

Calm before the *Storm*

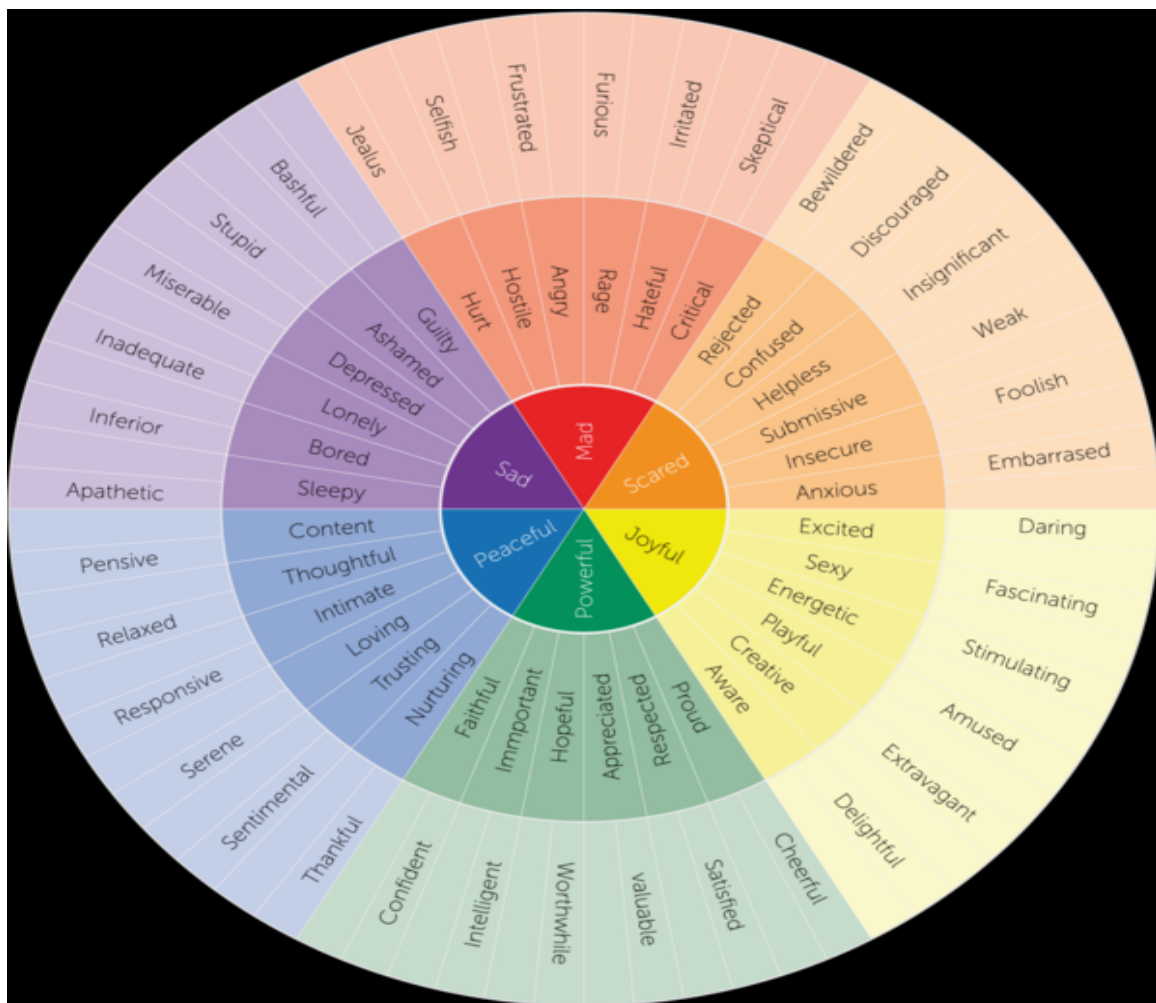
Getting to know our emotions and the difference between stress and distress



What are emotions?

The ability to experience and express different emotions is a natural part of being human. Emotions can be positive and make us feel good about ourselves. When we feel happy, we smile, we think happy thoughts and we behave in positive ways.

Sometimes, however, we can have emotions that are more negative; they feel intense or painful. Because of this, people may try to consciously forget or push their thoughts away. Unfortunately, the more we try to suppress the more distressing emotions, the harder it is to manage them.



Did you know...?

There are over 300 words in the English language to describe emotions.

What words do you tend to use to describe how you are feeling?




