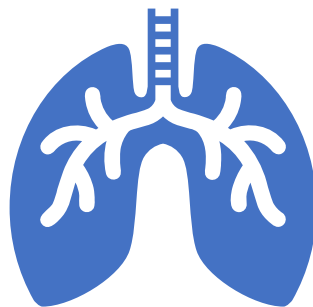




Your guide to...

Managing Breathlessness

Anxiety and panic



How to use this guide:

This guide forms part of a series. Each guide provides information, tips and strategies for coping with physical health symptoms that are impacting on daily life. Physical health symptoms can be personally challenging on both a practical and emotional level; with this in mind, these guides have been edited and co-developed by specialists from both physical and mental healthcare teams, with guidance from experts with lived experiences.

All information in these guides are intended to advise and benefit the individuals who intend to use them. The information described can be used as a supplement but does not replace any advice provided by your healthcare specialist(s). The authors do not accept responsibility for use of the information contained in the guides for any other purpose than has been described. If you are concerned about your physical health symptoms or condition(s) then you should seek qualified medical advice from your GP or your healthcare specialist(s).

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Part 1: Focus on breathlessness and anxiety

Here are some of the things people with health conditions have said about breathlessness:



“Nobody understands what it is like being so breathless”

Frustration:

“Sometimes I get really frustrated that I can’t do things like before”

Low mood

“What’s the point?” “I will only get breathless”

Worry and Panic:

“Feeling breathless makes me panic and I think I am going to die”

Embarrassment:

“I don’t want to go out because I am worried I will get breathless and start coughing and everyone will stare at me”

Dealing with breathlessness can be stressful and frustrating. Being really out of breath can be frightening and many people feel anxious about what is happening. The biggest problem with fear and anxiety is that these feelings make people feel **MORE** out of breath. Getting more out of breath can then make people feel **MORE** anxious and it becomes a vicious circle.

The focus of this guide is on ways to deal with breathlessness and anxiety which can occur due to a range of health problems or medical issues. Dealing with feelings of frustration, embarrassment and low mood are also important and are covered in a different guide.

As you read this guide, you will hear about different people’s experiences of health conditions and how they learn to cope with breathlessness and anxiety related to their conditions. You may find that you have experienced similar issues to the ones presented in this guide yourself. We hope you find this information guide helpful.

Tim's experience...

Tim had a viral infection earlier in the year. The infection affected his lungs and breathing. He now has ongoing problems with breathlessness and intense exhaustion which doctors are unable to explain. Tim is trying to get back to doing the activities he used to do before. He was running late for an appointment one morning. He was walking to his car where his partner was waiting for him. He was worried about running late and tried to walk faster.

*As usual Tim's breathing got faster, but today it felt worse than normal. Tim didn't have time for taking some rest as he would usually when feeling this way. He began to worry about missing the appointment. His breathing got worse and he started to feel alarmed and fearful **"I can't get my breath back"**.*

