

THE WELL-BEING GUIDE

REDUCE STRESS, RECHARGE
AND BUILD INNER RESILIENCE



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Authors: Ea Suzanne Akasha and Sarah Harrison

Layout and illustrations: Laetitia Ducrot

**International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support**

Blegdamsvej 27

DK-2100 Copenhagen

Denmark

Phone: +45 35 25 92 00

psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org

www.pscentre.org

www.facebook.com/Psychosocial.Center

Instagram: ifrc_psychosocialcentre

@IFRC_PS_Centre

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FIRST AID WHEN VERY DISTRESSED

Should you or others for some reason become very upset or distraught, the following exercise is aimed at getting immediate relief. If having a flashback, the same exercise can be used to direct the attention back to the here and now to assist leaving unpleasant memories in the past. Stand, sit or lie and keep your eyes open.

- Begin by finding five things in the immediate surroundings that **you can see**. Say out loud what they are and use concrete words to describe what you see.
- Next, find four sounds in the immediate surroundings that **you can hear**. Say out loud what they are and use as concrete words as possible to describe the sounds.
- Find three things in your immediate surroundings that **you can touch/ are touching**. Say out loud what they are using concrete words when describing the touch.
- Find two things in your immediate surroundings that **you can smell**. Say out loud what they are.
- Find one thing in your surrounding that **you can taste**. Say out loud what it is.

INTRODUCTION

The exercises in this guide are for all humanitarian staff, volunteers and for recipients of mental health and psychosocial support services.

If practised and used regularly, this catalogue of tried and practised tools can regulate stress, calm when distressed, promote sleep, and strengthen inner resilience.

The well-being guide: reduce stress, recharge and build inner resilience is for individual self-care, and for peers and teams who work together. Each section can be tested or incorporated within regular meetings with a focus on caring for the carers.

Humanitarians and people working in helping professions need to take care of themselves in order not to burn out and to be effective in their work.

Remember it is self-empowering to focus on what you can control. You can take control of caring for yourself.

The IFRC publishes one well-being exercise a week, including some from this guide, on our social media channels and webpage.

Participants should never be forced to do an exercise. Always leave the choice open when suggesting using any of the exercises presented in *The well-being guide: reduce stress, recharge and build inner resilience*.

When instructing others, be sure to have tested each exercise first with yourself and peers, so giving the directions of the exercise comes easily and naturally to you. Speak in a normal tone of voice, give adequate pauses when instructing, and allow time to discuss the effects of the exercise as well as sharing of thoughts and reflections afterwards.

When using the exercises in groups, ensure there is time to share experiences of each exercise. Everyone present can be asked to say a few words about how they feel now, if they felt the exercise was useful for them, or what they learnt from doing it. This will build the vocabulary, knowledge and familiarity with stress reduction and resilience building exercises.

When using an exercise with yourself, a team, a group or in pairs, it is recommended to do a basic 'check in' before and after each of the exercises. Mentally note or say one word that describes how you feel and one word that describes how the body feels in the actual moment. Thus, you can be better acquainted with the different exercises and find out what works best for you and what is the best choice in each situation for others.

WHEN FEELING OVERWHELMED AND DISTRESSED



When overwhelmed, distressed, and faced with many challenges it is hard to be aware of what is actually and concretely going on around us. During or after busy times, it is difficult to unwind due to the high level of stress in the body. Research also shows that periods of too little stress, low expectations and too few challenges will have the same effect of making it difficult to unwind. Too few stressors are as taxing on the body as too many stressors. These exercises will help you unwind and regulate the negative effects of too little or too much stress in body and mind.

1. AWARENESS OF THE HERE AND NOW

Being able to bring your attention back to here and now is a very useful skill when being overwhelmed. The thinking mind tends to be stressed and will almost automatically endlessly go over what happened or will constantly plan ahead. Others will focus non-stop on everything that can go wrong, which will only increase the worries and raise the level of agitation.

Practice focusing the attention on the here and now by using the senses. Mentally tell yourself what you see, hear, smell and sense in your body: *"Right now I am noticing a sound far way..."*, *"This moment I notice my hands touching..."*, *"Now I notice seeing the colours of..."* or *"I am now aware of the smell of..."*. Go on noticing what you are aware of in each present moment as you become aware of sensorial inputs - sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations on your skin or in your body. Do this whether walking, standing, lying, or sitting.

