

Module 6:

How thinking changes in psychosis



This module will explain:

- the common thinking patterns in psychosis
- what paranoia is
- what suspicious thoughts are and how we react to them
- what distressing or intrusive thoughts are

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Plan for today's session

How was your week?

What would you like to talk about today?

Evaluating today's session

Summary of what we talked about today

What will I do during the week?

How was today for me?

Name: _____ Date: _____



What sort of thinking patterns are common in psychosis?

The three thinking patterns most common in psychosis are:

- paranoid thinking
- jumping to conclusions
- emotional reasoning

Paranoid thinking

When you are paranoid, you blame others for bad things that happen even if you have very little evidence the other people are at fault.

You might also assume that you are being followed or the government is watching you, even though you have very limited evidence.

Jumping to conclusions

When you jump to conclusions, you interpret something as negative or bad even though there are no clear facts to support that. Then you start ‘mind reading’, thinking you can tell what people think. An example of this is when, at a party and you are not talking to someone at the moment, you think, “they must think I am a really boring person”.

Emotional reasoning

Emotional reasoning is when you decide something is true because of the way you feel. For example, you might feel bad one day, so you believe that only bad things will happen. You might say to yourself, “I know this isn’t going to work out” even though you only have a feeling and don’t have any evidence.

What is paranoia¹¹?

Paranoia is suspiciousness or mistrust that is not justified. When someone is paranoid, they constantly question or are suspicious of people around them. Someone who is paranoid generally believes someone is out to get them, and they might think there is a conspiracy against them.

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¹¹ The material in this section was adapted with permission from **Back to Life, Back to Normality** by D Turkington. It was published by Cambridge University Press in New York in 2009.

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Often someone who is paranoid does not have a good reason to believe what they believe. Sometimes they seem to have lost touch with reality.

Anyone can have paranoid ideas or behaviour. Someone who is depressed or anxious might also be paranoid. But paranoia is most common in people who are experiencing psychosis or schizophrenia.

When is paranoia normal?

There are times when it helps us to be a little bit suspicious or paranoid. For example, if you are walking at night in an area with a lot of crime, it is reasonable to be suspicious of the people around you. In this situation, being suspicious can protect you.

Sometimes we can experience an event that makes us suspicious or paranoid. For example, people who are near terrorist attacks can feel anxious, threatened and unsure even though they weren't caught in the attack.

In these situations, paranoia is normal. But if paranoid thoughts and behaviours take over someone's life and stop them from doing their normal everyday activities, then paranoia is a problem.

What makes paranoia worse?¹²

The way we think can make paranoia worse.

- We can exaggerate or overestimate a threat, thinking that the worst we can imagine is going to happen.
- We can underestimate our coping skills and think we can't cope.

When we use these ways of thinking to evaluate the world around us, we can become more paranoid as a threat increases.

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¹² This material is based on 'Psychological Investigation of the Structure of Paranoia in Non-Clinical Population' from the **British Journal of Psychiatry**, volume 186, pages 433-444, which was published in 2005. The article was written by D Freeman, P Garety, P Bebington, B Smith, R Rollinson, D Fowler, E Kuipers, R Katarzyna and G Dunn.

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Most paranoid

Severe threat
Example:
People trying to
cause you
significant harm.

Moderate threat
Example:
People going out of
their way to get at you.

Mild threat
Example:
People trying to cause
you minor distress or irritation.

Thinking there are special
messages for you in everyday events
and objects.
(This is called **ideas of reference**.)

Less paranoid

Concerns about what
people around you think of you.

The lower level of the pyramid shows people's everyday paranoia – worries about what others think about us, fears of rejection and so on are all normal.

Paranoia becomes a problem when we start to think our thoughts and worries are facts. If we believe this strongly, we can become very frightened and distressed. We might stop thinking about anything but our belief.

13 The pyramid was adapted from a paper on Psychological investigations of the structure of paranoia in non clinical populations. (Freeman et al., 2005)

In this case, our paranoia becomes a delusion and we believe people are going to harm us.

