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UK edition

# psychologies

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**15-page DOSSIER**

## DIAL DOWN THE DRAMA!

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- **What will help you get off the emotional rollercoaster?**

## IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT!

**Is your stress all down to Grandma?**

**The hidden rules of neurodivergent dating**

**Best-selling author and podcaster**

***Gretchen Rubin:***

**'It's not self-indulgent to pursue happiness'**

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# Welcome...



It might say May on the cover, but it's highly likely you're reading this magazine in April, a month that has become synonymous with two things: showers (traditionally), and more recently, stress. And I think they have more in common than you might at first assume. To put it briefly: both showers and stress are a fact of life, you have no control over either of them appearing, and, finally, most importantly, you don't have to let them ruin your day. Because the world we live in is stressful. For most of us, whether it's our job, our family and friends, the online environment or the wider global context we live in, there is always something to put us on edge, to cause us to worry. But the good news is, there are lots of steps we can take to alleviate this feeling, and we've packed this issue full of them. Our dossier this month is looking at ways we can dial down the drama (page 47). Whether that's drama on a world-scale, in your personal life or simply on your phone, it's got lots of ideas and advice to help you take control of the things in your power, like limiting how and when you are affected, calming down your response and taking action where necessary.

We also take a deep dive into how perfectionism causes us stress (and how to get over it, on page 20) and find out how the way you feel today could have its roots decades ago in your family tree (page 42). Plus, we find out how to use your beauty routine to wipe away the worry as well as the dirt and grime (page 78), discover a simple breathing hack to help us feel calm (page 88), and explore natural ways to look after ourselves to help us have a more mindful menopause (page 86). Finally, we've got the wonderful Gretchen Rubin explaining how the pursuit of happiness has indeed made her happier (page 12), and a look at the hidden rules of dating if you're neurodiverse (page 64).

So remember, you can't control the weather, or the world, but you can take steps to protect yourself from the worst of it. So grab your brolly, put your wellies on, and get out there and dance in the rain!

*Sally xx*

**Sally Saunders,  
Editor-in-Chief**

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MAY

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# The advice starts RIGHT HERE!

## DR LAURA WILLIAMS

*'One of the first challenges of perfectionism is that it's something we're often praised for,' writes Dr Laura Williams. She explains why when we minimise our needs and defer to authority this 'good behaviour' is validated — and why that pattern can be so damaging in later life — on page 20.*



## DR RATHIKA MARSH

*'If you're thinking about stress and trauma, there's often an ancestral pattern that comes into play about how somebody is,' says psychologist Dr Rathika Marsh. Discover how events that happened decades before you were born could be impacting how you behave today in our stress awareness feature on page 42.*



## KATE BECKWITH

*'When we repeatedly pair the word "masculinity" with the word "toxic", we send a message that, over time, becomes very hard to unhear, and can be damaging to young men,' writes therapist Kate Beckwith, in response to new drama Adolescence. Find out why the language we use is crucial on page 94.*



## 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 boost your happiness and resilience and lower your stress and anxiety. We do this by providing simple, achievable steps to make small changes that can add up to a real difference.

Embracing the four pillars of your life, from mind and body to heart and soul, *Psychologies* engages with the world around us as well as the 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



## ***Kicking it in the kitchen***

Busting your moves in a daily kitchen disco can help you reach your exercise targets.

Scientists asked 48 people of varying ages and dance abilities to boogie in any style they liked, as if no one was watching, in five-minute bursts, measuring their heart rate and oxygen uptake.

Northeastern University academics concluded that four of these stints would be enough to constitute a good day's exercise in line with the recommended 150 minutes a week.



## Colour me crazy

Bring instant cheer to your home with colour drenching, the hottest interiors trend for spring and summer 2025.

The technique usually involves making everything the same colour, from ceiling to skirting boards – and even doors and floorboards. But designers now say it doesn't have to be the same shade, and could instead feature harmonising or contrasting tones, as long as it is not white.

Dark colours give a cosy, cocooning effect while light ones enhance the space and size.

## Meno-tax?

*Menopausal women are spending an average of £1,800 a year on products like vitamins, smartwatches and creams to combat symptoms, a survey by Clearpay found.*



## Walnut winner

Adding a generous handful of walnuts to your morning meal could boost your brain's reaction times throughout the day and improve your memory in the afternoon.

In a small study of 18 to 30-year-olds, those who consumed 50g of the nuts first thing performed better in a series of tests over six hours compared to those who had a walnut-free breakfast of the same calories.

Experts from the University of Reading believe the particular nutrient makeup of walnuts, including omega-3 fatty acids, protein and polyphenols, could have a rapid effect on cognitive performance.

On the downside, participants who ate the walnut-rich breakfasts rated them less tasty and less palatable compared to walnut-free ones.





