How to cope with stress,
overcome challenges,
and handle conflict
We are grateful to the German Foreign Office for supporting the project «From Conflict to Dialogue».

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WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

This book offers tools to prepare yourself well for future conflicts and other challenging situations. It equips you with insights and techniques that help you regulate stress and fear, react appropriately to difficult situations, and transform conflicts.

At work, at home, and in civil society, we continuously encounter potential conflicts. It is natural that we will have diverging interests and disagree with other people.

Often, we intend to reach agreement with someone peacefully, but the situation gets out of control.

We want to discuss a problem constructively, but we end up in an argument.

This might be because we feel attacked by the other person, because we are incredibly stressed by the situation or for another reason.

A calm discussion seems impossible with the other person at the time.
And once the argument escalates, it is not easy to solve it and reconcile.

This book rests on the assumption that every one of us can learn to manage conflicts and other challenging situations better than we have done so far.

With informed preparation, we can solve many situations before they escalate.

We can find solutions even for problems that have accompanied us for a long time.

We find the strength to master even very challenging situations.
To achieve this, we need three main qualities:

- A flexible, resilient nervous system that regulates stress, fear, and anger.
- Stable personal boundaries that allow us to be confident and express ourselves authentically and clearly.
- The ability to listen and speak without judgment.

This book supports you in developing these three qualities that boost your competence to manage stressful situations. It suggests techniques and exercises that might be new to you — but why not try them out?

If you do so, it is very likely that your ability to act positively in challenging situations will increase. You will experience how seemingly unsolvable situations do actually have solutions.

**HOW THIS BOOK CAME INTO BEING**

In the summer of 2020, Libereco — Partnership for Human Rights and Vostok SOS hosted a training program for conflict transformation in the East Ukrainian war zone. Police officers, civil activists, teachers, and students navigated the waters of stress and fear management, and dealing with challenging situations. During this training, the artist Sofiia Runova used the technique of Life Drawing to record our journey. By reading this book, you can join us and your own journey.
ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

Human beings are wired to live in groups. Interaction is central to us. Without social interaction, we cannot survive.

But every social interaction carries the risk of conflict.

Often, we do not even realize how conflicts begin. Someone says something, and we feel offended. Sometimes we hear ourselves replying before we have even consciously decided what to say.

This book explains how we can become more alert to potential conflicts before they escalate.
Our response might then sound a little more defensive than it was supposed to. We slide into conflict mode.

When we are in conflict mode, we might think we are defending our opinion, but in fact, we are defending ourselves. The more we feel treated unfairly or misunderstood, insecure, and not accepted the way we are, the more we will defend ourselves.

And before we even realize it, we are in the middle of a quarrel.

This challenges the other person and results in more defense, forceful language, and escalation.

The pathway towards mutual understanding is blocked because stress decreases our capacity for empathy.

The more stress, the more we believe that we are surrounded by opponents and enemies.

This book illustrates how to come to terms with your stress and keep cool in conflict situations.
Every conflict is rooted in an unfulfilled need.

In every conflict setting, the needs of at least one conflict party are unfulfilled.

Often, this is true for the needs of all conflict parties.

When we discuss our opinions, the tone of our voice is driven by our feelings.

Still, the root of our behavior lies in our needs.

Unfulfilled needs thus form the often invisible base of our conflicts.

This book shows how to recognize our needs and use them as a key to transforming conflict into dialogue.
In situations of dissent, we usually try to prove to the other person that we are right.

This entails that the other person is «wrong». We see their «lack of understanding» as the cause of the disagreement.

We might even reject their opinion as illegitimate, false, or malicious.

If both sides act like this, the conflict is unlikely to be resolved.

If we insist on being right, we can battle forever. Will that make us happy? Probably not.

So we need to choose what is more important to us: being right or being happy.

This book accompanies you on your way to being happy. It offers tools to shape conflict dynamics towards a peaceful, constructive dialogue.
WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

In colloquial language, the term «dialogue» might serve as a synonym for conversation or discussion. In professional language, however, dialogue describes a particular way of talking to each other: it is the earnest attempt to understand the other side better and to make yourself better understood.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is considered the father of dialogue. Socrates spent most of his life talking to people. However, he never lectured or corrected them. He simply asked questions. His questions, often unexpected and sometimes even uncomfortable, motivated people to think in new ways. They began to understand more about themselves and the world.

According to Socrates, a dialogue is supposed to bring the other person’s knowledge to the surface. This fosters responsible, self-determined thinking.
Asking questions is just one essential component of dialogue, listening is the other. This is indicated by the phrase «Listen to learn».

If you listen deeply and open-heartedly, you allow yourself and the other person to change.

Dialogue means «listening deeply enough to be changed by what you learn». That does not mean that you take somebody else’s opinion. Instead, you allow your attitude to change.

A readiness to listen to each other accelerates the learning processes that can transform conflict.

What you have just read is what we consider the foundational things to know about conflicts, challenging situations, and how to deal with them. However, there is much more to say, learn and try out. We have invited you to come on a journey with us. In fact, you have already started it!
STRESS AND CONFLICT ARE TWO CLOSE RELATIVES

Stress and conflict are closely interrelated. Usually, conflicts with others evoke tension in us. And vice versa: when we feel stressed, the likelihood of getting into a conflict increases. Because our readiness to listen to others is low.

For successful dialogue, each conflict party must recognize its stress mechanisms.

Friedrich Glasl
Conflict researcher

Stress puts us into defense mode. We are watching out for danger and are ready to protect ourselves. In this mode, it is almost impossible to feel empathy and take someone else’s perspective. That is why it is so difficult to listen to others, be open, and ask questions when we feel tense.
We hear people talking about stress almost anywhere.

My team is suffering from permanent stress.

Her job is really stressful.

Stress seems to be all around. Our jobs, our families, our responsibilities and ambitions all seem to cause us stress.

In fact, stress happens within our body. It is our response to external stimulus.

You know that you are stressed because you can feel it in your body. It is not the event, but your bodily reaction that determines the level of stress.

Take a moment to remember how you feel when you are stressed.

How do you know that you are stressed?

What parts of your body are involved?

In situations of acute stress, most probably you feel your heart beat increasing. Your hands might get sweaty. Maybe you feel a tension or tightness in your chest or stomach.
Not everyone feels the same stress when exposed to the same stimulus.

For some people, paragliding is pure joy. Others feel anxiety just to think about it. Some people love to speak to crowds, while others feel tense with three people listening.

Even one person can react to the same stimulus differently at different times.

When a friend visits spontaneously, you can be happy and easily change your plans, or you can feel tense.

How much stress we feel depends on our capacity, our inner state and the resources at our disposal.

When we feel rested, safe, accepted by our environment and open to new challenges then it takes quite a bit to stress us out.

When we feel tired, unfairly treated at work, or misunderstood by our friends, then a much smaller impact can make us feel stressed.

STRESS HAPPENS WHEN DEMAND EXCEEDS CAPACITY.
Stress is a signal from our body that our capacities will soon be exhausted.

The sensations that we label as «stress» are an embodied signal to take action.

How do you react when your body sends you stress signals?

Do you stick your head in the sand and pretend the stress isn't there?

Do you try to figure out why you are stressed and make changes in your environment?

Do you talk to a trusted colleague, take a rest and recharge?

Do you pretend you are okay and go on with what you're doing?
CHRONIC STRESS

There is nothing wrong with a challenging situation from time to time.

Stressful situations aren’t anything to worry about. However if stress is our usual working mode, this will sooner or later result in exhaustion.

A constant high stress level keeps our nervous system activated and does not allow us to rest and recharge. We are permanently «switched on».

For some time, we might find ourselves very productive. We get a lot done. But this does not last long.

Soon we might realize that we have a hard time sleeping or concentrating. Even small challenges make us feel tense.

Staying in a permanently stressed mode comes at a high price. Our immune system suffers and we are more susceptible to infections and cardiovascular diseases. Anxiety, chronic pain, insomnia, depression and occupational burn-out are other symptoms that might result from chronic stress.
BURN-OUT

Occupational burn-out results from overwhelming and often long-term work-related stress. Most frequent symptoms are emotional exhaustion and fatigue, feeling weak, under-performing and depressed. We distance ourselves from work by being cynical or apathetic.

Some of these symptoms are related to us trying to ignore our feelings and sensations, so that we won’t feel the pain and the needs that have been with us for a while.

Once burn-out is fully developed, it can take months or even years to recover.

Some jobs are related to a higher risk of burn-out than others: caretakers, nurses, physicians, social workers, psychologists, teachers, police officers, and lawyers are more often affected than others.

Taking responsibility while lacking stable boundaries may foster burn-out.

Occupational burn-out frequently occurs in societies that promote high performance, permanent self-optimisation and caring for others more than for oneself.

BURN-OUT PROTECTION

- Keep a healthy work-life balance
- Foster solid personal boundaries and the ability to say «No».
- Make time for regular social contact with people whose company you enjoy.
- Know what resources are available to you, and use them.
- Take time for a hobby or something creative.
- Practice yoga, meditation or breathing exercises.
Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity.

Building up your resilience increases your ability to cope with current stressful situations and with painful experiences of the past.

Resilience helps you to recover from extreme situations.

