

Introduction to Mastering Panic

This was written by Neal Sideman. His full work can be found at <http://www.paniccure.com/Default.htm>

"Mastering Panic" is a very powerful cognitive-behavioral approach. It can be used for self-help or with your therapist. It's easy to begin to learn – start with the first activity and keep going! With practice, you can learn mastery over the emotions of anxiety and panic.

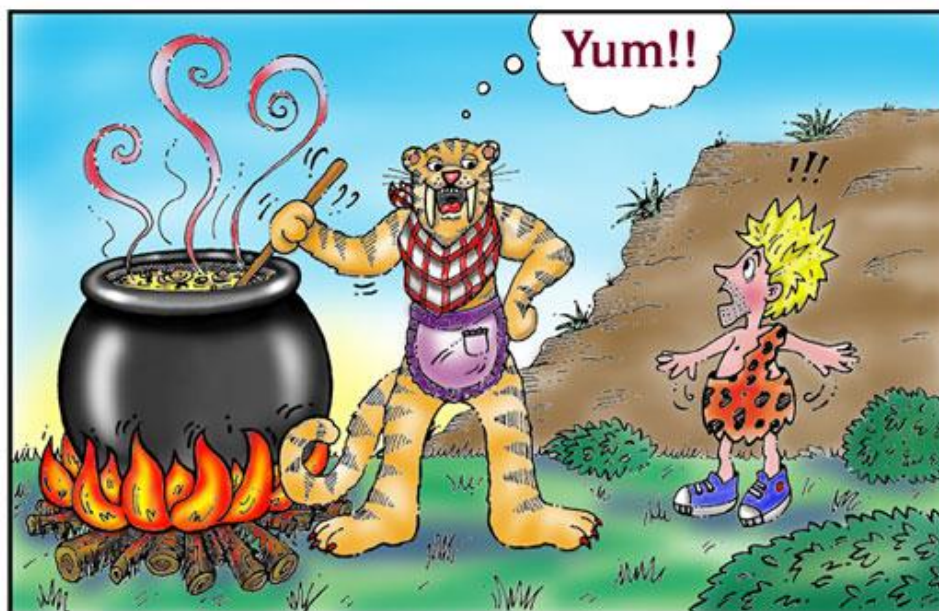
Many of the main ideas in "Mastering Panic" have been adapted from *Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic, Workbook*, by Barlow and Craske.

Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic: Workbook is designed to be used with a CBT therapist, but it can also be used for self-help. It was developed by Dr. David Barlow and Dr. Michelle Craske – two of the world's leading experts in the field – and is used by many therapists around the world. Be sure that you get the Workbook (not the Therapist Guide) and that you get the latest edition, published in 2006.

Understanding Panic

Panic is perhaps the most intense and the most challenging of all human emotions. What is panic, and how can we best understand it?

Panic comes from the "fight-or-flight" response that all of us have and that has been key to our survival as a species. In prehistoric times, when a saber-toothed tiger or neighboring cannibal tribe wanted to have us for dinner, the fight-or-flight response kicked in. Instantly, we would have superhuman strength and speed, to either fight or flee.





Today, the stresses we face are very different from what they were in prehistoric times. Sometimes, our fight-or-flight response gets triggered when there is no actual threat to our survival. With no external, life-threatening danger to focus on, bodily sensations and scary thoughts can spiral into a panic attack.

It's helpful to think of our fight-or-flight response as having two parts. The first part is an internal alarm. A great analogy is a fire alarm bell.



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A fire alarm is loud, scary and very unpleasant, but the alarm itself is never dangerous. In fact, the fire alarm is designed to insure our protection and survival in the event of an actual fire.

Once our internal alarm bell gets triggered, the second part of our fight-or-flight response kicks in – we instinctively search for the danger. We need to know instantly what kind of danger we are facing, in order to know whether to fight, flee or climb a tree! A great way to think of this part of our survival response is a huge, round clock with only one hand, in the shape of a huge POINTER.



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The POINTER spins around at top speed, locating the danger, so that you can instantly respond and save yourself from great peril.

But what happens when your internal alarm is a false alarm? The POINTER spins around wildly, desperately trying to locate the danger, in order to save you. But there aren't any tigers or cannibals around. The only thing unusual is what's going on in your own body – sensations that relate to the activation of the fight-or-flight response. So the POINTER, with no other place to go, points inside, to those strange and strong sensations. The POINTER says "That must be the danger I've been looking for!"

What sensations do you experience during panic? Believe it or not, all of these sensations are simply a result of the fight-or-flight response getting turned on. Being afraid of the sensations makes them seem bigger.

