

Seeing through the façade of anorexia: A grounded theory of change in emotion processes

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(All identifying information has been removed and participants
have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity)

Overview

- ▶ Background
- ▶ Rationale and aims
- ▶ Method
- ▶ Results
- ▶ Summary and implications
- ▶ Questions

Anorexia

- ▶ Serious mental health problem
- ▶ Typically develops in adolescence
- ▶ Affects approximately 0.9% of women over their lifetime
- ▶ Behaviours include extreme dieting, self-induced vomiting, and excessive exercise, to achieve a low body weight (BPS, n.d)
- ▶ Associated with poor treatment outcomes and long-term difficulties

Anorexia and emotions

- ▶ Early accounts of anorexia described problems with recognition and awareness of bodily states, including hunger and emotions (Bruch, 1978)
- ▶ More recent theoretical models include-
 - ▶ Emotion regulation
 - ▶ Low self-esteem
 - ▶ Perfectionism
 - ▶ Interpersonal problems

Anorexia and emotions - quantitative research

- ▶ Literature reviews (Oldershaw et al., 2015; Lavender et al., 2015)
 - ▶ Negative beliefs about emotions
 - ▶ Poor emotion awareness
 - ▶ Maladaptive (unhelpful) coping strategies
 - ▶ Emotional suppression
 - ▶ Reduced capacity to tolerate negative emotions
 - ▶ Difficulties controlling behaviour when distressed
 - ▶ Avoidance of situations likely to induce emotion

Anorexia and emotions - qualitative research

▶ Fox (2009)

- ▶ Early experiences of overwhelming emotions
- ▶ Suppression of emotions in family
- ▶ Associated with inhibiting emotions and using eating disorder behaviour to suppress emotions
- ▶ Not knowing how to manage emotions
- ▶ Needing permission to express emotions
- ▶ Questioning their sense of themselves as emotional beings

Treatment

- ▶ NICE (2017)-
 - ▶ CBT-ED
 - ▶ The Maudsley Model of Anorexia Treatment in Adults (MANTRA)
 - ▶ Specialist Supportive Clinical Management (SSCM)
 - ▶ Focal Psychodynamic Therapy (FPT)
- ▶ Emotion-focussed treatments
 - ▶ Emotion Acceptance Behaviour Therapy (EABT)
 - ▶ Emotion Focussed Therapy (EFT)
 - ▶ Radically Open Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (RO-DBT)
- ▶ No consensus on which approach is most effective

Rationale and aims

- ▶ Difficulties in regulating emotions have been implicated in the development and maintenance of anorexia
- ▶ Little known about the role of emotions in recovery process
- ▶ Bridging the gap in the literature by-
 - ▶ Exploring participants' subjective experiences
 - ▶ Developing a theoretical account of emotion processes in **the process of recovery from anorexia**