Suspicious thoughts are part of paranoia. People who are paranoid may also hear voices which are saying things that make them more suspicious or frightened.

Experiences of paranoia: personal stories¹⁴

Robert's story

“this might be a risk to my family and me”

“At a personal level, I recall after 9/11 being in my house listening to the radio which reported a story that crop dusting planes in the USA had been grounded to prevent terrorists spraying poisonous gases over cities. Of course, what happened next was that I hear a light aircraft flying repeatedly over our house. We very rarely have aircraft fly overhead as we live in the city centre, and it seemed even more unusual that it was flying back and forth. I became anxious, and became concerned that this might be a risk to my family and me. I was concerned that this plane might be spraying poisonous gas. I went and looked up at the plane and then closed all the windows in the house. My partner was out and I was looking after my young children at the time and had not been sleeping well because of it. I convinced myself that it was all ok, primarily because the wind was blowing strongly so any poison would be dispersed in the wind”.

What makes paranoia better?

To reduce paranoia, it is important to learning coping strategies such as:

- standing back from our thoughts and beliefs
- checking there is evidence to support our thoughts

These strategies can help reduce the anxiety associated with paranoia. We can use these coping strategies to help us improve our mood.

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¹⁴ This story comes from the book **Back to Life, Back to Normality** by D Turkington. It was published by Cambridge University Press in New York in 2009.by D Turkington.

How do we react to suspicious thoughts?¹⁵

These are the most common ways we react to suspicious thoughts.

1. Ignoring them
2. Avoiding them
3. Responding emotionally
4. Treating suspicious thoughts as if they are correct
5. Trying to understand our suspicious thoughts
6. Taking a problem-solving approach to our thoughts

Sometimes we might react in more than one way to our thoughts.

1. Ignoring problems

The most common response to suspicious thoughts is to ignore them.

When we have a suspicious thought, we just notice it. We do not see it as true or important. It's just another one of the thousands of thoughts we have each day, most of which we will forget.

If we are mindful about ignoring suspicious thoughts, we can learn to ignore them without even trying. All it takes is practice.

2. Avoiding suspicious thoughts

We may feel our suspicious thoughts are not justified, but we may still avoid the situations that trigger these thoughts. We may also avoid talking about our feelings or pretend they don't exist.

Avoiding thoughts can make us feel better in the short term. But, over time, it may take more and more energy to avoid situations. This means that suspicious thoughts are affecting our day-to-day lives more than they should. Eventually, we may feel trapped by the thoughts we're working so hard to avoid.



¹⁵ The material in this section is based on the book **Overcoming Paranoid and Suspicious Thoughts** by Freeman, Freeman and Garety. It was published in 2006 by Robinson in London.

3. Responding emotionally

Sometimes we can react to our thoughts with emotions. We do not ignore the suspicious thought. Instead, we take them to heart and let them upset us. We may begin to feel hopeless. We might also criticise ourselves and feel guilty because we believe we should be able to cope with these thoughts.

4. Treating suspicious thoughts as if they were correct

Sometimes we can think our suspicious thoughts are true. We may fear that people are really trying to harm us. When this happens, we tend to use safety behaviours – actions we do to make the threat less likely to happen.

5. Trying to understand our suspicious thoughts

When we try to understand our suspicious thoughts, we often talk about them with friends or family. This is helpful even if the person you talk to can't advise you on what to do, they can always listen.

When you explain your fears, you express your distress more than you did before, and you get to hear it out loud. Instead of a jumble of thoughts in your head, you have clearer statements of the problem. This gives you some perspective on what is going on. Writing them down can also help you to step back and check out if there are any errors or unhelpful thinking styles.

6. Taking a problem solving approach

Some people like to take time with a problem and work out steps to solve the problem. Suspicious thoughts are a problem to be solved.

When we problem solve, we try to work out if:

- our suspicious thoughts help us in any way
- there is evidence for or against our suspicious thoughts and
- there are alternatives to our thoughts

We may also talk to other people to get a different view of our thoughts.

