

Calming the Panic

Practical Skills to Reduce Anxiety

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Campus Wellness



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO



In this seminar you will learn

- Facts about panic and anxiety attacks
- Common symptoms of panic attacks
- Coping strategies to calm down your mind and your body



Panic facts

Facts about panic attacks

- Approximately 35% of college and university students have experienced a panic attack
- Described as “the worst feeling they have ever had”
- Most often experience their first panic attack in their late teens and through their twenties
- Panic attacks tend to increase in frequency, severity, and duration if left untreated
- Only 3% go on to develop a panic disorder

Common symptoms

- Shortness of breath
- Intense fear, dread, or terror
- Racing heart
- Tightness in chest, neck, or back
- Sweating: feeling hot or having chills
- Lump in throat, choking sensations, dry mouth
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Nausea or butterflies in stomach
- Needing to urinate or defecate
- Need to escape the situation
- Feeling unreal (de-realization)
- Feeling outside yourself and watching the situation
- Irrational thoughts or irrational fears
- Shaking or trembling

Panic symptom facts

- Everyone experiences panic differently
- Symptoms might be intense and can be often misinterpreted as:
 - That you must be dying
 - That you are having a heart attack
 - That you are suffocating
 - That you are losing control over your body
 - That you are going to faint and/or embarrass yourself

Symptoms can lead to

- More fear and focus on having another panic attack
- Avoiding situation or places that might trigger another panic attack



The good news

People can learn to reduce and eventually eliminate their panic attacks



Coping with panic attacks

Calming the mind

Go for a medical consultation

- Check with a physician to rule out any medical reason for the symptoms you are experiencing
- Result of knowing there are no medical concerns can bring great relief



Learn more about panic attacks

- Remember: Panic attacks are treatable
- Learning about how panic attacks happen and strategies to manage them, then using the strategies can provide significant relief
- 80-90% of people benefit from using coping strategies
 - Remember to use the strategies consistently
 - Have multiple strategies available
 - The more you practice your strategies, the better you will get at managing your panic attacks.

Remember that panic can't harm you

- Panic attacks do not cause heart attacks, mental illness, suffocation, fainting, loss of balance, etc
- Panic attack symptoms have never physically harmed anyone
- Fears are imaginary
- Understanding what your body is reacting to is fear and that it takes time for your body to breakdown adrenaline

Panic is related to the fight or flight response

- Panic attacks are a normal body response to threats or danger even though there is no danger
- The flight or fight response keeps you safe as it prepares the body to respond to danger
- This response poses no danger to your body
- Your body's response of fight or flight can be frightening but is temporary

Let go of trying to stop all symptoms

- Doing so creates more anxiety, fear, and frustration
- When adrenalin is released into your body it takes time to break down
- Usually symptoms peak in 3-5 minutes and then quickly subside
- Apply strategies to calm down your mind to help you get through the peak



Have an accepting attitude towards symptoms

- Understand that your body is not in danger
- Accept how your body is reacting
- Develop knowledge to calm body and mind
- Don't fight the symptoms – give the body time for symptoms to pass and let the adrenalin break down

Use positive, encouraging coping phrases

- Create a list of coping statements
- Begin to repeat the statements at the beginning of an attack
- Might be a single phrase or combination of statements. Ex. “This is temporary.”



