

# Understanding & Calming Panic Attacks Webinar Summary

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Educational / Information Purposes  
Consult with a Professional

This should not be used as:

Advice  
Diagnosis  
Replacement for Therapy

## **What is Panic?:**

Panic is our brain sending a false alarm. Panic is believing the false alarm is a sign of real danger. Panic is tricky because a false alarm feels the same as a real emergency.

Panic sensations are real and not imagined.

Panic is normal. Panic doesn't cause harm. Panic doesn't kill.

## **Thoughts-Feelings-Behaviors:**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy teaches that our Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors are all interrelated and influence one another. Most of the time these things happen below our awareness. By increasing our awareness of each of these, we gain more control.

## **Feelings**

Panic occurs in the body:

- Racing heart
- Heavy breathing
- Chest pain
- Shaking
- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Dizziness

## Thoughts

Panic occurs in our thoughts:

- "I don't have control"
- "What if I go crazy"
- "I'm having a heart attack"
- "I need to get out of here"

## Behaviors

Panic causes us to avoid, escape, or engage in behaviors that keep us "safe."

## **What Makes Someone More Susceptible to Panic?**

- Genetics - Some of us are more 'allergic' to anxiety sensations than others.
- External stress - We all have a limit. When we reach our limit, sometimes it will boil over in the form of panic.
- Negative self-talk - When we are in the habit of thinking negatively, we are more susceptible to seeing many things as a threat.
- Small and Large Traumatic Events - Our brain can learn unhelpful lessons from the past

## **The Anxiety Cycle**

Triggering situation -> feeling anxiety -> Fear/worry thoughts -> Avoid/escape the "danger" -> Short-term relief -> Long-term maintenance of anxiety

If we are not in danger and do what fear/worry/anxiety urges us to do, we continue to teach the amygdala that its false alarms are accurate. As a result, we reinforce the anxiety cycle.

The way out is to do the opposite of what the amygdala is urging us. We increase short-term discomfort for long-term reduction of anxiety/worry. It's a paradox.

## **The Brain**

Amygdala: The amygdala is in charge of keeping us alive. It's the fight/flight response. It achieves this by being geared to constantly overreact: "I value keeping you alive over being right."

- It does not learn from language. Only through experience.

- Haunted House example: We can't teach the amygdala by simply explaining to it the haunted house is not dangerous. We teach it by continuing to go inside despite the amygdala telling us not to.
- The amygdala is only open to learning new lessons when it's activated (sending anxiety signals). It can't learn if it's not activated.

Thinking Brain vs Observing Brain: The thinking brain is wild. It comes up with all sorts of concerning and weird things. A nickname for this is The Monkey Brain. Luckily, our brains have an incredible ability to watch themselves. This is the observing part. Moving into the observing part of the brain takes practice. And the more we practice, the easier it is to access. The goal is to move further away from participating in our thoughts and more into observing them. When we worry, we're often caught in the Monkey Mind. The goal is to shift to the observing side.

Cognitive Distortions: Our brains are constantly distorting reality. This is very normal but can be one of the major contributors to panic.

<https://socialanxietycounseling.com/cognitive-distortions/>

### **Changing Our Relationship to Panic:**

- It's only natural to want to get rid of the feeling of panic, however, we can't control the amygdala
- The more we try to control the amygdala, the more we are inadvertently teaching it "Panic is dangerous." This reinforces the unhelpful lesson.
- Instead, we must focus on our response to panic, not panic itself.
- If we run away, avoid, or engage in "Safety Behaviors" we reinforce panic.
- As long as we aren't in real danger (most of the time we aren't), we need to lean into the panic, accept it, and even want it!
- By leaning into the panic, we are teaching the amygdala panic is not dangerous and that "I can cope" when false alarms happen.
- Success ≠ no panic sensations
- Success = doing the things we value, despite false alarms occurring

### **Safety Behaviors**

Safety behaviors are small acts we do to keep us "safe" from the "danger." These maintain the anxiety cycle because we inadvertently reinforce the unhelpful lesson that the situation is dangerous.

- Reassurance seeking
- Distractions
- Fast acting anxiety medications (e.g., benzodiazepines - talk with your prescriber before making any changes to medications)

- Avoidance
- Excessive planning
- “Safety” objects, for example, carrying a bottle of water on stage "in case my throat gets too dry and then I can't speak and I'll panic."

## **What to Do?**

### Behaviors

- Do more of what brings you panic
- When panic happens, stay put
- Avoid avoidance and escaping
- Avoid "safety behaviors"

### Thoughts

It's natural to try and predict and prevent panic. Often the driver of this is an unspoken/unacknowledged belief that "I can't cope" if panic happens again.

It can be helpful to acknowledge and challenge the self-talk that occurs about panic:

- "Oh no, I think panic is coming on" --> "Panic is uncomfortable, but it's not dangerous"
- "What if I lose control?" --> "This is a false alarm. The amygdala is made to overreact"
- "I need to get out of this feeling" --> "Panic is a game of short-term discomfort vs long-term anxiety gains. If I try to escape now, the amygdala's unhelpful lesson will be reinforced."

### Other helpful self-talk

- "Great! My alarm brain is still working!"
- "The amygdala can only learn when it's activated. Great!, it's open to learning a new lesson."
- "That's all you got amygdala? Try to send me more. I can cope with it!"

### Make the Worry Get Specific

- Poor: “What if I get a panic attack?” - OK, what if that happens? Then what?
- Better: "What if I get a panic attack and people see me?" - OK, what would be so bad about that?
- Even Better: "I'm going to have a panic attack, I'll lose control, people will notice and think I'm going crazy. Then I'll really lose it!!"

### Feelings

We can't control how we feel. We can influence our feelings by changing our thoughts and behaviors, but ultimately, we don't choose how we feel.

### **Exposures - Scaffolding**

Triggering panic on purpose allows us to teach the brain that panic sensations are not dangerous. It's often helpful to slowly work your way up to more triggering and intense situations. Start with less intense exposures first.

### **Thought Records**

It can be helpful to write down your thoughts, before, during, and after panic episodes. Most of the time we aren't aware of our automatic thoughts. And when we aren't aware of them, they become hidden drivers of our behaviors and emotions.

### **Breathing/Calming Techniques**

Breathing and calming techniques are helpful, however, we need to be aware of our intentions behind using them. If the intention is, "I need to calm down. I can't handle this!" We're reinforcing the unhelpful lesson that panic is dangerous. A more helpful intention is using these techniques as something to engage in while you wait for the feelings to pass.

### **Other helpful tips:**

- Patience
- Persistence
- Remember to redefine success from "never having panic sensation" TO responding to panic in new ways.

### **Helpful Books**

Overcoming Anxiety and Panic interactive guide (Overcoming Guide) by Elizabeth McMahon, PhD

Overcoming Unwanted Intrusive Thoughts: A CBT-Based Guide to Getting Over Frightening, Obsessive, or Disturbing Thoughts by Sally Winston, PsyD, and Martin Seif, PhD

Needing to Know for Sure: A CBT-Based Guide to Overcoming Compulsive Checking and Reassurance Seeking by Sally Winston, PsyD, and Martin Seif, PhD