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1. **Coming Up for Air after Burn-out**

- 1. How A Divemaster Training with Simple Psychological Exercises in the Tropics Can Change the Way You See Your Life**

2. Introduction

Who ARE you?

You did what you were supposed to do — career, family, whatever the list was. You're still here, waiting for meaning to come back on its own. That did not work because whatever you've tried hasn't actually changed anything real.

You Need a New, More Natural Physical Environment

You cannot see your own life clearly while you're standing in the middle of it. A genuinely new environment — different enough that you have to think about basic things again — is what creates the distance to actually see the patterns instead of the incidents.

You Need a New Social Environment

Reinventing yourself doesn't work if everyone around you keeps putting you back where they've always had you. You need a new social world with a real role in it, not a retreat full of strangers all "finding themselves" with nothing actually asked of any of them.

Using Your Body for Meaningful Physical Activity

Years behind a desk, barely using your body, and you lose touch with what's happening inside you until a crisis forces it back into view. Changing how you use your body is usually faster, and less painful, than trying to change your mind directly — but only if it's real use, with real stakes, not gym theatre.

How to Sell Leaving for a While to Yourself and Others

"Travel the world and find yourself" doesn't sound serious, and it's a hard thing to explain to your family. What actually sells it, to yourself and to them, is a clear agenda: somewhere new, a real role, real skills, and something concrete at the end — a certificate, not just a story about a break you took.

A special Divemaster Trainee Program

A Second Look: Perspective Change and Personal Reorientation Through Dive Training is a real, standard training program to become a Divemaster, run at a dive shop under one mentor, and combines it with simple psychological practices. You dive with your mentor to learn and get assessed on skills, with instructors to assist and learn how to handle real students, with other trainees for experience. You gradually take on real responsibilities: gearing people up,

running buddy checks, demonstrating skills underwater, keeping a group together. It runs as a repeating two-to-three-week block, over a total stay of two to three months, until you're certified.

No therapist can hand you a new physical environment, a new social world, real responsibility, and hours of meaningful physical use of your body, all at once, every day, for months. A dive shop was never designed to help people through a crisis. It does it anyway, simply because of what it structurally is.

The Psychological Practices.

Personality: The Big Five You look at your own personality measured through self-assessment, and through 360-degree feedback from the people training alongside you. A few weeks in, you compare the two: what you think about yourself against what others actually see. The gap is usually bigger than expected, and it is a source of real insight.

Cultural Differences: Living and working alongside people from genuinely different backgrounds, you get exposed to real cultural differences, using a tool built to help you notice actual patterns rather than vague impressions.

Cognitive Biases: Confirmation Bias: looking for evidence that proves you're right and ignoring evidence that shows you're wrong
Fundamental Attribution Error: your own failures are bad luck, other people's failures are who they are.
Spotlight Effect: everyone is always paying attention to you.

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy: A simple, well-tested technique for understanding why you react to things the way you do, and a concrete way to change that reaction.

The Reframe Story Photo Exercise: Once a week, from the third week on, a small group and the mentor talk through a photo that you took that tells you something about the journey you are taking. Not an illustration of anything, just a trigger for whatever comes out once you actually tell the story behind it.

What Do You Take Home?

By the time your two or three months are over and you fly home, most of your actual life back there is unchanged. What's changed is how you see it. You're leaner and stronger from months of real physical work. And you have a certificate that says exactly what you did with the time.

3. The Meeting that Never Ends, the Endless To-do List, the Bag of Tricks to get You through yet Another Day: Who ARE you?

Years ago, I read a bumper sticker:

“This is the first day of your new life. Tell that to your liver, tell that to you ex-wife”.

Yes, unfortunately, we might have to live through a divorce and deal with the consequences, or, maybe worse, we are stuck in a relationship that has become really bad and damaging, we lose the interest in our job, or we get fired or promoted away. Parents are getting older, or have died, children have grown up and left us. We start realising that we are not on the path up anymore, but on the path down, and the world is no longer a playground with promises and rewards. We realise with frightening clarity: if we want meaning and happiness in our life, we will need to find out how to do that ourselves, and all this while carrying all the ballast of the years.

Happy people do not ask what the meaning in their life is. Very scared people don't either. Only people who are truly stuck ask this question. We want attention! We want to be attractive! We want admiration, or at least recognition! We want to be important, or at least matter! We want money, and if we have money, we want more money! We want meaning! We want a lot, and we do not get much, and the older we get, the less we seem to get. I know, some lucky people seem to be able to easily cope with this or even just escape this. I was not one of them, and my guess is that you are not one of them either, which is why you are reading this.

I'm a psychologist, and I also train Divemasters for a living. Over the years, I've watched a specific kind of person show up at my door: mid-40s to mid-50s, successful on paper, but quite broken inside. They don't come to learn how to work in the diving business. They come because something in their life stopped working and they don't know what to do about it, so they just bought a ticket and went diving.

And it worked!

This book is my case — the best explanation I have — for why a Divemaster training combined with some basic psychology is one of the most effective ways of dealing with a life crisis, and why it might work for you too.

Now, I know exactly what cliches people have given you (if you are one of these people who are lucky enough to have someone to talk to) or you have read. Let's see:

The count-your-blessings approach:

"Just look all the things you still have!"

"At least you have your health"

"Your children are doing fine"

"Most people have far less than you, and would swap places in the blink of an eye."

The be a brave-soldier approach:

"You can be proud of what you have accomplished! Focus on that!"

"Life goes on. No use crying over spilled milk. On with it!"

"Go on dating site, find someone new. Do not stay grieving and alone."

The magical-solution approach:

"What you need is a break. Go on a nice holiday somewhere."

"Go and get help. I know a friend/doctor/psychologist/spiritual adviser/yoga teacher/faith healer/ Buddhist master who is really good"

"Just buy nice clothes, a big car, have plastic surgery and act like you are young again! Life starts at 40!"

The cruel-to-be-kind approach:

"Well, if you feel that way, sell everything and become a monk."

"You know what, spend some time with people who have a really tough life, and see if you still feel like complaining".

"What were you expecting, love and peace and eternal youth and happiness? Grow up!"

Familiar? Familiar. Are they right? Yes they are. Did it help? No it did not. So why doesn't this advice work, even if it is good advice? Because it is not telling

you how to do all this. How are you grateful for your health, or happy with what you still have, 24 hours a day?

