

LEAVING TO LIVE

A PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL
GUIDE FOR EX-MUSLIMS



DR SAVIN BAPIR-TARDY

Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) was formed in June 2007 in order to break the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam. The main aims of the organisation are to provide support to and highlight the plight of ex-Muslims, challenge Sharia and apostasy and blasphemy laws and take a stand for reason, universal rights and secularism.

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Leaving to Live: A Psychoeducational Guide for Ex-Muslims

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Educational and Professional Disclaimer

This book is a psychoeducational resource. It is intended to provide general information and support reflection. It is not a substitute for individual medical, psychological, psychiatric, legal, safeguarding or emergency advice. It does not provide diagnosis or treatment and cannot assess an individual reader's circumstances or level of risk.

Readers should use the exercises, reflections and suggestions according to their individual circumstances and refer to the Important Safety Information before completing any exercise involving distress, privacy, disclosure or current risk.

Readers who are in immediate danger, unable to keep themselves safe or concerned about another person's immediate safety should contact the appropriate emergency, safeguarding or professional services where they live.

Examples and composite accounts in this book have been anonymised and, where necessary, combined or altered to protect confidentiality. They are intended to illustrate recurring experiences and themes and do not represent any single identifiable individual.

The inclusion of an organisation, service or resource does not necessarily imply endorsement of this book by that organisation, nor does inclusion constitute a guarantee regarding the availability, suitability or quality of a particular service.

Dedication

Maryam Namazie, you are the first person I want to thank on behalf of everyone in the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) support groups. For years, you have worked tirelessly to make it possible for ex-Muslims to speak openly, find one another, and know that they are not alone. Despite the many challenges you have faced, your courage, persistence, and refusal to stay silent have helped create spaces many people urgently need. People joining the support groups often say they had no idea such spaces existed. Your work helped make these support groups possible because you have consistently argued that people who leave an authoritarian Islamic environment deserve more than simply the freedom to leave. They deserve support, community, and a place where they can be fully themselves. Because of that work, being an ex-Muslim does not always have to remain something whispered, hidden or carried alone.

I want to thank all the CEMB members who have been part of the support groups over the years: those who joined from the beginning and are still with us, those who came for a period of time, and those whose journey with us is only just beginning. Thank you for trusting me, and for trusting one another, with some of the hardest and most personal parts of your lives. I know that for many of you, speaking about these experiences has not been easy. I also want to thank you for what you give back. Again and again, I have watched members offer understanding, kindness, humour, reassurance and practical support to someone else, often while carrying their own pain.

This book was written with you in mind. It is for those who have spoken, those who are not yet ready to speak, those who are still questioning, those who have left, those learning how to live more openly, and those still working out what leaving means for them.

This book is for you.

Scope and Terminology

In this book, the term **ex-Muslim** is used to describe people who have left Islam. However, it will also be relevant to those who are questioning Islam, considering leaving, or who have significantly distanced themselves from an authoritarian Islamic environment. In such environments, religious authority may be used to restrict personal autonomy, enforce obedience, or limit freedom of belief and expression.

The book focuses specifically on people who may have experienced coercive control, shame, surveillance, exclusion, shunning, threats, abuse, or other serious consequences for questioning, refusing to conform, or leaving.

It does not suggest that all Muslims or all Muslim families are harmful or controlling. Muslim experiences are diverse, and many people practise Islam without using religion to control or punish others.

This book focuses on the psychological, relational, and practical effects of living in an environment where a person was not, or is not, free to question, disagree, choose differently, or leave without serious consequences.

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Foreword

I have been a fellow traveller with the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) almost from its inception in 2007. I have attended and spoken at its conferences, bringing a feminist understanding to the importance of secularism. Over the many years of engagement with Southall Black Sisters (SBS), an organisation that works with minoritised women escaping domestic abuse, I have seen firsthand the havoc that religion has wreaked on women.

A key element of almost every conference has been the harrowing individual stories of men and women from around the world, whose decision to leave Islam has brought a cornucopia of consequences and emotions – fear, shame, loss of family, friends, community and status, employment prospects, shunning and hounding, imprisonment for apostasy, abuse, violence and even death. Usually, and unsurprisingly, the impact of non-conformity on women is worse. Almost every story ends with the relief of having found a community of ex-believers through CEMB, which dispelled the profound loneliness and unshakeable sense that each of them had embarked on this dangerous journey alone.

It is no wonder then that the people who attend these conferences are among the warmest and friendliest I have encountered. They come up and chat, to inquire about your own personal journey out of Islam, even if there isn't one as in my case. But there is no awkward standing around deciding who to approach and start a conversation with.

Economic and emotional dependence are two of the main threads that come together in a knot that ex-Muslims find hard to unpick. There can be no one better qualified than Dr Savin Bapir-Tardy, who runs support groups for CEMB survivors and is a qualified Counselling Psychologist, to help people untie this knot. Savin is now a fellow member of the SBS trust where her expertise and work in this area are deeply valued. She has written this self-help book for those trying to negotiate a path through the confusion, trauma and loneliness of such a momentous decision.

This book represents the distillation of her experience and wisdom, a guide for people on the journey of discovering their true selves, the values they want to discard and those they want to keep. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. It's a rebirth in need of a midwife. Savin has set herself the task of helping them reframe their new identities, find an accommodation with their guilt and the confidence to survive without the familiar props that kept them anchored to their previous lives.

Savin is at pains not to provide fodder for racists by pathologising Islam or religious upbringing. Her aim is to identify situations in which coercion and control exist, preventing people from questioning and living as their authentic selves. She is keen to dispel ideas of victimhood. Of course, without agency ex-Muslims could not have made such a momentous decision, but she highlights their resilience, their humour, their creativity, their ability to pick up the pieces and begin new lives and forge new relationships.

Apart from the difficulty of leaving family and community, there is also institutional betrayal. Dismissal, avoidance and disbelief are some of the responses that ex-Muslims might encounter, leaving them feeling that their suffering has been minimised - a double rejection. Teachers, social workers and therapists are often confused by ex-Muslims, having internalised the idea that embracing Islam is the broad-minded, liberal and

anti-racist approach to take. Ex-Muslims may fear that exposing their critique of Islam to wider society may encourage hostility to Muslims. Conversely, some may go to the other extreme, finding affirmation in groups that hate Muslims and conflate the religion with its followers. Savin warns that this may impede a healthy recovery.

The book is full of insights: it draws attention to the system that has failed ex-Muslims because ‘healing begins with understanding that these losses are not personal failures’; reassures ex-Muslims that ‘you are not defined by the trauma you carry. You are defined by the courage it takes to step beyond it’; and emphasises that recovery is less about erasing the past and more about choosing a new self.

There are also practical tips on how to assess your risks and opportunities and think through all the options – particularly useful if you’re on the brink of making a panic-inducing life decision when many thoughts crowd in and no clear path appears. The exercises force you to stop acting on impulse. Exercises include how to assess present-day risks, and how to build a stronger foundation for recovery; learning how to tell the difference between anxiety and danger; what steps to take before telling your family about your decision to leave Islam; how to identify people who will support you through the journey; and knowing when to use professional help.

An invaluable companion to consult at every stage of the journey!

Rahila Gupta, July 2026

Important Safety Information

You do not need to complete every exercise or read the book in a particular order. Use only the sections that feel relevant and safe enough for your circumstances.

Stop an exercise if it:

- ☐ significantly increases your fear or distress;
- ☐ causes panic, dissociation, numbness, or detachment;
- ☐ leaves you feeling less connected to the present;
- ☐ places your privacy at risk;
- ☐ encourages you to overlook genuine danger; or
- ☐ could allow someone else to discover sensitive information.

You may return to an exercise later, adapt it, or complete it with someone you trust. Grounding, breathing, relaxation, and mindfulness exercises cannot make an unsafe situation safe. They may help you manage reactions connected to earlier experiences, but they do not replace practical safeguarding when there is an ongoing risk.

If closing your eyes, focusing on your breathing, or directing your attention inward makes you feel more anxious or disconnected, stop. Keep your eyes open, focus on your surroundings, move your body, or contact someone you trust.

Do not write down, copy, move, photograph, or store plans, documents, contact details, or evidence if doing so could reveal your preparations or increase your risk. Your safety comes before completing an exercise, disclosing your beliefs, or making progress in a particular way.

 Important safety warning	
Urgent	If you are experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, feel unable to keep yourself safe, or believe that you or someone else is in immediate danger, seek urgent professional assistance.
NHS 111	In the United Kingdom, you can contact NHS 111 for urgent mental-health support.
Emergency	If there is an immediate danger to life, call 999 or attend the nearest Accident and Emergency department.
Samaritans	Samaritans can be contacted free of charge on 116 123.
Outside the UK	If you live outside the United Kingdom, contact the emergency or crisis services available where you live.

Introduction

This book is mainly for ex-Muslims who have lived, or still live, in high-control religious environments. In my clinical work and research, I have found that many of these settings rely on similar forms of coercive control, such as fear, shame, surveillance, punishment, isolation, and conditional belonging. Although the beliefs and doctrines used to justify these practices differ from one group to another, their effects are remarkably similar: they restrict personal freedom, encourage conformity, and help those in power maintain control.

When these patterns are interpreted as religious or cultural practices, mental-health professionals, the police, safeguarding practitioners and other professionals may fail to recognise them as forms of coercive control and abuse. This can make it easier for other forms of abuse that are more widely recognised, including child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, and financial abuse, to remain hidden or unchallenged. It may also lead to professionals misunderstanding or minimising a person's fears, particularly when those fears are based on genuine risks rather than anxiety alone.

For some ex-Muslims living in authoritarian contexts where Islamic norms are enforced through state, family, or community power, questioning religion or being identified as an apostate may expose them to severe consequences, including violence and death. The nature and level of risk can vary considerably according to factors such as family circumstances, community, country, sex, sexuality, financial dependence, immigration status, and access to support. These risks must therefore be assessed carefully rather than automatically assumed, minimised, or dismissed.

This book addresses some painful realities that ex-Muslims may face, but these experiences are only part of the story. In the CEMB support groups, I have witnessed individuals who are resilient, intelligent, humorous, creative, and courageous. Many have faced rejection, coercion, uncertainty, and significant distress, yet have continued to raise children, build careers, form meaningful relationships, and create lives that reflect their own values. Some have gone even further by joining support groups to encourage those still finding their way. Their experiences also show that life after leaving can involve growth, possibility and new beginnings, rather than survival alone.

Who this book is for

This book is for people who have left Islam, are questioning Islam, are considering leaving, are in the process of leaving, or are rebuilding their lives after leaving. You may have stopped believing recently, or you may have left many years ago and still notice that certain fears, rules, or emotional reactions remain.

The focus of this book is not Islam as a whole. The book focuses on authoritarian Islamic environments where religious authority is used to control how people think, behave, form relationships, express themselves, and make decisions about their lives. This control may come through family expectations, community pressure, state laws, shame, surveillance, financial dependence, threats, punishment, or violence. Over time, it can also become internalised, so that a person begins policing their own thoughts and feelings because doubt, disagreement, anger, or desire have been framed as sinful, dangerous, or disloyal.

The central question is not what someone believes, but whether they are free to question, disagree, or leave without facing serious consequences. This book focuses on the psychological, emotional, relational, and practical effects that coercive control can have in authoritarian Islamic contexts.

You do not need to describe yourself as an ex-Muslim to use this book. You may feel uncertain about the label, prefer to keep your beliefs private, or continue to value parts of the culture and community in which you were raised. You may miss aspects of religious life while also recognising the harm you experienced. These feelings can exist alongside one another. Some readers will have left openly. Others may continue to present themselves as Muslim because disclosure could threaten their housing, finances, immigration status, relationships, physical safety, or access to their children. This book does not treat public disclosure as necessary for recovery. Keeping your beliefs private may be a thoughtful and protective decision.

The material may resonate if religion influenced your family relationships, gender roles, sex, sexuality, clothing, friendships, marriage, moral decisions, daily routines, or sense of belonging. You may have experienced pressure through shame, family “honour”, surveillance, exclusion, or shunning. You may also have learned to hide important parts of yourself to preserve relationships, avoid conflict, or remain safe.

There is no single ex-Muslim experience because each person’s journey is shaped by their circumstances. Some people leave with the continued love and support of their families, while others face rejection, hostility, or profound loss. Some feel immediate relief; others experience grief, guilt, fear, anger, loneliness, or confusion. Many experience several of these reactions at once. This book recognises those differences without assuming that every Muslim family, community, or religious environment responds in the same way.

Although written primarily for ex-Muslims and people questioning Islam, the book may also help partners, friends, support workers, and mental-health professionals understand the wide-ranging psychological, relational, and practical effects that leaving can have.

How this Book Was Developed

This book has been shaped by recurring themes that have emerged in Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) support groups, together with my clinical work, psychological research, trauma-informed practice, and established therapeutic approaches. The examples used throughout have been anonymised and, where necessary, combined into composite accounts to protect confidentiality. They are not intended to portray any particular individual. Instead, they draw together experiences and themes that have surfaced across many different conversations.

Since 2020, I have facilitated more than 100 support group sessions. The questions, concerns, and experiences shared in those spaces have played an important role in shaping this book. My hope is to address some of the needs that participants have expressed and to make relevant psychological insights more accessible to those navigating similar challenges.

It is reasonable to question whether the experiences described in the book might focus mainly on distress, as those experiencing difficulties are more likely to seek help. While this is partly true, it does not tell the whole story. Individuals who attend the CEMB support groups are at different stages of their journeys. Some are in crisis, while others left an authoritarian Islamic environment years ago and now offer support, perspective, and hope to others. What many participants share is not only distress, but also a sense of isolation and a need for a space where they feel understood. Across the support groups, a recurring theme is the relief of discovering that they are not alone and that there is somewhere they belong.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that not everyone requiring support has the ability to access it. Some people cannot attend groups due to surveillance, restrictions, lack of awareness, or distrust of services. Their experiences may therefore be missing. In addition, the process of identifying themes and selecting examples involves interpretation, which can sometimes highlight harm more than resilience or everyday experiences. For these reasons, the accounts in this book should be understood as examples of recurring patterns, particularly around coercion, shunning, and risk, rather than as a measure of how common these experiences are.

Not all sources used in this book carry the same level of evidence. Some ideas are strongly supported by research, while others are clinical frameworks that can help people make sense of their experiences but are still debated or not formally recognised in mainstream mental health settings. Where this matters, I have tried to make it clear.

There is currently limited research specifically focused on the psychological experiences of ex-Muslims. Because of this, the book also draws on broader research in areas such as trauma, attachment, identity, coercive control, emotional regulation, grief, religious trauma, and recovery from high-control environments.

A note about this book

This book is not a clinical manual. It is a self-guided, psychoeducational resource designed to help you better understand your experiences, reflect on them, and explore possible ways forward.

How the book is organised

The book is divided into two parts.

Part One: Understanding What Happened

Part One explores the psychological and social effects of leaving Islam within a high-control religious environment. It looks at imposed identity, fear, shame, coercive control, family rejection, concealment, social loss, and the ways people may learn to distrust their own thoughts, feelings, and needs.

Part Two: Rebuilding Safety, Trust, and Choice

Part Two focuses on the practical process of rebuilding safety, trust and choice. It explores safety, persistent fear, bodily responses, internalised rules, self-trust, boundaries, identity, grief, loneliness, meaning, and the gradual process of building a life shaped less by fear and more by personal choice.

Throughout the book, you will find psychological explanations, reflective questions, practical exercises, and worksheets. Some may feel immediately relevant, while others may not suit your circumstances or may become useful later. You do not need to complete every exercise or read the book in a particular order. Take what is helpful, leave what is not, and stop if an exercise makes you feel overwhelmed or less safe.

No single book can reflect the full range of lives, cultures, families, beliefs, and consequences involved in leaving Islam. Many experiences and challenges fall beyond the scope of this book. My aim is to offer a framework for understanding, language for experiences that often remain unnamed, and practical tools that may support reflection and recovery.

Part One: Understanding What Happened

Chapter 1: When Religion, Family and Identity Become One

In an authoritarian Islamic context, religion can extend far beyond a system of beliefs. It may influence how a person dresses and speaks, the relationships they are permitted to form, the roles they are expected to fulfil, and what they learn to regard as acceptable thoughts, emotions and desires. Religious identity may also be closely connected to belonging, gender roles, family expectations, community membership and a person's wider understanding of who they are.

When these parts of life develop together, questioning religion can feel as though many foundations are shifting at once. A change in belief may raise questions about family loyalty, culture, morality, relationships, the future and the person one has been expected to become. This is one reason leaving may feel much larger than an intellectual decision about whether a religious claim is true.

Childhood and adolescence are important periods for exploring ideas, developing preferences and gradually becoming more independent. Research on identity development distinguishes between commitments formed through meaningful exploration and those adopted when exploration has been restricted (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966).

Some ex-Muslims in the CEMB support groups recall that questions about religion were met with shame, anger, fear or punishment. Others describe being taught that doubt itself was sinful or dangerous. In such an environment, curiosity may not feel like a normal part of development. It may feel like a threat to safety, love or belonging.

There may also be little room to explore parts of identity that do not conform to religious or community expectations. This can include sexuality, relationships, education, occupation, clothing, friendships, gender roles and the people with whom one is allowed to associate. Some people become aware of their own preferences but learn that expressing them is unsafe. Others have had so little opportunity to choose that they reach adulthood unsure what they want.

The protective self

It may be tempting to divide your past into what was “real” and what was “false”. Human identity is rarely that simple. Some parts of your religious or cultural identity may have been sincerely valued. Other parts may have been accepted before you had any meaningful opportunity to examine them. Still others may have developed because they helped you remain safe, loved or included. These different strands can exist together. The aim is not to declare your whole former self false, but to begin noticing how each part came to be there.

Psychotherapist Gillie Jenkinson uses the term “pseudo-identity” to describe an identity organised around what a person believes they must, should or ought to be. She describes this identity as layering over, or intertwining with, the person's developing sense of self.

Throughout this book, I use the term *protective self* rather than *pseudo-identity* because I do not want to imply that a person's former religious or cultural identity was necessarily false or inauthentic. Many people held sincere beliefs, found comfort in their faith, and may still value important aspects of their religious or cultural background. The term *protective self* emphasises the ways people learn to adapt when acceptance, belonging, or safety feel uncertain.

The *protective self* is simply the part that learned how to survive. It may have learned to stay quiet, avoid certain questions, hide parts of itself, or present a version of itself that felt safer and more acceptable to others. These responses were often ways of coping with the world around them.

A child who learns not to ask questions may be protecting a relationship. A young person who dresses, prays or speaks in the expected way may be preventing conflict. Someone who appears more religious than they privately feel may be protecting housing, education, family connection or physical safety. These adaptations can be costly, but they should not automatically be understood as deceitfulness.

The house you inherited

Imagine that your identity is a house you have lived in since childhood. Some rooms hold parts of your history that still feel warm and familiar. Others were shaped by rules about who you were expected to be. Some doors may have stayed closed because what lay behind them — your questions, anger, sexuality, ambitions or relationships — did not feel safe to reveal.

Leaving religion does not mean burning the house down. It means gradually deciding what still feels like home, what you want to change and what can remain undecided.

You do not have to renovate the whole house at once.

Original metaphor informed by experiential metaphor in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Stoddard and Afari, 2014).

When the watcher moves inside

Some ex-Muslims describe growing up with a persistent sense of inner watchfulness. They learned to check their words, questions, emotions and private reactions before expressing them. Control in these contexts does not operate only through explicit rules. It may also be enforced through shame, disapproval, exclusion, threats or punishment.

Over time, the person may begin to regulate themselves before anyone else has to intervene. They may stop asking a question before asking it, feel ashamed of an emotion before showing it, or reject a desire before considering whether it is actually harmful. Academic literature on spiritual abuse similarly describes how religious authority may continue to affect autonomy, emotional expression and confidence in one's judgement after a person has left a high-control environment (Ward, 2011; Oakley & Kinmond, 2014; Oakley et al., 2018; Ellis, Hook, Zuniga, Hodge, et al., 2022; Koch & Edstrom, 2022; Streib et al., 2009; Jenkinson, 2023). This helps explain why changing one's beliefs does

not always create an immediate feeling of freedom. The external rule may have lost its authority, while the learned habit of monitoring remains.

The space between identities

Moving away from Islam may mean stepping away from a framework that once provided answers about morality, relationships, family duties, sex, sexuality, purpose, death, belonging and the future. It may also mean losing a familiar role, daily routines and a recognised place within a community.

Research on role exit and religious deconversion describes a transitional period in which a former identity has weakened or been relinquished while another is still taking shape (Streib et al., 2009). Some ex-Muslims in the support groups describe this as an emotional void or an existential free fall. Others experience relief, curiosity or a new sense of possibility. These reactions can exist together. A person may feel liberated by the loss of a rule and frightened by the responsibility of choosing what comes next.

Sadness, emptiness, numbness or uncertainty during this period should not automatically be treated as evidence of a mental health disorder. They may reflect grief, adjustment, social isolation, fear, the loss of a central role or the demanding work of developing a more self-directed identity.

Healing does not necessarily mean uncovering a complete and unchanged “true self” that was hidden beneath religion. For some people, it includes rediscovering preferences or identities that had to be suppressed. For others, it means exploring questions they were never previously free to consider. Identity is also formed through new experiences, relationships, reflection and choice.

Some ex-Muslims become secular or atheist. Others retain cultural practices, ethical commitments, family traditions or forms of spirituality. Some use the label ex-Muslim; others do not. There is no single correct identity after leaving Islam.

Old fears or protective habits may return during conflict, illness, bereavement or other periods of vulnerability. Their return does not necessarily mean that a person wants to resume belief or that progress has failed. It may simply show how deeply a response was learned.

Small acts of autonomy

Against this background, apparently ordinary choices can carry considerable meaning. Expressing an opinion, noticing a preference, choosing how to dress, setting a boundary, pursuing particular work, forming a safe relationship or allowing oneself pleasure without immediate shame may each contribute to a more self-directed life.

These acts are not small because the history around them is not small. They represent moments in which the person is no longer responding only to what they were required to be. They are beginning to discover what they think, value and choose.

Chapter 2: Concealment, Fear and the Double Life

In CEMB support groups, one question comes up repeatedly: “Should I tell my family or close friends that I no longer believe, and if so, how?” I see how much this question weighs on many people’s minds. They may long to be known while fearing that disclosure could lead to rejection.

There is no universal answer. Disclosure is not automatically healthier, more honest or more courageous than living a double life. Before deciding what to say, it is important to consider the likely consequences, the people involved, and any material dependence on them. It is also important to consider whether the information could spread beyond the intended recipient and what that might mean for the person’s safety.

Why living a double life may be necessary

For some people, hiding disbelief is the only realistic way to remain safe or preserve support on which they still depend. Being found out can have far-reaching consequences beyond how others view their beliefs. Depending on the context, disclosure may lead to family rejection, loss of accommodation or financial support, forced or pressured marriage, increased surveillance, community exclusion, physical violence or threats to life. In some countries, openly leaving Islam may also carry legal consequences. Similar experiences have been documented in research on apostasy and ex-Muslim lives, although their nature and severity vary considerably across individuals, families, communities, and countries (Cottee, 2015; Ammar, 2024; Lee, 2024).

Age, disability, caring responsibilities, financial dependence and insecure immigration status may all reduce a person’s options. Women and LGBTQ+ people may face additional risks connected with so-called family “honour”, sexuality, marriage, and gendered expectations. They may be entirely clear about their position and still be unable to disclose it without placing their daily security at risk.

Living a double life involves more than keeping one fact private. It can require continuous management of speech, behaviour, clothing, social media, food, relationships and religious practice. Missing a prayer, eating during Ramadan, removing a hijab, expressing the wrong opinion or failing to respond correctly to a religious conversation may invite questions.

A person may rehearse explanations in advance, delete messages, hide books, maintain separate online accounts or plan what to say if someone enters the room. They may calculate who knows what, who speaks to whom and how quickly information could move through the family or community.

The checking often continues after the interaction has ended. You may replay an exchange and wonder whether you paused too long, sounded defensive or allowed your expression to change. Something small can occupy your thoughts for hours because you do not know whether it was noticed or what might happen next.

When exposure could carry serious consequences, alertness is not irrational. The mind and body learn to scan for danger: a change in someone's tone, a question about fasting, an unexpected look at a phone, a relative asking where you have been.

The difficulty is that a response developed for real danger can become difficult to switch off. Even in a safer place, the person may remain tense, easily startled or unable to relax. They may continue editing themselves around people who pose no real threat because the body has learned that being spontaneous is unsafe.

This does not mean that all vigilance should be challenged. Where danger remains, some monitoring may still be protective. Part of the process involves asking whether a fear is protecting you from a real threat today, or from a threat that belonged to an earlier part of your life.

Being misidentified as Muslim

Concealment may continue even outside the family. A person may be assumed to be Muslim because of their name, appearance, language, ethnicity or family background. Casual questions such as "Are you fasting?" or "Are you going to Eid prayers?" can create an unexpected decision: correct the assumption, offer a partial answer or allow the misunderstanding to continue.

These choices are often difficult, with no clear right or wrong answer. Correcting the assumption may require a personal disclosure the person did not choose. Remaining silent may feel uncomfortable but safer. Repeatedly being misidentified can also create alienation: the person may no longer feel at home in a Muslim community, while wider society continues to perceive them as Muslim. Whatever they choose, the choice should belong to them. Over time, having greater control over how, when and with whom they share their identity and being recognised by others on their own terms can help rebuild a sense of belonging that does not depend on fitting someone else's expectations.

Privacy is not dishonesty

People raised in highly controlling environments may have been taught that family members are entitled to access their phone, location, relationships, beliefs and future plans. As a result, keeping information private can provoke guilt even when no one has a legitimate right to it.

The locked door

Not every door in your life needs to be open to everyone.

Some people have earned access to your thoughts, beliefs and plans. Others may use that information to control, expose or harm you.

Keeping a door closed is not the same as having no self behind it. Sometimes privacy is simply the way you protect what is not yet safe to share.

You decide who receives a key.

Original metaphor informed by personalised and experiential metaphor in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Stoddard and Afari, 2014).

Privacy is not the same as deception. Privacy lets a person decide what to share, with whom, for what purpose, and when. When disclosure may increase danger or dependency, strategic privacy can express judgement rather than a failure of authenticity.

Concealment may protect you and exhaust you at the same time. Both can be true. Understanding why you hide does not mean hiding is effortless or painless. Instead, it lets you see hiding as a natural survival response rather than a personal failure.

What to take from this chapter

Disclosure should be considered in relation to safety, dependence and likely consequences.

Concealment may reflect clear judgement rather than uncertainty about belief.

A double life requires continuous practical and emotional labour.

Hypervigilance can be both protective and exhausting.

Privacy is a legitimate boundary, not automatically a form of dishonesty.

Chapter 3: Conditional Love, Shunning and Social Loss

When belonging depends on obedience

Apostasy, or leaving a religion, falls within the internationally recognised right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change, adopt or reject a religion or belief. In practice, however, leaving Islam can be difficult and, in some contexts, life-threatening.

In several Muslim-majority countries, Islamic penal law, including hudud provisions, has been incorporated into state legal systems, with apostasy or blasphemy carrying the death penalty in some jurisdictions. Elsewhere, apostates may face imprisonment, fines, flogging, restrictions on civil or family rights, or prosecution under blasphemy, public-order or other religious-protection laws. CEMB's (2017) report, *Political and Legal Status of Apostates in Islam*, also documents cases in which apostates, atheists, secularists and freethinkers have faced arrest, harassment, censorship and other forms of state persecution even where apostasy is not expressly codified as a criminal offence.

These legal and political consequences can be reinforced by social pressures, including family rejection, shunning, loss of housing or financial support, exclusion from community life, threats or violence. The consequences of apostasy can operate at several levels at once: through the state, religious authorities, family and community. CEMB has argued that where political Islam has power, apostasy laws function not only as religious sanctions but also as mechanisms for suppressing dissent and enforcing conformity.

These experiences are not representative of all Muslims or Muslim communities (Cottee, 2015; Kanol & Michalowski, 2022; Eller, 2024). Though state implementation of Sharia is associated with Islamist political projects and processes of Islamisation (Namazie et al., 2010), the influence of such authoritarian norms is not confined to the state. They can also be reinforced socially through families, communities and religious authorities.

Leaving Islam, therefore, may be experienced as more than a private change in belief. For some families, it can also be understood as a rejection of shared values, expectations, loyalty or identity. Qualitative studies of former Muslims describe experiences of stigma, family conflict, alienation and, in some cases, being seen as having offended or betrayed the family or the Ummah (Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019b; Lee, 2024).

For some people, these reactions have practical and emotional consequences. Disclosure may lead to pressure to return to the faith, condemnation, increased monitoring, threats, or withdrawal of support. Some therefore keep their beliefs private because they fear that disclosure can damage important relationships or lead to the loss of housing, financial support, or community ties. Such reactions may be stronger where leaving the religion is understood as challenging the group's shared identity or boundaries (Cottee, 2015; Shaik, 2022; Ahmad, 2022; Kanol & Michalowski, 2022).

Apostasy as social death

In CEMB support groups, some participants describe rejection as going far beyond disagreement over religion. It can feel as though they have been quietly removed from the life to which they once belonged. Relationships with parents, siblings or relatives may become strained or hostile. Invitations stop coming. Familiar community spaces no longer feel open to them. Even small signs of belonging—being consulted, included in family decisions, welcomed into a room, or simply treated as one of “us”—may begin to disappear. Qualitative research with former Muslims has documented comparable experiences of family conflict, estrangement and social exclusion (Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019b; Lee, 2024).

The idea of social death gives language to this experience. It is not a clinical diagnosis, but a way of describing what happens when someone remains physically present while their recognised place within important relationships or their community is withdrawn. Ransom, Monk and Heim (2022), writing about former Jehovah’s Witnesses, use the concept to describe ostracism and loss of social identity after religious exit. Although their study concerns a different religious group, the concept helps explain why rejection after leaving a closely connected faith can cut so deeply: what is being lost is not only belief, but recognition, relationships and a familiar social identity.

Social death does not always mean complete loss of contact. Sometimes relationships continue in a more conditional form. A person may still be physically present within the family while feeling that their former role, voice or sense of belonging has changed. They may feel accepted only if certain beliefs remain unspoken or particular expectations continue to be met. This can leave someone caught between preserving relationships that matter deeply and feeling that an important part of themselves cannot safely be known.

Where faith, family and community are tightly connected, leaving religion can therefore mean losing more than a belief system. For some, it also means losing a familiar place in the social world and having to work out where they belong now.

Social exclusion can also have material consequences. Where a person depends on family or community networks for housing, finances, education, immigration support, childcare or marriage arrangements, rejection may threaten the practical foundations of everyday life as well as emotional wellbeing (Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019a).

Shunning as coercive control

Research on family estrangement has examined relationship breakdown and the withdrawal of contact between parents and their children or adult children. Blake (2017) describes estrangement as an intentional decision by at least one family member to create or maintain distance, often after a long history of conflict, hurt, difficult relationships or clashing values. In some situations, that distance may be the only way a person can protect their wellbeing or create space from a relationship that has become damaging.

From the outside, it is easy to confuse estrangement with shunning because both involve withdrawal from a relationship. What separates shunning from ordinary estrangement is not simply the distance itself, but the purpose that distance begins to serve. People are entitled to step away from relationships; choosing not to remain in contact is not automatically coercive. The concern arises when silence becomes a form of pressure, when affection is made conditional, or when belonging is held just out of reach until the person agrees to return, conform or abandon a disapproved belief or way of life. In those circumstances, exclusion is no longer only the consequence of a relationship breaking down; it can become a way of trying to shape the person who has left (Ransom et al., 2021; Luther, 2023). To clarify, shunning does not simply carry the message, “I disagree with you.”

It can become something crueler: “You can still have a place with us, but only on our terms.” This can result in affection, recognition, family involvement and practical support no longer being freely given; they become conditional, dependent on obedience, conformity, or reciprocation.

Shunning can extend far beyond the person being excluded. When others watch someone lose relationships, community, and support after leaving, they learn something about the potential consequences of dissent. They may learn that doubt is safer when kept private because openness can carry serious consequences. Excluding one individual can silence many others, not because they are directly threatened, but because they have witnessed what happens when someone challenges the norm. This is part of what gives shunning its force as a form of social punishment. Human beings are profoundly shaped by belonging, and shunning can threaten basic psychological needs for connection, self-worth, control and the sense that one matters to others (Williams, 2007; 2009). When belonging itself becomes conditional, fear can begin to regulate behaviour before exclusion even happens. People may hide doubts, censor themselves or continue to conform because the consequences of openness have already been made visible. In that way, one person’s exclusion can become a lesson for the whole group.

The pressure is not always felt only by the person who has left. In some families, relatives may also feel caught between affection and expectation. They may fear religious condemnation, community judgement or damage to their own reputation if they remain close to the person who has departed. Understanding that pressure helps explain how shunning is sustained, but it does not lessen the harm the shunned person experiences.

This is also why shunning can become systemic rather than simply personal. A parent or sibling may still care deeply for the person who has left, but come to feel that maintaining an ordinary relationship threatens their own standing, religious identity or place in the community. Research on religious shunning has described situations in which continued contact with former members is discouraged or sanctioned, allowing the consequences of leaving to spread across several relationships at once (Grendele, Flax, & Bapir-Tardy, 2022). What follows can be a kind of collective withdrawal, where the person does not lose one bond, but an entire network.

For the person being shunned, the wound is not only the absence of others. Over time, repeated exclusion can begin to alter how they see themselves. When the people whose recognition once helped anchor identity begin to behave as though the person no longer

counts, shame, helplessness, worthlessness and a sense of social invisibility can take hold. This is one reason shunning has been described as a form of “social death”: the person remains physically present, while their recognised place in the social world is gradually stripped away (Williams, 2007; Ransom, Monk, & Heim, 2022). Where exclusion is prolonged, especially when it involves an entire family or community, the psychological effects can be deep and enduring.

The consequences can also be painfully concrete. Family rejection may affect where someone lives, whether they can continue their education, who controls important documents, whether childcare is available, or whether they can remain in a country. It may also mean losing inheritance, employment opportunities, marriage prospects or access to the wider network that once provided practical help.

This is why advice such as “just leave” or “cut them off” can miss the reality of the situation. Emotional separation is already difficult; material dependence can make immediate separation impossible. Some people may need to preserve contact, comply selectively, conceal parts of themselves or delay disclosure while they slowly build safer alternatives.

Grieving people who are still alive

The grief after shunning can be difficult to name because the people being mourned are still alive. A parent may continue living in the same city. A sibling’s photograph may still appear online. The family home may still exist. What has been lost is the relationship as it was, or the hope that the relationship could survive honest difference.

This kind of loss can remain unresolved because there is no clear ending. A message may arrive after months of silence. A relative may offer contact but only on the condition of a return to Islam. Hope and rejection can therefore alternate, making it hard either to reconnect or to grieve.

People may repeatedly ask why their family could not love them differently, whether they were ever truly known or what they could say to make the family understand. These questions are understandable. Yet some questions do not have answers that bring relief. The problem may not be that the person has failed to explain themselves well enough. The relationship may be organised around a condition they cannot meet without abandoning themselves.

The empty place at the table

Some losses do not leave an empty chair. The person is still alive, but the relationship you knew or hoped for is no longer available. You may still think of them at birthdays, celebrations or ordinary moments when you would once have called. Their absence can remain present even when no one else can see it. You are grieving a relationship that still exists in memory, but not in the form you need.

Metaphor informed by experiential metaphor in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Stoddard and Afari, 2014).

Why new relationships do not replace family

Following shunning, many people come to rely on supportive friends, partners, and chosen family for the recognition, care, and sense of safety they need. Family relationships carry shared history, childhood attachment, language, rituals, cultural memory and expectations formed across many years. A new relationship may be loving while still being unable to restore the particular people, memories, history, and sense of place that were lost.

This does not make a new connection less valuable. It means that gratitude for what is being built can coexist with grief for what cannot be recreated. Healing need not require pretending that one relationship is interchangeable with another.

New roots

New relationships can become deeply meaningful, but they do not erase the roots that were cut. A new tree can grow beside the place of an old one without pretending that nothing was lost. New belonging does not require you to stop grieving the old.



Chapter 4: Shame, Fear and the Aftereffects of Control

Guilt and shame are not the same

Guilt usually centres on a specific action a person believes they have committed, such as “I acted wrongly”, “I caused harm”, or “I failed to do what I should have done” (Brown, 2007). In contrast, shame tends to be more internal, addressing the entire self: “I am bad”, “I am impure”, “I am unworthy”, or “There is something fundamentally wrong with me” (Brown, 2007). This distinction is also well established in the psychology of moral emotions, where guilt is generally understood as more focused on behaviour, while shame is more closely tied to a person’s overall sense of who they are (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007).

Guilt can sometimes be useful when it accurately signals that we have harmed someone and need to repair what happened. It becomes less reliable when it is triggered simply because a person has broken an inherited rule, disappointed an authority figure or protected themselves from coercion. Research on trauma-related difficulties acknowledges that guilt can stem from actual, perceived, or exaggerated moral responsibilities and is not always harmful (Tilghman-Osborne, Cole, & Felton, 2010). This means guilt can also signal that something connected with morality, responsibility, or belonging has been activated. It does not, by itself, establish that you have done something wrong.

In some high-control family or religious environments, guilt and shame can also become ways of regulating behaviour. A person may be made to feel responsible not only for their own actions, but for a parent’s distress, the family’s reputation, a sibling’s future or the community’s sense of ‘honour’. Research on ‘honour’-based abuse has described how shame, guilt and emotional pressure can be used to reinforce obedience and conformity (Björktomta, 2019; Parekh & Egan, 2021). This can make it difficult to distinguish genuine responsibility from responsibility that has been enlarged or imposed.

Sometimes the first emotion is immediately followed by another. You may feel angry and then ashamed for being angry. You may feel relieved after setting a boundary and then guilty for feeling relieved. You may experience pleasure, confidence or freedom and then become frightened that these feelings are sinful/haram or dangerous.

A second emotion can quickly judge or suppress the first. Anger may be signalling that a boundary was crossed. Relief may show that something had become too burdensome. Fear may be an old response rather than evidence that you have done something wrong.

Pause and reflect

Sometimes shame is not the first feeling.

Before it arrived, was there anger, relief, pleasure, fear or a wish to protect yourself?

The feeling beneath the shame may be trying to tell you something.

