

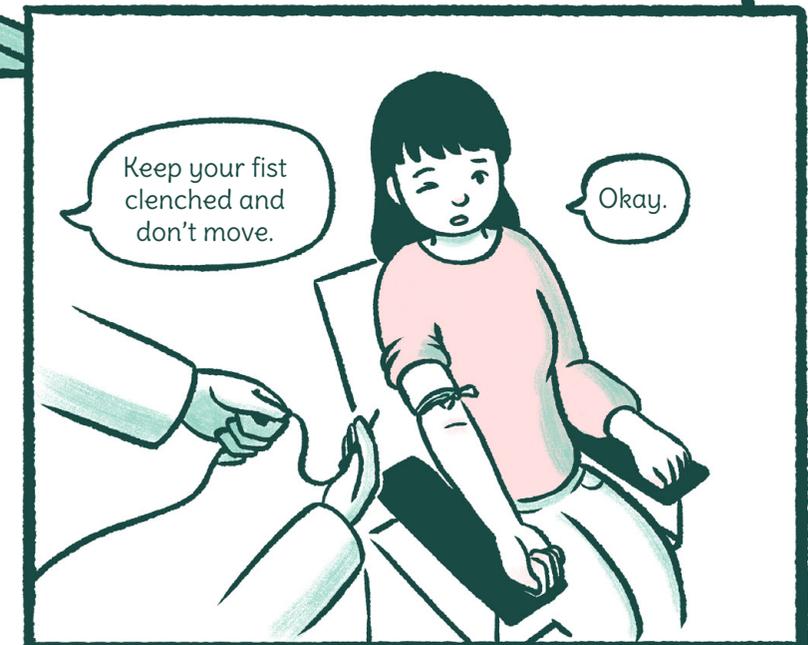
# FALSE ALARM

HAVING A PANIC ATTACK

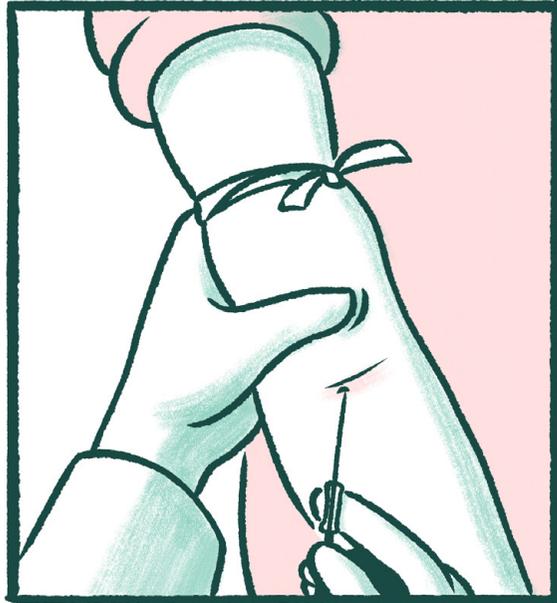


BY AILEEN LIN

I WAS GETTING MY BLOOD DRAWN FOR A BLOOD TEST, SINCE I'D BEEN SICK FOR A WHILE.



I WAS FEELING WORRIED SINCE I'D FELT UNWELL AFTER BLOOD TESTS BEFORE, AND ESPECIALLY BECAUSE I ALREADY WASN'T FEELING WELL THAT DAY.



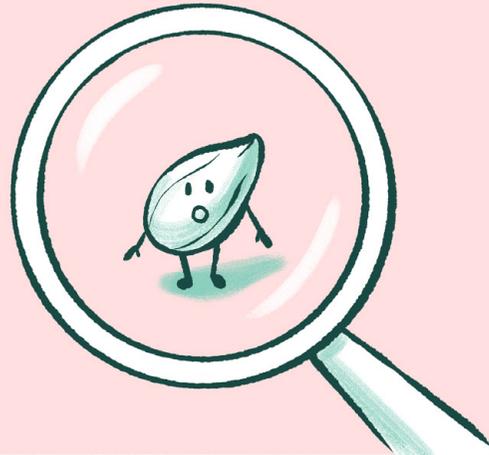
I WAS ALSO MISSING THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS.