But no matter how intense they are, all of these sensations are completely harmless. In fact, the body is mobilizing for heroic action. If you were really facing a tiger or a cannibal, you wouldn't even notice these sensations – you'd be too busy fighting or fleeing. But with

no external danger, your POINTER focuses on these strange sensations – they are the only thing unusual that's going on.

And yes, the sensations are unusual. The fight-or-flight response doesn't often get turned on. In fact, the first time you experienced a panic attack may have been the first time your fight-or-flight response was triggered without a real, external emergency to focus on. So, yes, the sensations are unusual. And completely harmless.

Fast on the heels of the strange sensations, the scary thoughts come in. "What if I'm going crazy?", "What if I'm having a heart attack?", etc., etc. Your POINTER has found a "danger". And this "danger", as convincing as it seems, is composed only of sensations, each of which is completely harmless, and scary thoughts, each of which is completely untrue.

In fact, these scary thoughts are just about the most false thoughts the world has ever seen. They are less likely to happen than the sun not rising tomorrow. They are even less likely to happen than the Cubs winning the World Series.

Let's take one of the most popular scary thoughts as an example: "What if I'm going crazy?"

With all the millions of people experiencing tens of millions of panic attacks, there is not a single case of anyone ever going crazy from a panic attack. Not ever. Psychotic disorders develop gradually over a period of many years, and do not arise from panic attacks. Psychosis has to do with losing touch with reality. This couldn't be further from the experience of the panic sufferer, who is super-attuned to reality.

So, how do these completely false, scary thoughts arise?

Again, let's take the example of "What if I'm going crazy?" Now, we all have a vocabulary that includes the scary thought of going crazy. Cultural myths about people "going mad" run very deep. We've seen more than enough horror movies, from an early age. We have plenty of images in our brains of psychopathic killers, snake pit asylums and padded cells. So, when our POINTER is spinning around, desperately trying to locate a danger, the best it can find might be: "Maybe these strange sensations mean I'm going crazy!" Very convincing, but completely untrue.

Let's take another of the most common scary thoughts: the fear of fainting. Many people with panic attacks have a fear of fainting. The sensation of light-headedness and/or dizziness can make us think that we are about to faint. But the reality is that panic does not cause fainting.

Panic causes the sensations of light-headedness and dizziness, but it DOES NOT cause fainting! Fainting is caused by a big drop in blood pressure. During panic or anxiety, our blood pressure does not drop. In fact, it's likely to go up a bit. So -- believe it or not -- there

is virtually NO CHANCE of fainting as a result of panic. There is actually less of a chance of fainting during panic than at any other time.

The sensations of light-headedness and dizziness are caused by over-breathing, also called "hyperventilating". Hyperventilating causes sensations that are sometimes scary, but these sensations are actually completely harmless.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) teaches you and convinces you, little by little, that panic does not result in fainting, and that the sensations of lightheadedness are completely harmless. The techniques are very powerful. As you gradually come to believe the truth -- that panic does not cause fainting -- your anxiety and panic become less and less. This is the power of CBT.

Ask yourself about how many times you have experienced panic or high anxiety. 50 times? 100 times? 200 times? How many of those times did you faint? So, what are the chances you will faint the next time you experience panic or high anxiety? The right answer is.... ZERO!

Thousands of people with panic disorder have been studied. The instances of people fainting during panic are extremely rare. It's more common to find people who faint from standing up! People faint for many reasons, but not from panic!

By the way, fainting is a self-protective reflex. We need a certain amount of blood pressure to pump blood to the brain, since we are going uphill. If our blood pressure were to suddenly drop, this could endanger circulation to the brain. So, to protect the brain, the fainting reflex brings the brain down to the level of the heart.

Fainting is rarely dangerous. When people faint, they kind of slump and go limp. Usually within a few seconds, they wake up. It's rare that someone would be seriously injured by fainting. So, even if you did have a fainting spell, it's very unlikely you would be injured. But, if you want to find this out first-hand, it will be a lot easier to faint once you overcome panic disorder!

Panic is a fascinating and very odd emotion. But remember, the fight-or-flight response resides in a very old part of the human brain. Prehistoric times were very, *uhh*, colorful. Without our survival response, we wouldn't be here today. And in giving us the gift of our fight-or-flight response, our Creator was more concerned with ensuring our protection than with avoiding false alarms.

The most sensitive among us are the ones who get to experience the false alarms. We can feel victimized, or we can use the experience to learn and grow in some extraordinary ways.

We are members of a very select group. We have repeatedly faced the most intense experience of fear that the human organism is capable of. Anyone who does this has tremendous courage.

