

WHEN ⚡SYMPTOM⚡ FLARE

A 4-step, science-informed guide to
calming your nervous system
during chronic illness flare-ups



WHEN SYMPTOMS FLARE

A nervous-system informed guide
for chronic illness, autoimmune
conditions, and persistent
symptoms

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A Gentle Introduction

Flare-ups can feel frightening.

Whether it's pain, fatigue, gut symptoms, dizziness, inflammation, or a wave of exhaustion — symptoms often intensify quickly and unpredictably.

When this happens, the body doesn't just experience physical discomfort. The nervous system often shifts into threat mode.

A Gentle Introduction

This guide offers a calm, practical approach to:

- Reduce escalation
- Steady your nervous system
- Support your body compassionately
- Shorten the secondary stress response that can amplify symptoms

This is not about denying symptoms.
It is not about pushing through.

It is about helping your system feel safer.

Why Flare-Ups Escalate

Many chronic conditions involve sensitive nervous systems.

When a symptom appears, even a small one, the brain may interpret it as danger.

This can trigger:

Fight / flight activation

Adrenaline release

Faster breathing

Muscle tension

Heightened pain sensitivity

Increased inflammation signalling

Why Flare-Ups Escalate

**This does NOT mean symptoms
are imagined.**

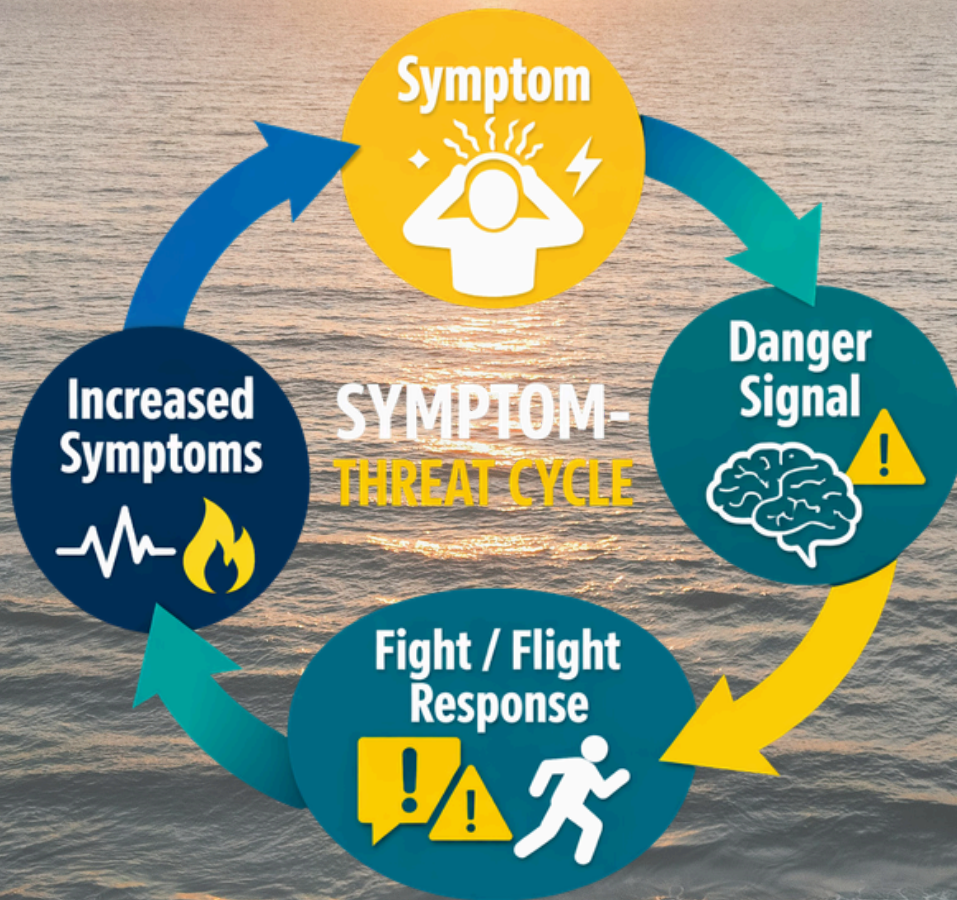
**It means real symptoms can be
amplified when the nervous system
detects threat.**

**Understanding this loop gives you
leverage.**

The Symptom-Threat Cycle

1. A sensation appears (pain, nausea, fatigue, tightness).
2. The brain scans for danger.
3. Worry or “what if?” thoughts arise.
4. Adrenaline and cortisol increase.
5. Breathing becomes shallow.
6. Muscles tighten.
7. Symptoms intensify.
8. The brain registers “See? Something is wrong.”

