

When Panic Attacks

Module 4

Coping with Physical Alarms

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Introduction



So far, we've worked on understanding the cycle of panic and changing some of the thoughts contributing to panic. However, only changing our beliefs about panic sensations will not be helpful if we continue avoiding those sensations, or situations that may trigger similar sensations. In this module, we will explore with you how you can challenge your beliefs about panic symptoms by actually experiencing them. Research has shown that this is particularly important in successfully overcoming panic symptoms and distress about panic symptoms.

In Modules 1 and 2, we discussed some important factors that maintain panic.

1. **Thinking styles**, such as catastrophic thinking. Panic sensations signify something terrible may happen.
2. **Focus on bodily sensations**. Monitoring your body for symptoms of panic means that you are especially sensitive to the sensations, even when those changes are normal.
3. **Avoidance**. As a result of this fear of experiencing a panic attack, you avoid certain situations and physical sensations related to panic.

Of course, trying to avoid sensations similar to panic attacks seems natural. It is also natural to scan for possible physical changes, as this helps you avoid them. After all, panic attacks can be frightening and uncomfortable; it's no wonder you would want to avoid them! However, if you don't experience these sensations, you won't give yourself any real evidence about one crucial thing: **panic sensations are not harmful**. By facing your "fears" about panic attacks and related physiological sensations, you will have enough evidence to challenge your beliefs about physical alarms.

There are two ways to do this. One way is to experience the physical sensations you are afraid of, or "exposure to internal sensations". The other way is to experience situations where you fear you might have a panic attack, i.e., "situational exposure". This module will focus on learning how to cope with physical alarms through exposure to internal sensations. We will talk about situational exposure in Modules 5 and 6.

HOW DOES "EXPOSURE TO INTERNAL SENSATIONS" WORK?

As mentioned, exposure helps by providing you with evidence that panic attacks are not harmful. It works by challenging the three factors discussed above, to break the cycle of panic and anxiety.

1. **Thinking styles**. Through exposure to physiological sensations, you will have direct evidence that such sensations are not catastrophic.
2. **Focus on bodily sensations**. Suppose you do notice normal changes in your physiological sensations. In that case, exposure tasks will give you direct evidence that physiological sensations are not catastrophic, reducing your fear of them. Further, if you are not afraid of these sensations, you will have less reason to monitor your body for them.
3. **Avoidance**. Exposing yourself to physiological sensations is incompatible with avoiding them. By repeatedly exposing yourself to such sensations, you will become used to them and less likely to react with anxiety when you notice them. By doing it over and over again, it becomes easier to do.

If we know physical sensations may trigger a panic reaction, then a core treatment component is getting used to normal physical sensations. By experiencing the feared sensations repeatedly in a controlled way, you can start to separate the experience of physical sensations from the anxiety you feel about the sensations. Therefore, anxiety about such sensations should steadily decrease over time, given the harmless nature of the sensations being experienced.

IS THIS HELPFUL WHEN I DON'T KNOW WHY I AM HAVING A PANIC ATTACK?

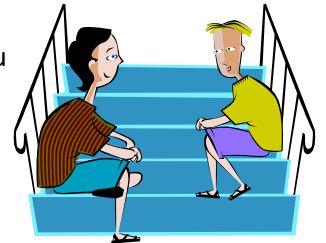
Have you ever experienced a panic attack that seemed to come out of the blue - in other words, you did not notice any clear internal or external trigger for the attack?

One way to explain unexpected panic attacks is the concept of *interoceptive conditioning*. Basically, our brain is great at seeing patterns between things. One pattern our brain tends to learn is when we have a physical sensation (e.g., tight chest or increased heart rate) and a response of fear or panic. This is just what brains do; our brains are just trying to protect us! But if the brain keeps noticing a pattern of experiencing a tight chest or increased heart rate and then fear multiple times, then even a tiny change in sensation (tightness in the chest, increase in heart rate) can trigger fear without us even realising it!

These sensations have become so well learned that the fear response occurs automatically. The occurrence of panic for no apparent reason can result in many of the misinterpretations we discussed in the last module. Either way, we can help our brain to learn that these physical sensations are harmless, so that we do not feel panic every time we notice one.

