



WORKBOOK

Questioning Unsettling Experiences

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WELCOME TO THE QUESTIONING UNSETTLING EXPERIENCES WORKBOOK!

This workbook is a collaborative creation between Early Intervention in Psychosis (North West Sussex) and i-Rock Horsham District. It is designed for Young People who have experienced strange, confusing, or unsettling visual experiences – these types of experiences are a lot more common than people think and do not always mean that something is “wrong” or that you are unwell.

It is intended for Young People who have not been given a diagnosis of Psychosis or a Psychotic Disorder, but are confused, curious, or worried about their experiences and want to better understand their mind.

Inside, we cover:

- information and ideas about brain processes
- examples of unusual visual experiences
- Tools for reflection and managing distress
- Grounding and Mindfulness exercises
- Activities to reflect on your own experiences

You should initially be guided through the contents of the workbook by an i-Rock Practitioner across 3 safe and confidential sessions. After these sessions, you can use the workbook as a tool to keep coming back to in order to practice skills, refresh your knowledge, or reflect on your journey. Feel free to share it with loved ones or trusted Adults in your life.

Note: a pencil icon indicates that this is an opportunity for you to complete an activity. Some pages may feel more relevant to you than others. You can complete these in session with your i-Rock Practitioner or in your own time. Use them in a way that feels right for you. There is no right or wrong way to reflect on your experiences.

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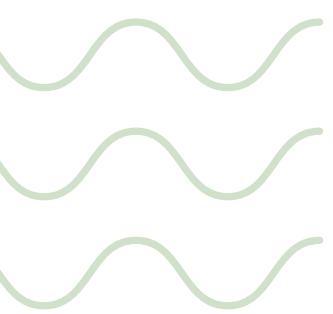
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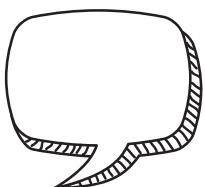
PART 1

Understanding Unsettling Experiences

What are these things I'm seeing?

PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCES OR HALLUCINATIONS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE AND DOES IT MATTER?

Have you ever experienced hearing:



Your name
being called
out



A child
crying



Your phone
vibrating

When in fact, it wasn't actually happening?

Are these experiences hallucinations? Misperceptions? Illusions? Or vivid attention-grabbing thoughts?

It could be any of these things!

WHAT IS A HALLUCINATION?

A hallucination involves our senses being activated in the absence of something obviously happening in the world to activate them... But this sort of thing happens to us all the time. Sometimes in ways which are distressing, sometimes not.

When is a time you thought you had experienced a hallucination?
Make some notes in the box below:



So, when is it a clinical/mental health issue? Let's discuss.

INSIDE VS OUTSIDE THE MIND

Some people find it hard to be able to say whether what they are experiencing is inside or outside their mind (particularly when talking about hearing voices).

We might consider whether we are aware that what we are experiencing is not a 'real' perception. We might experience a perceptual experience very vividly (like hearing a voice, or seeing a face) but know that 'It's just in my mind'.

However, some people are able to vividly perceive sensory experiences in their mind to the extent they appear real (for example people with eidetic/photographic memory).

Often, it's difficult to draw a line between hallucinations, illusions, misperceptions, and vivid perceptual experiences which come from our own thoughts/imagination.

Some say, it is more like a continuum:

Continuum

Imagined perceptual experience

- Aware 'it's in my mind'
- Experience originates from 'inside' my mind, or in my 'mind's eye'
- Might be less detailed or less vivid than 'true' perceptual experience

Hallucination

- Perceptual experience in absence of external stimuli
- Unaware 'it's not real'
- Surprised others are unable to see/hear what you are seeing/hearing
- Experience appears to be happening in external world
- Involuntary

Think about the example you gave on the last page. Did you know, in that moment, that what you were seeing was in your mind? Did you think it was 100% real? Were you unsure? Write some thoughts in the box below:



EXAMPLES OF PERCEIVED VISUAL EXPERIENCES DUE TO LIMITED SENSORY INPUT

ARCTIC EXPLORERS

Due to reduced sensory stimuli, Arctic Explorers began to experience vivid visuals that did not make sense to them.



LEFF'S SENSORY DEPRIVATION STUDY (1968)

Leff found that when a person has limited or is deprived of sensory input (taste, smell, sight, hearing, touch) they can report experiences that are similar to hallucinations despite not having a mental illness. This can also be the case when socially isolated.

B.: "I just got an image of a head and shoulders then, of a man. I think he's wearing a suit 'cos there's clean outlines to his shoulders."

"I got a strange vision then. Someone with a white robe. Like a knight with a white coronet. It was very vivid. I just saw it."

"Saw a hunchback then. Saw him then as an image as if he was standing twenty feet away."

"It's like looking up at a ceiling now. I can see the join between the ceiling and the walls. It's a long box-like room, relatively very high."

"Some of these images are very vivid. As vivid as Batman comic illustrations. That vivid with that much colour."

Ro.: "I do see kind of visions. They don't last more than a few seconds. Of different places. Sometimes they're rooms."

"I still see sort of visions that have no meaning for me. I just saw a very long banqueting table covered with a white cloth and stacks of food on it. This table is about two hundred feet long."

