

# Session 4

## Avoidance



In this session we will focus on *avoidance* and how it keeps PTSD symptoms going.

Let's start by listening to the *progressive muscle relaxation* track.



## Emily's experience of avoidance:

Emily hasn't left the house much recently. At first this was because she was in too much pain, but now she just doesn't want to go out.

She doesn't feel safe outside of the house so will only leave if she absolutely has to. Her



partner and mother have been a big help and have taken care of most things so she doesn't often have to leave the house.

On the few occasions Emily has left the house, she's walked to the local shop and straight back. She's noticed that she felt on **high alert** the whole time.

Emily hasn't been in a car since her accident and is **making excuses** to her partner as to why she hasn't tried out her replacement car yet.

She's also been **avoiding** watching TV programs such as police dramas (a former favourite) as they often have scene of cars driving quickly or dangerously.

One of Emily's main **worries** is how she is going to get to work, as she has no access to public transport.

**Avoidance** is when we stay away from something. We can **avoid**: places, people, objects or even smells.

People tend to **avoid** because it **reminds** them of their trauma or makes them feel **frightened**.

**What is Emily currently avoiding?**

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## Different ways Emily is avoiding

Not thinking or talking about what happened	Staying away from cars (and other triggers)
Pushing people away	Not leaving the house unless necessary
Not watching TV programs with fast driving cars	Keeping her mind busy

It's easy for us to get stuck in *avoiding*, because no one wants to feel *frightened* or *distressed*.

Avoidance can work in the short term, but in the long term can mean PTSD symptoms continue because:

- Memories remain unprocessed
- Beliefs go unchallenged

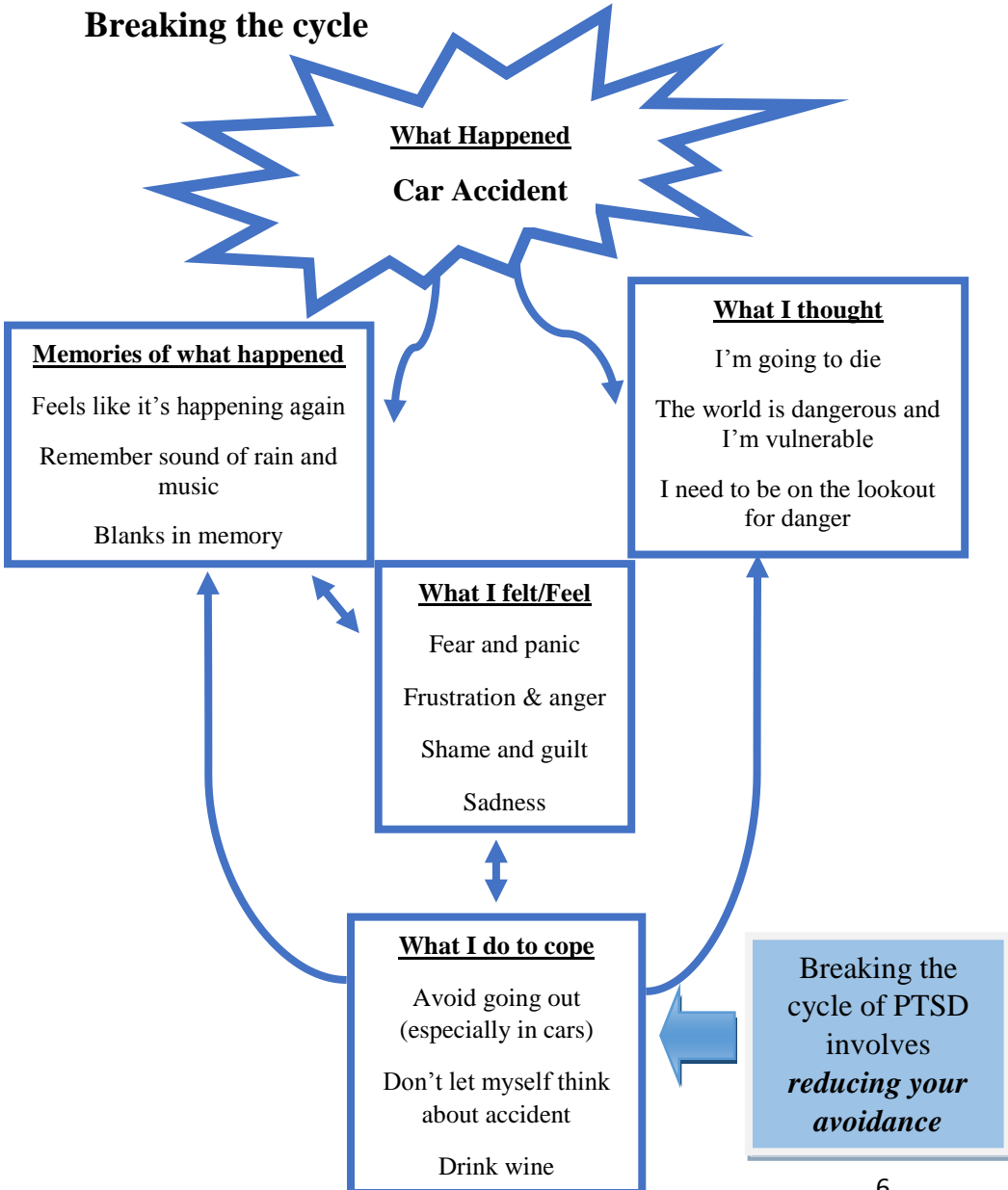
## Are you an expert avoider?

