NO ALCOHOL? NO PROBLEM! HOW TO NAVIGATE A DRY CHRISTMAS CREATE A LIFE YOU LOVE UK edition UK edition

REATE A LIFE YOU LOVE

BE KIND TO YOU!

Manage your energy — and say no if you need to

16-page DOSSIER

Your simple, stress-free, joyful Christmas!

- Set healthy boundaries
- Let go of trying to be perfect
- Simple joys to celebrate what really matters

BANISH SOCIAL ANXIETY

Overcome fears, relax and have fun

Vogue Williams

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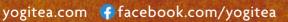
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24

Take a coaching masterclass in learning self-love

CHRISTMAS

In this issue...

Regulars

7 In the mood

Enlightening, happy-making facts, fascinating news stories and more

12 Viewpoint

What's caught your eye in *Psychologies*? We want to hear about it!

14 * Vogue Williams

The model, presenter and podcaster on overcoming her anxiety attacks and how to make a marriage work

Mind

20 * Your confident Christmas

Overcome social anxiety and enjoy the celebrations!

24 Coaching in action

The award-winning coach Kim Morgan helps a client learn to love herself again

30 * Time to say no?

Reclaim your Christmas calendar and avoid party-season burnout

34 * It'll be lonely this Christmas

Whether you want to reach out and connect, or celebrate your solitude, alone needn't mean lonely

41 By the letter

Pen a hand-written missive to mark the new year, urges Jackee Holder

Heart

60 Goodwill to all men (and women!)

Turn up your tolerance levels and let this Christmas be a time of peace



64 Your dilemmas addressed

Mary Fenwick offers a fresh perspective on what's plaguing you

66 Coming up for air

Caro Giles finds sanctuary in the hustle and bustle of the city

Body

70 Mindful wellness

Conscious and accessible ways to eat, move, look, and live well

74 * All fun no fizz

Discover the benefits of a no-booze Christmas

80 Let's stay home!

Deliciously indulgent desserts from The Hebridean Baker's new cookery book, *My Scottish Island Kitchen*

84 On my walk today...

Annabel Streets celebrates the sanctity of a micro pilgrimage

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OVER IMAGE: RUTH ROSE. LOTHES BY LITTLE MISTRESS





88 Make December a digital detox

Ditch the devices and discover the joy of Christmas 'presence'

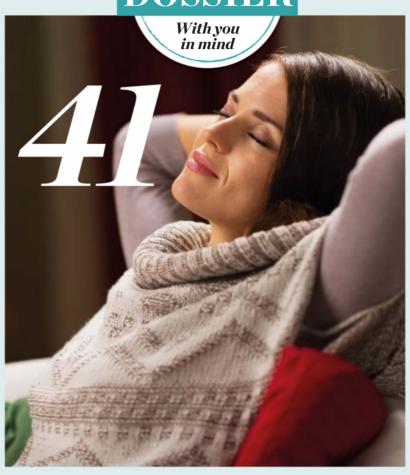
92 Work in progress

Our agony aunt, Mary Fenwick, resolves your difficulties in the workplace

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psychologies DOSSIER



A simple, stress-free Christmas

45 Know what you really, really want

Quit comparing and focus of your own idea of fun

46 Set your intentions

Create boundaries around time, money and commitments

47 Have the conversations

How to compassionately communicate your wishes

47 Know when enough

Break free from unrealistic ideals

48 Give back

Revisit the real meaning of Christmas

49 Let go of perfectionism

Learn to lower your expectations

52 Simple joys

Find pleasure in the little things

54 What do you need for a simpler Christmas?

Take our test to find out

58 Your real Christmas list

Think about what matters most

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Kelsey Publishing Ltd, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Kent ME18 6AL (01959 541444, email letters@psychologies.co.uk)

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SUBSCRIPTIONS

13 issues of Psychologies are published per annum

- UK annual subscription price: £63.7
- Europe annual subscription price: £77
- USA annual subscription price: £77
- Rest of World annual subscription price: £83
- UK subscription and back issue orderline: 01959 543747
- Overseas subscription orderline: 0044 (0)1959 543747
- Toll-free USA subscription orderline: 1888 777 0275

• UK customer service team: 01959 543747; subs@kelsey.co.uk

Find subscription offers on our website: shop.kelsey.co.uk/psy

Manage your subscription online shop.kelsey.co.uk/site/loginForm

DISTRIBUTION & PRINTING

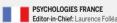
- William Gibbons & Sons Limited, 26 Planetary Road, Willenhall WV13 3XA; 01902 730011; williamgibbons.co.uk
- Distribution in Great Britain: Marketforce, 3rd Floor, 161 Marsh Wall, London, E14 9AP; 0330 3906 5551

Distribution in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Newspread; 353 23 886 3850

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GLOBAL EDITIONS

Groupe Psychologies, 2-8 rue Gaston-Rébuffat, 75019 Paris, France. Tel: 0144655800



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The advice starts **RIGHT HERE!**



CATHERINE HALLISSEY

It's important to remember that there is a difference between being alone and being lonely,' says psychologist Catherine Hallissey, on finding yourself on your own this Christmas. Discover ways to reach out, and how to reframe this fallow period as a chance to rest and refresh, on page 34.

KELLY HEARN

'Grounding ourselves in commonality and connection means we will feel safe enough to tolerate difference,' says psychotherapist Kelly Hearn, on the tension that can be common at Christmas family gatherings. Learn to see the bigger picture and look inside yourself, to reduce polarity and division this festive season, on page 60.





RUARI FAIRBAIRNS

'The benefits of fun alcohol-free plans far outweigh any perceived disadvantages,' says Ruari Fairbairns, CEO of One Year, No Beer. 'While others may be slurring their words and repeating themselves on Christmas Day, you are fully present to appreciate the magic of the day.' Find out more on page 74.

Our mission

Psychologies' mission is to provide you with inspiration and advice to support you to improve your emotional wellbeing. We aim to help you We do this by providing simple, achievable steps to make small changes that can add up to a real difference

world within to help you discover inspiring ways to make every day better and create a life you love.

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In the mood

Thought-provoking culture, insightful science and inspirational snippets to bring you up to date on all things uplifting, hopeful and happy-making

COMPILED BY ALEX LLOYD





A natural ageing process?

Exposure to natural 'blue spaces' in childhood has been linked to improved wellbeing in later life.

An EU-funded study across 18 countries found that adults with better mental health are more likely to report spending time around rivers, lakes and coastal water when younger.

These individuals also tended to place greater value on natural settings in general, and visit them more as adults.

Report lead author, Dr Valeria Vitale, said: 'Our findings suggest that building familiarity and confidence in and around blue spaces during childhood may stimulate an inherent joy of nature, and encourage people to seek out recreational nature experiences, with beneficial consequences for adult mental health.'

United in grief

That there is no one face of grief is the wise message of National Grief Awareness Week 2022, which takes place on 2-8 December. The annual event of commemoration and education sees bereavement charities unite to support those who have lost someone special, as well as press for better understanding on the topic. Organiser, The Good Grief Trust, says the pandemic and the death of the Queen have led to increasing numbers contacting it for help. Find out more at thegoodgrieftrust.org/ngaw



LIFE AS I KNOW IT

Deck the halls!

It's never too early to spread a little festive cheer, says Harriet Minter

Last year, I did something I've never done before:
I put my Christmas tree up in November. I'd just broken up with the man I was living with and so, as he exited the building, I decided to fill the space he'd left behind with some sparkle and light.

Yet, wherever I turn on social media right now, I can't seem to escape a middle-aged man complaining about his girlfriend or wife putting the Christmas decorations up too early. Every other Instagram post is a woman saying, 'Can you please tell Michael that Love Actually is a romcom that can be watched year round; it's just set at Christmas,' while men are posting TikToks of themselves doing the Home Alone scream as they walk into a sitting room that has been transformed into Santa's grotto.

This dismissal of the joy of Christmas as a 'silly female thing' seems to be a new phenomenon. Perhaps it's a reality of being in my 40s and dating men who are now deep into their own personal midlife crisis. While most of the women I know seem to use their midlife period as a moment for really finding what brings them joy, the men seem to fall into a hole of anger that they never really recover from. And a key target for this anger is Christmas.

In the Christmases

we spent together,

I developed a negotiation system with my ex that made Brexit look civilised. Discussions would begin in October. As he began to mutter things like, 'earlier and earlier each year.' and 'just another example of capitalism gone mad,' I'd start to gently drop the C-word into conversation. As November rolled in, I'd be bartering Christmas party invitations for a cessation of the harrumphing that happened at each appearance of the John Lewis ad. By December, we'd be in deadlock about whether or not he'd visit my family, and UN peacekeeping forces were on speed dial. The impact of this on me was that the Christmas joy began to bleed away, and I started to wonder if it was worth the effort, too.

This is, of course, how the patriarchy wins. Little by little they diminish the things that women love. They tell us that sparkles and gifts and singing are 'girly' things – things that are too silly for the real men to waste their time on. It feeds into the assumption that if women like it or lead on it, then it's just not quite as good. And I for one have no time for that. So, this year, my Christmas wish is for every man who sneers at his girlfriend putting up her Christmas tree in November to wake up on the morning of 25 December all by himself.

Meanwhile, the women will keep

Follow Harriet Minter's writing journey by signing up for her newsletter at harrietminter.com

Decorating
the tree is
our favourite
Christmas
tradition, with
watching
Christmas films
in second place
and wearing
festive pyjamas
third, according
to a poll by the
Happy
Linen





Time-honoured tradition

The secret to establishing true friendship is 34 hours of socialising, spread over 11 meetings and six months, according to a new study.

Two thousand British adults were quizzed about how new acquaintances had evolved to become firm friends. Their experiences were then analysed by Oxford University

anthropologist Robin Dunbar – famed for the theory that we can only maintain 150 connections at once – to find the winning formula.

The research, by Fisherman's Friend, also found that 61 per cent of us rated a sense of humour as the most essential quality in a pal, followed by holding similar values (44 per cent).

Embracing change

Every woman should be invited for an NHS health check at 45 to discuss the menopause, MPs have said. A report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Menopause said women are being let down during this life stage, with better workplace support and fresh training on symptoms for health workers among the suggestions. The committee also urged the Government to make HRT free in England, as it is in the devolved nations, and bust the myths around its use. Committee chair Carolyn Harris said: 'We are beginning to feel the tide of change, but the taboo around the menopause still prevails.'

"T've learned that
you can get
through anything.
Just make the
most of every day,
be grateful for
the good things,
don't look at the
bad things"

Actress and producer Sadie Frost

WATCH, LOOK, LISTEN



watch She Said, starring Carey Mulligan and Samantha Morton, tells the story behind

the New York Times investigation that launched the #MeToo movement. Out now.



LOOK Dandy Style at Manchester Art Gallery's newly opened

Fashion Gallery explores 250 years of menswear. Visit it until May 2023.



LISTEN Something Rhymes with Purple with Susie Dent and Gyles Brandreth

lets you enhance your vocabulary while learning the fascinating origins of language.





Take My Hand by Dolen Perkins-Valdez (Orion, £14.99). This drama,

inspired by true events, sees a nurse take on the establishment to win back the rights of women for their bodies.



Sorrow And Bliss by Meg Mason (Orion, £8.99) is a sharp novel

about a writer hitting 40 and discovering whether she can ever be truly happy in the face of her mental illness.



Reputation by Sarah Vaughan (Simon & Schuster, £8.99). The double standards imposed

on women in public life is at the heart of this courtroom thriller about an MP facing a murder trial.



Advent advantage

Want to add magic to the Christmas countdown while helping others? Opt for a calendar from Advent of Change – each door reveals details of a charity that your purchase has benefitted. The range is fully recyclable, too.

For kids, you can also generate a personalised note from Father Christmas in aid of NSPCC. Just pick your layout and add details about your child for a recommended donation – and it will arrive in the post a few days later.

Find out more at adventofchange.com and letterfromsanta.nspcc.org.uk





Dogs can sniff out stress in humans with 94% accuracy, thanks to changes to our breath and sweat, a study by Queen's University Belfast discovered.

Perfectly imperfect

It wouldn't be Christmas without a bit of chaos, according to six out of ten of us.

A poll by Warner's gin found the majority of Brits believe a real and authentic celebration – mishaps and all – makes the occasion more memorable.

Three-quarters of people admit to a festive fail, such as knocking over the tree, forgetting presents, being caught cheating at a board game or leaving the price tags on gifts.



LETTERS ARE EDITED FOR STYLE AND LENGTH

Viewpoint

Send your letters of gratitude and tell us what you loved reading in the magazine to letters@psychologies.co.uk



I have just read 'A room of one's own' (November) and thought I'd write to tell you about my own 'safe space', in the room next to my bedroom. It's become a sanctuary, and the place I retreat to, so I related to your feature. I especially enjoyed reading about how to curate your own 'emotional escape

room'; I've now put all my clutter tidily on shelves and in a spare wardrobe (as it used to have a bed in the room), so now I can relax and declutter my mind, too. Thanks for the inspiration!

Thank you for another great Psychologies, packed with useful tips and things to do. Amy Hunt

"I have just purchased Psychologies, and read the editorial. Kudos - it is insightful, comprehensive, very well written, and was much enjoyed"

LILITA KENYON

A way with words

I was very interested in the article 'Poetic justice' by Jackee Holder, in your October edition. I started writing poems in March 2018, when I woke up in the night with a poem in my head. I had to get up and write it down. So, like Jackee, my poems come to me in my sleep. I agree with her when she says that everyone can be a poet as, once I'd written one, writing them came so easily to me, and I have since written dozens. I have found writing so cathartic and it has helped me deal with difficult issues in my life, especially the loss of my mother at an early age.

Many of your articles encourage gratitude and dwelling

gratitude and dwelling on the positive, especially at challenging times; a number of my poems express gratitude to the wonderful people who have supported me during my life.

I just love your magazine.Thank you! Sue Brown



We'd love to know what you think

Read an article in Psychologies that rings true? Have something on your mind or a poem or a picture you'd like to share? Get in touch and share your thoughts at letters@psychologies.co.uk!





It was such a pleasure to feel the sand under our toes in between lots of cycling on a recent family trip to île de Ré in France.

My girls Edie (nine) and Hetty (seven) took a moment to appreciate the sunset, in between rapturous laughter running away from the tide.

I was grateful to have the opportunity to be with my family enjoying the simple pleasures. As Hetty's holiday catchphrase put it so well, I couldn't help think, 'This is the life...'

Dee

Viewpoint LETTERS

Thanks for all the positive articles in *Psychologies*, at a time when there seems so much negativity around.

This photo is of the shore at Seamill in Ayrshire, where my husband and I recently celebrated his 70th birthday with a couple of nights at a hotel on the coastline. My husband successfully survived prostate

cancer by having it completely removed a few years ago, and we're grateful to still be together enjoying adventures after 47 years of marriage – and counting! We loved the peace of our morning and evening walks, accompanied only by the gentle sigh of sea and busy birds. Rosemary Gemmell

I lost my dad in March 2022 and have found managing a heavy work load on top of my grief too much at times. The Lake District is one of my favourite places to go to unplug, rest and heal.

Here I am looking out over Lake Windermere on a recent break, taking in the beauty of nature. I find it brings me peace and gives me time to reflect – just like the water reflects the sky above. Vicky Eldridge



Would you like to showcase your photographic talent in Psychologies?
What moment has made you feel inspired, grateful or moved this month?
Capture it and tell us why, and we'll print our favourite. Share your photograph with us and explain its inspiration on Instagram @psychologiesmagazine with the hashtag #PsychologiesPhoto, or email it to letters@psychologies.co.uk

LETTER OF GRATITUDE

I'd like to thank...

My mum, Asifa,

I've recently been diagnosed with neuropathic pain after cancelling my travel plans in June 2022, due to becoming really unwell while abroad and returning to the UK. My parents took me in and my mum has witnessed the most vulnerable sides of me while I have been unwell. Thinking it would break her, she has instead been amazing, and shown a superhero strength that I'm in awe of. She's kept me feeling

positive, encouraged patience, and engaged me in small activities that are possible for me. At a time where I feel I've lost my way in life, she's taught me new skills, such as sewing and cooking, because she knows my mind always wishes to learn, even when I'm having a 10/10 pain flare-up.

She is a superwoman and deserves all the good in the world and more. I couldn't have got through what has been the toughest time of my life (and still is) without her love and support. Thank you, Mum.