It also supports you in daily life — in conflicts and other challenging situations.

With low resilience to stress, even small disturbances can knock you out. The more resilient you are, the easier and the more exciting life can feel.

Here is what you need to build up your resilience:

**RESILIENCE**

- Best described as a mix of strength, elasticity and confidence, resilience enables you to master challenging situations, and emerge from them even stronger.

- Resilience helps you to recover from extreme situations.

- It also supports you in daily life — in conflicts and other challenging situations.

- With low resilience to stress, even small disturbances can knock you out. The more resilient you are, the easier and the more exciting life can feel.

- Here is what you need to build up your resilience:
Feeling seen, heard and supported by others fosters our resilience.

Interaction with trusted people stimulates our nervous system and makes it more resilient.

Positive social interaction while being connected to yourself and others decreases your stress level and makes you feel safe and grounded again.

When you are stressed, reach out for company and support.

Call someone, visit a friend, be in a social environment where you feel safe and accepted.

A vibrant social life increases your resilience significantly.
THE MAGIC OF SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation is a natural process. When the conditions are right, your system regulates by itself. However, we can actively contribute to creating the right conditions. When you pay attention to your activation without judging or manipulating it, the nervous system will calm down. So how does this work in detail?

Turn your attention inside your body.

What do you sense? Which body parts feel relaxed and which feel balanced? Where do you sense tension? Is there a part that feels more spacious? Is there any body part where you feel discomfort? Is your heartbeat fast or slow, heavy or light? How is your breath? Deep, balanced, or shallow? Effortless or strained? How is the temperature of your hands, feet and face?

Observe your body like scientists observes their object of investigation: with curiosity, open to anything that comes up. Without judging. Without trying to change anything.

Self-regulation means that you turn your attention to your nervous system and let it do what it needs to do now.

Instead of trying to breathe more calmly or shaking your arms and legs, just observe what is going on in your body.
In stressful situations, self-regulation will make you feel more grounded, gain control over the situation and react appropriately to any external impact.

You can sit everyday for a couple of minutes and monitor your body without judging or trying to change anything.

The more often you become aware of your self-regulation in daily life, the more available it will be when you really need it.

A good start for your practice is to monitor your feelings, sensations, and thoughts in everyday situations: on the bus, at work, or on your way home.

Once you have mastered that, start to monitor yourself in situations that you perceive as slightly uncomfortable, like when you feel a little nervous, after a difficult day, when you are faced with a challenging task, or when you feel unsafe or treated unfairly.
The more resources we have to draw from, the greater our resilience. If we do not take care to relax and recharge regularly, our resources will run down and we will not be equipped to manage difficulties.

We increase our resources by taking actions that make us feel safe, grounded and happy.
BECOME AWARE OF YOUR RESOURCES

Make a list of things that you consider your internal and external resources. Think of what feels good to you. Include all your senses.

Internal resources

Thinking of my best friend, remembering a pleasant event, feeling my feet warming up, acknowledging the fact that I sleep well...

External resources

Touching wood with your hands, sitting in a comfortable chair, having a tasty dinner...

Keep this list and whenever something else comes to your mind, add to it.

RESOURCE PLANNING

Look at your list of actions you can take. Pick three that can recharge your batteries today.

This could be a cup of coffee with your friend, listening to your favourite music while driving home, cooking a dinner you particularly enjoy, or getting take-away food so you do not have to cook.

Do three of these things today.

Choose another three resources you can use this week.

Examples might be a fishing trip, an evening just for yourself, a yoga class, going running, watching a movie, visiting friends or anything else that fills you with joy.

Put aside time for these three actions.
ASK YOUR BODY

Resourcing actions are situational.

Sleep can be great when you are exhausted and tired. Hiking can recharge your batteries if you have just spent the whole week sitting in front of a computer.

So ask your body what it wants. Sit down in an undisturbed place and bring your attention inwards. For a couple of minutes, let your attention take you through your body. Listen to your body parts, to your organs. How do they feel? What do they need?

After you have become aware of your body’s needs and desires, it will be easier to decide what resource will be ideal in this moment to allow you to recharge and build up your capacity.

RESOURCING YOURSELF THROUGH IMAGINATION

Can you imagine a situation when you felt really good?

It could be a walk in the forest, an evening with friends, a successful day at work or perhaps even a very mundane situation.

Try to recall as many details as possible. Remember how you felt in that situation.
EMERGENCY SITUATIONS AND OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

As you know, we can’t just decide not to be stressed. It’s not in our brain’s power to say: «Now, I will switch off my stress and be cool and relaxed.»

Even if we tell ourselves that everything is ok, that there is no reason to freak out — it does not seem to convince our body.

So what decides whether we feel stressed or calm in the face of challenging situations?

THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM!
The nervous system consists of the brain, the spinal cord, and the nerves. It is your system of communication, regulation, and reaction.

Your sensory nerves constantly collect information about the environment and send them to the brain.

The brain uses this information to choose an appropriate reaction to the environment. The motor nerves send related information from the brain to the body parts that are supposed to be involved into the reaction.

We differentiate between two parts of the nervous system:

- **The somatic nervous system** — governs all processes that we consciously control.
- **The autonomic nervous system** — governs our organs and metabolism.

The autonomic nervous system makes the heart beat, governs the digestion, and makes us swallow. It basically controls all the processes going on when we are busy with something else.

Imagine the autonomic nervous system as a rhythm of life that keeps several other bodily rhythms going.
SYMPATHETICS AND PARASYMPATHETICS

The autonomic nervous system consists of two complementary powers:

- **The sympathetic system** that wakes us up, activates us and speeds us up. In moments of danger, it takes us into the fight/flight mode.

- **The parasympathetic system** that slows us down. It makes us relax, enjoy time with friends, sleep and digest. In moments of life danger, it sends us into the freeze mode to save our life.

The autonomic nervous system is running by itself. We cannot impact it with cognitive willpower. When something surprises us, challenges us, whenever an increase of energy is required, our sympathetic system kicks in.

If we do not listen to the parasympathetic signals, if we ignore that we are tired or hungry, if we sleep too little and use caffeine as a crutch to aid concentration, our system will wear out and lose its healthy balance.
An elastic nervous system can deal with a certain amount of stress and still be able to wind down and relax afterwards. If stress exceeds capacity or if we are unable to return to our «relaxed» mode, our nervous system loses its resilience. With decreased stress resilience, we tend to overreact and get stuck in bad moods.

The autonomic nervous system with its sympathetic and parasympathetic subsystems is wired to manage all kinds of experiences. It functions best with a balance of challenging experiences and relaxing moments of self-care.
Hi! My name is Paul McLean, I’m a neuroscientist. I developed the model of the triune brain in the 1960s. The triune brain offers a simplified understanding of our brain functions.

The oldest part of our brain is the brainstem, the root of our survival instincts. We call it «reptilian brain» as we share it with all reptiles.

Close to the brainstem is the limbic system that evolved later than the brain stem. It is the root of our social instincts — our desire to belong to a group, to come together and share. We call it mammalian brain or emotional brain.

The youngest part is the Cerebral Cortex, also called cognitive brain, which allows us to do all the things we understand as uniquely human, like abstract thinking, reflecting, and writing.
HOW DOES THIS WORK?

Our limbic system is constantly scanning our environment for potential threat.

The amygdala, a small area in the limbic system that is closely connected to the brainstem, acts like a smoke detector. When there is the slightest signal of danger, it sends an alarm signal to the other areas of the brain.

Luckily, the signal reaches the reptilian brain faster than it reaches the cortex.

The cortex is skillful yet very slow. Making a decision, it wants to scan all its experiences and evaluate a number of choices to find out what action will be the most effective. But in emergencies, there is no time for evaluation. In these situations, the reptilian brain takes over.

The reptilian brain takes us through a number of steps that we can call the «emergency cycle». It is very quick as it selects from only three options — *fight, flight and freeze*. 
THE EMERGENCY CYCLE: ANTELOPE AND CHEETAH

For a closer examination of the emergency cycle, we take you to the hot and dusty Savannah, into the busy life of an antelope.

The antelope is grazing in the evening sun, relaxed but attentive. Her parasympathetic system is on.

Suddenly, there seems to be a suspicious movement in a nearby bush.

The antelope startles. Its head moves up, its eyes and ears are wide open. It is gaining orientation to find out if it is in danger. Its limbic system senses danger and sends alarm signals to the other parts of the brain.

Yes! There is a cheetah in the bush.

The antelope’s reptile brain takes over, switching on sympathetic activation. As running away promises the best chances for survival, the reptile brain chooses flight mode.

The antelope’s body mobilizes an enormous amount of energy — the energy it needs to survive. This is why it can run much faster than usual.
Another antelope is older and slower. While running, it can sense the cheetah coming closer. When its reptilian brain realizes that there is no escape option anymore, it switches from flight to freeze mode — the antelope collapses.

If the cheetah kills it now, it won’t feel any pain.

Imagine that a competing predator turns up this moment. The two start to quarrel over the prey. When the antelope comes out of freeze mode while the two predators are busy with each other, it can switch back to flight mode and escape.

The fast antelope is still running at the front of the herd. At some point, it realizes that the cheetah has caught another antelope. It understands that it is not in danger anymore and stops.