The Symptom-Threat Cycle



The loop strengthens.

The earlier you intervene, the easier it is to interrupt.

THE 4-STEP FLARE RESPONSE PLAN

STEP 1: NOTICE EARLY SIGNS

STEP 2: REGULATE THE BODY FIRST

STEP 3: PAUSE THE “WHAT IF” SPIRAL

STEP 4: SUPPORT THE BODY
COMPASSIONATELY

Step 1: Notice Early Signs

Early signs might include:

- Subtle muscle tension
- Faster breathing
- A sudden urge to fix or research
- Catastrophic thinking
- Irritability
- Heat or shakiness
- Withdrawal

Step 1: Notice Early Signs

Ask yourself:

- What am I noticing in my body?
- What just changed?
- Has my breathing shifted?

Early noticing reduces escalation.

Step 2: Regulate the Body First

Before analysing symptoms, calm
the system.

Calm the System Breathing.

A longer exhale stimulates the vagus
nerve and signals safety to the
brain.

Even if symptoms remain, reducing
adrenaline can prevent further
amplification.

Step 2: Regulate the Body First

- Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly.
- Breathe in slowly for 4.
- Breathe out gently for 6.
- Let the belly expand on the inhale.
- Keep your focus on the counting.
- Continue for 3-5 minutes.

Regulation first. Interpretation later.

Step 3: Pause the “What If” Spiral

Once your breathing steadies, gently address thoughts.

Instead of:

- “What if this gets worse?”
- “What if I can’t cope?”
- “What if this symptom continues?”

Step 3: Pause the “What If” Spiral

Try:

- “This is uncomfortable, but I am safe.”
- “My nervous system is activated.”
- “I am responding to this calmly.”

You are not arguing with the symptom.

You are reducing threat signals.

Step 4: Support the Body Compassionately

After calming the system, ask:

What does my body need right now?

Pressure increases threat.
Compassion reduces internal
pressure.

Compassion helps to calm a flare-
up.

Step 4: Support the Body Compassionately

Possibilities include:

- Heat pack
- Rest
- Hydration
- Light stretching
- Reducing stimulation
- Cancelling non-essential tasks
- Eating something simple

After the Flare: Reflect, Don't Blame

Once symptoms settle, reflect
gently.

Consider:

- Was I overtired?
- Was there emotional stress?
- Did I overextend?
- Was I worried about something?
- Had I been ignoring early signals?

After the Flare: Reflect, Don't Blame

Notice patterns without judgement.

Awareness builds nervous system
literacy.

Long-Term Nervous System Stability

Reducing flare frequency often involves:

- Pacing and energy awareness
- Mindfulness practice
- CBT for health anxiety or stress loops
- Trauma-informed support
- Gentle exposure to feared activities
- Building daily regulation habits

Long-Term Nervous System Stability

Repeated experiences of safety can gradually reduce the intensity and frequency of flare-ups for many people.

This reflects current understanding of chronic pain and neuroplastic processes; the nervous system can learn both threat and safety over time.

Change is usually gradual, not dramatic.

Flare-Up Reflection & Tracking Sheet

Use this regularly to understand your symptom flare-ups better.

1. Early Signals I Noticed:

(Physical sensations, mood changes, thoughts)

2. What Was Happening Before?

(Stressors, activity level, sleep, emotional triggers)

3. Nervous System Signs:

- Faster breathing
- Muscle tension
- Urgency
- Heat/sweating
- Catastrophic thoughts
- Other: _____

4. What I Did to Regulate:

- Breathing practice
- Paused “what if” thoughts
- Heat/rest
- Gentle movement
- Cancelled non-essential tasks
- Other::_____

5. What Helped (Even Slightly):

6. What I Learned:

Over time, this builds early awareness and personalised understanding of what supports your system



About & Next Steps

I am an accredited Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist with over 17 years' experience across the NHS, charities, and private practice.

My work focuses on supporting adults living with chronic pain, persistent physical symptoms, and long-term health conditions.

I integrate evidence-based CBT with mindfulness and mind-body informed approaches, drawing on current understanding of chronic pain and neuroplastic processes.

Alongside professional training, my work is informed by lived experience of chronic illness, bringing realism and sensitivity to the therapeutic space.

I work with a small number of clients at a time to offer thoughtful, paced support.