Hiba

Spencer and Thave good and bad patches marriage is something you have to work at

Vogue Williams may look like she has the perfect life. But, here, she reveals that it's not always a case of marital harmony, and opens up about her ongoing struggle to manage the anxiety that at one time threatened to derail her

WORDS: BETH NEIL



into romance, even if that meant fighting her feelings. Matthews, however, was persistent, and three children later – Theodore, four, Gigi, two, and sevenmonth-old baby Otto – it was clearly worth the effort he put in to win her over.

'It's funny, he asked me the other day if I still get a thrill when I hear his motorbike at the gate, and I do! I hear the bike and think: 'Ah, Spenny's home' and have that excited feeling. I suppose that's a nice way to be after five years.'

Having said that, it hasn't all been plain sailing, and Williams doesn't pretend that their marriage is perfect.

'We have good and bad patches. There have been times of stress – waking up with the baby 10 or 12 times a night has been really difficult. But we're not big fighters, and he doesn't get banished to the couch to sleep for the night after an argument.

'And we're currently in a very good place, where we're having a lot of fun and both enjoying our work. We have three kids who drive us up the wall sometimes, but I do feel like we're in a particularly good spot right now.

'Marriage is something that you have to work at. For us, it's about trying to do something once a week where we can have a little bit of time together. Sometimes, it doesn't work out, and it's rare that we wouldn't have at least one child in tow – we went for a date on Sunday with Otto! But we do try.

'Wherever we are, we love each other's company, and I think that's key. My mum and stepdad have been married for nearly 30 years, and they still just really enjoy being in each other's company.'

Listeners to their podcast, Spencer & Vogue, which recently celebrated 100 episodes, will be used to hearing the two of them light-heartedly bicker and banter. But Matthews showed his softer side with a heartfelt Instagram post in October, wishing his wife a happy



birthday and calling her 'the beating heart of our family' before adding that he 'couldn't be more proud' to be her husband.

'Yeah, he's definitely more romantic than me!' says Williams. 'He's always doing thoughtful things. Mind, if he put away his clothes, I'd find that *very* romantic!

'The podcast is actually good for our marriage because it gives us time together. We have such fun with it.' Williams is quick-witted, confident and naturally funny – the sort of woman you'd want in your corner. It's hard to reconcile that self-assuredness with the fact that, just a few years ago, she was so racked with self-doubt and anxiety that she sought medical help and therapy.

With hindsight, Williams now recognises that anxiety is something that has always been there at some level, but it was in the wake of her divorce from first husband Brian McFadden, after their three-year marriage broke down in 2015, when it became all-consuming. She describes a cycle of anxiety and sleeplessness that was leaving her in a

state of stress and exhaustion. She began grinding her teeth uncontrollably, and was forced to wear a gum shield at night.

She says: 'There was a point where I was having really, really anxious days, which would then make my nights awful. I'd be lying awake in the early hours of the morning and then become stressed about not sleeping, which made me exhausted the next day, and the anxiety would be even worse.'

The day she suffered a panic attack so severe that the physical pain made her think it was a heart attack, was when she realised she was at crisis point.

'It was quite frightening, especially because I wasn't expecting it. I'm lucky that I haven't had a panic attack in a long time now, but I still get a lot of the physical symptoms of anxiety.

"I'd lie awake in the early hours and become stressed about not sleeping, and then the next day the anxiety would be even worse"



'So it was around that time that I decided to get help. I was given beta blockers by the doctor, which really did help, because they allowed me to find some calm while I was going through therapy and figuring stuff out.'

Williams doesn't use medication today, but she still dips into therapy when she feels like she needs some extra support. She has plenty of strategies to help keep her anxiety at bay these days, although says it's something that will remain part of her because there will always be triggers – lockdown and her third pregnancy were just two recent events that caused flare-ups.

'Life is going to throw up bumps in the road, and my anxiety can be triggered by those unexpected, stressful, big life moments. But it's about having the tools to manage those situations. Everyone finds their own way to deal with anxiety, but being super organised is one of the things that works well for me. If I have my work stuff laid out so I can meet all the deadlines, that makes me feel comfortable.

'Exercise is also incredibly important to my day. Avoiding alcohol is another one. I stopped drinking for the whole of October and I loved my productivity that month, because I wasn't spending any time, like, dying! I get really bad hangovers, and alcohol fuels my anxiety, so I don't drink very often.'

Williams says that spending less time on her phone and refusing to get sucked into comparisons or unpleasant online commentary is helpful: 'I'm not someone who finds other people's social media triggering because I understand it's just a snapshot of someone's life. And I don't care what people think of me; I refuse to let that affect my day. I mean, I find [trolling] bonkers - I don't understand the mind of somebody who takes pleasure in hurting someone else's feelings. But not everyone's going to love you, just as you're not going to love everyone either. Just look after yourself, and don't be too concerned about what other people think.'

If she could go back in time to seven years ago, when things felt pretty desperate, what would she say to herself?

'That everything works out exactly the way it should, and don't sweat the small stuff. Easier said than done, but some of the things I'd get myself in a tizzy about were really unimportant.'





Part of everything working out for Williams was finding love again with Matthews. But it has also been down to her determination and work ethic, instilled in her by her stepfather Neil, who pushed her to complete her degree in construction design and management, even as her modelling career was taking off. He wanted to make sure she always had a fallback plan, and Williams is grateful for his guidance.

'He's extremely strict and really into education, and he just wanted the best for us. When I was at uni and doing modelling on the side, he always drummed it into me that if I wanted to have a comfortable life, I needed to work really hard.

'I remember when I was 16, I dared to ask him and my mum to buy me a pair of jeans and they said: "Yeah, sure!" And I came home to be told they'd got me a job in a shop up the road so I could buy my own jeans – which I did, by the way!'

Next year, Williams will hit the road with the nationwide sellout tour of her hilarious podcast *My Therapist Ghosted Me*, presented with best mate and comedian Joanne McNally. It includes two dates at The London Palladium and three at Dublin's 13,000 capacity 3Arena.

"I absolutely love Christmas. I much prefer it to New Year, when I'd be more than happy to sit in and do nothing!"

'It's absolutely insane,' she says, in disbelief. 'Podcasting was something me and Spenny kind of fell into, and then Joanne and I started doing it together in a very organic way. To do a job where you sit there laughing for a couple of hours with your mate is the best thing.'

She says Matthews will be in the audience for some of the dates.

'He'll come to a lot of them, I'm sure. He's actually a big part of the show because he gives us so much content...!'

For now, though, Williams is looking forward to Christmas. It's a time of year she relishes and she can't wait to get the festive PJs on, dig out the Elf on the Shelf and take in a panto back home in Ireland.

'I absolutely love Christmas. I love the whole run up to it, I love seeing people I haven't seen in ages and all the traditions. I love Christmas dinner! I much prefer it to New Year, when I'd be more than happy to sit in and do nothing.'

There's nothing in particular on her gift wishlist, although a full night's sleep wouldn't go amiss. Of the three, Otto has proved to be the trickiest to settle at night. 'If he wasn't so cute, I'd have probably found the whole sleep thing a little bit annoying,' she laughs, 'but, honestly, you will never meet a smilier baby.'

Nevertheless, the fatigue has made Williams reconsider plans for a fourth. Or at least put them on hold. 'We are definitely taking a long break now!' she says. 'I haven't 100 per cent decided if it's a forever break but, right now, we're very, very tired parents!'



Vogue Williams' first children's book, Jump For The Stars (New Frontier, £12.99), is out now



Inspiration to boost your happiness and confidence, plus simple steps to overcome anxiety and stress



NAME OF STREET

Your confident Christmas

Social-anxiety expert Mita Mistry helps us to feel happy and excited about the festive party season again

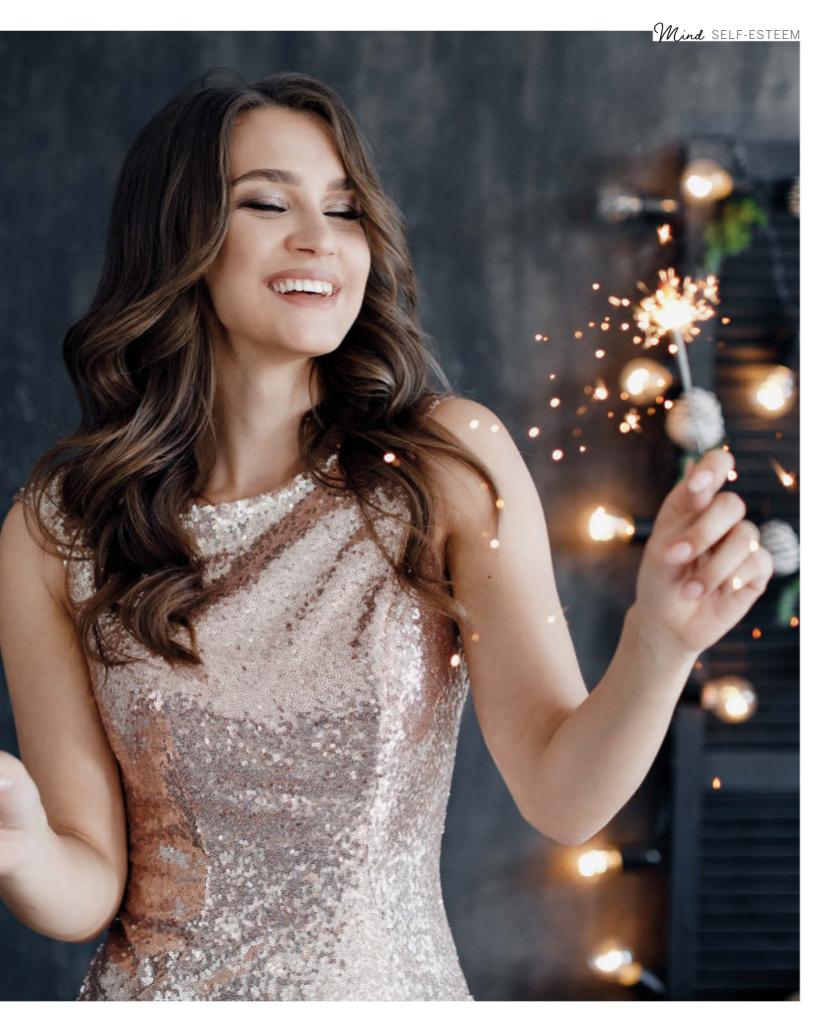
oes the thought of going to Christmas parties and get-togethers, or mingling with people for drinks, give you butterflies – and not in a good way? Maybe you're nervous about what to wear, how you'll get there, who will be there, or what to talk about, because you haven't seen many of these people in such a long time. Perhaps you used to be the life and soul of the party – or, at the very least, *enjoyed* going out – but now you find yourself feeling less-than-festive, because you don't know what to expect.

If this sounds familiar, you're certainly not alone. Most people feel nervous in some social situations, and worry about saying the wrong thing or not coming across well – but, after the couple of years we've just had, the stakes are raised.

After all, we are hard-wired for connection to survive, so of course rejection feels scary. But, for some, this goes beyond shyness or nervousness; it's an overwhelming fear of social situations that affects the body, bringing on nausea, sweating, or a pounding heart, alongside psychological changes, such as jumping to conclusions. This is what's known as social anxiety, and it's extremely common, affecting one in four people, who feel overly worried before, during, and after an event.

Socialising can be overwhelming at the best of times, but it's worse during party season – studies show that one in five people have pretended to be sick to avoid Christmas celebrations. And, let's be honest, many of us haven't been properly 'out-out' in full glad rags and





heels since before the pandemic. We're out of practice. Remember, in lockdown socialising was actually against the law! So it's hardly surprising if pandemic trauma has kept your brain on high alert at the thought of mixing with people. The good news is, by taking easy, proactive steps, you can loosen anxiety's grip on you and feel happier – meaning you can confidently ease into the festive season and party on!

First and foremost, if the only reason you are thinking about saying 'no' to plans is because you feel anxious (rather than just because you're exhausted, in which case read our feature on protecting your energy – and your diary – on page 30), you need to say 'yes' to invitations when possible. Avoiding socialising will only worsen your anxiety, as you won't get to prove your fears wrong. So, schedule that party in your diary!

Before the event, preparation is key. Ideally, tell a trusted person about your worries. This might sound daunting, but you'll be surprised by the empathy and support they lend. Ask them to check in with you when in a large group, accompany you to an event, and give you a bit of moral support.

If you're worried that your social skills aren't up to scratch (which they are, you just need a little practice), then try to make small talk with people when out and about during your day. Ask someone what time it is, give someone a compliment, or ask the checkout cashier how their day is going. Such interactions are game-changers and will boost your confidence when you meet new people. If you're jittery about what to talk about once at the party, prepare general questions, such as asking what holidays someone has planned, projects they're working on, their Christmas plans, and what films or books they enjoyed lately.

The pressure to look party-perfect is real (thanks to social media!), but most people struggle to like how they look.

Truthfully, looking and feeling great comes from within. Plan your outfit in advance and check the dress code to avoid last-minute wardrobe stress. Choose something you love but, most importantly, feel comfortable in. And try on the ensemble beforehand: shoes, accessories, the whole shebang. Tell yourself, 'I feel great,' 'I look fabulous,' or 'I am enough.'



"Try to make small talk when out and about; such interactions are game-changers and will boost your confidence when you meet new people"

Studies support the idea that positive affirmations relieve anxiety and brighten your outlook, so use this simple way to boost your confidence.

On party day, be gentle with yourself. Do little things that soothe your nerves, such as listening to relaxing music or tunes that get you in a festive mood. Give yourself a pep-talk and say, 'I'm going to enjoy this celebration,' 'I'm grateful to be invited,' 'people like me,' or 'I will let go of things I can't control.'

If you're really feeling tense, try learning some breathing techniques that relax your fight-flight-freeze response when triggered by stress. Try the four-seven-eight technique, where you breathe in for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and breathe out for eight. You can use such science-backed tools discreetly anywhere.

Once you're at the event, you'll probably feel your nerves melt away. If you do still feel tense, do whatever you need to feel safe – but get involved and make the most of the party. Don't let



pop up, challenge them, and say, 'nice try, but you're not a fact!' By assuming thoughts are true, you'll feel more anxious and come across as standoffish.

Keep in mind, many of the other guests probably haven't really partied in ages and are probably feeling nervous, too, so it's perfectly acceptable to acknowledge and normalise any awkwardness by saying, 'Excuse me if I'm a little rusty, I've forgotten how to party!' If someone looks nervous say, 'I like your dress,' they'll appreciate your kindness. Make yourself talk to at least one new person.

Try to avoid getting lost in your own thoughts and, instead, fully listen to what people are saying, as it helps conversations to flow naturally. If someone is telling you about their upcoming holiday in India, instead of thinking 'my holiday plans are extremely dull in comparison', ask which places they are visiting, to learn why they're excited.

While it might be tempting to drink more alcohol, or seem like a brilliant idea to calm those nerves, be mindful of your intake. The last thing you need is extra layers of worry about whether you said or did something embarrassing. Plus, relying on alcohol to prop you up through the party means you don't really face your social fears and prove that you're more than capable of socialising. Find out more about alcohol-free socialising on page 74.

If you do feel overwhelmed during an event, it's okay to create a little space for yourself to recalibrate. Go outdoors for fresh air, or take a quick walk if possible. Likewise, at a family gathering, should you feel the walls closing in on you, offer to wash up or take the bins out for some breathing space.

And, after the event, be kind to yourself. Stop your inner critic from conducting a post-mortem analysis and bullying you with unhelpful chatter, such as 'you should have worn a dress,' or 'you sounded cringey.' Instead, congratulate yourself for going - you faced your fears and did it! That's amazing. And promise yourself some post-party self-care. Make a vow, 'I will have a soothing bath after,' 'I will read an uplifting book,' or arrange to call a trusted person who can put you at ease. You deserve it!

Mita Mistry (Octopus, £6.99).

Remember, many of us will be feeling nervous about social situations this Christmas. You are not alone, and your feelings are valid. Be gentler with yourself and everyone this festive season. Above all, accept that party invite, show up, and pull on your dancing shoes - you never know, you might have the time of your life!



Dession two...

'd really looked forward to seeing Heather again. She had left our last session excited about creating a vision board of her desired future. She had also set herself a goal of a wardrobe makeover session with an image consultant.

