

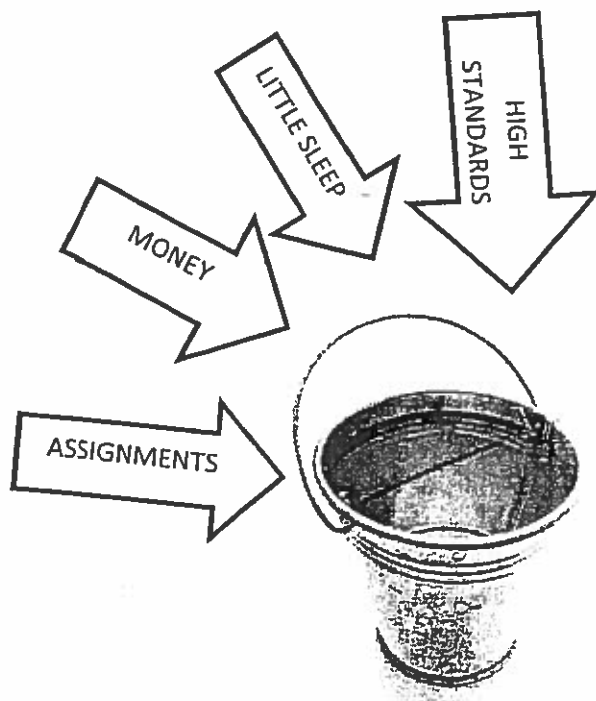
Understanding Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal, if unpleasant, part of life, and it can affect us all in different ways and at different times.

Some people have a very identifiable cause for their anxiety; a traumatic incident, lots of stressors or have undergone a significant life event. However, some people don't have an identifiable cause for their anxiety and it causes them some distress.

One way of thinking about your anxiety is to imagine your stress levels as being like a bucket of water. If we keep adding stressors to the bucket (even tiny ones), over time it fills up until one day it overflows.



This can be a good way of looking at anxiety as it explains why sometimes it can seem to come out of the blue with no significant trigger.

However what has happened is that the trigger was just a very small stressor that tipped us over the edge and allowed our bucket to overflow.

What we need is a leaky bucket with lots of holes in to reduce our stress levels. We will later look at some techniques to punch holes in your bucket!

UNDER PRESSURE?

