

## Panic: Medical Realities vs. Common Fears

1. **Common Fear:** “I’m going to have a heart attack.”

**Medical Reality:** Having extremely rapid heart rate with a panic attack can be really scary, but it’s not dangerous. A healthy heart can beat up to 200 times a minute for hours, even days, without being damaged. Unlike a heart attack, a panic attack does not deprive the heart of oxygen. If you’re having panic attacks a medical doctor can test to ensure your heart is healthy. In the case of a heart attack, the primary symptom is continuous pain and a pressured/crushing sensation in the center of your chest. In the case of panic, the primary symptom is very rapid heart rate. Your heart rate will begin to slow as you calm down. Remind yourself, “I am safe, and my heart will be fine.”

2. **Common Fear:** “I can’t breathe; I am going to suffocate.”

**Medical Reality:** Under stress, muscles tighten and your breathing will become more constricted and shallow. This is part of the stress response, and a built-in reflex that will actually force you to breathe if you are not getting enough oxygen. This type of breathing, particularly when accompanied by catastrophic thoughts of harm or death, can be really scary and intense. However, it’s not dangerous, and your body will not let you suffocate. To gain relief, change how you interpret the stress response, and learn to practice diaphragmatic breathing.

3. **Common Fear:** “I think I am going to faint.”

**Medical Reality:** Feeling light-headed while panicking sometimes occurs, and this is most often due to breathing too much oxygen very rapidly (i.e. hyperventilating). With excess oxygen and your heart pumping harder, it is unlikely that you will actually faint (due to lack of oxygen to the brain). Sit or lay down if needed. By tensing your muscles, you can also increase blood pressure, and as a result, oxygen to your brain. Practice breathing deeply and slowly and notice the sensations subside.

4. **Common Fear:** “I am about to go crazy!” or “I’m about to completely lose it”

**Medical Reality:** The rapid breathing that often accompanies panic can sometimes be disorienting and may result in a feeling of “unreality.” This may seem very strange and scary, especially if you believe you are having a “nervous breakdown.” Fortunately, people do not “go crazy” in a sudden or spontaneous way. Mental disorders that include psychosis (e.g., schizophrenia) develop gradually and do not rise from panic attacks. No one has ever started to hallucinate or hear voices simply from a panic attack. Also, you will not act uncontrollably. The only way you may actually “act out” is by escaping or avoiding the situation. Remember you cannot “go crazy” from a panic attack. Tell yourself, “This is just a symptom of anxiety, and these sensations will pass as I calm down.”

Created by David Emmert, Psy.D. 2018; Based on: The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook 4th Edition, 2005

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## 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique for Anxiety

By: Sara Smith, BSW

Anxiety is something most of us have experienced at least once in our life. Public speaking, performance reviews, and new job responsibilities are just some of the work-related situations that can cause even the calmest person to feel a little stressed. This five-step exercise can be very helpful during periods of anxiety or panic by helping to ground you in the present when your mind is bouncing around between various anxious thoughts.

Before starting this exercise, pay attention to your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths can help you maintain a sense of calm or help you return to a calmer state. Once you find your breath, go through the following steps to help ground yourself:

**5:** Acknowledge **FIVE** things you see around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the ceiling, anything in your surroundings.

**4:** Acknowledge **FOUR** things you can touch around you. It could be your hair, a pillow, or the ground under your feet.

3: Acknowledge **THREE** things you hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.

2: Acknowledge **TWO** things you can smell. Maybe you are in your office and smell pencil, or maybe you are in your bedroom and smell a pillow. If you need to take a brief walk to find a scent you could smell soap in your bathroom, or nature outside.

1: Acknowledge **ONE** thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like—gum, coffee, or the sandwich from lunch?

This technique is one of many options you could use if you are feeling anxious or overwhelmed. If anxiety is something that you struggle with regularly, and you continue to have trouble refocusing or coping with these feelings, please talk to your doctor or contact Behavioral Health Partners at (585) 276-6900. Behavioral Health Partners is brought to you by [Well-U](#), offering [eligible](#) individuals mental health services for stress, anxiety, and depression.

Keith Stein | 4/10/2018

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