

When panic hits: a menu

Five ways through. Pick one — you don’t need them all.

This is panic, not danger. It cannot hurt you, and it will peak and pass — usually within minutes. **Nothing here needs doing perfectly.**

1

Breathe out longer than you breathe in

Good when your chest is tight and your breathing is fast and shallow.

Breathe in through your nose for about 5 seconds, then out slowly through your mouth — and make the out-breath longer than the in-breath. The long exhale is what tells your body it’s safe. If counting feels impossible, just do this: two quick sniffs in through your nose, then one long sigh out.

2

Come back to your senses: 5-4-3-2-1

Good when you feel spacey, unreal, or pulled into worst-case thoughts.

Anchor yourself in the present by naming, out loud or in your head:

5 you can see

4 you can feel

3 you can hear

2 you can smell

1 you can taste

3

Give your brain a different job

Good when your thoughts are looping and picking up speed.

Break the cycle by making your mind work at something neutral: count backwards from 100 in sevens, sing a song in your head from start to finish, or describe your surroundings in extreme detail — colours, textures, shapes, as if to someone who can't see them.

4

Cold water on your face

Good when your heart is pounding and the adrenaline feels unstoppable.

Splash properly cold water over your face, or hold an ice cube, a cold can, or a bag of frozen peas against your cheeks for 30 seconds. The cold flips a built-in reflex that slows your heart right down.

If you have a heart condition, low blood pressure, or a history of restricting food, check with your GP before using intense cold.

5

The butterfly hug

Good when you’re shaky and what you need most is comfort.

Cross your arms over your chest, hands resting on opposite upper arms, and tap slowly — about one tap every second or two, left, right, left, right. If you can, bring to mind a place where you feel calm and notice its details: what you’d see, hear, feel on your skin.

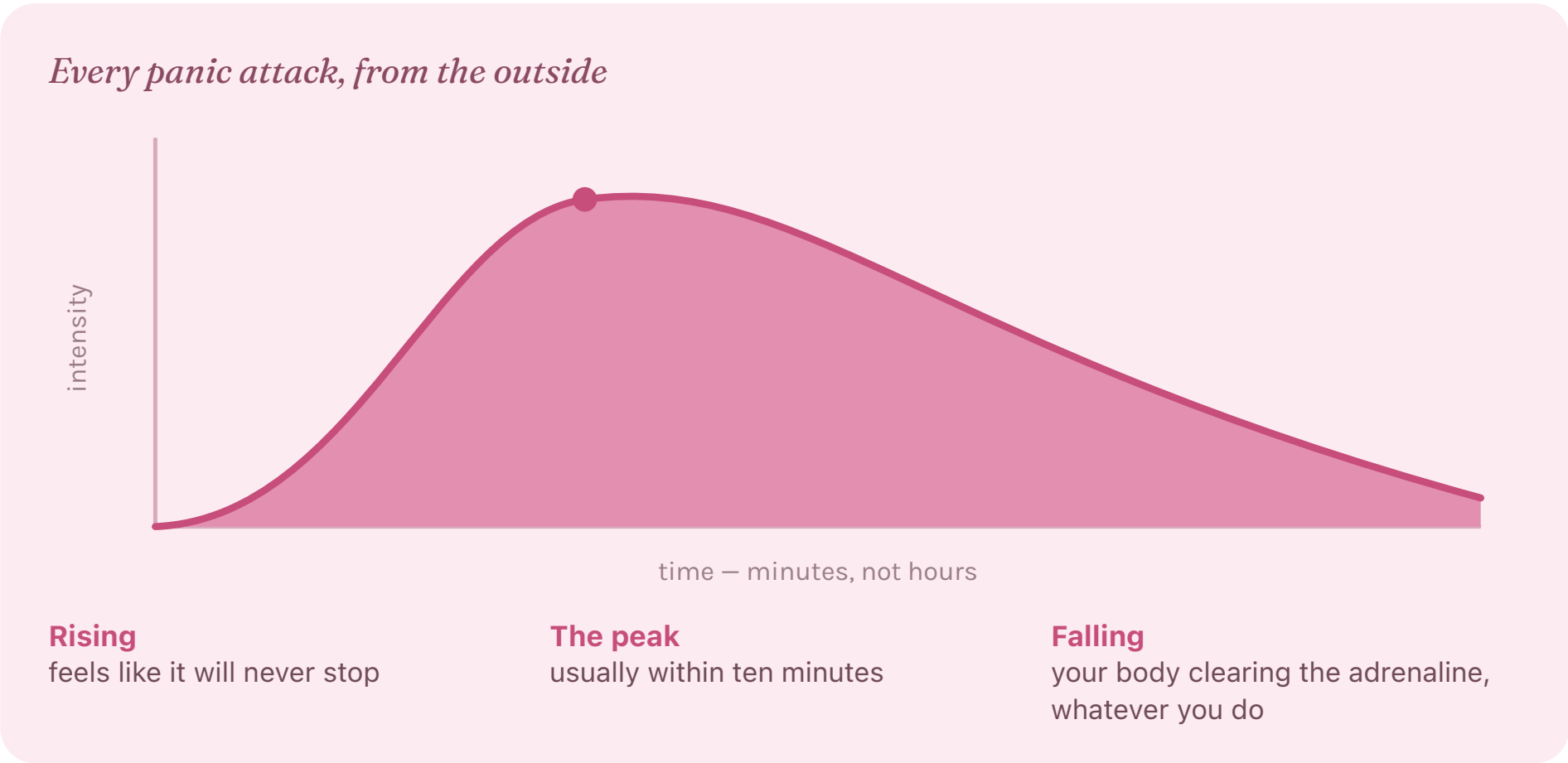
This one works best if you practise it when you’re already calm — a skill your body knows is one it can find its way back to mid-panic.

THE PART YOUR FEAR WON’T TELL YOU

What’s actually happening

Panic is your body running an ancient survival programme — the one built to save you from a tiger. Adrenaline floods in; your heart speeds up; your breathing quickens. There is no tiger, but the programme runs anyway, and the adrenaline clears within minutes.

The strange sensations have ordinary explanations: fast, shallow breathing blows off too much carbon dioxide — that’s what causes the dizziness, tingling and chest tightness, and slowing your out-breath rebalances it. Fainting is rare, because your blood pressure rises rather than falls. Panic is exhausting and horrible — but it is not dangerous.



Afterwards: feeling shaky, drained or teary once the wave has passed is completely normal — your body has just run a marathon standing still. It isn't the panic coming back. Rest, water, something gentle.

The one that works best for me:



The wave always comes down.

You are not broken, and you are not doing this wrong. You have survived every single one of these before — one hundred percent of them — and you are going to ride this one down too.

Be as gentle with yourself now as you would be with someone you love. You made it here. That was the brave part.