

# Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide



**World Health  
Organization**



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# Preface

*Doing What Matters in Times of Stress* is a WHO stress management guide for coping with adversity. This illustrated guide supports implementation of WHO's recommendation for stress management.

There are many causes of stress, including personal difficulties (e.g. conflict with loved ones, being alone, lack of income, worries about the future), problems at work (e.g. conflict with colleagues, an extremely demanding or insecure job) or major threats in your community (e.g. violence, disease, lack of economic opportunity).

This guide is for anyone who experiences stress, ranging from parents and other carers to health professionals working in dangerous situations. It is for both people who flee war, losing all they have, and well protected people living in communities at peace. Anyone living anywhere can experience high levels of stress.

Informed by available evidence and extensive field testing, the guide provides information and practical skills to help people cope with adversity. While the causes of adversity must be addressed, there is also a need to support people's mental health.

I hope that you will find this WHO guide useful, and that it helps all readers in their efforts to cope with stress.

Dévora Kestel

Director  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Use  
World Health Organization

(This version of *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress* is a field test version.  
Please provide any feedback to: [psych\\_interventions@who.int](mailto:psych_interventions@who.int))

# Acknowledgements

*Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide* is a component of a forthcoming WHO stress management course, Self-Help Plus (SH+),<sup>1-2</sup> initiated by Mark van Ommeren (Mental Health Unit, Department of Mental Health and Substance Use, WHO) as part of the WHO Series on Low-Intensity Psychological Interventions.

## Content creation

Inspired by his previous work,<sup>3</sup> **Russ Harris** (Melbourne, Australia) created the content of SH+, including *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide*. This comprised both writing the text and making initial sketches to inform illustrations.

## Project coordination and management

**Kenneth Carswell** (WHO) (2015–2020) and **JoAnne Epping-Jordan** (Seattle, USA) (2014–2015) have managed the SH+ project, including the editing and design of this book.

## Project development group (alphabetical, with affiliations at time of contributions)

At different stages of this project, Teresa Au (WHO), Felicity Brown (WHO), Kenneth Carswell (WHO), JoAnne Epping-Jordan (Seattle, USA), Claudette Foley (Melbourne, Australia), Claudia Garcia-Moreno (WHO), Russ Harris (Melbourne, Australia), Cary Kogan (WHO) and Mark van Ommeren (WHO) contributed to the conceptualization and development of the SH+ project, including this book.

## Illustrations

Julie Smith (Melbourne, Australia) provided all illustrations and artwork.

## Book production

David Wilson (Oxford, United Kingdom) was responsible for text editing, and Alessandro Mannocchi (Rome, Italy) for graphic design.

## Narration of audio exercises

Sanjo Ogunseye (Lagos, Nigeria) narrated the audio exercises that accompany the book.

## Administrative support

Ophel Riano (WHO).

1 Epping-Jordan JE, Harris R, Brown FL, Carswell K, Foley C, García-Moreno C, Kogan C, van Ommeren M. *Self-Help Plus (SH+): a new WHO stress management package*. *World Psychiatry*. 2016 Oct;15(3):295-6.

2 Tol WA, Leku MR, Lakin DP, Carswell K, Augustinavicius J, Adaku A, Au TM, Brown FL, Bryant RA, Garcia-Moreno C, Musci RJ, Ventevogel P, White RG, van Ommeren M. *Guided self-help to reduce psychological distress in South Sudanese female refugees in Uganda: a cluster randomised trial*. *The Lancet Global Health*. 2020 Feb;8(2):e254-e263.

3 Harris R, Aisbett B. *The Illustrated Happiness Trap*. Boston: Shambhala, 2013.



**Book review** (with affiliation at time of review)

Book reviewers included Mona Alqazzaz (WHO), Ebert Beate (Aschaffenburg, Germany), Cécile Bizouerne (Action Contre la Faim), Margriet Blaauw (War Trauma Foundation), Kate Cavanagh, (University of Sussex), Rachel Cohen (Geneva, Switzerland), Elizabeth De Castro (Children's Rights Resource Center), Manuel De Lara (WHO), Rabih El Chammay (Ministry of Public Health, Lebanon), Mohamed El Nawawi (Wintherthur, Switzerland), Boaz Feldman (Geneva, Switzerland), Kenneth Fung (UHN – Toronto Western Hospital), Anna Goloktionova (IMC), Brandon Gray (WHO), Elise Griede (War Child Holland), Jennifer Hall (WHO), Fahmy Hanna (WHO), Louise Hayes (Melbourne, Australia), Tiina Hokkanen (Fida International), Rebecca Horn (Queen Margaret University), Lynne Jones (Harvard School of Public Health), Mark Jordans, (Healthnet TPO), Dévora Kestel (WHO), Bianca King (Geneva, Switzerland), Nils Kolstrup (UiT The Arctic University of Norway), Aiysha Malik (WHO), Carmen Martinez (Médecins Sans Frontières), Ken Miller (War Child Holland), Mirjam Fagerheim Moiba (Njala University), Lynette Monteiro (University of Ottawa), Eva Murino (WHO), Sebastiana Da Gama Nkomo (WHO), Brian Ogallo (WHO), Patricia Omidian (Focusing International), Andrea Pereira (Geneva, Switzerland), Bhava Poudyal (Kathmandu, Nepal), Beatrice Pouligny (Washington DC, USA), Megin Reijnders (WHO), Patricia Robinson (Mountainview Consulting Group), Shekhar Saxena (WHO), Alison Schafer (World Vision Australia), Pratap Sharan (All India Institute of Medical Sciences), Marian Schilperoord (UNHCR), Andrew Thomson (Car Gomm), Mikai and Hana van Ommeren (Divonne-les-Bains, France), Peter Ventevogel (UNHCR), Matthieu Villatte (Evidence-Based Practice Institute), Sarah Watts (WHO), Wietse Tol (HealthRight International's Peter C. Alderman Program), Nana Wiedemann (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), Inka Weissbecker (International Medical Corps), Mike Wessells (Columbia University), Ross White (University of Glasgow), Eyad Yanes (WHO) and Diana Zandi (WHO), and all emergency-affected people in Syria, Turkey, Uganda and Ukraine who participated in adaptation and field-testing of the book and its images.

**Testing** (alphabetical)

The following organizations supported development of this book through field testing: HealthRight International's Peter C. Alderman Program (in collaboration with Ministry of Health Uganda, UNHCR, WHO Country Office in Uganda), International Medical Corps, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Médecins du Monde, the University of Verona and other members of the RE-DEFINE consortium, and the WHO Country Office in Syria. Acknowledgements of the contributions of colleagues involved in the testing of the SH+ course will be included in the publication of the course and articles describing its evaluation.

**Funding** (alphabetical)

European Commission; Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) Programme (managed by Elrha); United Nations Fund for Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict; and the WHO Country Office in Syria.

**Note on translation and adaptation of this guide**

WHO will publish a translation of this work into Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish.

To avoid duplication of translations, please consider contacting WHO at <http://www.who.int/about/licensing> prior to starting an adaptation.

**If you are experiencing stress, you are not alone.**

**Right now, there are many other people in your community and all around the world who are also struggling with stress.**

**We will help you to learn practical skills for dealing with stress.  
You will see us throughout this book, as we teach you the skills you need.**


**Enjoy your journey of learning how to do what matters in times of stress!**



## How to use this book

This book has five sections, each containing a new idea and technique. These are easy to learn and can be used for just a few minutes each day to help you reduce stress. You can read one section every few days and take time to practise the exercises and use the learning in the days in between. Or, you can read the book through once, applying whatever you can, and then read it again, taking more time to appreciate the ideas and practise the techniques. Practising and applying the ideas to your life is key for reducing stress. You can read the guide at home, during break or rest periods at work, before you go to sleep or any other time when you might have a few moments to concentrate on taking care of yourself.

If you find that doing the exercises in this book is not enough for you to cope with intolerable stress, then please seek help from relevant health or social services, or from trusted people in your community.

If you have a device for accessing the Internet and storing audio files, when you see the symbol  in the book you can download an audio version of the exercise from <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/9789240003927> to support your practice.

If you are not able to access the online audio files, you can still get similar benefit from reading and carefully following the instructions and exercises in this book.

Part 1

# GROUNDING



This book is to help you manage STRESS.



“Stress” means feeling troubled or threatened by life.

Stress can be due to major threats...

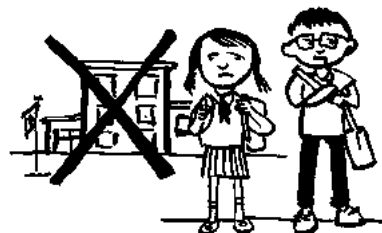
One man did something really bad to me



**FAMILY VIOLENCE**



**ILLNESS**



**NO SCHOOL**



**PROBLEMS  
PROVIDING FOR YOUR  
FAMILY**

**DISPLACED FROM HOME**



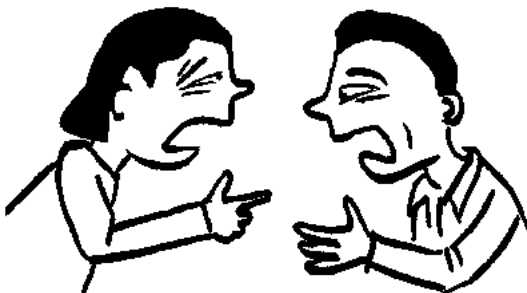
**VIOLENCE**



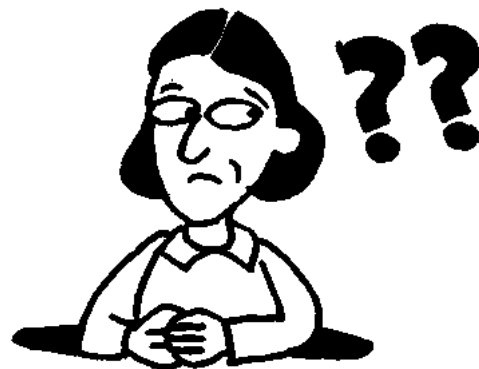
**IN YOUR  
COMMUNITY**

...or smaller problems.

**ARGUMENTS WITH  
YOUR FAMILY**



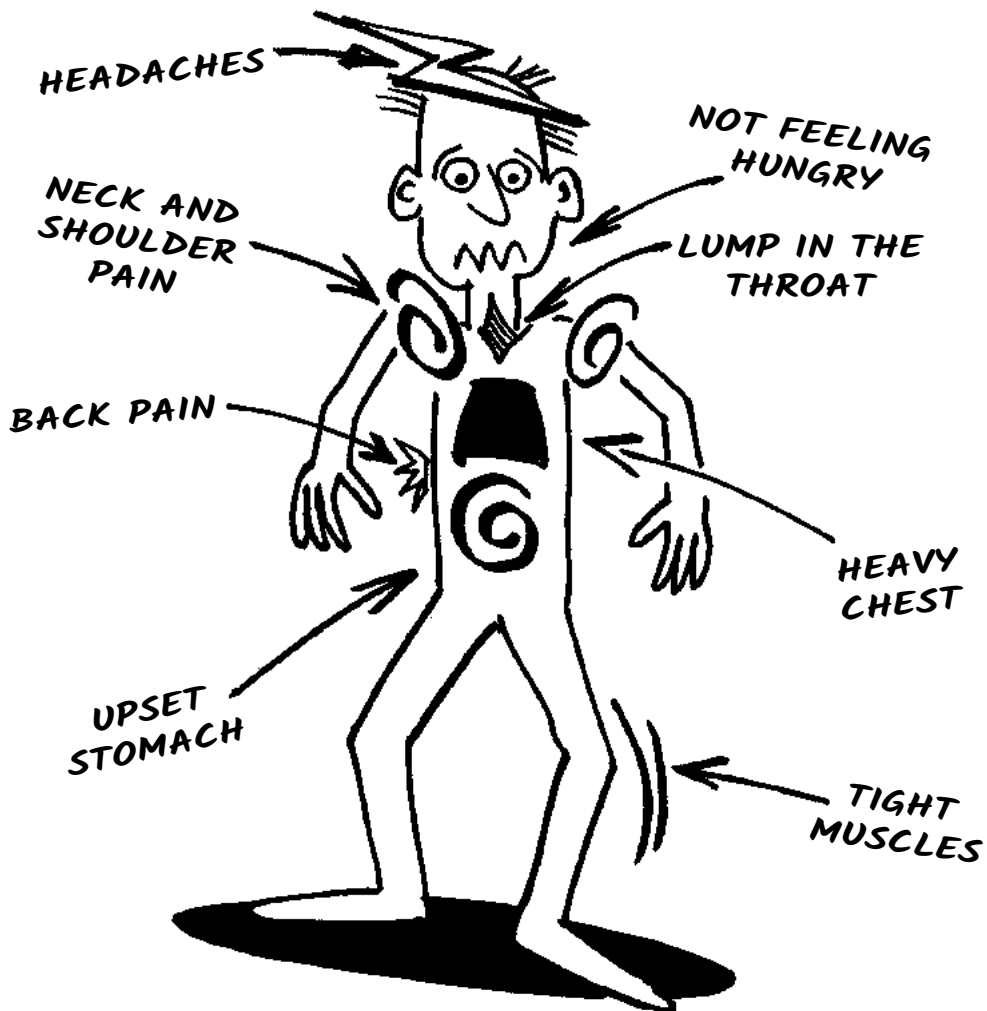
**UNCERTAINTY ABOUT  
THE FUTURE**





Everyone experiences stress at times. A little bit of stress is not a problem.

But very high stress often affects the body. Many people get unpleasant feelings.



Other people find their body gets sick – skin rashes, infections, illnesses or bowel problems.

## When they are stressed, many people ...

...cannot focus



...get angry easily



...cannot sit still



...have difficulty sleeping



...feel sad or guilty



...worry



...cry



...feel very tired



...have changes in appetite.



And many of us think a lot about bad things from the past or bad things we fear in the future.

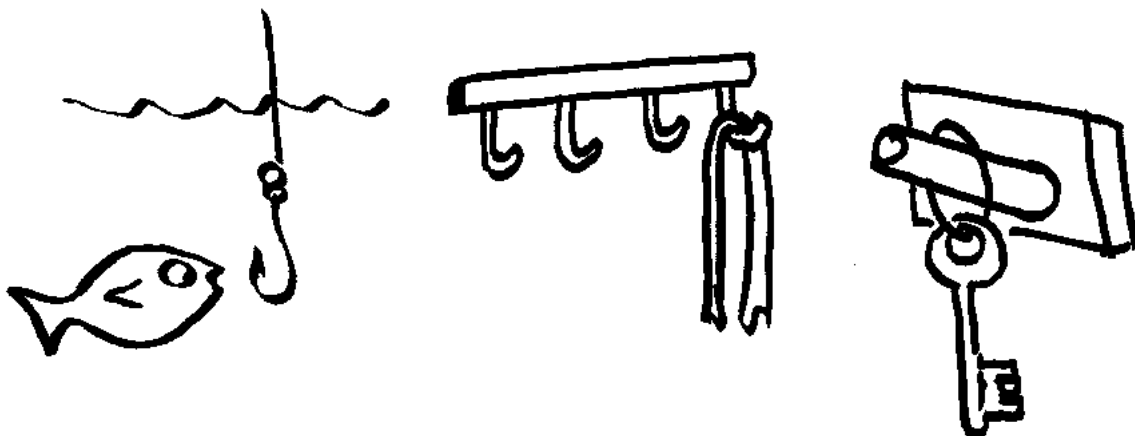




These powerful thoughts and feelings are a natural part of stress.  
But problems can occur if we get “hooked” by them.



What does “hooked” mean?  
Well, there are many types of hooks.



When something is on a hook,  
it cannot get away.  
The hook traps it.



In the same way, we can get  
hooked by our difficult thoughts  
and feelings.



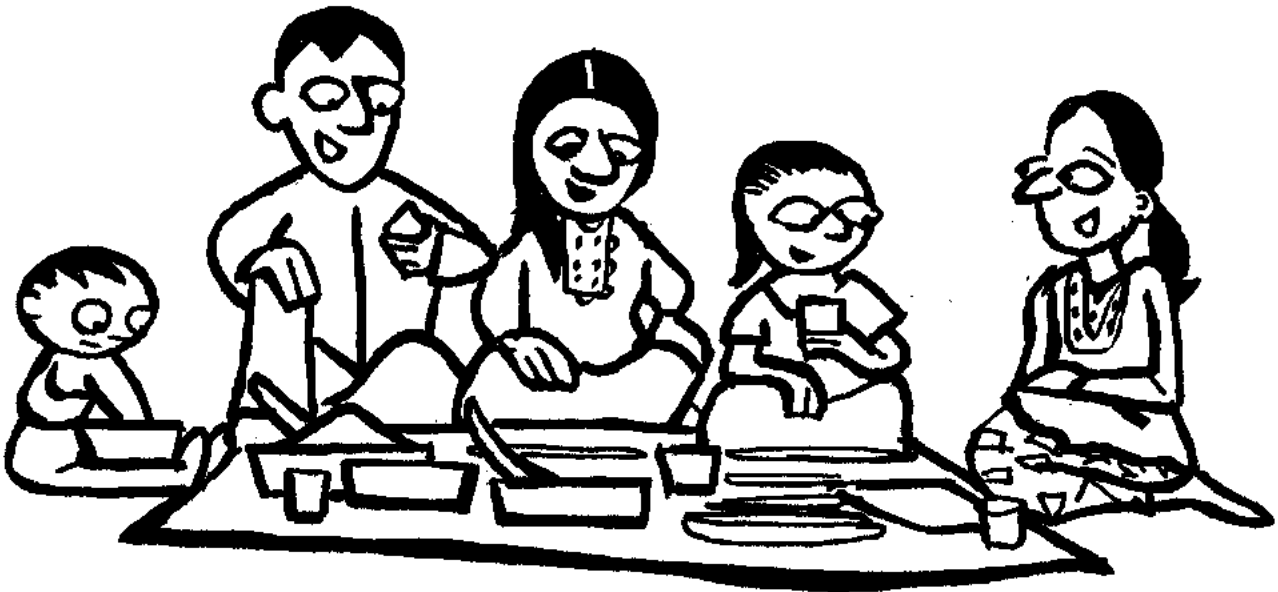
One moment, you might be  
playing with children...



...and the next moment,  
you might be hooked by difficult  
thoughts and feelings.



One moment, you might be enjoying sharing a meal...



... and the next moment, you might be hooked by angry thoughts and feelings. You may feel as if you are being pulled away by anger, even if you are still there.