In some high-control families and religious environments, anger is treated not simply as an emotion but as evidence of bad character. Children may learn that disagreement is disrespectful, that anger towards parents is sinful/haram, or that expressing hurt threatens family unity. As a result, anger may be turned inward. Instead of thinking, “Something unfair happened”, the person concludes, “There is something wrong with me for feeling this.” Anger does not automatically make an action right. But neither does feeling angry make you cruel, disloyal or morally corrupt.

Pause and reflect

Anger is not a verdict

Anger is often the part of you that noticed something was unfair, intrusive or harmful. You can have the feeling without letting it cause harm.

The internalised authority voice

In a controlling environment, rules may be repeated by parents, teachers, religious leaders, or community members. Over time, their language can become an internal voice. Psychological research on internalisation helps explain how externally imposed expectations can gradually become self-imposed, particularly when acceptance, approval or belonging have been tied to obedience (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). The voice may use words such as selfish, disobedient, dirty, ungrateful, arrogant or sinful. It may appear whenever you set a boundary, experience anger, choose a relationship or prioritise your own future.

This voice can feel like a conscience because it has been present for so long, almost like an old friend. However, conscience and conditioning are not exactly the same. An internalised rule is not necessarily the same as a choice a person has made freely or still fully supports. Sometimes, internal pressures come from feelings like guilt, shame, or fear of disapproval, which is often called introjected regulation. This means the external authority might no longer be around, but its demands can still be felt from within us (Grolnick et al., 1997; Neyrinck et al., 2006). Reflection can take into account the context, harm, intention, consent, and ways to repair. But internalised authority often jumps to a judgement without really looking at the situation closely. One useful question then is: “Is this voice helping me think, or is it demanding submission?”

A person may stop believing in hell, divine punishment or religious impurity while continuing to feel afraid of them. Intellectual belief and emotional learning do not always change at the same pace. Research on learning fear suggests that when a strong threat association has been learned, later learning does not necessarily erase the original association completely; fear can return even when the person consciously regards the feared outcome as unlikely or no longer true (Bouton, 2002).

Eating during Ramadan, having sex, drinking alcohol, removing the hijab, expressing anger towards a parent or speaking openly about disbelief may trigger dread even when the person no longer regards the act as wrong. The fear may arrive as a bodily surge before any conscious thought appears.

This does not make the feared punishment real. It shows that the belief became closely linked with threat, allowing fear to arise quickly and automatically.

The old broadcast

For years, you may have heard the same warnings: do not question, do not disobey, do not bring shame.

Even after leaving, those messages may continue to play inside you.

Hearing the broadcast does not mean you still believe it. It may mean only that your mind learned the recording well.

A familiar voice is not always your own.

Original metaphor informed by the ACT practice of helping people notice thoughts as mental events rather than unquestioned truths (Stoddard and Afari, 2014).

Emotional flashbacks and triggers

Some people experience sudden waves of fear, shame, helplessness or guilt that seem larger than the present situation. A sound, smell, phrase, religious recitation, family gathering or question about belief may evoke an emotional state connected with earlier experiences.

These reactions are sometimes described as emotional flashbacks. They may not include a clear visual memory. Instead, the person may abruptly feel small, trapped, condemned or in danger. The present moment has activated an older pattern of threat.

Not every strong reaction is a trauma response, and the term should not be applied automatically. Current danger, grief, panic, obsessive fear, social anxiety and ordinary emotional pain may produce overlapping experiences. The important question is what the reaction means in this particular person's context.

Dissociation, numbing and hypervigilance

When emotion or threat feels overwhelming, the mind may create distance from experience. A person may feel unreal, blank, detached from their body or unable to follow a conversation. Others describe functioning on autopilot during prayers, religious events or family discussions.

Numbing can protect someone from unbearable feelings, but it may also reduce access to joy, grief, desire and connection. Hypervigilance moves in the opposite direction: instead of becoming less aware, the person becomes intensely alert to signs of danger. Both responses can be understood as attempts to manage threat.

Dissociation is a symptom or experience rather than a single diagnosis. It ranges from common experiences of detachment to more severe symptoms that require professional assessment. Where episodes are frequent, frightening or interfere with daily functioning, specialist support may be needed.

Difficulty trusting yourself

Years of being told what to think, feel and choose can weaken confidence in one's own judgement. The person may repeatedly ask others whether they are bad, selfish, unreasonable or making the wrong decision. Freedom may feel less like possibility and more like the risk of making an unforgivable mistake.

Self-doubt can continue even when a person strongly rejects their former beliefs. A person may come to rely entirely on a new group, partner or political community to confirm that their former religion was wrong. External reassurance may bring temporary relief while leaving the underlying difficulty with self-trust unchanged.

Rebuilding trust does not mean believing that every feeling or first thought is correct. It means becoming increasingly able to consider evidence, context, consequences and values without assuming that someone else must make the decision for you.

Self-blame can sometimes create a painful sense of control. If you tell yourself that everything happened because you were weak, disobedient, careless or selfish, it can seem as though the outcome might have been prevented if only you had behaved differently. The alternative, that you were dependent on people who held more power, or that the situation was not fully within your control, may be harder to bear. This does not mean that all guilt is false. It means that guilt should be examined carefully rather than automatically treated as proof of wrongdoing. Trauma-related guilt may involve perceived responsibility for actions or inaction, and can sometimes function as an attempt to make sense of helplessness or lost control.

Pause and reflect

Before you blame yourself

Ask not only:

What did I do?

Also ask:

What power, freedom and information did I actually have at the time?

A note on trauma language

The language of trauma can validate experiences that were previously minimised. It can help explain why fear persists, why the body reacts and why leaving an environment does not always end its influence.

It can also become too broad. Not every painful religious experience is traumatic, and not every distressing response indicates Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or complex trauma. Some readers may be dealing primarily with grief, depression, anxiety, obsessive doubt, present-day coercion or the normal difficulty of major life change.

The purpose of trauma language is to help people understand their experiences and seek appropriate care. It should not be used to assign an identity or diagnosis without assessment.

A note on scrupulosity Scrupulosity is a form of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) in which obsessions and compulsions centre on morality, religion, sin or responsibility. It may involve intrusive doubts, repeated checking, reassurance seeking, confession, mental review or rituals intended to create certainty that one has not done something wrong. A person leaving religion may have realistic concerns about family or community consequences and also experience obsessive doubt. These need to be distinguished carefully. Real risk calls for practical safety planning. Obsessive doubt is usually maintained by repeated attempts to achieve complete certainty.

Where intrusive thoughts and rituals are consuming significant time or interfering with life, an assessment by a professional familiar with obsessive-compulsive disorder may be helpful.

What to take from this chapter

Guilt concerns perceived action; shame condemns the whole self.

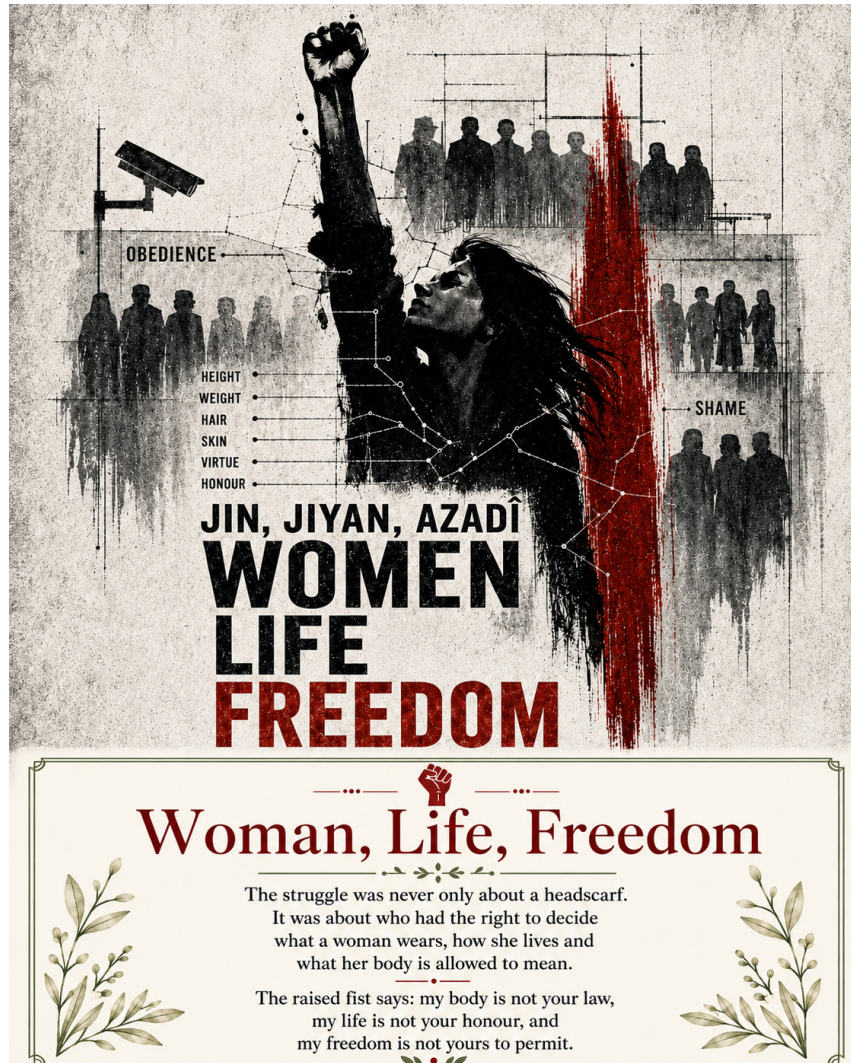
An inherited moral reaction may continue after belief changes.

Triggers can evoke older states of fear without proving present danger.

Dissociation, numbing and hypervigilance may function as protection.

Trauma and scrupulosity language should be used carefully and, where necessary, supported by assessment.

Chapter 5: Sex, Sexuality, ‘honour’ and the Body



When ‘honour’ becomes a means of control

In some authoritarian or highly conservative Islamic environments, ‘honour’ is not treated as a private value. It is understood as something shared by the family and tied to how others view the family. The behaviour of women and LGBTQ+ family members may therefore be treated as a reflection of collective reputation. In this sense, ‘honour’ can become something watched, defended, and enforced through the behaviour of individual family members rather than something belonging only to the individual (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Gill & Brah, 2014).

Clothing, friendships, movement, marriage, sexuality and intimate relationships may be controlled not only as matters of faith but as evidence of family dignity. ‘Honour’ can then become a means of monitoring, shaming and punishing, particularly where a person’s behaviour is understood as affecting the standing of the wider family (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Gill, 2009; Gill & Brah, 2014; Begikhani, Gill, & Hague, 2015).

In such environments, the body may be treated as more than personal. It can be made to represent the ‘honour’, morality or religious standing of an entire family. How a person dresses, speaks, moves, forms relationships or expresses sexuality may therefore be monitored as though these choices belong to everyone except the person whose body is involved. Research on ‘honour’-based violence has repeatedly identified the regulation of women’s sexuality, marriage and social relationships as central to these systems of control (Gill, Begikhani, & Hague, 2012; Payton, 2017).

This burden is often placed most heavily on women and girls. Their clothing, the hijab, virginity, marriageability and sexual behaviour may be treated as evidence of whether a family is respectable. A woman may learn that a private choice could bring public shame, damage relatives’ reputations or provoke punishment. Men and boys may also be controlled through expectations of heterosexuality, strength, religious conformity and responsibility for policing female relatives. LGBTQ+ people may face additional pressure where sexuality or gender expression is viewed as incompatible with family expectations, cultural identity or reputation (Jaspal, 2014; Donovan, Magić, & West, 2024).

In the CEMB support groups, women describe facing stricter rules around dress, friendships, virginity and reputation, with disclosure of non-belief sometimes being interpreted as evidence of sexual immorality. Participants have also described victim-blaming following sexual assault and fears of severe violence where someone was believed to have brought ‘dishonour’. These accounts are consistent with wider research showing how ideas of sexual purity, family reputation and obedience can become intertwined in ‘honour’-based abuse (Gill, 2009; Begikhani et al., 2015).

It is useful to pause here and clarify what ‘honour’-based abuse or violence means. The word ‘honour’ is placed in inverted commas because this form of abuse is neither honourable nor justified. It refers to a range of harmful actions carried out to protect or restore the supposed ‘honour’ of a family or community. While men and boys can be affected, women and girls are disproportionately targeted.

‘Honour’-based abuse is an umbrella term covering different forms of harm, including domestic abuse, forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), sexual violence, threats, surveillance, confinement and, in the most serious cases, ‘honour’ killings. These practices are not identical, but they may be linked by a common concern with controlling behaviour, relationships, sexuality and marriage. Women’s and girls’ sexuality is often treated as reflecting the family’s reputation, and control may be exercised not only through direct violence but through threats, surveillance, withdrawal of support and restrictions on social or sexual choices (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Gill et al., 2012; Payton, 2017).

More specifically, a woman’s body may be treated as a form of social currency, with its perceived value tied to virginity, modesty, marriageability and sexual reputation. This means that, for the woman, the body is no longer regarded as fully her own, but as something the family believes it has a right to guard, regulate or punish.

It is important to note that ‘honour’-based abuse is not exclusive to any specific religion or community, and it should not be presented as characteristic of Muslim families in general. Research has documented ‘honour’-related violence and control across different cultural, religious and geographical settings. What tends to recur across settings is the combination of collective reputation, sex inequality, control over sexuality and strong expectations of obedience (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Gill & Brah, 2014).

It is also important not to frame ‘honour’-based abuse simply as a problem belonging to particular cultures. There are clear parallels with other forms of violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse: in both, people may be monitored, threatened, assaulted or killed by those close to them. One important difference is that ‘honour’-based abuse can involve a wider network of perpetrators. Parents, siblings, extended relatives and, at times, members of the wider community may participate in monitoring, pressuring, threatening or punishing the person. This wider participation can make abuse especially difficult to escape because control may come from several directions at once rather than from a single perpetrator (Begikhani et al., 2015; Gill & Brah, 2014).

Where someone is believed to have brought ‘dishonour’, the response may include pressure to marry, restrictions on movement, forced separation from a partner, violence or rejection. In the most serious cases, family or community members may believe that ‘honour’ can be restored only through severe punishment.

Leaving an authoritarian Islamic environment can add another layer of risk for women. Non-belief may be interpreted not only as religious disobedience, but as sexual or moral transgression. A woman may therefore be seen as rejecting her family, her expected sex-based role and the collective identity of the community at the same time. For LGBTQ+ people, religious departure and disclosure of sexuality or gender identity may similarly intersect with family expectations and produce multiple sources of pressure (Donovan et al., 2024).

Control of women and girls

For women and girls, control may begin early. Dress codes may be enforced, friendships restricted and movement outside the home closely monitored. Women affected by “honour”-based abuse have described curfews, repeated questioning and surveillance of phones or social media accounts. Texting a boy, removing a hijab or refusing a proposed or forced marriage may lead to coercion, threats, violence or expulsion from the family home (Meetoo & Mirza, 2007; Gill, 2009; Idriss, 2017).

Women in the CEMB support groups have also described learning to make themselves smaller to prevent confrontation: avoiding eye contact, remaining silent, limiting ambition or surrendering choices that might attract scrutiny.

Culture and religion can give people identity, continuity and belonging. They do not give families, communities or institutions unlimited authority over another person’s body. International human-rights standards recognise bodily integrity, freedom from violence and discrimination, and access to appropriate healthcare as fundamental rights. In relation to FGM, these standards make clear that a practice does not become harmless because it is longstanding, culturally defended or presented as necessary for respectability or marriage. They also emphasise that women and girls who have experienced such practices should receive respectful, non-judgemental and appropriate care (Khosla et al., 2017). The same principle can be stated more broadly.

Tradition can explain why a practice exists. It does not by itself determine whether the practice is safe, consensual or just.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):

Some readers may have experienced FGM, some may fear that a child or relative is at risk, or some may be living with physical, sexual or psychological effects from the practice. FGM is internationally recognised as a harmful practice and a violation of the rights of women and girls. Its effects can include pain, complications with menstruation, sexual difficulties, childbirth complications, and psychological distress, although experiences vary and not every woman or girl will experience the same consequences (Khosla et al., 2017). International human rights standards also make clear that a practice does not become harmless because it is longstanding, culturally defended or presented as necessary for respectability, marriage or belonging. At the same time, women and girls who have undergone FGM should not be reduced to what happened to their bodies. They are entitled to informed, respectful and non-judgemental healthcare that protects dignity, privacy and choice.

You may have complicated feelings about what happened. You might feel anger, grief, violation or loss. You may also feel loyalty towards family members who arranged or accepted it, particularly if they believed they were protecting your future or acting according to community expectations. Some people hold both reactions at once. Understanding the pressures surrounding FGM does not require you to minimise its harm, excuse coercion, or give up the right to decide what happens to your own body now.

For some survivors, the loss of control involved in FGM can make later experiences of medical care, sexuality, pregnancy or family pressure particularly sensitive, which is why restoring choice and bodily autonomy is an important part of respectful support.

“Niceness” and Gendered Conditioning:

Many girls are taught that being good or ‘nice’ means being pleasant, ‘modest’, forgiving and accommodating. Anger may be described as unattractive, disrespectful or dangerous. Saying no may be framed as selfish, while protecting one’s reputation or preserving family harmony may be valued more highly than protecting one’s comfort, boundaries or safety.

Over time, a person may become more attuned to what others expect than to what their own body is signalling. They may notice another person’s disappointment before they notice their own reluctance. They may become highly skilled at anticipating reactions, keeping the peace and avoiding conflict, while becoming less certain about what they themselves want, need or feel.

Psychological research has described a related pattern as self-silencing: suppressing one’s own thoughts, needs, or emotions to preserve relationships or avoid rejection and conflict (Jack, 1991; Maji & Dixit, 2019). Social and family expectations can teach women to prioritise approval, accommodate others and treat other people’s distress as more important than their own discomfort.

In unsafe or highly controlling relationships, accommodation may also become protective. Agreeing, appeasing, staying quiet or monitoring another person’s mood can sometimes reduce immediate conflict or danger. This does not mean that compliance causes or excuses abuse, nor that the person freely chose the conditions they were responding to. It means that accommodation may have developed as a way of managing rejection, punishment, escalation or threat (Engel, 2008).

Pause and reflect

Kindness does not require self-abandonment

You can care about another person's feelings without surrendering your body, safety or choices.

Disappointing someone is not the same as harming them

LGBTQ+ ex-Muslim experiences

Where 'honour' is closely tied to public perception, being lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans may be interpreted not only as a religious transgression but as a source of family shame. LGBTQ+ Muslims and ex-Muslims have described threats of forced marriage, removal or exile to another country, family confinement, coercive religious intervention and physical violence (Yip, 2004; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Siraj, 2012).

Some people are pressured into relationships intended to conceal or suppress their sexuality. Others are required to choose between family contact and living openly. The person may therefore experience rejection within the family while also feeling misunderstood in LGBTQ+ spaces that do not recognise the cultural, religious and family dimensions of 'honour'-based risk.

For LGBTQ+ people, leaving religion may become intertwined with another disclosure: revealing a sexual orientation or gender identity that the family or community condemns. These disclosures do not always carry the same risks. A person may be able to disclose non-belief but not sexuality, or the reverse. They may also choose not to use a label at all. Safety planning should therefore treat each part of identity separately rather than assuming that becoming open in one area requires openness in every other.

The psychological and embodied effects

Research on coercive control, identity conflict and minority stress suggests that prolonged exposure to these forms of pressure and control can contribute to chronic fear, shame, anxiety, isolation and trauma-related difficulties, which may continue after the person has left the immediate environment (Yip, 2004; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Siraj, 2012; Gill & Brah, 2014).

The person may continue monitoring how they dress, speak or move even when no one is present. They may struggle to believe that their body belongs to them. Belonging may have been made conditional on obedience, while affection, security and recognition were used as leverage for control (Stark, 2007; Gill & Brah, 2014; Idriss, 2017).

Reclaiming your body does not mean doing the opposite of everything you were taught. You do not have to remove particular clothing, have sex, drink alcohol, reject marriage, change your appearance or adopt a new label in order to prove that you are free. Acting in opposition can sometimes be an important early expression of autonomy, but it can become another rule if you feel required to perform liberation in a particular way. Bodily autonomy means having the right to choose, including the right to move slowly, change your mind, remain uncertain or keep aspects of your previous life because they still feel right to you.

Pause and reflect

Hold on to This

Your body is not evidence of obedience, purity or worth.

You do not have to use it to defend your family's honour, prove your freedom or satisfy anyone else's expectations.

It belongs to you.

Forced marriage and relationship control

Marriage can become a central mechanism of control when it is used to preserve family reputation, regulate sexuality, maintain religious continuity or secure obedience. Pressure may range from emotional persuasion and threats of rejection to confinement, deception, removal abroad or physical violence. A proposed marriage should not be considered freely chosen merely because the person eventually agrees. The relevant question is what would happen if they refused. Consent is not freely given where refusal carries threats, punishment, coercion or loss of essential support.

A person may have learned to comply before they had the freedom to choose. They may have agreed to clothing rules, marriage discussions, physical affection or sexual expectations because refusing felt dangerous, selfish or impossible.

Compliance should not automatically be mistaken for free agreement. A person may say yes while feeling frozen, detached or unable to imagine that saying no is possible or safe. They may focus more on preventing another person's anger than on noticing their own wishes.

Some people learn early that it is safer to give in, keep quiet or put other people first. They may suppress their own feelings, needs or opinions because they fear conflict, punishment, rejection or shame. Over time, this can become an automatic way of relating to others, even when the original danger is no longer present (Farrell et al., 2014). The aim is not to blame yourself for previous compliance. It is to begin recognising the conditions under which your choices were made.

Pause and reflect

Before Calling It a Choice

Ask:

Could I safely say no?

Did I know that my needs mattered?

What did I believe would happen if I refused?

Modesty, purity and sexual shame

When worth is tied to ‘modesty’, virginity or sexual purity, the body can begin to feel like property held on behalf of the family. Ordinary experiences of desire, attraction and bodily pleasure may become linked with disgust, danger or shame.

Modesty culture shifts responsibility for male harassment, rape and violence onto women and girls, implying that female bodies must be covered or controlled to prevent men’s actions. In doing so, it sexualises girls from an early age, shames women who are considered ‘immodest’, and denies male accountability for abusive behaviour (Namazie, 2018). The word ‘modest’, as Namazie (2018) has stated, is not neutral. Once certain ways of dressing are described as ‘modest’, women who dress differently can easily be cast as ‘immodest’. This then equates clothing with judgements about respectability, behaviour and what a ‘good’ woman is supposed to look like.

The effects of modesty culture can continue after leaving Islam. A person may feel watched while choosing clothing, experience guilt during consensual intimacy or struggle to identify their own boundaries because bodily decisions were previously made by others.

Reclaiming the body does not require any particular form of dress, sexual expression or relationship. Freedom includes the right to remain sexually inactive, explore intimacy or leave decisions unresolved. The central issue is whether the choice can be made without coercion.

The same outward behaviour can carry very different meanings. A person may choose clothing because it feels culturally meaningful or personally comfortable. Another may dress in the same way because refusal would lead to surveillance, punishment or rejection.

The question is therefore not simply what someone wears, whether they have sex, whom they marry or how they describe themselves. The question is whether they can choose without coercion, fear, or serious consequences. A choice is not fully free when one option carries the threat of violence, forced marriage, or family exclusion.

Pause and reflect

Clothing and Judgement

What did you learn about how a “good” woman should dress?

What messages were given about women who dressed differently?

Do any of those judgements still affect how you see yourself or other women today?

When control is protected by silence

‘Honour’-based control may be reinforced when relatives, community leaders, religious authorities or officials treat abuse as discipline, family responsibility or the protection of morality. When coercion is framed as a private family matter, it can continue without effective challenge (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Meeto & Mirza, 2007; Begikhani, Gill, & Hague, 2015; Idriss, 2017).

The language of ‘honour’ may also reverse responsibility after abuse. Survivors of sexual violence may be blamed for the harm done to them and silenced, confined or pressured to preserve the family’s reputation. In some legal and social contexts, survivors of rape or harassment have been pressured or forced to marry the perpetrator in an attempt to restore family ‘honour’ (Welchman & Hossain, 2005; Gill, 2009; Gill & Brah, 2014).

Many girls are taught that goodness means being pleasant, ‘modest’, forgiving and accommodating. Anger may be described as unattractive or disrespectful. Saying no may be framed as selfish. Protecting one’s reputation may be valued more highly than protecting one’s comfort or safety.

Over time, the person may become more attuned to what others expect than to what their own body is signalling. They may notice another person’s disappointment before they notice their own reluctance.

Engel discusses how cultural and family messages can teach women to prioritise approval, avoid conflict and place other people’s feelings above their own. This idea is relevant here, although it must be applied without implying that compliance causes or excuses abuse (Engel, 2008).

Pause and reflect

Freedom is not another dress code

You do not have to look liberated.

You do not have to prove that you have changed.

You do not have to choose the opposite of what was imposed.

Freedom begins with the choice being yours.

Apostasy and ‘honour’

For some ex-Muslims, ‘honour’-based control intensifies when they step away from Islam. Non-belief may be treated not only as spiritual betrayal but as damaging to the family’s public standing.

Women who remove a hijab, reject modesty requirements, refuse an approved marriage or date outside the community may face shunning, confinement, threats or violence. LGBTQ+ ex-Muslims who live openly may face estrangement, forced relocation, coercive marriage or physical danger (Cottee, 2015; Vliek, 2019a; Lee, 2024).

The person may be placed in an impossible position: silence may preserve safety while requiring continued concealment; disclosure may bring relief while increasing exposure to punishment.

Chapter 6: From Fixed Rules to Ethical Reflection

A fixed moral framework can simplify complex questions by clearly defining permitted and forbidden actions, correct and ‘corrupt’ beliefs, and approved versus forbidden lifestyles. Restrictive rules can offer structure by reducing the need for individuals to decide what they believe is right, since the decision is already predetermined.

When that framework loses its authority, the change can be freeing. It can also be unsettling. Questions that once appeared to have a single answer now require judgement. You may find yourself responsible for decisions about honesty, family igious or that every lasting cultural value is a problem.

In this context, it can help name the persistence of patterns such as searching for absolute answers, distrusting uncertainty, dividing people into morally pure and corrupt groups, or locating moral authority entirely outside oneself.

When one authority is replaced by another

Leaving a religious environment, or no longer believing in its teachings, does not automatically mean that you begin trusting your own judgement. Your beliefs may change while your relationship with authority remains much the same.

A person might move from thinking, “My religious leaders say this is true, so it must be true”, to thinking, “The people who oppose my former religion must be right.” The position has changed, but the underlying process may not have. In both cases, someone else still decides what is true, what is good and how the world should be understood.

This does not happen to everyone. Some people who leave controlling religious environments become more reflective, open-minded and self-directed. For others, uncertainty about identity or belonging can make groups with clear answers, firm boundaries and a strong sense of community feel especially reassuring (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Hogg, 2014).

Sometimes, the attraction lies less in the group’s beliefs than in the comfort, certainty and familiarity it provides. The new source of authority might be a political movement, an online community, a charismatic individual or any group that offers clear answers and a strong sense of belonging.

Pause and reflect

Certainty and belonging

Sometimes what draws us in is not the idea itself, but the feeling that comes with it: relief, clarity, belonging, or the sense that someone finally understands.

That does not make the idea wrong. It does mean the comfort it provides can make it harder to question.

Ask yourself: *If this group no longer made me feel certain, understood or included, would I still believe what it teaches?*

And: *Am I moving towards something I have chosen, or towards the familiar feeling of being told where I belong?*

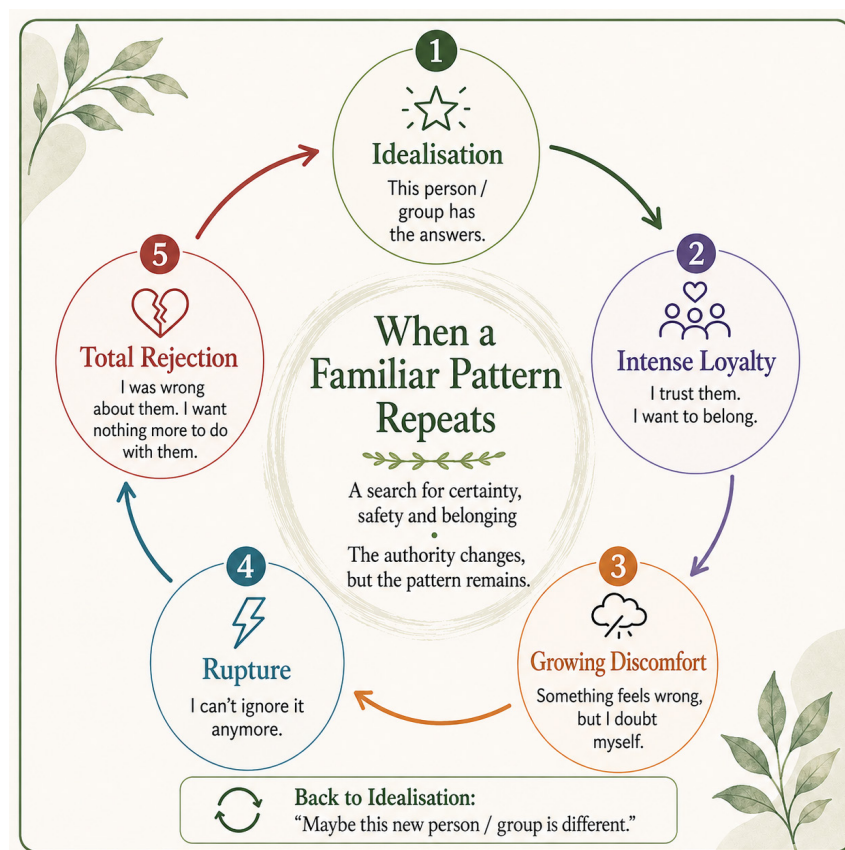
When the new relationship feels familiar

The pull towards certainty can also shape relationships. You may find yourself drawn to familiar ways of relating to people who hold power. Perhaps you learned that belonging depends on agreement, that questioning leads to rejection, or that safety comes from keeping authority figures pleased. Without immediately recognising the pattern, you may silence doubts, idealise someone, overlook warning signs or work hard to prove your loyalty.

A relationship may feel reassuring because its dynamics are familiar and predictable, even when those dynamics are controlling. Familiarity, however, is not the same as safety.

Schema Therapy proposes that patterns formed in earlier relationships can continue shaping what people expect from themselves and others. Someone who learned to expect rejection, shame, punishment or the withdrawal of affection may keep suppressing their judgement, emotions or needs in order to preserve connection. These patterns may involve beliefs linked to abandonment, mistrust, subjugation, self-sacrifice, approval-seeking or emotional inhibition (Young et al., 2003; Farrell et al., 2014).

These responses will not apply to everyone. People adapt in different ways. Schema Therapy describes several possible coping patterns. One person may surrender to the familiar pattern by complying and remaining silent. Another may avoid closeness because relationships feel dangerous. Someone else may try to protect themselves by becoming controlling, emotionally distant or determined never to appear vulnerable. Each response may have developed as a way of managing an earlier threat, even when it later creates new difficulties (Young et al., 2003).



Periods of loneliness, uncertainty, disrupted identity or lost community may make a controlling relationship harder to recognise. After leaving a high-control environment, a person may feel especially drawn to someone who offers certainty, intense validation, rapid closeness or simple explanations. This does not mean that entering another controlling relationship is inevitable. It means that unmet emotional needs and familiar relationship patterns can make coercion less visible at first.

It may help to distinguish intensity from safety. Intense attention, constant contact, immediate certainty or demands for loyalty can feel reassuring, especially after rejection or isolation. Safety looks different. It develops through respect for boundaries, tolerance of disagreement, emotional consistency and the freedom to say no without being punished, threatened or shut out.

Pause and reflect

Some relationships feel safe because you are free to be yourself.

Others feel safe because you have learned exactly how not to upset them.

The difference is easy to miss.

Ask yourself:

Do I feel secure here because I am accepted or because I have become skilled at disappearing?

A relationship is not truly safe if keeping it requires you to shrink your voice, hide your doubts or abandon parts of yourself. Real belonging does not ask you to become less visible in order to stay connected.

Belonging is not the problem

Leaving a controlling environment does not mean that you need to avoid new communities, relationships or movements. Healthy belonging can reduce isolation, help rebuild trust, strengthen identity and give people a place where experiences that were once denied or minimised can be understood. Connection is a basic psychological need, and supportive group membership can contribute to well-being, resilience and recovery (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Haslam et al., 2018).

The important question is not whether you belong, but what that belonging asks of you. A healthy community can make room for questions, uncertainty and changing views. It allows people to maintain relationships outside the group and to disagree without being humiliated, threatened or excluded. Leaders can be questioned. No one has to give up their judgement in order to remain accepted.

Healthy belonging also leaves room for more than one identity. You can be part of a community without letting it define every belief, relationship, or part of who you are. Feeling strongly connected to a group can be beneficial. The risk increases when one group becomes the only acceptable source of identity, meaning or support.

Psychological safety exists when people can ask questions, admit uncertainty, raise concerns and express disagreement without expecting punishment or humiliation.

Although this idea was developed mainly within organisational research, it can also help distinguish a supportive community from a controlling one (Edmondson, 1999).

Belonging becomes unhealthy when acceptance depends on repeating the approved view, proving loyalty, concealing doubt or showing contempt towards outsiders. Fear of exclusion can keep people silent even when they privately disagree, because ostracism threatens basic needs for belonging, self-esteem, control and recognition (Williams, 2007).

The risks grow when loyalty to the group matters more than evidence, conscience, or personal boundaries. Warning signs may include leaders who cannot be challenged, pressure to cut off people outside the group, demands for secrecy, punishment of disagreement, a division between supposedly pure insiders and dangerous outsiders, or the belief that leaving proves disloyalty or moral failure.

When anger is carrying something else

Anger is a normal response to coercion, betrayal, injustice or abuse. It can signal that a boundary has been crossed or that something deeply unfair has happened. In this way, anger can help people recognise wrongdoing, protect themselves, challenge mistreatment and recover a sense of strength or agency. Psychological research suggests that anger is not only destructive. It can also motivate action, support self-protection and drive people to seek justice when they believe they have been wronged (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006).

At times, anger may also sit alongside more vulnerable feelings. These can include grief for lost relationships, shame about past obedience, fear of further rejection, helplessness or sadness for the life that might have been. Emotion-focused approaches distinguish between primary emotions and secondary emotional responses, recognising that anger can sometimes emerge in response to fear, hurt, shame or grief (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg, 2015).

This does not make the anger false or inappropriate. A person can be genuinely angry about what happened while also carrying sadness, fear or loss. Recognising these other emotions does not weaken the anger. It may simply give the person more choice in how they understand and respond to what they feel.

Anger can become harder to loosen when it has served as a source of protection. A person may fear that softening it would mean excusing the harm, betraying themselves or giving up the strength that helped them survive. In this situation, anger may continue guarding against vulnerability long after the immediate threat has passed.

Other people may add pressure by urging forgiveness, reconciliation or the need to “move on” before the person feels safe, believed or understood. Healing should not require premature forgiveness or the denial of justified anger. It may instead involve gaining more freedom over how anger is expressed, when it is useful and whether it still serves the person’s present life.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) ¹treats emotions as meaningful responses that arise for understandable reasons and serve important functions. It also recognises that acting on every emotional impulse may not be helpful. Two things can be true at once: a person’s anger may be entirely valid, and some ways of expressing it may still cause

1 Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) is a structured psychological therapy developed by Marsha Linehan that combines acceptance and change strategies to help people manage intense emotions, tolerate distress, improve relationships and develop mindfulness skills.

harm or create consequences they do not want. Someone may have been deeply hurt or mistreated, while remaining focused on that injury indefinitely may also restrict their ability to build the life they want. DBT therefore encourages people to validate what they feel while considering which response is most effective and consistent with their longer-term goals (Linehan, 2015; Swales & Heard, 2017).

Healing does not require abandoning anger that remains justified. It may involve allowing anger to exist alongside grief, sadness, self-compassion and a fuller understanding of what happened. It may also mean recognising that the people associated with a former religion are not all the same, rather than viewing every person through the lens of past harm.

It can help to distinguish between anger that protects dignity and boundaries and anger that begins to define the self. Protective anger can be constructive. It can help a person recognise mistreatment, assert their needs and take action. When anger becomes chronic or all-consuming, however, it may keep them emotionally tied to the people or systems they are trying to leave behind.

Useful questions might include: <i>Questions for understanding what anger may be carrying</i>	
1	What is this anger protecting?
2	What boundary or value does it point to?
3	Is there grief, fear, shame, or helplessness alongside it?
4	Does this anger help me act effectively, or does it keep me trapped?
5	What would it mean to keep my moral clarity without letting anger organise my whole life?

Moving forward does not mean denying anger. It means allowing it to remain one part of a much larger life, rather than the main lens through which every person, relationship and experience is understood.

When validation becomes another form of control

A new group may give a person language for harm that was previously denied, minimised or misunderstood. Being believed can feel deeply relieving, especially after family members, religious authorities or others have dismissed what happened. That recognition can play an important part in recovery.

The difficulty begins if support comes with conditions. A group may expect the person to accept its entire worldview, treat its leaders as beyond criticism or direct hostility towards everyone connected with the former religion. Validation can then become another way of controlling someone: *we will believe you, but only if you think as we do.*

Some ex-Muslims may find recognition, belonging, status or a simple explanation for painful experiences in xenophobic and anti-Muslim movements. There is limited direct research showing how often this occurs, so it should not be presented as a common or expected outcome. It is better understood as a possible risk. Genuine anger about personal harm may gradually become directed towards a large and diverse group of people.

For some, an individual Muslim may come to represent earlier experiences of authority, rejection or control. The emotional response may therefore feel immediate and personal, even when little is known about that particular individual. This is one possible psychological response, not an assumption that should be made about all ex-Muslims.

For some, anger or hostility may function defensively and create distance from grief, helplessness, shame or fear; it may feel stronger or safer than more vulnerable emotions. Research on emotion recognises that anger can exist alongside hurt, fear, shame and loss, and may sometimes arise in response to them (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg, 2015).

For some people, hostility towards Muslims may also become tied to shame about beliefs they once held, defended or obeyed. Rejecting people who still identify as Muslim may then help create distance from a former identity. This should be treated as a possible clinical interpretation rather than a settled or universal explanation.

Understanding these processes does not excuse prejudice, nor does it make criticism of Islam illegitimate. It can, however, help a person ask whether they are responding to the individual in front of them, or to everything that individual has come to symbolise: authority, threat, betrayal, control or past harm. Joining a group that hates or dehumanises Muslims is not a healthy form of recovery. Such a group may validate real experiences while also encouraging rigid thinking, collective blame and prejudice. It may replace one version of “us and them” with another, rather than helping the person develop greater freedom in how they think and relate to others.

