Doing What Matters in Times of Stress

An Illustrated Guide

Adapted Version for the Caribbean

PAHO
Adapted version of the original title in English
Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide
© World Health Organization, 2020
ISBN 978-92-4-000391-0 (electronic version)

Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide. Adapted Version for the Caribbean
© Pan American Health Organization, 2021
ISBN: 978-92-75-12392-8 (print)
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CONTENTS

Preface iv
Acknowledgements v

Introduction 1

PART 1: GROUNDING 2
This book is to help you manage STRESS 3
The effects of stress 4
Being hooked? 5
What are values? 6
The risks of being hooked 7
Learn how to be engaged and focused 8
Exercises: Let’s get engaged and focused! 9
Overcoming an emotional storm 11
Learning how to ground yourself 12
Developing grounding skills 15
Take a moment 17

PART 2: UNHOOKING 18
Unhooking ourselves 19
Identifying hooking thoughts and feelings 21
Noticing and naming 22
How does noticing and naming help us? 23
Refocusing 24

PART 3: ACTING ON YOUR VALUES 26
Acting on your values 27
Why does acting on your values matter? 28
Choosing your values 29
Putting your values into action 30
How to deal with difficult situations 33

PART 4: BEING KIND 34
Building a caring environment 35
Being kind to ourselves 36

PART 5: MAKING ROOM 38
As large as the sky… 39
Making room 40
Being kind to yourself and making room for your pain 43
PREFACE

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has developed this stress management guide to help you cope with adversity. The guide is an adaptation for the Caribbean of the World Health Organization (WHO) publication *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide*, which supports implementation of WHO’s recommendations for stress management.

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

This guide is for anyone who experiences stress, ranging from parents and other caregivers to health professionals working in difficult situations. Informed by available evidence and extensive field testing, the guide provides information and practical skills to help people cope with adversity. While the causes of adversity must be addressed, there is also a need to protect and support people’s mental health.

We hope that readers will find this guide useful, and that it will help them in their efforts to cope with stress.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication would not have been possible without the sustained commitment of the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), and in particular of Ms. Kemberley Gittens and Mr. Lothar Mikulla, who provided revision support and facilitated feedback from CDB experts and Caribbean youth networks.

Thanks are due to Ms. Laure Garancher, project manager at The Ink Link, who prepared the outline of the adapted guide and coordinated the work of the illustrator, Sess, and the graphic designer, Mr. Guillaume Biasse.

Thanks also go to Ms. Lisa Bayley, Mr. Ken Carslwell, Dr. Renato De Souza, Dr. Claudina Ellington Cayetano, Mr. Brandon Grey, Dr. Elisa Prieto Lara, Mr. James Underhill, and Dr. Mark Van Ommeren, who assisted in revising and improving the document through the various drafts.

As a result of the work and dedication of these and several other persons not mentioned here, this adapted version of the WHO guide Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide will represent an important tool for stress management in the Caribbean.
ABOUT THIS GUIDE

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

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

If you have a device for accessing the Internet and storing audio files, when you see the symbol in the book you can download an audio version of the exercise from https://www.paho.org/en/documents/doing-what-matters-times-stress-illustrated-guide to support your practice.

If you are not able to access the online audio files, you can still get similar benefit from reading and carefully following the instructions and exercises in this book.
Part 1: Grounding
Stress means feeling troubled or threatened by life. It can be due to major threats…

This book is to help you manage stress.

Stressful situations:
- Gender-based violence
- Violence in your community
- No school
- Illness
- Displaced from home
- Family violence
- Economic hardship
- Uncertainty about the future
- Argument with your family

Or smaller problems:
The effects of stress

\[\text{EVERYONE EXPERIENCES STRESS AT TIMES. A LITTLE BIT IS NOT A PROBLEM, BUT VERY HIGH STRESS OFTEN AFFECTS THE BODY.}\]

\[\text{MANY PEOPLE GET UNPLEASANT FEELINGS.}\]
- Headaches
- Neck and shoulder pain
- Back pain
- Upset stomach
- Not feeling hungry
- Lump in the throat
- Heavy chest
- Tight muscles

\[\text{OTHER PEOPLE FIND THEIR BODY GETS SICK.}\]
- Skin rashes
- Infections
- Illnesses
- Bowel problems

\[\text{WHEN THEY ARE STRESSED, MANY PEOPLE ...}\]
- have difficulty sleeping
- worry
- cannot focus
- get angry easily
- cry
- feel very tired
- have changes in appetite

and many of us think a lot about bad things from the past or bad things we fear in the future.
Part 1: Grounding

Being hooked?

