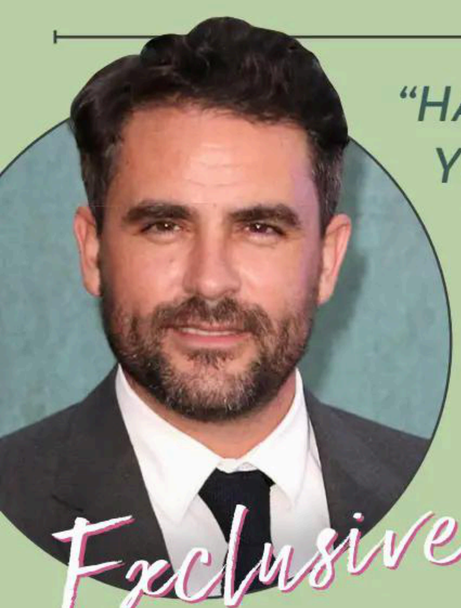
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VOLUME 7

Psychology Now

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE



"HARDSHIPS REALLY DO HELP YOU TO EVOLVE, AND THAT'S WHAT LIFE'S ALL ABOUT"

Exclusive

LEVISON WOOD

ON THE BENEFITS OF ADVERSITY & STEPPING OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONES



116 pages OF EXPERT ADVICE

MOTIVES, MINDSETS & *SERIAL KILLERS*

FIND THE TOOLS TO Face Your Fears

\+

HEAL EMOTIONAL HURT

BE MORE SPONTANEOUS

BUILD HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

HOW TO *Recover From* **BURNOUT**



Digital Edition

FUTURE

VOLUME 7
SECOND REVISED EDITION

Welcome to

VOLUME 7

Psychology Now

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR MIND FOR A HAPPIER, HEALTHIER LIFE

Understanding human behaviour and mental processes, whether our own or those belonging to others, is essential if we want to make better decisions and lead happier lives. Why do we feel certain emotions in specific situations? Why do we behave in particular ways? And what can we do to overcome the things that hold us back? Delve into the world of psychology and build a better relationship with your mind. Learn how to be kind to it, unlock its full potential and use it to your advantage.

In the pages that follow, we explore why people feel the need to give unsolicited advice (and why we're often guilty of giving it), how to heal emotional hurt, and why hardships can benefit us. We also look into the power of manifesting, the psychology of serial killers, whether we're bubble-wrapping our kids, and what drives us to stalk people online.

Packed full of expert guidance from psychologists, counsellors and other professionals, we also speak exclusively to Levison Wood about the benefits of adversity and stepping out of our comfort zones.

The mind is a powerful tool. Learn how to take control of your own mind today for a happier, healthier tomorrow.



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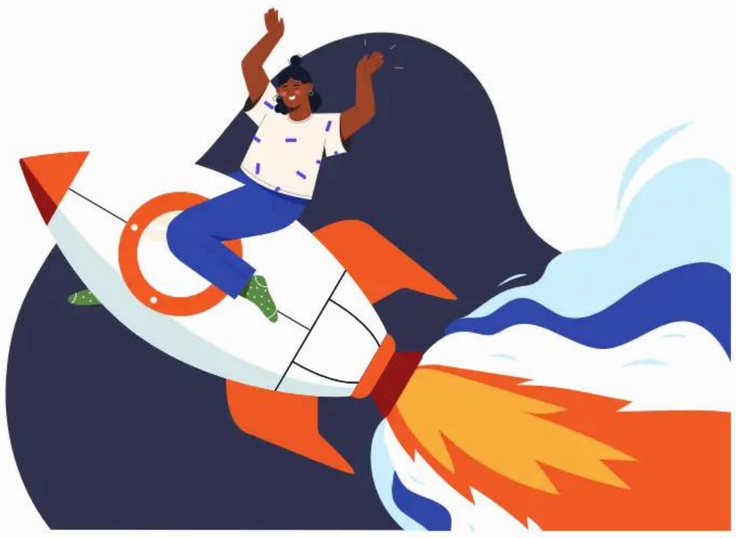


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10 WEIRD THINGS YOU NEVER KNEW ABOUT YOUR Brain

Discover the science and psychology behind the brain's fascinatingly quirky and unique design

WORDS JAMES HORTON

1 IT'S POSSIBLE TO LIVE WITHOUT MOST OF IT

In 2015, a team of neurologists and radiologists from Jinan Hospital in Shandong Province, China, wrote to the journal *Brain* reporting a rare and unusual finding. A 24-year-old female patient had been admitted with symptoms of nausea and vomiting. These were new symptoms, but she'd also suffered from dizziness and walking difficulties for most of her life. Despite these challenges, she was married and had enjoyed a successful pregnancy. The doctors referred her for computer tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans to search her brain for a cause of these symptoms. What they observed was a disorder so rare that less than ten people throughout the world were known to be living with it. The patient was completely missing her cerebellum.

Known as the 'little brain', the cerebellum is a distinct structure that sits at the back of the brain. It only occupies approximately ten per cent of brain volume but contains a dense abundance of neurons estimated to be well over 50% of the total neurons in the brain. Together these neurons work to coordinate motor actions, allowing us to walk with balance and speak with precision. Despite the cerebellum's integral function, sufferers of cerebellar agenesis – where the structure is completely absent – are sometimes able to mentally develop normally aside from hampered motor functions.

Loss of brain tissue can also be seen in sufferers of hydrocephalus, a condition where cerebrospinal fluid accumulates in the brain. In extreme cases, the fluid can accumulate to such an extent that it doesn't leave much room in the skull for anything else, including brain matter. In Marseille, France, a 44-year-old male was found to be suffering from a case of hydrocephalus so severe that he was estimated to be missing more than 50% of his brain tissue. And yet the man had led a relatively normal life, maintaining a job and raising a family, showcasing the brain's incredible capacity to adapt and utilise what tissue it has to perform necessary functions. »



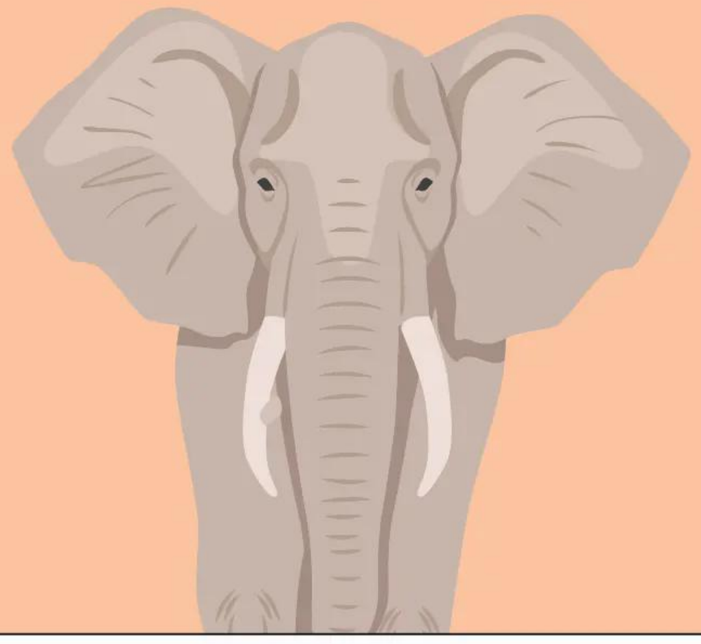
2 WRINKLY BRAINS ARE SMARTER

Sometimes we encounter people who have a high opinion of their own intelligence, and we might call them 'big-headed'. This is because we naturally associate a big brain with high intelligence – that more brain means more thinking power. But it would be more accurate to call them 'wrinkly brained'. The exterior of the human brain isn't a shiny, smooth surface, but instead is a wrinkled mass of folds that form as a result of 'gyrification'. As we develop, our brains expand into a limited space defined by the available room in the cranium. To maximise the amount of brain within this limited space, the brain expands and then folds in on itself, forming layers of gyri (bumps) and sulci (grooves).

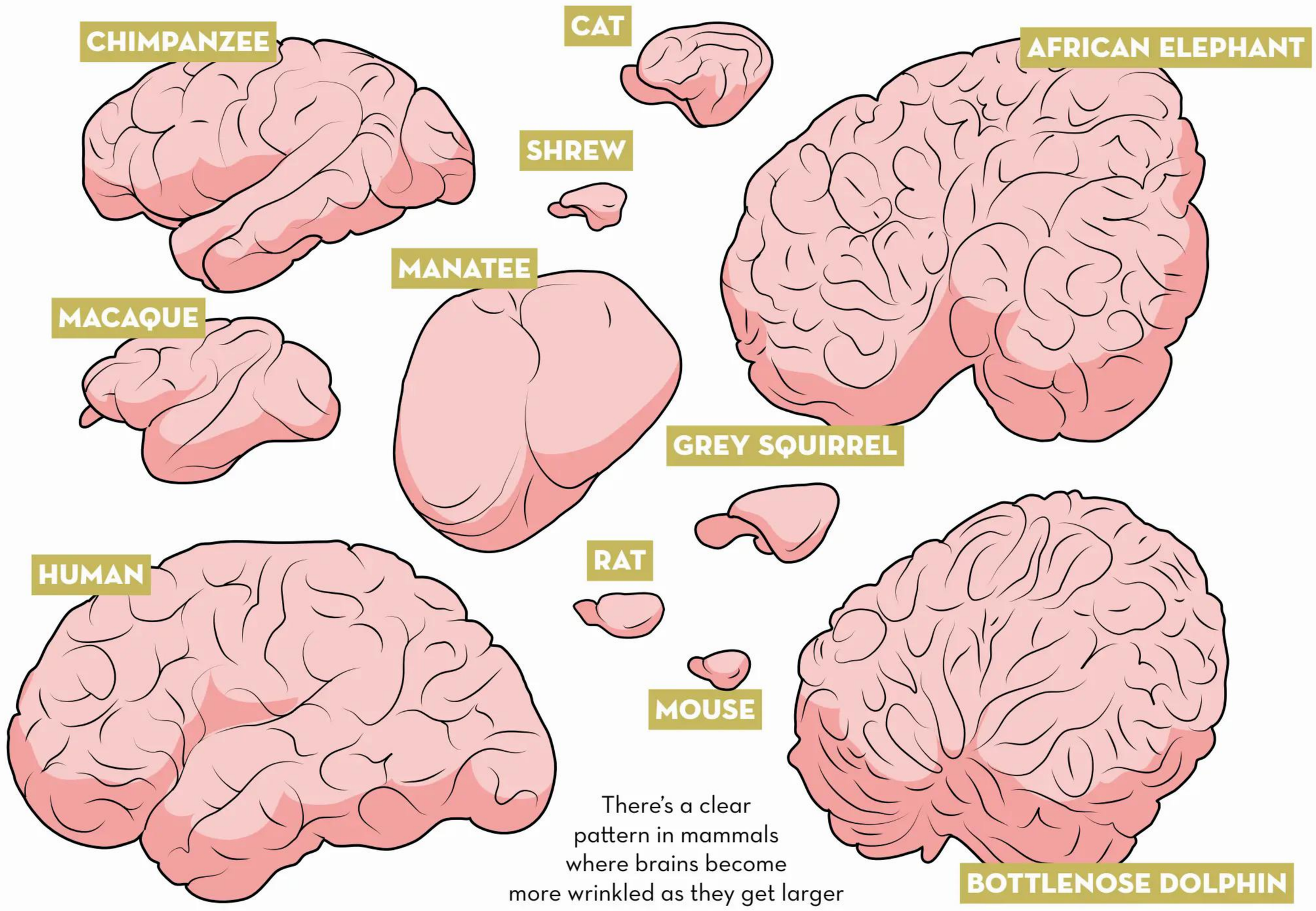
The result of gyrification is to increase the surface area of the brain. Increasing surface area in a limited space is a useful trick employed by biology all the time. Elsewhere in the human body, our lungs utilise tiny alveoli sacs and our gut uses finger-like villi to vastly increase the surface area available for exchanging gases and nutrients. The brain's high surface area allows it to pack as many brain cells, or neurons, inside our heads as possible.

In humans, a condition called lissencephaly, which describes when the brain is smooth and not wrinkled, causes severe and fatal mental development issues. However other mammals, such as mice and marmoset monkeys, are naturally lissencephalic. Typically, mammalian brains become more wrinkled as the brain becomes larger, meaning that larger rodents and primates possess gyrencephalic brains. But humans have neither the largest or the most wrinkled mammalian brain. In fact, the Atlantic bottlenose dolphin has a brain about the same mass as a human's but is nearly twice as wrinkled.

Humans do, however, have thicker layers of the brain, which may help explain our higher intelligence. While wrinkly brains usually mean bigger brains and are correlated with intelligence, there are other reasons for brain power hidden within their folds.



HUMAN VS ANIMAL BRAIN SIZE

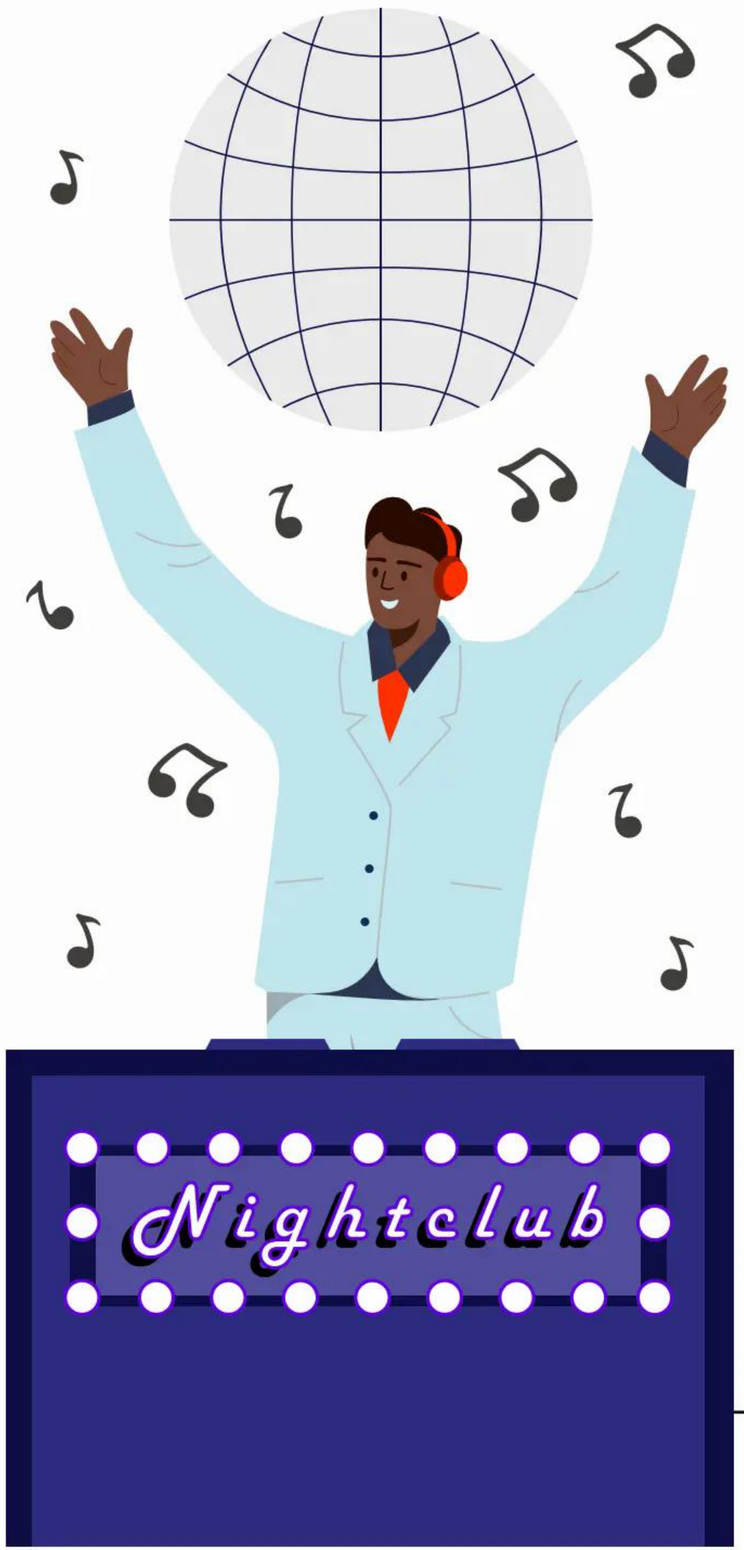


There's a clear pattern in mammals where brains become more wrinkled as they get larger

3 EARWORMS PROVE WE'RE SLAVES TO OUR BRAINS

Many functions controlled by the brain are autonomous and involuntary, such as breathing, digesting and shivering. But sometimes thoughts can be involuntary as well. One example of this is the 'earworm', where a song gets stuck in our head. In 1974, a research paper by Alan Baddeley and colleagues proposed the idea of 'working memory', which describes how we possess a small store of information that can be rapidly drawn upon to form decisions. In service of the working memory are the 'slave systems', which store audio-visual information and verbal information respectively. The verbal information slave system has a component known as the 'phonological loop', which can store short tracts of audio and rehearse them. This essentially builds an involuntary 'replay audio' button in our working memory. More recent research has additionally found that involuntary earworms can be triggered by recently listening to the offending piece of audio or by observing a different audio or visual cue that is associated with the memory of the song or sound. This means that a catchy song can be recalled and played on a loop entirely autonomously, even when we'd rather be rid of it.





4 YOUR BRAIN IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO TRICK YOU WITH THESE WEIRD PHENOMENA

Lethologics

In the middle of a conversation, our sentence stalls. We stop talking and search our brain for a word that isn't there. This is lethologica, when a word is at the tip of your tongue. We know what we want to say and know there's a word that fits, but we can't recall it because our memory has faltered. This is thought to happen more often with words that we don't use, because we haven't built strong recall connections with these words. Adults are believed to have an average of 50,000 words in their vocabulary, so lethologica could happen with many of them.

Misophonia

Sufferers of misophonia are sensitive to certain sound patterns that others pay no heed to, causing symptoms such as anxiety or anger. The sound of chewing is a common culprit of this, but foot tapping or the sound of a clock ticking can also trigger a response. Strangely, patients have reported that the subtle nature of these stimuli is what makes them potently irritating. The cause of the condition is not currently fully understood, but there are certain parallels with triggers observed in sufferers of Tourette's syndrome and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Déjà Vu

The sensation of déjà vu, French for 'already seen', describes times when we feel as if we've already experienced the present moment. For psychiatric patients déjà vu is often associated with anxiety, but around two-thirds of individuals also experience the sensation regularly. Déjà vu occurs when our brain makes a false familiarity with a new stimulus. This results in the construction of an artificial memory that triggers the sensation. Research suggests we're more likely to experience déjà vu when we go to new places and have new experiences.

The Doorway Effect

It can be irritating when you walk into a room and forget the reason why you entered in the first place. It's a consequence of the way our brain assembles and maintains memory. When we walk through a door, our memory passes through what researchers term an 'event boundary', which is when the currently experienced 'event' is banked into long-term memory as the next event begins. However, not all the banked information is retained for immediate recall. This means that when we pass through the door and go through an event boundary, our reason for entering the room can be lost from our working memory. »

5 THE BRAIN IS MOSTLY WATER AND FAT

Many organs of the human body are mostly water, and the brain is no different. The other compounds – including fats, proteins, carbohydrates and others – only make up about a quarter of our brain material. However, a brain's dry weight shows that fat is the dominant structural element of the brain. These aren't just the sorts of saturated fats you'd find in your favourite takeaway or snack, but types of lipids, including cholesterol and fatty acids, that are used to form myelin.

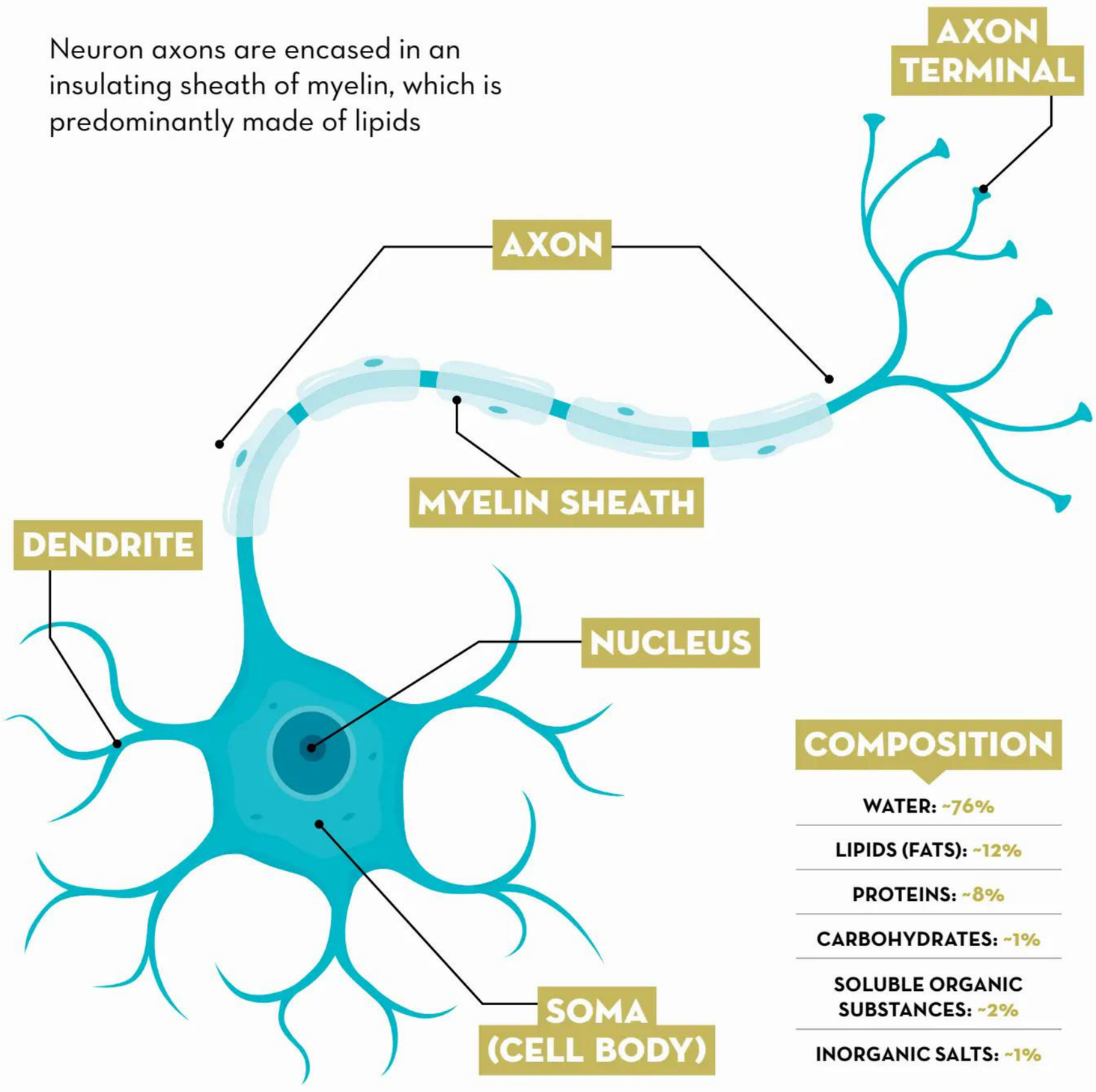
Myelin is a structure made up of approximately 80% lipids and 20% protein and is found wrapped around parts of our brain cells, known as neurons. Neurons are composed of three main structural elements, including dendrites, which receive electrical signals from neighbouring cells. The cell body, also known as a soma, contains genetic information and provides the cell with energy. Axons carry electrical impulses away from the cell towards neighbouring neurons. Like electrical wiring in our homes, axons require an insulating sheath to protect the cell and ensure that the signal remains strong and moving in the desired direction. Myelin sheaths are used for this task, meaning neurons with long axons harbour a lot of fatty material.

The brain possesses an abundance of axons – so many that myelin-dense areas change the colour of the brain on scans, turning it white rather than grey. Grey matter, which is found around the periphery of the brain, is mostly composed of soma. Matter, however, consists mostly of axons and their fatty coatings of myelin. While the brain might be surprisingly fatty, without lipids it simply wouldn't be able to function.



NEURONS

Neuron axons are encased in an insulating sheath of myelin, which is predominantly made of lipids



COMPOSITION

WATER:	~76%
LIPIDS (FATS):	~12%
PROTEINS:	~8%
CARBOHYDRATES:	~1%
SOLUBLE ORGANIC SUBSTANCES:	~2%
INORGANIC SALTS:	~1%

6 YOUR BRAIN ISN'T FULLY DEVELOPED UNTIL YOU'RE 25

Our brain reaches nearly full volume inside the cranium within the first few years of life, but the regions of the brain still require considerable development. These major regions are each associated with controlling certain behaviours and emotions, and throughout childhood and adolescence they develop at different rates, reaching maturity at different times. By the time we're 25, it's widely considered that all regions of the brain have reached maturity, but prior to this time we go through periods where the development is unbalanced, leading to different behavioural traits.

As the brain's grey matter develops from back to front, the prefrontal cortex at the top-front of the brain is one of the last regions to reach maturity. Unfortunately for parents wishing to reason with their teenage children, the prefrontal cortex is responsible for rational judgement and long-term planning. Instead, as the region has not yet fully developed, adolescents operate primarily at the behest of their limbic system, which is responsible for emotions. As a result of this, adolescents are prone to take more risks and tend to fixate more on the present moment – their emotions rule over rationality.

7 DEEP BREATHING AIDS THINKING

It's long been understood that the brain regulates breathing. The brain stem, which sits at the base of the brain near the spine, regulates the autonomic nervous system that controls automatic functions such as heart rate, digestion and breathing. Less understood is that this process can operate as a feedback loop – breathing can also regulate brain activity.

In 2016, a team demonstrated this phenomenon by performing an experiment using epileptic patients that had been prepped for surgery. The patients had already been fitted with electrode implants so that their surgeon could locate the origin of their seizures, allowing the researchers to accurately measure the activity of certain brain regions throughout the experiment. The regions of interest were those responsible for responding to olfactory nerves found up our nose (the piriform cortex), a region responsible for memory (the hippocampus), and a region responsible for emotion (the amygdala). The research team also equipped the patients with sensors to monitor their breathing.

Amazingly, the team observed that all three studied regions of the brain responded to the stimulus of breathing. This effect wasn't strong for all phases of breathing, but primarily during inhalation through the nose. Exhaling and mouth breathing did not cause the same effect. The researchers next asked the patients to identify emotions being displayed by a person using still images and also set them a visual memory task. They observed that both the emotion-based task and the memory task were completed more accurately when the patient was challenged for a response while breathing in. This showed that not only do brain patterns change while inhaling through the nose, but that cognitive ability is enhanced while breathing, relative to other states. »

BREATHE DEEPLY, THINK CLEARLY

Taking five to ten breaths per minute can help calm your mind

1 TRIGGERING THE AMYGDALA

When taking rapid, deep breaths, such as during periods of stress, regions of the brain associated with the fight-or-flight response are triggered.

2 TRIGGERING ALPHA WAVES

During slow, deep breathing, regions of the brain associated with inward-directed thinking are triggered. These alpha-wave patterns are observed during meditation and promote feelings of calm and ease.

3 IN THROUGH THE NOSE

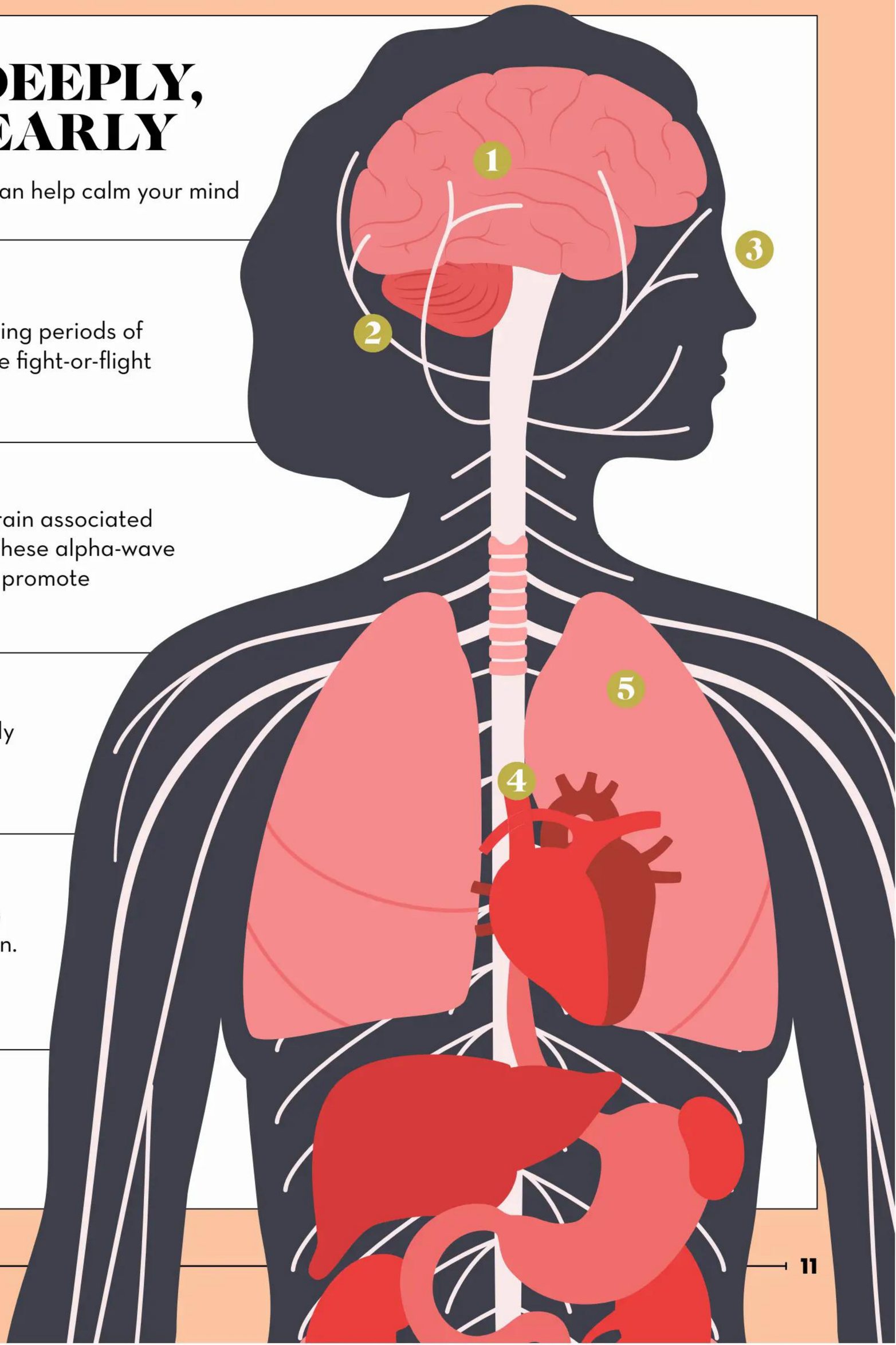
Olfactory neurons are stimulated mechanically as oxygen travels inwards through the nose, initiating a response in the brain.

4 VAGUS NERVE FEEDBACK

Slow, deep breaths trigger the vagus nerve to regulate the heart rate in tune with respiration. The nerve also relays information from the heart, lungs and gut back to the brain.

5 INHALING

Inhaling reduces intrathoracic pressure, allowing blood to return to the heart



REALITY-BENDING BRAIN DISORDERS

CAPGRAS DELUSION

Sufferers of this condition recognise their loved ones but do not believe them to be who they are. They become convinced that they've been replaced by imposters, robots or aliens. The condition has been seen in patients suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, dementia and brain injury.

ALIEN HAND SYNDROME

Also known as anarchic hand, patients with this condition lose full control of one of their hands, which periodically goes rogue. The rebellious hand appears to ignore orders from the brain and can reach, grasp and swipe. Patients can become convinced their hand belongs to someone else entirely.

FOREIGN ACCENT SYNDROME

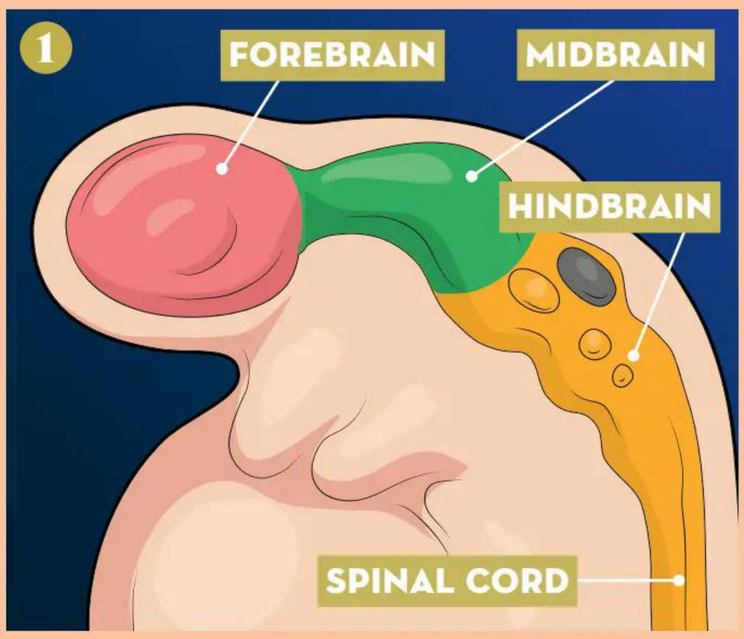
Following a stroke that affects speech, a rare neurological condition can occur wherein the patient recovers their speech ability in a foreign accent. This can occur even if they've never visited the country.

COTARD'S SYNDROME

Sometimes referred to as walking corpse syndrome, sufferers of this affliction think that they are dead. This can follow a depressive episode where the person stops feeling pleasure and is overcome by feelings of worthlessness and can sometimes be treated with antidepressants.

8 YOUR BRAIN BEGINS AS A TUBE

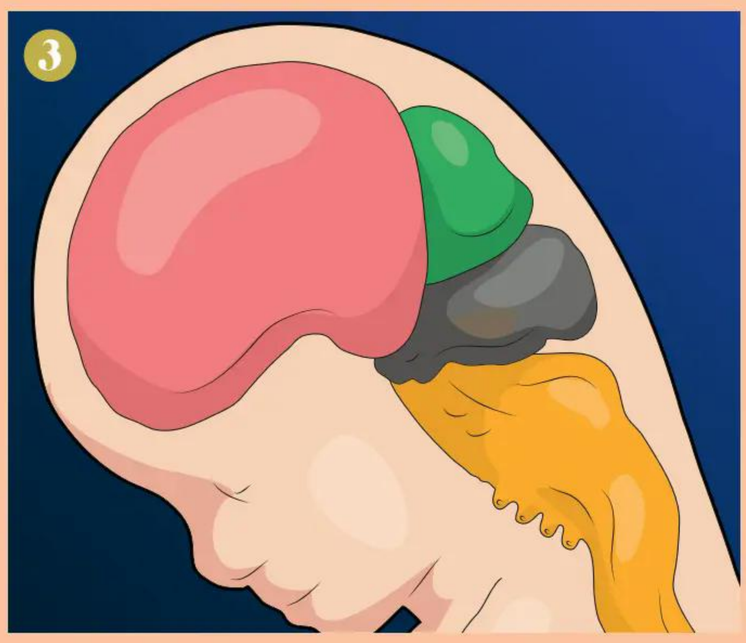
Neural development begins very early in the growth of an embryo. The central nervous system begins its existence from one structure, starting as a sheet of cells known as the neural plate. A few weeks following conception, the neural plate begins to form ridges and folds in on itself, becoming a tube structure. From here the neural progenitor cells of the tube, which can differentiate and specialise into numerous brain cell types, begin to proliferate in a highly structured manner to mature the neural tube into the developed brain. The cavity inside the hollow tube remains, eventually becoming a ventricular space that will hold the cerebrospinal fluid that protects and nourishes the cells of the brain. The expansive network of connections between neurons continues to develop throughout gestation as the brain grows, continuing long after birth. However, a foetus is capable of some cognitive function even during these early stages. By week 30 the pathways responsible for recognising pain are connected. While the foetus remains unconscious throughout most of its development, when awake it will eventually be able to recognise touch, smells and sounds, and alter its facial expressions in response to these external stimuli. These responses are innate and non-conscious, but numerous studies have reported that babies can remember and recognise audio heard as a foetus from the womb, when the sounds were muffled and dampened but still audible. Newborn brains also come equipped with innate reflexes and behaviours to help the baby survive in the big wide world. Despite poor vision, they learn to recognise their mother's face almost immediately. They can determine the difference in touch between self and others and they can display emotions. It's just a slight shame that initially most of these displayed emotions often involve screaming and crying.



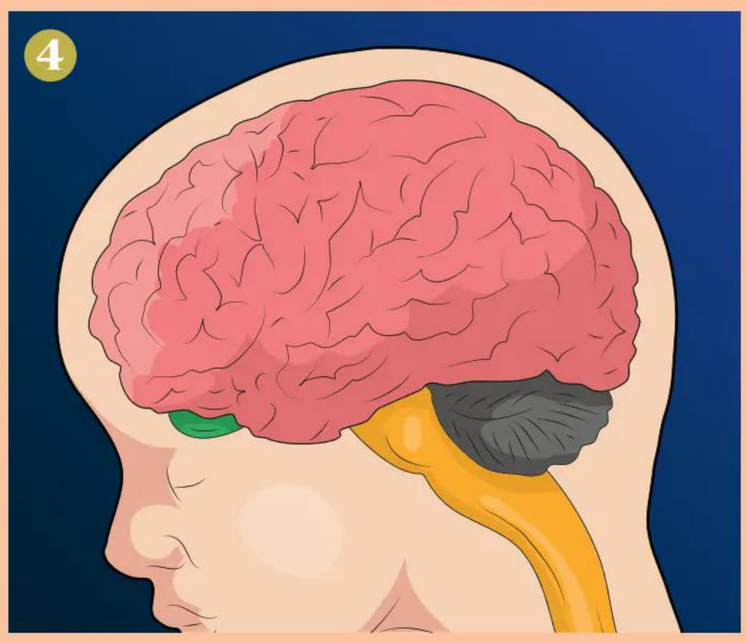
1 3 WEEKS
The budding brain starts off as the tip of a three-millimetre tube. This forms the beginnings of the forebrain, midbrain and hindbrain.



2 7 WEEKS
The regions continue to differentiate and expand. Buds of cranial nerves that will soon connect the brain to the face, neck and torso begin to appear.



3 11 WEEKS
The rapidly growing forebrain becomes much larger than the other regions. At this stage, the forebrain is still smooth.



4 BIRTH
The forebrain expands and wrinkles, enveloping the midbrain. The hindbrain develops into the cerebellum and part of the brain stem.



9 STONE-AGE PEOPLE CONDUCTED BRAIN SURGERY SUCCESSFULLY

In 1996, a skeleton was unearthed from a Neolithic burial site in Alsace, France. The skeleton belonged to a man around 50 years of age who was believed to have died around 5000 BCE. Despite living 7,000 years ago, the man underwent surgery on his skull and survived for some time afterwards. The researchers who recovered his skull noticed that roughly circular pieces of it had been surgically removed in two places, which is known as trepanation. One segment was around 6.5 centimetres long, and the other around 9.5 centimetres long. While the reason for him undergoing these surgeries is unknown, other ancient cultures used trepanation as a treatment for ailments such as headaches, epilepsy and mental illnesses. The surgery carried numerous risks, including haemorrhage, brain damage and infection, yet the researchers determined that the man survived for at least a decent period after the procedures. The bone around one of the trepanation holes had partially healed, while the other had fully healed, sealing the hole completely.

10 IF YOU REPEAT SOMETHING ENOUGH, IT LOSES MEANING

Words are the product of when our brains connect a particular sound to a specific meaning. Our brains are incredibly adept at maintaining this connection, providing us the power of language and the means to readily communicate complex ideas with another human who shares this knowledge. However, we can temporarily but rapidly sever the connection between sound and meaning, and we can do this simply by repeating a word. This effect is known as semantic satiation, where repetition strips a word of its meaning and renders it just a sound. You may have encountered this effect when vocalising a word over and over, perhaps when practising saying it or demonstrating its phonetics. Semantic satiation is believed to be caused by saturation of the brain with the same input, lessening the effect of the input to the point where it has no effect. ■



5 BRAIN MYTHS BUSTED

1. 10%

While neurons may be heavily outnumbered by other brain cells, we employ much more than 10% of our brain for almost all actions, even for simple ones such as gripping an item.

2. MALE VS FEMALE

Males and females have historically been attributed to have different cognitive abilities for certain tasks, but recent studies show this isn't the case. For example, a study looking at maths ability in children from 68 countries found no differences between the two sexes.

3. TEACH AN OLD DOG NEW TRICKS

While people may become unwilling to learn new skills when they grow older, the neurons in their brains are still able to form new connections, so they remain able to learn, permitting the desire is there.

4. BIGGER THAN OUR ANCESTORS

We may feel smarter than any humans who came before us, but counterintuitively our brains are around 10% smaller than our ancestors' from several millennia ago.

