

# Your Guide to Self-Care

Because

you   
MATTER



Kvinna till Kvinna, 2023

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**FOR ALL WOMEN'S RIGHTS**  
IN EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD

**Welcome to “your guide to self-care” and a journey of  
self-connection and reflection!**

**You will be introduced to using and getting the most out of this guide book.**

**This guide book is created and designed for every activist, women human  
rights defenders, and for every woman who plays multiple roles in her  
life; a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, and a friend, for the caring  
souls who cherish their loved ones and extend that care to women  
worldwide.**

Due to your exceptional efforts, Kvinna till Kvinna intends to present you with this guide book as an appreciation for your significant contributions to empowering other women all over the world. Given the incredible work you do in various aspects of life, in addition to the demanding situations and the many stressors that you encounter, which can leave no time for you to attend to your own needs and practice self-care, we are introducing this booklet to invite you to explore the different definitions related to stress, its signs and effects, assessing areas and level of stress, and identifying existing and potential self-care practices. So, start setting the intention to make this journey all about only you!

## **Aim of the guide book**

This guide book will help you to develop self-awareness to gain a deeper understanding of your own needs, emotions, and boundaries, in addition to acquire general information and understanding of the different terms related to stress, being able to recognize the signs and symptoms when experiencing stress, and responding to stress by holding ourselves accountable for taking care of ourselves through learning tools and practice self-care to maintain your psychological well-being.

## **Structure of the guide book**

This guide book is structured in three parts, it is recommended that you start with part one that explains the different terms related to stress, its effects, and signs, and the second part enables you to assess your level of distress in order to decide what next steps you need to take from part three which includes self-care tips, however, if you need a tool to handle a current stressor, don't hesitate to jump to part three and find a tool that works for you!



### **keep in mind**

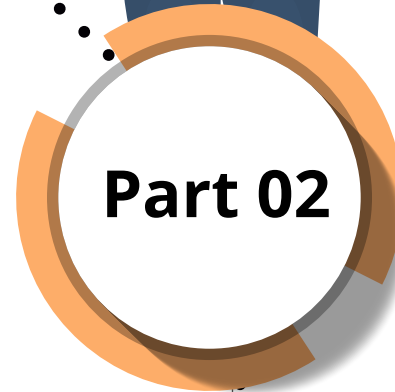
You can use this guide book regularly or whenever needed; if you feel stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, you can jump to part three and check the exercises and start choosing and practicing the ones that work for you.

**This journey is tailored for you to help you learn more about caring for your mental and physical well-being.**

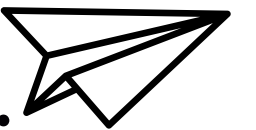
We will explore together various terms related to stress and gain an understanding of how stress impacts us. Join us on this journey from page (5) to page (14)



In this part of the journey, you will be introduced to two tools that will assist you in assessing your stress level and psychological well-being. And this will guide you in deciding the necessary actions to take. Page (15) to page (22)



The final stage of this journey will focus on equipping yourself with coping mechanisms and tools designed to help you reduce your stress level. Within these pages (23 to 62 ) you will discover breathing and relaxation exercises, techniques for altering our self-talk, and practical work-related tips



## Part one



## Introduction

Stress is part of our daily lives, we cannot escape it, it emerges from various adjustments, not only negative adjustments but also positive ones can induce stress!

Negative stress is the kind of stress that affects our physical and mental health, and is called distress such as facing financial difficulties, personal conflicts, and work-related pressure. While the term “eustress” refers to the positive kind of stress that is motivating and beneficial where it pushes us to perform and achieve better outcomes, examples on eustress can be planning for a wedding, starting a new job, having an important speech, and moving to a new country.

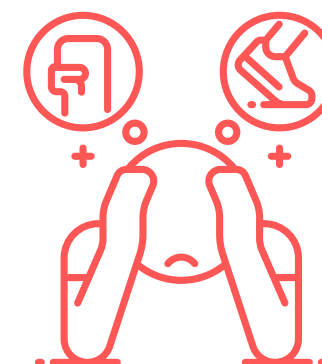
There are individual differences in the way we react to stress, and each one of us perceives external factors differently (that is based on our past experiences, personality traits, and core beliefs), therefore, what you find stressful might be a motivator for someone else! And here's where we learn to be compassionate to ourselves, you will find more details on showing compassion to yourself in part three of the booklet.

And to understand better stress and its impact on us, let's get to know what fight or flight stress response is, which is the body's stress response that is activated when we encounter stress.

Here is an example that can clarify more how the fight or flight response operates:

If you walk in a street and you noticed that someone is following you (this situation can be considered threatening for most of us), therefore, our body's “fight or flight” response is activated by releasing stress hormones such as Adrenaline and Cortisol where we can experience muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, and shortness in breath, all in which helps us either to fight the situation (in this case, we could confront the person following us), or to flee the situation where we escape and run away from the perceived threat.

This means that our bodies have an in-built system that makes us prepared to face stressors and threatening situations by activating our sympathetic nervous system that prepares us for the fight or flight to keep us safe as much as possible.





## Note

Our minds and bodies are connected to each other, this means that if you face a challenging situation, both your mind and body are influenced by the stress; the mind is affected by recurring thoughts about the stressful situation and experiences of anxiety, anger, fear ...etc. while the body responds by showing physical signs and symptoms such as the ones mentioned above in the fight or flight response, in addition to headaches, fatigue..etc..

As we started addressing some of the effects of stress on our minds and bodies, let's dive deeper into other possible symptoms and signs of stress.



Stress can be indicated by a variety of signs and symptoms, as shown in the table in the following page.



## Physical symptoms

- Muscle tension/ pain
- Headaches
- Rapid heartbeat
- Stomach pain
- Feeling dizzy, faint
- Fatigue and tiredness



## Cognitive Symptoms

- Racing thoughts and worry
- Negative self-talk
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness or memory issues
- Struggle to make decisions



## Emotional symptoms

- Anxiety, restlessness, worry, hopelessness
- Feelings of sadness/ depressive symptoms including loss of interest or pleasure in activities
- Increased sensitivity to criticism
- Irritability, anger



## Behavioral symptoms

- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Procrastination or avoidance of responsibilities
- Changes in appetite or eating habits
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other substances
- Nervous habits such as nail biting

It's important to note that these symptoms vary from one person to another, and if these symptoms persist and affect your daily life and your ability to function, then it's important to seek professional help.



### Note

it is very common that we usually seek medical care and advice when we experience physical pain such as headache, stomach pain, and fatigue, however, in many cases, the medical reports show no physical problem. If this happens to you, remember that our bodies can send us signals to tell us that we are not feeling well and that we need to take care of ourselves (mind-body connection), so listen to your body!

Now, let's shed some light on two terms that are related to stress but can be more severe than the typical stress (**Burnout and Secondary Trauma**).



You must have heard many people sharing that they feel burned out! So, let's get to know what burn out is and how different it is from stress.



**I don't have energy to do simple tasks as before**



**I don't feel appreciated**



**I can't take some time off because no one else knows how to do my tasks**



## Burn-out

As defined by Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary is: "exhaustion of physical and emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration".

And just as stress can impact different areas in our lives, so is burn-out, it affects physical, emotional, behavioral, relationships, and work. However, burn out is more severe and chronic and it results from the exposure to high levels of stress.

It is common that burn-out is related to work stress, and that is true especially when there's chronic work overload, having unsupportive colleagues and managers, unfair treatment and the lack of appreciation and rewards. However, even moms can also experience burn-out! So, anyone regardless of their position if exposed to an environment that does not appreciate or motivate them, is likely that we develop symptoms of burn-out if there aren't preventive measures to protect ourselves. You will find a tool to help you assess if you are experiencing any level of burn-out in the next part of the booklet.



## Secondary trauma

Charles Figley (1995) defines it as the emotional and psychological impact that individuals such as caregivers, health care professionals, or first responders experience when they are exposed to the trauma or suffering of others, this can lead to symptoms that are similar to clients/ survivors who have experienced trauma, even though the caregiver/ health care professional did not directly experience the traumatic event.



If you are affected by the work you do and seeing individuals who have experienced traumatic events, very similar signs and symptoms can appear just like stress and burn-out, however, what is more distinguished here is a symptom of nightmares, emotional numbness as a coping mechanism, sadness and grief related to the traumatic events of others, increased anxiety and hypervigilance, difficulties setting boundaries between personal and professional life, diminished sense of purpose or meaning, and decreased empathy or compassion towards others.

