

*The Combat Stress Training Programme*

# **UNDERSTANDING & RESPONDING TO VETERANS WHO MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH**

Module 3 of 4



# WELCOME & INTRODUCTIONS

- *Your facilitators are Dr Naomi Wilson , Head of Psychological Therapies and Jolandi du Preez, Head of Occupational Therapy at Combat Stress*
- *The webinar will be recorded and the recording shared on our 'on-demand' training webpage: <https://combatstress.org.uk/training-for-organisations-June-2021>*
- *We will be taking questions, please do submit these in the Q&A box and we will have a Q&A session at the end of the webinar.*

# THE COMBAT STRESS TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR VETERANS' WELLBEING

## **Module 4:**

*Building trauma informed organisations*

## **Module 3:**

*Understanding & responding to veterans who may be struggling with poor mental health*

## **Module 2:**

*Understanding why veterans may be vulnerable to poor mental health*

## **Module 1:**

*Understanding wellbeing & resilience and how to foster it*

# OUTLINE OF TODAY'S TRAINING

Module 3: Understanding and responding to veterans who may be struggling with poor mental health

- 1. Recognise common types of emotional distress following military service*
- 2. Feel confident to sensitively raise the topic of emotional wellbeing*
- 3. Providing appropriate support and signposting to services*

# **PART 1: RECOGNISING COMMON TYPES OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS FOLLOWING MILITARY SERVICE**

# MENTAL HEALTH WITHIN THE MILITARY CULTURE

- *How is the military addressing mental health?*
- *TRIM (Trauma Risk Management) trauma focussed peer support system*
- *Mental health awareness raising and dedicated support pathways, e.g. Royal Navy - Project Regain to assist Marines to access help easily*
- *Campaigns featuring role-models who are speaking up about mental health difficulties*



# DEAN SHARES HIS STORY...

**“I joined the Army when I came to a crossroads in my life at 24.”**



*“Just months after I came out of training I was deployed to Afghanistan. During a firefight with the Taliban one of our sections got hit badly and we lost three guys from our platoon.*

*“I was so affected by what happened that I couldn't function, even after the tour. So in late 2008 I left the Army.*

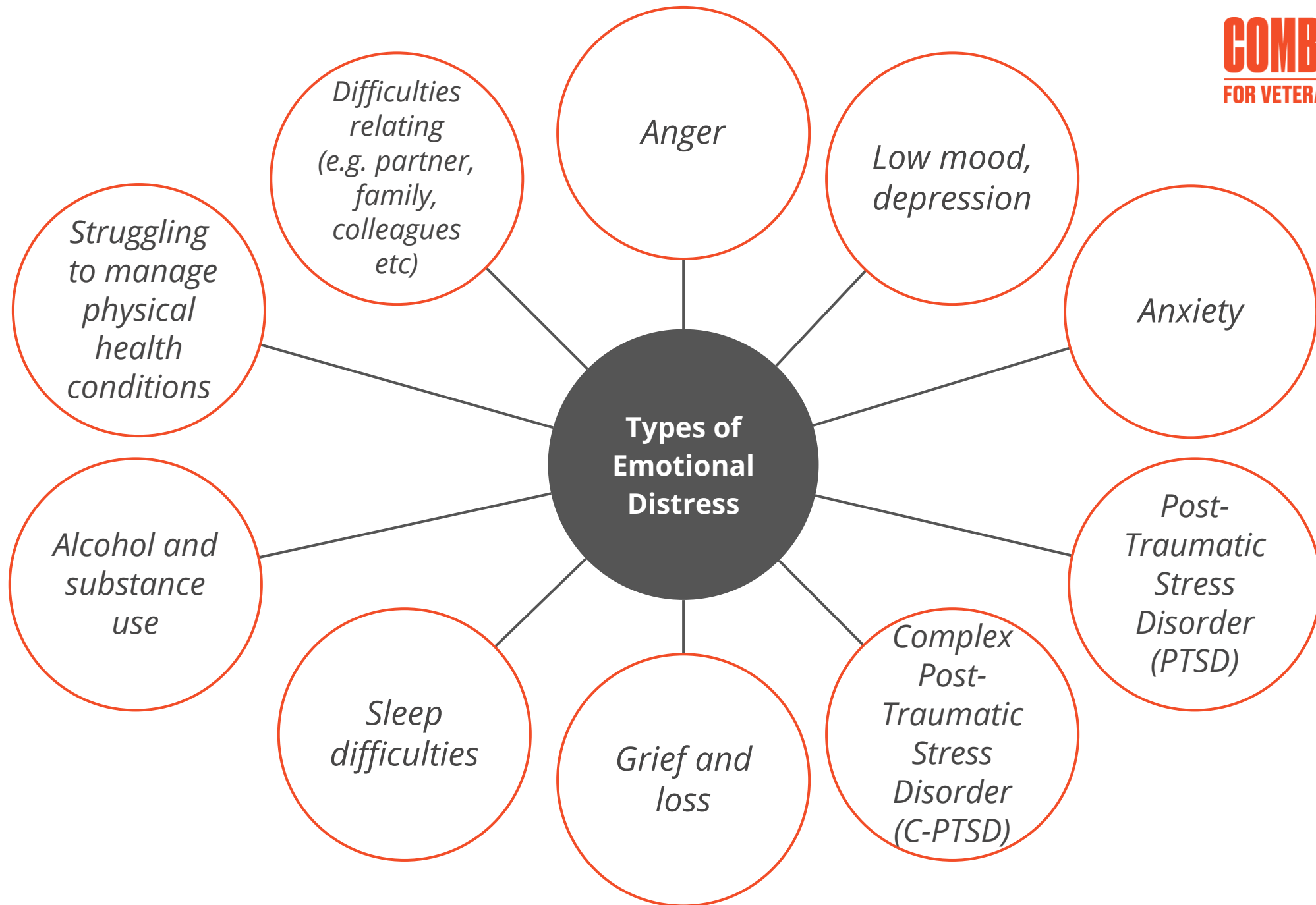
*“I really struggled adapting to civilian life. I lived turbulently, gambled and neglected my family.*

*“I started having nightmares so I never got a proper night's sleep.*

*“One day, it all became too much. I walked aimlessly for 40 miles until I reached a bridge. I was ready to jump, but then I thought about my family.”*

