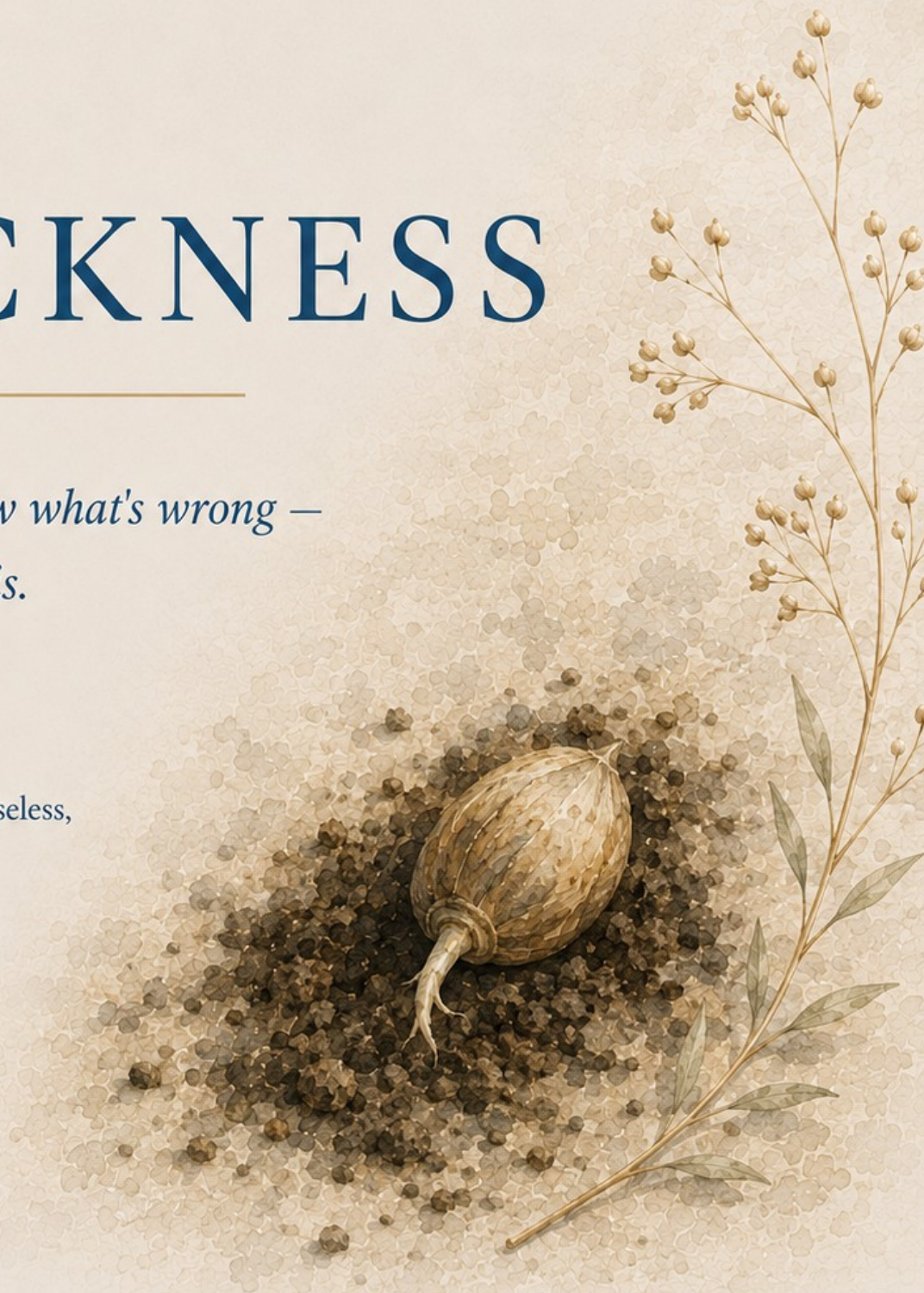


STUCKNESS



*When you don't know what's wrong —
only that something is.*

—
A guide to feeling lost, purposeless,
and unable to move forward.



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A note from me to you

You may still be holding the same map that always told you where to go, tracing the same familiar route with your finger, and only slowly noticing that the road in front of you does not match the lines on the page anymore.

Perhaps nothing is obviously wrong, and from the outside everything looks fine, yet something feels missing, and you cannot quite name what it is.

