

# FLOWERS AND STONES

Self-Care Handbook for Syrian Men Living in Germany



Gefördert durch:



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Publisher International Organization for Migration  
Charlottenstraße 68  
10117 Berlin  
Germany  
Tel: +49 30 2787780  
Fax: +49 30 27877899  
Email: [iomdemhpss@iom.int](mailto:iomdemhpss@iom.int)  
Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)

Authors: Stefanie Gaumert and Majdi Laktinah

Illustrations and design: Diala Brisly

Layout: Shadi Jaber

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Self-Care Handbook for Syrian Men Living in Germany



Gefördert durch:



Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung  
für Migration, Flüchtlinge und  
Integration



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# Introduction

This Handbook is directed at men like you: Syrian men of all ages who have left their homeland and are now living in Germany. The decision to leave your home country and the experiences that come with it can be stressful. Perhaps even as you continue to grapple with these experiences, life after arriving in Germany brings additional – sometimes unexpected – challenges. Many men feel like they have to start all over again after arriving here.

Difficult, demanding phases of life and stressful events can trigger a range of previously unfamiliar reactions that may be associated with strong feelings and emotions, such as fear, uncertainty and grief. These are your body's normal reactions to extraordinary circumstances. You are not alone in your experiences. Many men go through similar experiences after they arrive in Germany. You may also find it challenging to share your worries, certain thoughts and feelings with others, or to seek help. *Flowers and Stones: Self-Care Handbook for Syrian Men Living in Germany* was created with this in mind and is based on the experiences of Syrian men in Germany, supplemented by the perspectives of sisters, mothers, wives and daughters. It reflects the practical and emotional challenges that these men have faced and the strategies that have worked to manage them.

Every individual has a variety of strengths and resources that enable them to face challenges and overcome them. This Handbook does not offer generic solutions to common problems. How much certain stress factors affect you, how you react to them and what helps you overcome emotional crises and everyday stressful situations would vary from other people. The goal of this Handbook is to help you better understand your feelings, thoughts and bodily reactions to stress factors, identify your personal strengths and find strategies that work for you, to cope with your problems and challenges. At the end of this Handbook, you will find a link to a website with a list of referrals to various resources that might help you with your individual situation.

# 1. New Beginnings





Much has changed for you since you arrived in Germany. Some changes you would find to be positive, others negative. Still others would simply be new or different.

You can imagine your life since your arrival in Germany like a path that winds through different landscapes. With every step forward that you take, the landscape and your surroundings change.

Sometimes the path is arduous, strewn with rocks and boulders. Maybe it's cold or raining. These sections represent the difficult experiences you have had in Germany and the challenges you have faced.

These experiences and challenges could include, for example:

- Having to build new social networks
- Feeling lonely
- Difficulty staying in touch with Syrian friends and family
- Navigating a new culture, as well as new structures and systems
- Learning German
- Experiencing discrimination and rejection

You are not alone in these experiences. Building a life in a completely new environment is an enormous task which requires a lot of energy and patience. Yet you're already on your way. With every step, you gather new experiences.

If you like, you can think about these questions:

- Have you learned something from the obstacles that you have encountered?
- Have you had experiences that you learned from, that could be helpful for the road ahead?
- Can you say that you have grown from your experiences?

Surely you have passed some beautiful landscapes on your way...  
...with fertile land where flowers bloom...and a pleasant climate. These landscapes represent the positive experiences you have had on your way.





These experiences could be, for example:

- Meeting nice, kind, new people
- Having your asylum application accepted
- Feelings of safety
- The opportunity to express your opinions freely
- Discovering nice places

On these stretches of the path, you can “recharge your batteries”, “stock up on provisions” and strengthen yourself for what lies ahead. If you like, you can think about the positive experiences you have had since coming to Germany and what feelings they triggered in you. Maybe you can use these experiences to deal with future challenges?

It could help to talk to people who have been through a journey like yours. Talking to others or seeking advice is not a sign of weakness. It may also be fulfilling for you to use your collective experiences to support people who find themselves in a similar situation.

Are there any experiences or knowledge that you would like to pass on to others?

You can decide to what extent helping others would be good for you. The important thing is that it makes you feel good and that you do not forget about yourself when helping others.

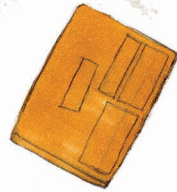
There are negative experiences that cast long shadows. You are not alone in having these experiences. Other men have had difficulties finding jobs, problems with their families and trouble finding their way in a new environment.

Sometimes these shadows obscure your view of the beautiful things that surround you, but that doesn't mean they stop existing. These things may be loved ones, wonderful memories or achievements you are proud of.

It may be helpful to consciously remind yourself of the various successes you have experienced along the way. This is not only about big successes, but also – and especially – small, everyday achievements, such as a phone call that you made or a new German word that you have learned.



## 2. Normal Reactions to Extraordinary Circumstances



Starting over in a new country, with an uncertain future and worrying about loved ones can cause distress. You may have experienced distressing situations in the past, like violence, war, dangerous travel, insecurity, displacement and discrimination. You know well the forms that stress can take in your body and mind. Yet the fact that you survived major life-threatening situations does not make you immune to the negative effects of everyday stress.

How frequently stress is experienced varies from person to person and depends on their circumstances. However, one simple truth applies to everyone: STRESS EXISTS. It's normal. It's part of life. It comes and goes. Sometimes stress can be avoided, but sometimes it can't. So it's good to be prepared.

Experiencing stress is part of being human. And as every person is unique, we differ in the factors that stress us out, and how and how intensely we experience stress. Different people might react completely differently to the same event.



Perhaps one or more of the following reactions sound familiar?



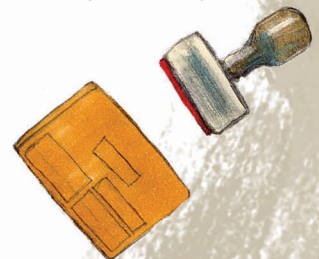
- Loss of appetite
- Hopelessness
- Trouble sleeping
- Exhaustion
- Apathy
- Paranoia
- Constant brooding and racing thoughts

Sometimes these reactions feel unusual, and you may feel unsettled by your body's and mind's stress-related reactions. Many people feel this way. However, these reactions – even extreme ones – are quite normal reactions to extraordinary circumstances.

Every action is followed by a reaction. Accordingly, your body has the appropriate response ready for every stimulus. For example, when you have an infection, you get a fever: Your body starts to produce heat and sweat. This is its natural self-regulation mechanism to fight off the infection. As an organism, you have various stress reactions to stressful experiences. These reactions are how your body and mind try to protect themselves from abnormal or threatening situations, or adapt to unfamiliar challenges. If you experience stress, it means that your body and mind are alive, and your natural self-regulation mechanism has been activated. Having a fever is a sign that your immune system is active, even though you might feel dull, exhausted or listless. Ultimately, stress reactions can impact your life, your relationships and your physical and mental state.

Stress comes and goes, even suddenly and at unexpected times. There might be a trigger that you never noticed before but would remind your brain of past bad experiences. Your reactions to triggers may vary in intensity and duration, depending on what caused them, and, most importantly, on your experiences and personality. If you are going through a long, stressful period, you may react strongly even to a small and otherwise everyday problem.

