



## Information about panic attacks for survivors

### What is a panic attack?

It is common for people to feel a sense of panic from time to time, for example, during exams or if you have had your purse stolen. A panic attack is different as it can occur suddenly with no obvious reason.

A panic attack is often an intense sense of distress or fear that something awful is going to happen. It usually lasts for about 10 minutes, but can be shorter or much longer. Anyone can experience a panic attack. However, it is not dangerous and it cannot harm you.

Humans have developed to react to danger and a panic attack is an exaggeration of our body's normal response to fear. Therefore, in situations we believe are threatening, our body prepares for action to defend itself. This is called 'fight or flight'. Part of this reaction is to release a substance called adrenalin into the bloodstream. This helps us to run away faster, fight harder or stay still and wait for the threat to pass. However, during a panic attack there is usually no threat present, yet our body reacts as if it has had a very severe fright.

### What causes a panic attack?

A panic attack may come out of the blue, or it may be caused by something such as an emotional crisis, a traumatic event or exposure to something you have a phobia about.

It often occurs during periods of stress. This may be when you are having difficulties at home or at work, or if you are in a situation which reminds you of being raped or abused.

A panic attack can occur when feelings from the past or present are being avoided. Looking at, and dealing with these feelings may help to reduce them.

### What are the effects?

The 'fight or flight' reaction described earlier, increases oxygen to your muscles and your blood flow, which allows your body to concentrate on an immediate threat. This causes physical symptoms such as: sweating, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, numbness, wobbly legs, and increased breathing and heartbeat.

Some emotional effects you may experience during a panic attack can be strong feelings around the fear of losing control, going mad, death or a heart attack. These things don't actually happen during a panic attack but often people worry that they will.

This is not a complete list of all the possible effects, but an example of some of the common ones. The effects can be an alarming experience in themselves and can lead to further anxiety.

### Things you can do at the first sign of a panic attack

You may already have your own ways of coping during a panic attack. There is no right or wrong way to cope. The following are some suggestions which you may find useful. Remember even if you aren't able to do any of these, the panic attack cannot harm you.

- Stop what you are doing. Sit or lie down.
- Concentrate on your breathing. It will help your body to relax naturally. Take slow deep breathes in and out. Relax your shoulders back - breathe out and pull your stomach muscles into your spine. Concentrate on your tummy muscles as you do this. Imagine you are breathing through your belly button – breathe in and hold for 4 beats and then breathe out to 8 beats.
- Try to give yourself positive feedback. You could create a sentence that has a personal positive meaning. Hold an image in your head that makes you feel happy and safe. Try to visualise being calm and relaxed when you are dealing with difficult situations and repeat your sentence a few times.
- It can help to breathe in the air you have been breathing out as it is full of carbon dioxide. You need to get more carbon dioxide into your blood. You could breathe into a paper bag (not plastic). Alternatively cup

your hands over your mouth to capture the expelled breath for you to breathe back in. Do this for a few minutes and the worst of the symptoms should disappear.

- When you panic, you tense up your muscles. By relaxing them you will reduce the effects of the panic attack. Tense the muscles in your body, hold for a few seconds then release and breathe out. Try to feel that every last bit of tension has flowed from your body.
- Try not to put any pressure on yourself to recover or get on with things. Reassure yourself that this is a normal response to stress brought on by strong emotions. Remember, it is only a feeling, and no matter how powerful it feels, it will pass.

## **What to do after your panic attack**

A panic attack can be very physical and after one you may feel weak, emotional and tired. Try to give your body the time and space it needs to restore a sense of calm.

- You may feel quite shaken up. It may help to sit down for a while with a hot drink.
- Don't put any pressure on yourself to recover or get on with things.
- Try to make yourself comfortable. Maybe put on your favourite jumper, wrap yourself up in a blanket or listen to music.
- Lie down with one hand on your chest and one on your tummy. Breathe slowly and fully. This can also be used at the first sign of a panic attack.
- You may worry about it happening again. This may cause another panic attack. Taking your mind off these worries and concentrating on something else other than your body will help your mind to relax. You could read, do a crossword or sudoku puzzle.

## **You can help to reduce panic attacks by:**

- Cutting down on caffeine as it speeds your body up. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, chocolate and fizzy drinks.
- Learning breathing techniques – try to breathe more slowly and deeply all the time.
- Being able to recognise when they are starting can also help you control them. It may help to jot down the place, time and thoughts that preceded the panic attack.
- They often start during periods of stress. You could try relaxation techniques such as yoga. Or you could make yourself a compilation of music you find soothing, and listen to it when you feel tense or anxious.

## **About us**

Talking to someone can help. We are a women only service and provide free support to women and girls aged 12 and over, who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. We offer phone, face-to-face, group, letter and email support. Our helpline number is 0131 556 9437. We can offer you a safe and confidential space to talk about your feelings or experiences.

We respect the courage and strength it takes for you to speak out about your experience of sexual violence, whether it happened recently or a long time ago.

## **Useful contacts**

- No Panic (Self-help organisation for phobias, anxiety and panic, [www.nopanic.org](http://www.nopanic.org)) 01952 590 545
- Rape Crisis Scotland Helpline (Freephone helpline open daily: 6pm-12midnight) 08088 01 03 02
- [www.stresswatchscotland.org](http://www.stresswatchscotland.org)

To view all our leaflets please visit [www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk). If you would like copies please contact us and we will send them out to you in an unmarked envelope:

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