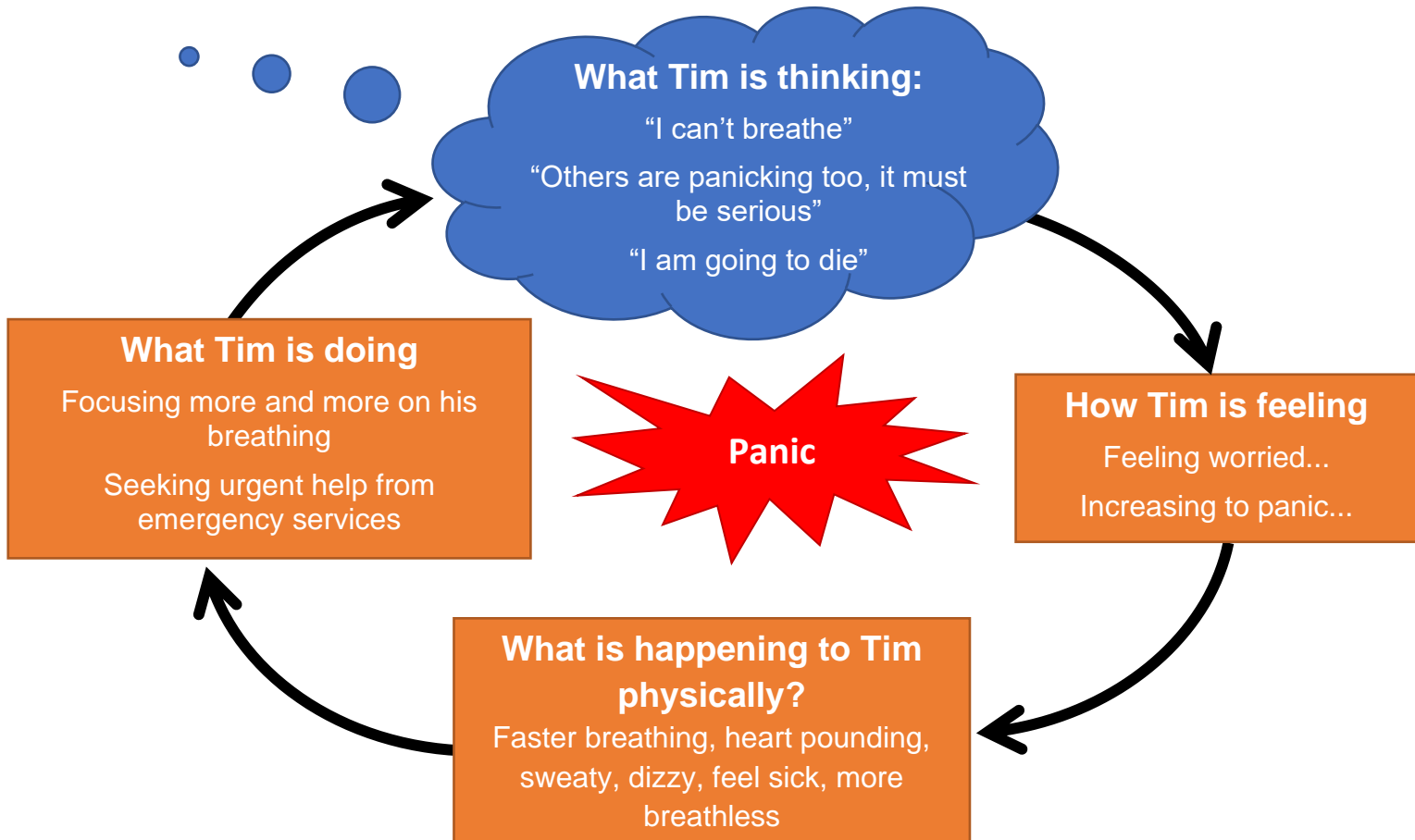
*Tim's heart was pounding, he was gasping for breath, and felt sick, sweaty, and dizzy. Tim felt out of control and was really panicking, he thought to himself **"It's getting worse" "I am going to die"**.*

*Tim's partner was frightened seeing him struggling for breath and rushed over to try and help. Tim couldn't get any words out. His partner did not know what to do: **"Shall we get urgent help?"***

*Seeing his partner worried made Tim panic more. He thought **"This must be serious" "This is it" and "I need an urgent help"**. He was in total panic. His partner encouraged him to get urgent help from A&E.*

The vicious circle of breathlessness and panic

Tim's breathlessness had led into a panic attack and the **feelings of panic made his breathing worse**, creating a vicious circle that can feel hard to control:



Have you been in a situation similar to Tim? The diagram on the above shows a vicious circle of what was happening to Tim. All the elements in the circle fed into each other and led to a panic attack. For example, Tim's thoughts about breathing made him feel anxious. Anxiety leads to physiological changes in the body (the body's 'fight or flight' response); one such change is that the body can speed up breathing even more. All of Tim's attention was focused on breathing, which only added to worrying thoughts. This made Tim more anxious and he believed some kind of emergency help was needed.