*Dean was picked up by the police and taken to hospital. After some time in hospital Dean's local mental health team referred him to Combat Stress.*

***We'll catch up with Dean's story a little later...***





# DEALING WITH EMOTIONS WITHIN THE MILITARY



# UNDERSTANDING ANXIETY

- *Anxiety is a word we use to describe the body's fear response.*
- *This is a series of physical processes in the brain and body that happen in response to a threat.*
- *These processes are often described as the fight/flight/freeze response and it is this response that we experience in feelings of being on edge or high alert.*
- *This response was intended to be triggered by an external and mostly immediate threat. However due to our sophisticated brains, it can also be triggered by memories of historical threats or imagined scenarios, predictions and worries about future threats (real or imagined), thoughts, feelings and relationships.*
- *For some veterans, it is difficult to recognise feelings of fear or anxiety as they are trained to override them.*
- *Through training, they may learn to channel their fears into controlled aggression and so may experience anger rather than anxiety when under threat*

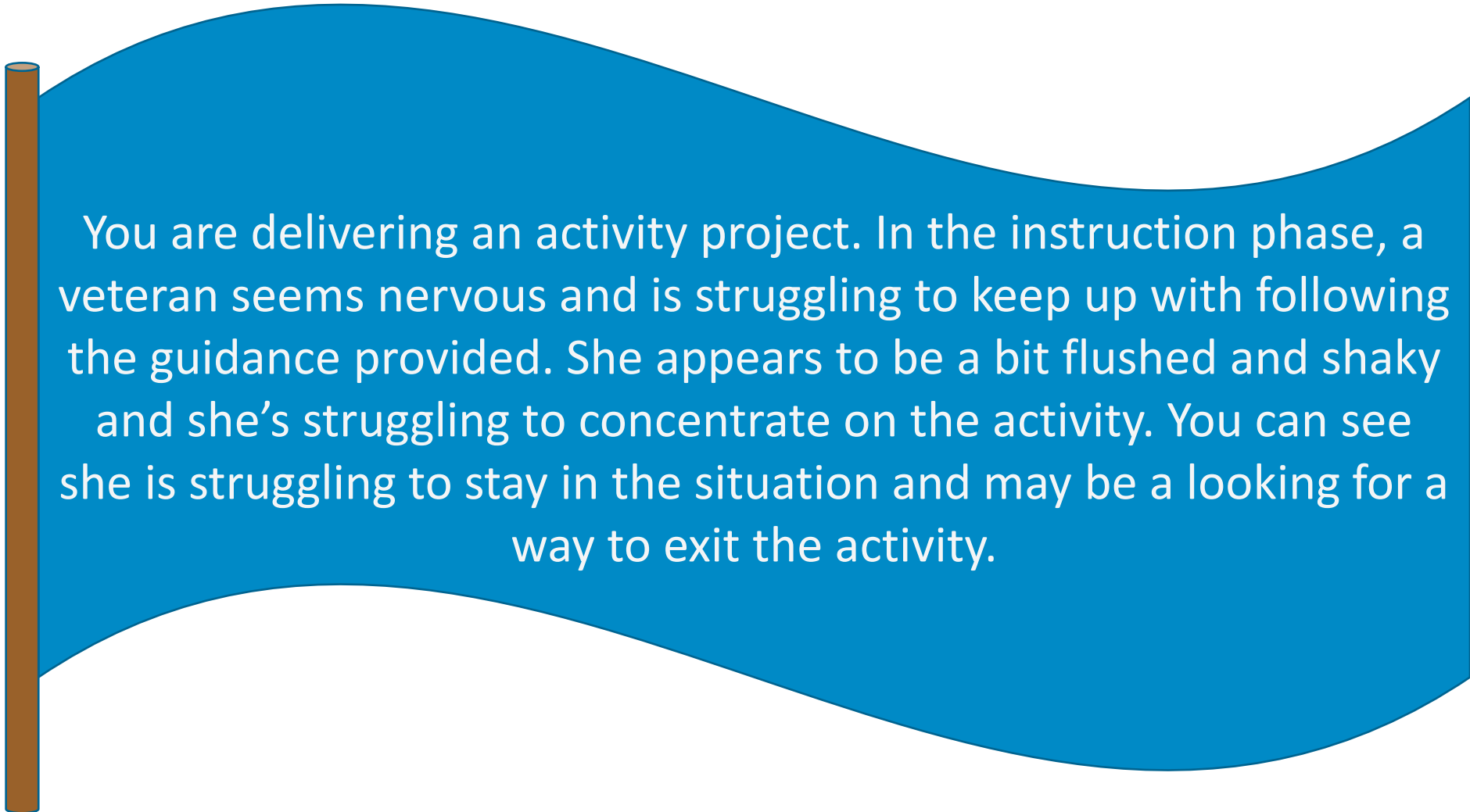


# KNOWING THE SIGNS OF ANXIETY

Physical Signs:		Mental Signs:	
Quick, shallow breathing	Tension in the jaw, grinding teeth	Racing thoughts	Feeling unreal or detached from reality
Tightness in chest	Blurred or tunnel vision	Losing sense of time and space	Expecting the worst
Loss of appetite	Increased sensitivity to sounds	Feeling constantly worried, restless	Fearing the safety or self/others
Sweaty palms, shaking	Feeling weak / unsteady	Unable to concentrate	Difficulty remembering things
Increased heart rate	Nausea	Difficulty 'switching off'	Not sleeping well

For more information, visit our Anxiety Self-Help Guide online: <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/anxiety/page1.php>

# BE AWARE OF WELLBEING FLAGS



You are delivering an activity project. In the instruction phase, a veteran seems nervous and is struggling to keep up with following the guidance provided. She appears to be a bit flushed and shaky and she's struggling to concentrate on the activity. You can see she is struggling to stay in the situation and may be a looking for a way to exit the activity.

# STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT COPING



## BREATH

Deep breathing is the fastest, easiest and most accessible way to de-stress your brain. It immediately lowers your heart rate and regulates your body and brain.