So I barely recognised Heather when she arrived back at my office. She was transformed - she'd ditched the dve and embraced her grey hair, and had a short, sassy haircut. The worn-out joggers and sweatshirts were gone, and she was wearing smart jeans, trainers, beautiful knitwear, and statement jewellery. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She looked like a million dollars yet her body language didn't reflect that.

'You look amazing!' I exclaimed. 'How do vou feel?'

Heather shrugged. 'It's taking some getting used to. I never thought I could look like this but...' Heather looked sad.

'I do look a bit like Judi Dench, now. I suppose' - which had been just Heather's aim - 'but it hasn't really made a difference to me on the inside - just the outside. It just proves, you can't tell a book by its cover.'

I asked Heather to tell me what was inside the Book of Heather.

'Blank pages. I tried to complete the vision board, but I just couldn't picture my future. I was married for so long that I feel like I don't know who I am anymore. I keep thinking about all the regrets, the time wasted, and my broken dreams. I thought I was over my divorce, and ready to move on, but I just feel stuck and a bit numb.'

I noticed that Heather was talking a lot about her thoughts, not her feelings. I wondered whether she needed to do some work acknowledging her feelings about the losses she had experienced her marriage, her home, her expectations for the future.

I shared a few thoughts about endings with Heather. 'When we go through a loss or a change, we can lose our sense of identity. You were married for years and now you are divorced - it can be

> hard to adjust. Endings, just like beginnings, are times of feelings about what is being left behind, and about what the

unacknowledged pain doesn't go away. Dealing with your feelings about the past will enable you to turn your attention to your future.'

Heather was nodding and was close to tears. 'Nobody bothered to even ask me how I was. I told myself, "No one died, so pull yourself together and get on with life," but it's not as easy as that. Thank you for understanding that divorce is a painful loss too.'

'Oh, if only you knew just how much I understand, Heather!' I thought to myself.

I listened for a long time as Heather reflected on her divorce. She also talked about the happy times she had experienced in her marriage. Every feeling she had been bottling up poured out of her. Eventually, she came to a stop, sighed, and smiled at me. 'I didn't know how much I needed that,' she said.

A lovely quote by David Kessler came to my mind: 'When we see our sorrow reflected in the eyes of another, we know our grief has meaning.'

Heather said, 'It's strange, but I feel more comfortable in my new clothes after getting all that off my chest.' Heather ran her fingers through her hair and jangled her silver bracelets.

'I don't want any more blank pages in my book, but I don't think I am ready to start dating, after all. I want to discover what kind of life I can make for myself without diving straight back into coupledom. I think I need to build a new relationship with myself first.'

I asked Heather what one thing she was going to stop doing and what one thing she was going to start doing before we met again for our next session.

She didn't take long to answer: 'I'm going to stop languishing and procrastinating, and I'm going to start flourishing!'

Find out how Heather set about re-writing her story in next month's issue.

Does this sound like you? Turn the page for Kim's coaching exercises



Work it out

Get out of your comfort zone... gradually!

COMFORT ZONE

Comfort zones are great. They are safe, familiar and comfy. But they don't challenge us, and when things stay the same, we don't have to question anything. Everything is predictable. That means we don't learn much here either.

PANIC ZONE

When we decide that we are stuck in a rut and want to make changes, it is easy to set ourselves big, daring, crazy goals to move ourselves forward. However, this can land us in a panic zone! Panic zones are so far away from our usual comfort zone that we can feel fear and stress, and have way too much challenge. Going straight from comfort zone to panic zone can send us racing back to our comfort zone and staying there.

STRETCH ZONE

The trick is to take small steps and increase our courage and confidence gradually. The stretch zone is halfway between the comfort and panic zones, and while it still feels a bit strange and unfamiliar, it is manageable. Here, you can practise new behaviours safely and, by staying here, you will find your comfort zone slowly expanding.

Coaching questions to help you flourish

Take some time to write your answers to the following questions:

- What or who gives you strength, pleasure, and nourishes you?
- Where or with whom do you feel safe to learn, grow and change?
- What or who doesn't give you enough of the above?
- When do you feel most alive and true to yourself?
- What gives you your greatest sense of achievement?
- When did you recently feel fulfilled and happy?
- Describe your life if you were really flourishing

What have you learned from reading your answers? What changes do you need to make to flourish more in your life?

WORDS OF WISDOM

"If you do not change direction, you might end up where you are heading" Lao Tzu



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*HOTLINE OPEN: MONDAY-FRIDAY, 8.30AM-5.30PM. CALLS ARE CHARGED AT YOUR STANDARD NETWORK RATE





hen the prospect of the line-up of parties and gatherings in your diary fills you with dread instead of delight, it may be time to take control of your time - and energy - for the sake of your own wellbeing. However, the fear of letting others down can often make this easier said than done.

Expectations of festive 'joy and togetherness' can weigh heavily, and intensify worries about changing plans, being seen as flaky, or hurting someone's feelings. But, if we're not careful, the Christmas break can pass without us allowing ourselves a moment to relax, because we find ourselves so busy complying with "How often, everyone else's festive ideals that we neglect at the time

of agreeing,

do we ignore

the little

voice warning

us that

we might

be agreeing

to too much?"

Michelle Elman, life coach and author of The Joy Of Being Selfish: Why You Need Boundaries And How To Set Them, recognises that this festive plight can be especially difficult to negotiate for people-pleasers. She believes that. in order to avoid the situation in the first place, we need to stop saying 'yes' as a default.

our own needs.

For Elman, the first step in weighing up whether or not to withdraw from an event is to revisit the sign-up. Why did you make the commitment in the first place? After all, it's easy to be liberal in our commitments - we want to have festive treats to look forward to. Those drinks with colleagues, a Christmas shopping day, and that carol service all seem like essentials if we are to conform to the glossy ideals of the season. But how often, at the time of agreeing, do we ignore the little voice warning us that we might be agreeing to too much?

Elman says: 'One of the ways we can reduce the amount of times we cancel is by having better boundaries around what we say yes and no to. When we are a people-pleaser, we often have a

knee-jerk reaction to say yes to any invite, simply because we have a spare space in the calendar. But what you need to do instead is insert a step where you actually ask yourself whether you want to go!'

When signing up for something well in advance, we often presume that we will have more time then than we do at that moment: we are optimistic about how we will be more 'on top of things' by the time the engagement comes around. But, generally, this isn't the case and, as the commitment approaches, it feels too much, and the urge is to wriggle out of it. Or, we agree, despite not really buying

> into the plan, because we cannot think on the spot of a legitimate enough reason to say no. But Elman warns that our habit of signing up to something only to cancel at the last minute can damage our relationships, and encourages us to be honest and realistic

'We need to stop begrudgingly saying yes, knowing we don't want to go and then cancelling on the day of the event. Saying no in the first place is best and, failing that, giving plenty of notice when cancelling is better. We think it's

better to say yes then make up an excuse later, but that actually breaks the trust in the relationship and isn't authentic.'

To break the cycle of saying 'yes' without proper consideration, Elman suggests we need to add an extra step into our thought process before we agree: 'In order to decide whether you actually want to go, you need to ask yourself why you want to go. Notice if the answer you give is about them or yourself. For example, 'because they will be angry at me if I don't' versus 'because I want to relax'. We're all guilty of over-committing, but if we can get better at the stage before cancelling, when the invite actually comes in, then you reduce your need for cancelling and letting others down,' says Elman.

from the outset.



Backing out kindly

But what about those commitments you have already made – the ones that are filling you with dread right now? How can we back out of these plans with kindness and compassion?

Clinical psychologist Dr Emma Millar recognises that the act of backing out is a tricky one to navigate and, before we know it, we've spent so long worrying about how to make our excuses that it becomes too late in the day to cancel.

Dr Millar says: 'First – and most importantly – it's about listening and being kind to yourself, acknowledging what you need to do.' She has the following advice when weighing up, firstly, if we are justified in cancelling and, secondly, how to do it with compassion...

Self-awareness Why are you backing out? Dr Millar advises that we think carefully about the real reasons that we are backing out of plans - recognising that sometimes we need to push through discomfort and follow through with a plan because, despite our hesitancy, going along will do us good. This will require the ability to recognise that we may be isolating ourselves too much. She says: 'Make sure you are cancelling for the right reasons rather than withdrawing from others (for example, due to anxiety or low mood). Protecting our mental health works both ways; we need to recognise when we need some down time to look after ourselves, but also when we need to push ourselves to follow through on a commitment because despite our reluctance in the lead-up - the experience will benefit us. It's about remembering that, while we may not feel like sticking to the plan, the outcome will be more positive if we do go.'

Don't postpone the difficult conversation 'If you have agreed to do something then are not going to make it, always give as much notice as possible,'

says Dr Millar. 'Cancelling at the last minute (unless it is an emergency) only makes things seem more awkward, and could impact greatly on others, which leaves everyone feeling dissatisfied with the end result. We sometimes don't want to have those difficult conversations, but always remember that your friends and family should understand if you cannot make it to something, as well as respecting you if you don't want to give details of why.'

Stick to your guns Our plans to politely back out can be derailed when our reasons are challenged and our conscience is tugged at. Dr Millar has this advice on standing firm: 'Write a list, and stick to it!' she says. 'At times, people will try to persuade you (by demonstrating how much you mean to them, and how much they want you there), and that can be difficult. As we live in a world of balancing the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) with knowing what is right for us and what we need, we could be easily persuaded to relent and agree to go out, when we really don't want to. Making a list of all the reasons why you need to cancel a prior arrangement can help you stay focused on why you can no longer go.'

Protect me-time The fact we have a space in our diary does not mean we are 'available' to others and, Dr Millar says, practising compassion towards ourselves is essential: 'With Christmas around the corner, we may all plan to have a restful break, but somehow our days become filled with seeing others or attending different events. Being compassionate towards ourselves by protecting me-time and saying no to things or cancelling occasionally is crucial. It is a balancing act, where we must hold in mind that there is always next time to practise making it work for us if we don't quite get it right the first, second or third time!'

"Being compassionate towards ourselves by protecting me-time and saying no to things occasionally is crucial"







IT'LL BE LONELY THIS hristmas

While some people find their diaries are packed to bursting right now, many others will be alone – and lonely – this festive season, writes Caroline Butterwick

t Christmas, we're bombarded with images of what a perfect holiday season should look like – the family gathered around the table, laughing and smiling, the piles of presents by the tree. But when our reality doesn't match up, we can feel we're lacking, which can compound any negative feelings about missing out that we may already have.

For many people, Christmas can be a lonely time. You may have lost someone dear to you, have moved to a new area where you don't know many people, or perhaps you find yourself alone this year for other reasons. Whether it's being alone on Christmas Day itself, or feeling at a loose end throughout the festive season, for some, the so-called season of joy can also be incredibly hard.

Understanding loneliness

April Baker is the CEO of Brighton-based loneliness charity Together Co. 'It's absolutely normal to feel like you want to belong,' says Baker. There is a lot of stigma around loneliness, despite how common it is – we will all experience at some point what it feels like to be lonely. And admitting that it's something you are experiencing can be powerful.

"We are a connection -seeking species; from the moment of birth, we are driven to connect with others"

Loneliness can affect us in so many ways. For Baker, her own experience of loneliness and feeling disconnected from others impacted her mental health. She became agoraphobic and struggled with anxiety. And, according to the charity Mind, research suggests that loneliness is associated with an increased risk of several mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep problems and increased stress.

'We are a connection-seeking species; from the moment of birth, we are driven to connect with others,' explains psychologist Catherine Hallissey. 'So, when we find ourselves feeling alone, that goes totally against the way we are designed to be in life.'

Coping with loss

Christmas can be particularly painful for those who have lost someone, whether through bereavement, or their loved ones leaving or moving away. The empty seat at the table can be a painful reminder of the person you wish was still there celebrating with you.

How you cope with this, Hallissey says, is an individual choice. 'Some people do really well when they make themselves busy,' she says. 'So, let's say you're recently separated, and you don't have your



children with you on Christmas Day; if you can get together with somebody else, and do something totally different, suddenly you're not trying to re-enact the past, and Christmas doesn't become a shallow reflection of the ones you used to have.'

Some people, Hallissey explains, 'really like the idea of honouring the relationships they've lost, which often means acknowledging the *person* they've lost. I know families who have the photo of a lost loved one with them at the dinner table. There's no hard and fast rule to this; it's about tuning into what you think is going to work for you, not what you *think* should work for you,' says Hallissey.

Alone versus lonely

It's important to remember there is a difference between 'being alone' and 'being lonely'. Time spent by yourself can be enjoyable, and many of us appreciate solitude. Don't worry about what is expected of you – if you love curling up on the sofa with a hot chocolate and a good book rather than going for a meal out, that's completely okay.

For many of us, there is a balance between alone time and being with others. Hallissey highlights that it's worth thinking about where you sit on the introvert-extrovert scale. Do you get your energy from time by yourself, or from being around others? Understanding this can help you appreciate what it is you really need.

A meaningful Christmas

Hallissey tells me about the idea of 'designing your life', and how this can help us deal with loneliness at Christmas. This is where you cast a vision of what you want this Christmas to look like. Who, if anyone, do you want to come round? What kind of food would you eat? What music would you listen to? How would you feel? Once you've thought about this or written it down, ask what you need to do to make it happen.

Hallissey also talks about a similar exercise that involves imagining it's 31 December, and you're looking back at the festive season. Writing in the past tense, as if you're in the future reflecting back, spend around 15 minutes jotting down what you really enjoyed about this Christmas.

These two exercises can help you think about what really matters to you. Do you want to reach the New Year feeling rested and refreshed, and if so, what would help you do this? Is travelling around the country seeing family important or, actually, would you prefer to have a quiet evening with a friend? Do you want to feel like you've done something positive for others, such as volunteering? Do you want to reach out and make new connections? Do you want to have spent time with yourself, perhaps finally starting to write that novel you've been mulling over all year, or just watching *The Muppet Christmas Carol* while eating Celebrations? Are there any traditions

"Time spent by yourself can be enjoyable, and many of us like solitude.
Don't worry about what is expected of you"

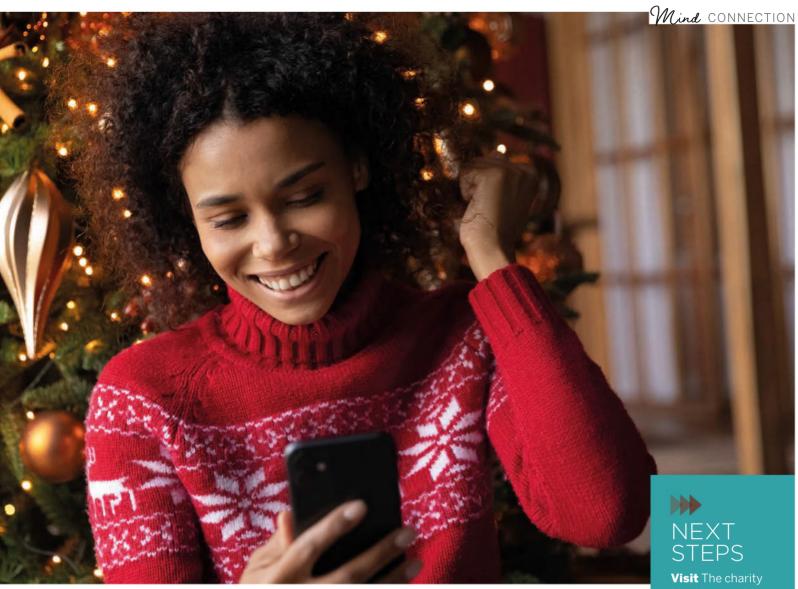
that you want to keep hold of, move on from, or start?

There are no right or wrong answers. Reflecting on what you want your Christmas to be like can help you work out what you need to do to make it happen. It can also help tackle that feeling of comparing yourself to others, especially when you realise that the things that matter to you aren't actually the things you feel you've been told should count.

Reaching out

If you have identified that you would like to spend time with others this Christmas and that you're worried about feeling lonely, think about what it is you can do to address this.

'Through my own experience, the best way to relieve yourself of feeling disconnected is to help others. Volunteering is an incredible thing to do,' says Baker. Research suggests that acts of giving and kindness can help improve your mental wellbeing by creating positive feelings and a sense of reward, giving you a feeling of purpose and self-worth, and helping you connect with other people. In fact, 'Give to others' is one of the NHS's 'Five steps to mental wellbeing'. It's worth thinking about what



you want to get from the opportunity, and what suits your interests.

