

EASY-READ EDITION

Seeing Someone Else's Pain



Why we look away,
and how we can care

STUART CORLETT

WITH GROUP DISCUSSION WORKBOOK

SEEING SOMEONE ELSE'S PAIN

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Easy-read edition with group discussion workbook

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Book 3 of a three-book easy-read series. An easy-read version of Turning Away from Suffering: Care and responsibility in the face of suffering

This book is not a substitute for medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, please talk to a doctor or another qualified professional.

Unless otherwise stated, the people described in this book are imagined, and are introduced as such.

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A Note from Stuart

Chances are, if you've picked up this book, you're hoping for some answers. These books grew out of a search for understanding. I've always found that understanding something helps me work out what to do. I hope they give you something to think through, both on your own and with friends. Researching and writing them helped me. If that's all they ever do, I'm happy.

I'm getting older, and so are my friends. So are you. Gone are the days when I could ride my motorcycle at high speed and feel invincible. I also feel more at risk in the war zones where I work. Looking back, some of the things I did when I was younger were downright dangerous. There might be a book in that.

My mother died by suicide when I was in my thirties. The experience changed me in many ways, some of which I still struggle to explain. My marriage collapsed in my fifties, something I had hoped would never happen

to me. I've walked alongside friends through great difficulties. I've also spoken with hundreds of people from Myanmar who have experienced atrocities, most of which I won't describe here.

Yet, through what I've lived and witnessed, I've seen people find ways to go on, often with great happiness. I've found ways, too.

There have been times when I've felt like giving up on trying to be a decent person or a positive influence in the world. I've wondered whether it would be easier to harden my heart and stop feeling so much.

But I've come to think that, within a generation of my death, most people will have forgotten who I was. Perhaps what remains will be the influence I had: something I did or said that made a difference to someone, who then made a difference to someone else.

So, my friend, these books won't give you all the answers. But perhaps, if you take time to reflect, there's something in them for you.

From 2002 to 2023, I did health work in Thailand, much of it among Shan communities on the border with

Myanmar. It is a region where conflict and displacement have shaped people's lives for generations. Yet for much of the world, it has rarely been more than an occasional headline.

This book grew out of that gap: between suffering that is real and constant for the people living it, and the short, patchy attention it gets from everyone else.

I do not think the people who look away are usually cruel. Most of us, at one time or another, have closed a news story, scrolled past an appeal, or changed the subject when someone else's pain came too close.

This book asks why. And it asks what we owe other people, even when we feel tired, helpless, or far away.

The book looks at two places in some detail: Gaza, and the Karen communities in the south-east of Myanmar. My own work was with Shan communities, not Karen ones, so I have not written about the Karen from personal experience. I chose these two places because there are careful published reports about them, many written by the people and organisations involved.

This is an easy-read version of a longer book of mine called *Turning Away from Suffering*.

Most of the people you meet in this book are made up, to help explain an idea. When a person is made up, I will say “imagine” or “suppose”, so you will always know.

At the back there is a workbook. You can use it with a group, or on your own.

I do not offer a checklist for caring about the world. I hope to offer a way of thinking that lets us have limits without pretending we owe nothing, and enjoy our own lives without forgetting other people's.

Stuart Corlett
Carterton, New Zealand

Why We Look Away

A familiar feeling

You are watching the news. A story comes on about war, hunger or disaster. The pictures are hard to look at. You change the channel.

Or a charity appeal pops up on your phone. You feel a twinge. Then you scroll on.

Most of us have done this. This book asks why. And it asks what we should do about it.

Is it because we are afraid?

One idea is that other people's suffering reminds us that we could suffer too. It reminds us that we, and the people we love, are fragile. It even reminds us that we will die one day. So, the idea goes, we look away to protect ourselves.

This may be true *sometimes*. But it is not the whole story. People look away for many reasons. Some reasons are good. Some are not. This book looks at them one at a time.

Looking, feeling and doing

There are three different things we can do when we hear about suffering.

We can *look*: pay attention and learn what is happening.

We can *feel*: be moved, upset, sad or angry.

We can *do*: give, help, speak up, or change something.

These do not always go together. A person can watch every news report and do nothing. Another person can read a short summary once a week and give steady, practical help.

Imagine two people. One watches upsetting news every night and feels terrible, but never does anything else. The other avoids the pictures, but gives a little every month to a local group and writes to her MP about an issue she cares about. Who is more engaged? Probably the second.

So how much we look, or how much we feel, does not tell us everything about how much we care.

The main idea of this book

Here is the main idea in one sentence.

Other people's needs do not disappear when our feelings fade.

Feelings matter. But we cannot always feel strongly about everything. What matters most is connecting what we know with what we can sensibly do.