2. HUG YOURSELF CALM

When needing to de-stress emotionally, take a few moments to collect and hold yourself together by using your hands and arms. Many have found the calming hug useful when facing an overwhelming situation as for example before giving a presentation, taking a call in a call centre, or moving into the world again after a lockdown. Before or during an overwhelming situation, do this exercise to help yourself to be ready:

- Stand or sit upright with your feet solidly planted on the ground.
- Notice the support from the ground against your feet.
- Take a deep breath and breathe out slowly and consciously.
- Place your right hand, palm turning inwards, in your left armpit and the left hand on your upper arm below the shoulder.
- Press inwards with both hands and hold the firm grip for some seconds giving yourself a solid hug.
- Release the grip for five seconds and repeat twice more.
- Let the arms drop to the sides of the body and move on in daily life.

3. GROUND YOURSELF

Grounding oneself and releasing unnecessary tension before a situation that make us uncomfortable and tense is a great way to get ready. As humans we relate to the ground when moving about and if muscles are too tense it increases the feeling of uneasiness. Releasing some tension of the muscles by sensing the ground and accepting the support it gives can bring a much-needed sense of connecting to the reality of the moment as well as a sense of slowing down.

Wear flat shoes or no shoes when using this grounding exercise. If doing it with children, ask them to imagine they are growing roots into the ground from the soles of their feet. When swinging slowly back and forth, they need to keep both feet on the ground, so the roots are not coming out of the ground.

- Stand upright and place both feet on the ground. Place your feet a little apart and in a parallel position.
- Rest your arms by your side.
- Take a moment to notice how your body and breathing feel.
- Send your awareness to the soles of the feet.
- Gently and slowly move the entire body from the ankles forward without lifting the heels off the ground.
- Gently and slowly move the entire body backwards from the ankles without lifting the toes off the ground almost like a pendulum.
- Gently move the entire body from the ankle joint back and forth between the two positions.
- Next lean to one side without lifting the other foot off the ground and lean to the other side
- Repeat these sideways pendulum-like movements a few times.
- Find a comfortable upright position and notice how you feel after the grounding exercise.

4. THOUGHTS IN A BOX

Experiencing invading thoughts are common when feeling overwhelmed and stressed. Intrusive thoughts visit the mind as uninvited guests, even if one just wants to be left alone. It is important to learn how to place those unwanted thoughts aside. In your imagination create a beautiful and sturdy box. You have the freedom to visualize this box in a nice material with as many beautiful colors and decorations as you like. Supply the box with a solid lock. Place every intrusive thought into the box and lock the box securely.

Visualizing the box can help release the uninvited thoughts from our head. It is a simple exercise for children as well, as it helps keep the mind clear in chaotic times. Before going to bed it is also an option to imagine placing the box outside of the bedroom, leaving the thoughts there till the next morning.

5. ANGER MANAGEMENT

Anger is a common and natural, yet powerful emotion that overrides reasoning and other feelings. When upset and annoyed, irritated, or angry the hands typically clench, which in turn leads to both arms, the shoulders and the neck tensing up. The breath quickens too. Let the anger pass by acknowledging it is a feeling that will pass. Open the hands, let the arms hang relaxed by the side of the body with the palms showing.

Anger can also prevent good sleep. Many people have a bad habit of clenching their hands into tight fists when falling asleep. This leaves the body tense and fatigued in the morning. A simple trick is to sleep with open palms. This will help your hands, arms, and shoulders to also relax giving you healthier and happier sleep.

If a person is talking about anger and is pained by it, a psychosocial supporter can explain: *"When you are angry the hands are making a fist and when you're in a neutral mood, the hands are open. A simple tip to release anger is to open the hands and show the palms to the world. Try this now... How does it feel?"*

WHEN ANXIOUS AND NERVOUS



Challenging situations, changes in life as well as habits can increase the overall levels of anxiety and nervousness inside us. When the level of distress in the muscular and nervous systems decreases, it is much easier to think clearly, to feel somewhat in control and to act in a meaningful way. The exercises in this section aim to give more control over situations and build new habits. Deep breathing is a highly effective way to calm down and gain perspective and thereby giving you more control and leverage to decide what to do and how to act, instead of reacting.

