

What Keeps Panic Going?



People who panic tend to misinterpret harmless body sensations as being signs of impending doom or catastrophe. You might have thoughts like:

- I'm going to die.
- I'm going to lose control.
- I can't breathe, I'll pass out.
- I'm having a heart attack.

Interpreting your body sensations as a sign of catastrophe activates your fight or flight system. This leads you to experience even more uncomfortable and frightening body sensations in a worsening cycle.

If someone told you there was an escaped tiger in your neighborhood, you would probably keep a lookout when you left your house. It's the same for body sensations that you think are dangerous - you stay on the lookout for them.

The problem of being on the lookout is that you're more likely to notice things. Even noticing and worrying about harmless body sensations can set off a 'false alarm' in your fight or flight system and trigger anxiety.

Misinterpreting what your body sensations mean

Being on the lookout for 'dangerous' body sensations

What keeps it going?

Panic

Avoidance and safety-seeking behaviors

Safety-seeking behaviors are the things that you do to prevent the worst from happening. People with panic often do things like:

- Carry medication (just in case).
- Look for the exits (in case they need to make a quick getaway).
- Distract themselves (to prevent panic from escalating).
- Avoid exercise or coffee (to avoid increasing their heart rate).

Safety behaviors can make you feel reassured in the short term, but they come with unintended consequences. They can prevent you from learning that your panic symptoms are just the result of a 'false alarm' from your fight or flight system.