

Managing Distress

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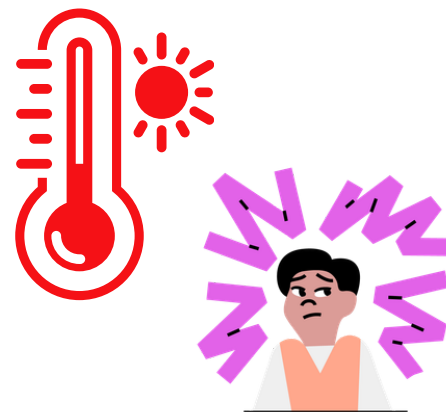
Please note that this blog post is drawn from lived experience and will not align with all experiences of distress. The content discussed here is not a substitute for professional medical advice.

What is distress and what does it look like?

Distress in the context of mental health, can be described as a state of overwhelm, where the stressors in your life outweigh your ability to cope with them. Distress can encompass a range of different emotions like sadness, anxiety, grief or anger. For me, a helpful way to conceptualise distress is by classifying my distress as hot or cold.

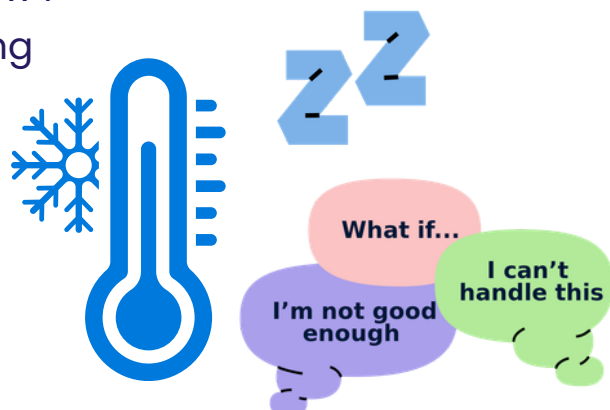
Hot distress is where I feel overwhelmed by how I am feeling, want to react to these feelings and have high energy.

- Sadness makes me feel apathetic and reckless
- Anxiety makes me feel jittery and on edge
- Anger is focused externally and can quickly turn into a spiral of what has gone wrong or who hasn't shown up in the way I would have liked them to



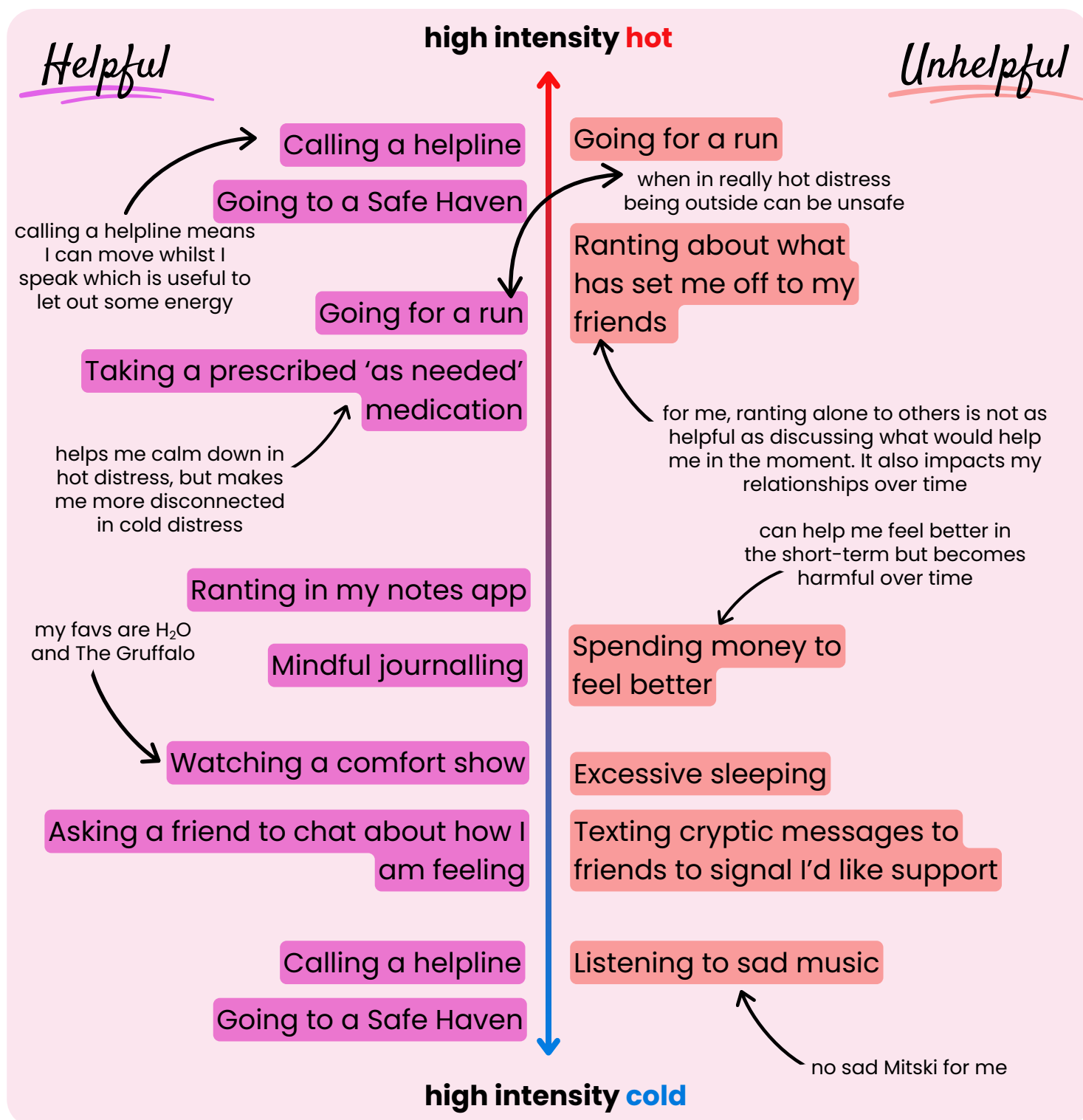
Cold distress is where I feel overwhelmed by how I am feeling, have low energy and feel like shutting down or disconnecting from my emotions.

- Sadness makes my body feel heavy and I withdraw from activities and relationships
- Anxiety feels frightening
- Anger is focused inwardly and starts feeling like shame



What can I do for myself if I am feeling distressed?

If you have experienced distress before it can be helpful to reflect on how you managed how you were feeling, or what things you could've done to better manage how you were feeling. Knowing the type and the extent to which I am experiencing distress can help me understand how I can support myself to move out of that distress range. It can also help me understand what things, people or places to avoid so that I do not make myself feel further distressed.



How can I help a friend or family member who is feeling distressed?

Sometimes when someone is distressed it can be difficult for them to know what might be helpful. Instead of asking “how can I help?” or “let me know if you need anything!” it can be more helpful to ask more specific questions like:

- Would it be more helpful to chat about how you are feeling, or solutions to the problem you’re facing?
- Would you like me to come as a support person to a Safe Haven or be here whilst you call a helpline?
- Do you want to call and chat right now?

I find that I can also prevent distress by doing things along the distress thermometer before reaching a certain level of intensity. I hope this blog has been helpful in sharing what strategies work for me for managing distress!

- Tara