What is a panic attack?

What a panic attack is, why it feels so serious, and why it is not dangerous.

A panic attack is the body's alarm system going off at full volume when there is no real danger. It comes on fast, usually peaks within about ten minutes, and then fades. Many people have one at some point in their lives.

What it can feel like

- [ ] Pounding or racing heart
- [ ] Short of breath, or a choking feeling
- [ ] Chest tightness or pain
- [ ] Dizzy, unsteady or faint
- [ ] Shaking or trembling
- [ ] Sweating, hot or cold flushes
- [ ] Tingling or numbness
- [ ] Feeling sick, or a churning stomach
- [ ] Feeling unreal or detached
- [ ] Fear of dying, collapsing or losing control

Why it feels so serious

The sensations are strong and they come out of the blue, so the mind looks for an explanation. The usual conclusions are "I am having a heart attack", "I am going to faint", or "I am going mad". Those thoughts are terrifying, so the alarm rings louder, and the sensations get stronger.

In fact these are the ordinary sensations of adrenaline, the same ones you would feel after sprinting for a bus.

When panic becomes a problem

After a first attack, many people start to fear the next one. They watch their body for warning signs, avoid places where an attack happened, and carry "just in case" items. This fear of panic is what turns one frightening episode into an ongoing problem.

What we know

A panic attack is very unlikely to make you faint, because blood pressure goes up in panic and fainting needs it to drop. It cannot make you go mad, and it does not damage a healthy heart. It always passes.

Check first

If you have not already, see your GP to rule out a physical cause for your symptoms. Once that is done, the work is learning that these sensations are safe.

My notes and questions

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Fight, flight and freeze

What your body is doing when the alarm goes off, and why.

When your brain senses danger, it prepares your body to fight, to run or to freeze. This happens in a fraction of a second, before the thinking part of your brain has had a look. It is the same response whether the threat is a dog off its lead or a presentation on Monday.

Every sensation has a job. None of them is harmful.

What you notice	What your body is doing	Why
Racing or pounding heart	Pumping blood faster to the big muscles	More fuel for running or fighting
Fast, shallow breathing	Taking in extra oxygen	Ready for a burst of effort
Dizzy or light-headed	A side effect of breathing faster than you need to	Harmless, and it settles as breathing slows
Tight or shaky muscles	Muscles tensed and ready to move	Faster reactions
Sweating	Cooling the body down	Stops you overheating
Churning stomach, dry mouth	Digestion switched off for now	Energy goes where it is needed
Tunnel vision, racing thoughts	Attention narrows on to the threat	Nothing else matters in an emergency
Cold or tingling hands and feet	Blood moves from skin to muscles	Protects against blood loss
Frozen, blank or numb	The freeze response	Staying still and unnoticed can be safest

After the alarm

Once the threat has passed, a second system (the "rest and digest" system) brings everything back down. This always happens. The body cannot stay at full alarm for long.

Afterwards you may feel shaky, washed out or tearful for a while. That is the adrenaline clearing. It does not mean something is wrong.

> **Try this**
> Next time you notice a sensation, name what it is for: "That is my heart getting blood to my legs." Many people find this makes the sensation less frightening.

