THE WALKING STICK

The Invisible Things
We Lean On to Survive

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READING SAMPLE

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A note to the reader

This book offers education and reflection on everyday psychological patterns. It does not provide a diagnosis, psychotherapy, or individualized medical or mental health advice. Its exercises are invitations to explore, not clinical assessments or a treatment programme. If an exercise causes substantial distress, stop and consider discussing it with a qualified professional. Seek appropriate professional help when difficulties are persistent, overwhelming, or affecting your safety or daily functioning.

Imagined situations are introduced as fictional or hypothetical illustrations. They are not reports of the author’s clients or verified accounts of real individuals. The brief Apollo 13 historical example is identified separately and sourced in the notes.

The walking stick is a metaphor for the ways people seek emotional security. It is not a psychological diagnosis. Physical mobility aids, disability accommodations, medication, and necessary care are valuable supports; using them does not indicate emotional weakness. Nothing in this book asks you to abandon necessary assistance, prescribed treatment, your faith, or supportive relationships.

Where another person uses threats, violence, surveillance, or financial restriction to limit your choices, the problem is not simply your emotional dependence. Safety and access to appropriate help take priority over exercises in self-reliance. Personal responsibility never makes you responsible for someone else’s abuse.

What is holding you up

You can know that something is hurting you and still feel unable to loosen your grip on it.

That is one of the most difficult experiences to explain, especially to yourself. You recognise the relationship that keeps costing you your peace. You hear yourself agreeing when you wanted to say no. You achieve what you once thought would make you feel secure, only to discover that you need another achievement before you can rest.

Understanding the cost has not yet given you the freedom to choose differently. When this happens, it is worth asking a question that goes deeper than “Why do I keep doing this?” Ask: “What am I afraid I would have to feel, face, or believe about myself if I stopped?”

We usually recognise dependence by what a person keeps reaching for. But to understand it, we must also examine what they are reaching away from. A request for reassurance may carry a fear of being unwanted. Constant helping may protect a person from wondering whether anyone would choose their company without needing their service. The determination to win every disagreement may conceal difficulty accepting that being mistaken does not make someone insignificant.

These are possibilities to investigate, not explanations to impose. The same behaviour can arise for different reasons. But once you begin asking what a habit is protecting you from, a pattern that seemed senseless may become understandable. And what you can describe accurately becomes easier to address deliberately.

I call these psychological supports our walking sticks: the things we lean on to steady ourselves, preserve an identity, or get through feelings we do not yet know how to manage another way. The metaphor becomes especially useful when a support starts limiting the life it was meant to help us live.

A walking stick can be a relationship. It can be money, admiration, anger, control, or the conviction that your past has already decided your future. Sometimes it is a role that other people praise. Being the reliable one can become a life in which you are never allowed to need anything. Being the successful one can make an ordinary setback feel like the loss of your right to be respected.

The danger is easy to miss because the thing itself may be valuable. Love matters. Financial security matters. Achievement can be deeply satisfying. Faith, friendship, family, and community can sustain us through experiences we could not reasonably bear alone. The question is what happens when one of these becomes responsible for holding together your entire sense of who you are.

What happens when the thing holding you up becomes the very thing preventing you from standing?

A restrictive dependence rarely presents you with a single bill. Its cost is spread across ordinary days. You avoid a necessary conversation. You spend money to maintain an impression. You agree to a commitment and resent it before you have finished saying yes. You postpone a decision because somebody might disapprove.

Each incident can seem too small to justify changing anything. Together, they can shape a life you no longer feel you are choosing. This is why advice such as “Just leave,” “Stop caring,” or “Be confident” often fails to reach the difficulty. It names a desired result while overlooking the task the current pattern performs. If approval has become your evidence that you are acceptable, disappointing someone will feel like more than an awkward moment. If being needed has become your evidence that you belong, setting a limit can feel like putting your place in a relationship at risk.

Understanding that task gives you a more realistic starting point for change. Throughout this book, I will help you examine what you lean on, what it does for you, and what it asks you to sacrifice. We will distinguish support that strengthens your ability to live from arrangements that progressively narrow your choices. Then we will work on practical responses: handling a delayed reply without immediately treating it as rejection, setting a boundary without turning it into punishment, making a decision without requiring a guarantee, and receiving help while retaining responsibility for your life.

These are ordinary situations. Changing how you meet them can matter far more than making an impressive declaration about becoming a different person.

