



Overcoming Panic Attacks

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Helping
Yourself
to...

Feel calmer



UNIVERSITY OF
EXETER

It can be hard to ask for help when you are experiencing panic attacks. Well done in taking the first step towards tackling the problem.

This booklet is aimed at anyone who struggles with panic attacks. All the techniques in the booklet are based on the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy approach, we will talk more about what that is later in the booklet. We have included a student example to illustrate the different ideas and techniques. CBT has a lot of research to show that it can be very helpful for varying problems including panic attacks. You may be working through the booklet on your own or with the support of a practitioner from the Wellbeing Centre. It can also be helpful to talk to someone you trust such as a family member or a friend so you have their support as well.

If you are working with a practitioner it is likely you will have regular sessions where you can talk through how you have got on using the different techniques and any problems that may have arisen. You can talk together about how to solve these problems and progress with the techniques.

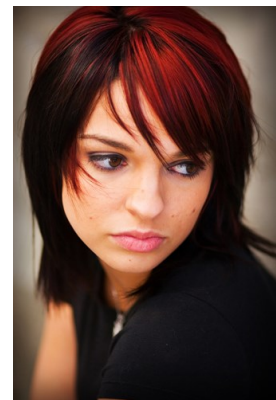
Tackling panic can be a difficult and challenging process and there may be times where you feel as though you aren't getting anywhere. Just remember that we all have good days and bad days so try not to let the bad days feel as though you have taken 'two steps back'.

If you are seeing a practitioner at the wellbeing centre then you can talk this through with them and work out the best course of action. If not then you may want to get in touch to access some support in using these techniques.

The idea of this booklet is to give you the information you need to help yourself tackle your panic attacks. This means that you need to have a go at all the techniques to find out which ones are the most helpful for you.

Clare's Story...

Clare started University last year. She had always felt a bit anxious in public places but in one of her first lectures her anxiety reached an all time high. She had a cappuccino just before hand which increased her anxiety and before she went in she started to feel a bit light headed. When she sat down she suddenly thought "I'm going to pass out?" This thought terrified her. Her heart started racing and she started to sweat and felt dizzy.



After this thought Clare felt even more light headed and she noticed changes in her vision. She was terrified about passing out as well as thinking about how embarrassing it would be in front of everyone else.

At that point Clare rushed out of the lecture and went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. After 10 minutes she started to feel better. She was sure she would have passed out if she stayed. After this Clare would always sit at the end of the row near the exit. She also made sure that she ate something sugary beforehand and stopped drinking coffee altogether.

Throughout the overcoming panic book we are going to be referring to Clare to help illustrate the different ideas and techniques. Hopefully by seeing how these things apply to Clare it will make it easier to know how they might apply to you.

Why do we experience anxiety?

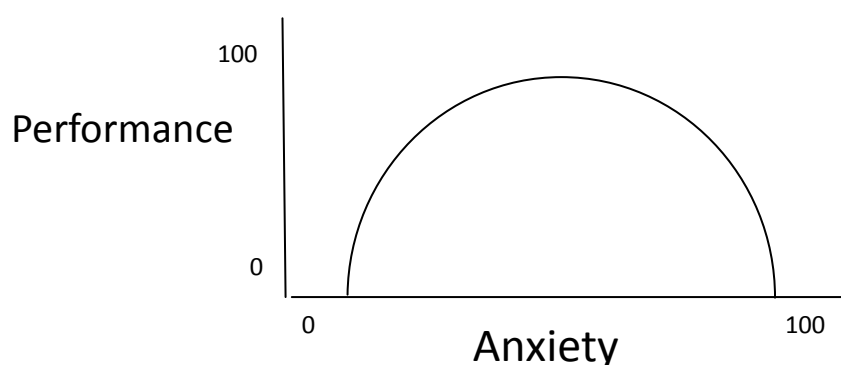
It is important to remember that all humans experience anxiety. It's the physical response to fear which has kept us safe over the course of evolution. These physical feelings can range from nervousness up to extreme panic/sheer terror.

The Fight or Flight Response

When we are exposed to a threat (whether physical or psychological) we experience a fight/flight/freeze response where adrenaline is released into our bodies that causes a series of physiological changes.

Anxiety tells us that there is something dangerous to pay attention to. This is why it feels so unpleasant; it gets our attention. Often this is a helpful response - for example, if a car was speeding towards us. If we felt no anxiety we are likely to get injured or killed. Anxiety can also help improve performance, for example it can help athletes to perform better during a race.

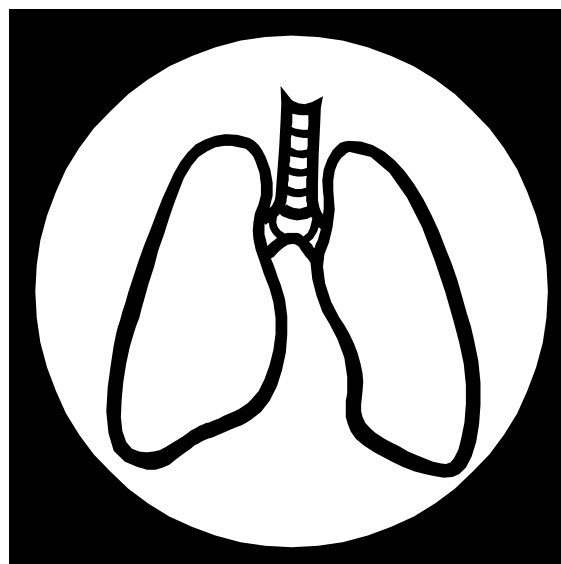
In some situations this anxiety response can be out of proportion to the event and is less helpful, for example, freezing during an exam feeling really anxious or in a social situation. It can be helpful to imagine the graph below - some anxiety will improve your performance, however too much anxiety can impair your performance.



Physiological response to stress

When the fight/flight/freeze response is activated we experience an increase in adrenaline which causes a number of physiological responses. Whilst these can feel unpleasant, they all serve a specific protective purpose and are signs that your body is preparing to fight, run away or to freeze until the threat passes.

1. **Glucose** is released into our blood stream to give us a surge of energy
2. **Heart beats faster** to carry extra oxygen in the blood to our muscles and our brain. It may feel like your heart is pounding
3. **Breathing faster** to increase our oxygen intake which is needed to convert the glucose into energy. You may start to yawn, notice breathlessness or feel tightness in your chest
4. **Tingling or feeling cold** where blood is diverted away from areas that are not so vital such as vital organs, skin, fingers and toes
5. **Dry mouth and churning stomach** where blood is diverted from the digestive system to the muscles
6. **Muscles tense** for action and can result in aches and pains, trembling or shaking
7. **Sweating** originally to make us more slippery to escape from predators. Today it is also the body's way of cooling
8. **Vision changes or spots before your eyes** pupils dilate to give clearer vision



What is a panic attack?

