

When Panic Attacks

Module 5

Facing Feared Situations

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Introduction

So far in the modules, you have learned about what panic attacks are, how to challenge unhelpful thinking, and how to become less afraid of physical symptoms. In this module, we will focus on avoidance and how it keeps panic attacks going. We will learn why it is important to approach situations where we are worried about having a panic attack, rather than avoiding them. This can be challenging, but we will look at how we can approach this in a planned, step-by-step way.

What is avoidance?

Because panic attacks can be extremely uncomfortable and frightening, it makes sense that people who have experienced a panic attack want to minimise the risk of ever having another one. This can often lead people to avoid situations that they think might trigger their panic attacks.

Some typical situations that people might avoid due to fear of having a panic attack include:

- crowded places
- unfamiliar places
- public transport
- flying
- driving (especially on highways, freeways, bridges or through tunnels)
- areas that are far from home
- situations where it is difficult to leave early (e.g. meetings, appointments, theatre)
- loud or brightly lit environments
- elevators/lifts
- vigorous exercise
- ...and many more!

Avoiding situations that might trigger panic attacks can help people feel calmer and more in control in the short term. Unfortunately, avoidance gets in the way of the life you want to live and can make panic and anxiety worse in the longer term. Avoidance can also spread – people may begin by avoiding only one or two situations, but over time they may start to avoid more and more situations.

WHY IS AVOIDANCE A PROBLEM?

Although short-term avoidance may help us feel safer and less anxious, in the longer term, avoidance keeps us anxious for a few reasons.

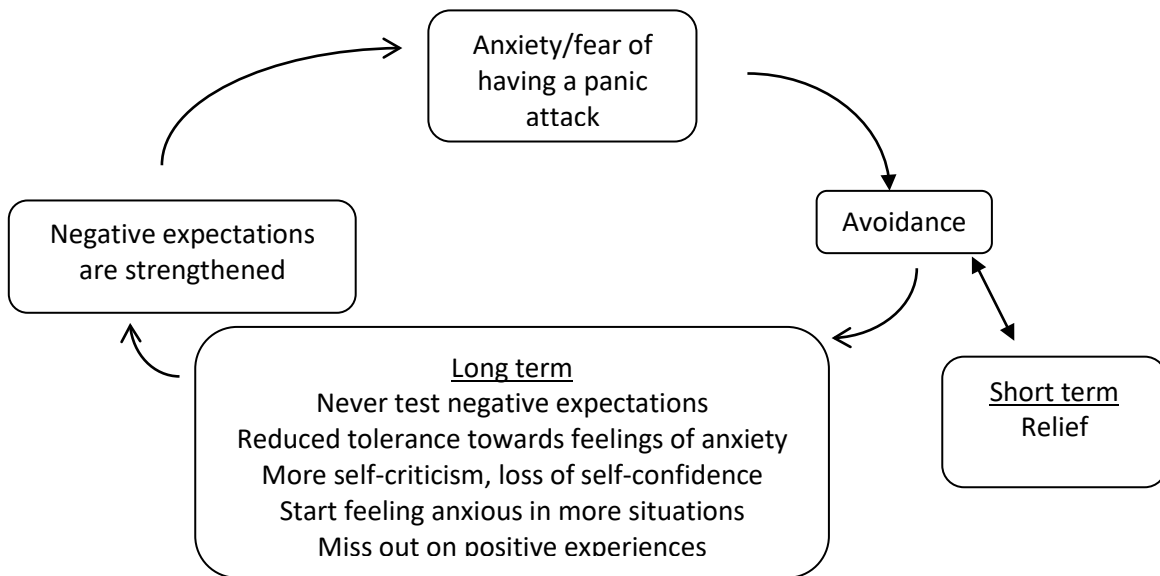
1. **We never get to test our negative thoughts.** When we avoid a situation, we assume that our negative thoughts are accurate (i.e., that we would panic, and that we would be unable to cope with these feelings). However, avoidance never allows us to test our fears directly. If we did, we might discover that our thoughts are inaccurate. We might learn that our fears don't always come true and that things can turn out better than expected. We might also find that even if we start to feel panicky, we can also cope with this.
2. **Avoidance and anxiety can spread.** As we avoid situations and lose confidence in an area of our lives (e.g., driving), our fear can spread to more and more areas of our life (e.g., going to unfamiliar places; being alone). This can make life very limited and less enjoyable and can start impacting our ability to function in important areas of life (e.g., relationships, work, study, and hobbies).