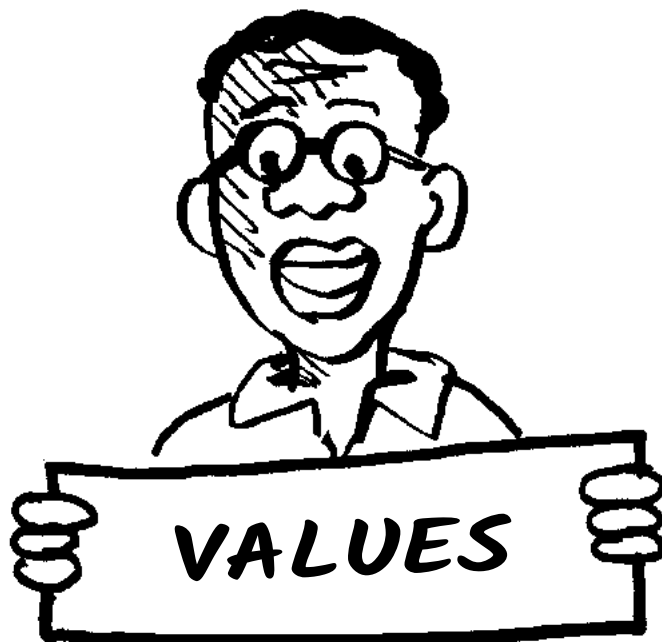


So these difficult thoughts and feelings "hook" us and pull us away from our VALUES.

What are values?



Values are your deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be.



For example, if you are a parent or if you have responsibilities caring for others, what kind of person do you want to be?



- Loving
- Wise
- Attentive
- Committed
- Persistent
- Responsible
- Calm
- Caring
- Protective
- Courageous

So values describe the sort of person you want to be; how you want to treat yourself and others and the world around you.





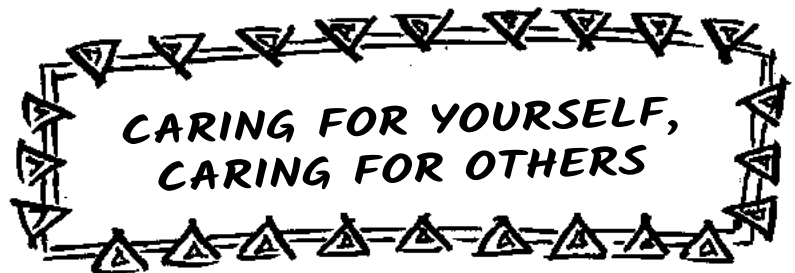
Just reading this book means you are likely acting on some of your values. Do you see how?

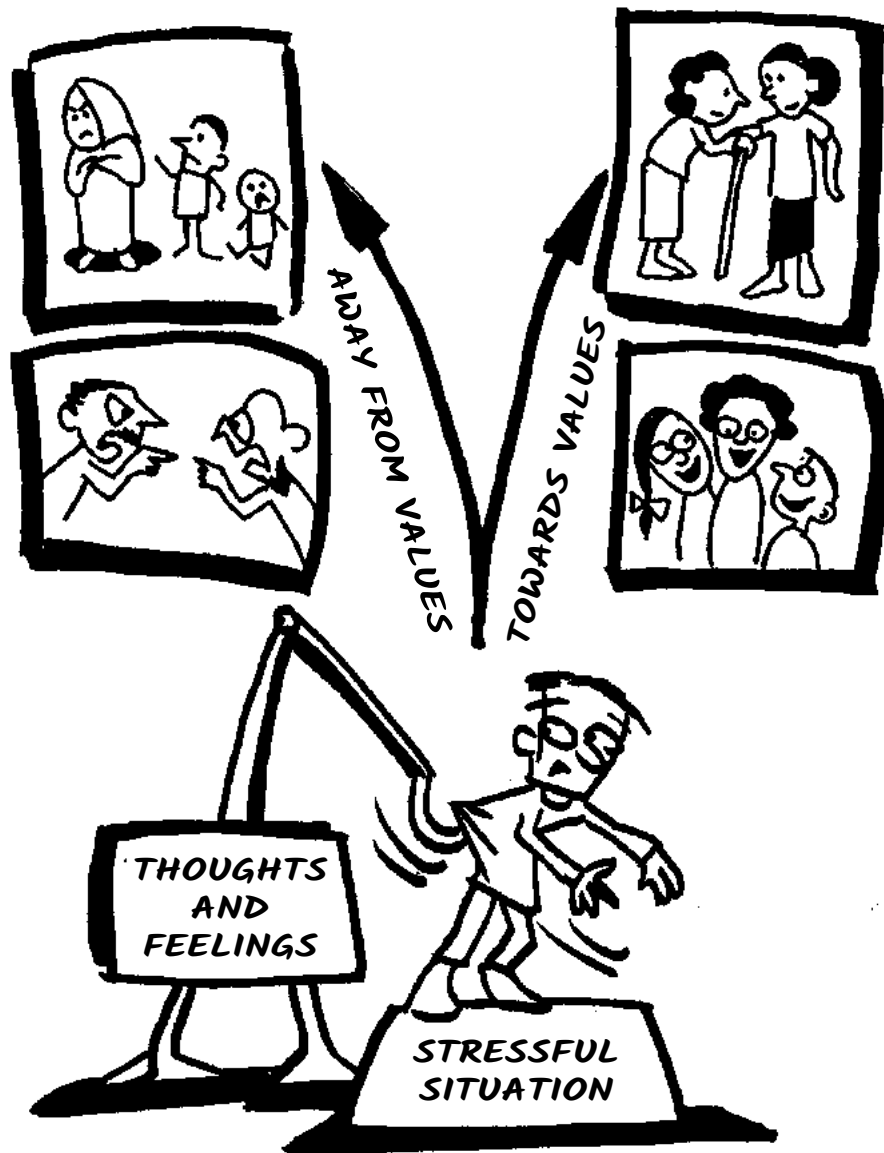
Yes, I am reading this book because I care about my family.

Yes, and I care about my well-being.



That is correct. So likely you are acting on one value that is important to many people:  
**CARING.**





In stressful situations, difficult thoughts and feelings hook us, and we are pulled away from our values.



There are many kinds of difficult thoughts and feelings that can hook us. Thoughts about giving up...



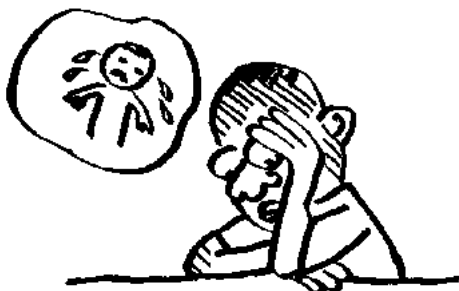
Thoughts that blame others...



Harsh judgements about ourselves...



Memories, especially about difficult events...



Thoughts about the future, especially about what we fear...



Thoughts where we worry about others.

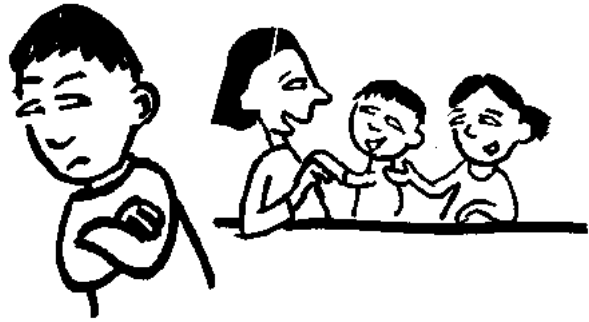


When we get hooked, our behaviour changes. We often start doing things that make our lives worse.

We might get into fights, arguments or disagreements.



Or we might withdraw  
and stay away from people  
we love.



Or we might spend  
a lot of time lying in bed.



We call these behaviours  
“AWAY MOVES” because  
when we act this way, we  
are moving AWAY from our  
values.

So what can we do?

This book is here to help you!



First you learn how to focus, engage and pay attention better.

How will that help us?

And what do you mean by "focus" and "engage"?



Have patience! I will explain.

When we are stressed, we find it hard to engage in life.





I do not understand what you mean by "engage".



To "engage" in something means to give it your full attention.

When you are drinking something, do you give it your full attention? Do you savour the smell and the taste?



When you listen to music, do you give it your full attention? Do you listen to it and enjoy it?





When you give your full attention to any activity, we say you are “engaged” with it.



But when hooked by thoughts or feelings, you are “disengaged” or “distracted”.



When you give your full attention to any activity, we say you are “focused”.

But when hooked by thoughts or feelings, you are unfocused.

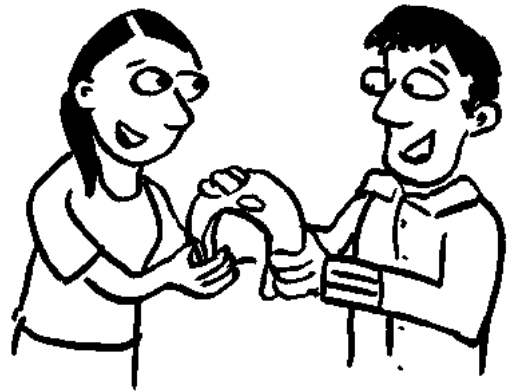
And when we do things in an unfocused way, we often do them poorly, or are unable to enjoy the activity and feel dissatisfied.





So, if you can learn to be more engaged, and focus better, then you will handle stress better.

For example, you will find your relationships with others more satisfying.



And, you will be able to do important things much better.





There are many ways to practise engaging in life or focusing on what you are doing



You can practise these skills with any activity you do. For example, if you are drinking tea or coffee...



...focus your full attention on it. You notice the drink with curiosity, as if you have never encountered such a drink before. You notice its colour.



You savour the smell of it.



You sip it SLOWLY.



Let it sit on your tongue, feel it on your teeth and savour the taste.





You drink it as slowly as possible, savouring the taste, noticing the temperature.



You notice the movements of your throat as you swallow.



You notice the taste fading from your tongue, as you swallow.



And you drink each mouthful in the same way: slowly, noticing and savouring.



And whenever you get hooked by thoughts and feelings ...

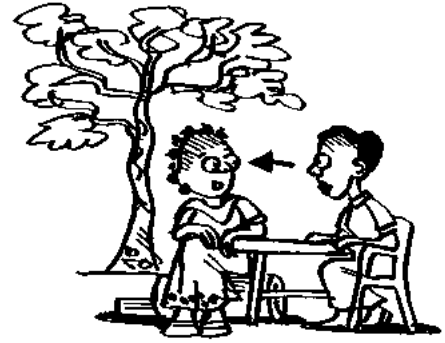


Exactly! What other activities could you use to practise engaging or focusing?



Go ahead and practise this now. Get some water, tea or coffee, and follow the pictures and instructions above. You can also go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download the *Awareness of Drinking exercise*.

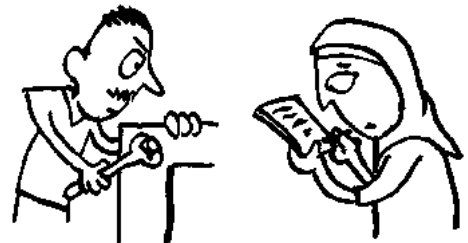
You could practise while talking to family or friends. Notice what others are saying, their tones of voice and their facial expressions. Give them your full attention.



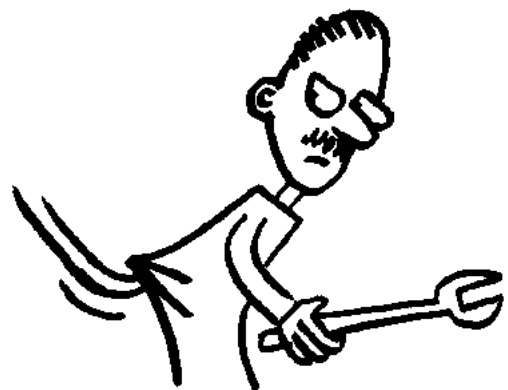
You could practise this while playing a game or doing some other activity with children, like teaching them to read. You simply give your full attention to the children and to the game.



You could practise this while washing, cooking or doing chores. You simply give your full attention to the activity.



And whenever you notice you get hooked...



We unhook  
by refocusing  
and engaging in what  
we are doing.



Okay!  
I can do that when  
my thoughts  
and feelings  
are not  
too difficult.



But sometimes my feelings and stories are just so painful.

Yes, sometimes they are so overpowering they turn into "emotional storms".



An "emotional storm" means that you experience intensely difficult thoughts and feelings. They are so strong they are like a mighty storm, and they can easily overpower you.



When an emotional storm appears we must learn how to "ground ourselves".

What does that mean?



Imagine you are high in a tree when a storm begins.



Would you want to stay in the tree?



While you are in the tree, you are in great danger!



You need to get down to the ground as quickly as possible!



On the ground, you are much safer.



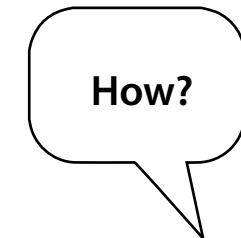
And on the ground, you can help others.  
For example, you could comfort others  
while the storm rages.



And if there is somewhere safe for you to hide,  
you can only get there after you are on the ground.



So we need to “ground ourselves” when our emotional storms appear.



Again, through engaging with the world around you, and focusing on what you are doing.

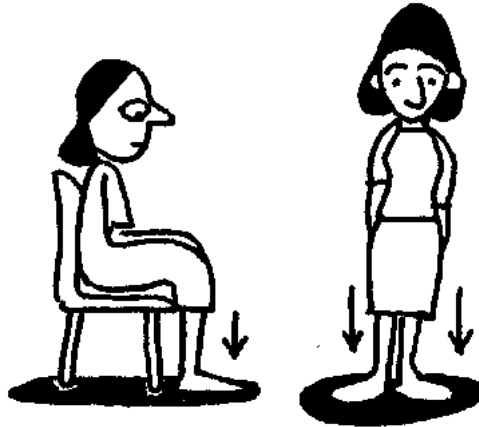


The first step is to **NOTICE** how you are feeling and what you are thinking.

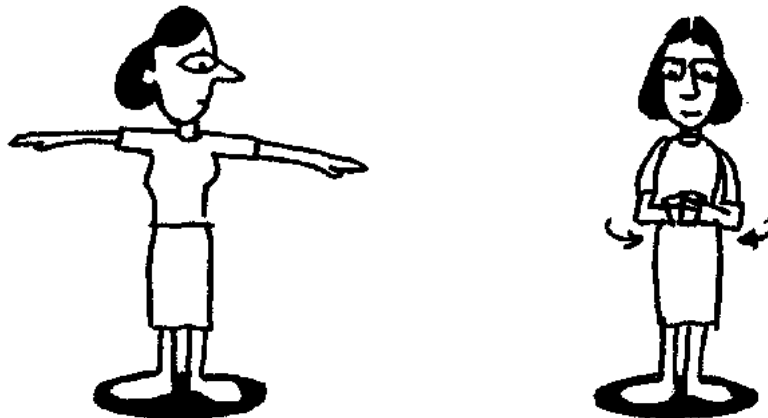
Next, **SLOW DOWN** and **CONNECT** with your body.  
Slow your breathing. Empty your lungs completely.  
Then let them refill as slowly as possible.



Slowly press your feet into the floor.



Slowly stretch your arms, or slowly press your hands together.



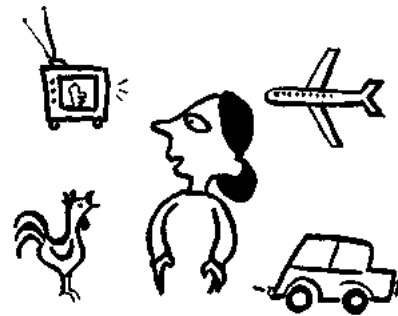


The next step in grounding is to **REFOCUS** on the world around you.

Notice where you are. What are five things you can see?



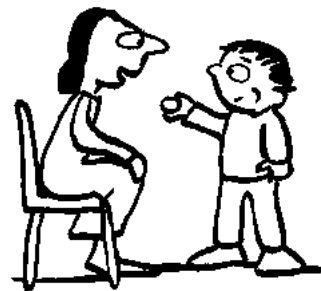
What are three or four things you can hear?



Breathe the air. What can you smell?



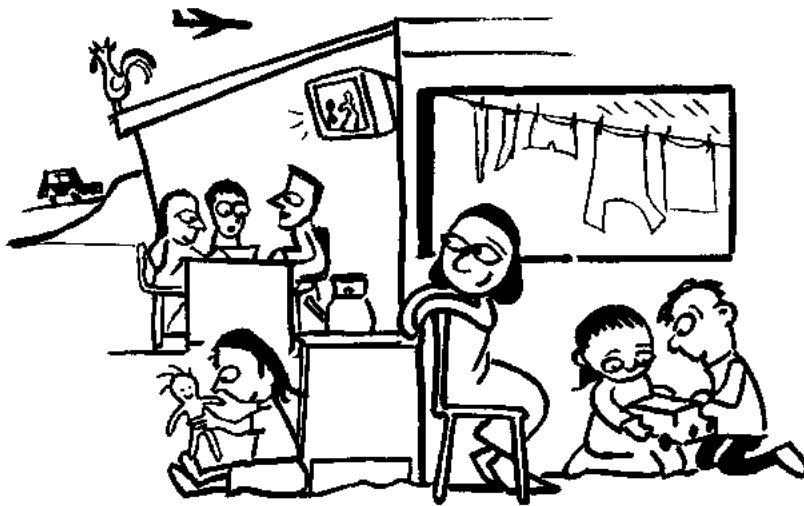
Notice where you are and what you are doing.



Touch your knees, or the surface beneath you, or any object you can reach. Notice what it feels like under your fingers.

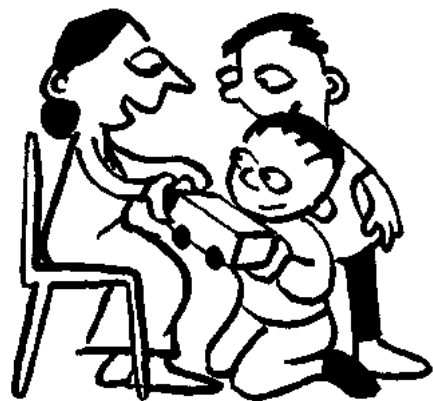



So notice there are difficult thoughts and feelings appearing...



...and there is also a world around you that you can see and hear and touch and taste and smell.

And you can also move your arms and legs and mouth – so if you want to, you can act in line with your values.



 You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download *Grounding Exercise 1*. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.



Grounding does not make your emotional storms disappear. It just keeps you safe, until the storm passes.

Some storms last a long time.

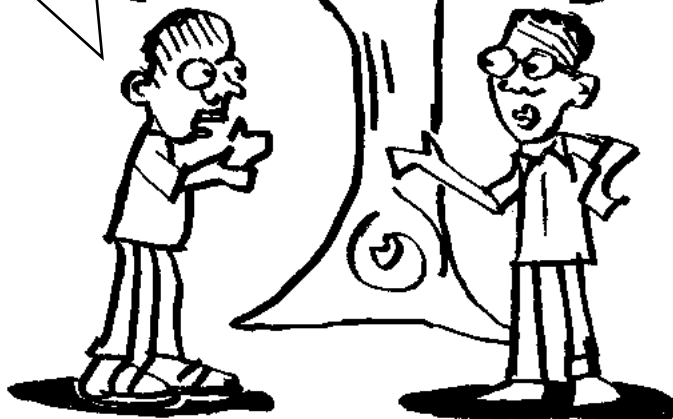


Others pass quickly.