A panic attack involves a sharp and severe peak of anxiety which happens suddenly. The severe peak of anxiety lasts a short time (5 - 10 mins) but can leave you feeling exhausted and out of sorts for the rest of the day. During a panic attack people often have thoughts that something 'terrible' is going to happen to them , e.g. "I'm going to faint".

Panic attacks can affect your thoughts, behaviours and how you feel physically and each area can have additional 'knock on' effects on the other areas.

Thought (Catastrophic Misinterpretation)

"I'm going to have a heart attack", "I'm going to pass out", "I can't breathe", "I might lose control", "I'm going to be sick", "I'm going to humiliate myself" "I need to get out."

Physical Symptom

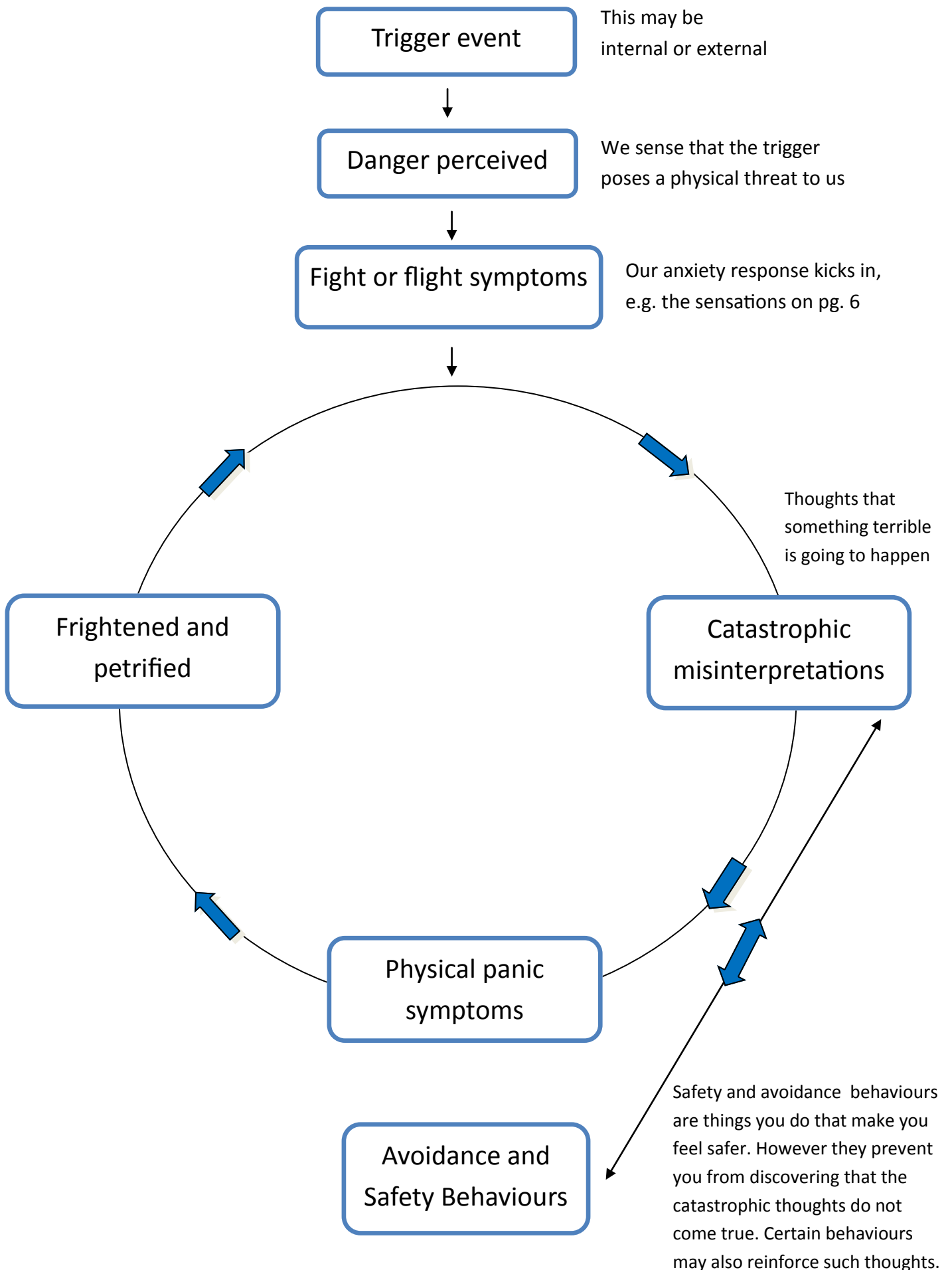
Increased heart rate, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, feeling faint or dizzy, nausea, needing to go to the toilet, numbness or tingling, sweating, shaking, feeling as though you are disconnected from your surroundings or yourself.

Behaviour

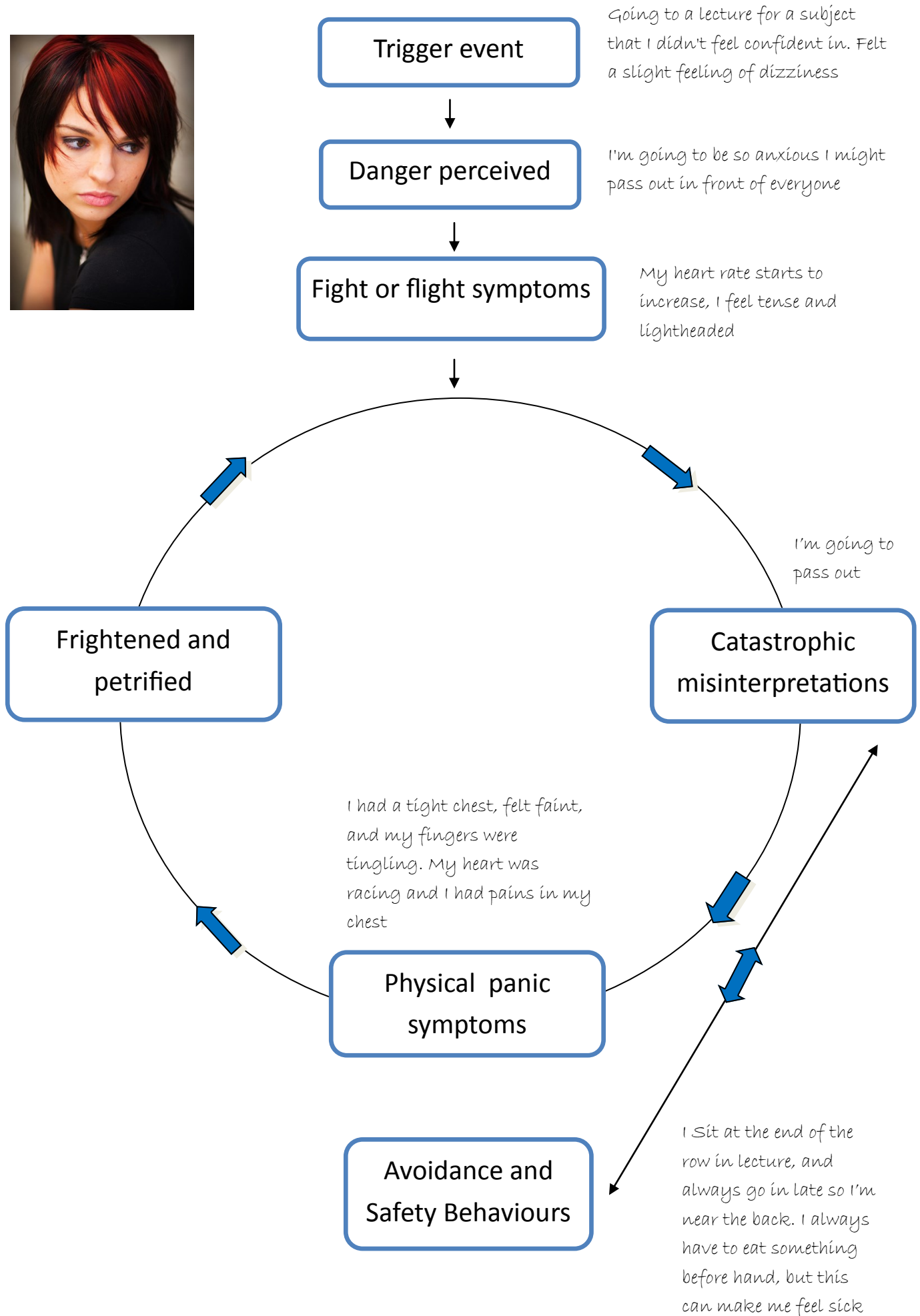
Leaving the situation, avoiding the places where you have had panic attacks, doing anything to avoid the risk of having an attack, trying to avoid things which may trigger the scary thoughts.

