



# A Practical **Guide** to Coping with **Panic Attacks** in Public



by **D.Mil.Pylarinou**

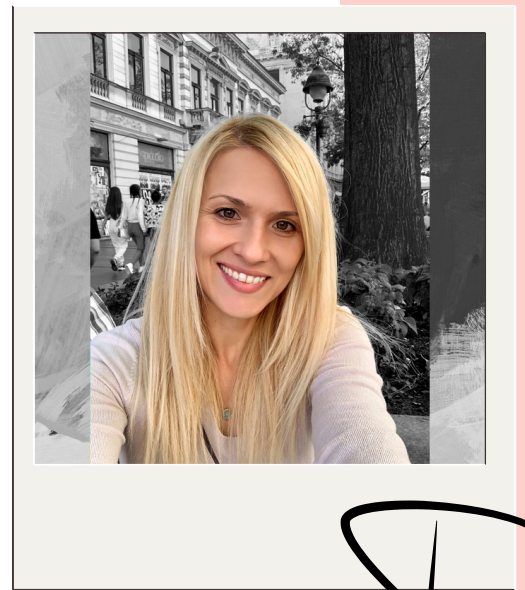
## A Message from the Author

Greetings to all those who are taking a step forward on their journey to overcome panic attacks and embrace life more fully. I'm a licensed psychologist and I've spent more than a decade working closely with individuals just like you, supporting them as they navigate the complexities of panic attacks and anxiety.

In this guide, we're addressing a common challenge: the fear of public spaces. I understand how daunting it can be to step out of your comfort zone, to face the world when anxiety seems to hold you back. We all have our unique paths, and your journey is yours to own.

For some, sharing a laid-back selfie from a public place might feel like a huge achievement. I want you to know that I'm right there with you. I understand that the thought of taking a selfie in public might not resonate with everyone – it certainly didn't with me. However, I'm here to support you, whatever your comfort level might be.

If you find solace in the idea of sharing your progress, know that it's not about the selfie itself, but the courage and progress it represents. So, if you're someone who appreciates the power of visuals, when you're ready, feel free to share your laid-back selfie in a public space with me (@creativebchange). I'd be thrilled to celebrate your victories with you.



Remember, this journey is about embracing progress, no matter how small or large. Your steps are your own, and your progress is a testament to your strength and determination. I encourage you to use this guide in a way that suits your unique needs, and to consider seeking the assistance of mental health professionals who can provide personalized guidance.

Wishing you courage, strength, and a newfound sense of freedom.

Warmly,  
D. Mil. Pylarinou  
Licensed Psychologist and Therapist

The guide is specifically designed to help you manage panic attacks while in public places. The emphasis is on providing practical strategies to cope with the intense sensations and emotions that can arise during a panic attack in these situations.

## Some key points the guide will cover include:

**Preparation:** Equipping you with relaxation techniques and mindfulness exercises that can be discreetly practiced in public to reduce anxiety.

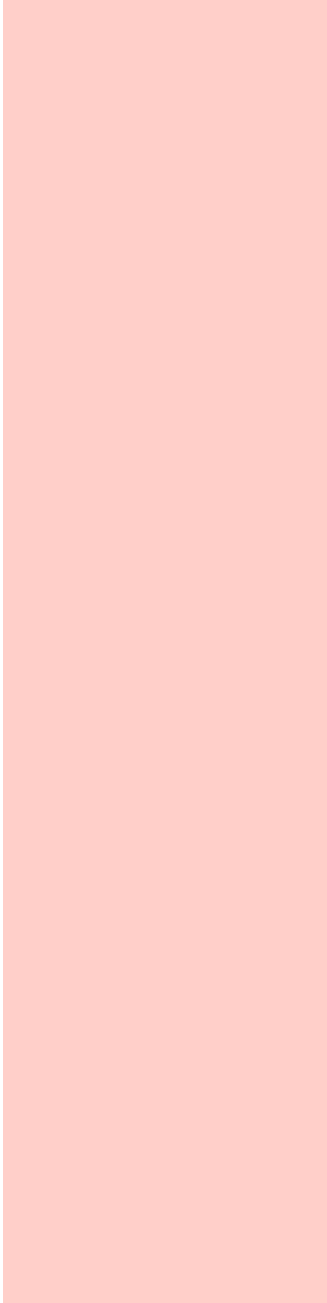
**Cognitive Coping:** Teaching methods to identify and challenge negative thought patterns that often accompany panic attacks.