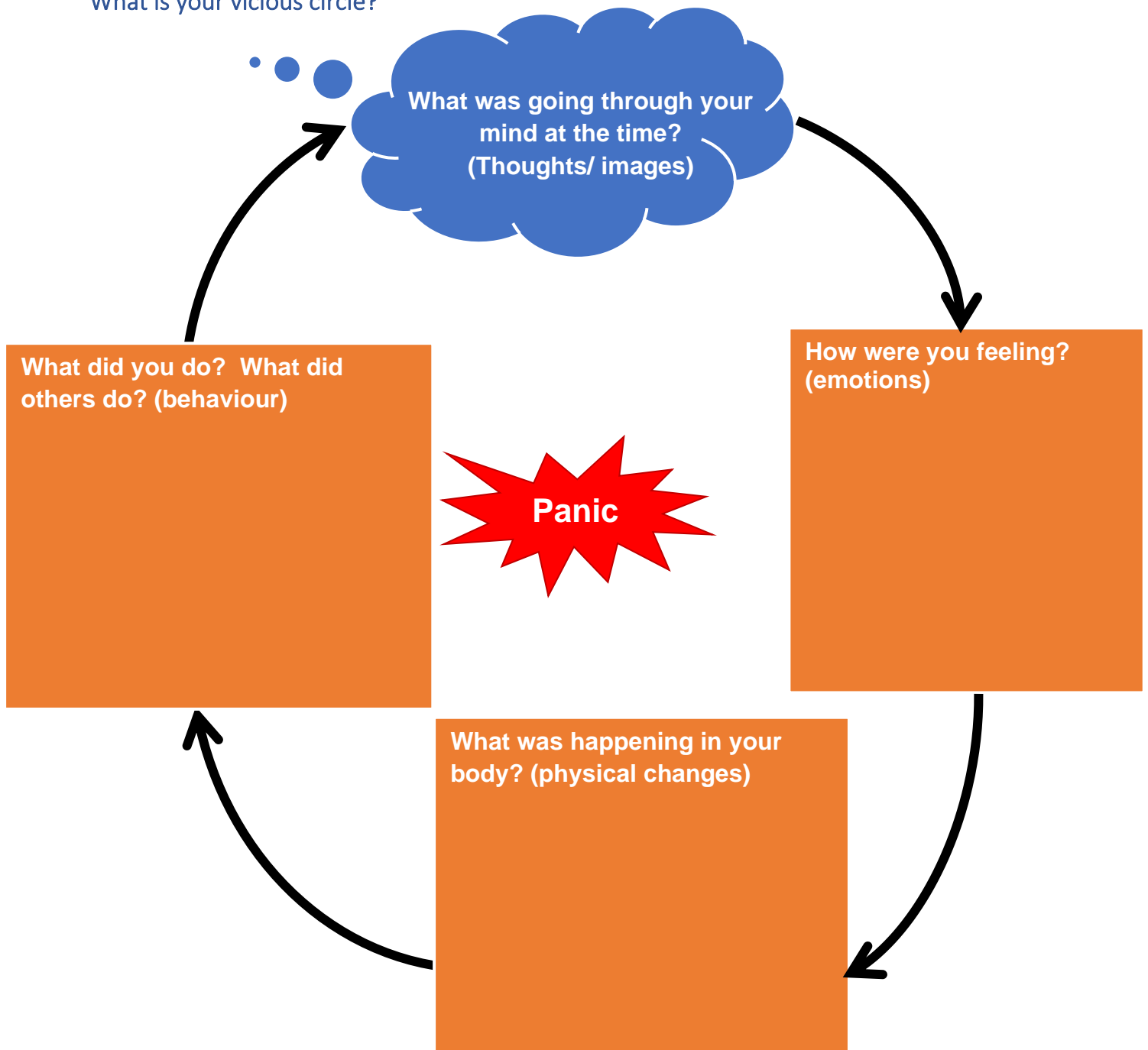
Understanding how this circle works is the first step to controlling breathlessness and feelings of anxiety and panic.

You may find it helpful to visit [our website](http://our.website) for an educational video about panic and breathlessness where this cycle is described by iCope psychological wellbeing practitioner Spiro: www.icope.nhs.uk

Have you ever started to feel anxious or panicky because of your breathing?

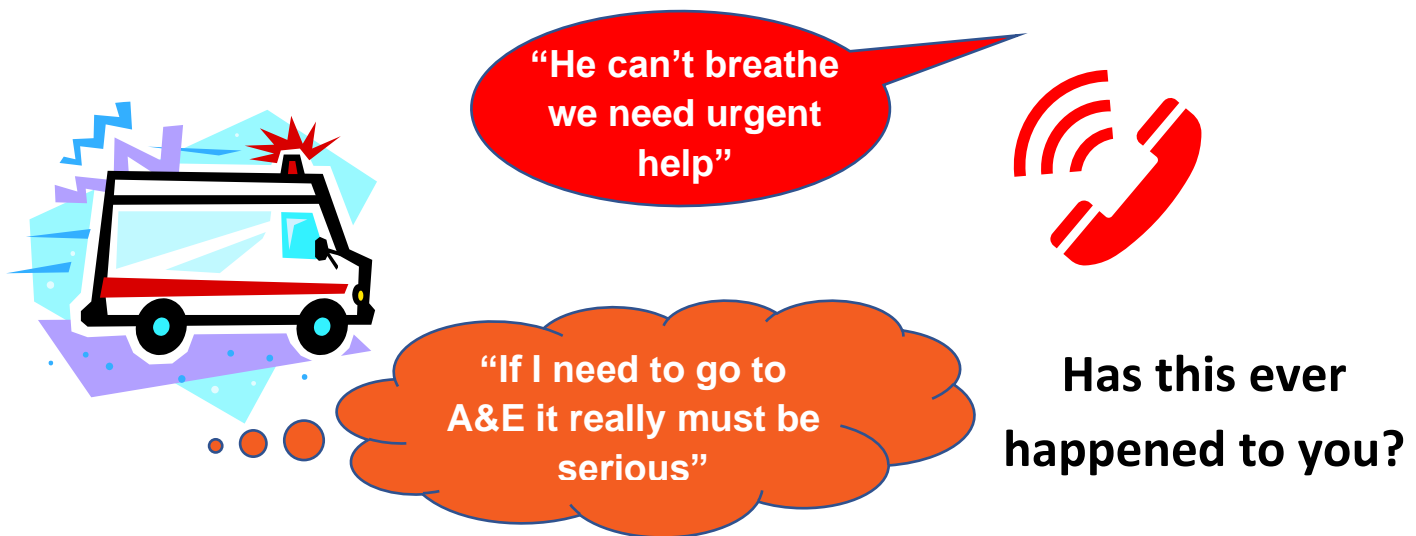
What was the situation: Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with?