1. BLOW SOAP BUBBLES

For adults and children all over the world the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been a source of stress, anxiety, constant changes, and uncertainty. Individuals and families have been forced to socialize less, children have missed out on school, and all of us have had to change our habits.

When in distress, a simple breathing exercise can ease the mind, and bring you a calming moment. Imagining blowing soap bubbles is the simplest and easiest way for children of all ages to learn deep breathing. The lungs effortlessly empty and fill up with air when wishing to blow a nice big bubble. Blow a couple of real or imaginary soap bubbles. For children bubble blowing is associated with fun and it keeps their attention on something other than worries and uncertainty.

2. CHEW GUM

When chewing gum, or imagining chewing gum, the mouth will fill with saliva. The saliva signals a state of well-being to the brain which makes us feel less nervous. When nervous or anxious the mouth and throat feel dry – therefore this exercise tricks the brain into sending messages of relaxation to the body.

- Put a real or imaginary piece of bubble chewing gum in the mouth.
- Chew it slowly and thoroughly as if it were real.
- Notice how the saliva spreads in your entire mouth.
- Imagine the gum growing bigger or getting harder. Work your jaws a bit more to chew the gum.
- Notice how you feel after the exercise.

3. BREATHE IN A COLOUR YOU LIKE

An easy way for children and adults to calm themselves if anxious or worried is to do a breathing exercise combined with a mental image. This exercise

WHEN ANXIOUS AND NERVOUS

uses the image of breathing pleasantly coloured air in with the in-breath and unpleasantly coloured air out with the out-breath.

- Begin by taking a deep in-breath and let the exhalation be long. Let the bottom of the lungs fill and empty with each in-and out-breath.
- Next imagine a favourite and pleasant colour being inhaled with the in-breath. Fill the lungs with a beautiful colour you like and find pleasant.
- Then exhale a least favourite colour with the out-breath. Expel the air imagining the least favourite colour leaving the body.
- Continue as long as you like....

Children over six years can use the exercise. Only continue for as long as the child is able to concentrate. Begin with just a few breaths.

4. MANAGE WORRIES

Unfortunately, a tendency to worry and think about problems will only increase when focusing on them. When constantly mulling over worries, the mind remains occupied, and this makes it hard to react constructively and proactively to solve the problems or issues at hand. One way to deal with this is to focus the mind away from worries during the day and set aside a dedicated time slot during the day to only focus on them. Note that your dedicated times slot should NOT be before bedtime. The following exercise has the benefits of training you to decide where to direct your attention and is action oriented, since there will be a plan of how to act.

Decide on a daily ten to 30-minute worry time where you note down each worry and make an action plan for each of them.

Should a worry appear at other times during the day, remind yourself - and the worry - that you will take care of them later at worry time. When getting familiar with the worry time technique, use it when needed.

5. CLIMATE ANXIETY

Climate anxiety can leave anyone feel dis-spirited, powerless, and without a clue about what to do. When anxious about climate changes, remember that by identifying and acknowledging a feeling, it is both easier to understand what is happening to you as well as to find ways to become an active agent. When noting any climate anxiety, think for a moment about each thing you can do yourself, with your friends, at work, at school, and as a volunteer to take action against climate change. This is a way to support your well-being.

To create a supportive environment, have a group discussion with your peers, colleagues, family members or other social circles using the following questions as a point of departure:

- What are our feelings about and reactions to the issue of climate change?
- What can we do as individuals and as a group to manage our reactions to climate change?
- Which actions can we take as individuals and as a group to mitigate or stop the effects climate change?

WHEN WANTING TO CALM DOWN



Being able to regulate how you feel and to modulate the level of mental bodily arousal are vital skills for humanitarians who need to be clear headed to be able to make good decisions in challenging work environments. When affected by strong feelings or in the grip by disturbing thoughts, it is hard to think straight. A clear head and a calm mood are required when supporting others in distress. It is important to know how to de-stress yourself. Practice these exercises regularly as this will enable you to have them at your disposal almost like a reflex.

1. TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Breathing is an individual affair as each of us has a different build and our signature ways of breathing. If doing breathing exercises with others, allow each person to follow their own natural rhythm rather than forcing someone to breathe at a set pace. In general, when body and mind are well balanced nine to twelve deep breaths per minute are all that is needed. The deep breathing gives new energy to the entire body, stimulates the immune system, and activates the lymphatic system. A deep refreshing breath also promotes a feeling of harmony and inner peace.

Sit comfortably, upright with relaxed shoulders, hands lying on a table or in your lap. Breath in and out through the nose. Relax your lips and jaws for at least a full minute while counting the number of breath cycles – in and out - within this time span.

Sit for a moment quietly and repeat the one-minute breathing and counting. Use the exercise often, for example two to three times per week if you want to improve your well-being over time.

2. OUTLINE A FLOWER

Sometimes we need to slow down for a minute to ground our thoughts and feelings. When calm, the breath is deeper and slower. Deep breathing can therefore be used to calm down and take time to find yourself. This grounding exercise aims to shift your attention inwards and learn how to listen to yourself.

Place a pencil in the middle of a piece of paper. Draw a flower with eight petals. Inhale as you draw one line of the petal from the centre and pause at the tip of the petal. Exhale as you draw the other side of the petal, back to the middle. When the flower is done, ask yourself how you are feeling. Do you feel a difference from when you began drawing the flower?

3. HAND ON THE HEART

Anxiety, fear, and feelings of uncertainty are natural in adverse situations, such as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prioritizing self-care is a crucial component in maintaining our mental health and well-being. With so many external stressors happening in the world, it is important not to forget to slow down and take care of ourselves when needed. A simple self-care gesture is placing your hands on your heart or putting the palms of your hands together in front of your chest as in a greeting or prayer as you inhale and exhale. Allow the shoulders to relax while doing so; sink into your own being.

4. CALMING BY AWAKENING THE SENSES

In this exercise you need a thin bamboo or wooden stick, or a pencil. The type of touch used in the exercise, releases oxytocin, which is a feel-good brain chemical and hormone that help us stay calm and collected. A release of oxytocin also makes us feel connected to others. It stimulates the skin with its myriads of sensorial nerves.

- Take a pencil or a stick in one hand.
- Very slowly and thoroughly, touch and physically trace the outline of the other hand. Let the pencil or stick glide over fingers, palm, back of the hand, all the way around and in and out of the hand and around the wrist.
- Notice if there are areas of the hand and wrist that needs more attention and gently touch and slowly stroke the area.
- After a few minutes, put the pencil or stick down. Notice how your hand feels now. How does it feel in comparison to the other hand?
- Now swap hands and hold the pencil or stick in the other hand.
- Now touch and trace the outline of the other hand very slowly as

before. Give it the same amount of attention and time as you did the first hand.

- Bring the exercise to an end and notice the effect it has on you. You may feel a tingling sensation in the hand, note how the shoulders are lowering and even let out a sigh of release.

If you like the effect of the exercise you can use it on your arms, face, throat, neck, lower legs, or feet. For example, gently move the stick over the skin of half of the face and throat, next compare it with the other part of the face and throat for a moment. Change side and repeat the same procedure on the other half of the face.

5. IMAGINE A HUG

The effect of imagining something pleasant and soothing has a calming effect on you in the same way as thinking about something unpleasant or scary has a distressing effect. The exercise also builds on the fact that as humans we are wired to connect with others. Touch is a powerful way for us to relate.

This simple exercise using the imagination releases positive chemicals, neurotransmitters and hormones that boost positive feelings, strengthens trust, and increases your overall well-being. It can even help compensate somewhat for the lack of social contact.

Imagine holding the hands of someone you love or imagine hugging someone you care deeply for. Notice the feeling on the skin and the effect of thinking about a loved one and holding or hugging them. Add an inner smile if it doesn't occur by itself. Hold the hands or hug for more than 20 seconds to feel and enjoy the benefits of the touch and human contact.