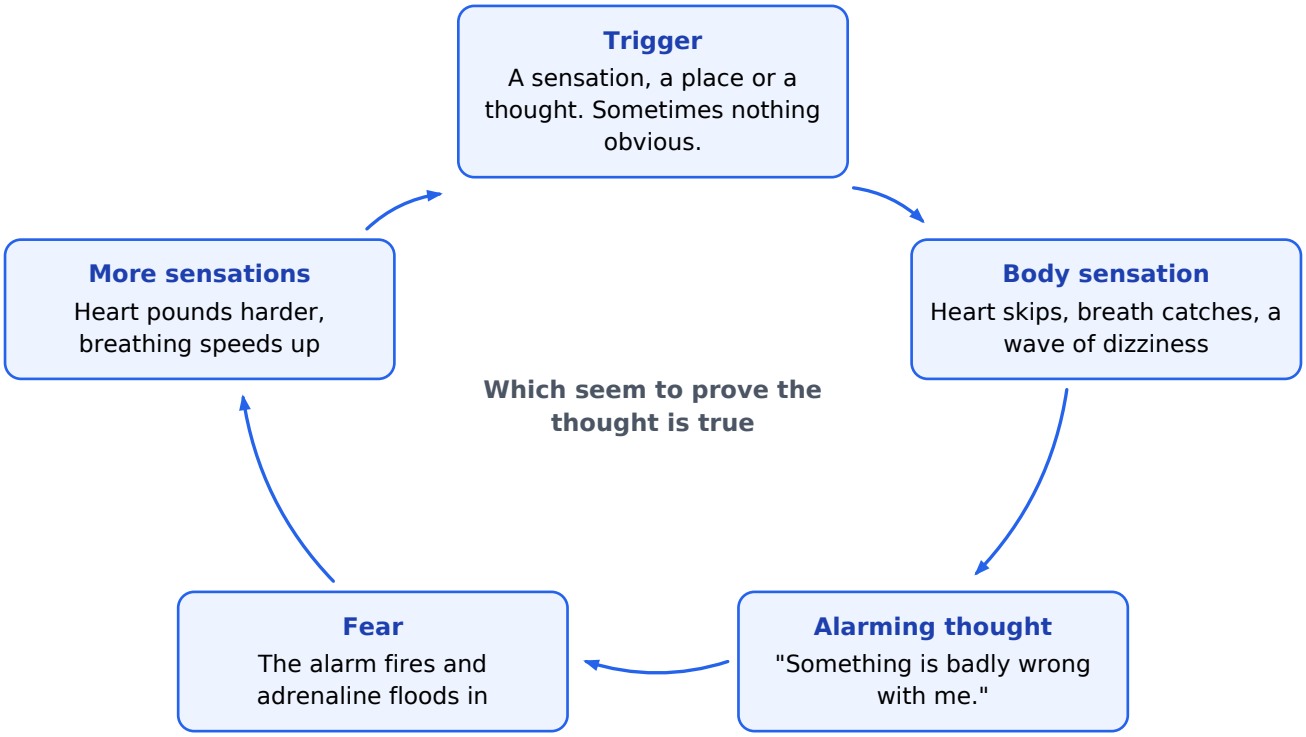
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The panic cycle

How a harmless body sensation turns into a full panic attack.

Panic attacks are driven by a loop between body and mind. It can build in seconds.



The step that matters most

The loop depends on how the sensation is read. If a racing heart means "I ran up the stairs", nothing happens. If it means "heart attack", the alarm fires. The sensation is the same in both cases. Only the meaning is different.

What keeps it going between attacks

- **Body watching.** Scanning for sensations means you find more of them.
- **Avoidance.** Staying away from places or activities linked to panic.
- **Safety behaviours.** Sitting down, holding on, sipping water, escaping. Each one seems to have saved you, so the belief in danger survives.

What breaks it

1. Learning what the sensations really are.
2. Testing the alarming thought. Did the feared disaster ever happen?
3. Bringing the sensations on deliberately and discovering they are safe.
4. Going back, step by step, to the places and activities you have been avoiding.

Based on the cognitive model of panic developed by David M. Clark.

