

**RASA**  
Merseyside

Sexual  
Violence  
Services

Information  
for survivors of  
sexual violence

# Panic Attacks



Data and content supplied  
by Rape Crisis Scotland

# Panic attacks

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## What are panic attacks?

- » Panic attacks are an intense feeling of distress or fear that something awful is going to happen
- » They are the body's response to fear. When under threat, we get ready to defend ourselves by running away, fighting back or freezing until danger is past ('fight or flight response'). Although you are not in actual danger, your body behaves and reacts as if you are
- » Panic attacks are a natural reaction to experiences of sexual violence and trauma
- » They can come without warning, or may be caused by an emotional crisis or a traumatic event. They often happen when you are stressed and anxious, or are linked to something that you associate with a past trauma
- » Although they are very frightening, they do not mean that you are in danger now
- » If you are able to understand why panic attacks happen, they may not be so frightening

## How do panic attacks affect survivors of sexual violence?

- » Adrenalin pumping through your body and increased oxygen in your muscles and blood flow (so you can run faster) cause physical symptoms such as: sweating, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, numbness, wobbly legs and faster breathing and heartbeat
- » Emotionally, you may feel you are losing control, going mad, about to die, have a sense of impending doom and feel absolutely terrified
- » Feeling like this is alarming in itself, and can make you feel even more anxious
- » Anxiety about panic attacks can also mean that people isolate themselves and avoid certain places and situations. Although this may feel helpful in the short-term it can cause other problems in the longer-term

If this is happening to you, it is a natural response to your experience of sexual violence.

There are things you can do to manage panic attacks and reduce the anxiety, stress and other issues they can cause.

## What you can do: self-care tips for survivors

Survivors have found the following helpful for managing panic attacks:

### When you have a panic attack:

- » Try not to panic about the panic
- » Distract yourself. Try to focus on something in your surroundings and describe this to the last tiny detail
- » Focus on your breathing. It will help your body to relax naturally. Take slow deep breaths in and out. Relax your shoulders back; breathe out; and pull your stomach muscles into your spine. Breathe in deeply, in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 5. Put your hand on your tummy and watch this rise and fall as you breathe
- » Try to slow down your breathing. It can help to breathe in the air you have just breathed out as it is full of carbon dioxide. You need to get more carbon dioxide into your blood. You could breathe into a paper bag (not plastic). Or cup your hands over your mouth to catch the air from your outbreath and breathe it back in. Do this for a few minutes and the worst of the symptoms should disappear
- » When you panic, you tense up your muscles. By relaxing them, you can reduce the effects of the panic attack. One way to relax them is to tighten them up first. Start with your toes and work up through your body, tensing and then relaxing your legs, buttocks, tummy, shoulders, arms, fingers... For example, breathe in,

tighten up your toes, hold for a few seconds, then release and breathe out. Try to feel all the tension leaving your body

- » Think of some words which are soothing and reassuring, personal and positive, and repeat them to yourself. Picture something that makes you feel happy and safe. Try to visualise being calm and relaxed when you are dealing with difficult situations
- » Tell yourself you are having a panic attack and that this is a temporary and natural reaction to what happened. It will pass. It will not hurt you

### **After a panic attack:**

- » After a panic attack you may feel quite shaken up. It may help to sit down with a hot drink. Try to make yourself comfortable. Maybe put on your favourite jumper, wrap yourself up in a blanket or listen to music
- » Lie down with one hand on your chest and one on your tummy. Breathe in for 5 beats and out for 5. You can also do this at the first sign of a panic attack
- » You may feel weak, emotional and tired. Try to give yourself time to restore a sense of calm. Don't put pressure on yourself to recover or get on with things
- » You may worry about it happening again. This may cause another panic attack. Taking your mind off these worries and concentrating on something else can help your mind to relax. You could read, do a crossword or sudoku puzzle

## **Reduce panic attacks:**

- » Cut down on caffeine as this speeds your body up. Caffeine is in coffee, tea, chocolate and fizzy drinks. Avoid stimulants, such as cigarettes and alcohol. Eat regular meals and avoid processed foods and drinks, to keep blood sugar levels stable
- » Take regular exercise
- » Reduce any unnecessary stress. Try new ways of saying what you need and asserting yourself
- » Find someone you trust to confide in, such as a family member, friend or support service
- » Learn breathing techniques: breathe more slowly and deeply all the time
- » Recognise when panic attacks are starting as this can help you control them. It may help to keep a note of the place, time and thoughts immediately before the panic attack. This can help you see if there is any pattern
- » Identifying what triggers panic attacks can help you to plan and manage difficult situations and regain control
- » Learn ways to challenge unhelpful thoughts (see website links below)
- » Use relaxation techniques such as yoga or listening to soothing music. The RCS Helpline can send you a free CD which teaches relaxation if you would find this helpful

**Remember: you are important. Your feelings matter. You do not have to cope on your own.**

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## Help and information

**There are many people who want to help. You can phone/email the RCS Helpline for support and information. We can tell you about services in your area. You do not need to give your name. RCS Helpline (6pm to midnight every day) on 08088 01 03 02 or email anytime on [support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](mailto:support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)**

If you are feeling overwhelmed and you think this is having a serious effect on your health, speak to your GP or another professional. They may be able to refer you for talking or other therapies which can help you manage better.

The information in this leaflet draws on various sources including those below. **You can find more information online at:**

- » [www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)
- » Information after rape and sexual assault:  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/13141931/0)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)
- » [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/Anger.asp)
- » [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- » [www.getselfhelp.co.uk](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk)

App: eCBT Trauma

**A useful book is:** *The Courage to Heal Workbook: For Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Laura Davis, 1990. Published by: HarperCollins in paperback.

## Local rape crisis centres

Rape Crisis Centres are located in all local authorities in Scotland; for the most up to date contact information and referral criteria please go to: [www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/](http://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-local-rapecrisis-centres/)

### **Aberdeen**

Rape Crisis Grampian

### **Argyll & Bute**

Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis Centre

### **Dumfries & Galloway**

Rape Crisis & Sexual Abuse Support Centre

### **Dundee**

Women's Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre

### **East Ayrshire**

The STAR Centre

### **Edinburgh**

Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre

### **Fife**

Fife Rape & Sexual Assault Centre

### **Forth Valley**

Forth Valley Rape Crisis

### **Glasgow & Clyde**

Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis Centre

### **Lanarkshire**

Lanarkshire Rape Crisis Centre

### **Moray**

Moray Rape Crisis

### **Orkney**

Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service

### **Perth**

Rape & Sexual Abuse Centre Perth & Kinross

### **Highland**

Rape & Sexual Abuse Service Highland

### **Scottish Borders**

Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

### **Shetland**

Shetland Rape Crisis

### **Western Isles**

Western Isles Rape Crisis Centre





**Helpline 0151 666 1392**  
**[helpline@rasamerseyside.org](mailto:helpline@rasamerseyside.org)**

**Helpline Times:**

Tuesday - 6-8pm

Thursday 6-8pm

Friday 12-2pm

**Information & Referral Line Contact Numbers:**

Liverpool/Sefton 0151 558 1801

Wirral 0151 650 0155