Chapter 8

# Panic Attacks

Panic attacks, or the sudden experience of intense fear or terror, can be found to occur in most anxiety disorders and are the main symptom of panic disorder in particular. However, as you may remember from the first chapter, panic attacks are actually a very common experience, even for people who haven't been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Panic attacks can also be very frightening and may have a major impact on a person's life. Fortunately, DBT skills can be incredibly useful in reducing the impact of a panic attack and in potentially eliminating panic attacks altogether. Now, before we go into the specific DBT skills that can be helpful for panic attacks, it is important to go over what panic attacks are, where they come from, and what kind of impact they can have on a person's life.

## What Are Panic Attacks?

If you have ever experienced a panic attack, chances are that you are probably well aware of what a panic attack is and what it feels like. There really is no mistaking a panic attack. A panic attack is much more than just strong anxiety or fear. Panic attacks are basically your body's fight-or-flight system going off unexpectedly. It is a "false alarm" (Bouton, Mineka, and Barlow 2001). During a panic attack, your body is essentially telling you that you are in some kind of immediate danger, even if a threat really isn't present. We'll talk more a little later in this chapter about why this may happen. Someone who experiences a panic attack has very strong feelings of fear, terror, or discomfort that arise quickly and intensely (APA 2000). A panic attack can be expected or unexpected. Panic attacks that are unexpected or occur without warning are also sometimes described as "out of the blue," spontaneous, or uncued. Many of the first panic attacks that people ever experience occur without warning.

Left alone, a panic attack will be relatively short lived, lasting just a few minutes (even though it may *feel* as if it lasts longer). However, how you respond to a panic attack can determine whether the panic attack persists for a longer period of time. You see, when a panic attack occurs, unfortunately

there isn’t too much that you can do about it except to let it run its course. You essentially have to wait for that false alarm to turn off. Now, if you try to avoid the symptoms of a panic attack or push them away, that alarm can persist or sometimes even get stronger.

Don’t get us wrong; it makes sense that someone would want to try to get away from a panic attack as quickly as possible, as it is a really scary and unpleasant experience. In the end, though, trying to fight or escape a panic attack just fuels it and makes it stronger. Therefore, as scary as a panic attack can be, the best bet is to simply ride it out until it passes. Later we will walk you through some DBT skills that may make it easier to sit with the discomfort of a panic attack.

During a panic attack, people may feel a variety of sensations in their bodies, including increased heart rate, sweating, shortness of breath, and dizziness. In addition, people often have certain fearful thoughts during a panic attack, such as *I’m going crazy* or *I’m going to die*. In fact, because the physical sensations and fear that accompany a panic attack are so intense, it is very common for people who experience panic attacks to think that they are having a heart attack, prompting a visit to the emergency room, a place where many people with panic attacks first try to get help (Swinson et al. 1992).

Listed next are some common sensations that people experience when they are having a panic attack. The most common symptoms are increased heart rate, dizziness, trembling, and fear of losing control (Barlow 2002c). To qualify as a panic attack, at least four of the symptoms described next must be experienced. If you have fewer than four of these symptoms, you may be experiencing what is called a *limited-symptom panic attack*. Limited-symptom panic attacks are less common than standard panic attacks and generally less intense. However, they may still have some of the same negative consequences that accompany full-symptom panic attacks (ibid.; Rapee, Craske, and Barlow 1990). Regardless of whether you tend to experience full-symptom or limited-symptom panic attacks, it is important for you to be aware of the symptoms you generally experience when you have a panic attack. This information will allow you to tailor to these particular symptoms the DBT skills we describe next.

## Exercise 8.1 Identify Your Panic Attack Symptoms

**Mark all that apply.**

**Exercise 8.1 Identify Your Panic Attack Symptoms**

**Mark all that apply.**

| | |
|---|---|
| | Racing heart or feeling your heart pounding |
| | Sweating |
| | Shaking |
| | Shortness of breath or difficulty catching your breath |
| | Feeling as though you were choking |
| | Pains or discomfort in your chest |
| | Feeling sick to your stomach |
| | Dizziness, faintness, light-headedness |
| | Feeling as though things around you were unreal, almost as if you were in a dream |
| | Feeling separated or detached from yourself (kind of as if you were watching yourself from afar) |
| | Fears or thoughts that you will lose control |
| | Fears or thoughts that you are going crazy |
| | Fearing that you are about to die |
| | Numbness or tingling in your extremities |
| | Chills or hot flashes |
| Do you have any other symptoms? List them. | |

Now that you know what symptoms you experience when you have a panic attack, let’s go over some more information on panic attacks.