If we want meaning, and purpose, a “why”, that motivates us to endure a “how”, we have to find one ourselves. A “why” is easy for most people in their twenties (getting laid, finding a partner, making babies and all you need to do for that). To find a “why” when you succeeded a bit at this at 35, 45, 55, or whatever is far more difficult. What now? And why?

One thing is true: You will not get any younger, and you will not get happier by just waiting. One of your problems is: you think you have time, and more important things to do. Well, the graveyards are full of irreplaceable people who thought they had time enough to change. I am sorry. You better take your situation seriously and do what you need to do. Even if that makes you scared, and others angry. You are wasting precious time being unhappy, waiting for a miracle.

There is this famous play called “Waiting for Godot”. Maybe you know it. Two bums, sad losers called Vladimir and Estragon, are on an empty stage. They talk about who they are (they don’t know, and they don’t remember), and how they are waiting for a certain Mr. Godot. They are not sure if they are at the right place, or on the right date, or the right time. They are not sure what this Mr. Godot looks like. In fact, they do not even know who he is. Come to think of it, they are not sure if they even have an appointment with him. Or why. But they reason and reason with each other and always come to the same conclusion: better do nothing and wait. He might turn up. And this goes on and on and on and on:

Estragon: I can't go on like this.

Vladimir: That's what you think.

Or:

“Why are we here, that is the question? And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come... We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment.”

And on and on. If you see or read this play, it makes you want to jump up and shout: DO SOMETHING. ANYTHING. IT DOESN'T MATTER. ANYTHING.

I know something you can do. I have seen work over and over again. But let's first look what you will need to get unstuck in the first place.

4. 1. You Need a New, more Natural Physical Environment for at least a few Months

You cannot see your own life clearly while you're in the middle of it. You simply will not be able to re-evaluate your problems while you are in the middle of it. You need distance, real and psychological distance. Distance from your old, familiar self. The environment where you are now is full of triggers that pull you straight back into old thought patterns. The kitchen where you had the fight. The commute where you feel the boredom. The gym where you check the mirror and feel the years.

There are actually easy to understand psychological reasons why a change of environment causes a change of perspective. If you take away familiar cues, you will be forced to think about basic things again — what to eat, how to get somewhere, who these people are. You will need to reexamine old assumptions instead of just re-using the old ones. What also gives you chance to change perspective is just distance itself, in time or in space. From a distance, the same things start to look smaller and more general: you will start to see the patterns, not the incidents.

In addition, that changed environment is especially effective if it is very different from our usual environment: a more natural environment than our offices and cities. You could probably fill a small library with books on the back-to-nature argument, and I am pretty sure you heard it all before. I am pretty sure you experienced this yourself at one point, even if only through a walk in the park. I will limit myself here to telling you that our brains were not evolved to function in a crowded, information-dense, overstimulating artificial environment, and that living in such an environment will inevitably lead to serious problems. In short, you probably could do with some quiet nature, and I don't think I need to convince you of this.

In your old environment, people know who and what you are, and they force you into that role. You have accepted that identity, and it feels like it IS you. But it is not. It is just a role you play in a certain environment. Of course, you have a personality, we will come back to that later. But with that personality you can play many, many roles. If you had been born, say, in China, with your personality, would you be what you are now? I do not think so.

5. You need a New Social Environment for at least a few Months

You will have a hard time to reinvent yourself, when everyone around you pushes you right back where they have put you for years. Exchanging your 3-piece suit for beach-bum attire and going to work will not go down well in your social environment, and it will not help you anyway. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. You will need a new stage with a new audience, at least for a while. That is why it is not a good idea to take a part of your old environment with you, not even your best friends. People who love you might not like this, and you might not like this. But it is necessary.

And here we have a problem. For almost everyone it is very stressful to be all alone in a new strange environment. For many people it is a nightmare. That is exactly NOT what you need. So you need a new environment with new people but feel safe. This is usually solved by making an artificial social environment, with people-just-like-you. A retreat, a long sailing trip on a big boat, walking a pilgrims' trail with a group of other pilgrims. These are fine, but they are not ideal solutions. Your new environment needs to be, for want of a better word, "real". You need to have a clear role there, be a part of that social environment. Without some sort of responsibility (yes I know, I know, that is exactly what you are fed up with, I know), but without some sort of responsibility it is all just make-belief, shallow entertainment. I have rarely seen even a month-long retreat full of Eastern wisdom or creative expression make any lasting change, and that is exactly because there is not any responsibility attached. It may feel nice to be part of a select group of truth-seekers or underappreciated talent, but without responsibility it is all a game, and you do not change by playing no-obligation games.

You need a role in that environment, you need to be part of a social network where you have a position, that comes with responsibility and obligations. You want to be free, but freedom is not a lack of responsibilities. Freedom without any demands is a hell of insignificant boredom, and anyway, it will not help you change. If you just pay to be somewhere and are treated as a guest (or worse still, as a client or patient), not much is going to reset in your head, because you don't get a new role at all.

6. Using your Body for Meaningful Physical Activity

We tend to underestimate the role of your body in mental health. It goes much deeper than “if you are healthy and fit, you feel good”. For example, you might think that when you feel an emotion, it starts in your brain and then goes to your body, because that is how it feels. But it works exactly the other way around: your brain is constantly monitoring signals from inside the body (heartbeat, breath, gut, muscle tension) and a huge part of what we call "an emotion" is the mind's interpretation of that internal signal. Your body reacts, your brain looks for cues in the environment, and then produces your experience. In psychology this is called appraisal: the appraisal of the environment that triggers a physical reaction which causes the emotion. If you can make a different interpretation, you can experience a different, hopefully more positive emotion. There is whole school of therapy based on this, we will get to that later.

Someone who is "out of touch with their feelings" is usually out of touch with their body. Spending years behind a desk, hardly using your body, makes it hard to feel what's happening inside – until a crisis hits. It goes beyond emotions: thinking isn't a separate mental process happening in some abstract brain space, but deeply connected to your body. Changing how you use your body is usually faster and less painful than trying to change the way your mind works.

An important point is that only using your body on a daily basis for useful, meaningful activities helps, not half an hour of pointless gym exercise, let alone using yet another mindfulness app. You need to do things with real stakes, not performance under fake ones -just like you need responsibility to be able to accept a new role. Most "confidence-building" activities fail this test because the stakes are fake and everyone knows it.

Breathing Control as Way to Become Quiet and Ready to Take in New Impressions.

