

Getting to grips with Anxiety

Managing Panic



Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those practitioners and researchers whose work has underpinned the cognitive-behavioural techniques included in these open-source guided-self-help manuals.

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Introduction

- Some young people might have times when they feel overwhelmed by anxiety or the physical sensations of anxiety, often described by people as feelings of 'panic' or 'panic attacks.' This supplement has been developed to help understand and manage these feelings, particularly where they are getting in the way of using a step by step plan for overcoming anxiety with your practitioner.

Panic and Panic Attacks

What do we mean by panic?

People use the word 'panic' to mean a sudden feeling of very intense anxiety, which we might all experience if we found ourselves in an extremely frightening or dangerous situation. A panic attack is when this intense and overwhelming feeling of anxiety happens along with body changes that happen as part of the fight/flight/freeze response. This might include feeling your heart beat faster, breathing more quickly, sweating, shaking, or feeling sick or dizzy.

If problematic anxiety is a bit like the smoke alarm going off when you've burnt the toast, panic is like the sprinklers then coming on and the fire brigade arriving. It's a much more intense false alarm.

Why do people feel panicky?

Occasional panic attacks are common in people experiencing anxiety, especially if they encounter something particularly anxiety-provoking for them. Imagine, for example, how someone who was scared of spiders might feel if they uncovered a tarantula unexpectedly; they are likely to feel very intense anxiety and lots of the physical sensations associated with anxiety.

This handbook is designed for people who experience occasional feelings of panic when they encounter something they are particularly anxious about. Discuss with your practitioner what kinds of situations you get this feeling in. You can use the box to record the kinds of situations or a specific example that represents this:

Situation: Where were you? Who were you with? What was happening at the time?



The thing to remember with feelings of panic is that, even though they are really unpleasant, they are not dangerous. Panic is our body's alarm system signalling threat and preparing our body to fight or run away from danger. The problem is that sometimes it is just a false alarm and there isn't actually any physical danger.

What happens during a panic attack?

Panic starts with anxiety and the fight/flight/freeze response. You will already have talked about these feelings with your practitioner, probably in session 1. Use the box below to list the physical sensations you experience when you are feeling anxious or panicky.

Physical Sensations:



Sometimes when we are feeling anxious or panicky, we can misinterpret these physical sensations and start to think that they are much more dangerous than they actually are, even though these physical changes are part of the body's normal fight/flight response. There are some examples in the box below.

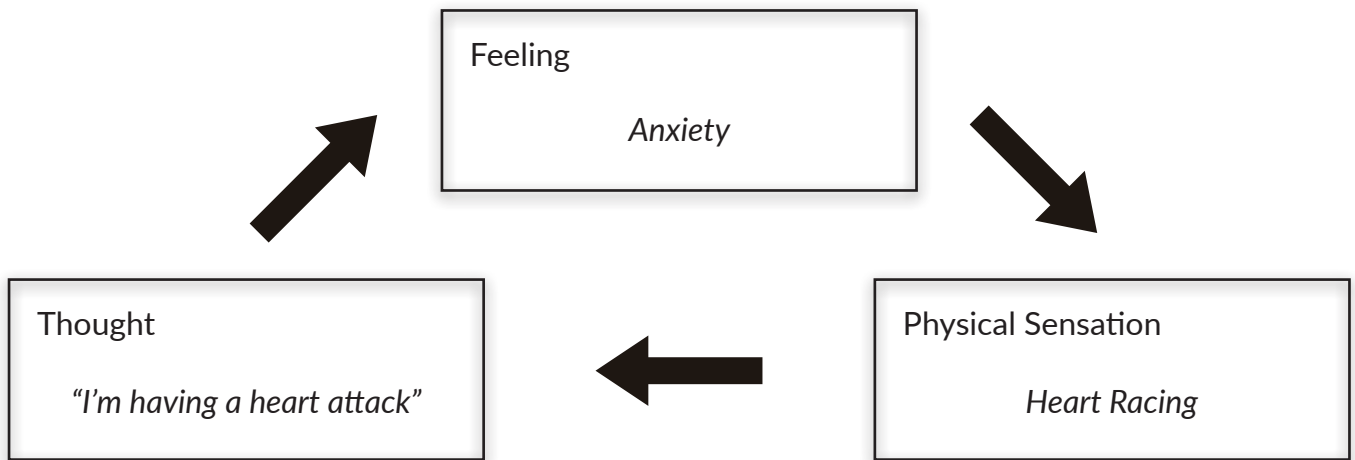
Physical sensation	Reason this happens	Misinterpretation
Heart beats faster	Pumps blood to muscles to prepare for fighting or running away	"I'm having a heart attack"
Breathing quicker and shallower	Take in enough oxygen to power our muscles	"I can't breathe" or "I'm choking"
Blurry or tunnel vision	Eyes focussing on danger	"I'm going to pass out"

