



Stress management handbook for Primary Care receptionists

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This handbook has been developed by Moa Sundström who is a Trainee Health Psychologist working in the Primary Care Training Hub at Kent and Medway ICB. The contents have been co-produced with a team of receptionists to make it as relevant as possible. Nevertheless, we recognise that everyone has individual stress responses and circumstances. We also recognise that there are many sources of stress that we cannot do much about. The reality of working in health and social care is that we will experience stress and emotionally challenging situations as we strive to support our patients as best as we can. It is completely understandable that these situations affect staff negatively sometimes. The hope is that we will teach you some tools that will help you move on from the difficult situations, but we do not expect them to go away, nor do we expect you to not be affected by them.

Three broad categories of sources of stress have been identified:

1. Basic needs and physical stressors

- a. Loud environment caused by noisy phones and layout of reception
- b. Not always able to ask senior members of staff for advice
- c. Not feeling confident in triaging knowledge, not having access to training
- d. Lack of opportunities for breaks, hot drinks or other basic needs

2. Not knowing how to cope with stress and unawareness of own triggers

- a. Not knowing how to communicate with aggressive or abusive patients
- b. Not knowing how to cope after dealing with upsetting situations
- c. Not noticing early signs of becoming overwhelmed (or not knowing what these signs are)
- d. Lack of values-based self-care (work and home) due to feeling too overwhelmed

3. Systemic causes of stress

- a. Not feeling valued as a receptionist by staff and patients
- b. Feeling unable to raise concerns due to closed working culture and atmosphere
- c. Not enough staff to complete all tasks that need to be done
- d. Inflexible working environment

These have all been taken into consideration when developing this resource. The main purpose of this handbook is to give you more tools and techniques to help cope with stressful situations, as we know that not everyone will benefit from the same approach to wellbeing. We are hoping you will feel more able to focus on the things that are within your control and let go of the things you cannot change as easily. There are no quick and easy fixes, no one technique that will stop us from struggling with stress.

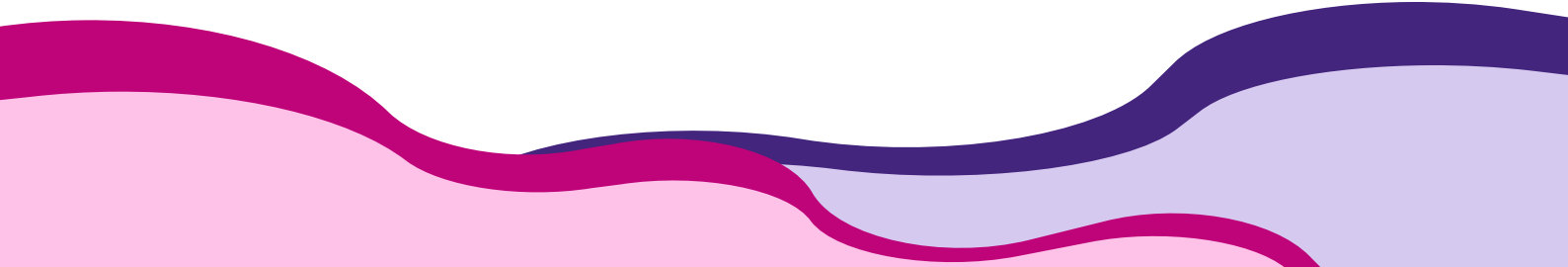
To manage our stress levels, we need to develop a different relationship with difficult thoughts and feelings and create healthy coping habits step by step. You do not need to read the whole handbook from start to finish, each chapter can be read independently. All techniques and concepts have been referenced and you can find a full reference list on page 27. If you want to learn more, you will find a variety of books, websites, and articles where you can learn more about the different topics discussed.





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Part 1: What is stress?

Stress is normal and something we all experience, but particularly those working in health and social care. Stress is the response of our mind and body to a physical or emotional challenge – which can be real or imagined¹. Stress happens when the demands are too great in comparison to our perceived ability to cope. We do not all experience and respond to stress in the same way as we all have different perceptions and reactions of stress.

When we feel stressed, there is a physiological response in our body, which can include²:

Hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline rising
 Muscles tensing
 Shortness of breath or rapid breathing
 Increased heart rate as your heart pumps more blood to large muscles
 Increased blood pressure
 Gut symptoms such as pain, nausea and feeling bloated

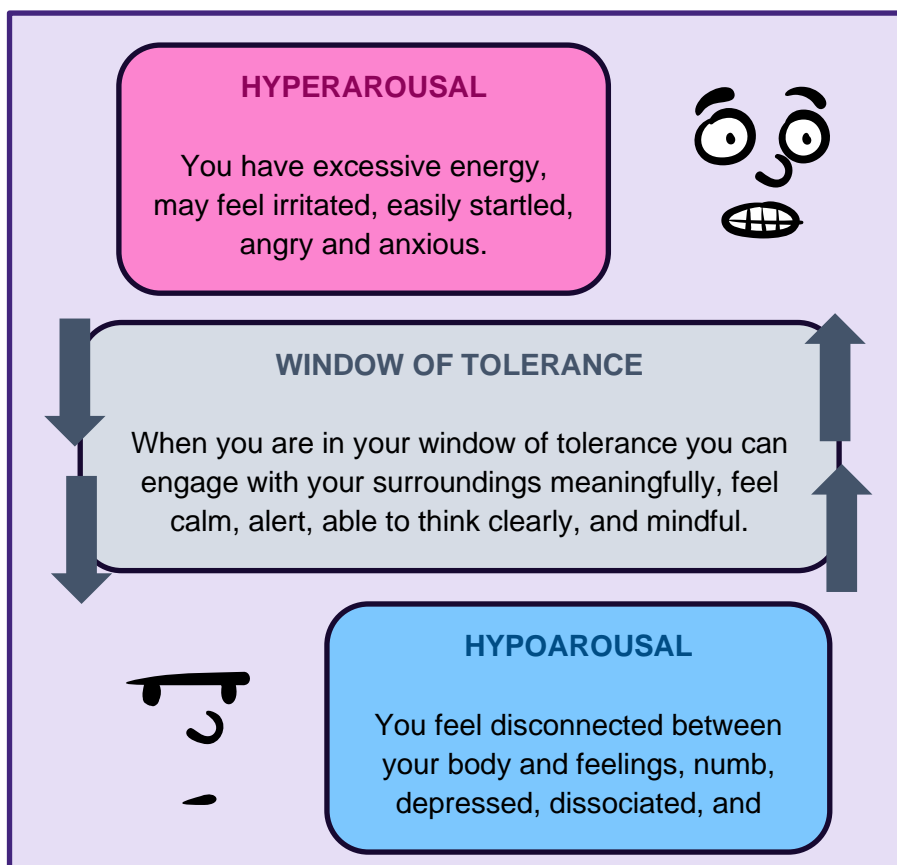
These **automatic** responses have developed to keep us safe when facing difficulties and arise from the parasympathetic nervous system. Although these are healthy and normal reactions to stress, if we are exposed to chronic stress the impacts of the responses can cause wear and tear on our bodies and make us at risk of various illnesses. This does not mean that everyone who is exposed to stress will develop complications, but some people do.

