

OFFICIAL USE ONLY

THE TOMMY ATKINS CENTRE WORCESTER



FIRST FIELD DRESSING

The PTSD & Anxiety Self Help Guide

CONFIDENTIAL

In Association With
The Sandbag Times & Tommy Atkins Centre
Worcester, UK

Established 2015

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Name.....

Welcome To The First Field Dressing

This 'First Field Dressing' is a self help guide which has been constructed by veterans and professional mental health staff. It is an effective guide to assisting you to understand the symptoms and effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder especially with Armed Forces Veterans.

Along with understanding the condition, the FFD gives advice of helping to control the symptoms until professionals can form a treatment programme. This advice is only a guide which has helped other veterans in the past and should not be relied upon as a cure.

It must be stressed that the First Field Dressing is NOT a medical document. Nor is it endorsed, legally, by any official body. As mentioned, it is merely a guide and anyone undertaking any exercise should be aware of the minimal possible risks to further mental health issues.

If at any point, you feel in the need for immediate help, please ring the helplines below



**24-HOUR
HELPLINE
0800 138 1619**

**SAMARITANS
0845 790 90 90**

“First Field Dressing”

A PTSD & Anxiety Self Help Guide

The Aim:

- To improve the mental health of veterans.
- To increase the veterans ability to cope through stressful situations
- To reduce the level and frequency of mental health related episodes

The “FFD” programme aids by:

- Promoting recovery and improving quality of life
- Identifies the things that keep us well
- Identifies the conditions that give us stress
- Identifies the varying trigger points we may have
- Understanding the way we are affected
- Identifying the early signs of related illnesses
- Developing better strategies for coping
- Building support networks with people we trust
- Managing the resources around us to avoid further episodes

Why Bother?:

Many veterans have experienced life threatening and horrific situations during their service lives. Many of these veterans will recover from the trauma’s of these events naturally within a few months while many more will not. The effects of these events may not show themselves for many years after. This can lead to the veterans just blanking the memories out and ignoring the symptoms of growing illnesses such as Combat Related PTSD, depression, anxiety etc. It can also lead to an increase in drinking, drugs, crime etc leading to alcoholism, prison and , in extreme cases, suicide. Although some veterans may choose to blank the memories and “not go there”, they will remain as unhealthy memories and thoughts that need addressing.

So the objective of “FFD” is to give us increasing control over situations that make us vulnerable, to reduce the impact of related illnesses and to promote our present and future well being. This kind of approach reduces symptoms and improves quality of life. It works alongside any treatments, care plans or other help you may have and is specially focused on what you can do to promote your own recovery and avoid relapse.

Okay, So How Does PTSD/ Anxiety Affect Us

Imagine that your mind is a working office. You are sat behind the desk dealing with the daily work load (Thought processes and information) that comes in and out. We have a big filing cabinet in the corner of the office to safely store away our memories and learned information once they have been used and dealt with. They are then safely locked away until such time we choose to use them. All good so far. On our desk, we have an in-tray and an out-tray. The in-tray is for thoughts that we need to deal with later because there maybe something more pressing to do or we don't have time or we don't feel ready to deal with them yet. Our out-tray is somewhere to put these thoughts once we have dealt with them ready to be put away in our filing cabinet. Normally, the daily running of the office is not too difficult and although sometimes we find that the in-tray can pile up a little, there is no problem in dealing with these things. everything is harmonious. Things can, and often do, happen to upset the daily running of our office. For me, it was a period of 22 years in the British Army. It was only when I looked at things in this way that I realised the amount of stuff that had piled up in the in-tray that hadn't been dealt with. (These are the memories we don't want to think of too much from active service or traumatic things that have happened by doing a hazardous job) Because the pile was now so high, I didn't know how to deal with it or where to start so i just left it there and tried to manage the normal running of the office. But every now and then the door to the office would open unexpectedly and a gust of wind would blow everything out of the in-tray. This 'door opening and gust of wind' was actually a trigger to remind me of something in the tray. In my panic, I would scramble to try to pick everything up off the floor but as I saw all of the information that I hadn't processed lying around I automatically start to remember all of the bad stuff all at once and lose concentration on my normal daily operations. I've just entered a flashback, reliving these traumatic memories but still not processing them. All I can do at this point is try to pick everything up and get them back in the in-tray. But because these events have traumatised us so much the office doesn't quite shut down when we go to sleep and we are constantly thinking of the things that we have been reminded of while we sleep. (nightmares). As you can see, it is now virtually impossible to run the office normally. So what can we do? The First Field Dressing will help to place a hand on the pile and steady it until professional help can help to put everything where it should be.

