

# survive & thrive

moving forward from interpersonal trauma

Week 09

Understanding flashbacks, nightmares  
and dissociation and coping with these

# Welcome back

- Any questions from last week?
- Any feedback on the exercises?
  - Successes?
  - Things you may have needed to rethink?
- Thinking about the end of the course, are there still things you need from us?



# What we will cover today

- What are flashbacks and nightmares?
- What is dissociation?
- Switching on
- Coping with flashbacks and nightmares

# Getting into the 'green zone'



# What are flashbacks and nightmares?

- This is a terrifying experience where the person feels as though the trauma is happening again. It is different from bad memories where you know you are remembering something.
- Nightmares are similar, but where the images come while you are sleeping. You will often wake up disorientated and distressed.

# What is dissociation?

- Dissociation is when in order to cope with a bad experience we ‘switch off’ our awareness.
- People often describe:
  - Blanking out
  - Spacing out
  - Numbing out

# Why dissociate?

When someone hurts us and we cannot do anything to prevent it, we need to cope. Dissociation is a survival trick which makes the unbearable bearable.





# If it ain't broke, don't fix it

- If you are occasionally not 'present' this is not going to be a problem. However, some survivors have found that since they learned to switch off as a child, they are still doing that if stressed in adulthood.
- This can make things tricky, trying to keep track of everything...

# If dissociation is a problem

- Things difficult to keep straight
- Difficult to keep appointments
- Haven't got other coping mechanisms
- Losing chunks of time
- Not sure how things got there...
- Missing memories
- Confused

# Flashback, nightmare and dissociation

- You may need specialist help to recover from these difficulties.
- This is intended to be a beginners, guide to understanding and coping with these difficulties.

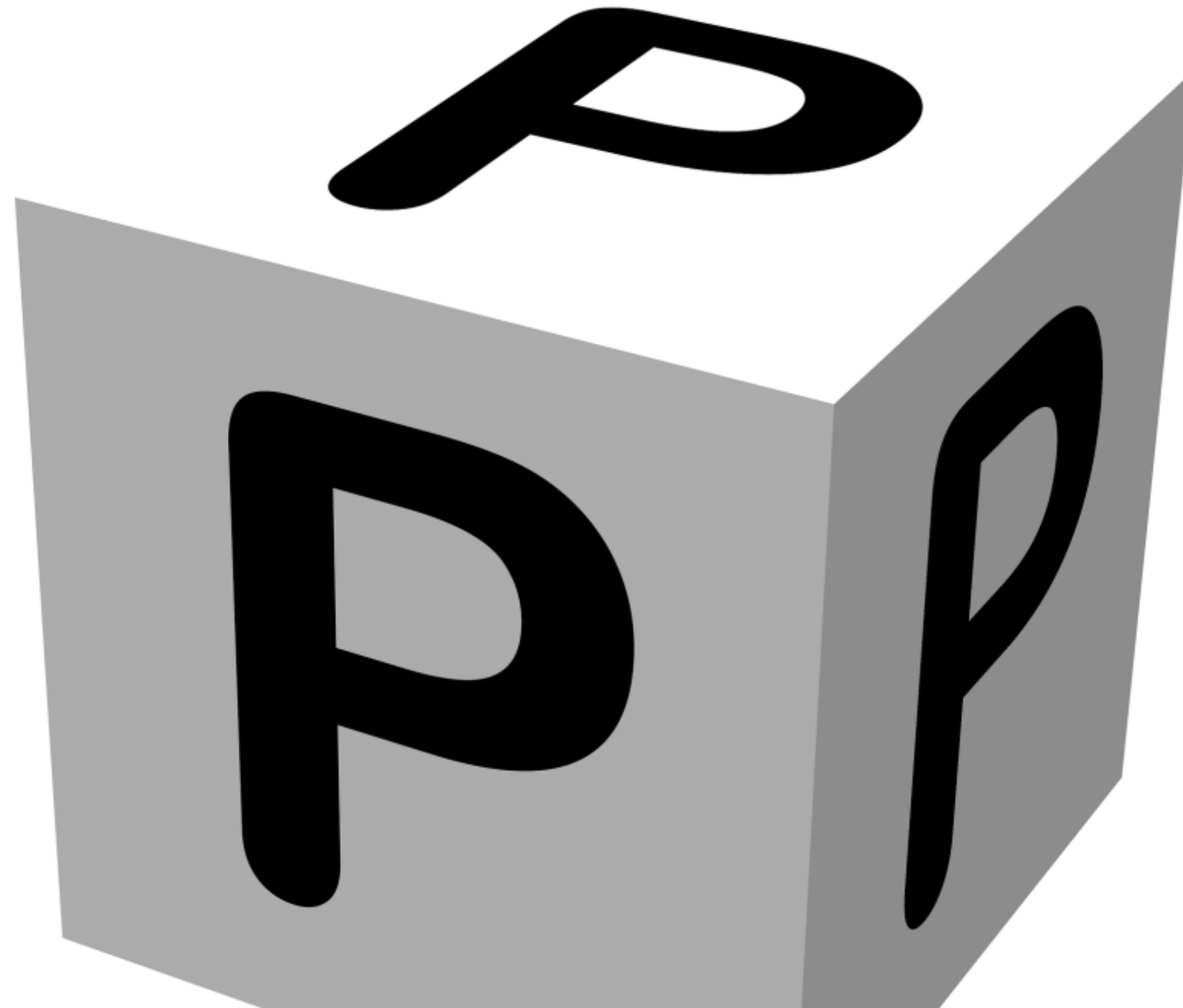


# Understanding flashbacks, nightmares and dissociation

- Use the diary form that is at the back of this week's key points workbook.
- Use this to try to work out patterns and what worked and didn't work

