



Your guide to...

# Managing Fatigue

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).

## Contents

<b>Part 1: Focus on fatigue and anxiety</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Safiyah’s experience.....	3
The vicious circle of fatigue, fear and avoidance .....	4
What is your vicious circle or worry storm? .....	6
How mood affects exertion – the breathometer .....	8
What about panic attacks?.....	9
What is the fight or flight response? .....	9
Top five things to remember about panic:.....	11
<b>Part 2: How to overcome fatigue, fear and avoidance</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Overcoming the vicious circle.....	12
The coping circle .....	12
How to cope with symptoms of fatigue .....	13
How to cope with being out of breath .....	13
Other fatigue management methods that you might find helpful .....	14

## Part 1: Focus on fatigue and anxiety

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



“Nobody understands what it is like for me being so exhausted all the time”

### Frustration:

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

### Low mood

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

### Fear and worry:

“Feeling so tired doing simple things makes me worry about doing too much”

### Fear and shame:

“I don’t want to go out. I am worried that I will get tired and won’t make it back home. People don’t understand and I don’t want to ask them for help”

Dealing with fatigue can be stressful and frustrating. Being completely exhausted with no way to immediately restore energy levels can be frightening and many people feel anxious about what is happening, especially when fatigue symptoms come out of the blue or don’t have a clear diagnostic label. The biggest problem with fear and anxiety is that these feelings can lead to behaviours and responses like avoidance of activity. Avoiding activity can make people feel **MORE** fatigued over time due to a gradual reduction in physical fitness and activity tolerance. Getting more fatigued can then make people feel **MORE** anxious and it becomes a vicious circle.

The focus of this guide is on ways to deal with fatigue and the fears and anxieties that 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 fatigue 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.

## Safiyah's experience...

*Safiyah had a viral infection earlier in the year. The infection affected her heart and lungs. She now has ongoing problems with extreme exhaustion which doctors are unable to fully explain. She has been told her heart and lungs are functioning as normal now and that **“physiologically there should be nothing stopping”** her from becoming physically active again. She has been trying to get back to doing the activities she used to do before but has been really struggling with this.*

*In preparation for a birthday party for one of their two other housemates, Safiyah and one of her housemates decided to go grocery shopping together. They walked for 10-minutes to the local shop and Safiyah had to ask her housemate to stop 4-times on the way. She thought **“I feel like I have run a marathon”** before they had arrived at the shop. While her housemate went to roam the aisles, Safiyah decided **“I must sit down and wait to recover.”** She sat on the floor outside the shop. She was experiencing shortness of breath, dizziness and severe fatigue. She felt embarrassed and decided to herself **“there is something seriously wrong with me”, “being too active like this is dangerous”, “I need to look after myself and slow down even more”** and **“what must people think? I won't go out like this again until I'm better.”***

*Safiyah's housemate was frightened seeing her struggling for breath and so exhausted and unwell. He rushed over to try and help when he came out of the shop. Safiyah felt even more embarrassed, she struggled to get her words out. Her housemate planned to call an ambulance until Safiyah felt able to say: **“I just want to go home to rest”**. The housemate called one of their other housemates, who came to pick them up by car. Seeing her housemate worried made Safiyah worry even more. She thought **“This must be serious” “something is seriously wrong”** and **“I need to avoid this kind of activity in future”**.*

## The vicious circle of fatigue, fear and avoidance

Safiyah's worry led her into a fear-avoidance, worry circle or storm whereby **fears and catastrophic predictions** made her want to **stop or reduce any activities that might lead to further symptoms**. Catastrophic beliefs can increase the intensity of physical symptoms. Additionally, reduced activity can lead to reduced physical fitness and further symptoms. This creates a vicious circle or worry storm that can feel hard to overcome:



### Have you been in a situation similar to Safiyah?

The diagram on the above shows a vicious circle of what was happening to Safiyah. All elements in the circle feed into each other and lead to a fear-avoidance, worry circle or worry storm. For example, Safiyah’s thoughts about her fatigue and ill-health made her 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 the body’s heart rate and breathing even more – this is further exertion and

can lead to further fatigue. Safiyah’s attention was also focused on her body and symptoms, feelings of embarrassment and the concern that symptoms could get worse; this only added to the worry circle. This made Safiyah more anxious and she was left believing that she needed to avoid these situations to prevent this process from occurring again. Unfortunately, reduced physical activity can lead to a process known as muscle deconditioning (a weakening of the body’s muscles) and also reduced cardiovascular fitness. This then means that it can take increasingly lower levels of exertion for your body and heart to become fatigued – this means that there is more likely to be a re-experiencing of fatigue even with less physical effort over time.

