Introduction

“For me, a panic attack is almost a violent experience. I feel disconnected from reality. I feel like I’m losing control in a very extreme way. My heart pounds really hard, I feel like I can’t get my breath, and there’s an overwhelming feeling that things are crashing in on me.”

“It started 10 years ago, when I had just graduated from college and started a new job. I was sitting in a business seminar in a hotel and this thing came out of the blue. I felt like I was dying.”

“In between attacks there is this dread and anxiety that it’s going to happen again. I’m afraid to go back to places where I’ve had an attack. Unless I get help, there soon won’t be any place where I can go and feel safe from panic.”

Panic disorder is a real illness that can be successfully treated. It is characterized by sudden attacks of terror, usually accompanied by a pounding heart, sweating, weakness, faintness, or dizziness. During these attacks, people with panic disorder may flush or feel chilled; their hands may tingle or feel numb; and they may experience nausea, chest pain, or smothering sensations. Panic attacks usually produce a sense of unreality, a fear of impending doom, or a fear of losing control.

A fear of one’s own unexplained physical symptoms is also a symptom of panic disorder. People having panic attacks sometimes believe they are having heart attacks, losing their minds, or on the verge of death. They can’t predict when or where an attack will occur, and between episodes many worry intensely and dread the next attack.

Panic attacks can occur at any time, even during sleep. An attack usually peaks within 10 minutes, but some symptoms may last much longer.

Panic disorder affects about 6 million American adults and is twice as common in women as men. Panic attacks often begin in late adolescence or early adulthood, but not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder. Many people have just one attack and never have another. The tendency to develop panic attacks appears to be inherited.

People who have full-blown, repeated panic attacks can become very disabled by their condition and should seek treatment before they start to avoid places or situations where panic attacks have occurred. For example, if a panic attack happened in an elevator, someone with panic disorder may develop a fear of
elevators that could affect the choice of a job or an apartment, and restrict where that person can seek medical attention or enjoy entertainment.

Some people’s lives become so restricted that they avoid normal activities, such as grocery shopping or driving. About one-third become housebound or are able to confront a feared situation only when accompanied by a spouse or other trusted person. When the condition progresses this far, it is called agoraphobia, or fear of open spaces.

Early treatment can often prevent agoraphobia, but people with panic disorder may sometimes go from doctor to doctor for years and visit the emergency room repeatedly before someone correctly diagnoses their condition. This is unfortunate, because panic disorder is one of the most treatable of all the anxiety disorders, responding in most cases to certain kinds of medication or certain kinds of cognitive psychotherapy, which help change thinking patterns that lead to fear and anxiety.

Panic disorder is often accompanied by other serious problems, such as depression, drug abuse, or alcoholism. These conditions need to be treated separately. Symptoms of depression include feelings of sadness or hopelessness, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, low energy, and difficulty concentrating. Most people with depression can be effectively treated with antidepressant medications, certain types of psychotherapy, or a combination of the two.

Techniques for Panic Attacks
This is a collection of anti-panic techniques. It comes from people who suffer from panic attacks and the programs that help them. Researchers are proving that many of these methods are helpful.

#1: The Breath Wheel

Introduction
When you turn off the fight-or-flight response, you turn off the panic. When your body switches on the relaxation response, the fight-or-flight response has to turn off. They can't both be on at the same time. One of the most powerful, yet simple, ways to create body mind relaxation is the Breath Wheel. It steadies your breathing in a way that tells the body to switch on the relaxation response and switch off the anxiety.

The Technique
1. Imagine a very large mill wheel with a knot in the wood near its edge. Notice how the knot gradually crosses over the top of the circle that it traces, and then descends to cross the bottom.
2. Make the top and bottom of your breathing cross over at the same rate that the knot does, as if your breathing were a giant mill wheel, following that knot.

3. Make your breath slow and moderately deep. Slowing the breath can keep you from taking in too much oxygen (hyperventilating). This helps you, like keeping oxygen away from a fire.

4. Maintain that nice, slow breath as long as it takes for the panic to pass.

**Tips**

**Belly breathing:** Include your belly in your breathing. Breathe so that your abdomen moves forward, a little like a balloon filling up. This can help you relax. When you feel some pressure and relaxation in the floor of your pelvis, you are doing a really relaxed belly breath.

You can practice by laying on your back and putting your hands on your abdomen. Inhale as if you can inhale the air pressure up into your hands, lifting and spreading them apart.

**Shoulder awareness:** As you inhale, leave your shoulders relaxed, and notice how they slightly lift. As you exhale, feel them lowering. Allow them to relax a little more with each breath.

**Nose and mouth:** Inhale through your nose, and exhale through pursed lips. This is a very grounding, relaxing sensation.

#2: Thought-Mapping

**Introduction**

For many of us, panic is fueled by panicky thoughts. They may trigger anxiety, or they may add fuel to it once it starts. That's because the feeling of panic justifies panicky thoughts, just as dramatic thoughts can trigger panic.

This technique helps you get to know which thoughts are the most triggering or fueling. The better you know them, the better you can manage them.

**The Technique**

1. Think about the thoughts that you have before you become anxious. Write them down as fast as you can, non-stop, for two minutes. You can set a timer. If you are still thinking of more, keep going for a while after the two minutes.

2. Think about the thoughts that you have when you are already anxious or panicking. Write them down for two minutes.

3. Take a highlighter and mark the thoughts that seem to pack the most punch in fueling anxiety, negativity, anger, or helplessness.
4. When you are feeling okay: Practice counter-thoughts (below) to make a habit out of extinguishing panic-producing thoughts.

5. When you are anxious or panicking: tell yourself the counter-thoughts. Or practice the mindfulness technique (below), or thought-stopping (below).

**Tips**

SAVE THIS LIST. You can use it in therapy or in the Counter Thoughts technique that follows.

You can get anxiety-provoking thought by replaying a panic attack in your mind, carefully reviewing whatever thoughts were going through your mind at the time.

Sometimes the most triggering thoughts are the ones that you aren't very aware of. That gives them a kind of sneaky power to work behind the scenes. That means that you will discover more thoughts as you practice this. Also, the mindfulness exercise can help you do this.

