

# Rest for the Restless Mind

## Part One

By Stefan Blom 19 May 2021

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**No matter what you experience, be it loss, trauma or everyday shocks that are making you restless, here is some guidance on how to find rest for the restless mind, says clinical psychologist Stefan Blom.**

It started with me documenting my own restless mind, in a kind of diary, noting the process from disconnection to connection, from restlessness to peace of mind. Over time, I started observing the journeys of others in therapy: From “I am feeling so lost” and “I don’t know what I need”, to “I feel grounded, aligned, centered... the best I have felt in years”.

“How do you find rest for the restless mind?” is the question I hear most often from my clients; it’s a question I have been wrestling with for many years myself. You might believe that finding rest for your restless mind lies in something extraordinary, something you have never heard of before, but it comes in life’s freest, simplest and gentlest ways.

Here, I share some of my own tried and tested ways while weaving in the wisdom of others whose guidance I’ve found worthwhile.

### **Understand loss and trauma**

Loss and trauma often arise from life’s unexpected and inevitable shocks or surprises. They range from everyday shocks, like a car suddenly swerving in front of you on the road or a stranger shouting at you, to more traumatic losses, like the passing of a loved one or the loss of one’s job or one’s health. We underestimate the distressing effects of a child not being well, or a loved one screaming at you or ignoring you. These experiences often shake us to our core as we feel them in our minds, bodies and souls; and yet, despite their real impacts it seems we often spend most of our time suppressing, avoiding and hiding from our truths.

We experience multiple losses during traumatic events, shocks and new beginnings. The birth of a child or getting married can come with many traumatic experiences and losses (along with the beautiful gains). The effects of a break in trust, the loss of job security or mental ill health can be experienced as loss on many levels, limiting our ability to be at peace.

In therapy, shock, loss or trauma are often experienced like a metaphorical blow to your core self. Like a bus hitting you from the side, your inner world starts to shake as your mind accelerates, going into survival, coping or protective mode. This speaks to many of our biggest fears, like the feeling that we are not in control over what is happening to us, or that we will not be able to cope with what life throws at us.

To find rest for our restless mind, we need to understand what is happening to us. This requires a deeper understanding of what we are experiencing and why.

Based on my observations, the symptoms of shock, trauma and loss are often the same:

- Feelings of displacement and disconnection from your self, almost like standing next to your self;
- Fragmentation of the mind, often manifesting as distraction and scattered thoughts that float like busy butterflies in a room;
- Restlessness, hyperactivity and sleeplessness, often manifesting as accelerated thoughts;
- Random bursts of distractibility, poor concentration and short attention span;
- Heightened sensory sensations, often feeling sensitive to noise, light or smell;
- Feeling alert, defensive, vulnerable and in need of protection; desperately looking for safety and calm;
- A constant state of deep exhaustion paired with an inability to rest or be still;
- Short-term memory gaps, often forgetting what you are busy with, wandering around lost and without direction; brain fog;
- A pressing need to escape or get away, leading to avoidance behaviour and procrastination;
- Circular, repetitive and anxious thinking, picking up one idea after another, without feeling productive or “together”;
- Remarkably low levels of physical and emotional energy, low mood;
- Irritability and short temperedness, easily frustrated, low tolerance;
- Questioning life, but not finding answers, creating a general feeling of being lost and without direction;
- Feeling tense, highly strung and impatient, with an exaggerated fright or fear response;
- A tendency towards anxiety, lots of worrying about the future, catastrophic and worst-case-scenario thinking;
- A tendency towards depression, a low, dark mood with negative thoughts, seeing the world with negativity, lots of complaining;
- A compassion fatigue, low tolerance for the suffering of others, emotional saturation;
- Shortness of breath, shallow breathing, pressure on your chest;
- Tension in the core of your body, often manifesting as a heavy pit in your stomach or tensions in the neck or shoulder areas; and
- Mood swings, feeling like you are on an emotional rollercoaster, often experiencing different and mixed emotions over short periods.

You might experience a few or many of these signs as a result of experiencing everyday shocks, trauma or loss. They meet the criteria for a few psychiatric conditions, especially anxiety conditions. No matter what the labels are, it is important that we move beyond our symptoms, as knowing them too well does not bring calm.

