

## A simple breathing exercise

Controlling and slowing breathing is central to managing panic. One simple technique is known as 'counting the square'. Counting the square involves simply thinking of a square with each of these phases as a side and counting to a set number (ideally between 4 and 5) along each side of the square as you breathe:



Try to get your stomach (well, your diaphragm) to do the work of breathing - not your shoulders and chest. To ensure you are breathing deeply, place your hands flat on your abdomen at the bottom of your rib cage. You should feel a movement out as you breathe in and out. Breathe gently, don't force it. Keep your shoulders down and relaxed. If you do not do this naturally, try practicing it regularly until you can.

## Reducing muscle tension

Slow breathing should lead to a feeling of relaxation by itself but there are a number of simple general relaxation strategies that can add to this. We describe them in a separate leaflet. However, the goal of relaxing is to be as relaxed as possible at the time you are experiencing stress. So, when you feel the beginnings of panic, take time to focus on becoming as relaxed as you can. This does not mean lying down or taking time out. It means getting rid of excess tension while still getting on with life.

## Putting it all together: an action plan

The key to managing panic is preventing panic. The strategies described here are simple to implement and of proven benefit. But it is easier to use them before panic has taken over. So, having a simple plan of action can be useful.



Be aware of times or situations in which you have previously felt panicky. Be ready to spot any early feelings of anxiety or panic and deal with them before they become too difficult to handle.



If you have sensations that make you fearful of having a further thrombosis, don't immediately assume they really are symptoms of one. Allow yourself to consider that they are normal sensations and immediately begin to use the breathing and calming exercises. Don't get hooked into thoughts that this inevitably is another thrombosis.



Focus on deep muscle relaxation and becoming as relaxed as you can.



Only if the symptoms continue after you have your breathing and relaxation under control, consider seeking help.

This information sheet has kindly been developed by Professor Paul Bennett and Dr Rachael Hunter, Swansea University

## Post thrombotic panic syndrome



## Helping you deal with panic after you have had a thrombosis

Some people who have had a thrombosis experience periods of panic or acute anxiety. These often result from experiencing sensations similar to those that occurred at the time of the thrombosis. Panic typically develops through a number of stages.

1

It may initially be triggered by sensations like those experienced at the time of the thrombosis. Walking too fast or walking up stairs, for example, may make you feel short of breath or you may have pain in your calf.

2

These sensations may trigger worrisome thoughts – “Am I having another clot? Is the clot still there?” This can be alarming and result in you focusing on your body, searching for signs of a clot. This will inevitably make you feel anxious.

### The Panic Cycle

4

These sensations appear to confirm that there really is a physical problem (even though there isn't) and turn anxiety into full-blown panic.

3

This anxiety leads you to become physically tense and to start breathing more deeply and rapidly. Your body is adopting a 'flight or fight' response, preparing to deal with the threat by either running away or dealing with it head on. Over-breathing can also trigger sensations including feeling short of breath, light headed or tingling.

## Coping with panic

The three processes that result in panic are:



Anxiety provoking thoughts; typically interpretation of benign sensations (being short of breath after over-exertion) as signs of impending or actual thrombosis.



More general increases in physical tension, evident through a feeling of tension in the muscles throughout the body. This may be most noticeable in the stomach, chest, or arm muscles really involves all or most of the big muscles in the body.



Increased or rapid breathing (or more technically hyperventilation).

Managing or preventing panic involves developing a plan to deal with each of them if they occur. Overleaf are some relatively simple strategies you can use to manage them and a suggested plan of action that can be used at times of panic.

## Keeping Calm



Panicky thoughts: in some ways these are the most difficult things to alter because they come quickly to mind and are clearly alarming. Nevertheless because they are the trigger to panic it is important to address them. The key here is to give yourself:

'Calm down' messages such as, 'I've had these sensations before and they did not mean I was having a clot'.

Reminders to use the relaxation and breathing exercises described below:

In the cold light of day, these thoughts are relatively easy to evoke. You may even think them after you have had a panic. So, the content of the thoughts is not the problem. It is the timing. The key is to bring them to mind as soon as you begin to realise you are feeling anxious. Delay can mean you are too far into the panic process for them to be of maximum benefit.