**Nearly half of unmarried people who cohabit and share a pet would consider drawing up a plan to include the animal if they split, a Co-op Legal Services poll found.**

## Womb test

A new swab test for women with signs of womb cancer, which is less invasive and more accurate, has been approved for use by UK regulators.

Patients currently have to undergo transvaginal ultrasound or hysteroscopy but the WID-easy vaginal swab was found to be just as good at detecting the disease.

It also significantly reduced the number of false positive results, which could mean that fewer healthy women would need an internal scan or biopsy.



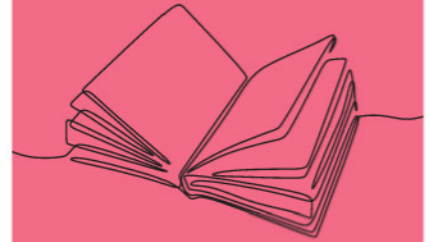
## Low-effort living hack

Being 'lazy' could be the secret to living a long life, with a simple, low-effort lifestyle better for you than gruelling workouts or strict diets.

Scientists from Fulda University in Germany analysed Blue Zone regions where most people live past 100 and found it was common to do light exercise like walking, gardening and stretching, not high intensity ones.

They also found getting enough good-quality sleep, spending time with friends and laughing often were key to longevity.

## 3 family-focused thrillers...



**1** *Favourite Daughter* by Morgan Dick (£16.99, Viking). Two sisters who are strangers are unknowingly reunited by their dad's dying wish in this darkly comic tale of grief.



**2** *Mrs Spy* by MJ Robotham (£16.99, Aria). Mum Maggie Flynn is a MI5 operative in the 1960s, on a twist-filled mission to uncover the secret behind her husband's death.



**3** *Speak To Me Of Home* by Jeanine Cummins (£20, Tinder Press). Three generations return to Puerto Rico when a life-or-death crisis forces them to confront a family rift.



## Abuse underestimate

*Domestic abuse is underestimated by British people, with only 25 per cent aware that one in four women will be victims in their lifetimes, a study by Refuge found. The charity learned that while 80 per cent would report physical abuse, less obvious forms – like coercive and controlling behaviour, technology-facilitated, economic and psychological abuse – are less understood, and only 39 per cent would inform police. Younger people are less likely to spot the warning signs too, with only 57 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds considering sharing images of them without consent as abuse, compared to 88 per cent of over 55s. Educate yourself on the topic at [refuge.org.uk](http://refuge.org.uk)*

## Time to play

Playtime is a fundamental part of childhood, but the time kids spend outdoors has declined 50 per cent in a generation.

The Raising the Nation: Play Commission found fewer than three in ten children play out on the street now, while school breaktimes have reduced by an average of 23 minutes for Key Stage 1 pupils (5-7 year olds) since 1995.

The report blames playground closures, concerns about traffic and safety, and the growth of a no ball games anti-play culture, alongside the rise of tech.

The commission is now calling for ringfenced time in the school day, targeted funding to maintain playgrounds, a review of 'no play' bylaws and a National Play Strategy.



## The fairer sex

Women are the most generous sex, more likely to split a windfall with a stranger than men.

In an experiment with 1,000 adults, participants were given €10 and asked how much they would like to share with a second person, an anonymous stranger chosen at random from the group.

Women parted with 40 per cent more, giving an average of €3.50 compared to male average of €2.50.

But the most common decision for men was not share at all, while for women it was to split it 50-50, say psychologists from Jaume I University in Spain.

## WATCH, LOOK, LISTEN



**WATCH** *The Ballad of Wallis Island*. When an eccentric lottery winner gets his favourite folk duo back together for a private concert, tensions simmer between the former lovers. In cinemas 30 May.



**LOOK** *Ed Atkins at Tate Britain*. A career-spanning look at this influential digital artist who uses technologies to bridge the gap between computers and human feeling. Until 25 August.



**LISTEN** *To Be A Boy*. Parenting campaigners Joeli Brearley and Elliott Rae explore themes of masculinity and boyhood with expert guests, humanity and good advice.





*"I try not to look in the mirror too much. Madness lies that way — looking in the mirror is not where the truth is. The beauty of wearing contact lenses is that I can take them out at the end of the day and the world becomes beautifully blurred. It makes more sense like that than it does in sharp vision."*

**Actress Felicity Jones.**



**Tuesday evening is now Britain's big night in rather than Sunday, driven by big sporting fixtures and gaming releases, data analysis by Virgin Media O2 shows.**





# “It’s not seen as self-indulgent to pursue happiness now”

Gretchen Rubin explains why self-knowledge and better relationships are crucial for her own contentment

**W**hen most of us take up a hobby, we might do it at the weekend, or perhaps every week or two. Not Gretchen Rubin.

When the best-selling author of *The Happiness Project* starts a hobby, boy, does she start a hobby. She’s visited the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York every day for more than five years (closures excepted), and now she has a new passion. ‘One of the things I’m doing in 2025 is I’m water colouring every single day,’ she tells me. ‘I’m kind of an all-or-nothing person, and so, for me, it’s easier to do something every day.’

