

ME HEKE KI MUA: RESTORING FLOW THROUGH A PHASED RESET

A Te Poutama o te Ora Framework for Navigating Disruption, Overwhelm, and
Realignment

Submitted in partial fulfilment of academic requirements – Te Poutama o te Ora Wellness Research Series | 2025

By Ruku l'Anson, February 2026

ABSTRACT

Disruption is an inherent feature of human life. Despite careful planning, the demands of contemporary living — accumulating digital overload, relational complexity, occupational stress, and disconnection from embodied rhythms — frequently overwhelm even the most committed wellness intentions. Existing models for resilience and recovery, while valuable, tend to emphasise cognitive changes and personal agency while giving less attention to the physical, energetic, and spiritual dimensions of restoration. This article introduces Me Heke ki Mua — a Māori phrase meaning 'to flow forward' and coined 'When You are Stuck!' — as a structured, three-phase reset protocol within the Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) wellness framework. The three phases — Clear Backlog, Heal Body, and Revisit Plans — constitute an integrated response to the experience of being stuck: a state characterised by stagnation, overwhelm, and disconnection from purpose and flow. Drawing on research about stress on the body, nervous system responses and indigenous concepts of energetic clearing and embodied restoration; TPO framework's emphasises relational and spiritual alignment. This article argues that 'Me Heke ki Mua; offers an approach informed practice that is culturally grounded, and an accessible pathway to the restoration of wairua, clarity, and momentum. Rather than being a one-way correction, the protocol is designed as a compassionate cycle that helps people respond to the inevitable ups and downs of living with purpose.

Keywords: Me Heke ki Mua, Te Poutama o te Ora, resilience, reset, body stress, nervous system response, wairua, Kaupapa Māori, overwhelm, flow restoration, taha tinana, taha hinengaro

1. INTRODUCTION

Every wellness framework faces the same test: what happens when it breaks down? When the carefully constructed plan meets the reality of a difficult season — when illness, bereavement, occupational crisis, relational rupture, or simple accumulation of demands overwhelms the individuals' best intentions? How a framework responds to disruption reveals more about its depth and integrity than how it functions under ideal conditions.

Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) responds to this question with Me Heke ki Mua (When You are Stuck) — a phrase drawn from te reo Māori that encapsulates both direction and flow: to move forward, to cascade downward toward the sea, to find one's course again after obstruction. It is offered not as a remedial protocol for failure, but as an expected and normalised component of any genuine wellness practice. The premise is explicit: it is normal for plans to be disrupted; it is normal for other priorities to intrude; the difference between this framework and others lies in what one does when that happens.

This article examines Me Heke ki Mua in depth. Section 2 reviews relevant theoretical foundations from Western psychology and neuroscience, noting both their utility and their limitations. Section 3 introduces the Māori epistemological concepts that ground the Me Heke ki Mua approach, with particular attention to understandings of energy, embodiment, and flow in te Ao Māori. Section 4 examines each of the three phases — Clear Backlog, Heal Body, and Revisit Plans — through both a neuroscientific and a kaupapa Māori lens. Section 5 addresses the cyclical nature of the protocol and its implications for individuals. Section 6 discusses broader implications for indigenous wellness scholarship and practice.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: DISRUPTION, OVERWHELM, AND RECOVERY

2.1 Allostatic Load and the Cost of Chronic Stress

The concept of allostatic load — first described by McEwen and Stellar (1993) and later expanded by McEwen (1998) — refers to the gradual strain placed on the body when a person experiences ongoing or repeated stress.

Short-term stress can be helpful. It activates the body’s natural survival responses, and once the stressful situation passes, the body usually returns to normal. However, when stress is constant or repeated without enough time to recover, the body does not fully reset. Over time, this leads to imbalance across several systems, including stress hormones, the nervous system, the immune system, and heart health.

The feeling of being “stuck” — overwhelmed, drained, or unable to move forward — is often a sign of high allostatic load. It is not simply a lack of motivation or discipline. Instead, the body’s systems have been under strain for so long that clear thinking, decision-making, emotional balance, and creativity are affected.

This understanding changes how wellness practitioners should respond. When someone says they feel stuck, the solution cannot focus only on changing thoughts or behaviour. It must also support the body’s stress systems and allow space for real physiological recovery.

2.2 Polyvagal Theory and the Nervous System Basis of Restoration

Polyvagal theory, developed by Stephen Porges (1995, 2011), explains how our nervous system shifts between different states depending on whether we feel safe or threatened.

