



JENNIFER BALLERINI, PSY.D

Helping People Build Better Relationships

PANIC ATTACK STRATEGIES

Cognitive Techniques

1. Become an expert on panic attacks and the body's fight-flight response. The more you learn about panic attacks and why they affect you the way they do, the more you'll be able to challenge your fear.
2. Remind yourself that although the experience of a panic attack is extremely uncomfortable and frightening, **it is not dangerous**. The sensations you're experiencing are normal bodily reactions to fear; you will not go crazy or have a heart attack. Your fight-flight response is just running the show for a few minutes.
3. Remember that panic attacks are **time-limited**. They are usually over in a few minutes, if not sooner.
4. Remember that the terrible things that you have imagined in the past, rarely, if ever, have come true. Studies show that 85% of the stuff we worry about ends up having a positive or neutral outcome. The few times that it doesn't, most people say that the negative outcome wasn't really that bad.
5. Ask yourself: **"What's the worst thing that can happen here?"** Observe how challenging your irrational thoughts helps calm you down and makes you feel more confident and in control.
6. Practice thought challenging to replace your irrational, stressful thoughts with more realistic, grounding ones.
 1. **Identify your negative thoughts.** Ask yourself, "What was I thinking when I started feeling anxious?" If this is hard to do, practice keeping an anxiety journal so that you can write your thoughts down as they happen.
 2. Examine each negative thought for **cognitive errors and distortions**, such as fortune

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telling, all-or-nothing thinking, etc.

3. Replace negative thoughts with realistic ones, removing the distortions and coming up with new ways to see yourself and your circumstances. An example of the above steps in action might look like...
 - a. Negative thought: "I'm going to have a panic attack while I'm driving and I'll have a heart attack on the freeway."
 - b. Cognitive distortion: catastrophizing.
 - c. Realistic thought: "Panic attacks are scary, but not dangerous. My heart is safe and I am healthy. If I have a panic attack, I will just pull over and it will pass in a few minutes."



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Behavioral Techniques

1. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and other **stimulants**, as they cause anxiety symptoms.
2. Get 30-60 minutes of brisk cardiovascular **exercise** almost every day.
3. Practice **yoga and/or meditation** regularly to help manage stress, increase peacefulness, and to soothe your nervous system. These help strengthen your body's "relaxation response," a great counterbalance to the stress kindling response that leads to panic attacks.
4. **Take good care of yourself.** Get enough sleep, spend time with friends and loved ones, engage in hobbies and activities you love, practice healthy eating, and avoid abusing drugs or alcohol.
5. **Reduce stress** in your life. Examine the causes of stress in your life—do you hate your job? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you failing to set boundaries with a needy friend? Take inventory of where you're struggling and start working to resolve or manage the sources of stress.
6. Practice deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation to help calm your body and to fight against hyperventilation.
 - **Box breathing** involves breathing in through your nose for a count of four, holding the breath for a count of four, and breathing deeply out through your mouth for a count of four. Practice repeating this for several minutes until you feel calm.
 - **Progressive muscle relaxation** involves deliberately tensing and then releasing each major muscle group, to experience the difference between tension and calm in the body.
7. **Avoid avoiding.** Fear gets worse the more we avoid our feared situations. Exposure therapy forces you to face your fears systematically until they no longer panic you, giving you a sense of control and self-confidence back. Exposure can be imaginal (in your head) or in vivo (in real life). All exposure work involves making a list of your feared situations and ranking them from least to most frightening. Rather than facing your biggest fear immediately, you start by working with the least scary items on your list, slowly and methodically working your way to the top, a process called **systematic desensitization**. The steps of exposure work are:



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- a. Learning **relaxation skills**, such as deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation. Practice this first when you are calm. You will later use this to combat physical symptoms of anxiety (such as hyperventilating).
 - b. Create an **exposure hierarchy**. List 10-20 things that frighten you and rank them from least to most scary. For example, if you are afraid of driving over bridges, you might begin by looking at pictures of bridges and work up to actually driving over one at the end of your treatment.
 - c. Start working through your list. Take each item and practice staying in each scary situation until your fears subside. This teaches you that your fears are not dangerous and that they **DO** go away. If the anxiety gets too intense, you can use your relaxation techniques to manage it.
8. **Stick to your treatment plan.** This is an extension of the “avoid avoiding” above. Just remember that recovering from an anxiety disorder isn’t an overnight process. Stay with it and keep being brave and you will get through this!
9. Learn to **distract yourself** from the physical and mental symptoms of runaway anxiety. Refocus your attention outside of yourself using some of the distraction techniques below.
- Count backwards from a large number by sevens or some other number (for example, 856, 849, 842, 835, etc.).
 - Take part in a fun and challenging game that requires some level of attention, such as a crossword puzzle or Sudoku.
 - Focus your attention on your environment. Name all the colors in the room. Try to memorize and recall all the objects that you see in a room.
 - Do something creative. Draw a picture or build a model.
 - Do some chores, such as cleaning the house, doing laundry, or washing dishes.
 - Read a good book or watch a funny movie.