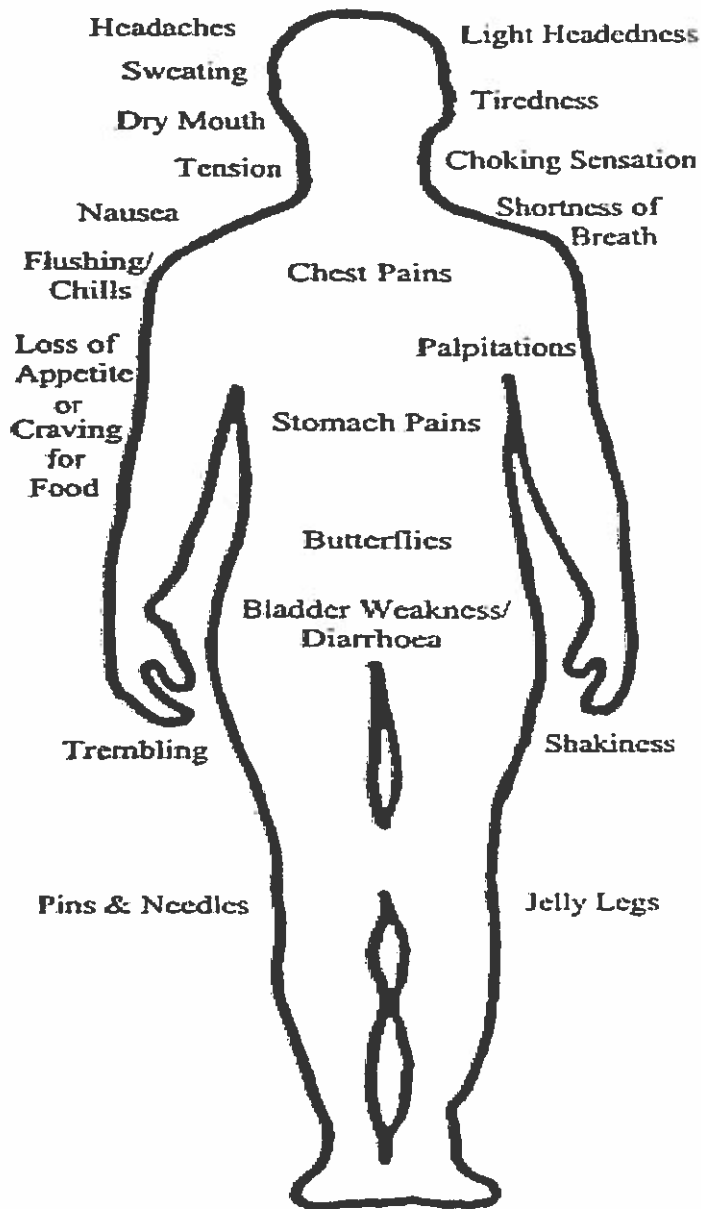
HOW'S YOUR BUCKET



How does Anxiety feel?

When we are anxious we normally experience a variety of uncomfortable physical sensations because our **THREAT SYSTEM** has been activated

ANXIETY - BODILY SYMPTOMS



We have all been given a fight or flight response to protect and preserve us from dangerous situations. The autonomous nervous system is split into two parts: the sympathetic nervous system, the part which presses "the emergency button" when under threat; and the parasympathetic nervous system, the part which releases the button when the threat is passed.

The Cardiovascular System Effect

This produces an increase in heart rate and strength. It pumps blood around the body more rapidly in order to reach the parts that become more important during a threat. Vital areas such as the thighs, biceps and legs all are prepared for flight. Blood is therefore taken away from areas like fingers and toes.

