

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOURSELF



*Understanding self-worth, self-criticism
and the inner voice that shapes everything else*

—
This workbook is an invitation to turn toward yourself
with the same care you have spent a lifetime
offering to everyone else.



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A note from Shelagh

If you've picked up this workbook, there is a good chance that something about your relationship with yourself has been asking for attention.

Perhaps you have spent much of your life focused on everyone else — their needs, their feelings, their expectations — while your own relationship with yourself has quietly remained in the background.

Perhaps you are harder on yourself than you would ever be with someone you love.

Perhaps you carry a sense that who you are is somehow not quite enough — and that if you could just do better, achieve more, look different, be more confident, more productive, more successful, then you might finally feel at peace with yourself.

Or perhaps there is simply a feeling that something is missing. That despite everything you have done, there is still a distance between you and the person you are.

If any of that feels familiar, you are far from alone.

Over more than twenty years as a psychologist, I have come to believe that the relationship we have with ourselves is one of the most important and least understood relationships in our lives. Beneath anxiety, depression, perfectionism, people-pleasing, burnout, relationship difficulties, and struggles with self-worth, I often find the same thing: a person who has learned to relate to themselves in ways that are far harsher, less compassionate, and less understanding than they realise.

Many people assume this is simply who they are.

The critical voice feels like truth. The constant striving feels normal. The habit of dismissing their own needs feels responsible, or mature. They have lived with these patterns for so long that they no longer see them as patterns at all.

But the way you relate to yourself is not something you were born with.

It was shaped over time — through experiences, relationships, messages received from others, and conclusions made about yourself, often when you were far too young to fully understand what was happening.

I know something about this territory myself.

As a child, I was not particularly strong academically. Like many people, I found ways of adapting. I learned how to compensate, how to manage how I was perceived, how to find worth in other places. Over time, those experiences became woven into my relationship with food, achievement, and self-worth.

I share this because the story of self-worth is rarely random. The way we see ourselves almost always has a history. And what has been learned can also be questioned, understood, and gradually changed.

This workbook is the one in this series that I feel most tender toward.

Not because it deals with the most dramatic struggles, but because it explores the relationship that sits underneath all the others.

The relationship you have with yourself influences how you love, how you work, how you care for your body, how you respond to setbacks, what you believe you deserve, and how much space you allow yourself to occupy in the world.

It shapes far more than most people realise.

As you move through these pages, there is nothing you need to achieve. Nothing to prove. Nothing to get right.

The invitation is simply to become curious.

To begin paying attention to how you speak to yourself, how you treat yourself, and what you have come to believe about your own worth.

And if part of you is already wondering whether you deserve this kind of attention — whether you are worth the effort, whether focusing on yourself is somehow selfish or unnecessary — just notice that.

That voice is not a reason to stop.

It may be one of the reasons you are here.

For now, all that is needed is a willingness to look with curiosity rather than judgement, and to consider the possibility that your relationship with yourself can become kinder than it has been.

That is enough to begin.

With warmth,

*Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling. Work through the sections in order if you can — each one builds on the last — but follow your own instincts if something draws you elsewhere.

A particular note for this workbook: if you notice something contracting as you read or write — a wish to close the page, a voice saying this is self-indulgent, or that you're making too much of things — please don't take that as a signal to stop.

Take it as a signal that you're close to something that matters.

Shame thrives on silence. Gentle, honest attention is its antidote.

There are no right answers here. There is no way to do this incorrectly. The only thing required is honesty, and a willingness to be slightly kinder to yourself than you have perhaps been in the habit of being.

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SECTION 1

How self-worth influences our relationship with ourselves

Where it begins — and how it is learned

As you read this, you might notice certain people, memories, or moments coming to mind — things from your own history, or the way you grew up.

If that happens, I want to start by saying something quite simply: this isn't about blame.

It's about understanding.

From what I've seen over the years, most parents and caregivers weren't intentionally shaping how their child would come to feel about themselves. They were usually doing the best they could with what they had at the time — their own emotional resources, their own history, their own understanding of what love or care looked like.

And so much of what we end up believing about ourselves was never actually said directly.

It was learned quietly. Over time. In ordinary moments that didn't seem especially significant at the time.

What I'm really interested in here is something quite personal: how your relationship with yourself came to feel the way it does.

Because that relationship didn't form in isolation.

It formed in connection — with the people around you, and with what you learned from being with them.

