

# ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

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YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

APRIL 2022



## ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

### WHAT ARE ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease. It can range from mild to severe, and can include feelings of worry and fear. Panic is the most severe form of anxiety.

Panic attacks are the sudden and often intense reaction to fear or anxiety that can trigger specific physical reactions in the body.

Panic attacks can be very intense and cause shortness of breath, a racing heartbeat, chest pain, a feeling of dread or a fear of dying. They can feel very frightening but they are not dangerous.

When anxiety or panic attacks affect your daily life and cause significant distress, you need to seek help and support.

### WHAT CAUSES AN ANXIETY OR PANIC ATTACK?

To better understand anxiety and panic attacks we first need to consider how the brain reacts in certain situations and how this reaction leads to symptoms.

The brain controls the autonomic nervous system that in turn regulates bodily functions - such as heart-rate, blood flow, digestion, breathing, urination, sexual arousal.

It is the primary mechanism for the 'fight or flight' response and is activated when we perceive danger - whether it is real or not.

Stress hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol are released which stimulate the body and cause an increase in heart-rate, breathing, sweating, and dilation of pupils.

This survival mechanism impedes other brain functions such as those that are involved with decision-making, thinking clearly, and problem solving.

In some situations this response can be helpful, but in others it can have a negative effect and result in the feelings we associate with anxiety and in panic attacks.



#### **Anxiety and Panic Attacks**

was written by Dr Lisa Dvorjetz, Advisory Psychologist to the ME Association.

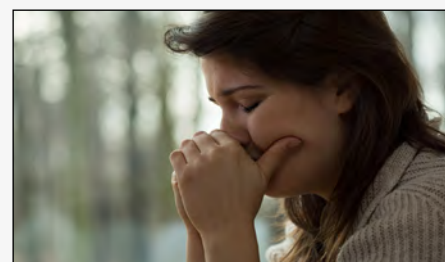
Dr Lisa Dvorjetz is an accredited counselling psychologist with both the British Psychological Society and the Health and Care Professions Council.

Lisa is currently working within the NHS and private practice with people who have long-term health conditions.

We know her well. She has been volunteering as an ME Connect helpline supervisor since 2013.

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### WHAT HAPPENS TO ME WHEN I FEEL ANXIOUS OR HAVE A PANIC ATTACK?

In this situation, imagine the brain working like a fire alarm system. Any time we perceive a threat, the fire alarm system (autonomic nervous system) gets activated. The body reacts as if there were a fire occurring in the here-and-now so that it can stimulate your 'fight or flight' response with the aim of keeping you safe. What we need our brain to understand is that it reacted to the threat of a fire and not an actual fire.

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY?

Anxiety can produce a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms. More common ones include:

- General restlessness or irritability ■ Feelings of apprehension or inner tension
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased sensitivity to physical sensations
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty swallowing
- Irritable bowels
- Nausea
- Numbness and tingling
- Palpitations
- Urinary frequency

### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF A PANIC ATTACK?

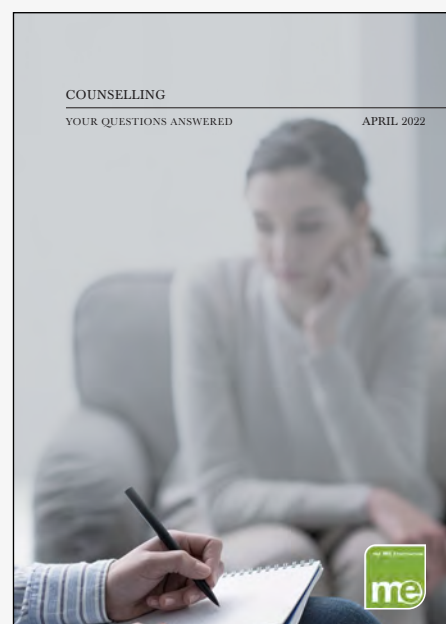
Panic attacks are the intense reactions that can last between five and 20 minutes but it can vary.

The main symptoms are:

- Palpitations
- Shortness of breath or hyperventilation/over-breathing
- Chest pain or tightness
- Sweating



You might feel a deep sense of loss when future dreams and hopes appear unachievable. But it is normal to experience fear and worry about the future and to wonder if you will ever get better.



