

CREATING SAFETY

**A trauma information and self-help
course for survivors of sexual violence**

**NOTTS
SVS
SERVICES**

**LISTEN
BELIEVE
SUPPORT**

Introduction

This course is meant for you to use in the way which feels right for you. It is written as a six week course and you could spend 6 weeks working through the exercises for a few hours each week at a set time if that works for you.

Alternatively you could pick out what feels most useful to you and just do that - or you could spend 5 minutes a day looking at the materials and take however long you like to complete the exercises.

The course includes quotes and poems which are intended to offer inspiration and different perspectives.

As you will be following the course on your own it is important to think about staying safe and going at your own pace. Think about whether parts of the content might be too much for you at this point. Put your safety and wellbeing first.

Ask yourself - do I feel I can work through this content and keep myself safe? If not maybe this isn't the right time for that part of the course.

Also think about whether you might want helpline support while working through the course. Support workers on the helpline will be familiar with the materials and will be able to support you as you use them.

Each week will give some reading, some exercises and some homework to practise what you have learned during the week. This is how the course is structured but you can use it in whatever way feels right for you.

Finally, use the course as an exercise in listening to yourself and thinking about what will be useful to you, now. You can always return to it later. Leave anything that you don't think is useful – take what you like and leave the rest.

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Week 1-Getting Safe

This week begins by thinking about our basic safety and how we can make small choices which will help to keep us safe today.

It introduces the idea of 'STOPP' moments which allow us to pause in difficult situations.

It then gives a brief introduction to the idea of grounding as a way of coping with flashbacks.

Week one ends with a brief introduction to mindfulness and explains the '3 minute breathing space'.

Being Safe Today

One of the really difficult things about having experienced a rape, or sexual abuse or sexual assault is that it can affect our self-esteem. Having been treated as if our safety, wellbeing, physical boundaries and choices did not matter can have the effect of making us feel that we don't matter. Sometimes other difficult life experiences have also made us feel that our safety and wellbeing don't matter.

Sometimes people who have been abused or assaulted then understandably behave in ways that don't keep them safe, which might include being in dangerous relationships, not eating or overeating, using alcohol or drugs unsafely or using self-harm to cope.

This course is not suggesting that you make any final decisions right now about whether to stay or leave difficult relationships, about how to use drugs or alcohol, or about whether to stop using self-harm. It can be overwhelming to try to make such big decisions - it is often more helpful to take small steps to value ourselves more and to be safe.

You have already taken the big step of seeking support and information for yourself by reading this course.

Perhaps we can begin by believing in our self-worth enough to say:

I am worth enough to be safe just for today.

Being Safe Today – Ideas on Staying Safe

Have a look at the ideas for staying safe below. There are spaces for you to add your own ideas. Circle any which feel like they might be possible for you, and tick any which you have managed to do.

<p>Call Women’s Aid. Women’s Aid are experts in helping you plan for your safety if you are in an abusive relationship. They won’t pressure you to leave, they will help you think about how to plan for violent incidents and how to stay safe.</p>	<p>Contact your GP Tell your GP or psychiatric support if you are thinking about suicide and self-harm. There might be more they can do to support you.</p>	<p>Call the Helpline You can call Notts SVS Services Helpline or the National Rape Crisis Helpline.</p>	<p>Contact one person, whether professional or friend who makes you feel safe and valued.</p>	<p>Read a bit of this course each week!</p>
<p>Call the Samaritans</p>	<p>Call 999 if you feel your life is in immediate danger from another person.</p>	<p>Do the 3 minute breathing space, when negative thoughts and emotions start to spiral.</p>	<p>Contact Harmless for information about self-harm or e-mail support.</p>	<p>Create a safety plan Have a plan of how to get out if violence happens.</p>

STOPP!

We will look in more detail at unhelpful thinking habits this week and as the course continues but at this stage you might find it helpful to begin to build STOPP! Moments into your life, especially when things are difficult.

