



Unlearning Internalized Ableism

Reflection, Rootwork & Grounding Guide

Understanding the Voice You Learned, the Systems That Shaped It, and the Needs Underneath

Purpose of This Guide

This guide is designed to help you slow down and begin understanding internalized ableism with more depth, care, and honesty.

**Internalized ableism is not simply “negative self-talk.”
It is often a learned relationship with yourself.**

It can show up as the voice that says:

- “I should be able to do this.”
- “Why can’t I just keep up?”
- “I’m lazy.”
- “I’m too much.”
- “I’m not enough.”
- “I need to try harder.”
- “Other people can do this, so what is wrong with me?”

But that voice did not come from nowhere.

It was often shaped by environments, systems, relationships, and expectations that did not make enough room for your nervous system, your needs, your capacity, your identity, or your lived experience.

This guide is not about blaming yourself for having that voice.

It is about asking:

- **Where did this come from?**
- **What did it protect?**
- **What did it help me survive?**
- **What support was missing?**
- **What would it mean to understand myself without shame being the main language?**

This is not about fixing yourself.

It is about understanding what you learned and beginning to choose something different.

Important Disclaimer

This guide is intended for **psychoeducation, reflection, and personal growth.**

It is not therapy, crisis care, diagnosis, medical advice, or a replacement for individualized mental health treatment.

Using this guide, purchasing REVAM materials, or participating in REVAM content does **not** create a therapist-client relationship.

Some reflections may bring up grief, anger, shame, sadness, emotional activation, memories of being misunderstood, or awareness of unmet needs. Please move through this guide at your own pace.

If this material brings up overwhelming distress, trauma responses, or concerns about your safety, please seek support from a licensed mental health provider, crisis resource, or trusted support system.

If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services in your area.

In the United States, the **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** is available by call, text, and chat for mental health crisis or emotional distress support.

The **Crisis Text Line** can be reached by texting **HOME** to **741741** for free crisis support.

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How to Use This Guide

This is not something you have to complete in one sitting.

You can:

- **Write**
- **Think**
- **Speak out loud**
- **Pause with the questions**
- **Come back later**
- **Skip what feels too activating**
- **Use this with a therapist or trusted support person**

There is no “right” way to move through this.

If you notice yourself trying to answer perfectly, rushing through, shutting down, or judging your responses, pause.

That reaction may be part of the pattern.

The goal is not to perform healing.

The goal is to notice what has been learned and begin meeting yourself with more accuracy.

Grounding Before You Begin

Before reflecting, take a moment to settle your body.

Try this:

- Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach.
- Inhale slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds.
- Repeat 3–5 times.

Then gently ask yourself:

“Am I here, or am I overwhelmed?”

If you are overwhelmed, pause.

This work can wait.

You matter more than finishing the guide.

Section 1: Many Women Were Taught to Adapt Before They Were Taught to Understand Themselves

Psychoeducation

Many women, especially neurodivergent women, were taught how to adapt long before they were taught how to understand themselves.

You may have learned how to:

- Be agreeable
- Stay quiet
- Mirror others
- Perform calm
- Hide confusion
- Push through overwhelm
- Overprepare
- Avoid taking up too much space
- Be useful before being understood

And because those adaptations may have helped you belong, avoid criticism, or stay connected, they may have started to feel like who you are.

But adaptation is not the same as identity.

Sometimes what looks like personality is actually survival that has been repeated long enough to feel natural.

Internalized ableism begins when the world teaches you that your natural way of thinking, feeling, needing, pacing, processing, or functioning is wrong.

And over time, you begin to believe it too.

Reflection

Where did you learn to adapt before you understood yourself?

What parts of yourself did you learn to adjust or hide?

What did being “easy,” “quiet,” “helpful,” or “high-functioning” protect you from?

Where were you praised for adapting in ways that may have cost you?

Rootwork Question

What did you have to become in order to be accepted?

What part of you had to wait?

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Action Tool: Adaptation vs Identity Check

Choose one trait people associate with you.

Example: responsible, easygoing, strong, quiet, helpful, independent, capable, flexible.

Trait:

How this may genuinely be part of me:

How this may also be an adaptation:

What it has protected me from:

What it may be costing me now:



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Section 2: What Internalized Ableism Actually Is

Psychoeducation

Internalized ableism is not just a belief.