So What's Involved?

Although not essential it can be really useful to work through the programme with friend or someone who you can trust to help you go through the booklet.

We will firstly look at ways to 'ground' ourselves initially when we are affected by our symptoms. These are simple exercises that can make us feel temporarily well so we can implement further actions to stabilise us. After which we will look at and recognise our symptoms and then build plans to recognise, prepare ourselves and put measures in place to help us in the future.

It is strongly advisable that when you begin any form of help or counselling, you inform the professionals of your plan. This will not only assist treatment but it may also aid in your recovery.

This booklet is an important step in taking control of your life and your issues

Your booklet should be done a little at a time, take a few easy steps at the beginning and always avoid making plans you may not find easy to achieve. You should constantly explore and develop the programme as your wellbeing improves to encourage recovery.

This booklet can be used over the long term. It may take weeks or months to develop fully, and it may take weeks or months to change. Always plan for what you think you can achieve easily – don't take risks with failure. **One hundred easy steps are infinitely better than ten impossible leaps**

Once you have begun to move through the booklet you will find yourself able to make positive and forward thinking decisions about your life and care which may assist in further treatment of your illness.

The “**First Field Dressing**” is divided into the following sections:

1. The Braking Strategy

This will be our safety plan for when things are running a little too quickly, our stress starts to climb a little too high or we just need to relax for a short time to re-gather our thoughts. We have included some relaxation techniques to help you.

It is important that we have this in place right at the start so we know we have a means of escape when things get a little too much.

2. Understanding our Triggers

With our Braking Strategy in place we can look at the things that cause our triggers to kick in. Identifying these is key to understanding the root problem and how to move forward. We will also look at the early warning signs that show that the triggers are affecting our well being and also when these triggers have caused problems to take control of our lives.

3. Controlling the Effects

By understanding how the triggers and memories are affecting us we can formulise plans to help control the way our minds deal with these events.