Activity: Use the worksheet **How Do You React to Suspicious Thoughts?** To think about your suspicious thoughts and how you manage them.

Tips for managing suspicious thoughts

- Choose how you react to suspicious thoughts. How we react to them affects how we cope with them.
- Keep your suspicious thoughts in perspective and do not let them interfere with your life. This is the most helpful thing to do.
- If you react emotionally, stop yourself. Reacting emotionally can make you miserable and cause you to withdraw from life.
- Practise managing your thoughts every day.

How do you react to suspicious thoughts?¹⁶ Page 1 of 4

What is one suspicious thought I had in the last month?

How did you react? Tick the reactions you used, and then tick the way you reacted. Do you think it was helpful or unhelpful?

Ignoring suspicious thoughts

Tick what happened:

I ignored the thoughts.

I hardly noticed the thought.

I felt quite detached from the thought.

It didn't really seem to matter.

I felt a bit anxious when I had the thought but I just went on with what I was doing.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

¹⁶ The material in this section is based on the book **Overcoming Paranoid and Suspicious Thoughts** by Freeman, Freeman and Garety. It was published in 2006 by Robinson in London.

How do you react to suspicious thoughts? Page 2 of 4

Problem solving

Tick what happened:

- I considered the thought and rejected it.
- I didn't panic and thought it all through carefully.
- I thought of all the reasons why the thought couldn't be correct.
- I wondered what advice my friends would give me.
- I put the thought into context and thought about the positive things.
- I decided to see what someone else thought about my anxious feeling.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

Responding emotionally

Tick what happened:

- I felt miserable.
- I felt overwhelmed.
- I was annoyed with myself.
- It felt like things were out of control.
- I felt vulnerable and helpless.
- I felt ashamed.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

How do you react to suspicious thoughts? Page 3 of 4

Avoiding suspicious thoughts

Tick what happened:

I wanted to withdraw from everybody.

I knew that I had to get away from the situation to stop the thoughts.

I didn't want anyone else to know I had had the thought.

I knew the only way I was going to feel better was by avoiding the thought.

I thought the only way to cope was by drinking or smoking.

I decided to see what someone else thought about my anxious feeling.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

Treating suspicious thoughts as if they might be correct

Tick what happened:

I believed the thought was probably true and needed to get away from the situation.

I tried to watch out for or escape the danger.

I was anxious and wanted to get somewhere safe.

I wanted to blend in and not upset anyone.

I got angry with the people involved.

I worried about what was going to happen.

I said I would avoid these situations in the future.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

How do you react to suspicious thoughts? Page 4 of 4

Trying to understand suspicious thoughts

Tick what happened:

I knew I had to get more information before I decided what to do.

I wanted another opinion on my suspicious thought.

I thought it was better to be uncertain about what was going on instead of leaping to conclusions.

I didn't know what to think but I knew I had to find out more.

This reaction was: helpful / unhelpful (Circle one.)

Now talk to your coping skills therapist about these questions:

- Is this how I'd like to react?
- Could I have reacted in other ways?
- What other reactions would be better for me?

Personal experience:

Calvin's story¹⁷

One morning, Calvin got a letter from his mental health services. His nurse, Philip, was going to be away and another nurse was coming to meet him the next week.

Calvin was upset to hear Philip was going away, but he accepted it. That night, though, Calvin's voices became abusive. They told him that Philip had left or become ill because of something that Calvin had done.

Over the next few days, Calvin's voices became more and more critical. Calvin got very worried that something had happened to Philip and that he was in some way responsible. Calvin began to feel very anxious and guilty and, as a result, stopped going to the drop-in centre or doing his normal activities. Instead, he spent time trying to work out what he had done wrong. Eventually, Calvin stopped sleeping. He began staying awake all night going over the past and what he did wrong.

When Calvin's new nurse, Amanda, arrived, Calvin told her he was convinced that he was to blame for Philip going away.

Amanda explained that there had been some deaths in Philip's family. Philip had to take a leave of absence so he could look after young children. It had nothing to do with Calvin or anything Calvin had done.

