



I Am Safe: A Personal Guide to Navigating Anxiety and Panic

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Introduction: Why I'm Sharing This With You

A few years ago, I had my first panic attack.

I was at home, watching an action movie. My partner was overseas for work, and his flight kept getting cancelled. What was meant to be a short trip turned into a long weekend on my own. Normally, I'm okay with alone time, but this time felt different—he and I live far from our home countries, and we've built a life where we rely on each other for everything. He's my partner, my family, my daily rhythm. So being on my own that weekend felt heavier than usual.

Then, suddenly, my body just flipped. My heart started racing, my chest tightened, and I got dizzy and weak. I had this horrible sense that something was really wrong. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was about to die.

At the time, I didn't know it was a panic attack. I had no language for it. I started Googling every symptom I could feel. I'd been on a juice cleanse and had a weird metallic taste in my mouth, so I convinced myself I had iron poisoning. I came across the words "panic attack" too, but everything I read said it would pass in 30 minutes. Mine didn't. It lasted the entire evening and into the night.

When my partner finally made it home, we went straight to the emergency. I couldn't even sit upright—I was on the floor, hugging myself, trying to count my breaths. They ran all the tests. Everything came back normal. And then the doctor asked, "Have you been under any emotional stress lately?"



It was such a simple question, and I remember thinking, “Well... nothing major.” But looking back now, the answer was yes. There had been plenty going on—things I had brushed aside because I thought I was handling it. I always do. But clearly, my body had other ideas.

That moment changed how I saw myself. I realised that even if life looks okay on the surface, we can still carry deep, unprocessed stress—things we’ve pushed down, ignored, or simply didn’t have time to feel. And eventually, it finds its way out.

That panic attack wasn’t the last. It became the start of a much longer journey. Over time, I had to learn how to recognise the signs, how to respond, and how to actually take care of myself—not just physically, but emotionally too.

This book is a collection of what helped me. Some of it is research-based and widely used. Some of it is personal—tools and insights I’ve found along the way that actually made a difference in real life.

I wrote this for people like me—people who are looking for clarity, for something practical, and for the reassurance that they’re not alone.

This isn’t a clinical guide. It’s a conversation. It’s meant to be useful, honest, and calming.

Let’s start with understanding what panic actually is.



Chapter 1: What Is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is your body sounding an alarm—even when there’s no real danger. It’s not that something is actually threatening your life, but your system *perceives* a threat, and that’s enough to trigger a full-body response. It can come on fast and without warning. You might feel like you can’t breathe, like your heart is pounding out of your chest. You might sweat, shake, feel dizzy, weak, sick, or like you’re about to faint. There’s often this overwhelming sense of doom, like something terrible is about to happen. It can feel like you’re dying—or losing your mind.

But you’re not.

What’s happening is your body’s threat response system—also known as the fight-flight-freeze-fawn response—has kicked in, even though there’s no actual danger.

These reactions are wired into your nervous system as survival strategies:

- **Fight** – feeling angry, reactive, or defensive
- **Flight** – the urge to leave, escape, or avoid
- **Freeze** – feeling paralyzed, numb, or stuck
- **Fawn** – appeasing, people-pleasing, or trying to diffuse conflict

None of these are “bad.” They’re your body trying to protect you the best way it knows how. But when these systems are firing off in situations that don’t actually require them, it can feel terrifying and confusing.



