



EFL Brieflet: Engaging with Panic Attacks

It started with an intense prickling sensation in my head, followed by ... 'waves' of anxiety. The next weekend it came back again, this time with even more ferocity. Night sweats, deep sensations of anxiety and nausea, shortness of breath and the ongoing prickly buzz and sense of tightening pressure in my head. [It] lasted 15 minutes."¹

Definition and Basic Facts (Mental Health Foundation, Aotearoa)

A Panic Attack is an exaggeration of your body's normal response to arousal in the forms of fear, stress or excitement. Sometimes called Anxiety Attacks, these feelings are experienced as overwhelming and generally start quite suddenly and unexpectedly. At least one in ten people will experience a panic attack each year; most will be female and between their late teens and mid-30s; and their parents are more likely to have had similar experiences. Panic Attacks can last 5-20 minutes - or even longer.

Physical and Psychological experiences associated with Panic Attacks

- Feeling out of control
- Pounding heartbeat - and thinking that you might have a heart attack or die²
- Feeling faint
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Chest pains
- Feeling unable to breathe
- Shaky limbs
- Disconnected from yourself/ your body/ reality

"I was like a person living with a baby tiger who had bitten my foot when hungry, and my response was to try to placate it by throwing it chunks of steak. ... but the tiger got bigger and stronger and needed more meat to be satisfied ... I was feeding it chunks of my freedom; chunks of my life ... It was exhausting."³

Causes

The causes of Panic Attacks vary. For some people they may occur from an unrelenting (often emotionally intense) workload or experience, or after loss or bereavement, or other types of significant life event or transition - often where a sense of control is felt to be overwhelmed. At least initially, Panic Attacks tend to be triggered unexpectedly - even during a fretful sleep. Caffeine increases the likelihood of Panic Attacks, as can certain types of cannabis. Some people are more sensitive to such attacks when tired or the effect of alcohol is wearing off. For some people Panic Attacks might increase in regularity - particularly if the person worries about having another attack - and continue occurring over a period of years. For others, often supported by education and reassurance, the attacks might remit after one or two occurrences.

Psycho-biology

Experiencing stress causes the *Sympathetic Nervous System* to release adrenalin and cortisol, and increase heart and breathing rates. The brain control centre for our stress response, the amygdala, continues to instruct the release of these hormones which surge into our pre-frontal cortex and - in Panic Attacks - causes a sense of overwhelm and inability to think rationally.

¹Todd Muller, National Party Leader, Aotearoa. (RNZ, 24/9/20)

² During a panic attack, because some of the symptoms are similar to those of a heart attack, some people may feel like they will die. However, although it can be a very traumatic experience, people cannot die from a panic attack.

³ **Steven Hayes – A Liberated Mind: the essential guide to ACT (2019)**. ACT's originator, Hayes also experienced Panic Attacks

Where leadership is a team responsibility

Questionable strategies that tend to be unsustainable or not work so well in the long-term

- ? *Plan to the last detail: diarise; stay alert for triggers; identify exit strategies & escapes; prepare excuses*
- ? *Monitor heart rate and move slowly in potentially anxiety-provoking situations*
- ? *Use humour*
- ? *Avoid anxiety-provoking situations*
- ? *Exposure to frightening situations*

Intervention

- Practise slow breathing, especially exhaling: In for 4 seconds; Hold for 4; Out for 4
- Take and/or look at calming pictures
- Gentle exercise
- Progressive relaxation
- Positive self-talk (e.g. reminding yourself that it will pass and you “can ride this out”)
- Practise relaxation techniques; listen to soothing music
- Have a friend available

Whilst prescribed medication can sometimes be a temporary solution, coping with Panic Attacks is often successfully supported by Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Techniques include monitoring and reframing/ replacing faulty thinking, and graduated exposure.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) - rather than trying to dispute or distract from difficult thoughts and emotions - enables clients to develop a more balanced relationship with their internal experiences. Recognising the inevitability of stress and anxiety, the approach of ACT and Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) encourages clients to be curious about and enhance their sense of *self-awareness, self-kindness and shared humanity* so that they can create a more enduring and balanced psychological space for difficult thoughts and emotions. Whatever the intervention, a core element of engaging with Panic Attacks is to activate the *Parasympathetic Nervous System* which calms the body down enabling us to “rest and digest; feed and breed”. As a result, whilst different strategies work for different people, rather than trying to plan or wait for a Panic Attack to occur, ACT and CFT encourage at least daily practices that calm the nervous system in an ongoing way and that focus upon:

- Regular Mindfulness to build body- and self-awareness⁴ in the present moment (e.g. start by paying attention in turn to each of the 5 senses. Progress, over time and if comfortable, toward a more internal focus. Yoga might help this practice)
- Self-talk and behaviour that enhances self-acceptance
- Self-talk and behaviour that enhances self-reassurance⁵
- Inform and be with those who demonstrate their care for you
- Healthy diet

Always, seek professional medical/psychological help if your symptoms persist, especially if symptoms are similar to those of a heart attack.

Sources for your further interest

Mental Health Foundation. Anxiety and Panic attacks <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/A-Z/Downloads/Mind-Anxiety-and-panic-attacks.pdf>

Psychology Tools <https://www.psychologytools.com/self-help/panic-attacks-and-panic-disorder/>

Russ Harris. The Struggle Switch. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCp1l16GCXI>

Tom Bunn, Panic attacks: what can you do if nothing stops them? Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conquer-fear-flying/201909/panic-attacks-what-can-you-do-if-nothing-stops-them>

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⁴ Mindfulness also builds greater tolerance for “uncomfortable” thoughts and feelings

⁵ Whilst noticing what **Steven Hayes** calls our “dictator within”, we could also give more attention to our “Doctor within”