And when you start to see that a little more clearly, something often shifts. Not everything. But enough to begin wondering whether it has to stay exactly as it is.

Because anything that has been shaped in relationship can also, in time, be reshaped in relationship.

We learn our worth in relationship

Something I often notice is that people assume self-worth comes mainly from what they were told as children. And that can definitely play a part. But in reality, it goes much deeper than that.

A child's sense of worth is formed through experience — through how they are met when they are upset, whether their feelings are taken seriously, whether there is space for them emotionally, or whether they learn they need to adapt in order to stay connected.

But it's not only what happens directly to them that shapes this. It's also what they observe.

Children are constantly taking in the world around them. How the adults in their life speak to themselves. How they respond when they make mistakes. Whether they seem gentle with themselves or critical. Whether being “enough” seems natural, or something that has to be earned.

And without anyone needing to explain it, something is being absorbed. Not as information — but as an internal sense of what it means to be a person.

The conclusions children make

When a child grows up in an environment that feels emotionally steady enough, something quite quiet and stable tends to develop inside them. Not entitlement. Not inflated confidence. Just a sense of being okay.

A sense that says: I matter. My feelings matter. I don't have to earn my place here.

But for many people, that experience was more mixed. There may have been love, care, and real moments of connection. And at the same time, other experiences that shaped things differently.

Maybe attention or approval came more easily when things were going well. Maybe strong emotions didn't quite feel comfortable for the adults around them. Maybe it felt safer to be easy, capable, or not need too much.

And children rarely interpret that as something missing in the environment. They usually turn it inward. They make it about themselves.

So, without choosing it, a child may begin to carry beliefs like:

I am too much. I am not enough. I need to earn love. I have to achieve to be valued. Other people's needs matter more than mine. I need to be careful not to take up too much space.

These aren't character flaws. They're adaptations — ways of staying connected, safe, and understood in the world they were growing up in.

Why these patterns can feel so true

Over time, these kinds of beliefs stop feeling like beliefs. They start to feel like reality.

Not something you are thinking... but something that simply is true.

And part of what makes them so powerful is that they didn't begin as conscious thoughts. They began as early ways of making sense of experience — formed by a younger version of you who was trying to understand something they didn't yet have the language for.

It doesn't have to be a difficult childhood

It's easy to assume that struggles with self-worth only come from clearly difficult or traumatic childhoods. But in reality, it's rarely that straightforward.

Many people who struggle with self-worth describe growing up in homes where they were loved in many ways. They were cared for. Their needs were met. There were moments of warmth, safety, and real connection.

And still, something subtle may have shaped how they came to experience themselves.

It's patterns. The way emotions were handled. What was praised or discouraged. What seemed to make someone "easy to love." What didn't quite feel welcome.

It's rarely one big moment. It's the repetition of small ones. And those patterns can quietly continue long into adulthood — shaping not just how you see yourself, but how you relate to yourself.

Exercise 1 What you learned about your worth

Slowing down

Before you write, take a moment to slow this down rather than answer it quickly. There is no right way to do this. You are simply beginning to notice what you may have learned, over time, about what makes you acceptable, lovable, or safe.

The question

What did you feel you needed to be, or do, or not be, in order to feel safe, accepted, or loved? You might notice patterns in behaviour, emotion, achievement, or personality — or simply a sense of how you learned to be in order to be okay with others. As you write, try not to edit or judge what comes up. Just notice what appears.

Exercise 2 The conclusions you drew

Slowing down

Before you begin writing, take a moment to slow down with this. Over time, you made sense of your experiences in the best way you could. This exercise is about gently noticing what you came to believe about yourself along the way.

The question

What did you conclude about your worth? About what you deserved? About what you needed to be or do in order to be accepted, safe, or loved? These conclusions may not always have been conscious. They may feel more like a background sense of “how things are” than clear thoughts.

A gentle reminder

Be as specific as feels manageable — but without pushing. This is not about getting it right. It is simply about noticing what was learned.

SECTION 2

Self-esteem, self-worth — understanding the difference

Two words we use as if they mean the same thing

These two ideas often get used as if they mean the same thing. And I think that can be confusing, because they actually refer to quite different experiences inside you.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is usually about how you evaluate yourself. How you see your abilities. How you feel about your performance. How you judge what you're doing in life.

