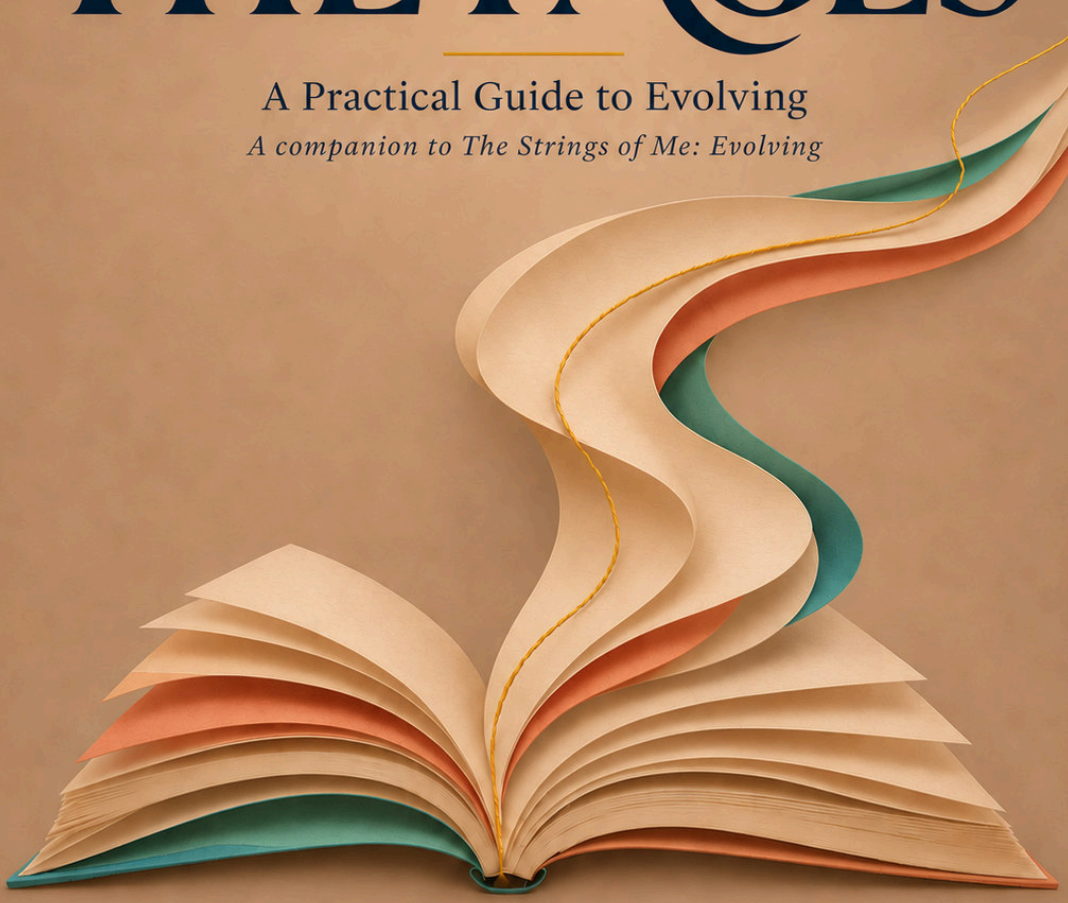
BEYOND THE PAGES

A Practical Guide to Evolving

A companion to The Strings of Me: Evolving



Keneva O'Connor

TIME TO EXHALE
A practical companion to

The Strings of Me: Evolving

Beyond the Pages

A Practical Guide to Evolving

Keneva O’Connor

Pause. Breathe. Reflect. Become.

An information and reflection guide

This handbook offers general educational information. It does not replace individual medical, legal or safeguarding advice. Education guidance relates to England; arrangements elsewhere in the UK differ.

Further information

For enquiries about this handbook, future events or the Time to Exhale initiative:

timetoexhale.info@gmail.com

Time to Exhale is an independent initiative and does not provide counselling, emergency or crisis services.

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Welcome

Begin with the concern or possibility that matters most to you. The contents will help you find the relevant guidance, examples and support routes. You can read individual sections and return when your circumstances change.

Using these pages

Beyond the Pages is a companion to The Strings of Me: Evolving and can also be used on its own. The activities are optional; you do not need to share personal experiences to use them.

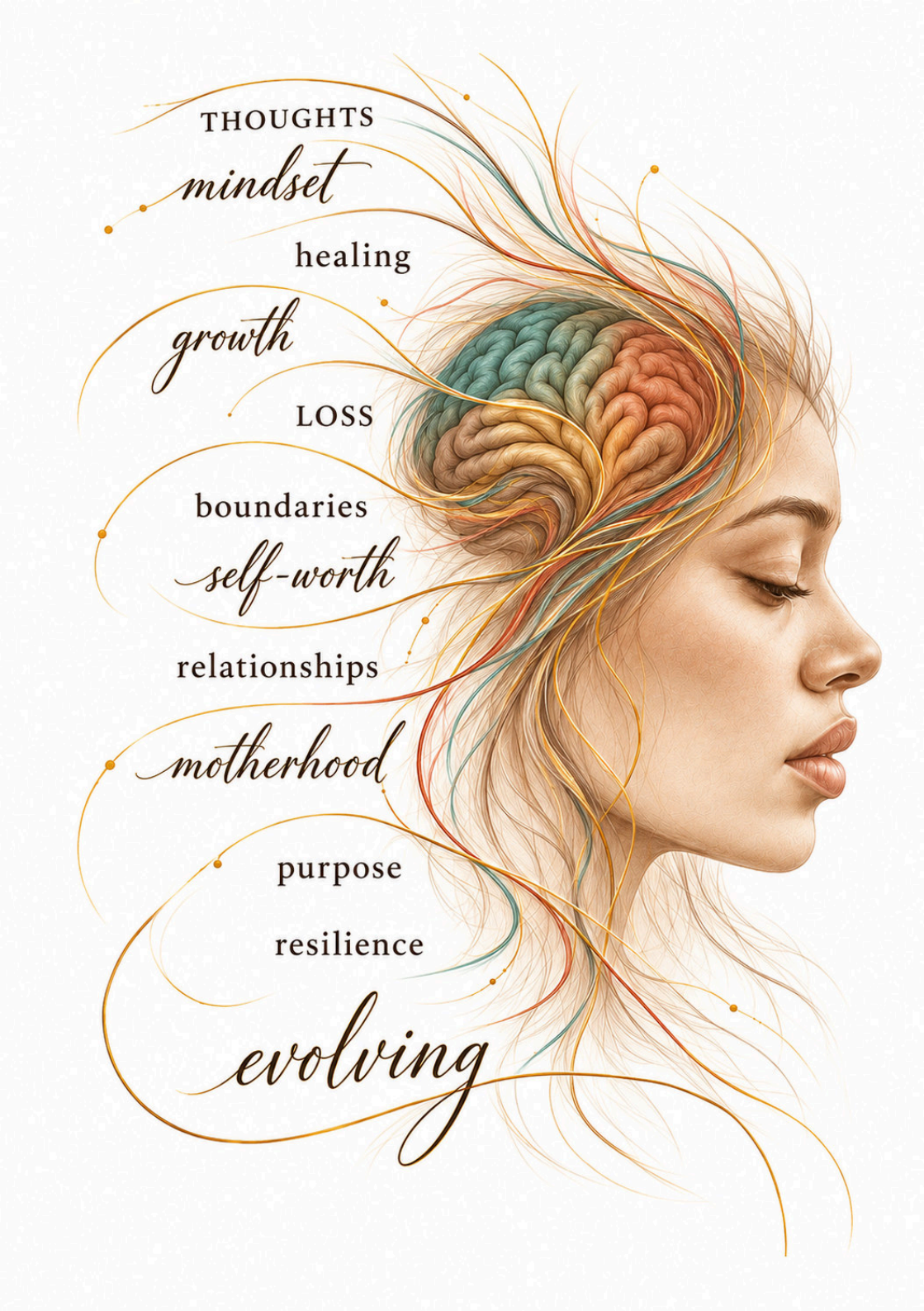
If you are unsure where to begin, use “What might help me next?” on page 7. For urgent help, go directly to page 55.

Use the overall check-in on page 63 to record what needs attention, what is helping and one practical next step.

A guide for different stages of life

For teenagers through to adults: explore learning, work, relationships, wellbeing and growing independence. Choose the sections that fit your circumstances. Parenting and caring guidance is for those in those roles; adult services have their own age and access criteria.

If you are under 18, a trusted adult or an appropriate professional can help you explore choices or concerns. You do not have to manage difficult situations alone.


THOUGHTS
mindset
healing
growth
LOSS
boundaries
self-worth
relationships
motherhood
purpose
resilience
evolving

Time to Exhale

Pause. Breathe. Reflect. Become.

Time to Exhale is a creative wellbeing and personal development initiative dedicated to encouraging self-awareness, personal growth and emotional wellbeing.

Through meaningful conversations, creative expression, reflective guidance and practical resources, we provide a supportive space for individuals to explore their experiences, recognise their strengths, consider their options and take positive steps towards personal development.

Our approach recognises that everyone's circumstances are different. We encourage individuals to make informed decisions, develop healthier coping strategies and identify the support that may be beneficial to their individual needs.

Our approach to support

Time to Exhale offers encouragement, creative expression, reflective guidance and practical signposting.