Once again it looks around and listens carefully to make sure the danger has passed.
With its escape, the antelope has used some, but not all, of the survival energy mobilised for the stress response.

If this energy stayed in the body, the antelope could not relax, eat or sleep.

As long as the body is full of survival energy, it struggles for survival.

So the antelope discharges the energy.

It shakes and trembles.

This is the normal bodily reaction when discharging survival energy.

At some point, the animal takes a deep, involuntary breath.

The energy is released, and the antelope can return to normal.

Now it orients herself again. Everything seems to be alright.

The antelope continues grazing as it did before.
When human beings sense a threat, they go through a similar emergency cycle as the antelope.

Now, let us revisit the stages of the cycle in humans.

The first step is orientation.

- Orientation tells us whether we are safe or not.
- Orientation tells us where to expect danger from.
- Orientation tells us where to seek safety and support.
- Orientation provides us with a feeling of our room to maneuver.
- Orientation helps us making the right decisions in a challenging situation.

We human beings do not always orient sufficiently. We may enter a situation and begin to act right away before we have acquired an overview of the context. The situation might be overwhelming so we are simply not able to orient. Without a solid understanding of the situation, it is very difficult to act appropriately.

Without sufficient orientation we might not understand where to seek safety or support.

If we orient too superficially, we might miss signals from the environment that would enable us to react appropriately. For example, we might fully focus on self-protection in a situation where we could de-escalate a conflict.
If we are alert and prepared to defend ourselves at any minute, we will not be open to interacting with others. It is difficult to take a step towards another person when we are in protection mode.

Good orientation helps to understand the possibilities and limits of a situation. It involves two directions:

**External orientation** — we perceive our outer environment. We see and feel the space that surrounds us, hear the voices and sounds around us, and understand our options to move.

**Internal orientation** — we perceive what is going on inside our body. We sense bodily sensations and feel emotions. If we check in with ourselves, we gain capacities to manage the situation.
If we orient sufficiently, we feel more confident.

We are better equipped to manage and survive even dangerous situations.

A key is to accept our own bodily reactions without judging them.

We might also understand who could support us in the situation.

And we understand our options for escape, if necessary.

This is all we need to be prepared for action.

Orientation is the basis for reacting effectively and appropriately to any situation.
Walk into a room and take time to orient yourself. Look at all the objects and colors you see. How is the light? Smell the odours that are present, listen to the sounds, maybe even touch the objects around you. If there are people: take time to look at them and estimate their mood. Every time you walk into a room or out of your house onto the street, take some more time for orientation than usual.

- When you walk somewhere, look at the environment as if seeing it for the first time. Try out new routes when you walk to work or home. Observe your environment and the people you meet. Use all senses as you orient yourself.

- Go to a place you like. This might be a forest, the market, or somewhere else. Try to use all senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste) to orient at the place. What do you perceive that you have not noticed before?

You can train your orientation skills. Here are some ideas:

- Walk into a room and take time to orient yourself. Look at all the objects and colors you see. How is the light? Smell the odours that are present, listen to the sounds, maybe even touch the objects around you. If there are people: take time to look at them and estimate their mood. Every time you walk into a room or out of your house onto the street, take some more time for orientation than usual.
When during orientation the amygdala signals danger, the brainstem prepares us for a defense response — fight, flight or freeze. It chooses the mode that promises the best chances of survival.

The reptilian brain does not think in moral terms. It does not consider fight more honorable than flight. It only decides what is best to guarantee survival.
The fight, flight and freeze modes have a dynamic range of responses. Within each range, different action scenarios are possible.

The «fight» mode does not necessarily imply literally hitting someone. Every reaction aimed at defending ourselves by means of an attack is within the «fight» range. For instance, you feel offended and respond louder than you intended — that’s «fight». Your mother gives you advice that you didn’t ask for — your reply will likely be within the «fight» mode. Your wardrobe won’t open, and you start pulling the knob angrily — that can also be a «fight» reaction.

When you are in a quarrel with someone and feel the desire to run away, that’s the «flight» mode. When you are requested to do something that requires leaving your comfort zone, you might feel the urge to flee. Do you tend to leave situations or relationships when they become challenging? That can also be a «flight» — reaction.

Fully developed, the «freeze» response immobilizes us — we become unable to move, speak, think, or all of these simultaneously. However most often, the freeze response immobilizes only parts of us. When you want to say something but you cannot open your mouth — you are partially in the «freeze» mode. When at an exam, you are not able to respond to the questions even though you know it all — this is a partial freeze. Being in love, you feel like your brain switches off in the presence of the fancied person? This also has elements of the freeze mode.

Freeze mode can manifest as dissociation. In dissociation, one part of us separates from the rest. Suppose you perceive a situation as if you are not in your body but rather seeing it from above or beside you. Or perhaps your head feels a little separate from your body, or you can’t quite feel your legs or arms. All these are indicators for dissociation.

For every of these survival modes, our nervous system mobilizes a biochemical cocktail of energy, including adrenalin and cortisol. After the challenging situation, it is important to release this energy because it is made for survival, not daily life.
You might ask: how does “freeze” save lives?

In evolutionary terms, the freeze response is the oldest defense mechanism and has its advantages.

In some predators, the biting reflex is triggered by the movement of the prey.

If the prey does not move, the predator loses interest.

The freeze response conserves energy. If the situation changes, the body can switch into the fight or flight response and make use of this energy.

The freeze response also releases hormones that stop us from feeling pain.
DISCHARGE/RELEASE THE ENERGY

The autonomic nervous system follows the principle: What comes up must go down.

Peter A. Levine
Biophysicist, psychologist and the developer of Somatic Experiencing

The energy that is activated in challenging situations must be used for action, or released later.

The antelope cannot return to grazing immediately after a life threatening situation. It must first discharge the survival energy.

Ideally, humans discharge their pent up survival energy through trembling or shivering, crying, or the release of heat.

Unfortunately, people often skip the needed energy discharge. Shaking and trembling after a stressful event might feel bizarre and embarrassing.

Trembling is often interpreted as a sign of fear and weakness. In fact it is the natural mechanism of discharging surplus survival energy.

If we stop the shaking, if we suppress the crying and pretend nothing extraordinary has happened, we interrupt the emergency cycle.
As a result, the undischarged energy remains in the body. You can imagine these leftovers of an activation as shards made of compressed energy. Every shard limits the elasticity and resilience of our nervous system.

If we suppress or ignore the undischarged survival energy within us, it may spring up when we need it least. Like a boiling pot with the lid held down — at some point the energy must explode.

**SO WHAT TO DO AFTER A CHALLENGING SITUATION?**

If you realize that parts of your body are trembling, allow them to do so. If you feel tears welling, allow them to flow. Do not suppress these responses. This is your nervous system discharging.

Getting in touch with another person, especially someone you trust, can help. Sharing how you feel without self-judgement can help the energy to dissipate and regulate our nervous system.

Observe your bodily reactions without judging or manipulating them. Allow your nervous system to self-regulate.

We all have the ability to recover, and learn from an overwhelming event.
EXERCISES

Our natural self-regulation helps us to come down after our nervous system has been up. We stimulate this process by paying attention to our sensations, feelings and thoughts without judging or changing them.

Here are some additional techniques to help you release stress.

SQUARE BREATHING
Prepare sitting on a chair, and becoming aware of the chair under you and your feet resting on the floor. Exhale all air from your lungs. Inhale through your nose to a calm count of 4. Hold your breath to the same count of 4. Exhale gently to the same count. Pause breathing to the count of 4. Repeat the square three or more times. You might want to visualize moving along the edges of a square while breathing.

KARATE-POINT
When you feel your body activating in a stressful situation, you can tap or massage the point on the outer edge of your palm, where you would «chop» in a karate chop move. Tap or stroke hard enough that you perceive it but don’t feel pain. This technique is particularly helpful as it is inconspicuous.

BLOWING ON YOUR THUMB
Blow softly onto the central part of your thumb for about 30 seconds. This has a sobering and calming effect as it stimulates particular nerves in your thumb and prolongs your exhalation. Increase the effect by being aware of the feeling when the breath hits the skin.

LEG PRESS
Sit down and place your feet hip-width apart. Place your hands on the outside of your knees. Press your legs outwards against your hands while your hands press your legs inwards. Build up as much pressure as possible. Then let go of the pressure simultaneously in your arms and legs. Rest and feel the changes in your body.

Our natural self-regulation helps us to come down after our nervous system has been up. We stimulate this process by paying attention to our sensations, feelings and thoughts without judging or changing them.
RYTHMIC SELF-HUG
Stand up with your feet slightly wider than your hips. Open your arms out at chest level. Swing your arms in to give yourself a hug, feeling your hands «clap» against your shoulders. Open your arms widely again. Repeat while alternating which arm is on top of the hug. Continue and notice what happens to the tension in your body.

LULLABY EXERCISE
Cross your arms and hold your upper arms as if hugging yourself. Sway your upper body in a figure eight or circular motion. Continue for one minute.

BUTTERFLY EXERCISE
Cross your arms over your chest and place your hands on your upper arms. Tap your arms with your hands open, mimicking outstretched butterfly wings. Keep the frequency at 40-60 taps a minute for one minute. As an alternative, you can tap your arms alternately. Try to find the rhythm that works best for you.
Trauma occurs when an event overwhelms our organism’s capacity to cope.