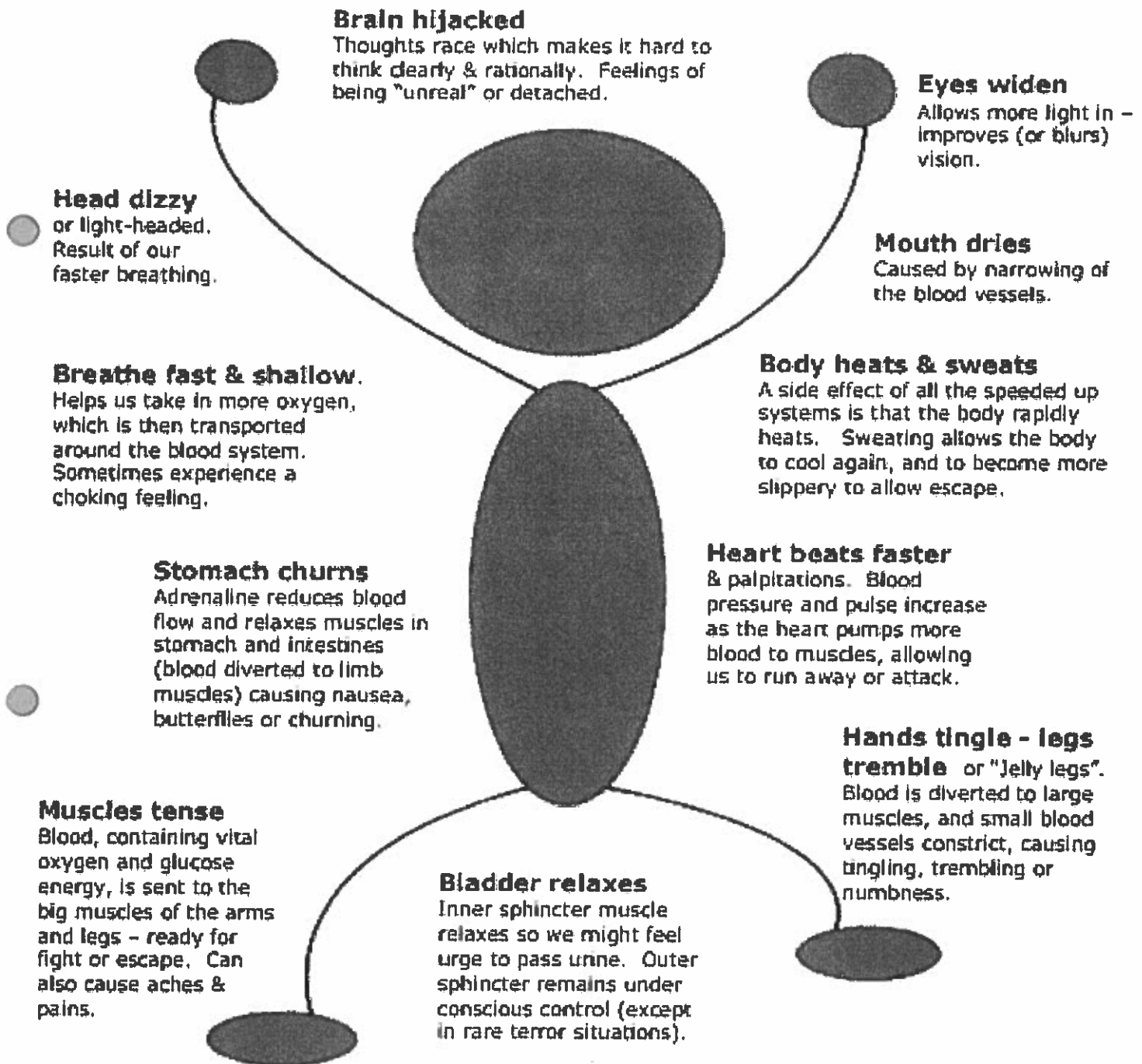
The Respiratory Effect

This produces deep accelerated breathing which gets needed oxygen to the tissues of the body. The side effects of this acceleration are often tightness of the chest. Most importantly because the blood to the head is decreased by heavy breathing – feelings of dizziness or light headedness may result. Often we revert to short shallow breathing which in turn causes further tightness.

ALARMING ADRENALINE !

The body's alarm system

When the brain perceives a threat, it activates the body's "fight or flight" alarm system, and adrenaline is released into the blood from the adrenal glands. We experience uncomfortable feelings because the adrenaline makes the body systems speed up, diverting blood towards the big muscles, preparing us to attack (anger) or escape (anxiety).



After the adrenaline has died down, we can feel exhausted, shaky and weak.

Symptoms and Explanations

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS	CATASTROPHIC THOUGHT	MEDICAL REALITY
Increased heart rate. Palpitations.	I'll have a heart attack	According to panic specialist Dr Clair Weekes, a healthy heart can pump 200 beats per minute for days, even weeks, without damage. Your heart was made to handle stress. An hour of panic is nothing compared to what the head was designed to deal with.
Feeling faint and light-headed	I'll pass out while driving or walking	The light-headed feeling is caused by reduced blood and oxygen supply to the brain, but it almost never results in fainting. Panic triggers higher blood pressure, quite the opposite of low blood pressure problems associated with fainting.
Feeling you can't get your breath: pain or pressure in your chest	I'll stop breathing: here comes a heart attack	Fight-or-flight causes chest and abdominal muscles to tighten. This can create pressure and muscular pain in your chest, as well as reduced lung capacity. To compensate, you may start to hyperventilate, which just makes you feel worse. No one has ever stopped breathing from panic. No matter how uncomfortable the feeling, you will always get enough air.
Feeling dizzy	I'll fall if I stand	The dizzy feeling is caused by hyperventilation and reduced blood and oxygen flow to the brain – a brief and harmless reaction. It's very rare even during the worst panic for anyone to lose balance.
'Jelly legs' – weak, shaky feeling in legs	I'm too weak to walk: I'll fall down	Fight-or-flight reaction causes temporary dilation of the blood vessels in your legs, allowing blood to accumulate in your large muscles. Your legs are as strong and able to carry you as ever.
Hot flush	Here comes the panic	The hot flush comes from increased oxygen and brief changes in your circulatory system. They're harmless and will not cause panic unless you interpret the symptoms as cause for alarm.
Feeling 'spacey', unreal, depersonalised	I'm going crazy. I'm losing hold of my self. I won't make it back this time.	These too are harmless Fight-or-flight reactions associated with hyperventilation and reduced blood and oxygen flow to the brain. They are temporary and never result in insanity or losing control of your actions. There are no reported incidents of schizophrenia, paralysis or "running amok" following a panic attack.

Adapted from Mackay M, Davis M, Fanning P (1997) Thoughts and Feelings: "Taking Control of Your Moods and Your Life." New Harbinger Publications

What causes Anxiety?

Fight or Flight

Anxiety can be thought of as an evolutionary response to danger that has some positive benefits.

Feeling afraid is very much a part of the experience of being human. Fear is actually a survival instinct when it occurs in response to a realistically dangerous situation. Think about how you might react if a dangerous animal approached you. Most likely you would respond with fear. In fact, it is often helpful to respond with fear at times like this because when we become afraid, our body goes through a whole series of changes that ultimately serve to protect us. This fear response would probably lead us to either run for our lives or become sufficiently 'pumped up' to physically defend ourselves. As you can see from this example, the experience of fear is part of the process of survival.