**Grounding Techniques:** Offering techniques to stay connected to the present moment, which can help counter the feeling of detachment often experienced during panic attacks.

**Practical Tools:** Suggesting strategies that can provide you comfort and distraction during a panic attack.

**Gradual Exposure:** Introducing a gradual exposure approach to public places that trigger panic attacks, helping you build confidence and tolerance over time.

**Self-Care:** Stressing the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, managing stress through self-care practices, and seeking professional help when needed.



By focusing on these strategies, you can gradually develop the skills and confidence needed to navigate public spaces even when dealing with the challenges of panic attacks. The goal of the guide is to empower you to cope effectively and reduce the impact of panic attacks on your daily lives.

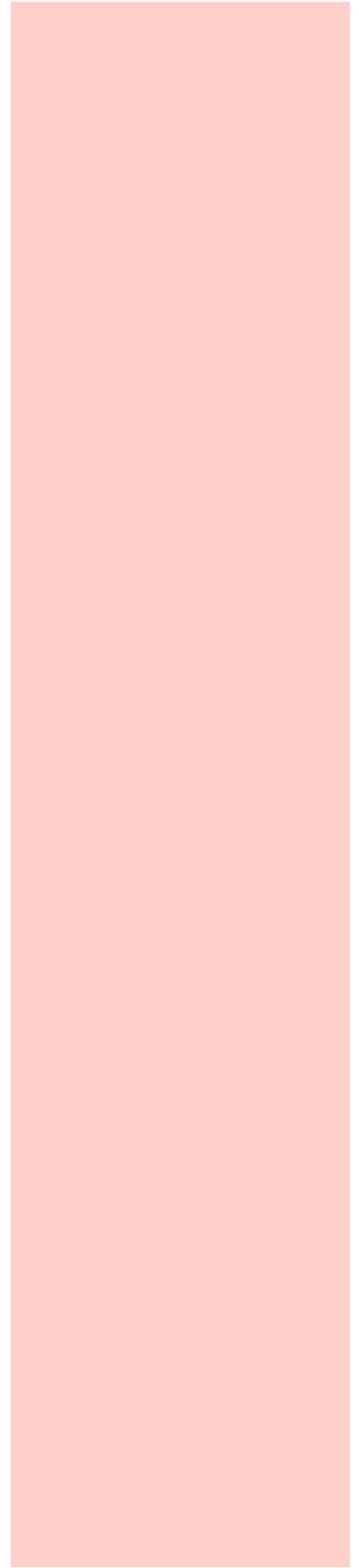
# Let's start



# Chapter 1: Understanding Panic Attacks:

Panic attacks are intense episodes of overwhelming fear and anxiety that arise suddenly and peak within a short period of time, typically around 10 minutes. They can occur without any apparent reason or trigger, leaving the individual feeling frightened and bewildered.

It's important to note that *panic attacks are distinct from general anxiety*. While anxiety is a more pervasive feeling of worry and apprehension that can persist over time, panic attacks are characterized by their acute and intense nature.