Yes, sometimes the work that we choose to do that includes being exposed to the psychological and physical suffering of others, can affect us negatively especially when we are not aware of our own needs and boundaries, therefore, it is important to be mindful of how specific stories affect us (especially that we also have our own stories that can be triggered by clients' stories), and learn self-care and stress management techniques to prevent reaching a point where we feel burned-out or being affected by secondary trauma. Always seek professional help if your daily functioning is affected.



If you are experiencing any of the symptoms above, please know that you are not alone, many individuals share similar experiences, acknowledging these symptoms is always a good first step toward healing and taking care of ourselves. Support is there and available for you, and remember that you deserve the care you offer to others.



## Part two

In the previous part, we have addressed stress, burn out, and secondary trauma and the possible symptoms that we could experience. And in this part, we will focus on checking in on ourselves and assessing our psychological well-being, so we make a conscious decision to prioritize self-care and self-awareness.

Our daily lives can be very busy filled with responsibilities and tasks, that we often overlook and underestimate the significance of taking a moment and check in on how we think and feel (emotionally and physically), therefore, this is an invitation to always remind yourself that your mental and physical health deserve to be checked in on as they can get sidelined when we are busy.

So, Let's make it a habit and check in on ourselves and our wellbeing, even if this means to set an alarm ever day and the other with a title: "how are you feeling?!"

We will learn about two tools that you could use to get a general understanding of what is going on and how you are functioning daily; these tools are: the wheel of strife, and identify you stress symptoms (burn out questionnaire). You can choose one tool or decide to try one each time, it is up to you to decide which tool works best for you to get back to for another reassessment every once in a while, this means every two weeks, once a month, or whenever you need to.



### Note

You will find in the last page of the guide book a link for a third tool to help you identify the current self-care practices and its scoring system; where it shows the level you are at regarding taking care of your mental health

## Wheel of life (Strife)

This tool is helpful to identify the areas in your life that are currently causing you stress, allowing you to gain insight and recognize the sources of stress, so you think about the effective strategies to deal with the stressor.

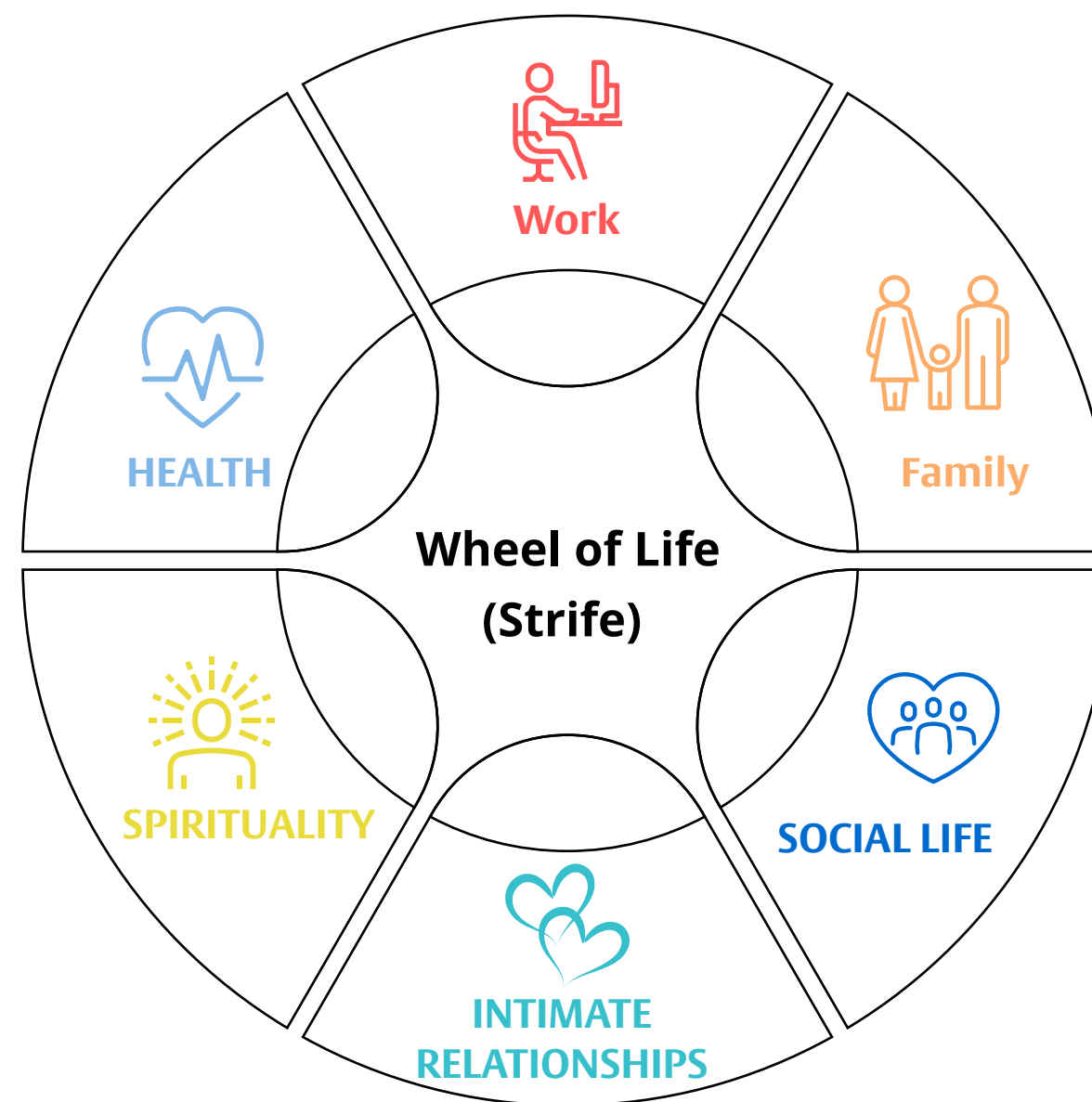
Here is a wheel divided into areas, each area corresponds to a distinct aspect of your life, such as health, work, family, social life, intimate relationships as shown below.

### Instructions

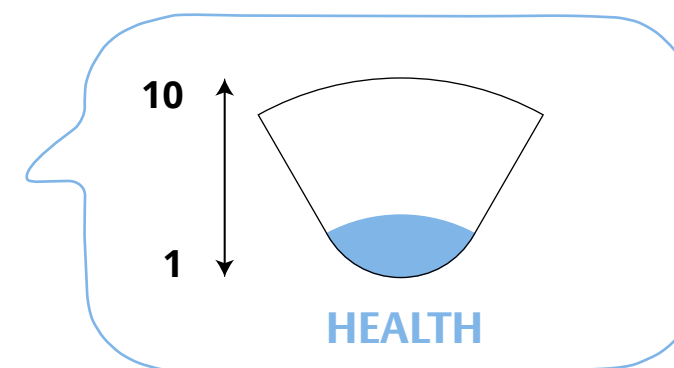


- Get a white paper and draw a wheel similar to the one in the next page
- Get some markers and coloured pencils.
- Take a moment and reflect on the various areas of your life that are causing you distress .
- Rate and colour each area, reflecting how much stress it is causing you (on a scale from 1 to 10 ;10: minimal stress, and 10: is extreme stress".
- And then look at the whole wheel and notice what it tells you about your life balance, are there areas where stress is high and needs more attention than other areas?
- Based on that and with the help of part three of this booklet, make a plan of the actions that you need to take to deal with the stressor (either by changing the situation if possible, or learning tools to adapt to it).

