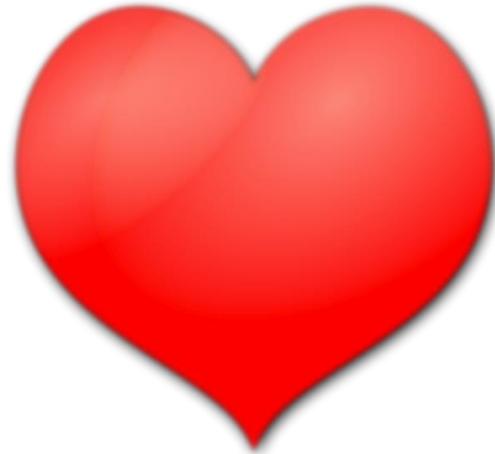


# Coping with the Worry and Stress of Heart Disease



Dr Jane Beckford, Counselling Psychologist, Ealing Cardiac Rehab Team/Imperial Cardiovascular Health Service  
with thanks to Dr Katie Murray for the presentation content

# Psychological Aspects of Heart Disease

There is a high prevalence of psychological distress in patients with heart disease  
- after a heart attack (MI) around 50% of patients experience anxiety and depression

There are relationships between anxiety/depression and increased cardiac risk, due to bodily effects (increased blood pressure, inflammation in the body) and due to behaviour in response to stress

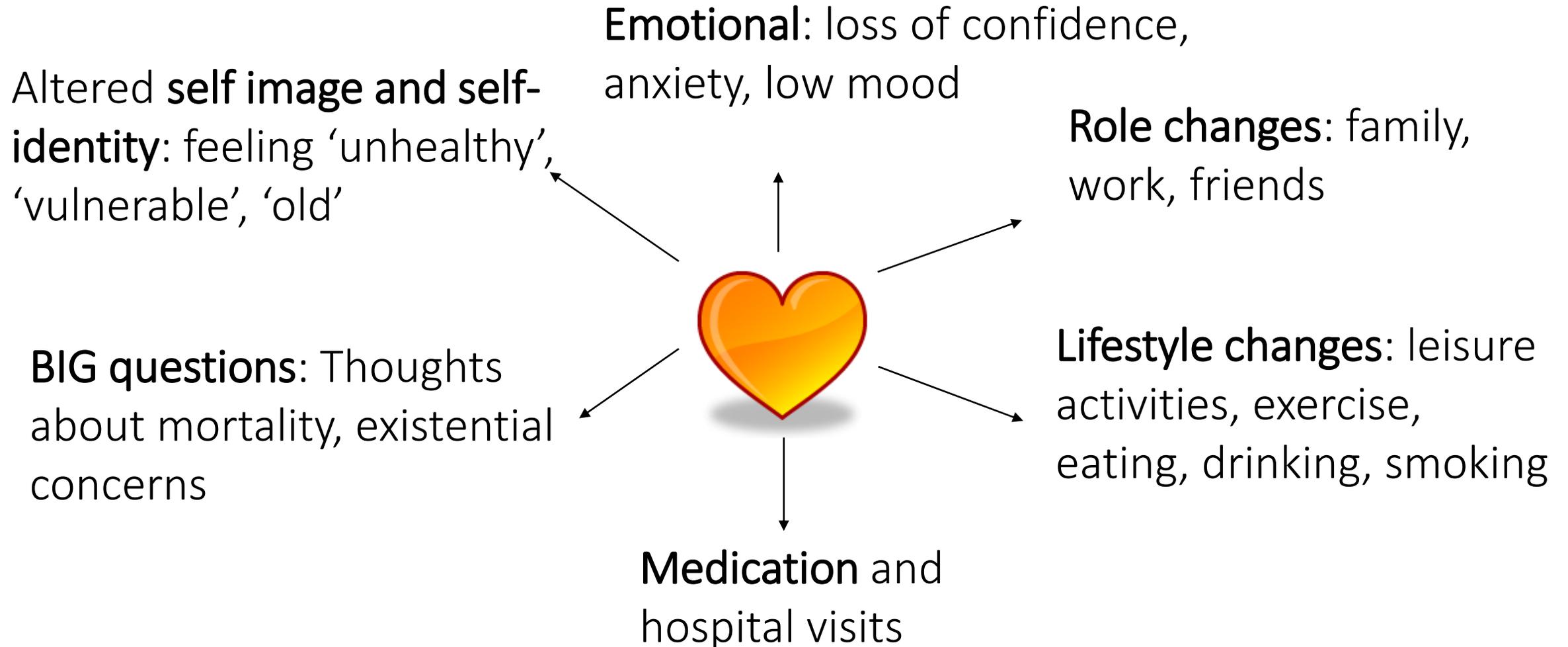
Psychological distress has a detrimental impact on cardiac disease progression, risk of mortality, engagement in cardiac rehab, use of healthcare resources and quality of life

