



## Anxiety/Stress Management Programme

“Your Safety System  
a User’s Guide”



# Your Safety System - a User's Guide.

Human beings are designed for safety - SO:

You have 2 settings:

1. An ordinary everyday setting

And

2. An emergency threat setting. This gets the body ready for immediate action.

Action: either -**FLIGHT**

For example run away/escape/avoid



Or **FIGHT** (Get angry)

Or

**FREEZE** - avoid. Do nothing.

*How do you know there really is a threat or an emergency?*

**You Don't !!**

**There probably isn't anything to worry about**

- The human safety system is a bit like the sort of burglar alarm that goes off every time the cat walks by!
- That is why it is important to notice when your body's action mode switches on.
- Then you can think about it and decide whether there is anything to worry about before you rush off and do something you might regret.

**To Think about: How does stress and anxiety affect your life? Does it stop you doing things?**

**Do you find yourself doing things you later regret because you feel stressed?**

***\*When your body switches into 'Action' mode - what happens?***

It is as if a series of switches are thrown that affect every part of you. Adrenalin is released, and this tells the different parts of your body to switch gear.

***What differences do you notice when you feel anxious or under threat?***

**Heart:** this pumps the blood round your body faster to enable you to use your muscles faster. You feel your heart pounding.

**Heat:** all that blood increases body temperature  
You feel hot and sweaty.

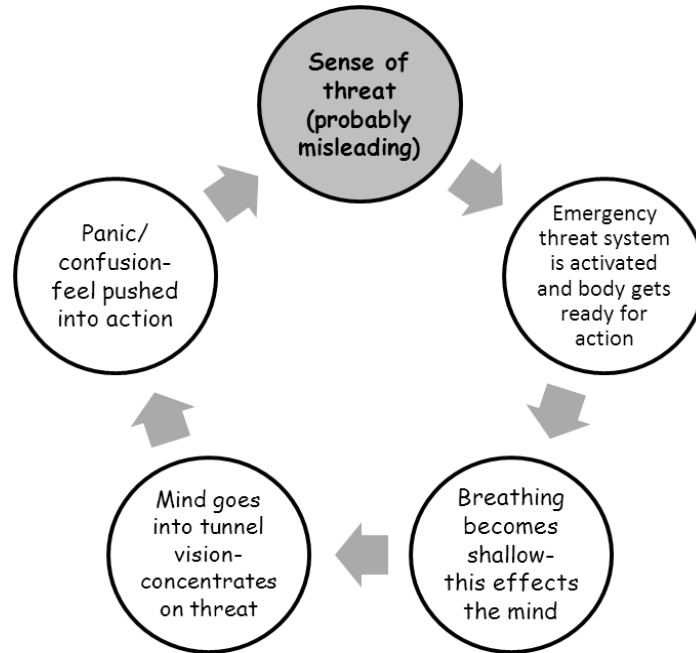
**Muscles:** these tense up - enable you to run fast or pack a punch.  
You feel tense, possibly shaky or agitated.  
You might get a headache or experience other muscle pain.  
It is sometimes hard not to act.

**Stomach:** this gets switched off - you cannot afford to put resources into less important things like digestion when (your body has decided) you are in immediate danger.  
You feel butterflies in your stomach. Uncomfortable gut feeling that tells you 'Something is wrong' - But is it?

**Breathing:** this gets shorter and shallower, and you breathe in more than you breathe out. That is because you need plenty of oxygen if you are just about to engage in physical activity.  
Unless you are engaging in vigorous physical activity when you breathe like this - you feel terrible. This is because 'action breathing' will upset the balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide that is vital to the way your brain and body work - unless you are 'acting' - i.e. doing something!

**Brain:** this first concentrates on threat and goes into tunnel vision.  
Then it becomes confused.  
It is the breathing, and the switch in the oxygen/carbon dioxide balance that the short breaths produce that causes the change in thinking.  
This is very important. It causes the type of thinking known as 'Emotion Mind'

# THREAT VICIOUS CIRCLE



Using breathing to break the circle.

## Breathing

Notice the important part that breathing plays in this vicious circle.

The good news is that it is the easiest one of those physical changes to control (imagine trying to slow your heart rate down.....)