Many Reasons for Turning Away

Caring takes effort

Imagining what someone else is going through can be hard work. Researchers have found that many people avoid it, mainly because it takes effort.

This does not mean those people do not care. It means caring can be tiring. An appeal that asks us to feel someone's pain deeply may be asking more than we can give. A clear explanation of what is needed and how we can help may work better.

“What difference can I make?”

Sometimes we look away because we feel helpless. The problem seems too big. We do not know what to do. We do not trust that help will reach the people who need it.

These are real worries. But they are worth checking.

Sometimes there is something useful we can do.

Sometimes we just need better information.

Not wanting to know

Sometimes people prefer *not* to know something, because knowing would make a choice harder.

Imagine a man shopping for clothes. He could easily find out whether a brand treats its workers badly. But he does not look, because he wants the shirt and does not want to feel bad about buying it.

That is different from someone who tries to find out and cannot. Both do not know. But they got there differently.

We cannot check everything we do. That would be impossible. But it is worth noticing when we are choosing not to know.

Other things that pull us away

People also turn away because they are tired, unwell, or overloaded. Because they have children or parents to care for. Because the news makes them anxious. Because they do not trust what they are being told. Because helping might put them in danger.

Some of these are good reasons for stepping back for a while. Some are excuses. Usually it is a mix.

Fear can pull us closer too

Fear does not always push us away. Sometimes when we feel fragile, we reach out. We hold our families closer. We help a neighbour. We give to a cause.

So fear of our own vulnerability is only one part of the picture. It can make us turn away, or turn towards others.

Explaining is not excusing

Understanding *why* someone turns away does not mean it is okay. And deciding that turning away is wrong does not tell us why it happened.

It helps to understand ourselves. But in the end, the people who are suffering still need what they need, whatever our reasons.

When the Numbers Are Too Big

One person and a million

A story about one person is easier to feel than a number like “a million people”. Most of us are moved more by a single face than by a large figure.

Researchers have found that our feelings often do not grow as the number of people in need grows. Sometimes they even shrink. This is sometimes called “compassion fade”.

But one life does not matter more than many. Our feelings just cannot keep up with big numbers.

Stories and numbers both matter

Stories show us real people, their lives and their choices. Numbers show us how big the problem is. We need both.

A single story should not be treated as if it speaks for everyone. And a big number should not make us forget that each one is a person.

“It’s just a drop in the ocean”

Many people feel their help is too small to matter. If there are thousands in need, what difference does helping fifty make?

But for those fifty people, it makes a real difference. Help does not stop being help because it does not reach everyone.

Imagine a community van that takes ten older people to the doctor each week. Hundreds more need help. That is a real problem. But for those ten, the van is the difference between seeing a doctor and not.

Small is not the same as useless

There is a difference between help that is small and help that does not work.

A small programme that works well is still valuable. A programme that cannot work at all, no matter how much money goes in, is a different matter. It is worth asking whether help actually does what it says.

Being part of something bigger

One vote, one volunteer shift, or one small gift may not change much on its own. But together with many others, it can.

Think of a choir. One voice cannot make the whole song. But every voice is part of it.

Being honest about what is left to do

Good organisations are honest. They say what they have done, and what still needs doing. They do not pretend that one gift will fix everything.

That kind of honesty can actually help people keep giving, because they know their help is real and their choices are well informed.

Us and Them

Caring more about our own

Most of us care more about people we see as “like us”. People from our family, our town, our country, our faith, or our culture. This is very human.

Having special care for our own people is not wrong. A parent should look after their own child. But it does not mean other people’s suffering does not count.

Caring is not the same as agreeing

Sometimes people hold back from caring about someone because they do not agree with their politics, their religion, or their leaders.

But recognising that someone has been hurt does not mean agreeing with everything they or their leaders believe. A child who has been injured needs help, whatever their family’s views.

Imagine someone who will only believe a child has been hurt once they know the child’s family agrees with them

politically. That tells us nothing about the injury. It only tells us whose side the family is on.

Same rules for everyone

It is right to ask questions about news reports. Is it accurate? Where did it come from? What is missing?

But we should ask the same questions of reports we like and reports we do not like. If we believe bad news about “them” easily, but demand much more proof for bad news about “us”, something is wrong.

A helpful test is to swap the groups in your mind. If the same thing happened, but the other way round, would you feel the same?

Loving a group without pretending it is perfect

You can love your country, your church, your workplace or your community and still admit when it has done wrong.

Imagine a nurse who is proud of her hospital, and then learns that some patients were badly treated there. Her colleagues may have done wonderful work. The wrong still needs to be put right. Both things are true.

Admitting a wrong does not mean everything about the group is bad.

Not everyone is equally at risk

It is true that we are all fragile. But that does not mean we are all in the same situation. Someone watching the news at home is not in the same position as someone living under bombs or forced from their home.

