

CREATING SAFETY

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

Week 3 Trauma Information

NOTTS
SVS
SERVICES

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SUPPORT

Week 3

Trauma Information

This week introduces ideas about why traumatic experiences might cause us problems such as flashbacks and intrusive feelings and thoughts.

It explains a little about how the brain works and how this can create problems when we have had overwhelming experiences.

It gives some ideas about what might help in coping with flashbacks, and goes into more depth about ideas for grounding.

It gives an exercise of creating an 'emergency box' to help when things are very difficult, and another drawing exercise of creating a 'first aid kit' for ourselves.

This week ends with some simple ways that mindfulness might support us in coping with traumatic memories.

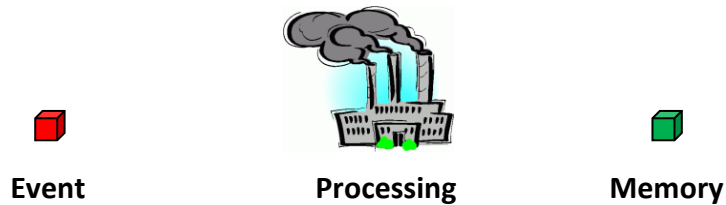
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Treating Traumatic Memories

The mind is like a factory, and one of its jobs is to process life events so that they can become memories. Most life events are of a size and nature that the factory can cope with:

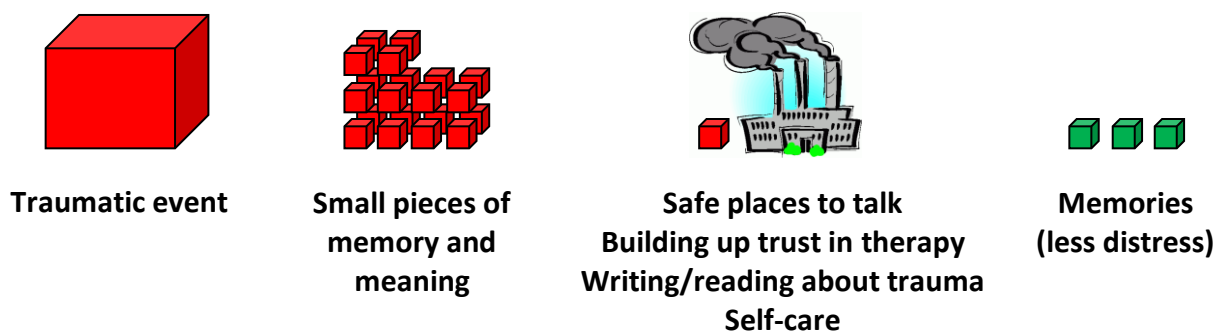


However, sometimes an event occurs, such as a trauma, which is simply too large or difficult to process.



Because it isn't processed, the event is prevented from becoming a memory – this means that it remains a current problem, rather than one that's in the past. Current situations or events that remind us of the original trauma, trigger us to have 'flashbacks' which means we re-live and re-experience the emotions and physical sensations that were experienced at the time of the original trauma. At those distressing times, we tend to press the factory's STOP button. We also avoid situations which are likely to trigger these 'flashback' experiences, reinforcing the lack of processing.

Effectively treating the traumatic event so that our factory can process them into memories means gradually becoming able to speak about or think about the traumatic event in a safe and contained way. This will mean dealing with each small piece of the trauma and what it means in manageable parts. It will also mean building up trusting relationships, perhaps with a therapist, over some time. We also need to learn to care for ourselves, especially when we are finding things difficult.



Two Parts of the Brain

Hippocampus

- Stores memories of time and space
- Places memories in context and perspective
- Impacted upon greatly by Amygdala activation
- Becomes suppressed during trauma - its function of placing a memory into the past goes off-line
- This “free-floating” memory can then cause flashbacks

Amygdala

- The brain’s “smoke detector” for fear/danger
- Very active during emotionally charged events
- Stores emotionally charged memories
- Can remain over-active thus responsible for many symptoms of PTSD (i.e. hypervigilance, re-experiencing of event, etc)

Flashbacks

What are flashbacks?

