

GUIDANCE FOR MANAGING TIMES OF ACUTE ANXIETY

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Background

Our bodies can be triggered into responding as if our life is threatened when it is not. This happens when something triggers a re-experiencing of a reaction we had to something that left us feeling extremely unsafe and vulnerable; we end up connecting to a time when we feared we might not survive.

The triggers can be things that we are not easily conscious of, such as a subtle smell, sensation, taste, sound or sight, and so the onset of the anxiety may seem irrational.

This trigger, that we may not have consciously noticed, sets off the “fight, flight, freeze or flop” response in our body, which can include increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweating, muscle tension including tension in the guts, buzzing ears, a dizziness, sense of disorientation and hyper-vigilance.

Some helpful strategies:

- 1) The phrase **“This is very distressing but not dangerous”** can be repeated as a mantra.
- 2) Place one hand, palm flat, firmly on your stomach, and take slow, deep breaths. Try to make each out-breath last for a count of 5. Notice how the air on your nostrils feels cool when you breathe in, and warm when you breathe out.
- 3) If you are in a place where it's possible, sit down and firmly but gently place your hands on the different parts of your body while naming them out loud, **“This is my right forearm.”** Pause, and really feel that part. Then, **“This is my right upper arm.”** etc.
- 4) Connect yourself to the 'here and now' by looking around and saying, either to yourself, or outloud, what you can see and what you know to be true, eg. **“I am in my flat, it is Wednesday, I can see the clock saying half past ten, I can smell soap, I can see a photograph on my desk, I can see 4 cushions, I can feel my glasses on my face,”** etc.
- 5) Once you have spent some time visualising a safe, calm place, and established an “anchor” to that place, use that anchor and reconnect with your imaginary place of safety.