

Stepping Stones presents

A WORKBOOK FOR MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY

A guide to provide concrete support in times of change

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Introduction

Welcome!

This workbook is the result of many hands, heads, souls working together, both people who are living or have lived a Recovery journey and by mental health professionals.

We wanted to create a versatile, concrete tool that could serve as inspiration and support in a personal journey.

The purpose of the workbook is to steer us in the direction of Recovery, to find our own ways, tools and steps to put us out there. It is an encouragement to be curious about one's own processes and mechanisms, to stimulate reflection and awareness and also promote change through learning by doing.

We understand personal Recovery in mental health as living beyond mental health challenges, being an active member in your treatment, interested in taking responsibility for your journey in order to find hope and meaning in life and reestablish your identity. For people with mental health challenges, this is the process of healing, knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, and creating a fulfilling life for oneself. It is important to keep in mind that recovery does not necessarily mean "cure." The Recovery process is about living a meaningful life, which may be different from person to person and at different times in one's life. There can also be dark times, regression or blockage! There are many paths to Recovery and it is up to people, their values, goals and preferences, to decide which ones to choose.

Just like Recovery, there is no right or wrong way to approach this workbook, intentionally there is no set order in the topics, you can dust it off even at different times in your life. And why not, maybe recommend it to a friend who might be training in some area!

We thought of this workbook as a training to be done alone, in your own safe space, or in a group, therapeutic groups led by professionals or a facilitator (people with lived experiences), etc. Sometimes it can be helpful to explore in a group, sometimes individually without the influence of others: the important thing is to feel what it does for us.

The structure combines information, testimonials, invitations for personal reflection, individual exercise, or getting involved with other people.

We chose a number of common topics in a Recovery path, knowing that the areas would potentially be many more, and we translated it into English, Romanian, Icelandic, Dutch, and Italian so that it could be usable for as many people as possible. The language is simple, non-medicalized and nonjudgmental.

For each topic there is a personal space, to write, draw, make notes, jot down reflections or insights... whatever you wish.

With this workbook on Recovery we hope to stimulate some curiosity and awareness about how we function, promoting new skills and habits, step by step.

TOPICS

Preparing for a medical visit

A few words about

On your journey to recovery, you can develop a fear of seeing a doctor or going to therapy. There can be all sorts of reasons why you have developed those fears, ranging from the stigma you encountered before to not being able to successfully let the other party know what is wrong. This chapter isn't about those reasons, it is about what you can do yourself before you go to one of those important visits. Good preparation can really help you with that. One of the most effective ways to prepare is by mentalizing the conversation with your doctor. This technique helps you organize your thoughts and emotions, allowing you to communicate your concerns and questions clearly.

What is mentalizing?

Mentalizing is the process of becoming aware of your own mental states and those of others. It helps you understand your emotions and thoughts, which is crucial for having an effective conversation with your doctor. By mentalizing, you can better anticipate what you want to say during the consultation and how to respond to the doctor's questions.

How to prepare by mentalizing?

There are a few steps you need to follow when you want to mentalize. These steps are:

1. Identify your concerns and questions.
2. Visualize the conversation.
3. Practice the conversation.
4. Reflect on your emotions.



Testimonial

[P.H., 32, the Netherlands]

“

Mentalizing my medical conversations in advance has been incredibly helpful. I felt less anxious and more in control during my last doctor's visit. By organizing my concerns and symptoms beforehand and practicing the conversation, I could explain everything clearly without panic. It really made a difference in how I experience healthcare.

”

Reflection

Here are three questions to help you reflect on your preparation for a medical visit:

1. Do you have any concerns about visiting a medical doctor?
2. How do these concerns affect your wellbeing?
3. How can you support yourself before, during and after medical visits that are concerning you?



Introducing a practice

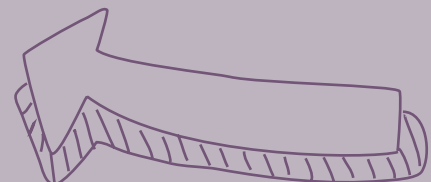
Mentalizing a conversation with the doctor

We will use an example to explain the practice of mentalizing a conversation with the doctor. You can use this example with your own problem later.

Suppose you have been experiencing persistent headaches and have an appointment with your doctor. Here's how you can prepare by mentalizing:

- 1. Identify your concerns:** Note that you have been having daily headaches for several weeks, how often they occur, and which remedies you have tried without success. Also, write down how the headaches affect your daily life, such as your work and sleep.
- 2. Visualize the conversation:** Imagine explaining your concerns to the doctor. For example: "I've been having daily headaches for four weeks. They usually start in the morning and last all day. I've tried taking paracetamol, but it hasn't helped. The headaches are affecting my concentration at work and my sleep quality."
- 3. Practice the conversation before your appointment:** Ask a friend to role-play as the doctor and practice the conversation of a medical visit. This helps you articulate your concerns clearly and respond to possible questions. Note: this is an exercise, not the real situation.
- 4. Reflect on your emotions:** Think about your feelings regarding the visit, try to understand where they come from. Maybe you're anxious because you're worried about a serious diagnosis, or because you are worried that the doctor won't take you seriously. Acknowledge these feelings and try to put them into perspective so they don't overwhelm you during the consultation.

Now apply this exercise to your own specific need of going to the doctor.



Personal space



Call to action

Are you in doubt of visiting a medical doctor? Consider what you need to plan the visit, make a list of support actions and if you feel ready for it:

Make the appointment!



Recognizing emotions



A few words about

Recognizing emotions, whether within yourself or in others, is like interpreting a complex language. Experiencing emotions and witnessing them in others has many layers to it. Just as you pay attention to various cues like facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and context to understand someone else's emotions, you need to apply the same level of attentiveness to yourself.

If you want to learn about emotions, it is important to consider the broad spectrum of emotions—ranging from happiness and excitement to sadness, anger, fear, and everything in between. It's like having a vast palette of colors, each representing a different feeling. Sometimes, emotions can be straightforward and easy to identify, like when you're laughing because something is funny or feeling tears well up when you're sad. But often, emotions can be nuanced and layered, requiring careful introspection to unravel.

When recognizing emotions within yourself, start by observing your own cues. Notice your facial expressions—are you smiling with joy or frowning with frustration? Pay attention to your body language—are you standing tall with confidence or slouching with uncertainty? Listen to the tone of your voice—is it cheerful and lively or subdued and flat? These signals provide valuable insights into your emotional state. Emotions can also manifest in a physical way like a high heartbeat when you are angry or anxious. A red face when you feel uncomfortable and tense muscles when you feel excited.

Once you've identified your emotions, acknowledge them with kindness and compassion. Emotions, with their wide-ranging intensity and diversity, are a natural part of being human. Whether you're experiencing elation or sorrow, anger or peace, each emotion carries its own significance and validity. By recognizing and accepting your emotions, you empower yourself to navigate life's ups and downs with greater resilience and authenticity.

Testimonial

[M.N., 44, the Netherlands]

“

Discovering my own feelings has been like finding secret treasures hidden inside me. It's like learning a fun new game where I get to guess what my face, body, and voice are telling me about how I feel. Sometimes, I'm as happy as a sunny day, and my smile shines like a bright rainbow. Other times, I might feel sad, like when a favorite toy gets lost, and my face looks droopy like a sad puppy.

But learning about my emotions isn't just about finding out what they are—it's about being friends with them. It's like making friends with all the colors of the rainbow, even the ones that feel a little tricky sometimes. When I'm mad, I remember it's okay to feel that way, just like it's okay to feel super happy or a little scared.

Understanding my feelings helps me feel like a brave explorer on a big adventure. Every day, I learn something new about myself and how I'm feeling. And even when things get a little confusing, I know it's all part of the exciting journey of being me!

”

Reflection

1. How does my body feel right now? Are there any sensations or tensions that might indicate an emotion?
2. What thoughts are running through my mind? Do they reflect any particular feelings or moods?
3. When I look at myself in the mirror, what facial expressions do I see? Do they match how I'm feeling inside?
4. How do you usually recognize your emotions
5. What do you struggle with when recognizing emotions?
6. How did you learn to recognize emotions?

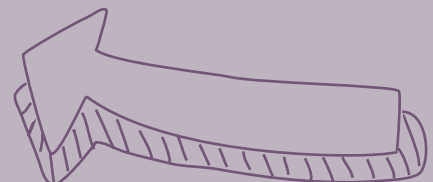


Introducing a practice

Exploring your emotional rainbow

1. Get some pen and paper and start writing. Make sure you have 10 minutes of alone time. Think of a title and write it down for example: How I feel today.. Just write, don't mind grammar and vocabulary.
2. Choose one emotion from the ones that came up in your writing.
3. Sit down and scan your body to recognize where you feel this emotion.
4. Feel it for three minutes. Observe if it changes when you focus on the part in your body where you feel the emotion.
5. Reflect on your experience
6. You can also do this practice the other way around.
 - a. First scan your body, with closed eyes.
 - b. Feel at which place you experience a different feeling.
 - c. Feel it for three minutes.
 - d. Give the feeling or emotion a name or word.

The 'wheel of emotions' can be an inspiration. You find the link in the section 'Other resources' at the end of this workbook.

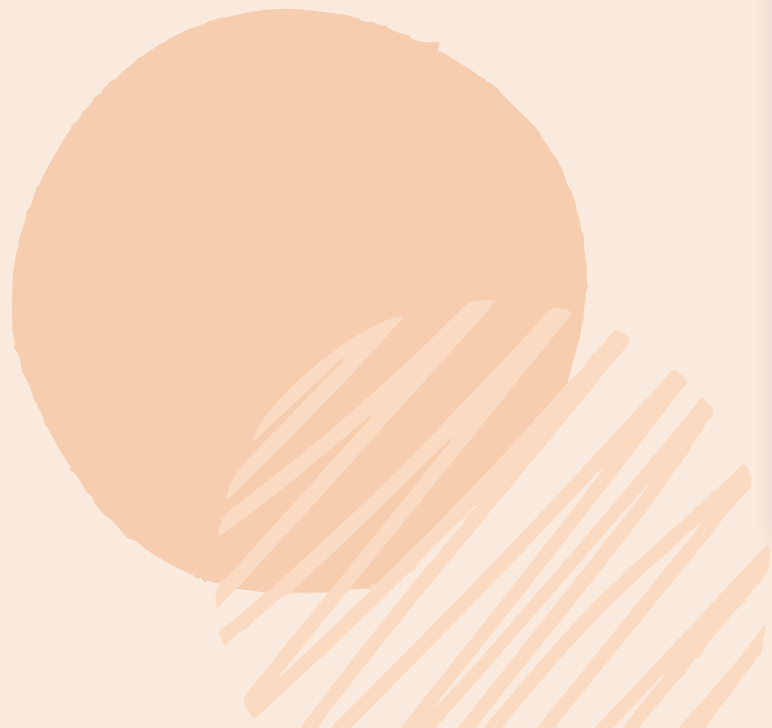


Personal space



Call to action

Take a moment to pause and listen to the whispers of your heart and look in a mirror. Notice the sensations in your body, the thoughts in your mind, and the expressions on your face. Embrace the colorful spectrum of your emotions with curiosity and kindness. The wheel of emotions can be an inspiration.