Memories of traumatic incidents can sometimes return in the form of flashbacks which are very frightening and can impinge on everyday life. They can feel like a re-experiencing of the traumatic event via intrusive and unwanted images and can sometimes include a re-experiencing of the physical pain endured during the traumatic event. Flashbacks can be so intense and disruptive that it feels as though the trauma is happening all over again in the here and now and can seriously affect day-to-day living. The impact of this can be one of a sense of loss of control, fear and helplessness.

Why do they occur?

A simple way of explaining why flashbacks occur post-trauma can be explained as follows. There are two parts of the brain that work to process and store events into memories – the amygdala and the hippocampus. The first one (amygdala) is involved in the processing of emotions such as fear, anger and terror, and will instantaneously prepare the body for flight, fight or freeze in such a situation (it can be likened to a smoke detector in a house). It is also responsible for determining what memories are

stored and where in the brain they are stored. The second part (hippocampus) is responsible for intellectualising information, putting it into perspective and storing it as a memory of something past.

However, the functioning of the hippocampus can become seriously impaired during a traumatic event due to being overwhelmed with stress hormones. This means that the traumatic event is prevented from becoming a memory as we understand them to be. It can be described as almost a “floating” memory – thus its ability to invade our thoughts at any given moment or for it to be provoked by certain triggers.

As the information regarding the trauma has not been properly encoded ‘in time and space’ by the brain, it can have the feeling of re-living the trauma all over again rather than simply remembering it. There is a big difference between remembering something and re-living it. Flashbacks are therefore extremely difficult for a person to understand let alone begin to control.

The ability of the hippocampus for clear and cohesive thinking is also drastically impaired during a traumatic event due to the combination of fear, anxiety and stress overwhelming it, together with the tide of stress hormones. Think of a contestant on a game show and how suddenly their mind goes blank and they just can’t think straight – this is why. Our ability to make sense of a traumatic event at the time it is happening is therefore almost impossible.

It is important to understand that flashbacks are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation – particularly one that is overwhelmingly frightening or life-threatening.

What can trigger a flashback?

Traumatic memories can easily be triggered and there can be many triggers for flashbacks, including –

- certain smells or sounds
- a place
- a voice
- seeing someone who resembles an abuser/attacker or seeing the abuser themselves
- sexual situations

However, a flashback can occur at any moment without there seemingly having been a trigger – the result of it having become a “floating” memory as described above.

Coping with Flashbacks

- ❖ Tell yourself you are having a flashback and that this is okay and very normal in people who have experienced trauma.

- ❖ Remind yourself that the worst is over – it happened in the past, but it is not happening now. "That was then, and this is now". The 'child' or traumatised person inside you is giving you these memories to use in your healing and, however terrible you feel, you survived the awfulness then, which means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.



- ❖ Call on the 'adult' or stronger part of you to tell your child or victim part, that she/he is not alone, not in any danger now, and that you will help her/him to get through this. Let your child or victim self know that it's okay to remember and to feel what she/he feel and that this will help her/him in their healing from what happened to them. However hard it is for you, she/he is communicating in the only way she/he can.

- ❖ Try some of these ways of 'grounding' yourself, and becoming more aware of the present:

- Stand up, stamp your feet, jump up and down, dance about, clap your hands, remind yourself where you are now.
- Look around the room, notice the colours, the people, the shapes of things. Make it more real.
- Listen to and really notice the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, washing machine, music etc.
- Notice the sensations in your body, the boundary of your skin, your clothes, the chair or floor supporting you.



- Pinch yourself or ping an elastic band on your wrist - that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing were in the past.