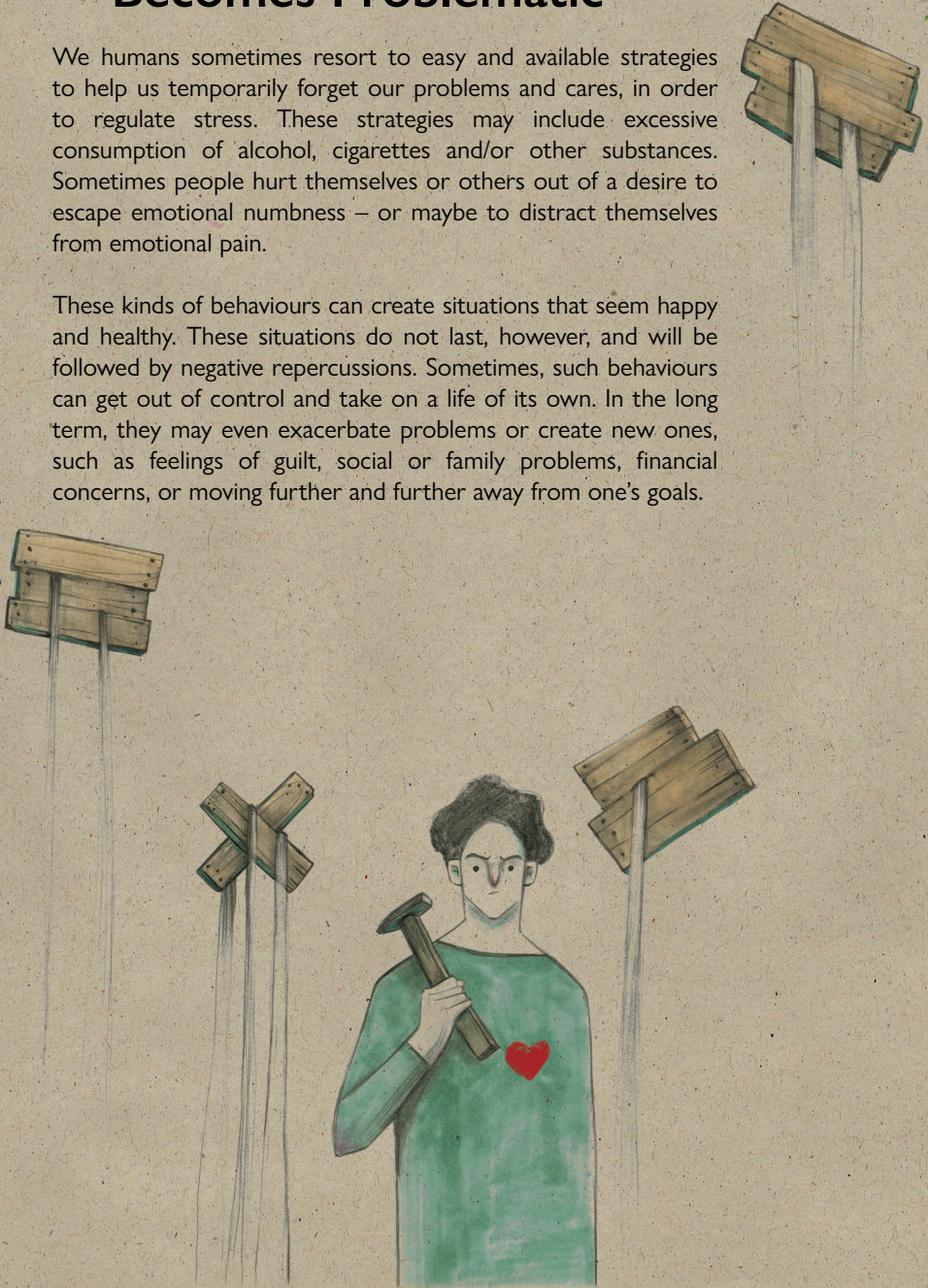
If you have the ability to address the cause of the stress, the stress reaction would usually subside on its own. This can also happen when external circumstances change – for example, your asylum application is approved, you find a suitable place to live, or you see your family again. However, a difficult situation may persist for a longer period, or the cause of your stress may be beyond your control. In these cases, you can use your experiences and personal resources to regulate your stress reactions in a healthy way. In the following sections, you will find suggestions on how to do this.



### 3. When Coping with Problems Becomes Problematic

We humans sometimes resort to easy and available strategies to help us temporarily forget our problems and cares, in order to regulate stress. These strategies may include excessive consumption of alcohol, cigarettes and/or other substances. Sometimes people hurt themselves or others out of a desire to escape emotional numbness – or maybe to distract themselves from emotional pain.

These kinds of behaviours can create situations that seem happy and healthy. These situations do not last, however, and will be followed by negative repercussions. Sometimes, such behaviours can get out of control and take on a life of its own. In the long term, they may even exacerbate problems or create new ones, such as feelings of guilt, social or family problems, financial concerns, or moving further and further away from one's goals.



Do you see yourself in any of the circumstances described above? If so, try to think about who or what can help you with your situation. You do not need to be ashamed of needing help. It is important that you talk to others about your problems and, if necessary, seek professional support. You can find more information about available support services on the website [selfcare-germany.ion.int](http://selfcare-germany.ion.int). It can also be useful to distance yourself from people who might influence you negatively or encourage you to engage in destructive behaviours.

You can try to see this phase as a starting point to consider how you might replace the aforementioned behaviours with healthy coping strategies.



Movement and exercise, for example, can make your body feel good, and improve your well-being and self-worth. Relaxation exercises can help you fall asleep, a book or movie can temporarily transport you to another reality, and a walk in nature or through the city can help you “switch your mind off”. Maybe some other ideas have already come to mind?



# 4. Feeling Is Human



Hopelessness

Exhaustion



Powerlessness

Gratitude

Helplessness

Guilt

Shame

Confidence

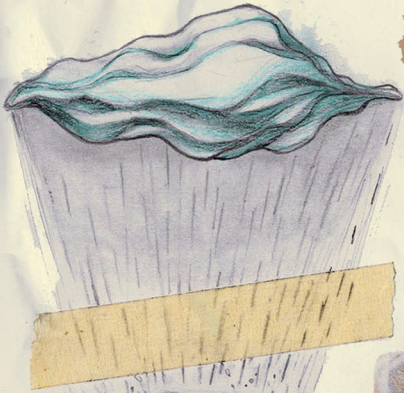
Joy

Fear

Sadness

Despair

Anger



These are some of the feelings and emotions that men in a situation similar to yours have gone through. Some people think that expressing sadness, fear or despair is not appropriate for a man's role in society. "Men need to be strong". "Men don't show weakness". Right? This section will help you to accept what you feel as something natural and give you suggestions on how to deal with your feelings and emotions constructively.

Feelings and emotions are not signs of weakness. Feeling is part of being human. It is impossible to not feel. Emotions and feelings are unavoidable and important for physical and mental well-being. Some feelings are experienced as positive (e.g. joy and contentment) and others as negative (e.g. fear and despair). Just as you express and share positive feelings and emotions with others, it is normal and important to also let out negative feelings and emotions because they also have important functions.

For example, you experience fear because it helps you protect yourself from threats.

If you feel angry, this can be a reaction to an experienced injustice. Anger can give you strength and energy.

If you feel exhausted, low in drive or burned out, your body is signalling to you that you need a timeout. If you feel helpless, this is a sign that you should seek help.

Being aware of your feelings and emotions helps you find your inner balance and react appropriately to situations.



Think about the different feelings – positive and negative – that you have experienced since coming to Germany. Can you make sense of them? Which feelings have you shared with others? Which ones have you not? What could be the advantages of also sharing your negative emotions?