What is your vicious circle?



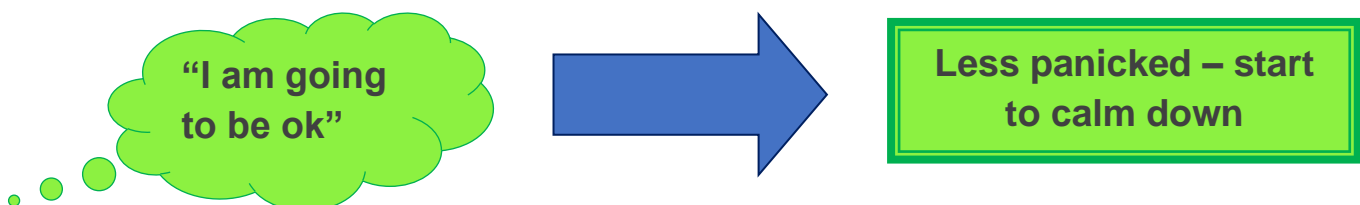
Tim's experience is very common

Tim's example of having a panic attack when he got breathless is common in a number of health conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), severe asthma, pulmonary hypertension, heart conditions and post-COVID symptoms. Some people experience this as a one-off panic, whereas others experience feelings of anxiety and panic more frequently. It can be equally frightening for other people watching, who may not understand what is happening or know what to do. They may panic themselves and seek emergency services.



In Tim's case, his partner took him to his local Accident & Emergency (A&E) department out of concern.

On the way, Tim started thinking less that he was going to die and more that he was going to be okay. At the same time, the intensity of the panic and breathlessness started to reduce.



After answering some medical questions at A&E, Tim was told that he had experienced a panic attack. He was told that he did not need any further medical help and was discharged home.

Tim had never had a panic attack before. He did not really know what a panic attack was, but just knew the whole experience had been terrifying for him and his partner. He felt exhausted from the whole ordeal.

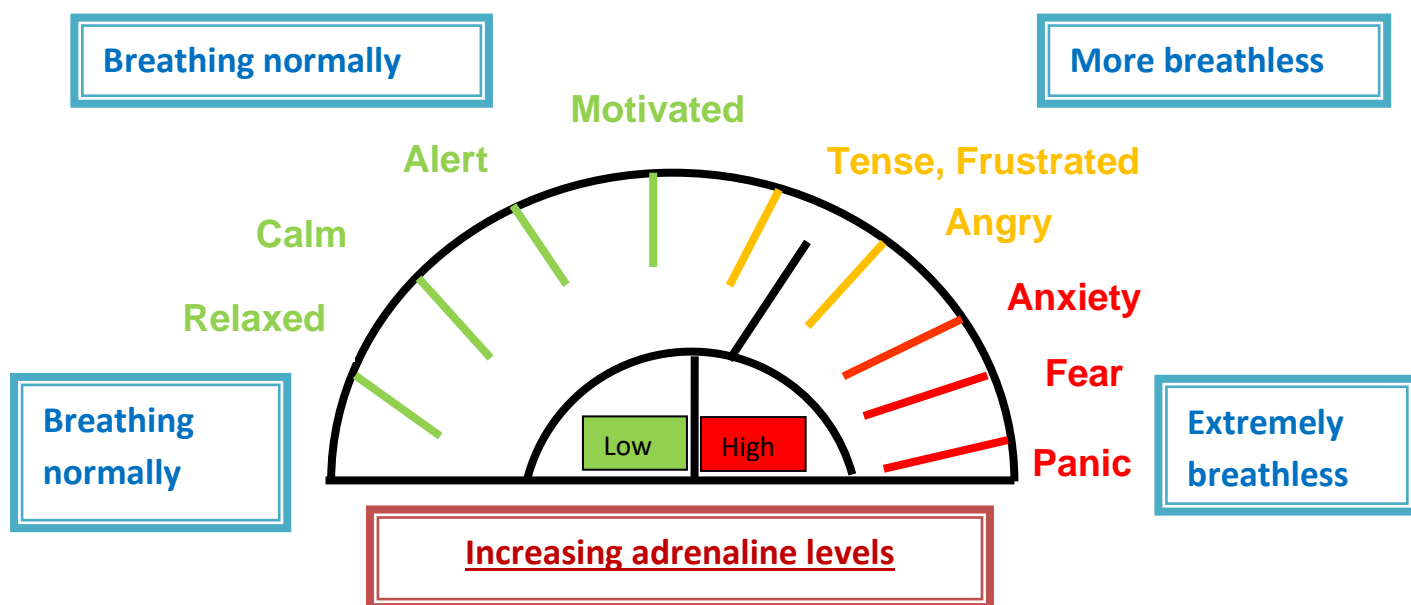
*Tim felt he had caused a fuss and was annoyed and embarrassed. He had also missed his appointment. **“Why did this have to happen today?”** Although he did not mention it to anyone, in the back of his mind he was worried about it happening again. **“What if I am out and it happens again?”** **“What if next time it is worse?”** **“What if next time I don’t get my breath back...?”***

