

Panic Attacks & the Panic Cycle

Understanding intense surges of fear, body sensations, and fear-of-fear patterns.

What a panic attack is

A panic attack is a rapid surge of intense fear or discomfort that can include a racing heart, shortness of breath, dizziness, shaking, chest tightness, nausea, tingling, chills, heat, derealization, or fear of losing control. The sensations are real and can feel dangerous even when the body is not in immediate danger.

The panic cycle

- A body sensation or trigger appears.
- The sensation is interpreted as dangerous: "Something is terribly wrong."
- Fear increases adrenaline and intensifies the sensations.
- Escape, checking, or reassurance may reduce fear briefly but can strengthen future fear of the sensations.

Skills that can help

- Name the experience: "This feels intense, and panic rises and falls."
- Exhale slowly and loosen unnecessary muscle tension rather than trying to force the sensations away.
- Reduce repeated checking of pulse, breathing, exits, or reassurance when it is safe to do so.
- Practice tolerating harmless body sensations gradually with a qualified clinician when appropriate.

When to seek medical care

New, severe, or unexplained physical symptoms should be medically evaluated. Panic should not be assumed to be the cause of chest pain or other potentially urgent symptoms without appropriate assessment.

Try this reflection

What sensation do you fear most during panic, and what prediction does your mind attach to it?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.