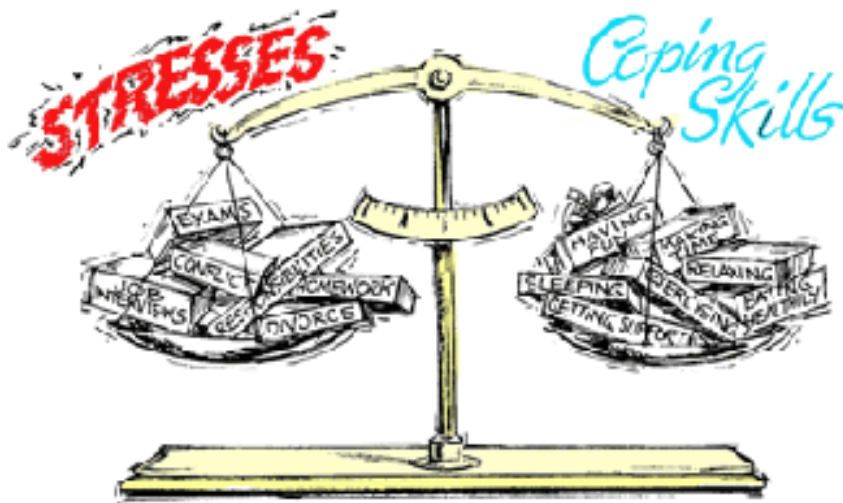
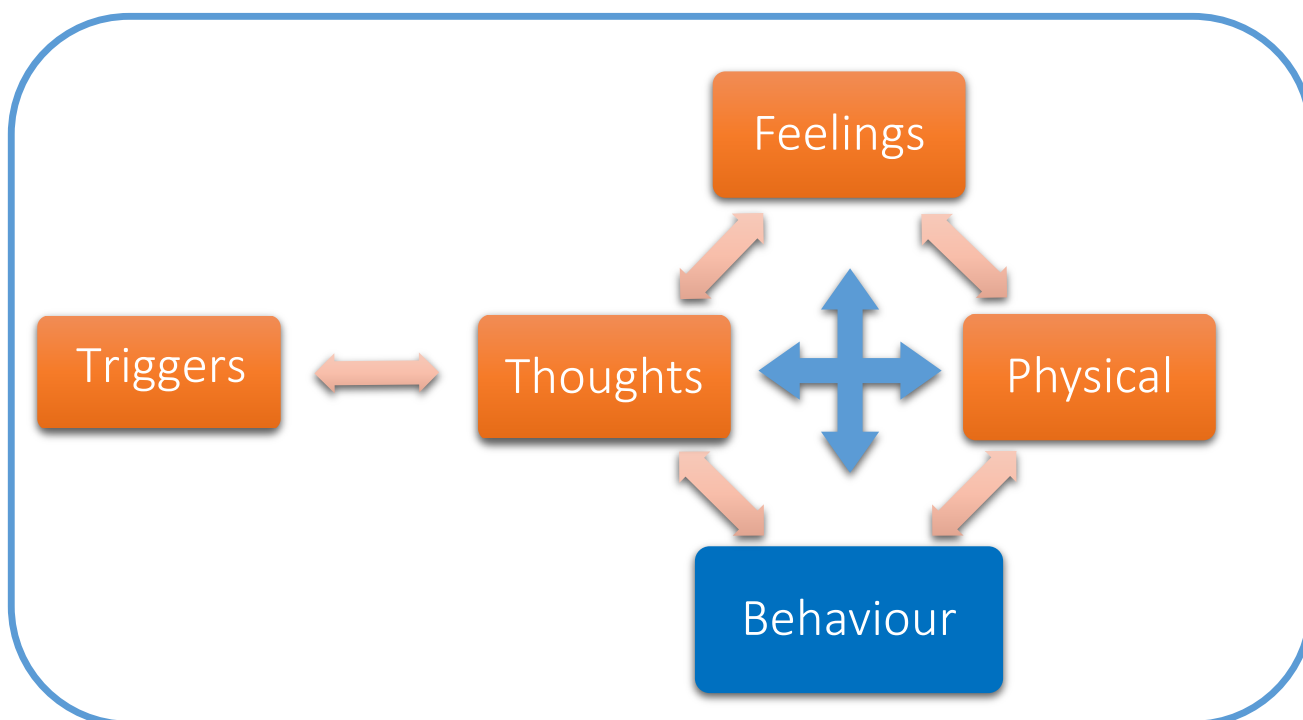


Calm *Behaviours*

Understanding what we do in response to stress and using new coping strategies to manage distress



When we are stressed we can often behave in ways that end up making us feel more stressed, keeping us trapped in a vicious cycle. We are living in challenging times, and all of this can have a big impact on our mental health and wellbeing. However, one of the ways we can weaken the vicious cycle of distress is to take control of the way that we behave and respond to distress.



