

# Safe Minds

## Workbook 1

### Part 1



PRACTICAL SKILLS FOR  
EMOTIONAL STRENGTH, SELF-  
BELIEF, AND HOPE.

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# INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS WORKBOOK EXISTS

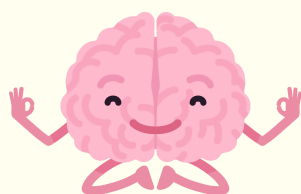
Dear Sister,

This workbook was created especially for you — the Afghan girl who carries more than most people will ever understand.

We know the weight you hold: the constant changes in the country, the restrictions on your education and future, the social pressures from family and community, the uncertainty that sits in your heart.

Safe Minds is here because your voice matters, your feelings matter, and your future matters.

Our mission is simple: to give Afghan girls practical tools for emotional strength, mental well-being, and self-belief, even in the hardest circumstances.



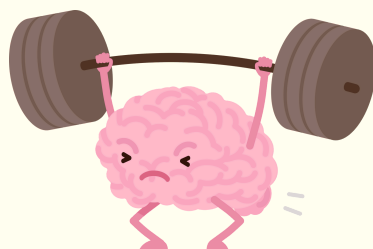
We know your life is not lived in peaceful streets or classrooms full of opportunity.

Your challenges are unique:

- The loss of schooling and safe spaces.
- Fear and anxiety about what tomorrow might bring.
- Pressure from family or community that can feel overwhelming.
- Loneliness when friends or relatives move away, or when you feel you cannot speak openly.

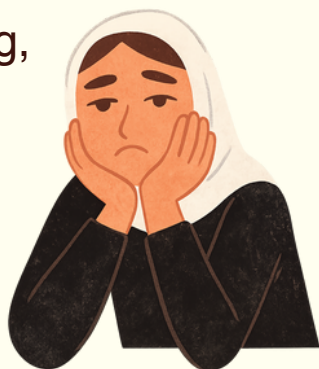
This workbook is not about telling you to “just be positive” or giving advice that only works in another country. It is built from the real words, struggles, and wishes of Afghan girls like you, gathered in our Safe Minds surveys and conversations.

Every chapter is made for our culture, our values, and our reality.



# WHY MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

In our communities, people often talk about being strong, but they rarely speak about the pain inside. Many girls hide their feelings because they fear being judged, misunderstood, or told they are “weak.”



But mental health is not weakness. It is the foundation for everything — your studies, your relationships, your ability to make good decisions, and your hope for the future. When your mind feels heavy, it is harder to focus, to dream, or even to get through the day. Caring for your mental health means giving yourself the strength to keep going, no matter what happens around you.

# STIGMA AND MYTHS

In Afghanistan and among Afghans around the world, there are many myths about mental health:

- “It’s not real, it’s just in your head.”
- “Only crazy people need help.”
- “If you are religious enough, you won’t feel sad or anxious.”



The truth is:

- Your feelings are real, and they are valid.
- Anyone can experience stress, fear, sadness, or anger — it does not mean you are broken.
- Faith and mental health work together; caring for your mind can help you connect even more deeply to your values and beliefs.

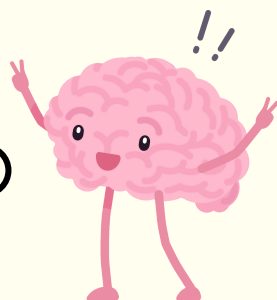
# HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

This workbook is your space.

You can:

- Use it privately, writing your answers where no one will see unless you choose to share.
- Work on it with a trusted friend or sister, so you can support each other.
- Bring it to group sessions or Safe Minds circles if you join them, to share ideas and learn together.

It is designed like a schoolbook: with chapters, activities, reflection questions, and small steps you can practice every day. You do not need to do it all at once. Some days you might write a lot; other days, you may just read a page and think about it. Both are okay.



# REMEMBER!

This workbook will not change the world around you overnight. But it can help you build the strength, hope, and skills to face that world — and to know you are never alone in your journey.

Welcome to Safe Minds.  
This is your book. Your voice. Your safe space.





# CHAPTER 1:

## STRESS, ANXIETY & BURNOUT

"My heart beats fast. My thoughts won't stop. Even when I lie down, I can't rest."



# SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS AND PANIC

Stress is not always loud. Sometimes it shows in your body, sometimes in your thoughts, and sometimes in the way you act.