Angry, helpless, and negative thoughts can be potent anxiety triggers. That's why we are including them as well.

Here are some example panic-producing thoughts:

- This is horrible (or terrible, or unacceptable, etc.)
- People can tell that I'm freaking out (or anxious, or breathing funny, or awkward, or inferior, etc.)
- A terrible thing is going to happen if I do this. (Plane will crash, elevator will drop, etc.)
- I can't.
- This is too intense.
- I can't take this.
- I'm going to have a heart attack.
- I'm going to lose control and make a fool of myself.
- If this happens (I lose my wallet, they say no, etc), it will be terrible (horrible, unacceptable, etc.)
#3: Counter-Thoughts

**Introduction**
Since you're learning to recognize the thoughts that amplify your anxiety, you can also learn to supplant them with thoughts that give your poise and confidence, or at least less anxiety. This is one of the most important things people get from cognitive behavioral therapy, a therapy that has been proven to help anxiety and panic.

**The Technique**
1. Get the list of thoughts from your Thought-Mapping experience.

2. You might want to do the Thought-Mapping experience again to get more thoughts.

3. Ask yourself what thoughts might be good antidotes to your anxiety-provoking thoughts.

4. This is just brainstorming, so jot down anything that occurs to you.

5. Go over your counter thoughts and see which ones make you feel the best. Also, which are the most realistic?

**Tips**
Keep your list of counter thoughts with you at all times and memorize them. Say them over and over when you aren't anxious so they will come to you easily when you are. You want this to be a habit.

Remember: The best counter thoughts are realistic. That's because they don't seem fake. You don't want a list that seems futile.

Usually, the best ones make you feel better. But sometimes, they might make you uncomfortable, because they kind of force you to let go of your familiar ways of becoming anxious. If it were easy to let go of those anxious thoughts, you would have already done it. So put a little elbow grease into working this technique. It can really pay off.

Here are some anxiety thoughts and counter thoughts as examples:

*This is horrible (or terrible, or unacceptable, etc.)*

This too shall pass. I can handle this. I've handled it before. People deal with this all the time, people just like me. Many people have panic, but they try hard not to show it. That means that I'm not really alone, and that people who feel like me handle this kind of thing all the time.

People can tell that I'm freaking out (or anxious, or breathing funny, or awkward, or inferior, etc.)
Most people are preoccupied with how they look, not how I look. Of the few people who are highly judgmental, they are preoccupied with judging all sorts of people instead of dealing with their own issues. Consider the source. Nothing will happen to me simply because someone is judgmental (say this when you are not in a situation where being judged is actually important, so that you are being realistic). Besides, this fear is more about my self-esteem than other people. That means I can work on my self-esteem instead of fearing people's thoughts.

A terrible thing is going to happen if I do this. (Plane will crash, elevator will drop, etc.)

Yes, it's always possible that something awful could have happened. But I will focus on why I'm here and use my anxiety techniques instead.

I can't.

Yes, I can. Piece of cake. I've done things like this before. People do this kind of thing all the time. I'm focusing my mind on the results in order to get the results. I'm committed, I'm committed, I'm committed.

This is too intense.

Wow, this is really intense. I'm refocusing my mind away from the distractions and using my anxiety techniques. I will get through this. One day I will be an expert at cutting though anxiety.

I can't take this.

I can handle this, even if it's panicky for me.

I'm going to have a heart attack.

Heart, I love you, I'm using my anxiety techniques to love you. My panic attacks are not deadly, they show how strong and intense my nerves are, and how much power is within my. I am learning to channel that energy for love, well being, and success.

I'm going to lose control and make a fool of myself.

I'm focusing my mind on the results and on my anxiety techniques. I'm canceling that silly fantasy about being embarrassed, and I'm imagining something far better.

If this happens (I lose my wallet, they say no, etc), it will be terrible (horrible, unacceptable, etc.)
Yes, I tend to get pretty upset about things like this, but they happen to everybody, and everybody gets through them. People take the time to handle things because they are committed to getting good results. I will use my counter thoughts to treat this like a normal problem in life, and I'll handle it.

*I don't have time for this, this is insane, these jerks have screwed me with their incompetence.*

This is a true set back, but I'm focusing my mind on how to get the results. I know that life does not guarantee convenience, justice, or me getting my way all the time. I'm committed to results and living well. I can manage this, even if I need to retreat in order to collect my wits.

### #4: Thought Stopping and State Shifting

#### Introduction
There are a lot of techniques to stop anxious thoughts or bounce you out of an anxious state. These are the brute force techniques of the panic control world. Sometimes, they're all you need. Especially as you gain experience with the other techniques to gain more control.

#### The Techniques
1. **Thought Stopping:** As an anxiety provoking thought begins, scream in your mind STOP! STOP! STOP! Substitute an anti-anxiety thought.
2. **Thought Clenching:** Counter an anxious thought by stiffening and tensing your entire body and blowing air out through pursed lips until your lungs are empty. Breathe in as you think a counter thought.
3. **Thought Singing:** Sing the anxious thought. This one sounds a little extra crazy, but it is very powerful. The trick is to remember to do it. You won't want to do this in public though. Put the words to your upsetting thoughts to music. Sing it out. You don't have to be a musician or singer to do this. You can be tone deaf and do this. Just make it more or less musical. Then think your counter thoughts. Singing tends to really shift your state out of anxiety or anger. You're using different parts of your brain. It's a little like getting a better customer service representative on the phone.
4. **Spider the anxious thoughts.** Make your hand into a spider on your table or thigh. Have it act out how it feels with those anxious thoughts. It might make you laugh. You can give the spider a voice, singing the anxious thought. Now the spider is an opera star; a real diva!

The point is to poke fun at the irrational thoughts that are driving your panic. The founder of cognitive therapy, the late Albert Ellis, endorsed the use of silly songs...
and other humorous techniques to attack the thoughts behind panic and other problems.

#5: Movie Mayhem

Introduction
This is a very powerful technique that people use for all sorts of upsetting issues and fears. This is best for a situation that provokes anxiety or panic. It involves manipulating a movie of the situation in your mind. Use it before you are in the situation. You can also use it afterwards if the memory is bothering you too much.