You can begin to understand this difference by separating two questions: “What has happened?” and “What have I decided it means about me?”

For a brief hypothetical example, consider receiving a correction at work. The event is that part of your work needs revision. You might then conclude that you are incapable, that your position is threatened, or that everyone has lost respect for you. Those conclusions require evidence of their own. They do not become facts simply because the correction hurt.

If you respond to the conclusion before checking it, you may spend the evening defending yourself against a judgment nobody made. If you establish what needs changing, you can address the work and examine the feeling separately.

The same distinction can help in relationships. Someone declining an invitation is an event. The belief that you are unwanted is an interpretation. Sometimes there is a real pattern of exclusion that deserves attention. Sometimes the person is simply unavailable. You need room to find out which situation you are in.

That room is part of what we will build: enough space between an experience and your response to investigate, choose, and act with greater care. You

do not have to stop feeling hurt before you can begin using it.

Having more room to choose should also make it easier to receive help honestly. You can ask for comfort without asking someone to promise that you will never be hurt. You can depend on another person for practical care and retain your own preferences and judgment. There is no contradiction between belonging to a community and having a voice within it. The purpose of standing more firmly is to participate in your life, including your relationships, with greater freedom.

Psychological research gives us a useful foundation here. Self-determination theory recognises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as psychological needs. Autonomy concerns acting with a sense of willingness and personal endorsement; relatedness concerns connection with others.[1] Having a voice and having people beside you can support each other.

A large research review also found an association between stronger social relationships and lower mortality risk.[2] That finding does not establish that every relationship is beneficial, but it reinforces the importance of taking human connection seriously. A book about dependence must not teach readers to become ashamed of needing people.

Nor should it confuse real hardship with an attitude problem. If your income cannot cover food and housing, you need practical options, not a lecture about your attachment to money. If illness or disability makes assistance necessary, receiving it

does not diminish your maturity. Where someone uses threats or coercion to restrict your choices, safety and appropriate support come before experiments in asserting yourself.

We will keep those realities in view. Greater emotional independence means developing the capacity to make considered choices within your circumstances and to seek the help those circumstances require.

That is why we will begin by recognising a pattern without turning it into an accusation against your character. Then we will examine the particular forms it can take in love, ambition, anger, approval, control, and the need to be indispensable. Understanding a pattern will lead to practical work: tolerating manageable discomfort, strengthening your sense of identity, changing habits, and building relationships with room for honesty and difference.

The thirty-day challenge near the end will give that work a daily structure. Thirty days cannot guarantee a transformation. They can give you a beginning you can observe and build on.

You do not need to understand your entire history before beginning. Childhood experiences may matter. So may recent loss, financial pressure, the expectations around you, or a response that became familiar through repetition. An explanation should help you see what to work on. It should not require you to invent a past or excuse harm you cause in the present.

For now, choose one recurring situation in which you feel less free than you want to be. Keep it in mind as you read. Look for something specific enough to examine: the request you cannot decline, the opinion you cannot bear to hear, the reply you keep checking for, the mistake you cannot allow yourself to make.

We will begin by finding out what that situation has come to carry. Once you understand the weight you have placed on it, you can start making decisions about how to carry your life differently.

Chapter 1

Everyone Has a Walking Stick

One place to look for your walking stick is the choice you keep postponing because you cannot bear somebody's possible reaction.

You may already know your preference. You may have considered the consequences carefully. Yet you keep explaining, seeking permission, or waiting for a moment when nobody will be disappointed. Eventually, avoiding the reaction becomes more important than the decision itself.

Something has begun to govern you beyond the practical merits of the choice. It may be fear of conflict, loss of approval, uncertainty about your own judgment, or a real consequence that requires careful planning. Finding out which one matters. You cannot respond wisely to a problem you have described only as "I am weak."

In this chapter, I want to give you a more useful way to look. Instead of asking whether you are strong enough to need nothing, ask what each support enables you to do and what you feel compelled to do to keep it.

Everyone relies on supports. We begin life receiving care, learn through other people, and continue to rely on skills, routines, relationships, and resources

that no one could create entirely alone. That shared reliance does not mean every support is harmful. A support becomes a concern when the arrangement repeatedly costs you honesty, judgment, or room to act, and you struggle to respond another way.

A useful place to begin is the difference between wanting something and making it a condition of your worth. When you want appreciation, you can enjoy it, miss it, and ask whether it is reasonably due. When you require it to feel worthy, the absence of praise becomes much harder to examine calmly. You are no longer considering only the quality of your work or the fairness of the response. You are trying to defend your right to think well of yourself.