## MOVE

Moving the body is one of the most powerful and healthy methods to de-stress and regulate. Although regular exercise is the ideal stress reliever just taking a movement break (get up from your chair) walking around the house helps get the brain and body to the optimum zone. Stretch (and breathe).

Give yourself hard pressure with both hands on your head.

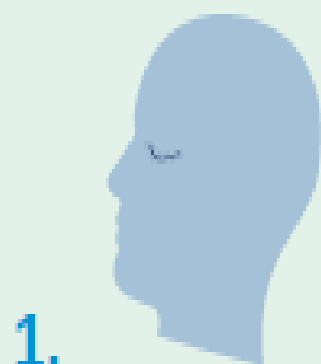
Push and pull your hands together.

# DEEP BREATHING

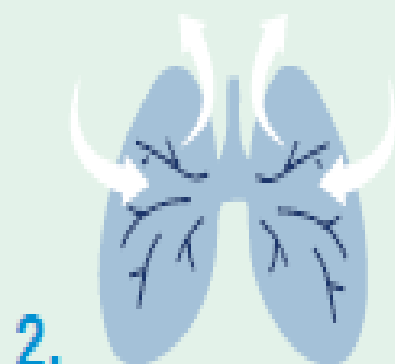
Exhale first, count to five as you inhale and exhale, pause between breaths

Calm your breathing, calm your mind.

Practice this exercise as many times as you can each day. This will make it easier to use when you are feeling stressed.



Pay attention to your breath.  
Close your eyes if you can  
to help you focus.



Breathe in slowly, pause  
and then exhale slowly.  
Do this five times.



Visualise the numbers  
one to five as you take  
each breathe.



Repeat three times.

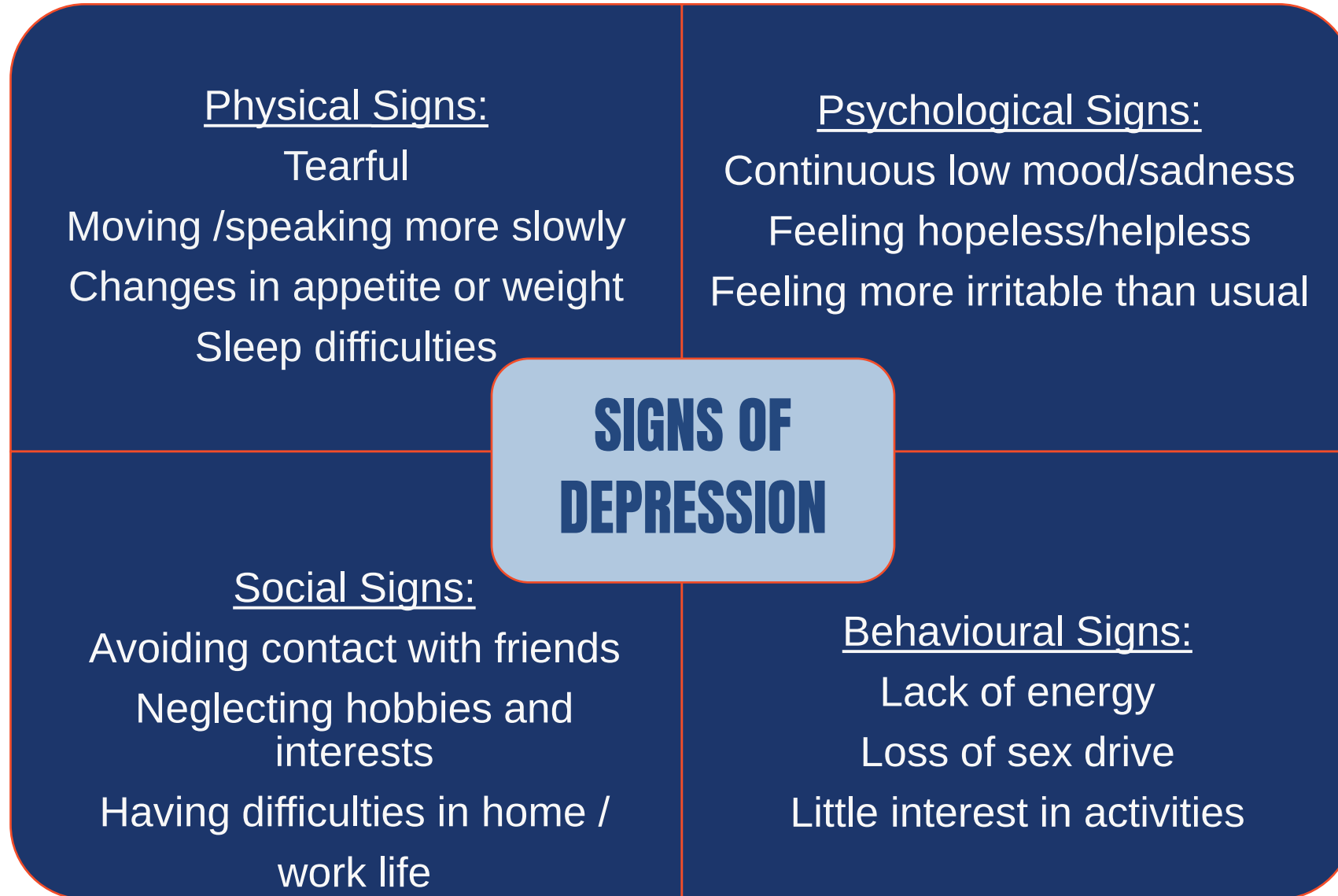
# UNDERSTANDING LOW MOOD

*Everyone can experience changes in their mood and we can all feel low at times, it's natural. However, this can become a problem when:*

- *Low mood is persistent*
- *It impacts on how you behave*
- *You are increasingly irritable*
- *You have low motivation, feel lethargic and have no energy*
- *You lack enjoyment in things that you used to enjoy*
- *You feel hopeless*
- *You have a poor appetite or are over-eating*
- *You're experiencing poor sleep*
- *You're taking less care of yourself*