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

There are many types of hooks.

What does hooked mean?

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

The hook traps it.

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

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

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

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

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

Values are your deepest desires for the sort of person you want to be. These difficult thoughts and feelings “hook” us and pull us away from our values.

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

Loving
- Wise
- Protective
- Persistent
- Calm
- Courageous

Responsible
- Committed
- Attentive
- Caring

I want to be caring for my family and I care about my well-being.

So, values describe the sort of person you want to be.

How you want to care for yourself and others

And care for the world around you.
The risks of being hooked

There are many kinds of difficult thoughts and feelings that can hook us.

Thoughts about giving up…

I give up; it is all too hard.

Thoughts that blame others…

He should not have done that; it is his fault.

Harsh judgments about ourselves…

I am weak, and I am crazy.

Memories, especially about difficult events…

Thoughts about the future, especially about what we fear…

Is he ok? Where is he now?

Thoughts where we worry about others.

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

Get into fights, arguments or disagreements.

Withdraw and stay away from people we love.

Spend a lot of time lying in bed.

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

But there are things you can do!
Part 1: Grounding

Learn how to be engaged and focused

To **engage** in something means to give it your full attention with your body and senses.

**WHEN YOU ARE DRINKING SOMETHING, DO YOU GIVE IT YOUR FULL ATTENTION? DO YOU SAVOR THE SMELL AND THE TASTE?**

When you give your full attention to any activity with your mind, we say you are **focused** on it.

**BUT WHEN HOOKED, YOU ARE **DISENGAGED** OR **Distracted**.**

If you learn to be more engaged, and focus better, then you will handle stress better.

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

**WHEN YOU LISTEN TO MUSIC, DO YOU GIVE IT YOUR FULL ATTENTION? DO YOU LISTEN TO IT AND ENJOY IT?**

**BUT WHEN WE ARE STRESSED, WE FIND IT HARD TO ENGAGE IN LIFE. WHEN HOOKED, YOU ARE **DISENGAGED** OR **Distracted**.**

And you will be able to do important things much better.
Part 1: Grounding – Exercise 1

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

You can practise these skills with any activity you do.

For example, if you are drinking tea or coffee, focus your full attention on it.

Exercises: Let's get engaged and focused!

You notice the drink with curiosity, as if you have never encountered such a drink before.

You notice its color.

You savor the smell of it.

You sip it SLOWLY.

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

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

Notice the movements of your throat as you swallow...

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

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

And whenever you get hooked...

I refocus on the drink!

Thoughts and feelings

Go ahead and practise this now. Get some water, tea or coffee, and follow the instructions above.

You can practise engaging or focusing while doing many other activities, for example:

While talking to family or friends, notice what others are saying, their tones of voice and facial expressions. Give them your full attention. While playing a game or doing some other activity with children, like teaching them to read, you simply give your full attention to the children and to the game. While washing, cooking, or doing chores, you simply give your full attention to the activity.

AND WHENEVER YOU NOTICE YOU GET HOOKED...

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

OKAY! I CAN DO THAT WHEN MY THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS ARE NOT TOO DIFFICULT.

BUT SOMETIMES MY FEELINGS AND STORIES ARE JUST SO PAINFUL.

WE UNHOOK BY REFOCUSING AND ENGAGING IN WHAT WE ARE DOING.

YES, SOMETIMES THEY ARE SO OVERPOWERING THEY TURN INTO EMOTIONAL STORMS.
Part 1: Grounding - Exercise 1

Overcoming an emotional storm

An emotional storm means that you experience intensely difficult thoughts and feelings. They can easily overpower you.

When it appears, we must learn how to ground ourselves. Let me explain...

On the ground, you are much safer.

Imagine you are high in a tree when a storm begins. Would you want to stay up there? While you are in the tree, you are in great danger!

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

And there, you can help others.

For example, you could comfort others while the storm rages.

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

We need to "ground ourselves" when our emotional storms appear through engaging with the world around us, and focusing on what we are doing.

THE FIRST STEP IS TO NOTICE HOW YOU ARE FEELING AND WHAT YOU ARE THINKING.

Next, slow down and connect with your body. Slow your breathing. Empty your lungs completely. Then let them refill as slowly as possible.