**You can use the wheel of strife every once in a while, to check in and reassess the balance in your life and make the needed steps.**



Example



## Questionnaire: IDENTIFY YOUR STRESS SYMPTOMS

### Instructions

Rate each of the following items in terms of how often the symptom was true for you during the last three weeks:

**0 = never**

**1 = occasionally**

**2 = somewhat often**

**3 = frequently**

**4 = almost always**

- \_\_\_ I feel little enthusiasm for my work.
- \_\_\_ I feel tired even with adequate sleep.
- \_\_\_ I feel frustrated about what I am achieving at work.
- \_\_\_ I am irritable or impatient over small inconveniences.
- \_\_\_ I want to withdraw from the constant demands on my time and energy.
- \_\_\_ I feel negative, futile, or depressed about my work.
- \_\_\_ My decision-making ability seems less than usual.
- \_\_\_ I am not working as efficiently as I should be.
- \_\_\_ The quality of my work is less than it should be.
- \_\_\_ I feel physically, emotionally, or spirituality depleted.
- \_\_\_ My resistance to illness is lowered.
- \_\_\_ My interest in sex is lowered.
- \_\_\_ I am eating more (or less) than usual; or drinking more coffee, tea, or sodas; or smoking more cigarettes; or using more alcohol or drugs than usual.
- \_\_\_ I am feeling emotionally callous about the problems and needs of others.
- \_\_\_ My communication with my colleagues, friends, or family seems strained.
- \_\_\_ I am forgetful.
- \_\_\_ I am having difficulty concentrating.
- \_\_\_ I am easily bored.
- \_\_\_ I feel a sense of dissatisfaction, of something wrong or missing.
- \_\_\_ When I ask myself why I get up and start work, the only answer that occurs is "because I must."

## Total score

**0-25** you are probably coping adequately with the stress of your job.

**26-40** you are suffering from job stress and would be wise to take preventative action.

**41-55** you need to take preventative action to avoid job burnout.

**56-80** you are burning out and must develop a comprehensive stress management plan.

Now, let's move to the next part where we will learn to do something about how we think and feel, and aim to reduce stress and enhance our ability to cope with stressors.



Part Three

			
	<b>Coping Strategies</b>		
			
			



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## Don't forget to love yourself

This part of the booklet focuses on equipping you with skills and tools to help you cope and deal with the different stressors and difficult emotions. We will call it the self-care toolbox; you can visualize self-care as a toolbox filled with different tools to promote and support your well-being. There are many tools and exercises that you can choose from, and you will learn with time the right tool at the right time to reduce your stress and maintain balance.



### keep in mind

(Consistency is key to benefit from the tools addressed in this part of the booklet, therefore, make the intention to integrate these exercises that you feel comfortable with in your daily routine, so you get the most out of these tools that help in obtaining a sense of calmness, balance and an improved well-being!)

Before we start with learning tools to take care of ourselves, it's important to shed light on two terms that are used interchangeably, self-care and stress management.

### Self-care



Think of self-care as a vaccine, where you take deliberate actions to maintain physical, and mental health. It involves mental hygiene practices and activities that promote relaxation, enjoyment, and self-reflection such as meditation, spending time with loved ones, eating well, getting enough sleep, exercise, and setting boundaries. Therefore, the main goal of self-care is to maintain and enhance your overall well-being. And remember that you don't need to be stressed or feeling unwell to practice self-care!

01

### Stress Management



Think of stress management as traveling with two suitcases; one suitcase represents the weight of your stressors, and the other one symbolizes your resources and coping mechanisms. And its main goal is to reduce stress and maintain a balance between the two suitcases by using techniques and strategies such as breathing, relaxation, and mindfulness exercises, in addition to challenging negative thoughts patterns.

02





It is highly recommended that we create our own self-care plan, and just as plants require regular watering and care, our physical, mental, and emotional health need to be nourished by the different activities and tools to increase our tolerance to deal with stressors when they happen, and on the other hand, if we are going through a difficult time and we need to reduce stress, we talk

about stress management techniques. And even though we say that the two terms have distinct focus, the booklet will address tools that could work for both self-care and stress management at the cognitive (the way we think) and the behavioral level (the way we behave) and how both can have an effect on the way we feel.



### Note

Not every exercise works for everyone, give yourself a chance to try it and if you don't feel comfortable, then this is not the exercise for you, and remember that you have many other tools in your toolbox where you could choose what works for you 😊

you can use all exercises addressed in this chapter for both self-care and stress management (both terms share the same goal to get and reinforce our emotional stability).

***So, let's start creating our toolbox!***



### Some simple breathing and relaxation exercises

It is common that we don't usually pay attention to the way we breathe as it is an automatic bodily function and especially when we're experiencing strong emotions, and here you are invited to bring your awareness to your breath and intend to practice some breathing and relaxation exercises and notice how your mind and body feel.

Here is briefly why you are encouraged to practice breathing and relaxation exercises!

(These exercises are helpful in managing stress and regulate emotions by activating the parasympathetic nervous system that is the body's natural relaxation response which helps in lowering heart rate, blood pressure and stress hormones such as cortisol, so you feel calmer, more grounded, centered, and it is the fastest way to turn off the fight or flight response that is activated when we are stressed.)

**A Quick tip:** making your exhale longer than the inhale helps in activating the relaxation response system.



### Note

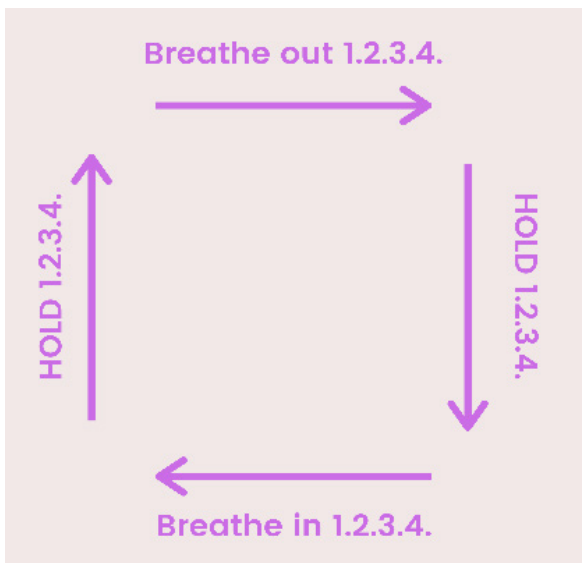
Breathing exercises can be easy to many of us, however, some of us could experience some uncomfortable feelings in the beginning if it's your first time to practice them (like headache, dizziness..), therefore, give yourself some time to practice, and if you still feel uncomfortable, try other exercises until you find the exercise that works best for you.

Box Breathing Exercise

There are four basic steps to do this exercise (breathing in, holding your breath, breathing out, holding your breath again, repeat!)

You can either use the image below or draw a square (box) and trace along the side of the box with your finger while you are breathing in from the nose for a count of four, hold the breath for four seconds, and trace down the side of the box for another four seconds while breathing out from the mouth, and hold again for four seconds.

(Repeat these steps at least three times/ rounds, or as much as needed)



You can watch this video for more clarification



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FriSddUY84>



if your chest is tightening and your heart beats fast, then your body is trying to send you a message that you are not feeling well, listen to it and practice some breathing exercises!

4-7-8 breathing exercise

Another technique that could help decrease symptoms of anxiety and stress is to breathe in through the nose for 4 seconds, holding your breath for 7 seconds and then exhaling through the mouth for 8 seconds (repeat at least four times).



Breath in and count 4 seconds



Hold and count 7 seconds



Breath out and count 8 seconds

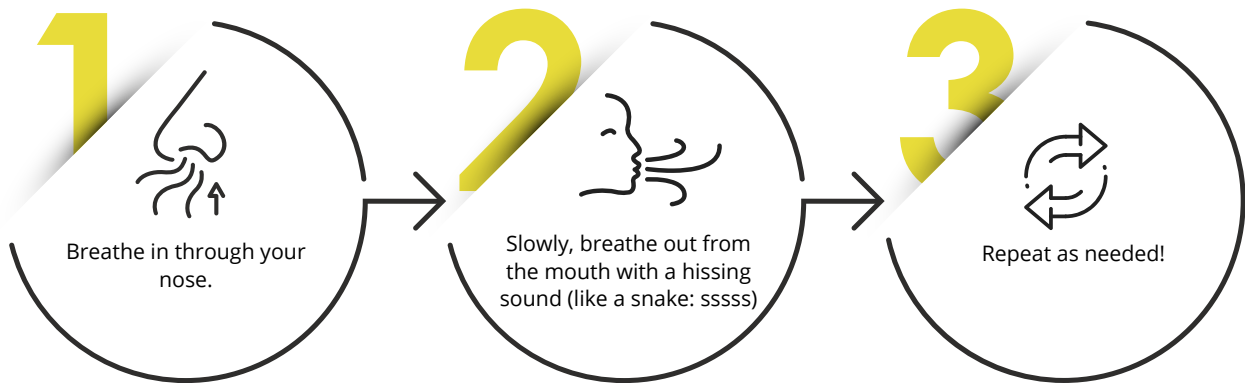


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Dv-lIdGLnIY>



Start from second 39

Snake breathing exercise



<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/ztUsSrBMVJ4>





### Mindful Breath Counting

1. Practice this exercise sitting up to enhance mindfulness awareness. Later, if you like, you can use it in bed as a technique to help you fall asleep.