Regulating emotions

A few words about

Regulating emotions means being able to, more or less consciously, manage and control an emotional activation without it taking over us.

Emotions are an intrinsic part of our daily lives and play an important role in providing us with information about how we are and how we feel in our relationships with other people or the actions we are taking. Contrary to popular belief, therefore, there are no positive or negative emotions, and we should try to have an attitude of openness toward any kind of emotion. Some basic emotions may be, for example: sadness, joy, anger, fear, disgust, shame, guilt... etc.

If the emotion becomes so strong that we feel overwhelmed, it is important to know some coping techniques that work for us so that we can get back into a tolerable state of intensity.

Some coping techniques (functional tools) might be: breathing exercises, problem solving (which helps to de-escalate the event), seeking support from other people.

If we do not know functional tools for managing very strong emotions, it may be that over the course of our lives we have learned maladaptive strategies for lowering the intensity: what may temporarily seem like solutions may themselves become the problem in the long run.

If as a strategy we repress the emotion, which is a form of avoidance, it may be a factor in maintaining the difficulty.

When faced with an emotion that is too strong for us, if we do not know how to regulate it, it may intensify to the point of becoming unwanted, intrusive, overwhelming, or problematic, initiating an escalation that may prevent us from processing the emotional experience.

Testimonial

(T. v H., 55, the Netherlands)

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Learning to regulate my emotions has been a long and hard journey. Emotions offer crucial insights into my well-being and relationships, and I've realized it's essential to approach them openly rather than viewing them as positive or negative.

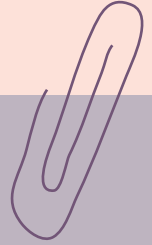
Previously, I often felt overwhelmed by strong emotions and lacked effective coping techniques. Now, I understand that regulation means managing emotions consciously without letting them take over. Techniques like breathing exercises, problem-solving, and seeking support have been invaluable.

I've learned that emotional regulation isn't about suppression but constructive management. This has significantly improved my emotional resilience and balance in daily life. I highly recommend this approach for better emotional regulation.

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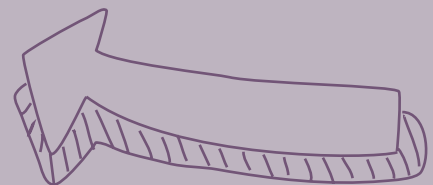
Reflection

1. Try to bring to mind an episode where you realized you felt an emotion so strong that you were overwhelmed by it: what effect did it have on you and other people who were present?
2. What strategies do you put in place when you feel a very strong emotion that is also unpleasant (e.g., anger, sadness, fear)? Did you learn this on your own or did someone give you some advice?



Introducing a practice

1. Try to focus on the emotion you are feeling and draw it: what shape is it? What color? How big is it?
2. When the emotion is too intense, try to focus on the breath: count in your mind 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004 as you inhale, hold for two/three seconds, count in your mind 1002, 1003, 1004, 1005, 1006, 1007, 1008 as you exhale, focusing on your shoulders drooping as you throw out the air. Repeat for at least 5 times.

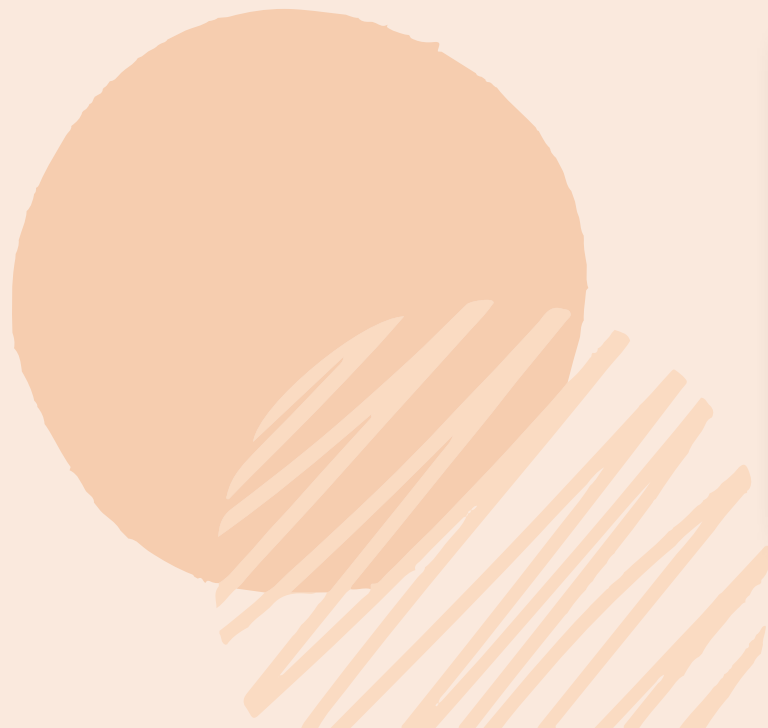


Personal space



Call to action

1. Next time you experience a strong and unpleasant emotion, try this exercise: once the most intense moment after emotional escalation has passed, write down on a sheet of paper what worked in coping and what, on the other hand, did not help. The purpose is to get to know yourself better and reuse the strategies that worked.
2. When you experience an emotion, imagine that it is coming as a wave, which invests you with its power but then passes to give way to tranquility; alternatively, try to imagine riding it with a surf, or swimming pleasantly through it.



Communicating emotions

A few words about

Knowing how to communicate one's emotions in the most effective way is an important skill for a person's well-being. Of course, communicating them requires first recognizing them, which is not always easy. Expressing your emotional state is crucial to building and maintaining healthy and satisfying relationships with those close to you.

Knowing how to properly communicate what you are feeling at any given moment also allows the other person to understand what is happening to you and to read your words and behaviours in a more complete perspective.

Sharing your experience and the emotions that come with it can help you in sharing the intensity and weight of the emotion you are feeling with the other person; talking about your emotional state can also help you in giving meaning and significance to what happened to you and what you are feeling now.

Communication about your emotions is effective if it is assertive, and this is when it respects your needs and rights but also those of the other person. For example, if you are angry and express it by yelling at the person who is listening to you, you are not acting assertively. The other person in this situation may not be able to understand your real need or may feel attacked and distance themselves, furthermore you are not communicating effectively the emotion you are feeling. Assertiveness is a communication skill that enables people to state their own point of view, needs, and requirements while fully respecting the needs and rights of others. Assertiveness lies along a line that sees, at one extreme, aggressive communication and behavior (in which there is no respect for the needs of the other) and, at the other, passive communication and behavior (in which one does not assert one's own needs). The two opposites, aggressiveness and passivity, both lead to unsatisfactory and frustrating relationships. Assertiveness, on the other hand, promotes the creation of positive and meaningful relationships.

Always remember that the other person is more likely to listen to you if you express your emotions with "I feel," rather than "you made me feel that way".

Testimonial

[S. van S., 35, the Netherlands]

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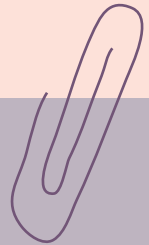
Learning to communicate my emotions effectively has been essential in my personal growth. Recognizing my emotions is the first step, and expressing them is crucial for building and maintaining healthy relationships. By sharing what I'm feeling, I allow others to understand my perspective and behaviors better. Discussing my emotional state helps me share the intensity and weight of my feelings, giving more meaning to my experiences. I've found that assertive communication, which respects both my needs and the other person's, is key to effective emotional expression and isn't that widely frowned upon as I thought, but is appreciated and encouraged. This approach has significantly improved my relationships and overall well-being.

”

Reflection

Are you used to communicating your emotions or do you usually keep them all inside? If you keep them inside, is it because you think others should understand for themselves how you feel, because you think they wouldn't understand you anyway or for other reasons? Try to focus what pushes you

Do you remember a time when properly communicating your emotions was helpful to you?



Introducing a practice

1. Imagine that the dialogue reported next is directed to you.

“Don't ask me anything else, I really can't stand you anymore! Between the alarm clock that didn't go off and the rain, today it's not a good day!”

How do you feel as a receiver? What emotions do you think emerge from this dialogue? Are they expressed effectively?

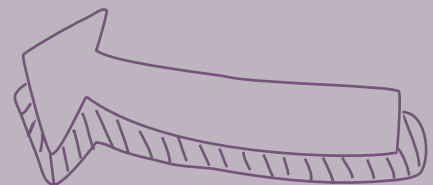
Now, instead, imagine that the dialogue addressed to you is as follows.

“Today is really a bad day for me. I am sad and frustrated because I didn't hear the alarm clock, so I was late, and I got all wet because of the rain. Right now I don't feel like talking.”

How do you feel as a receiver? What emotions do you think emerge from this dialogue? Are they expressed effectively?

Do you find differences between the emotions expressed in the first dialogue and the second? What about the way of communicating them? What is the most effective communication of emotions between the two dialogues?

2. Stand in front of the mirror and imagine that you are angry about something of low/medium intensity that has happened to you in the past month: first express anger aggressively out loud to your reflection, then express it assertively (i.e., clearly and paying attention to the use of “you” and “I”) by speaking in a calm tone of voice, and finally remain silent, but continuing to empathize with the anger. How did these three different ways of communication make you feel? Which one expressed your anger and allowed for the best understanding of it?

