

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY TREAT PANIC AND ANXIETY ?



Panic and anxiety are both incredibly common problems in today's society that affect millions of people across the world. But it's only a feeling, albeit a strong, unpleasant one! It's the fight/flight/freeze response - a biological overreaction. It can't physically hurt you. Once the adrenaline/epinephrine has been released, you need to 'surf the wave' of strong emotion. In order to cope with a panic attack, it is imperative that you try and stay calm. In doing so will help reduce the intensity of your feelings from rising too high, which may cause hyperventilation.

Those strong initial feelings will subside if you use calming techniques. Let go of concerns about what other people are thinking. Distract yourself but don't freeze or run away. If you can engage in active coping, you can bypass the freeze response. If you hang in there, you give your brain a chance to learn that this situation is not a threat after all. Breathe slowly and deeply. Pace or exercise to burn off excess adrenaline/epinephrine. [\(1\)](#) Relax your muscles, this will shorten the experience.

Tell yourself "I'm having a panic attack," but don't worry because it will pass with time.

Saying affirmations over and over can help to deescalate how intense things get. There are some very useful ones at this website [\(2\)](#)

I find it a coincidence that this site is called no panic as I know of someone that used to experience panic attacks. He had the words No Panic tattooed on his arm in Hebrew. That way no one else knew what it said but he knew the meaning. When he felt a panic attack looming he would look at his tattoo and repeat over and over "No panic, No panic". He found that a very successful strategy to stop panic attacks in their tracks.

The STOPP strategy (3)

Say 'stop' firmly but gently to yourself.

S - Slow your breathing. This is a powerful signal to the nervous system to calm down.

T - Take a step back into the bit of you that can see what's happening.

O - Observe and scale – how scared am I on a scale of 1-10? Using numbers forces your thinking brain to engage.

P - Perspective – is there another way of seeing this situation?

P - Positive thought or action – what do I need right now? Self-kindness? Distraction?

Every time you do something that makes you anxious and you come through it, your brain gets an opportunity to learn and rewire its response.

The 5,4,3,2,1 Grounding Strategy (4)

Find:

5 things you can see,

4 things you can hear,

3 things you can touch,

2 things you can smell,

1 emotion you are feeling – Ask yourself “Am I more settled? Or do I need to go through each step again?”

Other strategies to try are:

Try and get 7-9 hours of restorative sleep.

Reduce caffeine & alcohol.

Exercise – something moderately intense that you will keep doing.

Build up to meditating for 12 minutes daily - this rewires your brain to be calmer.

Do breathing exercises daily – try doing 3 x 5 minutes a day.

Put time aside to fully relax.

Take time out to practice things that improve your stress resilience. These include singing, cold water exposure, singing, tai chi, yoga. Spend time in green spaces – get outside for at least 20 minutes every day.

Remember your thoughts are just thoughts

We have thousands of thoughts a day – being clear about the difference between thoughts and actual events is key to managing anxiety. Having a thought doesn't make it true, doesn't mean something will happen and doesn't mean we need to act on our thoughts.

We often have the tendency to mix up our thoughts with reality. It might be helpful to start noticing when your thoughts are triggering anxiety. For example, 'If I go to the party, no one will talk to me' 'If I say no, people will stop liking me'.

Because the brain responds to those thoughts as if they were reality (5), you can reduce your anxiety by noticing when you are having those thoughts and giving them less energy. Use the 'Stopp' strategy to interrupt them, or simply watch them go past and wait for the next thought, rather like watching a cloud pass by watching. Let them go as opposed to attempting to quash them – after all they've already arrived. However, the less attention you give them, the sooner they will pass through.

Sometimes it helps to examine your thoughts more closely. Ask yourself these questions.

First identify that this is a thought e.g. move from.. 'I cannot bear to have another panic attack' to 'I'm having the thought that I cannot bear to have another panic attack'.

Is it true? How do I know?

What proof supports this thought?

What might other people I respect believe?

How does this thought make me feel?

What would be a reasonable alternative thought? A coping thought?

An example of this is... ‘I can’t stand this!’ to ‘This isn’t the end of the world – I’ll survive, I can get through this’.

How does the alternative make me feel?

Learning to worry well might sound like a strange idea but it can be very helpful in preventing anxiety and panic attacks. [\(6\)](#)

Being able to anticipate things going wrong can be very useful. For example, anticipating a river might flood and endanger your family and home led to people moving to another town and surviving to tell the story. However, it is only useful to us if it leads to planning, and then action. Constant anticipation of how things may go wrong can keep us stuck in negative emotions. Here is a tactic to move from worry to planning...and peace.

Worry Well

Set aside 20-30 minutes a day to worry properly, maybe toward the end of the day but not right before bed. If worries pop into your head in the day, tell them gently you will consider them later. At the time you have chosen, write out all your worries and concerns.

As you write them out, sort them into 2 lists – ‘things I can do something about’, and ‘things I can’t’. Any item in the first list needs a planned action next to it. Put that action directly into your diary. Think about who you might be able to delegate actions to, and what support you may need.

You should end up with some action entries in your diary and a list you no longer need. Now this bit is where the magic happens. Throw the list away! Then breathe deeply.

You have done all you can, now it is time to RELAX. Any further worrying can wait until tomorrow.

Take a few moments to jot down 3 positive things – things you have been grateful for today, things you were pleased to notice, small successes and signs of progress.

The Fear Ladder (7)

Every time you avoid a situation due to anxiety, you confirm to your brain that the situation is dangerous. If you expose yourself to situations that you feel anxious about, you give your brain a chance to learn that you aren't in danger, and eventually those situations won't activate the same response. Unfortunately, for it to learn, it needs to be activated – so you have to be willing to feel uncomfortable. One way of approaching this gradually is to create a fear ladder, and start at the bottom rung...

Think of something difficult to do that you tend to avoid, such as driving your car.

Create a specific, clear, significant goal related to it. This could be, I will visit my family next August (let's say the family lives 50 miles away).

Think of 5 – 10 smaller actions that might take you closer to your goals, and arrange them from easiest to hardest. The easiest is on the bottom rung of the ladder.

Using the same example 1. Sit in my car, 2 Start the engine, 3 Drive around the block, 4 Drive to a nearby beauty spot for a walk, 5 Drive to the next town with my friend, and so on until you are able to do the thing that made you feel anxious.

Start on the bottom rung. Remember anxiety is uncomfortable but NOT dangerous. Pause and acknowledge every success on the steps up. Don't worry about adding in extra steps, just keep going up.

Remember that facing fears can be really challenging but you can make it easier on yourself.

Monitor your thinking for anxiety igniting thoughts and substitute them with coping thoughts: 'I expect anxiety to rise but I can manage it' 'I'm activating my anxiety to rewire it'. Breathe. Relax your muscles. Hang in there, don't run away.

Avoid using safety seeking behaviours when challenging yourself because you will limit the results e.g. always going to the same place, going with the same person, wearing sunglasses. Increase your tolerance of physical symptoms of anxiety by doing things like breathing faster or taking vigorous exercise.

I hope that some of these strategies prove useful in overcoming your anxiety and panic attacks.

References

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