



Introduction

*A thousand-mile journey
begins with a single step.* Lao Tzu

Have you noticed that every second person you're speaking to these days seems overwhelmed? If you're not overwhelmed in your work life, chances are you're overwhelmed in your personal life. Never before have we been expected to be on in so many different contexts, and on an ongoing basis. It can feel like the goalposts are always shifting. We're being asked to do and be more and more with less and less time, energy and resources.

There are small, yet effective, tools and strategies that can help you break down any overwhelming situation and decipher what would be the most effective action you can take at this particular moment in time – and that is what the journey of this book is about.

We are psychologists who also happen to be a married couple. Our collective aim in writing this book is to teach you the smallest skills, which will result in the maximum positive impact on your life.

We have both experienced mental health difficulties and overwhelming life challenges. Our training has equipped us with the tools to shape our knowledge and experience into the concepts enshrined in the Power of Small. But we do not approach this solely from the position of professional qualification and experience. We have brought to the development of the Small concept our joint lived experience. Where useful, we will bring elements of these personal experiences to bear during the course of the book – both their detail, and how we have been helped by the application of the Power of Small to situations we have faced.

We believe that our past experiences coupled with our psychological knowledge of evidence-based compassionate strategies will allow us to give you a small skills kit full of small, yet powerful, tools for even the most difficult of life circumstances.

What the Power of Small is, and how it works

People who come to see either of us individually or to attend one of our groups, generally are not in a great place in their lives. They are often burdened by a long list of all the things they believe are wrong with them, others and the world. Of course, they have an equally long list of what they want us to help fix.

When someone comes to see us in a state of distress, we can more often than not tell where the central problem lies pretty quickly. Through asking a few key questions, we can pinpoint what areas of their life are on track and which ones have gone off course.

Big promises, big disappointment

A client called Michelle comes to see us. She is unhappy in her relationships, and is suffering both physically and psychologically. She absolutely hates her job and can't even remember the last time she had spontaneous fun. Much of the time, her life barely feels worth getting out of bed for.

Michelle wants big changes, and she wants them fast. However, if she gets overly caught up in trying to change everything all at once, she is likely to find herself paralysed from simply moving forward at all.

Michelle has got caught up in this trap of big promises, big disappointment many times before. She has spent thousands of euros and countless hours investing in the latest quick-fix solutions. She invariably starts off all guns blazing, but then quickly crashes and burns. She has gradually become more and more disillusioned, and over time has concluded that her life is unchangeable.

Michelle has been disempowered by always thinking too big. Our job is to help her change her life by thinking in small, incremental steps – and this way laying the foundations and building blocks for sustainable, long-lasting change.

The most effective way to achieve this is to break

everything down into small, manageable steps, rather than resorting to quick fixes. Quick fixes may lead to short-term gain, but in the long-run they result in continued pain.

This book is all about giving you the skills to break everything down into small steps, in a manageable way. This may involve you sometimes experiencing short-term pain. However, from our experience, and the experiences of those we have worked with, the long term gain will be more than worth it. Having said that, it is important to add that the small journey often contains twists and turns, and requires an ongoing commitment to the principles in order to achieve the maximum impact.

In this book we've broken down the many life-saving and life-enhancing skills we have learned into small, easily digestible chunks, which you can use one at a time, slowly building momentum to achieve the big changes you want in a gradual, yet sustainable, way.

We give clients like Michelle just one thing to do after each session that will take five to ten minutes per day. There may be supplementary reading or exercises we recommend, but the core action that will help Michelle the most is so short and manageable that she will likely engage in it, and it will lead to positive change.

Similarly, in this book we will be recommending small actions at the end of each chapter.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One will help you identify your comfort zone, and also the actions you take – actions that are motivated by a desire to move towards

a more fulfilling life, and those that are motivated by a desire to control or avoid unwanted experiences. Part Two will help you identify what needs to change in order to live a more purposeful and meaningful life.

We will provide you with a Power of Small toolkit in Part Three. Here we will share key skills and strategies to show you how to change your current unhelpful responses to being overwhelmed. In Part Four we will give you some small takeaways – nuggets of wisdom, tips and tools to maintain the gains you will have achieved through utilising the Power of Small.

By the end of the book, if you engage in this process by following through one tiny action at a time, you will have a kit full of effective tools that can be applied to even the most overwhelming of situations. This is a kit that you can come back to whenever life feels like it's too much. You'll be able to choose which skills you need to refresh to best enable you to make tiny but powerful changes.

TODAY'S SMALL STEP

Your small steps diary

Get a journal and on the first page write, 'My Small Steps Diary'. This is where you will record your Power of Small journey as you work through this book. You can purchase a notebook that is really appealing to you, or if that feels like too much, you can maybe use a copybook or journal you already own.

