

Healing Childhood Trauma and Reclaiming Your Authentic Self



*From*  
**Shadows**  
*to*  
**Self-Love**

**SARAH GRACE**

MCAHYP, RGN, PGMAN

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Title: From Shadows to Self-Love: Healing Childhood Trauma and Reclaiming Your Authentic Self

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# DEDICATION

For Ben and Becky, my beloved children, the loves of my life. You have taught me more about love, resilience, and truth than I ever knew I needed to learn. Being your mum has brought me home to parts of myself I never knew existed. You are my why.

For the extraordinary therapists who helped me piece my life back together. Especially Lorna Gale, the goddess who walked beside me as I reclaimed myself piece by piece. Through your presence, I learned the true meaning of consent, emotional integrity, and what it means to feel safe in my own skin. You were the mirror I didn't know I needed.

For Graham Grace, my husband, my rock, my soul's quiet anchor. You stand beside me with unwavering love, never demanding centre stage, always offering sanctuary. In your arms, I've known the kind of love that allows, expands, and holds steady when the world tilts. You remind me, every day, that I am loved, not for what I do, but for who I am. Life with you is a dance of laughter, kindness, creativity, and care, and I am endlessly grateful for the way you love me.

For Beryl Hildreth, whose courage to speak the unspeakable gave me back my voice. You said the words that cracked my trauma-bonded silence: *"If you don't leave him tonight, I will tell everyone what he is doing to you."* You offered me a lifeline, a way out I could live with. This book is part of the thank you I have never been able to say to you.

And for the girl I once was. At 18, full of shame, confusion, and questions no one would answer. This is the book I needed then. When I was searching for safety, for truth, for someone to tell me that how I felt made sense. I wrote it for her. And I wrote it for every woman who learned to survive in silence. For the woman who helped me see I didn't have to. This book is the echo.

# DEAR READER

Before we begin, I want you to know something: I've been where you are.

I know what it's like to feel loyal to someone who hurt you. To love them, and still long for freedom. To carry their shame like it's your own. And maybe, like me, you still find yourself protecting them in your thoughts. Making excuses. Downplaying what happened. Bending reality to protect them.

That's what survival taught you to do, even when some part of you always knew it wasn't yours to carry.

To understand why this book exists, I want to share something I've never put into words this clearly before.

When I was sixteen, I was living with my stepfather, the man who had been hurting me for years. I knew it felt horribly wrong. I knew I wanted to leave. But I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to, but because, of what I now know as a trauma bond, ran so deep, I couldn't separate myself from him.

I felt responsible for his wellbeing, even as he harmed me. That's what trauma does. It confuses love with duty. It makes loyalty feel safer than truth.

You're allowed to love them and still name what they did. You're allowed to carry both.

Then one woman, Beryl Hildreth, did something no one else had the insight or courage to do. She looked me in the eye and said:

*"If you don't leave him tonight, I will tell everyone what he's doing to you."*

It wasn't a gentle suggestion. It was an ultimatum.

And it gave me what trauma had taken away: The ability to choose myself.

Because in that moment, she offered me something I could live with. She saw the part of me that wanted to run, and the part of me that couldn't. And she gave me a way to leave that felt like I was protecting him.

That was the only way I could do it.

That's how trauma bonding works. It convinces us that our silence is love. That our disappearance is loyalty. That our suffering keeps everyone else safe.

It keeps us stuck in the role of protector, even when *we* are the ones who need protecting.

And sometimes, it takes someone else to step in and hold the clarity we can't yet hold for ourselves.

This book is for women like me. And maybe, like you.

Women who've lived in that awful in-between place: Longing for freedom but feeling too responsible to take it. Feeling disgust and loyalty all at once. Carrying the weight of secrets that were never theirs.

I wrote this book because it's the one I needed. When I was sixteen. When I was eighteen. When I was thirty, still carrying shame I didn't yet know how to name. When I was healing, but holding my breath, waiting for everything to fall apart again.

If you're reading this, love, you don't have to keep pretending everything's okay while you're quietly falling apart inside. You

don't have to keep gliding through life like a swan, composed on the surface, while paddling furiously beneath the water just to stay afloat. You don't have to keep holding it all together for everyone else, while no one's holding you.

You don't have to carry what was never yours.

This is the beginning of a new relationship with yourself. One rooted in truth. You may not feel ready. That's okay.

Just keep reading. I'm right here with you.

With love and fierce belief in your freedom,

Sarah x

# 1: THE COST OF HOLDING IT ALL TOGETHER

Childhood trauma, whether physical, emotional, sexual or neglect, hides in plain sight, leaving scars that aren't visible to the naked eye. These wounds run deep. They shape how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we experience the world, often long after the events have ended.

The statistics are sobering. SAPREA, a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping survivors of child sexual abuse report that 1 in 5 children will experience sexual abuse before they turn 18. Even more alarmingly, 80% of survivors report knowing their abuser, and in 20% of cases, the abuser is a family member.

I've lived this. And I've worked with countless men and women who have too.

You might not recognise it as trauma, telling yourself you were "*fine*". To forget it as it all happened so long ago. That it wasn't as bad as someone else's story. You've probably built a life that looks whole from the outside, and yet you still feel haunted, hollow, out of place within yourself.

And it doesn't disappear with time. It gets buried. Tucked away into the nervous system, where it quietly shapes our sense of worth, safety, and belonging. You might notice it in the push to overachieve, the inability to rest, the longing for connection that feels just out of reach.

This chapter is an unearthing of what happened to you, how it shaped you, and what healing can make possible.

## **The Unique Pain of Incest Trauma**

Incest trauma carries a distinct kind of grief and betrayal. It isn't just a violation; it's a distortion of the very relationships meant to protect us. When the abuser is a family member, the confusion, shame, and silence can be paralyzing.

Love gets tangled with fear. Safety with secrecy. Survival with silence.

At sixteen, I was living with someone who had hurt me for years. I wanted to leave. I knew it wasn't right. But I couldn't. I felt responsible for him, even though he was the one causing the harm.

That's what trauma does. It confuses love with duty. It makes silence feel safer than truth.

And when no one else names what's happening, we start to believe it's our fault. That we somehow caused it, deserved it, or should have done more to stop it.

We carry that shame like a second skin. We bury it, adapt, split off, and move forward, but never fully whole.

## **From A&E Sister to Single Mum, And the Cost of Survival**

At eighteen, I became a student nurse, eager, full of purpose, fierce determination, and an ache to do something meaningful with my pain. I rose through the ranks to become a sister in a busy Accident and Emergency department in the UK.

On the outside, I was the woman who held it all together, sharp, reliable, unflinching in a crisis.

Inside, I was a fortress built on sand.

I still remember the adrenaline-slicked corridors, the buzz of fluorescent lights that never dimmed, the acrid sting of antiseptic and urgency. I worked fourteen-hour shifts, constantly on my feet, commanding respect and organising chaos, but I never knew how to stop. I couldn't. Slowing down felt dangerous. Letting go felt like weakness. I told myself it was professionalism, but it was survival.

I couldn't relax. I couldn't ask for help.

I believed no one else had it as hard as I did. I wore my struggle like a badge, locked in a victim mentality I couldn't name at the time. I was hypersensitive to criticism, constantly on the edge, waiting for something to go wrong. I took everything personally and pushed myself to be perfect because I was terrified of being exposed as not enough.

I lived in a state of hypervigilance, my nervous system flooded, my body perpetually tense. Exhausted, but convinced I had no other choice. If I stopped, even for a moment, everything would fall apart, including me.

That wasn't resilience. That was trauma wearing a uniform.

No one would have guessed. But every shift, every smile, every calm instruction in the middle of someone else's emergency came at the cost of my own inner collapse.

I didn't realise back then that I wasn't thriving, I was coping. I had confused functionality with healing. But deep down, my body knew. And eventually, it would call me to truth.

## Subconscious Survival Patterns

When we experience trauma, our nervous systems adapt in ingenious ways to protect us. But what helped us survive then can hurt us now.

Some of the most common patterns I see in my clients, and have lived myself include:

- **People-pleasing:** Putting others' needs above your own, even when it hurts, exhausts you and makes you feel deeply resentful.
- **Perfectionism:** Believing that being flawless will keep you safe from criticism or abandonment.
- **Overworking:** Using productivity to outrun feelings of worthlessness or shame.
- **Hyper-independence:** Refusing help because vulnerability feels dangerous.
- **Emotional detachment:** Feeling cut off from your emotions, like you're watching life happen from behind glass.

These are survival strategies.

But survival isn't the same as freedom.

## The Science Behind Survival Patterns

Our nervous system is designed to keep us safe. When we experience trauma, especially in childhood, our bodies adapt to protect us. These adaptations can become ingrained patterns that persist into adulthood.

Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, explains how our autonomic nervous system responds to perceived threats. It describes three primary states:

1. **Social Engagement (Ventral Vagal):** When we feel safe, we can connect with others and regulate our emotions.
2. **Fight or Flight (Sympathetic Activation):** When we perceive danger, our bodies prepare to confront or escape the threat.
3. **Freeze or Shutdown (Dorsal Vagal):** When escape isn't possible, our bodies may immobilise to protect us.

These responses are automatic, we naturally shift between them constantly throughout each day.

Each of these nervous system states shapes the way we learn to survive, over time, those survival responses become patterns. Patterns that feel like they are our personality, but are adaptations, created to protect us.

For example:

- **People-pleasing** (also known as the fawn response) can develop when a child learns that appeasing others keeps them safe from harm. This behaviour becomes a default mode of seeking safety through compliance.
- **Perfectionism** may arise from a need to control one's environment to avoid criticism or punishment. The belief is that if everything is perfect, one can prevent negative outcomes.
- **Overworking** can be a way to distract from internal pain or to prove one's worth, stemming from feelings of inadequacy.
- **Hyper-independence** might develop when trusting others has led to betrayal or harm, leading to a belief that relying on oneself is the only safe option.

- **Emotional detachment** can occur when emotions were overwhelming or unsafe to express during trauma, leading to a disconnection from feelings as a protective mechanism.

Understanding these patterns through the lens of neuroscience and polyvagal theory can help us recognise them as adaptive responses to trauma, rather than simply the ‘way we were made’.

## **The Emotional and Physical Cost**

Unresolved trauma doesn’t just stay in the mind, it lodges in the body. It can manifest as:

- Chronic headaches
- Jaw pain and grinding teeth
- Digestive issues
- Backaches and muscle tension
- Sleep disturbances
- Persistent fatigue or immune issues

For years, I battled all of these. I cracked a tooth from clenching and grinding my teeth at night. I suffered constant migraines. My immune system struggled, picking up every cold and virus doing the rounds. My body was screaming what my voice had learned to silence.

So many of my clients arrive with similar symptoms; muscular aches and pains, fatigue, tight jaws, sleepless nights. Their doctors can’t find anything "wrong." But the truth is, their bodies are holding memories their minds have buried. And when we begin the work of gently unravelling the trauma underneath, their symptoms begin to shift.

One client came to me with constant tension headaches and unexplained digestive issues. She'd spent years chasing diagnoses and trying treatments that didn't help. But when we began to explore her trauma history, when we made space for the unspoken grief, the protective patterns, the guilt and shame her body had been carrying, her symptoms started to ease. Her nervous system finally had permission to move out of survival.

Trauma is stored in the body. Healing takes place there too.

## **The Cycle of Anxiety and Burnout**

When the nervous system is stuck in high alert, it doesn't take much to tip into anxiety.

Women with childhood trauma histories are significantly more likely to develop anxiety disorders. Add perfectionism, over-functioning, and a culture that celebrates productivity over presence, and you have the perfect recipe for burnout.

We crash, because we've had to hold it all together for too long without support, without rest, without safety.

Burnout is your body telling the truth.

Healing isn't about "learning to cope better." It's about releasing the subconscious programme that says you have to be everything for everyone, all the time.

## **How Trauma Impacts Relationships**

The relationships that were meant to teach us love, trust, and safety instead became classrooms for fear, silence, and self-abandonment.

When you've grown up with trauma, especially relational trauma like incest, emotional neglect, or coercive control, your nervous

system learns to associate love with danger, and connection with threat. We don't make a conscious choice. It is a survival adaptation hardwired into the brain and body, and it all happens without us even realising.

Your developing brain and nervous system were shaped in an environment where your needs were ignored, manipulated, or punished. Over time, that emotional blueprint becomes your internal compass, guiding who you trust, what you tolerate, and how you love.

Many survivors find themselves drawn to emotionally unavailable, critical, or even abusive partners in adulthood. Not because they want more pain, but because their body recognises the familiar. And in trauma-wired nervous systems, *familiar feels safe*, even when it isn't.

This is the cruel paradox of trauma bonding. When you've been conditioned to equate love with control, affection with volatility, and presence with unpredictability, your internal alarm system doesn't always sound when it should. It might even quiet down when you're with someone who feels like home, because home, for you, was a place of harm.

## **The Nervous System and Attachment**

The Polyvagal theory mentioned earlier in this chapter helps explain this. When we grow up in environments of threat, our autonomic nervous system adapts by cycling between fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses. We learn to scan for danger. To anticipate others' needs before they're spoken. To please, appease, and stay invisible, because that's what kept us safe.

These responses are wisdom. But what once kept us alive can start to erode our relationships later in life.

You may recognise this in yourself:

- Avoiding intimacy because it feels unsafe to be fully seen.
- Choosing unavailable or chaotic partners because emotional volatility is what you were raised on.
- Over-functioning or caretaking in your relationships because you were trained to meet everyone else's needs but your own.
- Struggling to express your needs because, as a child, your needs were dismissed or punished.
- Feeling profoundly alone even when you're not physically alone, because true emotional attunement was never modelled for you.

This is trauma logic. Your attachment system, the early blueprint for how you give and receive love, was formed in an environment where safety often depended on compliance, vigilance, or withdrawal. It was wired for protection, not trust.

## **Boundaries and the Cost of People-Pleasing**

If you were never taught to have boundaries as a child, if your body, voice, and choices were routinely overridden, it makes sense that you struggle to set them now. You may find yourself saying yes when you mean no, shrinking your truth to avoid conflict, or feeling responsible for others' feelings and reactions.

This is what you learned to do to stay alive. People-pleasing isn't about niceness. It's about nervous system safety.

But those patterns come at a cost: resentment, burnout, disconnection, and a gnawing sense of losing yourself in every relationship.

Healing begins when we stop seeing these patterns as us having something wrong with us, and start recognising them as survival responses. They make perfect sense when we trace them back to their roots.

## **What Healing Makes Possible**

You can rewire your attachment system. You can learn to recognise safety as calm, consistent, mutual presence. You can learn to set boundaries without shame. You can trust your body's cues. You can discern between healthy connection and old trauma reenactments.

This healing does not happen by simply talking about what happened to you and understanding why you feel like you do. It happens through the body. Through safe relationships. Through presence. Through practice. By rewiring the circuitry in our brain.

You were wired for connection, and you are worthy of the kind that doesn't ask you to disappear in order to be loved.

## **When Trauma Awakens at Midlife**

There comes a moment, often unexpected, often messy, when the lid you've kept so tightly shut for decades simply won't stay closed.

For many of us, that moment arrives during menopause.

As hot flushes, sleepless nights, and emotional eruptions that come out of nowhere.

We wake up one morning and realise we've lost ourselves somewhere in the middle of all the masks we've been wearing. Good daughter. Dutiful sister. Caring mother. Supportive partner. Loyal friend. Devoted employee. We've lived our lives showing

up for everyone else, always the one who remembers birthdays, checks in when someone's struggling, stays late, says yes when we mean no.

But no one's checking in on us.

No one sees the silent grief of the woman who has been everything for everyone.

We've been people-pleasing for so long we don't even notice it anymore. We smile and serve while stuffing our needs down so deep we've forgotten what they even are. But with the shifting of hormones comes a shift in what we can tolerate. The resentment starts to rise. The ache of our unspoken 'no' starts to scream from the inside.

And suddenly, the life that used to be "fine" doesn't feel fine anymore. It feels unbearable.

I've worked with so many women, and I've lived it too, who hit midlife and realise that the version of life they've built isn't one they want to keep living. That all the emotional labour they've been doing, often invisibly, has left them depleted and alone.

You might find yourself expected to care for ageing parents, maybe these are the very people who ignored or denied your childhood pain. You can't say no, but every time you say yes, it feels like a betrayal of the part of you that's still aching to be seen, to be believed, to be free.

And the worst part? You feel furious with yourself for not standing up sooner. For being so damn available for everyone else's needs while yours have gone unnoticed, even by you.

Some mornings, you might wake up with that hollow ache: *What's the point if this is all there is?*

This is trauma, rising to the surface now that your nervous system can no longer suppress it.

This is something that many of us ladies of a certain age experience. As oestrogen declines, our brain's natural ability to dampen down stress also declines. What you used to be able to brush off, you now feel in your bones. Emotionally, your threshold narrows. You feel things more. You tolerate less. And that is something to pay attention to.

Polyvagal theory helps us understand that our nervous systems were shaped by what we lived through. If connection felt dangerous as a child, your system adapted by keeping you in a constant state of alert. By pleasing. By staying quiet. By hyper-independence. By caretaking. These were genius survival strategies.

But they're not working anymore.

And that's a good thing. It means your body, your soul, is ready for something more than just survival. It's calling for freedom.

If you're here, reading this, it's because something in you knows that, too.

There will come a point, a moment that knocks the wind out of you, when you simply can't live like this anymore.

For some women, it's a relationship crisis. A health scare. A breakdown at work. The moment their child says something that hits too close to home.

For me, it was the scam.

## **The Scam That Shattered My Illusions**

On 3rd August 2025, I discovered I'd been scammed.

It was a grooming process that had unfolded over months, orchestrated with precision by someone I trusted. Someone I believed was helping me build something meaningful. Someone who, I later realised, had studied me, watched me, mirrored me, and then exploited every opening.

They took my entire nursing pension lump sum, along with money I was coerced into borrowing. Over one hundred and ten thousand pounds. Gone.

But it wasn't just the money.

It was what it exposed, a raw, unfiltered mirror to the most wounded parts of me.

For the first time in decades, I couldn't do what I'd always done.

I couldn't fix it. I couldn't soldier on. I couldn't override the pain with logic, or productivity, or stoic silence.

Every coping strategy I had so carefully crafted over the years, the competence, the independence, the ability to "handle it", crumbled under the weight of this devastation.

I collapsed.

Literally and emotionally.

For three days, I wandered my home like a ghost. Vacant. Dissociated. I would find myself rocking, staring into nothing, trapped in a looping reel of horror and shame. At other times, I would tip into full-blown panic, unable to remember how to

unlock my own phone, paralysed by the onslaught of noise in my mind.

His words haunted me.

The messages. The conversations. The grooming. The manipulation.

It played over and over in my head, a soundtrack to my shame. And layered on top, the voice I thought I had quieted long ago came roaring back, my inner critic, relentless and cruel:

*"You're so stupid. So naïve. How could you let this happen?"*

*"You're a complete failure. You've ruined everything. You are a complete idiot. No one will ever take you seriously again."*

But the most unbearable part?

The grief wasn't new.

It was ancient.

I realised I wasn't reacting to the scam alone, I was reliving the emotional blueprint of my childhood. The helplessness. The humiliation. The isolation. The desperate need to hide the truth. To carry it alone. To protect others from my pain, even as it destroyed me.

The scammer had groomed me in the same way my stepfather had.

And I hadn't seen it until I was in pieces. Until the armour shattered. Until there was nothing left but truth.

On the third day, as I lay on the floor, numb and raw, I realised something profound.

I no longer felt like the strong, capable woman I had worked so hard to become.

I felt like the child I used to be, silenced, ashamed, and unseen.

And in that moment, I made a decision.

I couldn't go back in time. I couldn't undo what had been done. But I could finally do what I hadn't been able to do as a child.

I could speak.

I could ask for help.

I could share the shame instead of swallowing it whole.

I reached out to a trusted colleague and had an EMDR session. I told my family. I told my clients. I told the truth, messy, imperfect, painful and full of raw emotion.

It was the beginning of something I hadn't known I was still waiting for:

Liberation.

What the EMDR session revealed was a subconscious survival pattern that had been running my life since I was seven.

It unlocked a memory I had no conscious access to before. A day when my stepfather, home on long-term sick leave, orchestrated a plan for me to stay off school so he could have uninterrupted access to me. He coached me to lie. To say I had a tummy ache. To fake being ill, vomit, refuse food, and go to bed early. I followed every instruction. I was terrified of him. And I wanted him to be pleased with me.

That day, he escalated his abuse in ways I had no words for. I was petrified that my mother would come home and discover what was happening. But I didn't tell. I never told.

Because I thought it was my fault.

He had taught me to believe it was. He said I made him do it. That he had no control. That I was the one to blame.

But what the EMDR revealed wasn't just that moment. It was the *programme* that moment turned on.

A programme that whispered:

- *You are shameful.*
- *You're not worthy of love.*
- *You are rotten to the core.*

It wasn't just the trauma of what happened. It was the trauma of lying to my mum, of being complicit in a setup I didn't understand but instinctively knew would lead to shame.

And in that moment during EMDR, I saw it clearly:

This deep, buried, unconscious belief that I was the bad one. That I was to blame. And that belief had quietly shaped every part of my life.

The scam brought that belief into the light.

Because when children are harmed by those meant to protect them, their nervous system does something remarkable to ensure survival: It makes the caregiver right and the child wrong.

We do this because we have to. To acknowledge that our caregivers are unsafe would be too overwhelming for our young,

dependent nervous systems to bear. So we internalise the blame. We make ourselves wrong so the world can stay right enough to survive.

It's like being the fish who doesn't know it lives in water, because the water is all it has ever known.

That was me.

I had lived my whole adult life inside that water. And until the scam cracked the bowl, I couldn't even see it.

The scam didn't just strip me of money. It stripped me of illusions. Of armour. Of silence. Of survival patterns I didn't even know were still running.

And in their place, it gave me the chance to come home to the deepest parts of myself.

To choose tenderness over toughness. To choose connection over control. To choose truth over secrecy.

To model, for the women I serve, that it's never too late to choose yourself.

## **A Final Truth for This Chapter**

You didn't deserve what happened. You were a child. You were innocent. It was never your fault.

But healing? That is your sacred birthright.

It's about reclaiming the parts of you that learned to stay small to stay safe. The parts that went quiet because there was no space for their truth. The parts that still flinch, still freeze, still wonder if they're safe to be here, whole, messy, magnificent, and unhidden.

This book doesn't ask you to be fearless. It invites you to be faithful to the part of you that never stopped hoping. To the knowing deep in your bones that there is more than survival. That peace is possible. That kindness is strength. That your story matters.

In the chapters ahead, we'll walk together. Gently. Truthfully. Powerfully. So that you can be free.

### **If You're Wondering, "What If I'm Not Ready?"**

Let this be your permission to begin gently.

You don't have to be certain. You don't have to be brave every day. You don't even have to be ready, you just have to be willing.

Willing to listen. Willing to feel. Willing to wonder: *"What if healing is possible, even for me?"*

Some days, that willingness will feel strong. Other days, it will flicker like a match in the wind. Both are enough.

There is no perfect moment to start healing. There is only this one: imperfect, tender, real, and already carrying the seeds of change.

## 2: THE UNSEEN WOUNDS

### **How Trauma Hides in a Life That Looks "Fine"**

There's a particular kind of pain that doesn't scream. It doesn't demand to be seen or named, it just weaves itself into your everyday life, quietly determining how you show up, love, speak, work, and rest.

And more often than not, you don't even know it's there.

When you've lived with these unseen wounds for decades, wounds shaped by things you couldn't fully feel or safely speak of at the time. Wounds from trauma that didn't just shape a moment, they reshaped your whole way of being.

You feel it now in subtler ways:

- Always being on edge, as if something bad might happen any second.
- The constant scanning of people's faces, tones, silences.
- A dull dread that sits in your chest like fog you can't clear.

You live with the deep exhaustion of being "fine."

### **When Survival Becomes Identity**

For many women, trauma doesn't look like chaos or collapse. It looks like over-functioning. Over-giving. Over-achieving. It looks like "being fine."

When we grow up in environments where our emotional needs were unmet, unsafe, or punished, our brilliant nervous system adapts, automatically stepping in to protect us. We don't consciously choose this, this is instinctual.

Your brain and nervous system made decisions on your behalf, split-second, non-verbal, physiological decisions, about what was safe, what was dangerous, and what needed to be shut down in order to survive.

You didn't *learn* to people-please. Your nervous system knew:

*"If I stay small, stay kind, stay useful, I might avoid pain."*

You didn't choose to numb out. Your body said:

*"This is too much. Let's disappear so she doesn't have to feel it."*

You didn't decide to overwork. Your system wired for:

*"Keep going. If you stop, it might all fall apart."*

And because this happened so early, so consistently, it became identity. You don't recognise it as trauma. You just think:

*"This is who I am."*

High-functioning. Capable. Strong. Independent. Maybe even admired.

But inside, there's a quiet knowing:

*"I'm not okay."*

And a louder voice that quickly chimes in:

*"But I should be."*

Because life looks good. You've done everything 'right'. You've made it out. You've built a life. You've held it all together.

And yet. You still feel like you're just surviving. Not present. Not connected. Not safe in your own body. When you're stuck in survival mode for so long, you didn't even know there was another way to live.

This is your body's quiet brilliance, keeping you upright, keeping you moving, keeping you alive.

But those old strategies? They're also keeping you from rest. From joy. From connection. From fully living.

The brilliance of your body saved your life. But now it's time to come home.

## **The Body Remembers What the Mind Tries to Forget**

One of the most disorienting aspects of unresolved trauma is how it seems to resurface without warning.

You might be brushing your teeth, cooking dinner, or walking into a meeting when suddenly your chest tightens, your heart races, and your breath shortens. You feel a deep sense of unease, a lurch in your body. Nothing feels safe, but you can't name why.

This is body remembering. Through sensations.

The mind often forgets what the body never stopped carrying. And without language for what's happening, we turn it inward. We call it weakness being dramatic, oversensitive, and we blame ourselves.

*"Why am I so sensitive?"*

*"Why can't I just let it go?"*

*"What's wrong with me?"*

There is nothing wrong with you. You are a human being, shaped by what you've lived through. And you're beginning to understand why you do what you do, and that changes everything.

## **Survival Scripts That Still Run the Show**

There are patterns running beneath the surface of your life, instinctive, automatic responses that were formed long before you had words for them.

They don't come from who you are. They come from what you had to survive.

These are the subconscious programmes that got wired in during childhood, shaped by what was safe to express, what got punished, what was ignored. And without even realising it, they begin to guide how you move through the world.

Messages like:

*"I have to earn love.*

*"It's not safe to need anyone.*

*"My feelings aren't welcome."*

You may have learned to stay silent, to make things easier for everyone else, to disappear inside your own life.

These beliefs didn't come from conscious choice. They came from adaptation, from your body and brain protecting you in the only ways they could.

You might notice them in moments like:

- Saying "yes" when you desperately want to say "no."
- Overexplaining or apologising for having needs.
- Reacting to feedback like it's a threat.
- Feeling responsible for other people's moods.

These aren't just habits. They're survival strategies, shaped in environments where emotional safety was uncertain or absent.

And the fact that they still show means your system did an extraordinary job of keeping you safe.

Now, slowly, gently, you get to meet those patterns with compassion. To remember: You have choice now. And with choice comes the possibility of freedom.

## **A Client Story**

One woman I worked with came to me saying,

*"I've achieved all the things I thought would make me happy, a successful career, a family, a beautiful home, but I still feel this emptiness. I'm anxious all the time, but I don't know why."*

On the outside, everything looked fine. But inside, she was stuck in cycles of overthinking, self-doubt, and deep exhaustion. She didn't feel connected to her own life.

As we worked together, she began to see that what she was experiencing wasn't her doing something wrong. She had been operating in a constant state of high alert since childhood, always watching for emotional shifts, anticipating withdrawal, and living with the silent fear that something might go wrong.

Through our work, she didn't just understand these patterns, she began to rewire them. We met the parts of her that had been protecting her for decades. We created enough safety for her nervous system to stop gripping. She began to reprogram her subconscious mind and reclaim the parts of herself she thought were lost.

She said,

*"For the first time, I feel like someone sees the parts of me I've always kept hidden. I'm starting to understand myself, and it's bringing me a peace I didn't think was possible."*

And that's where healing began. Through understanding, through self-compassion, through being gentle with yourself and opening up to being present with yourself in a whole new way.

## **A Somatic Anchor**

Pause for a moment. Place a hand on your chest, and one on your belly. Take a slow, gentle breath.

Ask yourself, without any pressure to answer, just ask:

*"What part of me is trying to keep me safe right now?"*

Just acknowledge it. That awareness alone is healing.

## **The Things You Haven't Been Able to Say**

Before we move on, let's name a few truths that may have never been spoken aloud.

The suffering that doesn't often get named. Because it's so constant, it starts to feel like the background hum of your life.

It's the ache of dissociation, when you're in a conversation, at the dinner table, even laughing with people you love, and yet you feel like you're floating outside yourself, numb, watching it all from a distance.

It's the guilt that comes when you can't quite feel joy. When life is "good", or you think it should be, and you still feel restless, low, or flat. You tell yourself you should be grateful. That others have it worse. That this is your fault.

And then there's the quiet craving for connection, to be met, seen, held, that lives just under the surface. But it feels unreachable. Like you're too much. Or not enough. Or both at once.

It's hard to explain that kind of loneliness. Especially when you're surrounded by people.

And still, the days stretch out full of responsibility and noise, and you're exhausted before you've even opened your eyes.