The next page shows a diagram of how you can get trapped in this vicious cycle between these areas. If you are thinking that you can't cope or that you are going to humiliate yourself, you might start to feel your heart rate increasing and feel short of breath, this can then cause you to have an urge to get away from the situation and to avoid that situation in future.

The vicious cycle of panic



Clare's vicious cycle





Trigger event

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Danger perceived

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Fight or flight symptoms

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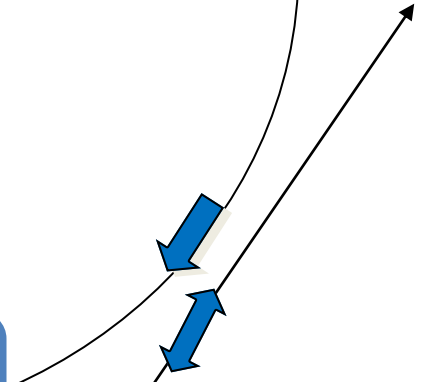
Frightened and petrified

Catastrophic misinterpretations

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Physical panic symptoms



Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

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The techniques in this booklet are based on the idea of this vicious cycle. If you have catastrophic thoughts about something terrible happening to you then its no wonder you feel petrified. We can break the cycle by tackling the catastrophic misinterpretations and the avoidance and safety behaviours. The term 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy' refers to techniques that focus on thoughts and behaviours. Research has found that CBT can be an effective way to overcome panic attacks.

Misinterpretations and panic

Panic attacks involve unpleasant physical feelings. Often when people experience these physical feelings they misinterpret them and assume the worst. These thoughts can then maintain or even increase the panic. Sometimes these thoughts are a key factor in causing a lower level of anxiety to escalate into a full blown panic attack.

Below is a list of some of the most common thoughts that people have when they experience a panic attack. People may experience one, or a number of thoughts during a panic attack.



Physical symptom of anxiety	Common panic thought
Increased heart rate/palpitation/pain in chest	"I'm having a heart attack"
Out of control thoughts	"I'm going mad" or "I'm losing control"
Shallow breath/shortness of breath	"I can't breath; I'm going to die"
Dizziness/wobbly legs	"I'm going to pass out"
Tingling sensations or numbness	"I'm having a stroke"
Feeling dissociated from your surrounding; strange mental sensations	"I'm going mad" or "I'm having a stroke"
Changes in vision	"I'm going blind"
Needing the toilet	"I'm going to lose control of my bowels/bladder"

Myth Busting

—The facts about panic symptoms



Fear of having a heart attack or a stroke

There are some similarities in symptoms, e.g. Chest pain or changes in vision. However heart disease is very unusual in young people. It is also unlikely to be a heart attack or stroke if it has been medically investigated. It would also be helpful to ask yourself if have you experienced this pain/symptoms before? What happened then?

Fainting is another survival mechanism, it happens because of low blood pressure. Fainting gets your body level so that blood can flow to the brain more easily. When you panic your heart rate increases, which means that the chances of you faint are lowest when having a panic attack.

Fear of passing out

Fear of going mad

There is a big difference between anxiety/panic attacks and serious mental health problems. Everyone experiences anxiety during their life and feeling dissociated is part of the anxiety response. Panic attacks do not cause mental illness and mental health problems such as schizophrenia are rare compared with panic attacks.