When experiencing stress, our body **reacts** and gets us ready to act in one of the following ways when exposed to a stressor³:

- **Fight** – getting ready to fight off the stressor, e.g., an aggressive person
- **Flight** – getting ready to run away, e.g., run out of the street when you see a car
- **Freeze** – unable to move in face of the stressor, e.g., someone threatens you
- **Fawn** – try to avoid or minimise stress or danger by pleasing the threatening person
- **Flop** – you flop or collapse when facing stress, e.g., after receiving distressing news

These five reactions can be split into two types. The first type causes us to be alert and on the lookout for problems (hyperarousal), and the second one causes us to “shut down” and feel numb (hypoarousal). When we feel calm and content, we sit in what is known as our **window of tolerance** (a concept developed by Dr Dan Siegel)⁴. When we experience stress, we move out of this window to one of these reactions, or both as it is possible to go from feeling anxious to numb.

Stress and trauma can reduce our window of tolerance, making us prone to be triggered more easily. The actions we take when feeling hyper- or hypoaroused are largely involuntary, however, by becoming aware of our stress **reactions** and working on our self-awareness, we can take the first steps towards **responding** to the stress and regulating our emotions. This can be very hard to do, but techniques such as breathing exercises, mindful moments, and purposeful movement can all support you in moving back into your window of tolerance where you are able to cope with life's difficulties in a more productive way⁵.



<https://www.mindmypeelings.com/blog/window-of-tolerance>, 29.07.2024

Whilst our stress reactions are involuntary, our responses are not, and we can learn how to respond in more productive ways. The rest of the handbook will therefore cover various ways in which we can **respond** to stress.

Main learning points

- We all experience stress, and it is normal to have stress reactions
- We often cannot change what happens to us, only how we behave afterwards
- Reacting to stress is involuntary, but we can choose how we respond to stress

Practice

Make a note of how you cope with stress at the moment. Do you tend to move into hyper- or hypoarousal when feeling stressed?

I cope with stress...

Next time you are feeling stressed, can you try taking a minute to engage with a breathing exercise? Below you can find two practices, but you can find a huge variety online.

Alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Shodhana)⁶

This is a useful technique to use before a meeting, after a stressful social interaction, before going to bed, or whenever you feel overwhelmed.

1. Place the thumb of your right hand gently over your right nostril and the ring finger of the same hand over the left nostril. You can rest your forefinger and middle finger between your eyebrows.
2. Close the right nostril with your thumb and inhale very slowly through the left nostril.
3. At the top of the breath, pause briefly, holding both nostrils closed, then lift your thumb and exhale through your right nostril.
4. After exhaling, briefly hold your breath for a moment by holding both nostrils closed, then inhale through your right nostril.
5. Continue altering breaths through the nostrils for 5-10 minutes, or however long feels good for you.

4-7-8 breathing⁷

This technique is helpful for falling asleep as many experience a deep sense of relaxation after breathing this way.

1. Take a breath in, then exhale through your mouth making a *whoosh* sound.
2. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose whilst counting to **4**.
3. Hold your breath for a count of **7**.
4. Exhale completely through your mouth, with a *whoosh*, to the count of **8**.
5. Repeat these steps at least four times.

If you do not find breathing exercises to be helpful for you at the moment, you may want to consider trialing a “worry time”, which is another way we can manage stress.

Worry-time⁸

If you regularly find yourself worrying about different things throughout the day or as you try to go to sleep at night, you may want to try having a dedicated “worry-time”. Set aside 10-20 minutes each day to think about and write down everything that worries you. By doing this regularly you may find that you worry less throughout the day, and if you do start to ruminate in the day, gently remind yourself that you will get back to that thought during your worry-time.

Reading suggestions

This Is How You Grow After Trauma by Dr Olivia Remes

Lost Connections: Why You're Depressed and How to Find Hope by Johann Hari

When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress by Gabor Maté

The Comfort Book by Matt Haig

Part 2: Introduction to self-compassion

Being compassionate is something that often comes naturally to people working in healthcare. To experience compassion, we need three things: notice that someone is suffering, realise that suffering is part of normal human life, and respond with warmth, kindness, and understanding⁹.

Self-compassion on the other hand, consists of the following elements:

Being kind and understanding towards ourselves when we fail, make a mistake, or feel like we are not good enough instead of pushing these negative thoughts and feelings away.

When struggling with life we often feel as though nobody else feels this way. When we are compassionate, we can connect with others through our suffering, rather than become isolated.

Utilise a mindful approach to our suffering, and not suppress or exaggerate it. If we face our pain with acceptance of the present reality, we are less likely to be swallowed by the difficulties.

Adapted from Kristin Neff [Exploring the Meaning of Self-Compassion and Its Importance](#), 29.07.2024

We are often very quick to give others compassion and understanding, but it is worth considering whether you show yourself the same level of kindness and understanding when struggling. When you notice you “inner critic” – the voice in your mind that points out everything you are doing wrong or are inadequate for – ask yourself: *would I say these things to a friend who is struggling?*¹⁰

Practicing self-compassion can help us deal with stress at work, but to do this, we first need to recognise and get in touch with our thoughts and feelings. We often push negative thoughts away and try to ignore them, which only makes them shout louder¹¹. If we take a self-compassionate approach, we can deal with these thoughts by using positive self-talk, showing ourselves acceptance and understanding, or engaging in compassionate self-care¹².

Are you self-compassionate? What do you think of self-compassion? When you make a mistake (at work or home) how do you usually treat yourself?

We can show ourselves self-compassion in many ways, for example by eating nourishing food, prioritising sleep over scrolling social media, and exercising. There are also numerous practices we can engage with which can increase our ability to be self-compassionate, which can be a useful tool to utilise when you are feeling stressed at work, find examples of these below.

