

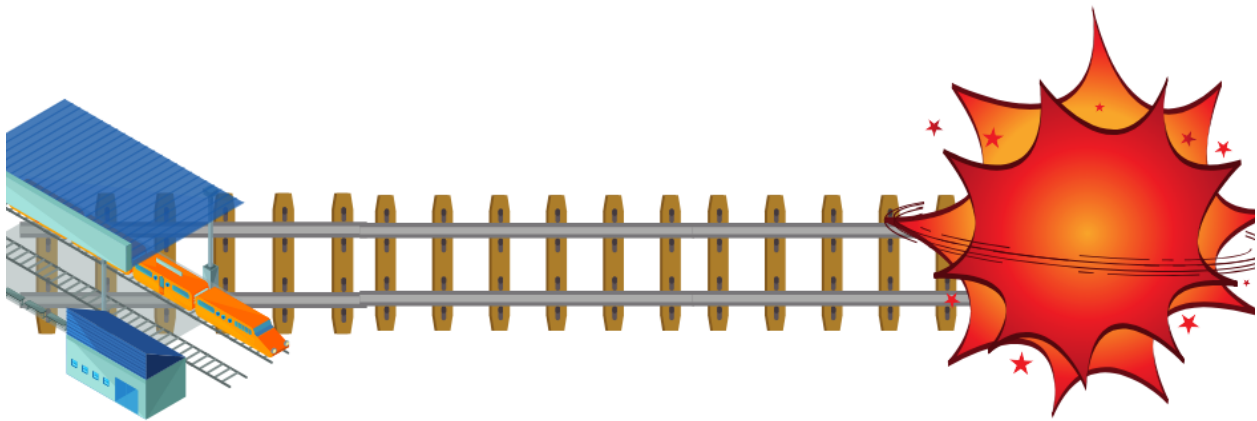
Managing Anxiety/Coping with Panic Attacks using the Identify, Monitor, and Intervene Tool

As someone with a lived experience of anxiety, I came to eventually realise when it came to managing it, there was no quick fix or brilliant solution that could resolve all my problems.

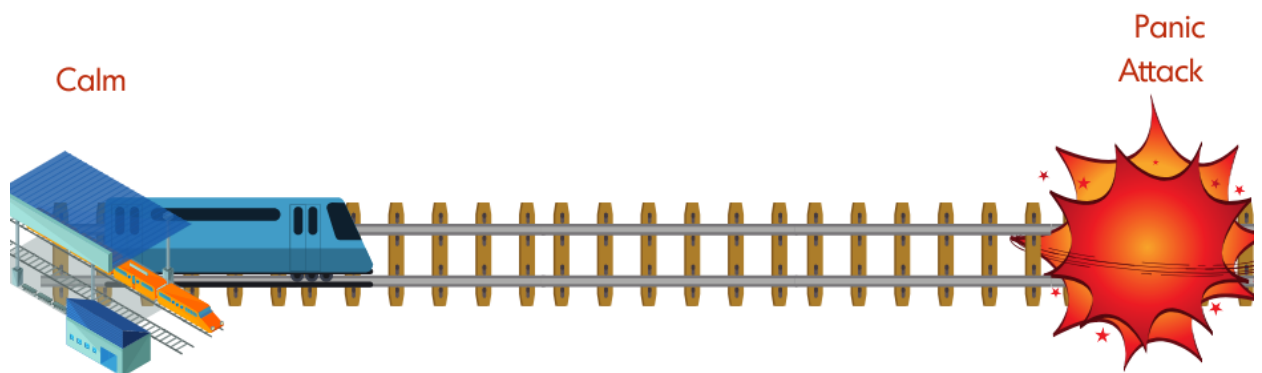
Rather, I feel, coping with anxiety is a combination of different things that each play a part in helping us manage. Personally for me my strategies consist of a number of different things. This includes the obvious stuff such as surrounding myself with positive and supportive people, maintaining a good diet, sleep hygiene, and getting regular exercise. Some of the more advanced stuff includes techniques derived from Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance Commitment Therapy. No matter how big or small, each of these things has played a part in helping me manage.