5. BRAIN FOG ISN'T REAL

Although it isn't a medical term, brain fog describes when the brain's usual clarity is lacking, causing forgetfulness, confusion and slower mental processing.

© Getty Images/ Rudzhan Nagiev / Pikovit44 / wetcake

THE Joy OF A TICK LIST

Ever heard of a reverse bucket list? Boost your confidence and plan ahead by looking at what you've already achieved

WORDS JENNY ROWE

Often at the start of a new year or new phase in our lives, we look ahead, write a to-do list, or even create a bucket list of places to visit or challenges to attempt in the next year or five years. But perhaps it's time to dip into that bucket. This exercise, known as a reverse bucket list, not only promotes contentment in the present, but it also helps you to get the most out of your future.

DRAWING A BLANK?

Feel like you're boasting? "You may have been taught as a child not to celebrate your victories," adds Phil. "If this is the case, look at this exercise through the lens of contentment rather than pride."

"A reverse bucket list is reflective. It encourages you to celebrate your accomplishments, rather than getting bogged down in things that you think you ought to have done but haven't yet," says positive psychology coach Lynne Dorling, author of *Ageing Rewired: How to Flourish in Later Life* (£14.99, Troubador). Here's how to get started.

Fresh perspective

When we're young, a standard bucket list can be very motivating, as we have lots of big dreams and ample time to accomplish them. Then, as we age, we gain life experience and our circumstances change – perhaps we have caring responsibilities or health concerns that limit our ability to travel. We tend to become more realistic and a forward-looking list loses some of its appeal. This is where the reverse bucket list comes in.

"It shifts your mindset from a pessimistic 'I can't' to an optimistic 'I can', because it will show you how much you have already done," says life coach Phil Drinkwater (phildrinkwater.coach). "It makes you feel more sure of your ability to achieve in the future."

This change in perspective may also make you feel grateful for any opportunities you have had, and gratitude is associated with increased happiness and motivation for self-improvement, according to research*.

Finally, a reverse bucket list is a deep dive into the past, so don't be surprised if it throws up things you haven't thought about in years. "We tend to be very good at goal-setting, and not so good at appreciating and savouring life," says Lynne. Precious memories shouldn't be left to gather dust in your archives – relive them and share the joy with anyone else involved.

Get stuck in

"One way to structure your reverse bucket list is to take it decade by decade," says Lynne. Start with what you achieved before you were ten years old and continue from there. Alternatively, you could use significant life events, such as moving home, having children or changing career, to bookend each chapter.

Take a broad view of your life and consider all your different roles – whether that's as a parent, a child, a student, a sportsperson, an entrepreneur, an employee and/or a volunteer. "Look out for times when you've demonstrated traits such as adaptability, resilience, proactivity and connectivity, which

you might not typically count as achievements," says Lynne. These softer skills should be celebrated as much as any material successes, if not more so.

Depending on how you like to work, you could:

WRITE A JOURNAL

Remember this is for your eyes only, "so you can include everything you're secretly proud of, too," says Lynne.

RECORD AN AUDIO DIARY

This one could work well if you want to buddy up and swap stories with a friend. "As long as you choose carefully and approach the exercise in a positive and affirming way, an objective viewpoint can help to reveal strengths you wouldn't have acknowledged yourself," says Lynne.

MAKE A VISION BOARD

"If you've ever done this to motivate yourself to achieve something in the future, it could be just as powerful in reverse," says Lynne. Create a collage from old photographs and snippets from memory boxes.

> "A REVERSE BUCKET LIST ENCOURAGES YOU TO CELEBRATE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS"

Reflecting on hard times

Looking back can be difficult if you have particular regrets or painful memories. Whether it's loss, failure or missed opportunities because of illness or even lockdown, "if you can identify a lesson or positive outcome, the difficult event or period of time could still be well worth delving into," says Lynne.

With the benefit of hindsight, this might be easier than you think. "It's not about looking at the past through rose-coloured glasses, it's about reframing," says Lynne. "Think of the time when things didn't work out as you planned and ask yourself if there was a silver lining. For example you might say 'If X hadn't happened, then Y wouldn't have happened'." It may have led you to meet someone or travel somewhere new, for example.

Now look ahead

Throughout the process, you will learn a lot about yourself: what you can do and what makes you light up. "Underline the highlights in your reverse bucket list – these are the experiences or achievements that speak to you the loudest," says Lynne. Now you have clarity on the kinds of people, places and purposes that feed your soul.

"As a result, you can be more selective about what you should invest your time and energy in," says Lynne. Start editing your forward-looking list. You'll have full confidence in your choices and will enjoy a greater number of truly meaningful and worthwhile moments in the months and years to come. ■



© Getty Images / SpicyTruffel

*The Science of Gratitude report by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley

TURN *Adversity* INTO ADVANTAGE

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger… as the saying goes. But can facing hardship really be beneficial to our long-term mental health?



WORDS JULIE BASSETT

No one wants to suffer hardship or adversity. But life isn't always plain sailing, and challenges will get thrown in our paths. How we face these challenges and get through them can change the impact these struggles have on our mental health and wellbeing. Difficult experiences are usually associated with a negative outcome on mental health, but this is not always the case.

We can learn from our hardest times, building resilience, honing skills, increasing empathy and changing perspective. In fact, we might be better placed to cope with what life throws at us if we've faced some adversity before, which is why some people seek to place themselves in challenging situations to reap the benefits – for example, those who take on extreme sports events, explore difficult parts of the world or plan gritty adventures.

Of course, there is a big difference between hardships that are thrust upon us without warning or choice, and those that we choose to take on ourselves. But if we're willing to accept our situation and work through it, we can find positive benefits that help us build essential skills and coping mechanisms for the rest of our lives.

What is meant by hardship and adversity?

Adversity is a state of hardship, a difficult or unpleasant situation. This is quite a broad definition, and it covers so many different »

> "WE MIGHT BE BETTER PLACED TO COPE WITH HARD TIMES IF WE'VE FACED SOME ADVERSITY BEFORE"



types of issues. This can be emotional adversity, where we struggle to manage our emotions to the point that they impact on daily life. Mental adversity is struggles related to our mental health, which could take the form of a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. Physical adversity relates to struggles with our body, which could be anything from placing our body under stress and strain due to a specific challenge, to living with chronic pain or a disability. Social adversity covers struggles we might have in our relationships and social environment, such as the way people treat us. Financial adversity relates to hardships around money, which is increasingly more likely in a period of economic turmoil, fuelling a rising cost of living. As you can see, hardship, struggles and adversity can come in many different guises and it's something that, one way or another, we will all have to face at some point in our lives.

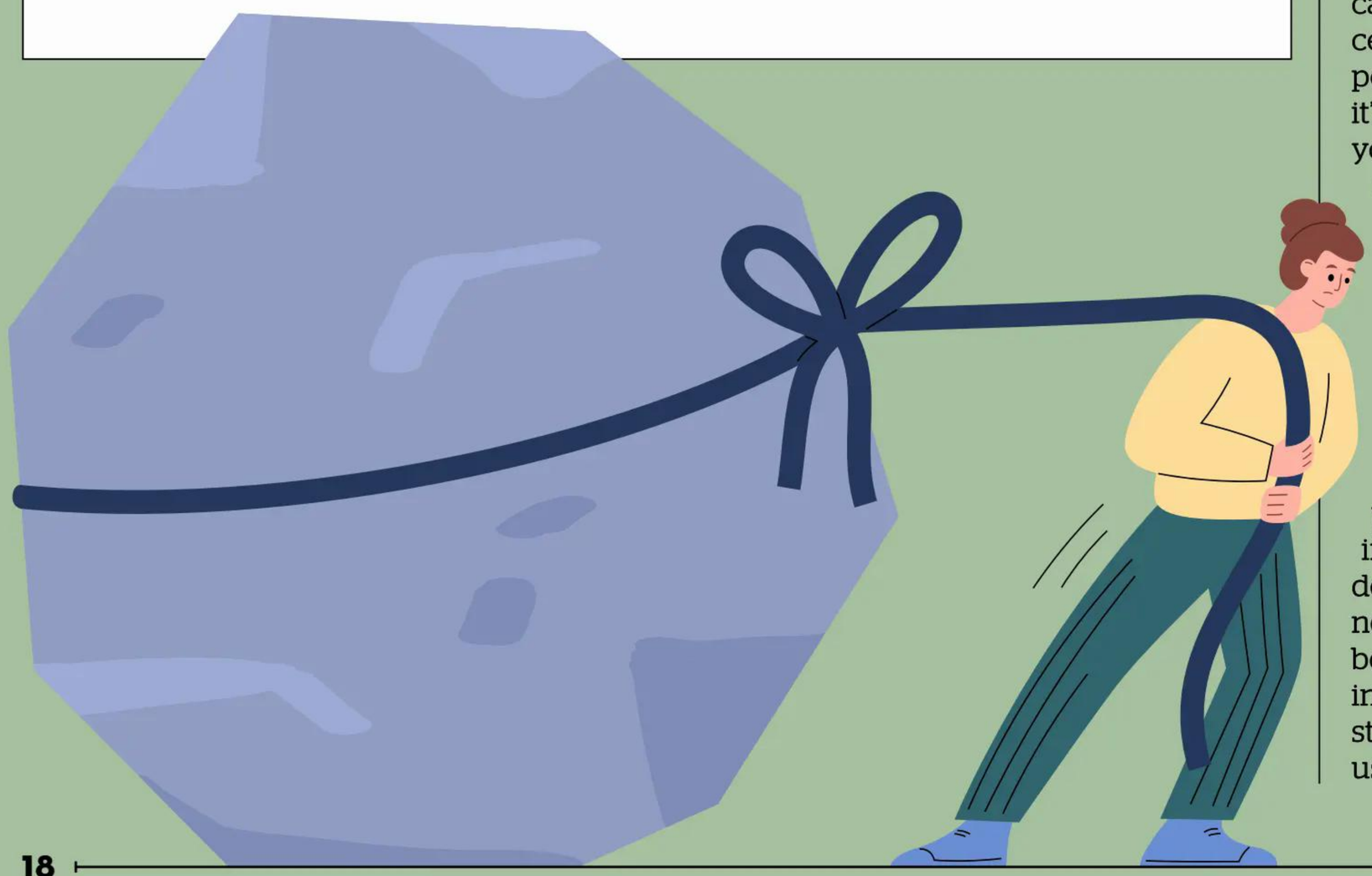
So, for one person, adversity might come due to the breakdown of a relationship, serious illness or job loss; for another, it might come by taking on a deliberate physical and mental challenge designed to push them to their limits. Continuous and relentless adversity will often have a negative impact on wellbeing, with poorer outcomes. However, what one study* showed is that those who experience some adverse experiences actually have better mental health than those who have had no adverse experiences. "Adverse experiences may foster subsequent resilience, with resulting advantages for mental health and wellbeing. In a multiyear longitudinal study of a national sample, people with a history of some lifetime adversity reported better mental health and wellbeing outcomes than not only people with a high history of adversity, but also than people with no history of adversity."

> "WE SURVIVE ALL KINDS OF DIFFICULT SITUATIONS BECAUSE WE HAVE TO, AND WE COME OUT THE OTHER SIDE"

The study also showed that having adverse experiences in our past makes us more able to cope with further hardship later on. "People with some prior lifetime adversity were the least affected by recent adverse events. These results suggest that, in moderation, whatever does not kill us may indeed make us stronger."

HOW TO REFRAME STRUGGLES INTO SUCCESS

Turning a difficult challenge into a positive experience isn't easy, but it will help your mental health and resilience over time. If you're feeling overwhelmed and stressed, you may need to step back from the situation and look at it with fresh eyes. This is achieved in three key steps. First, try to notice your thoughts and feelings. Are you stressed? Emotional? Angry? Frustrated? Acknowledging your thoughts helps to bring a sense of control into your situation. Next, you need to challenge these thoughts – sometimes we are so focused on the negative aspects of a situation that we forget to look at the positives. Can you look at your problems in a different way? Finally, you need to reframe those thoughts and feelings, and find a different way to approach the challenges you're facing.



Mental health benefits of facing hardship

When you're in the midst of a difficult situation, it can be hard to believe that it can be in any way beneficial. Adversity certainly doesn't feel like it could have a positive effect on our lives. Even when it's a challenge you've opted to take on yourself, there will be moments when you question your choices and can't see a way out. Yet you're stronger than you think; we survive all kinds of difficult situations because we have to, and we come out the other side with lessons learned and new perspectives gathered.

For one thing, we learn to stretch the limits of what we think we're capable of. It's amazing what you can teach yourself when you have to. For example, if you're made redundant, you might decide to retrain and build an entirely new skillset that you would never have been in the position to do without the initial struggles. Adversity teaches us to strive and work hard, which builds within us the knowledge that our own successes

come from within and only by moving forwards and building our skills and abilities can we thrive. Once we start to see a challenging situation as an opportunity to learn, grow, improve and adapt, it leads to more positive outcomes. This in turn can improve self-esteem and self-belief, which can boost our mental health.

Experiencing some level of adversity can also make you more compassionate and empathetic as a person. Empathy is an important skill, enabling us to understand the feelings of others, which helps to build stronger relationships and friendships – something that is very important when it comes to good mental health. Having been through difficult situations ourselves, we can offer true compassion and support towards others dealing with their own hardships. This ability to learn from our own adversity and support others can encourage far more meaningful relationships in our lives, developing a deeper connection with those around us.

A new perspective

Having to face up to true struggles and adversity can also help us when it comes to putting our lives into perspective. For example, going through, or watching someone we love go through, serious illness can remind us how precious life is and to make the most of each day to the best of our ability.

Even self-created periods of difficulty can be important for gaining a sense of perspective. For example, you might decide to take on a hard physical challenge; there will inevitably be moments when you feel like you can't go on or that you've taken on too much. But pushing through these periods of doubt, facing the challenges in front of us, acts as a reminder that we're often stronger than we think and more capable than we imagine. We can then apply this in our daily life – by remembering those times we've pushed through something hard, we can take on bigger day-to-day challenges.

With a fresh perspective may also come gratitude. Going through hardship makes us more grateful for what we have. If you get seriously injured and are unable to do your usual activities for a while, you may find yourself more grateful for your health and strength once you're healed. Being away from home for a long period of time can increase gratitude for family and friends. Having financial struggles can bring gratitude for the simpler things in life, like spending time at home reading or watching a good film.

We know that being able to apply perspective to challenges in life, and regularly practising gratitude are hugely beneficial to our mental health and wellbeing. Another thing that helps our mental health, and can be borne out of adversity, is resilience. The ability to adapt to difficult times can build an inner strength that helps us to find solutions to problems, rather than wallow in them, and handle the stress in a more productive way. Building resilience helps to protect our emotional state and remain hopeful, even when we're faced with further struggles.

A journey of self-growth

Life is full of ups and downs. Each new challenge we face is an opportunity for self-discovery, teaching us about the person we are and who we want to be. The moments of hardship and struggle are as important as the moments of joy in building our sense of self. These moments help us to become well-rounded, experienced and resilient, and able to better cope with the world around us.

In psychology, we talk of 'self-efficacy', which is an individual's belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals. A strong sense of self-efficacy is often linked to better mental health. One study** applied this to the Covid-19 pandemic, which found that those with higher self-efficacy were likely to have lower risk perception and more active coping strategies, leading to better mental health outcomes in the face of such a stressful global event.

However, this self-efficacy is built through resilience and exposure to challenging situations. As we prove ourselves capable of overcoming hard times, our confidence in conquering obstacles and struggles is increased. Take, for example, a fear of talking to a room full of people. That fear won't miraculously dissipate overnight. Only by facing that fear and taking part in a speaking event can we prove to ourselves that we can do it. Over time our confidence grows, and we become stronger, more resilient and more able.

If you're in a situation that's out of your control, try to focus on the ways that you may learn and grow from your experience, look for small moments of gratitude, and reframe your situation in a more positive light (see the box on the previous page for more on this). If you're looking to develop your resilience and ability to adapt to change, maybe consider finding a way to challenge yourself, mentally or physically, to help build your skillset and turn adversity into an advantage.

SET PERSONAL CHALLENGES

You may wish to reap the benefits of facing challenges by setting yourself a personal goal that's outside your comfort zone. It doesn't have to be as extreme as trekking through remote wildlands or climbing a mountain – though, of course, it could be if that works for you – but it needs to be something that creates a situation that you're not used to and where you need to dig deep to push through. This will help you to build the necessary resilience, and also give you a sense of achievement and confidence in your abilities. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- ***Plan a solo adventure – having only yourself to rely on can be a great confidence builder***
- Try wild camping – take yourself away from the comforts of everyday life
- ***Enter a long-distance hike, run or cycle – to push yourself to your physical limits***
- Face a fear – do something that you're scared of that's outside your comfort zone
- ***Go somewhere new, tech free – learn to navigate and enjoy your surroundings without using modern technology***

© Getty Images / tatianazaets / Kudryavtsev Pavel

*Seery, M., Holman, E., & Silver, R. (2010). Whatever does not kill us: cumulative lifetime adversity, vulnerability, and resilience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*

**Chenhao Zhou et al (2021). Self-efficacy and mental health problems during COVID-19 pandemic: A multiple mediation model based on the Health Belief Model. Personality and Individual Differences

Exclusive

INTERVIEW

Levison Wood

Explorer, writer and photographer Levison Wood talks to Psychology Now group editor Sarah Bankes about the benefits of adversity, and the importance of stepping out of your comfort zone

What were you like as a child and growing up – were you always adventurous and resilient or has it been your life experiences that have shaped you?

As a kid I was very adventurous and curious. I grew up in suburban Stoke-on-Trent, so it was far from 'wild'. My parents were both teachers, so they encouraged me to read and do well at school, but they didn't really have any money, so long-distance travel wasn't on the horizon. I had to make do with adventuring around the urban jungle of Stoke-on-Trent, which inevitably got me in lots of trouble as a kid!

A lot of my sense of adventure was inherent and in my nature, but a lot of it also came from the stories I heard from my dad and grandad. My grandad fought in the Second World War in Burma, and spent time in India and Japan and the Far East, and although he didn't glamorise any of it, listening to those stories as a ten-year-old boy certainly made me feel excited about travelling myself.

> "NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE IF YOU HAVE THE VISION AND APPETITE FOR TAKING RISKS"



© Simon Buxton

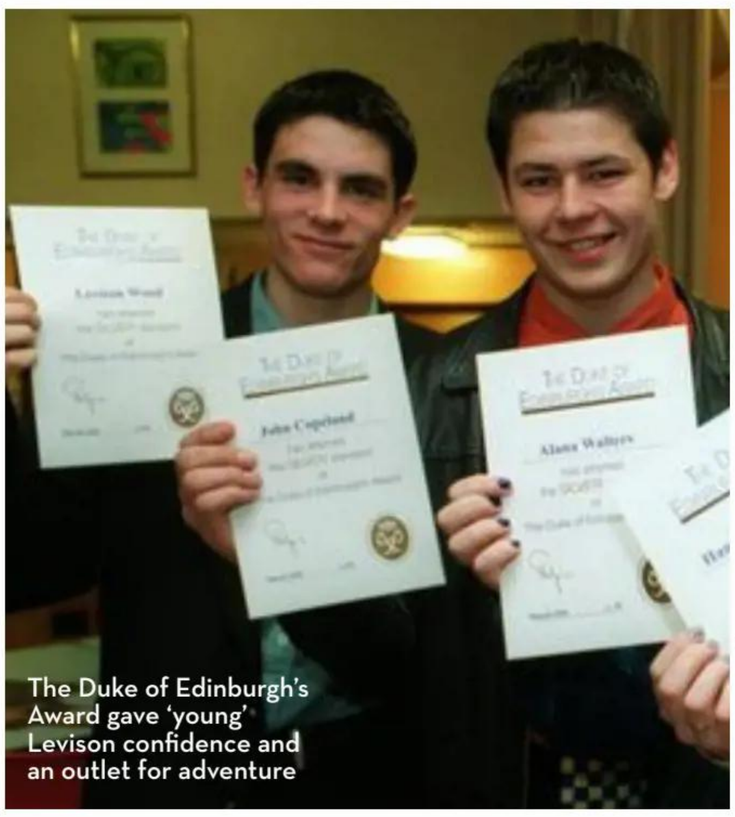
My first adventures were camping holidays, and then I did my Duke of Edinburgh's Award and went traipsing off across the Peak District and Scotland and Wales.

I always knew that at the earliest opportunity, I was going to take myself off and put myself to the test, and so I did. At the age of 18, I went off on a bit of a cliché gap year and have been travelling ever since!

What made you want to join the army?

I knew from the age of about ten that I wanted to be an explorer, and that to be an explorer I had to join the army first and learn about life and gain skills and resilience, so I kind of planned everything towards that. When I was 14 or 15, I went on these army insight days, and then took my interviews when I was 16. Because I knew I wanted to be an officer, I had to go to university, so I studied history at university, all whilst on the officer training course. Everything I did was with a view to join the army, which I did at the age of 23 after I graduated.

Just before joining the army, the year that I graduated, I hitchhiked to India from Nottingham, where I'd been a student, because I wanted to travel to some of the places I knew I'd get sent to with the army. So I went to Iraq and Afghanistan when I was 22, and got a bit of an insight into what those countries were like. I then went to Sandhurst and spent a year training there in the officer academy, and then ended up in the parachute regiment, which I guess is the toughest unit to get into.



The Duke of Edinburgh's Award gave 'young' Levison confidence and an outlet for adventure

© Levison Wood



At the age of 22, Levison hitchhiked to India from Nottingham

© Levison Wood

How were you so fearless at such a young age?

I was probably more fearless back then than I am now. I think you acquire fears along the way. I don't think you're necessarily born with fears, apart from the rudimentary ones. As a young man, I was up for anything, and it was early risk-taking that enabled me to do certain things. I think you've only got a certain number of risks in you and a certain level of energy to expend. Those early journeys taught me a lot about independence. My dad encouraged that too. When I was 16, he stopped my pocket money and told me I needed to get a job, so I flipped burgers in McDonald's, stacked shelves in Safeway, packed boxes at Toys R Us, worked at Alton Towers, laid railway tracks – all character-building stuff, which taught me a hell of a lot, including the value of money and standing on my own two feet.

I'd had these life experiences at a young age, which had taught me that actually nothing is impossible if you have the right vision and appetite for putting yourself on the line and taking risks that often you're not fully prepared to do. I think a healthy appetite for risk is good for us. It encourages us to push ourselves and to do things that we wouldn't ever think we were capable of.



Even as a child, Levison knew he wanted to join the army

© Levison Wood

> "HARDSHIPS REALLY DO HELP YOU TO EVOLVE, AND THAT'S WHAT LIFE'S ALL ABOUT"

I think a lot of children are mollycoddled these days, sadly. I mean, there's a reason it's called being 'spoilt'. Being tested when you're young, and being encouraged to think for yourself and be resilient later on in life is so important. If you're not given the opportunity to be tested, whether that's because you've got over-protective parents or you're scared of failing, you're setting yourself up for issues later in life. All the things I had to do as a young man, which I didn't really like at the time, were so important for my future. They taught me what I *didn't* want to do; I proved to myself that I *could* do them; and they also enabled me to pay for my travels.

How do certain hardships help us when faced with future challenges?

With hindsight, you realise it wasn't the end of the world, which you don't appreciate at the time. You think 'I can do that again, it wasn't that hard', and then next time you can push yourself a bit more. Hardships really do help you to evolve, and that's »



Levison joined the parachute regiment, the toughest unit

© Levison Wood

5 QUICK-FIRE QUESTIONS

1. Who's your biggest inspiration?
My dad.

2. What are you scared of?
I hate spiders and insects!

3. What music are you into at the moment?
When I'm walking, I deliberately don't listen to music or podcasts, as I try to be as open as possible to the environment, but I've got a very eclectic taste in music. The last couple of years, I've really opened up to different styles of world music and indigenous music from the Amazon.

4. What would your last meal be?
Probably a Sunday roast – with Yorkshire puddings!

5. Is there a country you'd like to visit that you haven't yet been to?
I've always wanted to go to Papua New Guinea and haven't been. And Peru. So watch this space...



The first televised walking expedition Levison embarked on

WALKING THE NILE

Levison walked the length of the River Nile from 2013-2014 – an expedition of 6,840km (4,250mi) that took nine months. Documented and aired on Channel 4, it was the channel's most successful factual series of the year. His book *Walking The Nile* became a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

© Alamy

what life's all about – you don't want to be the same person you were five or ten years ago. And anyone who's content to be that same person is missing a trick, because we should all be aspiring to be better people and more resilient. Only when you're in a strong position can you help other people.

Can adversity bring people together?
When you're faced with challenges, particularly as a group, which is the whole concept of the military, you're in tricky situations with people you can rely on. That mentality of the group dynamic and shared hardship really improves confidence and encourages you to push yourself. You don't want to be the one to let down the group.

The fear of letting other people down is a great driver in many situations. And it encourages identity.

I do feel for young people who are sitting in front of their computers all the time, not making any actual friends and not putting themselves in risky situations, because they're missing out on huge life lessons. There's a great book by Sebastian Junger called *Tribe*, and he talks about hardship and how as a society we're fearful of taking risks and being in uncomfortable situations, because it's very easy to be comfortable these days, whereas it wasn't for previous generations.

> "HARDSHIP CAN BE A VERY BONDING EXPERIENCE"

He interviewed lots of people who survived the Blitz in London, and it's amazing how many people said that that was the best time of their lives, because that feeling of camaraderie in London at the time was such a unifying experience that enabled people to share stories and be in that shared hardship. Were it not for the isolation part of Covid, it would have probably been a similar situation – of getting through something together. Hardship can be a very bonding experience. I see it on my expeditions all the time – we're part of a small group of people and we're climbing mountains or crossing deserts and, although it's incredibly tough at the time, in hindsight you're very glad you did it.

Can you think of a time in your life or a situation that has changed you?
There have been so many! I had a pretty nasty accident back in 2015. I was walking the Himalayas and the irony was I was on a walking expedition and it was the one time I got in a taxi! I'd been chucked out of a village because there was a communist uprising going on, so I took a taxi and as we were



Crossing the mighty Caucasus mountain range that lies between Russia and Iran

FROM RUSSIA TO IRAN

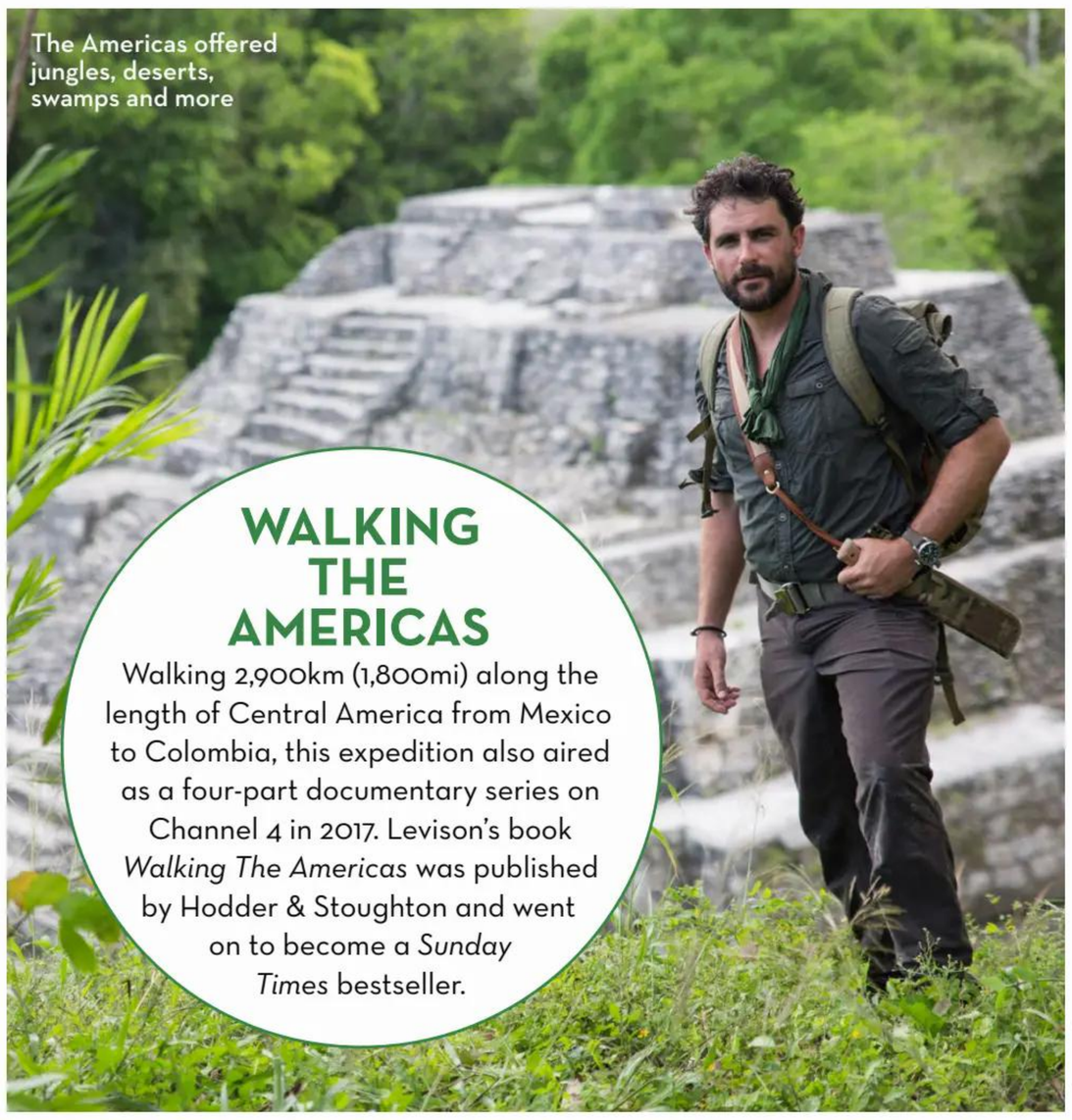
Levison's TV series *From Russia To Iran: Crossing The Wild Frontier* aired on Channel 4 for four weeks in late 2017.

© Simon Buxton



Revisiting the scene of the life-changing accident in the Himalayas

© Levison Wood



The Americas offered jungles, deserts, swamps and more

© Simon Buxton

WALKING THE AMERICAS

Walking 2,900km (1,800mi) along the length of Central America from Mexico to Colombia, this expedition also aired as a four-part documentary series on Channel 4 in 2017. Levison's book *Walking The Americas* was published by Hodder & Stoughton and went on to become a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

driving over the mountain pass, the brakes failed and the car went off the edge of the cliff. I thought I was going to die. The car rolled ten times, and I was just so glad to be alive. That one experience changed my whole mindset. It took a long time to get over it. There was an element of trauma to deal with, of course. But once I'd overcome that, it was really about reminding myself of how lucky I was to survive that, albeit with a broken arm, and come out the other side.

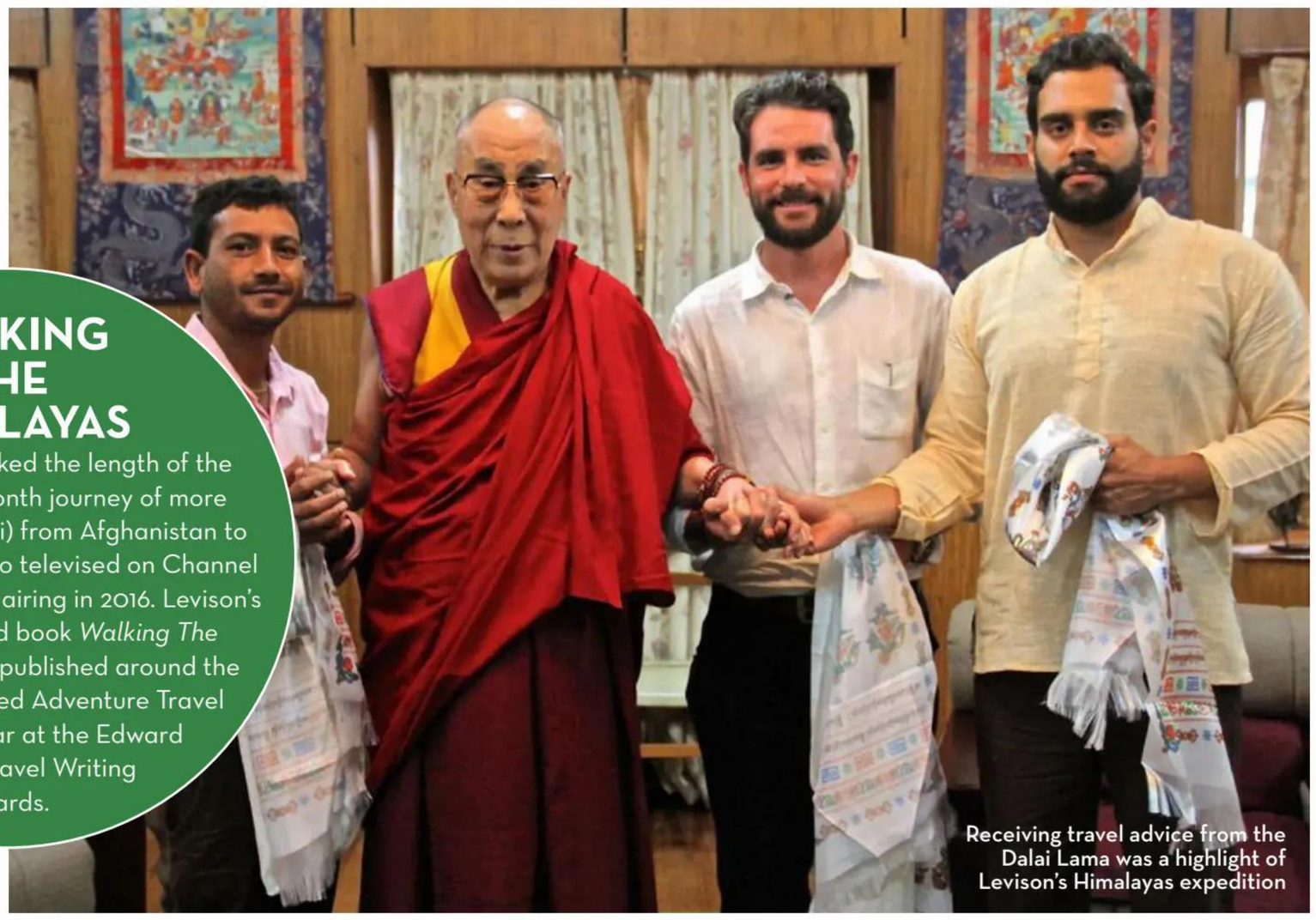
After a period of struggling a bit, I went through a pretty hedonistic stage actually, and it encouraged a whole new outlook on life beyond that. I changed the very regimented, strict, military mindset I had. Up until that point, I had five-year plans and knew where I was going to be every month and how much money I needed to achieve each goal. I was very regimented in the way I thought, which is useful in certain periods of your life because it means you have goals and can achieve them. And that's what I prided myself on – if I say I'm going to do something, then I'll do it. But after that experience, I knew I had to change that approach, because I had to let go of control. So I spent the next five years letting go of control in every which way, and going with the flow – taking up yoga and breathwork, and getting into all the 'woo woo' stuff; taking myself away on spiritual retreats, which all helped me to evolve and change and become a more well-rounded person.

> "That one experience changed my whole mindset"

Going back to the accident, I knew I had to continue the expedition, so after I'd had surgery on my broken arm, I went back out to where the car was and thought I'm going to face this, and then carried on. That was a cathartic experience. It didn't put me off, either. That was my third televised expedition, and I've done many since. I've broken all my other bones since then in various ridiculous accidents. I broke my left leg in a paramotoring accident in 2021. I broke my other leg in a motorbike accident in 2022. Accidents happen and risk is a part of what I do, and I know that. Is it going to »

WALKING THE HIMALAYAS

In 2015, Levison walked the length of the Himalayas, a six-month journey of more than 2,735km (1,700mi) from Afghanistan to Bhutan, which was also televised on Channel 4 as a five-part series, airing in 2016. Levison's critically acclaimed book *Walking The Himalayas* has been published around the world, and was voted Adventure Travel Book of the Year at the Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards.



Receiving travel advice from the Dalai Lama was a highlight of Levison's Himalayas expedition

© Levison Wood



Searching for polar bears deep in the vast Arctic wilderness of east Greenland

© Evangeline Modell

WALKING WITH...

Levison's '*Walking With...*' series saw him track down some of the most iconic but endangered animals on Earth, and look at how they are surviving against worsening odds.

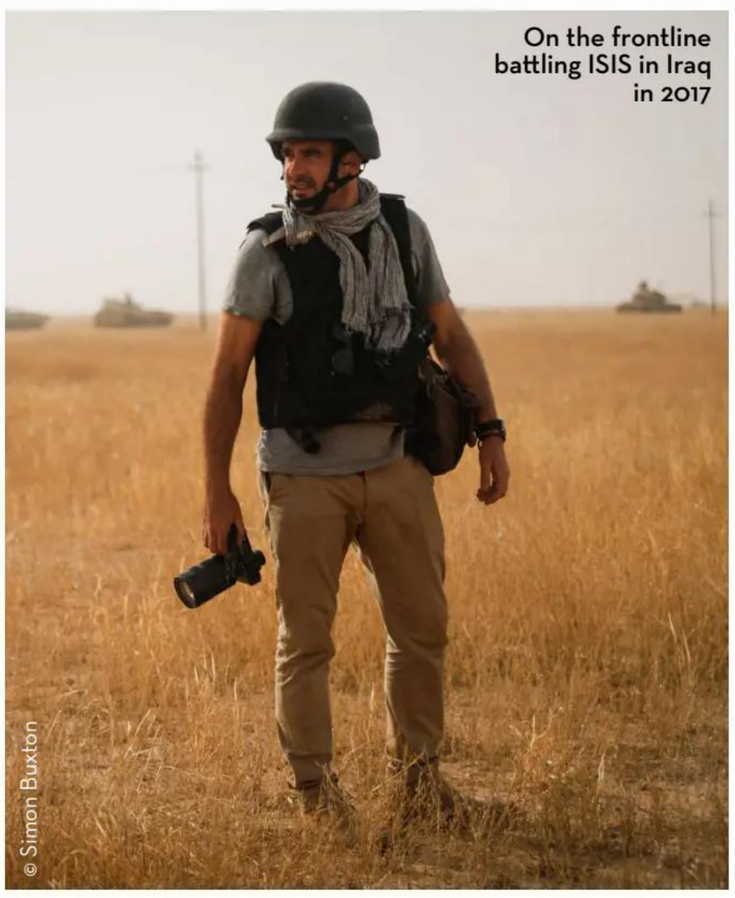
THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Levison left the army in 2010 to take up a career in writing and photography. His photographs have appeared in publications such as *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *BBC*, *National Geographic*, *CNN*, *Discovery Channel*, *Gentleman's Journal*, *Metro* and *Condé Nast Traveller*. Levison is passionate about capturing his adventures and the world around him. His photographic exhibition 'Visions of Africa' was held in the Royal Opera Arcade on Pall Mall, London, in 2015, while his first solo show 'Ground Truth' in 2016 was Leica Mayfair's most successful photography exhibition of recent years.



Documenting Palestinian protesters in Jericho in 2017

© Simon Buxton



On the frontline battling ISIS in Iraq in 2017

© Simon Buxton

stop me doing it? No, because what's the alternative? The prospect of an office job is too unbearable for me to contemplate.

How do you cope in situations where you feel nervous or apprehensive?

This might have been part of the trauma of the taxi flying off the cliff, but after that accident, I got really nervous about flying and hated getting on aeroplanes. Any turbulence would really shake me up. I thought, 'This is ridiculous – I have to use aeroplanes, whether I like it or not'. I needed to get over that fear, and the only way to get over it was to become a paragliding pilot, so I took myself to the Alps and threw myself off a cliff with a paraglider, and took that up as a hobby. I mean, I ended up breaking my leg doing that, but it got me over my fear of flying!

Is it possible to change our mindsets and how we approach a challenging situation?

It is, but it does take a big mindset shift. There are a lot of people who wallow in their own misfortune, sadly. And a lot of people who don't believe in themselves, and often the two go hand in hand. A lot of people blame outside circumstances or other people, and that's fine if you want to tell yourself that narrative, but the truth is we can all change our mindsets – we can all do whatever we want, if we're prepared to put in the hard work and make sacrifices. The first step is realising that in every disaster there are amazing opportunities.

In 2022, I found myself in a bit of a rut. I'd promised myself after Covid that I was going to leave London, but I was very comfortable



Levison broke his leg in a paramotoring accident in 2021

© Levison Wood

“THE FIRST STEP IS REALISING THAT IN EVERY DISASTER THERE ARE AMAZING OPPORTUNITIES”

there – I had my nice apartment, all my friends were there, so I was very much in my comfort zone. That year, I was in Greece on a motorbike thinking, ‘Something’s got to change’, and literally at that very moment I got whacked off the motorbike by a taxi driver. But even though my leg was pointing 90 degrees from where it should be, I was giggling thinking, ‘There’s the change I need!’