*The next few nights he had trouble sleeping and could not stop thinking about his breathing. **“What if my breathing stops during the night?”** **What if I don’t wake up in the morning...?”**. He was feeling miserable and even more exhausted than usual.*

How mood affects breathing - the breathometer

If like Tim, you have been taken to Accident & Emergency (A&E) because of your breathing and have had a panic attack; it can be helpful to understand more about how this can happen.

This breathometer shows how our mood influences our breathing patterns and also how our breathing patterns can also influence our mood:



Feeling **feeling calm** is linked to **slow, relaxed breathing**.

Feeling **tense and frustrated** is linked to **shallow, quick breaths**.

Being **extremely anxious** is linked **short shallow gasps for breath**.

This shows how **our emotions can affect the way we breathe**. This also works the other way around, meaning that, **the way we breathe also influences how we feel**. For example, if we make a conscious effort to slow down our breathing, this will make us feel calmer.

As adrenaline levels in the body increase, breathing gets faster and we become more tense and anxious. This is shown in the breathometer too.

What is a panic attack?

In Tim's case he was extremely breathless and his feelings increased from apprehension to panic. Below is an explanation of what happens during a panic attack.



A panic attack is...

an extreme form of anxiety. It is a strong feeling of terror that comes on suddenly. Panic affects the **mind** (*we believe something really bad is about to happen*), the **body** (*increase in adrenaline*) and how we **behave** (*act to keep safe*). In panic, the brain triggers an automatic reaction which leads to physiological changes in the body. This is known as the **fight or flight response** – a 'freezing or flagging' response can also occur.

What is the fight or flight response?

This is a normal, healthy response to threats or danger! You can opt to read the below or watch this Youtube video which describes this response: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG-Q>

When something happens and we believe we are in danger or under threat, such as being injured or attacked the body acts to protect itself.



In a split second, the brain sends a message to pump adrenaline into the blood. This puts the mind on high alert and prepares the body to react quickly - i.e. to fight something or to get out of danger quickly. This is an evolutionary survival response throughout the animal kingdom to protect against the attack from a predator such as a lion. Nowadays in our busy, modern world the threats we face are different, but we still have the same response.

When in real immediate danger, the fight or flight reaction is needed and would help. However, this powerful reaction can also be triggered when it is a false alarm and when it is not needed and is not helpful (such as in Tim's example when he was rushing and got out of breath).

A false alarm is when the brain **thinks** there is a threat or danger regardless of whether or not this is true. We may believe that something awful is about to happen when this is not the case. Typically we behave by wanting to protect ourselves from what we think is a threat or danger such as calling for help or getting out of a situation and avoiding it in the future.

The body's fight or flight response

The fight or flight response is the same in everybody. The fight or flight reaction can be set off during a breathlessness attack if people believe at the time they are in real trouble. This is because the breathlessness feels so scary and can make people feel extremely anxious as shown in the breathometer.

The first column in the table below highlights the body's immediate reaction. The second column highlights what we may notice and how we might feel.

Do you recognise any of these symptoms in yourself when you have been particularly breathless? If so, put a tick in the third column.