Calm Behaviours will cover some of the very common things we tend to do when faced with stress, including:

- Avoidance
- Withdrawal
- Safety behaviours

We will then introduce ways to overcome and calm distress more effectively, including:

- Exposure
- Activity monitoring
- Behavioural activation

Avoidance

Avoidance is one of the very common ways we try to cope with stress as human beings. It is often used as a protective strategy and relates to how our brains are wired to cope with threats in terms of the fight/flight system, which you can learn more about in the 'Calm Body' session. We tend to avoid in two different ways:

- **External experiences:** avoiding certain people, places or activities.
- **Internal experiences:** pushing away or trying to suppress difficult feelings, memories and thoughts.



When we avoid a situation or try to avoid feeling a particular emotion or sensation, we deny ourselves opportunities to learn how to cope. This means we don't get the chance to learn that our fears are often much worse than the reality, and often we can cope much better than we think. Ignoring or avoiding an issue can also leave a problem unaddressed, and mean that we only try to deal with it when it has festered or become even more difficult to manage.

This doesn't mean we need to do everything, of course: choice is essential! What we are talking about is when we start to avoid the things we can and are able to do – and which we might enjoy. For example, we might avoid going to crowded places because we are anxious about feeling hemmed in, and about other people noticing our anxiety. But, as a result, we cut ourselves off from things we might enjoy, and end up suffering more in terms of our mood because we feel even more isolated.

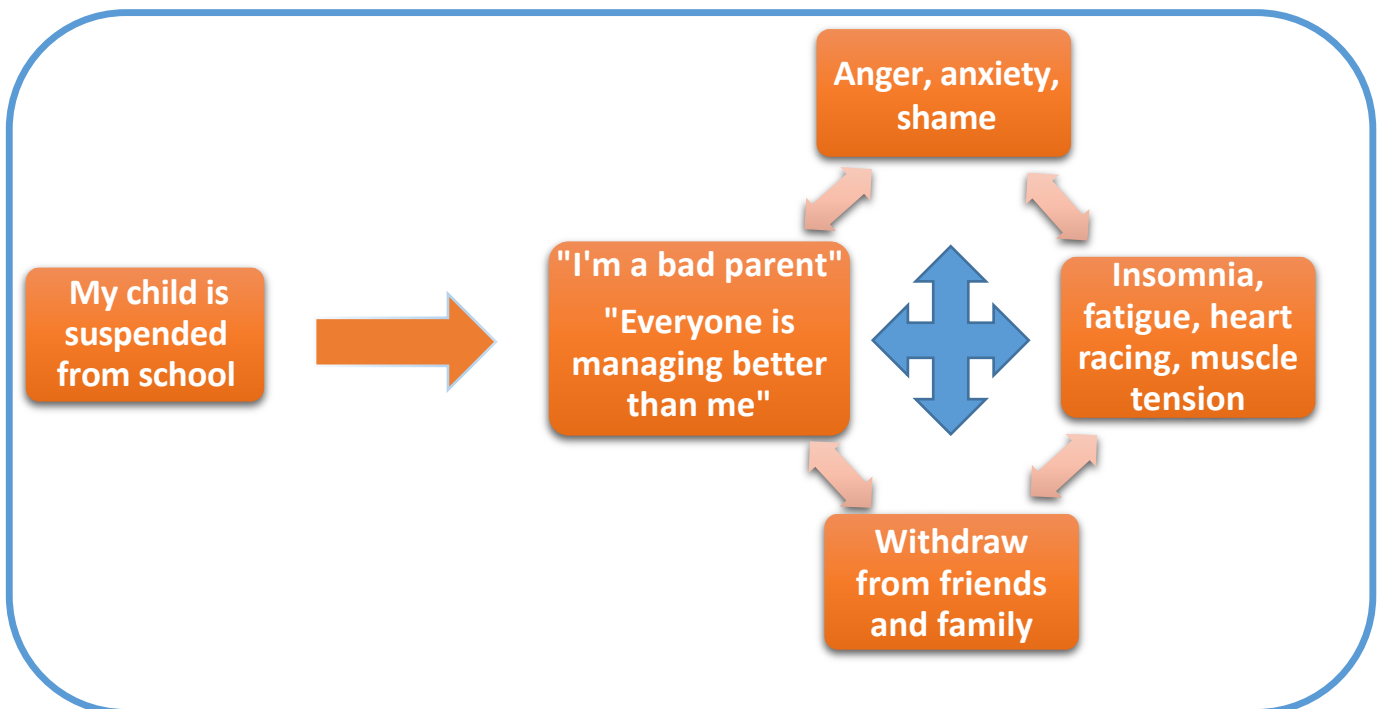
Avoidance can keep stress going, restrict our lives and reduce our confidence in our coping ability.