We do not provide counselling, psychotherapy, diagnosis or clinical treatment, nor do we replace the expertise of qualified healthcare or mental health professionals.

Where appropriate, we encourage individuals to seek professional assistance and provide information about relevant services, community organisations, helplines and freely accessible resources.

These resources are shared for information and signposting purposes. Their inclusion does not imply a formal partnership, endorsement or professional affiliation with Time to Exhale.

Our purpose

To encourage individuals to recognise their worth, develop greater self-understanding, access appropriate support and move forward with renewed confidence, understanding and purpose.

It's Time to Exhale.

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What might help me next?

You do not have to work everything out at once. Start by recognising the kind of help your situation may call for.

Something I can explore myself

Try writing down what happened, how you feel and what you need. Consider one manageable step, such as rest, a boundary, a conversation or a practical change.

Something I could share with someone

A trusted person, community organisation, school, carer service or support group may help you understand your options or share a responsibility.

Something that needs professional advice

For persistent distress, health concerns, safeguarding issues or difficulties affecting daily life, contact an appropriate qualified professional. A GP can help you consider health and mental health support.

A moment to reflect

What is concerning me most? What support have I already tried? Who or what could help me take one safe, realistic next step?

For urgent help and emotional support, see page 55.

A first step you can name

Choose one concern rather than the whole situation. For example: “I need help understanding this school letter.” Put the letter beside you and identify one question. If reading it feels too much, ask a trusted person to read it with you. Your next step may be asking, rather than solving.

Understanding Yourself and Your Wellbeing

Understanding yourself begins with noticing how you feel, what you need and what influences your responses. Your wellbeing includes emotional, mental, physical and social aspects of life. These affect one another, but each deserves attention.



Why it matters

Recognising these changes early can help you make informed decisions, communicate needs and seek support before pressures become harder to manage. Greater awareness may also help you respond more thoughtfully to people around you.

Recognise what is happening

Emotionally:

notice changes in mood, worry, frustration or withdrawal.

Mentally:

pay attention to concentration, memory and decision-making.

Physically:

notice sleep, appetite, energy and persistent tension.

Socially:

consider connection, isolation and the support available to you.

PRACTICAL APPROACH

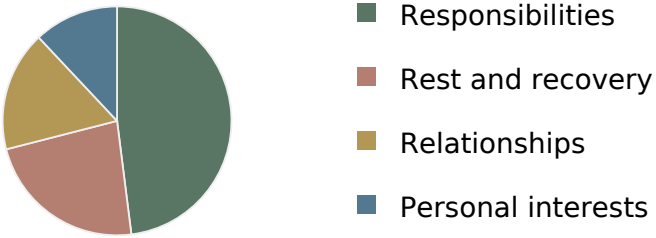
When several requests leave you irritable, name the pressure before judging yourself. Handle one request and ask another person to wait where possible. Later, consider what support would help.

The Importance of Self-Care

Self-care includes attending to health, protecting opportunities for rest, staying connected and making space for interests. It is not a luxury or another task to complete perfectly.

Where Your Time and Energy Go

Responsibilities can sometimes overshadow everything else, especially when work, parenting or caring demands are high. Balance does not mean giving every part of life equal time each day. It means noticing what needs attention and finding opportunities to respond when you can.



Illustrative proportions only. There is no prescribed balance.

A practical look at your own balance

Think about where your time and energy have gone recently. Which area needs attention? You do not have to make every slice equal.

If responsibilities have filled the day, choose one modest adjustment: sit for a few minutes when care is safely covered, listen to a song you enjoy or ask someone for help with a specific task.

Choose when you could try it and what support it needs. If it does not fit today, adapt the timing or ask for help. Your needs matter alongside your responsibilities.

Stress, the Brain and Stillness

The brain helps us think, remember, respond to situations and process emotions. Intense or prolonged stress can affect how we feel and function.

Connected systems, shared work

Prefrontal cortex: supports attention, planning and decision-making.

Amygdala: helps detect possible threats and contributes to emotional responses.

Hippocampus: supports learning, memory and context.

These regions work within interconnected networks. This is a simplified explanation, not a way to diagnose stress or identify where a symptom comes from.

What does this mean for everyday wellbeing?

Stress may make it harder to concentrate, recall details or respond calmly. It can also affect sleep and cause physical tension. These changes have many possible causes.

Stillness and gentle grounding may help you feel more settled. Try the exercise on page 12 if it feels comfortable for you; these approaches do not replace appropriate care.

Make the next task visible

If stress leaves you staring at an unanswered message, reduce the task. Read the message once, identify what it asks and write one sentence in reply. Save a draft if you need time. If concentration remains difficult, make a note of the effect on daily life to discuss when seeking support.

Recognise the Signs. Respond With Care.

What you may notice

Thinking: difficulty concentrating, remembering details or making decisions.

Emotions: feeling on edge, anxious, irritable or overwhelmed.

Body: headaches, muscle tension, sleep changes, digestive discomfort or a faster heartbeat.

What you can do

When concentration is difficult: reduce distractions, focus on one task and write down the next step.

When feeling on edge: take a pause, breathe slowly and comfortably and move somewhere quieter if possible.

When forgetful: use reminders, write down important information and allow time to rest.

When your body feels tense: change position, stretch gently, rest or take a walk if appropriate.

An ordinary moment

You open several messages and cannot decide which to answer. Close the others, choose the one that needs attention first and note its next action. If it is not urgent, return after a pause. For a reminder, write “reply to school about Thursday” rather than simply “school”. Specific words make returning easier.

Making Space for Stillness

Rest can be ten minutes in a safely parked car, half an hour in a quiet room with your phone aside, a walk, an enjoyable outing or even a weekend away when circumstances allow. Choose what is safe, manageable and restorative for you. Your body may be resting while your mind is still busy.



You do not need to solve every problem during that time. Rest itself can be worthwhile.

For more: see the sections on adapting thoughts, building resilience and seeking professional support. If symptoms are new, severe, persistent or concerning, seek medical advice.

A gentle grounding exercise

Feel your feet against the floor. Notice three things you can see, two things you can feel and one sound. Breathe gently at a comfortable pace without forcing or holding your breath. If focusing on breathing feels uncomfortable, return to noticing your surroundings.

Begin with a small pause

You do not need to create a perfect quiet hour. If circumstances allow, sit for a minute with your phone aside and notice the room around you. If quiet does not feel comfortable, try a familiar song or gentle activity instead. Notice what suits you; stillness is an option, not a test you have to pass.

Understanding Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation means recognising and managing responses, not pretending difficult feelings do not exist. Different situations call for different forms of support.

When pressure is rising

Settle the body: slow your breathing, take a break or reduce overwhelming noise where possible.

Make thinking space: postpone a non-urgent decision until you feel more settled.

Adjust the environment: reduce competing demands and protect recovery time.

Connect: speak with someone trustworthy or ask for practical help.

Seek further support: discuss persistent difficulties with a suitable health professional.

Why it matters

Managing pressure can support concentration, communication and physical recovery. It can also reduce the chance that stress is unintentionally passed on through our responses to others.

Identify an early sign of overload, such as a racing mind, tight shoulders or irritability. Choose one supportive response to use when that sign appears.

Recognise your own early signal

If you notice your voice becoming sharper, you might say, “I want to answer this properly. I need a moment.” Pause when it is safe, then return to the issue. If someone is relying on your care, arrange a safe pause rather than leaving them unsupported. Later, consider which demand or adjustment needs attention.

Adapting Thoughts and Responses

We cannot control every thought or feeling that arises, but we can learn to examine our interpretations and choose how to respond. These approaches take practice and may be supported through counselling or other professional help.

Useful approaches

Self-awareness: recognise a familiar reaction and what tends to trigger it.

Metacognition: notice how you are thinking, rather than accepting every thought as a fact.

Cognitive reframing: consider another reasonable way of understanding a situation.

Cognitive restructuring: examine evidence for and against an unhelpful belief.

Cognitive flexibility: adjust your approach when circumstances or new information change.

Neuroplasticity: the brain can adapt through experience and learning; change may take time.

Choose one recurring thought and use the example on page 15 to examine it. If speaking feels difficult, try writing or drawing what you want someone to understand; page 42 offers different ways to express feelings.

Put the terms into ordinary words

Self-awareness: “I agree quickly when I feel pressured.” Metacognition: “I notice I am predicting rejection.” Reframing: “They may need more information.” Checking evidence: “What was actually said?” Flexibility: “A daytime session may suit me better.” Practising one useful response gives you something to repeat; you do not need to master every approach at once.

Adapting thoughts: a practical example

You begin learning something new but find it harder than expected. Your first thought might be, “I am no good at this. There is no point continuing.”

Rather than treating that thought as a fact, consider what you are still learning, what support might help and whether another approach would work better.

You might say, “I have not mastered this yet, but I can practise, ask questions and improve at my own pace.”

SEVEN-DAY CHALLENGE

Choose one low-risk situation in which you can pause, reconsider your interpretation and try a more constructive response.

Try it for yourself

The situation:

My first interpretation:

Another reasonable explanation:

One response I could try:

Give yourself something to work with

If an application feels difficult, read one question and draft a short answer. Ask for help with that question, rather than deciding you cannot apply. A draft can be improved. Choose when you will return to the next part. You do not need to feel fully confident before making an enquiry.