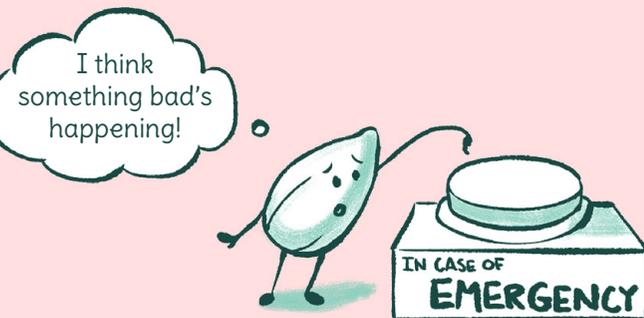
THERE'S A LITTLE THING IN OUR BRAINS CALLED THE **AMYGDALA**.



WHICH MEANS ALMOND.



ONE OF THE THINGS OUR LITTLE ALMONDS CAN DO IS ACTIVATE OUR BODY'S EMERGENCY ALARM SYSTEM, CALLED THE **FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE**.

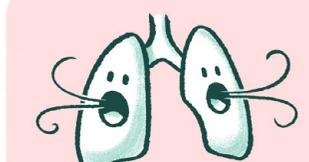


WHEN THE **FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE** IS ACTIVATED, IT AFFECTS OUR WHOLE BODY.

THE HEART STARTS TO BEAT **FASTER AND HARDER**.

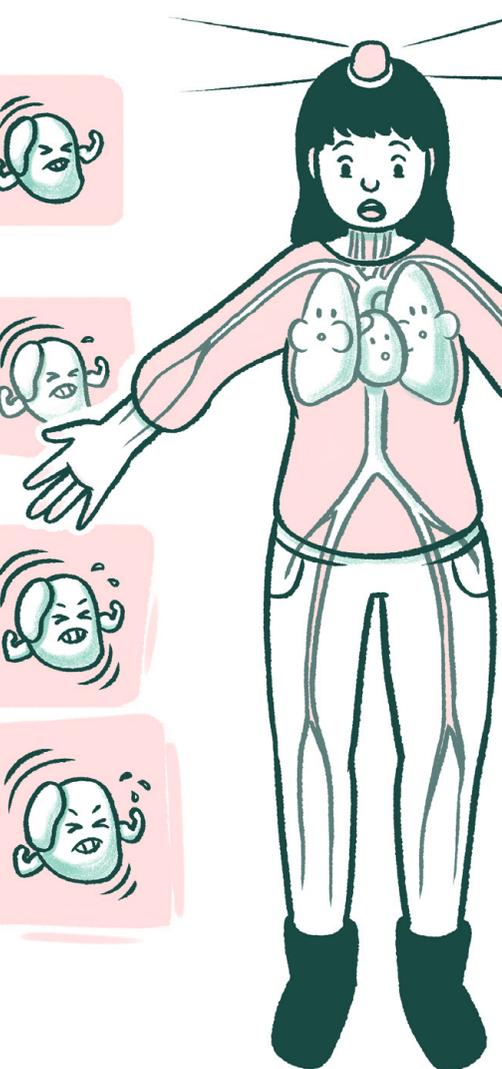


WE START TO BREATHE **FASTER AND SHALLOWER**.



THIS IS CALLED **HYPERVENTILATING**.

BLOOD CIRCULATION CHANGES TO PRIORITIZE SENDING BLOOD TO BODY PARTS THAT ARE MORE IMPORTANT FOR PHYSICAL ACTION.



MORE BLOOD IS SENT TO THE LARGE MUSCLES OF THE ARMS AND LEGS.



THIS CAN LEAD TO **MUSCLE TENSION** AND **SHAKING**.

LESS BLOOD IS SENT TO THE DIGESTIVE SYSTEM.



THIS CAN LEAD TO FEELINGS OF **NAUSEA**.

SWEAT GLANDS BECOME MORE ACTIVE.



LESS BLOOD IS SENT TO THE SKIN, ESPECIALLY YOUR HANDS AND FEET.



THIS CAN LEAD TO **NUMBNESS** AND **TINGLING**.

