



stresscontrol

Face your fears; be more active; watch what you drink

Step 8

Controlling your panic

Panic attacks are common in stress. For some, panics may be the worst part of stress. **Step 8** teaches you ways to get on top of panic. It will also teach you ways to prevent panic.

Even if you have not had a panic, you will find the skills taught in this session will help with your stress.

This handout is in two parts:

PART 1: Finding out about panic

- What is a panic attack?

- Types of panic
- Who gets panic?
- Thoughts, Actions, Body
- Breathing

PART 2: Fighting panic

- Work out the problem
- Control your breathing
- Control your thoughts
- Control your actions
- Reduce the risks
- What to do in a panic

PART 1: Finding out about panic

1. What is a panic attack?

The word 'panic' comes from the Greek God Pan. Pan would lie in wait for people in remote mountain passes. He would jump out at them and frighten them to death. Hence 'panic' means being in a state of terror.

Though they cause great stress, panics are not dangerous.

When you have your first few panics, you may fear you are going mad. You may call out your GP. You may rush to hospital as you fear you are having, e.g. a heart attack or stroke. Panics can last from a few seconds to a few hours and may leave you feeling shaken, tense and tired out. You may find your life revolves around trying to stop the next panic.

We can look at the way panic affects many people. The next page looks at how it affects Sam.

THOUGHTS:

You will feel a rush of fear and feel that you are losing control. You will feel that something awful is about to happen to you even though you may not be able to say what that thing is.

ACTIONS:

You may avoid going places where you think will bring on a panic. You may avoid doing things for the same reason.

BODY:

The body reacts in much the same way as to stress. But the symptoms will be **much** stronger. Your heart rate can almost double in a few minutes in panic. That has such a strong effect on the rest of the body, it is no wonder that it can fill you with terror.

Sam

Sam is a 27 year old taxi driver who had his first panic three months ago. It hit him out of the blue while he was watching TV at home. He has about one a week now.

"I can go into a panic so quickly. Most of the time, I can't see any reason for it. It's hard to tell you what it is like but it is like everything speeds up so fast and I just lose the place. I feel cut off from the world and I feel out of control. I'm off work now due to this but being in the house all day makes me worse. I'm sure the panic just feeds itself.

I can be soaked in sweat in seconds and my head spins. I think my heart is going to burst out my chest. I can shake from head to toe and I've often got to get to a toilet quickly. I get this surge through my body. That frightens the hell out of me. I think that I'm going to explode. I get these pins and needles in my fingers and arms and, if it is a bad panic, around my mouth. I feel like I can't breathe right.

Once the panic is over, I know that I'm OK but I can't tell myself that at the time. My head spins and I can't think straight. I feel like screaming. I can burst into tears as I feel so helpless (I'm even getting tense thinking about it now). I feel knackered after it.

I go through each day with a dread that I might panic. I hate being in the house on my own in case I panic and I can't get help. This puts a real strain on my wife. She is at her wit's end. I'm as bad tempered as hell now and I think I drink too much as well. If I'm out, I always have a diazepam in my pocket just in case.

I have given up the five-a-side football with my mates as I'm sure that I panic more when I exert myself. I know that one part of my mind seems to monitor my body and just a wee change in my heart rate can set me off.

I hope I have given you some idea of how I feel but, to be honest, if you have never had a panic, I don't think you can ever know just how awful it is"

2. Types of panic

Panics you can predict

You may think that if you have had a panic in a busy pub, you will panic if you go back to that or any other pub. You may think that if you get angry or exert yourself you will upset your body and you will panic.

You must face these fears if you are to get better. Think of using the skills about controlling thoughts and actions to cope with this.

Panics you can't predict

Most panics seem to happen out of the blue. You may feel OK. Then, for no reason you can see, you can be in a state of panic. This may lead to great fear as you feel you have no control. As you can't predict when a panic attack could hit you, you don't know how to prevent the next one. Sometimes the fear of having a panic is as bad as having it.

