

PANIC ATTACKS

A Practical Guide to Controlling Them

By

Gill Jones MA, BACP Registered Counsellor

Panic Attacks

Introduction

Thank you for buying this e-booklet. I have been counselling people with panic attacks since 1991 and I've put together all the strategies and useful pointers that past clients have found helpful. I hope they will help you, too. You may have tried some of them before and found the panic attacks still return. *Please read my e-booklet and try again.* Anxiety usually builds up over a period of time and it won't disappear overnight.

practice makes perfect

Re-training your body and your thoughts takes time. If you would like me to help you with individual therapy please contact me using the email link on my website and put Panic Attacks in the subject line.

The symptoms of panic attacks are very real, very frightening, and emotionally draining. Some people go to their nearest hospital when they have their first attack because they are frightened they are having a heart attack.

A panic attack is one of the worst experiences a person can have which isn't life-threatening.

You may read this leaflet in any order, using the thumbnails at the left hand side of the Acrobat Reader screen to move among them as you wish. I hope you find the information helpful. When you've read through this leaflet please email me with comments and suggestions, I am always interested in ideas for approaching this complex and distressing condition and it helps me to help you if I know what is working.



Gill Jones MA,
Psychotherapeutic
Counsellor

BACP Registered
Counsellor,
UK Registered Independent
Counsellor

**Online and Face to Face
Counselling**

Website:
www.gjcounselling.co.uk

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What is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack has been described as an **emotional nightmare**. Here are some of the ways people talk about what was happening to them.

- ✚ You're caught in a catastrophe you didn't see coming - something bad is going to happen to you at any moment.
- ✚ You feel as if you are having a heart attack. Your heart is racing and beating very loudly. (These heart palpitations convince you that you are about to have an attack.)
- ✚ You feel as if you are going out of control and will do something embarrassing in front of other people.
- ✚ You can't get enough breath and feel dizzy. You're afraid you're going to suffocate from lack of oxygen.

Panic attacks are often triggered by recent stress or other negative conditions in your life. However, they are not always brought on by a recognizable circumstance, and may seem to come "out of the blue". They are an extreme form of anxiety and occur at unexpected times. Sufferers become afraid of going out to public places in case they have an attack. One minute you're feeling fine, the next you're struggling for breath and feeling sick and dizzy. The symptoms are intense and you can experience overwhelming terror worrying that you may be having a heart attack, a stroke, or losing your mind.

Some people become so frightened of having additional panic attacks, especially in public that they withdraw to their "safe zones", usually their homes, and very rarely leave them. This condition is known as agoraphobia and is a depressing and miserable existence. Some people who suffer panic attacks have them in particular situations like going in a lift, using an escalator or shopping. This can also lead to agoraphobia as they begin avoiding the situation which triggers the attack.

People who have panic attacks fear they have a life threatening illness like heart disease or seizures. They're not particularly reassured when a doctor explains it's not life threatening. *(The symptoms were so powerful what was it, if it wasn't a heart attack?)* Other people fear that they are going crazy and that their panic attacks are a sign of weakness or they are going out of control.

The frequency of panic attacks vary. Some people have weekly attacks for months at a time. Others have patches where they suffer, for example, daily for a week, then have long intervals when they have no attacks, or very infrequent attacks.

Panic Attacks come in 3 different types:

1. **Unexpected** – the panic attack comes "out of the blue" without warning and for no discernible reason.

2. **Situational** – situations where you always have a panic attack, for example, going into a tunnel.

3. **Situationally predisposed** – situations where you sometimes, but not always, have panic attack (e.g. sometimes having an attack whilst driving).



People who want to **conquer** their
PANIC ATTACKS
don't run away from them

What Happens During a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is a sudden surge of overwhelming fear that comes without warning and without any obvious reason. It is far more intense than the feeling of being 'stressed out' that most people experience.

"It came out of the blue, I was feeling fine one minute, the next I was trembling and sweat was pouring off me."

A typical panic attack lasts for several minutes (between 5 and 20). Some panic attacks have been known to last for longer or to recur very quickly over and over again.

"It felt like I was never going to be normal again. That's very frightening. I don't know how long it lasted, it seemed for ever."