Main learning points

- Self-compassion is not the same as self-pity: “it is a practice of goodwill, not good feelings”
- We are often quick to show others compassion but not ourselves
- Our inner critic is unlikely to go away, but using self-compassion we can learn to distance ourselves from this critical and unhelpful voice

Practice

Self-compassionate break^{9,13}

Being self-compassionate involves being supportive and kind to yourself when facing challenges or after making a mistake. Instead of thinking “just get on with it” or getting lost in a trail of negative thoughts and feelings, see if you can stop yourself and notice that you are going through a really difficult situation. When you have recognised the difficulty, see if you can remind yourself that it is part of normal human life to go through hardship, and it is normal to struggle and have negative thoughts and feelings. It is a universal, shared human experience to suffer with self-criticism and doubt. And lastly, see if you are able to show yourself some self-compassion, how can you comfort and care for yourself in this moment? You can try thinking “may I be kind to myself”, “may I forgive myself”, or “may I learn to accept myself just as I am”. The important thing is that you come up with a phrase that feels most authentic to you, as long as it is a supportive sentence that extends compassion towards yourself.

Please note, if you have a very active inner critic – which many of us do – this inner critic may try to overwhelm your kind and compassionate self-talk to begin with. This is a normal part of the process towards becoming more self-compassionate, and with time, hopefully your self-compassionate voice will start to speak louder than your inner critic.

Compassionate imagery¹²

Start by gently closing your eyes and slowing your breathing. When you think of compassion, notice what images, thoughts or feelings are showing up for you. Don't try to force anything, simply observe these images, thoughts and feelings for a few moments.

Allow an image to arise that represents compassion to you, it may be a pet, person, a landscape or something else entirely. If nothing comes to mind immediately that's okay, take your time and wait and see what shows up no matter how strange it might be. It does not need to be a vivid image, a sense of the image is just as good. If several images are showing up for you that is fine too, over time you may settle on one or you may continue to have multiple images.

See if you can start to develop an image that holds warm feelings towards you

- An image that has a sense of understanding of you, your struggles and your feelings
- An image that radiates kindness, care and concern for your wellbeing
- An image that is strong and wise
- An image that accepts you exactly as you are

Notice if the image is of a person or not, real or imagined, an animal, a landscape, or a completely random object. Does it have an age? Gender? Colours? How does this image make you feel? What physical sensations can you feel in your body when thinking about this image? How does it sound or communicate with you, if it communicates with you? What does it do to help or comfort you? When you feel ready, slowly let go of the image and open your eyes.

Now have a go at describing your compassionate image, or if you prefer, get a pen and paper and draw it instead.

My compassionate image...

Also note down the various experiences that accompanied this image.

Emotions:

Physical sensations:

Facial expressions:

Advice:

Often people think of religious figures or grandparents who are no longer with them. For the compassionate image to be truly compassionate, you need to be able to tell it your deepest darkest secrets, thoughts, and desires, and that they would not judge you, but instead accept you unconditionally. If your image is even the slightest judgmental, then try the exercise again and look for a different image. It usually takes a few attempts to create a compassionate image and that is ok. It can be a fun and creative process, and your image is likely to change over time. There is no right or wrong compassionate image, it can be anything that works for you that gives you a sense of compassion and understanding.

Audio practices

You can find several different recordings here [Audio \(compassionatemind.co.uk\)](http://Audio.compassionatemind.co.uk)

Reading suggestions

Self-compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself by Kristin Neff

The Compassionate Mind Workbook: A Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Your Compassionate Self by Chris Irons and Dr Elaine Beaumont

Humankind: A Hopeful History by Rutger Bregman

Part 3: Mindfulness

“By investigating inwardly our own nature as beings and, particularly, due to the nature of our own minds through careful and systematic self-observation, we may be able to live lives of greater satisfaction, harmony, and wisdom.” – Jon Kabat-Zinn¹⁴

Sometimes when we go through our day-to-day routine of driving to work, cooking dinner, walking the dog, we can be completely lost in our thoughts. You might be worrying about something that happened at work, thinking about what you need to pack for your lunch, wonder how your friend is doing, and so on. Regardless of what you are thinking about, when this happens, we are rarely able to be in the moment or focus on what we are doing¹¹. This is known as **auto-pilot mode**.

Mindfulness is the opposite of being in auto-pilot mode, as when we are mindful of what we are doing and our surroundings, we are able to engage actively in life and in that moment. Mindfulness makes it easier for us to take meaningful action and engage with others and the world around us¹⁴.

If we live mindfully, we pay attention to things happening in the moment without being swept away by worries or thoughts about the past or future. We can appreciate what is happening around us and learn to identify **glimmers** more easily which are small moments of joy (perfectly toasted toast, seeing a rainbow, hearing birds). **Mindful living is a way of life, not a technique to use when feeling stressed**. Mindfulness practices may still have benefits when used occasionally, but to get the most out of them, we need to engage in mindful living multiple times a week^{15,16}.

Whilst we do not want to ignore or push away negative thoughts and feelings – as this will only make them come back louder – by being mindful we can learn to recognise that even when there is an emotional storm happening within us, we have a whole body which can contain these thoughts and feelings, and there is a whole world around us that we can engage with *in addition* to experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings¹¹. By learning to take a step back and simply observe your thoughts and feelings, they lose their power over us.

One of the most powerful mindfulness “tools” we have is the breath, it is always with us and is something we can use to bring our awareness back to the present moment. Becoming aware of our breathing without manipulating it can help us break rumination circles by focusing on how our lungs feel when we inhale and exhale¹¹. See if you can take a step back to observe your thoughts and feelings instead of being consumed by them.

Four ways of being more mindful^{11,14,15,17}

1. Surroundings – be aware of the world around you. What can you see? Think about the shape, colour, size, and texture of various objects such as a plant or notebook. When you are outside, see if you can mindfully observe the surroundings, look at the leaves, different birds. Use all senses to take in the experience of being outdoors – can you feel the wind against your cheeks, is it warm or cold, damp or dry, what can you smell and hear. Keep a sense of openness and curiosity, and if your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the trees, flowers, or whatever else you can see.

2. Thoughts – our brains are continuously feeding us thoughts, most of which are completely random and irrelevant, but often we start to believe these thoughts as if they are facts which can cause us to feel stressed, anxious, or sad. One way of learning how to distance yourself from being consumed by these thoughts is by doing an exercise called leaves on a stream. Imagine sitting by a stream in a quiet, green meadow and every time a thought pops into your head, see if you can place it on a leaf on the stream, and simply sit back and watch it float by. Every time your mind wanders – which it will do – gently bring your attention back to the stream and place the thought “my mind just wandered” onto a leaf, and watch it float on by.

3. Feelings – as with thoughts, we sometimes may want to distance ourselves from our feelings so as to not become completely consumed by them. A technique which you may want to try is naming these feelings¹¹, for example, “here is the feeling of being a failure”. You can also try thinking of these as stories, for example “here is the *I’m not good enough story*”. Try practicing this with both positive and negative feelings. We are more likely to learn something new when feeling neutral or happy, so do not feel disheartened if you struggle to name your thoughts and feelings when feeling upset as it takes a long time to learn how to distance oneself from these.