"I can see myself walking down the aisle of a church. It's a big church with columns down either side. It's very old but in good preservation. Very clean and freshly painted."

Sh.: "Now I'm looking up a long shaft, or down one. I feel as if I'm falling down it. It's gone now. Now I can see a crocodile's head. Now I can see a body. It's gone out of sight now. It's back again. I think it's a man. Now I can see a bloke with his hair chopped off."

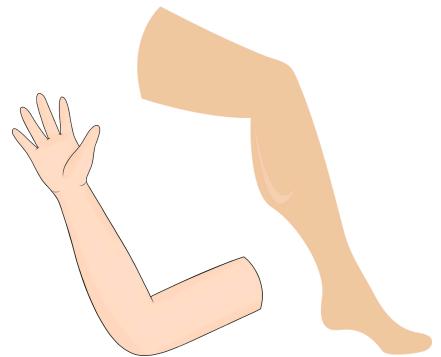
PRISONER'S CINEMA

Often described as a “lightshow” of different colours that appear out of darkness when a person has been deprived of light or visual stimuli for an extended period of time. These lights have sometimes been reported to take the form of shapes, faces, figures etc. This has been reported by Prisoners confined to dark cells, truck drivers, pilots, and astronauts.



PHANTOM LIMB SYNDROME

Individuals that have had one (or more) of their limbs removed sometimes report still experiencing sensations from that missing limb – pain, itchiness, discomfort, aching etc. There are some experiments that you can watch online where people experience feeling sensations from a fake/prop limb:



Is That My Hand?:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DphlhmtGRql>

Scan to watch video



Science Of Self – The Rubber Hand Illusion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ASM12IpDDyO>

Scan to watch video

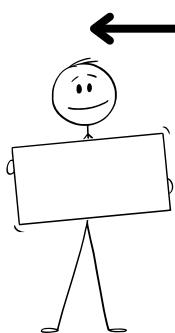


VISUAL IMAGERY

Visual imagery refers to how we perceive things in our 'mind's eye'. For some, this is a simple task that conjure detail images. For others, it is a difficult task. This is understood to be on a spectrum:

Aphantasia

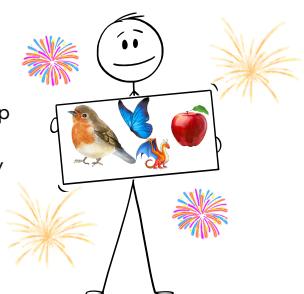
Struggling or being unable to form mental images



- Some key aspects of aphantasia:
- More likely to think in numbers or words
 - Struggle to recall visual details of a past event or memory.
 - Less likely to imagine frightening/scary scenarios

Hyperphantasia

Being able to imagine things very vividly and in extreme detail



- Some key aspects of hyperphantasia:
- Mental images can be as sharp as real vision
 - Stronger emotional or sensory reactions to imagined scenes
 - Can enhance creativity, memory, and visualisation skills

A quick at-home test for finding out your visual imagery ability is called the red apple test.

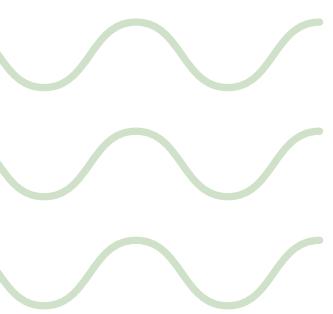
How well can you see the apple visually on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most vivid? Can you see its colour, shape and the length of the stem?



How vivid is your apple? Where would you place yourself on this spectrum?

There's also a more official questionnaire, called the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire. VVIQ, the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, explores the vividness of your visual imagination. It was created in 1973 by British psychologist David Marks and is proven to be an accurate test of the vividness with which you can see people, objects, or settings in your mind's eye.





PART 2

Why does this happen?

What's going on in my brain and body?

HYPNAGOGIC AND HYPNOPOMPIC EXPERIENCES/HALLUCINATIONS

Have you ever experienced seeing something in the middle of the night when you were in bed?

Yes No 

If you ticked yes, had you been asleep before you saw it?

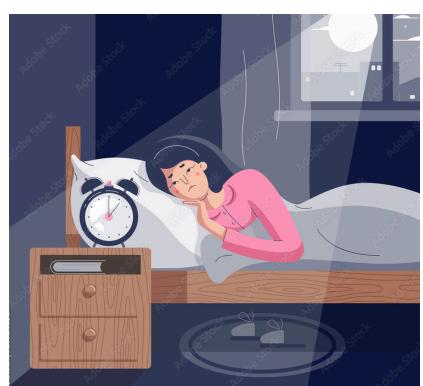
Yes No 

Can you remember what you saw? How long did it last for? Were you able to interact with it? How did you feel? Use the box below to make some notes:



When we are in a near sleep state, we can experience another mode of hallucination known as Hypnagogic Hallucinations.

These hallucinations occur just as we are falling asleep or waking up. They are thought to be experienced by 37% of the population. The person often believes the hallucination has woken them up. It can be auditory, visual, kinaesthetic or tactile and is sudden in occurrence.