You may not have “signed up” to become one of the most courageous people on the planet, but this is exactly what you are doing by reading these words right now, and by taking steps, day by day, for your recovery.

The fire alarm analogy can help us understand panic disorder.

Suppose you had never heard a fire alarm before, but you knew what it was. The first time you hear the alarm, your whole body and mind react as though there is great danger. Your whole body is primed, ready for superhuman action, including rescuing others and fleeing at top speed. And a good thing too, because that alarm might have signaled a real fire.

But now let's suppose you have a peculiar condition called "fire alarm disorder." False alarms keep going off – there is never any real fire. Still, your body and mind react as though each alarm signals mortal danger. Before long, you are in a constant state of apprehension, never knowing when the next alarm will go off. Your high state of anxiety sets off even more alarms.

With a good teacher and hard work, you can learn that all those false alarms are really harmless. As you begin to learn this, something amazing happens. The false alarms gradually become less frequent. Finally, they fade away altogether.

Why do some people get panic disorder?

Many researchers believe there is a biological predisposition for panic disorder. People with this predisposition may be more sensitive and reactive than average. They may also be more imaginative and creative.

The onset of panic disorder usually occurs after a highly stressful event, such as a bad drug experience, the illness or death of a loved one, or a big life change. It usually starts with a series of panic attacks that can seem to come "out of the blue." In the wake of the panic attacks, the individual develops a pervasive fear of panic, with persistent, high levels of anxiety. This pervasive "fear of panic" is at the core of panic disorder.

As one learns, with the help of CBT, that the sensations are not dangerous and the scary thoughts are not true, the "fear of panic" begins to fade. As the fear of panic lessens, the panic attacks lessen as well.

Panic Pizza

Draw a large circle on a blank piece of paper. Then, with your pen or pencil, cut it into slices like you are slicing a pizza pie. Cut it into quarters, and then into eighths. Most people love pizza, but I've never seen anyone trying to eat a whole pizza pie all at once. Cut into manageable slices, it's very delicious.

Believe it or not, panic is a lot like a pizza pie. Taken all at once, it's overwhelming. But taken one slice at a time, it's manageable (and even tasty!)

Panic consists of a bunch of sensations and scary thoughts, all rushing through in a fraction of a second. It's important to learn that panic arises from our survival instinct and that it is never dangerous. But that intellectual knowledge just isn't enough when four sensations are triggering four scary thoughts all at the same moment.

By identifying each slice of your panic pizza, you can learn to master your panic, one slice at a time. Each slice by itself is no match for the powerful techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapy. And, as you learn to master each slice, your panic pizza gradually loses its power to overwhelm you.

Identifying a Sensation and a Scary Thought

Here is a simple way to think about panic pizza: each slice consists of a sensation and a scary thought. No sensation is ever dangerous, and no scary thought is ever true.

Here's an example: For many people recovering from panic disorder, a common sensation is rapid heartbeat. The scary thought might be "Oh my God, I'm having a heart attack!" The sensation and scary thought together make up one slice of the pizza. To master this slice, you learn to challenge the scary thought.

Here's an example of a thought challenge:

"My heart is beating at about 90 beats per minute. The idea that I could have a heart attack from that is ridiculous! My heart is strong, and beating at twice this rate would pose no danger to me. The chance that I'm having a heart attack is ZERO."

When you identify and then learn to challenge the scary thoughts, you discover a very powerful secret: EVERY scary thought that comes from panic is an absurd exaggeration, groundless and completely untrue. Your repeated challenges gradually whittle down each scary thought. And since panic is only a collection of sensations and scary thoughts, it gets weaker and weaker.

See if you can identify a slice of your panic pizza – a sensation and a scary thought. Try to make it very specific. For example, "I feel strange and I think I'm just going to lose it!" is too vague. Identifying the slices of your panic pizza is really important work.

Challenging Scary Thoughts

Panic is only a collection of sensations and scary thoughts. It's unpleasant (to say the least!), but completely harmless.

EVERY scary thought that comes from panic is an absurd exaggeration, groundless and completely untrue.

Each time you challenge a scary thought, you are:

- 1) Taking charge,
- 2) Shifting out of the "victim" experience,
- 3) Affirming the truth, and
- 4) Resolving and healing a bit of your "panic pizza".

(It's like taking a bite!)

Here's how to challenge scary thoughts:

- 1) Make a note of the situation where you experienced the anxiety
- 2) Identify a sensation
- 3) Identify the scary thought that goes with the sensation
- 4) DISPUTE THE SCARY THOUGHT: out loud, silently to yourself, and in writing. Make fun of it and belittle it! Use your creativity and sense of humor.

