



SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY

Anxiety and Panic

Understanding the alarm system and finding steadier ground

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCE

Anxiety and Panic

Anxiety is part of the human alarm system. It prepares us to notice risk and respond, but it can become exhausting when the alarm remains active, appears without a clear danger or begins to restrict everyday life. Panic is a sudden surge of intense fear and physical sensation. It can feel dangerous even when the symptoms are being created by the body's survival response.

An anxious body is not a broken body. It is trying hard to protect you, and it can learn new experiences of safety.

How the anxiety cycle develops

A thought, body sensation, memory or situation can be interpreted as danger. The body responds with adrenaline, faster breathing, muscle tension and increased alertness. These sensations may then be read as further evidence that something is wrong, which increases fear. Understanding this loop does not make the experience imaginary; it shows why the symptoms can intensify so quickly and where small interventions may help.

What a panic attack can feel like

Panic may involve a racing heart, dizziness, shaking, sweating, nausea, breathlessness, tingling, unreality or fear of fainting, losing control or dying. The peak usually passes, although exhaustion and fear of another attack can remain. New, severe or unexplained symptoms should be medically assessed, because it is important not to assume that every physical symptom is anxiety.

Why avoidance makes sense - and can become limiting

Avoiding a place or sensation can bring immediate relief, teaching the brain that escape prevented danger. Over time, the list of situations that feel unsafe may grow. A supportive approach does not force exposure. It builds choice gradually, at a pace the person understands, with enough preparation and recovery. The goal is not to prove fear foolish but to create new experiences of coping and safety.

Grounding during a surge

Reduce the struggle to make panic disappear instantly. Name what is happening: 'My alarm system is active.' Look for neutral details around you, feel a stable surface, loosen tight clothing and allow the exhale to lengthen without forcing a deep breath. Some people prefer movement, cool water, counting or a familiar voice. Use techniques that help you feel present rather than trapped inside another task you must perform correctly.

Working with anxious thoughts

Anxious thinking often overestimates danger and underestimates coping. Ask: What am I predicting? What evidence supports and challenges it? If the feared event happened, what support or action would be available? A balanced thought should be believable, such as 'I feel frightened, but I have experienced this feeling before and it has passed.' Certainty is rarely possible; confidence grows through learning that uncertainty can be carried.

Daily conditions that affect anxiety

Sleep, hunger, caffeine, alcohol, pain, hormones, medication changes, sensory overload and prolonged stress can influence the alarm system. This is not a demand for a perfect lifestyle. Notice patterns without blame and choose one realistic adjustment. Predictable routines, regular food and hydration, movement that suits your body and quieter transitions can reduce avoidable strain.

Helping someone through panic

Stay calm, reduce questions and ask what usually helps. Remind the person where they are and that you will remain nearby if they want you. Do not tell them to calm down, breathe into a paper bag or explain why the fear is irrational. Offer simple choices and protect dignity. Afterward, ask what was useful and whether a personal plan would make future support easier.

When to seek further help

Professional support may help when anxiety is persistent, panic is recurring or life is becoming increasingly restricted. A GP can consider physical causes and treatment options. Therapy can explore patterns and develop personalised strategies. Seek urgent help if anxiety is accompanied by immediate danger, inability to stay safe or thoughts of suicide. You deserve support before reaching crisis point.

A gentle reflection

What feels most important for me to remember? What is one small and realistic form of support I could offer myself today?

This resource offers general information and does not replace personalised medical or mental health care. If you are in immediate danger or unable to keep yourself safe, contact emergency services or an urgent crisis service where you live.