

Managing Anxiety & Panic Attacks in College

Understanding anxiety & panic

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a **common and normal emotion we feel towards certain situations which require our action**. For example, a small amount of anxiety motivates people to start studying for upcoming exams or preparing for a presentation. Likewise, it is also beneficial in dangerous situations and motivates you to respond to and remove yourself from danger as soon as possible, such as if you came across a large bear in the woods (Williams, 2012).

Why do we get anxious?

When we are in a situation of immediate danger, our bodies go into **'fight or flight mode'** (Williams, 2012). This is where our **brains perceive a threat or danger** and sends a signal to either 'fight' or 'flight' the situation. The **hormone adrenaline is released** to spur you on to 'fight' or 'flight', and is the hormone that **results in many of the physical symptoms** of anxiety, such as shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, nausea and dizziness.

This 'fight or flight mode' is beneficial in situations of real danger, for example meeting that bear in the woods. However, for everyday situations such as going to lectures or taking the bus, **constantly being in this state not only impacts on your day to day life**, but is also tiring and wearing on your mental, physical and emotional health.

When is anxiety an issue?

Anxiety becomes an issue when:

- you are anxious in situations which are **not dangerous at all**
- you are **constantly anxious in anticipation of some future** situation or event
- the levels of anxiety you experience are **beyond helpful and therefore interferes with your daily life** (Clark, & Beck, 2012; Williams, 2012).

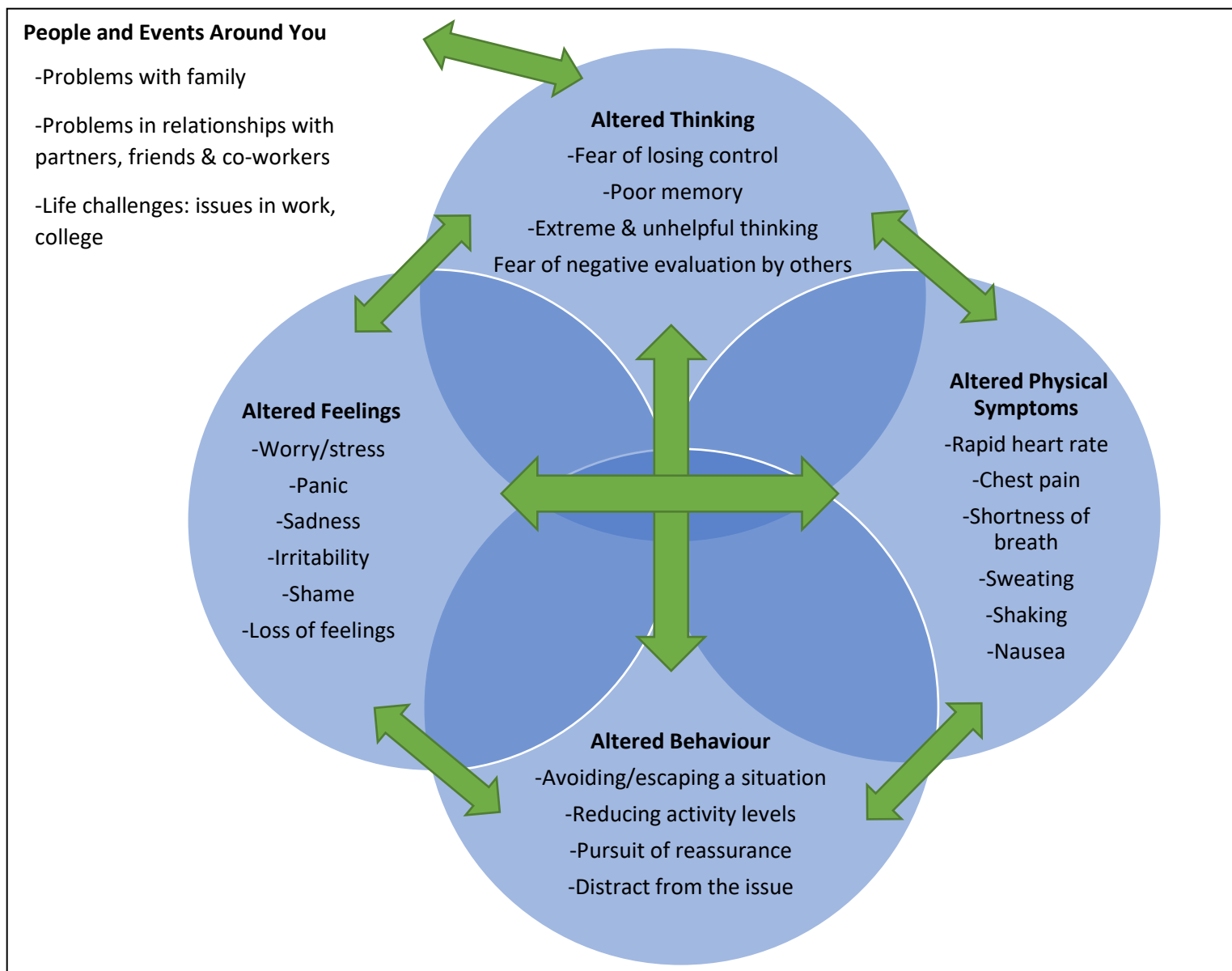
What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are a state of acute fear or terror. During a panic attack, there is a sudden rush of adrenaline which leads to many physical symptoms (e.g. fast heartbeat, sweating, shaking), and you become convinced that some catastrophic is occurring **right now**, such as “I’m going to have a heart attack” or “I’m going mad or losing control”. Panic attacks can last up to 30-40 minutes as your body can only produce a certain amount of adrenaline at any given time, however most attacks may only last between five and eight minutes (Barry, 2018; Williams, 2012).