It is a learned relationship with yourself.

It is the internal voice that says:

- “You should be able to do more.”
- “You shouldn’t struggle this much.”
- “You need to try harder to be normal.”
- “You are falling behind.”
- “You are too sensitive.”
- “You are making excuses.”

But what we are really talking about is this:

- You were taught what was acceptable before you were given space to understand what was natural for you.

So your self-perception may have been shaped by standards that were never designed for your nervous system.

This means the problem is not that you failed to become “normal enough.”

The problem is that you were taught to measure yourself against a standard that did not account for your actual needs.

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Reflection

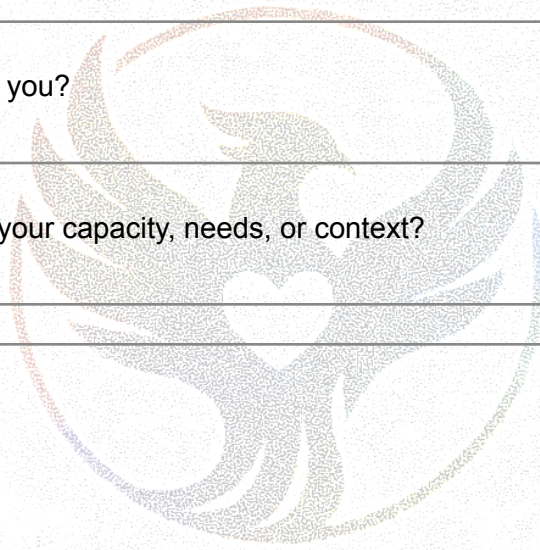
What does internalized ableism sound like in your mind?

When does that voice get loudest?

What does it usually accuse you of?

What does it demand from you?

What does it ignore about your capacity, needs, or context?



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Action Tool: The Voice Is Not the Truth

Write one harsh thought you often have about yourself.

The thought:

Now ask:

Who or what taught me this?

What expectation is this thought trying to enforce?

What need does this thought ignore?

A more accurate statement would be:

Example:

Harsh thought: "I'm lazy."

More accurate statement: "I may be overwhelmed, under-supported, or needing a different structure."

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Section 3: Where It Comes From — Systems, Not Just Self-Talk

Psychoeducation

Internalized ableism does not come from nowhere.

It is reinforced through systems.

- School systems that reward compliance over curiosity.
- Families that value behavior over understanding.
- Workplaces that treat productivity as worth.
- Cultures that praise overworking and shame rest.
- Religious or community systems that frame struggle as lack of discipline.
- Gender expectations that teach women to accommodate before they are considered.

For many women, especially women of color, there can be an added layer of survival.

You may have learned:

- Do not take up too much space.
- Do not ask for too much help.
- Do not show struggle.
- Do not make mistakes.
- Do not give people a reason to judge you.
- Be twice as prepared.
- Be easy to deal with.
- Be grateful.
- Be strong.

That is not just personal.

That is systemic conditioning becoming internal.

When we only call it “negative self-talk,” we miss the systems that trained the voice.

Reflection

What systems shaped the way you see yourself?

- School
- Family
- Work
- Religion
- Culture
- Gender expectations
- Race/cultural expectations
- Productivity culture
- Medical/mental health systems
- Relationships
- Social media
- Capitalism

Other:

What did those systems reward?

What did those systems punish or misunderstand?

What did you learn you had to do to stay accepted or safe?

Rootwork Question

Where did you learn that your needs were too much?

Where did you learn that your worth depended on how well you could adapt?

Action Tool: System-to-Self Translation

Choose one message you internalized.

Example: "I should not need help."

Message I learned:

Where I learned it:

What it helped me survive:

How it shows up now:

What I want to begin practicing instead:



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Section 4: The Cost of Being Undiagnosed, Misunderstood, or Unsupported

Psychoeducation

Many women are diagnosed late or spend years without accurate language for their experience.

When you do not have language, your brain often creates explanations.

- “I’m the problem.”
- “I’m not disciplined enough.”
- “I’m irresponsible.”
- “I’m dramatic.”
- “I’m broken.”
- “I’m behind.”

But often, the deeper truth is:

- “I was unsupported.”
- “I was misunderstood.”
- “I was trying to function without the right tools.”
- “I was judged for needs no one helped me name.”