You can want your work to be appreciated while remaining able to assess it when praise does not arrive. You can value your partner’s opinion while retaining the ability to disagree. But if appreciation is the only way you know whether your work matters, silence acquires enormous power. If agreement is the only way you feel secure in love, an ordinary difference becomes something you must eliminate.

Listen for the conditions you place on yourself. They may sound like “I must be useful,” “I must never fall behind,” or “I must keep everyone happy.” Such statements often leave little room for being a person with limits. They turn circumstances you cannot fully control into requirements you must somehow meet.

The difficulty becomes especially clear when the requirement changes after you satisfy it. One

success is followed immediately by the need for another. One reassurance settles you only until the next uncertain moment. No amount of giving establishes that you have given enough. You are trying to finish a task whose terms keep moving.

The desire for appreciation or comfort deserves to be understood. The important question is whether you are asking it to settle a judgment about yourself that must be renewed every time circumstances change.

To see more clearly what is happening, consider the function of the support, the flexibility it leaves you, and the cost of keeping the arrangement as it is. These questions will guide our reflection throughout the book; they are not a diagnostic test.

Begin with what the support does for you. It may offer practical help, pleasure, companionship, relief, or a sense of importance. Several functions can exist together. Naming the benefit honestly matters because you will struggle to change a pattern if you refuse to acknowledge why you use it.

Once you understand the benefit, consider what choices remain available to you. Can you adapt when someone is unavailable? Can you hear advice without having to obey it or reject it completely? Can you rest when you planned to work, or allow another person to handle a task differently? Flexibility is always limited by real circumstances; having few resources is not a character failure. Here we are examining the room you actually have and how you use it.

READING SAMPLE

Then consider what maintaining the arrangement repeatedly takes from your life. Consider money and time, but also attention, trust, privacy, sleep, and commitments. A behaviour can be useful in the moment while becoming expensive across a month or a year.

Let me illustrate these questions with one fictional situation. Imagine a man named Peter who often helps his younger sister with practical problems. When she arranges a move without asking him, he feels left out and accuses her of becoming distant. For this example, suppose that being needed has become his main evidence that he matters to her.

Helping serves a generous function: he cares about his sister. It also protects him from feeling unimportant. His flexibility becomes limited when he cannot welcome her competence without experiencing it as a loss. The cost appears when she feels obliged to ask for help she does not need to reassure him that he still belongs.

Simply telling Peter to stop helping would miss the issue. He needs to learn how to remain connected when he is not solving a problem. The relationship needs room for his sister to be capable and for him to be valued as more than a service.

That is the purpose of examining an arrangement closely. It lets you preserve what is worthwhile while identifying the demand that has become harmful.

What becomes apparent through these questions is that the object you reach for may be quite different from the need you are trying to meet.

Money can pay for safety and opportunity. It can also become a way to seek respect. An apology can repair a wrong. It can also be used repeatedly to end someone’s displeasure, even when you do not believe you have done anything wrong. Advice can improve a decision. It can also become a way of avoiding ownership of it.

In each case, you need to know which task you are dealing with. More money may improve a material problem while leaving a demand for admiration untouched. More apologies may create temporary calm while making an honest disagreement harder to have. More advice may supply information long after information has ceased to be what you lack.

Ask what you hope will happen inside you after you get what you are seeking. Will you feel informed, rested, safer, accepted, vindicated, or briefly beyond criticism? Then ask whether the thing you are pursuing can reasonably provide that result, and for how long.

Sometimes the answer will be straightforward: you are tired and need sleep; you are short of money and need practical assistance; an agreement is unclear and needs discussing. Do not invent a hidden problem where an ordinary need explains the situation.

READING SAMPLE

But where the same response repeatedly leaves the same deeper question unresolved, pay attention. You may be asking it to do work it cannot finish.

What relief leaves unresolved

An immediate benefit can keep a costly pattern persuasive. A decision to agree may relieve the discomfort of anticipating conflict. The consequences of having agreed arrive later, when the task competes with your own responsibilities. By then, saying no feels like breaking a promise, and you have another reason to continue.

For a simple hypothetical illustration, suppose you are asked to take on extra work. You have no space for it, but you say yes because you dread appearing unhelpful. The conversation ends pleasantly. That pleasant ending is real. So is the evening you later lose trying to meet two incompatible commitments.

