

Session 3

Being on 'high alert'

In this session we will explore:

- Over-arousal
- Anger
- Self-medication
- Self-harm



...and what keeps these difficulties ongoing.



Let's start by
listening to the
mindfulness
practice with an
external focus.

Being on high alert

It is common for people who have experienced a traumatic event to often feel *under threat*.

This feeling is connected to our threat system (fight & flight).

You might feel on edge, overwhelmed, irritable and on the lookout for danger.

Being on high alert can negatively affect:

- Sleep
- Appetite
- Sexual functioning
- Memory and concentration
- Relationships

Emily's experience of being on high alert

Since the car accident Emily often feels very tense, on edge and finds herself jumping at the smallest things.



She's waiting for something bad to happen.

Sudden or loud noises make Emily's heart start racing and makes her feel quite panicky. Recently, Emily has found herself becoming startled and feeling very frightened when her son is playing his PlayStation too loudly.

At times, she loses her temper and shouts at him angrily, which is very out of character for her.

Things which remind her of the car accident such as the sound of rain or certain songs tend to make her feel more anxious and alert.

She has also been struggling to fall asleep; she will often lie in bed feeling wide awake.

Emily has recently been drinking wine more regularly at night to try and get to sleep, but this has also been leading to some arguments with her partner.

When she has felt angry, Emily has occasionally thrown objects such as mugs across the room breaking them.

Please watch the being on *high alert* video to learn more.

What keeps these difficulties ongoing?

After a traumatic event, you may *feel* like you're in danger even when you're safe.

Therefore, we're often *on the lookout for possible danger*, and this turns on our threat system.

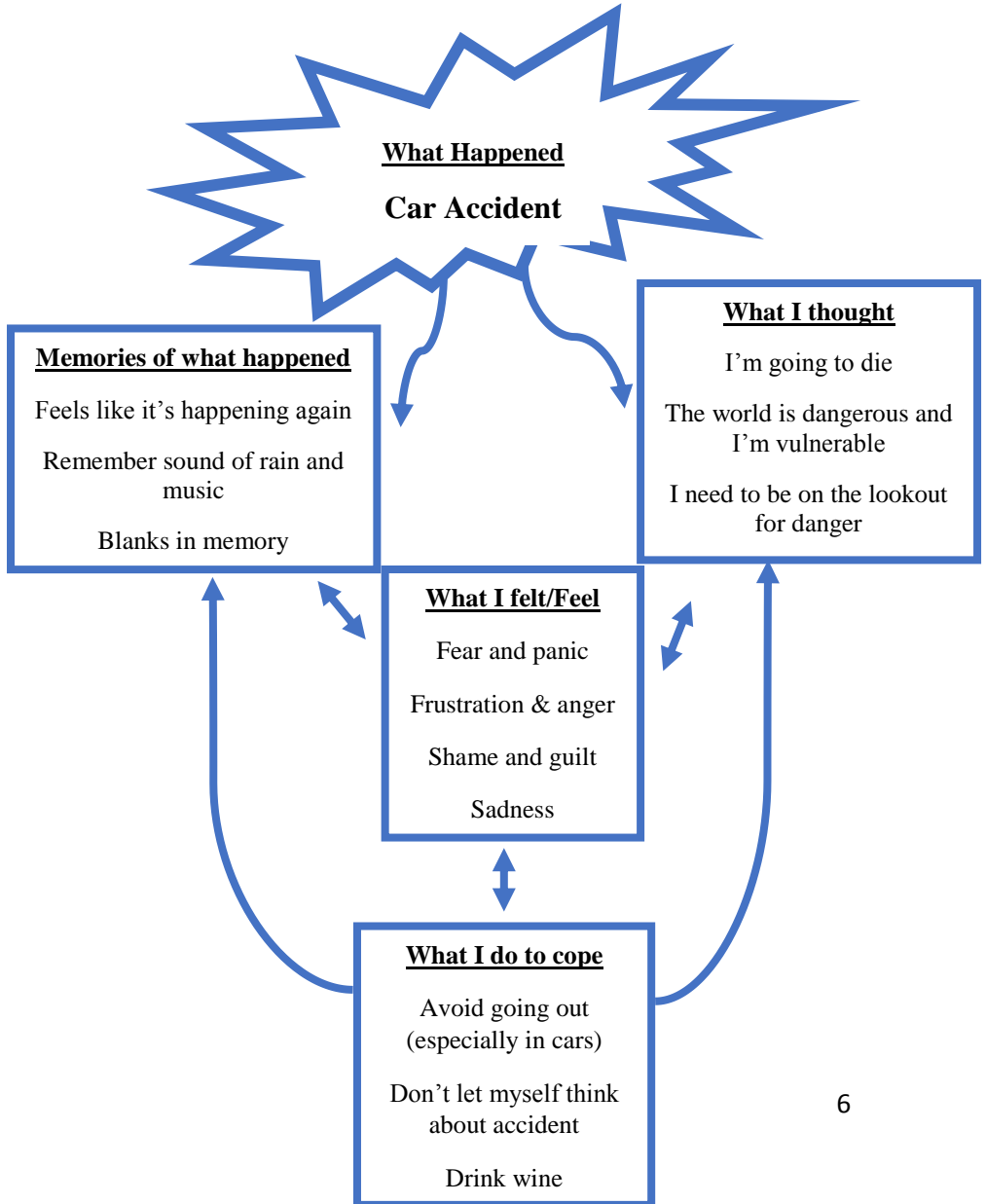
Being in your threat system is uncomfortable. When you feel frightened, overwhelmed or angry you will naturally do something to try to reduce these negative feelings.

