

10 Tips for Managing Panic Attacks



A Publication Written by

CBT Professionals Psychology Clinics

A Publication Written by

CBT Professionals Psychology Clinics

Managing Anxiety

This guide is designed to provide you with a starting point around how to manage your anxiety in 10 steps. Whilst these are some helpful guidelines, it is important to remember that reducing anxiety is a difficult process that takes time.

Contents

1. Identify that you are anxious
2. Stop running
3. Take a breath
4. Be mindful
5. Use coping statements
6. Be kind to yourself
7. Consult your GP
8. Get moving
9. Get connected
10. Get support

1. Identify That You Are Anxious

The first step to managing anxiety is to identify that you are anxious. Whilst this seems like a simple step, it can often be very difficult. Anxiety can result in a number of physical sensations including a fast heart rate, sweating, breathlessness, tightness in the chest, blurred vision and nausea. It's important to remember that the experience of anxiety has its origins in our caveman ancestors. The bodily changes that occur when we are anxious actually helped our predecessors run faster from danger or fight off an attacker. Sometimes this system can become confused and become activated when there is no clear threat, or exaggerate the likelihood of something bad happening.

As there are so many physical symptoms associated with anxiety, many people will often think that they are having a medical emergency such as a heart attack. This can be really frightening and often results in us becoming more anxious (and the associated physical symptoms becoming worse). Scan the physical sensations in your body and notice what you are thinking about. If there is something that you are nervous about, label this feeling by saying to yourself, "I am anxious".

2. Stop Running

Anxiety can be an overwhelming experience and signifies to us that there is something threatening in our environment. Given our inbuilt drive to survive we are hard-wired to try to avoid the perceived threat. Whilst there are times that this is a very helpful survival skill (such as avoiding getting too close to a steep cliff) there are other times when it is not so helpful. For example, if a person becomes anxious when they are in a large group of people they may choose to not go to the event (and avoid the threat). Whilst avoidance is very effective to reduce anxiety in the short term, it can have a number of long term problems. The biggest problem is that it makes us feel that we would not have been able to cope in the situation. When we avoid situations (such as social gatherings) it can also prevent us from doing the things in life that we enjoy. This can lead to other difficulties such as depression and social isolation.

When we stop running away and face our fears we learn that we are brave. We learn that even though we feel anxious, we don't need to be scared.

3. Take a Breath

One of the scariest symptoms of anxiety is the feeling of tightness across the chest and the sensation of not being able to breath. Whilst it feels that we don't have enough oxygen, this experience occurs when we have TOO MUCH oxygen. This experience is also known as hyperventilation. Our body restricts movement in our chest as an attempt to reduce the amount of oxygen that we breath in, and return even out the balance between oxygen and carbon-dioxide in our blood.

With this knowledge in mind, the best thing that we can do when we feel these acute symptoms of a panic attack is to slow down and control our breathing. The best way to do this is to take long and slow breaths. Each time you breathe in count to three, then hold the air in your lungs before releasing the breath slowly. Repeat this process for as long as you need. As you do this you will notice that the tightness across your chest will slowly start to lessen.

4. Be Mindful

When we focus on our surroundings it can help keep us grounded and get “unstuck” from our anxious thoughts. Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by bringing one’s awareness to the present moment. There are many different types of mindful exercises. Some of these activities focus on directing the person’s awareness to the physical sensations in their body. Whilst other activities aim to direct attention to the physical environment such as the clouds in the sky or a gentle breeze that can be felt on the skin seen through the rustling through the trees.

There are a number of mindfulness activities that can be found on the internet and many places offer short courses to assist people to learn how to be more mindful. Research has shown that mindfulness is effective in reducing distress associated with anxiety.

One easy mindfulness activity involves bringing attention to the present moment and naming two things that can be experienced by each of the five senses.

- Name two things you can *touch*
- Name two things you can *smell*
- Name two things you can *hear*
- Name two things you can *see*
- Is there anything that you can *taste*?