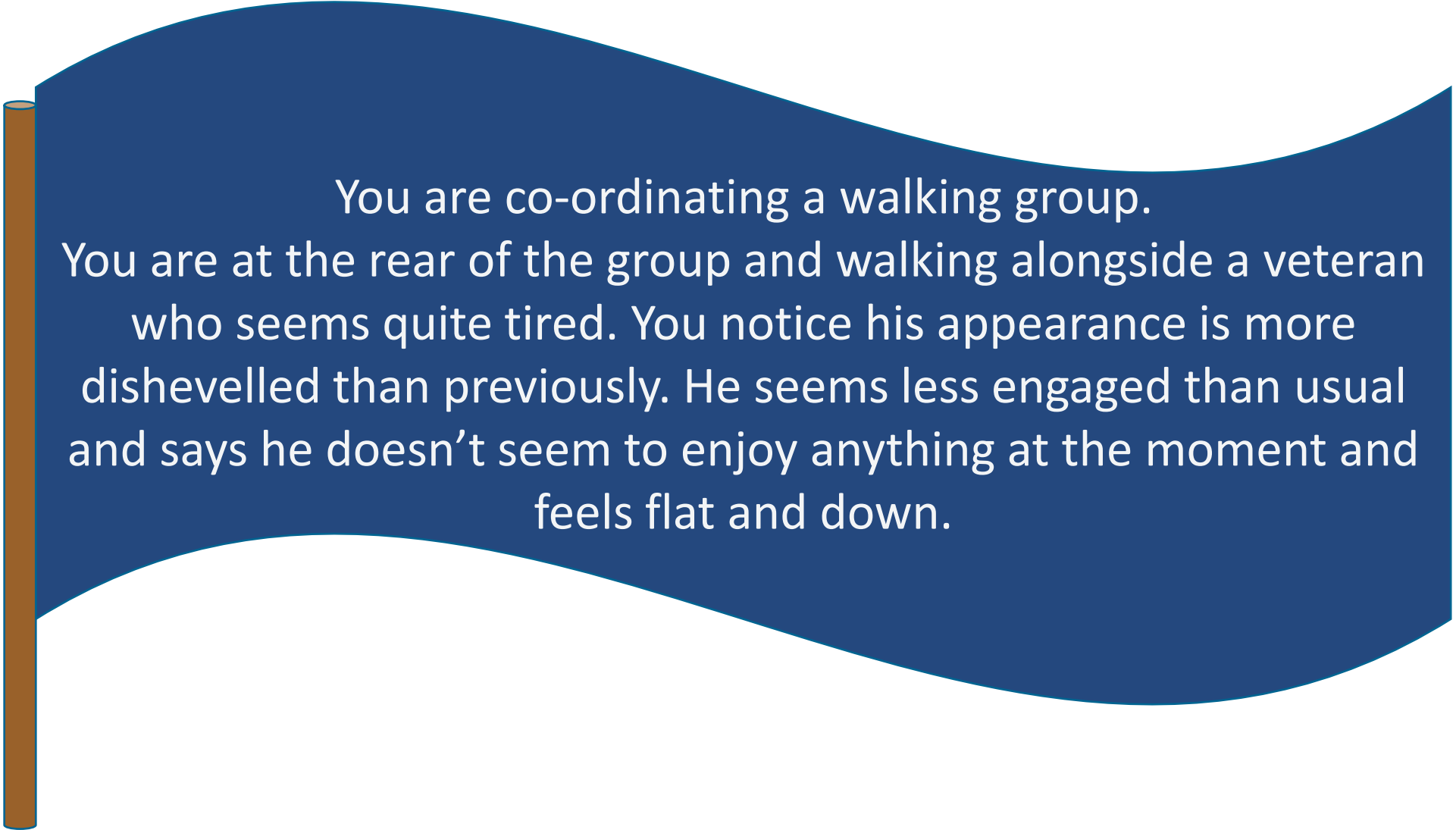
Visit the Combat  
Stress Self Help  
Guide:

[combatstress.org.uk/  
coping-low-mood](https://combatstress.org.uk/coping-low-mood)



