



Panic Attack Survival Skills (PASS)

Panic is the body's built-in safety mechanism. That means that if we're in danger, we have sufficient blood pumping to allow us to run to safety or fend off danger. This response is called the "fight or flight" response. Throughout history, this has been essential for mankind's survival.

Panic attacks are a misfire of our protective alarm system. They are more common in times of stress, but sometimes they happen out of the blue. You can even wake up with one.

A panic attack begins when the brain sends an errant signal to the adrenal glands to release epinephrine, also known as adrenaline. Epinephrine causes your heart to pound and your respiratory rate to increase. People can feel shaky, dizzy, or faint. Some people feel detached or like they're floating. You may feel a sense of doom or almost feel like you are dying. It's scary. Fear increases your sense of alarm, further fueling the release of adrenaline and prolonging the panic attack. This is the panic feedback loop.

There are techniques for extinguishing this feedback loop. Understanding what is going on in your body during a panic attack can make the symptoms less scary. When your feelings make sense, you feel more in control. This helps adrenaline subside and shortens the panic attack. Here are five steps you can take to make a panic attack PASS:

Step 1: Name it.

The first step is to recognize that you are having a panic attack. Remind yourself that everything you are feeling in your body is due to an adrenaline misfire, nothing more. It's uncomfortable, but you are safe.

Step 2: Focus on your breath.

A panic attack makes you breathe fast. You may feel short of breath, but actually you have plenty of air. Focus your energy on your breath and slow it down. Slowing your breathing will gradually calm all the other uncomfortable bodily responses. Box Breathing and Belly Breathing, as described in Chapter 19, Your Motherhood Survival Plans, are very effective against panic attacks.

Step 3: Do a body scan.

Get curious about your panic attack. What does it feel like? Scan your body for all the places you feel affected by the adrenaline. Imagine you are a scientist and need to describe exactly what your panic attack feels like to someone who hasn't ever had one.

By analyzing it, you are engaging your frontal cortex, the analytic part of the brain, rather than the emotional part of your brain. This down-regulates the panic feedback loop.

Step 4: Get grounded.

Ground yourself with your senses × 3: by naming three things you can see, three things you can feel, and three things you can hear. Open your eyes and look around the room. Remind yourself where you are. Name three objects you can see.

What can you feel? Stomp your feet on the floor. Rub your legs or reach up high and stretch your body out. If you're sitting, feel yourself grounded in the chair. Name three things you can feel right now.

Then notice what three things you can hear right now. Is there a clock, a fan, or other sounds?

You can then repeat this step, noticing three more things you can see, feel, and hear.

Step 5: Give gratitude.

Thank your body for being capable of jumping into action, even though you don't need it to right now. Thank your heart for being able to beat fast and hard. Thank your lungs for being so powerful. Your body is strong and can be there for you if you need it to. You just don't need this response right now. Make peace with your body's responsiveness.

Each of these steps can dissipate the panic feedback loop. Your panic attack will end. Most last less than 15 minutes. It is a long, miserable 15 minutes, but it will end.

If you experience panic attacks, let your prenatal care provider know.