4. Future Plans

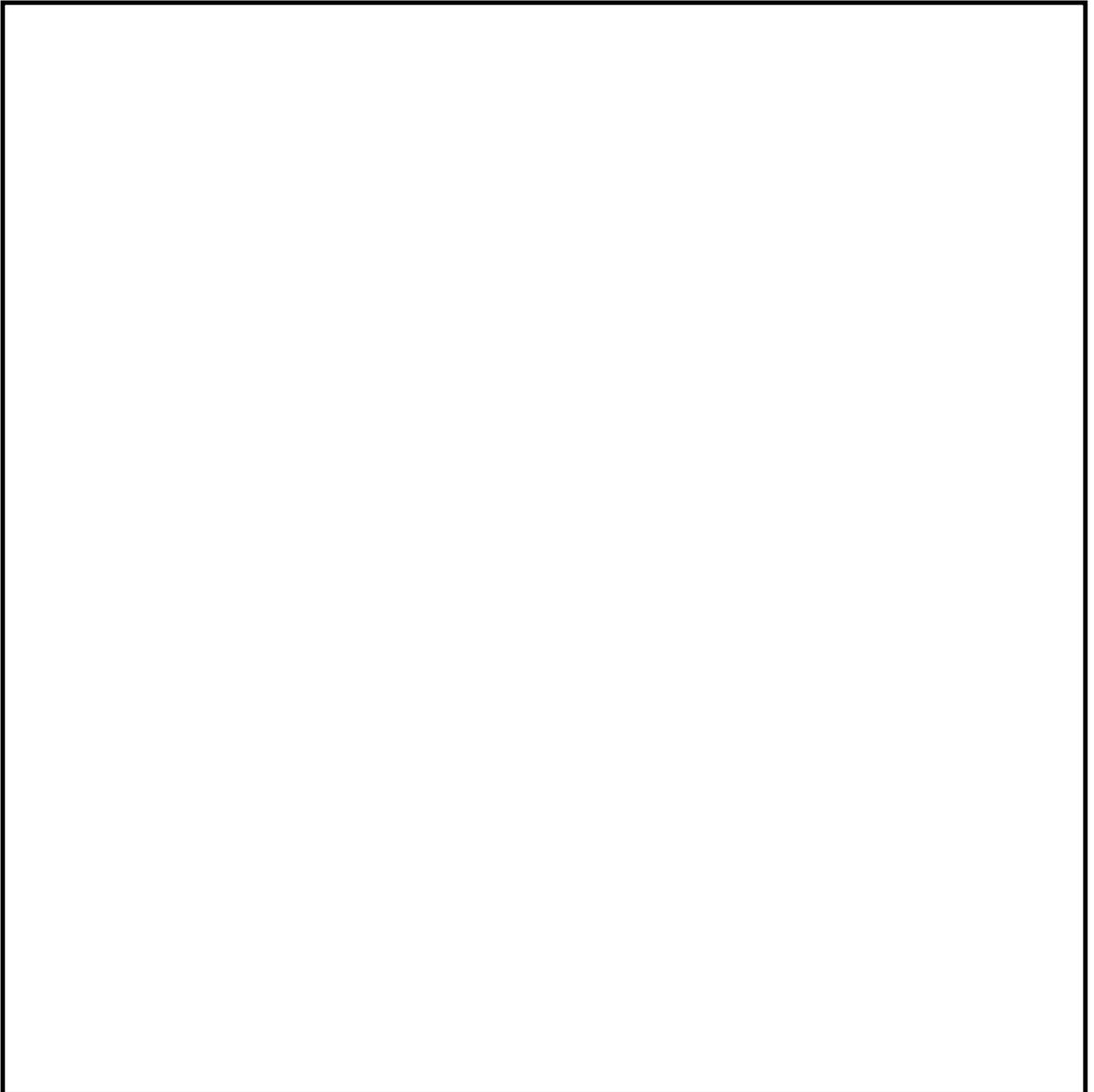
In this section we will look ahead at different ways to cope, people whom we can turn to for support, and agencies who may be able to help.

Someone once said “Take small bites out of Elephant sandwiches”. Apart from the crazy idea of eating an elephant between two slices of bread, I sort of see where he was going. Take your illness as a very big sandwich. The only effective way to finish it properly is to take small bites and take our time. Happy munching!!!

Part 1a **The Braking Strategy**

A Braking Strategy is simply as it suggests. It is a way of applying the brakes and slowing our life down a little to give us a bit of space and time to think clearly. That is it in a nutshell. This can be absolutely anything, reading, listening to music, art, creative writing, walking, exercise, etc. As a piece of personal advice, avoid TV or newspapers. Negative content may be responsible for worsening symptoms of PTSD. Use this space as a notepad to jot down possible ideas.

Your Idea's to apply the brakes

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for the user to write down their ideas for applying the brakes.

Part 1b **Relaxation Exercises**

Sometimes our own activities are not enough to calm us down so let's try one or two exercises.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise

This exercise involves tightening and relaxing all the different muscle groups in your body, one at a time. When you tighten a muscle it becomes hard and tightens around the bone, when you relax it loosens, creating a sensation of warm heaviness.

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Set aside 15-20 mins with no interruptions or distractions. Relax yourself to the best of your ability. Consider the various muscle groups one at a time, and aim to learn the difference between tight and relaxed muscles. Try constantly to concentrate on the feeling in the muscle as it goes from tight to loose.

