

## Looking after your mental health as a parent

Who is this course for?	Parents in the perinatal period. Does not require a diagnosis. Suitable for any parent, or parent to be, who want to understand mental health and equip themselves with coping skills.
What is the course duration?	Once a week for 5 weeks. Each session is up to 2 hours.
Recommended format for delivery:	<p>The course can be delivered in groups meeting together in person, or online.</p> <p>Online: Use accompanying powerpoint presentation. This version still requires interaction and discussion from parents attending. Therefore, an appropriate platform should be used.</p> <p>In person: Follow the guide below. This can be used in conjunction with the powerpoint presentation or with on flipchart/whiteboard and worksheet handouts.</p>

### Session Outline:

Session number	Session topic	Learning aims and objectives	Resources required for in person delivery.
Week 1	Introduction to Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to mental health and mental ill health continuum.</li> <li>• Introduction to the “stress bucket”</li> <li>• Tools for reducing stress</li> <li>• Difference between baby blues and mental ill health.</li> <li>• Common mental health problems/ diagnosis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flipchart paper/whiteboard and pens.</li> <li>• Print out of “Common experiences”</li> </ul>
Week 2	Managing emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference between thoughts, feelings, emotions, and behaviour.</li> <li>• Function of emotions</li> <li>• Emotion &amp; behaviour/actions</li> <li>• Wise mind</li> <li>• Ride the wave</li> <li>• Coping with difficult or intense emotions</li> <li>• Our children’s emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flipchart paper (preferred, as you can refer back) or a white board and pens.</li> </ul>

Week 3	Thoughts, comparison & identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unhelpful thinking patterns</li> <li>• Intrusive thoughts</li> <li>• Video about why we have these thoughts</li> <li>• Diffusing thoughts: DARE Skill</li> <li>• Comparison</li> <li>• Owning our identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unhelpful thoughts handout</li> <li>• Projector for video</li> <li>• Internet connection for video OR pre-load video.</li> <li>• DARE handouts</li> <li>• Identity handouts</li> </ul>
Week 4	Mindfulness: Isn't it just colouring in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition</li> <li>• What &amp; how skills</li> <li>• Grounding exercise focused on our sense &amp; world around</li> <li>• Exercise focused on your self</li> <li>• Exercise focused on thoughts</li> <li>• Summary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scripts for mindfulness exercises</li> </ul>
Week 5	How to keep going	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying well day to day</li> <li>• Coping when things get tough</li> <li>• Mental health first aid kit/ self-compassion bag</li> <li>• Self-compassion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traffic light handout</li> </ul>

## Week 1

### Welcome and introductions.

Warm welcome and introductions. Relevant “housekeeping/ group rules”. Invite discussion, with the agreement to be respectful to others. Group confidentiality.

**Question for discussion:** What are your hopes and expectations for the course? What are you hoping to gain from this?

### What is mental health?

Group discussion: **“What is mental health?” How would you define it?** *Option: Write answers down on a whiteboard or flipchart paper.*

After group discussion share these two definitions:

1. ‘Mental health means much more than just the absence of mental ill health. It is about physical and emotional wellbeing, having strength and capacity to live a full and creative life and also the flexibility to deal with its ups and downs.’ (Young Minds)
2. ‘Mental Health might usefully be viewed as a continuum of experience, from mental well-being through to a severe and enduring mental illness. We all experience changes in our mental health.’ (The Counselling Service, University of Liverpool)

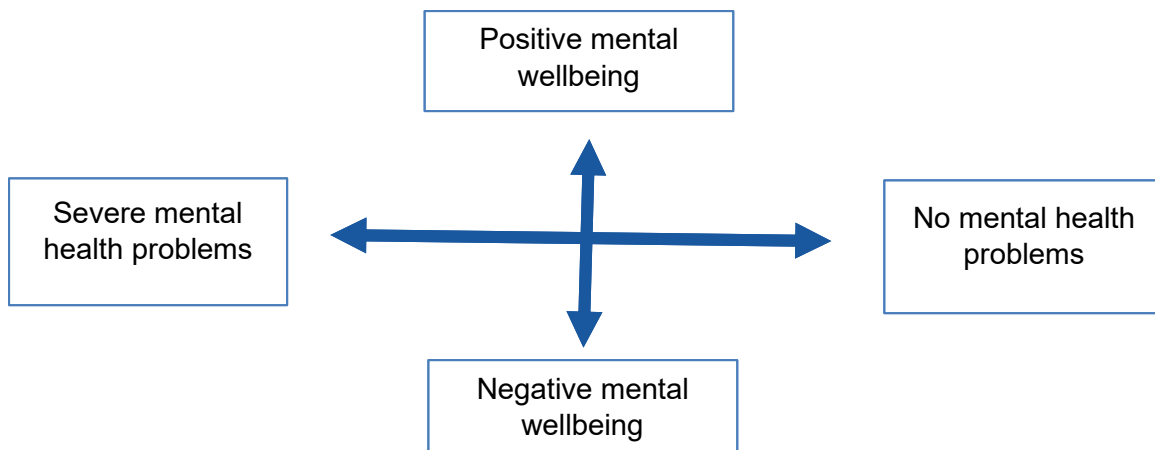
### So, what are mental health problems?

1. Mental illness refers to a diagnosable condition that significantly interferes with an individual's cognitive, emotional or social abilities e.g. depression, anxiety, schizophrenia. (NHS)

***Anyone can become unwell. Sometimes the change is rapid. Sometimes it is gradual.***

### The Mental Health Continuum

Some people find it helpful to think of mental health along a continuum. The mental health continuum describes the way our mental health is fluid and changes over time. It is not fixed nor static. **Draw out the continuum for the group to see. Draw horizontal line first which refers to medical language, and then the vertical line which uses more social language.**



Rather than thinking about a line from “mental illness” to “mentally healthy”, this continuum shows a broader range of experiences. It is possible for someone with a diagnosable mental health illness to be coping well with the illness (through good coping strategies, good medication regime, supportive friends). Therefore, they have positive mental wellbeing (feeling in control of their emotions, good quality of life and so on). Someone without a mental health diagnosis will also experience ups and downs in their mental well-being.

