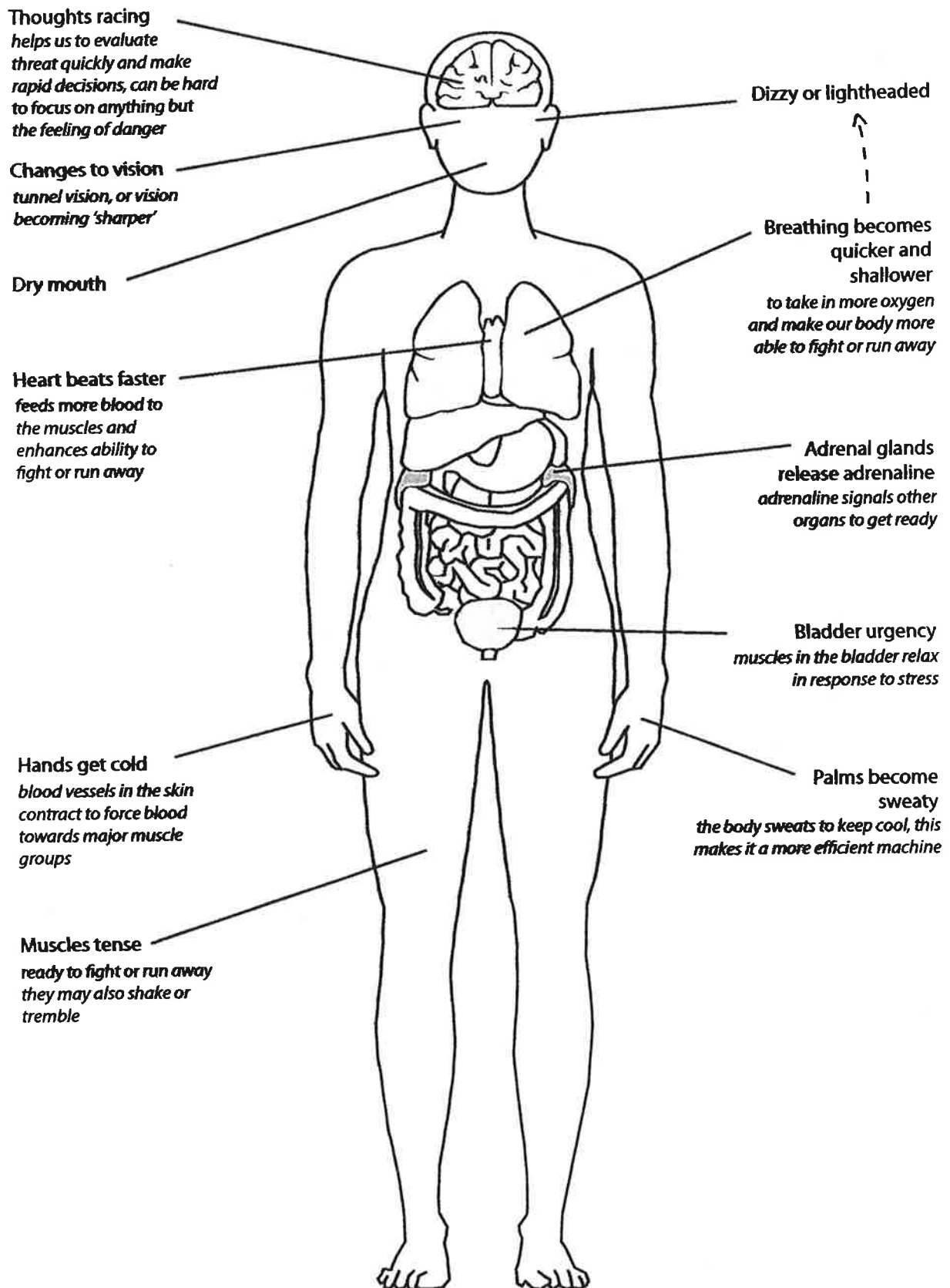


Threat System (Fight or Flight)

The 'fight or flight' response gets the body ready to fight or run away. Once a threat is detected your body responds automatically. All of the changes happen for good reasons, but may be experienced as uncomfortable when they happen in 'safe' situations.



Unhelpful Thinking Styles

All or nothing thinking



Sometimes called 'black and white thinking'

If I'm not perfect I have failed

Either I do it right or not at all

Over-generalising

"everything is always rubbish"
"nothing good ever happens"

Seeing a pattern based upon a single event, or being overly broad in the conclusions we draw

Mental filter



Only paying attention to certain types of evidence.

Noticing our failures but not seeing our successes

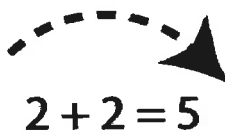
Disqualifying the positive



Discounting the good things that have happened or that you have done for some reason or another

That doesn't count

Jumping to conclusions



There are two key types of jumping to conclusions:

- **Mind reading** (imagining we know what others are thinking)
- **Fortune telling** (predicting the future)

Magnification (catastrophising) & minimisation



Blowing things out of proportion (catastrophising), or inappropriately shrinking something to make it seem less important

Emotional reasoning



Assuming that because we feel a certain way what we think must be true.