Understanding Yourself and Building Confidence

Confidence can vary between situations without defining your overall worth. The focus here is on understanding patterns and recognising what helps you develop.

Understand a pattern without turning it into an identity

A familiar response may have a purpose. Agreeing quickly might avoid an uncomfortable conversation; postponing an application might protect you from possible disappointment. The immediate relief can make the response attractive even when it creates a later difficulty. Understanding that function gives you something more useful to work with than calling yourself weak, lazy or incapable.

Consider an adult who often agrees to take on extra responsibilities and later feels resentful. The pattern may involve wanting to be dependable, difficulty estimating the workload, or fear of disappointing someone. Each explanation suggests a different response: clarify the task, allow time to decide, or practise declining respectfully and managing the discomfort that may follow. The same outward behaviour does not always have the same cause.

Build confidence around something you can evaluate

Imagine you would like to apply for a course or a new role but worry that you will not explain yourself well. Identify the actual task: describe one relevant experience clearly. Draft a short answer, practise with a trusted listener and ask which part was clear or needed more detail.

Practise one part of the next stage

Try one sentence: “I am interested in this course because…” or “One experience I could bring to this role is…” Then give a real example. Ask a trusted person what they understood. Use their response to improve the next attempt. Your first explanation is a starting point, not a verdict on your potential.

Confidence, continued

The useful evidence is more specific than whether you felt nervous. Was your example clear? Did it explain your contribution? Would more preparation, a shorter answer or a different format help? You can use the answers to improve the next attempt. This is a low-risk learning approach, not an instruction to expose yourself to an unsafe or overwhelming situation.

Distinguish ability, capacity and opportunity

A missed plan may reflect exhaustion, inaccessible arrangements, lack of childcare or insufficient money. Changing your self-talk will not supply those resources. Before concluding that you lack motivation, ask whether the plan fits your current capacity and whether an adjustment or practical support would make it workable.

Recognising strengths also requires evidence. Think of a situation in which you handled uncertainty, learned something, solved a practical problem or supported someone effectively. Identify what you actually did. You may then see where that ability could be useful again, and where more learning is needed.

Leave room for the life you value

Personal development can include protecting an interest, becoming more patient in a relationship or enjoying an ability without turning it into paid work. Consider whether a goal reflects your values or pressure to prove yourself to someone else. You can appreciate your present life and still want a change.

You need not monitor every reaction or treat ordinary uncertainty as a problem to fix. If distress or the effects of past experiences are persistent or interfere with daily life, appropriate professional support may be more helpful than further self-analysis.

Recognise what you carry

Your appearance, relationship status and achievements do not tell the whole story of your worth. Notice the character you practise: wishing others well, working with care, keeping your principles and taking responsibility when you are wrong. Name one recent example. Let it inform a choice: “I value honesty, so I will ask for clarity before agreeing.” Having faults does not cancel your dignity.

Grief and Living With Loss

Grief may follow bereavement, separation, changes in health or the loss of a hoped-for future. It can affect sleep, concentration, identity, energy and relationships. There is no fixed timetable or single correct way to experience it.



Gentle, practical approaches

Allow for different days: comfort and sadness can exist alongside one another.

Prepare for significant dates: consider whether company, quiet or a familiar tradition may help.

Ask for specific support: a meal, childcare, transport or someone to listen.

Protect basic needs: attend to food, rest and healthcare as best you can.

Seek additional guidance: speak with a GP or bereavement organisation when you need further support.

Moving forward does not mean forgetting. Nor does it require turning loss into a lesson before you are ready.

Ask for one kind of help

If “let me know what you need” feels hard to answer, make the request smaller: “Could you bring a meal on Thursday?” or “Could you sit with me for a little while without expecting me to talk?” You may not know what would help yet. You can say that too, and change your mind. For bereavement support options, including Gracefully Prepared, see page 56.

Small acts of remembrance

Choose an idea that feels meaningful, leave anything that does not, and return another time if you wish.

Buy flowers for yourself or place them somewhere meaningful.

Prepare a favourite meal, perhaps one linked with a happy memory.

Spend time with family or a trusted friend, if company feels helpful.

Look through photographs, share a story or write down a memory. You can stop whenever you need to.

Listen to meaningful music, make something or do an activity your loved one would have enjoyed.

Plan gently for birthdays and anniversaries. Quiet, company or a familiar tradition may each feel right at different times.

A gentle reflection

What is one kind or meaningful thing I could do for myself this week?

You do not have to make grief positive. If grief feels unmanageable, a GP or bereavement support service may help.

Let the idea remain small

You might choose one photograph rather than open every album, or listen to one song rather than plan an event. If it brings comfort, you can return another day. If it feels too painful, put it aside. Remembrance does not need an audience, a purchase or a finished creation to have meaning.

Building Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to respond to difficulties, recover where possible and adapt when life does not go as planned. It does not mean hiding emotions, being unaffected by hardship or managing everything alone.

Resilience can develop through experience, supportive relationships, practical skills and access to appropriate help. It is not something we must already possess.

Ways to strengthen resilience

Recognise what you can influence. Focus on manageable actions while acknowledging what is outside your control.

Develop flexible thinking. If one approach is not working, explore another.

Build supportive connections. Encouragement, belonging and asking for help are strengths.

Recognise progress. Notice skills and adjustments that have helped you before.

Allow time for recovery. Rest, emotional expression and professional support can be part of resilience.

Knowing when to let things be: Not every opinion needs a response, and not every disagreement needs your involvement. Resilience can include choosing not to engage, while still addressing genuine concerns and harmful behaviour when necessary.

Adapt the plan, not your worth

You planned to make an enquiry but the day became unmanageable. Keep the number or question ready for another suitable time. If the difficulty keeps returning, ask what is missing: time, information, childcare, money or support. A smaller task may help, but some barriers need practical assistance. Rest and asking for help can be part of moving forward.

Belonging, Relationships and Boundaries

Healthy relationships can offer companionship, encouragement and a sense of being valued. They also need room for different responsibilities, individual needs and respectful disagreement.

When work, parenting, caring or personal circumstances affect availability, it does not automatically mean affection has changed. Mutual relationships make room for communication, understanding and different seasons of life.

Approaches that strengthen relationships

Communicate clearly: explain what you can offer rather than making promises you cannot keep.

Show mutual care: make space for another person's needs as well as your own.

Respect individuality: belonging should not require abandoning your values.

Maintain boundaries: be clear about your own time, responsibilities and choices.

Repair when possible: acknowledge misunderstandings and agree a practical way forward.

Everyday example

“I'd love for us to spend time together. This week is difficult, but could we arrange something next week?”

If a conversation becomes heated, taking a break and returning when both people are calmer can help. Where there are threats or coercion, prioritise safety and specialist guidance.

A boundary you can put into words

If a non-urgent call comes when you need rest, you might say, “I can talk tomorrow afternoon for a short while.” Offer only what you can genuinely give. Notice whether the arrangement respects both people. You do not need to prove your kindness through constant availability. Where saying no could put you at risk, seek individual specialist guidance instead.

Building and maintaining healthy relationships

Good relationships give people room to be known, to contribute and to enjoy one another. Friendship, family life and partnership all involve learning how another person experiences care. One person may value regular conversation; another may show care through practical help. Understanding those differences makes it easier to ask for what matters without dismissing what is already being offered.

Trust grows through experience

Trust involves more than believing that someone means well. It develops as words and actions become dependable: a confidence is respected, a commitment is kept, or a change of plan is explained. Different relationships can offer different forms of support. A friend who is good company may not be the right person for a private concern. Recognising this allows a wider support network without expecting one person to meet every need.

Reciprocity means that each person matters. It does not require identical contributions every week. Illness, parenting, money pressures or caring can change what someone can offer. What needs attention is a continuing pattern in which one person's needs are taken for granted and the other's are repeatedly overlooked. With children, care remains an adult responsibility; a child should not have to provide emotional support in return.

Ask what care would look like

Instead of hoping someone guesses, try: "It would mean a lot if you checked in after my appointment." Ask what matters to them too. Notice whether words are followed by a dependable response over time. Your generosity is valuable, and your needs belong in the relationship as well.

Healthy relationships, continued

Make the meaning clear

Suppose a friend has twice cancelled plans. One thinks, “I am no longer important.” The other is struggling with unpredictable caring arrangements. The cancellations are facts; the conclusion about affection is an interpretation. A conversation might begin: “I have missed seeing you, and I felt disappointed when our plans changed. Is there a way of meeting that works better for both of us?”

The response might reveal a need for flexible plans, more notice or a more honest conversation about effort. Listening includes checking what you understood: “Are you saying you want to meet, but cannot promise a whole evening?” Understanding a difficulty does not require pretending its effect on you does not matter.

Share responsibility, including the thinking

In a household, sharing a task involves noticing it, planning it and following it through. Someone may do the school collection yet leave another adult to arrange every change, reminder and backup. A useful agreement names who will manage the responsibility, what needs to happen and how changes will be communicated. Fairness should take account of available time, health and other duties, rather than assume an equal split always works.

Work with disagreement rather than a verdict on character

A disagreement is easier to address when the problem, its effect and the hoped-for change are made specific. “When collection changes at short notice, I have to leave work and feel I cannot rely on the arrangement” gives more to work with than “You never support me.” The other person also needs room to explain their understanding and constraints.

