

Driving

One of the most disabling phobias associated with panic attacks is the fear of driving. In many areas, driving is a daily necessity, and your life can be severely restricted by limitations such as where, when, or how you can drive.

The fact that you panic while driving a powerful vehicle that weighs a ton or more may seem like a particularly difficult problem to solve. In other panic situations, the panic sufferer plays a relatively passive role—a passenger on a train, a shopper in a store, a worshipper at church, a person getting a haircut—when they experience a panic attack. Their main task is to ride it out until it passes, or until they have left the scene. But drivers cannot remain entirely passive. They have to continue to operate the vehicle, at least for a while. People who experience panic attacks while driving, particularly on high-speed roads, fear not only losing control of themselves but also losing control of the vehicle.

People usually assume that they are “out of control” during panic attacks and therefore that they will be unable to drive safely during one. If you actually drive in a dangerous and erratic manner during a panic attack, this problem needs to be taken seriously and resolved. But keep in mind that panic often fools you into believing things that simply aren’t true. Don’t take your fearful assumptions as the truth. Instead, use the materials in this chapter to review your actual driving behavior and determine whether you can drive safely during a panic attack.

Let’s start by considering the nature of the fear you experience. Simply calling it a driving phobia makes it sound like your fear prevents you from driving, even though you know how to drive and are licensed to do so. That happens to some people, but for the great majority it’s more complicated than that. It’s much more common for people to impose limits on their driving in response to their fears. For instance, a lot of people who come to me for help with a driving phobia do drive but avoid expressways or other specific circumstances such as overpasses and bridges.

Part of avoiding expressway driving may involve the higher speeds on those roads. But what can be more upsetting is the fact there are only certain points at which one can exit the expressway. A road sign that says “Next Exit—12 Miles” might as well say “Next Panic Attack—1 Mile!” As soon as someone starts worrying “What if I have a panic attack when the exit is still 11 miles away?” the next thing they know, they’re having a full-blown attack.

The same person might be able to take an alternate route, a local road with lots of intersections, and drive 30 miles without breaking a sweat. What makes the difference? It’s not necessarily how far they drive, or how fast. It’s the thought of being “trapped” on the road without an exit nearby. It’s the thought of having a panic attack with no way to get off the expressway. The thought of being trapped can also lead people to avoid bridges, tunnels, overpasses, left turn lanes, red lights, ferry boats, the center or left lanes of multilane roads, roads under construction, or roads without a shoulder.

It will help to carefully review the details of your driving phobia. Let’s start by taking an inventory of the limits you impose on your driving.

In the past year, have you driven a car at all? Yes No

(If your answer is “no,” move on to the bottom of page 15.)

On the following list, check the driving conditions you prefer to avoid. If you absolutely never drive on expressways, for instance, check the “Always Avoid” column. If you usually avoid such driving but sometimes do it, check the “Avoid with Exceptions” column. If you don’t avoid a particular road condition at all, make no marks for that item. **Then add any others that aren’t on the list.**

DRIVING CONDITION	ALWAYS AVOID	AVOID WITH EXCEPTIONS
Expressways with limited access	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roads through areas with no homes or stores where you can stop	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roads where the speed limit is 50 mph or greater	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Red lights	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Left turn lanes at busy intersections	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Busy roads at rush hour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Express lanes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

DRIVING CONDITION	ALWAYS AVOID	AVOID WITH EXCEPTIONS
Roads without shoulders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Roads under construction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Driving in the middle lane	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Driving in the left lane	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unfamiliar roads	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bridges	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tunnels	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Car washes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Driving at night	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Emission testing stations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
others _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Now look at the “Avoid with Exceptions” column and consider the times when you drive in circumstances you normally avoid. Think about the reason you can, at least sometimes, drive in those circumstances. It’s probably not random. There are probably some rules that tell you whether or not today is a day when you can drive in one of these situations.

What makes it possible for you to sometimes drive in these situations?

DRIVING CONDITION

Recent exception	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____

DRIVING CONDITION

Recent exception	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____

DRIVING CONDITION

Recent exception	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____

DRIVING CONDITION

Recent exception	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____

DRIVING CONDITION

Recent exception	Reason
_____	_____
_____	_____

Common reasons for exceptions include the following:

- *Dire Need.* For example, having to take a child to a doctor's appointment when no one else is available to drive may require that you pass through an area you usually avoid or go beyond your "safe zone."