Method

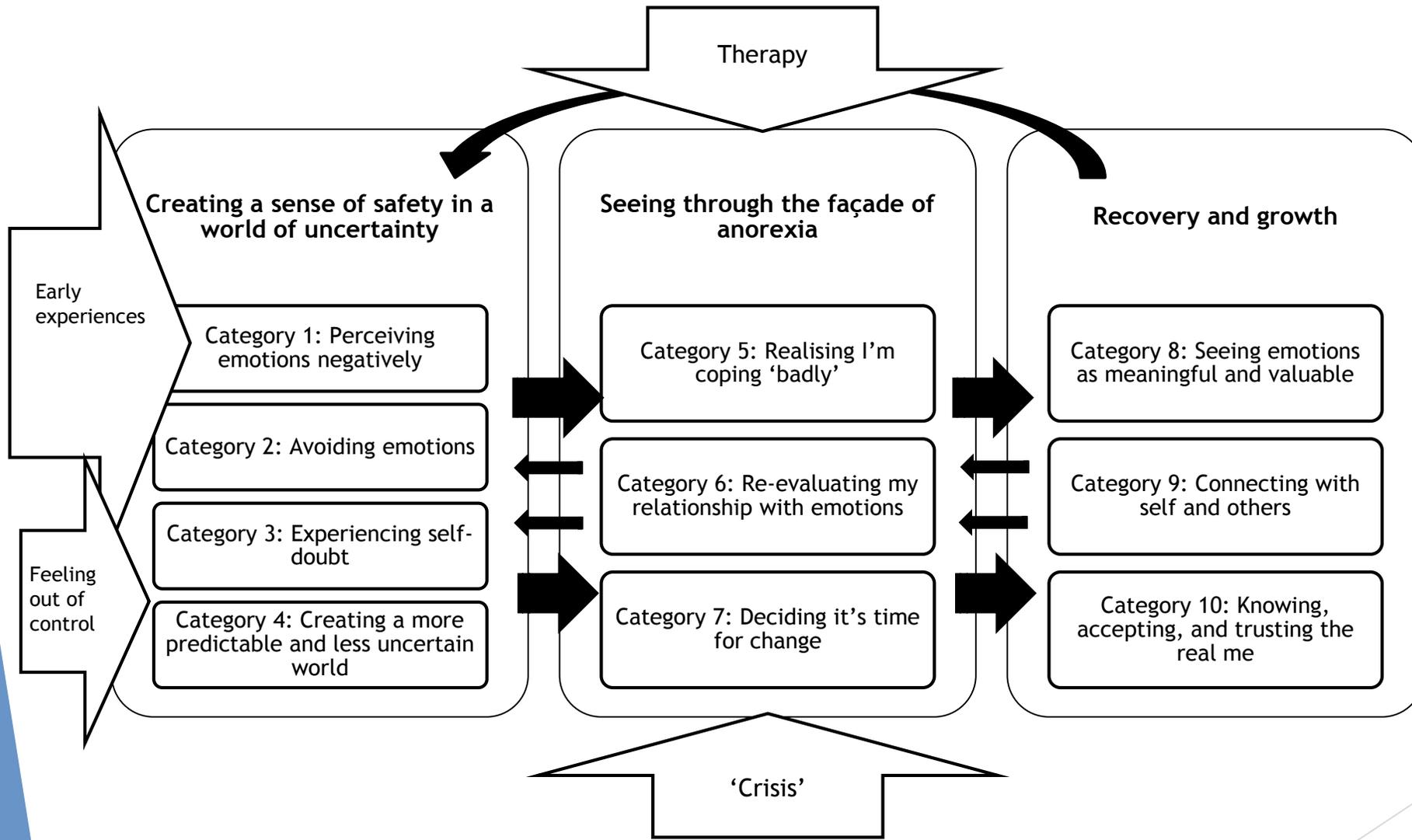
- ▶ Semi-structured interviews
- ▶ Participants = Adult outpatients with a diagnosis of anorexia (n=9)
- ▶ Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014)
- ▶ Participant validation