Common emotional triggers

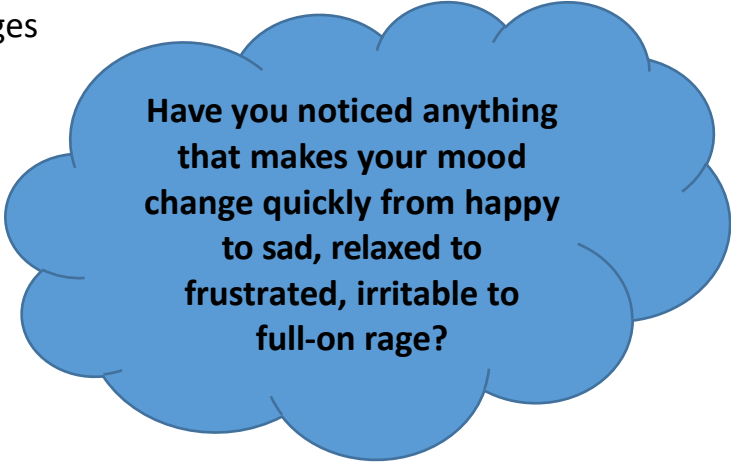
Emotional triggers are anything that sparks an intense emotional reaction. Triggers can include memories, images, places or people. Significant life changes, such as moving house, starting a new job or having a baby are common triggers. They can bring you happiness and joy but at the same time can also make you have some feelings of anxiety and stress.

Common experiences that can trigger our emotions can include the following:

- Relationships
- Moving house
- Work
- Money
- Significant life changes



Are you aware of what your triggers are?



Have you noticed anything that makes your mood change quickly from happy to sad, relaxed to frustrated, irritable to full-on rage?

Knowing what your triggers are will help you to plan ahead and problem-solve situations. More on this point later but first, let us focus on an important question: what is the point of emotions?

Would you rather experience...

No emotions?

Only the 'positive' emotions?

All emotions?

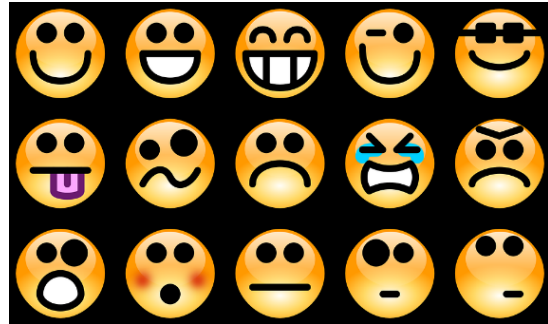


What is the point of emotions?

Do you ever wish you didn't feel emotions? Would it be easier to not have any emotions at all? Or to only feel the positive ones? It turns out we have emotions for a reason!

They are a source of information

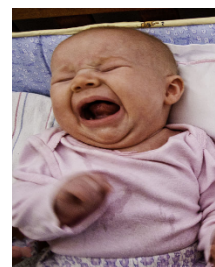
Emotions give us important information on our values, needs and desires. It is important to be able to notice our emotions and understand what they are trying to tell us.



For example, when we feel sad it might be because something undesirable has happened, when we are scared it might tell us we are worried something bad might happen. When we feel angry it might be because we believe we have been intentionally wronged and that this is not OK.

They help communication

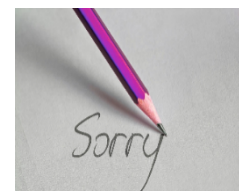
Emotions are hugely important in helping us communicate with each other. We communicate our emotions in what we say but also in our tone of voice, our behaviour and our body language. If we think of babies, they can



communicate a huge amount to us through their emotional reactions. In feeling and expressing discomfort, babies are able to communicate their needs to us and hopefully have these needs met. The same also applies to the rest of us.

They can regulate our behaviour

Our emotions can influence how we approach or respond to situations. For example, feeling anxiety crossing a busy road does serve a function: it reminds us to look carefully. Or in another situation such as missing a friend's birthday, guilt could encourage us to apologise and make it up to them. Noticing our own feelings of stress or pressure may help us make changes to look after ourselves.



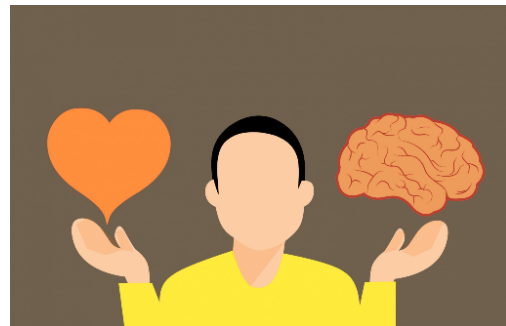
They prepare us for action

Emotions can also gear us up physically for action. They trigger changes in our bodies, such as increasing our heart rate, blood flow and muscle tension, making us more alert, quicker to react and giving us more stamina. Such changes can be hugely helpful in situations such as getting ourselves out of the way of danger, such as a speeding car coming down the road! Small amounts of stress can also be helpful in boosting our performance in situations such as sitting an exam. We will learn more about these changes in the Calm Body session.