Sometimes you may feel overwhelmed by your feelings and emotions. In this case, it can help to take a breath and distance yourself from the situation before you think about solutions or venting your anger. This would help you avoid making rash decisions or unintentionally hurting others. Below are a few examples of what this might look like. You decide what is helpful for you, and when.

- Take a walk in nature.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings.
- Get some sleep.
- Breathe in and out deeply and consciously.
- Go to a quiet place to clear your head.
- Seek distraction, for example, by doing the dishes, cleaning your house or running errands.
- Do something that feels good.
- Have a short self-reflection session.

Ignoring or over-controlling your feelings can have long-term negative impacts on your health. It can trigger tension, cause headaches or chest pains, or create a kind of emotional numbness, among other things. Also, suppressing negative feelings doesn't make them go away. On the contrary, they pile up. If the pressure inside becomes too strong, there is a danger that your feelings and emotions will burst out uncontrollably at a certain, perhaps unwanted, moment. To avoid this happening, your feelings and emotions need regular space to escape in a healthy manner.



Here are some healthy ways to channel your feelings:

- Exercise to relieve tension.
- Cry. Crying can be liberating. If you don't like to cry in front of people, find yourself a quiet place where you can be alone and feel comfortable.
- Talk to someone you trust.
- Scream out your worries.
- Are you a creative person? Turn your emotions into artworks, songs or stories.



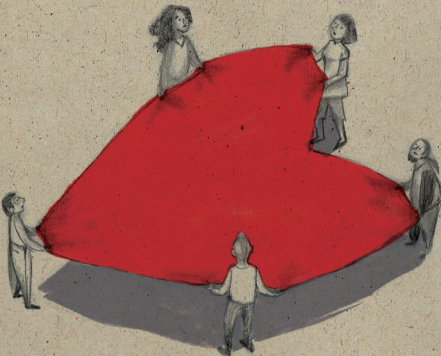
## 5. You Are Not Alone

History shows that humans have always lived in groups and tend to stick together. Whether we are happy or sad, we should not think of our feelings as shameful, inappropriate or unimportant, but instead share them with others. Especially in times of stress or emergencies, it can be helpful to have someone to spend time with, seek advice from, offer us comfort or simply talk to. Sometimes it's good just to know that someone is there and that we are not alone. This person – or persons – could be anyone.

Your usual partner for card games may be different from the person you cook with or the friends you go out partying with. The same goes for the people you go to when you're feeling stressed. While some people have a specific person they go to, others turn to different people depending on the situation.

You might share your experience of work-related stress with your partner or with a friend who has a similar background as you. Family-related stress, you might share with someone else. And if the bureaucratic processes in Germany are getting to you, maybe you have an acquaintance who can support you with their experiences. Who you turn to depends on what you need and what is good for you at a particular moment.

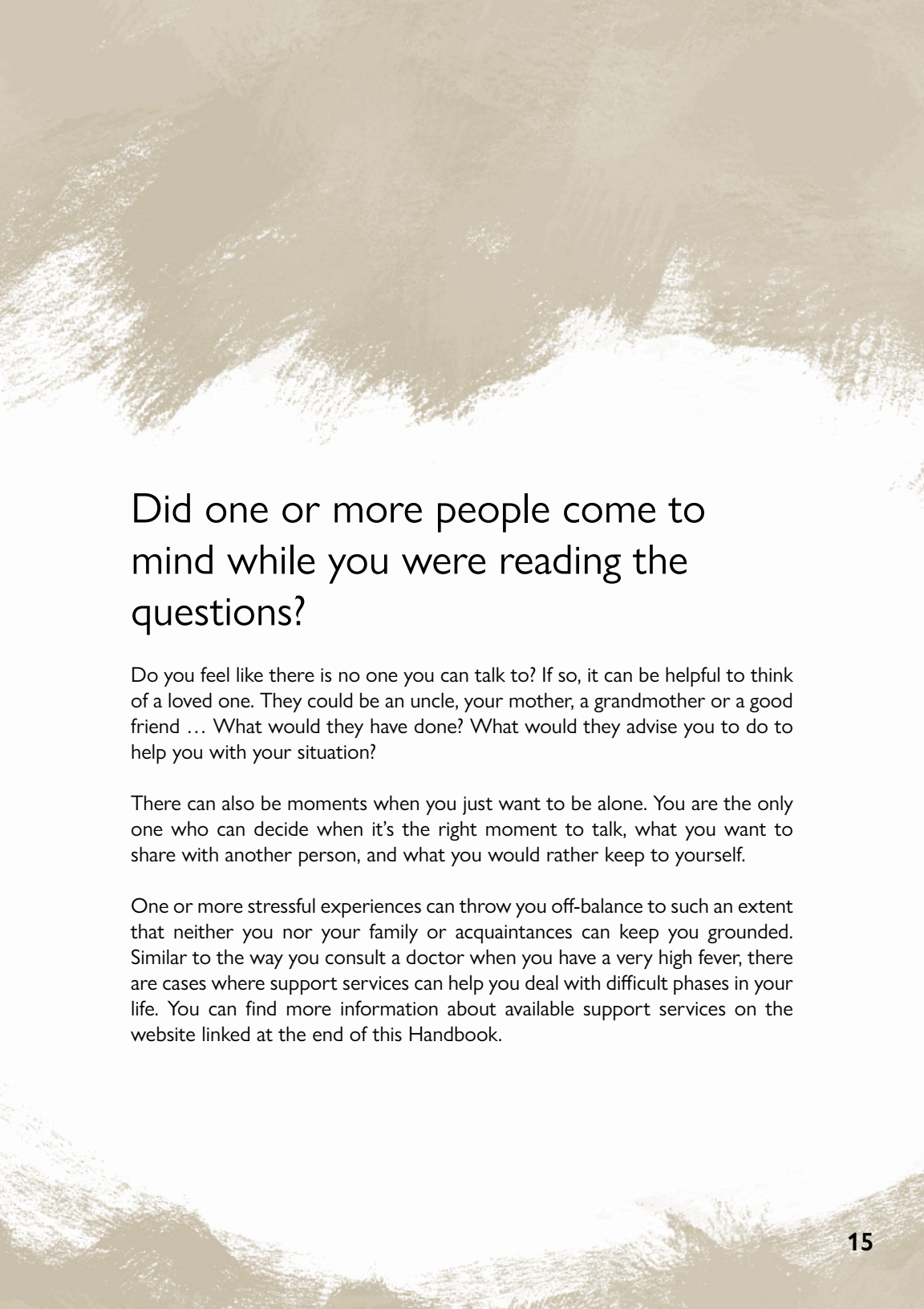
*Do you have a specific concern in mind? Think about who can best support you through it.*



Do you need...

- A good listener?
- Someone you can trust who doesn't judge?
- Someone to offer you advice and help you come up with solutions?
- Someone who builds you up and shares their positive energy?
- Someone who understands your feelings and can give you love or intimacy?
- Someone who distracts you, for example, by changing the subject?
- Someone who helps you see things from a different perspective?
- Someone who doesn't know you and doesn't judge? (Under certain circumstances, it can also be a relief to speak to a total stranger.)





## Did one or more people come to mind while you were reading the questions?

Do you feel like there is no one you can talk to? If so, it can be helpful to think of a loved one. They could be an uncle, your mother, a grandmother or a good friend ... What would they have done? What would they advise you to do to help you with your situation?

There can also be moments when you just want to be alone. You are the only one who can decide when it's the right moment to talk, what you want to share with another person, and what you would rather keep to yourself.

