

UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH PANIC ATTACKS

In Case of Panic Read This

Background

Panic makes us feel terrible and fear the worst. It causes us to stop what we are doing and hurry away to seek help. The first thing to know is that during a panic attack your panic is not caused by a looming heart attack or the situation you're in - it's caused by scary thoughts. That's right - scary thoughts! The scary thoughts make your body produce adrenaline - a chemical that speeds up your heart and your breathing and gives you a dry mouth and a churning stomach. When we all lived in caves, it helped to make us frightened enough to run away from wolves, bears and escape other dangerous situations. These days, it's not quite so useful. When you have a panic attack, your mind makes a mistake and turns your adrenaline tap on full. But don't worry, you'll run out of it in half an hour or so!! That's right! You only have a set amount of adrenaline, so your racing heart, shallow breathing, churning tummy and dry mouth will settle down soon, even if you do nothing.

How adrenaline fools you into feeling worse

Adrenaline makes your heart flutter and pump faster. This can feel as if you're having a heart attack, so you panic about this and produce even more adrenaline. Adrenaline makes you breathe rapidly, which can create a pain in your chest. It also upsets the balance of gases in your lungs and blood. This makes you feel as if you're going to suffocate or pass out. You panic even more about this and produce even more adrenaline. Rapid, shallow breathing makes you feel dizzy and off balance. You think you're having a stroke, or that you're going mad, or about to fall off a cliff. You panic about this and produce even more adrenaline. Get the picture? It's adrenaline that's making you feel that way, but your scary thoughts mistake it for something else. As soon as you start to feel panic coming on, remember that it's just adrenaline and you are not going mad, having a heart attack, a stroke or a fainting fit. Panic feels dangerous, but it isn't.

How can I apply this to my life?

A wise old person once said, "I've lived through some terrible things in my time - one or two of which actually happened." We all imagine that things will be much worse than they really are. That lift won't drop ten floors. People won't laugh and you won't fall. Flying in that plane is actually safer than crossing the road to get to the shops. Your heart won't suddenly stop pumping just because you are scared. Your brain knows this, of course. But the thing that makes you scared ignores your sensible side and lets its imagination rip. So, now that you're breathing a bit better, and the adrenaline gush is slowing down a little, try thinking differently. Recall your previous panic attacks. Did the worst really happen? Did you fall off, drop dead, have an accident, make a complete fool of yourself? Use that evidence to help see the panic for what it is.

If your panic attack happens in a place that scares you, it seems sensible to leave, doesn't it? But sometimes, this isn't sensible at all - it just keeps the problem going and everything will repeat itself the next time you go there. By hurrying away, you're letting the scary thoughts win. It's the same if you have a drink, pop a pill, go to the Emergency Department or phone a friend when you're in a panic. These things can sometimes make you feel better, but only until next time. Next time, you'll have to do the same again, and your problem will get a little bit worse. Eventually, things like this will become part of the panic attack itself - like rapid breathing or a racing heart. And they'll make the problem bigger and bigger if you don't fight back. So what do you do?

Why running away is wrong - Stay or go? Tough it out or phone a friend?

If, even after you've tried to slow your breathing, and remembered about adrenaline, you still feel awful, then do what you have to do, but do it slowly. Don't rush away, don't gulp that drink down, don't babble if you phone a friend. Alternatively, you could try something radical: stick it out! Breathe calmly through your nose and put those scary thoughts in their place. If you're able to face your fear this way, proving to yourself, just a little bit each time, that the worst fears are only in your imagination, you'll have taken a big step towards tackling your panic attacks for good.

Here's what to do about your breathing

Close your mouth 1,2,3 - When you panic, you breathe too fast. It's called hyperventilation and it's making your dry mouth, blurry eyes and dizziness worse. It's also making you feel faint, and it may be giving you a tight feeling in your chest. Some people get pins and needles as well. So using the number 1,2,3 do this: Close your mouth, then...through your nose, breathe in a normal sized breath while slowly counting one...two....three to yourself. Take about a second for each number. Now breathe out again, still through your nose, counting one...two...three.

Breathe like this for at least two minutes and you'll start to find your dry mouth and dizziness fading away. Your heart rate will also start to calm down as well. This works even better when you imagine a lovely, calming scene like a deserted palm tree-filled tropical island surrounded by calm sea waters on a sun filled beautiful day. Can you hear the sea lapping on the shore? Link your breathing to the slow movement of the waves.

1

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2

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3

Further Content

In case of panic book (online at www.llttf.com on the Panic button).
Worry Box book.
Face it Planner worksheet.
Why do I feel so bad and Overcoming avoidance modules.
All available at www.llttf.com.

**GM HEALTH
HUB**

Information Leaflets available from Living
Life to the Full.
Written by Dr Chris Williams.

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