This does not mean that criticism of Islam is prejudiced against Muslims. Islamic beliefs, scriptures, laws, institutions, authorities and practices can be questioned and criticised in the same way as other religious or political ideas. Such criticism is necessary where doctrines or institutions have contributed to coercion, discrimination, violence or abuse.

Anti-Muslim prejudice, by contrast, involves stereotyping, hostility, exclusion or dehumanisation directed towards people because they are Muslim, are assumed to be Muslim or come from a Muslim background, treating a highly diverse population as though all its members share the same beliefs or responsibility for the same harms (Bleich, 2011; Garner & Selod, 2015).

A person can therefore remain deeply critical of Islam, religious authority, apostasy laws, inequality or coercive practices while still examining whether anger towards particular teachings, institutions or experiences has been extended to people who did not cause the harm. The aim is not neutrality or forgiveness. It is to keep judgement connected to evidence, responsibility and actual behaviour.

Therapists should also be careful not to label strong criticism of Islam as prejudice, displaced anger or unresolved trauma simply because it is forceful. Doing so may repeat the person’s earlier experience of having legitimate concerns denied or minimised. The task is to help distinguish criticism of beliefs, laws, institutions and practices from stereotyping, collective blame or dehumanisation of people.

Ethical independence means being able to condemn harm clearly without needing an entire group of people to become the enemy.

Ideas can be challenged. People should not be condemned.	
CRITICISM ASKS	PREJUDICE ASSUMES
“Is this belief, law or practice true, fair or harmful?”	“People who carry this identity are all the same.”
<i>You can reject an idea without reducing a person to it.</i>	
<i>When judgement moves from what someone believes or does to what they are, criticism has become prejudice.</i>	

Ethical autonomy is more than rebellion

Ethical autonomy does not mean rejecting everything associated with religion, doing the opposite of what one was taught or refusing all forms of guidance. It means becoming increasingly able to examine an authority, belief or community without surrendering one’s judgement to it.

The movement from externally defined answers towards a more internally considered way of making meaning has been described as self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Self-authorship does not mean becoming uninfluenced by other people. No one develops values in isolation. It means being able to consider influence, evidence and advice while remaining an active participant in one’s own decisions.

For some, identity may initially be organised around reaction: “I am not what they wanted”, or “I will do what was forbidden.” Reaction can be an understandable part of separation. Over time, a different question becomes possible: not only “What do I reject?” but “What do I want to stand for?”

Values can conflict

Fixed rules can create the impression that one value should always defeat another. Real decisions are often more complicated. You may value honesty while deciding that disclosing your beliefs to an unsafe relative would place you at risk. You may value loyalty while recognising that loyalty does not require you to hide abuse. You may value compassion and still believe that someone should face consequences for what they have done. You may want to protect your family from distress while refusing to sacrifice your future in order to preserve their comfort.

Values can conflict. There may be no decision that removes every form of discomfort or loss. This does not mean that every possible answer is equally good. It means that ethical reflection sometimes requires weighing several important considerations rather than searching for one rule that will make the decision on your behalf.

A painful decision is not necessarily an unethical one. Sometimes distress remains because something important is being protected and something else important cannot be preserved.

Living without guaranteed answers

Ethical autonomy can be demanding because it does not promise perfect certainty. You may make a careful decision and still feel guilty. You may act according to your values and still disappoint someone. You may later revise a conclusion as you learn more.

The aim is not to become morally flawless or completely independent. It is to become more able to pause, examine, choose and take responsibility. This is a move from responses shaped by automatic obedience or automatic opposition towards active self-authorship.

Developing an ethical life after leaving Islam is not a matter of finding a new set of perfect rules. It is learning to make decisions with greater awareness of safety, consequences, evidence, values and the rights of others.

At times, you may still wish that someone else would give you the correct answer. That wish is understandable, particularly when independent judgement once carried danger. The task is not to become untouched by other people's ideas. It is to become more able to consider them without disappearing inside them.

Freedom is not the absence of influence. It is the growing ability to decide which influences you will examine, retain, revise or refuse.

Chapter 7: Getting Help When the Risk Is Complex

You may ask a therapist, doctor, social worker, teacher, police officer or another professional for help and still leave feeling that they have not understood you. This does not necessarily mean that you explained yourself badly. The professional may not recognise how coercion, religion, family reputation, sex, sexuality, immigration status and community pressure can operate together.

Professionals can misunderstand these situations in two very different ways. Some may minimise the danger because they are afraid of appearing culturally insensitive or Islamophobic. Others may treat Muslim culture as inherently dangerous and view every religious or family practice as abusive. Neither response helps. You need someone who will look carefully at what is happening in your particular family and circumstances, rather than making assumptions based on culture or religion. Research has warned that cultural stereotyping and excessive cultural relativism can both obstruct effective responses to ‘honour’-based and sex-based violence (Meetoo & Mirza, 2007; Gill, 2009; Gill & Brah, 2014; Idriss, 2017).

Professionals should be willing to ask questions, listen and learn without allowing fear of causing offence to prevent them from recognising danger or taking appropriate safeguarding action. A responsive assessment should examine how power operates within this particular family and community.

A professional may try understanding how power works around you	
<i>They may ask:</i>	
1	Who makes the demands or rules?
2	Who supports or enforces them?
3	What happens when you refuse?
4	How does information travel between relatives?
5	Who controls your money, housing, education, childcare, travel documents or immigration status?
6	Who has access to your phone, online accounts, records or location?
7	Could relatives or community members in another area or country become involved?

Many of the same safeguarding concerns may arise for ex-Muslims when leaving an authoritarian Islamic environment where leaving means bringing shame, dishonour or reputational damage to the family or community. In these circumstances, there may be parallels with ‘honour’-based abuse. Several people may become involved in applying pressure, monitoring the person, making threats, restricting their movement, withdrawing financial or housing support, interfering with relationships or attempting to force them back into conformity (Cottee, 2015; Parekh & Egan, 2021; Vliek, 2019a).

When your new life is still trying to prove something

Leaving can change who has the authority to make decisions in your life. Yet the people whose approval once mattered can remain present in a different way. You may no longer follow their rules, but still find yourself imagining what they would think of the life you are building.

Expectations that once came from other people can gradually become expectations we carry within ourselves. Even when the external pressure is gone, we may continue measuring ourselves against standards that were once tied to approval, acceptance or belonging (Haines & Schutte, 2023).

Sometimes this appears as a wish to become successful, happy or visibly well in order to prove that the people who rejected you were wrong. This is understandable, particularly if you were told that leaving would ruin your life. When approval has been closely tied to achievement or behaving in an expected way, success and failure can become particularly important to how we evaluate ourselves (Assor & Tal, 2012; Haines & Schutte, 2023).

In CEMB support groups, people have spoken about the difference between building a life because it is genuinely the life they want and building one partly in the hope that those who rejected them will eventually see what they lost.

There is nothing wrong with feeling proud that you survived, grew or succeeded despite what was predicted for you. But there may come a point when it is worth asking:

If they never saw this life, would it still feel like mine?

Part of becoming the author of your own life is discovering what matters to you, what success means to you and what kind of life feels worthwhile even when nobody from your past is watching (Abbott et al., 2026; Nica, 2020).

The overlap lies in the way control operates. In both situations, the person's wishes may be treated as less important than family reputation, religious conformity or collective authority. Relatives may exchange information, reinforce one another's demands, monitor behaviour or pressure the person to return to an approved identity.

Risk may increase when the person discloses that they no longer believe, leaves the family home, removes religious dress, refuses a marriage, begins a relationship that the family disapproves of, or becomes publicly identifiable as an ex-Muslim or LGBTQ+ person.

'Honour'-based abuse and abuse connected with apostasy should not, however, be treated as the same thing. Not every ex-Muslim experiences 'honour'-based abuse, and not every case of 'honour'-based abuse involves someone leaving religion. A more accurate understanding is that apostasy can become an 'honour'-related issue in authoritarian or highly conservative Islamic environments when leaving Islam is seen as damaging the family's reputation, challenging collective authority or threatening its standing within the wider community.

Professionals should therefore consider whether an ex-Muslim faces risks commonly associated with 'honour'-based abuse. These may include the involvement of several perpetrators, pressure from the wider family or community, digital surveillance, transnational connections, control over money or important documents, demands for reconciliation, and escalation following disclosure or separation.

Assessment must still remain individualised. These risks should never be assumed simply because someone comes from a Muslim background. The task is to understand how power and control operate in this particular person's circumstances.

Professionals may fail in less obvious ways

Professional misunderstanding does not always appear as open dismissal. It may emerge in decisions that overlook how risk operates.

A professional may rely on standard domestic-abuse questions without asking about wider family, community, digital or transnational involvement. They may encourage disclosure, confrontation, family mediation or reconciliation before establishing whether any of these steps are safe. They may also assume that leaving the family home brings the danger to an end.

Relatives, community leaders or informal interpreters may be involved without first checking whether they have links to the people creating the risk. A professional may focus on anxiety, depression or trauma symptoms while missing the continuing coercion behind them. Realistic fear may be described as paranoia, overthinking or catastrophising.

Compliance may be mistaken for consent because the person did not openly resist. Secrecy, guardedness, fragmented disclosure or missed appointments may be interpreted as dishonesty or unwillingness to engage, rather than possible attempts to stay safe.

Professionals may also underestimate how strongly a person remains dependent on others for housing, money, education, childcare, immigration status, travel documents or access to healthcare. Some expect the person to explain religion, apostasy, culture or 'honour' repeatedly, rather than seeking the knowledge needed to assess the situation properly.

Confidentiality may be treated as though it automatically guarantees safety. In practice, shared phones, family email accounts, appointment letters, online patient portals, interpreters and access to medical records may all expose contact with services.

Therapy may begin before practical and physical safety have been established. At the other extreme, a professional may become so alarmed that they take control of every decision, repeating the person's earlier experience of having little choice. Harm may also occur when professionals fail to seek specialist advice after the situation has moved beyond their area of competence.

In forced-marriage and 'honour'-based abuse cases, encouraging mediation or contacting relatives can increase danger when family members are involved in the coercion (Chantler, 2012; Idriss, 2017). Similar caution may be needed when an ex-Muslim fears coordinated retaliation from relatives or members of the wider community.

Risk may increase when you resist

Risk can sometimes increase when a person leaves, refuses, demands or speaks openly, especially where others respond by escalating attempts to regain control. This may happen if you disclose that you no longer believe, refuse a marriage or relationship, leave or attempt to leave home, remove the hijab, begin a new relationship, report abuse or become publicly known as an ex-Muslim or LGBTQ+ person. Others may treat these choices as acts of defiance rather than decisions about your own life (Stark, 2007; Chantler, 2012; Idriss, 2017).

For this reason, risk should not be assessed only once. A professional should review the situation whenever something changes, including your living arrangements, relationships, travel plans, immigration circumstances, public visibility or what your family knows.

Tell the professional if someone's behaviour has changed, if more people have become involved, if threats are increasing or if you are planning a step that others may strongly oppose. These details may affect both the level of risk and the safety plan.

Services do not always recognise the particular dangers involved in 'honour'-based abuse. Specialist advice may therefore be important when the risk is serious, involves several people or extends across different locations or countries (Idriss, 2017).

A decision that gives you greater freedom may also increase the danger for a time. That does not mean the decision is wrong. It means that the safety plan may need to change alongside it. The table below summarises common warning signs and practical steps that may help a person communicate risk and seek safer professional support.

What you may notice	What may help
Other people may be used to pressure you Someone may threaten your children, siblings or supportive relatives, blame them, expose them or use them to reach you. You may feel forced to comply because you are worried about what could happen to someone else.	Tell a trusted professional who else may be at risk or used to pressure you. It may help to ask yourself: "Who might harm or pressure me?" and "Who else might be harmed, pressured or used to reach me?"
Technology may be used to monitor or control you A person may use phones, social media, shared accounts, location services, cloud backups, family phone contracts or hidden devices to find out where you are, who you are meeting or whether you have asked for help.	Plan digital safety carefully with a trusted specialist. Check who can see messages, appointment reminders, records, passwords or location information. Do not make sudden account or device changes if this could alert someone and increase risk.

It may take time to tell the full story You may find it difficult to explain everything at once. Fear, shame, loyalty, trauma or worry about what a professional may do can affect what you remember, how you speak and the order in which you describe events.	You are allowed to share information gradually. Ask the professional to explain confidentiality and what they may need to do if they believe someone is in danger. A changing or incomplete account does not, in and of itself, mean your experience is untrue.
Professionals may misunderstand what is happening A professional may describe the situation as family conflict, cultural difference, anxiety or trauma and may miss the wider pattern of control, threats or involvement by several people.	You can say when an explanation does not feel accurate. Ask the professional to consider the full pattern, including who is involved, what has been threatened, what has happened before and what you fear may happen next.
A service response can sometimes make things worse Risk may increase if a service contacts relatives without permission, shares information, encourages reconciliation, minimises the danger or treats culturally specific threats as exaggeration.	Before sharing details, ask how your information will be stored, who may see it and when it could be shared. Tell the professional clearly if contacting family or community members could place you or someone else in danger.
Therapy cannot remove an active threat Counselling or therapy may help with fear, shame, grief, self-blame and the effects of trauma. However, therapy alone cannot stop another person from threatening, monitoring or harming you.	Ask for safeguarding support and specialist ‘honour’-based abuse advice as well as emotional support. Your current coping responses may have helped you survive. Safety should come before pressure to change how you think, feel or behave.

What safer support can feel like

When you seek help, the professional should take you seriously, try to understand the full situation and keep you involved in decisions about your own life. They should not dismiss your fears, but neither should they assume that every feared outcome will happen. They should ask enough questions to understand what has already happened, which risks are present and credible and what changes might increase danger.

A professional should explain confidentiality clearly, including the circumstances in which they may need to share information. They should ask when and how it is safe to contact you and check before leaving messages, sending letters or contacting anyone else.

They should look beyond immediate physical danger. Risk may also involve money, housing, immigration status, travel, phones, online accounts or relatives in another country. They should ask whether children, siblings or supportive family members could be threatened, blamed or used to pressure you.

They should understand that disclosing your non-belief, entering a relationship, changing how you dress, coming out as LGBTQ+ or speaking publicly may be seen by others as a challenge to family authority or reputation. Your safety plan should be reviewed whenever your circumstances change.

You should not be expected to teach the professional everything about apostasy, 'honour'-based abuse, religion or coercive control. When they lack the necessary knowledge, they should seek specialist advice.

You should remain involved in decisions wherever this can be done safely. If the professional believes that safeguarding action is necessary, they should explain what they plan to do and why, unless speaking to you beforehand would create an immediate additional danger.

Respecting your choices does not mean leaving you alone to manage serious risk. Protecting you does not mean taking control of your life.

Finding the right professional support

A helpful therapist does not need to share your background or beliefs. They do need to take your account seriously, assess realistic risk and remain open to correction. Therapy may help with shame, grief, anxiety, identity, relationships and the longer-term effects of control.

Where there are threats, forced marriage, stalking, family surveillance, confinement or 'honour'-based abuse, therapy should not be the only source of help. Specialist domestic-abuse or 'honour'-based abuse services may be better placed to assess practical risk and assist with safeguarding, housing, legal, immigration or financial needs.

Warning signs include encouraging immediate disclosure without assessing risk, assuming family involvement is always helpful, treating coercion as a cultural misunderstanding, minimising threats because physical violence has not yet occurred, or becoming defensive when you correct an assumption.

A professional should clearly name abuse without reducing culture, religion or family life to stereotypes.

When self-help is not enough

Self-help cannot provide physical protection, emergency assessment, medical treatment or sustained practical advocacy. Additional support is important if you fear abduction, forced marriage, serious violence or being taken abroad; if someone controls your phone, money, documents or movements; if threats are escalating; or if you cannot keep yourself safe.

It is also important to seek professional assessment when depression, panic, dissociation, intrusive memories, substance use or self-harm are causing distress and preventing you from sleeping, eating, working or caring for yourself.

Part One: Closing Reflections

Part One has described how an authoritarian religious environment may shape identity, concealment, belonging, fear, shame, sex and gender, sexuality, the body and moral judgement. These effects are connected, but they are not identical. Understanding the differences matters because each calls for a different kind of response.

Current danger requires practical safety. Shunning requires space for grief and relational loss. Internalised shame requires a different response from justified guilt. Hypervigilance cannot be approached in the same way when a threat is present as when the danger has passed. Moral uncertainty is not solved by substituting one rigid authority for another.

Part Two turns towards the practical and emotional work that can support recovery: assessing safety, helping the body settle, recognising inherited messages, rebuilding self-trust, developing boundaries, making room for grief and creating relationships and choices that feel more genuinely your own.

Part Two: Rebuilding Safety, Trust, and Choice

Introduction to Part Two

Leaving a high-control religious environment does not automatically remove its effects. Your beliefs may change before your fear, shame, habits, relationships or bodily reactions begin to change. You may understand that a punishment is no longer coming and still feel afraid. You may live independently and still become tense when a relative calls. You may know that you have the right to make your own choices and still feel guilty when you use that right.

Part Two explores what may help with these experiences. It is not a fixed programme, a clinical treatment plan or a set of steps that everyone must follow. It is a practical, trauma-informed guide offering psychological explanations, reflective questions and tools that you can adapt to your circumstances.

The focus remains on people who have lived within authoritarian or coercive Islamic environments. These may include families, communities or states in which religious authority, including through political or legal structures, is used to enforce obedience through fear, shame, surveillance, exclusion, threats, punishment or violence.

This does not mean that all Muslims are harmful or controlling. Muslim experiences are diverse. Religious beliefs, doctrines and practices can be freely criticised; the concern here is the use of religion and religious authority to restrict freedom, equality or the right to dissent and leave.

For some ex-Muslims, the consequences are not only psychological or emotional but also social, material, legal and physical. Disclosure may affect housing, finances, immigration status, family contact, access to children, marriage, reputation or physical safety. In some circumstances, threats of forced marriage, violence or death are real.

Recovery cannot therefore begin with the assumption that the danger has passed. Where the source of harm is an ongoing law, institution, family structure or religious authority, psychological coping cannot substitute for rights, protection and freedom from coercion.

Some ex-Muslims may remain in unsafe or unstable situations. Others are physically safer but continue to react as though earlier danger is still present. Many may recognise themselves in both experiences. Part Two begins with safety. What this part covers The chapters move from safety and bodily reactions towards inherited rules, self-trust, values, grief, relationships, boundaries and future choices. Along the way, you will find reflective questions and practical exercises that you can use selectively rather than as a fixed programme.

How to use this part

You do not need to complete every exercise or read every chapter in one sitting. The chapters follow a general movement from safety towards deeper reflection and rebuilding. Your needs, however, may not follow the same order. You may begin with the chapter that feels most relevant and return to earlier sections later.

Some days, you may want to examine a belief or complete a worksheet. On other days, reading one page or using a grounding exercise may be enough. Feel free to stop halfway through an exercise and return to it another day. You can do it with someone you trust or decide it's not for you at all. This book does not have to become another set of rules.

People who have lived under strict rules may approach recovery as another task they must complete correctly. You may worry about choosing the right exercise, giving the right answer or making progress quickly enough. These reactions can make sense when mistakes once led to shame, rejection, punishment or fear.

When an exercise feels difficult.

Stop an exercise if it significantly increases fear, panic, dissociation, numbness or disconnection. Stop as well if it places your privacy or safety at risk.

Feeling distressed does not necessarily mean that an exercise is helpful or that you should continue. It may mean that the exercise is too much for now, does not suit you or would be safer with professional support.

If you feel overwhelmed, you might: look around the room and name what you can see; keep your eyes open; move your hands or feet; drink some water; step outside if it is safe; contact someone you trust; return to the exercise another time.

Grounding, breathing, relaxation and mindfulness cannot make an unsafe situation safe. When danger is current, practical protection may need to come first. This might include housing support, legal advice, financial assistance, safeguarding or specialist services.

Before you begin Take your time. Use a separate notebook only if writing things down is safe. Skip, shorten or adapt any exercise that does not suit you. Do not pressure yourself to confront anyone, disclose your beliefs, forgive, reconnect or make major decisions before you are ready. Some sections may be easier to work through with a therapist, support group, advocate or trusted person. No single exercise will resolve every difficulty. Change often develops through many small experiences of safety, choice, reflection and support.

Chapter 8: Safety Before Openness

Being safe and feeling safe

Quotes from Support Group	What do these experiences have in common?
“I still haven’t told my family.” “I’ve lived alone for years, but my heart still races when my mother calls.” “I’m waiting for an asylum decision. Every email feels life changing.”	At first glance it may seem there is very little in common. One person is hiding. One person has already left. One person is trying to rebuild a life under uncertain circumstances. Yet all three are asking the same question: <i>Am I safe?</i> <i>Safety can look different on the outside, but still organise very different lives.</i>

For ex-Muslims, there is no single path to recovery since everyone leaves with different experiences, needs, and circumstances. After leaving, some may want to understand what happened to them, while others might focus on rebuilding confidence, finding purpose, setting boundaries, repairing relationships, or making sense of rejection from family or community. Each of these is an important part of recovery, yet it becomes harder to focus on emotional work when danger or instability is still part of daily life. When housing, finances, immigration status, relationships, or physical safety are uncertain, the mind and body naturally prioritise getting through the day. The pressure of meeting practical needs and staying safe can leave little space for reflection, healing, or rebuilding a sense of self. This focus on safety aligns with Judith Herman’s phase-based model of trauma recovery. Herman places safety and stabilisation at the start of recovery, while acknowledging that recovery rarely follows a tidy or predictable sequence (Herman, 1992a).

That is why this section begins with one simple question:

Is it safe for me to take the next step?

For some ex-Muslims, this question is not a hypothetical risk but a genuine and immediate danger. As many of the support group participants have stated, speaking about their beliefs comes with the risk of losing their most basic needs, such as housing, financial support, relationships, immigration status, or physical safety.

Women and girls may face additional risks due to family ‘honour’-based beliefs and expectations around marriage, sexuality, religiously prescribed dress, obedience, and family reputation. In some families, leaving Islam is seen as an intentional act that brings dishonour to the family and community. In attempts to protect and restore their perceived ‘honour’, relatives may increase surveillance, impose additional restrictions on freedom, force marriage, use violence, or make threats to life. In the most serious cases, this can lead to so-called ‘honour’ killings or coerced suicide. These are safeguarding concerns and should not be treated as ordinary family disagreements. If you believe you may be at risk, it is important to remember that your safety comes before openness or disclosure of your beliefs.

Other ex-Muslims may no longer face immediate danger, yet reminders of the past can still trigger strong emotional or physical reactions. A phone call from a family member, an unexpected encounter with someone from a former community, or hearing a familiar name may still bring a racing heart, tense muscles or an urge to escape.

Some ex-Muslims continue to face genuine risks while also carrying reactions shaped by earlier experiences. Part of recovery involves learning to recognise what is happening today and to feel connected to the present. It also involves recognising what your mind and body still expect because of the past.

One of the clearest lessons from my clinical work with ex-Muslims is that being safe and feeling safe are not always the same thing. You are living with current danger. You may still depend on family for your most basic needs, such as housing, financial support, immigration status, childcare, transport, or other practical needs. You may be worried that revealing your non-belief could lead to rejection, homelessness, forced marriage, violence, surveillance, or other serious consequences. If this reflects your current situation, protecting yourself needs to come first. The purpose of this section is not to pressure you into disclosure or confrontation before it is safe. It is to help you assess your current circumstances, recognise possible risks, and make informed decisions without placing yourself in unnecessary danger.

Case Example
Safe Now, but Still Watching
Nadia had moved away from her family and was living alone in a flat. She earned her own income, had supportive friends and decided who entered her home. No one checked her phone, questioned where she had been or demanded explanations about how she lived. By any practical measure, she was safe. Her body had not fully accepted this.
An unexpected knock at the door made her freeze. When a relative called, she sometimes glanced around the room to check whether anything nearby might reveal too much about her life. Before leaving the flat, she occasionally watched the street from the window, even though her family did not know where she lived.
She would then turn on herself: • <i>“Why am I still doing this?”</i> • <i>“Nothing is happening.”</i> • <i>“I left. I should be over it by now.”</i>
At first, Nadia tried to force the fear away. Each time it returned, she felt frustrated and ashamed. She had expected leaving to bring a sense of freedom. Instead, part of her still seemed to be waiting for discovery. Slowly, she began to respond to these moments differently. Rather than asking why she was still afraid, she asked: • <i>“What is happening right now?”</i> • <i>“Is there any sign that I am in danger, or has something reminded me of how danger used to feel?”</i>
This did not mean ignoring risk. Nadia continued to take precautions that made sense to her. She did not tell herself that every fear was irrational or force herself to relax before she was ready. She also began paying attention to what had changed. The door was locked. She chose who came inside. Her family did not know her address. She had friends she could contact if she needed help.
The fear did not vanish. But Nadia no longer treated its presence as evidence that she was still trapped. She began to understand that her reactions had developed when watching, checking and preparing had helped her protect herself. They needed time to soften.
Sometimes your circumstances change before your body is ready to trust that they have changed.

You are safer now, but your body may still expect danger: Your circumstances may have changed, but reminders of the past may still trigger you to feel anxious, tense, or ready to protect yourself. For example, a message from a relative, seeing someone from your former community, or an unexpected question about Islam may trigger a reaction that feels much bigger than the situation itself. Many ex-Muslims describe this as one of the most confusing parts of recovery because they know their circumstances have changed, yet part of them still responds as though they are face to face with earlier dangers. Chapter 9 explores these reactions in more depth.

You recognise yourself in both: Some dangers remain part of your life today, while other fears connect more closely to the past. For example, you may live independently but still rely on family for immigration documents. Or you may be physically distant from immediate family and relatives while remaining vulnerable to digital monitoring or community pressure. Or you may feel emotionally safe with friends while continuing to conceal your non-belief from family.

Current danger and reactions shaped by past danger can exist together. The important question is not which category you fit into, but what kind of protection or support you need now. This section explores what safety means, how to assess present-day risks, and how to build a stronger foundation for recovery. Along the way, you will find reflections and practical exercises to help you understand your circumstances and decide what feels safe enough for your next step.

What do we mean by safety?

Over the years I have observed that, when many ex-Muslims think about safety, they think first about physical danger: violence, homelessness, financial insecurity, or the risk of family discovering they no longer believe. These are real risks, and for some they remain part of their everyday life. Yet, physical safety is only one part of the picture and is the one that may appear most obvious because it is visible. When we consider an ex-Muslim who lives independently, supports themselves financially, and faces no immediate physical threat, they can still avoid certain conversations, hesitate before expressing an opinion, or feel anxious whenever their phone rings. Anxiety in these moments may be a response to risk, anticipated consequences or earlier experiences of danger. Safety therefore includes more than protection from physical harm. It also includes whether you can be yourself, trust the people around you, and protect your privacy.

Throughout this section, we will look at four interconnected areas of safety:

Area	What it means	Question to ask
Physical safety	Protection from harm and access to basic needs.	Am I protected from harm, and are my basic needs met?
Emotional safety	Space to express yourself without fear of shame, punishment or rejection.	Do I have space where I can express myself without fear of shame, punishment or rejection?
Relational safety	People around you respect your boundaries, privacy and decisions.	Do the people around me respect my boundaries, privacy and allow me to make my own decisions?
Digital safety	Control over access to personal information, communications, location and online activity.	Can I control who has access to my personal information, communications, location and online activity?

Physical safety: You do not have to feel entirely safe in every area of your life before you start healing. A more helpful question is: Which areas of my safety are not protected right now?

For some ex-Muslims, this might be the most urgent question in this section. In my clinical work and support groups, many ex-Muslims talk about feeling unable to make important decisions because they rely on family for housing, financial support, transportation, childcare, immigration matters, or access to crucial documents. Others live in fear of homelessness, being taken or forced to travel abroad, facing violence, being monitored, or what could happen if people find out they no longer believe.

When these kinds of risks exist, practical protection needs to be addressed as a priority. Securing a safe place to stay, keeping important documents protected, making sure there is access to money and medication, identifying trustworthy people, and reducing the chance of harm create the foundation that allows recovery to begin. When all your energy is spent just getting through the day, there is usually little left for deeper emotional healing. That is a natural response to living with fear and uncertainty.

Emotional safety: If physical safety asks, “Am I protected from harm?”, emotional safety asks, “Do I have anywhere I can be myself without fear?”

Many ex-Muslims continue to censor themselves even when nobody is directly pressuring them. Some avoid certain conversations. Some carefully rehearse what they want to say before expressing an opinion. Others reach important milestones yet feel unable to share them with the people they most want to tell. In my clinical work, many ex-Muslims describe finding it difficult to make their own decisions or disagree without feeling guilty because, for much of their lives, they learned that:

- saying “no” leads to criticism;
- expressing a different opinion creates conflict;
- asking questions attracts shame or punishment;
- making an independent choice puts important relationships at risk;
- revealing certain parts of themselves may have serious consequences.

Over time, these experiences teach many ex-Muslims that openness can bring punishment, rejection, conflict or loss.

That does not mean you should force yourself to speak openly before you are ready. Emotional safety does not require complete disclosure, particularly where openness may place you at greater risk.

Instead, it may help to ask: Am I staying silent because there is a risk today, because earlier experiences have taught me to expect danger, or because both are true? The purpose of this is to understand what your silence is protecting you from.

Relational Safety: Emotional safety means having a place to be yourself without fear. Relational safety now asks: How do those around you respond when you think, believe or live differently from them?

Many ex-Muslims struggle to maintain family relationships while protecting themselves from pressure, coercion, surveillance, control or rejection. This creates an exhausting tension because you may care deeply about your family and still feel unsafe around them. You may want the relationship to continue while knowing that certain parts of your life must remain private. Or you may feel love, guilt, anger, grief, and relief within the same relationship. These mixed emotions do not mean you are confused. They often reflect the reality of caring about people whose behaviour also brings fear, pressure, or pain. Relationships become safer when there is room for difference and when disagreement does not lead to punishment, coercion, surveillance or loss of basic rights.

A safe relationship allows you to:

- say no without pressure;
- make your own decisions;
- keep personal information private;
- disagree without being treated as disobedient or disloyal;
- express your needs without fear of punishment or rejection.

Relationships that undermine your safety often follow a pattern rather than involving a single incident. You may notice that your boundaries are repeatedly ignored, your behaviour is monitored, your privacy is not respected, guilt or religion are used to control your choices or situations are repeatedly created that increase pressure, dependence or control.

Part of recovery involves recognising relationships that feel supportive to your well-being, those that need firmer boundaries, and those that continue to put your safety at risk. Where there's a credible risk of retaliation, protecting yourself and planning carefully are often more important than direct confrontation.

Digital Safety: Digital safety often asks, 'Can I control who has access to my personal information and online life?'

Many ex-Muslims find the online world both a lifeline and a risk. For some, it offers friendships, support groups, information, and a sense of belonging hard to find elsewhere. But it also exposes personal information to family members, acquaintances, or former community members. Ex-Muslims think carefully before sharing information online, even when using anonymous accounts.

They may avoid posting photographs or restrict who can see their social media or avoid discussing certain topics online altogether. It is important to recognise that these precautions may not reflect how a person would freely choose to use the internet. They may be necessary responses to surveillance, threats or the risk of being identified. The important question is not whether you should be more or less cautious than someone else. It is whether your precautions match the risks you face today.

Digital safety involves more than social media. Consider who can access your phone, email, online accounts, shared devices, photographs, location, or financial information.

If someone monitors your devices or online accounts as part of a wider pattern of control or abuse, changing passwords or privacy settings may increase risk. In these situations, seeking specialist advice before making changes may be the safer option. Protecting your privacy isn't dishonesty; it's part of protecting your physical and emotional safety.

Case Example

Mariam was twenty-four and still lived with her parents, who believed that she remained a practising Muslim. Her father controlled the family finances. Her older brother sometimes checked her phone and questioned her about where she had been.

Mariam wanted to tell her family that she no longer believed. Keeping such an important part of herself hidden left her feeling trapped and ashamed. At times, she worried that remaining silent meant she was still allowing her family to control her.

A friend from an ex-Muslim group told her:

”
“

‘You will never be free until you tell them the truth.’

The comment stayed with her. Part of Mariam wanted to disclose her beliefs to prove that she was no longer afraid. Yet she also understood what she could lose. Her family might ask her to leave home, cut off her access to money or prevent her from seeing her younger sister.

Until then, Mariam had focused on one question: What if they find out before I tell them?

She began to see that courage was not the only issue. She also needed to ask:

?	<i>Do I want to tell them?</i>
?	<i>What might happen if I tell them now?</i>

Mariam decided not to disclose yet. Instead, she began quietly increasing her choices. She researched housing options, learned how she might access money independently and identified two people she could contact in an emergency.

She still hoped that one day she might speak openly. For now, she chose to increase her options before increasing her visibility. The decision did not remove the discomfort of hiding, but it gave her time to prepare without placing herself in greater danger.

Looking at safety as a whole

The aim is not to remove every uncertainty before taking the next step, but to understand where genuine risks remain, strengthen the areas that need attention, and recognise whether fear is responding to a current threat, earlier experiences of danger, or both. As you continue through this section, keep returning to one question:

What do I need to feel safe enough to take the next step that matters to me?

Is it danger, anxiety, or both?

One of the hardest parts of leaving Islam can be working out whether fear is responding to a current threat, an earlier experience of danger, or both. This is an issue that I often hear in both my clinical work and support groups where many ex-Muslims talk about sharing their fears with therapists, healthcare workers, friends, or other professionals, only to be told they are “just anxious”. For many, being told they are “just anxious” can feel deeply invalidating and may result in genuine risks being overlooked. An ex-Muslim once put it simply:

“My therapist keeps asking whether my fears are realistic. The problem is that some of them are.”

This section does not assume that every fear reflects a current danger, nor does it assume that fear can be explained simply as anxiety.

One of the most important parts of recovery is learning to assess the difference between the two. Anxiety and danger are not opposites. Anxiety describes what happens in the mind and body when we anticipate something threatening, uncertain, or hard to control. Danger refers to the likelihood and seriousness of an external threat or risk of harm. Fear, by comparison, is the immediate alarm that rises when we sense a threat. Psychologist David Clark, an anxiety researcher, and psychiatrist Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, distinguish fear, an alarm response to perceived immediate danger, from anxiety, which is more often associated with anticipated threat, uncertainty or possible future harm (Clark & Beck, 2010). This distinction helps us consider both our inner alarm and the situation we face.

Sometimes anxiety can show up even when there is no immediate threat. Sometimes danger is present even when others do not see it, and sometimes both exist at once. For some ex-Muslims, especially those affected by so-called ‘honour’-based abuse, danger can involve several people and extend across family, community, digital and transnational networks. A parent, sibling, partner, extended family member, or someone within the community may take part in monitoring, intimidation or punishment.

The pattern matters just as much as the individual incidents. One argument, one threat, or one attempt to control you may not tell the whole story. When the same behaviours keep happening repeatedly over a long period of time (behaviours such as being monitored, criticised, humiliated, isolated, pressured, or having your choices restricted), they begin to reveal a pattern of coercive control. Research on coercive control and so-called ‘honour’-based abuse encourages us to look at these repeated patterns rather than focusing on one isolated event (Stark, 2007).

Ask yourself whether you notice a pattern.

Pause and reflect

- Does the same person repeatedly ignore your boundaries?
- Do they monitor your movements, phone, or relationships?
- Do they use guilt, religion, shame, or family ‘honour’ to influence your decisions?
- Do they become more controlling when you ask for space?

When these patterns are present, they deserve careful attention as they can often indicate that greater caution, practical safeguarding, or specialist advice is needed.

Safety is not the same as certainty

After listening to many ex-Muslims, I notice another pattern. Many postpone important decisions because they hope that, with enough time, certainty will eventually arrive.

They want to know how their family will react, whether their relationship with their family will survive, or even whether they will regret leaving. Wanting certainty is understandable when a decision may affect your relationships, housing, finances, immigration status or physical safety. High-control environments can also make uncertainty difficult to tolerate because they often present fixed rules, prescribed answers and recognised authorities as sources of certainty. Leaving Islam, on the other hand, involves making decisions without the certainty previously promised by religion and religious authority.

Leaving Islam does not necessarily end the search for certainty. For many ex-Muslims, it simply changes the questions. Instead of wondering, “What does my religion expect of me?” you may begin asking yourself:

“What if I make the wrong decision?”

“What if my family rejects me?”

“What if I regret this?”

“What if everything gets worse?”

You may find yourself waiting until you feel completely certain before taking the next step. The difficulty is that complete certainty rarely arrives. None of us can know exactly how another person will respond. We cannot guarantee that every relationship will survive, that we will never regret a decision, or that life will immediately become easier. If you wait until every doubt disappears, you may find yourself waiting for something that no one can ever have.

Sometimes I notice ex-Muslims comparing their own uncertainty with the confidence that family members, religious communities, or even other ex-Muslims may hold. Yet, even when confidence can feel convincing, it is not the same as certainty because none of us can predict the future. Perhaps a more useful question is not:

“How can I know for certain what will happen?”

Instead, it may be more useful to ask:

“What would help me feel safe enough to make this decision?”

That question shifts the focus from seeking certainty to increasing safety. For example, if you are thinking about telling your family that you no longer believe, you may never know exactly how they will respond, but you may be able to strengthen your financial independence, identify somewhere safe to stay, protect important documents, seek specialist advice and think through your options. You may decide in advance whether to disclose at all and, if so, how much you want to share. None of these steps can guarantee a particular outcome. What preparation can provide is greater choice, more protection and a stronger basis for making the decision on your own terms.

Pause and reflect

Waiting for certainty

Think about a decision you have been postponing.

Ask yourself:

What certainty am I waiting for?

Is that certainty something anyone can realistically give me?

What would help me feel safer before I decide?

Is waiting protecting me at the moment, or is there one small step I can safely take?

Sometimes, waiting feels like the safest move as you get ready for what's next, and it can even open up new possibilities. Choosing to delay a decision or opting not to share everything can be a valid way to exercise your autonomy. Learning to recognise the differences is an important part of healing.

Putting safety into practice

Understanding safety can be an important first step, but when it comes to applying it to your own life, it is often more difficult. Many ex-Muslims understand the importance of safety but still find themselves asking practical questions:

- ☐ Who can I trust?
- ☐ Which risks are current, and which reactions may be shaped more strongly by earlier experiences?
- ☐ What support do I have if something changes?
- ☐ What do I need to feel safer before making an important decision?