Bottom-Up vs. Top-Down: Two Pathways Into Panic

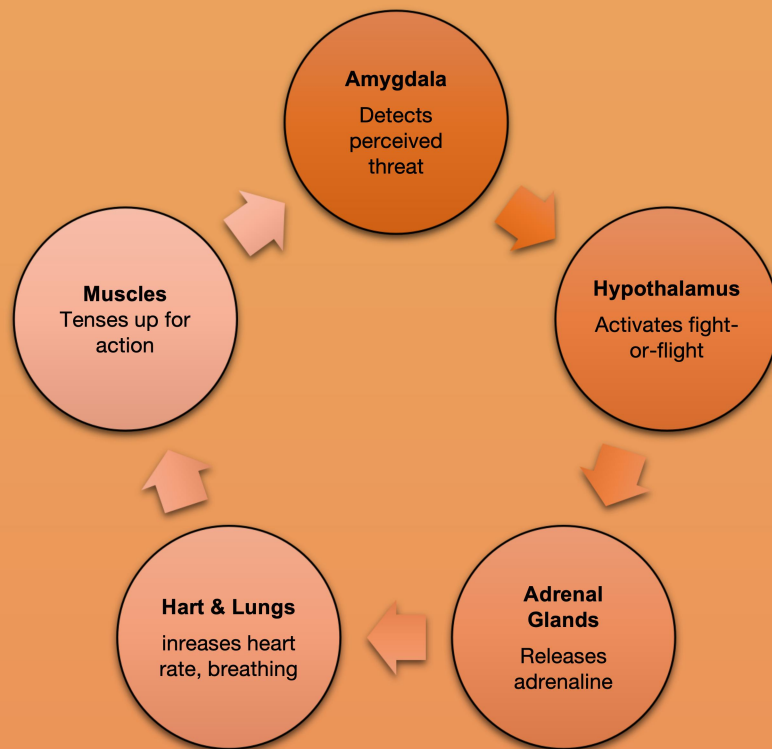
Panic can arise from the body. Panic can arise from the mind. Sometimes it's obvious where it started. Other times, it just hits.

Bottom-Up Processing (Body to Brain)

This starts in the body—through sensations like a tight chest, a racing heart, dizziness, or shortness of breath. These signals travel up to the brain and alert it that something might be wrong.

Here's how it works:

- The amygdala—your brain's threat detector—picks up on those bodily signals or an external cue.
- It sends an alarm to the hypothalamus, which switches on your sympathetic nervous system.
- This triggers the HPA axis (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal), releasing adrenaline and cortisol—your stress hormones.
- These chemicals flood your system to prepare for action: faster heart rate, rapid breathing, dilated pupils, shaky hands, digestive slowdown.



This is your body’s natural survival response—and it happens fast. The goal is to keep you safe. But during a panic attack, it’s reacting to a false alarm. There’s no actual danger, but your system doesn’t know that yet.

Top-Down Processing (Brain to Body)

This begins in the mind. A thought, memory, or trigger sets off a chain reaction. Maybe you remember a time when you couldn’t breathe. Maybe you’re imagining something going wrong in the future. That mental input tells your body: “Get ready.”

This process happens through the **prefrontal cortex**, the part of your brain responsible for thinking, reasoning, and decision-making. It draws on past experiences, beliefs, and associations to interpret what’s happening—and



sometimes it gets it wrong. It tells the body to prepare for danger, and the body responds. Suddenly, the anxiety you were thinking about becomes physical.

When the Loop Takes Over

In people who experience panic attacks or chronic anxiety, these systems can become dysregulated.

- The bottom-up system is overly sensitive, reacting quickly and strongly to subtle cues.
- The top-down system struggles to calm things down—it may even make things worse by catastrophizing or jumping to fear-based conclusions.

This loop—body reacting, mind reinforcing, body reacting more—is what creates the spiraling feeling of panic.

But once you understand how the system works, you can learn how to work with it. You can interrupt the loop—either by calming the body (bottom-up tools) or changing your interpretation (top-down tools) or both.

And that's where we begin.



Chapter 2: Why Do Panic Attacks Happen?

There's no single reason. But here are some common ones:

- High stress or burnout
- Unprocessed trauma or grief
- Chronic anxiety
- Certain environments (crowds, enclosed spaces)
- Physical health issues (like thyroid problems or blood sugar drops)
- Even too much caffeine

Sometimes, it seems like they come out of nowhere. That doesn't mean there's no cause—just that it might be something your body picked up before your mind did.

Triggers can be subtle. A smell, a memory, a particular time of day. Learning your personal triggers can give you a sense of agency. You may not control when a panic attack shows up, but you can control how you prepare for it and respond.

Reflection prompt: Have you noticed any patterns around your panic attacks? Time of day? Situations? People? Write down anything that stands out.