If you judge the decision only by the first few minutes, it seems to have worked. If you examine the whole sequence, you can see the cost more clearly.

Try extending the period over which you assess a response. What did it give you immediately? What happened by the end of the day? If repeated for six months, what would it make easier or harder? This is a practical reflection, not a prediction you can make with certainty. Its purpose is to include consequences that urgency tends to push out of view.

You may discover that a short period of discomfort would be less costly than the arrangement you keep making to avoid it. You may also discover a real barrier that requires help or preparation. Both findings are useful.

As you examine that wider cost, be careful about where you place responsibility. The purpose is to understand your participation, not to make yourself answerable for everything that happens around you. Other people make choices. Their dishonesty, aggression, or disregard is not created by your failure to respond perfectly.

At the same time, wherever you have meaningful choice, your response deserves attention. You may not be able to make someone welcome a boundary. You can examine whether you have communicated it clearly, whether you can uphold it safely, and what support you need if they continue to ignore it.

This distinction keeps responsibility specific. Instead of “Everything is my fault,” you can ask, “What is mine to address?” Instead of “They must change before I can do anything,” you can ask, “What options exist within the situation as it is?” Sometimes the answer begins with gathering information or seeking assistance rather than taking immediate action.

The same precision helps when you examine your feelings. Feeling excluded does not establish that exclusion was intended. Feeling guilty does not, by itself, establish that you have done wrong. A feeling may alert you to something important, but you still need to investigate its meaning.

Taking your experience seriously includes allowing yourself to learn more about it. An initial feeling may identify a concern; further information may change your understanding of what caused it. If you can allow that process to unfold, you gain an alternative to either dismissing yourself or insisting that your first explanation must be right.

Looking at your own life

Understanding becomes more useful when you can apply it to a particular moment. Choose a recent, manageable incident in which you felt pressed to recover somebody’s approval, regain control, prove your worth, or escape uncertainty. Leave your most distressing experience aside for now.

Write a few sentences answering these questions. This exercise is an original reflection tool for the book, not a clinical assessment.

1. **What happened?** Describe what someone could have observed. Keep the event separate from your explanation of it.

2. **What did I believe was at risk?** Name the practical consequence you feared and any conclusion you drew about yourself.

3. **What did I do?** Record your response without defending it or insulting yourself.

4. **What did it give me, and what did it cost?** Look beyond the immediate moment. A response may have been helpful; allow the account to show that if it was.

5. **What remains uncertain?** Include other explanations and information you still need.

6. **What is one proportionate next action?** Choose something within your circumstances: clarify a request, delay an unnecessary reply, check a budget, discuss a boundary, or ask for appropriate help.

Here is an invented example of a short entry:

“My manager asked me to revise two paragraphs. I assumed she regretted hiring me. I rewrote the entire report that evening, including sections she had approved. Working made me feel that I was reducing the danger, but I missed a family commitment. I do not know that my position was threatened. Next time, I will establish the scope of the revision before starting.”

The useful discovery is the point at which a correction became a threat to the writer’s whole position. That is where checking the interpretation might change the response. The exercise does not demand that the writer suddenly feel confident. It identifies a smaller action that can be taken while confidence is uncertain.

If your own entry reveals a practical problem rather than a question of self-worth, respond to the practical problem. The framework must serve your understanding, not force your experience to fit its terms.

Having made the pattern more visible, you may feel tempted to impose a sweeping rule. Give yourself time to consider what would actually help. Never

needing reassurance again is an unrealistic target. Becoming more specific about the reassurance you need is something you can practise.

Choose one situation this week in which you can make a smaller, more honest request of a support. Ask for feedback on a piece of work rather than confirmation of your entire ability. Ask a partner to discuss a particular concern rather than guarantee that nothing will ever change. Offer help with a defined task rather than taking responsibility for the whole outcome.

Then observe what happens. Did the feared reaction occur? If it did, how did you respond, and what support helped? Did discomfort remain longer than you wanted while still proving manageable? Did the situation reveal a concern that deserves a more substantial conversation?

Over time, observations like these can give you a more accurate account of your choices than a verdict such as “I am weak” ever could. You begin to see the circumstances that make a response difficult, the help that makes it possible, and the consequences of responding differently. As we turn to the distinction between support and dependence, keep this question with you: does this support help me take part in my life, or am I increasingly arranging my life around keeping it available?

You do not have to put it down today. You need to begin seeing clearly what you are asking it to carry.