Here's an example:

- 1) Situation: Taking a walk
- 2) Sensation: "My heart is beating fast and loud."
- 3) Scary thought: "I could be having a heart attack!"
- 4) DISPUTE THE SCARY THOUGHT:

"My heart is beating at about 90 beats per minute. The idea that I could have a heart attack from that is ridiculous! My heart is strong, and beating at twice this rate would pose no danger to me. The chance that I'm having a heart attack is ZERO. If people got heart attacks from having a heart rate of 90, we'd have to build hundreds of new hospitals! Everyone would have to move in slow motion!

"Hearing my heart beating is odd, but not at all dangerous. Babies hear their mother's heartbeat, and that's not dangerous. In fact, I think they like it! It's funny how we don't usually hear our own heart beating – and that's not dangerous either! None of the sensations that I'm experiencing are the least bit dangerous."

When you notice your anxiety going down a bit when you DISPUTE the scary thoughts, congratulate yourself! You've just taken another bite out of your panic pizza.

Thank you, Socrates!

Socrates, born in Athens in 469 B.C., was one of the greatest teachers of all time. His “Socratic Method” of teaching involves:

- 1) a conversational style,
- 2) asking and answering questions,
- 3) using logic and deductive reasoning, and
- 4) relying on experience and empirical fact

Mastering panic is a learning process, and the Socratic Method is one of the most powerful tools for learning. To take advantage of the Socratic Method, challenge your scary thoughts with a “Q & A” – question and answer – style. Actually have a conversation with yourself – posing questions, answering them, and relying on logic, experience and fact. By taking after Socrates – using his “Q & A” style – you actually start to become your own “wise teacher”.

The examples on the next couple of pages demonstrate the power of the “Q & A” style.

Getting Specific with the Scary Thought

The more specific you can get with your scary thoughts, the easier it is to challenge them. Oftentimes, thoughts are so subtle and rapid that we’re not fully aware of them. This is so common that psychologists even have a term for these thoughts – they call them “automatic” thoughts. When you bring these “automatic thoughts” out into the open, it becomes very easy to challenge them.

Here’s an example of “getting specific with scary thoughts,” using the “Q & A” style:

Situation: At a social gathering

Scary thought: “I could panic and totally lose control!”

Challenging the scary thought:

Q: What specifically could happen?

A: I wouldn’t be able to stay in the room. I’d have to run outside and get some fresh air.

Q: And how would that be losing control?

A: I would feel this urge to run outside, and I wouldn’t be able to control it.

Q: So, you might feel an uncontrollable urge to run outside?

A: Right.

Q: Is that totally losing control, or giving in to a strong urge?

A: Well, giving in to a strong urge, because I’d still be in control in every other way.

Q: So, the scary thought is that you might give in to a strong urge to run outside?

A: Yes. But now it's not as scary.

Now that you've identified the scary thought, you can continue to challenge it. Now that it's out in the open, it's pretty defenseless – in fact, downright pathetic!

Q: If you really wanted to, could you resist the urge to run out of the room?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: Have you ever successfully resisted this urge in the past?

A: Well, yes, a number of times I can remember. But once I had to leave the room.

Q: So, a number of times in the past, you successfully resisted an overwhelming urge to run outside. Were you in control then?

A: Yes.

Q: It sounds like, those times, you were exerting pretty extraordinary control, resisting an overwhelming urge.

A: I guess so.

Q: And one time, you left the room, even though you didn't want to.

A: Right.

Q: Did you run or walk?

A: I walked out.

Q: So, even then, you successfully resisted the urge to run out of the room, and you just walked out.

A: Right.

Q: Are there other times you've given in to strong urges, even though you didn't want to – like eating sweets?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think other people do that too?

A: Yes.

Q: And is that the same as "totally losing control"?

A: Of course not!

Pulling the Plug on the Scary Thought

Scary thoughts are powered by mistakes in thinking called “cognitive errors.” As you begin to correct these cognitive errors, the scary thoughts start to run out of steam.

There are three main cognitive errors that power scary thoughts:

- 1) “Overestimating risk”: overestimating the probability that a scary event will happen
- 2) “Emotional reasoning”: believing that a scary event is more likely because you are anxious
- 3) “Catastrophizing”: believing that an event would be a catastrophe, when, in fact, it would only be an irritation or an inconvenience

In the next section, you learn how to pull the plug on the first cognitive error, “overestimating risk”.

What Are the Chances That...

“Overestimating risk” – overestimating the chances that a scary event will happen – is perhaps the biggest source of power for scary thoughts.