# Common Symptoms of Panic Attacks:

## Physical Symptoms:

- Rapid heartbeat or palpitations
- Sweating or chills
- Trembling or shaking
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Nausea or stomach distress
- Feeling of choking or suffocating

## Emotional Symptoms:

- Intense fear or terror
- Feeling of impending doom or a sense of losing control
- Fear of dying or going crazy
- Overwhelming anxiety or distress
- Detachment from oneself or reality (depersonalization or derealization)

## Cognitive Symptoms:

- Racing or intrusive thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating or thinking clearly
- Negative self-talk and catastrophic thinking
- Feeling overwhelmed by fear and panic

## Behavioral Symptoms:

- Avoidance of situations or places where panic attacks have occurred before
- Urgent need to escape or leave the situation
- Restlessness or pacing
- Seeking reassurance from others

# Common Triggers in Public Places:

Panic attacks can be triggered by various factors, and public places are particularly prone to triggering such episodes due to the presence of crowds, unfamiliar environments, and increased social pressure. Some common triggers in public settings include:

**Crowded Spaces:** Being surrounded by a large number of people can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed, especially if the individual is concerned about their ability to escape or the possibility of judgment.

**Social Situations:** Engaging in social interactions, especially if the individual has social anxiety, can lead to heightened stress and panic.

**Performance Anxiety:** Public speaking, giving presentations, or performing in front of others can trigger panic attacks due to the fear of making mistakes or being evaluated negatively.

**Travel and Transportation:** Using public transportation or being in unfamiliar places can evoke anxiety about getting lost or experiencing a panic attack without easy access to help.

**Physical Sensations:** Physical sensations, such as feeling overheated or trapped, can trigger panic attacks in public places.

**Past Trauma:** Previous traumatic experiences associated with public spaces or public events can make those locations triggering for panic attacks.



# Chapter 2: Preparing Yourself

## Teaching Relaxation Techniques:

Relaxation techniques are essential tools to manage the physical and emotional symptoms of panic attacks. Two effective techniques are deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation:

### Deep Breathing:

- Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 4.
- Hold your breath for a count of 4.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of 6.
- Repeat this pattern several times, focusing on the rhythm of your breath.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

- Start by tensing a muscle group (e.g., hands) for 5-10 seconds.
- Release the tension suddenly and completely, feeling the relaxation wash over you.
- Move through different muscle groups, working your way up from your toes to your head.

## **Mindfulness and Grounding Exercises:**

Mindfulness and grounding exercises can help you stay centered and present, reducing the intensity of panic. Here are some techniques to try:

### **5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique:**

- Identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste (if possible).

### **Square Breathing:**

- Visualize drawing a square in your mind.
- Inhale for 4 counts as you trace one side of the square.
- Hold your breath for 4 counts as you trace the next side.
- Exhale for 4 counts as you trace the third side.
- Hold your breath for 4 counts as you trace the final side.

## **Body Scan Meditation:**

- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing.
- Start from your toes and mentally scan your body, paying attention to any areas of tension or discomfort.
- As you identify tension, visualize it melting away as you continue to breathe deeply.

## **Mindful Observation:**

- Choose an object in your surroundings, such as a flower or a tree.
- Spend a few minutes observing the object in detail—its colors, textures, and shapes—without judgment.



Practice these relaxation, mindfulness, and grounding techniques regularly, even when you're not experiencing panic. Regular practice will enhance your ability to use these techniques effectively in public settings. These tools are like muscles; the more they're used, the stronger and more effective they become. As you become more adept at utilizing these techniques, you'll be better equipped to manage panic attacks and maintain a sense of calm in challenging situations.



# Chapter 3: Developing Coping Strategies

## Strategies for Identifying Negative Thought Patterns and Cognitive Distortions:

Negative thought patterns and cognitive distortions often fuel panic attacks. By recognizing and addressing these patterns, you can regain control over your thoughts. Here's how to identify and address them:

### Mindfulness of Thoughts:

- Become aware of your thoughts during moments of anxiety.
- Identify recurring themes or patterns, such as catastrophizing or assuming the worst.

### Journaling:

- Keep a thought journal to track anxious thoughts.
- Write down the situation, your thoughts, emotions, and any physical sensations.
- Look for patterns and inconsistencies in your thinking.

