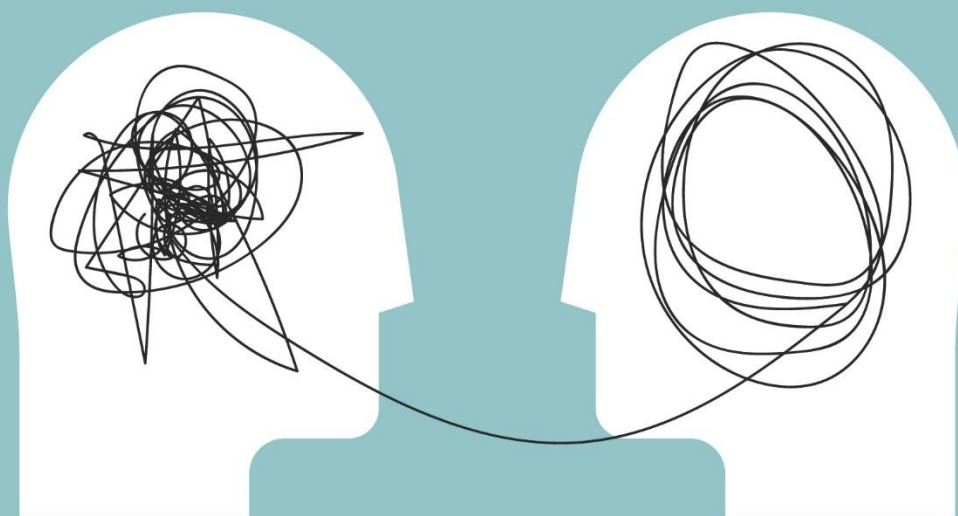


“A wonderful, down-to-earth and fun to read book on how to get over anxiety.”

John B. Arden, PhD, Author of Rewire Your Brain

# THE FRAMEWORK

2nd Edition



Understanding and Reducing  
Stress, Autostress and Anxiety

the fluff-free guide<sup>®</sup>

REBECCA MARKS

The Framework: Understanding and Reducing Stress,  
Autostress and Anxiety by Rebecca Marks

Second Edition

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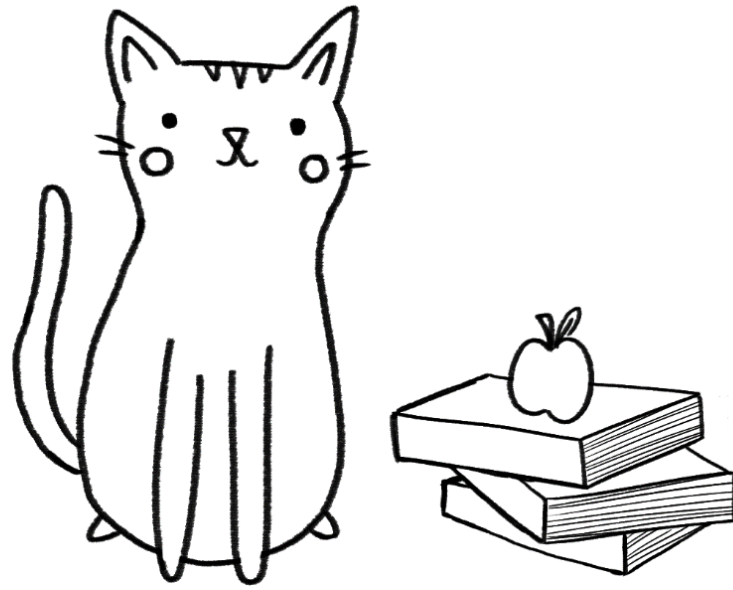
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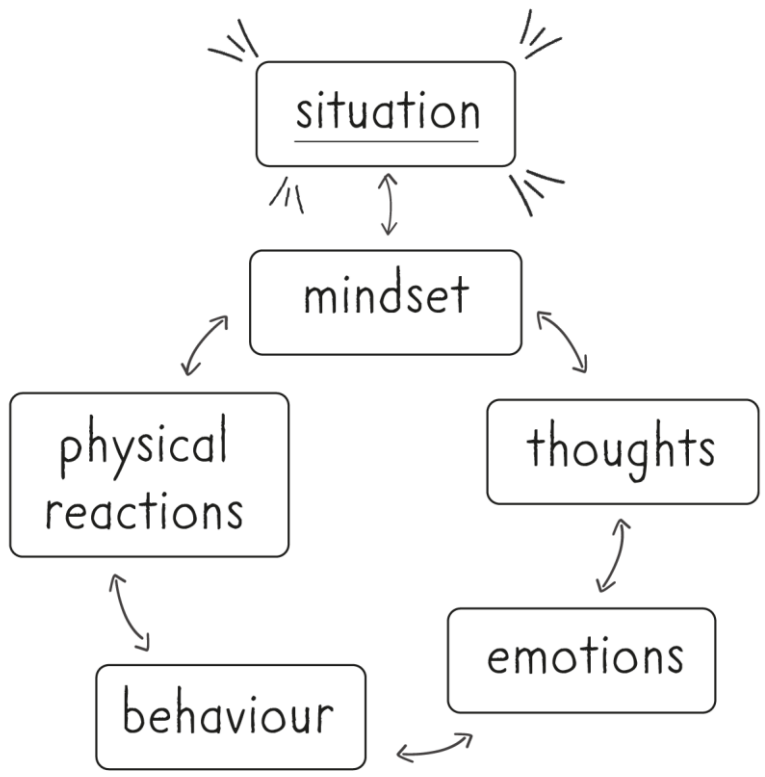
*For everyone who feels lost and confused  
because of poor mental wellbeing.*

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# PART ONE: Situation



## PART ONE: SITUATION

We've all heard of the phrase "mind over matter". It can be defined as:

— *A situation in which someone is able to control a physical condition, problem, etc., by using the mind.*

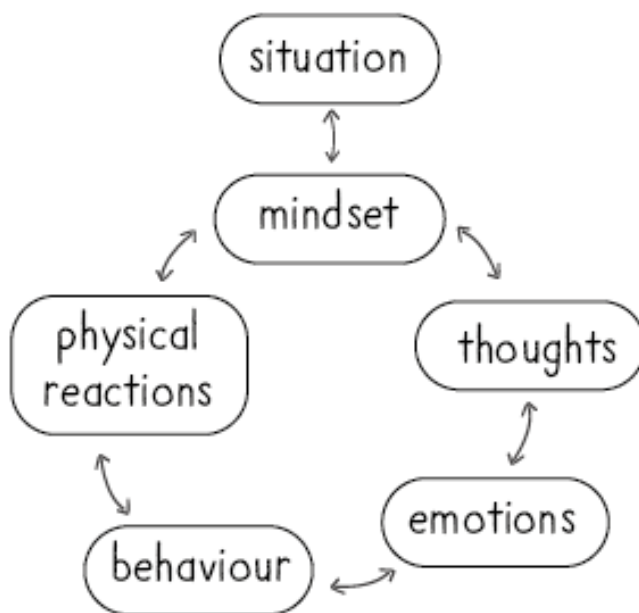
In The Framework, we're going to explain how to use mind over matter.

We'll discover the amazing interconnectedness of our minds and bodies, and we'll learn how we can use this to our advantage.

To be more specific: we'll be explaining how we can use our mindsets, thoughts, and behaviour to change our emotions and physical reactions, so we can become calmer and happier.

To do this, we'll be taking you on a journey through the cognitive behavioural cycle, a.k.a. the CBT cycle. This cycle is an extremely useful tool for understanding human psychology.

Here's what it looks like:



As you can see, the cycle demonstrates how our mindsets, thoughts, emotions, behaviour, and physical reactions are all interconnected. Each aspect of our life influences the others.

Without an understanding of the CBT cycle, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and unsure where to start when it comes to helping ourselves feel better.

Struggling with mental health is extremely common. The Mental Health Foundation have found that 70% of women and young adults aged 18-34 in the UK have experienced a mental health difficulty.

The good news is when you invest some time reflecting on different parts of your cycle, it gives you plenty of opportunities to make positive changes. Also, changing just one part of your cycle can make changing the other parts easier. Small steps create big changes!

To help you understand the CBT cycle, we'll be telling you the story of a woman called Polly. Let's start with her situation:

Polly is a 25-year-old support worker for people with severe and enduring mental health issues such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Growing up, she got on fairly well with her Mum, but she had a difficult relationship with her Dad. As a child, she remembers being very scared of him. Her Dad never really spoke to her unless he was shouting, and he never took an interest in getting to know her or spending time with the family.

Needless to say, she was very happy to move away from home. But unfortunately, Polly also had a tough time at university. She studied at a top-ranking university and was surrounded by very wealthy people. Coming from a working-class family, she felt like she didn't belong. She had a range of unpleasant physical symptoms that she'd learned to live with and had come to view as a normal part of life.

She buried herself in her studies - she'd always been incredibly driven and hard-working, putting a lot of pressure on herself to do well. Polly never visited the GP or told anyone about how bad she felt.

Now, her typical work day involves responding to people with suicidal thoughts and those about to be made homeless, all whilst keeping on top of mountains of paperwork.

Fortunately, since starting her new role, Polly has made some new friends that she's been able to start opening up to. They're all very interested in mental health and are pursuing careers in the field of clinical psychology.

She joined a book club they set up, and over the past two years she's read and discussed these three books:

1. *Rewire Your Anxious Brain* by Catherine Pittman and Elizabeth Karle,
2. *The Happiness Trap* by Dr Russ Harris,
3. *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGonigal.

Applying the knowledge from these books along with the support of her new friends has resulted in her mental wellbeing gradually improving over the past two years.

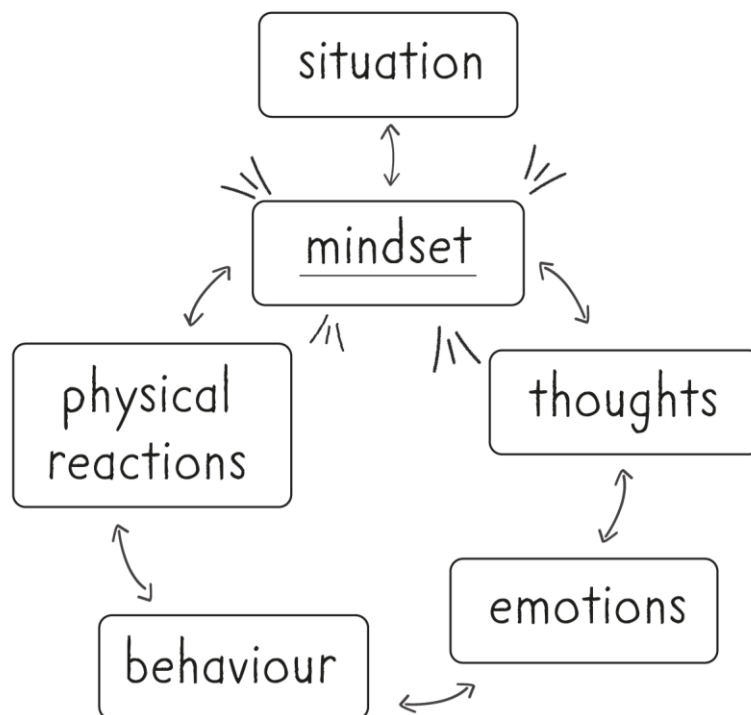
She understands her mental health better than ever. She's successfully reducing her stress, autostress and anxiety. And for the first time in her life, she feels quite happy.

Let's learn how Polly did it - and how you can too.



# PART TWO: Mindset

with Negative Nancy & Running Ruth





## PART TWO: MINDSET

### 2.1: Different Methods Are Needed to Address Stress, Autostress and Anxiety

*“Problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them.” – Albert Einstein.*

Our mindset refers to our *sets of beliefs about the world*.

We can think of them as our *core beliefs*. These beliefs shape our reality. They influence how we interpret the world, what we pay attention to, and ultimately, how we feel. Developing awareness of our mindsets is therefore an incredibly powerful tool when it comes to enhancing our wellbeing.

To access a core belief, we can keep asking ourselves ‘why?’. This is called Socratic questioning, or the downward arrow technique. Here’s an example:

***I’ll never feel better.***

*Why?*

***I’ve tried different things to help me feel less anxious and none of them have helped.***

*Why?*

***I’m an anxious person and there’s nothing I can do about it.***

*Why?*

***Because of my genes. Anxiety runs in my family.***

*Why?*

***Because... anxiety is a genetic condition and science tells us there’s nothing we can do about our genes.***

Here, the core belief is about how anxiety is genetic and therefore incurable. And this core belief is false. It’s true that we can be born with a vulnerability towards stress and anxiety, but new scientific research in this area is incredibly empowering.

We truly have the power to rewire our brains and calm our bodies.

In this part of The Framework, we’ll take a look at three of Polly’s new mindsets that are influencing her CBT cycle in ways that are helping her alleviate stress, autostress and anxiety.

Her first new mindset is: different methods are needed to address stress, autostress and anxiety.

Before, stress and anxiety were fuzzy terms that she used interchangeably. After reading about them, she now understands what they are, how they affect her, and what she can do about it.

So, what exactly are stress, autostress and anxiety? Their exact definitions have been a subject of debate by experts for a long time.

#### **Stress**

Kelly McGonigal, an expert in the new science of stress, offers us this definition: *“stress is what arises when something we care about is at stake”*.

Stress is best understood as manifesting in the body. It’s the racing heart, sweaty palms and funny tummy we’re all familiar with. A key part in all this stress is the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for generating our stress response.

Experts agree that central to the definition of stress is the perception of threat and danger. You've probably heard of the 'fight-or-flight' stress response as a reaction to perceived danger. We actually have various stress responses. For example, we experience a different type of stress response when we perceive a challenge. It's possible to transform our stress response in a way which helps us perform.

As we'll discover, our beliefs about stress and our mindset play an important part in how it impacts us.

## **Autostress**

Dr John Arden, author of several books integrating neuroscience and psychotherapy, recently put forward the term *autostress* for describing what happens when our body's stress response goes on for a long time. He explains:

*"Like autoimmune disorders that hijack the immune system, attacking the body instead of protecting it, autostress [transforms] the stress response system into something that attacks the self rather than protecting it."*

When we're autostressed, we experience a wide range of physical stress symptoms on an ongoing basis, such as breathing difficulties, heart palpitations, chest tightness, headaches, IBS, light-headedness, and so forth. We experience these symptoms regardless of our situation.

Autostress is associated with what psychologists call a high level of *stress reactivity*. People with high levels of stress reactivity may be more vulnerable to developing autostress. They may release more stress hormones, have a stronger sympathetic nervous system reaction, experience higher blood pressure, and/or have a higher heart rate during their stress response.

Throughout their lives, people with high stress reactivity may experience stress responses that can often feel out of proportion to the situation.

What are the possible causes of high stress reactivity? Past experiences of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, being bullied, experiencing stigma and/or discrimination, having parents or caregivers who don't treat you warmly, or having overprotective parents can all contribute to stress reactivity.

Anxiety is currently conceptualised as encompassing both mental and physical symptoms. In The Framework, I'm arguing that autostress is a better term for understanding the physical symptoms of anxiety. I feel the term autostress yields more understanding and more compassion. I believe the distinction is particularly important as different methods are needed to address physical symptoms (what I label autostress) and mental symptoms (what I label anxiety).