The aftermath of a panic attack is painful, too. You can be left feeling depressed and helpless and your anxiety can remain high, long after the attack has subsided and your breathing and heart rate have returned to lower levels. You fear that the panic attack will come back again, making life unbearable.

"I haven't driven on that particular stretch of road since and I don't mind if I never go that way again. It's safer if I avoid it altogether."



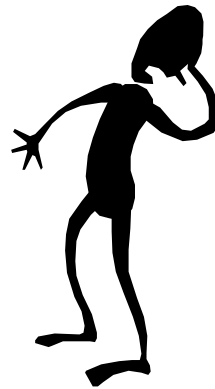
The next section deals with the individual symptoms you may experience during a Panic Attack.

What are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

People experience different symptoms during a panic attack. Which ones from the list below, fit your experience?

- A feeling of imminent danger or doom**
- Heart palpitations (rapid or irregular heartbeat and pounding heartbeat)**
- Trembling or shaking**
- Hot flushes or sudden chill**
- Sweating or flushing alternating with feeling chilled**
- Choking feelings**
- Nausea or abdominal distress**
- Shortness of breath or a smothering feeling**
- Chest pain or discomfort**
- Numbness or tingling in hands, arms or legs**
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or unsteadiness**
- Feeling of detachment, or feeling out of touch with yourself**

- ✚ **A sense of things being unreal, depersonalization**
- ✚ **Fear of dying**
- ✚ **Fear of going crazy or out of control**
- ✚ **A strong need to escape**



I can't go back in there!

EMERGENCY MEASURES TO CONTROL PANIC ATTACK SYMPTOMS

You may want to print the next three pages and keep them handy or download my MP3 version and keep it on your player.

Begin to take control of the panic attack as soon as you feel it coming on. ***The longer you wait, the harder it is to control.*** Choose from the following suggestions – some may seem contradictory, this is because some work for one person, some for another. Choose the ones that work best for you.

- ***Exercise.*** Go for a short brisk walk breathing deeply rather than breathing fast.
- ***Distract Yourself.***
 - Pick something to look at and count it (e.g. the number of bricks on a wall, the number of blue objects you can see, etc.).
 - Listen to the sounds around you (birdsong, clattering machines, people talking/laughing).
 - Change the station on the radio and listen to one you don't normally listen to.
 - Say hello to the people who you pass if you are walking.
 - Talk to someone.
 - Splash cool water on your face.
 - Sing a favourite song (out loud or under your breath, depending on circumstances).

- **Massage Your Neck.** The carotid artery (which leads to the brain) when massaged, causes a reflex slowing of your heart beat. You can feel your pulse from the artery by pressing just below the angle of the jaw. Gently massage one side at a time. Do this while sitting in a comfortable chair or lying back.
- **Slow Your Breathing A..** Use the second hand of a watch (or count slowly). Slow your breathing to 3 seconds for each inhale and 3 seconds for each exhale. Try to breathe so your stomach balloons out as you breathe in.
- **Slow Your Breathing B..** Breathe out slowly to avoid over-oxygenating the blood. Count 7 as you inhale; 11 as you exhale. (7/11 breathing)
- **Monitor your Panic Attack.** Notice what is happening and write it down.
 - Note the time you first feel panicked and give the feeling a rating of between 1 and 10 (*1=feeling calm and relaxed, 10=the worst stage of a panic attack*).
 - Continue to note the time and give it a rating as the feeling grows. Think of all the panic attacks you have had before - is this one better or worse?
 - Note the time the feelings subside and give yourself another rating.
 - When you feel better, note the time.

- Keep a record of all your attacks and compare them – are they reducing in severity?

If your symptoms return, don't get discouraged. It probably means you have allowed your breathing to speed up again – maybe you didn't notice it happening.

Each time you succeed in reducing your symptoms, you are moving closer to controlling your panic attacks altogether.



The Good News about Panic Attacks

You may be puzzling over this heading – what can be the Good News about panic attacks? Well, basically, the good news is that sufferers of panic attacks can be helped. Panic attacks can be treated successfully in the vast majority of cases.