2. Use slow, deep diaphragmatic breathing.

3. Count each exhalation to yourself. When you reach the fourth exhalation, start over again at one. Here is how you do it: inhale...exhale (one)...inhale...exhale (two)... inhale...exhale (three)...inhale...exhale (four)...inhale...exhale (one)...and so forth.

4. As other thoughts enter your consciousness or as your mind goes blank, simply observe those thoughts or the blankness without judgment or expectation, and then return to counting your breaths.

5. If you lose track of your count, simply start over again at "one."

6. Optional: If you like, you can label each of your thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise. Say to yourself, thought, feeling, or sensation, and then return to counting your breaths. You can make up your own labels but keep it simple. The purpose of labelling is to increase your objectivity and emotional distance from potentially charged material.

7. Continue counting your exhalations in sets of four for ten minutes. Gradually increase to twenty minutes

*For more exercises, check the links below:*

### Breathing exercises



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DqTuWve9t8>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3T9bkt7-0I>



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dthmKu\\_IIPY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dthmKu_IIPY)



### Meditation exercises



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlr3RsUWrdo&t=1s>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZToicYcHI0U>



**Note:** meditation helps you feel calm, relaxed, and focused on the present moment through breathing and/ or some thoughts and images

## Progressive relaxation technique

There are two versions of this technique, below you will find the short version that doesn't take much time, it involves tensing a group of your body muscles and then relaxing them (experiencing both tension and relaxation to release stress)

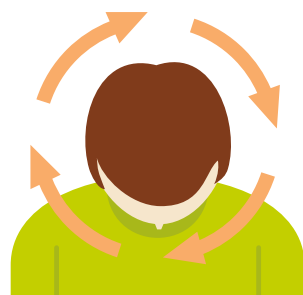


1

Start with the pose of Charles Atlas (you can google it and see his posture) where you curl your right and left fists, and at the same time tightening your biceps and forearms, and then relax (you can say to yourself: relax, my body is relaxed, I'm relaxed)

2

Now, move to your head and roll it around on your neck clockwise, a complete circle, do it reversed as well and then relax.



3

Moving to the face muscles by wrinkling the forehead, with your mouth opened and shoulders hunched, and then relax.

4



Take a deep breath with your shoulders arched to the back and hold for three seconds and exhale. Then take another deep breath pushing out your stomach, hold for three seconds and exhale (relax)



5

Last step is focused on the lower part of your body, straighten your legs directing your toes toward your face, hold for three to four seconds and then relax (your calves, thighs and buttocks will be engaged here).

**You can also check the following links for different progressive muscle relaxation.**



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClqPtWzozXs&t=140s>

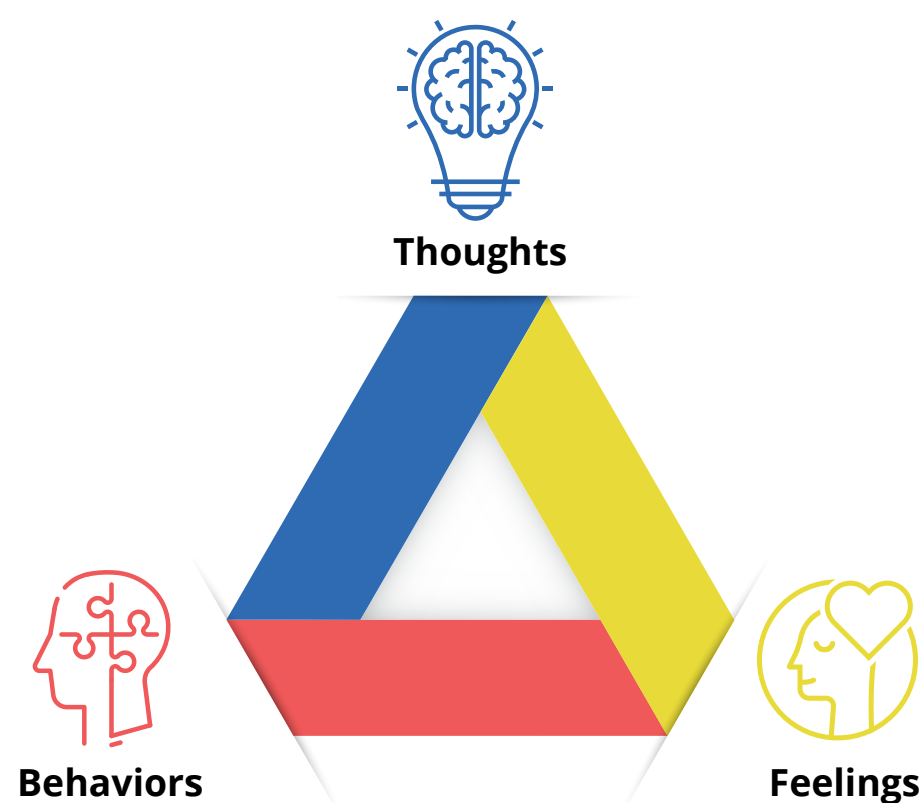


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=912eRrbes2g&t=18s>



**And now after learning about some breathing and relaxation exercises, let's focus on the cognitive level**

As addressed earlier in part one, there's a very strong relationship between our minds and bodies, this means that we cannot only work on our bodies and calming ourselves down through breathing and relaxation exercises (although they are super helpful for many) they need to be integrated with other tools that are more on the cognitive level; the way we think and perceive things. Therefore, you are invited here to listen to yourself and observe how it is like in your internal world! And before that, let's get to know what the cognitive triangle is (or what we call sometimes, self-talk cycle) and how it works!



This cycle suggests that the way we think affects the way we feel and behave. For example: I didn't get invited to a friend's party.

A possible **thought** could be: my friend hates me, no body cares about me, no body will ever invite me...etc

And some possible **feelings** that could result from such thoughts are sadness, anger, and frustration. But not only emotions are affected but also the physical sensations where we could experience rapid heartbeat, shortness in breath, tightness in chest, headaches...etc

Our **behaviors** are impacted by the way we think and feel; therefore, we might decide to isolate ourselves and limit our social interactions with others, which reinforces and generates new thoughts that are negative in their nature.

Note here that this is a cycle and if we don't stop it, more negative thoughts will keep popping up impacting us and creating negative emotions and behaviors, therefore, it's important to know what keeps the cycle going, so we break it! (And yes, sometimes it can be difficult to separate our thoughts from our emotions, but it gets easier with learning and practicing).







### keep in mind

**Negative thoughts can be very automatic, so we do not question its validity. Be aware and start observing your thoughts!**

If you are wondering why it's so important to separate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, be noted that it is the responsibility of each one of us to break this self-talk cycle by identifying what patterns of negative thoughts we have. It is a fact that we can't control external factors, but we do control the way we think about it and what actions we choose to take to adapt to the situation. We will focus on what we call thinking traps that we could fall into in the way we think, so, be prepared to take a closer look to your mind and its products 😊

**We can't control the rain in winter; however, we can choose what to wear and turn on heat to keep ourselves warm**

### Thinking traps

patterns of irrational thinking (errors in the way we think) that can lead to negative emotions, they are automatic in nature, therefore, often, we don't notice them, and they need to be challenged and corrected.

You will be introduced to the most common thinking traps as the more you learn about them, the more you'll recognize the ones that come around for you the most, so you challenge them and stop more negative thoughts from coming.







### Thinking traps (unhelpful thinking styles)



#### Jumping to conclusions

Reaching conclusions without sufficient evidence. There are two types for it:

- Mind reading: assuming we know what others are thinking (e.g., I know she hates me)
- Fortune telling: predicting the future (e.g., things will never get better).



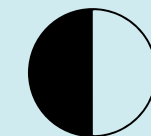
#### Emotional reasoning

If we feel a certain way, then it must be true (emotions based)

e.g., I feel like a failure, I must be a failure.

I feel rejected, so I must be unlikable.

I feel guilty, I must have done something wrong.



#### Black and white thinking

Also called all or nothing thinking, where there's a tendency to be either or (no grey area)

e.g., if I can't do something perfectly, I won't do it at all.