One of the best ways to pull the plug on scary thoughts is to ask yourself “What are the chances that (the scary thought) could actually happen?” A scary thought is powered by the belief that it is likely to happen. When you challenge that mistaken belief, the scary thought starts to run out of steam.

Here’s an example:

Sensation: Racing heart

Scary thought: “Oh my God, I could be having a heart attack!”

Challenging the scary thought (using “What are the chances” and the “Q & A” style):

Q: When you are having a panic attack, what do you think is the chance you'll have a heart attack?

A: 50-50.

Q: How many times have you had a panic attack?

A: Maybe a hundred

Q: So you've had 50 heart attacks?

A: Not exactly.

Q: OK, then, how many?

A: Actually, zero.

Q: Do you have any heart problems?

A: No. My doctor says my heart is in great shape.

Q: And how fast do you think your heart is beating during a panic attack?

A: I've read that it could go as high as 140.

Q: How high does it get when you go running?

A: Oh, about 120 to 160.

Q: And have you had a heart attack when you were running?

A: Of course not. In fact, running is good for my heart.

Q: Has anyone ever had a heart attack just because they had a panic attack?

A: Well, I've read Barlow, Zuerker-White, Bourne and some others. They all say the same thing. No one has ever had a heart attack just because they had a panic attack. That's based on thousands of people who've had panic attacks. No one has ever had a heart attack as a result.

Q: So, what is the chance you will have a heart attack from panic?

A: Zero!

Emotional Reasoning

Here's another "cognitive error" that powers scary thoughts: the belief that a scary event is more likely because you feel anxious. For example, when you're calm, you know that a panic attack has zero chance of causing a heart attack. But when you're anxious, it can seem much more likely. This is a cognitive error called "emotional reasoning". In reality, when you're anxious, the probability of panic causing a heart attack is *still* zero. As you begin to practice "Mastering Panic" when you feel anxiety, you challenge this "emotional reasoning," and the scary thoughts lose even more steam.

Changing "What if..." to "So what!"

The last big power source for scary thoughts is the cognitive error called "catastrophizing".

"Catastrophizing" is believing that something would be a catastrophe, when, in fact, it would be only an irritation or an inconvenience. "Catastrophizing" often starts with "What if..." A very powerful way to challenge this is to respond by saying "So what!" Then, you can go on to ask yourself "So, what would happen then?"

For example, let's suppose the scary thought is that, while driving, you could get lost.

Scary thought: "What if I got lost?! If I got lost, that would be a catastrophe!"

Challenging the scary thought:

Q: "So what would happen if you got lost?"

A: "I wouldn't be able to find my way home"

Q: And what would happen if you couldn't find your way home?

A: "I'd have to ask for help, and someone might see how scared I was"

Q: "And would that be a catastrophe?"

A: "Well, no, but it would be very embarrassing."

Q: "So, you might feel embarrassed. Would that be a catastrophe?"

A: "No."

Q: "Would you be able to cope with feeling embarrassed?"

A: "Yes."

Q: "Besides asking for help, how else could you cope with getting lost?"

A: "Well, I could stop and look at a map that I keep in the glove compartment. I could simply ask for directions at a gas station or store. Or, I could re-trace my route. There are lots of ways."

Catastrophic thinking is a really fat target for humor. It's easy to poke fun at it, or to make it into a ridiculous exaggeration. Here's an example:

Scary thought: "What if I got lost?! If I got lost, that would be a catastrophe!"

Challenging the scary thought:

Q: "So what would happen if you got lost?"

A: "I would only have about 10 or 20 solutions. I could ask for directions. I could look at my map. I could retrace my route. I could make my own map, starting from a point called "Unknown Territory." I could even plant a flag, claiming the "Unknown Territory" for the King of Spain. I think I could probably figure something out. My 20 years of schooling and my PhD would come in handy. Also, that time I played "capture the flag" in junior high school."

Starting Your “Mastering Panic” Journal

You can learn to master panic by repeatedly challenging the scary thoughts – silently to yourself, out loud and in writing. Here’s how to do this in writing: start a journal or notebook, and title it “Mastering Panic” or another title of your choice. When you experience anxiety or panic, start a new page. Write the date, time and circumstance at the top of the page. Then, create three columns down the page, with the third column the largest. Title the first column “Sensations,” the second column “Scary Thoughts” and the third column “Challenge & Debunk!”

Date:_____ **Time:**_____ **Circumstance:**_____

Sensations	Scary Thoughts	Challenge and Debunk!

The first column is for any sensations you feel. Sometimes, the sensations can be subtle. Write down whatever comes to mind.