The Technique
1. Think of the situation that you are afraid of.
2. Imagine that you are watching it on a TV screen.
3. Run the "recording" backwards to the point just before you would normally become anxious.
4. Watch the movie, running it through to a stopping point.
5. Adjust the movie so that it is black and white.
6. Run it backwards.
7. Make the TV smaller and put funny clothes on the people involved, you included. You can use superhero outfits, clown costumes, animal costumes, you name it.
8. Run the movie forward in fast motion. Everyone has high squeaky voices.
9. Run it backwards and forwards a few times at super fast speed.
10. Notice how this changes your feelings.

#6: Mindfulness

Introduction
One of the things that give momentum to panic is the way we think. Thoughts can trigger or build panic. A great way to get control over thoughts is to observe them. But when we experience panic, this may not be so easy. That's why we need to practice observing our thoughts when we aren't in panic. So I suggest you practice this when you're feeling okay, but also use it when you feel anxiety. Many people find this very calming.

The Technique
First, Practice:
1. Sit in a comfortable, but alert position.

2. Get your breath into a smooth, slow cycle, like the turning of a large wheel.

3. Notice the thoughts that run through your mind. Each time you notice one, imagine that you can step back from it and say something about it. For example: "Grocery list," or, "Angry about my neighbor's yapping dog." You're kind of like the color commentator on TV commenting on the golf game.

4. Notice any thoughts that make you more anxious. Those tend to be thoughts that tell you something is terrible, frightening, or intolerable.

**Second, Transition**

1. Imagine approaching a situation that tends to make you anxious. Or, if you think it's okay, actually approach it in real life.

2. Notice your thoughts just as you did in the practice above. Pay special attention to the anxiety-provoking thoughts.

3. Comment on each thought and add, "I am not that thought." This gives you even more distance from the intensity.

4. You can use this to gradually be less sensitive to approaching and entering the situation or place. As you progress, get closer to the thing or situation you fear until you can handle it. Use other desensitization techniques as needed.

**Third, Respond**

1. When you begin to experience anxiety out of the blue, or even a full-blown panic, start doing mindfulness.

2. Remember to steady and slow your breath, like a big, slow wheel.

3. Remember to comment on the thoughts and say to yourself, "I am not these thoughts."

**#7: Breath Waiting**

**Introduction**

This one may be a little hard to believe. When people are anxious, their body is preparing for fight or flight. That means, among other things, that it is getting energized. This causes most people to breathe too much air. They don't know that they are doing it. This is hyperventilation. It can cause more anxiety. One of the ways it does this is by creating disturbing feelings. Dizziness is disorienting, and so it can spur panic.

This technique will take your oxygen level down to the normal level.
**The Technique**
1. As you feel panicky, very slowly exhale though pursed lips.

2. As you approach the bottom of the breath, slow down even more.

3. When you get to the bottom, wait until you feel a good, strong desire to breathe. This desire is not an idea, it is the actual feeling of needing to breathe. Wait until your body tells you that it is definitely time to breathe. You might be surprised to find that you have to wait for a little while before this feeling becomes strong; especially if you have been over-breathing for a while without realizing it.

4. Then slowly breathe in. You can begin the Breath Wheel at this point.

**Tips**
Do that slow out-breath so slowly that it is like a meditation. Focus very intently on this action. This strong body awareness can distract and calm you.

Do the in-breath through your nose. If you close your throat enough to make an air sound as the air comes in, you may find this to be relaxing.

**#8: Zone Tracing**

**Introduction**
This is a surprisingly effective technique. We will find where the emotion "lives" in your body, and trace it with a finger on an imaginary screen.

**The Technique**
1. Scan the inner feelings of your body with your mind. Look at all the different feelings in your body. You might find some tension, or notice that your posture is a little off, for example.

2. Find where you feel some emotion. If you don't, you can think of a situation coming up that is a little inconvenient, like having to return a purchase or pay a parking ticket. Notice how that stirs up a little bit of emotion, even if it's just a twinge of frustration.

3. Imagine that you see your body on a screen, and that area of emotion shows as a different color on your screen, kind of like on a weather map or medical body scan.

4. Notice the shape of the feeling. Put your finger up to the imaginary screen, somewhere on the periphery of the feeling.

5. Slowly (really slowly) trace your finger around the feeling shape. Go so slow that a casual observer might think you were frozen.
6. Notice any changes in the shape of the feeling. If it changes shape, move your finger to stay on the periphery.

7. Many people find that the feeling lightens up a great deal or even goes away completely. Notice the better feelings and the good energy that is in its place.

**Tips**
You can encourage the good feelings in your body to dilute and absorb the anxious area.

You can find those good feelings the same way you found the anxious area, only by looking for the most intense good or relaxed feelings.

Practice this with less intense feelings. You'll get good at it pretty quickly. Then, if you have a panic attack or fear doing something, you can use this technique as an antidote.

**#9: The Pearl Within the Pearl**

**Introduction**
This little trick is a great add on to the mindfulness meditation. It is a lot like Zone Tracing, but tends to create a deeper relaxation. However, it's also a little more advanced. But you can try it right now to get a feel for it. It's kind of like a distraction technique, but it appears to be the opposite. When people put their awareness into the center of their intense feelings and do this little trick, many find that the intensity diffuses. When the sun is focused through a magnifying glass, the heat of that point can burn paper. By moving the glass toward the paper, the point of sunlight becomes diffused, and can no longer burn. That's what this is like.

**The Technique**
1. Scan the inner feelings of your body with your mind. Look at all the different feelings in your body. You might find some tension, or notice that your posture is a little off, for example.

2. Find where you feel some emotion. If you don't, you can think of a situation coming up that is a little inconvenient, like having to return a purchase or pay a parking ticket. Notice how that stirs up a little bit of emotion, even if it's just a twinge of frustration.

3. Imagine that you can insert your mind, like a mini-you, into that area of feeling, by peering into it very intently. Focus your mind so much that it's like you're going inside the feeling.

4. Look for the center of the intensity of that feeling. If it were a weather map, where would the hottest point be?
5. Put your awareness into that point, as if you could inject yourself into it.