When facing difficult or stressful situations, it's easy to react automatically, without thinking, to the situation. Most often, that automatic reaction is not the best or most helpful one, and can sometimes make the situation worse, or makes us feel worse. STOPP is a useful acronym to help us remember what to do in such situations. It can be summed up in a quote from Epictetus who was a Greek-born Roman slave who became a Stoic philosopher in the first century:

“Try not to act merely in the moment. Pull back from the situation. Take a wider view; compose yourself.”



STOPP

> Stop and Step Back

- Don't act immediately. Pause.



> Take a Breath

- Notice your breath as you breathe in and out.

> Observe

- What am I thinking and feeling? What are the words that my mind is saying? Is this fact or opinion? Descriptions or evaluations? Accurate or inaccurate? Helpful or unhelpful? What unhelpful thinking habit am I using (e.g. mind-reading, negative filter, thinking the worst)? Where is my focus of attention? What metaphor could I use (mountain, tunnel, playground bully, thought train, beach ball, passengers on the bus)?



> Pull Back: Put in some Perspective



- See the situation as an outside observer. What would a fly on the wall see? Is there another way of looking at it? What would someone else see and make of it? What advice would I give to someone else? What's 'the helicopter view'? What meaning am I giving this event for me to react in this way? How important is it right now, and will it be in 6 months? Is my reaction in proportion to the actual event?

> Practise what works

- Do what works, what is most helpful.
Play to your Principles and Values.
Will it be effective and appropriate? Is it in proportion to the event? Is it in keeping with my values and principles?
What will be the consequences of my action?
What is best for me and most helpful for this situation?




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www.getselfhelp.co.uk/stopp.htm


www.get.gg

Print or write out the cards below and carry one with you if they are helpful.


STOPP
TAKE A BREATH
OBSERVE What am I thinking?
What am I reacting to?
What am I feeling in my body?
PULL BACK: Put in some perspective. See the bigger picture. Is this fact or opinion? How would someone else see this?
PRACTISE WHAT WORKS: What's the best thing to do for me, for others, for this situation?




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Grounding – an Overview

Week 2 will go into more detail about why flashbacks happen and how overwhelming traumas can create them. For this first week we wanted to explain that flashbacks are a re-living of the traumatic event as if it were happening in the present.

Flashbacks can include hearing sounds or words from the original trauma, smelling smells which were present at the time, seeing images or feeling bodily sensations which happened then. Flashbacks are a normal response to trauma and are experienced very frequently by people who have experienced a rape, sexual assault or sexual abuse.

We wanted to include a grounding exercise in week one because flashbacks can be such a big part of trauma survivors' feeling unsafe, and can cause overwhelming feelings which can result in wanting to self-harm or use other ways of coping which might be harmful.

If flashbacks are a problem for you it is a good idea to practice the grounding technique often so that it is familiar and can be remembered easily when a flashback happens. Gradually we can move toward being able to have control over flashbacks, and being able to have compassion for ourselves and how frightened and overwhelmed we were at the time.

Grounding Technique

If you are experiencing a flashback you can talk yourself through this grounding technique. You can learn it and use it if you want to at times when you have a flashback. The aim is to help focus on the here and now and to move out of the 'flashback'.

We will look at more ideas for grounding later in the course.

You need to engage your senses, so any question which gets you to think about where you are will be helpful.

Visual

- What can you see?
- Look around the room and describe it
- What room are you in?
- Is there a clock in the room? What time is it?
- Are there pictures in the room – can you describe them?

Hearing

- What can you hear? (If you hear something in the room describe it)
- Keep asking yourself questions in a calm voice.

Sensory

- Are you sitting down?
- Can you feel your feet on the floor? (It is helpful to place feet flat on the floor and to feel that stability)
- Sometimes people find textured materials – cushions etc helpful
- Heat or cold

Relaxation

- Slowing down breathing – take a long breath in and slow breath out – try to do this a few times
- Something called 7 – 11 breathing is really helpful when trying to relax. Count in to yourself to a count of 7 and count out to a count of 11. This helps both slow the breathing down and engage the parasympathetic nervous system and control panic.