In one to one therapy I focus on the individual experience of panic attacks with my clients. We work together concentrating on the thoughts and feelings that lead into the cycle of anxiety and panic and at the same time thinking about ways to change them. Sometimes the therapeutic path we follow is clear, at other times it is difficult and confusing as the cycle of anxiety and panic seems to come out of nowhere with no obvious pattern. I use different therapeutic approaches with my clients tailoring therapy to what works best for the individual.

When you develop and practise new ways of thinking about your panic attack, you are changing the way your brain responds. When this happens the anxiety and panic will start to shrink and eventually stop causing you problems.



What You Can Do to Help Yourself

If you've just experienced your first panic attack, you may be feeling there's nothing you can do to prevent another. However, there are things you can do to control another attack. The first step is to understand how anxiety works. Anxiety is a mixture of symptoms which are interactive. One set of symptoms relates to how your body reacts when you are experiencing panic (**physical**); the other set of symptoms relates to how you think and feel during the panic (**psychological**). The symptoms are part of what is called the 'fight or flight' response. When you feel under threat your body automatically prepares to either

defend itself or run away and this involves both physical and psychological preparations.

This section lists different ways you can take action. You will see that I deal with the physical and psychological symptoms separately. You will need to tackle both parts in order to overcome your panic attacks but if that seems too much to cope with right now, I suggest you deal with them one at a time.

I have summarised below **4 physical** measures you can take and **3 psychological** ones. You can find out more about some of them in the next section.

Taking Control of your Panic Attack

Physical 1 - Breathing through the Panic Attack

It is useful to be able to control the shortness of breath many people feel during a panic attack. **Techniques for breathing** (see page 20) need practice but once mastered, they can help to control an attack and eventually may prevent attacks from developing.

Physical 2 – Relaxation

To manage your panic feelings you must first break into this cycle of physical and psychological symptoms. One way of doing this is to reduce the severity of physical symptoms by practising **relaxation** techniques (see page 21).

Physical 3 – Exercise

Another strategy for breaking the cycle of physical and psychological symptoms is to take some aerobic exercise. This is exercise that is low impact - not involving carrying heavy weights or sudden exertion - and acts mainly on the heart. Any gentle **physical exercise** (see later section) that leaves the heart slightly racing will help.

Physical 4 – Diet

Caffeine is present in many soft drinks (e.g. cola drinks), not just in tea, coffee and chocolate. Try to cut out caffeine, it can set up its own vicious cycle speeding up the heart and making you pass more urine - both signs of general anxiety. It can also disturb your sleep, leaving you less in control of your emotions and more likely to feel anxious. You should also aim to eat regularly and healthily, avoiding sudden surges in blood sugar levels from fast-burn sugary foods like biscuits and cakes.

Psychological 1 - Monitoring Your Panic Thoughts

Just as asthmatics will often check their breath capacity regularly, it can be useful to check your panic feelings regularly. You can do this by becoming aware of your moods and noting them down (see page 25). Eventually you will be able to spot problems and deal with them before they become unmanageable.

Psychological 2 – Challenging Your Panic thoughts

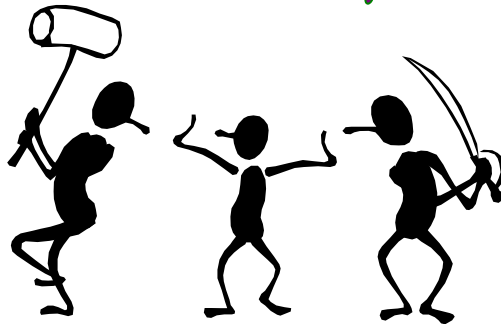
You can also begin to challenge the automatic thoughts that accompany a panic attack and change them for more helpful ones (see page 27).

Psychological 3 – Be less harsh on yourself. Try saying 'No'

This can be the very best therapy. It is easy to take on too much. You can find yourself in a situation where you have too many demands on your time. Try saying 'no' next time someone asks you do something that feels too difficult or too time-consuming, to you. If you don't feel confident doing this, watch how someone else does it and copy them.

Be assertive - say 'No'

Be assertive - say 'No'



Physical 1 – Breathing through the Panic Attack

Deep Breathing: This is one of the first ways you can begin to **take charge** during a Panic Attack. It is a way of breathing deeply, making sure you empty your lungs fully before filling them again. Follow these three stages below, moving on when you are comfortable.