The exercises that follow are designed to help you answer those questions. You do not need to complete every exercise or work through them in order. Choose the ones that fit your circumstances and leave those that do not. Some exercises may help clarify which risks have reduced. Others may identify risks or vulnerabilities that perhaps need further attention or support.

If an exercise increases your fear, places your privacy at risk, or feels unsafe to complete on your own, then stop. Consider whether it would be better to return to it later or complete it with someone you trust.

The aim is not to complete everything but to understand your circumstances and consider whether your decisions reflect your current situation.

Exercise 1: Safety Audit

One thing I notice in my clinical work is that many ex-Muslims think about safety as though it is something they either have or do not have.

In reality, safety is often more complex because you might feel physically secure yet still conceal parts of yourself from your family. You may trust your friends but feel anxious about your immigration status. You could feel emotionally safe yet be financially dependent on people who aren't aware that you've left Islam. Looking at each area separately often gives a clearer picture of where you feel secure and where you may need more support. There are no right or wrong answers. This exercise is simply a way of helping you understand your current circumstances.

My areas of safety Rate each area from 0 (not safe) to 10 (very safe).																									
Area of safety	Rating	What helps me feel safe?	What needs attention?																						
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Rate each area from **0 to 10**, where:

☐ **0** = This area currently feels very unsafe.

☐ **10** = This area feels secure and well supported.

When you have finished, take a moment to reflect.

Pause and reflect

Which area feels strongest now?

Which area feels most vulnerable?

Which area would make the biggest difference to your wellbeing if it improved?

Is there one small, realistic step you could take to strengthen that area?

Do you need practical, professional, or specialist support before taking that step?

This exercise is not a formal risk assessment, and the numbers themselves do not determine whether you are safe. Its purpose is to help you organise your thoughts, recognise your strengths, and identify the areas that may need the most attention right now.

Exercise 2: Your Safe-People Map

One thing I notice in my clinical work is that many ex-Muslims spend so much energy managing difficult relationships that they rarely stop to think about who actually helps them feel safe. Familiarity does not always mean safety. Someone may be a close relative and still ignore your boundaries. Someone you have known for a short time may consistently respect your choices, your privacy, and your wellbeing.

This exercise invites you to think about the people in your life based on their behaviour rather than their relationship to you. A person may appear in more than one category depending on the situation.

People I could contact in an emergency

Who could offer practical help if I needed it?

This might include somewhere to stay, transport, emotional support, or help during a crisis.

People I can be honest with

Who allows me to speak openly without shaming, pressuring, dismissing, or trying to change my mind?

People I trust in limited ways

Who is supportive in some situations but not others?

For example, someone I would ask for practical help but not talk to about my beliefs.

People I need to be cautious around

Who repeatedly ignores my boundaries, shares private information, pressures me, monitors me, or involves other people without my permission?

When you have completed your map, ask yourself:

- Who consistently respects my privacy?
- Who accepts “no” without trying to change my mind?
- Who supports me even when we disagree?
- Who has earned my trust through their actions rather than their words?
- Who leaves me feeling calmer after we spend time together?
- Who leaves me feeling anxious, guilty, or on edge?
-

You may notice that trust looks different from familiarity. That is often an important part of recovery. This exercise is not intended to help you decide who should remain in your life. It is to help you recognise which relationships support your wellbeing, which have clear limits, and which require greater caution.

Exercise 3: Emergency Support Plan

Many ex-Muslims will not require an emergency safety plan. For those facing risks, having a plan can help them prepare. It may reduce the number of decisions you have to make under pressure if circumstances change suddenly. You may never need to use this plan. Even so, many people find that simply knowing they have thought things through helps them feel more prepared.

Complete only the sections that are relevant to your circumstances.

The sections are:

1 People I could contact

Who could I contact quickly if something changed?

Consider: someone who understands my situation; respects my privacy; would not share information without my permission; could respond quickly.

2 Places I could go

Where could I go if I could not stay where I am?

Consider: whether I would feel safe there; how I would get there; whether anyone could find me; whether arrangements are needed in advance.

3 Important documents and information

What information might I need to access in an emergency?

Consider: identification or immigration documents; medication details; bank or legal information; emergency numbers; evidence of threats or harassment.

4 Immediate practical needs

What would I need during the first day if I had to leave quickly?

Consider: money; medication; transport; essential belongings; the needs of children or other dependents.

5 When to ask for outside help

What would make me seek specialist advice or emergency support?

Consider: direct threats; escalating harassment or surveillance; pressure to travel abroad; forced marriage concerns; confiscated documents; violence; loss of housing; immediate danger.

The most important question is:

What would help me feel safer right now?

You do not have to face these situations alone. If you recognise these risks, specialist organisations, domestic abuse services, safeguarding teams, and emergency services may be able to help. The purpose of this exercise is to help you think more clearly about your options if your circumstances change.

Case Example:
A Plan That Could Not Be Written Down

Harun lived with relatives who entered his room without knocking and sometimes moved his belongings. He knew that writing down a detailed safety plan, keeping important documents in a bag or suddenly changing his routine might draw attention.

He kept thinking:

	• <i>“What if they find something before I am ready?”</i> • <i>“What if trying to prepare is what makes them suspicious?”</i> • <i>“How am I supposed to make a plan when I have nowhere private to keep it?”</i>
---	---

At first, Harun felt as though he was doing nothing. He had no emergency bag, no written list of steps and no safe place to keep documents. When he compared himself with the advice he had read, his preparations seemed too small to count.

He began to see that a visible plan could create its own risk. He needed something quieter.

Harun memorised one telephone number. He agreed on a simple phrase he could send to a trusted colleague if he needed help. He kept an ordinary-looking spare charger at work and learned how to reach a public place without relying on his phone.

None of this removed every danger. It did, however, give him a few options that fitted the circumstances he was living in.

His plan was not less serious because it could not be written down. Its value came from being discreet enough to use without making him more visible.

	A useful safety plan is not the most detailed one. It is the one that increases your choices without drawing attention to your preparations or creating additional danger.
---	--

If you are not yet safe

Some ex-Muslims remain at genuine risk because of their circumstances. You may still depend on family for housing, financial support, immigration status, childcare, or other practical needs. You may worry that your non-belief could lead to rejection, violence, forced marriage, loss of financial support, or other serious consequences. If this reflects your situation, the exercises in this chapter cannot replace specialist safeguarding, legal advice, domestic abuse services, housing support, immigration advice, or emergency assistance. They can, however, help you think through your options and organise important information while you decide what to do next.

For some people, remaining closeted is the safest available choice. Not to disclose your beliefs is not a sign of weakness or dishonesty. When openness places you at genuine risk, protecting your privacy is often the safest and most responsible decision. The following plan is intended for those who believe that disclosure could affect their safety, housing, finances, immigration status, relationships, children, or future.

Chapter 9: Helping Your Body Recognise the Present

Leaving an authoritarian Islamic environment does not necessarily remove fear, even when you know that your circumstances have changed. Your mind and body may continue to react to thoughts of punishment, rejection, or danger.

What trauma means

Trauma is often thought of as the result of a single overwhelming event, such as a serious car accident or a life-threatening house fire. Sometimes that is the case. Trauma-related difficulties may also follow repeated exposure to similar events or several traumatic experiences occurring at different points in a person's life (Herman, 1992a, 1992b; van der Kolk et al., 2005). Their psychological effects may also develop gradually when fear, coercion, or helplessness become part of everyday life, although not every prolonged or distressing experience meets the formal criteria for PTSD or CPTSD (Herman, 1992a, 1992b; McEwen, 1998).

The source of the harm can also matter. Trauma caused by another person may affect people differently from trauma caused by an accident or natural disaster (Herman, 1992b; Freyd, 1996). Both can seriously affect a person's sense of safety, but deliberate interpersonal harm may also damage trust, relationships and confidence in one's own judgement (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). This may be especially significant when the person cannot easily leave, depends on those involved, or is punished for speaking about what is happening (Herman, 1992a, 1992b; Freyd, 1996). Outcomes of any traumatic event vary according to factors such as the severity and duration of the experience, previous difficulties, available support and what happens afterwards.

A natural disaster may threaten a person's assumptions about physical safety, predictability, and control. Unlike abuse by someone they trust, however, the event itself does not necessarily involve a deliberate violation of interpersonal trust. Natural disasters can still disrupt relationships, social support, and trust in institutions, particularly when people feel abandoned or inadequately protected afterwards (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008).

Why Can Interpersonal Harm Feel Different?

Several factors may contribute to this:

- Betrayal of trust: Harm caused by a parent, partner, community, or authority figure may undermine a person's sense that others are safe or reliable.
- Intent and responsibility: Knowing that another person chose to threaten, punish, humiliate, or control them can be difficult to make sense of.
- Isolation and shame: Interpersonal harm may be hidden, denied, or blamed on the person experiencing it, limiting opportunities for support.
- Loss of belonging: Speaking about the harm may place family, community, housing, finances, or important relationships at risk.
- Questions about preventability: People may repeatedly wonder whether they could have stopped what happened, even when responsibility belonged to those who harmed or controlled them.

Repeated coercion, rejection or punishment within an important relationship may continue to affect you after the immediate situation has changed. When you have limited ability to escape or protect yourself, your mind and body may adapt by giving priority to signs of danger. These responses may help you survive at the time, but they can later affect emotional regulation, trust, relationships and your sense of self (McEwen, 1998; van der Kolk et al., 2005; Herman, 1992a, 1992b).

Another framework for understanding the trauma of leaving high-control environments comes from Robert Jay Lifton's research into Chinese thought-reform environments, which described processes such as milieu control, confession, loading the language, demands for purity, and placing doctrine over the person. He explored how these features of an ideologically totalist environment could shape people's understanding of themselves and the world around them (Lifton, 1961/1989). His work concerned organised thought-reform programmes and should not be used to classify every strict family, religious community, or disagreement as a totalist environment.

These frameworks can help us understand certain experiences, but they should not be applied to everyone. Not every strict or religious upbringing is traumatic, and not every family with strong beliefs is controlling. The key question is not simply whether rules exist, but what it is like to live under them. One way to explore this is to consider what happens when someone questions, disagrees, or tries to make different choices.

Consider:

What happens when someone doubts or questions religious beliefs?

Can family members disagree without fear of rejection or punishment?

Does love or acceptance depend on obedience?

Who controls decisions about clothing, relationships, education, work, or marriage?

Can someone leave the religion without losing their home, family, financial support, or safety?

Are private thoughts treated as moral failings?

The answers to these questions often reveal more about the emotional environment than the formal rules themselves. When questioning, leaving, or living more openly carries a risk of punishment, rejection, or coercion, the impact may extend beyond belief and affect a person's sense of safety, identity, trust, and connection (Herman, 1992b; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Do I Need a Diagnosis to Explain What I Am Experiencing?

You may recognise some of the reactions described in this chapter. You may also have encountered terms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) and wondered whether they apply to you.

You do not need a diagnosis for this material to be meaningful. Some people recognise these patterns without meeting the criteria for a mental-health diagnosis. Others receive a diagnosis, while many experience understandable responses to prolonged stress, fear, coercion, or control that do not fit neatly into a diagnostic category. Only a suitably qualified clinician can determine whether a diagnosis applies.

In clinical settings, PTSD describes a particular pattern of symptoms that can develop following qualifying exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Diagnostic systems also require specific symptoms, duration, impairment, and other conditions. Exposure alone does not establish a diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

This distinction matters because experiences such as coercion, rejection, shame, or chronic stress may be deeply harmful without always meeting the formal exposure criteria for PTSD.

Judith Herman proposed the term complex PTSD to describe broader psychological difficulties observed after prolonged and repeated trauma, particularly where a person was under another person's control and had limited ability to escape (Herman, 1992a).

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder is recognised as a separate diagnosis in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision. It includes the three core PTSD symptom groups: re-experiencing, avoidance, and a persistent sense of current threat, alongside difficulties with emotional regulation, a persistent negative sense of self, and sustaining relationships (World Health Organization, 2024).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision does not include CPTSD as a separate diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). These differences matter in clinical assessment and classification, but they do not determine whether your experiences are real, meaningful, or deserving of support.

A Typology of Trauma		
You may find it helpful to think of trauma in three broad categories. You may relate to more than one of these and that's okay. They are ways of recognising what you survived, and you do not need to carry these labels forever.		
Acute trauma: a single overwhelming event, such as a violent assault, a severe threat, or being forcibly outed in circumstances involving serious danger.	Complex or developmental trauma: long-term relational trauma, especially in childhood or adolescence, where escape is impossible, for example, coercive family or religious control.	Chronic trauma: ongoing stress over time, such as years of being surveilled, shamed, or manipulated.

What Do People Mean by Religious Trauma?

You may also hear the term *religious trauma*. Unlike PTSD or CPTSD, religious trauma is not a recognised diagnosis. It is a descriptive term used by some survivors, clinicians, and researchers to describe harm connected to religious beliefs, practices, relationships, or institutions.

Psychologist Marlene Winell used the term Religious Trauma Syndrome to describe distress associated with authoritarian religion and the process of leaving it (Winell, 2011). Although many people find this language helpful, Religious Trauma Syndrome is not recognised as a diagnosis in either the DSM-5-TR or ICD-11.

Those who hold religious beliefs should not automatically be equated with coercion or abuse. Religious doctrines, however, do contain ideas that restrict autonomy, justify inequality, enforce obedience or punish dissent, particularly when they are interpreted literally or given legal, familial or institutional authority. Many Muslims practise their faith without experiencing religious harm, and many people leave Islam without developing lasting psychological difficulties. For some ex-Muslims the distress may be connected to experiences such as:

- fear of hell or divine punishment;
- pressure to conform;
- shunning or social exclusion;
- control over clothing, relationships, sexuality, or education;
- 'honour'-based expectations;
- punishment for questioning or doubting;
- restrictions on personal autonomy; or
- fear of rejection, violence, or losing family relationships.

One experience I hear repeatedly is a gradual loss of trust in one's own judgement. Some ex-Muslims describe being told that they are confused, manipulated, mentally unwell, immoral, possessed, or influenced by the devil. Others are told that they are incapable of knowing what they truly believe. When these messages are repeated over many years, they can become difficult to separate from a person's own thoughts.

Naming an experience does not remove its effects, but it can offer a clearer place from which to begin.

A different question after trauma	
Old question	"What is wrong with me?"
Shift	For many people, naming what happened brings a sense of relief. The question may slowly shift.
New question	"What did I learn to expect, and what helped me survive in that environment?"

Fight, flight, freeze, shutdown, and appease

When you have repeatedly experienced fear, coercion or punishment, your body may learn to react quickly to possible danger. These reactions do not always disappear as soon as your circumstances change. A sound, word, place, person or memory may activate an old protective response before you have time to think about what is happening (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; van der Kolk et al., 2005).

Prolonged or repeated trauma can contribute to difficulties with emotional regulation, attention, relationships, and even our sense of self. This is especially true if you felt a lack of control or couldn't escape the danger (Herman, 1992a;b; van der Kolk et al., 2005). When you detect a possible threat, your body may respond with fight-or-flight reflexes, such as becoming highly alert, escaping, fighting, freezing, or shutting down. Some people may appease or comply to avoid resistance or escape (Kozłowska et al., 2015).

The fight-or-flight response can manifest in physical symptoms like a racing heart, rapid breathing, muscle tension, and narrowed attention as the body prepares for action. But when escape or active resistance feels impossible, some people may freeze or enter a state of numbness or detachment (Kozłowska et al., 2015; Schauer & Elbert, 2010). In the diagram below you may recognise one response more strongly than the others or notice that your reaction changes depending on the situation. To explore your own patterns, turn to Appendix 1: Recognising Your Protective Responses. The exercise includes a checklist of common fight, flight, freeze, shutdown and appease reactions. It is not a diagnostic test, but a tool to help you notice how your body may respond when it senses danger.

It's worth noting that not everyone who experiences trauma will develop lasting difficulties. Some people recover quickly, while others may struggle with intrusive memories, nightmares, heightened alertness, withdrawal, or difficulty concentrating for a long time (Bryant, 2019; Bonanno et al., 2023).

The effects of trauma depend on various factors, including what happened, how long it lasted, whether it was repeated or inescapable, and the level of support available afterwards.

FIGHT	Confront, argue, become angry or defensive.
FLIGHT	Escape, avoid, remain busy or restless.
FREEZE	Become still, blank, numb or unable to act.
SHUTDOWN	Feel detached, exhausted or disconnected.
APPEASE	Comply, placate or prioritise another person's needs to reduce danger.
These are natural survival responses. None of them are wrong. Awareness gives you more choice.	

For some people, even years after leaving a high-control environment, reminders of past danger can still trigger strong reactions. This might be due to automatic patterns of threat detection that developed during their time in the environment (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Persistent fear may simply reflect that our brains and bodies need more time to process and heal from past traumas.

Before moving on, it may help to notice what is happening in your body. By embodied experience, I mean ordinary sensations such as breathing, tension, hunger, tiredness, comfort, discomfort and emotional reactions. Trauma-related stress can affect attention, breathing, muscle tension, sleep, sensory awareness and the impulse to fight, flee, freeze or withdraw (van der Kolk, 1994). Paying attention to bodily sensations can therefore offer another source of information about when you are moving into self-protection.

Bodily sensations may include noticing your:

- sleep;
- breathing;
- muscle tension;
- movement;
- hunger;
- fatigue;
- sensory awareness;
- connection with the present.

Our bodies have the capacity to adapt, protect us, and recover. Reconnecting with the body allows us to gradually become more aware of our needs, limits, emotions, and physical responses.

The window of tolerance

If your body can continue responding to earlier experiences, another question naturally follows:
Why do I feel able to cope one day but overwhelmed or completely shut down the next?

One model that many therapists find helpful is the Window of Tolerance, developed by psychiatrist Daniel Siegel (Siegel, 1999). Think of it as your own range of emotional capacity.

Within that range, you can experience difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed or emotionally disconnected. Later, Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain applied this model within Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, describing states above this range as hyperarousal and below it as hypoarousal (Ogden et al., 2006).

The window of tolerance is a clinical framework, not a medical test. Understanding your window of tolerance helps you make sense of what's happening to you. Instead of thinking, "What's wrong with me?" you can say, "My nervous system is outside its window." For some people, this way of understanding their reactions reduces shame and makes the experience feel more manageable.

Recognising signs of hyperarousal or hypoarousal may help you identify what kind of support or regulation you need. With practice, you may find that you can tolerate a wider range of emotional experience without becoming overwhelmed or disconnected. What once overwhelmed you may become manageable. What once shut you down may feel tolerable. See the figure below for a visual presentation of the window of tolerance.

ABOVE YOUR WINDOW	Hyperarousal: your body is on red alert. You might feel anxious, angry or panicky; feel like everything is too much; or notice racing thoughts or a heart that will not slow down. Your body may be trying to fight or run.
WITHIN YOUR WINDOW	Life may still be hard, but you can be in it. You can handle challenges without falling apart, connect with people, focus on tasks, and feel and express emotions without being overtaken by them.
BELOW YOUR WINDOW	Hypoarousal: your body shuts down. You might feel numb or empty, struggle to get out of bed, space out or feel like you are not really here, or feel underwater and disconnected. Freezing is also a survival response.

Everyday Examples:

Think of a time when you felt steady, clear, and present; that's within your window. Now think of a moment when you snapped at someone in panic or anger; that was hyperarousal. Or a time when you went completely blank in a conversation, unable to think or speak, that was hypoarousal. Neither is an evaluation of who you are, nor does either say anything about you. It simply means you have stepped outside your window. If disconnecting from your body once helped you cope, you may gradually learn ways of reconnecting that feel safe and manageable.

Growing up in a high-control religious or family environment can also affect your window of tolerance. If you spend years expecting criticism, punishment, rejection, or harm, your mind and body may become quicker to recognise possible danger and slower to recognise safety. Constant monitoring, fear of divine punishment, 'honour'-based control, or being discouraged from asking questions can all shape how you respond to everyday situations. As a result, you may find yourself becoming overwhelmed more easily, staying constantly alert, shutting down emotionally, or moving between these different states. Many ex-Muslims also tell me they worry about what will happen if they allow themselves to feel emotions they have held back for years. You may fear that grief, anger, sadness, or loneliness will become overwhelming if you stop keeping them under control.

If expressing emotions once led to criticism, shame, or punishment, it makes sense that showing them now may still feel risky. Healing does not require you to face everything at once. For most people, it happens gradually. As your sense of safety grows, you may find that difficult emotions become easier to experience without feeling consumed by them. The window of tolerance is helpful because it reminds us that capacity is not fixed. Over time, many people notice that they can stay present for longer, recover more quickly after becoming overwhelmed, and respond with greater flexibility than before. Progress is rarely dramatic. More often, it comes through many small experiences of recognising what is happening, responding to your needs, and discovering that you can move through difficult emotions without remaining stuck in them. Everyone's window is different. It can widen or narrow depending on stress, sleep, physical health, relationships, and what is happening in your life.

Rather than asking whether you are coping well or badly, ask a simpler question:

Can I stay connected to what is happening right now, even when strong emotions are present?

When the answer is yes, you are more likely to think clearly, communicate, consider different options, make decisions, and recover after a difficult situation. Being within your window of tolerance does not mean feeling calm or happy all the time. It means having enough emotional capacity to stay connected to yourself and the present, even when life feels difficult.

What narrows or widens your capacity

Understanding your window of tolerance can help you notice when you are moving towards or beyond your window of tolerance. The next step is to consider the everyday factors that can affect how much stress your mind and body are able to manage. When people think about recovery, they often expect it to begin with deep insight or difficult emotional work. This may not always be necessary, because recovery often begins with the ordinary things you overlook, like sleep, movement and rest.

These may appear too simple to matter, especially when you are dealing with painful memories or difficult relationships. Yet they influence how much physical and emotional energy you have available each day. One thing I notice in my clinical work is that many ex-Muslims become so accustomed to meeting other people's expectations that they stop noticing their own needs.

- You may ignore hunger until the end of the day.
- You may keep working when you are exhausted.
- You may tell yourself you'll rest later.

Or you may become so used to living with tension that you no longer notice it until your body forces you to stop. None of these responses means you are failing. They often reflect habits that develop while surviving environments where your own needs receive little attention. Looking after yourself is not about achieving perfect routines or following another set of rules. It is about asking a simple question:

“What do I need today to give myself the best chance of coping?”

The answer varies daily because you might need sleep, food, physical activity, or a peaceful evening instead of facing another tough conversation. At times, you crave connection. Other times, you require solitude. Recovery rarely depends on doing one big thing well. More often, it grows through repeatedly noticing what you need and responding with care rather than criticism. A worksheet in the appendix will help you reflect on your sleep, eating, movement, emotions, physical sensations, and any needs you may be overlooking. You can use it over the course of a week to notice patterns and identify where additional support, or small changes may be helpful.

Exercise: basic-needs check-in

Use the check-in below at the end of each day for one week. Spend a few quiet minutes noticing how you have been caring for yourself, what emotions have been present, and what your body may be trying to communicate. Try not to judge your answers or treat the exercise as something you need to complete perfectly. The purpose is simply to help you notice patterns that may otherwise be easy to overlook. At the end of the week, look back over what you recorded. Notice which needs you regularly meet, which ones tend to be overlooked, and whether one small change could support your wellbeing. You may also become aware of the need for additional medical, practical, or psychological support. Use the picture below to complete your daily check-in.

For additional support, see Appendix 2, which includes a daily check-in instruction sheet along with reflection questions that can be used to guide your responses.

A week of check-ins A few minutes each day can help you stay connected to what you need.
For the next week, spend a few minutes at the end of each day asking yourself:
Did I get enough sleep? ----- -----
Did I eat and drink regularly? ----- -----
Did I spend any time moving my body? -----
What emotion stands out most today? ----- -----
What do I notice physically right now? ----- -----
Is there anything my body or mind seems to be asking for? ----- -----

At the end of the week, look back over your answers.

Ask yourself:

Do I notice any patterns?

Which needs do I regularly overlook?

What small change would make the biggest difference this week?

Do I need additional medical, practical, or psychological support for anything I have noticed?

This is not a test, and there are no perfect answers.
The aim is simply to become more aware of the
foundations that support your wellbeing.

Sleep: Sleep is a basic biological need that supports our physical health, thinking, memory and ability to manage emotions (Medic et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2024). When someone has lived through trauma, prolonged stress or an environment in which they did not feel safe, sleep can become difficult too. They may struggle to fall asleep, wake repeatedly during the night, have nightmares, or find it difficult to feel settled enough to rest (Werner et al., 2021).

Over time, poor sleep can become part of the distress itself. Feeling exhausted can make emotions harder to manage, while stress and trauma-related symptoms can make it harder to sleep, creating a cycle in which each can make the other more difficult (Slavish & Graham-Engeland, 2022; Palmer et al., 2024).

Some CEMB members have connected night-time distress with earlier experiences of fear, punishment, surveillance or religious teachings about divine punishment and moral failure. Research specifically examining sleep among ex-Muslims is limited, so these experiences should not be assumed to apply to everyone. However, there is research that suggests that trauma-related stress may affect sleep in several ways.

Hyperarousal: A person may find it difficult to settle physically or mentally, which leads to lying awake with racing thoughts, tense muscles, heightened alertness, or a sense of dread. This state of hyperarousal is associated with people who have experienced trauma and insomnia and can interfere with the ability to fall and stay asleep (Germain, 2013).

Fear or Avoidance of Sleep: Some people become anxious about going to sleep and may respond by staying up late or trying to stay awake for as long as possible. Over time, this fear of sleep can maintain trauma-related sleep problems (Kanady et al., 2018; Werner et al., 2021). Sleep paralysis can add to this fear. It happens when your mind wakes up before your body has fully come out of sleep. It can last for a few minutes, during which you may know what is happening around you but be unable to move or speak. Some people also experience frightening sensations, or see or hear things that are not actually there (Denis et al., 2018).

A frightening episode of sleep paralysis can make someone more anxious about going to sleep again. This can create a vicious cycle: fear may lead to delayed or disrupted sleep, which can worsen existing trauma-related sleep difficulties (Kanady et al., 2018; Werner et al., 2021). Disrupted or insufficient sleep is also linked with a greater chance of experiencing sleep paralysis again (Denis et al., 2018).

Broken or fragmented sleep: A person may fall asleep but wake repeatedly during the night. Insomnia, nightmares, repeated awakenings, and disrupted sleep are commonly reported among people with PTSD (Germain, 2013).

These symptoms are not specific to trauma. They can also occur with depression, anxiety, chronic pain, hormonal conditions, breathing-related sleep disorders, medication effects, substance use, environmental insecurity, and periods of acute stress. Persistent or severe sleep disruption may therefore need medical or psychological assessment.

Difficulty winding down: When trying to fall asleep, people often struggle with persistent worry, mental rehearsal, or threat monitoring, which can be habits they have developed to cope with stressful situations. For some people who have lived in threatening or controlling environments, slowing down can actually trigger memories or emotions that they'd previously pushed aside.

Not everyone who leaves a high-control environment will struggle with sleep, and if you do, there may be more than one reason for it. You might feel anxious, have nightmares, dread going to bed, or simply find it hard to switch off.

Good sleep habits can help, but they are not always enough when insomnia has become an ongoing problem (Edinger et al., 2021). The figure below gives some examples.

If sleep continues to be difficult, a more structured treatment for insomnia may help. It can make it easier to fall asleep, reduce the time spent awake during the night and improve how you feel about your sleep overall. Research with people who have PTSD has also found improvements in insomnia and sleep-related functioning, although nightmares and other trauma symptoms may still remain (Talbot et al., 2014).

Exercise: Sleep Hygiene Self-Audit

A Sleep Hygiene Self-Audit is included in Appendix 3 to help you notice which everyday habits support your sleep and which may make rest more difficult. For several nights, spend two or three minutes before bed completing the checklist. Try to approach it with curiosity rather than judgement. This is not a test, and you do not need to achieve a perfect score. If you answer “No” to several questions, simply notice what is happening. You may begin to recognise which habits help you feel more settled in the morning and which are harder to maintain.

Choose one sleep habit to focus on for three to five days. Once it begins to feel more familiar, you can consider adding another.

After a few days, reflect on the following:

- ☐ What helped you feel more rested in the morning?
- ☐ What was most difficult to follow?
- ☐ What could you try differently next week?

Grounding through the senses

There are times when understanding why you react may be enough. There are other times when your mind and body react so quickly that understanding has to wait. In those moments, your first priority is not analysing what happened. It is helping yourself reconnect with the present. This is where grounding can help. Grounding is not about convincing yourself that everything is safe or trying to stop your thoughts. It is simply a way of bringing your attention back to what is happening here and now. Different approaches work for different people. Some people find it helpful to look around the room and others may need movement. Others find it easier to focus on an object, a sound, or the feeling of their feet on the floor. There is no single correct way to ground yourself. The best approach is the one that helps you feel more connected to the present without becoming more overwhelmed.

If looking around helps

When fear takes over, our attention often narrows. We become absorbed in thoughts, memories, or imagined outcomes. In these situations, sometimes it helps to gently remind yourself where you are.

Take a slow look around and notice:

Where am I?
What time of day is it?
Who is here with me?
How did I get here?
What am I going to do next?
You might quietly say to yourself:

*“I’m at home. It’s Tuesday evening. I’ve just finished work. The door is locked.
I’m going to make a cup of tea.”*

The aim is not to make yourself feel better but to reconnect with the facts of the present.

If you prefer something more structured:

Some people find it easier to focus on their senses because it is more structured. A simple way of doing this is the 5-4-3-2-1 exercise.

 5 See	Five things you can see.
 4 Feel	Four things you can feel.
 3 Hear	Three things you can hear.
 2 Smell	Two things you can smell.
 1 Taste	One thing you can taste.
<i>There is nothing special about these numbers. Adapt them if you need to, or skip any sense that feels unpleasant. Choose neutral or comforting sensations rather than anything painful or startling.</i>	

There is nothing special about these numbers, so you can adapt them if you need to, or skip any sense that feels unpleasant. Choose neutral or comforting sensations rather than anything painful or startling.

Three-minute pause

This brief exercise comes from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2013).

1 Notice	Pause and ask: What thoughts do I notice? What emotions are here? What sensations do I notice in my body? There is nothing to fix; simply notice what is present.
2 Focus	Gently bring your attention to your breathing for a few moments. If focusing on your breath increases distress, choose something outside yourself instead — a sound, an object in the room, or the feeling of your feet on the floor.
3 Widen	Gradually expand your attention to include your whole body and surroundings. Notice the room around you, the floor supporting you, and what feels different from a few moments ago.
<i>Take your time. There is no right or wrong way to do this.</i>	

Now notice the difference from a few minutes ago.
Then ask yourself one final question:

What do I need right now?

Sometimes the answer is rest, movement, nourishment, connection, or permission.

Take a moment to pause. Which of these feels most true today?

Rest	Movement
To slow down, pause, or simply allow yourself time to recover.	To stretch, walk, change your position, or gently release tension.
Nourishment	Connection
To eat, drink, and care for your body's basic needs.	To reach out to someone you trust, or spend time with others.
Courage	Permission
To have a difficult conversation or take one small step towards what matters.	To accept that today may not be the right day to push yourself.
<i>Your needs may change from one moment to the next. Mindfulness does not tell you what the answer should be. It simply helps you notice it more clearly.</i>	

***Mindfulness does not tell you what the answer should be.
It simply helps you notice it more clearly.***

If focusing inward feels difficult:

Some ex-Muslims find that closing their eyes or paying attention to their breathing makes them feel less connected rather than more connected. If that happens, try focusing on something outside yourself instead.

Choose an everyday object nearby and describe it in as much detail as you can. Notice its colour, shape, texture, weight, temperature, or any small marks you have never noticed before.

Giving your full attention to something ordinary can interrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts and help bring you back to the present.

If your body wants to move:

For some, sitting still is not comforting, and their body may need movement before their mind can settle. You might:

1	Walk around the room.
2	Stretch your shoulders or neck.
3	Place both feet firmly on the floor.
4	Gently shake out your hands.
5	Walk outside for a few minutes if it is safe to do so.
6	Put on music and move in whatever way feels comfortable.
7	Complete one simple practical task, such as making a drink or watering a plant.
<i>One small action can be enough to help your body and mind begin to settle.</i>	

(Choose whichever feels most manageable in this moment.)

Movement does not need to be intense. Its purpose is simply to help you reconnect with your body and your surroundings. Choose activities that feel physically safe for you, and stop if you experience pain, dizziness, or increasing distress.

Releasing physical tension: Sometimes we become so used to carrying tension that we stop noticing it.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation, developed by Edmund Jacobson (1938), involves gently tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups to help you recognise the difference between tension and relaxation. If deliberately tensing your muscles feels uncomfortable or you have an injury, simply notice where you are holding tension and see whether you can allow those muscles to soften a little.

1 Hand & fingers	Make a gentle fist. Hold. Relax.
2 Arms	Bend your arms and gently tense your biceps. Hold. Relax.
3 Shoulders	Lift your shoulders towards your ears. Hold. Relax.
4 Face	Squeeze your eyes shut and tighten your forehead. Hold. Relax.
5 Neck	Gently press your head back. Hold. Relax.
6 Chest	Take a deep breath in and hold. Hold. Relax.
7 Abdomen	Tighten your stomach muscles. Hold. Relax.
8 Legs & feet	Tighten your thighs and point your toes upwards. Hold. Relax.
<i>Gently tense each muscle group, hold for a few seconds, then slowly relax and notice the difference. There is no need to force your body — simply noticing tension is a helpful place to begin.</i>	

There is no need to force your body to relax. Often, simply noticing tension is a helpful place to begin. As you try these different approaches, remember that the goal is not to find the perfect technique. It is to discover what helps you return to the present when your mind or body begins responding to danger associated with earlier experiences.

When mindfulness helps

If grounding helps you reconnect with the present, mindfulness can help you notice what happens next. Mindfulness is often described as paying attention to present-moment experience with openness and without immediately judging it (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

In practice, it may be as simple as noticing:

“I’m feeling anxious.”
“My shoulders are tense.”
“I want to explain myself.”
“I don’t have to respond immediately.”

For many ex-Muslims, that small pause can be significant.

Living in a high-control religious or family environment often means reacting quickly. You may learn to hide your thoughts, monitor your behaviour, or explain yourself before anyone questions you. Mindfulness creates a small space between what you experience and what you do next. That space can make it easier to respond deliberately rather than automatically.

Mindfulness is a skill, not a requirement. It does not remove painful emotions, eliminate difficult memories, or make every situation easier. It simply offers another way of relating to your thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Research suggests that mindfulness-based approaches can reduce rumination and help some people develop a different relationship with automatic thoughts, although the benefits vary from person to person (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Segal et al., 2013).

When mindfulness does not help

Mindfulness does not suit everyone. Some people find that focusing inward increases anxiety, traumatic memories, depersonalisation, or dissociation. Research also documents difficult meditation-related experiences, particularly for people with a history of trauma (Lindahl et al., 2017; Treleaven, 2018). If you notice yourself becoming less present rather than more connected, stop the exercise and try something different.

You might:

- keep your eyes open;
- focus on sounds or objects around you instead of your breathing;
- stand up and move;
- speak to someone you trust;
- return to one of the grounding exercises earlier in this chapter.

There is nothing therapeutic about forcing yourself to continue with a practice that leaves you more distressed, dissociated or disconnected.

My regulation exercises

When I notice that I am becoming overwhelmed, I can pause and consider what might help me feel safer, calmer or more connected to the present. Look at the picture below and choose what helps you.

Choose what helps. You know yourself best.

Ground / Move	Pause/ Nourish	Connect/ Plan
Look around the room and remind myself where I am.	Drink water or eat something nourishing.	Speak to someone I trust.
Focus on my breathing or another grounding exercise.	Take a break before responding.	Write my thoughts down.
Go for a walk or move my body.	Rest or get more sleep.	Return to my safety plan if there is genuine danger.
<i>Add to the list as you discover what works for you. Ask: Which helps me feel more connected to the present? Which helps me think more clearly? Which reminds me that I have choices?</i>		

Trying a 10% different response

Understanding your reactions is an important first step. The next step is asking:

Does my usual response still fit my life today?

Many habits, such as explaining yourself, saying yes when you want to say no, avoiding disagreement, apologising automatically, keeping busy or staying silent, develop for a reason. At some point they served a purpose.

For many ex-Muslims, these responses help reduce conflict, avoid criticism, or protect important relationships. Some may still be necessary where genuine risks remain. In other situations, however, they may continue long after your circumstances begin to change. Rather than trying to behave in a completely different way, it is often more helpful to experiment with one small change.

This idea is influenced by Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). DBT includes a skill called Opposite Action, which encourages people to consider responding differently when an emotion or the urge that follows it does not fit the facts or is unlikely to be helpful (Linehan, 2015). The approach in this book is gentler because instead of doing the opposite, try doing something about ten per cent different. The change should feel manageable, not overwhelming. It should not require you to ignore genuine danger, push through exhaustion, or abandon sensible precautions.

For example, try this:

My usual response	A ten percent different response
I reply immediately.	I wait ten minutes before replying.
I automatically say yes.	I say, "Let me think about it."
I explain everything.	I give one clear sentence.
I keep working.	I stop after one task and take a short break.
I avoid starting.	I work for three minutes.
I isolate myself.	I send a simple message to someone I trust.
I apologise automatically.	I say, "Thank you for waiting."
Everything has to be perfect.	I leave one small thing unfinished.

Notice that none of these changes is dramatic because the aim is not to be a different person overnight but to discover that you may have more than one response available.

An Everyday Example: A colleague asks why you are not fasting. Your first instinct is to explain everything, so they do not misunderstand you. Before answering, you pause. You ask yourself whether there is any current danger. Your colleague seems curious rather than hostile. No family or community members are present. You decide the situation feels safe enough to try something different. Instead of giving a long explanation, you simply say:

"I don't fast, but I'd rather not discuss it at work."

The goal is not to appear confident. It is to see whether you can protect your privacy without feeling that you must justify yourself.

Pause and reflect

After trying one small change, ask yourself:

- What happened?
- What did I expect would happen?
- Did the outcome match my expectations?
- What did I learn about this situation?
- Would I respond the same way next time?

Sometimes the result may show that the risk was lower than you expected. Sometimes it will remind you that caution is still appropriate. Both are valuable, and remember the purpose of this exercise is not to eliminate fear. Instead, it asks you to recognise that when the situation is safe enough, you may have more choices than you first realise.

Finding what works for you

By now, you have explored several ways of responding when life feels overwhelming. Some help you reconnect with the present; others help you increase your capacity. Some help you care for your body. Others remind you to slow down before reacting or help you recognise when you need practical support or greater safety.

