

**STEPS primary care mental health team, Glasgow**

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## **Panic Attacks**

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## **PART 1: Finding out about panic**

## **What is a panic attack?**

### **Here are some of the ways people describe panic attacks:**

1. "I am so scared that another panic hits me. I thought I was going to die when I had the last one. It came right out of the blue - I couldn't get a breath, my heart felt like it was going to burst. I felt that I was going to faint. I was drenched in sweat and I felt sick. At its worst point, I thought I was dying. It was the worst feeling I have ever had"
2. "When I feel panicky, my throat gets all tight. It feels like I've got a ball stuck there. I feel I can't get a breath. It feels like I can't get enough air in my lungs. I even get like this in the shower – as soon as the water hits my face, I feel I can't breathe and have to get out"
3. "I go through each day with a dread that I might panic. I had a panic last week and I was rooted to the spot. I couldn't move. I was like a rabbit caught in a car's headlights"
4. "My panic seems to start for no reason. I can be soaked in sweat in seconds and my head spins. I think my heart is going to burst out my chest. I can shake from head to toe and I often have to get to a toilet quick. I get this surge right through my body. That scares the hell out of me. I get these

pins and needles in my fingers and arms and, if it is a bad panic, round my mouth. I try to sit down when I feel it come on. I think this will stop me from fainting”

**Important:**

**Though they cause great stress, panics attacks are not dangerous.**

**They will do you no harm.**

## Who gets panic?

About one in three people in Scotland has at least one panic each year. So they are common. It may be that some of us are more prone to panic due to our basic nature. But those whose lives are most affected by panic often have:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Phobias
- Sleep problems
- Alcohol / drug problems

These may go hand in hand. If you get tense at the thought of meeting others, you might drink too much as a way to cope. This may make you more stressed and more prone to panic. This may lead to depression and poor sleep.....and so on, as a vicious circle builds up.

Panics can be over in a few minutes or they can last a long time. You will feel washed out after one and will then fear having the next one. Learning to stop panics will give you a greater sense of control and will help you control other problems.

This booklet looks only at panic. You can find out about help for these other problems at the end of this booklet.

## **Body, Actions and Thoughts:**

### **Body**

Panic hits your body hard. Your heart rate can almost double. You might sweat, feel dizzy, feel sick, or feel you can't get a breath. You may get tingling or numb feelings; you may feel you are choking. You may shake and feel 'unreal'. You may get chest pains. You may be very aware of your body and get stressed at the slightest change in it.

### **Actions**

You may find it hard to stay still. You may snap at people. You may avoid places where you think you will panic. You may escape from places as soon as you feel your stress rise. You may fear exerting yourself as you feel this could cause a panic. You may be afraid to be alone in case something bad happens to you.

### **Thoughts**

You will feel a rush of fear. You will feel that you are losing control. You may fear you are going to faint. You may feel you are dying. You may feel you are going mad. You may feel you will do something stupid. You may feel that something awful is about to happen to you even though you might not be able to say what that thing is.

**One of the common fears in panic is that you are having a heart attack. The next page looks at the difference between panic attacks and heart attacks.**

## **Panics and Heart Attacks**

As some of the signs of a panic attack are like those of a heart attack, e.g. chest pain, you can see why people can mix them up. Find out more about the symptoms of a heart attack on the British Heart Foundations's webpage [www.bhf.org.uk/doubtkills](http://www.bhf.org.uk/doubtkills). If chest pain is frequent or long lasting, it is wise to seek medical advice. If you have a good reason to believe you are at risk of a heart attack, or you have any serious doubts about your chest pain, it is important to get yourself checked out. But if the doctor has ruled out any heart problem, it is less likely that further chest pain is caused by a heart attack. The table below looks at some of the main differences.