Planning exposure to internal sensations

We have been exploring why exposure to physiological sensations is essential. It is also important for us to have a chance to talk about how we can start talking about how you can work through our fear of these sensations. Essentially, we will produce some physiological sensations similar to panic, such as a rapid heartbeat, breathlessness, dizziness and so forth, through some structured tasks. Wait! Before you close this booklet, bear with us for a little bit and give us a chance to explain. Simply put, we want to start experiencing some of these physical sensations. If we experience them repeatedly, our brain starts to learn a new connection – that these sensations do not result in something terrible happening, so we begin to see less anxiety over time. You don't have to do this all at once, rather you can do it starting with something you find a bit easier, and we can step it up with harder tasks as we go.



PREPARATION FOR THE TASKS

On page 5, there is a list of tasks designed to produce some physical sensations. To begin with, you can do all of them. This will help determine which exercises are particularly relevant to you so you know which ones to focus on. Here are a few hints on preparing for the tasks:

- Talking to a trusted, supportive relative or friend about your tasks may be helpful. You could speak with them regularly and discuss how you are going and if you are having any difficulties. This can help you acknowledge the positive steps and motivate you to continue.
- The tasks are in random order. Try starting with exercises and be curious about which ones may elicit anxiety. The goal here is to learn from these tasks.

PERFORMING THE TASKS

1. Try to experience the sensations as much as possible. Remember that there are many ways to avoid these sensations subtly. Common methods of avoidance include:
 - Stopping the task early. For example, thinking, "My heart's beating faster - that's enough, then".
 - Not completing the tasks properly. For example, if you are trying to create the sensation of sweating through heat, keeping a window partly open might be a form of subtle avoidance.
 - Distracting yourself from noticing the sensations rather than paying full attention to them.
2. While experiencing some sensation is better than nothing, try to complete the exercise in full as this will provide a more accurate assessment of your fear of the sensation.

3. In some tasks, the sensations develop during the exercise, whereas in other tasks, they occur shortly after the exercise. So pay full awareness to the sensations that occur **during and after** the exercise.
4. After each task, make some notes about your experience
 - Use a scale of 0-100 to rate your level of **anxiety/distress** about the sensations, where 0 is the lowest and 100 is the highest.

0	<i>Relaxed:</i>	You feel absolutely no distress, you feel calm.
25-49	<i>Mild:</i>	You can still cope. You might feel like you're more alert or nervous.
50-64	<i>Moderate:</i>	Becoming difficult to cope. Distracted by anxiety, might use safety behaviours.
65-84	<i>High:</i>	Difficult to cope. Difficulties concentrating, looking to escape
85-100	<i>Severe to extreme:</i>	It feels like you cannot cope. Your body response feels overwhelming

- Use a scale from 0-100 to rate the **intensity** and the **similarity** of the sensations.
- Write down all the internal sensations you experienced.



- Write down all the anxious thoughts you experienced.
- We suggest you use the Internal Sensations Exercises worksheet to make these notes.

PRECAUTIONS

Before you start, we would like to make a note about medical issues before we continue. Most of the symptom exercises are relatively mild in intensity. You are not being asked to run a marathon. However, they may be too intense for persons with certain medical conditions. If you do suffer from a medical condition (such as those listed below), we recommend that you undertake these symptom-induction exercises under the guidance of your medical doctor or mental health professional.

- Epilepsy or seizures
- A heart condition
- Physical injuries e.g., neck problem
- Pregnancy
- History of fainting/low blood pressure
- Asthma or other lung problems

These exercises are designed to be uncomfortable but not intended to be painful. You should use your common sense at all times in regard to any physical limitations you may have.

Internal Sensations Exercises

Note: You should use a timer that you can set to sound an alarm after the specified time.

Exposure task	Duration	Notes/Comments
Hyperventilation. Breathe deeply and quickly through your mouth, using as much force as you can.	1 min	Try to breathe as loudly as possible and maintain the breathing rate without slowing down too much.
Shaking head. Shake your head from side to side while keeping your eyes open. After 30 seconds, look straight ahead.	30 sec	Be careful with your neck in this exercise – do not shake too vigorously.
Head between legs. While sitting in a chair, place your head between your legs. After 30 seconds, stand upright quickly.	30 sec	Lower your head gently if you have had back problems.
Running in place/run up steps. Run/Step up and down quickly.	1 min	It may be tempting to slow down once you notice physical sensations. Try to maintain a quick pace.
Maintain muscle tension. While sitting in a chair tense/tighten all of your muscles or do a push-up and hold that position.	1 min	You can use the methods of tensing we discussed as part of the module on PMR.
Hold your breath. Take a deep breath and hold it.	30 sec	If you cannot hold it for 30 seconds, hold it for as long as you can.
Spinning. Use a swivel chair to spin around as quickly as possible by pushing against the floor as you spin.	1 min	You can spin around while standing up, but make sure you are not in danger of injuring yourself.
Breathe through a straw. Use a narrow straw (eg cocktail straws) to breathe, whilst holding your nose closed.	1 min	Make sure that your lips are sealed around the straw, so you breathe ONLY through the straw.
Chest breathing. Take a deep breath until your chest is “puffed up”, then take short, sharp breaths, breathing just from your chest.	1 min	Try to maintain a quick, shallow pace throughout.
Stare at a spot. Stare at spot on a blank wall, or at your mirror image, without shifting your gaze.	1.5 min	It is easy to be distracted and shift your gaze, but try to hold it as long as you can. Also, try not to blink for too long.