- ★ Put one hand on your diaphragm (the soft area at the bottom of your rib cage). Take a deep breath in and make the hand move outwards like a balloon filling with air, then breathe out and let it fall back to its starting point. Try to make the breaths slow and steady.
- ★ Take a slow breath in through your nose then breathe it out even more slowly through your mouth whilst counting in your head. Count to 7 on the In breath and 11 on the Out breath. Slowing down the breath out prevents you from hyperventilating during an attack (which makes you feel dizzy).
- ★ Now as you breathe in, say the word peace to yourself and as you breathe out say the word calm but draw the words out so they take up the whole of the breath like this.

breathe in p-e-e-a-c-e

breathe out c-a-a-l-m-m

Physical 2 – Relaxation Exercises

You will need to do these exercises regularly too. I have written them out here for you but you can also download my MP3 audio file of them from the website.

- ✚ Find somewhere you can sit or preferably lie down. You will need to be warm and comfortable. Switch off the telephone, TV, radio and listen to the sounds around you
- ✚ Now let the sounds drift away into the background and think about your body, you are going to relax each part of it separately.
- ✚ Starting with your toes clench the muscles for a few seconds until you start to feel an ache, then completely relax them letting your foot go limp like spaghetti.
- ✚ Now clench your calves, knees and thighs and relax them letting your legs go limp.
- ✚ Now clench your buttocks and stomach, hold them tight for a few seconds and let go.
- ✚ Now clench then stretch out your fingers, stretch your arms, hold it for a few seconds and let your arms and hands go limp and lie beside you.
- ✚ Hunch your shoulders up towards your chin, screw up all the muscles in your face and move them around (nobody's looking) then relax your face. Close your

eyes and let your jaw relax into a slightly open position.

- ✚ Lie with your body relaxed, your breathing slow and quiet and spend a few minutes enjoying the peace.
- ✚ When you feel ready, gradually move your toes, legs, hands, arms and open your eyes then slowly move into a sitting, then standing position.
- ✚ You are ready to take part in the rest of the day.

There are other ways you can relax as well as the one described above.

Music - Do the exercises above whilst you listen to a favourite CD playing quietly in the background. Then lie and enjoy the rest of the music for extra relaxation.

Basic/Beginner Yoga - Yoga is a great form of breathing and relaxation. You will learn to breathe deeply and get much needed exercise at the same time. Buy a beginner yoga video or enrol in a Yoga class. Practice daily.



Physical 3 - Exercise

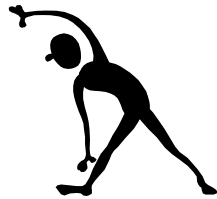
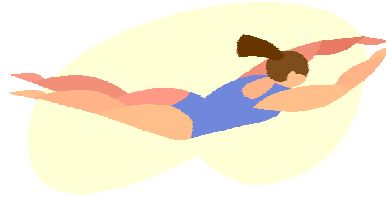
Below, are some suggestions that people have found helpful. Don't be afraid if your heart rate increases a little when you exercise. Just because your heart is beating faster doesn't mean that you are about to have a panic attack.

Get yourself checked out by your doctor if you are at all uncertain about what level of exercise would be appropriate for you

- ★ Go for a 30 minute walk or jog outside in the open air. If it is raining take an umbrella. Fresh air and exercise are good for fighting the feelings of anxiety and panic. Another bonus - they are good for your health as well!
- ★ Or you might like to do aerobic exercise at home using a video. This is exercise that is low impact - no heavy weights or sudden exertion. Aerobic exercise acts mainly on the heart.
- ★ Any gentle physical activity that leaves the heart slightly racing will help, if you enjoy swimming, try going to the pool regularly.
- ★ Get your bicycle out and go for a ride.

exercise helps you **relax** and be less anxious

The heart is like any other muscle in your body. Exercising it helps it become stronger. A stronger heart will be less prone to the kind of pounding that can make the physical symptoms so unpleasant. Exercise will also help to release some of the tension that builds up and can fuel the anxiety.



Psychological 1 - Monitoring Your Thoughts/Feelings

These next two sections work on your thoughts and feelings of panic rather than the physical symptoms of panic. This section encourages you to notice situations you find stressful.