Night time panics

You can wake from sleep in a panic attack. These 'nocturnal panics' are common in the first few hours of sleep. The most common signs are shortness of breath, racing heart, hot and cold flushes, choking feeling, trembling and a fear of dying. You may fear going to sleep due to your fear of having such a panic. You may sleep with the window open as you think there is not enough air in the room.

3. Who gets panic?

About one in three people in Britain has at least one panic each year. So they are common. It may be that some of us are more prone to panic due to our basic nature. But those whose lives are most affected by panic often have:

- Anxiety

- Depression
- Phobias
- Alcohol problems

These may go together. If you get tense at the thought of meeting others, you might drink too much as a way of coping. This may make you more stressed and more prone to panic. This may lead to depression.....and so on as a vicious circle builds up.

4. Thoughts, Actions and Body

The following pages look at some of the ways in which panic affects your thoughts, actions and body - **TAB**.

Thoughts

I'm losing my mind

I'm having a heart attack

I'm losing control

I'm going to die

I'm going to pass out

I'm going to make a fool of myself

I've got to get out of here

I'm going to lose control of my bowels or bladder

I'm going to do something stupid

They are all looking at me

I'll never be normal again

Focus on body state e.g. pulse rate

Confused

Actions

Behaviour

Can't stay still

Fidgeting

Foot tapping

Snapping at people

Pacing up and down

Yawning

Sighing

Avoidance

**Exertion (for fear of bringing on an attack) e.g.
sex, running for a bus, sports**

Getting into arguments (fear of getting angry)

Staying alone (no-one to help you)

Being far from home

Going abroad (too far from 'safety')

Busy places

Body

Palpitations or Heart racing

Sweating

Nausea (sometimes vomiting)

Tingling or numbness,

*e.g. fingers and/or toes, around mouth and nose,
sometimes on one side of body*

Changes to vision,

e.g. stars in front of eyes, blurring, tunnel vision

Breathlessness

Smothering sensation

Chest pains or tightness

Hot and/or cold flushes

Choking sensations

Cold, clammy hands

Muscle tension

Exhaustion

Shaking or trembling

Dizziness or faintness

Unreal feeling

Upset stomach

The vicious circle

Though it may feel like it, panic does not come out of the blue. Panic is a **reaction**. Once you learn about the things that trigger panic, you can take your first step in controlling it. TAB feeds itself. Let us look at how this works with panic:

The role of thoughts

As the panic may seem to come out of the blue and as it hits you with such strength, you may think, e.g.:

"This can't be stress. I'm losing control. I'm going mad"

If you believe these thoughts, they must cause you to feel more stress. The more stress you feel, you more it affects your thoughts. Add to this:

The role of actions

Panic will affect your actions and this will feed back into your thoughts -

"Look at the state of me - I'm acting like an idiot. They are all looking at me. I've got to get out of here"

If you are avoiding going places or doing things for fear of having a panic, you are aware that you are restricting your life out of fear. This will affect your self-confidence.

The role of the body

Panic makes you tune into your body. This is no surprise given the very unpleasant ways your body may react to panic. So your thoughts are made worse by this:

"I'm so dizzy. I'm going to pass out"

"My stomach is heaving - I'm going to throw up"

And so the vicious circle is fed. One aspect of your body reaction stands out:-

5. Breathing

When you breathe in, you breathe in OXYGEN.

When you breathe out, you breathe out CARBON DIOXIDE (CO²).

OXYGEN is taken to your lungs and is then carried round your body in the blood stream. It feeds all the cells in your body. Once this is done, what is left - the waste product - has turned into **CARBON DIOXIDE (CO²)**. This is sent back to your lungs via your blood stream and breathed out.

When you are calm, there is a balance between the oxygen going in and the CO² going out. This balance is kept by your breathing. Think of a car - the faster the car goes, the more fuel is used. If the car goes slower, it burns less fuel. Your breathing works in the same way with oxygen acting as your fuel. If you are playing football, running for a bus, digging the garden, then your body need more fuel. So you breathe in more oxygen. When, a few hours later, you sit at home in front of the TV, you breathe much more slowly as you do not need the same energy. In both cases, the balance will stay in place.