It’s this single-mindedness, one could even say obsessiveness, while focusing on something so ephemeral as art, that makes Rubin so fascinating.

On the surface she is, to use her own terms, a classic Upholder (Rubin created her Four Tendencies framework almost a decade ago, in which she categorises us based on our response to expectations, of which more later). She has a ferocious intelligence: she went to Yale Law School and edited the Yale Law Journal before clerking for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, and she’s gone on to teach at Yale Law.

But rather than follow this path further, perhaps making partner at a law firm, or becoming a judge herself, she has turned herself into one of the world’s leading researchers on the subject of happiness. And, unsurprisingly, she’s not done it by halves. She blogs daily on the subject, sends out weekly newsletters religiously detailing five things that have made her happy that week, and has a weekly podcast. Oh, and she’s written half a dozen best-selling books on the topic, that have sold millions of copies and have been translated into more than 30 languages.

So how can one be so laser focused on something so intangible as happiness? And does she feel pursuing this feeling so doggedly has helped her find it?

‘A lot of people have this idea that if you think about happiness too much, it’ll get in the way of your being happy,’ she says. ‘I myself do not see that. I do not see that people are spending too much time thinking about how to be happier. I think that by far the bigger thing is that you don’t think about it at all.’

‘There’s this idea that thinking about happiness sort of trips you up. It’s something that rhetorically



seems like it would make sense. But I don't feel like it's a problem that you actually see in the world that much.'

She does, though, believe that happiness is something we have become much more aware of in the last couple of decades, and for good reason.

'There's more acknowledgement that it's worthwhile, and not self-indulgent to pursue happiness now,' she says. 'On the practical side, workplaces are more aware of the fact that happier people are more productive, more cooperative, more creative, have less burnout, less absenteeism. And so I think there is kind of an awareness that we want people to be happy because we want them to be happy, and we also want them to be happy because they'll be better at their jobs, or they'll be healthier.'

'So I do think that there is a much more open discussion of how a person might be happier, healthier, more productive, more creative.'

And what has made the biggest difference to her own happiness? 'Truly understanding that relationships are the core,' she says, without a pause. 'If, anytime, I'm trying to make a decision about how to spend my time, my energy, or my money, if it's going to deepen or broaden my relationships, I always try to do it.'

'So do I go to a college reunion? Do I go to a newsletter conference? If a friend is saying, "Hey, do you want to get together?" I really make an effort to do all those things, because I know how important relationships are.'

Her second revelation harks back to her work on the 'Four Tendencies'. 'The other thing that has made most difference is just understanding how people are really very different from each other,' she says. 'When I started, I thought "Well, I'll just figure out the best way to be happy, and the right way, the most efficient way for people to be happier, and then I'll just convince everybody to do it, and then it'll be problem solved."

'But no, you can't do that, because Sally is so different from Gretchen, and the thing that worked for me, may be the very opposite of the thing that works for you.'

This is at the heart of her work on the Four Tendencies: the Upholder, the Questioner, the Obliger and the Rebel. Rubin's website explains that the Upholder responds readily to outer and inner expectations — 'discipline is my freedom'.



Questioners only meet expectations that make sense to them — 'I'll comply — if you convince me why'. An Obliger will meet outer expectations whilst struggling to meet inner ones — 'You can count on me; and I'm counting on you to count on me'. Finally, the Rebel resists all expectations, whether outer or inner — 'You can't make me, and nor can I'.

'I feel like, in a way, knowing you're a rebel is the highest value of all the tendencies, because I feel like rebels are the most misunderstood,' says Rubin. 'They're the most different, and so much of conventional wisdom doesn't work for rebels. For

example, morning people will give you 50 reasons why working in the morning is sensible. But if you're a night person, it doesn't matter.

'Everybody says making a to-do list is a good idea. Everybody says that something's important to you, you should sign up for a class, right?

'And so you might think that yourself, but if you're a rebel, you might find that really, really hard. And then you're like, "Well, what's wrong with me? Because if I put it on the to do list, I don't want to do it. And if I sign up for a class, I don't want to go. So maybe I'm not a real grown up, maybe I'm lazy. Maybe there's something wrong



"You can read a single line, and a giant lightbulb goes off in your head"

with me." You've just assumed that everybody else is right, instead of understanding, no, that's a tool that works really well for other people.'

It suddenly strikes me that the term rebel seems to have a lot in common with our current understanding about neurodiversity. 'It's very interesting, because people raise this to me all the time,' she says. 'It's especially the case with ADHD. Many, many people have asked me, "Do you see correlations? Is this sometimes the same thing?"