Try to list anything that you are currently avoiding:

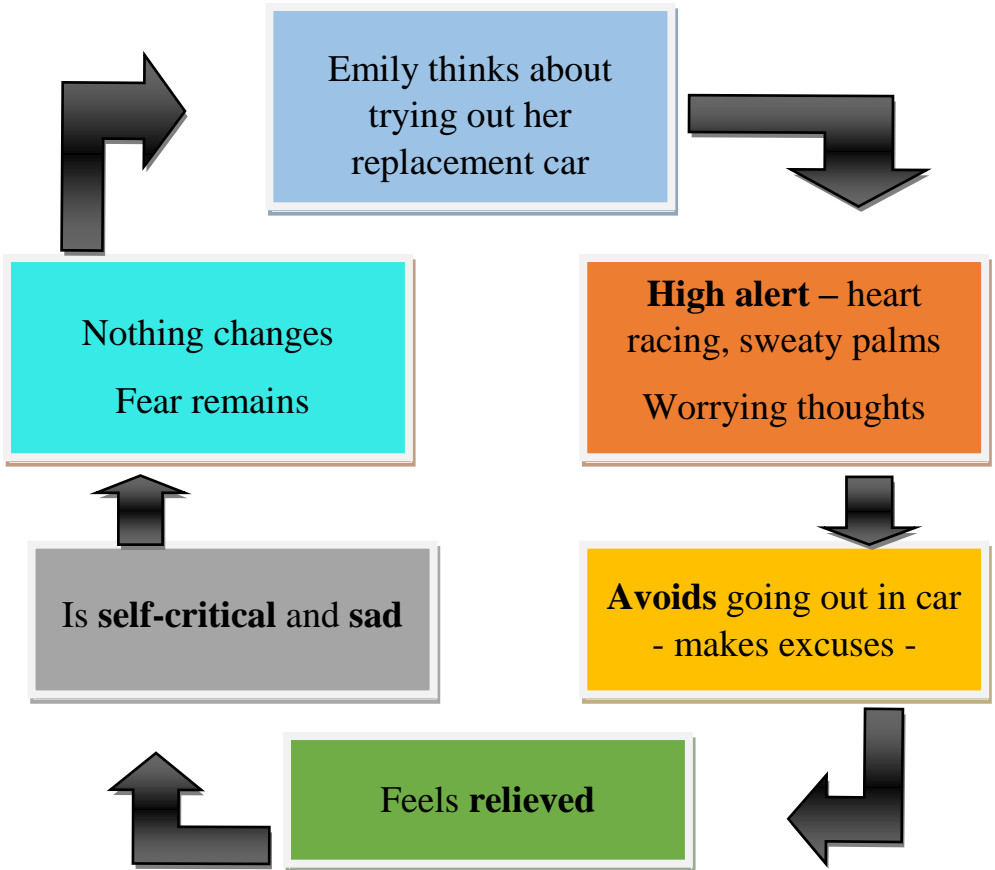

Please watch the video on *avoidance* to find out more.

# Avoidance keeps PTSD going

## Breaking the cycle



## Emily's avoidance cycle



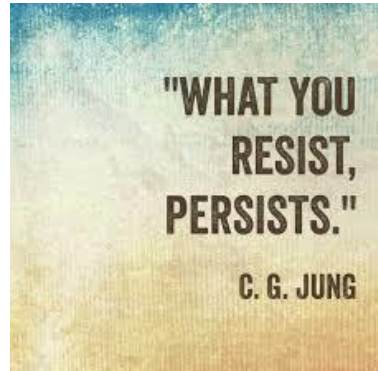
Over time you *learn* to *avoid* situations which make you feel on *high alert*.

However, avoiding stops you learning that you *can cope*.

## The role of exposure

*Avoidance* keeps PTSD going.

However, if you learn to *face your fears*, over time you will feel *less distressed*.



*Exposure* is when you practice facing your fears in a *safe* and *controlled way*.

If you *pay attention* to distressing thoughts or *stay* in situations which make you anxious, eventually *your distress will reduce*.

**Exposure** should be:

**Gradual**

**Repeated**

**Prolonged**



## Graded Exposure Hierarchy

A graded exposure hierarchy is a list of activities you might avoid because they are distressing.

We use a rating scale called *SUDS* - Subjective Units of Distress to rate how distressing an activity might be.

1 is the least distressing and 10 is the most distressing.

### Emily's hierarchy:

<b>SUDS</b>	<b>Exposure task</b>
10	Driving alone to work
9	Driving to work with partner
8	Driving on motorway alone
7	Driving on motorway with partner
6	Driving to mum's house (15 minutes)
5	Driving to the local shop (5 minutes)
4	Driving around the block (2 minutes)
3	Sitting in the car with engine on (10 minutes)
2	Sitting in the car with engine off (10 minutes)
1	Watching videos of cars driving fast

