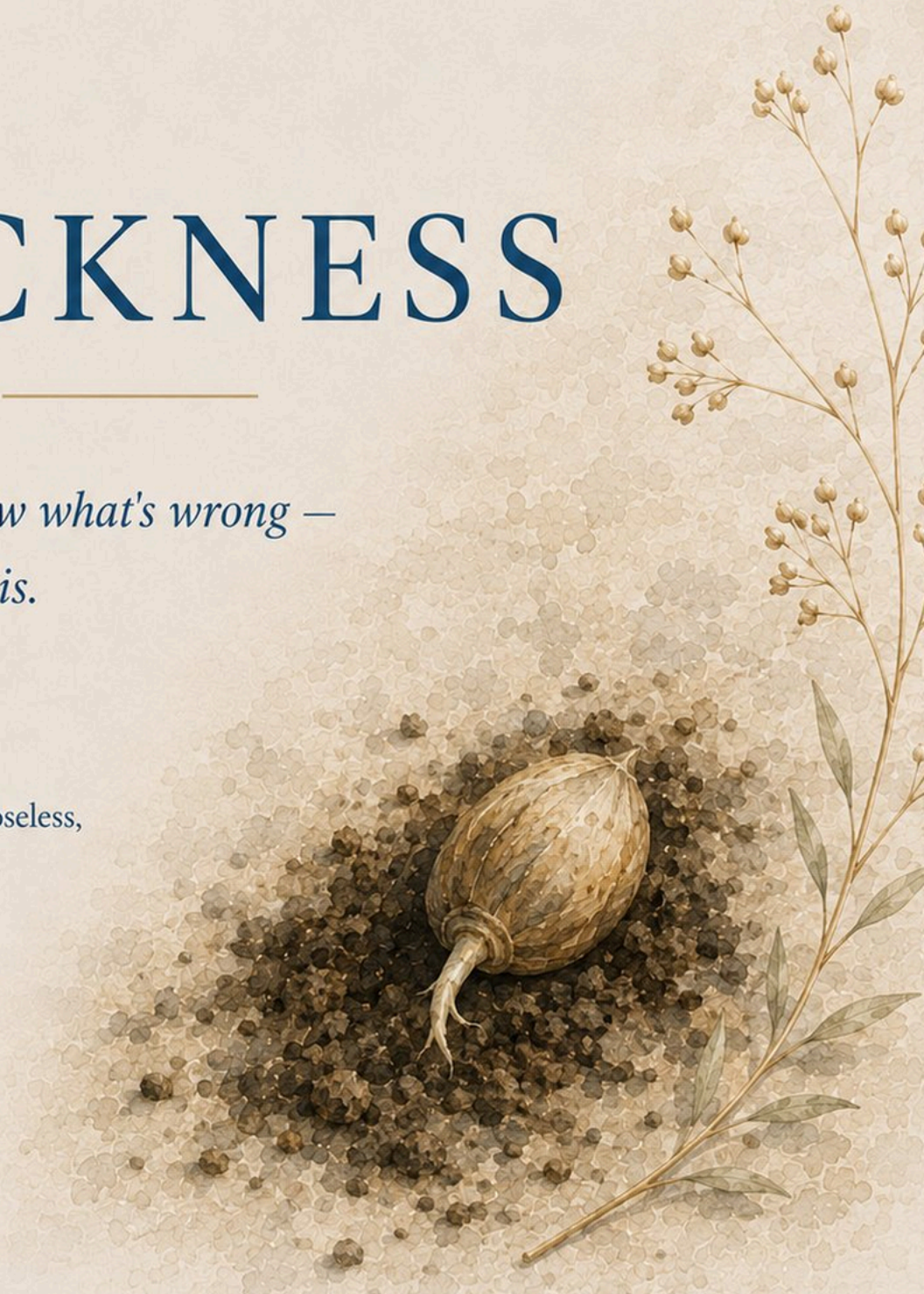


STUCKNESS



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

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



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice

A note from Shelagh

If you have picked up this workbook, there is a good chance you are tired of your own life in a way you cannot quite explain.

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

Perhaps you are going through the motions. Perhaps you know you should feel grateful, and instead you feel flat. Perhaps 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 the feeling of being stuck.

Over more than twenty years of sitting with people in this place, 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 you move, the harder movement becomes. The more disconnected you 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.

This workbook is an attempt to take it seriously — to treat stuckness not as a failure of motivation, but as meaningful information about where you are, what you need, and where movement might begin to emerge.

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 toward.