My own history with anxiety has been one of my biggest experiences of loss. Anxiety is a loss of perspective. My mind gets plagued by circular, fleeting and repetitive thoughts, restless hyperactivity fuelled by waves of anxiety, worrying about the future and catastrophic or worst-case-scenario thinking. What I often lose, along with my peace of mind, is my sense of safety and security and the courage, self-belief and energy to act. Loss deepens our lostness as we lose perspective on the bigger picture and repetitively zoom in with tunnel vision.

Knowing your symptoms and diagnosis is not enough. Go deeper and find your own words and descriptions for what is making you constantly restless. Finding words for what you are experiencing can be the first step on your road of recovery.

### **Gently meet and greet your pain and worries**

Choose to go on a journey of self-awareness or consciousness, and go deeper through introspection and self-exploration. Make it your priority to figure out what is going on inside you and not so much around you.

Do not lose time trying to figure out who or what you are or what it all means; rather focus your energy on finding out where you are at. Knowing where you are at is about connecting with what is bothering you, disturbing or confusing you. Ask yourself: What exactly is bothering or creating tension for me?

Take your time in slowly noting what is creating the discomfort inside you through listening to your thoughts, feelings, intuitions and the cues of your body. Because the mind can play powerful tricks on us, the physical messages sent by your body are a good place to look for your truths.

Listen to what your body is telling you (and not always your mind). If you need space or rest, silence or company, tell yourself to go there without judgement or evaluation. Don't overthink it.

You might be exhausted, for example, but the idea of sitting still and "just being" can feel impossible. Your body is desperate to rest, but your restless and neglected thoughts are shouting for your attention and are overriding your real need for rest. Connect with what is true on the inside of you without the need to judge, fix or problem-solve. Simply try to take note of what is distressing and ungrounding you. Be as lost, broken or fearful as you truly are; simply greet and meet your pain and worries. Be reminded that on the other side of this meeting place are the beginnings of your peace of mind.

### **Make it visible and leave it in one place**

Whatever is disturbing your mind, keep it in one place and make it visible – for example, by writing it down in one place or finding authentic words and descriptions for what you are experiencing. Look at what is going on and avoid the "whys". What this process provides is similar to one of the many benefits of therapy: One place where you can share safely and "see" your life without fear or judgement.

The process of documentation as meditation is important, as it centres your thoughts in a place with boundaries, instead of storing them in your circular, repetitive mind. Personally, I prefer to write my restless thoughts in a paper diary, but you need to find your own way. Writing down what is bothering you is not a process you need to judge or even necessarily revisit; the process of acknowledging and storing your thoughts in one place often provides your first experience of relief.

### **Be kind with what you see**

From your first spark of awareness of your body, mind and soul, demonstrate gentle love, kindness and compassion. Be very patient, especially if you are dealing with a lot.

Take your time and move between "seeing" and healthy distraction as often as you need. Whether the list of worries, losses, fears, uncertainties and painful events circling your mind is short or long, pace yourself in meeting with whatever is activating your restless mind.

Get to know your concerns one by one by spending time with what you feel, think and know. Try to make friends with what you meet and find out how it really feels.

Expect it to be hard at times, to feel vulnerable, sad, lost or broken. There is no need to add further injury through worrying about worrying or getting more lost. Know that whatever is disconnecting you is in desperate need of your attention. Remember that what is true for you, but unexamined, will stand in the way of resting your mind. Here, I visualise our rescue animals, demanding our attention; restless until we really “see” them and give them all our loving attention. Sit back, breathe deeply and say: “Hello, I see you. Good to meet you at last.”

### **Slow down on measuring yourself and your experiences**

Most often, what I observe in therapy (and in myself) is that the sharing of what we fear, restlessly feel and think is followed by words that speak of evaluation. We like to label and dismiss what is constantly speaking to us as “nothing” or as “oversensitive”, as “wrong or right, too much or not enough”. We struggle to just feel what we feel; we have to give ourselves points for it. “What is wrong with me?” I hear in therapy, followed by a lot of “should and should not or what ifs”. Whatever you connect with, try your best to not judge or evaluate it. Become aware of your scales of evaluation, where you hear yourself speaking to yourself with should and should not, do and do not, or labels like good or bad, or right and wrong. Try your best to ban all evaluative and judgemental thoughts and simply “see” what is making you restless. No need to judge.

One way to do this is to speak to yourself like a close friend who knows you and will not judge you; or imagine the non-judgemental voice of your therapist speaking to you, gently telling you to see it without the need to judge. What you connect with does not need to be judged, but welcomed.