I feel embarrassed so I must be an idiot

should

must

Using critical words like 'should', 'must', or 'ought' can make us feel guilty, or like we have already failed

If we apply 'shoulds' to other people the result is often frustration

Labelling



Assigning labels to ourselves or other people

I'm a loser
I'm completely useless
They're such an idiot

Personalisation

"this is my fault"

Blaming yourself or taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault. Conversely, blaming other people for something that was your fault.

Hindsight Bias

Hindsight bias is a type of memory distortion. It is the tendency to look back and see events that have already occurred as having been more predictable than was actually the case

Hindsight bias can lead people to blame themselves for events which were not predicted, or predictable

A fairer standard to judge our decisions by is 'what did you know at the time'? Courts use this standard to judge people's responsibility for an event. How can you hold someone responsible for something they did not know?

Questions to explore hindsight bias:

What is it that you think you should have known?

What information did you have that would have prevented this outcome?

When did you learn that X would happen, or that you could have done Y?

How could you have known that at the time?

How could you have known something that you didn't know?

If you had known that then, do you think that's what you would have done?

If the horrible outcome hadn't happened, would we be talking about this decision that you made?

Given what you knew then, was it a reasonable or unreasonable decision at the time?

Have you ever made mistakes in your life?

- have you ever gone over the speed limit in your car?*
- have you ever forgotten to finish a course of antibiotics?*

Do you beat yourself up about these mistakes? If not, why not?

Hindsight Bias

Hindsight bias is a type of memory distortion. It is the tendency to look back and see events that have already occurred as having been more predictable than was actually the case

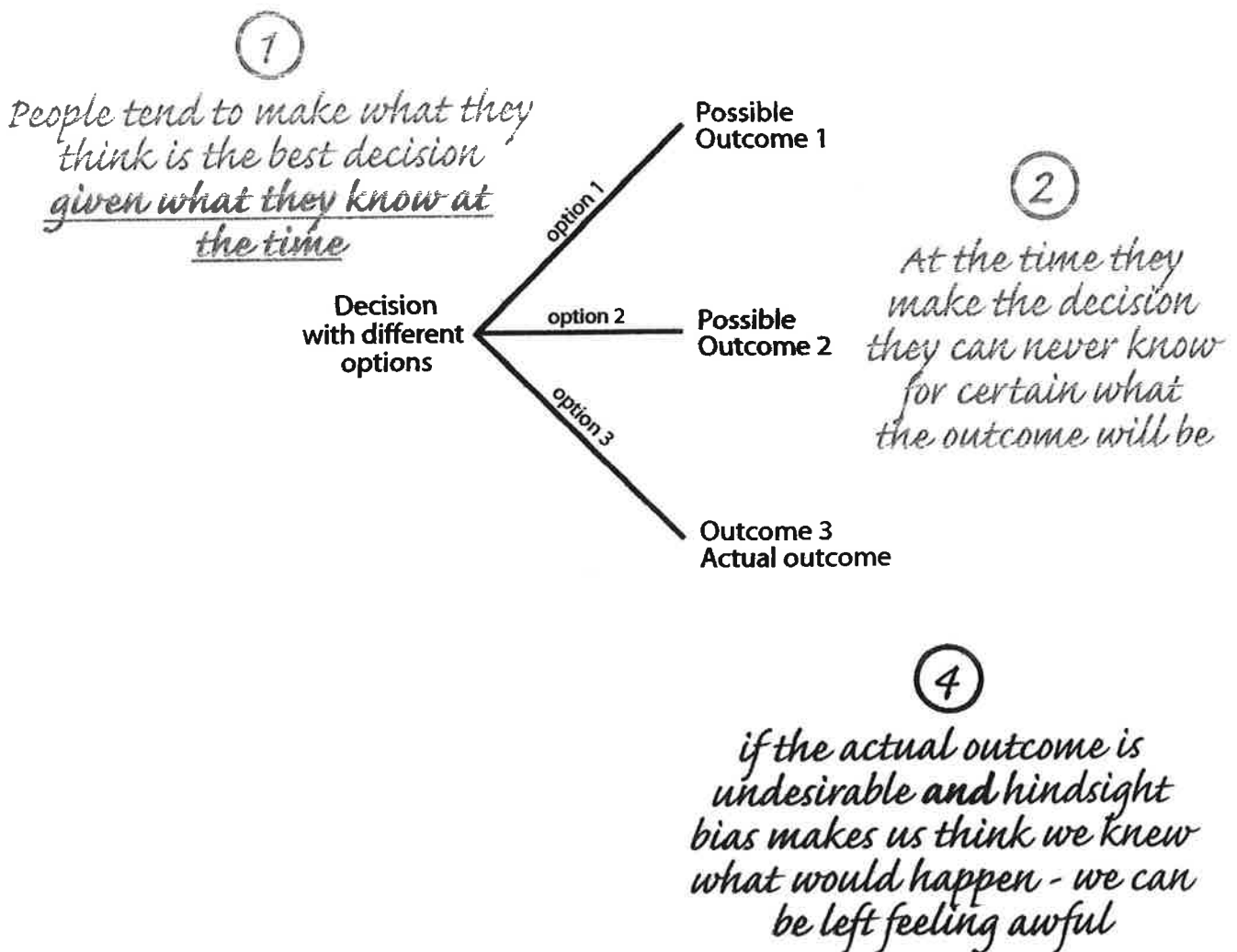
Hindsight bias can make us believe that we knew something at the time even if the evidence indicates we didn't. If this leads us to think we made a bad decision it can result in strong feelings such as guilt or shame

Typical hindsight bias (after-the-event) thoughts are:

"I knew it all along..."

