

CREATING SAFETY

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

Week 2

**Unhelpful / Helpful
Thinking Habits**

NOTTS
SVS
SERVICES

LISTEN
BELIEVE
SUPPORT

Week 2

Unhelpful / Helpful Thinking Habits

Week two introduces the idea of thinking which is unhelpful and tends to restrict us and thinking which helps us to feel more positive and see more choices, and gives an exercise to help us start to identify this for ourselves.

It introduces the importance of self-compassion and gives the 'self-compassion break' as an exercise to try.

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- There's a world of help out there... Helpful / Unhelpful Thinking
- There's a world of help out there... Mindfulness

- Acknowledgements













Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Having experienced the overwhelming trauma of sexual abuse or sexual assault can make us more prone to having unhelpful thinking habits. This is very understandable - we have been overwhelmed and powerless, and may have been told very negative things about ourselves and other people. We can start to identify habits of thinking which don't help us, which keep us feeling small, feeling worthless, and feeling like we don't have choices. Becoming aware of these patterns takes time and is likely to happen in lots of very small steps with many setbacks.










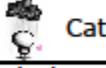

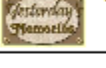
We can also start to learn about more helpful and realistic ways of thinking which support us to feel bigger, to feel like we have choices, to build healthy connections and feel good about ourselves. This is likely to be a long process and each tiny step is important!

Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way. *Blue text (italics) helps us find alternative, more realistic thoughts.*

 <p>Mental Filter - When we notice only what the filter allows or wants us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed. <i>Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?</i></p>	 <p>Judgements - Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for. <i>I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?</i></p>
<p>Prediction - Believing we know what's going to happen in the future. <i>Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?</i></p> 	<p>Emotional Reasoning - I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger. <i>Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes</i></p> 
<p>Mind-Reading - Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us). <i>Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?</i></p> 	<p>Mountains and Molehills Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives <i>Am I exaggerating the bad stuff? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?</i></p> 
<p>Compare and despair Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and getting upset when comparing ourselves negatively against them. <i>Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?</i></p> 	<p>Catastrophising - Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen <i>OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?</i></p> 
<p>Critical self Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility <i>There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?</i></p> 	<p>Black and white thinking - Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'. <i>Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?</i></p> 
<p>Shoulds and musts - Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations. <i>Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?</i></p> 	<p>Memories - Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now. <i>This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me feel upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.</i></p> 

Finding Alternative Thoughts

Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Alternative more balanced thought
Mental Filter 	<i>Am I only noticing the bad stuff? Am I filtering out the positives? Am I wearing those 'gloomy specs'? What would be more realistic?</i>
 Mind-Reading	<i>Am I assuming I know what others are thinking? What's the evidence? Those are my own thoughts, not theirs. Is there another, more balanced way of looking at it?</i>
Prediction 	<i>Am I thinking that I can predict the future? How likely is it that that might really happen?</i>
 Compare & despair	<i>Am I doing that 'compare and despair' thing? What would be a more balanced and helpful way of looking at it?</i>
Critical self 	<i>There I go, that internal bully's at it again. Would most people who really know me say that about me? Is this something that I am totally responsible for?</i>
 Shoulds and musts	<i>Am I putting more pressure on myself, setting up expectations of myself that are almost impossible? What would be more realistic?</i>
Judgements 	<i>I'm making an evaluation about the situation or person. It's how I make sense of the world, but that doesn't mean my judgements are always right or helpful. Is there another perspective?</i>
 Emotional Reasoning	<i>Just because it feels bad, doesn't necessary mean it is bad. My feelings are just a reaction to my thoughts – and thoughts are just automatic brain reflexes</i>
Mountains and molehills 	<i>Am I exaggerating the risk of danger? Or am I exaggerating the negative and minimising the positives? How would someone else see it? What's the bigger picture?</i>
 Catastrophising	<i>OK, thinking that the worst possible thing will definitely happen isn't really helpful right now. What's most likely to happen?</i>
Black and white thinking 	<i>Things aren't either totally white or totally black – there are shades of grey. Where is this on the spectrum?</i>
 Memories	<i>This is just a reminder of the past. That was then, and this is now. Even though this memory makes me <u>feel</u> upset, it's not <u>actually</u> happening again right now.</i>

Helpful Alternatives Worksheet

Identify your own unhelpful thinking using the sheets above and come up with some alternatives. If you want to you can use this sheet as a kind of diary over the week, identifying when unhelpful thinking patterns took hold and noticing any moments when you managed to have alternative more helpful thoughts. Even one moment of becoming aware of unhelpful thinking patterns or being able to have an alternative thought is great progress.

Alternatively you can just note down one or two ideas in whichever unhelpful habit is most common for you.