**Understanding how this circle works is the first step to overcoming the fear-avoidance, worry circle or worry storm.**

You may find it helpful to visit [our website](#) for an educational video about coping with difficult thoughts and feelings or “emotional storms”: [www.icope.nhs.uk](http://www.icope.nhs.uk)

**Have you ever started to feel anxious or worried because of your fatigue?**

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

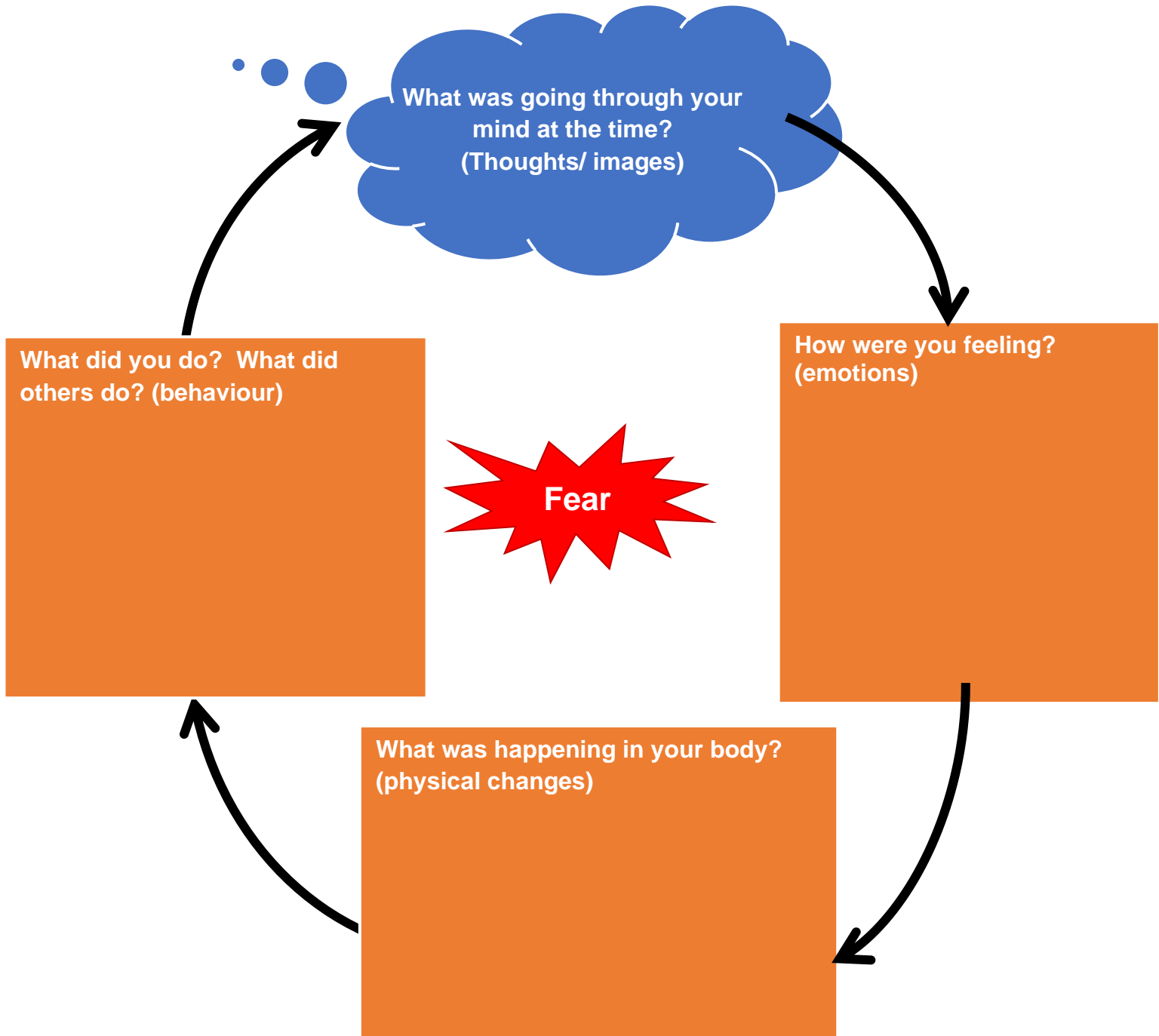
---

---

---

---

## What is your vicious circle or worry storm?



**Any other thoughts or comments about our circle that you might want to check with a healthcare professional?**

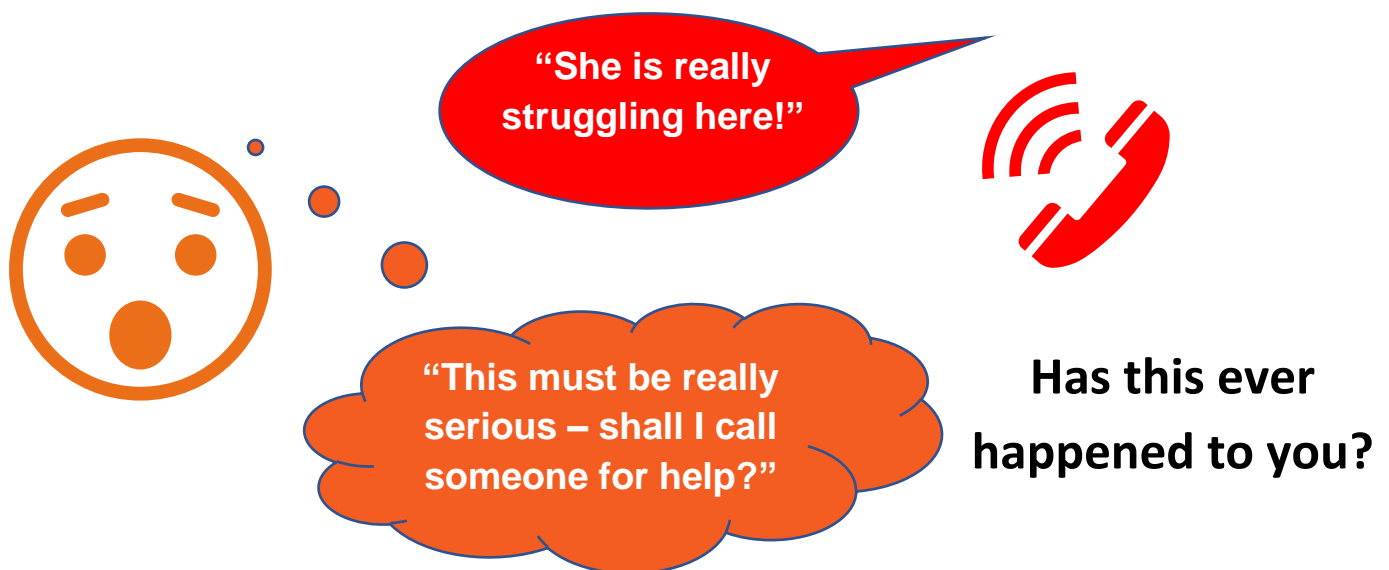