Remind yourself that this is a flashback and it is not happening now

Isolation

One of the really difficult effects of having experienced trauma is isolation. It can feel as though we are the only one to feel this way and as though no-one can understand. Sometimes things that perpetrators have said and done increase this sense of isolation.

An important part of recovery is finding other people who can understand - this might be through stories in books or on the internet, it might be through finding a counsellor with an understanding of sexual violence, or it might be through finding a support group or close friends who will listen. This might be a gradual, slow process and we can learn to trust our own sense of who it is safe to share with.

'If we fetishise trauma as incommunicable then survivors are trapped - unable to feel truly known... You don't honour someone by telling them, "I can never imagine what you've been through." Instead, listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels.'

Phil Klay, veteran, US Marine Corps

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a set of techniques which help us to focus on our feelings and sensations in the present moment. The idea is that instead of avoiding discomfort or distress and responding in a 'panicked' way that restricts our choices, we can learn to feel the distress and respond to ourselves compassionately and without judgement.

The three minute breathing space is a very short exercise which can be used whenever we recognise that we are distressed, that we are responding in a panicked way, or that unhelpful thinking habits have begun to take over. Some people will find this practice soothing while others might find it difficult. It is fine to just stop if it feels too much, and come back to it later or decide it is not right for you at the moment.

A written description of the three minute breathing space follows on the next two pages. There are also number of versions which are recorded for you to listen to on Youtube and other sites.

The Three Minute Breathing Space

The three minute breathing space is a brief practice and can be used when we find our thoughts or mood spiralling in a negative direction.

The first thing we do with this practice because we want to come into the present moment quickly is to take a very definite posture. The back is erect, but not stiff, letting the body express a sense of being present and awake.

Now, closing your eyes, if this feels comfortable, take the first step of becoming aware of what is going on with you right now.

Becoming conscious of what is going through your mind: what thoughts are around? Here again, as best you can, just noting thoughts as mental events... so we note them,

and then we note the feelings that are around at the moment... in particular, turning toward any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings.

So, rather than try to push them away or shut them out, just notice them, perhaps saying, "Ah there you are; that's how it is right now."

Similarly, with sensations in the body... are there sensations of tensions, of holding, of letting go? And again, becoming aware of them, simply noting whatever is arising in this moment. Silence (15 seconds)

So, you have a sense of what is going on right now, having stepped out of automatic pilot.

The second step is to collect your awareness by focusing on a single act - the movement of the breath.

So now really gather yourself, focusing your attention to the breath moving in and out... spending a minute or so to focus on the motion of breathing, moment by moment, breath by breath, as best you can right here, right now.

Noticing when the breath is moving in, and when the breath is moving out, being with the breath as it moves into your body and out, binding your awareness to this process, to be present right now. Silence (25 seconds)

And now, the third step, is allowing your awareness to expand to the entire body, bringing a more spacious awareness to your experience, letting the breath be present but in the background.