### **Slow down on running away and avoidance**

We have become experts in avoidance and procrastination, and spend a rapidly growing portion of our lives doing it. Increase your awareness of how you run away from your problems. And expect that connecting with your worries or pain can fuel your need to run away.

Running away or avoiding yourself is like going to the same restaurant you always go to, but complain about. Why do you keep going back when you know it doesn’t make you feel good? It seems that the false belief that if we ignore our problems they will get better or miraculously go away keeps us stuck in repetitive cycles with no relief. Hope of change and empty promises without responsibility and dedication feed your restless mind. I had to learn it many times myself: The only way around it is through it.

Healing starts in meeting with your realities. Feel what is true: Your losses, your fears, your regrets and your pain. See what is in need of your urgent attention.

This step might be enough of an inward journey for you: Simply unpacking the moments that affect you and that you still carry. Seeing it all unpacked might be the relief you needed and your process might end here.

### **Silence the noise of others**

Give yourself full permission to focus on yourself for once; even just for a little while per day, because every moment going inwards is a step closer to peace for your mind.

Introspection requires the silencing of the voices or noise of others and constantly bringing yourself back to yourself. Write or responsibly share your truths for a change; press pause on thinking for or about others. If you struggle to do this, constantly remind yourself of the choice you’ve made and turn back to your path of self-discovery. Give yourself all the time you need; no rush.

At the core of the avoidance of your reality, could be a lack of trust in yourself or belief that you will be safe. These beliefs that prevent us from going inward, often come from our childhoods, a time when we were unsupported, unloved, neglected, betrayed or spoiled, creating false perceptions, expectations and beliefs about who, what and how we are. Those hurtful and lost places endure – places where we experienced pain and fear, but found coping mechanisms, avoidance tricks and power moves to survive – fuelling habits of hiding from our truths.

Here you might battle with your cultural and social programming trying to steer you off your path of introspection. For example, I grew up in a time in which knowing yourself was unpopular to the point of being labelled “selfish” or “self-absorbed”. Not being calm or happy would be called “crazy”.

Avoid pathologising yourself with general descriptions or labels. Rather, find rich descriptions of what you are experiencing on the inside. See yourself as dimensional; notice your contradictions and describe the contours of your inner world as you would beautiful landscapes.

Boosted by a popular culture of unhealthy distractions, like always looking at our phones, or using food, prescription medication and substances, we know very well how to avoid, fuelling our levels of anxiety and depression. The belief that you need something on the outside of you constantly chips away at your inner belief in your own ability to be safe. Stop hiding behind substances, making excuses or empty promises and carrying others.

Become aware of how much you are worrying about or thinking for others and look out for your habit of pointing a blaming finger outwards for everything you feel. We seem not to listen and trust our own voice, as we listen too much to undefined others. Rather, look at getting to know yourself through spending time with you. Try to put aside your constant effort to please others or worry on behalf of others, and give yourself permission to gently look inside yourself.

You can do anything if you give it time.

### **Filter your feelings and decide what needs attention**

Filter through what is worrying you, causing you pain or discomfort. Make sure you are only focusing on what is yours to carry and that you are not worrying on behalf of others most of the time.

Find a balance between carrying a load for others and carrying what is yours. Stand back from what you cannot control and put it down. Remind yourself constantly that you can feel for the world, but you need to connect with what is yours for peace of mind.

Ask yourself: Is what I am spending time with worthy of my attention and energy? Is what I carry really true for me? You might realise that the lot you have been carrying is not yours to carry and that you can lighten the load. In my experience, not looking at what is making us restless can result in it growing much larger in our minds, rather than simply meeting our reality.

And know that you set the pace: You can set the pace of your journey with breathing, meditation, visualisations and healthy distractions.

# Rest for the Restless Mind

## Part Two

By Stefan Blom 24 May 2021

**No matter what you experience, be it loss, trauma or everyday shock that makes you restless, in the second part of this story, clinical psychologist Stefan Blom shares how meditation, breathing and other techniques can help you find rest for the restless mind.**

### **Breathing, meditation and visualisations**

I cannot write about rest for the restless mind without speaking about the power of simple breathing, meditation and visualisations. For years, I felt that these were skills I needed to acquire by going on special courses, but, in fact, I've learnt that these everyday practices are readily available to us.