Hyperventilation (HV)

HYPER (too much) **VENTILATION** (breathing) means you are breathing too fast for your needs. Once your fight / flight reaction kicks in, your body is filled with energy to fight a threat. This is fine if you have to run from danger - you will use up the extra energy. One of the problems in panic is that the threats you worry about are not those that you can fight or run from. So you are left filled with this energy in the shape of oxygen that you can't burn up. It is like breathing fast enough to let you play a hard game of football when all you are doing is sitting in front of the TV

- As you are not burning up the oxygen, it lies in your blood stream longer as your cells do not need to use it up. But as you have to breathe out each time you breathe in, you lose CO². At this point, you have lost the balance - you have too much oxygen and too little CO² in your blood. This causes three things to happen:
 1. CO² levels in your blood drop
 2. there is a drop in the amount of acid in your blood and it becomes more alkaline
 3. some blood vessels in your body narrow for a short time

These three changes cause many of the body signs of panic. The blood stream hangs on to the oxygen for longer. So even though you are taking in a lot more oxygen, it 'sticks' more to your blood.

This means less blood gets into the brain. This may cause you to feel:

- dizzy
- faint
- confused
- 'unreal'
- breathless, choking
- You may also have blurred vision

It also means less blood gets to parts of the body. This may cause:

- raised heart rate (as it pumps blood around the body)
- numbness or tingling in fingers, feet, mouth
- stiff muscles
- clammy, cold hands

Your body is now working hard. This may cause you to feel:

- hot, flushed and sweaty
- tired out
- aches and pains in your chest as if you have a tight belt around your ribs (breathing from the diaphragm will ease this a lot)
- you may yawn or sigh a lot. This is a sign of HV.

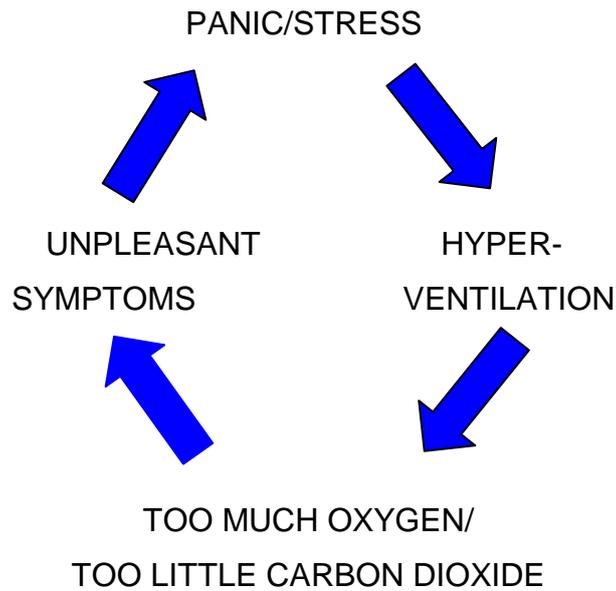
Note that all these symptoms are caused by HV and not by stress. Yet they are very similar to the way people say they feel in a panic attack. So if you control it, you will control the symptoms. This will then help you control (or prevent) panic. Bear in mind:

HV IS NOT DANGEROUS

If you hyperventilate quickly - say thirty breaths a minute - these symptoms can come on in seconds (e.g. if you get a sudden shock). More common is to increase your breathing from, say, fourteen times up to fifteen times a minute. No big deal yet with every minute that passes, you have one extra breath of oxygen going and one less amount of CO² in your blood stream.

After one hour, you have sixty extra breaths and have lost sixty amounts of CO². The balance is slowly changing. In this case, the body tries to deal with the slow change and you may not get any signs of the HV. But you will get to the point of no return when the symptoms appear without any warning. This is when your CO² drops below a certain level. This could happen even with a yawn (you lose a lot of CO² when you breathe out of a yawn).