Body's reaction	What we may notice	Tick if you experience these <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Breathing gets quicker so more oxygen can reach muscles	More breathless, tightness in chest, feel dizzy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Heart rate speeds up to pump blood to the muscles	Pounding heart or palpitations	<input type="checkbox"/>
Muscles tense up ready for action	Tense muscles especially in the shoulders and neck, which would be straining to help with breathing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Digestive muscles slow down as blood is diverted to the major muscles (e.g. legs)	Nausea, dry mouth or a heavy stomach	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pupils open up to increase vision	Blurred vision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mind in on high alert, focusing on possible danger, filtering out other things	Apprehension, feeling keyed up, on high alert, difficult to concentrate on anything else	<input type="checkbox"/>

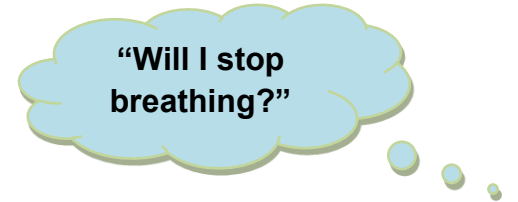
In Tim's case, he was rushing and got breathless and his most worrying thought at that time was "I am going to die". This made him panic and set off the fight or flight response, which made him breathe even faster. He got caught up in a vicious circle of more breathlessness and more panic.

Worries about breathlessness at night

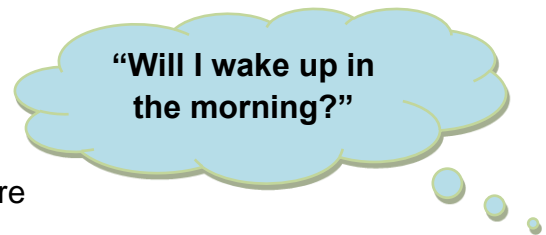
After a while, Tim also started to have trouble sleeping and to worry about his breathing during the night when he was asleep. Other people with health conditions that can affect their breathing have commented that they feel more anxious at night and have similar thoughts.

Is this something that you relate to?

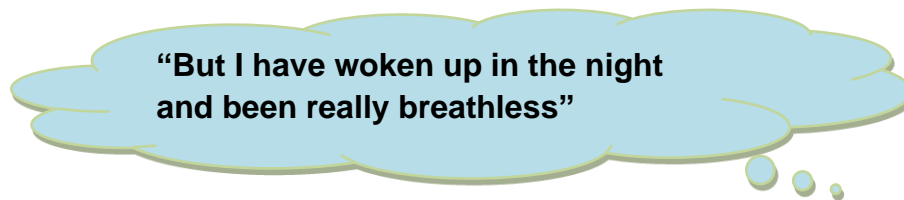
Tim was worried that he would stop breathing during the night.



Another way of thinking about this is to consider that when we are asleep, our bodies are relaxed. When we are relaxed, our breathing is slower and calmer as shown in the breathometer. Conversely, when we are awake our brains are processing everything going on around us in our daily lives and any daily hassles and stresses are more likely to affect our breathing pattern.



Breathing is naturally deeper and slower during sleep because the body is calm and relaxed.



Remember how our thoughts can influence our breathing? So thinking that something bad is going to happen can make us feel anxious and alter our breathing pattern? During sleep our underlying thoughts and fears can be played out through our dreams. After a period of dreaming it is common for some people to wake up or experience very light sleep. So, if somebody with a health condition has just had a worrying dream and has woken up feeling breathless, this change in breathing could be due to their current fears and worries rather than a problem with their condition. Doing some calm, relaxed breathing will get breathing back to its normal rate.

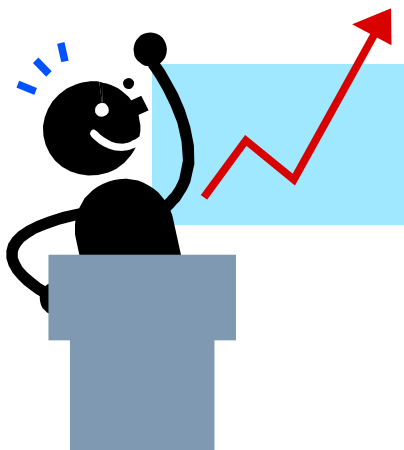
Main message: Breathlessness and panic attacks are not harmful. Being breathless or having a panic attack does NOT harm the lungs or make lung function worse.

For more information on how to get a comfortable nights' sleep, have a look at our separate guide on this.