You go through the motions. You know you should feel grateful, and instead you feel flat. You used to know who you were and what you wanted, and somewhere along the way you lost the thread.

There is a particular kind of suffering that is very difficult to talk about, because it has no obvious cause.

It is not grief, because nothing has died. It is not anxiety, because there is no specific threat. It is not quite depression, though it can look like depression from the outside.

It is something quieter, and in some ways more disorienting than any of those. It is standing in a landscape your map no longer describes. It is the feeling of being stuck.

Over more than twenty years of doing this work, much of it from the inside, I have come to believe something deeply. Feeling stuck is not a character flaw. It is not ingratitude. It is not laziness in disguise.

It is a signal, usually from a self that has outgrown something, and does not yet know what comes next.

The difficulty is that stuckness tends to reinforce itself. The less we move, the harder movement becomes. The more disconnected we feel from purpose or direction, the more overwhelming change can feel. And because stuckness rarely produces an acute crisis, it can persist for a long time without ever being named.

I know this place too, not as something separate from this work, but as something I have lived inside of. There were times I reached outward for direction before anything inside had space to form, and other times I found myself looking back for an earlier, more driven version of myself, unable to locate her in the present, as if what I wanted was behind me rather than here. Sometimes it was quieter than that, just a sense of sitting slightly outside my own life, watching it move forward while I stayed on the edge of it.

Comparison did this too, tightening into something that felt like evidence against me, until I learned to stay with it a little longer and let it point toward what mattered rather than what I lacked. None of it shifted through certainty. It moved through small, unfinished experiments, long before I trusted what was emerging enough to call it a direction.

The path did not need to be clear before I began. It became clearer as I moved through it. It still does.

This workbook is my offering to something many of us grapple with, myself included.

I am not going to suggest you follow your passion, write a five-year plan, or think your way into positivity. What follows is slower, and more honest, an inquiry into what the stuckness is actually protecting, and what it might be pointing towards.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. Work through the sections in order if you can, they build on one another, moving from understanding the experience of stuckness, to exploring its roots, to beginning, gently, to orient towards something different.

A note before you begin. This workbook asks you to sit with some uncomfortable questions. The temptation when feeling stuck is to want immediate answers, a plan, a direction, a sense of forward motion. I want to gently resist that temptation here, because in my experience the rush to solutions is one of the things that keeps us stuck. If something surfaces that feels like more than you expected, please don't push through it alone. The final section maps the support available to you.

The answers, when they come, come from understanding. And understanding requires a willingness to sit with the questions first.

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SECTION 1

What stuckness actually is

And why it is worth taking seriously

It is a question so many of us have carried, in one form or another, even if we have never said it aloud.

Why can't I make myself move? Why do I know exactly what needs to change and still not do it? What is actually wrong with me?

The answer is usually much kinder than that question expects. Nothing is wrong with you. Stuckness will not show up in any psychiatric manual, and it is not a diagnosis. But it is real, it is genuinely painful, and it deserves to be understood rather than brushed off.

At its core, stuckness is movement that's stalled. It's not the paralysis of acute anxiety, which usually has a clear object. And it's not the withdrawal of depression, which drains the colour out of everything.

It's more specific than either of those. It's knowing we need to move, in some direction, towards something, but not being able to find that direction, generate the momentum, or locate the motivation that would make movement possible.

The issue isn't a lack of willpower. It's a lack of direction.

And direction isn't something we can force into existence through sheer effort. It comes from self-knowledge, from understanding what we actually value, what we actually need, and what we've been living in service of. Are those things genuinely ours? Or were they inherited, expected of us, or just arrived at by default?

Stuckness as a developmental signal

One framework I keep coming back to is Carl Jung's. He described being stopped like this as often signalling a developmental threshold, a point where the self that got us here simply isn't enough for where we need to go next. The identity, the values, the roles that served us well in one chapter have reached their limit. Something new is waiting to emerge. It just hasn't found its shape yet.

From the inside, that threshold tends to look a lot like being lost. Our old map doesn't work anymore, and the new one hasn't been drawn yet. In the space between the two, it's normal to feel disoriented, flat, and unsettled, like the life we've been living doesn't quite fit anymore.

Stuckness and meaning

Viktor Frankl believed our primary human motivation is the search for meaning, and that when meaning is missing, it produces a very particular kind of suffering. He called it the existential vacuum, a state of inner emptiness, boredom, and purposelessness.