---

---

---

### Safiyah's experience is very common

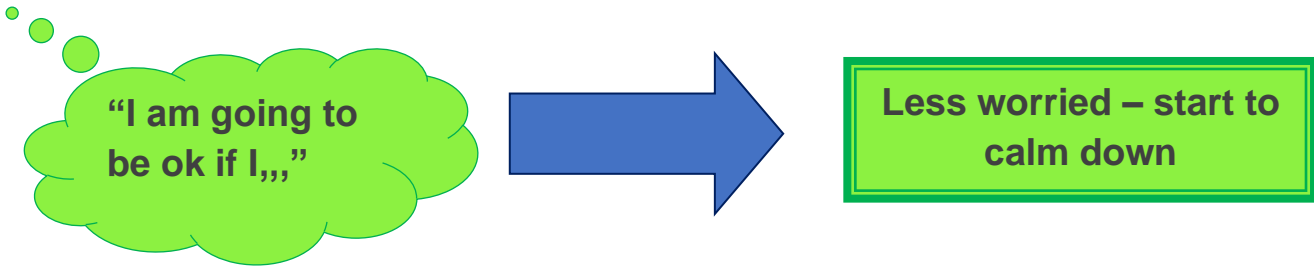
Safiyah's example of getting into a worry circle or worry storm when she became acutely fatigued and unwell is common in a number of health conditions such as heart conditions, chronic fatigue, post-viral fatigue and post-COVID symptoms (e.g. long-COVID). Some people experience this every day, whereas others experience these sensations and worries less frequently. It can be equally frightening for other people watching, who may not understand what is happening or know what to do. They may worry themselves and inadvertently add to the worry for the person experiencing symptoms..



