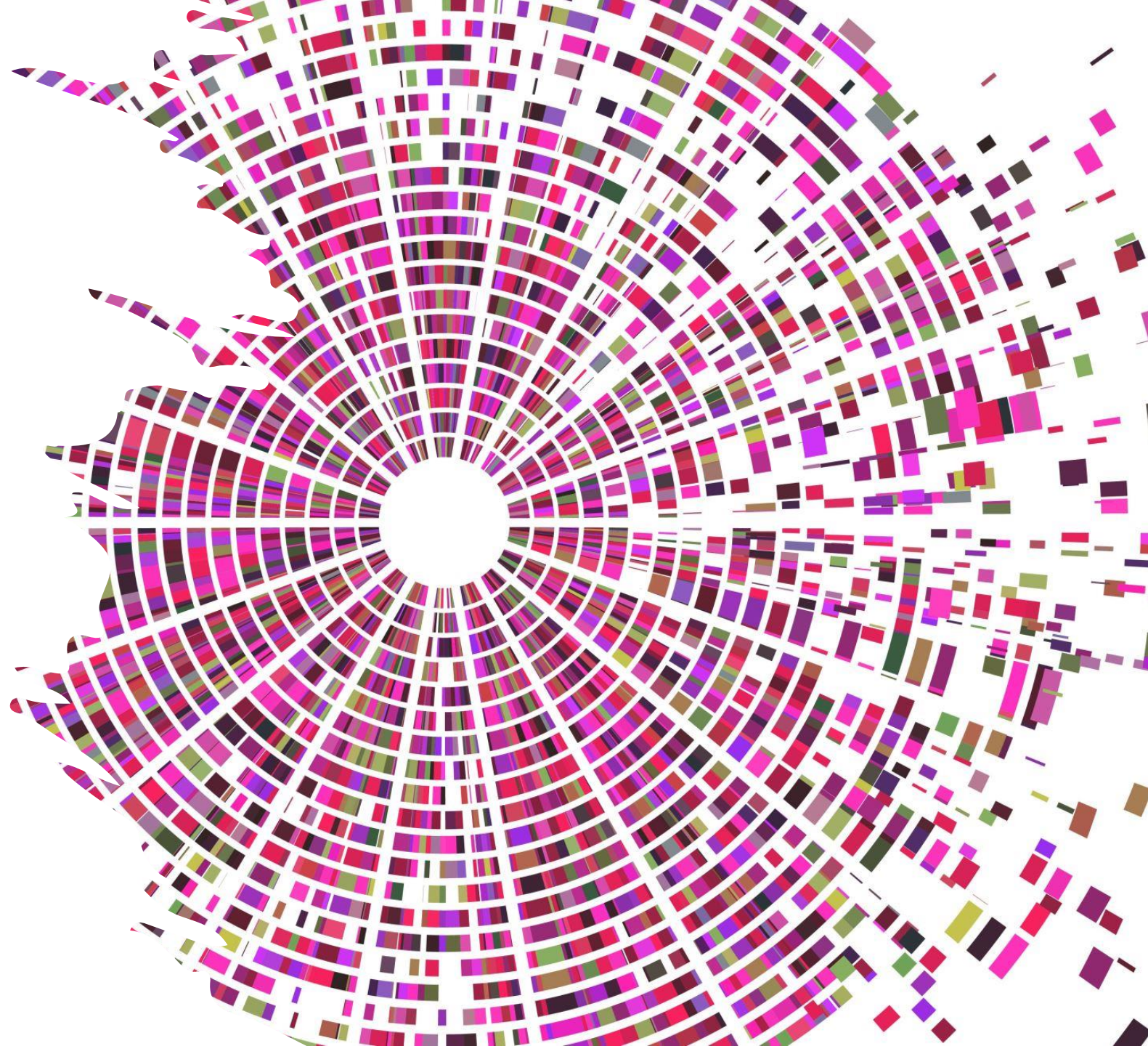


*Anxiety and  
Chronic Health  
Conditions – How  
to Find a Way  
Through*

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# ***Contents of this booklet***

This booklet on anxiety and chronic health conditions is split into the following sections. Feel free to read it all end-to-end, or just read the sections you're interested in. It's your booklet, the choice is yours!