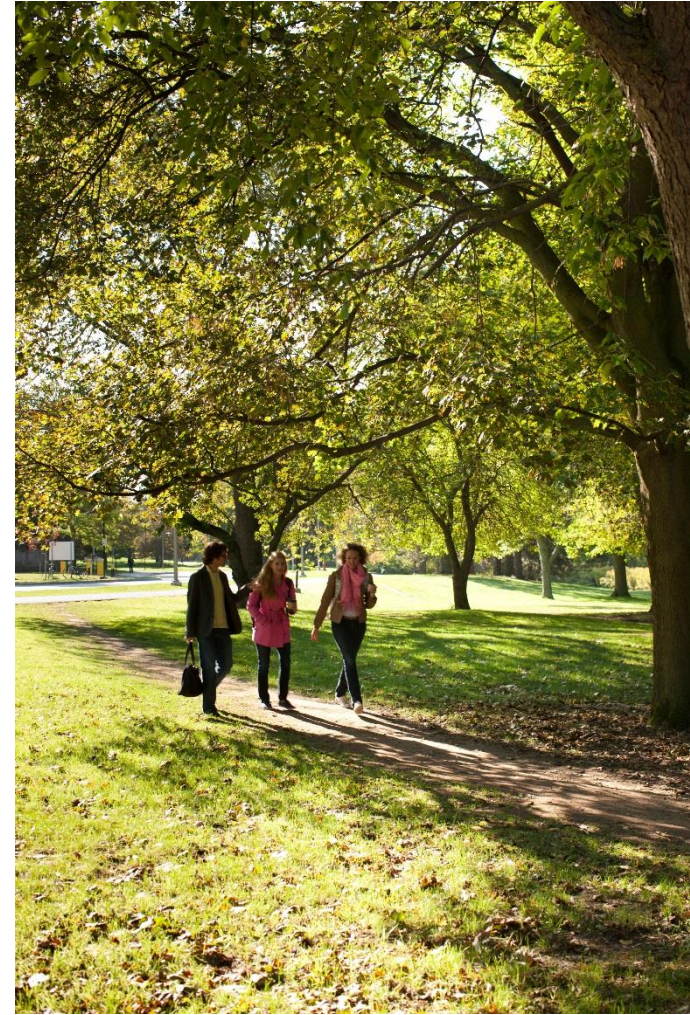
Examples of positive coping statements

- “That’s just my adrenalin kicking it – it will pass.”
- “I know what is happening in my body. I just need to breathe through it.”
- “I know what I can do. I have dealt with this before.”
- “This is an opportunity to practice what I have learned.”
- “I can survive this. I’ve done it before.”
- “I can’t stop the symptoms this instant and I don’t need to.”
- “It’s only anxiety. I’m not going crazy.”
- “Just need to go with the flow.”

Use distraction

Change your focus of attention from panic symptoms:

- Count backwards by 3 from 99
- Talk to a friend
- 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
 - What do I see?
 - What do I hear?
 - What sensations do I feel as the body is connected to the outside world?



Do a fun activity

- Pair a positive activity with negative feelings of a panic attack
- Creates positive feelings which are not compatible with anxiety
 - Have a shower
 - Listen to music
 - Eat something
 - Snuggle with a comfy blanket



Monitor your panic attacks

- Keep a log of your panic attacks - Use an app like the Self-Help Anxiety Management (SAM) app
- Logging helps you identify triggers and learn to manage them - Possible triggers can include:
 - Stress, fatigue, lack of sleep, too hot, stimulants, too much or low blood sugar
 - Certain people or situations
 - Increase in heart rate or increase in respiration
- Research shows that people prone to panic attacks tend to be overly focused on subtle changes in their body and interpret change as negative



Learn your early symptoms of panic

- Panic attacks start small and subtle and build to overwhelming
- Noticing early small signs and then applying coping/calming techniques can prevent a full blown panic attack
- Early symptoms include:
 - Sweaty hands, increase in heart rate, tightening muscles, or dizziness

Learn to rate your anxiety

- Ask yourself throughout the day: How intense is the anxiety?
0 = no anxiety, 10 = worst
- Watch the rise and fall of your anxiety throughout the day.
This reinforces that anxiety is temporary.
- Act with coping strategies when anxiety gets above 5/10
- Acting earlier can significantly decrease the frequency and intensity of panic attacks

Get support from friends and family

- Sharing that you have been experiencing panic attacks can reduce anxiety because it reduces fear of being “discovered in the middle of a panic attack”
- It can help to know you alone in dealing with your anxiety
- Can help remind you of coping strategies and help you to intervene before a panic attack
- You are not alone: 30% of people have experienced a panic attack in their life



Thought stopping techniques

- Interrupt the negative thought patterns
- Stop the catastrophizing thoughts
- Yell **Stop** either out loud or in your head
- Replace negative thoughts feeding the panic with self-encouraging coping thoughts



Express your feelings

- Holding in your feelings increases your overall stress level, which makes you more prone to panic attacks
- When calm, let others know how you are feeling. This can reduce your stress level
- Write out your feelings in a journal first, which can help you practice how to respectfully express your feelings

Containing worry exercise

Set aside time for worry (for example, 3-4 p.m. is worry time), which means you have 23 hours of no-worry time

When a worrying thought happens:

1. Write it down and put it in a worry file on your phone or computer or in a worry box
2. At 3-4 p.m. look at the worries in the file:
 - How many still apply? Work on a worry you can work on.
 - Check out the Worry Box App.