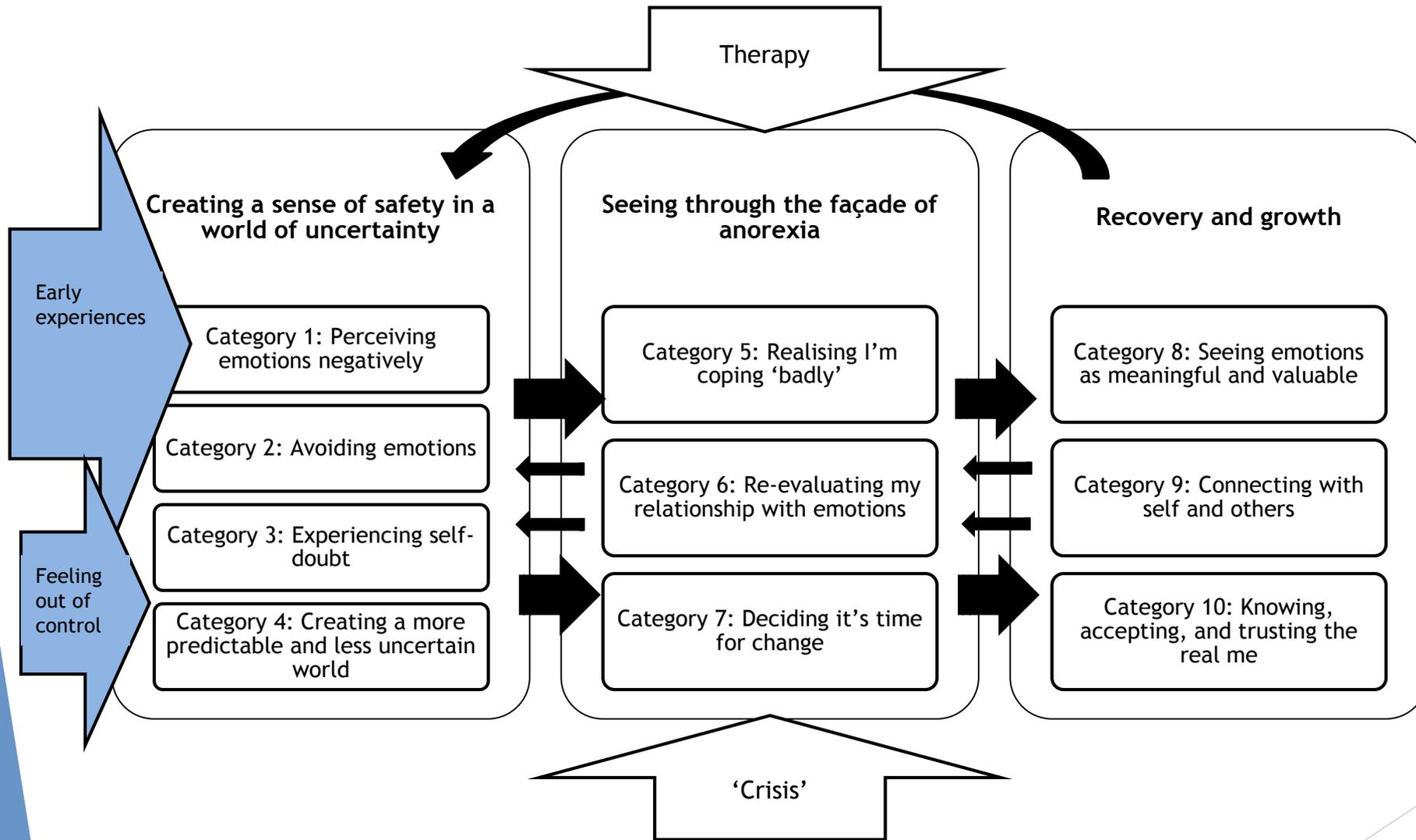
Results

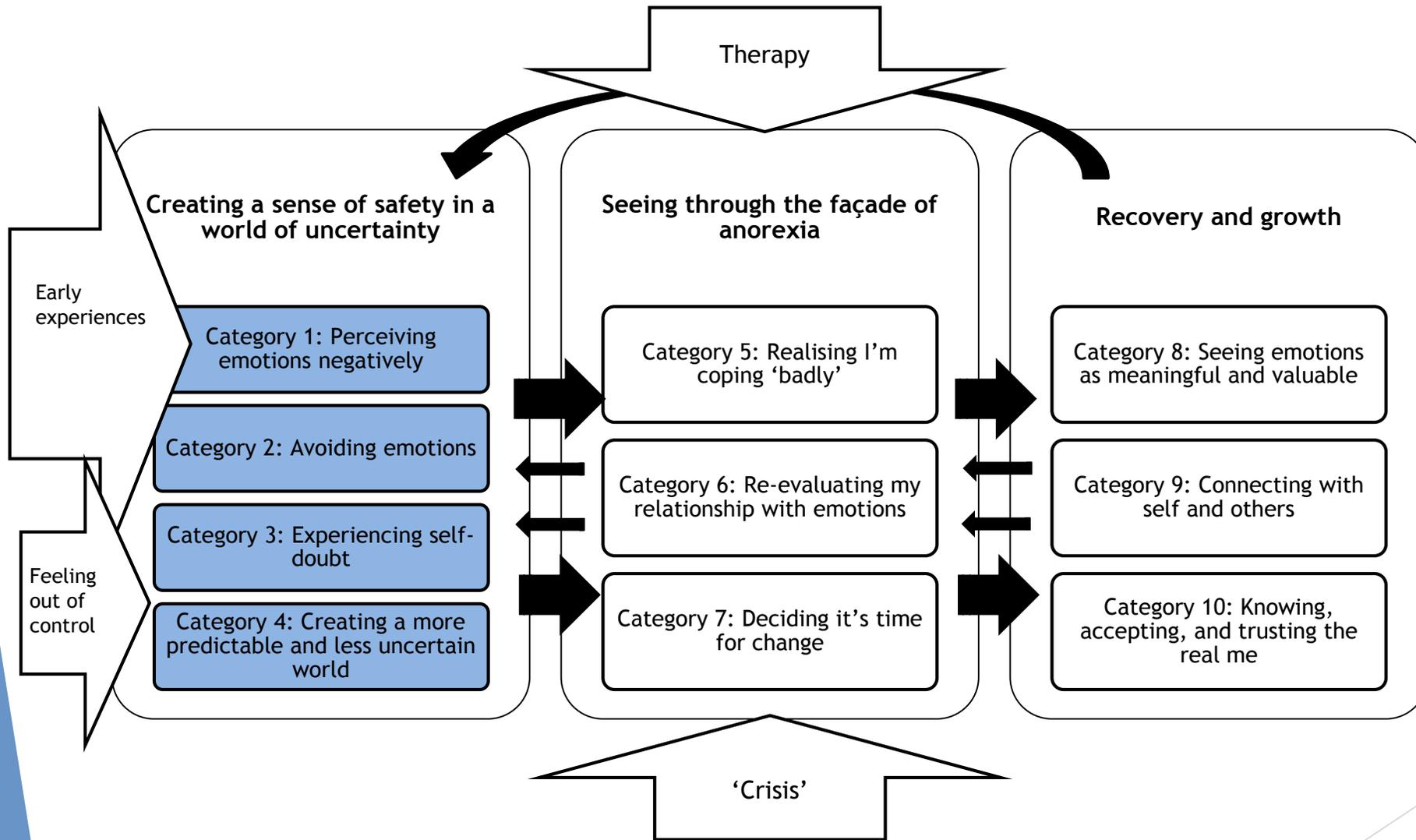
- ▶ Three overarching ‘themes’
 - ▶ Creating a sense of safety in a world of uncertainty
 - ▶ Seeing through the façade of anorexia
 - ▶ Recovery and growth