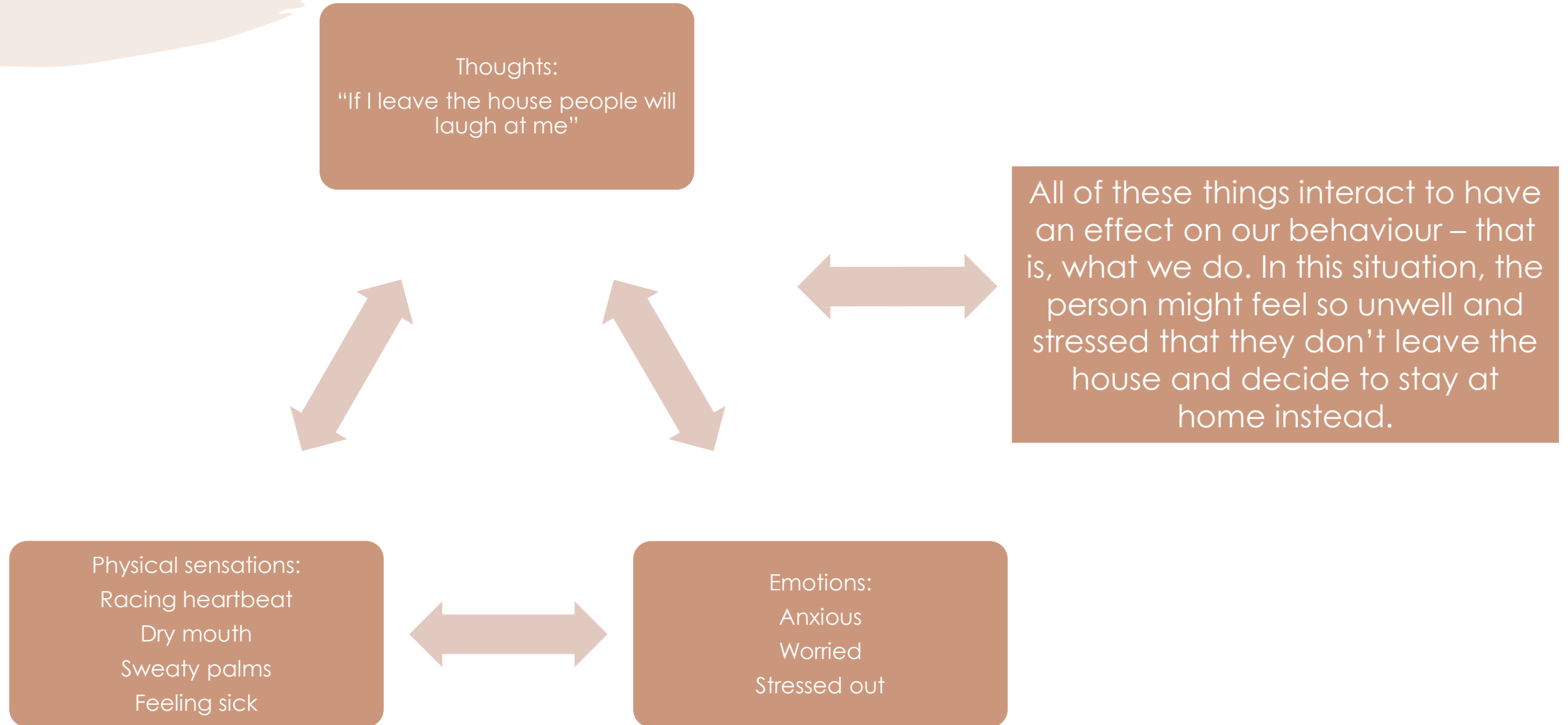
- What is anxiety
- How can anxiety affect people
- How might this be different if I have a chronic health condition?
- Anxiety management tips
- Tips for managing anxiety with a chronic health condition



