

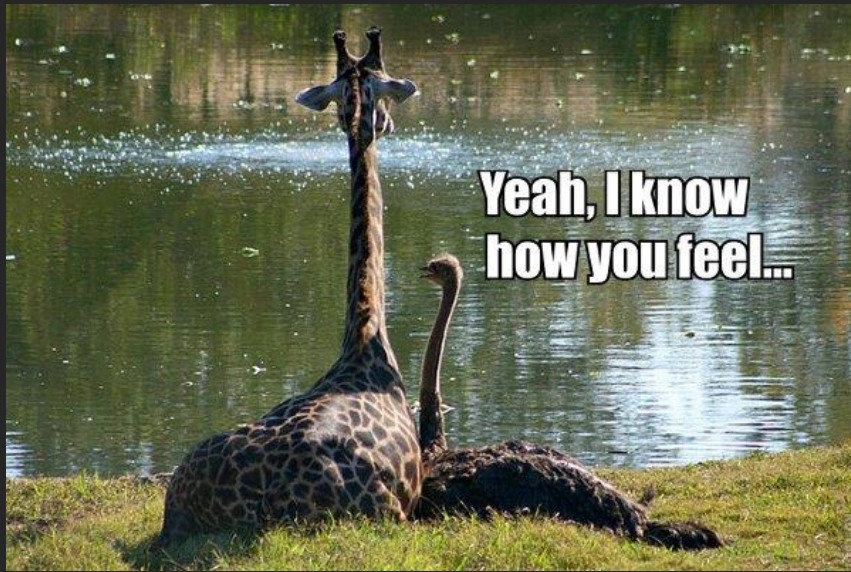
Dr Ellie Atkins  
Principal Clinical Psychologist

# Managing anxiety

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AROUND CORONAVIRUS





- ❑ I am a Clinical Health Psychologist working at St George's hospital in London and at Headspace Guildford. I work with adults and children around mental health and wellbeing related to their physical health condition.
- ❑ In my job I walk alongside people who are experiencing significant distress and difficulty. Importantly I can't take away the difficulties they are going through
- ❑ This situation is unprecedented. We've never experienced anything like this before. But you are not alone. That doesn't mean I know exactly how you feel or the particular pressures you are under. But we can walk together in this.

# Key messages:



1. It's ok to not be ok
  - This situation is unprecedented
  - Feeling worried and stressed is normal
2. We will get through this
  - There are strategies that will help
  - This won't last forever

# This is what I'm going to cover

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How do we understand anxiety?

Why are we anxious?

What can we do about anxiety?

- All of us
- Parents
- Children

What strategies help?



# How can we understand anxiety

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Our brain has 3 sections



1) The 'reptilian brain'  
(fight or flight or freeze)



2) The 'mammalian brain'  
(memories, emotion)



3) The human brain  
(Planning, organising,  
thinking about consequences)

# What happens when we get anxious?

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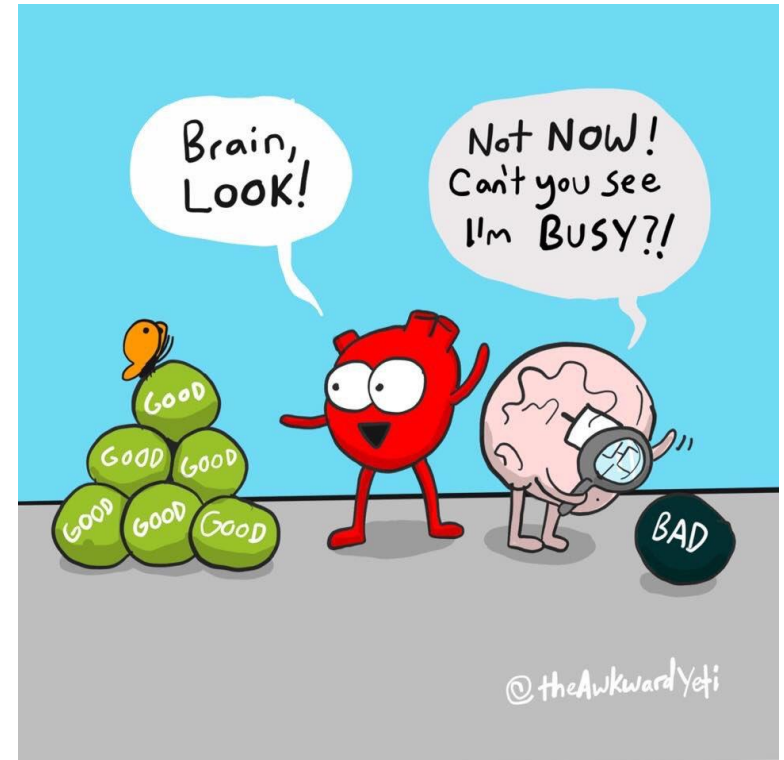
When we're anxious, our brain can shut down, leaving us stuck either very emotional or in emergency 'fight or flight' mode. This makes it hard to think, to plan or to reason.



# Why are we anxious?

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- It is evolutionarily adaptive to focus on risk – those who do would have survived to pass on their genes.
- Our brain is designed to focus more on problems than on good things (good things are all very well, but bad things have more impact on survival)



<http://theawkwardyeti.com/>

# Triggering anxiety

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WHEN I BURN TOAST IN MY HOUSE...



MY SMOKE ALARM GOES OFF





# Anxiety is like an alarm

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It's an in-built mechanism that warns us about danger.