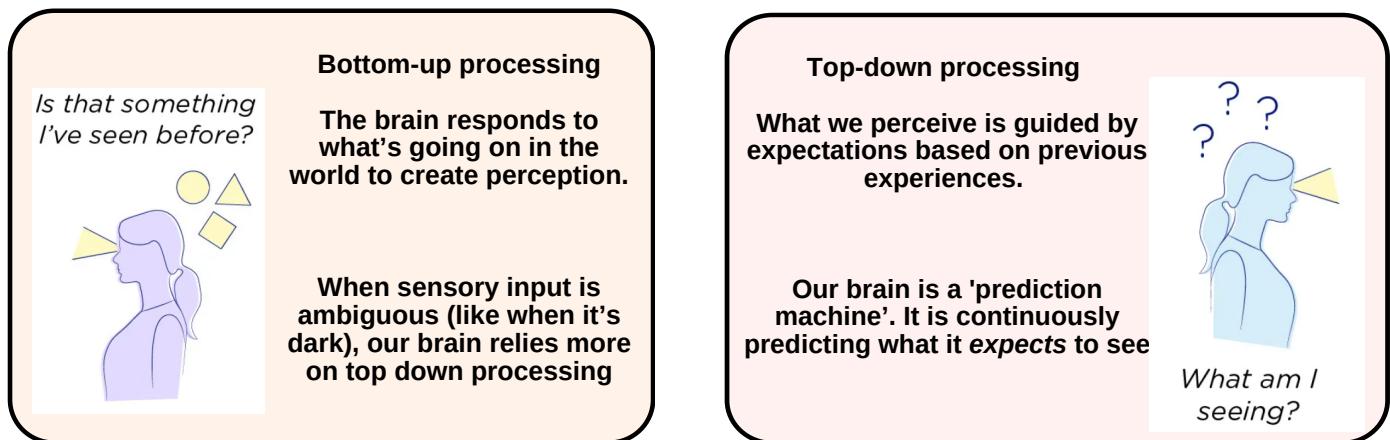


People who experience this will often say they were fully awake when they experienced it, however when this has been tested (by using an EEG) it shows the brain is still in a state of sleep at the time of the hallucination.

HOW DOES THE BRAIN CREATE PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCES?

Our brains use a combination of **bottom-up processing** and **top-down processing** to perceive experiences. A dynamic balance of both of these forms of processing is necessary for accurate perception.

If what we are experiencing is distorted, degraded, or ambiguous, this usually means that our top-down processing is being used more to process the sensory input.



Have you ever experienced a strange sensation when you have gone to walk on an escalator that doesn't work?

Yes No

Or when you have gone to lift a bottle that you thought was full but is empty?

Yes No

Have you had any other experiences that have felt strange when the outcome was not as you had anticipated?
Use the box below to make some notes:

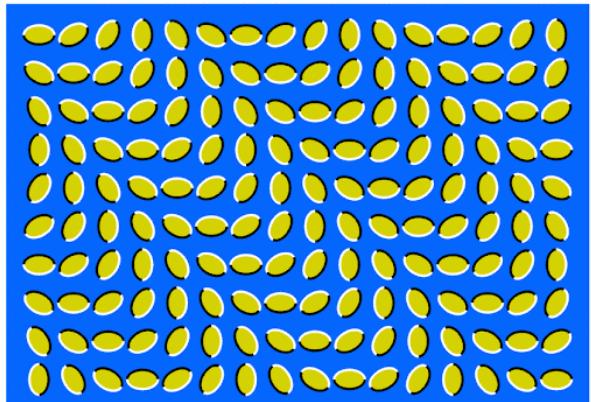


ILLUSIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

Most of us have looked through illusion books or seen them online, like the one here:

Can you notice the different colours moving about in the image?

This is how our brain is perceiving it but in reality they are still.



**BLACK
AND
BLUE?**

**OR GOLD
AND
WHITE?**

Do you remember the viral image of this dress?

The dress is black and blue. However, due to perception, how the light is reflecting off the dress, and context, many people perceive it as gold and white.

Similar illusions can happen with sounds too. What we perceive we are hearing can change based on what we are seeing in front of us:

McGurk Effect - Auditory Illusion:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k8fHR9jKVM&t=65s>

Scan to watch video



How the volume is increased/decreased in different speakers can cause us to feel as though we are in different places or situations. This is known as the Stereo Effect:

Virtual Barber Shop:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUDTlvagjJA>

Scan to watch video



The Stereo Effect can also make us perceive words being spoken when it is simply just random, overlapping noises:

Deutsch's Phantom Words:

http://philomel.com/phantom_words/pages.php?i=1115

Scan to watch video



OTHER EXAMPLES OF THIS

DALAMTIAN IMAGE

Amidst these black and white splodges, can you see a spotty dog? If you had not been told this was a "Dalmatian Image" do you think you would have noticed it? Knowing what we are looking for primes our brains to find structure in ambiguous images.



black green yellow black black black black yellow
red green green yellow green yellow green blue
blue red blue yellow green red blue yellow red
blue green blue black blue black blue red black
yellow black black yellow red yellow green yellow
green blue blue yellow blue yellow yellow blue
black yellow green red red red black black black
red yellow black green green black green black
red black red black blue yellow black blue blue
red red blue yellow yellow green red blue yellow

THE STROOP TEST

Can you read out loud the colour each of these words is written in, quickly? Our brains will process the word before the colour it is written in. For example, when reading the word "Green" in red ink we are more likely to shout out Green. If we are rushing, this can mean we might not even notice if we've processed the colour incorrectly.

