

■ The body's fear reaction and how it becomes oversensitive

The symptoms are in fact an exaggeration of the normal bodily reaction to a fearful situation. Imagine what would happen if you were up a ladder and felt it slip from under you. Your heart would pound, your breathing would alter, you might turn very pale or break out in a sweat. However, as soon as you climbed down the ladder and recognised that you were safe, but had nearly had a nasty accident, your anxiety would die down. You would understand the symptoms as being quite natural, and you would not worry about those symptoms. But what if you experienced exactly those same symptoms pushing a trolley around a supermarket or sitting at your desk at work? Your mind would immediately try to make sense of the situation and would come up with a number of very frightening thoughts.

The problem with panic attacks is that your fear reaction has become oversensitive and is being triggered in a variety of apparently normal situations. This oversensitivity of the fear reaction is more likely if you are tired or under a lot of stress. Sometimes this stress can be caused by worrying about having another panic attack. If you have had one bad attack you can become over-vigilant, an expert at detecting the normal changes in your body which you would usually ignore. You are constantly on the lookout for slight changes that may indicate that something is amiss. Once you begin to imagine something is wrong, you become slightly frightened, triggering the body's reaction and the vicious circle of panic takes off. Other factors which can trigger panics include physical exertion, hunger, hormonal changes, caffeine and alcohol.

■ Can panic feelings harm me?

No. No one can die of fright. Though panic feelings are unpleasant they cannot in any way harm you. The feelings themselves are quite normal. It is just that they are happening in an ordinary situation, rather than in an obviously dangerous or frightening one. You are not going

mad or having a heart attack, although these are common fears. It is almost impossible to faint while you are having a panic attack, because your blood pressure is higher and not lower than normal as your heart is racing. People usually only faint when their blood pressure drops. The one exception to this is a blood or injury phobia.

■ Summary of main points about panic attacks

- ❶ A panic attack is the same as the body's normal fear reaction, but it is happening in an ordinary situation.
- ❷ Your body's normal fear reaction has become oversensitive and has become easily triggered. This happens particularly if you are tired or under stress, but this reaction can be triggered by exertion, hormonal changes, hunger, caffeine or alcohol.
- ❸ The feelings themselves are not harmful and do not indicate that there is anything seriously wrong with you.
- ❹ The feelings can be caused and maintained by a combination of worrying thoughts, hyperventilation or overbreathing, and avoidance of situations that create anxiety.
- ❺ Once you understand what is going on, half the battle is won.