- *Upbeat, Optimistic Mood.* On days when you feel especially good, for whatever reason, you feel capable of more than on days when you don't feel so good.
- *Support People.* If you have your "support person" with you, you probably do more than you can without him or her, even though you do all the driving.
- *Support Objects.* When you have certain objects with you, like a cellular phone or a water bottle, you may do more than when you don't have them.
- *Good Days/Bad Days.* You may have some general rules that you don't think of too often but that influence your choices. Often they involve some kind of association with a particularly bad attack you've had. If you had a bad attack on a Monday, or in early December, you might subconsciously lay low at those times and not "push your luck."
- *Hospital Locations.* Knowing where the nearest hospital is frequently makes a difference to people with panic attacks. The reassurance of knowing that a hospital is just down the road can enable them to drive through an area which they might otherwise avoid.
- *Distraction.* Listening to a favorite tape or CD, chatting with a good friend on the phone, or engaging in some other distracting task often helps people to travel further than they would otherwise.
- *Weather.* For many people, pleasant weather seems to make driving more possible.

What are you afraid will happen if you have a panic attack while driving?

If you're having trouble with this question, recall a specific major panic attack you had while driving. Imagine that I was in the car with you and at the height of the attack, I asked you "What are you afraid is going to happen now?"

Yes, you'll get afraid, but the question is, what will be the *result* of the attack? What is the worst outcome you fear as a result of having a panic attack while driving? A lot of people don't get to the bottom of their fear when they first try to answer this. They may identify some symptoms they'd experience. For instance, they might say, "I'd hyperventilate" or "I'd have to pull onto the shoulder and stop driving." Then my follow-up question would be, "And if you do, what's the worst thing that will happen as a result of that?" They might say "People will see me stopped there and wonder what's wrong with me," and again I'd have to ask, "And what would be the worst consequence if they did?"

Review your own answers and make sure you get to the bottom line. What would the worst outcome be?

Once you have that answer, move on to the following questions.

In the past, what has been the worst result of having a panic attack while driving? How did it compare to what you feared?

If you have special exceptions that allow you to occasionally drive beyond your boundaries, how do they work? Do they help make you safer or more calm?

When you panic while driving, what do you do to help yourself?

And how do those things work? Do they make you safer or more calm?

If your panic attacks while driving didn't produce any dangerous or catastrophic outcomes, how do you explain that?

With respect to the first question—what you fear will be the outcome of having a panic attack while driving—many people identify one or some of the following:

- Die, faint, or go crazy
- Cause a crash by suddenly slamming on the brakes, or jumping across lanes of traffic without warning
- Abandon the car and flee in some dangerous fashion
- Become so paralyzed with fear that they are unable to function
- Stall out the car and be unable to get it moving again
- Have a heart attack or a psychotic episode while stranded in traffic amid hundreds of angry motorists honking at them.

Reviewing your answers to the rest of the questions above may help you to realize that:

1. *Panic does not produce the dangerous or catastrophic outcomes you fear.* In fact, I know of only one client in more than 20 years who has had an accident of any kind during a panic attack—she clipped the side of her garage. People can experience a lot of fear

and still do an adequate, safe job of driving. The results of panic attacks are all about discomfort, not danger.

2. *All special exceptions that allow people to occasionally drive when they would normally avoid it seem to work by influencing the person's mood or comfort level or need to drive, not by making their driving any safer.*
3. *People try to help themselves during a panic attack while driving in a variety of ways, including singing, yelling, praying, opening the windows, turning on the air conditioner, pinching and slapping themselves, turning the radio on, turning the radio off, eating snacks, playing with their hair, calling friends on their cellular phones, and pulling off the road. Of all these efforts, only pulling off the road has the slightest possible connection to making them safer. All the others are purely devoted to distraction and comfort. Even those who do pull off the road typically do so to regain their composure and then resume driving. They don't abandon their car, nor do they call friends, towing services, or the state police to come get them.*
4. *In the throes of a panic attack, you still remain in control of your actions.* People tend to attribute the fact that they didn't get into a terrible accident, or abandon their car and run across six lanes of traffic, to luck, distraction, support people, support objects, and the various efforts they made. But upon closer examination of those factors, you can probably see that while they may make a person more comfortable, they don't make a person safe. They don't protect against insanity, heart attacks, or collisions. The real explanation is that panic doesn't lead to dangerous or catastrophic outcomes because that's not the nature of panic.

What about Distracting Yourself?

Distraction can sometimes ease problems of discomfort, and that's why people reach for it. The fact that you use distraction can be a helpful reminder of what you're up against. Would you distract yourself if you were really in danger? If you saw a big truck barreling out of control toward you, would you hum a little tune, or would you steer out of the way?

People instinctively reach for distraction when they face discomfort, but not danger.

That's what happens during a panic attack. You're feeling afraid, upset, and miserable, and you need to relax. But you *can* drive when you're feeling afraid,

upset, and miserable, just as you can drive when you're sad, glad, angry, jealous, lonely, or hopeful. You can drive with a wide variety of emotions.