Life Events

Often we develop anxiety following a series of stressful life events. This is especially true if we experience many different stressful situations or pressures all at once. For example if someone has assignments, financial difficulties and relationship difficulties all at once then it is unsurprising that they may become anxious.

Anxiety can also develop based on life experiences, for example if someone was bullied in school then they may feel anxious beginning university.

Thinking Styles

Some people may have a thinking style that lends itself to experiencing anxiety. For example anxious people have a tendency to expect that the

As well as this anxiety affects us mentally too. We may often worry for long periods of time, so much that our worries feel out of control. These worries could be about a variety of issues and commonly our mind will jump quickly from one worry to another.

Anxiety also influences how we behave. For example when we feel anxious we often avoid doing things that we want to because we are worried about how they will turn out. Although short experiences of anxiety are part and parcel of daily life, it becomes challenging when anxiety begins to follow people around and is a regular feature in their lives.

worst possible scenario will always occur. They also feel like they must be constantly on guard in case something bad happens. They believe that by thinking of all the bad things that could go wrong, they will be better able to cope with situations. However thinking in these ways makes it difficult for people to switch off.

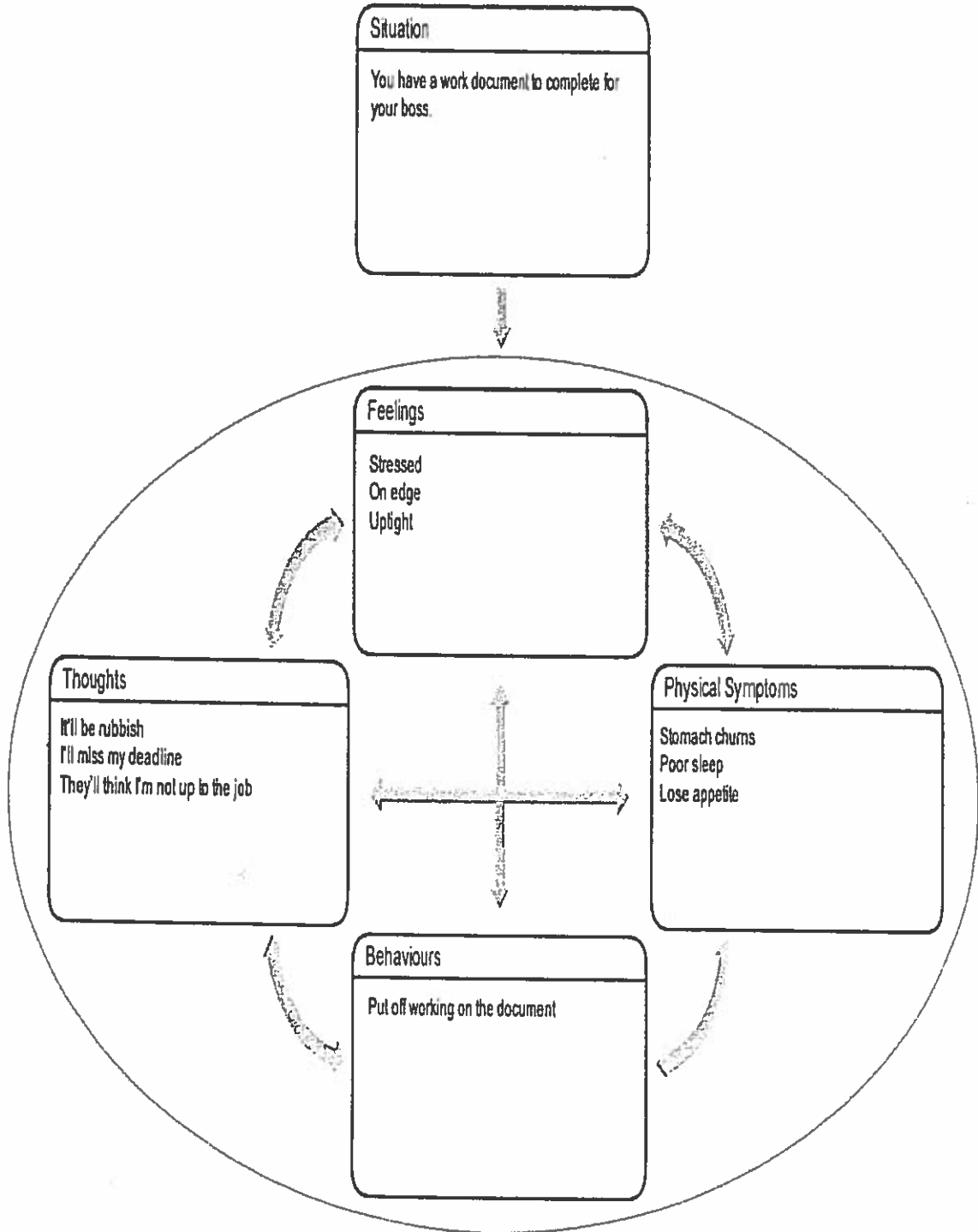
Biological Reasons

Research suggests that anxiety has familial ties. If someone in your immediate family experiences anxiety then there could be an increased chance that you will have similar experiences of anxiety.

It is likely that a combination of the above factors influence our anxiety levels.

Maintenance Cycle

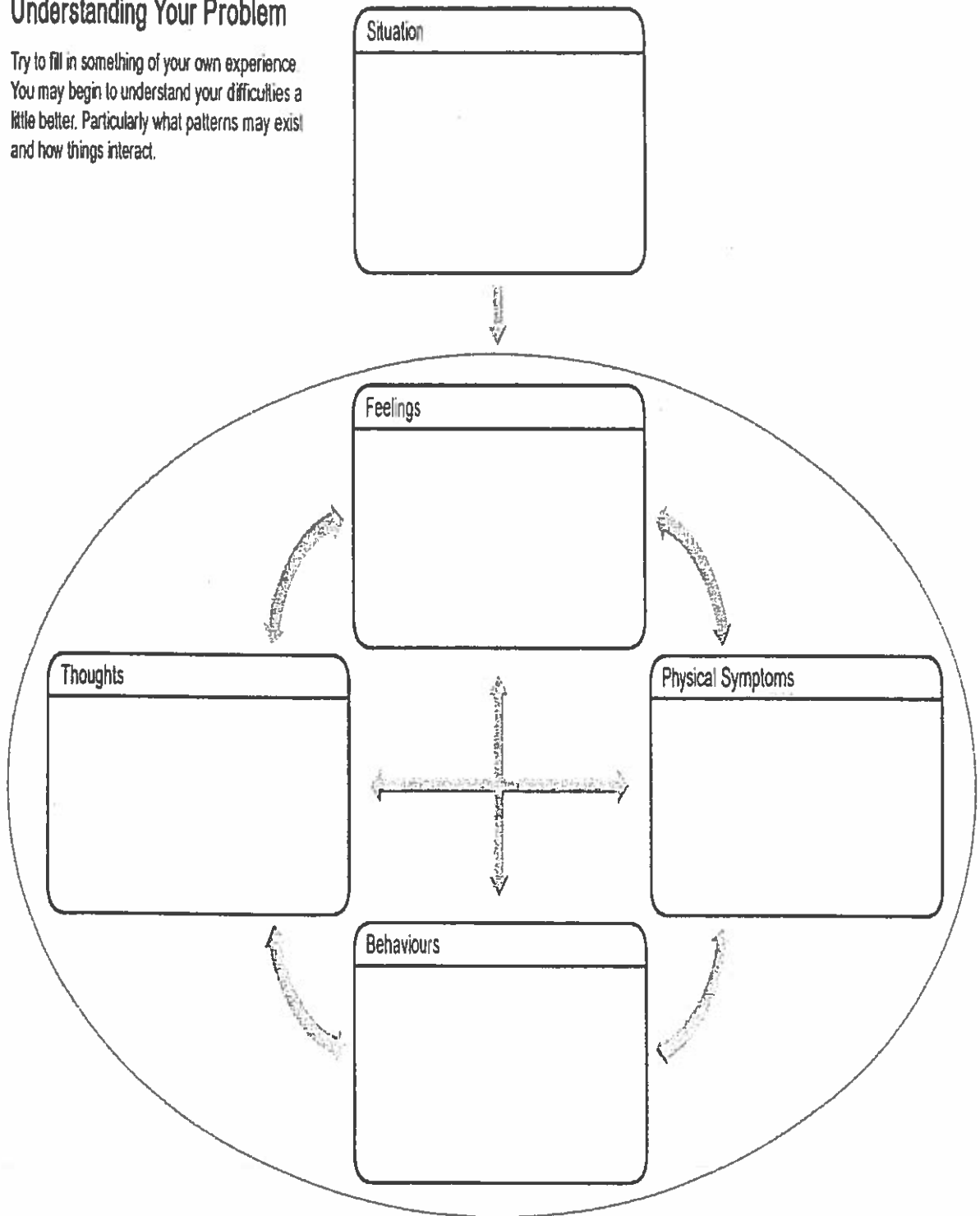
An example of an anxious cycle:



Have a go...