Although there are real physical changes in the body during panic through the fight or flight response, they only last a short time because the adrenaline in the body wears off. The function of the fight or flight response is to protect us from danger, not cause harm to the body. If it was harmful, it would not have evolved over millions of years. Therefore, it is not possible to die from a panic attack, even though it feels very distressing at the time. It is also not a sign of being weak or mad. In panic, the fight or flight reaction is triggered when it is a false alarm.

Top five things to remember about panic:

Read this to yourself a few times until you can remember it.



- 1. A person cannot die from a panic attack
*(it just feels like that at the time and leads us to believe that)***
- 2. Panic only lasts a short time as eventually the body's adrenaline wears off**
- 3. Panic does not damage the lungs in any health condition**
- 4. It is possible to control breathlessness and panic**
- 5. Panic is not a sign of being mad or being weak or that your health condition is getting worse**

Part 2: How to cope with breathlessness and panic

Overcoming the vicious circle

Understanding how each element of the vicious circle feeds into each other is key to breaking it. So the *meaning or interpretation* we have of a situation or event (e.g. being breathless) influences our feelings, how we react physically and our behaviour.

So with Tim, his most worrying thought when he got very breathless was *"I am going to die"* and he may have had an image of himself collapsed on the floor. This *thought/image* was creating *feelings* of panic. Panic has a *physical* effect on the body through the release of adrenaline, which would have made his breathing feel even worse. His *behaviour* was to focus all of his attention on his breathing and attend A&E for urgent help.

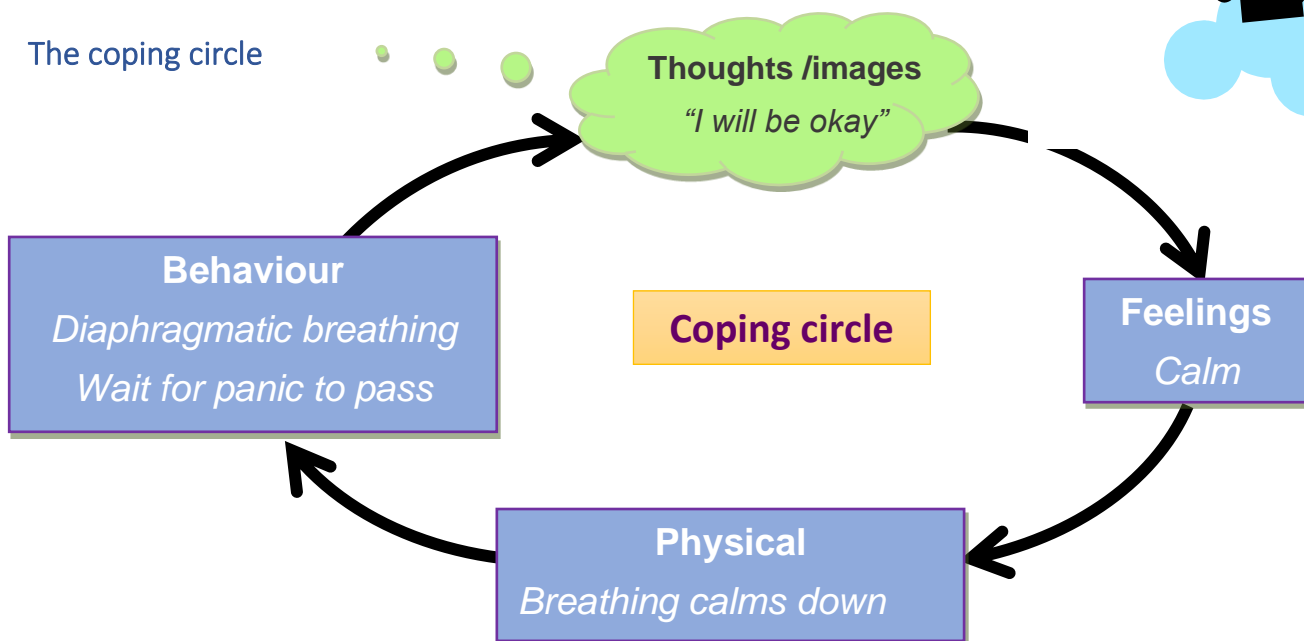
If Tim had believed he was going to be okay (which would have been a more accurate interpretation), he would have felt calmer and his breathing would have calmed down. In addition, if he had tried diaphragmatic breathing (described below), this would have slowed his breathing down which would have made him feel calmer.



Even if he had not done anything and had waited for the panic to pass, his breathing would have returned to normal anyway because the effects of adrenaline on the body only last a short time.