Burnout isn't just about overwork. It's the cost of surviving for too long without being resourced. Without rest that actually replenishes. Without touch that actually soothes.

And anxiety, oh, the way it lives in the body like a constant background app. Sometimes it surges like a wave. Other times, it's just there, a jitteriness in your brain, a tightness in your chest, a knot in your stomach. Waiting. Watching. Scanning. Preparing for something to go wrong.

You might not call it trauma. You might just say: "I'm tired." "I don't feel like myself." "I don't know why, but I just can't relax."

But so often, what we call tiredness is emotional depletion. What we call "not myself" is dissociation. What we call stress is survival mode.

When you've spent your life adapting to unmet needs, emotional unpredictability, or being invisible in your own home, your system learns to cope, but not to rest.

These aren't just isolated feelings. They're clues, invitations to begin making sense of your story in a new way.

As we move through this book, we'll begin to untangle the knots:

- Naming what was never spoken
- Validating what was always felt
- Releasing what no longer protects you

Safely, gently, meeting yourself, in the places you've been taught to avoid. Acknowledging and honouring your truth. Because here's the quiet miracle: Everything you need to heal is already within you. This is your journey home to yourself.

## **A Loving Reflection**

*"Your numbness shows how your body has protected you."*

*"Your fatigue carries the imprint of everything you've endured." "Your longing speaks to the sacred desire to belong, and that desire is valid."*

These truths matter. They deserve to be spoken. Your voice is welcome here. Your truth is felt.

And now, let's explore the ways your body has carried the cost.

## 3: WHEN THE BODY REMEMBERS

There are some stories the mind forgets, but the body never does.

You might not remember every detail. You might not name it as trauma. But somehow it is locked into you at a cellular level. It remembers the tone of voice that made you flinch. The moment you knew it wasn't safe to speak, to breathe too loud, to exist too fully. The sound of footsteps that made your stomach tighten. The tension in a room before the fight. The ache of not being held when you needed comfort the most.

And it doesn't remember through words. It remembers through sensation.

A sudden tightness in your chest. The dry-mouth panic when someone shifts their tone. A pricking behind your eyes when there's no reason to cry. The way your breath becomes shallow and ragged when someone looks at you 'that way' and you want to disappear.

This is the intelligence of your body, the body that has carried you through everything. Even the things your mind couldn't make sense of. Even the moments you buried because you didn't feel safe enough to feel them. Your brilliantly protective body. Shaped by what it to survive.

### **A Personal Remembering**

As a child I spent my days and nights waiting, anticipating. I felt scared. All the time.

My stepfather wasn't just cruel, he was calculating. Emotionally, physically, psychologically and sexually abusive. And somehow, still the man I loved and called "Dad."

He didn't raise his voice often. He didn't need to. His control was quiet, terrifying, absolute.

He turned my mum against me, with words, suggestions, silence and with expertly planted seeds. By the time I hit puberty, I felt like she hated me. Not overtly. But in her sighs. Her distance. Her comments. Her lack of protection.

At eight years old I went to her upset, a sore on my tongue, nothing major, but it hurt, and I wanted comfort. She didn't ask what was wrong. She glared at me and hissed,

*"That's because of all the lies you tell."*

That moment stayed with me. The pain in my mouth was one thing. But the ache of being met with contempt instead of care, that went so much deeper.

He made her jealous of me. Manipulated her into seeing me as competition, not her daughter. He isolated me from her, made me the enemy in her eyes.

At home, I was always on alert. Scanning. Watching. Reading his mood, her mood, the air in the room. I felt like prey, desperate for love, and always under threat.

He used me. And he made sure I stayed silent.

With the kind of control that makes a child believe:

*"This is your fault. You're the problem. If you speak, it will get worse."*

These weren't things I was told directly. They were things my body *learned* to believe.

So I didn't speak. Not really. Not about what mattered. I kept it all locked inside

I became the child who didn't cause trouble. Who read the room like a survival map. Who guessed what others needed before they asked. Who made herself easy to be around, useful, quiet, compliant.

And when I finally left that home, when I escaped his grasp, you might think the fear would end.

But instead, it changed shape.

I began chasing validation in places that never offered true safety. Nights out blurred into mornings of regret. I craved the thrill of being wanted, but the act itself, the sex, felt hollow, uncomfortable, confusing.

I didn't know how to say no. I didn't even know I *could* say no.

And here's the truth I want to offer you gently, if this is something you carry too:

Just because I didn't say no, doesn't mean I was saying yes.

Sometimes, a man would smile at me and something in me felt compelled to go home with him. As if that smile obligated me to open my body. As if being seen meant being taken.

I thought this made me shameful. Like I was getting life completely wrong. But I wasn't. I was still surviving. The trauma hadn't left my body. It had just changed costumes. There was the thrill of the chase the high of being desired, of *getting the man*. But as soon as the act was over and they left, I was left with a familiar ache: feeling disgusting, discarded, unseen.

What I really wanted was so simple; To be seen. To be held. To be called the next day. To be loved. But I didn't know how to ask for those things. I didn't know I deserved them. And deep down, the calm kind of love felt, well, to be honest, boring. My nervous system wasn't wired for peace. It was wired for vigilance.

That's why I thrived in A&E. The drama, the adrenaline, the chaos, it mirrored the internal landscape I'd always lived in. To my brain, the panic was familiar. And therefore, it felt safe.

The same was true in relationships.

When I met the father of my children, something in me recognised him. He was moody. Controlling. Emotionally unavailable. So much like my stepfather.

I mistook familiarity for safety. But it wasn't safe. It was just known. And known had always hurt me.

## **A Gentle Reflection: Forgiving Yourself for Surviving**

There is nothing shameful about the ways you survived. Your body did what it had to do. Your nervous system instinctively chose what felt safest in the moment.

If you dissociated, if you couldn't say no, if you chased what felt like love in all the wrong places, it wasn't because you were wrong. It was because your body believed it had no other choice.

So take a breath with me now. One hand on your heart. One on your belly.

Breathe in gently through your nose, and sigh out slowly through your mouth. A whisper to your body:

*"You did nothing wrong."*

Try this somatic anchor now and in the days to come, place a hand on your chest and breathe into your belly with long, slow exhales. This simple act begins to calm your vagus nerve and invites your body back into safety, one breath at a time.

You don't need to punish yourself for the things you did, the paths you took to survive.

You need gentleness. You need truth. You need a nervous system that no longer sees love as danger.

And you are already on your way.

## **A Personal Awakening: Reinventing Myself in Spain**

I didn't know back then what I know now.

Like you, I didn't realise I was living out trauma. I wasn't aware that survival had become my identity. I thought I'd moved on.

When I moved to Spain 21 years ago, I thought: "*This is it.*" A fresh start. A clean slate. I put distance between myself and the people and places that had shaped my pain.

But I brought *me* with me.

And that meant I brought the survival patterns too, the people-pleasing, the overachieving, the anxiety I couldn't name. I hadn't healed. I'd only relocated.

It wasn't until years later, when I trained as a hypnotherapist, that something clicked. For the first time, I learned how to reach the *subconscious programmes* that had been running my life. The same ones keeping me in shame. The same ones sabotaging my relationships. The same ones that said,

*"You're the problem."*

That training didn't just give me a new profession. It gave me access to myself. I met my inner child, the one who had carried everything in silence. The one who was never comforted, never protected, always blamed. And I began to offer her what no one else had: Safety. Presence. Compassion. Love.

Hypnotherapy was the beginning. It brought me face-to-face with the subconscious beliefs that had shaped my identity. In those early sessions, I connected with my inner child, learned to soothe my nervous system, and discovered how to replace the programming of shame with the possibility of self-compassion.

Years later, it was EMDR that helped me process what talk therapy couldn't touch. It gently led me into the root memories that were still governing my body's fear response, memories I didn't even know were there, but that had been directing my life from the shadows.

Now, I combine these modalities with nervous system regulation, inner child work, and somatic anchoring, because trauma lives in the body, and healing has to include the body too. My sessions are not just about insight, but about integration. About coming home.

Over time, I kept learning. Five years ago, when the world went quiet in lockdown, I decided to go deeper. I studied the neurobiology of trauma. I studied attachment wounds and dissociation and how sexual abuse echoes into adulthood.

I didn't do this just for my clients. I did it for *me*.

I wanted to understand. I wanted to forgive myself. I wanted to feel whole, to do more than just function.

And it wasn't until very recently, after the scam led me into EMDR, that the final thread of my trauma unwound. Something I

didn't even know was still buried rose to the surface and was met with care.

That session changed me. It helped me reclaim a part of myself I'd lost a long time ago.

Now, after all of it, the childhood, the therapy, the healing, the remembering, I can say this without flinching:

*"I love myself."*

And that is why I'm here. Not just to teach. Not just to share my story. But to walk with you, as someone who *knows*.

## **A Gentle Invitation**

I know what it's like to look back and wonder why life has always felt so hard, why you've done everything "right" and still feel disconnected from joy, safety, or peace.

But awareness is the beginning of everything. And that's exactly where you are.

To help you gently explore where you are on your journey, I created something for you.

It's a short, thoughtful quiz, just a few minutes, to help you understand how your nervous system might be operating behind the scenes, and how your past experiences could still be shaping your present patterns.

This is a first step toward seeing yourself with more compassion, less judgement, and realising just how much is possible from here.

One client shared:

*"I used to think I needed to be fixed. Now I know I needed to be safe."*

That's the heart of this work. Not more effort or more striving. But grace. Safety. Sanctuary.

When you're ready you can take the quiz by clicking this link:

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>

## **Coming Home Begins with Seeing**

This chapter may have awakened something within you. An ache. A quiet knowing. Perhaps even a wave of grief.

Grief for the girl you were. Grief for the safety you never had. Grief for the years shaped by trauma.

That grief is welcome here.

It means you're seeing clearly. That clarity is the beginning of freedom.

You don't need to rush. Allow yourself feel what you feel.

And in those feelings, something beautiful begins to unfold: You find the way home to your true authentic self, the you beneath the survival patterns.

## **A Gentle Reflection**

Place one hand on your heart, and if it feels safe, close your eyes.

Slow down your breathing.

Then gently offer yourself these words:

*"It makes sense that I feel this way." "I wasn't meant to carry all of this alone." "I am beginning to understand, and that changes everything."*

Pause with each sentence.

Feel the truth of it, even if it's just a flicker. Feel it in your body.

You don't need to be anywhere else but here. This is what healing can look like: A moment of meeting yourself with compassion.

# 4: WHEN THE BODY BECOMES THE MESSENGER

As a trauma-informed therapist, I want to begin with something many survivors have never heard:

Your body is not weak. It did not betray you, it is not betraying you now. And the symptoms you experience aren't random.

They are your body's way of speaking a truth that your conscious mind may have had to silence.

## **How trauma speaks through physical symptoms**

There are parts of your story your mind may have silenced, but your body has never forgotten.

You might not recall exact moments, or name what happened as trauma. But your body knows how it felt to be unsafe. To be ignored. To be made small. To hold your breath and pretend everything was fine.

You don't consciously think, "*I'm unsafe.*" But your chest tightens before walking into certain rooms and you don't know why. You can't fall asleep until 2am, because your body still believes the night is when danger comes. You try to rest, but your jaw is clenched, your stomach bloated, your muscles tight. You wake up exhausted, even after eight hours in bed.

This isn't your body betraying you. It's your body protecting you, still responding to a past that was never fully felt or fully processed.

Because when trauma isn't given a voice, it finds expression in the only way it can: through your physiology.

## **How Childhood Trauma Can Show Up in the Body**

One of the most validating truths I've discovered, both through the research of trauma experts like Bessel van der Kolk and Gabor Maté, and through the lived experiences of so many women I've supported, is this:

The body remembers what the mind has had to forget.

If you've carried symptoms for years that no one seemed to understand, if your body has felt like a mystery or a burden, please know this: You are not imagining it. And there are real reasons your body feels the way it does.

These are just some of the physical ways unresolved trauma can show up in the body. This awareness might help you finally connect the dots. To show you that what you've felt is not only real, but an invitation to begin understanding the *why* behind what you feel.

Below are some of the most common physical conditions linked to early trauma. These symptoms are often signs that your nervous system has stayed in survival mode far beyond the original threat.

### **Pain That Feels Like It Came from Nowhere**

Migraines, tension headaches, fibromyalgia, neck/back pain, jaw tension When you live in fear, your body is in a constant state of tension. Over time that chronic tension turns into inflammation, and pain, not because your body is doing anything wrong, but because it's been trying to hold everything for you.

### **Gut Struggles That Don't Make Sense**

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), reflux, bloating, erratic digestion. Your gut is deeply tied to your sense of safety. If your nervous system has stayed in survival mode, your digestion may have too.

That's why the discomfort persists, even when nothing seems "wrong."

### **Breathing That's 'Not Quite Right'**

Asthma, shallow breathing, or feeling like you can't exhale If, as a child, you had to stay quiet, small and invisible, that pattern can linger. The body still waits for danger to pass, keeping the lungs tight, the chest closed.

### **When Your Body Feels Like It's Turning On You**

Autoimmune issues like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, Multiple Sclerosis. This isn't self-destruction. It's a nervous system pushed past its capacity, keeping your defences up for too long. Your immune system becomes confused and overreactive, because it's absolutely exhausted.

### **The Weight of Long-Term Stress on Your Heart**

High blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, heart strain When your body runs on adrenaline and cortisol for years, it takes a toll. The constant readiness and alertness are a heavy load for your heart to carry.

### **When Focus Feels Foggy and Memory Slips**

Forgetfulness, overwhelm, early signs of burnout Living in constant hypervigilance splits your attention. You're surviving, scanning, staying one step ahead. It's no wonder your mind feels tired, it's been trying to protect you for years.

### **Fatigue That Rest Doesn't Touch**

Hormonal shifts, thyroid issues, irregular cycles. When your nervous system can't downshift, your whole endocrine system suffers. You may feel like you're running on empty all the time,

lacking in energy, constantly tired. This isn't laziness. It's soul-deep exhaustion.

## **Skin That Flares Without Warning**

Eczema, hives, sensitivity, mystery rashes. Your skin is a boundary. When that boundary has been crossed or ignored, your body carries the memory. The inflammation may not respond to surface treatments because the roots go so much deeper.

## **When Cellular Safety Feels Compromised**

Some cancers, including breast, skin, and lung, have shown links to early trauma. Not all cancers are linked to stress, but science is exploring how chronic survival mode can affect cell repair and resilience, and understanding the load your body has silently carried for so long.

Your symptoms are not random. Your body is not the enemy. It has been trying to tell you something for a very long time.

One of my clients put it like this:

*"I used to think I was imagining the pain. That it was all in my head. But it wasn't. My body was crying out for me to listen. Once I understood the link between my symptoms and my past, everything changed. I stopped blaming myself, and started caring for myself."*

## **Why These Symptoms Happen**

So why does trauma from childhood affect our physical body so profoundly? Let's look at the pathways it takes to express itself.

Trauma from childhood doesn't just stay in the mind, it reshapes how your body functions. Here's a simple way to understand how your body locks into survival mode, and why those symptoms stay with you.

## **Your Body's Alarm System Stays Switched On**

Constant stress rewires your brain's threat centre, keeping you hyper-alert, even when the danger has passed. Hormones like cortisol remain high, keeping your body stuck in defence.

When your internal alarms never turn off, your body starts to show signs in the places it's holding that fear.

## **Tension Becomes Your Normal**

When your body anticipates and prepares for danger again and again, muscles stay tight. That chronic clenching can show up as neck and jaw pain, back tension, or even migraines.

If you've felt this tension for years, you may notice it echoing even deeper, into the core of your digestion.

## **Your Stomach Can't Settle**

In survival mode, digestion takes a back seat. When the body perceives threat, blood and energy are redirected away from "non-essential" functions like digestion, and toward muscles needed for fight or flight. This slows or disrupts the gut's natural rhythm.

Over time, this can turn into gut issues like IBS, reflux, or unpredictable digestion. When the gut is constantly unsettled, the immune system often follows suit, operating in a state of exhaustion

## **Your Immune System Gets Overwhelmed**

When your body is on constant alert, your immune system stays in overdrive, scanning for threats that aren't there. Over time, this chronic activation can lead to inflammation, flare-ups, and autoimmune conditions. The immune system becomes confused, reacting to the body's own tissues.

These hidden battles in your immune system don't just stay there, they ripple out into your hormones and energy levels too.

## **Your Hormones Get Out of Balance**

A constantly activated stress response can impact everything from your sleep and energy to your cycle, thyroid, and blood sugar, making rest feel impossible and fatigue constant.

## **Your Body Speaks What You Couldn't Say**

When it wasn't safe to feel or speak your truth, your body held it instead. That might now show up as chronic pain, unexplained symptoms, or a deep fatigue that has no clear cause.

You might have been told it's all in your head. You've likely tried everything, supplements, sleep routines, diets, exercise. But the symptoms remain.

And you're left wondering: Why is this happening to me? Why can't I get well? Why does nothing seem to work? Your body hasn't been malfunctioning. It's been protecting you.

You survived something that was never your fault, and your body has been telling the story ever since. A client told me:

*"I thought I was imagining it, all the exhaustion and pain. But now I understand, my body wasn't letting me down, it was fighting for me"*

## **A Personal Thread: When the Pain Has No Name**

I didn't know why I was in so much pain for so much of my early life. No one around me seemed to understand either. On the outside, I was "fine." But my body was telling a very different story.

By the time I was 9 or 10, I was already suffering from debilitating migraines and tension headaches. They came on like waves of overwhelm, throbbing, pressing, shutting everything else down. I

couldn't explain them. I didn't have the words for why I felt like I was carrying so much. But my body knew.

There were days I would wake with my jaw clenched so tight it was almost locked. I would have to massage my own face just to be able to move it again. I wasn't just holding tension, I was holding back screams, holding in truths, holding myself together.

The grinding of my teeth became so severe that in my late twenties, I cracked a tooth in my sleep. The dentist gave me a mouth guard, something I was meant to wear every night to stop doing damage. But no one thought to ask *why* my body was to tense. No one asked what my jaw was protecting me from.

Because it wasn't just stress. It wasn't just habit. It was the imprint of trauma, echoing through my muscles, speaking the unspeakable.

For so many years, I thought this was normal. That I was just "the kind of person" who got headaches. That I must just be prone to this sort of pain. But now I know, my body wasn't malfunctioning, it was communicating.

These weren't random ailments. They were intelligent responses to danger, stored deep in my fascia, my nervous system, my breath. I had no idea that the physical symptoms I was experiencing were connected to the childhood trauma I had lived through for 14 years, not until lockdown, when I began studying the neuroscience of trauma.

It was like someone turned on a light inside my body.

The constant pain in my jaw, the tension in my neck and back, the migraines and headaches that shadowed my days, they all suddenly made sense.

I wasn't imagining it. I wasn't 'making it up'. And I certainly wasn't to blame. These symptoms were signals. Messages from my body. Invitations to stop fighting and start listening.

During the EMDR sessions I undertook as part of a neuroplasticity programme, I began to process the deep layers of trauma that had been living inside me for decades. And as the emotional charge was released, something extraordinary happened.

The jaw pain, the backaches, they eased. The migraines, once so constant, lessened. And I realised: healing wasn't just possible. It was already happening. Someone shared:

*"I just wanted to share my thanks and gratitude to you. After the EMDR I had yesterday I slept through the night for the first time in weeks. Thank you for helping me find that peace again."*

And the more I learn, the more I know this is true for so many women.

What we call "mystery symptoms" are so often the stories of survival, written in the language of the body.

## **A Gentle Reflection: Listening to the Language of Your Body**

Place one hand on your heart, and if it feels safe, close your eyes. Slow your breathing. Lengthen your exhale.

Now say, gently, to the part of you that's carried so much without understanding why:

*"It makes sense now." "You weren't fragile, you were fierce in your protection." "You weren't making it up, you were making it through."*

Invite each word to land like a warm blanket across the ache. Let your body hear what your mind never knew how to name.

Now place both hands on your belly. Feel the quiet rise and fall, the breath that has never stopped carrying you.

And whisper to yourself:

*"I'm listening now.."*

*"We're safe enough to feel. Safe enough to heal."*

Your body was never your enemy. It was the brave messenger, whispering truths that words couldn't hold. This isn't the end of your story, this is the beginning of your homecoming.

And as you start to reconnect, you'll notice your body in new ways. Our next step is a gentle one: noticing your patterns. Bringing compassionate awareness to how your nervous system shows up, moment to moment. No fixing. Just witnessing.

Because healing begins with seeing, and choosing not to turn away.

Before we move into chapter five take a moment to feel into the wisdom of your body.

Place your hand over your heart and ask gently:

*"What have you been trying to tell me, body?"*

Feel into the response, stay here for a few moments allowing this wisdom to be make itself known to you.

# 5: THE PATTERNS THAT KEPT YOU SAFE (NOW KEEP YOU STUCK)

## **Understanding Your Survival Scripts**

These patterns were not your choice. They were chosen for you, by a body that was hell bent on keeping you alive.

Hyper-independence. Over-functioning. The need to always be busy. The tightening grip of perfectionism. The ever-present hum of anxiety that says, *"You can't stop now."*

They weren't character flaws. They were your body's way of saying,

*"I've got you. We're going to stay safe."*

## **The Truth About Survival Scripts**

Survival scripts are unconscious strategies the nervous system develops when the world doesn't feel safe. They helped you cope. Helped you stay connected. Helped you keep going, even when you were breaking inside.

But over time, what once protected you begins to limit you. They stop you from resting. They stop you from receiving. They stop you from believing you are already enough.

## **Hyper-Independence & Over-Functioning**

We'll open with a gentle truth. You learned never to need anyone. Not because you wanted to do everything yourself. But because needing people felt dangerous. Because help was unreliable. Because asking made you vulnerable to disappointment, dismissal, or even harm.

So you became *capable. Efficient. Organised.* Always two steps ahead of disaster.

Your nervous system decided that the safest way to survive was to stay in control.

And on the outside, it looks like you are doing great. Strong. Reliable. Put-together.

But inside? You're exhausted. Lonely. Longing for someone to say,

*"Let me help you."*

## **A Personal Thread: When "Strong" Is a Survival Strategy**

I never asked for help. I didn't know how to.

By the time I was a teenager, I had already taken on the role of caretaker, not by choice, but by necessity. I learned early that being vulnerable wasn't safe, that needing something from someone often meant disappointment, or worse. So I didn't ask. I didn't cry. I didn't crumble.

Instead, I became capable.

I made sure everything looked okay on the outside. I did the work, met the deadlines, kept the peace. People saw me as strong, reliable, always the one others could lean on. And I leaned into that. Because it was the only place I felt some sense of control.

But inside?

Inside, I was exhausted.

Behind every polished surface was a girl holding it all together with clenched fists and gritted teeth. I wasn't coping, I was surviving. And the more I achieved, the more I lost touch with my own needs, my own voice, my own body.

Hyper-independence had become my shield. Over-functioning, my way of avoiding pain.

I thought if I just worked harder, did better, became more useful, I could finally feel safe.

But safety never came that way. It couldn't.

Because the version of me who deserved care, tenderness, and support, had been buried beneath all the performing.

It's taken time to unlearn. To realise I don't have to do it all alone. That asking for help is safe, and that letting go is a reclamation.

And I'm still learning.

But now, I can recognise the difference between coping and healing.

Between survival and self-connection. Someone shared their shift from achievement to belonging with me:

*"I used to believe my value was in what I produced. Now I know it's in who I am."*

## **Anxiety: Your Body's Way of Staying Ready**

Anxiety is the result of having to stay constantly on alert. It's the constant scanning, overthinking every message, replaying conversations long after they're done. The knot in your stomach before a phone call, the inability to rest without guilt. It's the part

of you that's always waiting for something to go wrong, because something inside you says,

*"you haven't done enough"*

If you grew up in a home where safety was uncertain. Where emotions flare without warning. Where love and fear came wrapped together. Then, of course, your system learned to stay on guard.

Anxiety is not irrational. It's your body's deep intelligence trying to keep you out of danger.

### **A Personal Thread: The Dread That Greets Me**

For years, anxiety hummed through me like background static, a constant, invisible hum. I smiled. I worked. I coped. But there was always something just beneath the surface, a quiet urgency, a clenched belly, a chest that never quite exhaled. Even when things were calm, I was waiting for them to fall apart. It wasn't a flaw in me. It was the residue of a life lived without safety.

Now, things are different. I no longer live with that constant hum during the day. I've rewired so much. The catastrophising thoughts, the spirals of "*what if?*", they rarely visit anymore.

But still, there is a moment. Every morning.

In that strange space between dreaming and waking, before I'm fully back in my body, she comes. The fear. The dread.

She slips in quietly, sometimes disguised as a thought:

*"You forgot that thing. There's too much to do. You're running out of time."*

Then the feeling follows: a constriction in my chest, a sense of urgency, pointlessness, panic. A fear that claws at my heart.

It feels existential, a whisper of futility, The ever-tightening grip of "*what's the point*" The ache of knowing time is finite, The terror of not having done everything I want to do while I'm alive.

This is the imprint of 14 years of surviving trauma.

This is the nervous system's echo, still learning that it can feel safe in the morning light.

Some mornings, I write it out. Name her, meet her, breathe with her. To remind myself: *She is not all of me*. She is a scared part. A loyal part. A voice that learned long ago to anticipate danger in the silence. And when I open my eyes, she retreats.

## **A Client's Voice**

*"I used to wake up with that awful rush of panic, like I was already behind on a day that hadn't even started. My chest would tighten before I'd even opened my eyes. I thought I was just wired wrong. But working through the Freedom Programme helped me realise: it wasn't me, it was the way my body had learned to survive. I don't dread the mornings anymore. Now I start my day gently, knowing I'm safe."*

## **The Protector in Disguise**

Perfectionism didn't begin as vanity or ambition.

It began as a child's quiet plea for safety. As a nervous system strategy to prevent chaos. As a desperate attempt to earn love, approval, and a sense of worth.

You didn't become a perfectionist because you wanted to impress people. You became a perfectionist because you wanted to feel safe in a world that kept shifting beneath your feet.

You realised that 'good' behaviour might earn praise. That excellence could shield you from criticism. That if you could just get it right, maybe you could avoid the outbursts, the cold silences, the punishments.

So you got top marks. Tried harder. Took care of everyone. Smiled through it all.

And you were told you were driven, responsible, high-achieving.

But underneath it?

Was fear.

A fear of doing it wrong. Of being blamed. Of being seen, and rejected.

So you polished every rough edge. Held impossibly high standards. Struggled to rest, or begin, or stop, because it never felt quite "done."

And even now, it might still whisper:

*"You have to do better."*

*"You should have handled that."*

*"Don't let them see the cracks."*

But my darling, what if those cracks aren't flaws? What if they're places where the light is trying to get in?

For many of us, perfectionism wasn't just about safety. It was about love. About approval. About trying to earn our parents' acceptance by becoming who they needed us to be.

You may have learned that love was conditional. Dependent on achievement, compliance, or fitting their mould. Perhaps your parents measured worth by how much you achieved, how well you behaved, how little space you took up.

And so, you became the good girl. The helpful one. The one who never made a fuss.

You shaped yourself into their expectations. Even if it meant abandoning parts of your true self.

Because when love is given for what you do, not who you are, Perfection becomes your armour.

## **A Personal Thread: The Birthday That Broke the Spell**

Perfectionism doesn't always scream. Sometimes it plans. Sometimes it makes lists. Sometimes it hires the villa, coordinates the colours, writes the itinerary, and forgets to ask for help.

It was my birthday. A big one. I'd hired a beautiful Spanish villa, invited both of my brothers, our children, friends. I wanted connection with those I love. But underneath it all? I was terrified it wouldn't be perfect. So I organised. Over-prepared. Micromanaged. Wrote ten pages of to-do lists that only I could see.

And when the people I loved most didn't intuitively know what I needed, I fumed silently. I slammed cupboards. Stomped. Fell into martyr mode.

*"This is all for them, why don't they care how hard I'm trying?"*

But the truth was, they did care. I just hadn't let them in.

Then came the moment that broke the spell. My beautiful, beloved son, looked me in the eye and gently said:

*"Mum, we love you. But we can't help you if you won't tell us how. You're making yourself miserable trying to make everyone happy."*

And with those words, something inside me unravelled. I burst into tears.

What I realised in that moment was this: Perfectionism is fear. It's control, disguised as care. It's the child in us who once believed love had to be earned through performance, now orchestrating adulthood like an event planner on edge.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

## **How Perfectionism Lives in the Body**

Perfectionism is more than a thought pattern. It's in your posture, tension in your neck. A catch in your breath, a stomach clenched with worry, scared you'd got it wrong. Your jaw clenching in anticipation of judgment. It's your body, your nervous system saying:

*"If I do well, maybe they'll approve."*

*"If I do everything right, maybe I'll be okay."*

*"If I stay alert, maybe I'll stay safe."*

*"If I make myself useful, maybe I'll be loved."*

*"If I stay in control, maybe their criticism won't hurt."*

*"Maybe this time they'll see me."*

Perfectionism often begins as a survival strategy when love was conditional. When you knew that everything could turn to chaos without warning. When approval came through performance, and

safety meant scanning every room, every face, every possibility for what might go wrong.

Over time, your body began to live in this pattern. Muscles tense. Breath shallow. Sleep elusive. The to-do list became your lifeline. Achievement became your armour.

And while others might admire your ‘drive’ or ‘standards’, only you know the cost: The exhaustion. The pressure. The never-ending loop of "not quite enough."