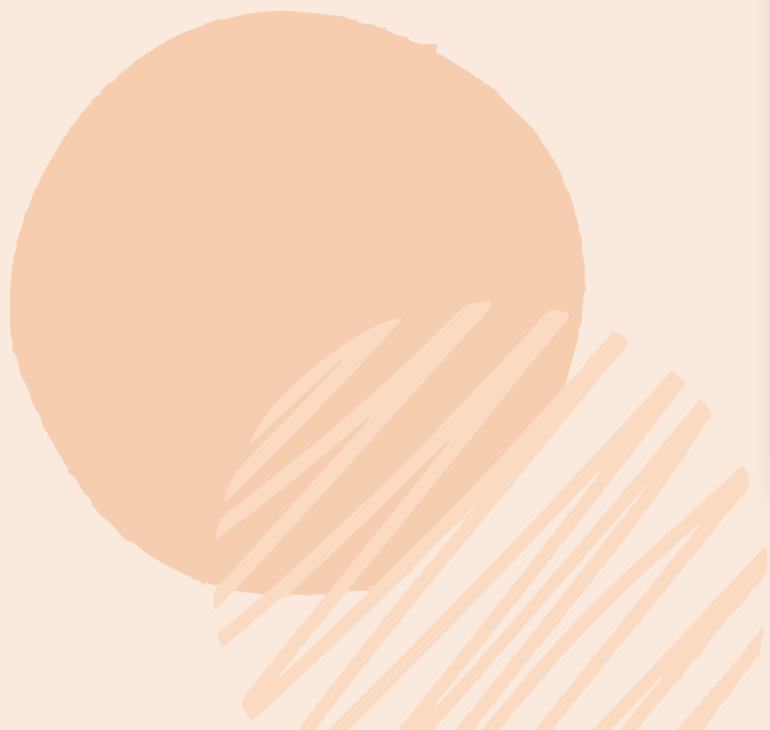


Personal space



Call to action

1. During a conversation, communicate your emotional experience about something you are told or that has happened to you with the formula “this thing (that you told me or that happened to me) makes me feel this way (e.g., sad, scared, happy, angry, hopeful etc.)”
2. Have you ever found yourself unable to express the emotions you felt while relating to someone? Sometimes it is difficult in the moment to recognize the emotion and communicate it, but in some cases, we feel the need, once the emotional activation has lowered, to let the other person know how we felt. Try, therefore, to do this in written form, write a small letter or message and consider delivering it to the receiver.



Setting boundaries

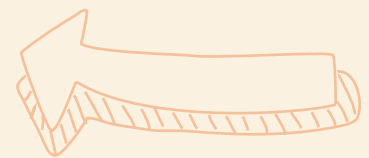
A few words about

Boundaries define the space between you and the outside world, they help you distinguish between your own identity, needs and desires, and those of other people. They serve as a protective barrier which prevents external influences from penetrating your identity and such, they allow you to be your authentic self.

In essence, personal boundaries protect your personal space, privacy, emotions, thoughts, needs, beliefs and rights and allow you the power to decide over your own life. Areas of your life usually protected by boundaries are: physical needs and integrity, sexuality, emotional and mental experiences (the right to have your own feelings and thoughts), spirituality, finances and material possessions, time and how you spend it.

Acknowledging and communicating personal boundaries are relevant within relationships, to establish your comfort levels with different types of interactions. When your boundaries are crossed, you may notice feeling taken advantage of, overwhelmed by stress, unsafe, pressured, disrespected, or resentful.

People usually don't cross your boundaries intentionally, but they are often not aware of them or of their own behavior. Therefore, setting boundaries can often be as simple as just communicating them. Other times, you may need to restate boundaries or enforce consequences if they keep being crossed. At the core of doing this is you keeping your side. You are the one doing the final check if all is within line. Oftentimes, there are friends, family, conduct rules or legal systems that you can use in your favor.



Testimonial

“

I notice how a big part of my therapeutic process is about finding my voice to express my needs and boundaries. It is as if I am learning to say things differently, as if through therapy I am starting to see the letters that I was missing, letters that I now learn how to write down, sometimes clumsily, and to use in relation with others.

One of the things guiding me is gentleness, so my challenge these days is to communicate my boundaries firmly but also gently. Therapy offered me a frame to understand that setting boundaries in relation with others is in my benefit, that it is not wrong to express my wishes and set the frame of how I want to interact with others, that people distancing from me is just a possibility, not a given, when I hold on to my boundaries.

It is an ongoing process to express my boundaries in a constructive manner and to manage the emotions that follow these attempts, which sometimes feel so new, and therapy supports me in this process also.

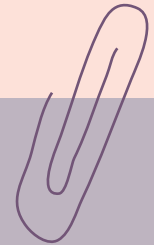
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Reflection

Where in your relationships have you identified and/or communicated your boundaries?

How did you feel when you did it and what was the impact of this on your relationships?

If you haven't communicated your boundaries, what do you think prevents you from doing it?



Introducing a practice

Think about a circumstance or moment when you felt uncomfortable with an interaction.

Remember what the other person said or did.

Take a pen and a piece of paper and write down how you felt and what went through your mind, in as much detail as you can.

Notice exactly what of this interaction, from what the other person said or did, made you feel uncomfortable and which need of yours was at stake there.

Identify if any area of your life from the ones mentioned in the first section was intruded or disrespected and define a boundary that might have been crossed in that interaction.

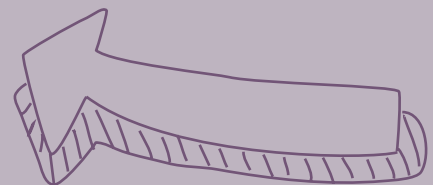
Clarify the boundary by asking yourself how much of this behavior is acceptable to you, under which circumstances and what is the point when it gets too much.

If you are seeing this person more than once, plan a conversation to communicate this boundary for future instances.

Repeat this exercise whenever you feel uncomfortable after a social interaction and record the boundaries you identify.

After a while, reflect on your boundaries to learn which ones are situational [they apply only under certain circumstances] and which ones are more stable.

Take into account communicating the more stable boundaries when starting new relationships.

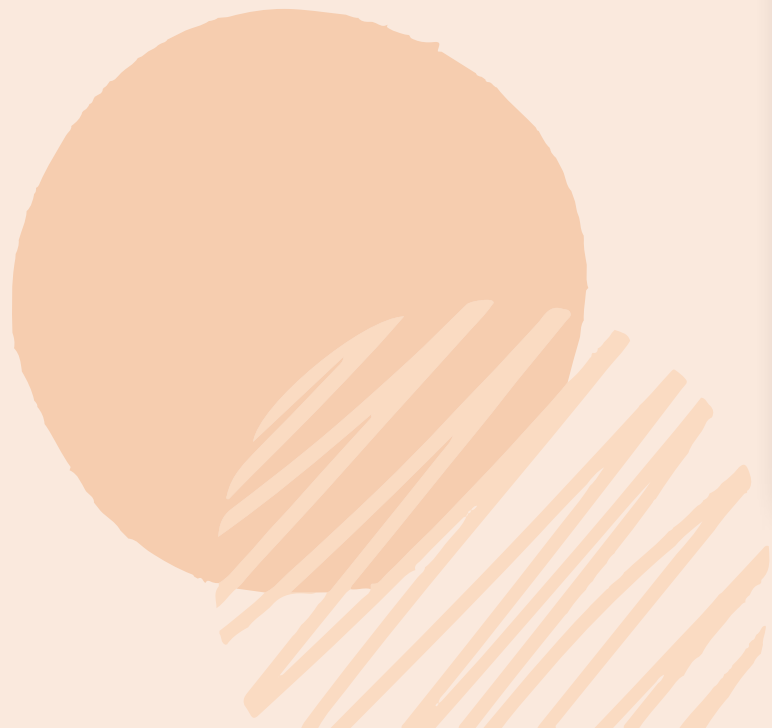


Personal space



Call to action

1. Share with someone about a boundary you have and how you discovered it. Ask them to share as well.
2. Talk to someone close about the difficulties you experience when identifying or communicating boundaries.
3. Communicate to someone that they have crossed a boundary.



Mapping and accessing resources

A few words about

Recovery isn't something that you do alone. You need other people and resources to help you. Resources can come from yourself or from outside yourself.

In this part of the workbook, you will be working on mapping the People and Animals and you will take a closer look at the skills and abilities you might need in your recovery.

In your recovery it is important to know who you can rely on. It's also important you know when you can rely on them. Not everyone is available all the time. The exercise you can do in this chapter will help you visualise who is part of your network.

Skills and abilities you have or can develop, that will help you in your recovery, are for example:

- Being curious.
- Looking for the best in everyone.
- Being reliable.
- Taking risks.
- Being optimistic.
- Taking responsibility.
- Dare to be different.
- Being in touch with nature and your spiritual self.
- Being brave in looking at your own shortcomings.

Testimonial

[S. v S., 37, the Netherlands]

“

When I first started my journey of recovery, I felt like I was standing all alone in a big, scary world. I was scared because I couldn't see anyone around me, no support, no network. But deep down, I knew I couldn't do this alone. Recovery from mental health challenges is tough, and it's not something you can do by yourself.

So, I took a deep breath and decided to make my network visible. It wasn't easy at first. I felt vulnerable reaching out to people, afraid of rejection or judgement. But I realised that the only way forward was to open up and let others in.

Having a visible network made all the difference in my recovery journey. I no longer felt alone in my struggles. There were people who understood, who cared, and who were rooting for me every step of the way. They became my pillars of strength, guiding me through the tough times and celebrating with me in the good times.

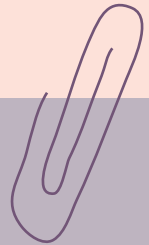
Today, I am grateful for my network – a network that I once couldn't see but now stands strong and visible, a constant source of support and encouragement. Recovery may be a journey I walk alone, but I am never alone in it. And for that, I am truly thankful.

”

Reflection

Questions you might ask yourself in reflection of this chapter are:

- Am I aware of my resources and my network?
- Do I think that at this moment in my life and my recovery my resources and my network are sufficient?



Introducing a practice

In order to make your network visual you need to have a big piece of paper, preferably A3, pen or pencil in different colors. Let's start:

- In the middle of the paper you draw a figure that's you. If you don't like to draw you can also use symbols, stickers or something else you do like.
- Personalize your figure
- Next you draw your pet or hobby, and you place it somewhere around you.
- If there are people you live with, draw them near you.

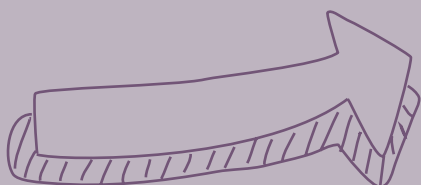
This is the basis from where to start.

- Now start drawing figures around you identifying all the people who are in your network. Personalize them too, it will help you recognize them.
- You can always add more figures later.
- People in your network can be: family, neighbors, friends, teachers, co-workers etc.
- Now put in the people you don't think of often as part of your network such as: the landlord, that one shopkeeper you like, your physician, your therapist, the lady who always plays with your dog, that one municipal worker that listened to you etc.

At the side of your paper you write in different colors what kind of a connection you have like blue for personal and black for work. You will now get a list with different colors you can use to show the connections you have.

- Draw lines from your figure to the other people around you.
- The thicker the line the stronger your connection is.
- Use the color related to the connection like blue for personal.
- You can also use a broken line.
- Even dots can show how "good" a relationship is.

Hopefully you now have a better idea about how your network can work in your recovery. To help you in your recovery you can write down for each of the people in your network what kind of skills and abilities they have to help you in your recovery.



