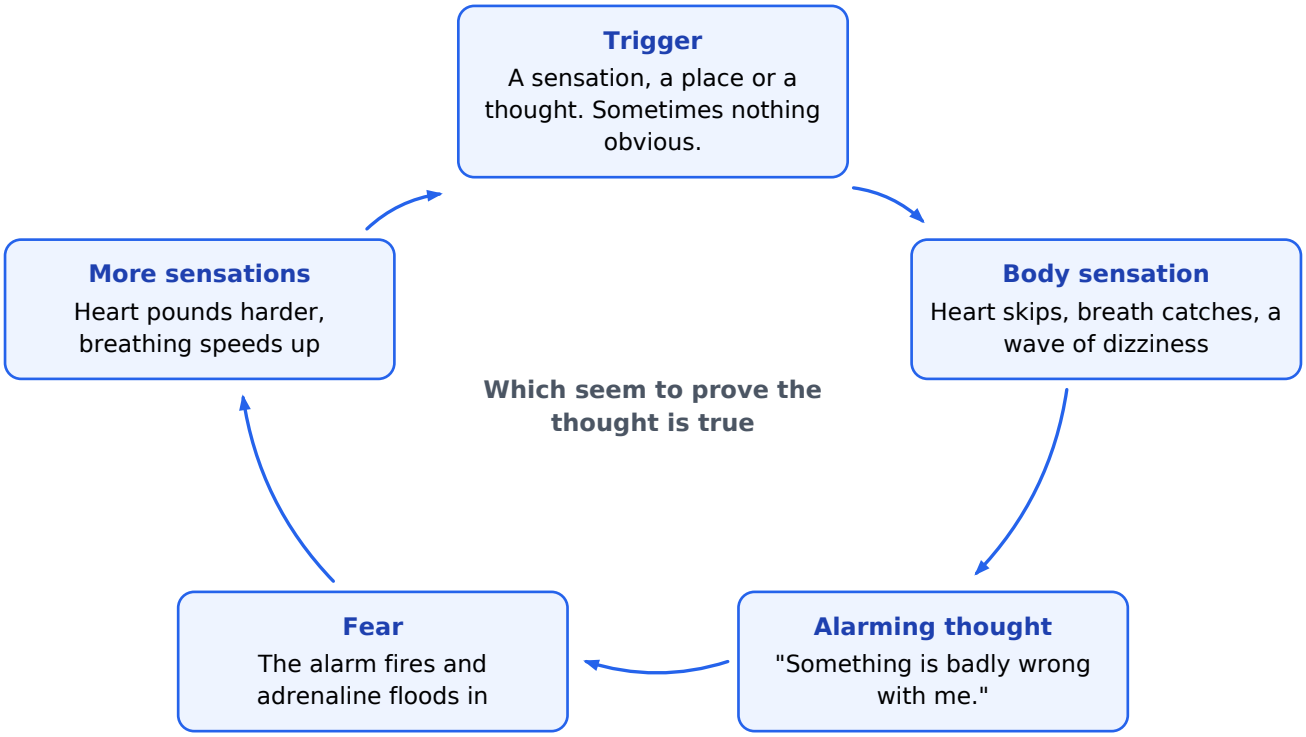
The panic cycle

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.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.