We must acknowledge that there is no single approach that works in every situation. What helps after a difficult conversation may not help after a nightmare. What helps when you feel overwhelmed may be very different from what helps when you feel emotionally numb.

Over time, many people find it helpful to build a small collection of strategies they know they can return to. Think of it as your own personal regulation menu. Not every option will suit you, and you do not need a long list. Two or three approaches that you know work well are often more useful than twenty that you never use.

My personal regulation menu		
☐ Looking around the room and reminding myself where I am.	☐ Focusing on my breathing or another grounding exercise.	
☐ Going for a walk or moving my body.	☐ Drinking water or eating something nourishing.	
☐ Taking a break before responding.	☐ Speaking to someone I trust.	
☐ Writing my thoughts down.	☐ Resting or getting more sleep.	
☐ Returning to my safety plan if there is genuine danger.	☐ Something else:	
You can add to this list as you discover what works for you and try to make it easier to remember what helps when life feels difficult.		
Ask yourself		
Which of these helps me feel more connected to the present?	Which helps me think more clearly?	Which reminds me that I have choices?
Noticing what helps you is a form of self-care. The clearer you know what works, the easier it is to return to yourself.		

A worksheet in Appendix 4 can help you build your own personal regulation menu and record which strategies work best for you.

Chapter 10: Understanding the Voices That Remain

Before you can reclaim your voice, values and freedom more fully, it can help to pause and notice which thoughts reflect what you believe now and which may have been absorbed from other people.

When someone grows up in a high-control religious environment, messages from parents, religious leaders and community figures can gradually become internalised. Over time, these messages may begin to feel like personal beliefs, standards or obligations. Research on socialisation and self-determination distinguishes between values that a person has examined and freely endorsed and those adopted under pressure, conditional approval, guilt or fear (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Assor et al., 2004; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

These messages do not necessarily disappear when a person leaves the religious environment or no longer accepts its beliefs. Qualitative and clinical literature on spiritual abuse and high-control groups describes ongoing inner conflict, shame, self-monitoring and difficulty separating personal values from former group expectations after leaving. This evidence remains limited and should not be applied to everyone who leaves religion (Ward, 2011; Jenkinson, 2023).

Through facilitating the CEMB support groups over many years, I have repeatedly noticed that internalised religious messages can remain long after someone has intellectually left an authoritarian Islamic environment. Some people describe feeling free in principle while still governed by guilt, fear or shame in practice. They speak of carrying messages within them that no longer match their considered values.

These thoughts may become more noticeable during vulnerable moments: when someone feels low, exposed or visible, or when they are making an independent choice.

They may sound like this:

You are dirty.
You will regret this.
You are nothing without God.
No one will ever love you like your family.

At first, these thoughts may seem to come entirely from within. They can sound familiar and convincing, almost as though they express the person's own judgement. With more careful consideration, however, they may contain echoes of earlier preaching, parental warnings, moral policing or community threats.

Messages repeated over time, particularly when reinforced through fear, punishment or conditional belonging, can become part of a person's inner dialogue. When left unexamined, they may contribute to an internal critical voice shaped by shame, fear, inadequacy or self-doubt. Psychological research describes different forms and functions of self-criticism, including attempts to correct or control oneself and more hostile forms linked to self-disgust or self-attack (Gilbert et al., 2004).

Internalised messages or representations of influential people are sometimes called “introjects”. Jenkinson uses this term to describe messages that can continue to influence someone after they have left a coercive or spiritually abusive environment (Jenkinson, 2023). In these settings, such messages may once have helped the person maintain attachment, gain acceptance, comply with expectations or stay safe. Later, they may limit freedom by continuing to shape thoughts, feelings and behaviour after the external authority has weakened or been left behind.

This is why one question can become especially important:

Whose voice is this, and does it reflect what I believe and value now?

Whose voice is this?

“I felt guilty buying a birthday present for my boyfriend. When I stopped and asked myself why, I realised I wasn’t breaking my values. I was breaking someone else’s rules.”

Quote from a participant from the CEMB support groups.

The participant had not acted against her own sense of right and wrong. Buying the present fitted the care she wanted to show within her relationship. The guilt appeared because the action crossed an older rule that still carried emotional force, even though it no longer reflected what she believed.

This distinction matters because guilt often feels like evidence. It can create an immediate sense that you have done something wrong and must correct, confess or undo it. Yet the presence of guilt does not always mean that you have acted against your values. Sometimes, it means that you have acted against a rule you learned to obey.

That is when it can help to ask:

Whose voice is this, and does it reflect what I believe and value now?

When an external authority becomes an internal voice

Now there may not be anyone standing beside you telling you what to wear, who to love, what to believe or how to live. Yet the narrative can continue. It may question your decisions, criticise your choices or warn you that something terrible will happen if you get things wrong. It can sound like: *A visual map of repeated messages*

Because these messages arise inside your own mind, they can feel like your personal judgement. This is what makes them so difficult to recognise. They may use your voice, but the rule behind them may have originated somewhere else.

Through facilitating CEMB support groups, I have repeatedly heard people describe this gap between what they believe intellectually and what they continue to feel emotionally:

“I don’t believe this anymore, but I still feel it.”

A person may no longer believe that listening to music, choosing a partner, removing the hijab, refusing to fast or setting a boundary makes them immoral. They may still experience guilt, fear or shame when they do so. They may know they are free to decide yet feel as though someone is watching them, waiting to punish them as soon as they do what they have been told is a prohibited behaviour.

This reaction does not necessarily mean that they secretly still believe. It may show that their beliefs changed more quickly than the emotional and behavioural patterns that were built over many years.

When approval, connection or safety once depended on obedience, a person often learned to anticipate what authority expected before anyone needed to say it. They may have monitored their clothing, questions, friendships, facial expressions and private thoughts. Over time, external monitoring could become self-monitoring. The person starts carrying out the supervision from within.

This is not simply remembering something a parent or religious leader once said. It is learning a way of seeing yourself. You may automatically evaluate your needs as selfish, doubt as dangerous, pleasure as suspicious or disagreement as disrespectful.

This is also why insight may not bring immediate relief. You can understand that a rule is unreasonable and still feel afraid when you break it. You can reject a belief and still react as though the punishment attached to it remains possible.

Messages taken in without examination

Internalised messages of this kind, as mentioned earlier, are called introjects. Jenkinson describes an introject as a belief or behaviour taken into the self without a real opportunity to examine it. She compares it to swallowing food whole rather than chewing it, tasting it and deciding whether it is something you want to take in (Jenkinson, 2023).

This can happen when questioning is discouraged or carries serious consequences. A child may not yet have the independence, knowledge or safety needed to assess what they are being taught. They depend on the people communicating the message. The rule enters before they have enough freedom to decide whether it is fair, accurate or consistent with their own values.

Introjected messages	
<i>Internalised rules often sound like obligations, prohibitions and self-criticism.</i>	
I MUST...	I SHOULD...
I must never disappoint my parents.	I should always put other people first.
I must be certain before I make a decision.	I should not feel angry.
I OUGHT TO...	I AM NOT ALLOWED TO...
I ought to feel grateful, no matter how I am treated.	I am not allowed to question religious authority.
	I am a bad person if I say no.

These words do not always indicate control. All of us hold responsibilities and make commitments. They become important to examine when they carry fear, shame or the assumption that you are unacceptable unless you comply. Jenkinson notes that introjected beliefs may contribute to guilt and shame and become woven into the identity a person developed within a controlling environment. The person may come to experience a rule about how they must behave as a fact about who they are (Jenkinson, 2023).

Some of these messages may once have helped you maintain attachment, gain approval, reduce conflict or stay safe. Recognising this matters. It allows you to understand the pattern without attacking the part of yourself that learned it.

The problem arises when a rule continues to govern your life after the circumstances have changed. What once reduced danger may later restrict intimacy, independence, rest, pleasure, self-expression or the ability to make ordinary decisions.

How thought reform can shape more than belief

A high-control religious environment may influence not only what a person believes, but also how they relate to doubt, authority, emotion and their own judgement.

You may have learned that:

- Questioning signals rebellion.
- Doubt comes from weakness, temptation or corruption.
- Certainty proves faith and moral strength.
- Discomfort means you are doing something wrong.
- Independent thinking places you at risk.
- Obedience makes you good.
- Authority knows you better than you know yourself.

When these messages are repeated through *khutbah*², family expectations, community pressure, emotional blackmail and warnings about punishment, they can become habits of mind. You may stop asking whether a rule makes sense and begin asking whether you will be punished for questioning it.

Robert Jay Lifton's work on thought reform describes how control over language, behaviour, confession and acceptable ways of thinking can shape how people understand themselves and interpret their experiences (Lifton, 1989; original work published 1961).

Steven Hassan similarly describes high-control systems as affecting identity and self-trust, not only outward belief (Hassan, 2015; Hassan & Shah, 2019). In his account, a group-approved version of the self can gradually take precedence over independent thought, emotion and personal judgement. Leaving may therefore feel disorienting because the task involves more than rejecting ideas. It can involve rebuilding trust in parts of yourself that were organised around obedience.

² The Arabic term *khutbah* refers to the formal public sermon delivered in Islamic tradition, most notably during the mandatory Friday afternoon congregational prayer (*Jumma*). It serves the same religious, educational, and social functions as a sermon in the Christian tradition.

This does not mean that every religious family or community uses thought reform. It does not mean that every ex-Muslim will identify with this process. The relevant issue is whether your particular environment allowed you to question, disagree, examine information and make meaningful personal choices without fear of serious consequences.

When language narrows thought

High-control environments may also use emotionally charged words to divide experience into rigid categories.

Words such as pure, sinful, obedient, corrupt, apostate and haram can carry more than a simple description. They may contain an entire judgement about character, belonging, danger, and punishment; for example, see the picture below.

When complex questions become binary judgements		
A complex question	May be replaced by	Binary judgment
Does this relationship reflect care, honesty and mutual respect?	Is it halal or haram?	Halal / haram
Is this decision right for me?	Am I being obedient or rebellious?	Obedient / rebellious
Has someone treated me unfairly?	Am I being ungrateful?	Guilt / ingratitude
These replacements can happen automatically. Recognising them is an important first step towards asking questions that truly serve you.		

When language permits only two moral positions, it becomes harder to notice context, intention, harm, consent, or personal values. The person may feel forced to choose between being pure or corrupt, obedient or rebellious, accepted or cast out.

Jenkinson discusses “loading the language” as part of thought reform: particular words carry meanings defined by the controlling environment and restrict how members can describe or examine their experiences (Jenkinson, 2023).

Narrow language can produce narrow choices. If every disagreement is called rebellion, it becomes harder to recognise healthy independence. If every sexual feeling is treated as impurity, it becomes harder to think about consent, affection and bodily autonomy. If doubt is defined as temptation, the person may judge the act of thinking before they have considered the question itself.

Reclaiming your voice may therefore involve finding more accurate words for your experience. Instead of I am sinful, you may begin with I am making a choice that differs from what I was taught. Instead of I am selfish, you may say I am considering my needs as well as the needs of others.

The aim is not to replace one rigid vocabulary with another. It is to make room for complexity.

When fear remains after belief changes

Steven Hassan uses the term phobia indoctrination to describe the repeated installation of fears about what may happen if a person questions, disobeys or leaves a controlling group. These fears can take many forms, including rejection or shunning, losing one's salvation, becoming mentally unwell, harm coming to oneself or loved ones, or supernatural consequences such as hell or demon possession (Hassan, 2012).

The belief may later change, but the alarm attached to it can remain. You may no longer believe in hell but still feel panic after eating something once forbidden. You may no longer believe that doubt is sinful but still become anxious when questioning an authority figure. You may know that setting a limit is reasonable but feel certain that the relationship will end. You may recognise that choosing a partner is your decision but still feel responsible for a parent's health, reputation or survival. These reactions can be confusing because the mind appears to hold two positions at once. One part says: I do not believe this. Another part reacts: Do not take the risk.

This does not necessarily show hidden faith or personal weakness. It may reflect conditioning: an old connection between a particular action and the expectation of danger. Fear-based learning can continue to influence current reactions even when a person consciously understands that the circumstances or beliefs have changed. Zayfert and Becker (2007) similarly note that beliefs and protective responses shaped by earlier danger may remain active in situations where they are no longer accurate or necessary (Zayfert & Becker, 2007).

The old response may once have protected you. Taking religious warnings seriously may have reduced punishment. Monitoring your behaviour may have protected family relationships. Avoiding questions may have kept you included.

Understanding this can shift the response from:

What is wrong with me?

to:

What did I learn to fear, and does that fear fit my life now?

Inherited beliefs and automatic thoughts

It can help to distinguish between inherited beliefs and automatic thoughts. They are connected, but they operate at different levels.

Inherited beliefs: Inherited beliefs are deeper assumptions absorbed before you had much opportunity to question them. They shape how you understand yourself, other people and the world.

They may include:

- *Good people always obey.*
- *My needs are less important than everyone else's.*
- *Questioning authority is dangerous.*
- *My choices determine my family's 'honour'.*
- *Love must be earned through compliance.*
- *Mistakes deserve punishment.*

These beliefs may become so familiar that they no longer feel like beliefs. They feel like reality. One participant described this process:

“I don’t remember learning these rules. I just remember believing them.”

Automatic thoughts: Automatic thoughts are the immediate interpretations that appear when something happens. They often arise so quickly that you notice the emotion before you notice the thought.

You tell your family that you cannot visit
and immediately think:

“I’m selfish.”

— —

You decline a religious celebration and think:

“I’ve hurt everyone.”

— —

You express a different opinion and think:

“I’ve gone too far.”

— —

You make a mistake and think:

“Something bad will happen.”

Beck describes automatic thoughts as rapid interpretations that can influence emotion before the person has consciously examined them (Beck, 1979). Zayfert and Becker (2007) also describe automatic self-talk as occurring so quickly that the resulting fear, sadness, anger or guilt can appear to come from nowhere (Zayfert & Becker, 2007).

An automatic thought is not the deeper rule. It is the rule being applied to the present moment.

Inherited Belief	Automatic Thought
Good people always obey.	“I shouldn’t have said no.”
My needs come last.	“I’m selfish.”
Questioning authority is dangerous.	“I’ve gone too far.”
Family honour depends on me.	“I’ve brought shame on everyone.”
Mistakes deserve punishment.	“I don’t deserve to be happy.”

This distinction helps you look beneath the thought rather than arguing with every sentence your mind produces.

The question changes from:

Why do I keep thinking this?

to:

What deeper rule makes this thought feel so convincing?

Reflection exercise: Following the voice back

This exercise can help you notice which messages reflect your values and which may have been shaped by fear, emotional blackmail or coercive control.

It is not about positive thinking. You do not need to replace every painful thought with a cheerful one or persuade yourself that everything is safe. The purpose is to understand a thought before deciding how much authority it should have in your life.

It is also not about blaming your parents or attacking your past. People may pass on rules that they sincerely believe, fear or have inherited themselves. Understanding where a message came from is different from deciding that one person is responsible for everything.

1. Identify three to five recurring thoughts

Choose thoughts that tend to appear when you feel ashamed, exposed, frightened or uncertain.

Examples might include:

- I'll go to hell for this.
- I'll never be good enough.
- I deserve bad things.
- I am selfish for putting myself first.
- I have disappointed everyone.

2. Choose one thought and follow it back

Ask yourself:

- What was happening when this thought appeared?
- What emotion did I notice first?
- Where do I first remember hearing a similar message?
- Did it come from one person, or was it repeated across family, religious teaching and community life?
- Was it reinforced through fear, guilt, punishment, rejection or emotional pressure?
- What deeper rule sits underneath it?
- Who did I have to become in order to follow that rule?
- What did following it protect me from at the time?
- What does it cost me now?

3. Compare it with your present values

Ask:

- Does this message reflect what I genuinely believe now?
- Does my action harm someone or violate a value I have freely chosen?
- Am I responding to present evidence or to an old expectation of punishment?
- What matters to me in this situation?
- What would I say to a younger version of myself who carried this fear?

4. Write a grounded response

A grounded response does not need to deny your feelings. It acknowledges the old message while making room for your present position.

For example:

I notice that I feel guilty for saying no. I learned that disappointing my family meant I was selfish. I can care about their feelings without agreeing to every request.

Or:

Part of me expects punishment because this was described as haram. The fear is real, but it does not decide my values for me.

Or:

This thought sounds like an old warning. I can pause before treating it as my own judgement.

The good daughter rule — Sara

The core is not simply that Sara hears a critical thought. It is that the inherited belief has become a rule for how she judges herself, interprets other people's reactions and makes everyday choices. Sara had grown up with a simple message: a good daughter puts the family first. No one needed to say it directly anymore. Sara carried it with her.

When she was tired, she still agreed to visit. When she wanted a weekend to herself, she found an excuse rather than saying no. If her mother sounded disappointed, Sara immediately felt that she had done something wrong.

One Friday, after a difficult week at work, her family asked her to come to a gathering. Sara wanted to stay home.

Almost immediately, the familiar thoughts appeared:



- "They have done so much for you."
- "You are becoming selfish."
- "What kind of daughter chooses herself over her family?"

Sara noticed that the decision no longer felt like a simple question of whether she had the energy to go. Staying home seemed to say something about the kind of person she was.

She imagined her mother being disappointed and felt a rush of guilt. Then came the urge to fix it: send another message, explain herself properly, promise to visit the next day.

This was how the old belief affected her. It did not only tell her what to do. It shaped what she believed her needs meant. Rest became selfishness. Saying no became rejection. Someone else's disappointment became evidence that she had failed.

Sara began to ask herself a different question:



If I had never been taught that a good daughter always puts herself last, what would I think about needing rest tonight?

She still felt guilty when she stayed home. But she began to understand that the guilt was not necessarily telling her she had done something wrong. It was showing her that she had broken an old rule.

Over time, Sara started making room for a different belief: caring about her family did not require abandoning herself.



That is the effect of an inherited belief: it can continue organising your choices long after you consciously disagree with it. The work is not only to recognise where the belief came from, but to notice what it has taught you to believe about yourself whenever you do not obey it.

Jenkinson recommends identifying and externalising introjected messages so that they can be examined rather than accepted automatically (Jenkinson, 2023). Russ Harris similarly describes stepping back from the mind's habitual stories so that a thought can be noticed without automatically directing behaviour (Harris, 2007).

Writing the message down can help place it in front of you rather than leaving it fused with your identity. You may discover that some inherited values still matter deeply to you. Others may need to change. Some may no longer belong in your life.

The past cannot be erased, but it is important to recognise that the past and present are not the same. There is a worksheet in Appendix 5, Tracing and Reframing Old Messages, to guide you through this, and each time you pause and ask whose voice you are hearing, you strengthen your ability to make a different kind of decision. Not one based automatically on fear, guilt or obedience, but one guided by what you value now.

Your own voice may initially feel quieter than the messages you inherited. Quiet does not make it less real.

With practice, it can become clearer: a voice shaped by reflection, self-trust and compassion rather than threat.

When guilt, shame and fear start sounding like the truth

The previous section invited you to ask where a thought came from and whether it reflects your values now. That question can help you recognise an inherited message even if it does not always change the feeling that follows it.

You may understand that a rule is no longer yours and still feel guilty for breaking it.

You may recognise that you have done no harm and still feel ashamed. You may know that punishment is unlikely and still feel frightened. You may tell yourself that mistakes are human while continuing to work, check or apologise as though a single error could put everything at risk.

This is where many people become frustrated with themselves.
They think:

I understand this. Why do I still feel it?

You can still feel it because a belief can lose its intellectual authority before the guilt, shame or fear attached to it begins to loosen. The feeling may arrive quickly and sound convincing since it has been reinforced over many years.

Guilt, shame, moral fear, perfectionism and self-criticism often appear together. They may rise so quickly that they feel like one heavy emotional state. They are connected, but they are not identical. Each one carries a different message. Learning to distinguish them can help you understand what is happening and how to manage them.

When fear feels like proof — Hana

Hana no longer believed that God was waiting to punish her for doing something wrong. Intellectually, she was clear about that. But one evening, after an argument, she raised her voice and said something angrily. Almost immediately, the old fear appeared:

”
“

- “You should not have said that.”
- “Something bad is going to happen now.”

The next morning, her train was cancelled. For a moment, Hana felt a jolt of recognition. “See. This is because of what I did.” Later that week, she developed a headache and had a difficult day at work. Again, her mind linked the events together. She knew, rationally, that trains get cancelled and people get headaches. But the fear made coincidence feel like proof. That was what made the old belief powerful. It did not need to convince Hana consciously. It only needed to make her anxious enough to start looking for evidence. She began noticing the sequence:

- **I did something I was taught was wrong.**
- **I feel afraid.**
- **Something unpleasant happened.**
- **Therefore, I am being punished.**

Hana started writing down what she feared would happen and what actually happened afterwards. She also asked herself:

”
“

Would I have connected these two things if I had not already been frightened?

Slowly, she began to see how easily an ordinary bad day could be recruited as evidence for an old warning. The fear still sometimes arrived. What changed was that Hana stopped treating the strength of the feeling as proof that the prediction was true.



An inherited belief can survive by teaching you what to notice. Once you expect punishment, ordinary setbacks can begin to look like confirmation. Learning to separate fear from evidence helps loosen that connection.

Guilt: “I have done something wrong”

Guilt usually focuses on behaviour. At its healthiest, guilt helps us recognise when our actions have conflicted with our values or caused harm. It can encourage us to take responsibility, apologise, make amends or act differently next time. Healthy guilt does not require you to condemn your whole identity. You can recognise that you made a poor decision while still knowing that you remain a person worthy of respect and care. This distinction is often described as separating behaviour from identity: *I did something wrong* rather than *everything about me is wrong* (Brown, 2007).

This kind of guilt usually has somewhere to go. You identify the harm, take responsibility where appropriate and consider what repair is possible.

For many ex-Muslims, however, guilt may also appear when no personally held value has been violated. It can arise because the person has stepped outside a religious, family or community rule that once carried serious consequences.

You may feel guilty because you:

- declined to fast;
- chose a partner your family would not approve of;
- stopped wearing religious clothing;
- set a boundary with a parent;
- did not attend a religious celebration;
- rested instead of meeting another person’s demand;
- made a decision without seeking permission;
- experienced pleasure in something once described as forbidden.

The feeling may be strong, but the strength of the feeling does not prove that you caused harm.

Jenkinson distinguishes healthy guilt from guilt created by imposed standards of purity and perfection. When the rule comes from a controlling environment, guilt may continue until the person returns to compliance, confesses or receives approval. Any relief may be temporary because the standard itself remains impossible to satisfy (Jenkinson, 2023). This is why it can help to ask:

Have I acted against a value I freely hold, or have I acted against a rule I was trained to obey?

That question is not an excuse to avoid responsibility. It helps you locate responsibility more accurately. Perhaps you did speak harshly and want to apologise. Perhaps you made a private decision that another person dislikes but which did not harm them. Those situations may produce similar feelings, but they call for different responses.

One requires repair and the other may require tolerating another person’s disappointment without treating it as a verification of wrongdoing.

Shame: “There is something wrong with me”

Shame goes deeper than guilt. Guilt says, *I did something wrong*. Shame says, *I am wrong* (Brown, 2007).

When shame spreads across the whole self	
ACTION	Shame stops focusing on one action and begins to define the whole person.
I AM DIRTY	A judgement about the whole self rather than one behaviour.
I AM A DISAPPOINTMENT	The self becomes the problem.
I AM UNGRATEFUL	A reaction is turned into an identity.
I AM CORRUPT	Moral judgement spreads beyond the original event.
I AM UNLOVABLE	Belonging becomes tied to self-condemnation.
I RUIN EVERYTHING	Responsibility becomes global and absolute.
Shame does not stay on the surface. It convinces us that we are the problem, not the action.	

One participant described this persistent sense of inadequacy:

“No matter what I achieved, I still felt like a disappointment.”

Another expressed the way shame can absorb the person’s entire identity:

“I didn’t just feel as though I’d let my family down. I felt like I had become the shame.”

These statements show why reassurance about one decision may not reach the underlying pain. The person is not only worried that they chose badly. They have come to experience themselves as the source of the problem.

Shame is closely connected with belonging. It can become especially powerful when acceptance has depended on being the right kind of child, woman, man, believer or family member. A person may learn that certain feelings, questions, relationships or aspects of the body make them unacceptable. Over time, they may stop thinking: Other people disapprove of this part of me, and begin believing: This part of me proves that I am defective.

Jenkinson distinguishes ordinary experiences of shame from toxic shame. Brief embarrassment or remorse may sometimes support humility, empathy, or social repair. Toxic shame is different because it attacks the whole identity. The person believes they are inferior, unworthy of love or deserving of punishment, rather than recognising one limited mistake or awkward moment (Jenkinson, 2023).

When shame takes this form, it can affect far more than how you remember the past.

You may:

- dismiss achievements because nothing feels good enough;
- struggle to receive kindness;
- assume that affection will disappear when people know you fully;
- to remain in relationships where you are poorly treated;
- hide ordinary needs;
- judge your body, sexuality or emotions;
- withdraw before another person has the chance to reject you;
- feel undeserving of rest, pleasure or security.

Shame may also make self-blame feel safer than recognising that someone else misused power. If the problem is entirely you, then perhaps you can correct yourself and prevent further harm. Recognising that someone you depended on behaved unfairly may feel more frightening because it exposes how little control you had. Jenkinson notes that blaming oneself can create a temporary sense of control within coercive situations, even though it causes deeper harm over time (Jenkinson, 2023, p. 214).

This is one reason shame does not disappear simply because you decide that the criticism was unfair. It may have helped you preserve attachment, make sense of confusing treatment or maintain the hope that becoming “better” would finally make you safe.

When shame becomes relational

For some women and girls, shame may have been attached not only to personal behaviour but to the reputation and emotional state of the whole family. A decision about clothing, relationships, marriage, sexuality, education or independence may have been treated as evidence of whether she was a good daughter and whether her parents had raised her correctly. In that setting, a woman may not simply fear that others will disagree. She may feel that her choices have transformed her into the problem everyone must control, correct or conceal.

This can produce a painful confusion between responsibility and visibility. Becoming more visible as yourself may feel like harming other people.

If a parent is distressed, relatives start gossiping or affection is withdrawn, the woman might be told her independence caused the harm. Her decision then becomes morally linked to others' reactions. Privacy may seem like deception. Independence might feel like cruelty. Protection can come across as betrayal. The earlier chapter on sex, sexuality and family 'honour' explored these patterns in more detail. The point here is that shame does not necessarily mean that the person has violated a moral value. It may reflect the fear that choosing openly will threaten belonging or provoke consequences that she has experienced before.

A useful question is:

Have I harmed someone according to my values, or am I feeling ashamed because another person is unhappy that I made a choice they could not control? Or more specifically whose shame is this?

Whose shame is this?

Sometimes shame does not begin with us. It may come from messages we have inherited from family, religion, culture, or society.

Shame can be reinforced by:

- Modesty rules
- Honour culture
- Racism or Islamophobia

Reconsider these questions

Who is trying to make me feel ashamed for simply existing?

Who benefits from my silence?

What beliefs, systems, or expectations created this shame in the first place?

Moral fear: “Something bad will happen”

I use the term moral fear to describe the expectation that breaking a religious or inherited rule will lead to punishment, contamination, catastrophe, or loss. It may arise the first time you eat during Ramadan, listen openly to music, remove the hijab, enter a relationship, drink alcohol or question something that was once presented as sacred and beyond doubt. One participant described the experience with humour, but also with precision:

“I kept waiting for lightning to strike. Part of me knew it wouldn’t. Another part wasn’t taking any chances.”

The fear contains two forms of knowledge at once. One part understands the present, and another continues to anticipate the earlier consequence.

This reaction may reflect years of warnings about punishment, reinforced through vivid descriptions, family reactions, and community stories. The mind may have formed a strong connection between the forbidden action and danger. That connection can remain emotionally active after the belief itself changes.

You may know that nothing terrible happened the last time and still feel tense the next time. You may reassure yourself repeatedly, only to find the doubt returning.

Moral fear can also attach to more ordinary choices:

- If I say no, I will lose them.

- If I prioritise myself, someone will become ill.
- If I make the wrong decision, my life will collapse.
- If I stop feeling guilty, I will become selfish or immoral.

The last fear can be particularly difficult. Some people worry that guilt and anxiety are the only things keeping them good. They fear that without an internal threat, they will stop caring about other people.

Yet morality does not have to depend on terror. Care, honesty, consent, fairness and responsibility can guide behaviour without requiring constant fear of punishment.

Perfectionism: “If I get everything right, I will be safe”

Perfectionism can look like ambition, conscientiousness or very high standards. Sometimes it is connected with pride in doing something well. In other cases, it functions less like aspiration and more like protection.

One participant put it plainly:

“I wasn’t trying to be perfect. I was trying not to get into trouble.”

This kind of perfectionism develops around threat. If mistakes once brought criticism, humiliation, punishment, rejection or tighter control, getting everything right may have seemed like the safest available strategy.

You may now notice yourself:

- apologising before anyone has complained;
- repeatedly checking messages before sending them;
- delaying decisions until you feel completely certain;
- working far beyond what the task requires;
- preparing excessively for ordinary conversations;
- becoming distressed by minor errors;
- feeling unable to rest while something remains unfinished;
- avoiding opportunities where you might be judged;
- assuming that one mistake reveals a serious flaw in your character;
- setting standards that no human being could maintain.

The person may appear highly capable while living with constant internal pressure. Achievement brings only brief relief because the mind quickly identifies the next possible failure.

Jenkinson links this pattern with demands for purity. In a high-control setting, doing one’s best may never feel sufficient because the required standard is not ordinary human responsibility but an ideal of being pure, obedient or beyond reproach. This can continue after leaving as shame, self-blame and a persistent feeling of not being good enough (Jenkinson, 2023).

Perfectionism may also protect against uncertainty. If you learned that the wrong decision could bring divine punishment, family rupture or permanent regret, you may feel unable to choose until all doubt has disappeared.

But many adult decisions do not come with certainty. Waiting to feel completely sure may become another way of remaining still.

Understanding the protective function of perfectionism changes the question. Instead of asking:

Why can I never be satisfied?

you might ask:

What does part of me believe will happen if I make an ordinary mistake?

That question responds to the fear underneath the standard rather than criticising you for having it.

Perfection After Leaving — Omar

Omar had left a high-control religious community several years earlier. He no longer believed that ordinary mistakes made him sinful or disobedient, but the need to get things right had stayed with him. At work, he could spend nearly an hour rewriting a short email. Before making a decision, he would search repeatedly for the 'right' answer. If he made a small mistake, his mind quickly moved to:



- “What if this proves there is something wrong with me?”
- “What if I have made a decision I cannot undo?”
- “What if people see that I am not good enough?”

Growing up, mistakes had not felt ordinary. They could bring criticism, shame, punishment or warnings about what kind of person he was becoming. Being careful had helped him avoid trouble.

Now the authority was gone, but the old rule remained: if I get everything right, I will be safe.

Omar began to see that his perfectionism was not only ambition. It was an old protection strategy that had outlived the environment in which it developed.

The question became less: ‘Why can’t I ever be satisfied?’ and more:



What does part of me still think will happen if I make an ordinary mistake?

That shift helped Omar begin practising something that had once felt dangerous: being imperfect without treating it as a threat.



Perfectionism can survive as a form of protection long after the original environment has changed. The work is not to stop caring or trying to do things well. It is to notice when getting things right has become a way of trying to feel safe.

Self-criticism: punishment delivered from within

Self-criticism is the voice that tries to keep guilt, shame, fear and perfectionism in place. It may sound like what we see in the image below:

Self-criticism <i>The harsh inner voice that never seems to stop.</i>	
 Critical Thought	You should have known better.
 Critical Thought	You are weak.
 Critical Thought	You have ruined everything.
 Critical Thought	Other people cope better than you.
 Critical Thought	You do not deserve to rest.
 Critical Thought	You will become selfish if you stop pushing yourself.
<i>These are not facts. They are critical thoughts — learned, not true.</i>	

Self-criticism often presents itself as useful. It claims that harshness will make you improve, prevent mistakes or keep you morally responsible.

Sometimes honest reflection is necessary. We all need to reflect on our behaviour and make changes. The problem is not every critical observation. The problem is an inner voice that humiliates, threatens or attacks the whole person.

Engel describes how a harsh inner critic can repeat the attitudes of critical or perfectionistic authority figures. It sets unreachable standards and offers little rest or satisfaction, leaving the person with the enduring conclusion that they are not good enough and never will be (Engel, 2008).

For someone raised under close moral or family scrutiny, self-criticism may function as a form of pre-emptive control:

If I attack myself first, I may correct the problem before someone else notices.

If I expect the worst from myself, rejection will hurt less.

If I never feel satisfied, I will keep trying and remain acceptable.

The critic may therefore have begun as an attempt to protect you from external criticism. It became the person inside who checks your motives, questions your worth and keeps you from becoming too visible.

Understanding this does not mean allowing the critic to continue unchecked. It means that you can approach it with curiosity rather than creating a second critic who attacks you for being self-critical.

You might begin to recognise:

- This voice is trying to prevent rejection.
- It believes punishment will keep me safe.

- Its method is harming me now.
- All three statements can be true.

Why knowing better may not immediately feel better

Many people understand on paper that they have done nothing shameful. Their body still reacts.

A self-critical thought may be followed by tightness in the chest, heat in the face, nausea, numbness, restlessness or a strong urge to hide. You may know that the thought is exaggerated while feeling as though it has already been proved.

This does not mean that the thought lives literally in the body or that every physical sensation has a psychological cause. It means that thoughts, emotions and physical responses often occur together. A well-practised shame response may activate quickly, before you have had time to consider the situation more carefully.

That is why a purely intellectual argument may not always be enough. You may also need time, repeated experiences of safety and a different way of responding when the old pattern appears.

The aim is not to force the feeling away. It is to stop treating the feeling as the final authority.

You can notice:

I feel ashamed.

without concluding:

Therefore I am shameful.

You can notice:

I feel guilty.

without concluding:

Therefore I have caused harm.

You can notice:

I feel afraid.

without concluding:

Therefore punishment is coming.

Bringing the experiences apart

Guilt, shame, moral fear, perfectionism and self-criticism often work together, but they are not asking the same question.

Different experiences carry different messages		
Experience	Central message	Possible response
Guilt	“What have I done?”	Responsibility or repair
Shame	“What is wrong with me?”	Dignity, connection, and separating identity from behaviour
Moral fear	“What terrible thing will happen?”	Present-day evidence and tolerating uncertainty
Perfectionism	“How can I prevent every mistake?”	Practising manageable imperfection
Self-criticism	“How can I control myself before someone else does?”	Firm but compassionate self-reflection

Separating them will not make them disappear immediately. It gives you a clearer place from which to respond.

Genuine guilt may need repair. Shame may need connection, dignity and a separation between your identity and what happened. Moral fear may need present-day evidence and time for the alarm to settle. Perfectionism may need permission to make a small, survivable mistake. Self-criticism may need a firmer and kinder internal response.

A worksheet in Appendix 6: Untangling Guilt, Shame, Moral Fear and Perfectionism will guide you through identifying the trigger, the feeling, the message underneath it and the response that best fits the present situation.

From the inner critic to an inner supporter

Reducing self-criticism does not mean telling yourself that everything you do is right. It means learning to respond in a way that supports responsibility without humiliation. A worksheet in Appendix 6 will help you identify the critic's words and tone, notice what it is trying to prevent, and develop a response that is honest, compassionate and consistent with your values. It also includes space to notice how self-criticism affects your body and what helps you return to the present.

Self-criticism can become a way of managing difficult emotions, particularly in the context of trauma. It may work as an internal form of control: an attempt to prevent criticism, rejection or punishment by turning against yourself first. These patterns do not always respond to logic. You may know that something was not your fault and still feel ashamed. You may recognise that a rule no longer reflects your values and still feel guilty for breaking it. Examining the thought matters, but so does learning to respond differently to the emotion that follows.

Self-compassion and accountability

Self-compassion does not mean pretending that nothing happened, excusing harmful behaviour or telling yourself that everything you do is right. It means looking honestly at what happened without abandoning yourself in the process. You can recognise pain, responsibility and regret without adding humiliation, contempt or punishment. You can acknowledge a mistake without allowing it to define your whole character.

This can feel unfamiliar when fear and criticism have been your main ways of controlling yourself. The inner voice may insist: If I stop criticising myself, I will become selfish. If I forgive myself, I will repeat the mistake. If I let go of guilt, I will stop caring. Self-compassion offers a different form of accountability. It allows you to respond honestly and firmly when needed, but without cruelty. The purpose is not to avoid responsibility. It is to create enough emotional safety to face what happened, understand it and decide what needs to change.

You can feel guilt without surrendering your values. You can feel shame without accepting it as your identity. You can feel fear without allowing it to make every decision. A compassionate response might be: I can see why this feels difficult. This feeling has a history. I can decide what responsibility belongs to me without attacking myself. These words do not remove the distress. They help you meet it without handing control back to the punitive voice.

The protective self and the authentic self

Notice what you learned to hide for safety, and what feels natural, meaningful or true.

The Protective Self	The Authentic Self
Write down the ways you learned to change, hide or suppress yourself in order to fit in or remain safe.	Write down the parts of you that feel natural, meaningful, joyful or true.
Examples might include: • pretending to pray • agreeing when you wanted to object • hiding relationships • avoiding talking about art or music • concealing doubt • denying your sexuality • dressing in ways that did not feel like you • acting more religious around family members	Examples might include: • a love of writing • curiosity and independent thought • attraction to someone of the same gender • creativity • a wish for greater freedom • a preference for privacy • a sense of humour • interests that were you once had to hide discouraged
Write your own reflections: ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----	Write your own reflections: ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
<i>You may notice overlap, uncertainty or contradiction. The aim is not to label every part perfectly, but to begin recognising what was shaped by safety and what feels more freely chosen.</i>	

Affirmations for shame and feelings of worthlessness

An affirmation is a short statement you can return to when shame or self-criticism appears. It will not make the older thought disappear, and at first the words may feel less convincing simply because the critical message has had more practice. The aim is to place another response beside it. Saying I am not worthless may not immediately silence the thought I am worthless. It can, however, remind you that the critical thought is not the only possible response. Instead of becoming completely absorbed in it, you begin to notice it and place another voice beside it.

A deliberate response can also interrupt a familiar pattern of shame. When the critic begins repeating the same judgement, the affirmation gives your mind something different to return to. With repetition, this response may begin to feel more familiar,

particularly when you say it aloud, write it down or pair it with a gentle physical action, such as placing a hand over your heart.