As 'action' breathing means you breathe in more than you breathe out - all you have to do to switch off your threat system is.....

To breathe out more than you breathe in!

A bonus is that, as you breathe in you naturally tense your chest muscles, so you naturally relax them on the out-breath

So - it is very easy to

concentrate on relaxing your muscles on the out-breath!

2 for the price of one!

The trick is to keep practicing this so that it is easy to do when under stress - there is a handout to help you with this.

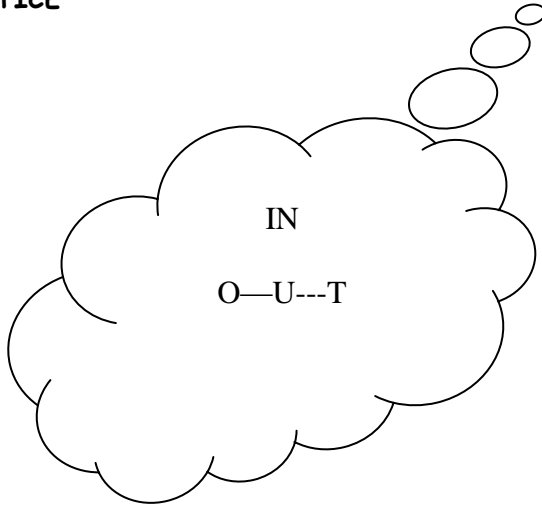
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BREATHING WILL BRING DOWN ANXIETY IF YOU CATCH IT EARLY -  
NOTICE WHAT YOUR BODY IS TELLING YOU - PICK UP YOUR FIRST SIGNS  
OF ANXIETY, AND LENGTHEN YOUR BREATHING THEN

LEARN TO READ YOUR BODY!

\*\*\*\*\*

USE THE BREATHING INSTRUCTION HANDOUT TO GET INTO REGULAR  
PRACTICE



# RELAXATION BREATHING HANDOUT

Using breathing to reduce stress, panic and anger.

High stress means that your body is getting ready for action.  
When stressed, you breath in more than you breath out.

This gives you a simple way to calm down:

Breath            IN   -   1  
                      OUT -   1 and 2

## Breath out more than you breath in!

And - you do not need to breath in straight after you have breathed out -  
you can have a little rest:

Breath            IN   -   1  
                      OUT -   1 and 2  
                      AND     R-E-S-T

A bonus is that, as you breathe in you naturally tense your chest muscles, so  
you naturally relax them on the out-breath  
So - it is very easy to

Relax your muscles on the out-breath!

Breath            IN   -  
                      AND   R---E---L---A---X

Keep practicing this so that it is easy to do when under stress.

**BREATHING WILL BRING DOWN ANXIETY IF YOU CATCH IT EARLY -  
NOTICE WHAT YOUR BODY IS TELLING YOU - PICK UP YOUR FIRST SIGNS  
OF ANXIETY, AND LENGTHEN YOUR BREATHING THEN**

**THIS BREATHING SHOULD HELP YOU TO THINK MORE CLEARLY.**

# AVOIDANCE

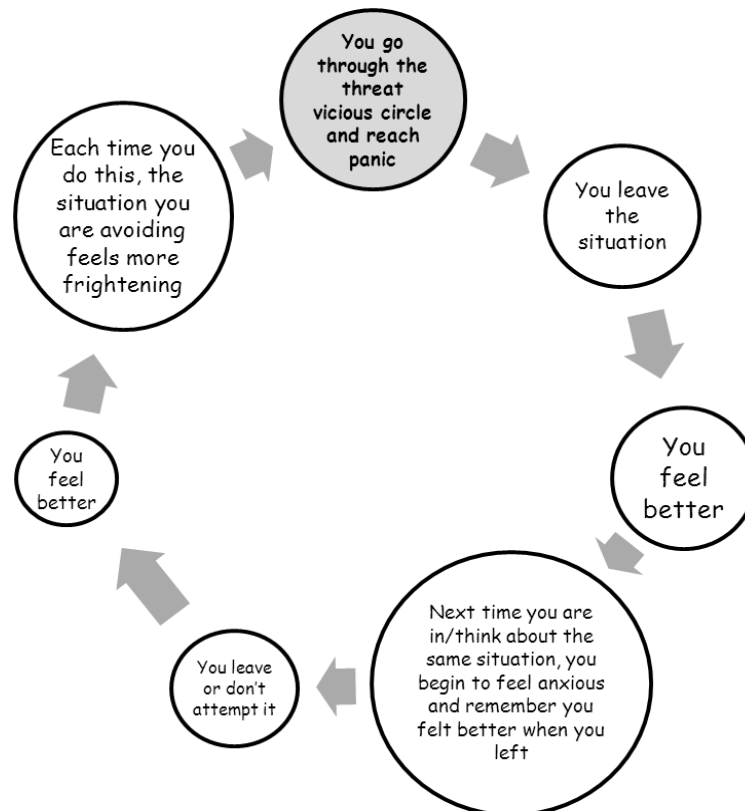
## AN EXAMPLE OF THE THREAT VICIOUS CIRCLE