Journaling prompt: Describe your earliest memory of feeling overwhelmed or scared. How did your body respond? Can you see any connections to your panic attacks today?



Chapter 3: Grounding in the Moment

Grounding is about returning to the present. When panic pulls you out of your body, when your thoughts spiral, or the world starts to feel too much—these techniques are your anchor. They're not about escaping, but about reconnecting with what's real, right now.

Many of these tools come from trauma recovery work, somatic therapy, breath practices, and mindfulness traditions. But most importantly, they're adaptable. They don't need to be done perfectly—they need to feel safe and supportive for *you*.

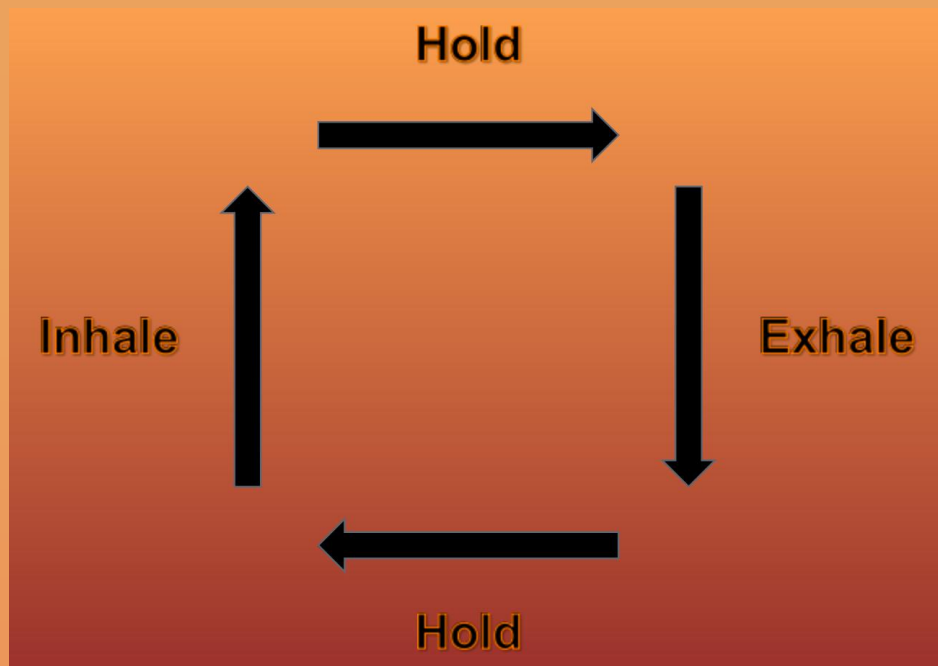
Here's how they work, and how I use them in my own life.

1. Box Breathing (Square Breathing)

This technique is often used by Navy SEALs and first responders to stay calm under pressure. It's designed to regulate your nervous system quickly.

How it works:

- Inhale for 4
- Hold for 4
- Exhale for 4
- Hold for 4



Repeat for a few minutes to settle your breath and bring your focus to a steady rhythm.

Personal note:

This one doesn't work for me. My panic is deeply tied to the fear of suffocation—I sometimes wake up gasping for air, like my body forgot how to breathe. In those moments, the idea of holding my breath feels terrifying. Instead, I use a softer approach: inhale for 3, exhale for 5, no breath holds. That gentle rhythm feels like permission, not pressure.

2. 4-4-6 Breathing (Grounding Breath)

This breath practice is used to stimulate the vagus nerve and activate your parasympathetic nervous system—your body's calming response.



How it works:

- Inhale for 4
- Hold for 4
- Exhale for 6

The longer exhale sends the message: “It’s okay to relax now.”

Personal note:

I often use this when I can feel anxiety starting to rise in my body but haven’t gone into full panic.

3. 5-4-3-2-1 Grounding (Sensory Grounding)

This tool is used to help people come out of anxiety spirals and back into the present.

