

Courage

IN THE *Dark*

A survival guide for hard times

By Patricia Tallman

*For when the world feels like it's falling
apart and you are overwhelmed.*

A Self-Guided Workbook of 16 exercises for relief, centering and keeping your strength up.

If you're reading this, things probably feel really bad right now.

Maybe you're terrified. Maybe you're angry. Maybe you're numb. Maybe you're all of these at once.

This workbook is for you.

You don't need any special training to use this.

You don't need to have done any previous work.

You just need to be willing to write some things down and try some practices that might help.

What this workbook will help you do:

- Process overwhelming fear so it doesn't paralyze you.
- Figure out what you actually stand for.
- Identify where you can make a difference (even small).
- Take care of yourself so you don't burn out.
- Find or build community so you're not alone.
- Keep showing up even when everything feels hopeless.

What this workbook won't do:

- Fix everything.
- Make the fear go away completely. Fear is actually important.
- Give you all the answers.
- Guarantee everything will be okay.

But it will help you think more clearly, feel less alone, and figure out what YOU can do from where you are with what you have.

How to Use This Workbook

You don't have to do this in order. Go to whatever section you need right now:

- Overwhelmed and can't think? → Start with Part 1 (page 4)
- Lost and don't know what matters? → Go to Part 2 (page 9)
- People looking to you for answers? → Try Part 3 (page 14)
- Already burning out? → Jump to Part 4 (page 19)
- Losing hope and motivation? → Read Part 5 (page 24)

You can do one exercise and stop. You don't have to complete everything. Even one exercise can help.

You can come back to this. This isn't a one-time thing. You'll probably need to cycle through these exercises multiple times. That's normal.

You can do this alone or with others. Some people need to process alone first. Some people need company. Do what works for you.

A Note About Fear

Fear is not weakness. Fear is information.

Right now, your fear is probably screaming at you. That's because your nervous system is trying to protect you from threats - and right now, there are real threats.

But here's the thing about fear:

When fear gets too big, it makes us freeze or panic. We can't think. We can't act. We just spiral.

This workbook will help you:

- Get the fear OUT of your head and body
- Separate real threats from fear spirals
- Remember what you can actually control
- Take action even while scared

You will still be afraid after doing this work. That's okay. The goal isn't to stop being afraid. The goal is to be afraid AND keep functioning.

Let's start.

Part 1: Processing the Fear

When you can't think straight

When to Use This Section:

- When your thoughts are racing
- When you can't stop doomscrolling
- When you're frozen and can't do anything
- When the panic is so big you can't think
- When you need to get the fear OUT of your body

Exercise 1: Brain Dump - Getting It Out of Your Head

Your brain is trying to protect you by thinking about all the threats at once. This makes you overwhelmed. Let's get it OUT of your head and ONTO paper.

STEP 1: What is actually happening right now that scares you?
Not future fears - just what is ACTUALLY happening today:

STEP 2: What are you afraid WILL happen?
Now the future fears. The worst-case scenarios:

STEP 3: What are you afraid you can't handle?
"I'm afraid I won't be able to handle..."

STEP 4: What are you angry about?

Sometimes fear comes out as anger. What's making you furious?

You just did something important. You got the fear out of your head where it was spinning in circles, and put it on paper where you can SEE it. That's not nothing.

Exercise 2: Moving Fear Through Your Body

Fear isn't just in your head - it's in your body. Your chest is tight, your stomach hurts, your shoulders are up by your ears. We need to move this fear THROUGH you.

OPTION 1: Rage Writing (5 minutes)

Set a timer for 5 minutes. Write as FAST as you can. Don't edit, don't make it make sense, don't worry about handwriting. Just POUR IT OUT.

Start with: "I am so fucking scared/angry that..."

And just GO. Fill pages if you need to. Your hand should hurt.

DO THIS NOW. Set the timer. Write until it goes off.

OPTION 2: Physical Release

If writing doesn't work for you, try this:

- Shake it out:** Shake your hands hard for 60 seconds. Like shaking off water. Make noise if you want.
- Stomp it out:** Stomp your feet. Hard. Pretend you're stomping on your fear.
- Breathe it out:** Take 5 LOUD exhales. Make a sound, like a lion or a dragon. Groan, sigh, yell if you can and it won't freak out your neighbors!
- Move it out:** Do 20 jumping jacks or run in place for 2 minutes. Move the fear through.

Pick one and DO IT NOW. Seriously. It helps. Animals do this naturally!