And because of that, it naturally shifts. It tends to go up when things are going well, and to drop when things feel harder, or when you don't meet your own expectations.

So in a way, self-esteem is quite responsive to what's happening around you — and to how you're doing in comparison to others, or to your own standards.

Self-worth

Self-worth feels a little different. It's less about evaluation, and more about something deeper in how you relate to yourself. A sense of whether you feel fundamentally okay as you are.

Not because of what you achieve. Not because of how you perform. But simply because you exist.

When self-worth feels more stable, something often shifts in how you are with yourself. Mistakes may not land quite as heavily. Failure may not feel like it defines you in the same way. And rest may feel a little less like something you have to earn.

They can exist at the same time

It might be helpful to notice that these two things can exist together. You may feel confident in what you do — capable, competent, even successful in many areas — and still carry a quieter sense underneath that something isn't quite enough. Or that you're still trying to prove something, even when things are going well.

This is something I see quite often. On the outside, things can look steady. But the relationship you have with yourself can still feel quite conditional.

A small place to pause with this

It might be interesting to gently notice: when things go well for you, does it shift how you feel about yourself as a person... or just how you feel about your performance? And when things go badly, does it feel like a temporary setback... or something that says something deeper about you?

There's no right answer here. Just something to begin noticing.

Where self-worth actually shows up

Self-worth often becomes most visible not in how you perform, but in how you are with yourself when performance is taken out of the picture. When you're tired. When you make a mistake. When things don't go to plan. When you're not "doing well" in any obvious way.

That's often where the relationship with yourself becomes clearest. And for many people, that relationship is where the deepest patterns live.

And it gives you room to be human.

Exercise 3 Esteem, worth, or both?

A simple question to sit with

You might find it helpful to pause with this for a moment, rather than answer it quickly. When you think about your relationship with yourself, what feels most familiar?

Two ways it can show up

Is it mainly self-judgement — a tendency to evaluate your performance, appearance, or capabilities quite harshly? A sense of not measuring up in what you do? Or does it feel deeper than that — less about what you do, and more about who you are? A quieter sense that, even when things are going okay on the surface, there is still something about you that doesn't feel fully acceptable?

Or perhaps both

Perhaps it shifts between the two. At times performance-based — linked to achievement or comparison. At other times more global, as though your sense of worth as a person itself is affected. There is no right answer here. This is not something to get correct, but something to begin noticing.

SECTION 3

The inner critic and what it is protecting

The voice that once learned to keep you safe

You may notice that, alongside these more underlying feelings about worth, there is often another experience that shows up quite strongly. A kind of inner voice.

For some people it is quite clear and easy to recognise. For others, it is more subtle — like a background commentary that runs underneath everything else. But either way, it can feel quite harsh at times.

Quick to point out what hasn't gone well. Quick to focus on what could have been done better. And often much slower to register what has gone well, or what you are managing under pressure.

And when things are difficult, this voice can become even louder.

Noticing how it sounds for you

You might begin by simply noticing what this voice is like for you. If you had to describe its tone, what words might fit? Is it critical? Pressuring? Disappointed? Cold? Relentless? Or something else entirely?

There's no right answer here — just your own experience of it. And you don't need to change anything about it at this point. Just noticing is enough.

Looking at it a little differently

There is a way of understanding this voice that some people find helpful. Not as something separate from you, but as something that developed over time, in response to your experiences. And in many cases, it may have originally formed with a protective kind of intention — even if it doesn't feel that way now.

You might be familiar with moments where it seems to say things like:

If I criticise myself first, maybe it won't feel as bad if someone else does.

If I push myself harder, maybe I can avoid making mistakes.

If I stay on top of everything, maybe I can prevent things going wrong.

If I don't assume I'm doing well, I won't be caught off guard.

At some point, this way of relating to yourself may have made a kind of sense — especially if being criticised felt painful, or if approval felt uncertain, or if mistakes felt like they carried more weight than you could easily hold.

What it learned along the way

You might also notice that this voice often reflects the environment you grew up in — not always directly, but in tone, expectation, or pressure. Sometimes it mirrors how people spoke to you.

Sometimes it mirrors how people spoke to themselves. And sometimes it simply reflects what seemed to be needed in order to stay safe, accepted, or valued.

Over time, it becomes internalised. And because it has been there for so long, it can start to feel like it is simply “how you think.”