Our own feelings matter. But the people who are suffering should stay at the centre of the story.

People Are More Than Their Suffering

A note about this chapter

This chapter looks at Gaza and at the Karen communities of south-east Myanmar. It uses published reports, mostly from 2022 to 2026. It is not an up-to-date news report. Things may have changed a lot since these reports were written.

Gaza: keeping life going

A United Nations update from July 2024 described what was happening in Gaza over two weeks. Food was being cooked and shared in community kitchens. Local health care was being supported. Temporary spaces were being set up so children could keep learning. All of this was happening despite danger, damaged roads, and shortages.

The Palestine Red Crescent Society's report for 2024 described its volunteers continuing to give emergency medical care, relief, and emotional support in Gaza, often at great risk.

Reports like these show that people living through a crisis are not just waiting for help. They are organising, caring for one another, and keeping daily life going in very hard conditions.

The story did not start with the headlines

A United Nations report from 2022, before the war that began in October 2023, described how the blockade of Gaza, tightened in 2007, had affected people's movement, services and jobs for many years.

In June 2024, a United Nations Commission of Inquiry reported that it had found war crimes in its investigations of both Israeli authorities and Palestinian armed groups. These are the findings of that Commission, not court decisions.

This book does not try to settle every question about the conflict. The point is simpler. One group's suffering never makes another group's suffering acceptable.

Children are more than symbols

A study published in 2025 looked at children's play in Gaza, based on what adults described. Children were still finding ways to play.

That does not mean they were safe or happy. Play and danger can happen side by side. But it reminds us that children are not just pictures to make us feel sad. They have their own lives, friendships, games and hopes.

Myanmar: help that was already there

In October 2022, the Karen Peace Support Network published a report describing how Karen community groups had long been helping people affected by conflict and displacement in south-east Myanmar. This was help organised by the communities themselves, often working with departments of the Karen National Union.

A United Nations report in 2024 also noted that local community groups in Myanmar were providing mental health support.

In 2026, the Karen Human Rights Group published a report about displaced women. It described women caring for families, moving again and again to stay safe, keeping in touch with relatives, protecting their children's chances, and hoping for safety and justice.

What this means for outsiders

Reports like these remind us of something important.

Help does not begin when outsiders notice. People in a crisis often already have their own ways of helping each other. They know what they need.

So the first question for anyone wanting to help is: *what is already happening, and how can I support it?*

That does not mean local groups can never be questioned. But their knowledge deserves respect.

Showing the whole picture

If we only ever see injured people and ruined buildings, we may forget the people who are cooking, teaching, nursing and organising.

But if we only see brave, cheerful people, we may think they can manage without help.

The honest picture shows both: real strength, and real need.

Help Others Actually Want

Good intentions are not enough

Wanting to help is a good start. But it does not guarantee that our help is useful.

Imagine a donor who sends a large box of goods to a community group overseas. The group cannot use them. They have to pay to store them and spend time sorting them. When they politely explain, the donor is hurt and talks about how much effort went into the gift.

The donor's effort was real. But the goods were not what was needed.

Listen first

The best help usually starts with listening. What do the people affected say they need? What is already being done? What would make things easier, not harder?

Sometimes the answer will surprise us. Sometimes it will be less exciting than we hoped. Money for fuel or a driver's wages may be more useful than a new building.

Taking criticism well

If someone tells us our help was not useful, it can sting. But it is valuable information.

A good response is to ask: What did not work? What should happen to it now? How can we do better next time?

The people we are trying to help should not have to comfort us when our help goes wrong.

Skills matter

Imagine a man who volunteers at a community food service. He is kind and keen. But the service also needs accurate rosters, careful handling of allergies, and someone who lets others know if he cannot come.

Being willing is important. So is learning to do the job well. When volunteers do not learn the basics, someone else has to fix the mistakes.

Good organisations help volunteers by explaining clearly what is needed and giving training and support.

The cost of being helped

Being helped can cost people something too. Visits, interviews, photos, reports and forms all take time. Telling your story again and again can be painful.

Good help thinks about what it asks of people, not just what it gives.

Working with, not for

Real partnership means more than praising local people. It means letting them help make the decisions, change the plans, and say no.

If an outside group keeps every important decision for itself, it is not really a partnership.

Limits Without Excuses

Feelings are not a perfect guide

Our feelings can alert us to someone in need. But how strongly we feel is not always a good guide to what we owe.

A close friend's small problem may upset us more than a stranger's great danger. That is human. But it does not mean the stranger's danger counts for nothing.

So we need more than feelings to guide us. We can also think about how serious the harm is, whether it can be prevented, whether we helped cause it, and what we can actually do.