Hands and Arms

Clench your fists, and tense your arms; feel the tightness in your hands and arms, hold for 5 seconds then slowly relax them. Release and relax each muscle group for 10 – 15 seconds. See how far they will go, but do not push. Do not hold on at all; let everything go.

Shoulders

Hunch your shoulders, then gradually let them settle down. Proceed as above.

Forehead

Pull your eyebrows together, then gradually let your forehead smooth out.

Eyes

Screw your eyes up tight, then gradually let them smooth out, leaving your eyes closed, feeling your eyeballs sink, and your eyelids droop. Let them get really heavy.

Jaw

Bite your back teeth together, then gradually ease off, and let your jaw get heavy.

Back of neck

Pull your chin forward on to your chest, feel tightness, then relax.

Breath

Slowly and steady, letting yourself go each time you breath out.

Tummy

Pull in your tummy tight, then gradually let it go, feeling it relax.

Thighs

Push your heels down hard against the floor, feeling the tightness in your thighs, then gradually let go.

Calves

Point your toes, then gradually let the tightness go.

Let everything go, further and further, and think about a really relaxing scene, for example, lying in the grass by a river, under a warm sun and a blue sky, or sitting by a fire in a big, comfortable chair. Feel yourself getting heavier and heavier.

Part 1b **Relaxation Exercises** (Continued)

This next Relaxation Exercise is used in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and is very effective at calming the mind. We shall call it Awareness Relaxation Exercise.

Awareness Relaxation Exercise

Firstly, like before sit or lie in a comfortable position. Set aside 15-20 mins with no interruptions or distractions. Relax yourself to the best of your ability. Let yourself go very loose and close your eyes.

Breathing

begin to focus on the air coming in and going out of your mouth and nose. Breathe in through the nose, feel the coolness of the air as it is drawn in through the nostrils. Feel your lungs fill with air, feel how your chest rises as you do so and then exhale through the mouth. Notice how the air is warmer as it passes through your mouth. Feel the tingling on your lips as the air passes over them. Repeat a few times.

Arms

Now turn your attention to your arms. Think about the weight of them, do they feel heavy or light? Draw your thought pattern from your shoulder down to your elbow, imagining the muscle as you go down. Is it tense or loose. Then imagine you moving down your forearm. Feel the hairs tingle as you slowly move down and then finally through your hand down to your fingers. Are they tingling? What do they feel like. Now repeat this process with the other arm.

Chest and Torso

Now focus on your chest, feel it rise and fall with your breath, feel the calming rhythm and then draw your focus down to your tummy muscles. Are they tight or loose? Can you feel it move in time with your breathing.

Hearing

Now we can focus our attention to what we can hear. Can you hear your breath? Listen to the rhythm? Its slowness should be nice and calming. Now bring your hearing to your movements. Can you hear yourself moving where you sit? Maybe your foot moving or your arm making contact with the chair. Focus now on any noise within the room. Listen for a clock ticking or the wind blowing against a window, water passing through heating pipes etc. Now bring your attention to noises you can hear outside of the room. People talking, cars driving or machines being operated, the sounds of footsteps. Just let your mind wander around listening to all the noises but not thinking too hard about any of them. Now bring your attention back into your room listening out for your own room noises and just stay there for a few moments and let your mind wander about the room.

And Out.....

Now slowly bring your attention back to yourself, feel the refreshing feeling of calmness wash over you and slowly open your eyes. Take a few moments to orientate yourself with your surroundings and slowly move your hands, feet and head about to wake your muscles up.

N.B. The above exercise is best practiced in the beginning with someone else telling you the above so you can focus your attention completely on the techniques. With practice you should be able to do this completely on your own.

Part 2a Trigger Points

Now we have our Braking Strategy or Safety net in place we can now start to look at what trigger points give us stress and set off our illnesses.