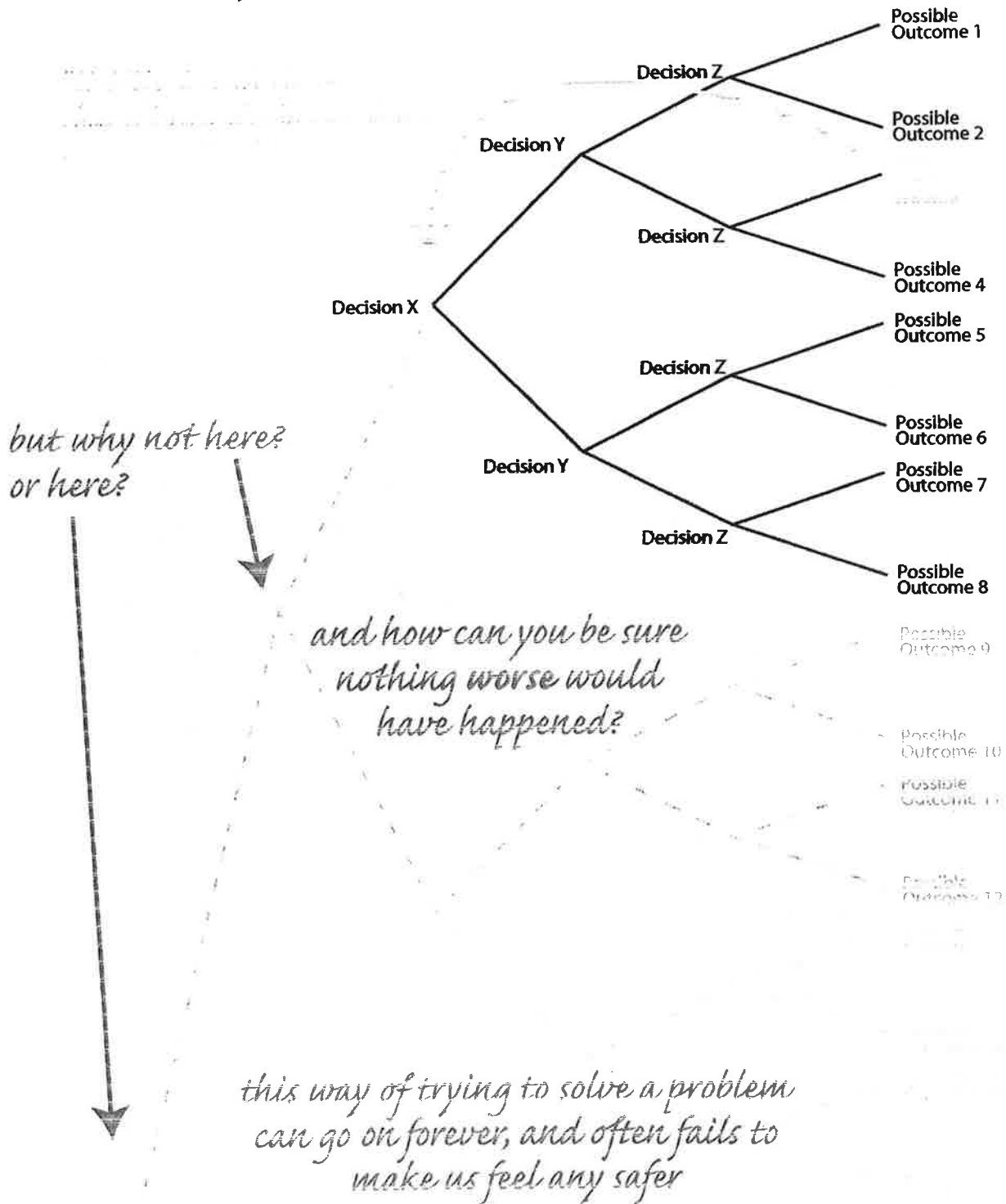
"I must have realized... so why didn't I..."

Life is a series of decisions. Every decision we make can lead to multiple outcomes, or different possibilities. At the time we make a decision we can't possibly know the outcome for certain