A limit is not the same as a free pass

Everyone has limits. Time, money, health, energy, safety, and other people who depend on us. These are real.

But a limit is not the same as saying "I owe nothing at all". If you cannot do one thing, you might be able to do something else. If you cannot help now, you might be able to help later.

Imagine a woman who cannot give money because her budget is tight. She might still be able to give an hour a month, sign a letter, or share accurate information with friends.

At the same time, people with very little should not be expected to carry the same load as people or organisations with a lot of power and money.

Family comes first, but not always for everything

We have special duties to our families and friends. A parent must look after their child. That is right.

But “family” cannot excuse every choice. Imagine a father who must choose between something his daughter really needs and giving to help someone in danger. His daughter may rightly come first. But if the choice is between a small luxury at home and saving someone from serious harm, the answer may be different.

“Reasonable” can hide a lot

People often say, “I’ve done what’s reasonable.” But what does reasonable mean? Comfortable? Safe? Fair, given what I have?

An honest limit says what doing more would actually cost. Would it take care away from someone who depends on me? Would it be unsafe? Would it be beyond my skills? Or would it just be uncomfortable?

Feeling uncomfortable is real. But it is not always as important as the harm that could be prevented.

Acting without a guarantee

We can rarely be sure our help will work. But that is true of nearly everything we do. If we waited for certainty, we would never act.

The question is whether our help is sensible, based on what we know, and whether we can learn and change if it does not work.

And doing nothing has consequences too.

When nothing can be done

Sometimes there really is nothing practical we can do. A loss cannot be undone. A wrong cannot be put right.

Even then, listening can matter. Imagine a colleague telling you about a death in her family. You cannot fix it. But listening may help her feel she is not alone.

But not everyone wants to be listened to. Some people want privacy. It helps to ask.

Is It Okay to Enjoy Life?

Guilt about being happy

When we know others are suffering, enjoying ourselves can make us feel guilty. A nice meal. A holiday. A laugh with friends.

Sometimes that guilt points to something real. Perhaps we have neglected a responsibility. Perhaps our comfort depends on someone else's hardship.

But often guilt rests on a mistaken idea: that feeling bad helps someone. It does not. Giving up a pleasure does not automatically help anyone.

Better questions to ask

Instead of feeling vaguely guilty, it can help to ask:

- Does this activity hurt anyone?
- Am I neglecting something I promised to do?
- Does this rest help me keep going with things I care about?
- Can I enjoy this without pretending the world is fine?

Rest is allowed

Taking a break is not the same as giving up. Rest can help us keep going over the long term.

But rest does not have to prove that it makes us work harder later. Rest is good in itself. People are allowed to have lives.

A smile does not mean all is well

Imagine someone sees a photo of children playing in a place described as dangerous. They decide the reports must be exaggerated.

That does not follow. A moment of play tells us about that moment. It does not tell us whether the children have enough food, safe shelter, or medical care.

People living through hard times are allowed to laugh, play, dance, celebrate weddings and enjoy music. They do not have to look miserable all the time to be believed.

Strength does not mean no help is needed

Showing people as strong and capable is important. But sometimes stories of strength are used as an excuse: “They’re coping, so they don’t need help.”

Imagine a community running activities for children with very few materials. That shows skill and care. It does not show that they do not need safe buildings or supplies. A person can cope with a burden and still deserve not to carry it.

Pleasure that depends on someone else

Imagine a family gathering where everyone has a lovely time, except one person who does all the cooking and cleaning and never sits down.

The problem is not that people are enjoying themselves. The problem is how the work is shared. If everyone helps, everyone can enjoy it.

The same is true in the wider world. The answer to unfairness is not for everyone to be unhappy. It is to share things more fairly.

Joy belongs to everyone

The good things in life, such as friendship, music, laughter, play and beauty, are part of what we want everyone to have. They are not only for the comfortable. And they are not a reason to stop caring about those without them.

Making a Commitment You Can Keep

Choose something specific

Trying to care about everything usually leaves us feeling we have failed. It can help to choose something specific: one cause, one group, one task, or one relationship.

Choosing one thing does not mean nothing else matters. It just means we can actually follow through.

It helps to choose something that fits our skills, and that the people affected actually want.

A promise people can rely on

“I’m always available” sounds generous. But it is hard for others to plan around.

Imagine a woman who offers to write a monthly newsletter for a refugee support group for six months, with a check-in after three months. That is clear. The group knows what to expect. She knows what she has promised.

At the check-in, the question is not “Do you still feel inspired?” It is “Is the newsletter useful?”

Quiet work counts

Some of the most useful help is quiet and unseen. Doing the accounts. Making phone calls. Driving people to appointments. Washing up after an event.

It may not get much praise. It still matters.