Normally when the danger is passed (the smoke clears) the anxiety goes down (we press the reset button and the alarm goes quiet)

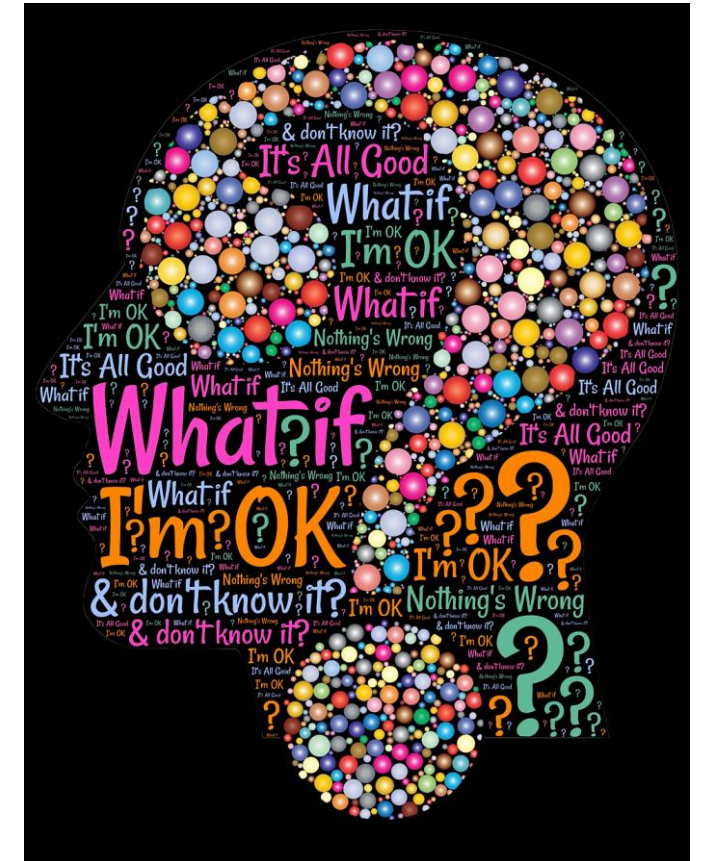
The problem with coronavirus is that we can't see the danger - so we are in constant high-alert without being able to re-set the alarm



# Is it ok to be anxious?

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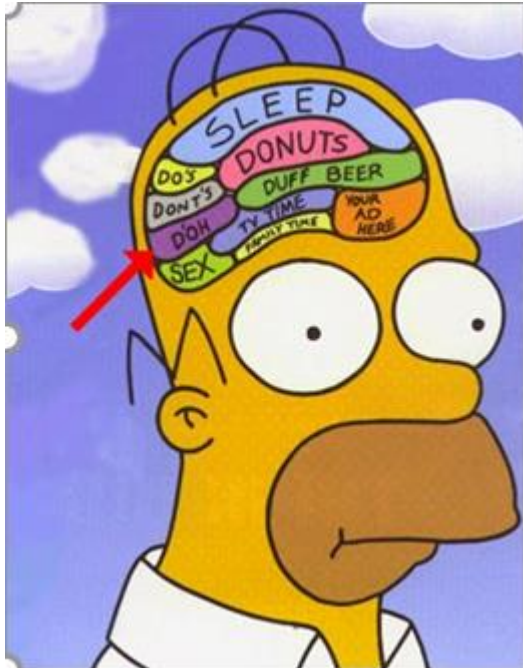
- ✓ Yes - it's completely normal. That's just how our brain is designed to react.
- ✓ Everyone is feeling anxious right now
- ✓ There's anxiety about the virus itself and then about how we respond, food shortages, childcare issues
- ✓ We can also get anxiety about anxiety - this makes everything worse



# Hypervigilance

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Have you noticed how we're talking about it, thinking about it, googling it and we can't stop - again this is about the way our brain is designed - we pay more attention to threats.



Normally.....



Now.....