Hindsight Bias

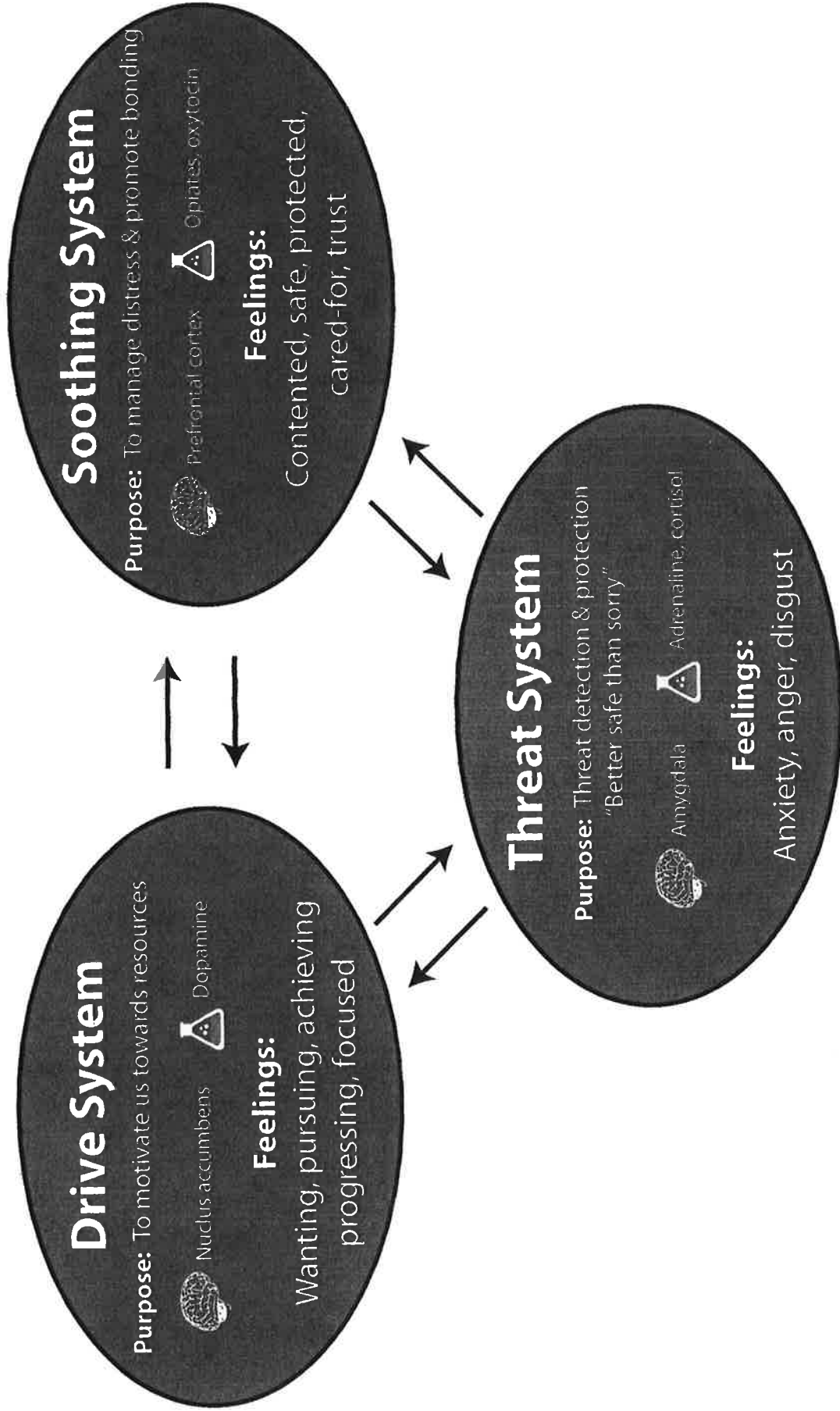
When people have experienced a traumatic event many often look back and blame themselves for what happened. It is quite common to fixate on a particular decision and think "If only I had done something different then... events would have turned out differently"



Sometimes, blaming ourselves can feel safer than accepting that negative things, over which we have little control, can happen. However, such self-blame comes with its own consequences

Emotional Regulation Systems

Paul Gilbert's evolutionary model proposes that human beings switch between three systems to manage their emotions. Each system is associated with different brain regions and different brain chemistry. Distress is caused by imbalance between the systems, often associated with under-development of the soothing system.



What Is Rumination?

Rumination is:

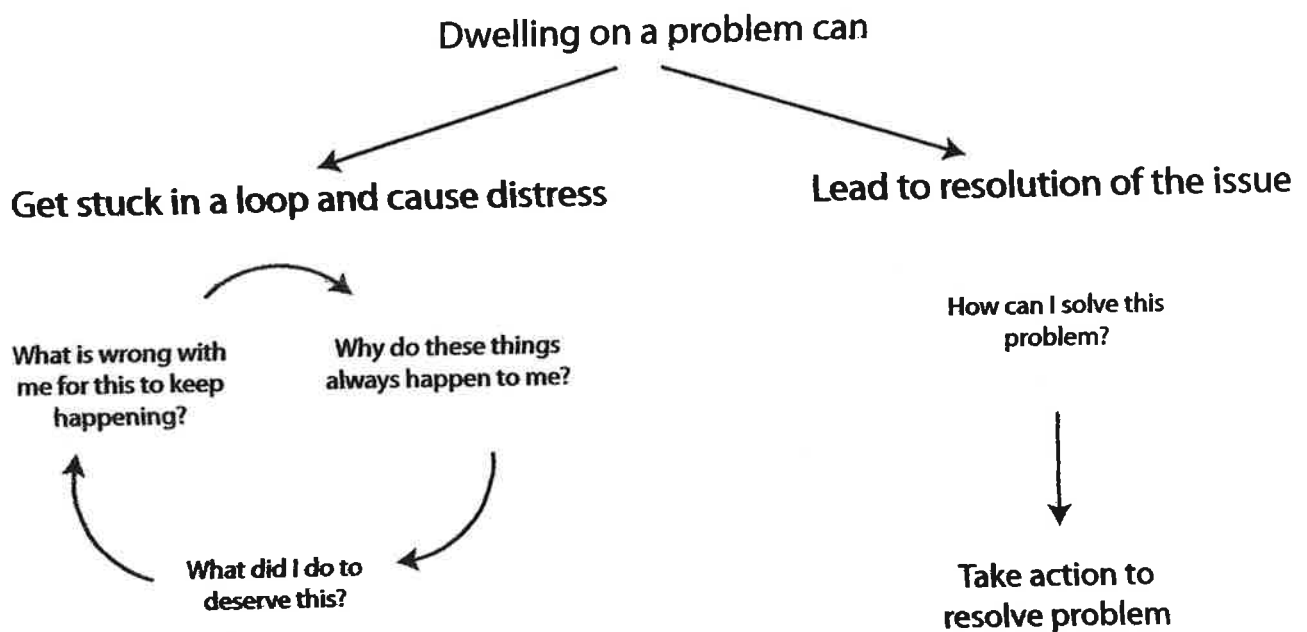
- dwelling on difficulties and things which distress us
- repeatedly thinking about events from our past
- becoming preoccupied with something and not being able to get it out of your mind
- a learnt strategy for trying to deal with our problems