Withdrawal



Stressful life events can lead us to feel overwhelmed, and so we can begin to withdraw from the world around us. There is some short-term benefit to this. Withdrawing from stressful activities can allow us some time to look after ourselves and gather strength before returning to face our issues, but problems can occur where someone relies on this too much and begins to become fearful of returning to the situation.

Here is an example using the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy model to think about a cycle we might get caught up in. Do you see how withdrawing from family and friends or other regular activities might leave us feeling that we can't cope, and leave us more isolated, impacting even more on our mood?



Safety behaviours

When we have a thought that something bad might happen, we are likely to feel anxious. If we cannot avoid the situation, we may do certain things that we think might reduce the chance of something bad happening. We call these **safety behaviours**. Here are some examples.

Fear	Safety behaviour	Intended consequence	Unintended consequence
Getting an upset tummy and being sick	Only eating a few bland, 'safe' foods	Reduce the risk of getting an upset tummy or being sick	Limits our enjoyment of food. Can increase our focus on physical sensations, so we are always hyper-alert for any sign of discomfort.
Having a panic attack and nobody being there to help me	Take someone with me all the time	Feel less fearful and more supported	If things go well, we put it down to the other person being with us and believe that is the only reason that it went OK. We are then at risk of then relying on other people when going out and don't learn we can cope on our own.
Might make a fool of myself in public as I get anxious around others	Stay very quiet in social situations	Avoid feeling embarrassment	Haven't tested out our fears so will still feel anxious the next time we are in a social situation. Loss of confidence. Keeps anxiety going and adds to our worries.

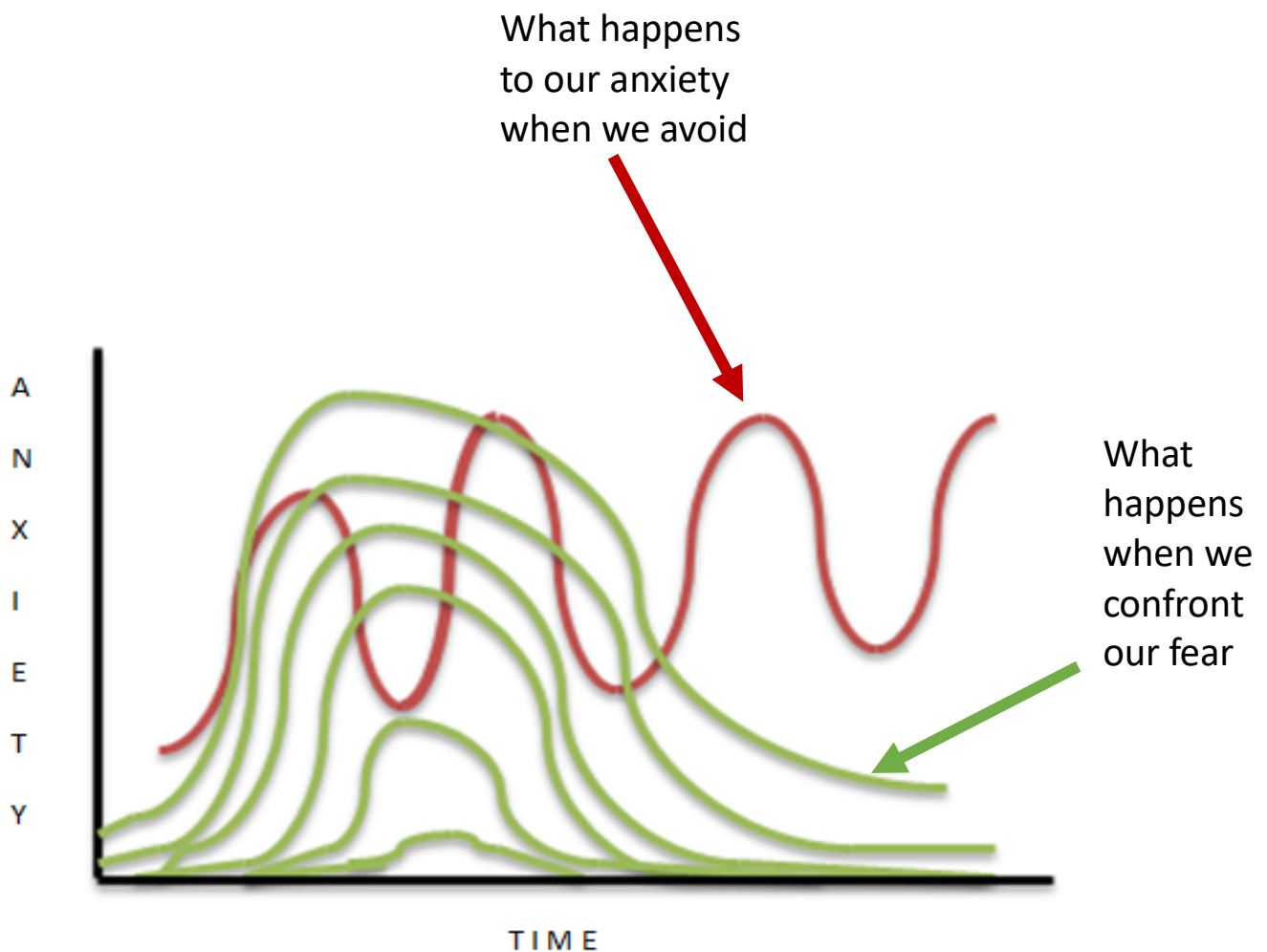
As you can see from these examples, like avoidance and withdrawal, the original intention of safety behaviours is an attempt to help ourselves feel safe and to cope in the short term. However, the long-term consequence can be that we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to learn that we are already safe or capable of coping without such measures.

