

FACT SHEET

04



ALCOHOL
and you

STRESS, TRAUMA & YOUR BRAIN IDEAS FOR HEALING

These ideas for healing are a follow on from the handout, Stress, Trauma and the Brain. They are not a replacement for professional help. It is our hope, that alongside other supports you find these ideas helpful.

Visit: alcoholandyouni.com



→ What can help people heal from stress and trauma? Strategies that help strengthen resilience

- Positive, healthy relationships
- Looking after yourself (self care)
- Notice - Don't freeze or flop
- The way you talk to yourself
- Put the poisoned parrot in the cage
- Laughter and physical activity

Give yourself a steady flow of good clean "emotional water" (Positive, healthy relationships)

We all need water to live. That is just a fact of being human. If you are dying of thirst you would drink anything no matter how dirty it is to survive..

What if you are emotionally thirsty?

Like water we have emotional needs that human beings need to survive.

You will take anything since it is meeting that basic need.

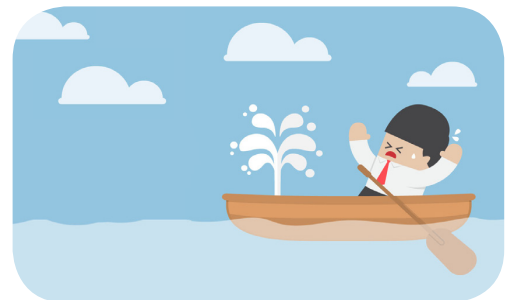
How much does unhealthy relationships, alcohol and drugs or other behaviours fill some of those emotional needs for you?

These may work in the short term but do they really work for you?

- To stay healthy do you have a reservoir of emotional strengths that help you through times like when you are sad, lonely or angry?
- Do you regularly spend time with people or do things for yourself that fill your reservoir or do the stress and strain of life mean you have chronic leakage?
- What do you do for yourself that fills your emotional reservoir?
- Who in your life gives you positive messages and you can lean on in hard times?

If you have intrusive thoughts about painful events in your life you may benefit from additional counselling.

Talk to your key worker or GP about this.



Knowing your areas of stress or trauma lets you see what could put you at risk. It also gives you choice of what you do to strengthen your resilience.

→ LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF: →

Use the Positive Emotions in the Midst of Stress

You may have seen this handout. But where did it come from?

Researchers were working with family members caring for someone who was dying. They found when they used 8 ways to express positive emotion, the carer's mood stayed up and their worry went down. Yet their situation did not change. Their family member was still dying.

Express Positive Emotions

The eight ways to express positive emotions gives you a way you can work on creating those positive experiences for yourself.

- Notice positive things
- Express those positive things
- Gratitude
- Attainable goals
- Acts of kindness
- Mindfulness
- Positive rethinking
- Notice your strengths

Journey Of Recovery

Along the journey of recovery strengthen how you are going to do this.

- Get a plan
- Use the plan
- What are the barriers to you using it
- Deal with set backs



What is stress?

Stress is the perception that something is more than the resources you have for dealing with it.

That word perception is really important. It's your interpretation that gives rise to stress.

What researchers are finding is that being able to have positive emotions during times of extreme stress helps people cope better. That does not mean you don't have negative feelings. Dealing with tough situations is hard. They can make you feel sad, angry, worried.

But... Positive emotions can make a difference.

What science is saying: Understanding our brains and nervous system

As we grow older neural pathways form like superhighways of nerve cells that transmit messages in our brains. When you travel over these superhighways many times, the pathway becomes more and more solid. Think of it like a set of Christmas tree lights that light up in automatically. Chronic stress and habits will create certain solid pathways. That is why our reactions to things may seem "automatic".

There is some good news about all this. Research has shown that we can actively affect how our brains work and we can learn to create new pathways.

Positive mental activity can help us form new pathways, since "neurons that fire together, wire together."

But because of the brain's well-known negativity bias - the neuron for the bad but Teflon for the good to make these changes takes sustained and deliberate effort.

To strengthen more positive pathways use your positive emotions:-

- **Take in the good:** having a good experience in the first place
- **Relish it:** helping it last 10 or more seconds while you experience it
- **Absorb it:** sensing that it's sinking into you.

The power of positive emotions

"Neurons that fire together, wire together."



How can we use these positively?

Take in the good. Having a good experience in the first place

ENRICH IT: HELPING IT LAST 10 OR MORE SECONDS WHILE YOU EXPERIENCE IT

ABSORB IT: SENSING THAT IT'S SINKING INTO YOU.

You're not denying the bad, but using these positive emotions to strengthen yourself.

"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."

Viktor E. Frankl who wrote his story of how he survived Auschwitz concentration camp

→ Notice: don't freeze or flop: get curious

Our minds are all too quick to see the negative so we have to teach ourselves to pay more attention to other more balanced thoughts. This takes practice.

The first step is to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings.

Maybe keep a journal or make a note on your mobile phone or tablet.

The easiest way to begin is to notice the thoughts that are causing us problems and become more aware of changes in our emotions.

So next time you suddenly feel anxious or sad ask yourself what were you just thinking? These are often the thoughts you need to work on.

You can apply this to cravings, feelings, or stress

Get curious. Where is it coming from, what options do you have, is there anything good you are missing here?

Language: talk to yourself in a way that helps

People in Northern Ireland usually are pretty good at seeing their weaknesses but not very good at seeing their strengths.