It was a really hard time, because I was in a wheelchair for a bit, and then it took six months to get over the surgery, but that accident was the catalyst for change. Being stuck in a wheelchair in my apartment, outside of Covid restrictions, was the last straw! So I sold half my possessions, rented my flat out, and forced myself to hit the road again. And I’ve never been happier. You’ve got to always look for opportunities, no matter how bad the situation is that you’re in. I’ve been in some pretty bad situations, but there’s always some good if you look hard enough.

Should we seek out adversity in order to grow?

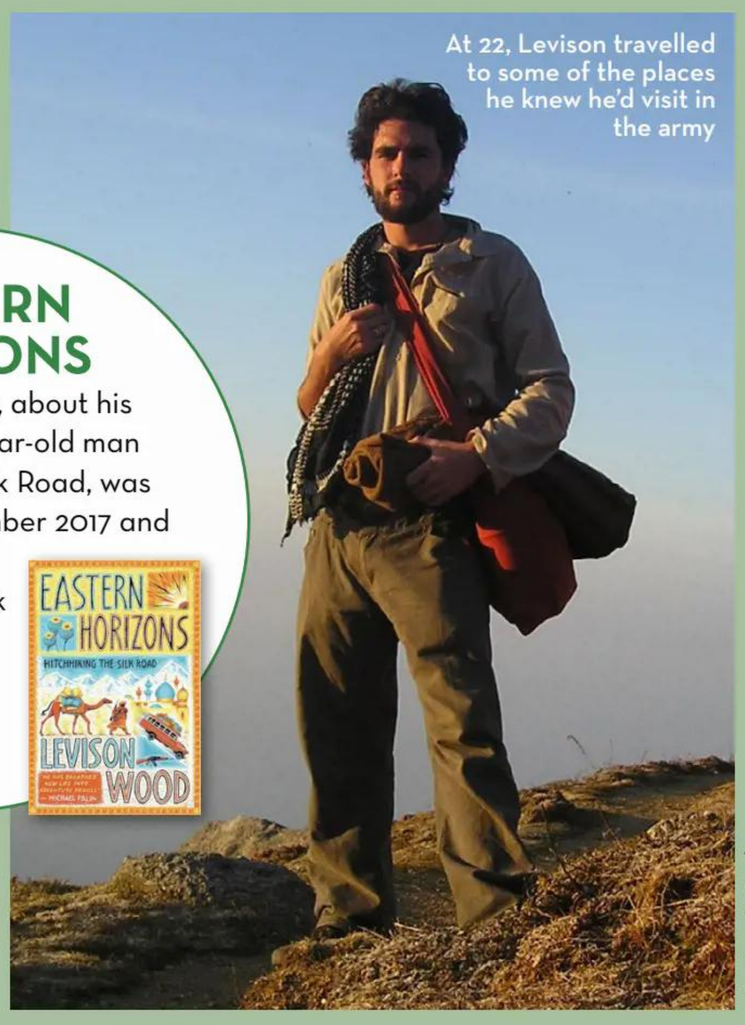
I think we should certainly seek out challenges, because only through struggles will we evolve, and if you avoid that then you’ll never grow. It’s that simple. You don’t necessarily need to put yourself in physical danger, but doing something new or uncomfortable or scary is good for us. It might be as simple as talking to someone on the Tube, or volunteering to do some public speaking, or going solo to a yoga class. There’s a lot to be said for putting yourself outside your comfort zone, because you realise it’s all in your head – it’s all ego! You realise it’s not that terrifying and people aren’t judging you. So you said hello and got rejected – it doesn’t matter! And it’s only when you try those things that you realise no one is thinking about you all the time! You need to get your head out of your backside!

Does it help to proactively prepare for hardship as opposed to reactively manage the response post the event?

It’s good to be prepared, of course. We have a saying in the army, which is ‘prepare for the worst, but hope for the best’. If you’re prepared as best you can be, then you’re far more resilient and in a better position to give yourself the best chance of success.

Do we need to encourage resilience in our children?

I think we do, but not every parent is equipped to do that, because they won’t necessarily know how to. People will figure out how to be resilient themselves if you give them the right environment to »



At 22, Levison travelled to some of the places he knew he’d visit in the army

© Levison Wood

EASTERN HORIZONS

Eastern Horizons, about his travels as a 22-year-old man hitchhiking the Silk Road, was published in November 2017 and shortlisted for Adventure Travel Book of the Year at the Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards.

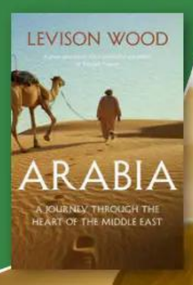


Experiencing a different mode of transport on one of the ‘walking’ expeditions!

© Simon Buxton

ARABIA

Arabia: A Journey Through The Heart Of The Middle East was published in November 2018 and shortlisted for an Edward Stanford Travel Writing Award in 2019. It documents Levison’s 8,050km (5,000mi) circumnavigation of the Arabian peninsula. The independently produced documentary *Arabia* was nominated for a Broadcast Award.



Levison travelled through 13 different countries in the Arabian peninsula

© Simon Buxton

“I’M DEFINITELY MORE AWARE OF RISKS NOW I’M OLDER”

do that, and that environment is not being alone in your bedroom on the computer or on your phone. You’ve got to figure all this stuff out by socialising. That was something we were all desperate for during Covid, and I really feel for the generation of teenagers and youngsters in their early 20s who missed out on two years of their life because of that.

I credit the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award for giving me so much confidence. I think if it hadn’t been for that, I’d have been a teenage delinquent! I was always in trouble and getting arrested. The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award was what put me on the straight and narrow because it gave me an outlet for adventure. I was doing expeditions; I was meeting people my age with a similar mindset, and that got me out of hanging out with the hooligans at my school.

I think you can replicate that on a grander scale in society. You’ve got to encourage people to be part of a team and to take risks, and I think the biggest thing of all, which I think would solve a lot of mental health problems, is to be in nature. When you’re staring at a brick wall, and I’m guilty of this when I live in London and only have big tower blocks to look at, it’s not a healthy mindset. Get out into the countryside; at the weekend, rather than sitting in the pub, go out and climb a hill or walk in a forest. Nature will help you. There’s something about breathing in fresh air, seeing greenery... it’s natural – that’s how human beings evolved for two million years, not cooped up in an apartment block. Being in a city where you’re inundated with sights, smells, sounds and constant radiation, that’s not a healthy place to be. And you might not be aware of it, but that has an effect on your mental health, as well as your physical health. I just think you need to take every opportunity to be in nature, and I know not everybody has the good fortune to be in the countryside, but get on a bus, get on the train, and go and walk across some fields with your mates.



Meeting Prince Philip, many years after completing his Duke of Edinburgh’s Award

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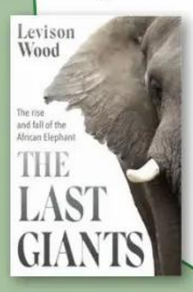


Exploring the rapid decline of elephants in Botswana

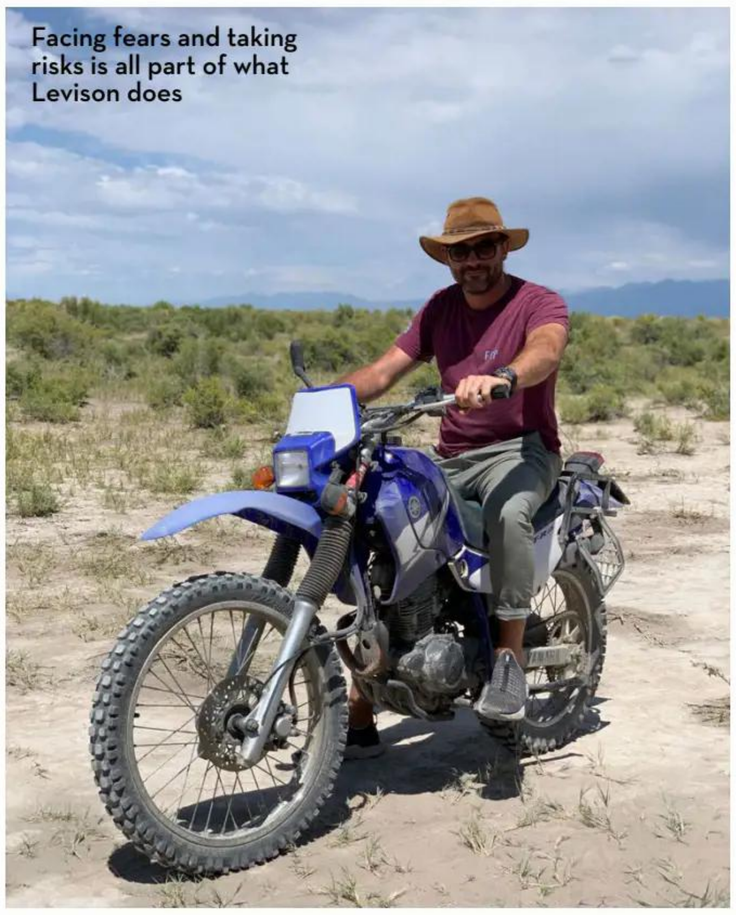
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THE LAST GIANTS

In 2019, Levison walked across Botswana following migrating elephants and learning about conservation in the region. His book *The Last Giants*, about the plight of the African elephant, was published in 2019 by Hodder & Stoughton. A documentary series, *Walking With Elephants*, following his journey, aired on Channel 4 in May 2020.



Have you become more or less fearless as you've got older?
I'm definitely more aware of risks now I'm older, but that's probably due to personal experiences. Having now broken all the bones in my body and had some very serious accidents, I'm definitely more sensible. Nowadays, I won't go straight to the top of a black run when I'm skiing – I'm a bit too old for that now! I have to remind myself that that sense of risk should apply to every part of your mindset, so instead of jumping off mountains, I now challenge myself in other ways, and that might be taking myself off on my own to a holistic breathwork session or doing something that I wouldn't previously have thought was my kind of thing.


Facing fears and taking risks is all part of what Levison does

© Levison Wood

Turning 40 can be an opportunity for reflection for many people. Did you reassess your life when you turned 40?
I spent the last two years of my 30s bricking it about turning 40, thinking that's really old! And then you hit 40 and actually it's like a reset button and feels like a fresh start. I feel more at ease in my early 40s than I did in my late 30s. I've given up caring about what society thinks I should be doing. In my late 30s, I was very aware that I wasn't married and didn't have children, and there's a lot of pressure on men and women to do that. But now I don't really give a toss! If it happens, great, but if it doesn't, it doesn't really matter. I've had a great life – I'm *having* a great life. Why stress about something that doesn't really matter?

If your role did change and you settled down and maybe became a father, do you think your outlook would change in terms of your boundaries and the risks you'd take?
Inevitably, you'd have to reassess, but I know lots of parents who still do paragliding and climb mountains, so I don't think it should change you. I'd like to think that I could still do the vast majority of what I'm doing.

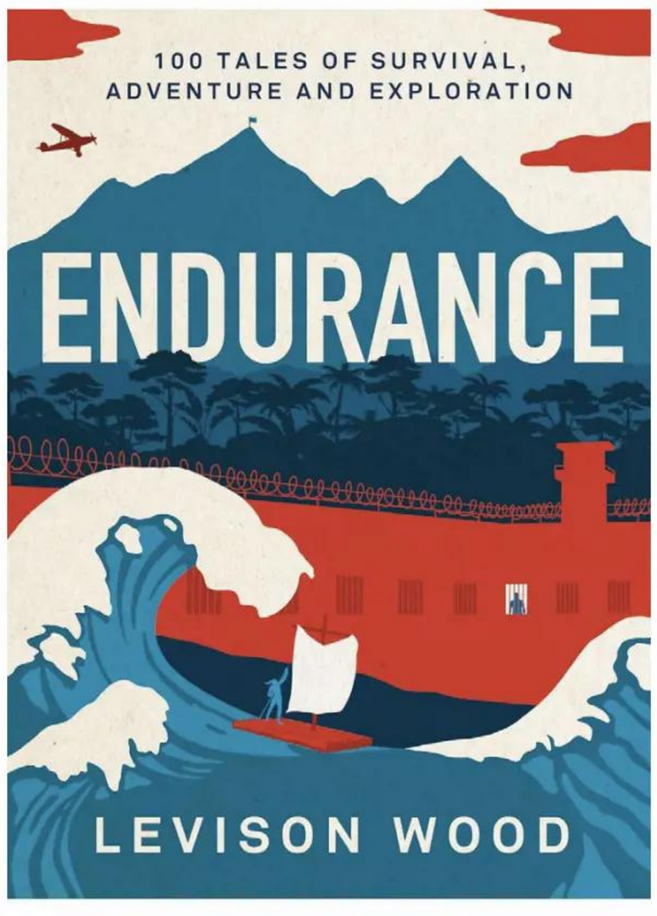

Levison's parents played a huge role in his sense of adventure

© Levison Wood

What do you think the next decade has in store for you? Will you continue with your adventures?
Certainly for the next few years. I've got ideas that are stacked up for the next couple of years already. I'm lucky that I've managed to diversify what I do, so if someone decides I don't have a face for TV anymore, that's fine because I write books and do other things. I've tried not to put all my eggs in one basket with work stuff. But I'm taking my foot off the pedal a bit right now and taking some time to think about where life might go. I'm enjoying being a bit of a nomad. I'm sure some people might see it as a step back, but I'm enjoying life!

ENDURANCE

In *Endurance*, Levison has gathered 100 of the most astonishing stories of human endurance, adventure and exploration throughout history, from the heroism of Antarctic explorers to pioneering women in the Middle East; from record-breaking athletes to survivors of war and torture. The accounts are organised around a range of themes, and all celebrate the enduring nature of the human spirit, showing the mental and physical determination it sometimes takes to achieve one's aims.



DREAM AND IT Will Come

The power to change things could be simpler than you think

WORDS SAMANTHA WOOD

Wish you could magic up happiness and good fortune? Well, some believe you can, simply by imagining it. Yes, it might sound a bit 'woo woo', but manifesting – also known as cosmic ordering – is the practice of visualising how you want your life to be and relying on this positive energy to then bring it into existence. It's a method that's been used for thousands of years. "Manifesting simply means bringing something into the realm of conscious awareness," explains expert and author Carolyn Boyes*. "If you can imagine yourself with something and trust that the universe can give it to you, it will come."

HOW TO DO IT

Close your eyes and imagine yourself with the thing you want. How does it feel?

Pretend that whatever you're wishing for is happening right now. Take a few minutes to observe your life, as if watching a movie of it playing out.

Now open your eyes and say 'thank you' to the universe.

If there are practical steps that you can take to get closer to your dream, take them. Otherwise, trust that the universe has it in hand, let it go and wait.

Manifest... extra money

"If there's a sum that would help and you believe it will come, you probably have the power to get it," says Carolyn. "I needed a very specific amount, so I asked the universe for it to come by an 'unexpected source'. A month later, I realised I already had the money tied up in my house, and when I cashed it in, it was the exact amount I had needed."

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Don't greedily wish for millions – have a specific sum in mind that would benefit your life.

Imagine seeing the money in your bank account.

How would you choose to spend the money? Take time to imagine exactly how that would make you feel and believe that you truly deserve it.

Manifest... the love of your life

"You can't make a person fall in love with you – that would be unethical – but you can manifest the type of person you want to be in a relationship with," says Carolyn. "Imagine yourself with your dream partner, conversations you'd have, the way they would treat you and the way you'd treat them. Tap in to how that would make you feel and believe that a person like this will come into your life – and they will."

MANIFESTING TIPS

POSITIVITY BUILDS RESILIENCE!

A study** found that women with high levels of optimism were less likely to die of major diseases, such as cancer.

ALL GOOD

Make sure your manifestations are 'ecological' – good for you and others. Wishing bad things on others could have repercussions.

SPACE TO PARK

Need a car parking space? Take a moment to imagine driving your car into an empty spot. Small manifestations work too!



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Find it hard to imagine someone who doesn't exist? Imagine an ex who has treated you well but without a face, or build up your 'dream' person like a jigsaw.

After manifesting, take practical steps to meet someone, like signing up for a dating site. You have to put in some work to meet the universe halfway.

Been hurt in the past and find believing hard? Manifesting small things to start with, such as one fun date, or a great chat, will build up your belief that it can work.

Manifest... better health

"Manifesting good health has limitations due to our personal and cultural beliefs," says Carolyn. "However, you can absolutely use it to better your health, for example by asking for better sleep patterns, the mental strength to get through certain difficult situations and by imagining the happy, healthy life that you want to be living."

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Write down your health goals using positive language. Instead of writing 'I don't want to feel sad', write 'I will feel happy' – so your brain isn't given a chance to picture sadness.

Make a list of three things that you are grateful for about your health. Gratitude works well with manifesting as it lets the universe know you are grateful for what you already have.

Think about the actions you need to take to show commitment to your desired outcome. For example, if you want better sleep, start to put a better bedtime regime in place to help you relax.

Manifest... your dream home

"This one took me some time, but I got there after building up a very strong visual picture of what my dream house would look like," says Carolyn. "I created mood boards of the type of house I really wanted – the ceiling heights, the hall lengths, the specific features – and spent time visualising myself living in a home like that. It was only after I bought the exact house I'd manifested that I looked back and saw I'd even noted down my dream location – which matched."

MAKE IT HAPPEN

Make a mood board or keep a scrapbook of pictures of the type of house you want. Visual references can make big manifestations easier to imagine.

If your friend has the type of house you like, absorb how it feels to spend time there, imagining that it was yours.

Understand that the universe can take its time, so be open to changing your time frame. ■

> "MANIFESTING SIMPLY MEANS BRINGING SOMETHING INTO THE REALM OF CONSCIOUS AWARENESS"

© Shutterstock / KatePilko

**The Art Of Manifesting* by Carolyn Boyes (£12.99, HB, harpercollins). ***American Journal of Epidemiology.*

BUSY? IT'S NOT A BADGE OF Honour



You might think your ability to multitask is something to be celebrated, but think again

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

You may think yourself a bit of a superhero for juggling emails while cooking the family dinner. But might you actually be setting yourself up to fail? While many of us fancy ourselves as multitaskers, only 2.5% are able to do it effectively.* This might be as shocking as it is disappointing – we're not superheroes after all, but for good reason.

"Multitasking requires brains to move quickly between tasks, which may cause an overload of information, meaning we miss crucial facts," says Dr Tom MacLaren, consultant psychiatrist at Re:Cognition Health. And it can be detrimental to our health, too, resulting in poor sleep, a weakened immune system and even a reduced libido.

This is where monotasking – or 'deep work' – comes in. Simply put, this is the art of focusing on one task at a time. Here, our experts explain how to get to grips with tackling that to-do list slowly.

Your brain on overdrive

Does the stress of juggling several responsibilities give you a bit of a thrill? While it might feel exhilarating to be busy, you could actually be exhausting your brain. "The extra cognitive effort of switching between tasks can be tiring and can increase stress, impair concentration and even reduce efficiency

"IT MIGHT FEEL EXHILARATING TO BE BUSY, BUT YOU COULD BE EXHAUSTING YOUR BRAIN"

THE FEMALE BURDEN

Women are 23% more likely to struggle with poor work-life balance than men.** This is primarily because women still tend to manage the household and family, even when employed.

in the longer term," says Dr MacLaren.

You might feel as if you're a multitasking mastermind, but your brain isn't actually multitasking at all. Our brains find it difficult to carry out tasks simultaneously and, instead, perform them in a sequence, explains Dr Catherine Carney, a psychiatrist at Delamere Rehab. "Scientists have developed a theory to support this – the 'bottleneck theory' – which suggests that the brain functions like a marble passing through the neck of a bottle – only one marble can fit through at one time," she says. In other words, the first task must be completed before the second.

Running on empty

Our tendency, or perhaps our perceived duty, to juggle a variety of personal and professional tasks puts us at risk of burning out. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines burnout as 'chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'. However, it doesn't necessarily have to be tied to professional exhaustion.

Burnout can be caused by anything that demands constant, overwhelming energy – whether that's caring for an elderly relative or ill partner, a difficult romantic relationship or highly dependent »



*Scientific American Mind **Women in the Workplace report

ARE YOU A SERIAL MULTITASKER?

If you tick 'yes' to two or more of these statements, you might be overloading your brain

- ☐ Checking emails, making a drink and reading the news is how I start my day.
- ☐ There are several tabs open on my computer at once.
- ☐ I often look at my phone while working.
- ☐ 'What was I supposed to be doing?' is something I say to myself several times a day, in the middle of a task.
- ☐ Waiting for dinner to cook is the perfect time to spring clean the kitchen.
- ☐ Phone calls are a great excuse to do the online food shop, go for a walk or run errands.



children. Or, as is often the case with women, attempting to do all of these things at once. "People will juggle the commitments of personal life, family time and work all in the same environment," says Dr Carney. "When work and life pressure increases, individuals will often multitask, but the overwhelming nature of taking on too much can result in exhaustion."

Redefining productivity

Imagine being able to get all of your jobs done to a high standard and breathe easy. It simply requires you to reframe how you approach that to-do list.

"By focusing solely on one task, we cause the cognitive load on our brains to be more easily managed, and allow the opportunity for our working memory to process far more information in a short space of time," says Dr MacLaren. "Productivity can be higher in people who regularly monotask, who focus on completing a stage of a project within a set timeframe or clear other tasks before moving on to the next."

In other words, start with those tasks that require more mental energy and finish with those you can more easily do.

5 ways to fix your focus

Monotasking isn't as difficult as it might seem. Here's how to do it...

1. PRIORITISE

"One way to do this effectively is to decide at the start of the week which tasks you will be working on during your deep session," says Dr Carney. This makes it easier to avoid multitasking and any distractions that you may encounter. "Set yourself clear deadlines and goals before starting a task. This will help guide you and focus your attention on the quality of the work and the finished result," she says.

2. PREPARE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Whether you're decorating the kitchen or helping an elderly parent with life admin, make sure you've removed any distractions. Turn your phone to flight mode, avoid going online just to 'quickly check something', and make sure you have everything you need at your disposal. "Distracting elements can divide your attention and make your work less productive, so make sure you clear the way of those things before you start," says Dr MacLaren.

3. TRY ACTIVITY SNACKING

Often used for exercise, completing a task in bite-sized chunks can

have the same benefits. As with most chores, deep work is often avoided because we associate it with great effort. "That's why it can be useful to simply sit down in your quiet space and get going with the work, even aiming for a very short work session, perhaps 20 minutes or less," says Dr MacLaren. "It is often associated with highly productive work, as we get on a roll with our creativity in that way and avoid putting tasks off until tomorrow."

4. PLAN FOR SUCCESS

Set out the goals and a rough plan of what you want to achieve and by when. "This can help to break up the work session, and you can track your progress as you go," says Dr MacLaren. "Even if you are working for a shorter time, it can be helpful to have an idea of what you want to get done in the time you have. This way you'll know quickly if you're going off track and becoming distracted."

5. GIVE YOURSELF A BREAK

Concentration lagging? Dr Carney recommends taking 20 minutes away from what you're doing to recharge the mind and body. "This will help to increase your productivity and creativity when you return. If you overwork or spend too much time focusing, this can be counterproductive and lead to burnout," she says. Simply enjoying a cuppa outside in the sunshine can help you feel re-energised and motivated to finish what you started.

> "START WITH THOSE TASKS THAT REQUIRE MORE MENTAL ENERGY AND FINISH WITH THOSE YOU CAN MORE EASILY DO"

SHINING A LIGHT ON BURNOUT

If you notice any of these symptoms, it might be time to take a step back

POOR PHYSICAL HEALTH

Never-ending to-do list keeping you awake? Maybe you're just too preoccupied to eat or, if you are eating, it's on-the-go fast food. It can feel difficult to prioritise your own physical health needs when you're spinning personal and professional plates, but this can have a knock-on effect, says Dr Carney. "If you can't switch off at night, the mind and body will not be able to recover for the following day, meaning energy levels will be low, you'll experience a loss of appetite, forget personal hygiene and your immune system will become weakened."

PROCRASTINATION

As counterproductive as it might seem, having too much to do can – for some – result in not doing anything at all. "This is typically due to the fear of not being able to complete a task in time," says Dr Carney. It can create a vicious cycle of stress, burying your head in the sand and feelings of failure when tasks aren't completed.

ANXIETY AND WITHDRAWAL

If you feel like you've got a constant knot in your stomach, it might be a sign you need to take a break. "Prolonged feelings of tension and stress can eventually manifest into genuine anxiety. If these feelings are not addressed, they can leak into other aspects of your life too, such as your ability to be social and to open up to your friends and family," says Dr Carney.

LOW SEX DRIVE

The last thing you probably feel like doing when you're overworked and overtired is getting intimate. This is because your mind is in a permanent state of fight-or-flight and is simply trying to survive – everything else falls by the wayside, explains Dr Carney. "Your burnt-out mind is so focused on producing adrenaline and cortisol that it neglects hormones required to get you 'in the mood', like testosterone and progesterone. This can lead to vaginal dryness and a general lack of interest in sex."

© Getty Images / everything bagel

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF A SERIAL KILLER

What causes individuals from all walks of life to engage in the world's most ruthless and diabolical crimes?

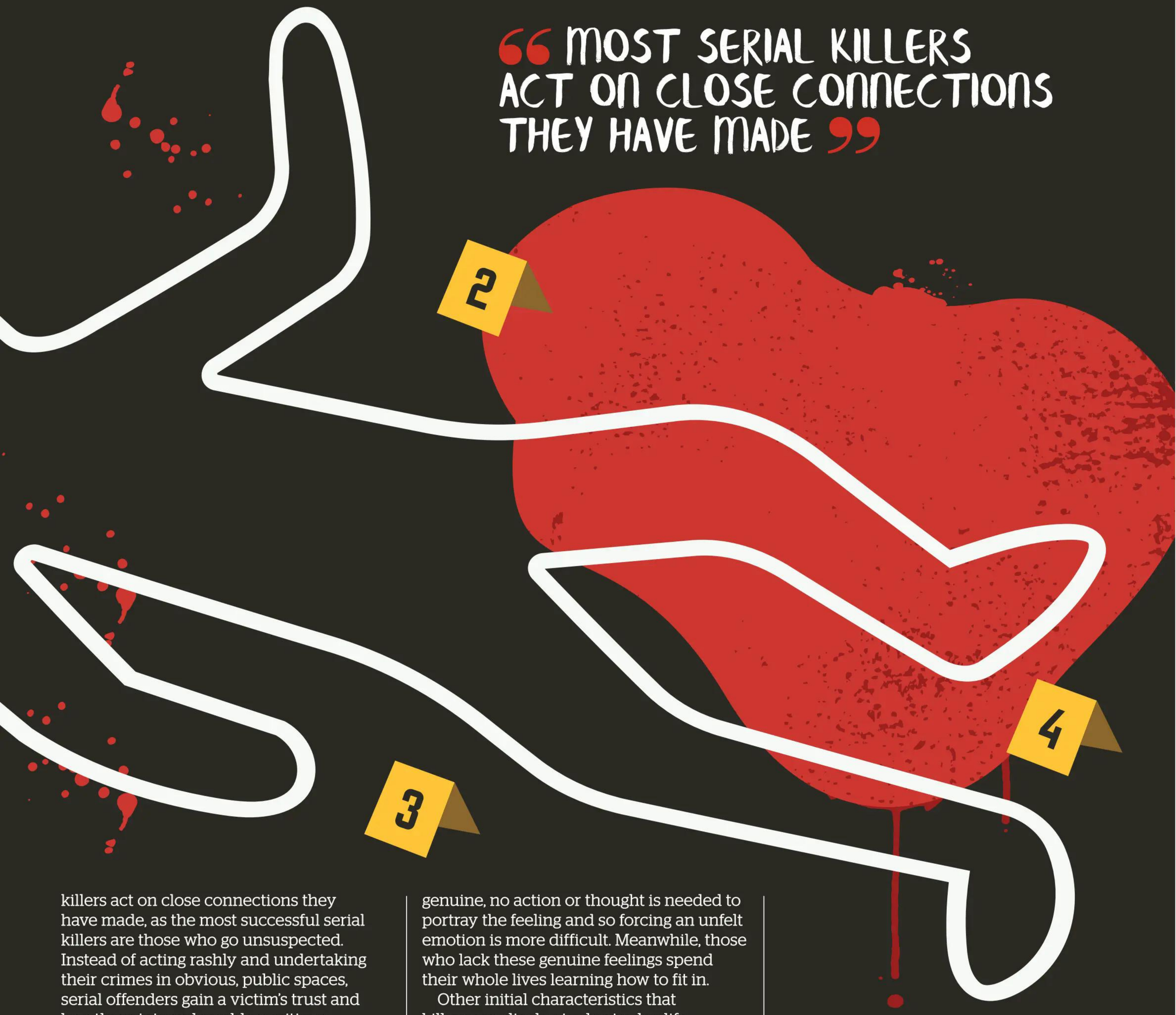
WORDS AILSA HARVEY

Step inside the mind of a serial killer. It's a dark and twisted place, with considerable chemical imbalances, normalised visions of violence and emotional disconnection from everyone around. Serial killers are unpredictable, their thought processes are chaotic, and their motivations and actions go against everything most people believe in.

The ability to empathise with others is an essential human trait. It's one that most serial killers lack and one that causes most people so much second-hand pain when we hear the horror stories of a murderer's victims. But, the natural predisposition people have to develop empathy for others is the same thing that drives our intrigue to know more about serial killers and try to understand them better. The mind of a serial killer is complex, and perhaps one that will never fully be understood. Yet, psychological analysis has revealed some of the shared experiences, motives and chemical alterations that drive a small percentage of the population into a vicious killing cycle.

Common personality traits

Serial killers share a range of telltale personality traits. While some of these highlight deeper issues at surface level, other personality traits can be deceiving as they are put on as a facade to enable monstrous acts to continue. One of these is superficial charm. Most serial



> “MOST SERIAL KILLERS ACT ON CLOSE CONNECTIONS THEY HAVE MADE”

killers act on close connections they have made, as the most successful serial killers are those who go unsuspected. Instead of acting rashly and undertaking their crimes in obvious, public spaces, serial offenders gain a victim's trust and lure them into vulnerable positions.

In most cases of long-term serial killers, the most shocking aspect is that they were just 'the guy next door'. Someone who has achieved this level of sin, while maintaining such little remorse that they can repeat their actions, has to become a master at mimicry. Psychopaths are the chameleons of society. They hold the ability to easily and accurately mirror normal human emotions. Studies of criminals in prisons show that when asked to copy a face of fear, those who had high levels of psychopathy were better at copying a face. This is because when feelings are genuine, no action or thought is needed to portray the feeling and so forcing an unfelt emotion is more difficult. Meanwhile, those who lack these genuine feelings spend their whole lives learning how to fit in.

Other initial characteristics that killers can display in day-to-day life include showing signs of controlling and predatory behaviour, high intelligence and demonstrating a low frustration tolerance. In some rare incidences, when a person doesn't find themselves connecting with anyone, they begin to fear relationships of any kind. Nobody likes to feel themselves losing control, but in the warped minds of killers, taking a person's life is a replacement for the lost control.

Predatory behaviour and high intelligence are used together to remove links being drawn between the killer and the crime. A person who wants to kill continuously, but doesn't have the intelligence to clear their tracks doesn't make a 'good' serial killer. They might feel mentally unscathed as a result of the lack of guilt they can feel, but poorly planned executions usually result in one-time murderers and quick incarceration. Some serial killers don't plan to kill at all. At the time they might have no intention of committing murder, but because their minds are operating with a low frustration tolerance, their feelings of anger aren't calmed. Instead they escalate into a frenzied assassination. »



Childhood warning signs

Children are automatically viewed as sweet and innocent, but all of history's most monstrous murderers were children at one point. This often leads to parents questioning what they could have done so wrong to produce a killer. Are there any indications of the ferocious acts a person will commit while they still present a baby face?

There are some telltale signs of serial killer traits in the early stages of life. Some of them are put down to the early learnings of childhood, while others require immediate intervention. One warning sign that a child could become sadistic or psychopathic is cruelty to animals. Children should be taught how to care and handle animals appropriately and set good examples. Studies show that 30% of children who see acts of domestic violence in the home will act out a similar form of violence on an animal. A child engaging in animal abuse may be seeking ways to feel power through pain. The more a person makes this a habit, the more likely they are to want to inflict pain to release feel-good hormones from the brain.



The level of animal violence is a good predictor for how psychologically ingrained these actions are. One theory, called the Macdonald triad, states that there are three factors that determine whether a young person will grow into a violent criminal or not. These are animal abuse, setting fire to objects and regular bedwetting.

Similarly to animal abuse, minor acts of arson can reveal alterations in the brain. It is considered one of the earliest signs a violent adult communicated in their childhood. To complete the triad, bedwetting beyond the age of five years old can plant deep triggers of humiliation. As a child reaches the age that still wetting the bed becomes humiliating, feelings of embarrassment and anxiety become heightened. This makes them more likely to continue wetting the bed, as their stress levels remove any increasing control over the body. This cycle, combined with animal abuse and arson makes a person more likely to kill or commit violent crimes, according to a 1966 study of 88 criminals.

More recent studies can't deny the link between some of the triad's violent tendencies and later, more severe violence – but the complex psychology of a serial killer can't be evaluated in just three acts. Other signs to be aware of in children include not understanding right from wrong, pathological lying and putting other children at serious risk in order to achieve personal gain.

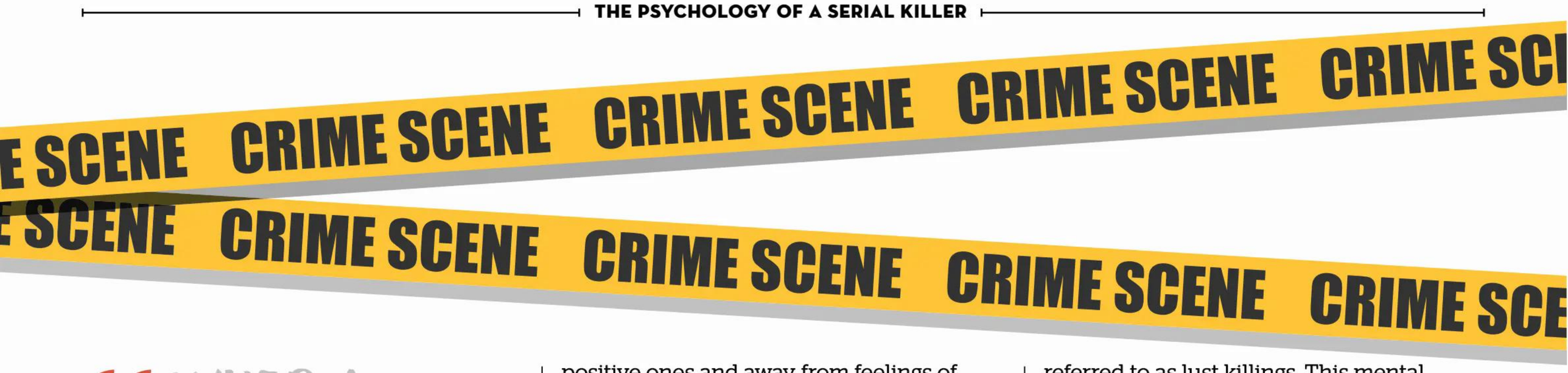
Passing on trauma

In the first eight years of a person's life, their brains are undergoing crucial developments that will shape what kind of people they become. In extreme cases, such as those encountering severe childhood abuse, the violence they see daily heightens a person's chances of developing personality disorders. As part of a natural coping mechanism, the body begins to suppress feelings of empathy. Otherwise, the constant exposure to pain would overload their emotional responses. If this trauma is ongoing, it becomes a habit for the body to numb the mental torment.

VIOLENCE ESCALATION

One of the main differences between murderers and serial killers is the compulsion to continue killing. Psychologically, frequent killers get a kick from murdering. Often, regular offenders display patterns of escalating brutality in their kills, and this is due to desensitisation. As a person becomes familiar with inflicting injuries that would torment most people's memories, serial killers start showing less of an emotional response each time. To match the trend of their adrenaline threshold, the violence they inflict needs to be on the increase. Then, when a killer is caught after several offences, the disbelief of the general public greatly contrasts with the lack of remorse shown by the culprit. For the killer, this level of violence is now their new normal.

Another form of trauma is rejection. Although most people who have been rejected in life don't become killers, when you flip the focus, many serial killers have experienced major rejection. Of the world's most prolific killers, many of their actions – and answers when later questioned about them – can be linked to regaining control of relationships with other people. For example, serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer explained that he felt no hatred towards his victims. Instead, partially eating their bodies was his way of "keeping them with [him]." Gerald Stano,



> "WHEN A SERIAL KILLER HAS SUFFERED MENTAL TORMENT, KILLING THEIR VICTIMS IS A WAY OF SEEKING REVENGE"

a serial killer who tormented and killed at least 22 women, expressed that taking their lives was his way of "owning" them.

Studies show that powerlessness in a relationship with others makes a person feel less human than their power superior. If people are treated like objects, or a being with no control, over time the human brain becomes worse at generating human traits. In the extreme example of these serial killers, they explain their behaviour as a method of replacing something they may not have had previously in life. The way they go about it is through physical violence, not emotional connection as would be a normal human response.

Kills for thrills: Is it addictive?

In interviews with serial killers, the murderer will often say they felt an urge or compulsion to kill. This sounds like a cop-out answer, with no attempt to explain the motive, but is it possible to be addicted to such a heinous crime?

When someone engages in an activity they enjoy, their body releases the feel-good hormone dopamine as part of the brain's reward system. As soon as these dopamine levels drop back down to normal levels, the body can feel depleted and desperate to feel the reward again. The system is in place to guide your actions towards positive ones and away from feelings of pain. Avoiding pain is your brain's way of protecting the body from danger, so how could it be possible for the same system to hook people on homicide?

The process of killing is one that criminals need to carry out secretly if they wish to remain outside prison walls. This means that targeted attacks involve capturing, containing and overpowering a victim. Any thrill-seeking event, which comes hand in hand with risk, causes the brain's amygdala (the back of the brain) to release dopamine, adrenaline and endorphins. These chemicals awaken all the cells in the body so that they're alert and ready to sense danger. This creates a buzz, or the feeling of thrill, that serial killers instantly strive to feel again. The person may think it's the act of killing that they're addicted to, but it's usually the chase that comes before any life-ending act.

What are common motivations?

Some serial killers are sexually aroused through the violence of killing. Murders that take place with this motive are often referred to as lust killings. This mental link first arises during puberty and can take the shape of sexual killing fantasies. Despite it being imagined in a separate space to real life, a person may begin to obsess over the fantasy and continuously play it out in their head with little control. Those who act on their fantasies might feel sexual satisfaction, but because they have crossed the boundary between an impulsive thought and reality, these boundaries become increasingly stretched. With no self-set limits, what began as an uncontrolled yet contained fantasy can snowball into a murdering habit.

Not all motivations are clearly thought out. When a serial killer has suffered mental torment from someone or something, killing their victims is a way of seeking revenge. Sometimes without realising it, a killer will target people who share characteristics with a person who tortured them in childhood. This can be seen in many murder cases, such as that of American serial killer Glen Edward Rogers.