Slowly press your feet into the floor…

…slowly stretch your arms…

…or slowly press your hands together.

THE NEXT STEP IN GROUNDING IS TO REFOCUS ON THE WORLD AROUND YOU.

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

Breathe the air. What can you smell?

What are three or four things you can hear?
Part 1: Grounding – Exercise 1

Notice where you are and what you are doing. Touch your knees, or the surface beneath you, or any object you can reach. So if you notice there are difficult thoughts and feelings appearing…

Notice what it feels like under your fingers. …there is also a world around you that you can see and hear and touch and taste and smell.

And you can also use your body and your words to act in line with your values.

GROUNDING DOES NOT MAKE YOUR EMOTIONAL STORMS DISAPPEAR. IT JUST KEEPS YOU SAFE, UNTIL THE STORM PASSES.

SOME STORMS LAST A LONG TIME.

OTHERS PASS QUICKLY.

UNHOOKING AND GROUNDING EXERCISES ARE NOT MADE TO GET RID OF YOUR DIFFICULT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS, RATHER TO HELP YOU MANAGE STRESS BETTER.
The purpose of these exercises is to help you engage in life. Give your full attention to others, family and friends.

Move toward your values to help you behave more like the kind of person you want to be.

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

So you can manage stress much better.

But I am in so much pain. Can I get rid of my anger, fear and sadness?

No… but we will come to that in the next section of the book.

But it seems so hard…

Like any new skill, it requires practice.

And the more we practise, the better we get!

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

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

Here are exercises to practise these engaging and grounding skills. We will practise them now! Do not simply read about it; actually do it!

Here is a 30-second exercise.

Let’s do it! I can practise anytime!

First, notice how you are feeling and what you are thinking. Slow down and connect with your body. Slowly breathe out. Slowly stretch. Slowly push your feet into the floor.

Now refocus on the world around you. Pay attention with curiosity to what you can… see, hear, taste, smell, and touch.

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

Part 1: Grounding - Exercise 3

DEEPER GROUNDING

First, notice how you are feeling and what you are thinking.

Next, connect with your body. Slowly breathe out. Slowly stretch. Slowly push your feet into the ground.

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

Notice your breathing with curiosity – as if it is the first time you have ever encountered breathing.

Now breathe out even more slowly. And when your lungs are empty, silently count to 3 before you breathe in again. Then let your lungs refill as slowly as possible.

Notice the gentle movements of your shoulders, how your belly moves in and out, the air as it flows in and out of your nostrils, your chest moving in and out.

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

Make sure you breathe slowly and gently. If you breathe too hard, too deeply, or too quickly, it could make you feel panicky, anxious, dizzy, or short of breath. If this happens, slow your breathing.

As soon as I realize this has happened, I refocus on my breathing, giving it my full attention.

AND IF OUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS HOOK US 1,000 TIMES... WE UNHOOK OURSELVES 1,000 TIMES!

To finish the exercise, once again ground yourself:
- Slowly stretch.
- Slowly push your feet into the floor.
- Refocus and engage with the world.
- Pay attention with curiosity to what you can see, hear, taste, smell, touch.
- Notice where you are, who is with you, and what you are doing.

Part 1: Grounding

Take a moment

Take a moment to acknowledge that each time you practise these exercises...

I am living by my values of caring...

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

That’s right! Because these skills help you to engage, focus, and unhook from difficult thoughts and feelings, so you can move toward your values.

Remember!

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

THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS
Welcome back! Earlier, we talked about “toward” and “away” moves.

When hooked, we tend to make “away moves” — moving away from our values.

We might get into fights, arguments, or disagreements, withdraw and stay away from people we love, or spend a lot of time lying in bed.

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

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

Good question. It makes sense that you would want them to go away. But is it realistic to think we can simply get rid of them?

Can we burn them like rubbish?

Can we lock them up, hide them away?

Can we run off and leave them behind?

Unhooking ourselves
Part 2: Unhooking

Most people try at least some of these strategies to get rid of these thoughts and feelings:

- Yelling!
- Trying not to think about it
- Avoiding people, places or situations
- Staying in bed
- Giving up
- Alcohol or tobacco
- Illicit drugs
- Starting arguments
- Isolating yourself
- Blaming or criticizing yourself
- What else have you tried?

Many of these methods make thoughts and feelings go away. But not for long! They come back soon! And most of these methods pull us away from our values! So we need a new way of handling difficult thoughts and feelings. 