So, what can we do instead?

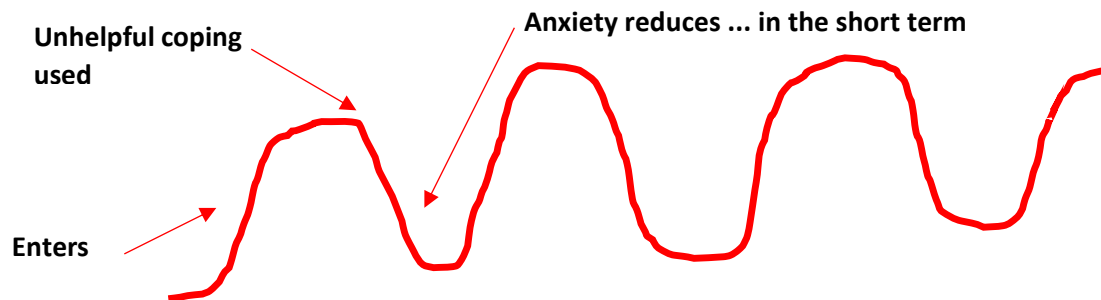
Before we introduce more helpful ways of coping, let us discuss the concept of **exposure**.

Exposure

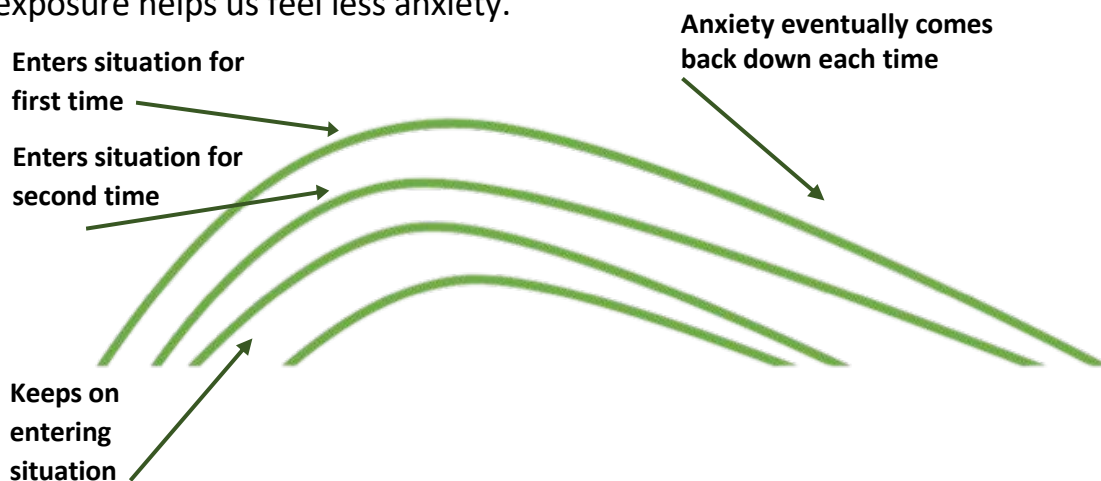
When we think about increasing our activity, this can mean increasing our exposure to situations that can understandably be very difficult. It is very normal to worry that anxiety levels will rise and just keep on rising until we can't cope any more (see 'Calm Thoughts' session for some information on how to help with this). In actual fact, that's not what the science tells us about anxiety levels. Have a look at the following graph to find out more.



The red line shows what happens to our anxiety when we avoid situations or use a safety behaviour. When this person **enters** the stressful situation, the anxiety levels increase, as we would expect. The person engages in their **avoidance or safety behaviour**. This has had the expected result that their **anxiety reduces** – but because they've not learned to manage the situation, the next time a similar situation has occurred then their anxiety has rapidly increased again, and so on.