Ground Back Into Your Body

After you've moved the fear, you need to ground back into the present moment.

Do this grounding exercise:

5 things you can SEE right now (say them out loud or in your head):

4 things you can TOUCH (actually touch them - your chair, your clothes, the table):

3 things you can HEAR (stop and listen):

2 things you can SMELL:

1 thing you can TASTE:

Now put both feet flat on the floor. Press them down. Feel the ground holding you up.

You are HERE. You are in this room. You are alive. You are breathing.

Exercise 3: Reality Check

Fear makes everything seem worse and makes you seem smaller. Let's check what's actually TRUE.

What is ACTUALLY true in this exact moment?

Look around. What's true RIGHT NOW, not what might happen later:

Right now, I am _____

Right now, I am safe from _____

Right now, I have _____

Right now, these people care about me: _____

Right now, I can _____

What am I AFRAID might happen that I don't actually KNOW will happen?

These are the spirals. The "what ifs." Separate them from what's actually happening:

These might happen. They might not. But they're not happening RIGHT NOW.

What can I actually control or influence TODAY?

Not everything. Not the whole crisis. Just today:

I can control/influence: _____

I CANNOT control: _____

Let yourself grieve what you can't control. Then focus on what you can.

What resources do I actually have?

Even small things count:

I have these people: _____

I have these skills: _____

I have this knowledge: _____

I have these supplies/money: _____

I have this survived before: _____

Quick Help: When You're Spiraling

Use this anytime you feel panic coming:

1. Name 3 things you can see right now
2. Take 3 deep breaths - count: In for 4, hold for 4, out for 8
3. Say out loud: "Right now, in this moment, I am safe"
4. Do ONE thing: drink water, wash your face, step outside for 30 seconds

Part 2: Remembering What Matters

Finding your anchor when everything is chaos

When to Use This Section:

- When you feel lost and directionless
- When you don't know what to do
- When you're making decisions from panic instead of values
- When you need to remember who you are
- When you're about to do something you might regret

Exercise 4: What Do You Stand For?

When the world is chaotic, values are your compass. They tell you who you are and what to do.

STEP 1: Your Core Values

What matters MOST to you? What are you not willing to compromise on?

Look at this list. Circle the ones that feel most important to you. Add your own if they're not here.

Common Values:

- Justice** - fairness, standing up for what's right
- Family** - protecting and caring for your people
- Community** - connection, belonging, helping neighbors
- Freedom** - autonomy, choice, not being controlled
- Truth** - honesty, speaking what's real
- Safety** - protection for yourself and others
- Compassion** - caring for people who are suffering
- Courage** - doing what's right even when scared
- Dignity** - respect for human worth
- Faith** - spiritual beliefs, trust in something bigger
- Creativity** - making things, solving problems in new ways
- Learning** - growing, understanding more
- Service** - helping others, contributing
- Independence** - taking care of yourself
- Loyalty** - standing by your people
- Peace** - reducing harm, finding calm
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

Write your top 3-5 values:

STEP 2: Values in Action

Values aren't just ideas. They tell you what to DO.

For each of your top values, complete this:

"Because I value _____, even in this crisis I will _____"

Examples:

- "Because I value **family**, even in this crisis I will **check on my parents weekly**"
- "Because I value **truth**, even in this crisis I will **not stay silent about what I see**"
- "Because I value **community**, even in this crisis I will **help my neighbors**"

Because I value _____,
even in this crisis I will _____

Because I value _____,
even in this crisis I will _____

Because I value _____,
even in this crisis I will _____

Because I value _____,
even in this crisis I will _____

STEP 3: When Values Conflict

Sometimes your values pull you in different directions:

- Safety vs. Justice (stay safe or speak out?)
- Self-care vs. Helping Others (take care of yourself or help?)
- Family vs. Community (protect your own or help everyone?)

Write any conflicts you're feeling:

"I want to honor _____,

but I also value _____."

This is normal. You don't have to choose one forever. You can honor both at different times. Just stay conscious about which one you're choosing when.

Exercise 5: What You're Good At

You have skills and strengths. Even now. Especially now. What are you actually good at?

Don't be humble. What do people tell you you're good at? What comes easily to you?

I'm good at:

What have you survived before?

Hard times? Loss? Change? Fear? Write what you've already made it through.

I've survived:

What gives you energy (even a little bit)?

What makes you feel slightly more alive? What makes time pass faster?

Who actually cares about you?

Who would help if you asked? Who checks on you?