<p><i>Examples of what positive mental wellbeing may look like:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regular or usual functioning</li> <li>• Regular mood fluctuations</li> <li>• Takes things in their stride</li> <li>• Consistent performance</li> <li>• Normal sleep patterns</li> <li>• Physically and socially active</li> <li>• Usual self-confidence</li> <li>• Comfortable with others.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Examples of what no mental health problems may look like:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common and reversible distress</li> <li>• Irritable / impatient</li> <li>• Nervousness, sadness, increased worrying</li> <li>• Procrastination, forgetfulness</li> <li>• Trouble sleeping and difficulty in relaxing</li> <li>• Lowered energy</li> <li>• Decreased social activity</li> <li>• Intrusive thoughts.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Examples of negative wellbeing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant functional impairment</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Lingering sadness, tearfulness, hopelessness, worthlessness</li> <li>• Preoccupation</li> <li>• Decreased performance in academics or at work</li> <li>• Significantly disturbed sleep</li> <li>• Avoidance of social situations, withdrawal.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Example of what mental health problems can look like:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clinical disorder</li> <li>• Persistent functional impairment</li> <li>• Significant difficulty with emotions, thinking, high level of anxiety, panic attacks</li> <li>• Depressed mood, feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>• Constant fatigue</li> <li>• Disturbed contact with reality, significant disturbances in thinking, suicidal thoughts / intent.</li> </ul>

**Question for discussion:** We all exist somewhere on the continuum and can move around them. Where would you put yourself on here today?

## Stress buckets



Some people like to imagine mental health is like a bucket or a “stress bucket”.

Our stress bucket can get filled with the things we experience throughout the day. It is often a combination of different things that cause us to be stressed.

It is normal to have some stress in the bucket, but if our bucket becomes full and overflows, we may feel overwhelmed and experience signs of low mental wellbeing or mental illness.

“Stressors” are things that fill up our bucket. This could be lack of sleep, a long list of difficult tasks, disagreements with a family member.

We can imagine a tap on the side of the bucket (or several taps). This represents the things we can do to reduce the level of the bucket. This could include coping techniques, practicing self-care, or seeking support. Self-care could be defined as things that improve our mental wellbeing.

### **Optional discussion:**

- *What examples of stressors can you think of?*
- *Can you think of any examples of “taps” to reduce stress?*

## Example tools for reducing stress

<b>Take care of your physical needs</b> – brush your teeth, wash your face, etc.	Sometimes <u>this can feel like a huge task</u> , especially if we are low on energy. If a shower feels too much, <u>take smaller steps</u> such as washing your face.
<b>Remember to eat</b>	<u>Food &amp; water are fuel our bodies need</u> . If preparing food seems too much, are there ready meals or regular small snacks that seem more manageable?
<b>Exercise or stretch</b>	This doesn't need to be a gruelling work out! Even simple stretching or a short walk can help.
<b>Notice positive moments</b>	Part of our brains are <u>wired to notice risk</u> . We pay attention to the negative and it can be easy for the good things to pass us by. We have to <u>purposely decide to notice the positive moments</u> we experience.
<b>Activities that give us a sense of achievement or enjoyment</b> (“Building mastery”)	This is where <i>goal setting</i> can be really useful. <i>Needs to be realistic</i> . For example, if I say I'm going to tidy my entire house in one day, this might be too ambitious for me. However, if I say I really need to put the bins out by the end of the day or do one load of laundry, I'm more likely to achieve it. Activities that give us a sense of achievement help increase our self-esteem.

## Mental Health for Parents (perinatal)

“Peri” = around, “natal” = birth. May also hear the phrase “post-partum” which means after birth”

Having a baby is a big life event. It's natural to experience a range of emotions during pregnancy and after giving birth. But if any difficult feelings start to have a big effect on your day-to-day life, you might be experiencing a perinatal mental health problem.

This may be a new mental health problem, or an experience of a mental health difficulty you have experienced in the past.

## Baby Blues vs Postnatal Depression

### Baby Blues vs Postnatal Depression

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The 'baby blues' is a brief period of low mood, feeling emotional and tearful around three to ten days after you give birth. You are likely to be coping with lots of new demands and getting little sleep, so it is natural to feel emotional and overwhelmed. This feeling usually only lasts for a few days and is generally quite manageable.