Personal space

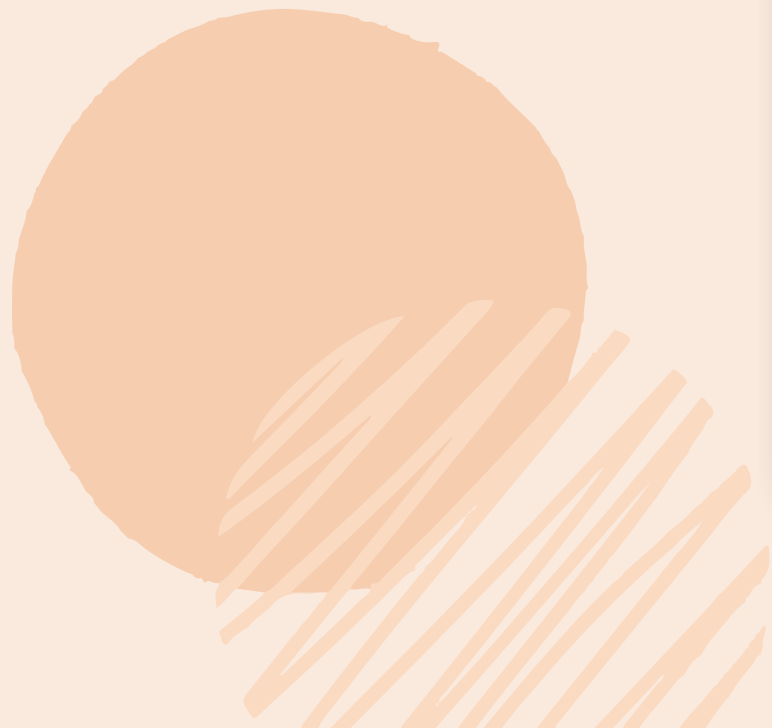


Call to action

Feeling overwhelmed or alone in your journey of recovery? It's time to take action. Start by mapping out your network and your resources today.

Reach out to someone from your network today.

Remember, you don't have to go through recovery alone. By mapping out your network and resources, you're taking an important step towards building a strong support system that can help you through the ups and downs of your journey. Take action today and start reaching out for the support you deserve.



Self-advocacy

A few words about

Speaking up for yourself when you are in mental health recovery means telling people what you need, want, and feel as you try to get better. It's about saying how you feel and what you think in a strong but assertive way, making choices about your treatment, and speaking up if something doesn't feel right.

When you stand up for yourself during mental health recovery, you're saying that your voice and what you want are really important. It helps you take control of your treatment, ask for help when you need it, and be part of decisions that affect your life a lot.

Learning how to speak up for yourself means learning some important skills, like talking to doctors and therapists clearly about what you need, setting boundaries in relationships, and using mental health services efficiently. Speaking up for yourself can help you be in charge of your own recovery journey, take back control, build strength, and feel powerful even when things are tough. It shows that no matter what, you have the strength inside you to heal and grow on your journey to feeling better.



Testimonial

[J.M., 54, the Netherlands]

“

Self-advocacy has been important throughout my journey of mental health recovery. There was a time when I felt powerless, silenced by the weight of my struggles and the stigma surrounding mental illness. But as I began to advocate for myself, I discovered a newfound sense of empowerment and resilience. At first, speaking up felt daunting. I feared judgment and rejection, but I soon realized that my voice held power. With each step I took to assert my needs, I reclaimed a piece of myself that I thought I had lost. Whether it was asking for help at work or seeking support from loved ones, self-advocacy became my compass in navigating the complexities of my journey.

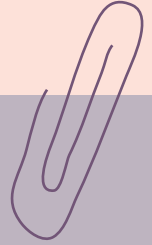
Through trial and error, I learned to trust my instincts and honor my experiences. I no longer allowed others to dictate my worth or define my struggles. Instead, I embraced my truth with courage and conviction. Self-advocacy has not only transformed my relationship with myself but also with others. It has opened doors to understanding and empathy, fostering deeper connections with those who have walked similar paths. Together, we have shattered the silence surrounding mental illness and created a community of support and acceptance.

Today, I stand as a survivor, guided by the unwavering belief that my voice matters. While my journey of recovery is ongoing, I am filled with hope and resilience, knowing that I have the power to shape my destiny and inspire change. Self-advocacy has been a great ally, reminding me that in the face of adversity, my voice will always be my strongest weapon.

”

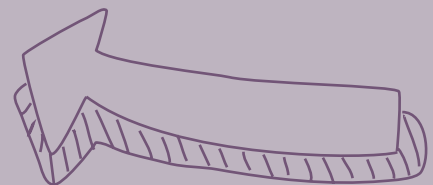
Reflection

- In what instances have my rights/boundaries been stepped on?
- Looking back, what could I have done differently to assert myself and communicate my needs more effectively?
- What prevented me from standing up for myself and my own needs?



Introducing a practice

1. **Visualization and affirmations:** Take a moment of hardship in mind that challenges your human rights. This can be a moment in the past or in the future. Visualize yourself in this situation. The first time it doesn't work to advocate for your rights. Feel you this makes you feel. The second time you visualize that you are advocating for your needs, and achieving your recovery goals. Take some time to experience how this feels. Then write down some affirmations that can reinforce your self-worth, resilience, and determination to overcome obstacles at those moments of challenge.
2. **Role-playing scenarios:** Practice role-playing with someone or just use a mirror to simulate real-life situations where you may need to advocate for yourself. This could include scenarios such as talking to a healthcare provider about treatment options, setting boundaries with family members, or asking for support from friends. Role-playing helps individuals build confidence, assertiveness, and effective communication skills.



Personal space



Call to action

Take a deep breath, summon your courage, and join the movement of self-advocates who are shaping their own paths to healing. Together, we can break down barriers, challenge assumptions, and build a future where everyone's mental health journey is met with respect, understanding, and support.

Are you ready to be your own biggest advocate? Let's stand up, speak out, and make a difference!



Creating meaning in one's life story

A few words about

Making meaning is the process by which we interpret and understand our life events, emotions, relationships, and the self.

If you go through experiences and relationships without examining them and without trying to understand their impact on you, how they shaped you, and how you could use that knowledge further, you might miss out on important learning and wisdom that your life alone can provide you with. Decisions you make are generally based on what you learned from what you previously experienced. The meaning you make of what you experience will either weaken or restrict you or help you build resilience, so being intentional about it can help you steer it in the direction of your wellbeing.

Making sense of your past experiences is essential to healing and recovery, as it can facilitate self-acceptance, confidence and contribute to a sense of purpose and direction.

While there are many ways to explore our experiences and create meaning out of them, some of their common mechanisms are reflection, perspective-taking, acceptance, self-compassion.

Lived experience is the knowledge and understanding you get when you have personally lived through something. It is the result of making meaning and it can also constitute something to offer to others as a support in their own recovery.



Testimonial

(D.S., 38, Iceland)

“

Since I was a child, I was inclined to reflect and try to understand who I am and how I came to be this person. I have always used diaries on a regular basis to reflect on experiences I went through, and more recently, as an adult, psychotherapy was another tool that helped me make sense of my life story. Through the dialogue with a therapist who could ask insightful questions and receive my sharing with acceptance and compassion, I gained understanding about topics such as family dynamics that shaped my way of thinking and relating, how I learnt what I know about myself, the world and others, why I seek certain types of experiences and avoid others, etc.

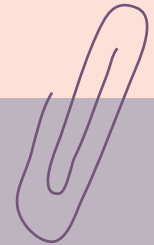
I got more clarity about my timeline and life story as a whole and this clarity helps me move forward with confidence.

”



Reflection

What are some of the most important events in your life and what did you learn from them, about yourself, life or other people?



Introducing a practice

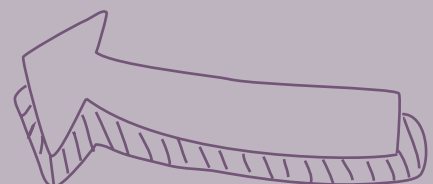
1. For this exercise, write about an emotional upheaval that dominates your thoughts and feelings. In your writing, try to let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts about it. Instead of referring to this trauma as “my experience” or “my feelings,” write entirely in the third person as if you were an observer reporting on your own experience. What happened to this person? What led up to the event? How did the person react and why? How were other people affected? How does the other person feel now? What meaning can you draw from this person’s experience?

Write continuously during the entire twenty minutes and maintain the third-person perspective. If you slip into first person, mark it out and change what you have written into third person. Remember that this writing is for you alone.

Excerpt from Pennebaker & Evans’ Expressive Writing: Words that Heal

This exercise can help you look at your experience from a different, more objective perspective, and in this way you can gain some distance from the unpleasant emotions that accompanied it. Moreover, it can facilitate you to find meanings that you maybe couldn’t see before in that experience.

2. Find yourself a quiet place in which you will not be interrupted for 30-45 minutes. Close your eyes and let your imagination carry you through the timeline of your life. Imagine it as a movie. What genre would it be? What would be its title? Who are the main characters? What are the takeouts from the movie? Write down the results of your reflection or share them with a friend.



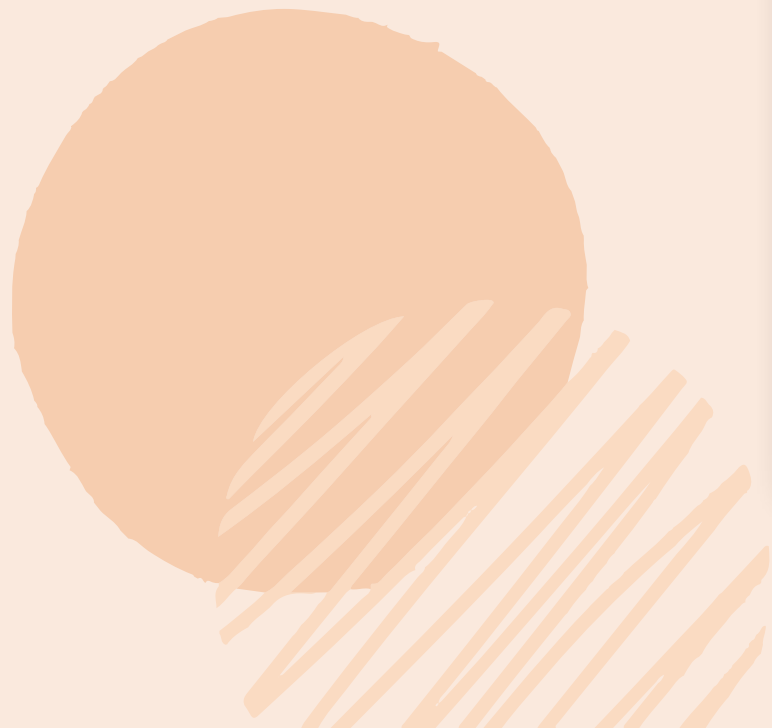
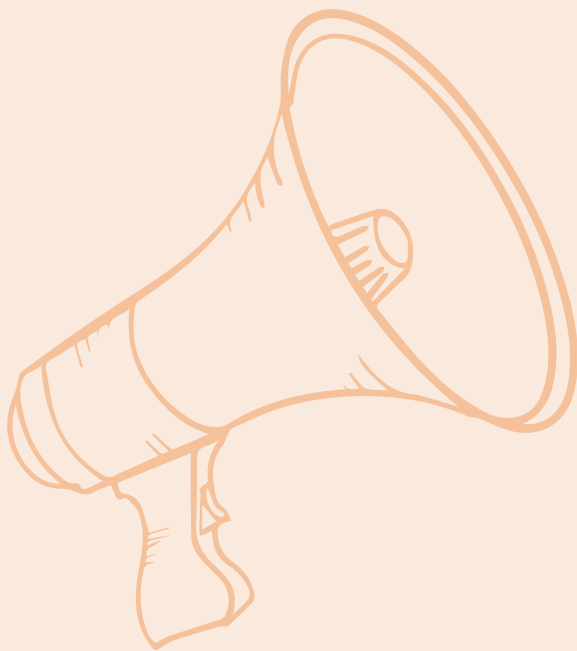
Personal space



Call to action

Have a conversation with a friend, family member, therapist or any other trusted person and go over the following points:

- What were the highlights of your week and what emotions have they stirred in you?
- Why were these moments important to you?
- What does that mean in the larger context of your life?