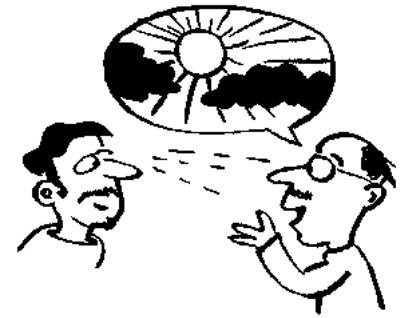


Do you mean these unhooking and grounding exercises will not get rid of my difficult thoughts and feelings?

Correct! That is not their purpose.



The purpose of the unhooking and grounding exercises is to help you “engage” in life. For example, to help you give your full attention to family and friends.



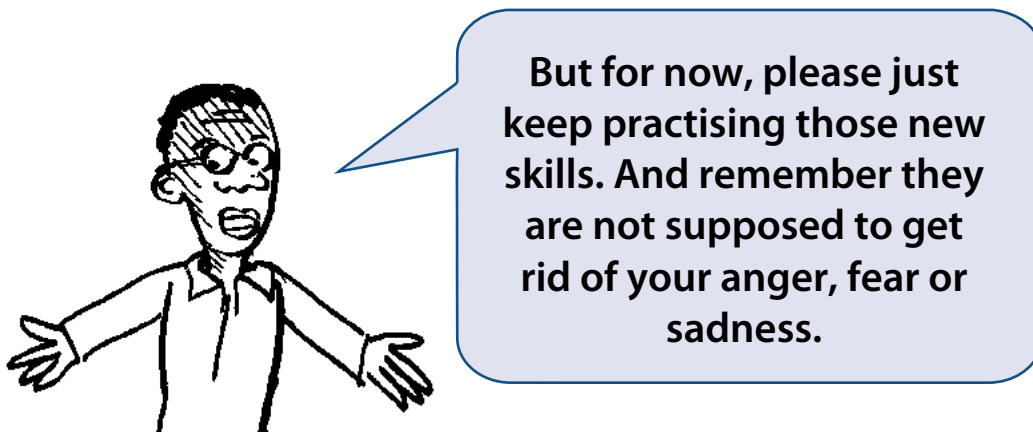
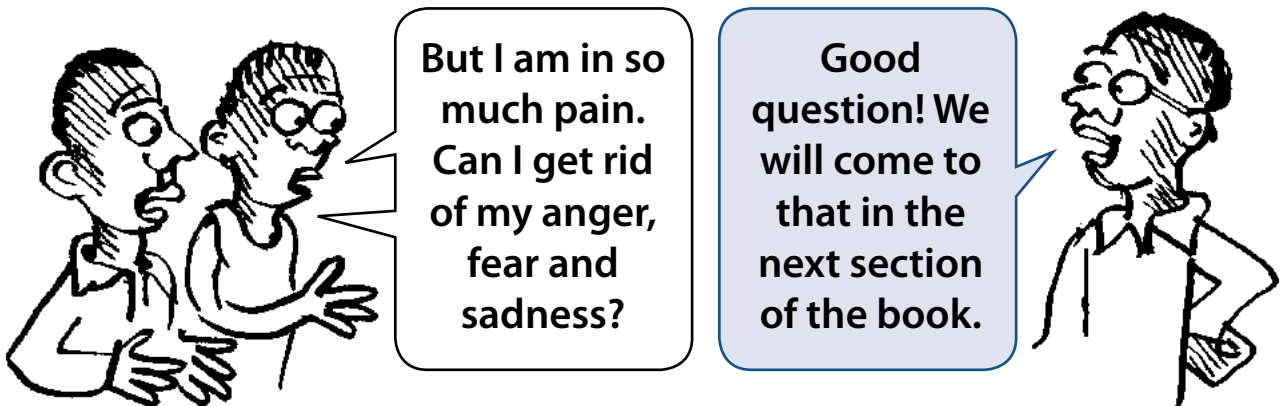
It is also to help you move towards your values; to help you behave more like the kind of person you want to be.



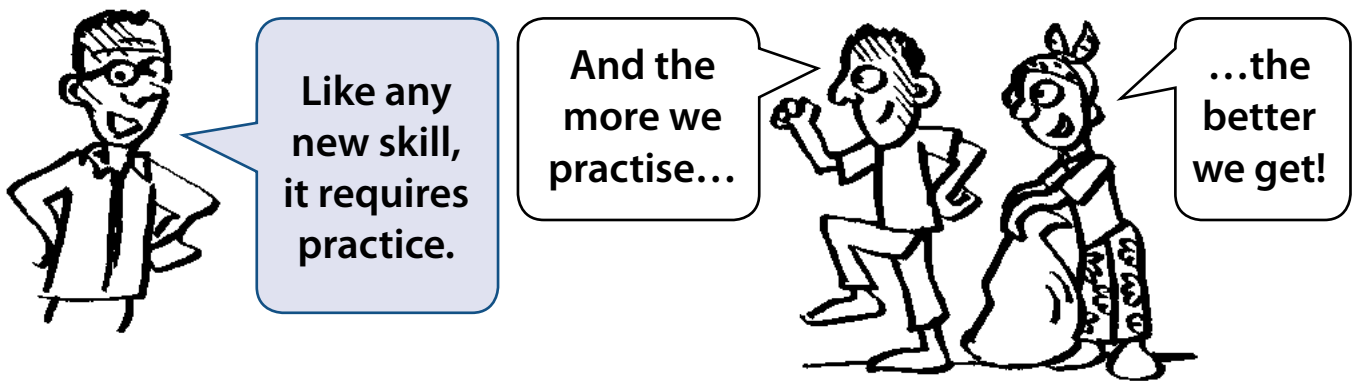
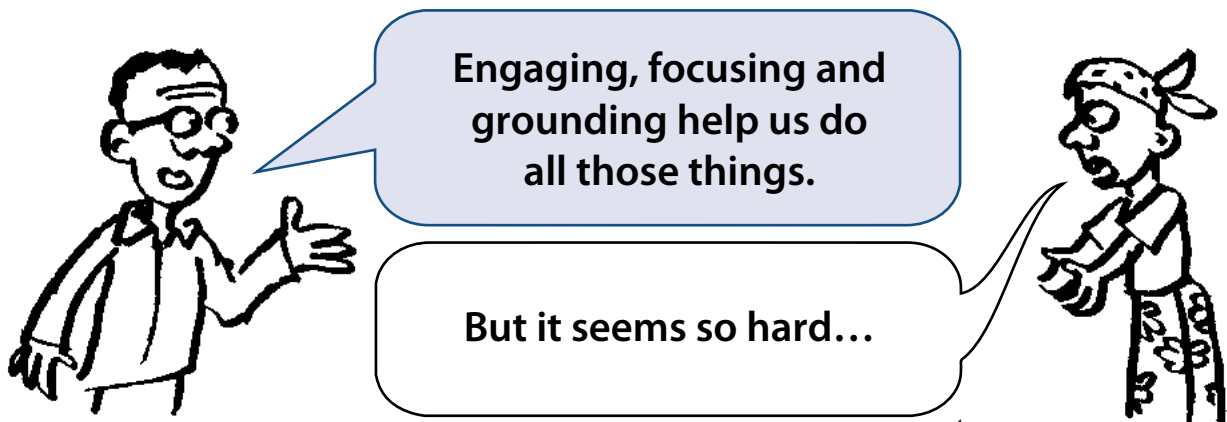
And to help you focus on what you are doing, so you can do it well.



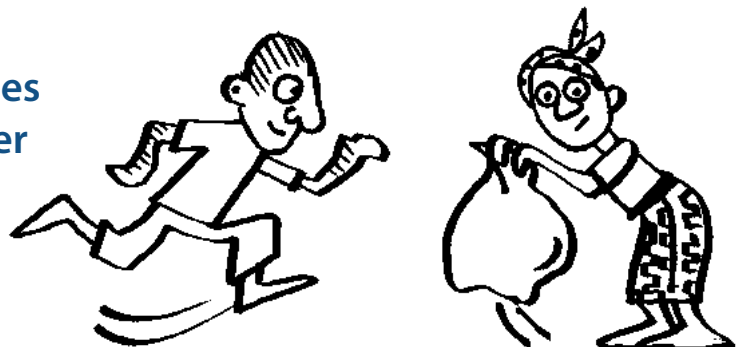
When you pay attention and engage fully in any activity you may also find it more satisfying. This is true even with activities that are boring or frustrating.



When we engage in life, pay attention to others, focus on what we're doing and live by our values, we manage stress much better.



It is like building your muscles to run faster or to lift heavier loads. With practice, your muscles get bigger!

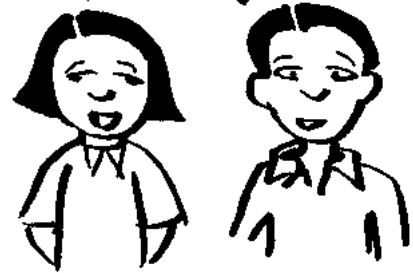


There are many ways to practise these engaging and grounding skills. We will practise them now!



As you read this book, follow the instructions. Do not simply read about it; actually do it!

OKAY!



First, NOTICE how you are feeling and what you are thinking. Then, SLOW DOWN and CONNECT with your body. Slowly breathe out. Slowly stretch. Slowly push your feet into the floor.



Now REFOCUS on the world around you. Pay attention with curiosity to what you can ...



SEE



HEAR



TASTE



SMELL

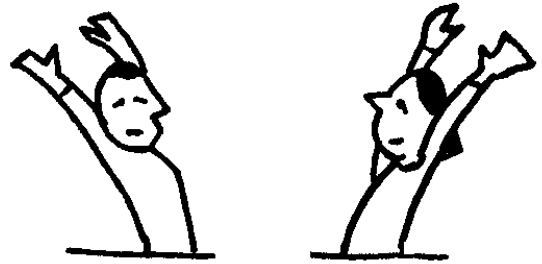


TOUCH

Now have a good stretch.  
Engage with the world. Notice  
where you are, who is with you,  
and what you are doing.



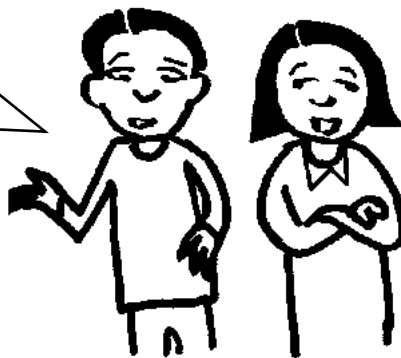
You can go to this [LINK](#)  
and listen to, or download  
*Grounding Exercise 2*. Or, you can  
simply follow the pictures and  
instructions in this book.



That exercise should take  
you about 30 seconds.  
You can do it anytime,  
anywhere.



That is great.  
I can practise it  
anytime.

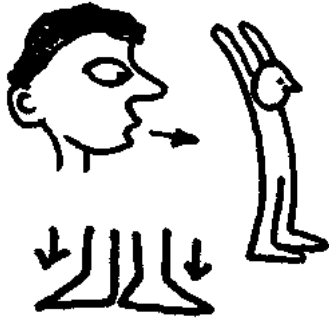


Yes, and the  
more I practise,  
the better!

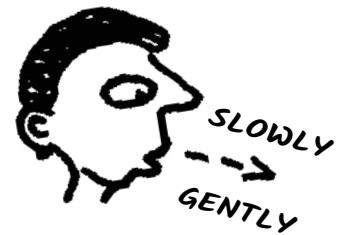


Now here is a longer grounding exercise to practise. First, **NOTICE** how you are feeling and what you are thinking.

Next, **SLOW DOWN** and **CONNECT** with your body. Slowly breathe out. Slowly stretch. Slowly push your feet into the ground.



Now slow your breathing even more. Slowly and gently, empty your lungs.



Make sure you breathe **SLOWLY** and **GENTLY**.

If you breathe too hard or too quickly, it could make you feel panicky, anxious, dizzy or short of breath.



And as you breath **IN**, also do so **SLOWLY** and **GENTLY**.

If you start to feel dizzy or light-headed, you are breathing too deeply, too hard or too quickly.





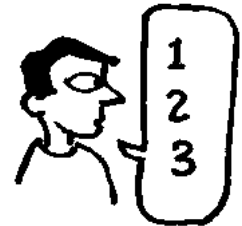


So if you ever start to feel dizzy, or light-headed, or tight-chested, **SLOW** your breathing. Breathe out **GENTLY** and breathe in as **SLOWLY** and **SHALLOWLY** as possible. (**DO NOT** take deep breaths. This will worsen your dizziness!)

Now notice your breathing with **CURIOSITY** – as if it is the first time you have ever encountered breathing.



Now breathe out even more **SLOWLY**. And after your lungs are empty, silently count to three before you breathe in again. Then let your lungs refill as **SLOWLY AS POSSIBLE**.



You are training your ability to stay engaged and focused. Can you keep your attention on your breath?

As you do this, from time to time thoughts and feelings will hook you and pull you out of the exercise.



As soon as you realize this has happened, **REFOCUS** on your breathing. Give it your full attention.



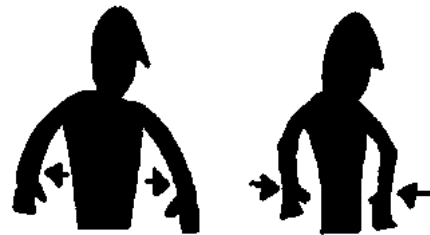
Notice the air as it flows in and out of your nostrils.



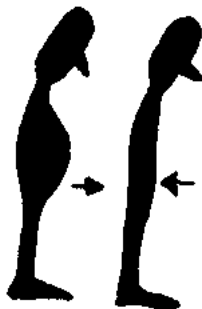
Notice the gentle movements of your shoulders.



Notice your chest moving in and out.



Notice how your belly moves in and out.



Again and again and again, you will get hooked.

So as soon as you realize this has happened ...



...refocus on your breathing.



And if your thoughts and feelings hook you 1000 times...

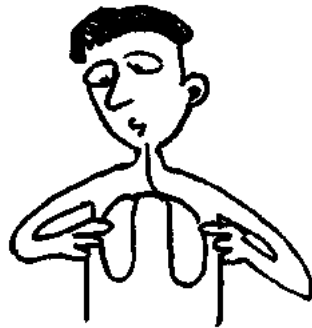
Then we unhook ourselves 1000 times!



That is correct! And then you refocus on your breath.



Again and again and again, you bring your attention back to your breath, noticing it with curiosity.



How long do we do this?



Like any skill, the more you practise, the better. So...

You could do some shorter practices that last for one or two minutes, and some longer practices that last for five to ten minutes.

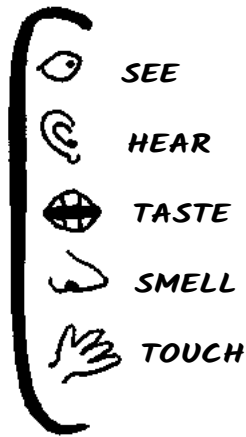


To finish the exercise, once again ground yourself.

**SLOW** down.  
Slowly breathe out.  
Slowly stretch.  
Slowly push your feet into the floor.



Then **REFOCUS** and **ENGAGE** with the world. Pay attention with curiosity to what you can...



Notice where you are, who is with you and what you are doing.



You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download *Grounding Exercise 3*. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.

And take a moment to acknowledge that each time you practise this...



I am living by my values of caring...

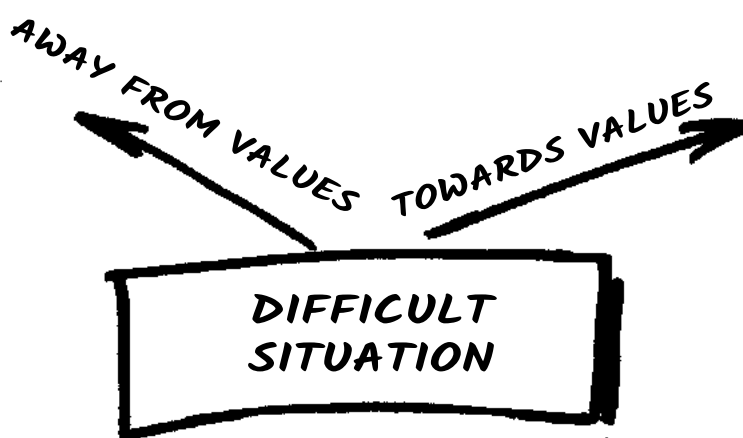
...for the health of myself, others and my community.





That's right! Because these skills help you to engage, focus and unhook from difficult thoughts and feelings...

... so you can move towards your values.



So remember, practise these skills throughout the day, at every chance you get.

It can help to make a plan. For example, think about when, where and how many times each day you will practise grounding. Practising does not need to be inconvenient! You can practise anytime, anywhere, even just for 1–2 minutes. Ideally, take at least a day or two to practise the skills from this section, before going on to the next section.

At the end of the book you'll find brief descriptions of every skill, which can remind you of the key points.

Part 2

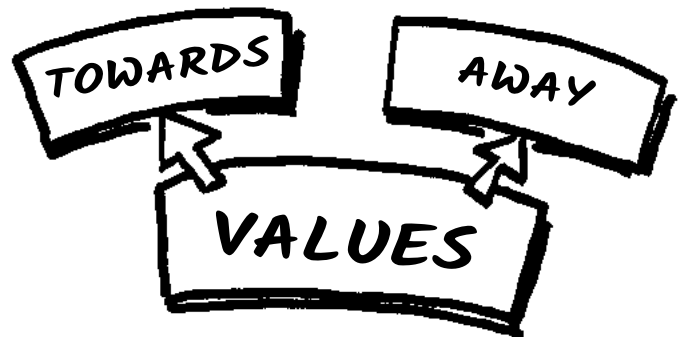
# UNHOOKING



Welcome back. I hope you practised engaging in life, focusing on your activities and grounding yourself during emotional storms.



Earlier, you may remember, we talked about "towards" and "away" moves.



When we get hooked by difficult thoughts and feelings, we tend to make “away moves” – moving away from our values.



We might get into fights, arguments or disagreements.





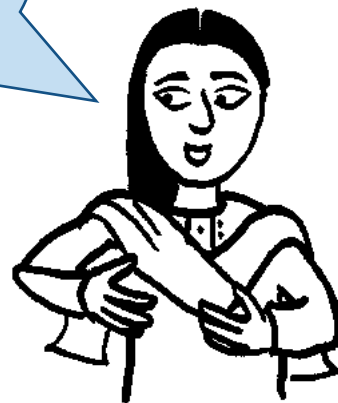
Or we might withdraw and stay away from people we love.