Porges describes three main states: A safe and connected state, where we feel calm, social, creative, and able to think clearly. A fight-or-flight state, where we feel anxious, reactive, or ready to act. A shutdown state, where we feel withdrawn, numb, low in energy, or “stuck.”. What many people describe as “being stuck” often reflects this

shutdown state. It is not laziness or lack of willpower. It is the body conserving energy and pulling back because it senses overwhelm or danger.

Polyvagal theory also explains that we cannot think our way out of this state. Clear thinking, planning, and purposeful action only become possible when the nervous system feels safe again. Returning to that state usually requires practical supports such as gentle movement, steady breathing, grounding through the senses, safe social connection, and reducing stress in the environment.

These are precisely the interventions that characterise Phase 2 of the Me Heke ki Mua protocol.

2.3 Self-Determination Theory and Motivational Restoration

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), offers another helpful framework. It suggests that long-term motivation and wellbeing depend on three basic psychological needs: Autonomy – feeling that you have choice and are guided by your own values. Competence – feeling capable and effective, relatedness – feeling connected to others.

When someone experiences ongoing stress or overwhelm, these needs are often disrupted. Autonomy can feel lost when a person is reacting to constant demands rather than living according to their values. Competence can decline as tasks pile up and performance drops. Relatedness may weaken as people withdraw socially or feel disconnected from their community.

The Me Heke ki Mua protocol can be understood, in SDT terms, as a systematic approach to restoring and satisfying basic needs — beginning with the most immediate and achievable (creating small wins through backlog clearing), progressing through physiological restoration, and culminating in the reconnection with internally motivating vision and purpose.

2.4 Limitations of Western Recovery Frameworks

Each of these theories helps explain why people struggle and how they recover. However, they mostly focus on what is happening inside the individual — in the body or

the mind. They say little about the spiritual, relational, and cultural dimensions of feeling stuck or finding renewed momentum.

In te Ao Māori, stagnation and restoration are understood more broadly. The focus is not only on biology or psychology, but also on the energetic qualities of the environment, the strength of connections with whānau and community, whether a person's actions are aligned with their whakapapa and sense of purpose, and the condition of their wairua. It is this wider and more holistic understanding that we now explore.

3. MĀORI EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: ENERGY, EMBODIMENT, AND FLOW

3.1 Hau and the Flow of Vitality

In Māori cosmology, hau refers to the animating vitality or spirit of a person, place, object, or relationship. Hau is not a static possession but a dynamic flow — it circulates through relationships of exchange, reciprocity, and care, and it becomes blocked or diminished when these relationships are disrupted, obligations unmet, or energetic burdens unaddressed (Mauss, 1925; Tapsell, 1997). The experience of being stuck can be understood, in these terms, as a disruption of hau: the normal flow of vitality has been impeded by accumulated physical, relational, or spiritual burdens that have not yet been properly addressed.

This framing has direct practical implications. The clearing of physical and digital clutter that characterises Phase 1 of Me Heke ki Mua is not merely a productivity strategy: it is an act of energetic restoration, creating the conditions for hau to flow again. The indigenous understanding that clarity in the environment creates clarity in the mind is not metaphorical; it reflects a cosmological understanding of the relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of human life.

3.2 Mauri and the Life Principle

Closely related to hau is the concept of mauri — the essential life force or binding principle that holds a person, community, or system in a state of integrity and vitality.

Mauri can be maintained, strengthened, or diminished by one's actions, relationships, and environment. The familiar closing phrase of many Māori blessings — mauri ora — is an invocation of flourishing mauri: a wish that the life force of the person or community be vital, healthy, and strong.

The experience of overwhelm and stagnation can be understood as a diminishment of mauri: the life principle has been depleted by chronic demands and insufficient restoration. Phase 2 of Me Heke ki Mua — the deliberate restoration of physical self-care, movement, sleep, nourishment, and reduction of digital overload — is, in these terms, an act of mauri restoration: a return to the conditions that allow the life force to rebuild and strengthen.

3.3 Wairua and Spiritual Alignment

Wairua — spirit or spiritual dimension — is understood in TPO as both a distinct dimension of wellbeing and the animating thread that integrates all other dimensions. When wairua is well, there is a sense of coherence, purpose, and rightness about one's life — a felt sense of alignment between one's actions, values, relationships, and deeper calling. When wairua is troubled or disconnected, even technically functional life can feel hollow, directionless, or heavy.

Phase 3 of Me Heke ki Mua — the reconnection with vision, Takutaku (personal declarations of intent and identity), and whakapapa — is fundamentally a practice of wairua restoration: a return to the deeper knowing of who one is and why one is here. The reconnection with Takutaku is particularly significant: the speaking aloud of one's values and intentions is not merely an affirmation exercise but, in Māori understanding, a performative speech act that participates in creating the reality it names.