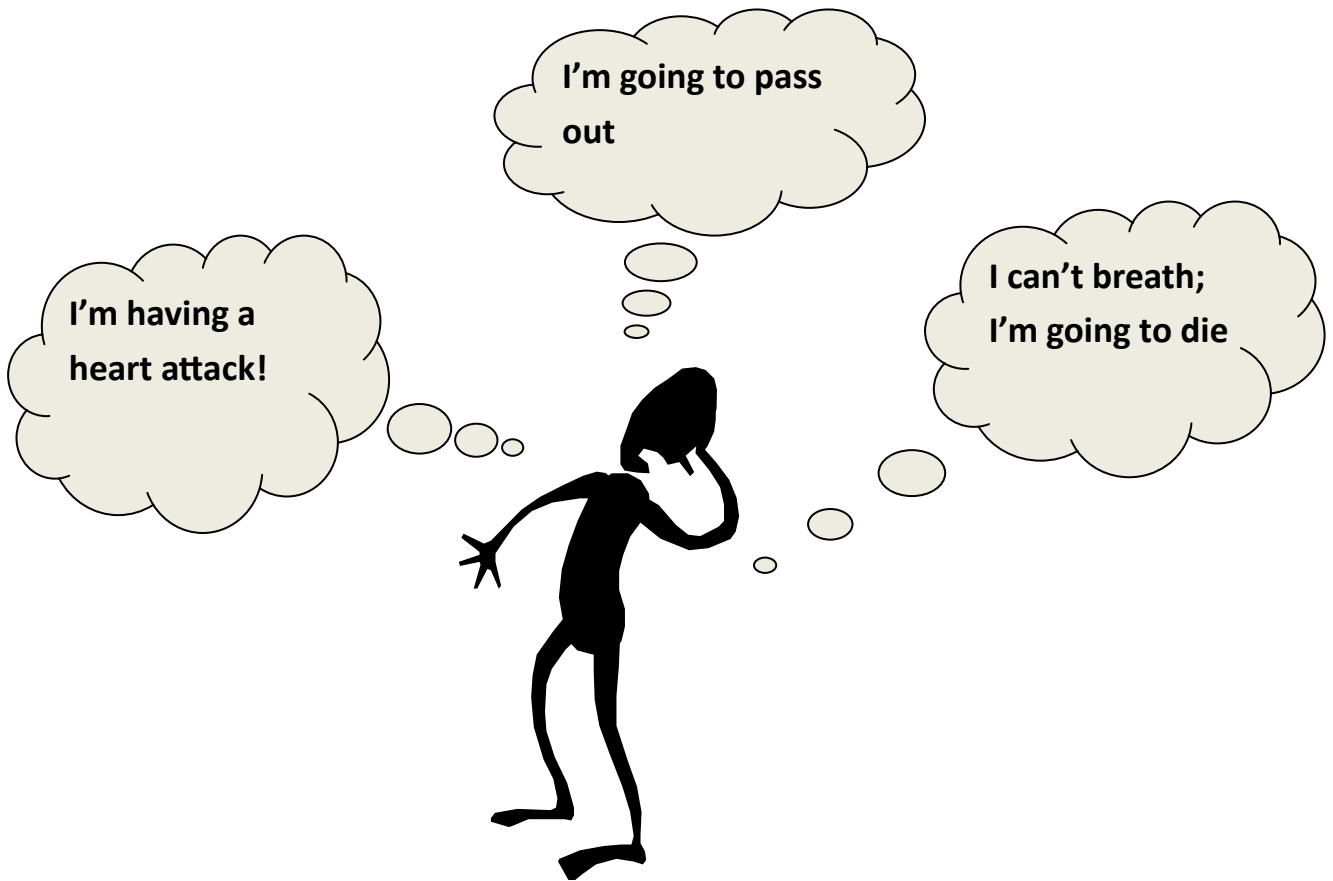
Increased breathing is a common symptom of anxiety and it can induce a number of panic symptoms; feeling faint; dizziness; tingling and breathlessness. Increased breathing changes the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood (hyperventilation). The main thing is that hyperventilation is not dangerous. We feel out of breath so breath faster, however this makes it worse, actually taking in more oxygen. Air temperature makes no difference to the oxygen levels we breath.

Fear of suffocation

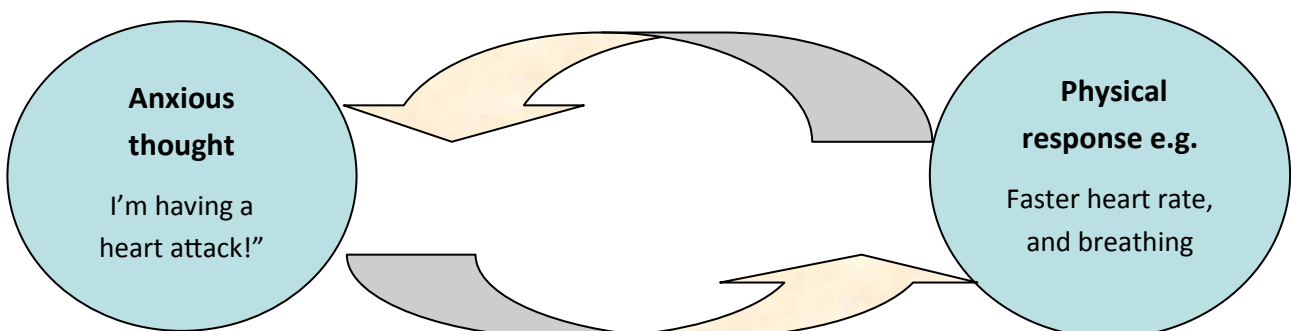
Fear of losing control of bladder or bowels/ vomiting

Needing the toilet is a common symptom of anxiety, however it is not the same as losing control of bodily functions. When you are anxious your sphincter muscles actually tighten. Very few people vomit whilst having a panic attack. It is again helpful to ask yourself—Have you experienced these symptoms before and what happened then?

About negative thoughts...



When feeling panicky, catastrophic misinterpretations are very common. It's part of the vicious cycle that we can get trapped into. Challenging these thoughts is one way of breaking the cycle.



Characteristics of Unhelpful Thoughts:

Automatic: We don't think them on purpose; they come into our minds involuntarily. **Believable:** They seem real at the time. **Unhelpful:** They are the kind of thoughts that would be upsetting to anybody. **Distorted:** They are not accurate reflections of reality but based on how we feel at the time.

Cognitive Restructuring: Challenging your thoughts

Cognitive Restructuring is a technique that aims to change unhelpful thoughts by identifying and challenging them. The technique can help you to see situations more objectively by lifting the veil of subjective, catastrophic negative thinking. Cognitive Restructuring reduces panic by targeting the catastrophic thinking that maintains it. It does this by using questions to help you consider different perspectives to generate factual evidence to challenge your unhelpful thoughts.

Challenging catastrophic thoughts can be difficult at first, but over time it gets easier and easier.

The three steps of Cognitive Restructuring

1 Recording your thoughts in a Thought Diary



2 Looking at evidence for and against your thoughts

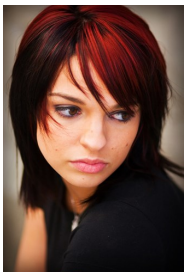
3 Revising your initial thought

1 Recording your thoughts



Firstly, you need to identify the content of your catastrophic misinterpretations. You can either complete the table below like a diary over the course of a week, or you could do it retrospectively, thinking back to previous panic attacks that you have had. Complete the first three columns initially.

1. In the first column write down a brief description of the situation you were in when the thought occurred i.e. where you were and what you were doing.
2. In the second column write down the physical symptom that you were experiencing.
3. In the third column write down exactly what the thought was i.e. the words that went through your mind or the image that occurred - how you were interpreting the symptom.



Clare's record of her symptoms and thoughts when she starts to panic.