But here’s the tender truth: You were never meant to carry that load. You were never meant to earn your worth through effort.

Your body didn’t choose perfectionism because you’re demanding or controlling. It chose it because, once upon a time, it was the safest way to exist.

## **A Client’s Voice**

*"Before working with you Sarah, I truly believed if I didn't do everything perfectly, people would leave. I couldn't rest. I couldn't stop. I was constantly proving my worth. But through our work that belief changed. I was able to trust that I didn't have to earn love by being perfect. I've never felt more at peace with myself."*

## **The Productivity Trap: When Doing Becomes the Way You Disappear**

You’re always moving. Always producing. Always trying to keep up with an invisible, unattainable list that lives in your mind.

From the outside, it looks like you’re thriving. Organised. Accomplished. Impressive. You never miss a deadline. You never drop the ball.

But on the inside?

You're tired. Tense. Haunted by the feeling that no matter how much you do, it will never be enough.

And beneath all that movement?

A quiet truth: You knew that slowing down didn't feel safe. That being still meant being seen. And being seen meant being vulnerable. So you kept going. To stay one step ahead. To disappear into the doing.

## **When Productivity Becomes a Survival Suit**

For many survivors of childhood trauma, productivity becomes a way of managing emotional pain. You don't just stay busy because you want to, you stay busy because you feel like you have to.

Because you were praised when you achieved, not when you rested, that being helpful, perfect, useful, might keep you safe. Because somewhere deep inside, there's a little voice whispering:

*"If I stop, it will all catch up with me."*

The trauma wasn't just what happened, it was also the pressure to be okay, to keep going, to not be a burden. Over time, productivity becomes a mask:

- To numb discomfort
- To avoid rejection
- To outrun the shame you never asked for, that was never yours
- To prove you're worth loving

But the mask is heavy. And it hides your needs, even from yourself.

## A Client's Voice: When Survival Becomes Unsustainable

*"I thought I had to prove my worth through how much I could do. I was constantly on the go, always feeling behind, always trying to stay one step ahead. But when I really looked, I realised I was scared to stop. I didn't know who I was without the next goal. Working with you helped me realise that I was worthy of rest. I was worthy of care. I didn't need to earn love through exhaustion anymore."*

Burnout is not a standalone struggle. It's the natural culmination of all the survival patterns we've named; the people-pleasing, perfectionism, overworking, emotional suppression, and hyper-independence that once kept you safe.

We have explored how your body learned to survive: by anticipating danger, staying busy, proving your worth, and putting others' needs first. Over time these protective patterns without become a prison.

Burnout is what happens when your nervous system, your hormones, your heart and your spirit can no longer carry the weight of those patterns.

It is a biological reckoning. The moment when the cost of coping becomes too high to ignore.

What follows is a naming of your body's final plea: to stop running and start listening.

## **Burnout: The Body's Response to Too Much, For Too Long**

Burnout isn't laziness. It isn't weakness. It isn't you saying,

*"I can't be bothered".*

It is your body's way of saying,

*"I can't keep running at this pace."*

For many survivors of childhood trauma, burnout is the result of a lifetime existing in survival mode. Always producing. Always proving. Always anticipating what's needed before it's even asked.

You may look 'high-functioning' on the outside: Meeting deadlines. Hitting goals. Holding it all together. But inside, you're wired and tired, operating on adrenaline and the subconscious belief that your worth is only in what you do and achieve.

And then comes the crash. The exhaustion that no sleep fixes. The brain fog that won't lift. The tears that rise without warning. The body aches, flares, and illnesses that seem to appear from nowhere.

This is your body communicating with you in the only way it can, first whispering, then screaming,

*"...enough!"*

### **A Nervous System in Overdrive**

Burnout is the result of a body that has been in survival mode for far too long. When safety wasn't something you had growing up, your nervous system became overactive, constantly scanning for risk, constantly adapting, constantly scanning for danger.

This is the rhythm that many of us who have survived childhood trauma live in.

## **Over-activation. Collapse. Over-activation. Collapse.**

We learned that our worth is tied to what we can do. So you kept going.

You formed the beliefs:

- That rest was indulgent, dangerous or selfish.
- That slowing down made you vulnerable.
- That to avoid being harmed, dismissed, or forgotten, you had to be useful.
- That achievement might win you love, or at the very least, reduce the threat.

And so you coped the only way your body knew how:

- You kept going.
- You kept producing.
- You tried to outrun the emotional pain and discomfort by staying busy.

But there's a cost.

## **The Real Symptoms of Burnout**

Here's how burnout really shows up, beyond the buzzword:

- Sleep becomes fractured. Even when your body is exhausted, your mind won't stop. You're physically knackered, but you can't sleep.
- Joy feels distant. Calm feels foreign. Stillness feels unsafe.

- The to-do list becomes your identity. You don't know who you are without something to accomplish.
- Numbness sets in. You're still showing up, but you've stopped feeling fully present.
- Your immune system falters. Illness, flare-ups, fatigue, your body is calling time when you can't say it.

## **A Personal Thread: The Day My Nervous System Said "Enough"**

Burnout doesn't always arrive as a breakdown. Sometimes it comes when your body says what your voice can't *say*.

I had been an A&E Sister for 15 years. I was experienced. Responsible. In control. But in a place where life and death meet in a heartbeat, the weight of what you carry doesn't stay in the walls of the hospital. It buries itself in your body.

We could go from treating a sprained ankle to trying to save someone with catastrophic injuries, in the space of minutes. And we had to move with it. No pause. No breath.

I was already weary, not just from the hours or the pressure, but from the cumulative grief of breaking the news that someone's loved one wasn't coming home. It was the children who finally broke something open in me.

It was a Sunday. We got the call: a quad bike accident. A child. Serious injuries. He was five years old. The same age as my son.

I was already preparing myself as the sirens grew closer. We did everything we could. But we couldn't save him.

I was with his mother when she was told. I held her while she keened, that primal, soul-splitting sound of a mother losing her

child. The pain, the disbelief, the devastation. Her grief became mine.

When it was time to lay him out, I couldn't stop weeping. All I could see was my own son. The boy's body, wrapped in a sheet, was placed into the adult-sized cold metal mortuary box. Too big. Too wrong. Too final.

And I knew, in that moment, I couldn't keep doing this.

Not because I wasn't capable. But because my nervous system had finally reached its limit. There was no more room to compartmentalise, to push through, to carry more. I needed to go home. To hold my child. To feel what I had spent years absorbing but never expressing.

Burnout didn't arrive as laziness. It arrived as grief. As humanity. As my body, heart, and soul saying: *"You have done enough."* A client felt the same.

*"I used to think something was wrong with me because I couldn't switch off. Then I learned: my body thought it was saving me. That made me want to stop fighting it, and start understanding it."*

## **A Gentle Reflection: A Love Letter to the You Who Kept Going**

Place a hand on your chest, right over the heart that kept beating through it all.

Close your eyes if that feels safe.

Slow down your breathing.

And then, gently, from the deepest part of you, whisper to the girl who had to grow up too fast:

*"You did what you had to do." "You kept us going when everything felt too much." "You felt you had to perform, to be perfect, to be productive, in order to survive." "I see now how tired you were. How brave you were. How alone you felt."*

Breathe.

Allow your shoulders lower as the truth sinks in.

Acknowledge all you had to do to survive.

And now?

Now you're here. Beginning to listen. Beginning to understand. Beginning to reconnect with the parts of you that are tired of pretending to be okay.

Say gently:

*"It's safe to slow down now."  
"You are loved, not for what you do, but for who you are."*

Let your body, so used to holding tension, begin to exhale.

You need to rest. Having time for yourself is not selfish. You feel tired because you are exhausted.

You are healing. Gift yourself the grace of time.

## **When Doing Stops Working**

And sometimes, after all the striving, the proving, the over-functioning.

When the lists are ticked, but the emptiness remains.

When the pace becomes unbearable, and even perfection can't protect us.

Something shifts. We stop. Not by choice, but because we can't stay in the pain.

We go quiet. We disconnect. We pull away from the world, and from ourselves.

Not because we don't care. Not because we're lazy. But because our nervous system has run out of options.

When survival scripts no longer keep us safe, the body finds a new way: It numbs. It forgets. It flattens the world so that we don't have to feel how much it hurts.

This is dissociation.

And it's where we're going next, into the tender terrain of what it means to feel nothing at all, and what it takes to come back home.

## **A Gentle Invitation**

If this chapter resonated with you, remember that these are survival patterns, signs that you've been holding it all together for far too long.

And if you're ready to understand your patterns with more clarity and compassion, I've created a tender self-discovery quiz just for you to gently explore where you are on your healing journey.

It's called the *Clear, Calm & Confident Quiz*, it's designed to help you identify how your nervous system has been coping, and what

could be possible for you. Gentle insight. Loving awareness. And a deeper sense of self-understanding.

When you're ready to take the next step, you can take the quiz here:

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>

## **An Invitation to Explore with Compassionate Curiosity**

Place your hand on your heart.

Take one deep, generous breath.

And ask gently:

*"Which part of me is tired from trying so hard to stay safe?"*

Let your body answer. Not your mind, your body. The part that's been doing, perfecting, pushing.

Now whisper to that part:

*"You don't have to protect me like this anymore."*

Exhale as you give yourself permission to rest.

We're not done yet, love, but you've come so far.

And in our next chapter, we'll explore what happens when the body can no longer keep up the doing, when it slips into silence, disconnection, or numbness.

This, too, is part of the path home.

# 6: WHEN YOU FEEL NOTHING AT ALL

There's a quiet kind of suffering that comes with not feeling. A dullness. A fog. A flatness that settles in the bones. And for so many survivors of childhood trauma, it becomes normal. You go through the motions. You tick the boxes. You care for others. But you don't feel like you're really here.

You wonder why joy feels so out of reach. Why you can't remember whole chunks of your childhood. Why you sometimes feel like you're watching your life, not living it. Why you smile when telling painful stories, or feel nothing when something good happens. And you blame yourself. Here's the truth you were never told:

## **Dissociation is not detachment. It is devotion.**

It is the body's instinctive way of helping you survive what should never have happened.

When your world wasn't safe, when trauma, neglect, or violation arrived, our brilliant, loyal nervous system stepped in. It said,

*"This is too much to feel. Let me help you disappear, just enough, so you can keep going."*

Dissociation is the brain dimming the lights, switching off sensation, disconnecting from unbearable physical or emotional pain. It's what happens when fight and flight aren't possible. When you couldn't run. When you couldn't scream. When you couldn't make it stop. It is a highly effective survival strategy. A biological brilliance that helped you do the impossible: stay alive once it's over.

And maybe, until now, no one ever named this for you. No one ever explained why you feel numb, lost, or cut off. No one gave language to the invisible experience you've lived with for decades.

That changes here.

Because when we name dissociation, we offer you a truth that undoes the shame. Dissociation is the body's way of stepping away when staying present felt impossible. It happens automatically, a protective reflex shaped by experiences that overwhelmed your capacity to cope. When you couldn't leave the situation, your nervous system found a way to help you survive it. Quietly. Invisibly. Effectively.

And when we name it, we can meet it with compassion.

This chapter is an unmasking, an unveiling of the survival response you didn't know had a name. It's a quiet revolution of understanding, where confusion begins to clear and self-blame starts to loosen its grip.

For perhaps the first time, you'll see that the numbness, the fog, the strange way you seem to disappear from yourself, it all had a purpose. With this clarity, you are invited into a fuller, deeper understanding of yourself than you may have ever known, and you begin to forgive the parts of you that learned to leave because they left to save you.

## **The Body's Way of Leaving Without Leaving**

Dissociation isn't a choice. You don't decide to enter this state. It's what your body *had* to do, when what was happening was too much to bear.

When you didn't feel safe, especially in childhood, especially from the very adults who were meant to protect you, the body does something extraordinary. It protects you by partially leaving.

You may have stayed in the room. You may have smiled. You may have spoken, obeyed, even comforted the person hurting you. But a part of you, the most tender, most feeling part, quietly slipped away.

That part knew:

*"This is too much. It's not safe to be here. I will stay, but I will not feel."*

That is dissociation.

A brilliant, adaptive, loyal act of survival.

When you couldn't run. When you couldn't scream. When your power was smaller than theirs. Your nervous system whispered:

*"If you can't leave, I'll help you leave in the only way we can."*

Your voice may have quietened. Your heartbeat slowed. And your thoughts, drifted.

This wasn't a choice you made. It's biology. It's the ancient wisdom of a system designed to preserve life at all costs.

Even now, years later, your body might still keep doing this. When someone raises their voice. When you feel overwhelmed. When intimacy feels too close. You might disappear again, not visibly, but inwardly.

And maybe, for the first time, you're realising: That was your body doing what it once had to do to keep you safe.

Let's honour that brilliance, not shame it as we begin to understand what happens inside a nervous system when staying present felt impossible.

## **The Science of Safety: Your Nervous System's Emergency Exit**

To truly understand dissociation, we begin with the body's language, the nervous system.

Every moment of every day, your nervous system is scanning your environment, asking the question: *Am I safe?*

It does this beneath conscious thought. Before you speak. Before you react. It listens for cues, a voice tone, a facial expression, a sudden noise, and it responds.

This is where the polyvagal theory we mentioned earlier gives us a map, a ladder of safety and survival.

Imagine your nervous system as a ladder with three rungs:

### **Top rung: Ventral Vagal**

This is where we feel safe, connected, and clear. We can relax, feel joy, be creative, ask for help. Our social engagement system is online. Life feels possible here.

### **Middle rung: Sympathetic (Fight or Flight)**

This is the body getting ready to act. Adrenaline rises, muscles tense. You might feel anxious, restless, irritable. You're prepared to run or defend. The world feels like a threat.

### **Bottom rung: Dorsal Vagal (Freeze/Shutdown)**

When danger feels inescapable the system pulls the final lever. Your body goes quiet, slow, distant. Heart rate drops. Movement

becomes sluggish. Thought blurs. You disappear inwardly to survive the unbearable.

This bottom rung, dorsal shutdown, is what dissociation feels like.

When you were small, and the person hurting you was also the one feeding you, dressing you, holding authority over your life, you couldn't run or fight.

Your body knew: This is hopeless. I cannot escape. And so, it dropped you down the ladder, into shutdown, into numbness, into survival.

This was not a mistake. This was adaptive brilliance. It was your biology choosing the safest possible path through the impossible.

The vagus nerve, the highway of safety signals in your body, did this faster than you could think. You didn't decide to freeze. Just like you don't decide to blink or sweat. Your body acted to preserve you.

And that freeze state? That's where dissociation lives. It's what happens when the world becomes too much, and your system gives you a way to keep going.

This understanding matters. Because once we understand this, nervous system ladder, we can begin to gently climb it again. One rung at a time. One safe breath at a time.

## **When You Couldn't Fight or Flee: What Happened in Your Body**

As a child, danger is rarely a situation you can run from.

If the person hurting you is your parent, your caregiver, your teacher, someone bigger, older, or more powerful, escape isn't an option. And if the threat comes not once, but repeatedly,

unpredictably, or from someone who is supposed to love you, your nervous system learns: Fight won't work. Flight isn't possible.

So it finds another way.

When fighting and fleeing are judged impossible, the body takes the third path: It freezes. It goes still. It dissociates.

This is the dorsal vagal shutdown we explored earlier, but now we meet it as a lived, embodied experience.

You might know that there were moments as a child where your body felt far away. You went quiet. You couldn't speak. You stared at the ceiling. You felt like you weren't really there.

This was survival.

In the face of the unbearable, your body shut down sensation, slowed your heart, blurred time, and protected you from the full weight of pain. It numbed you, emotionally, physically, cognitively, just enough to keep you breathing. Just enough to allow you to remain in the environment, while sparing you from being fully present to what was happening.

This isn't something you chose. It's your biology acting in service to your survival.

When a child's world is unsafe, dissociation becomes the emergency exit. It keeps you small, still, compliant, sometimes even "pleasing", in an attempt to avoid more harm. And it works. It protects you, not just from pain, but from obliteration. From the kind of emotional overwhelm that would be too much for a young system to carry.

It's important we name this clearly:

Your freeze was your body saving your life the only way it knew how. You survived because your system pulled you under, just deep enough, just far enough, to endure the unendurable.

And yes, that shutdown may still linger today, in numbness, in forgetfulness, in the way you sometimes vanish from yourself.

But it began in love. In your body's deep, instinctive desire to protect you. Not just then, but still.

## **A Personal Thread: The Moment I Disappeared**

When my stepfather took me, I disappeared.

Not in body, I was still in the room, still on the mattress in the attic, still in the dark space we called "the dungeon" under our bungalow, but somewhere inside, I was already gone.

I didn't know it then, but I had learned to dissociate. It was the only way to survive what should have been un-survivable.

I escaped into stories. Into books. Into places where girls like me weren't being hurt by the people who were supposed to protect them.

I loved the books by Arthur Ransome, I devoured them all, from *Swallows and Amazons* to *Secret Water*, as I read I escaped, to the Lake District with its endless adventure and fresh air. John, Susan, Titty, Roger. Nancy and Peggy. They weren't just characters to me. They were my friends. My safe place. My freedom.

While he did what he did, I sailed the lakes. I pitched tents. I imagined myself tacking into the wind, away from danger. I

wasn't there. I was far, far away, where baddies always lost and good always prevailed.

From the outside, no one would have guessed. I went to school. Played in the playground. Drew Holly Hobbie girls from the cards I was sent. I was a "good girl." I talked about what I'd be when I grew up. I smiled. I functioned.

But my body, my psyche, wasn't really there.

This wasn't a single incident. This was my normal. Fourteen years of it. And so, my mind did what it had to do: it split my stepfather into two people, the one who 'loved' me when we were alone, and the one we three children worked tirelessly to appease. We walked on eggshells to keep the peace. We never knew what would set him off. There were no rules, only the constant threat of, and regular dishing out of corporal punishment.

Home was not safe. But we were not allowed to be anywhere else. We were his little slaves. And my mum, she wasn't my safe person either. He had turned her against me. Made her jealous. Made me her rival. She rejected me. Withheld love. I didn't understand why. So I stopped feeling. There was no comfort, no escape, no one to tell. The world became something happening around me, not something I was in.

Dissociation helped me survive not just the abuse, but the loneliness. The rejection. The incomprehensible grief of being hated by the one person whose love I needed most. Only later, as a teenager, did I begin to feel the hopelessness. Only recently have I begun to realise the enormity of what I have lived through.

But in those early years, I survived by not being present. Because the present was too much. Too painful. Too dangerous. So I disappeared. And that disappearance saved my life.

## **What It Looks Like Now: Everyday Disguises of Dissociation**

For so many survivors of childhood trauma, dissociation becomes the air we breathe. We don't choose it, it was chosen for us by a mind that had to shut down to survive.

And even now, long after the threat has passed, these patterns remain. You might not call it dissociation. You might call it being forgetful. Distracted. Tired. Numb. Zoned out. You might think you're just "not very emotional" or "bad at remembering things."

But the truth is, your nervous system learned to adapt, and it did so brilliantly.

Below are some of the most common everyday ways dissociation shows up in adulthood. As you read, you might recognise yourself in some, or many, of them. This isn't a list of symptoms. It's a mirror, offering you the language to understand what your body's been trying to protect you from all along.

### **Spacing Out**

*You glaze over in meetings, lose track of conversations, find yourself staring into space.* This is your system quietly dimming the input. Your brain has learned to protect you by taking little breaks from reality.

### **Losing Time**

*You have no memory of the drive home. You look at the clock and hours have passed.* These blank spots aren't forgetfulness; they're signs that your nervous system briefly 'checked you out' because it sensed overwhelm.

## **Running on Autopilot**

*You get everything done, but feel like a robot. You smile, function, perform, but don't really feel.* This is the body executing well-worn survival scripts. You're doing what needs to be done, without truly being here.

## **During Intimacy**

*You're touched with love, but your body doesn't respond. You feel far away.* This isn't about desire, it's about safety. Your body holds the memory that closeness once meant harm, shame or pain, and it's protecting you by pulling you out.

## **Dream-Fog (Derealisation)**

*The world feels unreal. Like you're watching life through glass. Colours are dull. Sounds feel far away.* This fog isn't your fault. It's your nervous system pressing mute on a world that once felt too loud, too close.

## **'Not Me' Moments (Depersonalisation)**

*You hear yourself speak and barely recognise your voice. Your hands don't feel like yours.* This is your brain creating distance from the self that was once in danger as a protective barrier.

## **Chameleon Socialising**

*You blend in so well you forget who you are. You laugh on cue, mirror moods, adapt to everyone.* It started as a survival skill, keep others happy, stay safe. But it can leave you unsure of who you really are.

## **The Emotional Mute Button**

*You tell traumatic stories with a smile. You cry at random things, but not at the big stuff.* Your emotions aren't missing, they've just been shelved, waiting for a time when it feels safe enough to feel.

## **The Thrill-Seeking or 'Just to Feel' Urges**

*You chase danger, pain, or intensity, to remind yourself you're alive.* After so much numbness, the body sometimes seeks extremes to shake itself awake.

## **Blankness During Conflict or Intimacy**

*Arguments or closeness leave you with no memory of what was said. You nod, agree, forget.* This is the freeze reflex, trying to help you stay close while staying attempting to stay safe.

## **Chronic Fatigue or Emotional Flatness**

*You're tired all the time. You feel like you're moving through sludge. Nothing feels good.* Freeze takes energy. The shutdown state may look still, but it's burning power quietly, fiercely.

## **Clumsiness and Delayed Pain**

*You bruise easily. You stub your toe and feel it 10 seconds later. Your body seems "off."* This is the result of sensory processing being dialled down. It's like your body's boundaries are on pause. Dissociation is often subtle. Invisible. Passed off as 'normal.' But these quiet signs matter.

They are the whispers of a nervous system still operating under an old contract, one that promised survival, no matter the cost.

Now, as you bring this awareness to the surface, you begin the process of renegotiating that contract.

## **Why Feelings Go Missing After Childhood Trauma**

Before we name the disguises dissociation wears today, let's gently explore why your emotions may feel distant, blunted, or confusing. This isn't you doing anything wrong. It's the result of a protective reflex your body learned long ago, when big feelings weren't safe to feel.

### **Your Body Learned That Big Emotions Were**

**Dangerous** If you grew up in an environment where expressing fear, sadness, anger, or even joy led to punishment, rejection, or more chaos, your nervous system adapted. It created a powerful rule for survival:

**"Strong emotions aren't safe. Turn them off."**

This wasn't a conscious choice, it was your body's way of keeping you out of further harm.

### **Dissociation Became the Emergency Shut-Off Switch**

To honour that rule, your brain developed a shortcut: it began to disconnect the part of you that feels from the part of you that thinks. Sensations in your body might still happen, the racing heart, tight chest, or stomach flip, but the message never arrives in full form. It's like the phone signal cut out pulled mid-ring. The signal never reaches you.

### **Practice Made Permanent**

Each time you felt unsafe to feel, your system repeated this shut-off reflex. Over time, it became automatic. Now, even when you are safe, your body might still default to that old wiring, muting emotions before you can notice.

You're deeply protective of a heart that learned emotions could be dangerous.

## How This Shows Up Today

- You might say "*I'm fine,*" even as your shoulders tighten.
- Tears surprise you during a film, and you don't know why.
- Friends ask what you're feeling, and you reply with what you think instead.

It's not that you have no feelings, it's that the connection between body and awareness was severed for protection, and now it's being gently rewired.

## The Good News: That Connection Can Be Rebuilt

With gentle curiosity, body-based support, and trauma-informed care, this old survival script can be updated. You can teach your nervous system that feeling is now safe, that the alarm no longer needs to sound.

Each pause to name a sensation, each breath into your belly, each tiny act of reconnection tells your body a new truth:

*"It's safe to stay. I can feel this now."*

This is your body's loyalty, revealed. This is the wisdom of a system that kept you safe the only way it knew how. And this is the beginning of something new, the moment you begin to meet those patterns with understanding, not self-blame. Because every time you left yourself, it was to stay alive. And every time you come back, it's an act of profound self-trust and self-love.

## The Missing Pages: Why You Can't Remember

Not being able to remember the past is incredibly frustrating. I can't remember much of my childhood. Like me, you might know where you lived, which schools you went to, the timeline of your childhood in facts, but not with any sense of feeling. No warm

memories of birthdays or holidays. Just a blank space where there should be something.

You may have fragments, a photo, a sentence from a relative, a vague impression, but no full scenes. No sense of being there. And for years, you thought this meant you were "making it up," or that the trauma couldn't have been that bad if you don't have clear memories of it.

But what if the missing pages of your story are proof of your nervous system's brilliance.

This is dissociative amnesia, this doesn't mean you forgot. Again, it's protection.

When a child experiences overwhelming pain, fear, or confusion, the body can shut down the part of the brain responsible for recording memories (the hippocampus). Under the weight of intense stress hormones, the system simply can't press "save." Instead, it files the moment in pieces, a smell, a sensation, a burst of sound, scattered and unlinked, like puzzle pieces without a box.

The memories are still there but they haven't been stored in a way that allows you to recall them like a story.

You might notice this through:

- **Missing time:** not remembering entire chunks of your childhood.
- **Emotional blanks:** recalling an event in facts but feeling nothing when you describe it.
- **Gaps around trauma:** remembering what happened before and after, but the event itself is gone.
- **Sudden flashbacks:** unexpected emotional surges when a scent, song, or comment opens a hidden door in your brain.

Your body was never trying to erase your story. It was protecting you from being flooded by it, until you had the safety, support, and capacity to integrate it.

And now? Now you begin to piece it together with gentle curiosity, spaciousness, and a deep knowing that your mind did what it needed to do.

Your missing memories are not a void. They are a vault. And your body holds the key until it senses you are safe enough to open it.

### **Flashbacks: When the Past Replays in Your Body**

Flashbacks can feel like emotional ambushes. Sudden. Intrusive. Disorienting. They arrive without warning, hijack your body, and pull you into a moment you don't want to revisit. A smell, a sound, a glance and suddenly you're not here anymore.

They can unravel a day, a conversation, or your sense of safety in an instant. And if you don't know what's happening, it's easy to think you're losing your grip. You aren't, this is your body's way of processing a wound that was never given the chance to heal.

When something overwhelming happened in childhood, especially when there was no escape, no support, and no way to understand or express what was happening, the brain couldn't properly process the experience.

What you saw, heard, smelled, felt, all of it was stored, not as a cohesive memory, but as fragmented snapshots in the nervous system. Pieces of time frozen without a timestamp. Sensory fragments locked away for safekeeping.

These fragments live in the part of the brain responsible for survival. They're not stored in language or logic, so they can't be

recalled on purpose, but they can be reactivated by something that *feels similar* to the original event.

This is what a flashback truly is: Not a memory you choose to revisit, but a sensory echo triggered when your current environment unconsciously reminds your nervous system of a time it was in danger.

A smell. A tone of voice. A certain light. A raised eyebrow. A feeling in your stomach you can't explain.

The body reacts before the mind even realises what's happening. The danger is not back. It happens because your brain is trying to protect you, using information that was never fully processed, filed, or understood.

This is your nervous system doing what it was wired to do: Scan for threat. React fast. Keep you alive.

But now, you get to update the system. With awareness. With compassion. With presence.

You can say to your body, gently:

*"This is a memory, not a moment. I am here now. And I am safe."*

Because understanding why flashbacks happen gives you back something that trauma once took away: *Choice*. Not in whether they arise, but in how you meet them.

## **Meeting a Flashback: A Grounding Practice**

When a flashback rises, your body believes it is back in the danger. And yes, its horrible. You may feel frozen, overwhelmed,

dissociated, or flooded. This practice offers a way to gently interrupt that loop and anchor back into the present.

### **Try this sequence when a flashback arises:**

#### **1. Orient to Now**

Look around the room. Name five things you can see. Say them out loud if you can. This brings your brain back to the here and now.

#### **2. Find Contact**

Place your hand on your chest, or press your feet firmly into the floor. Feel the contact. Feel the support beneath you.

#### **3. Speak to Your Body**

Say, softly: *"This is a memory. I am not there now. I am here. I am safe here."* Repeat it as many times as needed.

#### **4. Engage Your Senses**

Sip water. Smell something grounding, like citrus or essential oil. Hold something textured, a stone, a soft fabric, and let your senses reconnect to now.

#### **5. Breathe into the Present**

Inhale for a count of four. Exhale for a count of six. Let the breath remind you: your body is not in the past anymore.

You do not can't force your way through a flashback. You only need to stay close to yourself with tenderness.

Each time you meet your body with presence, you loosen trauma's grip. Each time you stay with yourself, you lay a new pathway, one that says:

*"I am here. I can be with this. I am safe enough to stay."*

## **The Body Remembers: When Sensations Don't Make Sense**

Sometimes, your body tells a story your mind doesn't understand.

A sudden start when you realise you aren't alone in the room. A wave of nausea at a harmless scent. A freeze response during intimacy. Tears that arrive with no warning, no clear reason.

You might dismiss it.

*"I'm just being silly."*

*"I don't know why I feel this way."*

But your body knows.

This is the quiet truth of body memories.

When trauma happened, especially in childhood, your thinking brain may have checked out to protect you, but your body kept the score. Your senses stayed online. Your muscles recorded. The tension in your jaw, the knot in your stomach, the burn in your throat, they stored what the conscious mind couldn't bear to process.

And because those sensations were never fully felt or integrated, they linger.

