

Understanding panic

Why a panic response can feel so intense

Panic can involve a sudden surge of fear or discomfort, with a racing heart, changes in breathing, dizziness, trembling or a feeling of losing control. These sensations are real and can be frightening.

The body's alarm response can activate without an immediate threat. Sometimes a trigger is recognisable; sometimes it is not.

What can happen during panic

Body sensations Heartbeat changes, sweating, tingling, nausea or chest tightness.	Attention and thoughts Noticing sensations closely and wondering what they mean.
Emotions Fear, dread, overwhelm or a sense of urgency.	Actions Leaving, checking, seeking reassurance or avoiding a situation.

A useful principle

Panic sensations can be intense without necessarily signalling immediate danger. You do not have to force them away to respond with care.

A gentle starting question

What would I like to understand about my panic experiences?

New, severe or unexplained symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be panic. Seek urgent medical help for severe chest pain, fainting or significant difficulty breathing.

The S(A)EB system

Noticing how different parts of a panic experience connect

S(A)EB stands for Sensations, (Automatic thoughts), Emotions and Behaviours. These experiences can influence one another, but do not always happen in a fixed order.

Four connected parts of an experience

S • Sensations What is happening in my body?	(A) • Automatic thoughts What meaning does my mind give it?
E • Emotions What feelings are present?	B • Behaviours What do I do, or feel an urge to do?

An example

My heart races (S). I think “Something is wrong” (A). I feel afraid (E). I leave the room and check my pulse (B). Later I may notice my heartbeat more often.

How to use the framework

Think of these as connected parts, not a strict sequence. You may notice an emotion first, or a thought after an action. The aim is curiosity, not blame.

Which part of the cycle do I tend to notice first?

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Recognising my panic cycle

A gentle worksheet for noticing patterns without judgement

Choose one recent experience, only if it feels manageable to reflect on. You can use brief words or leave any question blank.

Situation: what was happening around me?

S · What sensations did I notice?

(A) · What automatic thoughts appeared?

E · Which emotions were present?

B · What did I do or feel an urge to do?

Reflection

What might have helped me feel a little more supported in that moment?

Working with automatic thoughts

Making room for alternative explanations

During panic, the mind may interpret unfamiliar sensations as signs of danger. A thought can feel convincing without being the only possible explanation.

A compassionate way to reflect

Notice What thought appeared? Try to record its wording without judging it.	Consider What do I know for certain, and what am I predicting?
Broaden Is there another possible explanation that is realistic and kind?	Respond What would I say to someone I cared about in this situation?

Example

“My heart is racing, so something terrible will happen” might become “My body is activated. I can respond calmly while staying attentive to symptoms that need medical assessment.”

My reflection

An automatic thought I sometimes notice:

A more balanced, supportive response I could practise:

Responding to panic

Practical options to try, without pressure to feel calm immediately

Different approaches work for different people. Choose what feels accessible, and stop any technique that makes you feel worse.

Small supportive actions

Orient to the present Notice a few things you can see, hear or feel around you.	Make room for breathing Allow breathing to settle naturally. Avoid forcing deep breaths.
Reduce extra demands Move to a quieter space or ask for a pause if that helps.	Use a supportive phrase Try “This feels difficult. I can take one step at a time.”
Reach out Contact a trusted person if connection would be reassuring.	Afterwards Rest, hydrate if helpful and return to activities at your own pace.

Remember The goal is not to achieve perfect calm. It is to respond to a difficult experience with greater understanding and support.
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What works for me?

One response I would like to try:

My personal support plan

A flexible plan for difficult moments and ongoing support

Use this page to collect the ideas that feel most useful. Your plan can change as you learn what helps.

Early signs I may be experiencing panic:

A phrase or reminder that feels supportive:

Grounding or practical actions I could try:

People, places or services I can turn to:

One manageable next step:

A gentle reminder

You can review this plan whenever your needs change. If panic is frequent, disruptive or difficult to manage, consider speaking with a GP or qualified mental health professional.