Panic attacks can be very uncomfortable; however they are **not dangerous**. Not everyone who experiences anxiety may experience a panic attack; and vice versa, it is possible to experience a panic attack episode without struggling with ongoing anxiety (Barry, 2018; Williams, 2012). It is beneficial to take note of those situations/events in which you feel panic building up in order to identify these situations and implement strategies to prevent a panic attack for the future (e.g. exams, presentations, etc.).

5 Areas Approach to Understanding Anxiety and Panic (Williams, 2012):

The below diagram gives a framework to understand how anxiety affects five important areas in life: the people and events around you, your thinking, your feelings, your altered physical symptoms and your altered behaviour. Notice how your thinking affects you physically, emotionally and influences what we you do behaviourally. Each area affects the others. Have you experienced any of these? What other thoughts/feelings/behaviours/physical symptoms and events have you experienced when you were anxious?



Practical strategies for Managing Anxiety and Panic:

7 Steps to Problem-Solving (Williams, 2012):

1. Identify & define the issue:

- a. Many things can cause us to be anxious. Think of those situations which make you anxious and choose one to problem-solve and write it below.

- b. Try **break down** the issue into smaller steps and decide on a step to start with.

2. Brainstorm as many solutions you can to reach your first step in the table below:

- a. This allows you to think **more flexibly**. Likewise, the more solutions you think of **the better chance of a good one emerging**.
- b. Ask yourself: 'what advice would I give a friend?' 'What ridiculous solutions can I include on top of the sensible ones?' 'What have I tried in the past that was helpful?'

Possible Solutions	Pros	Cons

3. Evaluate the pros and cons of each possible solution using the above table

4. Choose a solution:

- a. Review and choose a solution that is clear and small enough to be realistically achievable, but big enough to get you moving towards tackling the issue.

5. Plan the steps to take in carrying out your chosen solution:

- a. Use the table below to create a plan for what you are going to do and when.
- b. Try to **predict possible problems** that might occur, this allows you to think about how to respond if you encounter problems along the way.

Steps to take towards solution	When will I do this?
Possible problems that might arise	How will I respond to them?

6. Carry out your plan:

- a. You got this!

7. Review the outcome:

- a. Whether your plan worked or not, it is good to reflect on what happened and why.
- b. If your plan worked: highlight the **things you did that helped** you achieve the plan, any problems you encountered and how you dealt with them.
- c. If your plan didn't work: don't beat yourself up about it. Life can be unpredictable and get in the way of our plans at times. Just reflect on problems that arose and think about **how you could deal with them if they happened again in the future**.

5-Minute Free Flow Writing:

- Take out a blank sheet of paper and set a timer on your phone for 5 minutes.
- Write down anything that comes to mind within that 5 minutes. Try not to think too hard about it, just write whatever comes to mind.
- Free-flow writing can help you get your thoughts out of your head and on paper. Writing down our thoughts also helps to identify those which are irrational and begin the process of rationalising them.

Get Organised & Prioritise Your Workload:

At times in college we can have so much work to do and have no idea where to start. Furthermore, we can get overwhelmed with trying to manage between all our academic and non-academic commitments. Firstly, let's prioritise our demands, then let's manage our time effectively.

- Using the Eisenhower Matrix below, classify all your academic and non-academic tasks into the appropriate quadrant. For more information, visit <https://www.eisenhower.me/eisenhower-matrix/>

Urgent/Important Anything here you: DO	Not-Urgent/Important Anything here you: PLAN
Urgent/Not-Important Anything here you: DELEGATE	Not-Urgent/Not-Important Anything here you: ELIMINATE



- Use the Weekly Schedule Template or Google Calendar to slot in your regular **academic and non-academic commitments** (including meal times and commuting), then you can identify free time to plan activities such as study, assignment work, breaks and fun stuff!