A lot of the stuckness I see isn't rooted in practical obstacles at all. It's rooted in a loss of meaning, the sense that whatever is filling our lives, however successful it looks from the outside, doesn't add up to something that feels worth doing.

Exercise 1 What does your stuckness feel like?

Before analysing it, simply describe it

What is the felt experience of being stuck, for you?

Where do you feel it in your body? What does it make you want to do, or not do? How long has it been present? Is it constant, or does it come and go?

Just description

You don't need to explain it or fix it yet. Naming what it feels like, in the body and in words, is the first real move.

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 2 What stuckness has cost you

With honesty, without self-criticism

What has feeling stuck cost you?

Not what you should have done, what you sense you have lost, or delayed, or have been unable to access because of the stuckness.

Not a verdict

This isn't a tally of failures. It's an honest look at what's been waiting on the other side of the stuckness.

SECTION 2

The many faces of feeling stuck

Because stuckness does not always look the same

Stuckness often goes unrecognised, by those of us living it and by everyone around us, because it doesn't always look the same. Most versions of it don't look like the paralysed, unable-to-function state the word implies.

Going through the motions

This is probably the most common version, and definitely the most invisible. We stay functional. We meet our obligations, maintain our relationships, produce adequate work. From the outside, everything looks fine.

From the inside, though, there's a persistent, low-level sense of unreality. We're present in our lives without being fully in them, performing the role of ourselves, rather than actually being ourselves. It can feel like watching your own life from a slight distance. The days pass. Things get done. And underneath it all, a quiet, accumulating sense that something essential is missing.

The loss of purpose

You may recognise this one, arriving at stuckness through a specific loss of purpose. A role, a project, a relationship that once gave life direction has ended or changed, and left a vacuum behind. It's common after finishing a big piece of work, leaving a career, or watching children grow up and leave home. The structure that used to organise our days is gone, and nothing has arrived to replace it yet.

Paralysis in the face of choice

A different but related version isn't about having too few options, it's about having too many, or facing a choice we can't seem to make because no option feels clearly right, or the stakes feel too high to risk getting it wrong. This kind of stuckness feels more anxious than flat, more agitated, more overwhelmed. We often know, on some level, what we want. But the gap between knowing and acting is wide, and it's usually filled with a very specific fear.

The slow drift

Maybe the sneakiest version is the one that doesn't arrive through any single event at all. It creeps in through the slow, cumulative drift of a life lived according to other people's expectations, or according to choices made long ago and never revisited. Some of us find ourselves in our thirties, forties, or fifties, living a life that looks entirely reasonable and feels entirely alien. Not because anything went dramatically wrong. But because nothing was ever consciously chosen.

Exercise 3 Which version of stuckness is yours?

Recognising your own

Reading the four versions above, going through the motions, loss of purpose, paralysis in the face of choice, and the slow drift, which feel most familiar?

Your stuckness may contain elements of more than one. Write about which resonates most clearly, and what specific features of your own experience fit each.

More than one can be true

Most of us find ourselves in two or three of these at once. There's no single correct category to land on.

Exercise 4 When did you last feel genuinely unstuck?

Casting back

Think back to a time, recent or not, when you felt genuinely purposeful, engaged, or alive in your own life. Not necessarily happy in a simple sense, but present, directed, with a felt sense of moving towards something that mattered.

How long ago was that? What was present then that is not present now? What was different about how you were living, or what you were living for?

A baseline, not a benchmark

This isn't about proving you've lost something. It's about remembering what aliveness actually felt like, so you can recognise it again.

SECTION 3

What is underneath the stuckness

Unmet needs, suppressed values, and the unlived life

Stuckness is rarely just an absence of motivation. It's almost always the presence of something, something that hasn't been attended to, expressed, or allowed.

Figuring out what that something is means being willing to look underneath the surface experience of being unable to move, towards a deeper question. What might our stuckness be protecting, or pointing towards?

Unmet needs

We all have a fairly small set of fundamental psychological needs. When they go consistently unmet, they produce exactly the flatness, restlessness, and purposelessness that stuckness is made of.

There's connection and belonging, the need for genuine closeness and to feel part of something larger than ourselves. There's autonomy, a felt sense of agency and self-determination over our own life. There's competence, being genuinely good at something that matters to us. There's meaning, the sense that what we do adds up to something worth doing. And there's growth, the experience of becoming, of not being finished, of still having somewhere to go.