A personal reflection

I have had to pay attention to my own relationship with stuckness, too — not as something separate from this work, but as something I am inside of.

For me, stuckness is not only not knowing what to do. It is also the moments I don't stay close to myself long enough — when I reach outward too quickly for direction, before anything inside has had space to form.

Sometimes it shows up as looking back. Trying to find earlier versions of myself — the driven, engaged, passionate parts — and not quite being able to locate her in the present. And I notice how that looking back can quietly hold me in place, as if what I am looking for is behind me rather than here.

Sometimes it is quieter than that. Just a sense of sitting slightly outside my own life, watching it move forward while I stay on the edge of it.

Comparison does this too. Seeing others and feeling something tighten — a sense of lack, or distance, or envy. And I am learning to pause there a little longer. Not to turn it into a story about deficiency, but to stay with what it is pointing to. Because often there is something alive in it. Something I recognise. Something that matters to me.

When I can stay with that, it shifts. It stops taking me down and starts pointing me somewhere. And movement, I am learning, doesn't come from certainty. It comes from small experiments that don't have to be fully formed before they begin.

What I keep coming back to is that stuckness is not only about not knowing. It is also what happens when I don't quite trust what is emerging — in me, or in life. It can feel scary and unsettling, and at times there is a strong impulse to run from it as quickly as possible.

And yet I also know that when I slow down enough to turn inward, when I stop treating comparison as evidence and begin to listen to it instead, when I allow things to feel a little more tentative and alive, something begins to loosen. Not all at once. But enough to move.

The path does not need to be clear before I begin. It becomes clearer as I move through it.

With warmth,

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

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 toward 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 people stuck.

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

- 01 What stuckness actually is
- 02 The many faces of feeling stuck
- 03 What is underneath the stuckness
- 04 Why we stay stuck — the fear beneath the inertia
- 05 Finding orientation — not a plan, but a direction
- 06 Finding the right level of support

SECTION 1

What stuckness actually is

And why it is worth taking seriously

Stuckness is not a clinical diagnosis. You won't find it in any psychiatric manual. And yet it is one of the experiences I encounter most frequently in my work — real, genuinely painful, and deserving of being understood rather than dismissed.

At its most fundamental, stuckness is a state of arrested movement. Not the paralysis of acute anxiety, which has a clear object. Not the withdrawal of depression, which drains the colour from everything.

It is more specific than either. It is the experience of a self that knows it needs to move — in some direction, toward something — but cannot find the direction, cannot generate the momentum, cannot locate the motivation that would make movement possible.

The issue is not the absence of will. The issue is the absence of direction.

And direction is not something you can manufacture through effort. It emerges from self-knowledge — from understanding what you actually value, what you actually need, what you have been living in service of, and whether those things are genuinely your own, or were inherited, expected, or simply arrived at by default.

Stuckness as a developmental signal

One of the most useful frameworks I know comes from Carl Jung, who described the experience of being stopped as often signalling a developmental threshold — a place where the self that got you here is no longer adequate for where you need to go next. Where the identity, the values, the roles that served you well in one chapter have reached their limit, and something new is waiting to emerge, but has not yet found its form.

The threshold between one chapter and the next tends to look, from the inside, a great deal like being lost. The old map no longer works. The new map has not yet been drawn. And in the space between the two, the experience is often one of disorientation, flatness, and the unsettling sense that the life you have been living no longer quite fits.

Stuckness and meaning

The psychologist Viktor Frankl argued that the primary human motivation is the search for meaning — and that the absence of meaning produces a specific kind of suffering he called the existential vacuum: a state of inner emptiness, boredom, and purposelessness.

A great deal of the stuckness I encounter is rooted not in practical obstacles but in a loss of meaning — the sense that the activities filling one's life, however objectively successful, do not 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?

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.

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.

SECTION 2

The many faces of feeling stuck

Because stuckness does not always look the same

One of the reasons stuckness goes unrecognised — both by the people experiencing it and by those around them — is that it shows up in several quite different ways. Not all of them look like the paralysed, unable-to-function state the word implies.

Going through the motions

This is perhaps the most common, and certainly the most invisible. For some of us it can mean staying functional and going through the motions — meeting our obligations, maintaining relationships, and producing adequate work. From the outside, everything looks fine.

From the inside, there is a persistent, low-level sense of unreality. The feeling of being present in your life without being fully in it. Of performing the role of yourself, rather than actually being yourself. It can feel like watching your own life from a slight distance. The days pass. Things get done. And underneath, a quiet but accumulating sense that something essential is missing.

