



It's okay not to be okay

A guide for people seeking sanctuary

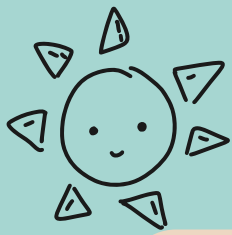
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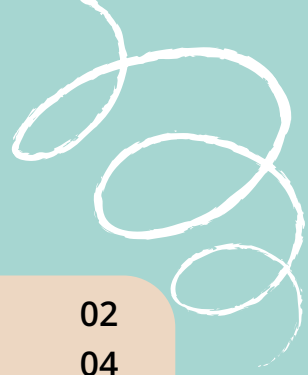
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FOREWORD

By Philomene Uwamaliya



This Mental Health guide, "It's Okay Not To Be Okay", was created at a time when many people are carrying heavy emotional, social and practical burdens.

Across the UK, migrant communities are navigating fear caused by anti-migrant narratives, uncertainty about immigration status, financial pressures, racism, and the pain of being far from loved ones. These challenges can make everyday life feel overwhelming.

This guide exists because you deserve support, kindness and clear, calm information especially when the world feels unsafe.

This guide reflects real strengths and real struggles.

It brings together practical ideas for looking after your wellbeing, stories that show the power of community, and reminders that you are not alone in what you are facing.

Every word here has been shaped to be simple, warm and accessible, because your mental health matters regardless of your status, background, or situation.

Co-created with National Health Advisors from Doctors of the World UK, people with lived experience of migration, the asylum system, exclusion from services and rebuilding life in the UK, this guide reflects real struggles and real strengths.

It honours wisdom found in cultural traditions, faith, creativity, friendship, and collective care.

It recognises that wellbeing is not just an individual effort, but something built through **connection, rights, respect and compassion.**

Whether you are supporting yourself or someone you care about, we hope these pages help you feel seen, supported and empowered. Most importantly, we hope you feel encouraged to reach out, speak up and take each day one small step at a time.

We hope these pages help you feel seen, supported and empowered.

You are part of a community of people who understand these challenges and believe deeply in your courage, dignity and resilience.

It's okay not to be okay and you never have to carry everything alone.



Philomene Uwamaliya is a Lived Experience Trustee of Doctors of the World UK & Senior Lecturer and Field Lead for Mental Health Nursing, School of Nursing, Public and Allied Health; Faculty of Health, Innovation, Technology and Science, Liverpool John Moores University.

IT'S OKAY NOT TO BE OKAY



We live in times where lots of people are feeling anxious about anti-migrant protests and policies, while being worried about friends and family around the world.

This is a guide to look after your wellbeing when life, migration and the world feel heavy. This advice will also help if you are trying to support someone and show kindness. **"It's okay not to be okay"**

This guide was co-created with National Health Advisors from Doctors of the World UK. We are people with experience of migration, the UK asylum system, and finding our way through healthcare.

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**"You are not alone in this.
We stand with you. You
and your voice matter.
Don't stay quiet, use your
voice.**

**We are stronger
together"**





WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?



The creators of this guide all have experience of migration and of difficulties accessing health care in the UK.

So, this guide will probably feel especially relevant if you are: going through the asylum process, renewing a visa or worrying about your status.

- Struggling with money or housing issues.
- Supporting family members in different countries.
- Facing barriers due to disability, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, trafficking experiences or others.
- Struggling to register with a GP or to access mental health support
- Worried by racism, discrimination or protests.

But, the guide is written in a way that can be useful to anyone going through a difficult time. This guide can also help teachers, volunteers, health workers, family members and friends supporting people affected by migration.

“But, the guide is written in a way that can be useful to anyone going through a difficult time.”



HOW WE MADE THE GUIDE



This guide was based on a 2020 COVID-19 version and rewritten through two workshops with National Health Advisors (NHAs) at Doctors of the World UK, facilitated by Dr Sohail Jannesari and Hassan Hussain.

Together we:

- Shared what we do to help ourselves and others when we feel down or anxious.
- Discussed different philosophies and beliefs around wellbeing.
- Wrote short stories about when someone was supported through a crisis.
- “Graffitied” the old guide, crossing out what didn’t work, changing the wording, adding what was missing.
- Designed new pages, front covers, and images that felt more inviting.

