

survive & thrive

Moving forward from interpersonal trauma

Weeks 5: Understanding Anxiety and Ways of Managing Anxiety

When you are in a dangerous situation your body's way of preparing you to cope is either by running away or fighting back or freezing (you may have heard of flight, fight or freeze). The need for flight or fight makes your muscles tense up, sends in loads of adrenaline and pumps the oxygen you need into your body. If you are in danger you need this to happen. But often people can feel like this when they are not actually in danger at this moment. This is part of the feeling of anxiety.

Feelings of anxiety can also be a sign that you are under too much stress. Are you constantly running to catch up, are you juggling the demands of work, home and caring without giving yourself time to relax and recover? If you feel stress is the cause of your anxious feelings, then remember that you may simply not be able to do all the things that you ask yourself to do.

Many people have other sources of stress: juggling money, jobs, health worries and concerns about family or friends are just a few.

However, many survivors of abuse or trauma, experience anxiety even when they are not at risk at the moment or not under particularly high levels of stress. This is when anxiety has become a problem. For many survivors of abuse, who have lived for a long time in fear, it's as if their internal anxiety system has got jammed on 'red alert'. You may feel you are constantly fearful of everyday things (the smell of alcohol on someone's breath, a loud noise, the key turning in the

lock, being in a situation that you don't know if you can escape) and these everyday things can make you feel uncontrollably anxious.

What can make Anxiety Worse?

There may be other things in your life making your anxiety worse without you realising it. These include:

- **Caffeine:** Caffeine is a stimulant which means it makes your nervous system work harder. When your body is already on 'red alert', a chemical to make that worse is definitely a bad idea. There is caffeine in
 - Coffee and tea
 - Coke, Irn-Bru & energy drinks such as Red Bull

Keep caffeine moderate, just one or two mugs or glasses a day (depending on whether you like your caffeine hot or cold). Try decaf alternatives instead such as herbal teas, fruit juices or water. Some heavy users will experience caffeine withdrawal if they go cold-turkey. Symptoms often include head-aches and achy muscles. These should be mild and only last a few days. If this is not the case, try cutting down more gradually or get some more advice from your GP.

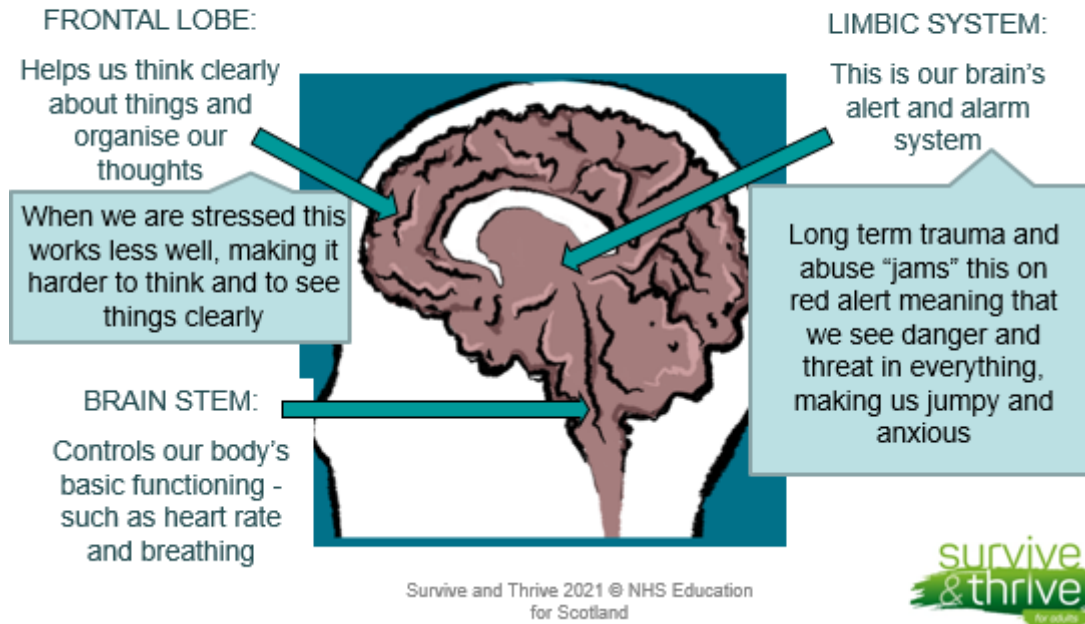
- **Nicotine:** Nicotine is also a stimulant. Unfortunately our tendency to have a coffee and a ciggy to relax is possibly not the best plan.
- **Poor Diet:** None of us are perfect but trying to improve our diets can really help. Ask for more advice about this if you feel it would be helpful.