Panic attacks are brought on by raised levels of stress. You can only make changes when you know what you want to change. Monitoring your stress levels regularly will show you what is happening when stress begins to build up inside you. A healthy level of stress is good. It helps you work better and keeps you motivated and interested in what is going on around you but when stress builds to an unhealthy level, it can cause the feelings of panic which (if left unchecked) can result in a panic attack.

To do this part of the leaflet you will need a small notebook that you can carry around with you. Keep a separate page for each stressful situation.

Note stressful times which lead to a panic attack

Begin by making a note of any stressful time during the past week/month which lead to panic feelings (not necessarily a full-blown panic attack). Keep a new page for each situation.



Work on each stressful situation separately.

- ✚ Describe what was happening at the time of the panic feelings which may have contributed to them. An argument with a colleague/family member - extra demands on your time - a new task or a change of routine. **List all the stressful things that were present at the time the panic attack began.**

- ✚ **Notice how you felt and what you were thinking** during this increasing level of stress. What did you feel first? Then what? What next? Note these changes down - there is an example of a page from a panic notebook at the end of this leaflet.

- ✚ Notice how you felt and **give each event a rating on a scale between 1 and 10** (1=no panic feelings at all; 10= the worst feelings of panic you have ever experienced). This scaling between 1 and 10 can be used when you next have a panic attack, it will begin to separate you from the feelings and they won't seem so strong.

The next section shows how you can begin change panic thoughts and feelings.

Psychological 2 – Challenging Your Panic Thoughts

Just as physical relaxation, breathing, diet and exercise encourage you to make changes to reduce the physical symptoms, this section is going to show you how you can change the way you think about panic feelings and thoughts. There are three parts to it, you may find some parts are easier for you than others. Give them all a try, then stick to the ones you find work best for you.

It's a good idea to keep your notebook with you whilst you work on this section. It's easier to write down your ideas as they come into your head than have to remember them for later.

1. Explore what can you change about your thoughts?

- Can you ***reduce the stress/pressure*** of the situation (manage it over a longer period of time instead of as before)?
- Can you ***shorten your exposure*** to the stress (take a break, leave the premises, go for a walk)?
- Can you see ways to ***make a more permanent change?*** (set yourself a ***more reasonable***

goal? Prioritize tasks on a list? or allow longer for a task to be completed)?

- Can you **delegate** some of your workload?

Note down any ideas (even the far-fetched ones). Write anything that might work for each of the panic situations you have described.

2. Reduce the Intensity of Your Reaction

The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. (Remember that fight/flight response earlier? Here is why you have it). Are there thoughts/feelings you can change here?

- Are you **viewing your stressful events/times in exaggerated terms** and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- Are you trying to **keep everyone happy?**
- Are you **over-reacting** and viewing everything as critical and urgent -even things that can wait?

- Do you feel ***you must always prevail*** in every situation?

If any of these statements describes you, make a note of it in your book then do section 3.

Don't be afraid of the panic feelings; you are beginning to deal with them.

3. Be Less Harsh on Yourself

- + ***Put the situation in perspective*** (stand back from the stress for a moment and decide if it's the worst it's ever been, or if something can be done about it).
- + Don't dwell on the negative aspects and the "what if's."
- + ***Pursue goals which are meaningful to you***, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- + Learn to ***say 'no'*** to things you don't want to do.
- + Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
- + Be kind and gentle with yourself - ***be a friend to yourself***.
- + Try ***repeating an affirming sentence*** over and over in your head. Like the ones below.

Every day in every way I'm getting better and better

I'm feeling OK

I am calm and in control

I have the power to make myself better

I love myself and my body

I feel strong and positive

THE FINAL STAGE - RE-EXPERIENCING THE SITUATION THAT CAUSED THE PANIC ATTACK

I've called this the Final Stage because this is where you confront the feelings of threat and fear that drive a panic attack. So far, we have worked on ways of reducing the physical symptoms and ways of tackling the thought patterns which allow an attack to develop. Now we are going to think about how you can **stop avoiding** the situations which bring on an attack. When you confront the situation which causes the panic attack you are reducing its power over you.

Let's go back to your Panic Notebook for a moment. Look at the list of events you have noted – what do they have in common (a similar place, or person, or task)? Do you avoid certain tasks, people, places because they might bring on an attack?

