.”

**Step #2: Examine the evidence “for” and “against”**

**For**
- “I experience so much panic that I can’t drive.”
- “I miss a lot of social events because I refuse to drive to them.”
- “I haven’t figured out how to overcome my anxiety.”

**Against**
- “I can’t yet drive, but I do take public transportation. I get myself to school everyday.”
- “I’m reading about anxiety management. And I saw a counselor.”
- “I would never call a friend a loser.”

**Step #3: Generate self-talk that discourages anxiety**
- “Working to better manage my anxiety takes courage and a lot of work.”
- “Despite the challenges of anxiety, I am accomplishing things in my life.”
- “My anxiety is difficult to deal with and sometimes makes me feel like I’m a loser. Doesn’t mean I am, though. I can stop telling myself I am.”

Challenging My Anxious Thinking

**Identify the negative self-talk**

- Pick one thought to challenge at a time. Choose the thought that is most "emotionally loaded" or evokes the most feeling for you.

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________

**Examine the evidence “for”**

- What makes you think this? Why do you believe this to be true?

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________

**Examine the evidence “against”**

- What are the odds?
- What are the exceptions?
- Is there another explanation?
- Is there another perspective?
- Is this way of thinking helpful?
- Would you talk to a friend this way?

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________

**Generate talk that discourages anxiety**

- Based on the evidence (for and against), what could you be saying to yourself that would work better (i.e., reduce anxiety)?

_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________________
Some Questions To Ask

What does my doctor say?

What is the evidence that a serious medical problem is the cause of my symptoms?

If the worst were true and I had a medical illness, is it treatable?

Has my worst fear ever happened?

What's the probability of the worst happening?

What's the actual probability of passing out/having a heart attack/having a stroke/going crazy/throwing up…?

In the past, when I've had panic, what was the ultimate outcome?

Would I talk to a friend this way?

Are my self-statements helpful?

Am I helpless?

Is panic treatable?

Am I capable of learning panic-management strategies?

Have I ever demonstrated an ability to help myself?

Some Things to Say

- O.k., panic is here again.
- This is just anxiety.
- I can let my body go through this.
- I can feel anxious and still cope.
- I can handle this.
- I can ride this out.
- I'll watch my body react instead of reacting to it.

- I can flow with the rise and fall of the panic.
- This will end.
- This is a limited time.
- This is not dangerous.
- This is not an emergency.
- I'm not going to faint, have a heart attack, vomit…
- Nothing serious is going to happen.

- My body knows what to do.
- If I wait, I will feel better.
- I'll stay in the present and not escape.
- Distracting myself isn't a useful strategy.
- Breathe.
- I am capable of managing.
- I've learned some things that I can use to help myself.

References