When any of these goes chronically unmet, we get a low-grade but persistent sense that something's missing, a restlessness that no amount of the usual fixes will resolve, because its source isn't external. It's internal. No amount of achievement fills the absence of genuine connection. No level of comfort fills the absence of meaning.

None of this means you failed to take care of yourself. Needs go unmet for all kinds of reasons, we were taught not to notice them, there was never room to ask, or the people around us could not meet them even when we did. Naming what has been missing is not a verdict. It is the beginning of tending to it.

Exercise 5 Your unmet needs

Looking at the five needs

Of the fundamental needs described above, connection, autonomy, competence, meaning, growth, which are most consistently unmet in your current life?

For each one that feels relevant, write a sentence or two about how its absence shows up for you. Where do you feel it? What does it produce?

Some will feel obvious, some won't

You may find one or two needs jump out immediately and others take longer to notice. Both are useful information.

Discovering your values

Our values are the things that genuinely matter to us, the principles, qualities, and ways of being that feel most essentially our own. Not the values we've been told to have, but the ones that, when they're present, produce a felt sense of rightness, and when they're absent, a felt sense of wrongness or loss.

Most of us have never consciously thought about our values. They're there, quietly operating beneath the surface, often without us even noticing. In some ways they act like a compass pointing towards true north. They give you ballast when life feels uncertain, and they become part of your deeper sense of who you are.

A lot of stuckness is rooted in values conflict, living in ways that are seriously at odds with what we actually value. That conflict is rarely dramatic. More often it's a slow accumulation of small compromises, small adaptations to what's expected of us, which over time add up to a life that feels fundamentally misaligned.

I know this because there was a time in my own life when I had no idea what my values were. I had experienced stuckness in many forms, but one of the most significant periods came when I was feeling lost, confused, frustrated, and increasingly disconnected from myself. My marriage had ended. Decisions about my future and my work felt uncertain, and it seemed as though the path I had imagined for my life was shifting in ways I had not expected.

In the midst of all that soul-searching, I found myself in a conversation with someone who asked me a question that stopped me in my tracks.

"What are your values?"

To my surprise, I had no answer. At first, I wasn't even entirely sure what they meant. And yet something about the question woke me up, not in an intellectual way, but in the sense of recognising something I had somehow always known, but had never really been asked to name. I knew I needed to find out.

Looking back, discovering my values became one of the things that helped me find my way through that period of stuckness. They gave me something to orient towards when I no longer knew where I was going. They helped me make decisions. They helped me understand what mattered. And, in many ways, they led me towards the work I do today.

When we reconnect with what genuinely matters to us, movement often begins to return. Not because all uncertainty disappears, but because we are no longer travelling without direction. And sometimes, direction is enough.

Identifying your values, a short series of exercises

Of everything in this workbook, values may be the most worth slowing down for. They probably deserve a workbook of their own, but the next three exercises belong together, and form one gentle, unhurried process for uncovering what matters most to you, moving from memory, to naming, to living.

Values are not something we simply think our way into. They are something we begin to notice through experience, memory, and reflection. There is no right or wrong way to do this, and no need to rush, you might take these in one sitting, or return to them over several days. Before you begin, you might find a quiet space where you are unlikely to be interrupted, settle yourself with a few unhurried breaths, and let your mind quieten a little before you start to write.

Exercise 6 Two kinds of memory

Times of alignment

Think back to times in your life when you have felt most like yourself, most alive, most real, most in integrity. What was happening in those moments? Who were you with? What were you doing? What felt important or meaningful there?

Times of friction

Now turn towards the opposite. Think about times when you have felt most out of alignment with yourself, compromised, unsettled, disconnected, or not quite yourself. What was happening then? What felt missing, overridden, or not respected?

What stands out

As you sit with both sets of experiences, begin to notice what repeats. You may start to see certain qualities, needs, or ways of being that matter to you. These are often the beginning of values.

Let the pattern emerge on its own

Don't force the two lists to match up neatly. The values usually reveal themselves in what repeats, not in what you decide in advance.

Before you name them, it can help to see what values can look like. Sometimes they sound like single words, honesty, freedom, connection, learning, creativity, stability, kindness, growth. But more often they are more personal than that. Honesty might mean being able to say what is true without fear of consequences. Connection might mean feeling emotionally met and understood. Freedom might mean having space to make choices without pressure or control. Growth might mean feeling like you are still becoming yourself. Try not to reach for words too quickly, stay close to your lived experience.