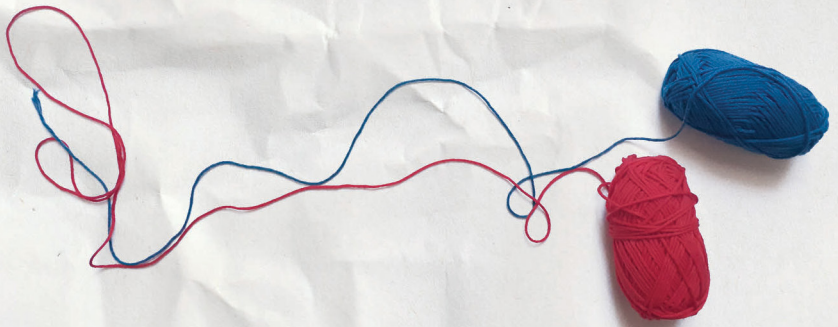
One or more stressful experiences can throw you off-balance to such an extent that neither you nor your family or acquaintances can keep you grounded. Similar to the way you consult a doctor when you have a very high fever, there are cases where support services can help you deal with difficult phases in your life. You can find more information about available support services on the website linked at the end of this Handbook.

*Far from the eyes, close to the heart.*

*— Arabic proverb*

Social relationships and networks come in many forms. You probably find that your social network, given the new context you are now moving in, is in some ways very different from what you have been used to.

You may find it easy to keep in touch with old acquaintances and relatives because they live in the same place as you do; you might plan regular trips and mutual visits, or maintain connections virtually (via text, voice or video messaging). Some connections may have become less tight. There may be different reasons for this: Views or values have changed on one or both sides, you don't get along as well as you did before, or the distance is simply too great. Perhaps you have already been able to build new circles of friends in your new environment. Sometimes this takes time, and it is not easy for everyone to build social networks similar to the ones they once had, or to be just as big and as tight. You may feel lonely at times, and the COVID-19 pandemic can intensify this feeling. A lot of people feel that way right now. It doesn't really matter how big or small your social network is, how often you meet, or what form those meetings take. What really matters is that you are aware that there are people in this world who care about you, and who you can reach out to if you need to. You can find available support services on the website linked at the end of this Handbook.



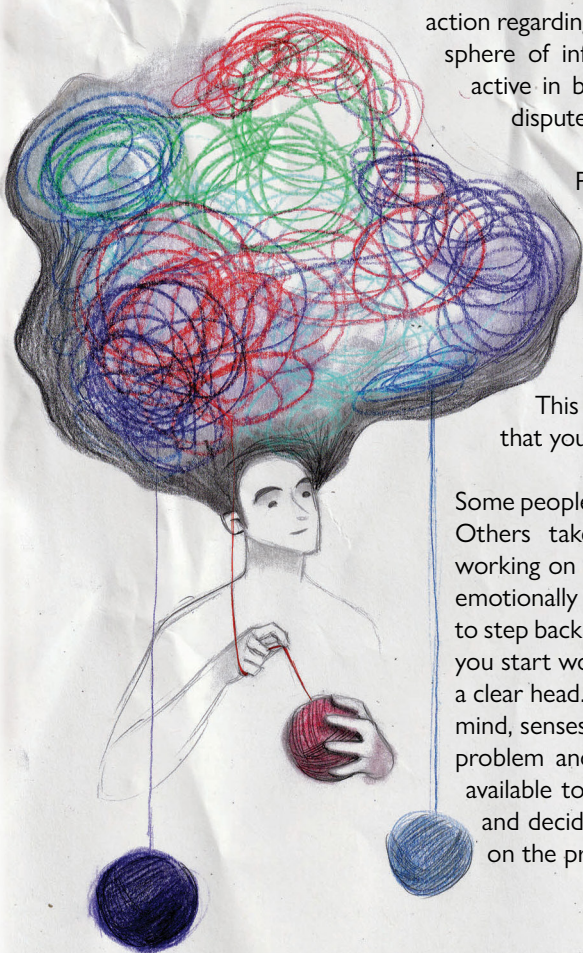
## 6. The Art of Problem-solving

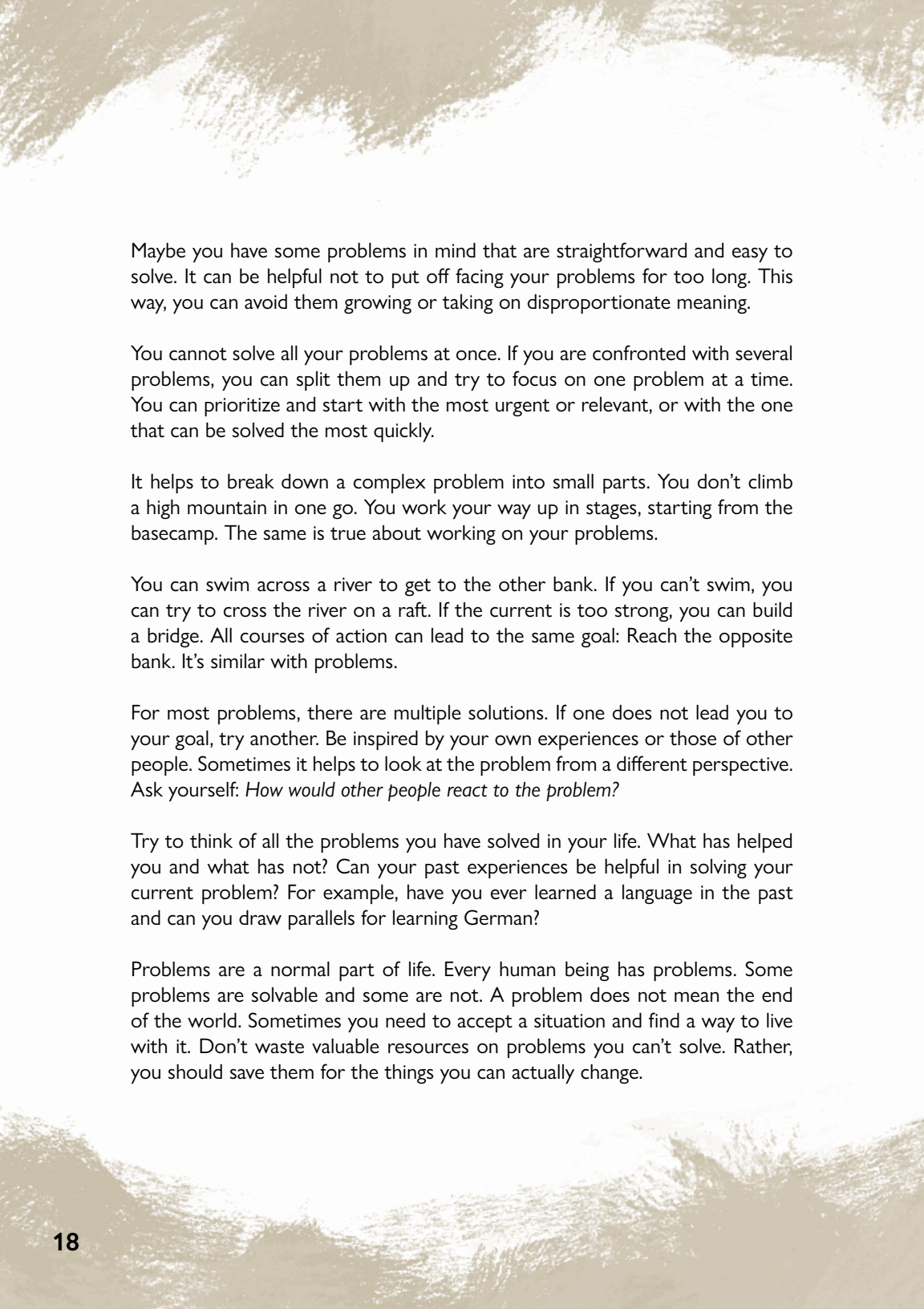
Some problems are beyond your control. Even if you would like to, you cannot solve them. These include disasters and bad news. You have to find other ways to deal with them (you will find different ideas for this in the following sections). You can take action regarding the problems that are within your sphere of influence. For example, you can be active in building a social network, resolving disputes or learning a new language.

