

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Panic Disorder?



Description

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear which is accompanied by strong body feelings (such as your heart beating rapidly, or finding it hard to breathe) and catastrophic thoughts (such as thinking that you will lose control or die). Panic attacks feel terrifying, but they are not dangerous. People who worry about their panic, and who take steps to try to prevent the possibility of having more, are said to suffer from panic disorder. It is thought that between 1 and 3 people out of every 100 will experience panic disorder every year and many more than that will have a panic attack at least once. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an extremely effective treatment for panic disorder: about 80% of people with panic disorder who complete a course of CBT are panic-free at the end of treatment.

The *What Is Panic Disorder?* information handout is designed to help clients with panic attacks and panic disorder understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of panic attacks and panic disorder.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have panic attacks and panic disorder.
- A description of why panic disorder might not get better by itself, derived from the Clark (1986) cognitive model of panic.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for panic attacks and panic disorder.

Instructions

Our 'What Is ...?' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** The handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

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What Is Panic Disorder?

You have recurrent panic attacks, where you fear that you will lose control or die.

You avoid things that you worry might cause a panic attack.

You worry about having more panic attacks, and avoid things you think might cause them.

You're constantly on the lookout for signs of danger.

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It's thought that between 1 and 3 people out of every 100 will experience panic disorder every year, and many more than that will have a panic attack at least once. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is an extremely effective treatment for panic disorder: about 80% of people with panic disorder who complete a course of CBT are panic-free at the end of treatment.

The core of panic: misinterpreting what your body is doing

Your body does lots of interesting things all day long to help you live your life. As you move around, your heart beats faster or slower, your breathing speeds up or slows down, and your muscles contract or relax. Much of the time you aren't even aware of these changes. People who panic tend to misinterpret harmless body sensations as being signs of impending catastrophe – they have a 'false alarm'.

I'm worried this feeling in my chest means I'm having a heart attack.



This tightness in my throat means I'm going to choke.



If I don't get out of here, I'm going to lose control.



Panic attacks persist and get stuck for a few reasons:

Misinterpretation of body sensations

Interpreting your body sensations as a sign of catastrophe activates your **fight or flight system**. Common fight or flight reactions include:

- Raised heartbeat
- Quicker breathing
- Tense muscles

People with panic tend to misinterpret these reactions as further signs of danger, which keeps the vicious cycle going.

Avoidance and safety behaviors

People with panic often do things to prevent the worst from happening:

- Carry medication (just in case).
- Look for exits (in case they need to make a quick getaway).
- Avoid exercise or coffee (to avoid increasing their heart rate).

Safety behaviors can make you feel reassured in the short term, but they also prevent you from learning that your panic symptoms are the result of a 'false alarm' from your fight or flight system.

Being on the lookout for signs of danger

If someone told you there was an escaped tiger in your neighborhood, you would probably keep a lookout when you left your house. It's the same for body sensations that you think are dangerous – you stay on the lookout for them.

The problem of being on the lookout is that you're more likely to notice things. Even noticing and worrying about harmless body sensations can set off a 'false alarm' in your fight or flight system and trigger panic.

Treatment for panic disorder

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help you to learn about how your body reacts to stress, whether your body sensations are really dangerous or not, and how to confront situations that you had been avoiding. Medical guidelines suggest that if you suffer from panic disorder and choose drug treatment, you should be offered a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) or tricyclic antidepressants (TCAs). Benzodiazepines are associated with a poorer long-term outcome and should not be prescribed for the treatment of panic disorder.

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