Or we might spend a lot of time lying in bed.



So today, we are going to learn more about unhooking ourselves from difficult thoughts and feelings.





My life is so hard now. Will my difficult thoughts and feelings ever go away?

Good question. It makes sense that you would want them to go away.



But is it realistic to think we can simply get rid of them?

Can we burn them like rubbish?



Can we lock them up, hide them away?



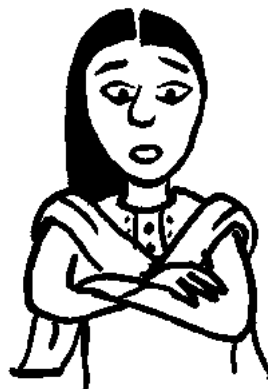
Can we bury them in a hole?



Can we run off and leave them behind?



Take a moment to think about all the ways you have tried to get rid of these thoughts and feelings.



Most people try at least some of these strategies:

Yelling!



Trying not to think about it



Avoiding people, places or situations



Staying in bed



Isolating yourself



Giving up



Alcohol



Tobacco



Illicit drugs



Starting arguments



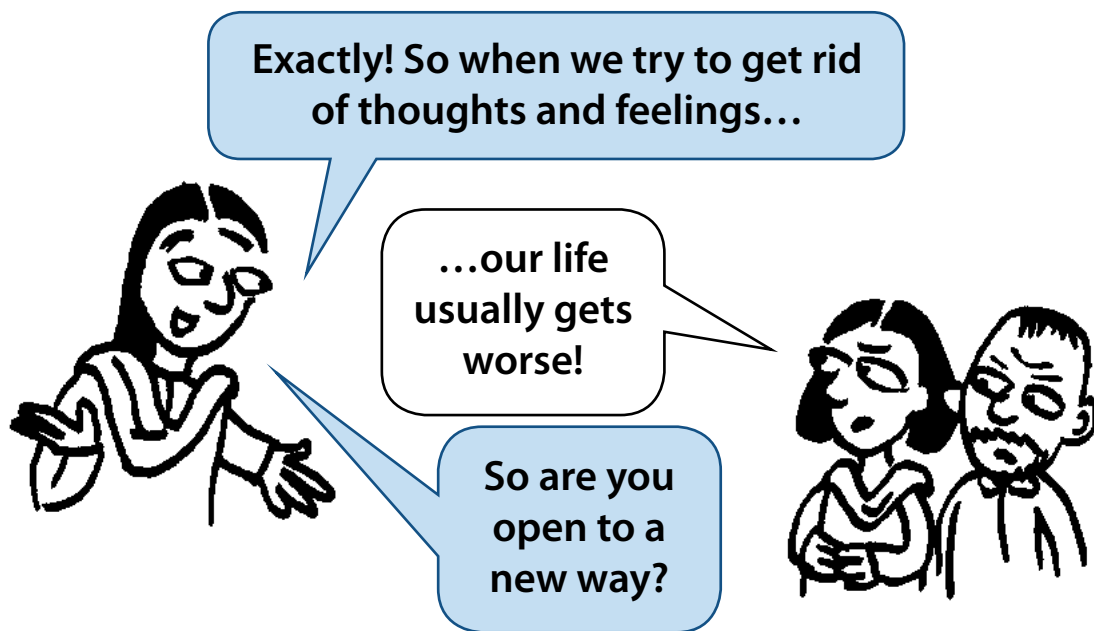
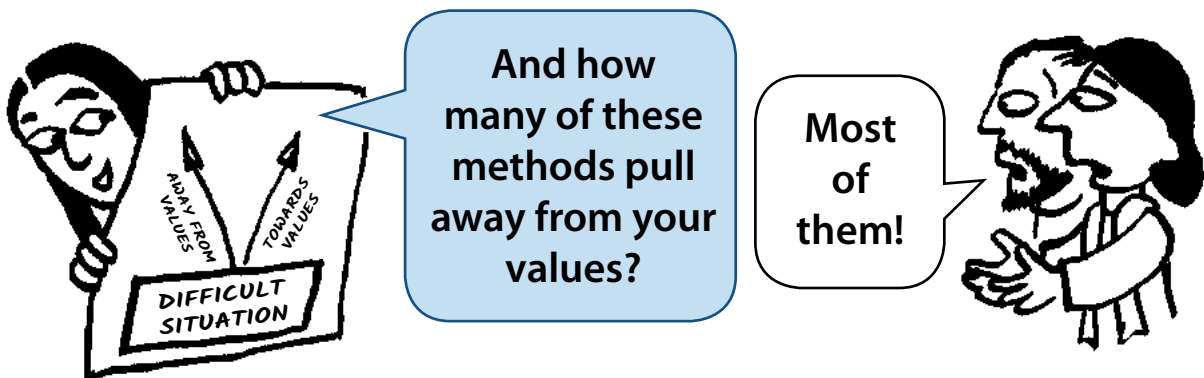
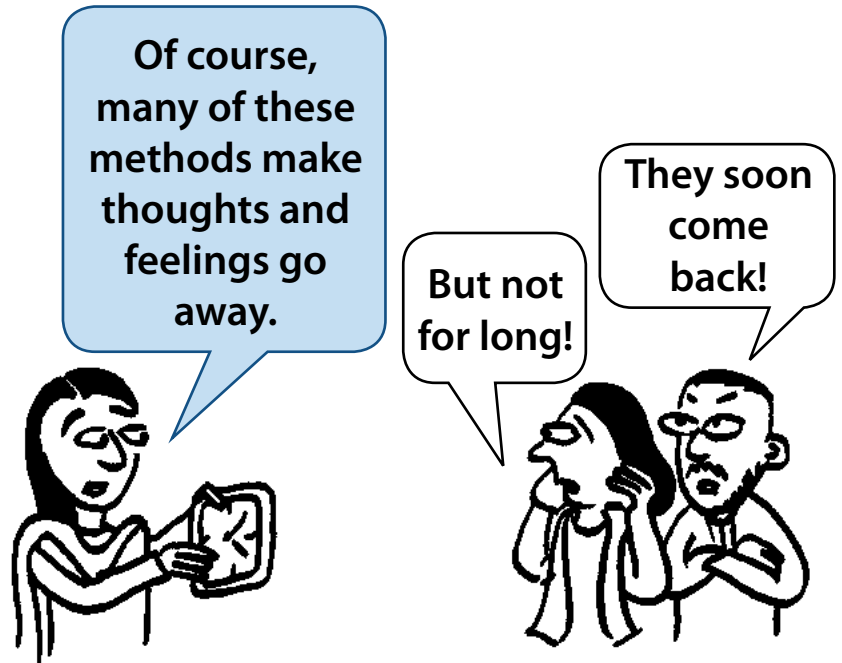
Blaming or criticizing oneself



What else have you tried?



Take a moment to think about or write down the things you have tried for getting rid of difficult thoughts and feelings.



It is a new way of handling difficult thoughts and feelings.



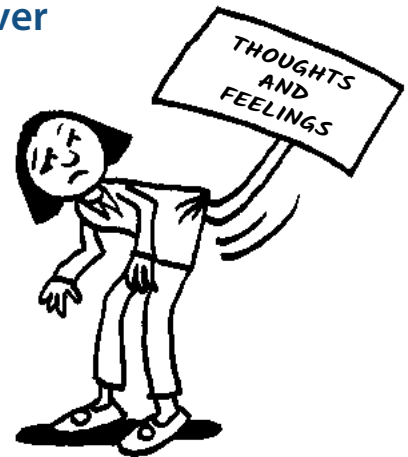
Instead of trying to push them away...



You stop struggling with them.



And whenever you get hooked by them...



...you unhook yourself again.

How do we do that?

I will show you soon. But first let us identify - what thoughts and feelings are hooking you?



### Are you being hooked by thoughts about...

Bad things that happened in the past

Not being good enough – being weak or crazy or bad

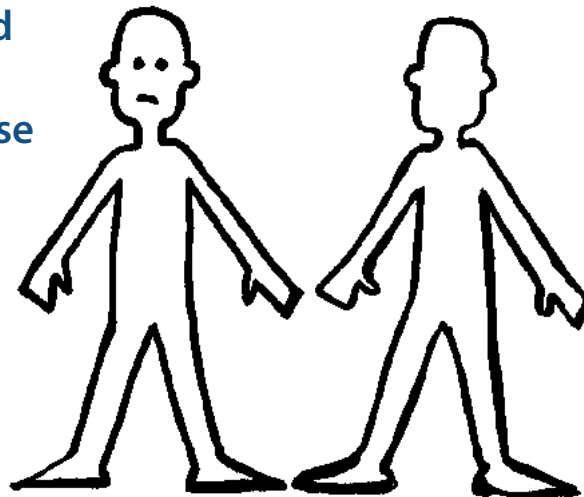
Bad things that might happen in the future



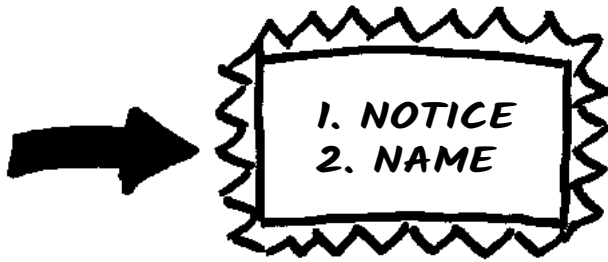
Write some of the thoughts that hook you:

A large rectangular box with a decorative border. Inside the box, there are ten horizontal lines for writing, providing space for the user to record their thoughts.

Are you being hooked by feelings in your body? Mark where these feelings are located:



The first two steps in unhooking are:



First you NOTICE that a thought or feeling has hooked you. Then you NAME it. To name it, you silently say to yourself something like...

Here is tightness in my chest.



Here is pressure in my forehead.

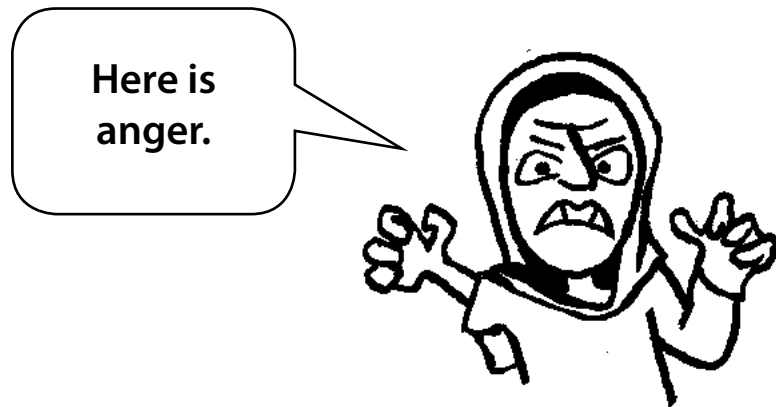


Here is a painful memory.



Here are fears about the future.









So naming begins by silently saying, "Here is a thought" or "Here is a feeling".

However, if we then add the phrase, "I notice", we usually find it unhooks us a bit more.



Try this now and see what happens.



I notice here is a heaviness in my chest.

I notice here is a painful memory.



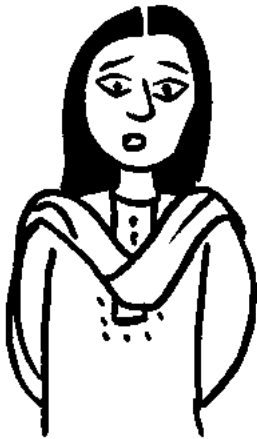
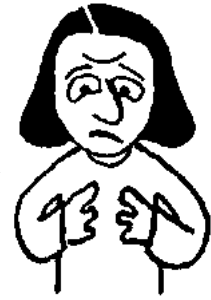
I notice here is anger.





I notice here is a knot in my stomach.

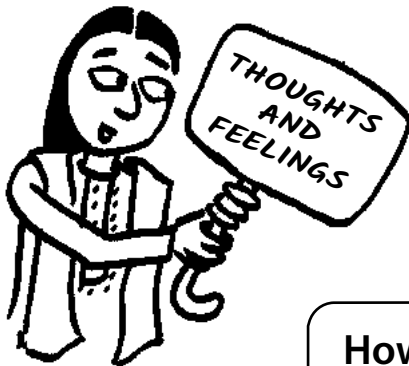
I notice here is a thought about what I fear.



Please try this now before you read any more. NOTICE and NAME a thought or feeling that has been present for you today.



You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download the *Notice and Name* exercise. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.



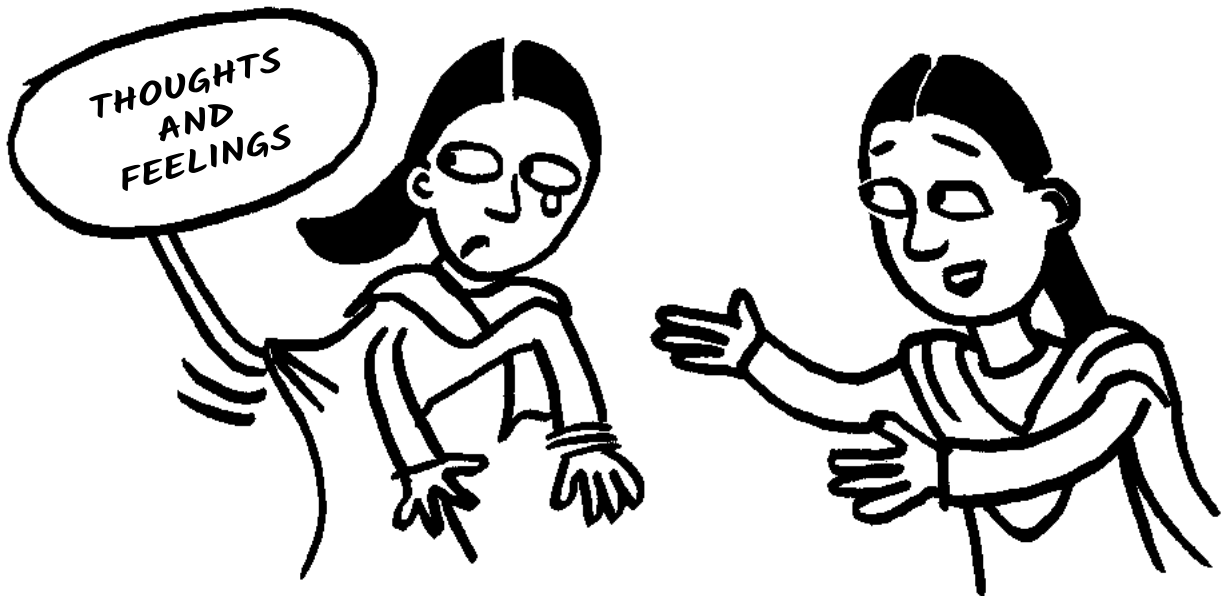
How does noticing and naming help us?

Well, thoughts and feelings hook us when we are unaware of them.

One moment you are talking to a friend, interested in what she is saying...



...and then in the next moment, you are hooked.



Suddenly, you are no longer really listening to your friend.

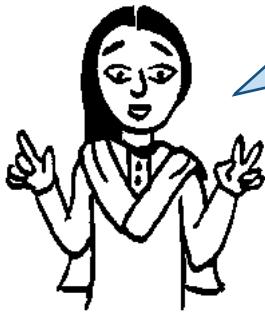


You might still be talking to your friend...



...but you are not really "engaged" in the conversation.

You are only half-listening.  
You are not giving her your full attention.  
Why? Because you are hooked  
by your thoughts or feelings.



The first step in “unhooking” yourself is to NOTICE that you have been hooked. The second step is to NAME what hooked you. You silently say to yourself...

I notice I have been hooked by memories.



Here is a difficult thought.



I notice a heavy feeling in my chest.



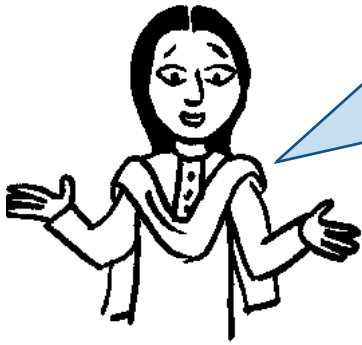
The next step is to REFOCUS on what you are doing – whether you are cooking, or eating, or playing or washing, or chatting with friends – and to ENGAGE fully in that activity; to PAY FULL ATTENTION to whoever is with you and whatever you are doing.

I am noticing a painful feeling in my throat.



THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS





We can do the same thing every time we get hooked and stop engaging in life.

I am noticing feelings of anger.

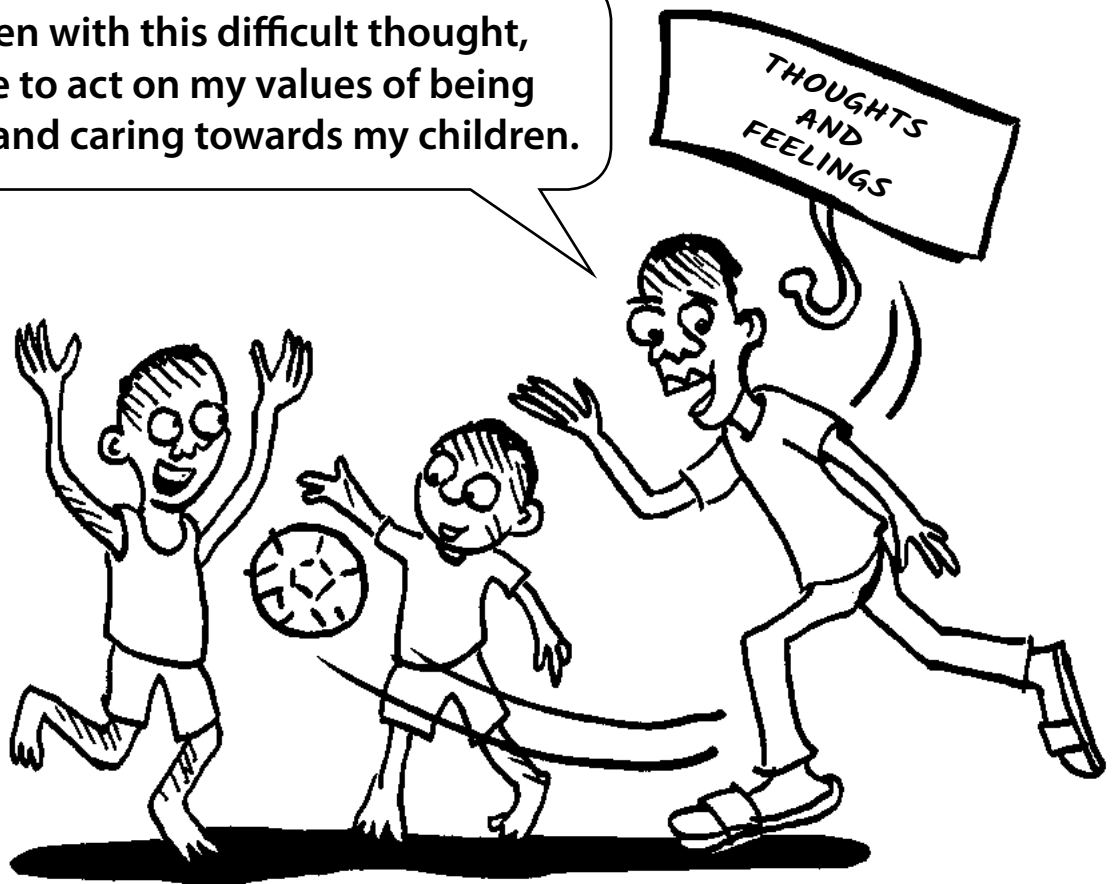


And even though I am having feelings of anger, I choose to act on my value of caring by refocusing and engaging with my family.