The green lines demonstrate exposure to an anxiety-provoking situation. We can imagine that the highest line is the **first time** the person has faced this situation. Yes, their anxiety has increased – but what we can see is that by allowing their anxiety to increase to its highest point, it doesn't keep going up for ever. Instead it begins to plateau – and then come back down – as the person realises that they are able to cope. This means that the next time they are in the situation (looking at the second-highest line) they approach it with a little more confidence, and maybe their anxiety levels don't reach the heights that they did previously. The more we expose ourselves to our fears, our anxiety becomes less intense and more short-lived. Over time, repeated exposure helps us feel less anxiety.



We will explain more about gradually facing your fears below!

Using two different people's stories to demonstrate, we will now introduce a number of behavioural approaches that can have a positive impact on well-being.

Let's look at Amy's story first of all.

"I was out shopping and I had a panic attack in the middle of the aisle. People were looking at me and I found it so embarrassing! Then in work, I felt hot and fuzzy-headed and worried it was happening again. I went outside for fresh air and I was OK, but I kept worrying. I was asked to do a presentation to the team and I just couldn't do it. What if I had a panic attack in front of them all? I felt so stressed about it that I called in sick to work, and I haven't been back since."

Graded Exposure

Graded exposure is focused on facing fears gradually, in steps. Creating a fear ladder is a helpful way to plan this step by step approach. We will explain the steps here, and worksheets are provided at the end of this booklet so you can create your own Fear Ladder.

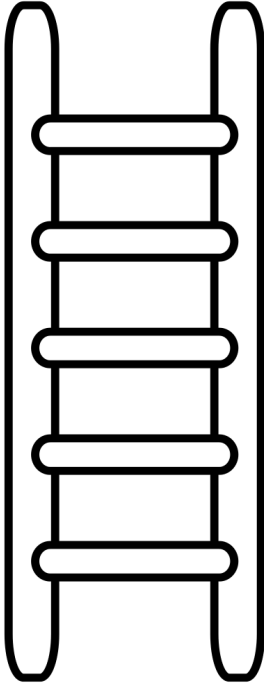
Step 1. Make a list of situations that you fear and avoid

Step 2. Go through your list and rate each item on a scale of 0-100% in terms of how much anxiety you feel in that situation (0 is low anxiety and 100 is the highest level of anxiety). Place these on the Fear Ladder from the lowest anxiety rating to the highest.

Step 3. Start from the bottom of your ladder – and, if needed, break each step into smaller steps to reach your goal. A step that is rated above 50% anxiety may need to be broken down into smaller steps to make it more manageable.