# How do I look for patterns and inconsistencies?

## **Example1:**


*Pattern:* Every time I feel my heart rate increase and my palms get sweaty, I'm about to have a panic attack.

*Inconsistency:* However, there have been times when I've experienced these physical sensations without it leading to a full-blown panic attack. For instance, during exercise or moments of excitement, my heart rate can increase and I can feel sweaty, but I don't always have a panic attack.

## **Example2:**

*Pattern:* Whenever I'm in a crowded place, I will definitely have a panic attack.

*Inconsistency:* However, there have been times when I've been in crowded places and not experienced a panic attack. For instance, at a family gathering, I was able to stay calm and enjoy the time even though there were many people around.



By recognizing this pattern and inconsistency, you can start to challenge your automatic assumption that certain physical sensations (example1) or crowded places (example2) always indicate an impending panic attack. You can learn to differentiate between normal bodily responses in certain situations (like exercise or excitement) versus the onset of a panic attack.

You can realize that your response can vary based on factors like your mindset, the context of the situation, and the strategies you use to manage your anxiety.

This practice can help you gain a more balanced perspective on your physical sensations reduce the fear associated with them and empower you to gradually confront your fear (like of crowded places) and develop a more nuanced understanding of your triggers.



## **Teaching Reframing Techniques:**

Reframing involves challenging and changing irrational thoughts into more balanced and realistic ones. Here are techniques to teach for challenging irrational thoughts during a panic attack:

### **Reality Testing:**

- Ask yourselves if your thoughts are based on facts or assumptions.
- Question the evidence for and against your anxious thoughts.

### **Alternative Interpretations:**

- Generate alternative explanations for the situation that triggered your panic.
- Consider different perspectives and possible outcomes.

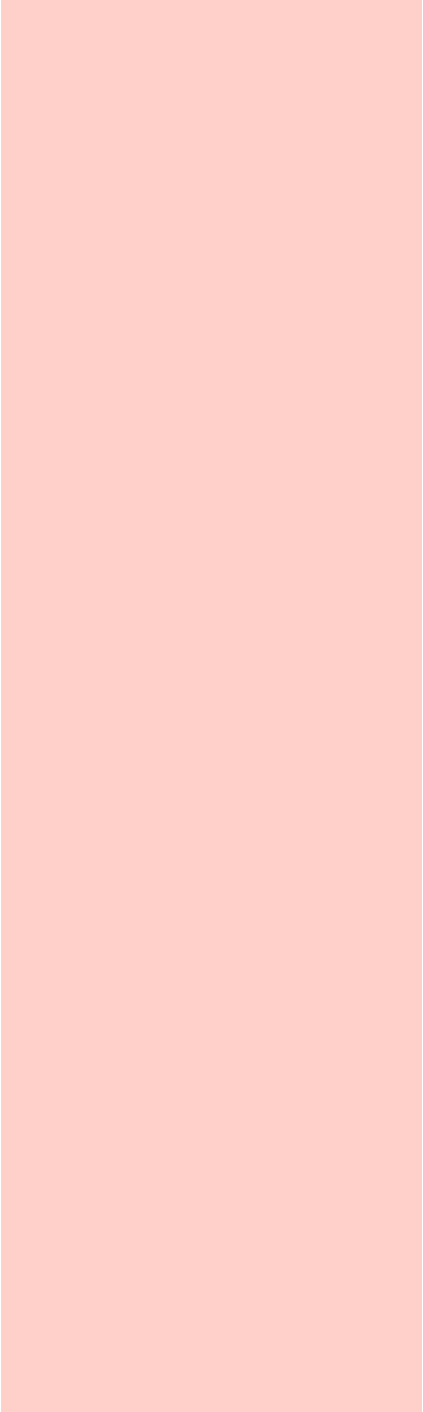
### **Socratic Questioning:**

- Ask yourselves probing questions to challenge your thoughts, such as "What's the evidence for this thought?" or "Is there a more balanced way to see this?"