Here are some simple examples:

- Walk while being aware of your breathing;
- Slow down your breathing as you breathe through what you feel;
- Breathe in new energy and breathe out your stress;
- Inhale and exhale five times slowly;
- Lie down or sit still (with your eyes open or not), and breathe and be still for as long as you can. Watch your tendency to want to do things. Do nothing but be still and breathe slowly for as long as you need;
- Visualise nature being inhaled into the areas of tension in your body. Exhale your pain and worries. Breathe waves into your worrying gut and wash away your stress. Inhale a tree into your lungs, breathing inside of you, as you exhale your worries;
- Do a simple meditation or breathing exercise where you breathe in and out while visualising moving towards the centre of your body. If you want, you can use your hands to wave good energy into your body and wave away bad energy exiting your body.

Develop your own ways to push against restlessness. We have almost forgotten that the simple act of breathing slowly and deeply is one of the most wonderful tools to soften the blows. Blow through that heavy pit in your stomach and expand your lungs.

### **Healthy distraction**

Find a happy relationship between connecting with your thoughts, feelings and body cues, and slowing down the pace with some healthy distractions.

Healthy distractions are not about avoidance of your problems, but about finding breathing spaces on your journey of self-discovery. Healthy distractions can be anything from watering your plants, to talking to a friend, to making a meal, to simple everyday actions like walking, gardening, swimming, washing, writing, singing... All of these things can be healthy breaks from a busy mind.

Avoid the places that you know well enough and have visited often enough; avoid habits, like substances and screen-watching, that are making your mind restless and stealing your light, keeping you out of balance, robbing your energy and distracting you from yourself.

Your intention is not to resist the restlessness, but to gently meet with your worries in a safer way. Therefore look at yourself with constant breaks for air in order to gain some new perspectives. Like the artist stepping away from the canvas to ponder on the work, healthy distractions are a welcome relief for a busy mind. A short break can be a source of remarkable perspective and insight.

Take your busy mind for a walk in nature or in a book, and see how these activities create instant relief for your restless mind.

### **Step outside of your comfort zones**

Say no to what comforts you but doesn't tell you the truth. What is true is most likely outside of your comfort zones. Put down what is not good for you and do more of what you know is good for you. Preserve your energy by carefully choosing the people and experiences you would like to have on this journey and need right now. Move towards nature and movement in order to find nurture.

### **Give yourself permission to be**

It seems hard to give ourselves full permission to be where we are truly at, be it lost, or anxious or struggling to be still. Give yourself permission to be where you are at and receive what you need.

In addition to the anxiety effects of our traumas and losses, we are increasingly restless because we wrestle with the experience of not being in control of our restless thoughts. Be it restless, lost, sad or all over the place, we struggle to accept the impact of a painful or stressful event on our minds and bodies. Often, I have to remind my clients about the real and human effects of an event and that what they've experienced is tough enough as it is.

### **Do what you need**

Restore your sense of inner stability through sticking to your own promises to yourself. If you need rest or need to take action, do it without negotiation and bargaining — and start to feel better. Don't overcommit to too many things at the same time. Maybe consider one thing per day. To focus on that thing requires some of your time. Give in to it. No debate.

Listen to what you need and move in the direction of your needs. Do not judge what you need; simply get to know it and see if it needs any attention. It is in the avoidance of what you know you need to do that your mind spins out of control.

Restore trust in yourself through listening to yourself and sticking to your own promises. Listening to yourself is about acting upon the cues from your mind and body and giving them what they need. If you need to stay away, put what you're doing down and slow down. Or, if you need to step up, listen and do it.

### **Create a counter process**

Develop a counter, inner voice that is a kind, understanding, compassionate and honest companion on your inner journeys. This voice might debate or even silence the voices that are critical, destructive or repetitive, as they will only make you question and keep you lost.

Discipline your critical mind instead of yourself. Tell your mind what you need, be it to slow down, stop judging, take one thing at a time, be silent or kind. Be reminded that you set your own pace and have authority over those voices that describe you.

Stop your critical, hard inner voices and practise a new voice that takes good, honest care of you. How you speak to what you do and who you are will change the way you feel about yourself. This might require challenging your thoughts by gently redirecting them to a space of kindness and understanding of yourself, rather than punishment. Develop an inner voice that is supportive, encouraging, honest and kind. Nobody can do this for you except yourself.

### **Manage your expectations of the process**

The expectation that it will be a smooth ride might be unrealistic. In actual fact, any expectations could mess you up. Stop trying to control what is not in your control and, instead, be as lost as you need to be. This might require a huge adjustment in your expectations and going against one's usual patterns of control, problem-solving and fixing. Accept that everything that happens to you is not always in your control, especially if you're doing your best with what you have. Stop putting expectations on life. This huge gap in expectations is what often messes with our minds and distracts us from continuing on our intuitive journeys.