5. Use Coping Statements

When anxiety attacks our minds are flooded with lots of unhelpful thoughts, possibly memories of times when we have failed. If we are anxious we recall events where we have felt overwhelmed by fear. Unfortunately, this is the brain's way of keeping us safe. As we have already covered, it makes sense that if we recall all of these bad experiences that we will be motivated to avoid the feared situation in the future. In the same way that we need to be brave and not avoid situations, we also need to remind our brain of the times that we have coped and overcame our fears. For example, if you are concerned about going to a shopping center because you had a "panic attack" the last time you were there – your imagination will think up images of you having another attack and possibly even an ambulance needing to be called. Our imaginations have a special way of painting a vivid picture of the *worst* possible outcome! However, we can actively remind ourselves of all the times that we have gone food shopping or to other crowded places and been okay. We can even remind ourselves of times we have felt panicked and anxious – and been okay! Sometimes when people start to panic they are bombarded with thoughts of "I'm going crazy". It's important to remind yourself that anxiety is a normal experience and that there are many effective strategies to manage this.

You could try these simple coping statements:

"It's only anxiety, it will pass"

"I can cope"

"Take a deep breath, I'll be OK"

6. Speak To Your GP

If you are experiencing panic attacks it is important to speak to your GP. Your doctor will assist you in determining if your symptoms are the result of anxiety or another physical health complaint (or if a medical condition / medication is contributing to your feelings of anxiety). This is a very important step as it will take the guess work out and give you peace of mind!

Your doctor will also be able to provide you with additional resources such as information booklets and refer you to other health professionals as required (such as a psychologist or psychiatrist). Your doctor also has a wealth of information regarding medication that can be used to assist in managing the symptoms of anxiety.

7. Be Kind To Yourself

It is important to extend to yourself the same kindness that we show other people in our life. Often we are our own worst critic and typically this is not helpful. When we struggle with something we often speak negatively to ourselves. We might say to ourselves, "you should be able to do this", "why did you do that?!?" and "you're such an _____". Being self-compassionate isn't self-pity and it's not pretending that everything is okay. Being self-compassionate means that you are recognising that you want things to improve, but it's not helpful that we are mean and discouraging to ourselves.

Have you ever had a boss or teacher who was always criticising your work? How did you find this? Did it motivate you to work harder? Or just make you more upset? Now think about when you have had a supportive boss or teacher. What was this experience like? Did they help you to learn from your mistakes and not feel too discouraged? Self-compassion is the same. When we are kind to ourselves it means that we are more motivated to keep trying to overcome our struggles.

8. Get Moving

I know that you have probably heard this a million times before.... But, physical exercise is very important. Research has shown that daily physical exercise can assist in alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety. Going for a walk in the morning is a great way to get you motivated for the day. Why not try and incorporate a mindfulness activity in to your daily walk and appreciate your surroundings of nature.

9. Get Connected

In order for us to feel happy it is important that we feel connected to other people. It's not about how many friends we have, or going to social gatherings. Feeling social connected is about having people in your life that you can seek support from and that understand you.

When you are struggling with anxiety it can be helpful to seek support from close friends and family that you think will understand. When you provide them with information about anxiety and assist them in learning how they can best support you they can help you to overcome these difficult feelings.

10. See a Professional

If you continue to struggle with high levels of anxiety it is valuable to consider seeing a psychologist or another mental health professional to speak about your concerns. Psychological interventions such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and distress associated with anxiety.

Whilst the internet and self-help books can provide valuable information, if your symptoms persist it is important that you access support around this. Your psychologist will be able to support you to understand your specific experience of anxiety, in addition to learning strategies to manage these symptoms. Your psychologist will assist you in overcoming barriers to change and trouble shoot what is going wrong when these strategies are not effective.

If you feel like you need to see a psychologist then please speak to your GP about options that are available to you in your community. For further tips on how to find a psychologist and how to find a good one, you may like to read our blog on this topic here:

<http://info.cbtprofessionals.com.au/blog/find-a-psychologist-and-how-to-find-a-good-one>

You can do it!