Management of personal goals

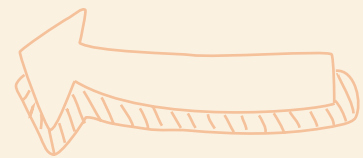
A few words about

In our journey of self-healing and recovery, setting and managing goals play a crucial role. Goals provide us with direction, purpose and motivation to navigate life's challenges and pursue our aspirations. To effectively manage your personal goals, it's essential to begin by clarifying what we truly desire to achieve. Reflect on your values, passions and dreams, and identify goals that align with your authentic self.

To increase your chances of success, you should set SMART goals - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound. Once you've established your goals, break them down into smaller, actionable steps. This allows you to create a clear roadmap for progress and prevents overwhelm.

Consistent monitoring and evaluation of your progress are also key aspects of goal management. Regularly assess your efforts, celebrate achievements, and adjust your approach as needed. Stay flexible and open to adaptation, as the journey towards self-improvement is dynamic and ever evolving. Cultivate a supportive environment that nurtures your growth. Surround yourself with positive influences, seek guidance from mentors or peers and most importantly, practice self-compassion along the way.

By effectively managing your personal goals, you empower yourself to create the life you envision and embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery and healing.



Testimonial

[A.H., Iceland]

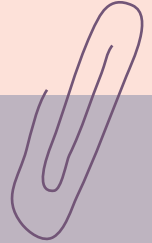
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Managing my goals on my healing journey has played a significant role in discovering myself and what I truly need to live a fulfilling life. It's important for me to see if my future vision is realistic, manageable, and aligns with my values. What has also played an important part in my journey is self-compassion, when my original goal isn't working out for me or is just too difficult. During my trials and errors, I've become more open to trying out new ideas when the old ones just aren't cutting it for me. That is where having a group of peers around me has been a total game changer; I'm not alone with my problems anymore, and my peers are more than willing to give me support in creating a new vision.

“

Reflection

- Reflect on your current personal goals. Are they aligned with your values, passions and authentic self?
- Are your goals SMART?
- Take a moment to reflect on your personal progress up to this point. What achievements have you made so far, and what challenges have you encountered? How can you celebrate your successes and learn from your setbacks to continue moving forward?



Introducing a practice

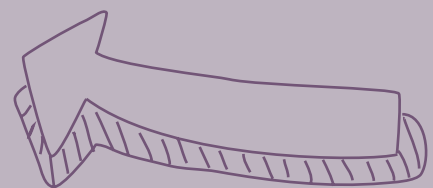
Put together an action plan for one of the personal goals you want to achieve. Instead of aiming for a perfect plan, where you strive for the ideal steps, focus on finding something that you can do that will lead you in the direction of your goal. This takes off some of the pressure and can create more space for change.

Write down some realistic steps you can commit to in order to further this goal. Include something you can commit to that scares you a little or feels like a stretch.

Some elements that can help you to make your plan more concrete:

- **timeframe:** are there specific dates, or a rhythm in the week? For how long?
- **place:** is there a specific place? Does it need preparation?
- **information:** do you lack information? Where or from whom can you find it?

You are always allowed to revise your plan. It is yours after all, and adjusting it to new circumstances, or new resources you gain on the way, or even to the challenges that might appear, is not just your right, but a very adaptive approach.

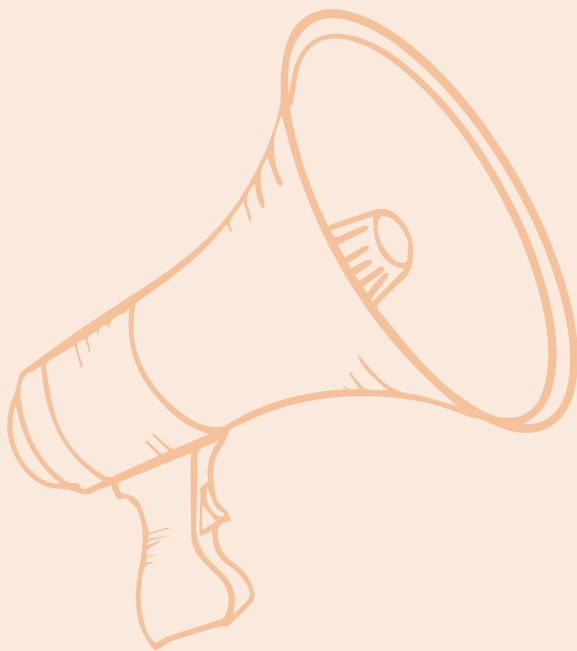


Personal space



Call to action

Find a person to be your accountability buddy. An accountability buddy is someone to check in with from time to time to support to achieve your goals. You can meet or call or text each other regularly, with the purpose to check on your progress, your commitment to your goals and your action plan, to brainstorm solutions when you encounter difficulties and need to adjust your steps. Start by getting on the same page together about how the role of accountability buddy looks in practice and then continue with implementing that.



Identifying and meeting needs

A few words about

Needs can be of many kinds. One can understand human needs as requirements of the mind-body, something necessary for survival and wellbeing. There are basic needs, which should be guaranteed to every human being, such as: food and drinking water, health care, personal hygiene and safety, a place to live etc. Without the guarantee of these basic rights, it becomes difficult to face a path to Recovery.

As a reference, we chose to share Maslow's pyramid of needs, which highlights that in order to reach the highest points of the pyramid, it is necessary to have basic needs met, even in terms of priority.

The pyramid base: **PHYSICAL NEEDS** (the need for air, water, food, rest, health)

Second level: **SECURITY NEEDS** (the need for safety, shelter, stability)

Third level: **SOCIAL NEEDS** (the need for being loved, belonging, inclusion)

Fourth level: **EGO NEEDS** (the need for self esteem, power, recognition)

The tip of the pyramid: **SELF ACTUALIZATION NEEDS** (the need for development, creativity)

Needs may vary from person to person and according to the social, cultural and economic context in which one finds oneself; they also vary throughout life. Therefore, identifying needs is a personal and ongoing process throughout the course of life. Very often, our emotions provide information about which our current needs are and whether they are fulfilled or not. Feelings serve as guides regarding our needs.

Sometimes we may feel that we don't deserve something or feel guilty because we have needs: each case is its own, if we communicate our need the other can understand us better and maybe support us (for example, if we had a bad day and need silence, we can tell those around us so we can avoid being misinterpreted).

Testimonial

[A. de Z., 37, the Netherlands]

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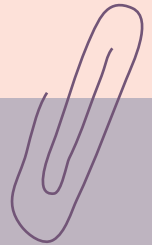
Understanding that needs range from basic physical requirements to emotional and social necessities has been eye-opening. Recognizing and prioritizing these needs have been crucial for my well-being and have helped me with my recovery.

I've realized the importance of ensuring basic needs are met first, such as adequate food, water, health care, and safety. There have been times in my life that those needs weren't met, and those times were really dark and hard. I'm glad that today I'm able to identify most of my needs. Communicating my needs to others, like needing silence after a bad day, helps them understand and support me better. This approach has greatly improved my well-being and fulfillment.

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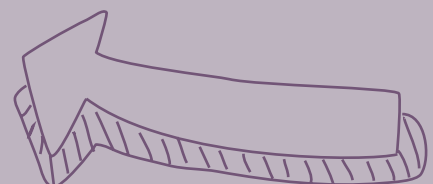
Reflection

1. Can you identify a need you have right now? What is it about?
2. Think of a need that you have already fulfilled today and focus on the process that took you from identification to fulfilment. What did you do? Did you do it alone or with others?



Introducing a practice

1. Write down scattered on a sheet of paper all the needs you feel right now. Read them again and identify the most important one, the one you want to prioritize, and highlight it. Then list the actions needed to fulfill that need, specifying whether you will do them alone or with someone. Pay attention to the order; the idea is to perform one action at a time, following the list. You can use this method to fulfill each identified need.
2. Choose a need that is a priority for you. Now try to imagine that the need has been fulfilled. Visualize yourself in that moment and try to see if that is what you really need. If you recognize this need as paramount, use that energy as the impetus to pursue it.

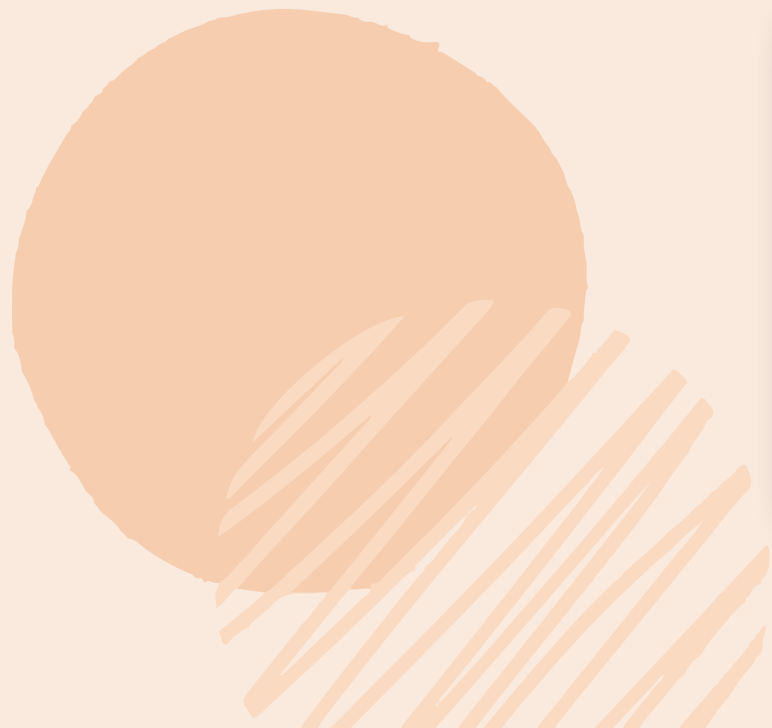


Personal space

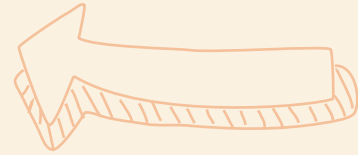


Call to action

Challenge yourself and implement the series of actions identified in exercise 1 of Introducing a practice to satisfy a need.