Is rumination normal?

- Yes, to some extent everyone ruminates or dwells on their problems
- Thinking about our problems can be helpful: especially if we reach a solution and put it into action
- Most of the time, and for most people, rumination is time-limited: it stops when the problem is solved
- Although rumination is normal, excessive use of it can become problematic

What are the problems with rumination?

- Unhelpful rumination tends to focus on causes and consequences instead of solutions
"What did I do to deserve this" and "Will my life ever get better?" instead of *"How can I make my life better?"*
- Rumination tends to focus on what has gone wrong and can lead to negative thinking
- When used excessively, rumination can lead to depression
- When used excessively, rumination can maintain an episode of depression
- Unhelpful rumination can lead to inactivity and avoidance of problem-solving



Unhelpful rumination

Unhelpful rumination asks more "why ... ?" questions (this is sometimes called the 'evaluative mode' because these questions evaluate the meaning of events or situations)

"Why ... ?" questions tend to focus on the problem, its causes, and its consequences

"Why am I in this situation?"

"What if it never gets better?"

"What did I do to deserve this?"

Helpful rumination

Helpful rumination asks more "how ... ?" questions (this is sometimes called the 'process-focused-mode' because these questions focus on the process of how events and situations happen)

"How ... ?" questions tend to focus on solving problems

"How can I get out of this situation?"

"What can I do to make this better?"

Smart Climbing

1. What is climbing anxiety?
 - a. What, why and how
 - b. Normal anxiety vs 'irrational anxiety'
2. Your signs and symptoms of anxiety
 - a. Building up your own formulation
 - b. The role of avoidance
3. Managing anxiety
 - a. Breathing
 - b. Muscle relaxation
 - c. Focus and attention
 - d. Undoing avoidance
4. Developing a routine
 - a. Preparation
 - b. Pause and reset
 - c. Stay Put - decide when calm
5. Graded exposure
 - a. Developing a hierarchy
 - b. Keeping it manageable
 - c. Keeping going for long enough
 - d. Staying relaxed - learning a new response to an old situation
 - e. Staying in the situation for as long as it takes
6. Falling
 - a. Eliminating 'safety behaviours' first
 - b. Natural falls are better
 - c. Falling in a relaxed way
 - d. Staying high till calm
 - e. Belaying
7. Mindfulness
 - a. What is mindfulness - practice and attitudes
 - b. How does it apply to climbing
8. Imagery
 - a. How to use imagery
 - b. PETTLEP
9. Positive Logging

1. What is climbing anxiety?

Anxiety when climbing is normal. Yes, that's right, its normal! We are high up, alone (usually unless it's a very crowded belay!), placing our life in someone else's hands, and challenging ourselves physically. Couple that with the fact that climbing places particular stresses on the hands, shoulders, neck and often breathing, the very places where anxiety and stress tend to show up, and you can see why we might begin to feel anxious.

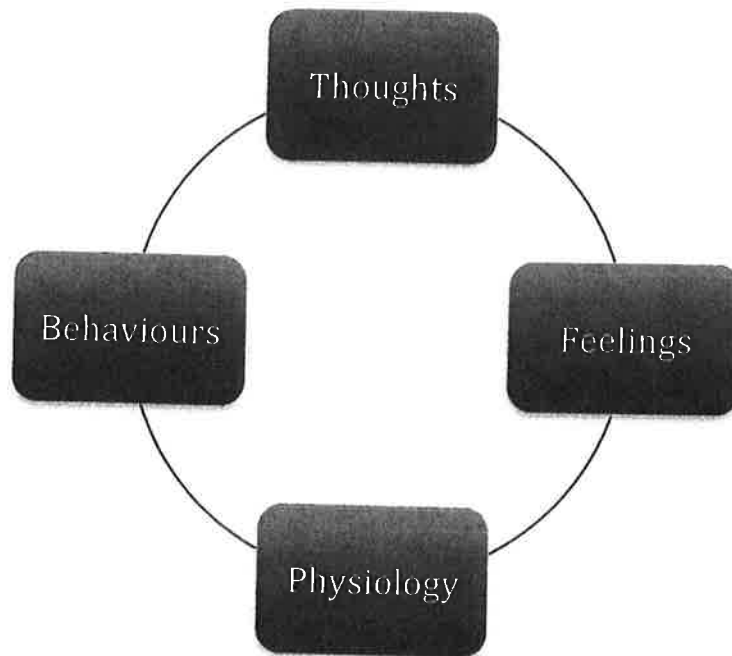
Everyone is different in terms of how reactive they are to stress. This is to do with a combination of our innate temperament (laid back, sensitive, etc) and our early life experiences. Our current situation or life stresses at present can also add a stressful load to our nervous systems. So often, if we have had a busy day at work, we might find it hard to relax enough to climb. Or if we tend to be a bit shy, it can be hard to climb in front of a crowd. Or if we have had a bad experience climbing, then the impact of that can be felt for a very long time afterwards.