“I guess in the end [...] you’re sort of choosing safety over the intensity of feeling [...] And yeah I guess what happens with the eating disorder [...] is that I kind of build a really safe and knowable little world for myself but there’s no one else in it [...] you get none of the kind of the life or the other positive emotions, or the sense of connection.”

[Maddie]







Perceiving emotions negatively

“I think if I was to be a really emotional person then I would get nowhere in life.” [Nadine]

“I think in my family there was a bit of disdain for people who were kind of perceived as being melodramatic or attention seeking.” [Maddie]

Avoiding emotions

*“I’m quite good at shutting them [emotions] off quite quickly...
you just do it without thinking. (May)*

*“So, I think I linked the feeling full with the feeling of being full
with emotion [...] with purging it’s just out. It’s out of my body.”
(Grace)*

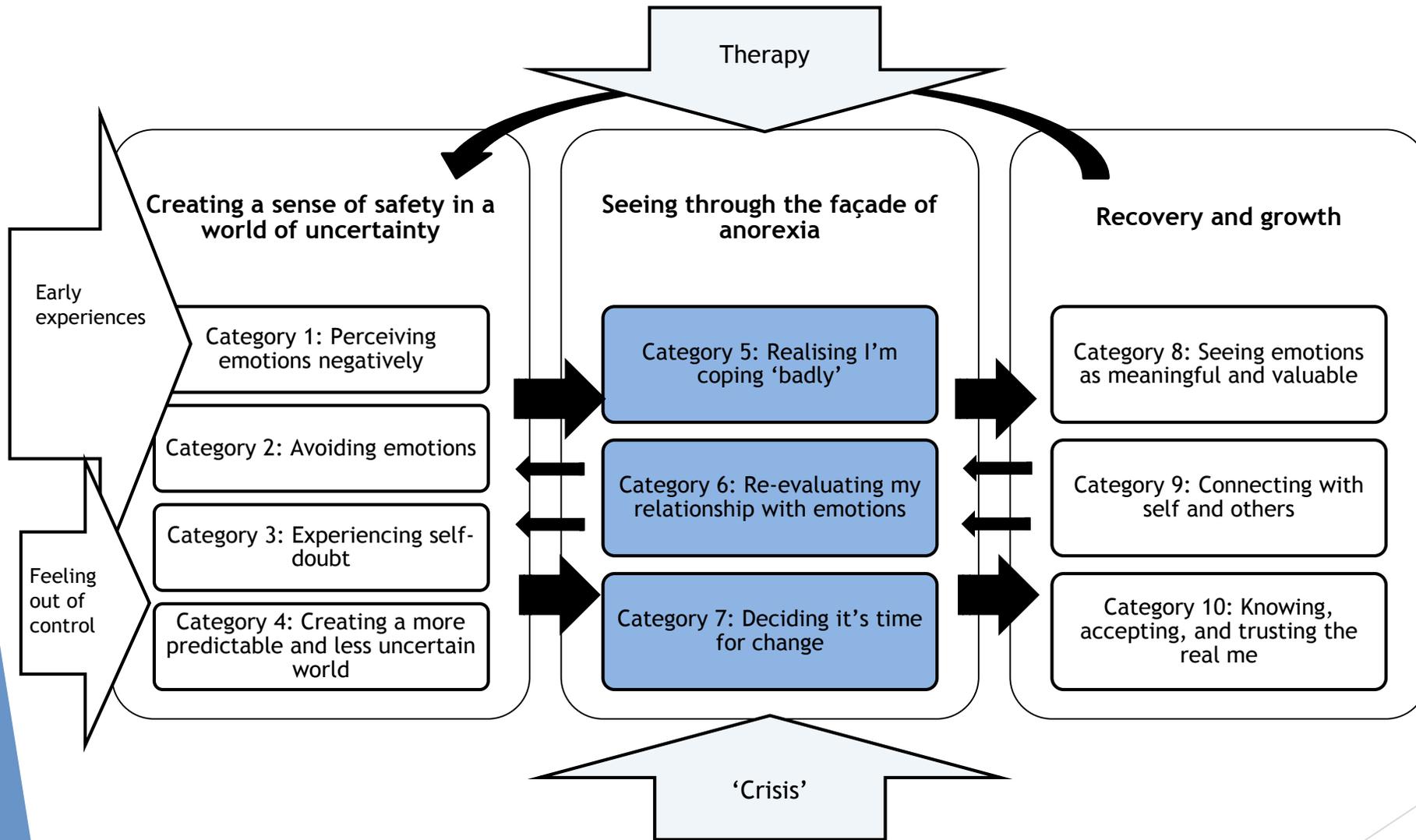
Experiencing self-doubt

“Should I have had that to eat? Should I have not had it? Do I need that to eat? Do I not need it? Have I had too much?” [Rachel]

Creating a more predictable and less uncertain world

“...like having to have the structure and doing exercise continuously. I just felt like it kept me safe even though it was incredibly unsafe.” [Claire]

“I suppose complete and utter control [...] definitely in terms of going out to eat [...] I would have had to have known like at least a week before.” [Kate]



Realising I'm coping 'badly'

“Do you know that thing ‘whack a mole’ where you try and hit things and other things pop up? [...] like when I get rid of one bad coping mechanism and another one pops up.” [Kate]

Re-evaluating my relationship with emotions

“So yeah part of this process for me has been [...] becoming aware of that approach to emotions that I had very much internalised.”