Situation	Anxiety Symptom	Misinterpretation	Alternative Response
<i>In lecture</i>	<i>Feeling sick Racing heart Dry mouth Shaky Feeling faint Increased breath</i>	<i>I'm going to be sick I'm going to pass out</i>	

Worksheet A - Thought Diary

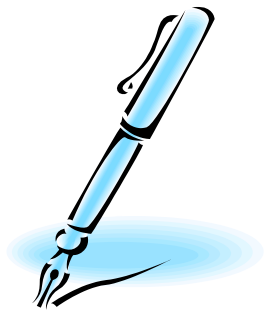
Situation Where you were and what you were doing	Physical Symptom	Catastrophic Misinterpretation Words that went through your mind and rating of how much you believe this thought (0-100%)	Revised Thought The helpful interpretation of the symptoms and rating of how much you believe this thought (0-100%)

Unhelpful thinking styles

Below are a number of different thinking styles that people can get into. Have a look through the thoughts you have recorded and see if any of these thinking styles apply to you, these can be helpful to refer to when trying to generate evidence.

<p>All or nothing thinking (sometimes called 'black and white thinking')</p> <p>Seeing only one extreme or the other. There are no in-betweens or shades of grey.</p> 	<p>Jumping to conclusions</p> <p>Mind-reading Assuming we know what someone else is thinking.</p> <p>Fortune telling Predicting what's going to happen in the future.</p> 
<p>Over-generalising</p> <p>Seeing a pattern based upon a single event or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw. Tends to involve the words always, everyone, never.</p> 	<p>Emotional reasoning</p> <p>Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.</p> 
<p>Magnification and minimisation</p> <p>Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophising), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important.</p> 	<p>Shoulds and musts</p> <p>Putting unreasonable demands or pressure on yourself or others. Using critical words which make us feel guilty or like we have failed.</p> 
<p>Mental filter</p> <p>Only paying attention to certain types of information such as noticing failures but not successes.</p> 	<p>Personalisation</p> <p>Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault or blaming other people for something that was your fault.</p> 
<p>Disqualifying the positive</p> <p>Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done.</p> 	<p>Labelling</p> <p>Assigning labels to ourselves or other people.</p> 
<p>Compare and despair</p> <p>Seeing only the good points in others compared with the bad ones in yourself.</p> 	<p>Memories</p> <p>Current situations triggering memories of past upsetting events.</p> 

2 Challenging your thoughts



Next you examine your thoughts in an objective way. We do this by collecting evidence for and against a particular thought to see whether it is accurate or not.

Choose a frequent thought from the ones you have noted on your diary sheet. Write the thought down in the top left corner of the Evidence Table sheet and note the percentage belief rating in the top right box.

Then, imagine that you are the judge in a court where the evidence for and against the truth of your thought is being examined. Write down the evidence for each side in the table. Remember that the evidence should be factual and that you need to present the full picture so that a fair decision can be made. Generating the 'Evidence Against' can be difficult as it is something you're probably not used to doing. Some questions to help you to do this are given on the next page.

Next Clare chose one of her thoughts and considered the evidence for and against it...

Thought	% Belief
<i>"I'm going to be sick"</i> <i>"I'm going to pass out"</i>	90%
Evidence For	Evidence Against
<i>Feeling sick</i>	<i>Feeling sick is a normal symptom of anxiety</i>
<i>Feeling faint</i>	<i>I have never been sick before</i>
	<i>I have higher blood pressure right now so I will not pass out, you pass out due to low blood pressure</i>
	<i>I have never passed out before</i>

Generating evidence against your thoughts

After you have recorded your thoughts in the thought diary the next stage is to evaluate each individual thought using the evidence table (worksheet B). It can help to imagine that you are a judge in the court house and that evidence needs to be presented for and against the thought. In court cases evidence provided needs to be factual and concrete, it is exactly the same for the evidence here. We want to get to the bottom of whether this thought is based on the facts or whether its based on how you feel.



It can be really difficult coming up with concrete evidence to start with, particularly against the thought as you may be more in the habit of looking for evidence to support your negative thoughts! Below are some tips for generating evidence.

What alternative views are there?

- If you rate the belief in your thought as 75%, what makes up the remaining 25%?
- How would a friend or someone who cares about you view this situation?
- How would I have viewed this situation if I wasn't having a panic attack?
- How would I view someone else in my situation?
- Do any of your physical sensations match those on page 11. If so then can you use the explanations on page 12?

Does this thought fit with any of the thinking styles on the previous page?

- If it does then this means you are only looking at this from one perspective, what is the other perspective?

Worksheet B Evidence Sheet

Thought	% Belief
Evidence For	Evidence Against

3 Revising your initial thought



Finally, you reconsider the original thought taking all the evidence into consideration. Try to come up with a revised thought based on both sides of the argument.

Write down the new thought in the fourth column of the Thought Diary.

Remember, unhelpful thinking takes time to change; it may often be necessary to challenge your thoughts several times before you notice a difference in how you feel. As you become more expert in this approach you will start to find that the process becomes more automatic and you are able to catch the thoughts and judge them as they actually happen.

Finally Clare looked back at her initial thought and, considering all the evidence she had noted both for and against the thought, came up with the following alternative thought...

Revised Thought
The helpful interpretation of the symptoms and rating of how much you believe this thought (0-100%)
<i>Feeling sick is a normal symptom of anxiety. I have never been sick before so this is unlikely to happen now (40%)</i>
<i>I have higher blood pressure right now so I will not pass out (70%)</i>

You can think about thoughts like pathways in a field: the more you have a thought the more entrenched the path becomes, until it becomes the automatic route you take. By challenging these thoughts, you are stopping yourself going down that automatic path and instead creating a new path. This might feel weird at first because you have not used this 'path' before (or thought in this way), but the more you use it and the less you use the 'old' path (or thought), the more entrenched it will become and the more 'overgrown' the old path will feel. Eventually the new way of thinking will be the one which you automatically go down.

What keeps panic going?

If we think that something terrible is going to happen to us, we are going to do what ever we can to prevent it. You might avoid certain situations all together (avoidance) or you might do things differently or take certain precautions (safety behaviours). It is important to identify any safety or avoidance behaviours you are doing as they also keep the viscous cycle of panic going.

Safety behaviours

These are things you do when you feel panicky to attempt to minimise the sense of danger. They are behaviours that make you feel safer and therefore less panicky but they also prevent you from gaining the valuable experiences that will help you overcome your panic.



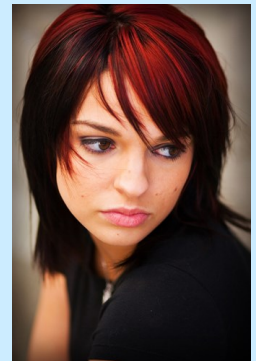
Situation	Fear of what will happen	Safety Behaviour
In town	I might faint if I panic	Go and sit down when feeling anxious
In town	I might faint if I panic	Deep breaths/relaxation
In a lecture	I might throw up if I panic	Don't eat anything a few hours before hand
In a lecture	Everyone will notice me if I panic	Sit at the back and at the end of the row
In the supermarket	I will panic and not be able to cope	Take a friend
Walking home from Uni	I won't cope if I take a different route back	Always stick to the same route

The problem with safety behaviours

Whilst it may feel as though safety behaviours are helpful, in the long run they can actually maintain the vicious cycle of panic. Here is Clare's example to demonstrate how.