Amanda sat down with Calvin to talk and try to understand why Calvin got so distressed during the week.

Amanda and Calvin used an evidence sheet to think about why Calvin had become upset.



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¹⁷ This story comes from a book called **Think You're crazy, Think again**. (Morrison, 2008). Printed in the UK by Routledge.

Here is Calvin's evidence sheet.

What are you worried about?

I harmed Philip so he isn't coming anymore.

Is your belief true? What evidence do you have that it is?

My new nurse says it isn't true. Someone died in Philip's family. It's nothing to do with me.

What are you doing that is making you distressed?

Jumped to conclusions
Stopped going places
Didn't check with others around me to see if my belief was true

What could you do differently the next time?

Talk to someone
Use another evidence sheet to help me work out what's going on

Name: Calvin Date: 29 September

Evidence Sheet

Use this worksheet to help you think about why you are distressed.

What are you worried about?

Is your belief true? What evidence do you have that it is?

What are you doing that is making you distressed?

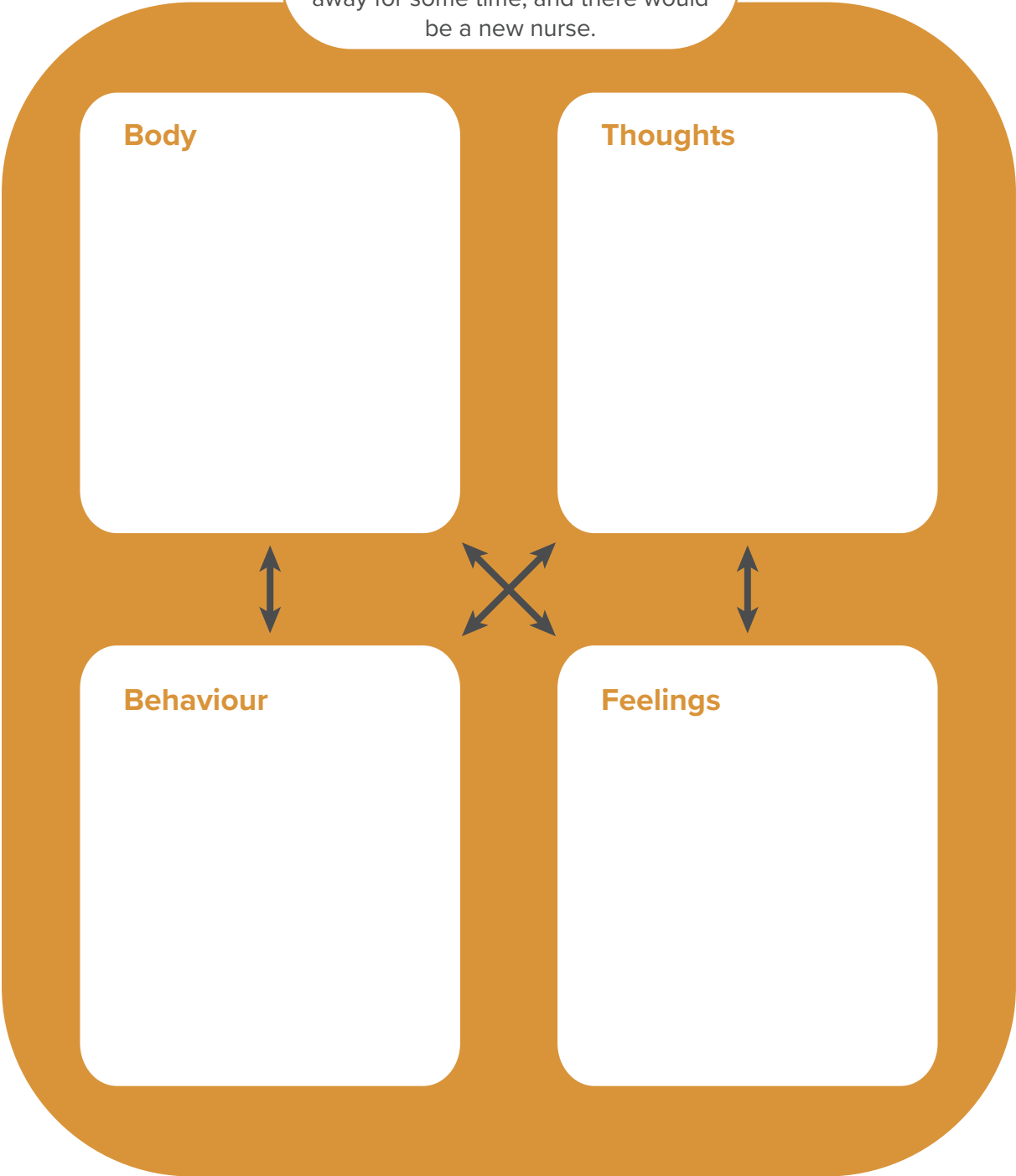
What could you do differently the next time?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Using a hot cross bun: thinking about Calvin's experience