However, despite doing these things, I often found that sometimes my anxiety would often be so severe that I would experience these difficult panic attacks. The scary thing about it was I felt so out of control because I wasn't even sure what triggered it. That's why eventually with some help I discovered a technique to help me with this. I found that in order to reduce the likelihood or intensity of the panic attack, it was helpful for me to gain some insight and awareness into what I was thinking and feeling into the build-up leading to a panic attack. By recognising these symptoms, I found that it allowed me to act quickly and reduce the likelihood of the panic attack occurring by identifying, monitoring, and intervening. In order to do so, I found it helpful to have a visual aid/metaphor called the *Train on the Track*.

First of all, let us visualise a regular, every-day train track. This train track is going to serve as a scale of our current stress/anxiety levels. As you can see on one end there is a train station platform. This end of the scale is going to serve as the lower end of the anxiety scale i.e. feeling calm, not feeling anxious. On the other end of the scale we have an explosion which is going to serve as the higher end of the anxiety scale i.e. panic attack, very stressed/anxious.



In the next visual, we are going to add a simple regular train. This is going to serve as an indicator of where we are currently are at on the stress/anxiety scale.



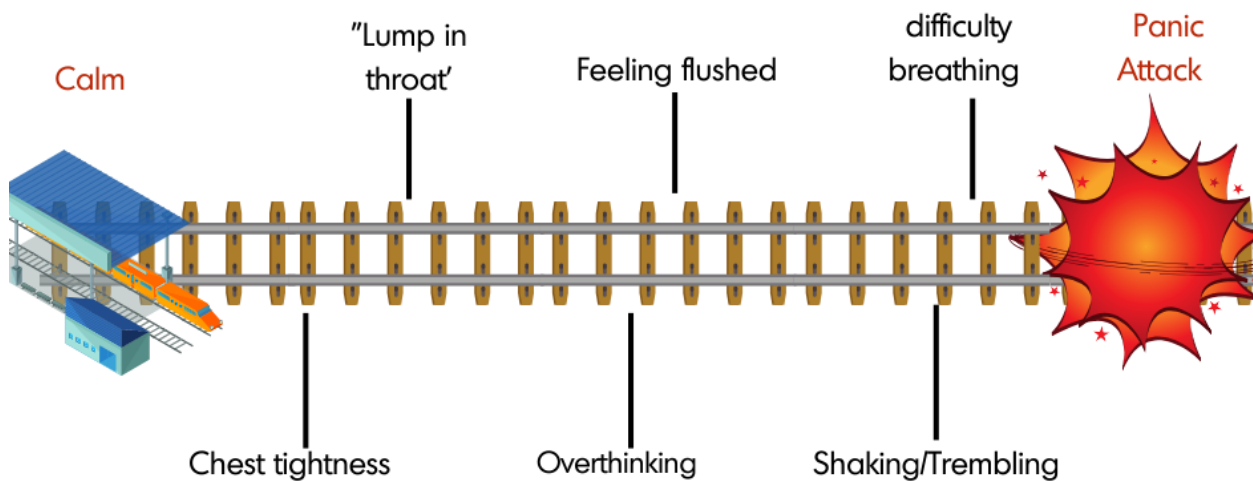
Identify

Now that we have our stress scale and also an indicator of where we are currently at, the next step is about gaining further insight by recognising what we think/feel when we are feeling calm, how we think/feel when our anxiety begins to escalate, and what we think/feel right before a panic attack. In order to this, it can first helpful to identify and write down some of the common symptoms you may experience whilst feeling anxious. Some of these things may include

- Racing and/or negative thoughts
- Muscle tension
- Trembling
- Shaking
- Headaches or migraines
- Fast or difficulty breathing
- Grinding teeth
- Difficulty sleeping or difficulty being able to relax
- Feeling nauseous or stomach pains
- Persistent, excessive, or often unrealistic worries about events or tasks
- Panic attack
- Intrusive or repetitive thoughts
- Feeling of dread
- 'Lump' in throat sensation
- Hearing 'pumping' blood in your ears