Saying no clearly

It is okay to say no. And it helps to be clear. “I can’t give money, but I could help on Saturday.” “I can’t do it this month, but ask me again in March.”

You do not owe anyone a full explanation of your health, your family or your money. But if people are relying on you, it is fair to give some notice when you need to stop.

Leaving a role well

Sometimes it is right to stop doing something. A task is finished. Circumstances change. You are tired.

Leaving well means passing on what others need to know. Imagine a woman who keeps the appointment records for a community clinic. If she leaves, someone

needs to know where the records are, what is unfinished, and what she promised to callers.

And if a whole organisation depends on one unpaid person with no backup, that is a problem with the organisation, not with the person who leaves.

Choosing between good things

Sometimes two good things clash. Imagine a man asked to join a new volunteer project on the same night he always drives his elderly aunt to her appointments. Saying no to the project does not mean he does not care. He has weighed two real needs.

The News and Your Wellbeing

How much news is too much?

After a terrible event, some people watch the news for hours. Researchers have found that spending many hours following coverage of a disaster can be linked with high stress, sometimes as much as for people who were actually there.

Watching upsetting pictures over and over is different from understanding what is happening. You may learn more from a short, clear report than from hours of repeated images.

Some people avoid the news

Many people avoid the news because they expect it to make them anxious, and they feel there is nothing they can do.

That is understandable. But avoiding all news can also mean we miss things we could help with.

A middle way is to choose a few reliable sources and check them at set times, rather than scrolling all day.

Not all sharing helps

Messages full of strong emotion tend to spread fast on social media. But how far a message spreads says nothing about whether it is true or useful.

Before sharing something, it can help to ask: Is this accurate? Could it put someone at risk? Does it help anyone understand or do something?

Ask good questions

When you read a news report, it can help to notice:

- What did the reporter see for themselves?
- What did someone tell them?
- What is a guess?
- Who is not being heard?

One mistake in a report does not make the whole report false. And a report we agree with is not automatically true.

Let people speak for themselves

Imagine a woman interviewed about a crisis. She talks about her family's needs, and also says she disagrees

with an aid programme. The published story only includes her needs.

Her voice has been cut in half. People should be able to say what they think, not just what moves the audience.

A story heard is not a story owned

When someone shares their story with us, we do not get the right to use it however we like. Retelling someone's private pain to show how much it moved us can feel like a betrayal to them.

It is worth asking: What was shared, and for what purpose? Would they be happy for me to tell it?

Talking With Children About Hard News

Children hear more than we think

Children often hear about wars, disasters and suffering, from the TV, the internet, school friends, or adults talking in the next room. They may not say anything, but they may be worried.

Many adults try to protect children by saying nothing. But silence can leave children to fill the gaps with their imagination, which can be scarier than the truth.

Find out what they already know

A good place to start is to ask. “Have you heard anything about what’s happening in the world? What have you heard?”

Children may have only half the story, or the wrong story. Once you know what they think, you can gently fill in the gaps.

Keep it simple and honest

Use simple words, suited to the child's age. Be honest, but do not give more detail than they need. A young child may only need to know that something sad is happening far away and that grown-ups are working to help.

It is okay to say "I don't know" or "That's a hard question. Let me think about it."

Help them feel safe

Children often want to know one thing above all: *am I safe? Are the people I love safe?* If that is true, tell them so clearly.

Keeping normal routines, such as meals, school and bedtime, can also help children feel secure.

Limit what they see

Upsetting pictures on the news or social media can stay with children for a long time. It is wise to limit how much they see, especially young children. If older children are watching, try to watch with them and talk about it afterwards.

Give them something to do

Children often feel better when they can do something. They might draw a picture, help collect food for a food bank, make a card, or give some of their pocket money to a cause.

This teaches children an important lesson: when we see someone else's pain, we do not have to feel helpless. There is usually something small we can do.

Notice their feelings

Some children may be very upset. Others may not seem bothered at all. Some may ask lots of questions, and some may ask none. All of these can be normal.

If a child seems very anxious for a long time, cannot sleep, or keeps coming back to the same fear, it may help to talk to their teacher or doctor.

Children from affected places

Some children in our communities have family in places affected by war or disaster. Some have lived through it themselves. News that seems far away to others may feel very close to them.

These children need extra gentleness. They should never be asked to explain or represent their country or community to others, unless they want to.

When You Feel Overwhelmed

Caring can wear you out

People who care a lot can become very tired. Nurses, carers, volunteers, aid workers, teachers, and people who follow the news closely can all reach a point where they feel numb, exhausted or hopeless.

This is sometimes called “compassion fatigue” or “burnout”. It does not mean you have stopped caring. It often means you have cared a lot, for a long time, without enough rest or support.