*In Safiyah's case, her housemate arranged for her to go home via car for the 10-minute journey back home.*

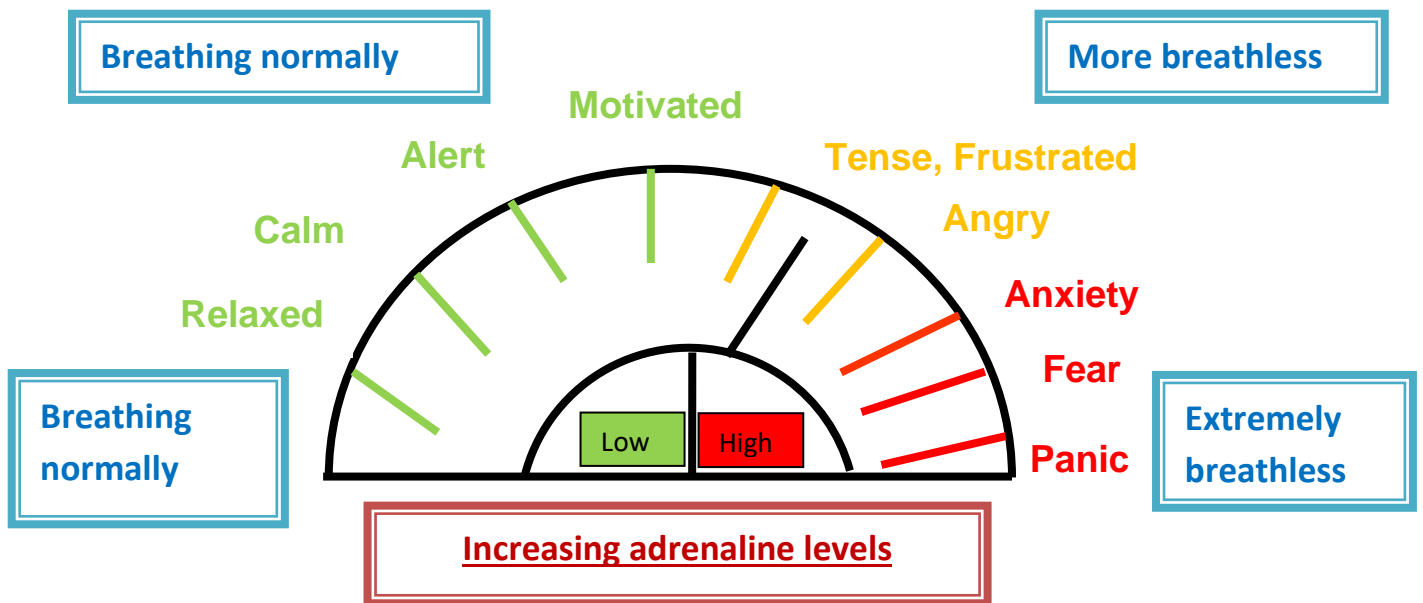
*On the way, Safiyah kept thinking that she had avoided her symptoms from getting worse because she had left the situation and exerted herself less. Unfortunately, this meant that she wasn't able to see if her symptoms may have been well managed with some strategies and techniques to both manage the anxiety and worry circle (to reduce the impact of this) and engage in activity with energy conservation techniques (to allow physical activity at the right level with reduced likelihood of over-exertion).*





## How mood affects exertion – the breathometer

This breathometer shows how our mood influences our breathing patterns (which determines how much oxygen is able to reach our heart and lungs to support exertion) and also how our breathing patterns can also influence our mood:



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

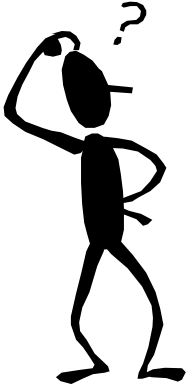
Feeling **tense and frustrated** is linked to **shallow, quick breaths**.