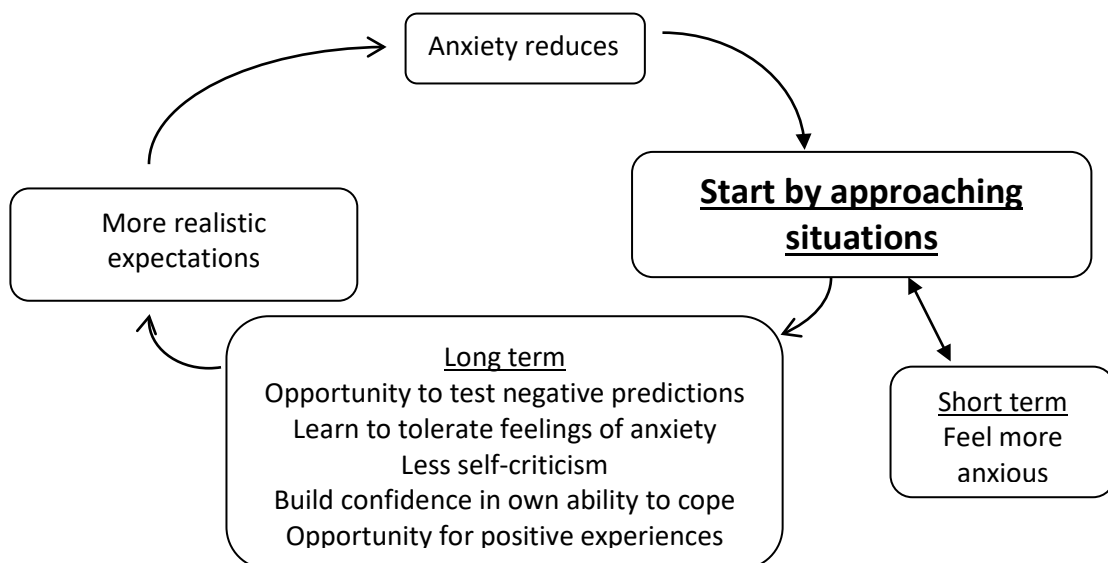
3. **Reduced tolerance to physical sensations.** Avoiding situations where you might feel panicky reinforces the belief that panic attacks are dangerous. Avoidance will mean you have fewer opportunities to experience physical sensations, learn that they are not harmful, and build your tolerance to coping with them.
4. **We never get opportunities for positive experiences.** As long as we avoid these situations, we have no chance of having positive experiences that would build our confidence in our coping abilities.

The vicious cycle of anxiety and avoidance

The way that avoidance specifically keeps us stuck in a vicious cycle of ever-increasing anxiety is illustrated below:



The key to breaking this vicious cycle is to start approaching the situations where we fear having a panic attack. In the short term, this might increase our anxiety, but it allows us to test our fears, build confidence in our coping skills, and learn to tolerate feelings of anxiety. This will reduce anxiety and vulnerability to experiencing panic attacks over time. This is shown in the cycle of progress:



SITUATIONS I AVOID

It is important to be aware of the situations you are currently avoiding, so that you can plan to start breaking the vicious cycle of avoidance and anxiety. This list of examples on page 2 might help you recognise situations you are avoiding, and you may also avoid other situations that are not on this list.

What situations do you think you are most likely to have a panic attack in?

Are there any situations you avoid? If so, which ones?

Is there anything you haven't done because of your anxiety in a while?

Approaching feared situations using Behavioural Experiments

Facing these situations in a systematic, planned way can help to test our fears and overcome our anxiety over time. **Behavioural experiments** can be used to directly our negative predictions. You can think of it like a curious scientist testing a theory to see what happens.

You might have tried approaching a feared situation before, and perhaps found it very overwhelming and unhelpful. Sometimes, we need more than just pushing ourselves into feared situations to test our fears properly. We might spend the whole time focused on surviving and getting through it, or selectively focusing on negative details and might not notice the information we need to test our fears. Planning experiments in advance can help you to identify your fears and figure out what you need to do to test them. Approaching feared situations in a structured way using behavioural experiments can help us focus on the information we need to test our fears.

Conducting a behavioural experiment involves taking a step back from our thoughts. Rather than assuming our predictions about a situation are accurate, we will treat them as 'just a prediction' and test them out. **Remember, the goal of behavioural experiments is not an immediate reduction in fear and anxiety; instead, the goal is for you to learn something new.**

We want to find out what happens in feared situations, so we can learn to think in realistic ways. There are several steps to conducting a behavioural experiment that enable us to learn as much as we can each time that we face our fears:

- 1. Predictions:** Identify a situation in which you fear having a panic attack and write down what you think will happen. What would be the worst thing about having a panic attack? How strongly do you believe this is what will happen (0-100)? How anxious do you expect to feel (0-100)?

