

‘Using her own life as a laboratory for the impossible, Sarah Kuipers gives the reader a rich, detailed and deeply valuable formula to go from a life of depleting, soul-and-body-destroying, one-way caring relationships to a balance of other-care and self-care. She presents multiple case examples and multiple self-care methods. The hope and promise she offers is a satisfying life of caring for human suffering and need while personally being able to be joyful and healthy. A gem of a book.’

Thomas Skovholt, PhD, psychologist, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota and co-author of *The Resilient Practitioner*

‘Healthcare professionals and all who care for others should read this outstanding book! In a well-researched, wise and superbly practical way, Sarah Kuipers takes you through simple, doable steps not only to reduce stress and prevent burnout, but also to feel energetic, happy and inspired while giving your best to others. This is your go-to book for taking care of the care-giver – your good self.’

Dr Richard Gillett, psychiatrist, author of the number-one bestseller *It’s a Freakin’ Mess: How to Thrive in Divisive Times*, and *Overcoming Depression*

‘At a time of such massive stress and strain on healthcare practitioners this book is essential reading. Sarah Kuipers has captured the nub of the matter and asks deep questions, such as “Why are we so poor at looking after ourselves?” Self-care needs to occupy a central role in any healthcare studies and this book really sets out the curriculum. With many first-hand stories, practical tips and methods for how to care for yourself, I cannot recommend it highly enough. This book is powerful, authentic and guides us toward true self-compassion.’

Dr Sarah Eagger, consultant psychiatrist and honorary senior clinical lecturer at Imperial College, London

‘This is a very well organized, well researched and meticulously thought-through book which is equally relevant for professionals and non-professionals. It gathers up and lays out so many of the principles we in the field know about but don’t always identify in this clear manner.’

Sue Schraer, psychotherapist and guest editor of *The Psychotherapist*

The Thriving Giver is a thorough, practical guide for caring professionals to maintain wellness and avoid burnout. Sarah Kuipers offers both personal warmth and professional understanding of the roots of exhaustion and burnout, and a comprehensive choice of approaches to help recovery and support continuing wellness.’

Elizabeth Wilde McCormick, psychotherapist and author of
Change for the Better (5th edition) and *Living on the Edge*

‘This is a timely practical self-help guide for health professionals which covers the most common psychological pitfalls of carers. Based on the author’s personal and professional experience, it offers a range of referenced approaches to build your resilience and is ideal for those looking for skills to improve the quality of their lives – one step at a time.’

Dr Derek Chase, Fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners

The Thriving Giver is a timely reminder to all of us in the caring professions that we need to discover – and implement – self-care strategies in order to head off or heal from burnout. ... This book should be on the “recommended reading” lists for all training schools and colleges in the complementary/integrative medical healthcare field.’

Jayne Goddard, President of The Complementary Medical Association,
Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine

The Thriving Giver is a timely and practical resource for caring professionals. The author provides a clear framework to assess and guard against stress and burnout through a range of evidence-based tools. Most importantly, she recognizes that, for many, the life experiences that drew them to their work have shaped counter-productive beliefs and behaviour patterns. She provides important foundations for releasing these unhelpful patterns and creating lasting practices to ensure that readers stay supported and nurtured in their work and wider lives.’

Jan Alcoe, co-author of *Stillness in the Storm* and publishing consultant in
health and social care

‘The author has created a book based on incredible experience and knowledge that will help many healthcare professionals to withstand the pressures of modern life. ... Without stepping back and using the tools described in this book there is a risk of burnout or giving up a career that would otherwise be manageable with the techniques described.’

Dr David Beales, specialist in mind-body medicine and
co-author of *Reclaim Health*

‘This book is a rousing call to action, inviting healthcare professionals to listen to their “inner radar” and commit to addressing their state of “self-care”. It shines a restorative light on doable ways and means to replenish the vital energy so needed for quality care. What’s so authentic is Sarah’s total transparency about her vulnerability and her matter-of-fact account of her own experiences of stress and burnout. ‘When you give from a cup that is overflowing, your giving is sustainable’ sums up this relevant and powerful “how to” book.’

Carole Falkner, consultant in healthcare organization development,
Canada

‘If you’ve ever felt stressed out and overloaded, you’ve probably been given well-meaning advice from friends to “take care of yourself”. But what does that mean? And how do we do it effectively – even recharging our batteries in the process? That’s what this book is about. The author tells how to recognize early stress patterns in yourself and what to do to lighten the load and energize yourself. Here’s down-to-earth wisdom for everyday life that really works.’

Dr Hal Zina Bennett, bestselling author of *Write from the Heart*

‘This excellent book could be a valuable tool for mental health workers enabling them to enhance their own lives as well as their clients. The simple, practical strategies could also be really helpful for patients being discharged from hospital or a community setting.’

Caroline Black, psychotherapist

‘For anyone struggling with overwhelm in a caring profession, this book is for you! I wish I had read it during my own professional challenges. The author speaks simply and honestly about her own personal battle with burnout and through illustrative stories and easy-to-follow reflective exercises lays a clear path to finding your way back to the Thriving Giver that you truly are.’

Dorothy McCrady, former elementary school principal, Canada

‘Sarah Kuipers has put her considerable knowledge into these pages to create a clear and simple workbook for change. A timely reminder of what is important in life – especially now.’

Professor Ursula James, Visiting Teaching Fellow,
Oxford University Medical School

‘This user-friendly book draws on up to date research and encourages busy health professionals to slow down and appreciate the need to care for themselves in the same way that they care for others. Rich examples bring the material to life. A really good reminder that self-care is not selfish if we want to be able to fully give to those around us. A great book to recommend to colleagues and friends.’

Dr Jodie Waterhouse, clinical psychologist

‘This is an important and timely book. I wish I had read it while training as a nurse before working in A&E, ICU and the operating theatre. ... I only learnt the importance of self-care many years later, after succumbing to chronic fatigue syndrome. This brilliant book, easy to read, full of useful information and resources, should be required reading for all caring professionals.’

Dr Jane Buckle, former nurse and lecturer for healthcare professionals

The Thriving Giver

7 PRINCIPLES

for health professionals and
caregivers to enhance self-care
and prevent burnout

SARAH KUIPERS

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 Practical Inspiration
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Disclaimer: important note for the reader

The exercises, strategies and recommendations presented in this book are not intended as a substitute for a consultation with, or advice from, qualified medical or psychotherapeutic professionals. The author and publishers cannot be held responsible for any loss, claim or damage arising from the use or misuse of materials in the book, or the failure to take medical advice.

In memory of Carole Hart,
whose life exemplified that of a Thriving Giver,
and in gratitude for her wisdom, encouragement and support in
opening that possibility for me.

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Introduction

What is it that enables some healthcare professionals and caregivers to continue to give from a space of replenishment – even under relentless pressure – while others struggle and become depleted? This is the question I set out to answer after experiencing burnout, and this book brings together everything I have learnt. There are two key elements to mastering stress and creating a life in which you thrive. The first is having a comprehensive range of stress management and self-care resources. The second, and perhaps deeper, question is: *what is holding you back from applying those strategies?*

During my master's in research studying stress and burnout in health professionals, one area that intrigued me was the importance of exploring the underlying patterns – many arising from childhood – that encourage us to take care of everyone else and ignore our own needs. When we have a tendency to keep everyone happy, find it hard to say 'no' or to set clear boundaries, it is more difficult to manage stress and continue giving our best.

Having identified the damaging impact of those disempowering traits in my own life, I subsequently observed them in many clients and training participants. They appear to be particularly prevalent in those drawn to the 'helping' professions. If you are a health or care professional, therapist, social worker or caregiver, or work in the non-profit sector, you may recognize some of those unhelpful patterns in yourself. When your work is more of a vocation, your passion, commitment or enthusiasm can often lead to a pattern of over-giving. If you are a parent,

The Thriving Giver

informal caregiver or someone who cares deeply for others, you may also have a tendency to put your own needs aside.

In order to create time in a busy schedule to de-stress, relax or recharge, it is important to release any disempowering patterns and learn to value yourself. If your job or life are emotionally demanding, it is also essential that you have a wide range of tools to manage stress, optimize self-care and develop your skills in assertiveness. When you fail to nurture yourself, you can only keep going for so long before becoming depleted.

The seven principles outlined in this book will help you develop effective resources to calm anxiety, manage emotional turmoil and set clear boundaries. When you reduce stress and care for your physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing, it becomes so much easier to avoid the life-changing impact of burnout, exhaustion or a stress-related illness.

This book will help you learn how to balance your own care with the care of others, and to develop a wide range of skills to master the inevitable challenges of our increasingly complex world. As a Thriving Giver, you can give from a cup that is overflowing, and your giving can be sustainable.

Is this book for you?

Are you a health or social care professional, informal caregiver or someone who is

- overwhelmed with the pressures of work or family commitments?
- exhausted?
- emotionally distressed or depleted?
- overworked?
- taking time off work due to stress?
- wondering how you can cope?
- feeling as if you have nothing left to give?
- worried about burning out?

If you answer 'yes' to some of those questions, then why not read on? *The Thriving Giver* will help you create a comprehensive toolkit of simple and effective tools to

- monitor your wellbeing
- calm your anxiety
- process and release emotional distress
- shift your mindset
- create a more balanced and nurturing life
- replenish body, mind and spirit
- infuse your life with more joy

When you manage stress effectively, optimize your wellbeing and create a life in which you thrive, it becomes so much easier to give from a space of replenishment, rather than depletion.

This book will also be helpful if you

- tend to put others first, while ignoring your own needs
- find it hard to say ‘no’ or to express your wants and needs
- believe that self-care is selfish
- allow people to take advantage of your kind nature
- struggle to set clear boundaries
- tend to take too much responsibility for others
- feel guilty taking time for yourself
- have a hard work ethic that stops you taking time for relaxation or pleasure
- worry about upsetting anyone

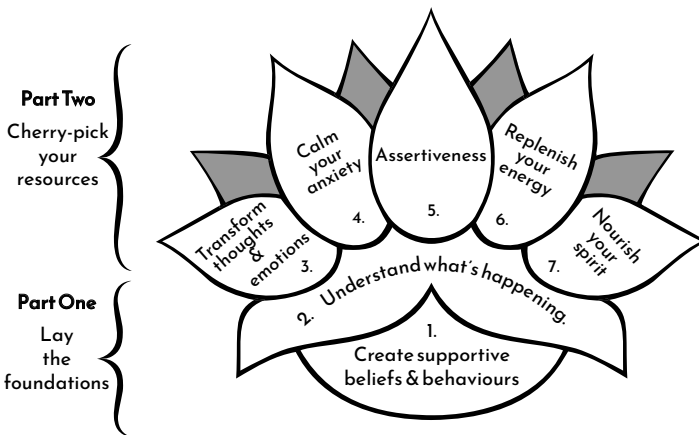
If you recognize any of these traits in yourself, then Principle 1 will help you unearth the roots of poor self-care, and learn to value and care for yourself. Then, it becomes so much easier to manage stress, prevent burnout and learn to thrive. The seven principles are designed to enable you to become a Thriving Giver. You may be surprised to discover that your family, friends, clients, patients* or colleagues will also benefit when you find ways to calm your mind, relax your body and take time to recharge.

* The terms ‘client’ and ‘patient’ are interchangeable, since the way they are used in different countries can vary.

How to use this book

In the past, you may have experienced how easy it is to get drawn into a book and be inspired as you devour the chapters. You want to race through to the end, maybe with an unconscious wish that, as you read, you magically acquire the necessary skills. Unfortunately, transforming your life requires time and commitment, so I invite you to focus on only one section at a time. It is better to wait until you become adept at applying a new skill or resource before moving on. This will also help you avoid becoming overwhelmed. Consistently applying one key strategy can yield remarkable results, while also benefitting many areas of your life. Starting now, reading one section is all that is needed to set you on the path towards a more balanced, nurturing and fulfilling life.

The following diagram shows the seven principles represented as a flower. As you can see, the principles can be divided into two parts.



Part One: Lay the foundations

Principles 1 and 2 make up the ‘base’, or ovary, of the flower, without which the petals cannot emerge. *Principle 1. Create supportive beliefs and behaviours* encourages you to value and respect yourself, prioritize your wellbeing and develop the confidence to be more assertive.

You then learn to monitor your stress levels and other aspects of your wellbeing with *Principle 2. Understand what’s happening*. This helps ensure that you never get too close to the critical zone of exhaustion, burnout or breakdown, while also guiding you towards the most helpful resources later in the book.

I recommend that you lay strong foundations by reading all of Part One before progressing to Part Two.

However, if you are currently struggling with emotional turmoil, you may find it helpful to begin by reading *3a. Expressive writing*. This is a fantastic tool to help you identify, release and process distressing emotions. Similarly, if you frequently experience anxiety, you could go directly to *Principle 4. Calm your anxiety* and discover which of the three approaches work most effectively for you. After you have mastered those skills, you can return to *Principle 1. Create supportive beliefs and behaviours*.

If you are already adept at balancing your own needs with those of others, and are comfortable in setting clear boundaries and expressing your needs, you may prefer to start with Principle 2. It is helpful to understand your risk factors before creating your personalized toolkit of strategies.

Part Two: Cherry-pick your resources

In the diagram, Principles 3 to 7 are represented by the five petals of the flower, and comprise the following.

- *Principle 3. Transform your thoughts and emotions*
- *Principle 4. Calm your anxiety*
- *Principle 5. Assertiveness: Step into your power*
- *Principle 6. Replenish your energy*
- *Principle 7. Nourish your spirit*

Each of these principles is made up of several sections presenting a range of simple and effective strategies. You are likely to already have some valuable tools in place that relate to certain principles. When creating your toolkit of resources, you can choose the ones that are most relevant for you, and work through them in any order you like. You may have a sense of which would be most helpful. If not, the overview at the beginning of each principle will help direct you towards the section you wish to focus on first.

As you explore these seven principles, if you become aware of something holding you back from valuing yourself, I encourage you to review *Principle 1. Create supportive beliefs and behaviours*. By releasing any unhelpful traits, you will feel so much more comfortable and confident about creating and sustaining a life in which you can thrive.

Reflective and experiential exercises

Every section incorporates exercises to help you gain a greater understanding of yourself, or to develop new skills and incorporate the tools and strategies into your life. The reflective exercises are designed to allow the logical part of

your mind to respond first, and then invite you to give yourself time to tap into your deeper knowing. You may be surprised at the creativity or innovation that your inner wisdom shares when you allow the writing to flow without interruption or judgement. After you have finished, you can then choose to reject whatever you wish.

Reflective journal

It is helpful to write your responses to the reflective exercises in a journal, as well as making a note of when, where or how you plan to integrate a specific resource into your schedule. When you write something down you use a different part of the brain, and you are more likely to remember the key information and follow through on your intentions. You can also jot down any insights, celebrate your successes and reflect on changes as you integrate new strategies into your week. Since it is easy to forget the progress you have already made, the journal also acts as a reference point for your own development. You may be surprised at how far you have come when you refer back. You can keep your journal on a tablet or phone if you prefer.

A workbook to accompany this book is available for you to download as a free PDF from the 'Resources' page of my website. www.sarahkuipers.com

Experiment and see what works for you

Some tools may not be helpful at the moment but might be invaluable at another time. See what feels comfortable and let go of anything that does not appeal to you. We are all different in terms of our character, circumstances, needs and viewpoints. Your priorities will be unique, and what may not be applicable to you could be life-changing for someone else.

Throughout the book, anecdotes from my own life, from my clients and from others I have interviewed demonstrate the multitude of ways in which each of these concepts, tools and strategies have transformed lives. To protect anonymity, almost all of the names have been changed, as well as certain identifying details, and sometimes several stories have been intertwined into one.

Unless you work for yourself, you may have little control over your workload, schedule, working environment or time pressures. This book recognizes the transformational potential of focusing on those factors that are within your control. It does not address organizational change.

Many of the concepts and strategies presented are evidence-based; however, to ensure the book remains concise and easy to read, the research is only referenced when it reinforces certain ideas or might encourage you to try something new. A list of References is included at the end of the book, together with a Bibliography in *Appendix B*.

While the book explores a wide range of approaches for building your mental and emotional resilience, if you are struggling with mental health issues, I strongly encourage you to seek help from your doctor or a counsellor, psychotherapist or other mental health professional. A list of registering bodies for fully trained psychotherapeutic professionals is included in *Appendix A: Additional resources*. Recommended books and other useful resources are also included in *Appendix A*.

PART ONE

LAY THE FOUNDATIONS

If you decided to redesign your garden, you would begin by looking at the present layout and choosing what trees, shrubs and flowers you want to keep, and those you wish to let go of. You would probably clear any brambles, nettles and weeds, except those you specifically wanted to preserve in order to support the wildlife! To ensure the ground was clear, you would remove the roots of anything you don't want, so that the new plants could thrive. If you simply dug over the surface, those unwanted plants and weeds would soon be back.

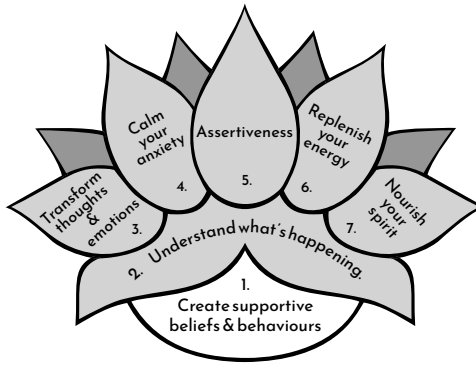
In a similar way, when creating a life in which you thrive, the first step is to unearth the roots of poor self-care, and identify any unhelpful beliefs or behaviour patterns that limit your ability to value and care for yourself. Those disempowering traits may have been programmed into you since you were young. If you tend to put others first, find it hard to say 'no' or feel guilty whenever you stop and relax, it is almost impossible to reduce stress and enhance your self-care. The belief change process outlined in Principle 1 helps you identify and release those disempowering traits. By creating new beliefs that support you in valuing and caring for yourself, you then have a strong foundation for transforming your life.

You will learn that self-care is not selfish. That's why, on an aeroplane, you are asked to put your oxygen mask on first, before placing one on your child. When you optimize self-care and allow yourself to thrive, you can give from a space of replenishment, rather than depletion.

Principle 2 encourages you to monitor your stress levels and different aspects of your health and wellbeing. Through developing greater self-awareness, you reduce the likelihood of exhaustion, burnout, breakdown or a stress-related illness. You

Lay the foundations

may have had a friend or family member who said to you, *If only I had paid attention to the problems earlier, I could have avoided...* When you ignore the warning signs, problems are amplified, whether they are related to your work, relationships, health or wellbeing.



PRINCIPLE 1

Create supportive beliefs and behaviours

Judy loved her work as a physiotherapist, finding it fulfilling. However, she tended to allow family and friends to control her life. If a client was late, she would tell them that was OK, even if she missed her lunch break. The more she gave others, the more they took. Trying to keep everyone happy took its toll. When she became exhausted and felt she had nothing left to give, it prompted her to see me for some coaching.

The sessions revealed how fear had permeated Judy's life from a young age. She had often witnessed her parents fighting, and when she was about six her mother left for London, leaving Judy with her father. He was an alcoholic, and she was often locked in a room, receiving little food, care or attention.

When her mother remarried a few years later, Judy went to live with her new family. Here, her mother's time was now devoted to Judy's stepbrother, Tony, a haemophiliac, who was frequently rushed off to hospital. Worried about upsetting her mother or brother, Judy always gave in to their wishes, ignoring her own needs.

Scared of her mother, who often had a short temper, Judy spent most of the time hiding away in the only safe place, her bedroom. Desperate for approval, she adopted the role of keeping the peace and putting others first.

Coaching helped Judy recognize the wisdom of such a young child discovering how to stay out of harm's way. When she saw how those same behaviour patterns held her back from valuing and caring for herself, she created new beliefs that gave her permission to stand up for herself, even if it meant upsetting someone. Embracing supportive beliefs and learning how to say 'no' made it so much easier for Judy to manage

the pressures in her life. She also discovered that when she respected herself, it often resulted in her gaining more respect from others.

A few years later, when I next saw Judy, it was heart-warming to hear how she had embraced the empowering beliefs. She was more assertive and self-care had become an intrinsic part of her life. She is now more resilient and has learnt that if she stops taking care of herself, everything in her life starts to crumble; she won't let that happen again.

Judy's story may have struck a chord with you, even though your childhood experiences may have been very different from hers. You might already have identified some of your own self-care saboteurs – conditioned habits and responses from the past that amplify your stress and stop you optimizing self-care. Maybe you have a pattern of keeping the peace, seeking approval, being over-responsible or finding it hard to say 'no'. Those traits have been so common in many of the clients I have worked with, and especially those in helping professions. If you wish to create and sustain a balanced and fulfilling life, you may first need to free yourself from any self-care saboteurs and create empowering beliefs and behaviours that support you in valuing yourself. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *1a. Identify unhelpful behaviour patterns* – discover the underlying patterns that amplify your stress.
- *1b. Create new, empowering beliefs* – develop and embody new beliefs that support you in mastering stress and enhancing self-care.
- *1c. Release your self-care saboteurs* – learn how to respond to situations in empowering ways and create a balanced and nurturing life.

1a. Identify unhelpful behaviour patterns

Discover the disempowering patterns that amplify your stress and limit your ability to value and care for yourself.

As a nurse Elizabeth worked tirelessly, looking after both patients and staff but ignoring her own needs. She allowed managers to phone her on days off and worked extra shifts whenever they were short-staffed. With little time to stop, relax and recharge, Elizabeth became frazzled and exhausted. One day, when she started having palpitations and chest pains and her legs felt like jelly, she went home and slept for 13 hours straight. Burnout forced her to stop, and she took three months off work.

Elizabeth's first coaching session revealed how her mother had died from substandard care at the local hospital. As a senior ward manager at the same hospital, Elizabeth had channelled her grief into work and committed to ensuring that her patients would receive excellent care. Positive feedback from staff and patients spurred Elizabeth on to keep pushing herself to the limit. She received the Nurse of the Year Award for her dedication and compassion in turning around a failing area of the hospital. She was asked to move to another unit that had issues with bullying and substandard care. Elizabeth accepted the promotion, putting aside her reservations about leaving the ward she loved. Receiving such an accolade, with everyone believing in her, she felt invincible. However, Elizabeth paid the price for ignoring her own wellbeing, especially when taking on such a challenging role.

When encouraged to reflect on her life, Elizabeth recognized how, for years, she had put everyone else first: her ex-husband, her daughters, her patients or the staff in her ward. Taking too much responsibility for others, she had been the fixer, the doer, the rescuer. She had stood up for everyone else, but not for herself. When Elizabeth worked through the exercise in *1b. Create new, empowering beliefs*, she created supportive beliefs that encouraged her to pay attention to her own wellbeing, speeding up her recovery. She bought herself the puppy she had always wanted and started growing vegetables and making jewellery. Her wife, Cathy, was delighted that Elizabeth had become more open to receiving and her bubblyness and zest for life had returned.

On returning to work, Elizabeth was able to give from a space of replenishment, rather than depletion; her patients received better care. She now asks other nurses to cover for her when she needs a break, and takes time off whenever possible after working extra hours. Having let go of the need to be everything to everyone, she sets a great example of self-care to the team.

As you reflect on Elizabeth's story, you may recognize similar patterns or traits in yourself. If so, what are they?

Releasing responsibility

Ella had always enjoyed her work as an acupuncturist, but her enthusiasm gradually diminished, and she felt depleted. Throughout married life, Ella had always put her husband and children first. She had the erroneous belief that if she looked after everyone else, they would take care of her. However, her family rarely, if ever, considered her needs. In addition to her

work, Ella did everything in and around the home: cooking, shopping, cleaning and washing for her husband and four teenagers. She had begun to seethe with resentment.

After her father died, she went to see a psychotherapist, who encouraged Ella to identify the roots of taking too much responsibility for others. Her father had argued continuously with her mother. Sometimes bad-tempered and sometimes kind, he had confided in his daughter. Her mother had also shared her problems. An only child, Ella had adopted the role of looking after and protecting her parents and friends. Taking care of everybody's needs became her survival mechanism, and the same pattern repeated itself when she married.

When Ella looked back on her life, she realized that the more she had taken care of others, the less they had done for themselves. Gradually, she started to relinquish responsibility and delegate tasks to her family. Initially they were resentful, but in time her teenagers began to appreciate the growing feeling of confidence and independence. When Ella took better care of herself, her family started to value her more, and to consider her needs. Now, there is a much healthier dynamic in the family. Ella has more time for nurturing herself, and the enthusiasm for her work has returned.

At everyone's beck and call

When Jay started a new job, he became overwhelmed with having to consolidate new skills, while also being given tasks that were not appropriate for his role in the company. He didn't like upsetting anyone and found it impossible to say 'no' to his boss, who was very demanding. Jay became resentful, and annoyed with himself for allowing other people to take

advantage of his compliant nature. One morning, he was so stressed that he was unable to go into work and took a few weeks off. Seeking help from a counsellor, he discovered the origins of becoming a people-pleaser.

Jay had been in hospital with tuberculosis for over a year at the age of three, and had not been allowed to play with other children. Missing out on the first year of school, he hadn't learnt how to make friends and when he was older, he moved schools every 12–18 months because his father was in the army. Naturally, it was hard to fit in to a class where friendship groups had already formed and many of the children had grown up together. Wanting to be accepted, it was not surprising that Jay constantly sought approval and wanted to keep everyone happy.

Having identified the unhelpful behaviours, Jay then created new beliefs for himself, including: *It's OK to say 'no', even if other people get angry with me; as I learn to value and care for myself, my confidence and self-esteem grows; some people won't like me, and that's OK.* Once he started standing up for himself, he gained the respect of his boss and he is now more productive at work. When he was more honest in communicating his wants, needs and opinions, he discovered who his real friends were. He also began to let go of others who made fun of him, put him down or were overly demanding.

What about you?

You might identify with some of the themes in these stories. However, we are complex beings, and for most of us, although there may be one primary theme, we are likely to have a combination of several different behavioural traits that influence how we live our lives.

Once you learn to love and value yourself, you can choose, in any situation, how to respond. There will always be times when someone or something else takes priority. For example, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021, you may have had to work exceptionally long hours, or perhaps you found it difficult to create time to relax while juggling home-schooling with working from home. If you became exhausted from caring for an elderly relative, it may have taken time to find the necessary support before you could step back. However, it is always essential to check whether your current commitments are sustainable, and to delegate or reach out for help before it impacts your health and wellbeing.

The following reflective exercise will help you identify any behaviour patterns that hold you back from optimizing self-care, managing stress or being assertive. If you are unable to identify the source of these patterns, it does not matter; the key is to identify any traits that are disempowering.

Reflective exercise: Identify unhelpful behaviour patterns

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 15–20 minutes.*

1. Reflect for a few minutes on any unhelpful behaviour patterns you identify in yourself.

You may have recognized some traits from Elizabeth's, Ella's or Jay's stories, or others that have not been discussed. While some of those patterns may still impact your life now, others you may have already released.

2. Make a note of any patterns or traits that increase your stress, or hold you back from prioritizing self-care.

You may find it helpful to look through the following list of traits. Which ones do you recognize in yourself? Some may occur regularly, others occasionally or only in certain situations.

- You overextend yourself for others.
- You seek approval.
- You like to please others, to the detriment of yourself.
- You need to be liked or appreciated.
- You find it hard to be assertive.
- You have a tendency to put others first.
- You avoid conflict, even when it is important to deal with the situation.
- You have a tendency to say 'yes' when you really want to say 'no'.
- You take unnecessary responsibility for others.
- You find it hard to express your needs.
- You don't allow yourself time to stop, relax or have fun.

What other unhelpful patterns do you recognize in yourself?

What are you doing for others that they can, or should, be doing for themselves?

As you identify the disempowering behaviour patterns, you may also recognize the beliefs and thoughts associated with them. If so, you can jot them down in your reflective journal too.

3. Look through that list and highlight in your reflective journal which pattern you wish to release first.

You might choose the one that has the greatest impact on your life, or you might prefer to start with one that is easier to shift.

Set your intentions

To help you release unhelpful patterns, you may also wish to make a note of specific situations where you would like to act in more empowering ways.

Now that you have identified some disempowering behaviour patterns, in the following section you will learn how to develop beliefs that support you in responding to situations in ways that enhance, not undermine, your wellbeing.

1b. Create new, empowering beliefs

When you develop and embody new beliefs that support you in prioritizing self-care, it creates the foundation to transform your life and learn to thrive.

Andy's concerns about becoming a burden to his family instead of being the provider prompted him to seek me out for coaching. He had developed fibromyalgia and heart problems, and realized that he had to find a way to manage the ongoing pressures in his life. On sharing his life story, it didn't take long to identify the roots of poor self-care.

As a child, Andy had been terrified of his stepfather, who would lose his temper over the slightest thing, such as a window being left open and letting the bugs in. His mother never seemed to protect him from his stepfather's anger, and anxiety permeated his life. As a child, young Andy had kept himself safe from that anger by avoiding conflict and keeping everyone happy. Unfortunately, the deeply ingrained fear of upsetting anyone continued when he grew up and left home. Dreading confrontation, when someone asked him to do something, Andy often agreed to do it, instead of saying 'no'.

After feeling pressured into joining the family business, Andy had been unable to create distance from the unhealthy relationships with his mother and stepfather. Even when working unsustainably long hours to resolve problems, many of which were outside his control, he had taken the blame for anything that went wrong. After his stepfather died, Andy's mother continued to be a partner in the business, and when she decided to sack one of the

best employees, Andy had been unable to stop her. The need for his mother's approval was still too strong.

Andy's inability to say 'no' amplified the pressures of work. He was worried about losing his home if the business failed, and often worked evenings and weekends, leaving little time to watch his children grow up. The prolonged stress and poor self-care finally took a toll on his health.

In the coaching session, I guided Andy through the belief change process at the end of this section. He started by identifying the patterns and behaviours that increased his stress: keeping everyone happy, avoiding conflict, his difficulty in saying 'no' and the fear of being wrong. Andy decided to focus on creating new beliefs to help him feel more comfortable saying 'no'.

In the next step of the belief change process, Andy identified the potential benefits of being able to say 'no', which included:

- less stress
- less resentment
- more time for himself
- greater self-respect
- a sense of freedom from resolving issues instead of avoiding them

Once he began to recognize these benefits, it became easier to create new beliefs which encouraged him to say 'no' without feeling guilty.

- *Taking care of myself is not selfish.*
- *It's OK to say 'no' sometimes.*
- *As I say 'no' to others, I'm learning to value and respect myself.*

- *Learning to say ‘no’ is essential for my health and spiritual development.*
- *Step-by-step, I can handle someone being upset with me.*
- *By stepping back, I can encourage other people to take more responsibility for themselves.*

Andy repeated these empowering beliefs to himself every night before going to sleep, while at the same time tuning in to a sense of appreciation for his two young daughters. Accessing those positive feelings helped dispel any anxiety and ensure that his mind, heart, body and emotions were all aligned. Andy began to embrace the new beliefs, and his stress diminished as he felt more confident in saying ‘no’.

Releasing responsibility

Danielle had adopted the role of taking responsibility for everyone since she was young. Her inability to prioritize her own wellbeing had eventually led to chronic fatigue syndrome, which blighted her life for several years. After recovering, wanting a quieter pace of life, she retrained as a yoga teacher. One summer, all her students wanted her to continue teaching through the holidays. Danielle had been torn – not wanting to disappoint anyone, while also recognizing that she was exhausted and needed to relax and replenish. If she failed to stop, she risked heading down the slippery slope towards chronic fatigue again. For someone else, the impact of continuing to teach over the summer may have been minimal, but for Danielle the consequences could have been significant.

To help Danielle feel more comfortable about taking the summer off, she created a new belief: *As I let go of my need to be responsible for others, I encourage them to take more responsibility for*

themselves. She repeated the new belief to herself when she first woke, before sleep and whenever she remembered in the day. She made a recording of her affirmation, and listened to it on a loop while walking her dog. The following week, she told her students that she would not be teaching during the holidays, and was delighted that they were understanding. Danielle felt a great sense of relief about creating that time and space for herself, and reminded herself that it is not her responsibility if students choose not to practise during the summer!

Freeing your mind from early programming

Like Andy and Danielle, you may recognize how the beliefs and habits you developed as a child can still influence your behaviours decades later. Your mind acted like a sponge for the first seven years of life. It absorbed as much information as possible through observing the actions and emotions of your parents, siblings or teachers. You will have adopted beliefs and behaviours in those early years, without any filter to check their validity. A few programmes worked quietly in the background for much of your life, without you being aware of them. Some beliefs may have kept you safe, or helped you fit in with your family or local community. Others may have helped you meet an unconscious need to be liked, wanted or appreciated.

Some childhood programming can be beneficial. I am grateful that my upbringing gave me the confidence to follow my heart, sometimes allowing me to leap into the unknown with a trust that things would work out OK. Likewise, you may be aware of valuable qualities that you acquired from your parents, whether they be a compassionate nature, a sense of integrity or a positive mindset.

However, alongside helpful programmes, there may be others running on autopilot which sabotage your ability to value and care for yourself, including patterns such as:

- putting others first
- a tendency to say ‘yes’ when you really want to say ‘no’
- finding it hard to stand up for yourself
- keeping others happy
- taking care of everyone else before thinking about yourself
- avoiding conflict, even if it amplifies your problems

Optimizing the belief change process

When you create a new belief, initially it is not so much of a belief as an idea. However, every time you repeat that thought, whether out loud, in your head, whispering to yourself, singing or writing, you reinforce it. Repetition nourishes the seed of the thought until it becomes natural and automatic – a genuine belief that becomes true for you.