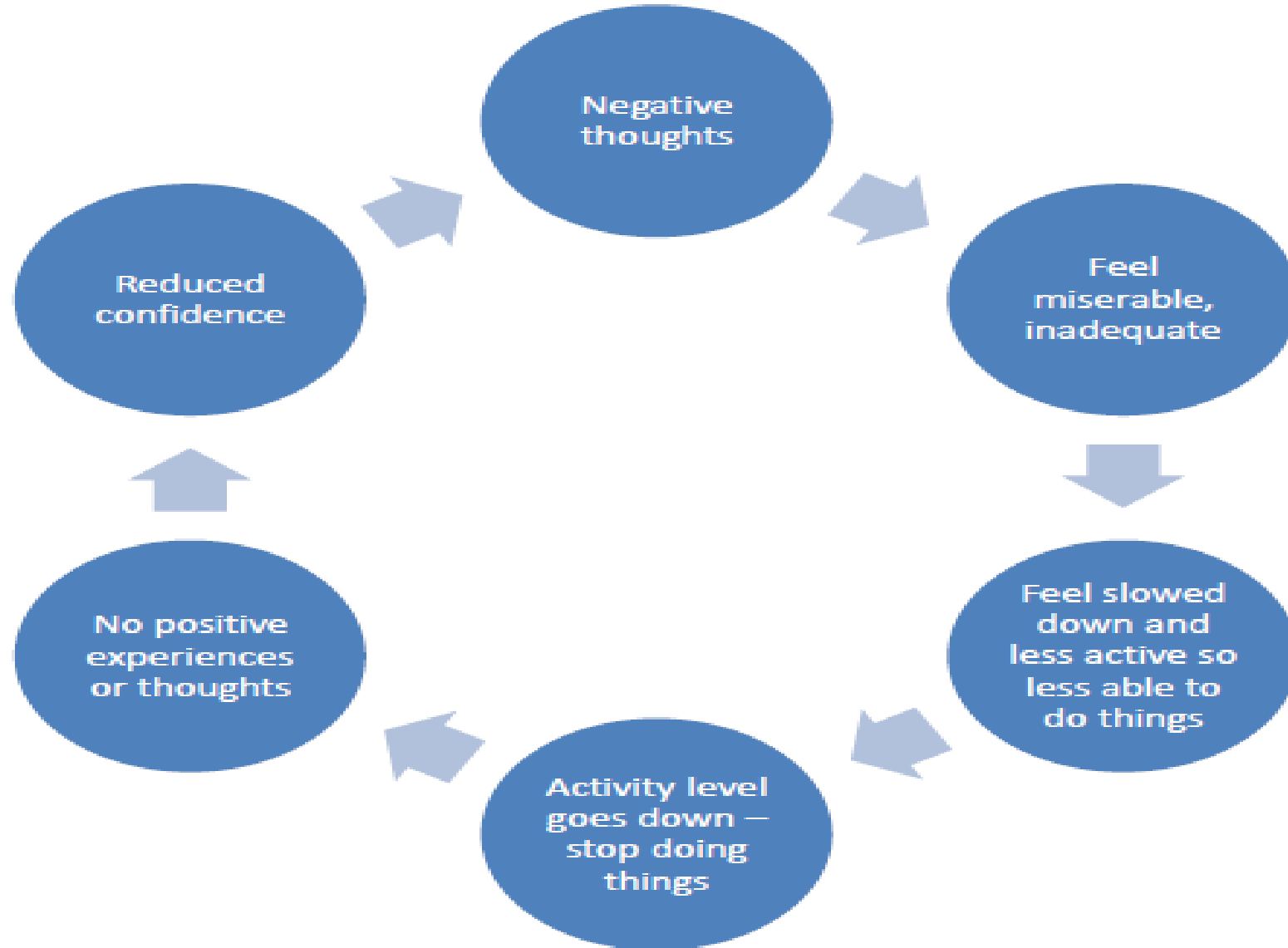


# BE AWARE OF WELLBEING FLAGS



You are co-ordinating a walking group.  
You are at the rear of the group and walking alongside a veteran who seems quite tired. You notice his appearance is more dishevelled than previously. He seems less engaged than usual and says he doesn't seem to enjoy anything at the moment and feels flat and down.

# COPING WITH LOW MOOD: LETHARGY CYCLE



# COPING WITH LOW MOOD

Being more active can help to break this cycle because activity:

- **Makes us feel less tired** - normally when we feel tired, we need rest. When we feel low, the opposite is true. We need to do more. Doing nothing means we feel more fatigue.
- **Distracts us** – being active gives our minds something else to think about. This means we are less likely to dwell on worrying or negative thoughts.
- **Improves our confidence** – being active gives you a sense that you are taking control of your life again. Small steps help rebuild shattered confidence. There is a chain reaction where you feel motivated to try to achieve something else.
- **Improves our thinking** – when we are more active we start using our brains in a more positive way. This can help us to get perspective on some problems and find new ways to manage them.
- **Involves others** – being more involved with others means we can improve our connections and feel supported.

**For more coping strategies, visit our Depression Self-Help Guide online:**

<https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/depression/>

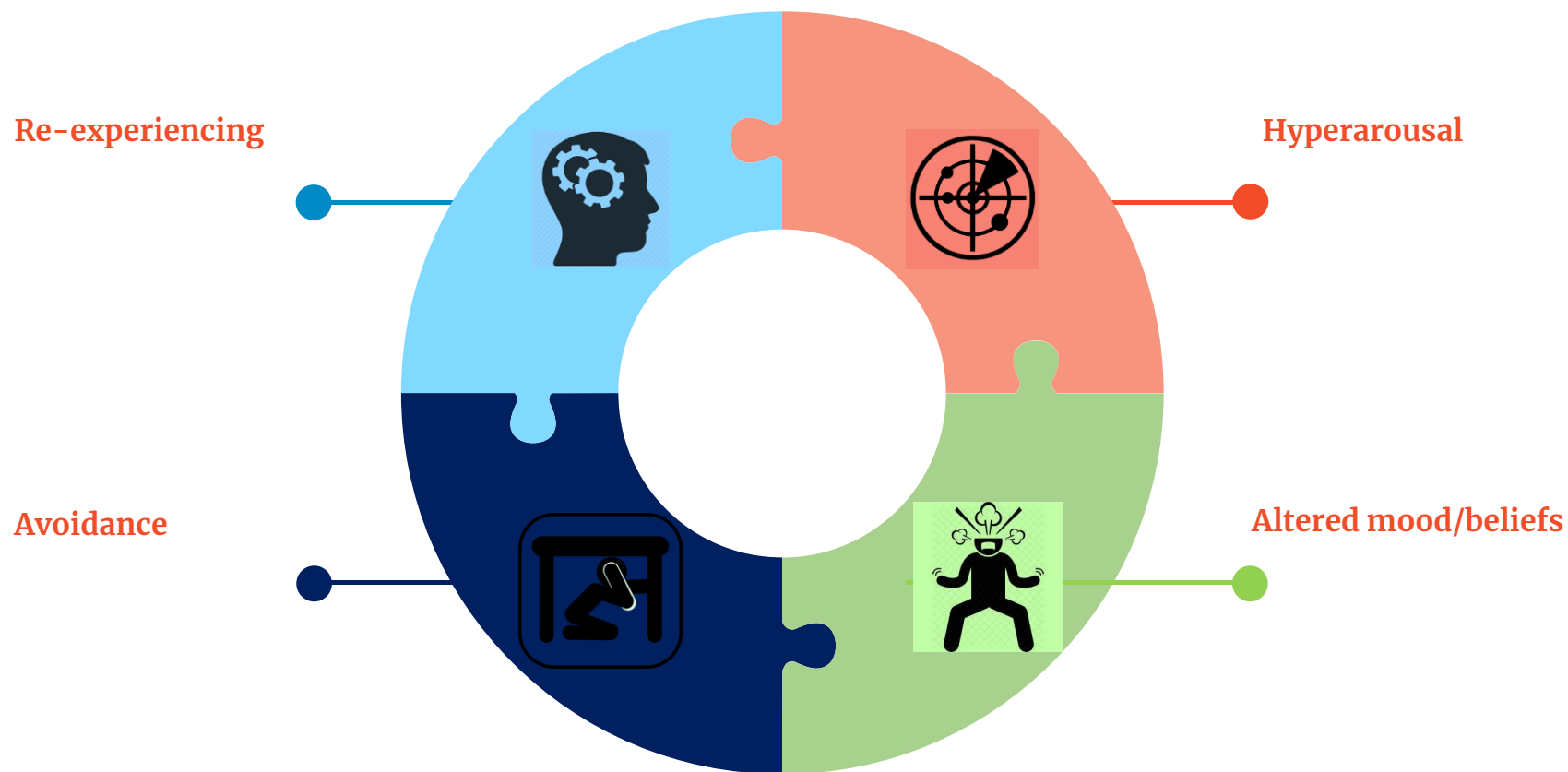
# UNDERSTANDING PTSD

- *Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events.*
- *Flashbacks (feeling as if the event is happening again) are perhaps the most well-known symptom of PTSD – however these are actually not as common as other symptoms*
- *Other re-experiencing symptoms, such as trauma-related nightmares, intrusive and vivid upsetting memories of the event, and strong physical and emotional reactions when reminded of the event are more common.*
- *Although it often feels like PTSD symptoms come like a bolt from the blue, it is much more likely that they have been 'triggered' by a thought, feeling, or something in our environment.*