- ❖ Take care of your breathing: breathe deeply down to your diaphragm; put your hand there (just above your navel) and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy, inflating it as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out. When we get scared, we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body begins to panic because we're not getting enough oxygen. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slower and deeper will stop the panic.



- ❖ If you have lost a sense of where you end and the rest of the world begins, rub your arms and legs so you can feel the edges of your body, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket, feel it around you.

- ❖ Get support if you would like it. Let people close to you know about flashbacks so they can help if you want them to. That might mean holding you, talking to you, helping you to reconnect with the present, to remember you are safe and cared for now.



- ❖ Flashbacks are powerful experiences which drain your energy. Take time to look after yourself when you have had a flashback. You could have a warm, relaxing bath or a sleep, a warm drink, play some soothing music, or just take some quiet time for yourself. Your 'child' or 'victim' and you deserve being taken care of, given all you've been through.

- ❖ When you feel ready, write down all you can remember about the flashback, and how you got through it. This will help you to remember information for your healing, and to remind you that you did get through it (and can again).

- ❖ Remember you are not crazy – flashbacks are normal and you are healing.

Adapted from Bristol Crisis Service for Women. 1999.

Grounding – an Introduction

We have included a number of different approaches to grounding because different people will find different things helpful. Have a look at the following pages and choose a number of techniques that you think you might find especially helpful.

Try them out and practice with them for a few days. If you feel a connection with them and they feel 'right' for you then continue to practice them and develop them for yourself until you have your own 'grounding routine'. Then practice it regularly.

If you're not sure what will work for you try different techniques on different days and continue with the ones that work best for you. They need to become comforting, familiar and easily called to mind.

Grounding Techniques

What is Grounding?

Grounding techniques are simple strategies to **detach from overwhelming distress** (for example, flashbacks, self-harm impulses, anger, sadness). Distraction works by focusing outward on the world – rather than inward toward the distress. You can also think of it as “distraction”, “a safe place” or “healthy detachment”.

Why Grounding?

When you are feeling safe and calm or supported in therapy or in another safe relationship, you may want to turn towards your distress to begin to process it and learn to manage it in a different way.

However, when you are overwhelmed you need a way to become calmer so you can gain control over your feelings and stay safe. Grounding ‘anchors’ you to the present and to reality.

Many people who have experienced trauma struggle with either feeling too much (overwhelming emotions and memories) or too little (numbing and dissociation). Grounding can help you to find a balance between the two and help you to feel more in control of your emotions.

Guidelines

- Grounding can be done **anytime, anyplace, anywhere** and no one has to know.
- Use grounding when you are: **faced with a trigger, having a flashback, afraid of losing control or when your emotional pain goes above 6 (on a 0-10 scale).**
- **Keep your eyes open, scan the room and turn the light on** to stay in touch with the present.
- **Rate your mood before and after** to test whether it has worked. Before grounding, rate your level of emotional pain (0-10, where 10 means “extreme pain”). The re-rate it afterwards. Has it gone down?
- **Stay neutral** – no judgements of “good” and “bad”. For example, “The walls are yellow; I dislike yellow because it reminds me that I am not happy”. Simply say “The walls are yellow” and move on.
- **Focus on the present, not the past or future.**

Ways to Ground

Mental Grounding

- ❖ **Describe your environment in detail** using all your senses. For example, “The walls are pink; there are six chairs, there is a wooden table against the wall.....” Describe objects, sounds, textures, colours, smells, shapes, numbers and temperature. You can do this anywhere. For example on the bus: “I’m on the

bus. I'll see the river soon. Those are the windows. This is the seat. The metal bar is silver. The bus adverts have five colours....."