Unhelpful Thinking Habit	Examples of my thoughts when this habit takes hold. What am I doing/ what is happening when these thoughts take hold?	Alternative Thoughts. What helps me to think in a more helpful way? What am I doing when I manage to think in a more helpful way?
Negative mental filter		
Thinking that I can mind-read		
Compare and despair		
Critical self		

Shoulds and musts		
Judgements		
Emotional reasoning		
Mountains and Molehills		
Catastrophising		
Black and White Thinking		
Memories		

Self-Compassion

“Survivors of abuse and trauma need to focus on developing self-compassion, far more than a positive attitude” Lily Hope Lucario.

Being a survivor of abuse can mean that we are very hard on ourselves. Perhaps the most helpful and important part of recovery is to begin to take small steps to think of ourselves, and behave towards ourselves with compassion. Instead of thinking of ourselves as our problems and difficulties, we can begin to think of ourselves as a valuable person who has experienced very traumatic events and needs compassion to heal.

On the next page is a self-compassion break, which is another mindfulness technique. It takes 5-10 minutes. Again you can use this script or you can Google self-compassion break to find spoken versions you can listen to on the internet.

Self-Compassion Break

Find a safe and comfortable place to sit. Take three deep breaths to relax. When you notice that you're feeling stress or emotional discomfort, see if you can find the discomfort in your body.

Where do you feel it the most?

Make contact with the sensations as they arise in your body.

Now, say to yourself, slowly:

1. This is a moment of suffering. It is not all of who I am. Other options include:
 - This hurts.
 - This is tough.
 - Ouch!

2. It is understandable that I feel this way. Other options include:
 - Other people feel this way when they have experienced a trauma.
 - I'm not alone.
 - We all struggle in our lives.

Now, put your hands over your heart, or wherever it feels soothing, feeling the warmth and gentle touch of your hands.

Say to yourself:

3. May I be kind to myself
See if you can find words for what you need in times like this. Other options may be:
 - May I accept myself as I am
 - May I give myself the compassion that I need
 - May I learn to accept myself as I am
 - May I be safe (pause)

If you're having trouble finding the right language, sometimes it helps to imagine what you might say to a dear friend struggling with that same difficulty. (pause)

Can you say something similar to yourself, letting the words roll gently through your mind?

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

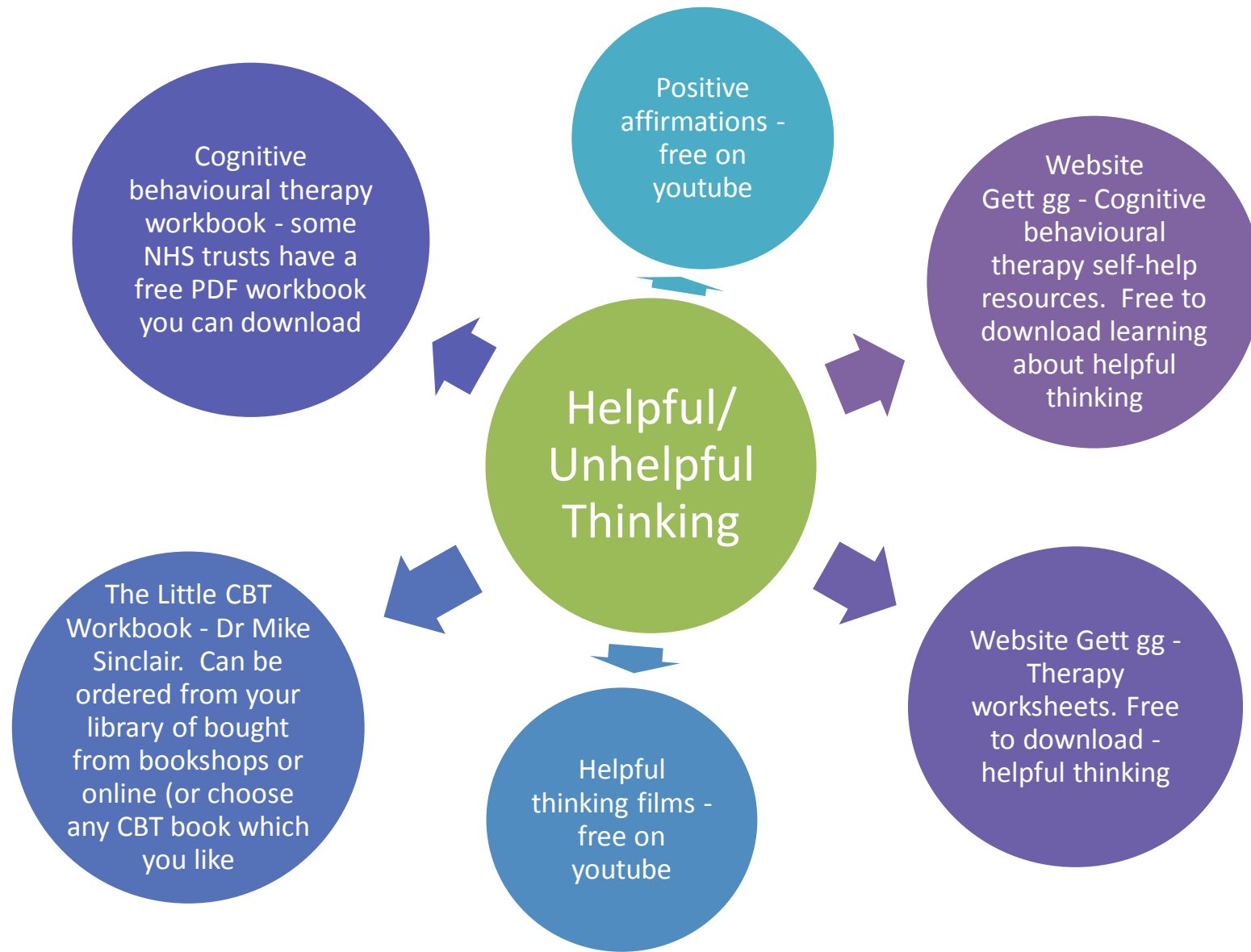
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