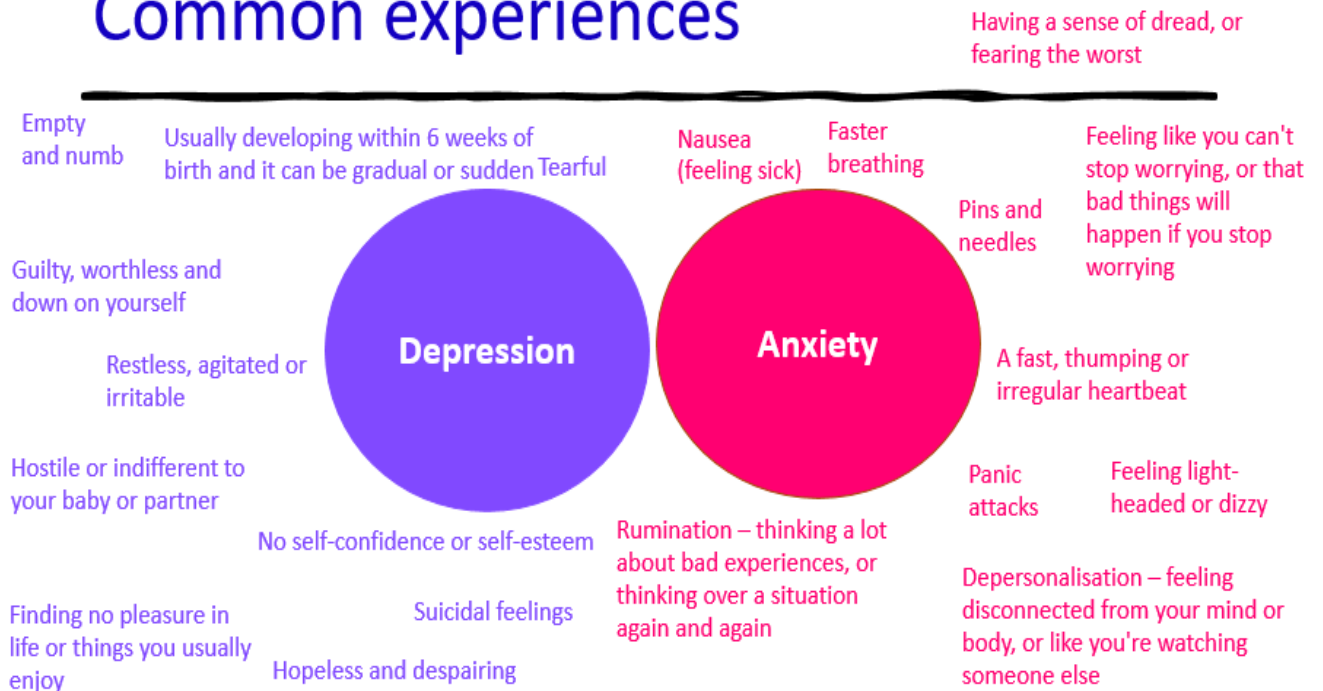
Postnatal depression is a much deeper and longer-term depression. This usually develops within six weeks of giving birth and it can be gradual or sudden. It can range from being mild to very severe.

You are not alone. 10% dads are affected by postnatal depression. Anxiety and related disorders are known to affect 15%-20% of women.

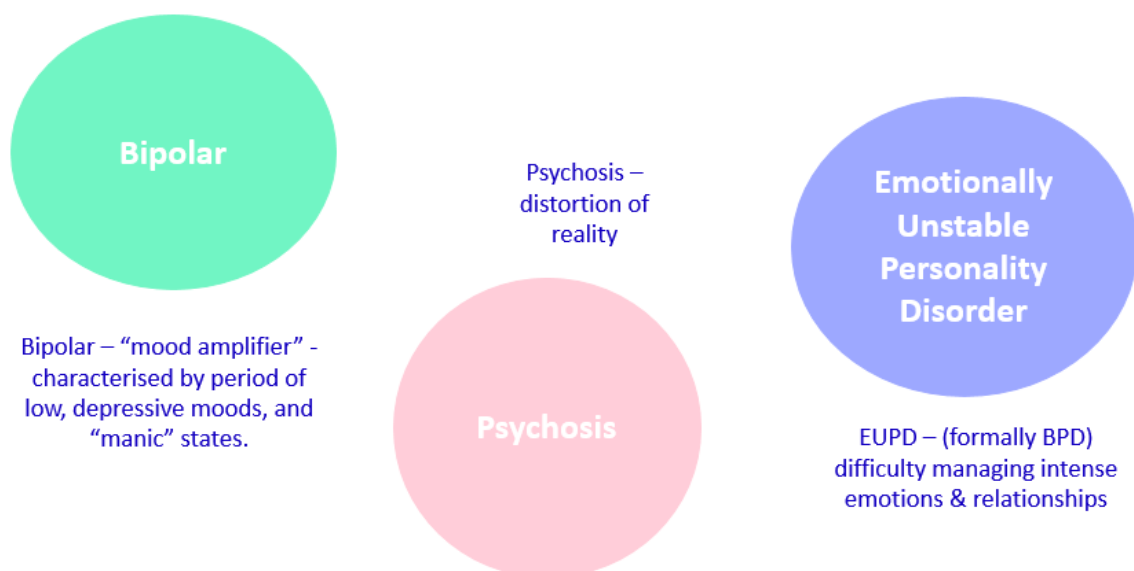
## Common experiences of mental ill health

Hand out the following page. Do any of the experiences of depression and anxiety surprise anyone? Some people find having a diagnosis helpful. It can act as a shorthand to summarise what they are experiences. They can also be “keys” to accessing support and/or treatment. Others prefer not to use these labels at all. Either is okay. During this course we are mainly going to focus on the experience and skills to manage and look after our mental wellbeing.

# Common experiences



(Sadness: when we feel loss, helps us understand what is important to us. Anxiety: Protects us and keeps us safe)



An example of a distortion of reality would be hearing or seeing things others cannot hear or see.

## Signs to look out for (and need an urgent assessment)

- ▣ Recent significant change in mental state or emergence of new symptoms
- ▣ New thoughts or acts of violent self-harm/suicidal ideation
- ▣ New and persistent expressions of incompetency as a mother or estrangement from the infant.

## Balloon Breathing

This breathing technique is a quick exercise which can be useful when feeling stressed.

- Place your hand gently on your stomach.
- Take a long slow breath in through your nose and notice the way your belly expands.
- When you are ready, breathe out through your mouth.

## Wrap Up

Is there anything from this today you might take away and use over the next week?

Perhaps practice noticing one positive thing each day.

Next week we will be looking more and what we might notice in our stress buckets, and particularly focusing on emotions.

## Week 2

(Today: Emotions: purpose & function, opposite action, wise mind, ride the wave, physical feelings, check the facts)

Welcome & check in - Brief recap on the mental health continuum and the idea of stress buckets.

Today we're going to be looking more at what might be going on in our stress bucket.

### Different ways to notice how we're feeling

We might notice stress in different ways. This could be through our emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and how we feel physically in our bodies. (Keep this list for next week if possible).

**Activity:** Right these 4 headings in **flipchart paper** and ask group for examples of each. OR use "whiteboard" feature on zoom. Use an example (e.g. going for a job interview or an argument to help imagine what you might experience).