Three conditions usually determine such situations:
1. Our system perceives a major threat
2. We feel helpless
3. There is no supportive other around us
If our survival response to an overwhelming event remains incomplete and our survival energy undischarged, it will leave an imprint in our bodies.

This imprint we call trauma. It is different from stress: during stress, the system is very challenged, and may barely have the resources to cope. But somehow, it does. Stress is at this border of coping and overwhelm.

Trauma and stress are connected. If you have a high stress level, your resources are low and your resilience decreases. This makes you more vulnerable to trauma.

Any prolonged stress will contribute to being overwhelmed at some point. A worn-out nervous system is more prone to being traumatized.

I cannot/I am overwhelmed

I am stressed

I can

I can but I don’t have to
Trauma can result from a single event that challenges our system: an accident, an act of violence, a sudden loss, or anything else that overwhelms our ability to cope. It can also be a series of events: being exposed to shelling or other war activity, being emotionally or physically abused or other recurrent stressful situations.

Trauma can occur in seemingly harmless situations. One example could be when a child is forced to undergo a medical procedure. If the child does not understand the purpose of medical treatment, it may seem to them that a group of uniformed strangers is attempting to harm them. In this light, the situation would constitute a fundamental threat and trauma could ensue.

We can be traumatized by a break up, an insult, a situation of shame, or any other situation that exceeds our nervous system’s current capacity to cope.

We can also become traumatized by witnessing other people becoming victims of violence or loss. The traumatizing force does not lie in the gravity of the event but in our body’s perception of threat and response to it.
IN A NUTSHELL:
When the limbic system detects a threat, the nervous system switches into emergency mode. It mobilizes an enormous amount of energy, enabling us to fight, flee or freeze.

If our nervous system manages to complete the natural emergency cycle and discharge our survival energy, we will not be traumatized.

However, if the emergency cycle is interrupted and not completed, the activation mobilized for survival remains in the body.

Like a shard of compressed energy, it remains imprinted within our system.

This residual activation interferes with the nervous system, decreasing its elasticity and strength.
After being traumatized, life feels more of a struggle than it should. You might react more sensitively to challenges. Situations you managed easily before can be stressful now.

The list of potential trauma symptoms is long. Several of the most common symptoms are easy to understand if you think of trauma as being fixed or stuck somewhere:

**IN THE SITUATION**

**IN THE FIGHT/FLIGHT RESPONSE**

**IN THE FREEZE RESPONSE**

---

**BEING STUCK IN THE SITUATION**

**RE-EXPERIENCING**

When our nervous system fails to complete the cycle and discharge the activation, it is as if a part of our body and mind is stuck in the event. Our thoughts and feelings return to the situation long after the danger has passed.
When a part of you is stuck in a past event, you might have nightmares or disturbing memories.

If you are reminded of the situation, you can become very upset.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms include involuntarily re-experiencing aspects of the traumatic event in a distressing way. Maybe your thoughts are returning to the event and revolving around the could-haves and should-haves.

Sometimes, you might feel or act as though the situation is happening again. We call this flashbacks.

You might react strongly to certain triggers — sounds, images, smells or settings that remind your body of a traumatizing situation.
Imagine that as a child you were attacked by someone wearing a red pullover. Your amygdala, the warning part of your limbic system, might have coded red pullovers as dangerous. Ten years later, the amygdala still signals danger or discomfort when you see a red pullover. Red pullovers trigger feelings you experienced during the overwhelming event.

Triggers are often unconscious. When you feel discomfort in a situation without knowing why, when you dislike a person or a place without any reason, when you react strongly to a seemingly harmless situation, you have probably been triggered.

Everyone has different triggers — because everyone has experienced different things. Even if two people experienced the same situation, they can have completely different triggers.

When triggered, our reaction may seem inappropriate to the current situation. This is because our body reacts to what happened in the past. The current situation is just a reminder.
AVOIDING REMINDERS

Being traumatized we might try to avoid thoughts about the trauma and refuse to talk about it.

We might not want to see a particular person we associate with the trauma.

We might avoid situations that remind us of the event — for example refraining from driving after an accident, or not entering a relationship after a traumatic breakup.

We might desire alcohol or consume other substances to relax and distract ourselves from scary thoughts.

We might load ourselves with work to occupy our minds.

BEING STUCK IN THE «ON»-MODE

If we got stuck in activation, in the «fight»- or «flight»-mode, our body is constantly set, ready for action. We might get angry or defensive more easily.
Being stuck in fast forward can be very productive. A successful executive might be overperforming due to being stuck in the «on»-mode.

But the traumatic imperative from the body is ultimately very draining and frequently associated with massive anxiety. Rage and panic attacks are some of the stops on this route.

**HYPERAROUSAL**

If our system is stuck in the «on»-mode, we might move from one task to the other quickly, and have problems sleeping, concentrating, or sitting still. We might be in action all the time, hardly taking breaks.

Thoughts might be racing or we may constantly come up with new ideas. We might seek adventure or risk: dangerous, challenging, or stressful situations. We feel better with elevated adrenalin levels.

In this mode, we might feel permanently alert. We can endure much more than other people. Sometimes, we do not even have to sleep much.
Being stuck in the «off»-mode comes with a lack of connection to ourselves, others, and the world. It manifests as a feeling of numbness, detachment from our body and surroundings, and being isolated from other people. We might experience situations as though we were not a part of it. We call that «dissociation».

Dissociation is the essence of trauma. It cuts us off from our bodily experiencing.

If we are disconnected we might hardly feel our body, or some parts of it. We might overlook signals from our body, for instance, that we are tired and should rest, that we feel sick and need to seek support.

The inability to sense the body and lack of connection to our internal experience often leads to pain and gloominess.

We might find it difficult to bond with friends. We might feel cut off, misunderstood or just not in the mood to join in.
These are only some of the many negative thoughts traumatized people can have about themselves and the world:

- No one understands me.
- I am a bad person.
- The world is dangerous.
- My life is useless.
- I make other people suffer.
- I cannot trust anyone.

Negative thoughts and emotions also include self-blame for the traumatic situation and persisting or recurring emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, or shame.

We might be withdrawn, lack energy, or find it difficult to motivate ourselves. We may feel sad and frustrated or depressed. Things we liked to do before no longer seem attractive.

We might also have trouble feeling positive emotions like love, connection, happiness, and gratitude.

**PTSD**

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a medical diagnosis used when a person suffers from a particular combination of trauma symptoms. It describes a severe and prolonged form of being traumatized.

You can watch the video to learn more about PTSD.
Peter Levine teaches the following:

"Trauma is a fact of life. Terrible things happen to human beings. All over the planet, all the time."

But trauma does not have to be a life-sentence. We are "wired to survive." We can overcome trauma. No matter how long you have lived with trauma, there are treatments that can help.

He explains the impact of trauma and the choice it offers for us by using a quote from an ancient manuscript, the Gnostic Gospels:

"If you bring forth that which is within you, then that which is within you will be your salvation.

If you do not bring forth that which is within you, then that which is within you will destroy you."

It is your choice either to face and integrate your trauma, or to remain controlled by it.

It is your choice either to befriend your nervous system or to ignore its needs.

It is your choice to nourish your body and keep it healthy or treat it like a machine that is supposed to work."
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Talking to a professional is one of the best things you can do to get help with trauma. There are several techniques that help you integrate the trauma and thus reduce trauma symptoms.

Somatic trauma approaches such as Somatic Experiencing have been particularly helpful in improving symptoms, personal and professional relationships, and quality of life.

There are other actions you can take:

- Try out the exercises in this book to reduce stress and strengthen your nervous system.
- Learn more about trauma and stress prevention. You will find a list of recommended literature and videos at the end of this book.
- Join one of our training courses on coping with challenges and dealing with the past.

Talking to peers might provide valuable support. Take the courage to talk to someone you trust.

Don’t be afraid of being judged as crazy or weak. You are definitely not the only one feeling this way.

Even if you are used to supporting others, try to allow others to support you.
GETTING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR BODY

It is not necessary to understand or remember your trauma in order to heal from it. If you could think or rationalize your way out of trauma, you would have done that already, right? The primal parts of the brain who deal with trauma do not understand cognitive thoughts.

Healing trauma is about listening to the body. By paying attention to bodily sensations and learning to self-regulate, we can reboot the brain and change our body physiology.

You can be fully in charge of your life only if you acknowledge the reality of your body, in all its visceral dimensions.

The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is happening outside.

Bessel van der Kolk
Psychiatrist

In order to overcome trauma, you need to get back in touch with your body, with yourself. The key is to befriend your body and to observe how it reacts in different situations.

Dag Hammardkjold
Former United Nations Secretary-General

STAYING GROUNDED AND ORIENTED

A brain impacted by trauma tries to keep protecting you as if the danger was still present. There is no need to return to the past to heal from trauma. Instead, you must renegotiate the traumatic response and discharge the residual activation.

The key skill is learning to stay grounded in the face of the intense sensations associated with your body’s fear response.

