



**stresscontrol**<sup>®</sup>

Face your fears; be more active; boost your wellbeing

# Session 3

## Controlling your thoughts



Stress affects the way we think. And the way we think affects stress. This helps keep stress alive. So, controlling your thoughts helps you to control your stress. In this session, you will learn skills that will help you do this.

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These booklets can only be used as part of a Stress Control<sup>®</sup> class

## Part 1: INFORMATION

We know stress affects our thoughts. And we know that the way we think makes stress worse. So, changing the way we think can help us control stress. Here are some of the most common ways our thoughts are affected by stress. Rate the ones you get when stressed between 0 and 100 where 0 = 'not at all' and 100 = 'could not be worse':

worry		self-criticism	
brooding		low self-esteem	
low self-confidence		feeling worthless	
poor concentration		easily confused	
too easily overwhelmed		seeing threats too easily	

We look at fight/flight and what triggers it: a sense of **threat**. Threat is to do with the way we see the world. So, along with the skills taught last week, controlling thoughts can stop fight/flight being triggered in the first place.



We look at our radar which, when we are stressed, 'sees' threats that, when calm, we would not bother about.

We look at how we zoom in on threats and ignore evidence against the threat. We do this because we become, in our minds, a grasshopper and take huge leaps in our thinking.



We will look at the nervous speaker asked to speak in front of a large group. His radar is busy scanning for signs he is making a mess of it:

That man yawned



He's bored



They are all bored



I'm a boring person

Think how this easily keeps your self-esteem and self-confidence low.

### Why did the nervous speaker jump to 'bored'?

It was due to fight/flight making us listen to our stressed voice shouting in our ear. Our common-sense voice is on the wrong side of the blinkers, so it is hard to pay attention to it. So, even though we know it is there, we can't listen to our quiet common-sense voice as it is drowned out by our stressed voice. Controlling your thoughts is all about reducing the volume of the stressed voice so you can hear, and, in your heart of hearts, believe your common-sense voice.



### The 'What ifs' and the 'If onlys'

As a rough rule of thumb:

- When we feel down or depressed, we brood on the past (the 'if onlys')
- When we are anxious, we worry about the future (the 'what ifs').

Session 3 will teach how to turn down the volume of our stress voice and turn up the volume of our common-sense voice. The **FIRST STEP** in doing this is to pull back the blinkers and **build the foundation**. Once the blinkers are pulled back and we've stopped the grasshopper thinking, we stop the stress dead in its tracks by moving to the **SECOND STEP** and **challenging our thoughts**.

And the good news is that, once you are aware of how these are affecting you, you can learn how to prevent stress in the future by nipping it in the bud. And you do this by learning how to prepare to handle a stressful situation; how to cope when you are in that situation and how to review how it went to build up your resilience. So, the **THIRD AND FINAL STEP** is to learn to **break stress up**.

And by combining the Controlling your Body and Controlling your Thoughts skills, we can continue to starve the vicious circle and feed the positive circle (see cover page).

## Part 2: SKILLS

Building the foundation



The Big 5 Challenges



Breaking stress up



## Building the foundation

Part 2 teaches you how to challenge your thoughts. Now that may sound like teaching your granny to suck eggs – when we get stressed, we do little else but argue with ourselves. But most of the time it fails and we get disheartened. But the reason it fails is because we have not built the foundation properly and so, like any house without a solid foundation, our challenges easily collapse.



So, in this part, we build a solid foundation upon which we can build our challenges. This lets our common-sense voice be heard, allowing us to challenge the stress voice until, in our heart of hearts, we can truly believe our common-sense voice. Building the foundation is very straight forward but it is crucial that you put it into place **before** you challenge your thoughts. It divides into three (try to memorise this):

### **Stand back, Pull back the blinkers, Wait a minute**

The best way to do this is to use your imagination. In your mind's eye, see yourself

#### **1) Standing back**

**2) Pulling back the blinkers** from your face so that you can see the whole picture and let your common-sense voice be heard.

**3) Think 'wait a minute'** to stop the grasshopper thinking in its tracks, allowing time to move to the second step where you get in a **Big 5 Challenge**:



## The Big 5 Challenges

Once the foundation is in place, this step teaches you ways to challenge your thoughts. As before, this is a straight-forward approach, but you will need to practise it a lot before you get to grips with it. It grounds the grasshopper by getting your common-sense voice back on top. We do this by using the Big 5 Challenges:

What are the chances....?

What is the worst thing....?

The Court Case

The five-year rule

What is this worth?

The challenge you use depends on the stressful thoughts. The more you practise, the easier it will be to pick the right challenge. You can get a practice forms at the end of this booklet.

**The next pages have an example of the Court Case.**

## The Court Case

or....'weighing the evidence'

This challenge assumes there is no black and white answer here – that it lies in the shades of grey. It works like a court case where the jury have to weigh the evidence - 'on the one hand, but then on the other' and come up with a balanced judgement. It asks, "Am I right to think that...."

Mick has suffered from depression, on and off, for many years. His self-esteem is so low that if asked to describe himself, his stress voice would simply give a very black and white response:



Mick needs to challenge his stress voice before the grasshopper thinking kicks in. So, Step 1 is:

**Build the foundation: Stand back, pull back the blinkers, wait a minute**

And with the foundation firmly in place, Step 2 is:



**Challenge with your common sense voice**

**Am I right to think that I'm a failure?** On the one hand, I know I'm so bad-tempered with my partner and I withdraw into myself and I don't have any confidence. But, on the other hand, I'm not a bad person - depression makes me do this. I try my best and a lot of the time, I can be OK. I'm holding down my job – just – but I'm still coping. I ask too much of myself – I can't be perfect. I'm far from it but I'm not the worst by a long way'

Mick has a long way to go. This won't clear up overnight. But the more he challenges his stress voice, the louder his stress voice will get. You will see from the example that Mick's challenge isn't all that great but, compared to calling himself a failure all the time, it is a big step in the right direction.

Breaking



up

To make the Big 5 Challenges easier to do, Breaking Stress Up helps take the sting out of stress by stopping stress from getting too high in the first place.

If you have a stressful event coming up that you know you have to go to, you might decide the best strategy is: “I’ll just not think about it”

Many people try to handle stress by doing this (avoidance again). As you will see in Session 3, this makes things worse. We call this the ‘Skateboarding penguin’. It is a daft trick but the more we try not to think of something, the more we end up doing so. So, this skill gets you to think about stress while working out ways to cope with it using your common-sense voice.

Breaking stress up breaks the stress into ‘bite-sized’ bits. It divides into three parts:

### Prepare to face stress

In this first step, you take control of your thoughts instead of the thoughts taking control of you. You use your common-sense voice to prevent the stress building up. If you **prepare** well, by the time the event comes along, you will be in much more control and much more likely to cope.

### Face the stress

Then, in Step 2, when you **face** the stress, you will be much more able to stay in control and, therefore, much more likely to cope with the event.

### Review how it went

When you **review**, in Step 3, you can work out how well or how badly your plan went.

‘Breaking stress up’ links up well with a skill in Session 4 called ‘Problem Solving’. There is a practice form at the end of this booklet

# Big 5 Challenge practice form

Listen to your stressed voice and write it down



**Build the foundation:**

Stand back; Pull back the blinkers; Wait a minute

Choose one of the Big 5 and challenge your stressed voice using your common-sense voice



## Breaking **STRESS** up practice form



Think of something stressful that is coming up in the next few days or weeks. Just imagine a stressful thing if you can't think of anything. Think about how you can use Breaking Stress Up to help control your thoughts.

### Preparing

### Facing up

### Reviewing