They help with decision making

Emotions are also really important in decision making. Firstly, anticipating what emotions may result from a decision will impact on what we choose to do. For example, anticipating the positive emotions around looking after ourselves may influence the decision to make a healthy food choice.



Secondly, the emotion we are currently experiencing when making a decision will also impact on what we choose to do. An example being, if we experience an intense fear of flying we are more likely to choose to drive to a destination even though flying would statistically be safer. In this situation, the immediate experience of the intense emotion overrides a decision based on statistics or probabilities. Sometimes this can be useful but sometimes this can be problematic.

They can protect us from danger

Naturalist Charles Darwin believed that emotions are adaptations that allow both humans and animals to survive and reproduce. For example, when we experience fear, we are more likely to flee the threat. When we are angry, we are likely to confront the source of our irritation in protecting ourselves. When we feel love, we might seek out a mate. So, emotions serve an adaptive role in our lives by motivating us to act quickly and take actions that will maximize our chances of our survival and success.



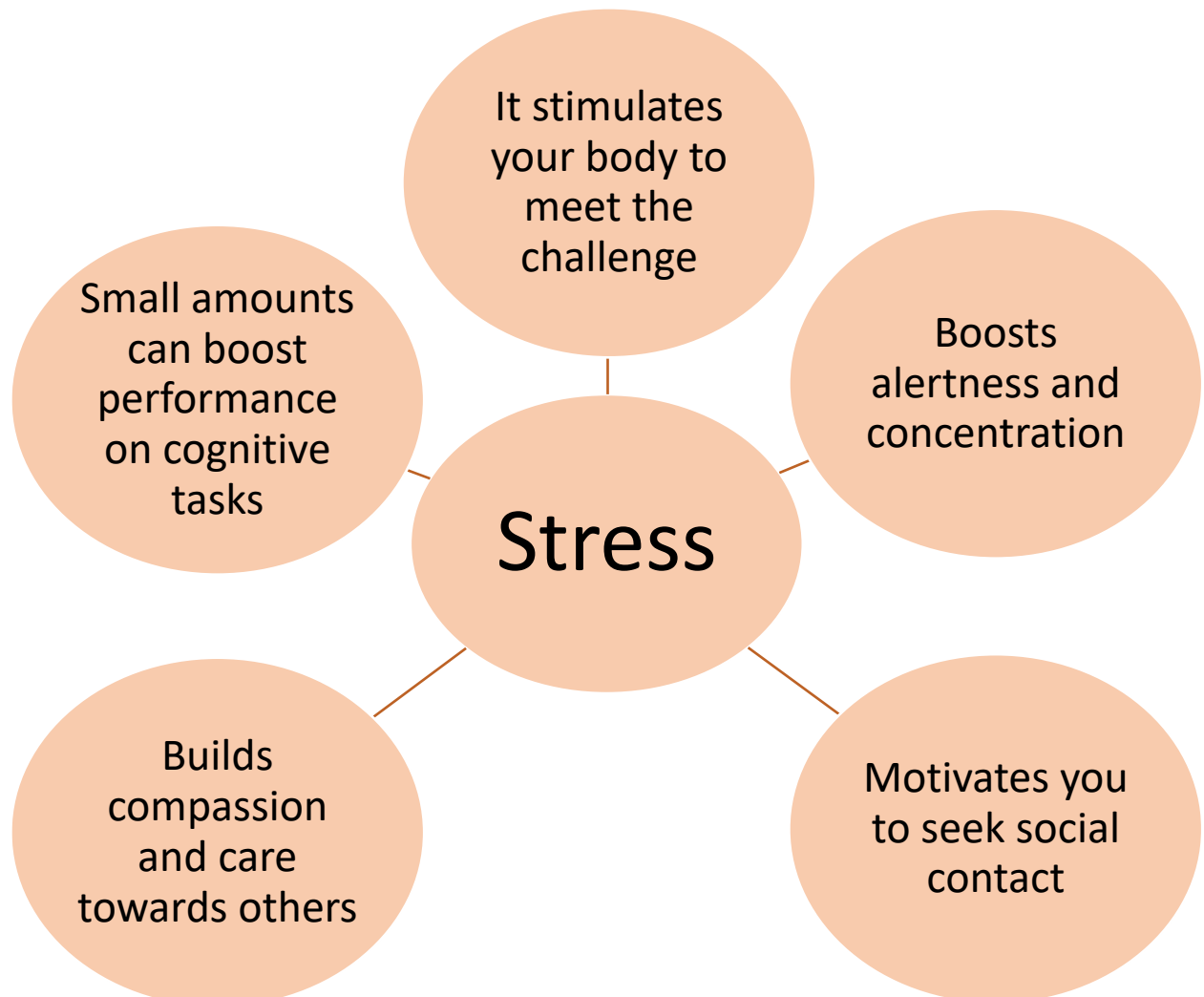
So to ask the question again, would you rather have no emotions, only the positive ones ... or all of our human emotions?