Look at what you just wrote. This is evidence that you have resources. You are not starting from zero.

Exercise 6: Your "Even Though" Statement

This helps when everything feels impossible.

Fill in the blanks:

"Even though _____,

I will still _____

because I value _____"

Examples:

- "Even though I'm terrified, I will still speak up because I value truth"
- "Even though I feel powerless, I will still help my neighbors because I value community"
- "Even though I want to give up, I will still take care of myself because I value survival"

Write yours:

Even though _____,

I will still _____

because I value _____

Part 3: Where You Can Actually Help

Figuring out what YOU can do

When to Use This Section:

- When you feel powerless
- When people are looking to you for answers
- When you want to help but don't know how
- When you're trying to do everything and it's too much
- When you need to focus your energy

The Truth About Power

You cannot fix everything. You cannot save the world alone. You cannot control what's happening at the big level.

But you CAN make a difference in your immediate world.

This section helps you figure out WHERE you actually have power and WHAT you can actually do.

Exercise 7: Your Circles of Influence

INNER CIRCLE - Your Household/Closest People:

Who lives with you? Who are you responsible for? Who depends on you?

Names:

Who in this circle is most scared right now?

What do they need from you?

- Calm presence (just being steady)
- Information (helping them understand)
- Distraction (helping them not spiral)
- Space (leaving them alone)
- Reassurance (telling them it will be okay to the extent you can)
- Help with practical things (food, safety, plans)
- Other: _____

What is ONE thing you can do for them this week?

MIDDLE CIRCLE - Your Extended Community:

Friends, coworkers, neighbors, extended family - people you see regularly or stay in touch with:

Who in this circle might be looking to you for steadiness?

What could you offer?

- Organizing something (a meeting, a group, an action)
- Information (you're good at research/explaining)
- Resources (you have money/supplies/connections to share)
- Listening (you can hold space for others' fear)
- Encouragement (you can remind people they're not alone)
- Practical help (rides, childcare, meals, etc.)
- Other: _____

What is ONE thing you could contribute this week?

OUTER CIRCLE - Your Wider Network:

Social media, acquaintances, community groups, the general public:

What message or presence could you offer?

- Share accurate information
- Post encouragement
- Amplify important voices
- Document what's happening
- Organize people
- Create art/content that helps
- Offer your professional skills
- Other: _____

What is ONE thing you could do this week?

THE KEY POINT:

You don't have to help everyone. You don't have to do everything. **Pick ONE circle and ONE action this week.**

Do what you can without draining yourself.

Exercise 8: Staying Steady When Others Are Panicking

Sometimes people look to you for answers. Here's how to help without falling apart yourself.

STEP 1: Are You Regulated Enough to Help?

Before you try to help someone else, check yourself:

Signs You're Regulated Enough:

- You can take a deep breath
- You can think in complete sentences
- You can feel your feet on the ground
- You're not in full panic yourself

Signs You're Too Dysregulated to Help:

- Everything feels urgent RIGHT NOW
- You want to scream or cry or run
- You can't think clearly
- You're spiraling yourself

If you're too dysregulated: Go back to Part 1. Get yourself grounded first. You can't help when you're drowning.

If you're regulated enough: Continue below.

STEP 2: Questions to Ask When People Are Panicking

These help cut through panic and get to what actually matters:

"What is actually happening right now?" (*Not fears - what's actually true*)

"What's the most important thing to deal with in the next hour?" (*Not everything - just next hour*)

"What resources do you have?" (*People, money, skills, information*)

"What is ONE thing you can do right now?" (*One concrete action*)

"What can't you control that you need to accept for now?" (*So you stop spinning about it*)

STEP 3: How to Hold Space Without Fixing

Sometimes people don't need solutions. They need someone to stay steady while they feel their feelings.

Things you can say:

- "I'm here. I'm listening."
- "That sounds really scary."
- "I don't know what will happen, but I'm here with you right now."
- "It makes sense that you feel this way."
- "You're not crazy for being scared."
- "What do you need right now?"

Things to avoid:

- "It will be fine" (you don't know that)
- "Don't worry" (they're already worried)
- "You should..." (advice they didn't ask for)
- Trying to fix their feelings

Exercise 9: Saying No When You Need To

You cannot help everyone. You will burn out if you try. You need to protect your capacity.

It's okay to say:

"I care about you, but I don't have capacity to talk about this right now."

"I need to protect my energy so I can keep showing up."

"I can't help with that, but maybe [other person] could?"