Years later, a tone of voice, a scent, or a certain posture can awaken the same sensations, not as thoughts, but as body echoes. Your mind may say,

*"Nothing's wrong."*

But your body says,

*"This feels familiar. This feels like then."*

You aren't being dramatic or overreacting. These survival imprints, the body's attempt to complete what was never safe to feel.

When a child experiences trauma, the body absorbs the fear, the pain, the helplessness. But if there's no support, no soothing, no safe adult to help regulate those sensations, they don't get discharged. They stay trapped. And the nervous system files them away in a "*do not open*" drawer, until something now looks like something then.

This is why body memories are so often confusing. You can't connect them to a narrative because they *aren't* a narrative. They're fragments. Stored in your muscles. Held in your breath. Echoed in your gut.

And yet, they're real. Valid. Deserving of compassion.

Body memories are your system's way of saying,

*"Something hurt here. Something scared me. I didn't get to finish this."*

Healing begins not with trying to make sense of the feeling cognitively, with your mind, but by *listening*. By noticing. By grounding. By gently telling your body:

*"I hear you. I'm here. And it's safe to feel, just a little, now."*

Over time your body begins to trust that it is no longer in danger. That the pain can be met, slowly, with presence and care. And that it doesn't have to carry the past alone anymore.

## Why You Still Disappear: The Legacy of Attachment and Co-dependency

Dissociation didn't begin in adulthood. It began in the earliest relationships that shaped your nervous system, in the ongoing, everyday experience of needing love from people who weren't safe.

Attachment theory helps us understand this. As children, we're wired to seek closeness. To look for comfort, for reassurance, for co-regulation. But when the person we need is also the person who frightens, shames, or hurts us, the attachment system faces an impossible task.

So the body finds a way to survive the contradiction. It said,

*"If being close means danger, I'll go numb, I'll turn down the volume on my feelings, my needs, my voice, so I can stay attached and still bear it."*

This isn't a conscious choice. It's a nervous system compromise. It's the blueprint that gets laid down: *closeness equals pain*, and the safest way to manage it is to disappear a little inside.

That blueprint doesn't just vanish with age.

As adults, this often becomes what we call co-dependency, the habit of staying tuned to everyone else's needs, focused on them, while staying disconnected from your own.

As a child, it kept the peace. It stopped the outbursts. It earned scraps of approval. It made you safe enough.

But now?

It keeps you far from yourself.

Here's how it shows up:

- You defer to others even when you disagree.
- You sense everyone's mood before you notice your own.
- You say "yes" before you've checked in with your body.
- You stay in relationships that drain you, just to avoid being alone.
- You feel anxious when you're not "useful" to someone.
- You can't relax unless everyone else is okay.

And even more subtly:

- You're with your loved ones, but feel miles away, present in body, absent in self.
- You respond with logic when someone needs emotion, then cry later alone.
- A sharp comment or raised voice causes you to go blank, go quiet, and abandon the moment.
- Calm relationships feel dull, while intensity feels like connection, even when it's painful.
- You default to being the fixer, the peacemaker, the reliable one, while your needs stay unspoken.
- You remember little of what you've shared with others, birthdays, holidays, deep conversations, because your body wasn't fully there to begin with.
- Intimacy becomes touch without feeling, presence without connection.
- Sometimes, without warning, the numbness cracks and a flood of emotion pours out, anger, grief, panic, leaving you and your partner disoriented.

This is the legacy of a nervous system trained to survive by merging, appeasing, and disappearing. And it's tied directly to dissociation.

Because in order to make someone else happy, to keep the love you needed, you had to turn yourself down. Turn down your hunger. Your boundaries. Your anger. Even your joy.

That's what makes this work so tender: Healing dissociation means coming back into your body, learning that you can stay with yourself, even when someone else is upset. Even when you're not being useful. Even when you're not perfect.

It's about updating the blueprint.

Saying to your nervous system, over and over:

*"I can stay with myself and still be loved."*

*"I don't have to disappear to be safe."*

This doesn't happen overnight. But it begins with noticing the reflex. Honouring where it came from. And gently, consistently, practising a new way.

## **The Invitation: It Was Never Your Fault**

There's a grief that lives beneath the numbness. A shame that whispers,

*"Why didn't I fight?"*

*"Why didn't I scream?"*

*"Why didn't I run away?"*

But that's a story told by the adult mind, not the truth of what your body knew.

Because the child you were didn't have a choice. She adapted. She endured. She did exactly what she had to do to make it through.

And none of it, not the dissociation, not the silence, not the way you disappeared from your own body, was your fault.

The freeze response is biology. When the body registers danger and sees no way out, it shuts down. When crying out makes things worse, the voice goes quiet. When escape isn't possible, the mind steps away.

It looks like numbness. It looks like immobility. But it was your nervous system choosing the only available path to survive.

And if your trauma included family, or someone you trusted. If you were hurt by the hands that were meant to protect you. The confusion runs even deeper.

Because when the one who causes harm is also the one who feeds you, holds you, or tucks you in, your system says,

*"I must stay, so I must not feel."*

It was never your weakness. It was your wisdom. The brilliant instinct of a young body doing whatever it took to stay alive.

And now? Now you're learning that what you once had to do isn't what you have to do anymore.

This moment invites you to release yourself from self-blame. To loosen the grip of *"I should have"* To whisper to that younger version of you, *"You didn't do anything wrong. You survived. Thank you."* You're here because you endured. You're here because you adapted. And now, you're ready to come home to yourself, one gentle step at a time.

## **A Personal Thread: How Dissociation Shows Up in Me Now And How I Gently Find My Way Back**

There's been a lot happening in my life lately. Big things. Deep things. The kind that stir old wounds and bring forgotten patterns

back to the surface. The kind of life moments that don't always have words, only sensations.

And recently, I felt myself slipping. Not dramatically. Not with visible distress. But in that quiet, familiar way I know too well.

A hollowing. A pulling away. A flattening of colour, of connection, of self.

It didn't look like anything on the outside. I was still smiling. Still working. Still talking. But inside, I wasn't there. Not fully.

That's how dissociation still shows up in me.

I don't crumble. I don't shout. I simply vanish, a little. Like a dimmer switch turned low. Like the world is happening around me, and I'm watching through glass.

And even after all these years, even with all I know, I still forget sometimes that this is what's happening. That this is a nervous system response. A safety reflex.

But the difference now? I notice sooner.

So the other night, with my beautiful daughter Becky and my steady husband Graham by my side, I did something different.

We threw down dust sheets on the kitchen floor. We pulled out paints and brushes. And we made a glorious, colourful mess.

No plan. No pressure. No "getting it right."

Just colour. Texture. Laughter. Just being.

And somewhere in the strokes and splatters, I felt myself return. To the moment. To my breath. To the sound of Becky's laugh. To the warmth of Graham's presence. To myself.

I called the painting "*Dissociation*." Because that's where I began. But it's also where I began to come back. To presence. To life. To choice.

This is what healing looks like now: Not never dissociating. But recognising when I do, and gently choosing my way home.

One breath. One brushstroke. One moment at a time.

## **A Pocket Toolkit: Ways to Come Back to the Body**

Now that you understand how dissociation has shaped your life and your relationships, here is a gentle path forward, a set of small, embodied steps toward coming back home. You don't need to force your way out of dissociation. You don't need to 'snap out of it' or shame yourself back into presence. Dissociation isn't something to battle, it's something to lovingly understand. And with that understanding, comes the power to return, slowly, lovingly, kindly.

Here are a handful of practices, each one a gentle invitation to help your body feel safe enough to come back online.

### **1. Create Pockets of Real Safety**

Choose one place that feels still, calm, or neutral, a particular chair, a quiet corner, the shower, a park bench. Sit there for three to five minutes. Feel your feet on the ground. Breathe. Let your eyes settle gently on a colour or shape. Invite your body to know: *this moment is safe*.

### **2. Wake Up the Body - Gently**

With sensory reminders that say: "*we're here*".

- Press your feet into the floor.
- Tap your arms or legs gently.

- Notice five colours in the room.
- Try warm water over your hands or a cool object on your skin. These are gentle signals that bypass logic and help the body return.

### **3. Name Small Feelings in Real Time**

Close your eyes, feel into your sensations. Notice and name what you become aware of:

*"My chest feels tight."*

*"My hands are warm."*

*"There's a flutter in my stomach."*

This begins the reconnection between sensation and awareness, the bridge between body and mind.

### **4. Practice Titration**

If emotions or memories come to the surface, don't push through. Taste it like a sip, not a gulp. Allow yourself feel a little, then ground again. This teaches your nervous system that feeling doesn't mean flooding. It can come in waves, and you are safe to ride them.

### **5. Co-regulate with Safe People**

Spend time with those whose presence feels steady, kind, and real. Be near someone whose tone, breath, and energy help you relax. We are wired to heal when we connect with safe people.

### **6. Explore Body-Based Trauma Therapies**

Consider working with someone trained in modalities like:

- Somatic Experiencing
- Sensorimotor Psychotherapy

- EMDR
- Polyvagal-informed therapy

These practices help complete survival responses and integrate the parts of you that had to disappear.

## **7. Build Soothing Daily Rhythms**

Little rituals matter. The same tea each morning. A stretch before bed. Balanced meals. Regular sleep. Movement and sunlight.

These small consistencies whisper to the brain: "*You are safe and you are supported*".

## **8. Set Boundaries Based on Your Body, Not Guilt**

Start noticing where you say "yes" when your body is a "no."

Honour your limits. Reduce overwhelm. This is how dissociation starts to loosen its grip, not by doing more, but by choosing less.

## **9. Express Without Explaining**

Draw. Scribble. Dance. Journal. Hum. Invite your body speak without the pressure to make sense. Expression is release.

## **10. Celebrate the Small Returns**

Coming back to the body isn't linear. Honour the small shifts:

- Catching yourself drifting.
- Feeling something in real time.
- Taking one conscious breath.

Your nervous system is learning a new language, and every time you do this, you begin to return to yourself.

You've already started. The moment you named dissociation, the moment you read these words and said, "*This is me,*" you began to come back.

### **A Client's Voice:**

*"I Didn't Know That Was Dissociation"*

*"For as long as I can remember, I felt like I wasn't really in my life, especially around my mother. It was like living behind a glass wall. I'd smile, nod, go through the motions, but inside I was numb. Flat. Disconnected. I couldn't feel angry, even when I knew I had every right to. I couldn't cry. I just shut down.*

*It got worse when she told me she was cutting me out of her will. It wasn't about the money. It was the confirmation that I had never truly mattered to her. That no matter what I did, I would never be good enough in her eyes.*

*Working with Sarah changed everything.*

*For the first time, I began to understand that what I'd been experiencing wasn't personality or weakness, it was dissociation. It was my body protecting me from pain I couldn't bear as a child.*

*We gently unpicked the old stories. The shame. The silence. The belief that I had to endure her criticism to be loved.*

*Now? I can speak to my mother and stay grounded. I don't float away. I don't shrink. I stay present, and I speak from*

*my truth.*

*I've reconnected with my father. I've built boundaries that honour me. And that numbness I thought was just part of who I was? It's lifted.*

*I feel like I've come home to myself."*

## **A Gentle Reflection: Holding the Numbness with Love**

Close your eyes, if that feels safe, if not, lower your gaze. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose to the count of 4, hold for 2, and exhale to the count of 6.

Feel your feet on the ground. Notice any support, warmth, or texture. Place one hand on your heart, the other on your belly.

Continue these long, slow breaths three more times, as you notice your feet on the floor, your bottom on the seat, feeling into your body. You've just walked through truths that your body has carried for a very long time. Truths that may have stirred something, or perhaps left you feeling distant, detached, far away. Both are okay.

This is about presence, just for a moment.

In your mind's eye picture yourself as a young child. If it's hard to imagine yourself as a child, you can look at a photo of yourself as a child.

Picture her in a place that feels comfortable and warm. A blanket around her shoulders. Your arms, if it feels right, gently holding her close.

Whisper to her now, from the heart:

*"You didn't do anything wrong."*

*"You didn't ask for this."*

*"You were only ever trying to stay safe."*

*"I see you. I love you. You never had to earn my love."*

Let her know she is not alone anymore, that there is no judgment here. Only love. Only tenderness. Only truth.

That numbness? It was her way of saying,

*"This is too much, I need to hide."*

And you honoured that. You survived because of that.

Now tell her this:

*"You are allowed to feel now, little one. You are allowed to rest. You are allowed to come home, slowly, safely, in your own time."*

Your breath is her anchor. Your kindness her shelter. Your presence the proof that she is safe now. She is loved. And she never, ever had to earn it.

Stay here as long as you need. And when you're ready, gently open your eyes. You're doing beautifully.

# 7: LETTING THE NERVOUS SYSTEM EXHALE

## **How Safety is Rebuilt from the Inside Out**

There's a quiet shift that begins to happen on the healing path, one you may not notice at first.

It lives in the exhale you didn't know you were holding. In the way your shoulders sit a little lower than they used to. In the way you no longer flinch when a friend gets too close, emotionally or physically.

This is where healing lives, in the slow reawakening of your body's sense of safety. And that safety begins, inside your nervous system.

## **A Bridge from Survival to Safety**

Healing doesn't begin with trying harder. It begins when something inside you starts to slow down. When your body begins to wonder,

*"What if I didn't have to stay on guard all the time?"*

That feeling might not come quickly. It might not come often. But it's a beginning.

Your nervous system is always listening, not just to what's happening around you, but to what it senses inside your body, your relationships, and your environment.

And it responds automatically.

These changes happen beneath your conscious awareness, based on whether your system detects cues of safety or cues of danger,

even if those cues are invisible to your thinking mind. This is the wisdom of your body at work.

You don't choose to climb the ladder into safety. You don't choose to fall into shutdown. Your nervous system shifts reflexively and automatically between states, depending on how safe or unsafe it feels in any given moment.

In the last chapter, we introduced polyvagal theory, as a way of understanding how your nervous system shifts in response to safety and threat. It gave us language for the three main states your system moves through:

- **Ventral vagal:** the state of connection, ease, and presence.
- **Sympathetic:** the activated state of movement, defence, or urgency.
- **Dorsal vagal:** the shutdown state, where everything dims and slows down.

We explored these shifts using the image of a ladder, rising up into connection, sliding down into collapse. This isn't something you control consciously. But understanding this ladder helps you begin to understand why you feel as you do, and to meet yourself with more kindness and compassion, wherever you find yourself on it.

When you feel anxious or go numb, your system is responding exactly as it was designed to.

This ladder is a way to understand what is happening automatically inside you. And the more familiar you become with your own ladder, the more compassion you can bring to those responses, and the more choice you begin to have.

Accepting yourself as you are and offering your system what it most needs: time, gentleness, and small signals of *"we're okay now."*

## **Burnout: When the System Has Carried Too Much for Too Long**

Burnout doesn't always look like falling apart. Sometimes it looks like carrying on. Being dependable. Staying busy. Holding it all together, until one day, you can't.

It often arrives quietly. Gradually, with a deep and persistent tiredness. A kind of inner fog that doesn't lift with sleep or time off. Your system becomes overwhelmed by the relentless pressure of caring for so long.

When your system has been stuck in sympathetic activation, locked into go, go, go, for too long, it starts to run out of steam. It can't keep firing forever. So it begins to protect you in the only way it knows how: by shutting things down.

You might notice:

- Emotional flatness or a lack of motivation
- Increased sensitivity to noise, touch, or demands
- Forgetfulness or a foggy brain
- Feeling constantly overwhelmed, even simple tasks feel too much.

This is your body waving a white flag. Saying,

*"We can't keep doing this,"*

and asking for something different. A new rhythm. An easier pace. A life that doesn't cost you everything to keep up with.

If you've always been the capable one, the one who pushes through, the one who just gets on with it, this may feel unfamiliar. But this isn't the end of your capacity. It's the beginning of your return.

You don't recover from burnout by doing more or trying harder. You recover by re-regulating your nervous system, by listening to your body, by recognising your limits, and by offering yourself what you may never have received: Time. Support. Permission to rest without guilt.

When you're burnt out, even resting can feel unfamiliar. The body might stay alert even when you are motionless. This is why sensory practices matter, they don't demand change, they *offer safety*.

Here's one you can try when your energy feels low, but your nervous system is still switched on:

**The Weight-and-Warmth Reset** Sit or lie down somewhere you can be fully supported. Place one hand on your chest, and the other on your belly, or wrap your arms around yourself gently, like a hug. Feel the warmth of your hands. Feel the weight of your body. Breathe naturally, no need to deepen or control it. Slowly say, aloud or in your mind:

*"It's okay to stop now. I don't have to hold it all."*

Stay with the sensation for a minute or two, or however long feels comforting.

This isn't about calming down on command. It's about showing your body a different rhythm, one where it no longer has to carry so much, alone.

## **The Startle Reflex: When Your Body Jumps Before You Can Think**

You're standing in the kitchen. A door slams. Before your mind even registers the sound, your whole body is tense. Shoulders tight. Heart racing. Breath caught.

This is the startle reflex, a fast, protective response that happens *before* you can think. It's automatic, primal, protective. And for many trauma survivors, it doesn't switch off easily.

You might:

- Flinch at sudden sounds
- Jump when someone speaks unexpectedly
- Feel constantly on edge in quiet rooms
- Feel your body tensing without knowing why

The startle reflex is a hallmark of nervous system dysregulation, a sign that your system is still scanning for danger, even when none is present.

It's about how your body has learned to expect interruption, to stay alert, just in case.

It's one of the responses I still live with.

Even now, when my husband walks into the room without a sound, I jump. Sometimes I even yelp, an involuntary sound, sharp and immediate. My body reacts before I can think.

He's learned to gently announce himself now. A quiet "hello" from the doorway before stepping into my line of sight. It helps. It tells my nervous system, *you're not under threat*. But there are still moments it catches me off guard.

This is what trauma does, it writes itself into the startle reflex. And this is why the following orienting practice has become one of my go-to tools for calming myself quickly, bringing my body back to the now.

## **Orienting Practice: Noticing You're Here**

When your system is shocked or startled, it narrows focus, searching for threat. Orienting is the practice of widening that focus again, offering your body sensory evidence that the danger is over. It reminds your system that it's here, now, in a different moment, no longer in the past.

Logic doesn't come into this. It's about sensory safety. Giving your body real, concrete evidence that it's no longer in danger.

Here's how I do it:

1. Sit somewhere comfortable and safe. Let your breath begin to settle.
2. Slowly move your head and eyes, looking around the room. Let your gaze land on anything that feels familiar or comforting, a plant, a photo, a colour, a soft texture.
3. Notice the support beneath you. Feel the chair holding your weight.
4. Bring awareness to your feet on the floor. Press them down gently.
5. Take one slow breath in, and a longer breath out.

If it feels okay, gently say to yourself:

*"I am here. This is now. That moment has passed."*

This simple practice can help signal to your nervous system:

*"We're not in danger right now. You can let go, just a little."*

Each time you practise this, you're offering your body new evidence. You're building a bridge from *then* to *now*. And each bridge helps you return home, to safety.

## **Micro-Traumas and the Quiet Cost of Survival**

Trauma isn't only what happened to you. It's what stayed with you. What lodged itself into your nervous system and shaped how safe the world feels, long after the moment has passed.

Some trauma is obvious, a single event that overwhelmed your system and left you feeling powerless. We often call these big T traumas: abuse, neglect, violence, accidents, loss. These are the kinds of experiences that often get recognised, by others, or by the world, as "trauma."

But there's another kind of trauma. The quieter kind. The accumulation of moments where something was *too much, too soon, or not enough for too long*.

These are micro-traumas, the everyday breaches in safety, connection, and attunement that often go unnoticed but still leave an imprint.

They sound like:

*"Why are you so sensitive?"*

*"You're fine, stop crying."*

*"If you can't be good, go to your room."*

*"We don't talk about that in this house."*

They feel like:

- Being ignored when you were upset
- Having no one to comfort you when you were scared

- Living in a home full of tension or unpredictability
- Learning to smile when what you really felt was fear or shame

So many survivors of trauma, whether micro or Big T, carry the belief that their pain doesn't really count. They compare it to what others have gone through. They tell themselves they're making a fuss over nothing. But healing begins with the willingness to stop minimising your story. To say with compassion: "*What happened to me mattered. It hurt. And it shaped me.*" This is how we begin to come home to ourselves, not through comparison, but through acknowledgement.

Micro-traumas don't make the news. But they live in the nervous system. And over time, they can shape your entire relationship with emotion, connection, and self-worth.

Dr Gabor Maté calls trauma "*a lasting rupture within the self.*" It's a wound that impacts not just your psychology, but your biology.

When you experience trauma in childhood, especially chronic or unresolved stress, it physically alters your developing brain:

- Your **amygdala**, the brain's alarm system, becomes overactive, making you more sensitive to threat and constantly on edge.
- Your **hippocampus**, responsible for placing memories in the past, becomes underactive, making it harder to separate then from now.
- Your **insula**, which helps you feel what's happening inside your body, becomes dysregulated, leading to emotional numbness, reactivity, or disconnection.
- Your **prefrontal cortex**, the thinking centre, goes offline, making it harder to think clearly, stay grounded, or regulate emotions.

- And your **cingulate cortex**, which helps you monitor and manage emotional conflict, loses power, making it harder to self-soothe or stay with discomfort.

When your early environment required you to silence your needs, stay hyper-aware of others' moods, or disconnect from your own body to get through, these shape how your brain and nervous system develop.

It changes how you feel, how you relate, and how safe the world feels inside your body.

These are survival adaptations. They are signs of a system that learned how to keep going, even in overwhelming conditions. Your body did exactly what it needed to do, and now, it's learning a new way.

There is no need for you to prove that it was 'bad enough.' If it hurt you. If it shaped you. If it still lives in your body. It matters.

And it can heal.

## **Pause and Reflect**

You've just read about experiences that may mirror your own, even the ones you were told didn't count. Take a moment to sit with what's stirred inside you.

Place a hand on your chest. Let your breath rise to meet the truth of all you've held then gently ask yourself:

*"What part of my story have I been minimising?"*

*"What didn't happen for me that I needed?"*

Whatever arises meet it without judgement.

## **Heart Harmony: A Practice for Soothing and Reconnection**

When the weight of your experience begins to rise to the surface, your body may need more than understanding, it needs a felt sense of safety. Heart Harmony is a simple, powerful way to soothe your nervous system and reconnect to the part of you that already knows how to heal.

Find a quiet space and settle into a comfortable seated or lying position. Close your eyes if that feels safe. Take a few slow, gentle breaths.

Place one or both hands on your heart, right in the centre of your chest. Bring your focus to this area. Imagine your breath flowing in and out through your heart.

Now, bring to mind someone or something that you truly appreciate, a person, a pet, a place, even a memory. Allow the feeling of appreciation grow in your chest. Let it fill you gently, breath by breath.

From this space of warmth and connection, silently ask your heart one clear question, something you'd like an answer to, or something it wants you to know. Then listen. Not for words, necessarily, but for any felt sense, image, or knowing that arises.

There's no right or wrong way to do this. Just let your heart speak to you in its own quiet language.

### **A Client's Story: Reclaiming Rest**

*"I spent most of my adult life feeling like I was one step away from falling apart. But no one could tell. On the outside, I was capable, helpful, strong. On the inside, I was exhausted and resentful. I didn't know I was in*

*survival mode, I thought I was just bad at coping. It wasn't until I sat in a safe space, with someone who didn't need me to be what I thought they wanted me to be, that something shifted. We did the smallest practices, just breathing, feeling my feet on the floor, putting my hand on my heart. It felt awkward at first. With time it became natural. Now I pause. I ask, 'What do I need?' Sometimes it's still hard to know. But I listen. I rest more. I don't explain myself as much. I feel like I'm finally learning to be on my own side."*

## **The Social Engagement System: How We Feel Each Other**

Your nervous system doesn't just react to threat. It listens for safety too, in voices, eyes, faces, and energy. Even before you're conscious of it, your body is asking:

*"Am I safe here? Am I welcome here? Can I be myself in this space?"*

This listening is called neuroception, the nervous system's way of scanning for safety or danger, without needing conscious thought.

Neuroception is what allows you to *feel* when a space is warm or hostile. When someone's words are kind, but their energy is cold. When something in the room feels "off," even if everyone's smiling.

This inner radar comes from your social engagement system, the part of the autonomic nervous system that supports connection and co-regulation. This state, called ventral vagal, is where you feel safe, seen and able to connect, and it links together the nerves that control your face, ears, voice, breath, heart, and posture.

When this system is active, you feel steady, connected, and able to engage with others without losing yourself. Your body recognises cues of safety, and begins to settle.

These cues include:

- Soothing tones of voice; not too loud, too fast, or too flat
- Soft, open eyes; not darting, blank, or overly intense
- Head tilts or nods; which signal openness and curiosity
- Facial expressiveness; like a smile that reaches the eyes
- Stillness and presence; not rushed, rigid, or unpredictable movement

But what happens when these signals are missing, or inconsistent? These micro-signals tell your system:

*"I'm safe. I'm being received. I don't need to guard myself right now."*

But many survivors of trauma carry the imprint of growing up in emotionally unsafe environments, where words said one thing, but energy said another. Where love was mixed with fear, or kindness came with conditions.

Your nervous system learned to notice mismatches, between what was said and what we feel. And even now, it may be highly attuned to those subtle contradictions.

That doesn't make you difficult or overly sensitive. It makes you wise. It means your neuroception is doing its job, trying to protect you from past pain repeating itself.

You may long for connection, but also feel your body pull back. You may sense safety in one moment, then lose it in the next.

You may have learned:

- To scan others' moods before expressing your own
- To shrink your needs in order to belong
- To mistrust closeness, even when you crave it

These patterns were *strategies of survival*.

Your body might still carry the imprint of those early relational dynamics.

You might want to connect, and also feel afraid. You might long for intimacy, and also feel overwhelmed by it. This is the nervous system doing its job: protecting you from what once felt unsafe.

The beautiful truth is: the social engagement system can be nourished again. Through small moments of safety. Through warm, congruent connection. Through spaces where what is said *matches* what is felt.

This is how we begin to rebuild trust, not just in others, but in your own perception.

You can give yourself permission to feel the feelings in your gut when you know something 'just doesn't feel right'. As you learn to trust your instincts, these subtle signals from your social engagement system, you get to become more connected, at a pace your body can truly receive.

## **Fawning: When Pleasing Others Was Safer Than Being Yourself**

There's a pattern many survivors carry that often goes unnoticed: The automatic urge to keep the peace. To please. To read the room and adapt, before anyone even says a word.

This is called fawning, a *relational survival response*, wired into your nervous system when being "*compliant*" or "*good*" felt safer than being real.

It might sound like:

- Smiling when you want to cry
- Saying yes when your whole body is screaming no
- Staying small, agreeable, helpful, just to avoid conflict or rejection

Fawning isn't just a habit, it's a way your nervous system learned to stay safe. And the more you begin to feel safe in your own body, the more choice you'll begin to have. You won't have to abandon yourself just to belong. You'll be able to stay with yourself *and* stay in connection, one breath at a time.

## **A Gentle Closing: Reawakening Trust in What You Feel**

The more you learn about how your nervous system works, the more you begin to understand why some spaces feel safe, and others don't. Why some people leave you calm, and others leave you scrambled.

This is the social engagement system at work. As a living rhythm in your body. And it can be nourished again. You don't need to push. You don't need to force yourself to trust or open. You simply begin with small, *felt* experiences of congruence, where what you hear, see, and sense all say:

*"you're safe here."*

The following two invitations are here to help you reawaken that sense. Bridges, back to your body, back to your wisdom, back to your truth. Take your time.

## **Reflection: *When Words Don't Match the Feeling***

Think back to a moment when something didn't feel right, even if nothing was said.

- What did your body sense first?
- What didn't match, the tone, the expression, the energy?
- What did you do in response? Freeze, smile, over-explain, leave, go quiet?

You're not imagining things. This is the intelligence of neuroception. Your body intuitively knows even when your mind can't explain why.

Place a hand on your heart and whisper gently to yourself: *"I trust what my body feels."*

## **Practice: *Safe Eyes, Open Ears***

This gentle nervous system practice invites your body into a felt sense of relational safety, through imagery, breath, and the soothing power of imagined connection.

1. Find a quiet space. Sit or lie down in a way that feels comfortable.
2. Close your eyes and begin to slow your breath.
3. Bring to mind someone or something that makes you feel safe, a person, animal, character, or presence that evokes calm.
4. Picture their eyes, kind, steady, warm.
5. Imagine they are looking at you now, with no demand, no judgment, only welcome.
6. Hear the tone of their voice, calm and sincere, as they say:

*"You don't have to do anything to belong here. Being you is enough"*

7. Breathe without effort as you invite your body to begin to believe:

*"Connection can feel safe. I can rest here."*

Stay with this feeling of safety, let it settle into your body. It's always been your birthright.

## **Regulating the Nervous System: Small Signals of Safety**

Your nervous system doesn't learn safety through information. It learns it through experience. Through the small, repeated moments where your body says,

*"Right now, I'm okay."*

These moments don't have to be big. In fact, healing rarely begins with something dramatic. It begins with what is gentle, repeatable, and *felt*.

We call this regulation, the process of helping your nervous system return to a state of relative balance, where you can think clearly, feel your emotions, and respond to life from a place of presence.

In survival states, this regulation goes offline. When you're overwhelmed, your system shuts down parts of your body and brain to protect you, just as it learned to do.

But regulation can be relearned.

And it doesn't have to mean hours of meditation or getting it *"right."* It can begin with a hand on your heart. A warm drink held in both hands. A few slow exhales out through your mouth. A

rhythm or sound that reminds your body, *we're not in danger anymore.*

This is how we offer the nervous system *micro-moments of safety*. These moments don't fix everything, but they give your body something new to reference. A sense memory of steadiness. A felt imprint of ease.