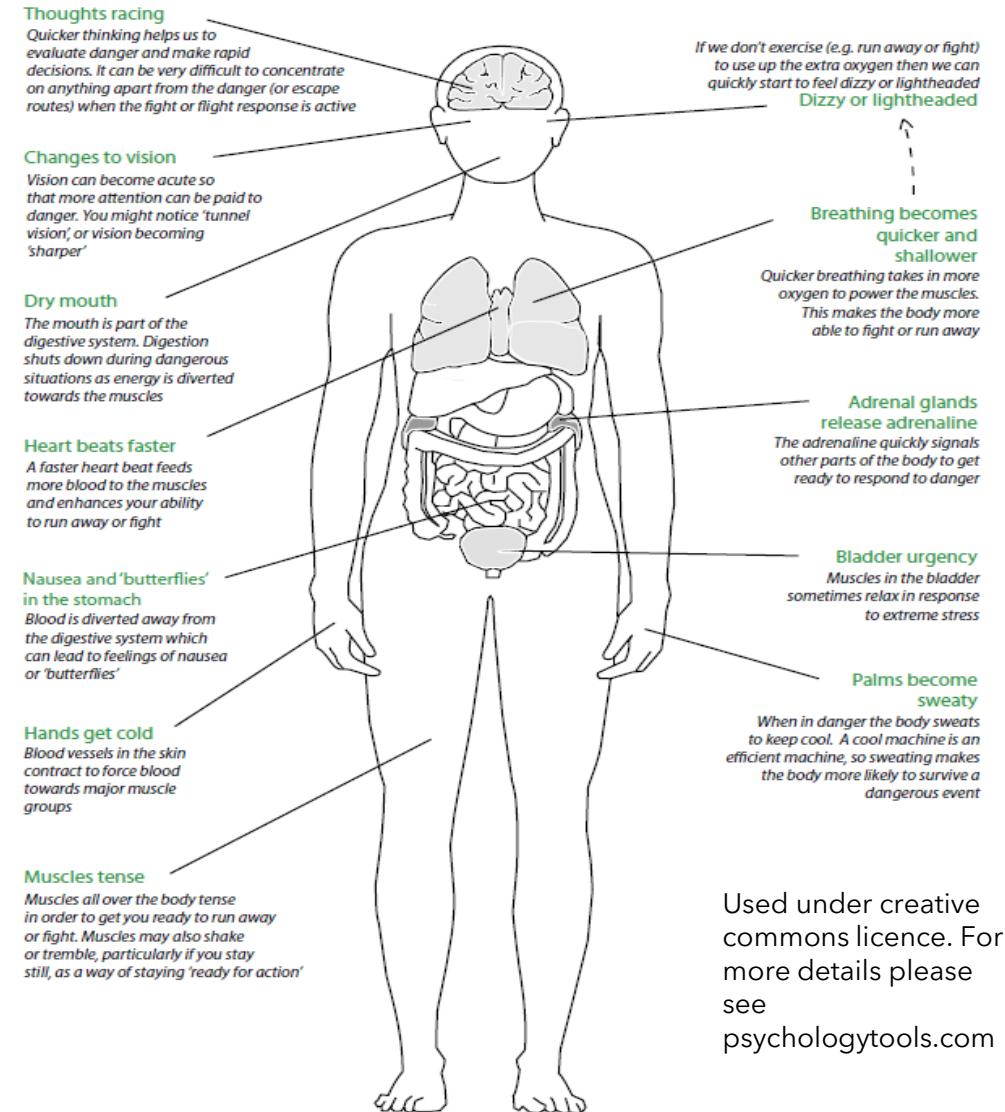
# Fight or flight

When we get anxious our body activates the flight/fight/freeze mode

Then we get physical symptoms which are designed to help us cope with a threat, but sometimes trick us into thinking there's an even bigger problem (especially when there's a health scare)

## Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.



Used under creative commons licence. For more details please see [psychologytools.com](http://psychologytools.com)

# 3 systems model

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Threat

Think about them like 3 balloons that can inflate or deflate depending on what's going on around us and inside us

Imagine it like this - we have 3 complimentary systems inside us



Drive

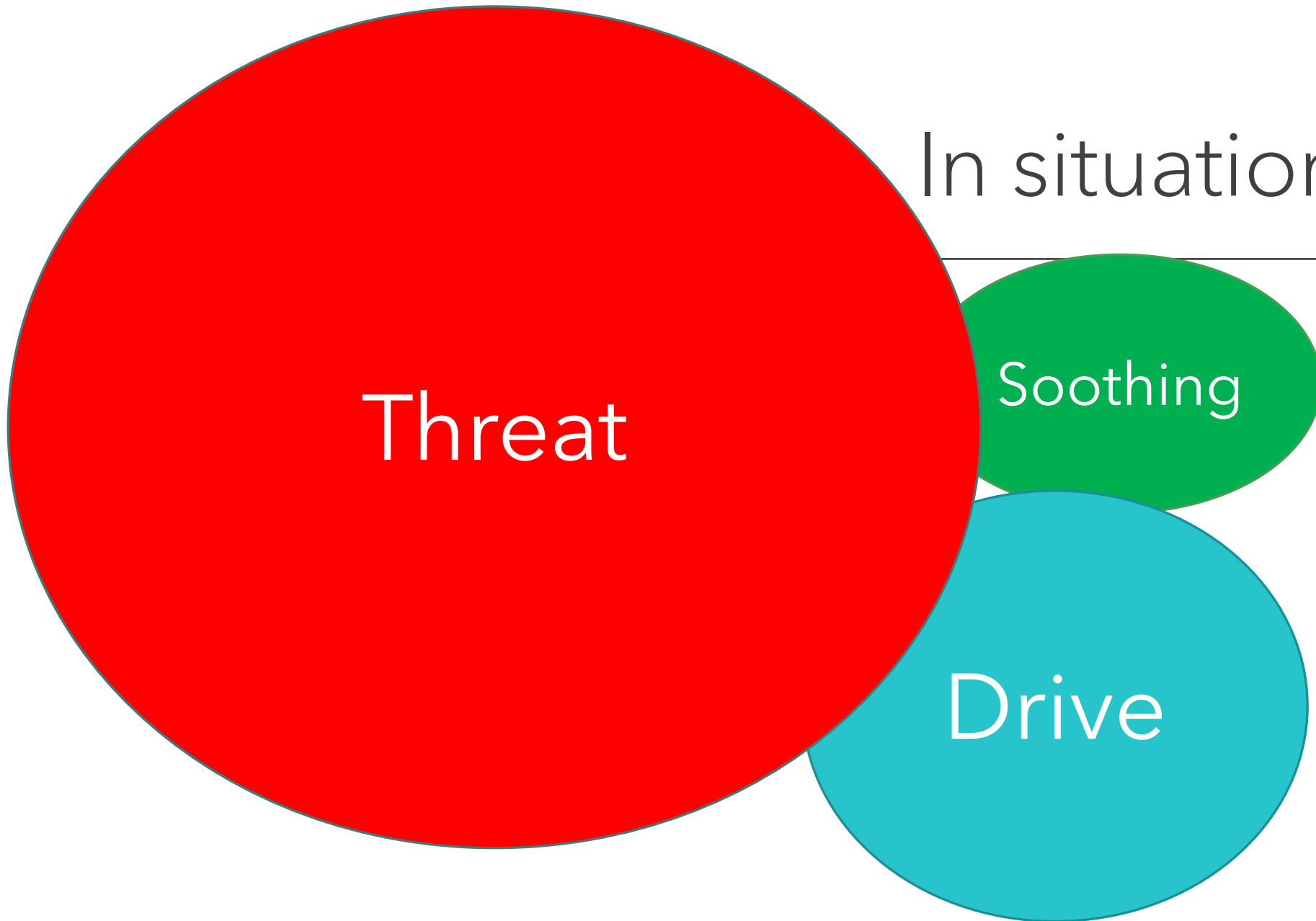


Soothing

For more info check out this YouTube clip:  
[compassion for voices](#)

# In situations of stress

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The soothing system is the one which looks after us and helps us manage. It can be the smallest in times of stress, just when we need it to be bigger.

