

Managing anxiety or low mood after a cardiac event or condition

What are anxiety and low mood?

After a cardiac event it is normal to go through a number of emotions, until a new balance is found ([see section on adjustment](#)). However, some people can start to feel stuck at some point in this process. We can all feel low for a day or two at a time but if this goes on constantly for more than two weeks this can lead to anxiety or depression. With around a third of people experiencing this at some point in their first year post event.

Common signs of depression may include: feeling helpless or hopeless about the future, feeling sad or weepy, feeling angry, experiencing less pleasure in activities, or withdrawing from others and putting things off. Common signs of anxiety include difficulty relaxing, excessive worry, difficulty concentrating and avoidance of previous activities. For more information about these see the [NHS and BHF leaflets](#).

For most people this will improve, and cardiac rehabilitation can play a big part in this. One way of managing anxiety and low mood is called the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy approach.

What is the Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) approach?

The CBT approach is based on the idea that our emotional reactions are often caused not so much by the situation as by our thoughts about the situation. Lets look at an example.

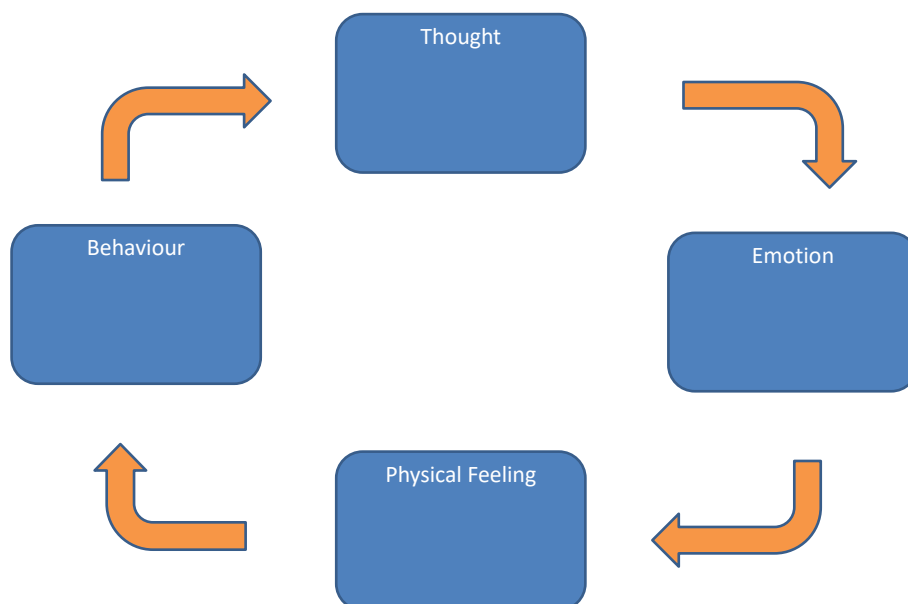
Imagine that its the middle of the night, dark, and you are suddenly awakened by a crash downstairs. Your thoughts run fast. “What if there is a burglar in the house?”, “Will they be dangerous?”, “What should I do?”, “Should I lock the bedroom door and phone the police, or wake my partner and go down to confront the burglar”. You are anxious. How are you feeling physically at that

moment? Your heart is racing, your mind is racing ahead on the danger. Your arms are tense ready for action and your breathing is heavy.

Then.... it comes back to you. Your son agreed yesterday to look after the neighbour's dog for the night. Your thoughts might then change. "It'll be the dog that caused the crash". "That vase I left on the kitchen table must have fallen". How are you feeling now? Less anxious. Your heart rate and breathing slow down. Now you can go downstairs on your own and check that the dog is alright.

The crash noise was the same. Two different sets of thoughts were linked to different emotional and physical reactions, and to two behaviours. The CBT approach looks at the links between our thoughts, emotions, physical reactions and behaviours.

CBT approach



Using a CBT approach we can become more aware of how our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and behaviours are connected. If we are getting

stuck into an unhelpful cycle, we can learn ways to break into this and change it. We can learn new ways to approach behaviour which has become unhelpful and learn ways to notice, step back and observe our thoughts (rather than accept them as facts) and try to think about a situation in a more balanced and helpful way.

How can this help people after a cardiac event?

Cardiac rehabilitation Lothian specialists are trained to help you to get back on track using approaches like CBT. They help you to learn skills that have helped other patients. You can use those which are most helpful for you .

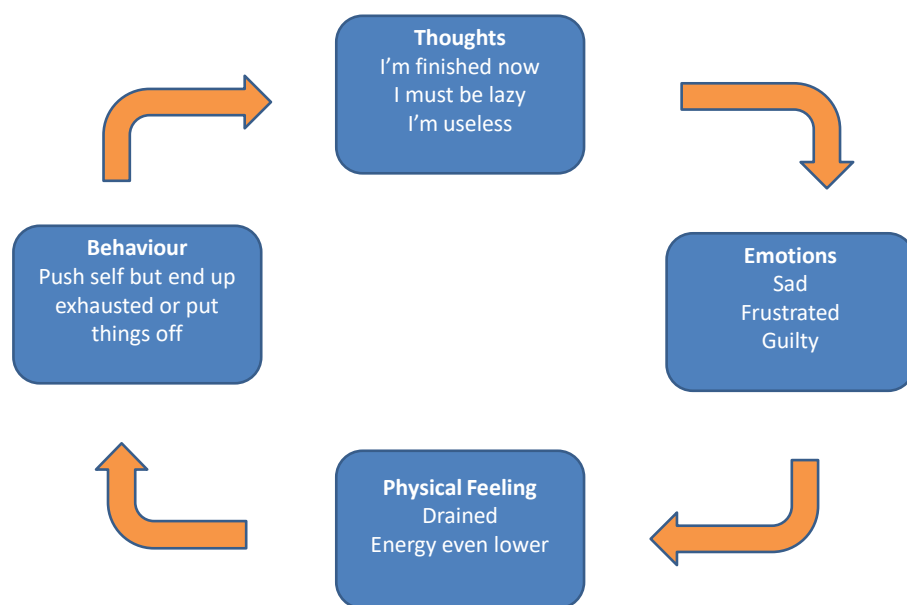
Examples of patient's experiences

Low mood - Peter's story

Peter is aged 50 and was active until a few months before his cardiac bypass operation. He enjoyed gardening and walking the dog. He had made a good physical recovery from his operation and was pleased that he no longer had chest pains. However, Peter was feeling fatigued and was battling against this. He felt frustrated and started to feel down and low. He was telling himself, "I'm not going to get back to normal", "this is hopeless", "I'm finished now". He knew other people who had recovered more quickly from operations and told himself "I should be able to do what they are doing" ,"if I can't do that then I must be lazy". Peter started to feel less motivated to start jobs in the garden as he worried that he wouldn't finish them the way he used to. He used to be very independent and became angry and irritable when his wife invited his two sons round to do the jobs for him. He told her that having things done for him made him feel "useless", telling himself " I should be able to cope on my own".

Peter was getting into a cycle of unhelpful thoughts and frustration, which was leading him to either push himself too hard resulting in fatigue or to feel hopeless and put things off. This led to less satisfaction and enjoyment in life and his mood is going down.

Cognitive Behavioural Illustration



When Peter started work with the cardiac rehabilitation specialist he was given information about fatigue, which can be common after a cardiac operation. His was given information on **pacing** to manage activity and behaviour without flaring up his fatigue. He was worried about his irritability and agreed to try some **relaxation** exercises to see if this would help. Peter was also encouraged to step back and look at his thoughts and how these were affecting his mood and behaviour. Peter was encouraged to ask himself what he would advise a relative or friend to do in his situation (i.e. with **more compassion**). He realised that he was thinking in a very **all or nothing** or **black and white way** about how well he was doing at the moment and that this wasn't helpful. He needed

to begin by getting back to activity in a gradual/graded way. He realised that **comparing himself negatively to others** was also not helpful as this also put unnecessary pressure on him. He reflected that he was expecting himself to coping with this event in the way that he had coped with problems in the past, telling himself that he must cope on his own. Maybe this new situation needed a fresh approach and to **let go of the old rules**. He decided to allow himself to work with the cardiac specialist and also to accept help from friends and family for a while, to see whether this helped to kickstart his activities again.

Peter began to set himself smaller manageable goals and to allow himself to rest in between. Rather than start and finish a task in one go, he spread tasks over several days to make them manageable. Peter invited a friend to help him with a heavier task, telling the friend that he needed his help **“just for the time being”**. He enjoyed the company and was pleased with the job they got done. By the end of two weeks Peter felt that he had achieved something, and began to feel more satisfied and realised he was becoming more confident and looking forward a little bit more to the next activity.