Name the whole responsibility

For a shared collection, agree who checks the time, arranges transport and communicates a change. A simple message might read: “You are managing Thursday collection, including contacting the school if plans change. Please let me know by midday if we need the agreed backup.” Check that the agreement is realistic for everyone involved.

Healthy relationships, continued

For example, two adults might agree fixed collection days, notice by midday when a change is needed and a shared backup arrangement. They can review whether the arrangement actually reduces disruption. This turns a repeated argument into something both can evaluate. If the conversation becomes too heated to be useful, agree a time to return to it rather than let a pause become indefinite silence.

Repair and enjoyment both need attention

Repair involves naming the hurt, accepting responsibility for your part and making a relevant change. “I should have told you earlier. I will contact you as soon as I know” offers more than an apology followed by the same pattern. The person hurt may need time; forgiveness and restored trust cannot be demanded.

Relationships also need experiences that are not about sorting out problems. A walk, shared meal, song, conversation or familiar joke can help people enjoy their connection. Ask what each person enjoys and what fits the season of life you are in. Keeping a friendship alive may require adapting how you spend time together, rather than reproducing an earlier routine.

These approaches assume people can speak and disagree safely. Fear, coercion, intimidation or abuse call for individual specialist advice and attention to safety. Better communication from the person harmed cannot make another person stop abusing. Joint counselling may be unsafe in that situation.

Give repair something to stand on

A useful apology names the action and the change: “I interrupted while you were explaining. I will let you finish.” Then practise that change in the next conversation. For enjoyment, suggest one affordable shared activity and a possible time. Neither repair nor companionship has to depend on a grand gesture.

Understanding and responding to trauma

Distressing experiences can affect how safe we feel, how we see ourselves and how we respond to other people. These may include childhood adversity, neglect, abuse, violence, discrimination or a traumatic loss. People respond differently; a difficult experience does not automatically lead to a clinical trauma condition.

What you may notice

Trust, confidence, concentration, sleep and everyday decisions may feel different. You might withdraw, feel constantly on guard or find reminders unexpectedly upsetting. These changes can have other causes too; they are not a way to diagnose yourself.

Support at your own pace

Begin with safety: consider what would help you feel safer today and who you can trust.

Protect everyday needs: food, rest, familiar routines and practical help can support you while you seek further guidance.

Choose what to share: you can ask for support without explaining everything at once. You do not need to revisit painful memories alone.

Seek appropriate help: speak with a GP or qualified mental health professional if distress persists, worsens or affects daily life.

If someone is still harming or controlling you, specialist domestic-abuse support can help you consider safety and options. See pages 26 and 57. For urgent help, see page 55.

You can ask without telling everything

An opening sentence could be: “Something I have experienced is affecting everyday life. I would like to understand what support is available, but I am not ready to describe everything.” You can ask how information is handled before sharing more. The first step is an enquiry, not a requirement to retell your experience here.

Recognising harmful cycles and trauma bonding

Trauma bonding can describe a strong attachment to someone who harms you, reinforced by repeated harm interspersed with affection, apologies, promises or temporary relief. It does not mean bonding because you have both experienced hardship. It is not a diagnosis, and abuse does not always follow a predictable cycle.

Look at the pattern

Concerns may include isolation, intimidation, monitoring, manipulation, control of money or repeated boundary violations. Warm moments do not cancel harmful behaviour. You can care about someone and still recognise that you are being harmed. Responsibility for abuse belongs to the person causing it.

Consider a safer next step

A specialist service can help you explore options and make an individual safety plan, whether you are staying, considering separation or already apart. You do not need to confront the person or decide everything before asking for help. If contact or internet use may be monitored, consider a safer device or contact route. Avoid keeping notes where discovery could increase risk.

Women's Aid: womensaid.org.uk. Men's Advice Line: mensadviceline.org.uk. Galop supports LGBT+ people: galop.org.uk. Further domestic-abuse support is on page 57. In immediate danger, call 999; urgent help is on page 55.

Worth is not earned through endurance

Knowing you are a caring person, recognising your principles and remembering what you contribute may help you name what you need from a relationship. None of those qualities makes you responsible for another person's abuse. You deserve respect even when you feel unsure of yourself. A first enquiry can simply be, "I am concerned about how I am being treated. Can you help me understand my options?" Use a safe contact route.

Making room for a life you value

“ An activity can remain something you enjoy without becoming a business or another obligation.

A meaningful life can include things we hope to achieve and things we want to keep. Recognising what already gives life value helps us make choices about time, energy and money.

Notice the kind of value an activity brings

Some experiences offer pleasure or rest. Others bring connection, absorption in a skill or the satisfaction of contributing. One activity need not provide all of these. A quiet walk may be worthwhile without producing an achievement; learning something demanding may matter even when it is not relaxing.

Make enjoyment sustainable

Imagine friends who enjoy meeting but find expensive outings difficult. They could alternate a shared meal at home with an occasional outing, agree costs openly and take turns organising. The intention is to preserve companionship in a form people can sustain, rather than quietly losing contact or spending beyond their means.

The same principle applies to interests and goals. If a goal matters, consider what its pursuit adds to your life and what it asks you to give up.

Contentment with room to develop

Contentment can include appreciating what fits your values even while some circumstances remain unresolved. It need not mean accepting harm, unmet basic needs or circumstances you want support to change. Consider one part of your life you want to preserve and one you want to develop. What would help you make room for each?

Explore what you want to develop

Your next interest might be a language, a digital skill, a qualification, movement or an activity you simply enjoy. Find one introductory resource or ask one question about access. Try a small part before deciding whether to continue. Choose its purpose for yourself: enjoyment, knowledge, greater independence or a route towards work.

EXHALE





Take a breath. Take your time.

Turn back a page or move forward. Find what speaks to you, and make room for the moments that bring you joy.

If what you need is not within these pages, allow yourself to seek the guidance, encouragement or support that may help.

You matter.

Learning, Work and New Possibilities

An opportunity is useful when it moves you towards something you value and has a workable route from your present circumstances. That might involve paid employment, a qualification, a different career, a creative interest or greater financial security. The aim is to understand what an option offers and what it asks of you before making a commitment.

Begin with the destination, then compare routes

If you want work in a particular field, look at actual entry requirements and typical roles before choosing a course. A short introductory class may help you explore an interest; it may not qualify you for employment. An apprenticeship, a recognised qualification, an entry-level role with training and a return to a former occupation offer different combinations of learning, income and commitment.

Ask whether the route provides the qualification, experience or access you need. Where a regulated qualification is claimed in England or Northern Ireland, it can be checked through gov.uk/find-a-regulated-qualification. Regulation alone does not guarantee that a course is suitable or that an employer will accept it. Check the relevant employer or professional requirements too.

From interest to application

You might be choosing school subjects, considering college or an apprenticeship, looking for a first job or changing career. Identify one requirement and ask what it means for you. Read a relevant application and draft one answer. Ask a teacher, careers adviser or suitable provider for help with the next stage.

Learning and work, continued

Check a claim before committing

A course advertises “guaranteed employment”. Distinguish the advertisement from the actual written commitment: check who provides the qualification, ask which employers recognise it and examine the conditions attached to the guarantee. Testimonials may describe individual experiences without establishing typical outcomes. If important information remains unclear, postpone committing while seeking independent confirmation.

Translate experience into evidence

Skills gained through work, caring, volunteering or creative practice can matter, but a label such as “good organiser” tells an employer little. An example explains more: “I coordinated dates and information for a community event, contacted participants when plans changed and kept the activity on schedule.” It shows the task, your contribution and its result. Keep examples accurate and protect other people’s private information.

Compare that evidence with the role. If it requires a particular digital system, safeguarding qualification or technical skill, related experience may show potential but does not replace the requirement. This distinction helps you present strengths honestly and identify learning that is worth paying for.

Check the whole commitment

A course advertised at £240 might also require £60 in materials and £120 in travel: £420 before childcare or lost earnings. This is an illustration, not a quoted course price. A cheaper online option may still require reliable internet, equipment and uninterrupted study time. Compare total cost, teaching hours, assessment, placement requirements and the support available, not just the headline fee.

Turn an interest into an enquiry

You could ask: “What qualification does this course lead to? What are all the additional costs? Is placement compulsory, and how are its hours arranged?” Save the reply beside the course details. To describe your experience, use one real task, what you did and what happened; you do not need to exaggerate to make your contribution visible.

Learning and work, continued

For a parent or carer, a timetable can be decisive. A course with compulsory placements or variable hours may fit less well than a longer flexible route. Ask about accessibility, absence arrangements and how difficulties are handled before enrolling. Available bursaries or childcare support can change the decision, but check eligibility and whether support is confirmed before relying on it.

Choose a route for a reason

A useful decision might be to enrol, apply with the experience you already have, refresh one relevant skill, or postpone a commitment until support is available. Explain the reason to yourself: “This course meets the entry requirement and the timetable is manageable” is a firmer basis than “I ought to be doing something.” Set a point to reconsider if circumstances change.

In England, nationalcareers.service.gov.uk provides role information, skills tools and course searches. Follow its current routes for careers advice; colleges can explain learner support and funding conditions.

Build a route that fits your circumstances

Ask about attendance, placements, accessibility and available support. Then identify the next task: obtain information, draft an application answer or arrange advice. A teenager might explore the options with school or a trusted adult; an adult might compare study with work or caring. If one route does not fit, explore another format or intake and choose when to review it.