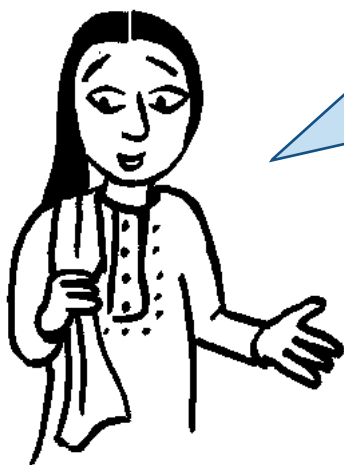
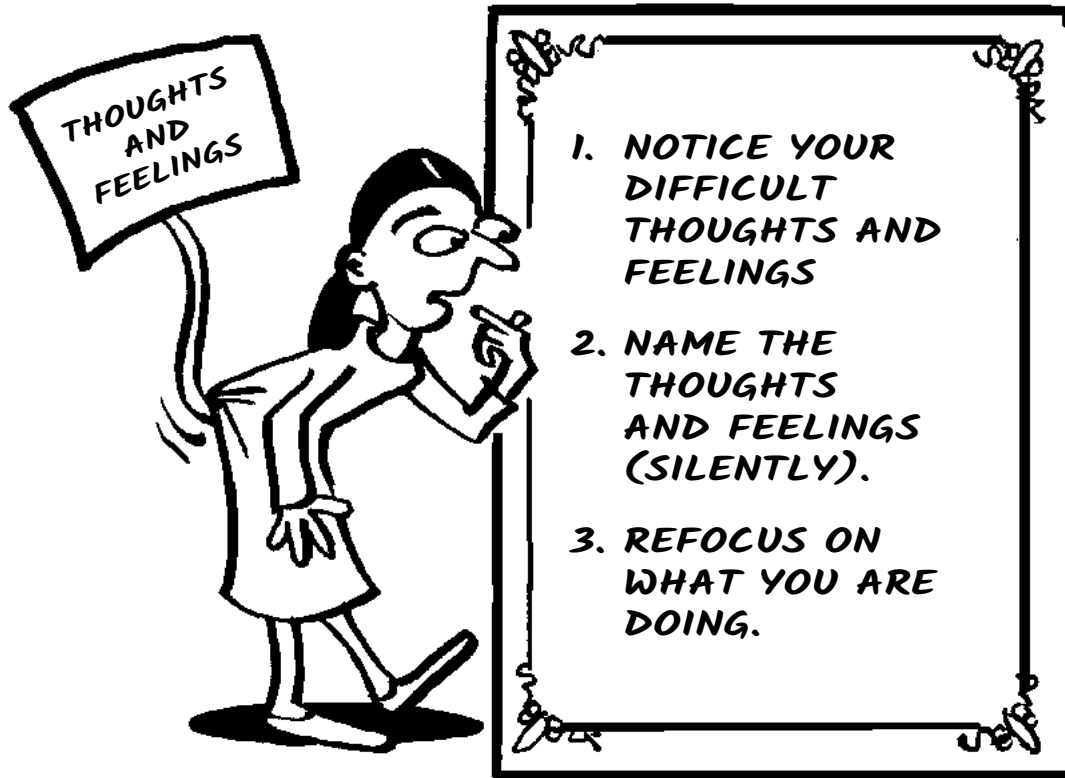




And even with this difficult thought, I choose to act on my values of being attentive and caring towards my children.



So to unhook from thoughts and feelings...

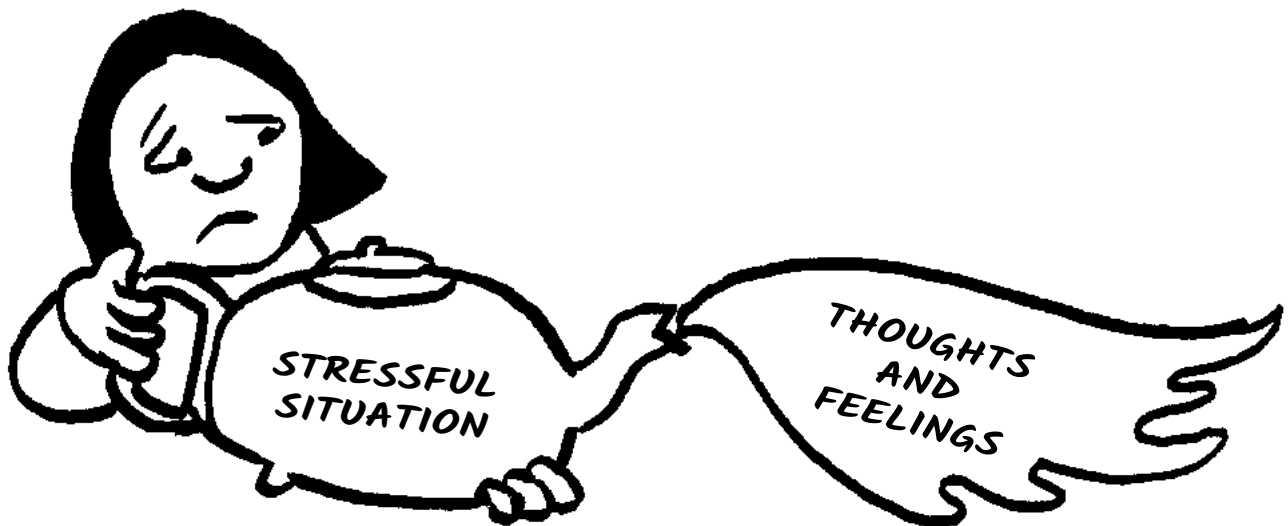


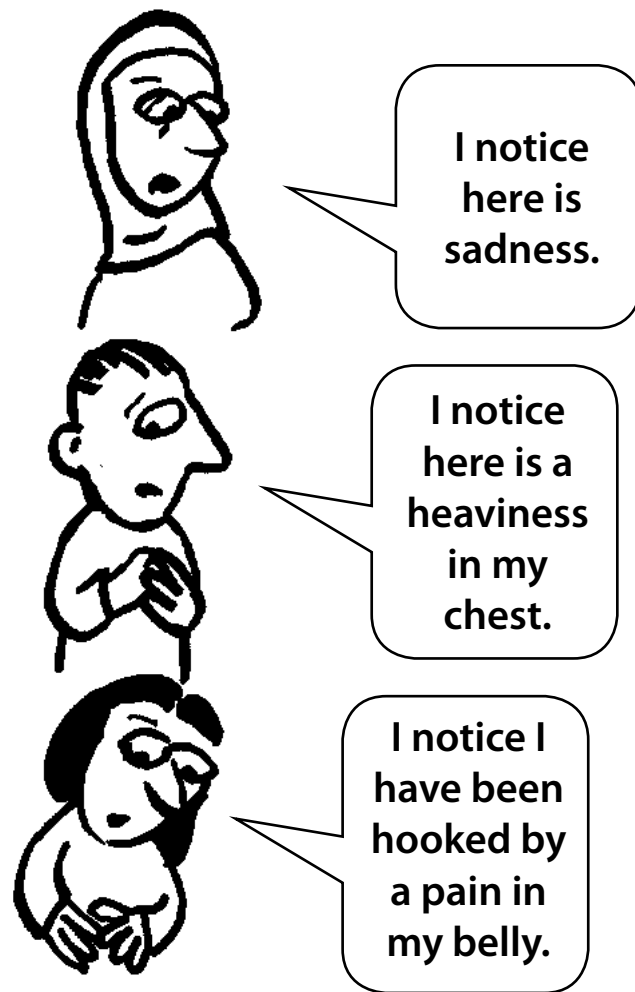
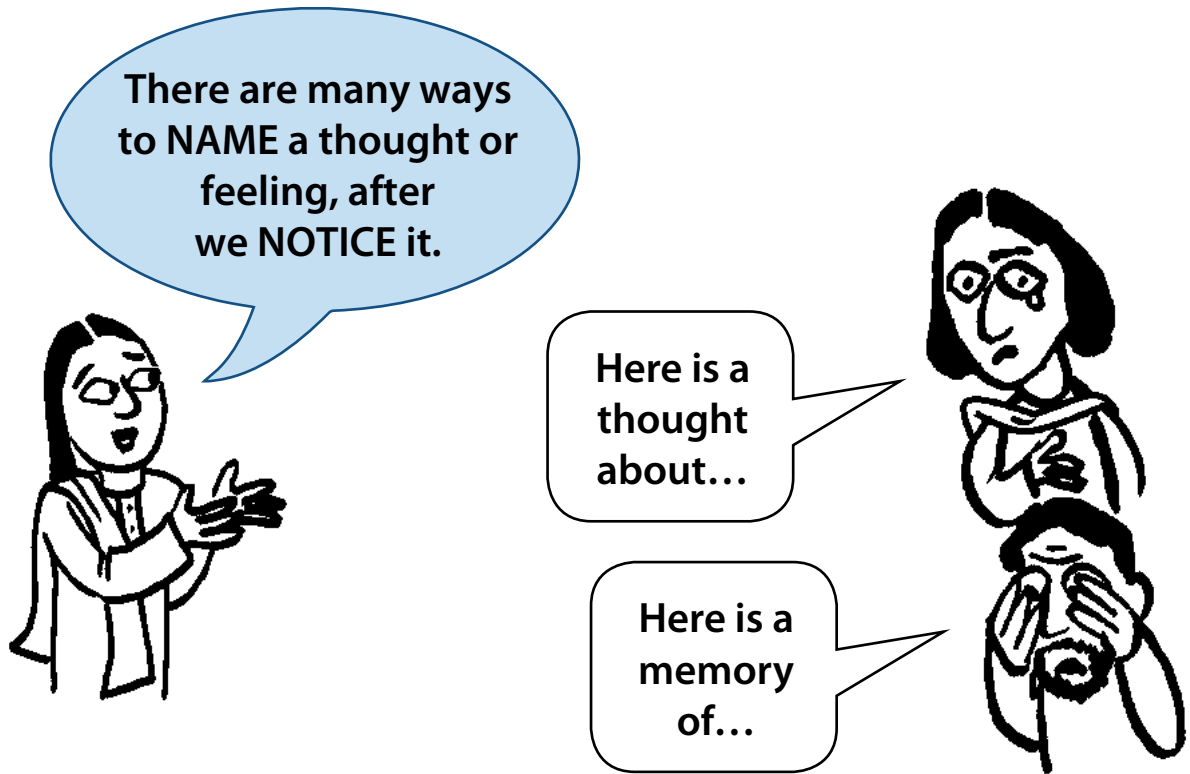
The more you practise this, the better you will get. See if you can practise this over and over again, all day long as you're going about your daily activities. Every time you notice that you have been hooked, run through these steps.



And remember it is natural  
to have difficult thoughts and feelings  
appear when we are stressed.

This happens to everyone!





And after we have NOTICED and NAMED,  
we can REFOCUS on the world around us.

We ENGAGE in life by noticing what we can...

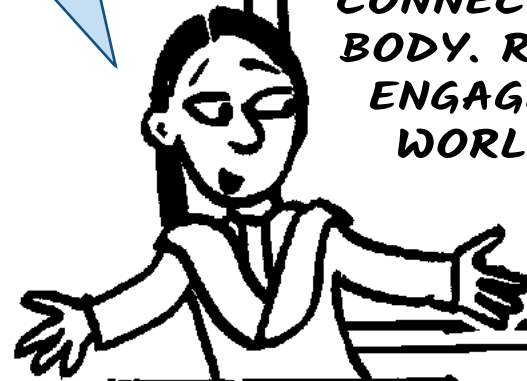


So now you have your first two tools for your tool kit.

**TOOL 1  
GROUND  
YOURSELF**

**DURING "EMOTIONAL STORMS". NOTICE HOW YOU ARE FEELING.**

**SLOW DOWN AND CONNECT WITH YOUR BODY. REFOCUS AND ENGAGE WITH THE WORLD AROUND YOU.**



**TOOL 2  
UNHOOK  
YOURSELF**

**FROM THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS BY NOTICING AND NAMING THEN REFOCUSING ON WHAT YOU ARE DOING.**


And we can practise using these tools at any time and in any place.



Of course, some people forget to practise.

So set times aside to regularly practise these skills. For example, in bed, or before or after a meal.



 You can go to this [LINK](#) to listen to, or download all of the exercises you have learned so far. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.

Think of some times, places or activities for regular practice.



And whenever you are lying awake in bed at night, and cannot sleep, then practise slowing down and connecting with your body.

It probably will not make you sleep (although sometimes it does), but it will help you feel rested.



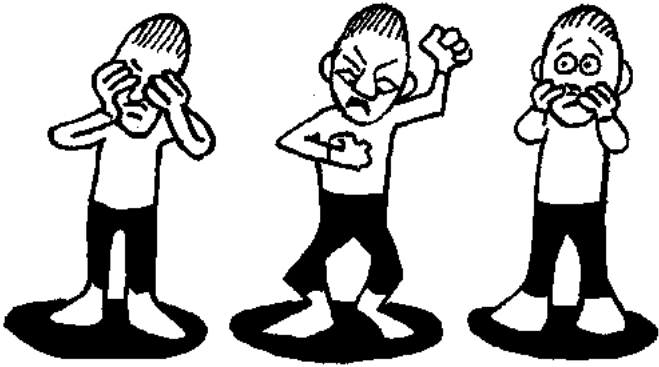


Other things can also get in the way of practising with these tools.

Maybe you feel too tired...

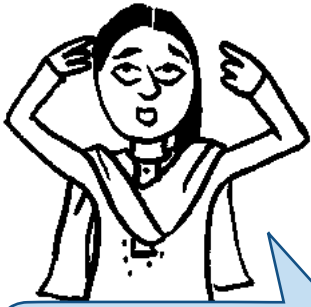


Maybe you feel too sad or angry or scared...



Maybe you just can't be bothered...





So remind yourself over and over...

This is like learning a new language. It takes a lot of practice!



You can also be hooked by unhelpful thoughts.



**THIS IS ALL SO STUPID!  
IT IS NOT IMPORTANT!  
IT WILL NOT HELP!  
I AM TOO BUSY!  
THERE IS NO POINT!  
IT IS A WASTE OF TIME!  
I CANNOT DO IT!**

So as soon as you realize you have been hooked by these feelings...



NOTICE, NAME AND REFOCUS



Every little bit of practice you do will make a difference.



And every time we practise, we are acting on our values of caring!



Yes, that's right. And in the next part of this book, we will explore values in more depth.



But before continuing with the next part, please take a day or two to practise what we've covered in this chapter.

And remember, at the end of the book you'll find short descriptions of every skill you learn.



## Part 3

# ACTING ON YOUR VALUES





Welcome back.  
Have you been  
practising  
unhooking and  
grounding?

Remember, doing these exercises  
is like learning any new skill.  
With practice, you get better  
and it becomes easier.



Now we are  
going to look at  
values in more  
depth.

Your values describe what  
kind of person you want to  
be; how you want to treat  
yourself and others and the  
world around you.

Are values  
the same  
goals?



No!

Goals describe what  
you are trying to get.  
Values describe the  
sort of person you  
want to be.



Suppose your goal is to get a job so you can support the people you care about.

And suppose your values – the way you want to be with your family, friends or people around you – are to be kind, to be caring, to be loving and to be supportive.





It might be impossible to achieve your goal...



...but you can still live your values of being kind, caring, loving and supportive towards your family, friends or people around you.

And even if you are facing a very difficult situation and are separated from your family and friends, you can still live your values of being kind, caring, loving and supportive. You can find little ways to act on these values with the people around you.



Many of your goals might be impossible right now.



But you can always find ways to act on your values.



Why does that matter?





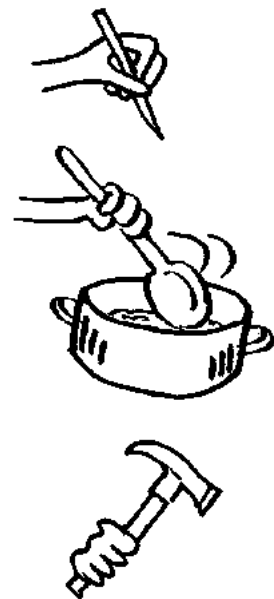
Because the way you influence the world around you is through your **ACTIONS**.

“**ACTIONS**” are what you do with your arms and hands and legs and feet, and what you say with your mouth.

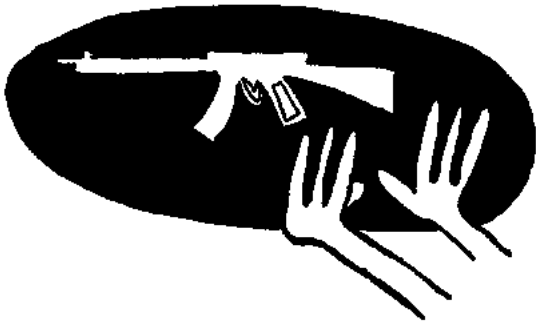


The more you focus on your own actions...

...the more you can influence the immediate world around you: the people and situations you encounter every day.



If your country is at war, you can't stop all the fighting...



...but you can stop arguing with people in your community...