On the next page is a worksheet where you can record the level of anxiety, how similar it is to your typical panic sensations, how intense it felt, and types of sensations you noticed.

Internal Sensations Exercises - Worksheet

	Anxiety 0-100	Similarity 0-100	Intensity 0-100	Physical Sensations
Task: <i>e.g., Breathing through a straw</i>	100	100	85	<i>Tightness in chest, difficulty breathing, pressure on the chest</i>
Task: Hyperventilation				
Task: Shaking head				
Task: Head between legs				
Task: Running in place/running up steps				
Task: Maintain muscle tension				
Task: Hold your breath				
Task: Spinning				
Task: Breathing through a straw				
Task: Chest breathing				
Task: Staring at a spot				
Other Task:				

Exposure to internal sensations

NOTE: You should complete the previous exercises before continuing with this section.

Now that you have conducted the tasks on the previous page, you can determine which exercises are most relevant to you.

1. **Similarity ratings.** Look at the similarity ratings for each task. If the similarity rating is over 25, then this exercise should be part of your ongoing exposure tasks. Please make a note of them now. If none, or very few, of them, are similar, you can create extra tasks that are more relevant to you.
2. **Anxiety ratings.** Sometimes it is easier to work through exposure tasks in order of increasing difficulty, in the same way, you might walk up a series of steps. Using the anxiety ratings from the previous exercises, list the *similar* exposure tasks you circled in increasing order starting from the lowest. You can use the Internal Sensations Exercises: Diary on p. 9 to list the tasks you will be trying.

We are now going to complete what we call interoceptive exposure. This technique involves having planned and predictable exposure to body sensations that we tend to experience during the panic. We want to learn that while these sensations are uncomfortable, they are not harmful.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN AN EXPOSURE SESSION

- **Thought diaries.** While sometimes thinking, “Just Do It!” is enough to get you working through your exposure exercises, at other times, it might seem like a struggle to get into it. If you have unhelpful thoughts about doing your exposure exercises, use a Thought Diary (Module 3) to challenge them.
- **Make an appointment to do the exercises.**
 - Mark blocks of time in your diary or calendar to complete the exercises. This helps to formalize your commitment to doing it.
 - Set aside enough time to complete 2 different exercises each day. Write down which exercises you will complete.
- **Materials.** Make sure you have everything you need to complete the tasks for that day.

DURING THE EXPOSURE SESSION

- **Try to experience the sensations fully.**
 - Pay attention to the sensations and notice what you are feeling
 - Try to engage in the task for the time indicated
 - Try to complete the task entirely rather than using any safety behaviours
- **Disputation.** During the exercises, you can use disputation (Thought Diary) to challenge any catastrophic thoughts about the sensations you are experiencing. Make a flashcard and keep it close by.



ONGOING EXPOSURE

Working through an exposure session is critical to getting used to the feared sensations. So how do you keep moving onwards and upwards? Here are some hints to help keep you moving through all of your feared sensations.

- **Repetition.** It is important to repeat each task until your anxiety rating has decreased to below 30. This might be doing it later during the same day or scheduling it for the next day. If you need to repeat it, try to complete the exercise to the same level of intensity to experience the sensations as fully as before.
- **Acknowledge your achievements.** Once you have completed an exposure session, acknowledge your efforts. You might want to do something that you find positive and rewarding in recognition of this.