Regulation is not about feeling calm all the time. It's about building capacity to stay present, even when things feel difficult. To move between states with more grace. To notice when you're leaving your window of tolerance, and gently come back. You're learning how to move with more awareness between its rungs.

And the more often you experience these small cues of safety, the more your nervous system begins to believe:

*"We can do this differently now."*

### **Practices: Small Signals of Safety**

To begin feeling differently in your body you just need small, consistent signals that say:

*"You're not alone. You're not in danger. You're safe."*

These simple practices are designed to gently awaken your nervous system to that truth, through presence.

Choose one. Try it slowly, allowing your system to respond in its own time.

### **Choose Your Way Back to Centre: Sensory Practices for Real-Life Regulation**

Stillness isn't always soothing. For many trauma survivors, slowing down can actually feel *more* unsafe at first.

That's why nervous system regulation isn't one-size-fits-all.

Here are a few sensory-based ways to come back into your body, especially when sitting still or focusing on breath feels hard:

- Shake it off: Stand up, gently bounce your knees, shake your arms. Invite the tension to move.
- Breathe out with a sigh: Inhale through your nose, then sigh audibly through your mouth. Repeat 3–5 times.
- Cold or warm: Splash your face with cold water or hold a warm mug in both hands. Notice the contrast.
- Humming or gentle sound: Humming vibrates the vagus nerve. Pick a tone or syllable and let it resonate.
- Rocking: Sit on a chair or lie down and gently rock side to side. This mimics soothing, primal rhythms of safety.

These practices are not about creating options, so you can meet your nervous system exactly where it is.

## ***1. The Hand-Over-Heart Pause***

This practice engages the vagus nerve and sends a powerful cue of safety through warmth, touch, and breath.

- Place one hand (or both) over the centre of your chest.
- Breathe slowly, in through your nose, out through your mouth.
- Gently say to yourself:  
*"I'm here. I've got you. One breath at a time."*

This small ritual helps regulate your heartbeat and anchor your awareness in your body. It can be done in public or private, even silently.

## ***2. Soft Eyes, Still Gaze***

This helps down-regulate the nervous system by inviting the eyes to relax, a direct signal of ventral vagal safety.

- Sit quietly and allow your gaze to soften.
- Find a neutral object to focus on; a plant, a candle, a texture.
- Keep your head still. Let your eyes rest there.
- Imagine your whole body watching with gentle presence.

Even 30 seconds of still, soft seeing can help bring your system back into a more settled state.

## ***3. Scent and Sip Ritual***

Smell and taste are direct pathways to the brain's emotional centres. This practice helps create a soothing interruption to spirals of overwhelm.

- Choose a warm drink; herbal tea, lemon water, broth.
- Before sipping, inhale its scent slowly. Really notice it.
- As you sip, hold the warmth with both hands.
- Feel the sensation of smell, taste, and warmth in your body.

This is about directing awareness to a sensation that says: *"This is now. And this moment is safe."*

## **Learning a New Way**

If you've ever wondered why certain spaces feel tense. Why your body flinches at sounds others don't notice. Why connection sometimes feels more frightening than comforting Know this:

Your nervous system is speaking to you.

It recognises the patterns from childhood, what happened and how it felt. The silence. The scolding. The moments when your tears had nowhere to land.

And still, it's here. Still protecting. Still adapting.

You can work with your nervous system by offering it something *new*, slowly, gently, repeatedly.

Small signals of safety. Moments where your body can say, "*Right now, we're okay.*"

That's how trust begins again. In others, in yourself.

You've already made it through so much. You've already done more than your share of surviving.

This is the beginning of living from connection, not just protection. Of being home, in your own skin, at your own pace.

Take one more breath, as you affirm:

*"My body is wise. And I'm already on my way home."*

## **The Power of Responsibility Without Shame**

Your nervous system responses are automatic. You don't consciously choose to live in a state of hypervigilance or collapse. Those patterns were formed in the absence of safety.

But now, as an adult, you do have choice.

### **Responsibility doesn't mean blame.**

It means recognising your power: To offer your system something new. To interrupt the old story. To tend to your needs, without waiting for someone else to rescue you.

Every time you breathe slowly, pause kindly, or meet your fear with compassion, you are rewriting what's possible.

You are no longer powerless.

### **Client Reflection: A New Way of Feeling**

*"I'm calmer in my mind and body. I don't feel the need to explain or apologise so much. I feel safer in my skin. My relationships are easier because I'm more comfortable with myself. And I trust myself more."*

### **An Invitation to Go Deeper**

If this chapter sparked a recognition, a question, or even just a breath of relief, know that this is where healing begins: with awareness.

When it feels right you can take the *Clear, Calm, Confident Quiz* here:

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>

It's a gentle self-inquiry tool to help you explore how your nervous system may be navigating the world right now, and what kind of support might serve you best.

In this chapter you've begun to understand how these protective parts formed, the next step is learning how to relate to them with curiosity and care, because healing doesn't mean getting rid of these parts, it means building a relationship with them.

# 8: THE VOICE INSIDE YOUR HEAD ISN'T YOU

There was a time I believed every word that voice said.

That voice inside my head that told me I was too much and not enough in the same breath. That dissected my every decision, my tone, my laugh, my body. That whispered I had to be better, quieter, smaller, more organised, more together. Constantly judging me, criticising me, making me doubt myself.

And for years, I didn't realise, it wasn't mine.

That internal narrative had been absorbed over time, from parents, teachers, culture. From every moment I was told to behave, to be grateful, to stop crying. It was shaped through survival. Polished by perfectionism. Sharpened by shame. And it had taken up residence in my mind as if it were the truth.

But here's what I've learned since:

The voice inside your head isn't you. It's a protector. A primitive survival mechanism. The voice of fear.

And it can change.

This chapter is about that voice. About how it came to be. About why it feels so convincing. And about how to begin to loosen its grip, one moment of kindness, at a time.

We'll explore:

- Why shame is so sticky, and how it nests in our nervous system.
- How perfectionism becomes armour.

- Why the inner critic often sounds like the people we tried most to please.
- And how your nervous system is ready for a new kind of inner dialogue, one rooted in truth, not fear.

## **Where Did That Voice Come From?**

You weren't born with a voice in your head that tells you you're not good enough. Its 'truth' reinforced by years of repetition. Through moments where shame filled the space where safety should have been.

Maybe it sounded like:

*"Why can't you ever get it right?"*

*"You're too much. You're too emotional. You're stupid. You're too hard and cold."*

*"No one else has a problem with this, what's wrong with you?"*

Sometimes those words were spoken aloud. Other times, they were silently transmitted, through looks, sighs, silence, or tension. Either way, they landed. And because you were a child, you believed them. You thought, "This must be my fault."

That's the thing about shame. It doesn't just hurt in the moment; it shapes the voice you carry forward.

Over time, the criticism that came from others becomes internalised. It moves inside your own mind. And eventually, you stop needing anyone else to point out your flaws, because the voice inside is already doing it for them.

As a child, your safety depended on the people around you. You couldn't risk seeing them as unsafe, even when their words stung or their love felt unpredictable.

So your body, your brilliant system, found another way. It made *you* the problem. It decided, "If I'm the one who's wrong, maybe I can fix it. Maybe then they'll love me. Maybe then it will feel safe again."

You made yourself wrong, not because it was true, but because it was safer than facing the alternative.

And in doing so, you turned the pain inward. You carried their chaos, their silence, their shame. And called it yours. This is where the inner critic began to take root. Not to hurt you, but to help you survive. A protector, a part of you that believed,

*"If I criticise myself first, maybe I'll avoid more pain."*

It was a survival response.

It came online when you were small and powerless, when you needed love or comfort or protection and didn't receive it. When you were punished for making mistakes instead of supported. When you were praised for being perfect instead of being real.

And so that inner critic took over the job of keeping you "in line." It whispered the rules: Don't stand out. Don't speak up. Don't get it wrong. It thought it was keeping you safe.

But now, it's exhausting.

Because even though you're no longer in those environments, that inner critic hasn't realised it yet. It's still operating on outdated instructions. It's still fighting an old battle that's no longer here.

And your nervous system, wired for survival, continues to listen.

## **Why the Inner Critic Feels So Loud, and So Real**

When your body feels unsafe, your thinking mind tries to help.

It searches for answers, creates rules, assigns blame, all in an effort to make sense of what feels overwhelming or out of control.

The inner critic is part of that process. The voice of self-judgement, a response to fear.

When something inside you feels too much, too painful, too messy, too uncertain, the critic steps in to manage the discomfort.

It says:

*"You should have known better."*

*"Why can't you just get this right?"*

*"If you were different, this wouldn't be happening."*

It's trying to restore order. To make things predictable. To stay in control.

But what it's really doing is echoing old survival patterns, ones shaped long before you had words for what you were feeling.

Your nervous system learned early on that unpredictability was dangerous. So it built strategies to avoid it: Overthinking. Self-correcting. People-pleasing. Harsh inner rules.

And the critic became a constant companion, because your system was doing its best to protect you.

Understanding this doesn't excuse the pain the critic causes, but it helps you meet it with more compassion, and less shame. You just need to become aware of it, and choose something kinder.

## **Perfectionism as a Survival Strategy**

Before we talk about perfectionism, take a breath. What you're about to read isn't a judgement, it's a gentle reframe.

A way to see yourself with a little more truth, and a lot more compassion.

We often think of perfectionism as a character flaw. As something to fix, shame, or overcome. But what if it's something your nervous system created to help you survive?

Perfectionism is often born from the belief that being flawless will protect you from rejection, abandonment, humiliation, or harm. It's protection.

Somewhere along the way, you formed the beliefs that:

*"If I can be good enough, helpful enough, quiet enough, smart enough, maybe I'll be safe."*

*"If I never mess up, maybe they'll stop being angry."*

*"If I don't need anything, maybe they won't leave."*

So you shaped yourself. You became the high achiever. The over-thinker. The one who always has it together. But inside, you're exhausted.

Because perfectionism doesn't make you feel safer, it makes you feel trapped. Trapped in a loop of never enough. Chasing a version of yourself that doesn't need anything. That never messes up. That never gets hurt.

But your nervous system doesn't need perfection. It needs presence. It needs warmth. It needs to know that it's okay to be real.

This is the invitation: To see your patterns with clarity and compassion.

Perfectionism is not who you are. It's who you became when being human didn't feel safe.

And the more you tend to your nervous system, with gentleness, with breath, with truth, the more that grip begins to loosen. You begin to make mistakes, and survive. You begin to rest, and the world doesn't fall apart. You begin to speak honestly, and realise you're still loved.

This is what healing sounds like: Your true self, finally getting a chance to speak.

### **Why Talk Therapy Alone May Not Reach the Roots**

You can know the origins of your patterns. You can explain where the pain comes from. You can even see your inner critic clearly, and still feel stuck in its grip.

Talk therapy alone can't reach the parts of you that didn't form through logic.

Your trauma didn't happen in your thinking brain. It happened in your body. In your breath. In the moments you froze, fawned, or disappeared inside yourself, just to make it through.

So healing has to go deeper than insight. It has to reach into the places where the wound lives. Where your body still carries the tension of being too much or never enough. Where you still wait for the next shame spiral, the other shoe to drop.

This isn't a dismissal of talk therapy. It's a call to include the whole of you in the healing process.

Your body. Your emotions. Your breath. Your held tension. Your voice, not just what you say, but how you say it. Your energy, the way you shrink or swell, hide or reach.

When you include the body, you don't just talk about the shame. You feel it rise, and learn how to stay. You don't just name the

critic. You offer it another job. You don't just trace the roots. You plant something new.

And healing becomes not just an idea, but a lived experience.

You don't need to figure it all out right now. But if you're ready to meet this part of yourself in a new way, the following practices are here for you.

They're invitations to meet yourself differently.

### **Mirror Dialogue: Begin Again with Kindness**

When you've spent years listening to an inner voice that criticises, doubts, or dismisses you, it can be difficult to imagine speaking to yourself any other way.

This practice is a way to begin hearing a more truthful voice. A quiet one. Your own.

This exercise aims to give your nervous system a new reference point. To hear warmth in your own voice. To feel steadiness in your own gaze. To begin building safety inside your relationship with yourself.

It may feel unfamiliar. It may feel tender. But with time, this simple ritual becomes a way home to your truth, your worth, and your capacity to be on your own side.

The invitation here is simply to listen, to speak to yourself with care.

The voice inside your head may not be yours, but the one you speak to yourself with now, can be.

This practice is about honesty. Compassion. And beginning to meet yourself with the kind of tone you needed long ago.

Before you begin this exercise place your hand on your heart and breathe. Let your body know you are about to witness yourself with compassion

### **Try this gentle practice:**

1. Stand or sit in front of a mirror. If this feels uncomfortable, start with a hand mirror and look only into your eyes.
2. Look yourself in the eyes. Pause. Breathe. Notice what comes up. Judgement? Sadness? Tenderness?
3. Place your hand on your heart if it helps you stay grounded. And then, quietly or aloud, say:

*"I see you. I'm here with you. I'm listening."*

4. You don't have to believe it yet. Just let your nervous system hear a different tone.
5. Ask gently:

*"Whose voice have I been listening to?"*

*"What would my true voice say to me now?"*

Whatever arises is welcome. The voice of your soul, your true self is quietly waiting for you to listen to it, when you're ready.

She's still here. The girl who longed to be seen. And she's ready to be loved, by you.

### **Visualisation: Meeting the Inner Critic, and Your Inner Wise One**

Your inner world holds more than one voice. There is the one you've known for so long, the inner critic. And there is another, quiet, steady, and often overlooked: the voice of your inner wise one.

This visualisation is about creating space. So your inner knowing has a chance to speak.

### **Begin Here:**

1. Find a quiet, undisturbed space. Sit or lie down. Slow your breathing.
2. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in a safe, open room. A place that feels private, warm, and undemanding.
3. In this room, two figures appear. One is the voice you know well, the inner critic. See how she stands. Hear her tone. Notice what she says.
4. Now, turn toward the second presence. Your inner wise voice, your inner goddess, your soul voice. She stands calmly. Her eyes are kind. She has no agenda, only truth.
5. Let the critic speak first. Let her say what she always does. Then, invite your wise one to respond.

What does she say? What does she *know*?

6. Let them talk. Let them both be seen and heard. And then slowly, with breath and trust, let yourself choose: *Which one do I want to listen to now?*

This practice is about recognising that you have a choice. You are the space that holds them both, and you get to decide which voice leads.

You might not always be able to silence the critic. But you can start to recognise her. And each time you do, you create just enough space to ask:

*"Is this the voice I want guiding me?"*

That's how change begins, by choosing, moment by moment, to follow the one that speaks your truth as the person you are now.

### **A Gentle Practice: Stop, Drop & Detach** *Creating space between the voice of your Inner Critic and your truth*

When the inner critic is loud, your body often follows. Your chest tightens. Your breath gets shallow. Your thoughts race, or vanish.

This is your nervous system doing what it was wired to do: protect you.

But now, you have tools. Simple, gentle ways to shift out of survival mode, and back into the part of you that can choose a different response.

This practice works not by pushing the voice away, but by pausing, returning, and gently separating your worth from its noise.

#### **Here is how to do it:**

##### **Step 1: Stop. Tune In. Listen.**

Instead of pushing away the critic, pause. Notice what it's saying, bring it into conscious awareness.

Say to yourself:

*"Isn't that interesting, I hear you."*

##### **Step 2: Drop Into the Body**

Bring your attention from your head to your physical body:

- Breathe in for 4, hold for 2, exhale slowly for 6
- Place a hand over your heart and feel its warmth
- Drop your shoulders, unclench your teeth

### Step 3: Detach from the Inner Critic

Name it. Externalise it. Create distance.

*"That's not me, that's my old safety script."*

Give the voice a nickname (the sillier, the better): Miss Perfect, Grumpy Knickers, Doom Diva. Then choose a playful or powerful dismissal phrase (the more profane the better!):

*"B\*\*\*\*\* off Snooty Knickers"*

*"Do one Doom Diva"*

*"Speak to the hand Miss Perfect"*

### The Science in Action

Each of these steps gently shifts your brain and body out of survival mode and into regulation:

- **Step 1** activates the prefrontal cortex, helping you observe your thoughts instead of reacting to them. Observation re-engages self-awareness and begins to calm the amygdala, your brain's fear alarm.
- **Step 2** calms the brainstem and activates the vagus nerve, moving you out of fight-or-flight. It reconnects you to the insula, your internal sensing centre, helping you feel what's real, not just what's feared.
- **Step 3** engages the cingulate cortex, the part of your brain that helps manage emotional conflict and choose a wiser response. Naming the critic gives you distance, clarity, and choice.

Over time, this practice rewires your brain's default pathways, making self-compassion more automatic, and self-criticism less convincing. Do it every time the Inner Critic pops into your thoughts. If it makes you smile, all the better!

## **Shift the Power: From Inner Critic to Inner Strength**

Now that you've learned how to interrupt the critic's voice, let's take it deeper.

This guided embodiment exercise helps you recognise when the critic has taken over, and practice shifting back into your inner power, truth, and presence.

Think of this as a way to rehearse, in your body, what it feels like to move from self-attack to self-honour.

## **Embodiment Practice: From Judgement to Power**

When the inner critic is activated, it's not just words in your head. It's energy in your body. It has a posture, a tone, a pull.

This practice invites you to rehearse a different inner state.

You'll step into the critic briefly, and then step out, into the part of you that leads with power, presence, and grounded self-trust.

### **Before You Begin:**

This is a somatic practice. Please do it somewhere safe, private, and undisturbed. You may feel emotions arise. That's okay. Go slowly. You can pause anytime.

### **Step 1: Feel the Critic in Your Body**

Stand tall. Close your eyes. Let your body remember how it feels when that inner critic shows up.

What happens to your posture? Do you shrink? Stiffen? Jut your chin forward?

Allow your face to shape into the expression you wear when judging yourself. Shift your tone into that critical voice. You might even speak it aloud.

*"You're so lazy.*

*"You never get it right.*

*"Everyone's judging you."*

Notice what's happening inside. No need to change anything. Just witness, acknowledge how you feel as it judges you.

## **Step 2: Step Out and Shake It Off**

Take one physical step to the side. Literally. Shake out your arms. Your hands. Your legs. Let that energy move.

You are no longer in that stance. You're somewhere new.

Take a long, slow, deep breath, in to the count of four and out for the count of six.

## **Step 3: Step Into Power, Truth, and Safety**

Now step into your grounded, wise self. What changes?

Drop your shoulders. Relax your belly. Lift your chin. Rest your hands on your heart. Find your true voice. Speak from here.

*"I'm learning, and that's enough." "I am worthy and enough, simply because I am me."*

Feel the difference. In your breath. Your energy. Your presence.

The inner critic lives in all of us, but this gives your body a new reference point. A felt sense of,

*"This is who I am when I'm safe with myself."*

Repeat this as often as you need. You are practicing coming home to your authentic self, in posture, voice, and presence.

## **Journal Prompt: What Shifts in Me?**

After you've moved through the practice, sit quietly with your journal and ask:

- What did I feel in my body when I stepped into the critic?
- What changed when I stepped into my grounded self?
- How did my breath, posture, or energy shift?
- What does my body know now, that my mind didn't?

Write without rushing or censoring. The invitation is to be compassionately curious, and witness yourself with care and kindness.

## **A Client Reflection: Learning to Speak Differently**

*"For years, I thought the voice in my head was the only one. I didn't realise I had a choice; I thought I had to believe it. I didn't realise that I could step into something stronger and wiser. This practice gave me a way to feel that choice. It's not always easy, but it's mine. And now I know how to return to it."*

## **Your Voice Is Coming Home**

There's a voice inside you that is not the critic. It doesn't shout. It doesn't shame. It doesn't threaten you into improvement.

It speaks in warmth. In quiet knowing. In the steady rhythm of:

*"You're doing the best you can."*

For many of us, it takes time to hear it gain. Time, and small moments of choosing something different.

You've begun that now.

Every time you pause. Every time you question the voice that says you're not enough, criticises you, and judges you, you're building trust with yourself.

The critic may still show up. That's okay. But you're no longer at its mercy. You get to notice. To breathe. To choose again.

And that, my darling, is healing in action.

## **An Invitation to Begin Again, Gently**

You've travelled through tender terrain in this chapter. You've met the voice that's lived inside you for so long, and begun to realise: it isn't the truth of who you are.

No need to try and silence it all at once or rewrite your self-talk in a single breath.

You just begin again.

With one pause. One new phrase. One moment of warmth where the shame used to live.

If, as you read this chapter, a flicker of recognition, a wave of grief, a glimpse of your true voice, you can take the next step. One that's quiet, curious, and just for you.

If all you do after reading this is rest, that is enough, however I would love to invite you to take my Clear, Calm, and Confident Quiz

This gentle quiz will help you explore how your nervous system might be shaping your inner dialogue, and what kind of support will help you move from criticism to compassion.

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>

## **Final Words for This Chapter**

Before you move on, take a breath.

You've done something powerful here. You've met your inner critic; you've realised that its words are not truths. And you didn't turn away.

That matters.

This is your only task now: To rest. To be gentle with yourself. And to remember, your true voice is always waiting to be heard.

## 9: BOUNDARIES ARE NOT BETRAYAL

Maybe you were taught to be kind at all costs. To make others comfortable. To smooth things over. To put others first, even when it hurt.

Maybe experiences taught you that being liked was safer than being real. That saying yes was easier than disappointing someone. That having needs made you difficult.

You may not have been taught about boundaries. But you *have* been taught something, over and over, about who it was safe to be.

And somewhere along the way, you made the decision to stay quiet instead of honest. To be helpful instead of whole.

This is where your yes lost its meaning. Because it was no longer a choice. It was an obligation. A reflex. A way to stay safe. Even now, when someone makes a request, you might jump to agree immediately, not because you do agree, but from a place of old protection. Because once, it wasn't safe to say no. And so "yes" became your shield.

This is the heart of people-pleasing, a survival strategy rooted in protection. The way your nervous system adapted to environments where asserting yourself didn't feel safe.

Owning your "no" now isn't just about being assertive. It's about coming home to the part of you that knows what is okay and what isn't. It's about listening to your body when it tightens. Honouring the voice inside that says, "That doesn't work for me."

This isn't selfish, something your Inner Critic might tell you.

Every time you honour your no, you affirm that your comfort matters. That your energy matters. That your needs are valid, and you don't have to disappear to be loved.

Boundaries are bridges back to yourself. They let the world know: *This is where I end and you begin.*

And that clarity is an act of love, not just for you, but for everyone around you.

It's okay not to be available for everything. Explaining yourself isn't necessary. Rest and permission to just be, doesn't have to be earned.

Now you get to take up space. To set the rhythm of your own life.

And every time you say no with love, to what drains, depletes, or disrespects you, you're making space for the truest yes to emerge.

## **What Is a Boundary, Really**

A boundary is the space where your needs, preferences, and limits are named and honoured.

It's the point where you end and someone else begins, a space that creates clarity, respect, and room for honest connection.

Boundaries create the conditions for intimacy to unfold in ways that feel safe, mutual, and true. They help your nervous system settle by anchoring you in self-connection, even as you open to connection with others.

You may not have been taught how to recognise or express your boundaries.

You may have learned to read the room instead of reading your own body.

To prioritise how others felt, while disconnecting from how you felt.

That doesn't mean you don't have boundaries.

It means they may have been unspoken, unacknowledged, or repeatedly crossed until silence became your shield.

Boundaries are a relationship, a living conversation between your truth and your needs, expressed with care.

They live in your tone, your breath, your timing, your nervous system.

A boundary might sound like:

*"I need time to think about that."*

*"That doesn't work for me."*

*"I'm not available for that conversation right now."*

*"Please don't raise your voice with me."*

And it might feel like:

- Saying no without guilt.
- Choosing rest instead of explanation.
- Noticing your inner yes and your inner no, and trusting them.
- Staying rooted in your body, even when others push or pull.

Boundaries help you remain in relationship with yourself, so you can choose how to show up with others, instead of abandoning yourself to stay close.

They don't demand justification. They don't need permission.

They simply speak the truth of your experience with grace.

And as you build this muscle, you learn something powerful:

I can have preferences.

I can honour what feels good, and what doesn't.

I deserve to be in relationship without losing myself.

### **Personal Reflection: When Familiar Isn't Safe**

I once stayed in a relationship far too long, not because it felt good, but because it felt *familiar*. He was moody. Controlling. Emotionally unavailable. So much like my stepfather.

At the time, I couldn't see the pattern. I just knew something in me kept shrinking. Agreeing. Apologising. Disappearing. I mistook familiarity for safety. But it wasn't safe. It was just *known*.

What I didn't understand then was the impact of trauma bonding. My nervous system had learned to equate intensity with intimacy. To cling tighter when things felt unsafe, instead of walking away. To confuse loyalty with self-abandonment.

There was a part of me still trying to earn love in the same places it had once been withheld. Still hoping that if I could just be good enough, calm enough, accommodating enough, the other person would change. But I was the one disappearing.

I didn't have language for boundaries then. I only had a body that clenched in his presence, and a voice that went quiet to avoid setting him off.

Looking back now, I see it clearly: That wasn't love. That was survival.

And my nervous system was still trying to earn safety in the places it had once been denied.

I had no idea what a boundary was, let alone that I had the right to choose. To disagree, to say "no" I didn't feel like I had an option. The thought of conflict was terrifying. Far too risky.

I believed I needed his love to be okay. I truly thought I couldn't survive without it. Until one day, I couldn't do it anymore.

We were in a DIY shop, nothing special. But across the aisle, I spotted a colleague from A&E. Someone kind, easy going, familiar. And in an instant, I panicked. I knew how jealous my partner could get. I knew even the slightest acknowledgment, a glance, a hello, could cost me days of coldness and silent rage.

So I did what my nervous system had been trained to do. I looked down. I shrank into myself. I tried to disappear.

And something in me opened up. Quietly, gently. I knew I couldn't live like this anymore.

I was no longer willing to live split in two, the friendly, open, capable version of me at work, and the silent, careful, repressed version at home. I couldn't keep betraying myself to keep him calm.

My body knew. My breath knew. And that day, when I got home, I drew a line.

I didn't scream it. I didn't explain it. I just said to myself,

*"No more."*

That's when something shifted in me. I didn't think of it as setting a boundary. I just knew I couldn't keep being the version of myself I had to become in order to stay.

That moment didn't feel powerful, it felt hugely sad, but absolutely necessary. But looking back, I can see it was the beginning of coming back to myself. The first time I chose honesty over harmony. The first time I made space for who I really was.

## **The Mask of "Fine": How We Learn to Hide Ourselves to Be Loved**

*"I'm fine."*

Two words that can mean so many things, and yet, often mean nothing at all.

Not because you're lying. But because you've learned that being *real* isn't always welcome.

Maybe you were the child who sensed that your sadness was too much, your anger was unacceptable, your joy too loud.

Maybe you were praised for being easy going. For not making a fuss. For being the one who didn't need much.

And so, over time, you became "fine." Even when your heart was aching. Even when your body was holding so much.

"Fine" became the mask you wore when the truth felt too risky to speak. When asking for more meant feeling like a burden. When showing your need meant being met with silence, shame, or rejection.

You smiled. You stayed agreeable. You said, "It's okay," even when it wasn't.

But the body knows. It always knows.

And eventually, that unspoken ache begins to show up elsewhere. In the tension in your jaw. In the exhaustion behind your eyes. In the resentment you feel when no one sees how much you're holding.

This is the quiet cost of being the 'strong one.' Of carrying the emotional load while appearing unfazed.

But here's the truth you need to hear: It's okay not to be fine. You can be tender, messy, honest, whole.

Taking off the mask may feel terrifying at first. But it's also where you begin to feel your own face again. Your own voice. Your own rhythm.

And it's where real connection begins. In the brave return to what's real.

## **Client Voice Spotlight**

*"I used to think being easy-going made me a good person. The kind of woman who didn't cause trouble. Didn't complain. Didn't make a fuss when people crossed the line. I didn't realise what I was doing was abandoning myself, over and over. All in the name of being liked. All in the name of keeping the peace. The truth is, I didn't say no because I had absolutely no idea that it was my right. At the very thought of saying no my body went into full panic mode. Chest tight. Heart racing. A deep sense that something terrible would happen. My nervous system had learned that pleasing others was safer than pleasing myself. Working with Sarah showed me that self-abandonment wasn't love, it was fear. And I finally began to choose me."*

## **Emotional Over-Functioning: The Cost of Being Everything for Everyone**

Some of us became caretakers before we even understood our own needs.

We learned to scan the room before we scanned our own body. To read other people's moods like weather patterns. To offer comfort, calm the storm, make things better, even when no one did the same for us.

That wasn't emotional maturity. It was emotional over-functioning, a nervous system adaptation that said,

*"If I can keep everyone else happy, maybe I'll finally feel safe."*

I see now how early that pattern took root for me.

By the time I was sixteen, I wasn't a girl. I was his slave. Mum had left me with him, taking with her my beloved brothers, handed over to a man who had been using me since I was four.

He wasn't just my stepfather. He was the one who twisted love into obligation. Who made his needs louder than my safety. Who installed, in my body, the belief that my worth lived in what I could give, soothe, or endure.

My mother left me in that house. And he kept me there, isolated, watching, taking.

I was surviving. Performing a role. Cooking. Cleaning. Caring for his ageing father. Meeting the emotional and physical needs of a grown man who should have protected me.