Why it can feel so persistent

One of the things people often notice is that this voice doesn't always update easily. Even when life changes. Even when you are no longer in the same situations. It can still speak as if the same rules apply.

As if you still need to be on guard. As if mistakes are still dangerous. As if worth still has to be earned.

And because it has been trying to help in its own way, it can feel quite difficult to simply switch it off.

What might be happening underneath

It can sometimes help to pause the instinct to argue with this voice, or push it away. And instead, just get a little curious about what it might be trying to protect you from. Not because everything it says is true. But because underneath the tone, there is often something more vulnerable.

Maybe a fear of being judged. Maybe a fear of not being enough. Maybe a fear of being rejected, or letting yourself down.

You don't need to fully agree with any of this. Just beginning to see it differently can sometimes soften the relationship with it a little. And that softening is often where things begin to shift.

Exercise 4 Getting to know your inner critic

Starting with what you notice

You might begin simply by noticing what this voice is like for you. If you had to describe its tone, what words would fit best? Is it harsh or contemptuous? Cold or dismissive? Quietly relentless? Something else entirely? There is no right answer here — only what you recognise from your own experience.

Getting curious about it

You might try writing about this voice as if you were getting to know something, rather than trying to get rid of it. Noticing its patterns. The situations it tends to appear in. The kinds of things it most often says. Something quite different can happen when you relate to it this way — when it becomes something you are trying to understand, rather than something you are trying to silence.

A gentle reminder

There is no need to change anything about the critic here. You are not trying to fix it, challenge it, or push it away. Just notice it — as clearly and as gently as you can, in whatever way it shows up for you.

Exercise 5 When the critic first appeared

A question to sit with

You might notice that the inner critic has a familiar tone — almost as if it belongs somewhere you've heard before. If it feels relevant, you might gently ask yourself: does it remind you of anyone's voice? Or a way people around you used to speak — to you, or to themselves? This isn't about finding a clear or definite answer, and it isn't about blame. It's a way of noticing that this voice didn't come from nowhere — and that it may not be a fixed part of who you are.

What this is for

This isn't about building a full understanding of where the voice came from. It's about softening the sense that it is simply "you." When the inner critic feels fused with identity, it can feel unchangeable. When there is even a small sense that it was learned — shaped through experience, environment, and relationship — something can begin to loosen. Not necessarily the voice itself, but your relationship with it. And if nothing stands out, that's completely fine too.

SECTION 4

How low self-worth shapes your life

The patterns you may not have connected

Low self-worth rarely announces itself directly. It doesn't usually show up as a clear thought like: I don't value myself.

More often, it is something quieter than that. Something indirect — woven into patterns of behaviour, the way you relate to others, the choices you make, and the ones that feel difficult or impossible to make at all.

It can also show up as a more background sense that something is slightly off, even when things on the surface look fine.

What follows is not a complete list. It is more of an invitation — to see whether any of these patterns feel familiar in your own life.

In relationships

You might notice certain familiar patterns in how you relate to others. Perhaps there is a difficulty trusting that you are valued simply for who you are, rather than for what you do, give, or manage for other people.

You might find yourself giving more than you receive, or staying attuned to others' needs in a way that leaves less space for your own. There can also be a kind of background anxiety in relationships — a sense that love might be conditional, or could be withdrawn if you don't stay "enough" in some way.

As a result, asking for what you need may feel difficult. Not because you don't have needs, but because having needs can feel like too much, or like an imposition.

And yet low self-worth doesn't always show up in this way. Sometimes it takes a different form. A sense of distance. Emotional self-protection. Not needing others too much. Even a kind of independence or superiority that keeps people at arm's length.

On the surface, this can look like confidence. But underneath, it may still be organised around the same fear — that if someone gets close enough to really see you, they might find you lacking in some way.

At work

Low self-worth is often less visible at work, partly because many people compensate through high performance. From the outside, things may look successful, capable, even accomplished. But internally, you might recognise something different.

Perhaps praise is difficult to take in — quickly dismissed or minimised. Perhaps there is a strong fear of failure that quietly drives perfectionism. Perhaps success doesn't quite land as something that belongs to you, while failure feels more personal, more confirming.

There may also be a sense of needing to over-deliver in order to feel temporarily “okay.” Or, at the other end of the spectrum, a stepping back from recognition altogether — a kind of self-sufficiency that looks strong on the outside, but may also be protecting against the risk of not being good enough.

