

# BOOSTING YOUR MENTAL WELLBEING

10 minute steps for **stressed**  
healthcare professionals  
using **CBT** and **mindfulness**



**Lee David and Debbie Brewin**

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using CBT and mindfulness**

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# Contents

Forewords	viii
About the authors	x
Introduction	xi

## **PART I   Understanding the GROWTH steps**

<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Follow your inner Guide</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	What do we mean by your inner Guide?	1
1.2	Finding your values	3
1.3	Living your values	8
1.4	Recognising your needs	9
1.5	Purpose and meaning	14
1.6	Personal qualities	17
1.7	Troubleshooting finding your inner Guide	18
	Chapter summary: using your Guide	19
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Ready for Action</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1	The importance of taking action	21
2.2	What is taking action?	22
2.3	From values to actions	25
2.4	Are you living according to your values?	28
2.5	Plans, goals and actions	30
2.6	What gets in the way?	34
2.7	Taking a Towards step	37
2.8	Planning for the long term	40
	Chapter summary: Ready for Action	42
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Open and Observe</b>	<b>43</b>
3.1	Open and Observe skills	43
3.2	Observe this moment: notice the 'NOW'	43
3.3	Finding flow	45
3.4	Flexible attention	46
3.5	Practising mindfulness	47
3.6	Practising your Open and Observe skills	48
3.7	Understanding our reactions	51
3.8	Stepping back and making space	57
3.9	Finding enjoyment and contentment	60
	Chapter summary: Open and Observe	62

<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Wise Mind</b>	<b>65</b>
4.1	What is Wise Mind?	65
4.2	We are not our thoughts	67
4.3	Thoughts and emotions	68
4.4	Negative thinking patterns	68
4.5	Let go of the struggle	72
4.6	'Defuse' from unhelpful thoughts	74
4.7	Wise choices	77
4.8	Support and encouragement	79
4.9	Repetitive and intrusive thoughts	80
	Chapter summary: Wise Mind	83
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Thrive and Balance</b>	<b>85</b>
5.1	The impact of stress	85
5.2	What is stress?	86
5.3	Factors influencing stress	87
5.4	Stress, pressure and performance	89
5.5	Coping with stress	90
5.6	Three circles model of emotions	92
5.7	The role of self-compassion	101
5.8	Developing self-compassion	104
5.9	Balancing the circles	107
	Chapter summary: Thrive and Balance	108
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Healthy Life Habits</b>	<b>111</b>
6.1	What are Healthy Life Habits?	111
6.2	What gets in the way?	111
6.3	Finding motivation to change	114
6.4	Physical activity	114
6.5	Healthy eating habits	118
6.6	Healthy sleep habits	121
6.7	Other unhealthy habits	124
6.8	Caring for physical health	126
6.9	Overcoming unhelpful life habits	128
6.10	GROWTH skills for healthy life habits	129
	Chapter summary: Healthy Life Habits	133
<b>PART II</b>	<b>Applying the GROWTH steps to common problems</b>	
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Personality traits and traps</b>	<b>135</b>
7.1	Personality traits: strengths and vulnerabilities	135
7.2	Unhealthy perfectionism	136
7.3	Imposter syndrome	145
7.4	The 'chronic hero': excessive responsibility and guilt	149
	Chapter summary: Personality traits and traps	155

<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Low mood</b>	<b>157</b>
8.1	Recognising low mood	157
8.2	When low mood becomes depression	158
8.3	What are the causes of low mood?	160
8.4	Different responses to the same situation	161
8.5	The route out of the swamp	165
8.6	Activity diary	170
8.7	Keeping it going	171
8.8	Managing negative thinking	171
	Chapter summary: Low mood	176
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Anxiety and uncertainty</b>	<b>179</b>
9.1	What is anxiety?	179
9.2	Are you struggling with anxiety?	180
9.3	Why do we have anxiety?	181
9.4	Anxiety is not dangerous!	183
9.5	Anxious mind visitors	185
9.6	Anxiety and Away actions	186
9.7	Uncertainty in primary care	187
9.8	GROWTH skills to cope with anxiety and uncertainty	192
	Chapter summary: Anxiety and uncertainty	201
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Connecting and communicating</b>	<b>203</b>
10.1	The importance of connection	203
10.2	Personality traits and relationships	204
10.3	Relationship circles	208
10.4	Strengthening important relationships	209
10.5	Expanding relationship circles	210
10.6	Social and performance stress	211
10.7	What gets in the way?	212
10.8	Communication and managing conflict	215
	Chapter summary: Connecting and communicating	222
<b>Chapter 11</b>	<b>Surviving significant events</b>	<b>225</b>
11.1	Coping in hard times	225
11.2	Experiences of trauma	227
11.3	Loss and grief	233
11.4	Moral distress and injury	242
	Chapter summary: Surviving significant events	243
<b>Chapter 12</b>	<b>Putting it all together</b>	<b>245</b>
12.1	Where are you now?	245
12.2	Recapping the GROWTH steps	246
12.3	Future forward plan	247
	Glossary of key terms	249
	References and further reading	257
	Support for health professionals	259

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# Forewords

Not many healthcare professionals will go into healthcare believing that it is going to be an easy ride or a low stress career. Although we are taught how to treat and care for patients and need to pass multiple assessments and exams in the process, what we are not taught is how to look after our own health and wellbeing in the course of providing care to others.

The publication of this book is timely because currently it is difficult for those working in healthcare not to feel despondent about the future, when phrases such as “the NHS is in crisis”, “record numbers of doctors retiring early”, “NHS staff on strike again”, and “I can’t see my GP” are being bandied about in the news and on social media.

At NHS Practitioner Health, we look after many healthcare professionals who suffer with mental health and addiction problems. We do not just want our colleagues to survive their careers in healthcare but to thrive, and where better to start than ensuring we learn how to safeguard our own mental health. Healthcare professionals are notorious for putting the needs of others before their own, and we know from our work with the profession how this can so often lead to tragedy when our own basic needs are continually left unmet.

We are delighted that Lee David and Debbie Brewin have brought together their knowledge and experience in this book, to provide healthcare professionals with tools to facilitate better mental wellbeing and self-care. We would urge readers to put these tools into practice because good self-care takes work. With repetition such self-care will eventually become part of your day-to-day life and will ultimately lead to a healthier, happier you and therefore healthier, happier patients.

*Dr Zaid Al-Najjar and Dr Helen Garr  
Medical Directors, NHS Practitioner Health*



This book could hardly have come at a better time. UK healthcare professionals across the spectrum are suffering. Suffering in so many different ways. Few thought that things could get worse as the Covid-19 pandemic receded, at least to an extent. But here we are in 2023 with a profession that many commentators have described as being 'on its knees'. Demand seems limitless, expectations unrealistic, and the workforce just doesn't have the capacity to offer satisfying consultations or healthcare experiences to all the patients seeking help for their health issues.

Debbie Brewin and Lee David bring a wealth of experience to this seemingly intractable problem – how do GPs look after themselves? GPs are unique in many ways. Their support is patchy at best. True, there are MDT meetings which play a role in providing patient care but also serve to support the healthcare professionals involved. Then there is the practice team, but with many of them direct employees of the GP partners, seeking help can involve challenging power structures within a practice. Unique among medical professionals, GPs spend long stretches of the day alone with their patients. This 'unsupervised practice' is not a feature of most secondary care provision. And it's a time when GPs can become isolated and lonely, carrying the seemingly impossible burdens of their patients with little direct help. Unlike therapists who can unburden during 'supervision sessions', this is rarely available to GPs and not funded as a structured support.