Take a moment to think about all the ways you have tried to get rid of these thoughts and feelings.
Part 2: Unhooking - Exercise 4

Identifying hooking thoughts and feelings

Instead of trying to push them away,
You stop struggling with them.
And whenever you get hooked by them,
You unhook yourself again.

First let us identify – what thoughts and feelings are hooking you? Are you being hooked by thoughts about...

Bad things that happened in the past?
Bad things that might happen in the future?
Not being good enough – being weak or crazy or bad?

Write down some of the thoughts that hook you.
Are you being hooked by feelings in your body? Mark where these feelings are located.
Part 2: Unhooking - Exercise 5

Noticing and naming

THE FIRST TWO STEPS IN UNHOOKING ARE:

FIRST, YOU BECOME AWARE THAT A THOUGHT OR FEELING HAS HOOKED YOU,

SECOND, YOU NAME IT,

YOU SILENTLY SAY TO YOURSELF SOMETHING LIKE:

HERE IS TIGHTNESS IN MY CHEST.

HERE IS ANGER.

HERE IS A PAINFUL MEMORY.

HERE IS A DIFFICULT THOUGHT ABOUT MY FAMILY.

HERE ARE FEARS ABOUT THE FUTURE.

I NOTICE HERE IS A TIGHTNESS IN MY CHEST.

I NOTICE HERE IS ANGER.

I NOTICE HERE IS A PAINFUL MEMORY.

I NOTICE HERE IS A DIFFICULT THOUGHT ABOUT MY FAMILY.

I NOTICE HERE ARE FEARS ABOUT THE FUTURE.

SO, NAMING BEGINS BY SILENTLY SAYING, “HERE IS A THOUGHT” OR “HERE IS A FEELING.”

HOWEVER, IF WE THEN ADD THE PHRASE, “I NOTICE,” WE USUALLY FIND IT UNHOOKS US A BIT MORE.

TRY THIS NOW AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.

Please try this now before you read any more. Notice and name a thought or feeling that has been present for you today.
How does noticing and naming help us?

Thoughts and feelings hook us when we are unaware of them...

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

… and then the next moment, you are hooked.

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

You might still be talking to your friend… but you are not really “engaged” in the conversation.

The first step in unhooking yourself is to become aware that you have been hooked.

The second step is to name what hooked you. You silently say to yourself…

Here is a difficult thought.

The next step is to refocus on what you are doing – whether you are cooking, or eating, or playing, or chatting with friends – and to engage fully in that activity;

To pay full attention to whoever is with you and whatever you are doing.
Refocusing

REMEMBER IT IS NATURAL TO HAVE DIFFICULT THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS APPEAR WHEN WE ARE STRESSED. THIS HAPPENS TO EVERYONE!

WE CAN FOLLOW THE SAME THREE STEPS EVERY TIME WE GET HOOKED AND STOP ENGAGING IN LIFE:

1. Notice your difficult thoughts and feelings.
2. Name the thoughts and feelings (silently).
3. Refocus on what you are doing.

I am noticing feelings of anger.

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

And after we have noticed and named, we can refocus on the world around us. We engage in life by noticing what we can... see, smell, taste, touch, hear.
Part 2: Unhooking

**TOOL 1**
Ground yourself during **emotional storms**. Notice how you are feeling. Slow down and connect with your body. Refocus and engage with the world around you.

**TOOL 2**
Unhook yourself from thoughts and feelings by noticing and naming, then refocusing on what you are doing.

---

**Notice name**


---

See if you can practise this over and over again, all day long as you’re going about your daily activities.

**Set times aside for this, for example, in bed, or before or after a meal.**

---

Certain things can get in the way of practising with these tools. Maybe you feel...

- Too tired
- Too sad
- Too angry
- Or maybe you just can’t be bothered.

---

You can also be hooked by unhelpful thoughts.

---

When you are lying awake in bed at night, and cannot sleep, then practise slowing down and connecting with your body. It probably will not make you sleep (although sometimes it does), but it will help you feel rested.

---

This is all so stupid!
It is not important!
It will not help!
I am too busy!
There is no point!
It is a waste of time!
I cannot do it!

---

Every little bit of practice you do will make a difference. Before continuing with the next part, please take a day or two to practise what we’ve covered in this chapter. This is like learning a new language. It takes a lot of practice!
Part 3: Acting on your values
Part 3: Acting on your values

Welcome back. We are going to look at values in more depth.