The direction you are moving towards is where you feel like you are "at home" in yourself again. This kind of "landing" in yourself is often described as relaxing or breathing again — an inner glow that shines through your eyes at times. You feel more centred, silent and like yourself. You experience lost and found moments of brief peace, silence and insight. Whatever your journey, let go of your expectations and be where you need to be. As you are making sense of your realities and show a dedication to them, your perspective on life might shift from tunnel vision towards an outward-bound, bigger-picture perspective. This can lead to feelings of gratitude and lightness of being as well as a renewed sense of energy and interest in life.

### **Stop the questioning**

We like to overthink our worries through questioning, intellectualising and rationalising, rather than looking for our truths. Questioning yourself, your past choices and life in general might just be another way of avoiding yourself. Asking what and why when you are dealing with loss and trauma can keep you in a familiar cycle that makes you feel even more lost. This is not the time to ask questions, especially about the meaning of life and who you are.

Rather, focus your energy on getting to know yourself well, while practising how to truly relax, just be and enjoy life. Spend time in good places with people who give off good, honest energy. This is much more rewarding than routinely asking yourself very circular questions about the many meanings of life.

### **Practise being still**

Slow down on the endless rushing from one thing to the next, steadily robbing you of motivation and purpose. Rushing is just another way to stay disconnected from yourself. You might find that you have lost connection with yourself and the people around you, despite your productivity and efficiency. A life dominated by administration and domestication can give you the sense of being in a good team, but it often feels empty. It is in the rushing that we lose ourselves and act in unconscious ways. Life starts to feel grey quickly.

Resist the rush through trying your best to slow down whatever you do. Take charge of your experiences of time: even five minutes of stopping and being still can be grounding; from this meeting place you might find the pleasure in the small things again — like the sounds of birdsong or taking your time to make and eat a meal.



Take it even further and practise being still by sitting anywhere and doing nothing. Tell yourself not to jump up or grab your phone. See if you can learn to simply be still. Take in what is around you as you slow down your breathing. This is, of course, not as easy as you might think, because we are programmed to constantly do, act and distract.

Take time to see what you normally would not see when rushing. Feel what you feel without the obsession to act. This is how you find the beauty in small things on any given day.

### **Share it with a friend or two**

Not being able to share our well-being with loved ones can make us feel displaced. Being seen by others is a restful experience for the restless mind. Share what you think and feel with someone you trust and with whom you feel safe.

### **Find proof of coping and victories**

To be safe in yourself is to believe in your capacity to cope with whatever life brings. You know that life can be difficult and loss inevitable, but do you believe you will be able to cope with it? This sense of safety requires trust in yourself, based on your history and experience. You need proof of having coped in order to be safe in yourself.

Your path might initially feel like a rollercoaster ride. What can be grounding is a simple reminder of your small victories — those little moments in which you wanted to run away, but dealt with whatever you were facing. Those moments where you had no choice but to be courageous. Maybe you've forgotten who you are despite fear or loss and need a reminder. Connect with those parts of yourself that can persevere and take charge.

The irony is, despite all our fears about not coping and despite often overthinking it, when trauma or loss actually hits you, you find yourself just getting through another day, even if it feels like you don't have it in you. I am constantly being reminded in therapy that we do cope even if we spend big parts of our lives fearing not coping. Taking it moment by moment, gently encouraging yourself to keep going while hearing yourself breathing deeply is how you move forward despite adversity. This is what coping means: kindness, patience and responsibility to yourself.

### **Postscript**

This story was born in response to losses and traumas as a kind of guide to how to handle loss. But there is no waterproof guide for loss or trauma, as we all process these experiences in so many unique and often beautiful ways. You have to find your own path.

Loss and trauma are the inevitable beginnings of change. Even though the loss or trauma is not by your own choosing (mostly, it is not), it is what you make of your experience that can bring new growth and a renewed sense of self. In our meetings with adversity and disaster, we get an invitation to go deeper and live consciously. We get this invitation for honest change often, and have the choice to go on a remarkable journey that can expand our appreciation for life. Every step you take on your path of awareness, along which you continuously show dedication to your realities, you feel more present in yourself. On the other side of the work of introspection are moments of quiet knowing, relief and grounding. You might find more than a safe landing in yourself when you take what has rightly been called “the road less travelled”.

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