Understanding Your Problem

Try to fill in something of your own experience. You may begin to understand your difficulties a little better. Particularly what patterns may exist and how things interact.



Factors that maintain anxiety

Negative Automatic Thoughts

Negative thoughts can maintain our anxiety if we aren't aware of them and don't try and challenge them.

Our thoughts are created by our mind, which is constantly helping us to interpret the world around us, describing what's happening, and trying to make sense of it by helping us interpret events, sights, sounds, smells feelings. It's just what the human mind does.

Without even realising it, we are interpreting and giving our own meanings to everything happening around us. We might decide that something is pleasant or nasty, good or bad, dangerous or safe.

Because of our previous experiences, our upbringing, our culture, religious beliefs and family values, we may well make very different interpretations and evaluations of situations than someone else. These interpretations and meanings we give events and situations, result in physical and emotional feelings.

Something happens or we notice something, which triggers a thought. Particular types of thoughts tend to lead to particular emotions.

Automatic thoughts...

- Can be words, an image, a memory, a physical sensation, an imagined sound, or based on 'intuition' – a sense of just 'knowing'
- Believable – we tend to automatically believe our thoughts, usually not stopping to question their validity. When another driver cuts me up, I might judge that he's a selfish thoughtless toad, but in fact, he might be taking his wife to hospital as she's about to give birth.

Thoughts are not necessarily true, accurate or helpful. Often based on emotion (rather than facts), which drives our opinion.

- Are automatic. They just happen, popping into your head and you often won't even notice them.
- Our thoughts are ours – they can be quite specific to us, perhaps because of our present or past experience, knowledge, values and culture, or just for no good reason at all. Some thoughts are so out of keeping with all those things, and that can make them seem all the more distressing – because we add some meaning about why we had them (I must be a bad person!)
- Habitual and persistent – our thoughts seem to repeat over and over, and the more they repeat, the more believable they seem, then they set off a whole chain of new related thoughts that lead us to feel worse and worse. They can follow themes, for short periods, or very often throughout years and decades

If you think your thoughts and in particular negative thinking patterns aggravate your anxiety you may want to consider the Counselling Service workshop on **Challenging Unhelpful Thinking Habits**