### **Best and Worst-Case Scenario:**

- Consider the best-case and worst-case scenarios related to your anxious thoughts.
- Find a middle ground that's more realistic and less extreme.





Practice identifying negative thought patterns and using reframing techniques in everyday situations. These skills take time to develop but can be incredibly powerful tools for reducing panic's impact. Be patient with yourselves as you work to reshape your thought patterns and reactions. By addressing irrational thoughts, you can build resilience and a sense of empowerment when faced with panic attacks in public settings.



# Chapter 4: Building Your Toolkit

## **Practical Tools for Coping During Panic Attacks:**

Having a toolkit of practical items can provide comfort and distraction during a panic attack. Here are some items you can carry with you:

### **Stress Balls or Fidget Toys:**

- Squeezing a stress ball or playing with a fidget toy can help redirect nervous energy.

### **Calming Music or Guided Meditation Apps:**

- Recommend carrying earbuds and a device with calming music or meditation apps to listen to during a panic attack.

### **Positive Affirmation Cards:**

- Create or carry cards with positive affirmations or grounding statements to read when needed.

### **Breathing Exercises Card:**

- Include a card with step-by-step instructions for deep breathing or grounding exercises.

### **Scented Sachets or Essential Oils:**

- Certain scents can have a calming effect. Carry a scented sachet or a small vial of calming essential oil.

### **Pocket-Sized Notepad and Pen:**

- Writing down thoughts and feelings can provide an outlet and help in understanding triggers.

This chapter will empower you to proactively prepare for panic attacks in public settings by equipping you with tools that provide immediate relief and support.



# Chapter 5: Exposure and Desensitization

## Gradual Exposure to Trigger Situations:

Gradual exposure is a proven method to reduce the intensity of panic triggered by certain situations. It involves facing your fears in a controlled manner to build tolerance over time. Here's how to approach it:

### Identify Trigger Situations:

- List specific situations that trigger panic attacks in public.

### Create an Exposure Hierarchy:

- Rank these situations from least to most anxiety-provoking.

### Start with Least Anxious Situation:

- Begin with the situation that causes the least anxiety. This might be a mildly uncomfortable situation.

### Stay Present and Practice Coping:

- Use relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and grounding exercises while in the exposure situation.

### Gradually Increase Exposure:

- As comfort increases, move up the hierarchy, tackling more anxiety-provoking situations one step at a time.

## Step-by-Step Approach to Facing Fears:

Step-by-step in a controlled manner:

### Choose a Manageable Situation:

- Start with a situation that you can handle, ensuring it's challenging but not overwhelming.

### Relaxation Preparation:

- Practice relaxation techniques before entering the situation to reduce anxiety.

### Set a Time Limit:

- Set a time limit for exposure to maintain a sense of control.

### Use Coping Techniques:

- Apply coping strategies during exposure, such as deep breathing or positive self-talk.

