



What are Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder?

A panic attack is a sudden and sometimes unexpected increase in anxiety which can be extremely distressing. Characterized by a rush of physical sensations, you may experience heart palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pains, dizziness, feeling hot, faint and shaky and sometimes feeling disconnected from yourself or the immediate environment. Many young people who struggle with panic symptoms also describe a general feeling of dread. Although extremely frightening, panic attacks are not harmful or dangerous. However, the impact of the panic attacks or the fear of having them, can have far ranging effects on your daily life. This may include you staying at home and avoiding school / University lectures, avoiding crowded environments such as the cinema, shopping centres and even using public transport.

If you have a panic disorder or struggle with panic symptoms, you may also have some degree of agoraphobic avoidance. Agoraphobia is a fear of being trapped or not being able to escape situations. You may also believe that you wouldn't be rescued or helped should you have a panic attack. Over time, you may have found ways to help you feel safer or reduce the risk of having a panic attack such as avoiding school assemblies or lectures, having an exit card that you can use in lessons, making sure that you sit on the end of an aisle in a cinema or theatre so that you have a quick exit route if needed. At its worst, you may have found it too difficult to leave the house, or to only do so when you're accompanied.

Can treatment help?

The evidence-based treatment for panic disorder (with or without agoraphobia) is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Panic problems can become very severe and restrict day to day life. A short course of CBT may be effective for less severe Panic Disorder, but for young people who have experienced Panic for several years and/or have additional anxiety problems, treatment may require more sessions.

CBT Assessment and Key Treatment Strategies:

At Bristol CBT Clinic for young people, an assessment will include use of standardised questionnaires that assess the severity of the panic, how it impacts on daily life, what thoughts and beliefs are associated with the problem, and an assessment of other difficulties. Following assessment, treatment may focus on the following:

- Developing a shared understanding of the true (harmless) causes of the Panic symptoms and what is keeping the Panic going
- Working together to agree goals for treatment
- Testing out beliefs about feared symptoms and developing less threatening and more helpful beliefs about the panic sensations and what they may mean
- With the support of the therapist, gradually facing avoidance with the aim of going out to places and engaging in activities which are currently avoided.
- Agreeing a coping plan which focuses on engaging in a life which isn't limited by panic symptoms.