I didn't get the promotion, so I'm a total failure in my career.



#### Overgeneralization

Drawing conclusions based on a single event and applying a negative experience to all similar situations.

e.g., one person betrayed me, so I'll never trust anyone.

I failed to meet my deadline, so I'm a complete failure at time management.



#### Catastrophizing (magnification) and minimization

Magnifying the severity of a situation (worst possible scenarios)- catastrophizing

e.g., I received negative feedback at work, I'm going to get fired. Or someone who interprets turbulence as a sign of a plane crash.

And shrinking something to make it less important- minimization.

e.g., I completed the project, anyone could have done it, it's not a big deal.



#### Mental filter

Focusing on the negative aspects of a situation (the failures) and not seeing the positive ones (successes).

e.g., I had a good day at work, but I made a small mistake in one task. I feel like a complete failure.



**Magical thinking (superstitious)**

Linking unrelated events or actions and believe that they influence each other (The belief in supernatural causality)  
e.g., I try to avoid seeing my neighbor as something bad happens every time I see her.  
I always knock on wood to prevent something bad from happening.



**Labeling**

Defining and labeling oneself and/ or others  
Such as I'm a loser, I'm a failure, I'm a terrible person...etc



**Should, must**

Using words such as should and must, setting unrealistic expectations on oneself and/ or others which could lead to guilt and frustration.  
e.g., people should always agree with me.  
I should always be perfect and never make mistakes.



**Personalization**

Taking responsibility for something that wasn't completely your fault (it's my fault).  
e.g., my partner seems upset, it must be because of something I did.  
My friend seems distant, she must be mad at me.

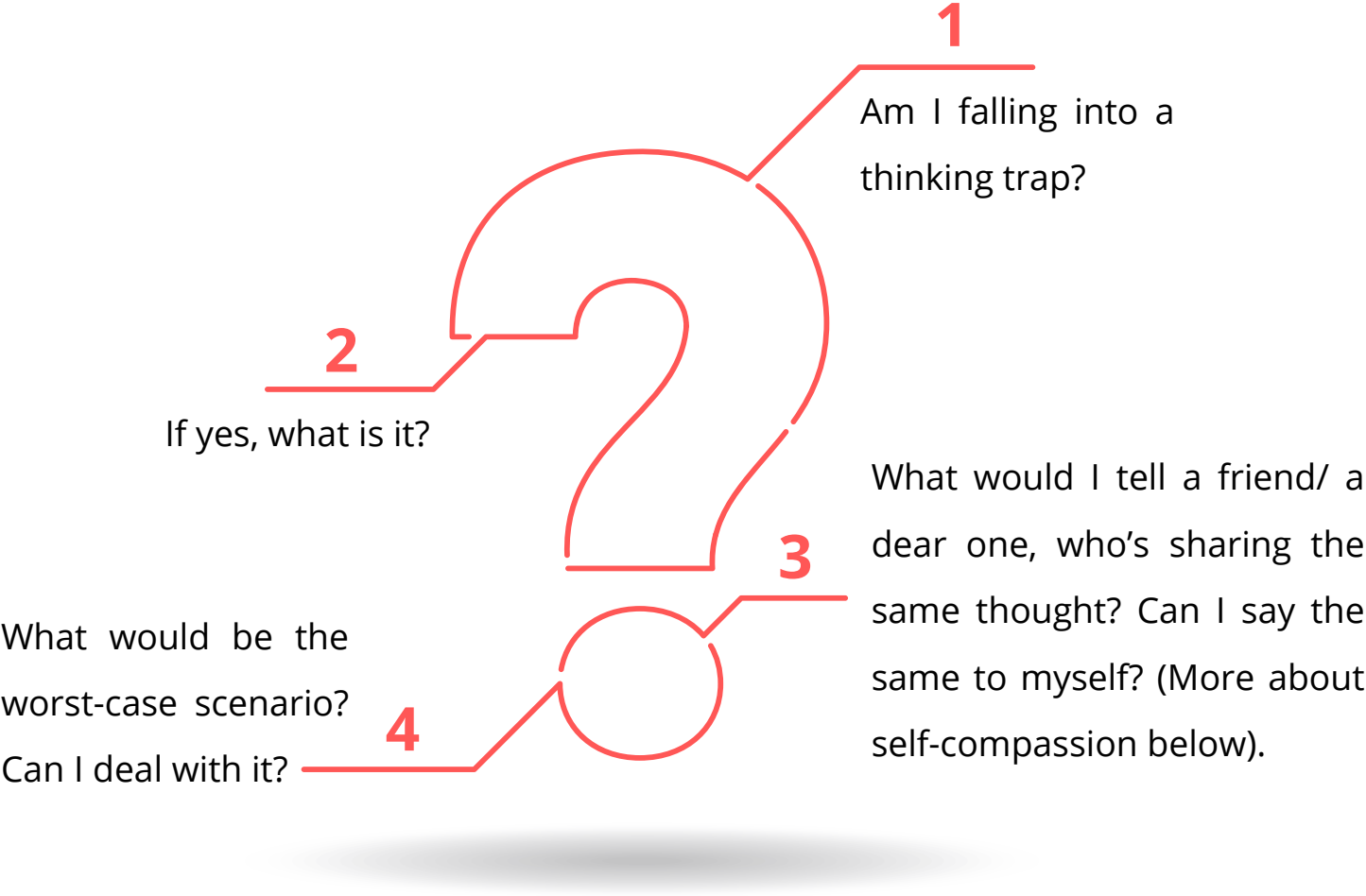
**Time to do some work!**

Try to specify a time during the day for a week to reflect on your thoughts and how they affect your Feelings (mood), and behaviors (check the example below). And if you identified any thinking traps that you learned about above, catch it, and look for evidence that supports the way you think and evidence that just doesn't.



Thinking about evidence with/ against the thought helps in testing reality and questioning the validity of the thought which is one way to deal with negative thoughts. And if needed, you can also check how true your thought is by asking people around you (for example: if I think that I’m a terrible mother, check with your loved ones what they think about that).

You can also ask yourself the following questions to help you deal with negative thoughts once you identify them from the table.



Try questioning your negative thoughts and see how that affects the way you feel 😊



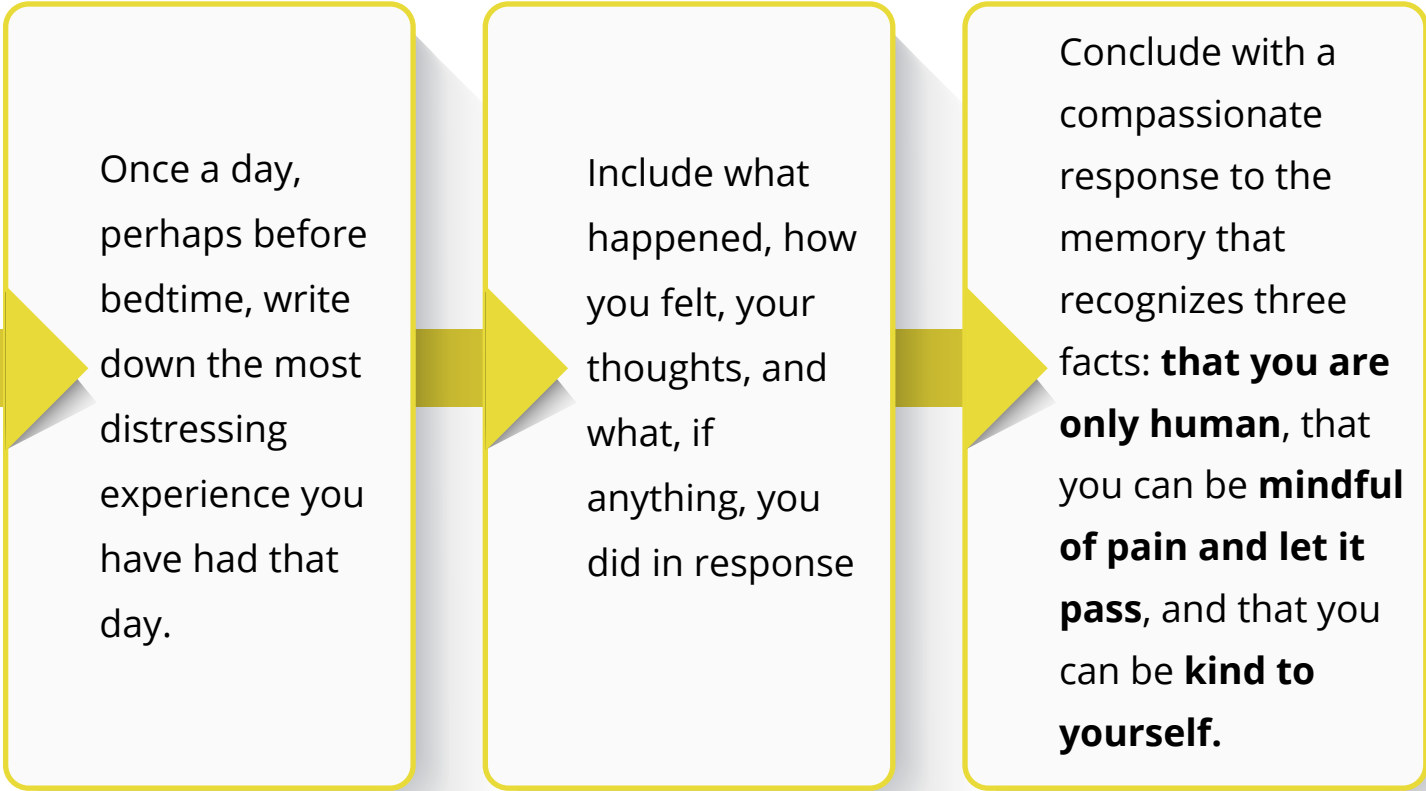
**Please be reminded that not every thought that crosses our minds is true, our brains produce millions of thoughts every day that we are only aware of some of them. You can tell a negative thought that it is just a thought and not necessarily reflect the reality.**