**Emotions** – mental state. E.g. anxious (we'll come back to emotions later)

**Behaviour** – What we do (sometimes in response to how we're feeling). E.g. what we say, shouting, avoidance, hair pulling, impulsive actions.

**Thoughts** – Our perception of the world. Memories, thoughts of the future. Self-reflection. E.g. Am I good enough?

**Physical feelings** – Our bodily response to the above. E.g. High heart rate, butterflies in our stomach

^ These are all interconnected and influence each other.

We might notice different things first, could be our emotions first, or are behaviours for example. I might not realise I'm angry, until I find myself shout (behaviour) at someone. Could I have noticed the emotion sooner? I might have been more prepared to manage it.

If we want to see change in one of these areas, we can start somewhere else on this page (pointing to flipchart paper) to help make that change happen. Some areas are easier to start at than others. For example, if I told you to "cheer up", it is likely to have the opposite effect! However, if we look at some of these other areas, we can influence how we feel.

### Emotions

Looking at these emotions– Do we think emotions are good or bad? (*Ask for response*)

Answer: There are no "bad" emotions. All are important and tell us how we feel about the situation we're in. Some emotions are comfortable/ uncomfortable, so we might think they are positive/ negative. Some of these emotions are difficult – we can see they have a strong physical response which can be uncomfortable.

Why are emotions important?

- **Emotions can direct us to our unmet psychological needs.** Just like our physical health, we feel hunger when we need food.
- Emotions can **indicate what we VALUE** and what is important to us. Emotions can be stronger when it relates to something important to us.
- Emotions **MOTIVATE** us. For example, in the fight/flight response, our body gets ready to respond, which is useful in situations where we need to react quickly. Also motivates us to meet those unmet psychological needs.
- **Emotions COMMUNICATE** how we're feeling. E.g., Facial expressions – has your face ever given you away, even when you haven't said anything?

It's useful to know

- that sometimes if our emotions feel too intense, we may start to block them out and feel numb.
- Emotions are not facts. They give us clues to what we need or what is important to us. Sometimes their spot on, but sometimes they're not. We can assign the meaning. Example: nervous or excited? Or "hanger" (emotional when you're hungry!).

## Emotions & their functions

Each emotion has a function

Write out first 2 columns "emotion", "when". (Can simplify what is written in the table by writing what is bold. Leave space for another column). Verbally explain "why"

Emotion	When	Why/ psychological need
<b>Anger:</b>	When <b><u>something is unfair</u></b> , or someone has <b><u>crossed our boundary</u></b> / or isn't taking our boundaries into consideration.	We need to <u>set limits and protect ourselves</u> . (A boundary could be not using my phone late at night).
<b>Sadness:</b>	We feel sad when we <b><u>experience the loss</u></b> of a person, object, job, etc. or ideas, such as when things aren't what we'd hoped for or expected.	It <u>signals we may need help, comfort, and to recoup</u> . Sadness can also prompt care from others
<b>Fear: (&amp; Anxiety)</b>	We experience fear when <b><u>facing a threat or dangerous situation</u></b> .	We need to feel <u>protected and safe</u> .
<b>Joy:</b>	<b><u>Good experiences</u></b> , connecting with others, winning something, succeeding, among many other things make us feel joy.	This enhances our wellbeing.

Each emotion has what we call an “action impulse” linked to it. Whilst we can choose our behaviour, emotions can prompt us to want to act and react in a particular way. This can be useful in some situations for example, if fear makes us run from a dangerous situation quickly without needing to stop and think about it.

*(Pause & add next column “Example Action Impulse”)*

However, sometimes it might not be helpful for us and our long-term goals to react so impulsively! Knowing this link between emotions behaviour can help us understand *why* we want to react in a particular way. When our emotions are high, we can choose to try the opposite action. This is hard work, as we are fighting to resist our impulses, but it is possible.

*(Add or say final column “Opposite Action”)*

### Emotions & their functions

Emotion	When	Why	Example Action Impulse	Opposite Action
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<b>Fear: (&amp; Anxiety)</b>	We experience fear when <u>facing a threat or dangerous situation</u> .	We need to feel <u>protected and safe</u> .	<b>To run</b>	Approach: Go anyway & stick with it
<b>Joy:</b>	<u>Good experiences</u> , connecting with others, winning something, succeeding, among many other things make us feel joy.	This enhances our wellbeing.	<b>Smile and do more of what is making us happy</b>	(We're probably not looking to change this, but if we feel we're doing too much, pausing can be useful).

## Emotions & their functions

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Other emotions: (optional)

Emotion	When/ Why	Example Action Urge
Guilt	Alerts to damage from crossing our own values.	Motivates us to repair relationships
Shame	Alerts us to risk of exclusion	Hide
Envy	Someone has something you want	Work towards goal, or destroy/take revenge
Disgust	Preserve health (physical and psychological)	Recoil/push away

## Wise Mind

We can see emotions are important and provide us with information. Some people talk about having an emotional or logical mind. Both are useful. Too much of one without the other means we're missing some of the information we need to make decisions. When we're able to use both together, this is called "Wise Mind". If our emotions are too intense, we need to give them time to calm them down before making important decisions. You could imagine this like a snow globe and waiting for the snow to settle before you can see the picture again.



## Ride the Wave

Another helpful way to think of emotions is to imagine them as waves in the sea. They can have a high intensity that then falls away. More waves will come, but they can vary in intensity, and will all subside again. We feel this physically; we have listed earlier how our emotions are closely linked to our bodies. When something provokes an emotion in us, this prompts a chemical response in our body. This might lead to our temperature increasing, faster breathing and so on. (Refer to list written earlier) This will have a peak intensity and then lessen again. It takes time for the hormones to go through our body, and time for the effects to wear off. (E.G., our heart rate going back to normal). The biochemical rush might only take 60-90 seconds, but it can take 20 – 40 minutes for the effects to subside. If we know this, we can show patience to ourselves during this time. "Riding the wave" is the opposite to pushing away the emotional and physical feeling away, which can take a lot of energy! The emotion might be uncomfortable but they're not bad. Accepting it doesn't mean we like it but means we are acknowledging our reality. We can use our energy to navigate the situation rather than pushing it away.