Clare's example

Clare fears that she will pass out in a lecture. To prevent this she will eat a chocolate bar before the lecture. She has not passed out yet. She is certain that this helps but sometimes it can make her feel a bit sick which can also make her anxious. She always sits on the edge near the back, although this generally reduces her anxiety, she became very panicky when those seats were taken.



How Clare's safety behaviours fed into the vicious cycle of panic

- Eating chocolate reduced Clare's anxiety about passing out so it became a way of coping.
- She never knew if she would pass out or not (unable to disconfirm this belief).
- She maintains her belief that she would pass out.
- When she can't eat she becomes very anxious.
- When she can't sit on the edge at the back she becomes very anxious.
- Sometimes eating chocolate is counterproductive as it makes her feel sick which can add to the anxiety she experiences.

Tackling unhelpful predictions



When you are feeling panicky, it is common to make negative predictions about what will happen in the future. These negative predictions tend to lead to us to engage in unhelpful behaviours such as avoidance or safety behaviours. These behaviours then prevent the negative predictions from being tested and make it difficult to have an alternative experience to counter the prediction meaning that we continue to believe that our negative prediction would have come true.

Behavioural experiments are a good way of testing these negative predictions. We need to set up experiments to put our thoughts to the test much like a scientist would to test a hypothesis.

Testing Predictions: The Process

We can test our negative predictions by following the steps detailed below:

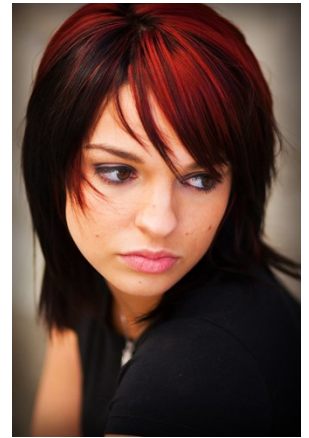
- 1 Note down the thought or belief you wish to test and rate how strongly you believe this prediction
- 2 Note an alternative prediction or belief and rate how strongly you believe it
- 3 Design the experiment – What will you do to test the prediction? Where? When? For how long? With whom?
- 4 Consider any safety behaviours that would need to be dropped
- 5 Consider likely problems and how they could be overcome
- 6 Note the outcome
- 7 Note the learning and re-rate the belief in the original prediction



Testing negative predictions Clare's example

Step 1: Negative thought or belief to be tested	How much do you believe this prediction ? (0-100%)
I will pass out in lectures if I don't eat beforehand	80%
Step 2: What is an alternative prediction?	How much do you believe this prediction ? (0-100%)
I might feel anxious and light headed but not pass out	20%
Step 3: Experiment design– What will you do to test the prediction? Where? When? For how long? With whom?	
I will avoid eating the chocolate bar before the lecture on Wednesday afternoon.	
Step 4: What safety behaviours would you need to drop?	
Eating	
Step 5: What things may get in your way? How will you overcome these?	
If my friends all go for cake before hand. I will be strong and not buy anything.	
Step 6: Record what happened when you carried out the experiment	
I felt very anxious and did get light headed but I didn't pass out.	
Step 7: What can you learn from this? How much to you believe your original prediction?	
<p>Although I might feel anxious and light headed, that does not mean that I will pass out..</p> <p>Belief—I will pass out in lecture = 30%</p> <p>Belief—I will feel light headed but not pass out = 70%</p>	

From the behavioural experiment Clare found that she didn't pass out in the lecture as she originally predicted. This made her feel far less anxious in the next lecture. She also stopped having the chocolate bar before the afternoon lectures and noticed that she also stopped feeling sick.



But what if my original prediction is supported by the findings of the experiment?

A

Is there another explanation for what happened?

For example, if Clare did pass out is there any medical explanation for this?

B

What else was happening at that time?

For example, did Clare have anything else going on which might have affected the outcome? E.g. she might have been ill or suffering with low blood pressure.

C

Are there other ways of viewing what happened?

How would someone else view this outcome? What would a friend say about this if you talked them through it?

D

What could I learn from the experience to improve or change things in the future?

If there were certain things which affected the outcome, then how can you stop this from happening again in the future? Were there any other safety behaviours that you noticed that you could try to stop next time?

Behavioural Experiment Worksheet

Step 1: Negative thought or belief to be tested	How much do you believe this prediction ? (0-100%)
Step 2: What is an alternative prediction?	How much do you believe this prediction ? (0-100%)
Step 3: Experiment design– What will you do to test the prediction? Where? When? For how long? With whom?	
Step 4: What safety behaviours would you need to drop?	
Step 5: What things may get in your way? How will you overcome these?	
Step 6: Record what happened when you carried out the experiment	
Step 7: What can you learn from this? How much do you believe your original prediction?	

How to start experimenting with safety and avoidance behaviours

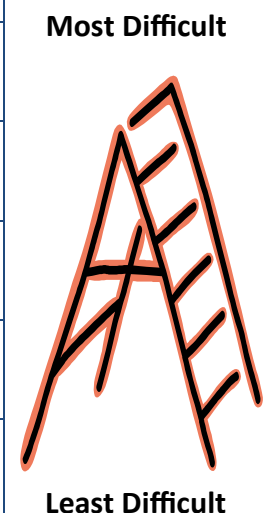
It can be scary to think about tackling these behaviours, but reducing safety and avoidance behaviours is a really effective way of breaking the vicious cycle of panic. Here are some ideas for how to make a start at reducing them.

Have a think about which behaviours would be the least difficult to start experimenting with and begin with these, then gradually increase to those which are more difficult.



Clare's example of how much anxiety would be caused by experimenting with various avoidance and safety behaviours.

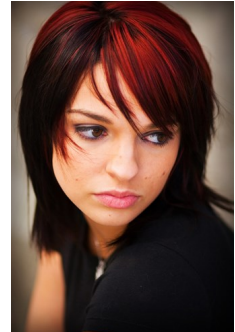
<i>Situation</i>	<i>Anxiety Rating (0-100)</i>
<i>Sitting at the front in the middle</i>	<i>90%</i>
<i>Sitting at the front, away from the exit</i>	<i>75%</i>
<i>Sitting at the front of the lecture</i>	<i>70%</i>
<i>Sitting in the middle of the lecture</i>	<i>50%</i>
<i>Sitting a few rows from the back</i>	<i>40%</i>



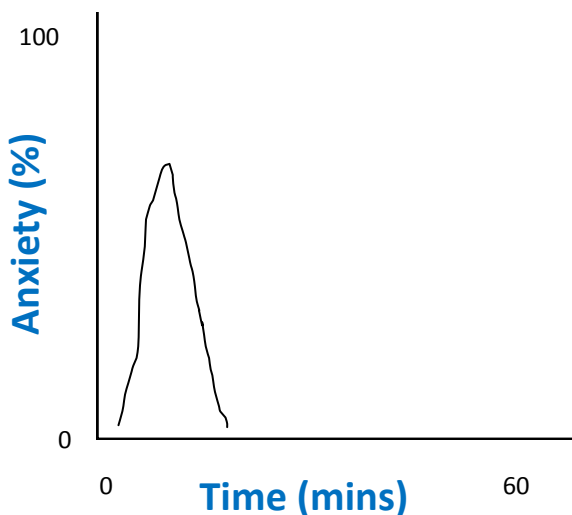
Avoidance, escaping and panic

As we saw from the vicious cycle of Panic, our behaviour can also be a strong factor that maintains anxiety. The fight or flight response tells us that there is something dangerous to respond to, so it's only natural that we would want to escape or avoid the perceived 'threat'. However, when the threat isn't dangerous, escaping or avoiding it can actually maintain the vicious cycle of panic.