# What are the symptoms of PTSD?

To struggle after a trauma is a normal part of recovery. For some, however, the difficulties will go on to develop into PTSD.



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## Re-experiencing

Recurrent, involuntary, intrusive memories

Re-living the traumatic experience(s) in the here and now (flashbacks)

Distressing dreams (nightmares)

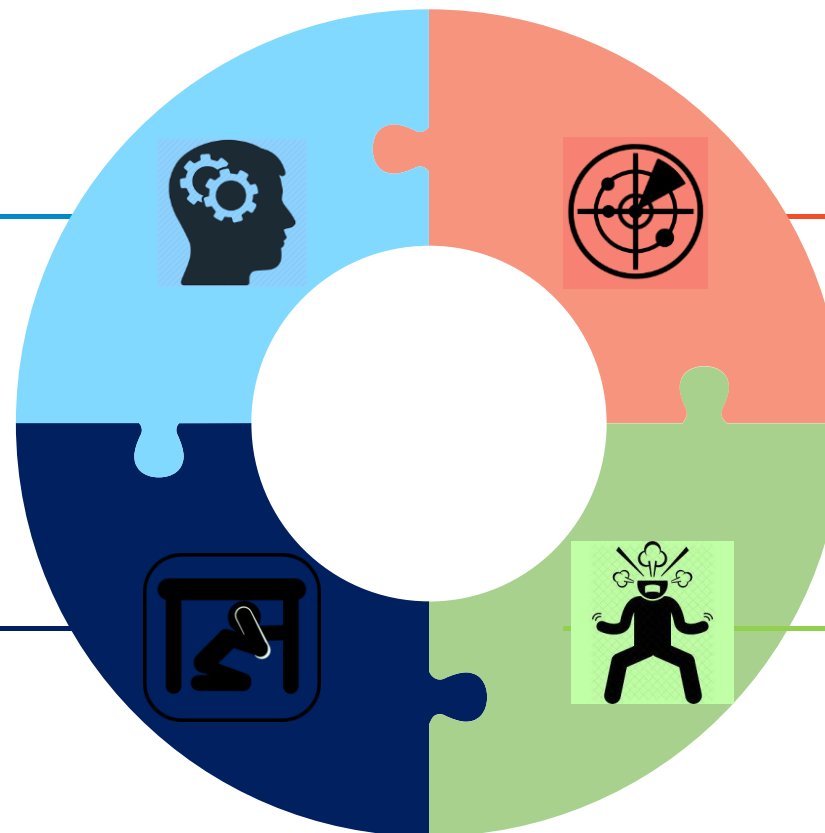
Experiencing distress when confronted with reminders of the trauma