SINCE A LONG TIME AGO, OUR FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE HAS BEEN USEFUL FOR SURVIVAL.



IT PREPARES OUR BODIES FOR PHYSICAL ACTION WHEN THERE'S DANGER.



BUT SOMETIMES THE RESPONSE IS TRIGGERED EVEN WHEN THERE ISN'T A LIFE-THREATENING DANGER, FOR WHATEVER REASON.



Your hands were feeling numb, right?

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

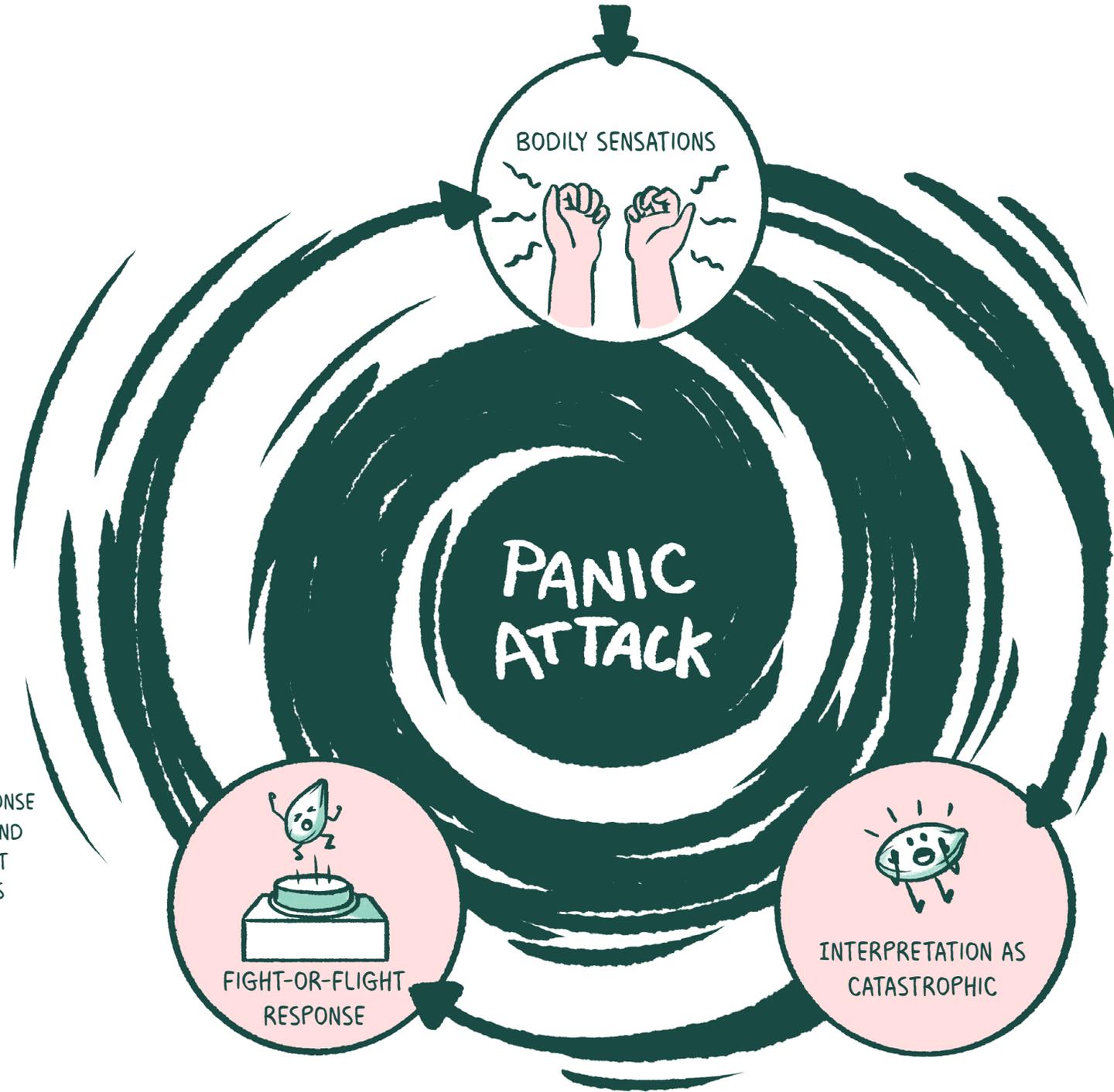


IN THIS CASE, THE RESPONSE IS OFTEN NOT FOLLOWED BY PHYSICAL ACTION.

