

Tips for Panic Disorder

Developed in collaboration with the mental health centers of NBHP and FBHP & the Client and Family Advisory Board

- 1. Learn about panic disorder.** “Fight, flight or freeze” is your body's natural defense to danger. Panic happens when your body’s flight or fight system is triggered when there is no actual danger. Educating yourself about the cause of anxious feelings and correctly interpreting your body’s reactions to stress will allow you to feel more in control and less likely to feel panicky. Panic attacks are scary, but they are not life-threatening and you are not “going crazy.” Panic attacks are short lasting, usually peak within 10 minutes, and subside after that.
- 2. Effective therapeutic interventions** have been used for many years to treat panic disorder. You can expect to receive education about anxiety and panic disorder. Your therapist will help you to learn breathing and thinking skills to confront the situations that cause anxiety. You may also work with your therapist to slowly expose yourself to the panic sensations in your body and situations that cause them.
- 3. Avoidance is your enemy.** Avoidance may give immediate relief, but it also makes things worse in the long run. When you confront the things you fear, your body and mind learn to correctly interpret the feelings you get when you have a panic attack. The sensations are part of the fight or flight system; they are not harmful. The more you avoid, the more difficult life will be and the more strongly your panic will hold on. Getting into a habit of avoidance can decrease engagement in valued activities and decrease your quality of life.
- 4. Practice anxiety management strategies.** When you are having a panic attack, practice the skills that you have learned in therapy and remind yourself that this will end and won’t last too long.
 - **Breathing.** You may be breathing short shallow breaths throughout the day, and have a tendency to hyperventilate, which increases the feelings of panic. Practice breathing exercises daily when you are not feeling panicky in order to reduce physical sensations of anxiety, and know how to regain control more quickly during a panic attack. Type “diaphragmatic breathing” in Youtube to watch videos that teach proper technique.
 - **Notice your thoughts.** People with panic attacks tend to tell themselves some pretty scary things. Work with your therapist on learning skills to be aware of your thinking and how it fuels your anxiety and panic. You will learn to use your thoughts to deal with anxiety, not to avoid it.
 - **Track panic attacks.** Keep a journal to increase awareness of patterns during the week and share this with your therapist. You may find that there are certain situations that trigger your panic. By paying attention to these triggers and writing them down, you can learn to recognize them and to manage your reactions. Search “panic attack” in your smart phone apps for help managing panic in the moment.
 - **Stress management techniques** such as meditation and aerobic exercise can help people with anxiety disorders calm themselves and may enhance the effects of therapy. Be aware that caffeine, certain street drugs, such as amphetamines, and even some over-the-counter cold medications, can aggravate the symptoms of anxiety disorders.
- 5. Take medications as agreed.** Medications will not cure anxiety disorders, but they may help you manage symptoms while you receive psychotherapy.
- 6. Regular medical care is important.** Rule out medical conditions that can mimic symptoms of panic or make your symptoms worse, such as asthma, hyperthyroidism, COPD, cardiac conditions, and hypoglycemia.
- 7. Create the support you need.** Family and friends can help you face and overcome your fears. Sharing your problems and successes with others in a self-help or support group may also be helpful.
- 8. Set personal goals.** You can learn to manage your anxiety and have a full and productive life. Use the skills you are learning to move towards the things that are important to you, and try not to let panic hold you back.

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Resources for Clients

Barlow, D. H. & Craske, M. G. (2006). *Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic: Workbook* (Fourth Edition)

The Panic Center (www.paniccenter.net)

National Institute for Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/panic-disorder/index.shtml>

Anxiety and Depression Association of America

<http://www.adaa.org/>