It's like the straw that breaks the camel's back. ***It seems to come out of the blue.*** As you don't see why the symptoms have hit you, they cause you to think that ***something awful is about to happen to you.*** And this leads you to panic. The next page shows the vicious circle that is involved:



This vicious circle is the same as exists for people who don't panic with one important exception - the panic/stress. If **anyone** hyperventilates, they will get the same symptoms - it is normal to do so. They do not cause you to panic. It is the way you **interpret** the symptoms that causes you to panic.

This is where the panic/stress enters the circle. If, e.g. you believe that you are about to have a heart attack, pass out or go mad, it is common sense that you feel stressed / panicky at the thought. What is wrong in the first place is the way you have **interpreted** the symptoms.

The next page has a list of HV symptoms.

Signs of Hyperventilation

When under stress (circle **Yes** or **No**):

Do you feel light-headed or dizzy?	Yes	No
Do you feel you are going to faint?	Yes	No
Do you yawn, sigh or gulp in air?	Yes	No
Do you feel short of breath?	Yes	No
Do you feel your breathing is shallow?	Yes	No
Do you feel your breathing speeds up?	Yes	No
Are you aware of chest pains?	Yes	No
Do you get a numb or tingling feeling around the mouth and nose and/or in your fingers and toes	Yes	No

If you answer 'YES' to any of these signs, then HV may be a factor in your case. You will learn what to do about this in the next part.

PART 2: Fighting panic

(1) Work out the problem

Find out as much as you can about how panic affects you. You will find Panic Diaries at the back of this booklet. Fill these in every time you have a panic. Do this as soon as you can after the panic. There are six questions:

- 1) Where and when did you have the panic?**

- 2) Was there a reason for the panic?**

- 3) What body symptoms did you have?**

- 4) At the worst point, what went through your mind? (Thoughts)**

- 5) What did you do? (Actions)**

- 6) What can you do next time to help control it?**

Keeping this diary may show you that panic is more common in certain places or at certain times. If so, try to work out why this is. Then try to work out a way to tackle this problem. This part will teach you skills you can use to fight the panic.

(2) Control your breathing

When you HV, you may feel that you do not have **enough** air in your lungs. As you have seen, you have **too much**. You have to fight against the desire to take deep breaths as this will make things worse. You should try not to yawn, sigh and gulp air for the same reasons. Keep a grip on your breathing. Check every ten minutes that your breathing is nice and slow (about 10-12 breaths a minute). A good way to stay in control is:

Breathing Retraining

This is a quick method to use to calm your body. It can also be used to help prevent panic.

Sit in a comfy chair and relax as much as you can. Take a slow normal breath (not a deep breath) and think "1" to yourself. As you breathe out, think "*relax*"; breathe in again and think "2", breathe out and think "*relax*". Keep doing this up to 10. When you reach 10, reverse and start back down to 1. Try to put all else out of your mind. It may help to see the numbers and the word 'relax' in your mind's eye.

Don't be put off if you can't do this straight away. You can boost the benefits of this by breathing from the diaphragm:

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Place one hand on your chest and the other over your belly button. As you breathe in, the hand on your stomach should be pushed out while the hand on your chest should not move. As you breathe out, your stomach should pull in. Your chest should not move.

To help, breathe in through your nose, purse your lips and breathe out slowly through your mouth. If you are a chest breather, you may find this difficult at first. If you can't get the hang of this, lie on your back on the floor and practise as it is easier to do in this position.

Put these two exercises together and do them twice a day. Once you get good at them, practise when you are at work, sitting on the bus, watching TV etc. The aim is to be able to do this no matter where you are. No-one will notice you doing them.

This approach is summarised on the next page.

Breathing Retraining

Take a breath in and think "**1**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Take a breath in and think "**2**"

Breathe out and think "**relax**"

Repeat up to **10** and then back down to **1**

Concentrate only on breathing and on the number and "**relax**"
in the mind's eye

Use slow normal breathing (10-12 breaths per minute).
Breathe in through your nose. Purse your lips and breathe out
slowly through your mouth.