# Panic Attacks in Anxiety Disorders

Just because you experience panic attacks does not mean you have an anxiety disorder. They are, however, quite common among people with anxiety disorders, and of course, unexpected panic attacks are the central

defining feature of panic disorder (APA 2000). Outside of panic disorder, panic attacks are more often expected or triggered by something in the environment. For example, someone with a specific phobia may experience a panic attack when confronted with something feared, such as a snake, an enclosed space, or a dental procedure. Someone with social anxiety disorder may experience a panic attack when in a social situation where there is the potential for criticism or negative evaluation. In PTSD, a panic attack may occur if someone encounters a reminder of a traumatic event. So, as you can see, the only real difference in panic attacks across the anxiety disorders is what brings them on. Otherwise, there really are no differences in what a panic attack feels like or its consequences. Therefore, as we present DBT skills for panic attacks, we will discuss panic attacks in more general terms, as opposed to within any particular anxiety disorder.

# Where Do Panic Attacks Come From?

Now, before we get into DBT skills, we want to provide just a little information on where panic attacks come from and how they develop. There are many theories on this topic, so here, we will just review a couple of the more well-supported theories.

### A Biological Theory of Panic Attacks

Some people believe that panic attacks are more likely to develop among people who are predisposed to be hypersensitive to carbon dioxide levels in their bodies (Klein 1993). According to this theory, panic attacks are brought on by a part of the brain that has developed through evolution to monitor for situations where a person may be at risk of suffocation. This "monitor" in the brain sounds the alarm (that is, a panic attack) when it detects an increase in carbon dioxide levels in the bloodstream. In addition, the alarm may be activated when a person is in situations with a risk of the loss of oxygen. This would include any type of situation where a person feels trapped (for example, large crowds), or as if there is no exit or escape (McNally 1994). There is some support for (Papp, Klein, and Gorman 1993) and against (Schmidt, Telch, and Jaimez 1996) this theory. This likely means that a hypersensitivity to carbon dioxide explains why some people have panic attacks, but not others.

### Psychological Theories of Panic Attacks

There are a number of psychological explanations for why panic attacks arise. However, a common underlying theme to these theories is that panic attacks come about when people negatively evaluate, or judge, the bodily sensations that often accompany anxiety or panic attacks. Basically, the idea is that some people develop beliefs that anxiety-related symptoms, such as certain thoughts or body sensations, will have negative or even catastrophic consequences, and these beliefs then actually increase their chances of having a panic attack. For example, people may believe that an increase in heart rate is a sign that they will have a heart attack. This negative (or catastrophic) evaluation of this normal bodily sensation can then lead them to fear that sensation, further increasing the intensity of that sensation and their anxiety. This spiral continues until their anxiety gets so intense that a panic attack occurs (Clark 1988).

People may also try to avoid that feared sensation—a reaction which, although understandable, usually only increases the intensity of that sensation, further fueling this vicious cycle (Tull and Roemer 2007). Beliefs that the normal bodily sensations that go along with anxiety are harmful may develop as a result of a person's upbringing or history with anxiety (Watt and Stewart 2000) or may be passed down through a person's genes and are therefore hardwired (Stein, Jang, and Livesley 1999).

## Features and Consequences of Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be very debilitating. Next, we review some common features of panic attacks, as well as some of the negative consequences of panic attacks. At each step of the way, we also walk you through some DBT skills that may be particularly helpful in addressing that particular feature or consequence.