How it works:

- 5 things you can see 👁
- 4 things you can touch ✋
- 3 things you can hear 👂
- 2 things you can smell 🤧
- 1 thing you can taste 👅

Personal note:

I use this often especially while working from home. My workspace is small, and sometimes the room starts to feel tight, like it’s closing in. When that happens, I stop, look around, and name five brown things I can see—there are a lot in my room. I touch my desk, the wall, my keyboard, my own skin, feeling



the texture and temperature. I listen: the fan that cools me down, birds outside, sprinklers. I smell my mint oil or the scent of rain on the pavement. I taste the coffee in my mouth (which, yes, probably isn't helping—but it's real). This practice gives me back a sense of space and control.

4. Affirmations

Common in self-compassion and trauma-informed care, affirmations help shift the inner narrative, rewrite the story and change the deeply rooted beliefs. Spoken out aloud, they also engage the breath and voice.

Examples:

- I am safe
- I am supported
- I am in control

Personal note:

I keep these around me—literally. Sticky notes on the wall above my desk say things like “Choose you” and “Listen.” One says “I am safe. I am expansive. I am spacious.” When I feel stuck or small, I read them out loud. Sometimes quietly. Sometimes like a mantra. They remind me there's more room inside me than panic lets me believe.

5. The Hug Technique

From somatic therapy, this self-holding gesture mimics the safety of a hug and activates calming pressure in the body.

**How it works:**

Cross your arms over your chest, so that each hand touches the opposite upper arm or shoulder.

Gently tap or pat your upper arms in an alternating rhythm, mimicking the flapping of butterfly wings.

As you tap, take slow, deep breaths, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth.

Concentrate on the comforting sensation of your hands touching your arms, visualizing a gentle, reassuring hug.

If your mind starts to wander, gently guide your focus back to the tapping, the touch of your hands, and the rhythm of your breath

Personal note:

This is one of my go-tos, but it is slightly different and has been shared with me by one of my yoga students some time ago. I hug myself with my right arm tucked under my left armpit and my left hand pressed firmly to my right shoulder. I breathe: 3 in, 5 out. And I say, “I am safe. I am safe. I am safe.” I stay there until my body softens—even just a little.

6. Cold Sensation

Cold exposure interrupts panic and dissociation by shocking the system into the present and stimulating the vagus nerve.

**How it works:**

- Hold an ice cube
- Splash cold water on your face
- Run your hands under cold water
- Drink something cold

Personal note:

Cold works for me when nothing else does. I often take a cold shower or grab an ice pack and hold it to my chest or hands. It cuts through the fog, the spiral, the chaos. It pulls me back.

Try, Adapt, Repeat

No two nervous systems are the same. What works beautifully one day might do nothing the next. That's okay.

These tools aren't rules. They're invitations. Mix them, change them, break them down, rebuild them. The point isn't to "get it right." It's to give yourself a way back into your body—into safety, presence, and choice.

You're not escaping the moment. You're staying with it, in a way that feels kind.



Chapter 4: Mental Strategies

Panic Isn't Just Physical – It's Mental, Too

A lot of people focus on the physical side of panic—the racing heart, the tight chest, the nausea. And yes, those sensations can be overwhelming. But what makes panic so all-consuming is what happens in the mind. The thoughts come fast, loud, and relentless.

Your brain tries to make sense of what your body is feeling, and it fills in the gaps with fear. Worst-case scenarios. Catastrophic thinking. Stories like “I’m dying” or “I’m going to lose it in front of everyone.” Suddenly, it’s not just a fast heartbeat—it’s the beginning of the end.

That’s why working with your mind is just as important as calming your body.

Panic lives in both places.

This chapter is about learning how to talk to yourself differently. It’s about interrupting the spiral—not with fake positivity, but with grounded, honest thoughts that give you a way out.

1. Reframing Your Thoughts

The stories you tell yourself in those moments shape your experience. You can’t always stop the thoughts from coming, but you can choose which ones you engage with.



Try these gentle shifts:

Instead of: “I’m losing control.”

Try: “This is a panic attack. It’s intense, but it will pass.”

Instead of: “I can’t handle this.”

Try: “I’ve felt this before and I got through it. I can do it again.”

Instead of: “Something terrible is happening.”

Try: “This is my nervous system sounding a false alarm. My body thinks I’m in danger, but I’m safe.”

These reframes aren’t magic spells—but they do create space. They help soften the fear, slow the spiral, and remind you that you’re not powerless.

2. Climbing the Thought Ladder

Sometimes a reframe feels too far away to believe. You might not be able to jump from “I’m panicking” to “I’m fine”—and that’s okay.

That’s where the thought ladder comes in. It’s about taking small, believable steps toward calm:

- “This is scary.”
- “My body is reacting to stress.”
- “This response is uncomfortable, but not dangerous.”
- “This will pass.”
- “I’ve handled this before.”
- “I have tools that help me through this.”



Use whatever language feels true to you. The goal isn't perfection—it's progress. Step by step, breath by breath.

3. Mental Anchors

When panic takes over, your mind wants something solid to hold onto. That's where mental anchors come in.

A calming memory.

A song that grounds you.

A mantra or phrase like "I am safe," or "This feeling is not forever."

A visual image—like the ocean, your favourite forest trail, or the face of someone who makes you feel seen.

Close your eyes and bring it into focus. Notice the colours, the sounds, the sensations. Let that anchor hold your attention. You're training your mind to come back to safety.

Practice Prompt

Think about one negative thought you often have during panic. Write it down.

Then write a reframe—a gentle, compassionate thought you can offer yourself in response. Example:

Original Thought: "I'm going to faint and everyone will see."

Reframe: "This is panic. I know what this is. I might feel dizzy, but I've never fainted before. I can ride this out."

Keep that reframe somewhere visible—in your notes app, your journal, or



even scribbled on a sticky note. You can come back to it when you need it most.

Chapter 5: Everyday Practices for Long-Term Support

Managing panic attacks isn't just about what you do in the moment—it's also about how you support your nervous system day to day. Panic thrives on unpredictability and disconnection. Building steady, nourishing habits creates the opposite: stability, presence, and resilience. These aren't quick fixes. They're the groundwork.

1. Nutrition & Hydration

Your brain and body run on what you give them. Blood sugar crashes, dehydration, or nutrient imbalances can mimic anxiety—and make panic more likely.

- Eat regularly. Whole foods, protein, and slow-digesting carbs help keep your blood sugar steady.
- Leafy greens, nuts, seeds, and dark chocolate are great sources of magnesium, which supports relaxation.
- Cut back on caffeine and alcohol. They can spike adrenaline and disrupt your sleep and mood.
- Drink water throughout the day. Even mild dehydration can cause symptoms that feel like anxiety.



Small shift idea: Add a mineral-rich smoothie in the morning. It gives your system a boost before the day begins.

2. Mindfulness & Relaxation

Mindfulness is simply the practice of noticing what's happening *now*—without trying to fix or judge it. It helps retrain the brain to stay in the present instead of spiraling into fear or past pain.

Types of meditation to explore:

- **Guided meditation** – Someone talks you through it. Great for beginners. Use apps like Insight Timer, Calm, or YouTube.
- **Body scan** – You gently bring awareness to different parts of your body. Helps with reconnecting when you feel disconnected or numb.
- **Breath awareness** – Focused attention on the rhythm of your inhale and exhale. Simple, but effective.
- **Loving-kindness (Metta)** – Repeating phrases of compassion for yourself and others. Especially helpful when anxiety turns into self-blame.
- **Walking meditation** – Moving slowly and mindfully. Good if sitting still feels too intense.

Other practices that support relaxation:

- Journaling to release looping thoughts
- Mindful stretching or somatic shaking
- Listening to calming sounds or nature ambiance



Personal note:

Start small. Even 3 minutes of sitting in silence or following your breath can shift your internal state.

3. Movement & Exercise

Movement is one of the most powerful tools for regulating your nervous system. It burns off excess adrenaline, improves mood, and reconnects you with your body.

- Gentle movement like yoga, tai chi, or stretching calms the system.
- Cardio like walking, cycling, or dancing releases pent-up energy.
- Even a few minutes of shaking out your body (literally) can help release tension and interrupt panic buildup.