There is evidence that psychological therapies have positive outcomes for cardiac patients

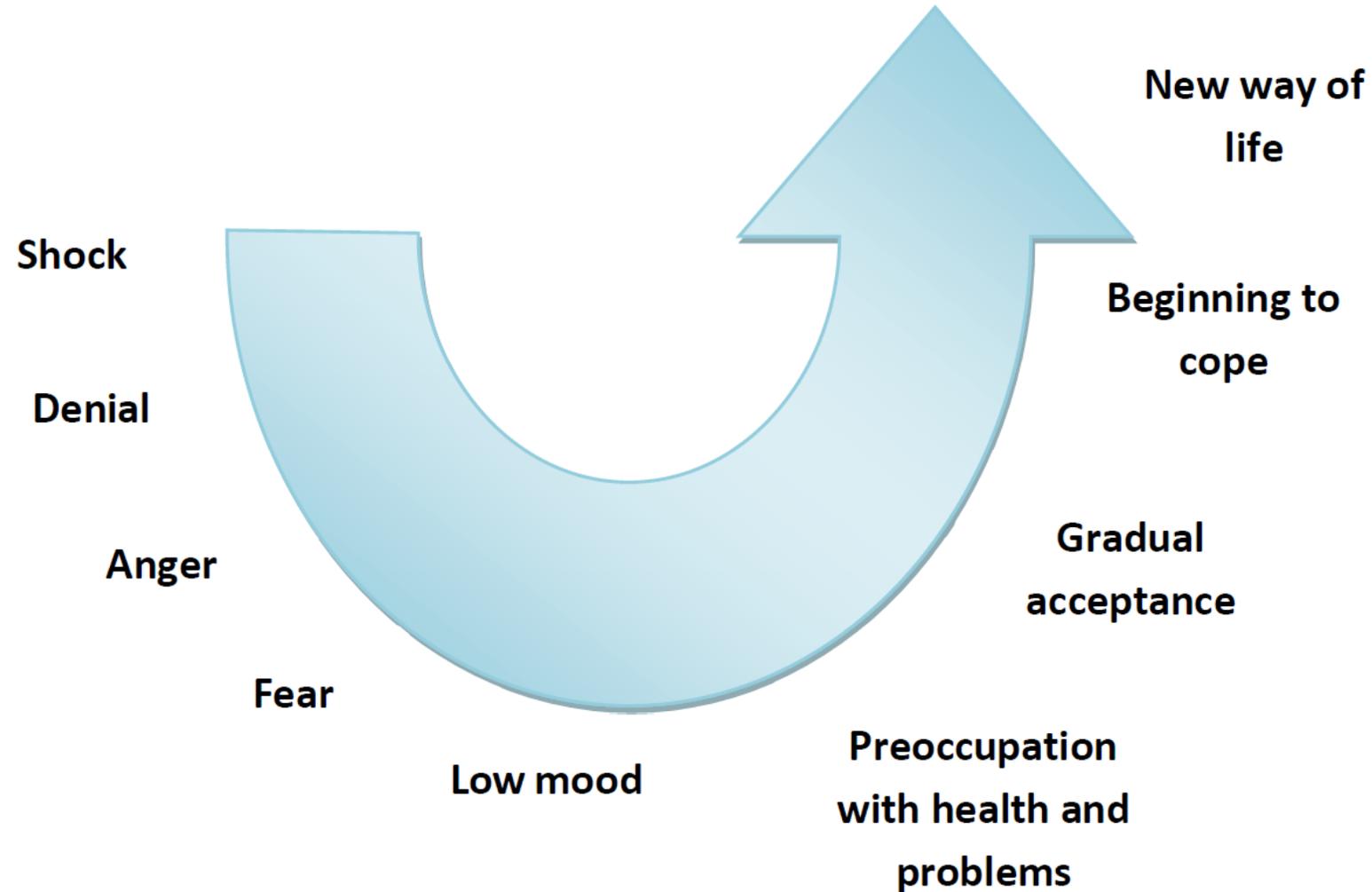
# Psychological difficulties can include