Derek Walcott

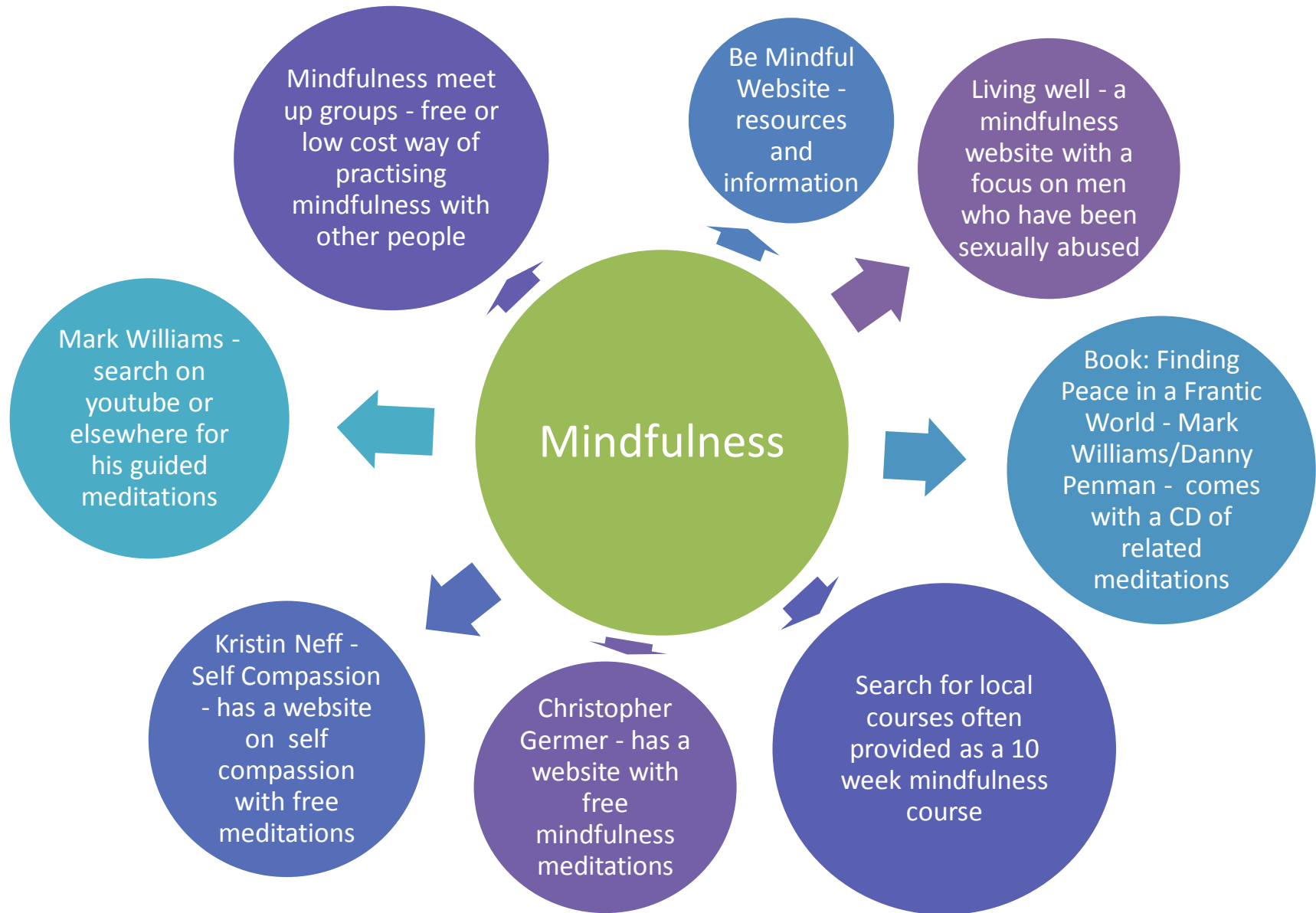
Homework

- See if you can identify what your most common patterns of unhelpful thinking are.
- Try noticing one self-critical thought each day and replace it with something compassionate towards yourself.
- Do the self-compassion break twice this week.

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



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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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