

Inclusion Thurrock IAPT
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NHS inclusion
- Thurrock IAPT -

Managing Panic

Session 2: Understanding why panic attacks happen

Jan 2020

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Housekeeping

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Keeping yourself safe


Sometimes emotional difficulties can lead to feelings of despair, including thoughts about hurting yourself, ending your own life or hurting others.

- Speak to a friend or family member
- Call NHS direct on111 select option 2 'in mental health crisis'
- Call the Samaritans 116 123
- In an emergency got to A&E for assessment
- Visit you GP to explore your options
- Please find details in your handouts.



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Course Slides and Worksheets



- We will be going through quite a lot of information throughout this course.
- So, you may find it helpful to download the slides in advance or for your own records.


Slides and worksheets to support home tasks can be found on our website at:

<http://inclusionthurrock.org/panic-materials/>



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Course Overview



Session 1: Recognising symptoms of anxiety and panic

Session 2: Understanding why panic attacks happen

Session 3: Reducing and managing panic attacks

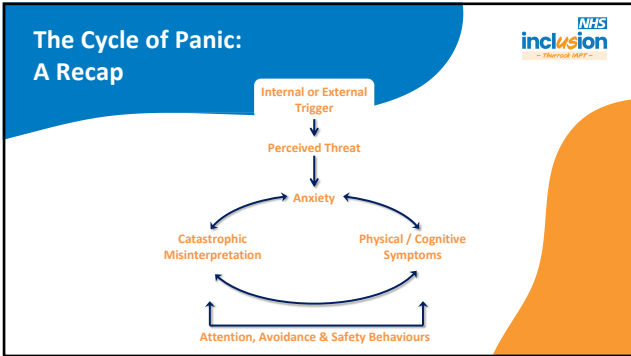


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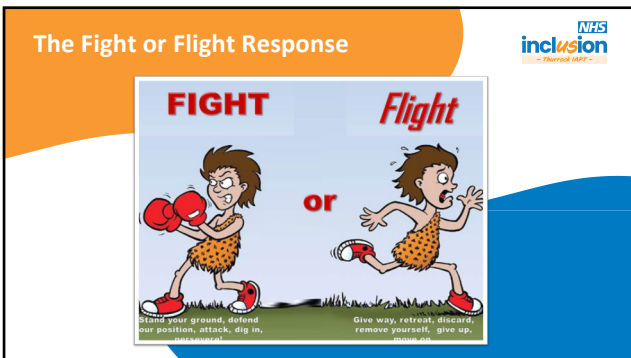
Session Aims

- To learn about the Fight or Flight response and what happens in our body when we panic
- To understand why panic symptoms are not dangerous
- To begin challenging some Catastrophic Misinterpretations of panic symptoms
- To learn how Selective Attention and Safety Behaviours keep panic attacks going

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The Fight or Flight Response

- When we feel scared or under threat, our brain triggers the Fight or Flight Response.
- This triggers several automatic changes in our body which prepare us to fight the threat or run away from it.
- The area of our brain which triggers the response has not evolved since we were cavemen, who were under constant and serious threat from predators.
- Now, our brain activates the same response regardless of threat level – think back to the faulty car alarm that rings in the wind.

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The Fight or Flight Response



The slide features a blue header with the title 'The Fight or Flight Response' and the NHS inclusion logo. Below the header, there is an illustration showing a cavewoman with a club and a tiger on the left, followed by an equals sign, and a businessman with a briefcase and a spider on the right. The background is white with an orange curved shape on the right side.

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Changes During Fight or Flight



The slide features a blue header with the title 'Changes During Fight or Flight' and the NHS inclusion logo. In the center is a blue silhouette of a human figure. To the left of the figure are the following symptoms: Thoughts racing, Changes in vision, Heart beats faster, Muscle tension, Nausea, and Sweating/hot flushes. To the right of the figure are: Dizzy, unsteady or light-headed, Dry mouth or throat, Rapid breathing, Breathlessness, Bladder urgency, and Shaking. The background is white with an orange curved shape on the right side.

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Symptoms of Anxiety in the Body



The slide features a blue header with the title 'Symptoms of Anxiety in the Body' and the NHS inclusion logo. In the center is a blue silhouette of a human figure. To the left of the figure are the following symptoms: Thoughts racing, Changes in vision, Heart beats faster, Muscle tension, Nausea, and Sweating/hot flushes. To the right of the figure are: Dizzy, unsteady or light-headed, Dry mouth or throat, Rapid breathing, Breathlessness, Bladder urgency, and Shaking. The background is white with an orange curved shape on the right side.

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Key Points to Remember



- Fight or Flight is a **survival** mechanism – it would be a useless survival mechanism if it actually did us harm.
- We can't stay in Fight or Flight for long – many of the changes cannot be sustained for more than half an hour or so.
- Our brain always reverses these changes – because they cannot be sustained, our brain automatically brings us out of Fight or Flight after this time.

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Catastrophic Misinterpretations



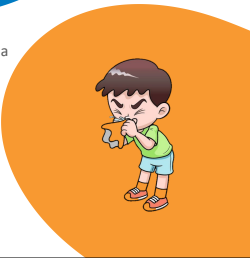
- The key to breaking the cycle of panic is not misinterpreting your anxiety symptoms.
- When we notice a change in our body, we look for an explanation and this can make us anxious.
- If we are able to confidently tell ourselves why we noticed the symptom, we do not misinterpret them and aren't drawn into panicking.