What this book does is to share a process which the authors call 'GROWTH' (read on). This goes much further than the unsatisfactory 'resilience training' and is underpinned by a strong background in CBT and ACT therapies. There is a clear message here about GPs needing to spend more time looking after themselves. Uniquely, this book provides a structure steeped in the theory of CBT and ACT on how overwhelmed GPs can regain control. And with this, can boost their mental wellbeing.

*Professor Mark Ashworth  
Professor of Primary Care, King's College London*

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## About the authors

**Lee David** is a GP who works as a clinician and CBT therapist for NHS Practitioner Health, supporting health professionals coping with mental health difficulties. She has an interest in ACT, compassion and trauma therapy, and in working with people with neurodiversity. She also has a role in primary care education and is the director of 10 Minute CBT, which provides training for primary care health professionals to use realistic and effective brief CBT skills within routine consultations.

**Debbie Brewin** is a CBT, trauma and occupational therapist. She has worked in the NHS, social care and voluntary sector as a therapist, supervisor, trainer and clinical manager. Her special interests include work rehabilitation, wellbeing and personal growth. Alongside training, she has written manuals for clinical trials and presented at healthcare conferences in the UK and Europe.

### Dedication

Lee and Debbie would like to dedicate this book to our NHS and to all the hard-working staff within it. We wish to thank them for their commitment and acknowledge the incredible care provided to patients throughout the service. We hope that this book provides a way to offer some care back to those professionals who may be in need of support in challenging times.

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# Introduction

- Do you feel motivated, enthusiastic and fulfilled at work, or are you feeling flat and aimless, counting down every second until it's time to go home?
- Can you remain calm and focused on the task at hand, or are you anxious, irritable or struggling to prioritise and maintain your energy?
- Do you stay resilient and reflective when things don't go to plan, or can you get overwhelmed or react defensively when facing challenges or feeling criticised?
- Would you benefit from finding ways to maximise your wellbeing and energy and promote personal **GROWTH**? Keep reading...

## Why read this book?

Primary care is one of the most challenging fields of healthcare. With 90% of patient consultations taking place in general practice, the pressure is intense. High levels of demand and complexity, a dense workload, long hours, and the emotional toll of the job leave clinicians vulnerable to distress and mental health challenges. These difficulties have been compounded by Covid as we cope with practical and political pressures through and beyond the pandemic.

**As a health professional you have high levels of knowledge and skills in supporting wellbeing in your patients, but how often do you apply this to your own physical and emotional needs?**

This book contains a practical toolkit for all clinicians, particularly those working in primary care. It includes a series of bite-sized skills to help you:

- Improve the balance between different parts of your life.
- Learn to make yourself a priority, take better care of yourself, and refuel before hitting 'empty'.
- Find ways to thrive and regain your enjoyment and enthusiasm for work and life.
- Make positive or helpful choices when struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings.
- Discover new strategies for dealing with stress, low mood and anxiety, and for coping with challenging situations such as complaints, change and unrealistic workload demands.

## Some case stories



**Kabir, Salaried GP:** *"I used to love the job, but now I just can't stand the thought of going into work. I dread it and I wake up on Monday mornings feeling sick at the thought of going into the surgery..."*

Kabir had always wanted to be a GP and previously found work enjoyable and satisfying. However, more recently he has found it increasingly difficult to motivate himself to get into work each day. He struggles with concentration and his energy levels are low. He feels exhausted and cannot find pleasure in things he used to enjoy. He has given up most of his usual leisure activities such as regular visits to the gym.



**Janet, Nurse Practitioner:** *"I have always been thorough and conscientious at work. Recently, I've been getting preoccupied and worried that I might miss something or make a terrible mistake at work. It's hard to think about anything else. Even when I'm with my family, I find myself thinking about work and whether I've done everything correctly..."*

Janet is having difficulty recovering after a recent complaint. No major harm came to the patient, and she was well supported by colleagues, but she found it extremely distressing, and has lost confidence in her abilities. Janet has recurrent intrusive worries that she might miss something or that another patient might complain about her, and how terrible this would be. She's also highly self-critical and feels inner shame and embarrassment about the mistake that occurred.

Janet used to enjoy working with her colleagues but has recently started to wonder if she really has what it takes to do the job. She takes great pains to hide all her possible shortcomings for fear she might be 'found out' and then rejected. This means she is working longer hours and is finding it increasingly difficult to keep the balance with her family life.

All the examples in this book are fictional but are based on our own experiences of the reality of working in primary care. We will come back to meet Kabir, Janet and many others, throughout the book, to find out how each individual coped with their difficulties.

## Stress and pressure in primary care

Many factors contribute to stress, burnout and mental health difficulties in primary care health professionals (Walker *et al.*, 2019). These include:

- Long hours and an intense workload, balancing time pressures with effective decision-making, patient safety, and maintaining relationships with patients and colleagues amidst the increasing complexity of patient care.
- Growing demands for access including telephone, email and face-to-face contact, alongside unrealistic patient expectations or hostile comments from politicians and the press.
- Adapting systems and practices to cope with frequent change and moving goalposts.
- The emotional toll of general practice which involves caring for people with psychosocial problems and emotional distress, and managing anxious, abusive and confrontational patients or colleagues.
- Fear of mistakes, complaints or litigation. Coping with a complaint places clinicians at a higher risk of burnout and mental health problems, with the level of distress increasing in relation to complaint severity (Bourne *et al.*, 2016).
- Experiencing professional isolation, fragmentation of practice teams or a lack of support.
- Difficulties with recruitment and understaffing.
- Dealing with regulatory demands and keeping up to date, including practice inspections, appraisals and revalidation.
- Moral distress and conflict with health professionals' personal values if we are unable to meet patient needs due to limitations in practice systems or the wider health service.

## Reluctance to seek help

Mental health problems are common in health professionals, yet there are often delays in seeking help and appropriate treatment. Continuing to work whilst suffering from a mental health difficulty is high among doctors, who tend to under-report illness and take one-third fewer sick days than other healthcare workers (Murphy, 2014).

There are many reasons why a clinician may be unwilling to seek help for mental health problems. We may fear that having a mental health problem will be perceived as a sign of incompetence or weakness, have concerns about lack of confidentiality, or have a strong sense of duty to our patients. Understaffing and a lack of cover can also make it harder to take time off when needed.

Effective care for mental health is essential for health professionals. If unrecognised, these may affect our concentration, productivity and decision-making. Clinicians who work whilst experiencing mental health difficulties are more likely to develop long-term problems, and it can also affect patient care, with an increased risk of medical errors and adverse patient outcomes (Kinman and Teoh, 2018).