Being grounded is tangible. It means that you can feel your butt resting on your chair, see the light coming through the window, sense the tension in your calves and hear the wind stirring in the tree outside.
Whatever you experienced, whatever has been done to you — you do not need to keep paying the price for this. You can reestablish a connection to yourself, to others and to the world.

FEELING SAFE

Finding safety is another key to recovery. Even if your body and mind do not allow you to feel safe all the time, try to create moments where you feel safety. Brains love safe places where they can rediscover their sense of curiosity and desire to explore.

The psychiatrist Stephen Porges explained: “The bottom line is that our nervous system is evaluating risk and safety in the environment … constantly sensing whether we are safe or not.” When we feel safe, we give the areas of the brain stem and the limbic system which are in charge of fight, flight, and freeze responses a break.

Even if you are not living in a safe environment, try to find places where you feel a little safer.

Seek people you feel safe with and spend time with them.

It is really important to find a community and get support to rediscover what safety feels like.
EXERCISES

SELF-REGULATION

Strengthening the capacities for self-regulation significantly contributes to overcoming trauma. Here are some more inspirations that can help you to get in touch with your body, strengthen your nervous system and boost your resilience.

BODYSCAN

Bodyscan is a meditation technique that facilitates connecting with your body. Starting with your toes, you scan your body giving every part specific attention. Each toe, the soles of your feet, your heels, ankles, calves, shins, knees and so on... until you have reached the top of your head.

It might be practical to complete a bodyscan first thing in the morning, or just before sleeping.

You can search for guided bodyscans online to learn more about this technique, for example on youtube.

QUICK GROUNDING

Even in tense situations, you can do a quick reconnection with your body.

Pay attention to the sensation of your butt in the chair. Wiggle your toes, push your feet into the ground. Rub your hands together and feel them warming.

Come out of circling thoughts into a simple, detailed exploration of safe, specific bodily sensations:

I am ok because I can feel my feet on the ground, my clothes on my skin, the chair in my back, the air coming into my lungs.
Another technique to ease tense feelings and restore your body’s inherent rhythms is shifting your awareness.

Turn your attention inside your body and observe yourself.

When you sense a body part that feels tense, tight, or aching, identify the body part that feels least this way. This might be your butt, a toe, or any other part of your body. Focus your attention on this area. Notice how it feels: relaxed, open, warm, calm, dynamic, strong, or another sensation.

Then return your attention to the tense body part. Spend a few moments focusing on the sensation of unease, noticing any details that arise.

Again, return to the body part that feels more pleasant. Sense how that part feels now.

Shift your attention back and forth a few more rounds, remaining curious and observant.

Be attentive to differences and changes, even of the slightest nature. Maybe something new will come up.

Always stay a little longer with the body part that is more at ease than with the tense one.

These exercises will help you best when practiced regularly. Try to attend to your nervous system every day for a couple of minutes.

Remember:

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.

Lao Tzu
Afterwards, we would like to present you with some magic communication tools: Active Listening, Expressing Empathy and Non-Violent Communication.

The term communication comes from the Latin word communicate, meaning «to be in relation with», or «to share». We understand communication as the art of interacting and bridging the gap between self and other, inner and outer worlds.

In this section we would like to draw your attention to two very important aspects of communication. If these are neglected, they become obstacles to our well-being and cooperation with others. These aspects are «stable personal boundaries» and the «inner compass».
Stable personal boundaries help us to prevent social situations from becoming stressful.

Human beings have several boundaries. Our skin is one of them. However, there is another boundary that people can usually feel.

It is the border of our personal space. This is the space only invited people may enter.

Imagine you are standing in a queue. Suddenly you feel slightly uneasy. You sense something unpleasant at your back, yet you can also tell that nothing is touching you. You turn around to see that the person behind you stands really close.

Imagine another situation:

In a meeting, you sit next to someone you barely know. They start talking to you. They seem to want to connect with you, so they put their hands on «your part» of the table, touch your notebook, and even touch your shoulder. You feel uncomfortable.

Do you know such situations? They are examples of someone invading our personal space.
Personal boundaries matter also on a less visible level.

Your mother tells you what is «good for you».

Your boss asks you in a patronizing way if you have family problems.

Your friend claims you should wear more white as this colour suits you better than others.

Your neighbor gives you advice that you did not ask for.

All these interactions have the potential to violate your personal boundary.

In the moment, we may be so surprised or stressed that we don’t even understand that our boundaries have been violated. We may only realize afterwards.

How does it feel to have our boundaries violated?

We usually feel a form of unease.

unprotected
humiliated
helpless
naked
angry
agitated
offended
Trauma causes breaches in your boundaries. You can imagine it as parts of your boundary becoming thin or developing holes. This makes them more prone to violations.

Some of us experience such violations often so that it seems a usual thing. Some of us strive to please other people all the time, so they draw their boundaries really narrow — with almost no space for themselves.

This can cause the desire to permanently protect yourself against potential boundary violations. Even gentle invitations to connect can be perceived as intrusion.

As a result, people might push others away or retreat from social contact.

Both overprotection and allowing others to take our space make it difficult to thrive socially.
Stable personal boundaries make us confident and give us a feeling of safety.

We do not have to be overprotective and can still avoid becoming hurt.

Because even if they are invisible, other people can sense our boundaries.

If our boundaries are stable, we can tolerate stressful situations better.

With stable boundaries, we are able to say to our mother: I appreciate that you care for me. However, I have a different plan.

We are able to ignore advice we did not ask for, without becoming insecure.

We are able to stand up against our boss and ask what part of our performance they are not satisfied with.
To stabilize your personal boundary, it is first of all necessary that you become aware of it. Try the following exercise:

Take a red string (or another colour of your choice) and make a circle around you. Tie the ends so the circle is unbroken. Stand in the middle of the circle and say or think:

**THIS IS MY PERSONAL SPACE. NO-ONE SHALL COME IN HERE UNLESS I INVITE THEM.**

Now try to sense how you feel in your red-thread-boundaries. Is it the right size? Is it too narrow or too big? Adjust your circle to your needs until it feels just right.
Try to stand in different parts of your personal space. Where do you feel most comfortable and where least? Do you feel well-protected by your red-thread-boundaries? Test to see how you feel if someone comes close to your boundaries (without transgressing it). How does it feel if you stick one hand out beyond the boundaries?

Wander with your eyes along the thread and pay attention to your bodily sensations. Do you perceive your metaphoric boundary as even or does it seem to have thicker and thinner sections?

Walk along the string on the inside of your circle. What do you sense in your body while doing that?

If you feel that your boundaries have holes or weak sections, you can mend these sections in your imagination. You can also take more red string and double your string in some places. Sense again what has changed.
Think about a situation from the past week when someone violated your personal boundaries. Now look at the string again and become aware of your personal space and the boundary enclosing it. Note how you feel inside when you concentrate on your space and your boundaries.

Now rethink the situation. How would you handle it now, as you are standing in your personal space, with stable boundaries?

Last but not least, try to visualize your boundaries in the most beautiful way you can imagine. Are they more like a golden curtain? A rainbow? A fortress? A waterfall? A blossoming rose hedge? How do you feel when surrounded by the boundaries that fit you best?

After you have explored your boundaries for a couple of minutes, you might realize that your sensations have changed throughout the exercise.

Your body tells you what feels good and what feels uncomfortable.

Try to recognize these feelings — they show you the way towards stable and elastic boundaries.
Even in daily life, awareness of your boundaries makes a great difference. The more aware we become of our boundaries, the less your boundaries get violated and the better we can react to boundary violations.

Boundaries have not only a protective quality, but also a connective one. Which quality is in the foreground in a particular situation depends on the amount of safety we perceive in that moment.
In each of us there is an inner compass. Whenever we have to make a decision, we can check in with our inner compass. It will show us what our body wants. It knows what is the right choice for us in the given moment. We can use our inner compass to avoid stress and keep ourselves healthy and happy.

However, sometimes there are complications...

Let us have a look at a typical situation:

At six o’clock, after a busy work day, a colleague asks me:

Could you please have a look at this text I have written? It’s due tomorrow.

My inner compass screams: NOO!!!

At the same time, I hear myself saying: Sure.

I am tired and I really want to go for a walk or lie on the sofa.

While I correct the text, I get really angry at my colleague. My thoughts start racing:

Why did she ask me in the first place? She could have written the text more carefully.

Does she not see how much I work? She is not respecting my time and my boundaries.

In fact, she is exploiting me, just like everyone else.
At the end of the day, I send her the text. I am not fully satisfied with my edits as I have been too tired. I still feel angry and exploited. I have done her a favor but it has not improved our relationship.

I still feel angry and exploited. I have done her a favor but it has not improved our relationship. And I feel like a victim.

Can you see what happened? I failed to say «no». And then I failed to take responsibility for failing to say «no». I blamed my colleague for my wrong decision and made her responsible for my situation and my feelings.

And I put myself into the position of a victim where I am helpless and the others are responsible for my misery.

How did it come to this? It happened because my inner compass said «no» but I said «yes».

But why did I do that, knowing that it can cause me harm and damage my relationship with others?
Maybe it’s because my moral mind tells me always to be helpful and kind to others.

Of course, readiness to help is a noble value. However to be able to support others you need the capability to care for yourself. Exhausted helpers need a long time to regain strength — and during this time, they cannot help others.