	<b>Heart Attack</b>	<b>Panic Attack</b>
<b>Pain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● May or not be present</li> <li>● If present, you may have a crushing feeling (like someone standing on your chest)</li> <li>● This pain is usually felt in the centre of your chest and may extend to the left arm, jaw, neck and back.</li> <li>● Pain, if present, is not usually made worse by breathing or by pressing on the chest</li> <li>● Pain, if present, is usually persistent and lasts longer than 5 – 10 minutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Any pain is usually described as ‘sharp’</li> <li>■ The pain tends to be felt over the heart</li> <li>■ Pain is usually made worse by breathing in and out and pressing on the centre of the chest</li> <li>■ Pain usually disappears within about 5 – 10 minutes</li> </ul>
<b>Tingling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tingling, if present, is usually in the left arm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Tingling is usually present all over the body</li> </ul>
<b>Vomiting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Common</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ You may feel sick but vomiting is less common</li> </ul>
<b>Breathing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A heart attack does not <i>cause</i> you to breathe more quickly or too quickly (hyperventilation). Panic does. With a heart attack, you may feel a little short of breath.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Breathing too quickly or too deeply (hyperventilation) is a very common panic response which comes before the panic attack</li> </ul>

Adapted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) Guide to Mental Health in Primary Care (2000). Royal Society of Medicine Press.



## **PART 2: Fighting panic**

**Answer these questions about the panic you have just had (and other panics you may have had):**

**1) Where and when did you have the panic?**

**2) Was there a reason for the panic?**

**3) What body symptoms did you have? (Body)**

**4) At its worst point, what went through your mind?  
(Thoughts)**

**5) What did you do? (Actions)**

**6) What can you do to prevent another panic?**

**Use what you have learned to spot patterns with your panic. Use it to build up a plan to stop the next one. Use it along with these ideas:**

## **Control your stress (in 10 words)**

- **Face your fears (if anxious)**
- **Be more active (if depressed)**
- **Watch what you drink**

## **Control your breathing**

As you saw in Panic/Heart Attacks section, hyperventilation – HV (breathing too quickly for your needs) often makes panic worse. To see if this happens to you, answer these questions:

**When you feel panicky:**

**Do you feel light-headed or dizzy?**

**Do you feel you are going to faint?**

**Do you yawn, sigh or gulp in air?**

**Do you feel short of breath?**

**Do you feel your breathing is shallow?**

**Do you feel your breathing speeds up?**

**Are you aware of chest pains?**

**Do you get a numb or tingling feeling around the mouth and nose and/or in your fingers and toes**

The more **YES** answers you give, the more HV may play a part in your case.

When you HV, you may feel that you do not have **enough** air in your lungs. It is the opposite - you really have **too much**. You have to fight against the desire to take deep breaths, as this will make things worse.

You should try not to yawn, sigh and gulp air for the same reasons. Keep a grip on your breathing. Check every ten minutes that your breathing is nice and slow (about 10-12 breaths a minute). A good way to stay in control is:

## **Breathing Retraining**

**Take a breath in and think "1"**

**Breathe out and think, "*relax*"**

**Take a breath in and think "2"**

**Breathe out and think, "*relax*"**

**Repeat up to *10* and then back down to *1***

**Concentrate only on breathing and on the number and "*relax*" in the minds eye**

**Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute)**

**Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out slowly through your mouth**

**Practise twice a day in different places**

## **Quick control:**

### **Use a paper bag**

Hold a paper (not plastic) bag tightly around your mouth and nose so that no air can get in from outside. If you don't have a paper bag, cup your hands over your mouth and nose. Breathe normally (10-12 breaths per minute) into the bag until you feel better. The bag will go (slightly) in and out as you breathe in and out.

### **This will help because:**

Bear in mind that even though you feel you need *more* oxygen in your lungs, you really need *less*. Using the paper bag helps get your breathing sorted. This will calm your body and you should feel more in control.

Of course, you can't just pull out a paper bag in a lot of places. At these times, use the breathing skills you have just learned.

## **How to prevent panic**

Now let us look at some of the risk factors. Knowing about these might help you *prevent* panic.