The MEA has produced another helpful leaflet, **Counselling - your questions answered**. It can be found on our website here:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/roj5>



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- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Numbness or tingling
- Muscular weakness – 'legs turning to jelly'
- A (temporary) effect on your eyesight
- Unpleasant feelings of unreality

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Going back to the fire alarm analogy, we want to get to a place where our brain is able to recognise the difference between a false alarm and an actual fire. We don't want to completely eliminate anxiety because if there were an actual fire, we want the system to get activated to get us to a place of safety. Rather, we want the brain to distinguish between its reaction to a hypothetical situation and a situation that requires action in the here-and-now.

### SO WHAT I AM THINKING ABOUT IS IMPORTANT?

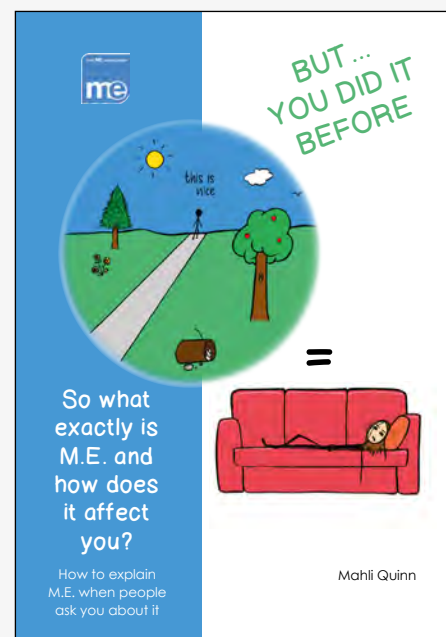
Yes it is important. How we perceive a situation can influence how our body responds and vice versa.

### LEARN TO CONTROL YOUR BREATHING

When our automatic nervous system is activated as the result of an anxiety or a panic attack it impedes the part of the brain that can make decisions and solve problems.

In order to re-activate this system, we want to bring our stress hormones down so that we can think clearer. The simplest way of doing that is focusing on our breathing.

By regulating our breathing, it will then inform our body that we are not in any danger. It will slow our heart rate, release muscle tension and generally reduce any physical symptoms that are associated with the body's built-in survival mechanism.



#### MEA Information and Support

We have a large range of free literature available to download from our website, including a section about the understandable effect of ME/CFS on Mental Health:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/fdwc>

■ **But... You Did It Before**, by Mahli Quinn, provides a great explanation of the impact of ME/CFS. It is available to order from the website shop:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/xmnl>

■ If you need to talk to someone please contact the **ME Connect** telephone helpline on **0808 801 0484**.

<https://meassociation.org.uk/me-connect/>



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### BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Learning breathing techniques will:

- help you to breathe steadily and calmly to avoid hyperventilating.
- allow you time to work through your 'uneasiness' by breathing from the diaphragm slowly and evenly until the pre-panic feelings subside.

Try breathing into a paper bag. This will slow your breathing down in order for it to become more regulated.

If you don't have a paper bag nearby then you can inhale for three counts and exhale for four counts. By making sure you exhale for longer than you inhale it will help relax the body. If you have a family member or friend nearby you can also elicit their help in breathing/counting with you.

### DOES MUSCLE RELAXATION HELP?

Yes it does. We need to relax and to release the tension that has built up in our muscles. Doing muscle relaxation daily will bring down the level of anxiety and desensitise the body.

There are muscle relaxation Apps and YouTube videos available that include breathing techniques as well. Most of them suggest that you tense your muscles and then relax them, working through all the muscle groups in your body one at a time.

Once relaxation is achieved it will be more difficult for the anxiety level to rise and trigger an adrenaline rush. This, in turn, gives you time, when you feel the first feelings of uneasiness, to start to relax and to use your breathing and muscle relaxation techniques. This will stop adrenaline from triggering a full-blown anxiety or panic attack.

We do appreciate, however, that many people with ME/CFS cannot tense and relax muscles without feeling pain. It is perhaps a good idea not to use this form of relaxation if your muscles are especially painful or weak.

### ARE THERE OTHER WAYS TO RELAX?

- There are Apps, CDs, and downloads available that play gentle music, bird song, and the sounds from nature.

You could experiment with just letting your feelings come into your mind and observing them kindly and dispassionately, without getting sucked into thinking too much about them.



The MEA has produced another helpful leaflet, Managing your emotions. It can be found on our website here:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/96kg>

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While they won't help you achieve the muscle relaxation described above, they can help you to enter a relaxed state that can distract you from pain and discomfort - that might allow better periods of rest and sleep.

■ The NHS has a series of free mental wellbeing audio guides recorded by doctors.