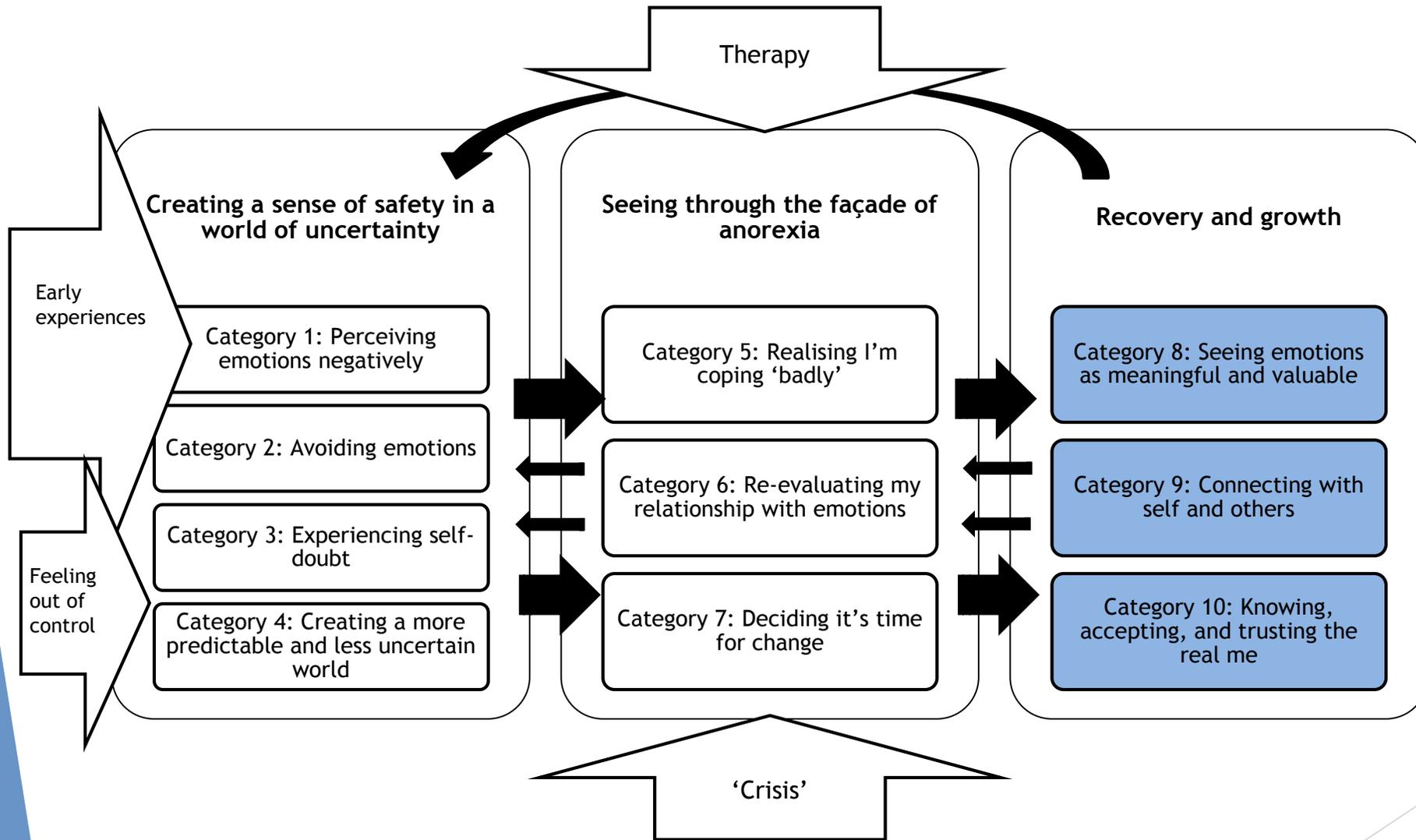
[Maddie]

“Yeah there has been some shift [...] Sometimes yeah I want to feel nothing... but I don’t want to feel like that all the time.

Whereas I did want to feel like that all the time.” [Grace]

Deciding it's time for change

I felt like there was becoming this quite wide gap between myself and some of my friends and um what they'd managed to do with their lives and um yeah I guess I was just quite determined to try and lead a relatively normal life. [Kate]



Seeing emotions as meaningful and valuable

“I know in order to get better and to improve my life I have to feel emotions. It’s [...] part of life and I’m only just beginning to realise that.” [Mo]

“I think like the things that generate positive emotions are like also the things that generate negative emotions [...] in the sense of engaging with the world.” [Maddie]

Connecting with self and others

“I was a bit [...] like I don’t want to talk about emotions [...] but actually I have ended up talking about my emotions and it has been really helpful.” [Kate].

“If I’m feeling something so intense and I can’t put my finger on it [...] I feel it in my body [...] I’ll talk to it and ask it questions like what are you? why are you here?”. [Grace]

“Once I know who I am that’s going to help in all areas [...] in socialising [...] with the eating [...] coming to terms with who I am.” [Sue]

Knowing, accepting, and trusting the 'real me'

