Understanding panic

Recognise the alarm response

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort. Your body may activate its protective alarm response, producing a racing heart, trembling, dizziness, sweating, breathlessness or a feeling of unreality. Symptoms can peak within minutes, although recovery may take longer. Panic can happen with or without an obvious trigger.

Panic and physical health

Panic symptoms can overlap with medical conditions. Do not assume new, severe or unusual symptoms are panic. Seek medical advice for unexplained or recurring symptoms. Call 999 for suspected heart attack, severe breathing difficulty, collapse or other immediate danger.

What sensations do I notice when panic begins?

What thoughts or fears accompany these sensations?

What would help me distinguish familiar symptoms from a need for medical assessment?

Mapping my panic cycle

Understand how sensations and fear interact

A sensation such as a racing heart may be interpreted as danger. This can increase fear and bodily arousal, creating a feedback loop. Avoidance and repeated checking can sometimes maintain fear over time. This is a possible pattern, not an explanation for every attack.

Notice without judgement

Try mapping an episode when you feel settled. You do not need to recall traumatic memories or deliberately recreate symptoms. A short description is enough.

Situation: Where was I and what was happening?

Sensations and thoughts: What did I notice and what did I fear?

Response and outcome: What did I do, and what happened afterwards?

During a panic attack

Choose a manageable next action

If you are in a safe place and recognise familiar panic symptoms, reduce immediate demands. Sit or stand somewhere supported. Notice a neutral object or the contact of your feet with the floor. If comfortable, breathe gently and slowly without forcing deep breaths or holding your breath.

Find what suits you

If focusing on breathing makes you more anxious, try looking around, listening to a familiar sound or asking someone to sit nearby. Avoid breathing into a paper bag. Seek medical help if symptoms are unfamiliar, severe or concerning.

Which grounding approaches feel comfortable for me?

What short reminder could I read during familiar panic?

What support or environmental changes could I ask for?

Recovering afterwards

Allow space for the body to settle

After panic, some people feel tired, shaky, emotional or apprehensive. Recovery varies. Give yourself time to rest, drink water and eat if appropriate. Reduce unnecessary demands temporarily and return to ordinary activities when you feel able.

Reflect with compassion

You do not need to analyse an attack immediately. Later, notice what helped and what did not. An attack is not a personal failure. If symptoms persist or differ from your usual pattern, seek medical advice.

What does my body need after an attack?

What helped me recover, even a little?

What could I change about the support I receive afterwards?

Rebuilding confidence

Take manageable steps towards everyday life

Fear of another attack can lead to avoiding places or activities. Over time, avoidance may restrict life. Gradual, manageable steps can help rebuild confidence. Choose a genuinely safe activity that matters to you, rather than forcing yourself into overwhelming situations.

Working with support

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is an established treatment for panic disorder. A clinician can help tailor a gradual approach, particularly when panic overlaps with trauma or health concerns. Do not stop prescribed medication without advice.

What meaningful activity have I been avoiding?

What is a small achievable step, and what support might help?

How will I recognise progress without expecting distress to disappear?

My personal panic recovery plan

Keep this page somewhere accessible

Use what you have learned to create a short plan. Review it as your needs change and consider sharing it with someone you trust. Your plan is a support tool, not a substitute for medical assessment or urgent care.

When I need additional help

Speak to your GP if panic recurs or affects daily life. In England, NHS 111 can provide urgent health advice and urgent mental health support. Call 999 in an emergency or if you cannot keep yourself safe.

My familiar warning signs and first helpful actions

My preferred grounding strategies and recovery needs

My trusted contacts, professional support and when to seek urgent help