Both Baker and Hallissey tell me about the importance of small daily actions we can do to build our sense of belonging. Looking up and smiling at people, or making conversation with a shop assistant, for instance, can boost our sense of wellbeing. These small interactions can also increase our confidence in reaching out to others, making it easier in the long term.

For some, we may have existing social connections we can reach out to, but are unsure or nervous about doing this. You may feel awkward about contacting someone, or worry they will say no. But chances are they will be thrilled to hear from you. They may have been feeling lonely themselves, and be glad that you got in touch.

If you're struggling with loneliness and feel stuck, schemes such as social prescribing may help. The idea of social prescribing is when GPs, other health professionals or charities can connect you with what's sometimes called a 'link worker'. 'Link workers are there for finding out what matters to you the most and how they can connect you to the

community,' explains Baker, whose charity, Together Co, offers social prescribing and has seen how it has helped. 'Sometimes we have individuals that want to get involved in the arts, and we have people that go with them to do that, or help them research it.'

I spend some time doing Hallissey's exercises around understanding what a good Christmas looks like for me. I've realised that I actually don't want big loud parties. Although I enjoy some social situations, I know I'm an introvert, and that events with lots of strangers aren't something I enjoy doing. When I look at photos on social media of big gatherings, it's worth reminding myself that I would rather catch up with a friend over gingerbread lattes than struggle to make conversation with dozens of people in a noisy bar, and that time I spend by myself can be nourishing. Knowing this feels empowering, like I understand myself better. It also spurs me on to arrange the kind of social interactions that do matter to me, easing my feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness is a common experience, but there are ways to get through. 'There are so many people in this situation,' Hallissey emphasises. 'You may feel lonely, but you are not alone.'

Visit The charity Mind has useful tips for managing loneliness. Visit mind.org.uk/ informationsupport/tips-foreveryday-living/ loneliness/ tips-to-manage-

TWEET If you're on Twitter, use the hashtag #JoinIn on Christmas Day, to chat to others.

EXPLORE Check out volunteering opportunities on the Volunteering Matters website: volunteering matters.org.uk





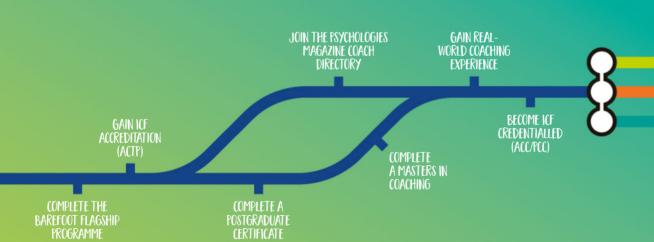
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A-Z OF COACHING

Welcome to Barefoot Coaching's *A-Z* series. We aim to distil what might otherwise be complex psychological theories and models and talk about them in a way that anybody can understand. We believe that everybody benefits from learning about and practising coaching skills - and it's catching! Coaching spreads into other areas of our life and work and the positive effects are felt far beyond just ourselves. Each issue we will be focusing on a different element of coaching. Last month we explored *Goals*, this month we will focus on *Happiness*.

'H' IS FOR HAPPINESS

What does 'happiness' mean to you? The answer might come to you straight away. If it doesn't, you might like to spend some time reflecting. **The Happiness Timeline** can help.

Draw a line that represents a period of time that makes sense to you - it could be the last week, month, year or decade! Think about periods within that time where you felt at your happiest, plot them on the timeline. For each point, reflect on the following:

- What were you doing? / Who were you with?
- Specifically, what was it about the situation that made you feel happy?
- You might also like to reflect on the degree to which your personal values were being fulfilled at that time

Once complete, step back and observe any patterns or themes. What actions could you take to bring more of that happiness into your life right now?

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IMAGE: LAURARICHARDSON

By the letter

On the threshold of a new year, use your journal to journey through time, to revisit the past and visualise your future, writes Jackee Holder

Letter writing can be a powerful ritual to mark the outgoing year and call in the new one. One way to start is by writing a letter to review your year from the perspective of your Best Self; another, a letter from you to your Future Self; a third exercise, a letter to self outlining a focus word for the year ahead.

It can be so easy to forget when and what you did during the year, so let's begin with a brainstorm. Quickly generate a timeline of one to 50 milestones you've experienced over the past 12 months. These can be significant moments, small moments, losses and regrets, wins and successes, events that made you smile. Keep this list close by as you turn to penning your letter.

Find a space where you won't be disturbed and, when you're ready, turn to a new page in your notebook and begin your letter to self from the perspective of your Best Self. Talk to yourself as you would talk to a dear friend. Begin with the words Dear (followed by your name). If it helps, use these prompts as guides: What a year you've had... I'm really proud of you for... I want to remind you of the courage and resilience you demonstrated when... I can see the lessons you learnt from... Anytime you feel stuck, return to your previous list of memories for inspiration, and then head back to the page.

With the old year now behind you, it's time to call in the new. Think wildly and without limits about your life in the future. You have achieved your best possible life in your career, work, relationships and living situations. Set the timer for 15 minutes and write as vividly and specifically as you can about what that life would look and feel like. Describe how you will go about making it a reality, even if you don't know how this will be done. In focusing on where you want to be, it can help you be clearer about concrete actions you need to take now.

The research evidence related to the BPS (best possible self) work pioneered by Dr Laura King is very encouraging. When diverse groups of research participants did this exercise for 15 minutes once a week, for four to six weeks, they evidenced increased optimism for up to six months afterwards, better

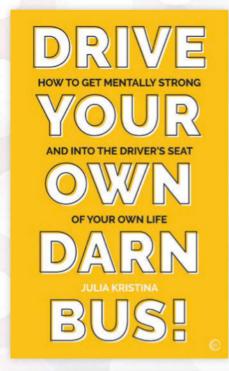


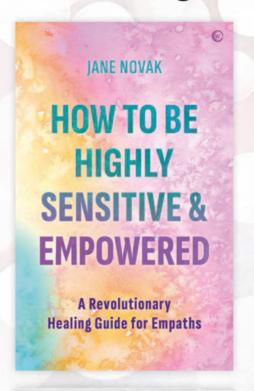
social connections, decreased levels of depression, and improvements in mental health and levels of life satisfaction. Try this activity once a week for the first two weeks of the new year, or for 15 minutes daily for four consecutive days.

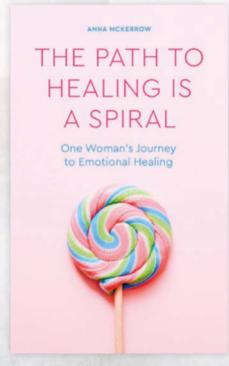
It's all too easy to fall out of one year straight into another. Why not hand write your message to your future self, pop it in an envelope and into the post. Receiving an envelope with your handwriting on makes the exercise more impactful.

Your final journal ritual for the year ahead is to select a focus word. Imagine your focus word as your North Star; a word to hold onto through the year's unfolding highs and lows. Write about why you've chosen this word, what it means to you, and how you plan to bring it to life. Allow the wisdom of your best self to gift you this word as you step over the threshold into a brand-new year. *jackeeholder.com; @jackeeholderinspires*

THIS HOLIDAY SEASON, Discover the Magic in Healing Yourself.











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f you could wave a magic wand, what would Christmas look like for you? For most of us, it wouldn't be the idealised Instagram version with lavish presents or a calendar packed with parties - because these aren't really the things we most enjoy or remember (and we know the fallout!). More likely, it would be a version that doesn't leave you stressed out and skint, where you have the time and energy to do the things you enjoy with the people you love. It doesn't have to be imaginary.

We've done Christmas differently in recent years, and we know it's possible. While people might be calling this the 'comeback Christmas', coach Becky Hall says it's more important than ever to make conscious choices and do things in a way that aligns with you and your values. 'Allow yourself time to step back and ask yourself what you're doing and why,' she says. 'By setting boundaries around your time and spending, we can resist the common traps of over-consuming, last-minute panic buying, and cancelling arrangements because we're too tired.' Being more conscious about what we do and buy will also reduce the environmental impact of Christmas, and help us feel more connected to the wider world. 'Without sounding worthy, it's perfectly possible to enjoy Christmas and make a positive contribution to the world,' says Hall. So, this year, rather than feeling pressured to make up for the past two years, why not choose to enjoy a simpler and less stressful Christmas?



How to set healthy boundaries

Bring Christmas back in line with your values and ring-fence what really matters, with these five simple steps...



KNOW WHAT YOU REALLY, REALLY WANT

One thing we all seem to forget when it comes to Christmas is what constitutes our own idea of a good time. Why do we find ourselves saying 'yes please' to big parties that we immediately dread, or book expensive Christmas shows we'd never consider at any other time of

year? 'We compare our definition of fun with other people's, and also do things to please other people,' says boundaries expert Michelle Elman. 'But you can have your own idea of fun – just switch on the filter in your brain and choose the things you like to do with the people you like.'

Elman says it's much better to say no to something in the first place than agree to it and back out on the day. 'Cancelling at the last minute means making up an excuse. If you decline the offer or invitation in the first place, you don't even need to make an excuse. A polite, "Unfortunately, I can't come," is all it needs.'

If possible, it helps to be clear in your mind exactly what you do and don't

want before the festive season gets fully underway – but it's never too late to do a quick mental reset. 'If you're not sure what you want, think about what energises you and what drains you,' says Elman. 'By law of averages, around half of us are introverted to some degree, trying to fit into a world that favours extroversion. Know what you like and how you feel, and don't keep doing the same things and expecting a different result.' If you don't like parties, you're not going to suddenly like them on New Year's Eve, when expectations are at their highest. If you'd rather spend New Year's Eve at home or in a cottage in the middle of nowhere, then that's what you should do.





Setting yourself some limits in advance will mean you're less likely to make those mindless, last-minute decisions we all make once we're busy and decision-fatigue has set in. When you're clear about what you want, you can create boundaries around whatever it is you need to from money to commitments, who you buy for, or even the time you spend shopping. If this makes you uncomfortable, life coach Becky Hall says it's helpful to think of boundaries 'like a plant pot, that allows us to grow and flourish neatly within a structure.'

There are many ways of doing things differently that won't detract from your enjoyment, or upset others. If you don't want to go to a pre-Christmas gathering because you don't have the spare money right now, suggest to your friends that you do something together in the new year, or that they come over with a dish and watch a Christmas movie, instead. And rather than mindlessly sticking cash in envelopes, propose a secret Santa where you buy one gift instead of five, or make some handmade gifts. 'You can make people feel special in lots of

ways that don't cost a fortune, and approach Christmas in a way that means you can be in the present moment,' says Hall. 'It shouldn't be an idealised time, but a relaxing one.'

Elman advises scheduling in time for both rest and play. 'Play is social activities that you enjoy, and rest is spending some time on your own or doing something relaxing,' she says. 'Both are equally important.'





HAVE THE CONVERSATIONS

Once you've decided what you want to do, you need to communicate it - and sooner rather than later. 'Talk to your family and friends; engage them in the idea of doing things differently,' says Hall. You'll find the conversations a lot less awkward than you think, and probably discover that most people are feeling a similar way to you. If you're worried about how your kids might react to a Christmas with fewer presents, Hall suggests making it fun and getting their input on ideas of doing things differently, like only shopping locally, having a shared experience, or having only charity-shop purchases in the stocking. 'What kids really want to know is that they're loved and appreciated, which you can do in other ways than buying lots of presents. And what are you teaching them if you're going to be worried for the next six months because you've overspent?' You can explain that setting limits is not a bad thing and that good boundaries are there to keep us safe and on track, healthy and well.

Communicating your reasons for doing things differently will help people understand, and you'll probably find they jump on board with your ideas, whether it's a no-wrapping policy or a different way of doing your office party or family gathering. And when you're buying a gift for someone or taking an offering, ask what they'd really like. 'People will really appreciate you asking what they'd like to drink, or if you can bring a dish rather than forking out on another bottle of Champagne they don't even like,' says Elman. In having these conversations, you're letting people off lots of hooks, which they will be thankful for and you'll feel a lot better for doing.



KNOW WHEN ENOUGH

If you struggle to know when to stop buying, cooking,

doing or shopping, it can be helpful to look at the triggers and why so many of us fall into this trap. 'Over-consumption and doing too much comes from a place of scarcity,' explains Hall, 'meaning that when we fear we're not enough, we keep on compensating by doing more. It doesn't help that Christmas has been overtaken by consumer pressure, all designed to make us believe we don't have what they're trying to sell us, so we buy more. As a result, we fall into the trap of thinking that more things will make us happy, and that the presents we buy represent the size of our love.'

As soon as we allow ourselves to fall into the idea of creating an idealised or perfect Christmas, we fall short, because we can never meet it. Hall says that we need to start from a premise of 'I am enough as I am and there's enough to go around' so you can then focus on what matters and make clearer choices with conscious intention. 'Instead of being driven by fear and the perceived sense that we're being judged, we want to be driven by a sense of love or abundance.'







GIVE BACK

Being more conscious about how you spend your time and money this Christmas will help you to find ways to make a positive contribution and avoid getting caught up in the whirlwind of consumerism. Start by trying to connect your values to how you approach Christmas. 'We all know about climate change, and most of us get a lot of pleasure from time spent in nature, so if we buy our presents with a sense of contributing to making the world better, rather than worrying and feeling guilty about how much plastic we're throwing away, it makes us feel happier and is a positive thing to focus on,' says Hall.

If you're looking for ways to give back to your community, think about how you can use your skills and the things you enjoy doing. If you enjoy cooking, for example, you could make hampers for elderly neighbours or volunteer to help prepare or serve a Christmas dinner for a charity. Hall suggests turning your intentions into gifts by sending a card offering your skills or time, such as gardening, babysitting or dog-walking vouchers.

Getting kids involved can also help them to see Christmas from a different perspective. You could collect produce together to take along to a food bank, or clothes and toys to donate to charities. 'Make it an adventure; a shared experience that everyone can engage with and get on board with,' says Hall.



"If you're looking for ways to give back to your community, think about how you can use your skills and the things you enjoy doing"



Let go of perfectionism

Shake off the weight of expectation – your own and other people's – and discover that good enough is plenty good enough

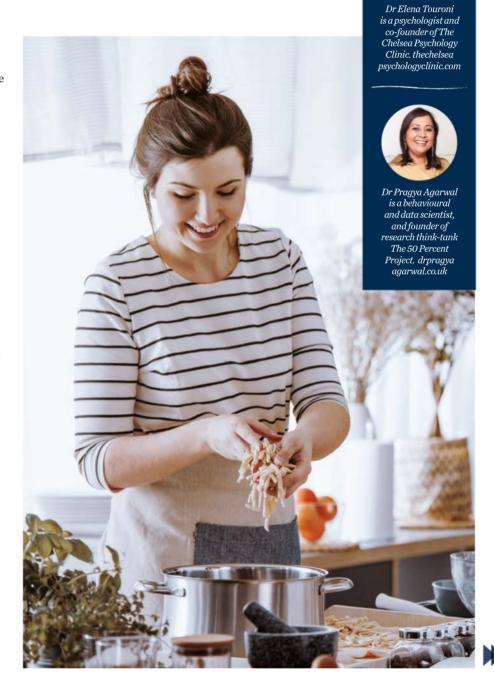
BY YASMINA FLOYER

ve lost count of the number of hours I've spent watching TV chefs instruct me in the art of making the perfect roast potato. Growing up, the festive season involved the likes of Delia Smith and Gary Rhodes revealing the wonders of parboiling spuds, of fluffing them in the strainer before adding them to very hot fat. Then, there was the year when, not too long ago, Jamie Oliver caused jars of goose fat to fly off the shelves after declaring it the fat of choice for roasties - but not before they had been given a light dusting in cornflour. These days, the stages required for roasting a spud would rival any multi-step skincare routine - and it epitomises the ever-growing trend towards achieving perfection during the festive period.

To me, the North Star of perfectionism had always played the part of comforting guide, helping me to aim higher, to be better. Even now, perfectionism is paraded as a virtue in disguise as a vice. I'm not the only one to have uttered the humble brag, 'The problem with me is that I'm too much of a perfectionist,' knowing that this roughly translates to 'I have impeccably high standards.'