Signs to watch for

Some signs that you may be overwhelmed include:

- feeling tired all the time, even after rest
- feeling numb, or not caring about things that used to matter
- being snappy or irritable
- having trouble sleeping
- feeling that nothing you do makes any difference

- wanting to avoid people or anything to do with the cause you care about

If you notice these signs, it is a sign to slow down, not to try harder.

Stepping back is not giving up

Taking a break is not the same as giving up. It can be the very thing that helps you keep going in the long run.

You might reduce how much news you watch, take a break from a volunteer role, share a task with someone else, or spend time on things that bring you joy.

The important thing is to keep a way back. A break can become a quiet goodbye if we are not careful. It can help to decide when you will check in again.

Share the load

No one should carry everything alone. If you are always the one who says yes, it may be time to let others step up.

Good groups and organisations make sure work is shared fairly, and look after the people who do it. If yours does not, it is fair to say so.

Look after the basics

When you are overwhelmed, the basics matter. Eat regular meals. Get some sleep. Move your body. Spend time with people who make you laugh. Get outside.

These are not luxuries. They are what keep you able to care.

Get support

Talking to someone can help, whether it is a friend, a support group, a minister or elder, or a counsellor.

If you feel very low, or have stopped being able to cope with everyday life, please talk to your doctor. In New Zealand, you can call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

You matter too

It is easy, when you care about others' pain, to forget your own needs. But you are a person too. Your wellbeing matters, not just because it helps you help others, but because you matter.

Helping Close to Home

Suffering is not only far away

This book has talked about faraway places. But suffering is also next door. A neighbour who is lonely. A family struggling to pay the rent. A friend caring for a sick partner. Someone sleeping rough in town.

Sometimes it is easier to care about people far away than people close by. Distant suffering can stay on a screen. Nearby suffering may ask something of us today.

Noticing

The first step is often just noticing. The neighbour whose curtains stay closed. The colleague who has gone quiet. The older man at church who no longer comes.

Noticing does not mean prying. But a simple “How are you going?” can open a door.

Small, practical help

Help close to home is often small and practical. A meal. A lift. Mowing a lawn. Picking up shopping. Sitting with someone for an afternoon.

As with help anywhere, it is best to ask what people actually want, and to make it easy for them to say no.

Respect and dignity

Being on the receiving end of help can be hard. People may feel embarrassed or ashamed. Good help protects people's dignity. It does not gossip. It does not make people feel they owe us. It does not expect constant thanks.

Local groups

Many communities have groups already helping: food banks, community gardens, churches, marae, mosques, temples, sports clubs, budget advisers, and volunteer drivers. Joining an existing group is often better than starting something new.

Near and far

Caring about people close by and caring about people far away are not in competition. Both matter. Some people

find it easier to help nearby. Others feel called to help further away. Many do a bit of both.

Working Together

It is not all up to you

No one person can fix the world. Big problems need many people, and good organisations, working together.

Organisations can keep caring going even when individual feelings fade. A regular budget, a clear role, or a good record can carry a commitment for years.

When organisations look away

Organisations can turn away from suffering too. A complaints process that is too hard to use. A form that leaves people out. A report that counts activities but never asks if anything changed.

Imagine a complaint that is passed between five departments, and none of them answers it. Each person did their small part. But the person complaining never gets help.

It is not enough to say “everyone is responsible”. Someone needs to have the job of fixing it.

Listening to the people being helped

Good organisations make it easy for the people they help to give feedback, in their own language, without fear of losing help.

Imagine an organisation that only asks for written feedback in English. Many of the people it serves do not read English well. Few complaints come in, so the staff think everyone is happy. They may be wrong.

When people do complain, it should be able to change things.

Remembering why

Imagine a community group that holds its meetings in the afternoon, so people do not have to travel home in the dark. Years later, a new leader moves the meetings to the evening because it suits her better. Attendance drops. She decides people have lost interest.

The real problem was that the reason for the afternoon meetings was forgotten. Good organisations pass on the *why*, not just the *what*.

Joy in serious work

Groups that do serious work need joy too. Friendship, shared meals, laughter and fun help people keep going, and make the work more human. They are not a distraction from caring. They are part of it.

Speaking Up

Why we stay quiet

Sometimes we stay silent about suffering because we are afraid. Afraid of being wrong. Afraid of losing friends. Afraid of being linked with a group we do not fully agree with.

These fears are real. But they do not have to stop us saying something true and careful.

You can be specific

You do not have to agree with everything a campaign says to support one part of it.

Imagine a woman who believes a hospital has been blocked from getting medicine, but does not agree with all the political views of the group campaigning about it. She can say clearly: “I believe this hospital needs medicine and should be allowed to get it.” She does not have to sign up to everything else.

Silence can mean many things

One person may be silent because they do not know enough yet. Another may be helping quietly in private. Another may be afraid for family members. Another may simply not care.