For example, if I get angry with my partner, waiting for the anger to calm before I talk about what's bothering me means I am more able to have the conversation without shouting. So instead of them getting defensive that I'm shouting at them, the conversation might be more productive as they might be more open about what I have to say. When our emotions are too intense, we cannot use our "wise mind"

We can recognise that our emotions are very close to linked to our physical feelings. So how we

- Temperature- cooling with water or moving away from heat
- Breathing – steady pace exercise, e.g. “box breathing” In for 4, hold for 4, and out for 4.
- Muscle tone – tense to then relax
- Restless energy – walk, run, or other exercise.

What can I do when my emotions are intense or difficult?

1. Identify and name what I’m feeling.
  - a. May need to pause to do this.
  - b. Even just naming how we feel can reduce the intensity.
2. Can I use my “wise mind” (balance of emotion and thinking)? Or is my behaviour urge likely to get in the way of my long-term goals?
3. Use techniques to manage or cope with the intense emotions until they calm. What can we notice about our feelings or behavioural impulses?
  - a. Opposite action
  - b. Physical feeling
  - c. (We will look more at challenging thoughts next week)
4. When we can use Wise Mind we can then make decisions that take into account our emotions and rational thinking.

Check the facts

- Our emotions are always real and valid, but they are not always connected to something real that’s happening right now.
- It can be helpful to notice this before we act.
- What is causing this emotion?
- Does this emotion fit the facts?
- Does the intensity of the emotion fit the situation?
  - If a best friend moved away, I might be sad I can’t see them. If I broke my favourite mug, I might be a bit upset, but maybe it doesn’t justify the same intensity of sadness.
  - The emotion may fit the facts of the past but not right now. For example, I might feel nervous about getting to my doctor’s appointment and missing the bus. However, I’m not even on my way to the appointment yet, so I haven’t missed the bus on this occasion.

## Managing our emotions summary

1. Identify & name the emotion. Notice the emotion and the feelings, thoughts, behavioural urges (this can also help identify what the emotion is).
2. Check the facts. Does how I'm feeling fit the situation?
3. If I want change, what is in my control? What can I change?
4. What can't I change and need to accept?
5. Can anyone help me?
6. What coping strategies can I use? This might involve using some of the skill we mentioned earlier, along with finding helpful ways to self-soothe.



## Our children's emotions

- Infants don't yet know how to regulate their emotions or manage their stress buckets.
- They also need to "ride the wave" of their emotion (It takes time for the physical response to emotions to settle)
- Their emotions communicate to us about their experiences
- As our children get older, we can help by naming the emotions they experience. Our experience of difficult emotions can also help – including making amends when we don't manage our emotions very well!
- We can role modelling managing difficult emotions – We can feel pressure to model being a happy parent all the time, which is a lot of pressure. It is useful for our children to see us managing difficult emotions as this can help them learn resilience.
- Our children may feel safest with us. This can mean they feel safer expressing their difficult emotions to us. This can feel like their taking everything out on us, which is difficult. Keeping this perspective that you are their place of safety can help us look after our own emotions in these moments.

### Wrap Up

Is there anything from this today you might take away and use over the next week?

Could try keeping a mood diary and recording what you notice.

Next week we'll be looking more at our thinking patterns.

### Week 3

(Today: Unhelpful thinking patterns, intrusive thoughts, video, DARE skill, comparison & owning our identity)

Welcome & check in

Did anyone keep a mood diary? Did your emotions vary or were they similar throughout the week?


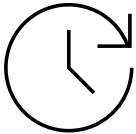


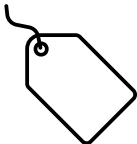


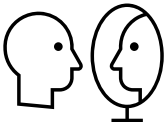
#### Recap

Last week we looked at how our emotions, thoughts, physical feelings and behaviours all link together. When stress buckets are getting full, we might notice any one of these things first. Last week we looked at our emotions, and how changing our behaviour and physical feelings can help improve our mood. This week we are going to look a bit more about what we might notice about our thoughts.

#### Thoughts

*(Look back at the list from last week and recap on what sort of thoughts we might notice. This might include specific examples or general descriptions such as “racing thoughts”, “ruminating” etc.)*

Our thoughts are our interpretation of situations and events. Thoughts often “pop” into our heads automatically. Some of us might be more aware of these thoughts than others. We’re going to look at some unhelpful thinking styles *(Give hand out on next page)*. Do you recognise any of these? *(Discuss)*

<b>Black and white thinking</b>   Believe things are can either be good or bad, wrong or right. No in between.	<b>Jumping to Conclusions</b> <b>Mind reading/ fortune telling</b>   <b>Mind reading</b> - imaging we know what others are thinking. <b>Fortune telling</b> – predicting the future
<b>Magnification/ catastrophising</b>   Blowing things out of proportion. "Awful-ising"	<b>Minimisation / Disqualify the positives</b>   Inappropriately shrinking the importance of something / Discounting good thing that have happened or that you have done
<b>Labelling</b>   Assigning labels to ourselves or other people.  "I'm a loser" "I'm completely useless" "They're such an idiot"	<b>Emotional Reasoning</b>   Assuming that because we feel a certain way, what we think must be true. "I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot"
<b>Over – generalising</b>  <i>"Always"</i> <i>"Never"</i> Seeing a pattern or drawing a conclusion from a single event. "Nothing good ever happens"	<b>Personalisation</b>   Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault. Or, blaming others for something that was your fault.
<b>Compare and despair</b>   Comparing our worst with someone else's best.	<b>Inner critic</b>  <i>"Must"</i> <i>"Should"</i> Using critical words like "should", "must", or "ought" can make us feel guilty or like we have already failed.