## **Anxiety**

*Polly's thoughts on a bus: "I feel dizzy and light-headed... What if I faint?"*

*Polly's thoughts in bed: "Why can't I sleep?! My presentation tomorrow is going to be so bad. Oh God, it's going to be so embarrassing if my mind goes blank and I forget what I'm saying."*

*Polly's thoughts on a night out: "Erghhh.. My heart is beating so fast all of a sudden. This is horrible. I'm so sick of this. [\*Imagines having a panic attack in the middle of the dance floor\*]"*

This is anxiety—the unhelpful thinking patterns we experience when our thoughts and mental images zoom in on horrible possible outcomes and negative aspects of situations.

Anxiety is common in creative people, as their creativity gives them the ability to imagine a wide array of potentially frightening scenarios.

It's also something that easily spirals out of control, and as such, easily impacts your mood. Along with anxious thoughts, people experiencing anxiety might also feel a sense of impending doom - feeling fearful and on edge, even at times when there's no immediate threat.

We're more vulnerable to anxiety when we've grown up with parents or caregivers who were overly attentive to danger and threats. This can lead us to having a mentality that the world isn't a safe place.

Anxiety can occur on its own, as a response to stress, or it can trigger stress. When it occurs as a response to stress, it can intensify our stress response, creating a stress-anxiety loop. In worst cases, this leads to panic attacks.

Anxiety comes from an area called the prefrontal-cortex, located at the front of our brain.

We have more power over our anxiety than we have over our body's stress response. This is because our amygdala - the part of our brain that triggers the stress response - is extremely powerful. It can even operate on a subconscious level, which is why we can often feel out of control and confused in moments of high stress.

It might help you to think of stress, autostress and anxiety as two living beings inside our heads: Running Ruth and Negative Nancy.

### **Stress and Autostress: Our Inner Running Ruth**

You feel your heart beating faster and stronger, your breathing becomes shallower, and your palms start to sweat. This is when you can imagine your inner Running Ruth arriving. Why running? Because we feel like we're out for a run even if we're lying in bed.



Running Ruth

Our inner Running Ruth helps us rise to challenges and deal with threats by altering our bodily responses. She pumps more blood to our brains by making our hearts beat faster, which helps our cognitive performance. She boosts our energy levels by releasing cortisol and helps us focus better through pumping adrenaline.

If your Running Ruth has been busy from a young age (as with people on the [C-PTSD spectrum](#)), she becomes more consistently active in adulthood. She's so active that she'll sometimes go running for no apparent reason. To help ourselves feel calmer, we need to learn how to give her a rest!

### **Anxiety: Our Inner Negative Nancy**

Negative Nancy hijacks our mind with negative thoughts and worries she wants us to pay attention to. She does this because she thinks she's being helpful. To be fair, she was helpful - 70,000 years ago. Today, not so much!

Whilst it was important for our ancient ancestors to be on high alert for danger, it's not as important for people in modern society.



## Negative Nancy

Hijacking us with negative thoughts is a skill she develops over time - the more she's done it, the quicker and easier it gets for her.

To help ourselves feel calmer, we need to learn how to reduce the impact of what she tells us, so that she doesn't spend so long hijacking our minds.

Just like some people have a more active Running Ruth, some people have a louder Negative Nancy.

In people who experience problematic anxiety, their unhelpful thinking patterns are more prominent, more difficult to control, and excessive given the situation.

## **SUMMARY 2.1**

We hope you'll have started adopting your first new mindset: different methods are needed to address stress, autostress and anxiety.

Broadly speaking, we're aiming to:

- Transform stress,
- Reduce autostress and anxiety.

And it's complex: different methods work at different times for different people. It's a skill, and some of us need to work harder at it than others.

Ultimately, what we need to do is become the scientists of our own wellbeing, trying and testing different methods in order to discover what works best for us.

Investing time in understanding and enhancing your mental wellbeing is one of the best investments you could ever make. It impacts so many areas of your life on a daily basis!

We mentioned earlier that our body's stress response is different depending on whether we see our situation as a challenge or as a threat. In the next section, we'll learn how we can transform our stress response from the *threat response* into the *challenge response*.

## 2.2: It's Possible to Transform Our Body's Stress Response

*"When you choose to view your stress response as helpful, you create the biology of courage."* – Kelly McGonigal

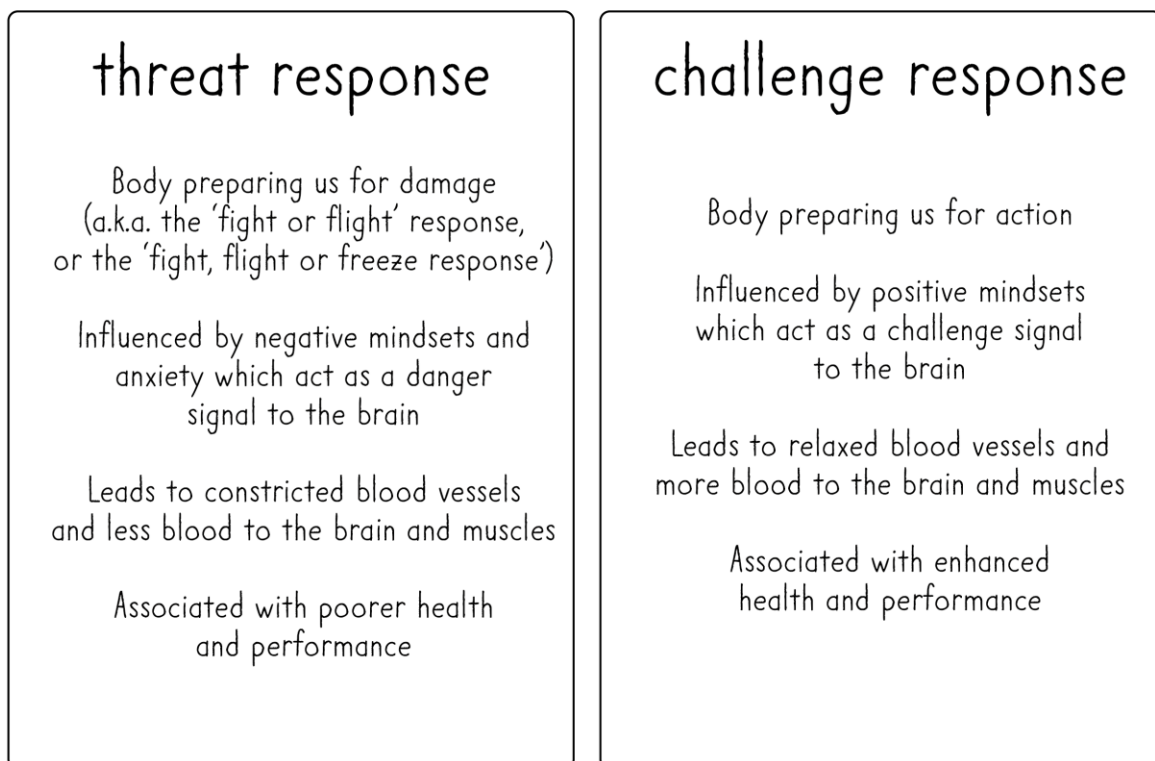
After reading Kelly McGonigal's book *The Upside of Stress*, Polly was surprised to find that her core beliefs about stress were fundamentally flawed.

She used to think that stress was simply her body going into fight-or-flight mode, but she now understands that her stress response is more complicated, and a lot of it has to do with her mindset.

Our body's stress response can actually activate several biological systems—not just the fight-or-flight response. Each system helps our minds and bodies cope with different types of challenging and threatening situations.

Jim Blascovich is a pioneer in this field. He's spent his career developing what he calls the *biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat*.

The challenge and threat responses represent different ends of a physiological spectrum. Here's an overview:



The threat response is what everyone knows as the classic flight-or-flight response. It's our body's way of preparing us for damage. It happens when our brain detects danger or threat, which can be physical danger or social danger (for example, the fear of social rejection).

On the other hand, the challenge response is our body's way of preparing us for action. You might know a natural challenge responder - they're the people who say they feel 'pumped' or 'excited' instead of 'stressed'. What makes them different? Their mindset.

Positive mindsets are what shift us into the challenge response. When someone says they're pumped, it's likely they're focusing on the positives in the situation, such as potential gains and opportunities for growth.

They still experience a stress response - their hearts beat stronger and faster, but their blood vessels remain relaxed.

When someone says they feel stressed, it's likely they're focusing on the negatives, such as worrying about possible negative outcomes. A negative mindset can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is due to our physical reactions the threat response – we're less likely to perform well because our blood vessels are more constricted, and less blood gets to our brain and muscles. If you've ever had a negative mindset and experienced brain freeze (for example, during public speaking or an exam), now you know why!

We can experience the threat response when we're overwhelmed with things to do and when we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to do well. In these situations, we're signalling to our brains that our demands outweigh our resources. Our brains interpret this as danger, and we shift into the threat response.

This is typical of people who experience high-functioning anxiety. 'High-functioning' refers to people who feel they're doing well in their jobs and life in general, but live with anxiety as part of their everyday lives. Nicky Lidbetter, CEO of Anxiety UK, explains:

*"Individuals who experience high functioning anxiety are often very driven, high achievers who set incredibly high standards for themselves. They can find themselves constantly striving for perfection in everything they turn their hand to."*

Here's the good news: research shows we can shift into the challenge response just by adopting a positive mindset about stress itself.

For example, a study in 2013 by Alia Crum and colleagues at Yale University showed that people made the shift from a threat response to a challenge response after watching just three 3-minute videos describing how our body's stress response can help us perform.

It's possible that understanding in better detail about the body's stress response made people more accepting of their physical reactions instead of fighting against them.

Understanding and accepting their physical reactions therefore prevented the stress-anxiety loop of escalating stress and anxiety.

[Here's a video](#) outlining what we're talking about here – why not save it on your phone as a helpful reminder?

## **SUMMARY 2.2**

Here's our second new mindset we hope you'll have started adopting: it's possible to transform our body's stress response.

Our stress response is more than just the fight-or-flight response. When we feel our body's stress response being triggered, our mindset matters.

Focusing on the negatives is like sending a 'danger' signal to our brain. This causes our bodies to react in a way that protects us from physical harm - our blood vessels constrict and we get less blood to our brain and muscles. When this continues for a long time, we risk entering a state of autostress, experiencing stress symptoms on an ongoing basis.

On the other hand, focusing on the positives sends a 'challenge' signal to our brain. This causes our bodies to react in a way that prepares us for action. Our heart still beats stronger and faster, but our blood vessels remain relaxed, allowing us to get more blood to our brain and muscles.

We'll get onto how we can adopt a more positive mindset about stress shortly. But first, what's the #1 mindset for reducing anxiety?

### 2.3: The Importance of Noticing Thoughts as Thoughts

*"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."* – Victor Frankl.

Freedom from anxiety begins with recognising that thoughts are just thoughts. You have the power to choose your response to them.

Thinking is a habit. Just like eating habits, we all have thinking habits.

Our thinking habits are the patterns our thoughts tend to follow in response to different situations. These patterns are shaped by our upbringing and our core beliefs about the world.

Recognising these patterns and the power we have when responding to them is key to reducing anxiety and becoming better at managing our emotions in general.

When you don't recognise your power to respond, you become a slave to the thinking habits you've passively adopted. Your emotions, behaviour and physical reactions largely lie in the hands of these automatic thinking habits. It's time to start taking notice of them!

A useful analogy is the Slide of Doom. Our inner Negative Nancy - our anxiety - starts at the top of the slide when she tells us our first unhelpful thought or worry. The more negative thoughts and worries she hijacks us with, the further she gets down the slide.



Slide of Doom



Our goal is to stop her getting to the bottom, which is when her hijacking of our minds results in her hijacking our mood.

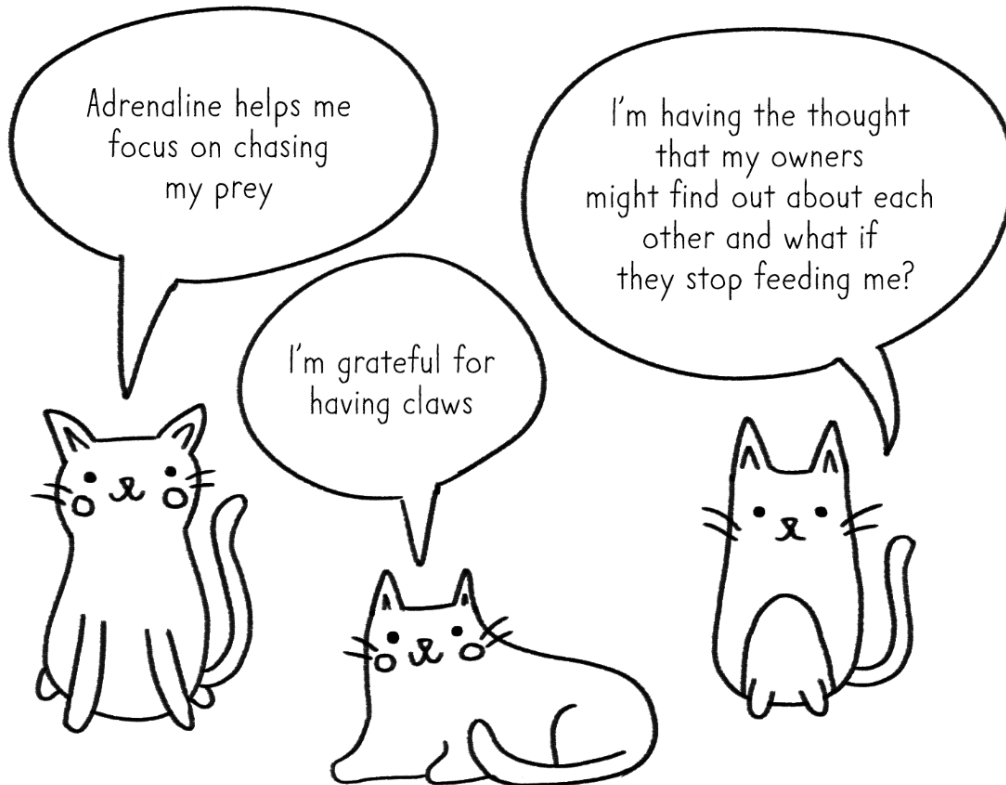
[Practising meditation](#) is an effective and popular way to become better at observing our thoughts. With her new meditation habit and cognitive techniques that we'll describe in 3.2, Polly can now spot Negative Nancy at the top of the slide, and now - more often than not - she can stop her getting to the bottom.