What Matt said about working with me:

Tina has been nothing short of excellent. I was looking for someone who understood TMS and could help me with extreme anxiety, compulsive perfectionism, IBS and CPPS symptoms I was experiencing. Her therapy gives you the tools to recover and more. I've been able to go from thinking non-stop, fearing pretty much everything, to actually almost being laid back! Which is crazy! Family and friends have noticed a distinct change in how I am day to day which is really great.

What I think is especially important is that I have not just been given tools to 'cope', I have been shown a process and have slowly learnt and experienced it. This isn't really something you can 'lose' once you understand it. I am now more resilient and able to tackle the day to day with more joy and less stress.

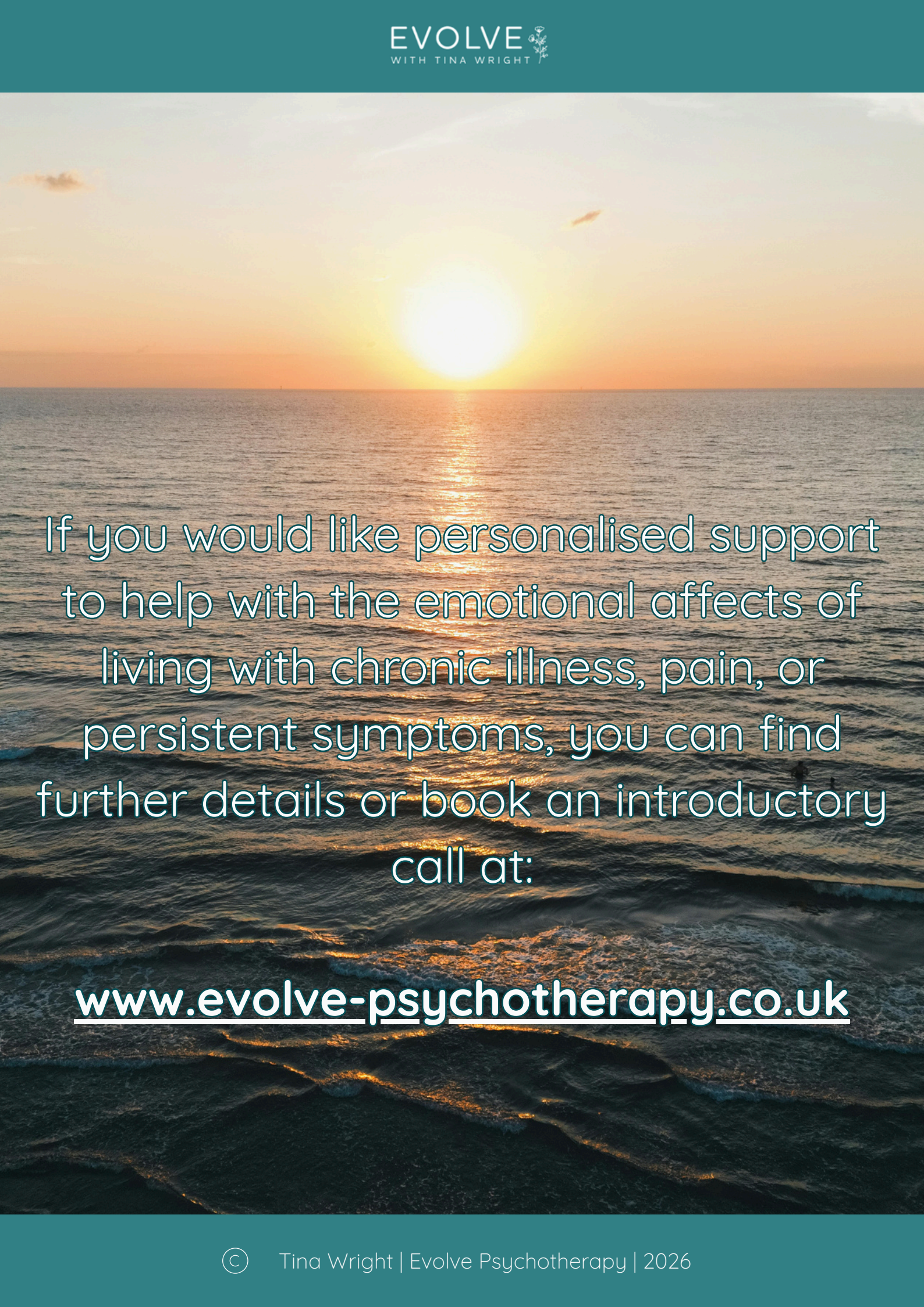


What Matt said about working with me:

My CPPS and IBS symptoms are now under control. I can go and do what I want without worrying about them. They are not totally gone yet, but I have many days go by without any symptoms whatsoever. I am experiencing less and less symptoms with every passing week and have no doubt I can completely resolve them with a little more time. I don't experience any pain whatsoever anymore if I get symptoms.