But no one came.

So I learned to anticipate his moods. To stay useful. To read the room before I'd even finished forming who I was.

My nervous system didn't choose to over-function. It was shaped into it. Moulded by the trauma of being made into a wife before I even knew what love meant.

This pattern didn't end when I left the house. It followed me into every room I entered.

I became the one who kept the peace. The one who sensed what others needed before they asked. The one who worked harder, gave more, apologised first.

Because deep down, my body still believed:

*"If I do enough, maybe I'll finally be safe."*

That's the cost of emotional over-functioning. Not just exhaustion. But the quiet erasure of who you were meant to be.

If you're reading this and recognising yourself. If you've spent years holding it all together for everyone else. If your needs, always come last. If you can't rest because something in you is still trying to outrun danger.

There is a different way to be.

You can stop, turn the care you give to others flow back toward you, too.

You're allowed to reclaim your tenderness, as a path back home to your body, your rhythm, your enoughness.

## **Client Voice Spotlight: The Weight of Always Holding It Together**

*"In December I started therapy with an amazing lady called Sarah Grace. Up until today I'd only really had one memory, from my early 30s, of daily abuse and harassment. I locked it away for years, convincing myself it was 'just part of the job.' But as I started doing the deeper work with Sarah and our circle of incredible women, something began to shift.*

*More memories surfaced. Deeper pain. But also a strange sense of relief. Because for the first time, I wasn't carrying it alone. I wasn't pretending to be fine. I wasn't trying to fix everything for everyone else while falling apart inside. Sarah gave me tools. Space. Safety. And little by little, I began to understand that healing wasn't about being strong all the time. It was about being real. About letting go of the roles I had taken on just to survive.*

*I still have a long way to go. But for the first time, I can say this: I feel good. And that's something I never thought I'd be able to say."*

### **Practice: The Boundary Body Check-In**

So many of us have spent years disconnected from the signals of our own bodies, learning instead to monitor others, to smooth tension, to stay small.

This practice is a simple way to begin rebuilding the trust between your awareness and your body's quiet truths.

## **Gently start here:**

1. Find a quiet space. Sit or lie down somewhere you feel undisturbed. Make yourself comfortable.
2. Close your eyes, or lower your gaze. Place a hand on your heart, or your belly, wherever feels anchoring. Breathe slowly and deeply.
3. Gently ask yourself: *"What am I holding right now that isn't mine to carry?"* Notice what arises, an image, a sensation, a word, a weight. Trust whatever comes.
4. Now ask: *"What do I need, that I haven't given myself today?"* Pause. Listen. Feel your body respond. No need to act on it, just honour it.
5. Feel into your inner yes and no. Recall a recent moment when you wanted to say no, but said yes. Where did your body feel it first? Now recall a true yes, something that felt good, right, whole. How did your body let you know?

Allow your body to teach you.

These signals are the language of your boundaries. The more you listen, the clearer they become.

You don't need to figure it all out today. Just begin by noticing what's real, and trusting that it matters.

## **Reflection: What My Body Has Been Trying to Tell Me**

After you've completed the boundary body check-in, sit quietly with a journal or simply let these questions stir something within. There are no wrong answers, only invitations into truth.

- What sensations did I notice when I felt my inner no?
- What did my body feel like when I recalled a true yes?

- Where have I been overriding those signals, and why?
- What might become possible if I honoured what I felt?

Close by placing a hand on your heart and whispering gently:

*"I'm learning to trust you. Thank you for waiting."*

This is the beginning of a new relationship with yourself.

## **The Longing for Connection (and the Fear of Losing It)**

There's a tender ache many of us carry. A longing so deep, it becomes a kind of gravity. The longing to be seen. To be chosen. To be kept. To belong.

When that longing was never met with consistency or care, we learn to do almost anything to hold onto connection.

We bend. We blur the edges of our truth. We say yes when every fibre of us is screaming no.

We don't want to, but our survival responses are still running the show. We remember what it meant to be left out, shut down, made small. We remember that love was often conditional. We remember how we attempted to stay safe by being 'good'. We remember how closeness depended on compliance. And that if we were 'nice' we wouldn't be rejected.

And somewhere deep within us we knew: If I am to stay alive, to stay safe, to survive, I cannot be me. I have to be what they want me to be. Being authentic is dangerous. Connection requires self-sacrifice.

So now, even as your awareness grows. Even as your body starts whispering, "That doesn't feel right". Something in you might still pull back from setting a boundary.

Because something ancient still whispers,

*"What if they leave?"*

As an adult you get to bring that longing into the light and say:

*"Yes, I want connection. And I want to be true to myself, too."*

Boundaries don't banish love. They refine it. They reveal who honours your truth, not just your compliance. They show you who can meet you, fully.

Your longing to connect is beautiful.

The two were never meant to compete. They were meant to dance together.

And when they do, when you stand in both care for others and care for yourself. That's where real intimacy begins.

Sometimes the deepest confusion around connection lives not in our minds, but in our bodies. Especially when touch became a language of loss instead of love

## **Intimacy, Consent & Boundaries in the Body**

### **Reclaiming Touch, Choice, and Self-Belonging**

For many of us who carry the wounds of childhood sexual trauma, the territory of intimacy is layered with complexity. Our relationship to touch, to sex, to consent, it didn't begin with choice. It began with violation.

When your body was not respected as your own, when someone else's desire took priority over your dignity, your nervous system

learned to survive at any cost. It learned to freeze. To leave. To endure.

And those survival responses, they don't just fade. They imprint. They linger. They show up years later in the most private places: In a sudden numbness during sex In the tightening that comes when someone touches you, even lovingly In the guilt you feel for saying no In the moments you disappear, even in your own body

This isn't a dysfunction. It's your body protecting you, again and again.

For years, I couldn't feel my body. I was a shell, performing intimacy, pleasing partners, disassociating from the discomfort. Because what had been done to me was never named, never healed, never witnessed in its full truth. I had been taught that my body was not mine. That to be loved, I had to give. That to belong, I had to say yes, even when every part of me was screaming no.

Consent was never modelled. Choice was never safe. Boundaries were something I built around my heart, not within my body.

And so I spent years in relationships where I didn't feel pleasure, didn't feel connection, just a sense of obligation. Of needing to be good, to be wanted, to be enough.

Healing began the moment I realised: I don't owe anyone access to my body. Not even if they love me. Not even if I once said yes.

The realisation was quiet but radical: I can choose. I can pause. I can listen to my body. That is enough.

There is grief here, for what was taken, for what was never taught, for what we've endured in silence.

But there is power too.

Because when you start to come back into your body, on your own terms, you begin to realise: You were never the problem. You are the home. And your body gets to be yours again.

## **A Tender Invitation Back to Yourself**

When your body has been touched without consent. When closeness once meant control, confusion, or betrayal. Touch can become a complicated language. A place where your body tenses before your mind understands why.

This practice supports you in gently rebuilding intimacy with your body, where you are the guide, a return to sovereignty, safety, and sensation.

Where your body's yes and no are honoured, not overridden. Where safety comes before closeness. Where permission comes from within.

You don't need to feel ready. Just a sense of slow, gentle presence.

### **Begin Here:**

**Create a safe space** Find a quiet, private space, this might be your bed, a cosy corner, or somewhere you feel unseen by the outside world. Light a candle if that feels grounding. Wrap yourself in something warm.

**Settle into your body** Find a comfortable position, you might lie down, curl into a ball, or sit upright with your back supported. There is no right way to begin. Invite your body to guide you. Place one hand over your heart, the other over your belly. Take three long, slow breaths. Feel the surface you are resting on beneath you. Release your jaw, neck and shoulders.

**Ask gently:**

*"Body, how do you feel about being touched right now?"*

*"Is there a place in me that wants to be acknowledged?"*

Notice what arises. Just listen.

**Offer Sacred Touch** If it feels welcome, place your hands on your body in a way that feels soothing. Perhaps on your thigh, arm, chest, belly or face. Stay here. Breathe slowly. If touch doesn't feel right, stay with breath or voice. That is perfect too.

**Listen for the Yes or No** Gently explore what a "yes" feels like in your body. Warmth? Peace? Openness? Then explore what "no" feels like. Tightening? Numbness? A pull away? Your body speaks in sensation. Just feel, and witness.

**Close with Compassion** When you feel complete, place your hands back on your heart and belly, or to the place that felt most supportive. Whisper softly: *"You belong to no one but me. I will listen to you now."* Your body is yours. Your no is absolute. Your yes is yours to give, from the fullness of who you are. This is how trust is rebuilt, slowly, with consent.

### **Client Voice Spotlight: Reclaiming Consent**

*"The most recent revelation has been around the words 'yes' and 'no', and what consent truly means. I realised I'd never really understood it. I thought saying yes was the only option if I wanted to avoid judgement, rejection, or conflict. That the answer was already prescribed and I'd either be right or wrong depending on what I chose.*

*But now I see: real consent means I get to respond based on my intuition and inner guidance. I get to choose freely, without fear of consequence. I'm learning that I am not responsible for how others react. I don't need to twist my yes or no into something others find more palatable. My answer can come from the place in me that feels most at*

*peace.*

*I still have work to do. But the biggest shift? I've stopped blaming others for wounds I once believed defined me. I no longer feel like a victim of what happened. I love myself, as I am. I learn from the past. And what once felt debilitating now feels like a doorway. A doorway to freedom. Freedom to be me."*

After Grace's words, you may be feeling the stir of clarity yourself, ready to discover how this can show up in your own life. If you'd like to explore where overwhelm or self-doubt live for you, and begin shifting toward that calm, confident version of yourself, this free quiz is a beautiful next step: The *Clear, Calm & Confident* quiz. You can find it here:

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>

This moment of curiosity, taking the quiz, is a small but meaningful act of permission: permission to slow down, to see what's underneath, and to start trusting yourself again.

## **Shame's Quiet Grip: When the Wound Feels Like Who You Are**

Many of us who have survived childhood sexual trauma carry a deep visceral sense that something is fundamentally wrong with us. A deeply felt belief that we are somehow 'wicked', 'bad' or 'dirty'. That we *are* the problem. For existing at all.

This is the legacy of shame. Not the shame of *doing* something wrong. But the shame that whispers, *I am wrong*. The kind that doesn't live in memory alone, but in muscle. In posture. In breath.

For survivors of childhood sexual trauma, this shame can feel embedded. Because the betrayal often came from someone trusted; a caregiver, a relative. And when a child's world collapses in that way, the brain doesn't blame the adult. It turns inward. It says, "*It must be me*".

That's how shame begins, as a survival instinct. It becomes the body's way of explaining the inexplicable. Of keeping attachment intact, even when safety is long gone.

And later, it shows up in the most intimate places:

- In the dread of being seen too closely.
- In the tightening during sex.
- In the fear that your needs are too much, your "no" too risky.
- In the way you disappear from your body, from your voice, from your truth.

Science shows us what survivors have always known in their bones: Shame registers in the brain the same way physical pain and social rejection does. It lights up the same circuits, the insula, and the anterior cingulate. It triggers your body to shut down. Your shoulders curl in. Your eyes drop. Your voice becomes small. It teaches us to silence our boundaries before they're even spoken.

This is how the automatic yes gets locked in. Because shame brings a strange relief. You appease them, soothe them, try to please them. You get through the moment. You avoid rejection. And your nervous system embeds in the message: '*This is how we survive.*' The habit is formed.

But here's what else is true.

Shame is not permanent. It is a response to something that should never have happened. It lives in the body, yes, but so does the power to shift it.

You can meet shame with kindness. You can witness it without fusing to it. You can say, "I see you. And I'm not going anywhere." And slowly, your body learns: this part of me is welcome, too.

### **A Self-Compassion Pause (for when shame rises)**

Place a hand on your heart. Breathe in gently. Name what you feel:

*"I feel shame."*

Breathe out a long exhale Whisper:

*"That makes sense. You've carried so much. You're still good."*

This simple pause interrupts the shame reflex. It teaches your nervous system that self-honouring, not hiding, is safe. It reinforces that truth, connection, and care can all exist together.

Mid-life can be the beginning of a new chapter. It's a threshold. Your brain is changing. Old scripts are loosening. And your body is ripe for a new story, one shaped not by survival, but by sovereignty.

So, what if that warmth in your cheeks, that twist in your gut, isn't proof of unworthiness, but the signal that something old is ready to release?

That the shame you've carried was never yours to hold in the first place?

Feel into the truth of this possibility.

Because what comes next is where trust begins to rebuild. Inside you. With you. For you.

And as that trust begins to flicker back into view, another layer may rise, the quiet confusion of being made to doubt what you felt all along.

Where did you feel the shift, the warmth, the welcome?

## **The Lingering Impact of Betrayal**

Sometimes the deepest betrayal isn't what they did, it's how they made you doubt yourself for noticing it.

Maybe someone said you were "too sensitive" when you voiced your hurt. Maybe they flipped the blame until you were the one apologising. Maybe they promised one thing and delivered another, again and again, until inconsistency became the norm.

This is the slow burn of betrayal. It conditions your body to see clarity as dangerous. It teaches you that boundaries come with consequences.

You start to feel the edge of truth and wonder,

*"Am I overreacting?"*

You hesitate. You freeze. You apologise for needing space. Not because you're unsure, but because the imprint of betrayal is still there, echoing through your system.

When someone you trust repeatedly ignores, manipulates, or distorts your reality, something inside you begins to unravel. You stop trusting your instincts. You question your own memories. You doubt yourself before anyone else can.

This is gaslighting, a form of emotional manipulation where someone causes you to question your memory, perception, or experience.

It's subtle, persistent, and wrapped in a veneer of care. It sounds like:

*"That never happened."*

*"You're imagining things."*

*"You're too sensitive."*

Even when you know what you felt, even when you know your truth.

Gaslighting confuses the nervous system, wears you down.

- You feel a sense of dissonance, what you felt doesn't match what you're being told.
- You begin to defer to other people's versions of events.
- You second-guess what your body is telling you.
- You shrink your truth to avoid conflict.
- You constantly doubt yourself, wondering *"am I overreacting?"*

You're not. Every time you say yes when you mean no. Every time you freeze instead of speak. Every time you apologise, you are brushing against the imprint of what betrayal taught you.

This inconsistency conditions you to expect contradiction, to anticipate rejection, to abandon clarity for closeness.

When setting boundaries leads to someone withdrawing their affection, questioning your worth, or making you feel guilty, your wise nervous system adapts in order to preserve the relationship.

You defer. You apologise. You abandon clarity in the hope of staying close.

Your body did what it had to do to stay safe. Your nervous system adapted to help you survive in relationships, in an environment, where the cost of honesty was too high, where your truth was unwelcome.

Over time, that adaptation becomes a pattern, so even after the relationship ends, the patterns remain, because you remember what happened the last time you named a boundary. The dismissal. The rage. The silence. The shame.

- You hesitate to speak up.
- You freeze at the thought of expressing your truth.
- You explain yourself more than necessary.
- You apologise for your needs.
- You blame yourself
- You silence your boundaries to avoid conflict.
- You find yourself waiting for someone to question your reality.

This is how trust fractures inside us, imperceptibly, over time.

And yet, something beautiful happens when we begin to rebuild that trust. Each time you name what happened. Each time you grieve what was denied. Each time you listen to your body. Each time you believe your own knowing. Each time you say no, when you used to stay silent. Each time you choose, even gently, to honour your feelings, you reclaim something precious.

You rebuild trust with yourself, moment by moment. You say:

*"I will not disappear to stay safe. I will not abandon myself to be loved."*

Boundaries rebuild trust. They become healing in motion. A way to come back to your voice. To your wholeness. To your right to have a life where you can feel safe being fully yourself. To the woman you were always meant to be, before betrayal taught you to doubt her.

## **Practice: Reclaiming Trust in Your Inner Knowing**

A gentle grounding invitation after gaslighting and betrayal.

This is a space to feel your truth. To know that your inner compass was never offline. It was buried, quieted, distorted. Now, we begin to listen again. Gently.

**Come into the Body:** Find somewhere quiet. Somewhere safe. Sit or lie down. Place one hand over your heart, and one over your belly. Breathe in to the count of four, hold to the count of two, exhale to the count of six. Do this three times. Let your weight sink into the surface beneath you.

### **Ask Yourself:**

*"What is true for me right now?" "What part of me needs to be believed?" "What would trust feel like in my body, just for a moment?"*

Don't search for the "right" answer. Tune into your body. A sensation, a word, a tear, a shiver, whatever comes, welcome it.

**Anchor into Affirmation** Place both hands over your heart. Say quietly or silently:

*"I believe you."*

*"I hear you now."*

*"You have nothing to prove."*

**Close with Grounding** Rub your hands gently together. Feel the friction. The heat. Place them back over your chest or womb. Whisper:

*"I am learning to trust you again. One breath at a time."*

This is how the repair begins. Your knowing, your truth is within you.

## **Repeating the Pattern: Why We Keep Saying Yes When We Mean No**

### **The Neuroscience of an Automatic Yes**

Some responses live so deep in the body, we don't even realise they're happening, until we're already in the middle of them.

You hear a request. You feel the eyes on you. And before your mind has a chance to form a sentence, your mouth says:

*"Yes, of course."*

That "yes" doesn't always come from clarity or desire. It comes from a nervous system trained to avoid risk at all costs.

And in trauma-informed terms, that is known as boundary collapse.

This isn't about being weak or indecisive. It's about how your brain and body have adapted to survive.

When you've spent years in environments where saying no led to withdrawal, punishment, or emotional disconnection, your system begins to treat any form of refusal as dangerous. The vagus nerve, your body's internal surveillance system, starts sending signals of threat, even when no threat is present. Just the *possibility* of disapproval can trigger a survival response.

The prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain responsible for evaluating and choosing, goes quiet. And the amygdala, your fear detector, steps in, hijacking your clarity. This is what neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett calls a "false green light": when your brain interprets danger as familiarity and overrides your internal no in order to stay connected.

That's what's happening when your body tenses, but you smile anyway. When your stomach flips, but you nod. When your heart whispers "*no*", but your nervous system shouts "*keep the peace*."

It was 31<sup>st</sup> December 1993, I was pregnant with my first child and having a meal at one of my husband's friends' houses. There was laughter, good food, gentle banter. The conversation turned to how often we could be bothered to have sex. And my partner said, casually, in front of everyone: "You'd never dare to say no, would you Sarah?"

He was right. I didn't have a no. Not because I didn't want one. But because somewhere deep in my system, I believed that if I had boundaries, I would be unlovable.

In that moment, even as I smiled at him, nodding, I froze. And continued sipping my drink like nothing had happened.

On the outside, I looked composed. On the inside, I was mortified, filled with shame.

I nodded along to the conversation, laughing on cue. But I was no longer there.

I left myself, again.

It wasn't because I didn't know what had just happened. It was because my system had been wired, over years of repetition, to

prioritise his comfort over my reality. To stay agreeable, even as I felt myself disappearing.

This pattern of saying yes when you mean no is not about politeness. It's about protection.

It is a boundary collapse, a nervous system response that arises from earlier experiences where saying no felt unsafe, triggered punishment, or risked abandonment.

Again, your system did what it needed to survive. It appeased. It avoided conflict. It kept you attached, even if that attachment hurt.

And when this happens often enough, it wires your system to equate self-abandonment with safety.

Healing this pattern doesn't start with pushing through.

It starts with building capacity, creating enough safety in the body to pause between stimulus and response.

Enough regulation to *feel* the no and stay with it.

Enough support to choose differently, even when old reflexes rise.

This is what creates "neural flexibility." Your brain and body, learning, through small, repeated experiences, that you can tolerate the discomfort of honesty. That you can survive someone else's disapproval. That you can choose your truth, and still belong to yourself.

That's the path forward. One reclaimed no at a time.

## **A Gentle Practice: The Boundary Pause**

Your body often knows your truth before your mind does. It feels the pressure rising. The reflex forming. The "yes" slipping out

before you've even checked if it's true. This is your moment to pause. To reset. To return to yourself before you respond.

## The Practice

**0–5 seconds: Exhale with a sigh** Release the air from your lungs with a long sigh. Release your jaw. Drop your shoulders. Feel the shift begin.

**5–15 seconds: Two breaths** Breathe in for a count of four. Exhale slowly for a count of six. Repeat. Allow each breath ground you more deeply into the now.

**15–25 seconds: Self-contact** Place one hand gently over your heart or sternum. Feel the warmth of your palm. Stay here. Let the pressure anchor you, as if whispering: *You're safe.*

**25–30 seconds: Inner check-in** Without analysis, simply ask:

*"Where am I right now?"*

- Green = Open, clear
- Amber = Mixed, unsure
- Red = Tight, resistant

If you're in amber or red, you might say aloud or silently:

*"Thank you, I need a moment."*

Or:

*"Let me come back to you."*

This is how clarity begins. By giving yourself sacred space between impulse and truth.

## Why This Works: The Neuroscience of a Pause

This isn't just a soothing ritual, it's a full-body intervention.

- The exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system, your body's natural calm state. This "vagal brake" helps lower heart rate and signals to the brain: *we are safe*.
- Resonant breathing (at 6 breaths per minute) boosts heart rate variability, enhancing your ability to regulate stress and return to clarity. Even one minute of this rhythm calms the system.
- Supportive touch releases oxytocin and reduces cortisol. It anchors your system in self-compassion, countering the fawn response with a sense of internal holding.
- Interoceptive awareness (the final check-in) engages the brain's anterior insula and prefrontal cortex, helping you feel your internal state with accuracy, and act from truth rather than reflex.

In just thirty seconds, you teach your body that pause is safe. That refusal doesn't equal rejection. That boundaries are possible, and wise.

What changed in your body when you gave yourself thirty seconds? Was there a part of you that felt easier, even slightly?

## **Family Ties and the Discomfort of Saying No**

Saying no to family is difficult. Emotionally and physiologically. Because in the nervous system, family equals safety, even when it hasn't always been safe. It is a throwback to old survival patterns, hard-wired into our nervous system when we lived in tribes.

You might feel your heart race, your stomach flip, your jaw tighten before a single word is spoken, because you were wired for attachment. It speaks to you as:

*"If I say no, I might be cast out. If I say no, I might lose them."*

For many of us, our earliest sense of belonging came through compliance. We learned that harmony with parents or elders brought approval, or at least kept the peace. When those same people ignored or invaded our boundaries, the nervous system still coded them as safe. So now, as adults, even small refusals can feel like deep betrayals.

And it's amplified in mid-life. Especially for those carrying the emotional labour of ageing parents, dependent children, or intergenerational caretaking. The pressure to keep everyone else afloat can stir old roles, the good daughter, the peacemaker, the fixer, the self-sacrificing one.

And when you try to step outside of them, saying no isn't just uncomfortable, it feels like you're letting the whole system down.

And then there's the guilt about needing boundaries at all. It can feel like choosing your boundaries means choosing to hurt someone. But guilt often hides something deeper. Grief. Grief for the childhood you never got to have. Grief for the parent who never protected you. Grief for the years spent earning love instead of receiving it freely.

Let me tell you what that grief looked like for me.

## **Client Voice Spotlight: When Love Feels Like a Tether**

*"I used to tell myself it was just a phone call. Every Sunday, same time. Same script. She'd ask how I was, talk about her aches and pains, ask why I hadn't visited more. On the surface, it was normal. Loving, even. But my body told a different story.*

*Before the phone rang, my stomach would twist. I'd pace the kitchen. Practise how to sound upbeat. I'd pick up the call already on edge, already exhausted.*

*No matter what I said, it was never enough. She'd remind me how busy everyone else was. How lonely she felt. How I'd changed.*

*When I tried to say I needed space, or I wasn't available, she'd get quiet. Withdraw. I'd feel the guilt crawl in. Like I was abandoning her. Like I was bad.*

*And yet, after every call, I felt like I'd survived something. Not connected. Not seen. Just emptied.*

*It wasn't until I started working with Sarah that I realised I was responding to a lifetime of emotional responsibility. That my discomfort wasn't random, it was memory. That saying no to those calls didn't make me a terrible daughter. It made me an honest one.*

*With time, I learned to pause. To breathe before I responded. To honour my bandwidth, even when the guilt knocked loud.*

*It's still tender. But for the first time, I don't dread Sundays. Because I've started choosing me."*

This client's story echoes what so many of us carry: quiet dread, guilt-wrapped obligation, and inherited roles that never quite fit.

These patterns run deep, but so does your right to live unentangled.

You can start gently.

Here are a few gentle scripts to support that choice:

## **The Family-Proof "No" Toolkit to Hold Your Truth**

*"I won't be making it this time, thank you for understanding."*

*"That doesn't work for me, let's try something else."*

*"I care about this relationship, and I need to honour my capacity."*

*"This is what I'm available for right now."*

*"I'll read your message later, I'm logging off for now."*

*"Thank you, I'm satisfied."*

*"We're keeping things simple at ours this year."*

*"Can we divide Mum's care calendar between us?"*

And when it feels hard, when your voice shakes, try this:

## **The CARE Loop**

1. **Centre:** One slow breath.
2. **Acknowledge:** "I hear the request."
3. **Reality-check:** Do I have capacity?
4. **Express:** Name your truth. Yes. No. Or "I'll get back to you."

Each time you honour your inner yes or no, you rewrite the script. You remind your body: "I'm safe to be me." You make space where guilt once lived. And you show your inner child: *We don't have to please to belong anymore.*

## **Rebuilding the Relationship with Yourself**

There comes a point in this journey where the question shifts. It's no longer,

*"How do I stop people from crossing my boundaries?"*

It becomes,

*"How do I stay connected to myself, no matter what's happening around me?"*

This is the deeper invitation of boundary work. The invitation to say yes to yourself, consistently, clearly, and with care.

This is where self-trust begins to root. In the small, steady choices that affirm:

*"I hear myself. I believe myself. I will not abandon myself."*

You might not have been taught this kind of self-loyalty. You spent years being the dependable one, the helper, the support for everyone else. But now, it's the season where you become that for yourself.

It looks like:

- Saying no without over-explaining.
- Resting before you collapse.
- Leaving the room when your body tightens.
- Choosing peace over performance.

Noticing when the old roles try to pull you back, and gently, not going.

This is the work of becoming trustworthy to yourself.

And if no one ever showed you how, this is your reminder: You are allowed to stop negotiating with your truth. You are allowed to stop apologising for your needs. You are allowed to make your inner world your first home, not your last resort.

Because the most enduring relationship you will ever have is the one you hold with your own heart.

## **Reflection Anchor: This Is What Healing Looks Like**

There will be moments when you still hesitate. When the old guilt rises, uninvited. When the voice inside whispers,

*"Am I doing this wrong?"*

You're not.

This is what healing looks like. Messy. Brave. Uncertain. True.

Every time you pause instead of rush. Every time you turn inward before reaching outward. Every time you honour a need, a limit, a longing, you are practising a new way of being.

You're rewiring years of conditioning. And your nervous system is learning what it never got to know: *It's safe to choose yourself.*

So when it feels like you're moving too slowly, remember: You're moving with wisdom now.

When it feels like nothing's changing, remember: You are. And that's more than enough.

## **Practice & Integration: Tending to Your Boundaries Gently**

You've travelled deep in this chapter. You've met the parts of yourself that were taught to please. To bend. To disappear. You've remembered truths your body never forgot. You've spoken what once stayed silent.

And now, we exhale, integrate

Because setting boundaries isn't a one-time act. it's a relationship. An unfolding. A practice of self-honouring, moment by moment. Time after time.

This final section offers you tools that soothe and strengthen. They are simple. Gentle. Body-led. Designed to meet you where you are, and walk with you as you begin to live these truths out loud.

## **1. Boundary Anchoring Breath (2-minute reset)**

When your system feels overwhelmed or uncertain, use this to return to centre:

- Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly.
- Inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 6. Do this for 2 minutes.
- On each exhale, repeat silently: *"I belong to myself."*

This breath pattern activates your parasympathetic nervous system, the part of you that knows safety, rest, and presence. Each time you practise, you lay down a new neural pathway: *my truth is safe to live here.*

## **2. Journaling Invitations**

These prompts are to help you get curious about your truth.

- What am I no longer willing to carry in silence?
- Where does my "yes" feel truest in my body?
- What would change if I trusted my "no"?
- What boundary am I ready to honour this week, even in a small way?

## **3. Boundary Mirror Practice**

Look into your own eyes in the mirror and say aloud:

*"I see the part of you that learned to stay silent. I see the part that's learning to speak. And neither has to protect me anymore. I belong to myself now."*

Repeat daily for 7 days. It will feel tender, awkward, powerful, whatever rises, let it be, non-judgmentally. This is the practice of being present.

#### **4. Reframing Guilt into Wisdom**

Instead of trying to erase guilt, listen to it.

Guilt often masks grief, and growth.

When it arises, ask:

*"What old rule am I breaking?"*

*"What truth am I making room for?"*

Guilt can point to the places where your healing is taking root. You are wise for reaching toward it. It is what we all crave.

#### **5. A Whisper to the Woman You're Becoming**

Place a hand on your heart and close your eyes. Speak, silently or aloud:

*"You've carried so much. You've adapted, survived, and held more than anyone saw. But now, something new is being born. You are here to belong, first, to yourself. May your 'no' be trusted. May your 'yes' be honest. May your truth be safe in your own hands. And may the life ahead be shaped by the fullness of who you really are."*

In this chapter you're returning to your centre. Bit by bit. Truth by truth.

## 10: FREEDOM

By now, you've walked through some of the hardest truths, the patterns that kept you safe, the grief that once had no voice, the wisdom your body never stopped carrying.

