

# Understanding panic

and our body's response to stress

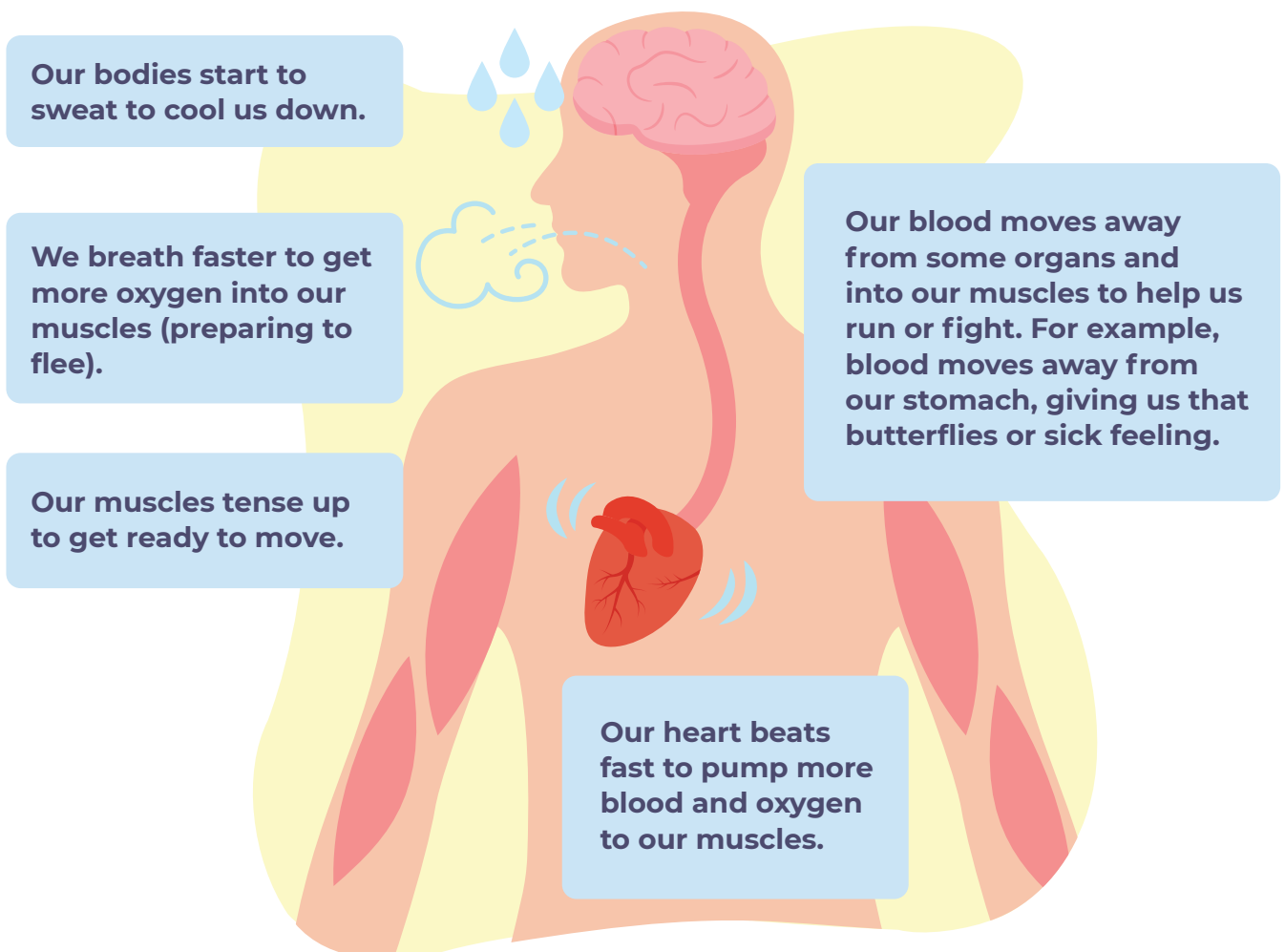


# Understanding panic and our body's response to stress

In this resource, we'll look at some of the main features of panic and our body's stress response, which is also called our 'fight-or-flight' response.