### Stay Until Anxiety Decreases:

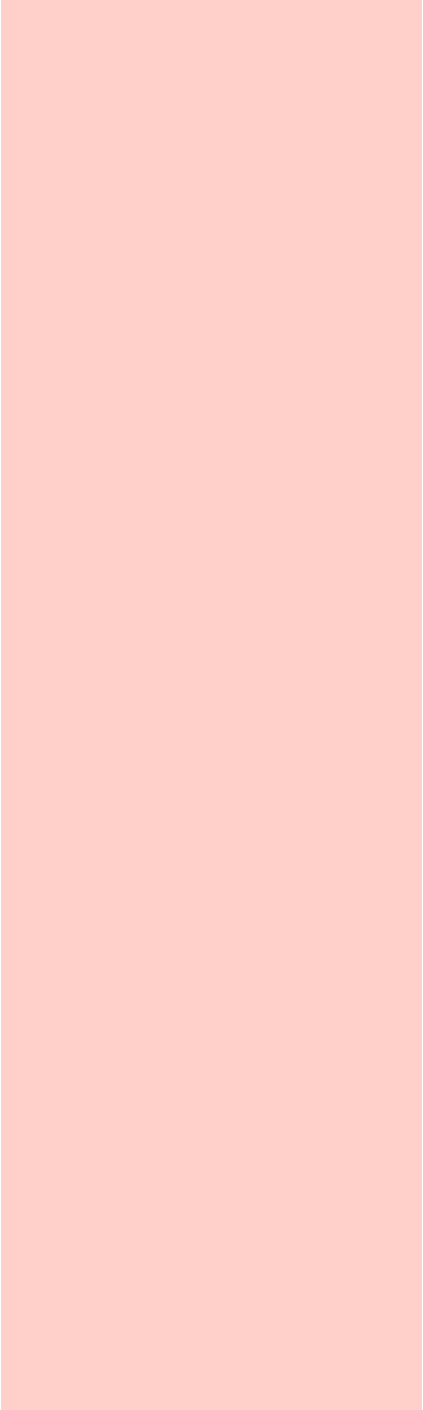
- Remain in the situation until anxiety reduces or becomes more manageable.

### Reflect and Reward:

- Afterward, reflect on the experience, acknowledging the accomplishment.
- Reward yourself for facing the fear, reinforcing the positive outcome.

### Repeat and Progress:

- Gradually increase exposure duration and intensity as anxiety decreases over time.



This process takes time and patience, but it can lead to significant improvements in managing panic triggers. Keep track of your progress and celebrate even small victories. By systematically facing your fears through exposure, you can retrain your brain to respond more calmly to trigger situations, reducing the impact of panic attacks in public places.



# Chapter 6: Self-Care and Lifestyle

## Maintaining a Healthy Lifestyle:

A healthy lifestyle can significantly impact your overall well-being and your ability to manage panic attacks. Here's why regular exercise, balanced nutrition, and adequate sleep are essential:

### Regular Exercise:

- Engaging in physical activity releases endorphins, the body's natural mood elevators.
- Recommend incorporating activities like walking, jogging, swimming, or yoga into your routine.

### Balanced Nutrition:

- Eating a well-balanced diet supports stable blood sugar levels, reducing the risk of triggering panic attacks.
- Encourage consuming whole foods, lean proteins, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fats.

### Adequate Sleep:

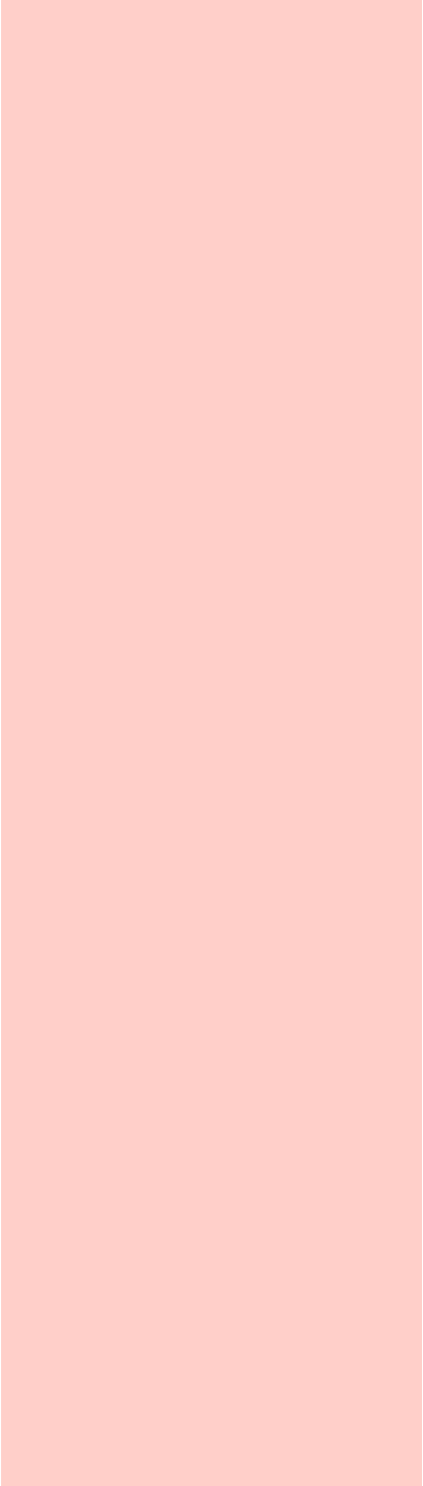
- Lack of sleep can exacerbate anxiety and increase susceptibility to panic attacks.
- Consistent sleep schedule and creating a calming bedtime routine are very helpful.