Energy management



A few words about

Resting and relaxation are a must for a healthy lifestyle, they are not merely unused time or empty time frames between productive hours. For example this is something well known and taken into account by professional athletes and sports teams.

You are, most probably, quite aware of the fact that your phone needs a battery in order to run. When the battery is running low most phones have a software that reduces their activity in order to preserve the energy. Eventually you will need to recharge it. Depending on how much you use, and how many apps run in the background, your battery will hold on for a longer or shorter period. If you run too many apps at the same time, it will heat up. There are devices that give you the option of fast-charge but they do come with the cost of shortening the battery life.

Even though your body and mind are tremendously more complex, the comparison still holds. You need your battery, in the form of food, air, water, time with others, being around things that you value, and you need rest time in the form of sleep, laying around and listening to music or just sitting and looking and time unfold (be it in the form of a busy city square or a serene panorama).

All these different examples answer different needs. You cannot fill your belly just by sleeping just as you cannot get the togetherness feeling by eating ice cream alone. So, it is important that you notice your sensations and feelings because they signal you of what is lacking. For example some people get cranky when hungry or when tired and it is also normal to get confused and foggy when overloaded with tasks or in a loud surroundings.

As a side note, take in consideration that time in front of screens (phone, laptop, tv) are really demanding on your attention capacity. Yes, it does feel good and yes, it does use up energy.

Remember this: your motivation and willpower does not add energy in your body but it merely gathers and organizes resources that you have in order to use them actively. If you are exhausted then the best thing to use your motivation and willpower for is to find a resting place.

Testimonial

[A. de Z., 37, the Netherlands]

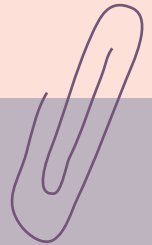
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For a person with a lot of interests, like me, energy management is a challenge in a lot of situations. There are a lot of things that I would do in a day and I often wished for a day with more hours in order to do all of it. Moreover, I grew up thinking that standing in one place, doing anything, is unproductive and useless. More than once I felt guilty trying to relax and the phone does not help when it tricks us that, when it's our face, we seem busy and, implicitly, productive. I know what helps me recharge but I still don't make enough room for it or, when I do, is because my body and mind say "stop".

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Reflection

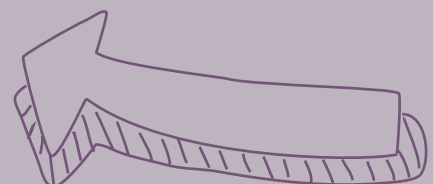
- Take a moment to reflect upon what you consider a resting moment or activity: what you do during them and how you feel afterwards, when you take them, how often and for how long, when you actually need them.
- How was resting seen in your family as you grew up? How do you see resting now and, more importantly, what does resting mean to you?



Introducing a practice

Imagine your energy levels quantified in spoons, spoons of energy. Through things that you do during the day you either use or acquire spoons of energy. If you use all your spoons before the day is over... well you will be dragging yourself. If you have extra spoons by the time you go to bed... you won't be able to sleep.

So take a moment at the start of your day to ask yourself how many spoons you have for the day. Write them down. Then, ask yourself what are the things that you have to do. Write them down in a list and also, write how many spoons you expect each thing to require. How does it look? Maybe you need to take from the list or to add some activities through which you will get some extra spoonfuls of energy? At the end of the day take again a moment to look at what you have written down and, looking back at your day, make the necessary adjustments: was the initial amount of spoons correct? Did the list of the activities include what actually happened during the day? Did you use the expected energy for each of them?



Personal space



Call to action

Think of your next work day. Identify a moment of break in it (it can be lunch break or another short 5-10 min breaks that you can take). Think of something simple you can do in that timeframe to unwind (no phone/laptop/tv screens). Put an alarm/memento on your phone for that hour as a reminder and actually do it when the time comes.



Cultivating joy

A few words about

While happiness is typically a more fleeting emotion, often sparked by a particular moment or event that brings a sense of excitement or exhilaration, joy is a deeper and longer lasting emotion that comes from within — from a sense of purpose and meaning, including finding meaning in suffering — and from relationships with others. Joy is internal and connected to your values, to what you think is important and good in life.

You can cultivate it intentionally, and it comes from an unlimited reservoir freely available to you, because it does not require everything to go well in your life, but it's a feeling that can share the space with suffering and difficulty. This can give us an idea of how we could transform joy into the bloodstream of recovery, that can pump vitality and purpose through all areas of our life that have been numbed or contracted by emotional suffering.

Cultivating joy starts with the intention to make room for it in our life, or to open ourselves up for feeling it, and it continues with using our attention differently than before. Much of the reason why we don't have as much joy in our lives as we would want to, comes from the tendency of our brain to focus on the negative content of what we experience. While this has its own role for our survival and adaptation to life, it can also narrow our daily experience. To counterbalance this automatism of the brain, we have to consciously direct our attention towards the positive, to intentionally try to notice or even to create the moments, events, contents of experiences that can give us the emotion of joy.

There are many ways to do this and they can be explored or created by each person on their own, but this chapter gives you some suggestions to start with.

Testimonial

[S.H.S., 44, Iceland]

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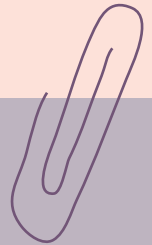
Cultivating and nurturing joy within myself is the most important training I have had on my healing journey. I have to en-joy what I am doing, or else my inner child will rebel and for good reason. So to take care of this aspect I always have my inner child in tow, gathering evidence in my daily life and especially when times are tough. She has a cape and a detective hat and her notebook and of course, a magnifying glass ;) Together we solve mysteries. This way of looking at life brings me joy and keeps me curious about the world and myself.

I also take care to play with my inner child every day. I dance-walk in the rain with my headphones, I fingerpaint, I order the largest ice-cream they have, I sing to the trees, I do something goofy - just for fun. I take care to keep the joy station fuelled because I know it keeps everything softer and lighter and it creates a feeling of freedom. And it's important to cultivate a feeling of freedom within. Giving myself joy is a powerful act of self-love and it keeps me open and in gratitude, away from fear. In the realm of possibilities.

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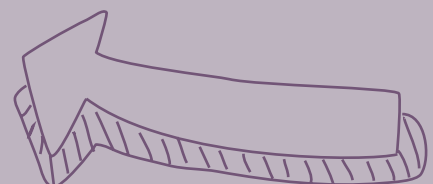
Reflection

- How often and in which ways do you allow and cultivate joy in your life?
- What kind of experiences bring you joy? Do they involve people, nature, technology, how big or small are they? How can you link them to your personal values?



Introducing a practice

Get a big empty jar and small pieces of paper. On each paper, write one thing that brought you joy in the past or something that regularly brings you joy. Make the notes as descriptive as you need them to be in order to evoke well the experiences or moments you refer to. Keep adding pieces of paper to the jar, as often as you can. You can make this a weekly practice or a daily one, if time allows it. And when you feel down and you find it hard to think about anything positive or to pull yourself up, randomly pick papers from the jar and let your imagination carry you into those moments of joy. This will be a reminder of good times you had, but also an inspiration for what to pay attention to or what kind of experiences to generate in order to restore the sense of joy and meaning in your life.

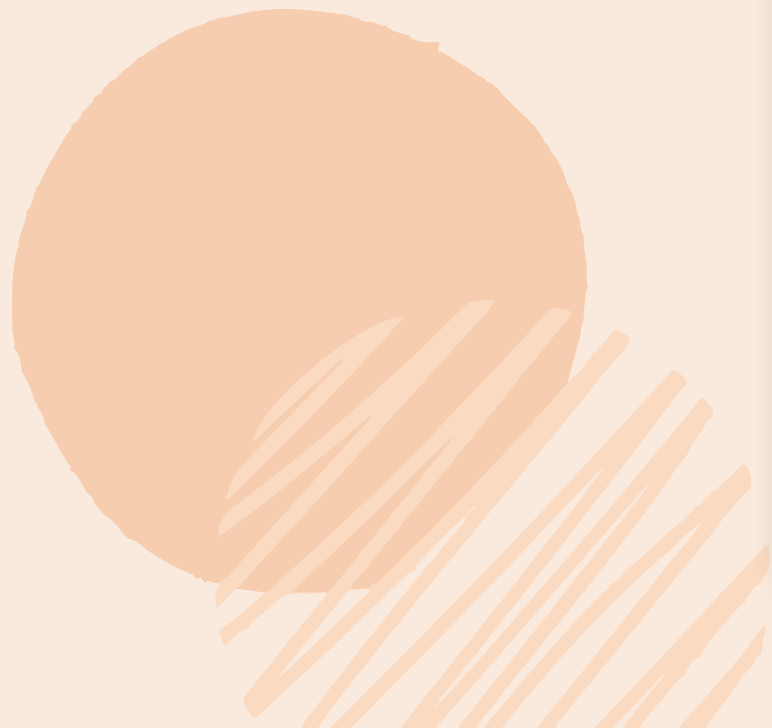


Personal space



Call to action

1. Find a person to go over your joyful moments, as regularly as you can. Speak about what brought you joy in a certain day or week and have the other person do the same.
2. Try out different things as for the first time and see if they bring you joy or not. Experiment and discover what fuels your own joy station.



Connecting with your values and expressing them

A few words about

The values you follow represent the glue of your behaviours in your life. By values we mean concepts like: justice, loyalty, family, honesty, humour etc. To be conscious of the values that are important to you represents a useful tool because it gives you meaning in life.

Values are useful in your life like a compass is useful to an explorer: they tell you the direction of the cardinal points. And, like a compass, you can guide yourself in life using values only if you know where you are, that is, if you are aware of the values that are important to you. This way you can ensure that you stay on a life path that is meaningful to you. And this also helps you feel at peace with yourself, with the actions you take, but also represents a beacon in the stormier moments of life.

In difficult times it is normal to be uncertain about the decisions you have to make, and indeed there is rarely a universally correct answer. So, if in such moments you manage to get close to your values, it means that you manage to get close to what is important to you. It may not be easy, even more since people around you may follow other values and sometimes your actions may clash between each other because of this. Still, this way you will have the chance to find the right solutions for you more easily or to come to terms with difficult decisions.

