

Generalised anxiety & panic attacks

- the facts

Everyone has experienced anxiety – it is normal.

But anxiety can become a problem if it is experienced frequently or in situations that should not really be stressful.

Sometimes anxiety problems are experienced in a specific way and are recognised as a particular anxiety condition.

Two of the most common anxiety conditions are:

➤ *Free floating or generalised anxiety*

And

➤ *Panic attacks*

Generalised anxiety

For some people, anxiety problems mean that they feel tense and anxious most of the time. A person who feels like this will worry about everything, even though he or she knows that the worries are “over the top”.

People who experience this generalised or free-floating anxiety find it impossible to relax.

They can experience many of the physical effects of anxiety, such as butterflies in the stomach, shakiness, headaches, muscle pain, tiredness, difficulties swallowing, rapid heart beat and sleep problems.



They can find it difficult to make decisions, can be irritable and get upset easily. They generally feel as though they are not coping with day to day things. Often these feelings can be worse when the person has nothing big to concentrate on e.g. after work or when they are going to bed.

This state of free-floating anxiety can be interrupted by panic attacks.

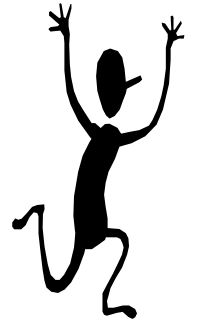
Panic attacks

Panic attacks tend to come on suddenly and involve a strong feeling that something terrible is about to happen. There are a range of physical symptoms including:

Breathlessness	Chest pain	Hot and cold flushes
Shaking	Trembling	Palpitations
Choking feeling	Sweating	Dizziness
Numbness	Faintness	Feeling of unreality

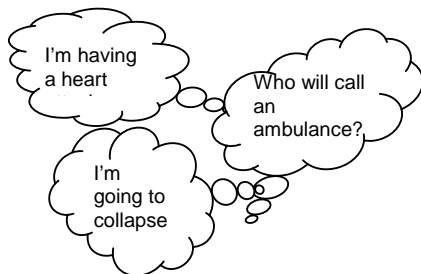
The physical symptoms of panic can be brought on by illness (e.g. flu), standing up too quickly, drinking too much caffeine (e.g. in tea, coffee or fizzy drinks) or if your blood sugar level is low (e.g. if you miss meals).

Panic attacks are linked to the **body's reaction to stress – the fight/flight response.**



When we feel we are in danger our body produces a rush of adrenaline. This happens very quickly. It causes physical changes such as our heart rate speeds up and blood leaves our stomach and goes to our muscles. This fight or flight reaction has happened for centuries - our ancestors needed to cope quickly with wild animals or enemy attack. The flight/fight response does not necessarily cause any problems but sometimes people do feel sick or faint or experience many of the other unpleasant things that happen in a panic attack. This happens because of changes in their breathing.

When a panic attack begins people usually start to over-breathe, i.e. fast and shallow breathing from the top of the chest. This leads to a loss of carbon dioxide and a change in their body chemistry. It is this change which causes faintness, trembling and dizziness.



Many people have frightening thoughts when they are having a panic attack. The thoughts make people want to run out and escape.

Remember –

the symptoms of a panic attack are not dangerous.

Such thoughts just make the anxiety worse.

Getting help

Suffering an anxiety condition is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. It can sometimes be hard for friends and family to accept that sufferers do have a “real” problem. But overcoming anxiety is not simply a matter of “pulling yourself together”. There are books and leaflets that can advise you on things to try yourself and there are self-help groups where you can get support.

If you feel that you need more help, speak to your GP or to the Practice nurse or health visitor. She or he will be able to offer advice and reassurance and, if necessary, can refer you to the Clinical Psychology Department. You will then be offered an appointment with the clinical psychologist or cognitive-behavioural therapist attached to your Surgery. She or he will help you learn the skills you need to overcome your anxiety condition.

Books about panic and anxiety include:

Overcoming panic, anxiety and phobias: New strategies to free yourself from worry and fear

By C Goldman and S Barbior (Whole Person Associates)

The panic attack, anxiety and phobia solutions handbook

By M MacFarlane (United Research Publishers)

Overcoming panic

By D Silove and V Manicavasagar (Constable Robinson)

From panic to power: Proven techniques to calm your anxieties, conquer your fears and put you in control of your life

By L Bassett (Harper Collins)