STRENGTHENING MY INNER RESOURCES



Knowing and making an inventory of your inner as well as outer resources is useful when facing adversity. It can change your outlook and allows you to gain perspective and find new possibilities. Being able to separate thinking from feeling and to think about what you are feeling is a key skill for someone supporting others. Everyone will feel worried, fearful, tired, bored, anxious, and overwhelmed sometime and hopefully also know how to handle it. Think of the following exercises as inner strength training that will come in handy when faced with dilemmas and ambiguities which seem to have no clear, right option or way forward.

1. THINK LIKE AN OPTIMIST

Optimistic thinking can prevent high levels of distress and will boost your inner resilience. When under pressure, it is easy to react with unhelpful feelings like frustration, annoyance, and irritation. Growing your internal resilience by practicing optimism will prepare you to react to, and handle, everyday stressors effectively. Notice the difference if thinking about a task that you *have to do* and then change the wording and think about a task in this way: *I get to do this task* and notice if and how it changes your approach and attitude to the task. One way to learn optimistic thinking is to identify a set of sentences that will mobilize your resilience and gear you for optimistic thinking. The next step is to use them generously!

Examples could be:

- *This is possible and manageable.....*
- *I get to do it.....*
- *I can manage.....*
- *I will ask for help.....*
- *I know how to calm myself.....*
- *I know my inner resources.....*

2. BE KIND AND COMPASSIONATE

Acts of kindness can reverse the effect of unpleasant stress. The body responds in completely opposite ways to stress and to kindness. When stressed, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, digestion is disturbed and the immune system suffers, making it easier to catch colds and other inflammations.

Kindness has the beneficial effects of lowering the blood pressure, slowing the heartbeat, making digestion easier and decreasing the likelihood of catching colds and so on. Kindness, such as helping another person, also makes us more open to others and even helps us recover after a distressing event.

Most faiths encourage showing kindness and compassion towards others. We can be too stressed to be kind to those around us and it is usually even harder to be kind and show compassion to ourselves! This exercise poses the following questions to welcome kindness and to show compassion to yourself.

- What kind act could I be inspired to do today?
- If you could call yourself at any point in your life, when would you call and what kind and compassionate words would you say to yourself?
- How can you acknowledge your own achievements and successes?

3. WELL-BEING FLOWER

Knowing about your inner and outer resources is very important to be able to draw on them when this is needed. When faced with a difficulty, train yourself to immediately think about which inner or outer resource can assist you to be more resilient.

Map your own well-being resources by drawing a flower with seven petals. Colour each petal of the flower in your favourite colour(s). Next, label each petal with the following domains:

- Material
- Social
- Spiritual
- Cultural
- Mental
- Emotional
- Biological

Each petal of the flower represents one of the domains of your personal well-being. They represent the aspects of life where we need to feel healthy and content. Reflect and write down examples of things, people, or activities under each of the seven areas that give you a positive sense of feeling healthy and good. This is your own well-being flower.

4. I HAVE, I AM, I CAN, AND I WILL

From time to time, it is useful to reflect on your resources. To do so is to be reminded of and be mindful of your resilience. This exercise is for those who could use a mental boost and a reminder of what motivates you in your daily life. You need paper and pen for the exercise.

- First, open your palm and fingers wide. Place your hand on a piece of paper and draw around your hand.
- Write **I HAVE** on one finger and list names, people, images, places, animals you can rely on for support.
- Write **I AM** on another finger and write the things you are proud of.
- Write **I CAN** on another finger and write the skills, abilities, activities you engage in.
- Write **I WILL** on another finger and write things you will do to bring comfort to yourself when times are hard.
- Give yourself a thumbs up at the end of the exercise!

5. LEARN FROM PAST ADVERSITY

It can make anyone tense and nervous when encountering a difficult moment. It could be a challenging event, a task, or an adverse situation. Remind yourself of what difficult situations you have faced earlier on in your life and how you met them successfully. When confronting adversity, we often tend to block out or simply forget those earlier successes. Use the following model to reflect on how you can be reminded of your own strengths and resources and how to apply them to the present:

First think about a difficult moment or event in the past. Next ask yourself the following questions:

- How did I cope with it and overcome the difficulties?
- How can this experience help me overcome my current difficulties?