Warning signs

We will talk in more detail throughout the book about how to recognise stress, burnout and mental health difficulties, but here are some pointers for possible problems in you or your colleagues:

Are you experiencing any of the following?	Have you noticed this?
Working more slowly or finding it harder to get through tasks than previously or compared to colleagues	
Finding it harder to make decisions or prioritise tasks	
Irritability with colleagues or patients	
Emotional outbursts or over-sensitivity to possible criticism or negativity from others	
Becoming rigid and inflexible, defensive, and finding it difficult to compromise or see the perspective of others	
Arriving early and leaving late, yet still struggling with workload, particularly if compared with colleagues	
Frequent lateness or unexplained absences during the working day	
Taking frequent sick leave	
Avoiding asking for help or support when it is needed, particularly in juniors or trainees	
Problems with exams, appraisal or revalidation procedures	
Feelings of uncertainty and disillusionment with medicine or primary care	

Responding to the challenges

Working in primary care can be stressful, yet can also be incredibly meaningful, rewarding and enjoyable. Health professionals are often busy and juggling multiple priorities, but if we take a little time to reflect, it may be possible to reconnect with some of the positive aspects of our role.

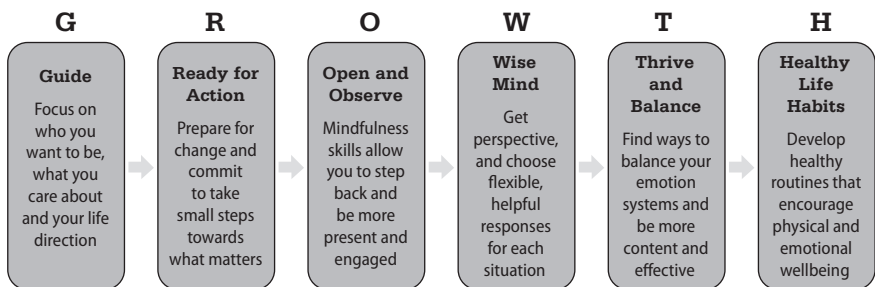
How we respond to all the challenges is likely to affect our mood and mental health. Exhausted clinicians may slip into negative spirals of unhelpful coping strategies such as over-working, having difficulty switching off, and not making time for rest, recuperation or other wellbeing activities.

In this book we will highlight some key skills that support individuals to thrive in their work and personal lives. Making time to prioritise choices that promote wellbeing is realistic and achievable, and making small changes in multiple life areas can have a surprisingly significant cumulative impact on mood. Alongside personal self-care strategies, it may also be important to work towards organisational and political changes that optimise working conditions and support clinician mental health.

## 10 minute steps to GROWTH



In the book, we will introduce you to six 10 minute steps leading to positive mental health, wellbeing and personal **GROWTH**. These are derived from theoretical backgrounds including cognitive behavioural therapy, behavioural activation, compassion-focused therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and mindfulness.

Here is a quick overview of the steps that we'll be looking at throughout this book:



These steps don't have to be followed in order – and some might be more relevant to you than others. You might also need to go back and forth between steps several times, especially with complex or stressful situations.

Throughout the book we will invite you to:

-  Take a closer look by reading and reflecting
-  Complete the exercises



Write down your thoughts



Set a realistic goal or a target



Take an action step

### ***Follow your inner guide***



This involves making decisions and choosing actions that have personal meaning, a wider purpose, and are important to you. Your **Guide** acts as an inner compass, which points in the direction of your most important values and helps you see the big picture and choose which direction to take. You might ask yourself questions like: Who and what do I care about most? What kind of person do I want to be? What do I want to stand for – in my professional and my personal life?

### ***Ready for action***



Being **Ready for Action** is a behavioural skill which involves making active choices about what we do and how we react to the changing circumstances and situations of our lives. It's often helpful to focus on taking small steps in the direction of our values, or important life goals. At times, these decisions may be clear, and the choices may be obvious, but when facing uncertainty, we may need to be flexible and experiment with different strategies, taking notice of what happens and learning from experience to guide us forwards.

### ***Open and observe***



We will introduce some brief mindfulness skills that we can bring into our busy lives, helping to improve our awareness and self-understanding, manage challenging emotions, and find ways to appreciate the moment. Learning to **Open and Observe** might involve taking a moment to check in with yourself, notice your thoughts, feelings and urges. You can then step back to make room for uncomfortable thoughts and feelings without getting caught up or dominated by them. This creates a space in which we can choose which actions are likely to be helpful in the context of our life and the specific situation.

### ***Engage your wise mind***



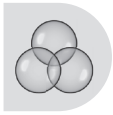
Our mind is our inner voice and includes our thoughts, beliefs, ideas, expectations, memories and personal stories. It enables us to make complex decisions and plans and can be an incredibly powerful and useful tool. But at



other times, our mind can be critical and unhelpful, producing thoughts which are self-limiting, and which affect our feelings and actions in negative ways.

Using **Wise Mind** may involve taking a short pause to expand your perspective and reflect on how to approach challenging circumstances. You may need to step back and 'unhook' from unhelpful, critical or negative thinking patterns that may be keeping you stuck, draining your confidence, and making it harder to perform effectively. Instead, you can learn to recognise helpful thoughts that direct you towards your values and allow these to guide your actions and choices.

### ***Thrive and balance***



In this chapter we will explore some of the triggers for stress, and how the 'three circles model' provides a simple way to understand how our brain, nervous system and emotions interact and influence how we function as a whole. In **Thrive and Balance** we will explore ways to thrive emotionally and achieve optimal performance and wellbeing, by finding a balance between the systems:

- **Threat** emotions alert us to potential danger and urge us to take action to stay safe. Overuse of the threat system can lead to anxiety, stress and irritability, as we live with an exaggerated sense of danger and risk.
- **Drive** emotions act to energise and excite us, helping us pay attention to opportunities and achieve goals. Overuse of the drive system can lead to excessive striving, exhaustion and addiction. If the drive system becomes linked with the threat system, it can also lead to self-criticism and fear of failure.
- **Calm and connect system** helps us experience feelings of contentment, safety and self-compassion. This system is sensitive to closeness and bonding with others and helps us recover when facing problems or when things go wrong.

### ***Healthy life habits***



Building **Healthy Life Habits** involves finding ways to maximise our physical and emotional wellbeing. This involves making choices about our daily routines and patterns of living that support this, including being physically active, eating well, maintaining a healthy body weight, getting enough sleep, cutting back on unhealthy choices such as limiting alcohol or technology habits, and taking care of long-term conditions and physical illness.

## **How to use this book**

Part I of this book includes exercises and activities to help you practise and learn more about each of the 10 minute **GROWTH** steps. It is helpful to read through these chapters in order before moving onto the second part of the book.

Part II focuses on applying the steps to some of the common difficulties that we may experience in primary care. These can be read in any order – start with the chapters that seem most relevant to you! Some of the important topics we will cover in this section include:

- Personality traits and traps such as perfectionism, imposter syndrome and being a ‘chronic hero’ that can make us more prone to mental health challenges
- Overcoming low mood, low motivation and burnout, if you are trying to ‘drink from an empty cup’
- Coping with anxiety, uncertainty and worry, perhaps if you are training, taking exams or feeling overwhelmed with constant change
- Managing change and loss, developing flexibility in relation to life’s inevitable changes and supporting the process of grief and acceptance
- Strengthening important relationships, setting boundaries and navigating tricky encounters with others
- Surviving significant life events: coping with loss, trauma and when things go wrong, such as complaints and errors at work.

## Back to the case stories

Let’s go back to the two individuals that we met at the beginning of this chapter and think how they might use the 10 minute **GROWTH** steps to work on their wellbeing.



