



Pillar D2

Tackle stress, anxiety and low mood

Definition of stress: “The demands being made on you exceed the resources you have to deal with them”

On the other hand, stress can also result from boredom or from decreased demands being made on you (think about caged animals in a zoo).

Think of stress as a set of scales with demands on one side and resources on the other. You might feel stressed if there is an imbalance on either side.



RESOURCES

DEMANDS

How to recognize when you are under stress

Stress not only causes muscle tension, it also alters how we think, how we feel and how we behave.

Mental / emotional (thoughts and feelings) symptoms can include:

- Inability to concentrate,
- Loss of self-confidence,
- Undue tiredness,
- Muddled thinking and
- Tendency to lose perspective.

When we are stressed, simple worries can seem overwhelming.

Emotional symptoms can include:

Anger or irritability, anxiety, panic, feeling

hopeless, hostile or resentful. You may also feel angry or cry more than usual.

Physical symptoms can include:

Tense muscles, especially aching shoulders, neck pain and increased back pain.

Breathing may be shallow or erratic,

Dry mouth,

Upset stomach/ butterflies/indigestion

Clenched jaw or fists,

Sweating

(You may be able to add several more to this list as you become more aware of how stress affects you.)

Behaviors and habits may include:

increased smoking or alcohol intake,

Increased or decreased appetite,

Increased or decreased sleep,

Nail biting or mannerisms such as finger tapping, fidgeting etc.

It is helpful to make a list of how stress affects you personally. When you begin to recognise that you are under stress, you will then be better able to prevent or minimise its effect.

My stress profile

My mental and emotional symptoms (thoughts and feelings)

My physical symptoms (the feelings in my body)

My behavioural symptoms (ask you family/friends how they can tell if you are stressed)

ANXIETY



Anxiety is the body's way of responding to being in danger. Adrenaline is rushed into our bloodstream to enable us to run away or fight. This happens whether the danger is real, or whether we believe the danger is there when actually there is none. It is the body's alarm and survival mechanism. Primitive man wouldn't have survived for long without this life-saving response. It works so well, that it often kicks in when it's not needed - when the danger is in our heads rather than in reality. We think we're in danger, so that's enough to trigger the system to go, go, go! People who get anxious tend to get into scanning mode - where they're constantly on the lookout for danger, hyper-alert to any of the signals, and make it more likely that the alarm system will be activated.

Thoughts that often occur relate to our overestimating or exaggerating the actual threat and underestimating or minimising our ability to cope:

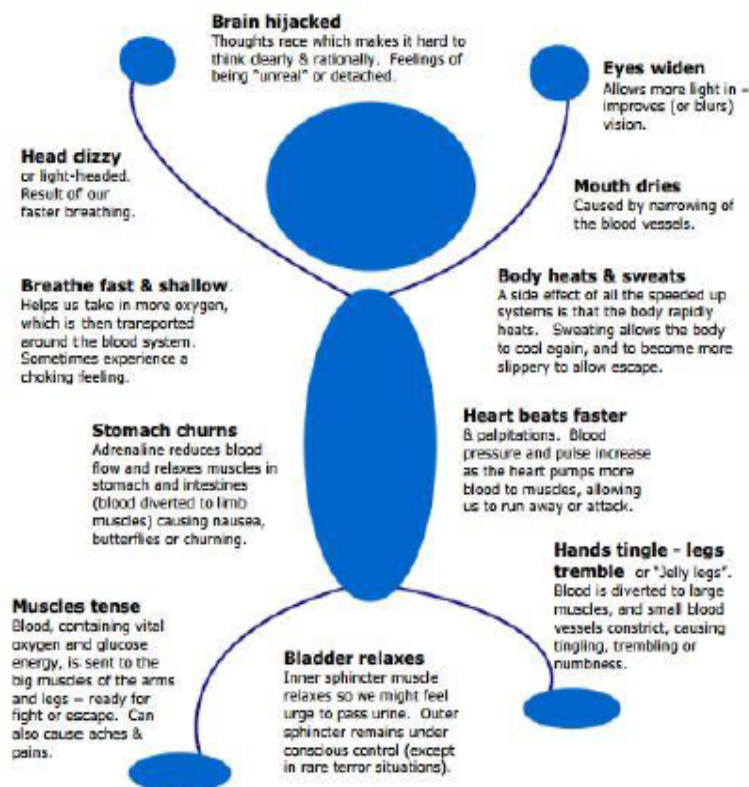
- I'm in danger right now
- The worst possible scenario is going to happen
- I won't be able to cope with it



ALARMING ADRENALINE !