Almost everything in your body's stress response is automatic: you are simply not in control of your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, which run that for you. You cannot just control your heart beat or your body temperature, or sweaty hands. But there is one important exception, and that is your breathing. We think that is because we need to control our breath to be able to talk, in fact,

language beats the normal breathing pattern when needed. We can use that to our advantage: “take a deep breath” is usually very good advice.

There are practically no programs dealing with stress or growth that do not focus in one way or another on breath control, because it is very effective and very easy to learn. But it is not easy to do, because regulating your breathing takes constant control, constant attention. This is exactly why meditation focuses so much on breath control: you simply need to concentrate, and that is what meditation is all about: to concentrate our scattered attention and awareness. This method often breaks down in the real world, because you simply cannot afford to focus completely on your breathing while the world around you is asking for your attention. What you need is a way to practice breath control while doing other things, while getting direct feedback.

I will give a short explanation why it works like this. The best way to visualise a brain cell is an enormous tree: it has a trunk and hundreds of thousands of branches that connect with other cells. Unlike a real tree, these branches grow and die fast — while you are reading this sentence, thousands of new connections are being made in your brain, and thousands of old ones are dying off, all at once, in millions of cells. That has to be coordinated somehow. Here is the interesting part: there is no control room in your brain deciding where new connections should grow. There can't be, nothing sits in the middle with enough information to make that call for every cell. Instead, the brain does something simpler and smarter: whichever cells are actually being used right now start producing a substance called BDNF, and they release it to the cells around them. BDNF is what triggers new connections to grow. So the brain cells that are busy, make more room for themselves by using themselves. And this happens far more with meaningful exercise, exercise where mistakes have consequences and you have to keep paying attention, because that kind of exercise activates far more cells at once than routine exercise ever does. This is exactly why using your body for something new, with real stakes, changes your brain faster than any workout you could do on autopilot.

Flow and Feedback

We all know the feeling of flow, to be “in the zone” when you become fully absorbed, lose self-consciousness and track of time.. To get there you need to function just slightly above your normal level, but not so much you are out of your depth, and you need to get constant and immediate feedback and rewards.

All games work like this, playing an instrument works like this, and learning a new skill, if you have a good method and a good teacher, will work like this. Functioning in the flow is extremely effective to build new pathways in the brain in a very rewarding and pleasant way.

Many people who experience some sort of life crisis report that they lost the feeling of flow in their work, and mostly in their lives as well. They just ran out of things that were testing their skills, and everything became routine, unrewarding and boring. In a way, they simply became too skilled at what they do. The only way to change this is, well, to do something new. Something that is challenging, but doable, with good immediate feedback. And of course, something that you can experience as useful, meaningful, and pleasurable.

There is another advantage to start doing new things that get you in the flow again: you have permission to be a total beginner again. That is an extremely important tool. In fact, one of the most influential books on the practice of Zen meditation called “Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind” says: *“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.”* Zen students are trying to bring this beginner’s mind back through attention and meditation, but of course, you could also just learn something new, and actually BE a beginner. This means a change of environment, and especially one where you have the opportunity to get back in a flow: something just hard enough, something meaningful and with good direct concrete feedback. You don’t have time to become a monk.

There is an interesting link with curiosity here. In a burn-out or a depression, one of the first things to go is curiosity. Curiosity makes you explore new things, makes you a beginner over and over again. When curiosity has gone, you cannot force it to come back in an old familiar environment. If you run out of things you want to learn, want to know more about, chances are you are in a bad place.

7. How to Sell Leaving for a While to Yourself and your Significant Others

Ok, so you need a change of environment where you learn meaningful skills, with your mind and body. Fine. But this can take many forms. The classical solution for 20-somethings is to go “travel the world and find yourself” ..whatever that means. I do not think that solution sounds very attractive to you, and I am sure that you would have a hard time selling it to your social environment. What you need is an activity, a learning environment, with a clear agenda. You need to go somewhere new where you have a clear role, use your body, will be able to get into a flow and learn useful skills. And it should give you something real like a certificate and skills that you can use when you are back in your own environment. Yes, I know it sounds childish to want a paper, and of course it is not about the diploma or paper itself, but it is about a clear mark of achievement that you and your social environment can accept and understand. That will make it much easier to get on that plane with a good feeling and the blessings of your family and friends.

Your significant others might not like this idea of going away by yourself for a few months. But think about it this way: what is the alternative? Surely, nobody who loves you wants to watch you disappear a little more behind the same, sad, tired face. (If they are actually ok with that, well...). Sooner or later, something needs to be done, something needs to change, like it or not. If you do not do it, something will, and you are probably not going to like it, and neither are they.

Tell them the truth: "I am not okay, and I found something that has actually worked for people like me." Explain it. Let them read this text. Assure them that you are not going away to be a beach bum acting out a classical cliché midlife-crisis. You are going to do a challenging program and will come back healthier and with a certificate to prove you are a Divemaster.

8. What Do You Actually Do during Dive Master Trainee Program?

As you know, I am trying to make the point that a Dive Master Trainee program in the tropics ticks almost all, if not all, boxes to deal successfully with some sort of life crisis, or at least an “is this all there is” feeling that will not go away. So let me first describe to you what this program actually feels like, what people actually do and learn. You can find dry descriptions on any website of any dive school, but here I want to give you a different perspective.

Chances are that you have been diving already on a holiday, so you know a bit about it already. If not, let me explain shortly: recreational diving in warm water has nothing to do with images of people in dive suits staying hours underwater in diving locks with funny helium voices or locked in cages looking at big sharks. All nonsense. Diving in warm water is relaxed swimming in an aquarium while you can breath under water and you can go to the surface any time you like. You do not need to be a good swimmer, you do not need to be super fit to go diving. If you can swim and are in a fairly reasonable condition, you can enjoy diving. Diving is flying under water while being in a completely new world. Diving in warm water is completely safe, absolutely not scary, and minimally physically challenging.

Learning how to dive is also not difficult. In fact, in three days with four dives you can have your certificate to go diving with a buddy all by yourself; the Open Water course. I know many of you have done this, probably. Many of you might have also done a two-day Advanced Course, where you have learned to go a bit deeper, worked on your buoyancy, and maybe to navigate more effectively, or been diving at night. Not many of you will have done the last recreational diving course, the three-day Rescue Course, where you learn how to take care of other divers. This last course is usually the favourite of students and instructors alike, because it brings together everything you have learned in a meaningful, challenging and fun way. So, in a week or so you can be at this level, even if you have never been diving.

After this, you go on to become a Divemaster Trainee, a DMT. This is the program I am convinced is the perfect way to deal with a crisis of meaning in our lives, because it ticks all the boxes I described above. I realise you are probably not that interested in actually working in diving (but you never know), but what I am saying is that this program itself is very interesting for you.