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

Values are different from goals.

GOALS DESCRIBE WHAT YOU ARE TRYING TO GET. VALUES DESCRIBE THE SORT OF PERSON YOU WANT TO BE.

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

It might be impossible to achieve your goal.

But suppose your values are to be kind, caring, loving, and supportive.

You can still live your values of being kind, caring, loving, and supportive toward your family, friends, and people around you.

And even if you are facing a very difficult situation and are separated from your family and friends, you can still live by your values, and find little ways to act on them with the people around you.

Many of your goals might be impossible right now. But you can always find ways to act on your values.

Job Offers

No Job

You can still live your values of being kind, caring, loving, and supportive toward your family, friends, and people around you.

And even if you are facing a very difficult situation and are separated from your family and friends, you can still live by your values, and find little ways to act on them with the people around you.

Many of your goals might be impossible right now. But you can always find ways to act on your values.

Values ≠ Goals
Part 3: Acting on your values

**Why does acting on your values matter?**

**The way you influence the world around you is through your actions.**

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

The more you focus on your own actions, the more you can influence the immediate world around you: the people and situations you encounter every day.

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

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

... and instead, act on your values.

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

** Fighting **

** Collaboration **

So, we need to keep asking ourselves this question: are my actions moving me toward or away from my values?
Part 3: Acting on your values – Exercise 6

Choosing your values

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

- To be kind
- To be caring
- To be generous
- To be supportive
- To be helpful
- To be patient
- To be responsible
- To be protective
- To be disciplined
- To be hardworking
- To be committed
- To be brave
- To be persistent
- To be forgiving
- To be grateful
- To be loyal
- To be respectable
- To be honorable
- To be respectful
- To be trustworthy
- To be fair/just
- To be...
- To be...

Select three or four of those values that seem most important to you. Write them down on a paper to remember.

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

What does this person say or do that you admire? Does this person treat others in admirable ways?

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

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

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

Values go both ways: toward yourself and toward others.

So, if your values are caring and kindness, then you aim to live those values toward both yourself and others.
Part 3: Acting on your values - Exercise 7

Putting your values into action

If we do not take care of ourselves, then it will be hard for us to care for others!

This is important!

Time to put your values into action!

Pick an important relationship; choose someone you care about a lot, who you see on a regular basis. What values do you want to live by in this relationship?

For example, suppose you choose your child. And the values you want to act on are: to be kind, to be responsible.

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

Or suppose you choose a relative. And the values you want to act on are: to be grateful and to be friendly.

Then a small step might be to greet that person warmly and express your gratitude. Remember, even the tiniest actions matter.

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

If we do not take care of ourselves, then it will be hard for us to care for others!
A giant tree grows from a tiny seed. And even in the hardest or most stressful of times, you can take small actions to live by your values. When you act on your values, you will begin to create a more satisfying and fulfilling life.

So, create your action plan now. What will you do in the next week to act on your values?

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

Pick something that seems realistic to you. Do you believe you can do this?

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

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

Please make this action plan now, before reading further. It is important!
Part 3: Acting on your values

Any tiny action matters! Often, as soon as we start thinking about taking action, difficult thoughts and feelings may appear. They can easily hook us and stop us from following our action plan. If this happens, you know what to do! Notice and name them and engage with the world around you. You can go back to previous chapters for a refresher if needed!

Yes, we do! This is one of the benefits of living by your values.

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

Do this while you are still in bed, or while you are getting up.

And throughout the day, look for ways to act on those values.

Acting on your values is the third tool of your toolkit!

And every time you act on your values...

Acknowledge it to yourself.

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

I’m behaving like the sort of person I want to be.

A journey of 1,000 miles begins with one step!
1. Leave.  
2. Change what can be changed, accept the pain that cannot be changed, and live by your values.  
3. Give up and move away from your values.

But sometimes you cannot leave…

But I do not like to give up and move away from my values. They are important to me...

So then, option 2 is what is left.

Change what can be changed
Use your arms and legs and hands and feet and mouth to take action: to do whatever you can, no matter how small it might be, to improve the situation.

Accept the pain that cannot be changed…
Many difficult thoughts and feelings appear when you face difficult situations – especially if you cannot improve them! So, we unhook and ground ourselves.

And live by your values.
So, if there is nothing you can do to improve the situation… We find other ways to live by our values.