Dr Bruce Lipton’s extensive research on the biology of beliefs¹ suggests that it is easier to reprogramme beliefs when you are deeply relaxed, reflecting, meditating or daydreaming, or just before you drift off to sleep at night, or on waking in the morning. He also suggests repeating the beliefs when your conscious mind is otherwise engaged, such as when driving along a familiar road or performing a repetitive task such as chopping vegetables. Tuning in to your beliefs at these optimum times helps facilitate change at a subconscious level. You plant the seeds in fertile ground.

In addition to simple repetition, neuroscience research² demonstrates the importance of accessing *positive feelings*

when creating supportive beliefs, rather than merely focusing on the thoughts. You are more likely to accept and embrace new beliefs when they are associated with positive emotions. However, this can be challenging, because you might feel anxious, uncomfortable or worried when releasing old behaviour patterns which may have kept you safe in the past. If you do find it difficult to access positive emotions when creating new beliefs, have a look at *4b. Remember the magical moments*. This simple strategy will help calm your anxiety and support you in generating positive emotions while creating and changing your beliefs. If your mind is buzzing with worries, or you experience uncomfortable emotions when you think about changing your beliefs, you may also wish to check out *3a. Expressive writing*.

To summarize, the three keys to embracing new beliefs are:

- repetition
- tuning in to the beliefs when you are deeply relaxed
- accessing positive feelings

A note on the reflective exercise

The following reflective exercise and the exercise in the next section are possibly the most important ones in the book. Your new beliefs will lay the foundation that makes it so much easier to take the pressure off yourself and prioritize your self-care when you ‘cherry-pick your resources’ in Part Two.

In the reflective exercise below, you will focus on creating beliefs that are directly related to valuing yourself and your needs. However, you can use the same process to reframe beliefs associated with any area of your life.

If you have experienced trauma, deprivation or abuse in the past, are going through major challenges in your life or have concerns about releasing those unhelpful patterns of behaviour, I encourage you to consider seeking professional help. Sometimes we need longer to get to the bottom of issues, and to identify and work through them before we are ready to release old patterns and develop these kinds of strategies. A counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist could offer invaluable support alongside the resources in this programme.

Reflective exercise: Create new, empowering beliefs

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 20–30 minutes.

1. Identify limiting beliefs and behaviours.

Spend a few minutes reviewing the unhelpful behaviour patterns that you identified in the previous section. Then note the limiting *beliefs* that underpin those behaviour patterns and jot them down. For example, you may have thoughts such as:

- *I have to put others first.*
- *I can't say 'no'.*
- *I don't want to upset anyone.*
- *I have to keep everyone happy.*
- *It is selfish to say 'no'.*
- *I hate conflict.*
- *Self-care is selfish.*
- *I can't relax until all the work is done.*
- *My needs are irrelevant.*

If you are unsure of the underlying limiting beliefs, simply jot down a few ideas. Then, underline the ones that evoke strong feelings.

Next, choose *one* of the core behaviours or beliefs that you wish to change. You will intuitively sense which to focus on. You may select the one that has the biggest impact on your life, or you may prefer to start with one that is easier to shift.

2. Recognize the positive intentions.

Take a few minutes to reflect on how that belief or behaviour pattern may have been useful to you in the past.

- How did it look after or protect you? Maybe it kept you safe, helped you fit in or kept everyone around you happy.
- What needs, if any, did it help you meet? Maybe it was a need for love, approval, appreciation or being liked or wanted.
- How else might those old patterns have been helpful for you in the past?

3. Discover the benefits of releasing old beliefs.

Now, knowing the detrimental impact the old belief or behaviour has had on your life up until now, reflect for a few minutes on how you might benefit from freeing yourself from that belief or behaviour trait. How might it help you in terms of:

- Your stress levels?
- Your ability to prioritize self-care?
- Your confidence, self-esteem or self-respect?
- How might your family, friends, colleagues or clients benefit from you taking better care of yourself?

4. Create new, empowering beliefs.

Now, you can choose to create new beliefs that help you let go of that unhelpful behaviour, and support you in valuing and caring for yourself. If you find it difficult to come up with empowering beliefs, you may find it helpful to look at the following ones that other people have found valuable. They might give you some ideas, and you can fine-tune them so they feel valid for you:

- *It is OK to put myself first sometimes.*
- *Respecting myself is the first step in gaining respect from others.*
- *When I look after myself, I have more to give to others.*
- *I can handle someone being upset with me.*
- *As I take care of myself, I model that behaviour for my children.*
- *Taking time to relax or enjoy myself boosts my energy and lifts my spirits.*

A few examples of beliefs related to assertiveness include:

- *Each time I stand up for myself, it becomes easier.*
- *When I say 'no' to someone, I am saying 'yes' to myself.*
- *It is OK if people don't like me saying 'no'.*
- *Saying 'no' is a crucial step in learning to respect myself.*
- *Setting clear and appropriate boundaries helps me prioritize my own self-care.*

Make a note of any beliefs that feel constructive and helpful. Keep that list somewhere accessible, whether it is in your reflective journal, on your phone or a card that you keep with you.

5. Reprogramme through repetition.

The following pointers will help you embrace and adopt the new beliefs, so that they become natural and habitual.

- Repeat your new beliefs out loud, or silently to yourself, *while connecting to positive feelings and emotions such as gratitude or appreciation.*
- Powerful times to do this include: just before you drift off to sleep at night; on waking; at the beginning or end of your meditation; while relaxed and performing repetitive tasks.
- Record the new beliefs on your phone so that you can listen while walking, jogging or commuting to work.
- Write them out.

Set your intentions

Now, make a commitment as to exactly when, and how, you will tune in to and repeat those new beliefs. It is helpful to write down your intentions in your reflective journal or record them on your phone, and also to share your intentions with a friend.

Having created supportive beliefs, next you will learn how to *Release your self-care saboteurs*. When you let go of any disempowering beliefs, behaviour patterns and traits that hold you back from valuing and caring for yourself, it becomes so much easier to master stress and begin to thrive.

1c. Release your self-care saboteurs

Empowering beliefs and behaviours enable you to value yourself and to consciously choose how to respond in any situation.

Andy had adopted new beliefs to support him in setting healthy boundaries, instead of just going along with what people wanted. Now, he needed to put them into practice.

When his mother asked him to accompany her to meet a client the following week, he knew it was not necessary for him to be there. He responded diplomatically, with a clear and firm ‘no’. When he felt anxious afterwards, he reconnected to a feeling of appreciation* for his two daughters, which helped calm his fears. Over the next few months, he became more confident and relaxed whenever he needed to say ‘no’, even if it upset someone. The new beliefs, together with the ability to control his anxiety, enabled him to start setting clear boundaries in all areas of his life.

Gradually, the new way of thinking and responding became more natural and instinctive. He became less worried about what his mother or stepbrother thought when he took time off work. He started to express his opinions, instead of keeping them to himself. He lost the fear of his mother and, for the first time in his life, gained the confidence to contradict her when he disagreed strongly with something she said.

* Using the magical moments exercise in Section 4b.

Over the next few months, as Andy made self-care a priority, his wife commented that he was like a different person now – so much more relaxed and easy to get on with.

What tools might support you in releasing your self-care saboteurs?

When you release old behaviour patterns and start prioritizing self-care, it might stir up unresolved emotions or anxiety. You may also find that you need to develop your skills in assertiveness. As you begin to step into your power, the following sections may be helpful.

- *3a. Expressive writing* – a simple way to express and process your emotions.
- *4a. Conscious breathing* – an effective tool for calming your anxiety.
- *4b. Remember the magical moments* – another technique to calm anxiety and access positive emotions.
- *5a. Learn to say ‘no’* – practical tips on how and when to say ‘no’.

Again, if you have experienced trauma or abuse in the past or are going through significant challenges in your life, alongside the book I encourage you to consider seeking professional help from a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist or your doctor. *Appendix A: Additional resources* includes a list of professional organizations.

Reinforcing the new responses

Every time you stand up for yourself, let go of the need to be over-responsible or take time for relaxation or pleasure, you strengthen the neural pathways associated with valuing

yourself. Likewise, each time you allow yourself time to relax, go for a run, tell a colleague to stop shouting at you or ask your partner to help with washing up, it becomes easier. You may want to reflect on the positive shifts that you have made each day, whether large or small, and give yourself credit for responding in ways that enhance your self-respect.

Enrol support from family or friends

Gail was at the end of her tether when she came to see me. She was struggling to cope with the pressures of bringing up a toddler and keeping her marriage together, while also helping to cook, clean and shop for her disabled grandparents. Her husband was complaining that she had become snappy and was avoiding intimacy.

In the coaching session Gail reflected on the balance in her life, and decided to set in place more support for her grandparents. Initially, they were resentful when she found a cleaner, set up online shopping and encouraged them to do more for themselves. However, as they began to cook a few meals and tidy up, their mobility improved and they became more independent. When they went to the local shop, they heard about a pop-in coffee morning just down the road and other activities for the elderly. In time, they began to appreciate the benefits of taking more responsibility for themselves.

Meanwhile, Gail started yoga again and had more time to play with her toddler. Her energy improved, as well as her relationship with her husband. When visiting her grandparents, she often took them to the coast instead of doing chores. Releasing unnecessary responsibility for her grandparents worked wonders for everyone's health and wellbeing.

Gail had had a conversation with her grandparents before implementing the changes, so that they understood her predicament. It wasn't easy for them, but they loved her enough to know she needed to take better care of herself. If you have been the peacemaker and put your own needs aside most of your life, it can come as a shock to friends and family when you begin to nurture yourself. Like Gail, you may find it helpful to explain to those closest to you the reasons why you are learning to set clear boundaries, express your needs more honestly or take time to relax. Once they understand, they are more likely to support and encourage you. Those who genuinely want the best for you will cheer you on.

Start with the small changes

When you begin prioritizing self-care, you may want to practise in easy situations first. For example, you could tell your colleague that you can't sell raffle tickets at the moment. When you feel a sense of dread about having to visit your elderly aunt, you may decide to see her only once a month, instead of every week. Or you might ask your teenage daughter to drop one of her numerous after-school activities so that you can start going to a yoga class. Every time you choose to respond in ways that value and respect your own needs, it becomes easier, and gradually those actions will become more natural and instinctive.

Be compassionate with yourself

As with any path where you are stepping into your power, there will be times when things don't work out in the way you expect. Sometimes you may be disappointed that you didn't handle a situation better. You may not have found the right way to express something, or a friend may be angry or upset with you. No one can do everything perfectly, and sometimes you need

to settle for 'good enough', especially when you are exploring new behaviours and responses. So be kind to yourself. Give yourself credit for taking on the challenge of choosing a path of personal growth. Cheer yourself on every time you try, regardless of the outcome.

Reflective exercise: Release your self-care saboteurs

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 15–20 minutes.*

1. Consciously choose supportive inner talk.

Tune in to your new beliefs, and find phrases which support and encourage you to respond in ways that enhance your wellbeing. For example, you might say to yourself:

- *I can do this.*
- *I can handle this.*
- *It is OK if people don't like me.*
- *I am choosing to take care of myself.*
- *My needs are important too.*
- *As I take care of myself, I have more to give to others.*
- *I am learning to respect and care for myself.*

Make a note of those positive and encouraging statements. It is helpful to have them at the forefront of your mind so you can tune in to them easily when you need them.

2. Write down several situations in which you wish to respond in more empowering ways.

For example, they could be related to:

- taking better care of yourself
- putting yourself first
- setting clear boundaries
- saying 'no'
- letting go of the need to keep others happy
- allowing yourself time to relax

3. List those situations in order of difficulty.

You may like to start with the easiest people or situations first, while knowing that over time you will gain more confidence to deal with more challenging scenarios.

4. Reflect on how you could choose to respond in those situations.

For example, the next time someone asks you to do something, rather than automatically agreeing, you can say, 'I'll think about it and get back to you'; tell a friend that you can't speak now as you need an early night; go for a walk as soon as the sun comes out, without waiting to finish the chores; accept someone's help when it is offered instead of saying you can manage.

5. At the end of the day, reflect on how you benefitted from acting in line with your new beliefs.

- How did it improve your health or wellbeing?
- How did it help you value and care for yourself?
- What was the effect on your stress levels?
- How might your family, friends, patients or colleagues have benefitted from you taking better care of yourself?
- How did it enhance your confidence or self-esteem?

To summarize, here are different ways that you can support yourself in releasing your self-care saboteurs.

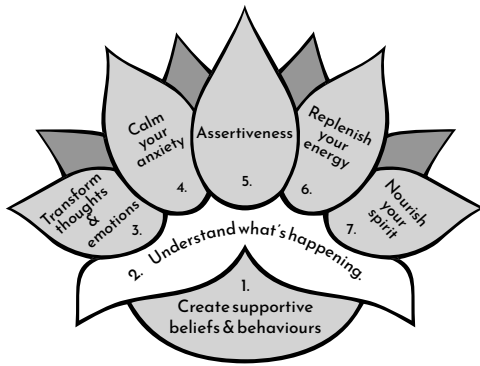
- Enrol the support of friends and family.
- Ensure your 'self-talk' is positive and encouraging.
- Choose responses and behaviours that align with your new beliefs.
- Reflect on your day, giving yourself credit for making new choices.
- Remind yourself of the benefits to yourself and others.

Set your intentions

Highlight in your reflective journal the situations you would like to focus on and consider, for each of them, how you would like to respond differently. You may wish to share your intentions with a friend, so they can support and encourage you along that empowering path.

Now that you have embraced Principle 1 and released your self-care saboteurs, I encourage you to spend a week or two focusing on putting into practice your new beliefs and behaviours before progressing to *Principle 2. Understand what's happening.*

You may be tempted to skip Principle 2, and start to *Cherry-pick your resources.* I would have wanted to do the same. However, unless you can recognize your stress signals and the early-warning signs of a crisis, it is so easy to slide down the slippery slope towards exhaustion, breakdown, burnout or ill-health, without being aware of what is happening. I failed to monitor myself, with disastrous consequences, which is why I invite you to learn from my mistakes and complete Principle 2 before exploring Principles 3–7.



PRINCIPLE 2

Understand what's happening

Observers on a research ship off the east coast of Canada were on constant alert, using radar to plot the paths of any icebergs. If one was heading too close, a four-inch-thick, one-mile-long floating rope was deployed, suspended between two tugs, in the hope of shifting the course of the iceberg away from the ship. When an iceberg was far enough away, deviating its course by only one or two degrees was enough to avoid a collision. However, if it was allowed to drift too close, it was impossible to alter the trajectory enough to avoid any damage, so the ship had to move to safety.

Working as an oceanographer, Ed's role was to coordinate the iceberg protection service. He was well aware of the importance of identifying problems early, especially with the larger icebergs, many of which weighed over a million tonnes and towered above the research vessel.

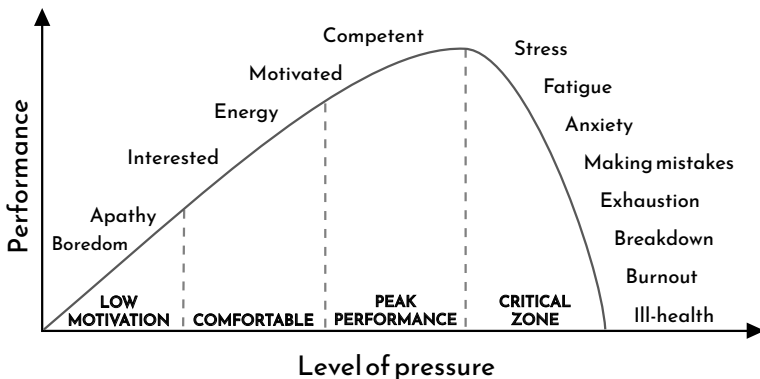
It is exactly the same with health and wellbeing. If your inner radar is switched on, and you monitor yourself, you can help protect yourself from exhaustion, breakdown, burnout or stress-related illness. Awareness of your own physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing helps you recognize early-warning signs. If my inner radar had been switched on, I could have avoided burnout and later the auto-immune condition that devastated my life for several years. When you understand what is happening you can take action early, and the use of a few key strategies may be all that is required to ensure you can sustain your energy levels and learn to thrive.

Ruth was exhausted from working 11- to 12-hour days, and started exploring escape routes from work. She was a general practitioner (or family doctor; GP) in a practice where financial difficulties had led to considerable strain on all the staff. When

she couldn't recall a drug name and started to make minor mistakes, she became concerned that patients' lives were at risk. The catalyst for change came at a workshop when she saw the diagram below and recognized how close she was to burnout.

Too young to retire, Ruth reduced the number of sessions she worked, freeing up time to join a choir, practise tai chi and get back into gardening. Over the next few years she developed a comprehensive toolbox of stress management strategies that she uses for herself as well as her patients. Now she enjoys her work again and maintains a balanced and nurturing life.

Like Ruth, you can use the following diagram illustrating the performance-and-pressure curve, based on the work of psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson,¹ to help you assess how close you are to the critical zone.



The graph shows the relationship between pressure and performance, and how a certain amount of stress can be positive and motivate you to perform better. However, if the pressure becomes too great and you move further to the right on the graph, you might begin to experience some of the signs indicated on the downward slope of the curve. Unfortunately,

when you are under considerable pressure, it can be almost impossible to step back and notice what is happening and prevent yourself from sliding down the curve towards exhaustion, burnout or a stress-related illness.

As you look at the performance-and-pressure curve, tune in to yourself and get a sense of where you are right now on the curve. You won't necessarily experience all the symptoms indicated, as each person's response will be different. If you are near the peak, a few changes may be enough to rebalance your life, whereas if you are closer to the critical zone, more radical changes may be necessary. However, your position on the curve is not fixed, and these seven principles will enable you to return to, or remain in, the 'safe zone'. You may wish to reassess where you are on this curve as you work through the book.

Principle 2 will help you assess and monitor your stress and wellbeing, and discover your personal risk factors. Unfortunately, I learnt too late about the importance of this, and I was unable to stop myself heading down the curve towards burnout and then, later, ill-health. So, even though you may be tempted to skip directly to *Part Two: Cherry-pick your resources*, I encourage you to read all of the sections related to Principle 2 first. Here is an overview of each one.

- *2a. Assess your wellbeing* – offers a quick and easy method for monitoring different elements of your wellbeing and self-care.
- *2b. Stress: Recognize the warning signs* – provides an overview of stress and helps you identify the signs and symptoms you need to look out for.

Understand what's happening

- *2c. Burnout: How to spot the tell-tale signs* – gain an understanding of the main components of burnout so that you are more able to take preventive action.
- *2d. What are your risk factors?* – identify the factors that increase your susceptibility to stress and burnout, which also helps direct you towards the most relevant resources for your needs.

2a. Assess your wellbeing

When you develop greater awareness of the different elements that contribute to your wellbeing, it can act as a wake-up call, as well as indicating the areas of your life that need most attention.

You may be familiar with the parable about the frog. If it hops into a pot of boiling water, the frog quickly jumps out to safety. However, if it plunges into cold water and the temperature increases gradually, the frog keeps adapting to the heat until it is too late; the frog is cooked before recognizing the danger.

Stress is similar – it can build up without you even noticing. If your prime focus is caring for your patients, being a brilliant teacher or bringing up your children, you may not notice how the pressures of life are starting to take their toll. Only when you stop and reflect do you become aware that you have become more irritable, been too tired to phone your friends, missed three sessions of Pilates or that your headaches are more frequent. Change often happens insidiously, and we need to be alert to the rising temperature.

The following exercise will help you identify how well you are nurturing different aspects of yourself. If some of your scores are low, it may indicate the need for specific strategies when you *Cherry-pick your resources* in Part Two. You can rest assured that your wellbeing scores will increase as you gradually incorporate the seven principles into your life. Implementing even a single strategy can have wide-ranging benefits. For example, practising

yoga can improve health and fitness, calm anxiety and expand your social network, as well as lifting your spirits.

Reflective exercise: Assess your wellbeing

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 5–10 minutes.

- 1. On a scale of 1–10, how satisfied are you right now with the following aspects of your life (where 1 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'very satisfied')?**

It is best to give yourself a quick score for each of the elements, without puzzling too long about each one!

Aspects of wellbeing	Scores		
<i>Date</i>			
Relationship with your partner			
Relationship with your family			
Friends and social life			
Emotional wellbeing			
Spiritual wellbeing			
Health and fitness			
Time for exercise			
Time for leisure and interests			
Time for yourself			
Time to relax			
Time for creativity			
Time in nature			
Humour and playfulness			
Healthy eating			
Quality of sleep			

Some elements in the table may be less important for you, which is fine. Healthy eating and sleep have been included since they impact health, even though we do not focus on them directly.

Set your intention

Returning to this questionnaire can be an encouraging way to validate your progress as you embrace the different principles. How often would you like to do that?

You can make a note of your current scores in your reflective journal or electronic device and highlight the lowest ones so they are at the forefront of your mind as you choose the resources in Part Two.

You may wish to schedule in your diary when you want to check your scores again, maybe in a month or two.

2b. Stress: Recognize the warning signs

Monitoring early-warning signs and symptoms is a crucial component of reducing stress and helping you avoid exhaustion, burnout or breakdown.

Your body will have switched into fight, flight or freeze mode at different times in your life. This instinctive reaction to threats has remained unchanged for millennia. The response in the body is the same, whether you are starting your first shift at a new job, dealing with a disgruntled patient, stopping your toddler from running onto the road or thinking about something that makes you angry. You may also have noticed that even positive experiences, like starting a new relationship or getting a promotion, can trigger a stress response.

Stress affects your mind, body, emotions and behaviours in a multitude of ways, and it impairs your ability to think clearly, absorb information or make coherent decisions. When you are under threat, it is difficult to step back and see the situation from a broader perspective.

Stress stimulates the part of the brain that controls your emotions, so you may fly into a rage or burst into tears. Some people become antisocial, while others shout at their partner, get drunk, binge on chocolate or buy yet another handbag. Everyone has their own way of dealing with stress. How does it affect you?

Due to our sedentary lifestyles, once the danger has passed, we rarely have the opportunity to burn off stress hormones through exercise. The body only returns to normal healthy function when the calming part of the nervous system is

activated. This is why learning to initiate the relaxation response is one of the cornerstones of mastering stress. Even if you already use breathing, mindfulness or relaxation exercises to calm your mind and relax your body, I invite you to explore the resources related to *Principle 4. Calm your anxiety*. Having access to a range of tools to calm your nervous system is invaluable.

The impact of unrelenting stress

A few years ago, I went through one of the most sustained periods of high stress of my life. I was defrauded in a property investment scheme, by someone I had trusted. I took on the work of representing the group of investors to try and gather evidence for a legal case; for months, every spare hour I had was spent on it... only to be told that there was insufficient evidence for the courts. A few days after this further devastating blow, I was made redundant from my job at the university.

My body – and my friends and family – had tried to warn me that I was pushing myself too hard, but I hadn't listened, and a few weeks after I lost my job I was unable to work anyway as I had become so ill. I had developed Graves' disease, a debilitating chronic condition, and later I would also develop thyroid eye disease. It took three years, and much medical intervention, before I was well again. If only I had listened to my inner radar!

For me, those unremitting high levels of stress led to an autoimmune disease. For you, it could be mental health problems, high blood pressure, stomach ulcers or maybe a breakdown in your relationship. Hopefully you are reading this book before you reach the critical zone, but if you are close to it, these seven principles will be invaluable in helping you reduce stress and bring your life into balance.

The cost of not making a wise decision

When Lisa's partner, a builder, injured his back in a sailing accident, she was concerned he might never be able to work again. As the sole earner, she became responsible for keeping up the mortgage payments so they didn't lose their home. Her contract work as a technical editor was very demanding, and she had little support from managers.

Normally, at the end of a contract, Lisa would have had a break to rest and recharge. However, this time, worried about when the next job would come along, she started a new contract immediately. Being physically fit through running and sailing, she saw it as an endurance test and believed she could handle anything, but she was failing to pay attention to her exhaustion, the increasing frustration at work and how drinking half a bottle of wine every evening was the only way she could switch off.

Lisa got flu within a few months of starting the new contract, and three days later she was unable to stand up. Despite having never heard of fibromyalgia, Lisa soon discovered how debilitating it could be. It would be three years before her life regained any sense of normality.

It was only later, once Lisa was able to step back and see the situation from a wider perspective, that she realized there had been other options. If she had sold the house or rented out a room, she could have avoided developing fibromyalgia. You may have noticed for yourself that when you are stressed, the logical, rational part of the brain is unable to think clearly and make wise decisions. This highlights the importance of developing your skills in calming anxiety, especially if you are in a role which involves making critical decisions.

Paying attention to the warning signs

It is so easy to ignore those seemingly insignificant stress signals, especially if you are always on the go. Alyssa's warning signs were exhaustion and blisters that kept erupting on her hands. She failed to pay attention to them and ended up in hospital for several days while the doctors got the secondary infection under control. Only then did Alyssa realize that it was time to stop supporting an exceptionally needy friend and instead take better care of herself and her family. Now, as soon as Alyssa sees those blisters, she immediately steps back and reflects on what changes she needs to make in her life.

Turning the spotlight on yourself

If you are a parent, your awareness is likely to be alert to any signs of illness, distress, worries or unusual irritability in your child. Similarly, you may be acutely aware of what is happening with your partner, an elderly relative or colleagues at work. Focusing that same level of attention on your own thoughts, feelings, emotions, actions and behaviours may not come so naturally.

I teach a course on personal development to first- and second-year medical students. On the first day, most students believe they are OK, merely anxious about the pressure of exams. However, the interactive exercises often reveal a variety of other stress factors: worries about finances, an altercation with a friend, learning to shop and cook for themselves or problems with an unhelpful landlord. Equally, they are surprised to learn how many of the things they consider to be normal are in fact signs and symptoms of stress; like the frog in the previous section, they do not notice that the water is getting hot.

When you are under pressure, it becomes more difficult to see what is really happening in your life. It is only when you make time to stop, slow down, relax or reflect that you are able to monitor yourself effectively. When you recognize your warning signs early enough, before the water gets too hot, a few simple actions may be enough to keep you away from the critical zone. You will know when it would be helpful to, for example,

- blow off steam by going for a run
- step back from your commitments and take time for yourself
- do a breathing exercise to calm your mind and body
- cancel a social engagement so you can have an early night

The following reflective exercise will help you identify and monitor your personal stress signals so that you can be proactive and avert potentially more serious problems.

Reflective exercise: Stress: Recognize your warning signs

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow about 10 minutes.*

1. Where are you on the stress scale?

Tune in for a few moments, and assess yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being almost no stress, and 10 representing high levels). Make a note of what your score is right now.

You may wish to do this five-second check-in daily, keeping a note of your score.

2. Check in with yourself and write down your personal signs and symptoms of stress.

- *How does stress affect you physically?*
 - Scan your body for signs of tightness in a particular area, or for changes in your posture or breathing.
 - Do you experience insomnia, headaches, muscle tension, bloating or an irritable bowel?
 - Or maybe it is exhaustion, dizziness or a flare-up of eczema.
 - Perhaps you become restless, dizzy or prone to infections?
 - Or you may start bingeing or notice changes in your menstrual cycle or problems with your eyesight.
 - Are there any other changes?
- *How does stress affect you emotionally?*
 - Do you become moody, frustrated or shout at your partner?
 - When the pressure builds up, do you feel anxious, burst into tears or tend to panic?
 - How else do you respond emotionally?
- *How does stress affect you mentally?*
 - Do you make mistakes or have difficulty making decisions?
 - Maybe you find it hard to switch off, become forgetful or lack concentration?
 - What else do you notice?
- *What kind of thought patterns commonly show up?*
 - Maybe it is *I can't cope, I don't have time* or *I'm never going to be able to sleep.*
 - Or perhaps you ask yourself questions such as *Why me?* or *Why can't I cope better?*
 - What other thoughts come up for you?

Understand what's happening

- *How does your behaviour change?*
 - Do you tend to drink more alcohol, eat junk food, or lose your appetite?
 - Do you get fidgety or clench your jaw?
 - Maybe you can't get to the gym, or never manage to get an early night.
 - You might want to call in sick.
 - What other changes are you aware of?

3. Identify your red flags.

As you look through your list of common stress signals, highlight your key warning signs and symptoms.

Which are the red flags that indicate that something needs to change? Make a note of them in your reflective journal.

4. Maintain your vigilance.

Continue to keep an eye out for your red flags. They will encourage you to take action early and avoid burnout, breakdown or a stress-related illness.

Your responses in this exercise can also help direct you towards the most relevant principles. If stress has a strong impact on your thoughts and emotions, you may wish to check out *Principle 3. Transform your thoughts and emotions*, whereas *Principle 4. Calm your anxiety* could be particularly beneficial if you experience predominantly physical symptoms.

Set your intentions

How often will you carry out your five-second check-in on the stress scale? When would be the best time?

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If you create a routine and do it at the same time, such as at the beginning of your lunch break, after your evening meal or on Friday evenings on your way home from work, you will find it easier to remember.

Since burnout is often linked with high levels of stress, and its insidious onset can be easy to miss, it is especially important for you to understand it, so we will explore the syndrome in the next section.

2c. Burnout: How to spot the tell-tale signs

Recognizing the early-warning signs of burnout enables you to take action early and rebalance your life so you can learn to thrive, not just survive.

Driving home after a day in the clinic, the voice in my head was saying *I just can't do this anymore*. For so many years I had loved my work, enjoying a deep sense of satisfaction at the end of the day, believing that in some small way I had made a difference. But that morning I had struggled out of bed, dreading the thought of work. As a single mother bringing up and providing for three boys, I had been working non-stop for many years. My self-care saboteurs – difficulty in setting clear boundaries and the tendency to put others first – had held me back from optimizing self-care. It was not surprising that I was exhausted and had started to withdraw from family and friends.

When several clients cancelled over the next few days, it was clear that I had to slow down. Over the next few months, I only worked part-time, hoping that would be enough to restore my energy and enthusiasm. However, when my youngest son left for university, I still felt depleted, and decided to take a three-month sabbatical, albeit on a tight budget. I arranged a trip crewing on a boat in the Caribbean, and then backpacking around Peru. It was time to nurture myself.

Be alert: Recognize the warning signs

I had never been taught about burnout in any of my professional training, so I was unable to identify the warning signs. When

you can recognize the key components of burnout, prevention becomes much easier.

Even though burnout often arises as a result of unrelenting stress, the exhaustion that accompanies it is more likely to be associated with a loss of motivation, feeling overwhelmed or hopelessness. Burnout affects everyone in different ways, but it tends to have three main components:²

- emotional and/or physical exhaustion
- emotional detachment
- feelings of inadequacy

Emotional exhaustion

Whereas previously you may have looked forward to work, you can begin to feel emotionally drained as a result of working directly with people all day: your clients, students or children you teach or care for. A sense of running on empty and having nothing left to give is common. The depletion or physical exhaustion may be accompanied by frustration or feeling overwhelmed. Rest, relaxation or a short holiday is rarely enough to relieve this kind of exhaustion – it needs a deeper level of healing that addresses the complexity of the problem.

Emotional detachment

This often follows on from the emotional exhaustion. You may start to isolate yourself, avoid phoning friends or turn down social invitations that previously you would have enjoyed. You may begin to feel numb emotionally, or other people may notice that you seem less caring and compassionate, or have become more cynical.

Reflecting back on my life, I remember driving home one day after clinic while hearing on the radio the unfolding of the shocking events of two planes being hijacked and flown into the World Trade Centre in New York, with the loss of thousands of lives. Even though I was appalled by the horror and trauma, emotionally it did not touch me. Looking back now, I am amazed and ashamed at how hardened and numb I had become – a clear warning sign of burnout.

Feelings of inadequacy

When you are exhausted and can no longer give of your best, you may start to feel incompetent or disillusioned. A career that previously sustained and inspired you can become demoralizing, and you may think about changing careers. If you have been passionate about your work, burnout can lead to a deep sense of despair or a spiritual crisis. You might question the meaning of life: who are you when you no longer have your work? What is your role now, when you can no longer make the world a better place?

Stepping back from the brink

Over the Christmas period, John was looking after two terminally ill patients from his general practice. It was emotionally draining, and was particularly poignant because he had lost his wife seven years before. Having to juggle looking after his own family's needs with those of his patients pushed John beyond his limits. After Christmas, he was exhausted and came down with flu for the first time in years. John found a locum so that he could take four weeks off. He rested, slept, walked and planted a hedge in his garden, taking time to build himself up again before going back to work.

By taking time out, John avoided burnout. He recognized how, under that high level of stress, he had not taken care of his own needs or asked colleagues for the support he so desperately needed. Sadly, no one else in the practice had noticed how he was struggling.

Empathy – a risk factor for burnout?

Empathy plays such an important role in the care or wellbeing of others. However, it is helpful to be aware that there are two types of empathy:* emotional and conscious.^{3, 4} Emotional empathy tends to be an unconscious process which often involves experiencing the other person's emotions. You might have felt this yourself – sharing a friend's joy when they got married, or feeling the distress of a client in crisis. Unfortunately, when we experience the suffering, pain or trauma of those we work with, as occurs with emotional empathy, we are more susceptible to burning out.⁵ When we share someone's distress, it is also harder to be objective, and we tend to be less effective in our work.⁶

In contrast to this, conscious empathy is when we feel *for*, rather than *with*, the other person. If we respond to another's suffering with compassion, without sharing their pain, we can express our warmth and concern, while remaining emotionally detached.⁷ This allows us to communicate effectively, and respond better to patients' needs.⁸ Nurses who demonstrate conscious empathy, without any sharing of emotions, are less prone to emotional exhaustion⁹ and burnout.^{5, 8} Another study on 353 medical students also found that those who had higher levels of conscious

* Emotional empathy, which is associated with the contagion of emotions, is sometimes called unconscious empathy or personal distress. Another term for conscious empathy is empathic concern.

empathy had significantly lower levels of burnout three years later compared to those who empathized emotionally.¹⁰

The role of empathy in burnout is a complex topic, and it is beyond the remit of this book to go into greater detail. My intention is to raise your awareness of how emotional empathy can cause empathic distress and increase susceptibility to burnout. Then you can be more proactive and protect yourself from its debilitating effects. If you tend to 'pick up' the pain or distress of those you are working with, and it impacts your wellbeing and/or your ability to work effectively, I encourage you to seek help from someone trained in this area. The seven principles in this book will be invaluable in helping you reduce stress and avoid burnout alongside professional support, and the following sections will be particularly helpful in protecting you from the emotional demands of your work.