Some values you have were taught in your upbringing: in your family, at school, in the community where you grew up. These are manifested when you justify or accuse actions with words like “that’s how it’s done”, “that’s normal”, “that’s not normal”. You approached other values, you felt attracted to them perhaps without having a concrete argument, but rather you felt that you wanted to go in that direction. You notice these if you think of ways you wanted to be or changes you made: “I always wanted to...”, “I don’t want to be like...”. And other values are perhaps from the category of those you are still striving for but have not yet begun to act on.

Testimonial

[D.A., 27, Romania]

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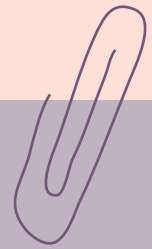
When I think back on my recovery, I often remember walking in the city one time, thinking of what is next, of what I can do now that I decided I want to try to work on changing my life for the better. I’ve struggled to find meaning and motivation my whole life before, I knew I wanted to be happier but I didn’t know how or where to start. Throughout the years, some of the therapists I’ve seen asked me about them, brought them to my attention. And gradually, they’ve become important to me. They’ve become my motivation in a way I never experienced before. Now, for some years, I have them whenever I come to crossroads.

Now, if I ever find myself walking in the city not knowing where to go next, I think back on them and they are the ones grounding me, helping me find answers and plan my further actions. Now, even when there is a lot to process, when difficult things happen, they help me stay focused. Knowing and following my values is a huge part of what makes my life good now, what makes me proud, what makes me enthusiastic every day.

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Reflection

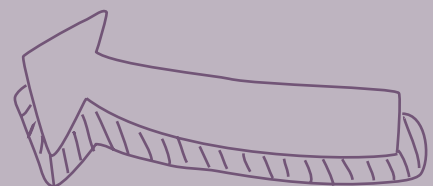
1. Do you have a mentor or role model in life? It can be a person you actually met or a person who inspired you. Describe this person paying attention to the aspects you value about them. What kind of values would you say match those traits and behaviors?
2. Think of situations where there is no ideal decision, whatever is chosen something is lost. Maybe you have experienced such situations, or if not, you can think of situations you have heard about or read about or seen in a movie. What did you choose, what would you choose? Why? The chosen choice is in line with a certain value, what is it?



Introducing a practice

Write on slips of paper 6 values, one per slip, that are important to you at this moment in your life. Keep them all in sight and start a timer. Every 30 seconds (better if you set a timer to ring every 30 seconds) put a note aside, face down, thinking that from now on you will no longer follow that value, it no longer exists. Continue to draw values, placing them face down, one on top of the other. You will end up with only one. Congratulations! You know your most important value to you right now. Write the number 1 next to it. Take the stack of removed values and write them down in ascending order (the last removed has #2, the one before #3, and so on). Now you have a ranking with the most important 6 values.

Next you will test these values in example scenarios. Write down difficult or uncomfortable decisions you have to make during this time or situations you went through in the past that left their mark. Ask yourself what a particular decision or action would mean from the perspective of each value listed above. Notice which of the actions you would be more at peace with after taking them. Which would feel more appropriate for you? Write down your observations.



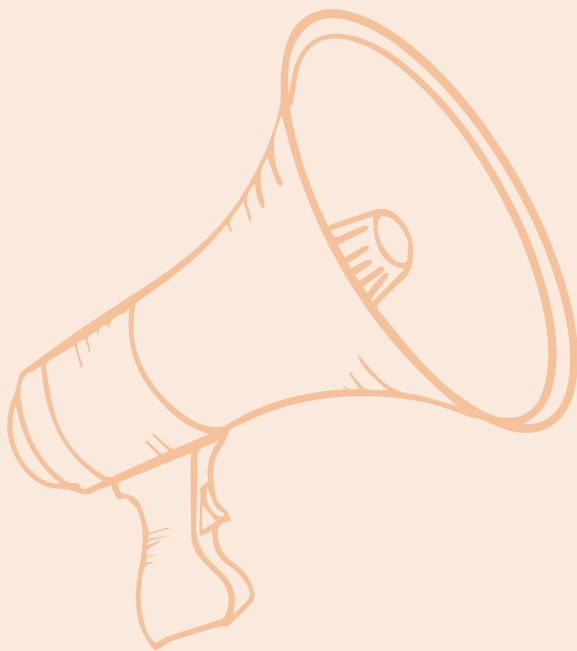
Personal space



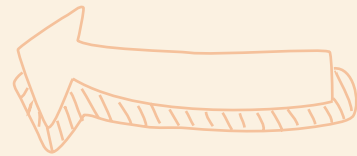
A large grid of small squares, intended for writing or drawing.

Call to action

Take one of the values identified up to this point, and think of a simple, easy activity or action that falls in line with this value. Plan it in your schedule.



Self-advocacy



A few words about

The process of expressing your own self or identity comprises all the ways in which you display and assert your individual traits, characteristics, internal beliefs, or feelings through your actions and choices.

Expressing your identity influences your surroundings, which then shape who you are. In the long term, it allows you to develop your identity, discover more and more who you truly are and feel capable and valuable. When you restrict your self-expression, you may, in time, feel that your identity is unclear, that you are not living a meaningful life, or that you are not seen in your authentic whole.

There are endless ways in which you express your identity, sometimes without realizing it. Some of these are simple, day-to-day behaviors or choices such as the language you use, your facial and bodily expressions, the clothes you wear, how you change and decorate your bodies, but other come in the shape of more complex choices: the people you surround yourself with, the career you choose, the hobbies you practice, how you prioritize things, use your time, and so on.

There is actually no recipe to do it. Listen to your feelings, thoughts and ideas and allow yourself to experiment, acting on them. Just keep in mind to do so in a rhythm and intensity that you can keep and that fits your way of life.

Testimonial



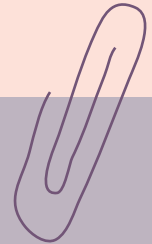
“

My way of expressing my identity is mainly through writing verses. During my recovery process, when I felt that no activity can give me pleasure, the pen and paper became my best friends. It all started like a game: I saw an interview with a known hip-hop artist that was asked what one needed to do to become good at this craft. He answered simply "Repetition is the mother of all learning". So I played some instrumental background music and started writing. I can't describe the process like a state of meditation - although I do sometimes choose the theme I'm going to write about, most of the time I just let myself flow, letting my mind fly away. I feel as if I am surfing, carried by the waves of a sea. The most beneficial aspect observed at this process is that it helped me discover myself, to figure out who I really am, what I believe about several things and, most importantly of all, how I feel. Because I do not have time to think during the creative process, letting myself just flow, I discovered my emotions in a way I haven't lived them since forever. It did not take long until clothes and way of being came closer to the hip-hop style. I feel indebted to this culture because I feel it gave me everything and was one of the pillars in my recovery process. Paradoxically, I remember writing my first lines when I was 7. I still have the poems notebook, but this hobby will have stopped until I reached my darkest moments. Maybe the reconnection to my inner child, the one writing poems and doing stuff just because they felt right, that had a meaning, contributed to my wellbeing that came together with retaking this activity.

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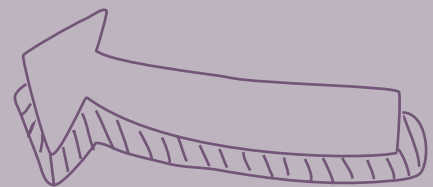
Reflection

1. What are the moments, activities, behaviors or other ways in which you currently express your identity?
2. What do these express about you?



Introducing a practice

1. Choose a way of artistic expression that you feel suits you best: writing, drawing, painting, creating music, dancing or moving, etc. Gather any materials you might need and take some time by yourself, about 1 hour. Start to notice the feelings you are feeling, the ideas that are going through your mind and anything else that's happening within you, connect to these inner motions and allow them to dictate first a small expression, then to come out more and more through the artistic medium you have chosen. At the end, sit with your result or the bodily memory of it (if it's not a material one) and notice elements that might characterize it, notice how you feel with it, notice how letting it out made you feel.
2. At the end of the day, set aside some time to look at how your day went, how you spent your time, the people you've met, the ideas that occupied your mind and write down a few of them. Mark the ones that involved conscious decision making, then the ones that were unconscious or automatic. Start with the conscious decisions and reflect on, then write down, what these decisions say about you: what kind of things are important to you, which things aren't, what do you like and what don't you. Remember also and write down how you felt after making each decision. Is it something you want to keep doing, did it make you feel good, or did it bring unnecessary stress or discomfort and you'd rather not repeat it? Next, go to the unconscious decisions (things you found yourself doing) and reflect again: how did you end up doing this, what are the things that drive you deep down? After reflecting on both types of decisions, allow yourself to be curious and out of this curiosity, invite an idea about what you'd like to explore or express about yourself the next day, how you'd like to do it, either through making a decision or taking a specific action.

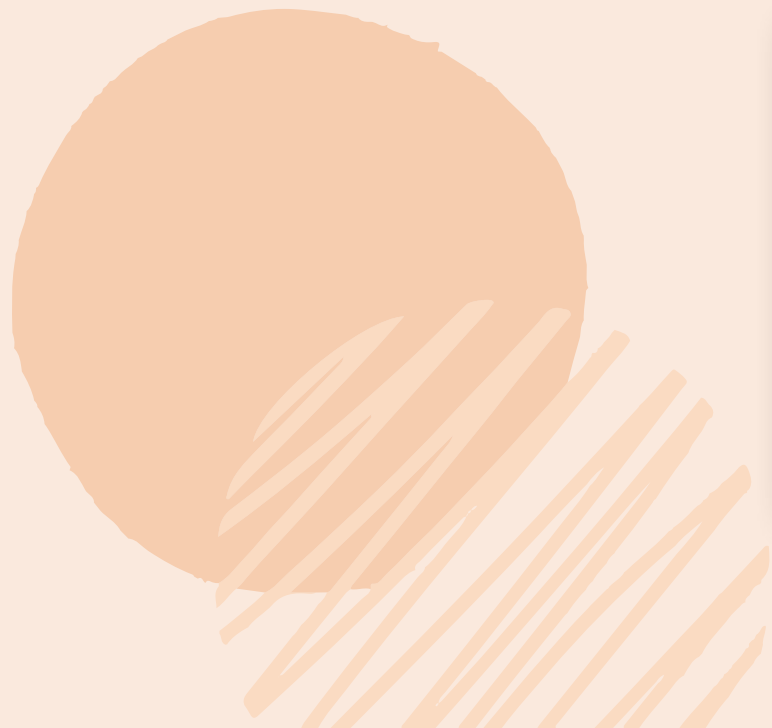


Personal space



Call to action

1. Pick some clothes that represent how you feel now and go out for a walk.
2. Talk to someone close about a dream or a wish you have for your future.
3. Create a spontaneous piece of art (writing, drawing, music, etc.) then share it with a friend.
4. Invite a friend to join you in an activity you like.
5. Share a photo of yourself as a child with another person.