And now, it is time for some good news
There is something you can do that will improve any difficult situation, at least a little bit

This is what we will explore in the next section!
Part 4: Being kind
Part 4: Being kind

Building a caring environment

No matter how bad your situation...

Whether you are in danger or in a family argument or without income...

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

Someone who is kind and caring and helpful.

Someone who says kind things when you are in pain.

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

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

Even tiny little actions of kindness can make a difference.

This includes kind words.

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

I am here for you.

When you see someone in pain, suffering and struggling, what are small acts of kindness that you could do? Every small, kind action makes a difference.
Part 4: Being kind

Being kind to ourselves

And we should be kind to ourselves, too.

So, unhook from thoughts like...

Everyone needs a friend. Everyone needs kindness.

Remember: like all values, kindness goes both ways.

So speak to yourself kindly.

This is hard. This hurts. But I can still be caring to myself and others.

Yes! That is correct! There is one more really useful skill to learn to help with stress.

And if you are kind to yourself, you will have more energy to help others.

And more motivation to be kind to others.

So, everyone benefits.

My needs do not matter.

I do not deserve kindness.

My needs do matter.

Others self

And if you are kind to yourself, you will have more energy to help others.

And more motivation to be kind to others.

So, everyone benefits.

Yes! That is correct! There is one more really useful skill to learn to help with stress.

Before continuing with the final section, please remember to take at least a day or two to practise what we’ve covered in this section.
Part 5: Making room
As large as the sky...

On page 4 we looked at the common problems that happen when we struggle with our thoughts and feelings: trying to push them away, avoiding them, or getting rid of them.

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

There is another way to do this, called Making Room.

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

No matter how severe the weather, the sky has room for it!

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

Our thoughts and feelings are like the weather.

Yes! Always changing.

And sooner or later, the weather always changes.

And we can learn to be like the sky, and make room for the “bad weather” of our difficult thoughts and feelings without being hurt by it.
Part 5: Making room - Exercise 8

Making room

FIRST, SILENTLY, FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON A DIFFICULT THOUGHT OR FEELING.

NOTICE and NAME it, then observe it with curiosity.

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

And you are like the sky, making room for the weather.

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

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

Breathing out, emptying your lungs...

Breathing in slowly...

Imagine this any way you like.

Opening up and making room for it...

Allowing it to be there...

Breathing into and around your pain...

1 2 3

PAIN

DIFFICULT THOUGHT

PAINFUL FEELING
Part 5: Making room - Exercise 8

It often helps to imagine a painful feeling as an object. Like a heavy, cold, brown brick on my chest.

Imagine it has a size and a shape and a color and a temperature, and imagine breathing into and around this object - making room for it.

And it often helps to imagine a difficult thought as words or pictures on the pages of a book.

Please try this now:

Notice your difficult thought… … and imagine it as words and pictures on the pages of a book. … and imagine it gently resting on your lap,

… and engage with the world around you.

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

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

Part 5: Making room - Exercise 8

So, now you have another tool for your toolkit.

Especially if you are in bed and can’t sleep; you can combine making room with your breathing exercises:

You breathe into the difficult thoughts and feelings…

…and let the breath flow into and around them.

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

Notice its shape, size, and temperature, and notice with curiosity what happens.
Your pain might get bigger or smaller; it might stay or it might go.
Your aim is simply to make room for it; to allow it to be there; to stop fighting it and give it space.


And whenever you get hooked and pulled out of the exercise… notice and name… and refocus on breathing and making room.
Part 5: Making room - Exercise 8

Being kind to yourself and making room for your pain

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

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

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

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

You can use two hands, if you prefer.

Hold yourself kindly...

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

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

AND, OF COURSE, EVERY TIME YOU DO ANYTHING FROM THIS BOOK...

IT IS AN ACT OF KINDNESS TO OURSELVES AND TO OTHERS!
Try to practise and consider reading this book again to help you understand the ideas and skills even more.

Thank you for your time, and please share this book if you found it useful.
The Pan American Health Organization has developed this stress management guide to help people cope with adversity. The publication is an adaptation for the Caribbean of Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide, a World Health Organization publication to support implementation of its recommendations for stress management. This guide is for all who experience stress, ranging from parents and other caregivers to health professionals working in difficult situations. Informed by available evidence and extensive field testing, the guide provides information and practical skills to help cope with adversity. While the causes of adversity must be addressed, there is also a need to protect and support people’s mental health.

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