Perhaps you have a few problems in mind that you have encountered recently. For each of these problems, think about whether it is within your power to solve or whether it is beyond your control.

This section can help you solve problems that you can influence.

Some people tackle their problems immediately. Others take some time before they start working on them. Especially with a serious and emotionally charged problem, it can be helpful to step back for a while and take a breath before you start working on it. It's easier to think with a clear head. You can use this time to calm your mind, senses and emotions, properly assess the problem and its causes, and review the tools available to you. You can stock up on energy and decide when you want to start working on the problem at hand.





Maybe you have some problems in mind that are straightforward and easy to solve. It can be helpful not to put off facing your problems for too long. This way, you can avoid them growing or taking on disproportionate meaning.

You cannot solve all your problems at once. If you are confronted with several problems, you can split them up and try to focus on one problem at a time. You can prioritize and start with the most urgent or relevant, or with the one that can be solved the most quickly.

It helps to break down a complex problem into small parts. You don't climb a high mountain in one go. You work your way up in stages, starting from the basecamp. The same is true about working on your problems.

You can swim across a river to get to the other bank. If you can't swim, you can try to cross the river on a raft. If the current is too strong, you can build a bridge. All courses of action can lead to the same goal: Reach the opposite bank. It's similar with problems.

For most problems, there are multiple solutions. If one does not lead you to your goal, try another. Be inspired by your own experiences or those of other people. Sometimes it helps to look at the problem from a different perspective. Ask yourself: *How would other people react to the problem?*

Try to think of all the problems you have solved in your life. What has helped you and what has not? Can your past experiences be helpful in solving your current problem? For example, have you ever learned a language in the past and can you draw parallels for learning German?

Problems are a normal part of life. Every human being has problems. Some problems are solvable and some are not. A problem does not mean the end of the world. Sometimes you need to accept a situation and find a way to live with it. Don't waste valuable resources on problems you can't solve. Rather, you should save them for the things you can actually change.



## 7. Bridging Waiting Times

When you're waiting in line to get into the supermarket or when you're waiting for an important reply...when you're waiting to fall asleep, or for a long-awaited event, or just for time to pass...when you're waiting for something, it can seem like time is moving extra slowly. Waiting times are special occasions when you have the chance to think about all kinds of things.



Maybe you're sometimes plagued by feelings of guilt. You might be ashamed of making supposedly wrong decisions or of being better off in Germany than your family and friends back in Syria.<sup>1</sup> Maybe you believe that your problems and worries are unjustifiable compared to the situation in Syria. Remember that your problems are no more or less relevant than those of your friends and family in Syria. They are just different, just as your situation is different. Sometimes you may find yourself going around in circles with your thoughts. Maybe you brood over things that can't be changed, or about things that are old, small and already past. This can make your problems seem bigger than they really are.

In these times, it can be useful to throw yourself into things that help you break these cycles of thought...things of your own choice, things that can distract you, take your mind off things and help you bridge waiting times.

During short waiting periods, you can:

- Listen to music.
- Read a few pages of a book.
- Browse through social media.

During long waiting periods, you can:

- Work on the plans and projects you've put off, that you wanted to do but never had time for.
- Use the time productively, perhaps to improve your language skills, explore your new surroundings or pick up a new hobby you've always wanted to try. Maybe your new surroundings offer new and exciting activities or inspirations?
- Meet friends, go out, cook something or play cards.
- Stop and think about what it is you really want.

Many find it helpful to have a daily routine. It could include volunteering, or regular virtual or in-person meetings with people who have similar interests. You can find more information about volunteering opportunities and social groups on the website linked at the end of this Handbook.

What would help you the most during times of waiting?

Think of several activities that are good for you or can help you feel calm and balanced. If you like, you can write them down. Make sure that the activities are easy to do. Check afterwards if they have fulfilled their purpose. If not, think of new activities.

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<sup>1</sup> All instances of "Syria" in this Handbook refer to the Syrian Arab Republic, the country's official long and short name used by the United Nations, as per <https://unterm.un.org>.

## 8. Time for Some Time Off?

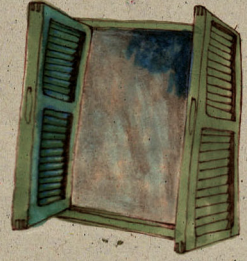
Sometimes it can seem like your problems are becoming too much for you. The pressure becomes too much, or the prolonged stress pushes you to your limits. Things can sometimes become unmanageable, and you lose sight of the big picture. This can be a sign from your inner self that it is time to take a break. Time to rest and get some distance from your problems. Accept this friendly reminder and try to think of ways how you would prefer to spend this break. Use it to clear your head and “recharge your batteries”, which you will need later on.

Maybe it will help you to tune out for a while and take some time off from the world.

- Find a quiet spot where you feel comfortable.
- Distance yourself and avoid things, information and people that might stress you out.
- Turn off the television and your phone.
- Take a break from the Internet and social media.
- Take some time to do something nice for yourself. Don't do anything stressful, but only things that are fun. Go for a walk alone, read a book, write in a journal or maybe do nothing at all.

The duration, regularity and form of this time off can vary, and only you can decide what you need.

## 9. You Can't Change the Situation, but You Can Change Your Attitude!



Perhaps you have had the experience, in difficult times, of problems cast like a dark veil over your field of vision, blocking your view of all that you have already achieved in life, beautiful and happy moments, positive memories, or things that are worth looking forward to.

### FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE MOMENTS

The following small exercise aims to direct your attention to the small, positive things in everyday life. The point here is not to spot great moments of exuberant joy. Rather, it is the conscious appreciation of the small, everyday successes that can give you strength and confidence. If you like, take time at the end of each day to reflect on one or more of the topics listed. You can also share ideas with your friends. Maybe they can come up with more ideas. Are you a creative person? You might want to capture the events in pictures instead of writing.





## ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

- Take 10 to 20 minutes to think about what you want to write (or draw) about.
- Describe in as much detail as possible what made you feel grateful or satisfied and explain why.

Some writing topics:

- The most wonderful experience I had today
- Something that gives me reason to look positively into the future
- Something I learned today
- Someone I admire or trust
- Something beautiful that I saw today
- Something good I did for myself today
- Something unexpectedly good that happened to me today
- An aspect of my current circumstances that I am grateful for
- Something that makes me proud
- Something or someone worth fighting for
- Something I have accomplished today
- Other topics you may have in mind

## IT ALL DEPENDS ON YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Comparing your current situation with your life in Syria can be frustrating or even depressing. Don't put yourself under pressure. Your current situation is completely different. Sometimes, it can help to look at things from another perspective, or to change your frame of reference. Try to focus on everything you have already achieved without comparing yourself to others. Everyone is different, and their circumstances might be completely different. Maybe you can find motivation and inspiration in the success of others?