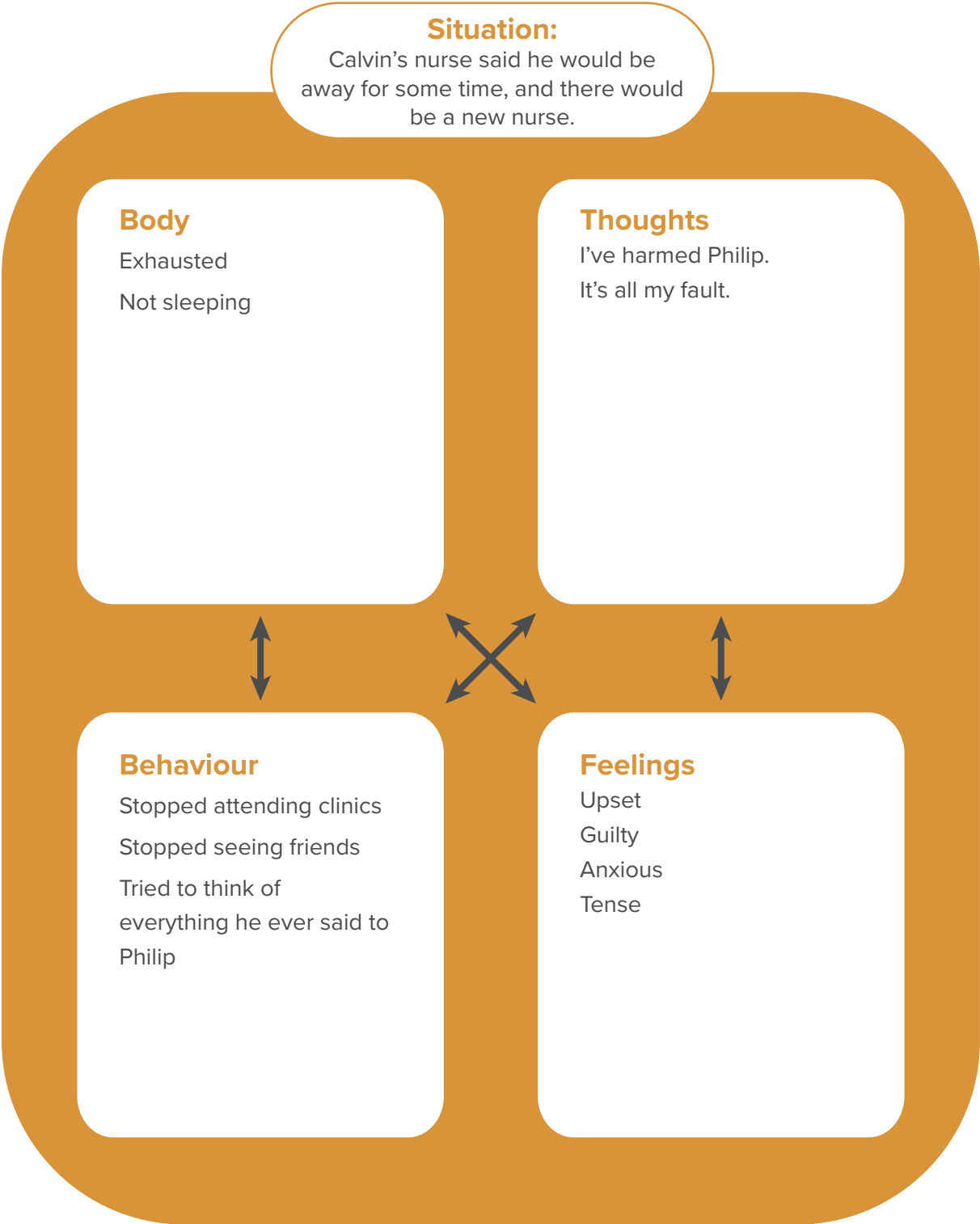
See if you can fill out Calvin's hot cross bun for Calvin's experience. The situation has been filled in already.