### **SUMMARY 2.3**

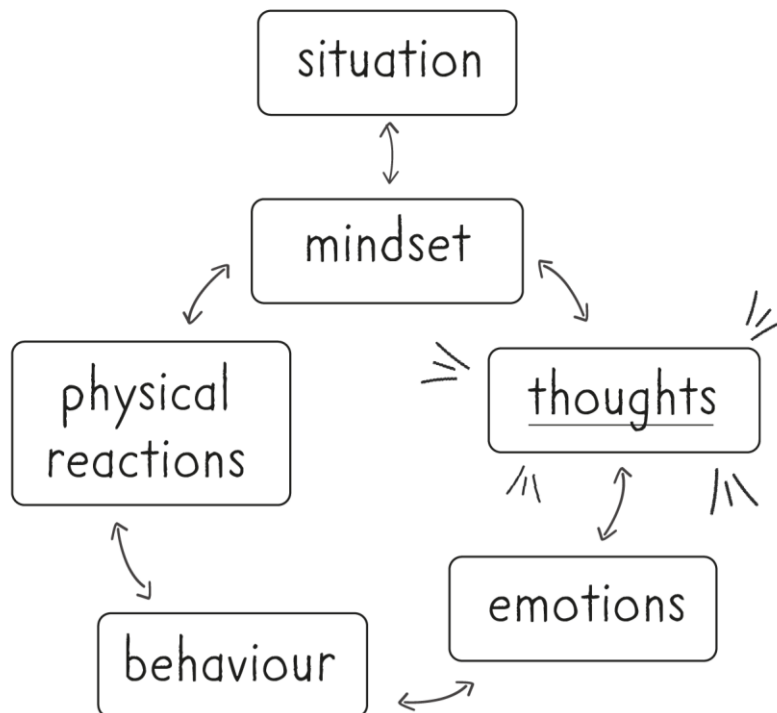
Here's a recap of the three new mindsets we'd like to introduce:

- 1) Different methods are needed to address stress, autostress and anxiety,
- 2) It's possible to transform our body's stress response,
- 3) To reduce anxiety, we must notice thoughts as just thoughts and focus on our response.

In the next section, we'll outline three of Polly's new thinking patterns that help her transform her stress response and reduce anxiety.



## PART THREE: Thoughts



## PART THREE: THOUGHTS

### 3.1: Three Thinking Patterns to Alleviate Stress, Autostress and Anxiety

*"It hurt because it mattered."* – John Green

With new mindsets come new thinking patterns.

In the past, when Polly felt her body's stress response her thoughts focused on how unpleasant it was:

*"This is horrible"*

*"I can't stand feeling like this"*

*"My heart's beating so fast, I'm starting to feel light-headed... what if I faint?"*

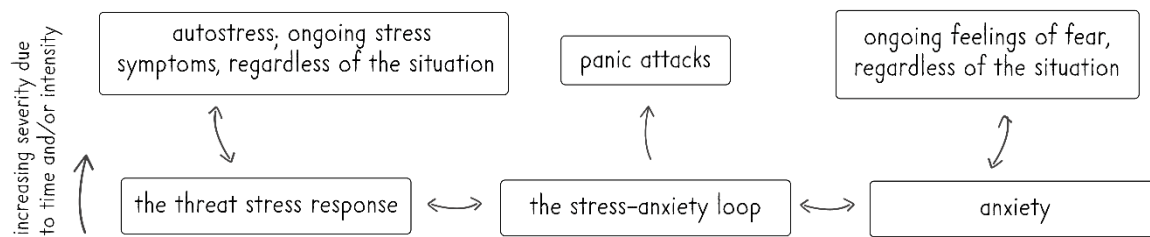
Instead of fighting against her stress response, she's learning to accept it.

Accepting our body's stress response can be the quickest way to feel calmer.

Everyone varies in their experience of the stress response. Here are some common physical reactions:

- Heart pounding and racing
- Heart palpitations
- Irregular heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy and light-headed
- Neck and shoulder tension
- Clenched jaw
- Grinding your teeth (especially at night)
- Headaches
- General aches, pains and tense muscles
- Shaking hands and legs
- Breathing difficulties (for example, feeling as though you can't get enough air)
- Excessive yawning
- Faster breathing
- Chest tightness
- Sweating or hot flushes
- Pins and needles
- IBS
- Restlessness
- Low energy
- Ringing in the ear
- Tingling or numbness in the arms, fingers, toes, or around the mouth
- Fatigue
- Feeling sick
- Frequent urination
- Changes in sex drive
- Frequent colds
- Feelings of unreality (of the self and the world)

Alongside these physical experiences, some people feel panicky for no reason, feeling an ongoing sense of fear and impending doom. This can happen when the part of your brain that generates the stress response - the amygdala - becomes overactive.



An overactive amygdala makes you hypervigilant to all possible threats in your environment. It makes your mind zoom in on the negative, which would have helped your ancient ancestors keep safe when they kept coming across life-threatening danger.

In the stress-anxiety loop, you become extremely vigilant of distressing physical symptoms and interpret them as being dangerous. This leads to more anxious thoughts, rising stress levels, and can ultimately result in a panic attack.

Key to overcoming this is taking control of our minds. As Paulo Coelho says:

*“You have two choices, to control your mind or to let your mind control you.”*

With her new mindsets, Polly has three new thinking patterns helping her take control of her mind:

### **New Thinking Pattern 1: Focusing on the Benefits of Stress**

To help us become more accepting of our body’s stress response in moments of high stress, there are plenty of benefits we can focus on.

Instead of thinking ‘I can’t stand when my heart is beating this fast’, here are some examples of new, helpful thoughts:

*‘Adrenaline is helping me focus more and process information quicker.’*

*‘I have more energy due to cortisol increasing my blood sugar levels.’*

*‘The neurosteroid DHEA is helping me become more resilient and learn from my experiences.’*

*‘Oxytocin is encouraging me to get social support and it’s helping my heart cells repair and regenerate.’*

### **New Thinking Pattern 2: Focusing on The Meaning of Stress**

The scientific research that led to the mainstream view that stress is purely harmful was mainly done on mice experiencing the worst kind of stress possible - stress lacking any kind of meaning, as well as being unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Whilst this kind of stress exists in extreme situations, most of the stress we experience on a daily basis we can in fact find meaning in, as well as anticipate and control.

Research shows that stress is strongly associated with finding life meaningful - it's an inevitable part of pursuing personal goals and caring about things important to us.

Here are three questions to consider:

### **1) Which of My Personal Values Does It Relate To?**

Studies show that reflecting on your personal values is one of the most effective psychological interventions around.

This insight helps Polly understand her stress response on a regular basis. Polly values making a difference. When she feels stressed at work, she reminds herself that it's because she cares about the wellbeing of the people she supports. This puts her in a much more positive mindset by reminding her that she feels grateful for the job she has.

Download our free [Values Worksheets](#) to help clarify your values.

There's a flipside to values contemplation worth considering. Often, we get ourselves worked up over things which upon reflection, we might care less about than we originally thought. Sarah Knight, author of *The Life-Changing Magic of Not Giving A F\*ck*, explains her experience:

*"I stopped caring about small things that annoyed me. I unfriended some truly irritating people on Facebook. I refused to suffer through another reading of friends' plays. And I stopped getting dressed up just to go to the grocery store behind my house (pyjamas are the new black). Little by little, I started feeling better. Less burdened. More peaceful."*

Next time you feel stressed or anxious, ask yourself: how much does this really matter?

This applies to other people's opinions, people-pleasing, our daily hassles, personal commitments, and situations where perfectionism creeps in. Letting go of caring so much about things that don't actually matter can be a simple and quick way to feel better!

### **2) Which Core Beliefs Does It Relate To?**

The stress response can also be related to our core beliefs. For example, people who experience stress in social situations often hold the belief that they need social approval in order to feel worthy.

Working on accepting ourselves and accepting that nobody appeals to everybody can help us overcome this kind of stress.

Jules Evans, an author who researches wellbeing, resilience and practical philosophy, talks about this in his book *Philosophy for Life*. He explains:

*"I held certain toxic beliefs and habits of thinking which were poisoning me, such as [...] 'Everyone must approve of me, and if they don't, it's a disaster.' These toxic beliefs were at the core of my emotional suffering. My emotions followed my beliefs, and I would feel extremely anxious in social situations, and depressed when those situations did not go well."*

Another way our core beliefs can influence our stress response is in circumstances where they're out of sync with our behaviour. Psychologists call this 'cognitive dissonance'. For example, in her

previous marketing job, Polly noticed her autostress flare up when she was working with a client whose business ethics she didn't agree with.

### **3) Which Basic Needs Am I Not Meeting?**

As humans, we all share the same basic needs that we must meet to have healthy minds and bodies, such as:

- A sense of safety and security
- Enough rest and sleep
- Sufficient exercise
- Social connection
- A healthy diet

Polly, like a lot of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, struggles with getting enough rest. When she's been on the go too much and starts experiencing autostress, she knows it's her body telling her she needs to slow down and invest in rest. If she doesn't pay attention to these signs, she risks spiralling down into burnout zone. When this happens, we can end up experiencing depression, where all our energy and desire to do anything disappears.

This response can be seen as the body's way of hibernating in order to regain balance – it's our brain's way of removing us from what it perceives as a threatening situation. We'll explore more about the importance of meeting our basic needs in part five.

### **New Thinking Pattern 3: Focus On 'Getting Excited'**

Another way to transform our stress response and reduce anxiety is by simply telling ourselves to get excited!

This worked for a group of people who did a public speaking task in a study by Alison Brooks in 2014. She found that people who told themselves "I am excited" compared to those who said "I am calm" ended up:

- Speaking for longer
- Coming across as more persistent
- Being perceived as more persuasive, competent and confident

### **SUMMARY 3.1**

How about trying these new thinking patterns when you notice your body's stress response?

- Focusing on the benefits of stress,
  - Our hearts beat stronger and faster so that more blood gets to our brain, which can boost our cognitive performance.
  - Adrenaline can help us focus better and process information quicker.
  - Increased cortisol can help boost our energy levels.
  - The neurosteroid DHEA can help us become more resilient and learn from our experiences.
  - Oxytocin can encourage us to seek social support and it helps our heart cells repair and regenerate.
- Focusing on the meaning of stress:
  - Which of my personal values does it relate to?
  - How much does this really matter?
  - Which of my core beliefs does it relate to?
  - Which basic needs am I not meeting?
- Focusing on getting excited.

Next, we'll describe five unhelpful thinking habits to be aware of, and two important techniques - cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring - to help us overcome them.

### 3.2: Cognitive Defusion and Cognitive Restructuring Techniques

*“Most people don’t realise that our mind constantly chatters. And yet, that chatter ends up being the force that drives us much of the day in terms of what we do, what we react to, and how we feel.” – Jon Kabat-Zinn*

We heard in 2.3 that the key to reducing anxiety is to notice thoughts as just thoughts and focus on our response. Once we get into the habit of noticing our thoughts, we’ll eventually start noticing our thinking patterns. Here are some common unhelpful thinking patterns related to anxiety to be aware of:

#### 1. Hypothetical Worry

Worry is normal, and becomes an unhelpful thinking habit only when we focus too much on hypothetical worries instead of practical worries. Hypothetical worries include ‘what if?’ thoughts, and are typically things we don’t have control over. This type of worry is common in people who feel uncomfortable with the feeling of uncertainty. On the other hand, practical worries are things we can act on, and they can help us keep organised.

#### 2. Rumination

Rumination is when we repeatedly think about bad experiences, dwelling on things that have distressed us, a.k.a., ‘overthinking’. This unhelpful thinking habit becomes particularly problematic when we focus on the causes and consequences of distressing events instead of what we’ve learnt and would do differently in future.

#### 3. Catastrophising

People who experience hypothetical worry and rumination may also be prone to catastrophising. This is when our thoughts jump to worst case scenarios, exaggerating the negatives, or as the saying goes, ‘making a mountain out of a molehill’. People prone to catastrophising might notice their minds conjuring up mental images of worst case scenarios, which research shows tends to be more stress-inducing than thought-based anxiety.

#### 4. Pessimistic Thinking

When our thoughts focus on the negatives and aren’t balanced by acknowledging the good, we’re experiencing pessimistic thinking; it’s like our minds have put on a pair of Negativity Glasses which filter out anything positive. The glass is always half empty.

#### 5. Black-and-White Thinking

When our thoughts centre on seeing situations and people in terms of extremes, labelling things as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’, we’re experiencing black-and-white, or ‘all or nothing’ thinking. In reality, the world is full of shades of grey. Acknowledging these can play a big part in helping you reduce anxiety.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT, pronounced ‘act’ for short), when we’re not aware of the space between our thoughts and our response to them, we’re experiencing *cognitive fusion*.

In the cognitive fusion state, you forget that thoughts are just thoughts, you treat them as truth, and you fall deeper and deeper into downward spirals of challenging emotions.



In other words, your Negative Nancy always ends up at the bottom of the Slide of Doom; your thoughts always end up hijacking your mood.

Buddhist philosophy offers lots of helpful tips and metaphors for mental wellbeing. Here's one that helps explain the concept of cognitive fusion further.

In Buddhism, as well as the Western notion of five senses - sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch - they have an additional sense, 'mind' or 'mental object'. Minds are seen by Buddhists as a *sixth sense* that creates a filter on top of reality.

The Buddha taught that mental suffering arises from mistaking that filter for reality itself. Just as we can observe what we see, smell, hear, taste, and touch, we can also observe the activity of our mind.



When we're so fused to our thoughts, we can't take a step back and observe them as our mind's activity. We're in a state of cognitive fusion.

Meditation and *cognitive defusion techniques* train us to start observing our mind as we would observe a smell: as something to notice and respond to if we wish.

Here's an example of a cognitive defusion technique: labelling your thoughts as 'brain noise'. Techniques like these help remind you that thoughts aren't facts and you can choose how to respond to them.

Two more examples of cognitive defusion techniques are:

- Saying "I'm having the thought that" before unhelpful thoughts
- Imagining thoughts being spoken in a silly voice, e.g., by our inner Negative Nancy character

Another technique which is central to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is to practise *cognitive restructuring*. For anxiety related to daily hassles (for example, delayed or cancelled trains), people often find cognitive defusion techniques most useful. On the other hand, when anxiety relates to our core beliefs, cognitive restructuring might be more effective in the long run. Ultimately, everyone is different. Remember, try and test and discover what works best for you!

An example of cognitive restructuring is what we call *The BOP Method* (you can bring to mind that toy from the 90's to help you remember!).



At the core of anxiety is focusing on and exaggerating the negative as well as focusing too much on hypothetical worries. To combat this, The BOP Method trains our thinking habits to become more *balanced*, *optimistic* and *proactive*.

### **Balanced**

In balanced thinking, we move away from pessimistic, black-and-white and catastrophic thinking by bringing to mind the wider, more realistic picture. We can ask ourselves:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What's the bigger picture?
- If I viewed this from an outsider perspective, what would I think?
- Will this matter in a week, a month or a year's time?
- Is this fact or opinion?

### **Optimistic**

In optimistic thinking, we rewire our brains to become more *realistically* positive, which helps us combat anxiety as well as increasing our overall happiness levels.

Susan Jeffers, author of best-selling book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, suggests the following mantra that fits with optimistic thinking: "*whatever happens, I'll handle it.*"

It's important to note that what we're aiming for isn't simply positive thinking, it's *realistic optimism*. Realistic optimism helps us see the good whilst still acknowledging the negatives.

We can ask ourselves:

- What are the positives, or potential positives, in this situation?
- Does the situation involve opportunities for growth, character development, or learning?

- What do I have to be grateful for right now?

## Proactive

Anxiety can make us feel frozen and unable to take action. We feel a desire to withdraw and avoid what makes us feel distressed, even when it's something that matters to us. To let go of worries and shift into a habit of more proactive thinking, we can ask ourselves:

- Is there something I need to let go of because I can't control it?
- What can I control in this situation?
- What's the smallest action I can take that could make a positive difference right now?

You might find the following mantra helpful: *"be proactive, not reactive."* Research shows that when we shift our focus to what we can control, we see meaningful and lasting differences in our wellbeing, health, and performance.

