

Challenging your catastrophic misinterpretations

When someone starts to panic they can misinterpret the strong physical signs of anxiety as evidence that something terrible really is happening.

It's common to think that a fast-beating heart is the sign of a heart attack starting, for example. Or someone who is feeling anxious that they might faint in public can misinterpret the symptoms of anxiety (feeling dizzy or wobbly) as proof that they are about to faint. Other people fear they are losing control or might do something 'crazy' and embarrass themselves in public.

This is known as '**catastrophic misinterpretation**'.

Finding ways to challenge catastrophic misinterpretations can help you to manage your panic attacks or stop them from happening.

Symptom of anxiety	Common misinterpretations	Challenge misinterpretation
Fast beating heart/palpitations	I am having a heart attack	A fast-beating heart is a symptom of anxiety. It's part of the threat response - the body's way of responding to danger by getting ready to fight or flight. Ask yourself 'Did I have a heart attack the last time I had a panic attack? No. Then why should I be having one this time?'
Dizziness and feeling wobbly	I am going to faint or collapse	Feeling dizzy and light-headed are symptoms of anxiety and not a sign that you are about to faint. You're actually less likely to faint during a panic attack than at any other time. Fainting is caused by a drop in blood pressure. During a panic attack the heart beats faster and our blood pressure rises.
Breathing too quickly	I am going to stop breathing	Breathing too quickly changes the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in the blood resulting in too much oxygen rather than too little.

Symptom of anxiety	Common misinterpretations	Challenge misinterpretation
Racing thoughts	I am losing my mind or going to lose control	Ask yourself 'Did I lose control last time I had a panic attack? Why should I this time?' Feeling disconnected or confused are common experiences when having a panic attack.
Feeling detached from reality/ unable to concentrate or focus	I am going 'crazy'	Remind yourself that these are common symptoms of a panic attack.
Numbness or tingling sensations	I am having a stroke	Remind yourself that these symptoms are the result of overbreathing and taking in too much oxygen.
Need to go to the toilet	I am going to wet myself and embarrass myself in public	Ask yourself 'If I did not wet myself during my last panic attack why should it happen this time?' and 'What would a friend say about this fear?'
Blurred vision	I am going blind	Tell yourself that blurred vision during a panic attack is caused by rapid breathing and less oxygen in the blood. It is not a sign there is a problem with your sight.
Feeling nauseous	I am going to be sick	It's common to feel nauseous during a panic attack but not to be sick. Think of how many times you have felt nauseous but not been sick. Why would it be different this time?