You've begun to meet yourself more honestly, with more tenderness. You've softened into parts that were long exiled. And perhaps now, you feel something shifting. A quiet recognition: "*I don't want to stay stuck here anymore.*"

This chapter is an invitation. Not to push, but to choose something different.

To gently step into the next layer of your healing. To move from insight to integration. From knowing what shaped you to choosing what frees you.

Here, I want to introduce you to *The Freedom Programme*, my 12-week, one-to-one healing journey designed for women and men who are ready to stop managing symptoms and start transforming the patterns at their root.

Together, we work gently with your nervous system and subconscious to release the survival responses that no longer serve you, so you can feel calm, connected, and free in your body.

The heart of this work is the *Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP)*, a method I've developed over years of trauma-informed practice, grounded in neuroscience, compassion, and the body's wisdom.

It's a gentle but powerful way to rewire what's been running your life. Not by reliving trauma, but by releasing it.

## **How Your Subconscious Holds the Key to Change**

You freeze when someone gets angry. You say "yes" before your mind catches up. You disappear inside yourself when you long to be present.

Because most of what's running your life isn't happening in the part of your mind you can consciously control.

Roughly 5% of your mental activity is conscious. It's your thinking mind, the part that plans your day, writes a list, makes a decision.

That's your hardware. It's deliberate, logical, focused. But it's also slow, and it can only process a tiny amount of information at a time, about 40 bits per second.

Meanwhile, your subconscious is like your software. It runs everything else, beliefs, habits, emotional associations, safety responses, at lightning speed.

It takes in and filters over 11 million bits of information per second. It's always on, always scanning, always acting in the background. And most of the time, it's the one calling the shots.

So when you've spent years trying to "talk yourself out of it," trying to explain your reactions or override your fears, and nothing changes, it's because you've been trying to change the output without rewriting the programme.

This is why the Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) goes deeper. We work with the software, where transformation truly happens.

## How the Old Programmes got Installed

Your subconscious didn't make up these patterns out of nowhere. It recorded them.

Like every child, you were born into a world you didn't yet understand. And from the moment you arrived, your brain was like a sponge, wide open, highly impressionable, designed to download information without question.

This is especially true between the ages of zero and seven. In those early years, your brain operates predominantly in theta state, the same brainwave pattern used in deep meditation or hypnosis. It's not about logic. It's about absorption. Whatever you see, hear, feel, or experience is taken in as truth.

If love meant abandonment or control, your brain logged it. If boundaries led to punishment, your nervous system encoded that too. And those early experiences became your operating system, the software that still runs in the background today.

Then came repetition. If something happens often enough, a parent dismissing your needs, a loved one exploding in anger, it becomes the dominant script.

And trauma? That writes in bold.

Emotionally intense experiences get tagged as "priority" by your brain. Your subconscious marks them as critical for survival. So those responses, freeze, fawn, self-silence, shame, don't fade with time. They become default settings.

This is why certain situations feel like they take over your whole body, even now. Your system is doing what it was taught to do. Even if it no longer fits who you are or what you want now.

But here's the good news: What was once downloaded can be rewritten.

And that's exactly what the Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) is designed to do.

## **The Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP)**

A gentle, proven process to rewrite what's been running your life

Imagine this: Your computer's acting up. You keep pressing a button, but something unwanted happens every time. You double-check your settings. You try harder. You press again. Still the same result.

The issue isn't with the button. It's the programme behind it.

This is how the subconscious works.

It's not your willpower that's weak. It's the outdated script your nervous system is still following.

The Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) helps you gently rewrite that script, without having to relive your trauma or dig endlessly into the past.

The Dynamic Transformational Release Process is at the heart of *The Freedom Programme*, my online 12-week one-to-one journey for men and women ready to move from stuck to free.

This isn't a surface-level course or a quick fix. It's a deeply personal process of rewiring what's been running your life, in a space where your body, truth, and timing lead. What follows is how that process unfolds in real time, across our sessions together.

This is how the Freedom Programme works:

### **Step 1: The Freedom Assessment**

We begin by identifying what's *really* going on, the specific challenges, triggers, or stuck behaviours showing up in your life right now. You might be people-pleasing, stuck in a freeze response, avoiding conflict, or constantly doubting yourself. Whatever is surfacing is the key. Because the subconscious programmes running beneath your awareness are revealed through your present-day struggles. Together, we get clear on what's been holding you back, and where you long to feel peace, power, and ease.

### **Step 2: Freedom Tools to Calm and Prime**

Next, I give you a Freedom Tool, a simple but potent practice to regulate your nervous system and prime your subconscious for change. This helps you feel safe enough to do the deeper work. It settles the overwhelm, reduces anxiety, and makes emotional resilience possible. Why does this matter? Because real transformation comes from creating the conditions where your system can let go and feel safe to relax.

### **Step 3: Reprogramme the Subconscious**

This is where the shift happens. Using the Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) which combines trauma-informed hypnotherapy, EMDR, and other subconscious tools, we locate and gently undo the outdated programmes running your life. You don't need to go digging for memories or explain everything. We work with the present moment, what your life is asking for now. And we create new subconscious scripts rooted in self-trust, ease, and choice. The old protective patterns dissolve. The behaviours that once felt automatic, saying yes when you meant no, freezing in

conflict, shutting down emotionally, begin to shift. Because the programme has changed. And with that change, your nervous system finally gets to exhale. Not because you're trying harder, but because you're no longer being run by survival code.

Once we've rewired the subconscious programme, the external shifts may seem small at first, but they are deeply significant. A quiet moment of pause before reacting. A sense of groundedness when you speak. A weekend that no longer carries the weight of obligation.

You don't need to force anything.

You simply begin to feel more *you*, less entangled in the overthinking, overgiving, or emotional overwhelm that once ruled your days. As one Freedom Programme client described:

*"I've found myself doing things I never thought I'd do, speaking up in meetings, saying no without over-explaining, even choosing to rest without guilt. It's like the noise in my head has quieted. For the first time in years, I'm living more in the moment. I'm not constantly waiting for something to go wrong. I feel like I've got my life back, gently, powerfully, one day at a time."*

So, what begins to shift when the programme changes? When the old survival code is rewritten, life doesn't explode into dramatic change, it opens up to new possibilities. Clients often describe:

- Feeling less triggered in everyday moments.
- Speaking up without the internal collapse.
- Noticing peace where panic used to be.
- Being able to rest without guilt.
- Choosing to meet their own needs, and feeling good about it.

These shifts are subtle but steady, because you're finally safe to be who you've always been. This is what true freedom *feels* like.

## **But What If I'm Still Not Sure?**

Even when your heart aches for change, it's normal for doubt to rise. As something whispers "*maybe*," another part might still be holding back. That hesitation isn't resistance, it's felt intelligence, shaped by everything you've already lived through. It's the voice of lived experience, asking for reassurance.

Let's offer it. Let's bring those quiet fears into the light, together.

## **"What if I've tried everything and nothing's helped?"**

Maybe you've spoken to someone who didn't understand that to heal we need to work with the root cause of the patterns that are no longer serving you. Maybe you tried to fix things on your own, and it helped for a while, until it didn't. This isn't about providing you with more coping strategies and tools which require effort to remember or manage, it's about transforming what drives the need for them, at the root.

The Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) works gently with your subconscious, the place where these patterns were first written, so healing no longer has to mean managing symptoms. It means lasting change. It all happens during our 1:1 sessions, no homework.

## **"What if this stirs everything up and I fall apart?"**

You won't. Because we won't go faster than it feels safe to go. Falling apart isn't the goal. Being held while you let go, that's the invitation. This work is trauma-informed, paced with care. There's no force. No pressure. Just support. You move at the speed of

safety. This work is paced, attuned, and led by what your body can hold. You won't be dropped into memories or asked to relive what hurt you. We begin where you are. We go gently. And I walk with you the whole way.

### **"I don't want to relive the past."**

You don't have to. This process doesn't involve retelling or reliving trauma. We start with what's happening in your life now, the reactions, the patterns, the triggers, and we gently work backwards, reprogramming the part of you that has been holding on so tightly, just to keep you safe.

### **"What if I can't be hypnotised?"**

You can. Hypnosis isn't some mysterious state, it's the state you drop into when watching a film or reading a book. You remain in control the entire time. This is not about surrendering power, it's about getting it back.

### **"I'm scared I'll lose the people around me if I start changing."**

Healing shifts dynamics. That's true. But the people who love you will meet you there. The ones who only loved the version of you that over-functioned or stayed silent, they were never loving the real you. You are allowed to change. And the people who belong in your life will make space for that change.

### **"What if I'm the one person this doesn't work for?"**

You're not. You're just the one who's hurting. Every single woman who's come to me has carried this fear. And every one of them has started to feel different when they finally stopped trying to do it all alone.

## **"What if I can't do this?"**

You're already doing the bravest part, listening to the call for something different. Even reading this, something in you is waking up, the part of you that remembers you were made for more than survival. That's the part we work with. That's the part we grow.

## **"I'm exhausted. I don't know if I have the energy to begin."**

That's exactly why this exists, this process doesn't demand more from you, it gives something back. When you stop carrying the old programming, when your nervous system no longer has to stay on high alert, something beautiful happens. You start to feel peace again. Your system has been carrying old programming, keeping you stuck in patterns that once protected you, but now only exhaust you. When we shift those, everything else begins to get easier.

## **"What if I can't afford it?"**

I understand. That's why I offer flexible options to meet you where you are. Because your healing should never feel out of reach. And the cost of not healing, in energy, relationships, peace, is already too high. We'll work together to find a way that feels doable and kind.

I'm here when you're ready. Not when you're perfect. Not when you're certain. Just ready enough to wonder: *What if this time, it could be different?*

## **Reflection Invitation**

Before you move forward, pause with this: *"What part of me is quietly ready for this next chapter?"* Feel into your body as it responds. Allow this next step, whether it's reaching out or simply resting, come from within.

## When You're Ready to Talk, I'm Here

If something in you is curious about what this might look like for you, let's talk. You don't need to have all the words. You don't need to be completely "ready." You just need to feel that small pull toward something new.

And when it feels right, here's the link where you can find a time to chat:

- <https://calendly.com/sarah-livinglimitlessly/stuck-to-free-chat>

## Why This Work Feels So Different

By now, you might be wondering:

*"What actually happens when someone works with Sarah, one to one?"*

Here's what clients tell me, again and again:

They feel safe. Not just emotionally, but in their whole nervous system. Many describe it as "being in my mother's arms," or "the first time I've ever felt truly seen without judgement."

They feel changes quickly, because the work goes deep, to the root. One woman said,

*"After just three sessions, I'm the complete opposite no anxiety, no paranoia. I'm sleeping."*

They feel held without shame. That quiet inner voice that says "you should've known better" begins to quiet in the presence of true compassion.

They feel the difference in their body. Hypnotherapy, EMDR tools, and gentle trauma healing processes mean that breakthroughs aren't just in the mind. They release stored pain and trauma from the body.

They feel like themselves, sometimes for the first time.

*"I actually looked in the mirror and smiled at myself. The fear has gone, and peace is resting in its place."*

This is what makes the Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP) so powerful.

It's a deep, personalised journey that meets you where you are, and gently walks you home to yourself, clearer, calmer, and more in charge of your life than you've felt in years.

If what you've read here resonates with you, imagine what one-to-one, nervous-system-led work could unlock.

Every single story you've read started with one message:

*"I think I'm ready."*

Your next chapter could begin the same way.

It's about coming into right relationship with yourself, with your past, your patterns, and your power, so that you no longer live at the mercy of old stories.

It's intimate, attuned, and tailored to *you*.

Because your healing deserves to be as unique as the life you're ready to claim.

As one Freedom Programme client shared:

*"My life really did feel like it was imploding when I first met Sarah, and I know that it was no coincidence our paths crossed. Working with the strategies she teaches*

*have been revelatory, and I am healing in a way I could never have imagined."*

This isn't magic. But it is profound.

And it begins, as all sacred healing does, with a quiet decision to choose yourself, gently, powerfully, now.

## **Reflection Prompt**

You might ask yourself, "*what is one story I inherited that no longer holds my truth?*"

Let your body guide your response. Notice what tenses, what softens, as you reflect. This is about having the power to choose what you carry forward.

## **A Closing Ritual: Name the Shift**

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position. Let your body settle.
2. Place one hand on your heart, the other on your belly.
3. Take a slow inhale through the nose, long exhale through the mouth. Repeat twice more.
4. Speak these words aloud or silently: "*I choose to rewrite the story from here.*" Let your body absorb it. Feel where it lands.
5. Bring to mind a word that describes the future you're stepping into, perhaps *sovereignty*, *peace*, *ease*, or *clarity*. Whisper it into your hands.
6. End with a grounding touch, palms pressed together, or a hand lightly on your cheek and a breath that tells your body: "*this is safe.*"

# 11: MIRROR WORK FOR THE SOUL

As you have travelled through the pages of this book you've walked through the quiet terrain of your inner world.

You've peeled away the layers of silence that kept you functioning but distant from your own aliveness. You've recognised the patterns, perfectionism, people-pleasing, over-working, never resting, and named them for what they are: survival strategies disguised as coping.

You've begun setting new, sacred boundaries. Touched old wounds. Held yourself in the light of new truths.

And now, love, you are ready for a deeper reunion. A sacred seeing. As we arrive at the mirror.

## **Why the Mirror Now?**

There comes a point in every healing journey when the body no longer wants to be interpreted through someone else's lens. When the self no longer wishes to be explained, only *felt*. When the eyes begin to search not for answers, but for recognition.

This is that moment.

After all the releasing and remembering, the body seeks a new anchor. A return to the face it once learned to avoid. The mirror becomes that place. A space of presence where the woman you've been and the woman you are becoming can make eye contact. Where truth and tenderness begin to live in the same gaze.

You may have spent decades seeing yourself through imagined eyes, a parent's judgement, a partner's disdain, society's

impossible standard. But here, now, the only eyes that matter are yours.

And yes, at first it might feel like too much. The critic may flare, the shame may tighten your chest. This is the residue of being unseen for so long.

This chapter will guide you to meet your own gaze, slowly, gently, truthfully. To practise seeing without flinching. To pair sight with safety. To begin the slow return to self-love that doesn't need proof to be real.

Because when you can look into your own eyes and stay, even for three seconds, you begin to rewrite the very map of your identity.

You begin to belong to yourself, as this Freedom client discovered.

*"For the first time, I didn't flinch at my own face. I just stood there. Tears came, but I stayed. And in that moment, I realised I'd never truly seen myself before, not like that. It felt like coming home to a part of me I didn't know was waiting."*

## **The Mirror as Medicine: What Your Body Already Knows**

The mirror offers real-time, unfiltered feedback. A living presence reflected back. And that reflection? It reaches places your words haven't touched yet.

When you see your own face with warmth, your nervous system responds. Compassion, breath, touch, these small acts change the way your brain and body relate to your image.

Neuroscience calls it the *mirror neuron network*, the circuitry that lights up when you see yourself.

- Self-recognition strengthens the part of your brain that anchors identity.
- Gentle gaze and supportive touch activate your social safety system the vagus nerve, helping your body feel more at ease.
- Even brief moments of kindness can release oxytocin, a chemical linked to connection and calm.

This is how self-love becomes embodied, a felt part of you.

So much of your life has been lived through the lens of who others needed you to be. This next practice is a quiet rebellion. A return. And now, if it feels okay, we'll begin.

### **The 3-Minute Mirror Ritual**

Begin with what's here. You don't need ideal conditions. You don't need the perfect lighting. You don't need the right words. You don't even need to feel ready.

All you need is three minutes, a mirror, and the willingness to stay gently with yourself, just as you are.

**Minute 0–1: Anchor the Body** Sit or stand in a way that feels comfortable, mirror in view. Relax your jaw. Drop your shoulders. Unclench your belly. Take two slow resonance breaths, in for four, out for six. Feel the ground beneath you.

*(These longer exhales help your body shift from stress to steadiness. This is the work of your vagus nerve the part of your nervous system that calms and connects)*

**Minute 1–2: Meet Your Gaze** Gently rest your eyes on your reflection. Just look, with softness. Name what you see, aloud or silently. Maybe it's tiredness, curiosity, resistance, discomfort. Name it without judgement.

*(When you name what you're feeling, your brain starts to feel safer by switching on your prefrontal cortex (the thinking part of your brain) and quietening your amygdala (the alarm part of your brain). This is a way of showing your nervous system that you're listening.)*

**Minute 2–3: Hand-Over-Heart Phrase** Place one hand over your heart. Feel the warmth of your palm on your chest. Now gently speak a phrase to yourself, something steady and kind.

*"I'm here. I will stay; I won't look away".*

Breathe again. The moment settling into your body. Then gently close the mirror. Inhale once more. Notice what is different, even if only slightly.

*(Supportive touch releases oxytocin, a naturally soothing chemical that helps you feel safe and cared for. It's what our bodies release in moments of connection and comfort. This moment pairs your own image with feelings of safety and care, a new association.)*

This simple practice invites your body and mind to experience something new. A moment of being seen. A moment of staying. A moment of belonging to yourself.

## **Integration Prompt**

Place one hand on your heart, one on your belly. Stay with yourself for a few quiet moments.

Then ask:

*"What did I notice in my body when I looked into my own eyes? What part of me felt seen, even if only for a second?"*

Whatever arises is enough. There is no right way to feel. Only the truth of this moment.

## **A Personal Reflection**

For years, I couldn't look at myself.

Not in passing windows. Not in mirrors. Especially not when I was undressed.

I blamed my body for what had been done to it. I thought it had betrayed me, by growing, by responding, by surviving. The shame wrapped around me like fog, thick and silent. I couldn't meet my own eyes without feeling disgust, or worse, nothing at all.

I avoided the mirror like it was an enemy. And in doing so, I stayed a stranger to myself.

But slowly, gently, I began to practise this work. A few seconds at a time. A breath. A glance. A quiet phrase spoken into the silence.

At first, all I could manage was to be there. No flinch. No turning away. That alone felt like a victory.

Over time, something shifted. The woman in the mirror began to feel familiar. I stopped blaming her. I started listening.

Now, I can stand, stark bollock naked, in front of the full length bathroom, pat my ample belly and smile. Sometimes I even give myself a cheeky high five.

This didn't happen overnight, it came from choosing to look, to accept myself, exactly as I am. From choosing, again and again, to stay. To see. To be kind. To come home.

## **Client Voice**

*"So today something pretty god damn amazing has happened to me. It was the first time in all my adult life I've actually looked in the mirror and smiled at myself. I actually love the way I look. I am proud of myself. Six months ago, I felt I had no light at the end of the tunnel. I felt worthless. After working on myself, loving myself, allowing help in, taking chances, stepping out of my comfort zone... I feel on top of the world. This is only the beginning."*

## **Reparenting the Reflection**

Every time you looked in the mirror and turned away, there was a part of you holding her breath. Waiting. Hoping. Longing to be seen, not for how she looked but for who she was on the inside, for what she carried, for what she needed, for what she lost.

Reparenting through mirror work is an invitation to return to her now. To sit with the one who was silenced mid-sentence. To witness the woman who became strong by necessity, not by choice. With the eyes that still remember what it felt like to be dismissed, misunderstood, or misread. To honour the gaze that carries memory, depth, and untold need.

## **Deepening The Practice: The Photo Beside the Mirror**

Sometimes, it can feel easier to offer compassion to the child you once were than to the woman you are now. If meeting your current

reflection feels tender or overwhelming, this variation offers a bridge.

Find a photo of yourself from childhood. One where your eyes still carry that raw, open magic, before the difficult stuff all began, or one where your body already knew how to hide.

Place it beside the mirror, or hold it in your hand.

Begin the mirror ritual as before, breath, gaze, presence. But this time, speak to *her*.

You might say:

*"You were always worthy of being loved gently."*

*"You never needed to earn safety; it should have been yours from the start."*

*"I see how brave you were. And how tired you must have been."*

*"You deserved protection, kindness, presence, love. I give you that now."*

She is real. She lives inside you. And each time you offer her compassion through the mirror, you begin to remember who you really are.

## **Energetic Integration Tips**

This kind of mirror work can stir the quiet places within you, the parts that once had to disappear to stay safe.

As your gaze begins to become kinder toward yourself, the body may speak more loudly. You might feel tearful, tender, exposed, or flat. This doesn't mean anything has gone wrong. It means the freeze is melting. Your truth is being heard.

Here are a few ways to tend to your energy after mirror work:

**1. Ground Through Sensation** Run your hands under warm water. Place your feet on the earth or floor and notice the texture beneath you. Hold a smooth stone or wrap yourself in a blanket. Choose one thing that reminds your body it is safe to be here.

**2. Move Gently** Rock side to side, or sway slowly to music that feels soothing. Movement helps integrate emotional energy and reorient the nervous system.

**3. Co-Regulate** Let someone you trust witness you. This can be as simple as a text that says, *"I saw myself today."* Being seen while you're learning to see yourself deepens safety.

**4. Rest Without Explaining** Give yourself permission to lie down or be still after a practice. Your nervous system is processing layers that words can't always reach. Honour that.

**5. Breathe With Intention** Try a pattern like: inhale for 4, exhale for 6. Longer exhales invite calm. Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly.

**6. Reassure the Younger You** Speak to the part of you who felt overwhelmed: *"You're safe now." "I've got you." "You don't have to disappear anymore."*

Healing unfolds in layers. What felt heavy yesterday may feel lighter tomorrow, and what feels tender today is often a doorway to deeper freedom.

Keep coming back to your breath. Keep coming back to your gaze. Keep coming back to the truth that you are never too far from yourself.

## Co-Regulation as a Bridge

Healing doesn't always have to happen in isolation.

If staying with your own gaze feels too activating or too tender right now, consider inviting in a trusted presence. Someone who can hold space for you, non-judgementally without needing to fill the silence.

You might:

- Do a video call mirror ritual side-by-side.
- Share a voice note after each day's practice.
- Text a simple reflection like, "I stayed with myself today."

When your nervous system experiences compassion from *another*, it becomes easier to offer it to yourself. Safety grows in relationship. And there is no shame in needing to be seen while learning to see yourself.

Many women arrive at this point in their lives having carried years of misplaced shame, silence, or disconnection. Sometimes the mirror opens a doorway that feels too difficult to walk through without support.

If you feel called to explore this further, to be witnessed, gently held, and compassionately guided as you continue returning to yourself, I'd love to walk alongside you.

It can begin with a quiet conversation, here's the link to find a time to chat:

- <https://calendly.com/sarah-livinglimitlessly/stuck-to-free-chat>

## **Closing Reflection**

You have begun to turn the mirror into a friend. You've witnessed the girl who waited, the woman you are now. You've taken

something sacred, your reflection, and met it, maybe for the first time with compassion.

There may still be days when your gaze falters. When the inner critic returns. When shame tries to tighten its grip.

When it does, remind yourself: You are worthy of self-compassion. You are allowed to look and accept yourself without judgement. That harsh voice is not your truth. You are already enough.

Gently ask yourself:

*"What becomes possible when I see myself through eyes of love, again and again?" "What truth rises in my body when I stay with my reflection?"*

You are the one you've been waiting for. You are the one who does not turn away. This is how self-love begins.

## 12: YOU ARE THE MEDICINE

The truth of you has always been within you. Whole. Complete. Enough. Even when life asked you to hide it. Even when layers built up to protect it. Even when you forgot how to feel it.

This story is yours.

In 1767, the Burmese army swept through Thailand. Ruthless and violent, they destroyed everything in their path. Villages were burned. Inhabitants killed. Treasures looted.

Nothing sacred was safe. When they reached the capital and entered the royal temple, they slaughtered every monk within its walls. What could be stolen, they took. What they couldn't carry, they destroyed or ignored.

There was one thing they left behind, a massive, 10-foot-tall 10-foot-wide terra-cotta statue of The Buddha. Unremarkable. Decorated with bits of coloured glass. Too big to move. Too plain to seem valuable. So they left it behind, and the statue stood untouched for almost 200 years. Then in 1955, the temple caretakers planned to relocate it into a new building. As workers tried to lift the immense statue from its pedestal, the ropes snapped. It fell heavily to the ground, cracking the surface.

Something glinted from inside the broken clay.

As workers peered into they saw a gleam. Curious, they chipped away more of the surface, and what they found stunned them.

The entire statue was made of solid gold.

Hidden for centuries under a layer of ordinary looking clay. Covered, by those ill-fated monks, to disguise it, when they

realised the invasion of their monastery was about to happen, and forgotten ever since.

Photographs were taken. Pieces of plaster were preserved. A key was found inside the base that could disassemble the golden statue for transport. It weighed over five thousand kilograms and consisted of nine golden parts.

Today, the statue stands in Wat Traimit Temple in Bangkok, Thailand.

It's worth never changed. Its radiance was never gone. It had only been covered, for safety.

This is your story.

That shining part of you, your authentic self, the you who is powerful, radiant, creative, intuitive, has always been there. And like the monks who protected their sacred treasure from destruction, you too created coverings to survive: the perfectionist, the pleaser, the hardened, the critic, parts of you that helped keep the gold safe.

You have had this protection for so long, it's easy to forget there's anything to them.

As children, we build what we need to survive. We become what keeps us safe. We bury our intuition and truth under layers of coping, compliance, masks and control.

But the gold is still there. Intact. Untouched by the trauma. Waiting to be remembered.

This chapter is your return to your authentic self.

## **Reconnecting With the Self You Were Asked to Leave Behind**

Your authentic self is the part of you that feels and knows your truth.

It's how you arrive as a baby. Open, intuitive, emotionally honest, deeply connected to your inner rhythm.

Dr Gabor Maté describes it as the capacity to feel what you feel, know what you know, and say what you need, without shrinking to stay loved. This is the compass every child is born with, the compass which most survivors were forced to abandon far too soon.

As babies we express our needs without hesitation. When we are hungry, uncomfortable or in need of comfort, we cry, and our caregiver responds. However, as we develop, this changes.

We quickly learn that our truth is not always welcome. when feeling, asking, or expressing leads to withdrawal, punishment, or danger we begin to adapt.

We realise we have to make a trade. We can't survive without our caregivers, so we begin to shape ourselves into someone who will be accepted.

We quieten. We please. We become 'the good girl'.

Dr Maté describes this as the moment a child learns that being true to herself carries a cost, and attachment takes priority.

The body stores that decision. And the body remembers.

Science confirms what survivors feel:

- The **insula**, the part of the brain that senses what's happening inside us and reads the body's signals, dampens down.
- The **amygdala**, the part of the brain which scans for threat, goes into overdrive.
- The **prefrontal cortex**, part of the brain that enables us to think clearly and rationally, closes down.

Together, these shifts teach the body that being true to yourself is dangerous, and abandoning yourself keeps you alive. What begins as safety becomes habit.

This is the code trauma writes. But it's not the end of the story.

Your authentic self never disappeared. She learned to stay quiet and wait. She hid herself beneath layers of compliance and vigilance, knowing the time for return would come.

That time is now.

This chapter holds that return, through the quiet noticing of what has always been here, reconnecting you with the one who has always been whole, even while she was hidden.

## **A Personal Reflection: The Moment I Met Her**

There was a point in my life when I realised I had been walking through life without her.

Not because she had gone anywhere, but because I had long stopped listening.

The self I abandoned was still inside me, silenced, scared, waiting. And when she finally showed herself, it came with truth, raw and undeniable. It came with grief. Shame. Recognition.

This is the moment I met her again, the real me, after years of staying hidden behind protective layers built from years of surviving.

I was in the bath, alone, at the home I made after my husband and I separated.

Years previously Mum had sent me a book, *How to Love Yourself When You Don't Know How*. I had never read it. That day, I finally opened it. I closed my eyes. I tried to speak to little Sarah.

In my mind's eye I found her, cowering behind the garish green and yellow couch. The bed settee from the house I lived in with my stepfather and mum as a young child. The house where so much happened.

She peaked out from behind it, small, still, watching. Terrified of me.

She didn't trust me. I wouldn't have either.

I had just had another one-night stand. Some random man from the night before. He was actually kind. That made it worse. I felt disgusted with myself.

I wasn't chasing sex. I was addicted to the chase, to the power I felt when I locked eyes with someone and lured them in. It made me feel I was worth something, I was wanted, desired. That was the hit.

The rest, once I'd got them, the touch, the act, the pretending, I did because I thought I had to. It was expected. And somewhere in all that, I knew I was killing something inside me.

I saw her, little Sarah, cowering behind that old couch. I knew I was hurting her. Hurting her by hurting me.

The shame rising in my chest and feeling vulnerable and exposed in the bath, I got out, wrapped myself in a towel. Curled up in the living room. Little Sarah still in my mind, hiding behind the couch.

*"Will you come sit with me?" I asked her.*

Shaking her head, in a voice barely louder than a whisper, she responded:

*"No. You hurt us."*

She was right. I did hurt her, and myself. Over and over again. With that realisation, looking at that frightened little girl, the same age as my daughter, I made a promise. To both of us.

I said it aloud:

*"I will stop Sarah. I don't want to hurt you again. I don't want to feel like this anymore. I love you, I love you so much."*

She didn't believe me.

But I stopped. I stopped giving myself away for nothing. I stopped picking up scraps.

I started speaking to her. Every day. She started to believe me. She began to move closer. Each time I connected with her, she got a little braver. I kept my promise, and with that, trust grew. Now she hugs me. Snuggles into bed with me. Paints with me. Reminds me what fun feels like.

That was the first time I met her. The day I stopped running from myself. I didn't know what would come next, but I knew I wanted

to stay. That choice became a thread, one I followed, one that led me back.