- fear of recurrence, or about the future
- low mood due to a sense of loss or limitation associated with cardiac condition
- trauma associated with cardiac event or hospital experience
- psychological difficulties impacting on behaviour change goals, e.g. fear of exertion a barrier to staying physically active

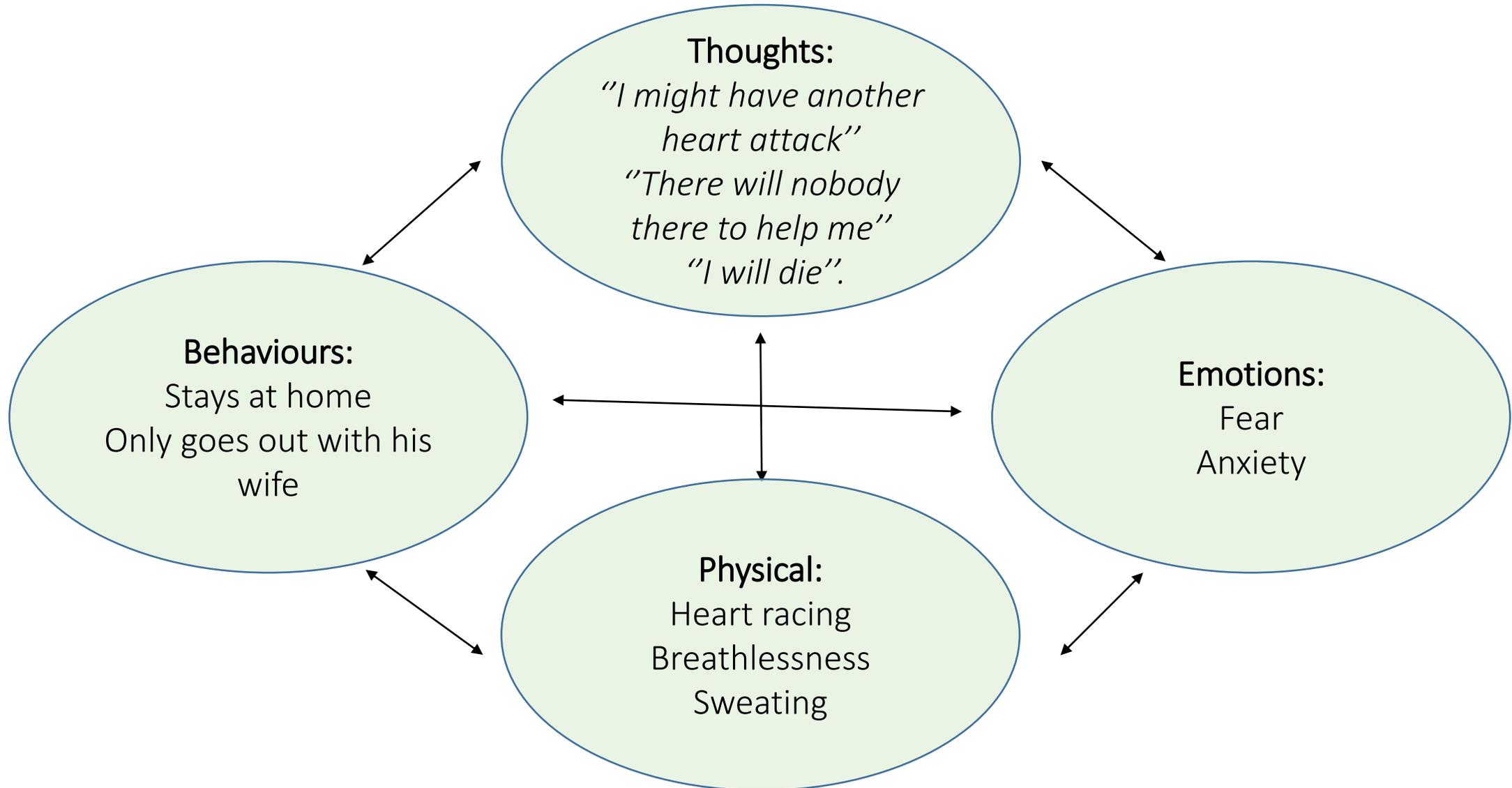
# Common Challenges of Having a Heart Condition