## 'Fight-or-flight' response

When we feel in danger, our bodies react by helping us get ready to either escape (run) or fight off whatever might harm us. This is a natural human reaction to keep us safe. When the 'flight-or-fight' response starts, different things happen within the body:



**The fight-or-flight response can cause physical sensations (feelings) in the body.**

**These physical sensations may include:**

- Feeling light-headed or faint
- Racing heart or irregular heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy or confused
- Tingling or numbness in our hands or legs
- Feeling breathless
- Cold or clammy hands
- Feelings of unreality or confusion
- Stiffness in our muscles
- Blurred vision
- Feeling hot



The most important thing you should know is that these physical sensations (feelings) are normal. They aren't really harmful to us, and aren't necessarily a sign that we have a serious problem with our health, or our mental health. They are a natural response that comes with worry and anxiety.

But they can become a problem when the fight-or-flight reaction is turned on over and over again. They also cause problems for us when there's little or no real danger in the situation we're facing. These sensations often increase our anxiety further, and make us more strongly believe something bad is going to happen to us. This can get us stuck in a cycle of anxiety. Never fear! But this cycle can be broken! Learning about panic (the 'fight-or-flight' response) and ways to support yourself using CBT will really help you!

## What is panic?

- When we think something bad is going to happen and the physical sensations of our 'fight-or-flight' response become really intense; we can begin to have what we call a 'panic attack'.
- These sensations usually increase and then decrease or get better over about 10 minutes.\*

*\*If your sensations are really severe, if you have heart problems or if you have not seen a doctor, we recommend that you talk to your GP or a health professional to make sure these sensations are a result of anxiety and not caused by something else.*

- The good news is you can have more control over these sensations than you might realise.
- There's a lot that you can do to reduce panic. This includes getting to know the common behaviours and anxious thoughts that trigger panic attacks.

Below is a list of common worries we can have when we experience panic.

## Common fears in panic attacks

- *I'll lose control*
- *I'm going crazy*
- *I'll have another panic attack*
- *I'll have a heart attack*
- *I might faint*
- *I'll never stop feeling this way*
- *I won't be able to breathe*
- *I'll die*



## The panic cycle

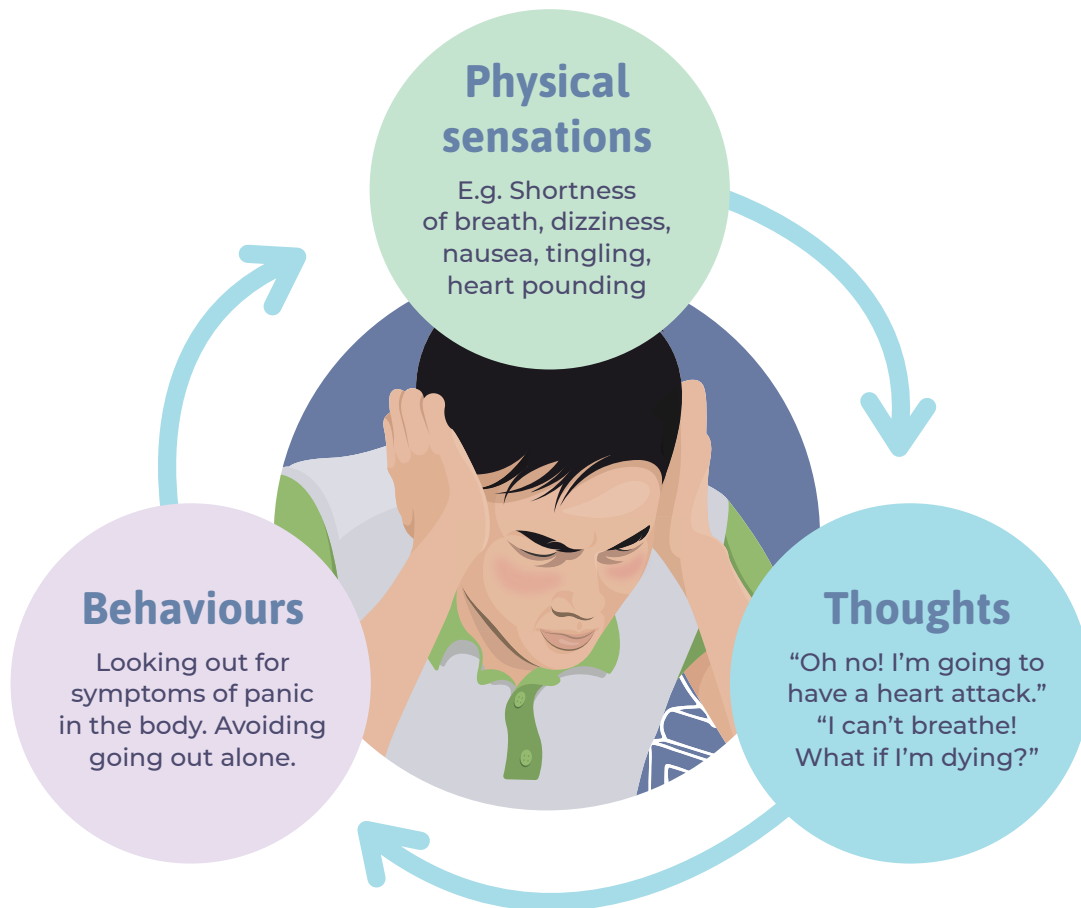
Even though they can't physically hurt you, panic attacks can feel very scary. It's common after experiencing a first panic attack, to worry about having more. It's also common to worry that panic might lead to something bad happening, like a heart attack or "going crazy". Unfortunately, these worries only increase our anxiety during panic, making it last longer and become more intense.