'And I don't know, I just don't have big enough data, unfortunately. I would love for there to be a research project where they were really looking at that, it would be a really interesting way to go.'

Instead of dipping her toes deeper into this area, her new work is focusing on what it does indeed mean to be 'a real grown-up'.

'It's organised into the sort of things that we face in adulthood, like confronting the perplexities of relationships, getting things done, understanding the truth about ourselves, making decisions.

'It's the insights that I've had, that have come to me mostly through time and experience, all the little things I've learned.

'The proverb is, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears",' she says.

'And I do think that sometimes, you can read a single line and it's like a giant light bulb goes off in your head, and you can see a situation more clearly or see the way forward.

'I always push myself to write aphoristically, just partly for the creative fun of it, and also I think it's more powerful as a way to communicate. So I've been amassing these for years.

'And my younger daughter was going up to college, so I thought, "OK, let me give you my secrets of adulthood. Let me spare you some of my suffering."

What's her favourite one liner?

Again, without pause, she says: 'Accept yourself, and also expect more from yourself.'

She says: 'This is very confusing to people, that both things are true, but sometimes, when you just see it written out like that, you're like, "OK, I get it. I need to have self compassion, but I also need to push myself out of my comfort zone. But only I know where that is."

'That took me so long to understand that in my

study of happiness, months and months. But it's absolutely crucial.'

So where does she feel she is now, compared to when she began? 'I just go deeper and deeper,' she says. 'There are always new things, always new areas. I feel like in *The Happiness Project*, I did a good job of laying out a foundation for figuring out how I think about it as a subject. And now I'm going to habits, deep, deep, deep into habits. Because if you study happiness, you quickly are led to habits.'

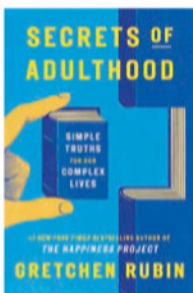
Which takes us back to her new daily habit of watercolours. Her reasoning for the intensity of her habit surprises me.

'It's easier for me to do something every day, because then, nothing matters,' she says. 'Like today, I did a really bad job. But do you know what? It doesn't matter, because I'm going to be doing it again tomorrow.

'There are lots of things I want to try, but I'm like, "I have so much time. I'll get to that later."

'I've got plenty of time to explore that. I don't have to rush.'

I suddenly see I'd got her all wrong. With her smartly-dressed petite frame and neatly coiffed hair, I thought she was all about perfection, and being perfectly happy. But it's the fact that her commitment and regularity actually allow her to feel calm and relaxed even when making mistakes, that actually leads to her happiness. And I think that's a secret we could all learn.



**Secrets of Adulthood: Simple Truths for our Complex Lives** by Gretchen Rubin (John Murray One, £12.99) is out now



# *Yours, sincerely*

*There's nothing like being kind when it comes to making a good impression, discovers Harriet Minter*



At the start of the year I decided that 2025 was going to be the year that I took

dating seriously. Rather than half-heartedly swiping through a few profiles before deciding the whole thing was too awful and giving up, I was going to be gently committed to the process and that's what I've done. Has it paid off? No. But it has taught me a few lessons and I think made me a better date in the process. So in case you're still in the trenches, here's what I've learned so far.

One, look at others the way you want them to look at you. I can be a tad judgy when I look at dating profiles — I spot typos and roll my eyes at one word answers — but

this year I made a commitment to try and find one sincere compliment I could pay to each profile I saw. I can't say I have a 100% success rate but I think I find something for at least 80% of people. It's not that I necessarily want to date all of those people, but I find something good in them and it makes me feel more hopeful that others will do that to my profile too.

Two, nothing breaks the ice better than a sincere compliment. I learned this the first time someone sent me a message simply saying, 'You're funny, I like it!' I am funny! And I tried to show that in my profile, so for that to be recognised made me feel good. Now when I swipe on someone I pick the thing I liked in their profile and send it in a short but sweet compliment. After wasting so much

time crafting witty openers, it turns out being sincerely kind is the way to everyone's heart.

And three, there are always more fish in the sea. I used to get really disappointed when someone I had had a few days of interesting chat with suddenly disappeared off the face of the earth. But this time around, I am seeing each disappearance as just one more person getting out of the way for the right person. I hold the connection lightly while we're talking and I let them go easily if they fade away because at the end of the day I know I will shut down my phone and go back to my single life. And after years of working to make that life a beautiful one, being alone is always a pleasure.



IMAGE: MARK HARRISON. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CAROLINE PIASECKI. STYLIST: KATE ANYA BARBOUR





# Self-care isn't selfish!



*Six essential practices to prevent burnout and help you thrive, from wellness coach and podcaster Debbie Green*

**B**urnout is widely recognised as a condition resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It often extends beyond work, impacting our personal lives, relationships and overall wellbeing. To protect yourself from burnout, it's important to take a proactive approach that prioritises your mental, emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing to be able to live a compassionate existence.