Turn to the back page of the Notebook and write a list of the situations, places, people you avoid because you fear you will have a panic attack. If you are avoiding more than one situation, take them and work on them one at a time – don't try to tackle all the situations at once.

Write down the situation you are avoiding at the **bottom** of the page, then write the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 **up** the

page (using a separate line for each). (see example on page 33). Think of each of these numbers as one rung of a ladder which gets you from the point where you are now (avoiding the situation) to the point where the situation is no longer a problem. Beginning with number 1 (where you are now) think of one small step you can take which will take you one rung up the ladder. Then on number 2 rung think about how to get to number 3 and so on until you have reached number 10 which is the final step. Begin your climb when you are ready and review your success regularly by ticking off each rung as it is climbed (you might also want to give yourself a small reward each time you move up a rung ☺).

Begin by thinking about the rung you are on now and give yourself a scale rating between 1 and 5 (1=too frightened to go up; 5=ready to climb). Now think about the next step. Imagine yourself climbing. It will feel scary at first. Use your breathing and the other physical and psychological skills in this booklet to control your thoughts and fears. Stay on this rung until you feel safe to move. If you find you have made one rung too difficult to climb in one step, build some extra rungs on your ladder. If you find yourself panicking, just go down one rung and try again when the panic has subsided.

There is an example of a ladder on the next page.

Here is an example of how your ladder might look.

This person was avoiding air travel because of panic attacks. Here are the steps of the ladder they chose.

10. Board the aircraft (use breathing if necessary, tell air stewardess?)
9. Check in at the desk (repeat affirmations and breathing if necessary)
8. Journey to airport (relax body, breathe quietly)
7. Pack suitcase (include notes + soothing CD for flight)
6. Receive ticket through post
5. Book time off work
4. Choose a holiday and book it
3. Surf the internet looking at flights
2. Involve partner in plan (I will do all booking)
1. I decide to take a holiday which involves a flight (wait until breathing is calm before moving on)

APPENDIX – EXAMPLE PAGE FROM A PANIC NOTEBOOK

Event	Feeling 1	Feeling 2	Feeling 3	Feeling 4
<p>Driving - car journey (140 miles) Tuesday: including Motorway worried about meeting - bad night; sleep - late night. Woke up dreading it</p> <p>Rating 80</p>	<p>Woke up feeling tired, drained, exhausted</p> <p>Got up and dressed in a hurry - overslept. Skipped breakfast</p> <p>50</p>	<p>Very anxious getting into car and starting engine</p> <p>Going over meeting in my head Just missed gatepost.</p> <p>70</p>	<p>Very anxious all journey keep going - but worried about getting there on time Had to drive fast on M'way felt very unsafe</p> <p>70</p>	<p>Arrived exhausted had panic attack in car park. Couldn't get out for 15 mins. pretended to be on the phone until it subsided . Went in for meeting sweating.</p> <p>80</p>
<p>Changes I can make to reduce stress</p>	<p>Allow more time for journey so I don't have so much pressure to be on time If I allow plenty of time for the journey I can go more slowly and then I won't feel so anxious</p> <p>Get there early and have a short break before the meeting - sit in car and do some relaxation breathing or go for a short walk.</p>			
<p>Changing thoughts to reduce stress</p>	<p>I shouldn't have agreed to go to that meeting. I could have suggested Jo go instead. I didn't say 'no' when it would have been OK.</p> <p>The meeting could have gone OK with Jo.</p> <p>I need to take stock and not agree to everything just</p>			

	because it's come from the boss.
Be less Harsh on Myself	<p>I'm a good, careful, driver I sometimes dread driving particularly long journeys but I don't have accidents, I arrive safely.</p> <p>I can say No occasionally if there's not enough time for me get ready for the meeting and make the journey safely. It's better for me and better for the company if I'm safe and in control.</p> <p>I can listen to a CD in the car - not traffic or news programmes that will be more relaxing</p> <p>When I take my time, I even enjoy driving sometimes.</p>

So now you have reached the end of my e-Book on Panic Attacks. I hope you have found it helpful. Thanks for downloading it. I am always interested to hear your feedback, comments and suggestions.



Gill Jones

Email: info@gjcounselling.co.uk