The person who feels self conscious in a supermarket:

- Feels that everyone is looking at them (are they really?)
- Goes into shallow breathing
- Rushes out and goes home
- Never learns that the panic would have subsided if they had stuck it out



## THE AVOIDANCE VICIOUS CIRCLE



## BEATING AVOIDANCE



- Make a list of what you are avoiding
- Put it in order; least scary first up to the most scary
- Promise to yourself that you will do the least scary item.
- Use breathing to make it easier
- Congratulate yourself when you have done it!
- Carry on up the list as your confidence grows



## Session 2:

### TIPS FOR MAKING THE MOST OF THE BREATHING AS A WAY TO SWITCH OFF YOUR EMERGENCY SYSTEM:

- It is most likely to work if you are not on the point of panic - so - CATCH IT EARLY!
- To do that: READ YOUR BODY! Be aware of the changes that take place when your threat system kicks in.
- Be aware of which hits YOU first.
- The moment you notice it - START THE BREATHING!

## ANOTHER WAY OF AVOIDING: AVOIDENCE of FEELINGS



Bad memories or anxiety provoking thoughts can also trigger the threat system. This feels horrible, so people naturally want to avoid that feeling. They find something that blocks or lessens the feeling:

- Could be alcohol or drugs
- Could be shutting yourself away and stopping doing things
- Could be doing something (washing hands, counting) - what we call Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Could be eating - or stopping eating
- There are others - human beings are very inventive

This then becomes a vicious circle, or an addiction.

## CHRONIC STRESS



If your threat system gets triggered a lot, stress levels can stay high most of the time. This has a number of bad results. Your body does not work well in emergency setting.