Avoidance

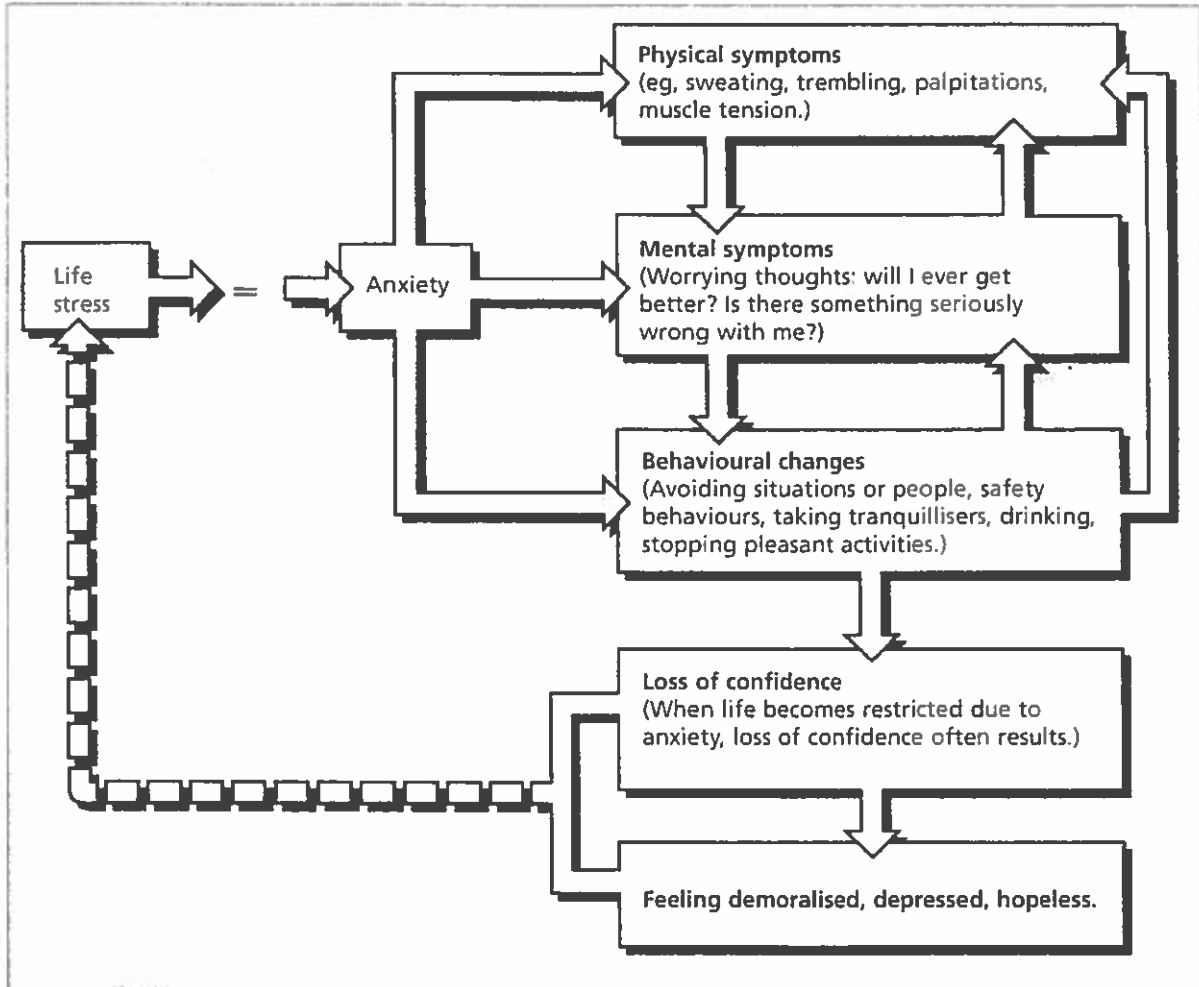
Avoiding situations or tasks that make you anxious can build these up to be more anxiety-provoking in the future. Unfortunately because people tend to use such avoidance strategies, they can never see that things would often go better than they thought and their anxiety remains high as a result.

No Time for Relaxation

Not having enough free time to relax and do the things that we enjoy can contribute to feelings of anxiety. However occasionally too much free time can mean we have lots of opportunities to engage in worrying thoughts. It is important to achieve a good balance.

Poor Self-Care

A poor diet, poor sleep routine and generally poor looking after ourselves can lead us to feel tired, irritable and contribute to higher levels of anxiety as it is more difficult to challenge or check negative thoughts and thinking when you are experiencing tiredness.



What can I do to get better?

1 Understand the process and how anxiety persists because of a spiralling vicious circle between physical symptoms, worrying thoughts and changes in behaviour.

2 Break into this vicious circle by learning new skills:

a *Physical symptoms* can be reduced by learning relaxation or controlled breathing.

b *Mental symptoms* ie, worry, can be combated by a combination of identifying and challenging worrying thoughts and replacing them with positive ones, and/or distracting yourself.

c *Behavioural changes* can be altered by deliberately changing your behaviour and going back into difficult situations in a gradual step-by-step fashion.

3 Make alterations to your lifestyle and so manage successfully the amount of stress you put yourself under. This might involve learning to be more assertive, managing your time better, breaking unhelpful habits or learning other new skills.

Common myths about anxiety

As anxiety symptoms often occur without any obvious explanation, people often misinterpret them and think there is a more serious problem.

- 1 I'm going crazy:** There is no link between panic anxiety and more serious psychiatric illness.
- 2 I'm going to lose control:** There has never been a recorded case of anybody doing anything 'wild', or 'out of control' or against their wishes.
- 3 I'm having a heart attack:** Although the major symptoms of heart disease include breathlessness and chest pain, the symptoms are generally related to effort and will go away quickly with rest.
- 4 This anxiety will harm me:** Anxiety does not harm you physically, although it is unpleasant and uncomfortable.
- 5 I'm going to faint:** Very unlikely as your heart rate goes up. You only faint if your heart rate and blood pressure drop.

