

Factsheet 8: Understanding and coping with fear, tension, hypervigilance and panic

One of the most common reactions after a traumatic event is an ongoing sense of fear, tension and being on high alert for danger (hypervigilance). These feelings can last long after the traumatic event has passed.

During a life-threatening event, our bodies automatically prepare for danger, releasing hormones to prepare the body to fight the threat, to run away or to freeze. This automatic response prepares the body to protect us from harm and is not within our immediate control.

How our body responds to threat (Fight/Flight/Freeze)

The body instinctually prepares itself to either confront the danger (fight), to flee from the danger (flight), or to shut down to protect itself from the danger (freeze). This is known as the Fight/Flight/Freeze response.

Even after the initial threat has passed, our mind and body may remain in a state of high alert to ensure safety and keep us away from danger.

When you have experienced prolonged trauma or long periods of feeling unsafe, the body remains prepared for danger and may lose its ability to recognise safety. These responses may continue long after the threat has passed.

Understanding panic

Panic is a word used to describe a sudden surge of intense fear, occurring without warning. It feels overwhelming, creating a strong desire to flee or a fear of losing control of your actions. Panic is triggered by reminders of past traumatic events.

Fight (confront)



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Faster heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Tensed hands, arms, jaw
- Reduced blood flow to digestive system, causing stomach-ache, nausea, needing to go to the toilet
- Intense focus on danger and how to defeat the threat

Flight (run away)



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Faster heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Tensed leg muscles
- Reduced blood flow to digestive system, causing stomach-ache, nausea, needing to go to the toilet
- Fast thinking, attention focused on escape

Freeze (shut down)



The body prepares to shut down by:

- Becoming still or frozen
- Fast thinking or unable to think
- Less sensation
- Numb emotions
- Inability to move
- Feeling faint and/or dizziness



Signs of fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance you and your family may notice

- Being constantly alert for danger
- Restlessness and agitation, difficulty relaxing or sitting still
- Being easily startled by sudden noises
- Trouble falling asleep or frequent waking at night
- Increased irritability and anger over small events, arguing with loved ones
- Constant nervousness and fear, difficulty relaxing
- Racing thoughts
- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated or angry
- Difficulty trusting others and being fearful of people
- Fear of being alone
- Difficulty concentrating or learning new information, including a new language
- Frequent headaches, body aches and pains
- Racing heart, feeling sick, dry mouth, loss of appetite, difficulty speaking, sweating, trembling hands or legs

Coping with fear, hypervigilance and panic

When practiced regularly, the exercises in *Factsheet 8B: Exercises to cope with fear, hypervigilance and panic* can help lower feelings of fear and slowly restore a sense of safety.

Sometimes our feelings of fear are very strong, and you may find these techniques difficult to do on your own. Talking to a QPASTT worker can help you to gradually learn these strategies and support you as you do them in a way that feels safe for you.

Tension and relaxation

Holding muscle tension in our body is a common fear response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

When people have been under stress or fearful for long periods of time this tension can lead to headaches and other bodily aches and pains. This tension may also make people feel irritable, anxious, worry a lot, and be more sensitive so that they react to small events as if they were threatening. Many people may not even realise that they are tense.

By learning to relax your body you can start to shift feelings of fear and anxiety. What creates a sense of relaxation is unique to everybody.

What is important is that you choose an activity that is relaxing for your body and your mind, and you practice this regularly.

What are the activities that you know help your body to relax?

Some examples of relaxing activities include:



Meditation



Prayer



Enjoying a favourite meal



Singing



Playing or listening to music



Being in nature



Going for a walk



Playing with children



Spending time with friends and family



Playing a sport or doing exercise



Reading



Watching a funny movie

EXERCISE: Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation asks you to tense and then relax different muscles throughout your body.

When practised regularly, it can reduce pain, improve sleep and help people achieve a very powerful feeling of calm.

Your counsellor will be able to guide you through a progressive muscle relaxation exercise which you can practice at home, or you can use the simple instruction script below. You can record it on your phone and listen back to practise the exercise. If you record the script, make sure you leave extra time in between saying each instruction to give your body and mind the chance to follow along when you come to do the exercise.



Take a moment to sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable.

1 Take a deep breath



Breath In through your nose. Hold it for a moment. Now slowly breathe out through your mouth. Let your body relax.

2 Focus on your hands



Squeeze them into fists. Hold the tension for a few seconds... and now, let them go. Feel the tension leaving your hands.

3 Move to your arms



Tighten your arms by bending your elbows and making your muscles firm. Hold the tension... and release. Notice how they feel softer and heavier.

4 Shift to your shoulders



Lift them up toward your ears. Hold the tension... and let them drop. Feel your shoulders relax completely.

5 Focus on your face



Scrunch your face, tightening your jaw, eyes, and forehead. Hold for a few seconds... and now, let go. Feel your face smooth and soft.

6 Next, your stomach



Tighten your stomach muscles like you're pulling your belly button in. Hold the tension... and release. Let your stomach feel calm.

7 Now your legs



Press your toes downward and tighten your thighs. Hold it... and let go. Feel the heaviness in your legs.

8 Finally, your feet.



Curl your toes and tighten your feet. Hold for a moment... and let go. Notice the ease spreading through your feet.

Take one more deep breath in... and slowly exhale. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

To speak with QPASTT or find out more about our services, please call 07 3391 6677 or visit qpastt.org.au.

QPASTT is the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. It is a community organisation which provides a variety of flexible and culturally sensitive support services to people who have been tortured or who have suffered refugee-related trauma. QPASTT has offices across Queensland.