You can use apps like Google Keep and Google Calendar to break down tasks into smaller steps, create to do lists and set reminders. This helps you to keep on top of life's demands to your best ability.

We can also use these apps to try a technique suggested by Robert Leahy, author of *The Worry Cure*. He suggests making a note of our worries throughout the day, then reviewing them at the end of the day. He explains that most people who do this for a few weeks soon realise their worries are repetitive and unimportant, which takes their power away from us.

Another form of proactive thinking is to focus on developing your problem-solving skills. When you're faced with an issue you can control, you can get into the habit of writing down exactly what the problem is, and all of the possible solutions you can think of.

You then evaluate the solutions, choose one to try, and make a plan. If it doesn't work, you can come back to your notes and try something else. Typing up or writing out notes is a lot better than trying to problem-solve in our heads - everything becomes clearer when it's written down!

## Cognitive Defusion and Restructuring in Action

Here's an example of how Polly uses cognitive defusion and The BOP Method in a social situation.

She opens up to a friend and tells her about her self-esteem issues. Her friend responds "you have so many great qualities you could focus on to build up your self-esteem. You're a good friend, hard-working and really caring. They're all qualities I really value in others". However, her friend pauses for a while before she says this. Uh oh! Polly's immediate response is anxiety:

*"She took a long time to respond (pessimistic thinking). She probably doesn't like me (catastrophising). What if she tells everyone what I told her? What if she stops inviting me to things? (hypothetical worry). This sucks - I really want her as a friend (anxiety starting to affect mood)."*

At this point, she notices she's stuck in cognitive fusion, treating her thoughts as absolute truths and spiralling further down the Slide of Doom. She then focuses her attention to cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring:

*“OK, I’m having the thought that she probably doesn’t like me (cognitive defusion). Actually, I might be reading too much into it. Maybe she was thinking hard about what to say because she cares about me, or maybe she finds complimenting people a bit awkward (balanced). What she said was actually really nice. And I agree, I am a good friend and I’m caring (optimistic). I’ll take her advice and start focusing more on my positive qualities (proactive).”*

The more Polly practises cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring, the more they become her natural way of thinking.

It’s important to remember that thinking habits are just that - habits. Habits are difficult to break. When you spend years thinking in a certain way, it takes time and effort to change your way of thinking. You can think of getting mentally fit in the same way as we think of getting physically fit - it doesn’t happen overnight, but with time and effort, it’s totally possible!

### **Cognitive Distraction**

In moments of intense anxiety and racing thoughts, it might be difficult to follow through with cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring techniques.

When you’re feeling extremely distressed, cognitive distraction can be an effective way to calm down your brain. This simply involves redirecting your attention to something else so that you take your mind off your anxiety. Some ideas for cognitive distraction include:

- Watching something
- Going for a walk
- Listening to a podcast
- Listening to relaxing music
- Talking to someone
- Counting backwards from 200 in 5s
- A pampering activity such as painting your nails or doing a face mask
- Cleaning or tidying
- Practising other relaxation techniques, as we’ll explore in 5.2

Once you feel calmer, you can focus on your cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring techniques.

### **SUMMARY 3.2**

Unhelpful thinking patterns can worsen your mood, put you at risk of negative self-fulfilling prophecies, and shift you into the threat response.

If unhelpful thinking patterns continue long enough, they put you at risk of experiencing autostress. Common unhelpful thinking patterns include:

- Hypothetical worry
- Rumination
- Catastrophising
- Pessimistic thinking
- Black-and-white thinking

When we don’t recognise our unhelpful thoughts hijacking our mood, we’re in a state of cognitive fusion. To combat cognitive fusion, you must notice thoughts as just thoughts and focus on your

response. To do this, you can start getting into the habit of using cognitive defusion, cognitive restructuring, and cognitive distraction techniques. These techniques help reduce the impact of unhelpful thoughts on the rest on your emotions, behaviour and physical reactions.

An example of cognitive defusion is labelling your thoughts as 'brain noise', saying to yourself "I'm having the thought that" before your thought, or imagining your thoughts being said in a silly voice.

An example of cognitive restructuring is The BOP Method, which involves focusing your attention on balanced, optimistic and proactive thoughts.

<p>balanced:</p> <p>what assumptions am I making?</p> <p>what's the bigger picture?</p> <p>if I viewed this from an outsider perspective, what would I think?</p> <p>will this matter in a week, a month, or a year's time?</p> <p>is this fact or opinion?</p>	<p>optimistic:</p> <p>what are the positives, or potential positives, in this situation?</p> <p>does the situation involve opportunities for growth, character development, or learning?</p> <p>what do I have to be grateful for right now?</p>	<p>proactive:</p> <p>is there something I need to let go of because I can't control it?</p> <p>what can I control in this situation?</p> <p>what's the smallest action I can take that could make a positive difference right now?</p>
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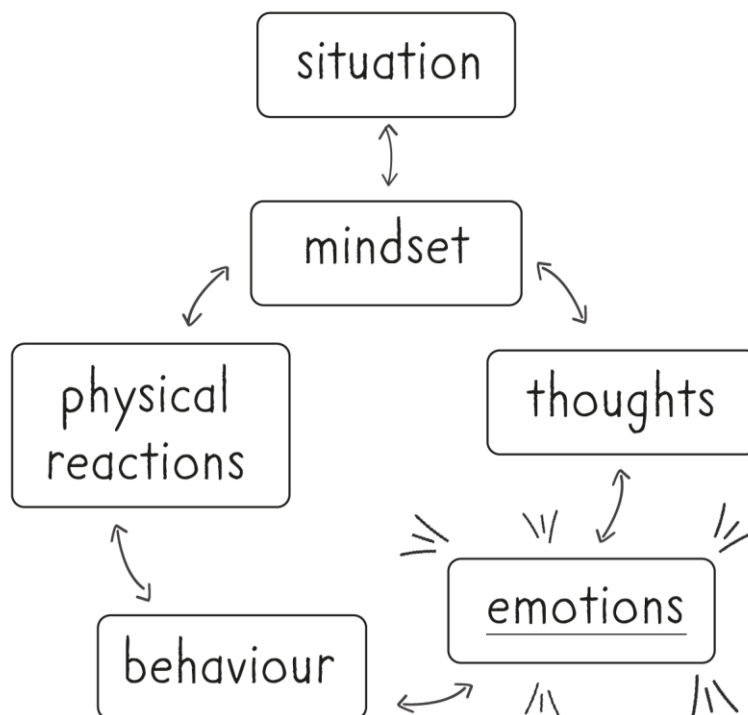
For moments of high distress, examples of cognitive distraction techniques include watching something, going for a walk, or listening to a podcast.

There are endless techniques to explore. It's all about finding out what works best for you. Be sure to check out The Thinking Slow Method in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#) for more techniques and practical tools for taking control over your mind.

In the next section, we'll describe three important points about the psychology of emotion. When put into practice, these can help you boost your happiness levels.



## PART FOUR: Emotions



## PART FOUR: EMOTIONS

### 4.1: Three Key Points About the Psychology of Emotions

*“Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.”* – Dalai Lama.

In the last two years, Polly’s new mindsets, thoughts, and behaviours have reduced her challenging emotions and enhanced her positive emotions. When you experience a lot of stress and anxiety, all your negative emotions intensify.

You might feel:

- A sense of dread
- Low mood
- Irritable
- Impatient
- Tense
- Angry
- Guilty
- Paranoid

Transforming and reducing your stress, autostress and anxiety is therefore incredibly powerful, as it has the potential to help you reduce a wide range of challenging emotions.

As we’re effectively covering how to tackle challenging emotions in the rest of The Framework, in this section, we’ll be focusing on boosting our mood.

#### **Key Point 1: Positive and Negative Wellbeing States Can Occur at The Same Time**

In her TED Talk, psychologist Nancy Etcoff from Harvard Medical School describes our two parallel systems of mental health: mental unwellness and mental wellness.

Mental health isn’t a single continuum, as it seems to feel intuitively. To become less miserable doesn’t necessarily mean we become happier; the absence of mental unwellness is not mental wellness.



Our two parallel systems of mental health would have allowed our ancient ancestors to look for opportunity at the same time as avoiding danger. This explains why it’s possible to suffer from stress, autostress and anxiety but at the same time we can feel happy.

Negative thinking habits come easier to us than positive thinking habits because we have an ingrained and powerful negativity bias. As avoiding danger was extremely important for our ancient ancestors, negative emotions have a stronger impact on us than positive emotions, we process negative information more easily and quickly, and we react more intensely to negative stimuli than to equally strong positive stimuli.

The struggle is real - it takes effort to feel happy! Happiness is a skill, so, how do we do it?

## Key Point 2: Emotions Are Best Seen as a By-Product

As our opening quote from the Dalai Lama stated, happiness comes from our own actions.

It's best understood as a *by-product* of what we do - the mindsets we adopt, the thoughts we focus on, and our behaviour. When it comes to the type of thoughts that give rise to happiness, The BOP Method is a perfect example of what we should be focusing on: thoughts that are balanced, optimistic and proactive.

When it comes to happiness-inducing behaviours, researcher Lahnna Catalino explains, "people who pursue happiness by seeking out pleasant experiences as part of their everyday lives are happier." It's all about discovering our nourishing activities, knowing what brings us joy, and making it happen! Why not use our free Nourishing Activities Inspiration Checklists ([Indoor](#) and [Outdoor](#))?

Also, there are lots of free mood tracking apps that can help you discover what makes you happiest. You might be surprised by what you find!

Catalino warns us: "In stark contrast, people who strive to feel good every possible moment, as if it were possible to will oneself to be happy, appear to be following a recipe for unhappiness." This is why it's so important to focus on happiness as a *by-product*, not seeing it as something you can make happen just like that.

It's also important to note that sometimes we have no control over our mood regardless of the mindsets, thoughts and behaviours we adopt. Mood naturally fluctuates.

For women, changes in hormones during the second half of the menstrual cycle can lead to mood swings, anxiety and irritability, which ease and disappear when the period starts. (Second half, as in, for a full two weeks!). Each woman's experience of this is different, and may vary from month to month. However, nearly *all* women experience some kind of premenstrual symptom. So, it's important to enjoy the positive moods whilst they're there, and know that bad moods will pass, and they're often outside of our control.

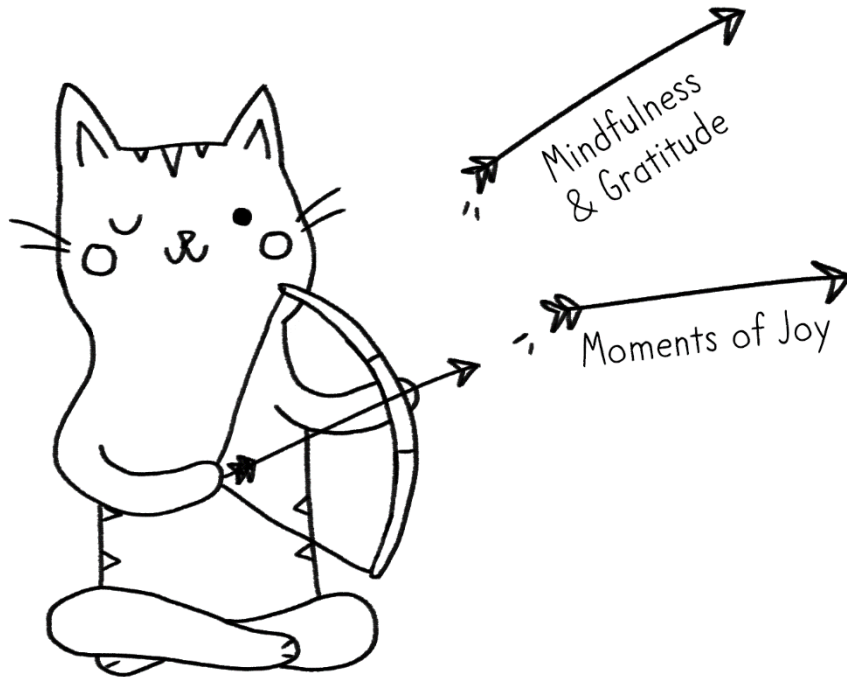
## Key Point 3: Using the Two Arrows of Happiness Mindset

When it comes to mindsets for happiness, by far the most powerful is The Two Arrows of Happiness mindset. This mindset is inspired by The Two Arrows of Suffering, a popular Buddhist metaphor.

Buddhists say that any time we experience misfortune, two arrows come our way. The first arrow is the actual bad event, which can, indeed, cause real pain. The second arrow is the suffering, which represents our response to the bad event. This short quote from Buddha sums it up: "*pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.*"

The Two Arrows of Happiness follows the same principle. Anytime we experience fortune, we have the first arrow: the joy we experience in that moment. To boost our happiness levels, we can intentionally fire the first arrow more often, making an effort to plan more pleasant experiences into our lives.





Second, we can choose to fire the second arrow of happiness - prolonging and intensifying our experience of joy. You can do this by adopting an attitude of gratitude and practising mindfulness during your experience of happiness and pleasure. It's all about making an effort to be fully present when it's happening and appreciating it during and after it happens.

The more you shoot The Two Arrows of Happiness, the happier you become.

This is what makes gratitude journaling one of the most effective interventions in the field of positive psychology (the study of happiness). Research shows that people who practise gratitude are more likely to be happier and more optimistic, which studies suggest boosts our immune system.

Want to give this a go? Download a free Gratitude Log from our [Free Tools Library](#) or check out the more comprehensive Positive Emotions Journal in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

Happiness is a state of mind that becomes a state of brain. Dr Rick Hanson, an expert in the neuroscience of happiness, explains:

*“By taking just a few extra seconds to stay with a positive experience - even the comfort in a single breath - you’ll help turn a passing mental state into lasting neural structure.”*

We'll explain more about what this means in the final part of The Framework!

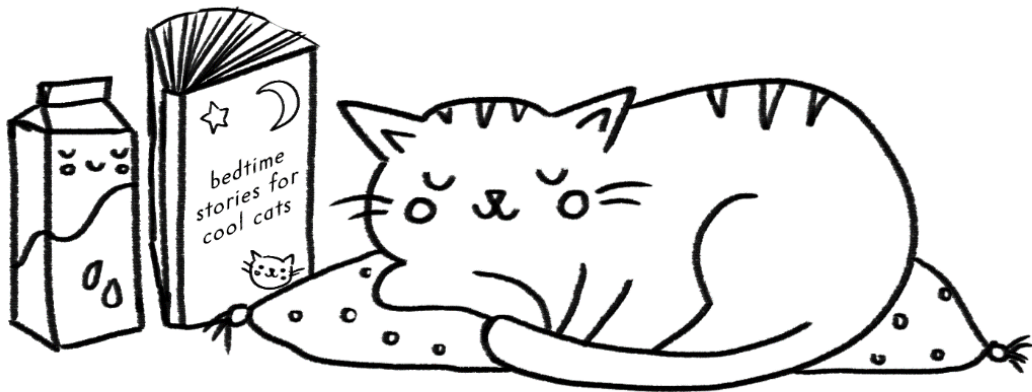
#### **SUMMARY 4.1**

Our emotions are best viewed as by-products. Changing them is achieved by optimising our mindsets, thoughts and behaviour.