Aisling and Trish Leonard-Curtin

Your small steps diary will be something you can come back to whenever you feel overwhelmed. If you engage with this book fully, your diary will contain a great number of personalised skills, tools and strategies that you will have developed bit by bit.

The Small Basics

Limbering Up for Life

*There is something wonderfully bold and liberating
about saying yes to our entire imperfect
and messy life. Tara Brach*

The Power of Small is grounded in the tenets of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which was developed in the US by psychologists Dr Steve Hayes, Dr Kirk Strosahl and Dr Kelly Wilson.

ACT is an effective approach to helping people with a wide range of issues, from depression and anxiety, to chronic pain and addictions. It is helpful for those experiencing workplace burnout or those wanting to increase their productivity and leadership skills. It has also been hugely beneficial for athletes wanting to hone their sporting abilities.

The premise behind ACT is that you are most likely to struggle and suffer when you are being *psychologically*

inflexible. Every single one of us falls into the psychological inflexibility trap from time to time; it is a totally normal response to the often overwhelming world we live in. The aim of ACT is to help you become more psychologically flexible.

What is psychological flexibility?

While physical flexibility is your ability to bend, move and respond to whatever is going on in your physical environment, on the other hand psychological flexibility is your ability to stay grounded in the present moment, even when distressing events occur. It's about staying connected to what matters to you most, letting your values guide your actions rather than being pushed around by unwanted thoughts and emotions.

Just as you can learn to become more physically flexible through activities such as stretching, exercising and eating healthily, you can also learn how to become more psychologically flexible through practising reflection and mindfulness, for example, and doing things that bring long term gain, even when they are uncomfortable.

And just as there are actions that lead to greater physical inflexibility, such as living a sedentary lifestyle with little exercise, there are also actions that result in a person being more psychologically inflexible. Psychological inflexibility has been shown to increase the risk of depression, anxiety, addictions, disorders and general dissatisfaction with life.

Three states of mind that lead to psychological inflexibility

1. **Lack of awareness in the present moment**

When you are preoccupied with the past or future, you become psychologically inflexible. Because you are either rehashing what has happened already, or becoming entangled in what may or may not happen, you lose contact with the only time when you can actually influence the course of your life – the present moment, right here and now.

2. **Getting caught in thinking and emotional traps**

This is when you either get blinkered by your thoughts and emotions, to the extent that you lose contact with the present moment, or when you get caught in a vicious cycle of pouring all of your time and energy into futile attempts *not* to think a particular thought or feel a particular feeling. These traps usually result in your engaging in actions that feel good in the short term, yet carry a heavy long term price tag.

3. **Disengagement from what really matters**

Whenever your actions lack a sense of direction, purpose or authenticity, you will likely become more psychologically inflexible. When you are unclear about what is important to you, you lack a core from which to guide your actions. As a result,

any actions you take will likely be haphazard, and dictated by thoughts and emotions rather than a definite sense of what is important to you. These actions take you further away from who and where you want to be.

Small strategies that lead to psychological flexibility

The Power of Small is all about learning how to move towards psychological flexibility. The strategies fall under three headings:

- 1. Awareness of the present moment**

You can learn how to reconnect with the present moment, through which you will become a more flexible, wise and compassionate thinker.

- 2. Openness to unwanted experiences**

You can learn how to break out of thinking and emotional traps and instead observe your thoughts and emotions in helpful and effective ways.

- 3. Engagement with what matters**

You can learn how to connect to what truly matters to you and what you want your life to be about, allowing these core values to guide a sequence of small actions that build up over time to radically change the course of your life.

The Power of Small will teach you all of these strategies, so that you can become far more psychologically flexible in your life. You will still think unwanted thoughts and feel unwanted feelings (you're only human, after all), but the extent to which these throw you off course will greatly diminish.

As you work through this book, you will acquire an ever-growing toolkit of small skills that we will teach you, one manageable step at a time. This psychologically flexible toolkit will help you to respond from your core values in even the most distressing of situations.

TODAY'S SMALL STEP

Assess your psychological flexibility

Here are three questions to help you gauge where you are on the psychological flexibility spectrum. From zero to nine, indicate how often you get caught up in these activities, which result in your becoming more psychologically inflexible.

Zero indicates never. Nine indicates all the time. Five represents about half the time.

1. Are you completely lost in your thoughts about things that have happened, or things that might happen? Things you have done, or things you have to, or want to do?
2. Do you get so blinkered by your thoughts and feelings that they become overwhelming?