4. Body – when you notice being completely caught up in your thoughts and feelings, see if you can break this cycle by focusing on your body. Your breath is a good option, but you may also want to mindfully pay attention to how your body is feeling in the moment. If you are sitting down, how does the chair or sofa feel against your back, how do your feet feel placed on the floor. If you are able to, you may want to take your socks off and notice how your feet feel bare on the floor. Perhaps you walk around, feeling different surfaces against the soles of your feet. The idea is to feel connected to your surroundings rather than being completely caught up in your mind.

Main learning points

- Mindfulness is paying attention to what you are doing and thinking, being in the moment
- Focus on small everyday joys and be mindful of how they make you feel
- Create mindful moments by focusing on your surroundings, thoughts, feeling and body

Practice

Mindful floor stretch

If you are able to do so, sit or lay down on the floor once a day and stretch your body mindfully. How do your arms, legs, back, shoulders feel like, how do they feel against the floor? You may wish to focus only on certain body parts such as your neck and arms, or a why not a whole-body stretch. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the sensation of stretching your body. Do this for at least 3-4 minutes, staying in touch with your breathing and with what your body is telling you (pain, discomfort, pleasantness). Remind yourself that this is your body today. Are you in touch with it?

If you want to try a full body scan which is a very common meditation practice, you can find a 30-minute video here [Body Scan Meditation - Jon Kabat-Zinn \(youtube.com\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30-minute-body-scan) and a 30-minute audio recording here [Beginner's Body Scan Meditation - Mindful](#)

Mindful cup of tea

Next time you are busy at work, see if you can make a mindful cup of tea. When walking to the kitchen, bring your awareness to your legs or back, how do they feel as you walk, do you notice any tension anywhere in your body? Perhaps you can stretch your neck as you wait for the kettle to boil and focus on how this feels. Bring your awareness to your hands, are they warm, cold, painful, stiff, dry... As you walk back with your cup, notice how your arms are feeling as you tense and walk carefully as to not spill your tea. As you take the first sip of your tea, notice how it smells, what it tastes like, can you easily identify what kind of tea it is? Bring your awareness to your throat and stomach and see if you can feel the tea warming you up from the inside as you swallow.

Reading suggestions

A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled by Ruby Wax

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World by Mark Williams and Dr Danny Penman

The Miracle of Mindfulness: The Classic Guide by Thich Nhat Hanh

Part 4: Values-based living

Sometimes we feel stressed, unhappy, or low because we are not living in accordance with our values. Values can be defined as “our heart’s deepest desires” for how you want to treat yourself, others, the world around you and how you want to live your life. If we know what our values are we can draw on these for inspiration and motivation to help us live a life full of meaning and purpose. Values are *desired* or *chosen* meaning that they are words describing how you **want to behave**, how you **desire to act**^{11,18}.

Values are not the same as goals. Goals are something you want to get or achieve in the future whereas values are how you want to behave continuously. That is not to say that values cannot change, they often do, but when they change, the new value will be a continuous one too. You cannot “complete” a value^{11,18}.

In any given moment, we can choose to act or not act on our values, for example being helpful. Even if we have neglected our values for a long time, we can start working on them right this moment. A goal is always in the future, and once you have reached it, it is no longer a goal. Being goal-oriented can cause stress and unhappiness, as we are always looking for the next thing to achieve. If we instead focus on values-based living, we are more likely to feel satisfied as the emphasis is on living by your values in every moment, which we can do whilst working towards our goals of course.

Whilst we want to live according to our values, if taken too seriously they may start sounding like rigid rules. If you find yourself thinking that you should, must, have to, really ought to... do something that aligns with your values, try to take a step back and ask yourself if thinking this way is helping you lead the kind of life you want or whether it is causing you more stress and worry. **“Pursue your values vigorously but hold them lightly”**.¹¹ Values give meaning to our goals.

It can be very difficult to identify what your values are, but below are a few practices that you may find helpful.

Imagine that you are in the future, ten years from now, and you are looking back at your life as it is today. Complete these three sentences¹¹.

1. I spent too much time worrying about...
2. I did not spend enough time doing things such as...
3. If I could go back in time, what I’d do differently is...

Discovering your purpose and meaning¹⁸ (adapted from Steven Hayes,
<https://stevenhayes.com/the-power-of-writing-about-your-values/>, 29.07.2024)

Below is a list of 10 life areas. Read through all of these.

10 life areas	Important (1-10)	Actions (1-10)
Intimate relationships		
Family		
Friends		
Community		
Environment		
Work		
Education		
Recreation		
Spirituality		
Physical wellbeing		

Rate **how important** these are on a scale from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important). There are no right or wrong answers here, you decide what matters to you. Then rate **how consistent** your **actions** are with your **values**.

Take a look at your answers, particularly those which you have scored as being of high importance (8 or above) and a relatively low action score (6 or below). These might be a good place for you to start working on living in accordance with your values.

See if you can spend ten minutes writing about your deepest values in **ONE** of these life areas. Ten minutes may sound like a long time, but it really is not!

Below is an overview of common values:

Accepting
 Adventurous
 Authentic
 Compassionate
 Cooperative
 Curious
 Encouraging
 Fair

Flexible
 Friendly
 Forgiving
 Grateful
 Helpful
 Honest
 Kind
 Loving

Mindful
 Open
 Persistent
 Playful
 Protective
 Respectful
 Supportive
 Trustworthy

<https://jamesclear.com/core-values>, 29.07.2024

These are some prompts to help you start writing about your values:

- What do you care about in this area?
- What do you want to *do* in this area that reflects how much you care about it?
- When in your life has this value been important?
- Who in your life manifests such values – and what do they mean to you?
- When have you violated this value? At what cost?
- What might you do differently to make this value a bigger part of your day-to-day life?

Try to focus your writing on the qualities of your life as *you* want to live it – qualities you hold as being very important. What do **you** care about? If it starts to feel like you are writing a wish list about what you want from life or others, redirect your writing by describing the qualities of actions you want to manifest. If you cannot think of anything else, just continue writing whatever shows up in your mind. **Use this space to write freely about your values in one life domain:**

Can you find a few examples of what you want to do in your chosen area? Try to find **two actions or behaviours** you can start doing today that would bring your action score closer to your importance score in this particular life domain. For example, if you want to focus on the life domain “family” two actions might be put all phones and gadgets away for an hour when spending quality time together and go for a walk once a month with a sibling. Look for mentions of the qualities you want to manifest in your actions and see if you can note those qualities. You might want to do things lovingly, creatively, compassionately, thoughtfully, supportively, honestly, fairly...