### Avoidance

Panic attacks and avoidance go hand in hand. When people have a panic attack (whether expected or unexpected), they often go to great lengths to avoid having that experience again. People who experience expected or cued panic attacks may try to avoid cues (for example, a feared object or

social situation) that could bring on a panic attack. When it comes to unexpected panic attacks in particular, people may try to avoid experiencing the bodily sensations that go along with a panic attack, such as increased heart rate and shortness of breath. For example, some people may avoid exercising, sexual activity, eating heavy meals, or drinking caffeine just to try to make sure their heart rate does not increase. People may also use substances (such as alcohol) to try to calm themselves down and lower their chances of having certain bodily sensations, such as increased heart rate and muscle tension.

These strategies may work in the short term or some of the time, but it is impossible to completely avoid bodily sensations, especially those associated with anxiety. Therefore, strategies like this just won't work. Instead, this type of avoidance often leads to a vicious cycle in which unsuccessful attempts to avoid these sensations make people try even harder to avoid them. This could eventually lead to the development of substance use or agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is a condition in which a person has intense anxiety about situations where escape or help may not be possible (for example, large crowds). As a result, a person with agoraphobia will go to great lengths to avoid these situations. Sometimes agoraphobia can become so severe that people don't feel safe outside of their homes (APA 2000).

There are a number of skills that can help you with the avoidance that accompanies panic attacks.

#### APPROACHING ENVIRONMENTAL CUES OF PANIC ATTACKS

One of the best skills for dealing with the avoidance found among people with panic attacks is acting opposite to the emotion (Linehan 1993b). As we discussed in chapter 4, this skill is all about helping you change emotions that may be getting in the way of your life by responding to them differently. Although fear can be a very useful emotion, providing you with important information about threats in the environment, the experience of fear in the anxiety disorders can get a bit offtrack and start to malfunction. There are few better examples of this than panic attacks.

As mentioned, panic attacks are considered a misfiring of your body's alarm system, or a false alarm. Therefore, one of the best ways to manage the fear associated with panic attacks is to approach what you fear head-on.

If the situations or objects that bring about panic attacks were truly dangerous, then avoiding them would be quite helpful. The problem is that these situations and objects are not actually dangerous, and avoiding them will only make the panic worse. The best way to deal with the fear and avoidance of these cues is to approach them.

Now, we know this probably sounds incredibly counterintuitive (and really scary). Yet approaching these cues and situations provides you with the chance to learn that they are not inherently dangerous and may not always lead to a panic attack. And, if they do lead to a panic attack, it gives you the chance to learn that panic attacks themselves, although very distressing and uncomfortable, will not lead to some catastrophic outcome. Basically, you learn that you can make it through a panic attack and be okay, and you have the chance to practice other skills to help you get through the panic attack more quickly and easily.

So, how does acting opposite to fear work? Well, as we said, the basic idea is to approach what you are afraid of, over and over again. Approach any of the places, people, experiences, sensations, or activities you are afraid of, and keep approaching them until you are no longer captive to your fear. If you do this, we can guarantee that your fear of these activities and situations will decrease.

So, the first step is to identify the cues of your panic attacks that you try to avoid. Let’s start first with expected or cued panic attacks. If you have any panic attacks in response to specific cues in your environment (such as certain objects or situations), or when confronted with something in the environment that you fear, use the following exercise to help you figure out how to apply the acting opposite to fear skill to these cues.

First, take some time to figure out what situations, events, or objects tend to cue your expected panic attacks.

- If you have social phobia or an intense fear of being evaluated negatively by others, cues for your panic attacks may be social in nature and may involve situations in which you think you could be judged or evaluated, such as speaking in public, eating in front of others, or being around large groups of people.

- If you have specific phobia, then the cues for your panic attacks may be specific to whatever you are afraid of, such as enclosed spaces, spiders or snakes, airplanes, or elevators.

- If you have PTSD, then the cues for your expected panic attacks may be those that remind you of your traumatic event, such as smells or sights associated with your trauma.

Take some time now to identify the environmental cues that often trigger a panic attack for you, and then write them down in the first column of exercise 8.2.