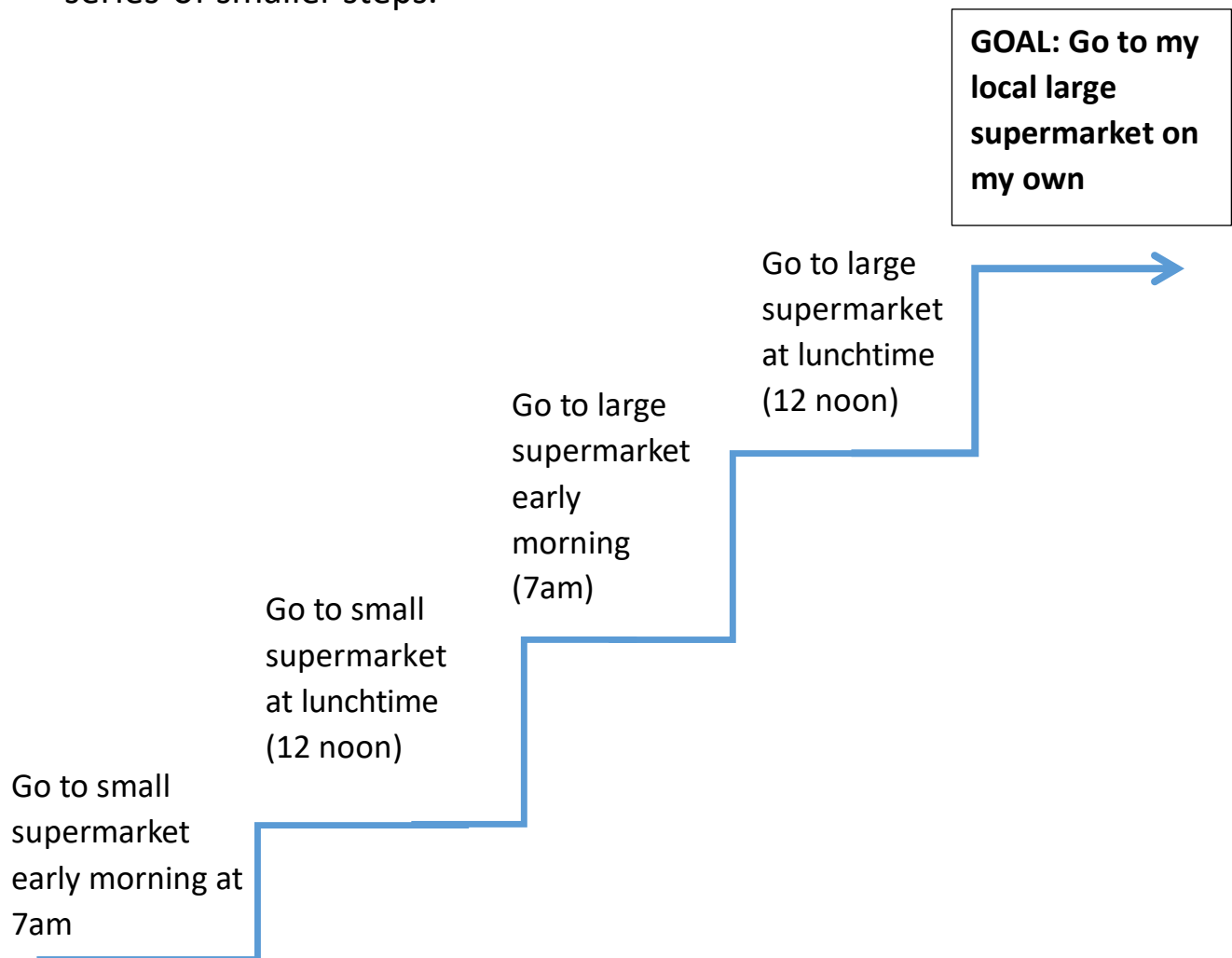
Amy's Ladder

Situation	Fear Rating
Going back to work	95%
Going to the supermarket	75%
Going to the town centre	60%
Talking to friends and family	50%
Going for a walk	45%



For Amy you can see she has noted a number of situations that cause her anxiety. As there are situations that cause her over 50% anxiety, she needs to break them down into further steps.

So, Amy has divided her goal of facing the supermarket into a series of smaller steps.



You could break up your goals into smaller steps by changing ...

- **Who is there**
- **What you do**
- **When you do it**
- **Where you do it**
- **Time you spend doing it**

The Golden Rules of Exposure



Graded Exposure can take time to learn so here are some golden rules to help you keep on track.

- ✓ Stay in the situation until your anxiety has at least halved. You can use your SUDs to help keep track of your anxiety levels: see 'Calm before the Storm' for further information on SUDs.
- ✓ Repeatedly practise each step frequently until you feel better able to cope prior to moving on to the next step on your ladder
- ✓ Complete each step one step at a time – although it might be tempting to jump ahead, you want to master the lower steps before you move on to the next step.
- ✓ Ultimately, you want to be able to complete each step without any safety behaviours you might be using (e.g. taking someone with you, distracting yourself, staying near an exit, etc.)
- ✓ Write things down so you can see your progress and identify areas to focus on.
- ✓ Combine this work with skills from other sessions.
- ✓ Give yourself praise and recognition for each step you make that takes you closer to your goal – and be kind to yourself if an exposure didn't go as well as you had hoped. Sometimes things don't work out as planned. If that happens, don't give up. What else could you try instead?

John's story

"I'm a self-employed plumber and suffered a minor back injury, but it meant I had to stop working for a while. This put a real strain on me financially. The days also felt long, and I started to sleep until mid-afternoon because I didn't feel a sense of purpose any more. I stopped showering and getting dressed because I had nowhere to go. It seemed like such a big effort to even get myself a drink or something to eat. Even as my back started to get better, I just didn't have the energy or motivation to do anything. Bills and housework started piling up, which made me feel even more overwhelmed. All I wanted to do was pull the covers over my head and avoid the whole world."

Our activity levels and mood are closely linked. In John's story we get a really clear picture of the impact that avoidance and withdrawal have had on his wellbeing. He talks of losing all purpose and also lacking motivation to engage in activities that he had previously found enjoyable.

A helpful way to consider activity levels and the effect they are having on our mood is to carry out **activity monitoring**. This involves identifying what we are doing throughout the day and how our mood is at these times. Once you know how your activities affect your mood, you can take steps to plan how you want to spend your time, scheduling in more of the activities that give you a sense of pleasure, achievement and closeness to others.

John's Activity and Mood Monitoring

John noted what he was doing throughout the day, and rated his mood each time – a bit like using SUDs, but in this case 0 would be his lowest mood and 100 his highest. We can see that his mood lifted when he was talking to his friends and family, and when he was watching something he enjoyed on TV. However, there was a dip when looking at social media and watching TV in bed. Understanding this might help John to plan a day differently.