Psychologist and co-founder of The Chelsea Psychology Clinic Dr Elena Touroni tells me that, 'At the heart of most perfectionists is a deep fear of disapproval and of not being "good enough". And, so, in extreme cases, this drive for perfection can lead to anxiety, depression and, ultimately, burnout' – something that I can really relate to.

When I became a mother, I wanted to be the *best* mother, and part of that



meant making Christmas the best time of the year for my children. I'd plan gifts months in advance, carefully paying attention to clues (I still do this; noted is the faux-fur leopard print coat my teen talks longingly about!).

One of the main downsides of perfectionism is the way it affects our expectations of how things will be versus the reality of how they turn out. 'Perfectionism steals joy because the drive to do or be "better" is relentless,' Dr Touroni explains. 'So, when it comes to Christmas, this puts a huge amount of pressure on festivities that are meant to be fun. Not only will this pressure be felt by the perfectionist themself, but also by their friends and family, too.'

The rigid script of perfectionism leaves little to no room for the chaotic plot twists of real life. When my daughter was two, for example, friends with older children spoke of the joy that we as parents would experience now that our daughter could really 'get' the whole Christmas thing. Looking back, that simply meant she had reached an age where we could tell her what to expect, and that she was capable of carrying those expectations. 'Twas the night before Christmas when, dressed in pink penguin PJs bought weeks in advance, sat with her hot chocolate watching a festive movie, I exhaled and thought, isn't this perfect? And then my daughter's sick bug began, lasting well into Boxing Day. In reality, our daughter wasn't very sick and was completely content eating crisps while playing with her new toys. In my mind, however, everything had been ruined because the day had failed to live up to the pressure of my expectations.

Dr Pragya Agarwal, behavioural scientist and author of books including her most recently published *Hysterical* (Canongate Books, £16.99), tells me that, 'In the lead up to Christmas, perfectionist behaviours can become heightened – especially for women. We feel the responsibility of creating joy for others in

our family, of giving them the best festive season possible, and we are also fearful of being judged as a bad parent, as a not-good-enough woman if we fail to create a perfect Christmas.'

I had this rule, after having my first child, that even on days when we would predominantly be at home, I had to be dressed in something 'proper', such as jeans, in order to earn the comfort of cuddling up cosily in lovely soft loungewear come the evening. There was no logic for this beyond the fact that, on some deep level, I felt that I had to pay for my comfort with the relative discomfort of fitted jeans, and if I'm honest, there was usually a mild feeling of guilt attached to feeling good without having felt bad first. Some version of 'fittedjeans syndrome' happens to me come November. The knowledge of approaching a time of year where there is much to feel good about fills me with mild panic. How on earth do I go about earning all that joy? In the past, the answer to this would include over-working, restricting my diet and obsessing over tiny details, frequently culminating in illness and burnout come the holidays.

The delayed gratification that is baked into things like the advent period and 'being good' all year round in order to elicit a visit from Santa breeds the notion of having to earn one's pleasure. There is nothing wrong with that in theory, and I frequently tell my children that hard work and diligence at the start of an endeavour equates to success and relaxation later. But what happens when pleasure, joy and rest become things we feel we must always earn in order to experience them? Dr Agarwal tells me that, 'Perfectionism is setting expectations of flawlessness. It puts emphasis on the end result and not the process, and will always leave the person feeling "not enough" or an imposter.'

Understanding the ways in which perfectionism can hinder us, and reframing it to expose it for the joy

"The rigid script of perfectionism leaves little to no room for the chaotic plot twists of real life"







With you in mind stealer it truly is, can allow us to connect to our pleasures without the complexity of expectation and guilt. 'It is completely possible to set high standards without comparing yourself to others, or to a perfect ideal,' Dr Agarwal explains. 'We can allow ourselves to make mistakes, and be prepared to learn from them. This is the growth mindset that acknowledges that setbacks and failures are an integral part of life. We have to remember that putting this pressure on ourselves will stop ourselves from truly enjoying the intimacy and closeness of our family, of finding joy in the little-moment things that truly matter in the end.'

Interrogating the fact that I felt I had to earn my joy at Christmas time lead me to question why I didn't think I deserved it in the first place. I would never deny my children their moments of joy by telling them that they hadn't earned the right to feel good! When I began challenging the thoughts that formed my so-called rules, I was able to see that I deserve joy for joy's sake, as do we all. The Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi speaks of the beauty of imperfection, reminding us that life is messy and impermanent, and therefore perfection is impossible. This Christmas, I hope to make my crispiest, most fluffy roast potatoes yet, though I don't feel under any pressure to meet this standard. I know that if something goes wrong, then Aunt Bessie's will work out just fine too.



Listen In How to Fail with Elizabeth Day, journalist Day invites interviewees ranging from athletes and authors to reality stars and musicians to explore three of their failures. This reframing of failure via these candid and vulnerable conversations acts as a brilliant antidote to perfectionism.

Watch *Nativity!* is a charming British festive calamity movie starring Martin Freeman and Marc Wootton, and sure to become a firm family favourite.



Simple joys

Explore ways to reduce stress and appreciate the little pleasures of the season

HAVEA SPRUCE-NEEDLE BATH

Cut three fresh twigs from your Christmas tree, chop them into small pieces and add to a litre of water. Bring to the boil then take off the heat, cover with a tea towel, and leave to infuse while you run your bath. Strain and add to warm bath water before bed. This is particularly good if you



Write cards

Who doesn't love to receive a handwritten card? Taking the time to write

a few personal words of good wishes or thanks will cost you little in time or money, and help make someone's day special.



Sleeeep!

Don't be tempted to skip on your sleep. It helps to regulate your hormones and appetite, causes a drop in the production of the stress hormone cortisol, and makes you a more patient, happy bunny. Grab an early night or a nap whenever you have the opportunity.

Light candles

It can be very special to get up early on a winter's morning and light some candles. Do some gentle stretches

or relaxed breathing, and watch the day awake. Enjoy candlelight in the evening, too, to encourage production of the sleep hormone melatonin, and help prepare your mind and body for sleep.

READ TOGETHER We all love a bit of Christmas TV, but turning it off occasionally and enjoying the silence while you read quietly together is a bonding and relaxing way to spend an evening.



consciously and

look around you, listening to the

sounds while

thoughts.

gathering your

Play a game

It wouldn't be Christmas without a good board game or jigsaw. You don't need to buy a new one though – check out the charity shops or do a swap with a friend.

psychologies

DOSSIEI

With you in mind



Forage for vour decorations

Head to your nearest woods and collect holly, pine cones, seed heads and evergreen branches to make into a wreath, table decoration or fireplace display. Add bay leaves, rosemary, dried orange slices and clippings from your tree for a wonderful festive scent.

BE GRATEFUL

Sharing a few words of gratitude around the table will help all the family appreciate what you have. You could take it in turns to name something you feel grateful for. Think of it like saying grace, but your way.



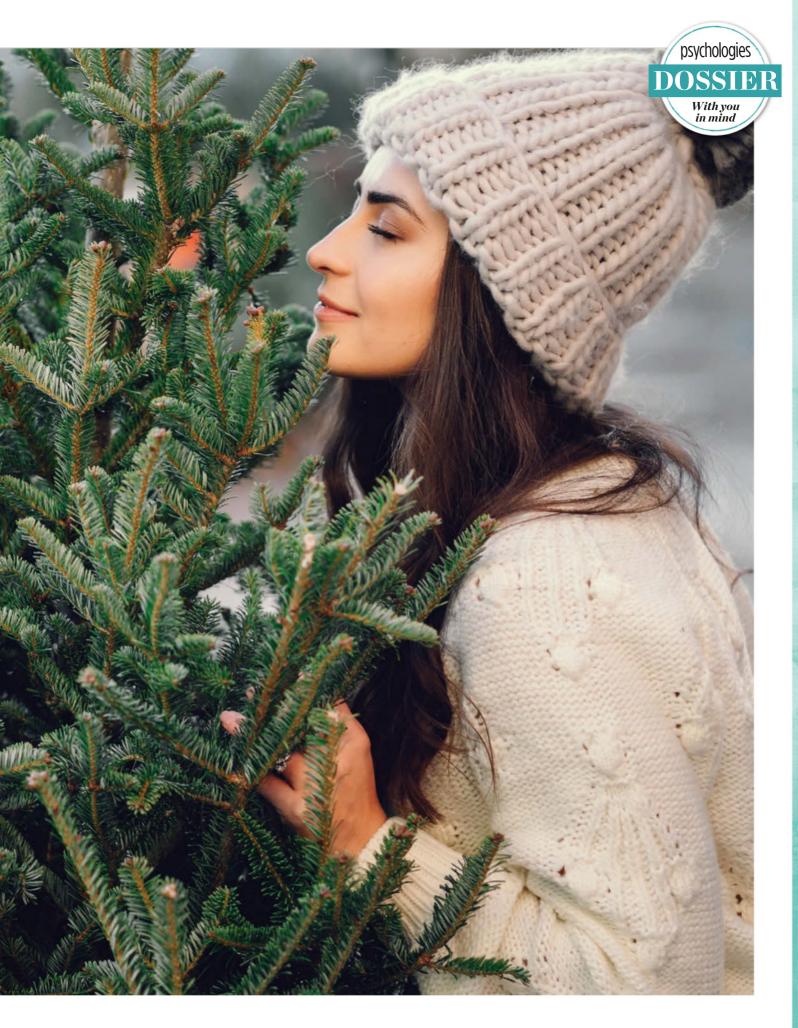
psychologies.co.uk test

WHAT DO YOU NEED FOR A SIMPLER CHRISTMAS?

If you're determined to take the stress out of Christmas this year, take our test to find out your personal barriers to reconnecting with joy

Tick the answers that most closely apply to you, then add up the symbols. Read the section, or sections, you ticked most, to find out what gets in the way of your festive fun

1 You secretly worry about ♦ Missing out	make you feel more on top of things? Knowing what really matters in the long run
 Are with people who really get 2 Part of you worries that if ■ Are doing something creative Christmas was simpler, you'd feel 	
 Lonely Guilty Bored Lost 6 You would enjoy Christmas if there was More guarantee that everyon enjoyed it 	■ Not worrying about what other e people think all the time
 Less emphasis on tradition You think of yourself as Less pressure to see everyon Less pressure to make it perf 	in a second control of the control o
 Makes time for everyone	e less busy • You did the things you really
4 At the end of Christmas day, it would be great to feel ▼ That you'd enjoyed it as much as	
everyone else	



What's stopping you simplifying Christmas?



IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ♥

Responsibility

If you feel personally responsible for your loved ones' happiness at Christmas, is it surprising that it feels like there's no space left for your own? Being the unofficial director of the perfect family Christmas is a role that you may have wholeheartedly embraced, or maybe it's just one you've grown into with time. Either way, taking on emotional responsibility for others' happiness usually goes hand in hand with a lot of crystal-ball gazing; trying to work out what might happen and what people might want, which can be an impossible task. Of course, being with loved ones is at the heart of Christmas, but sacrificing your own enjoyment for the sake of others' is likely to affect everyone's fun.

People who are prone to taking responsibility tend to be naturally caring, but an often unacknowledged benefit is feeling in control and at the centre of things. If your default association with Christmas is pressure and exhaustion, it's time to let go. Your task is to reconnect with fun, which may mean trusting others to step up. You also need to let other adults take responsibility for their own happiness. One of the joys of Christmas is that, every year, we get a chance to do it differently – if we're willing to be brave.

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ◆

Overwhelm

You may be well aware that you're prone to overdoing it at this time of year, and you regularly start the new year feeling exhausted. But what's often harder is trusting that a simpler Christmas can be just as memorable and enjoyable. If you tend to throw yourself at the festive season with huge amounts of enthusiasm, scaling back can feel like a big change. Slowing down and simplifying may generally be a challenge for you, if you thrive off the buzz of new experiences and being busy. You might also be prone to a fear of missing out if you haven't said yes to every invitation and opportunity. But it's something you need to face up to if you've noticed a feeling of fragmentation and overwhelm creeping in at this time of year. And consciously simplifying Christmas might help you set the tone for the year ahead, and trigger a much-needed shift.

Start by thinking about what you'd really like to be at the heart of your Christmas, then work out what periphery events you can let go of. Clarifying your values can make it easier to find a focus, which can help you shape a festive season that truly brings you joy, rather than a series of experiences. The key is focusing on how you want to feel, rather than simply what you want to do.



IF YOU SCORED MAINLY

People-pleasing

There's something about the festive season that makes even those of us who are savvy about self-care and boundaries suddenly start saying 'yes' to things that, in all honesty, we really don't want to do. We might be happy to skip that office drink or school reunion at any other time but, at Christmas, it can suddenly feel hard to opt out.

If you have a vocal inner critic and worry about being judged by others, it can be hard to resist the pressure to socialise at this time of year. You may be aware that you need to say 'no' more often, but even those who are aware of the limits of their 'social battery' can feel pressure to override it in the festive season. And it may well be that relationships are at the heart of Christmas for you, creating a drive to make time for friends, family, neighbours and colleagues.

If you find yourself stuck in people-pleasing mode, trapped by a fear of disapproval or missing out, remember that there will be plenty of time after Christmas to spend time with people you care about. A simpler Christmas for you starts with prioritising quality over quantity when it comes to time with others, and moving out of reactive mode into consciously curating how you spend your time.

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY

Perfectionism

There is no other time of year more guaranteed to trigger your inner perfectionist than now, after weeks spent surrounded by often unattainable images of how to 'do Christmas'. If you're creative, you might appreciate the chance to explore new ideas and put your talents to good use. But when it becomes less about what you enjoy doing, and more about seeking approval from others, it's time to think about simplifying Christmas. Aspiring for perfection at any time of year is setting yourself up to fail, but at Christmas there's so much more to 'get right', including making other people happy.

Perfect is often about how something looks to others, and what can get lost in the constant striving to make the right impression is fun, enjoyment and, ultimately, what you actually want from Christmas. If you've already had the thought that no one really seems to appreciate all the time and effort you've put in behind the scenes, it's time to gift some of that time and effort back to yourself. It doesn't mean stopping caring – you can still have high standards – but you can also settle for good enough and not feel bad about it. Start by thinking about what activities you'd do if there was no one else to witness them, or no one to compare your efforts to.



Your real ? Christmas list

We've looked in huge detail, here, about how to make this a calmer, happier, less stressful Christmas – so now it's up to you! Instead of making endless lists about what you need to buy for everyone this year, or the food you need to stock the cupboards with, take time to think about what really, truly matters to you...

This Christmas,

Twant to...

Twant to see...

Twant to see...

Twant to share...

I want to visit...



How to connect more meaningfully and enjoy loving relationships with our partners, children, parents and friends



GOODWILL TO ALL MEN (and women!)

If turkey, trimmings and a side helping of tension are staples of your Christmas dinner, learn how to up your tolerance levels and avoid the angst. Emma Cooling investigates...



iting our lips as we mix with the opinionated friends and relatives that we've spent the past 12 months dodging can be a festive rite of passage - but, this year, we may find our tolerance levels lower than ever. Recent times have put the kybosh on such gatherings, and, as well as avoiding the annual clash of views on everything from politics to turkey basting, our own horizons may have narrowed - making us less open to others' views and more defensive of our own opinions. Indeed, we may find that, this year, we have less time for our sister-in-law's uninvited stateof-the-nation address than ever before!

Each to their own

Working from home and restrictions on community and family gatherings have robbed us of the opportunities for off-the-cuff discussion and debate with those who think differently to us. Restrictions on mixing have seen us hunkering down with our tribes,

surrounding ourselves with those whose views echo our own, and relying on social media feeds engineered to re-enforce our sense of self, not challenge it.

But the world has opened back up, and with festive gatherings imminent, we may need to unwrap the social cotton wool that has kept us feeling safe during uncertain times, and prepare for healthy debate, as family groups and generations mix.

Yet the fear of the discomfort that hearing a different view might bring can be unsettling; even entertaining the idea that there might be another side to the story can shake up a solid sense of self. But tolerance and the ability to actively listen to others are vital life skills that may need dusting off.

Different directions

Ali Goldsworthy, campaigner, co-author of *Poles Apart*, and president of Accord – a specialist consultancy that brings together leading names to reduce polarisation in business – recognises

that the past few years have been the perfect storm in terms of lowering our tolerance levels and increasing polarity.