**Self-Compassion**

Sometimes, we can be very harsh on ourselves, and we don’t provide the empathy and understanding that we show to others to ourselves. It takes a lot of practicing to start speaking to ourselves differently, in a more kind and compassionate way.



It is suggested that you keep a self-compassion journal for a week as follows:



Respond to your flaws, mistakes, and emotions in a more compassionate way, talk to yourself as if you're talking to a friend and remind yourself that you've done everything you could, and that you are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.

When we are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or in need of comfort, it's important to acknowledge our emotions and take care of ourselves. By placing your hand on your heart, you are directing your attention inward and connecting with your body. This simple act can help you feel grounded and supported.

As you press your hand against your chest, you may notice a gentle warmth radiating from your palm to your heart. This warmth represents the compassion you are giving to yourself. It's a reminder that it's okay to feel whatever emotions you are experiencing, and that you deserve kindness and understanding.



**self-compassion is not selfish or indulgent. It is an essential part of self-care and can contribute to overall mental and emotional health..**

So, the next time you find yourself in need of compassion, try placing your hand on your heart- chest and pressing a bit harder until you feel the warmth coming from your hand to your heart. Allow yourself to fully experience and accept your emotions. Give yourself the love and kindness you deserve.



## More about dealing with our emotions



**Remember that our emotions are like waves, they come and go 😊**

We all experience a wide range of emotions, both positive and negative. And it's important to know and remember that emotions are an integral part of our human experience. The more we resist emotions, the more they persist. There is no way that we could run away from ourselves and our emotions. Therefore, it's vital that we learn to deal with our emotions rather than escaping from them. It takes us to make a conscious decision to face our emotions and allow them to happen, having the belief that we have the ability to tolerate and handle these painful emotions.



**Attempting to avoid or suppress our emotions, make them resurface in unexpected ways, and this can lead to stress, anxiety, and even physical symptoms! therefore, our emotions need to be acknowledged and addressed**

Yes, it is not easy to face our painful emotions, it takes a lot of courage, vulnerability, and willingness to connect deeper to ourselves. However, by choosing to face our emotional pain and suffering, we are taking an active role in our own emotional well-being through a process that aims at recognizing our emotions and responding to them. Here are some few steps that you could follow:

### 1 Identify and acknowledge the feeling

Name the emotion you're experiencing (fear, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, helplessness, self-blame, self-doubt...etc), Acknowledging the emotion can help in diminishing its power. Give it a try!

To name a feeling, you need to sit and reflect on what you are experiencing inside. It can be confusing sometimes to identify what feeling we are experiencing as sometimes we can experience more than one feeling at the same time and feelings can mask each other. But here is a tip if you find it difficult to identify what you feel, check how your body feels. It's always easier to check our bodily sensations rather than emotional ones. over time, you will notice that for example, every time my heart beats fast, and I have shortness in breath, I know that stress is the feeling I might be experiencing.



## 2 Validate the feeling

There is no right or wrong feeling, your feelings are valid and all emotions are welcome, and that means when we experience a certain emotion, we need to tell ourselves that it's ok if we feel this way and that it's our right to feel angry, upset..etc

## 3 Sit with the feeling

Allow yourself to spend five to ten minutes experiencing how it feels like to go through this pain (yes, it's painful, but imagine a tunnel and you want to get through it to the other side where there is light, you will have to get through darkness sometimes not around it to get to the other side!)

**(See here that we are not trying to resist our emotions, on the contrary, you are accepting them and allowing them to happen)**

## 4 Express your feelings

You have acknowledged, validated, and sat with your feelings. Now, your feelings need to be expressed in any healthy way you wish, you could try to write, cry, sing, draw, or do physical movement.

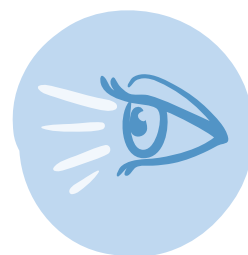
## Other tools to add to your own toolbox when feeling distressed:

### Grounding techniques

Strategies that help us reconnect to the present moment (the here and now tools) when we are emotionally distressed, anxious, and dissociated from the present moment, they help in increasing our sense of stability and connection to reality.

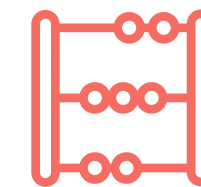
**Here are some examples where you could use in every time your mind wanders!**

**1** The 1-2-3-4-5 technique: identify and name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. Using our five senses can help in bringing our minds back to the present moment



**2**

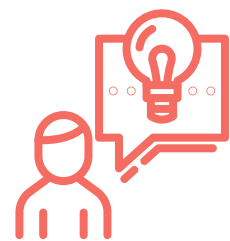
Count objects around you: count number of blue, red, green etc., around you, number of objects with a triangle shape for example.





3

Describe an object: find an object in the room you're sitting in, describe it with details (its colour, shape, texture..etc).



4

Use grounding objects: hold onto a physical object that provides you with a sense of comfort such as a stress ball, smooth stones. Try to focus on the texture and the weight of the object.



5

Breathing exercises can also help, refer to the ones addressed earlier in this part of the booklet and try to count the breaths.



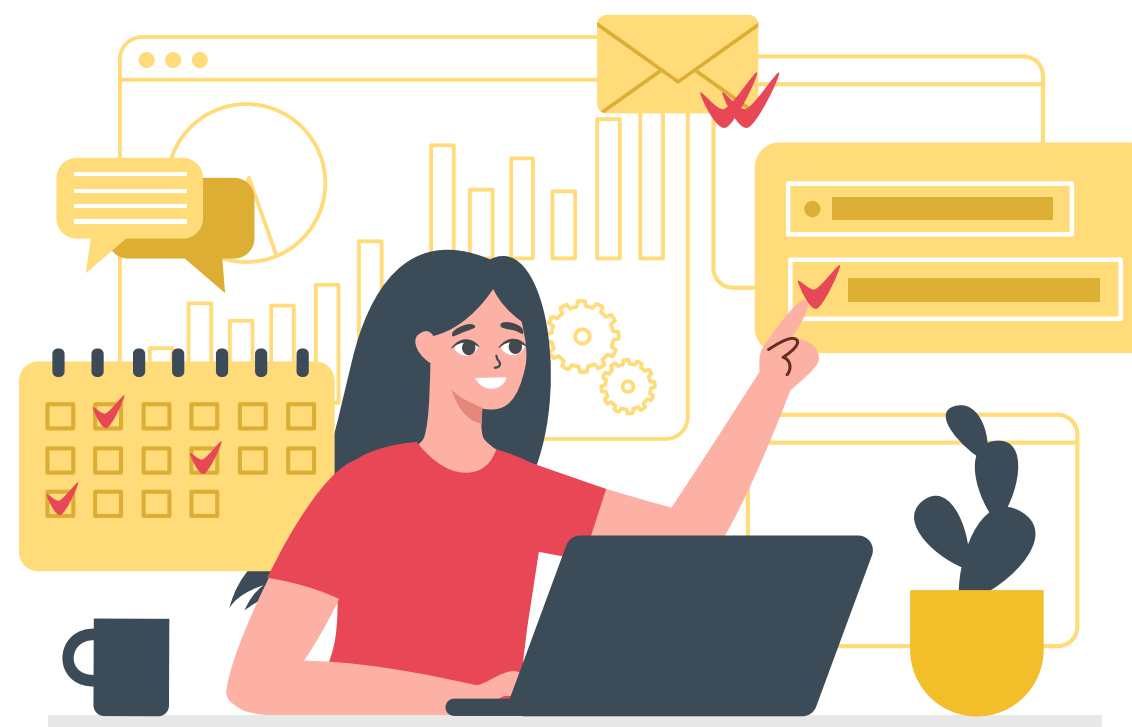
6

Engage in physical activity: do some exercise, stretch, walk, this can help to focus on your body and its sensations such as your feet on the ground.