Then, for each of those situations, see if you can come up with a plan for approaching these situations or objects rather than avoiding them. Try to focus on small steps you can take to begin to approach each one, or things you can do to increase your contact with these cues. Remember, as scary as they may feel, these situations and objects are generally not actually dangerous. So, figure out a plan for beginning to approach them.

For example, if you have come to avoid crowded places because they trigger panic attacks, steps you could take to act opposite to your fear could be to go to a coffee shop at eight or nine in the morning (when it is a bit more crowded), to the mall with a friend, or to a movie theater just before the next set of movies is about to start. The goal is to keep figuring out ways to be in crowds so that you can learn that these situations are not dangerous. As another example, if you fear spiders, you could begin by going to the bookstore and looking through a book on spiders, going online and looking at pictures of spiders, renting a film that features spiders, or going to a toy store and finding a toy spider—anything to begin to approach this cue as much as possible. Now that you have the hang of it, see if you can identify three to five steps you can take to begin to approach the cues you just identified. Write these steps down in the second column.

**Exercise 8.2 Identify and Manage Cues of Expected Panic Attacks**

| Write down all of the situations or objects in your environment that trigger expected panic attacks. | Write down up to five steps you can take to begin to approach this situation or object. Focus on small, doable actions. |
|---|---|
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |

Now that you have identified a plan for approaching these cues, the final step is to do it. Get started on your plan now. Remember that the more you approach these situations and objects, the less you will fear them and the less control they will have over your life. So, get going and start approaching what you fear!

We started this exercise by focusing on expected or cued panic attacks, because people often find that it’s easier to identify the situations and objects outside of themselves that are a source of fear. If particular situations or objects in the environment sometimes lead to panic attacks,

folks are generally aware of what these situations or objects are. They tend to be difficult to forget! For those of you who struggle with unexpected or uncued panic attacks, however, have no fear. Acting opposite to your emotion can also help with your panic attacks; it just requires a slightly different approach.

#### APPROACHING AVOIDED ACTIVITIES

When people have unexpected panic attacks, this means that there is nothing in particular in the environment that leads to a panic attack, no specific object or situation that they can try to avoid to prevent a panic attack. And what this means is that people who experience unexpected panic attacks often try to avoid experiencing any of the physical or bodily sensations that they associate with panic attacks, such as increased heart rate or shortness of breath.

So, what is the problem with this? Well, in addition to the fact that avoidance tends to not work in the long term, the major problem with trying to avoid these very common physical sensations is that so many different activities can make you out of breath or cause your heart rate to increase. Therefore, the only way to avoid these sensations is to severely limit your life.

Think about it: what kinds of things make your heart rate increase or cause you to be short of breath? Exercise? Walking up stairs? Seeing an exciting or scary movie? Eating or drinking something with caffeine? Having sex? And if your goal is to avoid these physical sensations, then that probably means that you need to avoid all of these activities, as well as many others. Basically, to avoid these sensations, you have to dramatically limit your life and avoid doing a ton of different activities—some of which are enjoyable and others of which are very healthy. And that can have some major downsides for your quality of life.

So, let’s apply the acting opposite to fear skill to these unexpected panic attacks. The first step for this type of panic attack is to identify the physical or bodily sensations that you try to avoid, those sensations that you associate with the onset of a panic attack and that you do everything in your power not to experience. Take some time now to identify all of the bodily sensations that you try to avoid and write them down in the first column of exercise 8.3.

Next, for each of these sensations, identify the different activities that you fear could cause these sensations. Focus in particular on activities that you tend to avoid or do less of. Try to identify as many activities as possible and write them down in the second column.

**Exercise 8.3 Identify Avoided Activities in Panic Attacks**

| Write down all of the bodily sensations associated with a panic attack that you try to avoid. | Next, write down the different activities that often lead to each of these sensations, focusing in particular on activities you try to avoid or limit. |
|---|---|
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |

Next, use the information from the second column of this exercise to create a list of all the activities you try to avoid because they trigger panic symptoms. Write down all of those activities in the following table. Then, see if you can, once again, come up with some small, doable steps you can take to begin to engage in these activities. How can you begin to approach

these activities? Think about all of the things you can do to get into contact with these activities, focusing on small steps you can take to act opposite to your fear. Write down these steps in the second column of exercise 8.4.