Our process treated lived experience as expertise.

This meant the language, examples and advice were shaped by people who know these experiences first-hand, ensuring the guide reflects real struggles and strengths in migrant communities.



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You do not need to read this guide from beginning to end. You can:

- Dip into one “way” that feels useful today.
- Start with the case study that sounds closest to you.
- Go straight to the “Help is Available” section if you need support now.

This guide is not therapy, and it cannot replace professional mental-health care or legal advice. It is a supportive resource you can use alongside other help. Keep or ignore whatever feels right for you.

You can also share it with someone else (like a friend, a support worker, a GP, a lawyer) if you want help understanding a section, to help explain what you are going through, or help others.



WHEN LIFE FEELS TOO MUCH



Sometimes we don't know when we're overloaded and overwhelmed. Here are some warning signs that might help you notice:

- Checking your phone all night for messages from home.
- Jumping every time the post arrives in case it is another Home Office letter.
- Feeling sick when you see the news.
- Staying strong for everyone else, children, partners, parents, and forgetting to look after your own body and mind.
- Difficulties sleeping or always feeling tired; finding it hard to eat, or eating more than usual; headaches, tension in your shoulders, or a racing heart.

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WHEN LIFE FEELS TOO MUCH

Continued

- Carrying the stress of working long hours in low-paid jobs to afford rent and visa renewals.
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy.

It is a sign that you are human.

This guide shares five tips to get through these times and support others.

“It’s normal to feel these things, because none of us are superhuman”



TIP 1: YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY IT ALONE

Wellbeing is not just something inside our heads. It lives between us.

When it's strengthened by trust and confidentiality, connection can help people feel better. Connection can be hard to find when you're missing families and friends from home. You might connect or support connection by:

- **Calling or messaging** one person you trust when you or they feel down.
- **Having coffee or tea** with someone in the traditional way, slowly, with conversation.
- **Listening carefully** but also knowing that "sometimes people don't want to talk yet, they just need someone near until they are ready".
- **Joining online groups** with people who share your language or culture.
- **Joining a free drama/theatre**, faith, arts group, community centre event or dance class.

"A person is a person through other people".

"Togetherness is power".



CASE STUDY 1: CAROL AND PETER'S HOUSING

Carol had been in Essex for years but was struggling in temporary accommodation.

She always went to bed thinking, "what if we have nowhere to go next?"

It was weighing a lot on her mind, stealing her peace of mind and freedom. We first met her at a drop-in centre, she was with her child, Peter. He was five years old and using a council letter about housing as a paper plane.

"I should be providing for them," Carol told us. "I shouldn't be here asking for food." Someone at the drop-in heard her and quietly replied, **"Don't give up. Things can change"**.

From then on, every week, one of us would turn up to her house with a bag of food: rice, oil, vegetables, cereal, fruit. We checked what the children liked to eat and tried our best.

Carol always apologised, and we'd say, **"It's fine, this is what neighbours do"**. And the more we showed up, the more she opened up. The fifth time we went, Carol made tea and pulled out the council letters. She had already done the hard work, underlining the important parts and writing down questions.

We referred her to a local advice service.

They helped her challenge the housing decisions that had kept the family in limbo. Knowing people were on her side gave her the confidence to start challenging the decisions she'd been given.

Months later, we visited a different, permanent address.

Peter's drawings of dinosaurs were taped to the wall, his light shining brighter than ever.



TIP 2: GIVE YOUR MIND A BREAK



When we are overwhelmed, our thoughts can go in circles. News, social media, letters, memories and worries can flood us.

Taking a break is not “escaping reality”, it is a healthy way to give your mind and body time to recover.

Here are small ways you might change how you think and help others too:

Reading fiction and watching TV series to “travel away from this situation” for a while.

Listening to, and sharing, music from home or spiritual songs.

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“Life is like a wave. So ride it”.

TIP 2: GIVE YOUR MIND A BREAK

Continued

Limiting when you read news or respond to stressful messages, and allowing yourself time away from them so your mind can rest.

Using breathing exercises or simple grounding techniques (e.g., **counting 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste**).

Teaching others to do this too!

Activities You Can Do to Support Your Mental Health



TIP 3: BE KIND TO YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Many of us are harsh with ourselves. We compare our lives to others, or to what we imagined.

