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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Panic diary

A record of each panic attack, to show up patterns.

Name _____ Date _____

Date and place	Main sensations	What I thought was happening	What I did	What actually happened

Looking across the week: what do my panic attacks have in common? What do my feared outcomes have in common?

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