Let stress be your friend!

All emotions have a purpose. There is a reason we have them and even the more negative or stressful emotions can be helpful too. Stress is not here to be our enemy. Most of us see stress as bad and something we want to avoid but actually, like all our emotions, it gives us some very important information.

What if instead of seeing stress as bad and dangerous we could change our thinking to see it as positive and helpful? From the below diagram, you will see that stress can benefit us in a number of ways.



Stress vs Distress

The more stress we experience, the more likely our sense of wellbeing will suffer and we will feel less able to cope. We may also feel more hopeless as things seem more uncertain and uncontrollable. Understanding our emotional stress and recognising when we are becoming distressed is key to our long term emotional wellbeing. The table below shows some of the differences between what typical emotional stress is compared to more intense psychological distress.

STRESS	DISTRESS
It is usually short lived	Occurs in the short and long term
It can be motivating and feel exciting	Triggers anxiety and other unpleasant feelings
It is perceived as something we can cope with	We feel unable to cope
It can improve our ability to concentrate and perform	Negatively impacts on focus and performance
	Contributes to mental and physical health problems

So when does stress become distress?

How do I cope better when experiencing stressful events?

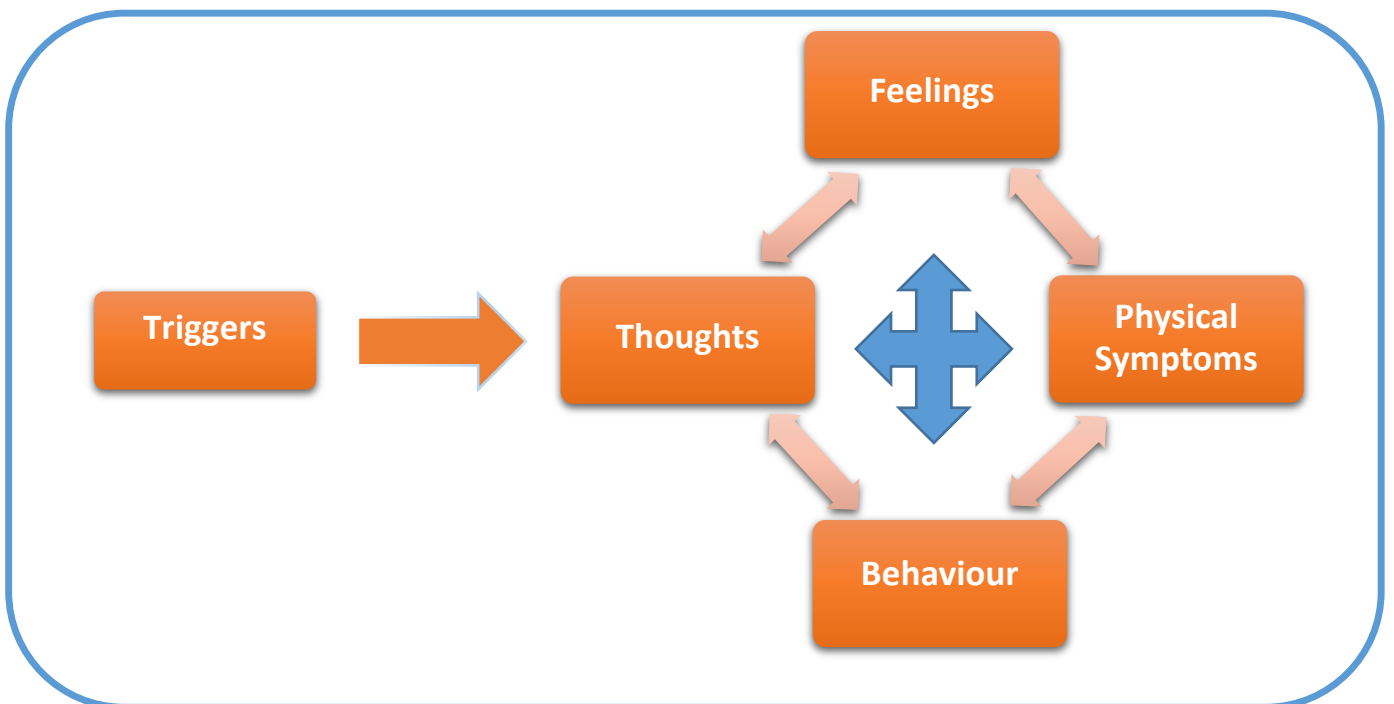
How can I avoid becoming distressed?