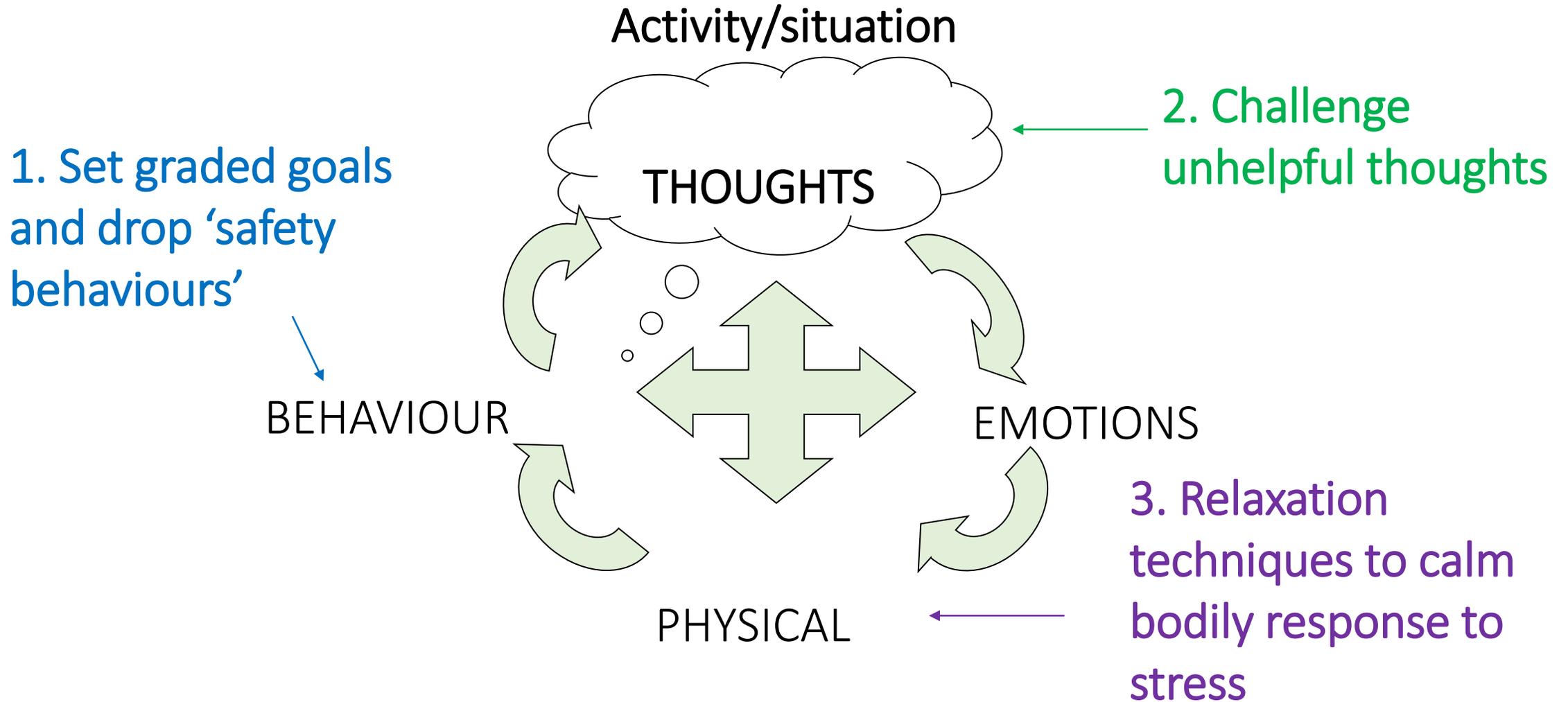
# Common Patterns of Feeling



# Example: Bob thinking about going out alone

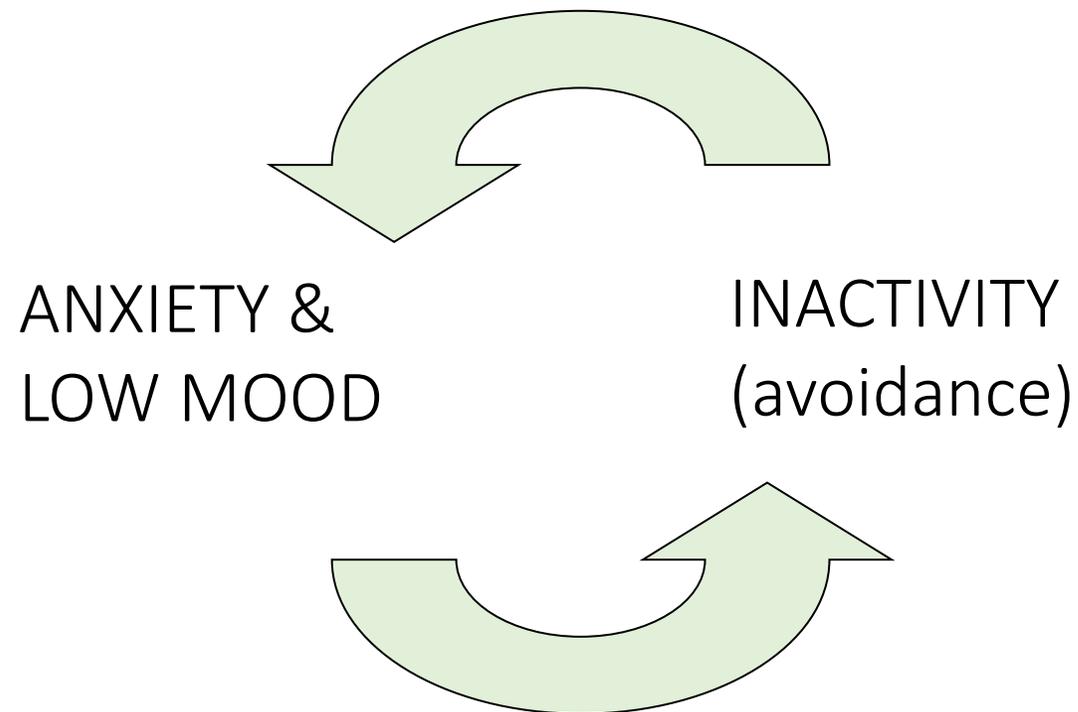


# How do we break out of vicious cycles?



# 1. Changing Behaviour

Avoidance may lead a short-term relief but in the long term **worsens anxiety and low mood.**





## 2. Challenging unhelpful thoughts...

- ♥ Most thinking is so quick and automatic that we don't even realise we are doing
- ♥ We often take thoughts as *truths or facts*, but our thoughts are just *ideas* that we can accept or reject
- ♥ Every time you experience an intense negative feeling, ask yourself:
  - What was going through my mind just then?*
  - So why should that worry me?*