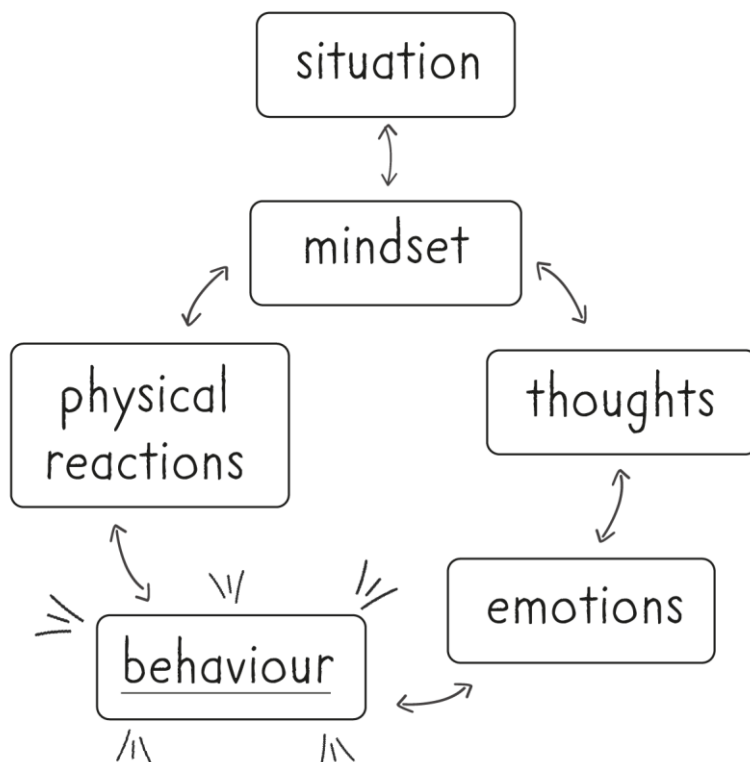
To experience less challenging emotions, focus on the methods described for reducing stress, autostress and anxiety outlined throughout The Framework.

To feel more positive emotions, use The BOP Method and adopt the Two Arrows of Happiness Mindset, making an effort to have more positive experiences and focusing your attention on being grateful and present.

In the next section, we'll discover the most effective behaviours for helping ourselves feel calmer and happier.



## PART FIVE: Behaviour



## PART FIVE: BEHAVIOUR

### 5.1: Overcoming Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

*“A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.”* – John A. Shedd.

When Polly moved to a new city, she wanted to meet new people but at the same time felt her anxiety held her back. She wanted to avoid the discomfort she felt in social situations. This meant she'd turn down invitations to social events, and at work, she kept herself to herself and didn't make much of an effort to socialise.

Though avoiding discomfort gives us temporary relief, it also prevents us from realising we're stronger, more capable, and more resilient than we think. When we avoid things, we limit our ability to live life to the full. Chloe Brotheridge, author of *The Anxiety Solution*, explains how people with anxiety often have difficulties 'leaning in'. She explains:

*“One thing I've learnt about women who have anxiety is that we have a problem 'leaning in' to things in general, whether it's speaking up, taking risks, or putting ourselves out there. Leaning in can feel risky and unsafe. It means we're stepping into the unknown; we don't trust ourselves, and, yup, we're afraid of losing control. But leaning into life, taking on challenges, pushing ourselves a little out of our comfort zones, and taking a few risks is essential if we're to overcome anxiety.”*

When you lean into life, you lean into uncertainty.

People who experience anxiety have been shown to have a low tolerance for uncertainty. It's worth reminding ourselves that uncertainty is an inescapable part of life, and the sooner we become comfortable with it, the sooner we can reduce stress and anxiety. As John Allen Paulos notes: *“uncertainty is the only certainty there is, and knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security.”*

To deal with uncertainty, we often resort to what psychologists call 'safety behaviours'. Safety behaviours are the things we do to feel safer, but they can end up making us feel worse in the long run. Like avoidance, they prevent us from realising we're stronger, more capable, and more resilient than we think.

An example of a common safety behaviour is relying on alcohol in social situations. For example, Polly used to make sure she had a couple of drinks before any social event she went to. She decided she wanted to feel more comfortable around new people and not rely on alcohol, so here's what she did:

- 1) First, she started making more conversation with people at work. She stopped going out by herself for lunch and brought in packed lunch and ate it in the kitchen. She introduced herself to people and asked how their week was going.
- 2) She decided to build her confidence by downloading Bumble BFF, an app for meeting new people. Whilst her initial discomfort was high, her distress reduced over time with the more people she met.
- 3) Next, she started accepting more invitations to more social events and didn't go home early like she used to. She stopped having drinks beforehand and instead focused on telling herself to 'get excited'. She thought about how she was looking forward to meeting new people, reminding herself that the more she goes to these events, the more comfortable she'll feel. She also allowed herself to feel a sense of achievement after each event she went to.

### **SUMMARY 5.1**

The longer you use avoidance and safety behaviours as coping mechanisms, the more your brain believes the activities you're avoiding are threats. This ends up causing you more stress, autostress and anxiety in the long run - and blocks you from experiencing personal growth.

To feel your best self, you need to cultivate the habit of leaning into uncertainty and challenging yourself to step outside of your comfort zone.

Keen to embrace this? Check out The GROW Planner in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

## 5.2: Calming Autostress With Relaxation

*“We humans have lost the wisdom of genuinely resting and relaxing. We worry too much. We don’t allow our bodies to heal, and we don’t allow our minds and hearts to heal.” – Thich Nhat Hanh.*

By the time Polly was at university, she was experiencing her stress response symptoms on an ongoing basis; she’d entered a state of autostress. Some of Polly’s autostress symptoms include:

- Breathing difficulties
- Excessive yawning
- Chest tightness
- Heart pounding and racing
- Heart palpitations
- Irregular heartbeat
- Muscle tension
- Ringing in the ear

When she wasn’t aware all her symptoms were related to autostress, she spent a lot of time on Google trying to figure out what might be wrong with her. She often came to some scary conclusions! Once, she rang an ambulance because she was worried she had a heart condition. She ended up having an electrocardiogram (ECG) at the hospital, a test that checks your heart’s rhythm and electrical activity. When everything came back normal, she felt relieved, but also confused and still worried about what was wrong.

Now she understands her symptoms are related to autostress, she feels a huge sense of relief. And she knows how to deal with it: to reduce autostress, you need to increase the activity of your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS).

Polly’s favourite way of activating her parasympathetic nervous system is through breathing exercises. She was so used to being on the go 24/7, she found it difficult to slow down and relax at first. She realised she was putting too much pressure on herself to be productive all the time, but eventually, she started seeing relaxation as form of productivity. It took her a few weeks to get into it, but the more she practised, the calmer she felt.

Autostress often results in breathing difficulties. You can even be holding your breath without realising it! Breathing difficulties are actually the root cause of the most common distressing physical symptoms. If your breathing is suboptimal, you lower the amount of carbon dioxide that’s normally in your blood. This leads to a wide range of symptoms associated with stress including:

- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness
- Tingling or numbness in the arms, fingers, toes, or around the mouth
- Feeling dizzy and light-headed
- Weakness
- Heart pounding and racing
- Heart palpitations
- Sweating or hot flushes
- Headaches
- Feeling sick
- Fatigue

These symptoms can all appear out of the blue. You might experience:

- 1) *Shallow breathing* (breathing in too quickly)
- 2) *Over-breathing* (breathing in more air as we feel like we're not getting enough, for example through yawning or sighing frequently)

Some people experience both.

So, let's take a moment to test your breathing:

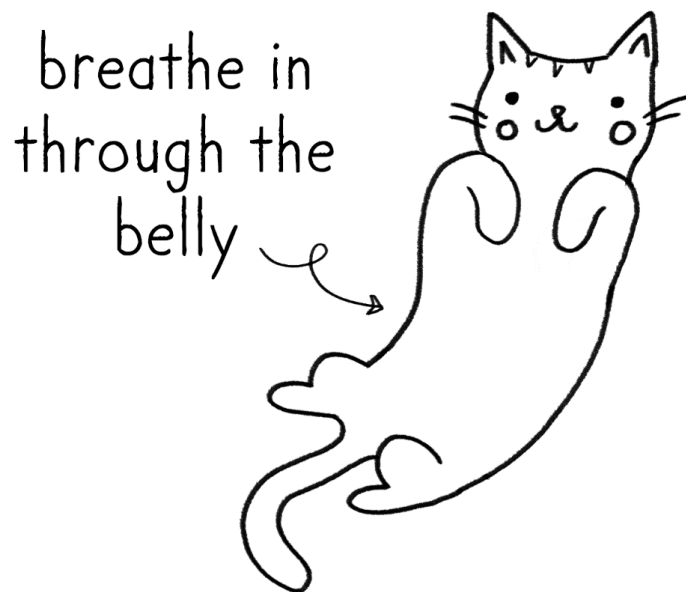
- Put one hand on your chest, and one on your belly
- Breathe for a few seconds. Which hand rises?
- If it's your chest, you might have developed a habit of shallow breathing

Although the effects of shallow breathing can be very unpleasant, it won't harm you, and you can reverse the habit with regular breathing exercises. The next time you feel stressed, take a moment to notice your breathing. Focus on breathing through your stomach, so that your belly rises when you inhale and drops when you exhale. Also, focus on breathing through your nose.

Here's a breathing exercise you can practise for five minutes a day to help you feel calmer:

- Inhale slowly and gently through your nose counting to four, expanding your belly as you do so
- Hold that breath for a count of two
- Slowly exhale through your nose for a count of six

This is called '4:2:6 Belly Breathing'. Research shows that practising regular breathing exercises can significantly reduce your symptoms within a matter of weeks.



## **SUMMARY 5.2**

To calm autostress, you need to increase the activity of your parasympathetic nervous system. We'll explore the science behind this in more detail at the end of The Framework.

Other relaxation techniques include:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualisation
- Yoga
- Pilates
- Tai Chi
- Massages
- Spending time in nature
- Mindful colouring
- Listening to relaxing music
- Warm baths
- Floatation therapy

Remember, mental wellbeing is complex - different things work at different times for different people. For some people, things will be relaxing, and for others, not so much. Try and test and discover what works best for you!



### 5.3: Meeting Our Basic Needs: Rest and Sleep

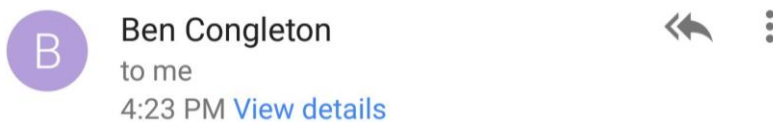
*“The current male-dominated model of success - which equates success with burnout, sleep deprivation, and driving yourself into the ground - isn’t working for women, and it’s not working for men, either.” – Arianna Huffington*

We’ve already spoken about how failing to meet our basic needs can result in the stress response. For the remainder of this section, we’ll look into why meeting those basic needs - rest, exercise, social connection and healthy nutrition - is so vital for our mental wellbeing.

We live in a society that glorifies being busy. So much so, that presenteeism (attending work despite being unwell) actually costs the economy more than general absenteeism.

When we ignore our body, forgo basic needs, and overwork ourselves, we increase our risk of exhaustion and burnout. This will ultimately lead to longer periods off work, so it’s vital you listen to your body.

Fortunately, there are many managers that understand the importance of looking after our mental health, for example, Ben Congleton. Here’s what he had to say when his employee, Madalyn, explained to her colleagues that she was taking a mental health day:



Hey Madalyn,

I just wanted to personally thank you for sending emails like this. Every time you do, I use it as a reminder of the importance of using sick days for mental health -- I can't believe this is not standard practice at all organizations. You are an example to us all, and help cut through the stigma so we can all bring our whole selves to work.

Go Ben!

Let’s take a deeper look into the importance of sleep.

Sleep deprivation is both a cause and a consequence of poor mental wellbeing. Studies show that a lack of sleep can lead to a more active amygdala - the part of your brain that generates the stress response. When you’re sleep deprived, getting less than seven hours sleep a night, there will likely be an increase in cortisol and adrenaline in your system.

As the NHS website explains:

*“When people with anxiety or depression were surveyed to calculate their sleeping habits, it turned out that most of them slept for less than six hours a night. One in three of us suffers from poor sleep, with stress, computers and taking work home often blamed. However, the cost of all those sleepless nights is more than just bad moods and a lack of focus. Regular poor sleep puts you at risk of serious medical conditions, including obesity, heart disease and diabetes - and it shortens your life expectancy. It’s now clear that a solid night’s sleep is essential for a long and healthy life.”*

It's therefore very important to develop good habits that give ourselves the best chance of getting a decent night's sleep. Here are four key areas to consider.

### 1) Addressing Your Anxiety

Often what keeps us most awake is actually our anxiety, especially if we don't have much time to think during the day. Practising cognitive defusion and cognitive restructuring techniques, as we've described, can be very helpful for bedtime anxiety. Making a note of your worries and reviewing them at the end of the day can also be helpful for reducing bedtime anxiety - especially for the common experience of Sunday night anxiety.

Negative thoughts about sleep itself are particularly disruptive. When your thoughts are along the lines of 'I'm going to get an awful night's sleep and feel so tired tomorrow', you're setting yourself up for a self-fulfilling prophecy. When it comes to restructuring your thoughts around sleep, more balanced and optimistic thinking might include:

*"If I don't get a good night's sleep that's OK, I'll get an early night tomorrow."*

*"I've woken up in the middle of the night. This is annoying. I might sleep more, or I might not. It's not a total disaster if I don't."*

*"I think I've got about four hours. This is far from ideal, but at least I've got a bit of sleep. I can only do my best."*

When you're having trouble dozing off, one of the absolute worst things you can do is to keep checking your phone. Did you know that just 20 minutes of looking at your phone has the same effect on your brain as a two hour walk in daylight? Plus, checking the time can lead to more anxiety. A simple but powerful sleep hack is therefore to leave your phone somewhere out of reach when you go to bed.

### 2) Creating A Bedtime Routine

Creating a bedtime routine can send a signal to your brain that it'll eventually associate with sleep.

Once the association is made, your brain will start producing melatonin, our sleep hormone. Your night time ritual could include writing in a journal (which, as we've mentioned, can be especially helpful for reducing anxiety). You could practise a breathing exercise, meditation, lighting a candle, reading a book, or listening to relaxing music (why not make a bedtime playlist?).

Many people find it helpful to set an alarm thirty minutes to one hour before bed time to alert us it's time to start winding down.

### 3) Optimising Our Diet

Here's what to avoid consuming when it comes to boosting your chances of getting a good night's rest:

- **Caffeinated drinks.** Avoiding coffee, tea (including green tea) and many Coca-Cola drinks after 2-3pm helps our body wind down before bedtime.
- **Alcohol.** Whilst many people believe that having a night-cap will help them sleep, it's been shown to lead to interrupted sleep and early waking.
- **Sugar and simple carbs.** These can cause a rise in blood sugar which makes us feel more alert.

- **Protein snacks.** Protein can also make us feel more alert; it blocks the synthesis of serotonin, which helps promote sleep.

#### 4) Optimising Our Environment

Because a slight dip in body temperature promotes good sleep, your bedroom should be cooler compared to your other rooms in your home, but not too cold! This also makes our nightwear choice important. You should avoid wearing pyjamas or bedtime socks that'll make you too hot, as it risks waking you up.