- ❖ **Play a "categories" game** with yourself. Try to think of "types of dogs", "jazz musicians", "films that begin with A", "cars", "TV shows", "writers", "sports", "songs", "European cities".
- ❖ **Do an age progression.** If you have regressed to a younger age (e.g. 7 years old), you can slowly work your way back up (e.g. "I'm now 8"; "I'm now 9"; "I'm now 10"...) until you are back to your current age.
- ❖ **Describe an everyday activity in great detail.** For example, describe a meal that you cook (e.g. First I peel the potatoes and cut them into quarters, then I boil the water, I add a little salt...").
- ❖ **Imagine.** Use an image: Glide along on roller skates away from your pain; change the TV channel to a better programme, think of a wall as a buffer between you and your pain.
- ❖ **Say a safety statement.** "My name is _____; I am safe right now. I am in the present, not the past. I am located in _____. The date is _____."
- ❖ **Read something, saying each word to yourself.** Or read each letter backwards so that you focus on the letters and not on the meaning of the words.
- ❖ **Use humour.** Think of something funny to jolt yourself out of your mood.
- ❖ **Count to 10 or say the alphabet** very s..l..o..w..l..y.
- ❖ **Repeat a favourite saying** to yourself over and over.

Physical Grounding

- × **Run cool or warm water over your hands.**
- × **Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can.**
- × **Touch various objects around you:** a pen, keys, your clothing, the table. Notice textures, colours, materials, weight, temperature. Compare objects you touch: Is one colder? Lighter?
- × **Dip your toes into the floor** – literally "grounding" them! Notice the tension centred in your toes as you do this. Remind yourself that you are connected to the ground.
- × **Carry a ground object in your pocket** – a small object (a small rock, clay, ring, piece of cloth or yarn) that you can touch whenever you feel triggered.
- × **Jump up and down.**
- × **Notice your body.** The weight of your body in the chair; wiggling your toes in your socks; the feel of your back against the chair. You are connected to the world.
- × **Stretch.** Extend your fingers, arms or legs as far as you can; roll your head around.
- × **Walk slowly, noticing each footstep,** saying "left", "right" with each step.
- × **Eat something. Describe the flavours** in detail to yourself.

- ✘ **Focus on your breathing.** Noticing each inhale and exhale. Repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale (for example, a favourite colour or soothing word such as “safe” or “easy”).

Soothing Grounding

- ✿ **Say kind statements,** as if you were talking to a small child. E.g. “You are a good person going through a hard time. You’ll get through this”.
- ✿ **Think of favourites.** Think of your favourite colour, animal, season, food, time of day, TV show.
- ✿ **Picture people you care about** (e.g. your children; and look at photographs of them).
- ✿ **Remember the words to an inspiring song, quotation or poem** that makes you feel better.
- ✿ **Remember a safe place.** Describe a place that you find very soothing (perhaps the beach or mountains, or a favourite room); focus on everything about that place – the sounds, colours, shapes, objects, textures.
- ✿ **Say a coping statement.** “I can handle this”, “This feeling will pass”.
- ✿ **Plan out a safe treat for yourself** such as a favourite TV programme, a nice dinner or a warm bath.
- ✿ **Think of things you are looking forward to in the next week.** Perhaps time with a friend or going for a walk.

What if Grounding Doesn’t Work?

- **Practice as often as possible.** Even when you don’t “need” it, so that you’ll know it by heart.
- **Practice faster.** Speeding up the pace gets you focused on the outside world quickly.
- **Try grounding for a loooooooooonng time (20-30 minutes).** And, repeat, repeat, repeat.
- **Try to notice whether you do better with “physical” or “mental” grounding.**
- **Create your own method of grounding.** Any method you make up may be worth much more than those you read here because it is yours.
- **Start grounding early in a negative mood cycle.** Start when you have just begun to feel bad or when you have just started having a flashback.

Emergency Bag or Box

When we are very distressed, it is difficult to think rationally and to decide how to help ourselves. We can therefore resort to using self-destructive behaviours which may help at that moment, but can cause other problems later and in the long-term. It can be useful to keep an 'Emergency' or 'Soothe' bag or box, in a prominent and handy place, so that when you feel overwhelmingly distressed, you can go to your bag/box and find something that will help you cope and/or feel better.