## Designing your own hierarchy

Have a go at designing your own hierarchy; this will be discussed in the next session. Remember to make it *gradual* and *realistic*.

SUDS	Exposure task
10	
9	
8	
7	
6	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

Please wait until you've discussed your hierarchy before beginning exposure tasks.

## Top tips for exposure

*Exposure* can be scary and difficult.  
If you stick at it, your *distress* will *reduce*.

When practicing exposure be careful not to use *avoidance* (e.g. Emily distracting herself by playing with her phone while in the car)

You need to *stay* in the situation until your *SUD*'s have *reduced* by at least *half*

Focus on making *small* and *continuous progress* rather than aiming for big leaps forward

## Exposure task

To complete in group session and try out before Session 5

**Exposure task:** \_\_\_\_\_

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*(It's important to be specific about the task you choose)*

**What do I think will happen?** \_\_\_\_\_

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<b>SUDS before (1 -10)</b>	
<b>Highest SUDS during exposure (1-10)</b>	
<b>SUDS after (1-10)</b>	

**What did I learn?** \_\_\_\_\_

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# Visualisation

Visualisation based relaxation practices can help reduce feelings of threat and give you rest from being on high alert.



It takes time and practice to get the most out of this technique.

Please listen to the *place of calm* audio track where you'll be guided to imagine being in a place where you feel *calm* and *content*.