So if you want to maintain your ability to support other people — you have to care for yourself. And to find the time and energy to do so you need to say «no» when your inner compass displays «no».

A «no» to someone else is often a «yes» to selfcare.

And selfcare is key to keeping up your strength and stress resilience.

We can cut off our inner compass and just keep going, keep working, keep doing favors for others.

If we dismiss our inner compass, we neglect our need to recharge our batteries and keep our boundaries stable.

We end up losing strength and elasticity, we get overworked, exhausted, and sooner or later we collapse. Not even a phone can work without recharging.
Maybe it’s because I am afraid of saying «no».

Indeed, saying «no» is not easy. Sometimes, people get angry at you. Sometimes, people are disappointed. However, in most cases, people will accept your «no». In the long run, they will probably even respect you more. You can learn how to say «no» in the most gentle and friendly way.

And remember, you are of more help when you feel well and charged.

You have to deny another person’s request. However, this moment of comparative stress is fairly short.

And if we overcome this moment, we gain a sense of freedom as well as strength that comes from stabilizing our boundaries.

Listening to your compass does not mean saying «no» to every request.

I am sure your compass will say «yes» quite often. But if the compass displays «no», it’s better to say «no». If you listen to your body, you will sense when to say yes and when to say «no».

As a consequence of trauma, it is possible that your compass is not calibrated. A nervous system that does not regulate is not able to express what the body needs right now. The ability to self-regulate is necessary for a reliable compass.
When we see someone get hurt, the nerve activities in our brain resemble those when we hurt ourselves.

That is why we wince when we see someone falling off a skateboard or cry when the family dog dies in a movie. This proves that human beings are naturally empathetic.

Our desire to fix the problem and cheer up the other person prevents us from being empathetic. We succumb to the urge to appease, give advice or present our own opinion.

Empathy calls us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being.

Being empathetic includes taking another person’s perspective, recognizing the person’s feelings, and refraining from judgment.

To connect with someone who feels miserable, we have to connect with the part of ourselves that remembers that feeling.
The ability to empathize is rapidly lost when we feel mistreated or humiliated.

Logically, empathy vanishes when our connections to ourselves and others break.

We cannot be empathetic when we feel fear, shame, or rage.

If we want to regain our capacity for empathy, we need to cope with our own feelings first.

True empathy requires listening rather than talking.
It doesn’t matter so much what we say in such situations, as long as we do not judge or try to advise them.

An empathetic “I do not even know what to say” is better than the smartest advice brought forward without compassion.

What makes things better is rarely the response — it is the connection.

The Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu stated that true empathy requires listening with the whole being:

“The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence it demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind.”

If you have a couple of minutes, watch the youtube clip «The power of empathy».
LISTENING

For some people, listening means waiting until the other person has finished speaking.

Some people interrupt others as soon as they think they know what the other person wants to say.

And most often, they have not understood the other person at all.

Some people listen for one or two sentences, and then they begin to prepare a reply in their head. They focus less on the speaker and more on their own thoughts.

Many people hear everything through the filter of their convictions and stereotypes. In fact, they hear their own expectations louder than what the other person is saying.

None of this is truly listening.
ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening requires connection, empathy, and patience.

It means paying attention without demanding, expecting, or judging.

To practice active listening, you need to have respect for the other person.

You need to be aware of your expectations and stereotypes, so you can turn them down (self-reflection).

You need to focus on the other person, instead of tasks that are still ahead of you (attention).

You need to open your heart and forget about time (joining).

Active listening is an almost magical skill because it changes both the listener and the speaker.
The German author Michael Ende described the mastery of listening when introducing Momo, the main character of one of his books.

«Very few people know how to listen properly, and Momo's way of listening was quite unique. She listened in a way that made slow-witted people have flashes of inspiration. It wasn't that she actually said anything or asked questions that put such ideas into their heads. She simply sat there and listened with the utmost attention and sympathy, fixing them with her big, dark eyes, and they suddenly became aware of ideas whose existence they had never suspected.

Momo could listen in such a way that worried and indecisive people knew their own minds from one moment to the next, or shy people felt suddenly confident and at ease, or downhearted people felt happy and hopeful. And if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo. And, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong: that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way.

Carl Rogers described the impact of listening on its recipients:

«When ... someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mould you, it feels damn good... When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to reperceive my world in a new way and go on. It is astonishing how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens. How confusions that seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard.»
Listening and empathy, the tools we just dealt with, are key components of Non-Violent Communication (NVC). NVC is a technique developed by Marshall Rosenberg, designed to solve conflicts and improve relationships.

Some people use NVC to get in touch with themselves, some to create greater depth in their personal relationships, and still others to build effective relationships at work or in the political arena. Worldwide, NVC is used to mediate disputes and conflicts at all levels.

If you aim to manipulate people or to get your way, then NVC is not an appropriate tool for you.

If you would like to improve your relationships, solve conflicts and enable yourself and others to change and grow, then NVC might be interesting for you.

The objective of NVC is to establish a relationship based on honesty and empathy.
NON-VIOLENT LANGUAGE (WOLF AND GIRAFFE)

Even though it is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately, we are raised to use language that creates distance and hierarchy. This moves us apart instead of bringing us together.

Marshall Rosenberg chose the wolf to symbolize this life-alienating language.

The main features of this type of language are:

- Moralistic judgement
- Comparison
- Relocating responsibility

He is selfish.

They are prejudiced.

You should be ashamed of yourself.

It's inappropriate.

Look what your classmate has achieved by now.
Labels, blame, insults, put-downs, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgment.

Classifying and judging people promotes violence. Even if the characteristic is «positive», like in «You are a good father».

Often, we judge people because they do not respond to the need we feel in the moment:

If my partner wants more affection than I'm giving her, she is «needy and dependent.»

But if I want more affection than she is giving me, then she is «aloof and insensitive.»

If my colleague is more concerned about details than I am, he is «picky and compulsive.»

On the other hand, if I am more concerned about details than he is, he is «sloppy and disorganized.»
In fact, judgements are needs and emotions in an obscured form.

They locate the responsibility for our emotions and the fulfilling of our needs with the other person.

In daily life, we use many more sentences that obscure our personal responsibility for our actions, emotions and thoughts:

- There are some things you have to do, whether you like it or not.
- You make me feel sad.
- You insulted me.

With such language, we transfer our responsibility to someone else.

We put ourselves in the position of an innocent victim who has no choice and is suffering at the hands of others.

Such self-victimisation is one of the biggest obstacles to solving conflicts.
Life-alienating communication supports hierarchy and domination.

When we are in contact with our feelings and needs we no longer need these authorities. We no longer make good slaves and underlings.

The more people are trained to think in terms of moralistic judgments, the more they look outside themselves, to outside authorities, to find out what is right, wrong, good and bad.
When we are in touch with ourselves, we do not need the language of judgement and blame — we can speak the giraffe’s language.

Remember how Rosenberg used the wolf to symbolize life-alienating language? He then offered the metaphor of a giraffe to help us think about the language used in NVC.

When we are in touch with ourselves, we do not need the language of judgement and blame — we can speak the giraffe’s language.
Non-violent communication is a way of speaking that allows us to express our most uncomfortable feelings without judgement, blame, or accusation. Instead, it encourages us to focus our consciousness on four areas:

**OBSERVING**
The concrete actions we observe that are affecting our wellbeing.

**FEELING**
How we feel in relation to what we are observing.

**NEEDS**
The needs that are creating our feelings.

**REQUEST**
The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives.
Observing without judgment

The first step is observing the situation: what is the other person actually saying or doing that has an impact on us?

If we express judgment instead of observation, we are putting ourselves above the other person. This creates an imbalance of power and destroys the equality necessary for constructive conflict resolution.

When we combine observation with evaluation, others are likely to hear criticism and resist what we are saying.

When we use observation without judgment as a first step, we focus on facts that all conflict parties can agree on.

Your brother is a poor soccer player.

Your brother hasn’t scored a goal in 10 games.

In doing so, we establish an even ground on which all parties can stand.

The key for an observation without judgment is refraining from generalization.

Setting out from this even ground makes conflict resolution possible.

The more specific we can be about time and context, the better.
In the second step of NVC we state how we feel about this observation: are we sad, angry, scared, happy?

If we express our authentic feelings without blaming the other person, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. This opens the field for connection, empathy and understanding, and helps resolve conflict.

It is important to distinguish the expression of actual feelings from words and statements that describe thoughts, assessments, and interpretations.

Our feelings result from how we choose to receive what others say and do, as well as our particular needs and expectations in that moment.

When someone communicates something we perceive as negative, we have four options as to how to receive the message:

- blame ourselves;
- blame others;
- sense our own feelings and needs;
- sense the feelings and needs hidden in the other person’s negative message.

Accepting our responsibility for our feelings makes us ready for overcoming conflicts.
The third step is to name the unfulfilled needs that lay at the base of the feelings we identified. Usually, we hide our needs behind accusations. The phrase «You love your job more than me!» disguises a need for intimacy. If you express it in this way, your partner is more likely to hear criticism and defend himself rather than be empathic and open with you.