You can use any bag or box or other container, and decorate it as you wish.

Collect together items that are meaningful, or you know will be helpful. If you cannot put the item in the bag or box, then perhaps use a reminder of the item, for example, a picture of an iPod, mp3 player, computer or games machine. Include items that will help soothe all your senses:

- Vision: photo album, DVD, book or magazine, a picture of a beautiful safe place (or use safe place imagery www.get.gg/docs/SafePlace.pdf), reminder for funny or inspiring YouTube video, walk or sit in the park or garden, guided meditation
- Hearing: soothing or inspiring music on CD or mp3 player, recordings of a friend's voice, reminder of phone numbers to ring, a talking book.
- Smell or taste: oils, fruity snack or treat, favourite perfume, a sachet of coffee or ready prepared cake mix.
- Touch: soft woolly socks or blanket, teddy bear, comforter or grounding object, hand or foot lotion, massage oil, warm bubble bath, nail varnish, make-up



When you use these items, or whatever you do, pay attention to your physical senses: see, hear, smell or taste, and touch. Look around you and notice what you see (colours, shapes, light or shadow, movement), what you hear (nature sounds, sounds in the room, near and far), what you smell or taste (including from the environment around you), and what you can touch – right now, wherever you are as well as items from your emergency bag/box.

Activities that help with an outer focus of attention or use physical energy:

- Puzzle books, game for game machine, item from hobby or interest, art or craft materials, notebook and pen, prompt for physical exercise or musical instrument

Activities which help you make sense of and cope with what you are thinking and feeling:

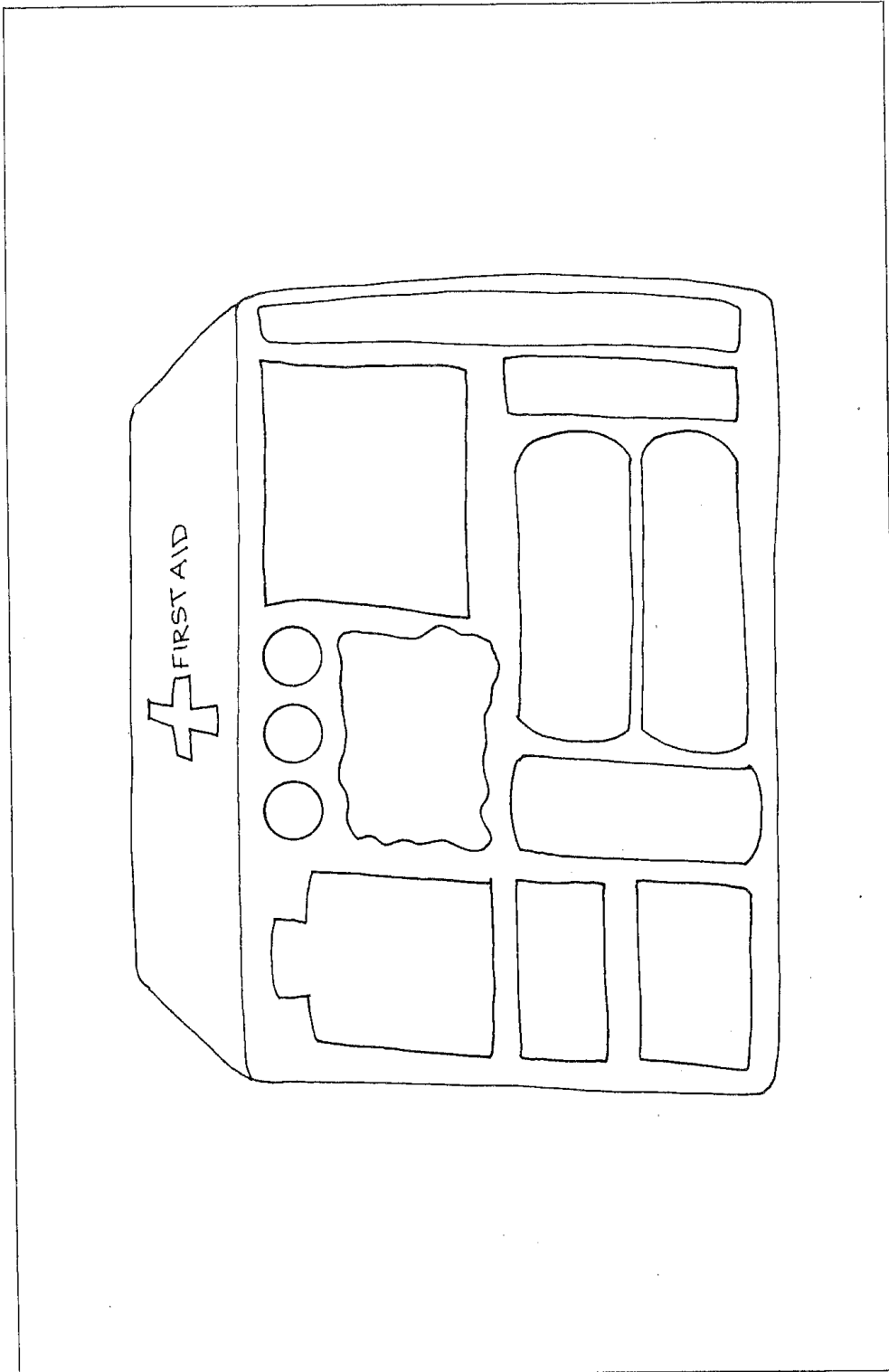
- Therapy worksheets (www.stopp.gg), reading or contact with others on the internet (reminders about websites or internet discussion forums etc)
- A card with positive coping statements – that you can read or say to yourself to help you get through the distress www.get.gg/docs/PositiveStatements.pdf