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 and can reduce anxiety and it's effects on our body. **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 about panic attacks?

In some cases, extreme worry can lead to a panic attack. Anxious worries can increase 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.

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 an attack of physical symptoms such as fatigue or breathlessness if people believe at the time they are in real trouble. This is because the symptoms feel 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 worried about fatigue or any other physical symptoms?** 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"/>

**Main message: Fatigue, breathlessness and panic attacks are not harmful.**

**These physical symptoms do NOT harm the body but avoidance of physical activity can reduce fitness and increase fatigue.**

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.

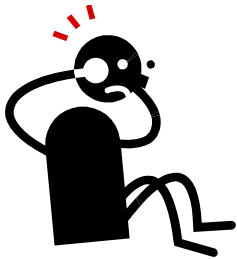


- 1. A person cannot die from a panic attack (it just feels like that at the time and leads us to believe that)**
- 2. Panic only lasts a short time as eventually the body's adrenaline wears off**
- 3. Panic does not damage the body in any health condition or with any physical symptoms that might accompany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

## Part 2: How to overcome fatigue, fear and avoidance

### Overcoming the vicious circle

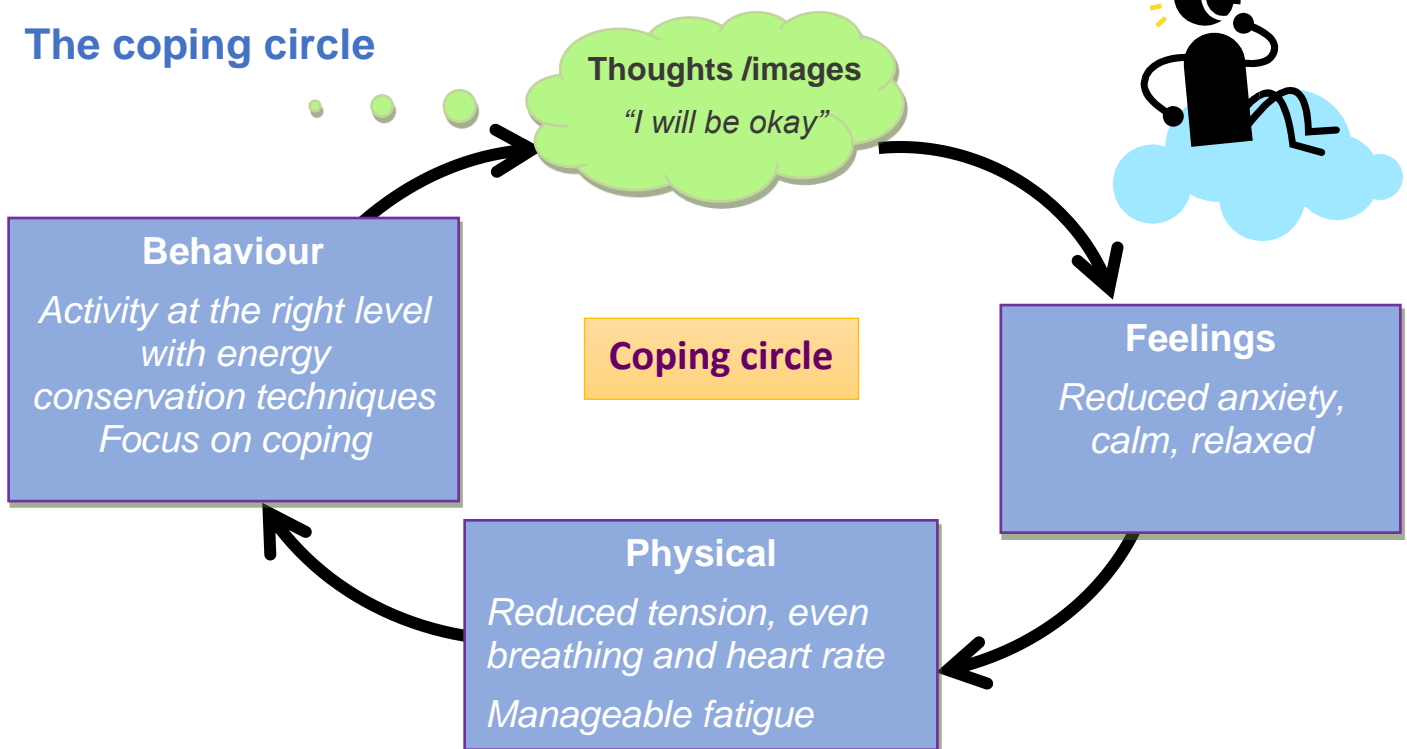
Understanding how each element of the vicious circle feeds into each other is key to breaking it. So the *meaning or interpretation* we have of a situation or event (e.g. being fatigued) influences our feelings, how we react physically and our behaviour.