PAREIDOLIA

What do you see in the images to the right? Many people would describe seeing faces in these images. This is because our brains have a tendency to interpret a random or ambiguous stimuli as an object, pattern, or with meaning. This can often lead us to assign human characteristics to objects. Have you ever noticed yourself doing this? Perhaps when looking at clouds in the sky?



INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS OR IMAGES

it is very common for unwanted thoughts, images, or urges to come into our mind involuntarily. These can be distressing or disturbing at times. For some, they may be linked to past trauma.

Most people will experience intrusive thoughts, urges, and/or images at some point in their lives. Shaming ourselves for experiencing them is likely to increase distress which will make them more likely to reoccur.

Think about the last time a strong or disturbing image popped into your head? What was it?



In that moment, what did it make you believe about yourself or the situation?

Do you think it could be trying to tell you something? Could it be linked to stress, past events, fears, or something else?



When it appears, how much control do you have over it?

What could you gently say to yourself next time it happens that might help?



It is important to remember that thinking about or visualising yourself doing something that is against your morals does not make you a bad person

DAYDREAMING

Daydreaming often involves unconsciously imagining scenarios, possibilities, fantasies, or memories. A person will become detached from their surroundings whilst they are daydreaming and it is sometimes viewed as a form of mental escape.

Immersive daydreaming describes deep, vivid, and highly engaging forms of daydreaming. It can be used to make sense of emotions, problem solve, or to help with creativity.

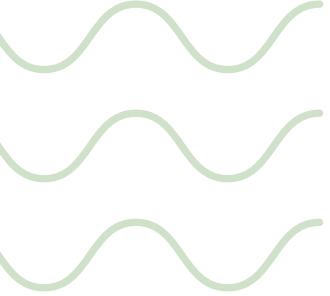


MALADAPTIVE DAYDREAMING (MD)

This is a term used to describe when a person's daydreaming becomes so immersive that it interferes with their daily functioning. It can be difficult to control, compulsive, and time consuming.



Use the space below to describe or draw out one of your daydreams:



PART 3

When it becomes distressing

Why does this bother me and what makes it worse?

WHAT MAKES THESE EXPERIENCES DISTRESSING

APPRAISAL

Sometimes the way we assess the experience can cause us distress.

What goes through your mind when you have these experiences?



CONTENT

Often, the content of what we see is distressing.

What is the content of your experiences that causes you distress?



NOT BEING UNDERSTOOD

Feeling like no one else shares your experiences or understands what you're going through can be distressing.

What do you wish the people in your life understood about what you're experiencing?



OTHER STRESS THAT TRIGGERS THESE EXPERIENCES

Sometimes we have other things that are going on in our life that can be upsetting, and the more upset we get, the more we have unsettling perceptual experiences.

What else is going on in your life that may be contributing to what you are experiencing?



VISUAL METAPHORS

Sometimes the things that are causing us stress in life can be quite overwhelming and difficult for us to process. We can feel stressed or scared but if the cause of those emotions isn't clear or tangible, it can be easier for us to create visual representations for these stressors instead.

For example, we might be anxious because we are worried about what other people think about us when we are going about our day. This anxiety, with no clear trigger, starts to be represented by a shadowy figure in the corner of our eye when we are out of the house or when we start to worry about other people's opinions.



What current stressors do you have in your life?