Use the diaphragm - as you breathe in, your stomach should
push out while your chest should not move.

As you breathe out, your stomach should pull in. Your chest
should not move when you breathe out.

Practise twice a day in different places.

Quick control: Using a paper bag

Hold a paper (not plastic) bag tightly around your mouth and nose so that no air can get in from outside. If you don't have a paper bag, cup your hands over your mouth and nose. Breathe normally (10-12 breaths per minute) into the bag until you feel better. The bag will go (slightly) in and out as you breathe in and out.

This will help because:

With HV, you are breathing in too much oxygen while breathing out too much CO^2 . Using the paper bag helps stop this because instead of losing CO^2 when you breathe out, you hold it in the bag and take it straight back in as you take your next breath. This stops you taking in too much oxygen. At the same time, you build up the level of CO^2 in your blood and lungs. This can help a lot but of course you can't just pull out a paper bag in a lot of places. At these times, use the breathing control skills you have just learned.

(3) Control your thoughts

Think back to the vicious circle. It is the way you *interpret* the HV symptoms not the HV itself that causes the panic.

Working along with the breathing skills, getting a grip on your thoughts will help a lot. Again you should try to think your way out of panic. Here are two of the short-cuts you can use:

What are the chances.....

.....of losing control or going mad?

"I always think I am going to lose control and crack up. I have felt like this lots of times in the past. But it does not happen. I don't go over the edge even though it feels hellish. These fears feed the panic. If I can get a grip on them, I will not panic as much. So face the fear and fight it all the way"

What is the worst thing that can happen?

.....if I wake in a panic in the middle of the night?

"The worst thing that can happen is that I'll be full of fear. I'll feel that I can't breathe; I will end up in tears and feel rotten. That is bad news but it won't be the end of the world. And that is *if* it happens. I now have some weapons to use to fight it. I know that I can't come to harm so keep a lid on this fear"

Work out your own ways to control your thoughts using these new skills.

(4) Control your actions

Look at what may happen to your **BEHAVIOUR** and **AVOIDANCE**

Behaviour

Do you:

Try to fill your lungs with air if you HV? You now know that you need less air not more and you know how to do this. So make sure you do it as soon as you can.

Pace up and down the room, try to read, watch TV - anything to try not to think about how you feel. Don't try to run from the panic. Face it and fight back using the skills you have been learning.

Avoidance

Do you:

Avoid going to certain places because you think you will panic there? **Go there, face it and do not run away.** Work out how to handle it and prepare well. Don't give in to it.

Avoid becoming emotional - feeling angry, feeling excited in case it provokes panic? Allow all these normal emotions to come out. In the long run, the restrictions on your life are adding strength to the panic. Don't give in to it.

Do things to try to stop panic - carry a diazepam, make sure there is someone at home with you. These make you worse not better. Plan ways of getting rid of them.

Whatever the Action problems are, try hard to change the way you react to panic or to the fear of it. By doing so you will show yourself that you can get a grip on this problem.

(5) Reducing the risk of panic

So far we have looked at ways of hitting panic head on. Now let us look at some of the risk factors. Knowing what they are helps you plan ways to **prevent** panic.

1) Rapid postural change

Don't change your position too fast. So, if you have been sitting down for a while, get out the chair slowly. Don't jump out of bed first thing. You may get a swimming feeling in your head if you do. This can lead to panic in some people.

2) Tiredness

Make sure you get enough rest as both panic and stress are made worse by fatigue.

3) Low normal blood sugar

This is nothing to do with diabetes. You keep your blood sugar level up when you eat every few hours. If you don't eat, the level drops and makes you more prone to panic. Though it slows down while you sleep, you need to eat something first thing to raise your sugar level - a piece of toast should be enough. Don't skip meals or go on crash diets. As a rough rule of thumb - eat something every three hours.