Exercise 7 Naming your values

Begin a list

From what you noticed in the memories, begin to write down what feels most important to you. Start with a longer list if it helps, perhaps ten or so.

Narrow it down

Then narrow it to the five that feel most essential, the ones that, if absent for too long, would leave you feeling that something important in you was missing.

The list will change, and that's fine

You're not committing to these words forever, just getting closer to language for something that's been wordless.

Exercise 8 Living your values

Where they are present

Notice what it feels like when your values are present in small, ordinary ways. Where in your week do you already feel some alignment, however brief?

What gets in the way

And notice what gets in the way of them, both external pressures and internal patterns like fatigue, doubt, or self-criticism. This is not about doing values perfectly. It is about noticing where life feels more aligned, and where it feels further from what matters. Even small moments of alignment matter.

Small counts

A five-minute phone call with someone who gets you, or ten unhurried minutes with a book, counts as alignment. Don't wait for the big version.

A final word before we move on. Values are not fixed or final. They are something we return to over time as we change and grow. As your life shifts, your sense of what matters most may become clearer, deeper, or a little different. That is not a failure of clarity, it is part of being human.

The unlived life

There's a term I love from the Jungian analyst James Hollis, the unlived life. It's the parts of us that get suppressed, left undeveloped, or never given permission to exist in the first place. It's not usually about dramatic dreams that never came true. More often it's quieter than that, the parts of ourselves that got set aside so we could be responsible, meet expectations, fit in, stay safe, or become who we thought we needed to be.

But those neglected parts don't just disappear. They have a way of making themselves known. Sometimes it is envy, not the kind that wants to take something away from someone else, but that particular ache we feel when we see someone living in a way that seems more alive, more free, more fully themselves.

Over time I've come to think that kind of envy isn't something to be ashamed of. It's often less about what the other person has, and more about what it wakes up in us. It's less a sign that something's wrong with us, and more a signal, a reminder that there's something in us longing to be expressed, explored, or lived more fully. Meeting it with curiosity instead of criticism is itself a form of self-compassion, one small refusal to treat longing as a flaw.

Sometimes it lives in the thoughts or fantasies that keep returning, the ones we dismiss as impractical or unrealistic, yet somehow can't quite let go of. Other times it appears in unexpected moments of aliveness, when something that had gone quiet briefly wakes up again.

I've come to wonder whether these moments aren't distractions to ignore, but invitations to listen to. Maybe they're life's way of getting our attention, signs pointing towards parts of ourselves that have been waiting, patiently, to be lived.

Exercise 9 The unlived life

What has been set aside

What parts of life feel as though they have not had enough space to be lived or expressed? Are there aspects of yourself that feel underdeveloped, postponed, or not fully allowed to exist?

What keeps returning

Are there recurring longings, fantasies, images, or preoccupations that keep surfacing, even when they are dismissed as impractical, unrealistic, or self-indulgent? What seems to persist, despite your attempts to move away from it?

What envy might be pointing to

When you notice envy towards others living differently, what is it about their life that feels alive, meaningful, or free? If you stay with that feeling gently, without judgement, what might it be pointing towards in your own life, what might be asking for more attention, space, or expression?

Curiosity, not self-judgement

Envy and recurring fantasies aren't evidence of failure. Stay with them a little longer than feels comfortable, and see what they're pointing towards.

SECTION 4

Why we stay stuck

The fear beneath the inertia

If stuckness were simply the absence of direction, finding direction would fix it. But we can understand fairly clearly what needs to change and still stay stuck, because stuckness is almost always held in place by something. Usually a set of fears operating below conscious awareness, quietly making movement feel more threatening than staying still.

Before naming these fears, let something quieter sit down beside you as you read, not judgment, not analysis, just the kind of attention you would offer a friend telling you what frightens them. That is enough to bring to what follows.

The fear of getting it wrong

Particularly for those of us who hold ourselves to high standards, stuckness is often held in place by the fear of making the wrong choice. If I move in this direction and it turns out to be wrong, the consequences, wasted time, wasted energy, the confirmation of the inner critic's harshest conclusions, can feel catastrophic. In that context, staying still can feel safer than risking being wrong. This fear is especially strong when self-worth is tied to performance or achievement.

The fear of losing what you have

Movement always involves loss. Even when something no longer fits, it is still known. It has structure, familiarity, history. The role that no longer feels right is still a role. The life that feels constraining is still a life. To move forward may mean leaving behind identity, security, relationships, or systems that have shaped who you have been. And even when those things are no longer nourishing, they can still feel safer than the unknown.