#### **SUMMARY 5.3**

Getting enough rest and sleep is crucial to your mental health. Research shows that people who are sleep deprived are more likely to experience stress and anxiety, possibly because it leads to your amygdala being more active and higher levels of stress hormones in your system.

Like the stress-anxiety loop, you can experience a mental unwellness-sleep deprivation loop. The worse your mental health, the worse your sleep; the worse your sleep, the worse your mental health.

There are plenty of other tips and techniques for improving sleep. If you want a practical tool to help you, be sure to check out The Better Sleep Planner in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#).

There's one important habit for improving sleep we haven't yet mentioned: exercise. We'll explore the wide-ranging benefits of exercise in the next section.

## 5.4: Meeting Our Basic Needs: Exercise

*“Walking is man's best medicine.”* – Hippocrates.

Exercise has an extremely wide range of health benefits. We tend to think of exercise as a healthy habit, but in fact, we'd argue it's a basic need.

Our bodies are designed to expend a great amount of energy, and when they don't, it negatively impacts our minds and bodies. Lack of exercise is associated with both mental health difficulties and chronic illness.

So, what happens to us when we exercise that makes it so important for our mental and physical health? Here's are 10 key benefits:

### 1. **Better Sleep**

Research shows that people who exercise regularly fall asleep faster, sleep longer, have better quality sleep, and wake up less often during the night.

One study suggests the improvement in sleep quality after 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise per week is 65%. Yep, 65% better quality sleep! Exercising in the late afternoon and early evening is best, as it promotes a dip in our night time body temperature which helps us sleep. On the other hand, exercising less than 3 hours before bed can have the opposite effect, increasing your body temperature and interfering with a good night's sleep.

### 2. **Less Stress**

Exercise reduces the overall activation of your amygdala and sympathetic nervous system - the parts of our brain and body that generate the stress response. It burns excess adrenaline and blood sugar, which helps us feel calmer and reduces our blood pressure. Exercise also provides us with a distraction from unhelpful thoughts and worries, reducing anxiety.

### 3. **Relaxed Muscles**

Exercise helps ease muscle tension, which can make you feel calmer for hours afterwards.

### 4. **Confidence Boost**

There are so many elements about exercise that helps boost our confidence: a feeling of achievement after each workout, toning up, weight loss, a positive change in our skin and developing the ability to go outside of our comfort zone - to name just a few! This new found confidence can help boost our mood.

### 5. **Better Mood**

Exercise also helps improve our mood through the release of endorphins and serotonin, our brain's feel-good chemicals. Endorphins help you feel happier and calmer and are a natural pain reliever. It's thought that exercise can increase our brain's serotonin levels in the same way as anti-depressants. One study showed that people who completed an aerobic exercise class had higher levels of serotonin and improved mood compared to a group who just completed a stretching class.

### 6. **Less Aches and Injuries**

Exercise makes our muscles stronger and more flexible, which supports our bones and joints, making it less likely that we pull a muscle or suffer from injuries and aches.

### 7. **Protection from Chronic Illness**

Lack of exercise increases your risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, Alzheimer's, and some cancers.

## 8. Better Digestion

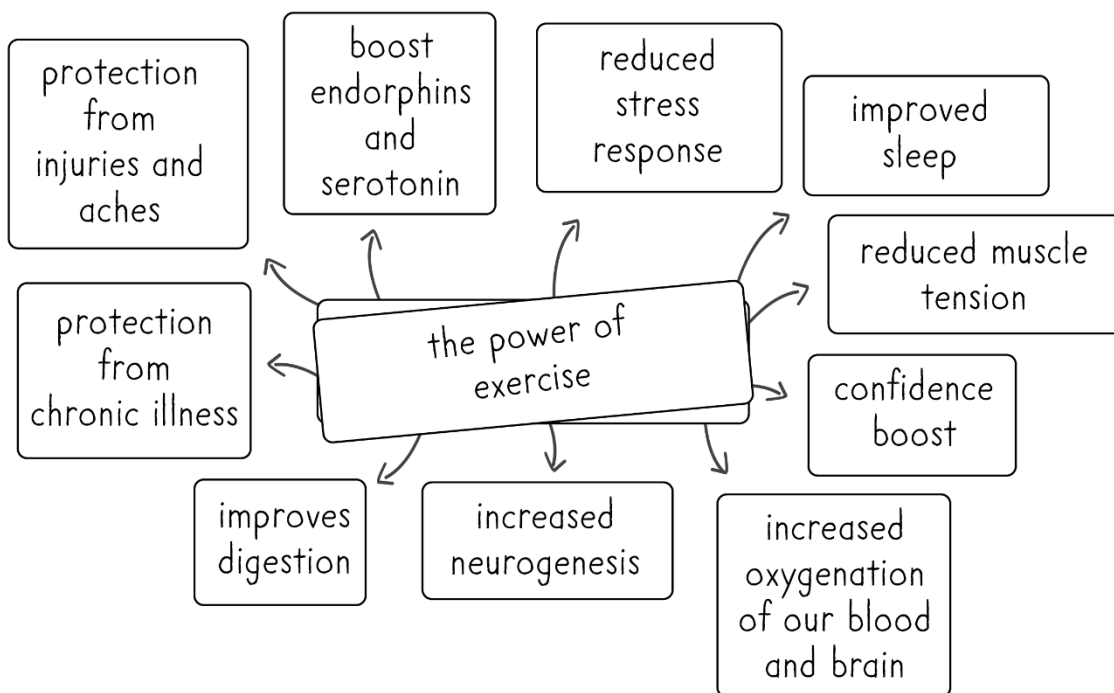
Autostress often results in digestion issues. Working out can help you absorb vital vitamins and minerals which help you feel calm. We'll explore more about the importance of this in 5.6!

## 9. Better Focus

Exercise increases our alertness and ability to focus by increasing blood flow to the brain.

## 10. More Brain Power

Exercise stimulates chemicals in the brain called "brain derived neurotrophic factors" which help new brain cells to grow and develop. This provides you with a stronger foundation for learning new knowledge and skills, such as mental wellbeing skills!



With such wide-ranging benefits and no negative side effects, it's no wonder doctors regularly prescribe exercise as a mental health intervention. It's a shame doctors don't have the time to properly explain all the benefits so that their patients understood just how powerful it is.

A study by Professor Steven Petruzzello showed that just 10 weeks of regular exercise was enough to reduce people's general level of anxiety.

Research suggests that aerobic exercise (such as walking, cycling, and jogging) provides the same benefits as non-aerobic exercise (such as yoga and pilates). Studies also suggest we need around 21 minutes three times a week to experience the benefits. So, you don't have to spend hours doing it - it's something most of us can fit in to our lives when it becomes a priority.

It could be something as simple as committing to get off public transport a stop earlier and power walking to and from work.

It's important to find something that suits us and that we enjoy. Exercising doesn't have to mean the gym, if that's not your thing. Why not try out some workout videos on YouTube? We recommend [Bailey Brown](#).

And remember, it's very common to not feel like exercising. You can't rely on motivation to exercise. Motivation is an emotion, so, it naturally fluctuates. Motivation comes with action. Once you begin exercising, that's when you get into it.

#### **SUMMARY 5.4**

Our bodies are designed for exercise. There's been a lot of research conducted into the effects of exercise on mental health which repeatedly suggest it can significantly improve mental wellbeing.

Research even suggests that it can enhance our mental wellbeing just as much as psychotherapy. Be sure to check out The Lasting Habits System in [The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit](#) if you're interested in developing an exercise habit. It outlines a three step process for building habits that last and it contains a variety of trackers to help you on your exercise journey.

It's also important to note that buddying up with someone can make it easier to develop an exercise habit. Exercise buddies give us the powerful combination of support, accountability, and even healthy competition.

In the next section, we'll explore why having an exercise buddy taps into another of our basic needs: social connection.

## 5.5: Meeting Our Basic Needs: Social Connection

*“Of all the means which are procured by wisdom to ensure happiness throughout the whole of life, by far the most important is the acquisition of friends.” – Epicurus.*

In ancestral times, being part of a community was vital to our survival. There’s now considerable evidence that suggests that, on the whole, compared with people in previous decades, we spend less time with family and friends. We have fewer close friends and are less involved in our communities. This affects our physical health as well as our mental health. Research shows that the health risk of social isolation is comparable to the risks of smoking, high blood pressure and lack of exercise.

It’s not surprising then, that The Mental Health Foundation calls relationships *“the forgotten foundation of mental health and wellbeing”*. They explain:

*“People who are more socially connected to family, friends, or their community are happier, physically healthier and live longer, with fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected. It’s not just the number of friends you have, and it’s not whether or not you’re in a committed relationship, but it’s the quality of your close relationships that matters.”*

In fact, the longest-running study on happiness found that the quality of our social connections is the single biggest predictor of happiness. Our relationships have more power over our happiness than genes, IQ, social class, money, or fame. The director of the study, Robert Waldinger, notes *“the surprising finding is that our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health.”*

When it comes to priorities for mental wellbeing, our relationships deserve a top spot. The new science of stress even suggests we release a hormone, oxytocin, that encourages us to seek social support during stressful times. Research suggests that women release more oxytocin, which has been called the ‘tend and befriend’ response to stress. ‘Tending’ refers to caring for ourselves and our children, whereas ‘befriending’ refers to seeking social support.

Polly considers herself an introvert, and she used to think that she didn’t need much social interaction. However, her beliefs on this have changed since she’s become happier. She’s found that she wants to socialise more, and doing so reliably boosts her mood. It feels like a positive feedback loop.

Studies back this up: it’s been found that compared with people experiencing a neutral mood, people experiencing positive mood show greater sociability, sense of connection, self-disclosure, and trust in others. Plus, the more time people devote to generating positive emotions in themselves, the more pleasant their interactions with others become.

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, a leading researcher in the field of positive emotions, labels this the ‘upward spiral’ of positive emotions and health. Her research suggests social connection is a key factor in happiness and is associated with changes in our vagus nerve, an important component of the parasympathetic nervous system.

Fredrickson carried out a study exploring this with Bethany Kok and colleagues in 2013. Half of the study participants attended a 6-week loving-kindness meditation (LKM) course, which involved learning how to cultivate positive feelings of love, compassion and goodwill toward ourselves and others. They were asked to practice meditation at home, but how often they meditated was up to them. The other half of the participants remained on a waiting list for the course.

For 61 consecutive days, participants in both groups reported their meditation, prayer, or solo spiritual activity, their emotional experiences and their social interactions within the last day. Their vagal tone -

the activity of their vagus nerve - was assessed twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the study.

The findings suggested that positive emotions, positive social connections, and vagal tone does indeed give rise to an upward-spiral dynamic. They found that greater positive emotions prompted people to see themselves as more socially connected. Over time, as moments of positive emotions and positive social connections increased, vagal tone also improved.

Fredrickson explains:

*"The daily moments of connection that people feel with others emerge as the tiny engines that drive the upward spiral between positivity and health."*

### **SUMMARY 5.5**

Social connection is one of our core basic needs that helps make us the happiest, healthiest versions of ourselves.

There's lots of great books and guidance online for how to improve our relationships. There's also now plenty of ways to meet new people with the help of technology. Check out the apps Bumble BFF, Hey! VINA, Meeup, MeetMe, and Skout.

Head to our [Free Tools Library](#) to check out The Social Connection Planner and The Relationship Challenge.

In the final section on behaviour, we'll explore the impact of meeting our basic need of healthy nutrition.



## 5.6: Meeting Our Basic Needs: Healthy Nutrition

*“Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food.”* – Hippocrates.

Our diet and mood are interconnected; what we eat has the power to make us feel better or worse. We need nourishing foods to fulfil our brain’s essential neurochemistry.

When we eat, the food is absorbed into our GI tract, a.k.a., our gut. Vitamins, minerals and amino acids are carried through our bloodstream and into our brain. Enzymes then convert our amino acids into neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, dopamine and GABA. These neurotransmitters are chemicals that help us keep calm, sleep well, increase our feelings of pleasure, and more!

Signs that our diet isn’t nourishing enough include:

- Anxiety and low mood
- Mood swings and irritability
- Low energy
- Stomach pain
- Gas
- Bloating
- Diarrhoea
- Heartburn
- Indigestion
- Poor memory and concentration

Here are our top food and drink tips to ensure your diet is helping you feel your best self.

### Top Food Tips

#### 1. Make Your Meals Balanced, Regular and Easily Digestible

Balanced meals consist of around half vegetables, quarter complex carbohydrates (such as whole grains) and quarter protein. An example of a balanced meal would be broccoli, brown rice and fish.

Chloe McLeod, a dietician, says *“for most people whose plates look like that, it’s going to mean better health because you’re filling up on more of the lower energy foods and getting more of those micronutrients [vitamins and minerals] found more so in the vegetables”*.

You should try to avoid high levels of trans fat. You can spot them by looking for ‘hydrogenated’ or ‘partially hydrogenated’ on food ingredients lists. The Food and Drug Administration removed the ‘generally recognized as safe’ label from trans fats, following studies that strongly linked them with cardiovascular problems such as heart disease.

The best way to avoid them is by eliminating the amount of processed food in your diet. Cooking from scratch is key!

Healthy fats, on the other hand, are very important for mental health. But balance here is also important. Most people eat too many Omega-6 fatty acids and not enough Omega-3 fatty acids. It’s thought this distorted ratio might actually be one of the most damaging aspects of the Western diet.

By far the best and healthiest way to increase your Omega-3 intake is to eat seafood once or twice per week - fatty fish like salmon is a particularly good source. If you don’t eat seafood, you could

consider taking a fish oil supplement (cod liver oil is best, because it's high in Vitamin D and Vitamin A).

Experts suggest that eating five small meals or three smaller meals with two snacks is better than eating three large meals a day. This is because large meals can be taxing for your digestive system and affect your mood and energy levels.

When you eat a big meal, your blood sugar level rises. Once the meal is digested, your blood sugar level falls, causing your mood and energy to fall with it. The bigger the meal, the bigger the crash.

## **2. Manage Your Blood Sugar**

This brings us onto the important point of managing our blood sugar. We all know that sugar is super tasty, and it can be highly addictive, too. When we eat sugar our brain releases dopamine, the same neurotransmitter that's released when people have cocaine.

Having too much sugar leads not only to unstable moods and energy crashes, but can also lead to what's called reactive hypoglycaemia.

Reactive hypoglycaemia is low blood sugar that occurs one to three hours after you eat food high in sugar. Symptoms are very similar to anxiety - you might sweat and feel shaky or weak, or develop a headache. Some people are more reactive to sugar than others. If you experience these symptoms, you should eat a healthy meal as soon as possible.

In the long-term, too much sugar is also associated with premature brain ageing and reduced neuroplasticity. We need neuroplasticity - the ability of our brain to rewire itself - to become our calmer and happier selves.

## **3. Help Your Good Bacteria Flourish**

It turns out we're just as much bacteria as we are human. The latest research suggests we have the same number of bacteria cells as we have human cells.

Keeping your gut bacteria healthy is essential for a healthy mind and body. It's believed your gut's microbiotic environment influences the functioning of your amygdala and prefrontal cortex - the key areas of your brain involved in stress and anxiety.