- Feeling flushed
- Tightness in chest or feeling of being squeezed

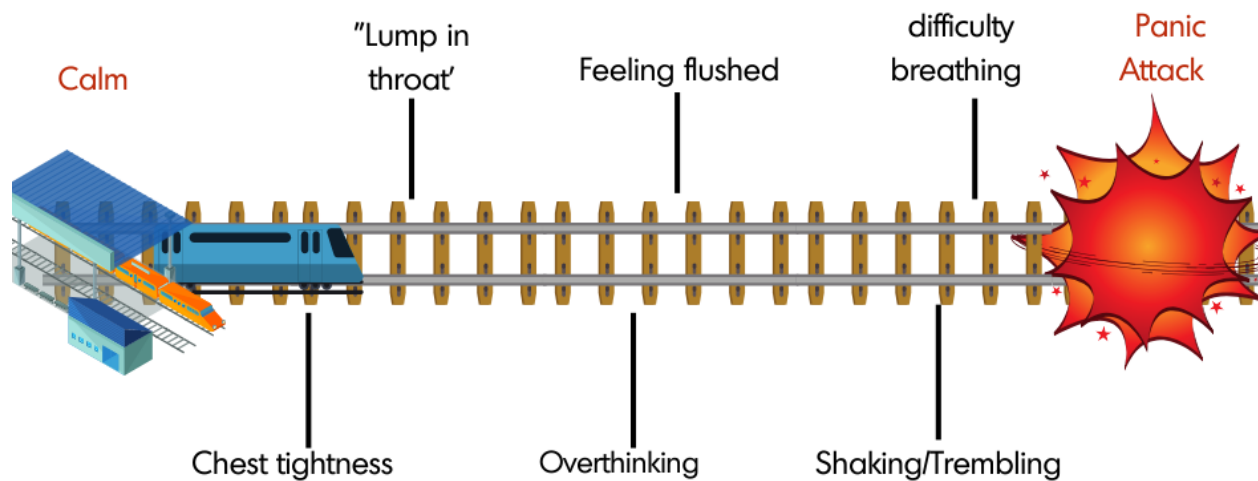
After you have listed down the symptoms that you personally experience the next step is to identify in what order these symptoms occur for you leading up to a panic attack. To assist, use the train track as an indicator of the intensity of these symptoms. For instance, my train track would look something like this.



As we can see from the visual, when I start to feel anxious some of the first few symptoms I experience include a tightness in my chest and also a feeling like there is a lump in my throat. If my anxiety becomes more intense, I usually find that I begin to overthink and my skin starts feeling flushed. If my anxiety does not de-escalate by this stage and continues to heighten I will typically experience shaking/trembling and have difficulty breathing right before I have a panic attack.

Monitor

Now that we have identified our symptoms, the next important step is to monitor these symptoms and 'check-in' with ourselves. In order to do so, let's use the train as a visual indicator of where I am currently at. As you can see from the visual, the train is located near the train station thus I am feeling reasonably calm and in control.