- 2. Plan an experiment:** Plan your experiment. What could you do to find out how accurate these predictions are? How could you find or create a situation that would enable you to test the accuracy of these thoughts?
- 3. Evidence to look for:** What evidence would you need to look for to check the accuracy of your thoughts? An important note is that this evidence must be clear, observable, and objective. Try to be as specific as you can. For example, if your fear is “I will go crazy”, – what evidence would you need to observe to know if this has happened? How would you know you had really “gone crazy”? Try to separate how distressed you feel from the actual observable facts and evidence.
- 4. Conduct the experiment:** Follow through and do the experiment!
- 5. Results:** Note the results of your experiment. What evidence did you observe?
- 6. Develop conclusions:** What does the evidence tell you about your initial negative predictions? Were there any differences between what you expected to happen and what actually happened? Given the results you observed, how strongly do you now believe in your initial predictions (0-100)?

On the next two pages, you will find some examples of how to set up and record behavioural experiments.



Behavioural Experiment Example - Paul

Paul is anxious about catching the train. He is concerned that he will have a panic attack, be unable to get off the train, and will go crazy. If he has to catch the train, he brings extra medication “just in case” and sits by the door so he can escape quickly if needed. Paul has decided to use a behavioural experiment to test his fears about catching public transport.

Prediction <i>Specifically, what are you afraid will happen?</i>	Experiment <i>How will you test your prediction?</i>	Evidence to Look For <i>What will I/others observe if the prediction is true?</i>	CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENT	Results <i>What actually happened? Stick to the objective facts</i>	Conclusions <i>What have you learned?</i>
<p>If I don't get off the train, I will become so overwhelmed that I will lose control and go crazy.</p> <p>Anticipated anxiety: 90%</p> <p>Belief in these predictions:100%</p>	<p>I will catch the train, and I won't get off even if I start feeling anxious. I will stay on the train and see what happens.</p>	<p>If I get so overwhelmed with my anxiety that I lose control, I will be really red and sweaty, I will struggle to breathe. I will be trying to shout for help, but my words won't make sense, and everyone will just stare at me.</p> <p>Other people around me will be scared of how I am acting. Eventually the police will get called to deal with me.</p>		<p>I did feel really anxious and panicky, but it only got to about 70%, not as bad as I thought it would get.</p> <p>I did not lose control or start shouting for help. I felt hot and felt like I was breathing too loudly, but no one seemed to notice or stare. No one called the police.</p> <p>The anxiety stayed intense for about 5 minutes and then started to come down. It had reduced to about 40% by the time I got off the train, and I felt a bit tired and drained.</p> <p>Actual Anxiety: 70%</p>	<p>My anxiety wasn't as intense as I expected.</p> <p>I did experience anxiety, and it was hard. Even so, I was able to manage it and the anxiety started to go down by itself.</p> <p>No one seemed to notice my anxiety except me.</p> <p>I might have been underestimating myself.</p> <p>Belief in initial predictions: 40%</p>

Behavioural Experiment Example - Jade

Jade is anxious about driving. She is concerned that she will start to feel stressed, which will lead to a panic attack that will cause her to faint and crash her car. If she has to drive, she tries to go when there is less traffic and takes the quieter back roads wherever possible. She listens to calm music and rubs her keyring in her fingers to distract herself from her anxiety. She will usually ask her partner Julie to come with her, so that Julie can keep her calm and take over the driving if needed. Jade has decided to test her fears about driving by using a behavioural experiment.

Prediction <i>Specifically, what are you afraid will happen?</i>	Experiment <i>How will you test your prediction?</i>	Evidence to Look For <i>What will I/others observe if the prediction is true?</i>	CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENT	Results <i>What actually happened? Stick to the objective facts</i>	Conclusions <i>What have you learned?</i>
<p>I will get stressed on the road and this will build up into a panic attack. Once I panic, I will collapse or faint, and this will make me crash my car.</p> <p>Anticipated anxiety: 80%</p> <p>Belief in these predictions: 80%</p>	<p>I will go for a drive.</p>	<p>Do I faint / collapse?</p> <p>Do I crash my car or have a near miss?</p>		<p>I did feel quite stressed driving in traffic.</p> <p>I didn't faint or collapse. My vision felt a bit blurry, but it cleared when I blinked.</p> <p>I started to feel hot so I turned the air conditioner up really high which helped</p> <p>I didn't crash or have any near misses with other cars.</p> <p>After a while I actually started to enjoy the drive.</p> <p>Actual Anxiety: 65%</p>	<p>I did get some weird feelings in my body, but I didn't faint, collapse, or crash my car.</p> <p>It was actually easier to concentrate on my driving without fiddling with my keyring or having the calm music going.</p> <p>It felt good to do this by myself.</p> <p>Belief in initial predictions: 20%</p>

Tips for conducting behavioural experiments

Some things to keep in mind to help you as you start conducting behavioural experiments are:

Preparation

- **Skills:** Use the skills you have already learned in these modules to help you. Practice challenging your negative thinking; remember what you have learned about the physical sensations you get when you are anxious (they are uncomfortable but safe and will pass with time).
- **Scheduling:** It can be hard to overcome avoidance and face your fears! Research shows that making a firm plan and writing it down increases the chance of following through. Make an appointment with yourself and set a date and time to complete your behavioural experiment.