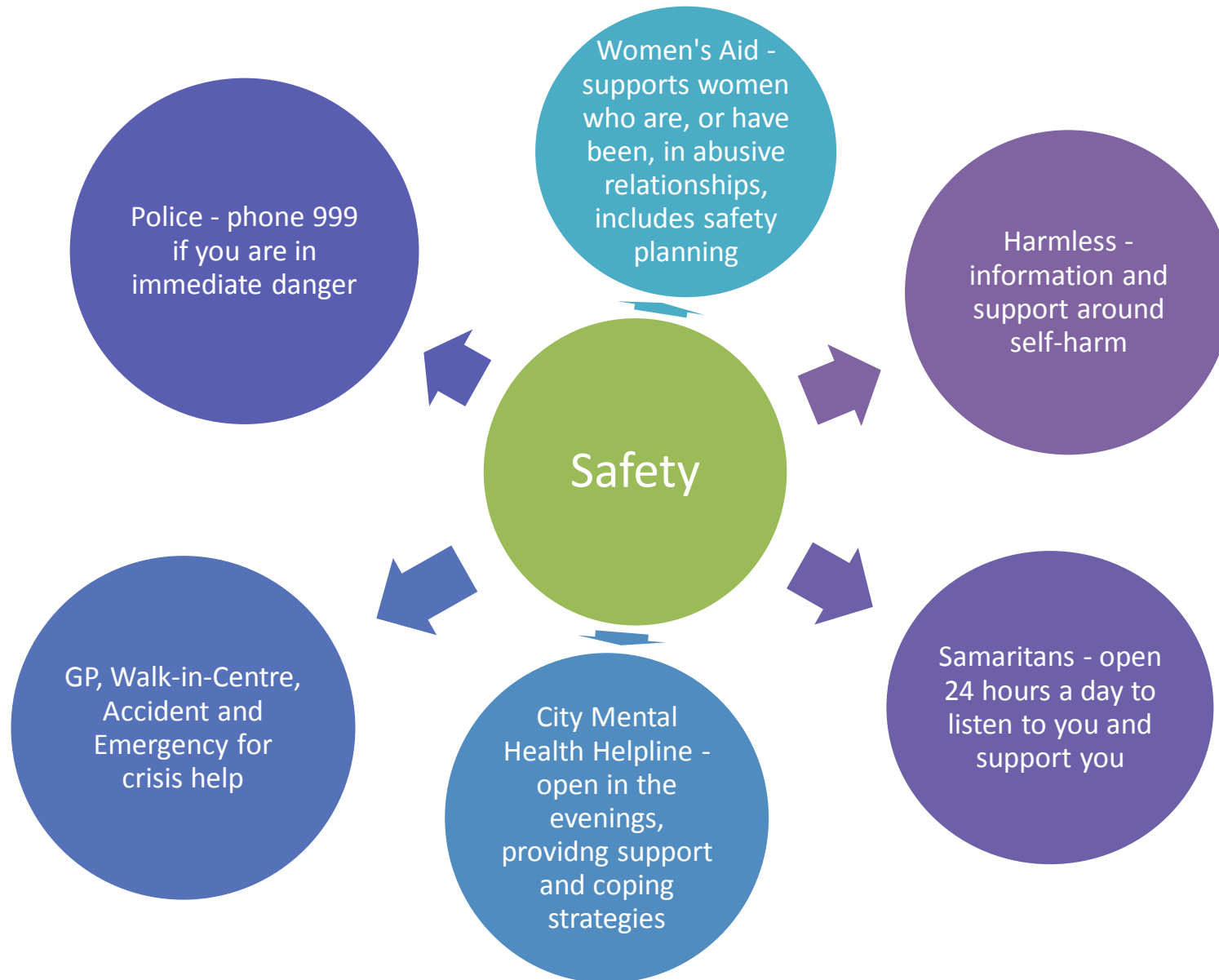
Bringing attention to the entire length of the body from head to toe, including any tightness or sensations related to holding or bracing. In this moment holding your awareness in this spaciousness place, breathing in and breathing out. (Silence)

And when you are ready, opening your eyes, letting go of this brief practice.
Silence (20 seconds)