So, what can we do?

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# Two ways to see this:

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This situation is out of my control.

There's nothing I can do

I can't cope with this

This will impact negatively on me

This is a very difficult situation. I will do what I can.

I can't control many things but I can look after myself

I am limited in what I can do, but that doesn't mean there's nothing I can do

I can still be positive despite the situation

We will get through this



# What can we do?

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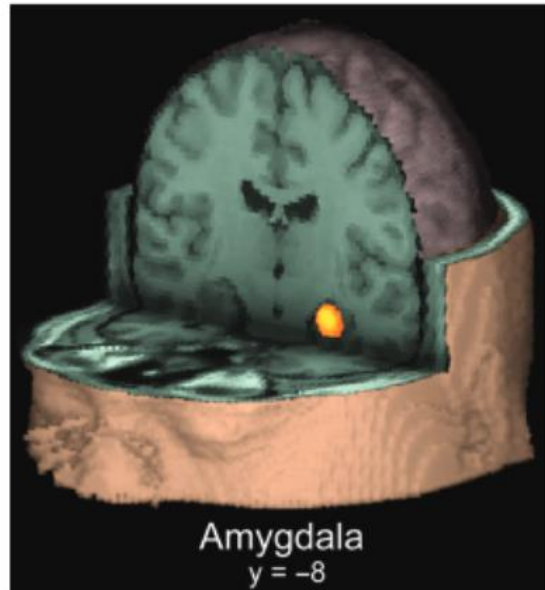
- Acknowledge and name the anxiety
- Accept the things you cannot change
- Change the things you can - take control
- Reflect on what's working and what isn't.
- Keep perspective

# Putting feelings into words (Lieberman et al, 2007)

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This is a brilliant study, where they were looking at the impact of naming feelings on people's brains.

They put the people in a scanner and showed them faces showing fear or anger...



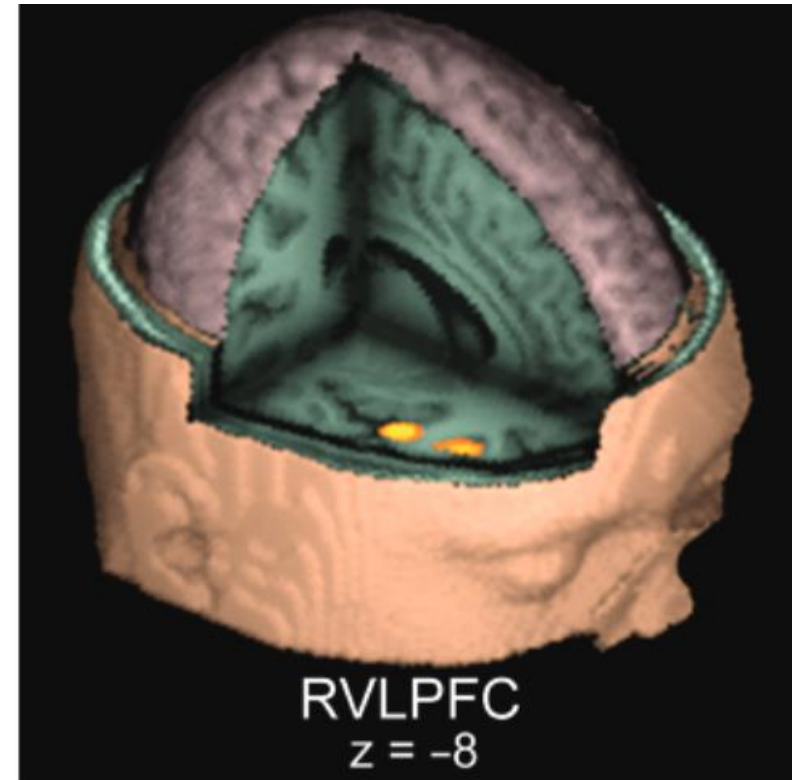
When they did this, the mid-brain (mammalian brain) was being used...