Suppose we stop telling others what is wrong with them and instead start voicing what we need ourselves. This increases the likelihood that all conflict participants’ needs will be fulfilled.

After all, how can we expect others to help us meet our needs if we have never expressed them directly?

If we explain the needs behind our feelings, we increase our chances of being heard and understood.

It can be frightening to reveal our needs in a context where needs are not often discussed. Most of us are socialized to ignore our own needs while caring for the needs of others.
There is a significant difference between needs and strategies for their satisfaction. Needs are always universal. This means that they arise in all people from time to time.

Here is a list of basic human needs:

- **Self-worth**
- **Creativity**
- **Integrity**
- **Meaning**
- **Authenticity**

**Autonomy**

To choose one’s dreams, goals, values and the ways how to fulfill them.

**Spiritual communion**

- **Beauty**
- **Harmony**
- **Order**
- **Peace**
- **Inspiration**

**Physical nurture**

- **Rest**
- **Movement/Exercise**
- **Food**
- **Air**
- **Water**
- **Shelter**
- **Sexual expression**

**Care**

- **Acceptance**
- **Community**
- **Contribution to the enrichment of life**
- **Understanding**
- **Consideration**
- **Respect**

**Interdependence**

- **Emotional safety**
- **Honesty**
- **Trust**
- **Love**
- **Empathy**
- **Closeness**
- **Reassurance**
- **Appreciation**
- **Support**

**Celebrating losses:**

- Loved ones, dreams, etc. (mourning)

**Celebration**

Celebrating the creation of life and dreams fulfilled.
While needs are universal, strategies for meeting them depend on your personal preferences and situation.

The more strategies we find to meet a need, the easier it will be to care for ourselves and our happiness. Think of three strategies to satisfy one need.

**Strategy 1**

**Strategy 2**

**Strategy 3**

If you feel the need to relax, you can lie down on the couch and read. If you feel a need for closeness, your strategy might be to hug your partner.

Each need can be satisfied in different ways. Thus, we can develop different strategies to meet a particular need.

If your partner is not around, you can cuddle with the cat to make up for the lack of closeness.

If we confuse needs with strategies or if we are convinced that there is only one way to satisfy our need, we reduce our chances of fulfilling that need.

One example would be believing that only our partner can satisfy our need for closeness. But what if she is away, or not in the mood for a hug? Then this belief can lead to dissatisfaction and conflict.
Many of us have yet to learn to take responsibility for what we feel and for meeting our needs. Rosenberg talks about a three-stage development.

**Stage 1: Emotional slavery:**

We believe ourselves responsible for the feelings of others. We think we have to keep everyone happy. If someone is unhappy, we feel we must do something about it. This can become exhausting and frustrating.

What we perceive as our responsibility for others’ feelings can feel like a constraint on our freedom. In response, we are likely to:

- **Engage in wolf language.**
- **Engage in moral judgments.**
  
  *As a good son/husband/father/neighbour, I have to...*

- **Refuse responsibility for our thoughts and feelings.**

- **Blame others for our unpleasant feelings.**

- **Fail to listen to the person we are “caring for” by focusing instead on problem solving.**

- **Act out of guilt, fear or shame and not out of our own will and an open heart.**

Instead of caring, we deprive others of their responsibility and harm ourselves. We create an imbalance between ourselves and the other person and make it impossible to solve the problem in a sustainable way. It can be hard to hold on to deep caring and love without feeling obliged by a sense of responsibility for how the other is feeling. But it is possible.
Emerging from the stage of emotional slavery, we begin to recognize our own needs and no longer want to be responsible for others’ feelings.

We might be angry and frustrated with others, and at the same time may feel guilt or shame.

If we manage not to fall back into depriving others of their responsibility, we can reach:

Stage 3: «Emotional Liberation»

At this stage, we accept full responsibility for our own intentions and actions, but not for the feelings of others.

We are aware that we can never meet the needs of others at the expense of our own needs, or our own needs at the expense of others.

Emotional Liberation involves stating clearly what we need in a way that communicates we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled.

We respond to the needs of others out of compassion, and not out of fear, guilt, or shame.
The fourth and final step of NVC is the request. It formulates what we want the other person to do.

First we need to know what specific action the other person could undertake to enrich our life. Then, we need to consider how to express our requests so that others are more willing to respond compassionately to our needs.

Most importantly, we avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing. We must also remember to use positive action language that states what we want the person to do. Rather than what we don’t want the other person to do.

To make sure the message we sent is the message that is received, you can ask the listener to reflect it back. Could you tell me what you just heard me say?

The clearer we are about what we want back, the more likely we are to get it.

But I do respect her! What did I do wrong? How should I express my respect? I don't understand what the problem is!

Please ask me before you make plans where I am involved.

Sure, I can do that.

You don't respect me at all!
A demand is a request one cannot decline without negative consequences. When the other person hears a demand from us, they see two options: submit or rebel.

To formulate a request, you need to be open to the option that the other person says «no».

For example, a mother might demonstrate the steps of NVC with her teenage son by saying:

Michael, when I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated because I need more order in the rooms that we share in common.

She would follow immediately with the fourth component — a very specific request:

Would you be willing to put your socks in your room or in the washing machine?
We can apply the four steps of NVC when we are talking to others and let them guide our expressions and formulations.

We also can apply the four steps of NVC when we are listening. Whatever the other person says, we try to hear the feelings and needs their words are rooted in.

For this purpose, Marshall Rosenberg designed a specific technique that we can call emergency empathy.

It works even when people are already raising their voice.
When we are doing emergency empathy, we try to guess the other person's feelings and needs.

Are you angry because you...

If this doesn't match what they are feeling and they say «no», no problem. We can guess again.

Usually after 3 or 4 guesses the other person starts to explain what they feel and need.

Emergency empathy turns the other person’s attention inside and motivates the person to understand their own feelings and needs.

It slows the conflict down and creates space for connection.

The more often you apply the technique of emergency empathy, the more it will unfold its almost magical calming and conflict-solving qualities.
Let us have a look at an example from Marshall Rosenberg’s book:

Suppose a mother comes to us, saying:

My child is impossible. No matter what I tell him to do, he doesn’t listen.

We might reflect her feelings and needs by saying:

It sounds like you’re feeling desperate and would like to find some way of connecting with your son.

If we have accurately reflected her statement, the mother might touch upon other feelings:

Maybe it’s my fault. I’m always yelling at him.

As the listener, we would continue to stay with the feelings and needs being expressed and say, for example:

Are you feeling guilty because you would have liked to have been more understanding of him than you have been at times?

If the mother continues to sense understanding in our reflection, she might move further into her feelings and declare:

I’m just a failure as a mother.

We continue to remain with the feelings and needs being expressed:

So you’re feeling discouraged and want to relate differently to him?

Such a paraphrase often encourages a person to look within.
If we stick to the principles of NVC, they will join us in the process and eventually respond compassionately in kind.

We persist in this manner until the person has exhausted all her feelings surrounding this issue.

We know the speaker has received adequate empathy when:

a) we sense a release of tension; or

b) the flow of words stops.

The use of NVC does not require that the persons with whom we are communicating be literate in NVC or even motivated to relate to us compassionately.
Now, towards the end of our journey we would like to focus on dialogue. In our societies, the term «dialogue» is used for all kinds of conversations. Much of what appears under the label dialogue, however, is actually a debate: convincing others of your own opinion.

Real dialogues, on the other hand, require:

- Openness
- Listening to learn
- Readiness to accept
- Authenticity
- Understanding each other’s motives
- Responsibility for one’s own opinions and actions
OPENNESS

The more open you are to the ups and downs, twists, and turns of the conflict resolution process, the easier it will be for you to navigate them.

Having a set procedure or outcome that you want to reach will make dialogue impossible. If one party sets the result from the beginning, this is not a dialogue. The outcome of a dialogue must be open.

In constructive talks, the conflicting parties begin at some point to see the other not as an enemy, but as a fellow human being.

This means they have become more open to another’s perspective.

Scientists have found that openness in human interaction is crucial for the success of dialogue.

Such changes in the relationship often determine how the conflict turns out.
LISTENING TO LEARN

When we listen to learn we aim to understand what the other person thinks and feels, and why. We can ask ourselves:

- What is behind the opinions of the other person?
- Where do they come from?
- What has shaped them?

This requires a shift in mindset when confronted with a person who we consider inadequate.

Instead of wondering «What is wrong with this person» we shall wonder: «What has happened to this person? What does this person need?»

Three techniques help you to listen to learn:
- Reflecting back what you have understood.
- Asking for clarification.
- Summarizing.

We can only understand another’s motivations if we make a clear distinction between the person and their behaviour.

UNDERSTAND ANOTHER’S MOTIVATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT WE SHARE THEIR OPINIONS OR ACCEPT THEIR ACTIONS.
But what about those who are skeptical, full of hatred and prejudices regarding the «enemy»? They will find it challenging to listen.

Let them talk first. Being heard and understood might soften their adversity!

At the beginning of a dialogue process, it must be clear: there is room to express your own opinions, criticism, frustration, and anger. And your feelings will be taken seriously.

It must also be clear that the dialogue will not ignore structural or political injustices, but on the contrary, will make them a topic of discussion.

Your approach to listening is what can transform conflict.