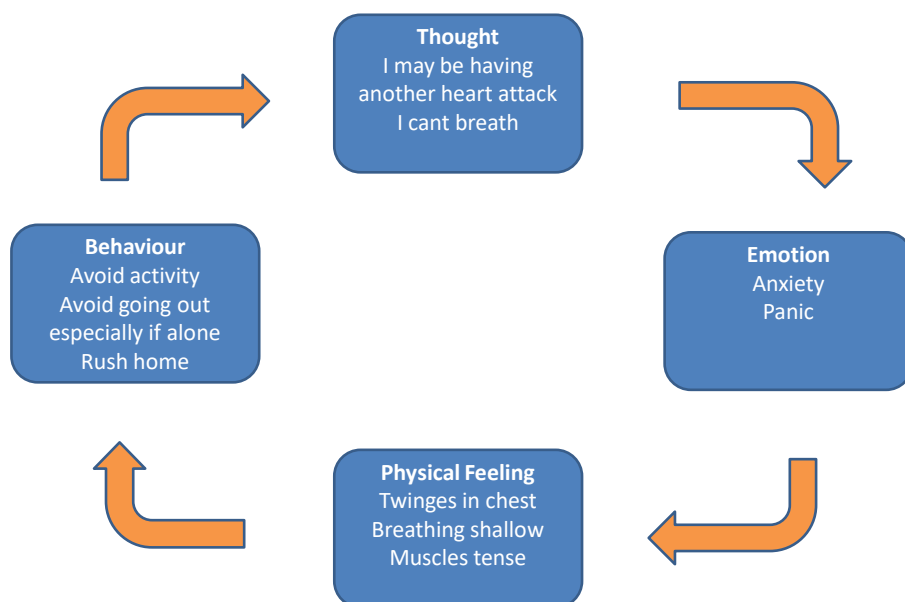
Anxiety - Fiona's story

Fiona is 45 years old and has two children living at home and a part time job. Her heart attack came totally out of the blue for her. She has been told that she has made a good physical recovery from the heart attack. She had a stent inserted and has been told that the function of her heart muscle was good.

When Fiona got home from hospital she started to feel anxious. She noticed occasional niggles in her chest when watching TV and asked her GP about these. The GP told her that these are not cardiac. But she still wondered what they were. Her family told her not to do **“too much”**. Fiona became very aware of her heart beat and any feeling in her chest area. If there was any change in that area she started to think **“Is this it?”**, **“I could have another heart attack”**. She worried about going away from the house as she did not want strangers to see her or ask her how she was. She therefore stayed at home and avoided

going out beyond her street unless her husband was with her. She would check her heart rate frequently. However, she noticed that the anxiety was not going away. She started to feel irritable if the children were noisy. If people were around when she was out, she often started to feel breathless and worried “**I won’t be able to breathe**”. She would then rush home as quickly as possible.

Cognitive Behavioural Illustration



When Fiona started working with the cardiac rehabilitation specialist she was given information about **the stress reaction** after an event like a heart attack. She talked with the specialist about her hyper focus on her chest and heart. They agreed that although this was natural and had seemed protective at first, her alarm system was now over firing and aware of even small normal changes in the body. She was given information about panic. She also talked with the specialist about the positive changes which she had made to her diet and the

medications she was taking which she knew were reducing her risk of another heart attack.

With this new information Fiona looked for other ways to explain the symptoms of breathlessness or short quick pains. She realised that she had been **jumping to the worst possible conclusion** without having the full information.

To help her manage this stress reaction, Fiona learnt some **relaxation** techniques and breathing techniques which she found particularly helpful. She stopped **checking her heart rate** so frequently and noticed that this helped her to worry less and become less anxious. Fiona realised that, although staying at home seemed easier in the short term, it was not helping to solve her anxiety in the long run. She decided to set herself some small graded steps towards increasing her activity and confidence.

Final comments

CBT is one of the approaches which has been shown to be effective and helpful for people with low mood or anxiety after health events such as heart conditions. If you are feeling depressed or anxious talk to your GP or cardiac rehabilitation specialist (or if you need to talk to someone out of GP hours phone 111). We will ask you about your experiences and try to help you to find the approach which will be most helpful to you.