## Understanding burnout

Burnout is characterised by several symptoms, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, a reduced sense of accomplishment, tiredness, disconnect from work or personal responsibilities, and a noticeable decline in productivity. Unaddressed, burnout can lead to serious mental and physical health issues, including anxiety, depression and chronic illness. Recognising the signs early is crucial in preventing its long-term effects.

As a wellness coach who spends time with clients helping them to prevent burnout, here are my top tips:

### 1 Prioritise self-care

Self-care is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Engaging in activities that rejuvenate the mind and body, such as exercise, meditation, reading or spending time in nature, can help reduce stress. Small but consistent self-care habits can make a significant difference in preventing burnout.

### 2 Set healthy boundaries

One of the key contributors to burnout is an inability to set boundaries. 'No' is a full sentence! Learning to say 'no' and protecting your time is essential. Avoid overcommitting, and establish clear limits on work hours to maintain a sustainable routine. Setting expectations with colleagues and loved ones can help create a more balanced approach.

### 3 Cultivate mindfulness and emotional resilience

Practicing mindfulness through meditation, deep breathing or simply being present in the moment can significantly reduce stress. Emotional resilience can also be strengthened by reframing negative thoughts, focusing on gratitude and seeking support from

loved ones or professional support when needed. Journaling or reflective practices can also be beneficial in managing emotional stressors.

### 4 Nourish the body and mind

A balanced diet, adequate sleep, rest and downtime plus regular exercise play a vital role in preventing burnout. Ignoring these things can exacerbate stress and fatigue, making it more challenging to cope with demands.

### 5 Foster supportive relationships

Human connection is essential for emotional wellbeing. Surrounding yourself with a supportive network of friends, family and colleagues can provide encouragement and perspective during stressful times. Joining social activities and spending quality time with loved ones can also help to improve overall happiness.

### 6 Engage in purposeful activities

Engaging in hobbies, volunteering, pursuing new skills, learning opportunities or creative pursuits can reignite passion and motivation. Finding meaning outside of work or obligations can provide a sense of fulfilment, purpose and joy.

Investing in yourself is not just about preventing burnout — it's about thriving in all aspects of your life, to stay balanced, fulfilled and resilient in the face of daily challenges.

*Debbie Green is founder and wellness coach at Wishfish Coaching & Development and co-host of Secrets from A Coach podcast. For more information visit [wishfish.org.uk](http://wishfish.org.uk) and [secretsfromacoach.com](http://secretsfromacoach.com)*

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# Mind

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



***‘Hope means  
taking action. I think  
that we need to redefine  
hope, because it’s being  
used against us. If there  
is hope you don’t need to  
do anything, but that is  
the opposite of hope.’***

GRETA THUNBERG





# THE PRICE OF *perfectionism*

Constantly second-guessing yourself is exhausting, but that's not the only problem when you feel you need to be perfect, writes Dr Laura Williams

**P**erfectionism is one of those terms that gets thrown around too much for my liking. In recent years, it's become a popular way of describing people who strive to achieve and do their best, in a broadly similar way to how obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is now spoken of. Too often, I hear statements like, 'Oh, she's such a perfectionist,' or, 'You know how I like things to be exactly right, I'm a bit OCD.' Incidentally, psychological research has long noted the relatedness of perfectionism and obsessive compulsive disorder. But the point I want to make is that speaking about perfectionism in this way diminishes the very real suffering it can cause individuals. Perfectionism has been linked to many psychological disorders, but for many people like me, it shows up in what may at first seem like relatively benign ways.

When asked about perfectionism, most people will tell you it's when we strive to do things 'just right' or correctly; that it's about making sure whatever we do is done to the very best of our ability. And if this is perfectionism, it doesn't sound that terrible, does it? Often, it isn't. Perfectionism, as far as psychological traits go, can be helpful, up to a point. In fact, early

research previously categorised perfectionism as either positive and healthy, or negative and pathological. It can allow us to meet the standards set for us and sometimes even exceed them. This can have a positive impact on our scholastic record, our career, and even what people think of us.

And therein lies one of the first challenges of perfectionism and many other psychological traits: It's something that we're often praised for. As children, when we do things 'right,' this behaviour is frequently positively reinforced by those around us. When we defer to authority and minimise our own needs, our parents, teachers, mentors, and sports coaches — to name a few — may view this as 'good behaviour' and tell us so. We feel validated by the praise and then strive for more of it, because the emotional experience of it is so pleasurable. Before we know it, we're demanding and expecting perfection from ourselves to replicate that emotional pleasure and the dopamine hit that being praised offers us. And that's before we've even thought about the other key underlying mechanism through which perfectionism can arise: social modeling. There are three main types of perfectionism:

- 1. Self-oriented perfectionism**
- 2. Other-oriented perfectionism**
- 3. Socially-prescribed perfectionism**

**Self-oriented perfectionism** is most well-known of the trio and what most people would describe if you asked them about perfectionism. This type of perfectionism is when we hold ourselves to high standards and can be self-critical if we fall short.