The series includes anxiety control training, sleep problems, unhelpful thinking, and low confidence and assertiveness.

While the recordings are not specifically aimed at people with ME/CFS, you might find them helpful resources:

<https://tinyurl.com/58kv57u3>

■ You may even like to talk to yourself a little. For example you could try repeating to yourself several times "Calm yourself, relax". You may find a phrase that works well for you. Feel the muscle tension go and be aware of this.

Whatever you do to learn to relax, just remember that your aim is to bring your anxiety levels down.

The way you learn to relax must become a daily habit, like cleaning your teeth. It is no good doing this in a haphazard fashion. Perseverance is key here, even if you don't feel any benefit initially, keep at it and you will over time.

## WHAT THOUGHTS CAN WE OFFER YOU?

■ If you think about it, anxiety sufferers are, on the whole, intelligent people with great powers of imagination. This can be channelled to help them recover.

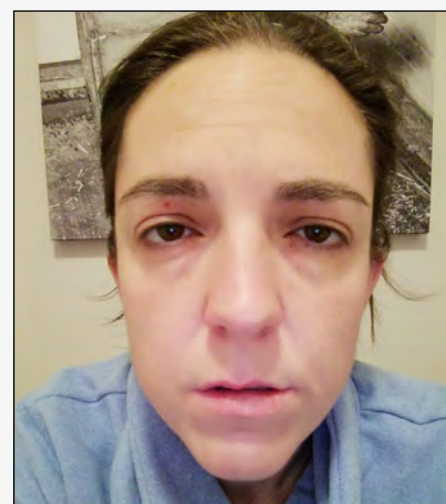
■ If we can remember that the first panic or anxiety attack occurs for a reason but the second and subsequent attacks do not – this can help. There is a quote that seems appropriate here: "The body manifests what the mind harbours." Remember what we said about the thinking part of the brain and the nervous system – and think about this.

■ If we can believe that an anxiety attack or a panic attack is just adrenaline accompanied by a collection of symptoms that cannot, and will not, harm us – then we can learn to effectively manage them.



If you have ME/CFS and are experiencing problems with a relationship, then you might like to read the MEA's booklet: **Personal Relationships - Intimacy and ME/CFS**. It can be downloaded from the website shop:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/foty>



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### WHAT ELSE CAN I DO TO REDUCE MY ANXIETY?

- It will help if you cut down on caffeine-containing drinks such as tea, coffee and cola because caffeine stimulates the nervous system as well.
- Take care with over-the-counter medication, especially cold remedies as some of these drugs cause nervous stimulation as a side effect. (Check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking these).

### WHEN SHOULD I SEE MY DOCTOR?

**Dr Charles Shepherd, Hon. Medical Adviser to the ME Association, writes:**

If you are having panic attacks, or your anxiety levels are becoming more than just an occasional inconvenience that is not being helped by self-management techniques; you ought to see your GP.

In addition to all the self-help strategies that have already been covered, your GP can:

- Check to make sure there isn't an underlying medical problem such as an overactive thyroid gland, or periodic episodes of low blood sugar, which can also produce anxiety-type symptoms.
- Refer you for help, possibly in the form of cognitive behaviour therapy, from either a local ME/CFS specialist service or mental wellbeing healthcare professional.
- Consider whether the use of one of the following anxiety-reducing drugs may be appropriate:
  - Benzodiazepines like diazepam/Valium are sometimes used as a rapid short-term treatment for more severe anxiety. But they can cause dependence - so extra caution is required. They are not a long-term solution.
  - Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) drugs such as fluoxetine and sertraline are the first choice medication for anxiety disorders. They can also help where anxiety is combined with depression. However, SSRI drugs have side-effects such as insomnia, dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, loss of appetite and sexual dysfunction and produce discontinuation symptoms if stopped abruptly. And we know that people with ME/CFS are often more sensitive to SSRI drugs. So it's normally sensible to



*Dr Charles Shepherd, Medical Adviser to The ME Association*



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start with a low dose and increase gradually. It takes two to four weeks before the full therapeutic effect occurs.

- Monoamine oxidase inhibitors such as phenelzine are an effective treatment for panic disorder. However, they are rarely used because of diet-related restrictions, side-effects and drug interactions.
- Beta-blockers such as propranolol may help with short-term symptomatic relief, especially for palpitations and rapid pulse rates. They can also be helpful in performance-related anxiety, such as social phobia.
- Pregabalin (Lyrica) can be used for both acute anxiety and the prevention of relapse in generalised anxiety disorder. It can also be effective in relieving depressive symptoms, reducing pain and improving sleep.
- Bupirone (Buspar) is sometimes used as an add on to pre-existing drug treatment for generalised anxiety disorder. It is not an effective treatment for panic disorder.