- **Use your resources.** Talk to a friend about how you are going, and work through any unhelpful thoughts about completing the tasks.
- **Exposure extension.** When you have an anxiety rating of less than 30 on a particular task, you can extend it to develop your coping further. For example, you might try.
 - Increasing the duration of the task by 30-60 seconds
 - Performing seated tasks whilst standing up
 - Performing the tasks in unfamiliar places or away from easy sources of help

Remember what the goal is for repeated practice, namely, we want to learn something, including:

- The physical symptoms and anxiety itself are not harmful.
- You can handle the symptoms and the anxiety.

As a result, eventually (although not necessarily immediately), the anxiety about the symptoms will diminish. These exercises are not only designed to face the symptoms but also the fear and anxiety initially produced by the symptoms so that you can learn to handle the symptoms, fear, and anxiety.

We have an example below of Mirna (from Module 2) completing some exposure exercises using tasks that are most similar to her feared sensations of chest tightness, heart palpitations, and dizziness. On the next page, there is a blank diary that you can print separately and use to monitor your exposure to internal sensations.

We recommend that you keep doing this exposure until even the idea of it is no longer anxiety-provoking, but rather boring – that you could do this any time if you wanted. In the next module, we will focus on how we can start engaging with situations we are afraid will cause panic attacks.

Internal Sensations Exercises: Diary – Mirna’s Example

	Anxiety 0-100	Similarity 0-100	Intensity 0-100	Physical Sensations
Task: Breathing through a straw	100	100	85	Tightness in chest, difficulty breathing, pressure on the chest
Date: 15/08/2022	95	90	80	Tightness in chest, difficulty breathing
Date: 15/08/2022	75	80	60	Difficulty breathing
Date: 15/08/2022	80	85	75	Fast heart rate, difficulty breathing
Date: 16/08/2022	70	75	55	Some heavy feeling in chest
Date: 16/08/2022	65	70	55	Pressure in lungs, sweating

Task: Hyperventilating	75	80	70	Dizziness, lightheaded, sweating, feel hot
Date: 15/08/2022	60	80	60	Dizziness, lightheaded, sweating, feel hot
Date: 15/08/2022	45	70	40	Dizziness, feeling hot, blurry vision
Date: 16/08/2022	45	70	40	Dizziness, lightheaded, blurry vision
Date: 16/08/2022	35	60	30	Dizziness, lightheaded
Date: 16/08/2022	25	50	30	Dizziness, blurry vision

Internal Sensations Exercises: Diary

Instructions: Write the previous exercise's exposure tasks with a similarity rating over 25. List these in order of anxiety rating, starting with the lowest. Use the following rows when repeating exposures until the anxiety rating drops below 30. Record the physical sensations you experience. Aim to do the same exposure multiple times in a row across multiple days for the best results

	Anxiety 0-100	Similarity 0-100	Intensity 0-100	Physical Sensations
Task:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____

Task:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____

Task:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____
Date:	_____	_____	_____	_____

Module Summary

- One way to help you cope with physical alarms is by experiencing physical sensations. This will help you get used to them and give you the evidence that panic sensations are not harmful.
- The first thing you need to do is to work out which sensations are most similar to those that you experience. You can do this by working through a list of exercises or tasks.
 - Before completing the tasks, you must take necessary precautions regarding your physical health. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns or need to consider any physical limitations.
 - Sometimes it helps to prepare for the tasks by talking to a trusted, supportive friend or relative.
 - When performing the tasks, remember to experience them fully, paying attention to your sensations both during and after the exercise. It is important to note what sensations you experienced, the anxiety rating, the intensity and the similarity of the sensations, and any associated thoughts.
- Once you have determined which exercises/tasks are similar to your panic, you can start to work through the exposure exercises daily, beginning with the one with the lowest anxiety rating.
 - Remember to use thought diaries, social support, and scheduling to maximise your continued commitment to working through the exposure exercises.
 - During the exposure sessions, try to experience the sensations fully by paying close attention to what sensation you are feeling. Dispute any unhelpful thoughts that might stop you from completing the exercise.
 - Work through the tasks in increasing order of anxiety ratings. Keep repeating the exercise until you have an anxiety rating of less than 30. Once you have done this, consider extending the exposure task to expose yourself to more intense sensations. Be sure to acknowledge your achievements and use your resources to help you continue with exposure daily.

In the next module we will look at exposure to activities and situations where you are worried that panic sensations might occur.



About the Modules

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Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

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).

Craske, M.G., & Barlow, D.H. (2014). Panic disorder and agoraphobia. In D.H. Barlow (Ed.), *Clinical Handbook Of Psychological Disorders, Fifth Edition*. New York: Guilford Press.

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