A quick bit of analysis first. What are triggers? Triggers are simply things that remind us of traumatic events. These can be sights, sounds, smells etc. Imagine someone who has heard explosions during their time in the forces. A sound of a car backfiring may suddenly bring the thoughts of the incident flooding back into our minds. These thoughts come back at such an intensity that we can actually relive the event as we were actually there. These are called 'Flashbacks'. This can cause us to have nights of restless sleep, waking up with nightmares, etc. They will also have a great effect on our normal daily lives as the thoughts take over and we become more and more disconnected from normality. In a nutshell this is PTSD. This causes Anxiety, Depression and all sorts of other mental illnesses. But don't panic! By using simple techniques we can bring these under control simply by a little understanding. This will help to lessen the effects of PTSD and help those that are treating us to understand a little better.

Let's firstly make a record of what happens and when. We shall start by using the thought record below.

<u>Date & Time</u> When did you start to feel bad	<u>Situation</u> <u>Describe:</u> •The event leading to the unpleasant emotion <u>and/or;</u> •The stream of thoughts leading to the unpleasant emotion	<u>Emotions</u> What emotions you felt e.g.. Sad, Angry Rate strength of emotion 1 – 10 (1 being not bad, 10 being the worst)	<u>Automatic Thoughts</u> Write what thoughts went through your mind just before you felt the emotion

<u>Date & Time</u> When did you start to feel bad	<u>Situation</u> <u>Describe:</u> •The event leading to the unpleasant emotion <u>and/or;</u> •The stream of thoughts leading to the unpleasant emotion	<u>Emotions</u> What emotions you felt e.g.. Sad, Angry Rate strength of emotion 1 – 10 (1 being not bad, 10 being the worst)	<u>Automatic Thoughts</u> Write what thoughts went through your mind just before you felt the emotion

Part 2b Trigger Points

Now we have a record of our triggers we need to find ways of rationalising our thoughts to understand our train of thought

<u>Emotion caused by Thoughts</u> e.g. Anger, sadness, fear, anxious etc	<u>Effects of emotions on our life</u> e.g. irritable, loss of concentration, forgetful etc	<u>Results of effects</u> e.g. Bad behaviour, work suffering,	<u>Feeling of Being Real</u> How real did the thoughts feel? (Rate 1-10 with 1 being totally unreal, 10 being very real)

Part 3a **Controlling the Effects**

Ok, we've now identified what triggers are and what they do to our normal daily lives. So what we need to do now is get them under some form of control. It is important to note that this is NOT a cure but simply a method of getting some kind of control while the experts do their thing. However, it should reduce the effects enough for you to be able to get some kind of life back. Let's first look at the early signs. These we can detect as we experience a trigger/ flashback. By recognising these at this early stage will greatly reduce their effect on our lives.

Early Sign/Trigger/ Flashback:

Date.....

When I need to take action:

What I can do when I realise I am having a flashback:

What I can do if this doesn't work:

Early Sign/Trigger/ Flashback:

Date.....

When I need to take action:

What I can do when I realise I am having a flashback:

What I can do if this doesn't work:

Part 3b **Controlling The Effects**

Despite making improvements in our lives by addressing the triggers/ flashbacks and early warning signs, there may be times when we feel unable to cope with their effects. In this case, it would be useful to have a plan to help us through.

How My Triggers/ Flashbacks are normally recognised

Have a look at your answer above, does it differ from the way you feel now? If you find that it is we need to put options in place that are available to help us through the crisis. Let's take a look at some examples:

- **Is there somewhere where you can go for a while to get away from it all?**
- **Do you have a good friend or family member that you can trust to listen to you?**
- **Contact your local GP**
- **Contact organisations such as Combat Stress, TRBL, etc (Combat Stress has a 24hr helpline)**

In the boxes below write out your options, if it involves other people make sure that you contact them and get their agreement.