3. Do you run around from one thing to the next, always doing something but not really getting anywhere? On the other end of the spectrum, yet equally problematic, do you always think about doing something different and meaningful but never quite get around to doing it?

Your score gives you an idea of where you are right now – and what you can work towards. The Power of Small will show you how to increase your psychological flexibility, in ways that will create space for movement and change of whatever unhelpful thought patterns and behaviour habits dominate for you.

Part One

The Comfort Trap



1

The Comfort Zone

It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all – in which case, you fail by default. JK Rowling

Feeling overwhelmed looks very different for each of us. How it impacts us depends very much on what we have going on in life, and also on our earlier life experiences. For example, if we have had a lot of trauma in our life, this may greatly affect how we respond to our sense of overwhelm. Interestingly, some people with a history of traumatic events see themselves as great in a crisis. They go into ‘do-do go-go’ mode, doing pretty much anything other than actually stopping and acknowledging how they are feeling. Other people go into complete lockdown, when it seems like absolutely nothing is possible, from brushing your teeth and feeding yourself nutritiously, to texting and calling family and friends.

Generally, though, we tend to get tipped into overwhelm when we face problems that seem too powerful, or beyond our capacity to deal with, or when we experience an intense emotion we don't think we can manage.

It's important to acknowledge that unwanted emotions, such as stress, can have extremely positive influences on our lives. We absolutely need to encounter situations and tasks that at least appear outside of our comfort zone. This is where growth happens. Without stress, we would live very boring and uneventful lives.

Staying comfortable is remaining static. If you don't break out of what you usually do, you stave off the possibility for meaningful change in your life. But the problem is that when we move too far outside our comfort zone, we end up with an unworkable sense of overwhelm. For manageable change, we need to learn to gently push the boundaries of our comfort zone, using the Small approach this book will teach you, in incremental, gradual, safe steps.

We are, by nature, all or nothing creatures. Most of us have a tendency to either procrastinate our lives away, or run life at a speed that is unmanageable and unsustainable in the long term. Chances are you know a lot about all or nothing. You most likely know a lot about either setting your standards and goals too high; or buying into the story that you are not able for very much at all. Many of us flit from one end of this spectrum to the other.

As we embark on this journey together, we invite you to gently break out of your comfort zone, by engaging with this

The Power of Small

book in a connected way that offers you a new experience. For those of us who go at things all guns blazing at the start and then fall off the wagon, a note of caution: the Small way means the gradual expansion of our comfort zone, little by little, so that the sources of your overwhelm diminish as you acquire the skills you need to bring your life into balance and harmony.

So, before we go any further, we'd like to invite you to connect to your underlying intention for reading this book. Is it because you're overwhelmed by the stresses of daily life – the overflowing inbox, the never-ending to-do list, the apparently impossible task of keeping everyone happy while eating a balanced diet, getting eight hours' sleep a night, and your 30 minutes of exercise every day, still looking like you're perfectly fine?

Or perhaps you're at a stage in life where a significant person is no longer with you, whether through death, the breakdown of a relationship, or someone moving away. Maybe you are in a job you dislike and you feel more and more stuck, or maybe you have too much responsibility and more is being piled on you every day. Maybe you are in financial difficulty and don't know how to find a way out. Whatever is overwhelming you, this book is about using small and simple steps to move forward.

It is extremely tempting to want to change all areas of your life all at once. However, we have found time and again that you will make the most significant impact if you start with one valued area. This is not to say that you will only

ever focus on this one area through the Power of Small. Quite the opposite, in fact. However, it is best to start with that part of your life where you believe the most positive impact can be achieved, right this moment.

TODAY'S SMALL STEP

Identify your comfort zone

In your small steps diary, write down three actions you take to keep yourself in your comfort zone. They could be things like drinking wine every evening, staying in rather than going out, or avoiding a particular task that you know needs to be done yet you can't seem to get around to. Only you will know what you do to keep yourself in a safe, unchallenged place. This is a chance to give yourself space to think about what those actions are, and assess whether or not they are helpful. And if you're feeling courageous and want to maximise what you get out of this book, also identify at least one cost for each of your comfort zone actions.

It is through this process of identification that change begins.

2

The Self-Care Zone

Self-care is never a selfish act – it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer to others.

Parker Palmer

Just as no positive growth can be experienced without venturing outside of the comfort zone, it is also true that if we move too far outside it too quickly, we can also move outside our self-care zone, thereby losing the potential for sustainable change. If we stay within our self-care zone, however, we can transform our lives in incredibly positive ways. We start to respond differently in relationships. We find ourselves capable of more than we ever knew possible.

When our sense of being overwhelmed is such that we are unable to do anything to change it, our task is not to completely eradicate it but to find a way to transform it into something manageable.