That gap between lived experience and accurate understanding can create chronic self-blame.

Over time, that self-blame can contribute to anxiety, depression, burnout, perfectionism, people-pleasing, overcompensating, and constant self-doubt.

Not because something is wrong with you.

Because you were navigating life without enough language for what was happening.

Reflection

What did you believe about yourself before you had language for your experience?

What labels did you carry?

What would have changed if someone had understood you earlier?

What support would have helped?

What grief comes up when you realize you were unsupported, not broken?

Gentle Check-In

Pause here.

If grief is present, let it be present.

Sometimes understanding brings relief and sadness at the same time.

That does not mean you are going backward.

It means something is being seen clearly.

Section 5: The Internal Voice

Psychoeducation

The internalized ableist voice often sounds familiar because it is built from repetition.

It may sound like:

- A parent
- A teacher
- A partner
- A supervisor
- A culture
- A diagnosis you did not have yet
- A system that only valued the parts of you that performed well

**Over time, these thoughts stop feeling like thoughts.
They start feeling like truth.**

That is why we slow them down.

Not to argue with ourselves aggressively.

Not to force toxic positivity.

But to ask:

Is this actually true, or is this something I learned to survive?

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Reflection

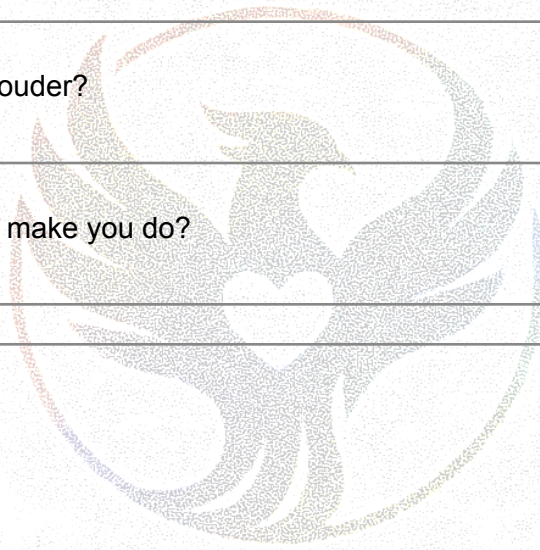
When you are struggling, what does your inner voice say?

What phrases come up most often?

Whose voice does it sound like?

When does this voice get louder?

What does this voice try to make you do?



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Action Tool: Voice Mapping

The voice says:

It sounds like:

It gets loud when:

It tries to protect me from:

But it costs me:

A more compassionate voice might say:



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Section 6: The Rootwork Reframe

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The shift is this:

These are not truths.

They are learned responses to unmet needs.

When your needs were not understood, supported, or named, your brain created explanations.

Those explanations became beliefs.

If you needed support but received criticism, you may have learned:

- **“I should not need help.”**

If you needed flexibility but received punishment, you may have learned:

- **“I am difficult.”**

If you needed more time but received pressure, you may have learned:

- **“I am too slow.”**

If you needed sensory support but received dismissal, you may have learned:

- **“I am dramatic.”**

Rootwork asks:

What was needed here that was not given?

That question changes everything.

Because shame asks, “What is wrong with me?”

Rootwork asks, “What need went unmet?”

Reflection

Choose one painful belief.

The belief:

What unmet need may be underneath it?

What support was missing?

What did you need someone to understand?

What would you say to someone else who carried this same belief?

Action Tool: Belief to Need

Belief:

What this belief says about me:

What this belief may actually be pointing to:

The need underneath may be:

One way to respond to that need now:

Section 7: The Nervous System Layer

Psychoeducation

Your nervous system is not broken.

It is adaptive.

- If you learned that mistakes led to criticism, your body may overprepare.
- If you learned that slowing down led to consequences, your body may rush.
- If you learned that being different led to rejection, your body may mask.
- If you learned that asking for help led to shame, your body may overfunction.
- If you learned that being seen led to judgment, your body may make itself smaller.

These responses are not signs that you are failing.

They are signs that your body learned what was required to stay safe.

This is why internalized ableism is not just “thinking bad thoughts.”

It can live in the body.