Other ideas:

- When you're feeling better and more positive, write yourself a letter to keep in the box/bag to read at those distressing times (or include a comforting or inspiring letter or email from someone else)
- Include a copy of your safety plan (if you have one), and include your "soothe/emergency" bag or box in your safety plan. www.get.gg/docs/SafetyPlan.pdf

Make Your Own 'First Aid' Box

Can you draw or write what helps you when you are experiencing a flashback or are feeling very distressed? What do you already do that helps? Are there any positive phrases that especially speak to you? Are there any places or people you could draw or write about which are comforting?



Mindfulness can also be a way of grounding and can also give you a sense of having more choice and control about how you feel. You could use these one or two minute ideas for mindfulness throughout your day so that they become habits you can call on when things are difficult.

NOW



Notice: Where my attention is.

Observe: What I'm doing. Say to myself: "I am walking", "I am sitting", "I am breathing", then notice those sensations in your body.

Wise Mind: What now? How shall I continue? Doing or Being?



If you want an explanation for your present, look at your past.

If you want to know your future, look at your present.

Buddha.

Mindfulness for Busy People

- Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day, for one or 2 minutes. For example: Drink a cup of tea. Walk. Wash the dishes.
- Whatever you are doing, be in that moment, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.
- Simply notice whenever other thoughts and sensations come to mind, then re-focus on your chosen mindful activity.
- Be patient and compassionate with yourself.
- Describe... rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.
- It is as it is.
- It will pass.