This is how we begin to reclaim the self we were never meant to leave. By staying with what's real. By listening. By holding her gaze when she finally looks back.

Every time you choose to stay with your truth, you walk toward the self who has always been within you. Waiting. Whole. Ready to be held.

## **What Grief Reveals**

As you begin to reconnect to your true self, you may begin to realise the enormity of what you have lost. And it hurts.

This grief runs deep.

It rises from the part of you that remembers everything. The moments your body froze and no one came. The birthdays spent pretending. The quiet shame that settled in when you were blamed for someone else's harm.

This is the grief of the child who waited for protection that never arrived. The girl who carried what no child should ever be asked to hold. The one who shaped herself to stay safe, and then forgot who she was beneath it all.

Grief sits inside the years you spent keeping it all together. Inside the times you pushed through when what you really needed was rest. Inside the ways you held others, hoping someone might eventually hold you.

And when it surfaces, it speaks clearly. It says: I remember. It says: That mattered. It says: I was alone, and I should never have been.

Grief is part of coming back to your true self. . Let it come. Let it speak. It is part of the return. Take a breath and ask:

*"What does this grief remember that I've tried to forget?  
What part of me is ready to be seen now?"*

## **The Unspoken Fire: A Reflection on Anger**

There are parts of you that were never allowed to speak. The ones that clenched their fists under the table. Bit their tongue. Swallowed their voice to keep the peace.

Anger may have lived there, silent, shamed, misunderstood. Not rage for destruction, but the clean heat of *truth denied*. The *no* that was never spoken. The *how dare you* that echoed only inside your bones.

You learned to push it down. To smooth it over. Because expression was unsafe. Because needs weren't met with care. Because your survival depended on staying small, agreeable, invisible.

But that anger? It's not your enemy. It's your inner guardian. It's the part that says: *I deserved better*. It's the part that insists: *I matter*.

Now, as you reclaim your wholeness, that fire deserves a seat at the table. Not to consume, but to clarify. Not to punish, but to honour. Let it move. Let it speak. Let it rise, without shame.

Because anger, too, is a form of love, the kind that protects what is sacred.

**Reflection Prompt** What parts of you had to be silenced in order to survive, and what might become possible if they were allowed to speak now?

**Somatic Cue** Sit tall, spine steady. Place one hand over your throat, the other over your belly. Breathe low, slow, and wide. If it feels safe, let a quiet sound rise on the exhale, a hum, a sigh, a whispered truth. Let your body know:

*"It's safe to feel. Safe to express. Safe to be heard. This is my fire. It knows what matters."*

## **Post-Traumatic Growth: Your Hidden Strength**

Some changes happen slowly. So slowly, you don't notice them until something rises in you that wasn't there before.

One day you pause before saying yes. You speak your truth in a room that once silenced you. You sit with a wave of sadness instead of pushing it away. You choose rest. You notice joy. You feel your feet on the ground.

These shifts are signs of growth, the kind that forms deep inside, in the space where your truth has been waiting to live again.

This is what psychologists call post-traumatic growth, the process of becoming more *because* of what you've lived through. It doesn't cancel out the pain. It rises through it.

Researchers have identified five areas where this kind of growth often emerges:

- A deeper appreciation for life
- Closer, more honest relationships
- New possibilities and directions
- A stronger sense of your own strength
- A richer connection to something greater than yourself

More than half of trauma survivors report experiencing growth in at least one of these areas. It doesn't happen all at once. And it doesn't follow a straight line. But it is real.

For many women, post-traumatic growth shows up quietly. You may find yourself holding firmer boundaries. Choosing what aligns instead of what appeases. Feeling more present in your own skin.

Growth also comes with deeper feeling. You may notice more tears. More truth in your body. More emotion. This is strength, natural strength, the kind of strength that stays.

You are embodying a new way of living. Safety and truth are beginning to sit side by side. Your story no longer needs to end at survival. You are moving into something fuller. Something more whole.

This growth doesn't require you to forget the past. It honours what you've lived, and builds something meaningful from the ruins.

Each time you choose presence over pleasing, truth over silence, self-connection over collapse, you strengthen the part of you that is allowing itself to be seen.

You are the medicine. And your life is beginning to show it. Ask yourself:

*"What strength have I grown through my healing? How is my life beginning to reflect the truth of who I really am?"*

## **Sacred Repair**

In Japanese culture, when a ceramic vessel breaks, it isn't discarded or hidden. It is repaired with gold. Every crack is filled with lacquer dusted in powdered metal, often gold, silver, or

platinum. The process is called *Kintsugi*, which means "golden joinery."

The bowl becomes stronger than it was before. Its history is visible. Nothing is covered. The repair is part of its beauty. The fracture becomes the art. The piece becomes more valuable because of what it has lived through.

Your healing carries the same truth.

The harm you endured was never yours to carry. They were wounds that were inflicted on you.

And yet, you have survived. You have endured, adapted, and continued. You have chosen to face what many keep buried.

As you heal, these wounds become the places where gold is laid. Your courage. Your clarity. Your capacity to speak, to feel, to know what matters.

This is sacred repair. This is beauty, crafted through self-compassion.

You are the vessel. You are the gold.

Some women describe this shift quietly. A slow return. A gentle chipping away of what covered their truth. A client shared it like this:

*"Transformation is owning and loving who I am warts and all. Allowing myself to be enough as I am. Being vulnerable about the things I carried shame about and finding that the shame released as I spoke and felt them in therapy. It wasn't one big moment. Just hundreds of tiny ones. A gentle chipping away*

Ask yourself:

*"What has gently shifted in me, one small moment at a time? What truth feels softer to hold now?"*

You've remembered the gold. You've felt the grief. Now let's bring it into your body. The next pages offer you a ritual to help you stay connected, to your breath, your truth, and the strength that's rising.

## **The M.E.D.I.C.I.N.E. Path**

Now that you've met these parts, your grief, your gold, it's time to bring them into your body. This practice is designed to help you come home to yourself, through breath, presence, and simple truth-telling.

You can walk through it as a ritual, a journaling sequence, or a grounding practice whenever you feel disconnected. There's no pressure to complete it all at once. Let each step meet you where you are, in your truth.

**M - Meet Your Body** Sit or lie in a way that feels supported. Breathe deeply and gently. Bring your awareness to one part of your body, maybe your feet, your hands, or the back of your neck. Notice what's there: temperature, sensation, movement. You are here. You are listening.

**E - Exhale with Intention** Place one hand on your chest or belly. Take a slow breath in, let the out-breath lengthen naturally. Repeat this three times.

**D - Drop Into Truth** Ask yourself gently: *What am I feeling right now?* You may notice sadness, warmth, confusion, hope, or many things at once. All of it belongs.

**I - Invite Compassion** Place both hands over your heart or another part of your body that needs support. Offer yourself a simple phrase: *"This makes sense." "I'm here with you." "You didn't deserve what happened."* Say it aloud or silently. Let it settle into your heart.

**C - Choose Presence** Look around the space you're in. Name five things you can see, three things you can touch, one thing you can hear. You are in the present moment. You are safe now. You are choosing to stay.

**I - Identify Support** Bring to mind someone who feels safe or steady, a friend, a therapist, a guide, a version of yourself from the future. Imagine their presence near you. If you need to reach out, do that. Support is allowed. Connection is medicine.

**N - Name Your Power** Name one way you have grown. One boundary you've held. One truth you've spoken. One choice you've made for yourself.

*Which part of you feels stronger now? Where has growth begun to take root?*

**E - End with Reverence** Place your hand over your heart. Say one word aloud that describes how you want to feel as you leave this practice. It might be "clear," "steady," or "held." Let that word settle into your body. You are here. You are whole.

## **Why This Practice Helps**

Each part of the M.E.D.I.C.I.N.E. Path supports your healing at a body and brain level:

- Meeting your body helps you reconnect with internal signals that trauma once trained you to ignore. This builds trust in your own felt sense.

- Exhaling slowly shifts your nervous system toward safety. Longer out-breaths send a signal to your heart and brain that you are safe.
- Naming emotions activates the parts of the brain that help you integrate experience, rather than store it as threat.
- Offering compassion supports the release of oxytocin, a hormone that creates safety and connection inside your system.
- Choosing presence orients your brain to the here and now. This widens your Window of Tolerance, the space where you can think and feel without overwhelm.
- Imagining or accessing support regulates your vagus nerve, the body's pathway of safety and connection.
- Naming your power rewires your sense of identity. Each time you remember a moment of strength, your brain starts to expect more of them.
- Ending with reverence closes the practice in a way that affirms dignity, rather than collapse or fixing.

This is a powerful process, backed by science. A return to trust in yourself as you remember how to connect with the authentic you.

## **Micro-Rituals for Daily Reconnection**

Healing builds through the choices you make each day, the ones that honour your truth, support you and help your sense of self grow stronger.

These micro-rituals are small, practical ways to reconnect with your inner world. Each one helps you shift from survival mode into presence, giving your system small, meaningful clues that you are here, and you know that you matter.

They don't take much time. You can use them as you wake, between tasks, during moments of overwhelm, or before sleep. Choose what fits. Repeat what helps. Invite them to become a part of how you live.

## 1. Ground-Gaze

**Time:** 20 seconds **What to do:** Find a horizontal surface, the floor, a table, a windowsill. Rest your eyes there. Keep your gaze steady. Drop your shoulders. **Why it helps:** A still gaze calms the midbrain's orienting system. It helps the body recognise stability and come out of alertness.

## 2. Butterfly Hold

**Time:** 30 seconds **What to do:** Cross your arms over your chest. Rest each hand on the opposite upper arm or shoulder. Tap gently, one side then the other, like wings. Breathe slowly. **Why it helps:** This creates bilateral stimulation, which helps soothe the limbic system and brings a sense of emotional containment.

## 3. Temperature Shift

**Time:** 60 seconds **What to do:** Run cool water over your wrists, or place a warm cloth across the back of your neck. Breathe as the temperature settles into your skin. **Why it helps:** Shifting temperature engages the vagus nerve and invites the nervous system into balance. It can interrupt spiralling thoughts and bring you back to the present moment.

## Remembering Fun

Right now the idea of having fun might sound ridiculous, pointless, something other people do, a luxury you can't afford.

You might even roll your eyes when someone invites you to do something playful, can't they see, you haven't time for that, you're

too busy! There's always something else to do. Fun doesn't feel urgent.

That's why it matters.

For many survivors, fun was unsafe. It made us vulnerable. It came before harm. It wasn't allowed. Your brain and body remember that.

When you live in survival mode for years, the parts of your brain responsible for joy, play, trust, and curiosity, including the prefrontal cortex, ventral vagus, and right hemisphere, go quiet.

Your dopamine and oxytocin levels drop. Your ability to feel pleasure shrinks.

Now you have the opportunity to begin building something new.

Fun as neural exercise.

Because play helps you strengthen the pathways in your brain that trauma closed down.

It's about giving your brain and body a new set of signals, ones that say, *I'm safe enough to feel alive.*

Fun rebuilds your Window of Tolerance. It increases your capacity to hold presence, connect with others, and enjoy your own company.

Every time you laugh, move with ease, create for no reason, or feel delight in your body, you are building new patterns. You're teaching your system that aliveness is safe, that joy can be trusted, that you can breathe here.

You are allowed to want more than relief. You are allowed to enjoy yourself.

## What Kind of Fun Works for You?

Fun is personal. What lights you up may be different to what works for someone else. What matters is that it feels like *yours*.

The suggestions are starting points. Try them out, you might surprise yourself.

### Gentle invitations to explore joy:

- Notice what you enjoyed doing as a child, see if a part of it still sparks curiosity
- Make something with your hands, baking, painting, clay, flower arranging
- Paint without a brush, use your hands, potato prints, throw paint onto the paper. Let go of having to create something perfect, enjoy the process
- Try a new texture on your skin, a soft blanket, velvet cushion, mud between your toes
- Doodle, colour in, make a collage without a plan.
- Dance to your favourite song, move as your body wants to move, feel the music.
- Sit in silence and listen for birdsong, wind, distant laughter
- Scribble with crayons or coloured pens without a goal
- Choose clothes that feel good on your body, regardless of how they look to others
- Try a game or activity designed for children, bubbles, chalk, skipping, silly walks
- Watch a funny show or video that makes you laugh out loud
- Listen to or read a book that isn't educational.

- Reclaim something that used to bring you joy before survival took over
- Try a mini "yes day", say yes to small things that feel kind and easeful

Get curious about what feels good. Fun is medicine. And it belongs to you.

Ask yourself:

*"Which invitation to joy feels like a yes in my body today? Even if I don't know how, what could I try?"*

## **Reclaiming What Matters**

As you return to your authentic self, some things become clearer.

You begin to see what truly matters, the values that live beneath your choices. You begin to recognise the quiet strengths that carried you here. You begin to honour the tenderness that asks to be held.

Take a moment to feel into these truths:

- What matters most to you now? Give yourself permission to speak your values, freedom, kindness, truth, rest, connection. Whatever rises, name it. These are your anchors.
- What qualities have helped you survive? Maybe it's your courage. Your ability to read a room. The way you care. The way you rise. These are not traits you need to develop, they are already yours.
- Where do you feel tender? This tenderness is the place where healing wants to grow. Your sensitivity, your need for rest, your longing for safety, all of it belongs.

These reflections are reminders of what has always lived inside you, waiting for permission, presence, and safety to be fully seen.

And on the days when that feels far away. When your truth feels hard to reach. When the gold feels buried again. When exhaustion takes over and it feels like you've undone everything. There is a place for you to come back to.

That's what the next chapter offers.

A letter written on a day of steadiness, ready to meet you when survival takes over again. It's a place to come back to when your body forgets that healing is possible. A voice of truth to hold you when your own voice feels out of reach. So when you feel like you've slipped backwards, you have something real to return to. This is your anchor. Your own words. Ready for the days that ask you to remember.

# 13: A LETTER FOR THE DAYS YOU FORGET

Some days hit like a punch to the chest.

You wake up heavy. Everything feels far away. The work you've done feels like it's slipped through your fingers. You question why you started this healing path at all. It hurts more than you imagined. You feel raw. Tired. Like you've gone backwards.

This is exactly how trauma healing unfolds.

This letter is for those days.

Every piece of research we have, from nervous system theory to memory science, says the same thing: healing after childhood trauma is cyclical. Your symptoms ease, and then they surge again. Your nervous system stores safety and threat in separate pathways. Some days, the old ones get louder. Stress, hormones, sleep changes, even subtle triggers can flip the switch from grounded to hyper-alert or shut down. It can feel like you're back at square one. But you're not

This is old wiring being updated. This is integration.

On those days, you need a voice. A grounded voice, one that speaks to your body, not just your thoughts. A voice that reminds you of the truth you've already lived.

That's what this letter holds. It was written from steadiness. From clarity. From the version of you who remembers.

## **How to use it:**

- Place a hand on your heart
- Take one slow breath
- Read the letter aloud, if you can
- Afterwards, choose one small action

Use it as something to lean on while you pause, while you rest.

## **Dear Brave One,**

If your eyes are on this page, something inside feels too much today. Maybe you're tired, hurting or afraid that all your hard work has vanished.

You may feel like all your hard work has been in vain, everything you've achieved has vanished. Dropped back in the dark without a torch. Back to where you were at the beginning. Like it was better before you started to heal. It was safer to stay asleep than wake up to all this pain.

I know this place.

This is how healing from childhood trauma often moves, in spirals and surges, ups and downs, deep, deep downs. Your body is still learning how to feel safe with feeling. Your nervous system is still sorting through old wiring. You are not back where you started, it's a layer being released. You are still healing, even here.

You said "maybe later" instead of "yes" when your body whispered "no." You paused long enough to feel your breath before answering the phone. You let yourself cry without shutting it down.

These changes are real. They are yours. They haven't gone anywhere. They are part of you now, even if today they feel out of reach.

Take a moment beloved one.

Relax your jaw. Exhale to the count of six again. Picture a place where you've felt safe and held. Maybe it's a warm bath, a favourite tree, a couch you sank into after a long day. Stay in this place for just ten seconds.

Now, choose one thing to do, now, from this list, to remind yourself that you're here.

Drink a glass of water Inhale for 4, exhale for 6, twice Step outside and feel the air on your skin Name one comfort you can reach within five minutes (blanket, music, garden). Text a friend or loved one that gets you, with a 'I need an anchor' message.

I am proud of you for choosing this path, for taking responsibility for your life from now on, and for having the courage to heal, even when it's hard.

I know the strength it takes to stay with yourself on days like this. How hard it is to reach for help instead of turning inwards and giving up. I feel the difference this moment made. I am breathing more freely, because you chose to pause, to listen, to care, for you.

I'm here whenever you reach for me.

I see you, always. I carry your truth, even on the days you can't feel it. You are never alone in this. I am with you, witnessing, understanding, and cheering you on, one breath at a time.

With love,

*Your Tomorrow-Self*

## An Invitation to Write Your Own Letter

The letter you just read was written to support you, but your own voice can go even deeper.

Writing to yourself, especially on a day when things feel clearer, creates a future anchor you can rely on. It becomes a thread between the version of you who remembers and the one who forgets. Here's how to begin.

### When to write:

Choose a day when your body feels more grounded. Even just a little. A day when your breath comes easier or your mind feels clearer. That's the voice you're borrowing.

### What to include:

Use these prompts as your scaffolding. There's no pressure to include everything, trust your truth.

1. **Start with a grounding breath** Place a hand on your heart. Take one slow inhale, one longer exhale. Begin from there.
2. **Open with a kind greeting** Use words that feel familiar and soothing to you. Examples:

*Hey love*

*Dear strong one*

*Hello, my steady self*

3. **Name the truth of the moment** Speak to how you often feel when the spiral comes. Examples:

*I know this place well, when everything feels too much and you want to disappear*

*You feel exhausted, ashamed, like all the work you've done has faded*

4. **Offer reassurance from your wiser self** This is where your clarity speaks. Examples:

*You've come through so much*

*You've survived worse than this*

*Even now, you are still healing*

5. **Remind yourself of something real** Choose one or two moments you're proud of. Examples:

*Last week, you said no without overexplaining*

*Yesterday, you let yourself cry and didn't apologise*

6. **Add a body cue** Give yourself a small grounding practice. Examples:

*Take one breath and soften your belly*

*Touch your feet to the floor*

7. **Offer three simple steps** Choose things you know help you. Examples:

*Drink water*

*Put on comfortable clothes*

*Text someone safe*

8. **Close with love and presence** Examples:

*I'm not leaving. I'll be here when you come back*

*Rest is not something you have to earn*

*With love from the you who never stopped believing*

## Where to keep it:

- Print it or write it out, and keep it close
- Save it in your phone photos
- Read it aloud once, so your body recognises the voice

This is more than a letter. It's a lifeline. A piece of you, written for the days when you forget who you are.

## Micro-Practices to Pair with the Letter *Small, body-based actions to bring you back to yourself*

Reading the letter is one way to steady your system. These short practices offer another, a physical way to support your return. You've met them before, now they come with new meaning

As you finish writing, or rereading your letter, pick one to do, now. Choose the one that feels most supportive in this moment.

- 1. Hand on Heart** *Time: 30 seconds* Place your palm over your chest. Breathe. Feel the contact. Whisper: "I'm here."
- 2. Ground-Gaze** *Time: 20 seconds* Settle your gaze on a stable, horizontal surface a table, floor, windowsill. Keep your gaze still as your body registers the stability.
- 3. Name What You See** *Time: 60 seconds* Name five things you can see. Say them out loud if you can.
- 4. Shoulder Tap** *Time: 30 seconds* Cross your arms, resting each hand on the opposite shoulder. Gently tap, one side at a time, like butterfly wings.
- 5. Temperature Reset** *Time: 60 seconds* Run cool water over your wrists, or place a warm cloth on the back of your neck. Feel the shift. Stay with it.

These are tiny acts of care. They don't demand effort. They offer presence.

These are the reminder that your body can hold you, too.

Take a moment and ask yourself this question:

"What would it feel like to stay with myself gently?"

You don't need to answer it right away. Give yourself all the time you need. Allow the answers shape your choices in the next few minutes, the next hour, the next day.

This is about staying close, to the part of you who's learning she's worth it.

## **Final Reminder**

There will be days when it all feels too much, when your body shuts down, your energy disappears, and it feels like everything you've worked for has slipped away.

This is part of healing from trauma.

Your nervous system is still learning what safety feels like. Your body is still learning how to stay with itself in discomfort. Your mind is still making sense of what once had to be buried.

None of this means you've gone backwards. You are still healing, even when everything feels hard.

Keep the letter close. A reminder you of who you are, and how far you've come. Even when your breath is shallow. Even when the ache is loud. You are here. In this present moment. Moving in the right direction.

## 14: YOUR NEXT BRAVE STEP

Take a moment. Breathe into the truth of what you've just walked through.

Page by page, you have shown up for yourself in ways that many never dare to. You've faced the echoes of your past. You've reclaimed your voice, your boundaries, your body, and your breath. You've sat with grief, met your inner child, remembered the gold beneath the clay.

That takes courage.

If you've ever questioned your strength, this moment is your reminder: it lives in your presence. It lives in your willingness to stay.

And now you're here.

You've walked through shame, silence, and survival. You've spoken truths many never speak aloud. Paused when your body needed it. Allowed tenderness to surface. You've made space for joy.

This chapter exists to honour that. You're already walking the path.

This is your invitation to keep walking it, with support, with clarity, with choice.

### **Integration Invitation**

Healing doesn't end with the final chapter. It settles into your choices, the way you speak to yourself, the pauses you take, the boundaries you hold, the way you breathe through the moments that used to undo you.

This part of the journey is about integration. That means weaving the truths you've uncovered back into the way you live. It means letting what you've remembered become how you move, relate, choose, and rest.

You don't need to do everything at once. You don't need to have it all figured out.

You only need to keep listening to what feels real.

The practices in this book have planted seeds. You've reconnected with parts of yourself that were silenced. You've allowed truths to rise, even the ones that once felt too sharp to touch. You've remembered who you are, beneath the survival patterns and the shame.

Now, you get to keep tending to that remembering.

Integration happens in the quiet. In the way you check in with your body before a decision. In the way you notice your breath and come back. In the way you choose presence over pleasing, even just once a day.

That is how your new foundation begins, not in grand gestures, but in the quiet moments of self-return.

This is how wholeness becomes your way of being.

## **Choose Your Next Brave Step**

You've already taken so many.

Reading these pages. Meeting yourself more honestly than ever before. Staying with the ache when escape felt easier. These are acts of courage. Acts of self-compassion.

Now, a new kind of choice stands before you, the invitation to take action.

What does support look like from here?

Here are three gentle paths you might take:

**Keep exploring, on your own, with grace, self-acceptance and gentle curiosity.**

Maybe you feel called to sit with what you've read. To revisit a practice, reread a chapter, or start a journal. That may be enough for now, you are allowed to take your time.

**Deepen your healing, with support and structure**

If this journey has stirred something that wants to go further, I invite you to reach out. You can take the *Clear, Calm & Confident Quiz* to discover where you are in your healing journey and what might support your next step. Here is the link to the quiz:

- <https://forms.fillout.com/t/3NUvDp7sDyus>,

you'll receive an email from me with your results.

**Book a date to chat with me to find out more about how I can support you**

If your heart is curious, if something inside you is wondering what working together might look like, I'd love to have a gentle conversation.

Just you and me, with a warm drink, no pressure, no expectations, just space to talk about what support could feel like from here. Click this link to book a time that suits you. I'd be honoured to walk beside you on your next brave step:

- <https://calendly.com/sarah-livinglimitlessly/stuck-to-free-chat>

And in closing, know this. You're allowed to want more. More ease. More connection. More of yourself.

Ask yourself gently:

*"What am I ready to know now? What kind of support would feel nourishing right now? What truth am I willing to honour next?"*

Whatever your answer, take action, take your next brave step.

With love,

Sarah x

# EMERGENCY SUPPORT RESOURCES (UK)

Below is a list of free, confidential services available in the UK that specialise in crisis support, sexual abuse recovery, and mental health care.

## **When you need someone to talk to, immediately:**

**Samaritans (24/7)** 📞 116 123 (free call) [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)

For anyone in distress. No time limit. No pressure.

**Rape Crisis England & Wales – 24/7 Support Line** 📞 0808 500 2222 (free call) Online chat available [rapecrisis.org.uk](https://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)

**The Survivors Trust** 📞 0808 801 0818 [thesurvivorstrust.org](https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

**NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in**

**Childhood)** 📞 0808 801 0331 Mon–Thu 10am–9pm, Fri 10am–6pm [napac.org.uk](https://www.napac.org.uk)

**SurvivorsUK (for men, boys & non-binary people)** 📞 020 3598 3898 Online chat and support groups [survivorsuk.org](https://www.survivorsuk.org)

**National Domestic Abuse Helpline (Refuge)** 📞 0808 2000 247 (free, 24/7) [refuge.org.uk](https://www.refuge.org.uk)

**Women’s Aid Live Chat** [chat.womensaid.org.uk](https://www.chat.womensaid.org.uk) (check website for hours)

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## A Gentle Guide to Language in This Book

**Attachment System** The early blueprint for how you give and receive love, shaped by your caregivers and environment. It lives in your body as a pattern of safety, trust, or fear in relationships.

**Burnout** Not laziness or weakness, but a nervous system that's been in survival mode too long. A depletion of emotional, physical, and mental reserves.

**Co-regulation** The calming of your nervous system through connection with another regulated presence. Often what we needed as children, to be met, soothed, and seen by a safe adult.

**Dissociation** A protective state where you feel numb, checked out, or like you're watching life from the outside. The body's way of creating distance from overwhelm.

**Emotional Dysregulation** When emotions feel too big, too fast, or too hard to control. Often a result of early experiences where feelings were dismissed, punished, or unsafe to express.

**Flashback** A body-based memory that returns suddenly, often without a clear story. It can feel like you're re-living something from the past — emotionally, physically, or sensorially, even if you can't name what it is.

**Fawn Response** A survival pattern where you please, appease, or over-function to stay safe. Often confused with "being nice," but rooted in fear of rejection or harm.

**Freeze Response** A trauma response where the body goes still, numb, or shut down to survive perceived danger. Often mislabelled as "laziness," when it's actually the body doing its best to stay safe.

**Hypervigilance** The sense that you're always braced for something to go wrong. The nervous system stays alert, even in moments that are objectively safe.

**Inner Child** The younger part of you that still holds unmet needs, old beliefs, or unprocessed emotions. Meeting her is a tender act of reclamation, not regression.

**Nervous System Regulation** The ability to shift out of survival states (like fight, flight, freeze, fawn) and return to grounded presence. A core skill in trauma healing.

**Polyvagal Theory** A framework for understanding how your nervous system responds to safety or threat. It explains why trauma isn't just in your head — it's in your body.

**Post-Traumatic Growth** The deepening of resilience, meaning, or self-awareness that can emerge after trauma. It doesn't negate the pain — it honours it and allows something new to rise through it.

**Reparenting** Giving yourself the care, boundaries, and nurturance your younger self needed. A way to build internal safety, one choice at a time.

**Somatic** Relating to the body, especially how it stores memory, emotion, and wisdom. Healing becomes possible when we include the body, not just the mind.

**Subconscious Programming** The beliefs, habits, and reactions stored below your conscious awareness. These are often installed in childhood and shape your adult life until consciously rewritten.

**Window of Tolerance** The range within which you can function, feel, and respond without becoming overwhelmed. Trauma narrows this window, but healing widens it, allowing you to stay present, even in challenge.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## **Sarah Grace, MCAHYP, RGN, PGMAN**

*Trauma-Informed Hypnotherapist, EMDR Coach & Author*

Sarah Grace is a Trauma-Informed Hypnotherapist, certified EMDR Coach, and founder of Living Limitlessly. With over four decades of experience in healthcare, including her work as an Emergency Nurse Practitioner, Sarah brings a rare blend of clinical knowledge and heartfelt compassion to her trauma recovery work.

A survivor of 14 years of childhood sexual abuse, Sarah has transformed her lived experience into a powerful mission of reclamation. She specialises in supporting women and men carrying the invisible weight of trauma to break free from the survival patterns of overgiving, overworking, and self-silencing.

Sarah holds a Diploma in Advanced Hypnotherapy and Hypnohealing, a Postgraduate Degree in Health and Social Service Management, and additional qualifications in Deep Tissue Massage and Reiki. She is a Reiki Master, and draws on both science-backed tools and somatic, intuitive methods to guide clients toward lasting transformation.

Her signature modality, the *Dynamic Transformational Release Process (DTRP)*, offers a gentle, fast-acting path to healing at the root, without re-traumatisation or overwhelm.

Through her private practice, online programmes, and global platform *Living Limitlessly*, Sarah helps survivors release shame, reconnect to their bodies, reclaim joy, and live with unshakeable self-worth.

She continues to walk her own healing path with courage, humility, and fierce devotion to truth, and she brings that same grounded presence into every room she holds.

## Stay Connected

If this book spoke to something deep in you, I'd love to stay in touch. Here's how we can connect:

### Website:

- <https://livinglimitlessly.co.uk/>

### Email:

- [sarah@livinglimitlessly.co.uk](mailto:sarah@livinglimitlessly.co.uk)

### Facebook:

- <https://www.facebook.com/SarahDawnImesonGrace/>

### Substack:

- <https://bravenotbroken.substack.com/>

### Book a Call:

- <https://calendly.com/sarah-livinglimitlessly/stuck-to-free-chat>

Whether you're ready to work together or simply want to keep walking this path with support and inspiration, you're warmly welcome.

With so much love,

Sarah x