The loss of purpose

You may recognise this: arriving at stuckness through a specific loss of purpose — a role, project, or relationship that once gave life direction, and that has ended or changed, leaving a vacuum. This is common after finishing a significant piece of work, leaving a career, or when children have grown and left home. The structure that once organised daily life is gone, and nothing has yet arrived to replace it.

Paralysis in the face of choice

A different but related form involves not the absence of options, but too many of them — or a significant choice that cannot be made, because no option feels clearly right, or the stakes feel too high to risk getting it wrong. This kind of stuckness has a more anxious quality — less flat, more agitated; less empty, more overwhelmed. We can often know, at some level, what we want. But the gap between knowing and acting is wide, and usually filled with a specific fear.

The slow drift

Perhaps the most insidious form is the kind that arrives not through any identifiable event, but through the slow, cumulative drift of a life lived according to other people's expectations — or according to choices made long ago that were 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 has gone 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.

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 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 toward 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 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.

SECTION 3

What is underneath the stuckness

Unmet needs, suppressed values, and the unlived life

Stuckness is rarely simply the absence of motivation. It is almost always the presence of something — something that has not been attended to, expressed, or allowed.

Understanding what that something is requires a willingness to look underneath the surface experience of being unable to move, toward the deeper question of what the stuckness might be protecting, or pointing toward.

Unmet needs

Human beings have a relatively small set of fundamental psychological needs — needs that, when consistently unmet, produce the flatness, restlessness, and purposelessness that characterise stuckness.

- **Connection and belonging.** The need for genuine closeness, and to feel part of something.
- **Autonomy.** A felt sense of agency and self-determination over your own life.
- **Competence.** Being genuinely good at something that matters.
- **Meaning.** The sense that what you do adds up to something worth doing.
- **Growth.** The experience of becoming, of not being finished, of still having somewhere to go.

When any of these is chronically unmet, the result tends to be a low-grade but persistent sense of something missing — a restlessness that cannot be resolved by the usual means, because its source is not external but internal. No amount of achievement addresses the absence of genuine connection. No level of comfort addresses the absence of meaning.

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?

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.

Discovering your values

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 have been told to have, but the ones that, when they are present, produce a felt sense of rightness, and when they are absent, a felt sense of wrongness or loss.

For many of us, values are not something we have consciously thought about. They are there, quietly operating beneath the surface, often without our awareness. In some ways they act like a compass pointing us toward true north. They provide ballast when life feels uncertain, and become part of our deeper sense of identity.

A great deal of stuckness is rooted in values conflict — living in ways that are substantially at odds with what we actually value. This conflict is rarely dramatic. More often, it is a slow accumulation of small compromises and adaptations to what is expected, 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 toward 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 toward 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 toward 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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

The Jungian analyst James Hollis writes about what he calls the unlived life — the parts of ourselves that have been suppressed, left undeveloped, or simply never given permission to exist. This is not necessarily about dramatic dreams that never came true. More often, it is about quieter things: the parts of ourselves that were set aside in the service of being responsible, meeting expectations, fitting in, staying safe, or becoming who we thought we needed to be.

And yet these neglected parts do not disappear. They have a way of making themselves known. Sometimes they show up in envy — not the kind that wants to take something away from someone else, but the particular ache that arises when we see someone living in a way that feels somehow more alive, more free, or more fully themselves.

Over time, I have come to see that this kind of envy is not necessarily something to be ashamed of. Sometimes it is less about what another person has, and more about what it awakens in us. Less a sign of deficiency, and more a signal — a reminder that there may be something within us that longs to be expressed, explored, or lived more fully.

Sometimes they appear in the thoughts, longings, or fantasies that keep returning — the things we dismiss as impractical, unrealistic, or impossible, yet somehow cannot entirely let go of. Sometimes they appear in moments of unexpected aliveness, experiences that briefly awaken something that had gone quiet.

I have come to wonder whether these experiences are not distractions to be ignored, but invitations to be listened to. Perhaps they are ways in which life is trying to get our attention — signs pointing toward 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 toward 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 toward in your own life — what might be asking for more attention, space, or expression?

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.

SECTION 4

Why we stay stuck

The fear beneath the inertia

If stuckness were simply the absence of direction, it would be resolved by finding direction. The reason we seem to stay stuck even after we understand fairly clearly what needs to change is that stuckness is almost always held in place by something — a set of fears that operate below conscious awareness, and make movement feel more threatening than staying still.

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 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, 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.