Rogers faced child abuse and neglect from his mother for the duration of his »



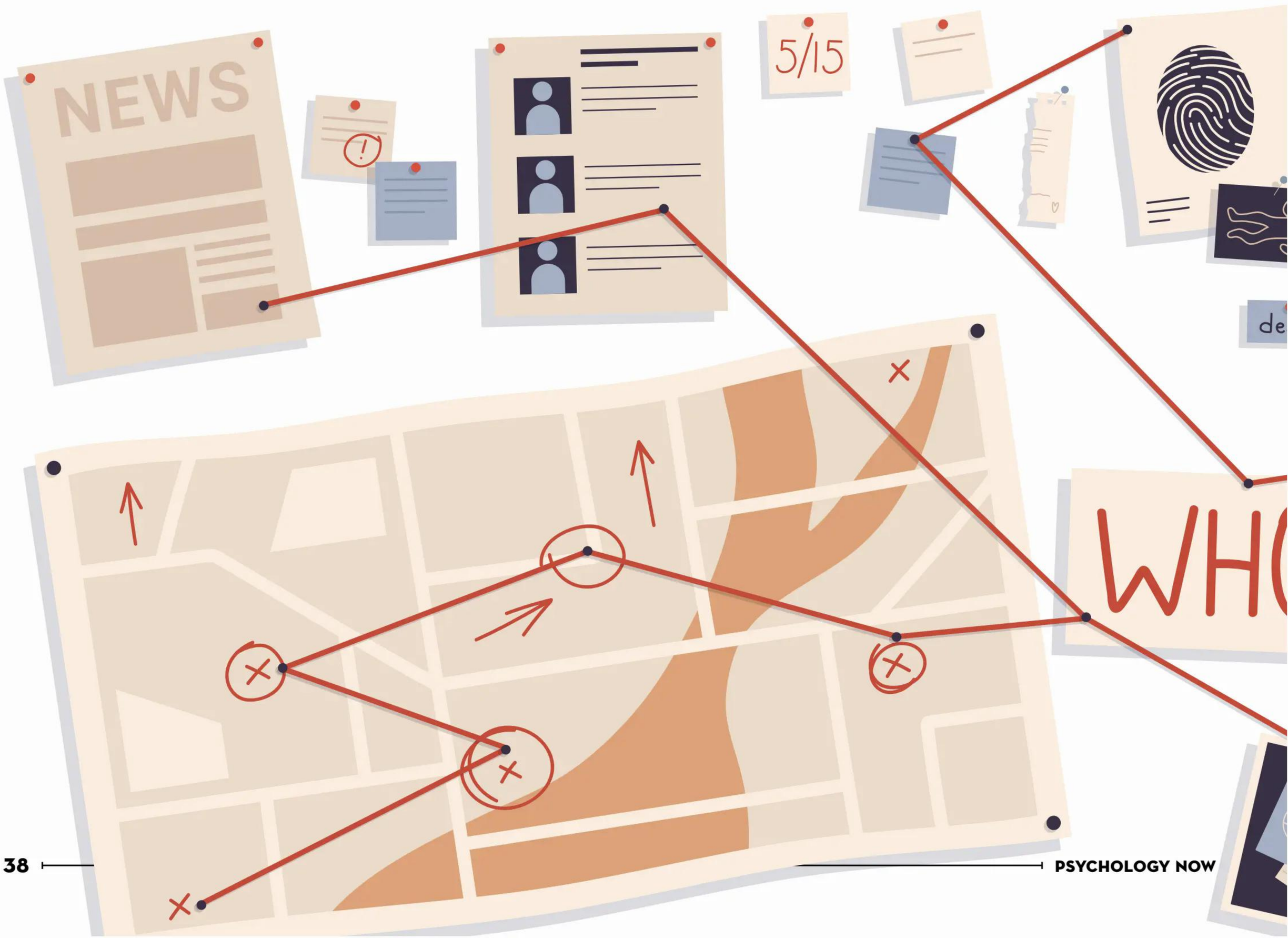
MALE AND FEMALE MOTIVES

Serial killers are usually classed as exceptions to many psychological rules. However, what appears to be true in most males and females is that they share common traits, trends and reactions with those of the same sex when it comes to killing. Genetics, epigenetics, brain structure and hormones generally present themselves differently in men and women, and this translates to differing psychological responses.

Motivation for killing is a common contrast between men and women. Male serial killers are more likely to kill for sexual satisfaction, or feel compelled to commit murder, while female serial killers demonstrate a more personal reasoning. Even though there is no justification for ending the life of another person, a female killer is more likely to express personal arguments for why they murdered someone. Female killers are also more likely to seek sympathy from others by killing their close family members, while such motives are extremely rare in males.

> "MANY SERIAL KILLERS WANT TO HAVE ACHIEVED MORE KILLS THAN OTHERS IN HISTORY"

early years. Then, as an adult he was convicted of travelling across California, Kentucky, Florida, Ohio and Louisiana to murder women. In his killing sprees, he would target women in bars. Towards the end of the night, he would ask his victims for a lift back to his room. When he had them alone, Rogers would attack them. When analysing his crimes, there was one clear pattern in the women who he killed – they all had red hair like his mother.



Rogers became famous as the 'Cross-Country Killer' or 'Redhead Killer'. Although most of the world population view this man extremely negatively, for many serial killers this notoriety is part of their motivation. They want to be successful serial killers who have achieved more kills than others in history.

What is criminal profiling?

To better understand the psychology and actions of serial offenders, forensics and police build a criminal profile for each serial killer. Piecing together any trends or triggers in their actions can identify them as suspects for other unsolved crimes or help to keep the general public safer and better informed. Those involved in criminal profiling roles need to combine psychological analysis and law enforcement skills.

The first step in criminal profiling is to gather any relevant information. Important evidence includes detailed investigation reports, photographs of crime scenes, thorough timelines of a victim and killer's movements and background information about small and major events in the serial killer's life. Psychological issues are often well-kept secrets among the most intelligent killers, so delving into all aspects of their lives is essential to find interview quotes or small events that could reveal how a person thinks and feels.

The next stage in profiling is to assess the main decisions that were made in the events leading up to a killing. Did the murderer stop at one killing or were they engaging in a killing spree? Sometimes a homicide is the end goal of the criminal's actions, but analysing the events of attacks can reveal whether it was a secondary offence as part of a separate motive. The type of victim can vary from high-risk targets – for example, homeless people who are exposed at all times of night – to those who are considered to be at lower risk and were especially sought out. This can reveal the planning and thought processes behind murderous acts. Some killers act on more spontaneous feelings, when a vulnerable victim presents itself, while others are more calculated.

This leads on to the crime assessment stage. Psychology profilers assess the evidence left behind at the crime scene for indications of an organised attack or vice versa. Elements such as the positioning of the body and evidence of sexual acts and cannibalism that take place after the killing are giveaways of premeditation. Some serial killers gain satisfaction from shocking the people and investigators who discover the human remains. Others go to great lengths to hide the evidence of the crime after the attack. How the body is left reveals much about the post-murder mindset. Are they showing regret and understanding that what they »

> "SOME SERIAL KILLERS GAIN SATISFACTION FROM SHOCKING PEOPLE AND INVESTIGATORS"





have done is unacceptable? Or does the killer instead want to show off their inhumane actions with misplaced pride?

Signs of an organised murder are often characterised by a lack of evidence, yet multiple crime scenes. Three locations are generally involved – the place where the killer approached their victim, the murder scene, and the body disposal site. Someone who is able to plan this level of deceit is often anti-social and unremorseful. They are generally not considered insane, because they know the difference between right and wrong. At least, they know they shouldn't murder, because otherwise they wouldn't go to such great lengths to conceal it.

Analysis of historic profiling shows that an organised serial killer is more likely to have an intelligence level above the average person's. They are often attractive, employed, have a partner and are well educated. To discard evidence of the most brutal murders, multiple offenders have developed high levels of social skills and have built what looks like a regular lifestyle. When searching for a conniving monster, this type of serial killer makes their surroundings an unlikely place to point a finger.

Less organised killings leave behind a trail of blatant evidence. The body is found soon after the murder, as little or no attempt is made to hide it. This type of serial killer might panic after following up on their compulsions, fleeing the scene with their fingerprints, blood and other biological evidence plaguing the area.

Generally, disorganised attacks are more common among younger offenders, mentally ill individuals, and those who act under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Oftentimes, when assessing these killers' backgrounds, they come from dysfunctional families and are more likely to have been abused in their past, compared to organised serial killers. Profiles of more spontaneous attacks show individuals who live alone and are more socially challenged.

When little preparation or thought goes into a murder, criminals are more likely to attack closer to their home, and the body left at the scene. Jack the Ripper is one example of a famous, disorganised killer. He acted on feelings of rage, engaging in random attacks on women in London in 1888. Historians believe that the serial offender suffered from mental illness, making his actions less controllable.

Before a serial killer is found, criminal profilers use all the evidence to create an example of the person police should look out for. By narrowing down the most likely personality type, living conditions and physical characteristics, investigators have a better chance of finding the culprit. The more serial killers that are arrested, the better understanding we have of their psychological patterns. The traits of each convicted killer are logged into the police profiling system. This is a computerised algorithm that gets better at predicting criminals' physical and psychological profiles each time it is updated with a solved case.

> "JACK THE RIPPER IS AN EXAMPLE OF A DISORGANISED KILLER WHO ACTED ON FEELINGS OF RAGE"

Knowing the neuroscience

If you're having a hard time understanding the thought processes that take place

before a brutal killing, this is because killers have different brains. By analysing the brain scans of serial killers and an average person, we can see the areas of brain activity vary between the two. Scientists have discovered that the connectivity in a serial killer's brain is poor in regions where negative stimuli are processed. This makes them more likely to act out on negative thoughts and less able to process emotions healthily.

In normal brain scans, there is more neural activity in the right side of the brain, where empathy and morality develops. More research is ongoing into the brain functions of serial killers. Abnormalities in the brain's amygdala, which usually regulates impulse aggression and fear, have been detected in many serial killers. Similarly, the frontal lobe of their brains are often smaller, limiting the ability to control impulses and decision-making processes.

Can you change a killer?

Criminals who are sent to prison for less serious crimes have demonstrated that they can be rehabilitated and successfully returned to society. Their main motive may have been a short-term goal, which can be processed rationally and overcome. But does this work in individuals whose brains are so hardwired to seek personal reward and satisfaction at the ultimate price?

Psychopathic killers don't designate as much thinking space to the negative consequences of their actions, compared to the average human brain. Most people will choose not to speed in heavy traffic, for example. Although the adrenaline might give some people a thrill, they choose to exercise caution and match the speeds of other cars on the road, because causing injury isn't worth the excitement they may experience beforehand. Serial killers will value the feeling of killing over any consequences that follow for the victim, their families and even themselves. Prison stops being a deterrent when a person is as psychologically disturbed as a serial killer.

Some studies show that a psychopathic brain experiences the uncontrolled firing of neurons in the prefrontal cortex shortly before making detrimental decisions and influencing violent behaviour. In the future, with more studies to show the neurological state in different types of serial killers, better attempts can be made to control this brain activity and alter the brain chemistry of killers.

For now, with the unpredictable nature and wide range of events and triggers that cause individuals to carry out killing sprees, much more work needs to be done to fully understand the detailed psychology of minds most people can barely begin to comprehend.

5 CHILLING KILLER QUOTES

CARL PANZRAM

"I am not the least bit sorry"

Panzram from Minnesota killed at least 22 boys and men in the 1920s. His quote shows that he didn't feel guilt and remorse like most people.

AILEEN WUORNOS

"I want the world to know I killed these men, as cold as ice"

Between 1989 and 1990, Wuornos murdered seven men. Many serial killers crave attention and this quote shows that she too wanted her crimes seen.

EDMUND KEMPER

"Whipping their heads off, their body sitting there. That'd get me off"

Kemper began killing at 15, starting with his own grandmother. His statement shows signs of sadism – seeking pleasure from inflicting pain and death.

JEFFREY DAHMER

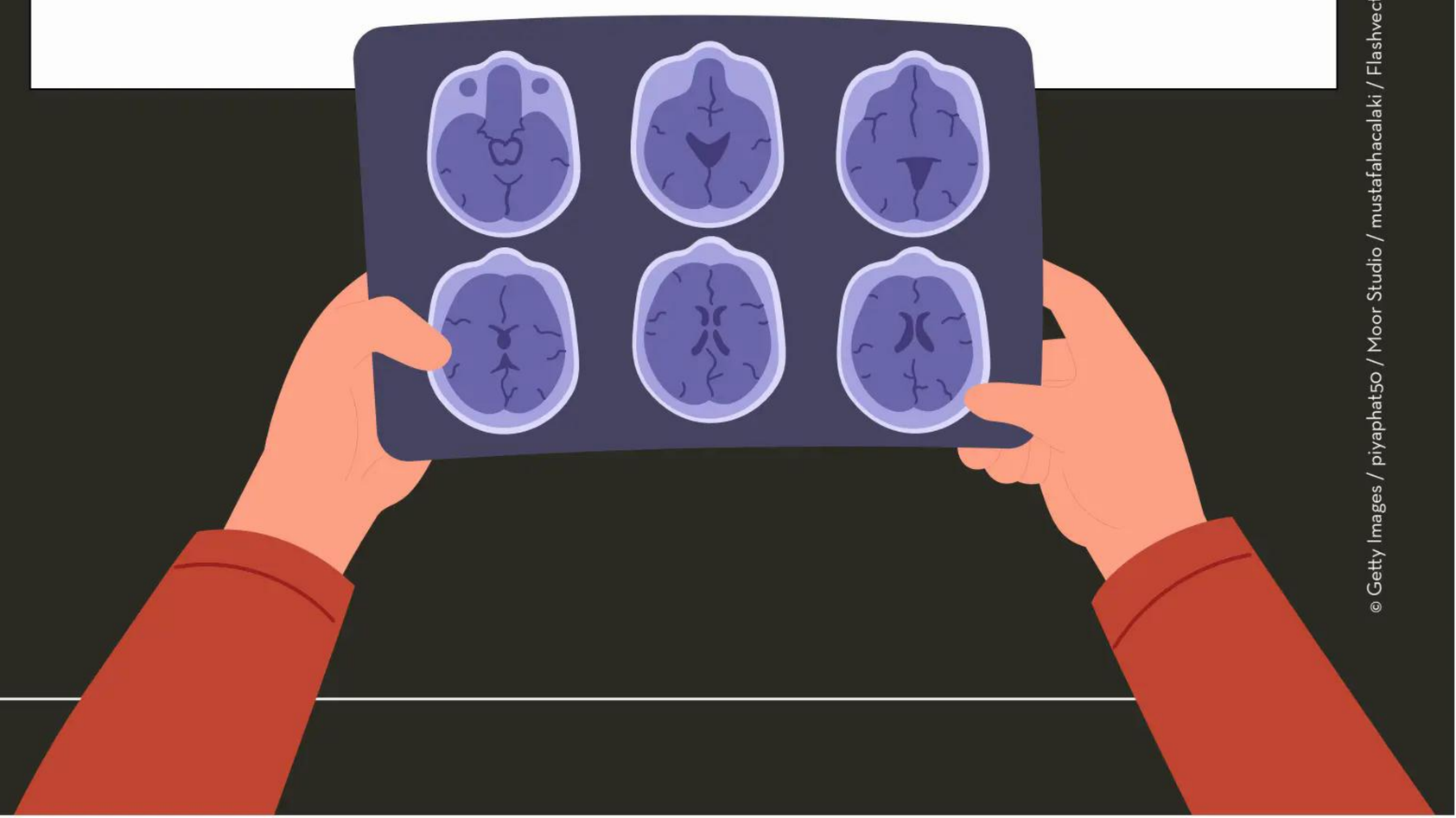
"I've always wondered myself why I don't feel more remorse"

Dahmer killed and cannibalised 17 men and boys. He explained he acted on compulsion and doesn't have reasons for his actions.

TED BUNDY

"What's one less person on the face of the Earth, anyway?"

Bundy killed 28 people. His quote drastically downplays his actions and lacks responsibility. He also described guilt as being an unhealthy "illusion."



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TUNE IN TO YOUR *senses*



Get an instant health boost by understanding the power of your body and mind

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

Hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch – we often take these for granted, but did you know that you can improve your health by 'hacking' your senses? A few easy wins couldn't come at a better time, given how the stresses and strains of modern life affect us.

To our detriment, we spend more of our lives indoors than ever before, says Professor Charles Spence, an expert in multisensory perception and author of *Sensehacking: How to Use the Power of Your Senses for Happier, Healthier Living* (£9.99 ($12), Penguin). He explains, we spend 90-95% of our time indoors, but we didn't evolve in environments that deprive us of natural light – this leads to light hunger (a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder). Then there's time spent in open-plan offices. "They're so noisy they make us lose something like 75 minutes of productive time per day," says Charles. "And poor natural ventilation leads to an increase in Sick Building

Syndrome or Sick Home Syndrome, causing headache-like symptoms."

We need to stop working against our senses. "The evidence shows that establishing a better balance of sensory stimulation, avoiding sensory overload, and tapping in to elements of biophilic design [working and living closely to nature] can help support our social, cognitive and emotional wellbeing," says Charles. "There's a growing body of research showing how exposure to blues and greens of water and nature, or the sounds of birds and water have been shown to help, as has increased tactile stimulation of the skin, the body's biggest organ."

Here are some ways to quickly reconnect with your senses. Try them – you'll feel better for it.

SIGHT

Curb your appetite

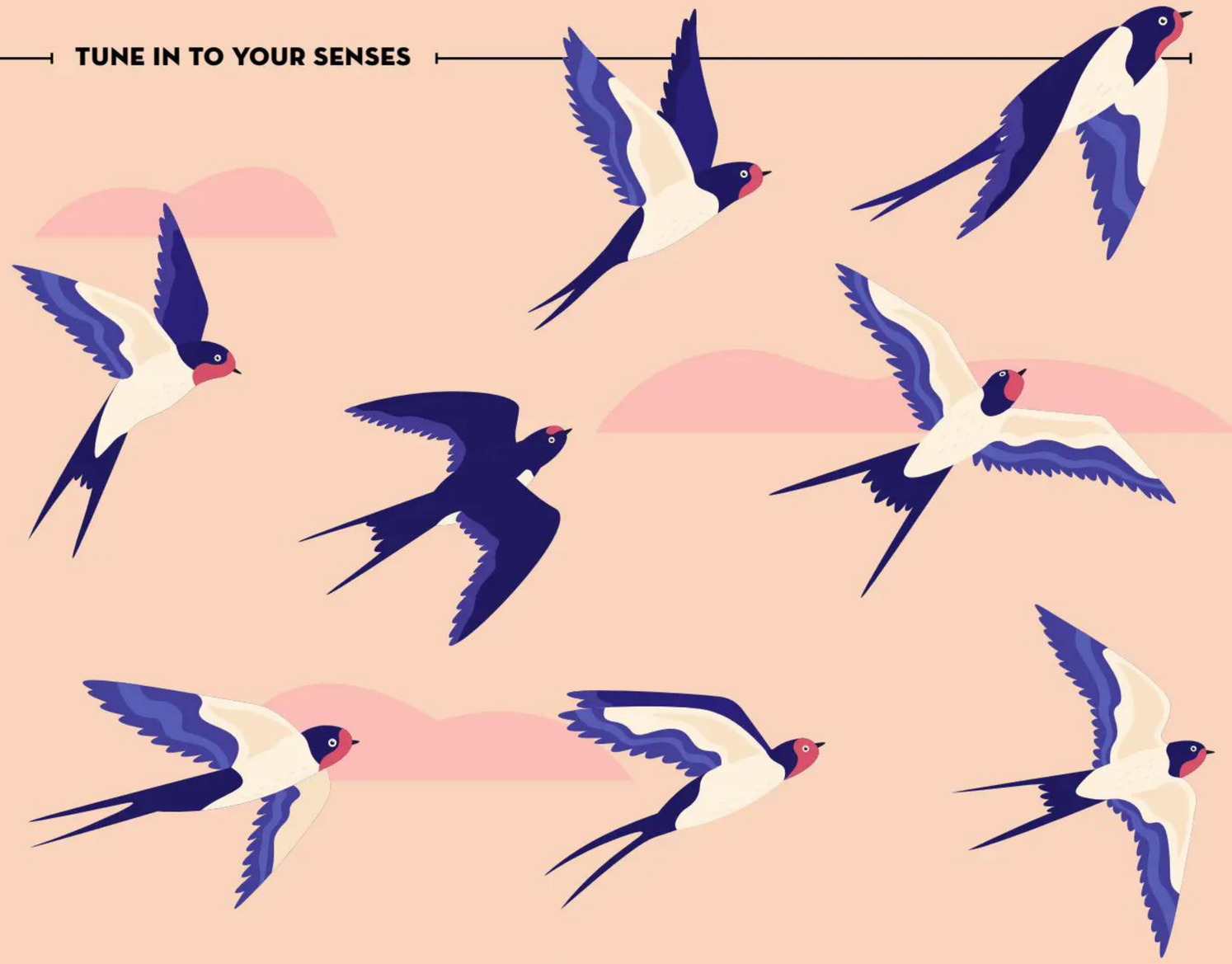
Want to eat less? "We generally find blue foods less appealing," says Charles. Eating off blue plates could curb your appetite.

Colour yourself happy

Dopamine dressing – wearing colours that match your mood – not only promotes your wellbeing but the happiness of others too. This is because strong colours encourage a good mood more than neutral hues. A study by Ilam University of Medical Sciences found greens and blues are the best dopamine enhancer, or don yellow to stimulate creativity and joy.

SENSORY OVERLOAD

Feel overwhelmed by your senses? "Sensory overload is a kind of sensory imbalance, with our higher rational senses of sight and sound being overloaded," says Charles. Focus on minimising disconcerting noises and images – avoid loud music, crowds and busy places, and take a break from your phone. "For many, sensory overload comes from mobile technology, so learning how to disconnect is the best place to start," adds Charles.



SMELL

Swap scents to de-stress

"If you've just had a stressful Zoom meeting, the best thing to do is change scent," says Charles. This is because our brain associates any given scent experienced while we were stressed with stress, he explains. Link the aroma of coffee with anxiety? Switch to green tea.

Sleep with aromatherapy

Would you prefer natural remedies to ease your insomnia? "There's some research to suggest that lavender and other calming scents can improve sleep quality as much as sleeping tablets," says Charles.

TASTE

Enrich mealtimes

Replace your cutlery to get more out of every culinary experience. "Eat with heavy cutlery, as we've shown that the weight in the hand makes food taste better," explains Charles.

Restrain a sweet tooth

If you're partial to sugary treats, try the less-is-more approach by eating smaller portions, but using specific crockery. "Serving dessert off a round, white plate will help bring out the sweetness of food, without the calories," says Charles.

SOUND

Be at one with the birds

Recent studies* show that hearing and seeing birds significantly boosts mood. If you don't have access to birds, even listening to birdsong on your headphones could lessen negative feelings.

Make workouts musical

According to a study by Samford University, choosing the right tunes can enhance exercise performance. It can also reduce fatigue and help you stick to a steady pace to train more efficiently. Research also shows that music can be a distraction from the monotony of working out, and it's a great motivator.

TOUCH

Hug and be hugged

The deep pressure we feel when receiving a proper hug triggers the release of oxytocin, a hormone that soothes and encourages bonding. A small study by Carnegie Mellon University even found that frequent hugs resulted in less severe cold symptoms.

Stroke an animal

A 2019 study by Washington State University found that participants who stroked a cat or dog for just ten minutes experienced a decrease in levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

"WE DIDN'T EVOLVE IN ENVIRONMENTS THAT DEPRIVE US OF NATURAL LIGHT"

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*Published in Scientific Reports

GOING IN FOR THE Thrill

Why do some people seem to purposely seek out thrill more than others and what can we learn from them?

WORDS EMMA GREEN

Thrill-seekers, daredevils, adrenaline junkies... These are just some of the many names we use to label those who enjoy living life on the edge. According to the Collins English Dictionary, a thrill-seeker is somebody who 'enjoys taking part in extreme sports and other activities involving physical risk'. However, this would appear to be a rather limited interpretation, not only for the kind of person we associate with being a 'thrill-seeker', but also for the types of activities that can elicit such feelings of exhilaration.

It might be more useful to view thrill-seeking through the lens of another term: sensation-seeking. Sensation-seeking refers to the drive to pursue new or intense experiences that produce feelings of excitement, pleasure or fear – a state that we would otherwise recognise as being 'thrilled'. Although these emotions can come from participating in adrenaline-fuelled ventures like skydiving or bungee jumping, they can also be just as easily replicated in any action that pushes someone beyond the limits of their comfort zone, such as trying an exotic cuisine or joining a new club. Sensation-seeking isn't merely motivated by danger; it is also driven by novelty and the fear of the unknown.

Different types of thrill-seeking

Research into sensation-seeking was first conducted in the 1960s by psychologist Marvin Zuckerman. He had originally been looking into the effects of sensory deprivation as a form of brainwashing, but instead discovered that sensation-seeking was an integral personality trait, with some people requiring higher levels of stimulation in their daily lives than others. This then manifested in them having a greater desire for new sensations and experiences. Zuckerman developed the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) to assess individual preferences for how much stimulation somebody might need, with extreme sensation-seeking on one end of the spectrum and extreme sensation-avoiding on the other.

The sheer complexity of the sensation-seeking trait meant that Zuckerman's test comprised of four distinct components that could contribute to how much someone might actively seek (or avoid) sensation: these were thrill- and adventure-seeking, experience-seeking, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility.

To score highly in the thrill- and adventure-seeking section is an indicator of someone who enjoys seeking out external stimulation through physical activities that are exciting and risky (or what we would typically think of as a traditional 'thrill-seeker'). Meanwhile, those scoring highly in experience-seeking require arousal through a variety of novel encounters that stimulate both the mind and the five senses, a form of internal sensation-seeking. Those with strong disinhibition scores display a natural tendency to be spontaneous and unrestrained as well as a preference for 'out-of-control' escapades, such as wild parties or excessive drinking. Lastly, those scoring highly on the boredom susceptibility scale are denoted by their dislike for repetition, boring people and predictable situations, and become extremely restless if they are unable to seek out new sensations.

> "IT ISN'T JUST MOTIVATED BY DANGER; IT'S ALSO DRIVEN BY NOVELTY AND THE FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN"

Most people fall somewhere in the middle on the Sensation Seeking Scale, but it is the extent to which an individual possesses each of these four traits that determine how they peruse their own personal supply of excitement. The first two components, thrill- and adventure-seeking and experience-seeking, are indicators of the type of thrill-seeker that somebody is, while the last two components, disinhibition and boredom susceptibility, reveal how much trouble someone is willing to get into in their pursuit of the thrill.

The blueprint of a thrill-seeker

Although anyone can be deemed to be a 'thrill-seeker', there are some biological and environmental factors that influence who is more likely to be one than others. Research suggests that sensation-seeking reaches its peak in adolescence and remains stable thereafter or is dampened over time by social obligations such as marriage or becoming a parent. Some studies have found that males score significantly higher than females in most aspects of sensation-seeking apart from experience-seeking, with divorced men ranking highest out of everyone.

The predominant factor in how likely someone is to be a thrill-seeker, though, is their response to the hormones that sensation-seeking produces. When the brain registers a potential danger, the amygdala triggers the release of a cocktail of hormones into the bloodstream, including adrenaline, dopamine and endorphins. Adrenaline increases our »

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF THE THRILL

It all begins in the amygdala, a small almond-shaped structure at the base of the brain that plays a central role in processing emotions. When we encounter something thrilling, such as a risky activity or an exciting event, the amygdala is activated. This then triggers the hypothalamus, the body's control centre in the middle of the brain, which releases a cluster of hormones, including dopamine. Next, the sympathetic nervous system, otherwise known as the 'fight or flight' system, kicks in. It suppresses activity in the stomach, stimulates the release of glucose, and dilates the pupils – all small ways to help prepare the body to face danger. The adrenal glands, found just above the kidneys, pump out adrenaline and cortisol. As adrenaline courses through the body, it acts as a signal to the heart to beat faster, pushing more oxygen into the brain. Our brain and body are now in a hyper-focused state.

> THRILL-SEEKERS REMIND THE LESS ADVENTUROUS HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF LIFE

heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate, pushing more oxygen into the brain and muscles, which puts us on high alert. As the response intensifies, other chemicals are pumped into our body, including cortisol (otherwise known as the 'stress hormone') and testosterone. Our pupils dilate, our senses sharpen, and we receive a vital boost of energy as our bodies prepare to confront a threat.

How someone perceives their body's reaction to this apparent threat can tell us a lot about whether their brains are wired to be that of a thrill-seeker or not. MRI studies show that high sensation-seekers, for example, have less activation in the amygdala in stressful situations and produce less cortisol compared to their more risk-averse counterparts. Furthermore, they also produce more dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure, so that they associate approaching a threat with reward rather than anxiety. For some, the coursing of adrenaline through the body, the rush of oxygen to the brain and the flooding of mood-boosting chemicals can be an addictive state that they want to chase over and over again; for others, it's something they would much rather avoid.

Thrill-seekers can come in all shapes and sizes but there are some correlations in how they tend to behave. Studies have found that those with 'Type T' (Thrill) personalities are inclined to exhibit traits such as impulsivity, curiosity, creativity, flexibility and an openness to change. Their much greater need for sensation-seeking can also influence various aspects of their lives from the careers they choose to their taste in the arts. For example, high sensation-seekers crave professions that are unconventional and which require flexibility, while low sensation-seekers prefer jobs that provide order and routine. High sensation-seekers are also more likely to listen to music or enjoy art that is arousing or striking in some way, for instance, heavy metal music or a piece that depicts a dark subject matter. When the low sensation-seeker is introduced to something new or unusual, they often reject it because it is strange and unfamiliar, whereas the high sensation-seeker welcomes it with open arms.

What these individuals share most in common, though, is what intrinsically motivates them to go after the thrill in the first place. One reason for their thrill-seeking is to achieve what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi referred to as the 'flow state'. Being in a state of flow produces feelings of joy and contentment from being fully immersed in the moment and connected to the task at hand. Although flow can be achieved through any number of callings such as gardening, writing or playing sports, high sensation-seekers usually need more stimulation than the average person to enter this state. This is why they gravitate towards more extreme activities that are both life-affirming and require concentration, like scaling a cliff. Another motivation is the high that sensation-seekers receive from facing their fears head-on and 'surviving' them. Research states that during a thrilling experience, the peak moment of exhilaration comes from the immense relief of realising that the fear we imagined did not materialise after all. Whether that's jumping out of a plane or having a close encounter with a shark, there's something intoxicating, especially for thrill-seekers, in staring death in the face and living to tell the tale.

Why we need thrill-seekers

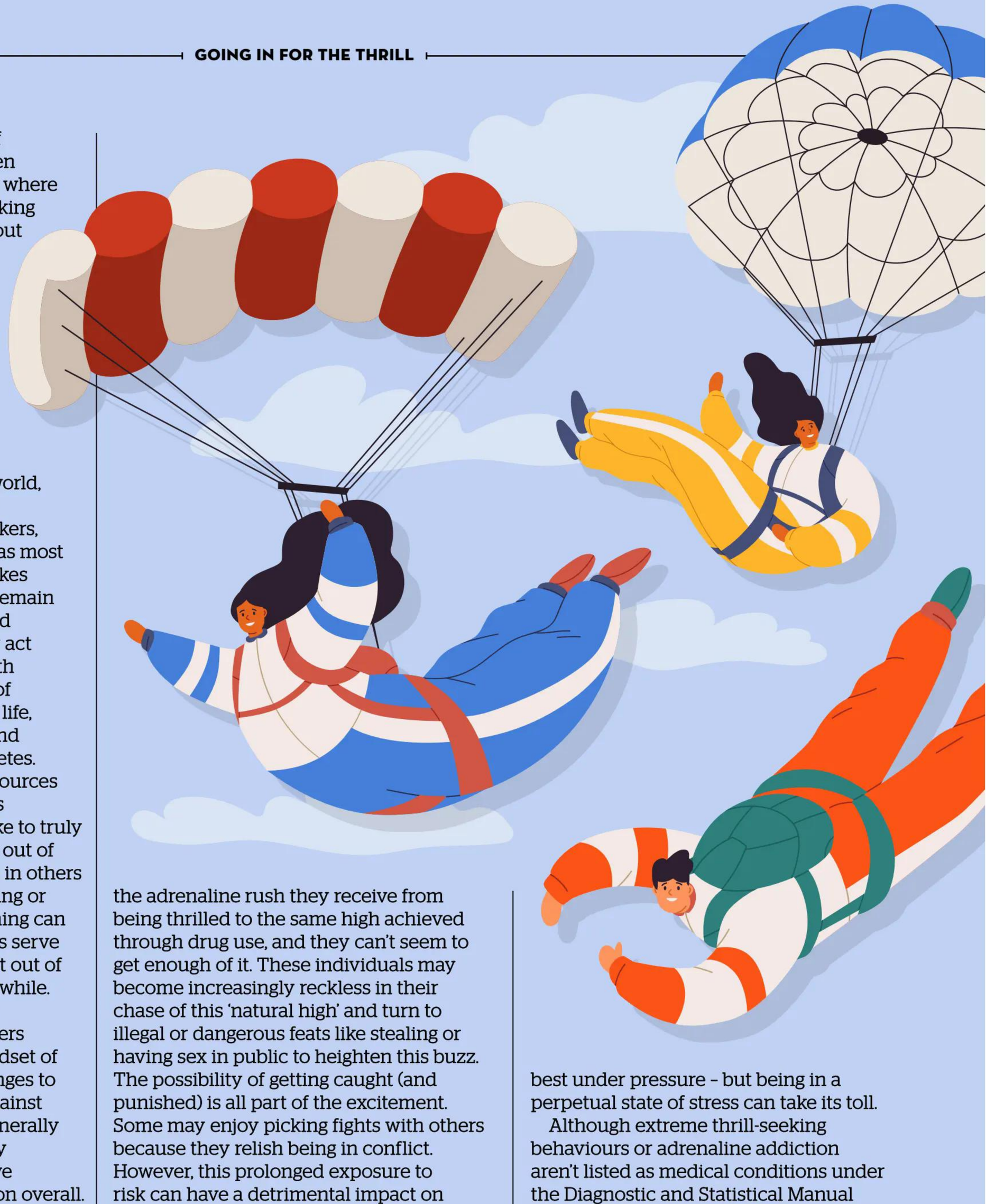
Researchers believe that thrill-seeking has an evolutionary purpose that has set humans apart from other mammals. According to Zuckerman, thrill-seeking is "coded in our genes and our nervous system." He explained that "our early ancestors survived on hunting and food gathering. Hunting



THRILL-SEEKING WITH SAFETY AT HEART

It may seem counter-intuitive, but it can be possible to enjoy the adrenaline-pumping antics of thrill-seeking while also maintaining your wellbeing and safety. There are plenty of ways to induce exhilaration in a controlled environment with proper equipment and expertise at hand, such as whitewater rafting, skydiving or ziplining. For a less physically taxing (and cheaper) option, riding a roller coaster, playing laser tag, attending an escape room with friends or watching a horror movie can produce similar levels of arousal.

Whatever the choice of activity, it is important to balance thrilling exploits with plenty of relaxation. Practising calm activities like deep breathing, yoga or tai chi after each round of riveting antics can counter the negative health effects caused by frequent exposure to stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol.



was one of the early expressions of sensation-seeking, particularly when they began to hunt large mammals where there's a high risk involved." Risk-taking was of real Darwinian value – without the will to explore the unknown, the human species may never have flourished to the extent that it did. Our predecessors would have experienced the same physiological response as we do when facing a potential threat. The difference is that thrill-seeking back then was about survival and advancement whereas, in today's world, it's usually about chasing pleasure.

Humankind needs sensation-seekers, especially in times of crisis. Whereas most people might crumble in a high-stakes situation, thrill-seekers are able to remain calm and not become overwhelmed by 'analysis paralysis' – they simply act and trust in their ability to cope with the events unfolding. These kinds of people can be found in all walks of life, from emergency service workers and military personnel to Olympic athletes.

We also look to thrill-seekers as sources of inspiration. They remind the less adventurous among us what it is like to truly be alive and how to make the most out of life. Whether that is by rousing awe in others by their willingness to try cave-diving or acting as real-life proof that something can be achieved, high sensation-seekers serve as a reminder to the rest of us to get out of our comfort zones every once in a while.

Having a high sensation-seeking personality doesn't just benefit others either. Thrill-seekers possess a mindset of viewing potential threats as challenges to overcome which acts as a buffer against life's hardships and makes them generally more resilient. They also reportedly experience less stress, more positive emotions and greater life satisfaction overall.

Pitfalls of thrill-seeking

Although thrill-seeking is usually a positive and harmless quality, this personality type's greater need for stimulation can mean that some individuals turn to destructive behaviours in order to fulfil this. Research has correlated that those with the high sensation-seeking trait are more likely to engage in substance abuse, gambling and driving recklessly. Those scoring highly in the disinhibition subscale are also more prone to partaking in risky sexual behaviour and excessive drinking.

One possible reason for this is that thrill-seekers tend to ignore or minimise the risks that come with getting involved in these kinds of exploits. Some liken the adrenaline rush they receive from being thrilled to the same high achieved through drug use, and they can't seem to get enough of it. These individuals may become increasingly reckless in their chase of this 'natural high' and turn to illegal or dangerous feats like stealing or having sex in public to heighten this buzz. The possibility of getting caught (and punished) is all part of the excitement. Some may enjoy picking fights with others because they relish being in conflict. However, this prolonged exposure to risk can have a detrimental impact on their lives, whether through the damage done to their interpersonal relationships, reputation or career, or through being injured or even killed in the process.

Destructive forms of thrill-seeking don't always involve potentially life-threatening situations or illegal activity. Some people may get their fix in more subtle ways – one example of this is procrastinating on a deadline. Someone leaving a project to do until the night before it's due can trigger the same adrenaline rush, knowing that they must work frantically in order to beat the clock. Another example is those who purposely work in stressful environments, such as taking on a high-pressure role or always maintaining a busy schedule. These individuals believe that they perform best under pressure – but being in a perpetual state of stress can take its toll.

Although extreme thrill-seeking behaviours or adrenaline addiction aren't listed as medical conditions under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), frequently being subjected to stressful situations can be harmful to one's health. Persistent surges in adrenaline can lead to medical conditions like high blood pressure and an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes.

If thrill-seeking is beginning to have an impact on someone's life or they are regularly putting themselves or others in danger, then it may be helpful to work with a therapist to identify the underlying motives driving this behaviour. Thrill-seeking can be a reinvigorating and wonderful pursuit but if it is causing more problems than it is joy, then it may be time to reevaluate whether chasing that next hit of adrenaline is worth the cost in the long-term. ■

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BUILDING TO A Burnout



Burnout is on the rise, with more of us experiencing it than ever, but what is fuelling this increase and what can you do about it?

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Are you feeling tired, exhausted or drained most of the time? Maybe a bit overwhelmed, procrastinating on tasks, or taking longer to do them? Feeling detached, alone, negative or helpless? Do you feel like life is getting on top of you and you're unable to keep up with the demands of your to-do list at work or at home? These are all signs that you could be heading towards a burnout, a state of physical or mental exhaustion that is usually triggered by long-term exposure to stressors.

In today's modern world, the pressure is on to do everything and do everything well. It's all around us, within our own social circles but also through social media, where we can see a glimpse of what other people's lives look like (what they choose to show us anyway). Burnout is on the rise globally – and it's no wonder. We're in a perfect storm, where on one hand we're pushing ourselves harder than ever to achieve at work and at home, while also being made to feel like taking any rest is 'lazy' or 'unproductive' by outside influences.

Bex Spiller, founder of The Anti-Burnout Club (theantiburnoutclub.com), explains: "When we've been going at full speed for so long, trying to keep all of the plates spinning at once, it feels strange when you suddenly slam on the brakes. The thing is, this perception that self-care is selfish or unproductive has often come from somewhere else, so one of the best ways to start reframing this is to work out who or where this perception comes from in the first place." Bex suggests that this perception might come from friends or family members making you feel like you're being selfish for taking any time to yourself, or a toxic boss who guilt trips you for taking time off. "For me, learned behaviour from my parents and 'hustle hard' influencers made me feel as though rest was for the weak... But once I realised this perception was part of their beliefs »

> "IN TODAY'S MODERN WORLD, THE PRESSURE IS ON TO DO EVERYTHING AND DO EVERYTHING WELL"

EXPERT BURNOUT TIPS



BEX SPILLER
FOUNDER OF THE ANTI-BURNOUT CLUB

Bex Spiller is a multi-award-winning expert in burnout, stress and overwhelm, author, TEDx speaker, and founder of the free mental health and wellbeing app, The Anti-Burnout Club.

THEANTIBURNOUTCLUB.COM

What would you say to someone who was experiencing burnout right now?

Becoming burnt out didn't happen overnight, so please don't try to rush your recovery! It took me several attempts to recover from burnout before I realised I was falling into what I now call the Cycle of (Un)Wellness. This is where you:

- ***start feeling stressed and overwhelmed as there's just too much to do***
- promise yourself you'll look after yourself when there's less to do
- ***feel burnt out and have to take time off***
- cram in some wellbeing until you can get back to that to-do list
- ***come back to an even bigger to-do list than before***
- start feeling stressed and overwhelmed as there's just too much to do

And so the cycle continues! Recovery doesn't mean just taking some time off and then falling straight back into old patterns. Yes, you will likely need some time off (and most health professionals will advise you of this). But what's important is what you do when life returns to normal. How can you fit little pockets of self-care into your daily life to help you find more balance?

What three daily habits do you think are the most important when it comes to preventing burnout?

FOCUS ON THE BASICS FIRST

We get so swept up in new wellbeing trends that we often neglect the essentials: getting enough sleep, drinking enough water, and eating food that makes us feel good. Get the basics in order and everything else will start to fall into place.

BRAIN DUMP

Our brains aren't designed to retain all the information we feel we have to nowadays, so regular brain dumping is a must. At the end of your day, dump everything out of your head and onto paper to help reduce stress and overwhelm.

CHECK IN WITH YOURSELF

Throughout the day, have regular check-ins with yourself to start noticing if stress levels are creeping up. You can do this in your head, in an app or in a journal. Connecting with yourself is vital for recognising any warning signs before it's too late. It could just be, 'How am I really feeling right now?' or a whole page of journal prompts – what matters is it fits into your life and becomes a habit.

and values, not mine, it made it much easier to give myself permission to rest."

Burnout doesn't look the same for everyone. Common symptoms include struggling to sleep or sleeping too much, feeling fatigued, finding it hard to do normal daily tasks, feeling emotionally drained, a sense of apathy and detachment, and a feeling of dread or anxiety. This can impact on your mental health, as you struggle to regain a sense of balance. You may also find that when you're feeling burned out, other areas of your life start to suffer; it's not uncommon to drink more than usual, eat less well and neglect exercise – all things we know are connected to poorer mental health.