We see friends getting status, jobs, houses, while we are still waiting. Or we see friends left behind, appealing asylum cases years after we've got ours. We need to be kind to each other because we are all on different, but difficult, journeys. Being kind can be:

- **Keeping a gratitude notebook** or sticking notes on the wall where you write down a few things to be thankful for.
- **Noticing and naming achievements**, for yourself and others: "You went to that appointment" "You called the GP", "I got through today".
- **Taking 10 minutes each day** just for yourself, even if it's sitting quietly.
- **Saying "yes"** when someone offers help with childcare, cooking or paperwork.
- **Helping people** who have difficulty accessing online resources to find resources and support (like this guide!).

It helps to recognise that some things are out of your control, such as how long it takes to hear back about your asylum claim.



CASE STUDY 2: MARIA AND THE LONG WAIT



Maria's asylum claim had been made years ago, but she hadn't heard back.

Not knowing was like being in the state of not living and not dying.

She felt like a bird whose wings and legs were chopped, in constant pain and craving freedom. Then, after so long, she got a rejection letter.

She had sleepless nights, headaches, and fear every time a van slowed down outside her building. She had to leave her government accommodation and lost the little money she was getting. When she was referred to our peer support group she had chest pains, shaking hands, and a sense that something terrible was about to happen.

We started with listening, an open chair and a cup of tea.

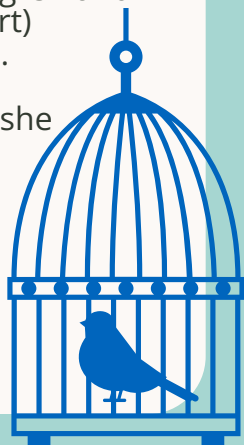
After a few sessions, we moved to practical steps. She wasn't registered with a GP as she worried it might affect her asylum claim. We explained to Maria that it was her legal right, and then supported her at the registration desk when she fought for them.

We signposted her to many different services (English and sewing classes, a foodbank, mental health support) including a legal organisation offering free advice.

They reviewed her papers and identified options she had never been told about.

Over time, Maria started volunteering at one of the local charities who had helped her. She described feeling,

"Less like my life is on pause and more like I am a person".



TIP 4: MOVE YOUR BODY, CHANGE YOUR SPACE

Stress lives in the body as well as the mind. When everything feels stuck, moving even a little can help shift the feeling.

You do not have to “get fit”. The aim is to remind your body that it’s still alive and capable of small joys.

When you’re down, try:

Doing housework to “distract yourself and keep moving”.

Going for walks (or even joining a walking group), taking yourself or your friends to the local park or even going window shopping.

Gardening, maybe at the local community gardens, and watching things grow.

Dancing with music from home with friends and family.

Chair exercises and gentle stretches when standing is difficult, including lifting light objects, rolling your shoulders, or doing slow ankle circles to keep your body moving.

Explore going to the gym, doing yoga, or meditating to improve your mental and physical wellbeing.



TIP 5: USE FAITH, CREATIVITY AND CULTURE

For many of us, wellbeing is about spirituality, culture and imagination.

We all come from different backgrounds, and we use these things in different ways. You might like:

Praying or taking quiet time in a small place of peace (created using a prayer mat, candle, book, or an object that reminds you of home).

Marking cultural days like Yalda (a Persian festival marking the longest night and the return of longer days).

Creating rhythm or sound with your body e.g., gently tapping your hands on your legs or chest in a steady pattern.

Trying arts-based therapies or joining a free community group (e.g., a free singing circle or choir).

Writing short stories or poems about what you are going through, or trying drawing or colouring when words feel difficult.



WHAT DOES GOOD SUPPORT LOOK LIKE?

The first mental health appointment was traumatising. The way he asked questions, it felt like I was doing something wrong.

“When I tried again, I was scared. But the new therapist said, ‘This is your one hour. It is your space. you don’t want to answer, don’t answer. If you want to cry, you cry. If you want to sit in silence, that is also okay.’ My pressure melted. She was like an angel. Then, slowly, I opened up”.