# Putting feelings into words (Lieberman et al, 2007)

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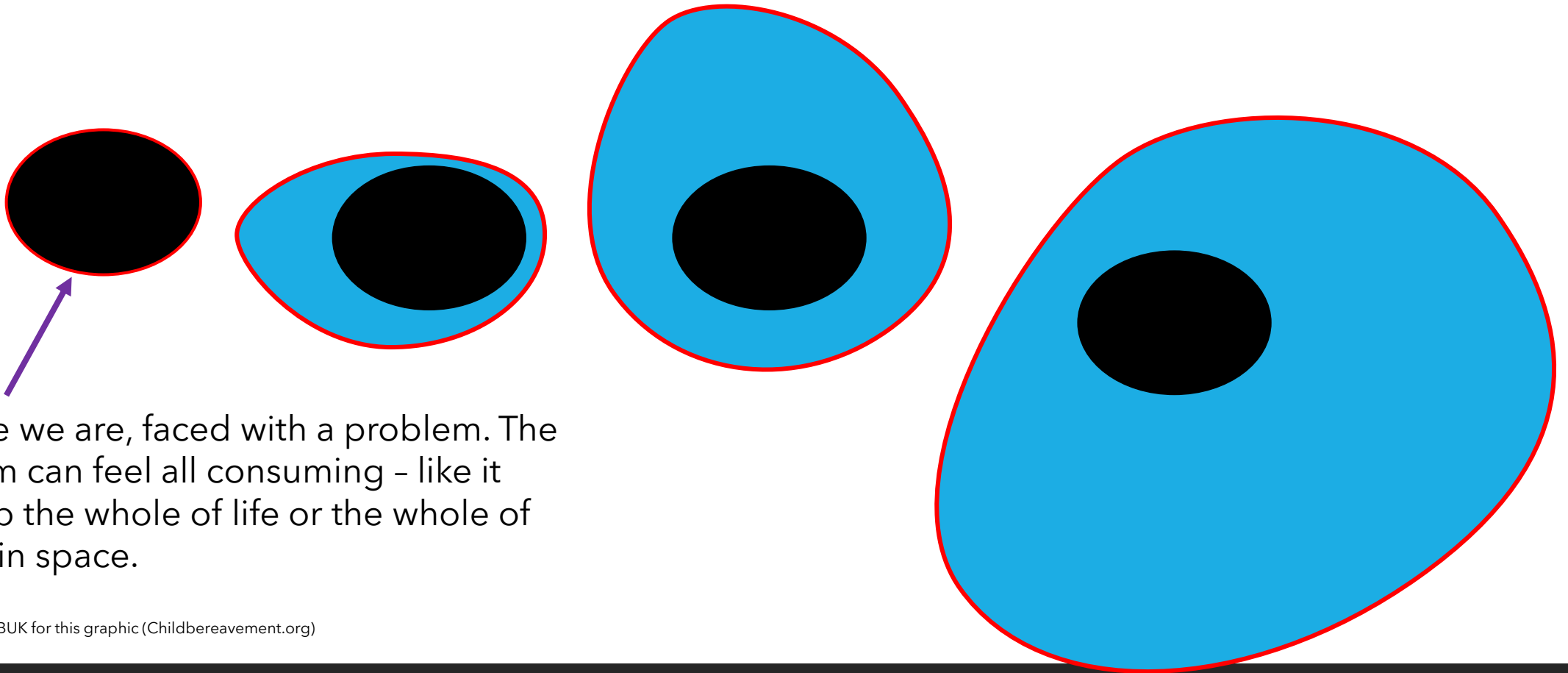
But, when shown the same faces and asked to label the emotion

- Labelling the emotion reduces amygdala activity
- And increases activity in prefrontal cortex
- This increases the 'human' or thinking brain part of us. So, when we name our feelings we can think about them more, and we can use our skills to think about what we do next.



# Growing around the problem

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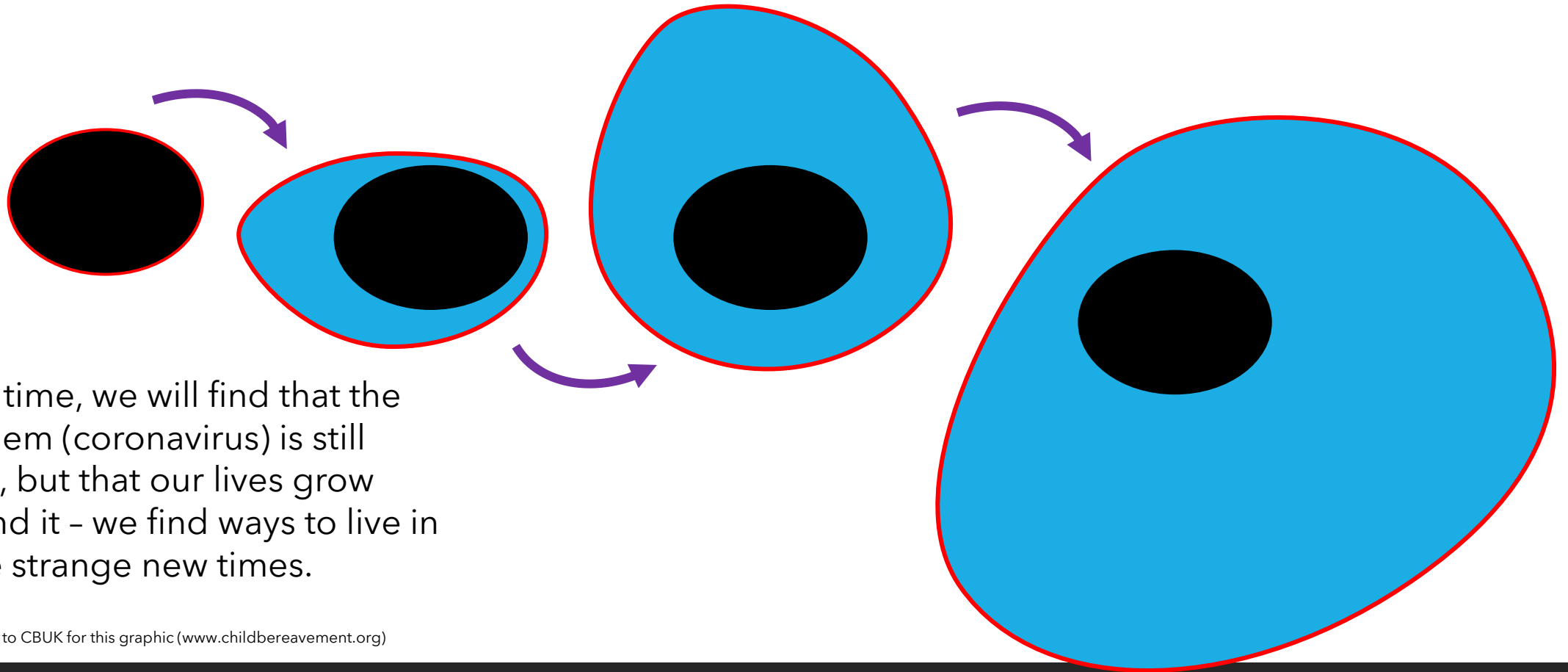


So, here we are, faced with a problem. The problem can feel all consuming - like it takes up the whole of life or the whole of our brain space.

With thanks to CBUK for this graphic ([Childbereavement.org](http://Childbereavement.org))

# Growing around the problem

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Over time, we will find that the problem (coronavirus) is still there, but that our lives grow around it - we find ways to live in these strange new times.