Values only matter when we really allow them to guide our life and behaviours. How do you want to show up during a family event? At work? At the gym? Living in accordance with your values is not always easy, but in combination with learning how to be more open and aware, a values-based life will bring you more fulfilment and meaning.

Sometimes we might be living according to our values, but we still feel unhappy or like something is wrong. Sometimes the reason for this is that although we are doing things that matter to us, we are not enjoying them in the moment. We are not present, as we are too busy thinking about the past or the future, ruminating or planning. If this is you, then you may want to revisit the mindfulness chapter and see if you can live according to your values more mindfully.

Main learning points

- Can use values to guide us through life, help us be the kind of person we want to be – might be helpful when having a difficult day at work
- Goals can be achieved and ticked off whereas values are ongoing qualities
- Living in accordance with our values can give us huge life satisfaction

Practice

*Clarifying values*¹¹

You inherit a fortune or win the lottery. What would you do with the money? Who would be there to share those activities or appreciate the things you buy? How would you act towards all those people who share your new life?

Reflections:

Who do you look up to and admire? Who inspires you? What personal strengths or qualities do they have that you admire?

Reflections:

Setting boundaries

If you often find yourself saying yes to doing things that you do not really want to do, why don't you practice saying no for a day? Or for a week? Will somebody else step up and help instead? See if you can sit with the potentially uncomfortable feelings that may arise as a result of saying no (for example fear of disappointing people) and try to reframe this as looking after yourself rather than doing everything for everyone else.

Reflections:

Reading suggestions

The Happiness Trap: Stop Struggling, Start Living (2nd edition) by Dr Russ Harris

The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living by 14th Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler

Values First: How Knowing Your Core Beliefs Can Get You the Life and Career You Want by Laura Eigel

Part 5: Goal setting and changing our behaviour

A behaviour is anything someone does in response to thoughts, feelings or other “internal processes” or what is happening around you or “external events”. We are constantly doing things and carrying out behaviours whether we realise it or not. Behaviours are often confused as “outcomes”, for example improving fitness = outcome, running three times per week = behaviour. Learning to differentiate between these two is the first step to changing behaviour as we need to be clear on what we are doing. It is much easier to take action and work on a behavioural goal as this tends to be much clearer than an outcome-based goal.

Often when we want to change our behaviours or habits, we decide on one or several goals, try changing our behaviours, and then get frustrated and give up when we are not able to stick with it or see the desired outcome. Behaviour change is difficult, time-consuming and can make us realise uncomfortable truths about ourselves. We cannot change behaviour with willpower alone, and for best chance of success, we can draw on different behaviour change techniques^{19,20}.

If there is something you want to stop doing, for example “I want to stop snacking in the evening”, what do you want to do instead? How would you like to spend your evenings when you get home from work? How would you like to treat yourself when you are tired and stressed? How would you like to treat your family or friends when you are tired and stressed? Questions like these can be helpful to reflect on even before you start thinking about making a change.

There are three different types of goals:

1. Emotional goals – how you want to feel
2. Outcome goals – what you want to have happened
3. Behavioural goals – what you want to do

Often, we come up with **emotional goals** which are very hard to act on and change, as we want to change a feeling. If we reframe our emotional goals as **behavioural goals**, you are more likely to be able to change something^{11,21}. For example, “I don’t want to feel stressed anymore” is an emotional goal, which can be rewritten as “learn healthy ways of coping with stress”. We can then decide to learn different techniques, such as breathing exercises.

When we are setting goals, we might also want to make them SMART:

Specific – clear and well-defined

Measurable – quantifiable

Achievable – realistic

Relevant – aligned with your values and priorities

Time-bound – have a deadline

<https://www.mindtools.com/a4wo118/smart-goals>, 29.07.2024

Regular goal: Run 5km

SMART goal: Go for a run on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays before work. I will increase the distance by 0.5km each week until I can run the full 5k.

When wanting to change behaviour, it can be useful to consider what change you want to make²²:

Starting a completely new behaviour: I will start practicing yoga three times a week

Stopping a behaviour: stop my caffeine intake by replacing it with decaf coffee/tea

Changing a behaviour: adapting an exercise regime to incorporate more muscle strengthening activities

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Sometimes we try to change too much and too quickly, which does not tend to end well. If we try to do everything at once, chances are we get fed up quickly which can lead to **“all or nothing”** thinking meaning that if we have a whole bar of chocolate rather than two squares, we then decide to not exercise either that day as we already “failed” with our other behaviour²¹. Striving for perfection is one reason we often fail to change our behaviour – rather than aiming for perfection perhaps we can strive for “good enough” instead.

To help you decide what to change, reflect on the following questions²³:

1. If you were to change this behaviour, how likely would it be to have an impact on the outcome you want?
2. How easy will the behaviour change be? What is the likelihood you will make the change?
3. Will changing this behaviour have positive “spillover” effects, e.g., make other health behaviours more likely to help meet other goals?

To further specify the target behaviour, try to answer the following questions²²:

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- What is the target behaviour?
- What will you do?
- What do you need to do differently to achieve the desired change?
- When will you do it?
- Where will you do it?
- How often will you do it?
- With whom will you do it?

Reflections:

There are many behaviour change techniques that we can draw on to help us change our behaviour, and to maintain this change over time. You are most likely already using several of these, for example social support, but you may want to consider some others such as²⁰:

- **Graded tasks**, e.g., start with going for a ten-minute walk, increasing the time or distance a little bit every two weeks
- **Prompts and cues**, e.g., if you want to go for a run in the morning, put your running clothes on the floor next to your bed
- **Environmental restructuring**, e.g., to help you remember taking your medication, put the pill box next to the tea bags or kettle so you see them when making your morning brew
- **Anticipated regret**, e.g., reflect on how it might make you feel if you do not quit smoking
- **Self-monitoring of outcomes/behaviour**, e.g., keep a diary of every time you make a healthy snacking choice or when you go for a walk when feeling bored

There are many more behaviour change techniques, but to make it easier for yourself, you can simply try following this formula:

1. Identify a **behavioural** goal, something you can take action on
2. Do you want to **start, change or stop** a behaviour?
3. Make this as **SMART** as possible (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound)
4. What will make behaviour change **easier**? How will you make it easier to eat healthy on a bad day?
5. Reflect on **why** you want to change, consider how you might feel in a year's time after you have changed your behaviour

Main learning points

- Behaviour change is hard, focus on one behaviour at a time that you want to change
- Do you want to start, change, or stop a behaviour?
- Aiming for perfection often leads to negative outcomes such as frustration and disappointment. Can you aim for simply improving, or “good enough”?

Practice

*Habit stacking*²⁴

This is a strategy for building new habits by anchoring them to existing habits or routines you already have. By using the existing habit as a prompt, it will make it easier to remember to do the new behaviour and eventually integrate it as part of your life.

