

When Panic Attacks

Module 3

Overcoming Thoughts About Panic

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Introduction

In Module 2, we introduced a model of what keeps panic disorder going. Applying this model to your experiences, you may have noticed a link between our thinking, emotions, physical sensations, and behaviours. Indeed, our thoughts (also known as our cognitions) influence how we feel and how we behave. When we feel anxious, it's often because our brain has jumped to a negative conclusion about the situation (e.g., "I'll fail the exam"), or we see ourselves as unable to cope with the situation (e.g., "I won't be able to deal with it"). These kinds of negative automatic thoughts can create more anxiety, keeping us stuck in a vicious cycle of panic. In this module, we will look at ways to identify these unhelpful thinking patterns, and practice challenging them to develop more helpful responses to panic symptoms.

The Thought-Feeling Connection

To understand how our thinking affects our feelings and behaviours, let's look at the following situation:

Jamie is standing at the traffic lights, waiting to cross the road, when he starts to feel a bit lightheaded. Thoughts go through his mind like "I'm going to faint and I might fall into oncoming traffic. I won't be able to do anything, and no one will come to help me." He becomes aware of his heart beating faster, his mouth going dry, and his fingers feeling clammy. Instead of crossing the road when the signal turns green, Jamie walks briskly to the nearest bench to take a seat.

What would happen if Jamie continued to catastrophise about the dangers of feeling faint?

E.g., Jamie's Thought: "I'm feeling really dizzy, maybe it's a stroke" →	Emotions:	Physical Sensations:	Behaviours:
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You've probably guessed that thinking this way would lead to Jamie feeling more anxious, and experiencing more physical sensations of discomfort (including possibly dizziness and lightheadedness). He may want to sit down to rest, or maybe even cancel his plans and head home.

What if Jamie thought a different way? How might he respond if he had the following thoughts:

Thought: "This always happens to me. There's no hope, I'll never get over this." →	Emotions:	Physical Sensations:	Behaviours:
Thought: "What a pain! I've got such a busy day, these symptoms are going to slow me down!" →	Emotions:	Physical Sensations:	Behaviours:
Thought: "This lightheadedness feels uncomfortable but it's not dangerous. I can sit with this feeling until it passes." →	Emotions:	Physical Sensations:	Behaviours:

You can probably see from the above example that different patterns of thinking lead to different ways of feeling and behaving. When our thoughts are negative, or perhaps inaccurate, we are more likely to experience negative emotions and react in less effective ways.



Just like Jamie, people who have difficulties with panic attacks commonly describe these thinking patterns:

- a) Imagining the worst case scenario (i.e., catastrophising) about normal or anxious physical sensations (e.g., “My chest feels a bit tight – I must be having a heart attack!”)
- b) Over-estimating the chance that they will have a panic attack (e.g., “I’ll definitely have a panic attack if I catch the bus to work”)
- c) Over-estimating the cost of having a panic attack (e.g., “No! This can’t happen now. It will ruin everything!”)
- d) Under-estimating their ability to cope (e.g., “I won’t be able to handle this, it’ll be too overwhelming!”)

When we think a negative outcome has a high chance of happening, and would be very awful if it did happen, we are bound to worry more, focus on potential threats, and feel more anxious. This then produces more physical sensations, falsely confirming to us that our fears must be coming true.

If you could discover that the physical sensations you feel may be unpleasant, but that they are quite normal and will pass, would you feel as anxious? What if you believed that the chance of having a panic attack was lower than you had expected, and that even if you did have a panic attack, the consequences would not be as bad and you would be able to cope? For the rest of this module, we will practise identifying our negative thoughts, and then challenging them to develop more balanced interpretations of the situation. We will focus on examples relating to unhelpful thoughts about physical symptoms, but note that these thought challenging strategies can apply to any types of negative thinking. In later modules, we will show you how we can also challenge these thoughts using direct behavioural strategies.

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts about Panic



Panic attacks often occur unexpectedly or out-of-the-blue, and it can seem like nothing happened between the initial trigger and the attack. However, as we’ve seen from the thought-feeling connection above, our thoughts about the trigger can influence our reactions greatly. This includes how we interpret our internal physical sensations when we feel anxious. By learning to identify these thoughts and interpretations, we can evaluate them, test them, and discover for ourselves how accurate they really are. Sometimes our thoughts will be accurate, sometimes they will only be partially correct, and sometimes they will not match the reality of the situation at all. This third possibility is often the case for panic attacks.

Trying to uncover and evaluate these negative automatic thoughts in your head can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down and we suggest using a Thought Diary to help you through this process. Thought Diaries are designed to guide you through the evaluation process step by step, on paper, making things clearer and more helpful for you. Eventually, with enough practice you will be able to do it in your head – but when we are learning, we think that practicing on paper is the best way to go.

On the next few pages are instructions and an example of how to complete a Thought Diary (using Mirna’s example from Module 2), followed by a blank copy for you to practise your own example.

STEP 1: IDENTIFYING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS ABOUT PANIC

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **identify your unhelpful thoughts about panic**.