**Exercise 8.4 Avoid Avoidance: Manage Avoidance of Activities in Unexpected Panic Attacks**

| Write down all of the activities you avoid in an effort to limit your chance of having an unexpected panic attack. | Write down up to five steps you can take to begin to approach these activities. Focus on small, doable actions. |
|---|---|
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |

Congratulations! Now that you have identified the steps you can take to approach these activities and address your avoidance, you are one step closer to breaking free of panic attacks and their hold on your life. This is a really big step. We know it can be difficult to break the cycle of avoidance, so even taking the time to identify what you can do to approach these activities can be really scary. And yet, this is also the first step on the road to recovery. The next step is to begin to make your way through this list, doing one thing at a time to approach these activities.

### APPROACHING THE BODILY SENSATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH PANIC ATTACKS

Another way to address the avoidance that goes along with panic attacks is to approach the very sensations associated with panic attacks. The exercises so far have focused on helping you manage avoidance of situations, objects, and activities. One reason for this is that the avoidance of these activities and situations can be problematic in and of itself, interfering with your quality of life and limiting your ability to live your life fully. Most of these forms of avoidance, however, are really all about avoiding the bodily sensations that go along with panic attacks. Isn't that one of the main reasons you avoid so many of the activities and situations you identified previously? For many people, the avoidance of these bodily sensations is what drives the rest of their avoidance behaviors. So, the best way to address this form of avoidance is to approach these sensations themselves. And, as much as that may be a very scary proposition, there are DBT skills to help you through it.

Two skills in particular can be very helpful. The first is to use the acting opposite to emotion skill (Linehan 1993b) we described previously to approach each of the feared bodily sensations you identified in exercise 8.3. Use the following exercise to help you with this. First, write down again in the first column all of the bodily sensations you associate with panic attacks and try to avoid. They will be the same sensations you identified in exercise 8.3.

**Exercise 8.5 How to Approach Feared Bodily Sensations Associated with Panic Attacks**

| Write down all of the bodily sensations associated with a panic attack that you try to avoid. | Next, write down different things you could do or actions you could take that could lead to these sensations and put you into contact with them. |
|---|---|
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |
| | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4.<br>5. |

Next, identify several different things you could do to get in touch with these bodily sensations. Try to generate as many actions as possible that could lead to these sensations and put you into contact with these internal experiences. They don't have to be normal activities you would typically do in your everyday life, just anything that could give you the chance to approach these feared sensations. So, if you are afraid of your heart racing, think of things you can do to get your blood pumping. How about jumping up and down, running up stairs, or doing push-ups? See table 8.1 for different ideas about how to get into contact with the physical sensations that often go along with panic attacks (Schmidt and Trakowski 2004). Once you have identified actions you think may work for you, write them in the second column of exercise 8.5. Use this list to help

you get in contact with these sensations, approaching them over and over again until they become less scary.

**Table 8.1 Increasing Contact with Bodily Sensations**

| Activity | Bodily sensations that may arise from the activity |
|---|---|
| 1. Shaking your head | Dizziness<br>Light-headedness |
| 2. Placing your head between your knees | Pressure and tension in your head<br>Dizziness<br>Light-headedness |
| 3. Running in place, or up and down stairs | Shortness of breath<br>Rapid heartbeat<br>Muscle tension<br>Sweating<br>Light-headedness |
| 4. Holding your breath | Shortness of breath<br>Light-headedness<br>Tension or pain in chest |
| 6. Breathing through a straw | Shortness of breath<br>Choking sensations<br>Rapid heartbeat<br>Dizziness<br>Light-headedness<br>Headache |
| 7. Hyperventilating | Dizziness<br>Tingling in your hands<br>Light-headedness<br>Rapid heartbeat<br>Tension or pain in chest<br>Shortness of breath<br>Dry mouth<br>Shaking or trembling |
| 8. Doing push-ups | Muscle tension<br>Shaking or trembling<br>Rapid heartbeat |

Another set of skills that can help you approach these feared bodily sensations is the DBT mindfulness skills (Linehan 1993b). As we mentioned in chapter 3, the mindfulness skills in DBT can help you get in contact with internal experiences (such as thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations) that you may often try to avoid. And, because mindfulness skills are not just about what to do but how to do it, these skills can help you get in touch with these sensations in a way that will be beneficial to you.