6. Now look for the center of that center, or "the pearl within the pearl" and inject your awareness into that.

7. Now just watch what happens. Hold your awareness there for a while, and simply observe.

**Tips**
When you feel panic coming on, you can seek out where the emotions are kindling (the pearl) and use this technique to reduce or even extinguish a panic attack.

By practicing on emotions that are less intense than panic, you can get used to doing this so that it is easy. The technique is a little like the mindfulness technique, except that you are focusing on feelings instead of thoughts, and you use a very narrow focus.

Imagine that you can breathe through the pearl within the pearl to make this technique even more relaxing. Imagine that the breath through the pearl is good energy coming in, and anxiety flowing out.

Have you ever put a drop of bleach on some oil that is on top of water? The oil spreads out very dramatically. Imagine that your awareness in the pearl causes the energy to spread out. This helps to diffuse it, so that it feels more like useful energy or excitement, rather than a focused, intense feeling.

Practice this with less intense feelings. This one might take some practice, because it's rather unusual. When you're fairly good at it, you can use this technique as an antidote to fear or panic, or for memories that trouble you.

People also use this technique for physical pain.

**#10: Distraction Techniques**

**Introduction**
Many people distract themselves from their panicky feelings in order to get through them or even quell them. This can help short circuit a brief attack, or be a survival strategy for people who have long-lasting attacks. Below are several examples.

**Examples**
1. Be a member of a panic or other discussion list. Write about your experience, and read about what others are saying.

2. Play a video game or online puzzle that tends to really engage you.
3. Take two pencils and drum to some country music (or anything with an interesting beat).

4. Think of all the activities that might distract you. Which do you think might work the best? Try one. Keep experimenting until you find the best ones.

#11: The Boulder Being

Introduction
This is one of those techniques for triggering the relaxation response by making the body and mind act relaxed. It involves slow movements and a giant, slow state of mind. Your body movements give you an "awareness alternative" to your emotional feelings. This helps to distract you and absorb your mind away from the anxiety.

The Technique
1. Imagine that you are the size of King Kong or even a sky scraper. You are made of gigantic boulders.

2. Do whatever you were about to do, but to it as the Boulder Being. Move slowly, ponderously toward your next task.

3. As you take a step, focus on how you balance, so that you can take that step slowly. Giant boulder body parts build momentum and swing across their arc to stop with a long, dull thud.

4. When you're done being the Boulder Being, you can shake off all the boulders and go back to your lighter self.

Tips
Picturing yourself as the Boulder Being, as though you were watching a movie helps to disconnect you from the body sensations. This is the opposite of the pearl approach.

See if moving microscopically slowly is helpful or if you prefer moving ponderously. If you like moving incredibly slowly, then it's more of a super slow motion technique, as if time was almost standing still. This allows you to focus your mind on the slightest movements.

#12: The Inner Smile

Introduction
This is a variation of a technique from ancient Yogic practices. It helps to trigger a safe state of body and mind. In this technique, you create a subtle smile in various ways. This also helps to distract you from anxiety.
The Technique
1. Get into a comfortable position. This is a great time to start the Breath Wheel.

2. Put a very slight smile on your face.

3. Slowly move your eyes down and up. Which angle seems to be the best for your anxiety? Gaze in that direction.

4. Imagine that your smile has an echo of a smile inside your body somewhere. It seems to be smile energy. It’s kind of sweet and kind of reassuring. It’s confident in its own way.

5. Allow the smile energy in your subtle smile to spread throughout your face, as if it could glow through your eyes and your skin; even your scalp and hair.

6. Allow that smile energy to grow and spread, moving through you like warm sap through a tree, until it radiates out through your skin like an aura.

7. As the smile energy travels through your body, let it relax each area that it flows through; especially your shoulders and breathing.

8. Imagine that smile energy is opening channels through your feet, so that it can connect you with the earth. Imagine that this dissipates all intensity and anxiety. The earth absorbs it all and converts it into useful energy that is available to you as needed for relaxation and well being.

Tips
For any meditation or relaxation technique, it’s good to relax your jaw. By creating some suction between your tongue and the roof of your mouth, you may find that it’s easier to relax your jaw without dropping it down.

#13: Progressive Relaxation

The Technique
If you’re having trouble relaxing, this technique can work very well. By tensing your muscles, you tire them, making it easier for them to relax. This signals your nervous system to relax as well, triggering a relaxation response cascade.

The Technique
1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.

2. Inhale and tense your feet. If they tend to cramp, you can tense them by extending your toes instead of curling them. Make your feet super-tense and hold for about ten seconds. Hold your inhale as well. Don’t create pressure in your lungs, though, because that can cause some dizziness or hyperventilation.

3. Release your feet and your breath.
4. Continue this inhale-and-tension process through each part of your body. You can use this sequence: Calves, thighs, buttocks, abdomen, back, shoulders, neck, face, sides of head (ears up), and forehead.

5. Scan your body with your mind, looking ONLY for feelings of relaxation. Ignore all other feelings.

6. Bring your relaxed or other good feelings into the foreground of your mind and savor them. Invite them to expand throughout your body, as you did with the Inner Smile.

**Tips**
You can follow this with the Breath Wheel.

You can add the Inner Smile to the Breath Wheel.

This is a nice exercise prior to going to bed or doing any kind of meditation or relaxation technique.

**#14: Focusing**

**Introduction**
This technique is from the book *Focusing* by Eugene Gendlin, Ph.D. By shifting back and forth between a word or phrase and the feeling that it goes with, you can get surprising improvements in anxiety and other feelings, even when you tend to react to an issue with disturbing feelings. It is a kind of mindfulness that was published before mindfulness was a popular term.

1. Think of how you feel when you are anxious (or if you are already anxious, notice how that feeling "lives" in your body).

2. Ask your mind to come up with a word or phrase that seems to capture the feeling. For example, "panicky," or, "anxious," or "welling up." The first words may not quite hit the spot, so give yourself a little time to get something that really captures the feeling.

3. Fully put your attention onto that word or phrase.

4. Next, turn your attention back to the anxiety. Where in your body is the anxiety the strongest?

5. Now shift your attention back and forth between the feelings and the words. Don't shift until you are fully focused on whichever one you're on for a few moments.