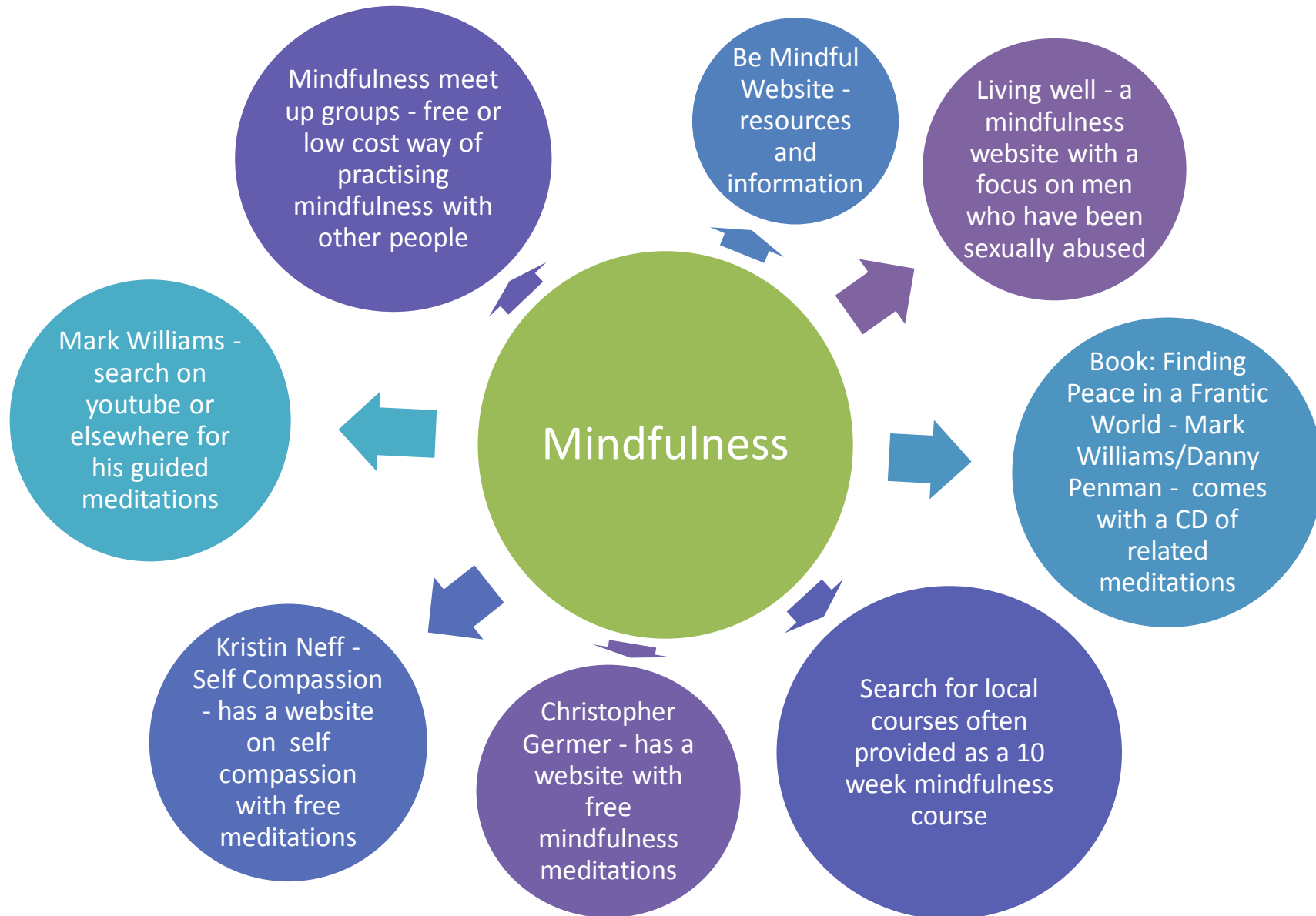
Homework

- Spend a few minutes a day looking through the grounding exercise and practising it. The more familiar it is the more easily you will be able to call it to mind and use it when a flashback happens.
- Do the three minute breathing space every day. You can listen to it on your phone on the bus or at home through a computer or phone. Or you can just slowly read the script to yourself.
- See if you can have a STOPP! moment once each day

There's a world of help out there...



There's a world of help out there...



Acknowledgements

Notts SVS Services would like to thank the following organisations who allowed us to use their materials in writing this course.

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood www.napac.org.uk

www.get.gg (www.getselfhelp.co.uk)

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