I have had panic attacks when I've been in big open spaces where there are lots of people. Now all I think is "I need to get out of here otherwise I will have a panic attack" I try and leave as fast as possible.



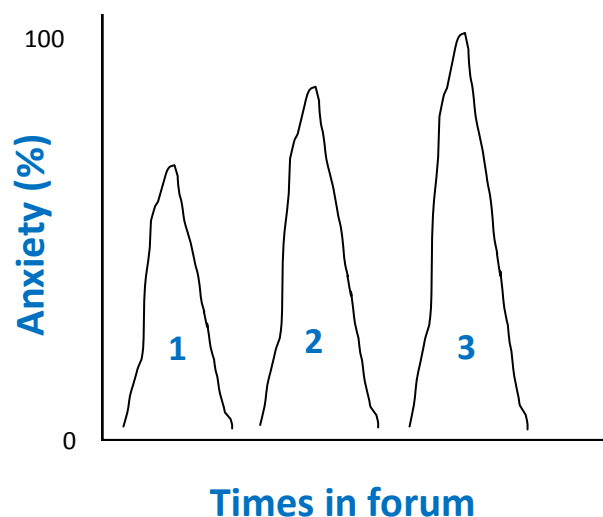
Escaping



The Escaping graph shows what happens to your anxiety when you avoid a feared situation. For Clare this would show her experience of going in the forum at lunch time. When she enters the forum her anxiety peaks really quickly. This feels so horrible that Clare gets out of there as quick as she can. When she leaves the forum she experiences a huge relief as the anxiety comes down. What she then remembers is the anxiety she felt in the forum and the relief she felt when she left.

The Escaping and Anxiety graph shows how over time avoiding the feared situation can actually increase anxiety. The graph above shows that when you escape a feared situation all you remember is how horrible you felt when you were in the situation and how relieved you felt when you got away. This means the next time you are in the same situation, the anxiety is worse than before and the desire to get away is even stronger. This is how phobias develop. Avoiding the situation means although we escape the anxiety temporarily, the situation will continue to trigger a strong reaction.

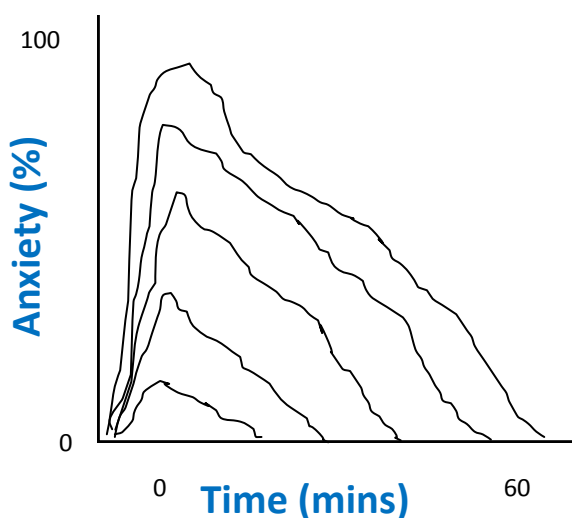
Escaping and anxiety



Tackling avoidance to overcome anxiety

Research has found that by tackling avoidance in a gradual, controlled and systematic way you can dramatically reduce the anxiety associated with a particular situation. This technique is called 'exposure therapy'. The idea of this may sound scary but on the next page we will go through how the process can be broken down to make it manageable. The graphs below show how exposure therapy works.

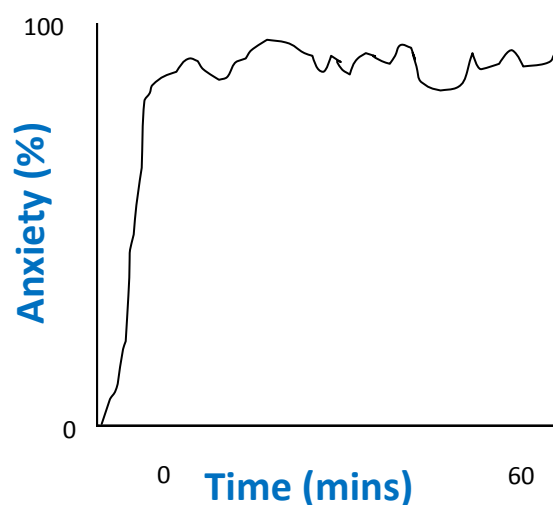
Exposure



The vicious cycle of anxiety can be broken by exposure to the feared situation. If we remain in the situation without escaping or distracting ourselves, our anxiety will start to come down on its own as our adrenaline response reduces. This process is called habituation. We then need to repeat this process for the initial feeling of anxiety to reduce. The initial anxiety we experience and the time it takes for us to habituate should decrease with each exposure.

Often when we face a situation that makes us feel anxious we try and make ourselves feel safer by distracting ourselves or doing certain things to reduce the anxiety. Although this can help in the short term, it also brings our attention back to the belief that the situation presents a threat. The fight or flight response then continues rather than reduces. Many people have tried to face their fears, however unless we experience the anxiety (as horrible as it can be) we won't habituate. Then the next time we are in the situation our anxiety is as high as it had been previously.

Distraction



Facing situations that cause you anxiety can be a really difficult to do. To make exposure more manageable it can be approached in a gradual, graded way.

4 Principals that make exposure effective

1 Graded

Rank activities according to the amount of anxiety provoked by the object or situation, starting with the easiest and finishing with the hardest. Then plan exposure exercises in a graded way using the activities on the list. For exposure to be effective you need to experience the anxiety reducing whilst you are in the situation. For this to happen you need to expose yourself to situations which cause you at least 60% anxiety when you first go into them. The higher up the list you can start, the quicker you will break the cycle of anxiety.