Building, maintaining and ending relationships

A few words about

As human beings, we live in society and cannot help but have relationships with other people. Each of us, depending on character, can be more or less sociable. In a recovery journey it is essential to have relationships. Your social network, formed by the people close to you, is your backbone and support network for sharing moments of joy and coping with difficult times.

Juggling relationships with people is not always easy, however, because it requires many social skills, such as active listening, the ability to initiate and maintain a conversation, and many others. Relationships can be more or less deep, like the layers of an onion: in the heart there can be only a few people with whom one has more trust and inclination to open up to each other, possibly expressing one's needs and limitations, emotions and thoughts.

In order to build a relationship, you must first participate in social experiences where you get to know new people. By frequenting places that are stimulating to you, you may find people who share the same interests, and this may facilitate establishing relationships and secondarily also the maintenance.

Maintaining the relationships we have built means solidifying the relation with those close to us; to do this, it is important to keep periodic communication over time and to try to carve out time and activities to share together. The key words are sharing and consistency.

The relationships you have built will not always be satisfying or positive for your well-being or may stop being so after a while; therefore, it is necessary to also know how to end them.

Ending a relationship with someone close to you can be difficult and exhausting: using assertive communication and adding your reasons for doing so may help you. Respect your need to end this relationship, effectively express how you feel without attacking the other person, and explain what brings you to this choice. Sometimes it may be for a defined phase of life, sometimes for good. Try to preserve your boundaries by listening to your needs.

Testimonial

[L.C., 52, Italy]

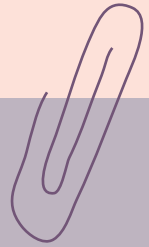
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During my last hospitalization I met a person with almost the same problems as me with depression, overweight and mood swings. We kept each other very much company during the hospitalization, sharing our problems, trying to help each other, however she wanted to do more and more: walk, lose weight, get better. This made me uncomfortable because it felt like a competition and not like supporting each other for recovery. Then once we were discharged, we kept in touch for a while. Now she has lost weight and is doing well and is bragging about all this, which makes me feel bad and hurts me. So I am trying to end this relationship because it is harmful to me now.

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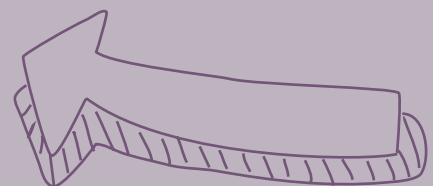
Reflection

- To date do you feel able to create a new relationship? If the answer is no, what would you still need to improve in order to do so?
- Think about the most important relationship you have right now, would you say it needs attention to maintain or to consolidate it? Is there something specific you could do? What about the partner, what does she/he bring to you?
- Have you ever had to break off a relationship? Do you feel the need to do so at this time?



Introducing a practice

1. Think about people close to you (e.g. family, friends, colleagues, health workers etc.) and write their names down on a sheet of paper; for each person, try to remember how your relationship started and what you both do to keep it alive and write it down.
2. Try to imagine that you have to end a relationship that makes you feel bad: how could you end it? What words could you use? Formulate an assertive discourse that respects your rights and needs but also those of the other person (e.g. 'I'm sorry but I realised that this relationship is not doing me any good, and although we talked about it some things have not changed. The reason is that these things you say/do make me feel this way, and I don't like that').



Personal space



Call to action

Reach out (via cell phone, email, or in person) to someone you care about but haven't seen in a while, think of an activity that would be of interest to both of you, and suggest it for your next meeting.



Memento for difficult times

A few words about

Difficult times are part of life and they happen to everyone. The negative emotional states that you experience every now and then can narrow your view of life, ourselves, and others, and limit the expression of our capacities. Therefore, when you go through difficult states or your mental health is at its worst, it can be challenging to even remember thoughts, intentions, resources and needs that you were aware of when you felt better, or you might experience them as very remote or not even belonging to you.

For this reason, during the more positive times, it can be useful to prepare a memento of who you are, what you want, and even what you usually need when you are in a difficult mental state. This could serve as an anchor to hold you through the more turbulent waters of life, an instrument for accessing more quickly and easily the knowledge and the support that you need through difficult times.

No one thing works for everyone, and it may take some trial and error, but going through this thinking process is a great way to be prepared for those times when your mental well-being starts to slip.



Testimonial

(S.H.S, 44, Iceland)

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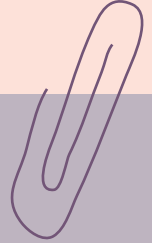
I have designed and integrated many systems for catching myself when I am low. The reason for this is that I know when I get low, everything gets low. I paint my world in gray colors, often without even realizing what I am doing. It's all a matter of perspective. So when I catch myself holding that gray paintbrush I know what's up and I need to implement one of my tools. I like having many of them because then I get to pick the one that suits best at the moment, if it does not I can try the next one. My most effective tool for this is my internal family system. My inner child, inner mother and inner father. I grew the parents from seeds in my inner fjord, in the backyard of my inner child's cabin. The creation of this family structure within me allows me to always remember who I am and to change perspectives on the current situation and give myself support at my lowest. I train the connection to my family on good days. We have quality time together. They know my needs, boundaries and desires. I nurture this inner structure on my good days so that it catches me on the bad ones. My inner mother gives me softness and compassion, my inner father encourages me forward in small manageable steps and my inner child reminds me of the purity of my heart and the beauty of the world around me.'

”

Reflection

Looking back to some very difficult states you experienced, reflect on the following questions:

- How did you communicate your needs to others?
- What knowledge about yourself would have made it easier for you to go through those moments?

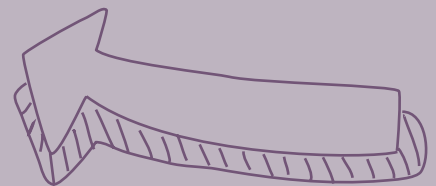


Introducing a practice

Divide the personal space below into four squares, each of them with one of the following questions on top:

- Who is the person experiencing this negative, temporary emotional state?
- What am I like? What are my strengths?
- What do I need from others when I am at my lowest and how do I ask for it?
- What would I like to remember in my difficult times?

Fill in each square with your answer to the respective question.



Personal space



Call to action

Place the memento in an easily accessible spot, or even visible at all times, like on your wall. Revisit it when you are going through difficult times. Discuss it with people who are close to you and who are likely to interact with you in your lowest moments. Make a new memento whenever this one doesn't feel relevant anymore.



OTHER RESOURCES

Preparing for a medical visit

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/medical-care-and-appointments/five-ways-get-most-out-your-doctors-visit>

<https://time.com/6974247/how-to-advocate-for-yourself-doctors/>

<https://www.mitoaction.org/day-to-day-with-mito/changing-physicians/caring-for-yourself-doctors-visit/>

Recognizing emotions

<https://positivepsychology.com/emotion-wheel/>

<https://www.mindfulnessmuse.com/dialectical-behavior-therapy/recognize-your-emotions-in-6-steps>

<https://dialecticalbehaviortherapy.com/emotion-regulation/recognizing-your-emotions/>

Setting boundaries

<https://psychcentral.com/lib/10-way-to-build-and-preserve-better-boundaries#10-tips>

<https://www.theschooloflife.com/article/learning-to-lay-down-boundaries/>

Good boundaries free you, TEDx talk by Sarri Gilman

The movie *Yes Man* (2008)

The Gifts of Imperfection, book by Brené Brown

Boundaries.me, podcast by Dr. Henry Cloud

Mapping and accessing resources

<https://synergycommons.net/resources/tool-mapping-your-network/>

<https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2024/02/14/social-network-analysis-tools-for-mapping-relationships/>

Self-advocacy

<https://selfadvocatenet.com/what-is-self-advocacy/>

https://advocacyfocus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The_Essential_Self_Advocacy_Tool-kit_1119.pdf

Creating meaning in one's life story

Expressive Writing: Words that Heal, book by Evans Pennebaker

<https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/>

Management of personal goals

<https://www.mindtools.com/a5ykiuq/personal-goal-setting>

Cultivating joy

The book of delights, by Ross Gay

On the Insistence of Joy episode from *On Being* podcast, by Ross Gay

Expressing your identity

The Art of Being Yourself, book by Caroline McHugh

Let's Talk About... Individuality episode from *Let's Talk About Mental Health* podcast, by Jeremy Godwin

The movie *Billy Elliot* (2000)

This Is Me, song by Keala Settle (soundtrack from *The Greatest Showman*)

Memento for difficult times

<https://mhanational.org/building-your-coping-toolbox>



Final words

You are here because you went through all the chapters, or maybe you read some and reflected on a few questions. Either way you are further away on your journey to recovery than you were before. Just take a moment to let this sink in. This journey may be long and windy, with dark paths and sunny trails. Above all, it is a deeply personal experience. Remember that everything that you learn and experience can be used to your benefit in the future.

The project Stepping Stones aims to give some resources and inspiration for you to use freely for your benefit: be it by yourself, with peers, in groups or other ways that we didn't even think of.

Stepping Stones brought together four organisations: Hugarafll (Iceland), L`Ovile (Italy), HerstelTalent (Netherlands), Minte Forte (Romania). Each came with their own expertise and all curious about learning more about recovery in mental health and reaching out with their findings.

This project created 3 materials:

- A visual guide: a collection of drawings, metaphors about various aspects of the recovery process aimed to spark reflection, dialogue and inspiration.
- 8 educational videos approaching topics about recovery in various styles
- This workbook aims to give you a frame to practice various skills and attitudes relevant in your own recovery process.

All these materials are translated in 5 languages: English, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Romanian. They are free to use and share for your personal journey, your projects or activities that you create in the benefit of others. They are being disseminated by the four organisations previously mentioned.

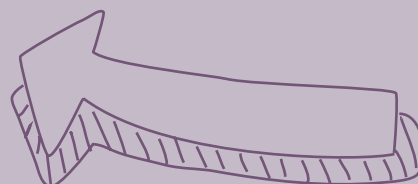
You can contact the participating organisations through:

Hugarafll: hugarafll.is
hugarafll@hugarafll.is
[facebook.com/Hugarafll](https://www.facebook.com/Hugarafll)

Minte Forte: minteforte.ro
contact@minteforte.ro
[facebook.com/MinteForte](https://www.facebook.com/MinteForte)

HerstelTalent: hersteltalent.nl
info@hersteltalent.nl
[facebook.com/StichtingHerstelTalent](https://www.facebook.com/StichtingHerstelTalent)

L'Ovile: ovile.coop
carlo.livi.ovile@gmail.com
[facebook.com/coop.ovile](https://www.facebook.com/coop.ovile)



This workbook was created as part of the project Stepping Stones,
a collaboration between four organizations:
Hugarafll (Iceland),
L'Ovile (Italy),
HerstelTalent (The Netherlands),
and Minte Forte (Romania)