1. Identify an existing habit or routine such as brushing your teeth, feeding the dog.
2. Choose a new habit you want to work on, such as daily stretching, eating fruit, doing 10 push ups in the morning.
3. Stack the new habit onto the existing habit by creating a rule such as “*After I brush my teeth, I will stretch for two minutes*”.
4. Follow this rule consistently. You can add a visual prompt such as a post it note on the mirror to further reinforce your new habit.

- Over time, the new habit becomes associated with the existing one, making it easier to stick to the new routine. Once it is fully established, you can start again and stack another habit to this routine or a different one altogether (for example in the evening)

By writing down your behaviour change plan and creating accountability, you are more likely to engage with the new behaviour. Have a go at writing your habit stacking plan below:

Implementation intentions^{11,25}

You can also use an implementation intention to change your behaviour, which involves creating a **“when-then” plan** that links a situational or environmental cue with a desired behaviour. Below is an example of how to create a when-then plan for the behaviour “drinking more water”:

- Identify one or several specific cues which you think could work as a cue to drink more water. For example, sitting down at your desk to work, turning on the TV.
- Decide that when you do this behaviour, you will go and get a glass of water.
- Make an explicit **when-then** plan: “when I sit down at my desk to work, I will drink a glass of water”. When-then plans are useful as they encourage you to think about barriers, for example, if you have a week of annual leave, you are unlikely to sit down at your desk. You can therefore create further if-then plans such as “when I get a bag of crisps, then I will get a glass of water”, “when the children come home from school, then I will get us all water”.
- Repeat the plan to yourself, write it down or visualise it until it becomes habitual.

Have a go at creating your own when-then plans below. By thinking about what might make it more difficult to engage in the new behaviour, you can create a plan A, B and C to counteract this.

Reading recommendations

How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to by Katy Milkman

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do, and How to Change by Charles Duhigg

Atomic Habits by James Clear

Part 6: Filling your wellbeing wheelbarrow

Wellbeing is a tricky concept to define, and it has a slightly different meaning to all of us. What is clear however is that we need to look after our wellbeing when we can and support our teams and colleagues in doing the same. This is difficult to do – especially in busy NHS settings – but hopefully this handbook has given you some ideas as to what you can do for yourself and others in your day-to-day life. We do not need grand self-care plans to look after ourselves, making a mindful cup of tea and practicing gratitude (see practice below) can make a significant difference as simply valuing and being kind to ourselves can have a positive impact on our wellbeing.

Hopefully you have enjoyed some of the practices included in this handbook and found them useful. This final chapter is all about filling your own **wellbeing wheelbarrow** with wellbeing tools. By writing them down, you have a visual reminder for all the things that you are still able to do even when things are looking bleak. In addition to all the information we have covered so far, below you will find a number of tools and techniques that you may find useful. Anything that you have found helpful so far, you can add to your own wellbeing wheelbarrow on page 23.

Many receptionists have identified that dealing with abusive and agitated patients is the most difficult aspect of their jobs. We know that this can take a huge toll on one's mental health and wellbeing and sadly there are no easy fixes for this issue. Seeking out training in conflict resolution and managing difficult situations may give you some communication skills that can help in these situations, but other than that, engaging in the wellbeing practices covered in this handbook may help you in *moving on* from the difficult event.

Gratitude practice²⁶

By using a gratitude practice, we are trying to shift our focus from neutral or negative thinking patterns to more positive ones. Rather than trying to push negative thoughts away, we simply let them be by focusing on nice, happy or positive things instead. It is natural and human to focus on negative things, and sometimes can get stuck in negativity loops. Having a daily gratitude practice can help shift our mindset and the best part is that it only takes a few seconds or minutes.

If you would like, you could keep a gratitude journal, but it will also work if you prefer to do this exercise in your mind. **Focus on three things that you are grateful for today**, they don't need to be big things, for example: having perfectly toasted toast in the morning, your dog being excited to see you after work, a patient saying thank you, seeing a nice flower and so on. You could make this part of your daily life by ending each shift with a gratitude practice or doing it as you go to bed.

Reflective practice

We can also engage in reflective practice as a way of supporting our wellbeing. Many people like to keep a reflective journal, but this is also something you can do with your colleagues at work as part of wellbeing in the workplace. Some people like to end the week with a quick reflective session, whereas others prefer to keep their own private reflective journal. If you struggle with

falling asleep at night you can try keeping your journal by the bedside to write down any thoughts and feelings as they arise – you can combine this with the worry time practice if you like and start by writing down all your worries and then moving on to reflecting on how it makes you feel.

To help you get started, you can consider the following reflective practice prompts:

How am I feeling today?
 What am I looking forward to this evening/week/weekend?
 What are my strengths at work/in my personal life?
 How do you show compassion to others? To yourself?
 What emotions am I holding on to?

How do you use your personal strengths at work?
 How does work fulfil you?
 What values do you consider most important in life?
 Which emotion do you find the hardest to accept?

What is causing stress at the moment? What action can I take to reduce the impact of this?
 My favourite things to do when feeling low are..
 When I look in the mirror, what do I see?
 When do I feel most in tune with myself?

Thinking traps²¹

In Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, there is something called “thinking traps” which refers to usually negative thinking patterns that we can get stuck in. Thinking traps can cloud our judgement and make our world seem smaller than it is, as we get trapped in a vicious circle of unhelpful thoughts. Recognising these patterns of unhelpful thoughts can help us accept them for what they are – simply thoughts – and support us in living life to the fullest when we are not caught up in any negative thought spirals. Below are examples of thinking traps and how we can overcome them:

All-or-nothing thinking^{21,27}: seeing everything as black or white, or in extremes. For example, if you are on a diet and have a piece of chocolate you might think you have ruined all your progress whereas in reality, whether you are on a diet or not you can enjoy all foods in moderation. If you notice all-or-nothing thinking, remind yourself that nothing is perfect in life, life is full of grey areas, and even if I made a mistake, it does not mean I’m a bad person.

Mind-reading^{21,27}: assuming that others are thinking the worst about you or criticising you, but without having any evidence of this and therefore jump to conclusions. We can overcome this by reminding ourselves that nobody can read minds, we can never know what someone else is thinking or feeling. Assuming we know what others are thinking is usually not helpful and will not aid us in living the kind of life that we want.

Overgeneralisation^{21,27}: if something challenging or negative happens to you, you may assume it is going to happen repeatedly. If you find yourself using words like “always” and “never” a lot, you may be overgeneralising, for example “why does this always happen to me” or “things never go my way”. To overcome this, remind yourself that you don’t know what will happen in the future, even if you have made a mistake in the past, you cannot know whether you will make the same mistake in the future again.