The second column is for writing out the scary thoughts. This part is really key. Be as specific as you can. When you identify the scary thoughts, you are well on your way.

The third column is for CHALLENGING AND DEBUNKING THE SCARY THOUGHTS. This is where you really learn to deflate each scary thought. It takes time, practice and repetition. Use your creativity and sense of humor. Deepen what you’ve already learned by re-reading pages 1-9 of “Mastering Panic”.

Observing Anxiety

When you experience anxiety, gently observe it and rate it on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is perfect comfort and 10 is perfect panic.



Simply learning to be an “objective observer” is very helpful in lowering anxiety. Then, use your “Mastering Panic” techniques. Notice and appreciate your level on the scale. If, for example, you lower your anxiety from a 6 to a 5, that is a success to feel good about! With practice, you can lower it more and more.

With each entry in your notebook, give yourself credit. Each time you face, identify and challenge a scary thought, it's a huge success!

Creating Your “Cue Cards”

Once you begin to learn your cognitive skills, it's essential to make your techniques ‘portable.’ I think the best way to do this is to create a ‘cue card,’ with some key words or phrases to remind you of your most powerful tools and techniques.

A 4 x 6 index card works beautifully. It's easy to fold and keep in your pocket. Your cue card can be a very powerful reminder of all you have learned, whenever the "panic monster" – who, like a 5-year-old, whines and flails his arms, trying to get your attention – makes you momentarily forget.

I spent a lot of time developing my special 4 x 6 card. I found that I carried my tools with me wherever I went. As time went on, I learned my tools so well, I rarely even had to look at my card.

It's important to make your 'cue card' your own, with words or phrases that are especially powerful reminders for you.

Here is a cue card that I used when I was healing. You are welcome to use all of it or any part of it. I used the acronym "ACTS," with each letter representing an aspect of my healing:

A: Allow anxiety and panic:

The fear of panic is *all there is* to this condition. (See The Attitude of "Allowing")

C: Curious Observer:

Observe my anxiety level (from 0 to 10)

Observe how I am breathing. If I notice over-breathing, I can choose to do some belly breathing.

Observe sensations and scary thoughts.

T: Truth:

Panic is not dangerous. (See Education)

Panic is only an emotion, and it only lasts a couple of minutes.

S: Success:

Any experience of panic is a success! (See Re-framing Panic as a *Success*)

I called my practicing "ACTS of gratitude." This phrase reminded me of my gratitude for my healing path.

Inner Safety Meditation: Week One

Week One starts you off with two healing practices, each of which take about 15 minutes a day. The first is Belly Breathing, and the second is starting your Inner Safety Journal.

Belly Breathing

This is a very powerful and very simple technique. It teaches you slow breathing from the "diaphragm" or belly. It relaxes you and also relieves many of the symptoms of anxiety. Plan to practice it once a day, starting with five minutes. Then, gradually increase the time up to about 15 minutes.

Lie comfortably on your back, with a pillow under your head, your knees bent and your back flat. You can stretch your legs out if that's more comfortable. Place one hand on your belly. Once you're comfortable, you can start the exercise.



Inhale while you slowly count to 4. Expand your belly as much as you can – like a balloon. You know you're doing "belly breathing" right when you can feel your belly expand. Then, exhale to the slow count of 4, just letting all the air out of the balloon. As you exhale, just feel yourself letting go of tension.

Keep repeating the belly breathing to the slow count of 4. When your mind wanders, just gently bring your attention back to the counting and belly breathing.

As you gradually master your Belly Breathing, you are mastering the first step of Inner Safety Meditation, as well as gaining a powerful tool to lower your overall level of anxiety.

Many people have used Belly Breathing or a similar technique to reduce symptoms of anxiety and panic. Many of the "scary sensations" of panic are related to "hyperventilation"

– which means rapid breathing. Also, during panic, people tend to breathe from the chest instead of from the belly. Breathing rapidly from the chest increases anxiety. Breathing slowly from the belly lowers anxiety and reduces many of the "scary sensations" of panic.

Inner Safety Journal

The philosophy behind the Inner Safety Journal is that by focusing on experiences, memories and images of safety, you are developing a "vocabulary" for your own inner safety. You discover that you already have many ways of feeling safe, secure and peaceful.

On the surface, it seems that we experience feelings of safety because the external circumstances are just right – we are at home, we are with a loved one, etc. On a deeper level though, these feelings of safety, comfort and peace come from within. And, because these feelings come from within, they are always available to us. The Inner Safety Journal is a powerful method of awakening and strengthening these feelings.