- *7a. Mindfulness and meditation* – explores the value of a regular loving-kindness meditation practice to counteract empathic distress.
- *5d. Create transition rituals* – considers different approaches to help you 'disconnect' from distress, frustrations or worries about work and prevent them from seeping into your home life.
- *4b. Remember the magical moments* – provides a strategy to help counteract empathic distress by generating positive emotions.

How strong is your passion for work?

If you are enthusiastic and give yourself whole-heartedly to your job, you are more likely to push yourself to the limits. It

is easy to forget that the only way to keep the fire burning is by reducing stress and enhancing self-care. If you fail to do that, eventually you may find that when you get up in the morning, there is no longer a spring in your step and you start to feel depleted. For me, it led to burnout, but for you it could be exhaustion, chronic fatigue, a stress-related illness, a breakdown in your relationship or mental health problems.

Some of the fuels that help to keep your fire burning include:

- adequate rest and sleep
- a strong support network: family, friends or colleagues
- effective tools to process your thoughts and emotions
- the ability to calm anxiety
- replenishing your energy through, for example, exercise, time in nature, creativity, music or having fun with family and friends
- nourishing your spirit through yoga, meditation, mindfulness, chi gong etc.
- healthy eating

Unfortunately, when Daniel first qualified as a dentist, he was unable to manage the unrelenting pressure of working in an accident and emergency department where bullying was tolerated. Initially, he lived for his work, determined to progress in his career and live up to his family's expectations, but paid little attention to his own self-care.

Eventually, deeply unhappy with his job, unable to cope and worried about making a mistake, Daniel stopped meeting up with friends. Alcohol was his only escape from the exhaustion, depression and desperation. Finally, he gave in his notice and found work as a gardener, which, although demoralizing,

enabled him to earn a basic living with minimum stress, and to save enough money to go travelling. The time away helped him reconnect with the parts of himself that he had lost, and rebuild his sense of self. He realized that he would never be able to return to work unless he let go of the pattern of trying to please everyone.

Through developing his skills in communication and assertiveness he learnt to prioritize his own needs. In time he was able to start working as a dentist again, gradually increasing his hours to three and a half days per week in private practice. In his spare time, teaching health professionals about self-care has brought meaning back to his life.

Burnout: A catalyst for transformation?

If you are in the early stages of burnout, you may be able to take a few weeks off for stillness, reflection and replenishment. That may be enough to bring balance to your life. However, if you are further along the trajectory, like Daniel, more radical changes may be necessary. Burnout often indicates the need for a profound inner shift, rather than merely taking a holiday or changing jobs.

Releasing the self-care saboteurs that led you to overextend yourself or put everybody else's needs first is likely to be an essential component of your healing journey. Equally, if your current commitments are unsustainable, you may need to consider different ways to restructure your life. You will discover how others transformed their lives through implementing changes in *5c. Become the architect of your life.*

If you are approaching burnout, remember that it is possible to reignite your passion for work or discover new opportunities.

Although it may be hard to see it at the time, burnout can be an incredible catalyst for change, encouraging you to create a life in which your body, mind and spirit are nurtured and aligned. When I recovered from burnout, I found an opportunity to lecture at a university while carrying out a master's research study. Like Daniel, burnout opened a whole new path for my life and work. The same can be true for you.

You can also choose to commit to your journey of transformation right now, without waiting for those warning signs of emotional exhaustion, numbness or disillusionment, let alone the onset of a stress-related illness! Now is the time to take action and discover your unique path towards a life in which you thrive.

If you are concerned about burning out, and how your work is impacting your wellbeing, I recommend that you complete the Professional Quality of Life (PROQOL) questionnaire. The 30 questions in this validated self-assessment will measure your compassion satisfaction and the two components of compassion fatigue – burnout and work-related trauma. This questionnaire is available on the 'Resources' page of my website: www.sarahkuipers.com. Your scores from that test will help determine whether or not you need to seek professional help.

Since the onset of burnout tends to be insidious, increasing in intensity over time, it is too easy to overlook the warning signs, which is why I invite you to complete the following exercise.

Reflective exercise: Spot the warning signs of burnout

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 5–10 minutes.

1. While reading this section, which signs and symptoms of burnout did you recognize in yourself, if any?

Which component was most prominent for you?

- emotional or physical exhaustion
- emotional detachment
- feelings of inadequacy

2. How close are you to the critical zone of burnout?

3. To what extent are you affected by the distress or suffering of those you work with?

Set your intentions

If you are experiencing severe symptoms of burnout or traumatic stress, I encourage you to seek professional help alongside the seven principles in this book. Remember that reaching out for help is a sign of courage, not weakness.

The following section will help you identify your personal risk factors and guide you towards the principles and sections that may be most relevant for you. If you are close to burnout and know it is important to make significant changes, I suggest you start by reading *5c. Become the architect of your life*.

2d. What are your risk factors?

Recognizing the factors that increase your susceptibility to exhaustion, stress and burnout can help guide you towards the most relevant principles and resources for your needs.

Having released your self-care saboteurs in Principle 1, and gained a greater understanding of how to monitor your wellbeing, the next step is to identify your risk factors and discover the most relevant resources for you. All of the principles will be important in enabling you to become a Thriving Giver, but your character, circumstances and response to stress are unique. Your needs may be very different to someone else's. The following table will help you determine the best place to start when developing your toolkit of resources.

Feel free to also check out any sections that you are drawn to intuitively and to follow your own path through the book from now on. You will find that many of the resources in Part Two complement and support each other. Once you have embraced your most important principles, you can then explore the other ones to ensure that you nurture and sustain yourself on every level – mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Reflective exercise: What are your risk factors?

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 5–10 minutes.

- Using the table on the next few pages, identify your most prominent risk factors.**

Risk factors	Helpful sections
High levels of stress or anxiety	3a. Expressive writing 4a. Conscious breathing 4b. Remember the magical moments
Feel burnt out, or close to it Overwhelmed by work or other responsibilities	3a. Expressive writing 3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage 5a. Learn to say 'no' 6. Replenish your energy
Want to please Tend to put everyone else first Take on unnecessary responsibilities Avoid upsetting anyone	3a. Expressive writing 3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage 5a. Learn to say 'no'
Easily affected by other people's pain, distress or trauma Can't stop thinking about clients or disturbing events	3a. Expressive writing 3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage 4a. Conscious breathing 5d. Create transition rituals (to 'disconnect' from work)

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<p>Not enough time for yourself</p> <p>Lack of enjoyable activities</p> <p>Poor work-life balance</p> <p>Low levels of self-care</p>	<p>5a. Learn to say 'no'</p> <p>5e. Enrol support at home</p> <p>6. Replenish your energy</p> <p>7. Nourish your spirit</p>
<p>Always on the go</p> <p>Find it hard to stop</p> <p>Workaholic</p>	<p>3c. Choose your questions</p> <p>5a. Learn to say 'no'</p> <p>6. Replenish your energy</p>
<p>Feel daunted about implementing changes</p> <p>Lose motivation easily</p> <p>Lack of support</p>	<p>3a. Expressive writing</p> <p>3c. Choose your questions</p> <p>3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage</p>

2. Tune in to yourself and make a note of:

- which resources may be most helpful
- what you would like to explore first.

Some principles and sections may resonate more strongly with you than others. You can choose to start with something easy, like *3a. Expressive writing*, or *4a. Conscious breathing*, or you may prefer to embrace a resource that might be a higher priority, like *3d. Reach out for help*. The table is designed to help you determine where you may wish to focus your attention initially. However, you are likely to need a range of strategies that encompass all or most of the principles.

You can refer back to this table whenever you are not sure which principle or section to move on to next.

PART TWO

**CHERRY-PICK YOUR
RESOURCES**

A common question when people find out I help clients manage stress is *what do I need to do?* Unfortunately, there is no simple answer, as everybody's needs are different. This was the same question that Dominic kept asking his mentor, Ian, a wise 80-year-old organic farmer. After a few years of drought, with his finances in a precarious state, Dominic was desperate to discover how to make his farm viable.

He was frustrated to be told by Ian, time and again, that he needed to discover for himself the best choices to make. Dominic learnt to understand the nuances of his particular farm by monitoring the rainfall, noting how much grass grew every week, and weighing the sheep before selling them. Dominic eventually worked out precisely what to do with the farm and how many sheep he could graze. When rainfall was plentiful, the land had a chance to regenerate. Regular monitoring taught David the secrets for running his farm successfully.

In the same way that Ian offered David a framework for finding out how to manage his farm, now that you have completed Part One, you are in a strong position from which to choose your personalized toolkit of strategies. There is no fixed route for navigating your way through Part Two; the key is to discover your own unique path.

The next five principles are

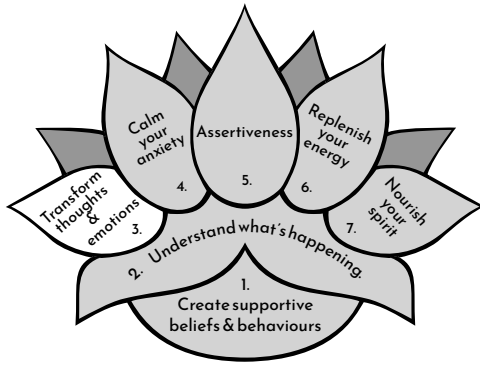
- *Principle 3. Transform your thoughts and emotions*
- *Principle 4. Calm your anxiety*
- *Principle 5. Assertiveness: Step into your power*
- *Principle 6. Replenish your energy*
- *Principle 7. Nourish your spirit*

Cherry-pick your resources

You may choose to ease yourself in gently, by beginning with *3a. Expressive writing*; *3b. The gift of gratitude*; or *Principle 6. Replenish your energy*. Alternatively, you may wish to jump right in and work with an area that urgently needs attention, such as *Principle 5. Assertiveness: Step into your power*.

If you already nurture yourself in a variety of ways, you may find it helpful to initially focus on Principles 3 to 5. Later, you can explore how to infuse your life with even more joy through a wider range of life-enhancing activities.

Even though you will be selecting your own resources, I encourage you to consider developing skills and strategies to encompass all of the Principles 3 to 7, since each one complements and supports the others. When you enhance your self-care by nurturing and unfurling all five petals of the flower, you will be more able to sustain yourself as a Thriving Giver.



PRINCIPLE 3

Transform your thoughts and emotions

As a child, I kept a tight lid on all distressing emotions, whether they were sadness, frustration, anger or hurt. I never learnt how to deal with painful feelings; they were simply locked away. Later in life, various experiences taught me the importance of learning to acknowledge and process distressing emotions, rather than simply ignoring them. I discovered the value of exploring the different layers of emotions that might lie beneath the surface, which is what Nick discovered when he came to me for help with controlling his temper.

A tall and broad nightclub bouncer, he was very capable of being physically intimidating. His boss had given him a final warning following an altercation with a customer. Although he looked like a colossus, the real healing for Nick came with releasing his tears – not with any physical show of strength. He had never allowed himself to get in touch with the grief and pain he had suffered when his partner had left him a few months before. Once he was able to acknowledge and release his sadness, the anger started to dissolve, and over the next few months he returned to being the gentle giant that everyone loved.

You may have seen for yourself how unexpressed rage might lurk behind the tears of sadness or a feeling of rejection. The tools in this section can help you unearth and process buried emotions, which is invaluable whenever something is troubling you. However, it can be like peeling away the layers of an onion – it takes time – so be kind to yourself as you work through all the layers.

Each resource related to this principle complements the others, and I invite you to experiment with them all. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *3a. Expressive writing* – gain a greater understanding of yourself through identifying, processing and releasing upsetting thoughts and feelings.
- *3b. The gift of gratitude* – a simple yet powerful tool to shift your mindset and emotional state.
- *3c. Choose your questions* – ensure that your self-talk leads you towards empowering thoughts, feelings and solutions.
- *3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage* – explore the value of expanding your support network and seeking help when needed.

You may have a sense of the best section to start with. If not, I suggest you begin with *3a. Expressive writing*, especially if you were brought up in a family where expressing your feelings was not safe or not allowed, or you were told to shut up if you got angry, or to stop being a wimp if you cried.

Once you have mastered these resources, you can also explore the different ways in which creativity, music and physical exercise can also support your emotional wellbeing, as discussed in *Principle 6. Replenish your energy*.

Please note – these resources can be invaluable tools. For me, they're vital in supporting my emotional wellbeing. However, when I was struggling with a serious illness, I needed professional support, which also helped me to discover the deeper meaning behind what was happening. If you are emotionally fragile, maybe grieving the loss of your child, struggling with a difficult relationship or working through trauma from the past, I encourage you to see a psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor. These tools are powerful, but they do not replace the need for professional help.

3a. Expressive writing

Releasing your thoughts and feelings onto the page can be like talking to your best friend. It is a wonderful tool for calming anxiety and processing thoughts and emotions.

Amy had been a well-respected member of a strong and supportive nursing team working in accident and emergency for several years. They called themselves the ‘A&E Family’. Nursing was her vocation; she loved it, and had always been able to perform at her best while working with a group of colleagues who valued and respected each other. Unfortunately, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021, a new matron arrived who wanted to run things differently. Unhappy with the new leadership style, 40% of the team left. The sense of teamwork disappeared, and everyone had to protect their own back. Having lost the support of her close group of colleagues, Amy felt isolated and vulnerable, fearful of making the slightest mistake. Eventually, the pressures of working in that hostile environment resulted in Amy taking several weeks off, due to work-related stress.

Amy’s stress was amplified by her husband now working from home, and her four-year-old’s nursery being closed. She never had time alone – which had been one of her key coping strategies. Jogging, another outlet for stress, no longer seemed to help. She was finding it very difficult to control the feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment about the changes in her team.

Amy relished the opportunity to use expressive writing to de-clutter her brain, emptying her mind of those swirling

thoughts and releasing feelings onto the page. Having found a safe way to discharge her anger, she no longer needed to find a kickboxing class to express her rage! She also saw how the anger helped her connect to an inner strength and fierceness at work, making it easier to stand up for herself. Yet, at the same time, it masked the underlying anxiety, highlighting the need to develop some calming resources. Under the anger and frustration, she discovered a deep sense of grief at losing her supportive team, and sadness for her friends who had been forced to leave.

Over the next week, Amy became significantly calmer, and able to think more clearly. Having noticed her anger flaring up when she didn't do any writing over the weekend, she committed to setting aside time every morning to doing it while she was off work. Alongside the writing, Amy also discovered that there were times when she also needed to reach out to a friend with whom she could share openly some of what she was feeling inside. Once the emotional distress started to ease, Amy was then ready to explore one of the calming resources in Principle 4.

Why is expressive writing so powerful?

This process is a safe and healthy way to express your feelings, and helps you acknowledge, structure and organize your thoughts. As you follow the flow of whatever comes up, whether it is despair, frustration or a feeling of inadequacy, your writing can reveal the feelings hidden underneath, and help you gain a deeper understanding of yourself. Instead of allowing anger to simmer inside, writing offers you an outlet, without hurting anyone. Through writing, you may recognize old behaviour patterns from the past that keep repeating themselves, prompting you to choose a different response in

the future. You might reflect on issues that you wish to resolve, or seek solutions to a problem. After initially expressing disappointment in yourself, you may begin to write in a more compassionate way. The processing that naturally happens through writing can help change the way you think about yourself, others and the world.

You can be as creative as you like when describing your feelings, using images or the symbolic language of metaphors. If you are someone who tends to ignore your emotions, you may be surprised how quickly you experience a sense of relief from not having to keep those feelings locked up inside.

James W. Pennebaker and John F. Evans¹ have written extensively on expressive writing and the growing evidence of a wide range of psychological and physical benefits. Participants who wrote for 20 minutes about a traumatic or emotional experience on four consecutive days showed improvements in their physical health, with fewer visits to the doctor, as long as *four months later*.² Another study³ demonstrated that one 25-minute session of expressive writing may reduce distress before an impending stressful event by lessening the emotional impact of intrusive thoughts. So, you may wish to try expressive writing before a situation which you expect to be challenging.

Transforming grief into gratitude

Let me tell you about a time when expressive writing helped heal my inner turmoil. That afternoon, I had been exploring the walled garden of a country mansion, pushing my friend Carole around in a cumbersome wheelchair. Her terminal cancer had spread throughout her body, yet she was determined to enjoy life. I negotiated alternative routes to avoid the steps

so we could enjoy the magnificent rose gardens outlined by clipped box hedges, the fragrance of sweet peas and stunning herbaceous borders filled with delphiniums, salvia and gaura. We reminisced about all the companionable times we had spent walking along the coasts, rivers, hills and valleys of Europe. For me, it was painful to witness the deterioration in her health and know that soon I would lose such a special friend.

After dropping Carole back home, I had an early night, unaware of the emotions simmering inside. A few hours later, I woke and tried all my usual tricks to get back to sleep. Finally, I switched on the light, got out some paper and started writing. All my thoughts, feelings and emotions poured onto the page, opening a floodgate of tears. I expressed my grief and untangled the multitude of ways in which my dear friend had brought insight, richness and variety to my life. She had been there for me through my illness. Her insights into family dynamics had smoothed the way for me to release myself from the role of rescuer and peacemaker in my family.

Forty minutes of writing led to a sense of appreciation for the gift of having such a wonderful friend, and how it was an honour to witness someone navigating the challenges of illness with such awareness and wisdom. Finally, I was able to drift off into a deep and restful sleep. This form of writing is now my constant companion through any turbulent times. Not only does it help me access, express and process whatever is troubling me; it often reveals new perspectives on a situation.

It can be reassuring to know that this type of writing is for your eyes only. It can be cathartic to tear up, shred or burn whatever you have written, especially if you are concerned that someone else might read it. If you do choose to keep your writing, I encourage

you to put it aside for several weeks before reading it, by which time you are likely to have moved on from that situation.

The benefits of expressive writing can be gradual and cumulative. However, as you write, you may initially experience higher levels of distress, physical symptoms or negative moods. This is likely to dissipate over time, but if you are experiencing difficulties with your mental health or have a history of abuse or trauma, this exercise may not be appropriate, and it would be wise to seek professional help.

Experiential exercise: Expressive writing

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 15–20 minutes.*

Switch off your phone and find a quiet space where you will be undisturbed and free from distractions. It is preferable to write by hand, rather than on a device. Instead of using your reflective journal, I suggest you use blank paper, so you can discard this writing. You can set the timer on your phone if you wish.

If you feel daunted by the prospect of having to write for 15–20 minutes, it is better to write for 5 minutes than not at all. You can gradually increase the time until the process becomes easier. There are also some variations at the end of the exercise that you could try.

1. Write for 15–20 minutes about:

- whatever keeps you awake at night
- anything troubling you, whether related to the past, present or future
- your relationships with your partner, colleagues, friends or family

Transform your thoughts and emotions

- whatever is important to you
- your work

If you can't decide what to write about, just start and see what comes up. As you are writing, you may find the following pointers helpful.

- Allow yourself to express the full range of your thoughts and emotions, without worrying about grammar, punctuation or spelling.
- Rather than describing in detail what happened, it can be more helpful to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and sensations in your body.
- Avoid judging, censoring or editing.
- Continue writing until the time is up. If you get stuck, you can repeat what you have written, or express your feelings about having nothing to write about.

2. When you have finished, scrunch your writing into a ball, or tear it up, then throw it away.

3. Spend a few moments checking in with yourself before rushing back into life.

- How are you feeling now?
- What subtle shifts have you noticed?

You may sense that other emotions and feelings are simmering under the surface which it would be helpful to express. If so, you might allow yourself a few more minutes to continue writing, or allocate another time to repeat the exercise.

Set your intentions

I invite you to use this process each day for a week so that you experience the multitude of ways in which it can be helpful. To confirm your commitment, you may wish to write down in your reflective journal:

- when you will do it
- how long you will spend doing it

After a week, you may decide to continue using expressive writing every day, if only for five minutes. You can also use it as a tool to have at your fingertips whenever something upsets your equilibrium, or the next time your partner, a friend or a colleague is not around when you want to talk something through.

Exercise variations

If the above exercise is not helpful for you, here are some variations you could experiment with, to see if they suit your needs better.

Focus on positive experiences

If you prefer not to write about painful experiences, this is another option. One study showed that writing about intensely positive experiences for 20 minutes on three consecutive days resulted in participants benefitting from enhanced positive mood, as well as fewer visits to the doctor, *three months later*.⁴ If you want to try this out, you could choose, for example, to write about a peak travel experience, a special time with family or friends or the birth of your child.

Finger writing

Another variation of this exercise is to simply use your finger to write with, instead of a pen. If you feel wary of writing on paper, this can give you more freedom to express secret thoughts, feelings or swear words. Writing with your finger can also be helpful if you are taking a courageous first step in expressing the truth of a challenging situation.

A different approach

Whenever Adam is stressed, he gets out his notepad and starts writing. Since organization is not one of his skills, the process of offloading all his thoughts and feelings onto paper is very cathartic. Writing often reveals that some of his worries are related to things he needs to do, prompting him to create lists or an action plan.

He also writes down all the positive and negative things that are happening in his life and then consciously crosses out anything irrelevant. He always articulates his thoughts and feelings about the positives. When there is something he perceives as negative, he then asks himself what actions he can take to mitigate it. The process often reveals a different perspective or a realization that the situation is not as intractable as he thought, and he finishes by switching to writing about what he is grateful for in his life. Adam finds this an invaluable tool, which enhances the quality of his life and his sleep.

Just five minutes

When teaching medical students, I give them five minutes to write down all their thoughts, fears, worries and emotions about their upcoming exams, and then immediately discard their writing in a bin that I take around the room. They often take great pleasure in tearing the paper into tiny strips, scrunching it into a ball or folding it repeatedly before throwing it away. Most students enjoy the exercise, finding it therapeutic or satisfying, and a few would like to spend significantly more time writing. Having experienced such immediate benefits, some students continue to use this strategy to manage their

stressors, particularly when they hear how expressive writing can boost academic performance.⁵

Resources

Lapidus: an organization that specializes in and promotes writing for wellbeing. www.lapidus.org.uk

3b. The gift of gratitude

A regular gratitude practice is a simple and powerful way to calm your body, enhance your mood and feel more optimistic about the future.

The first time I used this ritual was when climbing at a snail's pace up the steep steps towards yet another high peak on the arduous trek up to Machu Picchu. Even though I had spent a few days acclimatizing to the altitude, I was struggling to catch my breath and my muscles ached with exhaustion. Then I remembered the advice from the hostel owner in Cusco. Lesley shared how she had previously been in tears from the physical challenge of climbing up to those magnificent ruins. However, during her last trek, instead of looking up towards the next daunting peak, she focused on giving thanks to all the wildflowers along the way. It connected her with a deeper source of energy that kept her going even when she thought she couldn't take another step.

Inspired by Lesley's story, I shifted my focus and noticed a buzzard soaring between the majestic Andean peaks as I climbed slowly up the path. After that, whether I was walking up steps or through the lichen-clad rainforests, I sought out the native flowers and expressed my gratitude for their beauty, colours or fragrance. When the flowers were scarce, I found another wonder of nature to appreciate: the fresh breeze on my face, the glimpse of a sapphire-blue hummingbird darting between the plants or the gurgling of a stream rushing down the valley to provide irrigation for the farmers on the distant plains.

That gratitude ritual sustained my energy. It also enriched my experience throughout the four days as I climbed slowly and steadily up to the top of Dead Woman's Pass, before descending to watch the sunrise and look down on the awe-inspiring ruins below. That trek was the highlight of my trip while on sabbatical in Peru. It also taught me the power of gratitude.

Integrating gratitude into daily life

Fortunately, you can benefit from this practice even if you are not in far-flung corners of the world. Focusing on gratitude throughout the day keeps Ella sane by initiating a positive spiral of thoughts and feelings. Before going to sleep she reflects on the achievements of the day, seeking out the miracles in the minutiae: a new rose bud opening up, a few minutes snuggling up to her daughter, a patient responding well to treatment or being able to walk just that bit further after breaking her ankle.

You may have noticed how being thankful lifts your spirits and enriches your relationships. When you seek out the blessings, it switches your attention away from the challenges of the day. For a gratitude practice, you can also zero in on one aspect of the experience. For example, after a swim, you can reflect on what you most enjoy: the shock of cold as you dive in; the freedom of gliding through the water; or being present in the moment.

If you are a person of faith, prayer can be another way of giving thanks. In the last few months of her life, my elderly mother was encouraged by a wonderful carer to say her prayers before going to sleep, and to express her appreciation for all the blessings throughout her life. The prayers helped her

accept the restrictions in mobility, and appreciate the loving care she received, and the smaller pleasures she could still enjoy – especially a glass of white wine! That evening ritual also strengthened her faith, and helped her let go of life when the time came.

My friend Carole, despite terminal cancer, continually confounded family and friends with her ability to appreciate the glimmers of light in the day. Once, after receiving disappointing scan results, she stepped out of the hospital, stopped, took a deep breath and appreciated the warmth of the sun and the beautiful, clear blue sky. Many of the doctors, consultants and nurses remarked on her optimism and zest for life, and how she managed illness more skilfully than most people. She taught me so much about the value of cultivating an appreciative state of mind.

Seeking things to be grateful for is a choice. It may be the cosiness of your bed before falling asleep, a warm hug from your partner, the delight from playing the piano or a phone call from a friend who's checking if you are OK after a prang in your car. Those thoughts and feelings of appreciation help calm the nervous system and enhance emotional and physical wellbeing.

The proven benefits of gratitude

Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology, asked study participants to spend five to ten minutes at the end of each day writing down three things that went well, irrespective of how large or small. They were encouraged to further reflect and immerse themselves in the positive event, exploring the reasons why it went well. Completing that

exercise every day for a week led to higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction *six months later*.⁶

Another study⁷ has shown that writing daily about things in life you are grateful for can improve wellbeing and promote higher levels of positive emotions. This highlights the value of integrating a simple gratitude ritual into your day. The more you cultivate the art of savouring the positive elements in your life, the easier and more natural it becomes.

Most research focuses primarily on the benefits of *thinking* about what you are grateful for. However, extensive research on heart rate variability* (HRV) suggests that if you generate *positive emotions* associated with gratitude, the benefits may be even greater.^{8,9} Heartfelt appreciation and other positive emotions create more harmonious and coherent heart rhythms, and activate the part of the nervous system associated with calmness, rest and repair. It doesn't matter whether positive emotions occur spontaneously or whether you generate them intentionally; they both produce heart rhythms that are associated with greater emotional stability, mental clarity and improved cognitive and physiological function.^{10,11} This is why you are encouraged to experience the *feelings* associated with gratitude in the experiential exercise at the end of the section. Learning to consciously access a bodily sense of appreciation at will is a wonderful tool for shifting your emotional state.

* HRV measures the naturally occurring beat-to-beat changes in heart rate, which closely reflects the balance between the two branches of the autonomic nervous system. This is affected by our thoughts, feelings and emotions, as well as our ability to respond to stress.

Seeking the silver lining behind the cloud

It was not until I was through the worst of my debilitating illness that I began to appreciate the hidden blessings. It had forced me to release the last remnants of old childhood patterns of taking too much responsibility for others and ignoring my own wellbeing. Now, finally, I am vigilant in keeping my stress levels in check, and ensuring that I carve out time for activities that nurture and sustain me. Once I was able to value the unexpected gifts from being ill, it was also easier to let go of the anger I felt towards the property fraudster. His actions had triggered the manic activity that led to me developing the autoimmune condition. Having ignored the subtle warning signs that he was not to be trusted, I am now more cautious about who to trust, and pay attention to those intuitive whispers.

Danielle's chronic fatigue syndrome developed after years of working exceptionally long hours and not allowing herself to stop. The unexpected gift of her illness was that it gave her an excuse to reassess her life, change careers and discover who she was. Previously, she had spent her life trying to be the person that everyone else wanted her to be. Now she allows herself to live in alignment with her true values and essence. She knows what is important to her, and what makes her happy.

You may have experienced for yourself how an attitude of appreciative enquiry can reveal the hidden gifts in a situation, enabling you to shift towards a sense of gratitude or release feelings of upset or anger. However, it can be difficult to appreciate the blessings in the midst of challenging times. So be kind to yourself if you are unable to see the bigger picture right now. Instead, you may wish to seek out the simple things that you can appreciate, such as having food on your plate, a smile from a stranger or

enjoying five undisturbed minutes to drink your coffee. Or you may wish to come back to this section at another time.

At first, a gratitude exercise may seem awkward or false, but it is worth persisting. Just as it takes time to build up your muscles when you do strength training at the gym, the same occurs when you practise thankful appreciation. Each time you do it, you strengthen the new neural pathways in the brain. You are choosing to move away from contraction and negativity, towards growth and enhanced wellbeing.

Experiential exercise: The gift of gratitude

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 5–10 minutes.*

A gratitude practice can take just a few minutes or as long as you wish. Writing appreciative thoughts can be more powerful than simply thinking them, so you may want to create a gratitude journal. However, it is more important to start doing this exercise right now, even if you don't have a journal to hand!

1. Every day, seek out three to five things you are grateful for.

You can choose to focus on today, or different phases of your life. If you have a gratitude journal, you can write about those experiences, whether they relate to people, places, situations or things. Otherwise, spend a few moments thinking about each of them. For example, they could be:

- the thankfulness you feel for your partner, family, children or friends
- snuggling up with your child while reading them a bedtime story

Transform your thoughts and emotions

- the companionship of your pet
- the wonders of nature: a majestic mountain peak, the beauty of a sunset or the fragrance of honeysuckle in your garden
- the pleasure you experience from creativity, music, hobbies or holidays
- the sun peeking out for a few minutes between heavy showers of rain
- biting into a fresh, crunchy apple

2. Connect to the feelings in your body.

Shift your attention to the feelings associated with that experience, whether it is joy, gratitude or a sense of being loved and cared for. Where do you experience that in your body?

3. Schedule a regular time in your day.

If you slot this gratitude practice into a fixed time in your schedule, it can become a habit. However, you can also dip into it at other times, maybe when first waking up, while walking your dog, after dropping the children off at school, or driving home from work. The more you practice, the easier it becomes to access heartfelt emotions whenever you need them.

4. Share appreciation with others.

If your natural impulse is to talk about your problems with family and friends, you may wish to end your sharing with a gratitude practice. You can develop the habit of describing in detail something you appreciated in your day or something you value about the other person. Your gratitude practice then becomes a mutually beneficial and uplifting exercise.



Set your intentions

Decide when and how to incorporate this practice into your day. It may only take a few days before you start to reap the benefits of feeling happier, healthier and more optimistic.

Once gratitude has become integrated into your schedule, you will know whether to develop an additional resource to help transform your thoughts and emotions, or whether to move on to another principle.

3c. Choose your questions

When you choose questions wisely, you shift your attention towards more positive thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions. It is a simple tool to help calm your anxiety, build your confidence or discover creative solutions.

Have you ever been upset when a friend failed to call you back or respond to a text message? It is so easy to allow yourself to dwell on all the possible reasons why they are annoyed with you, only to find out later that they have lost their phone, had an argument with their partner or were working late.

Similarly, if your colleague has become angry and unhelpful for no apparent reason, you might automatically assume that you have done something wrong. But their anger is their own and may have nothing to do with you; it is their problem, not yours, and each of us is responsible for our own emotional wellbeing. When your mind is in turmoil and you are not sure what's happened, it is crucial to avoid jumping to conclusions or arbitrarily assuming that someone is reacting negatively to you. Instead, you can choose to discover a variety of different perspectives about your colleague, by becoming curious and asking yourself the following questions.

- *What might be happening in his life that has caused him to change?*
- *When was he helpful, considerate or kind in the past?*
- *What could I respect or appreciate about him, if I wanted to?*

You might remember that he is stressed because his mother is seriously ill, or was supportive when you first started the job. Once you consider the wider picture, it can become easier to accept, or to be more compassionate with others. In *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), reflecting on his time in Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl wrote, 'Everything can be taken from man but one thing. The last of our human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.' Choosing the questions you ask yourself is a simple way to shift your focus towards a more positive attitude or perspective.

The power of questions

Asking yourself a question is similar to doing a search on Google. You have the choice of whether to seek out heart-warming stories in the news or ones that are likely to disturb you. Similarly, the questions you choose to ask yourself have the potential to be empowering or disempowering.

You may have experienced the value of empowering questions in the reflective exercises. Likewise, if you have read *3b. The gift of gratitude*, you will already be reaping the benefits of asking, *What am I grateful for?* That powerful question automatically leads you towards uplifting thoughts and warm-hearted feelings.

When you choose questions with care, they can direct you towards:

- happier thoughts, feelings and emotions
- a more logical and rational interpretation of events
- recognizing that someone else's anger, distress or upset is nothing to do with you
- solutions, rather than problems

The following are some other ways in which choosing your questions carefully can help you.

Redirecting your attention

As the head teacher of a primary school, Maryam was under considerable pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021. With minimal advance notice from the government, she had to implement massive changes in how the children could continue their studies from home, while also arranging for those whose parents were key workers to come in to school safely. There was so little guidance from anyone that she was under phenomenal pressure to determine how best to organize everything.