With thanks to CBUK for this graphic ([www.childbereavement.org](http://www.childbereavement.org))

# Write about it

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- ✍ Write a journal or a diary
- ✍ Keep a log of events
- ✍ Write a blog
- ✍ Vlog about it
- ✍ Keep a photo diary



Give your brain ways to process what's happening

# Manage yourself

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- Keep a routine - even if it's different or adapted compared with life before.
- Think about sleep - try to maintain a regular pattern of sleep even if you're not getting up for work or usual activities.
- Manage your social media involvement - do what seems right - keep in touch but don't get sucked into hype
- Make an effort to stay in touch with people but also manage this so it is not overwhelming
- Do kind things for others - we know this has a huge effect on our wellbeing. You can still do kind things from isolation (offering support and encouragement)

# What can we do to help children?

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If your worries weigh you down,  
find somewhere to hang them up

1. Notice the worry and name it





# The worry tree

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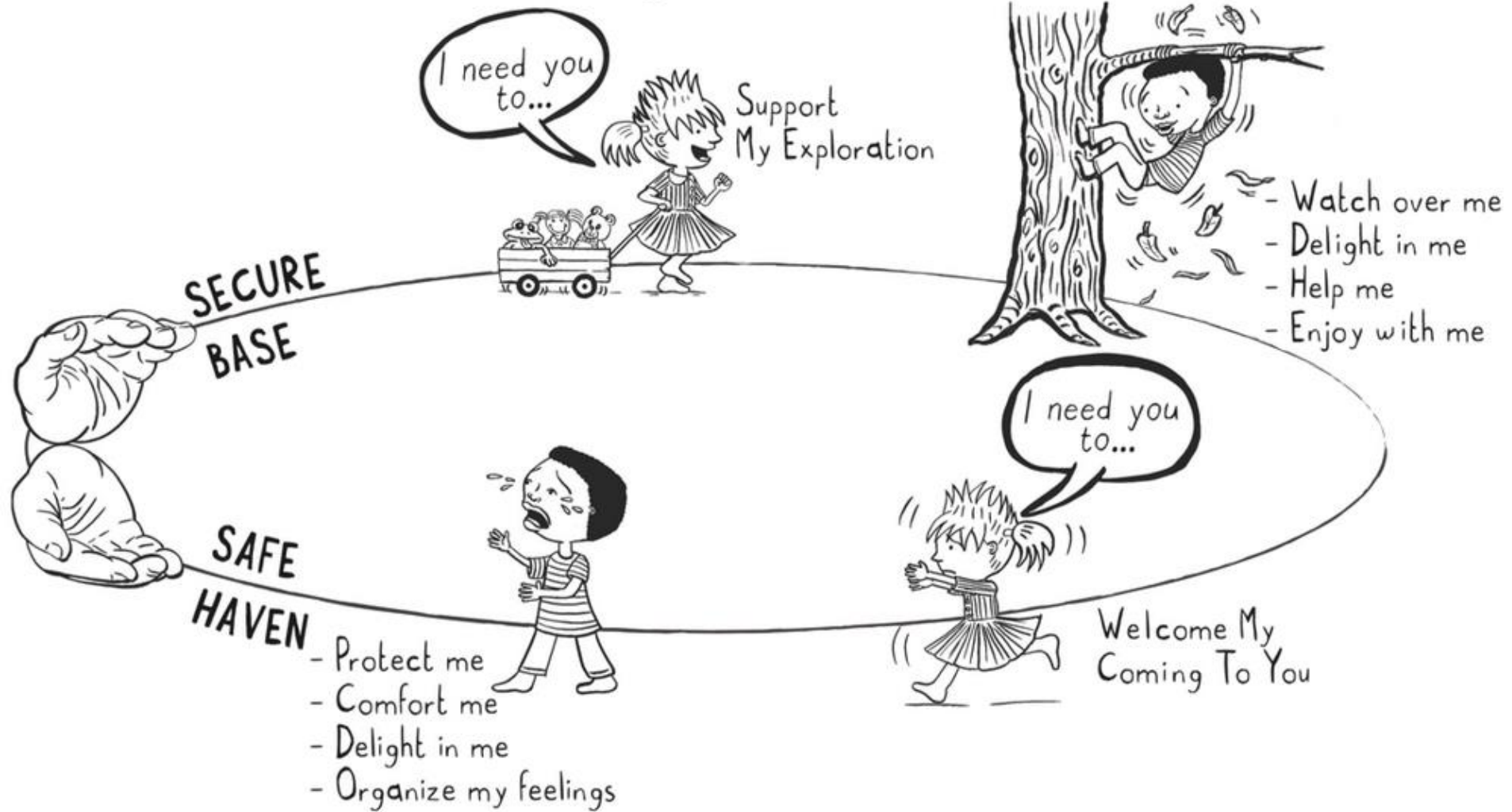
1. Notice the worry and name it
2. Think about it
3. Make a plan OR change focus of attention

Stop - Think - Do



# Circle of Security<sup>®</sup>

Attending To The Child's Needs





**ALWAYS BE: BIGGER, STRONGER, WISER & KIND.  
WHENEVER POSSIBLE: FOLLOW MY CHILD'S NEED.  
WHENEVER NECESSARY: TAKE CHARGE.**