## Comparison

“Compare & despair” thinking style:

Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others and comparing ourselves negatively against them.

“Everyone compares themselves to others, but we are a bit like swans: fine on the surface but paddling underneath!”

Parent

As well as this, we might compare to the old you or how we think things “should” be.

You may experience a “tug of war” **between your old and new self**. Particularly after significant life changes, such as becoming a parent. We may even experience a sense of grief.

it can be distressing or uncomfortable for us **when are experience and expectations about how things should be don't match.**

There is no perfect parent, or one correct experience of how parenthood should look like. Perfection is not sustainable. Being “good enough” is not about settling for less. It’s about having a realistic expectation. It can still strive for good but allowing for us the ups and downs that come with being human.

## Why are our minds being so unhelpful?!

This video shows why our brains think in this way.

<https://youtu.be/kv6HkipQcfA> - The Happiness Trap: Evolution of the Human Mind by Dr Russ Harris

Video synopsis in case video cannot be played: Thinking back to our caveman days, it was really important for people to recognise threat. The “default setting” for our brains then was safety first. We in the modern world have inherited this. Our brains warn us about risk and dangerous. Today, instead of warning us about bears, we might worry about other social threats and pressures. In the past it was helpful for us to replay a frightening encounter with a bear to learn and remember how we survived. However today we might replay painful memories over again even when there is nothing useful to learn or lessen has already been learnt. In caveman days it was important to fit in with the group because this helped your chances of survival. Today we still worry about fitting in or if we’re doing enough. Today our groups are much larger, plus our online connection. This adds to the level of comparison to others and stress. These thought patterns aiming to keep us safe, is intensified by our fast past modern life. When our minds start thinking in ways which our now unhelpful, it isn’t deliberating trying to make life hard for you, and it’s doing the job it was designed to do, to keep you safe and save you from pain.

Coping skill: “Unhooking” from unhelpful thoughts. / DARE Use the next two pages as handouts

Diffuse or unhook → This makes the thought less powerful and reminds us thoughts come and go.

Acceptance → Similar to riding the wave and not pushing it away. This gives us space to look at our options. It is difficult and hard work to block thoughts out. Sometimes fighting against a thought makes us think of it more. For example, if I tell you not to think of pink elephants, it's too late. You're already thinking about it.

Realistic → is it fair? Likely? Helpful?

Embracing values → We feel discomfort when our thoughts or behaviours don't match our values.

## “Unhooking” from unhelpful thoughts

**D - Diffuse** – We can create distance from our thoughts.

“I am failing at this” vs “I am having the thought that I am failing at this.”

**A – Acceptance of discomfort**

“Ride the Wave” instead of avoiding and blocking out.

**R – Realistic and fact-based thoughts**

Is this thought an opinion or a fact? Is it realistic?

**E- Embracing Values**

Does this thought support my goals?

We feel discomfort when our thoughts or behaviours don't match our values. Remembering what is important to us helps us set goals that support our values.

Example: When I see a pizza advert when I've already had dinner

Diffuse – "I'm having the thought that I need pizza".

Acceptance of discomfort – Resisting ordering a pizza at night because I've already had dinner... even though the advert on tv looked really good.

Realistic goals and fact-based thoughts – "I need pizza!" It's not a fact... I am not starving, in fact, I already had dinner.

Embracing Values – I value enjoying my food (pizza), so I won't say I'll never have pizza. I also value trying to be healthy (or at least not overeating). Having two dinner is not helpful for my goal of trying to be a (moderately) healthy weight.

Example: When a bee lands on my arm

Diffuse – "I am having the thought of swatting the bee away".

Acceptance of discomfort – I really don't like the bee sitting on my arm... but I know it is more likely to sting me if I try and swat it away.

Realistic goals and fact-based thoughts - I want the bee to go away. Realistically, it is more likely to keep pestering me if I swat it.

Embracing Values – I value my health/ not being in physical pain. Swatting the bee does not help my goal of not getting stung by the bee.

These skills require as to have an awareness of our goals and values. Or to put it another way: Know what is important to us, how we invest our time and energy. What do we want to prioritise? Some of our priorities will remain constant and others will change.

### Owning our own identity

Thinking about our identity and what we value can feel strange if we haven't paused and reflected about it before.

Perhaps start with your story so far.

- What are some of your significant moments?
- Thinking of difficult situation in your life, how did you overcome these? What strengths have you used before? This could include being brave enough to ask for help.
- What do you value or want to prioritise? This may change overtime.

Values and priorities could include:

Attending to relationships	To be secure
Being part of a group	To be a spiritual person
To be self-directed	Keep life full of exciting moments
To be powerful and able to influence	Have integrity
Achieve things in life	Contribute to the larger community

This can be difficult to think about all at once. You may wish to take these questions away and fill them in over time. *(Give next two pages as handouts)*

## My Identity and Values

What values are important to me?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Key moments, events, and milestones:



What strengths and skills have I used before?

Is it time to let go of any particular thoughts or beliefs I've been holding onto?

What values do I want to prioritise going forwards?

### Wrap Up

Is there anything from this today you might take away and use over the next week?

Next week we'll be looking at mindfulness. "Isn't mindfulness just colouring in?"

## Week 4

(Today: Mindfulness: What is it? Examples)

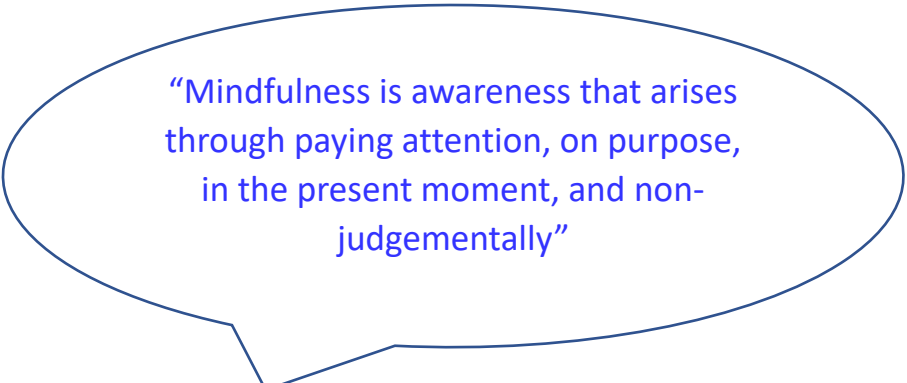
Welcome & check in

Recap: Unhelpful thinking patterns, unhooking, identity, values and strengths

Discussion: “Are you familiar with mindfulness?” “Have you heard of it?”