We cannot always tell from the outside. But silence matters more from someone who has power and knowledge and could change something.

Anger

People who are suffering are sometimes angry. That anger often has a reason: a broken promise, an injustice, a cruelty.

Anger does not make someone right. But it does not make them wrong either. Focusing on someone's tone instead of what they are saying can be a way of not listening.

Changing your mind

If you learn you were wrong about something, it is okay to change your mind. That is not giving up on a cause. It is being honest.

Imagine someone who discovers that a figure they shared was not accurate. A good correction says what was wrong and what is still true. That builds trust.

No one is perfect

No one has a perfect right to speak. We all have mixed motives. We all benefit from some unfair systems. We all have gaps in what we know.

But that does not mean we must stay silent. We can admit what we do not know, be open to correction, and still speak up for what we believe is right.

Keeping Our Eyes Open

Why do we look away from other people's suffering?

Sometimes because it reminds us that we are fragile too.

But also because we are tired, unsure, overloaded, afraid, or because knowing would make life less comfortable. Some of these reasons are fair. Some are not.

Here is what this book has tried to say.

Looking, feeling and doing are different things. How upset we feel is not the only measure of how much we care.

Other people's needs do not disappear when our feelings fade.

We all have limits. But a limit is not the same as owing nothing.

Small help is still real help. It does not have to fix everything to matter.

People who are suffering are more than their suffering. They have knowledge, skills, plans and opinions of their own. The best help listens to them first.

It is okay to enjoy life. Joy is not a betrayal. And the people we hope to help deserve joy too.

We do not have to do everything alone. We can work together, through groups and organisations that can carry on when our own energy is low.

And we can speak up carefully, honestly and specifically, even when we are not perfect.

The world's pain is too big for any one of us. But we do not have to look away completely. We can choose something we can do, do it well, keep our eyes open, and keep listening.

About the Author

Stuart Corlett has been a registered pharmacist since 1989 and practises at Carterton Pharmacy in the Wairarapa, New Zealand. From 2002 to 2023 he did humanitarian health work in Thailand and among Shan communities on the Thai–Myanmar border. He founded Circuit International, a New Zealand charity, in 2015.

This book is an easy-read version of his book *Turning Away from Suffering: Care and responsibility in the face of suffering*.

Group Discussion Workbook

Seeing Someone Else's Pain

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook goes with each chapter of the book. You can use it in a group, or on your own.

For each chapter there are two parts.

Talking together has questions for a group. You do not have to answer all of them. Pick the ones that feel useful.

Just for you has questions to think about privately. There is space to write your own notes. No one else needs to see what you write.

Some ground rules for groups

- No one has to share anything they do not want to.
- What is said in the group stays in the group.
- Respect different views, including political and religious views.
- Disagree with ideas, not with people.
- There are no right or wrong answers.

A note for groups

Some topics in this book, such as war and displacement, can be very personal for some people. Some group members may have family in places affected by conflict,

or may have lived through it themselves. Be gentle, and let people choose how much to say.

If talking about these things brings up strong feelings, please talk to your doctor. In New Zealand, you can call or text 1737 any time to talk to a trained counsellor.

Chapter 1: Why We Look Away

Talking together

1. When was the last time you looked away from a news story or appeal? Why?
2. What is the difference between looking, feeling and doing?
3. Can someone care a lot without watching a lot of news? Can someone watch a lot and not care?
4. “Other people’s needs do not disappear when our feelings fade.” What do you think?

Just for you

1. Which do you do most when you hear about suffering: look, feel or do?
2. Is there one issue you would like to understand better?

My notes

Chapter 2: Many Reasons for Turning Away

Talking together

1. Which reasons for turning away do you recognise in yourself?
2. Which reasons do you think are fair, and which are excuses?
3. Have you ever chosen not to know something? What happened?
4. Can fear make us reach out to others, as well as pull away?

Just for you

1. Think of a time you turned away. What was really going on for you?
2. Is there anything you would do differently now?

My notes

Chapter 3: When the Numbers Are Too Big

Talking together

1. Why do you think one story moves us more than a big number?
2. Have you ever felt your help was “just a drop in the ocean”?
3. How can we tell whether help is small but useful, or does not work at all?
4. What makes you trust an organisation’s reports?

Just for you

1. Write about a time when a small act of help made a real difference, to you or to someone else.
2. What is one small thing you could do that would still be real help?

My notes

Chapter 4: Us and Them

Talking together

1. Which groups do you feel most connected to?
2. Is it wrong to care more about your own people?
Where is the line?
3. Can you care about someone's suffering without agreeing with their views?
4. Try the "swap the groups" test on a recent news story.
What did you notice?