# The 3 Ps

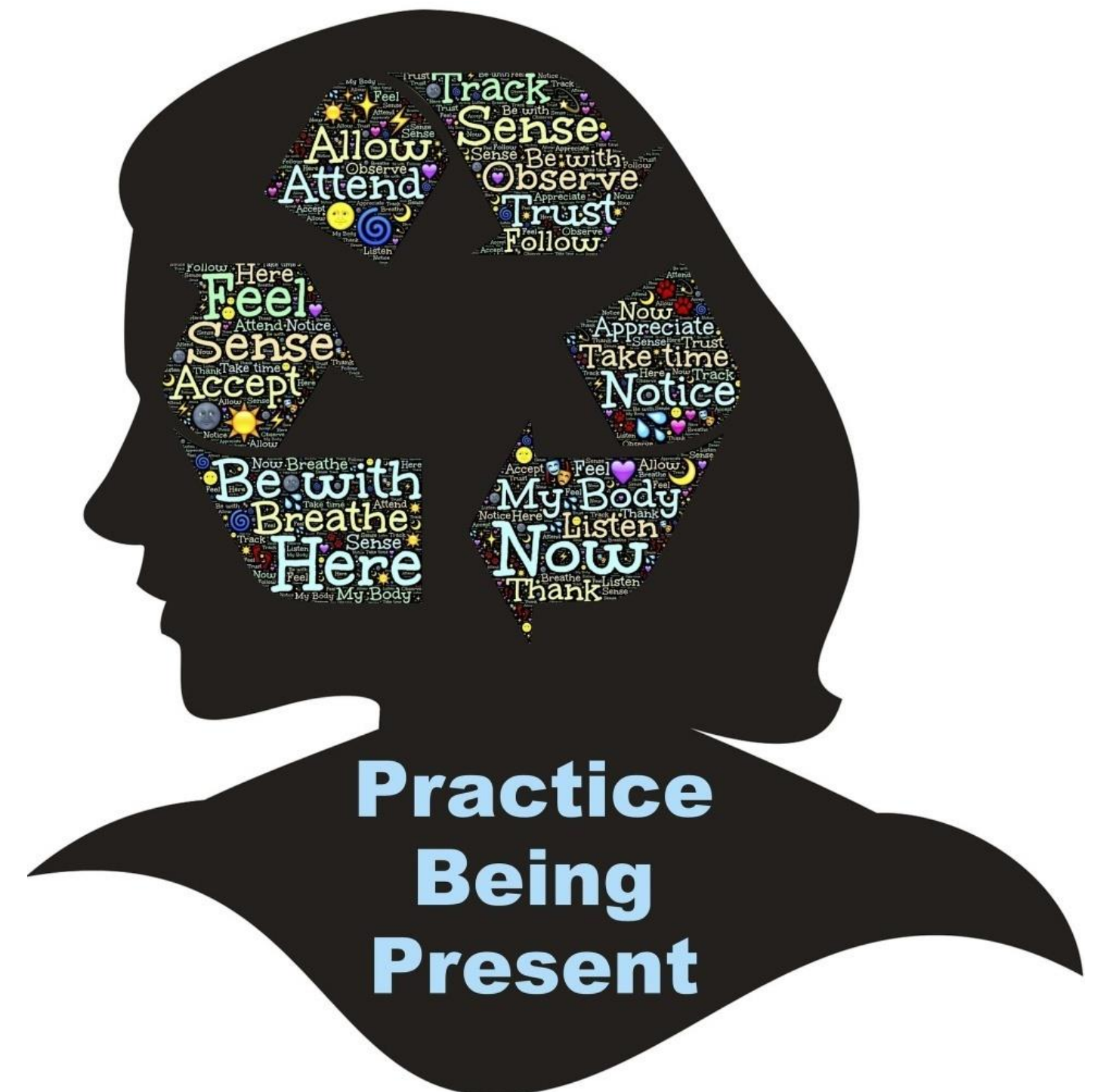
- Preparation
- Practice
- Patience



# Switching on

## How to switch on:

- Mindfulness
- Grounding
- Doing something—shower, stamping feet, cool cloth on the face
- Breathe (mindfully)
- Have a grounding object
- Focus on something else



# Coping with flashbacks

(Briere 2006)

- Identify what is happening—*‘this is a flashback’*
- Helpful questions to ask yourself
  - Does this thought/feeling/sensation ‘make sense’ in terms of what is happening to me right now?
  - Are these thoughts and feelings too intense to be dealing with just now?
  - Is this a situation I am usually triggered?

# Coping with flashbacks

(Briere 2006)

## Find the trigger:

- Try to think about the current situation and what it is that is ‘setting this off’.
- It might be things like interpersonal conflict, someone similar to my abuser, a particular smell or sound, a sexual feeling.
- You might need to do a bit of detective work, keep a diary.



# Coping with flashbacks

(Briere 2006)

## Dealing with it:

- Accept some need to avoid (e.g. someone angry or drunk).
- Really try to understand why this trigger is difficult.
- Call in your support system, tell someone what is happening.
- Self soothing.

# Coping with flashbacks

(Briere 2006)

## Dealing with it:

- Positive self talk '*I am safe*', '*It's in the past*'
- Distract yourself
- Can you 'stay with the memory' and not avoid it?



# Take some time to practice...



# A final thought

“I never think of the future  
—it comes soon enough.”

**Albert Einstein**