In how you treat your body and wellbeing

One of the clearest places self-worth shows up is in how you relate to your own basic needs. Rest. Nourishment. Medical care. Pleasure. Time that is just yours.

For many people, these needs are not ignored out of carelessness, but because of a deeper, quieter assumption that they are not fully deserved. That other people’s needs come first. That rest has to be earned. That looking after yourself is somehow indulgent.

In whether you ask for help

There is something quite painful, and also very human, here. Often, the people who most need support are the ones who find it hardest to reach for it.

You might notice a tendency to minimise your own difficulties — to assume they are not serious enough, or that others have it worse, or that you should be able to cope. This isn’t really perspective. It is often what low self-worth looks like when it turns inward and becomes small. Not dramatic. Not obvious. Just quietly self-diminishing.

As you begin to notice these patterns, it can sometimes bring a sense of recognition — and for some people, a sense of heaviness as well. It may become clearer how much of this is not about isolated habits or personality traits, but about a deeper way of relating to yourself that has been shaped over time.

This is where the next part of the workbook becomes important. Because if low self-worth is reflected in the way you relate to yourself across different areas of life, then change also begins in that same place — in the relationship you have with yourself, moment by moment. This is where self-compassion becomes relevant. Not as a technique to add on top of everything else, but as a different way of meeting yourself within the patterns you have just begun to recognise.

Exercise 6 Where these patterns show up

Only what feels useful

You don't need to answer all of these. You might stay with only one, or simply notice what comes up as you read. There is nothing to get right here — only patterns to gently recognise.

- *Where in your life do you find yourself giving more than you receive? What is it like to notice that?*
- *How easy is it to believe you are valued simply for who you are, not what you do?*
- *When you are struggling, do you tend to reach out for support, or manage alone? What feels familiar about that?*
- *How do you respond internally when things go well — do you take it in, or move past it quickly?*
- *When you think about your own needs (rest, care, support), do they feel as important as other people's?*

SECTION 5

How self-compassion can be a way forward

A different way of being with yourself

By this point, you may have started to notice something important. That the way you relate to yourself isn't random. It has a shape to it. A kind of pattern. A familiar tone. A way of responding that can feel almost automatic at times.

And you may also have noticed that the inner critic — the voice you explored in Section 3 — is often part of that pattern. Not separate from it, but woven into how you tend to meet yourself, especially when things are difficult.

A different way of being with yourself

Self-compassion is often misunderstood. People sometimes assume it means being lenient with yourself, lowering your standards, or letting things go. But that isn't really what it refers to.

At its core, self-compassion is a different way of being in relationship with yourself. It's the capacity to stay with your own experience — in a steadier, less critical way — especially in moments when things don't feel easy.

So it might look quite simple. When something goes well, it can mean allowing yourself to notice that — to let it land a little, without immediately moving on or dismissing it. When something is difficult, it can mean not adding an extra layer of criticism on top of what is already hard. And when the inner critic shows up, it can mean beginning to see it as something you can relate to differently, rather than something you automatically have to believe.

When it feels unfamiliar

For many people, this way of relating to themselves doesn't come naturally at first — especially if self-criticism has been a long-standing way of coping, staying motivated, or trying to avoid mistakes. So it can feel unfamiliar. Sometimes even uncomfortable.

There may be a sense that if you soften the inner critic, something important might be lost — like drive, focus, or standards. That concern usually makes sense in context. Because if self-criticism has been part of how you've managed life, it has likely also been trying to help in its own way, even if it has been harsh.

So this isn't about forcing a different stance toward yourself. It's more about beginning to notice what it is like to meet your experience in a slightly different way. Even briefly. Even imperfectly.

Self-compassion and self-worth

Over time, something often becomes clearer. The way you are with yourself shapes how you experience your own sense of worth. Not in a forced or positive-thinking way, but in a lived, ongoing way.

When the relationship with yourself is mostly critical or conditional, it can be difficult for a steadier sense of worth to take root. When there is a little more space — a little more understanding, especially in difficult moments — something can begin to soften. Not because everything changes, but because you are no longer relating to yourself only through judgement.

And that shift, even if it feels small, can begin to change how life is experienced from the inside.

A place to begin

Self-compassion doesn't usually arrive as a fully formed state. It tends to begin in smaller moments. A pause before reacting to yourself. A slightly different tone internally. A moment of not immediately turning on yourself when something goes wrong.