Anxiety and your Brain

It is important to understand how anxiety works within your brain. Below is a simplified diagram of it as if looking at it from above.

The diagram explains how a person that has been subjected to abuse changes to try to cope with that experience. Some of the problems you are having with anxiety might be caused by these attempts to cope.

Brain and Trauma



What this means is that our brain becomes super-prepared to cope with threat. When you see something coming, for example a dog barking and running towards you, your brain switches the limbic (alarm system) into over-drive. This sends lots of messages to your brain stem to speed up your breathing and your heart rate, but less to your frontal lobe to help you to think clearly about whether the oncoming animal is

- a. a wolf
- b. the next door neighbour's kindly old golden retriever

The result is that you are often jumpy and on edge and find this super-preparedness hard to switch off. This is a really good idea if you are living day to day with threats to your safety, such as while you are surviving abuse. But it makes it much harder to live peacefully once that threat has passed.

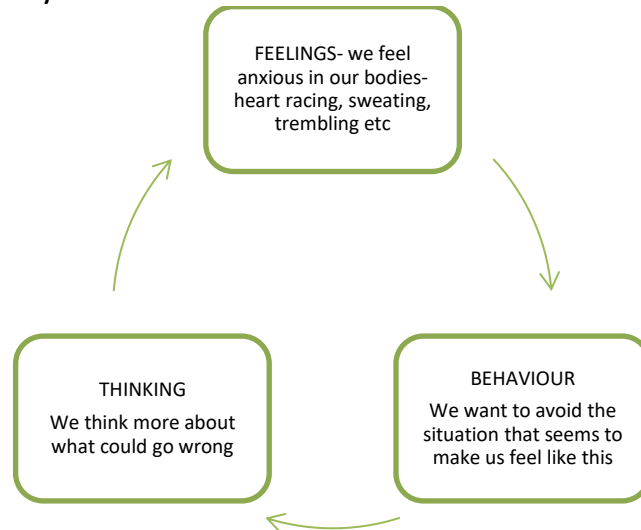
Learning to control anxiety is a really good way of 'reprogramming' your brain to stop or reduce this happening.

What Anxiety Feels Like

Anxiety affects us in three different ways

- Our bodies
- Our behaviour
- Our thinking

We will look at each of these in turn. These all have an effect on each other, leading to a vicious cycle.



Anxiety and our Bodies

Anxiety has a wide range of effects on our bodies. These effects are caused by the body preparing to ‘fight or flee’ in order to respond to danger but this produces unpleasant side effects if this is not actually necessary at this moment. The most important thing to remember is that these feelings are natural and not harmful (even if it often feels that way). You might feel:

- Your heart pounding (sending all that oxygen round your body)
- Your head aches and feels dizzy (caused by too much adrenaline, which is the chemical produced by your body when it is under threat)
- Blurred vision (caused by your pupils opening wider to take in as much information as possible)
- Headaches, backaches, neck aches (caused by the muscles tensing up)
- Chest pains, tingling in your fingers, feeling of not being able to get a breath, palpitations (caused by over-breathing)
- Nausea or ‘butterflies’ (caused by the blood moving from your stomach to your limbs to help with the fighting or running)
- Sweating, blushing (caused by your body trying to keep itself cool as your blood races to your limbs to help you run away or fight)

Anxiety and our Behaviour

Anxiety affects our behaviour because we start to AVOID things. This makes sense -in prehistoric times if we went into a cave and were attacked by a sabre toothed tiger, it would be wise to avoid that cave in the future and perhaps be wary of caves in general. If today, knowing that meeting your abuser puts you at risk of being assaulted or verbally abused; avoiding him is a good idea.

However, we can start to associate all sorts of things that are not in themselves dangerous with feelings of anxiety and danger and can end up restricting our lives in a way that keeps us living in fear. Common examples of this are:

- Supermarkets or queues. Lots of people experience anxiety and panic in these situations and begin to avoid them for fear of the anxious or panicky feelings returning. (This is possibly due to the fear of not being able to escape easily)
- Your own particular ‘trauma’ triggers. These might be thoughts or memories, or they might be things that you have begun to associate with your own abuse experience. You might find yourself organising your entire life to avoid these reminders. Dealing with the thoughts and memories will be looked at in more detail in the session on ‘managing flashbacks’. But common triggers are
 - Seeing or hearing something on TV, reading something in a magazine.
 - A particular smell.
 - A particular sound.
- Specific phobias. Common examples of these are a fear of going outside (agoraphobia) or of confined spaces (claustrophobia). These will lead to you avoiding these situations.