A Divemaster Trainee program teaches people the knowledge, skills and attitudes to take the responsibility to lead dives with certified divers and assist instructors at teaching diving. Usually, there is one person who is the mentor of all trainees and who is responsible for the whole program. All trainees are also part of the team and go diving daily together, or help instructors teaching courses.

To acquire the skills you need to be a Dive Master takes time and practice. You are either diving with your mentor to learn skills, diving with an instructor to assist and learn how to deal with divers, or you are diving with other students for the experience and fun. You will spend a lot of time on the boat, under water, or interacting with people of all ages and all nationalities.

A good dive school has a clear program to help you with this, and someone responsible for this program. Usually, this is a two-week or a three-week schedule that is repeated in sequence, or monthly, or whatever. You will be expected to join activities from this schedule when you are able, or when you are ready, or when you feel like it. A good dive school will give you at least a month, but preferably two or even three months to do this. You will need this time, because you are not here to become a dive master as quickly (and cheaply) as possible. For you, the road is the goal. Besides, you probably need some time as well to do some online-work or whatever.

As soon as you are comfortable under water and have done some workshops, you will be needed to assist instructors with courses, usually try dives, open water, or advanced open water courses. You will be an active member of the team as soon as possible. Let's look at a typical two-week Dive Master Trainee schedule.

12/07/2026 Afternoon	Orientation plus DM manual Chapter one	22/07/2026 Morning	Briefing and Guiding Workshop
13/07/2026 Morning	Skill Circuit 1	23/07/2026 Afternoon	Decompression Theory and the RDP
14/07/2026 Afternoon	Dive Environment	24/07/2026 Morning	Skill Circuit 2
15/07/2026 Morning	Rescue Skills Review and Rescue Assessment	26/07/2026 Morning	Deep Dive Scenario
15/07/2026 Morning	Stamina Tests: 400 m swim, 15 min tread, 800 m snorkel, 100 m diver tow/push	28/07/2026 Morning	Skill circuit 3
16/07/2026 Afternoon	Physics	30/07/2026 Morning	DM cond.prog: Discover Scuba Diving Workshop
17/07/2026 Afternoon	DM cond.prog: Skin Diver Course and Snorkelling Supervision	01/08/2026 Morning	Skill Circuit 4

Afternoon		Morning	
19/07/2026 Afternoon	Physiology	03/08/2026 Morning	DM cond.prog: ReActivate / Scuba Review for Certified Divers Workshop
20/07/2026 Morning	Psychology Teaching Diving	05/08/2026 Morning	Equipment Exchange
21/07/2026 Afternoon	Equipment		

activities. Usually, the theory (physics, physiology, equipment, decompression theory and dive environment) are optional: if you prefer to do this on-line and alone, or at home, that is up to you.

A **skill circuit** is simply a session in a pool or shallow water where you learn how to demonstrate and evaluate all skills that are taught on an open water course; clearing a mask, using an alternative air source, recovering your regulator, etc.

9. 1. **A Typical Day of a Dive Master Trainee in the Tropics.**

You wake up in the morning and you probably have a shower, jump on your bike or walk to the dive shop or to a coffee shop close to it. You are in the middle of assisting an open water course with your favourite instructor, Robin, who has worked for a few years at the dive shop and you worked before with him (or her). You are meeting up at the boat, the large wooden boat that can take 40 students, waiting at the pier. It is sunny and there is a bit of wind, but no large waves. Robin tells you what you two will be doing: you have the same four students as yesterday, one from Germany, one French and one Canadian. They all can speak English a bit, and Robin speaks a bit of French, while you speak a bit of German, so that is one reason why you are there. You know them already, you have been diving with them yesterday at dive 1 and dive 2 from their open water course, so you know what to expect. You will be helping them set up their equipment, doing the buddy checks. You will listen to the briefing Robin gives, and then you will help them jump in the water, Robin will go first. Because one of the Germans is still a bit nervous, you decide that you will be the buddy of that student.

You will be repeating a few skills under water: how to recover a regulator and how to clear your mask. You are responsible for keeping the students organised, and you will be demonstrating these skills as a reminder. You have done three skill circuits already and looked these specific skills up yesterday, so you feel confident enough to do this. After this, you all will go for a dive. Robin will be at the front, and you will be with your student at the back. You will be first to help them with small problems, like buoyancy, and you will keep them all together.

There are a few other Divemaster Trainees on the boat, and you all drink a coffee together. Divemaster Trainees come from all walks of life, from many different countries, they usually came for a break with their old life, to get some distance and perspective, and actually have time enough to do that. (It is amazing how easy it is to connect and learn from these people: I have listened for hours to software developers, construction workers, airline pilots, ex-convicts, star-chefs, ex-army guys, you name it, sooner or later they have turned up And you all connect, because we all know why we are there.)

When all students have arrived, you guide yours to their gear. Usually it takes a while to get to the first dive site, and students always like to ask people like you

first instead of their busy instructor, so you get to know them and you can help them to get ready and relax. They usually ask about things that stress them: fish, their gear, and they always ask you where you are from and how long you have been here and what you are doing. Again, it is very easy to connect, and have real conversations with them. It is amazing how much they tell you, how open and personal it can become. That might be because you took them to a new and potentially stressful environment, so they are in a very new and good mood, and because you have proven they can trust you. And it probably helps as well that they know they will leave soon and probably will never see you again. I really know of no other situation, no other environment where this is so simple and easy to do.

During the dive, under water, you need to relax and keep your breathing under perfect control. You will learn to do this really quickly, because with your breath you control your buoyancy and your own relaxation. All the time under water, you will be perfectly aware of your breathing pattern. You will help your students to relax as well, point out interesting things, and you will be the first person to help solving small problems, while the instructor has the final responsibility, like a captain and you being the co-pilot.

After the dives, back on land, more often than not you will have a drink or share a meal with your students with your fellow dive master trainees. You will not make it too late, because tomorrow you will have a workshop: search and recovery under water at sea.

Everything you do will be evaluated on clear criteria and signed off by your mentor or a dive instructor, so you will get clear feedback. When you have done all you need to do, and probably more, you will be certified as a Divemaster by the international dive agency of your shop, usually PADI or SSI. You will be a world-wide recognised dive professional from that moment.