- To start, identify the situation that triggered this episode of panic and the physical symptoms you experienced. Ask yourself, “What was the event or situation? What physical symptom(s) or internal sensations set this off?”
- You’ll then need to ask yourself, “What do I notice in my body? How do I feel?” Write down:
 - *What emotion(s) am I feeling?* Rate the intensity of the emotions from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the more intensely you felt the emotion – underline the most intense emotion.
 - *What physical sensation(s) do I notice?* Physical symptoms are a primary concern for people with panic, so record the physical reactions that you notice, such as heart racing, breathlessness, sweating, and so on.
 - *What did I do?* Note any actions and behaviours that you carried out, for example, if you were using safety behaviours, or if you left the situation.
- Then, consider your thoughts or what you are telling yourself about this experience – i.e., your thoughts, interpretations, perceptions, predictions to this event (your “self-talk”).
 - Ask yourself: “What am I worried would happen? What am I predicting? What conclusions am I jumping to?” Try to be as specific if you can, even if you think that some of your unhelpful thoughts sound silly or embarrassing.
- After you have written these down, underline the thought that is most associated with the panic. We’ll now call it your “hot thought”. Now rate how much you believe this thought on a scale from 0 to 100.



*QUICK TIP: Feelings are not thoughts!

When we first try to distinguish thoughts from feelings, it can be easy to confuse them. We frequently talk about thoughts and feelings as though they are the same sort of experience. For example, someone may say “I feel like you don’t pay me enough attention”, instead of separating them: “I think that you don’t pay me enough attention, and I feel hurt about that”.

With anxiety and panic attacks, it is common to hear someone say “I feel like I’m having a heart attack,” but they’re probably thinking “I’m going to have a heart attack,” so they feel anxious. It is helpful to practice separating them, because we can challenge and modify our thinking (e.g., “I’m having a stroke”) but we can’t challenge our feelings (e.g., “I feel anxious”).

STEP 2: CHALLENGING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS ABOUT PANIC

Once you’ve identified your “hot thought” you can move on to **challenging the unhelpful thoughts about panic**. This involves analysing, assessing, and evaluating the thoughts to see if they are indeed valid and true, as opposed to accepting these thoughts and believing them without question. To do this, we need to gather and examine evidence.

We liken this process to that of being a detective. The first step of this ‘detective’ work is to look at the factual evidence for and against your hot thought. Try to be as objective as possible, sticking to observable facts and behaviours (e.g., I am experiencing tightness in my chest right now), rather than what we “feel” to be true (It feels like a heart attack, so it must be a heart attack). Some questions you can ask yourself to examine the evidence are:

- What is the evidence (or proof) that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Is there any evidence that disproves my thoughts/beliefs?
- How do I know that my thoughts/beliefs are true?
- Are there facts that I’m ignoring or I’ve overlooked?

The second step involves looking at other ways of viewing the situation, and finding alternative, more helpful, perspectives for responding to it. To do this, we can ask other “Challenging questions” about our “hot thought”, such as:

- What are other ways of viewing the situation?
- How might someone else view the situation?
- If I were not anxious, how might I view the situation differently?
- Realistically, what is the likelihood of that happening?
- How realistic are my thoughts, beliefs, and expectations?
- What can I say to myself or do to help me cope with these feelings right now?
- Is it helpful for me to think this way?

STEP 3: DEVELOPING MORE HELPFUL THOUGHTS



When we have gathered all the evidence and considered other possible ways of looking at the situation, we can then **develop more helpful thoughts** about panic. Look through the information you wrote down in Section 2 again, and try to summarise the key points.

- Ask yourself, “Is there a more balanced or helpful way for me to look at this situation and the physical symptoms I am experiencing?”

Holding this more helpful thought in mind, re-rate your belief in the original “hot thought” (0-100%) and the intensity of your emotion (0-100). You may also find it useful to reflect on and rate how manageable your physical sensations seem when you can keep this more helpful thought in mind. Remember that your responses do not have to shift a great deal – even a small change can be meaningful in helping us to deal more effectively with the situation, and to feel more able to tolerate the uncomfortable physical sensations.

Thought Diary – Mirna’s Example

Identify Unhelpful Thoughts about Panic

What triggered this panic attack? (Remember that this can be an external situation or something internal like a sensation or a memory.) <i>Walking to the meeting room at work, start to notice tight chest</i>		
What am I worried would happen? What am I predicting? What conclusions am I jumping to? <i>“I can’t breathe – I’m going to suffocate”, “I’m going to have an attack in front of everyone”, “I’ll have to run from the room and they’ll think I’m crazy”, “I’m going crazy”</i>		
Underline the most bothersome thought (‘hot thought’) and rate how much I believe it (0-100%): <u>85%</u>		
When I am thinking like this, what are the consequences?		
Emotions: (Rate the intensity 0-100 & underline the most intense) <i>Panic (90)</i> <i>Stressed (60)</i>	Physical sensations: <i>Heart pounding</i> <i>Lightheaded</i> <i>Dry mouth</i> <i>Fast breathing</i>	Behaviours: <i>Walked close to the wall</i> <i>Stopped for water</i>