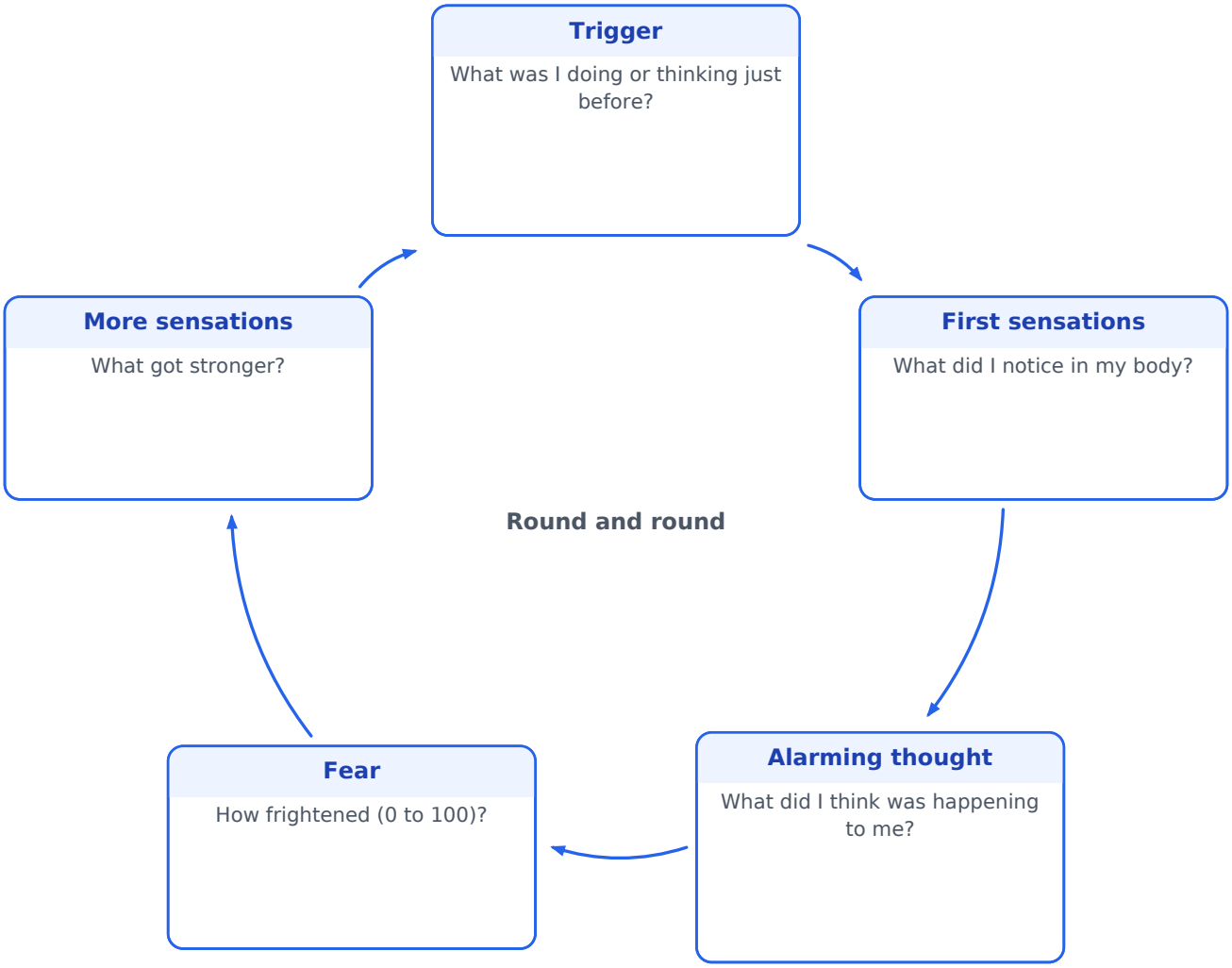
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My panic cycle

Map your most recent or most typical panic attack.

Name _____ Date _____

When and where did it happen?



What did I do to try to stop it or keep safe?

What actually happened in the end? Did the thing I feared happen?

What does that tell me?

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Panic sensations: what is really happening

Each sensation has an ordinary explanation.