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

### NHS Primary & Secondary Care

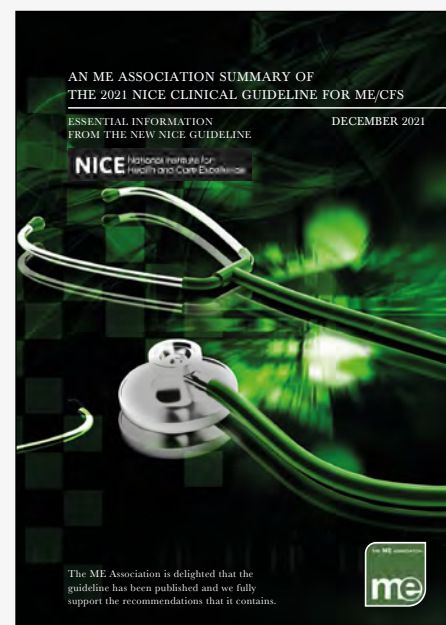
When anxiety and panic attacks become a real concern, consult your GP as there are medications which can help, and you might also be referred to an ME/CFS Specialist Service or mental wellbeing healthcare professional.

ME/CFS Specialist Services are available to anyone with the diagnosis and are usually hospital-based and see people on an out-patient basis. They are staffed by healthcare professionals from various medical disciplines who provide support and tailored management advice. They often include clinical psychologists who can help you combat the understandable mental health problems that result from trying to cope with this complex and chronic medical condition.

It is likely you will need a combined approach to really help overcome anxiety and panic attacks from a healthcare professional who understands your needs and by learning self-help techniques.

- The ME Association has produced a NICE guideline summary that features the key clinical recommendations for people with ME/CFS and information about what you can expect from the NHS. This booklet can be downloaded from the website shop:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/9d01>



The ME Association has produced a free booklet summarising the NICE clinical guideline that can be downloaded here:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/9d01>



## ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS

■ The ME Association has also produced a detailed booklet about counselling and how it might benefit people with ME/CFS who need this help. It can be downloaded free from the website:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/roj5>

### NHS Choices Online Resources:

■ Generalised Anxiety Disorder in Adults:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8e7hs5>

■ Anxiety, Fear, and Panic:

<https://tinyurl.com/2p82s9us>

### The 'No Panic' Charity

Self-help techniques and relaxation exercises are good tools to learn, and this is where the No Panic charity can help you learn general approaches to manage anxiety and panic attacks.

■ The No Panic Helpline: Call 0300 772 9844. Their helpline is open 365 days a year from 10am - 10pm and all volunteers are trained to help people who are suffering from anxiety or panic attacks.

■ Information booklets, MP3 and CD recordings:

<https://nopanic.org.uk/productcategory/book/>

■ Individual or group telephone courses based on cognitive behaviour therapy and anxiety management. A fee is charged for each course.

<https://nopanic.org.uk/>

## THE ME ASSOCIATION LITERATURE

The ME Association has the largest range of information covering all aspects of living with ME/CFS. Topics include:

**Awareness, Carers and Social Care, Covid-19 and Long Covid, Diagnosis, Diet and Nutrition, Education, Employment, Management, Mental Health, Symptoms.**

<https://meassociation.org.uk/fdwc>



## Become a Member of the ME Association

For a small subscription you can receive quarterly issues of **ME Essential** magazine, keep updated with the latest information on ME/CFS and with stories from other members of the charity.

You don't have to be personally affected by ME/CFS to join the ME Association. Membership is available to carers, family-members, and anyone with a professional interest in the condition.

Visit our website to find out more:

<https://meassociation.org.uk/nmrs>





## ME CONNECT

The Support and  
Information Service for  
people affected by  
ME/CFS/PVFS  
and Long Covid



# Freephone 0808 801 0484

For opening hours visit:  
[meassociation.org.uk/me-connect](https://meassociation.org.uk/me-connect)

Contact ME Connect  
**3 WAYS TO GET IN TOUCH:**  
by phone, email  
or social media private message



### HERE TO LISTEN

We are here to listen, validate and empathise with any issues you might be facing.



### VITAL SUPPORT

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