6) Keep going until you find that you can do it very quickly and easily.
**Tips**

You can use this technique to help with troubling feelings you have about a personal issue or embarrassing memory, among other things. How does thinking of the issue make you feel? Use that feeling for Focusing.

After Focusing, ask your mind to come up with creative ideas to help with the issue. Don't use any effort, though. Just mentally make the request, and wait for a while, allowing your mind to wander. The state of mind that focusing fosters can sometimes produce breakthroughs, because it activates mental abilities that work well together.

**#15: Using the Focal Point Technique to Cope with Panic Attacks**

Coping with panic attacks can be incredibly difficult, especially for those who are experiencing them for the first time. Luckily, there are a variety of methods for learning to bring the anxiety under control as quickly as possible. One of the more helpful strategies involves using a visual 'focal point' as a means of centering one's thoughts.

As with all coping methods, the focal point technique needs to be practiced during calm periods before it can be successfully used to deter a panic attack. The following steps detail the process.

1. Determine what the focal point will be. It can be any stationary object like a picture, figurine, or photograph. Clocks are not the best choice since both the movement and the concept of time will hinder concentration.
2. Focus your attention on the object, note every color and detail. Observe how still the object is, how solid, how real.
3. Slow your breathing. Keep your eyes centered on your focal point. If you choose, you can quietly or mentally repeat a calming word or phrase to yourself, such as "peace," or "I'm okay."
4. Spend at least 10 to 15 minutes on the exercise, and practice twice per day. Once you are able to slip yourself into a calm and relaxed state at will, this exercise will do wonders to help you deal with the onset of a panic attack or state of heightened anxiety.

Using other methods in conjunction with this exercise can be a great benefit for most patients. Not every method will work for everyone so it is important to practice each several times to see what suits you best.

**#16: Using Breath-Counting to Control a Panic Attack**

Stop and count to ten! It's likely that you've often heard that advice, especially when you were angry or upset. It happens to be extremely helpful in panic attacks, as well. Learning how to control your breathing will accomplish a two-fold response to anxiety and provide great results. Not only will you be able to
distract yourself from the feelings, both mental and emotional, but you will also be able to slow your breathing which in turn will help to bring about a much more relaxed state.

Simply rattling off the numbers isn’t quite good enough, however. The following breathing exercise is known as Four-Ten Breathing. To start, begin to inhale slowly, through your nose, while counting to four. Hold the breath a brief moment, then exhale slowly, counting down. Think to yourself, “one, two, three, four, hold, four, three, two, one.” For the second breath, end the count with two, and so one, until you have completed ten full inhales and exhales.

Work on this exercise several times per day until you are able to able to drop into it at a moment’s notice. The next time you feel a panic attack is imminent, begin your Four-Ten Breathing. You will notice that the more often you rely on this technique, the faster it will begin to work for you.

#17: The Lie of the Panic Attack

Panic disorder is very real, and affects a growing number of Americans each year. The disorder is developed and maintained by a sequence of psychological events in which the sufferer a) experiences symptoms of heightened anxiety, b) misinterprets the meaning of the symptoms, and c) develops a learned behavior of constantly monitoring his or her physical state for the return of the symptoms. The key step in the above system, the step that turns this process into a self-perpetuating cycle, is the second step involving misinterpretation of symptoms.

Panic attacks cause the patient to believe that those feelings of heightened anxiety are not just scary and uncomfortable, but a dangerous sign of ill health or even impending death. The most crucial thing to understand in order to bring panic disorder under control is that this belief is a lie. Unfortunately, because these symptoms are initially perceived as harbingers of doom, the panic itself becomes a thing to be feared. This causes the person to be hyper-aware of his mental, emotional, and physical state at all times. This heightened awareness can actually trigger the flood of adrenaline that fuels a panic attack.

In order to break the cycle, one must first be willing to reject the lie. Using affirming statements like "Anxiety is uncomfortable, but not dangerous," or "I can still function; this anxiety will pass," can be extremely beneficial. In time, the patient will be able to chart proven success in identifying the lie of the panic attack which will lead to a much quicker recovery from subsequent attacks. Using this method can help to banish panic disorder all together.

#18: Self-Disclosure Rule for Panic Attacks
Oddly enough, one of the most pervasive fears involved in acute anxiety is the fear that other people will notice the distress. "They will believe I'm crazy," the anxious person thinks. By sharing your struggles with close friends and family, you can strip panic attacks of their power and diffuse one of the most difficult aspects to overcome - that of being "found out."

Clients should be taught to reject the shame associated with panic. There is no shame in suffering from acute anxiety or panic attacks. Panic attacks can be so frightening and disturbing, that those who experience them will go far out of their way to avoid any and all situations in which they typically occur. Believing that you can't go to the grocery store because that will cause an attack is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you can bring yourself to admit to a friend or partner, "I'm afraid that I'll have an attack at the store," it will be much easier to approach the next step which is actually making the shopping trip.

If you can find the strength to share your worries and fears, no matter how unreasonable you believe them to be, you can continue to progress in your battle with anxiety and panic. Refer your support person to a book or article that explains your situation and take the time to answer questions so that they can fully understand your situation. Full disclosure is your best strategy for enlisting the help you need to succeed.

#19: Fantasy and Visualization Combat Anxiety

Of all the most popular strategies for coping with panic attacks and acute anxiety, visualization is one of the best for the creative personality. People who are able to spike their anxiety levels by imagining dire consequences and outcomes are also able to soothe themselves with the same technique - they simply don't know it yet.

These are some of the more creative visualizations for bringing a panic attack under control:

- **Floating.** Close your eyes, lie down, and breathe deeply. Imagine that your body is growing lighter and lighter, until finally it is absolutely weightless. Feel your body begin to float, rising gently. Hold the visualization as long as you can.
- **White light.** Imagine the concept of "calm" as a white light. See the light move over your body, starting at your feet and moving upward, leaving a residue of peace as it travels. Feel how the anxiety dissipates as the calming light sinks into your skin.
- **Recall a pleasant memory.** This could be a memory from childhood or from last week. As long as the memory induces a sense of well-being, you can re-visit it any time you need to relax.
The more vividly you can imagine your surroundings and the sensations that pertain to your fantasy, the better. Make sure to spend several minutes of practice on your visualization technique each day, understanding that a practiced response will be much easier to call upon when in a state of distress.