Wellbeing support is not always friendly, and it takes time before we find something that works. Good support should:

- Explain what will happen and treat you with respect and dignity.
- Offer an interpreter if you need one and use plain English if you don’t.
- Give you time to think and answer, respecting your confidentiality and any choice not to share.
- Know about your history and background without having you repeat the same painful story again and again.

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WHAT DOES GOOD SUPPORT LOOK LIKE?

You can use the below to prepare for appointments as, often, you will need to fight for your rights and needs. You might write down:

- What you want help with (e.g., sleep, panic, headaches, anger, loneliness).
- Topics you do not want to talk about yet.
- Things that have helped you in the past (music, faith, friends, routines).
- Your “triggers”/what makes things worse.

You have the right to an interpreter, and you can ask for a different clinician if the space does not feel safe or respectful.



CASE STUDY 3: AMIR AND SOFI AT THE HOUSING OFFICE

At the London housing office, Sofi sat behind her desk, watching a nervous young man shuffle in.

His name was Amir, newly arrived from Syria, holding a crumpled letter from his landlord.

His determined eyes darted around the room searching for the right person. When Sofi greeted him, he was reserved.

Though he spoke three other languages, he barely understood English. Instead of rushing, she gestured for him to sit and pulled up a translation app on her tablet.

Slowly, patiently, she began typing simple phrases. Amir's face softened as Arabic words appeared on the screen. Bit by bit, they pieced together his story. **His landlord had raised the rent unfairly, and Amir feared eviction.**

Sofi guided him through the paperwork, translating each form and explaining his rights step by step. By the end of their meeting, Amir understood not only his housing rights but also where to attend free English classes nearby.

A week later, Amir returned. He didn't have housing yet, but he was smiling confidently and greeting Sofi in English, **Thank you**". He knew his rights and felt like he could keep fighting.



HELP IS AVAILABLE

If you are in immediate danger or feel you might harm yourself or someone else, call 999.

If you need urgent medical help but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111. You can call these numbers regardless of immigration status and emergency care is always free.

Registering with a GP and accessing mental health care:

- You have the right to register with a GP (family doctor) regardless of your immigration status or ability to pay.
- You do not need proof of address, ID or immigration documents to register, although some practices still ask.

If you need advice on registering with a GP, you can contact Doctors of the World. Your GP can refer you to mental health support but the wait can be long.

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HELP IS AVAILABLE

Continued

Use some of the ideas in this guide to look after yourself and stay connected.

While you wait:

- Contact some of the groups we've highlighted on the next pages.
- Ask your GP about any charities that offer counselling or groups.
- Check if there are community groups near you offering free or low-cost support.
- You have a right to information in your preferred language. Please always ask for an interpreter and translated materials when you feel like you need them.

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

Samaritans: emotional support, day or night; Website: www.samaritans.org; Freephone: 116 123 (24 hours).

Refuge: domestic abuse support for women and children. Website: www.refuge.org.uk Domestic abuse helpline: 0808 2000 247 (24 hours).

Citizens Advice: money, housing, benefits and immigration advice. Find your local office: citizensadvice.org.uk; Freephone (England): 0800 144 8848 (varies by area).

British Red Cross: crisis support for refugees and people in hardship; Website: www.redcross.org.uk/get-help; Telephone: 0344 871 11 11.

Refugee Council: advice, advocacy, and support for people seeking asylum. Telephone: 020 7346 6700; Website: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

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WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

Continued

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

Rainbow Migration: support for LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum in the UK. Website: rainbowmigration.org.uk.

Say It Loud Club: mental health support for LGBTQ+ people of colour. Website: www.sayitloudclub.org.

Crisis: Supporting people facing or experiencing homelessness. Website: www.crisis.org.uk; Telephone: 0300 636 1967.

Refugee Action: Provides advice and practical support to asylum seekers and refugees in the UK (e.g., housing, immigration advice, welfare, integration). Website: www.refugee-action.org.uk; Telephone: 07725 638218.

Black Minds Matter UK: Offers free, culturally matched therapy for Black people with Black clinicians. Website: www.blackmindsmatteruk.com.