The fear of disappointing others

For those of us who learned that belonging comes through meeting expectations, this fear can be particularly powerful. Even when there is clarity about what feels more authentic, there is often an anticipated cost, disappointment, confusion, grief, or rejection from others whose approval has felt essential. In this way, stuckness can become a form of loyalty, even when it quietly costs the self.

The fear of the unknown self

Perhaps the deepest fear beneath stuckness is not about what might happen externally, but what might be discovered internally. If I slow down and look closely, what will I find beneath the roles I have learned to perform and the ways I have learned to adapt? For many of us, there is a quiet fear.

What if I am not who I thought I was? What if what is underneath is not enough?

This is where fear and belief begin to merge. Because what we are afraid of finding within is already shaped by what we believe to be true about ourselves.

The beliefs beneath the fear

When we look closely at stuckness, we often find a set of beliefs that feel like truth rather than interpretation. Beliefs about the self.

I am not capable. I am not enough. I cannot trust myself. I will fail if I try. There is something fundamentally wrong with me.

And beliefs about others and the world.

People will judge or reject me. It is not safe to be seen. Things don't work out for people like me. It is better not to want too much.

Reading a list like this can be hard, especially if more than one line sounds exactly like your own voice. That reaction deserves the same gentleness we are about to offer these beliefs themselves. Naming them is not agreeing with them. It is the first step in loosening their hold.

These beliefs quietly shape what we perceive, feel, and choose. Over time they become internal maps, defining the boundaries of the self we allow ourselves to inhabit.

How beliefs protect us

These beliefs aren't random. At some point, they probably made sense. They often form in response to disappointment, criticism, instability, neglect, or overwhelm. And once they've formed, they tend to serve a protective function.

If I believe I am not capable, I do not have to face the vulnerability of trying and failing. If I believe I am not worthy, I do not have to risk reaching for something and not receiving it. If I believe others will reject me, I do not have to risk being fully seen.

So beliefs aren't only limitations. They're strategies for managing fear. And stuckness is often what those strategies produce, safety that has quietly turned into restriction.

Motivation without punishment

We might try to move forward by pushing ourselves harder, through pressure, criticism, urgency, self-judgement. Sometimes that works, for a while. But for most of us, it eventually leads to exhaustion rather than meaningful change.

A more sustainable kind of motivation doesn't come from punishment. It comes from understanding, understanding why you're stuck, what's been protecting you, what parts of you are afraid, and why. From that place, motivation becomes less about forcing yourself forward, and more about supporting yourself into movement.

Self-compassion here is not softness as avoidance. It is clarity without attack. And it is worth being specific about what it actually means, since the word gets used loosely.

The first part is kindness towards yourself, instead of the harsh judgement so many of us default to without noticing. In practice, this might mean catching the moment you think I should have sorted this out by now, and offering something gentler instead, of course this is hard, I am genuinely trying to find my way through something real.

The second is common humanity, remembering that feeling stuck is not evidence that you are uniquely behind or broken. Almost everyone who has ever tried to change something has, at some point, stayed exactly where they were for longer than made sense. You are not the exception. You are the rule.

The third is simply noticing what you feel, clearly and honestly, without either drowning in it or refusing to look at it. In practice, this might mean pausing and naming what is actually there, this is fear, this is exhaustion, rather than either pushing it away or letting it take over the rest of the day.

Held together, these three things change how stuckness is met. It recognises that the part of you that is stuck is not the enemy. It is a part that has been trying, in the best way it knows how, to protect you. And when a part feels understood, it often begins to loosen its grip, not because it has been forced to, but because it no longer needs to hold everything so tightly.

Exercise 10 The belief, and what it protects

Choosing one

From the beliefs above, or one of your own, choose the one that feels most active in holding you in place.

Then ask, gently

How does this belief keep me safe? What emotional risk does it help me avoid? What might feel overwhelming if I no longer held it?

And the cost

And what has holding this belief cost you, in opportunities, in aliveness, in the sense of moving with your own life rather than against it?

It made sense once

Whatever you find here likely formed for a good reason at the time. Understanding that isn't the same as staying loyal to it now.

Exercise 11 If the belief were not in charge

A small experiment in imagining

It can be useful, even briefly, to imagine what might become possible if these beliefs loosened their grip. If I believed I was capable, what might I attempt? If I believed I was worthy, what might I allow myself to want, or receive? If I believed I could learn, adapt, or recover, what might open up?