**Kabir, Salaried GP:** *“I used to love the job, but I had got to the point where I just couldn’t stand the thought of going into work. I would dread it and used to wake up on Monday mornings feeling sick at the thought of going into the surgery...”*

### Applying the 10 minute GROWTH steps:

- **Guide** – Kabir might start by turning to his inner **Guide** to help him focus on his personal values and reconnect with his motivation for working.
- **Ready for Action** – he might then get **Ready for Action**, setting himself some small, realistic goals that move him towards valued life areas, which may help to lift his mood and sense of achievement. He might focus on getting back to the gym or something easier to achieve such as a regular walk with friends or family, so that he feels connected and supported and regains some motivation.

- **Open and Observe** – Kabir could also learn to use **Open and Observe** skills to step back from difficult emotions.
- **Wise Mind** – he could also engage his **Wise Mind** to seek a wider perspective.
- **Thrive and Balance** – his **Wise Mind** could help him to make choices that allow him to **Thrive** by creating more **Balance** between his emotion systems.
- **Healthy Life Habits** – Kabir might also reflect on whether any personality traits may be slipping into unhelpful traps, which prevent him from creating sustainable **Healthy Life Habits**. He may benefit from turning to *Chapter 8* to understand more about how to overcome negative cycles of behaviour and emotion in low mood and depression.



**Janet, Nurse Practitioner:** *"I've always been conscientious and thorough in my work but lately I've been getting overwhelmed by worries that I might miss something or make a terrible mistake. Even when I'm with my family, I find myself thinking about work and whether I've done everything correctly..."*

#### **Applying the 10 minute GROWTH steps:**

- **Guide** – Janet might need to remind herself about her personal values and connect with her inner **Guide** which may prioritise reconnecting with her family, and not allowing worry about work to get in the way of personal relationships.
- **Ready for Action** – she could choose to take small actions that are in line with her core values.
- **Open and Observe** – she could also use **Open and Observe** skills to help manage her worry and distress, and to ground her in the present moment, so she is able to pay more attention and focus on enjoying time with her family.
- **Wise Mind** – using this will help her step back and gain perspective on the mistake, and she may also benefit from developing her sense of self-compassion to counter the distress and shame that often arises when things have gone wrong.
- **Thrive and Balance** – Janet may find it helpful to think about ways to create balance in her life, and step out of cycles of rumination and worry, helping to reduce her sense of stress and overwhelm at work.

- **Healthy Life Habits** – reflecting on her individual personality traits may also help encourage sustainable **Healthy Life Habits** and minimise any personality traps that are keeping her stuck. She might also wish to look at *Chapter 11* which explores ways of coping after significant life events, setbacks and challenges.

## Don't just read this book – try it out!

We learn new skills by actively testing out new ideas, then noticing what happened, adjusting and repeating. So, we would encourage you to try out these skills and experiment to find out how you might bring any new ideas into your life. Then repeat the steps until you have developed a new, healthy habit.

### *Little and often*

It often helps to find a little bit of space on a regular basis to focus on yourself and what you need to live and work optimally. Spending a short time regularly reading and practising the techniques in this book is likely to have the greatest benefit. You will be surprised at what you can achieve in just 10 minutes!

### *Keep a record*

It's easier to remember what you have learnt when you write it down. You can use this book, a journal, a computer or your phone to keep track of your thoughts and reflections, and any important insights or helpful tips. This will also help you to notice whether your feelings change as you progress through the book.



### **EXERCISE: What brings you here?**

What made you pick up this book and start reading? What is your 'story'? Life often does not run smoothly, and many of us are facing multiple different challenges and difficulties. Getting it down on paper, or on the computer – anywhere but inside your head – can be a cathartic process that helps make sense of what you are dealing with.



### **Make a note of your thoughts**

What problems are you coping with at the moment? What are your major challenges?

What would you most like to change or improve in your life? What would make you feel more enthusiastic, empowered, energetic or excited to go to work? Does this seem realistic or like an impossible dream?

How will you know if things are improving? What would you or other people notice? What might be the first thing to tackle?

What would you be doing differently if you felt better about your life or your work? What actions would you take?

### Seek help if you need it

Do seek support if you are struggling. Help is available and can make a huge difference to enable you to overcome emotional challenges and difficulties with your mental health.

There are many different options. You might talk to a friend, a colleague, to a family member or your own GP. There are also a variety of support organisations that you can turn to, and we have included links to some key sources of help in the resources section of the book.

It's essential for us as clinicians and health professionals to be willing to stand up for ourselves and access the support and treatment that can enable us to thrive in our personal and working lives.

### Summary

This introduction covered the concepts behind the **GROWTH** steps to wellbeing in primary care:

- **Guide** – know who you want to be, what you care about and your life direction
- **Ready for Action** – prepare for change and take small steps towards what matters
- **Open and Observe** – learn to be present, aware, and able to step back and make space for difficult thoughts and emotions without being overwhelmed
- **Wise Mind** – gain perspective, choose helpful responses and do what works best in the circumstances
- **Thrive and Balance** – use the three circles model to balance your emotion systems and be more content and effective
- **Healthy Life Habits** – develop healthy routines that encourage physical and emotional wellbeing.



### Final thoughts

What did you find most helpful, interesting or surprising in this chapter?



### Set a target

In the end it's not what you read or watch or listen to, it's what you put into action that counts. What would you most like to get out of this book?

Can you commit to reading this book and spending time on yourself for 10 minutes each day? Anything else?



### Take an action step

What are your next steps? How can you bring this into your daily life in a small way?

Writing it down will help you remember. It will also help you to commit to doing something differently.

What I am going to do now:

---

## 02 Ready for Action

- Are you prepared, proactive and meeting your personal and professional goals, or are you overwhelmed and often procrastinating over decisions or plans?
- Do you feel in control of your daily actions and routines, or are you floundering under an ever-growing list of tasks and daily responsibilities?
- Do you worry about whether you will achieve things to a high enough standard, so you push yourself relentlessly or avoid doing it altogether?
- Do you want to find the motivation to achieve what matters most whilst acknowledging your own needs and interests? Keep reading ...

### 2.1 The importance of taking action



Taking action involves doing what matters, even when facing stress, difficulties, emotional changes and challenging events. It's often easier to change our actions than our attitudes or emotions. Trying out new ways of behaving, or consciously reacting to things differently, can create an opportunity for positive change.

Taking action involves making choices and balancing how much time and energy we put into different types of activity. In *Chapter 1*, we met our inner **Guide**, becoming motivated by what we value and care about, and recognising our important needs. The next step is to get **Ready for Action** and find concrete ways to live out these values. This involves:

- Doing things because they are important or meaningful, even if we also experience negative thoughts, difficult feelings or lack of motivation
- Being willing to try something new rather than staying stuck in old habits or patterns of behaviour
- Planning realistic changes which help us move towards our values in tiny achievable steps.





**Misha, newly qualified GP:** *"I'm spending all my time at work and as it's so busy, I can't seem to fit anything else in. My team are great – but I keep thinking that I'm not doing as well as everyone else and worrying that I'm letting myself down. I'm constantly stressed and anxious and I can't remember when I last enjoyed being at work. I keep trying to remind myself why I went through my training and all the effort it took to get here, but every morning I just want to hide under the duvet and stay at home. I'd love to get back to feeling more positive and motivated."*

Misha qualified as a GP about 6 months ago and has found the transition from being a GP Registrar very hard. She feels anxious and overwhelmed at work, despite having a supportive team around her. Misha is starting to feel quite low and demoralised, and her concentration and efficiency at work are starting to suffer. Recently she became very tearful after a long and busy day as duty doctor and is starting to wonder whether she would be better off giving up working as a GP altogether.