It can show up as:

- Tension
- Panic
- Shame
- Shutdown
- Urgency
- Overworking
- Collapse.

Your body may still be responding to old conditions.

Even if your mind knows you are trying to live differently now.

Reflection

What does internalized ableism feel like in your body?

- Tight chest
- Stomach drop
- Jaw clenching
- Racing thoughts
- Urgency
- Shutdown
- Heaviness
- Nausea
- Restlessness
- Panic
- Numbness
- Exhaustion

Other:

What situations activate it?

What does your body try to make you do?

- Overwork
- Hide
- Explain
- Perform
- Shut down
- Apologize
- Prove yourself
- Avoid
- People-please
- Push harder

Other:



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Action Tool: Body-Based Reframe

When your body reacts, try asking:

What is my body trying to protect me from?

Is that danger happening right now, or is my body remembering old consequences?

What would help my body feel supported instead of pushed?

What is one small cue of safety I can offer myself?

Examples:

- Feet on floor
- Water
- Lowering stimulation
- Asking for more time
- Using a written list
- Stepping away briefly
- Naming the pressure out loud



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Section 8: The Cost

Psychoeducation

There is a cost to internalized ableism.

And it is not small.

- Shame.
- Burnout.
- Overcompensating.
- Chronic self-doubt.
- Disconnection from self.
- Fear of needing support.
- Feeling behind no matter how much you do.
- Being highly capable but deeply exhausted.

Many women become functional without feeling supported internally.

- They can perform.
- They can achieve.
- They can keep going.
- They can appear composed.

But inside, they may be running on pressure, fear, urgency, and the belief that rest has to be earned.

That kind of functioning is costly.

And eventually, the cost shows up.

- In exhaustion.
- In resentment.
- In shutdown.
- In identity confusion.
- In anxiety.
- In relationships.
- In the body.

Reflection

What has internalized ableism cost you?

Emotionally:

Physically:

Relationally:

Creatively:

Spiritually or internally:

What have you been able to do because you adapted?

What has that adaptation cost you access to?

Rootwork Question

Where are you functioning but not actually supported?

Where are you capable but not okay?

Section 9: Survival Strategies Are Not Your Worth

Psychoeducation

Survival strategies are not your worth.

- Being able to push through does not define your value.
- Being productive does not define your value.
- Being easy to deal with does not define your value.
- Being agreeable does not define your value.
- Being independent does not define your value.
- Being able to mask does not define your value.

Struggling does not reduce your value.

You adapted.

But adaptation is not identity.

This distinction matters.

Because if you believe your worth comes from how well you survive, then rest will feel dangerous.

- Support will feel undeserved.
- Limits will feel like failure.
- Slowing down will feel like losing yourself.

But what if you are still worthy when you are not performing?

What if you are still worthy when you need help?

What if your value was never dependent on how little support you required?

Reflection

What survival strategy have you mistaken for your worth?

- Being productive
- Being independent
- Being easygoing
- Being helpful
- Being high-achieving
- Being emotionally contained
- Being low-maintenance
- Being the strong one
- Being agreeable
- Being useful

Other:

Who are you afraid you would be without that strategy?

What might become possible if your worth was not tied to that strategy?

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Action Tool: Worth Separation Statement

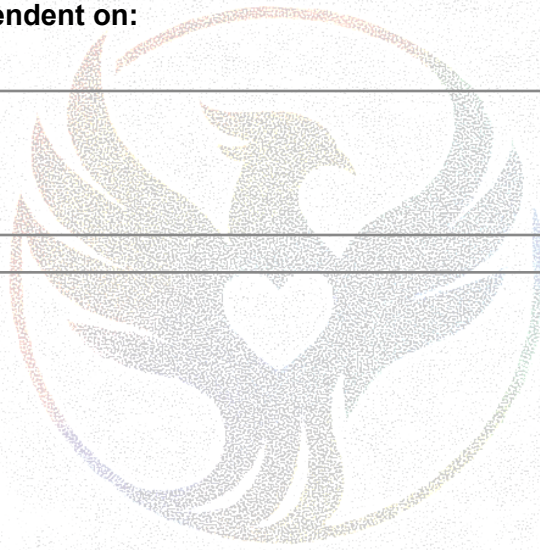
Complete:

I adapted by becoming:

That helped me survive by:

But my worth is not dependent on:

I am allowed to need:



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Section 10: Trauma, Identity, and Repeated Misunderstanding

Psychoeducation

Trauma is not always one major event.