Understanding Financial Pressures and Options

Understand what a financial change would mean



When comparing work options, consider take-home pay, necessary work costs, caring arrangements and any change to benefits. An increase in wages is not automatically the same increase in money available to the household. An independent benefits calculator can estimate different circumstances; a benefits adviser can help where the interaction is complicated. Check payment dates as well, because costs may arise before the first wage arrives.

A timing problem or a continuing shortfall?

It also helps to distinguish a timing problem from an ongoing shortfall. Money may cover the month overall but arrive after bills fall due; in that case, agreed changes to payment dates may help. If essential costs consistently exceed income, a different timetable cannot close the gap. Entitlement checks, income options, hardship support or independent debt advice may be needed. Borrowing to bridge a recurring gap can leave a larger problem.

For example, a fictional household has £1,430 a month available but essential costs of £1,550. Moving a bill to another date does not remove the £120 shortfall. The useful enquiry is what could change the amount available or the essential costs, and what support can help while options are considered.

Start with the money you manage

Your starting point might be pocket money, a first wage or a household budget. Note what comes in, what must be paid and what is left. If you depend on an adult for essentials, you are not responsible for solving the household's finances. Ask a trusted adult or appropriate adviser to help you understand a concern.

Money and options, continued

Understand urgency and consequences

Debt priorities depend partly on the consequences of non-payment. Rent or mortgage arrears, Council Tax and energy debts may need urgent attention even when another creditor is more demanding. A free debt adviser can help you understand those priorities and what remains affordable after essential living costs. Do not agree repayments that leave necessities uncovered. Court action, threatened disconnection or loss of your home calls for prompt advice.

What free advice can do

A free debt adviser can explore your income, essential spending, debts and any urgent action, then explain suitable options and the next steps. The purpose is to understand what is workable in your circumstances, rather than agree to the most insistent demand. Ask how advice is provided and what follow-up is available. If one service cannot help promptly, seek another suitable provider, especially when a deadline is approaching.

GOV.UK benefits calculators can help estimate the effect of a change. MoneyHelper's Debt Advice Locator, StepChange and Citizens Advice offer routes to free debt advice. Check access and eligibility directly. These services are independent of Time to Exhale.

A calculator gives an estimate, not an award or a guarantee. Some circumstances, including study and certain residence or immigration situations, may not be represented accurately. Seek individual benefits advice when the result is unclear.

Make the advice enquiry manageable

Put the latest relevant letter, its deadline and one question together. You might say, "I need help understanding this demand and what I can afford after essentials." Ask the adviser what information to provide and what will happen next. You do not need a perfect spreadsheet before seeking help, especially if a deadline is close.

When your plan meets real life



Photograph: Monstera Production / Pexels.

A worthwhile plan still needs room in your actual week. Check the time, money and support available before treating a delay as a lack of commitment.

Choose one priority. Decide what matters most for now and what can wait.

Name the missing support. Be specific about the task, person and time involved.

Agree a smaller alternative. If the original plan is not workable, change its scale or timing.

For example, an evening course may need transport and childcare. Ask about those arrangements before enrolling. If they are unavailable, try a shorter daytime session or ask when another intake begins.

Making a start can sound simple when you are already stretched. Childcare, tiredness and limited support are real difficulties. Look for one step you can take with what is available, even a few minutes of learning at home. The focus is on beginning. Your start does not have to look exactly as you imagined.

Choose a step towards greater capability

If an hour of study is unavailable, read one paragraph or draft a course enquiry. If a new responsibility feels daunting, ask someone to demonstrate one part, then practise with appropriate support. Name what is missing: time, accessible information, childcare, equipment or guidance. Ask for specific help and agree a manageable time to return.

Motherhood

Listening, Guiding and Growing Together



Being present involves more than meeting physical needs or sharing a room. Children need to know their voice matters, guidance is available and correction does not remove their dignity. Your response to a mistake can affect whether they speak openly next time.

Parenting calls for tenderness and responsibility. Listening does not mean overlooking harmful behaviour; boundaries can be firm without harshness. Model honesty, respect, integrity, compassion and self-worth, including acknowledging your own mistakes.

Guide children as they develop their own judgement. Make room for their personalities, interests, strengths and difficulties, alongside clear, age-appropriate expectations.

Everyday ways to nurture trust

- Make space for ordinary conversations, not only problems.
- Listen before deciding what words or behaviour mean.
- Correct behaviour without labelling the child.
- Explain expectations and offer a way to repair mistakes.
- Recognise strengths and take responsibility for your part.

In an ordinary moment

Try, “Tell me what happened.” Listen, then explain what needs to change: “That belonged to your sister. Let us work out how to put this right.” Guidance can remain firm while the child’s dignity remains intact.

Parenting, love and belonging

• Encourage children to recognise their strengths and speak about worries without shame.

• Adapt guidance to the child's age, understanding and individual needs.

Caring for the parent

Motherhood is a significant responsibility, but it does not erase the person who is doing the mothering. Rest, emotional support, meaningful interests and personal purpose all matter. Protecting your wellbeing can help you respond with greater patience and clarity, particularly when family life becomes demanding.

Parenting support, individual counselling and family therapy may help where stress, communication difficulties or family relationships are affecting wellbeing. Asking for help is not a declaration that you have failed. It is a recognition that some situations benefit from knowledge and support beyond what one person can provide.

Let Love Be Felt at Home

A child should not have to guess whether they are loved. Affection, dependable attention, respectful correction and opportunities to be heard help make care tangible. Homes can contain disagreements and still offer emotional security when adults take responsibility for repair and children know that mistakes do not remove their worth.

Build connection in ordinary moments

• Give each child some individual attention, even if it is a short conversation or shared activity.

• Offer affection in ways the child welcomes. Notice when a child needs quiet, reassurance or space.

• Correct behaviour without humiliation or comparisons. Explain expectations and recognise effort.

Let love be something they notice

Offer one small moment of attention that suits the child: listen to a song they choose, sit beside them while they draw or ask whether they would like company. Affection need not mean a hug they do not want. For yourself, name one practical need and one person or service you could approach for support.

Parenting, love and belonging

• Apologise when you get something wrong. Show that accountability belongs to adults as well as children.

• Create simple traditions such as meals, games, reading, outings or shared prayer where appropriate.

Helping siblings grow together

Sibling closeness is encouraged rather than commanded. Shared memories, kindness and mutual respect can strengthen their connection, while differences in age, temperament and needs deserve room.

• Plan opportunities for siblings to enjoy something together without insisting that every interest must be shared.

• Teach children to respect each other's belongings, boundaries and individuality.

• Avoid placing the responsibility for younger children on older siblings as though they were substitute parents.

• Help children repair disagreements fairly and celebrate each other's achievements.

Finding support beyond relatives

Where family support is limited, trusted relationships can be developed through parent groups, playgroups, libraries, community organisations, churches and family hubs. Build trust gradually and observe appropriate safeguarding boundaries. Parents may also benefit from parenting support, counselling or local parent-carer groups.

Make room for difference

If one child enjoys a game and another does not, offer a short shared activity with a choice to do something else afterwards. Ask before borrowing belongings. After a disagreement, help each child explain what happened and agree a fair repair. For community support, enquire about one suitable group before committing to attend.

Helping Children Develop Resilience



Children develop resilience through supportive relationships and opportunities to manage challenges with help suited to their needs. If a child is disappointed after losing a game, acknowledge the feeling before discussing what happened. When they are ready, explore what helped, what they might try differently and whether they want support.

Invite them to suggest an option and consider its likely effect. Offer guidance suited to their age, communication and understanding, allowing them to practise without being left overwhelmed. Adults can model this by acknowledging their own disappointment, adjusting a plan and asking for help.

These experiences can help children develop judgement, problem-solving and confidence in seeking support.

Resilience does not require enduring bullying, abuse or unmanageable demands. Sometimes the appropriate response is protection, an adjustment or professional help.

Model a manageable next attempt

After losing a game, your child may need comfort before advice. Later, ask, “Would you like to try again, change the game or stop for today?” If you make a mistake yourself, say, “That did not work as I hoped. I will try another way.” Adapt the words and choices to the child’s understanding.

Caring for Children and Understanding Needs

Love, care, reassurance and belonging are central to supporting a child. Every child deserves to feel valued, included and respected for who they are, including children whose communication, development or support needs differ from others.



Children benefit from warm relationships alongside consistent, appropriate boundaries and support. Their behaviour may communicate frustration, unmet needs, difficulty with change or something they cannot yet explain.

Respond with curiosity and care

Connect: offer reassurance and listen to the child's perspective.

Observe: notice what happened before and after a difficulty without immediately assigning blame.

Consider: explore sleep, communication, sensory needs, learning demands, health and environment.

Adapt: use clear language, manageable routines or suitable adjustments.

Review: recognise strengths and what is working, not only problems.

A child may behave differently at home and school. Differences between settings are a reason to explore circumstances, not dismiss concerns.

Change one part of the situation

If leaving home repeatedly becomes difficult, notice which part causes pressure. You might try preparing one item earlier or making the next step clearer. Ask the child what helps in a way they can communicate. Note whether the change made the routine easier, and share relevant observations with those supporting them. Avoid treating one difficult moment as their identity.

Connection through everyday play

An ordinary game can make room for connection and communication. Choose safe materials suited to the child's age, interests and needs.