'In general, despite the "we're all in this together" message, Covid has increased divides between people,' she says. 'In times of war, we share a common enemy and there is a "rally around the flag" mentality, but with the pandemic it was tricky - the enemy was intangible and the situation went on for such a long time. This extended period of uncertainty increased the divides between different groups in society.' And in times of prolonged uncertainty, Goldsworthy explains, we cling to our own. 'During difficult times, we go back to the familiar; we instinctively want to spend time with those we are most familiar with - the people who re-enforce who we are by telling us we are right, which makes us feel better. New bonds did form between people - neighbours for example - but, generally, everyone clung to those that they identified with most.'





And, during the period of isolation and limited integration with others, social media and news sources will all have played a part in pushing us apart. As Goldsworthy says, 'The harm comes not just when you are being fed news that re-enforces your own views, but when you are presented with the extreme version of the "other side" in a way that alarms you and makes you stand firmer in your existing views.'

Kelly Hearn, psychotherapist and co-founder of Examined Life, a collective of therapists providing an innovative approach to psychotherapy practice, says that the past few years have left our nervous systems in 'chronic high alert'. 'Fear and uncertainty are pervasive,' says Hearn, 'and when we are feeling scared, the natural tendency is to find safety in the group, and to attack any perceived source of threat. Us versus Them becomes a way of coping; of surviving.'

Hearn warns that the atmosphere of fear that has led to divisiveness will have left many of us rigid and inflexible in our thinking. 'This Christmas may be the first time that many of us fully emerge in the physical world post Covid. The bulk of our communication has been online, isolated in our silos of like-minded people.'

Setting the scene

Healthy debate is good, but festive outbursts of pent-up frustrations or injustice are generally not constructive. So, if you know that your sister can't stand your parents' views on Brexit, or you can't see your brother without him dragging up family arguments from

20 years ago, then a helpful first step would be to find some common ground.

Goldsworthy says: 'Think about the environment in which you all feel open-minded; a setting in which you yourself might change your mind about something. That is unlikely to happen during a shouting match over the Christmas table. Instead, work on shared projects: a craft, a jigsaw – anything that involves working together with someone rather than positioning yourself in direct conflict with them.'

Finding common ground is also advocated by Hearn - remember that your infuriatingly outspoken uncle does not come from another planet, and has more in common with you than not! She urges us to try to look beyond the view being aired in any particular moment. 'The opinion, while different from our own, comes from a fellow human being. Remind yourself that, just like you, this person is trying to take care of themself and their family. Just like you, they are feeling scared and unsure. Our ways of coping may differ, but when it comes to the fundamentals, we are all the same. Grounding ourselves in commonality and connection means we will feel safe enough to tolerate difference.'

When it comes to recognising the danger that intolerance can pose to society, most of us see the bigger picture. Hearn encourages us to translate that into looking inside ourselves, and to 'clean house on a micro level' when it comes to reducing polarity and division. 'We spend the bulk of our energy focused on others – either individuals or groups – and how their thinking and actions are the problem. We spend far less time tending to our own role in propagating the divide,' she says.



HOW TO IMPROVE OUR TOLERANCE LEVELS

Listening is key, says Hearn. 'Listen with the intent to understand someone rather than to change them,' she advises. 'All too often we enter conversation with the goal of winning someone over. Recall that no matter what fireworks may be exploding on the surface, this is a person struggling with uncertainty, just like you'.

Recognise emotion, stresses Goldsworthy. Division is rooted in identity rather than issues, which means that there is usually emotion behind someone's argument rather than hard facts. Remembering that we are all emotive beings can help us understand someone else's viewpoint.



Face the discomfort, urges Hearn. One of the most important practises we can engage in is to put ourselves in the face of differing views on a regular basis, to cultivate a tolerance for discomfort. Hearn says, 'Aim to manage discomfort better rather than trying to eradicate it.'

Ask how, not why, says Goldsworthy. 'Getting people to unravel their viewpoint makes for more constructive conversation. I use the analogy of a zip: if asked, most people say they know how a zip works, but if you dig deeper and ask them to explain it, they'll realise they don't really know "how" at all.'

Engage in self-care, says Hearn. 'Breathing exercises, a gratitude practise, and stretching all help to balance the nervous system. Find tools that help you cultivate a sense of safety, as we don't have access to empathy, collaboration, creativity and connection when our threat system is in chronic overdrive.'

Our agony aunt, Mary Fenwick, offers a new perspective on



whatever is troubling you

After a traumatic childhood, with one abusive alcoholic parent and another with undiagnosed mental health problems, it seems to me that my 'emotional core' wasn't created correctly. As an adult, I have a lovely life with a wonderful partner. My thoughts and self-talk are positive, and my outlook on life is optimistic, but I often feel the worse in my 'essence'. I have come to this conclusion after years of therapy, hindsight and self-analysis, and would like your help to improve things.

Your question led to an illuminating conversation with trauma recovery coach Mel Curtis. She is on Instagram as @meltalkstrauma, and works with people who have survived trauma but don't yet feel they are thriving. Curtis points out that the root of the word psychology is 'psyche', which is Greek for soul: 'When somebody talks about their essence, they are no longer talking about the mind, the brain, or their thoughts; what they are talking about is the *soul*.'

This stage, like most trauma recovery, means gradual small steps. There's no such thing as a spiritual bypass, says Curtis – it needs to be holistic: 'We need to connect the mind and the body, as well.' As one such example, Curtis suggests trauma-informed yoga.

Perhaps you have already tried some embodied or somatic therapies, such as EMDR (eye movement desensitisation reprocessing). Another option is a short body scan meditation, or anything that helps your awareness and tolerance of physical sensations. If you look for work by the trauma specialists Peter Levine or Irene Lyon, you'll find more suggestions. It's also useful to take a break from active recovery at times, allowing yourself to stabilise and gather your resources, just as you're doing now.

All of this work is deeply personal, so you might well have your own vocabulary of head, heart and essence, perhaps. Even if it's difficult to define, most of us are aware of something that exists beyond our thoughts or our bodies. You might call it your vision, calling or purpose: as Curtis says, 'We have to have a big enough "why" to do this work, because it's hard.' But your example will inspire others.

traumathrivers.com

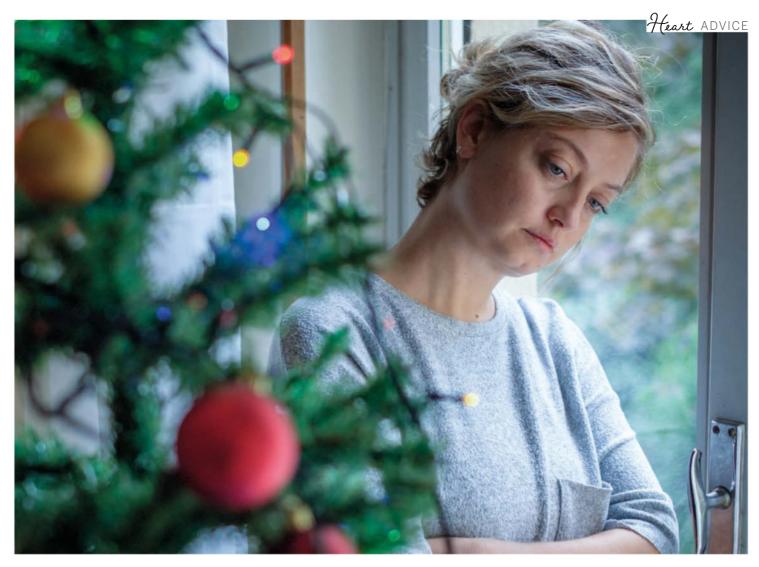


MARY FENWICK is a writer, speaker and executive coach. She is also a mother, divorcee and widow.

GOT A QUESTION FOR MARY? Email letters@psychologies. co.uk, with 'Mary life' in the subject line.

FOR MORE about Mary's work in leadership and team coaching, her 'Writing back to happiness' programme and free resources, go to maryfenwick.com









I'm seeking a divorce from my wife. It seems to have come as a surprise to her, despite the fact that I have been unhappy for years. I love my children, and my heart is breaking for them, but the complete blindness to my feelings by my wife is what I can no longer stand. She only wants me for what I can provide, and is putting pressure on me 'for the sake of the children'. Should I do one last family Christmas, even if it's fake?

This question is about timing, but perhaps not in the way that you think. What has made things come to a head right now? If you've been unhappy, and your wife is blind to that, what has happened recently that makes it no longer tolerable to you? This question is not intended to make you justify your decision, but to help you reach a more holistic understanding.

It's difficult, if not impossible, for children to be happy if their important adults are not; in the absence of an explanation for adult emotions, they are likely to blame themselves. Again, I don't mean to make you feel bad, but to point out that faking it won't work. Negative

emotions are hugely 'sticky' and they tend to embed memories – that's their function, so that we learn 'Ugh, I'm not doing that again'. Putting your children through a fake Christmas is a huge burden to place on a child, in which you're effectively saying, 'We did it for you'.

Rhian Kivits is a Relate-trained therapist who says there's a misconception that the aim of therapy is to keep you together. Talking to an impartial outsider might keep both you and your wife focused on the real issues – not only practical questions over things such as money and housing, but also what your expectations of each other are; what and when you are

going to tell the children; and how can you co-parent afterwards.

These are not easy conversations to have – it's much more tempting to retreat and blame each other. But my mediation colleagues talk about 'contribution' rather than accusation. For instance, ask yourself, 'How have I contributed to this situation by what I've done or left unsaid?' Having this open attitude is more likely to invite the same from your wife.

If you can manage this, Christmas could take place honestly, with kindness and understanding on all sides, even if it looks a little different to the Christmases of previous years. *rhiankivits.co.uk*



Very occasionally, I escape to the city. Boarding the train, I watch the North Sea flash by and disappear. I like to stare out of the window and look for deer standing in fields, or the fork of a red kite's tail silhouetted in the sky. The rough edges of Northumberland become smoother and softer the further south I travel, until the fields are swallowed by buildings. Some people are bemused by the concept of escaping to a city, glancing over my shoulder at the wide Northumbrian beaches and distant hills. But while the middle of nowhere holds its own remedies, I always find a trip to the city nourishing in its own special way.

The unspoken codes of life in the south feel familiar to me: tapping phones on train barriers, standing on the right of the escalator, always moving. Sitting on the train watching tired faces, beautiful faces, wise faces, young faces, and wondering what lives these people are leading, forming stories in my head. When I am here, the possibilities of who I could become feel endless. There's always a chance I might meet someone new, at any time, and my destiny would shift on its axis. Or perhaps it is something to do with strangers' perceptions; who do they see when they look at me? The streets are filled with sights and sounds that leave me breathless and hungry for more. I soak it all up like a sponge and feel less ordinary, somehow imbued with the glamour all around me. No one knows who I am and I can be whoever I choose. Alone without my children, my ring finger is bare; what is my story?

In the city, I wonder if I am returning to the person I was before I married and had children – but, of course, that isn't possible. I am someone different now – or perhaps the same person, but altered – and I can't go back. But this brief time in a space I know so well allows me to detach a little from the mother, recall the woman. When I lived here years ago, I was just a girl, malleable and not fully formed. I still feel girlish and playful, but more grounded now, responsibility dampening an impulsive nature.

Nevertheless, sitting in a pub with a friend, trains roaring overhead and lights flashing against a fading sky, I don't feel any different. I am still that girl with a head full of dreams, when everything felt possible.

At home, most of the diversity lies in the landscape, on shorelines bursting with birds, or fields where hares stand out from the scrub. The beautiful vastness of Northumberland feeds my reflective soul and taps into my creativity, but I am an extrovert, bubbling and frothing like the tides when I am with other people, words



"This brief time in a space I know so well allows me to detach a little from the mother, recall the woman"



spilling from my mouth, and sometimes I like to feed on their energy. It is this that I miss the most about the city: proximity to people – the ones I already know, and those I have yet to meet.

Following an escape, I return to writing alone at my desk, watching the sky burn pink beyond the rooftops as candles flicker and daughters sleep. And once more I think about the irony of feeling alone when I am surrounded at all times by children. But then I remember that it is this act of rising early and crafting thoughts onto a page that

enables me to return to the city. My solitary work is creating sparkling opportunities for me to connect with new people, readers like you who reach out to tell me their own stories, share their own ideas. This life I didn't know I would lead – raising children alone on the edge of the country – is a lesson in how to slowly build a community. It is a challenge to my extrovert nature to forge connections despite living in such a remote location. Screaming in rock pools or shouting into the wind goes some way to distilling the energy and, if I close my eyes, a disco in

my kitchen with whirling daughters can feel like somewhere much less mundane.

And when the city feels far away, there is solace in the natural world surrounding me. I can lose myself in the wilderness, standing on the rocks fringing the sea, or on a hill gazing out towards Scotland. Out there I can be anonymous, like getting lost in a crowd, and the slam of waves into sand feels as edgy as the too-long glance of a stranger on a busy street.

Caro's memoir, Twelve Moons (HarperNorth, £14.99), is out in January 2023, and available to pre-order now





Join Ollie's army

Ever wanted to make a difference and train to become a coach? With the Ollie School, you could be changing lives before you know it

espite the very best efforts of our education system, it is struggling to cope with fully supporting the emotional wellbeing of our children within the curriculum. Have you ever felt that you would love to help, but were powerless to act? Well, here's your opportunity to do something positive.

The Ollie School plans to build an army of coaches who can make the world a better place, one child at a time. Ollie Coaching is a holistic approach that leads all our youngsters to a place where they can thrive in the chaos of modern living.

So many schools are battling to provide an appropriate mental health environment, and busy parents are up against it in our fast-paced lives ruled by social media. That's why Alison Knowles, who was challenged throughout her life with undiagnosed dyslexia, decided to set up the

Ollie School. The Ollie methodology is all about empowering children to seek solutions and take control of their emotions, rather than be controlled by them. The Ollie School trains coaches in a blend of methodologies that brings together NLP, CBT, EFT and play therapy to make sure they cover all the bases. The Ollie methodology is all about personalisation and identifying which technique will work with each individual child – no one-size-fits-all approach here.

Licence to help

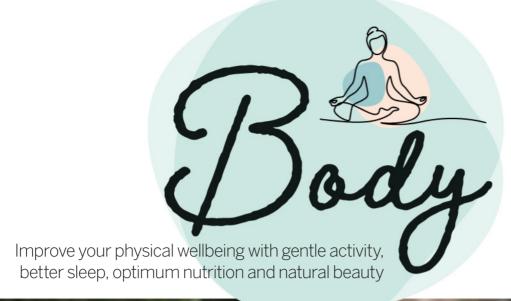
The Ollie School graduates are awarded a certified qualification in NLP and a licence to work as an Ollie coach. If helping children and their families to be more emotionally resilient appeals to you, contact Ollie School for a prospectus and to talk about getting with the programme.

Courses are now online and in the classroom, combining the best of both worlds with a limited number of trainees, maximising learning potential. See ollieandhissuperpowers.com

Get in touch

To train to become an Ollie coach, find a coach in your area or book an event, visit ollieandhissuperpowers.com, or email info@ollieandhis superpowers.com. The Ollie School is waiting to hear from you!









MINDFUL WELLNESS



Our Acting Wellness Director, Elizabeth Bennett, shares new research, strategies and wisdom on all aspects of wellbeing, from activity and nourishment to meditation and conscious beauty

Eat well

Taste of Christmas

Give something back during this time of gratitude and goodwill, and snuggle down with a cup of Christmas Tea from Yogi Tea Organic; all profits from its European sales are donated to the Nevandra association in India, which provides children with an education and a roof over their heads.