	Monday	Tuesday
11:00 – 13:00	Got up and ate packet of crisps (30%) Watched TV (30%)	Woke up and lay in bed watching TV (20%)
13:00-15:00	Friend called (70%)	Ate leftover takeaway (20%) Watched quiz show (30%)
15:00 - 17:00	Watched favourite film (60%)	Lay on couch watching TV (30%)
17:00 – 19:00	Lay on couch watching TV (30%) Ordered takeaway (40%)	Mum called (60%) Lay on couch watching TV (30%)
19:00 – 21:00	Ate takeaway (40%) Watched TV (40%)	Went on social media (20%)
21:00 – 23:00	Fell asleep on couch (30% when woke up)	Went to bed and watched comedy (50%)
23:00 – 01:00	Went on social media (20%)	Read news (40%) then fell asleep
01:00-11:00	Sleeping	Sleeping

Try your own activity monitoring: the worksheet at the end might help. We have also included a list of activities that you may like to try. This will help you identify what you are doing throughout the day and how these activities impact on your mood. Being aware of your emotions and behaviours is an important first step in breaking free of the vicious cycle of distress. Once you know what activities improve your mood and those that make your mood worse, you can take steps to reduce the activities that maintain your low mood and/or make it worse, and schedule more activities that improve your mood and give you a sense of pleasure, achievement and/or closeness to others.

Ask yourself...

- What activities do you tend to do most days?
- Are you aware of how they influence your mood?
- Are there any activities that give you a sense of achievement?
- Are there activities that you wish you had more time for?
- Are there activities that you find yourself doing that you wish you didn't do?

Being curious about how you spend your time and how it impacts on your mental health allows greater insight into those behaviours that may be unhelpful for your overall wellbeing. It gives you back control to make any changes that are important to you.

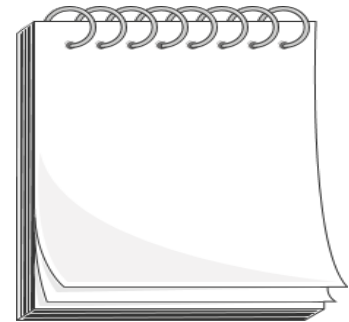
Doing more, feeling better (a.k.a. Behavioural Activation)

As John's example shows, when we are feeling stressed, we are more likely to avoid doing routine daily activities and pleasurable activities that we previously would have enjoyed. Behavioural Activation aims to change how you feel by changing what you do. In a similar fashion to graded exposure, it works by increasing activity levels in a structured and graded way.

It focuses on incorporating pleasurable activities in line with your personal values and other important routine activities that will give you a sense of achievement and connection with other people.

How to schedule activities

- ✓ Step 1. Make a list of all the activities that you have started to avoid, including daily routine activities and pleasurable activities.
- ✓ Step 2. Think about your values and what is important to you. Living a life in line with your values – how you really want to engage with the world around you – can have a big impact on your emotional wellbeing.
- ✓ Step 3. Use the worksheet at the end of this booklet to help you come up with some action steps that you could take.
- ✓ Step 4. Add these actions to your list of activities that you've so far been avoiding and then split the items on your list into the following categories: Easiest, medium difficulty, and most difficult.
- ✓ Step 5. Schedule a few activities each day into your weekly activity schedule – start with easier tasks and plan ahead of time.
- ✓ Step 6. Continue to monitor how this makes you feel.



Follow your plan, not your mood!
Remember the more we *do*, the better we tend to *feel*.

Summary

When we feel stressed, we can use coping strategies that aren't always helpful to us. Despite our best coping intentions, they can come with unintended consequences that can add to our distress and keep it going, such as with avoidance, withdrawal and using safety behaviours.

BUT...

We can make changes to help ourselves. We can gradually face avoided situations and build our confidence in our coping. We can also build our activity levels up through activity scheduling to help us achieve a better balance of activities that benefit our wellbeing. Making changes like this is not always easy and there may be ups and downs in your progress. This is normal! Using the steps we have outlined here will help you to gradually build yourself up step by step.



Calm Distress Worksheets

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



Worksheet 2



My Activity/Mood Monitoring Chart

For each hour write the activities you engaged in and your mood rating
(0=unhappiest – 10=happiest)

TIME	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
06:00							
07:00							
08:00							
09:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
13:00							
14:00							
15:00							
16:00							
17:00							
18:00							

TIME	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
19:00							
20:00							
21:00							
22:00							
23:00							
00:00							
01:00							
02:00							
03:00							
04:00							
05:00							

Worksheet 4



My Weekly Activity Planner

Use this planner to put in activities for the week. Remember to plan ahead ... and then follow your plan, not your mood.

At the end of the day you might find it helpful to go back and rate your mood for each activity (0=unhappiest – 10=happiest) so you can continue to monitor your wellbeing.