"I can listen for 10 minutes, then I need to shift topics."

"I'm already at my limit today. Can we talk tomorrow?"

Who do you need to say no to or set limits with?

What will you say?

Part 4: Taking Care of Yourself

So you don't burn out

When to Use This Section:

- When you're already exhausted
- When you're neglecting basic needs
- When you can't sleep
- When you're getting sick
- When you're running on empty
- When you feel guilty for resting

The Hard Truth

If you burn out, you can't help anyone.

If you collapse, you become another person who needs care.

If you destroy your health, you won't be there for the long haul.

Taking care of yourself is not selfish. It's strategic.

You need to last. This crisis is not going to be over in a week. You need practices that can sustain you for months or years.

Exercise 10: Your Non-Negotiables

What are the absolute bare minimums you need to function? *Be honest. What things, if you skip them, make you start falling apart?*

PHYSICAL BASICS:

Minimum sleep: _____ hours per night.

What happens when you don't get this? _____

Minimum food: _____

What happens when you skip meals? _____

Minimum movement: _____

What happens when you don't move? _____

Other physical needs: _____

EMOTIONAL BASICS:

I need connection with: _____

How often? _____

I need alone time: _____

How often? How much? _____

I need to process my feelings by: _____

Writing? Talking? Moving? _____

SPIRITUAL/MEANING BASICS:

(This might be prayer, nature, creativity, reading, whatever gives you meaning)

I need: _____

How often? _____

YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES LIST:

Write the 3-5 things that are absolutely essential:

Put this list somewhere you'll see it. These are not optional. These are survival.

Exercise 11: Information Boundaries

Constant news and social media will destroy your nervous system. You need boundaries!

YOUR INFORMATION DIET:

How often will you check news?

_____ times per day for _____ minutes each

When will you NOT check news?

- First thing in morning (check after breakfast instead)
- Right before bed (stop 3 hours before sleep. Fill your mind with sweetness instead.)
- While eating meals
- When already feeling panicked
- Other: _____

Where will you get information?

Pick 2-3 trusted sources instead of doomscrolling:

What content immediately dysregulates you?

What makes you spiral? Images? Certain topics? Certain people?

When you encounter this, you will:

- Close the app immediately
- Take 3 deep breaths before continuing
- Go do a grounding exercise
- Call someone
- Other: _____

CONVERSATION BOUNDARIES:

Who can you talk about the hard stuff with?

Your safe people - the 2-5 people who can handle your fear:

What will you say when others want to fear-dump on you and you can't handle it?

"I care about you, but I need to protect my energy right now."

OR

"I can listen for 10 minutes, then I need to talk about something else."

OR

"I'm already at my limit today. Can we talk about _____ instead?"

Exercise 12: Things That Actually Help

What actually makes you feel better? Not what should work - what DOES work for you.

QUICK RELIEF (Under 10 minutes):

What helps when you have just a few minutes?

- Cold water on face
- Step outside
- Pet your animal
- Specific song: _____
- Call specific person: _____
- Move your body: _____
- Other: _____

MEDIUM RELIEF (30 minutes - 1 hour):

What helps when you have a bit more time?

- Walk outside
- Shower/bath
- Cook something
- Watch specific show: _____
- Work on specific hobby: _____
- Other: _____

DEEP RELIEF (2+ hours):

What deeply restores you?

- Time with specific person: _____
- Nature - where? _____
- Creating something: _____
- Long conversation with: _____
- Other: _____

SCHEDULE ONE OF THESE THIS WEEK:

What: _____

When: _____

Put it in your calendar like a doctor's appointment. Because it is - it's preventive medicine.

Quick Help: Signs You're Burning Out

Watch for these warning signs:

- Can't sleep or sleeping all the time
- Not eating or eating too much
- Getting sick frequently
- Snapping at people you care about
- Can't concentrate on anything
- Feeling numb or nothing matters
- Crying all the time or can't cry at all
- Thinking "what's the point?"
- Ignoring your own needs
- Avoiding people who care about you

If you checked 3+, you need to stop and rest. Not later. Now. Go back to your non-negotiables and actually do them.

Part 5: Keeping Going

When you want to give up

When to Use This Section:

- When you're losing hope
- When you want to give up
- When nothing you do seems to matter
- When you're questioning why you should keep trying
- When you need to remember why you're doing this

The Truth About Hard Times

This is going to be long. You don't know how long, but probably longer than you want.

You will have days when you want to give up. That's normal.

