

Grounding Yourself in a Panic Attack: Techniques for Reclaiming A Sense of Control

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

"But it couldn't be a panic attack. I wasn't worrying about anything." Sometimes, panic attacks seem to come out of left field, and you can't identify a trigger or any reasonable explanation of why one would happen now. Panic attacks can occur without an identifiable trigger or even an obvious warning although some subtle physiological warning signals may be occurring often outside the person's awareness. That's the thing with panic attacks; they can be unexpected, and they can hit you like a ton of bricks. They can also occur in connection with an already elevated state of anxiety, complete with a threat (actual or imagined), fight/flight/freeze/fawn response, cognitive and emotional responses to physiological changes, and the resulting escalation of symptoms. For instance, if someone experiences a car accident while driving, develops a fear of driving, and starts avoiding it, a situation might arise where driving becomes unavoidable. In this scenario, getting behind a car's wheel can trigger panic.

Often-cited physical symptoms of panic include difficulty with breathing, pounding, racing heart, dizziness, chest pain, chills and sweating, trembling, choking, nausea and stomach pain, and numbness. Psychological symptoms include feelings of unreality, fear of losing control, fear of appearing crazy to others, and fear of dying.

Panic can feel overwhelming, helpless, and out of control. However, effective grounding techniques can help you regain your composure and restore peace of mind. One of the first things that people often do is seek safety. During a panic attack, people often experience a driving urge to find a safe place. Some of that need for "safety" might be about seeking privacy outside of the public eye and the need for control. Finding a safe place creates a contained and manageable environment to focus on regaining control of your mind and body.

Many people discover that they have been hyperventilating during a panic attack. Practicing slow, deep breathing calms down the nervous system, lowers the heart rate, and gives you a sense of regaining control over your physical responses. Several recommended deep breathing exercises exist, and a straightforward one includes closing your eyes. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, counting to four, hold your breath for a count of four, then exhale through your nose, also counting to four. Repeat this process until you feel relaxed.

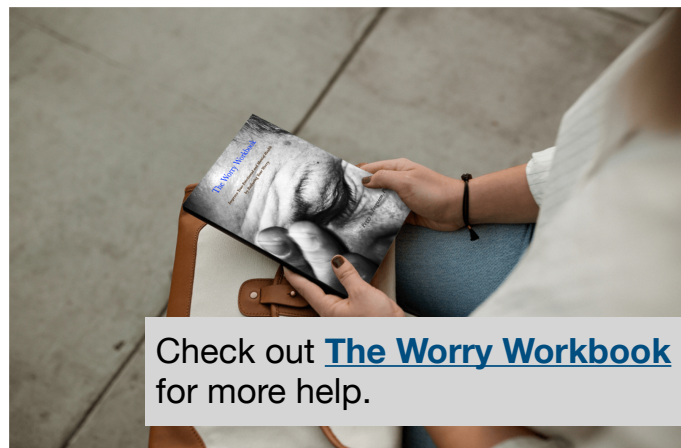
Another method, the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, involves identifying and naming five things you can see in your environment: four things you can physically feel, three things you hear, two things you smell, and one thing you can taste. By actively engaging your senses, you redirect your focus away from the panic and ground yourself in the present moment.

Talking yourself down with self-soothing statements can be highly effective in managing panic attacks. Speak to yourself in a gentle, reassuring manner, such as saying, "I am safe," "This will pass," or "I can handle this."

Cognitive therapy techniques can help you reframe your thoughts and reassure yourself during a panic attack. When physical symptoms like a racing heart occur, remind yourself that these are common symptoms of panic and anxiety. Use statements like, "My heart is racing because I'm anxious; it's a normal response, and I've experienced this before and lived through it. I am okay." Cognitive therapy is effective in preventing a panic attack that is expected or cued.

Incorporating these grounding techniques, self-soothing self-talk, and cognitive therapy can significantly reduce the intensity and duration of a panic attack. Use these techniques when panic occurs to regain control, reduce distress, and develop mastery over these techniques. Over time, you will become better equipped to manage and overcome panic attacks, restoring peace of mind and control over your life. If panic

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