This is why the gut is now often referred to as our 'second brain'. To help your good bacteria flourish, you could try adding into your diet:

- Probiotic and prebiotic capsules
- Fermented foods like yoghurt, kimchi, and sauerkraut
- Pulses, legumes, garlic, onion, apples, chickpeas, leeks, dates, figs and asparagus

### **Top Drink Tips**

#### **1. Stay Hydrated**

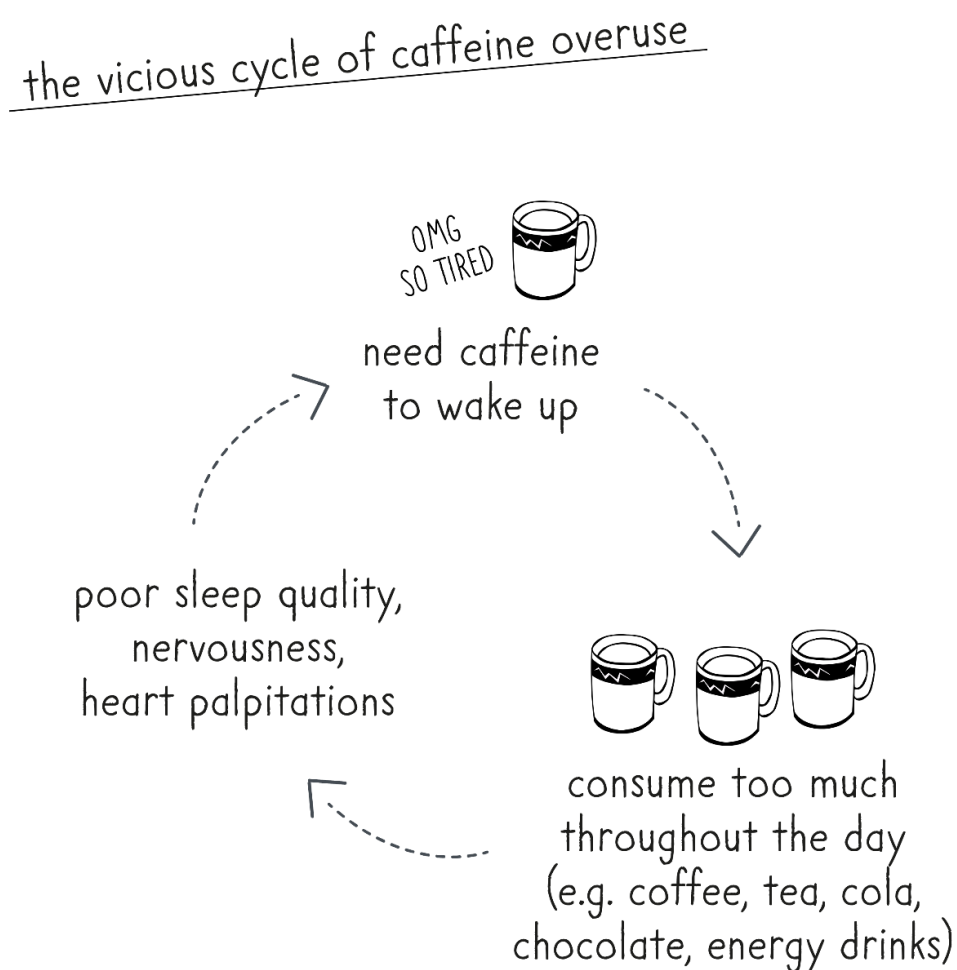
Our bodies are around 80% water. Each day we lose around 4% of our water weight through sweating, urinating and even breathing. If we don't replace our natural water loss, we can experience symptoms of dehydration which mimic those of the stress response - dizziness, light-headedness and

a faster heartbeat. In climates such as the UK's, we should aim for around six to eight glasses of water a day to stop us getting dehydrated.

## 2. Limit Caffeine

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea (including green tea), chocolate, cola, and energy drinks. Like sugar, we all vary in how sensitive we are to caffeine. In most people, it can increase mental alertness and concentration, but too much can leave us experiencing nervousness, insomnia, and heart palpitations.

This is because caffeine activates our body's stress response. It can increase our blood pressure and raise stress hormones such as cortisol. It can also deplete B vitamins, especially thiamin, which is needed for producing GABA, a neurotransmitter that helps keeps us calm. This can lead to this vicious cycle:



As mentioned in 5.3, as caffeine can lead to poor sleep quality, it's best avoided after 2-3pm.

## 3. Limit Alcohol

We also noted earlier that alcohol can have adverse effects on our mental health. Whilst many people believe that having a drink will help them sleep, it's been shown to lead to interrupted sleep and early waking.

Many people use alcohol to help feel calmer. Although it can calm us down initially, it actually increases our anxiety in the long run because it lowers our levels of GABA, the calming neurotransmitter.

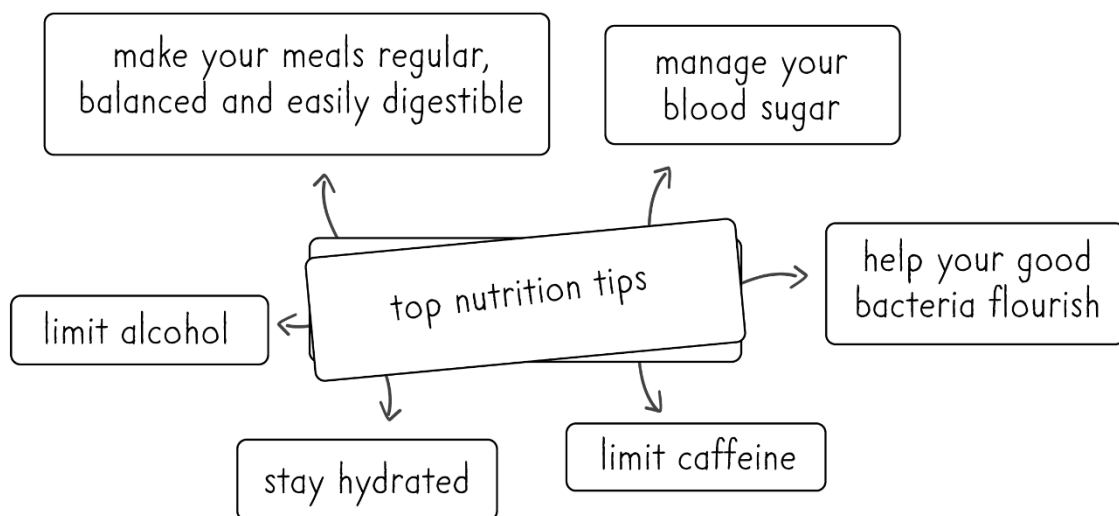
A study by registered nutritional therapist Amanda Geary in 1998 surveyed 165 people who were using nutrition specifically to improve their mental health. She found that over one third of people felt that improving their diet had directly improved their mental health.

When it came to cutting down or avoiding potential food 'stressors', the top 3 strategies found to be most helpful were:

1. Cutting down on sugar (80% of people found useful)
2. Cutting down on caffeine (79% of people found useful)
3. Cutting down on alcohol (55% of people found useful)

### **SUMMARY 5.6**

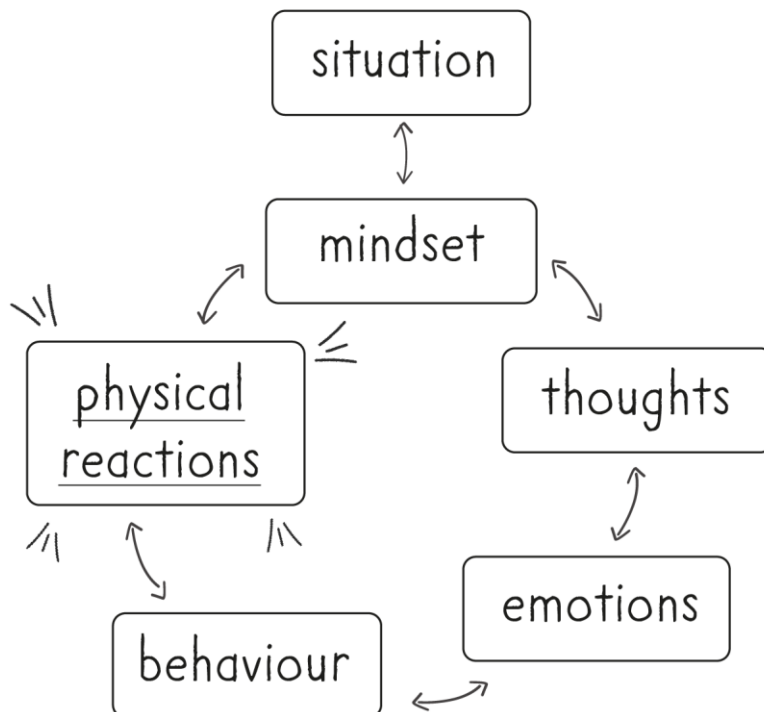
Meeting our basic need of a healthy diet is an important part of becoming calmer and happier. A nourishing diet involves balanced, regular, easily digestible meals, stable blood sugar, and a decent dose of healthy bacteria. It's also important to stay hydrated and limit our caffeine and alcohol intake if we're seriously committed to optimal mental wellbeing.



Next, we're onto the final section of The Framework: physical reactions.



## PART SIX: Physical Reactions



## PART SIX: PHYSICAL REACTIONS

*“Your body hears everything your mind says.”* – Naomi Judd.

By now, we hope you’ll have realised our minds and bodies are extremely interconnected!

This section is about putting what we’ve learnt all together: understanding more about the science behind what’s happening in our brain and bodies as we become calmer and happier.

Extremely complex neurological and physiological processes are involved here. We won’t go into huge technical detail, but we’ll instead provide simplified explanations that help you understand more about the mechanisms behind what we’ve described.

Here’s a reminder of the common unpleasant physical reactions associated with stress:

- Heart pounding and racing
- Heart palpitations
- Irregular heartbeat
- Feeling dizzy and light-headed
- Neck and shoulder tension
- Clenched jaw
- Grinding your teeth (especially at night)
- Headaches
- General aches, pains and tense muscles
- Shaking hands and legs
- Breathing difficulties (for example, feeling as though you can’t get enough air)
- Excessive yawning
- Faster breathing
- Chest tightness
- Sweating or hot flushes
- Pins and needles
- IBS
- Restlessness
- Low energy
- Ringing in the ear
- Tingling or numbness in the arms, fingers, toes, or around the mouth
- Feeling sick
- Fatigue
- Frequent urination
- Changes in sex drive
- Frequent colds
- Feelings of unreality (of the self and the world)

It’s important to be aware of our physical reactions and what triggers them. It takes practice - we often don’t notice our physical reactions straight away because we’re focusing on what’s causing our distress, and not on how it impacts us physically.

When we become more mindful of what’s happening in our body, we can take quicker and more effective action to help ourselves feel better. It’s like the old saying goes, *“if you listen to your body when it whispers, you won’t have to hear it scream.”*

Next time you feel stressed, try tuning into your body. Scan the length of your body, noticing what it feels like. See if there’s any clenching, tightness or aching. Common areas people hold stress in their

bodies include the jaw, neck and shoulders. You can then make an effort to relax these areas if you feel them tensing up.

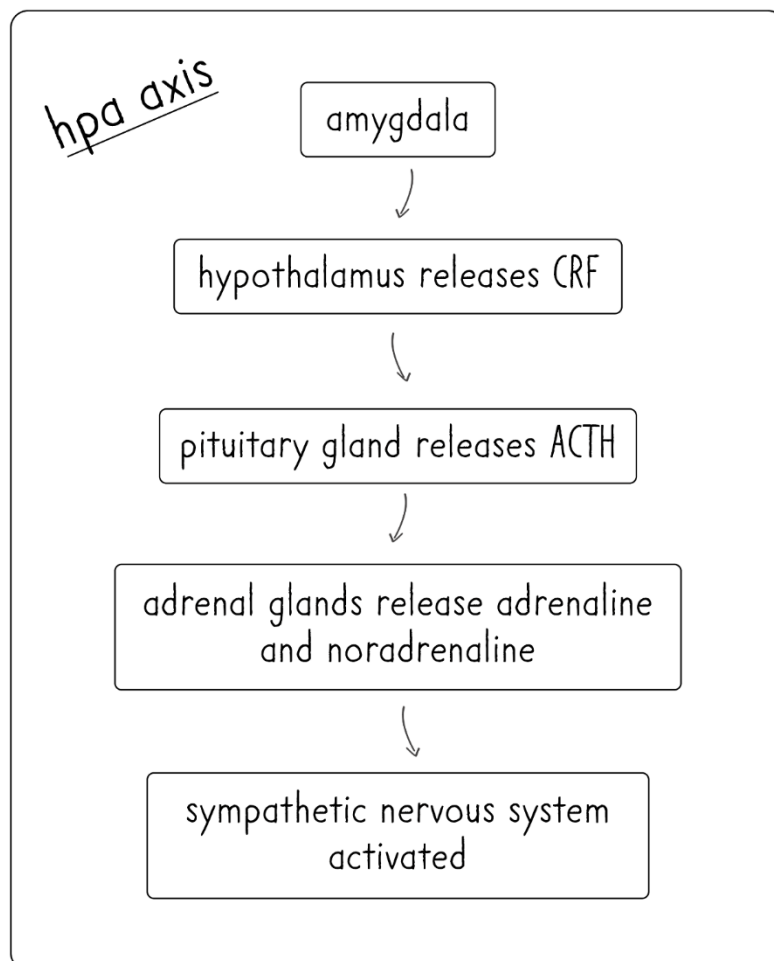
You can also pay attention to whether your breath has shortened or quickened, and do some breathing exercises to feel more relaxed. A great way to enhance self-awareness of our physical sensations is to do a body scan meditation. You can use free meditation apps or [Spotify](#) (this is also a great thing to include in your bedtime routine!)

Noticing your stress response can also give you a better insight into your thoughts and emotions. You might realise your mind is engaging in rumination, and you can then take steps to escape downward spiralling with cognitive defusion or cognitive restructuring techniques.

### 6.1: Calming Down Your Brain

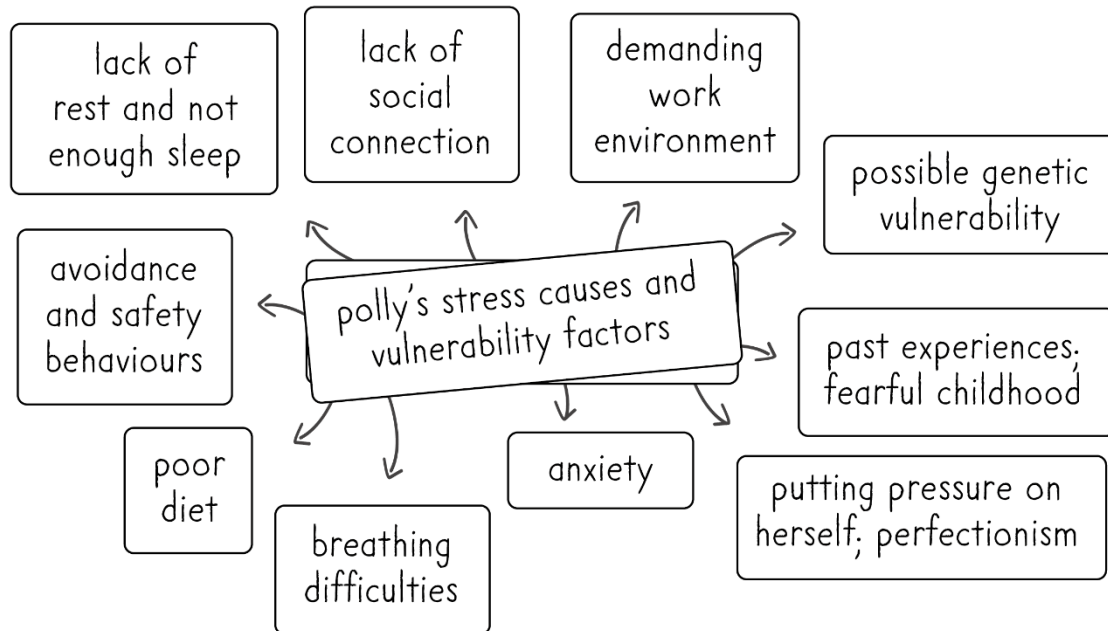
As you improve your mental wellbeing, you calm down your amygdala, the part of your brain that generates the stress response.