We call these behaviours *coping strategies*.

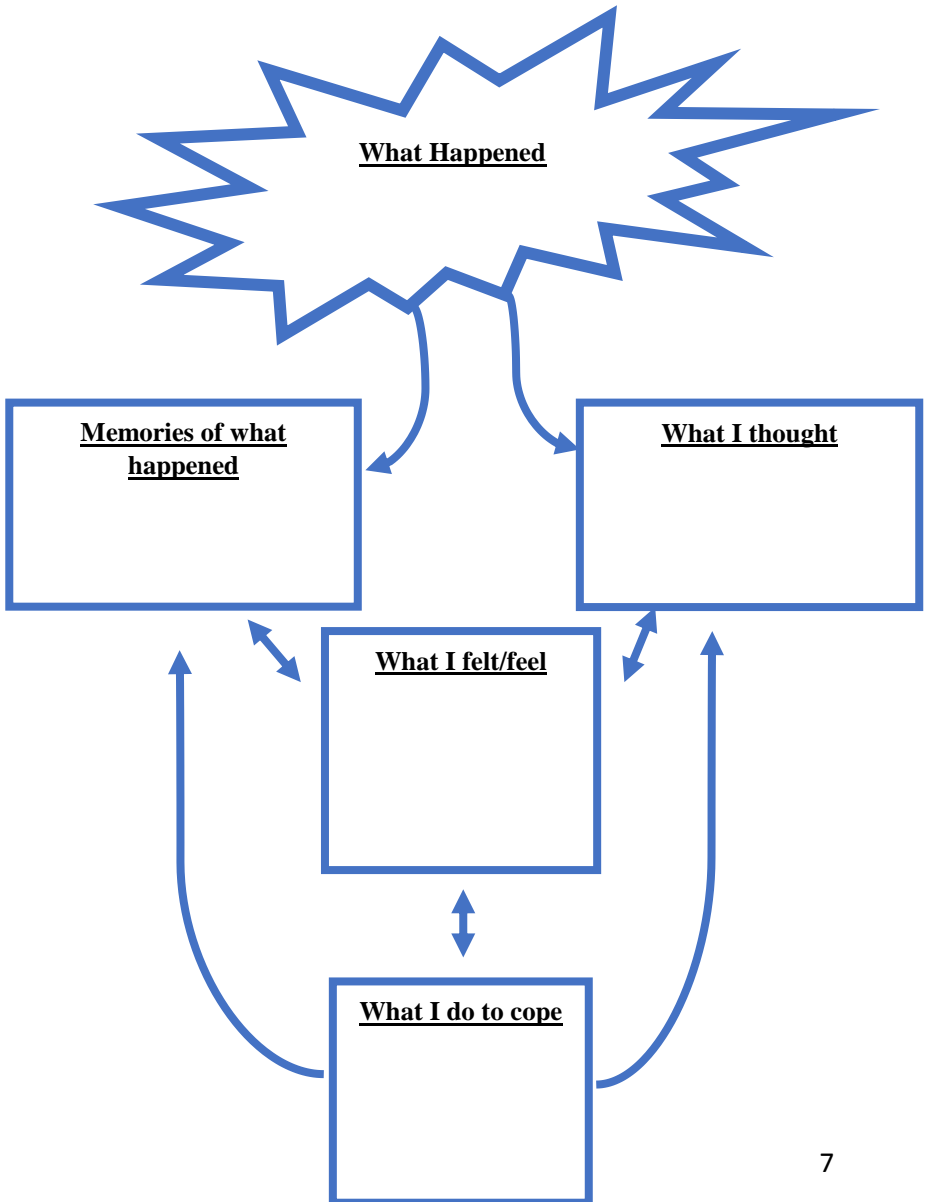
Some of these strategies might be quite useful; however, others might work in the short term but have *unhelpful consequences* in the long term.