3.4 Kaupapa Māori and the Normalisation of Disruption

A foundational principle of the Me Heke ki Mua protocol is the explicit normalisation of disruption: 'It is normal for changes to be needed... and normal for other priorities to interrupt what is planned.' This normalisation is consistent with kaupapa Māori

understandings of life as cyclical and rhythmic — marked by seasons of productivity and seasons of restoration, by periods of accumulation and periods of release.

The concept of Maramataka — the lunar calendar that has guided Māori agricultural, fishing, and ceremonial practice for generations — encodes this cyclical wisdom. Not every day is a planting day; not every season is a season of action. The wisdom of Maramataka lies precisely in its insistence that restoration and fallow periods are not failures of the system but essential components of it. Me Heke ki Mua draws on this same wisdom, reframing the need for reset not as a sign that the framework has failed but as a sign that the individual is living within, rather than against, the natural rhythms of human experience.

4. THE THREE PHASES OF ME HEKE KI MUA

4.1 Phase 1: Clear Backlog — Releasing What Weighs You Down

The first phase of the protocol addresses the most immediate dimension of the stuck experience: the accumulation of unresolved tasks, obligations, and environmental clutter that creates a pervasive sense of overwhelm and cognitive load. Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988) suggests that the conscious mind has a limited capacity for holding and processing information; when this capacity is saturated by accumulated demands — even unaddressed ones — it becomes increasingly difficult to think clearly, prioritise effectively, or access creative and strategic thought.

The Phase 1 protocol addresses this through five deliberate practices: the clearing and resetting of physical spaces; the comprehensive listing and prioritisation of open items; the dedicated time-blocking of priority tasks using focused work cycles (25/5 or 50/10 minutes of focused work followed by rest); the release of tasks through delegation, outsourcing, or conscious decision not to act; and the maintaining of visibility of one's values framework — Te Whāriki o te Ora — as an anchor and reminder of purpose.

The prioritisation framework embedded in Phase 1 is particularly significant. It maps directly onto the wants/need's distinction developed within the TPO framework: High-impact, time-sensitive tasks are genuine priorities that require immediate action. Low-

impact tasks that can be delegated or released are preferences and should not consume unnecessary cognitive or emotional space. This mapping ensures coherence across the TPO framework and helps individuals develop the discernment necessary for sustained self-leadership.

From a neuroscientific perspective, the clearing of environmental clutter has been shown to reduce cortisol levels and improve cognitive performance (McMains & Kastner, 2011; Roster et al., 2016). The act of externalising open items into a written list — sometimes described as a 'capture' practice in productivity literature — frees working memory from the burden of holding incomplete items, reducing the ruminative cognitive load associated with unresolved obligations (Allen, 2001). The combination of environmental clearing and cognitive externalisation creates the conditions for the nervous system to begin its downregulation from the sympathetic or dorsal vagal states associated with overwhelm.

4.2 Phase 2: Heal Body — Restoring Energy and Resetting the Nervous System

Phase 2 addresses the physiological substrate of the stuck experience directly. Where Phase 1 reduces environmental and cognitive load, Phase 2 actively rebuilds biological capacity: restoring the physical conditions necessary for clear thinking, emotional regulation, and purposeful action.

The four practices of Phase 2 — re-establishing self-care rituals; daily movement for a minimum of thirty minutes; structured work cycles; and digital detoxification — each have substantial empirical support. Regular physical movement has been consistently associated with reductions in cortisol and inflammatory markers, improvements in sleep quality and duration, enhanced mood and emotional regulation, and increased neuroplasticity and cognitive function (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008; Heijnen et al., 2016). Sleep restoration — typically disrupted in states of chronic overwhelm — is foundational: even partial sleep deprivation significantly impairs executive function, emotional regulation, and decision-making capacity (Walker, 2017).

Structured work cycles — particularly the 25/5 (Pomodoro) and 50/10 patterns recommended in the protocol — function as practical implementations of ultradian rhythm theory (Rossi, 1991), which identifies approximately 90-minute cycles of cognitive performance followed by periods of necessary rest in the human brain. Working in focused cycles with mandatory rest breaks has been associated with sustained cognitive performance, reduced fatigue, and prevention of the burnout associated with extended unbroken work periods.

Digital detoxification — the reduction of notification-driven interruptions, social media exposure, and screen-based environmental clutter — addresses a relatively novel but increasingly well-documented source of allostatic load. Research on the attentional and psychological costs of digital interruption (Mark et al., 2016; Twenge et al., 2018) suggests that the chronic low-grade activation produced by digital environments significantly impairs both cognitive performance and emotional wellbeing. The Me Heke ki Mua protocol's inclusion of digital detox as a component of physical healing reflects an understanding that the body-mind is a unified system: reducing digital overwhelm is as genuinely physiological an intervention as sleep or movement.