Should statements¹¹: we use should statements when we tell ourselves how we “should”, “must”, “need to”, or “ought to” think, feel, and behave even though this is not how we feel or think. This can lead to a feelings of anxiety and disappointment with yourself for not feeling/thinking/behaving how you think you need to. For example, “I should not feel anxious” or “I need to do better”. By replacing “should” with “can”, the statement becomes encouraging rather than discouraging.

The choice point¹¹ (adapted from Dr Russ Harris ACT Made Simple, 2019 and [The Choice Point: A Map for a Meaningful Life \(youtube.com\)](#), 29.07.2024)

All day long we are behaving and doing things: driving to work, playing with the dog, cooking dinner, watching TV... Some of the things we do move us *towards* the sort of life we want to have and the sort of person we want to be, for example we might prepare a healthy packed lunch. We call these **towards moves**. Other times, we may do things that mean we are moving away from the kind of person we want to be, and doing things that are not aligned with your personal values, for example spending a lot of time on your phone. We call these **away moves**.

These moves are context dependent and personal: for example, laying on the sofa watching TV may be somebody’s towards move as it helps them relax, whereas for someone else it may be an away move as they are not exercising/reading/etc. Depending on the context our behaviours may be interpreted differently too, for example, eating a few squares of a chocolate bar mindfully could be a towards move as it is aligned with your value of enjoyment, whereas eating three whole bars in on go may be considered an away move as it is not aligned with your value of wellness.

When life is going well, we find it easier to make towards moves, behave as the kind of person we want to be and treat others and ourselves according to our values. However, life is rarely that easy and we often experience difficulties both at work and in our personal lives, which can lead to difficult thoughts and feelings. We often get “hooked” by these negative thoughts and feelings meaning we may get consumed by them and are therefore more likely to engage in away moves, which in turn can lead to more negative and difficult thoughts and feelings.

There are times when we can “unhook” ourselves from these negative thoughts and feelings and engage in “towards moves” instead, which makes life better as we are behaving like the sort of person we want to be. When we are experiencing difficult situations, thoughts and feelings, we can make a **CHOICE**: do we allow ourselves to get hooked by them and engage in away moves, or do we unhook and engage in towards moves? Our default setting is often to do away moves, but the more we practice unhooking skills, the better we become at dealing with difficult experiences.

To do this we need two things: we need to **know what our values are** (see chapter 4, page 13), and we need to **learn unhooking skills**. Unhooking skills include self-compassion, mindfulness, acceptance, and learning to take a step back from our thoughts and feelings. This can be difficult but taking a step back is a very effective unhooking technique. You can do this by:

Whenever a difficult thought or feeling arises, take a step back and say to yourself “I am noticing anger”, or “here comes anxiety again”, or “this is the I’m-not-good-enough-story”.

Imagine putting your thoughts and feelings onto a cloud that is slowly floating past in the sky, simply sit back and watch your thoughts pass you by.

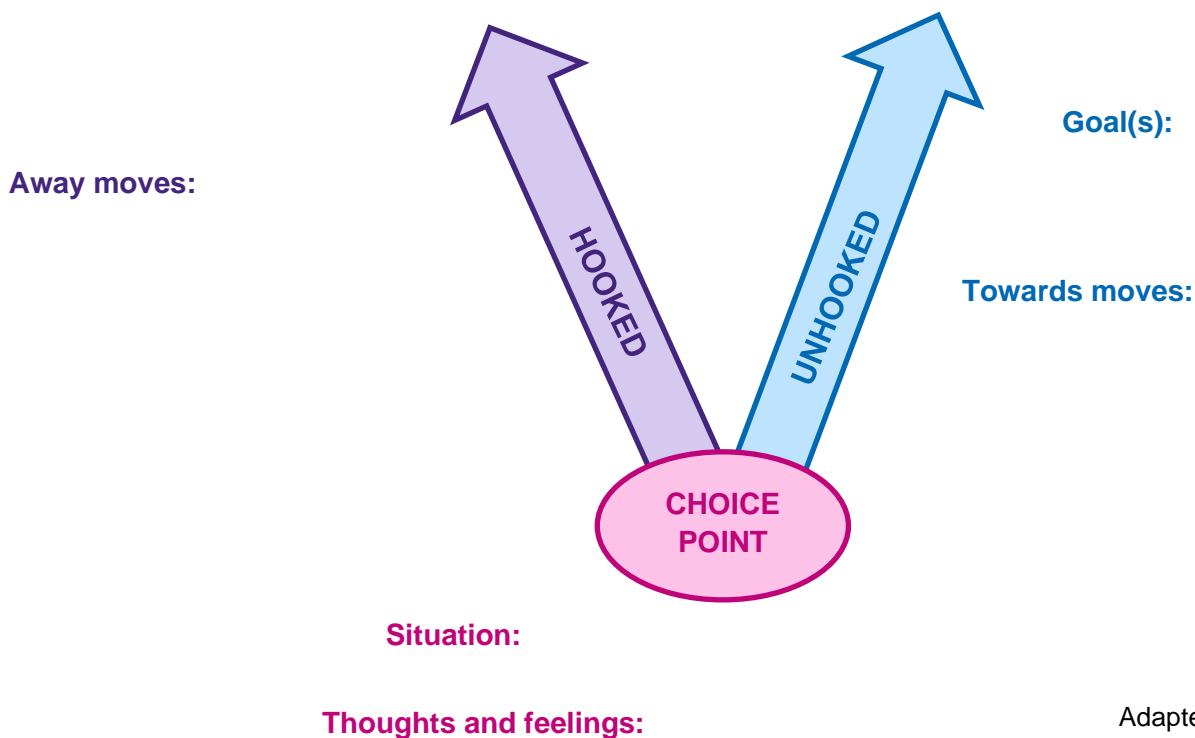
Try saying the thought in a silly voice (Donald Duck) or singing it (e.g., using the happy birthday melody).

Thanking your mind, our brains sometimes keep repeating difficult thoughts as your mind wants to keep you safe and learn from previous events, simply thanking your mind for the reminder can sometimes be a useful way of distancing yourself from the difficult thought. “Thank you mind for reminding me about that mistake”.

Thoughts can crowd your mind much like how your laptop may look if you open too many windows at once. Imagine clicking the “X” button on each of your thoughts and watch them disappear one by one.