**Grounding exercises can have an effect in distracting ourselves from the distressing emotions, however, its main focus is reconnecting us to the present moment.**

### Work-related skills and tips



Women are responsible for many things at both personal and professional level (she has to work and excel at her job, play the role of a wife, sister, mother, and take care of many people around her). Therefore, there is a pressure on women to meet the needs and expectations of others, which can influence the time and energy spent on self-care. Which is why it is important to shed light on the importance of setting boundaries and prioritizing one's own needs.

And yes, it is understandable that there's a challenge in saying no especially for women, where it is common that they tend to be nurturing and putting the needs of others above their own, and thus, it's important for women to be self-aware, we need to understand our own needs and limitations, acknowledging that our well-being matters, and that a balanced approach to life is possible where our needs are met while we are still there for others.

Here, we focus on a couple of skills that can be helpful to keep a healthy and professional relationship at work and at a personal level.

## The communication style

There are different communication styles that we can use in our professional and personal life: being assertive, passive, and aggressive. Probably each one of us has been in situations where we were forced to act aggressively; the times when we express our thoughts and emotions in a forceful and confrontational way or even passively where we avoid conflicts by not expressing our ourselves and not being able to say no. being assertive is the style that is encouraged where it helps a lot in managing different situations including conflicts at workplace.



**In self-assertiveness, you learn to express yourself confidently and respectfully while keeping your personal boundaries**

Ok then, how being assertive looks like!

### Being assertive is when

- You are clear and direct: very clearly expressing your thoughts and opinions (e.g., I like that you keep me posted with the recent updates regarding the project).
- You use “I” statements more than “you”, it makes a difference when you tell your colleague at work: I feel frustrated when I get interrupted, rather than telling her “You always interrupt me”!

- You are careful with the way you express your thoughts and needs, you pay attention to your tone of voice and body language (you can still be firm with what you need and want but keeping both the tone and body in a non-threatening position), it is the opposite of being aggressive and violent.

**Using “I” statements is vital in self-assertiveness, use the statements: I would prefer, I need, I would like. And don’t forget the eye contact when you are being assertive.**

- You let others know what is acceptable and okay for you and what is not (clear personal boundaries) whether it is for the workload or even the way you are treated by managers or colleagues.
- You deal with criticism or negative feedback assertively; by acknowledging the feedback and expressing your point of view, avoiding being defensive or submissive.



**Setting boundaries and being assertive is important in your self-care. Being able to express yourself and your preferences invites people to respect you and your boundaries, and that makes you feel valued and respected.**



it is one step and then the other and you can little by little set your personal boundaries. If you find it too difficult to say no to colleagues coming to your office and interrupting you from working or they show little respect to your breaks, be clear with how you want things to be using the “I” statements and firmly express your preferences in the workplace.

For that, try to specify a day during the working week (this could also apply to the personal situations as well) where you will practice saying no until you are more comfortable saying it.

You can use the following exercise (with an example of being passive) to help you keep track of your communication style and what you can change and do about it. It is called **the Assertiveness scorecard** where you record what happened and what you did about what happened, indicating which communication style you used and alternative response can be for the future.

Date: 20-5-2023Place: workplace

Person/situation:

I was overwhelmed with work, have reports and deadlines to meet, and a colleague came to my room feeling upset and needed someone to talk to, she entered my room and sat on a chair and started talking about a problem she’s facing.

Your response:

I couldn’t tell her that I’m already overwhelmed and need to finish my report that day, I felt sorry for her and just listened to her until she left on her own.

Assertive? Passive? Aggressive?

How did it turn out?

I had to work after working hours to compensate the time where I couldn’t work because I was supporting her.

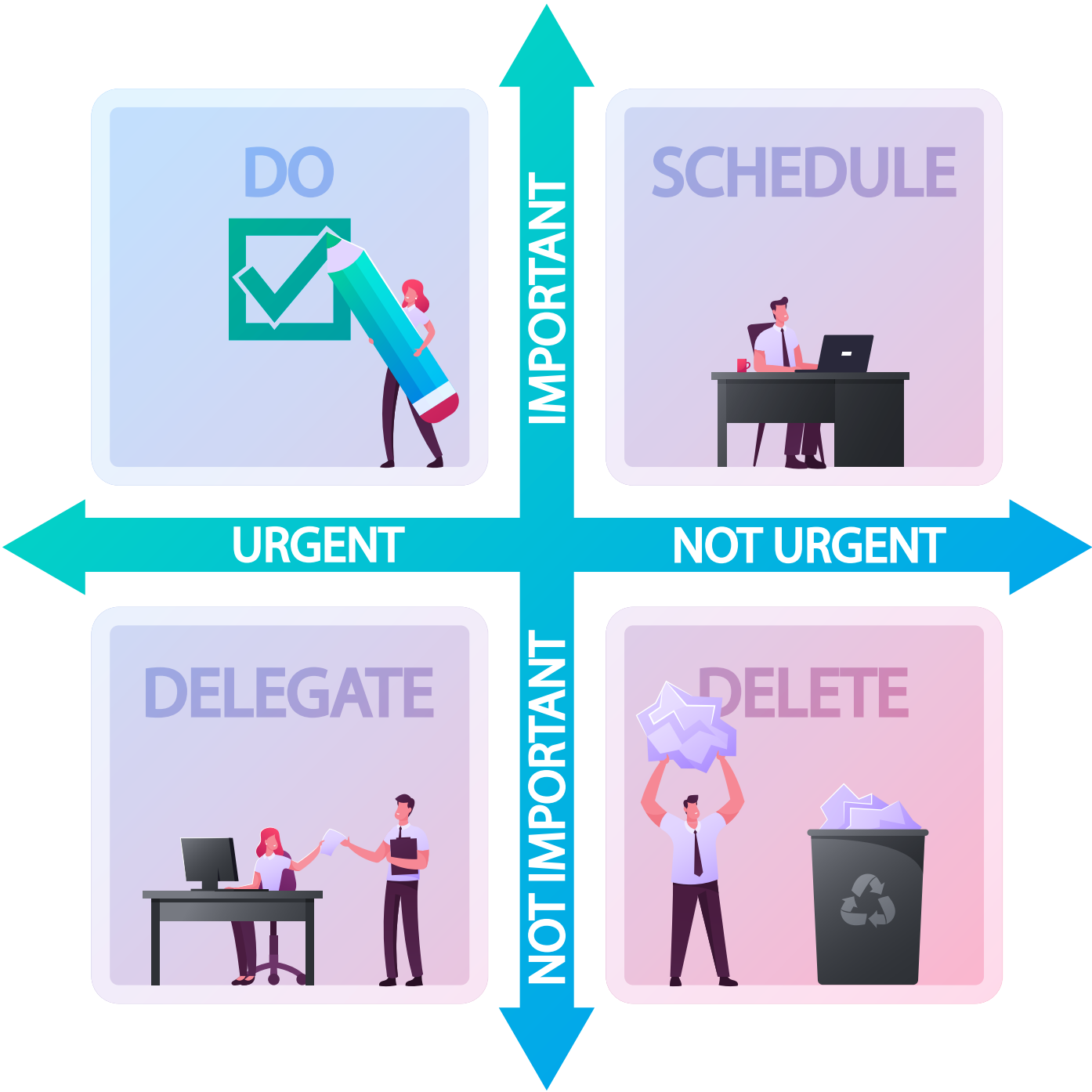
Feelings afterward:

Upset, overwhelmed, and physically tired.