Option 1

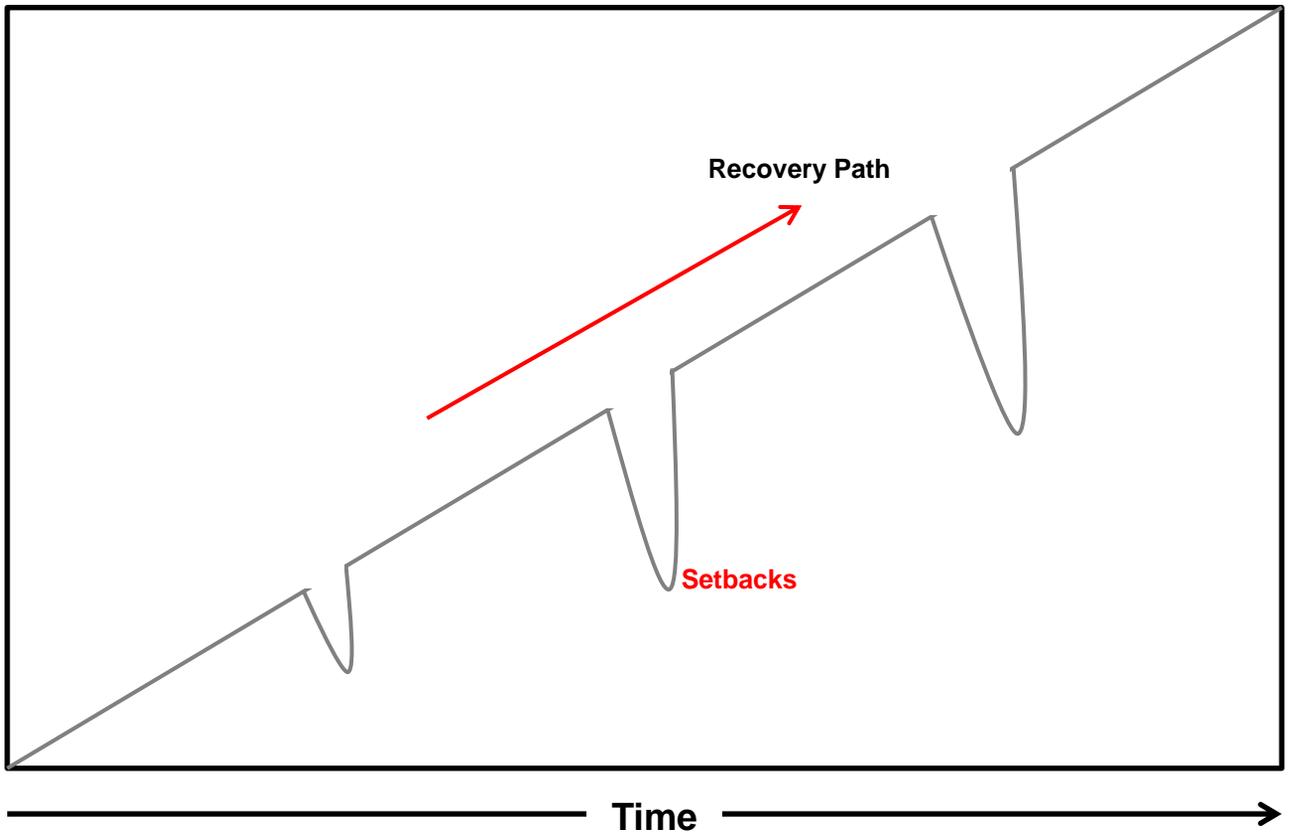
Option 2

Option 3

Part 3c **Controlling The Effects**

Sometimes people expect to get well within a short time, and some do, but it is wise to avoid setting a time limit. Remember to do things at your own pace (Remember the saying “*Small bites out of Elephant Sandwiches*”)

This is a graphic representation of the classic recovery path that some people have experienced.



For a time, especially in the early stages of recovery, the better you get, the worse the setbacks may feel and the stronger the feelings of failure. You need to give yourself permission to fail just as many times as is necessary and not to be discouraged by other people’s negative reactions to these events.

We can also begin to note signs such as feelings or behaviours that occur when we are stressed or before a crisis and plan ways of dealing with them.

Part 4a **Future Plans**

Hopefully we are now in a position to manage our “Thinking Speeds” in a better way. We should now be able to see the early signs of any triggers/ flashbacks, we should be able to put into practice plans to deal with the results of these, and we should be able to bring ourselves back down by using our own braking strategies or relaxation exercises.