For some people, affirmations provide words they rarely heard while growing up. If you experienced repeated criticism, threats of punishment or messages of unworthiness, a statement such as You matter may feel unfamiliar. It can still become part of learning to relate to yourself through care rather than fear.

You might begin with statements such as: I am not dirty; I was made to believe that. My feelings remain valid even when they make someone else uncomfortable. I am allowed to take up space. My worth does not depend on how much I give to other people. I do not have to earn love or safety. Leaving was not a betrayal; it was survival. I am not bad; I am healing. I do not need to be perfect to be worthy.

Example affirmations	When affirmation feels impossible
I am allowed to exist without apologising for who I am. My worth does not depend on obedience. Questioning does not make me bad. Changing my beliefs does not make me a failure. I am not responsible for protecting everyone from disappointment. Guilt is a feeling, not always evidence of wrongdoing. Shame is not proof that there is something wrong with me. I can make a mistake without becoming a bad person. I am allowed to have needs, preferences and boundaries. My body belongs to me. I do not have to earn safety. I am allowed to build a life that makes sense to me.	If strong statements do not feel believable yet, try a gentler version. Instead of “I am worthy,” try: “I am learning to question the belief that I am worthless.” Instead of “I love myself,” try: “I am practising speaking to myself with less cruelty.” Instead of “I am safe,” try: “Some things are safer now than they were before.” Instead of “I have nothing to feel guilty about,” try: “I can feel guilty and still ask whether I have actually done something wrong.” Instead of “I do not care what people think,” try: “Other people’s opinions can matter to me without deciding my life.” Instead of “I am confident in who I am,” try: “I am allowed to still be figuring out who I am.”

Choose words that feel grounded rather than forced. When shame is strong, a statement such as I am wonderful may feel impossible to accept. Something more measured, such as I am learning not to treat myself as the enemy, may feel more honest. The aim is not to replace one rigid message with another. It is to develop a response that is kinder, more accurate and more consistent with the values you hold now.

You can say the words aloud, even quietly, or write them somewhere you will see them. You might keep one on your phone, beside your bed or inside your wallet. Returning to one statement when shame, rejection or fear of punishment begins to surface may feel more manageable than trying to use several at once. You can also create your own by considering what you most needed to hear when the old message first took hold.

Some ex-Muslims and other survivors of high-control religious environments learned to mistrust their own minds, bodies and desires. They may have been told that their wishes were sinful or haram, that obedience determined their worth, or that suffering proved their goodness. Affirmations offer one way of answering these inherited messages with words shaped by compassion, autonomy and present-day values.

Chapter 11: Becoming the Author of My Own Life

In the last chapter, we explored how to distinguish your present thoughts and values from the inherited voices that belong to your parents, community or the former faith. Some inherited beliefs may continue to influence how you think about how you should act, what to wear or who you should be. Understanding where your beliefs come from is an important part of reclaiming your identity. This realisation also brings a deeper challenge: how do you determine what to believe now when you are no longer following someone else's rules?

Many find it difficult to answer that question. In fact, many ex-Muslims in the CEMB support groups describe an unexpected sense of emptiness after leaving Islam because the old blueprint is gone. For years, decisions may have felt straightforward because the answers were already defined. Religion, family, or the community often set clear expectations about what is right and wrong, what relationships are acceptable, how to dress, what to eat, who to trust, and even what your future should look like. When those structures are no longer in place, that clarity disappears.

Some people experience this as freedom. Others find it unsettling. One participant put it simply: "Nobody was telling me what to do anymore, but I realised I didn't know how to decide for myself." Another said: "I thought freedom would feel obvious. Instead, it felt like standing in the middle of a road with no signposts."

This uncertainty is a normal part of the process. Making your own decisions is a skill, and like any skill, it develops over time. If the most important choices were made for you during childhood and adolescence, it can take time to trust your own judgement and to believe that it is allowed and matters. Many people assume they need to replace one complete belief system with another before they can move forward, but that is rarely necessary. What tends to happen instead is a gradual shift, where people learn they can make considered decisions without needing absolute certainty. This chapter explores how to move from inherited rules towards chosen values, a more flexible identity, considered ethical judgement, and a sense of meaning that you can examine and make your own.

Religion, culture, and family are not always easy to separate

A common concern or worry during the process of leaving Islam is whether you need to reject everything you were taught. You do not. Many people continue to value qualities such as kindness, generosity, loyalty, and care for others. The difference is that these values become choices rather than obligations. You may want to hold on to celebrations, cultural memories, music, food and other traditions. What changes is that what you choose to retain no longer serves as a test of your loyalty, morality or the right to belong. This shift allows you to distinguish your values from expectations maintained through pressure, fear or conditional acceptance. In practice, it means you can keep caring for your family without feeling that they own you. You can be generous without completely sacrificing yourself.

At the same time, you may decide that some beliefs no longer fit the life you want to build. You might place more importance on authenticity than obedience, recognise that compassion includes yourself as well as others, or decide that obedience or deference should not be demanded simply because of age, sex or authority. These decisions are personal, and there is no fixed list of what you should keep or discard. The aim is not to replace one rigid system with another, but to become more deliberate about how you live.

Another issue that often comes up is the difference between religion and culture. In many cases, the two are closely linked, making them difficult to separate. Some traditions provide a sense of connection, identity, and continuity through language, food, celebrations, and shared experiences. Others may be tied to expectations around control, ‘honour’, or sex-based roles that no longer fit your life.

You do not need to resolve all of this at once. Some people continue to take part in family or cultural traditions while redefining what those experiences mean to them. Others choose to keep aspects that bring them satisfaction and let go of those that create distress. This process is usually gradual. It is less about choosing between two fixed identities and more about deciding, step by step, what you want to keep and what you are ready to leave behind. Continuing a tradition does not necessarily mean accepting every belief, rule, or expectation that was once attached to it. Equally, letting go of a tradition does not mean rejecting your entire history or becoming disloyal to the people you love.

Deciding what to keep is not easy or always straightforward. The guilt and self-criticism discussed in the previous chapter may still make it difficult to trust your choices. The next step is therefore not simply to reject old rules, but to understand what matters to you and begin building an inner framework of your own.

Keeping What Is Still Yours — Yasmin

When Yasmin left Islam, she wanted distance from everything connected to it. She stopped speaking her first language. She avoided family recipes. If she enjoyed music linked to religious celebrations, she felt uneasy.
Part of her thought:



- “If I keep any of this, maybe I have not really left.”
- “If I enjoy it, maybe I am going backwards.”

For a while, Yasmin treated her whole past as one package: religion, family, language, food, music, memories. She felt that leaving meant rejecting all of it. Over time, she began to separate these things. Some parts of her upbringing were connected with fear, control and rules she no longer wanted. Other parts were connected with her grandmother’s cooking, jokes in her first language, songs she had grown up with and memories of people she still loved. Yasmin began cooking some of the food again and speaking her language with trusted friends. She noticed something important: keeping these things did not make her religious again. She was not returning to the old system. She was choosing what still belonged to her. Leaving did not have to mean erasing her whole history. It meant that, for the first time, she could decide what to keep, what to change and what to leave behind.



The shift was from:
Does this belong to Islam?
to:
Does this still belong to me?



Leaving does not have to mean rejecting everything you inherited. The work is to notice what still belongs to you, what no longer fits, and what you now want to choose for yourself.

Identity does not have to be binary

It is normal to remain emotionally or culturally connected to parts of your Muslim background without continuing to hold Muslim beliefs or practise religious rituals. Other people may still perceive you as Muslim because of your name, family, appearance or cultural background, even when your private beliefs are different. You may continue to enjoy traditions, celebrations, food, music or language without attaching the same religious meaning to them. You may also love your family and value parts of your shared history while remaining critical of the religious beliefs or expectations you were raised in.

These things do not necessarily contradict one another. Your identity can hold different parts of who you are, including parts of your history. They may not always fit together neatly, but that does not mean they cannot all belong to you.

The table below can help you separate what you genuinely want to keep from what was reinforced through pressure, shame or control. Appendix 7 also includes a worksheet to help distinguish inherited rules from chosen values.

	Chosen value	Healthier expression
1. Respect means never questioning elders	Respect	I can listen and speak respectfully while still disagreeing.
2. Loyalty means protecting the family at all costs	Loyalty	I can care about my family without concealing harm.
3. Prescribed rules determine how I should cover or present my body	Privacy and bodily autonomy	I can decide for myself what feels comfortable.
4. Generosity means always putting others first	Generosity	I can give freely without neglecting my own needs.
5. Forgiveness means reconciliation without accountability	Forgiveness	I can let go of resentment while still requiring responsibility and boundaries.
6. Commitment means never leaving	Commitment	I can take relationships seriously without remaining in abuse or harm.

Building an Identity That Can Change

Leaving an authoritarian Islamic environment, or any high-control religious environment, often involves far more than changing what you believe. Religion may have shaped how you dressed, behaved, related to other people, judged yourself and understood what made you good, respectable or worthy (Coates, 2013).

When that framework begins to fall away, you may feel uncertain, disoriented or empty. Questions may start to surface:

Who am I now?
Which parts of me are genuinely mine?
What do I want to keep?
*How do I want to live?*³

³ These are reflective prompts. Research on religious exit often discusses identity questions, self-definition and reconstruction of personal narratives, but the specific

These questions may reflect the beginning of a different kind of life: one in which you have more freedom to notice what you think, understand what you feel and make choices that belong to you.

You do not need to find all the answers at once. Identity is not a problem you must solve quickly,⁴ nor something you must rebuild perfectly. It can take shape gradually as you gain new experiences, develop relationships and discover what feels meaningful, safe and true to you.

The Protective Self and the Authentic Self: In controlling environments, people often develop protective ways of presenting themselves. These are not evidence that you were dishonest or inauthentic. They may have been intelligent adaptations to danger, dependence, or conditional acceptance. This might have included hiding your doubts, altering your speech, pretending to believe, concealing your sexuality, suppressing your interests, or acting differently around various people. These adjustments may have been important ways of protecting yourself, maintaining relationships or reducing risk. The following reflection can help you notice the difference between the self you learned to present for safety and the parts of you that may have remained hidden.

Pause and reflect

Which parts of my authentic self still feel unsafe to express?

Where do I feel most able to be myself?

Who allows me to speak without monitoring or editing myself?

What is one small and safe way I could express more of myself?

Authenticity does not mean revealing every part of yourself to everyone. Safety still matters. You can begin by becoming more honest with yourself, then decide carefully what you want to share, when you want to share it and who has earned your trust.

Small acts of self-expression can help you reconnect with your sense of self. This might mean choosing a different hairstyle, exploring a new interest, writing privately in a journal, setting a boundary or speaking honestly with someone you trust. Each act may seem small, but it can strengthen the experience of living as yourself rather than performing the person others expect you to be.

questions are the author's formulation (e.g. Stromberg 2020; Streib et al. 2009; McAdams & McLean 2013).

⁴ Identity is commonly understood as dynamic and continually revised rather than completed once and permanently (Erikson, 1968; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011).

Creating Meaning and Direction

For many people, religion offers far more than a set of beliefs. It explains why you are here, how you should live, what suffering means, what happens after death and what makes a life worthwhile (Park, 2010).

When that framework no longer feels believable, its absence can be deeply unsettling. You may find yourself asking (Streib et al., 2009; Coates, 2013):

*What gives my life meaning now?
How do I decide what is right or wrong?
What should guide my choices?
What am I living for?*

These questions do not mean that your life is empty or that you have lost your moral direction. They may reflect a difficult but important shift: moving from answers that were given to you towards answers that you can genuinely examine, choose and stand behind.

There may be no immediate or permanent answer. Meaning often develops gradually through the way you live, the relationships you nurture, the values you practise and the commitments you freely choose (Schnell, 2009; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

You do not need to replace one complete system with another. Trying to find a new explanation for everything may recreate the same pressure for certainty that you are beginning to move away from.

It may help to begin with smaller, more personal questions:

*What matters to me?
What kind of person do I want to be?
Which relationships do I want to care for?
What do I want to contribute?
What helps me feel connected, alive or engaged?
What makes an ordinary day feel worthwhile?*

Meaning does not need to be grand, permanent or visible to anyone else. It may be found in caring for someone, raising children, creating something, learning, friendship, justice, pleasure, humour, nature, work or community. It may also grow through living with greater honesty, freedom and self-respect (Schnell, 2009).

Values as a Compass

When religious rules are no longer making decisions for you, values can offer direction.

Values are the qualities you want to bring into your life and actions. They may include compassion, freedom, honesty, creativity, fairness, curiosity, autonomy, courage or connection (Hayes et al., 2012).

A rule usually tells you exactly what you must do. A value helps you consider how you want to act while still taking account of safety, context, consent and possible consequences.

For example, valuing honesty does not mean disclosing everything to everyone. Honesty might involve speaking openly in a safe relationship, asking a difficult question, acknowledging a truth privately to yourself or refusing to take part in a deception that causes harm.

Valuing family does not mean obeying every family expectation. Valuing generosity does not require you to neglect yourself. Valuing forgiveness does not mean removing accountability or returning to an unsafe relationship.

Values offer direction, but they do not remove complexity.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, values are often compared to a compass. A compass cannot tell you exactly what will happen along the way, and it cannot remove every obstacle. It can, however, help you notice whether your actions are taking you towards or away from the kind of life you want to build (Hayes et al., 2012).

You may find the clarifying your values exercise helpful to identify the values that feel personally meaningful, consider how they were expressed in the past and explore how you might choose to live them now.

As you complete the exercise, try not to select the values you think a good or respectable person should have. Notice instead which values feel personally significant to you. In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, values are understood as personally chosen qualities of ongoing action rather than rules imposed by others (Hayes et al., 2012).

You may discover that you want to keep some of the values you were taught while changing the conditions once attached to them.

For example:

- You may still value family while rejecting the idea that loyalty requires obedience.
- You may value privacy and decide for yourself how you want to dress and present your body.
- You may value commitment without remaining in a harmful relationship.
- You may value generosity without always placing yourself last.
- You may value compassion while still holding someone responsible for harm.
- This is part of developing a moral life that is chosen rather than imposed.

This exercise follows naturally from the previous one. Once you have begun identifying what still matters when other people's approval, judgement or expectations are removed, the next question is:

how much does your everyday life actually reflect those values?

The Empty Room Test



Imagine that, for one day, nobody could see what you chose.

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| ✎ No family. | ✎ No one to praise you. |
| ✎ No religious authority. | ✎ No one to shame you. |
| ✎ No community. | ✎ No one to punish you. |
| ✎ No partner. | ✎ No one to be disappointed. |
| ✎ No social media. | |

Ask yourself:

What would I still choose to do?

.....

Who would I still want to be kind to?

.....

What would I still care about?

.....

What would I still refuse to do?

.....

What would I still want to learn, protect,
create or
contribute?

.....

What would matter even if nobody
knew?

.....

Now look at your answers.

Those may be closer to your values.



A value is not something you do because you are watched.
It is something that still matters when the audience disappears.

One final question:

*What is one small choice I could make this week
that would be the same choice even if
nobody ever found out?*

.....
.....

♡ That is where a value starts becoming your own. ✎

Who is making the decision?

How close am I living to my values?

Once you have begun identifying what matters to you, the next question is how much your everyday choices reflect those values.

1. Choose three areas of your life

☐ How I dress	☐ Family	☐ Rest	☐ Relationships
☐ What I hide	☐ My body	☐ Money	☐ Enjoyment
☐ What I say yes to	☐ Beliefs	☐ Time	☐ How I speak to myself

2. Look underneath the choice

What am I doing now?

Is this because it matters to me — or because I am trying to avoid guilt, shame, rejection or punishment?

3. Use this simple guide

0 — STILL MOSTLY AN OLD RULE Mostly shaped by fear, duty or inherited expectations.	1 — SOME OF BOTH Partly inherited expectations, partly what matters to me.	2 — MOSTLY MINE Mostly chosen because it reflects what matters to me.
---	--	---

♥ *There is no perfect score.*
The purpose is to notice what is shaping your choices.

Making Sense of Your Story

Leaving religion is rarely one clear moment. It is often a longer process involving belief, doubt, fear, conflict, concealment, relief, uncertainty and change (Streib et al., 2009; Coates, 2013).

You may remember times when religion gave you comfort, belonging or structure. You may also remember experiences that felt restrictive, frightening or impossible to reconcile with your values. Research on religious exit suggests that people may retain positive memories and attachments while also recognising conflict, restriction or harm (Streib et al., 2009). Both can be true.

Making sense of your story does not require you to decide that your religious past was either entirely good or entirely harmful. It means allowing yourself to look at what you experienced with greater honesty and complexity.

Your story includes more than what was done to you or what you lost. It also includes the ways you adapted, questioned, protected yourself, resisted, survived and grew.

The Before, During and After reflective exercise below offers a structured way to explore this journey. It invites you to consider:

- what religion and community once gave you;
- what began to create doubt or disconnection;
- what you feared might happen if you questioned or left;
- how you coped during that period;
- what has become possible since;
- who you are now becoming.
-

You can write in the first person, using “I”, or in the third person, using “they”.

Writing about a painful experience in the third person may create some emotional distance, helping you approach what happened without feeling quite so immersed in it (Andersson & Conley, 2013; Park et al., 2016).

For example:

They had spent years believing that doubt made them dangerous. Gradually, they began to understand that questioning was not a moral failure. It was part of learning to trust their own mind.

You do not need to write about everything at once. If a memory feels overwhelming, you can stop, take a break or focus on a part of the story that feels more manageable.

The purpose is not to force disclosure or produce a complete account. It is to help you recognise your experience in your own words and at your own pace.

Or instead you can complete the worksheet below.

Becoming the author

For much of your life, other people may have claimed the authority to define who you were, what you should believe and how you should live. Developing your own identity does not mean rejecting every influence, tradition or relationship. None of us forms an identity in isolation. We are all shaped by family, culture, experience and community (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The difference lies in whether these influences are considered and chosen or followed because questioning feels impossible.

Becoming the author of your life means developing a stronger voice in deciding what you believe, which relationships you want, what you will accept and what you want your life to stand for. Narrative-identity research describes identity as an evolving life story through which people interpret the past and imagine their future (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

This will not always feel certain. You may make choices and later revise them. A value may come to matter in a different way than you first imagined. You may also outgrow identities that once felt important.

Changing your mind does not mean that you cannot trust yourself. It is one of the ways self-knowledge develops. You do not need to create a final version of yourself. Identity is not a finished statement. It is an unfolding relationship with your history, your values, your needs and the life you are trying to build (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Rebuilding identity and meaning after religion is not about rushing to fill an empty space. It is about creating enough space to discover what may have been hidden beneath expectation, fear and silence. You are not a blank slate. You bring with you a history, a culture, memories, relationships, abilities, interests and values. Some parts may need to be questioned. Some may need to be grieved. Others may be reclaimed and carried forward in a form that feels more freely chosen. Studies of deconversion suggest that leaving religion can involve both discontinuity and the selective retention or reinterpretation of earlier identities, relationships and values (Streib et al., 2009).

You do not need to become a completely different person. You are learning to recognise the parts of yourself that were always present, as well as the parts that are still developing. You are becoming more fully the author of your own life. Your values can offer direction. Your voice can become clearer. Your choices can become more deliberate. You do not need to know the whole path before taking the next step.

Chapter 12: Grief and Ambiguous Loss

In the previous chapter, we explored what it can mean to begin rebuilding a sense of identity, values and direction after leaving Islam. This is just one step in the process. Creating a life that feels more freely chosen doesn't undo what was lost along the way. Leaving may alter relationships, routines, hopes, identities and forms of belonging that once gave life structure and familiarity. Some losses that you may experience can be immediate and visible. Others can be harder to name because the people, places or traditions involved have not disappeared completely (Streib et al., 2009; Coates, 2013; Williams, 2024).

Ambiguous loss doesn't always announce itself. Sometimes it appears at a family dinner, when you are physically present but still feel that an important part of you is unseen or unrecognised. Sometimes it shows up when you find yourself standing at the edge of your own culture, close enough to feel its pull, too far to fully belong. Other times, it is the strange ache of missing a faith you no longer hold, not the belief itself, but everything that grew up around it: the songs you knew by heart, the holidays that gave the year its shape, the quiet comfort of being part of something older and larger than you (Ransom, Monk & Heim, 2022). These experiences can feel confusing because they do not fit neatly into a simple story of either freedom or loss.

This chapter explores the grief that may follow leaving Islam, the loneliness that can come with losing belonging and the particular pain of losses that have no clear ending or public recognition. It also considers how grief and relief can exist together, how to recognise what you are mourning and how to begin carrying these losses without returning to relationships or environments that were harmful or unsafe (Ransom et al., 2022; Williams, 2024).

The aim is not to persuade you to move on quickly or to find a positive meaning in every loss. It is to help you understand that grief after leaving does not mean that you made the wrong decision. It means that something important has changed.

Pause and reflect

What has changed?

Take a moment to notice whether anything in your life is still present, but no longer feels the same.

What is still part of my life but no longer feels fully available to me?

Where am I physically included but emotionally unseen or unknown?

What do I miss, even though I do not want to return to how things were?

Which loss feels difficult to explain because nothing has clearly ended?

You do not need to resolve these feelings or decide what they mean. For now, simply notice what has changed and allow yourself to recognise that it matters.

The many layers of loss

No Last Conversation — Samir

Samir had been shunned by his family for several years when his father died. They had never spoken about what happened between them. His father had never explained why he stopped answering his calls, and Samir had never had the chance to say what the rejection had done to him. When he heard about the death, his first reaction was not simply grief. It was:

	• “Now I will never get to ask him.” • “Now he will never know what this did to me.” • “I cannot even say goodbye properly.”
---	--

Samir found himself grieving two things at once: the father who had died, and the possibility that one day they might have repaired what had been broken. That second loss was harder to explain to other people. They saw a bereavement. Samir was also grieving the end of a hope. The death made the shunning permanent. There would be no final conversation, no apology, no explanation and no chance to hear his father say, ‘I still love you.’ Sometimes grief after shunning is not only about losing a person. It is about losing the possibility of ever changing the ending.

	Sometimes grief after shunning is not only about losing a person. It is also about losing the hoped-for repair, explanation or goodbye that will now never come.
---	--

Leaving a high-control religious environment can bring a quiet but profound unraveling. It is rarely one loss. Instead, many connected parts of life may begin to shift at once. The religious environment may have formed the scaffolding around your life. It may have shaped your relationships, daily routines, identity and place within the community. It may also have defined what safety meant, where you belonged and what your future was expected to look like. When you step away, each of these foundations may begin to move beneath you.

Some losses are immediate and visible. Others take longer to recognise. They may surface months or years later, stirred by a family celebration, a familiar prayer, a particular time of year or an ordinary moment that reminds you of what is no longer available.

The losses described below are among those that people may experience, but they are not the only ones you may experience. Grief remains personal. You may also be mourning people, places, hopes or parts of yourself that are difficult to explain to anyone else.

Loss of relationship

You may lose contact with parents, siblings, extended family members or friends. Some people face explicit rejection or shunning. For others, the separation is less visible but still deeply felt.

You may continue speaking to your family while avoiding any mention of what you believe. You may attend gatherings while monitoring every word, expression and reaction. You may still fulfil the role expected of you while knowing that the people closest to you no longer know an important part of who you are.

A relationship does not have to end completely for you to grieve it. You may be mourning the closeness, trust or honesty that is no longer possible within it. Contact may remain, but the relationship itself may feel altered.

You may also grieve the relationship you hoped you would have: a parent who would continue to love you despite disagreement, a sibling who would defend you, or relatives who would recognise and celebrate the life you have chosen. Sometimes the pain lies not only in losing what existed, but in recognising that the relationship you needed may never have been available.

Loss of belonging

Before leaving Islam, you may have experienced belonging through your family, mosque, religious celebrations, cultural gatherings or connection to a wider Muslim community. Even when that belonging depended on obedience or came with restrictions, it may still have offered familiarity, regular social contact and a clear place within the group.

After leaving, you may no longer feel fully at home in the community you came from. At the same time, secular spaces may not immediately feel like home either. People who have not experienced religious control may struggle to understand why leaving has affected so many areas of your life.

This can leave you feeling caught between worlds. The former community may no longer feel safe or accepting, but you may not yet have found another place where you feel recognised and rooted.

Loss of identity

You may once have understood yourself through identities such as Muslim, believer, daughter, son, wife, husband or member of a particular family or community. Other people may also have related to you through these roles. When those identities begin to change, your sense of who you are may become less certain.

- You may find yourself asking:
- Who am I without this label?
- Which parts of me were freely chosen?
- Which parts developed through expectation, pressure or fear?
- What remains when the prescribed identity is removed?

The loss of an old identity can feel disorientating, even when that identity restricted you. It may have organised how you understood yourself, how you made decisions and how other people responded to you.

You are not simply losing a label. You may be losing a familiar explanation of who you were supposed to be. Discovering who you are beyond that explanation may take time.

Loss of structure and ritual

Religion may have organised the day, the week and the year through prayer, fasting, religious study and celebrations. When you leave, you may miss the rhythm these practices created, even when you no longer believe in their religious meaning.

Ramadan may have shaped the daily routine of an entire household or community. Eid may have brought relatives together. Prayer may have created predictable pauses throughout the day. Religious practices may also have marked major events, offered familiar responses during periods of distress or provided a shared way of understanding time.

Their absence may become especially noticeable during particular seasons, family occasions or stressful periods. You may feel unsettled by an empty space in the day or year without immediately understanding why.

Loss of certainty

A religious worldview may once have provided answers to some of life's most difficult questions:

- Why am I here?
- What is right and wrong?
- What happens after death?
-

Some of those answers may have frightened or restricted you. Even so, they may also have reduced uncertainty by presenting life as ordered, purposeful and already explained.

After leaving, questions that once had firm answers may feel open again. This openness can bring freedom. It can also feel unsettling, especially if you were taught that uncertainty was dangerous or that doubt would lead you away from safety.

You may miss the feeling of certainty without believing that the old answers were true. You may also grieve the belief that someone or something was watching over you, that suffering followed a predetermined purpose or that a clear plan existed for your life.

Loss of an imagined future

You may have grown up expecting a particular kind of future. This might have included a religious marriage, family approval, shared celebrations, children raised within the faith or reunion with loved ones in paradise.

When your beliefs or circumstances change, that future may no longer feel possible. It may no longer be the life you want. Yet consciously choosing a different direction does not prevent you from grieving the future you once expected.

This loss may become especially painful when you imagine important milestones:

- a relationship or marriage your family will not accept;
- children they may never know;
- celebrations you cannot share openly;
- illness or bereavement without their support;
- achievements they may refuse to recognise.

There may be no single moment when this imagined future ends. Its absence may reveal itself gradually as your life unfolds and each new milestone brings another reminder of who is missing or what cannot be shared.

Loss of safety and support

Family and community may once have offered practical support, including housing, financial help, childcare, social contacts or assistance during difficult periods. Leaving may place some or all of this support at risk.

You may find yourself facing decisions that other people make with the help of family while trying to manage alone. Ordinary challenges may become harder when there is no secure place to return to, no one to call in an emergency or no financial support to rely on.

You may also have to weigh disclosure against housing, financial security, immigration status or physical safety. In these circumstances, disclosure is not simply a question of emotional openness. It may carry serious practical consequences.

This means that grief is not only about emotional separation. It may also be tied to real changes in safety, resources, stability and opportunity.

Loss of time and possibility

Some people grieve the years they spent suppressing themselves, meeting expectations or postponing choices that mattered to them.

You may feel sadness or anger about:

- education or work opportunities you were discouraged from pursuing;
- relationships you were not allowed to explore;
- aspects of your sexuality or identity that had to remain hidden;
- time spent living in fear;
- decisions made before you felt free to choose;
- a childhood or adolescence shaped by responsibility, shame or control.
-

This grief can feel especially painful because the past cannot be changed. You may imagine who you might have become or what your life might have looked like under different circumstances.

It may help to remember that you made decisions within the knowledge, freedom and resources available to you at the time. You may not have had the safety, language, support or practical means needed to act differently.

Recognising what was lost does not require you to blame yourself for failing to leave, resist or understand sooner.

Loss of spiritual comfort

Not everyone who leaves misses spirituality, but some people do. You may miss prayer as a place to direct fear, grief or hope. You may miss believing that someone heard you, that suffering carried meaning or that you would see deceased loved ones again. You may eventually find another form of spirituality, find meaning elsewhere, or decide that spirituality no longer has a place in your life. You do not need to decide this now.



Hold on to This

.....

You have lost parts of the
life you knew. You have not
lost the possibility of building
one that feels truly yours.

Exercise: Naming what has been lost

You may recognise several of these losses, or your experience may look very different. The purpose of naming them is not to intensify your grief. It is to help you understand what you are carrying. When several losses occur at the same time, distress can feel vague, tangled and overwhelming. You may tell yourself: *I should be happier now that I am free*, without recognising that freedom may have come alongside the loss of relationships, belonging, certainty, identity, practical support or a future you once expected to have.

Naming a loss can make it easier to respond to what you are actually experiencing. Grief connected to a relationship may need something different from grief about lost time, cultural belonging or an imagined future. You may not be able to restore what was lost, but understanding the source of the pain can make it feel less confusing.

The *Naming My Losses* exercise in Appendix 8 offers a structured way to explore this. It invites you to consider losses connected to relationships, belonging, identity, rituals, certainty, safety and the future, and to notice which of these feels most present in your life now.

You do not need to address every loss at once. Some may feel immediate, while others may remain in the background and emerge later, perhaps during a celebration, relationship, bereavement or important life transition.

Grief often becomes more manageable not because every loss has been resolved, but because you can begin to recognise what you are carrying, how it has affected you and why it matters.

When loss has no clear ending or recognition

Some losses are especially difficult to grieve because there is no clear ending. Your family may still be alive but no longer feel emotionally available to you. You may continue attending gatherings while hiding important parts of yourself. The community may still exist yet no longer feel safe or accessible. A relationship may remain in your life, but only while you avoid speaking honestly about who you are.

This is known as ambiguous loss: a loss that has no clear ending or resolution Boss (1999). The person, relationship or community has not disappeared completely, but it is no longer available in the way it once was, or in the way you need it to be.

You may find yourself grieving:

- a parent who is physically present but emotionally distant;
- a sibling who still speaks to you but avoids what matters most;
- a family relationship that depends on silence or performance;
- a community you can see but cannot safely re-enter;
- the hope that one day you will be fully accepted;
- a relationship that continues without honesty or mutual understanding.

Ambiguous loss can leave you suspended between hope and grief. You may continue waiting for someone to change, for a relationship to return to what it once was or for your family to accept you without conditions.

There may be no single moment when you can say: *This is over*. Instead, you may encounter the loss repeatedly: at a family gathering, after an unanswered message, during a religious celebration or at an important milestone when someone is physically present but emotionally absent.

This grief can become even harder when other people fail to recognise it.



Hold on to This

You may never receive the explanation,
apology or recognition you deserve.

Your loss is still real, and your healing
does not have to wait for their permission.

Disenfranchised grief describes grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially understood or adequately supported. There may be no ritual, shared language or recognised place for mourning what you have lost (Doka, 1989).

Other people may say:

But your family still speaks to you.

You chose to leave.

You should be happy now that you are free.

At least no one has died.

Responses like these can make you question whether you have the right to grieve. Your grief does not depend on whether other people understand or validate the loss. It grows from attachment, meaning and the reality that something important has changed. You may grieve a relationship that still exists but no longer feels safe. You may grieve a community that would welcome only a version of you that is no longer true. You may grieve a future that never came to pass. You may grieve the hope that your family would eventually understand. These losses remain real, even when no one else recognises them.

The absence of a clear ending can also make it difficult to know how to respond. You may not feel able to let go because the relationship has not completely ended. You may struggle to keep hoping because each contact brings further disappointment. You may move between longing, anger, guilt, relief and numbness. This uncertainty does not mean that you are grieving incorrectly. It reflects the nature of a loss that remains unresolved. You do not have to force the relationship into one simple category. It may be neither entirely gone nor fully available. Sometimes the most accurate way to describe the situation is:

They are still in my life, but not in the way I need.

I still love them, but I do not feel safe with them.

Part of me still hopes, but I also need to protect myself from repeated disappointment.

I can grieve what is missing without denying what remains.

Recognising ambiguous and unacknowledged grief may not provide closure. It can, however, help you stop blaming yourself for struggling with a loss that has never been clearly named or allowed to end.

Pause and reflect

What am I still waiting for?

What am I still waiting to receive from someone who may never be able to give it?

Naming that hope does not mean giving it up. It means recognising the weight of carrying it.

Missing something does not mean wanting it back

Many people who attend the CEMB support groups are surprised by what they miss when leaving a high-control environment. A familiar recitation may stir something in you. The beginning of Ramadan may bring a sense of absence. Eid food, a family photograph, a particular phrase or the sound of people preparing for prayer may evoke warmth, sadness or longing (Wildschut et al., 2006; Sedikides et al., 2008). These reactions can feel confusing, especially when leaving was necessary.

You may wonder:

*Why do I miss this if I no longer believe?
Does this mean I made the wrong decision?
Am I being drawn back?*

The answer to the last question is not necessarily. Memory does not divide experience into neat categories. A religious practice may have been connected not only to belief, but also to family, childhood, language, sensory familiarity, community and moments of closeness. When something in the present awakens those memories, you may be responding to what surrounded the religion rather than to the doctrine itself (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Wildschut et al., 2006).

You might miss:

- your grandmother's cooking without missing the expectations placed on you;
- the atmosphere of Eid without wanting to perform belief;
- the rhythm of Ramadan without wanting to fast;
- religious music or recitation without accepting its message;
- family gatherings without wanting to hide who you are;
- the feeling of certainty without believing that the answers were true;
- the hope of being protected without wanting to return to fear or submission.
-

These distinctions matter because in a high-control environment, comfort and control may become closely intertwined. The same gathering may offer warmth while also involving scrutiny. The same family relationship may contain love and fear. The same ritual may feel familiar while reinforcing obligation. This can make it difficult to divide the past into experiences that were entirely comforting or entirely harmful.

You can miss what felt safe without denying what was unsafe. You can value a memory without accepting every condition attached to it. You can feel affection for people who were unable to accept you fully. You can retain parts of your culture without returning to the beliefs or rules that once governed them (Streib et al., 2009).

Longing is an emotion, not an instruction. It does not tell you what decision to make. It tells you that something held meaning, familiarity or attachment. At times of loneliness, the past may also appear more comforting than it felt while you were living through it. Your mind may focus on moments of closeness while fear, restriction or self-silencing recede into the background. This does not mean that your memories are false. It means that memory is shaped partly by what you are feeling and needing in the present (Levine & Safer, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2008).

When you find yourself longing for something from the past, it can help to think about what you are really missing. It might be your family, a familiar way of life, speaking the same language, celebrating together, or simply knowing where you belonged. Missing Eid, for example, does not necessarily mean that you miss the belief itself. You may miss the warmth, the food, the noise, the familiar faces, or the feeling of being part of something.

Some losses cannot be recreated. New friends cannot give you back a shared childhood. A celebration you create for yourself may never feel quite like the ones you remember. Finding a new community does not erase the hurt of being rejected by the one you came from.

But knowing what you miss can make the feeling a little easier to understand. You may want to keep some traditions, change others, or find new ways of having the connection and celebration you once valued. You may also find that some memories or practices are still too painful to return to. You do not have to decide all of that at once.

Some people continue to enjoy particular foods, music, language or celebrations. Others need distance from them. Some return to cultural practices later, once they feel less connected to fear or obligation. Others do not.

The important question is not:

Am I allowed to miss this?

It is:

What does this longing tell me about what mattered, and how do I want to care for that part of myself now?

In the CEMB support groups we distinguish influence from control and present identity as extending beyond belief to include relationships, culture, community, purpose and expectations for the future. This helps explain why someone may leave a belief system while remaining connected to some of the cultural, relational or personal meanings that surrounded it.

Finding belonging again

Losing family or community involves more than having fewer people to speak to or fewer social activities. It can disturb your sense of where you fit, who understands you and where you are able to be fully known (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ransom et al., 2022). In a nutshell, it impacts your sense of belonging, which is not simply about being surrounded by people. It involves feeling accepted, understood and safe enough to participate without constantly monitoring yourself (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the CEMB support groups, participants often describe belonging as being known, sharing experiences, feeling accepted, and not having to perform to remain included.

After leaving a high-control religious environment, you may find that some relationships provide contact without a genuine sense of belonging. You may still speak to relatives while avoiding the subjects that matter most to you. You may attend family gatherings while monitoring every word, expression or question. You may have caring secular friends who cannot fully understand the cultural, religious or relational

consequences of leaving. You may enter an ex-Muslim space and still find that your experience differs from those around you.

After losing one social world, it is understandable to long for another place where you immediately feel recognised, understood and at home (Coates, 2013; Ransom et al., 2022). Safe belonging, however, often develops more slowly. It may begin with one person who listens without trying to correct you. It may grow through a friendship in which disagreement does not threaten the relationship. You may find it in a group organised around shared interests rather than shared beliefs. It may develop through work, study, activism, creativity, sport, culture or mutual support. You may not find every kind of connection in one place. One person may understand your family history. Another may share your cultural background. Someone else may connect with your humour, values, interests or way of seeing the world.

Between Two Rooms — Layla

After leaving Islam, Layla stopped attending family religious gatherings. At first she thought the hardest part would be missing the people.

It was stranger than that.

With her family, she edited herself. She avoided talking about relationships, beliefs and how she actually lived.

With new secular friends, she could speak freely, but they did not understand why Eid made her sad, why certain foods reminded her of home, or why a five-minute phone call with her mother could affect her for the rest of the day.

At family gatherings, she felt like she was pretending.

Among new friends, she sometimes felt like she was translating.

Layla began to realise that leaving one community had not automatically given her another place to belong.



- She was no longer asking only: 'Where do I fit?'
- She was beginning to ask:
'Where can I be understood without having to hide or explain half of myself?'

Belonging after leaving may take time because the challenge is not simply finding new people. It is finding relationships in which you do not have to choose which parts of yourself are allowed into the room.



Belonging after leaving is not only about finding new people. It is about finding spaces where you do not have to hide, translate or leave parts of yourself outside the room.

Belonging can grow across several relationships rather than being located in one community that meets every need. This means the search for a complete replacement can sometimes leave a person vulnerable to another group that promises immediate intimacy, certainty or unconditional acceptance, but later demands loyalty, sameness or obedience (Lalich, 2004).