Specifically, you can use the DBT skill of noticing your experience without judging it (Linehan 1993b) to help you begin to approach the bodily sensations associated with panic attacks. The first part of this skill simply involves noticing your internal experience without getting caught up in or reacting to it. So, rather than reacting to your bodily sensations or getting caught up in them, you would make it your goal in using this skill to just notice each sensation as it arises, without trying to push it away or cling to it. Simply focus all of your attention on observing any bodily sensations you experience, watching them arise and pass from one moment to the next.

The second part of this skill involves the particular way in which we want you to practice observing these sensations. Specifically, as you practice noticing your bodily sensations and observing them as they arise and pass, make sure that you take a nonevaluative stance. Allow yourself to notice these sensations without judging or evaluating them. Focus on just noticing each sensation as it is, rather than judging it as bad or wrong. Keep in mind that these bodily sensations are simply a natural part of being alive, and something that every human being experiences. Observing your experiences in this way will help you connect with the fact that these sensations are not inherently dangerous or problematic, and will go a long way in helping you stop avoiding these sensations.

The following exercise provides some simple step-by-step instructions for noticing your bodily sensations without judgment or evaluation. Try it out and see how it works!

## Exercise 8.6 Practice Nonjudgmentally Noticing Your Bodily Sensations

1. To begin, find a comfortable and quiet place where you can sit or lie down.

2. Close your eyes.

3. Focus your attention on your breathing. Notice what it feels like to breathe in and out. Notice what parts of your body move as you

breathe in and out.

4. Expand your awareness outward to different parts of your body (for example, your legs, arms, back, or neck). Basically, bring your attention to parts of your body where you often feel tension or experience feared bodily sensations.

5. Do not label or judge those sensations, but instead try to notice them as just sensations, nothing else.

6. If you notice that you are labeling or judging those sensations, notice that evaluation or thought, and then return your attention to noticing the sensations as just sensations.

7. If you get distracted by judgments or thoughts, your job is just to notice that and then return your attention to nonjudgmentally noticing your sensations every time.

8. Practice focusing your awareness on different parts of your body. Move your attention across your entire body, focusing on observing a variety of different bodily sensations without judging or evaluating them.

9. Practice this exercise for at least fifteen minutes a couple of times a day. Initially, make sure you practice this exercise at times when you don’t feel overly anxious. This will make it easier to establish a new habit of noticing your experience without judgment.

## Catastrophic Beliefs about or Misinterpretations of Bodily Sensations

As mentioned, panic attacks sometimes come about when people evaluate certain bodily sensations as negative in some way. For example, some people who experience certain anxiety-related bodily sensations may believe that they are going crazy, dying, or about to lose control. They may misinterpret these very normal bodily sensations as a sign of impending doom. And it is these interpretations that then actually increase the chance of having a panic attack. Think about it: if you believe that your racing heart is a sign that you are about to have a heart attack, will you feel better,

or will you become even more anxious and afraid? We would guess the latter. And that makes a lot of sense. If these sensations really were a sign that you were about to die or were having a heart attack, then wouldn't that level of fear make sense? Of course! The problem is that these beliefs, while understandable, are not necessarily true or accurate. So, buying into them and believing that they are 100 percent true may not be incredibly helpful. The good news, though, is that you don't have to change these beliefs or keep yourself from thinking this way to move forward in your recovery. Instead, there is a really useful DBT skill that can help with these types of thoughts.