Sensation	What panic says	What is really going on
Pounding heart, palpitations	"I am having a heart attack."	Adrenaline makes the heart beat faster and harder to supply the muscles. A healthy heart can do this for hours.
Chest tightness or pain	"My heart is failing."	Chest muscles tense up, and fast breathing makes them work hard. Muscle pain, not heart pain.
Breathlessness, tight throat	"I cannot breathe. I will suffocate."	You are over-breathing, taking in more air than you need. The feeling of not getting enough is the opposite of the truth.
Dizzy, light-headed	"I am going to faint."	Over-breathing briefly lowers carbon dioxide. Blood pressure is up, so fainting is very unlikely.
Tingling, numb fingers or lips	"I am having a stroke."	Another harmless effect of over-breathing. It fades as breathing settles.
Feeling unreal or detached	"I am losing my mind."	A common effect of high arousal and over-breathing. It is unpleasant, and it passes.
Shaky, wobbly legs	"I am going to collapse."	Muscles primed with adrenaline tremble. They are stronger than usual, not weaker.
Hot, sweaty, flushed	"Everyone can see. Something is wrong."	The body is cooling itself. Others notice far less than you think.
Urge to run	"I must get out or something terrible will happen."	The flight response. The urge is strong, and nothing happens if you stay.

The sensation that frightens me most	What I used to think it meant	What I understand now

A note

This sheet is for people whose doctor has ruled out a physical cause. New or different chest pain, or symptoms that are not typical for you, should always be checked.

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Panic: myths and facts

The fears that keep panic going, and what the evidence says.

The fear	The facts
"I will faint."	Fainting happens when blood pressure drops suddenly. In panic, blood pressure and heart rate go up. The exception is blood and needle phobia, which works differently.
"I am having a heart attack."	Panic sensations peak within minutes and ease with rest. A heart attack does not come and go with anxiety. If your heart has been checked, these are adrenaline sensations.
"I will stop breathing."	Breathing is automatic. Your body will not let you stop. The breathless feeling comes from breathing too much, not too little.
"I will lose control."	People in panic do not run amok, crash the car or do something shocking. The alarm makes you more alert and more careful, not less.
"I am going mad."	Panic is not a sign of serious mental illness and does not lead to it. Feeling unreal is a normal effect of high arousal.
"It will never stop."	The body cannot keep producing adrenaline at that rate. Every panic attack ends, usually within ten to twenty minutes.
"Everyone can see."	Panic feels enormous from the inside. From the outside, most people notice little or nothing.
"I must have a weak or damaged body."	Panic is a strong, healthy alarm system firing at the wrong time.

The myth I have believed most strongly

How much do I believe it now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What evidence from my own experience goes against it? (How many panic attacks have I had, and how many times did the feared thing happen?)

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My panic safety behaviours

Tick the precautions you use, then plan to drop them one at a time.

Name _____ Date _____

Tick everything you do, or have done, to prevent a panic attack or keep yourself safe during one.

During anxiety or panic

- [ ] Sit down or lie down
- [ ] Hold on to something or someone
- [ ] Take deep breaths or open a window
- [ ] Sip water
- [ ] Leave the situation
- [ ] Distract myself (phone, counting, music)
- [ ] Check my pulse
- [ ] Take a tablet "just in case"
- [ ] Tense up to stay in control
- [ ] Phone someone

To prevent it happening

- [ ] Only go out with a trusted person
- [ ] Stay near exits or sit at the end of the row
- [ ] Carry water, tablets or a phone at all times
- [ ] Avoid exercise, caffeine, heat or anything that changes how my body feels
- [ ] Avoid queues, crowds, public transport or driving
- [ ] Avoid being far from home, or being alone
- [ ] Plan escape routes in advance

Safety behaviour	What I fear would happen without it	How hard to drop (0 to 10)

The first one I will experiment with dropping, and when

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Practising panic sensations

Bringing on the feelings on purpose, to learn that they are safe.

If you fear the sensations of panic, the most direct treatment is to produce them deliberately, in a planned way, and find out that nothing bad follows. The exercises below create sensations similar to panic. They are safe for healthy people.

Before you start

Check with your GP first if you are pregnant or have a heart condition, asthma or another lung condition, epilepsy, low blood pressure, a history of fainting, or neck, back or balance problems. We will choose exercises that suit you.