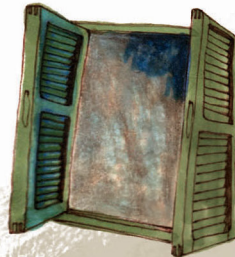


If you like, you can use this space to think about everything you have achieved so far – things that you are proud of. These could be, for instance:

- You managed to begin a new life in Germany.
- You made progress with learning the German language.
- Your application for family reunification was successful.
- You found a new hobby.
- Your apartment hunt was successful.
- You found work or an educational opportunity.

#### YOUR STRENGTHS

Everyone encounters problems in the course of their lives. Your personal strengths and positive attributes can help you overcome these. Yet it can be hard to remember about them whenever you're feeling bad and full of self-doubt, or when you're feeling overwhelmed by a problem.



## Try to call to mind your strengths.

What are your most important positive traits? An outside opinion can help you identify your skills and strengths. What would your friends or relatives say about you? How can you use your abilities to cope with problems, overcome obstacles or help others?

### BE YOUR OWN BIGGEST FAN

When you feel bad, depressed or demotivated, it can help to give yourself some encouragement. You can do this by standing in front of a mirror and speaking to yourself out loud. Say things to yourself that build you up. You can take on the role of a third person – this can be a role model or a loved one you trust. What would they say to you? “Nothing is impossible”. “Everyone has problems or goes through bad times, but these pass”. “People are capable of anything”. Do you want to add to these? Keep reminding yourself of these statements and look specifically for experiences in your life that prove their truthfulness.



## 10. Faith

Sometimes it can be hard to think positive thoughts or keep a positive attitude.

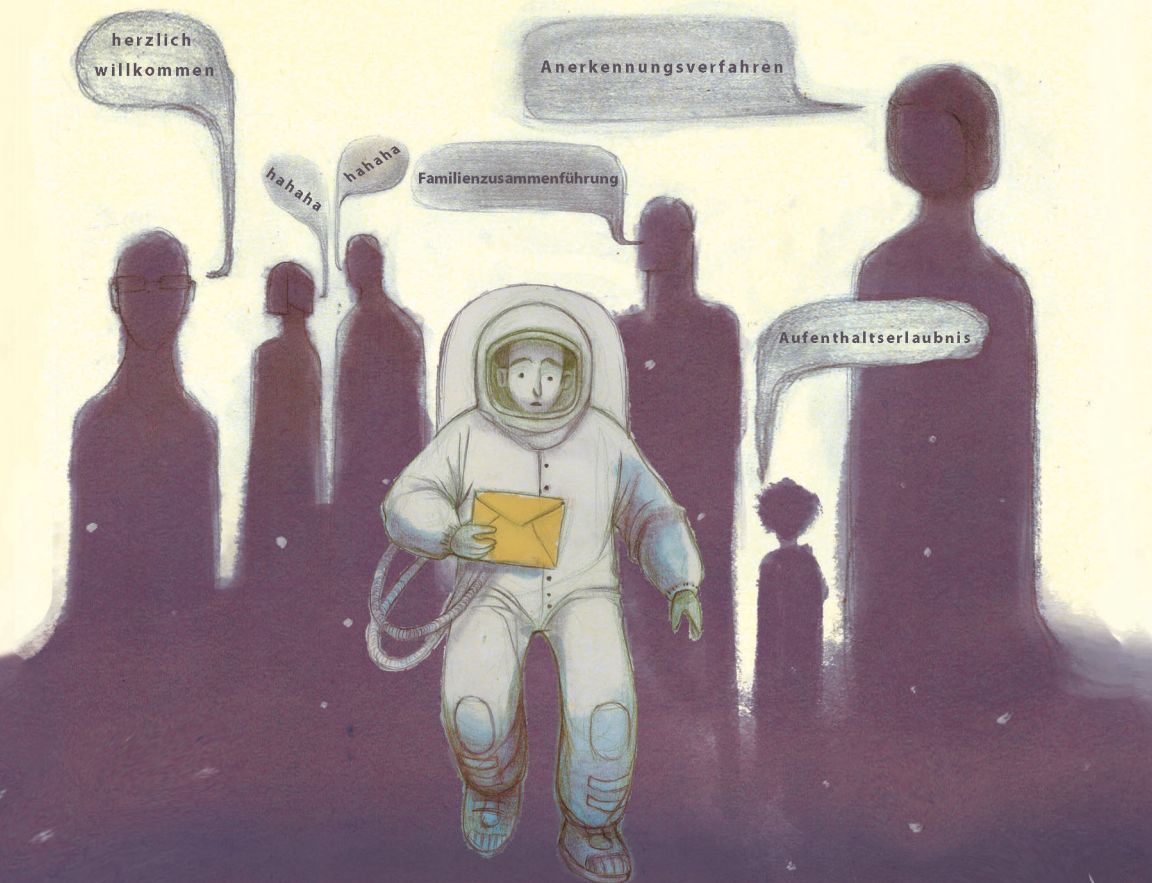
Maybe right now it would be helpful to believe in something that gives you strength and positive energy. Connecting with your spirituality can help you find peace during fast-moving, stressful times. It can help you slow your thoughts down and find a peaceful state of mind. When everything feels hopeless, belief can help you absorb negative feelings or make peace with things beyond your control – things that have already happened and those that might happen.

If you're religious, praying regularly, visiting holy sites or reading holy texts might help you.



You can connect with your spirituality, regardless of your religious beliefs. Maybe you prefer to go to a quiet spot to meditate or commune with nature, or find yourself by listening to music? Or maybe you have developed your own strategies?





## 11. Verstehst Du Deutsch?

German is the first and the biggest barrier that many men encounter when they come to this country. Language is a bridge, but it's also a "moat" that you need to cross, for example, in these cases:

- Receiving a letter that you don't understand
- Not having opportunities to communicate with others and express yourself, whether it's in the context of important occurrences, when searching for an apartment or a job, or making social connections

Language is the key to a new culture, and the first communicative exchange in German can feel like a huge success. At the same time, living in a foreign country whose language you don't speak can sometimes feel like walking blindly down a road.

Almost all men in your situation go through this problem. It's normal to feel helpless, afraid or insecure sometimes. Digital dictionaries and language translation apps (both for cell phones and computers) can offer support until you make progress in the German language. Or you can turn to your social network. Maybe you know someone who could help you with translations?

You already know some German? Then you could help others conduct their affairs in German. This way, you learn faster and deepen your knowledge of the language at the same time. However, you should not feel obligated to do so and only offer as much support as you feel comfortable with. Your well-being comes first.

Often, a considerable amount of time passes before you are able to meet the legal requirement for participation in an integration course. However, an integration course is not the only way to learn German. Maybe you want to look into one or more of the following alternatives:

- Watching movies in German (on television, in a movie theater or online).
- Free online resources, like the ones listed on the website linked at the end of this Handbook.
- Volunteering, including through organizations listed on the website.
- If you already speak some German, a language partner might be an option for you. This option also offers the opportunity for cultural exchange, and you can make social connections at the same time.

Just because others have had bad experiences learning German doesn't mean you will. It is important that you do not put yourself under pressure. You don't learn a language overnight. You decide the pace and method of learning that feels right for you. Don't be afraid to make mistakes and be proud of every new word you master.

Also, did you know that this book is also available in German?