The problem with avoidance is that it restricts your life and reduces the chance of you learning to deal with these feelings. As with all difficult feelings the trick is to learn how to cope safely with them rather than to avoid them. Through continually avoiding these feelings you gradually develop a ‘fear of fear’ where you feel you can’t stand being in a situation in case you become frightened or anxious. Avoidance also feeds a cycle of anxiety that is linked to the next bit on thoughts.

Anxiety and our Thoughts

It may take some time to understand your experience of abuse and the way it affects how you think about yourself, other people and the world. The

psychological approach known as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) works specifically with this. If you feel you need additional help and support with these issues you could ask for a referral to a service which uses this approach.

Anxiety (in situations where you are not actually in current danger) is thought to be caused by two types of thoughts.

1. Your thoughts about the amount of danger you are in. But this may not be accurate now but informed by your past experience. For example, if you had been bitten by a dog in the past you might start to think 'Ooh a poodle, I'm going to be bitten again'. You are basing your thoughts on the past rather than the present.
2. Your thoughts about your ability to cope with the situation. You may underestimate your ability to manage when you are stressed.

Remember, what is happening in your brain is that your limbic system is getting 'jammed on red alert' making you feel jumpy and 'switching off' your frontal lobes. This means it gets harder to think clearly and you are more likely to be convinced of the possible danger even when you are not at risk.

Example

Sandy was in the pub with her friend, having a chat when a man from the next table asked directions to a nearby hotel. Sandy could smell the alcohol on his breath, and although he was friendly and left immediately she found herself shaking uncontrollably and feeling terrified. Once she got home and spoke to her friend Sandy realised that the smell had reminded her of her abuser and she became convinced she was again in real danger. Now she understood that she was safe she was able to calm down more quickly.

WE CAN THINK OURSELVES ANXIOUS!

Common thoughts while we are anxious include:

- **"I'm going to lose control"**
 - This is often based on how we feel when very panicky or anxious, but there is no evidence that people when anxious actually lose control. Given how common anxiety is we would be frequently seeing people 'lose it' if this was the case.

- **“I’m going to have a heart attack”**
 - This is based on the feelings that anxiety gives us in our hearts; thankfully anxiety is **not** harmful to our heart. The symptoms of palpitations and breathlessness will pass.