I want to feel more in control, how do I do that?

What is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy?

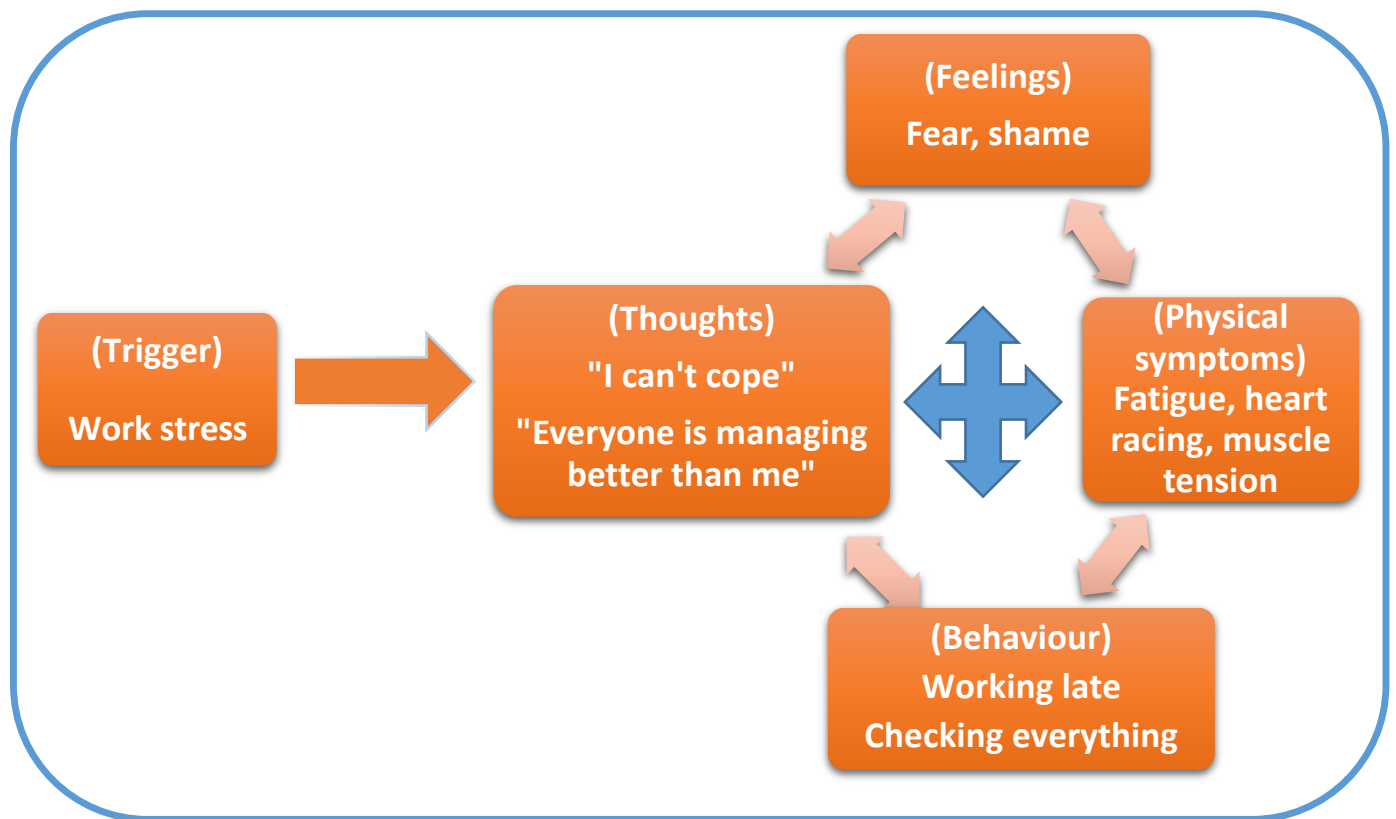
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a psychological therapy that focuses on the relationships between thoughts (cognitions), behaviours, physical symptoms, and feelings. CBT has been shown to help people by teaching how to recognise and tackle problems in the here and now, rather than focusing on the past. It has been widely researched and has been proven to work especially for those with depression and anxiety.

