

# Tool Kit for Beating Panic Attacks

Do you experience rapid surges of anxiety that come out of the blue? If so, you might have panic attacks.

Unlike normal anxiety that builds gradually, a panic attack peaks in a few minutes and is frightening because it is accompanied by sudden physical symptoms. These can include a pounding heart or rapid heart rate, breathlessness, dizziness, sweating, chest discomfort, nausea, and numb or tingling feelings.

Fearful thoughts, such as, *"I'm going to die, I'm going to have a heart attack, ..."* often occur during panic attacks, making them more distressing.

If your main problems are anxiety and panic attacks, you most likely have an anxiety disorder which can be effectively treated. If panic attacks are one of many symptoms, this may indicate another psychological disorder.

Studies show up to 12% of people have had an unexpected panic attack at some time in their lives.

## You are not going crazy

A panic attack is like an alarm reaction in the brain. It is a normal reaction in a crisis (say an intruder threatens you with a gun) but in some people the alarm goes off without being triggered by an emergency.

The most frightening thing is not knowing what is happening to you or why it is happening. A common worry is: am I going crazy? People who experience panic attacks often believe they might lose their minds but this fear is baseless. Becoming psychotic (a major mental breakdown) is a



different illness to anxiety or panic disorder.

## What causes panic attacks?

Panic attacks often occur during or immediately after a period of stress. Stress is produced by an event that hypes you up. It can be positive (marriage, a new job), neutral (a heavy workload, rushing to meet deadlines) or negative (loss of a loved person or being sacked).

The body responds to stress by going up a gear or two, and continual stress can result in a stuck gear, where your psychological levels don't return to neutral. Remaining in high gear increases the chance that your brain will trigger its alarm mechanism and produce a panic attack.

## Tool Kit

### 1. See a doctor

Panic attacks are not heart attacks and don't cause heart attacks in a healthy person.

However, because a simple ECG

(electrocardiogram) test can help identify heart attacks, and because in rare instances heart attacks are dismissed as anxiety, it is best to see a doctor to check the diagnosis.



## 2. Learn to relax

Relaxation is the key to overcoming panic attacks. Many of the other skills described below build on the ability to relax. The key to the effective use of relaxation is regular daily practice for 20–30 minutes. Several weeks of daily practice will result in less anxiety and tension, as well as improved concentration, memory, self-confidence and sleep.

Deep relaxation actually leads to a change in the physiological state of the body. Changes include decreases in heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, muscular tension and brain activity.

There are many ways to learn to relax. Try the following.

### a) Learn breathing control

Breathlessness is a common symptom of a panic attack. During an attack people either take shallow breaths, breathing high in the chest, or they hyperventilate, breathing out too much carbon dioxide. Because the brain and body are already revved up, excessive oxygen only worsens the problem. Learning slow and regular breathing will help you prevent this problem in future.

#### ● Abdominal breathing

- Place one hand on your stomach.
- Breathe in slowly and deeply into the bottom of your lungs. You should be able to feel your stomach expand while your chest and shoulders move only slightly.
- Pause for a moment, then breathe out slowly. As you breathe out, allow your body to relax.
- Repeat at least 10 times, keeping your breathing smooth and regular.

After five minutes of abdominal breathing you will begin to notice that you are much less anxious. This exercise should be practised at least daily.

#### ● Slow breathing

- Breathe in slowly, counting silently to yourself: 1...2...3...4...5...
- Hold your breath for a moment.
- Breathe out slowly, counting silently to yourself: 1...2...3...4...5...
- As you breathe out, say the word *relax* quietly.

This exercise is very effective when used at the first signs of a panic attack. It needs to be continued for

around four minutes to allow the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to return to normal.

### b) Progressive muscle relaxation

In this technique, the body's major muscle groups are alternately tensed and relaxed. You can use this technique to give yourself a period of deep physical and mental relaxation.

- Find a quiet place and a comfortable position. Your whole body should be supported so try a sofa, bed or reclining chair.
- Take the phone off the hook, loosen any tight clothes, remove your watch, glasses, shoes.
- Take two or three deep breaths and, as you breathe out, imagine the tension in your body flowing away.
- Start with your hands. Clench your fists and hold for 10 seconds. Release and enjoy the feeling of relaxation for 15–20 seconds.
- Tense your arms, tightening your biceps and triceps. Hold for 10 seconds, then relax for 15–20 seconds.
- Focus on your head. Raise your eyebrows and tense the muscles in your forehead, hold and relax; screw up your eyes and tense the muscles around them, hold and relax; yawn and stretch the muscles around your jaw, hold and relax. Be aware of the sensation of relaxation.
- Tighten your neck muscles. Hold and relax.
- Continue down through your body: shoulders, upper back, abdomen, groin, legs, hips, thighs, buttocks, calves and feet. Enjoy the sensation of relaxation. If any area still seems tense, repeat the exercise in that area.