Our amygdala triggers our body's stress response by signalling a part of our brain called the hypothalamus to release a substance called CRF. CRF then alerts our pituitary gland to release another substance called ACTH into our bloodstream. ACTH triggers our adrenal glands, located at the top of our kidneys, to release adrenaline and noradrenaline, which activates our sympathetic nervous system.



If our stress response is still activated after 30 minutes, we start releasing the stress-hormone cortisol, which then further activates our amygdala. This whole system is referred to as our hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis.

Here's a diagram outlining everything that likely contributed to Polly's overactive amygdala:



We can see how common experiences such as these can easily add up to create the high level of mental unwellness we see in society today.

When reflecting on your possible reasons for poor mental wellbeing, understand that there are likely numerous factors involved. This is normal, and it means that there are lots of avenues for you to create positive change.

Conversely, here are some things we've covered that are thought to help calm down the amygdala:

- Learning to accept your body's stress response rather than fearing it
- Focusing on the benefits of stress
- Focusing on the meaning of stress
- Focusing on 'getting excited'
- Learning to overcome perfectionism and putting too much pressure on ourselves
- Breaking down tasks into smaller steps and using productivity tools to prevent ourselves from feeling overwhelmed
- Using cognitive defusion techniques, such as thinking of our thoughts as 'brain noise', telling ourselves 'I'm having the thought that' before our thoughts, or imagining them being said in a silly voice
- Using cognitive restructuring techniques such as The BOP Method, focusing on balanced, optimistic and proactive thoughts
- Practising cognitive distraction
- Overcoming avoidance and reducing safety behaviours
- Meeting our basic needs of getting enough rest, exercise, social connection, and healthy nutrition



### **Bonus Tip: Safety Meditation**

Meditation, in a nutshell, is training the brain to focus on the here and now by directing our attention towards a sensory anchor (such as the breath, sounds, and bodily sensations). When we notice our minds wandering, we keep redirecting our attention to the sensory anchor in a non-judgmental way, with compassion and curiosity.

As we've heard, our mind can also be thought of as a sense. Focusing on thoughts (also called 'mantras') is a popular way to meditate.

After experimenting with different types of meditations, Polly tried making up her own mantras and found one theme to be particularly powerful: safety.

When using safety mantras, she noticed her body entered the relaxation state quicker and more often. She realised that this made a lot of sense in terms of what she'd learned about the amygdala.

Why not experiment with your own mantras?

Here are some suggestions:

- I am safe
- All is well
- I trust the process

You could also try repeating a single word you feel is soothing, such as calm, peace, or serenity.

## 6.2: Calming Down Your Body

If you're going through a highly stressful life period, it might be challenging to engage in the techniques we listed that calm down the amygdala.

Your stress might lack meaning. It might be uncontrollable and unpredictable. You might be experiencing financial difficulties, housing issues, or work-related stress.

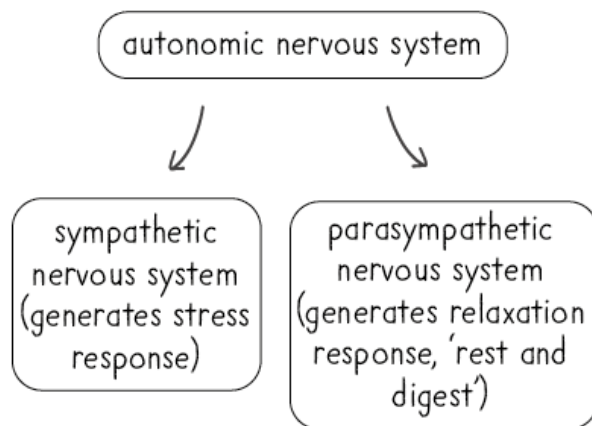
You might have entered the state of autostress, experiencing ongoing stress symptoms. When this happens, you can try your best to calm down your body.

This involves balancing the activity of your sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and your parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), which are part of your autonomic nervous system (ANS).

The ANS is the part of your body responsible for controlling and regulating life-sustaining functions you don't have to think about. It controls bodily functions such as breathing, blood pressure, your heartbeat, and digestive processes.

Whereas your SNS is involved in creating the stress response, your PNS is involved in creating the relaxation response.

For example, when it comes to our digestive system, our SNS reduces salivation and peristalsis (the process of food moving through the digestive system). This contributes to the digestion issues associated with stress. On the other hand, our PNS stimulates salivation and peristalsis, which can improve digestion.



During autostress, your SNS is in overdrive. This is what gives rise to the varied distressing physical symptoms.

To counteract this, you need to increase the activity of your PNS. In other words, you need to activate your body's relaxation response.

Dr Herbert Benson discovered the relaxation response in the same room at Harvard University that the stress response was discovered! He explains:

*"When you elicit the relaxation response, your energy usage is lowered, your heart beats slower, your muscles relax and your blood pressure decreases. If practiced regularly, it can have lasting effects." He notes, "anything that breaks the train of everyday thought will evoke this physiological state."*

Here's four things we've covered in The Framework that are thought to calm down your body:

### **1. Practising Relaxation Techniques**

Not surprisingly, relaxation techniques are top of the list!

Here's a recap of things we can do to achieve a state of relaxation, as described in 5.2:

- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualisation
- Yoga
- Pilates
- Tai Chi
- Massages
- Spending time in nature
- Mindful colouring (head to our [Free Tools Library](#) for two free booklets!)
- Listening to relaxing music
- Warm baths
- Floatation therapy

### **2. Practising Breathing Exercises**

Practising breathing exercises is thought to activate the PNS. As Dr John Arden (who coined the term 'autostress') explains:

*"Your breathing and heart rate are interconnected. As you learn to breath more deeply, your heart rate will slow, and you can enjoy a calm and clear frame of mind."*

As outlined in 5.2, breathing difficulties are the root cause of many stress symptoms. Committing to practising breathing exercises on a regular basis can therefore be an effective way to help ourselves feel better.

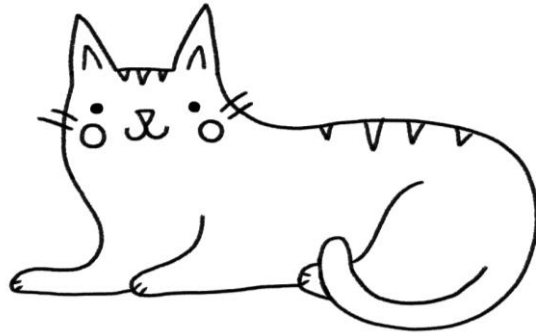
### **3. Practising Mindfulness and Meditation**

Dr Herbert Benson discovered the relaxation response when examining people who practised Transcendental Meditation. This involves sitting with our eyes closed and focusing our attention on a particular mantra (as described in the Safety Meditation).

He found that while people meditated, their breathing slowed, and levels of blood lactate (a chemical in our bodies that's associated with stress and anxiety) decreased. There's now an abundance of research showing that mindfulness and meditation can improve mental wellbeing.

What makes the simple practise of mindfulness and meditation so powerful is its wide-reaching effects. It essentially makes our minds, brains and bodies less reactive to stress and anxiety through several different mechanisms.

For example, it helps us develop self-awareness of our physical reactions and we get better at noticing unhelpful thinking patterns, which stops us getting carried away by them. We also develop self-compassion, improve our concentration, and more!



be here meow

#### **4. Practising The Two Arrows of Happiness Mindset**

People who experience more positive emotions have been found to have higher parasympathetic nervous system activity, lower blood pressure and reduced levels of stress hormones such as cortisol.

We heard in 5.5 about how positive emotions and positive social connections are associated with increased activity in our vagus nerve, part of our PNS. Research suggests that people who experience more positive emotions such as gratitude are quicker at returning to a normal state after experiencing the stress response, meaning their bodies are more resilient to stress.

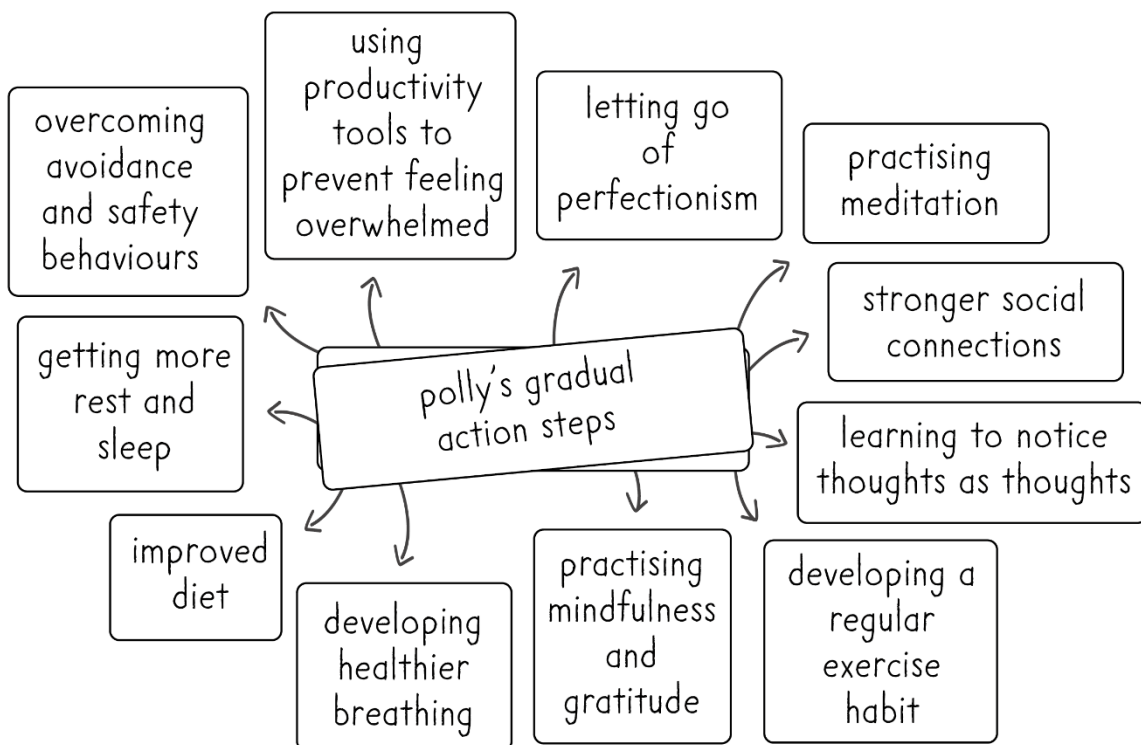
## CONCLUSION

You might have been born with a vulnerability towards poor mental wellbeing. Perhaps you endured life experiences that make your stress response strong and unpredictable. Maybe you inherited unhelpful thinking patterns from your parents or caregivers.

However, it's possible to help yourself feel better.

In The Framework, we've described numerous small steps you can take that together, create big change.

Here's an overview of the gradual steps Polly has made over the past two years:



When it comes to pieces of advice, we'll save the best 'til last: be kind to yourself.

We hope this book has given you a deeper understanding of your mental health and a greater sense of self-compassion.

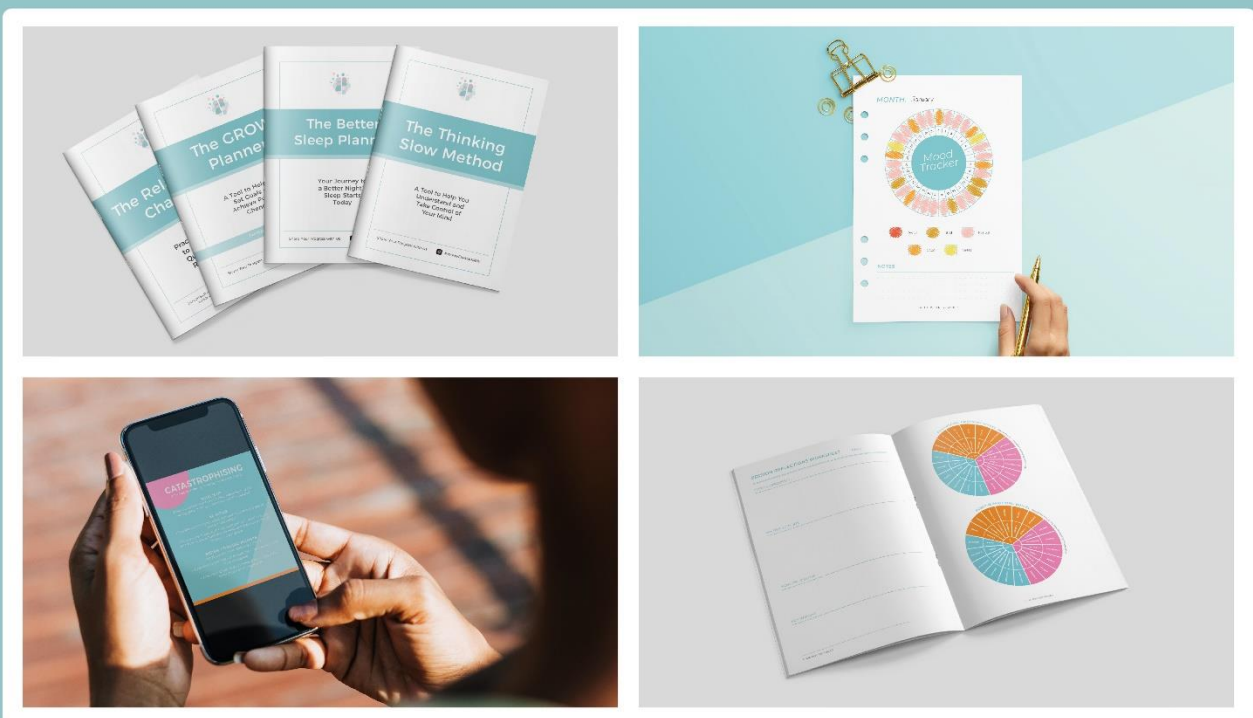
Our aim was to provide you with a concise guide containing plenty of useful tips and practical tools for improving your mental wellbeing.

We wish you the very best on your journey towards a calmer, happier you.

*"It does not matter how slowly you go, as long as you do not stop."* – Confucius

You've got this!

# Continue your journey with The Mental Wellbeing Toolkit



- ✓ Step-by-step programme for improving mental health and wellbeing
- ✓ For individuals, coaches, therapists and organisations
- ✓ Free lifetime updates
- ✓ “Everything you need all in one place”

LEARN MORE AT [THEWELLNESSOCIETY.ORG/TOOLKIT-OPTIONS](https://thewellnesssociety.org/toolkit-options)

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