**Other-oriented perfectionism** is when we expect those around us — our family, friends,



or colleagues — to perform to a high standard and do things as we would do them.

**Socially-prescribed perfectionism** is when we believe those around us — family, friends, and colleagues — expect perfectionism of us.

It's important to be aware of all three types of perfectionism to understand this personality trait within yourself. This is something many of my therapy clients struggle with, and which I think is more common than we may realise. To help shape your own thinking on this, let me share with you one woman's narrative of perfectionism. As you read it, ask yourself whether you can relate to any of the details.

## A vicious circle of perfection

This is the story of a woman who holds high expectations of both herself and others.

*At work, she struggles to delegate tasks to her colleagues, as she believes she will do a better job. She likes the feeling of being in control. That way, nothing can go wrong. But this means that she has a tendency to take on too much and she can struggle to keep up as a result. This can lead to making simple mistakes, which she then overly berates herself for. This, in turn, triggers her underlying core belief of not being good enough and means she procrastinates further and occasionally misses deadlines — a self-fulfilling prophecy.*

*At home, she sometimes feels resentful that her partner never seems to do as much as she does around the house. But when he does attempt to help her, she can often be critical of his efforts, which can give rise to some tension. On other days, her reaction can be quite different and when she sees him starting a household task, she will apologise, as she can feel like these should be her sole responsibility and that her partner believes this, too.*

*Her high expectations can sometimes extend to her children. She holds certain ideas about what they 'should' be able to do for themselves and can become frustrated, believing they are deliberately choosing not to do what she asks of them. She has stepchildren and often struggles with the idea that they think she isn't 'motherly enough' or, worse still, that she is the stereotypical evil stepmother.*

*She has a higher-than-average level of self-awareness around her perfectionism and other relational patterns. However, that doesn't always mean it's easy to catch herself and change her behaviour.*

In the example just given, all three types of perfectionism are in existence. However, the one that fascinates me most is socially-prescribed

perfectionism. This is where she believes that her partner expects perfectionism from her around the house. He doesn't, by the way.

How do I know this? Well, because that woman is me. Bet you weren't expecting that, were you? Perfectionism is one of the 'flavours' of my own psychological dysfunction and something that I recognise as having been problematic for me for years. It has developed in response to my fear of failure and is partly to do with the competitive environments I've been exposed to — sport and the profession of psychology among them. I also have a tendency toward minimising my needs in favour of those of others and taking responsibility for other people's feelings — one of the many impacts of my own childhood conditioning.

Now, just in case my mum or dad is reading this, or if you yourself are questioning the validity of 'blaming' our current behaviours on our childhoods and by extension our parents or other primary caregivers, I want to say something important here. I'm not in the business of externalising blame. I am in the business of taking responsibility. And not the kind of responsibility where I take ownership of things that are not mine to take responsibility for.

Let me explain further. My psychological challenges exist because some of this behaviour was modeled to me, sure. My mum had high expectations placed on her, too, by her own parents, and, in this way, we can see the intergenerational nature of our psychological makeup. But these behaviours of perfectionism and subjugating my own needs developed in a home that was also loving and supportive, and where other incredibly positive, adaptive, and helpful behaviours were modeled, too.

I know this won't be the case for everyone, but often our parents are simply doing the best they know how, with the resources, knowledge, and energy they have at the time. I'm a parent, too, and I often do things with all the best intentions and still don't get it right all the time.

But here's something you should know:

**The ruptures that happen in our relationships are never as important as the way that we choose to repair them.**

I have chosen to repair my ways of relating to myself and others by questioning the behavioural strategies that once served me, but no longer do so. My mum and dad aren't 'to blame'. They are part of me and my story. Just as their parents were part of them and theirs. And to change any of it, we need to take ownership and become fully







## Expert advice



*Dr Laura Williams is a psychologist with over 20 years' experience. She works with clients to transform cyclical patterns of anxiety and low mood. Her new book, What to Do When You Feel Broken: How to Let Go Of Negative Patterns, Heal Your Relationships and Find Freedom (Hay House, £14.99) is out now. [Drlaurawilliams.com](http://Drlaurawilliams.com)*

responsible for what happens next. The author and motivational speaker Mel Robbins says it best when she tells us: 'There is no one else coming to save you.' And the good news is, you can do that all by yourself. I believe, with the right knowledge and attitude, you can heal from the shadows of unhelpful childhood conditioning.

