WORKSHEET 68 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

The panic cycle

Understanding how a sensation turns into a panic attack

AIM

Explain the cognitive model of panic disorder: a bodily sensation is interpreted catastrophically ("I'm having a heart attack"), which increases anxiety and, with it, the sensations.

WHO IT IS FOR

Panic attacks, fear of bodily sensations. After a medical cause has been ruled out.

DURATION

20 min in session

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Reconstruct a recent attack: trigger, first sensation, interpretation, rising fear, other sensations.
2. Draw the cycle using the person's own words.
3. Identify the catastrophic interpretation and the safety behaviours (sitting down, leaving, avoiding coffee…).
4. Introduce the next step: testing the interpretation (worksheet 69) and reducing safety behaviours.

POINTS TO WATCH

> Check that a medical check-up has been done if the symptoms are new or atypical. Explain that the sensations are unpleasant but not dangerous in a healthy person.

REFERENCES

Clark, D. M. (1986). A cognitive approach to panic. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 24(4), 461-470.

Clark, D. A. & Beck, A. T. (2010). Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: Science and Practice. Guilford.

PSYCHOLOGIST'S NOTES

© 2026 Gonzalo Garzo, clinical psychologist · gonzalogarzo.com · CC BY-NC-ND 4.0: free to share, no commercial use or modifications

WORKSHEET 68 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

The cycle of my panic

A panic attack often starts with an ordinary sensation (a racing heart, dizziness). It is the interpretation ("I'm going to die", "I'm going mad") that sets off the fear, and the fear increases the sensations. Understanding this cycle is the first step out of it.

1. The trigger (place, time, situation).
2. The first sensation I noticed.
3. What I thought was going to happen to me.
4. What I did to protect myself, and what really happened.

Trigger	Sensation	What I thought	What I did	What really happened

What do I fear most when I have these sensations?

These exercises do not replace therapy. If you are in distress or having suicidal thoughts: 112 (European Union), 3114 (France) or the emergency number of the country where you live.

© 2026 Gonzalo Garzo, clinical psychologist · gonzalogarzo.com · CC BY-NC-ND 4.0: free to share, no commercial use or modifications