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
06:00							
07:00							
08:00							
09:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
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Take Care of Yourself

Area	Why?	Resources
Sleep hygiene	Anxiety can cause sleeplessness, and prolonged sleeplessness can make us feel poorly, both mentally and physically (Williams, 2012).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fix a bedtime and waking time – even on weekends! • Avoid napping during the day where possible. • Avoid caffeine several hours before bed (including soft drinks, coffee and caffeinated tea). • Keep your bedroom cold and dark. • Try a light snack before bed, (e.g. warm milk or a banana) • Don't take your worries to bed – write them down • Practice gratitude – identify one thing that happened in your day you are grateful for • Take a hot bath 90 minutes before bedtime. • Practice relaxation techniques before bed • Develop sleep rituals – give your body cues that it is time to sleep, such as listening to relaxing music, reading or doing your relaxation techniques
Exercise	Not only helps our physical health, but also increases energy, sense of wellbeing and positively impacts our mental health. It can be fun and you can plan things at your own pace (Williams, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go for a 10-minute walk around your neighbourhood • Go on one of the UCD Woodland Walks with a friend during lunch (https://tinyurl.com/y9x99pvx) • Try out an exercise class in the UCD Gym • Play a sport which you enjoy – basketball, GAA, golf – it all counts! • Dance!
Manage alcohol	Alcohol can be an aspect of college social life. However, some misuse alcohol to block out uncomfortable feelings such as stress which can worsen anxiety, damage your physical health and cause people to struggle to manage their workload (Williams, 2012).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to reduce your overall intake each week in slow and steady steps. • Many people don't realise they have an issue with alcohol. Visit http://www.askaboutalcohol.ie/ to find out more about the affects of alcohol and fun alcohol-free activities you can organise with friends.

Relaxation Techniques:

Tip: it can be helpful to set reminders on Google Calendar to remember to do relaxation techniques!

Relaxation Technique	Resources
Deep Breathing	<p>-Can be done anywhere</p> <p>-4-7-8 method:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds • Hold for 7 seconds • Exhale through your mouth for 8 seconds • Repeat several times as necessary. <p>-Google deep breathing: https://www.google.com/search?q=breathing+exercise</p>
Guided Meditation	<p>-If you are new to meditation, guided ones can be helpful to start off.</p> <p>-HeadSpace:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free guided meditation app for Apple and Android which provides 3, 5 and 10-minute meditations, and cute animations to explain the process! (https://www.headspace.com/) <p>-Oscailt Centre:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free downloadable audio guided meditations from Mary O'Callaghan (http://www.oscailt.com/#/resources/)
Progressive Muscle Relaxation	<p>-Can be done easily in public (e.g. library, exam hall, bus, etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit comfortably and close your eyes if you are comfortable to do so. • Rest your hands on your thighs and rest your feet on the floor. • Breathe in and out slowly and naturally. • Focus on your feet, as you breathe in tense all the muscles in your feet, including curling your toes. Hold for a few seconds. As you breathe out, release your muscles and feel the tension drain away. • Repeat the process as you work the way up through your body: calf muscles, thighs, stomach, back, shoulders, arms, hands, even your face!
Mindfulness	<p>5 step mindfulness exercise – identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 5 things you can see (clouds, pencil, grass) ○ 4 things you can hear (pages turning, birds chirping) ○ 3 things you can feel (soft jumper on skin, wind on face) ○ 2 things you can smell (fresh coffee, salty air) ○ 1 thing you can taste (mintiness from brushing teeth)

Engage in Nourishing Occupations:

Nourishing occupations are those meaningful and purposeful activities that nourish and relax you, and contribute to your health, well-being and sense of self (Nolan, Sullivan, Gleeson, & Lewis. 2013).

Some examples include watching a movie, reading, going for a run or spending time with others.

Identify those occupations which nourish you and make a plan to engage in them:

Nourishing Occupations	I will engage in this:

How to manage a Panic Attack:

Flooding Technique (Barry, 2018):

During a panic attack we experience the uncomfortable physical symptoms and assign danger to this experience by thinking things such as “I’m going mad” or “I’m having a heartattack”. This subsequently causes us to get more panicked, increasing the production of adrenaline and consequently prolonging the panic attack. With the aim of ceasing panic attacks, the **flooding techniques seeks to remove the danger we attach to having a panic attack** as follows:

As you are experiencing the physical symptoms during an episode of acute anxiety or a panic attack:

1. Visualise yourself being stuck to the floor or seat and are unable to move.
2. Without trying to stop the uncomfortable physical symptoms, allow them to flood over you like a wave.
3. Just go with the physical symptoms – do not try to implement any safety behaviours in the attempt to stop these symptoms.
4. Accept the fact that an adrenaline rush typically only lasts between five and eight minutes.
5. In relation to the uncomfortable physical symptoms, adopt the attitude of ‘bring it on!’ I order to remove the association of danger with them.
6. Accept the fact that the physical symptoms you are experiencing are uncomfortable, but not dangerous.
7. Only when the symptoms have subsided are you allowed to move.

You may have implement this strategy several times until the fear attached to panic attacks ceases.

**Additional Support:**

Student Health Centre/Student Counselling	(01) 716 3134 https://www.ucd.ie/stuhealth/contact/
UCD Access and Lifelong Learning Centre	all@ucd.ie https://www.ucd.ie/all/contact/
Samaritans	116 123
Niteline – free, confidential listening service for students in UCD, TCD, NCI and other colleges	https://niteline.ie/

This resource was brought to you by:

UCD Access and lifelong Learning Centre

Level 1, James Joyce Library Building

University College Dublin

Belfield, Dublin D04 V1W8

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