After waking up to my own perfectionistic tendencies and my avoidance of emotions or saying how I truly felt after my husband died, I decided to take ownership of my individual psychology. I now view myself as a recovering perfectionist and am quick to identify this trait when it arises. I'm learning to release control and to delegate tasks in my work and at home. This approach is also allowing me the opportunity to demonstrate better leadership and more conscious parenting. I'm more mindful of my workload and can rest when I need to without that inner self-criticism rearing its head. My confidence has been boosted by the imperfect action I take, and this has helped confirm my reframed core belief that 'I am enough'.

I'm still working on understanding how and why these core beliefs developed in the first place. I can see how the expectations placed on me by myself and others when I was growing up have shaped my life.

I am a work in progress, but can now see myself more clearly.

I am cultivating compassion for the vulnerable child within me that was used to well-worn patterns of relating to others. Sometimes, she comes to visit me and I welcome her with open arms, asking her, 'What do you need today?' At home, my current partner and I now operate more as a team. I communicate my needs better and have let some things go, in the knowledge that they aren't as important as I might once have believed.

Finally, I realise the expectations I sometimes hold for my kids are not always age-appropriate. And with tasks that are, I'm becoming more patient in scaffolding their learning around them. Life feels very different now that I am embracing imperfection and trusting that all will be OK. And I know that this can be your experience, too, when you examine your own conditioning fully and build your awareness of what needs to change.

Given all I've just shared with you, I want you to imagine that a different reality is possible for you, too. A reality in which you understand fully how your developmental history has shaped your individual psychology and the person you have become — both the adaptive aspects of yourself and the unhelpful ones. I can also tell you that change and personal growth are possible.

And, of course, perfectionism is just one psychological trait that's part of my story. There are countless expressions of our individual psychological makeup. I want to help you become aware of yours, whatever they are. My awakening came over many years, with the final catalyst being my husband's untimely death. You may be at the very start of your journey and you don't need to wait on a traumatic loss or life event to begin the work of inner change.





"A different reality is possible for you, a reality in which you understand how your history has shaped the person you have become"

## Begin your journey

Here are some questions to get you started. Take some time to reflect, and in your journal write down your answers to the following motivation exercise.

**1** What is your immediate reaction to the ideas presented in this article? What are your predominant thoughts and feelings?

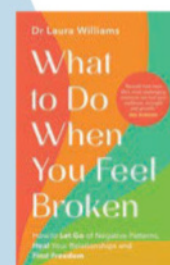
**2** Are there any areas of obvious resistance for you?

**3** What function do you think these areas of resistance serve for you?

**4** If you're keen to understand your own psychology, what is your motivation to do so?

**5** What's held you back from psychological work or understanding before now?

**6** What have you realised about your own psychological story already, simply from having started the process of placing conscious attention on it?



**What to Do When You Feel Broken: How to Let Go of Negative Patterns, Heal Your Relationships and Find Freedom (Hay House, £14.99)**

*Find out more about how your upbringing shaped how you respond to stress on page 42*

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this year and am now in my dream job working for a company specialising in workplace wellbeing. I spend most days designing and delivering group coaching programmes for amazing companies like Nando's, universities and businesses in the US! Not only that, I've turned my own health around using learnings from the course, and after years feeling stressed and anxious, I've never felt better.”



Amanda, HCA Health Coach Graduate

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## Expert advice



*Dr. Faye Begeti is a neurology doctor and neuroscientist at Oxford University Hospitals. She's on a mission to demystify the wonders of the brain and share her clinical knowledge through her Instagram page (@the\_brain\_doctor). While recognising the advantages of technology, she also underscores the importance of moderated and mindful use. Her game-changing debut book, *The Phone Fix: How to transform your smartphone habits* (Bloomsbury, £10.99), is out now. [drfayebegeti.com](http://drfayebegeti.com)*



*Dr Kirren Schnack is a clinical psychologist, and has worked with children and adults, including inpatient and outpatient NHS departments and in the law courts, for 19 years. She posts accessible advice and information about anxiety, mental health and her practice to her more than half a million followers on TikTok daily. Follow her @drkirren [drschnack.com](http://drschnack.com).*





# 6 ways

## TO RECLAIM YOUR ATTENTION SPAN

Worn out by getting distracted all the time?  
Yasmina Floyer finds out how to take back control

**A**s a teen and young adult, I could read for vast swathes of time undistracted. But recently, I read a (short!) newsletter, where the writer bemoaned the fact that she can no longer read for a solid half hour without getting distracted. Challenge accepted! I set a 30-minute timer and grabbed my book. Surely, I could manage half an hour? Reader, I reached for my phone four times before the timer went off!

I know I am not alone in noticing that my attention span is not what it used to be, and perhaps we have come to accept the ubiquitous perception that our attention spans are shrinking. But is there actually any truth to this?