Sometimes it is repeated experiences of being misunderstood, dismissed, corrected, pressured, or punished for needs no one helped you name.

When environments are invalidating, the brain adapts for survival.

Your identity can begin forming around:

- **“What do I need to do to be accepted?”**

instead of:

- **“Who am I naturally?”**

This can create deep disconnection from self.

You may begin to ask:

- Who am I if I am not performing?
- Who am I if I am not useful?
- Who am I if I stop adapting?
- Who am I if I move at my real pace?
- Who am I if I stop apologizing for my needs?

This is where unlearning can feel scary.

**Because the mask may have protected belonging.
Even if it also cost you.**

Reflection

Where did you learn to become acceptable instead of authentic?

What parts of yourself feel hardest to access now?

What parts of yourself feel hidden behind adaptation?

What would feel scary about being more honest about your needs?

Gentle Check-In

If this section feels heavy, pause.

It can be scary to notice how much of your identity was shaped by survival.

You do not have to remove the mask all at once.

You can begin by noticing where it came from.

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Section 11: Beginning to Unlearn

Psychoeducation

Unlearning internalized ableism is not about removing everything at once.

It begins with small shifts:

- Noticing the voice.
- Questioning where it came from.
- Allowing different pacing.
- Practicing self-compassion.
- Asking for support.
- Building systems that work with your brain.
- Letting rest count as care.
- Letting needs be information instead of failure.

Self-compassion is not letting yourself off the hook.

It is creating a relationship with yourself that is not rooted in shame.

That matters because shame may create urgency, but it does not create sustainable change.

Shame can push.

But support helps you build.

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Reflection

What is one internalized message you are ready to question?

What would be different if you did not automatically believe it?

What is one small way you can allow a different pace?

Where do you need more support instead of more pressure?

Action Tool: Notice, Question, Support

When internalized ableism shows up, use this three-step process.

1. Notice:

What is the voice saying?

2. Question:

Where did I learn this? Is it fully true?

3. Support:

What do I need right now?

Section 12: Language Shift — From Judgment to Attunement

Psychoeducation

One powerful shift is moving from judgment to attunement.

Instead of:

“I should be able to do this.”

Try:

- **“What do I need right now?”**

Instead of:

“Why can’t I just keep up?”

Try:

- **“What pace is actually sustainable?”**

Instead of:

“I’m lazy.”

Try:

- **“What is making this task inaccessible?”**

Instead of:

“I’m too much.”

Try:

- **“What part of me is asking to be understood?”**

This is not just a word swap.

It changes the relationship you are having with yourself.

Judgment creates pressure.

Attunement creates information.

Pressure asks you to perform.

Attunement asks you to listen.



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Reflection

Which judgment statement do you use most often?

What would the attuned version be?

What does your body feel when you say the judgment statement?

What does your body feel when you say the attuned question?

Action Tool: Judgment-to-Attunement Practice

Judgment:

Attuned question:

Possible need:

Small next step:

Section 13: Behavior Is Communication of an Unmet Need

Psychoeducation

Behavior is communication of an unmet need.

Always.

- Not laziness.
- Not failure.

Information.

This does not mean every behavior is harmless.

This does not mean there is no accountability.

It means behavior gives us a place to begin.

- **Avoidance may be communicating overwhelm.**
- **Procrastination may be communicating unclear steps.**
- **People-pleasing may be communicating fear of disconnection.**
- **Shutdown may be communicating overload.**
- **Overworking may be communicating fear of not being enough.**
- **Emotional intensity may be communicating unmet safety, belonging, or reassurance.**

Rootwork asks:

What is this behavior trying to tell me?

Not so you can excuse it.

So you can respond more accurately.

Reflection

Choose one behavior you judge yourself for.

What do you usually call it?

Example: lazy, dramatic, careless, too much, irresponsible.

What might it be communicating?

What unmet need may be underneath?

What support would respond to the need instead of just punishing the behavior?

A circular logo featuring a stylized phoenix bird with its wings spread, set against a background of a globe. The phoenix is rendered in a light blue and white color scheme.