Often our fear when climbing is actually a fear of fear; we are afraid of getting scared and losing control, rather than perhaps of getting hurt. Sometimes people have recurring thoughts or images which really bug them before and during climbing. Sometimes people give themselves such a hard time about performing at a certain standard during and after climbing that climbing becomes a stressful experience and makes them feel rubbish about themselves. We are all different, with different reactivity, different histories and different current circumstances, so our anxiety will manifest slightly differently for each of us. Understanding what is going on for you is part of the key. Accepting that this is just the way you are is also part of the key – a lot of distress is caused by fighting the way things are. Once you accept that you are the way you are, then it allows you to take the approach you need, rather than trying to do things the way others do them.

Anxiety whilst climbing is not 'irrational'. You 'should' feel anxious – its there to keep you safe and to prevent you from taking unnecessary risks. Accepting anxiety and learning how to manage it will help it from getting out of hand – you are teaching your inner 'chimp' that you have the safety angle covered and learning how to settle and soothe ourselves.

2. Anxiety Cycle

What are your signs and symptoms of anxiety? Fill them in the diagram below:



Anxiety works on a cycle – thoughts trigger feelings, feelings trigger thoughts, physical changes in the body trigger behaviours, behaviours trigger more thoughts, and so on. If we can manage the physical symptoms of anxiety and manage our behaviours, then our feelings and thoughts will often settle.

Understanding that thoughts are not reality is really important. Often we are stuck in the past, rehashing old events or predicting the future and thinking about maybe's and might's. Learning how to focus on the present, the here and now, can be hugely helpful for managing anxiety. This is more productive than trying to have a mental argument along the lines of 'I shouldn't be thinking about falling, Oh I'm scared, don't think about that, what if I fall off, why can't I do this, why do I get scared' etc etc. Focusing on your body and what it needs to do, letting go of thoughts, allowing them to wash over you and observing them with your mind's eye, helps you to understand that they are 'just thoughts'.

Avoidance

Avoidance is a key issue to tackle in managing anxiety. We tend to avoid things we don't like, that make us feel uncomfortable or threaten our self image, our egos! Avoidance maintains anxiety – this is because we never discover that we can overcome whatever it is we are avoiding. Tackling avoidance in a gradual way, through lots of repetition of small steps, whilst staying relaxed in our bodies, is very powerful in expanding our comfort zones and improving our skills. Most people believe that if they just keep doing the same thing, then their fears won't get any worse, but in actual fact, if we don't tackle avoidance then over time, our comfort zone actually shrinks, and fears tend to escalate.

3. Managing anxiety

a. Breathing

Breathe from your belly. Your belly rises as you breathe in, and falls as you breathe out. Make your out breath slightly longer than your in breath (eg a ratio of 3 to 5 or 5 to 7). Focus on the outbreath.

Practice switching from breath holding or fast breathing to your relaxed breathing. Always breathe out first, as if blowing up a balloon, blowing bubbles, or imagining bellows in your stomach. Taking a deep breath in is not helpful for anxiety, it tends to make you breathe from your chest and tense your shoulders. Focus instead on a slow steady breath out.

b. Muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is about tensing and relaxing the major muscle groups, each in their turn. We also did a shortened version, just focusing on the shoulders. Be aware that if you belay someone, especially on a harder route, you are likely to develop some muscle tension yourself, so it's important to get rid of that first.

c. Focus and attention

Keep bringing your focus back to your body. Pushing into your feet is helpful to ground you and also is useful for climbing well. Every time you notice your attention wandering, gently bring yourself back to the here and now. This is a habit, it takes time to learn to bring your attention under your control when climbing. Be sure to start as you mean to go on; when you tie in, only think about tying in, when you put your shoes on, just think about putting your shoes on. Focus on one thing at a time only.

d. Undoing avoidance

Start by noticing and noting anything you avoid when climbing. Slopers? Climbing in front of people? Routes in a particular style? Make a list and put them in order of difficulty, and then begin to tackle them one by one. Think small steps and lots of repetition.

Beware also of mental avoidance. Often we avoid thinking about certain things, for example we try not to think about falling off. This is a good short term strategy, but longer term it tends to reinforce anxiety, and so we need to be able to open certain mental boxes. Try to stay relaxed in your body as you do so. If there are traumatic things you have been avoiding thinking about, then it's best to get some professional help to guide you and support you whilst you open up those boxes.