## Stress-Reduction Techniques:

Stress-reduction techniques can help manage anxiety and prevent panic attacks. Here are some techniques to consider:

- **Yoga and Stretching:**
  - Yoga combines physical movement and mindfulness, helping to reduce stress and promote relaxation.
- **Meditation and Mindfulness:**
  - Meditation practices encourage being present in the moment and cultivating a calm and focused mind.
- **Journaling:**
  - Writing down thoughts and feelings can help process emotions and identify triggers.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:**
  - Practicing progressive muscle relaxation can help release physical tension and induce relaxation.
- **Creative Outlets:**
  - Engaging in creative activities like painting, playing music, or crafting can be therapeutic and enjoyable.





Incorporate these self-care practices into your daily life. Experiment with different stress-reduction techniques to find what works best for you. Self-care is an ongoing process that contributes to overall resilience against panic attacks. By prioritizing a healthy lifestyle and incorporating stress-reduction techniques, you can create a solid foundation for managing panic and promoting emotional well-being.



# Chapter 7: Seeking Professional Help

## Recognizing the Need for Professional Support:

When panic attacks begin to interfere with daily life and overall well-being, seeking professional help is a crucial step towards managing and overcoming them. Here's why professional support matters:

**Expert Guidance:** Mental health professionals have the expertise to diagnose and treat panic disorders effectively.

**Personalized Strategies:** Professionals can tailor strategies to your specific needs and triggers.

**Safe Space:** Therapy offers a safe and non-judgmental space to explore your thoughts and feelings.

**Long-Term Solutions:** Therapy aims to provide long-term coping skills and tools to manage panic.

## The Therapeutic Process: What to Expect

During therapy, you can expect a supportive and nonjudgmental environment where you can openly discuss your thoughts and feelings. Your therapist will help you:

**Identify Patterns:** Explore recurring thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to your mental health challenges.

**Develop Coping Strategies:** Learn techniques to manage stress, anxiety, and panic attacks effectively.

**Address Underlying Issues:** Uncover the root causes of your struggles and work through them with guidance.

**Build Resilience:** Develop skills to handle challenges and setbacks, enhancing your overall well-being.

# Chapter 8: Real-Life Scenarios

## Scenario 1: Navigating Crowded Places

**Description:** Imagine finding yourself in a crowded shopping mall, feeling the onset of a panic attack due to the overwhelming number of people.

**Guidance:**

**Deep Breathing:** Practice deep breathing to regulate your heart rate and calm your nerves.

**Grounding:** Use the 5-4-3-2-1 technique to ground yourself by focusing on sensory details around you.

**Positive Affirmations:** Repeat a positive affirmation, such as "I am safe and in control," to counter anxious thoughts.

**Stress Ball:** Squeeze a stress ball discreetly in your pocket to redirect nervous energy.

## Scenario 2: Public Speaking Anxiety

**Description:** Imagine you're about to give a presentation in front of a large audience, and anxiety begins to take over.