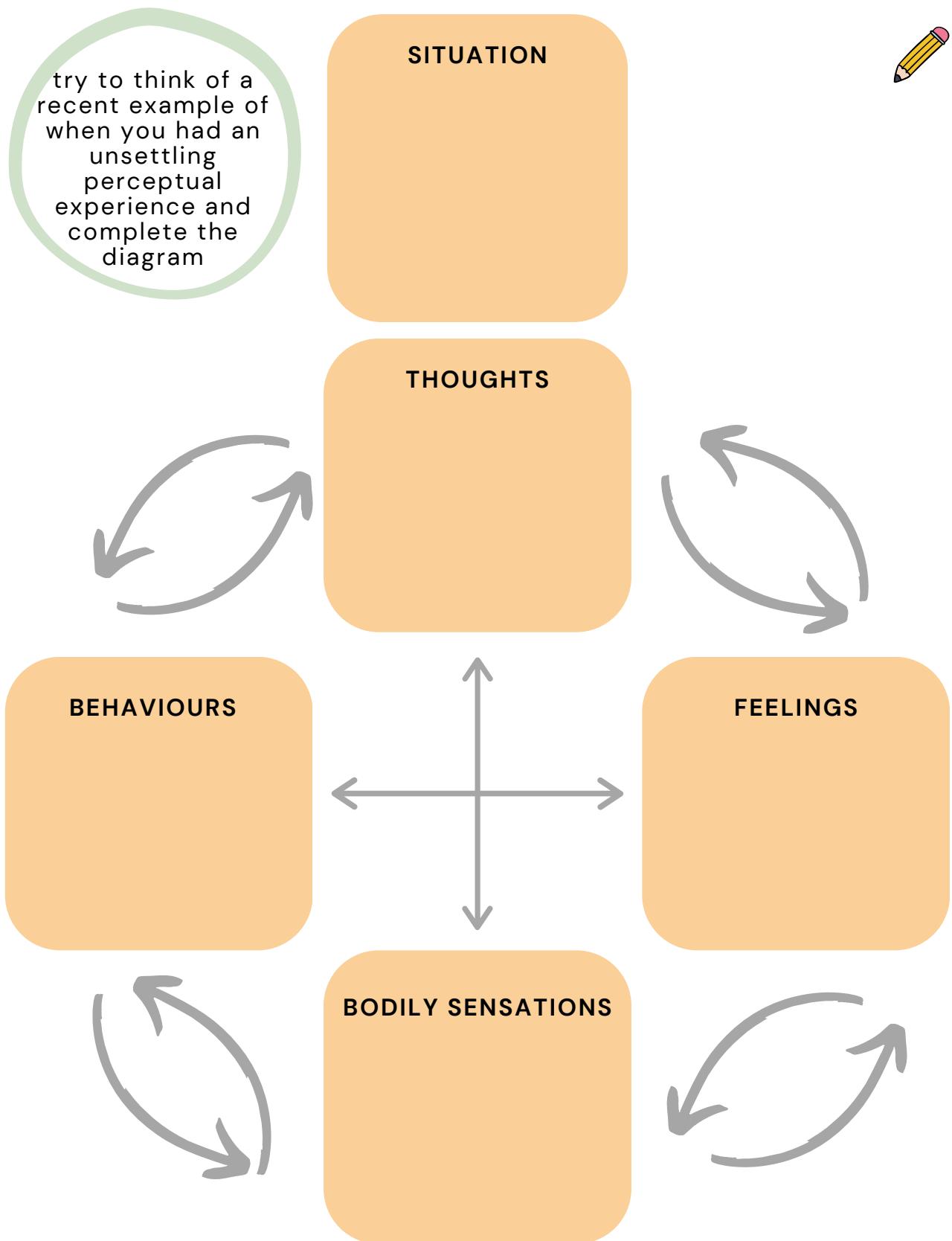
On the other hand, we might be really overwhelmed with lots of exam or work pressures that are building up and we are also having issues at home. Because there are so many different stressors in our lives, these start to be represented by a monster that we see when we are on our own or trying to go to sleep.

When do you usually experience unsettling perceptions?



HOT CROSS BUN MODEL (PADESKY & MOONEY, 1990)

Our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are all very closely linked. When we are faced with a distressing situation we will notice our thoughts feeding into that distress. We will feel the distress in our bodies as our amygdala preps our body for Fight, Flight, or Freeze. We may also notice that the way we respond to the situation keeps our distress going. All of this leads us to be stuck in a cycle of distress



BODY MAP

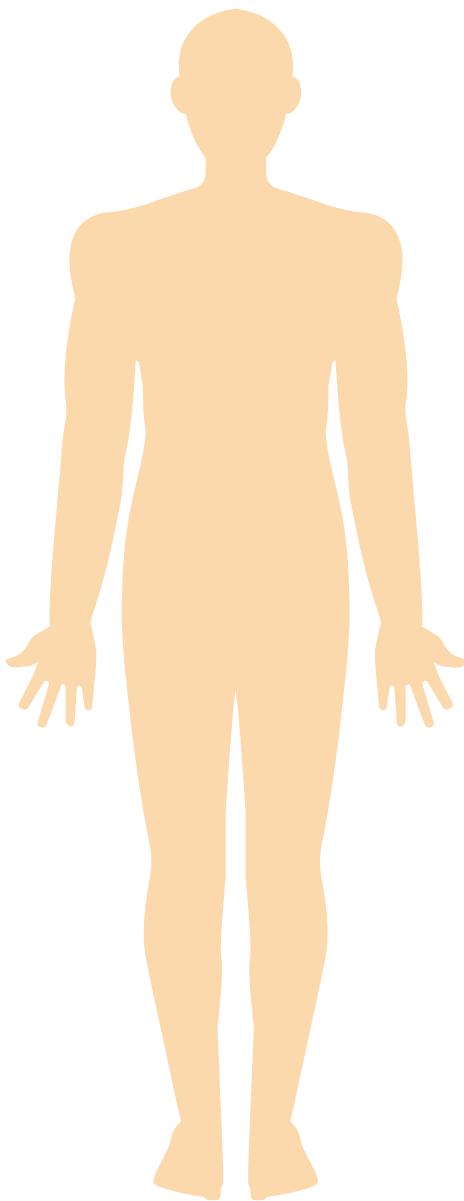
What emotions do you feel when you have unsettling perceptual experiences:



Our brain and body are working together to prepare us for a Fight, Flight or Freeze response to a perceived danger.