For Afghan girls, stress often comes from situations that may seem “normal” to others, but are heavy for you:

- Worrying about exams while also wondering if you’ll be allowed to continue your studies.
- Waiting for news about a visa or scholarship, not knowing if your future will be inside or outside Afghanistan.
- Hearing arguments or bad news at home and feeling unsafe or unsettled.
- Being compared to other girls in the family or community.



## COMMON SIGNS YOU MAY NOTICE IN YOURSELF:

- Fast heartbeat or shortness of breath
- Sweaty hands, shaking, or feeling dizzy
- Stomach aches or headaches without a clear reason
- Trouble sleeping or waking up many times at night
- Irritability — getting upset faster than usual
- Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Feeling “blank” or unable to think clearly



# NOW YOU TELL ME...

Before we learn how to calm the mind, let's first understand your own struggles.

Take a few minutes to think about situations that bring you stress, anxiety, or burnout.

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1. Situations that make me stressed:

- 
- 
- 

2. How my body reacts in these moments:

(Example: heart racing, headache, crying, feeling frozen)

- 
- 

3. What I usually do to cope (whether it works or not):

- 
- 



# UNDERSTANDING “FIGHT OR FLIGHT”

When you feel in danger — even if it's just from someone's words or a stressful thought — your body reacts as if you must fight (stand your ground) or flight (escape).



For Afghan girls, this might happen when:

- You hear about another restriction on women and feel panic for your future.
- A family member pressures you to marry when you are not ready.
- You are walking outside and notice men staring or following.

Your body may:

- Pump more blood to your muscles (making your heart race)
- Speed up your breathing
- Make you hyper-aware of everything around you
- Reduce digestion, causing stomach upset

# STRATEGIES TO CALM YOUR MIND AND BODY

1. Breathing Exercises – For when your heart is racing

The 4–7–8 breathing:

- Breathe in quietly through your nose for 4 seconds
- Hold your breath for 7 seconds
- Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds
- Repeat this 3–4 times.



# STRATEGIES TO CALM YOUR MIND AND BODY

## 2. Grounding Technique – For when you feel trapped in your thoughts

The 5–4–3–2–1 grounding:

- Name 5 things you can see
- Name 4 things you can touch
- Name 3 things you can hear
- Name 2 things you can smell
- Name 1 thing you can taste
- This brings your focus back to the present moment.



# STRATEGIES TO CALM YOUR MIND AND BODY

## 3. Time Management for Relief – For when you feel you have “too much”

- Break big tasks into 15–20 minute parts
- Do the hardest task first in the morning when your mind is fresh
- Use a timer — work for 20 minutes, then rest for 5
- Plan something small and enjoyable after a stressful task (like talking to a friend or having tea)





# ACTIVITY:

## CREATE YOUR OWN “CALM PLAN”

FILL THIS OUT IN YOUR WORKBOOK:

**WHEN I FEEL STRESSED, I WILL...**

(Example: close my eyes and take 3 deep breaths)

**A SAFE PLACE I CAN GO TO IS...**

(Example: my room, the balcony, on the rooftop)

**A PERSON I CAN TALK TO IS...**

(Example: my sister, my friend, my teacher)

**ONE ACTIVITY THAT HELPS ME RELAX IS...**

(Example: drawing, listening to soft melodies, reading)

# WHAT MAKES ME FEEL MOST STRESSED, AND HOW CAN I PREPARE FOR IT?

A cartoon illustration of a woman with brown skin, wearing a white hijab and a dark blue long-sleeved top. She is pointing her right index finger upwards and has a surprised or excited expression on her face. The background is a light cream color with a faint grid of small grey dots.



# CHAPTER 2:

## SELF-CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

"Sometimes I feel like my voice doesn't matter. I doubt myself before I even begin."



# WHAT IS SELF-CONFIDENCE?

When you still take the step to prepare for university admission despite the social challenges in Afghanistan and the uncertainty of visas, such as a U.S. student visa, it shows how confident you are. Being confident is not about being perfect or fearless; it is about trusting yourself even in times of uncertainty.

It can be as simple as:

1. Sharing your goal to study abroad with friends and family.
2. Preparing for TOEFL to fulfill admissions requirements.
3. Believing you deserve to continue your education, even if society says “no.”



# WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

When you apply for a scholarship, even after hearing others say that girls should not study abroad, it shows your self-esteem. Self-esteem is not about ignoring challenges; it is about knowing that you are worthy of education and opportunities, regardless of what others say.

For Afghan girls, self-esteem often gets tested when:

1. Family or community members do not approve your choices.
2. You are told your education or dreams are “useless.”
3. Your family praises your brother’s achievements but ignores yours.
4. You face rejection, whether from a school, scholarship, or even from loved ones.



# COMMON CHALLENGES TO CONFIDENCE FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

1. Restrictions on education — being told you cannot study makes you doubt your abilities.
2. Social pressure — being compared to other girls (“she cooks better,” “she is more beautiful,” “she got engaged earlier”).
3. Fear of making mistakes — worrying that your essay might be basic and that you are “not good enough.”
4. Silencing of voices — feeling like your opinion is not welcome in family or community decisions.
5. Limited role models — not seeing women in your community doing what you dream of doing.

# SIGNS OF LOW SELF-ESTEEM

1. Constant self-criticism (“I am not smart enough”).
2. Avoiding new opportunities because of fear of failure.
3. Overthinking what others think of you.
4. Feeling guilty for taking time for yourself.
5. Seeking approval all the time instead of trusting your own judgment.



# NOW YOU TELL ME...

Before we learn how to calm the mind, let's first understand your own struggles.

Take a few minutes to think about situations that bring you down.

---

1: Things that make me doubt myself are:

(Example: being told my dreams are impossible)

2: Times I have felt proud of myself are:

(Example: helping my siblings with homework, finishing a project, speaking up in class)

3: When I compare myself to others, I usually feel...

4: One thing I value about myself is...





# STRATEGIES TO BUILD CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

## 1: Affirmations for Strength

Words shape how you see yourself. Create a sentence you repeat daily:

- “I am capable of learning.”
- “My voice matters.”
- “I am more than the limits placed on me.”



# STRATEGIES TO BUILD CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

## 2: Celebrate Small Wins

Instead of waiting for a big achievement (like getting a scholarship), celebrate the small steps:

- Finishing a page of study.
- Speaking kindly to yourself after a mistake.
- Writing a good essay.



# STRATEGIES TO BUILD CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

## 3: Replace Comparison with Inspiration

Instead of saying: “She has opportunities I don’t,” say:

- “Her success shows me what is possible.”
- “I can learn from her journey, while walking my own.”



*Replace  
Comparison  
with Inspiration*

Instead of saying:  
‘She has  
opportunities I don’t’  
say:

# STRATEGIES TO BUILD CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

## 4: Practice Courage:

Each week, do one thing that feels a little uncomfortable:

- Planning and making bold decisions.
- Sharing your opinion at home.
- Writing down your dream, even if no one knows.
- Confidence grows when you take small, brave steps regularly.

## 5: Redefine Failure

Failure does not mean the end. It means:

- “I tried, and I learned.”

Each mistake is proof that you are moving forward, not standing still.

# ACTIVITY:

## MY CONFIDENCE TREE



**DRAW A TREE IN YOUR NOTEBOOK.**

**ROOTS:** WRITE QUALITIES YOU ALREADY HAVE  
(KINDNESS, RESILIENCE, PATIENCE).

- 
- 

**TRUNK:** WRITE THINGS YOU ARE CURRENTLY WORKING  
ON (STUDYING ENGLISH, LEARNING PATIENCE,  
PRACTICING COURAGE).

- 
- 

**BRANCHES:** WRITE YOUR FUTURE DREAMS (GOING TO  
UNIVERSITY, HELPING OTHERS, BECOMING  
INDEPENDENT).

- 

**THIS TREE IS YOUR REMINDER:** YOU ARE GROWING  
EVERY DAY, EVEN IF OTHERS DON'T SEE IT YET.

# WHAT MAKES ME FEEL LESS CONFIDENT, AND HOW CAN I OVERCOME THAT?

A cartoon illustration of a woman with brown skin, wearing a white hijab and a dark blue long-sleeved top. She is pointing her right index finger upwards and has a surprised or excited expression on her face. The background is a light cream color with a faint grid of small grey dots.



# CHAPTER 3:

## MOTIVATION, GOAL-SETTING & TIME MANAGEMENT

"I write my daily plans the night before and wake up the morning with the dedication to follow them step by step."