# *What is anxiety?*

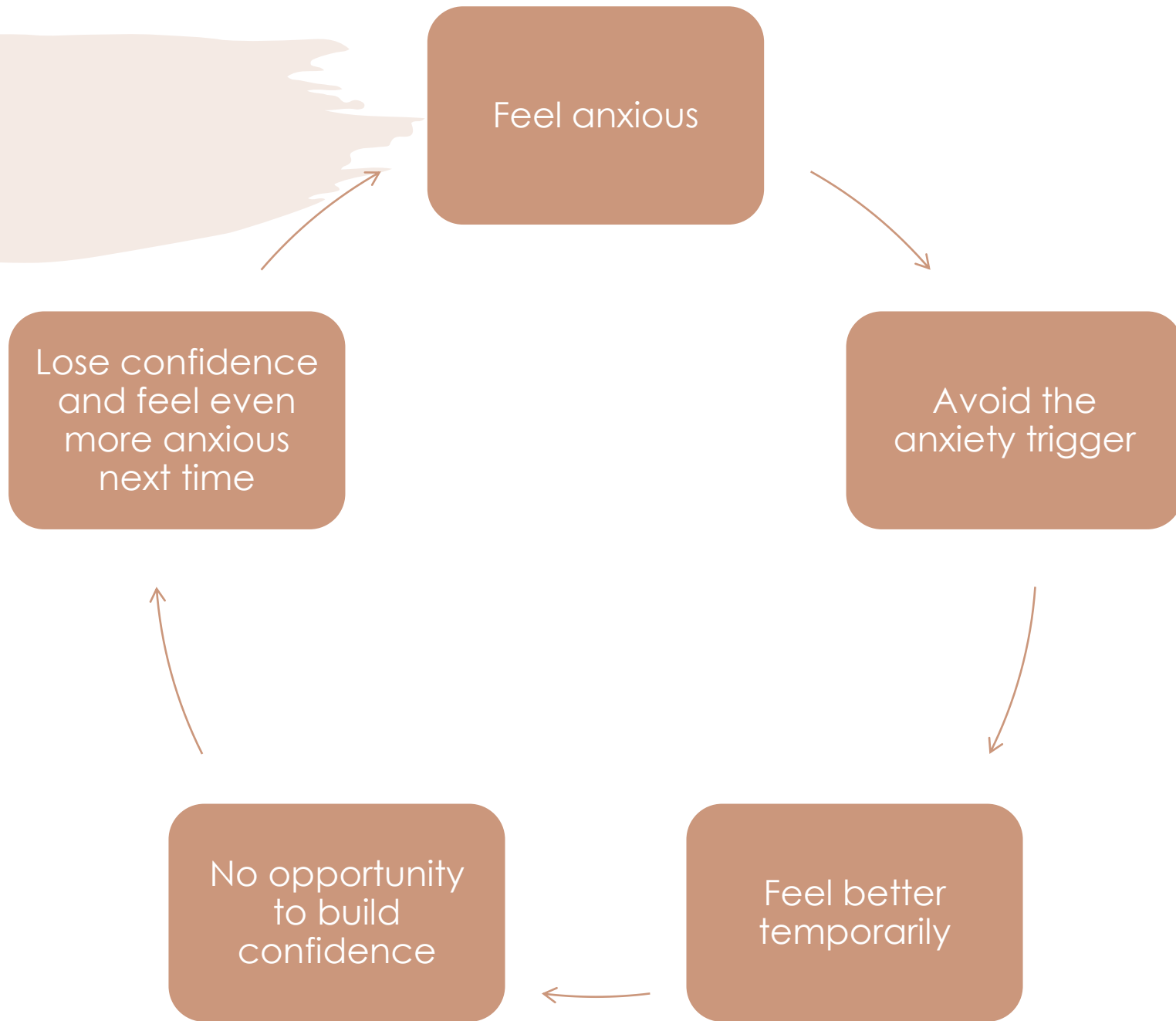
- Anxiety is a normal human response to living in the world. To fully understand anxiety, you can break it down into how it feels emotionally, how it feels physically, and what it can make you think about:
- **Emotions:** feeling worried, stressed and afraid, among other things
- **Physical:** butterflies in the stomach, feeling tense, dry mouth, racing heart, feelings of dread, among other things
- **Thoughts:** “what if...?” is a really common thought – generally worried thoughts about what might happen or what you fear is going to happen, which can be worries about other people, yourself, the future in general, and other things

- The following shows how emotions, physical sensations, and thoughts might interact when someone is anxious:



# *How can anxiety affect people?*

- When you're feeling anxious about something, the natural thing to want to do is to avoid it – run away from the spider, or leave the party early because you're worried about people judging you.
- Avoidance seems like the right thing to do in the moment – you don't feel well, and getting out of that situation helps to get rid of the horrible thoughts and feelings that you're having.
- Over time though, a different pattern emerges...



The relief given by avoiding an anxiety trigger is short-lived, and over time people often lose their confidence in trying new things, or the anxiety becomes bigger and threatens to take over their life. Different problems develop as people will do anything to avoid feeling anxious – they might start avoiding friends and family altogether, or drinking alcohol to numb their feelings. Or they might stop leaving the house, and become low in mood as well as anxious. In any event, the anxious person is now not living the life they want to.

# *How might this be different if I have a chronic health condition?*

- If you have a chronic health condition, you may experience pain and fatigue. You probably have to spend some of your daily time and energy focusing on your health, and doing the things you need to do to keep yourself on an even keel.
- With many chronic health conditions, the body is already under stress. Pain in particular activates the body's "fight or flight" system, which is a normal response to stress.

# ***Fight or flight symptoms***

- Butterflies in stomach/nausea
- Pupils dilate
- Heart rate increases
- Sweating/feeling flushed
- Breathing rate increases
- Shaking or trembling
- Tense muscles
- Dry mouth

...Wait, this is sounding familiar! That's because anxiety sets off the body's "fight or flight" response in the same way acute pain or a sudden shock would (like hearing a loud noise)

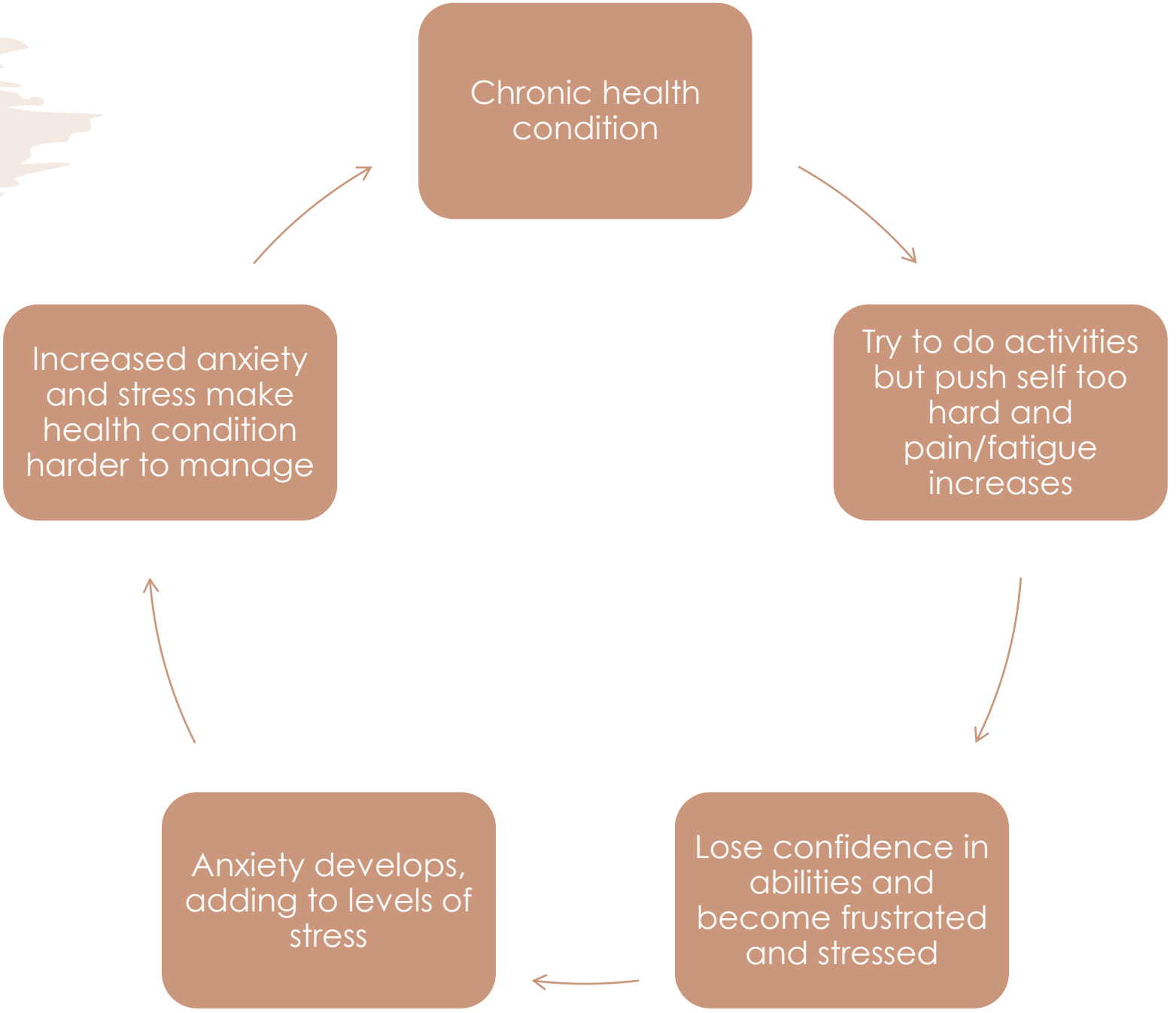
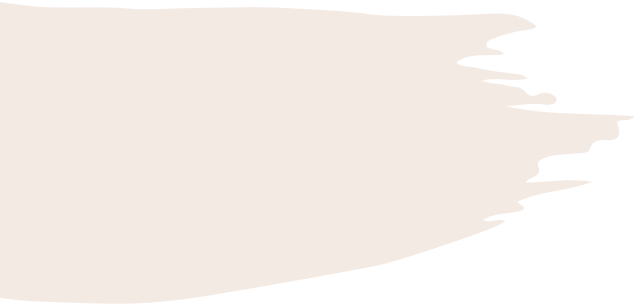