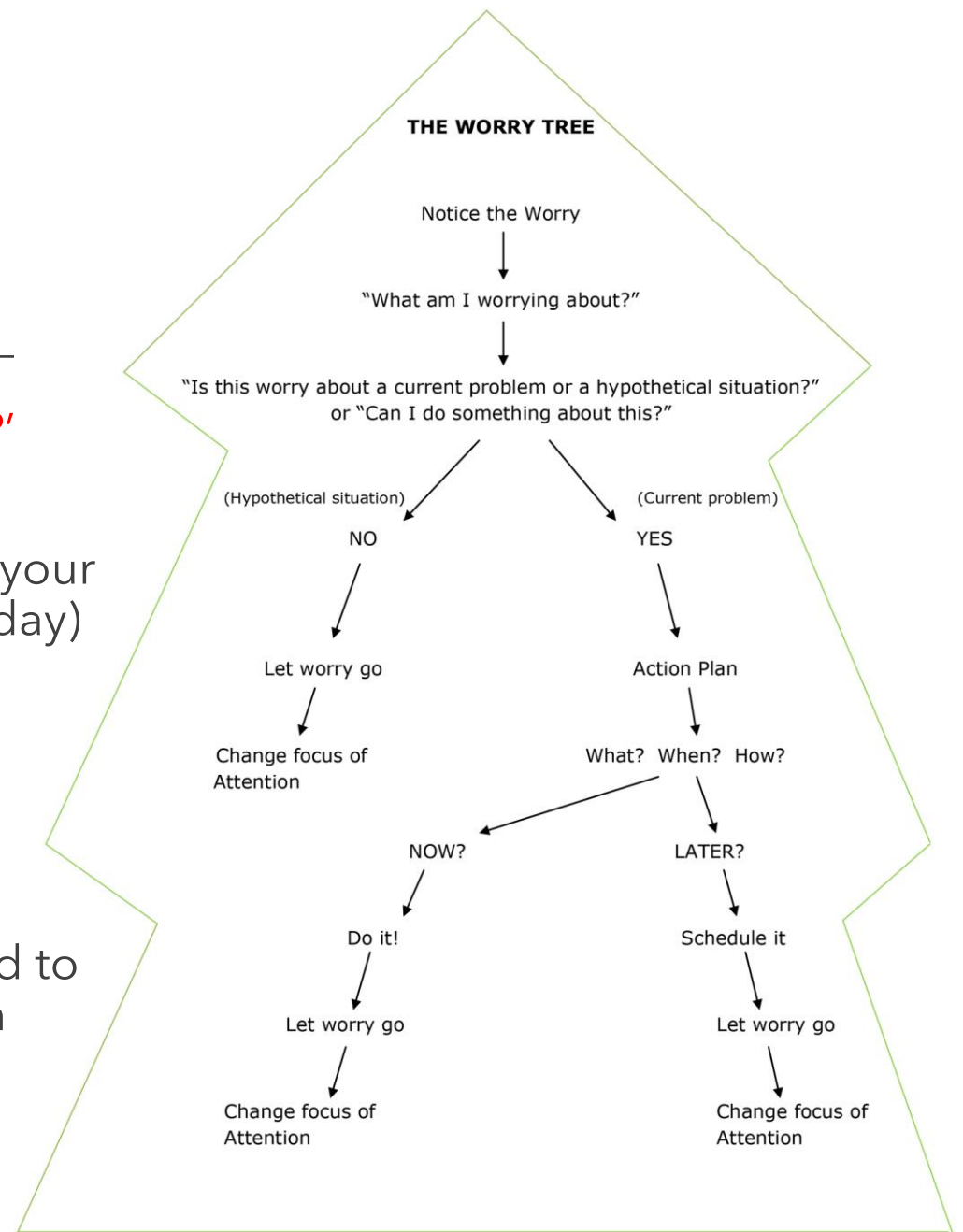
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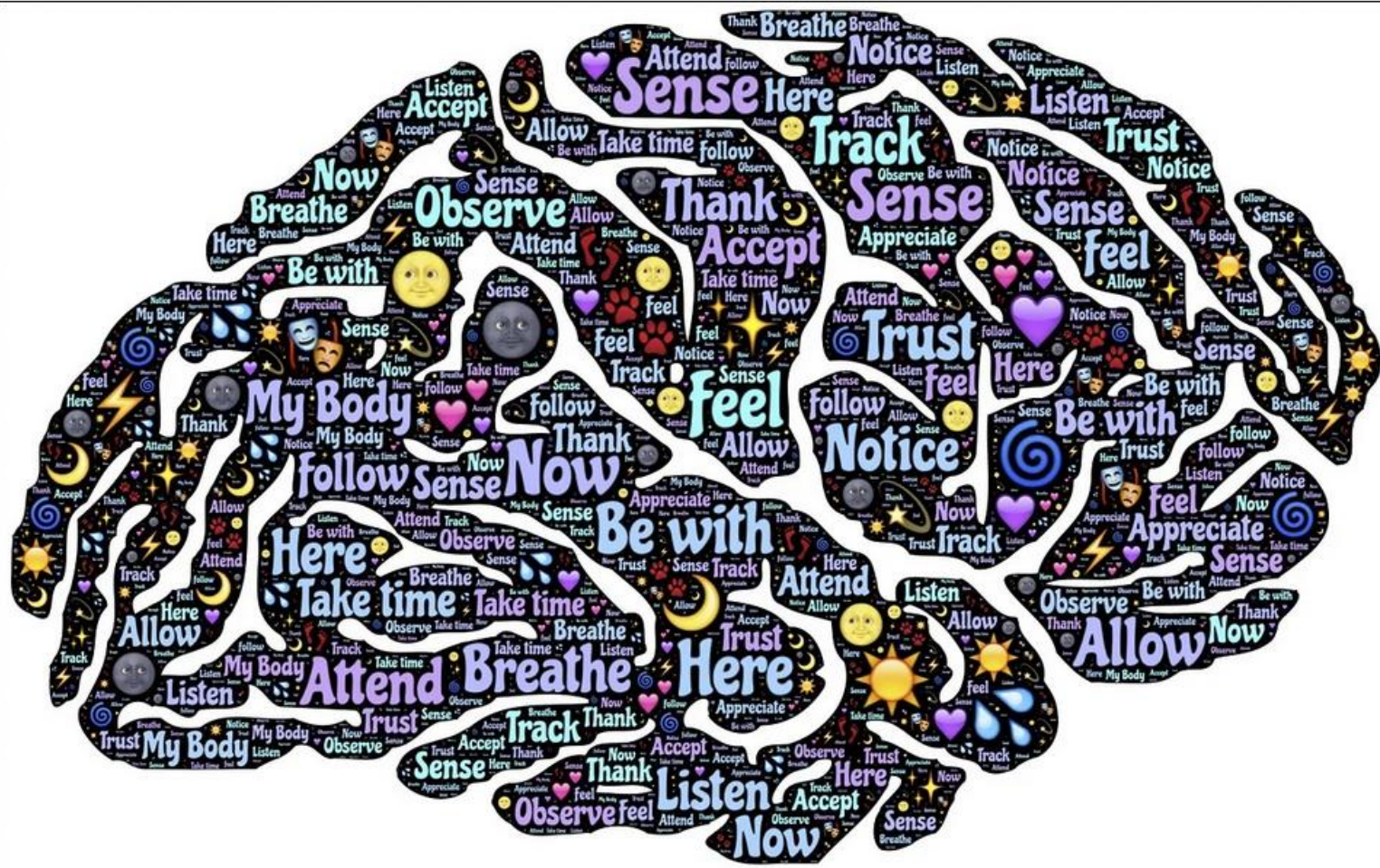
## What does 'change the focus of your attention mean?'