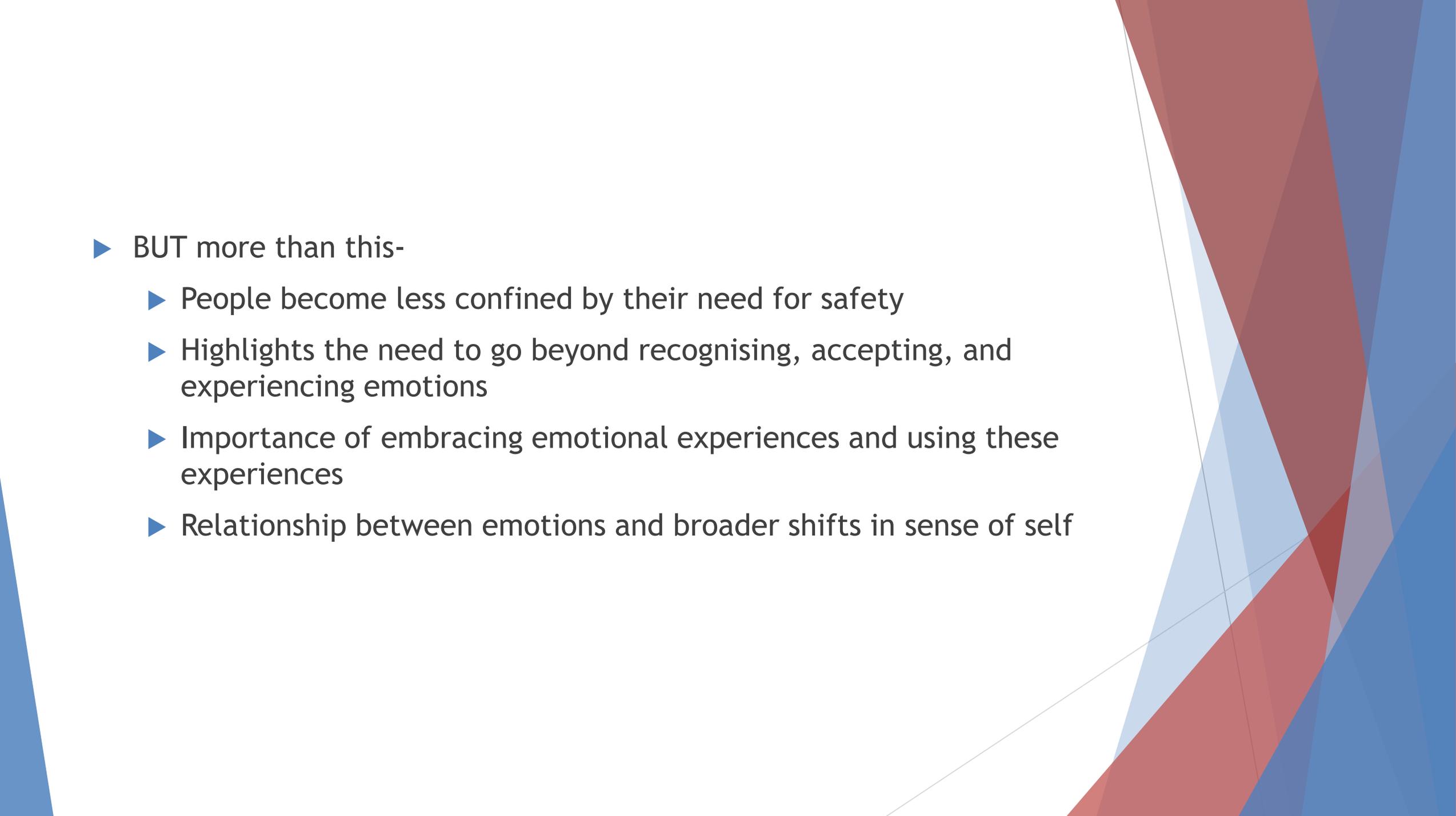
“And the biggest thing for me is I’m beginning to find out a little bit about who I am. The real me.” [Sue]

“It’s that confidence to be okay with yourself and your reactions to things.” [May]

*“I personally think that’s why emotions are SO relevant to my treatment [...] it’ll definitely help me as a person because I’ll be a lot more content [...] able to regulate myself. And not rely on other people.”
[May]*

Summary and implications

- ▶ Supports research suggesting difficulties in regulating emotions and the influence of early experiences
- ▶ Anorexia as one of many unhelpful coping strategies to manage emotions, as well as feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty
- ▶ BUT also that people have capacity for recovery and growth
- ▶ Suggests that difficulties in emotion processes are amenable to change
- ▶ Supports emotion-focussed interventions that-
 - ▶ Explore function of eating disorder in relation to emotions
 - ▶ Encourage people to connect with emotions

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- ▶ BUT more than this-
 - ▶ People become less confined by their need for safety
 - ▶ Highlights the need to go beyond recognising, accepting, and experiencing emotions
 - ▶ Importance of embracing emotional experiences and using these experiences
 - ▶ Relationship between emotions and broader shifts in sense of self

Questions?