Physiological reactivity after exposure to a reminder of the trauma

## Avoidance

Of circumstances resembling or associated with the stressor

Of trauma-related thoughts and feelings



## Hyperarousal

Difficulty falling or staying asleep

Irritability or outbursts of anger

Difficulty concentrating

Hyper-vigilance

Exaggerated startle response

Self-destructive or reckless behaviour

## Altered mood/beliefs

Fragmented memory

Negative beliefs and expectations about oneself and the world

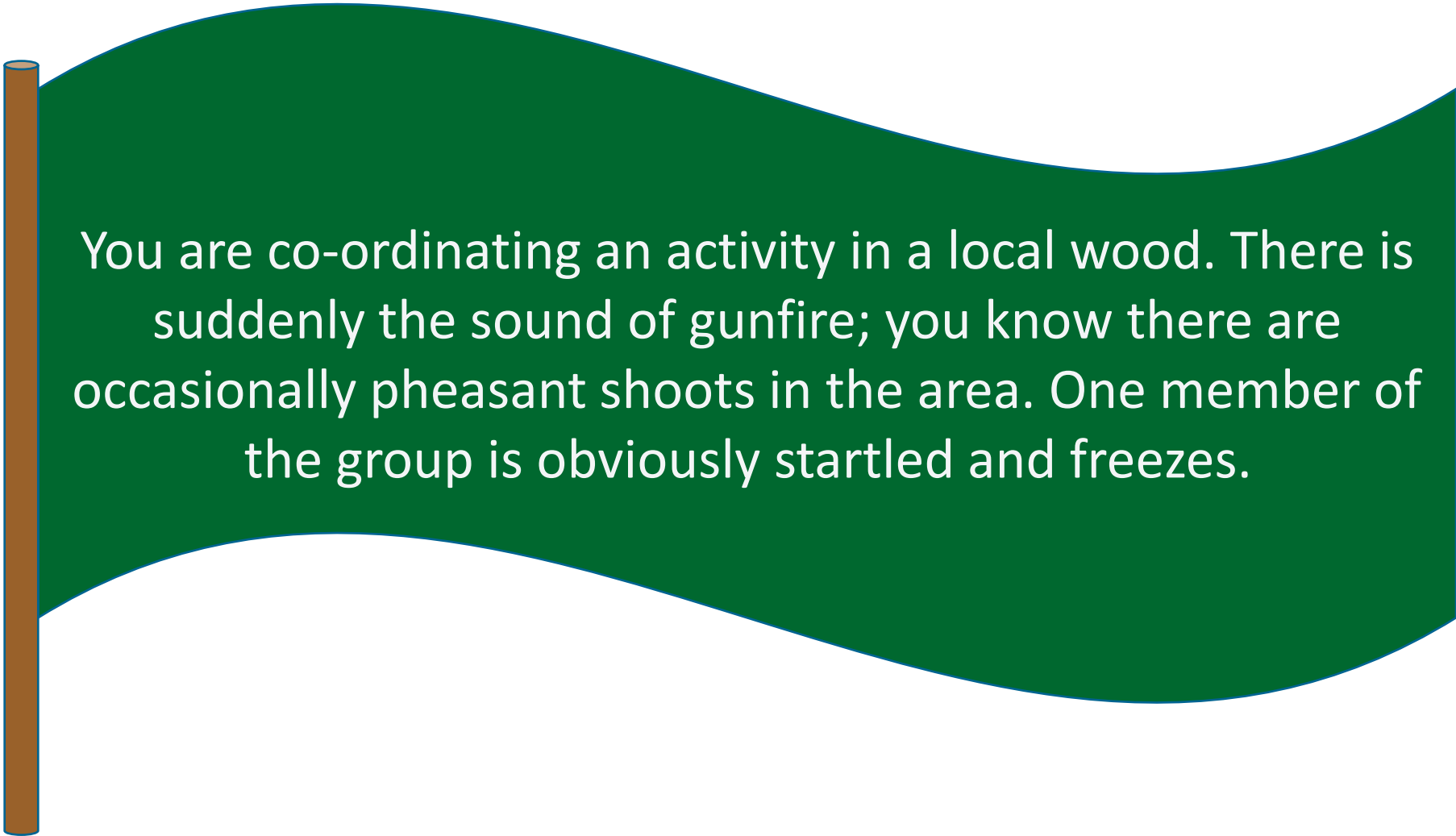
Self-blame, fear, guilt, shame

Emotionally numb

# AN EXAMPLE OF HOW PTSD MAY PRESENT

Symptom cluster	Example symptom	Impact on life
<b>Avoidance</b>	I hide all my medals and military memorabilia in the loft	I don't feel as close to my kids as they know nothing about my military service
<b>Re-experiencing</b>	I have nightmares that wake me up feeling anxious and startled	I now sleep on the sofa as it was waking my wife

# BE AWARE OF WELLBEING FLAGS



You are co-ordinating an activity in a local wood. There is suddenly the sound of gunfire; you know there are occasionally pheasant shoots in the area. One member of the group is obviously startled and freezes.



# COPING WITH PTSD SYMPTOMS

Do's and Don'ts for Providing Support if someone seems to be experiencing intrusive traumatic memories:

- **Do:**
- *Stay calm – remember that you and they are both safe*
- *Gently remind the person of where they are, who you are and encourage them to move and describe their surroundings, what do they see/hear/feel? (more ideas on next slides)*
- *Encourage the person to breathe slowly and deeply*
  
- **Avoid:**
- *Avoid crowding the person*
- *Don't touch the person without permission*
- *Avoid making any sudden movements, try not to startle or surprise the person*

# GROUNDING STRATEGIES TO HELP WITH COPING

## MENTAL (involving the mind)

- Describe an everyday object you can see
- Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste (in the here and now)
- Make an inventory of everything around you
- Use a safety statement – “I am safe, it’s 2021, I am at ...”
- Name out loud 10 things in the room that are square/rectangle, brown, white...
- Say the alphabet v..e..r..y... s..l..o..w..l..y... or say it backwards

# GROUNDING STRATEGIES TO HELP WITH COPING

## PHYSICAL (involving the senses)

- Focus on your breathing – inhale, exhale
- Touch an object. Notice texture, temperature, colour, shape
- Hum or sing
- Smell – spices, flowers, herbs, scented oils
- Count the trees, cars, birds
- Juggle with balls, keys, apples
- Taste something strong – lemon, mints, menthol sweets
- Use a stress ball
- Run your hands under cold water
- Take a brisk walk
- Stamp feet hard, jump, snap your fingers

# **PART 2: FEELING CONFIDENT TO TALK ABOUT EMOTIONAL WELLBEING**

# CONVERSATION STARTERS...

*"Would you like to talk?"*

*"May I ask about how you're feeling?"*

*"Can I check in with you, are you ok? How are things going for you?"*

*"I notice you seem [e.g. more frustrated than usual], how are you doing?"*

*"The power of a brew..."*



# FEELING CONFIDENT FOR THE CONVERSATION

## A 4-Step Approach

### Listen:

Maintain eye contact, nod, use verbal fillers to show you are listening (Examples are: yes / sure / uh-huh...)

### Agree:

Agree, empathise and reflect back what's been shared:

- “What you're going through sounds really tough.”
- “I can see how that would be stressful”
- “It's ok to feel this way, it's usual to struggle sometimes”