2 Prolonged

You need to remain in the situation until your anxiety has reduced by at least half. The time this takes can vary from person to person, you should initially allow yourself a few hours for exposure exercises. Your anxiety will reduce more quickly with each exposure exercise. If you don't stay in the situation long enough for your anxiety to come down then you will not feel a reduction in anxiety the next time you are in that situation. If anything it might even be worse.

3 Repeated

You also need to repeat the same exercise 3-5 times a week, the more you do it the quicker your anxiety will come down in that situation. Each time you repeat it you should notice a decrease in the initial anxiety you feel until you no longer find the situation fearful. Once you find your anxiety before the situation has reduced by at least 50% you can move onto the next activity on your hierarchy.

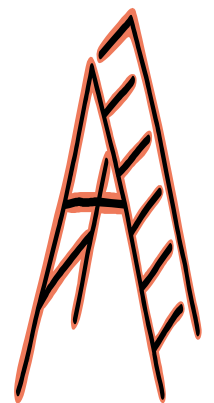
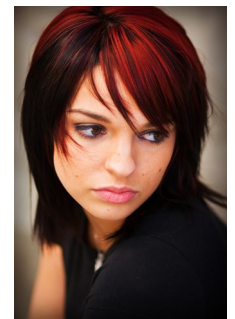
4 Without distraction

You need to fully feel the sensations of anxiety rather than distracting your mind from it or by doing things which make you feel safer. If you distract yourself then you will notice an effect similar to the 'distraction' graph. Rather than your anxiety reducing over time, you are constantly reminding yourself that the situation presents a threat and not learning that your anxiety will come down on its own, without doing anything else. It also means that the next time you are in that situation your anxiety will be just as high rather than it reducing. Distracting yourself from the anxiety keeps the vicious cycle of going!

Creating a hierarchy: Making it graded

Clare created a hierarchy for the situations that make her anxious which you can see below. First, she noted down the situations that caused her anxiety, then she identified which situation she would find most difficult and which she would find least difficult. Finally she put these into her hierarchy sheet and rated how anxious each situation would make her feel.

	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Anxiety Rating (0-100)</i>
Most Difficult	Town centre on a Saturday lunch time	90%
	Town centre on a week day lunch time	85%
	The forum around lunch time outside the market place	83%
	The forum at 3:00pm	70%
	Town centre at 5:00pm	72%
Least Difficult	Walking a different route back to my halls	68%
	Sitting in the park on my own	60%



It helps to consider nuances in the situation which affect your anxiety level – e.g. who is around at the time, how far you are from the feared object/activity, whether the time of day makes any difference. For Sally, the forum and town were more difficult when they were busier, e.g. at lunch time and on weekends.

Your hierarchy

Note down all the situations or objects which make you feel anxious. Start with the most difficult and work towards the least difficult. As we said before, be sure to consider nuances in the situation which affect your anxiety level – e.g. who is around at the time, how far you are from the feared object/activity.

	Situation	Anxiety Rating (0-100)
Most Difficult		
Medium Difficulty		
Least Difficult		



Setting up exposure exercises

It's really useful to plan exposure exercises on a weekly basis starting with the activity on the hierarchy that you feel able to do. Plan several times in advance when it would be possible to carry out the exercises. Rate anxiety as a percentage before (when you start to prepare for the exercise e.g. getting your coat or bag to go out), at the start (when you are in the situation) and at the end of the exercise (when your anxiety has reduced by half). Leave the duration box blank initially and fill this in after finishing the exercise with how long it took for your anxiety to reduce by at least half.

REMEMBER: You need to stay in the situation until your anxiety at the start of the exercise reduces by half, but the larger the reduction in anxiety, the easier it will be next time and the quicker the exposure process, so the longer you can stay in the situation the better!

Clare decided to start exposure by walking a different route back to her halls, she felt she would be able to manage this. At the start of the week she planned in a few exposure exercises, including what she was going to do, when she would do it and where it would take place. She then started to complete the exercises and recorded what happened to her anxiety on the exposure exercise worksheet. She could see from her ratings that her anxiety did reduce when she repeatedly exposed herself to a different route home.

Exercise	Time+ Date	Duration	Anxiety Rating 0-100			Comments
			Before the Exercise	Start of Exercise	After the Exercise	
Walk home via the tennis courts	Sat 1pm	1 hour 45 minutes	50	60	30	Felt v anxious initially but did get better
As above	Sun 3pm	1 hour	40	55	25	
As above	Wed 7pm	45 mins	38	50	22	Anxiety starting to go down quicker

Exposure Exercise Worksheet

Exercise	Time & Date	Duration	Anxiety Rating 0-100			Comments			
			Before the Exercise	Start of Exercise	After the Exercise				

Increasing energy levels: Physical activity

There are many benefits to physical activity, whether its exercise, sport or any activity that involves using energy. Research from the Cognitive Behavioural Centre in Newcastle found a single bout of exercise had benefits for those suffering from panic attacks.



Further benefits of physical activity

- It can increase your confidence, setting and meeting goals or challenges, even small ones.
- It can boost your self esteem and make you feel better about your appearance.
- It can be a positive distraction; exercise can help break a negative cycle of worries that can feed into anxiety.
- Exercise can give you an opportunity to socialise with other people.

Additional benefits:

- Releasing feel-good brain chemicals like neurotransmitters and endorphins.
- Reducing immune system chemicals that can worsen anxiety.
- Gets oxygen to the muscles and 'burns up' nervous energy.
- Improves fitness, energy levels and sleep.

Research has also found that green and blue spaces can help lift low mood which can have a positive effect on anxiety. Being out doors, in nature, by a river or the sea may be particularly beneficial. Have a think about what physical activities you enjoy that you are able to do. You might want to start adding these to a weekly diary. Try and build up how much you are doing each week, gradually increasing at a rate that you feel you can achieve.

Moving Forward

Well done on getting to the end of Overcoming Panic Attacks! It can be helpful to look back over the techniques you have learnt and to think about what has been the most helpful. This can help you to stay well in the future and ensure that you know what to do should you start to experience panic again in the future.

What have you learned?

Which techniques are most relevant for you?

How does panic affect you? (Thoughts / feelings / behaviours)

What areas are you going to work on?

What techniques will you use to do this?

A final note...

Well done for taking the first steps to tackle your Panic! It can be helpful to schedule in a Wellbeing day a month where you can focus on YOU! Where you can have a look back through this booklet to remind yourself of the different techniques that were helpful. If you schedule it in you'll be more likely to do it, these things can easily get lost or forgotten about otherwise.

Coping Tips

- You might feel as though you're still not where you want to be in terms of your panic. This is completely normal, remember that it can take time for these techniques to reverse the vicious cycle of panic. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is more effective the more you use it—like a muscle.
- If you found that they have made any difference at all even if its small this is encouraging, just keep up to good work and as time goes on you will notice it getting easier.
- Remember it is good to always be on the lookout for safety and avoidance behaviours and challenge them when you notice them!