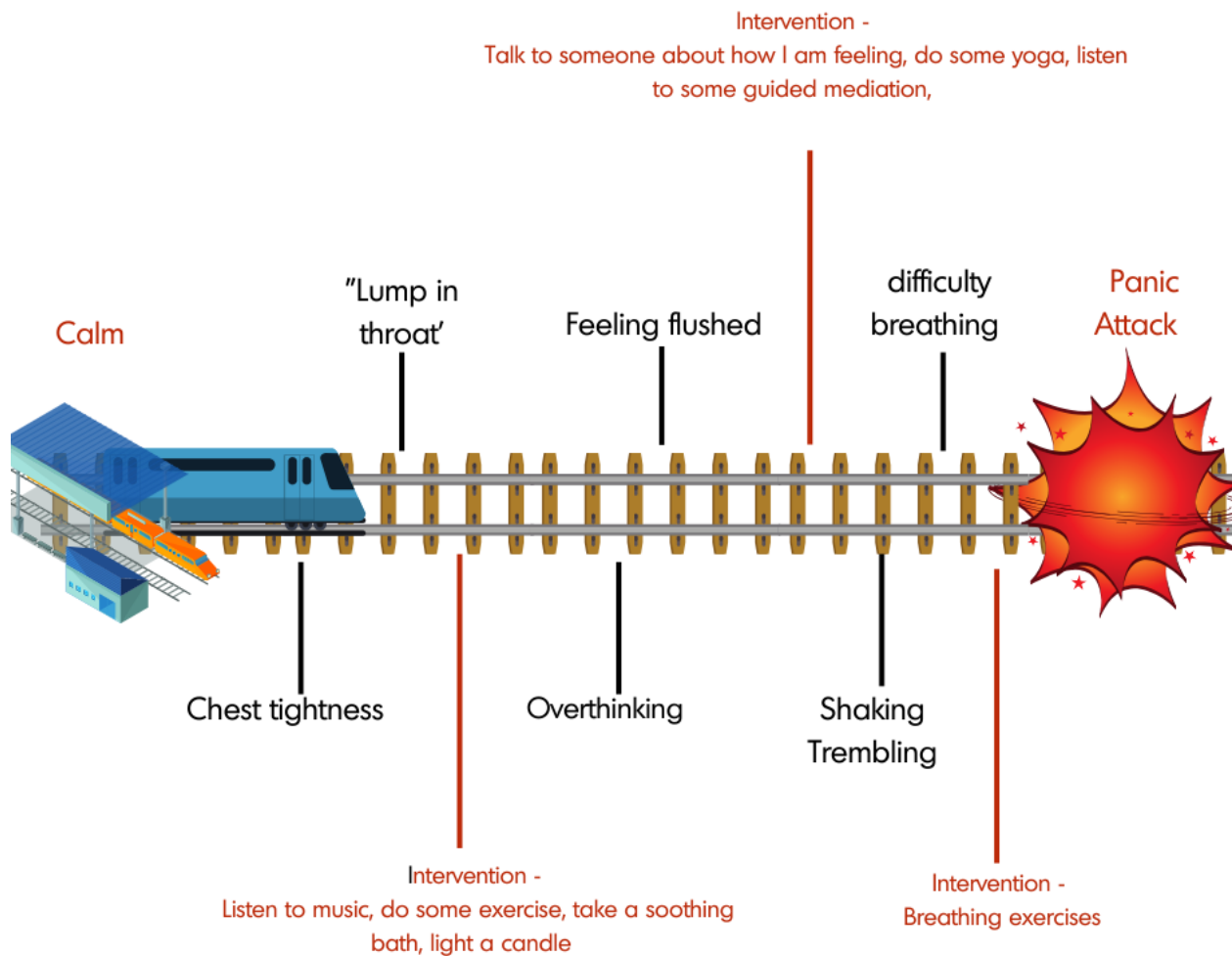


Intervene

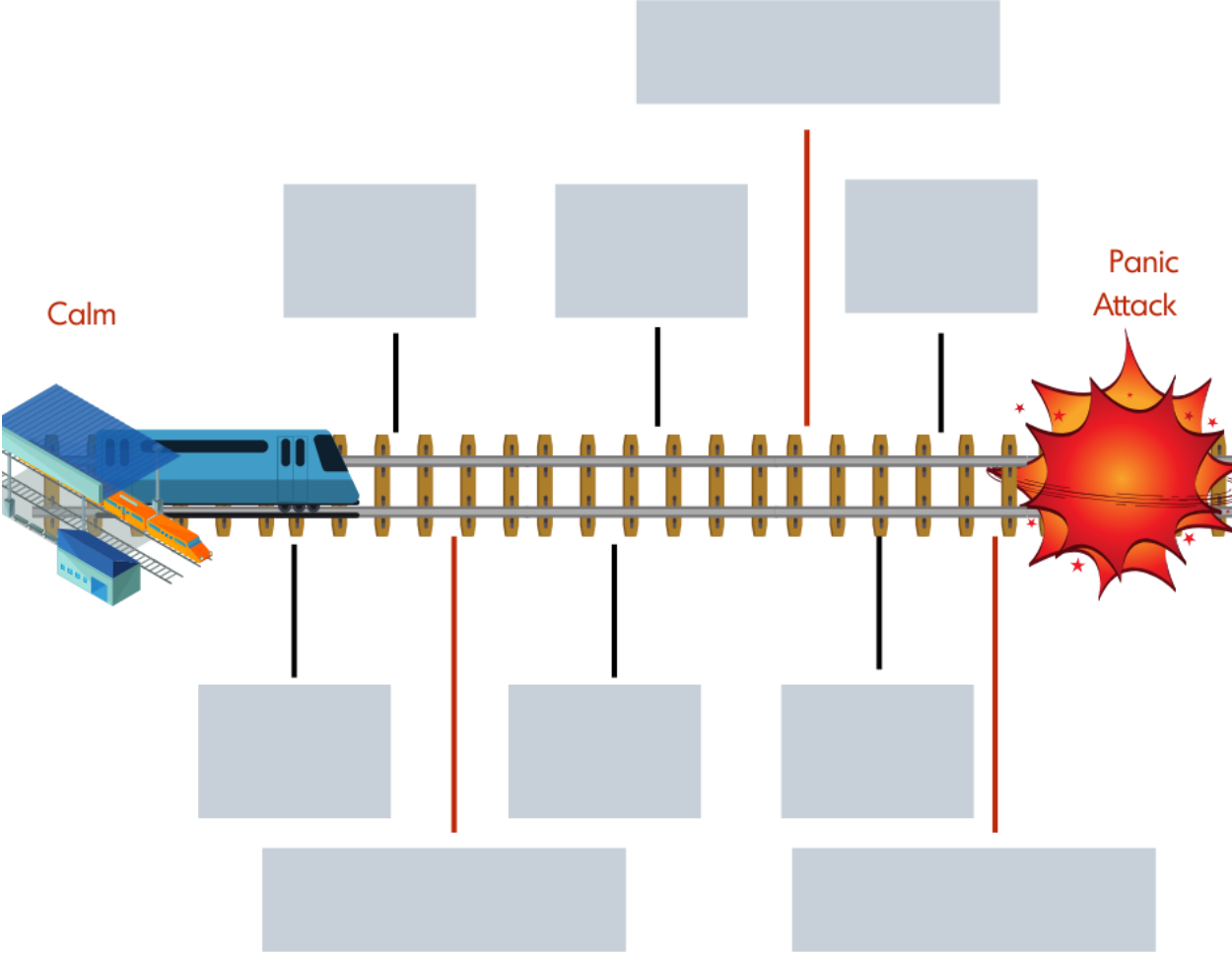
Although I am feeling calm at the moment, let's pretend that I have been informed of some news that I have perceived as very stressful. For instance, let's imagine that I have been informed that tomorrow I will have to give a public talk on a topic that I do not know much about and do not have much time to research. Therefore, although I was previously feeling quite calm, I am beginning to feel myself starting to get stressed and, based on my symptoms, leading

towards a panic attack. Now that I have identified this, this when it becomes very important to act quickly and intervene.

Our levels of intervention will be different depending on where we are currently are on the scale. For instance, if I find myself still in the lower-middle range of anxiety, then I might be able to use strategies such as listening to music or doing some exercise. However, if my anxiety is reaching breaking point I may find it more helpful to do something like breathing exercises because that has an immediate effect. For instance, my intervention plan might look something like this



Now that we have discussed the train track metaphor, I have attached a template that can be filled out to help you *identify* and *monitor* your anxiety, *and intervene* before it escalates.



It feels important to mention that sometimes we may take all the necessary precautions and steps to avoid a panic attack, and sometimes they may still happen! That's okay! We are trying and doing our best but sometimes it can be too much to handle. In those moments, it is important to reach out for support when needed. Whether this may be your therapist, a family member, or a friend. Panic attacks are scary and hard, and you don't have to go through it alone!

If you would like some more information or strategies regarding managing anxiety, or would like some additional support, please give LETSS a call at 1800 013 755 or start a webchat via www.letss.org.au.