4. Developing a routine

a. Preparation

Take time to warm up physically and mentally. Stretching is a good way of relaxing the body and will help relax the mind. Develop your own mini routine to carry out before you start each climb. Over time, this helps to settle you and prime you for climbing.

b. Pause and reset

Its important not to allow anxiety to build up so be strategic and pick certain points on the route to pause and reset. Pause and reset means; breathe out, release any body tension, focus your attention, and then plan the next section. This keeps anxiety under control a bit better.

c. Stay put – decide when calm

Fight, flight or freeze responses are very motivating, and when we are scared we tend to rush to get down or get up the route as quick as possible. To help manage anxiety over time, its better to stay put (hang on or hang in the harness), try some calming techniques and then make a decision about whether to go up or down. Ideally, if you decide you are going to come down, you want to stay where you are until you are feeling calm before lowering off. This way we start to carve a new response to being up high, where we feel relaxed and not desperate to get out of there!

5. Graded Exposure

This is an evidence based approach to turning avoidance into moving forward. It involves learning a new response (relaxation) to old triggers (climbing/ falling/ being up high) and then gradually and slowly exposing yourself to ever more challenging situations.

a. Developing a hierarchy

Write a list of all the climbing situations that scare you. Then try to organize them into a list, starting with the least scary and working up to the most scary. That's the order to tackle them in. You need to spend enough time at each stage that each situation feels ok, boring even, before moving on to the next stage.

b. Keeping it manageable

Go slowly. Its always tempting to try to leap ahead but its better to spend longer consolidating at each stage. For each climbing session, think of the rule of 1/3's. You should spend 1/3 of the time well within your comfort zone, 1/3 at the edge of your comfort zone, and 1/3 trying to stretch yourself a little. Don't be tempted to try 'flooding' – ie jumping right in at the deep end (a good example is taking a big whipper to deal with a fear of falling). This rarely works well and moving on too quickly can often make anxiety worse not better.

c. Keeping going for long enough

Adrenalin bursts can last quite a long time so for each time you try something off your hierarchy, you need to spend long enough trying it for the anxiety to drop to around a 3/10. One fall off is not enough, you need to keep going until it feels boring or commonplace.

d. Staying relaxed

Keep checking your body for signs of tension, breath holding, clenching fists, tight shoulders etc. Keep tensing and releasing your muscles, breathing out whilst trying a step on your hierarchy. Keeping the body and breathing relaxed is vital to start to undo the anxiety response you normally have.

e. **Staying in the situation for as long as it takes**
Any time you get anxious, you need to resist the temptation to get out of there as fast as you can. If you are practicing falling, or if you accidentally fall off, stay put up high until your breathing and muscles relax. This might take some time (more time the greater the panic). You won't remain panicky for ever, so trust yourself and give yourself time to settle before making a decision about going up or coming down. Too often people ask to be let down from the climb and so they exit the situation in a state of high anxiety. All this does is reinforce that being up high is scary. Stay hanging in your harness or on the holds until you start to feel more calm and relaxed – then its ok to come down (or carry on a little if you wish). Resist the urge to give in to the flight response!

6. Falling

Its normal and natural to feel scared of falling. Many climbers never really get to 'enjoy' falling BUT it doesn't have to hold you back as much as it seems. When we fall, we feel out of control even though we 'know' that we will be caught by our belayer.

a. Psychological Safety Behaviours

These are behaviours which make you feel safer in that moment but have no value and in fact tend to reinforce anxiety. Examples include:

- Checking your belayer has you at the top of the route before dropping onto the rope
- Saying 'take' rather than trying a hard move
- Dropping onto the rope rather than falling off trying
- Insisting on a tight top rope
- Clipping at full stretch so the rope is above you
- Asking 'have you got me?'
- Hanging on to the rope as you lower off

Most of these have the effect of only making us feel safe when we feel a pull on our harness, or are irrelevant because the belayer should always be paying attention, or they encourage us to stay gripping the rope which increases body tension. They are usually about wanting to stay in control or 'double checking', and they are always about avoidance! If we can start to undo some of these habits then we will actually start to feel safer over time, despite what it feels like! This is because we will gently begin to expand our comfort zone, and this is often more manageable than taking bigger steps such as falling practice.

b. Natural falls are better

Falling off when you decide to as in deliberate falling practice means you remain in control to some extent. Ideally, its better to fall off naturally because the route is too hard for you. This is much more realistic and also teaches you the limits of your climbing ability. Over time, if you can take natural falls on a top rope, as a second and then gradually as a leader, you will find that the prospect of falling becomes less of a worry.

c. **Falling in a relaxed way**

Keep your upper body relaxed, breathe out as you fall, bring your legs up a little in front of you to bounce against the wall, stay alert and try not to hold onto the rope. Holding onto the rope puts tension into your hands and shoulders, try to drop your shoulders instead and have your hands just a little up in front of you to ward off the wall.

d. **Stay high until calm**

Stay hanging in your harness until you feel calm. Don't fall and then get lowered straight away, even if you intend to come down afterwards. Stay up there, hang around, release any muscle tension, breathe out, check out the holds and see if you can go a little higher. Can you weight a foot (not step up, just weight it), move a hand, etc. One small move after a scary fall will stretch your comfort zone a little, even if you still decide to come down afterwards.

e. **Belaying**

Never underestimate the impact of belaying someone on a hard route on your own anxiety levels. Try to stay relaxed in your body when belaying – drop your shoulders, keep breathing, and try to resettle yourself before its your turn to climb. Watching someone try very hard can be very unsettling, so perhaps even taking it in turns for who gets to try hard each session can be useful.