Whenever Maryam's mind was whirring with incessant thoughts, she would shift the focus of attention away from the problems of school by asking herself simple, personal questions such as, *What can we have for tea? What shall I wear tomorrow? What needs to be added to the online shopping list? What shall we do this weekend? What am I looking forward to?*

In many situations, and especially when supporting vulnerable families, the main question she asked herself was, *Have I done everything I can do to help them?* If the response was 'yes', then she was able to let go and focus on something else. She was kind to herself by acknowledging that so much was outside her control, and if there was nothing further that she could do, then worrying about it did not help anyone.

Criticism: Looking at the bigger picture

Receiving criticism is never easy. However, if you are sensitive to disapproval or tend to be self-critical, instead of allowing

yourself to stay stuck in a rut of negative thinking, be inquisitive and ask yourself questions such as the following.

- *Is that always true?*
- *When was it not true?*

For example, if you are criticized for always being late, curiosity might reveal that you are often late when meeting friends, but always punctual for picking up the children from school, and only occasionally late for work. Careful questioning also helps you discover that words like *always*, *never*, *everyone*, *no one* are generalizations that are normally based on one piece of evidence, and are not necessarily true. Questions help you seek out the exceptions to the rule so that you see the bigger picture, which is likely to be more valid and less hurtful.

Seeking out solutions

This approach can also help you navigate difficult situations. For example, if you are looking for ways to reduce anxiety before a challenging meeting, you can ask yourself the following questions.

- *What has helped me in similar situations in the past?*
- *What can I do beforehand to prepare myself?*
- *What calming strategy is likely to be most effective?*
- *How can I prepare myself well for that meeting?*
- *What positive self-talk would help me?*
- *What else might help?*

You may be surprised at the possibilities that emerge when you are curious.

Exploring different options

Curiosity can also help you discover a range of possibilities. For example, if you want to explore ways to reduce your work commitments, you can ask yourself questions such as the following.

- *What are the different options?*
- *What else might be possible?*
- *What are the pros and cons of each option?*
- *How can I reduce my outgoings to make it feasible to work part-time?*

When you become inquisitive, it might reveal that you could ask to work four days a week, stop working at 6 pm, refuse to check work emails outside working hours or tell clients that you won't be answering your mobile at weekends. Or you may consider asking for time off in lieu after working overtime. Once you have several options, you are more likely to discover which would be most advantageous.

Shifting the self-talk

Are you sometimes plagued by questions such as, *Why did I make a mess of that consultation?*, *Why did I lose my temper so quickly with my son?* or *Why can't I sleep?* The inner voice behind those questions leads to a downward spiral of destructive thoughts which amplify your stress and concerns. Once you recognize what is happening, you can consciously choose questions that redirect your attention towards more positive thoughts, feelings or solutions, such as the following.

- *What aspects of that consultation did I do well?*
- *How could I manage the next distressed client better? How else?*

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- *What positive feedback have I had for other projects I have done?*
- *What would help me remain calmer the next time my son winds me up?*
- *What would help me sleep better? What else?*

Questions with a positive focus encourage you to explore the bigger picture, instead of automatically jumping to conclusions that make you feel upset or uncomfortable.

Finishing the day on a high note

A simple way to bathe yourself in positive thoughts and feelings before going to sleep is to ask yourself the following questions.

- *What went well today?*
- *What brought me joy?*
- *What do I value about myself?*
- *What do I appreciate about my home, family, friends or work?*

Curiosity opens up more flexibility in your thinking. It encourages you to remember your strengths and the times things worked out better than expected. Careful choice of questions can help you be more discerning with your interpretation of situations and avoid jumping to conclusions or taking things personally. This simple strategy is a powerful way to boost self-esteem, calm your mind, access positive feelings and encourage you to take supportive actions.

Reflective exercise: Choose your questions

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 10 minutes.*

- 1. Reflect for a moment on what you have read in this section, and make a note of:**
 - when you *already* use empowering questions
 - when it would be helpful to pay more attention to the questions you ask yourself
- 2. Recognize the disempowering questions. Jot down any questions that you tend to ask yourself that are not supportive or helpful.**
 - Which ones come up most often?
 - When do they tend to occur?
- 3. Replace with empowering questions.**

For each of those disempowering questions, choose new ones that lead you towards empowering thoughts, feelings and solutions in relation to that situation, or ones that show a different perspective. You may find it helpful to read through the following examples of how to switch towards more positive and solution-focused questions. Which questions can you relate to?

Disempowering questions	Empowering questions
Why do I never have time to relax?	How could I create more time to relax? When could I create more space in my schedule? What could I say 'no' to, so I could find time to relax? Why types of relaxation would I enjoy?

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Disempowering questions	Empowering questions
Why can't I slow down?	<p>What is one small action I could take to help me slow down? What else?</p> <p>What could I say to myself to help me slow down?</p>
Why do I get so stressed?	<p>What helps calm me down?</p> <p>What practical steps can I take now to manage stress better? What else?</p>
Why is my life so out of balance?	<p>What simple things can I do to get more balance in my life? What else?</p> <p>What can I start doing, right now?</p>
Why don't I take better care of myself?	<p>What could be the first step in taking better care of myself? What else?</p> <p>What can I say to myself so that I feel more comfortable prioritizing my own self-care?</p>
Why can't I put myself first sometimes?	<p>What would help me put myself first sometimes? What else?</p> <p>How might I benefit from putting myself first?</p> <p>What can I say to myself to remind me of the importance of putting myself first?</p> <p>How might other people benefit if I took better care of myself?</p>
How could I do something so stupid?	<p>What could I have done to manage that more skilfully?</p> <p>What can I learn from this?</p> <p>What did I do well?</p>

Disempowering questions	Empowering questions
Why can't I stand up for myself?	What could I say to remind myself that it is OK to stand up for myself, and that I can do it? When would I like to be more assertive? What would be an easy situation to start with? What could I say or do that would be helpful?
Why am I not more confident?	What helps me feel more confident? What could I do to build my confidence? When have I been confident in the past?
Why isn't anyone there for me?	Who could I reach out to? What could I share with people so they better understand the challenges of what I am going through?

Set your intentions

You may choose to pay attention to the questions you ask yourself over the next week. As soon as you recognize any disempowering questions, you can tell yourself to stop, and consciously shift towards more empowering ones.

At the end of each day, you may wish to write in your reflective journal about what you gained from remaining vigilant and redirecting your attention. When you start experiencing the benefits of this simple strategy, you are likely to be even more observant about how you direct your attention.

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Once you feel comfortable using this resource, you may be ready to progress to another section. If you want to explore questions and cognitive distortions in more depth, you may like to check out the recommended books in *Appendix A: Additional resources*.

3d. Reach out for help: A sign of courage

It is so much easier to make significant shifts in your life when you have support from family, friends, colleagues or professionals.

Christine was under investigation by the General Medical Council (GMC) following a prescribing error. She was devastated and, to ensure greater confidentiality, found a counsellor outside her area to help her navigate the way through that distressing time. Those sessions proved invaluable in helping Christine move from feeling like a victim to becoming a survivor, and to learning to thrive again. A doctors' support network offered her one-to-one support, and she also met every two months with a mutual support group. After a year, the GMC decided that there was no case to answer. However, the threat of never being allowed to work again had already led to what felt like irreparable damage.

When Christine was finally able to return to work, she knew that the only way she would manage the ongoing pressure would be to get a wide range of professional support from people she trusted. Even now, she continues to have ongoing supervision.

As part of her development, Christine learnt many self-help strategies. They have been crucial in helping her to manage stress, and she now shares them with patients. The commitment that Christine has shown in reaching out for help from every

possible source is a testament to her determination to continue to work in such a demanding profession. She has taken full responsibility to ensure that she has all the help that she needs. However, as Nick found, you don't have to be in such a vulnerable position before reaching out for support.

Saving his marriage

Nick was often grumpy, irritable and, due to the unrelenting pressures of work, had a very short fuse. When his wife started to bear the brunt of his anger, she became increasingly withdrawn, even though previously they had always shared their problems. When the foundations of their marriage started crumbling, it compounded the stresses in each of their lives, and they went for couples' counselling.

Their counsellor helped them realize how they had stopped listening to each other. She created a safe space in which they both learnt to step back and have honest conversations again. Whenever his wife said something that was uncomfortable for Nick to hear, he learnt to listen without having a knee-jerk reaction. They committed to setting aside time for a proper conversation every week, which helped them turn the corner in their relationship. The counselling not only saved his marriage but also taught Nick practical communication skills. Since then, he has shared them extensively with patients, colleagues and the medical students he now teaches. So, rather than struggling on your own, remember that seeking help is a powerful tool for building resilience.

Overcoming trauma

Hazel saw a client who had just lost her daughter. She heard how the mother had been woken at 3 am by her toddler crying

out. Going to her room, the mother found her daughter screaming in pain. A few minutes later she died in her arms. Having young children herself, Hazel identified especially deeply with the mother's anguish. *I felt her desperate sadness... It absolutely floored me... I reached complete emptiness... It pushed every button I had.* For the next few days Hazel woke at 3 am with vivid images of the scene, imagining one of her own children dying in her arms. She felt numb during the day, trying to push the thoughts to the back of her mind. But if she let her guard down, they came back. Her body's alarm system was on high alert, and the traumatic stress persisted for several weeks, only easing when she reached out for professional help.

Secondary traumatic stress can arise from working with an individual who is distressed or traumatized, or from being exposed to an extremely stressful situation. If you work in mental health or emergency medicine, you will be familiar with the challenges of witnessing the extremes of human pain. Even though the trauma has not happened to you directly, you can still be traumatized. If, like Hazel, you have experienced traumatic stress, and it still impacts your life, I encourage you to seek professional help.

Letting go of the lone ranger

When growing up, life appeared safer if I didn't need anything from anyone. I could always depend on myself and believed I could sort things out on my own. Yet underneath, there was a fear of rejection or of appearing weak and needy. If you were also brought up to be independent and self-reliant, or don't want to be a burden, you may be wary of seeking help. Similarly, if your role at work involves helping others, it can be even more difficult to admit that you are not coping. Looking

back on my life, I wish my fragile ego had been more open and honest about getting support before it was too late. Everyone would have benefitted: my sons, family, friends and clients. It took me far too long to understand that sharing my concerns, talking through options or getting professional help is an act of courage, rather than a sign of weakness.

Fortunately, the culture is changing and it has become more acceptable to talk about your feelings and the challenges you are going through. Supportive friends or colleagues might notice before you do when it would be helpful for you to slow down, step back from a situation or deal with unresolved frustration. So, the next time they express their concerns about your wellbeing, you might wish to listen!

Unexpected sources of support

After Rebecca had a car crash and broke her leg in three places, she was unable to get out of the house or do basic chores. Her partner went to work as usual and didn't seem to want to help out, and none of her friends stepped in. Rebecca was surprised to find that it was people she hardly knew who offered to shop, cook or take her to appointments. An 83-year-old neighbour turned out to be her greatest ally. She discovered the value of reaching out to an extensive network of people. It doesn't have to be your partner, daughter or close friend. Some people are unable to cope with people who are ill, distressed or in difficulty, and others are simply too busy. But someone will be there if you do reach out.

Adam used to be concerned that the more he talked about his problems, the worse they would get, so he buried himself in work and struggled on. It was not until he reached rock-bottom

and had to take time off for stress that he discovered that it was OK to open up and have more honest conversations about what he was feeling inside. A few years later, when grieving the death of his mother, Adam reached out to family and friends. He also sought support online, sharing some of his experiences with a group of people who hardly knew him. He was overwhelmed by the compassion and care that emerged. In sharing his distress, he also opened the door for others to communicate about their troubles, while some were happy to simply be there for him.

Adam discovered the value of not burdening one person with all his problems, and how, the more you share beyond your family, the less pressure it puts on those closest to you. He found a community of people who were emotionally strong enough to support each other through listening and sharing, so it was mutually beneficial. A larger group meant there were multiple sources of wisdom, care and compassion. Having a broader network of support is invaluable.

You may be fortunate in having a supportive partner with whom you can share your worries and concerns. This is highlighted by an Australian study of 12,252 doctors¹² which found significantly higher levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion (a key component in burnout) in those who were single, divorced or separated, compared to those who were in a committed relationship. Similarly, a review of 78 studies on nurses found higher levels of burnout in those who were single or divorced.¹³ Whether or not you work in these areas, if you are single, it can be even more important to create a network of support and commit to spending time on a regular basis with friends, family or colleagues.

Support works two ways

If you reflect on your own experience of supporting someone, you may feel that you were valued, or perhaps touched that they trusted you enough to ask for help. Most people find it rewarding to help others. When I was stuck in a snowstorm and asked the local farmer to give me a ride home on his tractor, he beamed with pleasure as he drove through the deep, pristine snow. There was no doubt that he enjoyed doing his good deed for the day.

You may have seen how many communities pulled together during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020/2021, only too willing to help out with shopping, picking up medication, working in a food bank or making personal protective equipment. We often underestimate people's willingness to help out,¹⁴ and most of us are hardwired to support others. Equally, when a close friend failed to ask you for help when they needed it, you may have felt disappointed or hurt. You would have been only too happy to give them a lift when their car broke down, or to talk through different options when they were made redundant. When you reach out for help, most people welcome the opportunity to support you.

How to ask for help

When seeking assistance, be direct and specific, so the person understands exactly what type of support you need. When asking for help with something that could be more of a burden, or time-consuming, make it easy for them to decline. Pay attention to whether their response is enthusiastic or reluctant. As Rebecca discovered, most people want to be supportive, and react positively to being asked, even if they can't help.

However, don't take it personally if someone is unable to help out. They are rejecting the request, not you personally.

Even if you manage life's challenges well, remember that any life event, whether bereavement, separation, a short illness or even your daughter starting school, can be the straw that breaks the camel's back. Those are the times when you might need to reach out. Equally, when someone asks how you are, rather than saying you are fine, learn to be more open and let them know when you are feeling exhausted, stressed or overwhelmed. Honesty helps to build trust in relationships.

Reflective exercise: Reach out for help

You will need something for making notes.

Allow about 10 minutes.

- 1. Spend a few moments and write down ten times in your life when you asked for help and it turned out well.**

Then, spend a few minutes reflecting on how you benefitted from reaching out.

- 2. Make a note of the situations in your personal or professional life which might benefit from outside help or support.**
- 3. Now write a list of ten people who you could turn to for help.**

As well as the obvious names, consider friends or colleagues who you may have supported in the past, possibly when they were changing jobs, starting a family or moving home. Equally, as Rebecca learnt, cast your net wide. Even if you don't need help now, all

those people on your list could be part of your support network.

4. What kind of support would you like?

Would it be a listening ear, a sounding board, meeting for coffee or a walk, someone to express your feelings to or more specific professional help?

5. If your best friend was in a similar position to you, what professional support, if any, would you encourage them to seek?

- a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist or psychiatrist
- a doctor
- an occupational health professional
- an osteopath, chiropractor or acupuncturist
- a supervisor, mentor or professional support group
- anything else

6. Looking at your own list, who might you like to contact first?

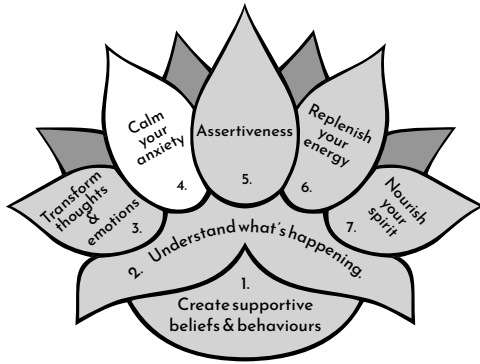
When speaking to them, it is helpful to be transparent about what kind of support you need. Remember, it takes time to build trust and develop deeper connections, and reaching out is the first step. Many might welcome the opportunity to become part of your wider support group, whereas others may not have the time or space right now. If so, you can appreciate their honesty in knowing their limits!

Set your intentions

Write down a list of the people you wish to contact, and when.

Transform your thoughts and emotions

I invite you to start expanding your support system before embarking on another principle. Having an extensive network of friends, family, colleagues and professionals will be invaluable in ensuring you have the support you require to step forward in creating a balanced life in which you thrive.



PRINCIPLE 4

Calm your anxiety

Andy became overwhelmed with anxiety when first looking through the list of new beliefs that he had generated from Principle 1. The thought of saying 'no' to his mother was enough to make him feel sick with worry. However, once he learnt how to calm himself by connecting to a feeling of appreciation for his two young daughters, he was able to embrace those new beliefs and begin to be more assertive. As fear had pervaded Andy's life since he was young, it was vital for him to find a way to soothe those feelings of apprehension. As Andy became adept at calming himself, he was more relaxed in daily life, and the extreme anxiety that he used to experience on waking each morning began to ease. Gradually, he stopped imagining everything in his life going wrong.

If, like Andy, you are prone to anxiety or high levels of stress, developing resources that help calm your body, mind and emotions is essential. The more agile you become at reducing the stress response, the easier you will cope with the inevitable challenges of life. Calming strategies are an invaluable tool, whether you are dealing with a toddler tantrum, standing firm with a patient, or feeling anxious starting a new role. They can also be helpful when you adopt new beliefs and behaviours, as it can be natural to feel apprehensive the first few times you respond in different ways.

As with learning any new skill, the more you use calming resources, the more effective they will become. Initially you will find it easier to practise when you are reasonably relaxed or dealing with a situation that only arouses mild anxiety. Soon you will be able to calm yourself when you are under greater pressure. We all respond to stress in different ways, and you need to discover which strategies work most effectively for

you, and in which situations. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *4a. Conscious breathing* – learn how to calm your nervous system using quick and easy breathing exercises.
- *4b. Remember the magical moments* – a simple yet practical tool that helps you reconnect to positive emotions to calm your anxiety and shift you into a more resourceful state.
- *4c. Grounding: Connect to the earth* – a visualization process that brings you into the present moment, and helps you feel more calm, safe and secure.

In this principle, we focus on calming strategies that can be practised almost anytime, anywhere. However, exercise and physical activity are also invaluable for calming the mind and body, as explored in Principles 6 and 7.

4a. Conscious breathing

Breathing exercises are a simple and effective tool for calming anxiety and enhancing mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Soon after I had settled into my seat on the plane, the man next to me introduced himself as Wayan, an engineer from Indonesia. With a five-hour flight ahead of us, we started chatting, and I told him about my amazing trip to Bali. He relished the opportunity to share his knowledge of and love for his beloved country. We enjoyed a fascinating discussion on culture, religion, politics and the environment, before finding out each other's occupations. When Wayan heard I was writing a book on managing stress, he told me that he was always anxious about the projects he was managing and often felt sick going into the office. Working long hours, often away from home, added to his worries, as he was concerned about how his wife was coping with their three young children. He asked me what would help.

I taught Wayan some conscious breathing exercises. With great enthusiasm, he started practising them straight away and I settled into reading my book. A short while later, I noticed that he had fallen asleep. Just before the plane landed, Wayan woke. He told me with great delight that counting with the breath had helped him drop into a deep sleep very quickly – something he had been unable to do for a long time. That simple exercise had taken his attention away from troubling thoughts, as well as relaxing his body. He was delighted to have discovered such a powerful tool that he could easily incorporate into his busy schedule.

Now, I introduce this popular relaxation strategy to the medical students on the first day of their stress management course. On the following morning, I find it heart-warming to hear them share how the breathing exercises helped still their mind before sleep, focus better while studying or calm their anxiety when travelling on the underground. Conscious breathing is quick and easy to learn, and doing the exercises consistently for even a few minutes several times a day can be beneficial.

Some people become more tense and anxious when they focus on their breathing or try to meditate. You may have experienced that for yourself. If so, don't be concerned. It merely suggests that the other relaxation exercises described in the following sections might be more helpful. Once you are more able to relax, you can return to the breathing exercises.

The breath and the nervous system

Extreme anxiety and a rapid, pounding heartbeat were my constant companions when I had an overactive thyroid. One evening, while doing a breathing exercise during a yoga class, I noticed that holding my breath led to my heart rate speeding up even more. Yet when I breathed out slowly, it calmed down. Intrigued, when I got home, I did some research and discovered that there is a direct link between your breathing and heart rate. When you breathe in, it stimulates the part of the nervous system which produces stress hormones, increasing your heart rate and blood pressure; preparing your body to fight, flee or freeze. When you breathe out, the calming part of the nervous system is activated, encouraging rest, digestion and repair.¹ That explained why a longer exhalation helped slow my heart rate.

When we are stressed or anxious, our breathing changes to prepare us to fight, flee or freeze. In those situations, we tend

to hyperventilate, or over-breathe, with more breath coming in than going out. You might have noticed that when you are frightened, you might breathe in deeply, hold your breath or breathe more quickly. When you see something shocking in a film or on the news, you will probably gasp. Likewise, if you are highly anxious or heading towards a panic attack, you may start hyperventilating.

Over-breathing is commonly associated with stress² and has been found to occur in around 10% of the population.³ This might be helpful if you want to run away from a threat. However, since the exhalation is the calming part of the breath, over-breathing is not so useful in situations where you want to calm yourself. Unfortunately, the whole mind-body system is disturbed by over-breathing, as it disrupts the biochemistry of the body, leading to depletion of important minerals. The good news is that as soon as you are aware of what is happening, you can consciously change your breathing to help calm your anxiety, focus your attention and bring your body back into balance, or even avert a panic attack.

Physical activity can also calm the stress response. This helps to explain why someone might manage to control their anxiety while wandering around a shop, but when they get to the checkout counter and stop moving, the panic attack comes on. That is why it can be helpful to move your body, even marching on the spot, in situations where you feel uncomfortable. With our sedentary lifestyles, physical activity to relieve stress is not always practical, whereas conscious breathing can be used almost anytime, anywhere, without anyone knowing you are doing it. Practising the conscious breathing exercises, as described below, for even five to ten minutes, twice a day, can be invaluable in helping to relieve more prolonged distress.

Abdominal breathing: The key to calmness

How does your breath move your body? Do your shoulders rise and fall with each breath? Does your abdomen move? Upper-chest breathing is associated with stress and anxiety and tends to be more rapid and shallow.

Conversely, if your abdomen naturally expands on the inhalation and contracts on the exhalation, you are breathing into both the upper and lower part of the lungs, instead of just the upper chest. When you breathe from the belly, you engage the diaphragm, which helps to soothe your nervous system and relax your body. A few months of practising abdominal breathing can help you shift away from upper-chest breathing, thereby helping to calm anxiety. If you don't already breathe from your abdomen, you can learn how to do this in the experiential exercise.

Slowing your breathing

When you breathe through your nose, rather than your mouth, it helps reduce the rate of your breathing, which helps to calm your nervous system. You can see this for yourself, right now, by breathing in and out through an open mouth for several breaths and then changing to breathing through your nose. Pay attention to how your breathing slows when you inhale and exhale through your nose. It is also encouraging to know that breathing through your nose has also been proven to support health and wellbeing, as well as being associated with improved sleep.

Breathing out through pursed lips helps extend the out-breath and relax the body. You may like to experience that for yourself, too. Place your lips together and breathe out through a small narrow space between your lips, as if you are blowing out a candle, before breathing in through your nose. You will

get a sense of how pursing your lips slows your breathing by lengthening the exhalation.

Slowing your breathing is a simple way to calm anxiety and enhance wellbeing. Research suggests that around five to six breaths a minute is the optimum rate in terms of reducing the stress response and supporting all the systems in the body to function at peak efficiency.^{4, 5} It is interesting that researchers discovered that study participants both reciting the Hail Mary prayer and repeating yoga mantras were found to slow their breathing to around six breaths a minute.⁶ This may help to explain some of the wider benefits of these ancient rituals.

When you first start, you may be unable to reduce the rate to five to six breaths a minute. That's OK – you can gradually reduce your breathing at a rate that is comfortable for you. Each time you do this you are helping to balance your stress response.

Practise, practise, practise

When you first learn to drive a car, you start on the quiet backstreets. The further you drive, the more comfortable and automatic it becomes. Gradually you gain confidence on busier roads until you feel relaxed navigating the rush-hour traffic. The same happens with conscious breathing; the best way to hone your skills initially is to practise regularly, preferably when you are reasonably relaxed. As the breathing exercises become more natural and instinctive, you can use them in progressively more challenging situations.

If anxiety permeates your life and you are often on 'high alert', spending five to ten minutes, twice a day, doing these breathing exercises will be invaluable in shifting your body from a chronic

stress response to a more relaxed state – even if it takes a few weeks, which was what Amber discovered.

Conscious breathing and panic attacks

Amber often experienced high levels of anxiety, with her mind spiralling out of control, sometimes leading to a panic attack. She was fascinated to discover that subtle changes indicating over-breathing have been shown to occur up to an hour prior to a panic attack that might seem to occur ‘out of the blue’.⁷

During our first coaching session, she tried out each of the breathing exercises, as explained below. As soon as she lay down on her belly to practise breathing from her abdomen, she felt her anxiety easing. That instantaneous response motivated her to do that exercise every night before going to sleep, as her panic attacks often occurred when she went to bed. She also made a commitment to spend five minutes during her morning tea break to breathe in through her nose and out through pursed lips. She knew that the simplicity of this exercise would make it easy to do if she started to panic.

After practising twice a day for several weeks, Amber began to wonder whether it was making any difference. But five weeks later, she realized that instead of having a panic attack almost every week, she had only experienced the beginnings of one. What was even more encouraging is that, for the first time ever, she had been able to prevent the attack from escalating. Breathing in through her nose and exhaling through pursed lips had calmed her down. Then, feeling more in control, she could think more rationally and switch her attention to something boring, like painting a cupboard.

Previously, she had never been able to refocus her thoughts and avert a panic attack. Over the following five weeks, Amber only experienced the onset of one other panic attack, and, again, was able to stop it progressing. As her anxiety levels eased, she was less worried about situations in life that were beyond her control, and her sleep improved. Having more energy, she became far more patient with her children.

Amber's experience shows the benefits of persisting with these breathing exercises, even if you don't notice any changes for a while. Since everybody's response is different, you may need to practise the exercises for longer than five minutes, twice a day, in order to experience the full benefits. If you experience panic attacks or severe anxiety, in addition to using these exercises, I encourage you to seek help from your doctor, psychologist or other health professional.

Now, you have the opportunity to experience the benefits of these breathing exercises for yourself.

Experiential exercise: Conscious breathing

It is helpful to do this when you are in a safe, comfortable place. Later, when the exercises become familiar, you can practise them almost anywhere.

Allow 15–20 minutes.

Please note: *do not use these exercises while driving or when you need to pay careful attention.*

- 1. Do you breathe from your upper chest or your abdomen?**
 - Begin by breathing in and out through your nose. If your nose is blocked or you find this difficult, then inhale and exhale through partly closed lips.

Calm your anxiety

- Now relax your abdominal muscles, making sure you are not holding your belly in.
- Place your hand on your lower ribs, at the sides, and take a few deep breaths. If your ribs expand with the inhalation, it shows that you are breathing in the optimum way, using the diaphragm. If your ribs don't move, you can gently squeeze the lower ribs as you exhale and then allow them to expand as you inhale. This helps engage the diaphragm so that it naturally sinks as you breathe in and rises as you breathe out. Continue doing this for a few minutes.

To summarize, the key elements of abdominal breathing are:

- breathe in and out through your nose
- relax your belly
- place your hands on the lower ribs, at the sides
- feel your ribs expand as you breathe in
- squeeze your ribs lightly as you breathe out

If you tend to breathe from your upper chest, I invite you to practise abdominal breathing for five to ten minutes a day. Once it becomes more familiar, you can practise it in your daily life: while waiting for the kettle to boil, after a meal or watching TV. The more you practise, the sooner abdominal breathing will become natural and unconscious.

2. Abdominal breathing lying on your belly.

Here is another simple way to ensure you engage the diaphragm when you breathe. This exercise is especially helpful before sleep, or when you come home from work and want to release the stresses of the day. If you are in a quiet and comfortable place, I invite you to try it right now.

- Lie down on the floor, on your belly. Cross your arms and push your elbows away from you. Allow your forehead to rest on the backs of your hands. This position locks the upper part of your lungs so that you have to breathe from the abdomen.

Lying in this position for three to five minutes is all it takes to calm your mind and relax your body, and it is a fantastic way to prepare yourself for sleep.

3. Extending the exhalation.

- Breathe in and out through your nose at your normal, natural rhythm for a few breaths.
- Now, gently, and in your own time, lengthen your exhalation.
- If you find it easier, breathe out through pursed lips to extend the out-breath, before breathing in through your nose.

Take your time, only prolonging the exhalation for however long is comfortable for you. If you exhale for too long, you may become tense or get out of breath. If, for any reason, you are struggling or feel uncomfortable, take a break and try again later. Otherwise, continue to breathe in gently through your nose, and lengthen the out-breath, pursing your lips if that helps. Continue breathing in this way for three to five minutes.

4. Counting with the breath.

Count silently to yourself on the inhalation, and on the exhalation. Find the count that is comfortable for each part of the breath. Depending on the pace of your breathing, you may, for example:

- breathe in for a count of three... breathe out for a count of three; or

Calm your anxiety

- breathe in for a count of three... breathe out for a count of five

Whatever your count is right now, that's fine.

When you are ready, gradually, at your own pace, you can increase the count, by slowing the inhalation and extending the exhalation. It is not a race, so take your time. If you try to progress too fast, it can be counterproductive – you may start to feel tense or get out of breath.

When counting slowly, a count of four on the inhalation and six on the exhalation might naturally take you to around five to six breaths a minute. For most people, breathing at this rate helps restore the body to a state of calm. It is also the optimum rate for physical and psychological function when the body is relaxing.

5. Integrating conscious breathing into your daily routine.

Choose which of the above breathing exercises you would like to practise. It can also be helpful to combine counting with extending the exhalation.

Ideally, practise for five to ten minutes, but even three minutes is better than nothing!

Twice a day or more would be invaluable, especially if you are often anxious.

What time of day would work best for you?

- when you first wake up
- while travelling to work by train or bus
- during your lunch break
- sitting quietly at the end of your shift, before heading home
- before going to sleep

Once you are familiar with the exercises, you can discretely integrate them into your daily activities: during a coffee break, waiting for a client, walking the dog or washing up.

To summarize, the foundation of conscious breathing includes:

- abdominal breathing
- breathing in and out through the nose
- extending the exhalation (breathing out through pursed lips if you find it easier)
- counting with the breath, working towards a rhythm of in four, out six
- breathing at five to six breaths a minute

Set your intentions

Make a note in your reflective journal about which breathing exercise you will practise, when and for how long. When you write down your intentions, you are more likely to keep to them!

Once you have integrated conscious breathing exercises into your day, and you can calm your stress response, you might like to check out the other calming resources or move on to another principle.

Resources

A few breathing apps you may wish to explore include: Cardiac Coherence, Breathing Zone, Breathe2Relax.

4b. Remember the magical moments

The ability to access positive emotions at will is a powerful tool to calm anxiety and shift your mind, body and emotions to a more resourceful state.

Since Ruby had split up with her partner six months earlier, her anxiety could be triggered by the smallest concerns: worries about the car breaking down, an unexpected bill arriving in the post or the dread of seeing a particularly difficult client. Often, she woke in the morning feeling sick, occasionally retching, sometimes leading to a full-blown panic attack.

I asked her to think about a memory which brought up feelings of gratitude or appreciation. After a few moments, she remembered an early-morning walk along her favourite beach in Cornwall. In her imagination she relished having the vast expanse of beach to herself. With each step, she felt the damp sand sinking beneath her feet. Her footsteps were the only imprints on the pristine shore as she walked towards the sea. She gasped when the icy-cold water first splashed on her feet. The sun glinted on the water, and all she could hear was the gentle sound of waves. As she immersed herself in that memory, Ruby felt a warm, comfortable feeling in her chest – relaxed and at peace within herself.

After Ruby had connected to that feeling for a few minutes, I suggested that she imagine, or pretend, that she was breathing in and out through her heart – to help sustain the feeling of appreciation. Surprised how quickly the anxiety eased as she tuned in to that uplifting memory, Ruby decided to do this

exercise on waking and before each meal, and whenever she felt anxious or fearful. Taking herself back to that memory and imagining breathing through her heart was such a simple way to generate a calm and relaxed feeling inside.

After a while, Ruby explored other memories to evoke a feeling of gratitude: the companionship of her sister, and the pleasure of sitting in a comfortable armchair while listening to her favourite pieces of jazz. In the following months, the habitual sense of anxiety loosened its hold on Ruby. Things that used to trigger high levels of fear now only led to a moderate response, which she was able to dispel. She no longer woke up feeling sick. Now, she catches those anxious feelings early, and stops them before they take hold.

In addition to calming her fears, the commitment to remembering the magical moments reaped other benefits. Throughout her life, Ruby had had an extremely negative mindset. Always looking at the worst-case scenario, she had been unable to see any situation from a broader perspective, especially when it came to financial concerns. A few months of frequently accessing those positive, heartfelt emotions started to shift her mindset. She now has a far more positive frame of mind, even around money. No longer immobilized by fear, she can think more rationally and take appropriate action.

The power of positive emotions

Extensive research demonstrates how generating positive, heart-felt emotions can help calm the stress response and improve physical, mental and emotional function. A comprehensive review of the research suggests that developing ways to generate meaningful positive emotions

plays a valuable role in both physical and emotional wellbeing, as well as broadening your thinking.⁸ When you are able to think logically and rationally, your perception of a situation can change, as well as your behaviours. Fortunately, this is a skill that you can learn, as exemplified by Ruby.

If you are easily affected by the distress, pain or suffering of those you work with, it may be even more important for you to develop your skills in accessing positive emotions and reconnect to a sense of wellbeing. When you are in a state of balance within yourself, you are far more able to work effectively and continue to give your best. Another way of evoking positive emotions is to use a loving-kindness meditation practice as explored in *7a. Mindfulness and meditation*.