What we can now do is set future goals for ourselves to further assist our recovery path. Let’s look at ways in which we can make this happen.

Therapy Courses

There are many therapy courses that can help. Courses like CBT and EMDR are particularly effective. Speak to your GP for more details or call Care After Combat on 0300 343 0255

Other Help

There are many organisations who can help you further . These include:

- ❖ **Royal British legion/ SSAFA**
- ❖ **Combat Stress**
- ❖ **Help For Heroes**
- ❖ **Citizens Advice Bureau**
- ❖ **NHS/ Local Health Authority**
- ❖ **The Samaritans**

My Plan:

On the next page you will find a page dedicated for you to write down your own future plans. Remember to make your goals achievable and within realistic limits. Do not plan too far ahead as you may find that your goals may not be reached. Remember, *small bites*.....

Part 4b Future Plans

My Future Goal

How I Intend To Carry it Out? Who can help? Who to talk to?

Guided Steps – Who can help me with these? Who do I contact? What do I need to do?

My Future Goal

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How I Intend To Carry it Out? Who can help? Who to talk to?

Guided Steps – Who can help me with these? Who do I contact? What do I need to do?

Useful Numbers Specific to Veterans

Royal British Legion	08457 725 725
SSAFA	01785 212680
Veterans UK	0800 169 2277
Combat Stress	0800 138 1619
Help for Heroes	01980 844224
Citizens Advice	0344 411 1303
NHS Direct Helpline	111
Samaritans	08457 90 90 90
Pensions & Medals	0800 085 3600
Army Benevolent Fund	0207 901 8900
Royal Air Force Association	01242 524384
Royal Navy Association	023 9272 3747
The Sandbag Times	01905 570590



Never Give Up, You Will Never Be Alone

Just the fact that you are reading this means you still have strength to fight. Anyone that suffers with mental illness very often finds themselves isolated, deep in that pit and feeling that all hope has finally gone. I cannot pretend to know what each of you are going through purely because every story is different and every struggle has its own nightmares. But I can promise you that no matter how deep in the pit you are you can always come to the surface. How do I know this? Because I've been that low myself. I've been to the very edge of desperation and have come back from it. I must stress from the start that the following is purely for inspiration. I have no intention of throwing religion at you or trying to convert you to my own way of thinking.

I merely want to give you a little encouragement in your struggle and try to pass on some comforting words. There will be references to the bible as I have found it to be full of good advice and guidance.



Are you losing hope?

There is always hope. I'm sure someone has told you that in the past, some may think that its a load of old claptrap. To be honest, it wasn't so long ago when I felt like this. Somebody pointed me into the direction of this passage. *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us"* When I first read that, I didn't feel it was really helping but I did read it again and again and I then saw myself when I was a soldier and remembered the times when we were really up against it, we didn't give up. We had strength. We believed in what we were doing and were determined to see it through. I remember that we used to be told to trust in God, he would see us through. It was true and, believe it or not even as you read this he is there to support you. Just trust in him and yourself.

Do you feel worthless?

It is very common for those who suffer from PTSD and other mental health illnesses to feel different. Sometimes you may feel that you are so damaged everyone pities you or looks at you as strange. You may feel that because you've hurt people around you, you feel like you are the lowest of the low. You may feel you have committed sins so bad there is no way back. In all accounts, not so. You are indeed, a very special, unique person capable of so much. But don't take my word for it "Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?" **Romans 8:32** God brought Jesus to die for you, God loves you, God is near you, God encourages you, God loves to listen and answer your prayers, God has a plan for you, so how are you worthless?

Do you feel like there is no help?

Hopefully, If you have got this far in the document you will see that there are people that truly want to help you. Us, for a start. But even when we are not about, you can always get help from someone else. *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."* **Proverbs 3:5-6**

Finally.....

You are not alone, you are loved, you are priceless and there is always, always hope. The dark times will end.

The Sandbag Times



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