

VCSS - Coping with Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural reaction to feeling threatened and can lead to symptoms of panic. These symptoms are natural and not harmful and may include: increases in heart rate, difficulty breathing, and feeling profoundly unsafe. Following a traumatic event you may find that these symptoms appear in inappropriate circumstances or have a negative impact on your day-to-day living or functioning. For example, you may find it difficult to do everyday things due to feelings of panic, for what seems like no apparent reason.

- Remember panic feelings are **only normal reactions** that are exaggerated. Try to relax. It may feel like you are about to die but you won't. Try to remember that a panic attack feels bad but they are only an adrenaline rush, they do pass and you won't be harmed by them.
- It can be helpful to say to yourself, "this panic attack will not hurt me, nothing worse will happen."
- Thinking about what *might* happen is unhelpful. **Only now matters.** Notice what is happening in your body now. Accept the feelings. Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly. Listen for your heartbeat getting slower and more relaxed. Sometimes putting your head between your legs can help if you are dizzy. Stay with the present. Slow down, relax, but keep going.
- **Consciously relax your tense muscles.** Feel yourself relaxing. Imagine somewhere safe and restful, perhaps a place, or activity you enjoy. Remind yourself of the positive people and support you have.
- Monitor your level of anxiety: if 10 is the worst and 0 is the least watch the level go down.
- **Stay in the situation.** If you run away, avoid or escape, it will be more difficult in the future.
- It can be helpful after an attack to write down how you were feeling or tell a support person. Panic attacks can be related to unexpressed anger or a feeling of being trapped. Perhaps you have had an unusually stressful week? Are you asking too much of yourself at the moment? Are there things in your life you can say no to, put on hold, or get support with? A good way to think about panic attacks is that they are a message from the universe for you to take care of yourself.
- Now begin to concentrate again on what you were doing before.

Sources:

Powell, T. 1992. "*Managing Anxiety.*"

Adapted from the Victorian Centre Against Sexual Assault Information Sheet "Panic Attacks"