Bringing it close

What would I do differently this week? What conversation have I been avoiding? What small step might become possible if I trusted myself slightly more?

This is imagination, not commitment

You're not promising to do any of this yet. You're just finding out what becomes thinkable when the belief loosens its grip, even briefly.

Exercise 12 A self-compassion practice

Not just an idea

Self-compassion isn't something to simply agree with in your head. It works best when it includes your body, because stuckness doesn't only live in your thoughts, it lives in your chest, your shoulders, your breath.

The practice

The next time you notice the inner critic taking over, place a hand on your chest or stomach, and take one slower breath than feels natural. Then say to yourself, silently or out loud. "This is hard right now. It makes sense that I feel stuck. I don't have to have this figured out today."

If it feels strange

That's normal, and it doesn't mean it isn't working. The point isn't the exact words, it's interrupting the automatic pattern of harshness with something that includes your body as well as your mind.

Practice over perfection

You won't remember to do this every time, and that's fine too. Each time you do remember is still a rep, evidence to your nervous system that something other than criticism is possible.

SECTION 5

Finding orientation

Not a plan, but a direction

I want to be careful here, because the rush to solutions is one of the most reliable ways to stay stuck. This will not hand you a new map, not yet. Plans come later, when there is enough clarity to build one. This is something more modest, a way of beginning to orient towards what feels alive, even when the destination is not yet visible.

Moving from what you don't want towards what you do

Here's something useful about stuckness. It's often very clear about what it's stuck away from. That sense of wrongness, a life that doesn't fit, a self that feels constrained, is information. Moving away from what's clearly wrong counts as real movement, even before we know what we're moving towards.

Following what is alive

Howard Thurman's guidance is often helpful here, don't ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive. For stuckness, that means paying attention to small signals of aliveness, moments where something in us softens, opens, or engages. Those moments aren't trivial. They're data.

Moving in small, experimental steps

One of the most effective antidotes to stuckness is small, experimental action. Not commitment. Not certainty. Not the pressure of getting it right. Just experimentation. Try this, notice what happens, learn from it.

At this stage, certainty isn't the goal. Certainty usually follows movement, it doesn't precede it. What matters is a step small enough to take without overwhelm, but real enough to actually tell us something.

Values as a compass

When direction is unclear, your values become the most reliable compass you have. You may not have a map yet, but a compass doesn't need one, it only needs you to notice which way already feels like relief. The question isn't what to do with your life. It's what would bring your life into closer alignment with what you actually value, right now, from where you are. And what's one small step in that direction? That's a far more honest and workable question than trying to solve everything at once.

Self-compassion is part of the doing, too

None of this works as pure insight. Every experiment we try will sometimes fail to produce what we hoped for, and the instinct in that moment is usually self-criticism, proof, the inner critic says, that we should have known better. Try treating each step the way you would treat a friend's first attempt at something,

with curiosity about what it taught you, not judgement about whether it succeeded. This is not a soft add-on to the process. It is what allows us to keep experimenting instead of giving up after the first setback.

Exercise 13 Collecting signals of aliveness

Over the next week

Notice and record moments, however small or fleeting, in which something feels genuinely alive. Moments where engagement replaces going through the motions. Where attention feels more present, more open, more absorbed. Where time feels different.

Just observe

What were you doing? Who were you with? What quality of attention or presence was there?

Notice more than you analyse

Resist the urge to immediately turn each moment into a life plan. For now, just collect the evidence.

Exercise 14 One genuine step

Drawing it together

From everything you have reflected on, the unmet needs, the suppressed values, the unlived life, the fears, the beliefs, the signals of aliveness, what is one genuine step that would move your life in a direction that feels more truly your own? Not a plan. Not a destination. A single step that is small enough to be possible, specific enough to be real, and honest enough to matter.

And then

Write it clearly. When might you take it? And what might it reveal, not about where you are going, but about what becomes possible when movement comes from understanding rather than force?

Small and real beats big and vague

A step you'll actually take next Tuesday matters more than a bold intention you'll quietly abandon. Choose the former.

A closing reflection

Stuckness can feel scary, confusing, frustrating, and lonely. Alongside everything else that may be present, all of these experiences are valid. Nothing in it means you are broken. And nothing in it means there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

Stuckness is part of being human. It is often where we lose our sense of direction for a time, not because something has gone wrong, but because something in us is asking for attention. And even here, there is still something possible. A moment of noticing. A breath. A small return to yourself.