01

Notice and join.

Watch what interests the child and play alongside them. They do not have to play in the way you expected.

02

Comment, then pause.

Use a few words about what is happening and allow time for a response, rather than filling every moment with questions.

03

Respond to their communication.

A gesture, movement, sound, sign, communication aid or word may carry meaning. Acknowledge it without demanding speech or eye contact.

04

Keep it enjoyable.

If the child turns away or becomes uncomfortable, pause or try another time. Follow any individual guidance from their speech and language therapist.

A small change to try

This everyday example shows how an adult might offer a choice without turning it into a test. Adapt it to the child's way of communicating.

An example: choosing a puzzle

Place two available puzzles where the child can see them. Name each one simply and give them time to choose. A point, reach, sign, sound or communication aid may show their preference.

If the child reaches for the animal puzzle, acknowledge the choice and offer it. You might say, "Animal puzzle." There is no need to require them to repeat the words before they can have it.

If the choice seems confusing, simplify it or return to something familiar. Do not withhold what the child needs or continue if the activity is causing distress.

Notice one useful thing

Was it easier with fewer words, a quieter space, more time or a familiar object? Try changing one thing rather than everything at once.

The situation or activity:

One adjustment I could try:

What I noticed:

Return to what helped

If the child found two choices easier than a long list, try that approach again in another suitable everyday moment. Keep the choice genuine and available. Notice whether it helps this child, rather than expecting the same result every time. Keep following their communication and any individual guidance.

Different ways to express feelings

Talking is one way to communicate. Drawing, pictures, writing or typing may make it easier to share a feeling or explain an experience. Offer a choice and allow time.

Pictures and comic strip conversations

A storyboard shows a sequence of events. Comic strip conversations add speech and thought bubbles to explore words, thoughts and feelings. Feelings boards offer pictures or words to choose from.

These approaches can suit teenagers as well as younger children. Choose a style that respects the young person's age, interests and communication preferences.

A simple starting point

Offer three prompts: What happened? How did I feel? What would help? A few words, symbols or pictures are enough.

For example, after a noisy lunchtime, a young person might draw the dining hall, write "overwhelmed" and add "somewhere quieter". Ask what their words or pictures mean; do not decide their feelings for them.

Writing can open a conversation

A private note or typed message to a trusted adult may feel easier than speaking face to face. Ask whether they want help or simply to be heard.

Choose a calmer moment to revisit an upsetting event. Do not insist on disclosure or a particular response. Follow any individual communication guidance, and seek appropriate support if concerns about wellbeing or safety arise.

Let the child choose the format

You might ask, "Would you rather draw it, type it or tell me later?" If they draw a crowded room, ask what they want you to understand about it. Do not decide the meaning yourself. Agree one appropriate next step together, such as helping them explain a concern to a trusted adult.

When your child finds it hard to share

Supporting a child when self-harm is a concern

Sometimes you notice a change in your child before you understand what has happened. They may say little to you, then speak to a teacher or another trusted adult. That can hurt when you have been trying to help.

Speaking elsewhere does not necessarily mean your child does not trust or love you. They may find some things easier to share outside the family. Their willingness to speak to someone can become a route to support.

If you suspect or discover self-harm, respond calmly and without blame. You might say, “I care about you. You do not have to explain everything now, but I want us to find the support you need.”

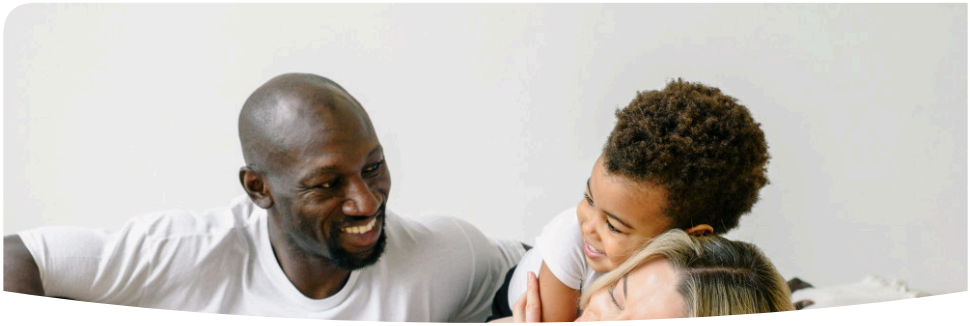
Offer writing, a message or another trusted adult or professional. Continue ordinary care, affection and time together. Your child should not have to disclose everything before receiving your support.

Seek support for your own fear, sadness or frustration from an appropriate adult or professional, so those feelings do not become your child’s responsibility.

You do not need to wait for a full disclosure before seeking advice from a GP or the child’s existing care team. A professional can help assess needs and agree a safety plan with them.

Serious injury, suspected overdose or immediate danger requires emergency medical help. For urgent help, see page 55.

Advocating for a Child With SEND



In England, families can raise concerns about special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) even before a diagnosis is confirmed. Support should be considered in relation to the child's needs.

Useful steps

Speak to the SENCO: ask what support is in place, who provides it and how progress will be reviewed.

Involve the child: seek their views in a way they can communicate comfortably.

Gather evidence: record dates, the child's words, impacts, adjustments and outcomes.

Seek independent guidance: local SENDIASS and IPSEA provide information about rights and processes.

Consider assessment: parents can request an Education, Health and Care needs assessment from the local authority. An assessment does not automatically lead to an EHCP.

Make the first message specific

For example: “My child is finding the noisy entrance difficult and is arriving distressed. Quieter arrivals have been easier. Could we discuss support and agree who will review it with us?” Include dates and what helped. Ask the child how they would like their experience shared, using communication that suits them.

When school attendance is reduced

Part-time timetables for compulsory-school-age pupils should be exceptional, temporary and in the pupil's best interests. Ask for written reasons, education arrangements, support to return to suitable full-time education and a review date.

Keep a short evidence record that includes the child's strengths, successful adjustments and concerns. Bring three priorities to your next discussion.

Ask for a proposed end date and regular reviews of any part-time timetable. It should not be used to manage behaviour. If the child has an EHC plan, ask how the local authority is involved. Seek SENDIASS or IPSEA advice if suitable education or support is unclear.

Key terms

SENCO: Special educational needs co-ordinator. The member of staff who co-ordinates a school's special educational needs provision.

SENDIASS: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service. Free, impartial information, advice and support for children, young people and families.

EHCP: Education, Health and Care plan. A legal document setting out a child or young person's special educational needs and the support required.

Bring one clear record

Use a brief factual entry: date, education offered, effect on the child, support tried and what helped. Keep the child's words separate from your interpretation. At the discussion, ask who is responsible for each agreed action and when it will be reviewed. Seek individual independent guidance about rights and deadlines rather than relying on an example as legal advice.

A support plan in practice

An illustrative example, not a diagnosis or a prescription.

An eight-year-old becomes distressed at the busy school entrance and struggles to settle. Their parent notices that quieter arrivals are easier.

Assess

The teacher, special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), parent and child explore when difficulties arise, what the child experiences and what already helps. They consider communication, learning demands and the environment rather than assume unwillingness.

Plan

They agree a trial of a quieter arrival, a familiar adult and a clear sequence for the first part of the day. They record who will provide each part, the intended difference and a review date.

Do

Staff put the agreed support in place. The child and parent have an accessible way to say what is helping or still difficult.

Review

At the agreed review, they consider the child’s distress, participation and learning, alongside feedback from home and school. If little improves, they revisit the understanding and adjustments and consider further advice, rather than simply repeat the same plan.

Adjustments should fit the child. This example does not replace the school’s responsibilities or decide whether an EHC needs assessment is required.

A Professional Email You Can Adapt

Use this letter to start a conversation with a school, healthcare, social care or other service.

Subject: Request to discuss concerns and agree support

Dear [Name / Team],

I am writing about [brief description of the concern]. The main difficulties are [specific factual examples], which are affecting [wellbeing, education, health or daily life].

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss what support or assessment may be available, what can be put in place now and who will be responsible for the next steps.

Please let me know whether a meeting can be arranged and whether I may bring someone to support me. Could you also confirm the agreed actions and review arrangements in writing?

Thank you for your time.

Kind regards, [Your name]

Keep a copy and follow up on agreed actions. You can seek independent advice or advocacy support before writing or as the process develops. For SEND concerns, begin with SENDIASS or IPSEA (see page 56). This is an opening enquiry, not a formal EHC needs assessment request or appeal.

You do not need a perfect letter

Replace the brackets with one concern, one factual example and the discussion you are requesting. Read it once for accuracy, check the recipient and keep a copy. If the matter is urgent, explain the relevant date clearly. For a formal request, complaint or appeal, obtain guidance on the correct process rather than assuming this opening email covers it.

Preparing for a Professional Meeting

Before: gather records and prepare three priorities.

Support: ask whether a trusted person or advocate may attend.

During: clarify responsibilities, timescales and the views of the person affected.

After: confirm agreed actions and review dates in writing.

Questions about rights and next steps

Which policy or legal duty applies? What support or reasonable adjustments can be considered? If I disagree, what review, complaints or appeal route applies, and what is the deadline? Ask for the answer in writing and seek independent advice where needed.