So, it's not surprising that the distress we feel can present through different bodily sensations. These can include stomach ache, headache, dizziness, shaking, crying, dry mouth, 'shutdown', tense muscles, fast heartbeat, shallow breathing.

Using the body map, try to plot down the different ways you feel the distressing emotions you experience in your body:





PART 4

What can help

How can I feel more in control and less distressed?

HOW TO EASE THESE SENSATIONS

It can be distressing to feel all these sensations and, since the brain is busy just thinking about running away or fighting, it's not going to be thinking clearly or rationally.

It can be helpful to know how to calm and soothe yourself, so that you can start thinking clearly again.

Here are some ideas, and there may be things you already find helpful.



Mindfulness exercises

Below are some short mindfulness exercises for you try.

Remember you can use these anywhere, anytime – especially if you feel yourself getting tangled up in your thoughts and feelings!



Put down roots

This is a simple exercise to centre yourself and connect with the world around you. It can be done sitting or standing up.

1. Plant your feet firmly on the ground.
2. Push them down – notice the floor (and chair if sitting) beneath you, supporting you.
3. Notice the muscle tension in your legs as you push your feet down and imagine roots anchoring you to the earth.
4. Notice your entire body – and the feeling of gravity flowing down through your head, spine, legs, into your feet and through to the earth below.
5. Now look around and notice what you can see and hear. Notice where you are and what you are doing.



Notice five things

This is another simple exercise to centre yourself and engage with your environment.

1. Pause for a moment.
2. Look around and notice five things you can see.
3. Listen carefully and notice five things you can hear.
4. Notice five things you can feel in contact with your body.
5. Finally, do all of the above at the same time.



Sense your activities

Pick an activity that you enjoy such as hugging a loved one, eating lunch, playing with the dog, walking in the park, listening to music, painting, having a hot shower etc.

Do this activity mindfully: engage in it fully using all five of your senses and savour every moment. When your attention wanders, as soon as you realise it, note what distracted you and re-engage in whatever you are doing.



4-7-8

Here is a little breathing technique that can help you to centre yourself and calm down when you feel stressed. It helps by focusing attention on the breath and also ‘tricks’ your body into feeling more relaxed by reducing a fast heart rate. You can use this anytime, anywhere.

1. Exhale deeply through your mouth.
2. Take a deep breath through your nose for 4 counts.
3. Hold the breath for 7 counts.
4. Exhale through your mouth for 8 counts.
5. Repeat 4–8 times.

More mindfulness

These exercises will take a little more time.

Leaves on a stream

While sitting quietly, close your eyes or focus on a particular object in the room.

Bring your attention to your breath,

then start to notice the thoughts that come into your mind.

As you notice each thought, imagine putting those words onto a leaf
as it floats by on a stream.

Put each thought that you notice onto a leaf, and watch it drift on by.

There's no need to look for the thoughts, or to remain alert waiting for them to come.

Just let them come, and as they do, place them onto a leaf.

Your attention will wander, particularly so at first, and that's okay – it's what minds do.

As soon as you notice your mind wandering, just gently bring your focus back to the
thoughts, and placing them onto the leaves.

After a few minutes, bring your attention back to your breath for a moment,
then (open your eyes and) become more aware of your environment.



Progressive muscle relaxation

Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable either sitting or lying down.

Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.

When you're ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot.

Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.

Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can.

Hold for a count of 10.

Relax your right foot.

Focus on the tension flowing away

and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.

Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.

When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot, and repeat the process.

Move slowly up through your whole body, contracting and relaxing the muscles as you go.

Useful resources

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk>

<https://www.themix.org.uk>

<https://www.mindfulnessforteens.com/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/>

Mindfulness exercises and tips
<https://www.mind.org.uk>

Leaves on a stream
youtube.com/watch?v=jovZDkEnFng

CREATE AN UNSETTLING PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE PROTOCOL

When first learning how to reduce our distress to these experiences, it can feel quite overwhelming. Creating a protocol for what to do when they happen can help you feel more in control of them. Here is an example but make sure yours is personalised to you:

1. Notice the sensations in your body, and name one or two, such as increased heart rate, rapid breathing, sweaty palms.
2. Identify the emotion you are feeling, e.g. 'I am afraid'.
3. Remind yourself these symptoms are in reaction to an unsettling perceptual experience. You can give it a short title if you want e.g. 'I am having these symptoms because I am perceiving The Shadow'.
4. Shift attention to your external senses and name at least three things you can see, hear or smell: 'I can hear the traffic in the road outside', 'I see the sun shining', 'I smell smoke from a bonfire'.
5. Affirm today's date, including day, month and year.
6. Based on the last two steps, evaluate if the situation you are in is safe or dangerous.
7. If you are actually safe, in spite of having an unsettling perceptual experience, tell yourself 'I am having an unsettling perceptual experience and I am not in any danger'.
8. If you are not in a safe situation, seek safety.

Saying each element out loud can be helpful, and a completed statement might go like this:

"I'm really scared and my heart is pounding and I'm sweating, because I'm seeing The Shadow. At the same time I'm looking round my living room and I can see my red settee, a newspaper and a photograph of my family. I can hear the washing machine going and music on the radio. Today is (month/year)."