Exercise	For how long	Sensations it tends to produce
Breathe fast and deep through your mouth	1 minute	Dizziness, tingling, unreality
Breathe through a narrow straw, nose pinched	1 minute	Breathlessness, air hunger
Hold your breath	30 seconds	Breathlessness, chest tightness
Run on the spot, or up and down stairs	1 minute	Pounding heart, breathlessness, heat
Spin in an office chair	1 minute	Dizziness, nausea
Shake your head from side to side	30 seconds	Dizziness, blurred vision
Head between your knees, then sit up quickly	30 seconds	Light-headedness, head rush
Tense every muscle in your body	1 minute	Trembling, tension, heaviness
Stare at a spot on the wall, or at your own reflection	2 minutes	Unreality, feeling detached

How to practise

1. Try each one and rate how similar it is to your panic, and how anxious it makes you.
2. Pick the ones that come closest. Start with a moderate one.
3. Do the exercise fully. Do not stop early, hold on, or distract yourself.
4. Stay with the sensations afterwards until they fade. Notice what happens, and what does not.
5. Repeat three or four times in a row, every day, until the fear drops.

The aim

To stop being afraid of the sensations. They do not have to go away.

Notes

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Sensation practice record

A record of each practice and how anxious it made you.

Name _____ Date _____

What I fear these sensations mean

Date	Exercise	Sensations (0 to 10)	Anxiety (0 to 10)	Like my panic? (0 to 10)	What happened

What am I learning about these sensations?

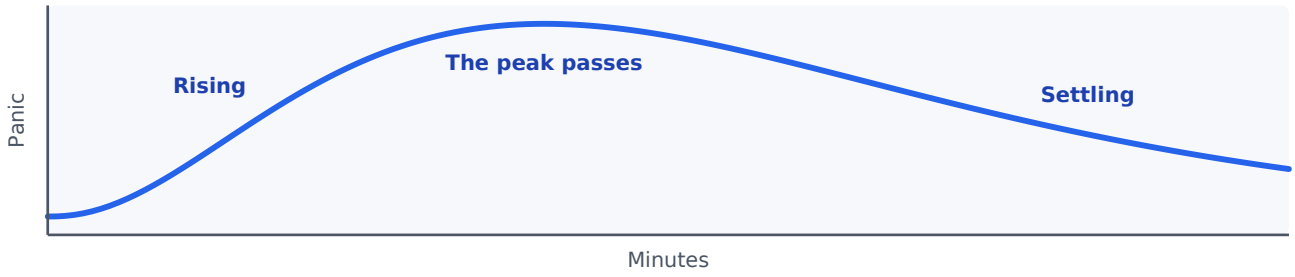
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Riding out a panic attack

Six steps for letting a panic attack pass without fighting it.

The instinct in panic is to fight it or get away. Both tell your brain the danger is real. It works better to let the attack happen and pass.

1. **Name it.** "This is a panic attack. I know what this is. It is adrenaline."
2. **Stay where you are** if you safely can. If you are driving, pull over when it is safe and wait.
3. **Stop fighting it.** Loosen your shoulders and hands and let the sensations come. They are unpleasant but not harmful.
4. **Breathe out slowly.** Do not gulp air. Let your breathing find its own pace.
5. **Watch it rise and fall.** It builds, peaks and comes down, like a wave. Notice the moment it starts to ease.
6. **Carry on.** When it eases, go back to what you were doing. This is what teaches your brain it was a false alarm.



Each time I ride one out

Date	Roughly how long to the peak	What I did	What I found out

Cut along the dashed lines. Keep a card in your wallet or phone case.

This is panic. It is adrenaline. It is not dangerous and it will pass. Stay. Loosen. Breathe out. Let the wave rise and fall. Then carry on.

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What I want to remember when panic comes

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Testing a panic prediction

Plan a test of what you fear will happen in a panic attack.

Name _____ Date _____

What I believe will happen if I panic and do not protect myself

How strongly do I believe it?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

If I am right, what exactly would we see? How would we know it had happened?

The experiment. What will I do to test it, and which safety behaviours will I drop?

What happened

If the catastrophe did not happen, why not? (Be honest: was it luck, a safety behaviour, or because it was never going to?)

How strongly do I believe the prediction now?

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50 — 60 — 70 — 80 — 90 — 100

Not at all — Completely

What is the next experiment?

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