## 2. Generate alternative, more helpful thoughts

I am **catastrophizing**

Feeling anxious doesn't mean something bad will happen

If I avoid going out alone, my anxiety will increase



My cardiologist says my heart is working well now

I am taking protective medication

A bit of gentle exercise will be good for me

In the unlikely event that I need help, most people want to help

# 3. Relaxation Techniques

**Breathing exercises** and **muscle relaxation techniques** work by reducing our nervous system response to stress and anxiety – the **fight or flight** response – and activating our calmer, counter response called **rest and digest**

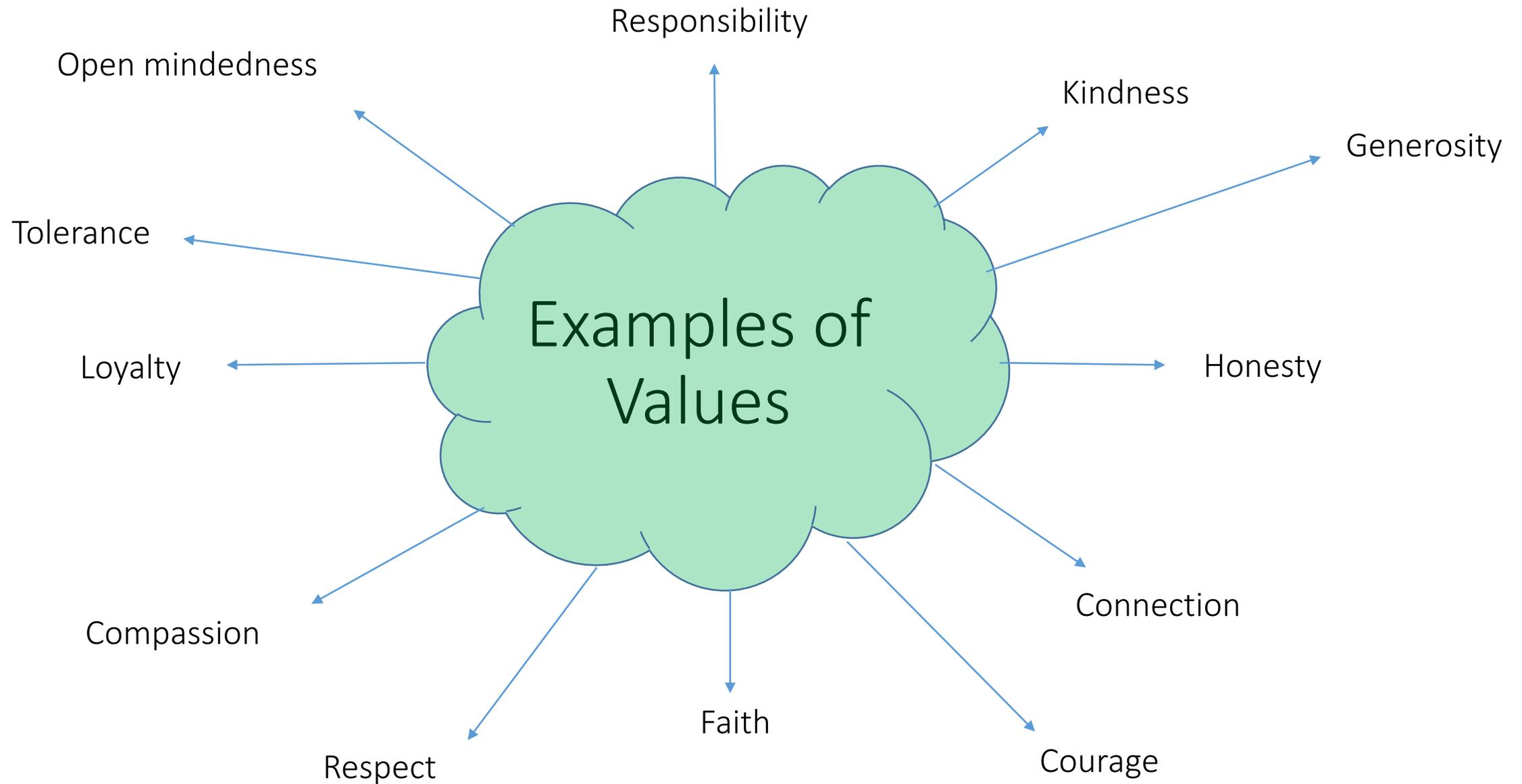
**A simple exercise** is to breathe slowly in for 5 seconds, hold your breath for 2 seconds and breathe slowly out over 10 seconds, then repeat

There are many online relaxation exercises such as progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness meditations etc.

