

# Panic Attacks

## 5 Steps to help you with Panic Attacks:

Here are 5 steps that have proven to be helpful to a whole bunch of people who experience panic attacks.

### Step 1: R-e-l-a-x...

One step that helps lots of people get a handle on their panic attacks is to learn and practice **relaxation strategies**. Here are three different types of relaxation strategies you can try:

**First, try changing your breathing patterns.** Stress often causes us to breathe shallowly. Unfortunately, breathing shallowly can actually prolong stress by depleting your oxygen supply and increasing muscle tension. This can lead to headaches, nervousness and a lowered threshold to panic attacks. To overcome this, practice monitoring your breathing and noticing when it becomes shallow or rapid. When this happens, take a minute to slow down, get comfortable, and breathe deeply. Begin this process by slowly but forcefully blowing all of the air out of your lungs, deep-down into your belly. This allows you to slowly and effortlessly "refill" your lungs with fresh air. Try breathing in through your nose and focusing on filling the bottom of your lungs first before filling the top. As you breathe in, your abdomen should rise slowly; and, as you breathe out, it should fall slowly. Gradually breathe more deeply and more slowly until you reach a comfortable plateau. Sighhh . . . .

A second technique is to **scan your entire body**, tensing and relaxing all your muscles. Begin by sitting in a chair with your feet flat on the ground. Focus on your feet and notice any muscle tension in your feet or toes. Tense your feet muscles by curling your toes like you're trying to dig into the carpet. Tense the muscles for a five-count, then allow them to go limp and release all the tension. It helps to exhale deeply and think the word "relax" at the moment you release the tension. After relaxing your feet, move up to your calves, tense and release. To your thighs, tense and release, and so on. Try to move through all of the following muscle groups: your feet, calves, thighs, "glutes," abdomen, lower back, chest, upper back, neck and shoulders, and finally, facial muscles. To tense up your facial muscles, squint hard and press your lips together (think Clint Eastwood), then just let your face go slack and expressionless. When you've completely covered your entire body, your muscles should feel warm and relaxed. Ahhhhh....

Finally, try taking a "**mental vacation**." No, not a trip to the Betty Ford clinic-just an imaginary visualization of a peaceful place. Mental imagery can be a great way of creating peaceful feelings. Start by imagining a peaceful, serene setting. Perhaps this will be some place you've gone before where you felt totally calm and relaxed. Or maybe it can be a fantasy place with all the ingredients to help

you relax and unwind. Once you've imagined this fantasy place, take a "sensory inventory" by asking yourself: "What do I see that's peaceful or beautiful?" "What do I hear that's soothing?" "What do I smell that reminds me of pleasant, peaceful feelings?" "What do I feel on my skin (is it warm, cool, breezy, still?)" and "What do I taste?" For example, someone who loves the beach might think about seeing a beautiful sunset over the water, hearing the waves gently lapping at the shore or the seagulls peacefully calling, smelling the scent of suntan oil, feeling the warmth of the sun and the gentle breeze, and tasting the salty air....Ahhhhh....Imagining each of these sensations in detail actually helps to create the same peaceful feelings in your body that you'd experience if you were actually at the beach. Plus, no sand in your undies!

**By themselves, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and mental imagery can be very powerful. When you put them all together, you've got a combination that can melt away your physical tension and anxious thoughts and replace them with peace and relaxation.**

### **Step 2: Change Habits**

Sometimes it helps to make some changes in your daily routine, like adding exercise and reducing or eliminating stimulants like caffeine, nicotine and sugar. Exercise helps to burn off excess tension that might otherwise come out as anxiety or panic. Eliminating stimulants, like caffeine, helps prevent your cup from "running over" with anxiety. If you tend to bottle up your feelings and worry a lot by yourself, it may be helpful to pay more attention to your emotions and become more willing to express them to others.

### **Step 3: Discover The Power of Positive Thinking**

Another way of tackling panic attacks is to look at the way you talk to yourself, especially during times of stress and pressure. Panic attacks often begin or escalate when you tell yourself scary things, like "I feel light-headed . . . I'm about to faint!" or "I'm trapped in this traffic jam and something terrible is gonna happen!" or "If I go outside, I'll freak out." These are called "negative predictions" and they have a strong influence on the way your body feels. If you're mentally predicting a disaster, your body's alarm response goes off and the "fight-flight response" kicks in. To combat this, try to focus on calming, positive thoughts, like "I'm learning to deal with panicky feelings and I know that people overcome panic all the time" or "This will pass quickly, and I can help myself by concentrating on my breathing and imagining a relaxing place" or "These feelings are uncomfortable, but they won't last forever."

Sometimes it's helpful to remind yourself of these FACTS about panic attacks:

- A panic attack cannot cause heart failure or a heart attack.
- A panic attack cannot cause you to stop breathing.
- A panic attack cannot cause you to faint.
- A panic attack cannot cause you to "go crazy."

- A panic attack cannot cause you to lose control of yourself.

If it is too hard for you to think calming thoughts or to concentrate on relaxation strategies when you're having a panic attack, find ways to distract yourself from the negative thoughts and feelings. Some people do this by talking to other people when they feel the panic coming on. Others prefer to exercise or work on a detailed project (such as gardening, deep cleaning your bathroom, sheep shearing, or reenacting historic naval battles with scale models constructed entirely from paper clips and Junior Mints). Changing scenery can sometimes be helpful, too, but it's important not to get into a pattern of avoiding necessary daily tasks. If you notice that you are regularly avoiding things like driving, going shopping, going to class, or taking buses, it is probably time to get some professional help.

#### **Step 4: Getting Help**

You might find that dealing with panic attacks will be easier if you have a person who can act as a coach as you learn how to cope with the attacks. Meeting with someone who has experience working with panic attacks and anxiety can help you find the right mixture of strategies that will work for you. This might be a therapist, psychiatrist or family doctor.

In addition to counseling, sometimes it can be helpful to talk to a psychiatrist or other physician about taking medication to help you cope with panic attacks. This has been a helpful tool for many people, though lots of people also recover from panic problems without medicine. Taking medicine for panic problems is usually temporary. It can provide relief of some symptoms while you focus on learning strategies for managing anxiety in the future.

#### **Step 5: Keep the Faith!**

Above all, have faith that you CAN learn how to handle panic attacks. If you practice the techniques you've learned about here, or seek out more information through counseling or the self-help resources below, the chances are EXCELLENT that you'll be able to overcome the panic problems in your life!