Some people find it helpful to record these instructions on an audio tape and use it until they feel confident of the steps. With practice it is possible to learn to relax quickly in any situation. For information on this technique, refer to the first two books listed on the back page (under Self-help books and the Internet) or visit a professional experienced in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for panic attacks.

### c) Visualisation

Imagining scenes that are tranquil, safe and relaxing helps many people feel less anxious. Scenes can be places you know or imagine. Common favourites

include the beach, snow-capped mountains, rolling green hills and waterfalls.

The more you incorporate all five senses into the image, the more relaxing it is likely to be. Imagine yourself as part of the scene: walking on the beach, feeling the sand between your toes, hearing the waves crashing, and smelling the salt in the air.

Once you have imagined your own peaceful scene, practise returning to it regularly. You may find it helps to combine this with other relaxation techniques. With practice, you will be able to return to the scene on the spur of the moment and divert your attention at the first signs of panic.



#### d) Meditation

Meditation trains your mind to let go of all thoughts and just exist in the moment. Meditation practices have been around for thousands of years and have been shown to greatly reduce anxiety and produce many positive benefits. There are many different methods. Classes can be found in most areas. Contact your local council's community service directory or call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

### 3. Don't let panic control your life

The fear experienced during panic sometimes spreads to other situations in a person's life.

Some people who experience panic attacks become fearful of entering shopping centres, crowded places or places from which escape might be difficult. This is called agoraphobia. Other people become fearful of a harmless sensation (perhaps a rapid heart rate) and avoid activities (like exercise) that produce these sensations.

Avoiding situations that produce fear is not a helpful strategy. It may help you feel better in the short term, but it only strengthens the idea that the situation triggers the panic attack. Try to continue with your normal activities and not let panic control your life.

### 4. Learn to control your thinking.

Trying to ignore or fight panic symptoms is likely to make them worse. It is important to acknowledge that you are beginning to experience a panic attack and try to avoid tensing up.

At this point, it is often helpful to talk to yourself about what you are experiencing, statements such as, *"I'm having another panic attack"*, *"I've coped with this before"*, *"It will pass"*, *"I can deal with this situation"*.

During a panic attack most people focus on

the physical symptoms such as the pounding heart, dizziness, sweating and so on. This only increases anxiety, releases more adrenalin and worsens the physical symptoms. The first step in breaking this vicious circle is to examine the thoughts you associate with these symptoms and to challenge them by looking at them in a realistic way. For example:

***"I'm having a heart attack."***

I've felt like this before and it wasn't a heart attack.

***"I can't cope."***

This has happened before and I can cope with it.

***"What will others think of me."***

Most people will not even notice.

***"Oh no, here it comes again."***

Now I understand what's happening I can deal with it.

***"I can't stand these feelings."***

I don't like these feelings but they will pass.

These new thoughts need to be reassuring but realistic, and based on experience, so you know they are true. Imagine you had a friend who was suffering panic attacks. What would you say to your friend? You would say something to reassure them and help them through the feelings, not something that would make them feel more

scared. If you begin to panic, talk to yourself as gently and thoughtfully as you would to a friend.

## 5. Avoid unhelpful drugs

Alcohol and other drugs may reduce anxiety temporarily but they worsen the problem in the long term. Avoid using alcohol or other non-prescribed drugs to cope with your anxiety. Coffee, tea and cola contain caffeine (a brain stimulant) and because panickers are over-stimulated, excessive intake of caffeine may worsen the problem.

## 6. Self-help books and the Internet

Many books expand on the above tips. For more information try the following:

- *Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic*, by Michelle Craske and David Barlow (\$94.00).
- *Overcoming Panic*, by John Franklin (\$40.50, Australian Psychological Society 03 8662 3300), a nine-week treatment program.
- *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edmund Bourne (\$52.45, New Harbinger Publications).

The books are available through bookshops.

Three good web sites are:

- [www.aforanxiety.com/selfhelp/index.htm](http://www.aforanxiety.com/selfhelp/index.htm) an Australian site run by the University of NSW.
- [www.algy.com/anxiety/files/barlow.html](http://www.algy.com/anxiety/files/barlow.html) on the causes of anxiety and panic attacks.
- [www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/panicmenu.cfm](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/panicmenu.cfm) run by the US National Institute of Mental Health.



## 7. Treatment options

The strategies listed above are part of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT). If attempts to resolve the problem yourself are not successful, see a psychologist or other health professional trained in CBT. Your doctor may also be able to help with medication. Certain medications have anti-panic properties and can be

used to control panic attacks. Remember, you can always talk your problems over with a Lifeline counsellor by phoning 13 11 14.

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*Many of these tips require practice and effort but they have been shown to be very helpful for many people, so it's worth persevering. Try a few and find which work for you.*

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We invite your feedback and comments. Call 1300 13 11 14



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