Alternative response:

I could have told her that I feel her and I would like to sit and listen to what happened, however, I have a report that I need to submit today and once I finish, I will come right away and hear from you.

A tool to help prioritizing tasks: the Eisenhower decision matrix (urgent- important matrix)



A time management tool that helps you prioritize tasks based on their urgency and importance. It was coined by former U.S President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The matrix is divided into four categories as follows:

The matrix is divided into four categories as follows:

**1- Important and urgent (do first):** these tasks are classified as important and need immediate attention. They are critical and have deadlines. Therefore, focus on completing these tasks to avoid negative consequences and possible distress.

**2- Important but not urgent (schedule):** the tasks here are important but don't have immediate deadlines. You need to ensure scheduling specific times to work on these tasks.

**3- Not important but urgent (delegate):** these tasks are urgent but are not from your priorities. Delegate if possible, and if not, then minimize the time and effort spent on them so you are not distracted from the more important tasks.

**4- Not important and not urgent (eliminate):** tasks here are neither important nor urgent, they have little to no value, so, you better eliminate or leave until you have free time.

#### Some tips on how to use this decision matrix effectively:

- Make a list of the tasks that need to be done (a to-do list).
- Assess the urgency of the tasks based on the deadline or its immediate impact.
- Evaluate importance in relation to your goals and priorities.
- Categorize each task into the four parts of the matrix based on its urgency and importance.
- And finally, begin with the "important and urgent", once completed, move to the "important but not urgent" and have it scheduled, delegate tasks, when possible, in the "not important but urgent", lastly, eliminate "not important, not urgent" ones.



Try to regularly review and update your matrix so it helps you stay organized.

## A tool to manage work stress

We have learned a bit about the different responses to work stressors in part one of the booklet, and how important it is that we notice how we usually respond to work stressors, so we make the needed changes that help maintain our well-being and not reach burn out.

Here you are presented with a tool that addresses five steps toward Managing Your Work Stress.

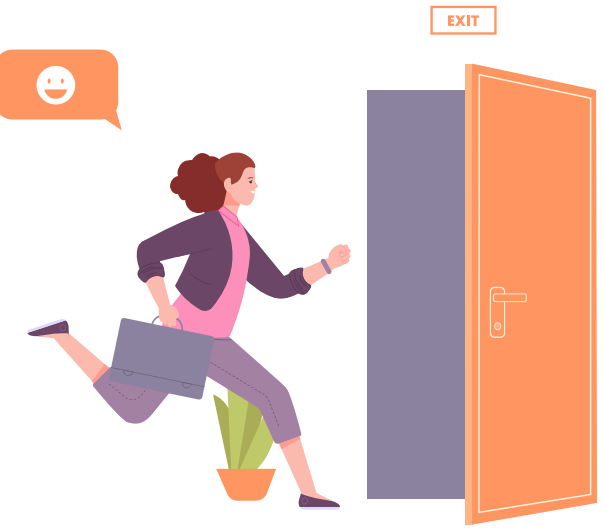
### Step 1: Identify How You Respond to Your Specific Work Stressors

Ask yourself: what are your specific work stressors and how do you tend to respond to them? (Both big and little stresses at work), write down your feelings and what you say to yourself and what you do about the situation (feelings, thoughts, and behaviors).

Examples of stressors could be meetings, a specific task, not having privacy, no space to work, no raise...etc and an example of responding to a specific stressor could be boredom and frustration by eating too much and drinking too much coffee.

Step 2: Set Goals to Respond More Effectively to Your Work Stressors

Now, it's time to respond in a more effective way to anticipated stressors. Make changes, when possible, in these areas:



responding to the external stressor by changing it if possible, such as quitting the job if it's causing too much stress, have a self-care plan that includes taking proper breaks, use the Eisenhower matrix to better time management, and be assertive and tell your boss not to overload you with work.

Changing your thoughts, manage your expectations about work and colleagues, how to separate work from home after working hours, don't take responsibility for other's mistakes, etc.,



Try some physical movements, relaxation, mental hygiene practices that includes exercising, getting enough sleep, and meditating.


Step 3: Change Your Thinking


We have addressed how our thoughts affect the way we feel and behave earlier. We all have the tendency to fall into thinking traps at some point, which can cause a lot of distress and affect our ability to function normally at work (some work related thoughts can be: I have to the job perfectly so everyone is pleased, and this thought creates a level of anxiety, another thought could be that the treatment is unfair, and that thought provokes anger.


Refer to the thinking traps and challenging the thoughts by testing their reality and provide compassion to yourself.

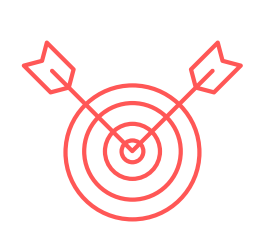
Step 4: When in Conflict, Negotiate

If you have a disagreement with your boss or your colleagues, you need to be assertive (refer to the self-assertiveness part earlier). And if you need to compromise, there's a four-step model to follow to arrive at a logical compromise.

- 

Identify the cause of your stress (what is the problem).
- 

Acknowledge how you feel about the problem.
- 

How the problem affects your motivation and productivity.
- 

Come up with a win-win solution



**An example:** an employee asked for a raise, but the manager shared that a raise this year is not possible. The employee could share with the manager: since I heard that there will be no raise this year, my motivation and enthusiasm for work have deteriorated, I believe that I'm adding a great value to the project I'm working on and I work extra hours to guarantee that we meet deadlines, and a raise is important to me, but since a raise is not possible this year, I would be satisfied to get paid for the extra hours and the overtime or to get days off. Here you can see that you need to come up with suggestions and solutions that could work with the current situation of the organization (and the win-win would be, them keeping the quality of the work that you do, and you get a compensation that is not necessarily be money.



### Step 5: Pace and Balance Yourself

Sometimes, it feels like we are working machines, and we have to keep up with work-related updates and deadlines. Therefore, balancing ourselves is vital to maintain our psychological and physical health. So, here are some tips that you might find helpful if you don't already engage yourself in such practices.

- During the day at work, try to shift back and forth between easy nice tasks and difficult ones.
- After submission of reports, meeting deadlines. etc., try to do something that you enjoy before moving to another task.
- Use coffee breaks and lunches (relaxation, meditation, conversations with colleagues and friends, a walk...etc)
- Take mini breaks throughout the day, you can use **pomodoro app (you can download the App, it's free!)** where it helps you to set breaks and deal with procrastination of tasks by increasing your motivation and getting yourself more organized.



- In addition to the stress management tools that we discussed earlier including time management, all these tools can help you to manage stress more effectively in both personal and professional life.

**Don't forget that there are individual differences, and we react differently to stressors, you and your experience are unique and you are worth the discovery journey to get to know yourself better and what helps you function well in you day to day life.**



## Seeking professional help: tips to guide you forward

This guide book serves as a resource to educate you about stress and its effects, enhance your awareness of your psychological well-being, and provide coping tools for different stressors. However, it's important to note that this booklet is not intended for diagnosis or therapy. If your distress level is significantly impacting your daily functioning at home, in social relationships, at work, or in terms of your health, seeking professional help is crucial.

Please remember that seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness, on the contrary, it is an act of strength, and an acknowledgment that you recognize the value of your own well-being. And by taking this step, you are advocating for yourself, and allowing the journey of healing to begin.

Please note that if you have decided to seek professional help, there are various mental health resources available in the MENA region. To find these resources you can search for:

- **Mental health professionals** in your area either in person or through the teletherapy platforms for online services, you can use keywords like (Clinical Psychologist, therapist, psychiatrist) adding your country/ city.
- **Medical centres and hospitals** in your city where they can guide and refer you to specialized mental health services.
- **Nonprofit organizations** where counselling services can be provided. Check with your organization the available services for the different organizations (the service mapping in your area), so you can also refer others if needed.

**For challenging situations and emergencies, you can contact the emergency number and counselling hotline services in your country which you can find online.**

## Further Readings

- Davis, M., Robbins, E., & McKay, M. (2019). The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. New harbinger Publications.
- Headington Institute. (n.d). Self-care inventory (Arabic and English). Retrieve from: <https://www.headington-institute.org/resource/self-care-inventory/>

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IN EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD