

HEALTH ANXIETY IN CARDIAC CONDITIONS

Dr Michelle O'Keeffe
Specialist Clinical Psychologist
11th February 2020

Outline

- What is health anxiety?
- CBT Model
- Case study
- Supporting patients with health anxiety



What is Health Anxiety?

- Health Anxiety is a condition that consists of either a pre-occupation with having a serious illness or a fear of developing a serious illness despite medical reassurance this is not an issue
- People who have long-term illnesses like epilepsy, diabetes or cardiac conditions may have symptoms related to their illness but may misinterpret and magnify their significance.

Signs and Symptoms

- Preoccupation with having/getting a serious disease
- Worrying that minor symptoms or body sensations mean they have a serious illness
- Easily alarmed about their health status
- Finding little or no reassurance from doctor visits or negative test results
- Worrying excessively about a specific medical condition or their risk of developing a medical condition because it runs in their family

Signs and Symptoms

- Experiencing so much distress about possible illnesses that it's hard for them to function
- Repeatedly checking their body for signs of illness or disease
- Frequently making medical appointments for reassurance — or avoiding medical care for fear of being diagnosed with a serious illness
- Avoiding people, places or activities for fear of health risks
- Constantly talking about their health and possible illnesses
- Frequently searching the internet for causes of symptoms or possible illnesses

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy Model

Environment

Predisposing factors



Precipitating factors



Presenting issue/s: Health anxiety



Triggers: Internal/External

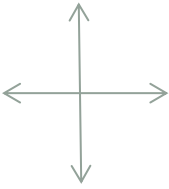


Perpetuating Factors

Thoughts



Emotions



Behaviours



Physical Sensations



Predisposing Factors

- **Genetic factors:** Family hx of MH issues may put someone at slightly increased risk of developing their own MH issues
- **Personality factors:** Certain personality characteristics may make someone more vulnerable, e.g. difficulty tolerating uncertainty, “Always been a worrier”, rigidity, pessimistic
- **Learned behaviour:** People are more likely to have health anxiety if their own parents worried too much about their own health or the patients health.
- **Life experiences:** Childhood illness, family member illness, hospitalizations, overprotective parents. Impact on beliefs/attitudes towards health, e.g. how much attention you pay to health, sense of fragility, how quickly you see a doctor

Health Anxiety Precipitating Factors

Change in
health status

New
diagnosis

Referred for
an
intervention

Cardiac
Event

The “T” word

Endocarditis

Hospital
Admission

ICD shock

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

- **Catastrophizing**, e.g. palpitations are a sign I'm going to have a heart attack and die
- **Black and white thinking**, e.g. live or die, treatment will be success or failure, I am sick/well, if I can't do it the way I used to then there is no point in doing it at all
- **Fortune telling**, e.g. If I have sex/exercise/go to crowded busy places my heart rate will increase and it will trigger an arrhythmia

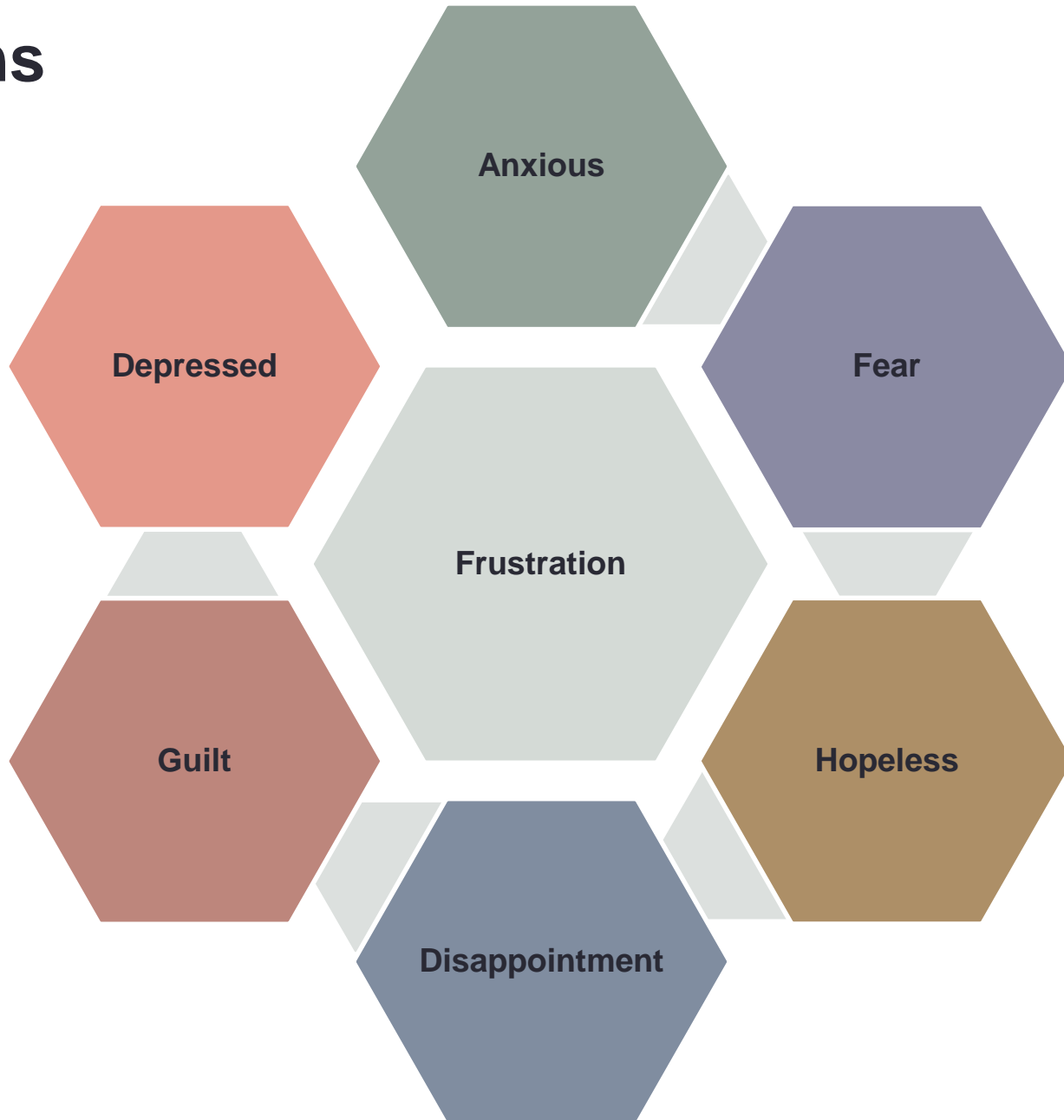
Unhelpful Thinking Styles

- **Mind reading**, e.g. My cardiologist didn't look my in the eye because she knows there is something seriously wrong with me
- **Mental filtering**, e.g. focusing on the negative information in a clinic appointment and dismissing the positives
- **Disqualifying the positives**, e.g. I know something else is going to go wrong with my heart in the future so what's the point in starting anything new

Unhelpful Thinking Styles

- **Labelling**, e.g. I'm useless, I'm defective, I'm abnormal
- **Low frustration tolerance**, e.g. It's too difficult or unbearable, such as patients who want to self-discharge
- **Shoulding**, e.g. I should be able to do everything my friends do, I shouldn't get upset about having a CC
- **Overgeneralizing**, e.g. I've had one episode when I had palpitations when I left the house on my own, this is always going to happen

Emotions



Anxiety Sensations



Anxiety Symptoms
anxietycentre.com

Word Cloud:

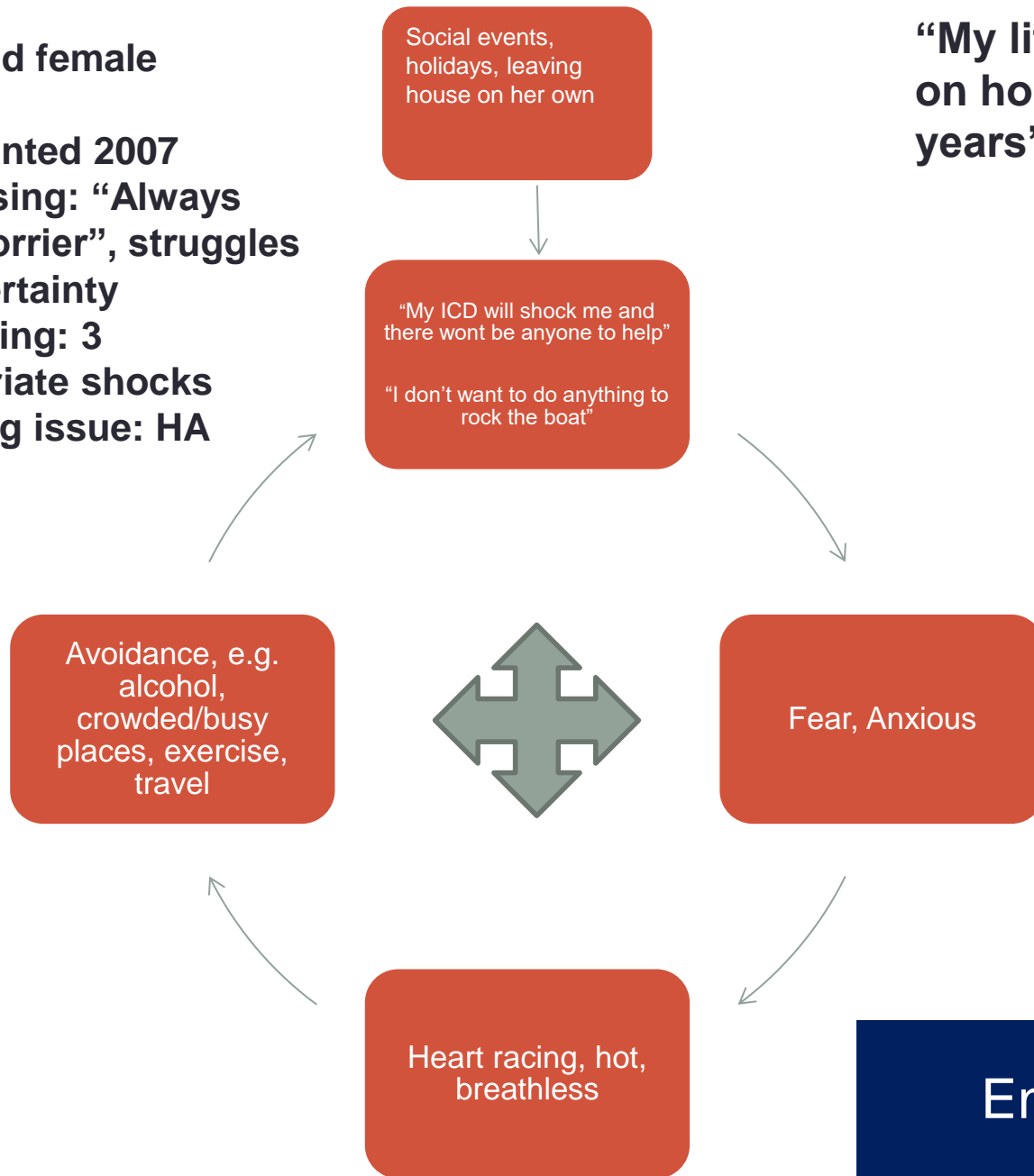
- racing heart
- nausea
- brain zaps
- falling sensation
- feel like
- headaches
- sweating
- shaking
- difficulty breathing
- passing out
- cold chills
- knot in stomach
- weak legs
- lump in the throat
- palpitations
- twitching
- trembling
- numbness
- facial tic
- burning skin
- weak limbs
- chest pain
- tingling
- stuck thoughts
- chronic fatigue
- body jolts
- restless legs
- giddiness
- night sweats
- head pressure
- body pain
- bloating
- depersonalization
- blurred vision
- lightheadedness
- ringing in the ears
- hearing loss
- chest pressure
- tight band around the head
- ringing in the ears
- crazy thoughts
- yawning
- sudden weight loss
- frequent urination