- It means actively directing your brain to think about something else (an engrossing task like planning out your day, a mindfulness activity, remembering a great holiday)

## How do you do that?

- It's not easy
- It takes practice
- To start with it will feel like it's not working - you need to be consistent with it - keep trying and you will re-train your brain.





# An exercise

Do this for yourself and see how it works.

Remember learning to relax is a skill just like learning to ride a bike or learning to knit. It's doesn't always come easy the first time

# Count your blessings

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WHAT ARE YOU GRATEFUL FOR?



With thanks to the Evening Standard, see <https://www.standard.co.uk/>

YESTERDAY I WAS GRATEFUL FOR:

- 1) living in a country that has the NHS
- 2) amazing teachers caring for our children
- 3) random acts of altruism springing up
- 4) levels of pollution going down
- 5) chocolate

# Laugh sometimes, cry sometimes

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## Both are important

There is some brilliant humour out there both about Covid-19 and unrelated. Look at it if you need light relief. Laugh when you can.

- Find joy in small things (the buds growing on the trees, the smell of coffee, a warm jumper)
- Sometimes you will feel overwhelmed. Cry sometimes. Allow yourself to connect with how you feel. Better to let it out than bottle it up.



# Other techniques that can help

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Grounding - feel the floor under your feet or the chair at your back. Touch the fabric of your clothes and feel the textures.

Breathing - For ideas about this look at:

<http://headspaceguildford.co.uk/just-breathe/>





# LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

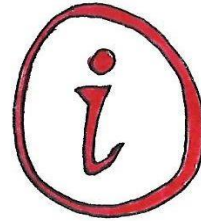
from [mentalhealth.org.uk](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

Sketchnote by  
@Haypsych

## try to avoid speculation and only use reputable sources on the outbreak

good sources:

- Public Health England
- Public Health Wales
- Health Protection Scotland
- NHS
- Gov.UK
- World Health Organization



## try to anticipate distress

- acknowledge how you are feeling
- talk to someone you trust if you are feeling anxious
- reassure people you know who may be worried
- check in with people you know who are living alone



## try to stay connected

- keep in touch with friends and family
- set up private chat groups on WhatsApp
- increase communication with colleagues working from home in isolation



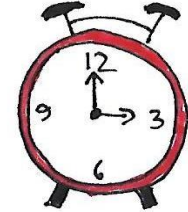
## try to manage how you follow the outbreak in the media

- limit your consumption of the news and social media
- if the news starts to cause you stress and anxiety, take a break from it
- Don't avoid all news as it's important to keep informed and educated about the outbreak



## stick to a daily routine

- Keep active
- eat a balanced diet
- have a to-do list
- take a lunch break
- have a regular start and end to your working day



## if you are in self-isolation or quarantine

- acknowledge that it is a different rhythm of life
- Keep in touch with other people regularly on social media, email, phone, video calls
- create a new daily routine, such as reading more or learning something new
- be gentle with yourself, rest if you need to

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If you feel helpless,  
help others

# References and useful links

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<https://www.psychologytools.com/downloads/worksheets-exercises-guides-handouts/>

<http://theawkwardyeti.com/>

Article on what helps during isolation:

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)

<https://mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/coronanxiety-support-resources/>

[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)

<https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/MindfulBreathing.pdf>

<https://tinyurl.com/rkhyl7y>



Helping others who are vulnerable

# As a helper : What can you do?

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- Acknowledge the impact on you. Be aware of your 'stuff' and your emotional reaction (and it will change)
- Name the feelings - acknowledge the impact
- Don't rush to 'fix'
- Normalise the anxiety and 'hold' it
- Be containing
- Offer suggestions for websites/apps as needed

# As a helper

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- They might be hanging their worries up with you
  - it's not your job to make it all ok, just to sit with it.
  - Also remember the rest of life (birth, death, sickness, relationships, money etc) doesn't stop just because of Covid-19. Remember they might need support around other things .
- Make sure you then have a place to hang yours



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KEEP CALM

There are lots of things outside our control. Let's remember to breathe and focus on what really matters so we can respond constructively.

STAY WISE

Making wise choices helps everyone. Let's choose positive actions that support our wellbeing and help others to do the same.

BE KIND

We're all in this together, even when we're forced apart. Let's stay connected and reach out to help others who may be in need.

<https://www.actionforhappiness.org/>

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