10. How this all Connects

Therapists can do many things, have far more training and experience in helping people. But no therapist can hand you a new physical environment, a new social world, a real role with real responsibility, and hours of meaningful physical use of your body — all at once, all day, every day, for months. A clinic cannot do what a boat, a dive site, and a team of strangers who need you can do. I find it fascinating that a dive shop was obviously never designed to help people, but it does it anyway, by accident, simply because of what it structurally is. I added some very basic psychological exercises, we will come back to this later. If you look at what is actually needed to get unstuck from a crisis, everything I listed above, you will find it already exists in a Divemaster Trainee program. Let me show you.

A new safe physical environment

Being a Divemaster trainee near a tropical beach, living in a different culture while being part of an international team is the perfect new physical environment. And spending hours under water, well, it does not get newer than that, or a better way to work with breathing techniques.

A new social environment

As a Divemaster trainee you will have the opportunity to meet people from all nationalities, from all walks of life and all ages. Moreover, you will have time to get to know them and have good conversations with them.

A new, meaningful role in that social environment with clear responsibilities

From day one you have a clear role, with clear responsibilities and a schedule. You are needed to assist with diving, it is not role playing or make-belief, you are part of a working team. You are learning new skills daily. You will be rewarded with a world-wide recognised certification as a dive professional, so you have a clear goal and a clear reward.

Using your body to use new, meaningful skills

Being a Divemaster trainee is just as much about using your body as using your brain. You will learn a whole new way of using your body underwater, and you will feel nicely physically tired when you go to bed.

11. **A Second Look:** *Perspective Change and Personal Reorientation Through Dive Training*

For all these reasons I started a program called: **A Second Look:** Perspective Change **and** *Personal Reorientation Through Dive Training*. It is a normal Divemaster traineeship with an addition of simple tried-and-tested psychological exercises under supervision of the Divemaster trainee mentor that help you to benefit maximally from your experiences. It is not therapy, but a way to make you realise what you are doing, what you are learning and how you are changing.

These are very basic psychological tools, and they fit the program naturally. We look at personality not as a label, but as a pattern, and we compare how you see yourself with how others actually see you. We look at cultural differences, so you become aware that things can be done very differently, without either way being right or wrong. We work with the three cognitive biases that get in your way the most when you are trying to change. And we use Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, a simple, well-tested technique, to give you real insight into why you react to your environment the way you do, and to give you a concrete way to change that.

We ask everyone in the group to keep what is shared there private — this is not a rule we can enforce, only a request, and almost everyone respects it, because they are sharing their own story too. The mentor steers the group gently away from anything too personal, too raw, or too easy to regret sharing with people you will still be diving with next week.

More importantly: a mentor who runs this part of the program gets basic training to recognise the difference between a normal, sometimes emotional moment of insight — which this program is full of, and something that goes beyond it: real trauma, something that clearly needs more than a group and a good conversation. When a mentor sees that line, they stop the activity, gently, right there, and state plainly that this deserves a professional, not us. That is not us ignoring you. That is us knowing exactly where our competence ends.

12. 1. Personality; The Big Five

Personality is a stable pattern of how someone thinks, feels, and behaves across different situations and over years. It is not a mood, which is short-term. People tend to describe personality as types: he or she is a “typical extrovert”. This is not how it works at all in reality. After decades of research, it turned out that people actually are different from each other on five scales, and on each scale you can score from low to high. Also, each scale is independent of the others, so knowing your score on one scale says nothing about your score on the other scales.

13. 1. 1. Self-assessment and 360 degrees feedback

Let’s first look at what the five scales are:

Openness — how much you're drawn to new ideas, new experiences, and abstract thinking, versus how much you prefer the familiar, the concrete, and the tried-and-tested. High scorers get restless without novelty; they like art, ideas, travel, and questioning how things work. Low scorers aren't less intelligent — they just find comfort and reliability in what's known, and don't feel a strong pull toward the untested.

Conscientiousness — how organized, disciplined, and goal-directed you are, versus how spontaneous and flexible. High scorers plan ahead, follow through, and keep their environment in order. Low scorers work more in bursts, tolerate mess and uncertainty better, and can be more adaptable when plans fall apart — but can also struggle with follow-through and deadlines.

Extraversion — where you get your energy from. High scorers are recharged by people, activity, and stimulation — being around others feels good, and quiet or solitude can start to feel draining. Low scorers recharge in the opposite direction — social interaction costs them energy, and solitude restores it. This isn't about being shy or confident; a low scorer can be perfectly comfortable socially and still find it tiring.

Agreeableness — how much you prioritize harmony and cooperation versus how much you're willing to create friction to say what you actually think. High scorers are warm, trusting, and avoid conflict — they'll often go along with something rather than cause tension. Low scorers are more skeptical, blunt, and comfortable disagreeing openly.

Neuroticism — how easily you're pulled into stress, worry, or negative emotion, versus how stable and even-keeled you stay under pressure. High scorers feel

things more intensely and are more reactive to setbacks — this isn't weakness, it's a nervous system that runs "hotter." Low scorers stay calmer under the same pressure, though that can sometimes look like being less affected by things that should matter to them.

To be absolutely clear: no score is "good" or "bad" , they are just descriptions.

We have a tool online available for you where you can score yourself on these five dimensions. This will give you a bit of insight into how you tend to react to your environment. More interesting is the have a look how people actually see you, so if your idea about yourself lines up with the idea people around you have of you. So after a month in the program, once people actually know you, we ask a few of them — your mentor, a couple of fellow trainees — to fill out the same test about you (you do the same for them of course). This gives you a 360 degrees view: how you see yourself, next to how you actually come across to people who have seen you being happy, tired, in control and irritated for a month. Again, this is not to judge you at all, but only to give you insight in yourself.

Here is an example taken from the tool you will use:



These are just made-up data, but they show what information this tool gives. As you can see, I have a much more positive view of myself than others have. I am not as open, conscientious, agreeable, or emotionally stable as I think I am...others see that differently. I am also much more extraverted than I think I am myself. Especially in emotional stability the two others agree between them that I am much less stable than I think I am. Interesting information, that we can explore further in real life.

We will explore this together with you in a personal session, and actually use this information in the program.

14. 1. 1. Personality as behaviour: The Big Five in real life

Big Five Observation

GB NL DE FR ES IT

All data is stored on your device only. No one else can see it.