# 12. Home Is a State of Mind



## HERE AND THERE

Living in another culture can make you feel like a leaf drifting in the wind. Lots of things can take longer than you expect. It's hard to orient yourself, and different norms clash with one another. Sometimes your expectations are not met. It's important to find a healthy balance within the diversity around you, so that the weight on your shoulders doesn't get too heavy.

Do you worry about your friends and family in Syria, or feel like you won't be able to meet your relatives' expectations of you, given the circumstances in Germany? Maybe they don't understand your current situation and the challenges you have faced? If thoughts of Syria make you sad or depressed, you could "take a break from Syria". Do what feels good and what helps you maintain distance. Concentrate on your life in Germany. Your well-being is what's important. It's what allows you to support your family in a healthy manner.

Do you miss your home country, Syrian culture and your life in Syria? Especially at the beginning, life in Germany can be exhausting. Maybe a break from Germany would help you. Get together with Syrian friends and acquaintances. Cook and enjoy the food of your homeland. Watch Syrian television programmes. Listen to Syrian music. Talk to your family and friends from Syria. The digital age offers a multitude of possibilities. Bring a piece of your homeland to Germany. This can create balance, be reassuring and make you feel less foreign.

## YOUR INGREDIENTS, YOUR CULTURE

If you have already spent some time in Germany, you may feel as if you are floating between two cultures. Maybe you feel closer to Syrian culture at times and German culture at other times, depending on the situation. It can make you feel pressured. Maybe you have the feeling that, in Germany, you are expected to conform? Or you're wracked with the worry that you might "betray" your home culture or "lose" your wife or kids to the new environment?

You do not have to choose one or the other culture. You can openly face a new culture without having to give up your own cultural identity. Integration is a mutual learning process and offers interesting opportunities for personal growth. For example, you appreciate Syrian spontaneity? You don't have to give it up. At the same time, you will discover new freedoms and opportunities in Germany. Use them! Try to find a "cultural" recipe that combines ingredients that you like, which unites both cultures' positive aspects. Filling out the graphic on the next page can help you with this.



{ Your personal growth,  
new possibilities }



## 13. Getting to Know Each Other

Our environment is highly complex. To simplify things, we humans automatically think in categories. This means that we make generalizations about people. This happens unconsciously, and we have no influence over this. This is how stereotypes about, for example, “Syrians”, “Germans”, “men”, “women”, “civil servants” and “politicians”, are formed. Not every generalization is automatically meant to be negative. Through personal encounters, we have the opportunity to get to know people, with their individual characteristics and traits, as they really are. Perhaps you have met people during your time in Germany who have little in common with the image you originally had of people in Germany. Perhaps this has caused you to change your mind at some point? Overcoming stereotypes requires that both sides be open, accepting of differences and curious about each other. Don't expect all Germans to know much about Syrian culture. Talk to them, exchange ideas, tell your story and hear theirs. Show them a piece of your culture. Invite German friends to share a Syrian meal or to a traditional celebration and accept their invitations, too!



## 14. Myself and Others

Just as you may have met open-minded, helpful and supportive people during your time in Germany, you may have also encountered people who were hostile towards you. Perhaps you have experienced prejudice or discrimination because of your appearance, origin, name, language skills or religion. Or just because you're a man. These experiences can make you angry or sad and can be demotivating. Always be aware of your personal worth. You don't need to prove yourself to anyone. Seek support from your social circle. Talk to people you trust and who understand you. It can help to share experiences, put your feelings into words and receive encouragement. Discrimination is a violation of human dignity, and you do not have to accept it. There are several counselling centres that can help you professionally and free of charge. You can find more information about support services on the website linked at the end of this Handbook.



In general, surround yourself with people who are good for you, no matter what their cultural background is.

People from many countries live in Germany. If you find it difficult to establish a connection with Germans, if you do not feel understood or valued by them, or if you do not feel represented by the Syrian community in Germany, it can help you, especially if you are young, to look specifically for an international environment. In this way, you will feel less foreign, and the language barrier will become less important. Or maybe you can find places and activities where people who share your interests come together.



# 15. Family

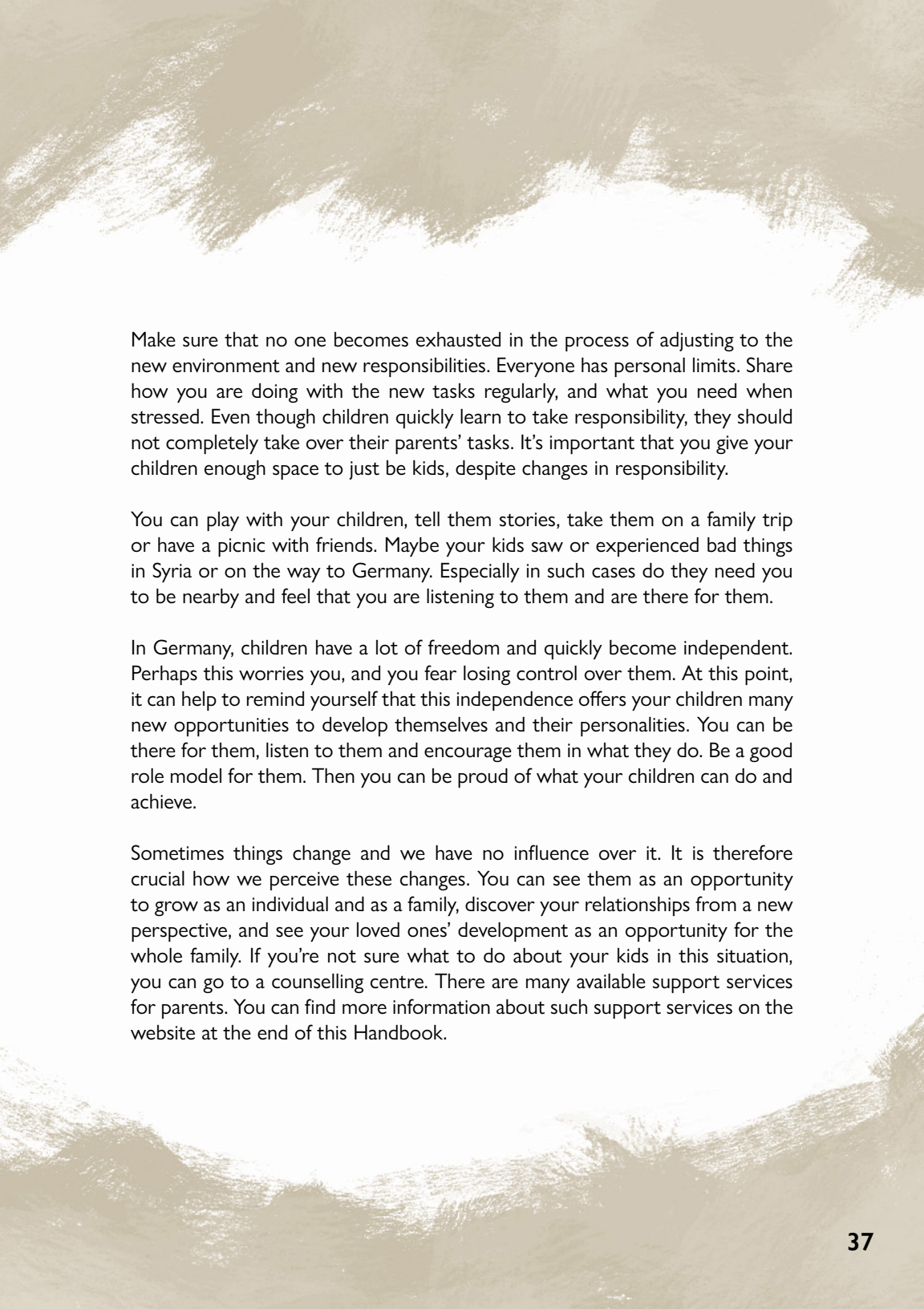


Whether or not you are here with your family (or depending on what your family looks like), the new situation can put you and/or other family members in a position of greater responsibility. Perhaps you may find yourselves having to devote to new, or different, tasks. Some people are comfortable with such changes and may even enjoy trying out new roles. They may find it easier to adapt to their new situation. For others, these changes may cause mixed feelings – even uncomfortable feelings, such as fear of losing control of the family or not being appreciated by other family members, or being useless or unproductive. This can be especially difficult for you if you have previously taken on a lot of responsibility and are not familiar with this type of change. That's okay. Remember that these changes are not just affecting you, but the whole family, and you are all facing this challenge together. This can be stressful for everyone. Instead of working against each other, you might think about how you can support or build off each other through this challenge. This may include giving up or sharing responsibilities. Roles can change – you get to define them together.

