

## Top Tips for Managing Panic

### Understand Anxiety

Anxiety has kept us safe for centuries. When we sense danger our fight/flight response activates and our body prepares to fight or flee from danger. Our heart rate increases to pump more blood and oxygen to our muscles; we start to sweat so our skin is slippery and difficult for predators to grab; and our muscles tense up ready for action. These changes don't feel pleasant, but they're not harmful and are actually intended to keep you safe in dangerous situations.

A panic attack is your fight/flight system activating by mistake. It isn't harmful even though it feels awful. If you were in a dangerous situation you would *want* your fight/flight system to activate.

### Know Your Triggers

Panic attacks can seem to come out of the blue but there's usually a trigger. Keep a record of your panic attacks and try to notice what you were doing or thinking about when they started. Looking at past panic attacks might also help you to find a pattern. Triggers might include: situations where you've had an attack before, noticing physical sensations in your body, or sleep.

### Identify Anxious Thoughts

Our thoughts affect how we feel and vice versa. When we're anxious we tend to have anxious thoughts, many of which aren't factual even though they feel like they are. Think about why panic attacks make you feel anxious – other than the fact that they feel awful. For example, some people worry that they're having a heart attack when they have a panic attack. Other people worry that they're going to lose control and "go crazy". What do you fear when you're having a panic attack?

### Manage Your Thoughts

When we're anxious we assume the worst and this increases our anxiety. Try to use factual information to evaluate your thoughts. For example, some people worry about fainting when they're having a panic attack because their fight/flight response causes them to feel dizzy. Fainting is caused by a dramatic *drop* in blood pressure, whereas anxiety actually causes a slight *increase* in blood pressure. The fact is, you're actually *less* likely to faint during a panic attack.

### Make Lifestyle Changes

Keeping stress levels low will help your anxiety feel more manageable. Make time for regular exercise, it's a great way to manage stress. Limit your caffeine intake; caffeine is a stimulant and can exacerbate anxious symptoms. Make sure you have time for relaxation. If your work/life balance is biased towards work, figure out how to get a better balance.

## PANIC DISORDER

**A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense anxiety that's accompanied by physical symptoms like:**

- Increased heart rate
- Sweating and feeling hot
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Dizziness
- Nausea

**Panic attacks are a symptom of most anxiety disorders so if you have a panic attack it doesn't necessarily mean you have panic disorder.**

**People with panic disorder worry about when they'll have another panic attack and about what their panic attacks mean. Some people worry that their panic attacks mean that:**

- They have a serious illness
- They're going crazy or losing control

**People with panic disorder might also:**

- Avoid places where they've had a panic attack before
- Avoid activities like exercise that cause symptoms that mimic a panic attack

**This tips sheet covers strategies for managing panic attacks. If your panic attacks persist or if you think you have panic disorder, speak to your GP about a referral to a clinical psychologist.**