AS A RESULT, THE RESPONSE SEEMS OUT OF PLACE, AND THE BODY SENSATIONS IT PRODUCES CAN MAKE US EVEN MORE SCARED.

ESSENTIALLY, THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS IN A PANIC ATTACK.

IN A PANIC ATTACK, BODILY SENSATIONS FROM THE FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE CAN FURTHER ACTIVATE THE FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE.



BODILY SENSATIONS

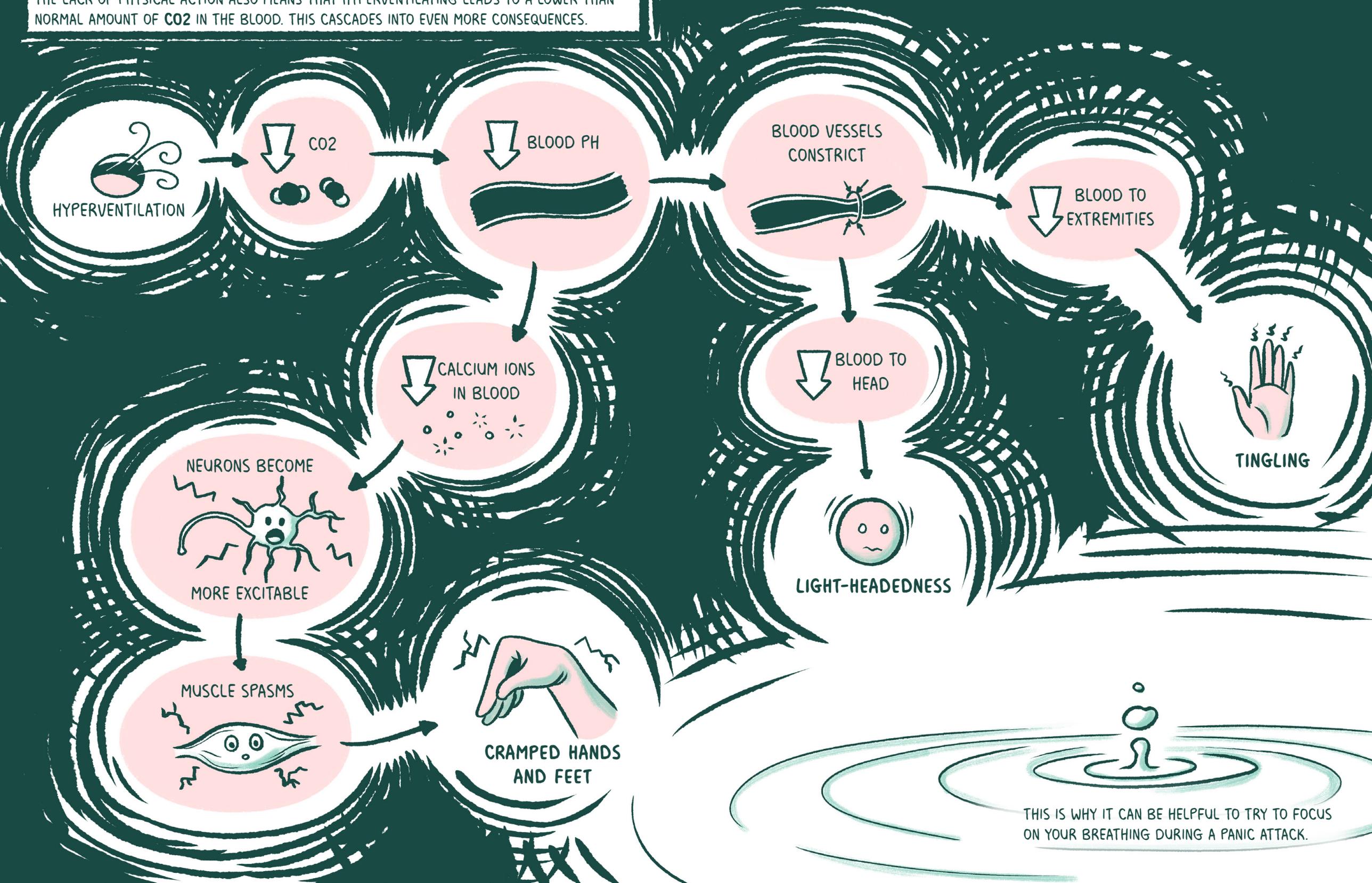
PANIC ATTACK

FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE

INTERPRETATION AS CATASTROPHIC

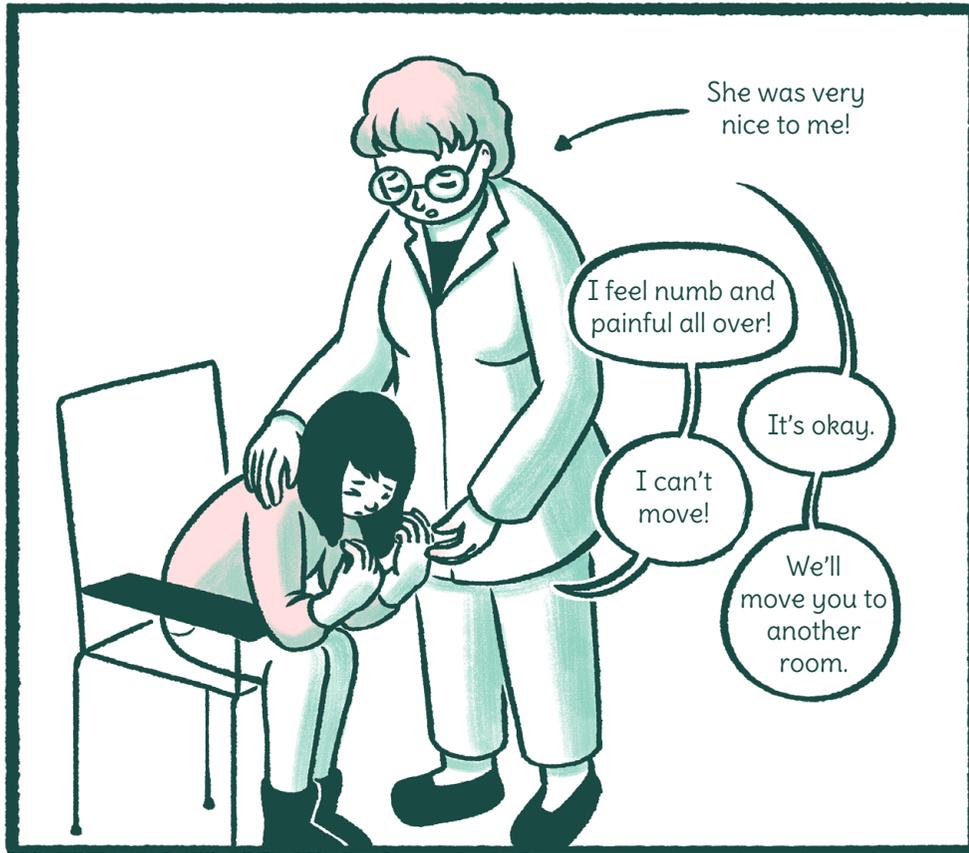
THIS LEADS TO A **VICIOUS CYCLE** WHERE THE WORSE YOU FEEL, THE MORE SCARED YOU GET, AND THE MORE THE FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE GETS ACTIVATED.

THE LACK OF PHYSICAL ACTION ALSO MEANS THAT HYPERVENTILATING LEADS TO A LOWER THAN NORMAL AMOUNT OF CO<sub>2</sub> IN THE BLOOD. THIS CASCADES INTO EVEN MORE CONSEQUENCES.



THIS IS WHY IT CAN BE HELPFUL TO TRY TO FOCUS ON YOUR BREATHING DURING A PANIC ATTACK.

FOR ME, BECAUSE I HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS HAPPENING, I INTERPRETED MY BODILY SENSATIONS AS DANGEROUS, AND MY PANIC ATTACK QUICKLY ESCALATED IN THE VICIOUS CYCLE.



