

## What is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is usually characterised by an abrupt and unexpected onset of intense fear and strong physical sensations usually lasting 3 to 5 minutes and subsiding within 10 minutes. The following symptoms are associated with a panic attack

- A feeling of imminent danger or overwhelming doom
- Increased heart rate/ palpitations
- Chest pain/discomfort
- Feeling of choking
- Butterflies or nausea
- Sense of things being unreal/ derealisation
- Fear of losing control/going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Tingling sensations
- Hot and cold flushes
- Feeling Dizzy/light headed
- Difficulty breathing/ shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Need to escape/avoid



## The Fight or Flight Response

Most people are familiar with the adrenaline surge we experience when faced with danger or extreme excitement. The fight or flight (FOFR) is our body's natural survival instinct that prepares us to manage danger. Adrenaline and other chemicals are released within the body when we are faced with some form of threat to our physical safety.

For example, if you are walking down the street and faced with a large dog your FOFR produces a variety of chemical changes within the autonomic nervous system to prepare you to 'fight' the dog or turn around and 'flight' (run) from the danger. Within seconds your heart rate increases to pump blood to the major muscle groups to either fight or flight. The blood is taken away from your non-essential processes, such as digestion, in order to move to the major muscle groups. Your breathing increases to get more oxygen into the blood flow. Sugars are released

into the blood stream to give you a burst of energy. Your senses (touch, sight, smell, hearing, perception of time) become heightened so you are alert to your surroundings. Your body temperature increases therefore your perspiration also increases to cool down the body. This process occurs within a very short period of time in order to prepare you to fight or flight the danger. This process is essential to protect us from physical danger, however is not so helpful when the FOFR response is set off within a situation where there is no immediate physical danger.

### External vs. Internal Threat

The above example highlights the role of the FOFR in relation to a physical danger or an external threat. The FOFR can also be triggered by a perceived danger or an internal threat. At times we may perceive a threat not to our life but to the *quality of our life* i.e. our integrity, reputation, health, etc and this is enough to trigger the FOFR. A panic attack is the natural FOFR being set off by a perceived danger or an internal threat.

## Anticipatory Anxiety and Avoidance

If the FOFR has been set off in a situation in which there is no immediate danger, such as a supermarket or stairwell, it is a natural process to be fearful of returning to that situation. Anticipatory anxiety can develop when anxiety exists about either returning to a situation where a panic attack occurred or a situation where a panic attack may occur. This anticipatory anxiety is panic about having a panic attack. This anxiety can then lead to avoidance of that situation. Although in the short term there is a relief of the anxiety, in the long term the fear becomes larger and overwhelming.

### Management Strategies

#### 1. Acknowledgement

Acknowledge that the sensations you are experiencing are from the fight or flight response, that you're not having a heart attack, and that it is unconfutable and it will eventually pass- even if you do nothing. By acknowledged the FOFR as your natural survival instinct going off at the wrong time helps to reduce the fear associated with panic attacks.

#### 2. Controlled Breathing

Controlled breathing works in two ways, as a distraction technique and to slow down the FOFR. Slowing down your breathing slows down your heart rate which then slows down the other symptoms of the FOFR. Focusing on your breathing also serves as a distraction technique as it takes the attention off the panic sensations.

#### 3. Relaxation/Leisure

Frequent stressful situation can increase your general level of arousal during every day functioning. This can lead to panic attacks appearing to come out of the blue, however in reality your general level of anxiety was high to start with. Regular relaxation will assist to reduce your everyday anxiety levels and reduce tension within the body, allowing you to become more aware of warning signs of a panic attacks occurring.

#### 4. Cognitive Strategies

Identifying a particularly anxiety provoking thoughts and challenging these thoughts can assist to reduce the frequency of panic attacks. Monitor your thinking for unhelpful thoughts about situations and events and challenge these views. Distraction techniques can also be helpful for example counting backwards from 1000 in 7's or think of an animal or name for each letter of the alphabet.

#### 5. Coping Statements

Use a coping statement prior to events where your experience anticipatory anxiety. Examples include "I can cope" "It's only my fight or flight response" "It is uncomfortable however it will pass" "I expect to feel anxious; however I can cope with that"