To start your Inner Safety Journal, choose a new, special notebook – one that is especially pleasing and attractive. If you keep a journal or diary now, create a separate journal for Inner Safety. This is a special journal for writing notes about safety, comfort and peace – experiences, memories, fantasies and images. You can also include drawings and pictures – feel free to use your imagination and creativity.

It takes only a few minutes a day to create your Inner Safety Journal. You can work on it anytime, but it's a good idea to set aside a special time, so that you get in the habit of writing in it every day. One especially good time is before going to bed at night. That way, you can think about experiences you had during the day that gave you a feeling of safety and comfort.

Here are three ideas for entries in your Journal:

- 1) What were some times today (or yesterday) that you felt safe and comfortable? Describe one of the scenes. What did you see and hear? Was there any taste or aroma? How did you feel?
- 2) What are some of your favorite memories of feeling safe, secure and peaceful? Choose one memory, and describe the scene as richly as you can.
- 3) Create a fantasy of a scene that would feel completely safe, serene and peaceful. Describe it in great detail.

Inner Safety Meditation: Week Two

Belly Breathing

Continue practicing your Belly Breathing once a day. Instead of lying down, try it in a sitting position. Pretty soon, you'll be able to do it lying, sitting or standing, in almost any situation.

Inner Safety Journal

Continue your daily Journal sessions, with three changes:

- 1) In Week One, the idea was to write in your Journal every day. Starting in Week Two, your Journal session can be more flexible: you can write a new entry, read over past entries or re-write a favorite scene.
- 2) Each time you sit down to start your Journal session, take a few Belly Breaths. Feel some of the relaxation that you feel when you do your Belly Breathing.
- 3) Sometime during each session, slowly read over one of your favorite safety scenes, and practice this visualization:

Close your eyes, and imagine a golden light illuminating your scene. Imagine the golden light surrounding you and enveloping you. This golden light represents the safety, protection and peace that is always with you. Imagine the light getting brighter. Imagine it feeling warm all around you. Now, imagine the golden light as a big bubble that surrounds and protects you, filling you with feelings of warmth, safety and peace.

Here are some additional ideas for your Journal sessions:

- 1) Slowly read over what you've written in your Journal, and choose your favorite scenes.
- 2) Re-write one of your favorite scenes, adding the golden light.
- 3) Read one of your favorite scenes aloud.

The best time to do Inner Safety Meditation is when you feel reasonably calm. If you are experiencing high anxiety, it is best to use your cognitive techniques and/or Belly Breathing.

By meditating when you feel reasonably calm, you are not asking your Inner Safety Meditation to compete with established patterns of anxiety. By using your cognitive techniques when you experience anxiety, you are directly addressing and resolving the anxiety, a little at a time.

Inner Safety Meditation: Week Three

In Week One, you learned “Belly Breathing” and the “Inner Safety Journal.” “Belly Breathing” is by itself a powerful, calming meditation technique. The “Inner Safety Journal” helps you to develop your own, deeply personal “vocabulary” for inner safety.

In Week Two, you began to use the “golden light visualization” to deepen the feelings and images of inner safety. Now, in Week Three, you put together what you’ve learned into a very powerful meditation practice called “Inner Safety Meditation”.

Inner Safety Meditation

Start with some belly breaths, then visualize the golden light.

Imagine the golden light surrounding you and enveloping you. This golden light represents the safety, protection and peace that is always with you. Imagine the light getting brighter. Imagine it feeling warm all around you. Now, imagine the golden light as a big bubble that surrounds and protects you, filling you with feelings of warmth, safety and peace.

Gently focus on the image of the golden light. Just allow yourself to rest in the feelings of warmth, safety and peace.

Next, select a focus or “mantra”. Your “mantra” can be:

a word

a short phrase such as "warm and safe"

the image and feeling of the golden light

your belly breathing, or

one of the favorite scenes from your Journal.

The first few times you practice Inner Safety Meditation, you can try a different "mantra" each time. Then, select your favorite mantra for your regular meditation practice.

There are two keys to Inner Safety Meditation:

- 1) The first key is the attitude of “allowing”. Simply allow yourself to experience whatever comes up during your meditation.
- 2) The second key is learning to gently focus your attention. When your thoughts begin to wander, gently re-focus your attention on your Inner Safety “mantra”.

Your Inner Safety Meditation encompasses both your Belly Breathing and your Inner Safety Journal. Anytime you want to deepen and intensify your Inner Safety Meditation, take a few minutes to do a Journal session.

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Attitude of Allowing

In the martial art of aikido, the basic principle is not to resist the adversary, but to use his own force to defeat him. I believe this is the way to defeat panic disorder.