MY ENTIRE BODY WAS TENSE AND IMMOVE ABLE, ESPECIALLY MY HANDS AND FEET.



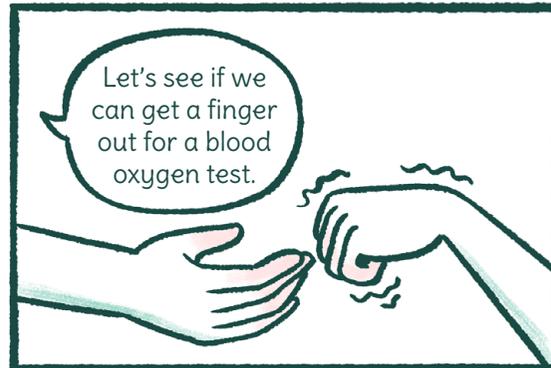
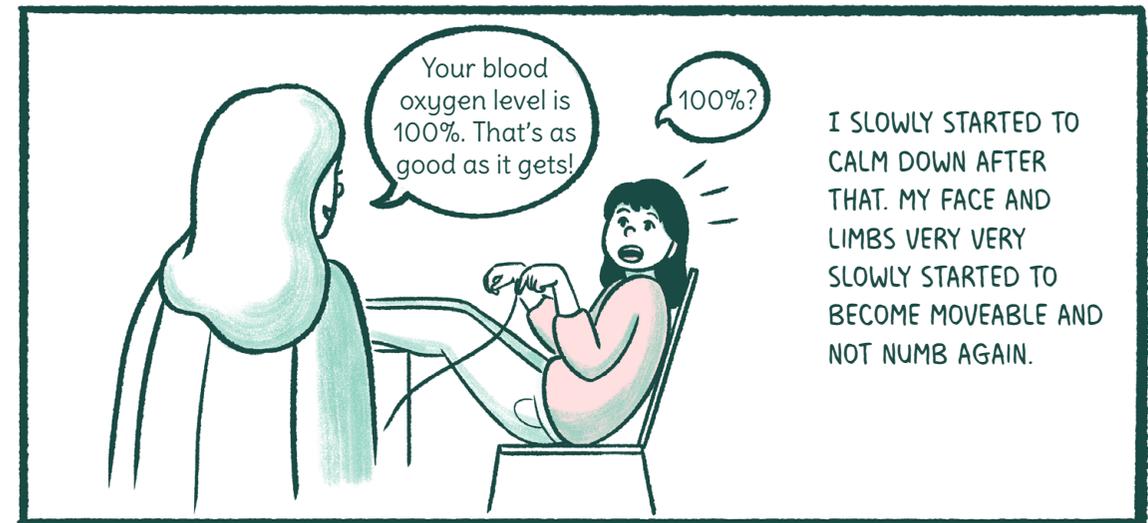
THE SCARIEST PART WAS WHEN I FELT MY THROAT CLOSING UP; MY FACE AND TONGUE STARTED GOING NUMB, AND IT BECAME HARD TO SPEAK.



I FELT LIKE MY BODY WAS PAINFULLY DISAPPEARING FROM THE WORLD, AND I WONDERED IF THE LAST MOMENTS OF MY LIFE WOULD BE IN A BLOOD TEST CLINIC.