Leaves on a stream exercise

- A cognitive defusion exercise
- Comes from ACT: Acceptance and commitment therapy
- Defusion: A strategy to help separate you from your thoughts
 - You are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are not you.



Coping with panic attacks

Calming the body

Learn how to breathe

- Getting control of our breathing can help to get control of the other symptoms of panic
- Controlled slow breathing results in relaxation in the body – the opposite of the fight or flight response
- Controlled breathing prevents hyperventilating which makes a panic attack worse

Diaphragmatic breathing

1. Breathe slowly in through nose to the count of four
2. Put a hand on your stomach – it should rise with the breath
3. Exhale slowly through mouth to the count of four
4. Put a hand on your stomach – it should fall with the breath

Diaphragmatic breathing is a skill – you need to practice it when you are calm

- This will help you get comfortable so you can do it when you are at the beginning of a panic attack

Alternate nostril breathing

1. Block off the right nostril with the thumb
2. Breathe in through the left nostril, then block it
3. Breathe out through the right nostril
4. Breathe in through the right nostril, then block it
5. Breathe out through the left nostril
6. Repeat three times, slowly

Get your body moving

- With an adrenalin surge comes a surge of energy
- Use physical exercise to burn up energy surge vs. energy manifesting as anxiety
 - Walking, running, cycling, swimming, yoga
 - Cleaning, gardening
- The purpose is to get your body moving and discharge energy and body tension, reducing the likelihood of panic



Symptom induction techniques

Practice coping with the symptoms of anxiety:

1. Run on the spot for 3 minutes
2. Notice the increased heartrate, breathing more rapidly and maybe getting hot or sweaty
3. Notice the thoughts that accompany these sensations
4. Breathe as you notice your body starting to calm down

Progressive muscle relaxation

- Induces a state of relaxation in the body
- Involves systematically tightening (for 8-10 seconds) and then relaxing (for 15 seconds) muscle groups in the body

Coping with panic attacks

Calming the mind and body

Reduce your overall level of stress

- Can make you less at risk for panic attacks
- Small changes in daily routine to reduce stress can equal a big change in frequency and intensity of panic
 - Participate in daily exercise
 - Eliminate stimulants – caffeine, nicotine, sugar
 - Strive for a healthy balance diet
 - Build an emotional support system
 - Create a daily relaxation routine
 - Choose to slow down your life – learn to say no

Temporarily take a break from a situation

- If in an anxiety provoking situation, sometimes there is the option of leaving
- But you don't want to develop a pattern of avoidance
 - Once your symptoms have reduced and you feel more in control, go back into the anxiety-provoking situation
 - Goal: To control symptoms of anxiety so that you don't have to leave and you don't have a panic attack



Resources

Counselling Services

- Individual counselling
- Workshops and group therapy sessions
- Coping Skills seminars, online and in person
- UW Mates peer support

Contact us:

519-888-4567 ext. 32655

Needles Hall addition, 2nd floor

uwaterloo.ca/campus-wellness



Health Services

Book an appointment with a Health Services physician to talk about your options.

Contact us:

519-888-4096

Located in the Health Services Building across from the SLC.

uwaterloo.ca/campus-wellness



Other resources

- Centre for Clinical Interventions
– Coping with Panic online course
(http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/infopax.cfm?Info_ID=44)
- Here 24/7 talk line: 1-844-HERE-247
- Good2Talk talk line: 1-866-925-5454



1.866.925.5454

Post-Secondary Student Helpline



Disclaimer

The information on the University of Waterloo Counselling Services site is not intended as a substitute for medical professional help or advice but is to be used only as an aid. A physician should always be consulted for any health problem or medical condition.

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