Everything Flows. Nothing is fixed. Heraditus

Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
what despair is; then
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
to waken again, to feel
in damp earth my body
able to respond again, remembering
after so long how to open again
in the cold light
of earliest spring--

afraid, yes, but among you again
crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

Louise Gluck

I go among trees and sit still

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

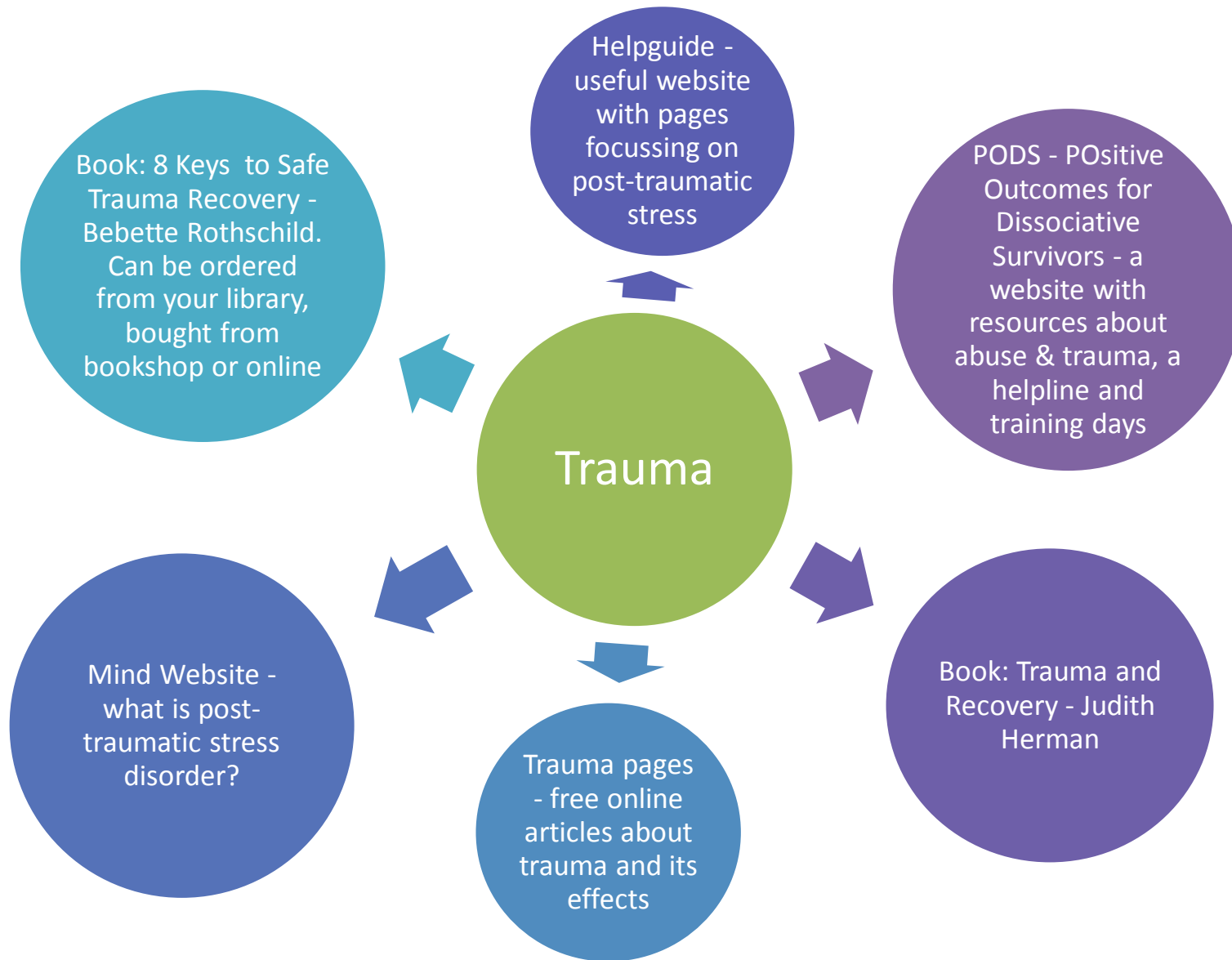
After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.