Elite athletes often use visualization to align body, mind and emotions towards success in a directed, purposeful way. Have you ever watched a tennis professional serve? Before they even swing the racket back, they feel the ball in their hand and know exactly how high they will throw it. They see in their mind's eye the precise trajectory of the ball and imagine it landing in the perfect position while listening to the whack of the ball as it hits the strings. By tuning in to certain memories, athletes create anchors that enable them to access feelings such as confidence, motivation, success or determination.

You can choose different magical moments to create a variety of anchors to help you consciously invoke positive feelings. Before seeing a distressed client, you might access a memory of when you helped someone with skill and compassion. If you are breaking up with your partner, a memory of being supported by a close group of friends might help you feel more comfortable, safe and secure.

Connecting to your heart

Research suggests that activating core heart feelings such as appreciation, love, caring and forgiveness is particularly effective in producing beneficial changes in your mind, body and emotions.⁹ Those feelings have the added benefit of being the easiest ones to self-generate. That is why the following experiential exercise focuses on accessing a sense of appreciation. However, you can choose to connect to any positive feeling or emotion you want, whether inner strength, confidence, courage or calmness. If, for any reason, you start to feel uncomfortable with one memory, let it go and choose another one.

The beneficial effects of connecting to a resourceful state can be amplified by imagining, or pretending, that you are breathing in and out through your heart. Once you become familiar with heart-focused breathing, you may also find that it helps you generate positive emotions. Both elements of this practice support each other. This can be useful when you are anxious or distressed, and I invite you to stop reading now, and experience it for yourself. Begin by placing your hand on your heart, and then imagine that you are breathing in and out through your heart for three or four breaths... How does that change what you are feeling or sensing?

In the following exercise, if you find it difficult to access a positive emotion, you may like to spend a few minutes doing heart-focused breathing first.

A word of caution

The more frequently we consciously invoke positive emotions, the quicker we can generate them. However, it is essential

to acknowledge that if we are experiencing uncomfortable emotions – whether anger, guilt, shame or grief – they are there for a reason. Consciously generating positive emotions at will does *not* address the deeper factors that underlie persistent distressing emotions. We need to find ways to identify and process those emotions. One effective way of doing this is to use expressive writing, as explored in Section 3a.

Remembering the magical moments is the tool that Ruby used to deal with the hurt and anger from the break-up with her partner. However, once she had more control over her anxiety, she was then ready to engage with an expressive writing practice. If you experience disturbing emotions often, you may also want to check out that strategy, or one of the other resources related to Principle 3. If upsetting emotions persist it can be helpful to seek help from a psychotherapeutic professional.

Experiential exercise: Remember the magical moments

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 10–15 minutes.*

It is best to do this in a safe and quiet place, where you won't be disturbed. Switch off your mobile and make yourself comfortable. Take a few slow breaths, extending the out-breath each time.

1. Choose a memory.

Take a few moments to think of something that you appreciate or are grateful for. It may be related to a specific magical moment or something you value in your life now, such as:

- being in a loving relationship

The Thriving Giver

- the warmth and kindness of a friend
- the joy of having a small patch of ground to grow a few vegetables
- the comforting feel of your cat on your lap
- a peak experience from a holiday
- listening to your favourite music track

Choose one of those memories, simply trusting yourself as to which one will be powerful. You can always repeat the exercise with another memory later.

2. Immerse yourself in that memory using all your senses.

If you can see an image, allow that picture to become even clearer... Then, make it brighter and more colourful if you can. If you are unable to create a clear picture in your mind, that's fine, as the process can be even more effective when you incorporate all your senses and access the associated *feelings* too, rather than focusing on the images alone. For example, if you imagine a garden, you might:

- *sense* the shapes, colours and textures of the flowers or trees around you
- *feel* the springiness of the grass beneath your feet, the warmth of the sun on your face or the breeze in your hair
- *smell* the fragrance of the flowers
- *hear* the birds singing, or the rustling of leaves in the trees

3. Where in your body is the feeling or sensation associated with appreciation?

You may feel it in your chest or around your heart. If you are focusing on another emotion, you might sense it somewhere else in your body. Immerse yourself in those pleasant sensations and allow them to become

even stronger – in whatever way works for you. As you sense those feelings of appreciation, you can consciously allow them to flow freely, spreading to every cell in your body.

4. Imagine breathing in and out through your heart.

You may find it easier to place one hand over the area of your heart as you pretend or imagine that the breath is coming in and out of the centre of your chest. Breathe a little more slowly and deeply than normal, while staying connected to that heart-felt feeling of appreciation. This might help you access the positive emotions. If not, that's fine. Simply move on to the next step.

5. Integrate the anchor into your daily life.

Now that you have established an anchor for appreciation, you can access that feeling whenever you need it. Each time you use the anchor it will become easier to access. Tune in to the magical moment whenever you need it. However, it is also helpful to do this as part of your routine by choosing specific situations where you automatically trigger the anchor, for example, when you:

- make a cup of coffee
- wash the dishes
- file your notes away at the end of the day
- wake up in the morning or before going to sleep
- are on your way to or from work

You can place a photo or postcard related to your magical moment in a prominent place. When it is on your desk, bedside table or used as a screensaver on your phone or laptop, it will remind you to tune in to that memory.

Set your intentions

Decide when you will practise using this anchor, so that it becomes part of your daily routine. It is helpful to make a note in your reflective journal as a gentle reminder of when you have committed to doing it. The more familiar it becomes, the more easily you will be able to calm your mind and body in more challenging situations.

Once you become adept at using this skill, you will know whether you need an additional resource to soothe anxiety or whether you're ready to focus on another principle.

Resources

The Heart Math Institute has carried out extensive research using Heart Rate Variability, and developed useful resources and free downloads for stress reduction and enhancing relationships. www.Heartmath.org

4c. Grounding: Connect to the earth

The ability to connect to the earth beneath your feet is one of the simplest ways to bring yourself into the present moment, and to help you feel more calm, safe and secure.

You may have noticed for yourself that when you sense the ground beneath your feet, physically and emotionally, you feel stronger and more balanced.

Grounding exercises can be especially useful if you:

- feel faint, dizzy or light-headed
- daydream or space out easily
- feel unsafe
- can't stop anxious thoughts swirling around your head
- are starting to panic
- find it difficult to focus or are easily distracted
- are a highly sensitive person
- have experienced trauma in the past

Feeling your feet on the earth and releasing frustration

When Ella focuses her attention on feeling her feet on the floor, it helps her connect to the earth. When grounded, it brings her into the present moment, and she finds it easier to let go of upsets from the past, or worries about the future. The steadiness of the ground beneath her feet helps her feel more centred, and capable of doing anything. If she loses that strong foundation, the confidence dissipates and she starts to doubt herself.

Another simple way to ground yourself is to walk barefoot on the grass and focus on all the sensations of your feet on the ground. When you are unable to go outside, you can do this in your imagination instead. You can pay particular attention to the feeling of the earth beneath your feet, and whether the ground is hard or soft, damp or parched, or how long the grass is. You may prefer to imagine yourself walking along a sandy beach, noticing whether the sand is wet or dry, cold or warm. You might feel the sand sinking beneath your feet or spreading up between your toes. Or, like Daniel, you may wish to ground yourself by sitting against a tree.

Daniel was exasperated when there was a problem with the booking system at work. No one would listen to his concerns, even though he was unable to see clients waiting for urgent dental treatment. By the end of the day, he was fuming and his back and shoulders were rigid. Knowing the importance of finding a way to calm down, he drove to Richmond Park and sat underneath his favourite oak tree. He imagined releasing all the anger and tension into the roots of the tree, and deep into the earth. Then he visualized white, healing energy coming in through the top of his head, until his whole body was filled with that fresh, new, calming energy. By the time he went home, he felt much more relaxed and was able to enjoy the evening with his family.

The 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise

This is a great resource to use when you are feeling anxious, overwhelmed or your mind is in turmoil. This sensory exercise is a fast and effective way to help regain control of your thoughts and bring you into the present moment using the five senses: sight, touch, sound, smell and taste. This is quicker than

the main exercise of this section; you may wish to try it out now, so that it is familiar if you ever need it.

Start by focusing your attention on your breathing, and take a few gentle, slow breaths, extending the exhalation each time. Then, go through the following steps to help ground yourself.

- 5. **See.** Describe 5 things you can see around you, and say them out loud (*I see a laptop; I see a photo*).
- 4. **Feel.** Name 4 things you can feel by paying attention to your body, and say them out loud (*I feel my feet on the floor; I feel the hair on the back of my neck*).
- 3. **Hear.** Name 3 things you can hear, and say them out loud (*I hear the clock ticking; I hear the sound of my breathing*).
- 2. **Smell.** Name 2 things you can smell right now. If that's not possible, think of 2 smells that you like, and say them out loud (*I like the smell of freshly baked bread; I like the fragrance of honeysuckle*).
- 1. **Taste.** Name 1 thing you can taste (*I taste toothpaste/ coffee/ cheese in a sandwich*). If you can't taste anything, then say your favourite food.

This simple 5-4-3-2-1 exercise is a quick and effective strategy to help you relax by redirecting your attention away from whatever is worrying you. Like Ella's simple yet powerful exercise of feeling her feet on the floor, this sensory exercise is more immediate. It can be especially helpful if you are highly anxious and need to calm down quickly and ground yourself in the here-and-now.

For a more in-depth grounding experience, try the following Tree of Life exercise. You may be surprised how quickly it

helps you feel more calm, steady, safe and secure. If you find it hard to ‘visualize’ or see pictures clearly in your mind’s eye, you can *feel* or *sense* the roots, rather than using images alone. You can find an audio of this exercise on the ‘Resources’ page of my website: www.sarahkuipers.com.

Experiential exercise: Grounding – connect to the earth

Allow 10 minutes.

I suggest you read the whole exercise through before doing it. Ensure you are in a safe place and sit with a straight back, with both feet firmly planted on the floor.

1. Sense yourself as the Tree of Life.

- Close your eyes and become aware of the soles of your feet on the floor, and feel or sense the solidity of the ground beneath you.
- Now, imagine, see or sense yourself as a sturdy tree, maybe your favourite one, with your legs representing the strong trunk of the tree.
- See or sense the roots of the tree extending down from the soles of your feet, deep into the earth. The deeper those roots go, and the wider they spread out to the sides, the more steady, stable and secure you may feel... Allow yourself to extend those roots even more, deeper into the earth, and further and further out to the sides.
- With each out-breath, imagine your roots spreading even further... You might see or sense the ground parting as they lengthen. Continue extending all your roots deep, deep down, into the core of the earth and extending out in all directions.

- Spend a few minutes sensing your connection to the earth as the roots extend even further, deep into the earth and out to the sides.

2. Connect to the feelings and sensations in your body.

- As you connect to the ground in this way, you may begin to sense a feeling of steadiness or stability. You might feel more calm, safe and secure.
- Allow yourself to embrace the comfortable feelings of being grounded and connected to the earth. The more you practise, the easier and more natural it becomes.

3. When you are ready, take a slow breath in, and extend your out-breath, before gently bringing your attention back to your surroundings.

As you open your eyes, keep those calm, steady feelings with you. Maintain the sense of being grounded, and have a good stretch if you wish.

4. Check in with yourself.

- How well could you connect with the sense of the earth beneath your feet?
- What has changed?
- What happened to your mind while you were doing this grounding exercise?
- How are you feeling now?
- To what extent do you feel more calm, steady, safe or secure?

Once you are familiar with the Tree of Life exercise, you may prefer to do it standing up. If so, ensure you have a stable base by placing your feet hip-width apart, and hold on to or lean against something if necessary. You may find you need to keep your eyes open throughout.

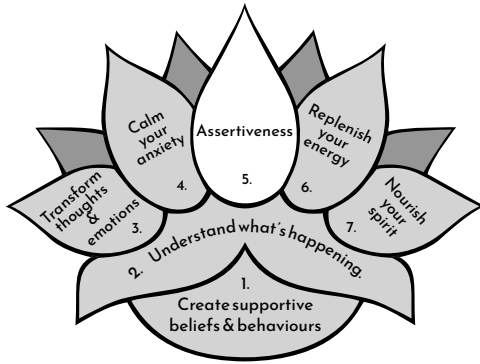
Set your intentions

As with any strategy, the more you practice, the more effective it will be. If you found the Tree of Life exercise helpful, over the next week, I invite you to set aside five minutes every day to practise it. When would be the best time for you?

- when you first wake up
- on arriving at work
- after you have taken the children to school
- during your lunch break

What will help remind you to do the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory exercise when you need it?

Once you have developed your skills in grounding yourself with these exercises and incorporated them into your schedule, you may wish to check out other calming strategies. It is invaluable to have a range of resources to manage anxiety, each of which will complement the other, before progressing to another principle.



PRINCIPLE 5

Assertiveness: Step into your power

Having spent much of my life failing to stand up for myself, the following folktale has been invaluable for me, and may also touch a chord with you.

There was once a snake who terrorized all the villagers by biting them. Even the donkeys, dogs and chickens were not safe. One day, a holy man came, and when the locals told him what had been happening, he committed to teaching the snake about non-violence. The snake was touched by the kindness and authority of the holy man and promised to change his ways, and not to harm anyone or anything ever again. Unfortunately, once the holy man left, some of the villagers were still furious with the snake and attacked it with sticks and stones. Finally, the snake hid under a boulder to protect itself.

When the holy man returned to the village, he found the snake miserable, bruised and starving. On asking what had happened, the snake explained that some of the locals had been tormenting him. ‘Yes, I did teach you not to bite’, said the holy man, ‘but I didn’t forbid you to hiss. Sometimes it’s helpful to be fierce.’ Once the snake understood its mistake, it slithered away hissing.

It has taken me a while to feel more comfortable being fierce, yet that inner strength is essential when we want to be assertive, as there will always be some people who want to test our boundaries.

Assertiveness and setting boundaries are two sides of the same coin; they work synergistically. Establishing clear boundaries enables you to protect your priorities: your health, emotional wellbeing, relationships, energy and physical space. Being able to stand up for yourself, to say ‘no’ to unreasonable requests

and to set limits on unacceptable behaviour are essential skills for enhancing self-care and creating a life in which you can thrive.

You may already have discovered that when you allow someone to overstep your boundaries, you feel angry, resentful or upset. Likewise, when you fail to stand up for yourself, it knocks your confidence and self-respect. If you are intuitive and highly sensitive to others, it is even more important to develop skills in assertiveness. When people overstep your boundaries, the emotional or energetic impact on you may be greater than on someone else.

Like the snake in the story, people often confuse assertiveness with aggression. However, it is possible to stand firm in a calm, clear and respectful way without shouting, getting angry or being confrontational. Assertiveness also entails respecting and valuing the other person as well as yourself, so you won't always get your own way!

Many people feel apprehensive about becoming more assertive, especially if, up until now, they have had a tendency to avoid upsetting anyone. However, assertiveness is one of the most important principles to master if you wish to become a Thriving Giver. Being able to set boundaries is a pre-requisite for learning to value, respect and nurture yourself. You will be able to sustain the energy, enthusiasm and joy for your life, and everything that's important to you. Only when you thrive can you give from a cup that's overflowing.

It takes courage to stand firm, and the five resources related to this principle will help you develop your skills, step by step. You can do this at a pace that is comfortable for you, starting

with easier situations first. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *5a. Learn to say 'no'* – discover how and when to say 'no'.
- *5b. Develop skills in assertiveness* – explore when to adopt a stronger stance, as well as the key elements of assertiveness.
- *5c. Become the architect of your life* – reflect on ways to fine-tune your work or personal life to ensure that your lifestyle is sustainable.
- *5d. Create transition rituals* – consider a variety of approaches to 'disconnect' from the distress, frustration, stress or worries about work so they don't seep into your personal life.
- *5e. Enrol support at home* – reflect on different ways to create a more supportive dynamic in your personal life.

5a. Learn to say 'no'

Giving yourself permission to say 'no' without feeling guilty is an essential component of valuing yourself and creating a life in which you thrive.

If, up until now, you have had a tendency to go along with what other people want, it is natural that you may feel anxious, uncomfortable or worried about standing firm. Many of us find it hard to say 'no'. So be kind to yourself, and acknowledge your concerns. You may decide to become more adept at using the calming resources in Principle 4 to support you as you embark on this journey of becoming more assertive. Learning to say 'no' is a crucial component of reducing stress, enhancing self-care and learning to thrive.

When you give yourself permission to say 'no', it becomes easier to carve out time for relaxation, creativity, jogging, meditation or having fun with family and friends. You have more opportunity to replenish your energy and infuse your life with joy. You can then give from a space of replenishment, rather than depletion.

As a Thriving Giver we can prioritize self-care and continue to give of our best, whether to family, clients, students or a cause we are committed to. When we take care of ourselves, we have plenty of fuel to sustain our enthusiasm, energy or passion for whatever is important to us. When we stop allowing people to exploit our kind nature, we also build self-respect and are less likely to feel frustrated or disappointed in ourselves.

Victoria took on the challenge of using her nursing skills in a prison. She learnt very quickly how to keep herself safe while running a ward for inmates with mental health problems. Her calm temperament was a great asset in situations where difficult and sometimes dangerous behaviour was a daily occurrence. It also helped her develop relationships with some of the prisoners, who began to talk to her and trusted her to get things done. Nevertheless, significant staff shortages were a considerable problem.

Victoria's repeated requests to the managers for additional help fell on deaf ears. There were never enough staff to run the ward safely. She knew that if the ward was shut down following an investigation by the authorities, it would be her in the firing line, not the managers. Worried about losing her registration as a nurse, Victoria finally gave in her notice. She was sad to leave, knowing how well she had held the unit together. However, the risk of not being able to work again as a nurse was too great, and it was time to say 'no' to those unacceptable working conditions.

What holds you back from saying 'no'?

When we were toddlers, it was probably easy to refuse to do something. Yet as we grew up, we may have unconsciously adopted unhelpful beliefs, such as, *saying 'no' is rude, selfish, aggressive or unkind*, or *other people's needs are more important than our own*. For some of us, our need for love, approval or being wanted makes it more difficult for us to say 'no'. However, sometimes what we want from others, whether it is respect, love or appreciation, is what we need to learn to give to ourselves. These seven principles will encourage you to give

yourself the same level of kindness, attention and care that you give so freely to others. Only when you value and nurture yourself can you become a Thriving Giver.

Having completed Principle 1, you will have released unhelpful beliefs that may have kept you safe as a child, and created new ones that support you in finding the courage to say 'no'. Once you start to communicate your needs in an honest way, you may well find that other people value and respect you more.

How to say 'no'

Here are a few practical pointers that will be supportive as you embark on this journey of standing up for yourself.

Start small

As with mastering any new skill, initially you may find it hard to choose the right words, or to be kind as well as firm; sometimes your efforts might seem rather clumsy. Practising in a variety of 'safe' situations helps build your confidence to cope with more emotionally charged scenarios. In the reflective exercise below, you begin by standing firm in easier situations first. You can hone your skills with a pushy telephone salesperson, an unhelpful shop assistant or a demanding neighbour. When someone asks you a personal question, you could tell them you don't want to answer it. Every time you say 'no', the easier it becomes, while also building your confidence in dealing with more tricky situations. You may also find it reassuring that most people are not upset when you don't go along with their request.

Remember, also, that you have permission to change your mind! If you have already agreed to do something, it is OK to

decide later that you don't want to do it, as long as you keep people informed.

Avoid the indirect 'no'

For many of us, if we go along with a request while wishing we had said 'no', we might mess up the job, 'forget' to do it, cancel at the last minute or feel resentful. Our subliminal behaviour betrays the fact that we wanted to say 'no', even though we agreed to the request. Unfortunately, that indirect response tends to be frustrating for everyone. Generally, giving a firm and clear 'no', refusing to do something unless we genuinely want to say 'yes', is better for everyone. You may be surprised how you feel more comfortable being honest and direct, rather than responding in a way that can sometimes be manipulative.

Four tips for saying 'no'

The following tips have transformed the lives of numerous clients, helping them to build confidence and learn to value themselves. You will probably recognize which ones are most relevant for you.

1. Check your body's response.

Have you ever noticed, when somebody asks you to do something and you really want to say 'no', that your body responds almost instantaneously? It might be a clenching of your jaw, a sinking feeling in your stomach, tightness in your chest or simply an inner knowing. It is helpful to tune in to the message from your body before agreeing to do something.

2. ‘Let me think about it and I will let you know’.

If you tend to automatically say ‘yes’ to requests, you might like to practise saying this, even when you know how you want to respond. When you allow yourself time to step back and reflect, it is often easier to decline the request. Even if you don’t want to check other commitments, it can help you build up the courage to say ‘no’, or to request more information before making a decision. This is also a great strategy in situations when you are more likely to agree to a request without considering it carefully, such as when you are tired, in a rush or are with a group of people.

3. Avoid excuses, unless they are genuine.

A direct and firm response without an explanation gives a clear message that is harder to dispute. If you often make up excuses on the spur of the moment, you might find it easier to simply refuse the request. However, if you have a genuine reason for saying ‘no’, then sometimes, especially in work situations, it may be important to explain briefly why you are unable to help. The key is to avoid mixed messages by defending your reasons or apologizing.

4. Be kind, yet firm.

Being respectful and communicating in a calm and considerate way are essential components of assertiveness. You can refuse the request while still being empathetic, using phrases such as *I wish I could help you, but I can’t*, or *I do hope you find someone else*. In that way, you demonstrate your understanding of the other person’s needs, while also valuing yourself.

You will intuitively know which of these tips may be most relevant for you.

Get family and friends on side

Other people may find it difficult when you start to stand firm, especially if you have previously gone along with their plans. It can be helpful to explain to those closest to you that your programme of self-care could mean that you say ‘no’ more often, or you might express your needs and opinions more freely. If someone can’t accept your ‘no’, they are probably not a true friend. Those who genuinely love you and care for your wellbeing will encourage and support you, even if initially it upsets the dynamics in a family or friendship group.

This can apply to children and other dependants, too. It is in our nature as parents to want to help and support our children; however, sometimes when we say ‘no’ to a child’s requests, it develops their confidence, sense of independence and self-reliance. When our teenager asks us to wash his football kit ready for the next day, we can explain that he knows it only gets washed if he puts it in the laundry basket, and he can do it himself if he wants. Each time we wash his kit at the last minute, we prevent him from learning a valuable lesson; whereas, when we step back, we give him an opportunity to grow.

In a similar way, Sophie was keen to ensure her daughters became financially independent once they left university. Her eldest, Eliza, wanted to get a dog as soon as she had graduated, even before getting a job. Sophie told her that she didn’t think it was a good idea, but knew that Eliza had to make her own decisions. Her daughter ended up renting an expensive flat so she had a home for herself and the Labrador puppy. Within a few months Eliza was in debt and asked to borrow some money. Sophie refused to bail her out, as she was keen for Eliza

to learn from her own mistakes. It took a few months, but eventually Eliza found a job, and she now takes greater care in managing her finances.

Visualization: Practising in your imagination

Professional sportspeople often use visualization as part of their training regime, and you can do the same to build your confidence in standing firm in challenging situations. Each time you imagine yourself saying ‘no’, it becomes easier to do it in real life. For example, if you are in private practice, a client might often turn up late and expect a full-length session. You may want to find the courage to inform her that as from now you need to finish on time.

In your imagination you might picture the scenario in which your client arrives late. Notice the details of the room around you, and maybe the expression on the client’s face. If you can’t see clear pictures in your mind, that’s OK. In fact, when you use as many senses as possible, it amplifies the power of the exercise. For example, you might tune in to the sensation of your feet in your shoes, feel yourself standing tall and hear the firmness in your voice. You could picture or sense yourself taking a deep breath and breathing out slowly, before saying calmly and clearly that you need to finish on time as you have another client afterwards. You can imagine being firm, yet kind and empathetic. Having practised in your imagination a few times, you will feel more confident about being assertive in real life. You also have the option of using one of the calming strategies, whether it is conscious breathing, remembering the magical moments or a grounding exercise, before doing the visualization.

The following reflective exercise gives you an opportunity to explore when and where you may wish to say 'no'.

Reflective exercise: Learn to say 'no'

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 10 minutes.

- 1. Make a list of at least ten different situations where you tend to say 'yes' when you really want to say 'no'.**

Consider circumstances in relation to friends, family, work, students, colleagues, neighbours, strangers, your children etc. Think laterally and explore a wide range of different situations, places and people.

- 2. Put the list in order of difficulty, with the easiest situations at the top.**

You can put the situations in which it will be more challenging to stand firm lower on your list. Then you can gradually build your skills by practising in 'safer' scenarios first.

- 3. Check in with yourself; how might you benefit from saying 'no' in those situations?**

What impact might it have on your:

- confidence and self-esteem?
- time?
- ability to enhance self-care?

How might others benefit when you say 'no'?

- 4. Which of the four tips would be most helpful for you?**

- Check your body's response.
- 'Let me think about it and I will let you know'.

- Avoid excuses, unless they are genuine.
- Be kind, yet firm.

Set your intentions

Having identified when or where you would like to say 'no', highlight the easier situations. Make a note of the tips that would be most helpful for you, so they are at the forefront of your mind. In what situations might visualization be helpful for building your courage in saying 'no'? When will you do the visualization – before starting work, during morning tea break or after dropping the children at school? Alternatively, you may simply use visualization in advance of a more challenging situation.

Once you feel more comfortable in saying 'no', you can progress to the next section and explore other ways to become more assertive.

5b. Develop skills in assertiveness

Assertiveness is inextricably linked to confidence, self-respect and self-care. It enables you to create a life that supports and sustains you on every level: physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Anna suffered from bipolar disorder and had been admitted to psychiatric units several times after attempting to take her own life. She had been referred to me by a psychiatrist. In the first session I discovered that, sadly, in spite of all the years of professional help, no one had helped her manage a major challenge in her life: a husband who criticized her mercilessly. It was not surprising that she was so overwrought and her self-esteem was on the floor.

Please stop criticizing me became Anna's primary response whenever her husband put her down, whether it was because dinner was late, she was driving too slowly or had forgotten to water the plants. It was a challenge to verbalize what she had wanted to say for years. Gradually, as she set limits on her husband's unreasonable behaviour, her confidence and self-respect blossomed. Over the next few months, Anna also became more assertive with her daughter, who had a fiery temper, and a fellow choir member whose unpleasant comments were hurtful.

Once she started to value herself, Anna stopped being at her husband's beck and call. When she allowed herself time for jogging, a music group and meeting friends for coffee, she felt less isolated. When her husband was rude to her friends at a

concert, she warned him that she would not invite him next time. Standing firm and explaining the consequences of his actions encouraged him to modify his antisocial behaviour. In time they started to enjoy doing more things together: going to the theatre and having weekends away. After developing a healthier relationship with her husband, Anna was more able to appreciate his loyalty and generosity. Over the next few years, Anna's mental health stabilized and she was discharged by the psychiatrist.

Anna's story highlights the inextricable link between assertiveness, confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Setting limits on her husband's difficult behaviour, and building the courage to do it time and time again, was an essential step in valuing and caring for herself. Anna's experience is matched by so many clients who have wanted to boost their confidence or self-esteem. A detailed case history frequently reveals their difficulty in setting clear boundaries at work, or with family or friends. It is wonderful to witness their burgeoning confidence and self-respect as they learn to stand up for themselves, and how they become less concerned by rejection or disapproval. More often than not, they discover that when they value themselves, other people become more respectful and considerate.

Asking for what you want

As an oceanographer, I was expecting to spend time at sea, only to find myself stuck in an office writing reports on predicted maximum wave heights. It was an era before satellite forecasts, and I asked my boss whether he could arrange for me to go offshore. A few months later, I was on a weather ship 150 miles northwest of the Shetland Islands, teaching

the Norwegian crew how to do four-hourly weather reports. I loved the exhilaration of being surrounded by the vast expanse of ocean and watching the glorious sunrises and sunsets.

The highlight of the trip was during a gale, with winds of over 35 knots. Listening to the howling wind and watching the colossal waves coming towards the bow of the ship, I was in my element. The highest waves measured over 67 feet. Witnessing the awesome power of nature was a spiritual experience that I will always treasure. If I hadn't asked, I would never have had that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

We tend to imagine that people know what we want, but this is often not the case. When you make a clear request, you ensure there is no confusion or misunderstanding, whether asking your partner to cook the evening meal, telling someone to stop shouting at you or asking to reduce the number of shifts you are working. When you make a request, you may not get what you want. If so, don't take it personally. As you become more assertive, you build your self-respect and gradually you learn to overcome the fear of rejection or of upsetting people.

Tackling the courageous conversations

Alyssa's manager rubbed everyone up the wrong way and his evangelist approach was disruptive for the whole team. When he challenged her about something in front of colleagues, she decided it was time to stand her ground. However, she recognized the importance of stepping back and compartmentalizing everything so that her emotions didn't sabotage the conversation.

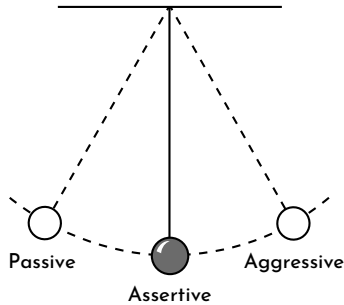
Having chosen the right time to confront her manager, Alyssa acknowledged that he was under a great deal of pressure. She commented on how it was often difficult to decompress from one meeting to another, and to have a fresh attitude going into the next one. She also mentioned that things may have happened that day which were not conducive to him being patient, or understanding what she was trying to achieve. Alyssa then commented on how she felt he had been unjustified in some of the things he had said to her in front of the whole team, and how that did not help her performance. She asked him to speak to her privately in the future if there was an issue about her work, and not to belittle her or cut her off in front of other people. Alyssa felt so empowered speaking her truth, and was surprised when her manager actually listened to her and apologized. After that conversation, she felt much more comfortable working with him and her stress levels reduced significantly.

Alyssa's masterful approach of being empathetic, looking at the bigger picture and being specific in stating the behaviour that she found unacceptable led to a great outcome for both of them. When you confront someone without blaming, judging or criticizing them, they are more able to hear what you have to say without being defensive.

For so much of my life I avoided having those difficult conversations, whether it was with work colleagues, estate agents, lawyers or friends, sometimes with devastating consequences. I lost the contract for a fantastic training project as a result of avoiding one of those conversations with a business partner. Now, I am committed to having those tricky conversations. Sometimes I find it easier to state at the beginning that I feel awkward about having to say this, but it is something I have to do.

Finding the balance

Assertiveness combines firmness with respect for others. It draws on the best qualities of passive and aggressive behaviour. It is centred between the two extremes, as shown in the following diagram.



The relationship between passive, assertive and aggressive behaviour

In the past, my passive nature meant that I tended to go along with things and rarely expressed what I was thinking or feeling. However, when I made a conscious choice to be more assertive, sometimes the pendulum swung too far towards an aggressive stance. One of my sons reminded me of a time when he was young and we were eating out at a restaurant, a rare occurrence in those days. The food was tasteless and James remembered me complaining loudly to the waiter, much to his embarrassment. It takes practice to find that mid-point, where you stand firm in a polite, kind and diplomatic way. For me, developing skills in assertiveness is a lifelong journey. I don't always get it right, even now, and then I reflect on how I could have handled the situation better.

Sometimes the most difficult people to be assertive with are those closest to us. For me, it was having to stop my elderly

mother from driving in order to prevent her from injuring herself or others. I was able to stand firm and be empathetic. I understood her anger and resentment at the loss of her freedom, while at the same time having to face the harsh reality of her declining mental and physical health. She was furious with me initially, but forgave me after a while.

A word of caution

There will be situations in which you may not be able to be assertive. If you work in a large organization, are under pressure to meet targets or are worried about losing your job, you may choose to go along with other people's wishes. If so, it is even more important for you to set clear boundaries in the areas of your life and work that are within your control. You can hone your skills in those situations and learn how to negotiate well or communicate your wants, needs and opinions in a calm and confident way.

The key elements of assertive communication

Discerning what you want or how you feel is the first requirement when being assertive. Only then can you choose how to respond. The following points will help you communicate in a way that ensures your message is understood.

Get their attention

Take care to choose a time when the person is not preoccupied. You may need to find a private space to avoid concerns that others are listening. To ensure you have their full attention, you can say their name, or use phrases such as:

- *Is this a good time to talk?*
- *John, I need to ask you something...*
- *Janine, please can you...*

- *Just a moment...*
- *I'd like you to listen to what I have to say...*

State clearly, calmly and firmly what you want, and when

Be concise, avoiding any preamble, to help ensure the other person knows what you want. Be positive and polite. You can also express how you are feeling, in a neutral tone, without any judgement or blame. Your aim is for the other person to understand your needs and wishes, for example:

- *Stop shouting at me*
- *I am not able to help you*
- *Please can you write your notes more clearly, so I can read them?*
- *I am upset that you didn't let me know you were coming home late*

Remember, when you make a request, you also need to respect their right to say 'no'!

Listen to understand their perspective

Pay attention to any underlying messages and intentions, as well as the words, so that you understand their feelings and points of view.

Respond in a firm and empathic way

When you acknowledge the other person's feelings or concerns, and summarize what they said, they feel understood, and it helps defuse their emotions. You can also choose to negotiate or find a compromise.

- *I understand that you are angry that the train was cancelled, but please stop taking your anger out on me.*

Assertiveness: Step into your power

- *I can see that you are worried that we have been unable to get the test results back in time. However, I warned you that the timescale was very tight.*
- *I know that you have done your best, but the problem has not been resolved, and we need to find a solution.*

State the consequences

Sometimes you may need to give an even stronger message by informing the other person about the implications of doing or not doing something.

- *Next time, please give me 24 hours' notice when you cancel an appointment, otherwise I will have to charge you.*
- *I will help you now, but this is the last time I will do it at the last minute. Next time, you will have to ask someone else.*
- *If you continue shouting at me, I will leave the room.*
- *If you are not ready by 7 pm, I won't have time to drive you to your friend's house.*

Repeat

You can be persistent by calmly repeating the same statement to ensure the message is understood. Avoid getting side-tracked or involved in an argument. To get their attention again, you can use phrases such as:

- *Just a moment...*
- *Before you...*
- *I would like you to hear what I've got to say...*
- *As I was saying...*

Sometimes you might need to move on by changing the conversation, bringing the meeting to a close or leaving the

room if appropriate. This also discourages the other person from trying to change your mind.