You will have days when nothing you do seems to matter. That's normal.

You will have days when you can't remember why you're trying. That's normal.

This section is for those days.

Exercise 13: Why This Matters

When you're losing motivation, come back to this.

STEP 1: Who Are You Doing This For?

Not abstract ideals. Actual people with names and faces:

I'm doing this for:

When I want to give up, I remember them.

STEP 2: What Gets Worse If You Give Up?

What happens if you stop trying? Who suffers? What gets lost?

If I give up:

I don't want that to happen.

STEP 3: What Gives You Hope (Even Small Hope)?

What makes you think it might be worth it?

I have hope because:

OR

I don't have hope, but I keep going because:

Sometimes we keep going without hope. That's okay too.

Exercise 14: Your Commitment

What are you actually willing to commit to?

Not saving the world. Not being perfect. Just what YOU will do.

Fill this out.

Even though I'm scared, Even though I don't know if it will work, Even though I feel small, I commit to:

1. Taking care of myself by:

2. Showing up for:

3. Doing this one concrete thing:

I will do this for: (how long? until when?)

I will measure success by: *(Not by outcomes you can't control - by showing up, by trying, by not giving up)*

Sign this:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

When you want to give up, come back and read this.

Exercise 15: Finding Your People

You cannot do this alone. Who are your people?

STEP 1: Who Do You Have?

Who can you talk to? Who gets it? Who's also trying?

People I can count on:

STEP 2: Who Do You Need to Find?

If you don't have people, where could you find them?

- Friends who care - I'll reach out to: _____
- Online communities focused on: _____
- Local groups working on: _____
- Faith/spiritual communities
- Mutual aid networks
- Activist groups
- Support groups
- Other: _____

One action I'll take this week to find my people:

STEP 3: What You Need From Them:

I need people who will:

- Check in on me regularly
- Remind me why this matters when I forget
- Tell me when I'm burning out
- Do this work alongside me
- Listen when I'm scared
- Celebrate small wins with me
- Other: _____

Exercise 16: Small Wins

When everything feels hopeless, small wins matter. A LOT.

WHAT COUNTS AS A WIN:

- You got out of bed when you didn't want to
- You took care of yourself today
- You helped one person
- You spoke up once
- You didn't give up
- You kept your commitment
- You showed up
- You're still here

Write down one small thing you did recently that counts:

This week, I will celebrate myself for:

When You Want to Give Up

Read this:

You're not supposed to do this alone.

You're not supposed to fix everything.

You're not supposed to be fearless.

You're not supposed to have all the answers.

You're just supposed to keep showing up. Scared. Imperfect. But showing up.

That's enough.

You're enough.

Your Emergency Card

Cut this out and keep it with you

WHEN I'M OVERWHELMED:

1. Brain dump (Part 1)
2. Move fear through body (Part 1)
3. Ground myself (Part 1)
4. Call: _____

WHEN I'M LOST:

1. Read my values (Part 2)
2. Read my commitment (Part 5)
3. Remember who I'm doing this for (Part 5)

WHEN I'M BURNING OUT:

1. Check my non-negotiables (Part 4)
2. Enforce information boundaries (Part 4)
3. Do one thing that helps (Part 4)
4. Ask for help

WHEN I WANT TO GIVE UP:

1. Read why this matters (Part 5)
2. Look at small wins (Part 5)
3. Call my people (Part 5)
4. Remember: I just need to show up today. Just today.

I AM NOT ALONE.

Resources Page

Keep these where you can find them.

MY PEOPLE:

Name: _____ Contact: _____

CRISIS HOTLINES:

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741

Other: _____

MY GROUNDING PRACTICES:

MY NON-NEGOTIABLES:

WHY I'M DOING THIS:

Weekly Check-In

Use this every week to stay on track

Week of: _____

Did I maintain my non-negotiables? Yes Mostly No

Did I honor my information boundaries? Yes Mostly No

Did I connect with my people? Yes Mostly No

Where did I show up this week?

What small win can I celebrate?

What do I need to adjust?

What's one thing I'll do next week?

Final Words

You don't have to be perfect.

You don't have to do everything.

You don't have to be fearless.

You don't have to have all the answers.

You just have to keep showing up.

One day at a time.

One action at a time.

One breath at a time.

You are not alone.

Keep going.

This workbook is yours. Write in it. Mark it up. Come back to it when you need it. Share it with others who need it. You don't need permission to make copies and give them away.

We need you. Keep going.

Love,

Patricia Tallman

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