# WHEN MOTIVATION FEELS STRONG

Motivation is that spark that pushes you to keep going, even when life is hard. For Afghan girls, it can look like:

- Waking up before everyone else to have your first study session.
- Teaching yourself a new skill online, even when the internet is weak.
- Helping your little sister with her lessons because you don't want her to feel left behind.





# WHEN MOTIVATION FADES

But motivation doesn't always stay. It fades when:

- You study for weeks and then situation for girls gets worse.
- You make a plan but family chores take all your time.
- You start comparing yourself to girls in other countries who seem to have more.
- You start stressing whether or not you will achieve your academic goals.



# THE CHALLENGE OF GOAL-SETTING

Goals are not just big dreams like “become a doctor.” They are small steps you take each day. But in Afghanistan, setting goals can feel risky because:

- Girls are expected to serve others before themselves.
- You may be told, “Why you work hard? Nothing will change.”
- Yet even in uncertain times, small, realistic goals keep your hope alive.



## EXAMPLES OF GOALS FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

- Reading one chapter of a book each night.
- Saving 20 Afghanis each week for your education.
- Practicing English speaking with a friend twice a week.
- Learning one computer skill this month.
- Finishing chores earlier to make space for your studies.

## COMMON STRUGGLES WITH TIME MANAGEMENT

- Interrupted Study → Sitting down to study but being called again and again to help with chores.
- Lack of Energy → Spending the whole day on housework and feeling too tired to open a book.
- Unclear Priorities → Doing small tasks first (scrolling, chatting, daydreaming) while leaving important work undone.
- No Routine → Sleeping at random times, which makes it hard to focus the next day.

# NOW YOU TELL ME...

Before we learn how to calm the mind, let's first understand your own struggles.

Take a few minutes to think about situations that bring you down.

---

1: When I feel motivated, it is usually because...

(Example: I imagine myself in university one day)

2: When I lose motivation, it usually happens because...

3: A small goal I want to reach this month is...

4: The biggest challenge in managing my time is...



# STRATEGIES TO STAY MOTIVATED & ORGANIZED

## 1. Connect Every Task to Your Bigger Dream

- When washing dishes, remind yourself: “This patience will help me handle bigger responsibilities.”
- When studying English, think: “Each word brings me closer to scholarships and opportunities.”



# STRATEGIES TO STAY MOTIVATED & ORGANIZED

## 2. Break Goals into Pieces

Instead of “learn English,” try:

Today → Learn 5 new words.

- 
- 

This week → Use them in sentences.

- 
- 

This month → Write one short paragraph using them.

- 



# STRATEGIES TO STAY MOTIVATED & ORGANIZED

## 3. Create “Study Signals”

Train your brain to know it's time to focus:

- Sit in the same corner with a notebook.
- Light a candle or make tea before study.
- Put your phone aside.
- Even if the house is noisy, these signals tell your mind: “It's my time now.”



# STRATEGIES TO STAY MOTIVATED & ORGANIZED

## 4. Reward Yourself

After finishing a task, give yourself something small:

- A walk on the rooftop.
- Listening to a favorite song.
- Writing in your journal.

Rewards remind your brain that effort is worth it.





# ACTIVITY:

## MY “ONE-WEEK PLAN”

**DRAW A SIMPLE TABLE WITH 7 DAYS. WRITE:**

- ONE GOAL FOR THE DAY (SMALL BUT CLEAR).
- ONE REWARD YOU WILL GIVE YOURSELF AFTER COMPLETING IT.

### **EXAMPLE:**

MONDAY – GOAL: READ 2 PAGES OF ENGLISH →  
REWARD: 10 MINUTES OF MY FAVORITE NOVEL.

TUESDAY – GOAL: HELP MY BROTHER WITH  
HOMEWORK → REWARD: CUP OF TEA ON THE  
BALCONY.

**AT THE END OF THE WEEK, LOOK BACK. EVEN SMALL  
PROGRESS IS SUCCESS.**

# REFLECTION QUESTION

**WHAT IS ONE HABIT I CAN  
PRACTICE DAILY THAT WILL  
BRING ME CLOSER TO MY  
BIGGER DREAM?**

Write honestly. You don't have to show anyone. This is for you to understand your own mind better.

A grid of dots for writing, consisting of 15 rows and 25 columns of small dots.



# The End of

## Workbook 1

### Part 1



PRACTICAL SKILLS FOR  
EMOTIONAL STRENGTH, SELF-  
BELIEF, AND HOPE.