In Māori terms, Phase 2 can be understood as the restoration of mauri through deliberate attention to taha tinana (physical dimension) — the recognition that wairua cannot flourish in a body that is depleted, dysregulated, or chronically stressed. The body is not merely a vehicle for the mind but a dimension of the whole person whose needs must be honoured before higher-order functioning can be sustained.

4.3 Phase 3: Revisit Plans — Realigning with Vision and Purpose

Phase 3 completes the reset cycle by returning the individual to their forward-facing orientation: reconnecting with the larger vision, values, and intentions that constitute their whakapapa of purpose. This phase is explicitly positioned after the physiological restoration of Phase 2 — a sequencing that reflects the understanding that reconnection with vision and purpose is only sustainable when the body and nervous system have been adequately resourced to support it.

The four Phase 3 practices — reviewing timeframes without shame, choosing one small and one significant daily action, monthly review and reflection, and reconnection with Takutaku — each address a specific dimension of the reorientation process. The explicit instruction to review deadlines 'without shame' and to adjust them with self-compassion is a direct counter to the perfectionist and self-critical patterns that frequently accompany the stuck experience — and that, if left unaddressed, transform the recovery process into a further source of self-reproach.

The daily practice of choosing one small and one significant action draws on implementation intention research (Gollwitzer, 1999), which demonstrates that the translation of abstract goals into specific, concrete, time-bound action intentions significantly increases follow-through — particularly during periods of reduced executive functioning associated with elevated allostatic load. The micro-win and meaningful-win structure ensures both the motivational reinforcement of immediate accomplishment and the sustained engagement with longer-term, intrinsically meaningful work.

The reconnection with Takutaku — the personal declarations of identity, values, and purpose that anchor the TPO practitioner's sense of self — is arguably the most distinctively Māori element of the protocol. In Māori oratorical tradition, the speaking of whakapapa and the recitation of ancestral connections constitutes a form of self-location: it answers the question 'who am I?' – 'Ko wai Au?' not merely as an individual but as a member of an extended network of relationships across time and space. To reconnect with one's takutaku is to remember, in the fullest sense: to bring to mind and body and wairua the knowledge of who one is and where one is going.

5. THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF RESET: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND INDIVIDUALS

A central and countercultural insight of the Me Heke ki Mua protocol is its positioning of reset not as an exceptional remedial response to failure but as a normal, expected, and healthy component of any sustained wellness practice. This framing — explicitly stated in the source framework — has significant implications for how wellness individuals conceptualise and communicate with clients about disruption.

The dominant cultural narrative around personal development and self-improvement tends to be linear and progressive: one improves, one maintains, one does not regress. Disruption, within this narrative, is either a sign of insufficient commitment, a personal failure, or a problem requiring urgent resolution. This narrative creates shame around the inevitable fluctuations of a real human life, and it generates the particular form of avoidance in which people abandon wellness practices precisely when they most need them — because the gap between the ideal and the reality has become too painful to acknowledge.

The TPO framework, grounded in the cyclical wisdom of Maramataka and the acceptance of waxing and waning inherent in te ao Māori, offers a different story. Disruption is not failure; it is information. It indicates that something has accumulated beyond the system's current capacity, and that restoration — not criticism — is the appropriate response. The Me Heke ki Mua protocol exists precisely to answer the question 'what do I do when this happens?' — transforming potential shame into a structured, compassionate, effective pathway back to flow.

For practitioners working with clients, this reframing is therapeutically significant. It shifts the relational orientation from 'what went wrong and whose fault is it?' to 'what does this moment of stuckness need, and how do we respond?' This is entirely consistent with the manaaki orientation that characterises all TPO practice: the enhancement and protection of the client's mana, including their mana in moments of difficulty and apparent setback.

The phrase Me Heke ki Mua itself encodes this wisdom. To heke is to descend, to flow downward as water does — not in defeat but in following the natural path of least resistance toward the sea. There is dignity and direction in the flowing forward, even when that flowing requires finding a new path around an obstacle. The protocol invites individuals to trust that flow is possible — that the natural inclination of life energy, when unobstructed, is to move forward.

6. DISCUSSION: CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIGENOUS WELLNESS SCHOLARSHIP

The Me Heke ki Mua protocol makes several contributions to the emerging body of indigenous wellness scholarship. First, it demonstrates that Māori epistemological concepts — hau, mauri, wairua, maramataka, takutaku, whakapapa — are not merely cultural decorations applied to Western wellness frameworks but constitute genuine and substantive theoretical contributions that enrich and sometimes challenge existing models. The understanding of environmental clearing as energetic restoration, of physical healing as mauri restoration, and of vision reconnection as wairua alignment each add dimensions that Western frameworks do not adequately theorise.