If the group is familiar, is it something they often use?

What is mindfulness?



“Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally”

Kabat-Zinn, Founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction.

Mindfulness is a skill we can use to move the focus of our attention.

What do we do in mindfulness?

- **Observing** – Just notice by **paying attention** to our thoughts or through our senses. Controlling our attention, but not the content.
- **Describe** – **put the experience into words** (but you cannot describe what you haven’t observed. Facts only. Not what we think it should be.
- **Participation** – throwing yourself into the current moment. Letting go of self-consciousness and criticism. Engaged in everyday life.

How do we do this?

- **Non-judgementally** – exactly how it is. Not adding labels like “good” and “bad”
  - Can still have likes and dislikes. Instead of saying “they are a terrible person” we can change it to “I don’t like this person’s behaviours, they bring up negative emotions for me and I wish it was different”
  - **Don’t judge your judgements.** Acknowledge them and then let go.
- **One- mindfully** – one thing at a time. What am I doing right now? Only focus on that. (e.g. eating, walking)
- **With curiosity and kindness.**

## Exercise #1

5-4-3-2-1

**5** things you can **see**

**4** things you can **hear**

**3** things you can **feel/ touch**

**2** things you can **smell**

**1** thing you can **taste**

Noticing with our senses

Sometimes we might notice that there isn't a lot to notice – that's okay too!

Brings our awareness to what is going on around us.

This is also an example of “grounding” particularly useful when we feel anxious or feel disconnected to our surrounding. This can be helpful when feel anxious, experience flash backs, or feel disconnected from our current surrounding.

## Exercise #2

Body scan

As well as focusing on what is around us, we can bring our attention to ourselves.

Start with the breathing → generally surroundings → how you're sitting → then start with the toes → work up to top of head & face → awareness back to surroundings

At the end reflect on how you could break this into smaller bits. For examples if you're putting hand cream on, give yourself a little hand massage.

## Exercise #3

Leaves on a stream.

This exercise brings our attention to our thoughts.

*Imagine you are next to a stream. Spend a few minutes watching the movement of the water as it gently goes past. (pause). Each time a thought appear in your head, imagine placing the thought on the leaf and watch it flow away down the stream.*

These three exercises use mindfulness in different ways. Which exercise did you prefer?

#### How my mindfulness be useful for our mental health and managing our stress buckets?

- Help us pause and notice the things that might bother us
- Mindfulness holds us to our intention. We can stay aware of whether we are working towards or away from our goals.
- Improve awareness of the good moments we often don't notice or appreciate.
- Returning our attention to the present when we notice we're ruminating on the past or worrying about the future.
- Letting go of judgements and expectations of perfection– being kind to ourselves
- Brings non-reactive awareness instead of automatic reactivity – so we can *choose* how we react
- Brings awareness to our behavioural patterns and thought patterns
- Brings awareness to emotions we might be carrying from the past that don't relate to the current moment. (Perhaps from a previous argument, or own experienced of being parented)
- Manage our “cognitive load” by focus on one thing at a time.
- Radical Acceptance – accepting reality as it is.
- Distress tolerance – give us control to direct our attention.
  - If the physical feelings associated to our emotions are intense, we can move our focus outwards
  - If our thoughts are racing/ ruminating on a thought – direct attention to notice what is around us right now
  - Can use self-soothing exercises, or muscle relaxation exercises

#### Wrap Up

What else could you do mindfully?

Is there anything from this today you might take away and use over the next week?

Practice mindfully noticing what's around you. You could try a specific exercise or do this as part of your typical routine.

## Week 5

(Today: Self Compassion bag, Traffic light zones, Self-compassion)

Welcome & check in

Recap: mindfulness as a skill. Did you try use this skill in the last week?

This week is a recap and a time for us to think about looking after our mental health after this course.

### Staying well day-to-day

All of the skills we have looked at over the last few weeks will help us manage our stress buckets. Whether it's skills that help us notice our stress level is filling up, or skills that help us reduce our stress, or manage the situation.

*Question for discussion: What could we do now we noticed our stress levels were getting too high? / What can we take from the last few weeks and use to manage our everyday wellbeing?*

Skills covered include: (offer recap)

- "Ride the wave" experiencing all our emotions – not resisting them and trying to block them.
- Diffusing and "unhooking" from thoughts and feelings
- mood diary/ journal to notice patterns in how we feel
- Being kind to ourselves when we start comparing
- Take care of your physical needs, what we eat, exercise or stretching
- Noticing positive moments
- "Building mastery" – activities that give us a sense of achievement
- Opposite action
- Mindfulness & grounding
- Aligning with our values so that we can act with intention towards the things in life that are important to us.

### When things get tough?

- **Pause & take a step back** – maybe try one big breath, like the balloon breathing we tried in the first week.
- **Notice what is happening** – What emotions/ feelings/ thoughts or behaviours am I finding difficult? Is the present situation or thoughts about the past/ future? Maybe we can't tell the reason right now if we are feeling overwhelmed, and that's okay too. Let's focus on keeping ourselves safe and grounded.
- **Paced breathing**: could try breathing in for 7 counts and out for 5. Or breathing in for 4, pause for 4, breathe out for 4
- **Practice something that works for you**: create a "mental health first aid box"

## Mental Health First Aid Kit/ Self Compassion bag

Some people like to create an actual box they can go to. It might include something for each sense:

- Photos, mindful colouring, positive affirmations you've written down.
- Fluffy socks, blanket,
- Flavoured tea / drink you like
- Hand cream (maybe scented)
- A reminder to listen to a playlist you've made
- Meaningful objects
- Reminder of things that inspire & encourage you

You could use the "notes" section of your phone to

- Write some mindfulness exercises down,
- Link to funny YouTube videos or music
- Save a folder of funny memes & photos that cheer you up

## Traffic light zones

*Give handout* - \*This zone system is relative to how *you* experience your health. It doesn't need to be the same as criteria for health services. Remember those services exist if you need them.