These key elements are simply guidelines, and some may not be relevant in every situation. There may be times, for example, when the message is stronger without being empathetic, or acknowledging someone's feelings.

Non-verbal aspects of communication

A dog, when protecting its puppies or guarding its owner, stands its ground with hackles raised, looking with unwavering attention. It makes itself appear as large and formidable as possible. Its body language conveys a convincing message even without growling or barking. Similarly, your body posture, gestures, facial expression and tone of voice are powerful tools that can reinforce your assertive stance. You may have noticed how you instinctively speak more slowly to convey a strong message, or put your hands out in front of you to stop someone coming too close.

Developing greater conscious awareness of the following non-verbal elements of communication will enhance your skills in assertiveness.

- **Upright and open posture** – stand tall, with your head up, shoulders back and arms uncrossed, and plant your feet firmly on the floor. This helps you ‘fill the space’, giving an impression of more power.
- **Voice** – use a warm, clear, calm and firm voice. You can also slow the tempo, increase the volume or lower the pitch in order to command more attention.
- **Eye contact** – hold good eye contact without staring.
- **Relax and breathe.**

When we stand up tall, we breathe more deeply and our voices tend to drop; whereas, when we are slouched or sitting, we tend to breathe from the upper chest. This may help to explain why, whenever I have an uncomfortable call to make, I stand up, take a deep breath and breathe out slowly before making the call. Walking around the room while speaking also helps me connect with my inner confidence.

You can practise these non-verbal elements of communication at any time in normal, daily life. Adopting a tougher stance, standing tall with your feet firmly placed on the floor, can help you connect with your inner strength. Depending on where you are, you may wish to try this for yourself, right now. Even if you are sitting down, alternate between a powerful stance and then swap to a more slouched posture. You may be surprised how changing your posture can help boost your confidence.

If you have a quiet voice, and find it difficult to get people's attention, you can 'play' with your voice at home, with friends, your dog or when you are alone. You may find that your children respond more quickly when you increase the volume slightly, drop your pitch or speak more slowly.

When you develop your skills in the verbal and non-verbal elements of communication, people are more likely to respect the boundaries you set.

Riding the waves

When you choose to respect and value yourself by being assertive, you may not always get the outcome you are seeking. The other person might ignore you, refuse your request, respond with sarcasm or lose their temper. However, if they

get angry or upset with you, remember that is their problem, not yours; we each need to take responsibility for ourselves.

There will be times that you stand up for yourself and feel delighted with how well it goes. Other times you may not be so pleased, and you can reflect on how you might have managed it better. Be kind and compassionate with yourself. Acknowledge your courage in standing firm, while knowing that it takes time to master any new skill. You may also become aware that the situations in which you previously felt uncomfortable, resentful or disappointed in yourself were often ones in which you had failed to be assertive. Setting clear boundaries is a powerful way to build confidence and self-respect.

Reflective exercise: Develop skills in assertiveness

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 20 minutes.

Allow yourself time with each of the following questions to gain a greater understanding of your own patterns around assertiveness, and make a note of your responses.

1. Recognize the situations in which you are *already* assertive.

Who do you find it easier to be assertive with: strangers, work colleagues, certain friends or specific members of your family?

2. What skills (verbal and non-verbal) do you already find helpful?

3. Identify the situations in which, and people with whom, you wish to be more assertive.

Assertiveness: Step into your power

Make a note of at least ten situations.

If you get stuck for ideas, you can consider the following examples.

- *Set limits on unacceptable behaviour.* For example, a friend consistently turns up late when you meet; somebody pushes in front of you in a queue.
- *Ask for what you want.* For example, you want to move into a different team at work; you want more information about something; you want help composing a contentious email.
- *Express your needs or wishes.* For example, you need to bring a conversation to a close when time is short; you need to tell a friend it is not convenient for them to stay an extra few days.
- *Express your feelings.* For example, tell a friend that you were hurt by what they said; inform someone you feel angry when you are shouted at; convey your disappointment with the slow service at a restaurant.
- *Step back from taking on responsibility for your colleagues, friends, parents, children or partner when it is not really necessary.* For example, stop doing tasks for other people which they could easily do themselves.
- *Express your opinions or preferences.* For example, express your opinions when asked what film to watch or food you would like; express your viewpoints in a conversation with friends or family; express your ideas or suggestions to improve systems at work.
- *Stand up for other people.* For example, ask a colleague not to criticize a member of your team; speak up for a friend.

- *Formalize the 'house rules' with your partner, family, housemates.* For example, agree on who empties the rubbish, washes up, manages the bills, cuts the grass.
- *Determine the ground rules with your children.* For example, limit screen time; turn down their music; tell them they must be back home by 10 pm; establish that they should inform you if they are going to be more than 30 minutes late.

4. List those situations in order of difficulty.

Now, put those situations in order, with the ones that would be easiest to handle at the top, and the most challenging at the bottom. It is so much easier to take small steps and practise your skills where there is little emotional charge. There may also be times when you choose not to stand firm, which is absolutely fine. The most important thing is to consciously choose how to respond.

5. Choose which skills to focus on.

Verbal skills include:

- getting their attention
- being clear and concise
- listening to their perspective
- responding in a firm and empathic way
- warning about consequences
- repeating and being persistent

Non-verbal skills include:

- posture
- voice
- eye contact
- relaxation and breathing

Although the skills required may vary in different situations, it is likely that focusing on a few of these elements is all that is needed. Initially, for example, it may be enough to be concise, repeat your statement and embody a stronger posture and firmer voice.

6. Prepare yourself.

Choose a person or situation to try out your skills the next time it arises. Consider in advance what would support you in standing firm. For example, you can become more aware of your body posture in situations you find challenging and consciously adopt a more confident stance: standing tall, with your shoulders back and with good eye contact. You might remind yourself, *I can do this*. If you often feel nervous or agitated, you could practise one of the calming strategies from Principle 4. It may be enough to simply take a few slow breaths and extend the exhalation.

It can be helpful to write down the key statements you want to make, and practise saying them out loud several times. When the phrases and words are familiar, it is much easier to apply them in real life. Visualization can also be helpful. You can picture, sense or imagine yourself communicating clearly and firmly with a confident posture, and the other person responding positively.

Set your intentions

Regarding non-verbal skills, which ones will you focus on, and when can you practise them in your daily life? For verbal elements of communication, which ones will you pay attention to? You can make a commitment to yourself as to when you will practise being assertive, starting with the easier situations first.

The Thriving Giver

As you develop your assertiveness skills, it is invaluable to share your successes, and disappointments, with a trusted friend. They can encourage and support you along this journey. Once these skills become more familiar, you will instinctively know whether to progress to the other three resources related to Principle 5, or explore another principle.

5c. Become the architect of your life

*Sometimes the smallest tweak can transform your life,
and when you consciously choose to make those changes,
you take full responsibility for yourself.*

Penny, a GP, started to dread seeing patients and listening to their problems. Her clinical shifts lasted ever longer due to a variety of delay tactics – looking at results, reading notes or checking unnecessary details before finally calling in the next patient. She counted down the number of patients still left to see – 10, 9, 8... 3, 2 more to go... She couldn't wait to say goodbye to the last patient, only to be confronted by piles of paperwork to complete before going home. She was exhausted, irritable and completely worn out after her days in clinic.

Having lost her sense of competence and empathy, Penny felt vulnerable. She was aware that no amount of relaxation and stress-reducing strategies would reignite her passion for work. She had to reduce face-to-face contact time with patients. A radical shift was essential – otherwise she would end up taking time off work, causing even more problems for her colleagues.

It took courage for Penny to speak to the practice managers about reducing her clinical hours. But when she finally had the conversation, it was empowering. She freed up time to work in commissioning and research, which she had always wanted to do. Rebalancing her work gave Penny space and time to think, enabling her to be fully present for patients during consultations, and rekindling her passion for work. Swimming

and singing became a regular part of her schedule. Soon she no longer felt flattened at the end of the day. After reducing her clinic hours, Penny became a Thriving Giver again. Everyone benefited: patients, family and friends.

Nick, another GP, adopted a different approach. Frustrated at the challenges of ten-minute appointments, he arranged with the practice to increase his consultation slots to fifteen minutes. It gave him more time for meaningful conversations with patients and to develop a greater understanding of all their needs. He also reduced the number of surgery hours, freeing up time to teach supervision skills to clinicians, an area of work that he particularly enjoyed. The renewed enthusiasm for his work and lower stress levels more than compensated for the reduction in income. Here are some other stories of how people became the architects of their own lives.

Claire: Seeing the signals

Claire was a self-employed massage therapist and always worried about whether she had enough work to pay the bills. Many years ago, she had stopped drinking alcohol, as it had become a dangerous coping strategy. After a particularly gruelling few weeks, she started craving a glass of wine after work. She recognized this as a sign that something had to change. Reflecting on her life, Claire realized that she was exhausted from the long shifts. Working into the evenings was convenient for clients, but didn't suit her. Within a month, she found a part-time job to supplement her finances. Two income streams took the pressure off her own business, and she no longer needed to work in the evenings. The spring in her step returned, and the craving for alcohol diminished.

Ben: Relocating and giving back

Ben was a paediatric nurse. When I met him, he had left his job in Australia and started work in a hospital in Christchurch, New Zealand. He loved outdoor sports and wanted to be within a couple of hours of rivers and mountains where he could kayak, ski and mountain bike. Having so much fun, doing what he loved in his leisure time, he realized how boring it was for the young patients stuck in hospital. He committed to getting to know each of them and to finding a way to brighten their day. Feeling energized and fulfilled, he was a Thriving Giver, able to give from a cup that was overflowing, and to be fully present for those in his care.

Linda: Exploring new possibilities

Linda hated her job in catering. When her marriage ended, she went to a drawing class at the local college. She loved sketching, and gradually developed her talent as an artist. Emboldened by the freedom to do as she wished, she enrolled for an art degree, and later became a teacher. She relished the opportunity to express her creativity while nurturing the talent of her students. That first step of trying out the art class ended up doubling her income and transformed her life. She never looked back.

Hana: Prioritizing quality of life

Hana was on track to have a brilliant career in medicine. However, she saw the price some consultants paid for being at the top of their field: minimal time to spend with their families or for relaxation or leisure. A few ended up divorced, having been unable to balance the pressures of work with family life, and many of those who were single had little life outside work.

Hana wanted a more rounded, full life, with time for herself, friends, creativity and the family she was hoping for in the future. She consciously chose a ‘second-rate’ career ladder that would allow her to work part-time, in spite of knowing she would earn significantly less money. Many of her colleagues were critical and thought she was wasting her career, but Hana never regretted her decision. It served her well, especially when she became a single mother a few years later. She was able to enjoy all aspects of life alongside a fulfilling career.

What about you?

Ben was fortunate in having no family commitments, giving him the freedom to relocate, and Linda’s life overhaul was set in motion through a significant relationship breakdown. If you are in a different phase of life, or lack the catalyst of a big life change, your options may be different or more limited. If you wish to reduce your working hours, you might be daunted by the impact on your finances. If so, discuss and explore different options with the important people in your life – especially anyone who may be impacted by your decision.

Whatever your circumstances, the following reflective exercise will help you explore a variety of ways to fine-tune your life.

Reflective exercise: Become the architect of your life

*You will need something for making notes.
Allow 10–15 minutes.*

1. Reflect on your life.

Begin by reflecting on the following questions, giving yourself a few minutes to simply rest with each one

before moving onto the next. It is often in the quiet space, when you stop thinking, that the deeper insights emerge. Jot down any thoughts, so that you can explore them in more depth later. At this stage, it is crucial to allow yourself to explore all options, without censoring or judging, even though some ideas may seem impractical or unrealistic. If some questions initially seem irrelevant, I encourage you to stay with them for a few moments.

- How sustainable is your current schedule?
- What changes might enable you to take better care of yourself, and manage your work or personal commitments better?
- What other changes would you like to make?
- What are the options for additional help, to take the pressure off yourself?
- What could you step back from, or let go of, so that you have more time to recharge?
- If you want to decrease your working hours, how could you reduce your outgoings, if necessary?
 - Who could you discuss this with – your partner, friend or financial advisor? Who else?
 - What additional information might assist you in making that decision?
- How nurturing are the relationships in your life?
- What people might you want to have less contact with, or connect with in a different way?

If you don't immediately get any clear responses, that's fine. Allowing the questions to germinate can encourage the deeper part of your being to continue seeking answers. You may get a flash of inspiration when you wake up in the morning, or overhear a conversation which stimulates an idea. Once you set the intention to find ways to realign your life, you may be amazed at what solutions emerge.

2. Choose what to focus on.

Spend a few minutes considering all the possibilities on your list. You will intuitively know whether it is best to start with something simple or the change that would create the greatest benefit. Alternatively, over the next few days, you may wish to explore these options in more depth, before taking action.

If you are considering making significant changes, allow yourself time to reflect carefully on all the implications. Sometimes a radical shift may be necessary, even though the prospect may be daunting. Only you will know whether it is appropriate to make that change. If you choose to do that, rest assured that the resources within these seven principles will support you. You may already intuitively sense which strategies will assist you. If you need to have an awkward conversation, perhaps it will be *5b. Develop skills in assertiveness*. *3a. Expressive writing* might help you identify and process your concerns about implementing the changes.

Set your intentions

- What would be the first step?
- Who, if anyone, would you like to discuss this with?
- When might you take that first step?

You may wish to write down your responses to confirm your commitment to exploring these options.

It can take time to implement structural changes. However, once you have started the process, you can create more resources and strategies to support you along that journey.

5d. Create transition rituals

Creating a clear boundary between work and your personal life will help you reconnect to your centre, be fully present for family and friends and make the most of your leisure time.

As deputy head of two primary schools, Sophie's work is exceptionally demanding. When driving home, she turns up the music loud, and sings along with her favourite songs. The windows are open wide so she can feel the fresh air on her face. Her children are old enough to know that she needs half-an-hour on her own after work, to walk in the woods. While out in the fresh air she is able to process and reflect on the day, or think things through from a different perspective. Only then is she able to disconnect from work and see what delights of nature she can find. If it is pouring with rain, Sophie has a shower instead. She imagines herself under a waterfall, with the crystal-clear energy flowing freely over her. Those simple rituals help her recharge and leave the challenges of work behind.

How often has your evening been ruined by your mind churning over a difficult situation at work? Maybe you still feel frustrated on arriving home, and shout at your partner, or get impatient when your children start squabbling. Transition rituals are invaluable in helping you leave the feelings, emotions, stresses and worries of work behind so they don't leach into your personal life. Then you can be wholeheartedly present for your family and friends, and you will also find it easier to relax and replenish.

If you frequently ‘pick up’ the despair, pain, suffering or trauma of those you are working with, effective transition rituals will be an essential component in your toolkit of resources. When you experience empathic distress, your risk of burnout is higher,^{1,2} and it is essential for you to find ways to reconnect to positive emotions and a sense of inner balance. For example, you might choose to do some aerobic exercise, remember the magical moments or listen to a loving-kindness meditation audio. Effective transition rituals help you ‘switch off’ from work so that you can fully relax and recharge in your leisure time. They help ensure that you can continue to work effectively, and to give from a space of replenishment, rather than depletion.

Shaking: a simple way to release

Wild animals are under constant threat. Unlike humans, they are able to relax and return to a state of balance quickly, and suffer no lasting effects from repeated stress responses. Peter Levine, in *Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma* (1997)³ has identified how, once the danger has passed after a traumatic event, wild animals often release the stress from their bodies by spontaneous shaking or trembling. That discharge of energy enables them to pass through the fear response and become fully functional again. You may have noticed your dog doing something similar.

This may help to explain why shaking is a practice that has been used in many traditions, including tai chi, chi gong and kundalini yoga, to release tension, energize the body and facilitate the free flow of life-force energy, also known as chi.

Having developed an awareness of how easily she was affected by the distress, pain or anxiety of her clients, Claire developed the practice of shaking at the end of the working day, and between clients when necessary. Now, as soon as she is aware of having

‘picked up’ something from a client or friend, shaking is her first response. It quickly returns her to a state of balance and flow, and helps her release any lingering thoughts, feelings, emotions or energy. Then she can be fully present for her clients and family.

When you first experiment with shaking, it might seem unnatural or strange, especially if your body is holding a lot of tension. You may find it easier to shake to music, and you will probably know instantly which track would help you relax into the shaking. You may find it helpful to follow an online video to guide you through a shaking exercise. I encourage you to try it a few times before assessing its efficacy.

Other transition rituals between clients

Grace, a hypnotherapist, was often exhausted at the end of the day. When she became aware how often she ‘picked up’ the feelings, emotions or anxiety of her clients, she learnt to pay more attention to her own emotional state while working. If she starts to feel tense or anxious, she slows her breathing to help restore a sense of inner calm. A family photo on her desk acts as a prompt to release any feelings of empathic distress before she sees the next client. She uses the ‘Remember the magical moments’ exercise in Section 4b to reconnect to positive emotions. When Grace takes the time to do those quick rituals to restore her own wellbeing, everyone benefits – her clients, her family and herself.

Lucy, a physiotherapist, feels as if she soaks up all her patients’ aches and pains. Between sessions, she washes her hands while visualizing letting go of any leftover energy, throwing it away and then imagining herself being filled with fresh, vibrant energy. Sometimes, when she finds it hard to centre herself, she uses an expensive hand cream with essential oils. The process

of rubbing it into her hands helps bring her into the present moment and then she can focus on the next patient.

If you work from home, at the end of the day you may want to develop a routine that symbolizes shifting away from work mode and towards your personal life. It could be shutting down your computer, switching your work mobile to aeroplane mode or clearing your desk. You might want to empty the bin and prepare your clients' notes for the next day before firmly closing the door. You may then change into a comfortable pair of jeans and mindfully put away your work clothes.

Laughter is the best medicine

Bob, a firefighter, shared the most grueling stories about his work as we were sailing in the Solent. One of the scenes he shared with us still makes my stomach turn when I think about it, even years later. Curious, I asked how he coped with the trauma and distress after the horrific situations he encountered. 'Humour', he replied, without any hesitation. Gallows humour helps Bob and his colleagues release the distress after horrific events; it acts as a neutralization strategy, enabling them to leave the trauma of work behind when they go home to their families. Dark humour keeps Bob and his mates sane and maintains their resilience, health and wellbeing. It also reinforces the social bonding in the team. To an outsider, that kind of humour may seem callous and uncaring, but it acts as a psychological salve, enabling them to carry on with their work. If you are a nurse, doctor or social worker, you may be familiar with the value of this type of humour for helping you cope with disturbing situations. Laughter is a powerful way to release tension, reduce stress and lift your mood.

Making the most of leisure time and holidays

Daniel is vigilant in making a note of all the thoughts and concerns about work. Having written them down, he knows he won't forget, freeing his attention to make the most of his evenings and weekends. You might decide to avoid looking at work emails, or to switch off your work phone. Now that people can contact you any time of day, wherever you are in the world, it is even more important to find ways to prevent work from seeping into your personal life.

Have you ever noticed, if you mention your profession when you are on holiday – whether you are a nurse, social worker, teacher or lawyer – someone will often find their way to ask advice? Or they may instigate a discussion on the state of the National Health Service or the education system. If you want to have a complete break, you may wish to be creative when responding to that inevitable question, *What do you do?* One response might be, *I prefer not to talk about work while I'm on holiday.*

Choosing the best transition rituals

You may already have a routine in place to stop the demands of work from affecting your home life. If so, you may have discovered that *how* you feel at the end of your working day determines the kind of strategies that are most helpful. If you are in a state of high alert, you might use conscious breathing to self-soothe, or release stress through jogging or a brisk walk. You might listen to one of the playlists you have created (see *6c. Music and creativity*), or practice a relaxation exercise when you are exhausted. Expressive writing could be invaluable if you have a buzzing mind or your emotions are in turmoil.

If you are fortunate enough to work in an environment where there is a quiet space to reflect, meditate or do a few yoga stretches, then you may find it easier to disconnect before going home. If not, you might use the time on your way home to let go of work mode.

Reflective exercise: Create transition rituals

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 10 minutes.

1. What activities do you *already* do to symbolize stepping away from work and/or to reconnect with a sense of wellbeing?

- How do they help you?
- What else might help?

2. How do you tend to *feel* after work?

- *Emotionally*: frustrated, anxious, distressed, or a sense of satisfaction?
- *Physically*: exhausted, a racing heart, churning stomach, nagging headache, or energized?
- *Mentally*: worried, distracted, or maybe remembering positive highlights from the day?
- Which of these tends to occur most often?

3. What might help you 'disconnect' more effectively after work or, if necessary, between clients?

You may instinctively have a sense of what would help you. Otherwise, here are some ideas that you can adapt according to your needs.

- *For your emotions*: remembering the magical moments, loving-kindness meditation, expressive writing, a gratitude ritual, watching a humorous

video or doing something creative, such as painting, clay or crafts.

- *Releasing*: shaking, laughing, changing your clothes or having a shower.
- *Being active*: walking, jogging, going to the gym, dancing, listening to upbeat music or being out in nature.
- *Relaxing*: conscious breathing, meditation, mindfulness, guided visualization, listening to a calming playlist or soaking in the bath.
- *For your mind*: singing, music, expressive writing, meditation, mindfulness, chanting or listening to an inspiring podcast.

4. If you have children, what could you do together to help you disconnect from work?

- Go for a walk.
- Put on some music and dance together.
- Snuggle up and read them a story.
- Draw or colour together.
- Watch their favourite TV programme with them, before preparing the evening meal.

Set your intentions

Choose the ritual that will be most applicable to you. You may prefer to have a few options, depending on how you feel. When would be the easiest time to fit it into your schedule, so it becomes a habit that you do automatically? Make a note of your intentions. When you reflect on how your life is enriched as a result of implementing those rituals, you are more likely to continue using them.

Once you have incorporated transition rituals into your working day, you will probably be aware of which principle to focus on next.

5e. Enrol support at home

When you share out the chores or delegate more, you send out a message that your needs are important too. If you have children, they grow up with the confidence and practical skills that prepare them well for leaving home.

Baby birds hatching from an egg will die if you break the shell for them. Pecking their own way out ensures they are strong enough to survive. In the same way, if we take too much responsibility for others, they miss out on the opportunity to grow. This was what Gail's disabled grandparents discovered when they started to do more cooking, shopping and cleaning for themselves. Gail had become caught in the compassion trap of doing too much for them; when she stepped back, their mobility improved and they enjoyed a wider range of social activities. It is similar with children – if you do everything for them, they never learn the practical skills of life.

From a young age my boys learnt to vacuum, sort the washing, iron, shop and cook basic meals. They had a rota in the mornings for making the lunchboxes, laying the table and clearing up after breakfast. Those regular routines took the pressure off me. As a single, working mother, I had no option but to encourage them to help with daily chores. Looking back, it was one of my more effective coping strategies, which reaped unexpected benefits for them, too.

Although giving them extra responsibilities and pressures did curtail their freedom, it nurtured a sense of independence and responsibility, preparing them for leaving home. It also

encouraged them to be caring, considerate and respectful of women. With minimal effort, those simple routines also instilled a sense of order and belonging.

I remember the pride Mark, my youngest son, showed when he invited his friends back for spaghetti bolognese. His mates were amazed see him cooking the pasta to perfection while frying the onions and garlic before adding the minced meat, tomatoes and herbs. Struggling at school with the challenges of dyslexia, it was heartwarming to see how those culinary skills boosted his reputation with his friends.

Tough love

Leanne was struggling to prevent her rheumatoid arthritis from interfering with family life. She was exhausted from the pressures of a part-time job, taking care of three children and running the family home. In our first coaching session, it became clear that her present commitments were unsustainable. Leanne associated love with looking after her husband and children. She believed it was her role to do all the cooking, cleaning and household tasks. When we discussed options to create more balance in her life, she was wary of asking for help, but decided to have a discussion with her family about needing more support.

Two weeks later, Leanne came in with a smile on her face. When she had broached the subject, her husband had been delighted that she would finally allow him to help more, especially with her pain increasing. Her daughter had been concerned about how tired her mother had become. Together the family had made a list of everything that needed to be done, and then created a rota of the daily and weekly chores for the children. To avoid any nagging, a job could only be ticked off the list

when it had been done without being prompted, so they had to check for themselves when a task needed doing.

Leanne's husband was initially daunted about learning to cook, but started by choosing quick and easy recipes. Everyone took it in turns each day to chop vegetables, lay and clear the table, wash up or put out the washing. Even her seven-year-old daughter had a few jobs: emptying the recycling and compost bin, tidying the shoes under the stairs, plumping up cushions in the sitting room or sweeping the kitchen floor.

A few months later, Leanne commented on the boost in her self-esteem, as she was learning to value herself more. She was sleeping better and felt more relaxed. She was delighted to have had no flare-ups of her arthritis. It had taken a while for everyone to fine-tune and adjust to the new system, but the whole family had become more thoughtful of each other's needs. They noticed how much happier Leanne had become, and the benefits of everyone pulling together as a family. Her husband had even begun teaching the teenagers how to mow the lawn, change a lightbulb and read the gas meter. When children grow up in a family where everyone helps, they learn to be caring and considerate to others.

Leanne was under pressure to enrol more support primarily due to the challenges with her health. You might choose to delegate because you are exhausted from working long shifts, care for elderly relatives or simply to take the pressure off yourself and share out the responsibilities more equally.

Sharing the chores with your partner or housemates

When James was sharing a house, each of them took it in turns to buy the ingredients and cook a meal once a week.

Some of his friends prepared sumptuous meals, whereas others chose something simple, but they all enjoyed the ritual of eating together. If you have housemates, you may wish to create a more formal structure to sharing out the tasks, whether it is paying the bills, cooking, vacuuming or cleaning the bathroom. When you live with your partner, it may be even more important to allocate those tasks and set up expectations early on, especially if you plan to have children in the future. Just because you are a great cook, or can clean the house in half the time, it doesn't mean your housemates or partner can't learn! In fact, it is the same at work. If you are naturally efficient or highly skilled with a range of tasks, your tendency, up until now, may have been to jump in and offer to take on additional responsibilities. As from now, you might choose to step back and remember the importance of your own wellbeing, and encourage others to develop their skills.

The art of delegating

Delegating means that you may have to let go of wanting something done your way. Leanne learnt that the washing up may not meet her high standards and sometimes a white-clothes wash may not be quite so bright after being soaked with a crimson t-shirt. It takes time to learn any new skill, and mistakes are inevitable. When a child first learns to dress themselves, they put their shoes on the wrong feet, or trousers on back-to-front. You may have discovered that showing your daughter how to prepare her lunchbox entails patience, persistence and an initial investment in time. It is always quicker to do it yourself, but saves you time and energy in the long run. Even more important, it can be empowering for them.

Managing resistance

It is possible that not everyone in your household will be keen to take the pressure off you and help with the chores. If your partner, children or housemates have had an easy ride for several years, they may enjoy being cossetted and cared for, and it might take time for them to adjust. It can be helpful to explain to them that your journey in learning to value and care for yourself means that you want to step back and share responsibilities more equitably. You were encouraged to have a similar conversation in *5a. Learn to say 'no'*, so that those closest to you understood why you were developing your skills in assertiveness.

Those who love and care for you are likely to encourage you along that journey of transformation, even though it may not be easy or convenient for them. When you start sharing out the chores more widely, and your partner, family or housemates become aware that you are happier, healthier or less stressed, they might begin to see how everyone is benefitting. This form of tough love can lead to you having more time and energy to nurture your relationships in different ways.

Paying for help

Having spent several years struggling with chronic fatigue, Danielle decided that one of her priorities was to have a cleaner every week. She lived alone and was willing to scrimp and save on other things in order to treat herself to that luxury. You might decide to get someone to cut the grass, or have a babysitter once a fortnight. If you have always done your own painting and decorating, you might treat yourself to getting professional help, even if your budget only stretches to asking

them to do the difficult bits: painting the ceiling or rubbing down the woodwork!

In the following reflective exercise, you can explore how you might enrol more help from your partner, children or housemates.

Reflective exercise: Enrol support at home

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 5–10 minutes.

1. How well supported do you feel at the moment in terms of managing tasks at home?

How much of the responsibility for the shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening, finances etc. is on your shoulders?

2. Up until now, how much have you encouraged other people in your household to help with those tasks?

3. Who could help more?

Would it be your partner, children or housemates?

4. What types of jobs would you like help with?

5. What might be the best way forward, to enrol more support?

- express your need for more help
- create a list of chores together
- ask each person what they would be willing to help with
- have a brainstorming session with members of your household or family to decide how best to share out those chores

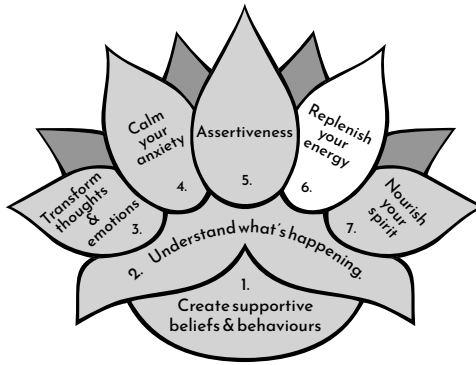
6. If paid help is an option, what kind would you like?

Childcare, cleaning, gardening or DIY? What else?

Set your intentions

When will you have that opening conversation?

Asking for more practical support at home is another way of learning to value yourself. Creating more time for replenishment and for other priorities in your life will also support you in becoming a Thriving Giver.



PRINCIPLE 6

Replenish your energy

On my first day at school, when I was given some toys to play with, apparently I told Mrs Ford, the headteacher, 'I haven't come here to play, I've come here to learn.' That response epitomized my serious nature from a young age. Growing up, I felt valued for how hard I worked. Even as an adult, anything related to work, chores and boring jobs always had to be done first before I allowed myself anything remotely related to pleasure.

It was ironic that I was allocated the role of coordinator for children's programmes at the local meditation centre. Initially I was frustrated, knowing it meant missing out on the meditation, chanting and the other spiritual practices that I enjoyed. However, I could only spend Sundays there if my children were happy to come with me! Organizing fun activities for a wide age range of children was hard work, yet it taught me to appreciate the value of play, pleasure and laughter in replenishing body, mind and spirit.

One Sunday, I arranged a walk in the forest and hid a variety of 'unnatural' objects. I still remember the expressions of delight and cries of glee when a child found a doll sitting in a tree, a ball nestled among the leaves, a mug filled with moss or a wellington boot peeping out from behind a fallen log. I shared their joy with each discovery; it was infectious.

Reflecting on the different phases in my life, I can see how, when I allowed myself time to follow fun and inspiring pursuits, they insulated me against stress. Enjoyable activities also helped to counteract the emotionally demanding elements of my work, since they naturally led to positive feelings, emotions and social interactions.

It didn't matter whether it was meeting up with friends, sailing, singing, gardening or walking through beautiful countryside. Those pleasurable activities enabled me to be a Thriving Giver – to give wholeheartedly in my work without becoming depleted. You may have noticed the value of replenishing activities in your own life.

In Principle 6, you will discover the value of infusing your life with joy, and how having fun and doing what you love plays an important role in protecting you from burnout, breakdown or poor health. I still work hard, but that is now balanced with a variety of ways to nurture myself. Now that you have released your self-care saboteurs, especially if you have also developed your skills in assertiveness, you will find it much easier to carve out time in your busy life for activities that bring you joy.

If your life or work has become a one-way flow of giving your time, expertise, care or support, you won't be able to sustain yourself unless you redress the balance, and allow time for self-nurturing. Enjoyable activities can have multiple benefits: lifting your spirits, replenishing your energy, releasing troubling emotions, focusing your mind in a positive direction. They can also offer an opportunity for light-hearted social interaction.

You may already have some valuable resources in place that replenish your energy, whether it is an active social life, sport, a hobby or regular time for creativity. If so, you can choose which additional resources might enrich your life further. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *6a. Family, friends and fun* – discover the value of nurturing your relationships, and the benefits of humour and pampering yourself.

The Thriving Giver

- *6b. The joy of exercise and time in nature* – find ways to integrate these life-enhancing pleasures into your schedule.
- *6c. Music and creativity* – explore how these resources have brought joy to people’s lives, or supported them through troubling times.

6a. Family, friends and fun

Allowing yourself time to enjoy the simple pleasures in life with family and friends, or bringing a touch of humour into your day, are simple ways to infuse your life with joy.

I never stayed in touch with friends from school, university or those I worked with, due to an erroneous belief that they wouldn't value my ongoing friendship. Later, I limited my friendships to those on a similar spiritual path to me, which eliminated many wonderful people from my life. Sadly, it meant that I didn't have a support network when bringing up the boys – another factor that increased my susceptibility to burnout. Having finally learnt that crucial lesson, a wide group of friends and family now enrich my life.

You may have experienced for yourself the value of having friends whose company you treasure, and with whom you can unwind and share the pleasures in life, as well as the tears. We all need people who celebrate our successes and support us through challenging times. This is even more important if you live alone, however happy you are with your own company, and even if your partner is your soulmate, you still need supportive friends!

Expanding your network

Jenny went to a local yoga class when she moved to a new town, and asked if anyone wanted to join her for coffee afterwards. She was delighted at the enthusiastic response, and it became a

fantastic way to get to know like-minded people. She learnt that people often welcome the opportunity to meet up and get to know you better. If your friendship group is limited, you may like to do the same, and connect up with other members of your book group or pottery, keep-fit or French class, knowing you already have something in common.