Wendell Berry

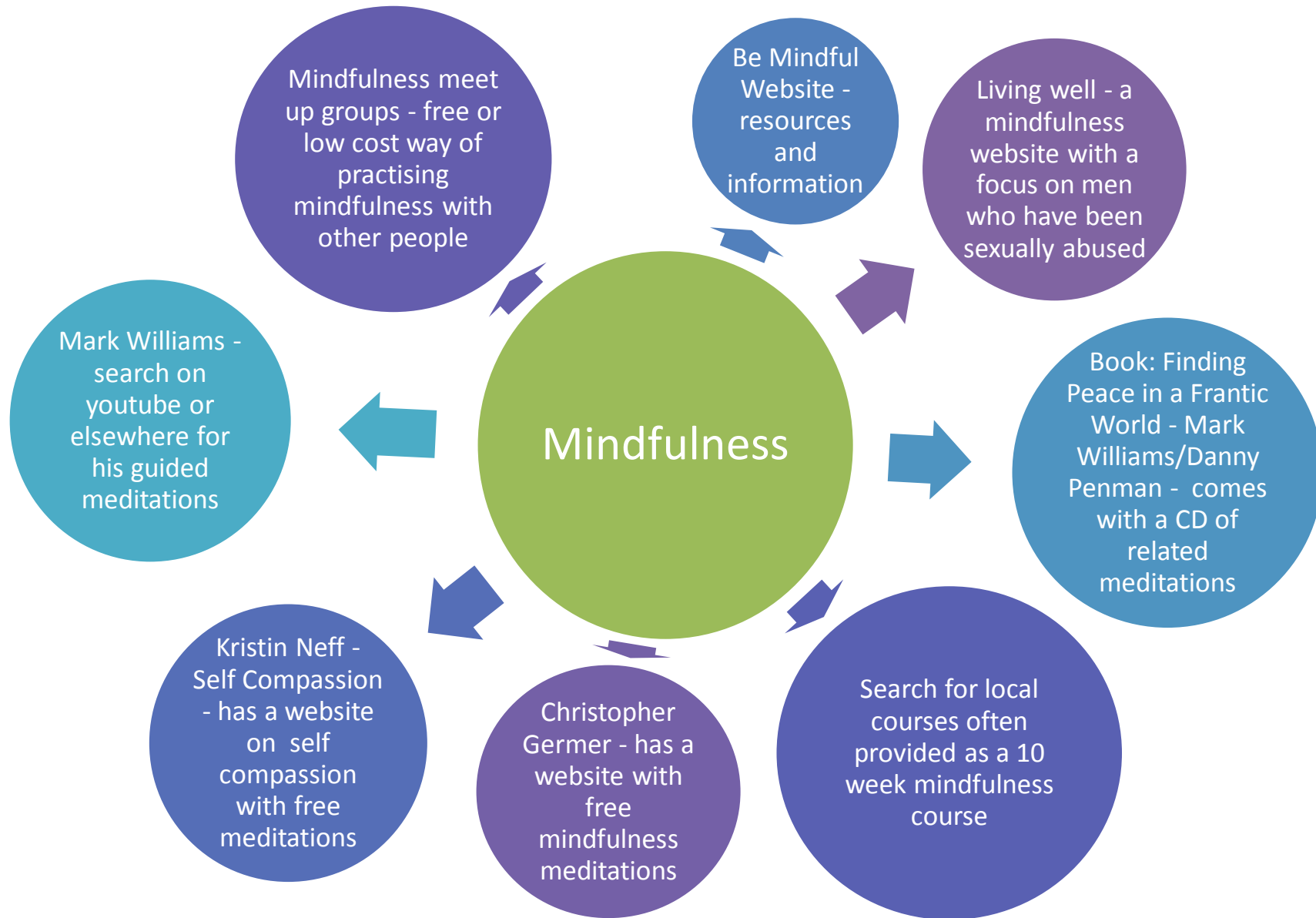
Homework

- Practice grounding for 5 minutes each day, even when you're feeling fine.
- Add a poem or a quote that comforts you to your emergency box, or put it in your purse or wallet.
- Read through the information about trauma and flashbacks again.

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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