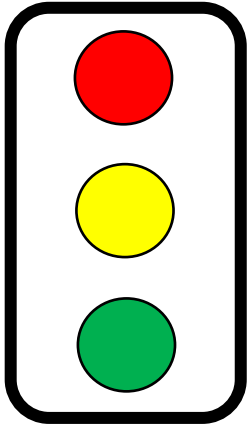
When thinking about how we are, it can be helpful to imagine traffic light zones:

**Green – mentally well.** Might be happy, or just feeling okay, but stable. We still need to maintain our mental health, but what we're currently doing, seems to be meeting our needs.

**Amber – Not quite 100%.** Have we forgotten something that helps us relax? Have we been putting our needs at the bottom of the to-do list? What can I do look after my mental health today?

**Red – I really need to stop and prioritise my mental health.** If I have tried to do this already, but still feel in the red zone. Is there something else from my first aid kit I can try? Have I spoken to anyone (possibly professional)? Maybe I'm doing the right thing, but just need longer (If you were hungry and needed a whole meal, you wouldn't eat just one grape). Therapy sessions are unlikely to have resolved everything in the first session!

*We don't need to wait until we are in the red zone, or even the amber zone to seek support.*



## Wellbeing Traffic Lights

These zones are relative to *your* experience. This is not a system for diagnosis. It can be a helpful way to think about your wellbeing, and a helpful way to communicate it to others. You don't need to wait until you are in the amber or red zone to prioritise your mental health.

### Red zone – Very low mental wellbeing

If I haven't already, I need to prioritise my mental wellbeing now. What skills can I use? Where can I ask for support?

If you have already tried to do this, but still feel in the red zone, is there something else I can try? Maybe you are doing the right thing, but just need to keep doing it for longer. (If you were really hungry, you wouldn't expect eating one grape to be enough. You need to keep eating a bit more. Likewise, self-help techniques or therapy session are unlikely to fix everything in one go).

### Amber zone – Starting to notice a “dip” in my mental health

What do I need to stay well? Do I have any physical or mental health needs I need to attend to? Have I been putting my health last? What can I do to look after my mental health today?

### Green zone – Feeling mentally well

Feeling okay.

I need to keep doing the things that are helping me to stay well.

**This can also be a helpful way to communicate to others** (e.g. someone we live with). You could even talk to them about what sort of support you might need in each zone. Maybe agreeing that if you're upset for them to ask if you need solutions or comfort?

## Self-compassion

Being a parent can really activate that "protect" setting in our brain – hyper vigilant and looking for threats or mistakes

If our threat response system or if our is highly activated it can still be hard to *feel* our mood change, even when we're successfully challenging our thoughts. We still have "yeah, but..." responses in our head. Our "inner critic" can give us a really hard time.

This "protect" system can conflict with our "calm" system that helps as self-soothe.

Extra reason to be gentle with ourselves. Don't push for perfect. We can practice being kind and compassionate to ourselves.

Being kind to yourself can sound strange if it's unfamiliar – can feel unsettling, or maybe we feel sadness or grief for the times we haven't felt this way

Life is about process, not results.

**Since we have "an inner critical voice", we can also help develop our "compassionate voice".** Imagine what compassion might look and feel like. Think of a best friend you care about, or someone who has been supportive to you. If you're someone who likes to visualise, then imagine in your mind a "compassionate image". This could be an animal or a shape – anything! Don't worry if the image goes quickly, this is very normal. Imagine a kind voice for the image (or without an image). When we notice our "self-critic" tell us what we *should* have done etc, practise kind self-talk with this image. You may prefer to write it down, or draw, or imagine in your mind.

## Reaching out

Who else is in my support circle? Friends? Family? Online communities? Professional groups, organisations, or services? – we don't need to struggle on our own.

We may find we get different types of support from different people. This could be to do with how far away they are and how often we can see them or depend on the way we know them. Some people might have strengths in offering practical support, whereas sometimes it might be in the way they are listening. Not all support needs to be in depth conversations. Sometimes that might be what we need, but sometimes even times a silly conversation with a friend can lift our mood.

If I don't have anyone, how might I find people?

## Seeking further support

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- Children's Centres
- Plymouth Options
- Counselling <https://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists>
  - Horizon/ Simply Counselling
- Devon Mind - Emotional support, courses, support groups & counselling
- GP
- Samaritans call on 116 123
- Shout text "shout" to 85258 <https://giveusashout.org/>

## Apps & Online Resources

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- Mind Website - <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/postnatal-depression-and-perinatal-mental-health/about-maternal-mental-health-problems/>
- Mindfulness apps: Headspace, Calm
- Mood diaries: MoodTools
- PANDAS <https://pandasfoundation.org.uk/>
- <https://maternalocd.org/about-perinatal-ocd/>

## Online resources – social media

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@drbeckyathome



@just\_chill\_mama (insta) / @just chill baby sleep (facebook)

@tidyminddoodles



@postbabybelly

@mumologist

@actionhappiness

*Just remember to watch out for unhelpful comparisons on social media!*

## Final Wrap Up

What's one thing you plan to take away from this course?

Feedback / evaluation

Course Feedback

Name of course	Looking after your mental health as a parent
Dates of course	
Do you think this course has helped you with your own mental health?	
What did you like about the course?	
What did you think about the length of the course?	
What would you change about the course?	
Any other comments?	