# *Chronic stress*

- If you have a chronic health condition, you may be dealing with the effects of chronic stress on the body, which are slightly different to the effects of acute stress (the “fight or flight” response).
- These include difficulties with memory and concentration, clumsiness, indecisiveness, physical symptoms such as muscle tension and fatigue, and difficulties such as insomnia.

# *Chronic health conditions*

- In addition, people with chronic health conditions often struggle with pain or fatigue, which can make it more difficult for you to do the things you want to do.
- It can be hard to plan when you have a chronic health condition, and you may feel unreliable or that you are a burden to other people.
- Over time, this can lead to a loss of confidence in doing activities, and anxiety can develop as confidence decreases.



# *Anxiety management tips*

- I'm going to talk about two main ways to manage anxiety – one is short-term, the other is long-term:
  - **Breathing and relaxation techniques** – these are helpful to calm the “fight or flight” response and help to manage the impact of stress.
  - **Graded exposure** – a series of steps, with the easiest first, to build up your confidence in managing anxiety symptoms by experiencing them rather than avoiding them.

# *Breathing and relaxation techniques*

- A technique called diaphragmatic breathing can be really helpful in the moment to calm down the “fight or flight” response.
- The diaphragm is a muscle that sits below the lungs, and helps to control the air flow into the lungs.
- On the following page is a short breathing exercise.



# *Diaphragmatic breathing*

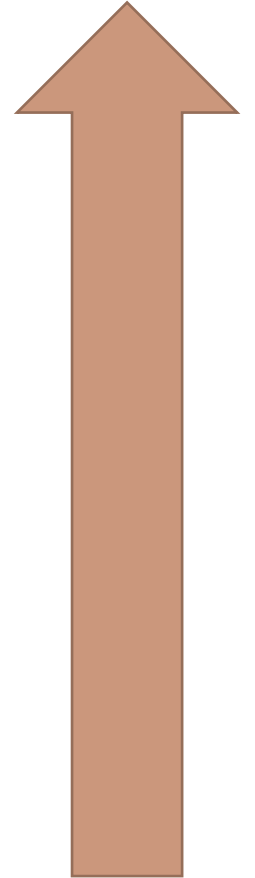
- Sit quietly with your hands on your stomach.
- Imagine there is a balloon in your stomach that inflates as you breathe in, and breathe in slowly for a count of four.
- Your hands should move as your stomach inflates.
- Imagine that the balloon deflates as you breathe out, and breathe out slowly for a count of six.
- Your hands should move as your stomach deflates.
- Continue for five minutes or so. If you feel lightheaded, that is normal – just breathe slightly less deeply for a few breaths.
  
- You should practice this three times a day for five minutes at a time – if you only use it when you're really anxious, it won't work as well. Practice makes perfect!

# *Graded exposure*

- The point of graded exposure is to gently start to work with anxiety rather than avoiding it. The more we avoid, the more we *need* to avoid in future. The only way out, is through.
- For graded exposure to be effective, we need to start with something that is a little bit anxiety-provoking, but isn't so scary that it would make you feel really stressed – on a scale of 0-10 (with 10 being really bad anxiety), you're looking for something no higher than a 6.
- Or, you can start with the thing that is really scary, and work backwards from there...