### Curiosity:

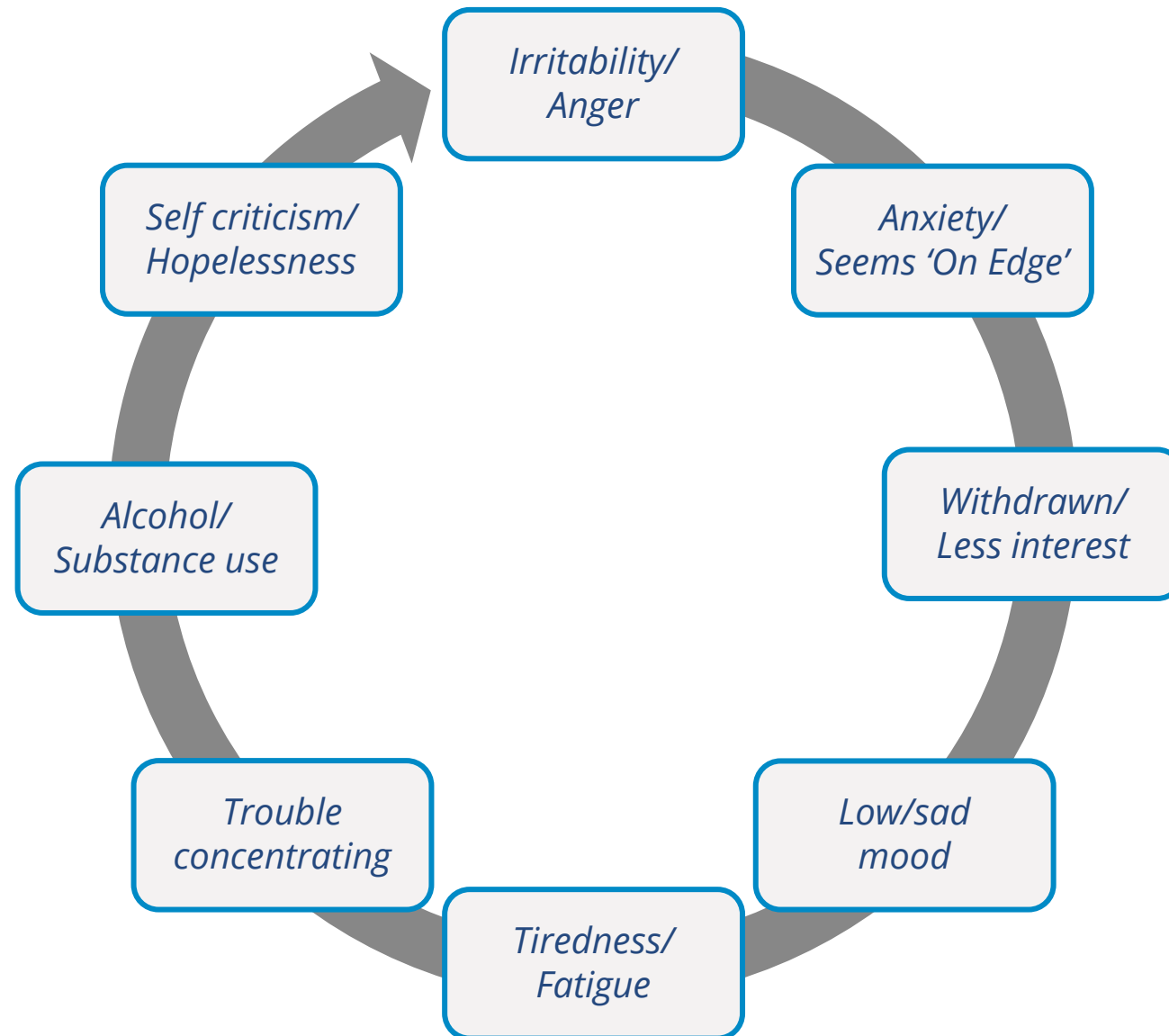
- “How can I / we best support you?”
- “What needs to happen for you to feel more at ease?”
- “What has helped in the past?”

### Encourage:

Provide encouragement that it's ok to seek support to promote mental fitness. Seek help yourself if you are unsure what to advise.

# **PART 3: PROVIDING APPROPRIATE SUPPORT AND SIGNPOSTING TO SERVICES**

# SPOTTING THE SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL DISTRESS:





# HOW TO OFFER SUPPORT

Starting the conversation is an important first step

*“Is there anything I / we can do to reduce the pressure on you right now?”*

*Show empathy and understanding:  
“This is a really tough time”*

*“What support can we put in place?”*

*“Are there any stressors at home that I/we can support you with?”*

*“It’s a difficult time right now. How are you coping?”*

*“Tell me about how the current situation is affecting you?”*

# BE AWARE OF ISSUES OF RISK (A.C.E):

If a veteran shares they are having thoughts of hurting themselves/others

**ASK:** Ask directly, "Are you thinking about harming yourself/others?"

**CARE:** Actively listen, calmly share you are concerned and have a duty of care to keep him/her safe. Remove means of injury if safe to do so.

**ESCORT:** To their GP / A&E department of local hospital. Wait with them until assessed by a health professional. Accessing help via NHS 111 or via phone is also a safe option. Call 999 if immediate risk to self or others.

# CONSIDER...

Consider confidentiality of information shared, organisational processes regarding documenting/record keeping

Consider organisational needs regarding wellbeing and reflecting on your approach, putting the topic of emotional wellbeing on the agenda

Facilitating the sharing of ideas of things that are helping/hindering wellbeing

Routinely discussing the advantages of seeking extra support to promote emotional wellbeing at this time

# SERVICES THAT COMBAT STRESS PROVIDE:

Advice & resources for all veterans, families and organisations

Treatment for those with complex trauma-related difficulties

## 24/7 Helpline:

*Free help and advice for  
veterans and their  
families*

**0800 138 1619**

**Interdisciplinary  
treatment across the  
UK:** *(Occupational  
Therapy, Nursing,  
Psychology, Psychiatry)*

**Peer Support Service**

**Digital and online  
support & education:**  
[combatstress.org.uk](https://combatstress.org.uk)

**Buddy Buddy  
Support Service**

**Support for  
partners and  
family members**

**Visit our website for self-help guides to support with a range of issues:  
<https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk>**

# DEAN SHARES HIS STORY...



*"I was diagnosed with PTSD in 2018. Talking about everything had such an impact on me - I'm more open about my feelings now. And the support from the other guys ...was amazing; being with other veterans who understood helped me have a different perspective.*

*"Things are going well for me at the moment. I still have my ups and downs, but I feel like I can cope.*

*"Now my life is about spending as much time with my family as I can. I still use what I learnt in occupational therapy to keep a good balance of everything and I still meet up with the guys from ITP: they're part of my journey now.*

*"Since I got in contact with Combat Stress, I haven't looked back."*

***Thank you to Dean for sharing his story with us.***

# A MOMENT TO REFLECT...

*What is your top take-away  
for yourself / your organisation?*

*What are your  
1-3 actions/next steps for  
yourself / your organisation?*

# SUMMARY, QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS

**1** *Question & Answer time*

**2** *What's one takeaway or action step for yourself / your project?*

**3** *This is module 3 of 4, the final module is 'Building Trauma Informed Organisations'*

**4** *Self-assessment quiz and certificate of attendance*

**5** *Evaluation and Feedback: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/CSTrainingCS>*

*Thank you for your time, attention & commitment to support veterans in your organisation*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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\*

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# REFERENCES

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*Combat Stress (2020). Coping With Low Mood Self Help Guide, retrieved online November 2020 at <https://www.combatstress.org.uk/coping-low-mood>*