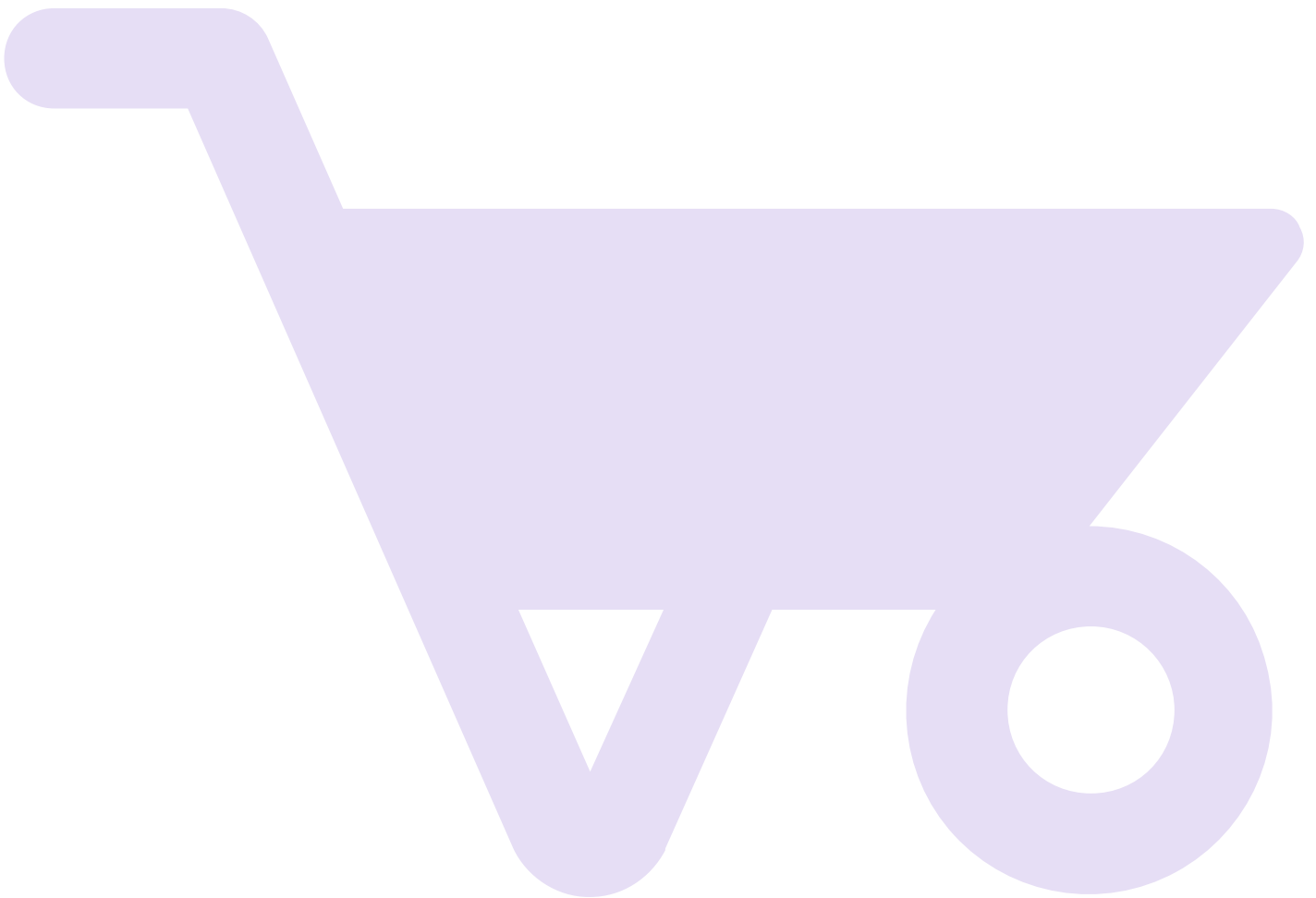
11

Below you will find a **choice point**¹¹ template, have a go at filling this out. You may find it helpful to first watch the YouTube video referenced at the start of this practice. Write down a situation such as “patient was abusive” and add your thoughts and feelings that arose as a result of this situation. Then add your typical away moves next to the “hooked” arrow, things you may be doing to deal with this that move you away from the sort of person you want to be such as get snappy. Then write down what towards moves you could be taking next to the “unhooked” arrow as well as any goals you may have, for example “learn de-escalation techniques”.

Adapted from Harris, (2019)¹¹

Building your own wellbeing wheelbarrow

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, you may find it useful to add all tools and techniques you have discovered to this page so that you can easily find them when you are in need of some wellbeing practices. Feel free to add your own tools and techniques that you have acquired over the years, such as speaking to friends, exercising, or doing something else. You could also print out your wheelbarrow to act as a visual reminder of all the ways in which you can look after your wellbeing when times are tough.





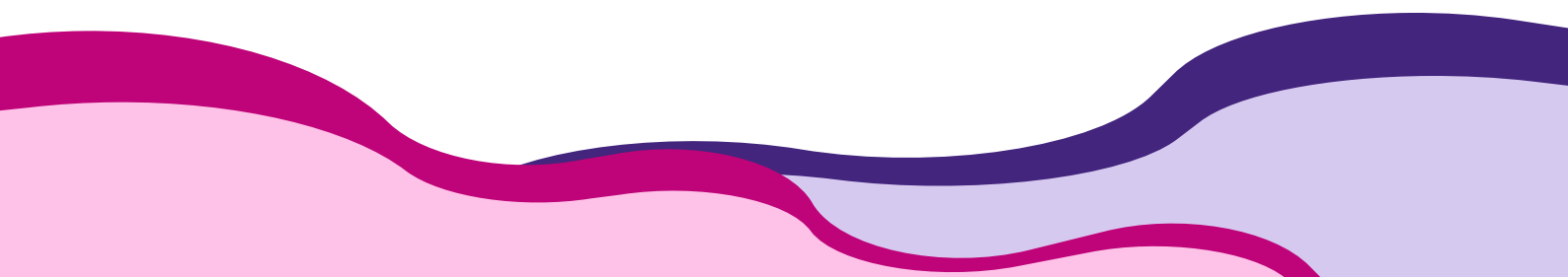
We hope you have found something useful within this handbook. There are no quick and easy ways of improving our wellbeing and stress levels, it takes hard work and personal development can be very uncomfortable as we start to recognise our own habits and ways of managing difficulties. We recognise that this handbook is quite lengthy, but we hope that you will have been able to pick and choose different sections and techniques that feel most authentic to you. Not everyone likes mindfulness, or self-compassion, or breathing techniques, and that is ok. You are the only person who knows what works and what does not work for you.

Nevertheless, the only way of finding out whether something helps you or not is by trying it several times. Using the 4-7-8 breathing technique once may not work, or it might make you feel worse, but I would encourage you to try it perhaps 10 times, in different settings and at different times, as this is the only way you will learn more about yourself and your body, and your stress responses. Be curious about your mind and your body, your thoughts and feelings, listen to what they are saying both when you are feeling stressed and when feeling calm.

We wish you all the best on your wellbeing journey.

29.07.2024

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