#### OBJECTIVELY LABELING YOUR EXPERIENCE AS WHAT IT IS

One of the best skills for dealing with these types of thoughts is the DBT skill of objectively labeling your experience (Linehan 1993b). The purpose of this skill is to acknowledge and describe your experience as what it is, labeling a feeling as just a feeling, a sensation as just a sensation, and a thought as just a thought. So, the next time you find yourself experiencing some of the bodily sensations that accompany panic attacks, begin by labeling that experience objectively and putting it into words. For example, say to yourself *My heart is beginning to beat faster*, *My breathing is becoming more shallow*, or *I'm having the sensation of shortness of breath*. Then (and this is the important piece), if you notice any thoughts associated with that experience, make sure to label those thoughts as just thoughts. For example, rather than believing *I'm having a heart attack* or *I'm about to die*, describe these thoughts as just thoughts by saying in your mind *The thought "I'm having a heart attack" has come into my mind* or *The thought "I'm about to die" has just entered my mind*. Approaching your thoughts in this way and clearly labeling them as they are—just thoughts that your mind has generated—will help you take a step back from these thoughts and not buy into them as if they were literally true.

The following exercise may help with this. You can think about it as a way of making this mindfulness skill more concrete. To begin, think about all of the different thoughts you have when you experience a panic attack. Try to focus on those thoughts that are most catastrophic and that you generally buy into and accept as reality. Then, write those thoughts in the following exercise. This will help you connect with the fact that this type of thinking is simply the activity of the mind.

# Exercise 8.7 Label Your Thoughts as Just Thoughts

Use this worksheet to identify thoughts associated with your panic attacks. Write down all of the thoughts that accompany your panic attacks. When you are writing them, focus on connecting with the first part of the sentence and the fact that they are just thoughts.

I am having the thought that _____

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

I am having the thought that _____

_____ .

**Increased Attention toward Bodily Sensations**

One of the other features of panic attacks that can unfortunately increase your chance of having future panic attacks is the tendency to pay much greater attention to your bodily sensations than do people who don't have panic attacks. This is called *having hypervigilance toward bodily sensations*, and it generally happens because people are so afraid of having another panic attack that they are constantly on guard for any sensation that could be a sign that a panic attack may occur. Basically, many people with panic attacks spend a lot of time scanning their bodies and focusing on their bodily sensations to make sure that they can catch the first sign of an impending panic attack. For example, people who struggle with panic attacks may find that they are constantly scanning their bodies to see if they can detect any small change in heart rate or breathing. Now, in some ways, this makes a lot of sense. It is one way of trying to establish a sense of control and predictability over something that can feel so out of control and unpredictable. And, who wouldn't want to have more control over when

panic attacks occur? The problem, though, is that the more you pay attention to these types of bodily sensations, the more likely you will be to notice these sensations at very low levels—far below those that should normally concern you. And, as we discussed, the more likely you are to notice them, the more likely you may be to try to avoid them. Therefore, as much as we understand the desire to be more aware of these sensations and as much as we believe that awareness of internal experiences is often a really healthy and adaptive thing, in this case this level of increased awareness will probably only increase your risk of having more panic attacks.

So, the best bet is to try to learn some skills for broadening your awareness to include aspects of your experience beyond just these bodily sensations. And, as you may have guessed, DBT has some really useful skills that can help you with this.

#### NOTICING AND LABELING SENSORY INFORMATION

One of the best ways to broaden your awareness beyond just your bodily sensations is to use the DBT skills of noticing and labeling your experience (Linehan 1993b) to focus your attention on your external environment and your sensory information. So, rather than limiting your awareness to just your bodily sensations, expand that awareness to notice all of the information coming through your senses. Focus on each of your five senses: taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight. See if you can focus all of your attention on one sense at a time, noticing everything that is coming through that particular sensory channel. Remember not to judge these experiences as good or bad, but just focus on the senses and everything you are experiencing in the moment. See if you can then begin to label these experiences, putting this sensory information into words and focusing on being as descriptive as possible. Ask yourself the following questions.

## Exercise 8.8 Questions to Help You Notice and Label Sensory Information

Ask yourself these questions to help you get in touch with and describe your sensory experiences.

### Exercise 8.8 Questions to Help You Notice and Label Sensory Information

Ask yourself these questions to help you get in touch with and describe your sensory experiences.