Behaviours

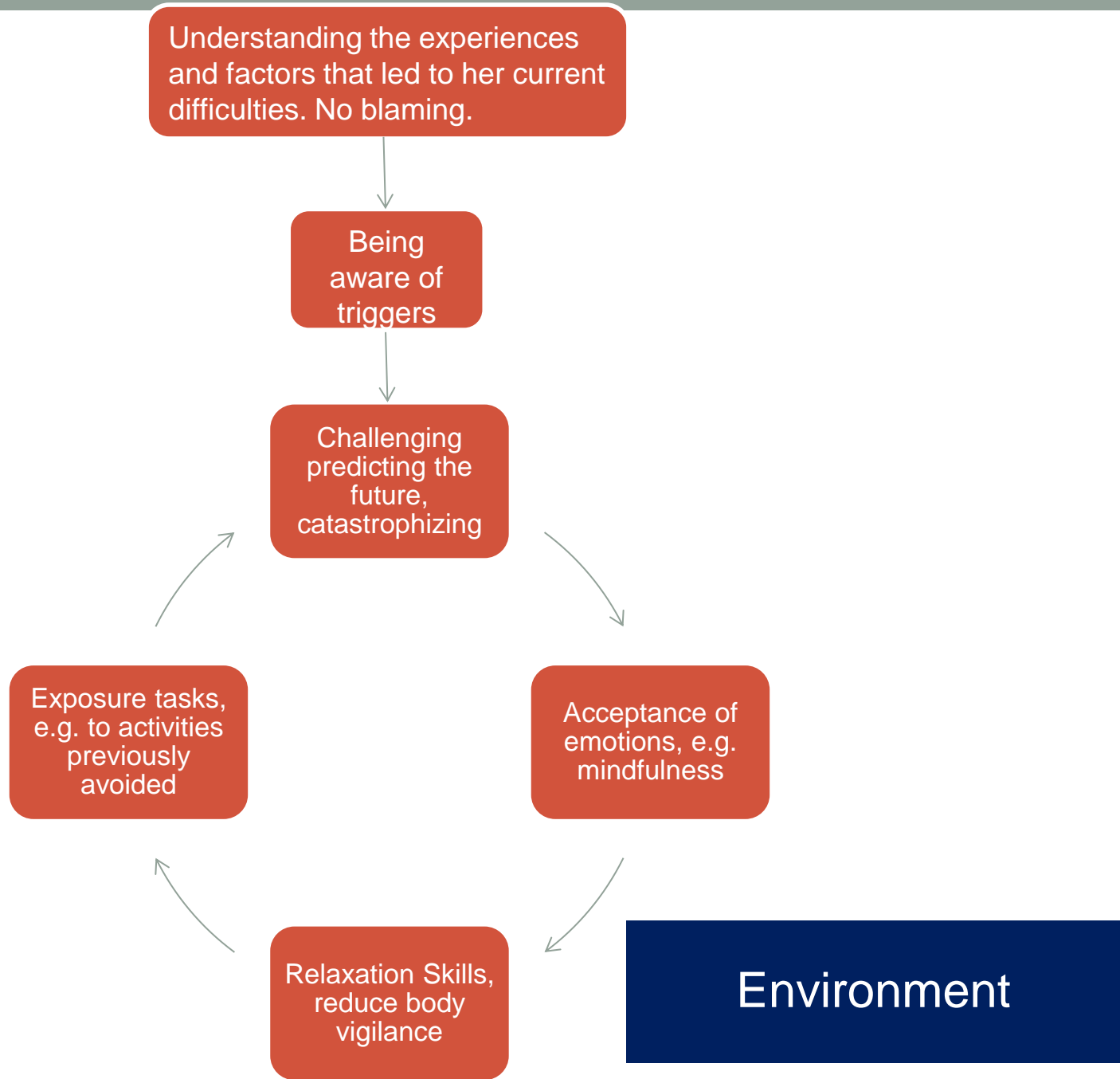
- Reassurance seeking – Googling, calling friends and family
- Checking – for signs that something is wrong, e.g. pulse, BP, O2 levels, balance, vision, speech
- Avoiding people, places or activities for fear of health risks, e.g. sex, exercise, alcohol, crowded/busy environments, leaving house on their own
- Health care utilization- Frequently making medical appointments for reassurance — or avoiding medical care for fear of being diagnosed with a serious illness

- 51 year old female
- ASD
- ICD implanted 2007
- Predisposing: “Always been a worrier”, struggles with uncertainty
- Precipitating: 3 Inappropriate shocks
- Presenting issue: HA

“My life has been put on hold for the last 12 years”



CBT Intervention



Treatment outcome

1. ***To be able to accept my ICD and the changes that may occur with my health.*** No longer worrying about her ICD shocking her and is more engaged in everyday life and activities she enjoys, e.g. yoga, walks on her own, socializing
 2. ***Travel to Tenerife.*** Flew to Glasgow in July, planned a trip to Newcastle in September and Tenerife in November 2019.
- HADS scores- Ax Depression= 9, Anxiety= 7
Dx Depression=1, Anxiety= 3

Supporting HA patients

- Be aware for signs of health anxiety
- Seek to fully understand the patients experience of their illness and the impact it has had and is having on their life
- How would you describe your relationship with your heart condition?
- Ask about any activities that patient is not engaging in, e.g. drinking alcohol, exercise, sex, socializing, travel and whether this is related to their heart condition.

Supporting HA patients

- Anxiety about symptoms- what has your cardiologist said about this? What has your cardiologist recommended?
- Plan A and Plan B – If cardiologist has told them heart condition is stable and that their symptoms are not concerning or non-cardiac related then Plan A) Manage it as anxiety, Plan B) Treat it as a cardiac issue

Supporting HA patients

Thought challenging

- This is probably anxiety
- I've experienced these sensations before
- If something bad was going to happen as a result of these sensations it probably would have happened by now
- I've told my cardiologist about these sensations and they told me not to worry
- I've had an ECG and Echo since having these sensations and they have shown that my heart condition is stable
- If this is anxiety I know how to manage it; breathing, grounding exercise, mindfulness, distraction

Supporting HA patients

- Prognosis- uncertainty really difficult to tolerate, here's what we don't know, here's what we do know, planning in blocks of time.
- Normalization of their feelings- whatever their feeling is valid
- Information seeking – about condition, symptoms, prognosis. Recommendation: specific websites, time limited and/or speak to ACHD team

Resources

Books

- Open Hearts- Kate Bull- Paediatric Cardiologist
- Living with the Enemy – Ray Owen
- Overcoming Health Anxiety – Wilson and Veale

- Centre for Clinical Interventions- module on Health Anxiety

Thanks for listening