What you see in the box below is the basic CBT model. We will explore each piece of the model throughout Calm Distress and identify alternative ways of responding to specific triggers.



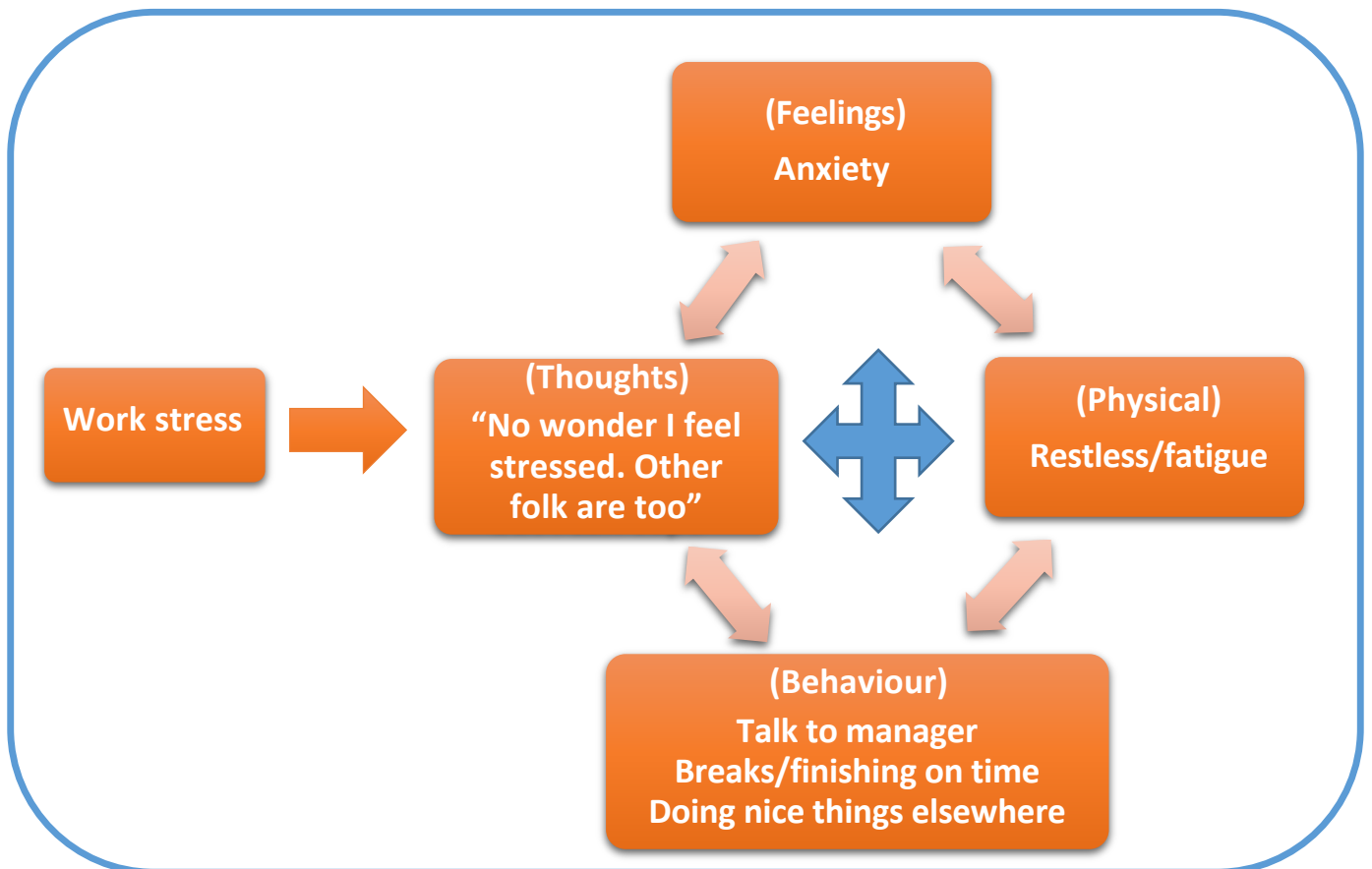
We are all unique. As human beings we all experience our own reactions to stressful situations. The situations we find ourselves in will **trigger** reactions in our **thoughts** (so: how we think about what has happened), and also in our emotions in how we **feel** about what has happened. Our bodies react in the form of **physical symptoms** and we will all try to cope in certain ways by changing our **behaviour**. How we react in each of these areas can affect each of the other areas and also how stressful or distressing we find situations.

Let us consider the CBT model using some examples.