What thoughts do you have when you're feeling panicky? Do you ever have any thoughts about the physical symptoms of anxiety you're feeling? Discuss these with your practitioner; can you think of any misinterpretations you might be making?

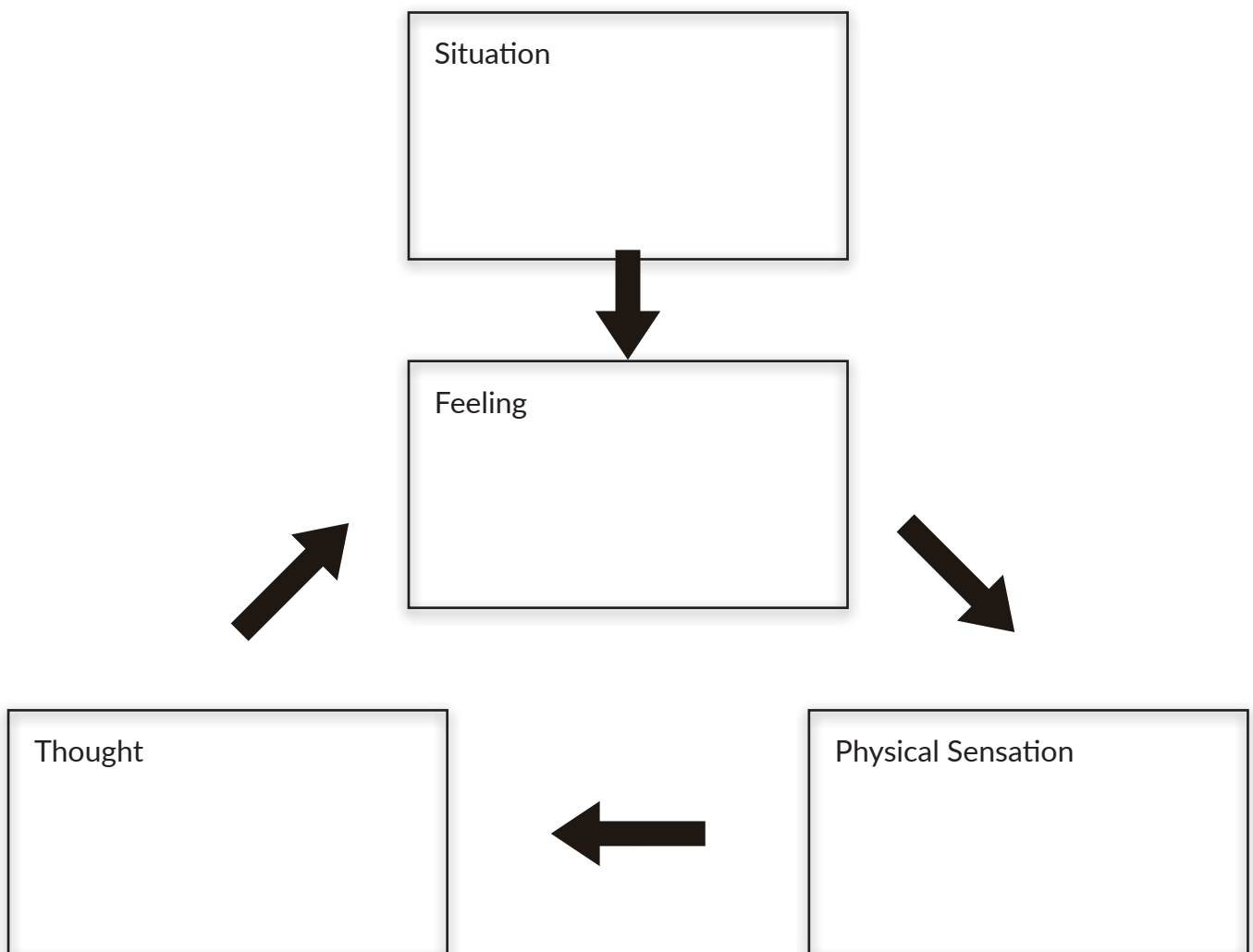
Thoughts:



The misinterpretations that people have when feeling panicky can themselves be anxiety-provoking. It's scary to think that the physical sensations you're experiencing might be dangerous. Unfortunately feeling scared leads to even more of these physical sensations. This leads to a vicious cycle:



With the help of your practitioner, think about a recent time when you felt panicky. What was the situation? What physical sensations did you experience? What thoughts did you have?



What keeps panic going?

The things that keep panic going are the same things that keep anxiety going in general. You will have covered these factors in Session 1 with your practitioner and might find those resources helpful when completing this section.

Our behaviour

Escape and Avoidance

Anxiety and panic are unpleasant feelings and it's understandable that we would try to act in ways to reduce or escape them. People who experience feelings of panic might leave the situation or start to avoid times and places where they might previously have felt panicky. Unfortunately, this means that we don't get the chance to find out how likely our fears were or learn to cope in those situations.

Panic feelings can also make it harder to work through step by step plans, because of feeling scared of having a panic attack while completing them. This might make it difficult to start the steps altogether, or it might be that things get stuck because there are particular steps which feel too anxiety-provoking.

Unhelpful Habits

We can also start to become dependent on certain behaviours to help us to feel safe and reduce anxiety or physical sensations of anxiety. They might make us feel better in the short term, but can prevent us from overcoming our anxiety in the long term.

Often people use unhelpful habits to feel less anxious in situations they find anxiety-provoking. Unfortunately, this means that unhelpful habits can get in the way of exposure work because they prevent the 'habituation' (anxiety gradually reducing over time as we stay in the situation). Coping strategies to boost your confidence, like positive self-talk, are fine, but it is important that you think with your practitioner about unhelpful habits you might be using at the moment and make sure you start to drop these, especially during exposure work.

Panic feelings can sometimes make it harder to drop unhelpful habits, but it is actually even more important that you do.

Our thoughts

As you've already learned, how we think about situations and about what is going to happen impacts on how we feel. Misinterpreting physical symptoms of anxiety can also keep panic going; the more anxious thoughts we have about our physical sensations the more anxious we are going to feel.



Is there anything that you have stopped doing because of feeling anxious or panicky? Perhaps there are places or situations that you avoid? Talk to your practitioner and record some of these in the box below:

A large empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing. In the top right corner of the box, there is a small, simple line-art icon of a human head profile facing left.

Do you have any things that you do to manage feelings of anxiety or panic? Could any of these be unhelpful habits? Discuss with your practitioner and think about whether there might be any unhelpful habits you might need to make a plan to drop:

A large empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for writing. In the top right corner of the box, there is a small, simple line-art icon of a human head profile facing left.

Just like with anxiety in general, the good news is that now you understand the things that are keeping the feelings of panic going, you can start to change things to help overcome it.

Managing feelings of panic

There are lots of things that you can do to help if you find yourself feeling panicky. Below are some coping strategies and things to remember which you might find useful. Read through them with your practitioner and look back through the 'Getting to grips with anxiety manual' if you need to.

If you feel that you might be starting to panic:

1. Try to stay where you are

We know that anxiety makes us want to escape the situation. This feels better in the short term but stops us from learning that we could have coped and we would have been OK. The best thing to do, if you can, is to resist the urge to leave the place or situation. Remember that anxiety goes down eventually and that facing our fears by staying in the situation will help it feel less scary the next time.

2. Remember that you are not in danger

Although the physical sensations you're experiencing are unpleasant, they are not dangerous and they can't harm you. They are your body's natural response to a perceived threat but in this case are a false alarm.

