

Session 2

Coping with difficult symptoms

In this session we will explore the:

- Window of Tolerance
- Three main symptoms of re-experiencing associated with PTSD:
 - Flashbacks
 - Nightmares
 - Dissociation (zoning out)

This booklet explains each of these and offers a *range of strategies* on how to help manage difficult symptoms. The videos provide further explanation.

Please pick *one strategy at a time* and practice this for a few days before moving onto another one.

Let's start by listening to our *soothing rhythm breathing* practice.



Window of Tolerance



OVER-AROUSSED: overwhelmed, on-edge, irritable, angry, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, fight/flight response

FUNCTIONING WELL:

In our “comfort zone”

We think rationally and manage our emotions,
We respond to everyday demands without too much difficulty

UNDER-AROUSSED: low mood, disconnected or shut-down (dissociated), numb, less active, less assertive and less able to express our own needs, freeze response

Please watch the video about the *Window of Tolerance* to find out more.

This understanding will be useful as we go on to describe common PTSD symptoms and consider helpful strategies.

Emily's story

In the first group session, we discussed Emily's story. Throughout the group we will use her experiences to consider different ways that PTSD can manifest and strategies that can help.

If you are looking ahead in the booklet prior to our group session, please note that the following story is about Emily's road traffic accident and subsequent difficulties, some of which you may relate to, depending on your own experiences.

While her story is not aimed to trigger difficult feelings and memories, it might. Feel free to use the breathing practice again if you want to connect back the present moment.

Emily's story

Background:

Emily is 36 year accountant and mother of one. She lives with her partner and their six year old son. Emily has worked at the same accounting firm for the last 10 years and makes the same 20 minute commute to work each day using her own car.

Emily enjoys her job and has a good relationship with her line manger and notes they have been supportive previously. She has a good relationship with her partner of eight years, but notes they can often argue. Emily has a good group of friends and has a good relationship with her mother who she sees every week.

Traumatic incident:

Six months ago, Emily left work at her usual time and was driving home like normal on the motorway. It was raining heavily and the car in front of Emily braked suddenly, causing both cars to collide. Emily's car was written off in this crash and she was taken to hospital in an ambulance and kept in overnight.

Emily was discharged from the hospital the following day with a severe sprain to her neck and back and a number of severe bruises. The nurse discharging Emily stated that she was "*incredibly lucky*". Emily was signed off work by her GP and she spent time at home recovering from her injuries and being cared for by her partner and mother.

Emily is due to start back at work soon and is feeling anxious about this. Emily has recently got a new car through her insurance but has yet to drive it and has not been in a car since her accident.

Flashbacks

What is a flashback?

A flashback is a vivid intrusive memory.

They are a normal way for your brain to try to make sense of intense emotional experiences.



Characteristics of flashbacks:

- ‘Flashing back’ to the trauma as if it’s happening all over again
- Physical sensations you felt at the time
- Watching a film of what you went through
- Reliving the event in any of your senses

Emily's experience of flashbacks

Since the accident, Emily finds herself reliving her crash over and over again. When this happens, it feels very real, as if she is back in the car and the collision is actually happening again. Emily clearly remembers the colour of the car in front of her, the sound of rain hitting the car, the song on the radio.

Emily often has flashbacks of the moments just before she hit the car in front of her. She remembers that as the cars collided, she thought she was going to die. Emily finds it difficult to recall which section of the road the accident happened on, which frustrates her.

Sometimes these flashbacks occur out of the blue, but other times they are triggered by the sound of heavy rain, a song on the radio or if she sees cars driving quickly on TV.

Emily notices that she will often “come back to reality” feeling frightened, with her heart beating quickly and feeling quite sweaty and shaky.

Please watch the video on *flashbacks* to learn more.

Coping strategies for flashbacks

Think of the following strategies as a menu you can choose from. Please pick 1 or 2 and practice these

Grounding after a flashback

- Grounding “anchors” you to the present moment.
- Grounding can be done any time, anywhere, and no one has to know.
- Grounding isn’t the same as relaxation. It’s much more *active*, focuses on distraction strategies, and is intended to help extreme negative feelings.
- Reorient yourself in *place* and *time* by asking yourself some or all of these questions:
 - Where am I?
 - What day of the week is it today?
 - What is the date?
 - How old am I?
 - What season is it?
 - Who is the country’s political leader?
 - What is happening now; what is the context?

