

Understanding what influences your mental health and wellbeing



About this booklet

If you would like to make sense of your experiences, or if you are struggling with your mental health, there are some key questions you may like to ask.

This booklet is produced by people who use and work in services provided by Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (NTW) and some of their supporters. It aims to help you to understand what is important to your wellbeing.

It can be helpful to ask yourself some questions about the things that may affect you. For example, the impact of day to day pressures, or things that have happened in your past.

We all experience difficulties and challenges in our lives. Some issues may keep difficult feelings going, for example ongoing pain, being alone, financial or family pressures. All or some of these may play a part in how we think and feel.

This booklet aims to help you to:

- note important events or relationships
- consider what may set off difficulties
- understand what the key mental health issues are
- recognise your personal strengths and the support around you
- find out what can help or hinder your day to day wellbeing
- look at ways forward and next steps: What would help you to make changes?

In NTW we describe understanding yourself in this way as developing a formulation. This means understanding the following five parts of your life, seeing how they are linked, and making a plan:



- **Past** - What has happened in your past that may be important?



- **Triggers** - What sets things off? What was happening when your difficulties started?



- **Current** - What is happening in your life at the moment?



- **Positives** - Positives in your life, including your strengths and support from people and things around you.



- **What keeps things stuck?** - Things that keep your difficulties going and make change difficult.



- **Plans** - Thinking about your next steps to build your wellbeing.



Past

It can be helpful to make sense of what has happened in your past. Events and relationships from your childhood or adulthood can affect you in helpful and harmful ways.

You may have had activities you enjoyed and were good at that can still help you now.

There may have been health problems for you or your family that affected you when you were younger.

You may have experienced loving relationships that strengthened you, or unkind relationships that left you feeling unloved or alone. You may have experienced or seen violence or abuse in your home - abuse can be sexual, physical or emotional. Or you may have experienced the loss or death of someone you loved and who loved you.

You may want to make sense of these past issues in order to understand what they mean to you.

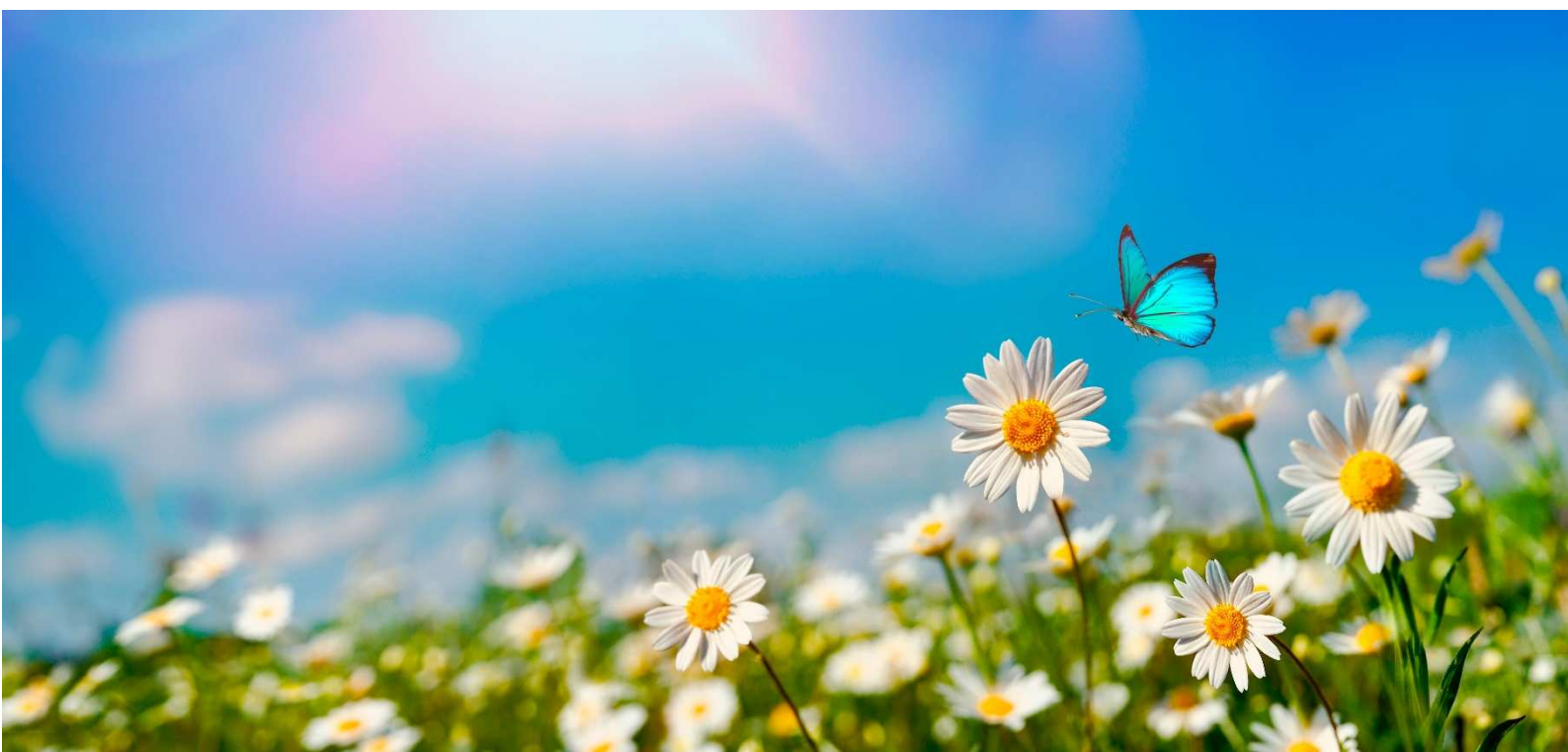
Examples of important past issues may be:

- you had health difficulties
- you had to look after people in your family
- you had some good friends
- you had to fight for everything you got
- people bullied you or were unkind
- you were happy at school
- you did things that were helpful

Sometimes people find it useful to write down important past relationships and events in their life: the good and the bad.

Have any of these had an influence on your life?

- your family life – relationships with your parents or people who looked after you?
- were some of your relationships empowering? Or disempowering?
- did you witness or experience abuse or violence?
- did you enjoy activities outside school?
- was there bullying in your family?
- did anyone in your family spend time in prison?
- was anyone in your family admitted to hospital for physical or mental health problems?



Triggers



It can be helpful to understand how your reactions and feelings may be linked to your physical health and/or to pressures from your family, friends social or work life. Sometimes the things that tip you into feeling very distressed may seem to come out of the blue and at other times the connection with your feelings is clear.

For some people memories of past or recent traumatic experiences can be triggered by people or events.

Examples of triggers may be:

- loss of sleep
- physical injury or assault
- losing your job
- someone you love becoming ill
- a smell or sound that brings back memories
- a significant date
- becoming pregnant or a parent
- difficulties in a relationship now

Some triggers may be hard to link with how you feel.

It can be difficult always to have control over what's happening to you, or if your safety or dignity are threatened.

You might like to ask yourself:

- when do things become difficult for you?
- if there have been similar issues in the past, what may have triggered those?
- are there certain times, dates, anniversaries, and/or changes that are important?
- have you suffered abuse or had criticism or rejection from others?
- are services not understanding your needs or the needs of someone you love?
- are relationship problems troubling you?
- has there been a recent loss (death), illness or health difficulty?
- is there the threat of losing your job?
- has something unexpected happened?

Sometimes the combination of different events can trigger distress. For example, you may deal with a major problem like a relative's illness very well, and then get upset by missing the bus.

Triggers may include exposure to physical, emotional, practical or social challenges. It can be difficult to always have control over what's happening to you, or if your safety or dignity are threatened.



Current

Problems can be overwhelming and it can be helpful to think about what matters most to you. It may be helpful to think about your physical health, your social situation, and/or how you think, feel and behave. And also to consider how other people are affected by things that are important to you.

Examples of current issues may be:

- worrying about paying bills
- anxious about your benefits or pension
- poor sleep or tiredness
- not leaving the house
- loss of a partner or relationship difficulties
- being bullied or racially abused
- health problems



You are trying to pin down what matters most to you, what is the most important or the easiest issue to work on.

You might like to think about:

- what is going on in your life?
- what are the main worries for you now? Have these things happened before?
- are there concerns that are worse for you at the moment? How do these affect your wellbeing?
- is there something new in your life?
- what needs to change for you to feel okay?
- what strengths do you draw on?
- what are you doing that you enjoy?



