

## Panic Attacks – Stop Them With This Simple Method

Panic attacks are brief experiences of intense feelings of anxiety. They are caused when a person responds to something around them with a fight-or-flight response – the primitive mechanism used by the body to respond to physical threats. While intense and unpleasant, there is much that can be done to reduce or eliminate panic attacks by understanding how the mind produces them. In this article, I'll show you one method that you can use to deal with them effectively. Please note that this article is not medical advice. If you experience panic attacks, you should seek the guidance of your doctor or physician.

Panic attacks occur as a result of problems with the brain's emotional system. Humans evolved an emotional system to make sense of the world around them. If they saw something that was an opportunity, like a mate or some food, they felt pleasant emotions. If they saw something that was a threat, like a wild animal or a cliff edge, they felt unpleasant emotions. Often these unpleasant emotions took the form of a 'fight-or-flight' response, meaning that the person experienced either intense anxiety or intense anger to help them fight or run away from danger. Naturally, the system is designed to work very quickly, often before the person is fully aware of what they are responding to, because the quicker you're aware of a threat, the better your chances of avoiding it.

The same system is still at work today, but the nature of the threats that modern humans face is very different. Not only do we still respond to physical threats, but we've also learned to respond to things like criticism, rejection or humiliation as threats too. Our brains can come to treat just about anything as a threat, however small or subtle, and when we encounter it later on, we react with the fight-or-flight response in what feels like a panic attack.

Thankfully, it's quite possible to begin to reprogram the brain so that it no longer treats harmless objects or situations as threats. To do this, we can make use of a visualisation exercise as detailed below. Read the instructions through until you have memorised what to do, and then follow them step by step.

1. Take a moment to close your eyes and imagine in your mind a situation that would make you feel a moderate sense of panic. Don't pick anything severe, just something that is quite frightening but not so much that you're unable to think about it.
2. Be aware of what you'd see if you were in this situation. Imagine it as though you were looking at a large, square photo of it from your point of view.

3. Now imagine that photo moving backward into the distance, turning into a tiny dot and disappearing over the horizon.
4. As it does, see another dot travelling toward you. As it gets bigger and bigger, watch it turn into a large picture of you, just a little way into the future, looking calm and relaxed. Imagine that this is the you just a little while from now who no longer suffers from panic attacks, but is calm and relaxed.
5. Open your eyes, then close them again and repeat the exercise from step 1, using the same situation each time. Repeat the cycle at least five times, making sure to open and close your eyes between each repetition.
6. Test the results by thinking about the situation you chose in step 1. Does it still feel as frightening or uncomfortable as it did at the start? If any fear remains, simply repeat a few more cycles from step 1 until you find yourself comfortably able to think about the situation.

Although this exercise is simple, the results can be powerful. Your brain learns by associating feelings with objects. For example, if you go to a restaurant and have a good time, you come to associate good feelings with the name of the restaurant and the thought of what it looks like. Many panic attack responses are learned in the same way – you experience intense anxiety in a situation and thereafter associate those feelings with it. Using this technique, you can deliberately learn to associate new feelings with old situations, and thus learn to feel much calmer and relieve your panic attacks.

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