The body's alarm system

When the brain perceives a threat, it activates the body's "fight or flight" alarm system, and adrenaline is released into the blood from the adrenal glands. We experience uncomfortable feelings because the adrenaline makes the body systems speed up, diverting blood towards the big muscles, preparing us to attack (anger) or escape (anxiety).



After the adrenaline has died down, we can feel exhausted, shaky and weak.

Behaviours might include:

- Avoiding people or places
- Not going out
- Going to certain places at certain times, e.g. shopping at smaller shops, at less busy times
- Only going with someone else
- Escape, leave early
- Go to the feared situation, but use coping behaviours to get you through: examples include: self talk, holding a drink, smoking more, fiddling with clothes or handbag, avoiding eye contact with others, having an escape plan, medication. These are called 'safety behaviours'.

Safety behaviours can also help to keep your anxiety going. Whilst you depend on them to help you cope, you don't get to find out that without them, the anxiety would reduce and go away on its own.

Whilst avoiding people or situations might help you feel better at that time, it doesn't make your anxiety any better over a longer period. If you're frightened that your anxiety will make you pass out or vomit in the supermarket aisle, you won't find out that won't actually happen, because you don't go. So the belief that it will happen remains, along with the anxiety.

Vicious Cycle of Anxiety



We all feel anxious some times. A certain amount of anxiety helps us to be more alert and focused. For example just prior to an exam, a few exam nerves have a positive effect - motivating us, helping us focus our thoughts on the job in hand, making us more alert. Too much anxiety, or constantly being anxious, is unhealthy and detrimental to our lives and relationships.

The Mind Bully

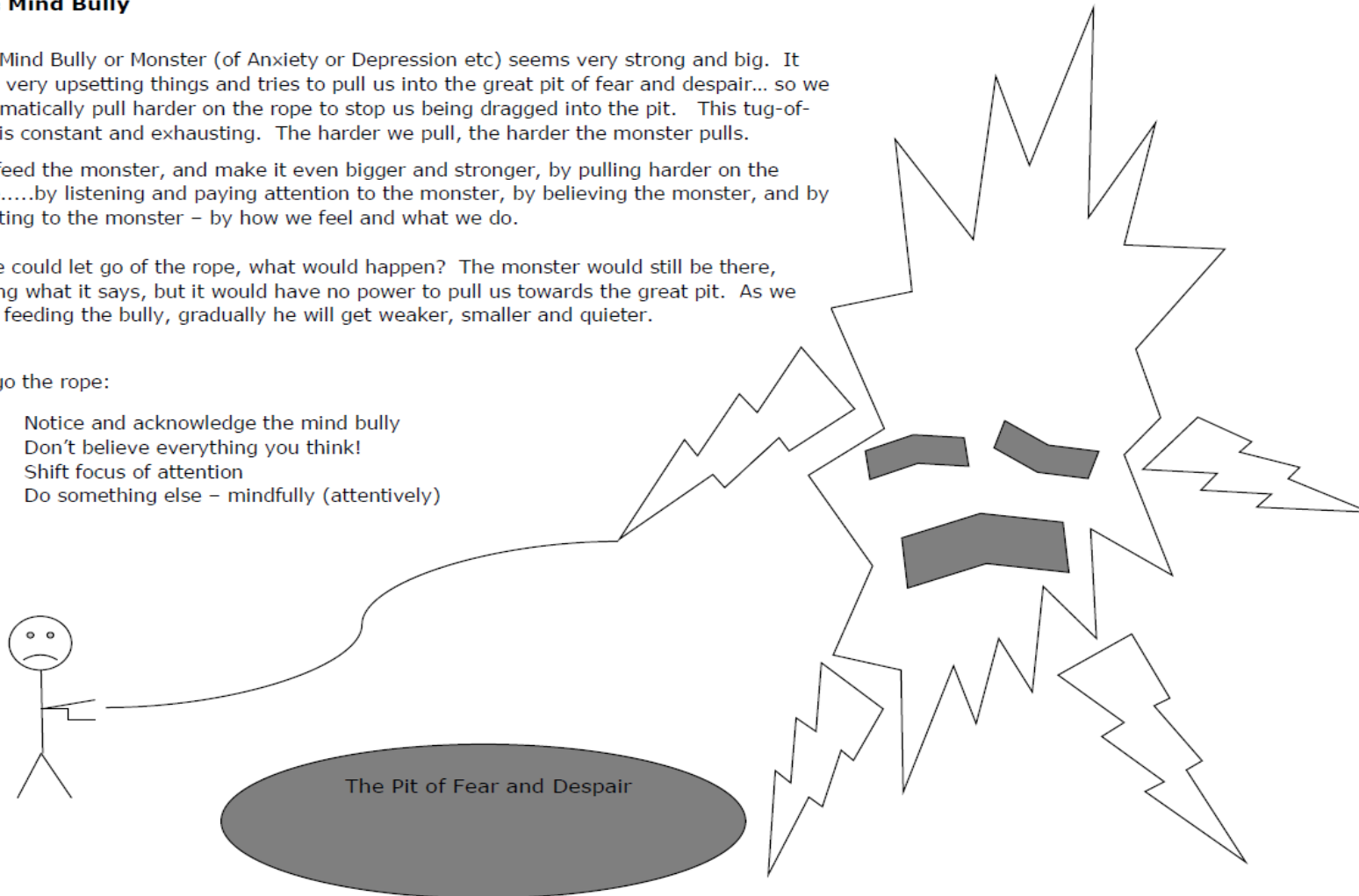
The Mind Bully or Monster (of Anxiety or Depression etc) seems very strong and big. It says very upsetting things and tries to pull us into the great pit of fear and despair... so we automatically pull harder on the rope to stop us being dragged into the pit. This tug-of-war is constant and exhausting. The harder we pull, the harder the monster pulls.

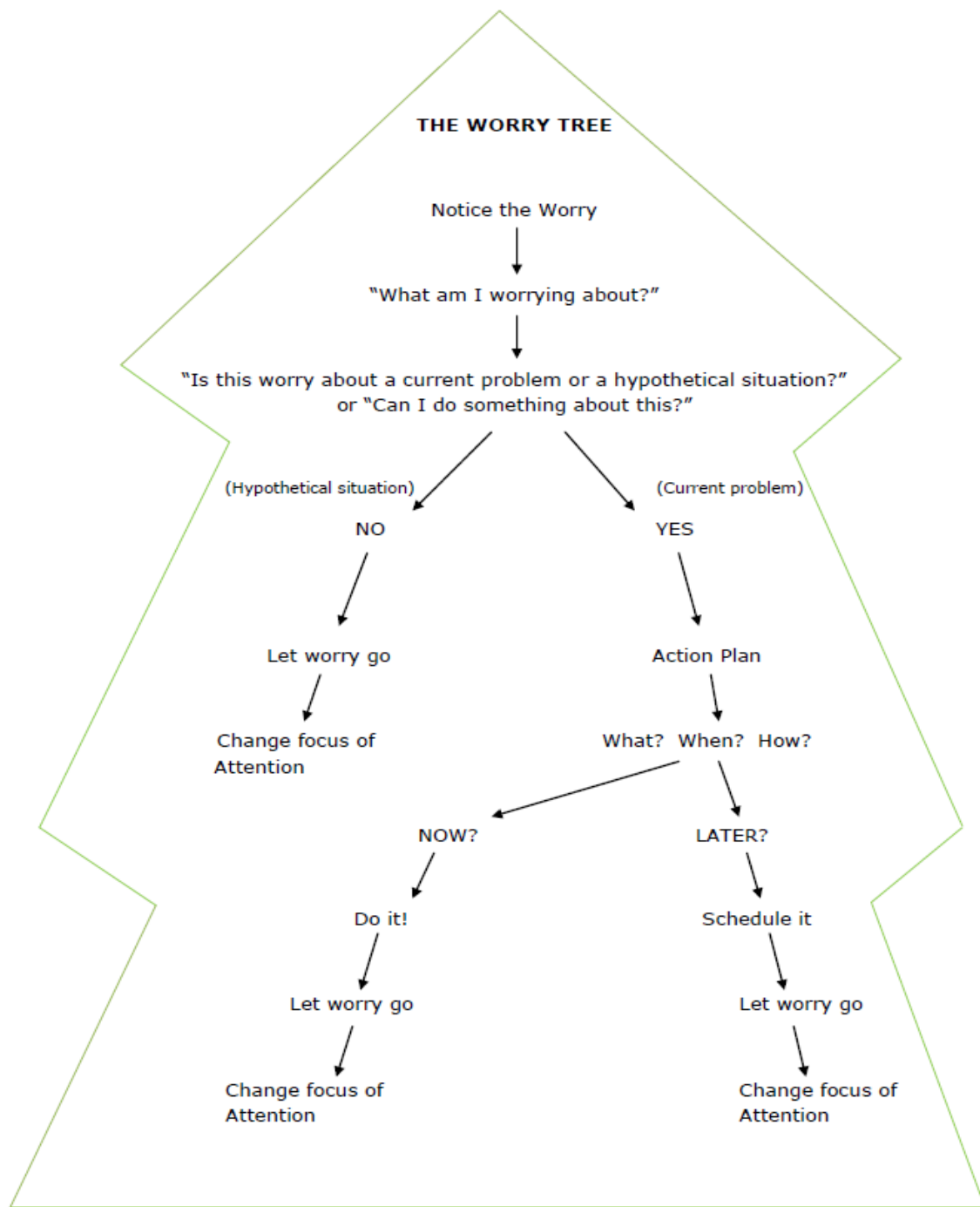
We feed the monster, and make it even bigger and stronger, by pulling harder on the rope....by listening and paying attention to the monster, by believing the monster, and by reacting to the monster – by how we feel and what we do.

If we could let go of the rope, what would happen? The monster would still be there, saying what it says, but it would have no power to pull us towards the great pit. As we stop feeding the bully, gradually he will get weaker, smaller and quieter.

Let go the rope:

- Notice and acknowledge the mind bully
- Don't believe everything you think!
- Shift focus of attention
- Do something else – mindfully (attentively)





The Super-Scanner



Some people can sleep through anything – partners snoring, trains speeding by and thunderstorms. Yet those same people, after they've just had a baby, can be woken by the slightest snuffle. It seems we have an inbuilt scanner, that keeps us alert to certain signals, even when we're sleeping. It's constantly scanning for the signal, then triggering the body's alarm system which wakes us up, even from the deepest sleep, to attend to the baby.

Sometimes these inbuilt super-scanners are programmed to look for other signals, and it seems the sensitivity can vary. Someone who worries about being burgled might have a super-scanner which is set to be highly sensitive to noises that are different from those we normally hear at night. A knocking sound will have them instantly awake, alert and anxious. On investigation, they might realise it was a twig tapping against the window, the anxiety subsides – and they can sleep reassured they're safe.



If you worry a lot about your health, you perhaps might have a super-scanner that is highly sensitive to picking up on body sensations. You can be going about your daily life, when suddenly, the constantly on and alert super-sensitive-scanner, notices something different: a slight pain, an ache, a numbness, a tingling – anything. This scanner immediately draws your focus of attention to the sensation. You might think, "Hey, what's that? I might be ill". You feel anxious, and the body's alarm system is activated: adrenaline is released into the bloodstream, which then itself triggers a whole host of physical symptoms:

- Heart racing
- Breathing faster
- Light-headed
- Tense muscles
- Aches & pains



- Shaking
- Hot
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Dizziness



- Unable to concentrate
- Butterflies in the stomach

These symptoms reinforce the anxious thoughts, and the super-scanner draws the focus of attention even more to what's happening in your body. Thoughts might include: "I'm in danger here. I might collapse. I really am ill". The feelings of anxiety intensify, and the whole focus of attention is now on what you're feeling. You then think: "That confirms it. I really must be seriously ill". This reinforces the underlying belief that you could be very ill or likely to become so, and makes it more likely that this cycle will keep happening.

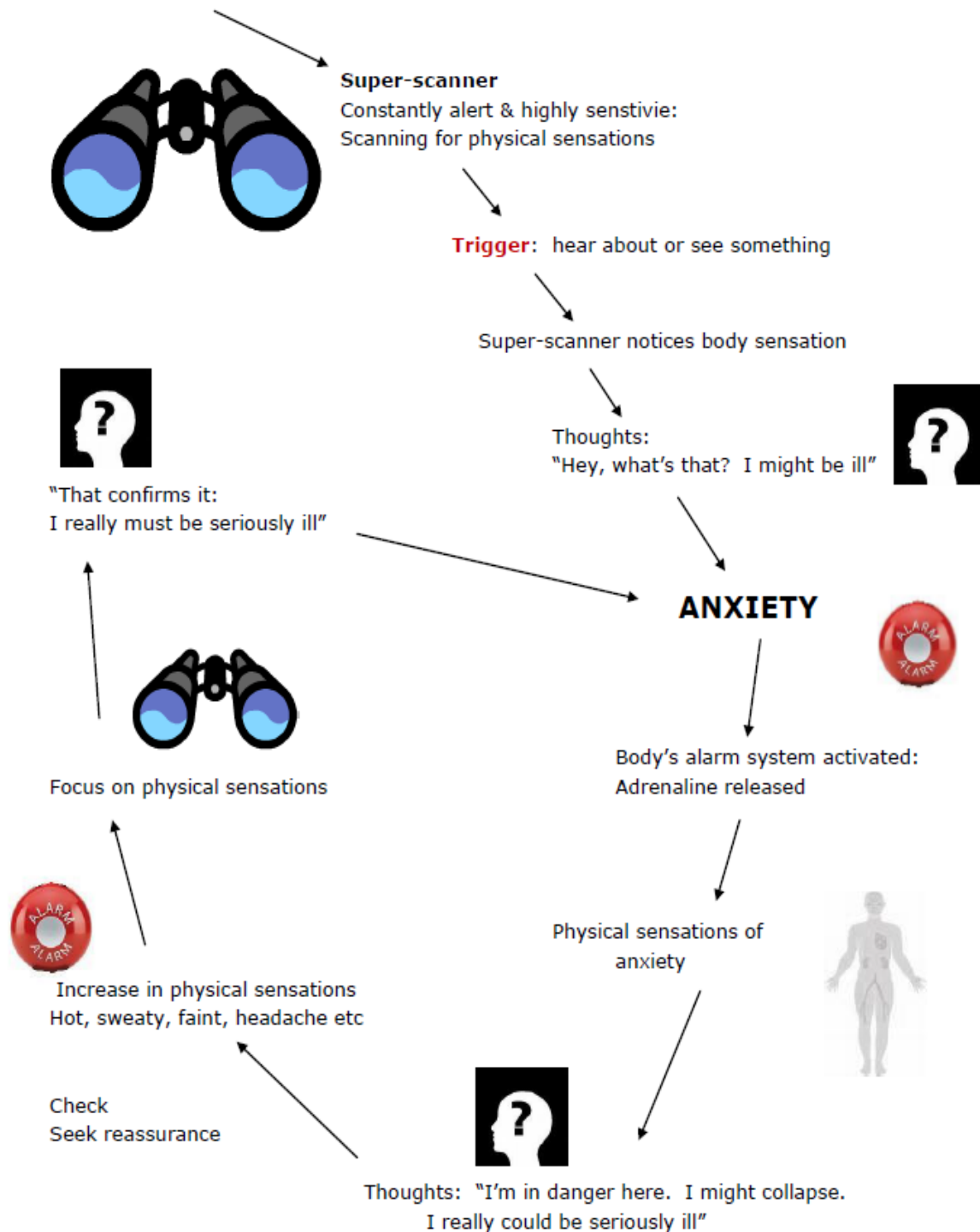
We can learn to notice the super-scanner, and turn the sensitivity dial down. It can be a useful mechanism so we don't want to turn it off completely, but we can improve our ability to interpret the readings accurately, and adjust the way we react to the scanner.

- **Notice the scanner:** "That's that (super-sensitive) scanner again!"
- **Readjust the sensitivity dial:** "Okay, the scanner is noticing the(physical sensations). I'm thinking the worst about that, but it's probably just a normal body sensation. The other symptoms are due to anxiety."
 - There's no need to fight the thoughts, you can notice them, and let them pass.
 - Change your focus of attention: Move on – do or think about something else.



The vicious cycle of Health Anxiety

Underlying belief: I could become seriously ill with a life-threatening illness





DEPRESSION

Thoughts

- Negative view of self, the world, the future
- I'm useless, I'm worthless
- Everything is hopeless



Body reaction

- Fatigue
- Slowed down
- Do less
- Stay in bed/home
- Disinterest
- Can't concentrate
- Changes in eating
- Changes in sleeping



Thinking differently

- Is this fact or opinion?
- I'm looking through those 'gloomy specs' again.
- It's okay to feel sad about this situation, but I can get through it.
- This doesn't mean I'm a worthless person. What would be a more helpful way of looking at things?
- What would I say to a friend in this situation?
- Even though I feel bad, if I do something anyway – I'll feel better.



Doing differently

- Do things anyway – in spite of how I'm feeling.
- Get up. Get out.
- Do something enjoyable or useful.
- If unmotivated, try an activity for just 5 minutes.
- Be with or contact others.
- Focus attention outside of me and my situation.



Imagine...

