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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This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.