An Ayurvedic tea blend of aromatic honeybush and Christmas spices, such as cinnamon and star anise, this hearty brew will warm your soul in more ways than one. *Yogi Tea Organic Christmas Tea*,

£2.59, yogitea.com



3 HEALTHY FESTIVE TREATS







Harissa roast pumpkin & feta salad

Looking for something that's light but still feels a little indulgent? This warm and nourishing salad is just the ticket. Roasting pumpkin or butternut squash brings out all its natural sugars, which is perfect next to the spicy kick from rose harissa and contrasting cooling feta cheese. The roasted chickpeas and toasted pumpkin seeds provide a delicious, moreish crunch

Serves 2

- 500g deseeded pumpkin (or butternut squash), cut into wedges
- 400g tin chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tbsp rose harissa
- 1 tsp wholegrain mustard
- Juice of ½ lemon
- 1 tbsp white balsamic vinegar

- 100g baby spinach leaves
- 100g feta
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tbsp pumpkin seeds, toasted, to serve

Preheat the oven to 200°C/fan 180°C/gas mark 6. Place the pumpkin (or squash) and chickpeas on a baking tray. Drizzle with 1 tbsp of the extra-virgin olive oil and the harissa, and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Mix well with your hands so that both the pumpkin and chickpeas are coated well. Roast on a high shelf in the oven for 20–25 minutes, or until just tender. 2 Meanwhile, for the dressing, in a medium bowl, mix together the mustard, lemon juice, balsamic vinegar and remaining 3 tbsp olive oil. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer

2 tbsp of the dressing to a small bowl and set aside.

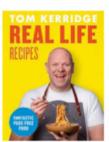
3 Take the tray of pumpkin (or squash) and chickpeas from the oven and put to one side to cool slightly.

4 Add the spinach leaves to the dressing in the medium bowl and toss gently to coat. Divide the spinach between two plates.

5 Distribute the roasted pumpkin (or squash) wedges and chickpeas over the spinach and crumble over the feta.

Sprinkle with the toasted pumpkin seeds and trickle over the reserved dressing to serve.

Extract from Tom Kerridge Real Life Recipes (Bloomsbury Absolute, £26)





Be mindful



Enjoy the moment this Christmas

Confidence coach Jenna O'Keefe shares her top three tips for a mindful festive break...

Tune into your senses
The smell of the dinner
in the oven, the touch
of a warm blanket, the
twinkling of the Christmas
lights... Use your senses to
savour the moment rather than
searching for imperfections.

Quit comparison
Comparison feeds
perfectionism, so be
mindful of your social
media use over the next few
weeks. Notice when and with
who you start comparing, and

give yourself permission to mute or unfollow accounts that leave you feeling heavy.

Don't sweat the small stuff Ask 'What would my 90-year-old self say to me right now?' She wouldn't be worrying about the number of gifts, the crisp on the potatoes, or the snippy arguments with relatives. She'd tell you to find gratitude in the tiny moments, because it's those we remember most. *jennaokeefe.co*

BOOK CLUB

The Gospel of Wellness

When you get a quiet moment over the holidays, it's always lovely to curl up with an engrossing book. In this new title, wellness journalist Rina Raphael takes a critical look at the wellness industry, posing important questions about how much of what we're

sold is clever marketing, and what elements of the wellness industry we *really* need.

The Gospel Of Wellness: Gyms, Gurus, Goop And The False Promise Of Self-Care by Rina Raphael (Profile Books, £16.99). Released 12 January 2023







Bit of a stretch

TAKE A BREATH



Hollywood child actress Rachel Hurd-Wood swapped the red carpet for a yoga mat in her new life as a Pilates teacher and mum of two

For years, I would manage any difficult or unpleasant emotions with compulsive behaviour. Sitting

with anything negative felt intolerable, so I'd go into octopus mode; tentacles reaching out to whatever they could find. Toblerone, tequila, Topshop (RIP). Anything that would blot out the discomfort. When it became apparent that this was unsustainable, I got help. Loads of it. But it can all be distilled into one handy phrase: the golden pause. Putting space between a feeling and an action means there's time for it to pass without doing anything regrettable.

The easiest way to create that space is through mindful breathing. It's no revelation that taking slow, deep breaths promotes a sense of calm. It takes the body out of stress-state, while getting the focus off any tricky thoughts. Then, it's possible to call a friend or go for a walk, rather than the octopus taking the helm.

"Putting space between a feeling and an action means there's time for it to pass" There are innumerable techniques around, so I'm going to share with you the most simple; diaphragmatic breathing. I teach it in Pilates to help ground those attending the class, and (try to) practise it myself when on the verge of overwhelm.

The diaphragm is a large muscle situated at the base of the lungs. When we inhale, it contracts and moves down to make space for the lungs to expand. When we exhale, it relaxes and moves up, helping to move air out of the lungs. Deep, slow breaths that make use of our full lung capacity helps inform our body that it's time to relax. It can be done any time, anywhere you're able to focus on yourself and your breathing safely. You can do it seated, standing or lying down. Here's how:

Place one hand on your chest, the other on your stomach. Take a deep, slow inhale through your nose, pulling the air down towards your stomach. Feel the sides of the rib cage expanding out like an accordion. You should be able to feel the air push your stomach up towards your hand, with your chest staying still.

Exhale slowly through the mouth, contracting the stomach muscles – imagine your rib cage contracting and your hipbones hugging in towards each other.

The whole process should feel concentrated, but not forceful. Try to keep your shoulders, head and neck relaxed. Aim for 3–5 minutes, then return to normal breathing – but anything is better than nothing.

ra fuz

Christmas can prove a challenge if you've been cutting back on alcohol; Sally Saunders finds out how to enjoy a sober festive season





id you know that Britain and Australia are the only countries in the world where it's standard to leave a boozy drink out for Santa on Christmas Eve? The rest of the world leaves wholesome treats such as milk and cookies, gingerbread and even rice pudding (we're looking at you, Denmark!). So it says a lot about our attitude to drinking alcohol at Christmas that we encourage the big man to drink and drive while on duty. But why is alcohol so intricately bound up with the festivities in this country? According to research, a third of women over 50 are now alcohol free. If you're one of them, and are facing a dry Christmas for the first time, or just want to reduce the amount you drink, how do you go about it?

'It would appear at a glance that drinking is a cornerstone of the holidays, an essential piece of the puzzle,' says Ruari Fairbairns, CEO of One Year No Beer, 'but that just isn't true. If anything, drinking too much during the Christmas season can lead you to feeling worn out, lethargic and potentially more anxious.'

Alcohol coach Michaela Weaver agrees: 'So often, alcohol equals Christmas, doesn't it? It's really everything in our celebrations; it's completely tied up with it. So it's a very empowering thing to decide not to make it part of yours.'

For Weaver, the key part of this centres around what are you missing out on – and it's probably not what you are focusing on. 'Ask yourself, what are you really giving up? Hangovers? Waking up feeling guilty? That terrible feeling of worrying that you lost your temper with Auntie Jane? Alcohol actually causes stress and anxiety. What you're really choosing to give up are all those things that can come if we drink too much, and the remorse that can go with that. And a headache on Christmas morning, to top it all off!'

Of course, many of us drink to oil the wheels socially: Christmas often means get-togethers with people you don't see very often, and there's nothing like a glass of something to relax you and get you talking, right? Again, Weaver disagrees: 'Without alcohol, we are naturally a whole lot more sociable than we are with it. Without it, we can be curious and seek out what people have to say, and really enjoy the conversation. You can also be a great listener; people love to talk about themselves, and when we actually stop to listen, and are truly present, it can be a real gift to others.'

But what do you say to someone if you've chosen to lay off the alcohol this year? If you usually enjoy a drink, won't people raise their eyebrows, and assume you're going to be a bit boring (or pregnant!)? 'Staying sober doesn't mean you will automatically miss out on festive fun,' explains Fairbairns. 'You can still go out and enjoy yourself with loved ones. Let your friends and family members know that you

have decided this and need their understanding. If you're going to be at someone else's house, consider explaining to them beforehand that you wish to be alcohol-free, so they can stock up on more soft drinks or non-alcoholic options. With their support, it shouldn't be a problem if you choose not to drink.'

And when you're going out for drinks or to a party? 'Peer pressure can influence a person to do something they wouldn't otherwise do,' points out Fairbairns. 'This is often because the person wants to be liked or because they think it will help them fit into the crowd better. Practise assertiveness, saying no, and in the worst case, leaving situations you feel uncomfortable in. If you don't want to get into your reasons why, prepare a simple explanation for why you're not drinking, such as you're on an alcohol-free challenge, you're on new meds, or hangovers have lately become too horrendous and you have too much to do in the run-up to Christmas.

'Don't feel obligated to follow suit just because others are drinking. You don't have to drink in order to fit in, and you should avoid people who try to make you drink when you don't want to. Yes, they might pull your leg initially, but once you've explained your choice, they shouldn't make a big thing about it, as it really doesn't impact them. Sometimes others react unhelpfully when you say you're not drinking because they feel it's some sort of judgement on their own behaviour. Make it clear that this is a personal choice and nothing to do with anyone else, and it should help them relax around the situation.'

Weaver advocates doing some preparation in advance to make it easier for yourself. 'Before you arrive at the event, think about what you're going to drink. This is helpful, because it means you won't be thrown. So just think, okay, my default is going to be a tonic water, or I'll have a soda and lime. This helps because, if there is limited availability in drinks, you know what you're going to have.' It's also helpful to think about what's going to be pleasurable about the event beforehand, so the mind is focused, says Weaver. 'Where the attention goes, the energy flows,' she says. 'If we think we're missing out, and it's all going to be awful, that's what we'll find. But if we think it's going to be uplifting, inspiring, and joyful, then that's what we'll find: it's just the way the mind works. It's about weighing it all up to tip the scales towards "I'm really looking forward to this". Get dressed up, look fab, whatever helps. And, really, just be there for that and be present.'

If a tonic water doesn't float your boat, Fairbairns commends how many more options there are now. 'A decade ago, low-alcohol or alcohol-free drinks weren't at all popular, or people felt embarrassed to ask for them at venues. But, in recent years, we've seen brand-new innovations on the market, and the variety of products has become endless. The upshot? It's now easy to enjoy a drink without the alcohol



"While others may be slurring their words, you are fully present to appreciate all the little magic bits of the day"

percentage,' he says. 'A good substitute will give you all the best bits of its alcoholic counterpart, without the hangover. Note that some alternatives are labelled as low alcohol at 0.5 per cent, rather than alcohol-free –but in the UK, anything at half a per cent or less is considered alcohol-free. Pregnant women can safely drink at this level, and you can still legally drive. There's no reason to feel that you're missing out by not drinking; it simply isn't an essential part of having a good time.'

Fairburns continues: 'The benefits of fun alcoholfree plans far outweigh the debilitating hangovers, slurred conversations, "hangxiety", brain fog, bad food decisions, and empty calories. Remind yourself that you can still attend all the parties and have the same amount of fun without being intoxicated.

'While you are up and able to be productive the day following a festive night out, others may be cradling a sore head. And while others may be slurring their words and repeating themselves on Christmas Day, you are fully present to appreciate all the little magic bits of the day with your loved ones.'

This is one of the key aspects for Weaver. If alcohol is one of your usual means of de-stressing, it might seem like exactly the wrong time of year to give up. 'There's a lot going on – often families come together in a way that they wouldn't normally, so we have a house full of people who we don't normally spend time with, we all have to have fun, we all have to get on, and that can be quite stressful. And so that is





a time when we might flick over to drinking,' says Weaver. 'But, actually, alcohol causes stress. It releases cortisol and adrenaline into our systems, which is why we wake up the next day with a pounding heart. Often what happens when we're drinking is that the logical, analytical part of our brain shuts down. And what that means is it's like a pressure cooker on our emotions; the lid is lifted, and we say all kinds of things that we don't mean. So much Christmas drama is caused by alcohol. So, actually, by skipping alcohol, you're missing out on avoidable arguments and all that angst. And, after all, isn't Christmas supposed to be the season of peace and goodwill? Alcohol takes us out of that feeling of peace: alcohol and peace just do not go together.'

Weaver advises focusing on the joy of the day, and taking care of yourself, if you find yourself flagging and reaching for a drink. There are walks, there are games you can play, there's engaging with people, and perhaps a religious aspect for you – just bring all that in and think of it in a different way, she recommends. Think about the food, the ambience, the music. There's so much to fill the day.

'And if you feel you need a drink,' says Weaver, 'take five minutes out, and ask yourself: "Why am I doing this? How am I feeling?" Fill yourself up with that power, the strength, the pride, the joy, authenticity, the health, all of the reasons. And, instead, listen, laugh, love – all of those things that Christmas is *really* about.'



SOMETHING TO GET YOU THROUGH THE WINTER....



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LET'S STAY HOME!

Pull up a seat by the fireside for the ultimate in festive comfort food, from The Hebridean Baker, Coinneach Macleod's new book, *My Scottish Island Kitchen*

Mulled Pear & Pistachio Pavlova

'This is a showstopper dessert and a recipe I return to every Christmas. The meringue will be crispy on the outside, soft and mallowy on the inside, and it contrasts perfectly with the tartness of the pears, the billowy cream and the crushed pistachios. You can make the meringue and pears in advance, but make sure you prepare the cream just when you are going to construct and serve the pavlova.'

Serves: 6

For the meringue:

- 6 egg whites
- 350g caster sugar
- 1½ tsp cornflour
- 1½ tsp white wine or cider vinegar
- 40g pistachios

For the mulled pears:

- 1 bottle (750ml) red wine
- 500ml water
- 1 orange, pared, zested and juiced
- •1 lemon, pared and zested

- 5 cloves
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 125g caster sugar
- 6 pears (Bosc pears are a perfect choice), peeled and with stalks on
- 150g blackberries

For the decoration:

- 400ml double cream
- 25g pistachios, crushed

I Preheat the oven to 140°C/120°C fan/gas mark 1. Draw a 20cm circle on a sheet of baking parchment. In a bowl, whisk the egg whites until they form stiff peaks. Add the sugar a spoonful at a time, whisking until you have a stiff and glossy meringue. Then, whisk in the cornflour and vinegar until combined. Swirl the pistachios through your meringue.

2 Carefully spoon the meringue onto the circle on the baking parchment, and use a palette knife to flatten the top. Bake for 1 hour, then turn the oven off and leave the meringue inside for at

least 2 hours to dry out as it cools. 3 Now for the mulled pears. Pour the wine and water into a pan. Add all the other ingredients, except the pears and blackberries, put over a low heat and stir until the sugar has dissolved. Bring to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and leave to infuse for 20 minutes.

- 4 Return the pan to the heat, adding the pears and blackberries. Bring to a simmer and submerge the pears for 45 minutes. Turn them every 10 minutes. They should be ruby red and just cooked. Remove from the pan and set aside to cool.
- **5** Sieve the poaching liquid. Bring back to the boil, reduce until thick and syrupy, then cool.
- 6 Place your meringue on a plate. Whip the double cream until soft peaks form, and layer over the meringue. Stand the pears on top of the cream in a circle, pour the syrup over and let it drizzle down the sides of the meringue. Finally, sprinkle the pistachios over the top. Serve immediately.

"Crispy on the outside, soft and mallowy on the inside; a showstopper dessert"



Shortbread Dips

'These fingers dipped in chocolate have the butteriness of traditional shortbread, with that extra indulgence given by the chocolate. The shortbread biscuit has been made in Scotland for hundreds of years. However, it is widely regarded that it came to prominence thanks to Mary, Queen of Scots. She fell in love with the shortbread served by her French chefs and, from then on, it became the iconic Scottish biscuit we all adore today.'

Makes: 12

- 300g soft butter
- 125g golden caster sugar
- 300g plain flour
- 50g cornflour
- ½ tsp fine sea salt

For the decoration:

- 150g dark chocolate
- 150g white chocolate
- 2 tbsp chopped pistachios
- 2 tbsp freeze-dried raspberries

I Preheat the oven to 170°C/150°C fan/gas mark 3. Grease a 20cm square

baking tin and line the base and sides with baking parchment. Cream the butter and sugar in a bowl until pale and fluffy.

2 Add in both the flours, plus the salt, and stir until it begins to come together, though take care not to overwork the dough. Bring the dough together with your hands and press the mixture into the prepared tin. Flatten the surface of the shortbread with the back of a spoon and use a fork to prick marks along the length of the fingers.

3 Bake for 45 minutes until pale golden. Remove from the oven and, with a knife, mark lines where you are going to cut the shortbread. Leave to cool in the tin.

4 Melt the dark and white chocolate separately in heatproof bowls set over a pan of gently simmering water. Take each of your shortbread fingers and use a teaspoon to coat one third with the chocolate. Sprinkle pistachios or freeze-dried raspberries over the chocolate end and allow to set. Serve with a hot cuppa, or they will keep in an airtight container for up to four days.