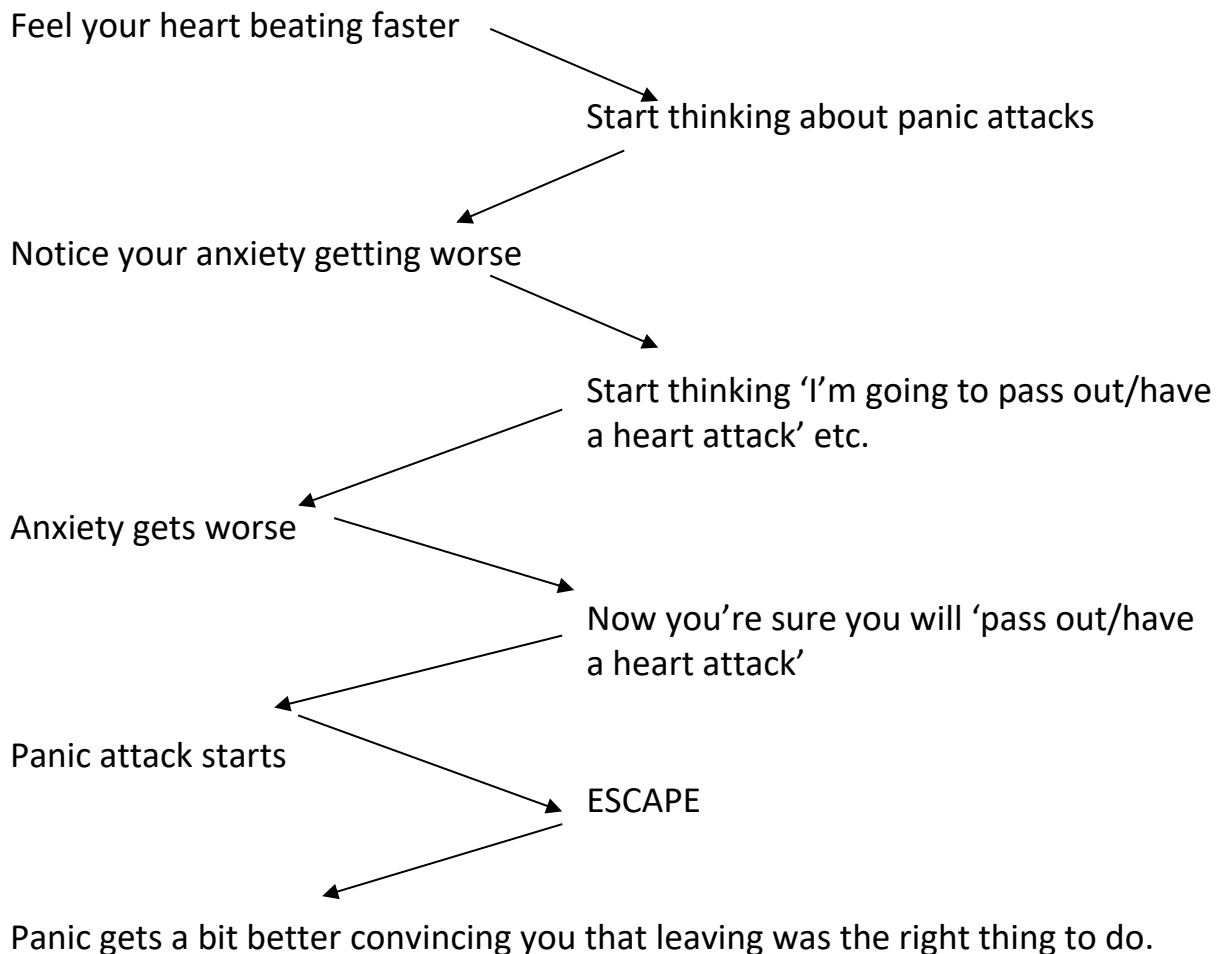
- **“I’m going to die”**
 - Again, this is based on the horrible feelings that anxiety gives us. Although really unpleasant, they are not doing you any harm. No-one has ever been killed by a panic attack.

- **“I’m going to faint”**
 - This is often caused by the dizziness that comes with anxiety. But anxiety is not a cause of fainting because it temporarily raises your blood pressure, while fainting is caused by a fall in blood pressure.

Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are common. They feel like sudden bouts of uncontrollable terror and are often associated with the thoughts described above, such as ‘I’m going to die’, ‘I’m going to faint’, ‘I’m going to have a heart attack’, ‘I’m going to lose it and make a fool of myself’.

Panic attacks happen in a spiral or vicious cycle which goes out of control. They are often triggered by being in a situation you are unhappy or fearful of (for example, being in a supermarket queue or on a train when you can’t get off or knowing you will have to talk to your boss about a problem at work). Panic can also start when you notice ‘anxiety’ symptoms in your body such as breathlessness or palpitation. It often looks like this



Managing Anxiety

For abuse survivors, anxiety may have been around for a while. To learn to manage it you will need to be patient and practice a lot. Remember the 3 P's. Your body is keeping you on red alert in an attempt to be helpful and to keep you safe but we need to slowly give it the message that the danger has passed and that it's OK to relax a bit (PLEASE NOTE THAT if your danger has not passed however, it would be safer to miss this section out).

For survivors who have experienced anxiety for a long time feelings of letting go or relaxing can be quite scary as they feel so different from what you are used to. Remember whatever is familiar is quite reassuring. This is when patience with yourself is really important. Managing to sit still for a moment and watch TV may be quite an achievement for some survivors. It has taken a long time for your body to get used to feeling on 'red alert', remember you have the rest of your lives to practice letting it go, so **small steps**. Set yourself achievable goals and don't compare yourself to anyone else. You are unique.

There are three parts to managing anxiety:

- **Managing your body**
- **Managing your behaviour**
- **Managing your thoughts**

Managing your Body

Managing your body is about retraining it to relax your muscles and to slow down your breathing.

Over-Breathing

Over-breathing or hyperventilation is an important part of panic attacks and anxiety. It is your body preparing to run or fight by flooding itself with oxygen, but if you do neither you can be left with 'side-effects'. Over-breathing even a little over time creates horrible feelings such as light-headedness, tingling in the fingers and causes your body to become increasingly tense. You may not always be aware that you are breathing a little more quickly than is needed, as it has become a habit. Slowing your breathing gives the body and the mind the message that you are relaxed and helps to overcome the habit of being 'on red alert'.