Do you disagree with that? Think about the last time you got a compliment. What did you do?

- Accept it, feel good, say thank you?
- Or did you dismiss it, shrug it off some way or feel embarrassed?



What makes your weaknesses stand out in our minds? Life can do that to you.

- You did not do that well in school. You failed
- You're sorry that you can't lose that weight. You failed
- You're sorry that you can't find a job. You failed
- You're sorry that your children have done something wrong. You failed
- You're sorry that you are sick and are not doing enough for your family. You failed
- You developed an addiction. You failed.



"The only thing standing between you and your goal is the story you keep telling yourself as to why you can't achieve it."

→ How do we talk to ourselves?

What happens when we feel like we fail every day?

- You begin to hear that criticism from yourself
- A little voice inside, telling you that you are not good enough, that you are a failure
- You feel like there is something wrong with you

When messages of failure or being incapable are heard enough they shape a deep seeded belief like:

- The world is a threatening place
- I must be perfect at all times
- I am no good at anything

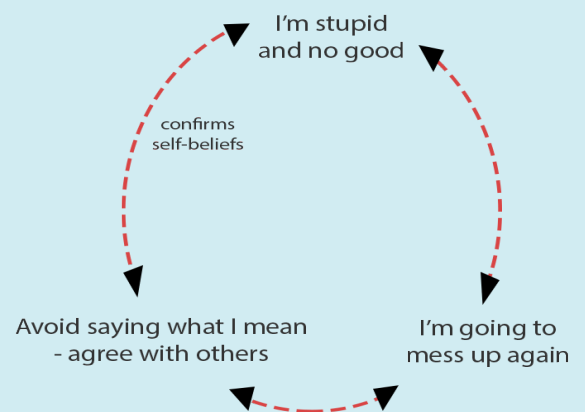
It may be hard to begin to see your strengths at first if you are so used to looking at your weaknesses. So this next skill may help.

Have a saying that you say to yourself every day:

"I'M GOOD ENOUGH"

A phrase that a service user uses to change an unhelpful view of themselves.

You can't reach for anything new if your hands are still full of yesterday's junk



→ Put the poisoned parrot in a cage

Imagine you're given a parrot. He doesn't have any knowledge, wisdom or insight. It recites things 'parrot fashion' without any understanding or comprehension.

However, this particular parrot is a poisoned parrot.

It's been specifically trained to be unhelpful to you, continuously commenting on you and your life, in a way that constantly puts you down and criticises you.

For example, the bus gets stuck in traffic and you arrive at work 5 minutes late. The parrot sits there saying: "There you go again. Late. You just can't manage to get there on time can you? So stupid. If you'd left the house and got the earlier bus you'd have arrived with loads of time to spare. But you? No way. Just can't do it. Useless. Waste of space. Absolutely pathetic!"



Here is a challenge for you
Catch you using the word "stupid" toward yourself
Challenge it and try to use the word less (or not at all)

→ How long would you put up with this abuse before getting rid of the parrot?

Is your thinking like this poisoned parrot? We can often put up with the thoughts from this internal bully for far too long.

We can learn to use the antidote: notice that 'parrot' – and cover the cage.

"There's that parrot again - I don't have to listen to it". Put your focus of attention elsewhere. Eventually this poisoned parrot will weaken. You'll notice it less and less. It might just give up and fly off to wherever poisoned parrots go.

→ Let's not forget two important things: regular physical activity and laughter

Any physical activity, like walking, jogging, swimming, biking, is a great way to burn up cortisol.

Just 20-30 minutes of activity most days of the week pays huge dividends.

If your schedule is too hectic to squeeze in a continuous session of aerobic activity, you can reap the same benefits by breaking daily activity into smaller doses like walking.

Also any bilateral movement where you are using both sides of your body helps immensely. Patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity: walking, running, dancing, singing, or knitting uses networks that uses the front part of the brain and helps the thinking part of the brain work better.



A good laugh goes a long way

Researchers have found that laughter is similar to meditation in the way it activates areas of the brain.

Laughter reduces detrimental stress hormones like cortisol, lowers your blood pressure, and increases blood flow which can improve your mood.

"That act of laughter "increases the release of endorphins and dopamine in the brain, which provide a sense of pleasure and reward. "In turn, higher levels of these hormones — responsible for feeling uplifted — increase brain wave activity. Both meditation and laughter do this.

So it is important to have a good laugh on a regular basis



A good, hearty laugh relieves physical tension and stress, leaving your muscles relaxed for up to 45 minutes after.

→ Getting support

There are other tools to help you strengthen your well-being and resilience:

Bend Don't Break - a self help book



The skills in the booklet Bend Don't Break can help strengthen the building blocks to resilience. It can be found on the South Eastern Trust's website under the healthy living tab in the resilience section.

Take 5

Take 5 is an evidence based approach to improve well-being including:

- GIVE
- BE ACTIVE
- CONNECT
- KEEP LEARNING
- TAKE NOTICE

Developed by Ed Sipler
Health Development Specialist in
Alcohol and Drugs
South Eastern Trust

How can you use what is in this handout?

What would you like to achieve?

Set 3 short term achievable goals.

- 1
- 2
- 3

Who could help you with these goals?

- 1
- 2
- 3

If alcohol is a concern see the Alcohol and You website that has self-help and a range of information and resources.

www.alcoholandyouni.com

ALCOHOL
and you



Download the KNOW UNITS APP:
alcoholandyouni.com