Anxiety and panic are never dangerous – unpleasant yes, but never dangerous. As you begin to adopt an attitude of "allowing" towards the experience of anxiety, a very amazing thing starts to happen: the anxiety lessens!

Panic is an amazing paradox. It's the scariest experience we are capable of, and yet it is completely harmless. Adopting the attitude of allowing panic dramatically reduces panic. Panic is never dangerous, so there is no reason not to allow it. When you allow panic, it's like popping a big, inflated balloon.

A panic attack can only occur if you are running from it. Panic is like a big dog that will chase you only if you run.



The "panic dog" is big and scary, but it is incapable of hurting you. When you stop running, the panic dog stops chasing you. With no one to chase, he looks kind of confused. He starts to wag his tail, then tries to lick your face!



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You discover that the “panic dog” was not chasing you to hurt you after all. He was chasing you to protect you! He thought you were in danger and needed protection!

When you allow panic instead of running from it, the experience is transformed. Physiologically, panic is very similar to exhilaration. As I recovered, I began to experience exhilaration in situations where I had previously experienced panic. When I entered a challenging situation and “opened wide” to panic, I didn’t experience panic. Instead, I often experienced a very intense and beautiful exhilaration.

Many people devote themselves to seeking out this very experience of intense exhilaration – with great effort, expense and often danger to life and limb. On my healing path, I got to experience it easily, safely and for free!

A word about “failure” thoughts

I believe that thoughts of failure are a big part of this condition – a big slice of the “panic pizza pie.” I believe that these negative thoughts actually come from the condition itself – they are not some defect of character. It's unrealistic to expect that these thoughts will disappear BEFORE one has achieved recovery. But part of the CBT approach is to begin to challenge these negative thoughts and gradually change them.

Reframing Panic as Success

At the core of panic disorder is the *fear* of panic. A big part of this fear of panic is the fear of failure. As long as we think of a panic response as a failure, it’s difficult to overcome the fear of failure. No matter how much healing work we do, we can never completely control our panic response, just as we can't completely control any other emotion.

The answer to this dilemma is to begin to challenge the time-worn idea that a panic experience represents failure.

The top researchers in this field tend to define success in terms of clients not experiencing panic. If I was conducting research at a clinic, I'd probably do the same thing. You have to publish studies and verify the effectiveness of your program. You have to quantify the results. It's all very logical.

But there is a deeper level of healing.

Still having panic disorder means still having the fear of panic, even if our panic responses are few and far between. Being cured means no longer having this fear – no longer caring whether or not we have a panic response. But how do we get there? How do we ever cross this "great divide"?

The answer is one last, big cognitive re-structure. We achieve our cure *by re-framing the panic experience as a success.*

A big part of the panic response is the thought: "Oh my God, I'm having a terrible failure." How could we *not* have that thought if we've been defining our success and failure this way?

By starting to re-define and re-frame the panic experience as a success, we take the wind right out of the sail of the panic response. It's the last cognitive re-structure, and it leads us to cure.

We are not used to thinking of panic as a success. The "old mold" of our thinking – panic as *failure* – keeps the panic disorder going and gives it power. Beginning to think of a panic response as a success breaks this mold. If you break the mold, you don't have panic disorder anymore, because an essential "glue" that's holding panic disorder together is the thought of failure. Interrupt that old belief that panic is a failure, and the whole mold of panic disorder falls apart!

There are some pretty paradoxical aspects of healing from panic disorder and agoraphobia. By doing what we fear, our fear is greatly reduced. By intentionally bringing on aspects of our panic response, we learn to overcome panic. By inviting panic instead of resisting it, we begin to experience a new level of safety and trust. Finally, by starting to re-frame the panic experience as a success, we begin to realize our cure.

Looking back on my own healing process, the panic experiences I had along the way actually *were* successes. They led me to the biggest insights. Learning that I could deal well with any experience of panic was very profound, and I couldn't have learned this without experiencing *some* panic!

When I achieved my recovery in 1998, I started traveling, which was an incredibly beautiful experience. On my trips, whenever I had apprehension about panicking, I reminded myself

that a panic experience would be a success. If I experienced a panic response, I would even give myself a big reward. I thought of a number of rewards I could give myself for panicking. The one I settled on was: an extra week of traveling to one of my favorite places!

Reframing panic as a success was the “last straw” for my panic disorder. I had worked through and resolved the sensations and scary thoughts that made up my “panic pizza”. Now, I was eliminating the fear of failure. There was nothing left for my panic to feed on – no scary thoughts and no failure thoughts!

By allowing panic, I began my healing. By inviting panic, I learned to overcome it. And by counting panic as a success, I achieved my cure.