Exercise

You can test this out by deliberately over-breathing for a few moments (don't do this if you have any breathing or heart problems or are pregnant). You will see how quickly these unpleasant side effects occur.

Breathing Exercises

You should practice this as much as you can as it takes a while to master. A yoga class is an ideal way to learn it really well. As always, be patient with yourself. The good thing about breathing exercises is that you can do them almost anywhere, so try a few on the bus, in the car, at your desk at work, while making the tea or watching TV -no one will know!.

If you start to feel a little light-headed while you are doing the exercises then reduce the amount of air taken in with each breath. When we concentrate on breathing sometimes we breathe more heavily although we are managing to slow it down. At first try to do it when feeling reasonably calm so you are not fighting your body too much. But when you feel you have got the hang of it try it at times you are feeling more stressed and see what effect it has.

Become increasingly aware of your levels of tension. This can be hard at first as you possibly are so used to feeling on 'red alert'. If you can start your breathing and relaxation early in 'the panic/anxiety' cycle then you have a better chance of feeling the positive effects.

To help your body feel calm the target is to breathe 10-12 breathes per minute. Measure how often you are breathing in a minute now to work out how much you have to slow it down

If you suffer from any significant breathing or heart difficulties, or are pregnant you will need to check with your GP before starting this.

Doing the Exercise

Start by sitting comfortably and check your shoulders, neck and stomach for excess tension. If you feel lots of tension try to let it 'go' or shake your shoulders around for a moment until they feel more relaxed.

When you start practicing it is a good idea to place one hand on your chest and another on your stomach. Breathe normally for a moment. What hand do you feel moving more? If your chest is moving more you are probably doing a lot of rapid, shallow breaths and this is causing some of the problems. If your stomach is moving more you are heading in the right direction.

Start by taking a 'normal volume' of air in through your nose but consciously moving your stomach out a little while you breathe in (just a small movement). This creates space at the bottom of your lungs and encourages the breath to travel more deeply into your lungs. Then slowly breathe out through your mouth. Co-ordinating this takes a bit of practice. You could also try it lying down comfortably.

When you get the hang of moving the stomach, start trying to slow things down. Try counting

Breathe inone elephant...breathe out....one elephant....breathe in.... one elephant....breathe out...one elephant.....

(Note: elephants are not essential in this! Use any word that feels calming and comforting to you e.g. 'let go', 'unwind', 'calm')

Additional Exercise

If you have got the hang of breathing slowly, rhythmically and feel completely in control you could try adding a visualisation exercise. This is where you picture your 'outbreath' as containing your tension and you are breathing it out. As you say 'calm' (or 'let go' or 'peaceful' or 'turnips' or whatever word feels right), picture your body becoming increasingly peaceful. Visualising or imagining things is a surprisingly powerful way of making our body do what you want.

Breathe in.....let go.....breathe in.....let go.....

Overcoming Physical Tension

If your brain is on 'red alert' then your body feels continually tense. Learning to breathe and to let go of that tension can help to re-train your mind to stop constantly expecting danger.

NOTE: A word of warning is that some survivors are told to 'relax' while their abusive experiences were happening. Therefore the word will rarely feel positive or help in regaining control. If this is the case we can call it anti-tension training, physical coping skills, self-calming or any other name that feels comfortable.

There are lots of different, safe ways of overcoming physical tension and we can only mention a few. As well as those described here you could try classes for example of yoga or tai chi. If you find this difficult but would like to give it a go, try to find someone to go with you. As always, be prepared, be patient and practice (lots).

Exercise

One way that survivors sometimes like to start this process is to sit (or lie) somewhere comfortable. Try to choose a time where you are less likely to be disturbed. Turn the phone off. If you like you can light a candle or aromatherapy burner and turn on your favourite calm and peaceful music. There are lots of CDs in the shops with this kind of stuff on them. Make sure you are warm and your clothes feel comfortable.

Start by paying attention to your feet, do they feel tense or wound up? Try to let that tension go and be aware of your feet feeling heavier, warmer and more comfortable. Then think about your legs, again do they feel tense and wound

up? Try to let that go and feel aware of your legs feeling heavier, warmer or more comfortable. You might feel like they are sinking further into the chair or the bed. Keep going as you pay attention to:

- your stomach
- your arms
- your hands
- your shoulders
- your face

As you feel the tension reducing, start thinking about your breathing exercises. Breathing slowly and peacefully, imagining your tension being breathed out.