Misha may benefit from engaging with her inner **Guide** to help her start to plan some simple Towards actions that keep moving her towards her values and also meet some of her important needs. As we progress through this chapter, we will explore how she might go about this.

## 2.2 What is taking action?

Actions are how we can influence the world around us through our behaviour. When we carry out actions that are congruent with and support our values, we are more likely to feel fulfilled and that life has meaning and purpose.

So, if your value is teamwork, you might take action by ensuring that you make time in your week to have meaningful discussions with colleagues. Alternatively, if you value connection with your family, you might ensure that you make space for family time at weekends and have a meal together in the evening without distractions. Taking action does not have to be a major life change but may involve making small tweaks to your routine which change the quality of your activities and interactions and bring you closer to your values.

Actions can also have an impact on your mood and stress levels. Spending time with a close friend may lift your mood and make you feel upbeat and positive. Alternatively, avoiding social interaction can make you feel isolated, low and more prone to worry.

External and internal actions

External actions take place in the physical world and can be observed by other people, such as what we do or say. As you arrive at work each day, you may carry out many actions including turning on your computer, making yourself a coffee or chatting to a colleague. We can also consider *not* doing something as a type of action. Not doing something could be helpful, or it could involve procrastination – putting off important tasks and instead getting stuck in social media or watching TV.

There are also *internal* actions, which take place within our mind and cannot necessarily be seen by other people. These usually involve thinking about something repeatedly, such as getting caught up in worries, doubt, mentally planning for the future, or repetitive self-critical thoughts and recriminations.

Other people may not be able to observe the thoughts that arise during internal actions, but their impact can often be seen in the outer world. When you are actively listening to and interacting with a colleague, it is usually obvious that you are present and engaged in the conversation. But if you are caught up in worries about what you are going to do with your next patient, you may appear preoccupied or distant, stare into space, hesitate when answering, or you may even seem uninterested in what your colleague is saying.

We will look in more detail at how to cope with intrusive thoughts and worry in future chapters. For now, we will focus on making active choices about our visible, external actions. And, as we focus on taking steps towards what matters most to us, *in spite* of what is going on internally, this can also help to manage mental preoccupation.



PAUSE AND REFLECT: Bring a memory to mind

Take a moment to think about a recent time in which you felt a sense of pleasure or enjoyment, or that life was fulfilling and meaningful. It often helps to pick something small or simple, such as sharing a joke or a drink with friends or colleagues, a time on holiday when you saw a wonderful view, or a moment when you felt fully engaged in an activity such as playing sport. Try to bring this memory to mind in detail, using all your senses. Now answer the following questions about the memory that you have chosen:

Where are you? Take a moment to notice your surroundings including the colours, sounds, smells and sensations	
What are you doing? Describe your actions in detail	

<b>How engaged or present are you in this activity?</b> Are you giving it your full attention or is your mind elsewhere?	
<b>What emotions can you notice?</b> Are there feelings such as joy, happiness or contentment? Do any other feelings arise, such as sadness, regret or sorrow, as you focus on this memory?	
<b>How are you treating yourself, others and the world around you?</b> What personal qualities are you demonstrating?	
<b>What can you learn from this?</b> What actions, behaviours or personal qualities would you like to bring to your daily life?	



Here are the responses from Misha, the newly qualified GP who is feeling overwhelmed at work:

<b>Where are you?</b> Take a moment to notice your surroundings including the colours, sounds, smells, and sensations	I'm lying on a sunbed on holiday in Portugal. I can see the blue pool next to me, and it's a lovely sunny day. It's very peaceful and there are beautiful purple flowers around the pool. I can see my partner next to me.
<b>What are you doing?</b> Describe your actions in detail	I'm reading my book and have just looked up to take in the view.
<b>How engaged or present are you in this activity?</b> Are you giving it your full attention or is your mind elsewhere?	I feel really engaged in this moment. I'm not thinking about work at all! I am just enjoying my book and the surroundings.
<b>What emotions can you notice?</b> Are there feelings such as joy, happiness or contentment? Do any other feelings arise, such as sadness, regret or sorrow, as you focus on this memory?	At the time I felt really happy, content and peaceful. Now I'm looking back, I can remember those feelings, and I also feel sad that life is so difficult at the moment.

<p><b>How are you treating yourself, others and the world around you?</b> What personal qualities are you demonstrating?</p>	<p>I'm being very open and friendly to my partner and to everyone around me. I'm also treating myself with kindness and giving myself permission to relax and enjoy the holiday.</p>
<p><b>What can you learn from this?</b> What actions, behaviours or personal qualities would you like to bring to your daily life?</p>	<p>I'd like to bring more relaxation and enjoyment into my life at the moment. This was such a lovely moment – it feels really far away from how I'm living right now.</p>

## 2.3 From values to actions



Our values are like the roots of a tree. They provide the support, strength, stability and nourishment that enable the tree to grow strong and healthy. The earth and the ground that the roots sit in will also affect the growth of the tree. This is our environment, our background, and the life events that all affect our attitudes and beliefs.

From our values come our goals and plans for the future. These are the branches of the tree stretching upwards and outwards in many different directions. They might include smaller twigs, such as plans for the next day or week, as well as larger branches which represent long-term plans for the next months or even years.

Finally, we have individual tiny actions that create the overall shape and beauty of the tree. These are the hundreds or even thousands of leaves, which all together provide the tree with energy to develop and grow. Your values, goals and actions work together to enable you to thrive, influenced by your background and environment.

### ***Actions and habits***

Our choices of actions often follow repeated patterns or habits. Habitual behaviours may feel comfortable and familiar – like a well-worn pair of slippers that are past their best but are difficult to part with. Although you may know that the actions you sometimes take are not in your best interests, you might get stuck in the habit of working long hours or at weekends to keep up, skipping breaks, or disconnecting from colleagues. You continue these habitual actions because they have become your way of coping, even though they may be unhelpful and clash with other important values and needs, such as self-care and being a nurturing parent or supportive friend.

The good news is that we don't have to stick with old habits if they are no longer working. We can choose our actions and we can use this to take control of the direction of our lives.

The first step is to take some time to pay attention and notice your habitual actions. Ask yourself whether a particular activity or habit is adding something positive to your life – is it enjoyable, important or uplifting in some way? Or is it acting as a 'life-drain' – sucking up your time and making you feel more negative, low, or lacking in energy or confidence?

### Life-boosting actions:



- Are enjoyable and uplifting
- Are important or meaningful
- Offer a sense of achievement or satisfaction

### Life-draining actions:



- Lower your mood or energy
- Don't add value to your life
- Involve avoiding or putting off things that are important



### PAUSE AND REFLECT: Noticing your daily actions

Think about the past week and what you did on a typical working day and another day when you had free time. Make a list of what you did on each day and include as many actions as you can. Try to include small things, such as taking a shower or making a drink, as well as longer activities, such as meeting with colleagues, going out to meet a friend for dinner or doing household chores.