# *Graded exposure example*

- Going to the shopping centre on my own on a Saturday
- Going to the shopping centre on my own on a Tuesday
- Going to the shopping centre with my husband
- Going to the local shop on my own and staying for ten minutes
- Going to the local shop on my own and staying for five minutes
- Going to the local shop with my husband
- Walking to the end of the street on my own
- Walking to the end of the street with my husband





# *Graded exposure tips and tricks*

- When putting yourself in a situation that causes anxiety, **you need to really feel that anxiety**. Diaphragmatic breathing can help to manage the “fight or flight” response, but things like listening to music as a distraction are not helpful in the long-term, because then you end up needing the music to manage the anxiety.
- Stay in the situation until your anxiety starts to go down – usually about 20 minutes. I know it feels like you’ll feel anxious forever, but you won’t.
- When you’ve managed to complete a step on the ladder, make sure you treat yourself – you’ve done something awesome!
- Don’t worry if you need to repeat each step multiple times until you start to feel a bit less anxious – this is normal. Repeat as many times as needed.

# *Tips for managing anxiety with a chronic health condition*

- In addition to managing anxiety by relaxation and graded exposure, people with chronic health conditions will need to consider:
  - How much of their energy they can spend doing anxiety management work that day
  - How pain or fatigue (or other symptoms) might limit their ability to do activities.
  - The differences between appropriate pacing of activities and avoiding anxiety-provoking activities.

# *How much energy do I have?*

- This is where planning comes into its own – it can be difficult to plan with a chronic health condition, but in combination with pacing this can be really helpful.
- Knowing what activities you have in a week (and what opportunities you have for rest/relaxation) can help in knowing when you might want to consider starting graded exposure.
- Consider that **you're also using energy feeling anxious all the time** – it's a balancing act, and you need to start somewhere.
- Good news – relaxation techniques help manage the stress of chronic health conditions, as well as anxiety!

# *How might my condition limit my ability to do certain activities?*

- This is where pacing can be helpful – breaking tasks down into smaller parts and stopping before you feel completely overwhelmed with pain or fatigue.
- On good days, don't do too much. On bad days, do a little bit more than you would normally do (only a little, don't push it!)
- This applies to anxiety too – some days, all you will be able to manage is relaxation practice. That's okay. Don't beat yourself up – make a plan for doing a tiny bit of exposure work the day after.

# *Pacing or avoidance?*

- Sometimes, leaving a party earlier than other people is pacing yourself so that you don't have a flare-up.
- Sometimes, it's avoiding a situation that makes you anxious.
- Only you know how you're feeling at any one time. *It's important not to lie to yourself* and call it pacing when it's avoidance – you're only giving anxiety a better chance at taking over.
- That said, it's okay to give yourself a break sometimes and if you need to leave early because you're too anxious, be kind to yourself. We don't get it right all the time.

# *Graded exposure with a physical health condition*

- Go to the shopping centre on my own for half an hour, using my walking stick.
- Go to the shopping centre with my sister for half an hour, either with my walking stick or in my wheelchair.
- Go to the local shops in my wheelchair.
- Go to the end of the street with my walking stick.
- Go to the end of the street in my wheelchair, with my sister.
- Do my physio exercises before my relaxation session once a day.
- Practice my relaxation techniques three times a day.

# *Anxiety management tips*

- Your anxiety management/graded exposure may need to include some physical activities to build up your ability to do them.
- Don't feel bad about using aids and adaptations – they're there to help you meet your goals.
- Start with things that are less time-consuming and less stressful – like relaxation techniques!
- Pace your activity, and your exposure to anxiety-provoking situations (remember, nothing over a 6/10) so that you don't flare your condition up too much.

# *Remember*

- Anxiety can be tricky to manage. When you have a physical health condition, it's even trickier.
- Don't beat yourself up if it takes a while to manage your anxiety. You're not just managing anxiety (which is hard enough), you're managing a condition where your symptoms may shift day-to-day.
- Make sure that when you meet a step on your exposure ladder, you reward yourself. **Every step counts!**



# *Resources*

For more information on diaphragmatic breathing:

<http://www.stresshack.com/diaphragmatic-breathing.html>

For more information on stress/fight or flight:

<https://www.clinpsychsarah.com/blog/lets-talk-about-stress-part-one-acute-and-chronic-stress>

For more information on pacing:

<https://themighty.com/2017/10/tips-pacing-yourself-chronic-illness/>