Just for you

1. Is there a group whose suffering you find harder to care about? Why might that be?
2. Is there a group you belong to that has done wrong?
How do you feel about that?

My notes

Chapter 5: People Are More Than Their Suffering

Talking together

1. What surprised you about the reports from Gaza and Myanmar in this chapter?
2. Why does it matter that people in a crisis are often already helping each other?
3. What is lost when we only see pictures of suffering? What is lost when we only see stories of strength?
4. How can we make sure children are seen as people, not just symbols?

Just for you

1. Think of a crisis you have seen on the news. What do you know about how local people are helping each other?
2. How could you find out more?

My notes

Chapter 6: Help Others Actually Want

Talking together

1. Have you ever given or received help that was not what was needed? What happened?
2. Why is it hard to hear that our help was not useful?
3. What does “working with, not for” mean to you?
4. What can being helped cost the people receiving help?

Just for you

1. Think of a time someone helped you well. What did they do right?
2. Before you next help someone, what question could you ask them first?

My notes

Chapter 7: Limits Without Excuses

Talking together

1. What are your real limits right now: time, money, health, energy, others who depend on you?
2. What is the difference between a limit and an excuse?
3. How should we balance caring for family with caring for strangers?
4. Can listening matter when nothing practical can be done?

Just for you

1. Write down your honest limits. Then write one thing you could still do within them.
2. Is there something you have been calling a limit that might really be an excuse?

My notes

Chapter 8: Is It Okay to Enjoy Life?

Talking together

1. Have you ever felt guilty for enjoying yourself when others were suffering?
2. Does feeling bad help anyone? Why or why not?
3. Why might people living through hard times be judged for smiling or laughing?
4. How can joy and caring go together?

Just for you

1. What brings you joy? Write down a few things.
2. Is there a pleasure you enjoy that depends on someone else doing all the work? How could that change?

My notes

Chapter 9: Making a Commitment You Can Keep

Talking together

1. What is one cause, group or task you feel drawn to?
2. What makes a promise easy for others to rely on?
3. What quiet, unseen work do you value?
4. How can someone leave a role well?

Just for you

1. Write down one specific commitment you could make: what, how often, and for how long.
2. When will you check whether it is still useful?

My notes

Chapter 10: The News and Your Wellbeing

Talking together

1. How do you get your news? How does it affect you?
2. Have you ever stopped watching the news? Why?
3. What questions should we ask before sharing something online?
4. Why is it important to let people speak for themselves in news stories?

Just for you

1. What would a healthy news routine look like for you?
2. Which sources do you trust, and why?

My notes

Chapter 11: Talking With Children About Hard News

Talking together

1. How did adults talk to you about hard news when you were a child?
2. What do children in your life know about suffering in the world?
3. How can we be honest with children without frightening them?
4. What could children do to help, in a way that suits their age?

Just for you

1. Is there a child you could talk with about something in the news? How would you start?
2. What would you want them to learn about caring for others?

My notes

Chapter 12: When You Feel Overwhelmed

Talking together

1. Have you ever felt worn out from caring? What did it feel like?
2. Which signs of being overwhelmed do you recognise?
3. How can you take a break without losing touch completely?
4. How can groups make sure no one carries too much?

Just for you

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how worn out do you feel right now? What would help?
2. What gives you energy and joy?

My notes

Chapter 13: Helping Close to Home

Talking together

1. Is it easier to care about people far away or close by?
Why?
2. What signs might show that a neighbour or friend is struggling?
3. How can we help someone without hurting their dignity?
4. What local groups do you know of that are already helping?

Just for you

1. Is there someone near you who might need a friendly word or practical help?
2. What is one thing you could do for them this week?

My notes

Chapter 14: Working Together

Talking together

1. What groups or organisations have you been part of that helped others?
2. Have you ever been passed from department to department without getting help? How did it feel?
3. How can organisations make it easier for people to give honest feedback?
4. Why do serious groups need joy and friendship too?

Just for you

1. Is there a group you could join, rather than trying to help alone?
2. What could you bring to a group?

My notes

Chapter 15: Speaking Up

Talking together

1. What stops you speaking up about things you care about?
2. Can you support part of a cause without agreeing with all of it?
3. How should we respond when someone who is suffering is angry?
4. Have you ever changed your mind about an issue?
What changed it?

Just for you

1. Is there something you would like to speak up about?
What would you say?
2. Who could you say it to?

My notes

Keeping Our Eyes Open

Talking together

1. Which idea from this book was most helpful to you?
2. Is there anything in the book you disagreed with?
3. What has it been like to talk about these things in a group?
4. How might this book change what you do?

Just for you

1. Finish this sentence: “One thing I will keep my eyes open to is...”
2. Finish this sentence: “One thing I can do is...”

My notes