Grounding using your senses: 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1

Focus on:

5 things that you can see

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:
- 4:
- 5:

4 things that you can feel/touch

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:
- 4:

3 things that you can hear

- 1:
- 2:
- 3:

2 things that you can smell:

- 1:
- 2:

1 thing that you can taste:

- 1:

Remembering that it is in the past

After a flashback, it can feel as though the traumatic event has just happened.

It can be helpful to practice putting the event back into the *past tense*.

Write down your most common thoughts when you're having a flashback and rephrase them in the past tense.

Current thinking	Remembering it's in the past
<i>I can hear rain</i>	<i>When I was in the car accident, I heard the heavy rain hitting down on the car</i>
<i>I'm going to die</i>	<i>When the cars hit each other I remember thinking that I was going to die</i>

Fast-forwarding to safety

Think of your memory like a video tape, and remember that we can fast-forward to a time we felt safe.

Fast-forwarding:

1. Think of your traumatic event
2. Identify when you first felt *safe* afterwards – try to picture this scene as clearly as you can. *Where were you? What were you doing? Who were you with? How did you know you were safe? (Use all 5 senses)*
3. Write down a description of this moment of safety

4. When you have a flashback, try *'fast-forwarding'* to this safe time. Try to quickly see everything that happened after the scene from the flashback and focus on the feeling of safety.

Tell yourself *you're safe now* and *it's in the past*. Focus on how safety feels in your body. Try to stay with this feeling of safety for as long as you can.

Nightmares

What is a nightmare?

- Nightmares are similar to flashbacks as they can also be triggered.
- Can be a 're-run' of the traumatic event, often based on the 'worst bits'.
- Can also be related to from events from that day.
- Can be related to key fears of:
 - Loss
 - Dying
 - Being unable to escape
 - Feeling unsafe

Emily's experience of nightmares

Since the accident, Emily has trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep. As it gets later in the evening, she becomes more anxious as worried about having another nightmare.

Emily has nightmares 2 or 3 times a week. She usually wakes up just before her car collides with the one in front. When she wakes up, she is sweating and frightened.

She finds it difficult to fall back asleep after this. This means that the next day she feels tired, and is more irritable when she's with her son and partner.

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

***Think of the following strategies for nightmares as a menu you can choose from.**

Please pick 1 or 2 and practice these*

Coping strategies for nightmares

Nightmare script

When I wake up in the night feeling: _____

(Write in the feeling, e.g. scared)

I will be sensing in my body: _____

(Write in at least three feelings, e.g. heart racing, shaky hands)

Because I will be remembering: _____

(Name of trauma by title, e.g. abuse, attack, but don't include details)

At the same time, I will look around and notice that I am in:

(Write the name the place where you are. E.g. My house in Dalkeith)

In the year: _____

(e.g., 2020)

And I will see: _____

(Describe what you can see when you wake up, inc. shapes & colours)

And so I will know that: _____

(Name of trauma by title again)

IS NOT HAPPENING ANYMORE

Keep this script by your bed to read when you wake from a nightmare.

Breaking the cycle

When you wake up following a nightmare, it's important to ***break the cycle*** of physical and emotional reactions the nightmare has triggered.

Some people worry about going back to sleep as they fear going back to the same dream.

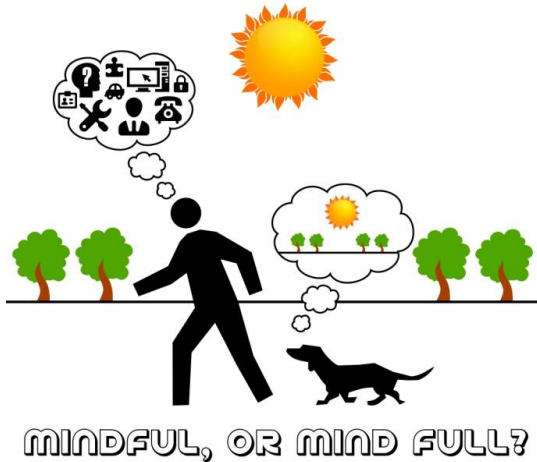
In an attempt to stop this happening, it's helpful to:

- Get up for 15 minutes
- ***Wash your hands and face*** to wake yourself up and clear your body of the nightmare you've had
- Use the 15 minutes however you want – engage in a ***calming activity***
- Perhaps have a drink of water
- Practice some ***mindfulness*** focusing on an external focus (*see next page*)
- After 15 minutes, once you feel ***safe and calm*** enough, go back to bed and try to sleep
- Remind yourself that ***it's safe to go to sleep now***

Mindfulness

“Paying attention to the present moment without judgement”

John Kabat-Zinn



Mindfulness is a strategy we can use to learn to notice where our attention is and to refocus it onto the present moment without judgement.

When we're being mindful, it's much harder to be worrying about the past or present.



Please listen to the *mindfulness practice with an external focus.*

Re-scripting nightmares

If you have nightmares regularly, especially the same one repeatedly it can be helpful to '*re-script*' the nightmare to make it much less powerful.

For example, when Emily re-scripted her nightmare about her car accident, she imagined that it was two bouncy castles shaped like cars which bumped into one another.

Re-scripting task:

- During the day, spend some time thinking about the nightmare, but practicing a *different ending* – an ending which you would *prefer* and that makes you *feel safe*.
- Practice this new ending over and over again in your mind.
- The more often you repeat and rehearse it, the more likely it is you'll remember it.
- If you can, talk through this nightmare and alternative ending with someone, no matter how strange your alternative ending might be.

Suggestions to help with sleep difficulties

- Have a bedtime routine
- Only go to bed when you're sleepy
- Do something relaxing for an hour before you go to bed. You could have a warm bath or listen to relaxing music
- Do some exercise during the day (not in the evening)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol
- Try not to sleep during the day even if you're tired
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, cool and comfortable
- Avoid eating, drinking and smoking an hour before bed
- Try to get up at the same time every day to get into a regular routine (maximum of 1 hour extra at weekends)
- Try not to read, watch TV, or look at your phone in bed
- If you're awake for more than 20 minutes, get up and go into another room to do something calming. Go back to bed when you are feeling sleepy



Dissociation / zoning out

What is dissociation?

Dissociation is when our brain shuts down certain parts to *avoid being overwhelmed*.



Characteristics of dissociation:

- It occurs on a spectrum: e.g.: auto-pilot → daydreaming → zoning out → ‘losing’ chunks of time → having an ‘out-of-body’ experience.
- Periods of time when you feel ‘spaced out’, unreal or dreamlike
- Feeling numb
- Not remembering conversations you’ve had
- Finding yourself in places and being unsure how you got there

Emily's experience of dissociation

Since the accident, Emily has found that she'll shift from feeling anxious and agitated to feeling numb.

When she's alone at home, when her son is at school and her partner at work, she finds that she loses chunks of her day - there are hours in the day which she simply can't account for.

On a few occasions, she's been sitting on the sofa, only to realise that she's now sitting in a dark room. Hours have passed since she first sat down and now as the sun goes down there's not much natural light in the room.

She often also finds it hard to remember certain conversations she is told that she has had, and she's having further disagreements and arguments with her partner.

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

Coping strategies for dissociation

Finding your own anchors to the present

Walk around your home and in each room *concentrate* on various things you can *see*, sounds you *hear*, any *smells*, anything you can *taste* and things you can *touch* or hold.

It's important to find things that are *neutral or pleasing* for you. For example, look at a pleasant picture/photo, listen to music you like, eat something tasty etc. For each room, choose three things you can see, hear, feel or touch.

You may want to make a list (either written down or an audio list on your phone) of these *anchors* – we often forget to use our anchors when we're feeling stressed.

As you search for anchors to the present in your home, you may come across items that remind you of painful experiences from the past. If you can, put these away.

The point is for you to *concentrate on neutral or pleasing objects that help you realise that you are in the present.*

Every room of your home should have anchors. When you notice you're starting to zone out, use these anchors to help *keep you in the present.*