...and instead, act on your values



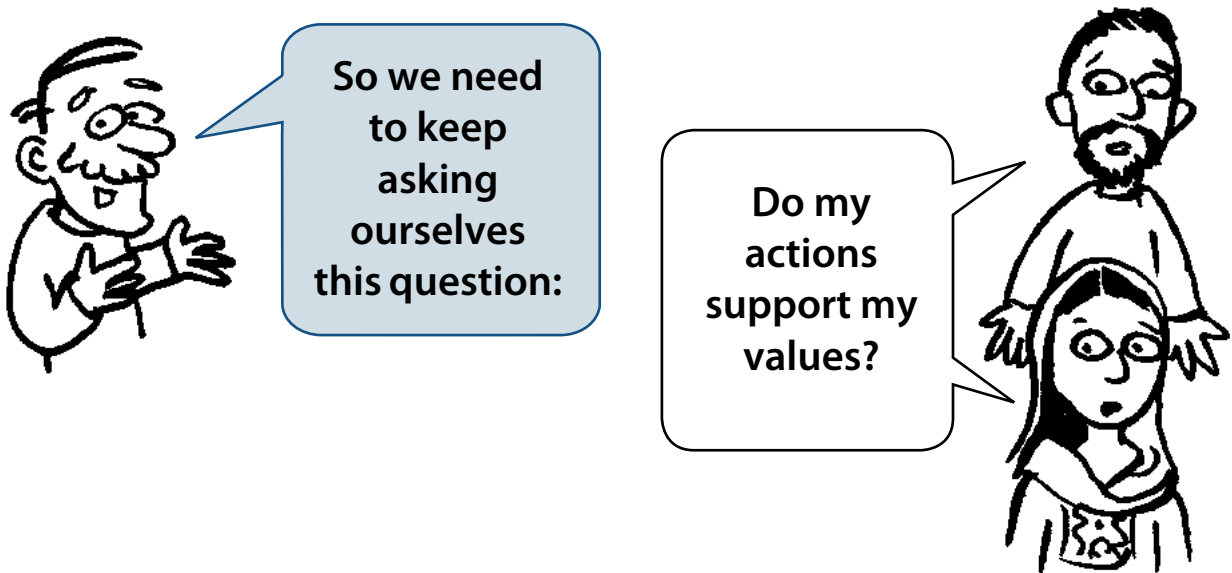
And notice: you may influence the people around you through your **ACTIONS.**

*Fighting*

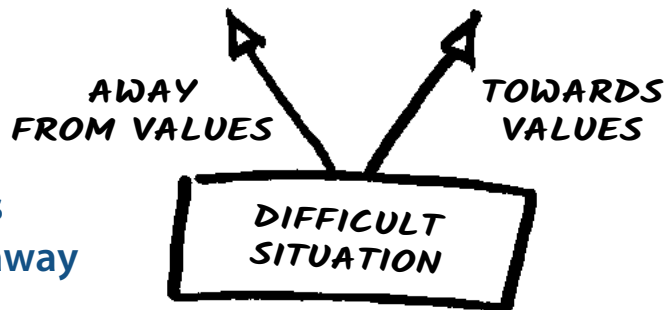


*Collaboration*





Yes. Are your actions moving you towards or away from your values?



To help you clarify your values, here is a list. These are not the “right” values or the “best” ones – they are simply some common ones.

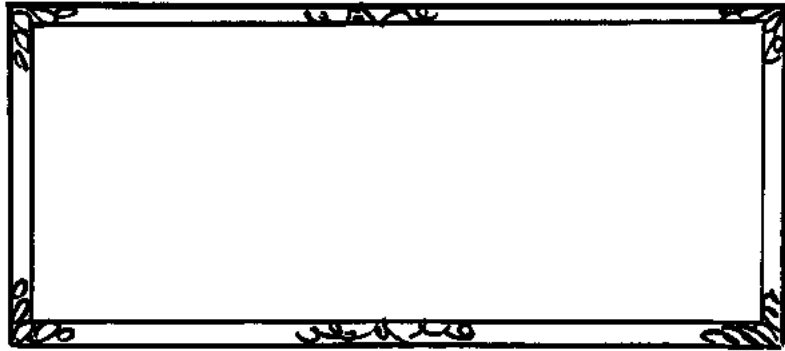
- To be kind
- To be caring
- To be generous
- To be supportive
- To be helpful
  
- To be patient
- To be responsible
- To be protective
- To be disciplined
- To be hardworking
- To be committed

- To be brave
- To be persistent
- To be forgiving
- To be grateful
  
- To be loyal
- To be respectable/honourable
- To be respectful
- To be trustworthy
- To be fair/just
- To be...
- To be...



Now select three or four of those values that seem most important to you, and write them in the box below.

Now we will do another exercise. Think of a role model in your community; someone you look up to.



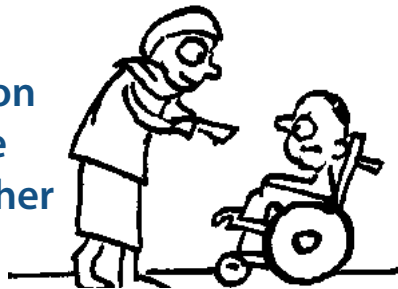
What does this person say or do that you admire?



Does this person treat others in admirable ways?



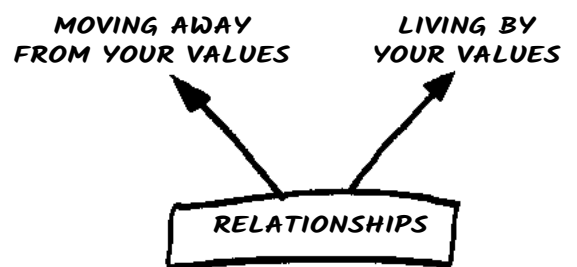
What values does the person demonstrate through his or her actions?



Which of those values would you like to model for others around you?

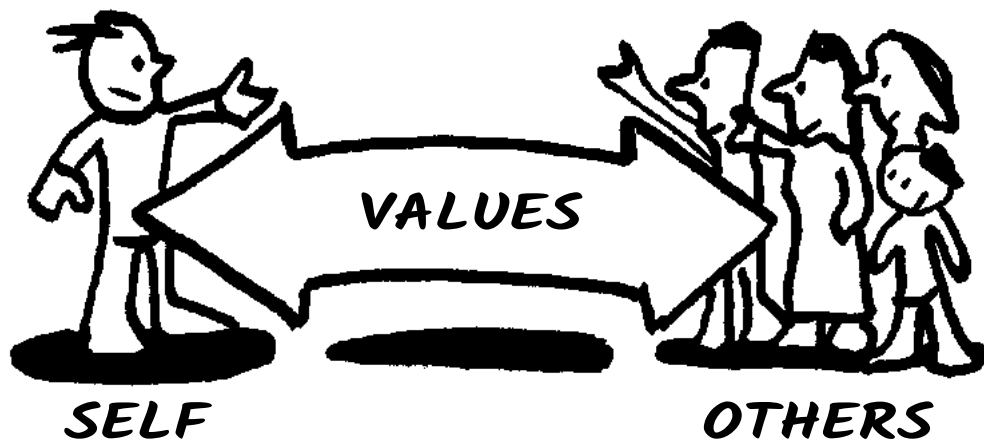


Now think of the people around you. What values do you want to live by, in the way you treat those people?





Values go both ways: towards yourself and towards others.



So if your values are caring and kindness...



...then you aim to live those values towards both yourself and others.



So now it is time to put your values into action.



Pick an important relationship; choose someone you care about a lot, who you see on a regular basis.



What values do you want to live by in this relationship?



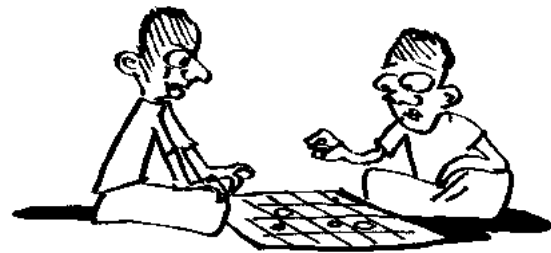
For example, suppose you choose your child.



And the values you want to act on are:



Then a small step might be to play with or to read to your child for 10 minutes every day.



Or suppose you choose a relative.



And the values you want to act on are:



Thank you Uncle, for all the help you have given me.

Then a small step might be to greet that person warmly and express your gratitude.

Remember, even the tiniest actions matter.

A giant tree grows from a tiny seed. And even in the hardest or most stressful of times, you can take small **ACTIONS** to live by your values.

When you act on your values, you will begin to create a more satisfying and fulfilling life.



So create your action plan now.

What will you do in the next week to act on your values?



Think in terms of ACTIONS.  
What will you say with your mouth?  
What will you do with your hands  
and arms and legs and feet?



Pick something that seems realistic to you.

Do you believe you can do this?

No!

Yes!





If your plan seems too difficult – if you do not believe you can do it – pick something smaller and easier.



OKAY!

Please make this action plan now, before reading further. It is important!



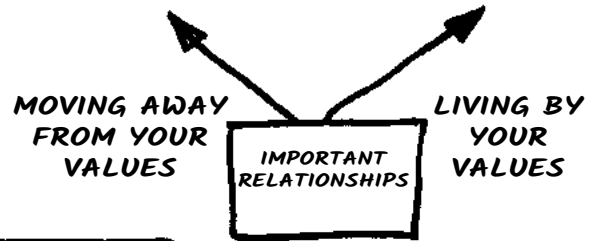
Pick an important relationship. Who is someone you care about, who you see on a regular basis?

What values do you want to live by in this relationship? You can look at page 85 for some examples of common values.

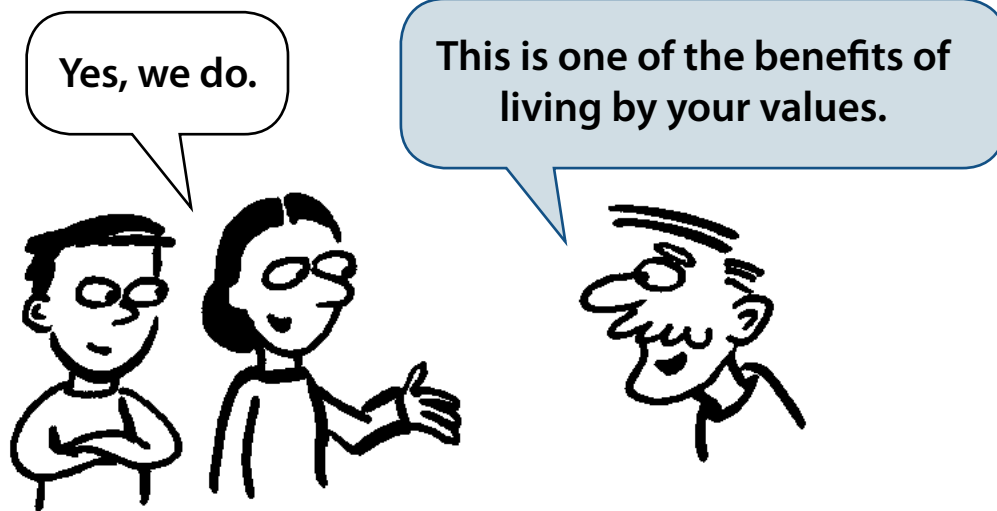
With this person, what one or more **ACTIONS** could you take over the next week to act on your values? What specifically will you do, or what will you say to this person?

Does your plan seem realistic to you? If not, choose something smaller, simpler and easier.

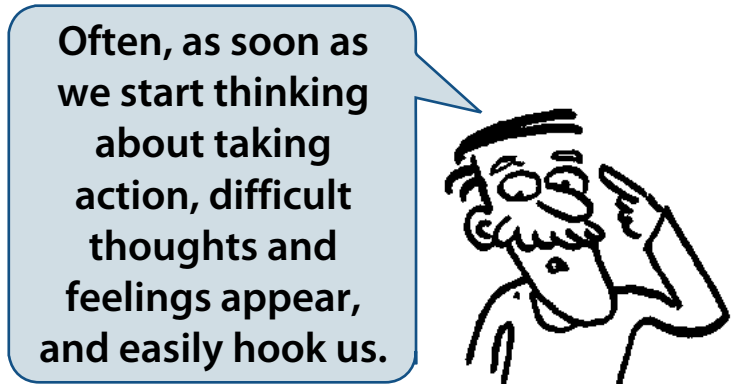
Will these actions take you towards or away from your values?



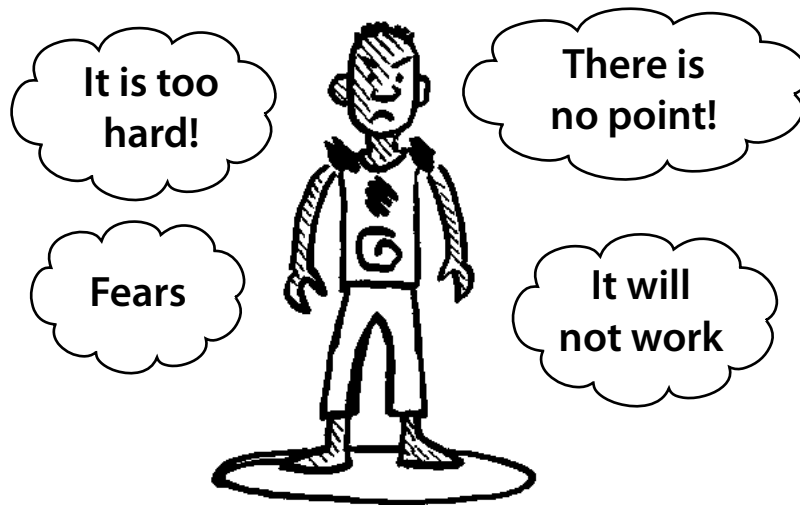
Do you feel a sense of meaning or purpose, of being more like the sort of person you want to be?



Now notice: are difficult thoughts and feelings starting to hook you and stop you from following your action plan?



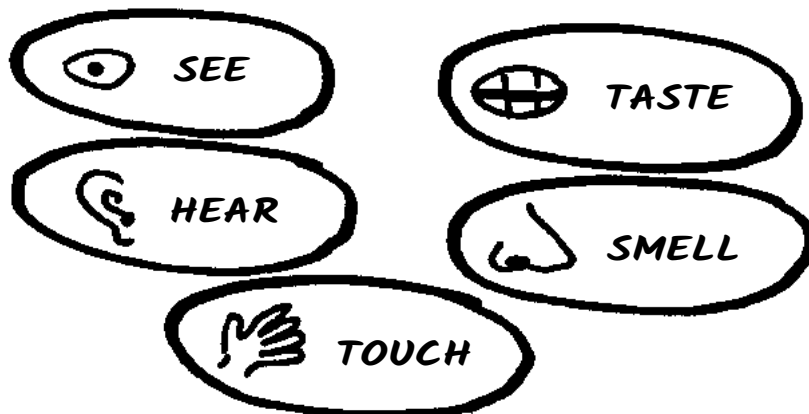
If so, you know what to do.



NOTICE and NAME them.



And ENGAGE with the world around you.







Aim to start each day thinking of two or three values you want to live by.

While you are still in bed, or while you are getting up.



Look for ways to act on those values.

And throughout the day...

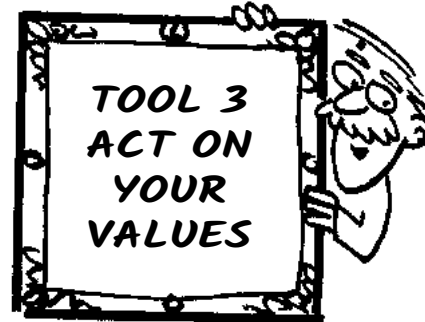


Yes! Even tiny actions matter!

The journey of 1000 miles begins with one step!

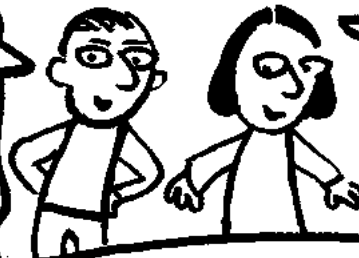


This is the next tool in your toolkit.




AND EVERY TIME YOU ACT ON YOUR VALUES...

I AM BEHAVING LIKE THE SORT OF PERSON I WANT TO BE



I AM ACTING ON MY VALUES.

...ACKNOWLEDGE IT TO YOURSELF.



SO YOU NOW HAVE  
THREE POWERFUL  
TOOLS:

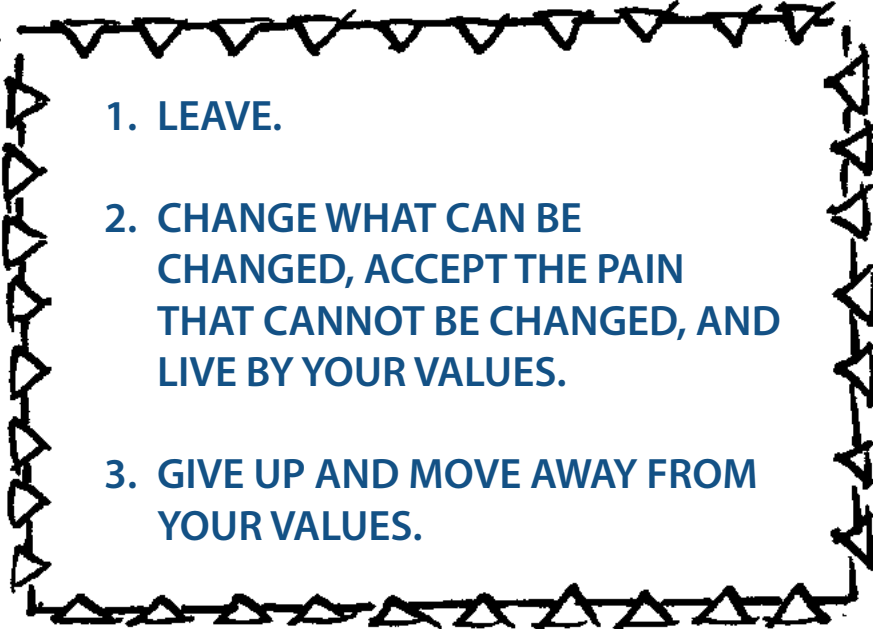
- \* UNHOOKING
- \* GROUNDING
- \* ACTING ON YOUR VALUES.

But we have so many problems!

You do!  
And there are three approaches to any difficult situation.



What are they?

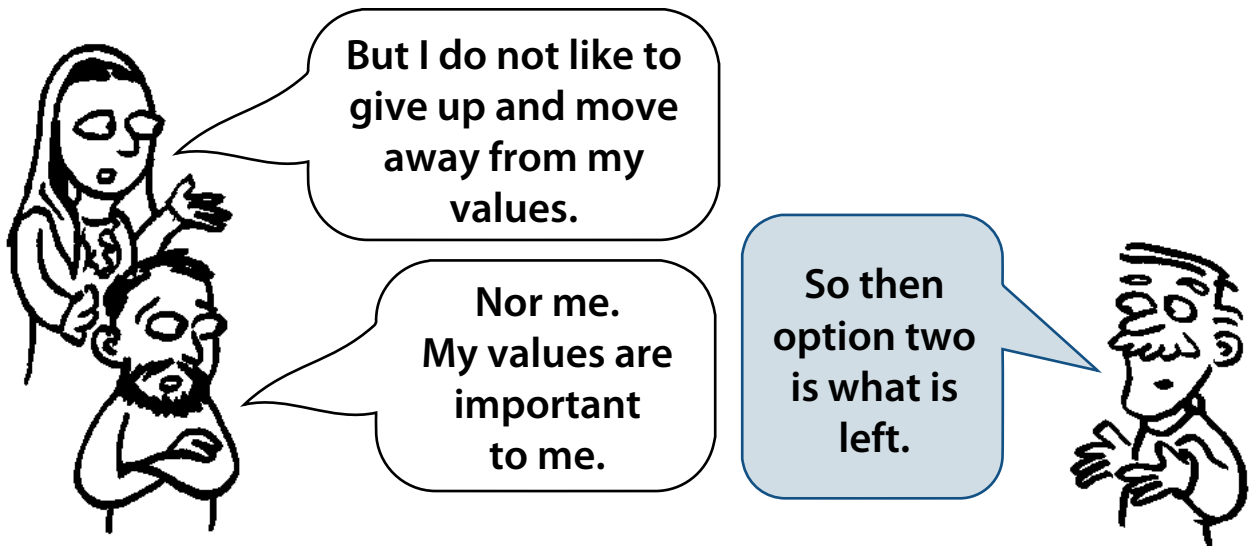
- 
1. LEAVE.
  2. CHANGE WHAT CAN BE CHANGED, ACCEPT THE PAIN THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED, AND LIVE BY YOUR VALUES.
  3. GIVE UP AND MOVE AWAY FROM YOUR VALUES.



