

Panic S(A)RB System

A practical framework for responding to panic in the moment

Panic can arrive quickly. Your heart may race, breathing may change, your body can feel shaky or unreal, and your mind may begin predicting danger. The S(A)RB framework gives you a short sequence to return to when thinking clearly feels difficult.

S — Stop

Pause where you can. The aim is not to force panic to disappear. It is to interrupt the automatic rush into fighting, escaping or reacting. Try: *“Something has been activated. I can pause before deciding what I need to do.”*

(A) — Acknowledge

Name what is happening without arguing with it: *“This feels like panic. My alarm system is activated.”* Acknowledging is different from agreeing with catastrophic thoughts. You are recognising the experience while leaving room for another explanation.

R — Regulate

Support the nervous system with gentle regulation. Let your exhale be comfortable rather than forcing large breaths. Feel your feet or another point of contact, orient to the room, loosen your jaw and shoulders, and reduce sensory demands if possible.

B — Behaviour

Choose the next helpful behaviour deliberately. That may mean remaining where you are for a little longer when it is safe, slowing down, asking for support, taking a planned break, or continuing a small part of what you were doing rather than letting panic make every decision.

The sequence is a guide, not a test. You may move backwards and forwards between the stages.

Understanding the Panic Cycle

Panic often becomes self-reinforcing. A body sensation is noticed; the sensation is interpreted as dangerous; fear increases; the body alarm becomes stronger; and the stronger sensations appear to confirm the frightening interpretation.

A simplified cycle

Trigger / sensation	→	Threat interpretation	→	More alarm
More alarm	→	Stronger sensations	→	More fear

Where S(A)RB can interrupt the cycle

Stop interrupts automatic reaction. **Acknowledge** reduces the struggle to make sense of every sensation immediately. **Regulate** gives your body cues of safety and orientation. **Behaviour** helps you choose an action based on what is actually useful rather than what panic demands.

Common panic sensations

People may notice a racing or pounding heart, dizziness, trembling, sweating, nausea, chest tightness, tingling, changes in breathing, feeling hot or cold, a sense of unreality, or fears of losing control. Panic symptoms can feel frightening even when they are part of the body's alarm response.

Important

New, severe or unexplained physical symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be panic. Seek appropriate medical assessment when needed, particularly if symptoms are different from your usual pattern or you are concerned about your physical health.

My S(A)RB Panic Plan

Complete this when you are relatively settled so it is easier to use during a difficult moment.

S — STOP: My pause cue

A short phrase I can remember:

A visual reminder or symbol I can use:

(A) — ACKNOWLEDGE: Words that help me recognise panic

For example: "My alarm system is active. I do not have to solve everything right now."

My words:

R — REGULATE: What helps my body?

- ☐ Feel my feet/contact points
- ☐ Orient to the room
- ☐ Unclench jaw
- ☐ Comfortable slower exhale
- ☐ Reduce noise/light
- ☐ Hold something grounding
- ☐ Other:

B — BEHAVIOUR: My helpful next steps

When safe, what behaviours help me avoid handing control to panic?

Regulation Without Fighting Panic

Regulation is not about proving that you can make every symptom stop. Trying too hard to control sensations can sometimes create another layer of fear. Aim instead to give your nervous system steady, non-threatening information.

Orienting

Look around slowly. Notice where you are, the exits, light, shapes and familiar objects. Remind yourself of the date, place and what you were doing before panic rose.

Grounding through contact

Notice the chair supporting you, your feet against the floor, your back against a wall, or an object in your hands. Describe its temperature, weight or texture.

Breathing

Avoid repeatedly taking very large breaths. If breathing exercises suit you, allow the breath to become comfortable and unforced, with a gentle exhale. If focusing on breathing makes panic worse, use another grounding method instead.

Sensory regulation

Consider whether noise, heat, crowds, lighting, clothing, smells or too many demands are adding to overload. Reducing unnecessary sensory input can be a legitimate part of regulation.

A short regulation menu

What I can try	Does this usually help?
Orient to five neutral things I can see	_____
Feel my feet / chair / an object	_____
Relax jaw, hands and shoulders	_____
Reduce sensory demands	_____
Use a familiar phrase or cue card	_____
Contact a trusted person	_____

After a Panic Episode

Once the intensity has reduced, try not to turn the experience into evidence that you failed. A brief review can help you understand the pattern and strengthen your plan.

My panic review

Where was I and what was happening?

What did I notice first — thought, body sensation, memory, environment or something else?

What did panic predict would happen?

What actually happened?

Which part of S(A)RB helped most?

■ Stop ■ Acknowledge ■ Regulate ■ Behaviour

Did I use a safety behaviour?

Safety behaviours are things we use to prevent a feared outcome — for example repeatedly checking our body, immediately escaping every situation, constantly seeking reassurance, or carrying out rituals. They can feel helpful in the short term but may sometimes keep the fear cycle going. Notice them without criticism and discuss them with a suitable professional if they are restricting your life.

One thing I want to remember next time:

A Message From Me

When panic is strong, it can feel as though you need to solve everything immediately. You don't. Your first task can simply be to recognise what is happening and give yourself one small next step.

The S(A)RB system is something you can practise when you are calm, not only when panic arrives. The more familiar the sequence becomes, the less you have to search for the right words in the middle of an overwhelming moment.

Your version does not have to look exactly like anybody else's. Regulation might mean grounding through your senses, reducing noise, moving your body, sitting somewhere familiar or having someone beside you. The useful question is: *what helps me stay connected to the present and choose my next action?*

If panic is recurring, leading you to avoid important parts of life, or causing significant distress, professional support can help you understand the cycle and develop an individual plan. Evidence-based psychological approaches can be particularly useful for panic difficulties.

Space to Breathe Therapy

Safety note: Panic can cause intense physical sensations, but symptoms should not automatically be attributed to anxiety. If you have new, severe or concerning symptoms, seek appropriate medical advice. In an emergency, call 999 or attend A&E.;

This guide is a psychoeducational self-help resource and is not a diagnosis or substitute for individual medical or psychological care.