Almond & Raspberry Layer Cake

'Layers of almond-flavoured sponge topped with raspberry jam and buttercream – this cake has a real "wow" factor but is deceptively easy to make. Just make sure you allow time for the cakes to completely cool before you slice them, and don't be too generous with the buttercream layers as you want to balance the textures and flavours throughout the cake. A bake for sharing with your loved ones.'

- 250g butter
- 250g golden caster sugar
- 5 eggs
- ½ tsp almond extract
- 175g self-raising flour
- 75g ground almonds

For the decoration:

- 300g butter
- 600g icing sugar
- 1½ tsp almond extract
- 250g raspberry jam
- 40g flaked almonds
- 150g raspberries

I Preheat the oven to fan 180°C/160°C fan/ gas mark 4. Grease and line 2 x 20cm round sandwich tins with baking parchment.

2 Cream the butter and golden caster sugar with an electric hand whisk until light and fluffy. Beat in the eggs one at a time, stir in the almond extract, then fold in the flour and ground almonds.

3 Divide the mixture between the two tins, then bake for 20 to 25 minutes until a skewer comes out of the cake clean. Take the sponges out of the oven and leave in the tins for 5 minutes, then transfer onto a wire rack to cool completely. Once cooled, cut each cake into two evenly sliced layers.

4 To make the buttercream, in a large bowl, cream the butter on its own with an electric hand whisk for about 5 minutes, until smooth. Add the icing sugar 200g at a time, whisking together between each addition. Finally, add in the almond extract and beat again until smooth.

5 To decorate, spread a layer of the raspberry jam on the first of the four sponges and top with a layer of buttercream; place the second layer on top and repeat; same with the third layer. Once you've topped with the fourth layer, spread the buttercream around the sides and top of the cake. Press the flaked almonds onto the buttercream on the sides of the cake and top the cake with the fresh raspberries.

ITOOKAMICRO DIGCOMMENTATION Snatched moments can be the most meaningful, says walking enthusiast Annabel Streets

t this time of year, I long for a few moments of unhurried peace. But, like most of us, I have to make do with a quick stroll – snatching brief moments in between the endless Christmas preparations. But these short walks can often be the most satisfying. I take my inspiration from a medieval mystic called Margery Kempe, a keen pilgrim who invented the micro pilgrimage for those times when she longed to walk a full route but couldn't.

Margery – who had 14 children – knew that most women couldn't drop everything and go on a full-length pilgrimage. Instead, she urged her followers to take a short walk to a nearby church, where they could spend a few quiet minutes in tranquillity and reflection.

At this time of year, a few moments of tranquillity and wintry solitude are what I crave most. So, last week, I escaped the frenzy of Oxford Street and walked – with my jam-packed shopping bags swinging at my side – to Hyde Park, for my own micro pilgrimage.

I turned off my phone (of course), took a few long inhalations, and then I walked using paced breathing, traditionally practised by Afghan nomads and remarkably similar to many varieties of walking meditation. Walking in step with our breath is a very calming way to walk, providing an immediate sense of inner stillness. It's not complicated, requiring nothing more onerous

than the ability to synchronise your inhalations and exhalations to your pace, which should be slow. Afghan walking was brought to public awareness in the 1970s by a French civil servant called Edouard Stiegler. After watching nomads arrive – fresh faced and dewy eyed – at the Kabul market, Stiegler was staggered to discover they walked 37 miles in a day. When he asked how they did this, they revealed their secret – a breath-oriented mode of walking better understood as paced breathing.

Steigler wrote two books about Afghan walking, in which he devised many different breath patterns according to terrain and personal fitness. But the core technique involves taking three steps during each inhalation, followed by a further step in which the breath is held. Then another three steps as we exhale, followed by a final step in which the breath is held again. Think of it as a 3:1 pattern on each inhale (three steps in which air is inhaled and one step in which it's held) and then a repeat 3:1 pattern for each exhale. When we walk to the rhythm of our breath (or breathe to the rhythm of our feet), we slow and lengthen our breathing.

As I walked beside Hyde Park, completely caught up in the rhythm of my breath and my body, I barely noticed the London traffic or the crowds. Instead, I felt the tension slip from my shoulders and the Christmas shopping list slip from my mind.

In the manner of all good micro pilgrimages, I ended up at a place of worship – Tyburn Convent, a working Catholic

convent where the nuns take it in turns to pray day and night, around the clock, with a gong marking the end of each shift. Tyburn was a site of execution for six centuries, during which time 50,000 people died here. I can't think of a better place to feel immense gratitude for all that we have, for progress, for the imminent Christmas I'm lucky enough to enjoy with my family and friends.

I am not particularly religious, but I'm following Margery Kempe's advice, so I go into the convent, put all my bags down and sit quietly, enjoying the prayers and singing of the nuns, and the quiet stillness of a half-empty chapel, while the bustle and noise of the West End fades to nothing.

When I leave, the sky is a violet-grey and the Christmas lights are turning on across the great metropolis, so that the whole city feels festively cosy, intimate, full of promise and possibility. This is my favourite time of day and year for a London walk – the party crowd isn't out yet, the shop windows are at their most dazzling, and in the shadowy twilight I feel curiously becalmed.

In fact, I'm feeling so serene I can't face battling with public transport. Besides, I want to arrive home with the inner stillness of a nun. So I decide to continue my micro pilgrimage on foot. Suddenly, Christmas no longer feels a chore. If I can squeeze a few more micro pilgrimages into my days of wrapping, cooking and everything else, I might even enter the big day as calm and collected as Father Christmas himself.

Anyone can devise a micro pilgrimage: locate a meaningful place (places of worship are ideal – time your arrival with a service), walk to it, reflect on the things you're grateful for. Inner stillness will follow as surely as Christmas is coming...

Visit Tyburn Convent at 8 Hyde Park Place, London W2 2LJ. It is open every day from 6.30am to 8.30pm



Annabel Streets is a writer. a founder of The Age-Well Project, and author of 52 Ways To Walk: The Surprising Science Of Walking For Wellness And Joy, One Week At A Time (Bloomsbury, £12.99). @annabelabbs





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Why digital detox now?

'December is the perfect time for a digital detox, as it allows the focus of the holiday period to be on spending quality time with family and friends,' explains life coach Samantha Quemby. The time you free up from scrolling on devices – which reports state is an average of four hours daily – suddenly becomes available for more meaningful connection and conversation with those around you.

'A digital detox also allows you to disconnect from work, as you won't be constantly bombarded by emails, and you can escape the temptation to respond,' adds Quemby.

IT'S A TOUGH TIME ONLINE

Everything in December is bigger, brighter and demands more attention – and digital life is no exception,' says business coach Dawn Baxter. 'During this time, there will be more people online sharing unrealistic content that can push us into negative comparison. If you've ever seen images of those houses decorated with lavish floral wreaths, bedecked in twinkling lights, and with a new car on the driveway tied with a giant red bow, you'll understand what I mean!

Visual representations can be inspiring if you have a healthy mindset and understand that Instagram is not reality. But, for many, it can do real damage to our sense of self-worth.'

Expert



Samantha Quemby is a certified and trauma informed leadership and life coach, qualified hypnotherapist, and NLP and EFT practitioner. samanthaquemby coaching.com



Dawn Baxter is a certified positive psychology coach, and founder of beyondthedawn blog.com

Make December a DIGITAL DIGITAL DIGITAL

This year, give yourself a Christmas you'll really remember by stepping away from your devices and enjoying the real world!

WORDS: SALLY SAUNDERS



Worried what you might be missing?

'Social media FOMO is there because we have built a habit of checking it multiple times a day, and it feels an ingrained part of life,' explains Quemby. 'The addiction to the dopamine hits we get from notifications and likes or comments on posts keeps us coming back for more. Not only does it make us feel good, it acts as an external validation that our life is exciting and we're doing enough with it. However, many people also find it a refreshing change when they do decide to take a break from devices.

'It's natural to find yourself reaching for your phone to open an app that has been temporarily deleted, and it acts to raise your awareness of just how many times a day you go on your phone when there isn't a pressing need to,' adds Quemby. 'But habits can be broken, and when you have clear boundaries around your phone and other devices, it isn't long before it starts to feel easier. Focus on what you are doing and the plans you have, rather than wondering what everyone else is up to. When you do go back online, you'll soon realise you haven't missed that much at all!'

HOW DO I STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS?

If you're worried that people won't be able to get in touch with you, let them know that you'll be uncontactable online for a bit,' says Baxter. 'Let yourself have contact with those who care about you in different ways: give them a call, or pop something in the post! This way, you won't feel like you are missing out on contact with the people you care about.'

Does a detox mean no photos?

'The thing about taking photos is that you can either experience the moment or you can document it – you cannot do both,' says Baxter. 'Take pictures for your memories and hold them tightly, for sure, but before you get your camera phone out ask yourself, "Why am I really recording this moment?" If the answer is so you can post it online and participate in the continued competition of one-upmanship, perhaps put it back away. If you do want to take photos, do it for you alone, and print them out to enjoy afterwards.'

WHAT ARE OTHER WAYS TO MAKE MEMORIES?

Instead of a 93-photo album on Facebook for everyone else to see, why not document special occasions by creating a piece of art from momentoes of the day, or writing about it in a journal?' says Baxter. Quemby adds: 'And, if you do still want to take photos over the festive period, rather than posting them on your social media, put them in a scrapbook or photo album instead. This can be for your own enjoyment or even to give as a gift to others, so they have a way to keep hold of the memories captured too.'

So what do we do if we're not online?

'Take the opportunity to snap back into real life and enjoy the festive season with the ones you love,' says Baxter. 'Go ice skating, visit a Christmas market, bake together, and enjoy the real world rather than the digital one.'

Quemby adds: 'Christmas wreath-making is a brilliant way to celebrate the festive season. Try a new hobby and it can act as a group activity to enjoy with family or friends.'



WORK IN PROGRESS

How can I find fulfilling work I can afford to do?

Our brilliant agony aunt, Mary Fenwick, turns her gaze to the world of work, helping sort out the problems you are struggling with day to day

I have been in my current job since 2004. The problem is, we are all still earning minimum wage; I'm so sick of having to scrape by and tell the kids I can't afford everything they want. In addition, I find it impossible to join in conversations with my colleagues, and I dread every Monday. So, why don't I leave? Partly because I'm institutionalised, but mostly because I find it very creatively fulfilling. I want a job that I look forward to doing, with people who inspire me and put value on the skills I have. Where can I find that?

There are a lot of strong emotions at play here: frustration, loneliness and determination. So, where do we start? Dr Lizzy Bernthal developed her coaching business after 25 years as an army nurse, and talks about overcoming your inner war zone. She says, 'If you dread going to work, it's never about the work. It's about the people you're working with.'

Dr Bernthal's main research area is resilience, belonging and fitting in. You clearly have a phenomenal work ethic, and in your longer letter you describe the many ways you've tried to improve things, only to be knocked back. In evolutionary terms this hurts, because

if we were thrown out of the tribe we'd starve. You are starving in a different way – you've given your heart and soul for years, with only brief moments of joy as your reward.

It's a common reaction to try to adapt so that the tribe will take you back but, as Dr Bernthal says, 'Fitting in is the opposite of belonging – you're never going to fit into that organisation because it's toxic'. We all need a sense of belonging, but first of all we need to belong to ourselves.

At the moment, your self-esteem is so battered that it's tempting to wait to be rescued. It's taken a lot of strength to keep fighting your environment, so I would argue that any other job – and





it can't be worse than minimum wage – might leave you with more energy to explore your options [see box, right].

'Courage is not just jumping out of a plane. Courage is doing something when you can't guarantee the outcome,' says Dr Bernthal. It will take courage to say out loud 'enough, no more', and it takes courage to do the exploration described opposite. There may be some unspoken fear that you will never find or live your true purpose. These are big emotions, so start small with pen and paper. Everything you need is already present.

rypotential.co.uk; Belonging: The Ancient Code Of Togetherness by Owen Eastwood (Quercus, £9.99)



Find your purpose

Dr Bernthal works with the Japanese concept of ikigai, which can be described as a balance of four elements to find your purpose. She suggests taking some time, in a space where you feel creative and safe, with just you and a sheet of paper. Take one prompt at a time and plunge into your imagination...

DO WHAT YOU LOVE

What did you enjoy doing as a child or in your early adult years? What exactly gives you joy in creativity – is it the thing itself, the people, your own sense of achievement? When else does your heart lift like that?

DO WHAT YOU ARE

Ask a couple of people to describe the strengths they see in you. Search Values in Action for a free strengths tool.

DO SOMETHING THE WORLD NEEDS

The clue might be in what makes you angry (anger is very energetic). Who inspires you? A key is to commit to something beyond yourself.

DO SOMETHING YOU CAN BE PAID FOR

Perhaps balance will mean paid work with people you like, and your creativity will continue to serve parts of you that money can't touch.

positivepsychology.com/ikigai/

Mary Fenwick is a writer and director of coaching at teamsandleadership.com. She's also a mother, divorcee and widow. Connect with her on LinkedIn or Twitter @MJFenwick

Got a question for Mary? Email letters@psychologies.co.uk with 'Mary life' or 'Mary work' in the subject line.

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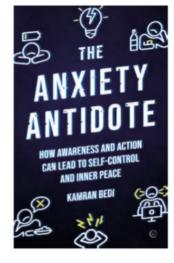
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Inner peace

The Anxiety Antidote by Kamran Bedi (Watkins Publishing, £12.99) offers mindset tools and techniques to combat anxiety, which the reader can easily apply on a daily basis. A perfect gift for a stress-free new year. watkins publishing.com





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Words of wisdom

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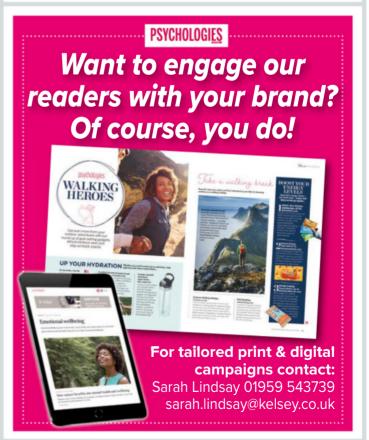
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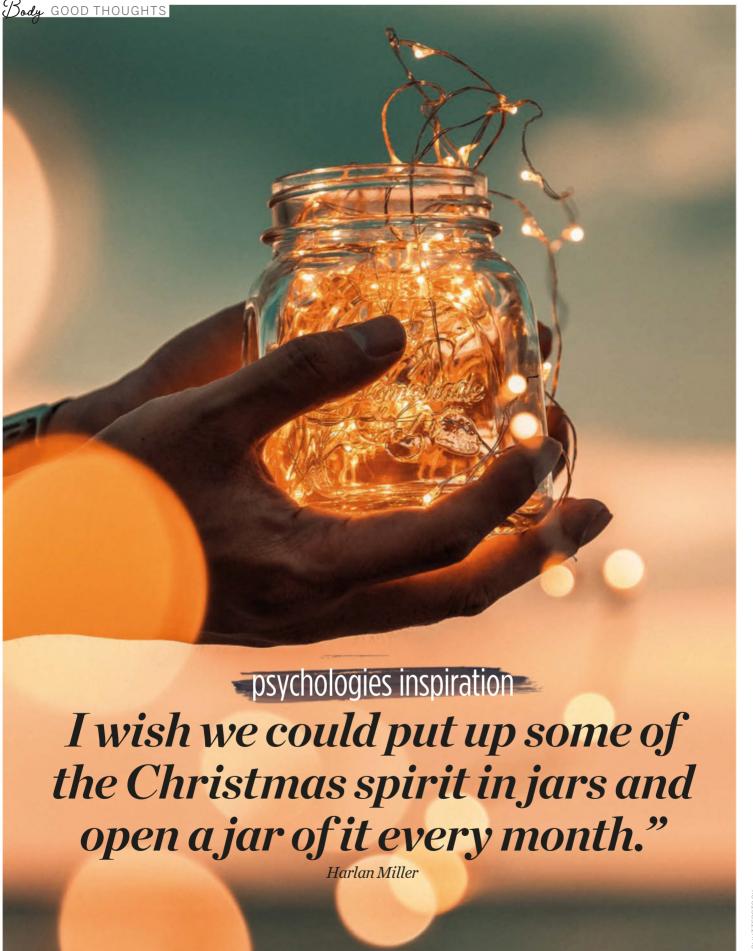
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