But sometimes you cannot leave... for example, if you are in prison, or if leaving is worse than staying.

True! If so, you must choose between options two and three.





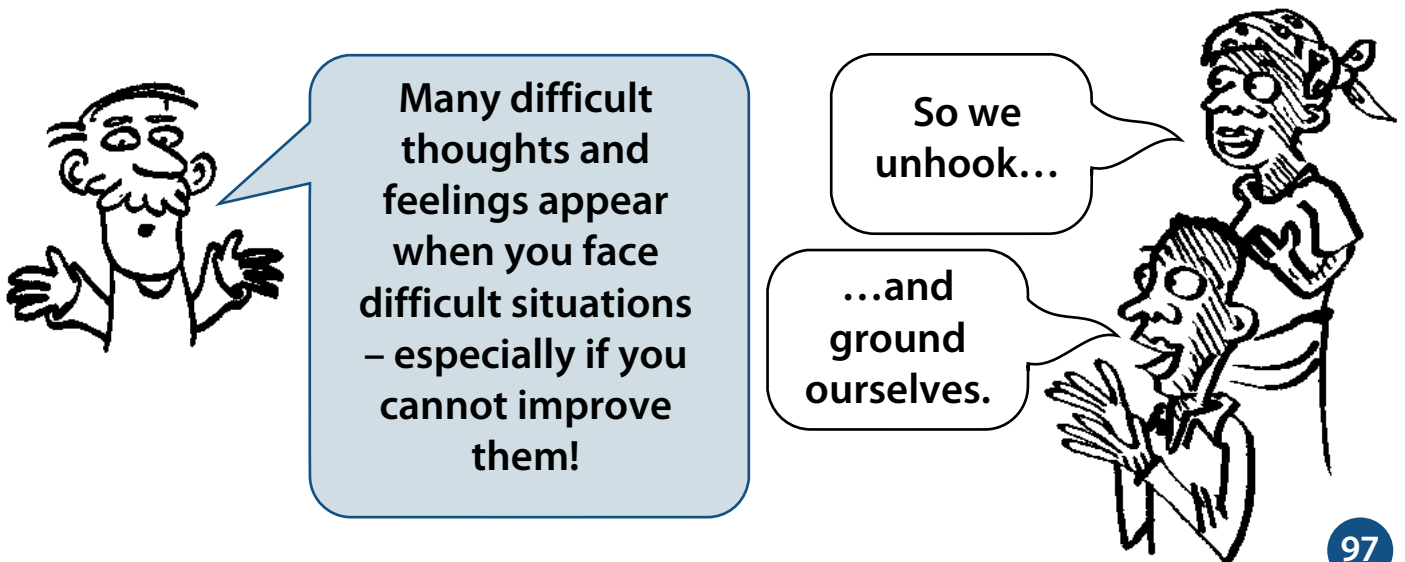
**CHANGE WHAT CAN BE CHANGED,  
ACCEPT THE PAIN THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED,  
AND LIVE BY YOUR VALUES.**



### CHANGE WHAT CAN BE CHANGED...

Use your arms and legs and hands and feet and mouth to **TAKE ACTION**: to do whatever you can, no matter how small it might be, to improve the situation.

### ACCEPT THE PAIN THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED...



### AND LIVE BY YOUR VALUES.



So if there is nothing you can do to improve the situation...

We find other ways to live by our values.

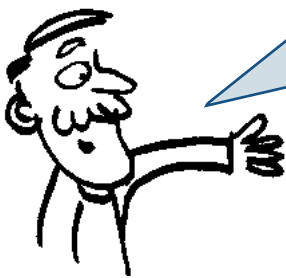


**CHANGE  
WHAT CAN  
BE CHANGED,  
ACCEPT THE  
PAIN THAT  
CANNOT BE  
CHANGED,  
AND LIVE BY  
YOUR VALUES.**



Yes! So commit this to memory, and use it to help deal with your problems.

And now, it is time for some



There IS something you can do that will improve any difficult situation, at least a little bit.

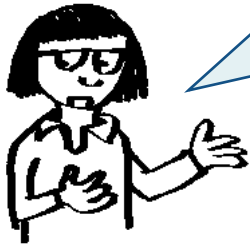
What is it?



Good question! That is what we will explore in the next section. But first, remember to take a day or two to practise what we've covered in this section. You can use the summaries at the end of the book to remind yourself of how to use the tools we've learned so far.

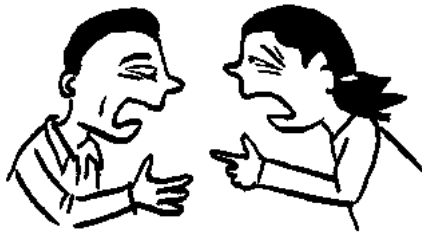
# BEING KIND





No matter  
how bad your  
situation

Or in a family argument...



...you are always better off if you  
have a friend by your side.



Someone who says kind things  
when you are in pain.

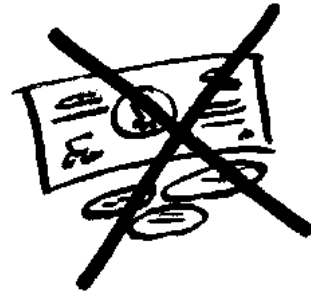
I can see this is  
hard for you.  
Let me help.



Whether you are in danger...



Or without income...



Someone who is kind and  
caring and helpful...



Yet many of us are not kind  
to ourselves when we are in  
difficult situations.



Often, we  
get hooked  
by unkind  
thoughts.

I am weak

I am  
crazy

I am  
bad

I did  
the wrong  
thing.



It is my fault

I can  
never  
forgive  
myself

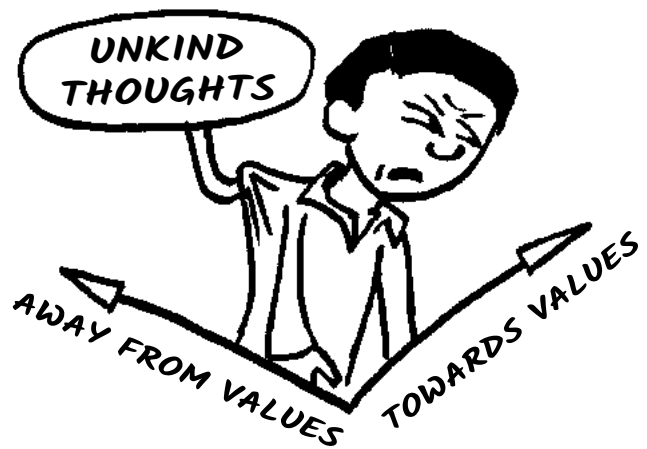
I should  
not have  
done that





Unkind thoughts are natural and may happen often; that is OK. But it is not helpful to be hooked by them, because...

...when we get hooked by these unkind thoughts, we get pulled away from our values.



So we need to NOTICE and NAME them, to unhook from them.

Try this now. Choose an unkind thought about yourself.

I am a bad mother.

I am weak.





And silently say to yourself...




Then add the words "I notice".



Then **GROUND** yourself and **ENGAGE** with the world around you.



 You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download the *Unhooking from Unkind Thoughts* exercise. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.

How do you feel when you are struggling, suffering, in pain, and someone reaches out to you with kindness, caring and understanding?



Even in the most difficult situations, there are ways we can act on our values of kindness and caring.



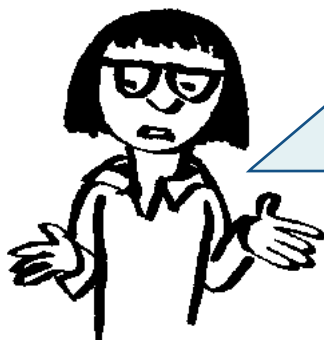
Even tiny little actions of kindness can make a difference.



This is really painful.

I am here for you.

This includes kind words.



When you see someone in pain, suffering and struggling, what are small acts of kindness that you could do?



Every small, kind action makes a difference.

And we should be kind to ourselves, too.



So unhook from thoughts like...

I do not deserve kindness.



My needs do not matter.

Everyone needs a friend. Everyone needs kindness.



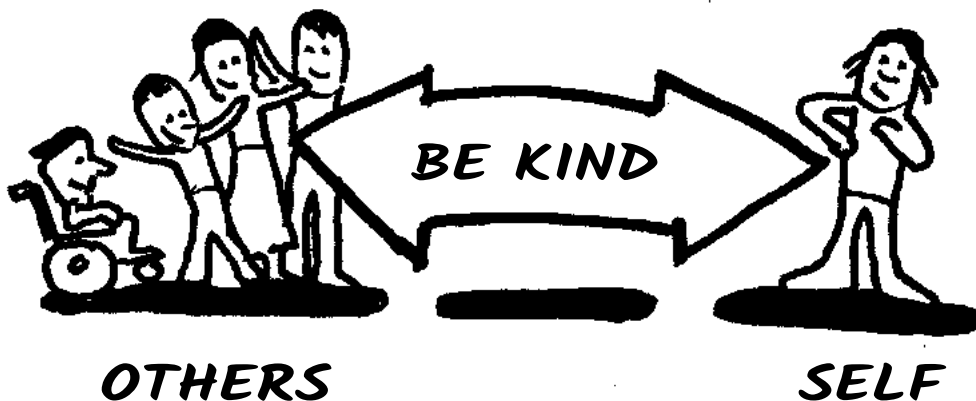
And if you are kind to yourself...



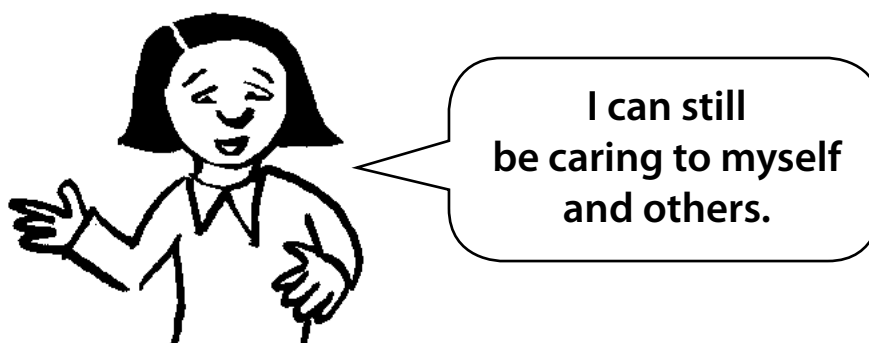
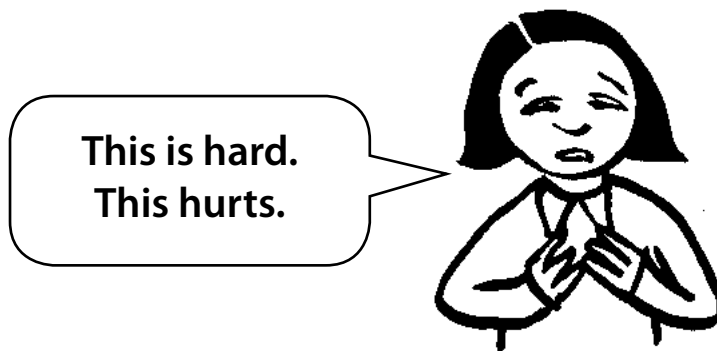
...you will have more energy to help others, and more motivation to be kind to others, so everyone benefits.



Remember: like all values, kindness goes both ways.



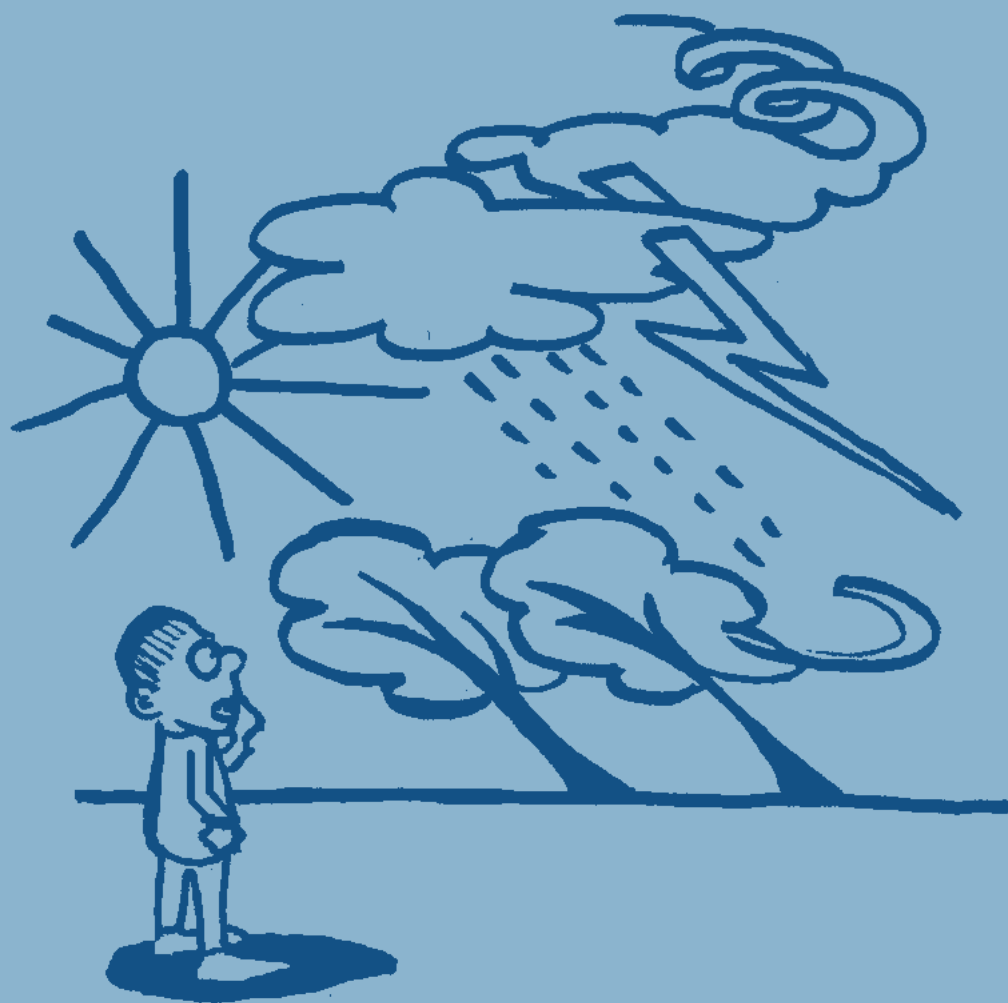
So speak to yourself kindly.



Before continuing with the final section, please remember to take at least a day or two to practise what we've covered in this section. The summaries at the end of the book will also remind you how to practise all of the skills you've learned so far.

Part 5

# MAKING ROOM





On pages 56–57, we looked at the common problems that happen when we struggle with our thoughts and feelings: trying to push them away, avoid them or get rid of them. If you have forgotten, please read them again now, before reading any further.



So UNHOOKING is one way to stop struggling with our thoughts and feelings.

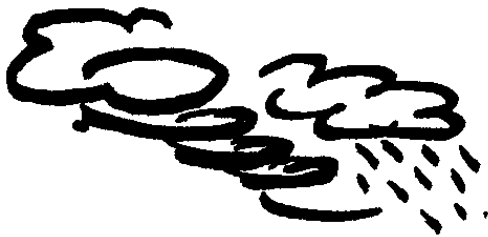


There is another way to do this, called MAKING ROOM.

To learn this skill, it is useful to think about the sky.



...the sky has room for it!



...or freezing cold.



Our thoughts and feelings are like the weather.

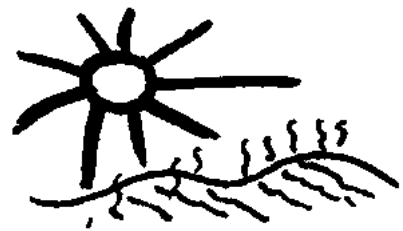


Yes! Always changing!

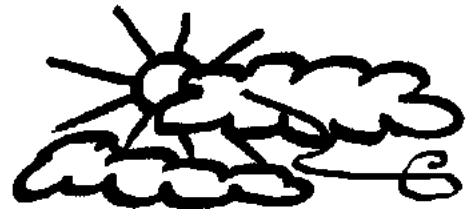
No matter how severe the weather...



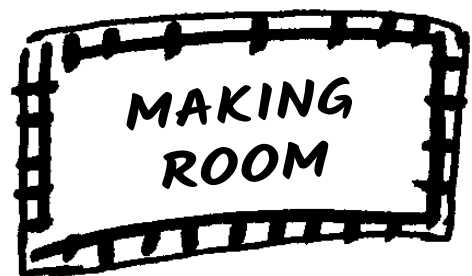
And the sky can never be hurt or harmed by the weather; whether it is intense heat ...

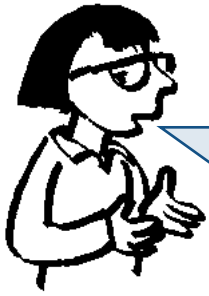


And sooner or later, the weather always changes.



And we can learn to be like the sky, and make room for the "bad weather" of our difficult thoughts and feelings without being hurt by it.





So try this now. First, silently NOTICE and NAME.

I am noticing a pain in my chest and belly.



Here are difficult thoughts.



Notice these thoughts and feelings with CURIOSITY.

And imagine these thoughts and feelings are like the weather ...



And you are like the sky...



...for the weather.

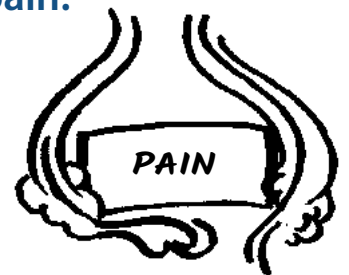
Focus your attention on a difficult thought or feeling. NOTICE and NAME it, then observe it with curiosity.



And as you do this, breathe out slowly. Then once your lungs are empty, pause for a count of three.



Then breathe in slowly, and imagine your breath flows into and around your pain.





Imagine this any way you like.