Risk factors for burnout

Burnout is something that anyone can experience. You don't have to be a corporate executive to feel the pressure at work, and you don't have to have a house full of children to burn out at home. "From what I've seen in the three years running The Anti-Burnout Club, burnout can impact anyone at any time; the only common denominator is some kind of chronic stressor," says Bex. "While the WHO defines it as an 'occupational phenomenon', I've seen people burnt out from work, home life, chronic conditions, and caregiving. If there's something that's making you feel chronically stressed, it can lead to burnout."

Some of us are more at risk than others. For example, if you are a perfectionist, setting constantly high standards and wanting to always achieve the best you possibly can, then you may feel chronically stressed more easily and more frequently. Extensive research conducted by Professor Gordon Parker, outlined in his 2022 book *A Guide to Identifying Burnout and Pathways to Recovery*, found that people who are perfectionists are more likely to head towards burnout as a result of their own 'unrelenting standards'.

Those who are prone to 'people please' may also be more likely to experience burnout, as they put the needs of others over and above their own, neglecting their wellbeing until it reaches a point of burnout. Similarly, those who are high achievers, particularly in the workplace, may also neglect self-care, work longer hours and pile on enormous amounts of pressure to meet their goals. One study by Asana*, a project management tool, also identified a crossover between those who suffer from imposter syndrome and burnout.

Burnout in the workplace

While burnout can impact anyone, work-life balance is still one of the biggest contributors to burnout. Workplace culture

can increasingly lead to burnout, thanks to unrealistic targets, increasing workload, longer hours, higher expectations, a sense of always being available, a blurring of lines between home and work life, and so on. It's no wonder, then, that there are so many studies conducted in the workplace that show a significant number of people experiencing burnout. Future Forum Pulse (futureforum.com) is a quarterly survey of more than 10,000 workers from around the world. Its winter 2023 report showed that burnout is reported by 43% of the workforce. The same survey also showed that more women than men reported experiencing burnout (46% to 37%), and age is a factor too – those under 30 reported more incidence of burnout than those above 30.

While there are things we can do personally to try to rebalance our work and home lives, some responsibility has to lie with employers themselves. Addressing a toxic or stressful workplace can help to give employees a chance to maintain their wellbeing, while also achieving at work. And this has to be more than signposting online resources, doing a one-off workshop or sending an email. "Employers should be helping employees create space and balance by encouraging and respecting boundaries," says Bex. "Ensuring workload is realistic, promoting workplace wellbeing initiatives throughout the organisation, and giving people the time to actually enjoy them too! Creating an open and honest workplace where employees feel comfortable talking about how they feel and can also spot the warning signs are two huge steps towards reducing burnout at work."

The Future Forum Pulse survey found that flexibility was a key factor in whether a person was more at risk of burnout – those unsatisfied with the level of flexibility in their work life were 43% more likely to say that they feel burned out at work than those who are happy with their level of flexibility. Of course, working from home, either fully or hybrid, brings with it its own problems. It can be harder to make that separation, and also when it comes to knowing when to switch off – it's so easy to jump on and answer a query when you're metres away from your computer at all times.

> "PEOPLE PLEASERS AND PERFECTIONISTS ARE MORE AT RISK"

Some simple, practical measures can help, advises Bex: "I'd always recommend separating your physical work and home space as much as possible. Even if you don't have a separate office space, being able to pack up or hide any work equipment and materials is vital. If you can see work-related stuff, chances are you'll be constantly reminding yourself of your to-do list. The same goes for being able to turn off work-related notifications on your devices too. If you don't have separate work phones, then most phones will let you change your settings to only get certain notifications at certain times."

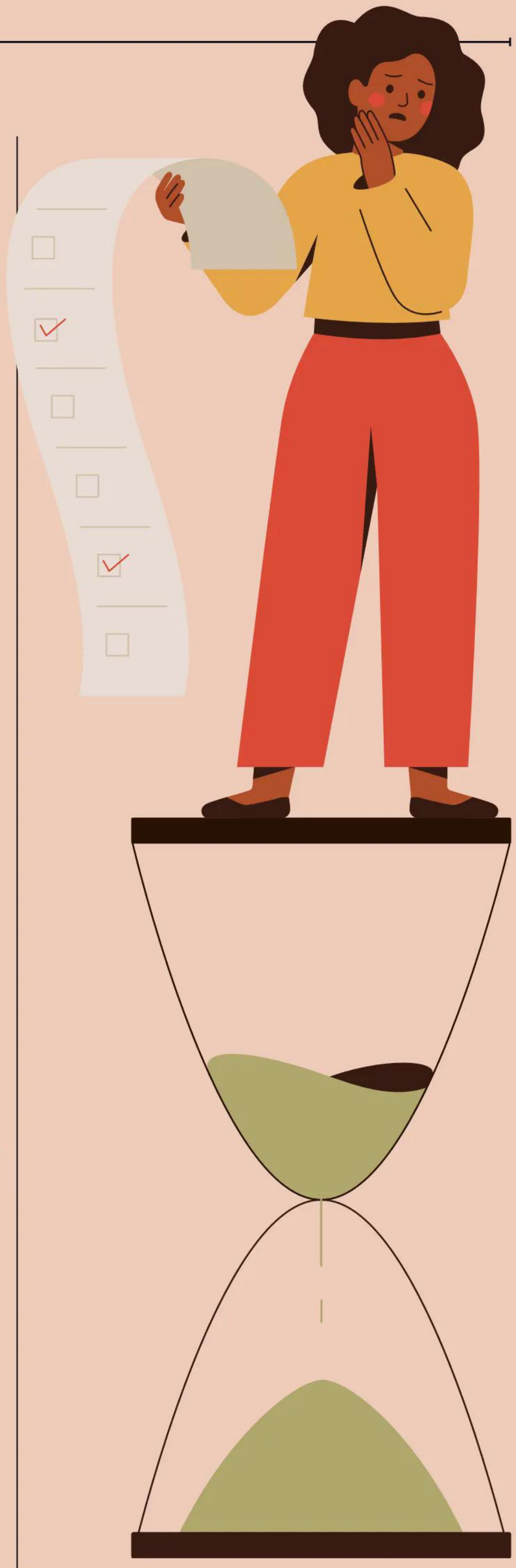
How to take action

If you feel like you're heading towards burnout, or already there, it's important to first recognise that. Admitting that you're burned out and need to rest – properly rest – can be difficult, especially if you feel like you can't just stop doing everything on your to-do list, whether that's at work or at home.

One thing that can help is to regain a sense of perspective. If you're struggling with being able to step away from work, for example, Bex recommends this activity, something that she does herself if she finds that she's slipping back into old patterns: "Ask yourself: 'What do I want to be remembered for when I'm gone? Do I want someone to stand up at my funeral and say, 'Well, she worked SO hard we never really saw her', or do I want them to tell stories about the amazing times they had with me when I wasn't working? I know it often sounds a little morbid to think about, but it's an ideal pattern interrupt that will stop you in your tracks when you go to open that email on a weekend."

Next, make sure you plan in some time for you – but don't overplan either. Sometimes what you need is a complete stop to reset – a day or two with no expectations and demands. Watch that boxset, catch up on sleep, read a book, go for a gentle walk. Then, once you start to feel a little better, take some time to think about what you need to do to make your daily life more sustainable. Do you need help in any particular area? Are there changes you can make to bring back a better sense of balance?

Talking to friends and family can be a useful exercise – they might not be aware of how pressured and stressed out you're feeling. If you feel you can, it's also worth having a conversation at work, if that's something that's contributing to your burnout. You may want to talk to a professional if you're struggling to identify the changes you need to make, or if you feel you need someone more removed from the situation to give you a different perspective.



The most important thing, however, is not to ignore the way you're feeling. Burnout is very real, and won't get better without some kind of intervention, self-care and rest. If you ignore it, it can get worse, causing real damage to your physical and mental health, leaving you unable to meet the demands of your job or home life. It's much better to learn to recognise your signs, and take action before it's too late. ■

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*Asana's Anatomy of Work Special Report

WHY DO *Smart* PEOPLE FALL FOR CONSPIRACY THEORIES?



To understand we look at conspiracy theories as manipulative process rather than fake content

WORDS CRIS ANDREWS

In one of his satirical TV interviews, Ali G – played by actor and comedian Sacha Baron Cohen – spoke about Ronald McDonald as if the clown mascot were the real CEO of McDonalds. Ali had, apparently, taken the TV adverts and wall posters literally. As far as he was concerned, Ronald McDonald not only owned the company but also came up with all the recipe ideas.

In 2020, during the Covid pandemic and just before the American presidential election, Baron Cohen (as himself) warned *Time* magazine readers about a flood of conspiracy theories spreading hate across the world. These theories, he wrote, were undermining health, inciting violence, threatening democracy, promoting autocracy. 'Covid isn't dangerous! Covid was created in a Wuhan laboratory! Donald Trump is a white knight fighting a cabal of devil-worshipping paedophiles!'

Four years on and conspiracy theories are more widespread than ever. According to research carried out last summer by Savanta for Kings College London and the BBC, there are now four million more conspiracy theorists in the UK than is generally believed. And this study focused only on conspiracies aimed at the authorities. We might think that Ali G is a parody of the type of person who would fall for conspiracy theories – impressionable, gullible, dim-witted. However, research suggests that intelligent people can be drawn in, too, particularly those who rely on intuition to understand what is going on, or if we don't feel safe and perceive threats in our environment.

We're also vulnerable if we feel superior, unique or antagonistic towards others, and if we're insecure, emotionally unstable, anxious, suspicious, impulsive, egocentric, or have strong views or political leanings that align with what a conspiracy theorist is claiming.

> "CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE MORE WIDESPREAD THAN EVER"

The process

Conspiracy theories involve a four-way interaction between the conspiracy theorist (the storyteller), the subject of the conspiracy (those who are allegedly doing the conspiring in the story), the

object of the conspiracy (those who are supposedly suffering in the story because of the conspiring), and the most important actor, the receivers of the storyteller's story.

The receivers are being asked by the storyteller to believe the story, identify with the object of the story, hate on the apparent conspirers, and eventually become followers of the storyteller and promoters of the story.

The process is the same whether the conspiratorial story is about big pharma putting nanobots in Covid vaccines, terrorists posing as refugees, or heavy metal bands hiding satanic messages in their songs.

Storytelling conspiracy theorists can be Neo-Marxist internet geeks who don't trust mainstream medicine; political lobbyists or publishers acting on behalf of a group that doesn't want refugees in its country; a church leader who resents – and disproves of – the influence rock stars have over their followers; or just someone with a grudge, an attitude and a keyboard.

In each case, the storyteller uses conspiratorial storytelling to try to influence the beliefs and behaviours of the receivers, towards some end desired by the storyteller. Vote Trump. Boycott »

HISTORIC CONSPIRACIES

Conspiratorial storytelling is nothing new; it has been part of human discourse since the first caveperson tried to convince the rest of their tribe that the cavepeople over the hill were plotting to steal the bright orange sphere in the sky and claim its life-giving benefits for themselves, provoking a war between the tribes.

The same conspiratorial themes can be found throughout history in legends, fables, religious missives, government propaganda and racist campaigns.

Don't upset the Gods, unbelievers prey on us as wolves prey on sheep, communist infiltrators are plotting to bring down the western world, Muslim immigrants are going to force Sharia law on the UK, European politicians tell us what to do for the benefit of France and Germany.

We're all prone to conspiratorial thinking from time to time, some more than others. How do you react if you're passed over for a job, fail a driving test or get left out of a sports team?

'Big Pharma'. Send 'migrants' home. Ignore – or better still – ban anything that's not promoting Christian values. This process often works because it meets a very basic and deeply entrenched human need.

The need to know

Ever since the first caveperson looked up at the sky and wondered about the big orange sphere that made them warm, people have tried to understand the world around them.

From this desire springs a natural curiosity about our place in the world, why things are the way they are, and what the future holds.

It could be argued that intelligent people might put more energy into figuring all this out. Invested emotionally and ideologically in a conspiracy theory, a clever individual might use his or her cognitive skills to prove that they are right and refute contradictory arguments. Those mentioned earlier who feel and think in certain ways, and have had certain motivations, might figure it out in less rational ways.

In times of crisis and hardship, the need to know and to predict the future becomes more acute, as curiosity, compulsion or obsession becomes entangled with and fuelled by our basic needs for shelter, health, money and safety. This is moreso if we have experienced bullying, abuse or other trauma during our formative years, leaving us with the impression that the world is a dangerous place in which we and our loved ones are not safe.

As followers of conspiratorial storytellers, we might see ourselves as helping to eliminate these threats. In this case, we get a sense of purpose, albeit a faux sense, that we are helping the world become a better place.

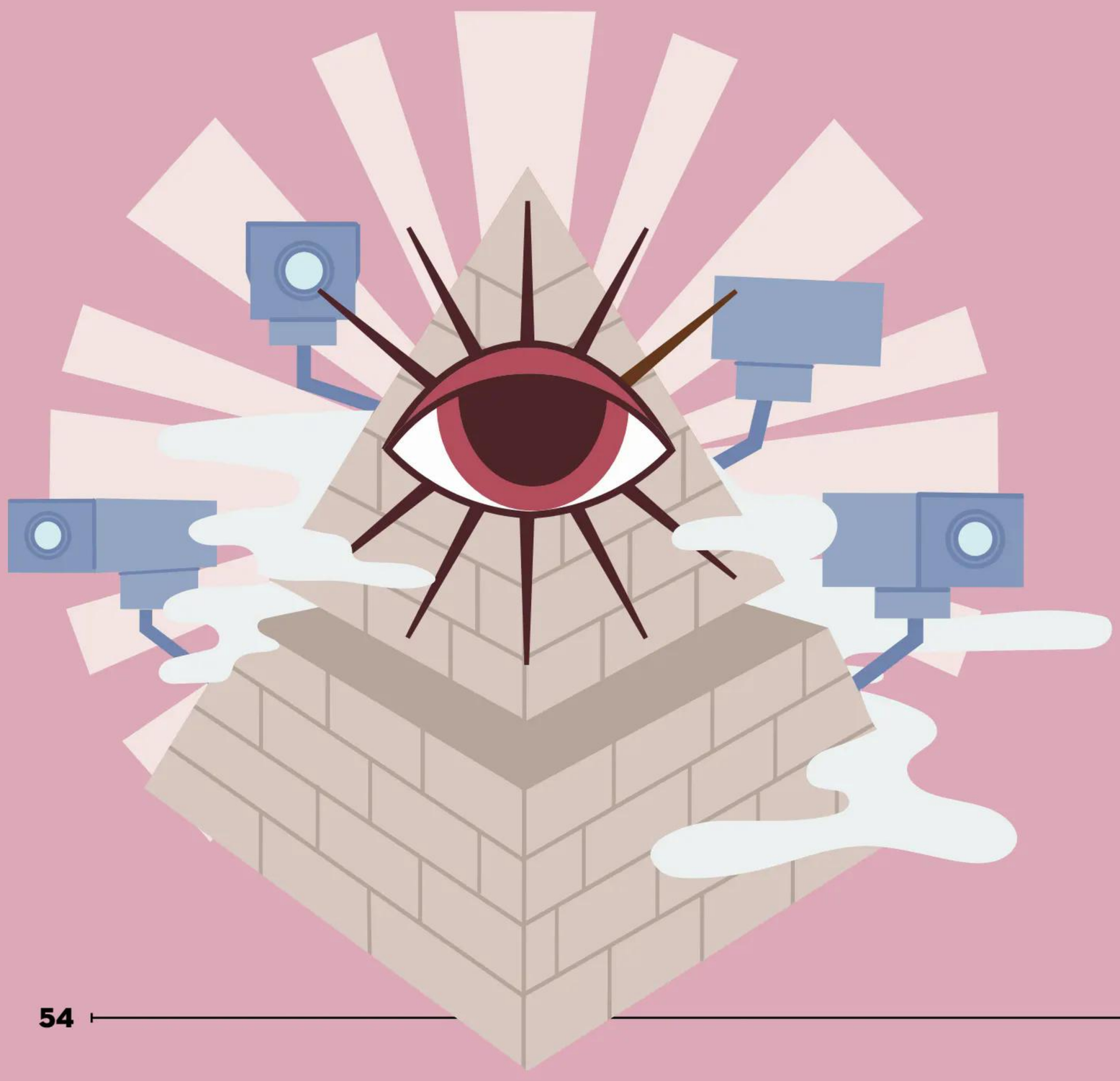
Unfortunately, there's always another threat around the corner, so the whole process starts again. Worse still, the world is seen as a dangerous place, full of powerful forces that work against us and where only fellow believers can be trusted.

The need to believe

When we feel our basic needs are not being met or are under threat, conspiratorial storytellers find it easier to get their theories past our cognitive radar. They do this by appealing to our emotions and claiming to solve our problems.

Conspiracy theories present us with an identifiable bad guy to blame for whatever is going wrong, as well as a victim or victims with whom we identify. Often, we are portrayed as the victims ourselves.

Conspiracy theories also provide a simple, straightforward solution to our problem (usually, rescue the victim and get rid of the bad guy) that won't take much effort and will reap immediate dividends.



In the real world, facing real problems we might feel alienated, impotent and overwhelmed, and that our problems are insurmountable, or require complex, challenging actions that we're not capable of doing. Enmeshed in the conspiratorial story, we feel powerful, special, influential, and part of a heroic movement of keyboard warriors who can bring down the enemy.

And if nothing good happens and things don't get any better, the conspiratorial storyteller can always come up with a new story – one that usually involves the bad guy outwitting the intrepid heroes with some dastardly, Machiavellian move. The migrant terrorists have gone into hiding. The investigation into vaccine deaths was corrupted by government officials with links to Big Pharma. The Satanic lyrics can only be heard if you play the songs backwards.

This provokes even more outrage from the followers and requires of them renewed action – from the safety of their own keyboards, of course.

Information gaps

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once had Sherlock Holmes say, "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts."

Unfortunately, when presented with information gaps to questions we feel are compelling, we're predisposed to do exactly this – to fill those gaps with what we think we already know.

We do this, of course, without realising that what we think we know is biased, subjective and influenced by our own experiences, attitudes, beliefs and those of the people we know and have known. And it's this, once again, that makes us susceptible to conspiracy theories.

Conspiratorial storytellers will say they can fill these information gaps with absolute truths about how the world works and what's going on. The fact that such absolute truths could not reasonably be known without years of painstaking research (if at all) can easily be ignored in our quest for certainty.

Conspiratorial narratives are usually short on specific detail, motivations are unprovable, the cause-and-effect relationship ambiguous. The conspiratorial storyteller claims to have the inside story from secret sources that no one else has access to – a whistleblower in the corridors of power, disgruntled former black ops agent, aliens, angels, God.

Confirmation bias

We can analyse conspiracy theories out of context and see that they are

fake and foolish. People who read, believe and share these stories, do so within a vast sea of information, where it's hard to tell objective from subjective, fact from opinion, informative discourse from persuasive argument.

These days, our news feeds and email servers are full of advertorials claiming to be reportage. Platform home pages and social media feeds are cluttered with clickbait headlines, and front pages of certain popular newspapers look more like party political broadcasts than objective news reports.

The internet and social media provide access to information from all over the world, but with no real way of verifying the validity of what is being written or said, or where the information originally came from. This makes it much easier for conspiratorial storytellers to infiltrate their way into our hearts and minds.

Algorithms present us with information to get our attention, based on careful analysis of our internet and social media usage. Influencers know content that provokes strong feelings is more likely to be noticed – anger, outrage, sadness, fear. So too content that aligns with what we already believe.

It's not presented to us like this, though. On our platforms, news feeds, internet searches and email servers it looks like we're seeing 'the news' rather than just 'our news'.

Online, others with similar tendencies flock around the same content, while dissenting voices are seldom heard – mainly because potential dissenters are being shown different content that supports their own views and interests.

Because of all this, there's little informed debate around conspiracy theories and not much scrutiny. Spend long enough down this particular rabbit hole and it would be easy to conclude that 'everyone' is in line with what is being said, and what is being said is indicative of wider societal trends and beliefs.

Real conspiracies

Whether it's the village committee, the board of directors and political party campaign staff to NATO, or the World Health Organization, groups and individuals really do work together to gain an advantage or to further their own beliefs and interests.

It's not all of them all of the time, in a coordinated fashion towards world domination or the destruction of humanity, as some contemporary conspiracy theorists will tell you. But it is some of them, some of the time, usually for selfish reasons, or because what they're doing would not be popular if made public.

> "THERE'S LITTLE INFORMED DEBATE AROUND CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND NOT MUCH SCRUTINY"



UNDERSTAND HISTORY TO STEER CLEAR OF CONSPIRACIES

Some people believe conspiracies are afoot because they don't understand the historical context in which certain events take place.

Throughout history, war and conflict has been common in places like Ukraine and the Middle East. Powerful countries have gone to war to protect investments and other interests in faraway parts. Britain went to war against Russia in the Crimean War in 1853 to protect trade routes to India, and during the days of Empire, fought Arab nationalists all over North Africa and the Middle East.

People who haven't studied history and geopolitics – and wouldn't necessarily know this – might see the wars in Ukraine and Gaza as unprecedented and look for hidden reasons as to why they are happening and why western countries are getting involved.

It doesn't help that we're taught history and exposed to politics through the rhetoric and reported actions of our leaders, rather than by studying the social and economic trends that motivate and explain human behaviour.

When we're told over and again that Winston Churchill won us World War II, Henry VIII protected his subjects from interfering European Catholics, William the Conqueror civilised the Saxon savages, and other such tall tales, it is understandable that we'd see the world as a place shaped by the powerful few.

When today, things are not going as we would like and our leaders don't seem to match up to the greats of old, it's only a short step to imagine that things are being run by a bunch of greedy, corrupt, self-interested elites who collude with each other to maintain their power and privilege. Whether they're doing all this with the help of black magic rituals, alien technology and genetically engineered super soldiers is another matter altogether.

Sometimes the conspiracy is discovered, the scam outed, with evidence and the conspirators held to account. Think Watergate, the Dreyfus Affair in 19th-century France, Guy Fawkes, the assassination of Julius Caesar – there are many more instances throughout history where the conspiracy was busted.

More evidence-based scam busting in the contemporary press would help distinguish between real and imagined conspiracies. It would also help debunk another popular modern conspiracy theory – that the world's media works for 'The Man' – and show those attracted to fake conspiracy theories that information presented in the mainstream media can be trusted. ■

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WHAT IS *Muscle* MEMORY?



How neural shortcuts in your brain make practised activities feel familiar

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

When you move from one side of the room to the other, how much do you analyse the action? For most people, the series of muscle movements that allow them to get around on a daily basis is automatic. But when babies are born, their brains haven't formed the neural connection with their walking muscles in order to stand and balance. Through trial and error, they begin to master walking on two feet. Eventually, when they've discovered the movements required for walking, the neural pathways are fully formed. From this point onwards, walking becomes a natural motion that requires little conscious thought.

Have you ever learned to ride a bike, play tunes on an instrument, or mastered a sport over several years? Now that you have these skills, they're unlikely to suddenly vanish. For example, you might not have ridden a bike for several years, but you'll still be able to ride one and stay in control of it with no additional lessons or guidance. Despite being called *muscle* memory, the body part responsible for retaining these skills is the brain. A region of the brain called the motor cortex sends signals to the muscles needed for each skill, with precise instructions to execute physical movements with accuracy. The more these signals are delivered through messenger nerve cells called neurons, the smoother each resulting action is. When these

MUSCLE MEMORY TACTICS TO TRY

PRIORITISE PRACTICE

Practise your new sport or skill in regular and short training sessions. The more your brain is exposed to muscle patterns, the quicker it will remember and master them.

AVOID BAD HABITS

Muscle memory can arise in any movement. Make sure you don't pick up bad habits or your brain will hold onto these and you will naturally use these techniques.

SKILL BREAKDOWN

Different skills can involve a series of complex movements. Focus on each element of the movement first to make them easier to combine correctly.

SWITCH UP THE ENVIRONMENT

When training in the same place or environment, you can limit your muscle memory. To make sure your muscles are firing correctly in different scenarios, don't make every practice session identical.

TAKE YOUR TIME

Nobody becomes an expert overnight. Muscle memory relies on consistency and long-term repetition.

become stored in your long-term memory, skill-based memories like riding a bike are recalled as soon as you sit in the saddle.

How do muscles 'remember' movements?

The repetition of movements creates a strong connection between the muscles and brain:

LONG-TERM MEMORY

The brain stores repeated movements in long-term memory. This means muscle movements can be performed with little thought.

SKELETAL MUSCLES

These muscles, which move the body's skeleton, are responsible for performing the motor tasks to be stored as muscle memory.

FASCICULUS

Bundles of nerve fibre strands in the muscles connect to the central nervous system and relay signals from the brain to muscles.

SARCOPLASM

This is the water-based cytoplasm of the muscle, which is responsible for storing and releasing calcium ions. Calcium is needed for muscle contraction to be initiated.

PERIMYSIUM

This connective tissue sheath surrounds a muscle's fibre bundles and protects them from forceful muscle contractions.

MUSCLE FIBRE

The higher the number of nuclei in muscle fibres, the greater the muscle memory capacity.

MYOSIN

These proteins in the muscles create force that gives the muscles strength to lift, push or pull.

ACTIN FILAMENT

This protein filament is a mechanical component of the muscle that guides the direction of contractions as it slides along the myosin filament. After repetitive contractions, such as in weightlifting, the number of actin filaments in the muscles used increases.

Athlete accuracy

If you observe a professional athlete in the middle of a football match or launching themselves over a high jump bar, the ease



of their movements can seem incredible. These are not superpowers, but the work of perfected muscle memory. Due to their relentless training schedules, the muscles that they need to control the dribble of a ball or expertly arch themselves over obstacles in athletics are almost pre-programmed. The strong neural connections that they have made to connect their mind and the rest of their body mean that while the brain focuses on the tactics of the competition, the body can perform complex moves without much conscious thought. An additional benefit to muscle memory in professional sportspeople is that it allows them to take breaks from the sport. Even though they may lose fitness during off-season months, not long after returning to training, their muscles can bounce back to the work they were previously trained for. ■

> "THE BRAIN STORES REPEATED MOVEMENTS IN LONG-TERM MEMORY"

© Getty Images / Rudzhan Nagiev

Relight YOUR FIRE

Surviving not thriving? Here's how to step out of the fog and into the sunshine



WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Are you okay, but not how you used to be? You may have been experiencing languishing. "Simply put, this is the absence of mental wellbeing," says Gosia Bowling, national lead for mental health at Nuffield Health. "You're not depressed, but you're certainly not thriving."

Many of us will be able to remember those feelings during the pandemic – where the sense of Groundhog Day took a toll on mental wellbeing, resulting in a sense of limbo, aimlessness or emptiness in the day-to-day. However, with lockdown behind us and normal life resumed, many are still struggling to get their groove back. We've asked our experts for the lowdown on languishing and how you can move towards flourishing and fulfilment.

Invisible condition

Languishing isn't diagnosable – it's not an illness and many are still able to function throughout.

"It can be more easily understood by thinking about it as the foggy grey middle ground between depression and flourishing. It's the kind of 'blah' where you're just not really one thing or another," says clinical psychologist Dr Marianne Trent, creator of The Feel Better Academy. You're simply getting through the day without any real joy in it.

"As a feeling or emotion, languishing sits at the crossroads between health and ill health, with some able to recognise and work on the feelings associated with it to positively move towards mental fitness, and others unable to do so, running the risk of moving towards mental ill health," adds psychotherapist Brendan Street from Nuffield Health.

> "LANGUISHING IS THE FOGGY GREY MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND FLOURISHING"

What's the impact?

Rather than being actively engaged in »



DID YOU KNOW?

According to the *Journal of Health and Social Research*, the risk of a major depressive episode is two times more likely among those who are languishing, compared to moderately mentally healthy adults, and nearly six times more likely among languishing adults compared to those who are flourishing.



what is going on around you, when you're languishing, you muddle through on a mundane auto pilot. "While you are not ill, you're certainly nowhere near your best," says Brendan. This can disrupt ability to focus and sap motivation, meaning less creativity, performance and productivity.

What makes languishing so problematic is that it can often go undetected. You might tell yourself it's 'just one of those weeks', which can insidiously slip into months of feeling unmotivated and unfulfilled. If you're not conscious of your deteriorating mental health, you won't seek help.

"People who are languishing now, and then blindly drift further without support, are more likely to develop more serious mood difficulties in the next months and years," says Brendan. "Languishing also makes it more difficult to practise good self-care; as we become less energised, interested and motivated, we take less care of our physical health."

Languishing versus depression

There are similarities, such as changes in mood, motivation and drive, and feelings of restlessness and detachment. However, Gosia points out that languishing is different from depression, because it's an absence of flourishing rather than the presence of mental ill health.

"Whilst depression also varies in severity, it has a much greater impact on ability to work or function in different aspects of life," she adds.

SPOT THE SIGNS

If you recognise three or more of these in yourself, you might be experiencing languishing

- ☐ The movements of your day-to-day feel mundane rather than worthwhile or engaging.
- ☐ You don't have the usual drive or energy for something you were once ambitious about.
- ☐ There's a sense of unease, but you're unable to pinpoint exactly where it's coming from.
- ☐ You're having difficulty focusing within all aspects of life.
- ☐ There's a feeling of detachment, not just from people, but also situations or moments.
- ☐ You're struggling to find the point in the day-to-day.

Stuck cycles

These occur when thoughts, emotions, actions and physical feelings interact with each other, each having a knock-on effect that can keep us stuck in unhelpful, and often unhealthy, patterns, says Gosia. Look out for:

SWITCHING OFF

Ever decided to stay in because going out feels like too much effort? While in the short term this might not be an issue, if you notice yourself choosing TV and mindlessly scrolling social media every evening or weekend – instead of socialising or engaging in activities you once enjoyed – every day can feel the same, with little to no enjoyment.

BOREDOM

By having no change to our routine, we get increasingly bored and indifferent. "This, together with a lack of connection or purpose, impacts on mood, increasing a sense of 'meh'," says Gosia. "You feel you have nothing much of interest to say, so we become more disconnected from social contacts, increasing boredom and stagnation."

UNHEALTHY HABITS

Languishing can often feel like a vicious cycle – cooking a healthy meal from scratch and getting outside in the fresh air to exercise feels like a chore, yet it will undoubtedly have a much more positive impact on our wellbeing, instead of ordering a takeaway and not moving from the sofa. "This sluggishness has a knock-on effect on motivation and energy levels," says Gosia.

Want to talk? Speak to your doctor or find an accredited therapist.

"WHAT MAKES LANGUISHING SO PROBLEMATIC IS THAT IT CAN OFTEN GO UNDETECTED"

FIND YOUR FLOURISH

Break free from the languishing cycle and regain your purpose

NAME YOUR FEELINGS

"The most important factor in managing languishing is to recognise and name this experience. Once you are aware of languishing, you can take steps to do something about it," says Brendan.

FIND YOUR FLOW

"One of the ways of acknowledging and breaking the cycles languishing creates is a concept called flow," says Gosia. This is often referred to as 'being in the zone' – when you become so engrossed in a meaningful activity that you lose track of time and all sense of self disappears. The best way of finding your flow is doing an activity you enjoy – whether that's baking, gardening, painting, hiking or playing music. "In order to move from the stagnant state of languishing, you need to take meaningful action which will get you 'unstuck' and back into a state of flow," adds Gosia.

CREATE STRUCTURE

If the days feel as if they're merging into one, giving yourself structure can be transformational, says Marianne. "You may find it helpful to use time blocking. Allocate yourself small increments of time to get things done and get them ticked off your list," she says. This can be implemented for anything – whether it's completing jobs around the house, scheduling time for coffee with a friend or going for a walk.
It can help to protect these blocks of time – meaning no scrolling social media, watching TV or checking your emails. Ease yourself in with blocks of 20 minutes – there doesn't need to be any maximum limit, but having a shorter time frame in mind can reduce feelings of overwhelm that may stop you from getting started.

BECOME MINDFUL, NOT MINDLESS

Mindfulness is not having a completely blank mind or reaching some blissful or 'zen' state.
"Mindfulness makes us more aware of the streams of thoughts and feelings that we experience, and rather than just accept them, notice how we can untangle ourselves from past unhelpful patterns," says Gosia. In times of uncertainty and stress, this is a really helpful skill. Want to give it a go?
Practise giving your full attention to the things that you are doing or experiencing. "Notice what is happening in your thoughts, emotions and body," says Gosia. "When your mind starts to wander (which it will), notice what happened to your attention and gently bring it back. Like any skill, it needs practise to develop. Start off with short mindful moments and build your practice gradually."

STAY CONNECTED

When you're feeling low and unmotivated, it can be very easy to isolate yourself, but it's during these times that our relationships are the most important. Surrounding yourself with people who make you feel positive and energised can help you to thrive. If you've ever considered joining a community group around shared interests, or even volunteering for a local charity, now is the time to do it. "Working together with a shared sense of purpose can help you out of the sense of aimlessness associated with languishing," says Gosia. "Network, share resources and look out for each other. Knowing you have each other's backs can be a huge comfort during difficult times."

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IS YOUR *Credit Card* YOUR CURE?

Emotions dictating your spending habits? Prioritising your mental health can help to better balance the books



WORDS LOUISE PYNE

What's the first thing you do when you're feeling bored, sad or frustrated, or you need cheering up? While many of us seek comfort from food, some of us go into autopilot mode when emotions are running high, reaching into our pockets to treat ourselves in order to avoid discomfort that might be plaguing us. But with the spiralling cost of living making our everyday lives more difficult – and a lot more expensive – a continuous cycle of overspending can lead to deep financial waters, which can further impact mental health.

The spending-spree high

A recent UK study found that 63% of women aren't confident their finances can withstand the financial squeeze.* At difficult times like these especially, it's clear that impulsive spending offers a one-way ticket to soaring levels of stress and anxiety.

"Spending becomes dangerous when we use it as a coping mechanism to regulate our emotions – hence the term 'emotional spending'," says consultant psychologist Elena Touroni, co-founder of The Chelsea Psychology Clinic. "Some people shop to mask difficult emotions, such as stress, boredom, anxiety and low self-esteem."

On a physiological level, when we treat ourselves, levels of the reward neurotransmitter surge short-term. "Shopping gives us a dopamine 'high', in much the same way as drugs like cocaine, opiates and nicotine, which is why, for some people, it can become addictive," says Elena. The problem comes after this momentary rush, when most people who overspend are left with a huge sense of guilt that makes them feel much worse in the long run.

Fed up of being in the red and want to break the cycle? Here are our top ways to get your emotional bank balance back in check.

Put everything down on paper

Your finances should dictate your lifestyle and not the other way round. "Weigh up the pros and cons before buying anything – the shopper 'high' can interfere with healthy decision-making. Write a pros and cons list and mull it over to make sure you're buying something for the right reasons," says Elena. Figure out whether you need or want the item in question.

If spending large amounts is tied with striving to foster happiness, look to other self-care practices that can ease any negative feelings. Yoga, meditation and journaling are all good outlets to help lower stress. Best of all, they're free!

Know your values

Your guiding principles help you to make everyday choices – this innate set of values makes us who we are. Sometimes we need to take a step back and ask ourselves questions that help to define our principles so we can connect with them. "Ask yourself what qualities you value, and what kind of person you ultimately want to be. What would you like to be remembered for? Connecting with our values steers us away from the superficial things in life and towards the things that really matter to us," says Elena.

Look within

Being more mindful about your spending decisions will help you to identify any recurrent patterns. Understanding the root cause of overspending is the first step to breaking the cycle, so work out if you're unconsciously trying to cover up certain emotions. "Do you shop after speaking to a particular person? After having an argument with your partner? When you're bored?" asks Elena. "Getting an idea of your triggers will help you understand what emotions you're trying to mask."

> "PEOPLE WHO OVERSPEND ARE LEFT WITH A SENSE OF GUILT THAT MAKES THEM FEEL WORSE"

SELF-CARE ON A SHOESTRING

These budget feel-good tips will help to lighten the stress load

HAVE A DIGITAL DETOX

Social media fuels comparison syndrome, which can trigger spending. Remember that social media reflects an edited version of reality, so seemingly 'perfect' lives are usually just a facade. Unfollow any accounts that are causing you anxiety, and give yourself incremental breaks. Start with a 24-hour digital detox once per month, building this up to fortnightly and then weekly. Be mindful of how cathartic it can feel not to scroll through your social feeds and use your time productively instead.

LISTEN TO A SOUND BATH

An audio sound bath (you can find plenty of sound-bath sessions for free on YouTube) can be a restorative way to ease stress and clear your mind. For example, listening to the meditative sounds of vibrating singing bowls helps to stimulate brainwaves, which evokes deep relaxation.

TAKE A WALK OUTDOORS

Nature is proven to boost the feel-good factor and even just ten minutes per day spent in green spaces will help you to reap the benefits. Next time you're tempted to splurge, step away from the situation and go for a walk outside. It's amazing how a breath of fresh air can help to clear your mind.

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*Financial advisors Charles Stanley and Censuswide

HOW CBD CAN *Change* YOUR LIFE

The supplement that can have a positive effect on mind, body and soul



WORDS JAMIE FRIER

It might seem that CBD is a fairly recent innovation, but cannabis has been used for therapeutic and medicinal reasons for more than 4,000 years. However, it was only in 1940 that cannabidiol (CBD), one of the two major components of cannabis, was successfully extracted and isolated from the plant. Cannabis was somewhat demonised by Western governments, and it took more than 20 years for CBD and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the other major compound of cannabis, to be synthesised and tested. THC was quickly »





identified as the psychoactive compound and was therefore the one that became the focus for users, scientists and lawmakers.

With cannabis being illegal in many countries around the world due to its hallucinogenic properties and potentially harmful side effects, clinical trials began to turn their focus back to CBD. Given that it is THC that contains the psychoactive element of marijuana, people began to wonder whether the other major compound, CBD, could provide the positives without the negatives.

How does CBD work?

Firstly, it's important to understand the difference between THC and CBD. Messages are sent around the body via neurotransmitters, some of which instruct the production of certain chemicals for certain reasons, for example, pain relief. When enough messages have been sent, biochemicals called endocannabinoids interact with cannabinoid receptors called CR1 and CR2 in your body's endocannabinoid system (ECS) to tell them to stop sending neurotransmitters. THC is able to bind itself to those receptors, blocking the endocannabinoids from carrying out their task. This means the body continues to get flooded with neurotransmitters and information, creating the 'high' that marijuana has become known for. This is where CBD comes in. It has a crucial role in limiting the impact of the THC on the receptor. If you think of marijuana as a cocktail, THC is the alcohol, while CBD is the mixer and fruit.

However, CBD has another effect, which is what makes it so useful as a product in its own right. Instead of blocking the receptors, it acts as a parachute on the endocannabinoid, slowing down the speed with which it interacts with the receptor and how quickly it dissipates back into the body. This means that the neural messages can continue to be sent for a little while longer, but the endocannabinoid isn't entirely prevented from doing its job and eventually everything returns to normal.

The overall effect of CBD is that it gives you certain benefits associated with marijuana, such as a happy feeling and temporary pain relief, but unlike THC, it doesn't attack your body's natural rhythm with the same rigour and isn't addictive. The out-of-body experience that puts users at risk and the potential mental health issues only occur because of the THC. By isolating the CBD element of marijuana, researchers created a product that gives tangible benefits without putting the user in any kind of present or future danger.

Is it legal?

The discovery that CBD gives users effective pain relief and relaxation without the 'high' and side effects prompted many

MYTH 1: CBD IS ADDICTIVE

There is no addictive element found in CBD. Of the two main compounds in the cannabis plant, THC is the one that attaches itself to receptors in the endocannabinoid system. This means that the more someone uses marijuana, the less their brain produces the neurotransmitters that send and stop information. This is because it is expecting the THC to do its job for it. Therefore, the user experiences withdrawal symptoms due to a lack of neurotransmitters that can only be sated by using more marijuana and THC. However, since CBD doesn't attach itself to receptors, it doesn't have the same effect – the brain continues to act as normal and users don't build up a dependence on it. The pain relief that CBD provides can become relied upon, but the substance itself isn't addictive.

"CBD GIVES CERTAIN BENEFITS ASSOCIATED WITH MARIJUANA, BUT IT ISN'T ADDICTIVE"

MYTH 2: CBD GETS YOU HIGH

As with the addictive myth, the claim that CBD can get you high is due to people attaching the effect of THC onto CBD. It is THC that has the psychoactive element and attaches itself to receptors, which is what results in the feeling of being high. CBD does not have a psychoactive effect and works in a different way, limiting the degradation of endocannabinoids rather than disrupting the system itself.

This means that CBD acts in no different a way than any other pain relief on the market, none of which result in a high, and it is therefore safe to use as part of normal self-medication. It is simply the fact that it comes from the cannabis plant that makes people think it'll give you that marijuana buzz.

authorities around the globe to re-examine whether CBD should be legal. Countries such as the UK and USA legalised the usage of CBD as long as it came from the hemp plant (rather than the cannabis plant), contained minimal amounts of THC, and was used for medicinal, rather than recreational, purposes.