Challenging the Unhelpful Thoughts about Panic

Factual evidence for my hot thought? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I feel strange, like I’m not connected to my body</i> <i>I can’t think clearly, my thoughts keep racing.</i> 	Evidence against my hot thought? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The symptoms I have are due to the fight-flight response.</i> <i>I am still able to recognise how I am thinking.</i> <i>I have had these sensations before and it only takes a little time before they go down.</i>
Ask other ‘Challenging’ questions, e.g.,: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How realistic are my thoughts, beliefs, and expectations? <i>The symptoms I have are part of a normal fear response. Everybody has similar sensations when they are in fight-flight, so it’s unlikely that I am going crazy.</i> What other ways are there of viewing the situation? <i>I’m stressed about the meeting because there’s so much to do before the end of the month.</i> Is it helpful for me to think this way? <i>Thinking this way adds to my anxiety and then I end up not concentrating on what people are saying.</i> 	

Developing More Helpful Thoughts about Panic

What’s a more helpful or realistic thought about this physical sensation or situation? <i>I might feel a bit strange, but it doesn’t mean I’m going crazy. Many of these symptoms are common when people experience fear and anxiety. I’m stressed about work and that might be why I’m feeling some of these sensations to begin with. They’re not harmful and tend to go down after a while anyway.</i>
How much do I believe my original thought now? (0-100%): <u>30%</u>
How intense are my emotions now (0-100): <u>40</u>
How manageable do my physical sensations feel now? More intense Same <u>Less intense</u>

Thought Diary

Identify Unhelpful Thoughts about Panic

What triggered this panic attack? (Remember that this can be an external situation or something internal like a sensation or a memory.)		
What am I worried would happen? What am I predicting? What conclusions am I jumping to?		
Underline the most bothersome thought ('hot thought') and rate how much I believe it (0-100%): ____		
When I am thinking like this, what are the consequences?		
Emotions: (Rate the intensity 0-100 & underline the most intense)	Physical sensations:	Behaviours:

Challenging the Unhelpful Thoughts about Panic

Factual evidence <u>for</u> my hot thought?	Evidence <u>against</u> my hot thought?
Ask other 'Challenging' questions, e.g.,: How realistic are my thoughts, beliefs, and expectations? What other ways are there of viewing the situation? Is it helpful for me to think this way? What can I say to myself or do to help me cope with these feelings right now?	

Developing More Helpful Thoughts about Panic

What's a more helpful or realistic thought about this physical sensation or situation?
How much do I believe my original thought now? (0-100%): ____
How intense are my emotions now (0-100): ____
How manageable do my physical sensations feel now? More intense Same Less intense

Following Through

Thought diaries are a helpful tool for identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts about panic and developing more helpful and realistic thoughts. However, these new and more helpful thoughts will not stick right away! After all, our brain was built as a natural threat detector, which means it is more tuned to the frequency of negative thoughts rather than the frequency of helpful and balanced thinking.

It is important to keep practising thought challenging, even when it is hard and does not seem to shift the feeling as much at first. It takes time for you to start believing these thoughts! We want you to remind yourself of the more helpful thoughts as often as you can. Writing helpful thoughts down on a small card (a “flashcard”) that you can carry around in your pocket or bag or type onto your phone can serve as a helpful reminder.

Another important way of strengthening how believable our new thoughts are is to act differently. If we continue to avoid situations because of our fear of panic attacks and physical sensations, or use our safety behaviours, then the helpful thoughts will not match. In the next few modules, we will look at ways to start changing how we respond to panic symptoms, approach situations and symptoms that we avoid, and drop our safety behaviours.

Module Summary

- How we think about panic, particularly the physical sensations of anxiety, will influence how we feel about it and subsequently behave. Suppose we are feeling anxious and we think that our physiological symptoms are a sign of something really catastrophic that is bound to happen. In that case, we are going to feel more anxious and panicky.
- Thought diaries can help us to identify the unhelpful thoughts we have about panic, and the catastrophic misinterpretations we make of our physical symptoms. We can then challenge these misinterpretations to develop more helpful and balanced thoughts.
- It takes time and practice to develop a stronger habit of thinking in more balanced and realistic ways. Using prompts and reminders such as flashcards can be useful.
- This module has looked at thinking differently about panic symptoms – it is also important and necessary to behave differently (i.e., for our updated ways of thinking to match updated ways of behaving). This will be the focus of upcoming modules.

In the next module we will look at how to cope specifically with physical sensations.



About the Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Adelln Sng (MPsych¹, PhD²)
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Dr Joel Howell (PhD³)
Clinical Psychologist

Melissa Burgess (MPsych¹)
Clinical Psychologist

Louise Pannekoek (MPsych¹)
Clinical Psychologist

Dr Bruce Campbell (DPsych⁴, MPsych¹)
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

¹Master of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

²Doctor of Philosophy

³Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

⁴Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical)

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Nathan, P., Correia, H., & Lim, L. (2004). *Panic Stations! Coping with Panic Attacks*. Perth: Centre for Clinical Interventions

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

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