How long did each action or activity last for? Then decide, on balance, whether it was life-boosting or life-draining. The aim is to discover any actions, however seemingly insignificant, like greeting the shopkeeper or stopping mid-morning for a cup of tea, which made a difference to your day.

A working day: make a list of actions during the day	How long did you do it for?	Was it life-boosting (B) or life-draining (D)?

A day with free time: make a list of actions during the day	How long did you do it for?	Was it life-boosting (B) or life-draining (D)?



### PAUSE AND REFLECT: Noticing your actions

Now go back to the list of activities and actions that you spend your time on. Ask yourself:

- **Is this a TOWARDS action** that moves you in the direction of your values and needs and following your inner **Guide**? Underline or highlight all the Towards actions and things you are doing which are a good 'fit' with who you want to be.
- **Where are the clashes?** What are you doing that creates conflict with your values or needs, or causes you concern or distress? Underline or highlight some of the **AWAY actions** in a different colour.
- **Notice the differences:** Are there any actions which had a variable quality to them that made them life-draining or life-boosting on different occasions? What made the difference? Was it *how* you completed the action, your *attitude* towards it or the *amount of time* you spent on it?



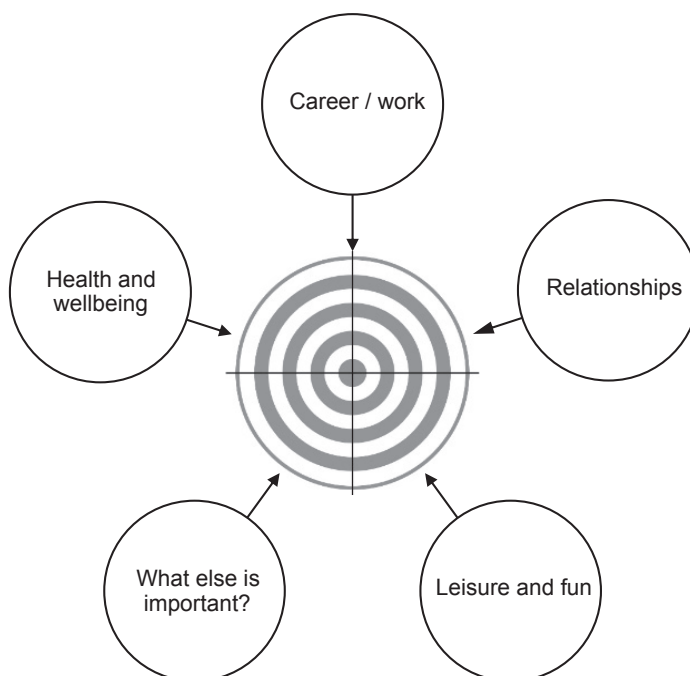
Write what you have discovered from this exercise here:

## 2.4 Are you living according to your values?

Most health professionals are highly skilled at setting goals, meeting targets, and planning how to cope with possible difficulties. But it may also be important to set aside the space and time to actively apply what you already know in your daily life. It's also important to avoid being rigid and ensure that your plans and goals remain balanced, flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.

You can start by making small changes to bring your life more in line with your values. What would life look like if you were meeting your important needs and living according to your values? What limits you or gets in the way of this?

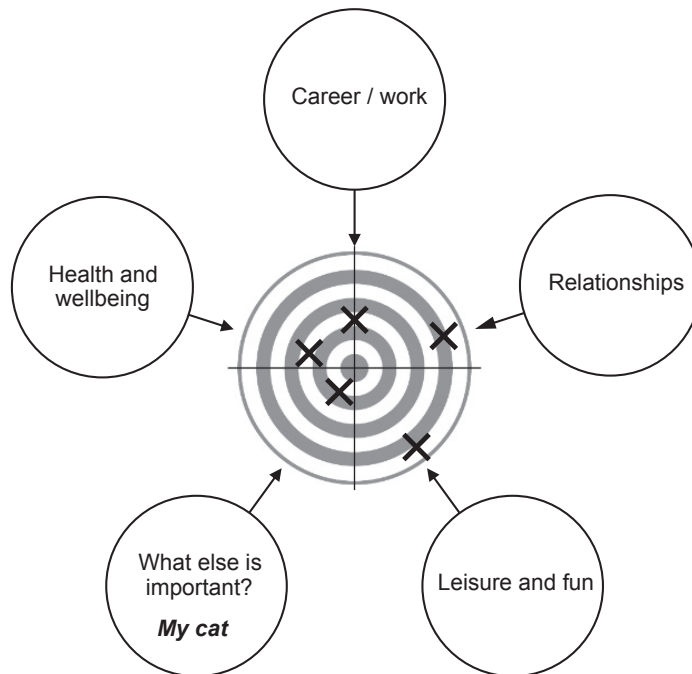
Take a look at the following diagram and think about how close you are to 'hitting the target' in different areas of your life. We have suggested some life areas that are important to many people, and you can add any other important areas, such as spirituality, or specific relationships, such as being a parent.





We asked Misha, the newly qualified GP who is feeling overwhelmed by her work, to complete this exercise. Here is her 'target' diagram:

*"This was an interesting exercise to carry out. I'm not really 'hitting the bullseye' in any of my life areas at the moment, but some are further out than others. Work is probably the closest in, as I'm going every day and putting in a lot of effort, but I'm not enjoying myself. Relationships are much further out – I keep arguing with my partner as I'm irritable when I get home, and I hardly have time to see my friends or family! I'm not unhealthy – I eat fairly well and look after myself – but I don't get round to exercise at the moment. For leisure, I mainly watch TV or play on my phone, but often I'm not paying attention and not really enjoying myself. What else is important? I love my cat and he is really well looked after!"*





## 2.5 Plans, goals and actions

The next step is to start making plans, setting goals and scheduling specific actions:

- **Plans** involve deciding what is most important in the long term.
- **Goals** involve thinking about what we would like to achieve in the short or medium term.
- **Actions** are small, specific, concrete and immediate steps towards a goal or a long-term plan.



### Micro-actions

Micro-actions are tiny actions that only take a short time to complete, ideally between 2 and 10 minutes. Most of us are incredibly busy, with many tasks that are non-flexible, and may have little room for making major changes in our activity patterns.

Carrying out a micro-action is unlikely to completely resolve a major life problem, but it is a step in the right direction. It also helps us to become less rigid or stuck in negative habits of thinking and behaviour, increasing our psychological and behavioural flexibility.



### TAKE ACTION

Take a few minutes to complete the following table. Can you commit to at least one micro-action that you are confident you can complete within the next few days?

Pick a value or a life domain that is important to you	List some activities that relate to this value	Pick one activity and break it into smaller steps. Can you plan a micro-action?

Here is Misha's completed chart:

Pick a value or a life domain that is important to you	List some activities that relate to this value	Pick one activity and break it into smaller steps. Can you plan a micro-action?
Relaxation and enjoyment	Playing my flute Reading Relaxing more at home	Spend 10 minutes looking for local music groups Ask my friend to recommend an enjoyable book Have a bubble bath or paint my toenails
Relationships – partner and friends	Spend quality time with my partner Make time to see my friends and family	Book a trip to the cinema for next weekend with my partner Print one of my wedding photos to take to work Send a text to my friend Daniella Phone my sister
Physical activity	Try to regularly do some physical activity to wind down and destress	Go for a short walk at lunchtime to stretch my legs and get out of the surgery Ask my neighbour to go for a walk at the weekend Look for times of Zumba classes at the leisure centre

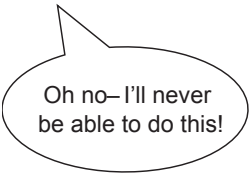
### ***Let's get specific...***

Now pick one to three activities from the list above. It's helpful to write them down, which gives an increased sense of commitment that can help you get them done. For each action, ask yourself:

- What am I going to do?
- Why is this important? What value or need is it linked to?
- Where and when will I do it?
- Who will I do it with?
- How often will I do it, and how long will I do it for?