Listening to relaxing music, yoga or walking in nature – many other things can help – try to stay “in the moment” and connect with your senses

# Living in line with our Values

- ♥ When adjusting to a cardiac diagnosis, not being able to **do** everything we could previously can understandably feel frustrating and upsetting
- ♥ It can be helpful to reflect on our **values** – **the principles that are most important to us in life and guide our decisions**
- ♥ Living in line with our values means that we can continue to lead a **meaningful** life, even if it means doing things differently
- ♥ Living in line with our values is crucial to our overall wellbeing, especially when experiencing health difficulties
- ♥ When we're not living in line with our values we may feel low, anxious, frustrated or empty



# Back to Bob...

- ♥ In therapy, Bob identified one of his core values as **connection with others** - he identified **time with family and friends** as the key way that he put this value into practice
- ♥ Since his heart attack, Bob was too unwell to make the trip to see his grandson - this left him feeling **disconnected**, negatively impacting his mood and causing him to avoid contacting his friends as much as before
- ♥ In therapy, Bob set **achievable goals** which allowed him to reconnect with his values in new ways
- ♥ This included organising more regular phone calls with friends and arranging for his family to visit him instead

# Conclusions

- ♥ It's common and normal to feel anxious and/or low after a cardiac event
- ♥ It may be helpful to reflect on your thoughts, feelings and behaviours
- ♥ It can also be helpful to identify your personal values and set achievable goals in line with these values
- ♥ Often psychological difficulties pass in time, but if they are having a significant impact on your daily life, professional support may be helpful

**Thank You**  
Any Questions?



# Emergency Support

If you feel that you cannot cope or keep yourself safe, it is important to talk to someone

**Single Point of Access (SPA)** for 24 hour mental health advice and support

**0800 328 4444** for West London NHS Trust

**0800 023 4650** for Central and North West London NHS Trust

**Samaritans** – available to talk to someone 24 hours a day **116 123** (free phone)

[jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**999** or **A&E**

# Counselling and Online Support

**Ealing Talking Therapies:** <https://ealingiapt.nhs.uk>; Call [020 3830 5640](tel:02038305640)

**Mind:** 0300 123 3393, Open Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 6:00, [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

**NHS Every Mind Matters:** includes specific tips for looking after our mental health and self-help modules for sleep, stress, anxiety, low mood. Audio links for relaxation and mindfulness exercises: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/>

**The Good Thinking website** provides digital mental health support to Londoners, with online assessment tools, free apps and resources: <https://www.good-thinking.uk/>

# Support for Long Term Conditions

**IMPARTS** has a list of resources for people with various health conditions:

<https://imparts.org/resources-self-help/>

**The British Heart Foundation** website includes lots of information and there is a link to the online community of cardiac patients - **Health Unlocked** <https://www.bhf.org.uk/> Cardiac patients can also speak to a cardiac nurse on the **BHF helpline**: 0808 802 1234, Monday to Friday 9am-5pm

**Cardiomyopathy UK** has lots of information, online support groups and Facebook live sessions with doctors covering FAQ: <https://www.cardiomyopathy.org/>

**CRY website** – Cardiac Risk in the Young. Information and support for young people and their families: <https://www.c-r-y.org.uk>, Tel: [01737 363222](tel:01737363222) Monday to Friday 10am–5pm

**The Diabetes UK website** has lots of detailed advice and support: <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/>. Patients can also contact the **Diabetes UK helpline**: 0345 123 2399 Monday to Friday 9am-6pm or email: [helpline@diabetes.org.uk](mailto:helpline@diabetes.org.uk)