



Getting your thinking straight.

Relevant to: Panic: 

Getting your thinking straight, if you are prone to panic attacks, is not an easy matter! During a panic attack we are likely to think thoughts such as the following:

- I'm going to do something really embarrassing.
- I'm going to faint.
- I'm not going to be able to control myself.
- I can't breathe.
- And so on, and so on, and so on. It's dreadful!

But there are three fixed facts that we can hang on to:

1. We won't faint. (This is because panic is associated with too much oxygen in the system rather than too little, and fainting is the result of too little oxygen in the system.)
2. You won't lose control over any of your bodily functions. (Again, you've got plenty of oxygen in the system, so your system will work fine.)
3. Your mind/body will not compel you to do anything, you can still be in control of yourself.



So why can't I breathe?

Those who have panic attacks find that the most frightening thing is often the inability to breathe. The reason we can't breathe is that there is already too much oxygen in our systems, so the executive brain orders a shutdown in more oxygen coming in. (The executive brain cares more about keeping your oxygen levels right than whether it bothers you to be stopped from breathing!)

This is why the best thing we can do when we feel a panic attack approaching is to begin slow, deep breathing, minimising the amount of oxygen coming in. (Deep breathing, perhaps surprisigly, is an inefficient way of breathing, which is just what we want when we already have too much oxygen.)



What other thoughts are useful to straighten out?

When we are new to panic attacks, we think we are having a heart attack, stroke, or something very severe like that, so it is not surprising that a degree of panic sets in. In fact, just the difficulty in breathing is sufficient to panic any reasonable person.

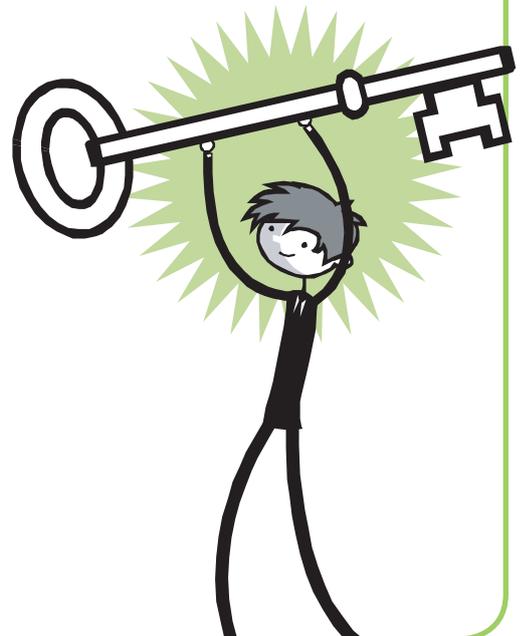
Once we've had panic attacks for a bit, we know that we're not having a heart attack, we're having a panic attack. People who have never had panic attacks can feel this is "nothing to worry about then". People who have had panic attacks know the error of this thought!



However, there is one key important thought, and it is this.

People who have panic attacks get very good at monitoring their physical and physiological condition, which means they can spot an impending panic attack a mile off. The great thing about this is if you know what to do (immediately start slow, deep breathing) then being able to spot the panic attack coming is a terrific asset, and your slow deep breathing will prevent it.

You do, however, have to know that this is a slow process: just as the excess of oxygen in the system took a while to accumulate, so does the slow deep breathing take a while to put things right. During that time we are prone to think "It's not working!" whereas in fact it is working, but slowly. (If you wanted to, and the situation permitted it, you could remedy things more quickly by, for example, getting on an exercise bike, taking a run, or doing anything that uses up the surplus oxygen in your system.)



In session discussion.

- How does what is described on this sheet tally with your own experiences?
- Have you ever tried getting on an exercise bike, taking a run, or anything else that would use up excess oxygen in the system? (It's not often feasible for most people.)
- Have you ever tried slow deep breathing? Did you manage to do it?

Post-session projects.

- Familiarise yourself with the three thoughts numbered overleaf, and really get them fixed in your brain.
- Practice slow deep breathing when you are not in a panic attack. Do it lots of times so you get really good at it, and could do it even when you see a panic attack approaching.

Myth Buster.

Myth: When you have a panic attack you are going to lose control of yourself in various ways.

This is not the case, because your system has (more than) enough oxygen in it. What you really need is to cut down on the oxygen coming in, and, if possible, use up what's already in the system.