Not doing it perfectly. Just noticing what happens when you don't add extra pressure or criticism on top of difficulty. That is often enough to begin with.

A gentle closing note

Nothing here is asking you to become a different kind of person. It's more an invitation to begin noticing what it might be like to be in a different kind of relationship with yourself. One that is a little less automatic. A little less harsh. And sometimes, just a little more on your side.

Exercise 7 The friend you would be

The exercise

Imagine a close friend came to you describing exactly the same thing about themselves. What would you say to them? Write it out — the words, the tone, the perspective you would offer.

Then read it back

And then notice: why is this available for them, but not for you?

Exercise 8 Small acts of self-regard

Starting small

It can begin with something very small. What might that look like for you?

Writing a specific commitment

Name one small act of self-regard you could practise this week. The smaller and more specific, the better.

SECTION 6

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

There's something I want to be quite direct about in this final section. The relationship you have with yourself is one of the most important areas of your life. And for many people, it's also something that is very difficult to change in isolation.

Not because reflection doesn't matter — it does. But because self-worth is formed in relationship. And it often begins to shift most meaningfully in relationship too.

What self-directed work can offer

This workbook is a starting point. A way of beginning to notice patterns that may have been running quietly in the background for a long time.

You may have started to notice the inner critic more clearly. Or the tone it uses. Or the way it can feel almost automatic at times. And you may have begun to experiment, even slightly, with not immediately believing everything it says.

These are not small things. Even noticing is a shift. And over time, small shifts like this can begin to change the internal landscape you're living in. Not all at once. But gradually.

When support from another person matters

At the same time, it can be helpful to remember that the patterns you are working with were formed in relationship. Through how you were responded to. How you were seen. How you learned to make sense of yourself in connection with others. And because of that, they often begin to shift most deeply in relationship as well.

Therapy, in particular, can offer something that reflection alone cannot. A steady, consistent relationship where the parts of you that you might usually judge or hide can actually be brought into the open. The self-criticism. The shame. The sense of not being enough.

And instead of being met with judgement or withdrawal, they are met with presence. Over time, that experience can be quite powerful. For many people, it is also unfamiliar — not because nothing like it has ever existed, but because it may not have been consistently available in earlier relationships.

Different approaches that may help

Different therapeutic approaches can support this work in different ways. For example, Internal Family Systems (IFS) often helps people begin to relate differently to the inner critic — not as something to fight, but as a protective part that developed for a reason, even if its methods are now outdated.

Compassionate Inquiry, developed by Dr Gabor Maté, tends to focus on understanding how early experiences shape present-day patterns — not just cognitively, but in how you relate to yourself emotionally and physically in the present.

There are many other approaches as well. What matters most is not the model itself, but whether you feel safely met in the process.

When it may be especially important to reach out

If self-worth difficulties are contributing to significant anxiety, low mood, or a sense that daily functioning is becoming difficult to manage, it may be worth speaking with a GP or a mental health professional. This isn't about labelling your experience. It's about making sure you are not carrying more than you need to carry alone.

A simple way to think about it

You might find it helpful to think about this in quite a simple way. Self-directed work can be helpful when:

- you have enough stability to engage with what comes up
- the inner critic is present, but not completely overwhelming
- reflection feels possible, even if uncomfortable

Therapy or additional support can be helpful when:

- the inner critic feels relentless, or hard to step back from
- self-compassion feels out of reach
- patterns repeat in relationships or work despite understanding them
- earlier experiences feel emotionally unresolved, or hard to access alone

There is no hierarchy here. Just different kinds of support for different levels of need.

A final thing I want to say directly

If any part of you is reading this and thinking:

my difficulties don't justify support · others have it worse · I should be able to manage this on my own

I want you to gently notice that thought. Not as truth, but as something familiar. Because often, that is not perspective. That is the self-worth wound speaking. And it tends to underestimate what you are carrying, while overestimating what you should be able to hold alone.

You deserve support that is proportionate to what you're going through. And beginning to take that seriously — even in a small way — is often part of what shifts the relationship you have with yourself.

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 — no obligation, no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and understand what working together might look like. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. All enquiries are handled personally by Shelagh and treated with complete discretion.

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It's to become, perhaps for the first time,
genuinely kind to the person you already are.*



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)
BCPA Registered (Canada)
20+ years in private practice



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