Breathing out, emptying your lungs...



Breathing in slowly...



Breathing into and around your pain...



Opening up and making room for it...



Allowing it to be there...





It often helps to imagine a painful feeling as an object.

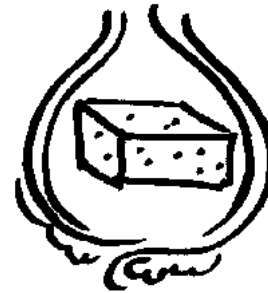
Imagine it has a size and a shape and a colour and a temperature.




Like a heavy cold brown brick on my chest.



And imagine breathing into and around this object – making room for it.

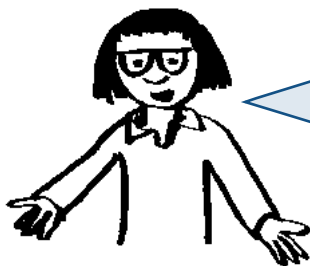


 You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download the *Making Room* exercise. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.



And it often helps to imagine a difficult thought...

...as words or pictures on the pages of a book.



Please try this now.

Notice your difficult thought...



...and imagine it as words and pictures on the pages of a book.



...and imagine it gently resting it on your lap...



... and ENGAGE with the world around you.

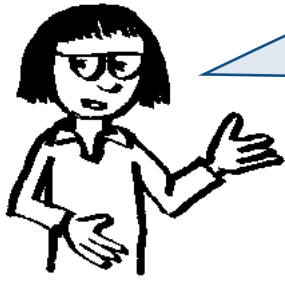


You can also imagine tucking the book under your arm, and taking it with you.



So the thought is still with you, but you can ENGAGE with the world around you.





To begin with, this exercise might take a few minutes. But like learning any new skill...



With practice it gets easier!

And much quicker!



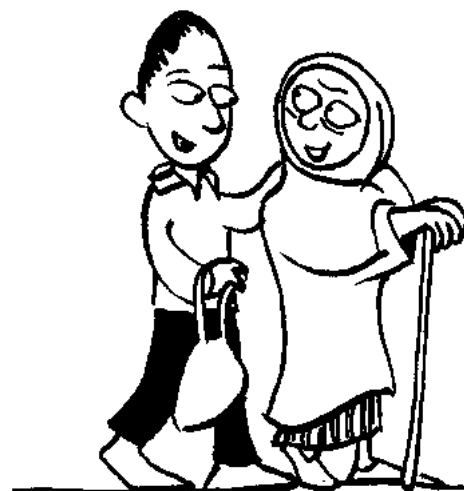
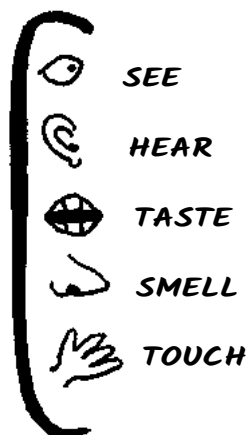
So please go back and practise these exercises now, before reading further. You can also practise during your day, whenever you experience difficult thoughts and feelings.

Remember: it is like learning any new skill.

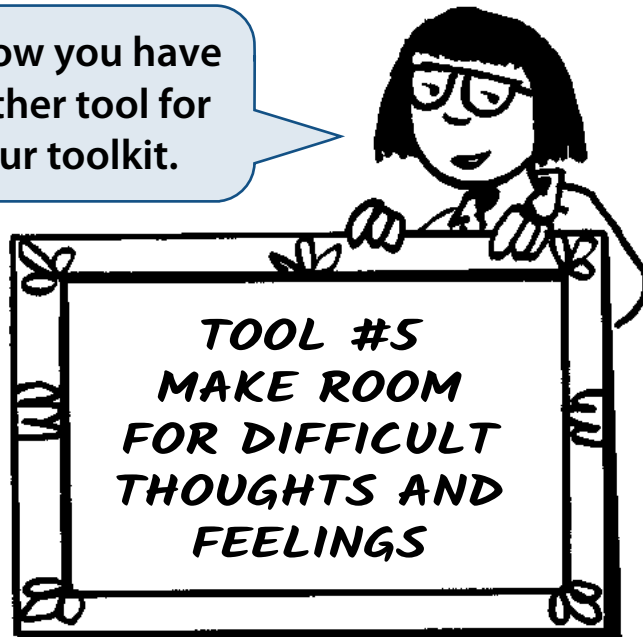


And after you **MAKE ROOM**, you then **ENGAGE** with the world around you.

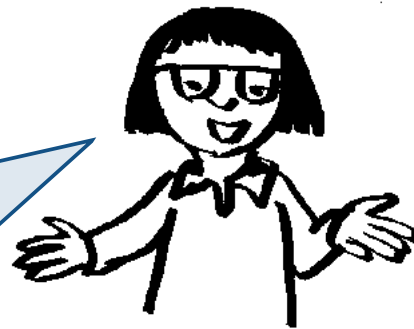
**NOTICE** where you are, who is with you, and give your full attention to the activity you are doing.



So now you have another tool for your toolkit.



And remember: practise, practise, practise.



Especially if you are in bed and can't sleep; you can combine MAKING ROOM with your breathing exercises.



You breathe into the difficult thoughts and feelings...



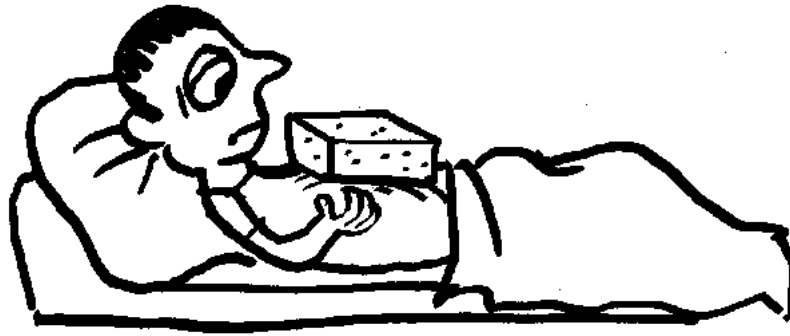
...and let the breath flow into and around them.



If you feel pain in your body, notice it with curiosity.



Notice its shape, size, and temperature ...

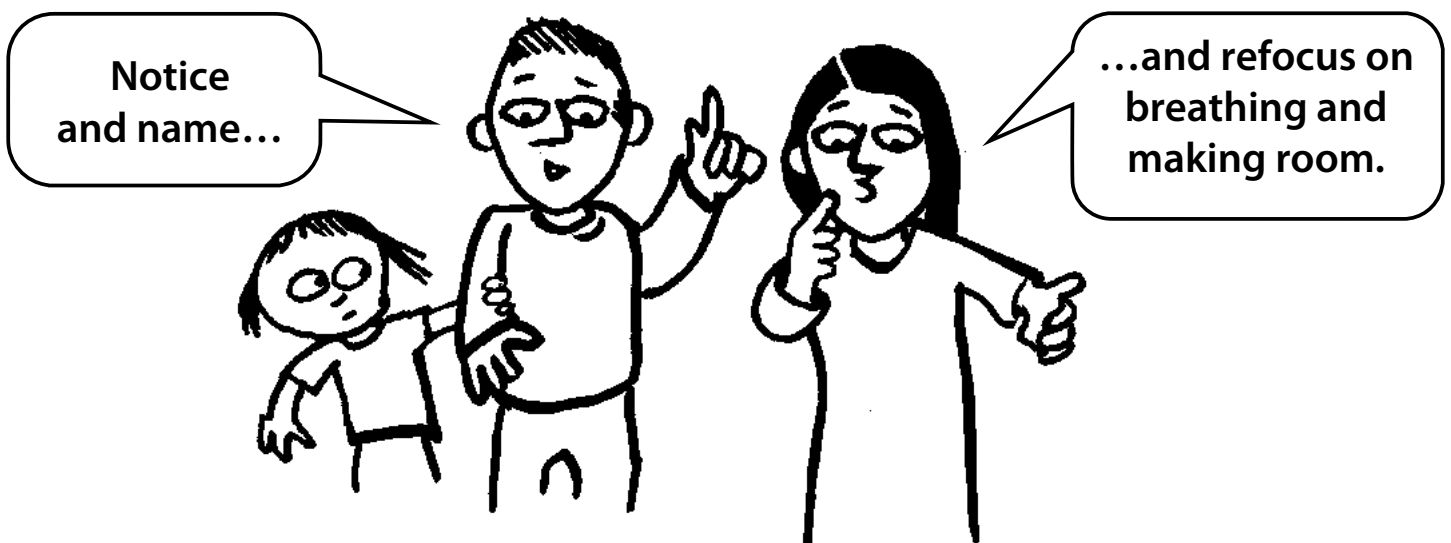


...and notice with curiosity what happens.

Your pain might get bigger or smaller; it might stay or it might go.  
Your aim is simply to make room for it; to allow it to be there;  
to stop fighting it and give it space.



And whenever you get HOOKED and pulled out of the exercise ...





So now we are nearing the end of the book. We have time for one last exercise.

An exercise in being kind to yourself and making room for your pain.



This is a good exercise to practise in bed or when you are alone.

Take one of your hands and imagine filling it with kindness...



Now place this hand gently somewhere on your body: over your heart, your belly, your forehead or anywhere you feel pain.



Feel the warmth flowing from your hand into your body, and see if you can be kind to yourself through this hand.





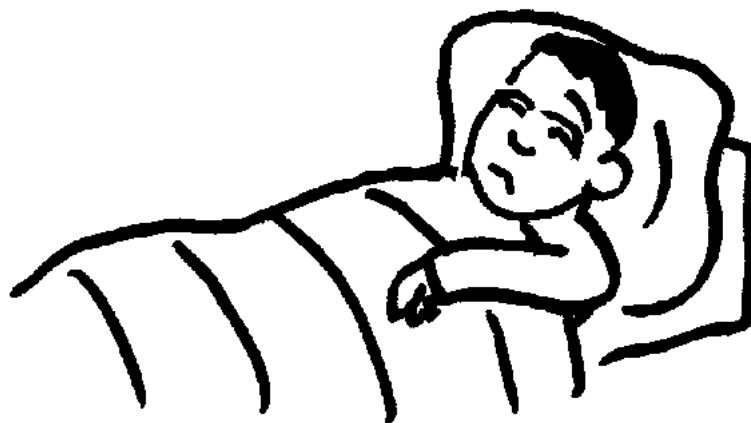
You can use two hands, if you prefer.



Hold yourself kindly...



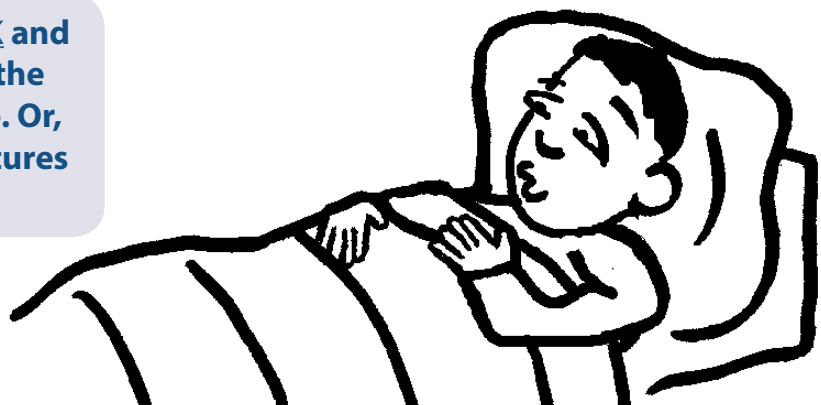
If you are in bed and cannot sleep, it can be helpful to add this to your breathing and MAKING ROOM exercises.



Place a hand over the painful feeling. See if you can be kind to yourself by imagining you are breathing through your hand to this painful feeling.



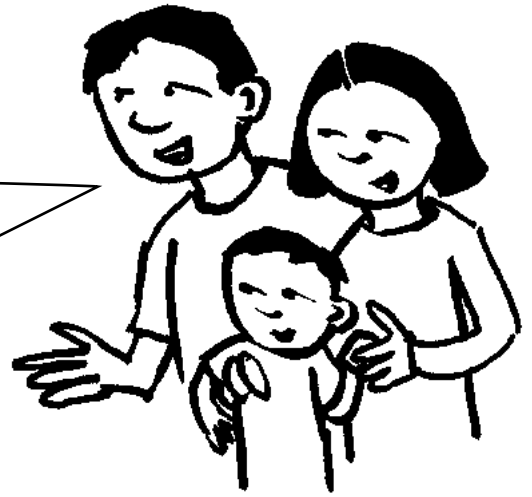
You can go to this [LINK](#) and listen to, or download the *Being Kind to Yourself* exercise. Or, you can simply follow the pictures and instructions in this book.





And of course every time you do anything from this book...

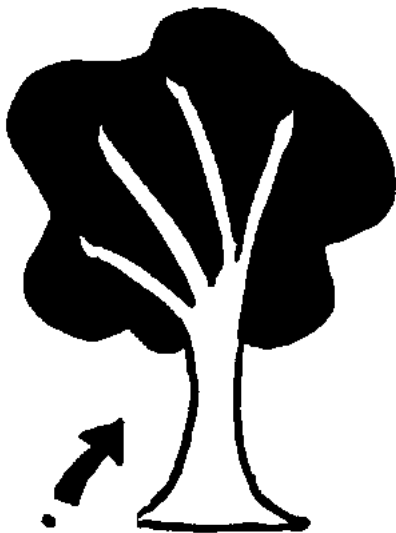
...it is an act of kindness to ourselves and to others!



Remember, too: it is like building muscles. The more you practise, the better.



And every tiny step matters. A tiny seed grows into a mighty tree.



And the journey of 1000 miles begins with one step.



Enjoy your ongoing journey!  
Try to practise and consider re-reading  
this book again to help you understand  
the ideas and skills even more. Thank you  
for your time and please share this book  
if you found it useful.



## Tool 1: GROUNDING

**GROUND YOURSELF** during emotional storms by **NOTICING** your thoughts and feelings, **SLOWING DOWN** and **CONNECTING** with your body by slowly pushing your feet into the floor, stretching and breathing, and then **REFOCUSING** and **ENGAGING** with the world around you.

What can you see, hear, touch, taste and smell? Pay attention with curiosity to what is in front of you. Notice where you are, who is with you and what you are doing.

### **Practice tip:**

Grounding is especially useful during stressful situations or emotional storms. You can also practise grounding when you simply have one or two minutes available, like when you're waiting for something, or before or after an activity you do every day, like washing, eating, cooking or sleeping. If you practise during these times, you may find that boring activities become more enjoyable, and it will be easier to use grounding later in more difficult situations.



You can download or listen to *Grounding exercises* of different lengths at this [LINK](#).



## Tool 2: UNHOOKING

UNHOOK YOURSELF with these three steps:

- 1) **NOTICE** that a difficult thought or feeling has hooked you. Realize that you are distracted by a difficult thought or feeling, and notice it with curiosity.
- 2) Then silently **NAME** the difficult thought or feeling; for example:  
“Here is a difficult feeling”  
“Here is tightness in my chest”  
“Here is a feeling of anger”  
“Here is a difficult thought about the past”  
“I notice here is a difficult thought”  
“I notice here are fears about the future”
- 3) Then, **REFOCUS** on what you are doing. Pay full attention to whoever is with you and whatever you are doing.



You can download or listen to the *Notice and Name* exercise at this [LINK](#).



## Tool 3: ACTING ON YOUR VALUES

Choose the values that are most important to you. For example:

- being kind and caring
- being helpful
- being brave
- being hardworking.

You get to decide which values are most important to you!

Then pick one small way that you can act according to these values in the next week. What will you do? What will you say? Even tiny actions matter!

Remember that there are three approaches to any difficult situation:

1. LEAVE
2. CHANGE WHAT CAN BE CHANGED, ACCEPT THE PAIN THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED, AND LIVE BY YOUR VALUES
3. GIVE UP AND MOVE AWAY FROM YOUR VALUES.



## Tool 4: BEING KIND

**BE KIND.** Notice pain in yourself and others and respond with kindness. Unhook from unkind thoughts by **NOTICING** and **NAMING** them. Then, try speaking to yourself kindly. If you are kind to yourself you will have more energy to help others and more motivation to be kind to others, so everyone benefits.

You can also take one of your hands and imagine filling it with kindness. Place this hand gently somewhere on your body where you feel pain. Feel the warmth flowing from your hand into your body. See if you can be kind to yourself through this hand.



You can download or listen to the *Unhooking from Unkind Thoughts* and the *Being Kind to Yourself* exercises at this [LINK](#).

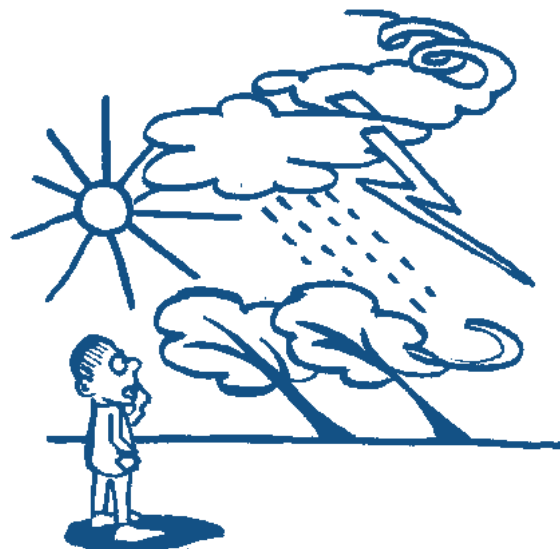
## Tool 5: MAKING ROOM

Trying to push away difficult thoughts and feelings often does not work very well. So instead, MAKE ROOM for them:

- 1) NOTICE the difficult thought or feeling with curiosity. Focus your attention on it. Imagine the painful feeling as an object, and notice its size, shape, colour and temperature.
- 2) NAME the difficult thought or feeling. For example:  
“Here is a difficult feeling”  
“Here is a difficult thought about the past”  
“I notice here is sadness”  
“I notice here is a thought that I am weak”
- 3) Allow the painful feeling or thought to come and go like the weather. As you breathe, imagine your breath flowing into and around your pain to make room for it. Instead of fighting with the thought or feeling, allow it to move through you, just like the weather moves through the sky. If you are not fighting with the weather, then you will have more time and energy to engage with the world around you and do things that are important to you.



You can download or listen to the *Making Room* exercises at this [LINK](#).











# Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide

If you are experiencing **stress**,  
this guide is for you.

The guide contains **information**  
and **practical skills** to help you cope.

Even in the face of tremendous adversity,  
you can find **meaning, purpose**  
and **vitality** in your life.

World Health Organization  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Use  
20, avenue Appia  
1211 Geneva 27  
Switzerland

E-mail: [psych\\_interventions@who.int](mailto:psych_interventions@who.int)

[www.who.int/mental\\_health](http://www.who.int/mental_health)