Second, the protocol demonstrates the possibility of frameworks that are simultaneously grounded in indigenous epistemology and responsive to contemporary evidence from neuroscience, psychology, and wellness research. The integration of allostatic load theory, polyvagal theory, SDT, and ultradian rhythm research with Māori concepts of hau, mauri, and wairua is not a dilution of either tradition but an enrichment of both. This is the scholarly aspiration of the TPO framework as a whole: to be a genuine site of integration rather than assimilation.

Third, the explicit normalisation of disruption within the framework reflects a mature and honest engagement with the realities of human experience. Many wellness frameworks implicitly promise transformation without relapse — a trajectory of ongoing improvement that does not adequately account for the complexity and unpredictability of real lives, particularly lives marked by the additional challenges of navigating post-colonial contexts, structural inequity, and intergenerational trauma. The Me Heke ki Mua protocol's honesty about disruption as normal and its provision of a compassionate and effective response to it represents a significant contribution to the field.

7. CONCLUSION

Me Heke ki Mua — to flow forward — offers a clinically informed, culturally grounded, and practically accessible response to one of the most common and least adequately theorised experiences in wellness practice: the experience of being stuck. Through its three-phase structure of backlog clearing, physical restoration, and vision realignment,

the protocol addresses disruption at environmental, cognitive, physiological, and spiritual levels, restoring the conditions for flow from the ground up.

The framework's grounding in both contemporary neuroscience and Māori epistemological tradition positions it as a genuine contribution to integrative wellness scholarship — one that demonstrates the possibility of frameworks that honour indigenous wisdom without abandoning empirical rigour, and that serve diverse communities without imposing a single cultural standard for what flourishing looks like.

Most significantly, the Me Heke ki Mua protocol embodies a deep compassion for the human experience of difficulty. It does not ask individuals to be other than they are — struggling, sometimes overwhelmed, sometimes magnificent. It asks only that when stuckness comes, as it inevitably will, one responds not with shame or abandonment but with the deliberate, gentle, culturally grounded practice of finding one's flow again.

In the end, the phrase itself is the teaching. Me Heke ki Mua. Flow forward. You know the way.

REFERENCES

- Allen, D. (2001). *Getting things done: The art of stress-free productivity*. Viking.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The 'what' and 'why' of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268.
- Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, 54(7), 493–503.
- Heijnen, S., Hommel, B., Kibele, A., & Colzato, L. S. (2016). Neuromodulation of aerobic exercise: A review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1890.
- Mark, G., Iqbal, S. T., Czerwinski, M., Johns, P., Sano, A., & Lutchyn, Y. (2016). Email duration, batching and self-interruption: Patterns of email use on productivity and stress. *Proceedings of the ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1717–1728).

- Mauss, M. (1925). *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* (I. Cunnison, Trans.). Cohen & West. (Original work published 1925)
- McEwen, B. S. (1998). Stress, adaptation, and disease: Allostasis and allostatic load. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 840(1), 33–44.
- McEwen, B. S., & Stellar, E. (1993). Stress and the individual: Mechanisms leading to disease. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 153(18), 2093–2101.
- McMains, S., & Kastner, S. (2011). Interactions of top-down and bottom-up mechanisms in human visual cortex. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 31(2), 587–597.
- Porges, S. W. (1995). Orienting in a defensive world: Mammalian modifications of our evolutionary heritage. A polyvagal theory. *Psychophysiology*, 32(4), 301–318.
- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton.
- Ratey, J. J., & Hagerman, E. (2008). *Spark: The revolutionary new science of exercise and the brain*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Roster, C. A., Ferrari, J. R., & Jurkat, M. P. (2016). The dark side of home: Assessing possession 'clutter' on subjective well-being. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 46, 32–41.
- Rossi, E. L. (1991). *The 20-minute break: Using the new science of ultradian rhythms*. Tarcher.
- Sweller, J. (1988). Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning. *Cognitive Science*, 12(2), 257–285.
- Tapsell, P. (1997). The flight of Pareraututu: An investigation of taonga from a tribal perspective. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 106(4), 323–374.
- Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2018). Trends in US adolescents' media use, 1976–2016: The rise of digital media, decline of TV, and the (near) demise of print. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(4), 329–345.
- Walker, M. (2017). *Why we sleep: Unlocking the power of sleep and dreams*. Scribner.