Finish by asking yourself: How confident am I? How likely is it that I will do this (on a scale of 1–10)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----



Aim for a confidence or likelihood level of **8, 9 or 10** that you will carry out this action. If your score is lower, you may need to make your planned action more achievable or realistic. Think: What would make this easier to carry out? Can I make it into a smaller step? Can I ask someone for help or support?

For each action complete the following table:

What am I going to do?	
Why is this important? What value or need is it linked to?	
Where and when will I do it?	
Who will I do it with?	
How often will I do it? How long will I do it for?	
How likely is it that I will do this (1–10)? Aim for a score of 8, 9 or 10!	
What might get in the way of doing this? How could I make it easier to carry out? Can I make it smaller or shorter, or ask for support?	

Here is Misha's completed chart:

What am I going to do?	I will go for a walk at lunchtime when I'm at work
Why is this important? What value or need is it linked to?	I really need to get a break and get outside during the working day. This will help me to recharge and might make me more efficient in the afternoon
Where and when will I do it?	I will go after I finish my morning surgery and tasks
Who will I do it with?	I could ask one of my colleagues to come with me so we can have a chat and a catch-up
How often will I do it? How long will I do it for?	I will aim to do this at least twice a week for 10 minutes
How likely is it that I will do this (1–10)? Aim for a score of 8, 9 or 10!	Around 6 or 7/10
What might get in the way of doing this? How could I make it easier to carry out? Can I make it smaller or shorter, or ask for support?	I might be busy and forget or feel too tired to go. I might have so much work to get through that I stay in front of my computer through lunchtime To make it easier, I will plan a shorter time, just 5 minutes. I will remind myself that this is important and might help me concentrate on work afterwards

### ***Notice what happened***

After trying any new action, it's helpful to take a few minutes to think about what happened. Ask yourself:

What had I planned to do? What did I try?	
Was this action linked to any of my important values?	
What were the short-term effects of doing this?	
What might be the long-term effects?	
What can I learn from this?	
How can I build on this? What will I try next (different or the same)?	

If the action didn't quite go according to plan, there are some other helpful questions:

What got in the way? e.g.: I ran out of time, I forgot, it was too difficult or something else important came up...	
Is this still important? If not, what else could I try?	
What could make it easier next time? Do I need to break it into smaller steps or change my expectations in some way?	
How can I remind myself to do it?	

Here's what happened when Misha tried her action out:



*"I had planned to go for a walk for 10 minutes at least twice a week at lunchtime. I only went once but I walked for 15 minutes which was longer than I planned. Taking time out of the day probably made me more productive and I enjoyed it as well. It linked to the value of taking care of myself and made me more relaxed. It's worth the effort! On one of the days, I had an unexpected extra patient, so it was harder to get away, but I will try to go on both days that I planned to next week. I think it is very important and not too difficult for me to fit in. I could aim to go for a shorter time – perhaps just 5 minutes walking around the car park would make a difference. I will set an alarm on my phone to remind me to go."*

2.6 What gets in the way?

Even though we may have the best intentions, it can sometimes be hard to carry out actions that take us towards our values. When faced with challenging situations, we may get caught up in distressing thoughts, emotions and body sensations and experience a strong urge to try to reduce this discomfort. However, this often leads to choosing 'Away actions' which move us away from our values and the direction our inner **Guide** is pointing.



Away actions usually involve trying to reduce difficult feelings or distress. However, in the long term, these often move us away from the people and things that matter most. **Towards actions** are in line with our values and fit with who we want to be, and usually lead to a greater sense of satisfaction, enjoyment and control over life.



**Abdul, Practice Pharmacist:**

Abdul wants to do more exercise to improve his fitness and lose weight, but he finds it hard to motivate himself after work. He spends most evenings slumped in his chair dozing or watching TV. Being sedentary in front of the TV is an Away action which moves him away from his values of physical activity, health and self-care. But he makes this choice because of his feelings of fatigue, and negative thoughts saying, “I’ll just look ridiculous and weak if I go to the gym, I haven’t been for years, and I won’t be as fit as all the other guys.”

**Bernice, Practice Nurse:**

Bernice has been a nurse for many years and would really like to develop some new skills and apply to train as a nurse practitioner. But she feels so anxious about submitting her application that she procrastinates and misses the deadline. This is also an Away action, driven by feelings of anxiety and fear, and negative thoughts about being “found out” and “not being up to the job”. These have got in the way of moving towards her values of self-development and career satisfaction.



**Action spoilers**

Action spoilers are examples of some common types of Away actions. These may involve physical sensations, emotions, thoughts or actions. Take a look at the list below. Do you recognise any action spoilers that frequently get in the way of achieving important goals?

Action spoiler: common types of Away actions		Do you recognise this?	What do you notice? How does it affect you?
Emotions	Negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, guilt or shame		

Physical sensations	Body sensations such as fatigue, lethargy, heaviness, pain and tightness		
Thoughts and beliefs	Negative thoughts and predictions about what might go wrong		
	Underestimating or doubting your ability or performance		
	Being too demanding, with excessively high expectations and unrealistic goals		
	Focusing on short-term discomfort and ignoring the long-term benefits of change		
	Criticising or judging your own performance		
Behaviour	Delay tactics, procrastination or avoidance		
	Waiting until you feel like doing something before getting started		
	Not asking for help or taking on too much responsibility		
	Trying to complete too much at once or underestimating the time required		
	Not being assertive or expressing your own opinion or needs to others		
	Spending time with people or in places that make it harder to stick to your goals		
	Avoiding new challenges and staying in your comfort zone		



Think of one or more times that you wanted to do something but didn't get round to doing it. What got in the way? What examples of action spoilers and Away actions can you notice in yourself?

## 2.7 Take a Towards step



To achieve our important goals, we may sometimes need to take a Towards action even when this might involve some discomfort, or when various action spoilers pop up and try to get in the way. Before we deliver a presentation to a large audience, perhaps we can accept that we may feel a little nervous beforehand. Or we might choose to study for an important exam, even when tempted to go out for drinks with friends.

We can carry out a Towards action which moves us towards something important, even in the presence of uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. This may not be easy! We will learn more skills in how to do this as we progress through the book.

Think back to the action spoilers that you identified in the previous exercise, which have got in the way and stopped you from doing something that you wanted to achieve. Can you plan a micro-action, that moves you towards one of your values?

To make this action step small and achievable, you may need to let go of unrealistic goals and focus on making progress in the direction of a long-term plan rather than making the whole step in one leap. You may also need to seek support or help from others and be flexible in how you approach your goals.