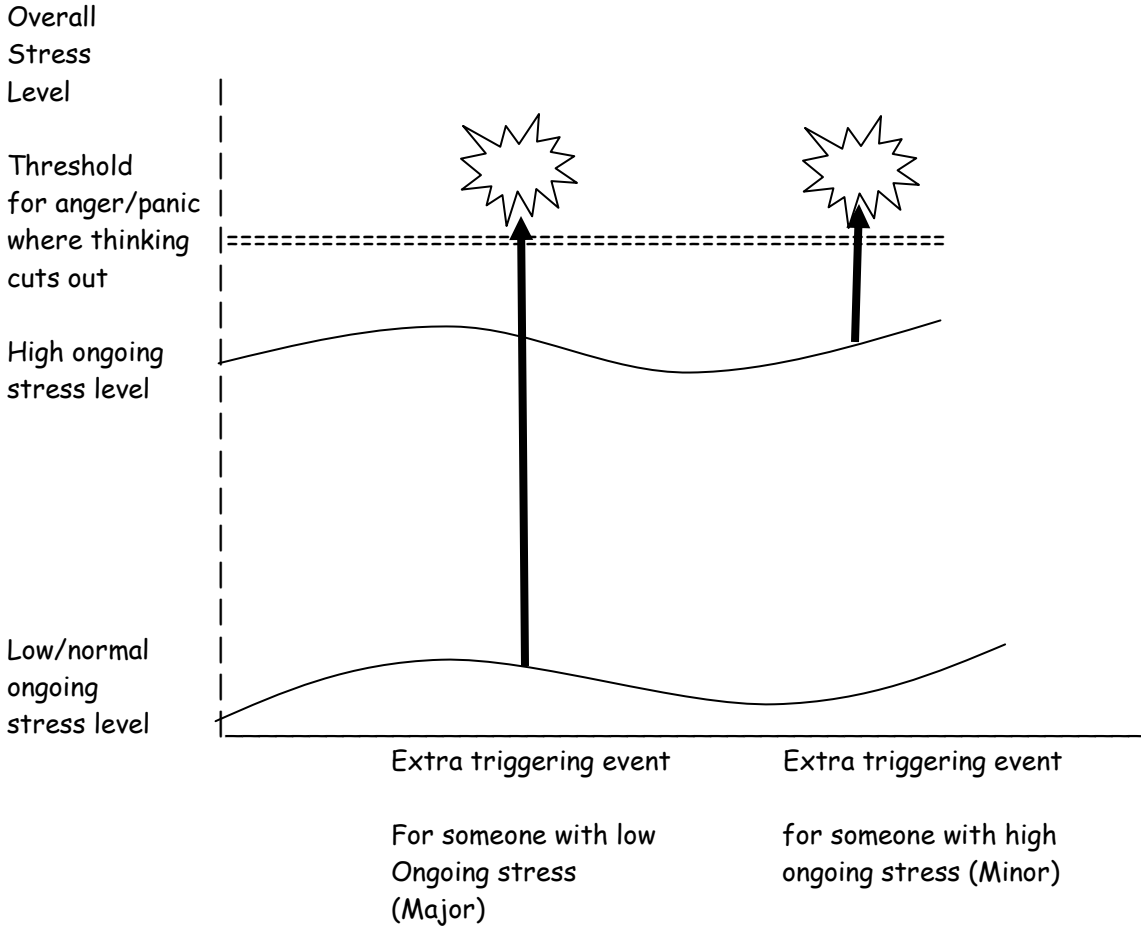
It is a bit like driving your car along the motorway in second gear. You need second gear for going round obstacles, but if you use it all the time, it is bad for the engine and very uncomfortable. Chronic stress is like that.

Also, it means that it only takes something quite small to trigger either panic, or loss of temper - where the sensible, 'Reasonable Mind' gets switched off, and the person 'Loses it'.

For someone more laid back, it takes a lot to push them over that limit.

The next diagram shows the relationship between stress (arousal level) and panic or loss of temper:

### Relationship between Stress (Arousal) Level, and Panic or Loss of Temper.



### REDUCING OVERALL STRESS IN YOUR LIFE

Given the above, it might be a good idea to change gear!

*How do you do that?*



#### First Think:

- ❖ What maintains chronic stress in your life?
- ❖ What is protective against stress?
- ❖ What lifestyle changes can you make to reduce overall stress levels?

**Hint:** As stress is about your body being constantly ready for action, but without getting any- regular exercise is a good start.

**However:**

Don't get hooked on it! Exercise itself can become an addiction! What you need is a balance between exercise and activity, and real relaxation.



## THE THREAT SYSTEM AND SURVIVAL

*Question: Why do human beings get themselves in such a pickle???*

**Answer:** Because we are designed for survival in a cave man environment. When life was simple, it was important to recognise threats to survival (wild animals, hostile tribes etc.) and respond to them rapidly.

So, we are equipped with a short cut system to do that. It cuts out the sophisticated, intelligent; thinking bit that takes too long if the danger is immediate. It lays down a memory of threat that is immediately triggered if something that reminds us of past threat happens again.

## THE THREAT SYSTEM AND THE MEMORY

So, threat memory - Emotion Mind - does not "do" time. It mixes up "then" and "now".

So, when your threat system is triggered, not only are you dealing with the current emergency, all the bad things that happened in the past can come rushing back, making it 10 times worse.....

This is one of the many good reasons for putting the threat system in its place - or it keeps the past and everything that went wrong in the past alive for you forever. This keeps you feeling bad.

- ❖ Immediate coping.
- ❖ Breathing. Giving you space. Think.
- ❖ Challenge avoidance - dismantle it bit by bit.
- ❖ Develop a low stress lifestyle
- ❖ Remember, too little challenge can be as stressful as too much sometimes, so find activity that feels meaningful and worthwhile for you - just enough pressure, but not too much!

**YOU RULE OK! NOT YOUR ANXIETY!**