In a similar way, when we worry about having more panic attacks in the future, we feel more anxious, which in turn increases our chance of having more panic attacks.

It is common to begin planning ways to try and avoid having another panic attack, or planning actions that make us feel safer if we had one. This might include avoiding being on our own especially out in public, avoiding using public transport, driving, or avoiding open, enclosed or crowded places. These actions are called '**safety behaviours**', because we do them to feel safer, and less anxious.

The problem is, these **safety behaviours** only work in the short-term. Unfortunately, over the longer-term, they often make things worse by keeping people believing their panic attacks are dangerous, which keeps anxiety going.

Some safety behaviours can actually trigger a panic attack. For example, scanning the body for signs of a panic can increase anxiety. As anxiety increases, more physical sensations appear, which can lead to panic.



## What to do when you experience panic

Things that will help you to cope when you experience panic, or a panic attack include:

### 1. Notice the physical sensations, just as they are.

Try and describe the sensations you are having to yourself just as they are, rather than getting stuck worrying about what you think is happening (e.g. “I can feel my heart pounding faster” rather than “my heart’s beating out of control”).

### 2. Become aware of your level of anxiety.

Try giving it a rating out of ten. This helps you notice how you feel, rather than getting stuck with the worried thoughts you are having at the time.

### **3. Use controlled breathing.**

Slow, controlled breathing can really help. You use our '3-Minute Breathing Exercise' or the 'Mindfulness of Breath Audio' in your course Tips and Tools resources to get your breathing better under control. This will help your mind and body to begin to calm down.

### **4. Remind yourself that getting stuck with anxious thoughts and beliefs about panic, only make the panic worse.**

It can be helpful to say things to yourself like, "*I don't like this feeling because it feels really uncomfortable*" rather than, "*I'm going to have a heart attack*".

### **5. Remind yourself that the 'flight-or-fight' response is harmless.**

Remind yourself that what you are experiencing are just sensations; they may not feel nice and may seem scary, but they are not dangerous.

### **6. Give yourself time for the feelings to pass.**

Remember that the feelings will pass. Often, when we are having a panic attack, it seems like it is going to go on forever and only get worse if we don't do anything to stop it. However, the symptoms of panic are like a wave: anxiety may increase to a point, but it will always come back down, even if you don't do anything. Trying to allow the panic to pass on its own helps you understand that firstly, you can cope and secondly, that nothing bad will happen. By realising that panic attacks aren't dangerous, and they stop on their own in time, you'll feel less worried about having another one, which will lead to having less over time!

If you have any further questions, please email us at [hello@justathought.co.nz](mailto:hello@justathought.co.nz). We'll do our best to help.

Take good care.

Ngā mihi nui,

The Just a Thought Team

[www.justathought.co.nz](http://www.justathought.co.nz)