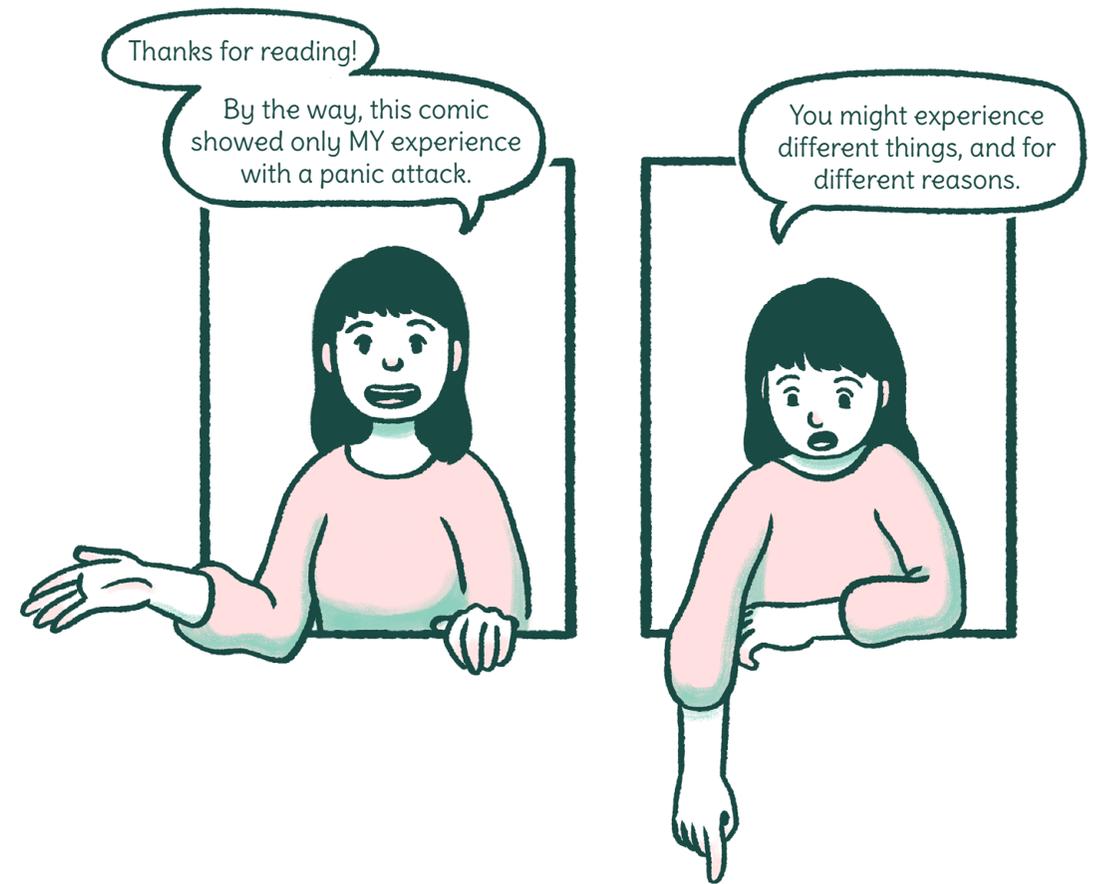
PANIC ATTACKS CAN BE REALLY SCARY, ESPECIALLY IF YOU'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED ONE BEFORE. MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCING THEM CALL 911 OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM BECAUSE THEY THINK THEY'RE HAVING A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, SUCH AS A HEART ATTACK OR A STROKE.



SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, I WENT TO MY FOLLOW-UP DOCTOR'S APPOINTMENT, AND SHE TOLD ME A BIT MORE ABOUT WHAT I HAD EXPERIENCED.



LEARNING MORE ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO ME HELPED ME FEEL BETTER. AND I THINK THE KNOWLEDGE WILL HELP ME BE JUST A LITTLE BIT LESS SCARED IF IT HAPPENS AGAIN.



PANIC ATTACKS CAN HAPPEN FOR MANY DIFFERENT REASONS.  
THEY CAN HAPPEN IN THE CONTEXT OF:

- ANY MENTAL ILLNESS,
- SOME PHYSICAL CONDITIONS,
- OR EVEN NOTHING AT ALL.

IT'S POSSIBLE FOR REPEATED ATTACKS TO  
SERIOUSLY INTERFERE WITH EVERYDAY LIFE  
AND DEVELOP INTO PANIC DISORDER.

IF YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS, A HEALTHCARE  
PROFESSIONAL CAN HELP.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Shelley and all my classmates from the 2018 Graphic Medicine class, for looking at so many of my drafts and giving me such good feedback and many good ideas!

Thanks to all the healthcare professionals who appeared in my story; everyone was so nice to me and made me feel as comfortable as I could given the circumstances.

Finally, thanks to my partner Tim, who arrived shortly after the paramedics in this story, and was there to support me after that: for staying with me the whole time while I was in the ER, and listening to me talk everything out. Thanks also for helping me edit my drafts!

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