Roles change with age and profession, and depends on the people around us, including those within the family. This is not a bad thing, and it offers new opportunities. Think about what your family appreciates you for. Just because your role may be a little different now doesn't mean you are a different person, or that your personal qualities and skills are no longer worth anything. You might think about how you can use those qualities to best be there for your family in this unfamiliar situation. In the same way, you can think about what qualities you value most in your partner. For example, do you value how they make or maintain social contacts? Maybe new opportunities will open up for them: They may find a job, volunteering opportunity or a new way to support the family. Children can be a great support to their parents in the new environment. They are younger, can learn faster and adapt more easily.

In times of stress, it's important for you and other family members to be there for each other. You can rely on each other to:

- Ask for support and give it.
- Take problems seriously and accept mistakes.
- Recognize skills and use them.



Make sure that no one becomes exhausted in the process of adjusting to the new environment and new responsibilities. Everyone has personal limits. Share how you are doing with the new tasks regularly, and what you need when stressed. Even though children quickly learn to take responsibility, they should not completely take over their parents' tasks. It's important that you give your children enough space to just be kids, despite changes in responsibility.

You can play with your children, tell them stories, take them on a family trip or have a picnic with friends. Maybe your kids saw or experienced bad things in Syria or on the way to Germany. Especially in such cases do they need you to be nearby and feel that you are listening to them and are there for them.

In Germany, children have a lot of freedom and quickly become independent. Perhaps this worries you, and you fear losing control over them. At this point, it can help to remind yourself that this independence offers your children many new opportunities to develop themselves and their personalities. You can be there for them, listen to them and encourage them in what they do. Be a good role model for them. Then you can be proud of what your children can do and achieve.

Sometimes things change and we have no influence over it. It is therefore crucial how we perceive these changes. You can see them as an opportunity to grow as an individual and as a family, discover your relationships from a new perspective, and see your loved ones' development as an opportunity for the whole family. If you're not sure what to do about your kids in this situation, you can go to a counselling centre. There are many available support services for parents. You can find more information about such support services on the website at the end of this Handbook.

## 16. Looking Ahead

You may be worried about what lies in the future. The outcome of your asylum application, your job situation, income prospects or the well-being of your family – your future in Germany hardly seems to be plannable, as many things are vague and uncertain – there seems to be no solid basis for shaping the future. This uncertainty can cause stress and worry. You share these worries with many other men.

Setting goals and working towards achieving them in stages can help you regain control of your future. It keeps you going and can change your life. Be aware that you won't achieve everything right away.

### SOME TIPS FOR GOAL-SETTING

- Try to choose goals that fit your situation, and use the tools that are available to you.
- Only set goals that are in your power to influence. The result of your asylum application, for example, is not in your power to influence. Learning German, in contrast, is something you can control. You can't ensure that you will get a job offer, but you can influence the process, for example, by writing applications or seeking opportunities for professional development.
- If you're pursuing ambitious goals, it makes sense to break them up into small steps that you can work on. Set yourself a concrete time frame to achieve your goals.
- Check on your progress regularly and adjust your goal to changing circumstances, if necessary.
- Reward yourself when you reach a milestone on the path to achieving your overall goal. Cook something, watch a movie or a television series. You decide what feels good for you.
- Try to keep a positive attitude and celebrate small, everyday successes.

## SHORT GOAL-SETTING EXERCISE

If you like, you can list some of your goals here. Make sure your goals are well defined, so that it's clear when you've reached them.

Compare your current situation with the situation you are aiming for. How far away are you from reaching your goal?

What factors are preventing you from reaching your goal? What obstacles do you need to overcome?

What opportunities are there to overcome the obstacles that stand between you and your goals? Think about concrete actions that will get you where you want to go. It makes sense to define these clearly and establish when they will happen.

How should I set goals when my future is unknown?

- Set goals that lie in the near future.
- Stay flexible in pursuing your goal.
- Set a variety of goals.
- Don't set yourself too firmly on one plan and stay as open to other options as possible.

Plans can change, as circumstances change. But remember that circumstances do not always change for the worse. Sometimes unexpected opportunities arise.

### ENJOY THE VIEW

While looking into the past can be sad, looking into the future offers new possibilities. Consider what is there to look forward to. Is there a new book or movie coming out, or perhaps a trip you have planned that you are looking forward to? Are there friends or family that you will see in the future? Or maybe interesting job and training opportunities? Here you can note down things that you are looking forward to. If you ever feel bad or down, or feel like you want to give up, these can serve as a source of motivation and help you keep looking ahead.

### THE PATH BEFORE YOU

Humans have learned to adjust to various climates using different kinds of clothing. The right gear and equipment help us navigate difficult or changing terrain. In the same way, you need the appropriate tools to help you deal with challenges and get through difficult phases on your way through Germany – you may even have developed some of your own. In this book, we have presented some tools you may use. Some of them might have already been familiar to you, some may be new, some might be useful guides for you, and some may not. Maybe as you've travelled on your path, you've developed completely different strategies, which are not mentioned in this book.

Here you have the opportunities to put together your personal equipment. Which of the aforementioned strategies would you like to take with you on your path – because they might be useful to you in the future, or were helpful to you in the past?



Not helpful

Accept and regulate your emotions.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Seek or accept social support.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Seek or accept professional help.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Tackle problems and seek solutions.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Pursue activities that distract you.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Take a break.



Very helpful

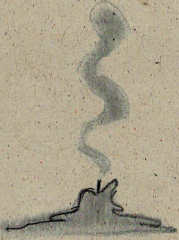


Not helpful

Develop a positive point of view.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Believe in something that gives you strength.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Strengthen or loosen your connection with your country of origin, as needed.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Make a new homeland of your new country, combining aspects of various cultures and a new language.

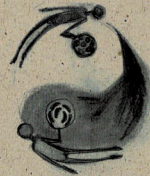


Very helpful



Not helpful

Get to know people through cultural exchange.



Very helpful



Not helpful

Focus on the future. Set goals and work on them.



Very helpful



What other strategies do you think you can use? Use this space for your additional ideas:

Are there strategies that you want to develop further?

What are the concrete steps needed for these?

What are the situations in which these strategies can help you? In what situations can they not help?

How would things change for you if you could use these strategies more regularly?

You can find more information about available support services on this website:

[selfcare-germany.iom.int](https://selfcare-germany.iom.int)

Maybe you will find resources to help you with some of your concerns.



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