These beliefs quietly shape perception, emotion, and choice. Over time they become internal maps — defining the boundaries of the self we allow ourselves to inhabit.

How beliefs protect us

These beliefs are not random. At some point, they likely made sense. They often form in response to disappointment, criticism, instability, neglect, or overwhelm. And once 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.

In this way, beliefs are not only limitations. They are strategies for managing fear. And stuckness is often the outcome of those strategies: safety that has quietly become restriction.

Motivation without punishment

We may try to move forward by pushing ourselves harder — through pressure, criticism, urgency, or self-judgement. Sometimes this works in the short term. But for many, it eventually leads to exhaustion rather than meaningful change.

A more sustainable kind of motivation does not come from punishment. It comes from understanding. Understanding why you are stuck. Understanding what has been protecting you. Understanding what parts of you are afraid, and why. From this place, motivation becomes less about forcing yourself forward, and more about supporting yourself into movement.

Compassion here is not softness as avoidance. It is clarity without attack. 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?

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 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?

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.

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. What follows is not a plan. Plans come later, when there is enough clarity to build one. This is something more modest — a way of beginning to orient toward what feels alive, even when the destination is not yet visible.

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

One of the most useful features of stuckness is that it is often very clear about what it is stuck away from. The sense of wrongness — of a life that doesn't fit, of a self that feels constrained — is information. Moving away from what is clearly wrong is a legitimate form of movement, even before you know what you are moving toward.

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 and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive. In the context of stuckness, this means paying attention to small signals of aliveness — moments where something softens, opens, or engages. These moments are not trivial. They are 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. But experimentation: I will try this. I will notice what happens. I will learn from it.

At this stage, certainty is not the goal. Certainty usually follows movement — it does not precede it. What matters is a step small enough to take without overwhelm, but real enough to generate feedback.

Values as a compass

When direction is unclear, values become the most reliable compass available. The question is not: what should I do with my life? It is: what would bring my life into closer alignment with what I actually value — right now, from where I am? And what is one small step in that direction? That is a more honest and workable question than trying to solve everything at once.

Exercise 12 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?

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 13 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?

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.

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 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 is genuinely meaningful in the context of stuckness — particularly when it is relatively recent, tied to identifiable circumstances or transitions, and has not yet produced significant symptoms of depression or anxiety. The exercises in this workbook are designed to do the most valuable thing self-directed work can do: deepen self-knowledge.

Understanding what the stuckness is about — which needs are unmet, which values are not being lived, what fears hold the inertia in place — is real and important work. Journalling, as an ongoing discipline 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 written half-consciously, in the sudden clarity that comes from having finally put something into words.

And small, experimental steps are both a form of self-directed work and a form of self-directed research. Each experiment produces information. Movement, even tentative, tends to generate more clarity than any amount of sitting still and thinking.

When therapy can help

Therapy is likely to be particularly helpful when the stuckness is longstanding rather than recent — when you have felt fundamentally lost or purposeless for years rather than months; when it is rooted in deeper patterns, such as a self constructed largely in service of others' expectations; when the fears holding it in place are powerful and resist conscious examination; when you know what you want to do and still cannot do it; or when significant shame or low self-worth is present.

The approaches I find most useful for stuckness 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 particularly helpful for the stuckness rooted in a conflict between parts — the part that wants to change, and the part terrified of what change might cost. And depth-oriented approaches drawing on Jungian ideas — including work with the unlived life — can be profoundly illuminating for stuckness that has an existential quality.

Coaching, as a complement or alternative, is also worth considering when the stuckness is primarily forward-looking — where the roots are not particularly deep, and what is needed is less healing and more navigation. As a Certified Executive Coach as well as a counselling psychologist, I work with both, and can help assess which is most relevant.

When more support may be needed

Stuckness itself does not require psychiatric care. But when it has progressed into significant depression — when the flatness has become pervasive, when daily functioning is substantially impaired, when the future looks not just unclear but genuinely hopeless — psychiatric assessment is appropriate, and

should not be delayed. If you are struggling to function, or having any thoughts of harming yourself, please seek support promptly.

A simple way to think about it

- Begin with self-directed work if your stuckness is relatively recent, has identifiable circumstances associated with it, and has not produced significant depression or anxiety.
 - Consider therapy if the stuckness is longstanding, rooted in deeper patterns of self-suppression, held by powerful fears, accompanied by shame or low self-worth, or if self-directed work has produced understanding without 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 — toward understanding, toward honesty, toward 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.

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. 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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*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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