

physical symptoms & panic



Panic Maintained

Some of the factors that are an important part of why panic is maintained are:

⇒ **Thinking styles**, such as catastrophic thinking. Panic sensations are interpreted as signalling something terrible, such as a medical emergency.

⇒ **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.

⇒ **Avoidance**. As a result of this fear of experiencing a panic attack, you avoid certain situations and sensations similar to panic.

It does seem natural to try to avoid the sensations that are similar to panic attacks. It might also seem natural to scan for the possibility of physical alarms, as this might help you to avoid them. However, if you don't experience these sensations, you won't give yourself any real evidence about one important thing:

Panic sensations are not harmful.

Only by facing your "fears" about panic attacks and related physiological sensations will you have enough evidence to challenge your beliefs about physical alarms. One way to do this is to experience the physical sensations that you are afraid of, or "exposure to internal sensations".



Exposure to Internal Sensations

Exposure helps by providing you with evidence that panic attacks are not harmful. It works by challenging three factors to break the cycle of panic and anxiety:

⇒ **Thinking styles**. Through physiological sensations exposure, you will have direct evidence that such sensations are not catastrophic.

⇒ **Focus on bodily sensations**. If you do notice normal changes in your physiological sensations, exposure tasks will give you direct evidence that physiological sensations are not catastrophic, and this will reduce your fear of them. Further, if you are not afraid of these sensations, then there will be less reason to monitor your body for them.

⇒ **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 you will be less likely to react with anxiety when you notice these sensations. By doing it over and over again, it becomes easier to do.

Preparing for Internal Exposure

Before you start, it is important to consider two things:

- 1) You must be in a healthy physical state before completing these exercises. If you have health issues that might be complicated by physical strain, you should not continue. Check the list of physiological exercises to your doctor to determine whether you can proceed.
- 2) If you are finding the tasks particularly difficult, or are concerned about progress, please see a mental health practitioner who can guide you through the process.

Tasks to Try Out



With a stopwatch, try each of these tasks, designed to produce particular physiological sensations:

- **Hyperventilation** Breathe deeply & quickly through the mouth using as much force as you can for 1 minute
- **Shaking head**. Shake your head from side to side while keeping your eyes open. Be careful with your neck. After 30 seconds, look straight ahead.
- **Head between legs**. While sitting in a chair, place your head between your legs. After 30 seconds, stand upright quickly.
- **Running in place/run up steps**. Run/Step up and down quickly, maintaining a quick pace
- **Maintain muscle tension**. While sitting in a chair tense/tighten all of your muscles for 1 min.
- **Hold your breath**. Take a deep breath and hold it for 30 sec or as long as you can.
- **Spinning**. Use a swivel chair to spin around as quickly as possible for 1 min.
- **Breathe through a straw**. Use a narrow straw to breathe, whilst holding your nose closed, for 1 min.
- **Chest breathing**. Take a deep breath until your chest is "puffed up", then take short, sharp breaths, breathing just from your chest.
- **Stare at a spot**. Stare at spot on a blank wall, or at a mirror, without shifting your gaze, for 1.5 min.

Decide which tasks are most relevant to your experience of panic, and practice them using the *Internal Sensations Exercises* worksheet. And remember:

- Try not to stop the task early, use distraction, or avoid doing the task properly
- Pay attention to physical sensations that occur during the exercise as well as those which occur shortly after
- Dispute unhelpful thoughts during the exercise
- Use thought diaries, social support, and scheduling to maximise your continued commitment to working through the exposure exercises.