The next page starts to make sense of Emily's experience. We'll talk more about this in the next group session and you can then have a go filling in the blank diagram on the page after.

Making sense of Emily's traumatic experiences and symptoms



Making sense of my own trauma



Anger



Anger and increased *irritability* are common reactions to a traumatic event.

Feeling on *high alert* and *under threat* makes our bodies go into a survival mode and we are more likely to feel *angry*.

Sometimes anger feels like a safer emotion to experience than sadness, fear, shame or guilt.

Anger doesn't always look the same, some people may shout while others may go quiet.

Emily's experience of anger

Emily has recently started becoming angry and shouting at her son when he is playing his video games too loudly. She has also occasionally thrown objects such as mugs across the room breaking them.

Metaphor for anger – a boiling pot

Imagine a pot of water on the hob

As the heat increases the water begins to boil

Life stress increases the level of the water



With more stress and heat, the water spills over
→ similar to having an *angry outburst*.

If we can remove some water, or lower the heat,
this can be avoided.

When you start feeling angry

Try the **STOPP** technique!

Stop (take a moment)

Take a Breath

Observe (what are you thinking?)

Pull back (to gain some perspective)

Practise and proceed (relaxation/other skills)

Please watch the next video which talks about the *STOPP technique* in more detail.

Exercise can also help reduce some of the physical sensations which accompany anger

Once you feel less angry, it can be helpful to:

- Speak to someone you trust
- Do something creative

Please watch the next video on *anger* to find out more.

Self-medication and risk-taking behaviours

People who have experienced a traumatic experience may use *alcohol* and *drugs* to try to cope with difficult trauma symptoms.

However, this can have *unhelpful consequences*.



Other **risky behaviour** may include:

- sexual activity
- dangerous driving
- risky sports without proper training

In the short term these may improve mood or avoid difficult memories; however, in the long term they can have *unhelpful consequences*.


If you do things which are *risky* or *dangerous*, let's think how you could make them safer.

Unhelpful behaviour	Safer options
<i>Drinking wine every night to help me sleep.</i>	<i>Gradually reduce alcohol intake. Practice relaxation.</i>
<i>Throwing/breaking cups when I am feeling angry.</i>	<i>Try punching a pillow or doing some exercise.</i>

Self Harm

Self-harm can take many different forms and people can do it for many reasons.

Please add any reasons you might *self-harm*.

Express or cope with emotional distress			To get rid of feeling numb
			To avoid difficult memories
To relieve feelings of tension			
To punish myself		To try and get support from others	To feel more in control

Sometimes people who *self-harm* have thoughts about ending their life.

If you have thoughts connected to *suicide*, it's important you tell someone.

Here are some **emergency numbers** if needed:

Your GP - _____



NHS 24 – 111

Mental Health Assessment Service -
0131 537 6000 (24 hours)



SAMARITANS

The Samaritans - 116 123 (24 hours)

Breathing Space - 0800 83 85 87 (6pm – 2am
Mon – Thurs, Friday 6pm – Monday 6am)



Shout (crisis text line): text 'shout' to
85258

You can also speak to one of the facilitators of this group.

Reducing self-harm

It is important to identify things other than self-harm that can help when you feel *overwhelmed*.

It's good to have different options and to match what you *do* to how you *feel*.

You may self-harm to:

- express pain and intense emotions
- deal with anger
- feel something when you are feeling numb
- to cause pain in order to calm yourself
- to see blood

The next page has some different ideas to try.

Please fill in the blank circles with other strategies that you would like to try.

Please watch the next video on *self-harm* to find out more.

Some ideas to replace self-harming

Soothing
breathing

If you're angry,
punch a pillow,
scream, run fast

Listen
to
music

Write down
difficult
feelings and
rip them up

Draw a red line
where you
would have cut
yourself

Speak to
someone
you trust

Go for a
walk,
sit outside,
do yoga

If you feel
numb, hold
an ice cube
in your hand

Draw or
paint how
you're
feeling

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is technique that can help reduce feelings of threat and reduce some of the physical feelings of anxiety.

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

Please listen to the *progressive muscle relaxation* audio track to guide you through this practice.