### **1) Rapid body change**

If you have been sitting down for a while, get out the chair slowly. Don't jump out of bed first thing. You may get a swimming feeling in your head if you do. This can lead to panic in some people.

### **2) Tiredness**

Make sure you get enough rest: panic is more likely if you are tired.

### **3) Low normal blood sugar**

This is nothing to do with diabetes. You keep your blood sugar level up when you eat every few hours. If you don't eat, the level drops and makes you more prone to panic. Though it slows down while you sleep, you need to eat something first thing to raise your sugar level - a piece of toast is fine. Don't skip meals or go on crash diets. As a rough rule of thumb - eat something every three hours.

### **4) Alcohol**

You may find you panic 'the morning after the night before' even if you have not had a great deal to drink. If you are prone to this, at least in the short term, you should stay away from drink. You can get into a vicious circle where you drink because you panic and you panic because you drink. This is the road to big problems. Watch out for this.

## **5) Illness**

Things like the flu leave you more at risk. As you feel so weak, you are less able to fight panic off. This may be more prone to panic when you are recovering from illness.

## **6) Caffeine**

Too much caffeine can be linked to panic. You get caffeine in coffee, tea, fizzy drinks such as Coke and Irn-Bru, pain killers such as Askits, energy drinks and tablets such as Red Bull and Pro Plus. Try to wean yourself off – use decaff tea and coffee and switch from fizzy drinks to pure juices. Cut down on pain-killers if you can.

## **7) Pre-menstrual phase**

Many women find that they are more prone to panic in the days before their period. This is due to a natural drop in CO<sup>2</sup> levels before a period. So HV takes its toll quicker at this time. PMT symptoms may increase stress in any case.

## **8) Stress**

This is the most common risk factor for panic. Control stress and you are on the road to controlling panic.

**Knowing what your risk factors are can help you prevent panic.**

## What to do in a panic

If you feel a panic come on, put this advice into action as quick as you can. Nip the panic in the bud. It may help if someone can run through these steps with you. If you are alone, say them aloud.

### **ACTIONS**

If you feel the panic coming on - stand your ground - don't let it make you run away.

### **BODY**

Keep your breathing under control - slow, normal breaths.

Each time you breathe in; say, "*I'm in control*".

Each time you breathe out, say "*relax*"

Relax your body - drop your shoulders, let your muscles go loose.

### **THOUGHTS**

Imagine pushing the panic from the top of your head, down through your body and out through your toes.

Keep your thoughts under control.

Say - "I'm having a panic attack. I feel awful but nothing bad can happen. I know what to do. I can control this. It will pass"

**Fight the panic all the way. Rule it - don't let it rule you.**

## **Useful contacts, books and websites**

**No Panic** ([www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk))

Enquiries: 01952 590 005

Helpline: 0808 808 0545

**This self-help organisation offers self-help booklets on a range of problems (cheap to buy); a phone recovery programme (free), a helpline and more.**

**First steps to Freedom** ([www.first-steps.org](http://www.first-steps.org))

Helpline: 0845 120 2916

**A registered charity which aims to help, in a practical way, people who suffer from a range of common problems including panic. Confidential helpline is open from 10am to 10pm, 365 days of the year. Trained volunteers run this service**

**Overcoming panic (book)**

**D. Silove and V. Manicarasagar, Constable and Robinson (1997)**

**£6.39 plus delivery** ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))

**Overcoming panic, anxiety and phobias (book)**

**C Goldman and S Babior, Whole Person Associates (1995)**

**£7.51 plus delivery** ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))

**Pass through panic: free yourself from anxiety and fear  
(audiocassette)**

**Claire Weekes, Penguin (1999)**

**£9.93 plus delivery ([www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk))**

### **Tackling other problems**

Many people find that having a problem with panic is only one problem among others. If you feel you would like to tackle problems such as stress, anxiety, poor sleep, depression, low self-confidence, etc., then STEPS might be able to help.

Ask at your GP practice for more information or take a look at our web site ([www.glasgowsteps.com](http://www.glasgowsteps.com)) to find out more.