You can write the steps down, or put them on your phone to remind yourself what to do if an unwanted perceptual experience begins.



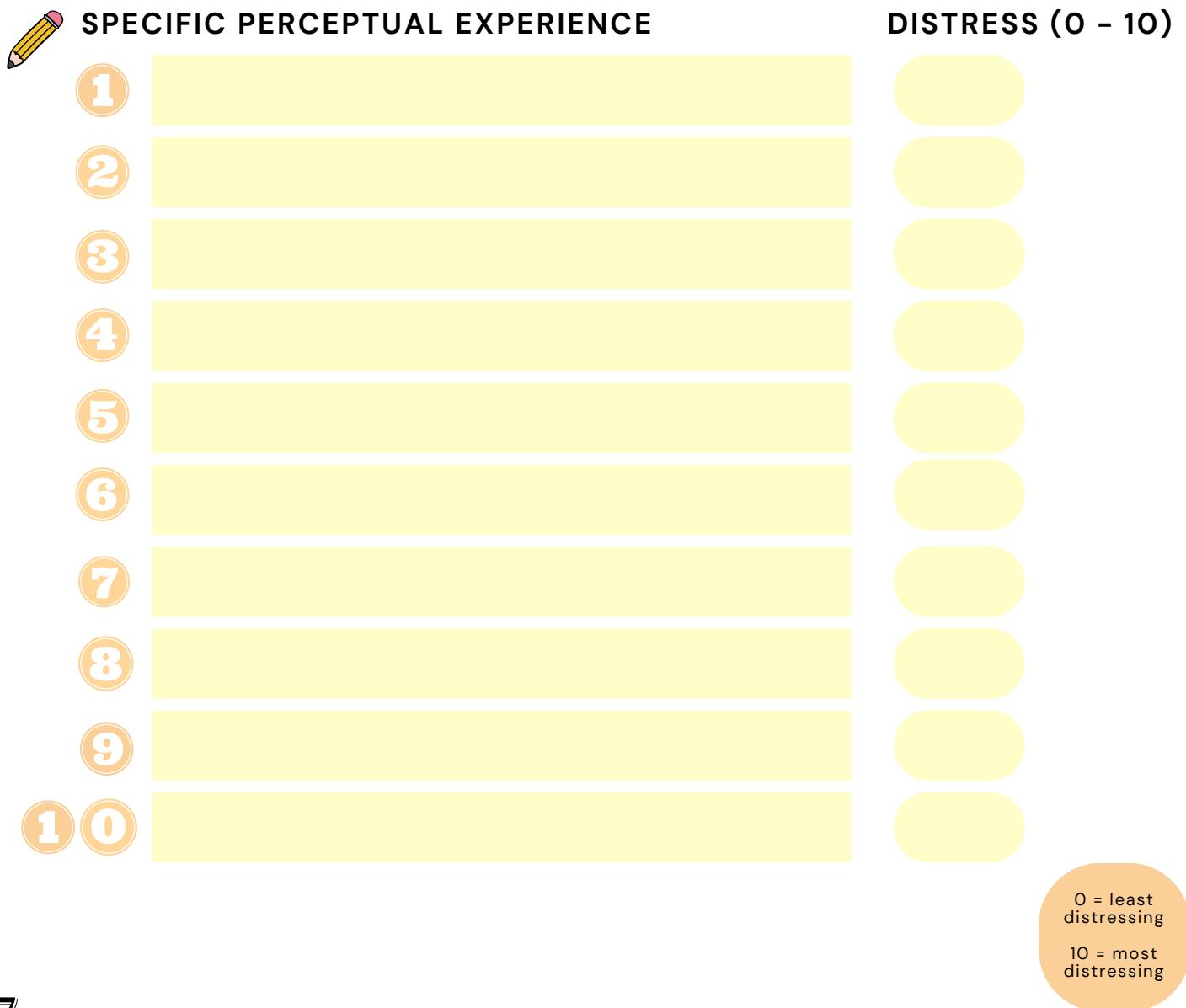
MY UNSETTLING PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE PROTOCOL

CONTROLLABILITY

Part of the distress we feel when seeing these visuals is due to the fact they feel out of our control. However, we can take steps to test and hone the controllability of them!

We need to start by doing this in small, safe steps then build up bit by bit:

- Start with a perception that you feel more comfortable with.
- Try to conjure up the perception when you are feeling well in your mood and in a safe space.
- Try to visualise it for a few moments then stop.
- Practice this several times until you feel that you have a strong level of control and your distress rating is a 3/10 maximum.
- Then build up from this – perceptions that you are less comfortable with, longer periods of time, different times of days etc.





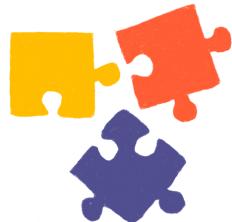
PART 5

My Reflections

What have I noticed about myself and what helps?

This section is designated for you to reflect on the knowledge and skills you have gained from completing this workbook.

We have provided some prompts and spaces to help guide you but, just like the rest of the workbook, it is for you to make your own and fill in however you want!