When online belonging pulls you somewhere else

Finding people who understand what you have been through can be very important. Feeling understood can reduce isolation and give you somewhere to make sense of experiences that may have been difficult to talk about. For some ex-Muslims, the first place they look for this understanding is online. They may want to hear from other ex-Muslims, recognise shared experiences or find a space where they can speak more openly. At first, this may feel like a relief, particularly if their experiences have previously been dismissed or minimised.

Sometimes, however, a person may gradually find themselves exposed to much wider political or ideological messages than the ones they originally came looking for. This may not always be obvious at first. You may agree with a criticism of Islam, recognise something from your own experience or feel relieved that someone is saying something you have struggled to say yourself. Over time, however, you may notice that other expectations are being added to that sense of connection.

A group may begin to expect you to accept its wider worldview, agree with its political positions or direct hostility towards people associated with your former religion.

Validation can then begin to feel conditional: *we understand what happened to you, but only if you also think as we do.*

This is where it can help to notice whether there is still room for your own judgement. Research in psychology suggests that people tend to do better when relationships provide both connection and room for personal autonomy: the ability to think, choose and act in ways that feel genuinely your own (Slemp et al., 2024). Continually silencing yourself in order to remain accepted can also have psychological consequences (Pintea & Gatea, 2021).

This can be especially important after leaving a religion. Leaving Islam may already involve working out what you believe for yourself and where you now belong. Research with ex-Muslims suggests that this process can involve both a greater sense of authenticity and difficulties around relationships, community and belonging (Abbott et al., 2026; Vliek, 2019a).

Some ex-Muslims may find recognition, belonging or a simple explanation for painful experiences in groups that are hostile towards Muslims. There is limited direct research showing how often this happens, so it should not be treated as a common or inevitable outcome. It is better understood as a possible risk.

It is possible to say, “I agree with this criticism of Islam, but I do not agree with where you are taking it.” It is possible to speak clearly about harms connected with religion while refusing prejudice against Muslims. Criticism of beliefs, laws, institutions and practices is different from stereotyping or dehumanising people because they are Muslim.

And it is possible to realise, “I do not belong here.”

Stepping away from a group does not mean you have failed to find belonging.

Sometimes it is a way of protecting your ability to decide for yourself what you believe, what you value and what kind of person you want to be. A healthy community does not require you to disappear in order to belong.

You may want to notice:

Ask yourself



- ? **Whether questions are welcomed;**
- ? **Whether disagreement is tolerated;**
- ? **Whether boundaries are respected;**
- ? **Whether you are free to leave;**
- ? **Whether affection depends on compliance;**
- ? **Whether people outside the group are treated with dignity;**
- ? **Whether mistakes can be acknowledged and repaired;**
- ? **Whether differences in identity, belief or experience are allowed;**
- ? **Whether your level of participation can change without punishment**
or exclusion.



Belonging should not require you to surrender your judgement, autonomy or safety.

Relearning what safe connection feels like



If belonging was previously conditional, genuine acceptance may initially feel unfamiliar.

- You may mistrust kindness.
- You may wait for hidden expectations to appear.
- You may worry that disagreement will lead to rejection.
- You may overexplain yourself, apologise excessively or agree to things you do not want because saying no once carried consequences.
- You may also withdraw when a relationship begins to matter because closeness now feels connected with the possibility of control or abandonment.

These responses do not mean that you are incapable of intimacy. They may reflect what you learned about the risks of depending on other people (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Safe connection is often built through repeated, ordinary experiences: someone respects your no, a disagreement does not threaten the relationship, or something private you share is treated with care. It can mean receiving an apology that is followed by changed behaviour, being allowed to change your mind, or spending time with someone without having to explain or justify yourself. It is being missed without being monitored and valued without being owned. These moments may seem small, but repeated over time, they can gradually help your nervous system learn that closeness does not always require submission (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

The difference between familiarity and safety

Familiar relationships can sometimes feel more comfortable, or you may be more drawn to them than safer ones. The community you came from may know your language, family history, humour and cultural references. New relationships may feel less natural at first, even when they are more respectful. Familiarity can create a strong sense of recognition. But familiarity is not the same as safety.

A relationship may feel deeply familiar while still requiring silence, obedience or self-erasure. A new relationship may feel awkward or incomplete while offering greater freedom, respect and emotional honesty. This can make the process of rebuilding belonging feel disappointing at first. New connections may not carry the weight of shared childhood, history or culture. That does not make them shallow.

Trust often deepens through time, consistency and shared experience. New belonging may initially feel less intense because it has not been created through urgency, fear or enforced closeness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Pause and reflect

Familiar or safe?

Think of one relationship or community that feels familiar to you.

Ask yourself:

- What feels familiar here?
- What helps me feel safe?
- What do I have to hide, change or tolerate in order to remain included?
- What happens when I disagree, say no or need space?

Familiarity may draw you towards a relationship. Safety is revealed by what happens when you are fully human within it.

Making space for mixed feelings

New relationships do not automatically remove attachment to the people or communities you have lost. You might feel hopeful about a new friendship and still wish your family understood you. Eid may bring sadness even when the celebrations you have created for yourself feel meaningful. You can be angry about how relatives treated you and still worry about them or wish they would call. These feelings do not have to agree with one another.

A common response to ambivalence is to decide that one feeling must be true and the other false:

*If I miss them, perhaps they did not really harm me.
If I am angry, perhaps I never loved them.
If I enjoy parts of my culture, perhaps I have not truly left.
If I feel relieved, perhaps I am cold or ungrateful.*

Emotional complexity does not mean that you are being dishonest with yourself. It means that attachment and harm can exist within the same relationship, and that freedom can carry both possibility and cost (Larsen et al., 2001).

Rather than asking which feeling is correct, it may be more helpful to ask:

What is each feeling responding to?

Different feelings may be responding to different parts of the experience. Anger may be about injustice while longing reflects attachment; relief can sit beside grief. Rather than deciding which feeling is the “real” one, ask what each is responding to.



Hold on to This

Love and pain can belong
to the same story.
You do not have to deny
either one to choose what
protects you now.

Carrying the past without returning to harm

Moving forward does not require you to reject every part of your history. You may choose to retain language, music, food, poetry, humour, clothing, hospitality or celebrations that still hold meaning for you. You may continue relationships with some relatives while setting limits around what you discuss or tolerate. You may redefine a tradition, participate selectively or create something new from what you inherited (Streib et al., 2009). You may also decide that some practices remain too closely connected to fear, shame or harm. There is no obligation to reclaim anything. Some people find comfort in adapting cultural traditions. Others need distance from them. Some return to parts of their heritage later, once those parts feel less controlled by fear or obligation. Others do not return at all.

The important question is not whether a practice is religious or secular, traditional or modern. It is:

What happens to me when I take part in it now?

Does it bring connection, nourishment or joy?

Does it require concealment or compliance?

Can I choose how I participate?

Can I stop without punishment?

Can I retain what feels meaningful without accepting the conditions once attached to it?

Carrying the past safely may involve separation rather than rejection.

You can keep a memory without recreating the situation, love someone without giving them unrestricted access to you, and value parts of your culture without accepting control. Missing a tradition doesn't mean returning to belief, and acknowledging what was good doesn't mean minimising what was harmful. Recognising the harm doesn't mean deciding that every part of the past was false.

This position can feel harder than total rejection or total return. It asks you to decide, sometimes repeatedly, what belongs in your life now. That is not indecision. It is an intentional pause that allows you to make a considered choice for yourself.

When family contact continues

For some people, rebuilding belonging does not involve cutting off the past completely. Contact with family may continue in limited, selective or changing ways.

You may decide:

- what information feels safe to share;
- which subjects are not open for discussion;
- how often contact feels manageable;
- which gatherings you will attend;
- whether you need your own transport or accommodation;
- what behaviour will lead you to leave;
- which relatives can be trusted with greater honesty;
- what support you need before and after contact.

Setting boundaries can bring guilt, particularly if you were taught that family should have unrestricted access to your time, choices or private life. A boundary, however, does not always mean rejecting the relationship. It may be what allows some form of connection to continue without the same harm being repeated. It may also help to notice when hope keeps drawing you back into a relationship that continues to hurt you. You may return believing that one more explanation, another achievement or a little more patience will finally lead to acceptance.

Hope can sustain you through difficult periods, but it can also become exhausting when it asks you to overlook a pattern that has shown itself repeatedly. A painful but important question here may be:

Am I responding to the relationship that exists, or to the relationship I still hope it will become?

You do not have to abandon hope. You may need to place boundaries around what hope is allowed to cost you.

Pause and reflect

The relationship I have and the one I hope for

Consider one relationship that continues to bring both hope and pain.

- What does this person consistently offer me now?
- What am I still hoping they will eventually offer?
- What has waiting for that change cost me?
- What boundary would allow me to keep hope without repeatedly abandoning myself?

Hope does not have to disappear. But it may need limits that protect you from being hurt in the same way again.

The grief of not being witnessed

Another form of loss is the pain of reaching important milestones without the people you once expected to witness them. You may build a relationship, complete a qualification, have a child, move home, recover from illness or create a life you are proud of while being unable to share it openly with your family.

The absence is not only about practical support. You may want someone from your past to see who you have become. New relationships can offer genuine love and recognition, but they may not erase the wish that a parent, sibling or community had been able to witness your life differently. This longing may remain even when your present life feels meaningful and connected. Its persistence does not mean that your new life is inadequate. Some grief remains because the original relationship mattered.

Chosen family and other forms of connection

Some people use the term **chosen family** to describe relationships that provide mutual care, loyalty and belonging outside their biological family (Weston, 1991). For some, this language feels deeply meaningful. For others, it does not. Chosen family should not become another demand to create a replacement household or intimate network quickly.

Connection can take many forms:

- one close friendship;
- a supportive colleague;
- a neighbour;
- a therapist or support group;
- an online peer community;
- a cultural or creative space;
- a relationship with a partner's family;
- a group organised around shared interests;
- several lighter relationships that together offer companionship and support.

Not every supportive relationship needs to become family-like. It is enough for a relationship to be respectful, reciprocal and safe.

Letting belonging develop slowly

After exclusion, you may feel pressure to prove that you can thrive without the people who rejected you. You may judge yourself for feeling lonely or believe that you should already have built a new community. Belonging does not develop on command.

It often grows through repeated contact, shared activity, trust and the experience of being accepted in small but meaningful ways (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). You can begin with questions such as:

Where do I feel least guarded?

Who listens without trying to define me?

Where can I disagree without fear?

Which relationships feel mutual rather than one-sided?

What interests or values might connect me with other people?

What level of connection feels manageable right now?

You may find the **What Helps Me Feel That I Belong?** exercise in Appendix 9 useful. It invites you to identify the qualities that create genuine belonging for you, rather than assuming that belonging must resemble the community you lost.

The **Belonging Without Performance** exercise in Appendix 10, can also help you notice where you are able to take part without hiding, proving yourself or reshaping who you are in order to earn acceptance.

What can help

Grief cannot always be resolved, and it does not need to be turned into a lesson. What may help is finding ways to make it more bearable, less isolating and less overwhelming when it returns. Different moments may call for different responses. At times, you may need to express what you feel. At others, you may need rest, practical support, firmer boundaries or the company of someone who feels safe. Contemporary grief models recognise that coping often involves moving between facing the loss and attending to everyday life, practical demands and restoration (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Name what is happening

A wave of grief may feel less confusing when you can identify what has brought it to the surface.

You might say:

I am not simply upset. I am grieving that my family cannot know this part of my life.

Or:

This is not only about Eid. I am missing the feeling of being included.

Naming the specific loss will not remove it. It can, however, help you respond to what is actually present rather than being pulled into a general sense that everything is wrong.

The **Naming My Losses** exercise in Appendix 8 offers a fuller way to explore the different losses you may be carrying and to notice which one feels most present in your life now.

Give the feeling somewhere to go

Some grief needs expression more than explanation. You might write, cry, speak with someone you trust, create art, listen to music, move your body or sit quietly with what has come up. The aim is not to grieve in the “right” way or to make the feeling disappear. It is to give the experience somewhere to go, rather than leaving it contained entirely within your body and thoughts.

You might, for example, write a letter to a parent explaining what you wish they could understand, without any intention of sending it. Research on expressive writing suggests that writing about difficult experiences can be helpful for some people, although the effects vary and it should not be treated as a substitute for professional support when distress is severe (Pennebaker, 1997).

Appendix 11, **A Letter That Does Not Need to Be Sent**, offers prompts for writing to a family member, a former community, your former self, a future you once imagined or the God you once believed in.

Stop if the exercise begins to feel overwhelming. Expression is most helpful when there is enough safety for you to remain connected to the present.

Respond to the body first

When grief overlaps with fear or trauma, reasoning may not be the first thing you need. If you notice panic, shaking, nausea, numbness or intense agitation, begin by helping your body recognise where you are now.

You might:

- place both feet on the floor;
- look around and name what you can see;
- slow your breathing without forcing it;
- hold something warm or textured;
- move to a quieter or safer place;
- remind yourself where you are and what is happening now.

For example:

I am in my own home. The message has upset me, but I do not have to reply immediately. I can take time before deciding what to do.

Appendix 12, **A Grief Wave**, can help you notice the trigger, the emotion, the bodily response and what you need in the moment, without asking you to analyse everything at once.

Reduce avoidable exposure

Some reminders cannot be avoided. Others can be approached with more choice. You may decide to mute a family group chat during Ramadan, leave a gathering earlier, ask someone not to send religious messages or avoid looking through photographs when you are already emotionally depleted. This is not necessarily unhealthy avoidance. It may be a temporary boundary that protects your ability to cope.

A useful question is whether the boundary gives you greater freedom to live, or whether fear is gradually making your world smaller. Persistent avoidance can maintain fear and restrict daily life, while temporary or deliberate distance may serve a protective function when a situation is unsafe or overwhelming (Craske et al., 2014).

It may help to ask:

Am I choosing distance because this is currently too much, or because I believe I must never experience this emotion?

Choosing distance because something feels unmanageable or unsafe can be protective. Believing that an emotion must never be felt may require gentler, supported work over time.

Separate what you can control

Grief can become more exhausting when you continue trying to change another person's beliefs, obtain an apology or secure recognition that may never come.

You may be able to communicate clearly, set boundaries and decide how much contact feels manageable. You cannot control whether another person understands, approves or changes.

You may, for example, choose to tell a sibling:

I want a relationship with you, but I will end the conversation if I am insulted or pressured to return.

You can control whether you communicate the boundary and what you do if it is crossed. You cannot control whether your sibling agrees with it. The **Control, Influence and Acceptance** exercise in Appendix 13 can help you distinguish between what you can change, what you may be able to influence and what may need to be acknowledged as outside your control. It can also help you decide where your emotional energy may be most usefully directed.

Seek witnesses, not only solutions

Not every painful experience needs advice. Sometimes what helps most is being with someone who can say:

That makes sense.

I can see why this hurts.

You do not have to justify why you miss them.

A safe witness does not rush you to forgive, cut contact, find meaning or move on. They stay with your experience and help you feel less alone while you decide what you need. This person may be a trusted friend, a member of a peer-support group, a therapist or someone who has lived through a similar experience.

The quality of the response matters more than whether the person has faced exactly the same circumstances. Supportive relationships can reduce the effects of stress, although support is most helpful when it matches the person's needs and situation (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Create small forms of continuity

Loss can make life feel fragmented. Small routines may provide a sense of continuity without recreating the religious structure you left.

This might include:

- sharing a regular meal with someone;
- marking a meaningful date in your own way;
- keeping a photograph or object connected to a valued memory;
- walking at the same time each week;
- preparing a familiar food;
- creating a private ritual for someone or something you miss.
-

If prayer once provided a pause in the day, for example, you may choose to spend a few quiet minutes reflecting, stretching, drinking tea or writing in a journal. The new practice does not need to imitate prayer or replace it. It can simply respond to your present need for stillness.

Speak to yourself without adding punishment

Grief is already painful. Harsh self-judgement adds another layer of suffering. You may notice thoughts such as:

I should be over this.

I chose to leave, so I have no right to be sad.

I am weak for missing them.

Other people have had it worse.

A more compassionate response does not deny what happened or remove responsibility. It recognises that your reaction makes sense in the context of attachment, change and loss. Self-compassion involves responding to personal suffering with kindness, recognising that suffering is part of shared human experience and holding painful thoughts and emotions in balanced awareness (Neff, 2003).

You might say:

Of course, this hurts. I lost something important, even though leaving was necessary.

Let support match the need

Emotional support may not be enough on its own. You may also need:

- legal or safeguarding advice;
- housing support;
- financial guidance;
- help with immigration;
- protection from harassment;
- practical support with childcare or transport;
- trauma-informed therapy;
- support with decisions about family contact.

When grief is connected to ongoing danger or instability, practical safety may need to come before deeper emotional processing.

Professional support may be needed when distress feels unmanageable, significantly affects daily functioning or involves a risk of harm from yourself or someone else.

Asking for help does not mean that you have failed to cope. It may be a way of refusing to carry alone what was never meant to be carried alone.



Hold on to This

Any belonging that requires you to abandon yourself is not belonging.

You deserve relationships in which you can be known, remain free and still be loved.

Chapter 13: Reclaiming Your Body, Relationships and Future

The previous chapter explored grief, loneliness and the losses that may follow leaving a high-control religious environment. Recognising those losses matters. Recovery, however, also involves learning how to live with greater ownership of your body, choices, relationships and future.

Control may have extended far beyond belief. It may have shaped what you wore, how you moved, who could touch you, which relationships were permitted and how much privacy you were allowed. It may also have influenced whether you could express desire, refuse a request, choose a partner, leave a relationship or imagine a future different from the one expected of you.

You may have learned that your body reflected your family's 'honour', that "modesty" determined your moral worth or that other people had the right to comment on your appearance and choices. You may have been expected to place family needs before your own, remain silent to preserve harmony or treat obedience as proof of love and respect.

These messages can continue to affect you long after your beliefs have changed. You may know intellectually that you are allowed to make your own decisions while still feeling guilt, fear or shame when you try. You may struggle to recognise what you want because wanting was once treated as selfish, dangerous or unimportant.

Reclaiming your life does not require you to change how you dress, disclose private information, pursue relationships or become sexually active. Nor does it require you to feel confident straight away. It means learning to notice what you feel, consider what you want and recognise where fear, dependency, pressure or unequal power may still be limiting your choices.

For some people, this process feels liberating. For others, it first feels frightening or confusing. Freedom can feel unfamiliar when rules, family expectations or the need to avoid consequences once made many decisions for you.

You may find yourself asking:

*What do I actually want?
How do I know whether I feel comfortable?
Am I allowed to change my mind?
How can I say no without feeling cruel?
What does a safe relationship look like?*

What kind of future would I choose if I did not have to prove anything to anyone?

You do not need immediate answers.

This chapter explores how control may continue to shape your relationship with your body, privacy, desire, boundaries and intimacy. It offers ways to begin recognising your internal signals, communicating limits and making choices without expecting yourself to become certain, fearless or completely independent.

The aim is not to replace one set of rules with another. It is to support a relationship with yourself in which your body, preferences and boundaries are treated as meaningful.

Learning to see your body as your own

In a high-control religious or cultural environment, the body may be treated as though it belongs to other people.

Your appearance may be understood as a reflection of family 'honour'. Your clothing may be monitored because of what others believe it communicates about your morality. Your movements, relationships or sexuality may be restricted in the name of protecting family reputation or meeting religious expectations.

You may have received messages such as:

- your body is a source of temptation;
- your appearance can bring shame to your family;
- “modesty” proves that you are respectable;
- your body must be protected for marriage;
- other people are entitled to advise, correct or monitor you;
- your preferences matter less than religious or family expectations.



Messages like these can make the body feel less like a place you inhabit and more like something you must manage on behalf of others. You may have learned to observe yourself from the outside:

*Am I covered enough?
What will people think?
Does my body look inappropriate?
Am I causing someone else to feel tempted?
Will this embarrass my family?*

When this happens repeatedly, it can become difficult to notice your body from the inside. You may be more aware of how you appear than of whether you feel comfortable, tired, hungry, tense, frightened or at ease.

Reclaiming your body begins with a different question:

What am I experiencing?

This may sound simple, but it can feel unfamiliar.

You may have had little opportunity to develop preferences about clothing, touch, movement, rest, pleasure or personal space. When someone asks what you want, you may go blank or search automatically for the answer that is least likely to cause conflict. This does not mean that you lack an identity or cannot trust yourself. It may mean that your attention was trained towards other people's expectations rather than your own internal experience.

Ownership does not require body confidence

Owning your body does not mean that you must love every part of it.

You may feel disconnected from your body, critical of it or unsure how you want to present yourself. There may be understandable reasons for this. Shame, unwanted attention, illness, disability, gender dysphoria, sexual harm or years of being taught to fear desire can leave a person feeling unfamiliar in their own body. The first step may not be confidence. It may be something more basic:

This body is mine.

It is yours when other people admire it and when they criticise it. It is yours when it feels strong and when it feels unwell. It is yours regardless of how you choose to dress or present it. It is yours whether you want physical intimacy or do not. It remains yours even when other people behave as though they are entitled to an opinion or a decision. Ownership becomes visible through ordinary choices:

- who may touch you;
- what kind of touch you welcome;
- what you wear;
- what remains private;
- whether you want sexual or romantic contact;
- when you need food, rest or medical care;
- whether you want children;
- whether you change your mind.

Not everyone has unlimited freedom to act on these choices. Safety, money, family circumstances, immigration status and the law may all affect what is currently possible. These restrictions do not erase your right to have preferences, needs and boundaries.

When choice feels frightening

People often assume that having more choice should feel like relief. Sometimes it does. At other times, it feels frightening.

When rules once made decisions for you, deciding for yourself can bring uncertainty and self-doubt.

You may think:

What if I get this wrong?

What if I regret it?

What if people judge me?

What if I become the person I was warned about?

What if something goes wrong and no one is there to help me?

Other people may also have their own ideas about what your freedom should look like. Your former religious community may expect you to remain visibly ‘modest’. People outside it may expect you to date, drink, change how you dress or become sexually confident, as though these choices prove that you have truly left. In both cases, someone else is still deciding what your body should demonstrate. You do not owe anyone proof of your freedom.

You are allowed to move slowly. You are allowed to remain uncertain. You may wear clothing you prefer, or try something you were once forbidden to wear. You may make different choices depending on the situation, your comfort and what feels safe.

A freely chosen decision does not need to look rebellious from the outside.

Beginning with ordinary bodily experience

Reclaiming your body rarely begins with a dramatic act. It often begins with small moments of attention.

You may start by noticing:

- whether you are hungry;
- whether you are tired;
- which fabrics feel comfortable against your skin;
- whether you tense around a particular person;
- whether you want to be touched;
- what helps you settle;
- when you need space;
- whether an experience leaves you energised or drained.
-

These signals are not commands that you must obey. A bodily feeling is not always a reliable instruction. Anxiety can arise in situations that are safe, while familiarity can feel comforting even when it is harmful.

The aim is not to follow every sensation without reflection. It is to stop excluding your body from decisions about your own life.

Imagine that you have agreed to visit relatives. As the day approaches, you notice that your chest feels tight, your sleep worsens and a sense of dread begins to build. This does not automatically mean that you should cancel. It does mean that something deserves your attention.

You might ask:

*What am I preparing myself for?
Is it criticism, pressure or questions I do not want to answer?
What might make the visit feel safer?
Would it help to stay for less time, arrange my own transport or decide in advance what
would lead me to leave?*

Your body is one source of information. Your values, circumstances and judgement also matter. Reclaiming choice involves bringing these different sources together rather than allowing fear, habit or other people's expectations to make the decision automatically.

Your body is not evidence

Your body does not prove anything about your morality, worth or loyalty.

What you wear does not reveal your character. Sexual experience does not determine your value. Virginity is not a measure of purity. Desire does not make you dangerous, and a lack of desire does not make you defective.

Your body should not be treated as a battleground on which religious, familial or political authorities assert their power. It is where you live your life. Learning to believe this may take time. You may continue to hear old judgements in your mind, feel watched when no one is present, or experience guilt after making an ordinary choice.

This does not mean that control still has the final say. It means that you are learning a different way of relating to yourself. You are learning that your body does not exist to prove obedience, purity, rebellion or freedom.

It belongs to you.



Hold on to This



**Your body is not
evidence of obedience,
purity or worth. It
belongs to you.**

Reclaiming clothing and self-expression

Clothing is often described as a personal choice. In a high-control religious or cultural environment, however, what you wear may carry far more meaning. It may be treated as evidence of modesty, purity, respectability, family 'honour', sex-based conformity or religious commitment.

You may have learned that clothing does not simply cover your body. It tells other people what kind of person you are.

A skirt may have been judged as too short. A top may have been considered too revealing. A headscarf may have been treated as proof of faith or morality, while removing it may have been understood as rebellion, sexual availability or rejection of the family. Even colours, hairstyles, make-up, jewellery or the shape of your clothes may have attracted comment.

When your appearance has been monitored in this way, getting dressed can become an act of self-surveillance. You may stand in front of a mirror and hear familiar questions:

*Is this too much?
Will people think I am disrespectful?
Am I inviting attention?
Will my family be ashamed of me?
Do I look Muslim enough?
Do I look liberated enough?*

These questions may continue long after your beliefs have changed.

Clothing can carry more than one meaning

A headscarf may be:

- imposed through family, community, religious or state pressure;
- worn to remain safe around family or community;
- retained because it feels culturally familiar;
- worn only around relatives;
- freely chosen by an adult woman;
- experienced differently at different stages of life.

Individual experiences vary. Some women choose to wear the hijab, while others wear it under family, community, religious or state pressure. Recognising individual choice, however, should not obscure the coercive systems that govern women's 'modesty'.

The same principle applies more broadly to clothing. Covering more does not by itself prove that someone is controlled, and showing more does not automatically mean that someone is free. The key question is whether a person is able to decide how to dress without coercion, punishment, surveillance or enforced religious rules. It is also important to note that a choice to wear the hijab can only be considered fully free where there is an equally real choice to remove it without punishment, coercion or loss of rights.

You may prefer particular clothing because it feels comfortable. You may want to explore styles that were previously forbidden. You may dress differently around family, at work or with friends. You may remain unsure about what you prefer.

None of these choices needs to become a public statement about what leaving Islam should look like.

You do not have to perform liberation

After leaving, a different kind of pressure may appear. Other people may expect you to prove your freedom by removing religious clothing, dressing more openly, drinking alcohol, dating or appearing sexually confident. You may begin to worry that retaining particular clothing means that you have not truly freed yourself from religion. This can recreate the same problem in another form: other people are still deciding what your body and appearance should communicate. You do not need to look visibly different for your internal change to be real. You do not owe anyone a performance of liberation. A choice is not automatically more authentic because it is the opposite of what you were taught. Rebellion can be an understandable part of reclaiming agency, but it is not the only form freedom can take.

Freedom may mean wearing something you were once denied. It may mean continuing to wear something while understanding it differently. It may mean changing gradually. It may mean deciding that clothing is not where you want to express change at all.

When safety shapes what you wear

Clothing choices do not happen in isolation. They may be shaped by housing, finances, family relationships, work, community visibility or the risk of violence, rejection or exposure. You may wear particular clothes around relatives because changing them would reveal your beliefs or place you at risk. You may remove a headscarf in one setting and wear it in another. You may change clothes after leaving home or avoid places where you are likely to be recognised. Sometimes clothing forms part of a safety strategy. Authenticity does not require you to expose yourself to consequences that you are not ready or able to face. You can know what you would choose under safer conditions while making a different practical decision for now.

It may help to distinguish between:

WHAT I FREELY PREFER My choice. My values. My expression.	WHAT I CURRENTLY DO TO REMAIN SAFE My strategy. My protection. My survival.
--	--

Both are important truths about where I am.
One is my direction. The other is my protection.



When being seen feels uncomfortable

Changing how you dress may bring unexpected emotional reactions. Something that once felt forbidden may initially create excitement, followed by shame, guilt or panic. You may feel exposed even when no one is looking. You may imagine relatives, religious leaders or community members judging you. You may repeatedly adjust your clothes or wonder whether strangers can somehow see that you are doing something wrong. This may happen because surveillance has become internalised. The external observer may no longer be present, but the feeling of being watched remains.

You may also feel uncomfortable receiving attention or compliments. Positive attention can feel threatening when you were taught that visibility is dangerous or that attracting attention makes you responsible for another person's behaviour.

You are not responsible for other people's thoughts or actions because of what you wear.

At the same time, you are allowed to dislike attention. Bodily autonomy includes the right to decide how much of your body you wish to show or cover and to make that decision without coercion.

Experimenting without forcing yourself

You do not need to make one dramatic change.

It may feel safer to experiment in small, reversible ways:

- try an outfit privately at home;
- notice how different fabrics and shapes feel;
- change one part of your appearance at a time;
- wear something new with a trusted friend;
- take a photograph for yourself without sharing it;
-

notice what feels comfortable before asking whether it looks acceptable;
allow yourself to change your mind.

As you experiment, you might ask:

Do I feel physically comfortable?

Do I recognise myself in this?

Am I choosing this because I want to, because I feel afraid or because I am trying to prove something?

Would I make the same choice if no one praised or criticised me?

There may not be one clear answer. A choice can contain preference, fear, habit and practical necessity at the same time.

The aim is not to become completely free from social or cultural influence. No one chooses clothing in isolation. The aim is to become more aware of the influences around you and gain greater room to decide which ones you want to follow.

Self-expression is broader than clothing

How you present yourself may also involve your hair, voice, posture, make-up, jewellery, name, mannerisms and the amount of physical or social space you allow yourself to occupy. Some people learn to make themselves smaller by speaking quietly, avoiding eye contact, hiding laughter, limiting movement or trying not to attract notice.

Reclaiming self-expression does not require you to become loud, highly visible or socially confident. It may begin with simply noticing the habits that once helped you remain safe.

You may choose to:

- speak more directly;
- wear a colour you once avoided;
- cut or grow your hair;
- use your chosen name;
- stop apologising for taking up physical space;
- express your gender differently;
- decide that your appearance is not available for discussion.

Small acts of self-expression can feel significant when your appearance was once subject to collective scrutiny.

Self-expression, however, is not a duty. You do not need a distinctive style or a public identity to prove that you are becoming yourself. Sometimes freedom is simply getting dressed without treating the mirror as a courtroom.

Pause and reflect

Choice, pressure and protection

Think of one item of clothing or one aspect of your appearance that carries emotional significance.

What meaning did my family, religion or community attach to it?

What does it mean to me now?

Is my current choice mainly:

- ☐ something I freely prefer
- ☐ something familiar that I am still considering
- ☐ something I do to remain safe
- ☐ something I feel pressured to maintain
- ☐ something I feel pressured to reject
- ☐ a mixture of these

What might I choose if I felt completely safe from judgement or punishment?

You do not need to act on your answer. Recognising the difference between preference, pressure and protection is already part of reclaiming choice.

Privacy and personal space

You may have grown up with other people feeling entitled to know:

- where you were;
- who you were speaking to;
- what you believed;
- how you spent money;
- what was on your phone;
- whether you were in a relationship;
- what happened in therapy;
- what you planned for your future.
-

Bedrooms may not have felt private. Messages may have been checked. Personal decisions may have been discussed with relatives before anyone asked what you wanted. Questions about marriage, sex, fertility, clothing or belief may have been treated as ordinary family business.

When personal space has been crossed repeatedly, it can become difficult to recognise that you are entitled to an inner life that is not available to everyone.

Privacy is not the same as deception

Privacy means having some control over what you share, when you share it and with whom.

It may include:

- keeping a conversation confidential;
- choosing not to discuss your beliefs;
- closing a bedroom door;
- protecting your passwords;
- deciding who knows about a relationship;
- keeping therapy private;
- taking time before answering a personal question;
- having thoughts and feelings that you do not immediately explain.

Deception involves deliberately creating a false impression. Privacy means deciding that some information is personal. This distinction can become more complicated when openness carries real consequences. You may conceal disbelief, a relationship, your sexuality or plans to leave home because disclosure could lead to punishment, homelessness, violence or loss of support. In these circumstances, withholding information may be a form of protection rather than evidence of poor character.

You are allowed to ask:

- Is this person entitled to know?
- Have they shown that they can handle this information safely?
- What may happen if I disclose it?
- Am I sharing because I want to, or because I feel pressured to prove that I am honest?

Honesty does not require you to give everyone unrestricted access to your life.

Deciding who has access

Trust does not come automatically with someone's title or role.

A parent, sibling, partner, friend, therapist or community leader does not automatically have the right to every part of your story.

Access can be based on how a person responds when you are vulnerable.

You might consider:

- Do they keep private information confidential?
- Do they use personal details against me during conflict?
- Do they continue pressuring me after I hesitate?
- Can they hear something they dislike without threatening or punishing me?
- Do they accept that I may share gradually?
- Do they understand the difference between concern and control?
- Can they tolerate not knowing?

Privacy within close relationships

Closeness does not require complete transparency. Healthy intimacy often includes openness, but it also allows each person to have private thoughts, friendships, interests and time alone.

Privacy becomes concerning when it is used to conceal ongoing harm, manipulation or a breach of an agreed commitment. The existence of personal space, however, is not itself a threat to a relationship.

A partner may know you deeply without reading your private messages.

A family member may love you without knowing every decision before you make it.

A friend may support you without being told everything you discuss in therapy.

You do not need to surrender your separateness in order to prove closeness.

When you still live with family

Privacy may be difficult to establish if you remain financially or practically dependent on relatives.

You may have little control over the home, your room or the expectations placed upon you. Direct confrontation may increase risk.

In this situation, reclaiming privacy may need to be cautious and practical.

It might involve:

- using secure passwords where it is safe to do so;
- keeping important documents accessible;
- limiting what is stored on shared devices;
- identifying one private place outside the home;
- planning how to respond to intrusive questions;
- sharing sensitive information only with people who have earned your trust;
- seeking specialist advice if monitoring or control places you at risk.

When other people react

A new limitation may reveal expectations that were previously hidden.

Someone may say:

Why are you being secretive?

We are family.

You have changed.

What are you hiding?

You used to tell me everything.

Their reaction may reflect anxiety, entitlement, fear of losing influence or genuine confusion. You can acknowledge what they feel without giving up the boundary.

For example:

“I understand that this feels different. I am becoming more private about some parts of my life.”

“I know you are worried. I am safe, but I am not discussing the details.”

“Being family matters to me. I still need some things to remain personal.”

A person's distress about losing access does not automatically mean that the access was appropriate.

Relearning privacy gradually

Privacy may initially feel lonely, especially if sharing everything once created a sense of closeness.

You may worry that having boundaries means becoming distant or emotionally unavailable. Privacy can, however, support more honest relationships by allowing disclosure to become a choice rather than a demand.

You can begin with something small:

- waiting before replying;
- declining one intrusive question;
- turning off unnecessary location sharing;
- keeping one journal entry private;
- asking someone to knock before entering your room;
- deciding that one subject is not open for discussion.

The My Privacy and Personal Space exercise in Appendix 14 can help you identify where access currently feels chosen, assumed or pressured, and where you may want a clearer limit.

Learning what “yes”, “no” and “maybe” feel like

When you have been taught to comply, it can be difficult to know whether you genuinely want something or whether you are agreeing because saying no feels unsafe.

You may have learned to respond quickly, avoid disappointing others or treat hesitation as selfishness. Over time, this can make your own preferences harder to recognise.

A “yes” may leave your mouth before you have had time to notice what you feel.

A “no” may appear only later, through resentment, dread, exhaustion or the wish that the situation would disappear.

A “maybe” may feel impossible because uncertainty was not allowed. You may have been expected to know immediately, cooperate or accept that someone else understood what was best for you.

Learning the difference between yes, no and maybe is therefore not only about becoming more assertive. It is about noticing what happens to you before, during and after a decision.

Why your signals may feel unclear

Some people experience preference as a clear bodily response. They may feel open and relaxed when they want something, or tense and withdrawn when they do not.

For others, the signals are much less obvious.

- You may feel blank.
- You may freeze.
- You may become highly focused on the other person’s reaction.
- You may notice fear but struggle to tell whether the situation is unsafe or simply unfamiliar.
- You may agree because the pressure stops once you say yes.
- You may feel detached from your body and only realise later that you were uncomfortable.
-

These responses can develop when compliance once protected relationships, reduced conflict or prevented punishment.

They do not mean that you are incapable of making decisions. They may mean that your system learned to prioritise safety over preference.

A yes is more than the absence of no

A genuine yes usually contains some degree of willingness.

It does not have to be enthusiastic or free from anxiety. You can want something and still feel nervous.

A yes that comes mainly from fear, guilt, pressure or exhaustion, however, deserves closer attention.

You might ask:

Would I still choose this if the other person were not disappointed by my refusal?

Do I feel able to change my mind?

Am I agreeing because I want to take part, or because I want the pressure to stop?

Would it feel safe to ask for more time?

A yes becomes more meaningful when no remains possible.

A no does not require a court case

You may believe that you need a strong reason before you are allowed to refuse.

You might search for evidence that your discomfort is serious enough, worry that your explanation will not be accepted or continue discussing the decision until the other person agrees with you.

But no does not always require a detailed defence.

You may say no because:

- you do not want to;
- you are tired;
- you are not ready;
- you need more information;
- the timing is wrong;
- something feels uncomfortable;
- you have changed your mind;
- you simply prefer not to.
-

You do not need to prove that the request was unreasonable before declining it.

This does not mean that choices have no consequences or that other people's needs never matter. It means that your preference belongs in the decision rather than being treated as an obstacle that must be argued away.

Maybe is a valid answer

People who are used to fixed rules may experience uncertainty as weakness.

But "maybe" can reflect careful self-awareness.

It may mean:

- I need more time;
- I need more information;
- I want part of this but not all of it;
- I feel curious and afraid;
- I am not ready to decide;
- I might agree under different conditions;
- I want to discuss what would help me feel safer.

A maybe does not need to become a yes in order to protect someone else from uncertainty.

You are allowed to pause.

You are allowed to revisit the decision.

You are allowed to discover that your answer has changed.

Your body can offer information Your bodily responses may help you notice what is happening.		
A possible “yes”	A possible “no”	A possible “maybe”
• interest • warmth • curiosity • ease • energy • a sense of moving towards something	• shrinking • tension • dread • nausea • the wish to escape • sudden numbness • resentment after agreeing	• mixed excitement and fear • hesitation • uncertainty • needing more space • wanting to ask questions • wanting some parts but not others
<i>These are possibilities, not universal rules. Your body is one source of information alongside context, safety, values, experience and judgement.</i>		

These are possibilities, not universal rules.

Anxiety does not always mean no. A safe but unfamiliar experience can still feel frightening.