3. Try a grounding technique

Grounding techniques are things you can do to focus on the 'here and now' when you are feeling very anxious. It can help you to shift your attention to what is happening around you, rather than on the bodily sensations.

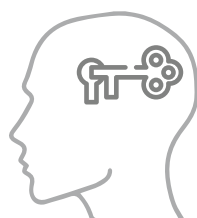
Page 26 of the Getting to Grips with Anxiety workbook has an example of a grounding technique and some suggestions of places where you can find other techniques and resources.

4. Try to focus on breathing slowly

When we are feeling anxious, our body can tend to start breathing very fast and shallow. Slowing our breathing down can be a helpful way of calming ourselves down in the moment. Page 25 of the Getting to Grips with Anxiety workbook has an example of a calm breathing technique for you to try.

5. Try some positive self-talk

Positive or soothing self-talk are statements that we say to ourselves, usually in our head, that can help us manage or cope in difficult situations. Discuss with your practitioner what helpful statements you might choose to say to yourself.



With the help of your practitioner, use the boxes below to make a plan for how to manage next time you notice that you are feeling panicky.

What will you do? What techniques are you going to try?

What are you going to say to yourself? (Positive or soothing self-talk)

How could your back up team help you?

Taking things forwards

Once you have learned how to cope with feelings of panic in the moment, and that these feelings aren't dangerous, even though they are unpleasant, it is important to go back to your step by step plan to tackle the anxiety. The main thing is to carry on facing your fears using the Getting to grips with Anxiety manual.

Sometimes feelings of panic can get in the way of completing the step by step plan. This can be because people, understandably, feel too overwhelmed by the anxiety and physical sensations and find it difficult to take the first step, find it hard to stay in the situation long enough for the anxiety to go away, or don't stay in the situation long enough. Often this is because their step by step plan isn't quite graded enough and they try out something that they haven't quite yet built up the confidence to try.

Discuss a recent situation where you felt panicky and it stopped you from completing a step on your step by step plan with your practitioner.

What feelings did you notice in your body? What was going through your mind? What did you do?



Luckily, there are some things you can try if feelings of panic have got in the way of the step by step plan. You and your practitioner will probably find it helpful to refer back to your original plan for facing your fears on page 37 of the [Getting to grips with Anxiety manual](#).

— 1. Make sure the first step is manageable

The first step should be something that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable but is not overwhelming and feels manageable. Do you need to break the first step down further or try something that feels more manageable first?

— 2. Make sure the steps are graded enough

It is important that you can move through the steps on your plan gradually enough that you can build the confidence to try each one. Do you need to break any of the steps down to make sure that they are manageable? Do you need to add in any extra steps to make the steps more gradual? Things you can easily change to make steps easier or more difficult are who is with you, the time of day (which might change how busy it is, for example), the weather, the type of situation, what you take with you, etc etc.

Check the ratings for how scared you would feel in the situations on the plan, are there any ratings that you need to update? Once you've done one manageable step on the hierarchy, you'll often find you can immediately think of what you should do next, so it's helpful to take a note of that when you've done one task. If you got through it, but it was very difficult, that's often a sign you should do exactly the same thing again, maybe even a few times, rather than move forwards yet.

— 3. Make sure you can stay in the situation long enough

We have learned that feelings of panic can make us want to escape or leave. But for the step by step plan to be successful you need to stay in the situation has dropped by at least half. How can you use your plan for managing feelings of panic to make sure that you can stay in the situation long enough that your anxiety goes down?

— 4. Make sure you drop unhelpful habits

Feelings of panic can often lead to us developing unhelpful habits but it's important that you drop these during the exposure tasks. You might find page 38 of the [Getting to grips with Anxiety manual](#) helpful here.

What unhelpful habits do you need to drop? Could you drop them all at once or do you need to make a gradual plan to reduce them?

What coping strategies could you use instead?

— 5. Address thinking, thoughts and predictions

If you are also having lots of thoughts which are getting in the way of the step by step plan, you might find the 'What to do when our thoughts get in the way!' supplement helpful.