Personal note:

I've found Jiu-Jitsu to be incredibly helpful. It's physically intense, but it teaches you how to stay calm under pressure. You learn to breathe through discomfort and to stay present when your body wants to escape. It's essentially exposure therapy in motion—controlled stress in a safe space, where your body learns it can survive hard moments. For me, it builds confidence, presence, and strength—not just physically, but mentally too.



4. Art & Creative Expression

You don't have to be an artist to benefit from creativity. Expression gives anxiety a place to go. It takes what's spinning inside and puts it outside, where you can see it and soften around it.

- Drawing, painting, collage, coloring—all work.
- Try expressive journaling: write without editing. Let it be messy.
- Don't focus on making something pretty. Focus on letting something out.

Ideas:

- Paint your panic. Scribble your fear. Color your breath. This is for you.

5. Sleep & Routine

Sleep is foundational. When you're tired, everything feels harder. Your body has fewer resources to regulate stress and your mind becomes more reactive.

- Keep a consistent bedtime and wake-up time—even on weekends.
- Create a wind-down routine: screens off, lights low, warm tea, journaling or reading.
- Avoid stimulants (like caffeine or doomscrolling) before bed.

Tip: Treat sleep as a boundary. Protect it like you would a therapy session or an important meeting.



6. Connection

You're not meant to manage everything alone. Connection co-regulates the nervous system—it reminds you that you are safe, seen, and not isolated in your experience.

- Talk to people you trust.
- Let others in, even if you don't go into detail.
- Join a support group (online or in-person).
- Work with a trauma-informed therapist.

Connection doesn't have to be deep to be meaningful. Even texting a friend or saying hi to someone at a café can shift your system toward safety.

Journaling prompt: What's one small habit you could start this week to support your nervous system?

Chapter 6: Building Your Personal Toolkit

Panic attacks can make you feel powerless. But the more you practice these tools, the more confident you'll become. This chapter is about turning what you've learned into a toolkit you can carry with you—mentally, emotionally, and even physically.

Create a Panic Support Kit:

Here are ideas for what to include:

- A grounding object (stone, small textured item, crystal)
- A printed copy of affirmations



- A small bottle of essential oil or something soothing to smell
- A reminder card with Box Breathing steps
- A photo or note from someone you trust
- A playlist of calming songs or sounds

Daily Toolkit Checklist:

Pick a few small habits you want to stick to:

- Drank water today
- Took a 5-minute breathing break
- Ate a balanced meal
- Practiced movement or stretch
- Checked in with a friend

Journaling prompt:

Which tools from this book do you want to practice more often? What works best for you so far?



Chapter 7: Final Words

You've made it to the end—but in many ways, this is where the real work begins.

Managing panic isn't just about reducing symptoms or avoiding triggers. It's about shifting the relationship you have with yourself. Panic often intensifies not because of what's happening, but because we fear its return. We anticipate it. We brace against it. And in doing so, we sometimes reject the parts of us that are simply trying to feel safe.

But what if panic isn't your enemy?

What if it's a part of you that just wants to be heard, held, and accepted?

When we stop fighting the feeling, when we soften instead of tighten, when we meet the panic with compassion instead of control—that's when things begin to change. The nervous system learns: I'm not in danger. I'm allowed to feel this and still be okay.

You are allowed to be scared and still be whole.

You are allowed to have panic and still have peace.

You are allowed to love all parts of yourself—shadow and light.

And as you continue to accept yourself more fully, the fear loses its grip.

The panic softens.

And the scared part of you begins to feel safe—because it knows it's welcome, too.



Remember:

- Panic is not dangerous—it's a signal, not a threat.
- You are not alone.
- You have tools. Use them. Practice them. Trust them.

Even when it's hard—you're growing. You're learning to hold yourself differently. You're building safety from the inside out. And you're reclaiming your calm, one breath at a time.

If you ever need support, don't hesitate to reach out.

Let's stay connected:

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<https://insighttimer.com/FlightOfThePhoenixHolisticTherapy>



Thank you for reading.

You are safe. You are supported. You are in control.

Let us heal, grow, thrive and inspire each other.

With love and strength,

Justyna