Strategies that can help with claustrophobia

**Symptoms** tend to occur suddenly, without warning and often for no apparent reason.

As well as overwhelming feelings of [anxiety](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx), a panic attack can also cause a variety of other symptoms, including:

* a sensation that your heart is beating irregularly ([palpitations](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Heart-palpitations/Pages/Introduction.aspx))
* sweating
* trembling
* hot flushes
* chills
* [shortness of breath](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/shortness-of-breath/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* a choking sensation
* chest pain
* nausea
* dizziness
* feeling [faint](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Fainting/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* numbness or [pins and needles](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Pins-and-needles/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* [dry mouth](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/thirst/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* a need to go to the toilet
* ringing in your ears
* a feeling of dread or a fear of dying
* a churning stomach
* a tingling sensation in your fingers
* shivering

### Causes:

### Traumatic life experiences

A trauma, such as [bereavement](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement/Pages/bereavement.aspx), can sometimes trigger feelings of panic and [anxiety](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stress-anxiety.aspx). These feelings may be obvious soon after the event or they may be triggered unexpectedly years later.

### Genetics

Having a close family member with panic disorder is thought to increase a person's risk of developing it. However, the precise nature of the risk isn't known.

### Neurotransmitters

Neurotransmitters are chemicals that occur naturally in the brain. It's thought that an imbalance of these chemicals may increase your risk of developing conditions such as panic disorder.

### Increased sensitivity to carbon dioxide

Some experts believe that panic disorder is linked to an increased sensitivity to carbon dioxide. Breathing in air with high carbon dioxide levels can bring on panic attacks, and breathing techniques can help to relieve or stop panic attacks.

### Catastrophic thinking

Another theory is that people who experience panic attacks tend to focus on minor physical symptoms and interpret them in a catastrophic way. This triggers a nervous system response that causes the panic attack.

### What to do:

### Stay where you are

If possible, you should stay where you are during a panic attack. The attack could last up to an hour, so you may need to pull over and park where it's safe to do so if you're driving.

### Focus

If you have a panic attack, remind yourself that the frightening thoughts and sensations will eventually pass.

During an attack, try to focus on something that's non-threatening and visible, such as the time passing on your watch or items in a supermarket.

### Slow deep breathing

While you're having a panic attack, try to focus on your breathing. Feelings of panic and anxiety can get worse if you breathe too quickly. Try breathing slowly and deeply while counting to three on each breath in and out.

### Challenge your fear

When you have a panic attack, try to identify what it is you fear and challenge it. You can achieve this by constantly reminding yourself that what you fear isn't real and that it will pass in a few minutes.

### Creative visualization

Many things can go through your mind during a panic attack – for example, some people think about disaster or death. Instead of focusing on negative thoughts, try to concentrate on positive images.

Think of a place or a situation that makes you feel peaceful, relaxed or at ease. Once you have this image in your mind, try to focus your attention on it. It should help distract you from the situation and may also help ease your symptoms.

Thinking positively can be difficult, particularly if you've got used to thinking negatively over a long period of time. Creative visualization is a technique that requires practice, but you may gradually notice positive changes in the way you think about yourself and others.

This audio guide aims to help you [replace negative thoughts with more positive thinking](http://www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/unhelpful-thinking-podcast.aspx).

### Don't fight a panic attack

Fighting a panic attack can often make it worse. Trying to resist the attack and finding you're unable to can increase your sense of anxiety and panic.

Instead, during a panic attack, reassure yourself by accepting that although it may seem embarrassing, and your symptoms may be difficult to deal with, the attack isn't life-threatening. Focus on the fact that the attack will eventually end and try your best to let it pass.

### Relaxation

If you have panic disorder, you may feel constantly stressed and anxious, particularly about when your next panic attack may be. Learning to relax can help to relieve some of this tension, and it may also help you to deal more effectively with your panic attacks when they occur.

Some people find [complementary therapies](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/complementary-alternative-medicine/Pages/complementary-alternative-medicines.aspx), such as massage and aromatherapy, help them to relax. Activities, such as [yoga](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/yoga.aspx) and [Pilates](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/pilates.aspx), can also be helpful. You can also practice breathing and [relaxation techniques](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/ways-relieve-stress.aspx), which you can use during a panic attack to help ease your symptoms.

### Exercise

[Regular exercise](http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Fitness/Pages/Fitnesshome.aspx), particularly aerobic exercise, will help reduce stress and release tension. It can also encourage your brain to release the chemical serotonin, which can help improve your mood.

It's recommended that adults aged 19-64 years should do at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, such as [cycling](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/getting-started-guides/Pages/getting-started-cycling.aspx) or fast [walking](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/getting-started-guides/Pages/getting-started-walking.aspx), every week.

They should also do [muscle-strengthening activities](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/strength-and-flexibility/Pages/Get-fit-with-strength-and-flexibility.aspx) on two or more days a week that work all major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms).

Visit your GP for a fitness assessment before starting a new exercise program if you haven't exercised before or for a long time.

Read more about the [physical activity guidelines for adults](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/physical-activity-guidelines-for-adults.aspx).

### Diet

Unstable blood sugar levels can contribute to the [symptoms of a panic attack](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Panic-disorder/Pages/Symptoms.aspx). Therefore, you should maintain a [healthy, balanced diet](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/healthy-eating/Pages/Healthyeating.aspx), eat regularly and avoid eating sugary food and drinks. Also, avoid caffeine, [alcohol](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Alcohol/Pages/Alcoholhome.aspx) and smoking because they can all contribute to panic attacks.