The coping circle



Please see [our video](http://www.icope.nhs.uk) about the coping circle: www.icope.nhs.uk

How to cope with being out of breath

When you get short of breath, you may find you automatically use your shoulders, neck and upper chest muscles. Using these muscles is not helpful and can make breathing feel worse. This is why...



The shoulders, neck and upper chest muscles are not designed to work for long periods of time and get tired easily. Overworking these muscles requires more oxygen which can make people feel more out of breath and lead to tense muscles.

It is also natural to breathe faster when short of breath; however this also makes breathlessness feel worse. This is because it takes more effort to breathe air in quickly. It also means the air does not get deep enough to make the most of each breath as it does not reach the alveoli (air sacs) of the lungs.

There are a number of breathing methods that can be used to help manage the breathlessness that can come when you have a health problem.

Lower chest or diaphragmatic breathing

This involves breathing slowly and deeply using the lower chest or diaphragm. This is the most effective way to breathe.

It can also help us feel calmer and relaxed.

We naturally breathe this way as babies, but with the stresses and strains of modern life, we often get into a bad habit of breathing more from the upper chest.

How to do lower chest or diaphragmatic breathing

Sit in a comfortable chair and make sure you are in a comfortable position, with your feet on the floor.

Place one hand on your upper chest and the other hand on your stomach. Carry on breathing as normal.

Which hand do you notice moves the most?

Most people at this point people say they notice their top hand moving the most. This means they are breathing from their upper chest, which is less effective. The aim is to feel the hand on the stomach moving, whilst the upper chest and shoulders remain still.



Relax your shoulders down. As you breathe in, feel your stomach go out (like a balloon inflating) as you are drawing the air down into your stomach. As you breathe out, feel your stomach go in again (like a balloon deflating).

As you breathe in count 1 and 2 and as you breathe out count 1 and 2 and 3. Focus on the out breath being longer. Say to yourself “*I am relaxed*”, “*I am calm*”. As you breathe out use pursed lips (like breathing through a straw).

Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth (nose breathing moistens the air and acts as a filter before the air reaches the lungs).

Reproduced with permission from The Institute of Cancer Research (2000)

With each out breath, look out for any change in the tension in your body. You might notice your arms and legs feeling more relaxed, or any tightness in your chest easing, or a feeling of calm in your body. Keep practising this technique at different times during the day, both when feeling short of breath and when feeling relaxed.

Before reading on, try this way of breathing for 5-10 breaths at a time.

Other breathing methods that you might find helpful

There are several websites that describe techniques about how to cope with breathlessness if you have a health condition. You can access these using the links below:

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care website:

<https://www.acprc.org.uk/publications/patient-information-leaflets/>

British Lung Foundation: <https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathlessness/how-to-manage-breathlessness>

British Heart Foundation: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/heart-matters-magazine/wellbeing/meditation-and-mindfulness>

Your COVID recovery NHS website: <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/managing-the-effects/effects-on-your-body/breathlessness/>

Macmillan's managing breathlessness booklet for people with breathlessness as a result of cancer or cancer treatments: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/stories-and-media/booklets/managing-breathlessness>

Diaphragmatic breathing exercise practice: <https://youtu.be/F0jvwQ9vURg>

Helpful breathing positions as outlined in  ***Guide C1 'Your guide to relaxation and breathing techniques: supporting wellbeing and health management'***

Top tips for controlling breathing:

- Stop and rest
- Get into a relaxed breathing position (see our guide on this). Relax the shoulders, unclench fists
- Use relaxed breathing and use it regularly (see our guide on this). Blow out using pursed lips
- Learn how to relax and practice this regularly as part of your daily routine
- Distract yourself so you are not focusing on your breathing. Count backwards from 200 to 1.
- Focus on an object - describe it to yourself.
- Imagine yourself somewhere you find relaxing. Think about the scenery and the colours, smells and sounds.
- Listen to music, TV or radio.
- Plan and pace yourself so you don't take on too much or get bored

Summary: How to control breathlessness

(You may want to cut out this page and stick it on your fridge as a reminder)

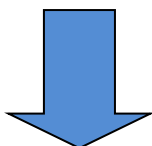
Tell yourself firmly that:

"I am going to
be okay".

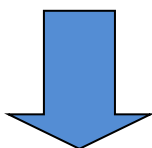
"Nothing awful is
going to happen"

"My breathing will
calm down".

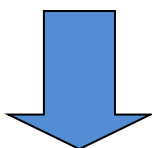
**DO lower chest (diaphragmatic) breathing, get into a relaxed
position and stop and rest**



This will help calm down your breathing and any feelings of anxiety



**Feeling less anxious will lessen the unpleasant physical responses
associated with anxiety**



This will help you feel more in control of your breathing