Openness

1. Asks about something that isn't part of their job or task.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

2. Suggests a different way to do a regular task, without being asked.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

3. Picks the new or unfamiliar option instead of the familiar one, when given the choice.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

4. Notices and mentions when something familiar has changed.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

5. Brings up something they read or watched and connects it to what's being talked about.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

6. Asks why something is done that way, instead of just going along with it.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

7. Joins in on a topic they don't normally care about, when someone else brings it up.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

8. Shares their opinion on a "what if" question, without being asked.

Very unlikely to do this

Unlikely to do this

Might do this

Likely to do this

Very likely to do this

It is
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use that lists behaviours per scale. You will take the time to just actually step back and just look at people in a systematic way, which will be surprisingly fun and informative.

15. 1. 1. Personality: the Gap

Here we are going to reflect on the personality data. After a few weeks, to have filled in questionnaires for yourself and others, and others have filled them in for you. You have also been able to actually systematically observed individual differences . You will start to explore the gap between what we all think about ourselves and what others think of us. We will do that with photo exercise below, and also in a discussion with the mentor and one or two significant others. We will make use of insights by cognitive bias research and Rational Emotional Behaviour Therapy.

16. 1. Cultural Differences

An important part of the success of this program is the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures, and also to live in a different culture under controlled circumstances. We have developed a tool you can use so you can become aware of these differences, and use them to reflect on your own situation.

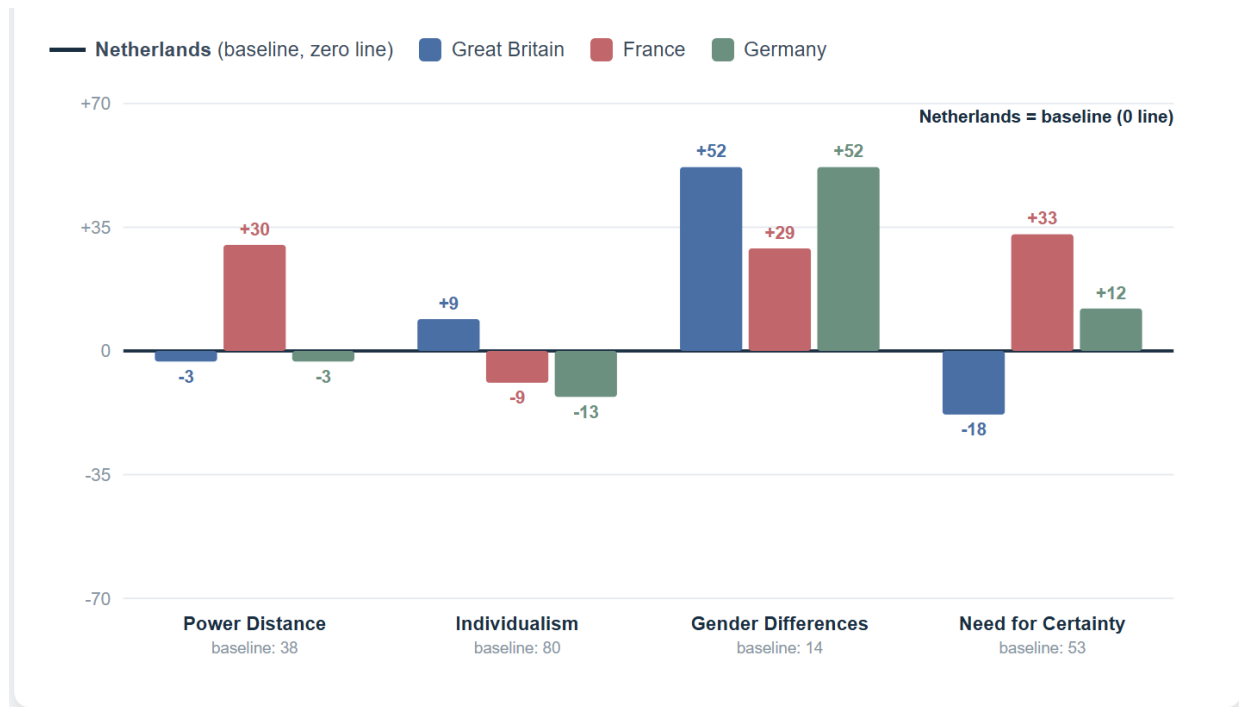
In the 1960s and 70s, research across dozens of countries showed that cultures differ consistently along a handful of measurable dimensions — not vague stereotypes but patterns that actually show up in the data, country after country, decade after decade. These dimensions matter here:

- **Power Distance.** How much people accept a boss having power over them. High: people obey, no pushback. Low: people expect to be asked, and bosses earn respect instead of assuming it.
- **Individualism.** Whether people put themselves first or put the group first. High: personal goals and opinions come first. Low: family, team, or community comes first, even over what you personally want.
- **Gender Differences.** How strictly a culture assigns "tough and competitive" to men and "caring and gentle" to women. High: men compete and achieve, women nurture, and stepping outside that gets noticed. Low: gender differences are small
- **Need for Certainty.** How much people need a fixed plan and one right way to do things before they feel okay. High: people want clear rules and get anxious without them. Low: people are fine improvising in uncertainty.

We have built a simple comparison chart, where you can pick your own country as a baseline (that is the way we all see it, we cannot help that) and put it next to the country you're training in, or your students' countries, or your fellow trainees', up to four at once, and see the actual numbers laid out side by side.

Every one of those scores describes something you picked up decades ago, long before you were old enough to question any of it, in the same way you picked up your language, simply by being surrounded by it for years with nothing else to compare it against, and never once being told that any of it was a choice rather

than just how things are. Now, you will have to chance to step back and get some perspective.



These are real data. I am Dutch, so I chose the Netherlands as base line. What is obvious right away, is that in my Dutch culture, gender differences are much less pronounced than in the rest of the countries. Dutch culture also doesn't have that much need for certainty... but Great Britain needs even less. Also this information you can use to get more to know about yourself and get some more perspective, and we do this in the program as well.

17. 1. Cognitive Biases

We all interpret the world around us and make up stories about how things are and what our role is in that. More often than not, the stories are not “true”, or even the most logical, effective, of pleasant ones for us. The problem is, we tell ourselves these stories to simplify things, to make them understandable: the world is way too complicated to really understand everything. In fact, even you yourself are far too complicated to understand yourself. But you make up stories, automatically, so you can deal with this. We are hardly aware that we even do this, we truly believe we experience the world “as it is”. But that is NEVER true.

You see, truth does not really matter for the survival machine your brain actually is. In fact, if the truth gets in the way of surviving, or is far too costly to discover, just let it be. The truth can be far too depressing to cope with directly, or is just irrelevant. Fooling yourself to feel at least ok about yourself and taking quick decisions that are half-decent most of the time paid off, and that is what causes these biases.

