

Coping with Panic Attacks

Working with symptoms of trauma



Dublin Rape Crisis Centre Resource

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are very frightening events that feel like they come out of nowhere and for no apparent reason. They trigger intense fear-responses in the body, including:

- ▶ Heart palpitations / chest pain
- ▶ Trembling / wobbling
- ▶ Difficulty breathing / rapid breathing
- ▶ Sweating
- ▶ Dizziness / light-headedness

If you have experienced a trauma like sexual violence, your body might be on constant high alert for danger. Panic attacks are a natural response to this kind of chronic stress and anxiety, and could be triggered by something seemingly insignificant, or by something you associate with the past trauma.

Even though there is no real immediate danger, panic attacks can sometimes feel like you are having a heart-attack, or that you are going to die. They usually last between 5 and 30 minutes. If you experience one, **consult with your GP** to reassure yourself that there are no underlying health conditions. You might also like to **speak to a counsellor or contact the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre** for support.

Remember, panic attacks are a natural response to sexual violence and trauma, and although very frightening, **they can be managed and overcome**.

Will it happen again?

Once a person has had a panic attack, they can live in constant fear of the next one. This increased tension & anxiety can push them closer to the edges of their [Window of Tolerance](#).

Because the cause of an attack is not always clear, you may try to stop it from recurring by avoiding people, places or events around which it took place. But isolating yourself in this way can reduce your confidence and limit your resources, making the next panic attack more likely.

Understanding what causes panic attacks and building your resources can help you to manage them, reduce their likelihood, and feel safe in the here and now.

What happens to my body during a panic attack?

During a panic attack, **your rational mind is hijacked by the primitive fight-or-flight brain**. There is a sudden surge of adrenaline into the bloodstream, making you feel like you are physically preparing to run away or fight back. This can cause symptoms like sweating, nausea, dizziness, rapid heartbeat and difficulty in breathing.

- ▶ **What happens to my breathing?** When your **breathing** speeds up (hyperventilation), you take more oxygen in and there is less carbon dioxide. This leads to a narrowing of the blood vessels and reduced blood flow to your brain, resulting in dizziness, confusion, blurred vision, and lapses in concentration and memory.

What can I do when I have a panic attack?

- ▶ **Pause and breathe:** Using **basic breathing techniques** can rebalance the oxygen/carbon dioxide in your system, and help you to feel more relaxed and grounded.
 - Put your hand on your chest or stomach to feel the breath going in and out. Then breathe in deeply for a count of five and exhale slowly for a count of six.
 - If you are still having difficulty, try using a paper bag or cupping your hands around your nose and mouth. Breathe slowly and steadily with the out-breath longer than the in-breath, inhaling the carbon dioxide that you exhale to balance your system. In a few minutes, you should begin to feel better. Breath focus may not work for everyone, so try something else if it isn't working for you.
- ▶ **Refocus:** For some people, focusing on their breath can increase panic. Instead, you can focus on the detail of your immediate surroundings to return to the here and now.
 - Take hold of an object around you and focus on its colour, its touch, its shape...
 - Inhale a scent associated with calm; an essential oil, perfume, fresh fruit or flowers...
 - Use the **5-4-3-2-1** method to give slow and caring attention to all your senses:
 - What **5** things can you **see**?
 - What **4** things can you **touch**?
 - What **3** things can you **hear**?
 - What **2** things can you **smell**?
 - What **1** thing can you **taste**?
- ▶ **Reconnect to your body:** Becoming more aware of your body can help you regain control:
 - **Relax:** In time with the breath, tense then relax each one of your muscles. Begin with your toes & work up to your legs, buttocks, stomach, shoulders, arms, & head.
 - **Move:** Try dancing, stamping your feet, or giving yourself a massage.
- ▶ **Use reassuring phrases:** Thoughts that accompany panic may be very de-resourcing and have a life-or-death quality. Replace these with soothing, personalised thoughts and phrases.
 - **Reassure:** Tell yourself "this is a panic attack, it is a temporary and natural reaction and will pass," or "I feel like I am in danger, but really I am safe now."
 - **Visualize:** See yourself in your very own safe place, where you are calm and relaxed.

What can I do after I have a panic attack?

Be kind towards yourself. Panic attacks are emotional experiences, after which you might feel upset, tired, weak or anxious. **These feelings are perfectly normal**; don't push yourself to get back to daily tasks and responsibilities. Give yourself some compassion and caring.

- ▶ Listen to music, make a hot drink, journal, talk to someone you trust.
- ▶ Try not to worry that it will happen again. Remind yourself that this one passed and that you have the resources to manage if it ever happens again.

How can I prevent it from happening again?

Although it often feels like panic attacks come out of the blue and without warning, there are ways to manage them and to prevent them from recurring.

- ▶ **Become aware of what happens:** You may like to note your experiences in a journal & perhaps discuss them with a trusted person to see if there is any pattern.
 - **How were you feeling and thinking?** What did you sense before, during and after?
 - **Where were you and who were you with?** Are there any particular triggers, e.g. journeys, fatigue, crowded places, pre-menstrual tension?
 - **What helps and what hinders?** Are there times when it can be controlled?
- ▶ **Be your own best friend:** After experiences of trauma, we can become disconnected from our bodies. Paying attention to our physical needs helps us to re-regulate.
 - **Take regular exercise.** Go for a daily walk, or try an online class.
 - **Eat regular meals.** Cut down on stimulants like caffeine, sugar, alcohol & cigarettes.
 - **Develop a bedtime routine.** Organise sleeping arrangements so that you feel more comfortable, safer and less interrupted.
 - **Breathe.** Focus on slow conscious breathing several times a day.
 - **Express yourself.** Sometimes anxiety needs expression: stamp your feet, move your arms, slam your hands down on cushions, shout out how you feel.
 - **Practice.** Use regular relaxation and visualisation to release stress.
 - **Challenge unhelpful thoughts.** Develop and savour a key phrase that helps you to feel safe. There is no need to judge yourself. You have not done anything wrong.

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre is there for anyone affected by sexual violence, including those supporting others. Call the [National 24-Hour Helpline 1800 77 8888](tel:1800778888) for non-judgmental information & support.

DRCC also offers **specialised training** on issues like secondary/vicarious trauma and sexual consent & healthy relationships – contact our Education Department for more at etadmin@rcc.ie or 01-661 4911 or check out www.drcc.ie.

Disclaimer: This resource is provided for general information only and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or counselling. **Issued Jan 2022**

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