Leave with an action you can identify

Prepare three questions: “What will happen? Who will do it? When will we review it?” Beside each answer, note anything still unclear. Afterwards, send a short factual summary and invite corrections. Put the agreed review date somewhere you will see it. If the action does not happen, refer to that agreement when following up.

EVOLVE



From thinking to doing

Within the next hour

Choose an area you want to develop: work, education, understanding, confidence or daily independence. Take one manageable step. You can begin by finding out what is possible.

When you doubt yourself

“I am not capable” need not be your final answer. Identify what you need to learn or what support would help. Practise one part, then choose when to return and review what helped.

A course or career

Ask about a school option, college course or apprenticeship. Check its requirements. Read an application and draft one answer. Explore a first job or a new career. Ask for guidance where you need it; an enquiry is already an action.

Ability and independence

Begin with movement or a daily task suited to your ability and any individual guidance. This may involve seated movement, an adapted task or assistance. Build gradually where appropriate. Asking for an adjustment can be your first step.

Understanding a support route

Understanding what a service can do helps you recognise what its response means.

Clarify the request

Information can explain options. Advice can help you consider your circumstances. A referral requests access to another service; an assessment may inform a decision. Neither a referral nor an initial conversation guarantees eligibility or support.

A route in practice

Suppose a course interests you, but travel costs make attendance difficult. In England, eligible learners aged 19 or over who face financial hardship and study at level 3 or below may receive Learner Support towards attendance costs. You apply through the learning provider. Ask the college which scheme applies, what costs it covers, what evidence is needed and when you should expect a decision. Course fees and attendance costs may involve different support.

Before committing, establish whether any help is confirmed and what you would still have to pay. The result might be an affordable route, an application awaiting evidence, or a need to consider another course or timetable.

If the answer is no, or not yet

Ask whether the reason is eligibility, missing information, a waiting list or the limits of the service. Clarify whether anything can be reconsidered, what alternative support exists and which review or complaints route applies, if any. An independent adviser may help you understand a decision, but access and review rights differ between services.

Check where the enquiry has reached

Ask, “Has the referral been sent or only discussed? Who receives it? How will I know what happens next?” Keep the reply and any reference number together. If the answer is no, ask what the reason means and whether another route is appropriate. An enquiry, referral and confirmed offer are different stages.

Understanding a support route

Support for an adult who cares for someone

In England, an adult providing unpaid care for another adult can ask the council's adult social services for a carer's assessment. A parent caring for a disabled child should ask children's services about a parent carer's needs assessment. Explain how caring affects health, work, relationships and everyday life, and ask what happens after the assessment. This considers the carer's own needs; it does not guarantee a particular service or payment. The assessment itself is free. Ask which support may be available, whether any services offered would involve a charge and how a decision can be reviewed.

Explain the effect of caring

Before an enquiry, choose two ordinary examples: "Appointments mean I miss work" or "I have little opportunity for uninterrupted rest." Describe what support would make a difference without assuming a particular service will be offered. Ask what information is needed, how the process works and when you should hear back.

Finding support for a child

Different needs, different routes

Learning, communication, attention, development and emotional wellbeing needs can overlap, but routes to support vary. Children's mental health services are often called CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). Neurodevelopmental assessment or speech and language support may use a different local route. A GP, health visitor, school or nursery can help identify the relevant service. Ask what it offers and whether you or a professional can refer.

What a referral means

The receiving service considers the information against its remit and access criteria. It may offer an initial appointment, request further information, suggest another route or explain that it cannot accept the referral. A referral does not guarantee assessment, diagnosis or treatment.

Ask how you will hear back and what support can be offered while you wait. Support at school can be considered alongside health enquiries; a health referral does not replace educational support. Ask how your child's views and consent will be considered.

If the route does not work

Ask why a referral was not accepted and what alternative is suitable. Seek advice from the referrer or service about reconsideration where appropriate. If your child's needs change or you become more concerned, contact a relevant professional again. Use the urgent-support information if immediate help is needed.

Prepare one example from daily life

Instead of only saying, "My child is struggling," describe a situation, its effect and anything that helped. Ask which route fits the concern and what support can be considered while you wait. Record the contact date and the response you were told to expect. Contact an appropriate professional again if needs or concerns change.

Counselling Options

Different circumstances call for different kinds of support. You can explore the approach that suits your needs and values.

Individual counselling

A private space to explore feelings, experiences and challenges.

Christian counselling

May bring Christian faith and psychological approaches together, according to the person's beliefs and preferences.

Couples counselling

Helps partners explore communication, conflict and connection.

Family counselling

Supports family members with relationships and transitions.

Bereavement counselling

Offers support following a death or other significant loss.

Choosing safely

Check the practitioner's training, professional registration, confidentiality, accessibility and any costs.

Faith-based guidance need not replace appropriate clinical care.

Where there is coercion, intimidation or abuse, joint couples counselling may be unsafe; seek individual specialist advice.

Ask a question before choosing

An opening enquiry could be: “I would like support with this concern. What approach do you offer, what would the first appointment involve and what would it cost?” Ask about accessibility, confidentiality and professional registration. If faith matters to you, ask how your beliefs would be respected without assuming every practitioner works in the same way. Community grief-support options are listed separately on page 56.

Counselling and Finding Further Support

Seeking help can be part of caring for yourself or someone else. A GP can discuss physical and mental health concerns and suitable referral routes. In England, NHS Talking Therapies offers support for eligible adults with common mental health difficulties, often through self-referral.

Before choosing a service

Check the service's purpose, eligibility and location.

Ask about confidentiality, qualifications, costs and waiting times.

Consider accessibility, language and cultural needs.

For immediate danger, call 999. For urgent mental health help in England, NHS 111 can direct you to appropriate support.

Approach others with sensitivity, compassion and discretion. Listen without judgement, respect privacy and offer information without pressuring someone to act.

Make room for your preferences

If a service appears suitable, ask whether appointments can fit your caring responsibilities and whether your language, cultural or access needs can be accommodated. Write down the reply and choose the next appropriate step. You can enquire without committing immediately; use the urgent-support route when waiting would be unsafe.

Urgent help and emotional support

999 | Immediate danger or emergency

Call 999 or go to A&E if someone's life is at risk or you cannot keep yourself or someone else safe.

NHS 111 | Urgent mental health help in England

Call 111 and select the mental health option. NHS 111 can direct you to the right help. nhs.uk

Samaritans | 116 123

Free emotional support, day or night, 365 days a year. You can talk about what is troubling you.
samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/

Different services, different purposes

Samaritans offers emotional support. It is separate from the emergency response provided through 999. Time to Exhale does not provide emergency or crisis services.

Support directory

Use these contacts to ask about support that fits your needs. Check current services, eligibility and access arrangements directly.

Children, families and carers

Childline: 0800 1111 | childline.org.uk. Counselling and support for under-19s.

NSPCC: 0808 800 5000 | nspcc.org.uk. Advice for adults concerned about a child.

Coram Family Lives: coramfamilylives.org.uk. Parenting and family support.

Contact: contact.org.uk. Information and advice for families with disabled children.

Carers UK: carersuk.org. Information and support for unpaid carers.

Bereavement and loss

Cruse Bereavement Support: cruse.org.uk. Bereavement information and support.

The Good Grief Trust: thegoodgrieftrust.org. Routes to bereavement support.

Gracefully Prepared (Manchester)

Community bereavement support, including a guided grief group for adults aged 18+. The published group listing describes a non-clinical space for conversation, reflection and optional sharing, rather than therapy or crisis support. Ask about current sessions, booking, accessibility and any costs. gracefullyprepared.co.uk | 07732 513111 | info@gracefullyprepared.co.uk.

SEND and education in England

IPSEA: ipsea.org.uk. SEND education law information and advice.

SENDIASS: find your local independent information, advice and support service through your council's SEND Local Offer.

Choose the service by the concern

Begin with what you need help understanding: a child's needs, caring, bereavement or education. Choose a relevant entry and check its current contact route. You might ask, "Is this something your service advises on, and what information should I prepare?" If it is outside its remit, ask where else you could enquire.

Further Support and Local Organisations

Confidential advice and support

Support can be sought without having to define yourself by what has happened. You may contact a suitable confidential advice service to understand your options. If a service's remit does not match your needs, ask where else you may be directed.

Citizens Advice: citizensadvice.org.uk (money, housing, rights and other concerns)

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 | nationaldahelpline.org.uk. Free, 24-hour specialist support for women experiencing domestic abuse; concerned others can also seek guidance.

Manchester and Greater Manchester

Caribbean & African Health Network (CAHN): cahn.org.uk (health education, community wellbeing and support)

Manchester Mind: manchestermind.org (mental health information and services; eligibility varies)

Gaddum: gaddum.org.uk (carers, wellbeing and other support)

42nd Street: 42ndstreet.org.uk (young people's mental health and wellbeing)

CARISMA Services: carisma.me.uk. Manchester community programmes including peacebuilding, hate crime awareness, community leadership and inclusive wellbeing. Ask about current sessions and eligibility.

You can begin with a question

A first enquiry does not require you to explain your whole life. Name the concern and ask what the service offers, how privacy is handled and whether you meet its access criteria. Where monitoring or abuse is a concern, use a safer contact route and follow specialist guidance about sharing information.