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Action Tool: Behavior Decoder

Behavior:

What shame says:

What rootwork asks:

Possible unmet need:

Support or adjustment:

Accountable next step:



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Section 14: Reflection — Where Did You Learn This Voice?

Deep Reflection

Slow down here.

There is no rush.

Where did you learn this voice?

Who does it sound like?

What environment made this voice feel necessary?

What did the voice help you avoid?

What did the voice help you survive?

What did the voice cost you?

What need might have been underneath it?

What would you want to say back to that voice now?

Grounding Pause

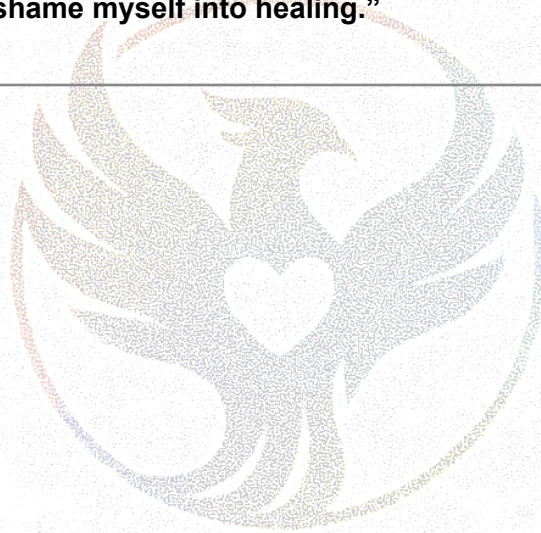
Look around the room.

Name three things you can see.

Take one slow breath.

Remind yourself:

- **“This voice was learned.”**
 - **“I can question what I learned.”**
 - **“I do not have to shame myself into healing.”**
-



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Section 15: Small Permission Shift

Psychoeducation

Unlearning does not require you to change everything today.

Sometimes the beginning is permission.

- **Permission to move differently.**
- **Permission to need support.**
- **Permission to rest before collapse.**
- **Permission to stop making everything a moral failure.**
- **Permission to question the voice.**
- **Permission to take up space.**
- **Permission to use tools.**
- **Permission to be a person with needs, not just responsibilities.**

Permission does not mean everything becomes easy.

It means you are no longer starting from self-punishment.

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Reflection

Choose one permission statement.

- I give myself permission to move at a different pace.
- I give myself permission to need support.
- I give myself permission to not have it all figured out.
- I give myself permission to rest before I collapse.
- I give myself permission to use tools without shame.
- I give myself permission to ask for clarity.
- I give myself permission to stop calling my needs failure.
- I give myself permission to take up space.

Create your own:

I give myself permission to:

What makes this permission hard to believe?

What would help it feel more possible?

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Section 16: Closing Integration

Reflection

What felt most important from this guide?

What is one thing you understand differently now?

What is one message you are ready to question?

What is one need you are ready to take more seriously?

What is one support you can allow this week?

What do you want to carry with you after this?

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Final Anchor

There is nothing wrong with you.

There are reasons.

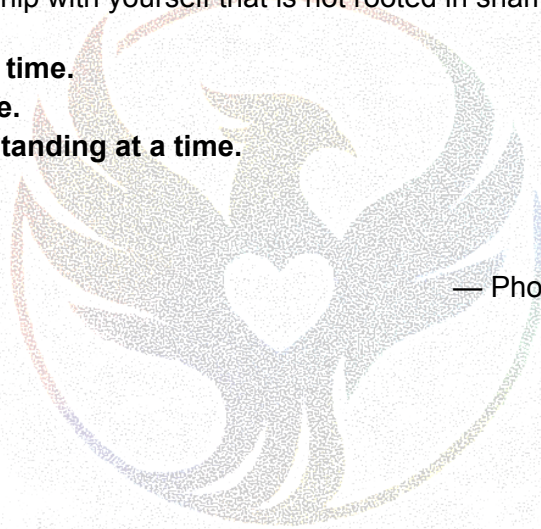
What you learned made sense in the environments you were in.

And you are allowed to understand yourself differently now.

You do not have to become someone new to heal.

You get to build a relationship with yourself that is not rooted in shame.

- **One question at a time.**
- **One need at a time.**
- **One act of understanding at a time.**



— Phoenix Within REVAM Healing

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