Positives



We all face difficult times differently and develop ways of dealing with them. Looking to see if there are any positives can help us to stand back and find other ways forward.

There are different ways of finding strength and support.

Examples of positives may be:

- friends to have fun with
- hobbies, something I enjoy doing
- someone to talk to
- a job where I am valued
- being physically healthy
- living in a friendly place
- caring for animals
- being a parent, auntie/uncle or grandparent

Sometimes when we are experiencing difficulties recognising our own positives can be hard to do. Positives can be simply eating food or drinking water every day. Or they may be having friends or enjoying interests like watching television, drawing or painting.

You may like to ask yourself:

- what positives have you got going for you?
- what is stopping the problems from getting worse?
- What survival strategies have you used? How are they helpful?
- what personal strengths help you? For example sense of humour, being well-organised
- what is going well at the moment?
- are there people around you who understand, encourage and support you?
- what are you interested in?
- how have you coped?
- what have your experiences taught you so far?





What keeps things stuck?

These are the aspects of your life that can keep things difficult. These can be physical health problems or social influences that affect your situation and/or ways you think, feel and behave. Some ways of coping help in the short term but not in the long term. Like drinking alcohol or over working, these can help us avoid rather than solve problems. Not having the right support can keep things more difficult.

Examples of what keeps things stuck may be:

- not sleeping at night
- too many bills to pay
- the judgemental way the media talk about mental health
- feeling helpless
- being isolated
- nobody around you understands
- not being able to speak about distressing or difficult things

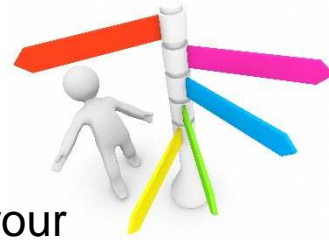
You may feel guilty about burdening other people so you don't ask for help or share your problems. You might put on an act that all is well, or hide away from other people.

Questions that you may want to ask about the things that keep your problems going are:

- what are the daily obstacles that may stop life improving, or stop you moving forward?
- is it difficult for you to get the right support?
- how do people around you respond to you, your strengths and your difficulties?
- are there things that are pressurising for you at the moment?
- what do you do to deal with your difficulties?
- how does your health affect you?



Goals, plans and finding ways forward



It is important to think about what needs to change in your situation and what matters to you, both in the long term and short term. Setting goals helps you to focus on the important things to change or those that are easiest to influence. This can help to plan changes that are meaningful for you.

Examples of some goals you may like:

- walk to the shops on your own
- give yourself a nice meal
- answer the phone
- manage your pain better
- move away from your noisy neighbours
- go to college
- get in touch with old friends
- discuss stopping your medication
- understand your feelings better
- drive again
- find safe ways to comfort yourself when you feel distress



You can achieve your goals more easily by breaking them down into smaller steps and making plans.

Next steps

Think about how you can start taking small steps towards your goal.

For example - walking to the shops on your own may start with:

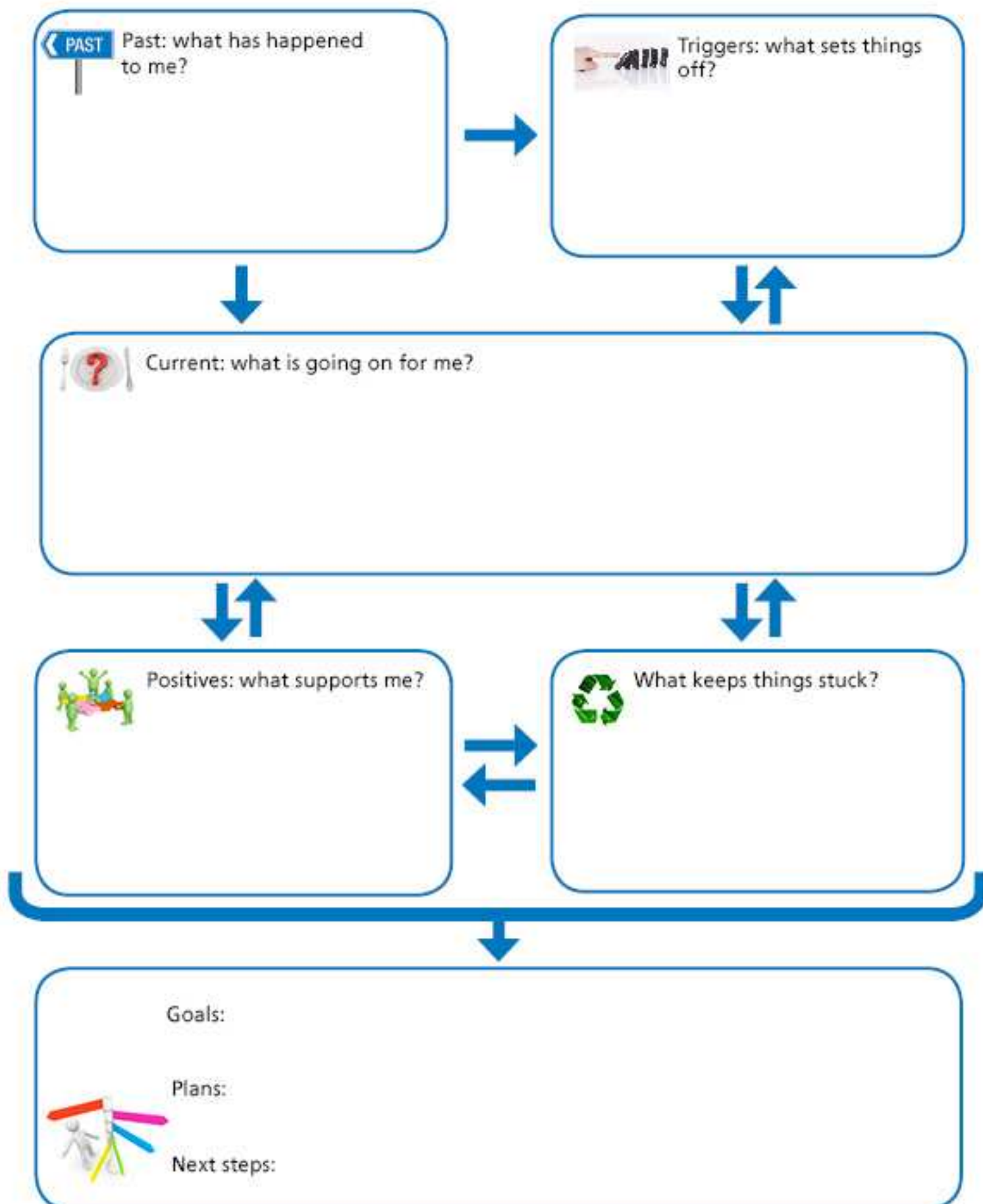
1. getting dressed every morning
2. practise opening the door leading to outside
3. walk outside at a quiet time
4. walk to the shops with a friend (if you prefer)
5. walk to the end of the street on your own
6. walk to the shops

Don't worry about not making progress as fast as you would like. We all have setbacks and you can start your steps again or re-visit your goals and plans, perhaps with more support. We all have good days and bad days, and there may be ongoing pressures that make change difficult. So be kind to yourself if your plans don't always work out.



5P's + Plan Formulation

Helping me to understand and make changes





Continue on this page to write down what matters to you, your goals, plans and next steps.



**If you can't fly, run; if you can't run, walk;
if you can't walk, crawl; but by all means
keep moving.**

Martin Luther King Jr, 1960



In NTW we are using **5 P's + Plan formulations** as a way of helping you understand your current difficulties, so that you can set goals and have plans to work on. You may want to work on this on your own, with friends or with a professional.

This booklet won't provide answers, but will help you to ask yourself key questions to understand yourself and your situation better. This may lead to some next steps for you to try.

Your formulation may change over time or as you discover more about yourself and your situation.



Ways to wellbeing

- Make sure that your goals and plans are realistic and important to you, not necessarily anyone else.
- Being active is really important for mental and physical health, for example walking around your home, going outside, gardening. Even though it may be the last thing you want to do. It can improve your mood and give you more energy.
- Friendly contact with people can boost your wellbeing. This can be through the phone, social media or face to face.
- Being curious and noticing what is around you is helpful and gives you a break from overwhelming or negative thoughts. This can also help you appreciate what matters to you.

Helpful websites

- Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust
A range of mental health self help guides available to view/download in various formats www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp
- Living Life www.lltff.com
- Moodjuice www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/mildmoderate/entry.asp

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