You may not always feel clear, or certain, or ready. But you can come back, again and again, to curiosity, to self-compassion, to the simple act of breathing and being here. Nothing needs to be forced. And even now, something in you is already moving.

SECTION 6

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

What you can do on your own

Self-directed work can genuinely help with stuckness, especially when it's fairly recent, tied to circumstances or transitions you can identify, and hasn't tipped into real depression or anxiety. The exercises in this workbook are built to do the most valuable thing self-directed work can do, deepen your self-knowledge.

Understanding what your stuckness is actually about, which needs are unmet, which values aren't being lived, what fears are holding the inertia in place, is real, important work. Journalling as an ongoing habit of honest reflection is particularly valuable here. The answers in this kind of work tend to arrive sideways, in the margin of a paragraph, in a sentence you write half-consciously, in the sudden clarity that comes from finally putting something into words.

Small experimental steps are both self-directed work and self-directed research. Every experiment gives you information. Even tentative movement tends to generate more clarity than any amount of sitting still and thinking.

When therapy can help

Therapy tends to help most when your stuckness is longstanding rather than recent, when you've felt fundamentally lost for years rather than months. Or when it's rooted in deeper patterns, like a self built largely in service of other people's expectations. Or when the fears holding it in place are powerful and won't budge under conscious examination. Or when you know exactly what you want to do and still can't do it. Or when there's real shame or low self-worth underneath it.

The approaches I find most useful for stuckness all work at the level of identity and meaning. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, with its focus on values clarification and committed action, is directly relevant. Internal Family Systems is especially helpful when the stuckness is rooted in a conflict between parts, the part that wants to change, and the part terrified of what that change might cost. And depth-oriented, Jungian-informed work, including work with the unlived life, can be profoundly illuminating when the stuckness has an existential quality to it.

Coaching is also worth considering, either alongside therapy or instead of it, when your stuckness is mostly forward-looking, the roots aren't especially deep, and what you need is less healing and more navigation. I'm a Certified Executive Coach as well as a counselling psychologist, so I work with both, and can help you work out which one actually fits.

When more support may be needed

Stuckness on its own doesn't need psychiatric care. But if it's progressed into significant depression, the flatness has become pervasive, daily functioning is genuinely impaired, the future looks not just unclear

but hopeless, please don't wait to get a psychiatric assessment. And if you're struggling to function, or having any thoughts of harming yourself, please reach out for support right away.

A simple way to think about it

Start with self-directed work if your stuckness is fairly recent, tied to circumstances you can point to, and hasn't produced significant depression or anxiety.

Consider therapy if it's longstanding, rooted in deeper patterns of self-suppression, held in place by powerful fears, accompanied by shame or low self-worth, or if self-directed work has given you understanding without giving you movement.

Seek psychiatric assessment if significant depression has developed alongside the stuckness, or if daily functioning is substantially impaired.

One final thought, and I mean it. The fact that you have worked through this workbook is itself a form of movement. Not dramatic movement. But real movement nonetheless, towards understanding, towards honesty, towards a slightly clearer sense of the self that has been stuck, and what it might actually need. That is where everything begins. Not with a plan, not with a decision, not with certainty about where you are going, but with understanding of where you are, and why, and what, gently, one small step at a time, might be genuinely possible from here.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

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Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

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This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

01 Anxiety

When worry has become the background hum of your life.

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The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the in-between — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

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A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

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For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

Explore the full collection at shelagh-psychologist.com

*Feeling stuck is not a character flaw.
It is a signal — from a self that has outgrown something
and does not yet know what comes next.*



It is not grief, because nothing has died. Not anxiety, because there is no specific threat. Not quite depression. It is the quiet, disorienting experience of being stuck — and it deserves to be taken seriously. This workbook offers a slow, honest inquiry into what the stuckness is protecting, what it might be pointing toward, and how movement begins to emerge from understanding rather than force.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  What stuckness actually is
-  The many faces of feeling stuck
-  What is underneath the stuckness
-  Why we stay stuck — the fear beneath the inertia
-  Finding orientation — not a plan, but a direction
-  How to find the right level of support

*The path does not need to be fully
visible in advance. It reveals itself
through engagement with what matters.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)
BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate life transitions, identity, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.

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ISBN 978-1-999999-00-0



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