In this example we can see thoughts of “I can’t cope” and “Everyone is managing better than me”. Such thoughts could lead to feelings of shame and fear, causing our bodies to react. We might try to cope by working late and double-checking things. However, thinking and behaving in these ways is likely to increase the intensity of our emotions and our physical symptoms. As a behaviour, over-working might help in the short term, but it stops us doing other things we enjoy, and very quickly the negative thoughts will return, possibly even more strongly. Ultimately, we can feel trapped in this tricky cycle and struggle to find a way to do things or feel differently.

The next example here illustrates how we can manage our thoughts, behaviour and physical health to prevent a stressful situation becoming too distressing. Here the stress of work is viewed as helpful and manageable as it encourages us in our behaviour to try doing different things, such as talking to a boss, and making time for pleasurable activities outside work (more on that in the Calm Behaviours session). We might still feel anxious, but by thinking it is OK to be stressed, and that we can cope, we reduce the likelihood that stress will feel overwhelming and tip into distress. Over time, feelings are more likely to become more positive and physical symptoms that go with these will subside.



Useful concepts that will be used throughout Calm Distress

❖ *What do we mean by helpful and unhelpful coping strategies?*

When we talk about our experiences, we can sometimes refer to them in very concrete or judgemental ways, like good or bad, right or wrong. When we are exploring how we cope with our distress, a more effective way of communicating is by using 'helpful' and 'unhelpful'. Throughout Calm Distress, we will use this language when considering decisions and choices to make.

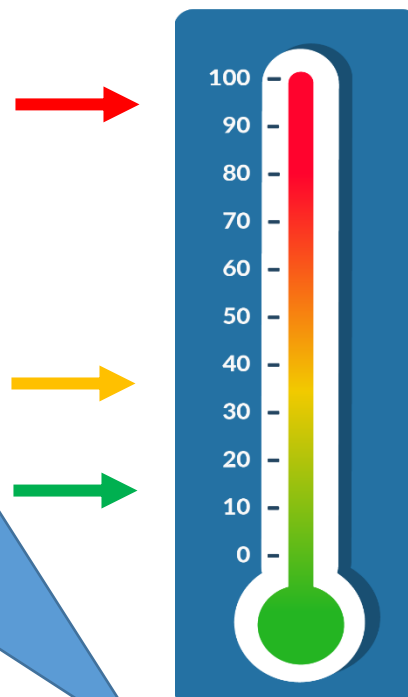
What are helpful coping strategies?	Examples include
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ They confront problems directly○ Help to understand problems○ Identify and help to change unhealthy responses○ Prevent adverse effects on the body	Talking to someone you trust Facing/ dealing with your problems head on Trying to think about the good and bad sides, rather than focusing only on the bad Being kind to ourselves Asking others for help when needed Healthy lifestyle

What are unhelpful coping strategies?	Examples include
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Don't address the root cause of the problem○ Only give short-term relief○ Aim to escape/avoid the problem rather than addressing it○ May make the problem worse in the long term	Drinking alcohol, taking drugs Unhealthy diet and/or overly high caffeine intake Trying to ignore problems Isolating self Poor sleep routine Self-harm

❖ *How do I measure how distressed I feel?*

A helpful way to measure how you subjectively feel is by using Subjective Units of Distress (SUDs). This scale goes between 0 and 100% (0 = No distress, 100 = intensely distressed). By using this method, it can act as a benchmark and help you identify the intensity of distress and then help you decide how best to manage it. Let's consider an example:

"I have always been told I'm a worrier. I never seem to be fully relaxed so I would say on a typical day my SUDs would be around 15%. At this level, I attend to my daily activities and continue as normal. I noticed when I went to a new gym class, my SUDs increased to 35%. I took some deep breaths and reminded myself of the benefits of exercise. This motivated me to go rather than avoid. However, when my friend asked me to do a skydive, I said no instantly. Even just thinking about it takes my SUDs to 95%. My distress would be too overwhelming for me to cope."



From the above example, we can see that when anxiety is low, it is easier to tolerate and we do not need to make any changes or use specific coping. However, as SUDs increase this can be a signal that more coping may be required. We will come back to the concept of SUDs as we go.

Where are your SUDS right now?



When do you feel the most relaxed?

When are your SUDS at their highest?

Summary

We have emotions for a reason. They are not our enemy! Just like other emotions, stress can be a very helpful feeling to have. It can give us a lot of important information about our values, needs and desires. It can also help us communicate, connect and have our needs met. It can influence our behaviour in helpful ways: it can prepare us for action, improve our performance, help us make decisions, and protect us from danger. However, we know that stress can tip into distress. This can be managed, and support is available to help. Our Calm Distress sessions on Calm Body, Calm Thoughts and Calm Behaviours will teach you skills to help manage psychological distress.