So as CBD became legal and companies started being able to produce, market and sell it, people became more aware of it as a genuine alternative to traditional painkillers, medicines and recreational drugs. It now comes in many forms, including pills, gummies, oils and creams, each providing different levels of benefit and convenience.

CBD benefits

There are many reasons why someone would take CBD, ranging from the management of chronic pain and sleeplessness to wanting better-looking skin. It can be taken as part of a regular medication routine, or just whenever it is required to deal with the flare-up of a condition. In some places, it is something that can be bought over the counter, providing swift access to pain relief without having to get a prescription, something that can take days or even weeks to arrange.

As a product that is derived from a natural source – the hemp plant – many people prefer to use CBD instead of a manufactured pill or powder. CBD isn't entirely free from side effects, though. It can result in fatigue, blood-thinning and nausea, but these side effects could well be less than a non-naturally occurring medicine. What you put into your body is a matter of trust and something like CBD can be much more trustworthy than something with a lot of chemicals and unfamiliar names in the ingredients list.

So what does CBD actually do for you? One major usage is pain management. Instead of taking drugs such as paracetamol, many people turn to CBD to alleviate the agony of chronic conditions, such as arthritis or inflamed joints. Pain inside the body occurs when something somewhere is being irritated, often because something is in the wrong place or your body's natural cushioning has worn away. Receptors within your body notice something isn't right and will create a reaction to help rectify this, such as swelling, or sending signals that manifest as either a sharp, shooting pain or dull ache. While CBD can't attach itself well to CR1 and CR2 receptors, it can attach itself to the TRPV1 receptors, which are linked to the way we feel pain. By reducing the sensitivity of these receptors, the presence of CBD can reduce the amount of pain we feel, leading to essential relief for those who suffer from a variety of ailments. The presence of CBD can also help to reduce inflammation, as it has anti-inflammatory properties. So not only does it block out the feeling of pain, but it will also work to remove one of the elements that could be causing further discomfort.

CBD has also been shown to help people manage serious conditions, including epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and even cancer. Taking CBD won't cure these conditions, but it can help manage many of the associated symptoms.

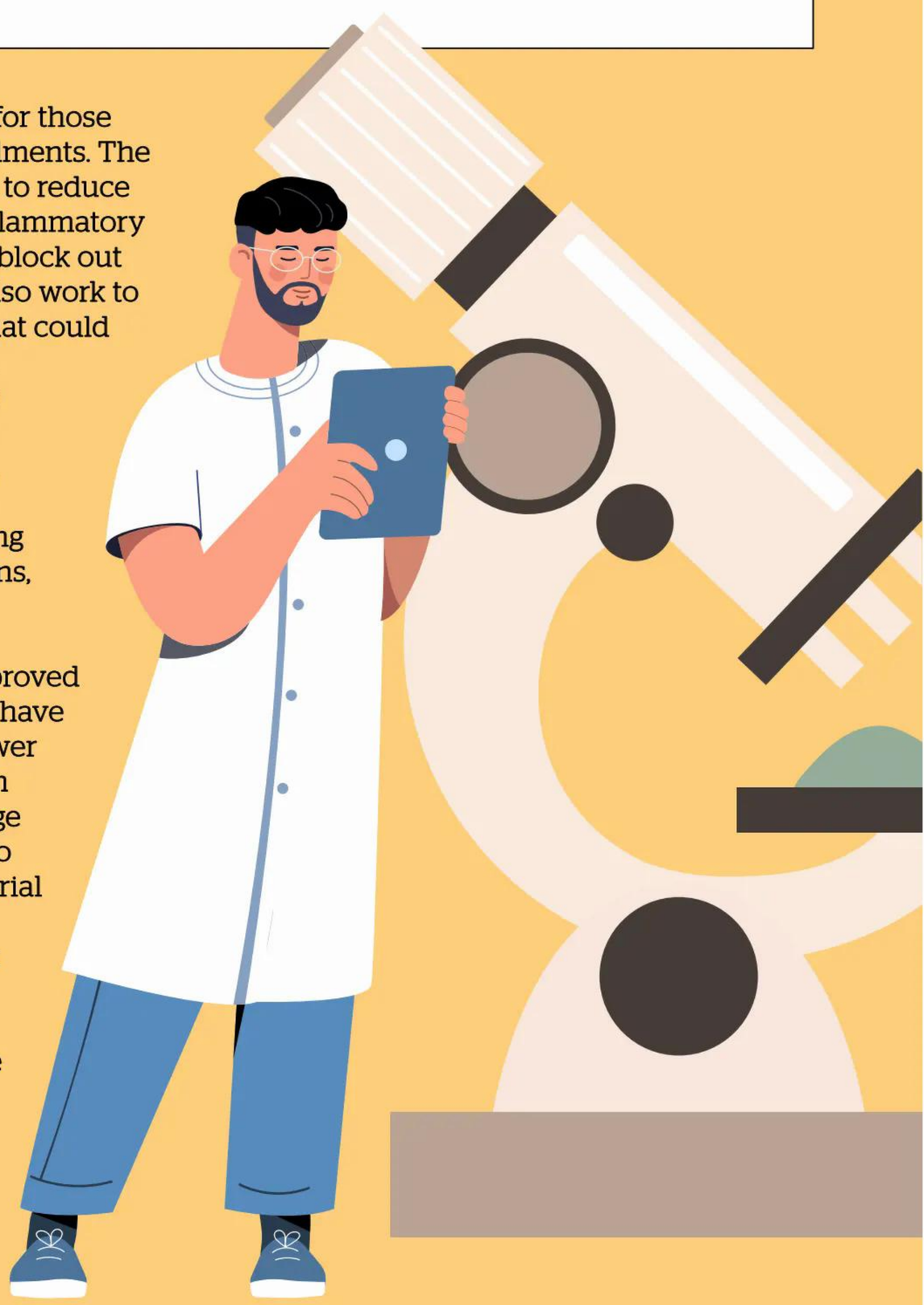
Heart health can also be improved by taking CBD. Several studies have looked at whether CBD can lower blood pressure, and it has been discovered that the right dosage does indeed lower it, while also improving blood flow and arterial health. Those who suffer from high blood pressure may want to consider adding a CBD supplement to their routine.

There is also the mental side of your health to consider. CBD is able to attach itself to receptors in the brain's limbic system, which is the area that controls memory and emotions. When »

MYTH 3: CBD HASN'T BEEN RESEARCHED

For a long time, CBD had been left alone while people either studied the effects of THC or worked hard to keep cannabis and cannabis-related products illegal and difficult to obtain. However, once it was noted that it didn't result in highs or psychosis, top global universities, such as Harvard and Oxford, and laboratories studied CBD in clinical trials to discover its pros and cons. The result of this was that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the USA approved a medication containing CBD to treat epilepsy, and many other countries around the world have tentatively legalised CBD products.

Given the public perception of drugs, there is no way governments would have legalised these products without being sure they're safe. Studies continue to discover more properties of CBD, but enough is known to confidently hold up its use for effective pain, anxiety and seizure management.





MYTH 4: IF IT'S ON SALE, IT'S GOOD FOR YOU

A word of warning has to be given for anyone buying CBD products. Just because something is being legally and legitimately sold in shops or online, it doesn't mean it's going to work miracles. CBD products are legal in many countries, providing they only contain a trace of THC and come from the hemp plant. The regulations don't say how much CBD has to be in it. So whenever you're buying a bottle of CBD gummies or oil, make sure you check the label so you know how much of the good stuff is in it. Some manufacturers only put in a trace of CBD so it can be sold as such and it ends up doing nothing for you. CBD is a wonderful product, so don't waste your money on something that doesn't contain an effective amount.

> "CBD IS CERTAINLY SOMETHING TO CONSIDER FOR INSOMNIACS"

overactive, the limbic system can cause spikes, resulting in anxiety or panic attacks. The presence of CBD can calm the limbic system by blocking receptors, so that your brain is put into more of a relaxed state. This should have the effect of reducing anxious feelings, so CBD is a useful companion to those wishing to control their anxiety levels. However, a word of caution: if you have been diagnosed with anxiety, depression or a mental illness, ensure you visit a doctor and get the appropriate help and support. CBD is not a substitute for medical help or prescribed medication, and should only be used as an extra aid to managing medical conditions.

The same mechanism that helps manage anxiety can also aid those who struggle with sleep. If your brain is whirring away with thoughts, feelings, worries or fears, you could find it difficult to drop off. With CBD blocking the limbic system, your brain should be much more amenable to settling down for a good night's sleep. Studies have also shown that taking CBD can reduce the frequency and severity of nightmares, which could also be affecting sleep, as well as helping to regulate your body's circadian rhythm. These two benefits could be the secret to a good, deep, restful sleep that is all too rare for many of us.

CBD has also been found to work well with the hypothalamus, which is part of the limbic system. This is the part of the brain that regulates temperature and we all know that you need to be at a comfortable temperature to go to sleep. By reducing thoughts and stress, and getting your body temperature right, CBD is certainly something to consider for insomniacs. As mentioned earlier, CBD does not have the same psychoactive properties of THC and marijuana, so a gummy or dosage of oil around an hour before going to bed ought to prove a useful night-time companion without the risk of disturbing dreams.

Talking of THC's addictive, high-inducing effect, it is somewhat ironic that one of the two major compounds in marijuana can actually help battle drug dependency. It has been found that people who have an addiction to heroin can find their cravings

reduced when on a course of CBD, as well as settling their resting heart rate. This could prove crucial in helping people to come off drugs in a slow, natural way, rather than going to rehab or cold turkey.

Physical effects

It's not just your insides that CBD can help, either. Pharmaceutical companies are increasing their range of skin creams that contain CBD, because of the compound's anti-inflammatory properties. With the CBD naturally reducing signs of swelling and the cream moisturising the affected area, CBD has been found to help those suffering with eczema and psoriasis. This anti-inflammatory property is also the reason CBD is increasingly being added to suncreams, reducing any redness from spending too long in the sun.

Another ailment that this miracle compound could be effective at treating is acne. Research has shown that CBD reacts with the receptors on oil-producing glands, reducing the amount they produce. The less oil on your skin, the less chance of spots. Not only that, but the cannabis plant has been shown to have anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties, further reducing the chances of your skin coming out in zits.

Word of warning

As previously mentioned, if you have medical issues, CBD should not be your only port of call. Always seek advice from your doctor about mental and physical conditions and check whether CBD is right for you. It can react with medication you're taking, which could lead to drowsiness, nausea or the prescribed medication not working as intended, so ensure your doctor approves, regulates and advises you on the right amount of CBD you can take.

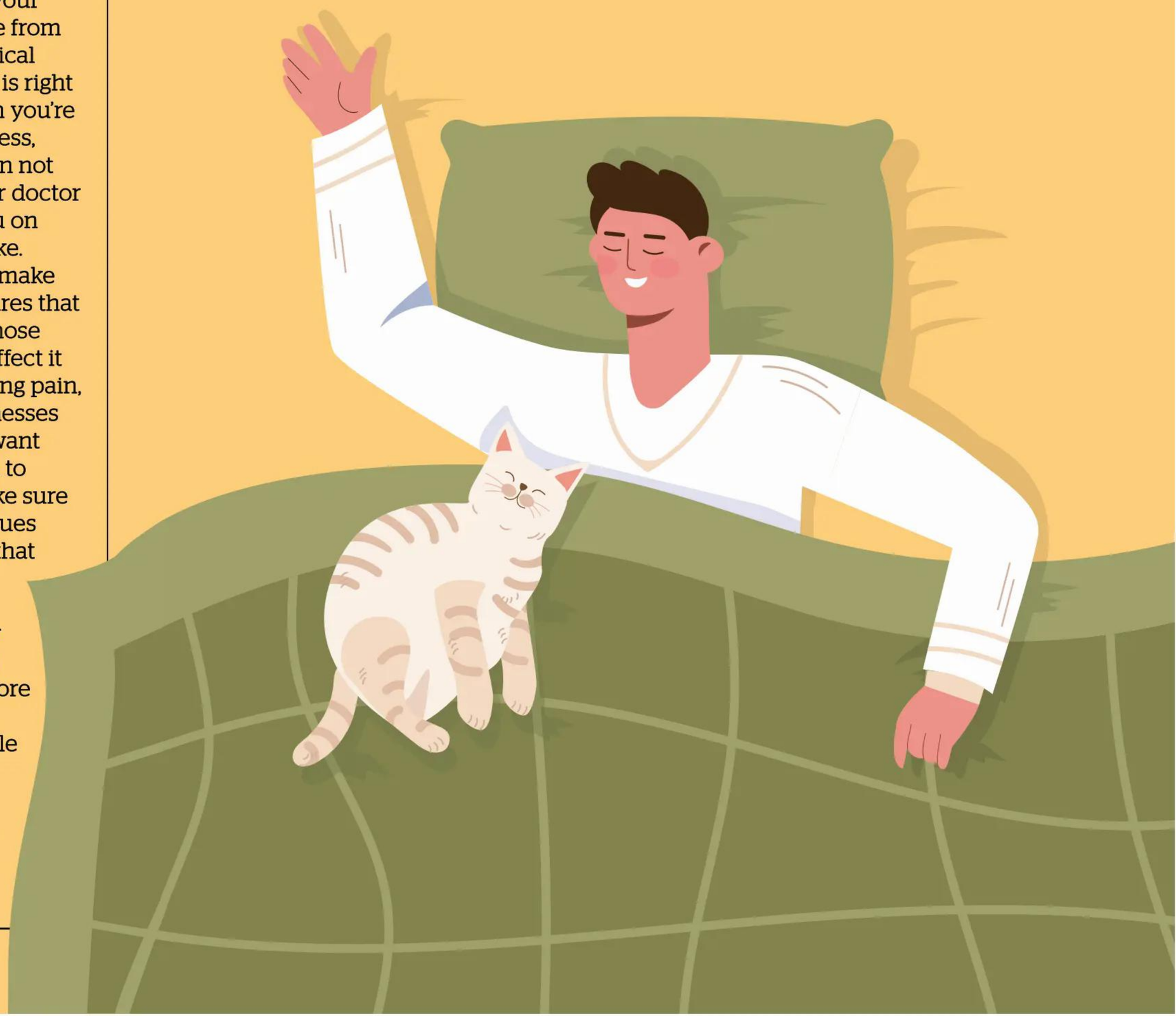
CBD is non-addictive and doesn't make you high, which are two of the features that make it preferable to cannabis for those with medical needs. However, the effect it does have – improving sleep, reducing pain, helping to manage symptoms of illnesses – can make it something you don't want to be without. Therefore you'll need to keep a handle on your usage to make sure it never gets out of hand and continues to be the natural, effective product that it is. While there does remain some element of stigma around CBD, as people associate it with cannabis or marijuana and believe anyone who takes it could be getting high, the more research that's done and the more people learn about the benefits while understanding the side effects, the more it will become mainstream and people can make the most of it without experiencing judgement. ■

MYTH 5: CBD HAS NO SIDE EFFECTS

While it's true that CBD doesn't contain the addictive properties of other pain medication, it's not completely free from side effects. It can result in anything from nausea to fatigue and users should be aware of this when considering it as a medical care option.

On that subject, given that CBD shouldn't be used as the sole medication for managing some conditions, be aware that it can react with other medication, such as blood thinners, and have a negative effect on your health and the medicine you're taking. With this in mind, always make sure your doctor knows you're taking or planning to take CBD so they can make an informed decision over any treatment or medication you need. CBD by itself is a useful product but, as with any supplement, needs to be carefully managed.

"CBD IS A USEFUL COMPANION TO THOSE WISHING TO CONTROL THEIR ANXIETY LEVELS"



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HOW TO HEAL Emotional HURT

Turn your breakdowns into breakthroughs by learning how to heal your pain



DONNA LANCASTER
COACH AND THERAPIST

Donna Lancaster has worked as a coach and therapist for more than 25 years. Formerly head of teaching at the Hoffman Institute UK and co-creator of The Bridge Retreat, she is also the author of *The Bridge: A Nine Step Crossing into Authentic and Wholehearted Living* (£16.99 ($20), Penguin).

WWW.DEEPENINGINTOLIFE.COM

WORDS DONNA LANCASTER

We wouldn't be human if we didn't feel sadness at certain times in our lives, but learning to let go can open the door to a brighter, more content future. Every life contains periods of pain and loss when our heart aches. But that doesn't mean we can't try to heal these wounds. Therapist and author Donna Lancaster believes that to be fully happy, it's vital to work on healing our past heartbreak.

"When we don't allow the time and space to feel our sadness, anger and fears – our grief about our past – then it never really leaves us. It defines our present," she explains. So how do we work through the effects of these tough times, draw strength from them, and start to live life to the full? Here are some tips on how to get started on your healing journey.

1 SHARE YOUR STORY

Donna recommends starting by acknowledging the hurt and loss you have experienced in your life so far. This can be really tough, but it's so important. "If we don't actively address past heartbreaks, our life force can become blocked and life feels heavy, like we're wading through treacle," she explains.

DO IT ***Map your heartbreak. On paper, write a timeline of the age you were when any significant hurts or losses happened. Everyday upsets can wound us deeply, so if it feels important, write it down. Think about how these past events have impacted on your life as you record them.***

2 BECOME YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND

Donna suggests "making a list of all the derogatory thoughts or words you've used against yourself, committing to ban them and replace them with words you would offer someone you love."

DO IT ***Be kind to yourself. Make a list of things that you like about you. Think about how you'd be kinder to yourself today if you were your own best friend, then behave like a great friend would. Donna urges us to "commit to doing one small positive thing each day – it could be as simple as taking a short walk."***

3 WHAT CAN YOU LEARN?

Once you have a clearer picture of past emotional pain, it's time to find out what it's saying to you right now. Donna explains that sadness always has something to tell us when we communicate with it. By connecting with the part of us that's still hurting and by being honest about how we feel, we clear the path to future growth.

DO IT ***Write a letter. Look at your timeline and think of yourself as the age you were when you were first hurt. Who were you then? Write a letter from the point of view of this past heartbroken self to the person who wounded you. It's for your eyes only, so write from your heart.***

4 THE POWER OF AN APOLOGY

You may have been waiting many years for the person who hurt you to say sorry, but what if they never do? Now it's time for you to take back some power and create your own heartfelt apology. Donna says that it can be "like a healing balm on an open wound."

DO IT ***Say sorry for your hurt. Write a letter to yourself from the point of view of the person***

> "WORK THROUGH THE EFFECTS OF TOUGH TIMES, DRAW STRENGTH FROM THEM, AND LIVE LIFE TO THE FULL"

who hurt you. Include everything you would like to hear them say. This may be challenging, but Donna points out that "true forgiveness is not about the other person. It can set us free."

5 MAKE JOY YOUR SUPERPOWER

What makes you light up with positive energy? "Joy is a superpower because it's highly contagious," says Donna. "The more you feel it, the more others do too, and this generates more joy inside you as you feel the ripple effect of your superpower!"

DO IT ***Practise daily gratitude. Every day, pause to give thanks for the good things in your life. Write them down or say them out loud. The more you focus on the positive, the more joyful you'll feel.***

6 BE THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

By healing past hurt, we're not aiming to live happily ever after, but to open the door to our best self right now. How can your breakdown become a breakthrough? Donna says, "When we clear away the debris of false layers, I believe what sits underneath is simply our true nature, which is love, kindness, peace and joy."

DO IT ***Manifest positivity. Donna recommends volunteering as a way of sharing the gifts our experience has given us. "Identify the issues that matter to you then ask yourself what you could do to help." By channelling the positive qualities we have to give, we can gain true freedom in life.***

© Getty Images / Angelina Bambina

ARE WE Bubble-Wrapping OUR KIDS?



Sheltering children from all harm sounds innocent, but it could add more to their adult life

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

There is so much to be wary of in the world. From abductions to new illnesses, the more you hear about, the more there is for parents to protect their children from. Although keeping children inside or accompanied at all times will undoubtedly lower the possibility of encountering such dangers, this can cause hidden damage that brews ready to present itself at a later time.

Bubble-wrap parenting is the term given to parents who overprotect their children. The metaphorical bubble they raise their children in means that as these young people go through early life, they never have to encounter much difficulty or stress. Some parents will even avoid strict discipline so that they don't make their kids feel uncomfortable

or anxious. However, by stopping early exposure to stress and painful situations, children become unable to confront and manage these pressures later on in life.

Why do parents feel the need to overprotect their children? Societal expectations are largely at play, along with the incessant flow of worrisome news headlines. As people have become more gripped by negative news stories, more are reported, making communities feel increasingly unsafe. Other people's comments on a person's parenting choices, such as a neighbour who expresses that your child shouldn't be playing outside alone, can further instil this need to protect. Parents sometimes feel the need to match others' standards of protection for fear of being judged as irresponsible.

The issues created by a challengeless childhood

No child should feel neglected. But, many parents intervene in their children's smallest downfalls. Whether that's finishing off their school project for them without imperfections or dropping off a packed lunch that the child forgot to pack, these consistent favours mean that the child never has to face disappointment or constructive criticism. Sure, the fraudulent school project might get full marks and put the child at the top of their class. But that child will soon come to expect praise and academic success without putting in any effort or learning time management.

If a parent innocently helps out while the child is young, later when the work is graded and parental help is forbidden, the student won't have learned how to take accountability for deadlines and will struggle to accept negative feedback or results. They won't have naturally developed problem-solving skills, because their parents made early education too easy.

> "BY STOPPING EARLY EXPOSURE TO STRESSFUL SITUATIONS, CHILDREN BECOME UNABLE TO MANAGE THESE PRESSURES"

NEW-PARENT FEAR

When you welcome a new baby into the world, it's easy for first-time parents to become overwhelmed by the unrivalled responsibility of protecting the health and wellbeing of a vulnerable infant. The fierce instinctual need to safeguard a newborn is natural and, in mothers, this is driven by the flood of hormones the body releases during pregnancy. Babies rely on the consistent dedication of a parent for everything they do. So, with such an escalated duty for new parents, how do you know when this protection has become overbearing and unhealthy?

Postnatal anxiety is possible in the first year following birth, and presents itself as intrusive thoughts and catastrophising about what could happen to your baby. This leads to parents being overprotective and obsessing over small changes in their child's development. It's important to speak to a medical professional if worries over your child are hard to control. Not only can this anxiety lead to parents limiting the early experiences a baby is exposed to and the cognitive stimulation they receive, but it also has a debilitating effect on the parent's quality of life.

In the second example, regarding a forgotten packed lunch, parents will differ on what they believe is appropriate. Young children who don't have the responsibility of packing their own school bags will need their food, but for older kids and teenagers, dropping off their lunch is usually seen as bubble-wrapping. In adult life, nobody will be there to chase after them with food, so experiencing the consequences of not being organised will make sure that after one day with no lunch, the child will make a habit of packing it every following morning.

Nobody can sail through life succeeding at everything they attempt. People need to take risks, try new things and learn from situations that don't follow the path they envisioned. As an adult, it's easy to forget that the reason you think you're better at handling failure than your children is because you have had experience at it since you were young. If you then intercept any failure you foresee for your child, you are depriving them of the crucial stage in their life when they can fail and learn with limited consequences.

Success is never guaranteed, but the best successes often come after multiple failed attempts. When a child fails in sport, school or social activities, they will initially find it hard. But, instead of preventing these moments from happening at all, it's better for parents to use them as learning opportunities. What was it that caused the disappointment? What could they do next time? And most importantly, teach the child that it is okay for things not to go to plan. When they eventually succeed at the same event, the happiness and pride is sure to feel much greater. The child will learn how failures can shape them and can tackle new things more fearlessly and with patience, determination and resilience. Those who don't will fear failure and are more at risk of suffering from anxiety later on in life. In fact, studies show that coping with some stress in childhood causes part of the brain's cortex – the area that controls resilience – to grow larger.

Anyone who has never failed at anything in their early years has no reason to expect failure in later life. After all, by excessively shielding them, their parents have provided them with a warped interpretation of life. Something you have never encountered is as good as non-existent, so when bubble-wrapped children leave their parents' assistance, they have unrealistic expectations of reality and become naive to real-world challenges. These children have also never had to tackle a challenge alone, and will lack independence.

Does overprotection actually reduce risk?

The main reason parents are overprotective of their children is because they fear those they are most responsible for being »

in danger. Yet, by creating a protective bubble around their children, they increase their fragility. The logic behind this parenting is that not exposing the children to danger means they will learn to stay away from it. In reality, children who miss out on the experiences their peers get are more likely to make risky decisions in their teenage and adult years.

Every child is different and needs room in their early years to experiment with who they are and learn to navigate risky activities safely. While some may become overly anxious adults after not being given the space to grow and learn about risk, other overprotected children will feel the need for independence in later life. This can include going against everything they were told as children. The danger of this is that as soon as they leave home, these children become impulsive and rebellious. Because they have been protected from trivial dangers, bubble-wrapped children don't have a clear perception of which risks are minor and which can become life-threatening.

What are the psychological effects of bubble-wrapping?

A key driver for parents becoming overprotective is anxiety. As children use their parents' responses to the environment around them as a guide to how safe they are, they pick up on the anxiety displayed in their household. This can impact their own mental health from as young as two years old. If parents hold on to these anxieties for a person's entire childhood, the constant thoughts of fear about the world that are projected onto them can amalgamate into debilitating anxiety. Around 60% of children who suffer from anxiety have parents who also suffer from it.

Whether overprotective households are based on strict rules or excessive attention, both impact a young person's mindset. Someone who has overly strict parents can become scared of very slight risk. Meanwhile, those who are overly protected from the smallest misfortunes can be told that they are special. Everyone should know their self-worth, but when they are given special treatment, children can develop an entitled attitude. And naturally so. In the world they have grown up in, they have been protected from anything that could cause them discomfort, so they will view anything that they have to work for as unjust. Unfortunately, most things in life require dedication and effort. So, their parents are setting them up for failure in adulthood.

Another psychological effect of bubble-wrapping is the need for validation. If a young person knows they need to get the approval of their caregiver to take part in any activity, seeking approval becomes very natural. When they move out and stop living with their parents, as adults they are likely to develop a people-pleasing attitude. This means that they act based on the needs of others rather than themselves. Thoughtfulness is a positive trait, but at the sacrifice of a person's own happiness and wellbeing, this becomes unhealthy. Overprotective adults are more likely to raise insecure adults who are incapable of setting their own boundaries.

Lastly, when infants and children grow up surrounded by excessive parental worry, their environment is engineered to emulate perfection. There's a lot of pressure on parents to do everything perfectly, so that they give their children the best start to life. But, there is no such thing as perfection in raising children, and because everyone is unique, not every child can be brought up the same. By focusing on a

> "BY CREATING A PROTECTIVE BUBBLE AROUND OUR CHILDREN, WE INCREASE THEIR FRAGILITY"

5 TIPS FOR REMOVING THE WRAP

1. CREATE CRITICAL THINKING SPACE

You might think you know more as an adult, but hold back from providing all the answers to life problems. Letting children think through solutions will prepare them for future issues faced.

2. TRANSLATE WORRIES INTO GUIDANCE

If you are worried about your child, provide helpful guidance instead of vocalising all your worries. If you regularly display anxious feelings, your child is more likely to develop anxiety.

3. INTRODUCE RESPONSIBILITY

You don't want your child to grow up too fast. However, by removing any chores or responsibility, children are less equipped to tackle bigger ones later on in life.

4. EMBRACE FAILURES

When your child makes a mistake, you shouldn't constantly save them from hardship. Instead, let them face the consequences and fight to conquer challenges.

5. DON'T CUSHION ALL FALLS

It's best not to remove children from all environments that could minorly hurt them physically or emotionally. Painful experiences can build a more wise and resilient adult.

perfect and sheltered upbringing, children are more likely to think they need to be perfect in order to do well in school, relationships or any part of their lives. If their childhood is strictly controlled, children may become perfectionists to make sure they always have control in their life going forward. This becomes problematic when striving for perfection makes a person think they are never good enough, or leads to them always picking out problems in their friends and partners.

From saviour to supporter

What can you do to help a child through challenging experiences, instead of removing the obstacles altogether? Firstly, remember that although overprotection is damaging, so is neglect. You still hold the responsibility of being the primary safeguarder and guider. Continue to inform a child of what they should or shouldn't do. Keep them away from things that could really harm them, and explain these dangers.

After teaching children verbally, the more minor lessons are best learned practically. Give your child some freedom to explore themselves, their surrounding environments and their capabilities, but know they won't have the skills or experience to negotiate the world perfectly. If they fail at something or make a wrong choice, show them empathy. Their frustration, confusion or disappointment should be validated, so they know that it's okay to feel as they do.

The next stage in building a child's learning and resilience is to use yourself as a model. When consoling failure, think of a time you felt or acted the same way, and share the lessons you learned. Most children look up to their parents and guardians, and will know that what they're going through isn't unusual or a personal attack. Help them to think about possible solutions, so that next time they're faced with a similar situation they can be mentally prepared to change their actions. Instead of telling the child what they should have done, a parent should attempt to steer the conversation towards positive changes and make the child think for themselves about what is a suitable next step. This assists future problem solving, rather than just teaching them to blindly follow demands.

Alternative parenting types

There are four main types of parenting styles, aside from the over-involved. These are authoritarian, permissive, neglectful and authoritative. Authoritarian parenting is the strictest of the four. The child is expected to listen and do as they're told or they are punished. Unlike the bubble-wrapped child who might rebel, those who were brought up in an authoritarian household are usually very well behaved. Rebellion is common after leaving home, however. This strict upbringing ensures children can follow instructions and reach a high goal, but they may have low self-esteem and anger issues caused by their lack of control.

Permissive parents have a completely opposite approach. They have little to no expectations of their children and maintain a friendly relationship without much discipline. These children usually have high self-esteem and social skills, but are more demanding and can make impulsive and dangerous decisions.

The third parenting type is the polar opposite to bubble-wrap parenting. Instead of being overprotective and highly involved in every aspect of their children's lives, neglectful parenting solely involves meeting basic needs. They might provide for their children physically, but emotionally they make limited effort to connect. They allow their children to do whatever they like and learn life lessons for themselves. This method produces highly resilient and independent adults, but they are forced to fend for themselves a lot of the time. Later, these children are more likely to have erratic emotions and struggle to form close relationships with other people as easily.

When compared to other parenting styles, it's clear that bubble-wrap parenting stems from positive intentions. Each form of parenting results in some good characteristics, however, these are often accompanied with a host of repercussions. Some of the core values of overprotective parents are beneficial in keeping children safe, but they should be scaled back.

Authoritative parenting is regarded as the healthiest parenting style for children to be exposed to. This involves healthy communication and clear guidelines that are put in place to keep the child safe and disciplined – without strict punishment and with the space to accomplish goals on their own. Instead of taking over a child's life and controlling every aspect, you should give children some freedom; to make mistakes as children, fight their own battles and come back stronger. Using all the bubble wrap at once to keep your children unscathed just means there's less to pass on to them when they eventually fly the nest and there's more of them to break.

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WHAT MAKES US Cry!



The psychology behind crying and why our eyes water

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

Tears are a clear liquid that fills your eyes when you experience significant pain, overwhelming emotion or the invasion of an irritant, but not all tears roll down your cheeks in uncontrollable streams. If you've ever touched your own eyeball, you'll know that it's always wet. This is because tears are produced by your eyes constantly. Usually, the volume of tears produced is low enough that they don't overflow out of your eyes. Instead they're drained by tiny holes in the upper and lower eyelids called tear ducts.

Tears contain the salts potassium chloride and sodium chloride, enzymes, lipids and essential minerals such as calcium and magnesium. Lysozyme is one of the most abundant enzymes in tears, as the first line of defence against bacteria. This protein works to kill any bacteria that enters the eye, which can easily happen when you rub your eyes with your hands. But not all of the benefits of crying are physical. Psychologically, we feel differently about others when we see them cry. It can show a person's vulnerability, and studies show that during emotional arguments, people often become less aggressive towards others when witnessing them crying. By releasing tears you're also more likely to receive help from others, bond with them and be trusted.

Why we cry with happiness

Crying is a release of emotion, but this emotion doesn't always have to be sadness. Have you ever

> “WE FEEL DIFFERENTLY WHEN WE SEE PEOPLE CRY”

been reunited with a close friend and burst into tears as soon as they arrived? Or perhaps you've been to a wedding and noticed many of the guests wiping away their tears. Although you know when you are happy and sad, the brain can become overwhelmed by influxes of such strong emotions. Both positive and negative emotions are dealt with in similar ways by releasing tears. The amygdala is the part of the brain that processes emotional and behavioural responses. Just before you cry with happiness, the amygdala sends a signal to the glands in the eyes to make them produce more tears. When these tears are released from the eyes, the hormone oxytocin is also released in the body, working to calm the body by instigating physical changes such as reducing blood pressure. In the same way that sad crying relieves the negative emotions felt, happy crying stops the brain being overwhelmed with opposing changes in your mental state.

Types of tear

The act of crying can have negative connotations, but not all crying is the same. Some tears are produced during highly stressful and emotional events, while others are formed after a single cut into an onion. There are three types of tears, differentiated by their triggers and impact on the body: basal, emotional and reflex tears. Each type also varies in its composition. Basal tears are always present on your eyeballs. They are made up of three layers, serving as a protective coating for delivering nutrients to the eyes. Without these tears, your eyeballs would dry out.

While basal tears work to keep small amounts of physical debris out of the eyes, emotional tears relieve stress and help to stabilise mental health. Stress chemicals have been detected in emotional tears, meaning that the act of crying can literally flush overwhelming feelings away. The third type is reflex tears. These are mostly made of water, which is released in higher volumes when an irritant such as a small insect – or the enzymes and acid released by onions when they're cut – makes contact with the eyeball. More antibodies, which are defence proteins of the immune system, are released in these tears to fight any harmful cells that might enter the eye.

WHY THE WATERWORKS?

Here are some ways that releasing tears impacts mental health

COMMUNICATION

Crying is a crucial display of emotion, which other people can use as a visual cue. Tears are a way to communicate sadness, joy and empathy.

STRESS REDUCTION

Stress hormones and chemicals are freed from the body in tears. This means that when crying, your stress levels are lowered to create relief.

PAIN RELIEF

Emotional tears contain endorphins and oxytocin. These are like natural painkillers that can lower both physical and emotional pain.

EMOTIONAL BALANCE

When the amygdala sends signals to tear glands during extreme highs and lows, this method of release is used to prevent emotions becoming unmanageable.

SOCIAL BONDING

If someone sees you cry, their brain instigates a compassionate and protective response towards you. This builds empathy, which helps two people to form a social connection.

MOOD ENHANCEMENT

Oxytocin and endorphins don't just relieve pain, they also improve a person's mood. Additionally, sobbing makes you breathe short bursts of cool air, cooling the brain and improving mood.

CATHARSIS

Crying-related catharsis is strongly linked with the environment. When crying is welcomed and supported by others, cathartic feelings are usually experienced. This is stronger with a small group present.

SELF-SOOTHING

Crying activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This system relaxes the body for energy conservation. When crying, it reduces distress and regulates emotions.

COPING WITH GRIEF

When losing a loved one, people can experience intense sorrow, guilt, anger or a temporary lack of emotion. Releasing tears helps to acknowledge these feelings and return them to their usual levels.

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Feeling INFERIOR

We explore what it means to have an inferiority complex and how you can overcome it to improve your mental health and wellbeing

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Feelings of inferiority happen to all of us; we might feel 'lesser' than someone else, whether that's due to their rank, status or ability. It's human nature to compare ourselves to others and we might perceive that, sometimes, we come up short. This can make us feel inadequate, sad or frustrated, but most of the time these feelings pass as we put them into perspective. However, sometimes it's harder to move on from this feeling of 'not being good enough', so much so that it starts to impact on our mental wellbeing, which is when it can become a problem.

Inferiority complex is when a person has sustained and persistent feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, beyond a normal, healthy reaction. So, for example, you might interview for a job and not get it – it's quite normal to feel disappointed and upset for a period of time. However, for someone with an inferiority complex, the level of disappointment and self-doubt felt is usually disproportionate to the event that caused it. Inferiority complex can be experienced due to real, tangible reasons (like a particular physical attribute, or scoring lower on a test than someone else), or it can be due to things that we imagine are true, even if this isn't reflected in real life.

People with an inferiority complex can react in many different ways, from withdrawing from situations that make them feel inadequate, to being intensely competitive to try and compensate for their perceived shortcomings. However, there are some common signs that may help to identify an inferiority complex. A person who feels persistently inferior may be low in self-esteem and often doubt their ability to do something for fear of being compared to others and being seen as 'less able'. They may also be prone to overanalysing situations and conversations; even if comments are positive, they may not believe that they are true. They may also withdraw from social situations in which they feel inferior. Reactions can also »

> "THE LEVEL OF DISAPPOINTMENT AND SELF-DOUBT IS USUALLY DISPROPORTIONATE TO THE EVENT THAT CAUSED IT"

LINKS TO OTHER DISORDERS

Inferiority complex, as we've explained, isn't its own diagnosable disorder, however it is often noticed alongside other mental health conditions and diagnoses. For example, feeling constantly inferior can contribute to depression and anxiety, as well as some personality disorders. Feelings of inferiority around the physical body can also contribute to eating disorders or body dysmorphic disorder. It's important to seek the right help and support if feelings of inferiority are present alongside other symptoms that may be commonly associated with these mental health conditions. The first stop is usually your doctor, who may refer you to counselling or therapy sessions alongside other treatments.



range from actively seeking out praise and compliments to help validate self-worth, or speaking negatively about others to try to make themselves feel better. Other common signs include negative self-talk, feeling resentful of others, procrastination because of the fear of starting something and doing badly, and perfectionism to try to overcome perceived inadequacies.

Inferiority complex, however, is not a disorder that can be diagnosed on its own; it is a state of mind in which you find yourself focusing on your real or imagined shortcomings more than usual. That's not to say that the treatments for other diagnosed mental health conditions can't be successful in the treatment of an inferiority complex, particularly talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which can help to reframe your thoughts. There is also a lot that you can do for yourself if you think you have an inferiority complex. If you find yourself fixating on other people and what they have that you don't, or constantly comparing yourself to others to the point it takes over your thoughts, then this can be a sign that you might need a little help.

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Constantly living in a state where you feel inferior and that everyone is doing better than you can, understandably, have a big impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

This can contribute to certain mental health conditions, like depression or anxiety. Feeling inferior can lead to self-doubt, worry, stress and sadness. Living with these thoughts and feelings over a sustained period of time can make you become withdrawn and not want to engage with your normal social circles or environments. It might also lead to feelings of 'what's the point in trying?'. All of these can develop into a more serious mental health disorder.

You may also find that spending so much time focusing on your perceived inadequacies means that you don't have a good quality of life. You may find that you shy away from social events, or stop doing things you enjoy because you feel like you're not good enough. The problem is that the more you withdraw from something, the less chance you have to improve. For example, feeling inferior at work can stop you from taking on more challenging roles and projects, which may mean that you're passed over for a promotion, which then enhances and confirms your perceived sense of inferiority, making it much more difficult to break the cycle.

The knock-on effect can be that you don't look after yourself as well as you should, which can mean that you don't get enough sleep, exercise or quality food, all of which can contribute to poorer mental health and physical wellbeing.

For some, the impact of living with an inferiority complex can be even more harmful. If you're feeling constantly inadequate and have low self-esteem, you might be more likely to turn to self-destructive habits. This might be drinking more than usual, using recreational drugs, or overeating on low-nutrition 'junk' foods.

When an inferiority complex can develop

There are lots of reasons why normal, occasional feelings of inadequacy can develop into a complex series of relentless thoughts. It usually develops over time, and there are many events or life experiences that can contribute to the development of an inferiority complex. One 2022 study* analysed social media posts that indicated inferiority feelings (based on the theory that people often use social media as a way to express their thoughts, even when they might not do it face to face in real life) and found that the common themes behind those feelings were: 'experience, physical defect, personality, love/relationships, ability and social interaction', among others.

For some, it's bedded in the physical; the way that we feel about our own bodies. This can be things like specific disabilities or physical impediments, which can sometimes lead to feelings of inadequacy if we struggle to do the same things as those around us. Or we may struggle with our body shape, height or facial features – we may become overly self-conscious as a result of the way

> "YOU MAY SHY AWAY FROM SOCIAL EVENTS, OR STOP DOING THINGS YOU ENJOY BECAUSE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH"

we see ourselves and this can make us feel inferior around others. This is often exacerbated by the use of social media, where the ability to compare lives with people from all walks of life, and from all around the world, is at our fingertips.

Feelings of inadequacy can have their roots in childhood and have stayed with us ever since. This could be due to a difficult upbringing, being constantly belittled or put down. Some children are pushed to pursue certain sports, or excel academically, which can lead to frustration, anger and doubt when it's difficult to meet those high standards. It can be hard to shake off this sense of failure as we move into adulthood.

An inferiority complex can still develop after the most secure of upbringings. Sometimes it can be triggered by a specific traumatic event – a serious illness, accident or loss of a loved one, for example. It can also develop because of life challenges, which could be financial (not earning as highly as peers, for example), social (feeling like our lives are not as exciting as others') or professional (we're not as high up the career ladder as we 'should' be).