TIME	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
06:00							
07:00							
08:00							
09:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
13:00							
14:00							
15:00							
16:00							

TIME	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
17:00							
18:00							
19:00							
20:00							
21:00							
22:00							
23:00							
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03:00							
04:00							
05:00							

Worksheet 5

Activities you can do on your own

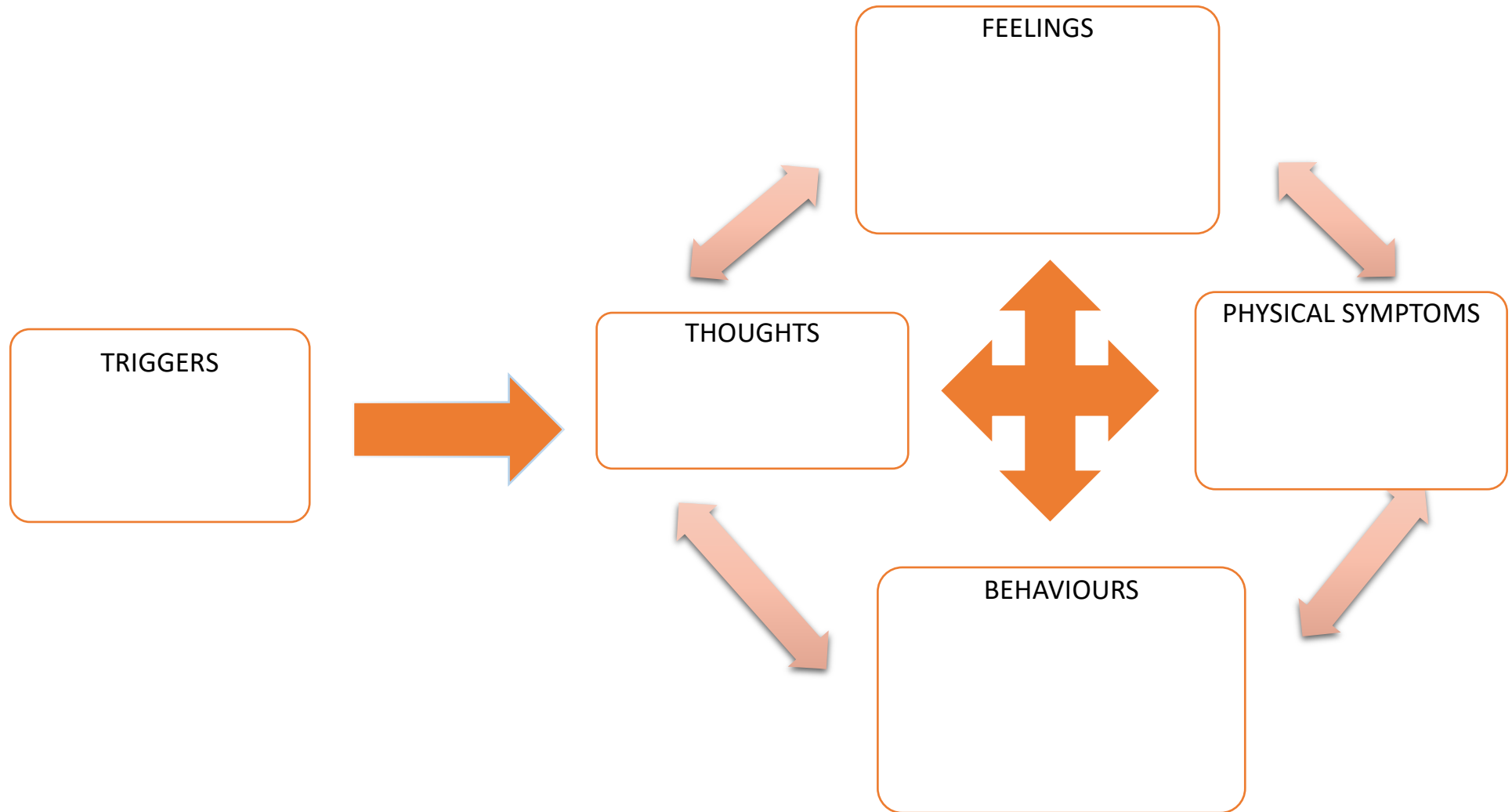
Activity	Indoor	Outdoor
Online virtual tours	✓	
De-cluttering an area in your house or garden	✓	✓
Cook a new recipe	✓	
Go for a walk, run or cycle		✓
Make a packed lunch and take it to a local park to eat		✓
Plant some flowers or vegetables		✓
Doing some yoga or light exercise	✓	✓
Write a letter or send a card to a friend/family member to let them know you are thinking of them	✓	✓

Activities you can try with other people

Activity	Indoors	Outdoors
Go on a botany adventure! With a notebook and crayons/pencils, try to draw local plants		✓
Play balloon tennis. No racquets? No problem. Use your hands, which is great for hand-eye coordination	✓	✓
Start a week-long fitness challenge – jump rope, sit-ups, push-ups, etc. Team up – kids versus adults	✓	✓
A good old-fashioned sports day: sack race with a few old pillowcases; egg and spoon race with a few hard boiled eggs; and kids versus adults three legged race		✓
Treasure hunts	✓	✓

Worksheet 6

My CBT cycle



Notes



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