**Together we can learn to accept our stress
and calm our distress.**



Calm Distress Worksheets

We invite you to try the following worksheets which may assist in improving your mood and wellbeing.



Worksheet 1

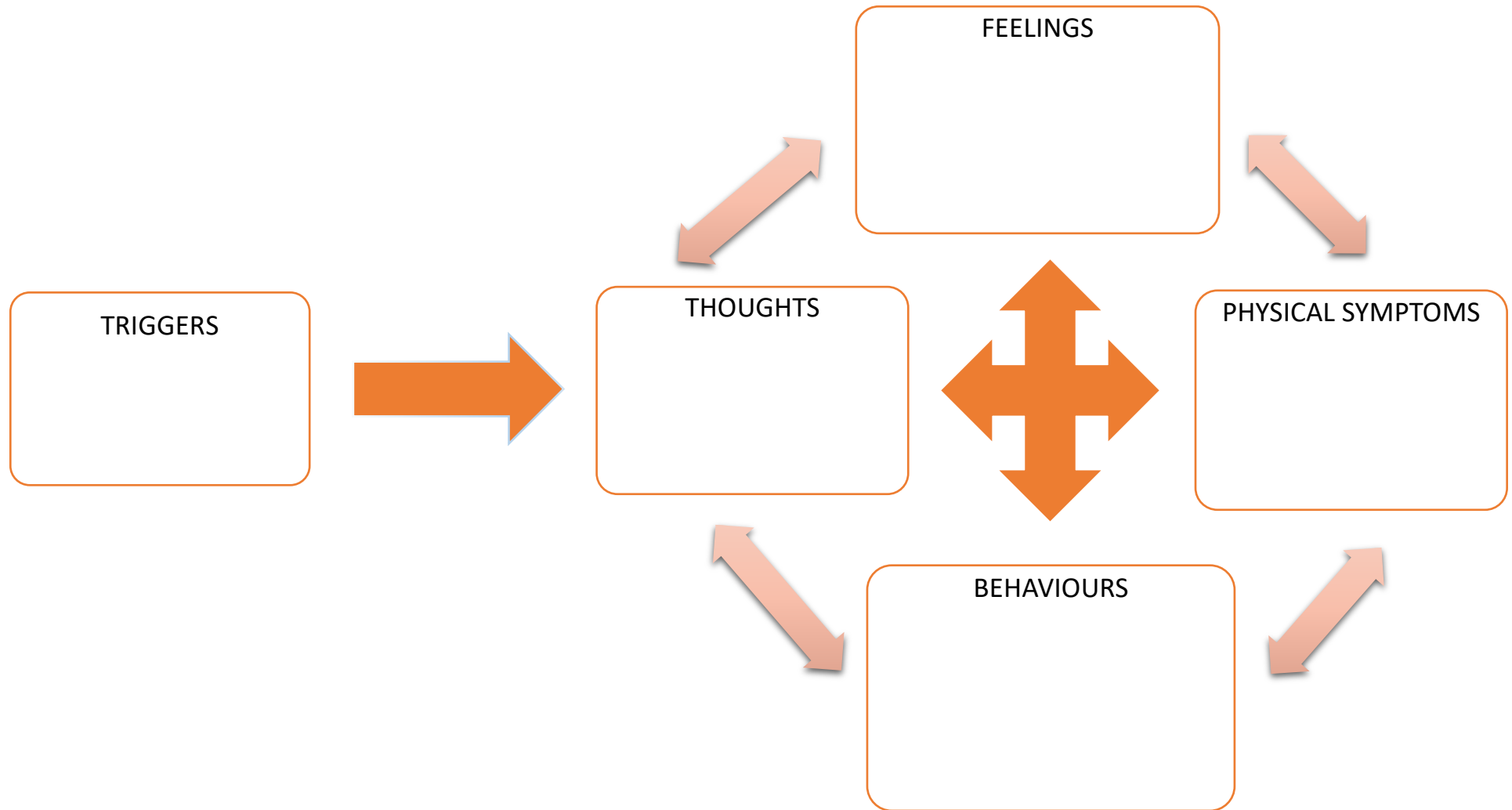


What emotions cause you the most distress or have the most negative impact on your life?

Can you identify any of your **unhelpful** coping strategies? (Things that you do to try and make yourself feel better, that don't really work in the long run)

Can you identify any of your **helpful** coping strategies? (Things that you have found that have worked in improving how you are feeling in the long run)

My CBT cycle



Notes



Please use this page to note down any thoughts or information that you would like to remember