Which experiences in the workbook felt most familiar to me?



Which tools or exercises worked best for me?



One thing I've learned that I want to remember is:



**What do I wish other
people understood about
what I go through?**



My experiences do not make me a bad person

I am not alone in what I am experiencing

It's OK to ask for Help

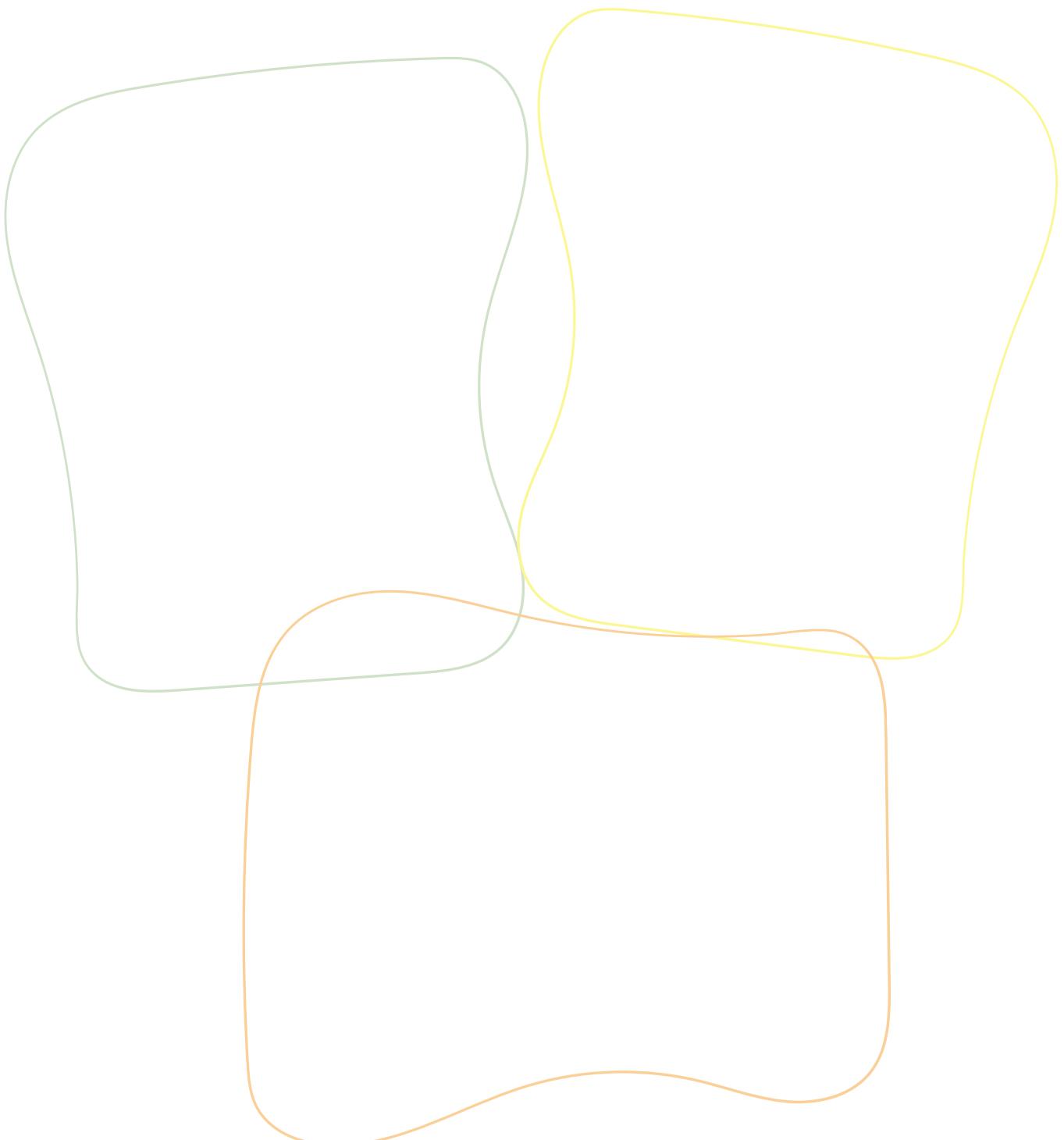
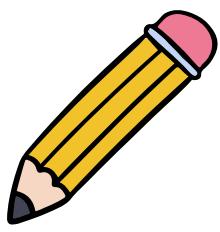
I can do hard things

NOTE TO SELF

My feelings are Valid



DRAW OR WRITE ABOUT
THREE THINGS
THAT I AM GRATEFUL FOR



Congratulations

YOU HAVE OFFICIALLY COMPLETED THIS
PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SESSION FOCUSED ON QUESTIONING
UNSETTLING EXPERIENCES!

WE HOPE YOU HAVE FOUND YOUR SESSION HELPFUL AND
THAT YOU HAVE TAKEN AWAY USEFUL SKILLS THAT CAN
HELP YOU TO GET TO WHERE YOU WANT TO BE.

PLEASE LET US KNOW HOW YOU FOUND THIS
PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL SESSION BY COMPLETING
OUR QUESTIONNAIRE USING THE QR CODE BELOW:



Thank
you