Spending time with friends is a great way to relax and recharge. If you want to invite them around for a meal and time is precious or your culinary skills are lacking, make it easy for yourself. You could opt for a pot-luck supper, a take-away or a simple soup and salad. You can then enjoy their company with minimal effort, especially if your schedule is demanding or you feel depleted.

Keeping the spark alive

After you have been in a relationship for a while, it is so easy to forget the importance of continuing to nurture it. You may want to set aside a ‘date’ once a month where you do something special – maybe going to a concert, cooking a meal together or giving each other a massage... whatever is quality time for your relationship. Those special times help you reconnect, check in with each other and share the deeper conversations. Time for just the two of you is particularly important when you have children.

If you do have a young family, when you have a child-free hour to yourselves, you may wish to share a bath, have a glass of wine while looking through your wedding photos or cuddle on the sofa listening to music. If you have a relative or friend to look after the children, make the most of that time. Go out for Sunday brunch, have dinner at your favourite restaurant or walk hand-in-

hand through the park. Arranging to have a few hours at home to yourselves might be even better, allowing time for intimacy.

Permission to play

As a child, Danielle was often told by her father, ‘Don’t be silly... Do things properly... Stop messing around.’ Her parents were too busy to play with the children. Taking care of their rambling house, high-maintenance garden and vegetable patch required all their time. Danielle grew up with a belief that sitting around doing nothing was unacceptable, and that only children play and have fun. Once she left home, it was only on holiday that she allowed herself to let go and do something for sheer pleasure. The unrelenting pressure that she put herself under to work hard finally led to chronic fatigue syndrome.

That illness gave Danielle ample time to reflect on the unhelpful beliefs around work, relaxation and pleasure that had blighted her life. Relaxing in the hammock under the pergola in her overgrown, wildlife-friendly garden has become a particular delight. She now allows herself the freedom to dance in the fields and spin herself around and around until she falls down. Playing silly board games or charades with her friends has helped her lighten up.

If, like Danielle, you find it hard to allow yourself time for pleasure, fun or relaxation, you can revisit the reflective exercises in Principle 1 and create new, supportive beliefs that encourage you to bring more joy into your life.

Family fun

When the boys were young, there was a squash court nearby, and we taught ourselves the rules. It was a great activity to

play together and release pent-up tension, even if at times we became over-competitive. One summer, we enrolled in a family run, cycle and swim event. Our team was called ‘Keep Up Mum’, and I must admit to being relieved when the event was cancelled due to bad weather, as I had never been a keen sportswoman. Nevertheless, the time we spent training together was brilliant, and great for strengthening family bonds. Unfortunately, my hard work ethic was still untamed at that time and I regret not spending more time doing enjoyable activities with the boys: building dens in the woods, taking them on nature walks, playing board games in the evening or picking strawberries at the pick-your-own.

Samuel, my eldest, now goes kayaking with his two young children. They love the adventure of discovering and then exploring uninhabited islands in the river. They search for trees to climb and look out for wildlife – woodpeckers, herons and Canada geese – or count the cygnets and ducklings. Their blow-up kayak has brought them so much pleasure, as well as teaching them new skills and how to be safe in deep water.

If you have children, depending on their age, you might prefer running in the park, cycling, skateboarding, roller-skating, dancing, miniature golf, badminton or ice-skating. You can add spice to your walks by playing chase, hide-and-seek or forty-forty. If you have teenagers, explore what might bring them pleasure. Would it be making music together, indoor climbing, abseiling, caving, gaming or an art project?

If you need time to chill out with your children, there are some fantastic relaxation and meditation audios that you can listen to. You could make it a ritual before their bath or bedtime story.

When you value yourself enough to balance work with leisure, your children are also learning that they, too, can value and care for themselves. You act as a great role model.

Family meals

Rob's family always eat meals together, without TV, radio or mobile phones. It gives each child the opportunity to share their celebrations, as well as their concerns, making it easier to nip problems in the bud. Mealtimes can be a safe environment to discuss what's happening in their lives and the world. You may also wish to create technology-free meals, so that social time is not interrupted by texts, WhatsApp messages and phone calls.

Sustaining your friendships

When life gets busy and you meet a new partner, move house or change jobs, it is so easy to lose touch with close friends, forgetting the benefits of having that supportive presence in your life. One way to stay in touch is to commit to making a space in your diary, maybe once a week, or every few months. You might arrange to meet at the local coffee shop, walk in the park or have a drink in the evening. If they don't live locally, you could share a glass of wine on FaceTime or WhatsApp to help sustain that friendship.

When Jenny was training in Pilates, she enjoyed the connection with her fellow students. Once the course finished, they stayed in touch by having a weekend away every year, with the exception of a few gaps when their children were young. Jenny values those friendships as well as the professional support. Samuel goes on a ski trip over a long weekend with his work colleagues every year, and now his wife does the same with a group of parents from school. Spending quality time together

is a great way to deepen friendships, and it doesn't have to be something exotic or expensive; you might prefer meeting for a country ramble, pot-luck BBQ or day at the spa.

There is something special about people who have known you 'forever'. When you meet you can open up, share and enjoy their company as if you had seen them last week, rather than a year ago.

Inoculating your life with humour

Having come through several dark phases in his career, Adam now ensures that his life is infused with pleasure. He enjoys watching YouTube comedies and loves bringing a smile to other people by sending humorous images and messages to friends or telling stories with an inspiring message. We can't help but feel good when we laugh, whether we are watching a comedy, sharing a joke or playing a light-hearted game.

If you want to bring more humour into your life, try writing down three funny things that happened in the day. One study¹ showed that doing this every evening for just seven days enhanced happiness and reduced depression up to three months later. Humour can also be an excellent antidote to stress and trauma.

Laughter yoga is another wonderful way to introduce more humour into your life and support mental, emotional and physical wellbeing. This practice was developed in India by Dr Madan Kataria, and is based on the premise that, even if you pretend to laugh, the benefits are the same as if you were laughing naturally. Laughter yoga is normally practised in a group, either in person or online, and combines laughter exercises with deep breathing. When we watch other people

laughing, it can often become infectious. This may help explain why people in a laughter yoga session find that, even if they start with fake or pretend laughter, it often becomes genuine and free-flowing.

One small research study² found that a single laughter yoga session helped reduce stress and anxiety, increase positive emotions and improve subjective wellbeing. Another study on male nursing students³ indicated that a programme of eight one-hour sessions of laughter yoga was beneficial for their general health, and also helped improve anxiety, depression and sleep. If you would like to try out this fun intervention yourself, some resources are listed at the end of the book.

Pampering

Charlotte loves to soak in the bath with aromatherapy oils, watching the flickering flames of candles while listening to calming music. Once a month, she treats herself to a facial, hot-stone massage or reflexology session. If you were to have a pampering session, what would it be – a sports massage, aromatherapy session, manicure or pedicure? Or would you give yourself time for a face mask or to paint your nails once a week? Pampering is a great way to relax and nurture yourself.

Immersing yourself in a book

If you enjoy reading novels, you could treat yourself to ten minutes a day to immerse yourself in the characters, plot and images of a story without feeling guilty. Some studies suggest that reading for pleasure may even help protect against burnout!⁴ You will instinctively know what kind of book will inspire, uplift or nurture you – a novel, a memoir, short stories, poetry or esoteric or transformational literature.

Joyful moments in your week, whether by yourself or with friends or family, are invaluable for replenishing your energy and lifting your spirits. The following reflective exercise will help you clarify where best to focus your attention.

Reflective exercise: Family, friends and fun

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 5–10 minutes.

- 1. What enjoyable activities do you already do with your partner, family, friends and colleagues?**
- 2. What other activities might you enjoy?**
- 3. Who would you like to spend more quality time with?**
 - Your partner, children or a particular friend?
 - Who else?
 - What would you enjoy doing with them?
- 4. Which of the following would enrich your life the most?**
 - More quality time with your partner, family or friends?
 - Expanding your network of friends?
 - More enjoyable activities?
 - More pampering?
- 5. How can you add more humour to your life?**
 - Write down three funny things that happened in the day.
 - Go to a comedy club or watch funny films, videos or YouTube clips.
 - Share jokes or funny stories, and act silly sometimes.
 - Try out laughter yoga or clowning.
 - Play light-hearted games with friends or family: Pictionary, Rapidough, charades etc.

Replenish your energy

- Spend more time with friends who have a sense of humour.
- Try to seek out the funny side of a situation.

Set your intentions.

- Reflecting on all your responses to these questions, what single change would make the most difference to the quality of your life?
- What would you like to commit to starting this week?
- When will you do it?

6b. The joy of exercise and time in nature

Exercise and spending time in nature are wonderful ways to calm your mind, boost your spirits, help process emotional distress and improve your health.

Exercise

I recently started playing tennis – a fantastic way to get fit, out in the fresh air, while interacting with a friendly group of people. On the court, it is impossible to focus on anything else. I feel uplifted and energized afterwards, irrespective of how well I played. Sadly, in spite of frequent encouragement from a friend, I hadn't allowed myself time for tennis many years earlier. I needed to release the old pattern of prioritizing work before allowing time for leisure and pleasure. If the same is true for you, I encourage you to go back to Section 1b and create new, empowering beliefs that encourage you to bring more joy into your life. Whether you cycle, do an aerobics class, gaze at the stars in the evening or walk through the woods, those life-enhancing activities will support you in becoming a Thriving Giver.

The pleasure of dancing

This is Isobel's key to relieving stress. Whether it is jive, salsa or ballroom, dancing is exhilarating, allowing full expression of her true spirit. Dressing up encourages Isobel to connect with her sexuality and sensuality. The lightness, laughter and fun from interacting with a wide variety of other dancers helps counteract the depleting aspects of her acupuncture practice.

Instead of forcing herself to work every hour of the day, she now gives herself permission to dance three times a week. It helps ensure that she can give from an overflowing cup, rather than an empty one.

Outlets for stress

Ben was the nurse on duty in the emergency department when a young man turned up with a shoulder tip pain. The doctor on duty failed to diagnose a pulmonary embolism and, within a few hours, the patient died unexpectedly. All the staff involved were devastated, but the hospital had no debriefing system to help them deal with their distress. As soon as his shift was finished, Ben went for an 18 km run. It helped him process the shock and trauma, and get some perspective on what had happened. For him, vigorous exercise is an invaluable coping mechanism.

When Jane graduated from dental college, she saw herself as an engineer specializing in teeth. She wasn't prepared for the difficulties of dealing with real patients, their pain and emotional outbursts. During her first years in practice, she needed two glasses of wine on arriving home to help release stress. However, when she became pregnant, this had to stop, and swimming became her mechanism to unwind. While doing lengths, she can only see the bottom of the pool. Without any other distractions, she processes all the thoughts, feelings and emotions from the week, as well as organizing meals and planning her children's activities. Playing hockey provides a different outlet, giving her an opportunity to sprint and whack the ball hard. She enjoys the social interaction with other players, and makes a point of never talking about work.

Discovering your passion

Joshua is in his element when windsurfing. He loves the exhilaration of adjusting his weight to counteract the wind and waves, and striving to keep the sail up when he tacks. A few hours out on the water fuels him for the week. He goes home invigorated, at peace with himself and the world. At work, he can give from a sense of unbounded energy.

If you engage in regular exercise, you will have experienced how – when you are engrossed in what you are doing – it gives you a break from the hassles of life. It is like a mini holiday, and is a fantastic way to boost your energy and access positive thoughts and emotions. When exercising with others, the friendly banter can be a pleasant escape from serious conversations about work.

At the end of this section, you can explore what form of exercise you would prefer as a means of replenishing your mind, body and spirit. If you are drawn to yoga, tai chi, chi gong and the martial arts, you can explore them further in Section 7b.

Time in nature

Judy, an aromatherapist, loses herself when working in the allotment, allowing her to forget about the demands of her practice. One day she rescued a bumblebee from drowning in the birdbath, and a few minutes later a robin fluffed up its feathers while splashing in the water; sometimes she sees the falcons fly overhead. Judy always has her phone switched off so she can immerse herself in the task, whether she is preparing the ground for sowing, weeding or harvesting a crop of tender young carrots. She finds it so enticing to see something growing from a tiny seed, and it continually reminds her of the blessings

of being alive. When was the last time you allowed yourself to be embraced by nature?

When you are in nature, you can consciously choose to pay attention to all your senses – listening to the rustle of leaves underfoot, smelling the freshly mown hay, noticing the sparkling dewdrops on a spider’s web or feeling the seed-heads of the grasses sift through your fingers as you walk. In that way, you assist nature in working its magic on you. When you are enthralled by the wonders of the natural world, it gives you respite from the challenges of life and calms your mind.

The benefits of an ‘awe’ walk

A recent study⁵ indicates the potential benefits of walking for only 15 minutes, once a week, for eight weeks, while paying attention to the details of the world around you and deliberately seeking out things that might invoke a sense of appreciation, awe or child-like wonder. Participants were encouraged to seek out different places to walk each week. Wherever they lived, in the city or countryside, this simple intervention was found to evoke higher levels of positive emotions – compassion, gratitude, admiration and happiness. It also helped them foster more social connections and to feel more connected to the world around them. A control group who went for a normal walk failed to experience the same benefits. Although the study investigated this in older adults, the next time you go for a walk, even if you live in a city, why not make it an ‘awe walk’!

Nature is a wonderful source of replenishment. Even if you don’t live in the country, there are many ways in which you can connect with this fantastic resource in your daily life. Here are a few additional ideas that you can explore.

- Allow yourself time to gaze at your favourite painting or photo: a majestic mountain peak, coastal landscape or forest path.
- Sit in the park or your garden, mindfully listening to the wind whistling in the trees, enjoying the fragrance of the flowers, watching the ripples on a pond or the bees gathering nectar.
- Look mindfully out of the window and observe the cloud formations, the branches of a tree swaying in the breeze, or watch the birds enjoying your bird feeder.
- Make a ritual of watching the night sky before retiring for the night.
- Potter in the garden.
- Plant a window box or find some house plants to enhance your living space.
- Seek out some wildlife documentaries.

Reflective exercise: The joy of exercise and time in nature

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 10 minutes.

As you reflect on your own needs, are you more drawn to absorbing yourself in nature or embracing exercise as a source of replenishment, or both?

Nature

- 1. How could you enhance your life by spending time in nature?**
- 2. When could you do that?**

Exercise

1. What type of exercise might you enjoy?

What would encourage you to carve out time in your busy schedule? Would it be netball, swimming, Zumba, indoor climbing or agility training with your dog? If you have children, what could you do as a family? Maybe cycling, roller skating or badminton?

Let your mind explore plenty of options, including those sports that you are curious about, but have never found an opportunity to pursue. If you come up with several ideas, jot them all down without rejecting any at this stage. You can fine-tune your choices later. If you fancy canoeing, abseiling, coastal walks or learning to sail, you can do some research and explore those options for weekends or holidays.

2. Moderate the type, intensity or duration according to your energy levels.

Take good care of yourself, and remember that if you are already exhausted, too much vigorous exercise can be depleting. You may prefer walking, yoga or Pilates.

3. Would you prefer exercising alone or with others?

If you enjoy interaction, something like netball, tennis or a spinning class might appeal. Or you can seek out an exercise buddy: your partner, friend or colleague to cycle, jog or walk with. Even so, there may also be times you prefer to be alone.

4. Inside or outside?

This may also depend on the weather!

5. What can you easily fit into your schedule?

- getting up early and going to the gym before work
- a brisk walk around the block in your lunch break
- a ten-minute keep-fit video while the children watch TV or, better still, do it with them

Having reflected on these questions, you will have discovered a few possibilities, although you may want to explore what classes, groups or facilities are available locally. Nevertheless, I encourage you to start this week, even if it is a jog around the park or a short power walk.

Set your intentions

- What will you commit to doing?
- When can you fit it into your schedule?
- How often?
- How long for?
- How about including a 15-minute 'awe walk' once a week?

You may wish to reinforce your commitment by writing in your reflective journal or electronic device what you intend to do, and when.

Remember, you can be flexible and switch to something different at any time. Your preferences may also change with the weather or the seasons.

6c. Music and creativity

Creativity and music are simple ways to infuse your life with joy, while offering the possibility for self-expression and healing mind, body and spirit.

Music

It was not until I developed thyroid eye disease that I appreciated the transformative power of music. I had severe double-vision and my protruding, watery eyes, encased by swollen lids with bulging bags below, were impossible to disguise. Friends I had not seen for a while would ask, ‘What on earth has happened to your eyes?’ Overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, I often burst into tears when responding to that painful question.

Finally, deciding I had to find a way to manage my despair, I listened to a wide variety of music and found that certain pieces were calming and comforting, while others picked up my spirits. Creating different playlists enabled me to choose what I needed at any one time: uplifting, sacred or calming to help me sleep. For months I started the day with my favourite heart-opening playlist: nine pieces of classical music that awakened a sense of joy and touched my soul. Those playlists became my anchor to mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. You may prefer to create ones with an emphasis on the lyrics, which would be equally beneficial.

When having radiotherapy sessions for my eyes, the heart-opening playlist was my constant companion. Sitting on the front seat of the upper deck of the bus on the way to the hospital, I distanced myself from traffic jams and fumes while

listening to ‘Pie Jesu’ from Faure’s *Requiem* or Mendelssohn’s ‘O for the Wings of a Dove’. It connected me to a knowing deep inside that everything would be OK and I could handle whatever happened. That playlist still touches my heart, although I have since added several pieces of Hauser’s sublime cello music. What are your favourite songs or pieces of music?

Playlists for transformation

Several years after creating my playlists, I came across Barry Goldstein, and his book *The Secret Language of the Heart* (2016). He explains how music can act as a powerful vehicle for transformation through its ability to carry emotion and touch your heart and soul. As a Grammy Award-winning producer, musician and composer, Barry has explored cutting-edge research on how music can counteract a negative mindset and improve emotional and physical wellbeing.

Bringing together his skills as a sound healer and practitioner of music, Barry suggests that you become the DJ of your life by creating playlists to help you access positive emotions, while ensuring at the same time that you are not suppressing any emotions. So, it is important to first become aware of, and then acknowledge, any painful feelings. You can use the expressive writing practice in Section 3a to help you do this. You will have the opportunity to create your own playlists using the simple method that I use in the reflective exercise below. If you wish to explore a more comprehensive approach to integrate the benefits of music into your life, you might like to check out Barry Goldstein’s book.

Music and emotions

Sometimes you only have to hear one song, and it can change how you feel for the day. Just a few notes can bring out a

smile and elicit sheer joy. Whether you are listening, singing, playing an instrument or improvising, music has the power to shift your mood and evoke different feelings – joy, sadness, tranquillity, nostalgia or enthusiasm. Certain music is associated with specific emotions,⁶ and we often choose what we listen to according to what we are feeling. Music can act as a kind of natural anti-depressant, enhancing happiness and improving wellbeing. Your breathing, heart rate and even your brain waves often match the beat of the song. That is why slower tunes calm you down, and upbeat ones are stimulating.

Kate can't imagine a world without music as it has always helped her through dark and challenging times. Louis Armstrong's 'What a Wonderful World' and Monty Python's 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' remind her to seek out the positive elements in her life. They evoke *joie de vivre*, which can prompt her to dance for pure pleasure. What are the lyrics and songs that lift your spirits? You may also have certain songs that evoke a sense of love or gratitude, amplify your courage, energize you or boost your motivation. By consciously choosing the songs or music you listen to, you can transform your thoughts and emotions.

Some tunes or songs that you associate with pleasant memories are likely to elicit positive feelings and emotions, whereas you might instinctively avoid listening to other music that reminds you of painful events. Everybody's taste is different; your teenager's favourite albums may be the ones that grate on you most!

Music for self-expression

As a GP, Penny sometimes finds it frustrating that she can do little to help resolve the underlying problems in her patients' lives. Unable to show any irritation or upset at work, she

relishes the opportunity to express herself with a loud voice in the community choir. Singing is the perfect antidote to work, as it is impossible to think about anything else. Even if she is exhausted at the beginning, an hour of creating beautiful harmonies leaves her feeling joyful and energized. She appreciates the light-hearted social interaction. That is one of the benefits of creating music in a group, whether you are playing in a band or having a jamming session with friends.

Adam wanted to be a pianist since he was tiny and he often immersed himself in playing for hours. Once he qualified as a doctor, writing lyrics about the challenges in his life became an invaluable cathartic process. Singing his own songs creates a raft of emotions, yet is always therapeutic and relaxing, and afterwards he feels elevated, as if he is floating.

The sounds of nature

If you dislike music, or it fails to create an emotional response in you, then you may be one of the 5% of the population who don't respond to music. If so, you may prefer listening to sounds from the natural world – the rustling of leaves in the trees, a babbling stream or the chirping of crickets. Those sounds can help you relax or shift your mood. Angela downloaded a track of the sound of rain falling on a glass window. Listening to it every night as she fell asleep helped ease her anxiety, let go of the troubles of the day and sleep more peacefully. For her, rain falling on a tin roof, the pavement or in the forest did not have the same effect!

What sounds of nature would you enjoy? Big waves crashing onto the shore in stormy weather could be great for replenishing your energy, while birdsong might evoke a sense

of calm and relaxation. Fortunately, there are many apps available that enable you to delight in nature's life-enriching sounds.

Incorporating music into your day

You can choose to sing along to your favourite album on the way to work, spend ten minutes strumming on your guitar in the evening or lull yourself to sleep with the sounds of the jungle. If you find it hard to wake up, you could listen to an upbeat song with a fast tempo while eating breakfast, which might even help your children get ready for school more quickly! Other lyrics might boost your confidence, calm your nerves or motivate you at the gym. After a demanding shift at work, you could choose something that uplifts and energizes you. Or you may prefer calming melodies to release any stress before cooking the evening meal. Equally, if you work at home, a particular song could help to signal the end of your working day.

Creativity

When Tanya first moved to a new town, she felt isolated. After a stressful shift at the local hospice, she came home mentally and physically exhausted, only to have to support her husband, who had mental health issues. Painting, drawing and working with clay was a powerful outlet to express and process all the feelings and emotions swirling around inside.

She used crayons and paints on page after page of paper, sometimes with the odd word or piece of poetry, never planning what she was going to do. Tanya chose carefully which colour to work with, as each one has a different energy: yellows and oranges representing the happy colours, with greys and

purples denoting the sadder feelings. Afterwards, looking at what she had produced helped to distance her from the painful emotions, or to see her life from a wider perspective.

When overwhelmed, sometimes Tanya channels all that energy into working with clay. It acts as a container for the feelings so they no longer churn around inside. The cold, wet, primal clay is grounding and creates a boundary between her and the emotions. She loves the sense of control in being able to mould the clay and create the form she wants. She experiences the truth of the words attributed to Pablo Picasso, ‘Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.’

Creating something beautiful

Hana, a doctor who works with victims of sexual assault, witnesses first-hand the horror of people’s lives. Carrying out a comprehensive risk assessment reveals the true reality of living with an abusive partner, in overcrowded accommodation, or of bringing up children on the fringes of society. Creating beautiful things helps to distance Hana from the parts of people’s lives that are not so beautiful. She loves collecting old fragments of broken pottery from the bank of the Thames at low tide and creating mosaics with them. She enjoys fiddling around finding the exact position for each piece.

Creativity is all-engrossing and acts as a balm for her soul, like meditation. In the silence, the awfulness of her patients’ lives disappears. Creating something positive with meaning enables Hana to reconnect with warm-hearted feelings.

Afterwards, she feels calmer, in better spirits. She enjoys looking at the beauty of the pieces she has created, and then finding a place for them in her home. It helps her feel more whole, more rounded as a person, and reminds her that she is more than her job.

The comfort of knitting

When she started knitting, Rhianna loved the simplicity of only having to learn two different stitches. She looks forward to sitting by the fire in the evening and the calming, rhythmic nature of knitting, which is so soothing and nurturing. Rhianna derives great pleasure from creating something, watching it come to fruition and then giving it away as a homemade gift – a blanket for her first grandchild, a cuddly mouse for her son’s cat or a scarf for a friend.

When her husband was diagnosed with cancer, Rhianna started making a jumper for him as an affirmation for him to survive. The knitting accompanied her whenever she went with him to medical consultations or treatments. She was calmed and reassured by the weight on her lap, which acted as an anchor of security. Having to concentrate on following the pattern brought her into the present moment and eased her anxiety. Once finished, her husband relished the opportunity of wearing the sweater, made with so much love.

Reigniting a childhood passion for writing

When Cameron was young, he had a passion for putting down on paper the endless short stories he created in his imagination. In his teens, life became too busy for writing, and the education system seemed to extinguish his creative

fire. For many years, all his energy went into his family. Finally, at a personal development workshop, he was asked ‘What is it you really want to do?’ His instantaneous response was to get back into writing, even though he had no idea how.

Once he had verbalized that desire, Cameron kept finding opportunities for workshops and writing groups where no experience was needed. Gradually, he eased his way back into writing short stories and he relished finding the language to craft the dramas that played out in his head. When absorbed in writing, he is completely cut off from the outside world. It gives him a buzz, a sense of satisfaction, and he loves getting positive feedback when sharing his writing in a group. Writing has become a fundamental part of who he is. It feeds his soul.

The camaraderie of a group

Emma went to an evening class in art, aimed at people who had been told they had no talent. She discovered that you don’t have to be skilled; you just have to enjoy creating. She tried out lots of different types of art and even took her four-year-old son to the sculpture classes, where he sat and enjoyed playing with his lump of clay. Later, when she moved to a small village, she joined a local craft group. It was a great way to meet people, especially as she was quite shy. Because everyone was concentrating on what they were doing and there wasn’t too much eye contact, it was relatively easy to join in the conversations. Yet it was also OK to simply listen if she didn’t want to share in the discussions. Whether you join a group of potters, sculptors, painters, creative writers or poets, you might also enjoy the companionship of fellow creatives.

Emma loves experimenting with different crafts, such as needle-felting, paint-pouring, candle-making, origami or book-folding. Fortunately, there are plenty of ‘How To’ videos on YouTube to start her off. She becomes calm and centred while working on a project, distracted from the challenges of work or hassles of life. Making gifts for her friends and family is an expression of her love and appreciation for them. She delights in seeing the pleasure on their faces on opening their presents.

What form of creativity would you enjoy?

Fortunately, you don’t need to be an ‘artist’ to be creative. You might express yourself through experimenting with mouthwatering recipes, woodturning, pressing wildflowers, stitching a patchwork quilt or spending time behind the lens of a camera. It is simply a matter of discovering what inspires you.

If you have young children, you can nurture your own creative talents as well as theirs, whether it is designing a collage, making *papier-mâché* masks, dressing up or constructing a mud kitchen in the garden. Fortunately, you don’t need to come up with the ideas yourself. There are so many resources available online, many of which use items you have at home, and may only take 20 minutes. Up until now, you may have thought of those projects primarily in terms of what your children might enjoy. However, you can also do something that would bring you pleasure. They will be inspired by your enthusiasm. You can even think back to creative projects you wished you had done when you were young.

If music and creativity are already an integral part of your life, you will be reaping the rewards. If not, the following exercise will help you embrace these wonderful resources.

Reflective exercise: Music and creativity

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 10–15 minutes.

Music

1. Create a playlist.

- Tune in to what emotions you would like to evoke through your playlist. What would be most helpful for you? Would you like to access joy, gratitude, inner peace, confidence, courage or to calm yourself before sleep?
- What songs or music do you already know, which you could incorporate into this playlist?
- Listen to a wide variety of music and lyrics. Tune in to how your body, mind and emotions respond to each of those pieces, and you will instinctively know what to include.

2. How else can you enhance your life through music?

Would it be:

- singing?
- going to concerts or live music events?
- picking up your flute again or learning to play an instrument?
- composing or writing lyrics?

3. When can you:

- start creating your playlist?
- listen to your playlist or other music? Would it be on your way to or from work, while cooking, after your evening meal or as you drift off to sleep?
- sing, play an instrument or compose lyrics?

Creativity

1. What forms of creativity, art or play have you enjoyed in the past?

Cast your mind back to when you were a child. You can choose to write in sentences, or you may prefer to make a list of all the creative activities that brought you pleasure in the past.

2. Now, allow yourself to explore anything you may have secretly wished you could do, but never had the opportunity.

Simply jot down any thoughts that come up, without editing or judging. Consider all possibilities, including the following.

- *Art:* pottery, painting, sketching, collage, mosaics, sculpting with clay, printmaking, photography, creating a vision board or an adult colouring book.
- *Crafts:* what materials would you like to work with – ceramics, glass, textiles, flowers, baskets, wood, paper, needlework, jewellery, leather or wax?
- *Drama:* acting, costumes, lighting, dancing or singing.
- *Writing:* journaling, poetry, short stories, haiku, thoughts for the day.
- What else?

3. What appeals to you most?

As you consider each of those options, think about the following questions.

- What would be easy to fit into your schedule?
- Do you want to take lessons, join a group or do it alone?

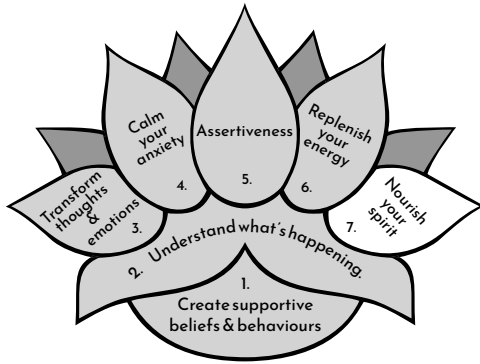
- What can you start soon, without having to wait until you have some lessons?
- What resources or materials do you need?

Set your intentions

- What commitment can you make to taking that first step?
- When will you create time in your schedule for music or creativity?

You may wish to set aside one evening a week, instead of watching TV, a box set or spending time on social media.

Once you are using these wonderful resources and have incorporated them into your schedule, you will be ready to progress to another section.



PRINCIPLE 7

Nourish your spirit

Drinking bottles of cold beer, Dominic and I welcomed the rain falling lightly on the parched ground outside. I asked him how he managed to keep sane when farming had become such a precarious business. He pondered my question.

After a few moments, he explained his morning routine. As soon as he gets up, Dominic sinks into his favourite sheepskin-covered chair to watch the sunrise. He looks out over the pastures and the blue gum forest, towards the sea. No houses or human activity are visible and his mind becomes still. He starts to see the bigger picture and get a perspective on life. Having had this routine for years, even if Dominic only has a couple of minutes, this daily centring practice is enough to warm him from the inside. It connects him with an inner faith that everything is OK.

Immersing yourself in poetry, sacred texts or esoteric literature, or gazing at a beautiful work of art, can also nourish your soul with wisdom, beauty and truth. Those kinds of activities can help you access life-force energy, or tune in to a sense of what you may call 'oneness' or 'spirit'. Sometimes simply *being* in a sacred place, whether it is a church, mosque, monastery or stone circle, helps you connect with the divine or universal energy. Nature may be your cathedral, maybe gazing out over a majestic range of snow-capped mountains, watching a spider spinning its web, listening to the dawn chorus or enjoying the vibrant colours of autumn leaves.

In this era of technological advances, when we can instantly connect to people, images, information and news from anywhere in the world, it becomes even more important to create time for *being*, rather than doing. When we counteract the fast pace of life and nurture ourselves with stillness and

solitude, it helps us stay in touch with our inner compass. Taking time to tune in to the subtle whisperings of our soul connects us with our intuition. We may discover the solution to a problem, or be guided towards a book or to speak to a particular person.

Do you have a tendency to fill your time – with work, social commitments, exercise or even chores? If so, it is possible that when you slow down or stop, unexpected thoughts and emotions can arise in the empty space. Being busy can be a simple way to avoid your feelings. So, if you discover emotions coming to the surface when you take time for stillness or solitude, you may want to check out *Principle 3. Transform thoughts and emotions*, and in particular *3a. Expressive writing*.

Principle 7 comprises two types of resources. Here is an overview of each of the sections.

- *7a. Mindfulness and meditation* – explore a variety of simple ways to incorporate these powerful, life-enhancing practices into your day.
- *7b. Yoga, chi gong and tai chi* – learn the benefits of these ancient practices, and how they may be especially helpful when your mind, body or emotions are in turmoil.

Which section are you most drawn to?

7a. Mindfulness and meditation

These ancient practices are powerful tools, proven over centuries to bring you into the present moment, calm your mind, relax your body and clarify your thoughts.

As a teacher, Kyle experienced waves of stress at different times in the academic year, especially prior to exams. With the pressures of work and the fast pace of life, he often became argumentative with his two teenagers. He had bought several books on meditation and mindfulness, but even with the best intentions he was unable to master those powerful tools through reading alone.

Kyle found a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) class locally with a qualified teacher. The eight-week programme became a personal journey of transformation. It gave him the space and time to absorb the depth of the teachings, and to learn to apply the tools in his daily life. He appreciated having individual support from a highly skilled and inspiring teacher, while also learning from other like-minded people in the group. Immersing himself in the concepts and practices of mindfulness for those two hours became the highlight of the week.

Kyle started to realize how much of the time he lived on auto-pilot, and he became more mindful in every area of his life. When something upset him, he discovered the value of looking at the bigger picture, and exploring other possibilities about what may have happened. He stopped taking things personally,

or automatically jumping to the conclusion that he had done something wrong.

He likes the metaphor of clouds in the sky representing the mind. Sometimes the clouds are small, white, puffy ones, associated with pleasant thoughts; at other times they might be dark and thundery. He finds it reassuring to know that those clouds are simply thoughts, and there is always blue sky behind the clouds.

One of the processes Kyle uses frequently is the *three-step breathing space*, which is so easy to integrate into a busy schedule. In the first step, he becomes aware of what is happening with his thoughts and feelings. Then he focuses his attention on the movement of the breath as he inhales and exhales. In the third step, he expands his awareness and senses what is happening in his whole body. Whenever Kyle is frustrated, annoyed or stressed at work, he goes to his car in the break and takes himself through the three steps. Within a few minutes he is able to relax his body and reset his mind, and he feels clear, light and refreshed.