Family dynamics can be difficult and may sometimes contribute to feelings of inadequacy. This can be true if, for example, a sibling is particularly high achieving or if there is a sense of favouritism from parents. This can lay the ground for comparison and competition from a young age. Even as an adult, we might struggle with having to justify our life choices to parents or feel like we've let them down if we don't follow a specific path. Personal relationships and friendships in adulthood can also be triggers, however we have more choice in these connections, often being drawn to people who are similar to ourselves and therefore we may be less likely to engage in regular comparison or competition.

Coping with an inferiority complex

If your life is consumed by thoughts of inadequacy, it can be very difficult and challenging. It takes a change in mindset, from a state of mind in which you feel inferior, to a place of acceptance – i.e. learning to be at peace with the person you are right now, no matter what's going on around you. This means learning how to catch those negative thoughts when you sense them, and reframe them in a more positive way. You can acknowledge the thought and consider its truth. Is it a fact? Has something concrete happened to cause the sense of inferiority? What can you learn from that? Or is it something that you perceive to be true, but has no basis in reality? How can you control that?



INFERIORITY AS A MOTIVATOR

We all experience a sense of inferiority from time to time; it's a normal part of life to compare ourselves to others. When these feelings of inferiority and inadequacy take over our thoughts and negatively impact on our daily lives, that's when it becomes an issue. However, sometimes a small dose of inferiority can be a positive thing. For example, when we see a highly trained athlete compete, we might feel inferior to them, but it could still motivate us to want to go out and do that sport. At work, we might see a colleague doing great things on a project and feel inferior, which could then incentivise us to take steps to improve ourselves and our career. A little sense of feeling inferior can, from time to time, be a good thing, driving us to push ourselves, as long as our mental health and happiness don't rely on it.

Keeping a journal can help, giving you somewhere to unspool your thoughts and make sense of them. Often the act of noticing and acknowledging your thoughts can be the first step towards acceptance. Try to also use the space to think of positive affirmations you can incorporate into your life – remind yourself daily of your strengths and positive attributes, to counteract the negative feelings of inadequacy.

You don't have to do it alone. You may wish to speak to a professional, particularly if it's affecting your everyday life. However, even talking with friends and family can be a big step. They can help to put things into perspective, give you a reality check and remind you of what you're good at.

There is only one 'you', so relish your uniqueness and individuality. We can't all be amazing at everything, so there will always be those who are better than us throughout our life in certain areas. But life's not a competition and no one should make us feel like we're inferior, not even ourselves. ■

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*Liu, Y., Xu, C., Kuai, X. et al. Analysis of the causes of inferiority feelings based on social media data with Word2Vec. Sci Rep 12, 2022

WHY WE Dream

The science behind your slumber and the benefits of drifting off to dreamland



WORDS SCOTT DUTFIELD

On average, we spend about a third of our lives – or around 26 years – sleeping, six years of which are spent drifting off to dreamland. During an optimal seven-hour sleep at night, the body experiences sleep cycles with four stages, which together take between 90 and 110 minutes to complete. The first two stages, called NREM 1 and NREM 2 (non-rapid eye movement) involve light sleep that lasts up to around 25 minutes. NREM 3 is the stage of deepest sleep and lasts for up to 40 minutes. Around 75% of a person's sleep is spent in NREM sleep. Dreams can occur through each of these stages, but during the final REM stage in the cycle, brain activity picks up, and we begin to vividly dream. In each of the four to five sleep cycles that occur in one night, the REM sleep stage increases in duration with each new cycle, starting at only ten minutes and increasing up to an hour long. The REM sleep stage is also when people are most likely to spontaneously wake up in the morning.

Three parts of the brain play a key role during REM sleep and allow us to dream: the hippocampus, amygdala and cortex. Each of these regions of the brain allows us to tap into the emotional, visual and memory content of a dream. As for the purpose of dreams, scientists still aren't entirely sure. Scientists think that they help us process emotions, retain information and cement new memories. Studies have shown that during sleep, those that spend more time in REM sleep have lower fear-related brain activity the next day and may be less prone to developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But don't worry if you don't remember your dreams – not everyone does. Around one in 250 people report having never remembered a dream in their lives. On average, a person will experience between four and six dreams per night. This is because the memory storage region of the brain, called the hypothalamus, is inhibited during the REM stage and doesn't record your dreams.

Restorative sleep

During sleep, the brain undergoes a period of rejuvenation: the brain's cells form, reorganise and repair themselves to cement memories and knowledge. It's also quickly working to remove all the waste that's built up within it. During the day our brains are naturally flooded with all sorts of molecules, such as proteins and carbon dioxide, which scientists call interstitial metabolic waste products. These can be harmful to the brain if they're not removed. That's where the brain's drainage system comes into play. Known as a glymphatic clearance, this evicts waste products from the brain and drains them away through the body's lymphatic system. This process is most effective while we sleep, with some studies suggesting that twice the amount of waste proteins are cleared from the brain during sleep. Studies have also linked a reduction in the effectiveness of glymphatic clearance, and subsequent accumulation of metabolic waste products, with the development of neurological diseases such as Alzheimer's and dementia.

The consequences of dream deprivation

How our bodies respond to being denied access to REM sleep:

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

The development of anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders have all been linked to poor dreaming.

HORMONE IMBALANCE

Sleep deprivation can lead to hormonal imbalances and disrupt the endocrine system. This can affect mood, cognitive function and even future sleep cycles.

CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

Those who suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, a condition associated with a reduction in REM dreaming, also have an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

PAIN SENSITIVITY

Some studies have shown that a reduction of REM sleep and dream deprivation may increase a person's sensitivity to pain.

OBESITY

When people haven't had enough REM sleep, it can increase the production of ghrelin, also known as the hunger hormone, which affects our appetite.

IMMUNE SYSTEM

Generally, sleep promotes a healthy immune system. However, some studies have found a reduction in REM sleep leads to an increase in inflammation in the body.

> "DREAMS HELP US PROCESS EMOTIONS, RETAIN INFORMATION AND CEMENT NEW MEMORIES"



5 TIPS TO HELP YOU REMEMBER YOUR DREAMS

1. LOOK AT YOUR DIET

Some studies have found that vitamin B6 can improve a person's ability to recall their dreams. Foods such as bananas, avocados and milk are a good natural source of the vitamin.

2. TELL YOURSELF YOU WILL

The power of suggestion for people can help to recall dreams. Simply telling yourself throughout the day that you will remember your dreams is believed to improve recall.

3. KEEP A ROUTINE

Ensuring that you maintain regular and optimal sleep periods gives you the best chance of experiencing the longest possible REM sleep, resulting in vivid dreams to recall.

4. BASK IN BED

Don't leap from your bed as soon as you wake up. Taking a few moments before rising gives your brain, especially the amygdala, time to process and recall your dreams.

5. GRAB A JOURNAL

Having a journal and pen next to your bed is a great way to jot down your dreams as soon as you wake before they fade away from memory.

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ANXIETY IN *Children*

Up to one in five children will experience anxiety during their childhood. As parents it's difficult to know when – or even if – we should seek professional support. Consultant Paediatrician Dr Sinead Doyle answers commonly asked questions to put your mind at rest

WORDS BEN GRAFTON



DR SINEAD DOYLE
CONSULTANT COMMUNITY PAEDIATRICIAN

Dr Sinead Doyle is a consultant community paediatrician, specialising in the care of children with physical, emotional and learning difficulties. During her career, she has worked with children for whom anxiety has been a key feature of their condition.

How do I know if my child is suffering from anxiety?

Many parents might ask themselves this question and it's not something that gets talked about enough. I always say to parents it's important to trust your parental instinct. If you think something is not right with your child, or they appear to be more worried than they should be, it's really important to seek advice and support.

In some cases, children can be labelled as 'difficult' or 'attention seeking', when in fact they might be displaying signs that they are struggling with their mental and emotional health. Children's behaviour is often a form of communication, and I think it's important that in some cases we consider what they're trying to tell us.

It can of course be entirely normal for children and young people to have worries. However, if these are starting to significantly impact on their daily life at home or at school, you might want to consider seeking further support.

What are some signs of anxiety in school children?

As with adults, anxiety can often manifest in children and young people in the form of physical symptoms. These include dizziness, pain (such as head and tummy aches), nausea or change in appetite, and difficulty sleeping. Older children might describe more typical symptoms, such as chest tightness or difficulty catching their breath. In some cases, medical advice is sought for these physical symptoms before the possibility of underlying anxiety is considered. It is therefore always important to consider whether a physical symptom in a child or young person might be their way of expressing their emotional needs.

For other children, however, anxiety might be demonstrated in their behaviour. They might be expressing frequent worry or seeking constant reassurance. They might be demonstrating avoidant behaviours, such as refusing to go to school, or comforting behaviours, such as comfort eating. For many children of school age, they may be able to talk to you about their worries directly. However, for children with speech or communication difficulties, for example, different strategies may be needed to help them communicate their feelings.

Do babies and toddlers experience anxiety, too?

For babies and toddlers, anxiety around everyday life is less common because the world in which they live is much smaller, and their cognitive and emotional understanding of the world is a lot less developed. They won't worry about bullying or not having their homework done on time, for example.

As infants, we are wholly dependent on our parents, and so our main concerns are around having our physical and emotional needs met. We know that having a secure attachment as an infant to our

> “CHILDREN CAN BE LABELLED AS ‘DIFFICULT’ OR ‘ATTENTION SEEKING’, WHEN IN FACT THEY MIGHT BE DISPLAYING SIGNS THAT THEY ARE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH”

main caregiver is important for our future mental and emotional health. Where consistent care and nurture isn't provided, this can lead to anxiety, as well as other developmental difficulties, in later childhood.

As toddlers, we start to widen our social network – we develop relationships with other children, and attend group settings, such as playgroups and nursery. For some children there can be some anxiety associated with this transition, which some might term ‘separation anxiety’.

What exactly is separation anxiety?

The emotional attachment between children and their parents is a natural biological imperative that ensures that as children we are kept safe and our needs are met. However, as we grow and begin to explore the world around us, it is important for our development that we can feel able to detach from our parents. This might be more difficult for some children, and anxiety might develop during periods of transition into nursery or school, for example. Children might struggle to settle without their parents being present in the room, or may look to them frequently for a sense of reassurance and security.

Separation anxiety is common and there are strategies that can help your child to overcome it. In some cases, comfort objects, or a gradual introduction into a new environment can be useful. It can be difficult emotionally for parents, too, and so it is important to seek support if you're worried. Depending on the age of your child, you could consider speaking to your child's health visitor – these are specialist nurses who are trained in the care and development of young children. Or if applicable, you could speak to staff at your child's nursery or school.

What sort of anxiety disorders do children commonly experience?

Childhood and adolescence can present »



some of the main anxiety disorders. For some children, their symptoms will be fairly clear cut, allowing a specific diagnosis (such as 'obsessive compulsive disorder') to be made by an appropriately trained professional. Having a specific diagnosis in some cases can be useful in deciding the best way forward in terms of treatment and support. For some children, more than one diagnosis might be given ('anxiety and OCD', for example) as it is well recognised that many of these disorders coexist or overlap.

For many children, however, any symptoms of anxiety may be mild, fluctuant, or even appropriate to the situation. We can all appreciate that exam periods, for example, or even world events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, are inevitably going to impact on mental health. As professionals, when we discuss mental health with children or young people, we try to think about what we call their 'lived experience'. What is their family life like? Where do they go to school? We try to build a picture of the child's life, and think about some of the things that are going well for them, as well as the areas that they feel need more support. Approaching children individually, focusing on their specific symptoms, needs and goals, allows their management to be tailored to them.

My child has a phobia. Is it normal?

Certain fears or anxieties as children are normal, as we try to process and make sense of the world around us. We can all recall as children the fear of 'what's under the bed' or 'what's in the cupboard'. Fear of the dark, for example, is common, and night lights or comfort toys at bedtime often help children to settle and sleep well.

Some perceived irrational fears might persist into later childhood and even adulthood, however, we only start to worry if these fears begin to have a significant impact on a child or young person's daily life. For example, if the fear means that they're not able to attend school or take part in play or leisure activities, then professional support may be needed. There are 'desensitisation' strategies, among others, which can help a child to overcome or adapt to their phobia.

Could my child's anxiety be linked to something more serious?

For many children, symptoms of anxiety will fall into what is perceived as the 'acceptable' or 'normal' range, although this might be different for different people. Children also cope differently, and some children are very good at finding strategies to support themselves, whether that's through peer relationships or through hobbies. Many children and young people cope with a certain degree of anxiety without the need for professional support.

In some cases, however, there might be concerns that anxiety is significantly impacting a child's mental or physical health. If you are concerned that your child's anxiety is impacting on their physical health – for example, if their sleep or their growth is being affected – you should seek support. You should also seek support if you feel that their mental and emotional health, or their learning, is being impacted. For example, if they are increasingly withdrawn, struggling with friendships or relationships, or if they are not able to attend school. For some children, consideration may be given to the possibility of an underlying neurodevelopmental disorder, such as autistic spectrum disorder or attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depending on their specific needs and difficulties.

What are some good sources of information if I am worried about anxiety in my child?

If you are concerned, there are a number of easily accessible avenues of support. You can discuss any difficulties with your doctor in the first instance. They should be able to sign-post you to the appropriate service or support.

For preschool-aged children, they should have an allocated health visitor who will be trained and experienced in supporting children with issues including sleep difficulties, toileting, eating, and emotional and behavioural support.

In the UK, every area has what's termed the 'Local Offer' – this is the range of services available in your area, and is usually accessible via your local council website. This includes mental health support accessible through the NHS, local charities for children and young people, as well as other avenues of support such as parent support groups. For most of these services, you will be able to self-refer without going through your GP.

For children who are school age there is the school nursing service. You can speak to your child's school or your GP about how to access this. School nurses are trained in supporting emotional and behavioural health, including support with anxiety.

Schools themselves may also be able to offer advice and support. Many have access to counselling services, and other forms



of therapy, such as 'play therapy' or 'art therapy'. They are also able to link in with community mental health support teams.

Finally, there are larger, nationally run charities such as Mind (www.mind.org.uk), Young Minds (www.youngminds.org.uk) and Childline (www.childline.org.uk), which all have excellent resources for young people and families seeking support with mental and emotional health.*

How can I help my children in their struggles with anxiety?

The first thing I would suggest is to simply try and have a dialogue with your child. It's not always easy, but reassuring your child that they can approach you and talk to you about their worries is a great first step. If you are able to identify specific triggers for your child's anxiety, it is then easier to address them as a family, with support from other professionals as needed. Don't be afraid to speak to the professionals who support your child, including medical professionals, teachers, social care workers and other support workers.

Simple strategies can be useful – there are some excellent ones listed on the Young Minds website. These might include, for example, providing your child with a 'worry book', where they can write down their worries before they go to bed. For other children, it might be the use of picture cards or the 'traffic light system' to describe how they are feeling.

For children, 'mental health hygiene' is no less important than in adults. By this we mean, taking time to do things that are positive for our mental and emotional wellbeing. This might include making time to exercise, time to see friends and play, time for hobbies, eating healthily and regularly, and making sure we get a good night's sleep. With the advent of social media, there are new wider social pressures on young people, and it is therefore important to manage your child's screen time, and consider the importance of 'online safety' and what they are being exposed to through social media.

> "CERTAIN FEARS OR ANXIETIES AS CHILDREN ARE NORMAL, AS WE TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD"

How has addressing anxiety in children changed in recent years?

One of the key things is that people are talking about mental health in a more open way. I think children and young people are becoming more literate in the language of mental and emotional health. The stigma that used to surround mental health difficulties is starting to dissipate, which is such a positive thing. The media has played a role in this, as has the voice of charities through their advocacy and campaigns. I talked earlier about the negative impacts of social media, however, in some cases social media can be a positive force, and I think it too has helped to spread positive messages about the importance of mental health, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Everyone who cares for or works with children in some capacity now plays a role in ensuring they are supported with their mental and emotional health.

Can technology help my child with their anxiety?

Yes. Many adolescents might not want to speak to their parents or their GP. They might want more non-traditional ways of getting support. Many local services supporting young people's mental health now offer other ways of making contact, such as through text message or online chat. There are also websites and online resources for young people, as well as phone lines where young people can receive direct support.

Technology is also changing the way that we provide healthcare services. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we carry out increasing numbers of consultations online through 'video' consultations. This can be useful for children who may feel more comfortable speaking to a professional from home rather than in a clinical setting.

Do you think technology will ever replace human contact?

I'm not sure if technological advances, such as artificial intelligence, can replace the human experience or human 'touch', particularly when it comes to mental and emotional health. When someone is struggling, one thing they need is to feel listened to and heard, and I'm not sure if that can be achieved through a computer. That's not to say that there isn't a role for technology, and I think as medical professionals, we are very open to embracing new ways of working,



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with the goal of improving patient care and experience.

Are children ever prescribed medication for anxiety?

It is not common to prescribe anxiety medication for children, and these would only be prescribed by specialists working in the area of children's mental health. For many children, support strategies, counselling, and other therapies are very effective at offering support. A small minority of children may receive medication treatment, usually where there is a specific underlying diagnosis and with specialist support. This is more likely in older school-age children and adolescents, and is often used in conjunction with therapies.

How can I feel less alone in dealing with my child's anxiety?

I think the key message is you're not alone, even though at times it might feel like it. There is a lot of support out there, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, not only from professionals, but also from other parents through parent support groups. Speaking to another parent who has been in a similar situation can be very useful. Don't be afraid to ask for help – if in doubt, speak to someone you feel you have a good understanding with, such as your child's teacher, or another keyworker or mentor. If they don't have the answers, they should be able to direct you to someone who does.

It's also important that parents remember to look after their own wellbeing. Caring for a child with anxiety and other emotional health needs can be a worrying and stressful time, and I try to remind parents that to do the best for their children, they also have to do the best for themselves. ■

* If you're in the US, Anxiety and Depression Association of America could help (https://adaa.org) or National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (800-950-NAMI (6264)). If you're in Australia, SANE Australia could help (www.sane.org) or Lifeline (13 11 14).

DOES Someone HAVE YOU IN THEIR POWER?

Five ways to tell whether you are being controlled

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Do you feel like you have no independence in your relationship? Or maybe your boss is constantly breathing down your neck with their unrealistic demands. "Coercive control is a form of psychological abuse where a person uses a range of tactics to dominate the other," says trauma-informed therapist Caroline Strawson. Left unchecked, it can lead to low self-esteem and depression. But to tackle it, you need to know if it's happening to you...

1 YOU'RE ISOLATED

Feel like there's no one to turn to? Gradually breaking down your relationships with others is a sure fire way to keep you all to themself. "This could be a partner disparaging your family, so you no longer spend time with them," says psychologist Dr Meg Arroll, author of *Tiny Traumas* (£16.66, Harper Collins Publishers). This also helps them distract you from the pain they're causing, by placing blame on those closest to you.

2 THERE ARE LIMITS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO

"This can include controlling your food and/or exercise (both either limiting or taken in excess), preventing you from seeking professional help or in other ways denying your autonomy (such as work, education, travel, personal development)," says Dr Arroll. Again, the purpose is to keep you tied to them. A controlling partner can be thought of like a vampire – to energise themselves, feed their ego and establish a sense of power, they need to feed off you. Your depletion keeps them alive.

3 TABS ARE KEPT ON YOU

Is your partner constantly checking what you're doing and who you're with? Or perhaps your boss is micromanaging everything you do. "In other words, you can't do something of your choosing or go somewhere of your choice and not feel guilty about it," says Dr Arroll. Essentially, the abuser doesn't want you to talk to anyone or do anything that might make you realise you should leave.



4 YOU'RE QUESTIONING YOUR SANITY

Also known as gaslighting, this is one of the psychological abuser's favourite tools. For example, they might confidently disagree with details you know to be accurate or even call you names such as 'psycho'. "It's another form of emotional manipulation, to make you feel dependent on them," says Caroline. You might begin to think, 'I'm crazy, delusional and stupid, so I must stay so they can take care of me'.

5 YOU FEEL HUMILIATED

Is your boss constantly putting you down in front of colleagues? Is your close friend repeatedly making jokes at your expense followed by 'You're so sensitive' when you get upset? "Humiliation is used to erode your self-esteem and keep you stuck – either in your job or in the relationship, as you don't believe you can do better," says Caroline. And the cycle of abuse continues.

Coercive control can be a criminal offence, depending on where you are in the world. Seek help if you feel you are being controlled.

"THE ABUSER DOESN'T WANT YOU TO TALK TO ANYONE"

© Getty Images / BRO Vector

YOU CAN FACE YOUR Fears

We're told to feel the fear and do it anyway, but that's sometimes easier said than done. Rather than dreading something, we take a look at finding ways to embrace the fear



WORDS DEBRA WATERS

If you're someone who is distrustful – superstitious, even – of change, these feelings can infiltrate decisions you make, big and small. BIG: it might take ten years of careful consideration, spreadsheets and sleepless nights to move to a different city. SMALL: your daily habits are so set in stone that you bore yourself (same morning coffee, same jogging route, same lunch at the same café). But do you try something new? Nope. And if, for some reason, you have to alter your routine, does your anxiety go into overdrive? Why have you become so change-averse?

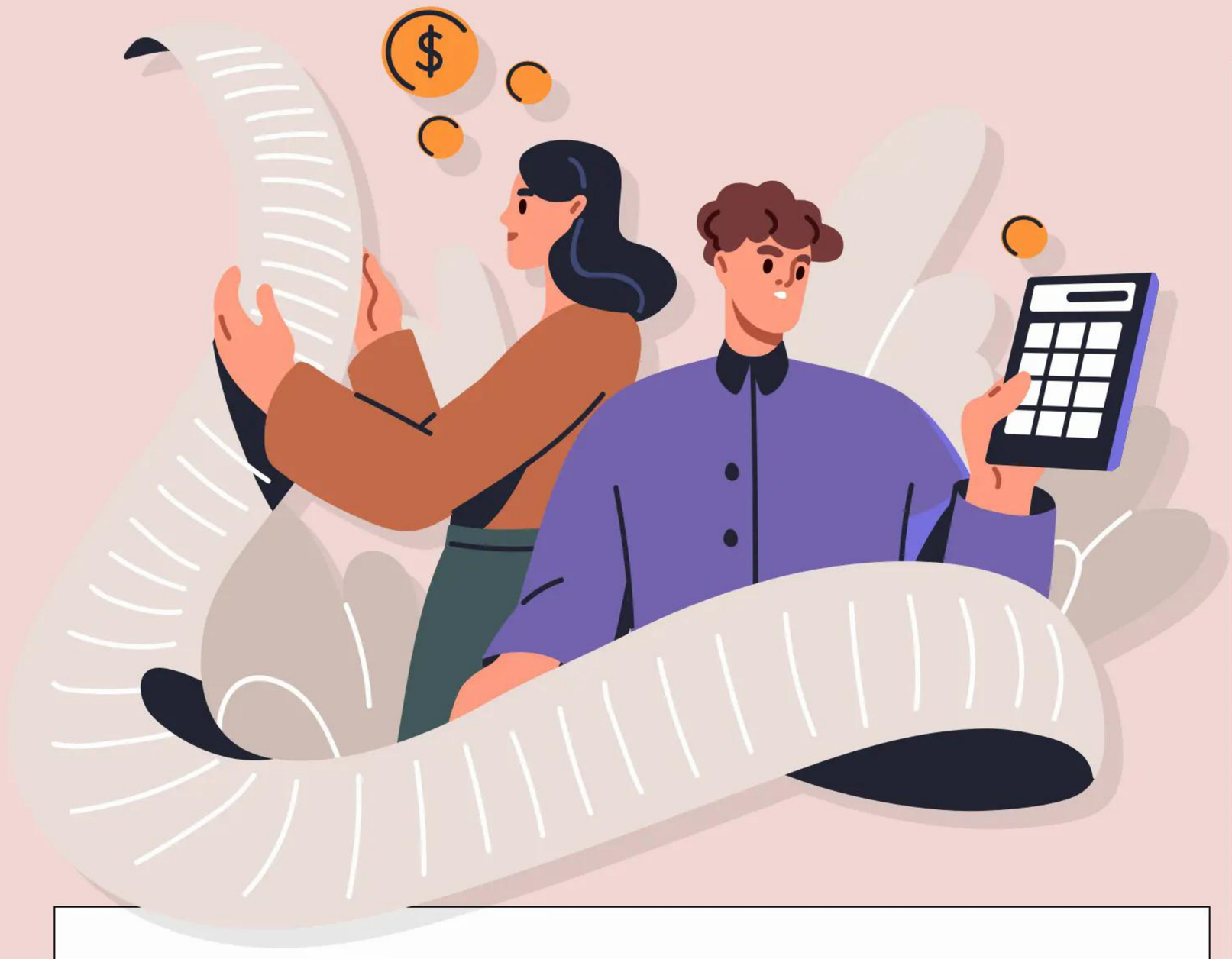
One explanation is 'better the devil you know'. Fear thrives on uncertain outcomes. For instance, you work on an uncomfortable chair that hurts your back – changing it might make your back worse, although it could make it better. More concerning are unhealthy relationships people hold on to, so as not to cause upset or a fuss, or experiences they reject in case they disrupt their carefully curated life. Sometimes, even though we become more comfortable and settled, rather than using this stability as a springboard to a more stimulating life we become more fearful than ever. Yet change can be inspiring and insightful. It enables us to adapt, learn and evolve, and it keeps boredom at bay. So why do many of us find it daunting?

Fear is physical

"Our responses to change are not always conscious or even within our control," says »

“CHANGE ENABLES US TO ADAPT, LEARN AND EVOLVE, AND IT KEEPS BOREDOM AT BAY”





SIGNS YOU NEED TO FACE YOUR FEAR

You...

– let opportunities or experiences pass you by

– avoid spontaneity, yet crave it

– feel unchallenged, bored or stuck in a rut

– envy others who seem to live more fulfilling lives

Becky Hall, a life coach and author of *The Art of Enough* (£14.99, PB, Practical Inspiration Publishing). "Our brains and nervous systems are hard-wired for predictability. Neuroscience shows us that the oldest part of our brain creates patterns quickly – we like to be able to predict what will happen next. So, when unexpected things happen, or we're not certain about how things are going to turn out, our brain responds as if we're in danger. This triggers our nervous systems into high alert, which is why we get anxious."

Could this mean that those of us prone to anxiety are more susceptible to fearing change? The way we react to excitement is sometimes barely distinguishable from a bad case of the nerves. For worriers, our default tends to be fretting over things that could go wrong rather than things that could go right. Perhaps we should give exposure therapy a go, starting with minor, manageable changes to increase our confidence.

Facing your fear

Fear of change isn't always negative. Caution can be self-protective, a gut instinct even. Sometimes it's a reaction to what's occurring in the world, such as the cost of living, which has made many of us fearful of changes to our financial stability. "The key is not to get overwhelmed," says Becky. "We want to be proactive not reactive, so taking time to calm our nervous system, breathe and think positively is crucial. Then we can look at choices we have to make calmly."

But what if we're faced with the unavoidable, such as redundancy? "One trick is to think about something or someone in your life that's certain or predictable," suggests Becky. This is reassuring and provides an anchor.

It can also help to draw two circles, one inside the other, says Becky. "In the inner circle, write down things that you can control or influence; in the outer circle write down things you can't do anything about. Focus on what you have written in the inner circle – things you can do something about. This puts you in your full agency and gives you real choices about things that you are able to affect."

Ultimately, to fear change is to fear loss – of a loved one, our livelihood, wellbeing or security. But playing it safe doesn't shelter us from possible losses – if anything, being too rigid can work against us. American writer Elbert Hubbard wrote, 'The greatest mistake you can make in life is continually fearing that you'll make one'. With this in mind, let's consider the pros and cons of the next change we need to make, and make an informed, panic-free decision. When we look at it rationally, we have nothing to fear but fear itself.

Stop fear from stopping you

"Finding something we can do to improve our health and wellbeing – even a small action – puts us back in the driving seat, and that alone makes us feel better," says health coach Lou Walker (louwalker.com). Here are some expert suggestions...

CALM YOUR MIND

There are real and useful ways of calming our nervous systems down, and reassuring them that we are

> "THINK ABOUT SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IN YOUR LIFE THAT'S CERTAIN OR PREDICTABLE. THIS REASSURES AND PROVIDES AN ANCHOR"

WHERE DOES IT ORIGINATE?

Fear feels like a purely emotional response, but it has a physical origin. "When the amygdala – the part of our brain that controls our fight/flight/freeze response – gets triggered, the energy in our brain is focused on danger. That's great if we're at risk but unhelpful if it happens when we're about to do something that requires our best thinking," says Becky. "Emotions come into it because our amygdala sits on top of the hippocampus, which stores memories," she continues. "This means that, sometimes, a fight/flight/freeze response reminds us of a time when we were worried, or something went wrong. So, not only are we reacting as if we're in danger in the present, but we're connecting it emotionally to past events or trauma. This can lead to anxiety and worry, emotional withdrawal or even actively protesting about things changing at all."

not in danger, says Becky, who suggests two easy ways to self-soothe. First, slow your breathing and think of something positive, she says. "Counting to four as you inhale then exhale calms our nervous system and helps us reset in the present moment. Secondly, go to your happy place. Thinking of something that makes us smile creates 'happy' hormones that override the hormones triggered by stress," says Becky. "When you feel physically calmer you will feel less afraid to make decisions."

TACKLE RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

Often, we fear asking ourselves questions that need answering, but once you've said yes or no you're in a stronger position to move on. Do you want to end your relationship? Yes. Then do it, says counsellor Margaret Ward-Martin (thegraceproject.co.uk). Do you want to end your relationship? Yes, but I'm scared. Then do it scared. "There's no avoiding the pain," says Margaret, "but if you circumvent discomfort it will likely come out in unhealthy ways, so embrace the process."

STOP SELF-MEDICATING

Fear can be hard to live with, so we may self-medicate to numb the nagging anxiety that we need to take action. But we can't face fear if we're using avoidance tactics. It could be a little something to take the edge off the fear – work, wine, prescription medication, illegal drugs, risky sex – but only by accepting the situation can you mitigate some of this fear, says Margaret. Give yourself a chance to tackle changes with a clear head, rather than self-anaesthetising.

IMPROVE YOUR DIET

Is fearfulness connected to the food we consume? Well, we are what we eat. "Our diet affects brain health, mood and thinking," says Lou. "Start by cutting out sugar and ultra-processed foods. This is tough, but start small – it helps. Improving diet lifts mood, clears brain fog and improves depression." If you feel brighter, you're more likely to feel confident about making changes.

ADDRESS YOUR FINANCES

A staggering 77% of adults are worried about the rising cost of living, but by confronting monetary concerns you can make constructive changes. "Identify what's keeping you up at night," says financial expert Makala Green (makalagreen.com). "Pinpointing the source of your stress will provide clarity. Then create a budget – identifying where your money is going can help you save money for areas causing financial concern." If it's too overwhelming, consider using a financial planner – in the long-term you could save more than this costs.*

THINK LIKE A SUCCESSFUL PERSON

If your fear of change is motivated by a fear of failure, try changing your mindset. "Successful people fail!" says Lou. "If you don't try to change something, it might mean you don't fail, but if you don't try, you definitely won't succeed. Trying and failing gives you the chance to learn why it didn't work that time so you can tweak your approach before trying again."

TRUST THAT YOU'LL BE OKAY

If you're fearful of something but you own it, you – not what's worrying you – are in control. Keep busy with healthy things that occupy you. "Being distracted can be restorative," says Margaret. And be kind to yourself. "Change requires effort and sometimes you won't feel like it – that's okay," says Margaret. "A duvet day is in order sometimes, but not if you become depressed (if this is the case, please see your doctor for support). You will be fearful – and you will also be fine."



*Office of National Statistics

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UNSOLICITED Advice

Being given advice you've not asked for can make you feel annoyed and angry, or even judged and embarrassed – so why do people give unwanted advice?

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

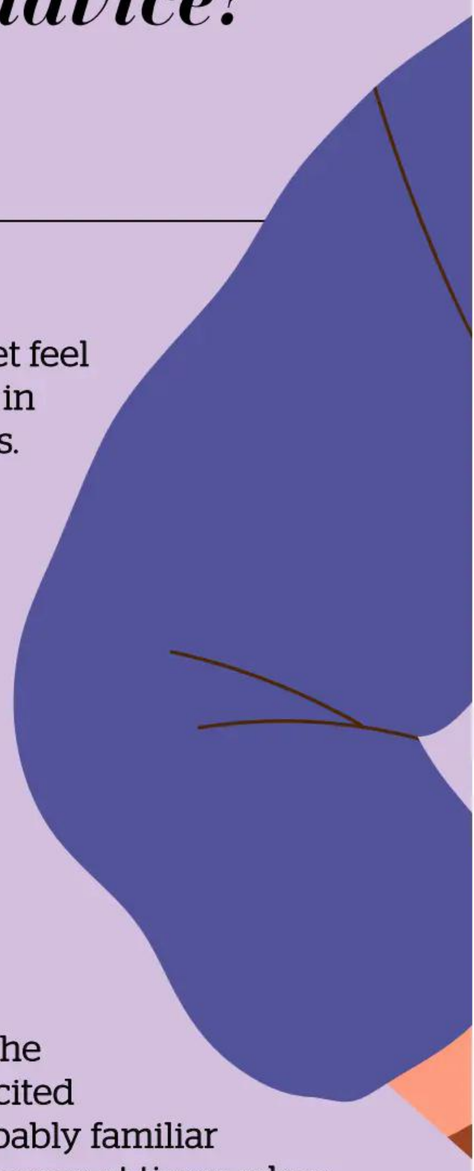
No matter what stage of your life you're at, at some point you've probably been on the receiving end of unsolicited advice. You've probably given it too. And while much of this advice is given innocently, in the genuine belief that it's helpful and useful, it can also cause undue stress, worry and embarrassment for the receiver.

We're not saying that all advice is unwanted – far from it. Sharing experiences, tips and resources is how we learn from each other, and how we develop and grow. When we are in a situation in which we need help, we often turn to those around us and ask for advice, especially from those who we know have been in the same situation before. This, in turn, builds bonds among friends and relatives, through conversations and connections. Good advice can make us feel less alone in our experiences and feelings, especially when we're going through difficult times.

What makes something unsolicited advice, however, is both the way in which the advice is given and the way it makes the person being advised feel. When advice is unsolicited, it means it hasn't been asked for and is unwanted, unhelpful or judgemental. Sometimes there is no ill intent behind the advice; but unsolicited advice can also be dished out more deliberately and unkindly. It can come across as criticism, suggesting that the advised way is better than the receiver's way. And no one likes to be told they're doing something wrong, which immediately creates a sense of defensiveness. Sometimes the advice is given directly in conversation; other times it's in a more passive, indirect manner.

Unsolicited advice might come from those who feel they have a certain expertise in the area they want to advise you in, and therefore feel that they know better. Or, and far more irritatingly, it often comes from people who have no experience at all and yet feel that they should weigh in on a scenario regardless. It could come from close family members, friends, colleagues or random strangers on the internet – with the same outcome that the advice is unwarranted and unwelcome.

> "UNSOLICITED ADVICE HASN'T BEEN ASKED FOR AND IS UNWANTED, UNHELPFUL OR JUDGEMENTAL"



How unsolicited advice can make you feel

If you've ever been on the receiving end of unsolicited advice, then you're probably familiar with how it feels. It can come at times when you're feeling particularly vulnerable. Commonly, the birth of a child, for example, can trigger lots of unwanted advice coming your way. Older family members might like to comment on 'modern' standards and how it 'wasn't done like that in their day'. Friends who already have children may like to share their tips, despite their babies being very different. Even partners can give each other advice for their shared child, causing friction over the right way forward. Not to mention the »



many articles in the news and strangers on parenting forums ready to weigh in on how to raise your baby. For a new parent, feeling overwhelmed and already stressed, hearing multiple tales of what they 'should' and 'shouldn't' be doing can create huge amounts of stress, pressure and anxiety.

Any major life event can have the same effect. Divorce, moving house, looking for a new job, a serious illness or starting a relationship can all attract unsolicited advice, which can range from the well-meaning to the vindictive... and everything in between. It's not just the big things though. If someone gives you advice on your outfit or a new haircut without being asked, that can also create tension.

When you're on the receiving end of such advice you might feel judged – it might feel like the person giving you advice is saying that you're doing something wrong and that you need to modify your actions. Even if you're confident in your own ability, it can plant a seed of doubt and make you question yourself. It may also reinforce a belief that you're not good enough the way you are, and that you need to make changes, which can knock your self-esteem greatly.

You might feel embarrassed, especially if the advice given is quite personal. Imagine someone coming up to you out of the blue and advising you that your dress doesn't suit your body shape and maybe a different style would be better – how would that make you feel? You might feel suddenly unconfident, judged and insecure – even if you had felt pretty good before they gave you the 'advice'.

Even if the advice doesn't bother you in this way, it can leave you feeling irritated, angry and annoyed. When we haven't asked for help and we don't want it, it can be frustrating to be given it regardless. And then when we try to explain that we don't need the help, it can so often get turned around into us being ungrateful for rejecting the advice.

It's not always easy if you're the one giving the unsolicited advice either. If you mean well and truly think that what you're saying would help someone, getting knocked back can make you feel quite hurt or sad. You may even be confused as to why your advice isn't being taken on board or appreciated. If you're naturally someone who wants to help all the time, you may not even realise that you're giving unsolicited advice. It can be quite hard to learn when to step back and just listen, rather than proactively jump in with a solution.

Motivations behind unsolicited advice

There are lots of reasons why someone might give out unsolicited advice. Sometimes it comes from a good place, where someone in your life genuinely

HOW TO STOP GIVING UNSOLICITED ADVICE

Are you guilty of giving unsolicited advice to others? This can be hard to stop, especially if you see yourself as a 'fixer'. The first step is noticing when you're doing it. When you're having a conversation with someone, you may feel an urge to share a piece of advice. Take a minute to step back and think: 'Have they asked for my advice on this?'. Try to prioritise listening first, and maybe even ask a few questions to help understand the situation better – 'How do you feel about that?', 'What do you think you're going to do?'. This gives them the chance to explain their own solutions. You may even want to ask how you can help: 'Is there anything I can do to help?', 'I have some ideas; would it help if I shared them at all?', 'Do you just want to vent for a bit?'. These conversations can open communications, which can help the person to feel more comfortable in asking for advice if, and only if, they want it.



"WHEN WE HAVEN'T ASKED FOR HELP, IT CAN BE FRUSTRATING TO BE GIVEN IT"

thinks that they can give you advice that will help you, make your life easier and solve a problem. This can be the case in closer relationships – a parent, a partner or a good friend – where they want you to be happy and the advice is coming from the right place, even if you don't want or need it.

They may also be overexcited – maybe they've had a revelation in their own life that's made a huge difference and they want to share it with you so that you might have the same outcome. They might be in the mindset that they wish someone had advised them, and so they feel like it's almost a duty to pass that wisdom on. Perhaps they're so caught up in the experience that they don't step back and determine whether you actually want the advice.

Sometimes – probably more often than you realise – giving out unsolicited advice is a reflection on the giver and not the receiver. If, for example, *you* are going through a very hard time, *they* might feel helpless and find that hard to cope with. They want to find a way to help, including giving you advice you don't want, which makes them feel better in themselves and like they've done something.

However, on occasions, the reasons that someone gives unsolicited advice are more deliberate. It may be delivered in judgement or in an attempt to change your behaviour in a way that suits, or even benefits, them. It may also be used in a way to assert dominance or authority within a relationship, and for those with narcissistic tendencies, they may feel like they're the only ones who can help you and only they have the advice you need. Unsolicited advice in this manner can range from the irritating to the emotionally abusive, depending on its impact on your wellbeing and self-esteem.

Impacts on relationships

Persistent unsolicited advice from those we know can have a knock-on effect on our relationships with them. It can affect a parent-child dynamic, for example, if the parent constantly gives unwanted advice to the child – the child is more likely to rebel, fight back or feel like they're not being given the independence to make their own choices. This can start in childhood and through into adulthood, making relationships strained.

If you have a partner, it's only natural to want to help them and make them happy – but unsolicited advice can have a damaging impact. If you're on the receiving end of constant advice over a particular issue, it can feel like you're being 'nagged' or even forced into something you don't want to do. It can be very hard not to give advice when it's someone you really care about. Sometimes we just need to vent and be upset – it doesn't always mean we're looking for a solution – and it can be frustrating to feel like we can't express our feelings in this way without being given advice on how to deal with it.

It can be hard to be on the receiving end of unsolicited advice from someone close to us, as we then feel bad for not taking their advice. It's worth taking a step back and considering why they are giving us the advice in the first place – is it coming from a good place or not? This can help us to respond appropriately; it doesn't mean we should take the advice if it doesn't work for us, but it does mean we can explain gently why we don't need the advice right now.

Equally, we might be the person who wants to give someone advice they haven't asked for, because we don't want to see them struggling. It's hard, but it's good to consider whether our help is wanted or has been asked for. Often the best way is to ask: 'Do you want any advice on this situation right now?' – and then honour the answer, whatever it is.