So things can go wrong, and they often do. The only way to work with this is try to become aware of the fact that you ARE telling stories so you can tell yourself you understand things. The next step is then simply to change the stories that make you unhappy and hamper your development.

The first way to do this is to look at Cognitive Biases. A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking that leads people to misinterpret information and make irrational judgments. These biases shape how individuals perceive reality and can cause different people to interpret the same facts differently. You probably have seen lists of them, proving that you are not so smart as you might think you are. We will work with the three most relevant to self-improvement in the Divemaster Trainee environment.

18. 1. 1. Confirmation Bias

You always look for evidence that proves you are right, and ignore evidence that shows you might be wrong.

We have the tendency to notice things that prove our stories, and just ignore or reconstruct that things that do not fit. I will prove to you right now that you are doing it as we speak.

I will give you a row of numbers, and you must guess the rule behind them. Then you must ask a number to check if you have the right rule. Here we go.

2 4 8 16 32

Now, any normal person would say: “64”, because you notice things just double all the time. And in fact, 64 is correct, yes, that can be the next number. So you say: you just double the number! No, you are wrong, that is NOT the rule. By asking me if 64 is ok, you cannot check that rule. You need to ask a number that is NOT a double. You should not confirm, but trying to disprove. You should have asked “63?” or something. If I say no, you can be a little more sure that doubling is the rule. But in fact, I say: “yes, 63 is ok”. Now you know for sure, absolutely sure, that rule is NOT doubling. Notice that asking 64 does not give you that information at all. (the rule is in fact: the next number must be larger, that is all. I tricked you, like the world does all the time).

This bias is extremely dangerous, because it gives you confidence that is based on nothing. This bias can make even very experienced pilots try to land on a taxiway full of waiting airplanes. Have a look at this fascinating video showing this:

<https://youtu.be/bLEGir9lzBo?t=705>

Now, if confirmation bias can make extremely experienced and extremely well-trained pilots explain away all facts that a taxi-way does not even look like a runway (on purpose, I might add), what chance do we have in normal life in the real complicated world? Not much, but we have to try to at least be aware that the story that we are telling ourselves might not be true, and that we perhaps can check a bit better.

You see this is nothing vague or mystical.

The point here is that you always need to ask yourself:

“What if my view of the world or myself isn't completely accurate?”

And then start actively looking for evidence that *contradicts* your usual story. To be absolutely clear: the goal isn't to “think positive”. The goal is to try to get a more accurate picture of yourself in your environment by trying to pay attention to things that are against your ideas. If you believe “*I'm not good with people,*” you will naturally notice things that “prove” this: you notice the awkward conversations and ignore the times people enjoyed talking with you. If you

believe “*I'm stuck in my life,*” you'll pay attention to all the things that “prove” you are stuck and disregard opportunities you might have to change. This is where the Big Five observation of others comes in handy: they give you a better, more objective view of what you actually do and how others react to you. In the program, we will teach you to look for things that disprove your idea about yourself.

19. 1. 1. **Fundamental attribution error**

Your successes are because you are competent and your fails are bad luck, but the successes of others were just good luck, and their fails because of incompetence.

When we try to do something ourselves, we are fully aware of our intentions. We judge the result against those intentions. If you fail, at least your intentions were good, and it was probably a lot bad luck that you did not succeed. When we look at others, we have no idea about their intentions. We cannot look inside their heads, so we just look at the results of the behaviour. If they fail, it was because they did something wrong. So we judge ourselves on intentions, but we judge others on results only. And that makes us think that if we do not succeed, it was mainly bad luck, but when others fail, it is because they are idiots who do not know what they are doing.

Now, it itself this is a very useful bias, because it makes you feel good about yourself, even if you fail. And you know, you may even be right (sometimes). This is all not to say that you actually cannot be an expert on some matters, and actually know better. But this bias make you think that you are always right. And the price you pay for this is that you are less likely to learn from your mistakes (it was just bad luck, nothing to learn really) and that you do not give other people credit enough to be able to work with them and more importantly, learn from their mistakes (they have proven they are idiots after all). Keep this up long enough, and you end up with the idea you are only at least half-competent person in a world of fools.

Putting you in a new environment where there are other people who actually do know better gives you the opportunity to catch that bias and give you back the opportunity to experience the pleasure of working with and learning from other people.

1. ○ ■ S:

Grossly overestimating how much other people notice, judge or remember what you do.

As a human being, having access to all those things that go on in your head, you are pretty self-obsessed. You need to be to survive. But the mistake is here that you assume that people are just as obsessed as you are with you. They are not. They are also obsessed with themselves and have no time and no interest in taking notice of you and the details about you. Yes, you are a grown-up and you know this, but the point is you probably still massively overestimate how much attention actually pay to you.

There are fascinating experiments where people are interacting with a sales person, are distracted for a few seconds, and in those few seconds the sales person switches with someone else, with different hair, different clothes. Most people do not even notice anything.

<https://youtu.be/VkrrVozZR2c?t=110>

And they rightly should not notice these things. Our capacity to process information is limited, and we cannot simply pay attention to every single detail in every single situation. The point here is that there is a good chance you might be torturing yourself with thoughts about what people think of you, what you said and done...when they are in fact not thinking about you at all, let alone about what you have said and done. They are far too busy worrying themselves about what others think of them...

There is one more amusing demonstration of the spotlight effect, and it features the very uncool Barry Manilow. Researchers made undergraduates wear a t-shirt with a big photo of Barry Manilow. Barry Manilow was pre-tested to be embarrassing for that population, he was not exactly a cool campus icon in the late '90s. A student wearing the shirt would then walk into a room with a few other students, and after a few minutes, they left again. And here comes the trick. The t-shirt wearer was asked to guess what percentage of people in the room would be able to say who was on their shirt, and of course the people in the room asked if they actually noticed anything.

The ones with Barry on their T-shirt thought that about half would have noticed, while actually only a quarter noticed. So: you are wearing the most uncool shirt ever, and only about 25% actually noticed this. A sobering thought.

In our program, we will show you the spotlight bias in action, so you can actually stop tormenting yourself about your image.

1. 1. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy

There is one more tool in the program, and it ties the others together: Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, or REBT. The idea behind it is simple, and you have already felt it in the biases above: our reactions, thoughts and emotions are not based on things happening in the world, but on our interpretation of those events — psychologists call this appraisal. It was developed in the mid-1950s, it takes this single idea and builds a whole method around it: if you can make your appraisal conscious and under your control, you can change your reaction to almost anything that happens to you.