Housing, complaints and further support

Shelter (England)

Housing rights, eviction, homelessness and problems with landlords.
england.shelter.org.uk

Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman

Complaints about councils and certain social care and education matters.
lgo.org.uk

Housing Ombudsman

Unresolved complaints about social landlords covered by its scheme.
housing-ombudsman.org.uk

Public Service Ombudsman

Formerly the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. Complaints about NHS services in England and UK government bodies.
ombudsman.org.uk

Financial Ombudsman Service

Complaints about banks, insurers and other financial services.
financial-ombudsman.org.uk

Usually, complain to the organisation first and follow its complaints process. Ombudsman services have different rules, timescales and jurisdictions. Check the relevant service before applying.

Put the complaint in order

Keep the organisation’s response, the dates you contacted it and the outcome you are asking for together. Before approaching an ombudsman, check the relevant service’s own rules and time limits. You can ask an independent adviser to help you understand which route applies. Do not wait on a general enquiry if a formal deadline needs attention.

Parenting Courses and Family Support

Practical guidance for parents and carers at different stages

Riding the Rapids

A group programme for parents/carers of children with additional needs, including autism or learning disabilities. It explores understanding behaviour, communication, emotional responses and family strategies. Ask your local NHS children's service about access and eligibility.

Solihull Approach and Triple P

Parenting programmes that explore children's emotional development, relationships, communication, routines and positive approaches to boundaries. Teen-focused versions may be available. Ask a Family Hub, school or local parenting service what is currently offered.

Youth Justice Service and family support

Where a young person is involved with youth justice services, parents may be offered family work, parenting interventions or referrals to appropriate courses. The programme name and availability vary by area.

CAMHS, Family Hubs and SEND networks

CAMHS provides specialist child and adolescent mental health support where appropriate. Family Hubs may offer parent-and-baby sessions, stay-and-play, parenting advice and referrals. SEND parent networks can provide shared experience, information and community connection.

Ask for the part you want help with

You might say, “I would like support with calmer morning routines” or “I want to understand communication that suits my teenager.” Ask which current programme addresses that concern and whether it fits your child’s age and needs. A course title alone may not tell you whether it is useful for your family.

How to Access Parenting Support

You do not always need to wait for a crisis or a formal diagnosis before asking what support is available. Courses, referral arrangements and eligibility differ by local authority and provider.

Where to begin

Ask your child's school SENCO, family hub, health visitor, GP, CAMHS team, Early Help practitioner or social worker about suitable local courses. A youth justice worker may also know about parenting and family programmes. Ask whether you can refer yourself.

Togetherness / Solihull Approach

These programmes can be accessed beyond Solihull. Courses may be available online or through local family services. Search your own council's family hub or parenting pages for a registration link and any locally funded access code.

Early Help and other courses

Contact your local council's Early Help or family hub service and explain what you would like support with. Ask about Triple P, family support workers, parenting groups and teenage parenting courses, plus any waiting lists, fees or eligibility conditions.

Before joining, ask about the age range, SEND accessibility, session format, childcare, travel and whether the course is online or face to face.

Explore togetherness.co.uk and triplep-parenting.uk.net, then check local funded access and eligibility.

Send one short enquiry

Try: "I am looking for parenting support for a child aged [age]. Our main difficulty is [brief description]. What is available, can I refer myself, and what are the costs and access arrangements?" Before joining, check the practical details that could prevent attendance, including caring responsibilities or travel.

Community Spaces and Positive Activities

Examples in Manchester and Trafford; contact providers before attending

Trinity House Community Resource Centre

A community setting with early-years activities such as a Toy Hub, stay-and-play and nursery provision. Junior and senior youth activities may include crafts, games, cooking and social time with peers. trinityhousecrc.org.uk

OT Creative Space, Old Trafford

An arts and community environment for workshops, creative expression and collaborative projects. Check each programme for ages and access. otcreativespace.co.uk

Powerhouse Youth Centre, Moss Side

A youth-focused community setting with opportunities that may include sport, music, dance, games, creative activities and learning. A place to build interests, confidence and connections outside school. msmpowerhouse.org.uk

Gorton Central and local community hubs

Social, wellbeing and learning activities are offered at Gorton Central. hmhc.co.uk Some sessions are for adults rather than children, so check before visiting.

Make a first visit easier to picture

Ask what happens during a typical session, whether you need to book and whether someone can explain the arrival arrangements. If it helps, visit the outside first or attend with a trusted person where permitted. After trying a session, consider whether you felt welcome and whether the activity suited your interests and needs.

Windrush Millennium Centre

Windrush Millennium Centre, Alexandra Road, Manchester, is home to the Moss Side and Hulme Community Development Trust and other community organisations.

Community connection, learning and support

Ask the Trust what health and wellbeing activities, group sessions, learning opportunities or practical support are currently offered, and which provider runs each service. Not all activities are for children, and community programmes are not automatically clinical mental health services.

Moss Side and Hulme Community Development Trust: mshcdt.co.uk | 0161 636 7500. Windrush Millennium Centre, 70 Alexandra Road, Manchester M16 7WD.

For Golden Centre of Opportunities activities, ask the Centre to confirm the current provider, programme and contact details before attending.

Before attending a group or club

Ask about the age range, costs, registration, staff supervision, accessibility and SEND adjustments, and whether a parent stays. Community activities can support wellbeing and belonging, but are not a substitute for clinical care when that is needed.

Resource information checked 15 November 2026. Services and access arrangements can change; confirm details directly before relying on them.

Check the actual activity

Ask who runs the session, who it is for, when it meets and whether it is currently taking new participants. If you are enquiring for a child, check supervision and whether you remain with them. Save the confirmed details rather than relying on an old poster or a forwarded message.

My overall check-in

Use for yourself or when supporting someone else. Tick an area, then choose one next step. Leave anything that does not apply.

Date: _____

☐ For myself ☐ With my child ☐ Supporting someone

Where would some attention help?

☐ Wellbeing, rest and energy (8–15)
☐ Kindness to myself and others
☐ Grief and loss (18–19)
☐ Relationships (21–26)
☐ Money and budgeting (32–33)
☐ Parenting and caring (35–43, 51)
☐ School and SEND support (44–48)
☐ Learning and interests (27, 29–31, 49)

What have I noticed?

What is helping or already working?

What is one practical next step?

Who could help, and what do I need to ask?

When will I check back? _____

When supporting a child, include their own words where possible. Keep personal notes private.

This is a reflection page, not a diagnostic checklist. Do not wait to complete it if urgent help is needed; see page 55.

Ten Reminders for Living and Growing

Recognise when your wellbeing needs attention.

Give yourself permission to rest and recover.

Value your feelings without letting every feeling decide your response.

Practise changing a pattern one manageable step at a time.

Keep room for enjoyment, learning and purpose.

Nurture relationships through mutual care and respect.

Communicate boundaries with clarity and kindness.

Let children and those in your care feel loved, valued and included.

Ask for support when you need it and share helpful information thoughtfully.

Remember that progress does not require perfection.

Closing Reflection

Return to your check-in and choose what needs attention now. Keep what is helping, change what is not working and ask for support where you need it.

Pause. Breathe. Reflect. Become.

What others go through, you may never know. So spread a little kindness wherever you may go.

BE KIND

Give development a direction

Choose something you want to understand, do or manage with greater confidence. It could be applying for work, studying, communicating a boundary or carrying out a daily task. Name the next action: ask a question, draft an answer, practise one part or request an adjustment. Choose when to return and what support you need. Your present circumstances need not decide every future possibility.

The Work Within

There is a work that few will ever see,
Beyond the strength the world believes is in me,
Where thoughts are questioned, feelings understood
And quiet truths within ourselves we try to make good.
For every thought that enters through the mind
Need not be given residence or room inside,
Nor every feeling rising in the heart
Be granted power over the good we do in part.
I learned that courage had another face,
Not only standing firm through troubled days,
But looking inward with an honest heart
And recognising where change had to start.
What purpose does this thought fulfil?
What good comes from dwelling on it still?
Will entertaining what I cannot change
Bring understanding or keep my thoughts in chains?
The heart was never meant to cease its feeling,
Nor strength be measured by the tears we hide.
There is a wisdom found in understanding
What we must face and what we must release inside.
I had to choose the reasons to be thankful,
To see the blessings still before my eyes,
For while there's breath within this body,
There are reasons to let my praises rise.
And growth is not the absence of emotion,
Nor reaching heights where nothing leaves a scar.
It is the grace to keep becoming wiser
Without forgetting who and Whose we are.

SMILE. YOU CAN MAKE IT.

Credits and contact

Beyond the Pages: A Practical Guide to Evolving
A companion to The Strings of Me: Evolving.

Photography

Photographs by Alex Green, Leyla Qəhrəmanova, Arina Krasnikova, Ksenia Chernaya, RDNE Stock project and Zen Chung, via Pexels. Additional photographs: Monstera Production (page 34) and Vitaly Gariev (page 40). Used under the Pexels licence. No endorsement by the photographers or people pictured is implied.

Artwork

Original woman-and-brain artwork supplied by the author. Cover artwork, the colour treatment of the woman-and-brain illustration and retained floral detail were developed with AI assistance.

The financial planning (page 32), mother with four daughters (page 35), family game (page 38), and mother-and-daughter (page 39) illustrations were created with AI assistance. These fictional people do not depict the author or her children.

Time to Exhale

For enquiries: timetoexhale.info@gmail.com

Time to Exhale is an independent creative wellbeing and personal development initiative.

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