

Panic Attacks Panic disorder

A panic attack is a false alarm. Panic disorder is the fear of the next one.

🕒 WHAT A PANIC ATTACK IS

A panic attack is an overwhelming false alarm: a sudden wave of fear that peaks within minutes and then gets better. It feels like being cornered by a lion because the alarm has maxed out.

It does not cause a heart attack, and it almost never causes fainting. Feeling unreal during one is harmless.

🏠 HOW PANIC DISORDER TAKES HOLD

Panic disorder is the fear of having another attack. A little anxiety becomes "I'm having a panic attack," then a faster heart and breathing, then "I'm going crazy," then more body response, round and round.

Avoiding places and feelings keeps the loop going, more than the attacks themselves.

📖 TREATMENT IN THREE MOVES

Reframe

"This is adrenaline. It peaks and it passes" changes how you respond more than "I'm having a panic attack."

Stay and let it pass

Don't escape. Breathe slowly, drop the safety habits, and carry on with what you were doing.

Go back

Exposure comes first: climb a ladder of avoided places, easy to hard, over weeks to a few months.

Benzodiazepines can calm a crisis but break the learning that you were safe, so they undercut exposure.

☀️ DURING AN ATTACK

- Pull over if you are driving
- Breathe in for about 3 seconds through the nose and out for about 6 through pursed lips
- Rate the feelings from 0 to 100, like a weather report
- Skip the safety habits and carry on
- Afterward, write what you feared and what happened

🏠 SAFETY HABITS TO DROP

These feel protective but keep panic alive: carrying a pill or water "just in case," sitting by exits, checking your pulse, needing a person with you. Fade them out one at a time.

Being told you are safe doesn't switch off the alarm. Learning it yourself, by staying, does.

Do keep any medicine you truly need, like an inhaler.

Practice list. Work through it over several weeks.

- ☐ Learn the body: panic is adrenaline, not danger
- ☐ Practice feared body sensations, after a medical check
- ☐ List avoided places and rate each from 0 to 100
- ☐ Start with a step rated about 30 to 50
- ☐ Practice most days, at least 3 or 4 times a week

- ☐ Stay in each practice 20 to 45 minutes
- ☐ Move up when anxiety is about half what it was
- ☐ Fade out a support person, one step at a time
- ☐ After a relapse, practice within a day or two
- ☐ Cut back on caffeine and alcohol, which can trigger panic

❓ THERAPY

CBT for panic has four parts: understand the body, bring on sensations on purpose, return to avoided places, and drop safety habits.

If you are housebound, start with a therapist. Early sessions by video can work.

📖 BOOKS AND APPS

Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic: Workbook by Michelle Craske and David Barlow.

When Panic Attacks by David Burns. **Dare** by Barry McDonagh.

MindShift CBT, a free app.

⚠️ GET MEDICAL ADVICE FIRST FOR CHEST PAIN, TROUBLE BREATHING OR FAINTING

Stop any practice and get checked for chest pain, breathlessness that doesn't settle within a couple of minutes, or fainting. A medical check for thyroid, heart rhythm and asthma problems is reasonable before you begin.

Source. Adapted from Psychofarm's panic attack guide (CBT for panic, after Craske and Barlow) and podcast conversations on anxiety.

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