**Taste:**

*What do I taste right now?*

*Where do I first notice this taste in my mouth?*

*Is it subtle or strong?*

*Is it bitter, sweet, or salty?*

*Is it cold or hot?*

*How long does the taste last?*

**Touch:**

*What do I feel against my skin?*

*What do I feel against my fingertips?*

*What textures do I feel?*

*Is what I am feeling soft or hard?*

*Is it rough or smooth?*

*Is it warm or cool to the touch?*

**Smell:**

*What scents do I notice?*

*Are they strong or mild?*

*How does the scent change over time?*

*How long does the scent last?*

**Sound:**

*What do I hear right now?*

*Are the sounds nearby or far away?*

*Are they loud or soft?*

*Is their pitch high or low?*

*How long does each sound last?*

**Sight:**

*What do I see right now?*

*What objects do I observe?*

*What colors do I notice?*

*What textures and patterns do I see?*

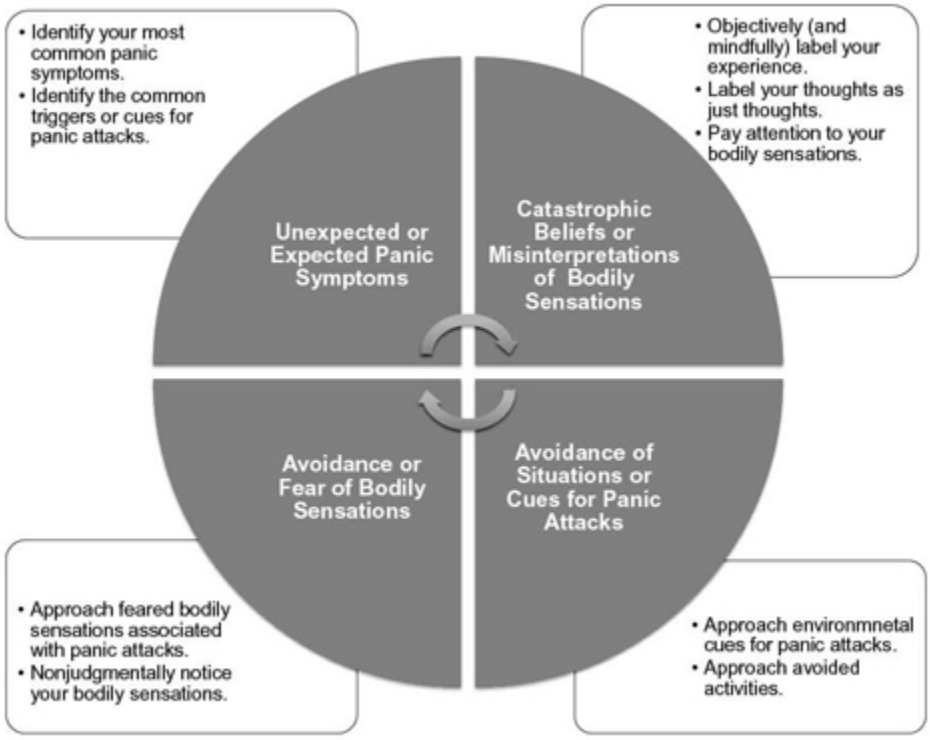
*What shapes do I see?*

Focusing on your external environment will help broaden your attention beyond just your bodily sensations, keeping you from getting too caught up

in these sensations. Try this the next time you find yourself drawn to only your bodily sensations and see how helpful it can be.

## Moving Forward

In this chapter, we gave you a lot of information on panic attacks and how they develop. We also taught you a number of different skills that you can use to manage panic attacks. Take some time to practice all of the different skills presented in this chapter and see what works best for you. You may find that some of these skills work better than others, or that some work only in certain situations or at certain times. This is incredibly important information to have, and the only way to get this information is to practice these skills regularly. It is also important to be patient with both yourself and the skills. Reducing avoidance behaviors and increasing contact with feared bodily sensations can be a very frightening experience. The more you do so, however, the easier it will become, and the more you will notice a reduction in your panic attacks. So, try these skills and start moving down the road to breaking free of the control that panic attacks can have on your life!



## *Figure 8.1* Putting It All Together: DBT Skills to Manage Panic Symptoms