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An Example




- Imagine you woke up one day with a blocked nose, a headache, and you were sneezing more than usual.
- What would you think is happening in your body? Would it make you anxious trying to work it out?
- Now imagine you have hay fever and these are symptoms you commonly experience.
- Would you feel less anxious because you could explain the symptoms?




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Increased Heart Rate




- To fight or run away, we need be able to use our muscles.
- Our heart pumps blood to our muscles to ensure we are able to use them.
- When in Fight or Flight, our heart pumps more blood to our muscles so we are well-prepared.




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Quick or Shallow Breathing




- Oxygen is what we use to power our muscles.
- In Fight or Flight, we need more oxygen to prepare our muscles to fight or run away.
- So, our breathing becomes much faster so we can take in more oxygen.



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Dizziness, Muscle Tension and Shaking



If we do not use up this excess oxygen, our brain can become flooded with it which causes dizziness.


Our body has some strategies for using it up, which can include tensing our muscles, or shaking.

When we are anxious, we build up a lot of excess energy and this energy has to go somewhere.



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Racing Thoughts and Changes in Vision




- When in a situation that may be dangerous, we need to be able to pay attention to potential threats.
- Our vision changes to allow this, which can cause 'tunnel vision' where our attention is directed to one specific place.
- Our thoughts race so we can evaluate threats and make quick decisions to keep ourselves safe.
- This is why it is hard to pay attention to anything other than the situation you are panicking in.

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Nausea and Dry Mouth




- When fighting or running, there is less need for us to digest food as avoiding threat becomes our priority.
- So, we reduce blood flow to our digestive system so more blood can get to our muscles.
- This can cause the sensation of 'butterflies in our stomach' when our blood flow changes.
- Our digestive system includes our mouth, so when digestion slows our mouth becomes dry.




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Bladder Urgency





- Like our digestive system, our bladder functioning is not key to our survival when under threat.
- The muscles in our bladder may relax during Fight or Flight to allow for more blood flow to other muscles that are more important at the time, e.g. arms or legs.



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Sweating / Hot Flashes



- When our body is cool, it is more efficient.
- Sweating, although we may feel hot, actually cools us down.
- To ensure our body can work properly, we may sweat when anxious to keep cool and make sure we can respond to danger.

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Selective Attention



1. Hold your left hand out in front of you like this.
2. Now focus all of your attention on your hand for one minute.
3. What did you notice?

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Selective Attention



- When we focus attention on one part of our body, every small sensation or change in them is magnified.
- When noticing a physical sensation during panic, we often divert attention to that sensation and so notice any small exaggerations of it.
- This makes us more anxious and more likely to keep panicking.
- Breathing exercises do not necessarily stop a panic attack – they encourage you to divert attention to your breathing.

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Why are Safety Behaviours Unhelpful?

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We panic because we fear that something catastrophic will happen to us, e.g. we could die of a heart attack.

We develop safety behaviours to make sure that this catastrophic thing can't happen and take that fear away.

So our brain associates the safety behaviour with preventing the catastrophe from happening – that we kept ourselves safe.

However as we know, panic attacks themselves are safe, so do we need the safety behaviour?

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Why are Safety Behaviours Unhelpful?

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I have a red button that I have to press every day at 5pm, or the world will end.

Not wanting the world to end, I have been pressing it every day.

How can I test that this button actually stops the world from ending?



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Why are Safety Behaviours Unhelpful?


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- By getting rid of our safety behaviours, our brain gradually learns that panic symptoms are safe.
- Next time we experience them, we won't jump straight from 0-100%

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The Role of Language




- Take a moment to think about the language we use to describe these experiences.

“Panic Attack”

- *Panic*: ‘a sudden strong feeling that prevents reasonable thought and action’
- *Attack*: ‘to try and hurt or defeat using violence’

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**What keeps us Panicking?
A Summary**



- We misinterpret panic symptoms as something more dangerous if we do not know why they are happening.
- These symptoms occur when our brain activates Fight or Flight and they are safe, designed to protect us.
- Selective Attention means we pay more attention to panic symptoms and exaggerate them in our mind.
- Safety Behaviours tell us that panic is not safe, so our brain assumes they stop a catastrophe from happening, even though it would not have anyway.

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Home Task



- Today we discussed the reasons behind all of the panic symptoms you may experience.
- Next week, we will bring everything together and show you how to challenge negative thoughts about panic attacks.
- To challenge your thoughts, you need a good understanding of what happens for you when you panic


- Using your panic summary from last week, explain why you experience your panic symptoms and what is actually happening in your body

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Home Task Examples



Panic Symptom	Explanation
Heart rate increasing	My heart is pumping more blood to my muscles so they are prepared for Fight or Flight.
Sweating	My body is sweating to keep itself cool and make sure it is working effectively if I need to Fight or Flight.
Legs shaking	I have a lot of oxygen left over after panicking, so my legs are shaking to use it up to avoid me feeling dizzy later.

‘When my heart rate increases, my heart is pumping more blood to my muscles to prepare them to fight or run away. My body also sweats to keep me cool, and I notice my legs shaking. My legs shake because I have taken in a lot of oxygen that needs to be used up by releasing energy.’



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Final Questions?



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