Calm does not always mean yes. Familiar situations can feel settled even when they are not good for you.

Your body is one source of information alongside context, safety, values, experience and judgement.

When you realise afterwards

You may not always know what you wanted until the moment has passed.

You might leave a conversation and realise that you agreed too quickly. You may feel upset after physical affection that you did not actively refuse. You may notice anger after accepting a family request you did not want.

This does not mean that you failed.

Delayed awareness is still awareness.

You can use it to understand what happened:

What made it difficult to notice my response?
What was I afraid might happen if I paused or refused?
What might I want to do differently next time?

Where appropriate, you may also return to the person and revise your answer:

“I agreed before I had time to think. I am not comfortable with that after all.”

“I need to change what I said earlier.”

“I thought I was ready, but I am not.”

Changing your mind is not a failure of character. It is part of your continuing right to choose.

Consent is not permanent

Consent is especially important in sexual activity, physical touch, medical treatment and the sharing or use of private information. The broader principle of choice also applies to visits, conversations and access to your private life. A single agreement does not imply ongoing consent. Being in a relationship doesn't grant unlimited permission, and marriage doesn't negate the need for consent. Past consent doesn't dictate what you want now. Silence, freezing, or complying under pressure shouldn't be mistaken for clear agreement. You have the right to stop at any point, request a different pace, or prefer certain types of closeness over others. Feel free to say: “I want to stop”, “Not yet”, “I am not sure”, “I was comfortable before, but I am not now”, or “I want this under different conditions.”

When the other person reacts badly

A respectful person may feel disappointed by your answer, but they do not punish you for it.

Pressure can include:

asking repeatedly after you have declined;

sulking or withdrawing affection;

accusing you of not caring;

using religion, culture or family duty against you;

making you responsible for their distress;

behaving as though previous agreement created a debt;

rushing you because uncertainty is inconvenient;

treating hesitation as consent.

The clearest test of respect is often not how someone responds to your yes, but how they respond to your no or maybe.

You do not need to become perfectly confident before your limits deserve respect.

Practising in lower-stakes situations

Recognising your preferences can start with simple decisions. Practise paying attention to whether you prefer tea or coffee, want company or solitude, want a hug, choose to reply to a message now or later, decide to attend an event, or prefer advice or just to be listened to. These seemingly minor choices are valuable because they help you develop the habit of checking in with yourself before reacting.

The My Body's Yes, No and Maybe exercise in Appendix 15 can help you notice how willingness, discomfort and uncertainty tend to show up for you. It also offers space to consider what might help a maybe become clearer.

Giving yourself permission

When your life has been shaped by strict rules, close monitoring or the need for family approval, even ordinary choices can continue to feel as though they require permission. You may know that you are free to decide and still hear an internal question:

Am I allowed to do this?

That question may appear when you rest, enjoy something, spend money on yourself, pursue an opportunity or make a choice that other people may not understand.

The authority that once existed outside you may now continue as an internal voice. You may find yourself waiting for approval from people who are not present, or interpreting discomfort as evidence that a choice must be wrong simply because no one has authorised it.

Giving yourself permission does not mean acting without thought, care or responsibility. It means allowing your own needs, preferences and judgement to have a place in the decision.

You can consider consequences without allowing fear to make the final decision.

You can care about another person's feelings without making their comfort the condition of your freedom.

You can choose something for yourself without treating that choice as a rejection of everyone else.

Permission to be ordinary

High-control environments often pressure individuals to represent their family, religion, sex, or community. After leaving such environments, a new demanding expectation may emerge: that you should now be entirely confident, independent, healed, and visibly free. However, you do not need to fulfil either role. You are entitled to be an ordinary person, feeling uncertain, making mistakes, changing your path, becoming tired, and not always knowing what lies ahead. Not every decision requires a deeper purpose. You can enjoy activities simply because they bring joy, rest because you're tired, say no because you don't want to participate, and make mistakes without viewing them as signs you're not ready for freedom.

From knowing to practising

There can be a significant difference between knowing you have the right to do something and truly feeling able to act on it. You might believe that taking rest is acceptable but still feel guilty when you actually stop. You could hold the belief that your needs are important but keep putting them last. Similarly, you might think your life is yours but seek

reassurance before making simple choices. This gap doesn't mean you don't understand; it shows that gaining permission is a process learned through experience. Each small decision you make while tolerating the discomfort that comes with it provides new evidence: I can choose and handle the consequences without everything falling apart. You can start with a modest permission—such as leaving a message unanswered until later, resting before exhaustion, admitting you don't know, enjoying something without explaining or defending it, or making one decision without reassurance. The goal isn't to become fearless, but to realise that fear and guilt don't have to control every decision. The Permission Slip in Appendix 16 can help you identify an area in which you are still waiting for approval and choose one realistic permission to practise.

Boundaries without guilt

A boundary is a limit around what you will accept, discuss, participate in or make available to another person.

It may relate to your time, body, privacy, emotional energy, beliefs, money, home or relationships. A boundary might involve declining a request, ending a conversation, limiting contact or deciding that certain information will remain private.

For people raised in high-control environments, the difficulty is often not knowing what words to use. It is managing what happens inside you, and within the relationship, after the limit has been expressed.

You may set a reasonable boundary and then feel anxious, cruel or disloyal. You may replay the conversation, soften what you said, send another message to reassure the person or reverse your decision entirely.

The guilt may become so uncomfortable that compliance feels easier.

Why boundaries can feel like harm

You might have believed that being good meant always being available, accommodating others, and being easy to handle. Family harmony may have depended on not objecting, and respect might have been equated with obedience. Love could have meant giving others unrestricted access to your time, choices, or personal life. Within this context, setting a boundary might not feel like a simple limit; it might feel like a moral wrongdoing. You might fear causing hurt, being seen as selfish, appearing disrespectful, losing affection, being excluded, harming the family, resembling those you were warned about, or causing someone else's anger or disappointment. These fears are understandable, especially if resistance previously resulted in punishment, withdrawal, threats, or rejection. Feeling guilty may indicate that the boundary challenges an important relational expectation, but it doesn't automatically mean the boundary is wrong.

Guilt or responsibility?

It can be helpful to distinguish feeling guilty from being accountable for harm. You might need to accept responsibility if you have intentionally humiliated someone, used boundaries to punish or control, broken an agreement without acknowledgment, communicated in a threatening or degrading manner, or put someone at avoidable risk.

However, another person's disappointment, frustration, or feeling excluded from information does not automatically indicate that you have caused harm. A useful question could be: Have I acted against my values, or has someone reacted poorly because I no longer complied? You can also ask: Was the boundary necessary for my safety, dignity, or wellbeing? Did I communicate as clearly and respectfully as the situation allowed? Am I defending my choices or trying to control others? Can I acknowledge their feelings without abandoning my boundary? Is there anything I genuinely need to repair? These questions are more reliable than guilt alone as evidence. A boundary describes what you will do or accept; it does not give you control over another person's behaviour. You can ask someone not to criticise your beliefs, but you cannot make them agree with you.

You can say that you will leave if shouting begins, but you cannot prevent them from shouting.

You can state that you will not discuss marriage, but you cannot stop someone from raising the subject.

The part you can act on concerns what you will do.

For example:

"If the conversation becomes insulting, I will end the call."

"I am not discussing my beliefs. If the subject continues, I will leave."

"I will not lend money again."

"Please do not enter my room without asking. If it continues, I will keep the door locked where it is safe and possible to do so."

This is an important shift. A boundary is not successful only when the other person accepts it. It is successful when it helps you respond more consistently to what happens.

When other people push back

People who benefited from your previous compliance may experience a new boundary as rejection or disrespect. They may:

- demand further explanation;
- argue with your reasons;
- accuse you of changing;
- appeal to family duty or religion;
- become cold or withdrawn;
- involve other relatives;
- treat your limit as negotiable;
- wait for guilt to make you reverse it.

Their response may be painful, but it also gives you information about the relationship.

A healthy relationship does not require immediate agreement with every boundary. It does require some ability to recognise that you are a separate person.

Someone may dislike your decision and still respect it.

Someone may need time to adjust and gradually respond differently.

Someone else may keep testing the limit because they do not accept your right to set one.

The important question is not whether the person is pleased. It is whether the relationship can adapt without coercion, retaliation or repeated punishment.

Avoiding the cycle of explaining

When a boundary is challenged, you may try to find the perfect explanation that will make the other person accept it.

You may reveal more personal information, defend every detail or continue the conversation long after your position is clear.

Explanations can be helpful in cases of genuine misunderstanding. However, repeated explanations might become a way of seeking permission to maintain your boundary. You may notice that no explanation seems adequate because the other person isn't trying to understand; instead, they want to change your answer. In such situations, repetition can be more effective than elaboration:

"I understand that you disagree. My decision has not changed."

"I have explained what I am comfortable sharing."

"I am not continuing this discussion."

"I know this is disappointing. I am still not available."

A brief response may seem rude if you are used to overexplaining. But it's not necessarily rude; it might be the clearest way to prevent the boundary from turning into a debate.

Boundaries can be flexible without disappearing

A boundary doesn't always have to be permanent or the same in every relationship. You may share more with one person than with another. You may need more distance during a period of stress.

You may reconsider a limit when trust has been rebuilt.

You may make an exception without creating a new rule.

Flexibility is not the same as abandoning yourself. The important question is whether the change is chosen or produced through pressure.

For example, you may usually avoid discussing religion with a parent but decide to answer one respectful question. This does not remove your right to end the conversation if it becomes intrusive.

A boundary can be adjusted by you. It should not be worn down by someone else.

Conclusion: A Life that Belongs to You

If you have reached this page, I want to begin with something simple.

You have already done something.

You picked up a book about experiences that may have been painful, confusing or difficult even to name, and you stayed with it. Perhaps you recognised yourself in some pages and not in others. Perhaps something made you angry, relieved, sad or uncertain. You may have put the book down for a while and returned when you were ready. Whatever your experience has been, reaching this point suggests some willingness to turn towards yourself.

If you have spent years scrutinising yourself, silencing parts of yourself or organising your life around what other people expected from you, paying attention to your own experience may not come naturally. It may even feel uncomfortable. It can also be difficult to do alone.

Before we finish, I want to share something personal about why this subject has stayed with me for so long. My interest in trauma began long before I had a word for it. As a child, I witnessed people fleeing their homes because of war. The details are not important here. What stayed with me was noticing that people who had been through terrible things did not all respond in the same way. I also noticed what happened in ordinary conversations around them. An adult might ask what seemed like a perfectly normal question and, suddenly, the person answering would become upset or begin to cry. Nobody was necessarily trying to hurt them. Somehow, though, the question had touched something painful. I remember thinking that I would not have asked that question. Not because I understood trauma. I did not. My reasoning was much simpler: if this person starts crying, I will not know what to do.

Looking back, I think something began there. A curiosity that stayed with me: what happens to us when something overwhelms the world we thought we knew? Why can similar experiences affect people so differently?

As I grew older, I came to understand that psychological distress and trauma-related difficulties do not belong only to war. They can emerge through violence, abuse, loss, coercion, betrayal, chronic fear and relationships in which a person repeatedly learns that safety depends on obedience or silence.

During my undergraduate studies, that childhood curiosity became part of my research. I became interested not only in trauma, but also in what researchers call Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG): the possibility that struggling with adversity may sometimes lead to changes in how people understand themselves, their relationships, their priorities and what matters to them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Much of the research I encountered at the time came from the United States. I began wondering whether the same ideas would make sense within a very different cultural and historical context. That question eventually led me to conduct my study on survivors of

the Halabja genocide. I did not enter that research expecting to find growth, and I did not want to place a hopeful interpretation onto experiences of extraordinary suffering. What I heard stayed with me. Alongside loss and pain, some people spoke about ways in which their lives, relationships or understanding of themselves had changed. Their suffering had not disappeared and the changes they described did not erase the loss and pain they endured. That distinction has remained important to me.

My doctoral research brought me back again to traumatic experiences and growth, and later my clinical work increasingly involved people whose lives had been affected by trauma. Across research, therapy and many different human experiences, one thing has remained with me. People can be deeply affected by what happened to them without being permanently defined by it. I have worked with people whose circumstances made change seem extremely difficult. I have also seen people develop capacities that neither they nor I could have predicted when we first met.

Sometimes that looks like resilience: adapting, continuing, maintaining or gradually rebuilding a workable life in the face of adversity. Sometimes something else happens. For some people, recovery is not simply a return to who they were before. Through struggling with what happened, they may begin to experience changes in themselves, their relationships, their priorities or their sense of what is possible.

They may discover a stronger sense of self. They may understand relationships differently. They may find a new direction, develop greater compassion, become determined to protect others or find a voice where they once felt unable to speak.

This is closer to what is meant by PTG. But I want to be careful with this idea. You do not owe anyone growth. You do not have to become stronger because you suffered or need to find a lesson in what happened. You can build a meaningful life and still wish that what happened had never happened. One of the things trauma has taught me is that human beings can carry experiences that seem to contradict each other. We can feel grief and gratitude at the same time, be frightened and still act with courage, feel anger alongside love, experience pain while also changing and growing, and even miss people who have hurt us.

There is another idea I have returned to over the years. It is often expressed as, “Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional” (A-Tjak et al., 2015; Casey & Vanceburg, 1983).

I would put it this way: pain is part of being human and it arrives without our consent. A further layer of struggle can develop around that pain.

That layer is:

I should not feel this.

I need to get rid of this.

When those efforts begin to organise our lives, fighting the pain can become another source of suffering. Acceptance does not mean saying that what happened was acceptable. Sometimes it begins simply with acknowledging that this happened, that this is how you feel, that you wish it were different, and that you are still here.

Some healing happens privately, in quiet moments when you notice something about yourself that you had never allowed yourself to notice before. And sometimes we need another person beside us. Someone who can listen without taking over. Someone who can remain present when something hurts, help us notice what we cannot yet see and allow difficult experiences to be spoken rather than carried entirely alone.

Perhaps reaching the end of this book is one small part of that movement.

You turned towards something. Whatever comes next does not need to be dramatic. It only needs to be yours.

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Appendices

Worksheets and reflective exercises

Use these pages selectively. You do not need to complete every exercise.

APPENDIX 1

Recognising Your Protective Responses

Recognising Your Protective Responses

The reactions below are common ways the body may respond when it senses danger. Read through the list slowly and tick any reactions you have experienced.

You do not need to tick every box, and your responses may change depending on the situation. This is not a diagnostic test. It is simply a way of becoming more familiar with how your body tries to protect you.

Fight

When I feel threatened, I may:

- ☐ become angry or irritable
- ☐ raise my voice
- ☐ argue or become defensive
- ☐ clench my jaw or fists
- ☐ feel hot, tense or ready to confront someone
- ☐ feel a strong need to prove that I am right
- ☐ become frustrated when I feel controlled

Flight

When I feel threatened, I may:

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ want to leave immediately | ☐ avoid certain people, places or conversations |
| ☐ feel restless or unable to sit still | ☐ keep myself constantly busy |
| ☐ cancel plans or withdraw from situations | ☐ feel my heart racing |
| ☐ look for exits or ways to escape | ☐ avoid messages, calls or difficult decisions |

Freeze

When I feel threatened, I may:

- ☐ feel unable to speak
- ☐ struggle to make decisions
- ☐ feel stuck or unable to move
- ☐ lose track of what someone is saying
- ☐ feel confused or mentally blank
- ☐ find it difficult to defend myself
- ☐ know what I want to say only after the situation has ended

Shutdown

When I feel overwhelmed, I may:

- ☐ feel numb or disconnected
- ☐ feel unreal or distant from my surroundings
- ☐ become very tired or heavy
- ☐ lose interest in what is happening
- ☐ withdraw from other people
- ☐ struggle to notice hunger, tiredness or discomfort
- ☐ feel as though I am watching myself from a distance

Appease

When I feel threatened, I may:

- ☐ agree even when I disagree
- ☐ apologise automatically
- ☐ try to keep everyone calm
- ☐ hide my needs or opinions
- ☐ say yes when I want to say no
- ☐ take responsibility for other people's emotions
- ☐ change my behaviour to avoid rejection or punishment

Reflecting on Your Answers

After ticking the reactions that feel familiar, choose one or two and consider the questions below.

What situations tend to bring out this response?

What sensations do I notice in my body?

What thoughts usually appear?

What does my body seem to expect will happen?

What might help me feel more supported in that moment?

You do not need to analyse everything at once. The aim is not to judge or eliminate these reactions. It is to recognise them with greater understanding.

These responses may have developed to protect you. Noticing them can help you pause, identify what is happening and decide what you need in the present.

Pause if you need to

If this exercise becomes overwhelming, stop and look around the room. Focus on something outside your body, move to a different space or contact someone you trust.

APPENDIX 2

A Basic Needs Check-In

A seven-day wellbeing awareness worksheet

How to use this worksheet

For the next week, spend a few minutes at the end of each day asking yourself the questions in this worksheet.

This is not a test, and there are no perfect answers. The aim is simply to become more aware of the foundations that support your wellbeing.

- Complete one page at the end of each day.
- Tick the response that feels closest for the first three questions.
- Use the writing spaces to note emotions, physical sensations and needs.
- At the end of the week, complete the weekly reflection page.

Week beginning:

Day 1: Daily Check-In

Date:

Did I get enough sleep?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I eat and drink regularly?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I spend any time moving my body?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

What emotion stands out most today?

What do I notice physically right now?

Is there anything my body or mind seems to be asking for?

One thing I want to remember from today:

Day 2: Daily Check-In

Date:

Did I get enough sleep?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I eat and drink regularly?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I spend any time moving my body?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

What emotion stands out most today?

What do I notice physically right now?

Is there anything my body or mind seems to be asking for?

One thing I want to remember from today:

[illegible]

Day 4: Daily Check-In

Date:

Did I get enough sleep?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I eat and drink regularly?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I spend any time moving my body?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

What emotion stands out most today?

What do I notice physically right now?

Is there anything my body or mind seems to be asking for?

One thing I want to remember from today:

[illegible]

Day 6: Daily Check-In

Date:

Did I get enough sleep?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I eat and drink regularly?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

Did I spend any time moving my body?

☐ Yes

☐ Partly

☐ No

☐ Not sure

What emotion stands out most today?

What do I notice physically right now?

Is there anything my body or mind seems to be asking for?

One thing I want to remember from today:

[illegible]

End-of-Week Reflection

Look back over your answers from the past seven days.

Do I notice any patterns?

Which needs do I regularly overlook?

What small change would make the biggest difference this week?

Do I need additional medical, practical, or psychological support for anything I have noticed?

This is not a test, and there are no perfect answers. The aim is simply to become more aware of the foundations that support your wellbeing.

APPENDIX 3

Weekly Sleep Hygiene Tracker

Use this tracker each morning to notice which evening habits supported your sleep and how you felt on waking.

Weekly Sleep Hygiene Tracker

Tick Yes or No for each habit. In the final column, briefly describe how you felt when you woke up, for example: rested, tired, alert, heavy, calm or unsettled. This is an awareness exercise, not a test.

Night	Avoided screens 1 hour before bed?	Avoided caffeine 3–5 hours before bed?	Kept a regular bedtime?	Completed a calming wind-down?	Used bed only for sleep or sex?	Woke up feeling...
1	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
2	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
3	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
4	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
5	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
6	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----
7	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	☐ Yes ☐ No	----- -----

End-of-Week Reflection

Which habits seemed to support my sleep most?

What small change would I like to try next week?

APPENDIX 4

My Personal Regulation Menu

What helps me when I notice that I am becoming overwhelmed?

My Personal Regulation Menu

Tick any options that usually help. Different strategies may be useful at different times. The aim is to notice what supports you and to remind yourself that you have choices.

When I notice I am becoming overwhelmed, what usually helps me?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Looking around the room and reminding myself where I am. | ☐ Focusing on my breathing or another grounding exercise. |
| ☐ Going for a walk or moving my body. | ☐ Drinking water or eating something nourishing. |
| ☐ Taking a break before responding. | ☐ Speaking to someone I trust. |
| ☐ Writing my thoughts down. | ☐ Resting or getting more sleep. |
| ☐ Returning to my safety plan if there is genuine danger. | |

Something else that helps me:

Reflecting on What Helps

Which of these helps me feel more connected to the present?

Which helps me think more clearly?

Which reminds me that I have choices?

You do not need to use every strategy. This menu is a reminder that you can pause, notice what you need and choose a response that supports you.

APPENDIX 5

Tracing and Reframing Old Messages

A reflective worksheet for noticing recurring thoughts and responding from your present values

Tracing and Reframing Old Messages

Move through this worksheet slowly. You do not need to answer every question at once. Pause if the exercise becomes overwhelming, and return when you feel more supported.

1. Identify three to five recurring thoughts

Choose thoughts that tend to appear when you feel ashamed, exposed, frightened or uncertain.

Examples

- I'll go to hell for this.
- I'll never be good enough.
- I deserve bad things.
- I am selfish for putting myself first.
- I have disappointed everyone.

1

2

3

4

5

2. Choose one thought and follow it back

Thought I am exploring:

What was happening when this thought appeared?

What emotion did I notice first?

Where do I first remember hearing a similar message?

Did it come from one person, or was it repeated across family, religious teaching and community life?

Was it reinforced through fear, guilt, punishment, rejection or emotional pressure?

What deeper rule sits underneath it?

Who did I have to become in order to follow that rule?

What did following it protect me from at the time?

What does it cost me now?

3. Compare it with your present values

Does this message reflect what I genuinely believe now?

Does my action harm someone or violate a value I have freely chosen?

Am I responding to present evidence or to an old expectation of punishment?

What matters to me in this situation?

What would I say to a younger version of myself who carried this fear?

4. Write a grounded response

A grounded response does not need to deny your feelings. It acknowledges the old message while making room for your present position.

I notice that I feel guilty for saying no. I learned that disappointing my family meant I was selfish. I can care about their feelings without agreeing to every request.

Part of me expects punishment because this was described as haram. The fear is real, but it does not decide my values for me.

This thought sounds like an old warning. I can pause before treating it as my own judgement.

My grounded response:

You are not required to settle every question today. The purpose is to notice where a message came from, what it once protected you from, and whether it still belongs in the life you are choosing now.

APPENDIX 6

Untangling Guilt, Shame, Moral Fear and Perfectionism

A worksheet for noticing the inner critic, practising compassion and reconnecting with your body

You now have the chance to notice the critic without automatically believing it, to name shame when it appears, and to separate your worth from your mistakes. You can begin speaking to yourself with the voice of someone who wants to protect you rather than punish you.

Exercise 1: Naming the Inner Critic

Externalising the inner critic can create space between you and the voice of shame or self-attack. Giving it a name, tone or image may help you recognise that it is a learned message rather than the whole truth about you.

1. What recurring harsh thought do I notice?

2. Who or what does this voice sound like?

3. If it had a name, character, tone or image, what would it be?

A separating statement I can use:

This is not my voice. This is _____. I see you, but you do not get to run the show today.

Exercise 2: What Would You Say to a Friend?

The inner critic often speaks in ways we would never use with someone we care about. This exercise helps you develop self-talk that is both truthful and kind.

1. Write down a recent self-critical thought.

2. If someone I loved said this about themselves, what would I say to them?
3. Now write that response to yourself as if you meant it.
Example
Critical thought
Friend response
<i>I am disgusting for setting that boundary.</i>
<i>You are not disgusting. You are allowed to protect your peace.</i>

Exercise 3: Body Response Check

Self-criticism can appear in the body as well as in thoughts. This practice helps you notice and respond to the physical signs of internal attack.

1. Recall a recent moment of shame or self-criticism. What was happening?

2. Scan your body slowly. Where do you notice tension, heaviness, numbness or discomfort?

3. Name the sensation and any emotion connected to it.

4. What small act of care could support me right now?

Ideas for a small act of care

- ☐ Taking one long, slow exhale.
- ☐ Placing a hand on my heart or another part of my body.
- ☐ Putting my feet on the floor and noticing the support beneath me.
- ☐ Saying: "I am safe now. This is not then."

A compassionate sentence I want to practise:

You do not need to complete everything at once. The aim is to notice, create space and practise a response that protects your dignity rather than punishing you.

APPENDIX 7

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

A worksheet for examining inherited beliefs and choosing values that reflect who you want to be

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

Some beliefs may continue to feel morally binding even after you no longer agree with them. This worksheet can help you examine where a rule came from, how it was enforced, and whether it still reflects the person you want to be. Choose one inherited rule to explore at a time.

1. What is the inherited rule?

Complete the sentence:

I learned that I must, should or should never...

Examples

- I must always obey my parents.
- I should put other people's needs before my own.
- I must not question religious authority.
- I should never bring shame to my family.
- I am not allowed to disappoint people.
- I must be certain before making a decision.

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

2. Where did this rule come from?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Parents or relatives | ☐ Religious teaching |
| ☐ Religious authority | ☐ Community expectations |
| ☐ Cultural expectations | ☐ School or wider society |
| ☐ A past relationship | ☐ Something else: |

The people or messages that reinforced it were:

3. How was the rule enforced?

What did you fear might happen if you did not follow it?

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Rejection | ☐ Punishment |
| ☐ Shame | ☐ Conflict |
| ☐ Loss of love or approval | ☐ Being called selfish, sinful or disloyal |
| ☐ Harm to myself or someone else | ☐ Social exclusion |
| ☐ Something else: | |

The consequence I feared was:

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

4. What effect has this rule had on me?

This rule may have helped me:

This rule may have limited or harmed me by:

It affects my choices now by:

5. Is there a value underneath the rule?

Some inherited rules may contain a value you still care about, even if you no longer accept the way the rule was applied.

For example: obedience may contain a wish for respect; self-sacrifice may contain a wish to care for others; silence may contain a wish to avoid unnecessary harm; loyalty may contain a wish to protect important relationships.

The possible value beneath this rule is:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Care | ☐ Loyalty |
| ☐ Respect | ☐ Responsibility |
| ☐ Honesty | ☐ Safety |
| ☐ Compassion | ☐ Community |
| ☐ Fairness | ☐ Something else: |

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

6. Does the rule still fit my values?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Does this rule respect my dignity? | ☐ Does it respect other people's dignity? |
| ☐ Does it allow meaningful choice? | ☐ Does it protect people from harm? |
| ☐ Does it depend mainly on fear or shame? | ☐ Would I apply the same rule fairly to everyone? |
| ☐ Can I question or revise it without being punished? | ☐ Does it reflect the person I want to be? |

What I notice is:

7. What do I choose now?

I want to keep:

I want to change:

I want to let go of:

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

8. Rewrite the rule as a chosen value

Replace the inherited command with a statement that allows freedom, responsibility and choice.

Instead of: "I must always obey my parents."

Chosen value: "I can care about my parents and listen to their views while making my own decisions."

Instead of: "I must always put other people first."

Chosen value: "I want to care for others without neglecting my own needs and limits."

Instead of: "I must never question authority."

Chosen value: "I can listen respectfully while also examining evidence and thinking for myself."

My revised statement is:

9. One action that reflects my chosen value

What is one small action I could take?

Inherited Rule or Chosen Value?

My Reminder

Use this section as a brief summary you can return to later.

The inherited rule says:

The value I choose is:

I can put this value into practice by:

You are allowed to examine inherited rules carefully. Keeping a value does not require keeping the fear, shame or coercion that once surrounded it.

APPENDIX 8

Naming My Losses

A gentle worksheet for recognising grief, change and what may need care

Naming My Losses

Grief can feel overwhelming when several losses are present at the same time. Naming each loss separately can make your experience easier to understand and help you recognise what you may need.

This exercise is not about measuring how much you have lost or forcing yourself to explore everything at once. Focus only on what feels manageable today.

Step 1: What Has Changed or Been Lost?

Read through the areas below and write down anything that feels relevant to you.

Relationships

This might include:

- contact with parents, siblings or extended family;
- friendships;
- emotional closeness;
- trust;
- family approval;
- relationships that continue but no longer feel honest or safe.

What am I grieving in my relationships?

Belonging and Community

This might include:

- feeling part of a family or community;
- shared history;
- being included in celebrations;
- being understood without having to explain yourself;
- having a familiar social role;
- feeling that you had a place where you belonged.

What sense of belonging has changed or been lost?

Identity

This might include:

- a religious identity;
- a family or community role;
- the person you believed you were supposed to become;
- a sense of certainty about who you were;
- parts of yourself you had to hide.

What part of my identity am I grieving?

Rituals, Culture and Familiarity

This might include:

- Ramadan or Eid;
- prayer;
- food, music or religious language;
- family traditions;
- familiar routines;
- cultural practices that now feel complicated.

What rituals, traditions or familiar experiences do I miss?

Certainty, Meaning and Spiritual Comfort

This might include:

- having clear answers;
- believing that life followed a plan;
- prayer as a source of comfort;
- belief in an afterlife;
- a sense that suffering had meaning;
- feeling watched over or protected.

What forms of certainty or comfort have I lost?

Safety and Practical Support

This might include:

- housing;
- financial support;
- childcare;
- practical help;
- family protection;
- immigration or community support;
- confidence that someone would help in a crisis.

What forms of safety or support have changed?

An Imagined Future

This might include:

- the family life you expected;
- a marriage your family would support;
- shared celebrations;
- children knowing their extended family;
- being accepted at important milestones;
- reunion with loved ones after death.

What future did I once imagine that may no longer be possible in the same way?

Time and Missed Possibilities

This might include:

- opportunities you were not able to pursue;
- relationships you could not explore;
- years spent hiding;
- choices made under pressure;
- parts of childhood or adolescence shaped by fear or control.

What time, opportunities or possibilities am I grieving?

Step 2: Which Loss Feels Most Present?

You may have identified several losses. You do not need to work on all of them at once.

The loss that feels most present for me today is:

I notice this loss most strongly when:

When it is activated, I tend to feel:

I notice it in my body as:

Step 3: What Does This Loss Need?

Different losses may need different responses. Some may need comfort. Others may need boundaries, practical help, expression or connection.

Does this loss need to be acknowledged?

Is there something I wish another person understood?

Would I benefit from comfort, practical support, distance, expression or connection?

What is one small and realistic way I could care for myself when this loss feels close?

Step 4: What Am I Judging Myself For?

Grief is often accompanied by self-criticism. Complete any sentence that feels relevant.

I judge myself for missing...

I tell myself that I should...

I worry that this grief means...

What might I say to someone I cared about who was grieving the same loss?

Step 5: A Gentle Closing

Finish with one or more of the following:

It makes sense that I feel this because...

Missing this does not mean...

What I want to remember is...

Y

You do not need to resolve the loss today. Naming it is already a way of recognising that it mattered.

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APPENDIX 9

What Helps Me Feel That I Belong?

A short reflection on the conditions that help belonging feel possible

What Helps Me Feel That I Belong?

Belonging can mean different things in different places and relationships. Tick the qualities that matter most to you, then identify where some of them already exist and one small step towards more connection.

Tick what matters most to you

☐ Feeling understood	☐ Feeling accepted
☐ Feeling safe	☐ Being able to be myself
☐ Shared experiences	☐ Shared values
☐ Shared language or culture	☐ Freedom to disagree
☐ Mutual care	☐ Something else:

The three things I need most to feel that I belong are:

1

2

3

One place or relationship where I already feel some of this is:

One small step towards more belonging could be:

Belonging does not require you to hide important parts of yourself. It can grow through safety, mutual care, freedom and relationships where you are able to be more fully known.

APPENDIX 10

Belonging Without Performance

A reflection on safety, honesty and being able to show up as yourself

Belonging Without Performance

Think of one relationship or group. Notice what you feel required to hide, change or tolerate in order to remain included. Focus on one small, manageable step rather than trying to change everything at once.

The relationship or group I am thinking about is:

I feel I have to:

- ☐ hide parts of myself
- ☐ agree to avoid conflict
- ☐ appear more religious than I am
- ☐ minimise my needs
- ☐ accept behaviour that hurts me
- ☐ prove that I am worthy of inclusion
- ☐ something else:

I feel most able to be myself when:

One sign that this relationship is safe enough for more openness is:

One small way I could reduce performance is:

Belonging should not depend on becoming less visible, suppressing important parts of yourself or surrendering your autonomy.

APPENDIX 11

A Letter That Does Not Need to Be Sent

A private writing exercise for giving words to what has been carried in silence

A Letter That Does Not Need to Be Sent

Choose one person, place, community, belief or version of yourself you want to write to. You do not need to send the letter. The purpose is not to force closure, but to create space for honesty, grief and expression.

I am writing to:

What I miss is...

What hurt me was...

What I wish you had understood is...

Continue your letter

What I needed but did not receive was...

You do not need to send this letter. You may keep it, tear it up, delete it or return to it later.

Stop if writing becomes overwhelming. The purpose is not to force closure, but to give words to what has been carried in silence.

APPENDIX 12

A Grief Wave

A short reflection for understanding and moving through an intense moment of grief

A Grief Wave

Think of a recent moment when grief suddenly became stronger. Focus only on what feels manageable today, and pause if the exercise becomes overwhelming.

What triggered it?

What emotion showed up first?

What did you notice in your body?

What loss might this wave be connected to?

What did you need in that moment?

☐ comfort

☐ space

☐ connection

☐ reassurance

☐ rest

☐ practical support

☐ something else:

One thing that could help you feel more grounded is:

*A grief wave can feel intense, but it will not always stay at the same height. You do not have to solve it.
You only need to help yourself through this moment.*

APPENDIX 13

Control, Influence and Acceptance

A reflection on where your energy can make a difference

Control, Influence and Acceptance

Think of one situation that is taking up emotional energy. This worksheet can help you separate what you can choose, what you may influence and what may be outside your control.

The situation I am thinking about is:

What I Can Control

Examples: my boundaries, what I share, how I respond and where I seek support.

What can I directly choose or change?

What I Can Influence

Examples: how I communicate, whether I invite a conversation and how I contribute to a relationship.

What might I influence, without controlling the outcome?

What I May Need to Accept

Examples: other people's beliefs, whether they approve, the past, and whether they apologise or change.

What is outside my control, even if I wish it were different?

One Next Step

Where would my energy be most useful now?

- ☐ taking action
- ☐ communicating clearly
- ☐ setting a boundary
- ☐ asking for support
- ☐ allowing myself to grieve
- ☐ letting go of responsibility for what is not mine
- ☐ something else:

The first small step I can take is:

Acceptance does not mean approval or giving up. It means recognising where your control ends, so that you can use your energy where it can make a difference.

APPENDIX 14

My Privacy and Personal Space

A reflection on access, boundaries and having a say in what you share

My Privacy and Personal Space

Think about the different parts of your life and who currently has access to them. Use this worksheet to notice where you would like more choice, privacy or personal space.

What Feels Private to Me?

Tick any areas where you would like more choice:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ my phone or messages | ☐ my bedroom or belongings |
| ☐ my location or daily plans | ☐ my beliefs |
| ☐ my relationships | ☐ my body or health |
| ☐ my finances | ☐ my therapy or personal reflections |
| ☐ my future plans | ☐ something else: |

Where Does Access Feel Pressured?

The person or situation where I feel least able to protect my privacy is:

I feel pressured to:

- ☐ answer immediately
- ☐ explain myself
- ☐ share personal information
- ☐ allow access to my phone or belongings
- ☐ report where I am
- ☐ discuss topics I want to keep private
- ☐ something else:

What Limit Might Help?

One thing I would like to keep more private is:

A sentence I could use is:

- ☐ "I am not ready to discuss that."
- ☐ "That is private."
- ☐ "I need time to think."
- ☐ "I will share if and when I choose."
- ☐ "Please ask before entering or using that."
- ☐ something else:

One small, safe step I could take is:

Privacy does not mean shutting everyone out. It means having a say in who has access to you and your life.

APPENDIX 15

My Body's Yes, No and Maybe

A reflection on bodily signals, uncertainty and personal choice

My Body's Yes, No and Maybe

Think of one recent situation involving touch, closeness, a request or a personal decision. Notice what your body and mind communicated, without forcing yourself to reach certainty.

The situation I am thinking about is:

My Yes

When I genuinely want something, I may notice:

- | |
|---|
| ☐ interest |
| ☐ warmth |
| ☐ curiosity |
| ☐ ease |
| ☐ energy |
| ☐ wanting to move closer |
| ☐ something else: |

My No

When something does not feel right, I may notice:

- | |
|---|
| ☐ tension |
| ☐ dread |
| ☐ shrinking or pulling away |
| ☐ numbness |
| ☐ irritation or resentment |
| ☐ wanting the situation to end |
| ☐ something else: |

My Maybe

When I am uncertain, I may need:

- | |
|---|
| ☐ more time |
| ☐ more information |
| ☐ less pressure |
| ☐ a slower pace |
| ☐ different conditions |
| ☐ someone I trust nearby |
| ☐ something else: |

What was my response in this situation?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no
- ☐ maybe
- ☐ I am still not sure

What might help me understand my response more clearly?

A sentence I could use is:

- ☐ "I need time to think."
- ☐ "I am not sure yet."
- ☐ "I want to slow down."
- ☐ "No, I do not want that."
- ☐ "I have changed my mind."
- ☐ something else:

You do not need a dramatic bodily reaction to justify pausing or saying no. Uncertainty is enough reason to wait.

APPENDIX 16

Permission Slip

A brief exercise for giving yourself permission to live with greater freedom and choice

Permission Slip

Sometimes you may know that you are allowed to make your own choices but still feel as though you need permission. Use this page as a reminder of what you are allowed to choose for yourself.

My Permission Slip

Today, I give myself permission to:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Exist outside of others' expectations | ☐ Ask questions, even uncomfortable ones |
| ☐ Choose joy without apology | ☐ Make mistakes and still be worthy |
| ☐ Release guilt that does not belong to me | ☐ Explore life beyond fear |
| ☐ Be free and still be good | ☐ Something else: _____ |

Now Make It Yours

Sign your name and add the date. Keep this somewhere you can return to when shame gets loud — on your mirror, inside your journal or saved on your phone.

Signed:

Date:

Pause and Reflect

Imagine, just for a moment, that you did not have to prove that you were a good person.

If I truly believed I was already “good enough”, what might I do differently this week?

When Old Messages Return

For many ex-Muslims, grief can sit alongside fear. Even after leaving, old messages may still appear:

- ☐ “You’re doing something bad.”
- ☐ “You’ll regret this.”
- ☐ “You’re becoming corrupt.”
- ☐ A different message I notice: _____

You might notice these thoughts when you make a choice that would once have been forbidden, disappoint someone’s expectations or begin living in ways that feel more like your own.

When one of these old messages appears, what would I like to remind myself now?

You do not have to earn the right to make ordinary choices. Permission can begin with one small decision that is genuinely yours.

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