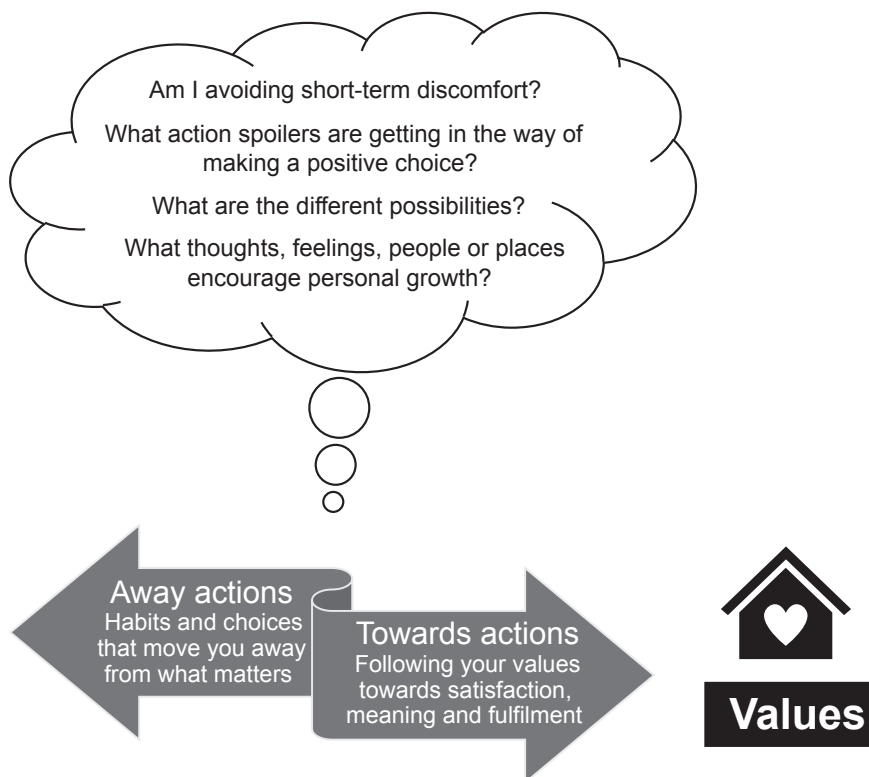
Try to plan two or three Towards action steps that might help you move past your action spoilers. Can you commit to trying these in the near future?



### ***Stepping outside your comfort zone***

Being **Ready for Action** also involves stepping outside our comfort zone as we explore new ways of living and discover how different actions can bring our values to life. This involves accepting uncertainty – we need to be willing to try something different, even when we are not sure exactly what will happen. This can be uncomfortable at first, because old habits often feel safe and secure, even if they are not very healthy or positive. But like all great adventures, it can also lead you in all kinds of new and exciting directions.

It can be helpful to pause and reflect when you notice this discomfort:



## Ready to take action: myths and facts

Myth	Fact	Towards action
I have to be motivated and in the right mood before I can get started	We can generate motivation by trying something and gradually build momentum from the positive feedback of getting started.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Behave as if you feel more motivated or enthusiastic and the feeling will catch up</li> <li>✓ Take one small step to get started</li> <li>✓ Experiment and see what happens</li> </ul>
I'm too tired or lethargic to start. I need to rest and save my energy	You can often energise yourself through gradually increasing activity levels. Over time, your physical and mental energy will grow as you become stronger and fitter.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Break the task into smaller steps</li> <li>✓ Start low, go slow, and build up gradually</li> <li>✓ Allow feelings of energy and achievement to slowly catch up</li> </ul>
There isn't enough time to get the important things done	Prioritise and make sure that you get through the most important tasks first. You might also need to set boundaries around your time, especially for work tasks which may feel never-ending.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Think: what is essential to achieve today?</li> <li>✓ Do priority tasks first, even if they are the least enjoyable</li> <li>✓ Be realistic: plan small, achievable actions rather than attempting too much</li> <li>✓ Stop before you are exhausted or hit 'empty'</li> </ul>
I find it hard to get started with tasks that I don't enjoy or find difficult, even if they are important	Some important tasks are not very enjoyable, such as completing a tax return or preparing for an appraisal. You may need to take a breath, choose to accept some short-term discomfort, and take a micro-step to get started.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Think about your values: is it important for you or someone you care about?</li> <li>✓ What are the negative consequences of avoiding the task?</li> <li>✓ Visualise how satisfied you will feel when it's completed</li> <li>✓ Enlist help: share the load or find a task buddy or supporter</li> <li>✓ Plan a micro-action: I will do 10 minutes preparation and then take a break</li> </ul>
The things I want are impossible; there's no point even trying to achieve them	If something's important it may be worth putting in some extra effort. Or do you need to adjust your goals and make them more achievable? Just take a tiny step – don't expect a giant leap!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Adjust your goals if necessary</li> <li>✓ Up-skill yourself or ask for help</li> <li>✓ Get prepared – have the right tools and equipment ready</li> <li>✓ Keep practising and acknowledge your efforts</li> </ul>



### PAUSE AND REFLECT: Actions – myths and facts

Have any of the above 'myths' stopped you from trying something?

Which of the Towards action remedies can you try?

## 2.8 Planning for the long term



Now it's time to dream a little and make some long-term plans, knowing that they are flexible and can be adapted to changing circumstances in the future:

Imagine you are sailing towards your dream destination. You are heading towards a beautiful island which is due north, but the wind is against you. In order to get there, you adjust your sails to the wind and tack north-west and then north-east diagonally, heading in a general northerly direction. En route, you encounter a storm and take shelter on an island to stay safe and then discover that you actually prefer this island to the one you were aiming for. This demonstrates how we can be flexible and adapt our goals and aspirations according to our needs and values and the context. Like sailing, life is about enjoying the journey and not simply reaching the destination.

### ***Making life plans***

What would life look like if you were 'living the dream' and hitting the target in all areas of your life – acting in line with your values, meeting important needs and being in places and with people you care about? What would you be **DOING** differently or doing more of?



Spend a moment writing down your ideal, aspirational, even if somewhat unrealistic, dream life here:

Now we are going to make this a little more concrete and realistic. You may have to let go of things which are completely out of reach, but you can include important long-term plans or directions of travel. Pick one or two life areas that you would most like to work on, that would make a meaningful impact to your life.



**EXERCISE: Making life plans and setting goals**

Choose a life area    Work		
What are your long-term plans or aspirations?	What are your most important values and needs relating to this?	What are some short- or medium-term goals that you could aim for?
Take on a management role or develop a specialist interest Retire at 60	Leadership Learning Financial security	Find a training course that would help me develop new skills and knowledge Book a meeting with a financial adviser to discuss retirement planning

Choose a life area:		
What are your long-term plans or aspirations?	What are your most important values and needs relating to this?	What are some short- or medium-term goals that you could aim for?

## Chapter summary: Ready for Action

- Actions have a powerful influence over how we think and feel.
- Actions are more likely to be enjoyable and life-boosting if they move us towards our values and the person we want to be.
- Choosing specific, relevant and achievable goals can help motivate us to make important changes.
- Making positive choices and completing regular actions can lead to longer-term gains and help us break free from unhelpful patterns.
- Now.... pick an action and try it out. This chapter is about taking action and not just talking about it... follow your inner **Guide** as you get **Ready for Action**!



### Final thoughts

What are the most important messages for you from this chapter?



### Take an action step

What are your next steps? What actions will you take as a result of reading this chapter?

Are there any regular actions or patterns of behaviour that you might try to practise or develop?