Now, when walking with his dog, instead of allowing his mind to wander, Kyle becomes aware of his surroundings: the texture of the grass, the breeze on his face, the sound of his footsteps. He might stop and observe the veins on a single leaf or the shape of the clouds in the sky.

The mindfulness course helped Kyle develop a range of fantastic tools. These were invaluable when he later developed a serious auto-immune disease which caused erratic moods, a racing mind and high levels of anxiety. The practices helped

him access a more peaceful state to support him through that challenging time.

Mindfulness in practice

During the funeral of a friend, Sandrine used mindfulness to locate the sensations of grief in her body and feel them with openness and compassion. She noticed that, once located in the body, the size of those sensations was smaller than she thought. There were more parts of her body where the grief wasn't felt. The parts which felt comfortable became a support for the small, yet very strong, sensation of grief. She realized she was 'bigger than her wound', so she was able to hold the sensation of grief with kindness, allowing it to be there while breathing peacefully through and around it. This prevented her from being overwhelmed by her sadness.

How does meditation differ from mindfulness?

These life skills are like two sides of a coin. Mindfulness is a form of meditation, and yet in order to meditate you will naturally become more mindful. Meditation has been associated with Eastern and early Christian religions, whereas mindfulness has been developed into a secular practice, even though it originated from Buddhism. Both practices use similar techniques. Meditation is generally considered a more formal practice, where you take time away from the busyness of life. However, in the ancient traditions, the emphasis was on bringing that focus and inner stillness into every aspect of your life.

Mindfulness can be practised in normal daily life, by paying full attention to the present moment, without judging or

analysing what is happening. You can choose whether to focus on the breath, the sensations in your body, your emotions, your thoughts or the sounds around you. Whatever you are experiencing – joy, anger or tension in the body – you are encouraged to meet it with softness, openness and acceptance, rather than trying to change anything. Mindfulness is invaluable in helping you find a way to be compassionate with yourself and accept whatever is happening in your life. You can set aside a specific time for your mindfulness practice, as well as integrating it into your day, whether you are working, eating, cooking or playing with your children.

For a meditation practice, you might repeat a mantra or phrase silently to yourself in time with the breath. You can also use an image, such as the flickering flame of a candle to focus your attention. When you are first learning this skill, you will probably find it easier to listen to meditations on audio. When someone guides you through the meditation it can also help to focus your attention back whenever your mind starts to wander.

What to do with a churning mind?

It is the nature of the mind to think. That is why thoughts often arise when you meditate. Once you become aware of any thoughts, you can choose to simply observe them, and then gently bring your attention back to whatever you have chosen to focus on – your breath, a phrase or an image. I found it reassuring to hear from my meditation teacher, ‘whatever happens *in* meditation *is* meditation’. This may help to explain how even though your mindfulness or meditation practice has been disturbed by endless thoughts, your mind can become more peaceful afterwards.

Potential benefits of a mindfulness or meditation practice

Research suggests that mindfulness and meditation are both associated with a reduction in perceived stress, and the ability to change the structure and function of the brain^{1,2} in positive ways. These practices have been shown to improve thinking processes, decision-making, self-control and the regulation of emotions. They can both induce the relaxation response in the body, and help you become more empathetic and less judgmental.

Research on the effects of an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) course on health professionals,^{3,4} nurses,⁵ and teachers^{6,7} suggests a wide range of potential benefits. These include: reduced anxiety, improved wellbeing, promotion of self-care, fewer ruminative thoughts, less self-criticism, higher levels of self-compassion and self-forgiveness. The eight-week course has also been shown to improve work satisfaction, as well as significant reductions in all three components of burnout.

Like Kyle, if you want to experience the wide-ranging benefits of this powerful practice, I encourage you to enrol on an MBSR course with a qualified teacher if at all possible. A list of some well-respected organizations that hold registers of fully accredited mindfulness teachers is included in *Appendix A: Additional Resources*. If you can't find a local class, there are a growing number of experienced teachers who facilitate courses online. Remember, you will gain so much more from your practice when you are taught by an experienced teacher.

Mindfulness and meditation apps

Not everyone can access a qualified teacher locally, or at a time that suits them. Fortunately, there is growing evidence of

the benefits of meditation and mindfulness apps, and online resources, including reduction in perceived stress, improved mood and emotional regulation and lower levels of anxiety and depression.^{8,9,10} A 13-minute guided daily meditation practice over eight weeks was shown to reduce anxiety, improve emotional regulation and to enhance attention and working memory.¹¹ Another eight-week study¹² using pre-recorded 10- to 20-minute guided meditation audio showed significant improvements in wellbeing, distress, job strain and perception of social support at work. Those benefits lasted for 16 weeks. Another study¹³ demonstrated a reduction in perceived stress and improvements in the resilience of medical staff after only ten days of using a mindfulness app.

If you are unable to find an MBSR course locally and wish to start enhancing your mental, emotional and physical wellbeing now, I invite you to check out the online resources listed in *Appendix A: Additional resources* or one of the recommended apps. You may wish to begin with a body scan, which is always the first mindfulness exercise taught in any MBSR course. Once you have experienced some of the benefits of using an app, you can take your practice to a deeper level by working with an experienced teacher.

The protective effects of meditation

Meditation was an integral part of my daily life for many years. It helped me connect to an unlimited source of energy, and maintain a compassionate presence without becoming immersed in clients' grief, anger, fear or pain. I was energized by work, rather than depleted. Unfortunately, the pressures of work and being a single mother led to my meditation practice being squeezed out of my schedule. It was only years later that

I realized how, when I stopped meditating, I was more affected by the distress and trauma of my clients. Without being aware of it, my meditation practice had nourished and sustained me, protecting me from burnout much earlier in my career. Having renewed my enthusiasm for meditation through doing an eight-week MBSR course, once again, I am reaping the rewards of a regular practice.

My research revealed a fascinating study¹⁴ showing the benefits of a compassionate meditation practice in protecting an expert meditator, Matthieu Ricard, from the distress of looking at disturbing images of children in a Romanian orphanage. When he looked at those images with emotional empathy, he resonated with their suffering. The empathic sharing of their pain became intolerable and he felt emotionally exhausted. When he followed that with a meditation practice invoking compassion, even though the images had not changed, he no longer felt distressed, but a sense of boundless love for the children instead.

Matthieu Ricard and I used practices from different traditions. However, they both appeared to help us meet the suffering of others with warm-hearted emotions such as loving kindness and compassion, without being in empathic resonance or feeling depleted.

Loving-kindness meditation

Fortunately, you don't need to be an expert meditator to benefit from these kinds of practices. A regular loving-kindness* meditation practice has been shown to invoke

* Another term for a loving-kindness practice is 'befriending', as used by certain mindfulness teachers, such as Dr Mark Williams.

positive emotions, improve wellbeing, reduce anxiety and enhance empathy and psychological resources, even in non-meditators.^{15, 16} One study,¹⁷ on novice meditators, showed potential benefits of even a single ten-minute loving-kindness meditation. It is possible that a regular loving-kindness meditation practice, through evoking a sense of compassion, may be helpful in acting as a buffer against stress, preventing burnout and promoting resilience in healthcare professionals.¹⁷

You may wish to develop a regular loving-kindness meditation practice, especially if you experience empathic distress in your work. This kind of meditation helps to evoke feelings of warmth and compassion for yourself and others, often leading to positive emotions such as joy, love and gratitude.¹⁶ However, for some, a loving-kindness practice can evoke uncomfortable feelings, especially if someone is going through challenging times. For this reason, Sandrine Cranswick, an experienced mindfulness teacher, recommends developing a self-compassion meditation practice before progressing to one of loving kindness. Links for resources related to both of these practices are included in *Appendix A: Additional resources*.

Mindful awareness

Stephanie's mindfulness practice has been invaluable in developing her resilience, and also her ability to maintain a compassionate presence in her work. She is a mentor for students, some of whom might be experiencing severe problems with their mental health. Her mindfulness skills enable her to maintain greater awareness of what is happening within herself as well as her students. She is more able to maintain a healthy distance so that she can be both objective and empathic, while reducing her tendency to feel their distress.

During the mentoring session, she might become aware of changes in her breathing, a tightness in her stomach or thoughts passing through her mind. Afterwards, especially if she feels any distress, or when a student is traumatized or deeply troubled, she checks in with herself. If she feels upset, she locates the feeling in her body, and observes it with compassion, allowing the upset to be there. She asks what her needs are now – to phone a friend, go for a walk in her special ‘healing forest’, express her feelings on paper or maybe listen to some music. Stephanie’s mindfulness practice is a key component in her toolkit of strategies that enables her to thrive and continue to give of her best to students.

Centring with children

Julia looks after two children and likes teaching them different mindfulness practices. One day she asked them to listen to a guided gratitude meditation and was surprised at how they both became so deeply absorbed. She then encouraged them to draw a gratitude tree, and write on the leaves all the things they were grateful for. When the children shared their pictures, the sense of peace, calm and appreciation in the room was palpable. Julia went home that evening feeling uplifted, and determined to explore other centring practices for the children.

If you have a young family, there are a variety of ways you can bring those still, peaceful moments into your life. If your children sit quietly for half-an-hour watching their favourite TV programme, you could allow yourself to join them, even for ten minutes. You might bring yourself into the present moment and enjoy the comforting presence of your daughter’s head resting comfortably on your lap as you stroke her hair,

watch the gentle rhythm of your son's breathing or tune in to your appreciation for having these wonderful beings in your life. If they enjoy drawing and colouring, you might sit with them and relish the opportunity to do the same in your own colouring book. At night, after their bedtime story, you could listen together to a guided meditation for kids, or lead them into meditation yourself with the help of a script.

Outside, you may delight in a walk in the park, encouraging your children to use all their senses: listen to the sound of the wind in the trees, seek out the crocus buds emerging in spring, feel the breeze in their hair. Older children may want to feed the birds, smell the fragrance of the flowers, feel the different textures of the leaves or petals or even look out for flowers of a colour they choose.

A word of caution

Mindfulness and meditation are powerful interventions in which you learn to become aware of your thoughts, feelings and emotions. This can be daunting and uncomfortable, especially when you are going through difficult times such as bereavement, divorce or issues with your health, or if you are experiencing severe anxiety, depression or other mental health problems. That is why meditation and mindfulness are not recommended in these situations, unless you work with a qualified and experienced teacher. These practices are also contra-indicated if you have suffered deep trauma, even decades ago, as they may stimulate the old trauma. If you are going through any of these challenges, I encourage you to seek help from a therapist first, before finding a qualified mindfulness or meditation teacher who is experienced in working with mental health issues.

When my thyroid was overactive, with high levels of anxiety and my emotions in turmoil, I found it impossible to meditate. Yoga was much easier as I could focus my attention on the gentle stretches. By the end of the session my mind was still and body relaxed, preparing me for the closing meditation. Fortunately, there are other practices besides mindfulness and meditation that can calm your mind, relax your body and nourish your spirit, including tai chi, chi gong and other martial arts, as explored in the next section.

Reflective exercise: Mindfulness and meditation

You will need something for making notes.

Allow 10 minutes.

1. Having read about mindfulness and the different forms of meditation, do you feel most drawn to:

- learning from an experienced mindfulness teacher?
- the convenience of a mindfulness or meditation app?
- focusing on a self-compassion or loving-kindness meditation practice?

2. If you are keen on an MBSR or meditation course, what is available locally?

How could you create time for learning this wonderful practice from an experienced teacher?

3. If time and resources are limited, and you wish to find an app or guided audios, here are a couple of guidelines.

- Find one that suits your nature and personality.
- If one app or guided meditation doesn't resonate with you, check out others, as the quality and content can vary considerably.

4. Establish a meditation or mindfulness practice.

Create a regular time when it is easy to fit into your schedule, such as:

- on waking in the morning, before your mind gets busy
- the last thing you do at night before sleep
- during your lunch break

Find somewhere quiet where you will be undisturbed, even if it is sitting in your car when you first arrive home after work.

Check that you are well grounded and fully focused after you have finished, before driving or doing something that requires your full attention!

Set your intentions

- What can you commit to, right now?
- If you wish to find a course locally, when will you check what's available?
- If you have decided to use an app or guided meditation, when will you set aside time to decide which one is best for you?
- When will you do your daily practice, and how long for?

A daily mindfulness or meditation practice is a powerful resource in helping you reduce stress and enhance your wellbeing, and may also play an important role in insulating you from burnout. The more you practise, the sooner you will experience the benefits.

Resources

If you want to avoid being overwhelmed by too much choice, you can check out the following apps, all of which have received excellent reviews.

- Headspace
- The Mindfulness App
- Insight Timer
- Calm
- Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World
- Medito

7b. Yoga, chi gong and tai chi

These ancient practices combine gentle movement with mental focus and are wonderful antidotes to the fast pace of life, while bringing harmony to body, mind and spirit.

Yoga

If you are not already familiar with yoga, it is an ancient practice that originated in India over 5,000 years ago. It combines physical postures, breath control and mental focus with meditation or relaxation.

Kelly had spent her whole life running around after her children and ex-husband. When first joining a yoga class she felt guilty, believing that she should be doing something to help someone else. Her weekly class has become ‘me-time’, when she can slow down and stop. It prevents her from pushing herself so hard. Having always had an active mind that over-analyzed and worried about the littlest things, yoga brings her into the present moment, clearing her head and relaxing her body. She feels calmer, more at peace with herself and the world. She was surprised to find that the benefits of the weekly class last all week. When Kelly’s two daughters see their mother taking time for the yoga class, they are also learning that it is OK to take care of themselves.

For Isobel, yoga has become an integral part of her life, helping her feel more relaxed and flexible in both mind and body. When she misses her regular practice, she becomes more irritable, finds it difficult to focus and her energy dips. Yoga has

a cumulative effect for her. The more she does, the greater the benefits. When Isobel's brother was killed in a car crash only two weeks after their father had died, her regular yoga practice helped her grieve and process what had happened. It was her lifesaver, supporting her through that traumatic time. In her daily life now, it ensures she has space and time for herself, and enables her to detach from what is going on in life. If everything else is falling apart, her yoga mat is always there, helping her to put herself back together again.

There are enough different styles of yoga to suit every type of body and temperament. Hatha yoga is gentle; Iyengar helps you learn the subtleties of alignment; Ashtanga is more vigorous; Bikram yoga is practised in a heated room and might appeal if you love to sweat! It is worth exploring different classes and teachers in order to discover which style suits you.

If you wish to access a deep state of physical, mental and emotional relaxation, yoga nidra may appeal more. This is a gentle, guided meditation and conscious relaxation practice in which you lie down so that you can unwind and completely let go. It normally takes 20–40 minutes and can be used to help you relax into a deep sleep.

Chi gong

Chi gong (also spelt qi gong), which literally means *internal energy exercise*, is one of the cornerstones of traditional Chinese medicine. It combines breathing and focused attention with gentle, repetitive, flowing movements and standing postures. This ancient discipline activates the flow of vital energy in the body. It is a wonderful way to bring you back to your centre and align body, mind and spirit.

For as long as she could remember, Fatima felt top-heavy, as if lots of energy was stuck in her head. She used to trip frequently and sometimes fell flat on her face. As a massage therapist and healer, she found meditating and connecting with the higher energies easy, but grounding was not so natural for her. When yoga didn't help, Fatima decided to try chi gong. After a few months of weekly classes, she felt more balanced and stable, and began to sense the energy moving down her legs and into her feet. She has become much more coordinated and has stopped falling over. Chi gong helps her to feel calm, centred and present in the moment, as well as feeling protected energetically. After a session she feels cleansed, refreshed and revived, even if she was exhausted at the beginning. What has also surprised her is that she rarely experiences headaches since she has taken up chi gong.

Michelle's experience of chi gong was different. She was working in a highly pressured job that she hated. Eventually she burned out. Having to take time off, the respite gave Michelle the courage to give in her notice and find more rewarding work. Within a few months she found a job in the music industry, which she loved, but she still felt depleted and had to take another few weeks off work.

Since nothing seemed to boost her energy, Michelle decided to try chi gong. One single class seemed to open up her energy channels, and she was able to go back to work the very next day. Encouraged by such a dramatic response, she continued with the weekly class and also established a daily practice. Chi gong helped release any stagnant energy in her body, transforming it into vitality and flow. Paying attention to the energy circulating through her body while coordinating

the movements with the breath was a brilliant way to help ground and centre herself.

A few years later Michelle experienced an unprovoked violent assault, which led to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She worked through most of the trauma with a psychotherapist. Having neglected chi gong for a while, Michelle then signed up for a taijiwuxigong retreat. This particular practice is based on a combination of tai chi and chi gong, and taught her how to use spontaneous movements and sounds. It helped release the remaining elements of the trauma energetically and return her emotional and physical body to a state of balance and flow.

Chi gong continues to assist Michelle in finding equilibrium, and she loves being able to heal herself through this practice. She prefers chi gong to yoga because it can be done standing up outdoors. She enjoys feeling the earth beneath her feet, and breathing fresh air into her lungs while looking out over the countryside.

Chi gong has the advantage of being relatively simple to learn compared to yoga or tai chi. Ryan was unable to find a suitable class to fit into his schedule. Instead, he found an excellent YouTube video, which was easy to follow, even for someone without any prior experience. He follows a 20-minute chi gong video every morning, after which he feels more energized, integrated and ready to start the day. When time is limited, he follows a ten-minute routine. It is easy to overcome any resistance and get started, because it requires no equipment and is done standing up, so he rarely misses his practice. If he is unable to switch off in the evening before sleep or if he wakes in the night, a sequence of chi gong exercises designed

for the evening is invaluable in settling his mind and assisting the transition to sleep. He now explores other teachers on YouTube and joins the occasional online class.

Once you have mastered the basics of chi gong in this way, you may wish to find an experienced teacher to take you to the next level and learn the subtleties of this fantastic practice. However, if there are no classes locally, it is far better to follow a video or online class than do nothing. Once you are familiar with the exercises, you can create your own simple ten-minute sequence to integrate into your day.

Tai chi

Tai chi (also spelt taiji) is an internal martial art, practiced primarily in the West for its health benefits, although traditionally it was used for self-defence and spiritual development. Tai chi involves learning a *form*, a series of sophisticated flowing movements that blend seamlessly from one to the next. There is a focus on soft, mindful movements and breathing. This encourages the flow of chi (energy) through the body, and enhances physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. In tai chi, there is an emphasis on relaxing the muscles while developing strength, balance and flexibility. It is a wonderful antidote to the fast pace of life, and invaluable if you struggle with a busy mind.

The stress from Simon's job led him to start drinking heavily after work. When he began to realize the potential pitfalls of that coping strategy, he took himself away on a week's retreat in Asia, where he was introduced to tai chi. On returning home he found an excellent class locally, with a teacher who came from a long and powerful lineage of masters.

Simon's mind often used to dwell on the negative: the next deadline looming, something going wrong or a disgruntled client. Developing greater body awareness while doing the slow, gentle movements in tai chi is a powerful way to bring his mind into the present moment; there is no need to think about the past or worry about the future. In his 20-minute daily practice, he begins by sinking his weight and grounding himself, which helps ease any panic. As he breathes more calmly and deeply with the sequence of movements, he becomes more settled.

Part of the appeal of tai chi for Simon is that you never stop learning and developing your practice as there are so many subtleties to grasp. It is a long, slow journey that is all-encompassing and endlessly fascinating. He loves the juxtaposition of gentleness and strength in tai chi. You need to learn to soften the muscles without collapsing – a great metaphor for life.

There are several different styles of tai chi, each of which emphasizes a particular aspect of movement. Some require more athleticism, whereas others, like the yang style, are more suited to people of all ages with less agility. Many good teachers are also able to adapt the tai chi for those who have limited energy or restricted mobility.

There are other forms of martial art, such as kung fu, aikido, judo, karate and taekwondo, that you may prefer to explore. As with yoga and tai chi, it is best to learn these from an experienced instructor, and you can check out what is available locally. The emphasis of each of the martial arts will vary. Yet they all have a mental and spiritual component, which will help improve your fitness, flexibility and strength, as well as mental focus and endurance.

Reflective exercise: Yoga, chi gong or tai chi?

1. Which of these practices are you most drawn to?

- Would it be yoga, tai chi, chi gong or another of the martial arts?
- What might be most helpful for stilling your mind, calming your body and nourishing your spirit?
- If time constraints are a prime factor in your decision, you may wish to check out what resources are available online, in particular for chi gong.

2. What classes are available locally at a time that suits you?

Set your intentions

- When will you find out what classes are available locally?
- If you wish to find online resources or videos, when will you do that?

Epilogue

Now that you have released your self-care saboteurs and are learning to love, value and care for yourself, I invite you to look back through your reflective journal to when you first started reading the book. What changes are you aware of in terms of your confidence, anxiety levels, your ability to say ‘no’, your energy or how you manage emotional distress? You may not have been able to embrace all the principles, but even if you have consistently applied one or two key strategies, you will have begun the process of transforming your life.

If you are still struggling to implement these strategies, I encourage you to seek professional help, whether it be from a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist, your doctor or a life coach. Reaching out for additional support could be one of the greatest gifts you give yourself.

When you are under additional pressure, or transitioning into a new phase of life, such as starting a new job, getting married or moving home, your stress levels are likely to increase. These are the times when it is especially important to monitor yourself and different aspects of your wellbeing. Then you will know which principle needs most attention. You may like to ask a supportive friend or family member to give you a gentle nudge if they notice before you do that your life goes out of balance or that something needs attention. Then, you can nip any problems in the bud.

Personal growth is an ongoing process and I encourage you to continue exploring these and other tools to help ensure that you sustain yourself as a Thriving Giver. My deepest wish is that these seven principles enable you to infuse your life with joy, because when your light shines, it will warm all those that it touches.

Afterword: What led me to write this book

My mother already had two children under the age of three when I was born. The unexpected third pregnancy was far from welcome news. My parents were in the throes of emigrating to Canada, and my father had already left to find a job.

The challenges of bringing up three very young children wasn't easy for my mother. Feeling unwanted, and desperate for love and approval, from a young age I adopted the role of keeping everyone happy. As the peacemaker, I left most of the squabbles and tantrums to my siblings. Putting on a brave face to the world, I became self-reliant from when I was tiny, while the loneliness and unexpressed tears lurked beneath the surface.

Even though I grew up in a happy, functional family, I believed that other people's needs were more important than mine. I never learnt to value and care for myself. My fear of upsetting anyone meant that I shied away from conflict and found it very hard to say 'no'.

With my intrinsic nature of wanting to care for others, maybe it is not surprising that I became a health professional. Initially I trained as an osteopath and naturopath, and then qualified as a homeopath. Later, working primarily as a hypnotherapist and life coach, I helped my clients manage stress, become more assertive and balance their lives. However, as a single mother bringing up three boys, I failed to practise what I preached. Many years of poor self-care eventually led to burnout.

Unable to work, I took a three-month ‘sabbatical’ while my youngest was away travelling before going to university. Crewing on a boat in the Caribbean and then backpacking around Peru gave me space and time to heal, recharge and reflect on my life. I wanted to understand more about what had happened to me at a deeper level. On returning home, I embarked on a master’s in research, investigating stress and burnout in health professionals.

Unfortunately, a few years later, my old pattern of taking too much responsibility for others reared its ugly head again. Offering my time and energy for free, I took on the role of compiling a complex legal case against a property fraudster on behalf of a group of investors. We were hoping to recoup some of our losses. Concerned friends encouraged me to slow down or take a break, but my constant refrain was, ‘Once the court case is over, I will...’ Eventually, I was struck down by a debilitating auto-immune condition which prevented me from doing any serious work for three years.

That illness forced me to re-evaluate my life, a second time. It reinforced the importance of overcoming unhelpful childhood traits and learning to prioritize self-care. It also emphasized the importance of monitoring stress levels and different elements of personal wellbeing on an ongoing basis. I didn’t recognize what was happening. If I had been aware that I was close to the critical zone, I could have taken preventive action.

When I did my master’s, my intention was always to share what I learnt and to help others avoid making similar mistakes to me. The seven principles presented in this book bring together everything I have discovered from my own life’s journey, my research and over 20 years’ experience of working with clients.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my parents, who gave me the courage to follow my heart and sometimes leap into the unknown. Without that faith, my life's path would have been very different, and this book would never have come to fruition. A special thank you also to my sons Samuel, James and Mark, whose love, support and encouragement have always been there for me.

My thanks also to the many teachers, authors, therapists and workshop facilitators that I have been blessed to learn from throughout my life.

I am incredibly grateful to everyone who shared their stories so willingly and openly, and those who volunteered for my research study. Their experiences and insights were instrumental in shaping this book. I would also like to thank all my clients, training participants and students for putting their trust in me. They showed me the uniqueness of each person's path in life, and the importance of personalizing the approach according to individual needs.

An enormous thank you to Hal Zina Bennett for teaching me how to write from the heart, and giving me the confidence to trust my own journey in finding my voice. His suggestion to use lots of anecdotes has enriched the book tremendously.

Eternal gratitude to Jan Gavin for her willingness to act as a sounding board, for her patience and commitment in giving feedback on so many drafts, and encouragement when my trust or confidence wavered. I would also like to thank Gerry

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Burston for supporting my inner journey with the writing, and ensuring I stayed true to my vision, while nurturing myself every step of the way. A big thank you to all the other people who have contributed to the process in different and important ways, including Roberta Werdinger, David Beales, Susan Kersley, Dorothy McCrady, Heather Clark and Sandie Pinches.

Finally, I would like to thank Alison Jones for her insight in coming up with the title *The Thriving Giver*, and all the team at Practical Inspiration, who have been incredibly patient in answering all my queries, and supporting me through the whole publication process.

Appendix A: Additional resources

The ‘Resources’ page of my website (www.sarahkuipers.com) offers a workbook that you can use alongside this book as a free, downloadable PDF, as well as a range of resources to support you on your journey towards becoming a Thriving Giver.

Principle 1. Create supportive beliefs and behaviours

Dispenza, J., *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself: How to Lose Your Mind and Create a New One*, Hay House, 2012.

Lipton, B., *Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles*, 2008.

Togetherall is an anonymous online community where you can access peer support via the chat service. Trained professionals are available 24/7 to keep the community safe. www.togetherall.com

Professional psychotherapeutic organizations

Here is a list of some of the professional bodies that accredit psychotherapeutic professionals.

UK

- The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). www.bacp.co.uk
- The UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). www.psychotherapy.org.uk
- The British Psychoanalytic Council BPC (BPC). www.bpc.org.uk
- The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP). www.babcp.com
- The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT). www.aft.org.uk

A directory of therapists in the UK and USA is also available on the *Psychology Today* website. www.psychologytoday.com

USA

- The American Psychotherapy Association.
www.americanpsychotherapy.com
- The American Counseling Association (ACA).
www.counseling.org
- The American Mental Health Counselors' Association (AMHCA). www.amhca.org
- The American Psychological Association (APA).
www.apa.org
- The National Association of Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapists (NACBT). www.nacbt.org

Canada

- The Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA). www.ccpa-accp.ca
- The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). www.cpa.ca
- The Canadian Association of Cognitive and Behavioural Therapies (CACBT). www.cacbt.ca

Australia and New Zealand

- The Australian Counselling Association (ACA).
www.theaca.net.au
- The Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (ARCAP). www.arcapregister.com.au
- The Australian Indigenous Psychologists Association (AIPA). www.indigenoupsychology.com.au
- The Australian Association for Cognitive and Behaviour Therapy (AACBT). www.aacbt.org.au
- The Australia and New Zealand Association of Psychotherapy (ANZAP). www.anzap.com.au
- The New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC).
www.nzac.org.nz
- The New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP).
www.nzap.org.nz
- The Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Cognitive Behavioural Therapies (ANZACBT). www.cbt.org.nz

Life coaching

There are numerous training providers, but one of the main organizations that accredits life coaches is the International Coach Federation (ICF). www.coachfederation.org

Principle 2. Understand what's happening

Mathieu, F., *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma*, Routledge, 2012.

Rothschild, B., *Help for the Helper: Self-Care Strategies For Managing Burnout and Stress*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2006.

Trotter-Mathison, M. and Skovholt, T.M., *The Resilient Practitioner: Burnout Prevention and Self-Care Strategies for Counselors, Therapists, Teachers and Health Professionals*, Routledge, 2001.

On the 'Resources' page of my website, you can find the Professional Quality of Life (PROQOL) questionnaire, and tables showing the common signs and symptoms of burnout and traumatic stress. There is also an overview of work-related trauma and the different types of empathy. www.sarahkuipers.com

The Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project. This website promotes awareness about compassion fatigue, burnout and work-related stress and how they can impact caregivers. The project offers a range of resources and suggested reading. www.compassionfatigue.org

Principle 3. Transform your thoughts and emotions

Alcoe, J. and Eagger, S., *Stillness in the Storm – 7 Tools for Coping with Fear and Uncertainty*, The Janki Foundation, 2018. This includes 20 audio tracks of meditations and visualizations, available from www.jankifoundation.org

David, S., *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*, Penguin, 2016.

Katie, B., *Loving What Is*, Ebury, 2008.

Kelly, R., *Black Rainbow: How Words Healed Me – My Journey through Depression*, Yellow Kite, 2014.

Hill, C. and Sharp, S., *How to Stop Overthinking: The 7-Step Plan to Control and Eliminate Negative Thoughts, Declutter Your Mind and Start Thinking Positively in 5 Minutes or Less*, 2019.

Seligman, M., *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018.

Lapidus. An organization that promotes and specializes in writing for wellbeing. www.lapidus.org.uk

Principle 4. Calm your anxiety

Brown, R.P. and Gerbarg, P.L., *The Healing Power of the Breath: Simple Techniques to Reduce Stress and Anxiety, Enhance Concentration, and Balance Your Emotions*, Shambhala Publications, 2012.

Childre, D. and Rozman, D., *Transforming Anxiety: The HeartMath Solution for Overcoming Fear and Worry and Creating Serenity*, New Harbinger Publications, 2006.

Apps

- Breathing Zone
- Breathe2Relax
- Cardiac Coherence

Dr David Beales demonstrates three simple conscious breathing techniques in the following video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8EVIJah6AQ

The Heart Math Institute has carried out extensive research using Heart Rate Variability, and developed useful resources and free downloads for stress reduction and enhancing relationships. www.Heartmath.org

Principle 5. Assertiveness: Step into your power

Dickson, A., *A Woman in Your Own Right: Assertiveness and You*, Quartet, 2012.

Levin, N., *Setting Boundaries Will Set You Free: The Ultimate Guide to Telling the Truth, Creating Connection, and Finding Freedom*, Hay House Inc., 2020.

Principle 6. Replenish your energy

Cameron, J., *The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self*, Souvenir Press, 2020.

Goldstein, B., *The Secret Language of The Heart: How to Use Music for Creativity, Relaxation and Harmony*, Hierophant Publishing, 2016.

Laughter yoga

Organizations that offer laughter yoga in the UK, USA, Australia and internationally include:

- www.laughteryoga.co.uk
- www.laughteryogausa.org
- www.laughteryoga-australia.org
- www.laughteryoga.org

Individual and group sessions may also be available online or by telephone if you are unable to find a local group.

Principle 7. Nourish your spirit

Hanh, T.N., *How to Relax*, Ebury, 2016.

Maurine, C. and Roche, L., *Meditation Secrets for Women: Discovering Your Passion, Pleasure, and Inner Peace*, HarperOne, 2009.

Williams, M. and Penman, D., *Mindfulness, A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, Piatkus Books, 2011.

Here is a selection of resources, as well as a list of some well-respected organizations that hold registers of fully accredited mindfulness teachers.

Free mindfulness and meditation resources

- The Oxford Mindfulness Centre. www.oxfordmindfulness.org
- The Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA. www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations
- Self-compassion. Kristin Neff, a pioneer in the research of self-compassion, offers free guided meditations. www.self-compassion.org/category/exercises

Apps

If you want to avoid being overwhelmed by too much choice, you may wish to check out the following apps, all of which have received excellent reviews.

- Headspace
- The Mindfulness App
- Insight Timer
- Calm
- Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World
- Medito
- Happidote. This app supports the wellbeing of health professionals, and offers two- to three-minute meditations as the antidote to ten typical stress-causing scenarios. It also has three generic meditation practices that can be used anytime, anywhere.

Mindfulness courses

The main evidence-based mindfulness courses include:

- mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)
- mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
- mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for life (MBCT-L)

Some of the organizations that offer trained teachers in your area include the following.

UK

- The British Association for Mindfulness-Based Approaches. <https://bamba.org.uk>

USA

- The Mindfulness Center at Brown. www.brown.edu/public-health/mindfulness/learn-more/mbsr-teacher-recognition

Canada

- The Centre for Mindfulness Studies. www.mindfulnessstudies.com

Australia and New Zealand

- The Mindfulness Training Institute Australia and New Zealand (MTI ANZ). www.mtia.org.au

International

- The International Register for Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). www.AccessMBCT.com

Other

Values in Healthcare: A Spiritual Approach. This is a modular development programme to help healthcare professionals and teams to support themselves and their patients. The digital pack is free to download from www.jankifoundation.org/values-in-healthcare-free-content

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Hamilton, D., *The Contagious Power of Thinking: How Your Thoughts Can Influence the World*, Hay House UK, 2011.

Peters, S., *The Chimpanzee Paradox: The Mind Management Programme to Help You Achieve Success, Confidence and Happiness*, Ebury, 2012.

Rosenberg, M., *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, 2000.

Smith, P., *Healthy Caregiving: A Guide to Recognizing and Managing Compassion Fatigue, Presenter's Guide Level 1*, Createspace, 2008.

Smith, P., *To Weep for A Stranger: Compassion Fatigue in Caregiving*, Createspace, 2009.

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Principle 2. Understand what's happening

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Principle 3: Transform your thoughts and emotions

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