4) Alcohol

You may find you panic 'the morning after the night before' even if you have not had a great deal to drink. If you are prone to this, at least in the short term, you should stay away from drink. You can get into a vicious circle where you drink because you panic and you panic because you drink. This is the road to big problems so watch out for this.

5) Illness

Illnesses like the flu leave you more at risk. As you feel so weak, you are less able to fight panic off. This may also affect you when you are recovering from illness.

6) Caffeine

Too much caffeine can be linked to panic. Caffeine can be found in coffee (much more in fresh), tea, fizzy drinks like Coke, Pepsi, Irn-Bru (more in diet versions), pain killers such as aspirin, cold remedies and headache tablets such as Askits. Chocolate has caffeine though at quite a low level. Many other products contain caffeine so check the packet before using.

Effects of caffeine: feeling nervous, irritable, agitated, shaky, headaches, muscle twitch, flushed face, upset stomach, increased heart rate, speeded up breathing, poor sleep (especially if you take caffeine at night). Your body can get so used to caffeine that, if you just cut it out dead, you can get:

Withdrawal effects: throbbing headache, tiredness or drowsiness, anxiety, depression and feeling sick. These feelings could last up to one week

If you think caffeine may affect you, you should:

- wean yourself off it slowly. This will stop withdrawal effects
- Switch to **decaffeinated** tea and coffee
- Switch from fizzy drinks to caffeine-free drinks or pure fruit juice
- Take as few pain killers, etc. as you can (check this with your GP if concerned)

7) Pre-menstrual phase

Many women find that they are more prone to panic in the days before their period. This is due to a natural drop in CO² levels before a period so HV takes its toll quicker at this time. In any case, PMT symptoms may increase stress in any case.

8) Stress

This is the most common risk factor for panic. Control stress and you are on the road to controlling panic.

Knowing what your risk factors are can help you prevent panic. Think of this scene:

You have a late night with your friends. You have a few drinks. You get up early the next day, don't eat but have a few cups of coffee to get yourself going. You are at risk of panic that day. Plan ways to lower your risk. In this case, cut down how much you drink, eat some toast first thing, take decaff coffee or fruit juice. You are much less at risk of panic now.

(6) What to do in a panic

If you feel a panic come on, put this advice into action as quick as you can. Nip the panic in the bud. It may help if someone can run through these steps with you. If you are alone, say them out loud.

IF YOU FEEL THE PANIC COMING ON - STAND YOUR GROUND - DON'T LET IT MAKE YOU RUN AWAY.

**KEEP YOUR BREATHING UNDER CONTROL - SLOW, NORMAL BREATHS.
EACH TIME YOU BREATHE IN, SAY "*I'M IN CONTROL*".
EACH TIME YOU BREATHE OUT, SAY "*RELAX*"**

**RELAX YOUR BODY - DROP YOUR SHOULDERS, LET YOUR MUSCLES GO LOOSE.
IMAGINE THE PANIC FALLING FROM TOP OF YOUR HEAD AND DOWN THROUGH YOUR BODY**

**KEEP YOUR THOUGHTS UNDER CONTROL.
SAY - "*I'M HAVING A PANIC ATTACK. I FEEL AWFUL BUT NOTHING BAD CAN HAPPEN. I KNOW WHAT TO DO. I CAN CONTROL THIS. IT WILL PASS*"**

FIGHT THE PANIC ALL THE WAY. RULE IT - DON'T LET IT RULE YOU.

Last words

The aim of Step 8 is to help you control and prevent panic. It takes time and hard work to get on top of panic. So don't be put off by early problems. Keep at it. It will be well worth it in the end. You should now look for ways to combine these skills with the ones you have learned in the previous sessions.

In the final session, Step 9 will teach you ways to control sleep problems and Step 10 rounds off the course by teaching you ways to control the future. Make sure you pick up these handouts at Session 5.

Panic diary

(1) Where and when did you have the panic?

(2) Was there a reason for the panic?

(3) What body symptoms did you have?

(4) *At the worst point*, what were your thoughts?

(5) What did you do?

(6) What can you do next time to help control or prevent panic?

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