So with Safiyah, her most worrying thought when she got very fatigued was *“Something is seriously wrong with me”* and she may have had an image of herself collapsing on the floor if the symptoms continued. This *thought/image* was creating *feelings* of fear and worry. Fear and worry have a *physical* effect on the body through the release of adrenaline, which would have made her physical symptoms feel even worse. Her *behaviour* was to focus her attention on her symptoms and avoid exerting herself any further but also in future.

If Safiyah had believed she was going to be okay (which would have been a more accurate interpretation), she would have felt calmer and the intensity of her fear would have lessened. In addition, if he had tried energy conservation techniques to manage her fatigue, this would have helped to manage her exertion levels which would have helped her to feel like she was able to manage her fatigue symptoms.

### The coping circle



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

## How to cope with symptoms of fatigue

There are several techniques to consider using to help you manage symptoms of fatigue.



*For more information, please read: **Guide B2 ‘Managing Fatigue: How to cope with symptoms’** and also **Guide C2 ‘Your guide to pacing: supporting wellbeing and health management’***

## How to cope with being out of breath

There are several techniques to consider using to help you manage any symptoms accompanying fatigue, such as breathlessness (which can lead to fatigue).



*For more information please read: **Guide C1 ‘Your guide to relaxation and breathing techniques: supporting wellbeing and health management’** and also **‘Guide A4 ‘Managing Breathlessness: Physical activity and exercise’***

## Other fatigue management methods that you might find helpful

There are several websites that describe techniques about how to cope with fatigue if you have this as either (i) a standalone symptom, (ii) as part of a health condition or (iii) combined with other symptoms such as breathlessness. You can access these using the links below:

Royal College of Occupational Therapists Guides: <https://www.rcot.co.uk/recovering-covid-19-post-viral-fatigue-and-conserving-energy>

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care Guides: <https://www.acprc.org.uk/publications/patient-information-leaflets/> (GL-03 Energy Conservation)

British Lung Foundation Leaflets: <https://shop.blf.org.uk/collections/lung-health-information> (including their [long-COVID pages](#))

British Heart Foundation: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/information-support/heart-matters-magazine/wellbeing/living-with-fatigue> (including their [long COVID pages](#))

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

The ME Association website: <https://meassociation.org.uk/product-category/covid-19/> (including their [long-COVID updates](#))

Action for ME Trust: <https://www.actionforme.org.uk/get-information/managing-your-symptoms/introduction/>

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

The Brain Charity Website: <https://www.thebraincharity.org.uk/how-we-can-help/practical-help/information-advice/living-with-a-condition/managing-fatigue>

## **Top tips for managing fatigue:**

- **Be sure to stop and rest - consider sitting to do tasks**
- **Build rest into your daily routines - don't wait until you are fatigued before resting**
- **Get into positions that will help with energy conservation. E.g. relax the shoulders, keep elbows low and close to the body**
- **Learn how to relax and practice this regularly as part of your daily routine**
- **Plan ahead, stay organised and pace yourself so you don't take on too much or get bored**
- **Ask for help with tasks where possible**
- **Break tasks into smaller steps with time for rest**
- **Adopt good sleep hygiene. Wind down before bedtime. Imagine yourself somewhere you find relaxing. Think about the scenery and the colours, smells and sounds.**
- **Try to adopt healthy habits - drink and eat well**