Additional Exercise: Visualisation

You can do this while you are doing the above exercise. Think about a place, in your fantasies, from your past or from your imagination, which feels safe and calm.

- A beach with beautiful white sand, gently rippling water, a warm sun and a gentle warm breeze?
- A comfortable armchair in the winter by a roaring log fire?
- A beautiful meadow with a stream and the scent of wild flowers?
- A wonderful garden full of flowers and birds?

Add as many details as you can. What can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you feel? It is your safe place, it can be whatever you want it to be. Go there and switch off.

You can also do this visualisation on its' own for a few minutes 'time out' when you need it.

Additional Exercise: Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a really useful technique in recovering from abuse and trauma. Basically, it is about being completely focussed on now and being in touch with what is happening now. Often when bad things have happened it can feel that the past is always present, you are used to experiencing fear and anxiety because of what happened then.

Try to focus all your attention on now. Don't judge, don't criticise, just notice. Focus on one thing at a time. Be mindful of your breathing. Try to eat mindfully, make a cup of tea mindfully. If you attention wanders (which it almost definitely

will) don't give yourself a hard time, just bring it back to now. Remember you need to be safe, before this will be successful.

Managing your Thinking

When you feel wound up even when you don't realise it, your mind is sending you 'anxious messages'. These messages are often called 'automatic thoughts' as they pop into your head without you fully realising that you are having them.

Getting to grips with these thoughts will probably take some time but you can start by checking out with yourself 'what am I thinking about' when you feel anxious.

However some of these unhelpful thoughts are more common, like the ones mentioned earlier on the section on panic attacks. If you find yourself thinking these thoughts you can start 'challenging' them. This is when you give yourself the more helpful messages by reminding yourself of the facts we have discussed in the panic section.

For example, instead of thinking *'I'm feeling panicky, I think I'm having a heart attack'* try saying to yourself
'Although this is a horrible feeling I am not having a heart attack. It is anxiety and it will pass, I think I will try my breathing exercises'

You can also try giving yourself helpful thoughts like the ones below when you feel a bit jittery or are going into situations you would rather avoid. Try writing these (or any other helpful messages) on a piece of paper and sticking them up in places you will see them in the house and/or carrying them in your pocket or purse with you. Some people who know their technology have put their favourite message on their mobile or as a screensaver on their PC.

Examples of helpful 'self-talk':

- *If I do get bad feelings, they won't last long and I can cope*
- *I know I am going to be OK*
- *One step at a time*
- *To have I survived what I have survived shows I am strong and can cope with this*

- *I've had these feelings hundreds of times before and they have never done me any harm*
- *I am strong*
- *I am a survivor*
- *Be patient*

It is very important to remember that it is sometimes difficult to clearly recognise or identify these thoughts and if you are struggling then you might want to think about skilled help from a trained professional such as a CBT therapist.

Distraction Exercise

Another useful trick to overcome these unhelpful thoughts is to fill your head with other stuff. When we go into situations we don't like we usually become completely focussed on the anxiety or possible anxiety. Learning to think about other things or becoming focussed on other tasks can help put this out of our heads.

- Try counting backwards from 1000
- Try thinking of places you've been/places you would like to go/movies/songs/flowers/food (or whatever you know a bit about) beginning with every letter of the alphabet *ie A is for anemone, B is for buttercup, C is for crocus*
- Try going to your 'safe place'
- Try thinking about everything you own that is blue/red/more than five years old
- Try imagining what you would spend a £1000/£10,000 lottery win on
- Go over lyrics of songs you like
- Plan your weeks shopping/tasks/gardening to do list
- Use your imagination to come up with other ones you like

Managing your Behaviour: Overcoming Avoidance

Are there places you no longer go because you fear becoming anxious? Overcoming avoidance may need lots of support, but you can start by making a list of the places you no longer go but which you would like to start going back to. Put them in order of difficulty below (1 being the most difficult and the last one being the easiest)

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.

(You might need more, use another sheet of paper or your diary if you are using one)

Once you have practiced all the other techniques and are feeling confident you could try to tackle the easiest one. But don't push yourself. If you do manage it- **reward yourself if you manage it!** Otherwise plan with your supporter what you will need to manage this.

Complete the exercises in the key points handout.