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

Continued

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

LOCAL AND CITY-LEVEL SUPPORT (NATIONWIDE EXAMPLES):

Praxis: Provides advice and practical support for migrants facing destitution, access to services, housing, and more. Website: <https://praxis.org.uk>

Hestia: Offers confidential support for survivors of domestic abuse & modern slavery, safe accommodation, legal advice, and counselling. Website: <https://hestia.org>

City of Sanctuary groups: Many cities in the UK have a City of Sanctuary group to welcome and support refugees. They offer community integration, social events, and support networks. Website: <https://cityofsanctuary.org> to locate the nearest local group.

Nafsiyat Intercultural Therapy Centre: Provides culturally-sensitive therapy for people from Black, Asian, minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers. Offers individual and group therapy in many languages. Website: <https://www.nafsiyat.org.uk>; Phone: 020 7263 6947.

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

Continued

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

EXAMPLES FROM OUTSIDE LONDON:

- **Mustard Tree (Manchester):** Offers housing, wellbeing and practical support. Website: www.mustardtree.org.uk.
- **Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Leeds):** Provides accommodation, food, advice, and long-term support for people experiencing destitution while seeking asylum. Website: www.pafras.org.uk
- **Leeds Asylum Seekers Network (LASSN):** support for people seeking asylum in Advice, advocacy, casework, destitution support, and community activities. Website: www.lassn.org.uk

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

Continued

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

RESOURCES FOR HELPING YOURSELF (AND OTHERS):

Kompasi is a free online hub for migrants and refugees living in the UK. It brings together trusted information on mental health, housing, immigration, healthcare, work and daily life. Website: <https://kompasi.org>

Thrive LDN connects people in London to mental health and wellbeing support, including free or low-cost services run by community organisations. Their website also has lots of relevant resources. Website: <https://thriveldn.co.uk/all-resources/>

Good Thinking is an NHS-approved app that directs you to resources for anxiety, low mood, sleep problems and stress. The tools are designed to use on your phone or computer at your own pace. Website: <https://www.good-thinking.uk>

WHERE TO GET SUPPORT

Continued

All services below are free and confidential (unless there's a case of serious risk to yourself or others). Opening hours can change, so check websites or call when you can.

RESOURCES FOR HELPING YOURSELF (AND OTHERS):

Side by Side (Mind UK): Side by Side is a free, not-for-profit online community run by Mind, where people can talk about their mental health and connect with others going through similar things. It is available 24/7, moderated 8am–midnight, and offers a safe space to share experiences, listen, and feel less alone. Website: sidebyside.mind.org.uk. You can also contact Mind's Infoline for general support: 0300 123 3393.

Different organisations have different roles. Some are independent charities; others are linked to government systems. For example, Migrant Help is the Home Office contractor for asylum support. They can change accommodation or allowance decisions, but they are not independent.

Share only the information they need to make a decision.



ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THIS GUIDE

Doctors of the World UK is a medical charity that works so everyone, no matter where they are from or what papers they have, can safely access healthcare. They run services in London and advocate nationally for people who are excluded from care, including destitute migrants, people with insecure immigration status, sex workers and people with no fixed address. This guide was co-created with Doctors of the World National Health Advisors who bring both lived experience and community wisdom. www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk

Thrive LDN is a partnership between London's NHS, public services, the Mayor of London, councils and charities. It works with communities to promote better mental health for everyone in London, and to get people talking more openly about wellbeing in their neighbourhoods, families and workplaces. www.thriveldn.co.uk





ABOUT THE ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THIS GUIDE

Continued

Developed with the Mayor of London, this resource is a part of wider work to build a healthier, fairer city for all. It reflects an ambition for London to be a place where people are supported to look after their mental health and live healthier, fuller lives.

www.london.gov.uk

The School of Nursing and Advanced Practice at Liverpool John Moores University is committed to improving health equity, advancing inclusive healthcare, and supporting people from migrant, refugee and people seeking sanctuary backgrounds. The school collaborates with local, national, and international organisations to promote culturally safe practice, trauma-informed care, and community wellbeing.

This guide benefited from the **civic engagement contribution of Philomene Uwamaliya**, a Registered Mental Health Nurse, educator and researcher at the School of Nursing and Advanced Practice. www.doctorsoftheworld.org.uk





ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Many of us are carrying many heavy things at the same time: immigration problems, money worries, housing issues, work and caring responsibilities, racism, violent protests, news about war or disasters in our home countries, and feeling far away from family.

If you're carrying some of these things, this guide is for you.