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy uses the insight that we all suffer more or less from four irrational thoughts that colour our interpretation of events. These irrational thoughts are easy to recognise because they contain absolute words like "must," "should" or "always":

Demandingness

These are rigid "musts," "shoulds," we impose on ourselves and others. Examples are: "I must perform well and win approval, or I'm worthless." "Other people must treat me fairly and considerately."

Catastrophizing

This is rating even a slightly bad event as the worst possible thing that can happen, almost the end of the world.

Low Frustration Tolerance / "I-can't-stand-it-itis"

The belief that you cannot bear discomfort, frustration, or unmet demands — "Things always need to go as I want them to go."

Generalised Failure

This is when we judge an entire person's or our own worth based on a single failure: "I failed, therefore I am useless." "They wronged me, therefore they're a bad person."

These thoughts are irrational because they are absolute and because they are not in your best interest to have. It is far more healthy to think that you do not always need to perform and win, that others sometimes just treat you badly for no reason, that a small defeat or temporary lack of success is not the end of the world, to think that you are a grown-up and can take a large amount of frustration, and that people, including you, make mistakes and that this doesn't make you or them idiots or bad people.

Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy tries to catch you having these thoughts by looking at an event that you choose because it was meaningful for you, and gave you negative emotions. Some event that made you unhappy. This is most informative and fun to do in a small group, because it becomes apparent that people might think and react very, very differently.

First, a mentor helps you to describe this event in purely physical terms, with as little interpretation as possible. For instance, "they looked at me in this aggressive way" is an interpretation, "they looked at me" is a factual statement. Then you explore what you thought, what your interpretation was: "They are always out to get me, and they look at me with aggression and contempt." Note that there are no feelings here, just your interpretation. And only then you express your feelings: "that made me feel angry and insecure."

And now we can see how your interpretation made you feel that way, and ideally, change that interpretation so you have a positive, or at least not a negative, emotion about it. We do that by asking about that interpretation: how do you know they were looking aggressive? Maybe they were very concentrated and you disturbed them. How do you know they were aggressive towards you? Maybe they had a fight and you just accidentally came in. Why is it so bad that they were angry at you (here the four irrational thoughts really come up: people must always like me, I am a bad person if people are angry with me, if people look at me like that they are totally bad people, etc..). As soon as you can accept that you can interpret the situation however you like, you can choose one that actually benefits you.

Yes, you might be right: these people may be out to get you and be aggressive, nasty people. But it is much more constructive to assume you are having irrational thoughts in the interpretation of their behaviour. The Truth (whatever that may be) does not really matter in using this technique.

It is a very simple, but very powerful technique once you master it. During your program, we will sit together in a small group and explore ways how you can use it by actually doing this with each other.

2. 1. The Reframe Story Photo Video Exercise

In this fun exercise we bring it all together. From the third week on, once a week, a maximum of three Divemaster trainees in the program come together with the mentor. You have been taking pictures of course, but here you will show us one or two pictures that mean something to you: something that struck you, surprised you, or made you see things differently than you would have before. The picture itself does not need to show any of this directly. It is a trigger, not an illustration. The picture itself can be really anything.

Sometimes the picture will show you something about your own personality, maybe a moment where you caught yourself doing exactly what your Big Five data said you would. Sometimes it connects to the cultural differences you have been learning about, a small thing that only makes sense once you see it that way. And often, once you start telling the story behind the picture, you will notice something else: you are holding on to an interpretation without ever checking it, the same trick confirmation bias always plays on you. Or you will hear yourself describing a moment that upset you, and this is a perfect opportunity to use RET, right there in the group: what actually happened, what you told yourself about it, and what you felt — and whether there was a different, less painful way to read the same moment.

You will tell the others why you chose those pictures, exploring the emotional and psychological meaning behind them, and, most of all, how you are starting to see things differently than you used to. The group can ask questions to make this clear, and like this it helps you to get your own thoughts clearer.

Again: this isn't a support group, and it isn't a critique session. This exercise does two different things: because you are on the look out for situations that are significant for you, you pay more attention to your process of growth and change. It also makes you put your experiences into words, into a story, and that helps you really process and reflect on it.

3. 1. **What do you take home?**

At some point, your two or three months are over, and you fly home. Probably, not much about your life there has changed while you were gone. What has changed is you. You now see your own life from a distance, in a different perspective. The story you used to tell yourself about who you are, why things went wrong, what you deserve, well, you know now that it was never the only version. None of this needs a boat, or a mentor, or a dive site.

You are leaner and stronger than when you arrived, from months of actual physical work. You have a certificate, that says exactly what you did with your time — not "took a break," not "found myself," but becoming a Divemaster. Something real, that you show anyone who ever doubted you, not least yourself.

But you do not just take home a new way of seeing, and a fitter body, and a certificate. You take home people: your mentors, the instructor you worked with, and most of all the other trainees who sat in that small group with you and heard the real version of your story, not the polished one you tell everyone else. You will stay in touch. You will always be able to talk to someone who was actually there, who knows exactly what you are talking about, because they went through the same thing together with you.

4. 1. What now?

You remember Estragon and Vladimir, waiting for Godot on their empty stage? Suppose they would have read all this, they might be convinced. But that would not have changed anything. The only way to change things, is to actually walk off that empty stage. So, I am not expecting this small booklet changed your life. I did not write it with that in mind. Reading this made you think, maybe. Feel something, maybe. Vladimir and Estragon also thought, and felt, and talked beautifully about all of it, on that empty stage. But they never moved.

I don't think you need more conviction than you already have right now. I guess you have had enough conviction for years, but you have become an expert in finding reasons to wait one more season, one more year, until the time is right, until the kids are older, until work slows down. It will not slow down. The time will never be right. You will never be perfectly prepared.

But before you do anything, be honest with yourself about one thing. This program is NOT INSTEAD of therapy. If you are in real crisis right now, if you are having thoughts of suicide, if you are in the grip of an addiction, if you are currently under care for a serious psychiatric condition, this program is not the right call. Talk to a professional. You can bring this text, but you need to talk to a professional, not to us. We are not qualified to help you. When in doubt, please talk to a professional first.

If not, just tell us where you are, what you are dealing with, and how much time you think you can take. We will help you work out the rest — the dates, the shop, the practical side of just getting on a plane. That part is easy. Then you have done the hard part already: deciding to actually talk with us.

<https://www.burnoutupforair.com>