Performing the behavioural experiment

- **Experience the sensations fully:** Remember, it is expected that you will feel anxious and will experience some uncomfortable sensations. Don't distract yourself from the sensations. Pay attention to them – observe your thoughts, feelings and sensations without reacting. Remember, the goal is not to feel calm during the experiment – the goal is to test your fears.
- **Don't stop the experiment too early:** Try to follow through with your experiment in full, just as you planned. Remember, anxiety builds and then passes like a wave. It is not helpful to stop the experiment early, while your anxiety is still building. It is important to “ride the wave” of anxiety and stick with the experiment until it starts to subside. Remind yourself that the anxiety may be uncomfortable and distressing, but it is not dangerous, it will pass with time, and you can stand it.

Persisting with behavioural experiments

- **Repetition:** It can be helpful to repeat the same experiment multiple times so that you feel convinced of the evidence you have collected.
- **Regularity:** It is important to keep conducting behavioural experiments regularly. Research shows that regularly conducting behavioural experiments is more effective than doing them ‘now and then’. Doing several behavioural experiments every week is the most helpful approach.
- **Remember what you have learned:** Brains fall back into old thinking patterns quickly, and it can take some effort to establish new ways of thinking. Each time you learn something new, write it down. It can help to remind yourself regularly of the important new things you learn through behavioural experiments. Visible, written reminders can help you remember important information (e.g., sticking a note on the fridge that you will see each day, visualizing the results of your experiment).
- **Keep challenging yourself.** Keep working through the process of using behavioural experiments to face your fears. Refer to the list of situations you avoid (page 4 of this module) and consider integrating the next module about safety behaviours (module 6) – keep going with your behavioural experiments until you have approached all these situations without safety behaviours. It is normal and okay for this process to take some time –keep working through step by step until you get there.
- **Acknowledge your achievements.** Facing your fears is hard work! It is essential to give yourself credit for the effort you are putting in. You can reward yourself by doing something enjoyable after completing a behavioural experiment. Acknowledge the progress you are making.

It is time to put things into action and conduct behavioural experiments yourself. Choose a situation you would be willing to approach, even though you still feel anxious about it. You might start with an experiment that only generates mild anxiety and work your way up to more challenging behavioural experiments. Use the blank behavioural experiment record on the next page to plan a behavioural experiment that will help you test your fears – then follow through with it!

Behavioural Experiment Record

Prediction <i>Specifically, what are you afraid will happen?</i>	Experiment <i>How will you test your prediction?</i>	Evidence to Look For <i>What will I/others observe if the prediction is true?</i>		Results <i>What actually happened? Stick to the objective facts</i>	Conclusions <i>What have you learned?</i>
<p>Anticipated anxiety (0-100):</p> <p>Belief in these predictions (0-100):</p>			CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENT	<p>Actual Anxiety (0-100):</p>	<p>Belief in initial predictions (0-100):</p>

Module Summary

- Avoidance keeps you stuck in a vicious cycle of fear. It stops you from testing your negative predictions, reduces your tolerance for experiencing anxiety, and erodes your confidence in your coping abilities.
- Facing your fears will be challenging in the short term but will help you overcome anxiety and panic attacks in the longer term.
- Behavioural experiments can be used to test your fears in a structured way.
- Remember that it is important to drop your safety behaviours as you conduct behavioural experiments. If you can, it is best to do behavioural experiments without any safety behaviours. If you don't feel ready for this, you can start your experiments with some safety behaviours in place and phase them out over time.
- It is important to conduct behavioural experiments regularly – research shows consistent practice will have the best impact. You can repeat the same experiment multiple times or take on a new challenge when ready.

In the next module we will look at how to deal with subtle avoidance behaviours called safety behaviours.



About the Modules

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Some of the materials in the modules of this information package were taken from:

Nathan, P., Correia, H., & Lim, L. (2004). *Panic Stations! Coping with Panic Attacks*. Perth: Centre for Clinical Interventions

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

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“WHEN PANIC ATTACKS”

This module forms part of:

Sng, A., Howell, J., Burgess, M., Pannekoek, L., & Campbell, B. (2023). *When Panic Attacks*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 978 0 9757995 3 6

Created: February 2023