In your mind's eye, see yourself doing and enjoying the things you used to or would like to enjoy doing, and successfully doing what you need to do.

Visualise orange for positive energy.
Breathe in orange, and breathe out blue/black.



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The Poisoned Parrot

Imagine you're given a parrot. This parrot is just a parrot - it doesn't have any knowledge, wisdom or insight. It's bird-brained after all. It recites things 'parrot fashion' - without any understanding or comprehension. It's a parrot.



However, this particular parrot is a poisoned and poisonous parrot. It's been specifically trained to be unhelpful to you, continuously commenting on you and your life, in a way that constantly puts you down, criticising you.

For example, the bus gets stuck in a traffic jam, and you arrive at work 5 minutes late. The parrot sits there saying: "There you go again. Late. You just can't manage to get there on time can you. So stupid. If you'd left the house and got the earlier bus you'd have arrived



with loads of time to spare and the boss would be happy. But you? No way. Just can't do it. Useless. Waste of space. Absolutely pathetic!"

How long would you put up with this abuse before throwing a towel over the cage, or getting rid of the parrot?

Yet we can often put up with the thoughts from this internal bully for far too long. Decades. We hear that 'parrot', believe the 'parrot', and naturally get upset. That then affects the way we live our lives - the way we behave towards others, how we are, what we think about others, what we think about the world, and how we think and feel about ourselves.



Who do you think you are..!

We can learn to use the antidote: just notice that parrot, and cover the cage! "There's that parrot again. I don't have to listen to it - it's just a parrot". Then go and do something else. Put your focus of attention on something other than that parrot. This parrot is poison though, and it won't give up easily, so you'll need to keep using that antidote and be persistent in your practice!



Eventually it will get tired of the towel, tired of you not responding. You'll notice it less and less. It might just give up its poison as your antidote overcomes it, or perhaps fly off to wherever poisoned parrots go.

Adapted from "The Malevolent Parrot" - Kristina Ivings

Thought Record Sheet (self-compassion)

Triggering events, feelings or images	Unhelpful thoughts and images (and their meaning)	Feelings (name the emotion or feeling)	Self-compassionate alternatives to unhelpful thoughts & images	Outcome: Understanding and change in feelings. What I did that helped.
<p><i>What, where, when, who with?</i></p> <p><i>What actually happened? What was the trigger?</i></p>	<p><i>What went through your mind at that time?</i></p> <p><i>What are you thinking about others and what they might be thinking about you?</i></p> <p><i>What are you thinking about yourself and your future?</i></p>	<p><i>What are/were your main feelings and emotions at that time?</i></p>	<p><i>What would you say to a friend in this situation? What would a caring friend say to you about this?</i></p> <p><i>Is there another way of looking at this? Is this fact or opinion?</i></p> <p><i>What is the evidence for this new perspective?</i></p> <p><i>In what way is this an example of self-compassion?</i></p>	<p><i>Write down any change in your feelings, and what you did that helped. (e.g. notice and change focus of attention)</i></p>

4.	Most days my pain keeps me from doing much at all	
5.	I go slower and work at a steady pace when I'm doing things	
6.	Once I start an activity I keep going until it is done	
7.	I limit my activities to the ones that I know will not make my pain worse	
8.	When I do an activity I break it into small parts and do 1 part at a time	
9.	I just ignore my pain and keep doing what I'm doing as long as I can	
10.	Because of my pain most days I spend more time resting than doing activities	
11.	I keep going until I can't stand the pain anymore	
12.	Instead of doing an activity all at once I do a little bit at a time	
13.	I don't start an activity if I know it will make my pain worse	
14.	I do extra on days when my pain is less	
15.	I remember to stop and take breaks when I'm doing an activity	
16.	If I know that something will make my pain worse I don't do it anymore	
17.	When I do an activity I do the whole thing all at once	
18.	Instead of doing the whole activity I divide it into small parts and do 1 part at a time	
19.	I've cut back my activities by not doing the ones that make my pain worse	
20.	When I do an activity I work for a while, take a break, and then go back to work again	
21.	Some days I do a lot, other days I don't do much	

Avoidance: 2, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19

Overdoing: 1, 6, 9, 11, 14, 17, 21

Pacing: 3, 5, 8, 12, 15, 18, 20

Adapted from **Patterns of Activity Measure – Pain (POAM-P)**

Pain-related Activity Patterns (Cane et al, 2013) *Clinical Journal of Pain* 2013; 29; 435-442