When a person is having a panic attack, they experience such powerful emotions and physical sensations that it can feel as though they're losing control of themselves somehow. This is the panic trick. They feel so upset, so "out of control," that they assume they *are* out of control. But feelings and thoughts aren't the way to tell if you're acting responsibly and "in control." The best evidence about whether you're in control is what you're doing.

In the case of a panic attack while driving, especially on expressways, people tend to assume that they are out of control and will therefore lose control of the vehicle, and cause a terrible accident. That's an understandable fear. You feel powerfully afraid during a panic attack, and it seems to make sense that you might lose control of your car.

If that's still how it seems to you, I have a couple more questions.

Do you have a history of traffic violations and/or accidents that were the result of panic attacks?

If I were a state patrolman, following a couple of car lengths behind you, would I notice anything about your driving that would lead me to pull you over and maybe have you walk a straight line or give you a ticket?

If your answer to either of these questions is "yes," you need to address that aspect of your driving. If you actually drive in a reckless or lawless fashion, that's a good reason to limit your driving until you get that problem resolved.

But most people answer "no" to both questions. They haven't had tickets or accidents as a result of panic. They report nothing that a patrolman would notice. In fact, they drive carefully. They stay within their lanes. They use their turn signals and mirrors when changing lanes. They usually don't drive any faster than the traffic around them (although speeding is the one violation that comes up occasionally). They'll sometimes attribute their good driving record to luck or other circumstances, but when they examine their actual behavior, they find no examples of being out of control. That's the test. Control is about behavior, not thoughts or emotions. If you have a reasonably clean record, that's a strong indication that you're up against discomfort, not danger.

Progressive Exposure and Driving

If, after you review your driving history, you find that your driving passes the test of being reasonable and safe, it makes sense to develop a program of progressive exposure as outlined in Chapter 18. Develop a hierarchy of driving tasks, as described in that chapter, and practice regularly with those tasks, using the AWARE steps to help guide you through the panic when it comes.

Here's how one individual I know—let's call him Joe—used the AWARE steps to guide himself through a panic attack during his driving exposure:

- *Acknowledge & Accept:* Joe talked to himself about the fact that he was having a panic attack, and how he was reacting to it. "Looks like I'm finally having a panic attack. I wish I wasn't, and I'm not grateful for the chance to practice. I just want to get to my sales call. I'm tired of this \$#!%. But if this is what has to happen now, while I'm driving to my meeting, so be it. Bring it on. I'm not going to pretend it's not happening, or pretend I don't notice. Not asking God to help. It's a pain in the ass, but so what. I'll just keep going, it'll pass sooner or later."
- *Wait & Watch:* Joe reminded himself of his options, such as pulling over onto the shoulder and waiting it out or putting on his hazard lights and driving more slowly, and decided he didn't need to use those options right then. He decided to keep them in mind if he felt worse; in the meantime he would keep driving. He "watched" by switching on a tape recorder and talking out his panic diary answers.
- *Actions to increase comfort:* Joe switched into belly breathing. He checked himself to see what parts of his body were particularly tense and stiff. He noticed he was holding the steering wheel in a death grip and relaxed his hands. He noticed his arms were rigidly extended, and he relaxed those muscles as well, getting a bend in his elbows and allowing for a lighter grip on the wheel. He noticed his hands were sweaty, and he wiped them. He rolled down the window to get some fresh air. He found that he was keeping his vision locked straight ahead, so he started glancing around, looking at other traffic and sights along the way. He checked his reflection in the rearview mirror to see if he looked like a crazy person and satisfied himself that he looked like his usual self.
- *Repeat:* Joe went through this cycle four times during a 35-minute ride and frequently reminded himself that this attack would . . .
- *End.* And so it did. (It will for you, too.)

A Final Suggestion: “Dress Rehearsals”

Before you get very far with your exposure situations, practice pulling off the road a few times. The key to realizing that you’re not “trapped” is knowing you have options you can use. One of the best options, if you feel unable to drive safely or just need a break, is to pull over and compose yourself, or even wait for help if necessary.

People with panic attacks often fear pulling over because they have a heckling thought like “What if I can’t get back on the road?” If you wait until you’re actually having a panic attack to pull onto the shoulder for the first time, it will be harder to exercise this option. So do some “dress rehearsals.” Pull over *as if* you were having a panic attack and rehearse the AWARE steps you’d go through if you were actually experiencing panic. Go through each step—do your breathing, fill out a diary, and so on. Do this several times, on all the road types that appear on your hierarchy. That way, when you do experience a panic attack and worry about being “trapped,” you’ll be able to remind yourself that you’ve already had the experience of pulling over, and you just need to do the same thing again.

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