#20: Developing a Relaxation Response

One of the best methods of dealing with panic attacks is to develop a reliable relaxation response. At the onset of a panic attack, a deliberate effort is made to trigger the practiced response which can result in almost immediate relief. There are many different methods of specific relaxation responses, but all are based on the same theories that said responses must be diligently cultivated and practiced in order to achieve any modicum of success.

Consulting a reputable therapist who specializes in panic and anxiety disorders can be extremely helpful, but patients can also attain real results on their own. Before trying to craft a relaxation response it is recommended that the patient identify the symptoms of an imminent panic attack. Of the many possible symptoms of an attack, most subjects report having the same symptom set during and preceding each event. This allows the patient to quickly recognize a pending panic attack and immediately begin to prepare the appropriate response.

The other part concerns the crafting of the actual technique. Examples of helpful techniques include progressive relaxation, breath counting, using a focal point, and fantasy. Once the patient is able to craft a response, he or she must faithfully practice the technique several times per day. It can be extremely beneficial to practice at different times and during different levels of activity and relaxation. For instance, practicing at night just before bed will probably be easier than practicing on the drive to work in the morning. However, varying the times and situations for practice will eventually develop a much more reliable automatic response.

#21: Dealing with Panic Attacks - Change Your Thinking Patterns

Panic disorder and acute anxiety are a learned cycle of behavior patterns. While that may sound excessively formal, it is helpful to understand that the cause is a learned behavior and not inherent. For this reason, it is possible to learn different behaviors and thinking patterns that will help to break the cycle and lessen the hold that panic disorder can have. Using positive self-talk will shift the balance of power back in your favor.

- Circular questioning. If you find yourself asking over and over, "why is this happening?" or "what is wrong with me?" you could try repeating to yourself gently, "this will pass."
• Can't thinking. Start by reminding yourself that you can, you are simply avoiding.
• All-or-nothing thinking. If the last trip out of the house was less than successful, remind yourself that doesn't necessarily mean that ALL such trips will pose a problem.
• Mind-reading. Thinking that you know what's going on in the heads of the people around you can lead to other faulty suppositions rather quickly.
• Fortune-telling. Likewise, don't fall into the trap of believing that a future scenario will definitely play out as imagined.

Breaking these thinking habits is a start to successfully coping with panic disorder. Once you are able to recognize them, start working on combating them with alternative strategies. When coupled with other relaxation and coping techniques, you can change or thinking patterns to those that are healthier and more helpful to your situation. Acute anxiety and panic attacks can come at you from out of the blue, without regard to real threat of danger. This is part of what makes them so incomprehensible to most sufferers. Understanding how panic and anxiety trick us into perpetuating the cycle is the first step to controlling, and eventually defeating, this disorder.

Think of how you feel while you're in the grip of a panic attack. Do you want to flee? Is your anxious mind telling you that you will be in danger if you don't? Understand that proving the panic wrong is the first step to overcoming it. You are not really in danger, you're in discomfort, and that is not dangerous. It's actually a natural response to the physical response that your panic is causing. When you feel your anxiety begin to ramp up, listen to what the panic is suggesting and do the opposite. Are you feeling a need to run? Sit down instead. You might be surprised to discover just how quickly your panic will abate when you refuse to feed the cycle of anxiety.

Disrupting this cycle allows you to consciously understand the difference between danger and discomfort, and to identify the physical sensations that are causing that discomfort. By refusing to give in to the panic's called-for response, you can avoid developing the 'fear of fear' that turns acute anxiety into a full-blown panic attack and stops it in its tracks.

#22: Combating Panic Disorder with Externalization

Because panic disorder is so rarely spoken of, those who suffer from it are often hesitant to reach out to friends or family, or any other form of support. This internalization of the process only gives weight to the problem and does nothing to help combat the disorder. Those who are dealing with panic disorder or episodes of heightened anxiety can use a process called "externalization" to assist with bringing panic under control.
In order to begin practicing externalization, start by using each of your senses to bring your focus back outside of yourself. For instance, ask yourself what you see, what shapes, colors, or patterns are around you. Use some hard candy or gum to exercise your sense of taste and smell. Listen to a random conversation around you, if you are in public, or take a few quiet moments to focus on the texture of your clothing.

Learning to externalize your attention will help you stop monitoring what's going on inside your mind and body, thereby lessening the effects of the anxiety. You can also try changing your environment by going for a walk, moving to a different room, or excusing yourself to the restroom for a few moments. All of these techniques work remarkably well to distract you from the internal self-monitoring that panic disorder requires in order to stay in control.

#23: Panic Attacks and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT): (This text is from another course at this site, but is included due to its relevance)

Model of Anxiety

Anxiety is fundamental to REBT theory. Ellis distinguishes between two major forms of anxiety. Discomfort anxiety (DA) results from a perceived threat to personal comfort in life coupled with a belief that “they should or must get what they want (and should not or must not get what they don’t want).” (Ellis, 1990) The anxiety is increased by a third requisite, that “it is awful or catastrophic (rather than merely inconvenient or disadvantageous)” (ibid) if they do not experience the desired outcome of what must or must not happen.

The other major form of anxiety is ego anxiety (EA). This results from a similar pattern as DA. In this case, the individual experiences a threat to self worth and believes that, “they should or must perform well and/or be appreciated by others…”(ibid) EA increases their anxiety further through the belief that, “it is awful or catastrophic when they don’t perform well and/or are not approved by others as they believe they should be.” (ibid)

Ellis cites EA as being particularly dramatic, and states that it is a key part of many emotional difficulties, including, “severe depression, shame, guilt, and inadequacy and frequently drives people to therapy (or to suicide).” (ibid) DA, on the other hand, is less dramatic but more common. It acts as a primary cause, or as a secondary factor that creates a vicious cycle in making emotional difficulties more persistent or extreme. In effect, the person may feel anxious about being anxious. The resulting emotional difficulties can include, “feelings of anxiety, depression or shame.” (ibid) As a primary cause, Ellis states that this can trigger anxiety in uncomfortable situations or situations that may be dangerous. The
results can include phobias toward potentially dangerous situations such as elevators and heights.