When you really listen, you slow down the process and open it up.
READINESS TO ACCEPT

To solve a conflict, you need to accept that it exists. As long as you or your counterpart deny that fact or deny the seriousness of the conflict, the dialogue will not work.

To enter a dialogue, you have to accept your counterpart as a serious dialogue partner.

This does not imply that you approve of their opinions or actions. It merely means that you have the intention to meet, and to listen to them. Remember to distinguish between the person and their actions.

Allow the other person to talk openly about how they came to their view.

Allow yourself and the other person to change.

You may also need to accept that dialogue may be the best of few options for conflict resolution.
In geopolitical conflicts, each side often believes that they will easily defeat their opponent. They tend to underestimate each other's capability. It is precisely this misjudgment, combined with the fear that dialogue is synonymous with giving in, that so often leads conflict parties to avoid it.

No matter which conflict party chose violence – the price all conflict parties pay for it is much higher than the cost of dialogue. It is worth remembering: in most cases, conflict cannot be solved by force without severe consequences.
AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is another key to reach an agreement.

Dialogue processes include a delicate question: Do we believe that the other person means what they say?

Or do we think that they deliberately exaggerate, maybe even lie?

Maybe your counterparts present themselves as victims, while you believe that they are not really suffering.

In a conflict situation, dialogue partners may initially accuse each other of using any means to push through their goal.

It makes a decisive difference whether you see the other person as authentic, or whether you assume their arguments are purely strategic.

Sometimes rightly so.
If you are having a dialogue in person, your assessment of your counterpart’s authenticity will depend on non-verbal signals like body language.

In person, you can better determine: Is the other person acting strategically, or do they really feel this way?

This questioning can lead to a moment of spontaneous truthfulness: when parties are, at least for a moment, convinced of the other’s honesty. This provides a minimum level of trust.

With this trust, the path is laid for each party to begin understanding, and opening their perspective.
UNDERSTANDING MOTIVES

It is very important to note that understanding does not mean agreeing with.

Often, conflict parties fear that through listening to and understanding the other person’s motivation, they are automatically approving of their actions.

This is why they do not even try to understand the feelings, needs, and motivations of the other.

Listening and understanding motives should not be mistaken for legitimizing actions.

On the contrary, we can clearly distinguish between what we understand and what we agree with.

Understanding means having cognitive comprehension of a person’s motivations.
There are always many «good» reasons for «bad» behaviors.

What makes the person speak and act this way?

It is much more difficult to condemn the political views of a counterpart if you know where they come from.

Knowing where they are coming from makes it possible to understand why a person or group decided to choose force.

We do not want to approve this choice, but we want to know about the needs behind it.

Understanding the motives and needs of the other party is essential for a durable solution.
Responsibility

Every individual needs to take responsibility for their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and expressions. Even if they are acting in an official position. And even if they have been a victim of violence.

People sometimes justify their harmful actions by pointing to their good intentions.

Max Weber
Philosopher

One cannot legitimize one's destructive behavior with the argument that one had the best intentions.

Good intentions do not absolve us of the responsibility for our actions. We must calculate the impact of our actions, not our intentions.

Dialogue participants should face any discrepancies between their intentions and the impact of their actions.
EVERYDAY DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a well-known tool to resolve geopolitical and ethnic conflicts. Dialogue can also help to resolve tensions in many other contexts: in families, friendships, at work, in civil initiatives, in or between NGOs, between citizens and administration, and so on.

It is an effective tool to unify fragmented and segregated groups and societies.

The less conflict a group faces internally, the better it can advocate for change externally.

Dialogue builds trust and mutual understanding between groups. This makes them stronger in their struggle against social and political injustice.

On any level, in any situation, the goal of dialogue is to overcome exclusion, to achieve recognition and reconciliation, and to create a more free, just, and peaceful future.
Libereco — Partnership for Human Rights is an independent German-Swiss non-governmental organisation dedicated to the protection of human rights in Belarus and Ukraine. Since our foundation in 2009, we have been advocating for people who are persecuted because of their political or civic commitment. We support victims of war and violence, contribute to intercultural human rights education and support the forces of a free and independent civil society in both countries.

Moreover, we engage in humanitarian and psychosocial aid for victims of war and violence. We offer trainings, support groups and information material for people who have been exposed to war and political violence.

Together with like-minded organizations and actors, we push for the respect, defense and promotion of human rights across borders. Libereco works closely, and on an equal footing, with Belarusian and Ukrainian organizations.

Our website: www.lphr.org/en/
In spring 2015, the foundation East-SOS, locally known as Vostok-SOS, was registered as a charitable organization. Our activities, however, date back to the early war days. In May 2014, activists from three organizations — the Luhansk-based Human Rights Center Postup, the Crimean Human Rights Center Diya and the Civil Sector of Luhansk EuroMaidan joined forces to help victims of the armed aggression in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Providing internal displaced persons with shelter and humanitarian aid, establishing an emergency hotline, and collaborating to evacuate people from the conflict area, we became one of the first initiatives to deal with the consequences of war.

We have participated in the search, release, and rehabilitation of victims of abductions, monitored and documented human rights violations, and reported on the situation in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Vostok-SOS also pioneered collecting and distributing humanitarian aid to front-line settlements and providing psychological first aid for people affected by the conflict.

Meanwhile, we have developed into an organization with profound crisis intervention skills, international project experience, and outstanding regional expertise for the conflict area. We continue to protect and raise awareness for human rights, including monitoring, legal support, and advocacy. Our educational and training programs contribute to non-violent conflict transformation and civic participation. We engage in humanitarian and psychosocial support for war-affected people with a particular focus on marginalized groups.

Our website: vostok-sos.org/en/
Feniks is an international team of psychotherapists who work with the consequences of physical and psychological violence, war, repression, forced migration, and other emergencies. The initiative focuses on supporting activists, volunteers, and people who help others in crisis. It works in partnership with Libereco and Vostok SOS.

Feniks aims to spread knowledge about stress, trauma, and the nervous system and increase individual and collective competencies to self-regulate, withstand pressure and overcome trauma.

The team offers individual therapeutic sessions, coaching, support groups, and training in stress resilience, trauma prevention, and non-violent communication. It runs an Instagram channel with information on activism under challenging times, stress management, and coping with trauma.

Our Instagram channel: feniks_podderzhka
REFERENCES

LITERATURE WE RECOMMEND:

VIDEOS WE LIKE:

Brené Brown on Empathy:

The Stress Bucket:

Why Mindfulness Is a Superpower:

How Mindfulness Empowers Us:

You are not your thoughts:

Tea and Consent:
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story:*

**EXERCISES YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:**

5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique:  
Square breathing:

Bodyscan:  
Vagus nerve reset:

«Feniks» Instagram channel: (in Russian)  
Imke’s Instagram channel: (in English)
## INDEX

- **WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS** .......................................................................................3
- **ORIGINS OF CONFLICT** ..........................................................................................6
  WHAT IS DIALOGUE?..................................................................................................10

- **STRESS AND CONFLICT ARE TWO CLOSE RELATIVES** ...................................12
  WHAT IS STRESS?.........................................................................................................13
  HOW TO STRENGTHEN OUR ABILITY TO COPE WITH STRESS?........................18

- **EMERGENCY SITUATIONS AND OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM**..............................26
  THE NERVOUS SYSTEM......................................................................................27
  THE TRIUNE BRAIN..........................................................................................30
  THE EMERGENCY CYCLE: ANTELOPE AND CHEETAH.............................32
  ORIENTATION.......................................................................................................35
  EMERGENCY RESPONSES.........................................................................................39
  ACTION................................................................................................................40
  DISCHARGE/RELEASE THE ENERGY........................................................................42

- **TRAUMA**................................................................................................................46
  TRAUMA = THE IMPRINT OF A PAST STATE OF OVERWHELM. .........................47
  HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE TRAUMATIZED?.........................................................50
  BEING STUCK IN THE SITUATION. ........................................................................50
  BEING STUCK IN THE «ON»-MODE .......................................................................53
  BEING STUCK IN THE «OFF»-MODE ....................................................................55
  RECOVERING FROM TRAUMA..................................................................................57

- **COMMUNICATION**..................................................................................................63
  STABLE BOUNDARIES...............................................................................................64
  THE INNER COMPASS.............................................................................................72
  EMPATHY................................................................................................................76
  LISTENING...............................................................................................................79
  NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION..........................................................................82

- **DIALOGUE**.............................................................................................................102
  OPENNESS.............................................................................................................103
  LISTENING TO LEARN..........................................................................................104
  READINESS TO ACCEPT.......................................................................................106
  AUTHENTICITY.......................................................................................................108
  UNDERSTANDING MOTIVES................................................................................110
  RESPONSIBILITY.....................................................................................................112
  EVERYDAY DIALOGUE.........................................................................................113

- **ABOUT US** .............................................................................................................114
- **REFERENCES**.......................................................................................................117
- **INDEX**
I CAN!

How to cope with stress, overcome challenges, and handle conflict

Author:
Imke Hansen

Art and design:
Sofiia Runova

Editorial Board:
Tatiana Dontsova
Maksym Moiseienko

and all those who participated in the project «From Conflict to Dialogue»

Libereco
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FENIKS

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