There will always be a time and a place for advice. But sometimes we need to be able to figure things out on our own, to help us grow, develop and learn, without advice from others, and let those around us do the same. ■

5 WAYS TO RESPOND TO UNSOLICITED ADVICE

1. TAKE A BREATH

Before you say anything else, take a moment. It's very easy to respond in frustration or anger, but this can escalate a situation, so count to five before replying.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR ADVICE

If you believe the advice is well-meaning, tell them that and thank them for their concern. If you think it's not, try something like 'I know that may have worked for you, but I'm not looking for advice right now'.

3. BE HONEST

Sometimes you want to be upset about a situation or problem, but you're not looking for a solution. It's okay to be honest and say that you're not ready to hear any advice quite yet.

4. TELL THEM WHAT YOU NEED

Those close to us want to help, which is why they might give advice. Tell them how they can help in another way – maybe you need a little time alone to think, or someone to talk to and just listen.

5. SET BOUNDARIES

If someone is persistently giving you advice you don't want, it's okay to set boundaries to protect your wellbeing. You may want to spend less time with them, or have a firm, polite conversation asking them to stop giving you advice.

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Hiding in THE VIRTUAL SHADOWS

We've all probably done it at some point but what is it that compels us to stalk people online? And where should we draw the line?

WORDS EMMA GREEN

In the last decade or so, social media has slowly become an integral part of our lives. While platforms like Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) offer us more opportunities than ever to stay in touch with friends, family and acquaintances, they have also opened up a Pandora's box of behaviours that can blur the lines between curiosity and obsession. One such behaviour is monitoring the online activities of people we know (or possibly don't know, like a celebrity or an ex's new partner). In a study conducted into the motives and uses of Facebook, surveilling others was the second most cited reason for using the site, after staying in touch with friends. In a world where our digital lives are presented on a platter for public consumption, it can be hard to resist the urge to have a good snoop into other people's businesses. But what exactly are the motives forcing us to act like amateur cyber detectives?

Humans are naturally curious creatures and social media has provided us an outlet for satisfying that inquisitiveness in a way that we've never experienced before. We can now have a front-row seat to the lives of others, all without ever having to leave the house or socialise with anyone. It's a convenient and easy way to stay informed without exerting any effort.

The anonymity that the internet can grant us makes it tempting to check up on those whom we would much rather remain oblivious to the fact that we are spying on them. We keep tabs on ex partners, old classmates or estranged family members not only to be nosy but to gain validation that our lives appear to be 'better' than theirs – at least online. We may also do this with our peers, ranking our achievements, relationships or how many 'likes' we have in comparison to them, in an attempt to bolster our self-esteem temporarily.

Another advantage of this anonymity is being able to gain knowledge about others without their awareness. We might Google a potential date before agreeing to meet with them in person. An employer might search for the digital footprint of a prospective candidate before agreeing to hire them. Some parents might secretly check their children's phones to keep track of what they are doing and saying online. These types of investigations can give us a sense of control and are a way of spotting any potential red flags on the horizon that we may have missed from our interactions in the real world.

Relational uncertainty can also be another major incentive as to why we spy on others online, especially when it comes to our romantic relationships. Whether this is by going through our partner's private messages or looking at who has commented on their recent post, we scour for any sign of a potential threat. This can be understandable, especially if the offending partner has unresolved trauma from previous relationships, for example being cheated on.

According to a study conducted by the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph, women are more likely than men to monitor their partner's activities on social media, especially those with an anxious attachment style. Regarding psychologist John Bowlby's work on attachment theory, anxiously attached adults are more inclined to engage in online surveillance because they are less trusting and secure in their relationships.

Surveilling others online isn't always just an activity confined to secrecy and solitude – co-creeping with others has evolved into a modern-day form of social bonding. Evaluating and gossiping about what other people choose to display on their social media has become a replacement sewing

> "IT CAN BE HARD TO RESIST THE URGE TO HAVE A GOOD SNOOP INTO OTHER PEOPLE'S BUSINESSES"



circle for the digital age. It allows us to engage in a real-time running commentary with others, savouring tiny morsels of tittle-tattle while running down mutual acquaintances in exchange for an ego boost and a sense of righteousness.

So where do we draw the line between harmless snooping and the more predatory practice of cyber-stalking? A lot of it boils down to the intention behind the behaviour. Cyber-stalking is defined as using the internet or other electronic communication to harass, threaten or intimidate others. This can take many forms including persistently sending unwanted messages to the victim, creating fake accounts to follow someone without their knowledge or trying to hack into their personal correspondence. Most of us wouldn't veer into this kind of territory and our snooping is usually not driven by malicious purposes. However, regularly monitoring other people's online activity can quickly turn into an unhealthy obsession.

We are all too widely aware of the negative impact that social media can have on our mental health. Multiple studies have found strong correlations between excessive social media use and an increased risk of developing psychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety and self-harm. Using social media to compulsively monitor other people's lives can play a key role in this. Having constant access to other people's content can fuel social comparison and promote feelings of inadequacy. We often forget that what we are viewing online is a heavily curated showreel of other people's lives and not a true depiction of what may be going on behind the scenes. Excessive monitoring can also intensify any underlying issues that we already have in our relationships and detract from honest communication and nurturing real-life connections. This can create a breeding ground for feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can cause even more dependence on these sites as a means of achieving a quick dopamine fix.

The meteoric rise of social media has normalised digital voyeurism and we have become accustomed to trading our privacy for the entertainment and social currency that these platforms can provide. While it's important to acknowledge our natural human tendency to be inquisitive about the lives of others, we must also be responsible for maintaining healthy digital habits and avoid crossing into obsessive or intrusive behaviour. ■

CURBING YOUR ONLINE SNOOPING HABIT

Social media is purposely designed to be addictive, with its hyper-connectivity, ease of access and infinite supply of information. So how do we break the cycle of being overly fixated with other people's lives online?

SELF-REFLECT

The next time you feel tempted to search someone up online, pause for a moment and ask yourself the following questions:

What's fuelling your desire to look for this person? Is it jealousy, insecurity, resentment or sheer curiosity? Will spying on this person stoke up any negative feelings within you? What are you planning on doing with any information that you might find out about them?

Being mindful of the factors influencing our surveillance behaviour (and the effect it might have on us after) is the first step to addressing the issue.

REDUCE ACCESS

If you find yourself habitually checking the same profile(s) over and over again, then you may want to consider limiting your access to them. Unfriend, unfollow, block or hide their posts from your feed. Remember: out of sight, out of mind.

FIND A BETTER SUBSTITUTE

Channel the time and energy you've been wasting dwelling in the digital realm into hobbies and activities in the real world. Find alternative coping methods for dealing with difficult emotions like boredom, loneliness or jealousy rather than relying on social media as a quick fix. Joining a club, going for a walk or writing a gratitude list are healthier ways of addressing the underlying emotional needs that we try to fulfil through social media.

AVOID PASSIVELY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Aim to use the time you spend online for positive, constructive purposes rather than for mindless scrolling or passively consuming other people's content. Use your digital presence to maintain connections, share interests and interact with others.

CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS OFFLINE

Make a point of spending time with family, friends and acquaintances face-to-face. Not only will this reduce feelings of isolation but it may also reduce feelings of envy too as others may be more willing to share the not-so-great aspects of their lives that you don't get to see online.

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THE HEALING POWERS OF Poetry

Increasingly more people are considering poetry therapy as a way to improve their wellbeing. Here we reveal more about the therapeutic powers of the poem



WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

Although poetry is usually known as a creative expression, the form is also gaining popularity as a therapeutic intervention. In fact, putting pen to paper in order to process thoughts and feelings is actually an instinctive tool that is learnt very early on.

A poem is succinct and packed with meaning. Unlike attempting a short story or a novel, it offers a faster dose of fulfilment, and often it takes just a few moments or a couple of hours to write a draft poem.

Writing just a few short lines of poetry can allow you to process experiences, often leading to new realisations about yourself and others. For others, it's simply a way to work things out.

Reading poetry is equally important too; the best poems will inspire you to reflect, dream, observe and grow. Careful reading of poems and writing in response to what you read can offer solace, pleasure, new insights and even awakening experiences.

It's actually the combination of reading, writing and discussing your responses to poetry that can give you the chance to fully explore your personal responses to the words, allowing you »



to generate awareness, make meaning and integrate your experiences.

What is poetry therapy?

Biblio-poetry therapy, as it's also known, is a way of making contact with self and others through the use of poetry and other writing materials. There are two types: clinical biblio-poetry therapy and developmental biblio-poetry therapy.

Clinical biblio-poetry therapy usually takes place in one-to-one therapeutic or clinic settings but can also occur in groups. Chemically dependent individuals respond well to clinical bibliotherapy and it's become a successful part of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programmes.

Developmental biblio-poetry therapy is for those who have chosen this mode as a way to further self-understanding and personal growth. Sessions often take place in groups in public spaces and the facilitator has less of an active role in the discussion phase than the clinical therapist would. It's helpful for building self-esteem, self-identify, independence and self-worth, and working with adolescents.

Based in the US, the International Federation of Biblio-Poetry Therapy (IFBPT) is one of the leading lights on the topics, and provides a training route into the field, attracting students from across the globe.

Poetry therapy roots

One school of thought sees the healing process as taking place through reading itself. From the 1920s, many librarians made a point of searching out reading materials for others, for their therapeutic potential. This area is known as bibliotherapy, which uses literature to promote mental health, whereas biblio-poetry therapy specifically uses poems to explore and support wellbeing.

A pioneer in the field, librarian Arleen McCarty Hynes worked at St Elizabeth's, a mental health hospital in Washington, USA. She engaged patients in literature, and later poems, as a process of healing and personal growth. Since then, social workers, English teachers and counsellors have been using poetry to help individuals' emotional growth or to offer insight into a personal crisis.

However, there is a distinction between using poems as a cathartic expression and as a therapeutic approach. These days, most recognise 'poetry therapy' as interactive biblio-poetry therapy, where the process of healing and growth is centred not as much in the act of reading as in the guided dialogue.

Arleen Hynes was instrumental in emphasising the 'interactive bibliography' term to differentiate it from simply reading a book or poem that may help you in some way. Poetry therapy offers a dialogue between the individual and the facilitator about their response that can lead to a whole new dimension of insight.

Benefits of poetry therapy

- Integration of self
- More self-compassion
- A way to discover new insights
- A boost to self-esteem and morale
- Ways to develop yourself more gracefully
- Healing through meeting (Buber 1963; Friedman 1976)
- To deal more creatively with what cannot be changed (Frank 1973, 233)
- Plus, it's cathartic as heck!

Poetry therapy exercise

Here's a self-guided poetry therapy exercise to try at home!

MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE

Then, slowly and carefully, read this western translation of a work by the Persian lyric poet Hafez-e Shirazi, known as Hafez. Afterwards, make a note of or underline the lines or words that jump out to you.

My Brilliant Image
by Hafez

One day the sun admitted
I am just a shadow.
I wish I could show you
The infinite incandescence
That has cast my brilliant image!
I wish I could show you,
When you are lonely or in darkness,
The Astonishing Light
Of your own Being!

REFLECT

Next, do some journaling, using the following questions as prompts:
What did you make of this poem?
How did you relate to it?
At the moment, are you able to see both your darkness and astonishing light?

RELATE TO YOUR LIFE

Imagine that there are these two parts of you: the dark, where you 'feel lonely or in darkness', and the light – your 'infinite incandescence'.

> "WRITING POETRY CAN ALLOW YOU TO PROCESS EXPERIENCES"

Dialogue between the two – have a written conversation between the dark and the light in you, where you write both parts. What does each part have to say to one another? Write for ten minutes.

It may feel as though you're making it up, and really, you are. Remember you have all the answers within. If you feel a little self-conscious, try to keep going with it and you may just surprise yourself with the amount of interesting detail or insights that come up.

LIGHTBULB MOMENTS

Reflect on what you've learned – you could use the prompts here as a guide:

How did it feel doing this? Were you able to identify things you've learnt? Were you able to cultivate acceptance or any learnings? What else came up?

Clinical evidence for poetry therapy

There are a wide range of papers, journals, scientific studies and books for clinicians written on the subject of biblio-poetry therapy or poetry therapy. Although poetry has been informally integrated into psychological therapies for some time, poetry therapy as an intervention only started to gain popularity in the late 1980s (Mazza, 2017), making the approach a fairly new addition to the field of expressive arts-based therapies (Heimes, 2011).

Poetry therapy* can help a wide variety of clinical presentations and client populations. Although studies have generally been small-scale and idiographic in nature, positive associations between poetry therapy and outcomes have been reported for people with the following diagnoses and difficulties, including:

- Aphasia (Shafi & Carozza, 2011)
- Addictions (Brooke, 2009)
- Dementia (Petriwskyj, Parker, O'Dwyer, Moyle, & Nucifora, 2015)
- Eating disorders (Hornyak & Baker, 1989; Ramsey-Wade & Devine, 2018)
- Grief and/or bereavement (Glover, Rice, Phillips, & Williamson, 2016; Sharma, 2019)
- Homelessness (Mazza, 2007)
- Psychosis (Tamura, 2001)
- Sexual dysfunction (Floyd, 2019)
- Survivors of intimate partner violence (Donovan, Dubrasky, Sorensen, & Corser, 2019; McGarry & Bowden, 2017).



KEEP A POETRY THERAPY JOURNAL

Buy yourself a journal or notebook you will enjoy writing in.
Then try one or more of these three things:

KEEP A WORD BANK

Start mining poems you've read, news articles, songs, posters, graffiti – notice any phrases and lines that resonate or jump out at you. Use your journal to write down these words or lines.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Now and then go deeper and use these lines or phrases as prompts. Reflect on how these poems, words or phrases have impacted you. You can use them as a writing prompt to inspire a ten-minute session of free-writing. Or use them to create your own poem.

EXPLORE A POEM

Next time you read a poem, try thinking about it through a therapeutic lens. Ask yourself some of the questions here and, if it's helpful, explore your responses in your journal.

How does this poem impact you?
Does it move you in any way?
What feelings arise when you read it?
Are there certain words, lines or stanzas that jump out?
Can you think why?
Can you relate to the persona's plight?
Are you transported to a new view about something important?
Are there any welcome surprises?
Do you find the ending satisfying? If not, why not?

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*Canterbury Christ Church University (2021): Identifying the Mechanisms of Poetry Therapy and Associated Effects on Participants: A Synthesised Review of Empirical Literature, Abigail Alfrey, Victoria Field, Ioanna Xenophontes and Sue Holttum

CAN WE LEARN TO BE Spontaneous?

Often, you're a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants, spur-of-the-moment person or you're not. But there are benefits to spontaneity

WORDS JO DUNBAR

Whether it's meeting a friend for coffee, arranging concert tickets or deciding to squeeze in a swim, our busy lives often mean we find ourselves scheduling even the smallest of interactions. Post-pandemic, our lives are full to bursting again. Those long afternoons and evenings where we could decide on impulse how to relax seem like a distant memory. Plenty of us vowed never to return to the frenetic pace of modern life once restrictions were lifted. But here we are.

Frequently, we don't plan just the necessary things in life – grocery deliveries, work meetings or dentist appointments – but also the activities that are supposed to be fun: seeing our friends, watching a movie, getting a beauty treatment. This leaves very little space for doing anything spontaneously. Plus, the arduous act of negotiating dates and venues saps joy. So many of us know how draining the WhatsApp tennis required to plan a catch up with a friend can feel. Sometimes some of the pleasure of meeting up is overshadowed by endless logistics chat.

A study by Harvard University academics in 2015 discovered that a degree of planning helps us to make better life choices. For example, planning a meal can mean healthier food; scheduling tasks mean they are more likely to happen. Planning is a sensible choice, granted. But does everything have to be pre-ordained?

"PLANNING IS A SENSIBLE CHOICE, GRANTED. BUT DOES EVERYTHING HAVE TO BE PRE-ORDAINED?"



Dr Meg Arroll is a psychologist and author of *Tiny Traumas* (Thorsons, out now). She says we have been hardwired to pre-plan our lives: "Human beings love certainty. We crave predictability, as knowing what's coming up and when has served us well in our evolution. Early humans observed the environment and planned around it in order to survive, so we are hardwired to crave regularity. In addition to this, planning is a learnt behaviour that builds up over a lifetime. We start early on in modern parenting methods with routines and schedules planned for children, which offer a sense of safety and security."

From timetabled school days, we move into adulthood, but this often leads to less opportunity for freedom as professional and familial responsibilities collide. Dr Arroll adds, "As adults we are often juggling competing roles, hence careful planning allows us to keep all these plates spinning. However, we have little opportunity to experience spontaneity, which is associated with positive emotions, such as joy, happiness and awe. We tend to enjoy activities that are spontaneous, but if we're not used to allowing time and space for unplanned adventures this can feel challenging."

Embracing spontaneity will not only set us free from some admin but also, as Dr Arroll explains, fully immerse ourselves in an experience. "With plans come expectations, and expectations can produce anxious thought patterns. When there is no script, no template, we are free to explore life without the fear of failure or doing something imperfectly."

Anything pleasurable that occurs unplanned can feel more rewarding if it happens organically or unexpectedly. Dr Arroll believes that it is when we allow events to unfold that we are in a better position to fully enjoy them. She says, "When we can go with the flow and let go of assumptions and rigid thought patterns, we are more able to truly experience the full spectrum of human emotion."



DR MEG ARROLL
PSYCHOLOGIST

Dr Meg Arroll is a chartered psychologist, scientist and published author.

WWW.DRMEGARROLL.COM

TEACH YOURSELF SPONTANEITY

DON'T OVERTHINK IT

Dr Arroll says we can learn to be more spontaneous. First step: swerve the predictable. "The key here is to not overthink it, as this involves engaging the high-order cognitive areas of the brain that will strive for the predictable."

DON'T FEAR FAILURE

Often, we plan extensively to ensure a perfect outcome. But when it comes to a catch up with friends or a spontaneous pizza, rather than embarking on rounds of organisation, try throwing out a quick message when you find yourself at a loose end and seeing if anyone bites.

EMBRACE CHANGE

We rely on visual cues in the pattern of our lives. Dr Arroll says we can switch this up: "If we're feeling stuck, it can be helpful to mix up these visual cues. Try moving furniture or furnishings around, sitting in different seats at the dining table, even wearing something that is saved 'for best' on a regular day."

FLEX YOUR SPONTANEITY MUSCLE

Rather than follow your repeated well-honed patterns of behaviour, challenge yourself to do something unexpected. Start small and see how it makes you feel. Dr Arroll explains: "Everyday decisions like choosing a take-away is an opportunity for spontaneity. Even if it's not the best meal in the world, it's a new experience! In this sense, the more you practise spontaneous behaviour, the easier it will become. Try it for days out, travel destinations, and even bigger decisions such as new hobbies."

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Building HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Setting healthy boundaries is a vital component in the toolbox of life skills, contributing to wellbeing and maintaining mental health

WORDS CLAIRE CANTOR

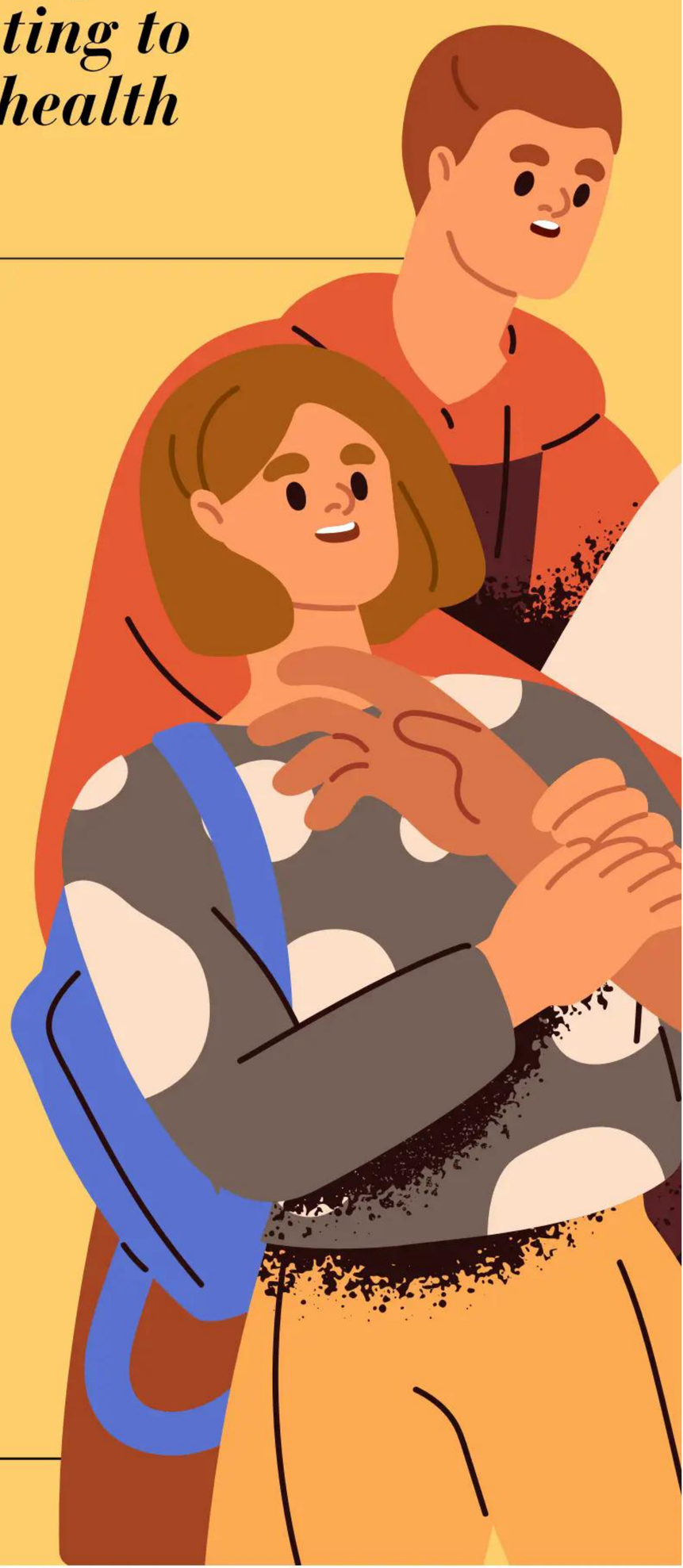
The modern world is a stark mixture of strong, weak and blurred boundaries. In our post-Covid, hybrid-working lives where working from home and remote working is firmly embedded, the boundaries of the work-life balance are decidedly confused.

Indeed, much has changed since psychologist Christena Nippert-Eng's initial development of boundary theory in 1996, which was grounded in her qualitative study of the experiences of the work-home boundary among employees at a US research laboratory. The study proposes that individuals manage the boundaries between work and personal life through processes of segmenting and/or integrating the domains. The cut-off points between work and home or family life were, at that time, more distinct than they are today.

Nowadays, however, companies increasingly use various strategies to keep us in the workplace as long as possible, and we in turn feel our presence is increasingly demanded to maintain our positions. Companies provide gyms, childcare, cafeterias and after-work social events. Addictive technology has invaded our private time and spaces, cutting us off from each other and breaking down verbal communication. New words have been invented to describe such phenomena, such as 'phubbing' – snubbing your partner for your phone.

Boundaries can look different in different cultures, contexts and personalities. In some cultures, touching and hugging friends, family and even strangers in public is regarded as normal and part of everyday life, whereas in other cultures it may not be accepted or can feel uncomfortable. Equally, how we behave and set boundaries

> "BOUNDARIES CAN LOOK DIFFERENT IN DIFFERENT CULTURES, CONTEXTS AND PERSONALITIES"



at work differs from how we are with friends in a social environment.

As our life stage, work situation or cultural environments change, so our boundaries may change or adapt. The necessity for healthy boundary setting remains; setting boundaries enables others to understand us better, gives us a sense of control, and denotes clear lines of expectations.

What do healthy boundaries look like?

"Healthy boundaries are the limits or rules we assertively set for ourselves based on our values," says psychotherapist Jade Thomas MBACP. "Any type of assertive communication or healthy boundary involves respecting your own needs whilst respecting the needs of others."

Thomas provides examples of this:

AT WORK

Establishing times when you will not respond to emails – for example, during your lunch break or in the evenings in order to prioritise time for yourself, family and friends. »

THE BENEFITS OF SETTING BOUNDARIES

1. They protect your mental health and wellbeing: having lax or fluid boundaries, or being overly available to others at the disregard of your own needs can lead to burnout and exhaustion.

2. You'll avoid conflict and misunderstanding: setting clear relationship boundaries and establishing transparent expectations, whilst encouraging calm communication of personal boundaries in relationships, can help to avoid potential conflict and misunderstanding.

3. They enhance self-esteem and self-respect: believing and behaving in a way that shows that your feelings and values are as important as others promotes a sense of self-respect.

4. They promote a sense of control: learning to say no and respecting your own needs can help you feel more in control. Setting boundaries helps you to manage your time more effectively.



IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS OR MARRIAGE:
Clearly communicating wants and needs with one another, honouring and respecting one's own needs and the needs of one's partner.

IN FRIENDSHIPS
Clearly expressing when you feel overwhelmed, ignored or unheard.

WITH PARENTS
Requesting the sanctity of your physical space or privacy if you share a home, or suggesting that parents call before dropping in unannounced.

WITH CHILDREN
Clearly setting rules, limits and routines, which adapt as the children grow up.

Key areas of healthy boundaries
Experts at positivepsychology.com describe seven spheres of life where it is important to set healthy boundaries:

MENTAL
Freedom to have your own thoughts, values and opinions.

EMOTIONAL
How emotionally available you are for others. Not always putting other people's needs ahead of one's own.

MATERIAL
Monetary decisions, giving or lending to others.



INTERNAL
Self-regulation, energy expended on others versus energy expended on self.

CONVERSATIONAL
Topics that you do and do not feel comfortable discussing. Or personal privacy.

PHYSICAL
Privacy, personal space, body.

TIME
How much time you spend with someone or doing something.

What are unhealthy boundaries?
Unhealthy boundaries are those that are too fixed or rigid and can block people out or curtail your own life on a social or emotional level. Being overly private or guarded emotionally can alienate people or show a lack of vulnerability, when the support may indeed be welcome. However, undefined or blurred boundaries can be equally tricky, especially for people pleasers and those who find it hard to say no – resulting in a sense of self-neglect, resentment or helplessness.

Having limitations in itself is not a concern, but unhealthy boundaries can highlight issues such as a need to control; fear of exposing one's emotions; feelings of inadequacy and a need to seek approval, love or validation; or fear of rejection – such as in romantic relationships.

"Unhealthy boundaries often tend to be too rigid/aggressive or too passive," says Thomas. "Whereas healthy boundaries fall somewhere between these two extremes. Rigid boundaries might lack a certain level of compromise or consideration of other people's needs, which can have a negative impact on your relationships. On the other hand, boundaries that are too passive or 'foggy' might disregard your own needs and only focus on other people's, therefore having a negative impact on your own mental wellbeing. This may potentially lead to people disrespecting you within relationships or taking advantage of you."

Chloe Brotheridge, author of *The Anxiety Solution*, explains, "People with unhealthy boundaries often struggle with issues such as a need for control or fear of rejection, which can stem from childhood experiences where they may have needed to please in order to feel safe. They may have had a controlling parent or experienced frequent rejection." Brotheridge suggests focusing on your own needs, naming your non-negotiables, by starting small,

> "TRY TO FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL"

practising saying no, and gradually working on being more flexible or firm.

How to set and maintain boundaries
Psychotherapist Danielle Baron explains why some of us find it so hard to set healthy boundaries: "Neuroscientific research has shed light on why establishing and maintaining boundaries can be a complex process. The brain is inherently wired to seek social connections and approval, often explained through the 'social brain hypothesis'. Thus, avoiding potential social conflict by not setting boundaries may stem from an inherent neural disposition that prioritises group cohesion and personal relationships.

"The amygdala, a region in the brain associated with emotional responses, plays a significant role in how we perceive and respond to social threats. When we consider asserting our boundaries, the potential for conflict could signal a threat to our amygdala, leading to avoidance behaviours or anxiety regarding the potential outcomes."

Thomas recommends practical ways to set and maintain boundaries:

KNOW YOURSELF
Being clear on your own values and what matters to you can help with boundary setting. Define the areas of life where you want to place your energy, the people you want to be around, and the nature of the relationships you wish to cultivate. If you value spending time with your family, you might set firm boundaries about working overtime.

ESTABLISH YOUR BOUNDARIES EARLY IN A RELATIONSHIP OR AT THE START OF A SITUATION
Identify what you want from a relationship and what you are able to give. Remember you have the assertive right to say 'no' if you believe something is overstepping your boundaries. Some ways you might do this might be by saying, 'I'm not comfortable with this', 'Please don't do that', 'This doesn't work for



me', 'This is not acceptable'. Being overly accommodating early on and then trying to claw back more space for yourself can be an uphill struggle.

HONE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

State your feelings clearly, choose your timing wisely, do your prep and think first rather than launching in unprepared. Expect feedback and accept that compromise may be necessary. Remember, the aim when communicating boundaries is to do so assertively rather than aggressively, so this means respecting both your needs but also others' needs.

TRY AN ASSERTIVENESS TECHNIQUE

Called the ABC rule: 'When you do A, I feel B; next time I would prefer C'. Practise expressing your boundaries clearly and respectfully, and when appropriate, offering a compromise.

REMOVE GUILT FROM THE EQUATION

Setting boundaries can upset those around you, but avoid taking on guilt for other people's reactions in the name of self-preservation.

What does the disrespect of boundaries look like and how can you tackle it?

"We cannot control other people or when others might disrespect our boundaries," explains Thomas. "Therefore, try to focus your attention on what you can control within the situation. For example, this might be calmly asserting to the other person that what they did was not okay. If the person continues to violate your boundaries, you may have to accept that their behaviour will not change and reconsider the worth of your relationship with that person because it does not align with your values." Brotheridge suggests violations of boundaries should be addressed directly and clearly, stating what boundary was crossed and how it made you feel. "Use 'I' statements to avoid sounding accusatory, such as 'I felt disrespected when you did X, despite me clearly stating Y as my boundary'. If someone continually crosses your boundaries, you may need to go one step further, such as distancing yourself from the person, or involving senior staff members in work settings." ■

BOUNDARY TIPS FOR PEOPLE PLEASERS

LEARN TO SAY NO

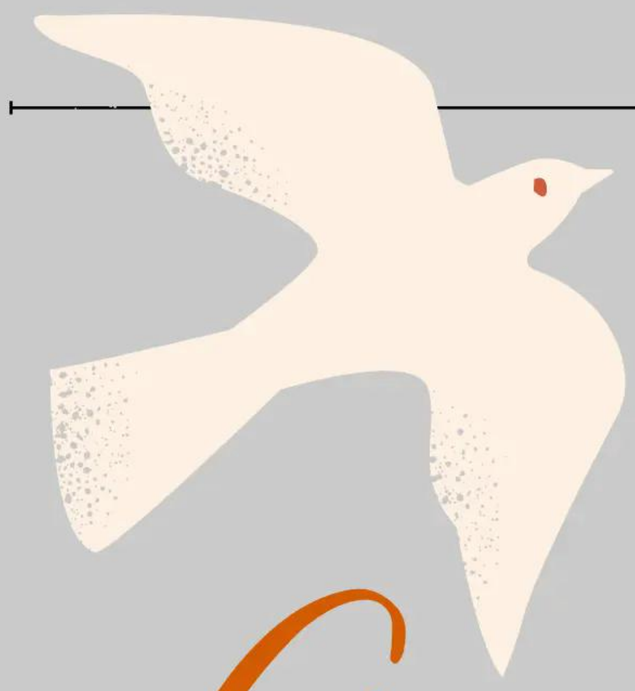
For those who find it hard to say no, practise in low-risk scenarios, such as when a waiter is pouring out water at your table or asking your hairdresser not to use a certain product on your hair. If you're caught on the spot and asked to do something you don't want to do, let people know you'll check your diary and get back to them. This will buy you time and thinking space to formulate your no.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

When setting boundaries, it can be helpful to make an observation. Talk about your feelings and then make a request. For example, instead of feeling resentful or helpless, say to your partner, 'When you leave clothes on the floor, I feel overwhelmed. Would you put your clothes in the laundry basket please?'

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HOW TO SAY Goodbye

Many things, good and bad, come to an end. But there are ways to bid farewell with grace and acceptance

WORDS DEBRA WATERS

Some people struggle more than others with goodbyes, whether it's not being able to visit an elderly relative in their final days or slipping away from parties (this actually has a name – it's called an Irish exit or a French exit). Many of us are guilty of evading farewells. For some, it's because they are awkward or emotionally charged. For others, they remind us of someone or something that left unexpectedly. Saying goodbye means accepting we may forget, or be forgotten. It means letting go. As a result, it's synonymous with loss or vulnerability.

"Goodbyes are moments of shared emotion," says psychotherapist Jordan Vyas-Lee, co-founder of mental healthcare clinic Kove. "Our preference to not be seen with our emotions on our sleeve makes it difficult to share a personal moment warmly, but while a goodbye is tough, it's actually a moment of tenderness when expressed."

Western culture is uncomfortable with goodbyes. We have funerals, but lack the soothing rituals of other societies. In his book *Hello, Goodbye* (£20, S&S/Simon Element), Day Schildkret writes, 'A wise man once told me, "If you can say it, you can see it." Naming makes things tangible and real'. Saying goodbye out loud is surprisingly powerful, as are rituals – however small. Day's book provides rituals for various losses – from miscarriage to moving home – to help us move on with gratitude. These include lighting candles for deceased loved ones or writing letters that aren't sent.

"Ritualising our losses lets us strengthen our capacity to simultaneously carry sorrow and gratitude, pain and beauty, power and powerlessness – to say hello and goodbye meaningfully," he writes.

The people and places that have meant something to us, and the dreams we didn't realise or the ambitions we didn't achieve, deserve a proper send-off. Winnie »

> "WHILE A GOODBYE IS TOUGH, IT'S ACTUALLY A MOMENT OF TENDERNESS"

WALKING AWAY CAN...

- ***express value and appreciation***
- provide closure
- ***prevent later regrets***
- allow a moment to grieve and move on
- ***create space for new experiences***
- tap in to the 'recency effect' – this is when we recall what came last; when we say goodbye meaningfully, we're more likely to remember this positive moment than previous negative ones



EXPRESS YOUR EMOTIONS

Not sure how to say goodbye meaningfully? "Frame goodbyes positively," says Jordan. "Tell others how much you'll miss them. Touch is important and hugs connect us. Smile and look into the eyes of those you're bidding farewell to if this feels comfortable. This wraps the goodbye in warmth and a sense of safety, leaving us thinking positively about each other."

the Pooh had the right attitude when he said, 'How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard'.

Without goodbyes we wouldn't know how deeply we loved. We wouldn't get closure or grow. Yes, goodbyes are endings, but endings are the flip-side of beginnings, which means a new start is on the horizon. Ultimately, goodbyes are transformative and they set us free.

Getting closure

Our expert tips can make some of the toughest situations easier...

LOVED ONES

The hardest goodbyes are arguably to those who are dying or have died. "People often resist saying goodbye; they feel these words are the world telling them to 'let go', to 'move on', but it's far from that," says grief expert Zoë Clark-Coates, author of Beyond Goodbye *(£9.99, Orion Spring). "Saying goodbye is saying, 'I'm sorry you had to leave, but now I'll live my life for us both'." There's a misconception that grief gets smaller over time, but this is wrong, adds Zoë. "When we allow ourselves to feel grief and don't fight pain, our grief muscles get stronger and we learn to carry loss." Sit with it, allow healing tears to fall, and fight the urge to conform to societal pressure, she says. "Grief is not a quick process, but it is a sacred passage. It's a lifelong journey we all navigate, where love and pain collide." Then after you have said your goodbyes, you're in a position to slowly rebuild.*

YOUR YOUTH

For women, the menopause years are often a time when we say goodbye to our youth. If you lament the passing of years and what they seemingly offered (carefreeness, fertility, opportunities), look to what maturity provides. "We mourn the loss of youth, naturally," says wellness expert Kate Cook (besensationalat60.com). "Instead, we might embrace the gift of wisdom and come into ourselves, and instead of disappearing, or being eclipsed by younger 'butterflies of youth' – which could be more about appearance – we're finally fully us. We're about substance and quality." In fact, in some cultures, such as Japan, the menopause is interpreted as a positive transition to a better place. "Life after the menopause is to be celebrated," says Kate. It's farewell to the limitations of chasing youth and being bound by raging hormones, she adds, "and it's a chance to be true to the self."

ASPECTS OF HEALTH

If you've developed a life-limiting illness or injury, saying goodbye to your health as it was can be cathartic. "Loss is an inherent part of the experience of health issues," says health psychologist Dr Sula Windgassen (healthpsychologist.co.uk). "Often, this isn't adequately discussed. It can lead you to believe that adjusting to life with the presence of something that you wish wasn't there is an easy thing to do – it's not." So what can be done? "Depending on the condition, our brain can double down on exerting caution, to protect us," says Sula. "Unfortunately, we become even further away from things that gave our life meaning and joy. Part of the adjustment process is exploring to what degree things are lost and to what degree they can be claimed in other ways. A person who enjoyed the strategy and competition of climbing may no longer be able to climb, but finds something else provides these joys, like chess. Or someone may not be able to run long-distance anymore, but walking outdoors in nature is accessible. Research shows that acknowledging the difficulties and sadness that can come with health issues, while applying problem-solving and focused coping, can lead to better health outcomes."

SENTIMENTAL CLUTTER

Eliminating clutter can be challenging, especially if you've assigned emotional value to it. "Holding on to heirlooms and sentimental items can be a weight around our neck, and we know clutter contributes to stress," says Marie Bateson, volunteers director at the Association of Professional Declutterers & Organisers (APDO) and founder of Cut the Clutter. "If items cause excessive clutter, then the memories we claim they invoke are buried, so keep a few favourites." Marie encourages us to think about whether anything could be used to help others. If so, give things a second life by donating or selling them. With any money made, use it to create a clutter-free memory, such as a trip or planting a tree. "If it's papers (e.g. children's artwork or letters), photograph them and have a folder on your phone or create a photo book."

DREAMS AND AMBITIONS

If you've been chasing a dream or ambition that you now think is out of reach, it's okay to give up. "How you frame the experience is key," says Jordan Vyas-Lee. "Speak with others who have a positive mindset about what you've been through and process the missed goal in a healthy way. It's better than ruminating about how things went wrong – this only leaves us with a sense of failure. "For most, healing from a lost dream is best done by setting new goals that are guided by your learnings," adds Jordan. What have you learnt that you can utilise? "As humans, we're happiest when we're setting a trajectory and feeling development. The best way to kiss goodbye to a dream is to move into action mode. With the right mindset, a new dream isn't far away."

PETS

The anguish of saying goodbye to pets is often underestimated. "This is because by choosing euthanasia, our goodbyes carry guilt,' says Diane James, head of pet bereavement support services at Blue Cross. People mourning a pet may suffer from disenfranchised grief – a type that is not fully acknowledged or accepted – making it even trickier to let go. "Saying goodbye helps us to grieve and have a form of acceptance," says Diane. "We can do this by having a service to talk about wonderful memories, memorialising with a plant or a special place for ashes. It's also important to say goodbye if we have lost or had a pet stolen, as it can be harder not having closure – writing down how you feel and what you'd say to them can help." If you feel strong enough, Diane advises being with your dying pet at the end. "It can make the final goodbye as good as it can be for both you and your pet, when you've shared unconditional love."

HABITS

If a bad habit provides you with a coping mechanism, until it's addressed it will be difficult to let go, so instead of relying on willpower, be self-aware, says life coach and author Michelle Elman – who recommends 'activation energy'. "This is the energy required before an action. For example, it's the energy needed to get dressed and walk to the gym. Lower the activation energy if you want to do something more often – e.g. lay out your gym kit for the morning," she says. "Conversely, increase activation energy for things you don't want to do – if you want to stop drinking coffee, put it on a top shelf so you have to get a chair every time you want it."



"THERE'S A MISCONCEPTION THAT GRIEF GETS SMALLER OVER TIME, BUT THIS IS WRONG"

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Editorial
Group Editor **Sarah Bankes**
Art Editor **Madelene King**
Compile by **Zara Gaspar**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Head of Art & Design **Greg Whitaker**
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Managing Director **Grainne McKenna**

Contributors
Cris Andrews, Sarah Bankes, Julie Bassett, Claire Cantor, Jo Dunbar, Scott Dutfield, Jamie Frier, Rose Goodman, Ben Grafton, Philippa Grafton, Emma Green, Ailsa Harvey, James Horton, Donna Lancaster, Leah Larwood, Dan Peel, Louise Pyne, Jenny Rowe, Debra Waters, Samantha Wood

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Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

International
Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**
licensing@futurenet.com

Circulation
Head of Newstrade **Tim Mathers**

Production
Head of Production **Mark Constance**
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For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

GPSR EU RP (for authorities only)
eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14 11317, Tallinn, Estonia
hello@eucompliancepartner.com, +3375690241

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