**Guidance:**

**Square Breathing:** Use square breathing to maintain a steady breath and stay grounded.

**Reality Testing:** Challenge thoughts of catastrophe by asking yourself for evidence supporting your fears.

**Emergency Contact:** Know you have someone in the audience you can connect with afterward for reassurance.

**Positive Visualization:** Close your eyes and visualize yourself confidently delivering your speech.

## Scenario 3: Using Public Transportation

**Description:** Picture yourself on a crowded bus or train, feeling anxious about being unable to escape.

**Guidance:**

**Mindfulness:** Focus on your surroundings and observe the people, sounds, and movements around you.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Discreetly tense and relax your muscles to release tension and anxiety.

**Contact List:** Have your emergency contact list handy in case you need to reach out for support.

**Breathing Exercise Card:** Refer to your breathing exercise card for calming breath techniques.



# Conclusion

In navigating the challenges of panic attacks in public settings, this guide has provided a comprehensive toolkit for managing anxiety and regaining control over your life. Here are the key takeaways:

**Understanding Panic:** Recognize the signs of panic attacks and differentiate them from general anxiety.

**Preparation:** Practice relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and grounding exercises to stay present.

**Cognitive Coping:** Identify negative thought patterns and reframe irrational thoughts.

**Building a Toolkit:** Equip yourself with practical items and coping strategies to ease panic attacks.

**Exposure and Desensitization:** Gradually face fears through controlled exposure to build resilience.

**Self-Care and Lifestyle:** Maintain a healthy lifestyle and engage in stress-reduction techniques.

**Seeking Professional Help:** If panic attacks persist, consider consulting mental health professionals.

**Real-Life Scenarios:** Apply coping strategies to common public situations.

### **Practice and Patience:**

Remember that these strategies take time and practice. Be patient with yourself as you integrate them into your life. Small steps towards progress are meaningful achievements.

**It's okay to have setbacks; what matters is your commitment to improving.**

### **Seeking Help:**

If panic attacks continue to impact your well-being, don't hesitate to seek help from mental health professionals. They can provide tailored guidance and support on your journey to managing panic attacks.





# For further reading and support, explore the following resources:

## Books:

- "The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook" by Edmund J. Bourne
- "Dare: The New Way to End Anxiety and Stop Panic Attacks" by Barry McDonagh
- "The Mindfulness and Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety" by John P. Forsyth and Georg H. Eifert
- "Rewire Your Anxious Brain: How to Use the Neuroscience of Fear to End Anxiety, Panic, and Worry" by Catherine M. Pittman and Elizabeth M. Karle
- "Overcoming Panic and Agoraphobia: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques" by Derrick Silove and Vijaya Manicavasagar
- "Into the Heart of Mindfulness: Finding Inner Peace Through Mindfulness and Meditation" by Ed Halliwell

## Support Groups:

- Look for local anxiety or panic disorder support groups in your community.

## Websites:

- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA): [adaa.org](http://adaa.org)
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): [nimh.nih.gov](http://nimh.nih.gov)
- Calm Meditation App: [calm.com](http://calm.com)
- Headspace Meditation App: [headspace.com](http://headspace.com)
- [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) - Offers information, resources, and support for mental health in the UK.
- [anxietyuk.org.uk](http://anxietyuk.org.uk) - Provides support for individuals dealing with anxiety, panic attacks, and related disorders in the UK.
- ReachOut.com (Ireland): [ie.reachout.com](http://ie.reachout.com) - Offers information, tools, and support for young people's mental health in Ireland.
- Mental Health Europe: [mentalhealtheurope.eu](http://mentalhealtheurope.eu) - An organization advocating for the rights of people with mental health issues across Europe.
- European Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Therapies (EABCT): [eabct.eu](http://eabct.eu) - Provides resources and information about cognitive behavioral therapy in Europe.
- [creativechangeonline.com](http://creativechangeonline.com)

Remember, you're not alone in your journey. By practicing these strategies, seeking support, and being kind to yourself, you can effectively manage panic attacks in public settings and lead a more empowered and fulfilling life.

Love D