WHEN GOING TO SLEEP



Many children and adults find it challenging to fall asleep for reasons often related to stress, worry and anxiety. The bodily and mental exercises listed below will help you fall asleep by activating the parasympathetic nervous system that is responsible for resting, digesting and restoration. Activating this relaxation response helps calm your body and mind and this promotes sleep. Should you wake up during the night or too early in the morning, using these exercises can also help you go back to sleep. Other exercises within this well-being guide can assist your sleep.

1. YAWN AWAY

Yawning is an effective and highly contagious reflex that sends signals of relaxation and release to the nervous system. Begin this exercise by opening your mouth and releasing tension the lower jaw and tongue. Then lift your palate to allow an 'O' shape to form in the back of your mouth. Begin to move the lower jaw from side to side and invite a yawn on the next inhale while keeping your shoulders relaxed. Yawn a couple of times and if it feels good, gently stretch your arms over your head. Take a moment to see if your mind and body feel different than before doing this exercise.

2. RELAX THE HEAD

Learn this exercise where you focus on relaxing the muscles of the entire head to slow down mental activity as muscle tension in the head accompanies any thinking activity. The exercise is also very effective to release tension-induced headaches.

- Relax the muscles on the crown of the head by imagining more space between each strand of hair on the top of your head, down the back of the head and to the sides of the scalp.
- Imagine the forehead smooth, without wrinkles and increase the space between the eyebrows.
- Let the eyes sink back in the eye sockets.
- Relax the muscles around and behind the eyes.
- Relax the cheeks so they are without expression.
- Relax the jaws so the lips and teeth barely touch.
- The tongue lies relaxed like a boat with the tip of the tongue touching the inside of the teeth.
- Imagine the space in the throat broadens creating space for the air passing when breathing in and out through the nose.
- If there is a somewhat compact feeling inside the head imagine it dissolving like a pill slowly in water.

3. DRAW WITH THE BACK OF THE HEAD

Strained eyes, neck and shoulders will make it hard to relax which is a necessity when wanting to fall asleep. You can release tensions in the upper part of the body by making drawings with the back of the head. Lie on your back in bed making yourself comfortable. Keep the face in a neutral position facing the ceiling. Your chin should be parallel with the mattress. If the neck is tense, you may need to stretch the neck slightly. Close your eyes softly and release the jaw. Next, roll the back of the head in a s-l-o-w and random fashion as when making doodles on a piece of paper. Keep at it for a few minutes making the random drawings small and large without making any conscious effort to move the head. End the movement of the head and lie for a moment noticing how the neck, shoulders and face feel now.

4. GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a powerful feeling that will also help you build resilience. Focusing on what you are grateful for also has a positive impact on your physical and mental health. It is a simple yet powerful exercise that celebrates the positive things in life. It is an important reminder to smile for the things you have, despite the challenges we all face in life. This exercise is also suitable for children.

Focusing on gratitude makes it easier to fall asleep and it has also been shown to improve mental health. A way to mentally detox at the end of the day, and to improve the mood over time, is to practice calling upon feelings of gratitude. Before going to sleep, take some time to think about the day that just passed. Pick three episodes, no matter how small or big, that made you grateful during the course of the day. Dwell on these good memories and notice how they fill you with pleasant feelings of being grateful. Allow the entire body to be filled with feelings of gratitude.

5. FOCUS ON AN OBJECT

Focusing on an external object trains the ability to concentrate and to be fully present. At the same time, the focusing on an object exercise can be used to drift to sleep more easily. If it helps you concentrate, choose an object, for example a small stone, or a small ball to hold in a hand or between both hands.

Lie in bed in a comfortable position. Close the eyes softly and breathe gently in.... and out. Now scan the body by letting the attention move around the body. Notice how one area after another comes to your attention. Next concentrate on the object. Focus on the sensations of holding the stone in the hand or between the hands. Notice the weight, the surface, the texture, and the areas of the palms and fingers that touch the object. Keep going for as long as you please or till you fall asleep... and hopefully sleep tight.



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Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support
Blegdamsvej 27, DK-2100 Copenhagen
Denmark

Phone: +45 35 25 92 00

E-mail: psychosocial.centre@ifrc.org

Web: www.pscentre.org

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/
Psychosocial.Center](http://www.facebook.com/Psychosocial.Center)

Psychosocial.Center

Twitter: @IFRC_PS_Centre

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