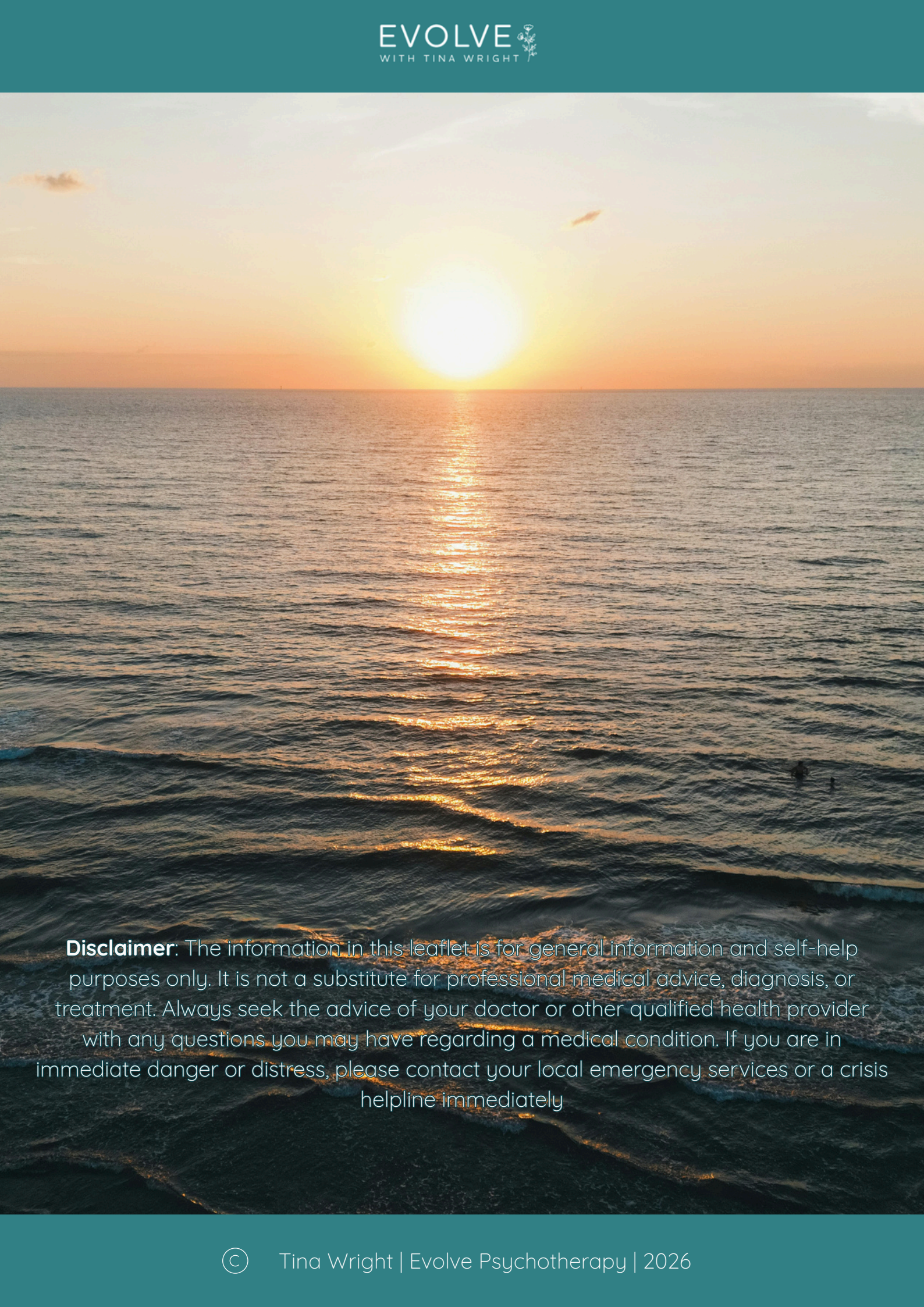
Overall I feel like I have control over my mind and body again!

Thanks!

A serene sunset over the ocean with the sun low on the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sky and reflecting on the water's surface. The waves are gently breaking in the foreground.

If you would like personalised support to help with the emotional affects of living with chronic illness, pain, or persistent symptoms, you can find further details or book an introductory call at:

www.evolve-psychotherapy.co.uk



Disclaimer: The information in this leaflet is for general information and self-help purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your doctor or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition. If you are in immediate danger or distress, please contact your local emergency services or a crisis helpline immediately

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