7. Mindfulness

a. **What is mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is an approach which has good evidence for helping with anxiety. It means, paying attention purposefully, to the present moment, without judgement. Essentially, you direct your attention to the physical and sensory here and now, moving away from thoughts about the past or future, and moving away from judgements and comparisons of this moment. You aim to simply experience this moment as it is without changing it, and then the next moment, and so on.

You can practice mindfulness anywhere though many people like to do a sitting practice or meditation. But you can also drink a glass of water mindfully or wash up mindfully by just thinking about what you are doing in that moment and concentrating fully. We spend most of our lives multitasking and in a 'doing', problem solving frame of mind, or on autopilot doing one thing whilst thinking about something else (driving is a good example). In mindfulness, we choose to focus on 'being' rather than doing and problem solving. The benefits are that our thinking becomes calmer and more focused, and moves away from those mental arguments that go round and round in our heads. It gets easier the more you practice.

a. **How does mindfulness apply to climbing?**

Mindfulness for climbing has several benefits

- It improves concentration and focus
- It reduces anxiety
- It makes a flow state/ flow experience more likely to happen

When we are on a route, we need to be fully focused on the route and not what's in our head. It's fine to plan ahead the next sequence of moves, but then once we start to execute them, all we need to think about is how to move our bodies in the best way possible. Making judgements about how good or not the holds are is pointless, they just are the way they are. Thinking about the past or the future, what might happen, is a distraction. Being in the here and now gets you into your body, which is the thing you need to help you get up the route.

Having a curious attitude when climbing (I wonder if...) is extremely helpful. If we keep judging what we can and can't do, what might or might not happen, can limit us from trying and then we never find out the extent of our abilities. Having expectations of a climb is unhelpful; each day is different and so we can never truly judge what we 'should' be able to climb. Try to park expectations and allow the climbing to unfold before you. Notice when your awareness and attention starts to wander, or when you start making judgements about the route, the rock, yourself. Try to bring your attention back into your body each time you realize it's wandered away.

8. Imagery

Imagery is a useful skill to learn for a few reasons

- It helps you to practice a sequence on a climb or problem when you are not actually climbing
- It helps you to prepare for climbing
- It helps you to memorise a sequence
- It helps to get you into the right head space for climbing

Some people find it easiest to see themselves climbing as if on a video, others find it easier to imagine actually climbing. Neither is right or wrong, it's whatever works for you. Try to make it as rich an experience as possible – sights, sounds, smells, feel. Practising imagery in context is also helpful – put your shoes and harness on, or closing your eyes at the foot of a route, or if you are practicing at home, then imaging the walk in to the crag first, unpacking your rucksack, racking up, and so on first is helpful.

You can also use imagery to help you get into a positive frame of mind before a climb. Spending a few minutes remembering a previous positive experience and really focusing on how you felt in your body can help give you a confidence boost before a climb.

Imagery is easier if you also spend time AFTER a climb reliving what happened and elaborating it in your mind. We tend to remember positive experiences in less detail than negative ones, so try to spend a minute remembering the route you have just climbed, thinking about all the things you did well and trying to fix them in your mind, even if the climb didn't go exactly to plan. Bouldering is also a good way of improving imagery, as is the game 'add a move'.

For really rich imagery, use the PETTLEP model

P – Physical – how will it feel in your body? Use some physical movements to simulate the climb. Wear your shoes and harness and chalk up
E – Environment – run through your imagery sequence at the actual crag, or using photos of the venue to help cue you in to the environment
T – Task – focus very specifically on the task in hand – the movements, concentration and feelings
T – Timing – imagine in real time, watch out for speeding up or missing out sections
L – learning – think about any specific technique or tactical things you need to remember
E – Emotion – if you do get stressed when climbing, then imagine this and then imagine slowing your breathing, releasing muscle tension and committing to moves, and growing in calmness as you get higher up
P – Perspective – try to feel the internal perspective – how will it feel kinaesthetically? How will it look? Any other sensory data (warmth if it's a warm day, cold if not, smells etc)

9. Positive process logging and feedback

Its too easy to criticize ourselves and think of all the things we should have done on a climb. However, this doesn't help our confidence and tends to make negative experiences more sticky and more likely to colour our view of ourselves and our climbing.

Spending a couple of minutes after each session writing down things that you did well in that session (not routes you completed, but perhaps individual moves, the fact that you worked hard, or that you figured out a sequence). Instead of being self critical, asking, 'what do I need to do more of next time?' is a positive way of helping to improve your performance.

Remember:

Success is not getting to the top of a climb perfectly – success is muddling your way through something you previously thought would be too hard either mentally or physically. Success is about stretching your comfort zone a little and doing a little more today than you did yesterday.

Happy Climbing!

**Dr Rebecca Williams
Smart Climbing**