DA can be insidious because of its more subtle nature, and because people tend to attribute the problem to the situation, rather than to their own beliefs. It can be mistaken for free-floating anxiety by clinicians, or simply go unaddressed.

It can also generalize to additional situations, as occurs when a person who is anxious about elevators, and is anxious about being anxious about that, begins worrying about whether they may become afraid of flying, of escalators, or any number of other situations. Such generalization can reach beyond these situations to mere symbols of the situations, or to activities that may involve such situations. For example, a person might begin to live a more limited life because they have become afraid that normal activities may require exposure to the situations that provoke anxiety.

Froggert (2005) describes a fundamental condition that results from demands regarding other people or the world, called “discomfort disturbance.” He states that it comes in two “flavors”, either low frustration tolerance (LFT) and low discomfort tolerance (LDT), that, “…are similar and closely related.”

Low frustration tolerance stems from the belief that one should not experience frustration, that they are entitled to convenience, and that it is terrible when the situation is otherwise. Low discomfort tolerance stems from the belief that one should not have to experience discomfort, that they are entitled to a comfortable existence, and that it is terrible when they are deprived of the comfort they deserve.

Needless to say, people with these anxieties do not generally verbalize such beliefs. However, through REBT treatment they come to see their feelings and behavior as expressions of such beliefs, they are more likely to adopt for constructive forms of self-talk and behavior. These, in turn, support better emotional functioning and greater success.

Discomfort disturbance, Forggert says, is expressed by one or more of the following behavioral and subjective symptoms. Any one of them can be expressed as myriad specific behaviors or states.

'Discomfort anxiety' (emotional tension resulting from the perception that one's
comfort (or life) is threatened). Worrying (‘because … would be awful, and I couldn't stand it, I must worry about it in case it happens’). Avoidance of events and circumstances that are seen as 'too hard' to bear or 'too difficult' to overcome. Secondary disturbance (upsetting oneself about having a problem, e.g. becoming anxious about being anxious, depressed about being depressed, and so on).

Short-range enjoyment - the seeking of immediate pleasure or avoidance of pain at the cost of long-term stress - for example alcohol, drug and food abuse; watching television rather than exercising; practising unsafe sex; or overspending to feel better.

Procrastination - putting off difficult tasks or unpleasant situations.

Negativity and complaining - becoming distressed over small hindrances and setbacks, overconcerned with unfairness, and prone to making comparisons between one’s own and others’ circumstances. Ellis feels that animals most likely evolved a high level of need to control their environment in order to meet needs such as safety. This, he says, probably is much of the impetus for discomfort anxiety.

**Using REBT to treat panic attacks: Case Illustration (this is also in the REBT for Depression course)**

About 15 years ago I had one of the worst panic attacks imaginable. It hit me out of the clear blue with an impact that was overwhelming. I had all of the classic symptoms including shortness of breath, increased heart rate, sweating, dizziness, numbness, feelings of doom, and a general feeling of complete fear. The symptom I remember most was the racing, incoherent thoughts that left me feeling disoriented and completely helpless. As a therapist familiar with REBT, I was at an advantage to deal with this sudden predicament, but for about the first 30 to 40 minutes into the panic attack, I was too cognitively impaired to do much about it. However, I gradually gained enough lucidity to start processing my plan. First of all, I knew I was dealing with a panic attack. I had never had one before, but knew the symptoms from my graduate school training and some brief experience helping others in counseling deal with the same problem.

My clinical experience told me I was not going to die even though I did have a strong feeling of impending doom. Recognizing that these feelings were not
going to kill me and that I was not in imminent danger were important insights in dealing with the problem. Although my thoughts were not completely straight, I realized that my first step had to be to not “awfulize” these panic feelings. This was not easy. The feelings I was experiencing felt bad, very bad, but I had to focus on the fact that they were not going to kill me and that they would eventually pass. I did not rely on positive thinking, but rather factual thinking (an important distinction made in REBT).

To my knowledge, no one has ever had a single, perpetual panic attack that lasted indefinitely. Also, ‘no one has died from a panic attack’ I told myself. I also realized that my main issue was that of control. I could not control the Discomfort Anxiety (DA) I was experiencing and had better stop making it worse by musting that it go away and awfulizing about how bad it felt. “I refuse to demand that these feelings go away (addressed the musting)” I said aloud over and over. “I can deal with these feelings whether I want to or not because I am not going to die (addressed the awfulizing).” I didn’t feel like it, but I stood up in my living room and loudly yelled these disputing beliefs while shaking my fists to emphasize my determination (Rigorous, dramatic disputation of false beliefs help incorporate more rational ones). Gradually, as I gave less and less into the “awfulness” of the moment by audibly reinforcing the disputing beliefs, I started feeling better.

Please understand, this panic attack left me feeling physically weak and fragile for at least a couple hours after the initial impact. I don’t want to sound as if my REBT training kicked into gear and all of a sudden the panic was gone. I also don’t want to minimize the absolute terror a person experiencing panic often feels. However, I am convinced that refusing to demand that these feelings go away, and not awfulizing how bad they were, as soon as I was cognitively able, were the first steps in the road to recovery.

After my panic attack, I had some time to think about how I might prevent additional attacks. I knew another panic attack would be on the way unless I had a plan for defusing it. REBT strategies for panic are far more effective if practiced before the ‘heat of the moment’. Using REBT, I knew I had addressed the Discomfort Anxiety (DA), but I had not addressed the Ego Anxiety (EA) that was probably at the heart of, and the impetus for, my panic attack. As I began to look at some of my core beliefs using the ones Ellis suggests as the beliefs behind most problematic emotions and behaviors, I realized that I had been unconsciously making some demands of myself for many months, perhaps years, that had culminated into these feelings of panic. I had also been awfulizing myself through self-downing for not meeting these demands in the way I thought I must.
Just a couple of years prior to this panic attack, I had lost a successful business due to several freak events. After losing my business and over the following months, I had begun to not only awfulize the loss of my business, but also myself (often called 'self-downing') for not being the success I thought I MUST be. Now, in a new town with a low paying job, I had bought into the belief that: “my life must not be the way it is; that it must be better with higher pay and greater status, and that I must not be the loser I was ultimately turning out to be” so I thought. These were all irrational or false beliefs creating my Ego Anxiety culminating in a panic.