Situation:
Calvin's nurse said he would be away for some time, and there would be a new nurse.



Calvin's experience

Here is the hot cross bun Calvin did with his new nurse, Amanda.





Dealing with paranoid and suspicious thinking

Here are five skills you can practise to help cope with paranoid and suspicious thinking.¹⁸

1. Don't fight the suspicious thought.

Many thoughts go in and out of our heads every day. They aren't facts. Your suspicious thought is just one of them. Don't try to force it out of your mind because that will make it come back, just like an annoying song.

2. Let go of the suspicious thought.

When you have a suspicious thought, don't try to pretend it hasn't happened. Notice it, then let it go.

3. Give yourself plenty of advice and encouragement.

Think of an encouraging phrase that might help you. If you had a friend with these thoughts, what would you say to them? Here are some ideas.

- "They are only thoughts – they don't matter."
- "There is no way I can know what she is thinking."
- "I can cope."

4. Focus on what you are doing, not what you are thinking.

Suspicious thoughts occur all the time for everyone. When you have one you might be walking to the shop, meeting someone or on your own. Don't focus on the thought. Focus on what you are doing.

5. Deal with your thoughts.

We can spend all our time thinking about something. As we've seen, this doesn't help. It only makes us more upset and distressed. Try to take a problem-solving approach to your thoughts. Write the thoughts down, identify possible solutions and look for help if you need it.



¹⁸ This material is based in the book **Overcoming Paranoid and Suspicious Thoughts** by Freeman, Freeman and Garety. It was published in 2006 by Robinson in London.

What are distressing thoughts?

Everyone is able to imagine the most horrible things and the most beautiful things that could ever happen. If we didn't, there would be no adventures, horror stories or fantasy stories such as Cinderella or Star Wars.

Sometimes we have intrusive thoughts, thoughts that are annoying, unwelcome or that upset us or our activities. These thoughts can be negative, mean or nasty. And sometimes they are difficult to stop. It is normal to have thoughts like this.

Two researchers, Clarke and Purdon, studied what kind of 'normal' thoughts people have. They asked 293 undergraduate college students with no history of mental illness to report the intrusive thoughts they had experienced. Here are some of the intrusive thoughts people have.

	Intrusive thought	Female students	Male students
1	Home unlocked and an intruder there	77%	69%
2	Accidentally leaving the heat or stove on	79%	66%
3	Strangers are naked	51%	80%
4	Having sex in public	49%	78%
5	Running the car off the road	64%	56%
6	Insulting family members	59%	55%
7	Sex with an unacceptable person	48%	63%
8	Insulting strangers	50%	59%
9	Swerving into traffic	55%	52%
10	Catching a sexually transmitted disease	60%	43%

As you can see, intrusive thoughts are common! These thoughts are a problem only if they are distressing, and developing coping skills can help manage them.

¹⁹ This is part of a table in a research paper called **Obsessive intrusive thoughts in nonclinical subjects**. Part 1. Behaviour Research Therapy (Purdon & Clark, 1992, 31, 713-720).