My next step in recovery was to dispute these false beliefs pertaining to my worth by defining what gives me, or anyone else for that matter, true worth. REBT provides much insight into the area of self-worth and self-esteem and how it is derived. REBT focuses on the issue of self-esteem because it is a crucial issue in treating so many emotional problems.

REBT teaches individuals to recognize their great intrinsic worth regardless of their appearance, achievements, status, or the amount of approval they get from others. The difficulty is that our society tells us almost the opposite: a person’s worth is highly dependent on how attractive they are, their achievements, their status, and the amount of approval they gain from others. This philosophy has its utility as long as it is kept in balance and consists of preferential beliefs. One may eventually become very anxious and depressed if these beliefs become absolute demands that go unmet. People who tend to be perfectionists at all cost usually have many “absolutistic,” “demanding,” or “musting” type beliefs.

Without knowing it, I had attacked my worth by making success/achievement an absolute requirement through irrational beliefs such as: “I must not have lost the business I lost and I am a true loser for having lost it” and “Look at me now, I am a total loser for not having the status I once had and will probably never have again, I must have that status now!” As I backed off these perfectionistic type demands: “I must always succeed and have others think well of me” my Ego Anxiety diminished. I changed these dogmatic demands into preferences like: “I would really like to have a successful business again with the security it brings, but I can’t demand it and it would hardly make me a more valuable person by having it.” “I cannot accurately rate my value based on a few subjective things; I will think well of myself regardless of my performances in these areas while continuing to do the best I can to succeed at my goals.”

The irrational beliefs mentioned above having to do with Discomfort Anxiety and Ego Anxiety raised their heads many times after my first panic attack. And in
reality, the Ego Anxiety beliefs originated long before losing my business. But the event of losing my business intensified them, gave them more steam and were finally manifested in my emotions and behavior in the form of a panic attack. My ‘panicky’ beliefs resulted in panicked behavior. I still have to deal with these beliefs from time to time, but I am able to dispute them using the REBT approach.

I had one other panic attack a few days after the first one described above, but it was much less intense and was shorter in duration. I have not had another one since that time. I attribute it to the techniques of REBT that keep my ‘musting’ and ‘awfulizing’ in check.

I understand that panic attacks are complicated and may have many casual factors. Some medical conditions, mitral valve prolapse for instance, are correlated with panic attacks. And, many people seem to be far more genetically predisposed to panic and anxiety than others. Certainly, exposure to certain life circumstances seem to play a role. Regardless of the causal factors, however, REBT may provide a very powerful approach for treating panic attacks in many clients.

In my opinion, REBT is an effective tool for helping many clients overcome all kinds of anxiety disorders. As a therapist using REBT, I would like to make some suggestions as to the process you follow when identifying the crucial issues involved with your clients’ panic or other anxiety issues:

1. **Address the Discomfort Anxiety.** The best way to combat the discomfort (Discomfort Anxiety) of the actual panic attack is to refuse to make demands that the discomfort not exist (demandingness). Also, teach your clients to not awfulize about how bad the panic attack will be. This is almost impossible to do in the middle of a panic attack, but you can encourage your clients to practice not living in fear of them, or being hyper-vigilant about anticipating them. Trying to control the attacks will only make them more likely to occur. Also, panic attacks gain much of their power from the ‘awfulizing’ one does before and during the onset of a symptom: “Oh no, here it comes, I’m starting to breath faster, this is going to be the worst feeling in the world, I won’t be able to bear it, others will think I am completely crazy…” Disputing belief: “I don’t like these panic attacks, but I will get through it and it will not kill me. Just calm down. The less I stress about it, the less intense it will be over time. If I do have an attack, others will probably be concerned instead of think the worst of me.” Have the client practice relaxation and cognitive restructuring techniques long before the attacks occur. Teach your clients to not ‘fear the fear.’

2. **Address the Ego Anxiety.** The client, and often the therapist, may not be able to easily identify the Ego Anxiety issue(s), but it is most likely at the
heart of the panic attack. Therapists can usually aid the client in identifying the Ego Anxiety issue(s) by referring to the three basic core beliefs behind most emotional disturbance as identified by Ellis and mentioned in an earlier section (The three 'musts'). Panic attacks usually start from the Ego Anxiety producing belief of “I must be perfectly competent in all that I do and because I am not, I am less than I must be”. Clients can often come up with many examples of how they are 'musting' and 'awfulizing' or damning themselves. In the above case illustration, I was able to identify a single event (loss of a business) contributing to my Ego Anxiety, but in reality, your clients may have many beliefs derived from many circumstances. Even if your clients cannot come up with specific situations, they will usually identify a general theme running through their beliefs like “I must always succeed” or “I can't bear to think of someone disapproving of me”.

3. **Identify the core beliefs and help your clients practice disputing them.** One of your main responsibilities as a therapist using REBT is to help your clients understand and identify what irrational core beliefs they will need to dispute. Learn what core beliefs are at the heart of panic attacks and anxiety in general. When discovering a client’s irrational beliefs, I start by asking myself “in what ways is this person ‘musting’ and ‘awfulizing’?” Using the example from the case illustration, there were several core beliefs that I needed to dispute. Some of them were: “I must not have lost my business” “I must not be a failure” “I have failed and therefore I am a failure.” Some of these beliefs originated not just from losing my business, but were issues in my family of origin as well. You will find that many of your clients can identify family of origin beliefs contributing to their panic. For example, a child whose parents demand perfection at all costs will likely see failure as “awful” instead of very frustrating. In addition to the beliefs identified above, clients who have panic attacks often worry about having one in the future and where it will happen. The belief is something like “I absolutely must not have an attack and if someone were to see me losing control it would be awful”. This belief needs to be confronted as well as the others. You can probably think of other beliefs at the heart of panic attacks that will need to be worked through with your clients. The keys to disputing false beliefs is to do it with force and on a regular basis. Examine the section on techniques for other suggestions.