A 2022 study conducted by King's College London found that 49% of people reported that they felt their attention spans have decreased. Like them, I took it for granted that my attention was a gradually eroding cliff face, a fact both natural and irrevocable. However, what is important to note is that this study focused on our *perception* of our attention spans, not the spans themselves.

Neurologist and author of *The Phone Fix: The Brain-Focused Guide to Building Healthy Digital Habits and Breaking Bad Ones* (Bloomsbury, £10.99) Dr Faye Begeti tells me that the idea that attention spans are shrinking is a common misconception. Instead, she says that at a population level, when looking at trends across the entire human species, people are in fact scoring higher on cognitive tests

than ever before. This includes IQ tests, academic performance, and even creative output, such as writing more books. 'The evidence does not support the idea that we are collectively losing the ability to pay attention. As a neurologist, I conduct 30–40-minute consultations, and most patients are fully capable of paying attention in that situation.'

'The issue is not that our attention spans have decreased, but rather that our attention is being misdirected — often towards non-meaningful distractions that don't align with our goals.'

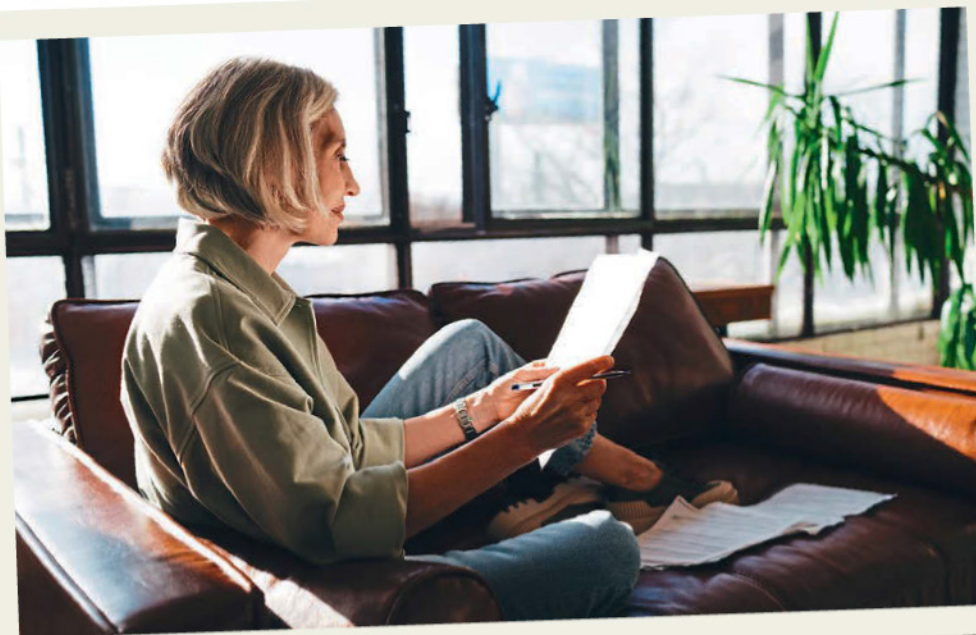
She suggests that if you are questioning your ability to focus, ask yourself this simple question: Can I watch a 40-minute TV show and follow the plot? If the answer is yes, then you do not have a fundamentally weak attention span: you have the capacity to focus for extended periods.

'People are still engaging in deep, immersive activities that require attention, it just might be binge-watching multi-hour TV series, playing complex video games, or consuming long-form podcasts. The challenge isn't the ability to pay attention, but rather where the attention is going.'

Dr Kirren Schnack, a clinical psychologist and author of *Ten Times Calmer* (Bluebird, £10.99), agrees that that changes in attention patterns are likely rooted in the fact that we are switching between tasks more quickly, often spending less time on a single thing before moving to something else. 'In my experience, many people







report this behaviour – something that we call “rapid attention switching”. Constant notifications can be a big contributor to this, and the ease with which we can access digital content – sometimes we might even do it out of habit.’

Dr Schnack turns off her notifications, checking them when she has time to. I have most of my notifications turned off and took a social media break recently, but this didn’t stop me from reflexively opening the app a few times during the early days of my break, highlighting how much of my behaviour had become habitual.

Dr Schnack observes that many people struggle to watch a movie without checking their notifications, or watch something on their phones at the same time (guilty!).

‘This is a classic example of rapid attention switching,’ she explains, ‘though interestingly, some research suggests that while our ability to sustain focused attention on a single task might be challenged, our ability to rapidly shift attention has actually increased. This can be due to how we can immediately check a notification and then go back to what we were doing.’

Living in a society where instant gratification has become the norm can make it all the more difficult to counter distractibility, especially when there is a sense of reward attached to the object of our distraction. Dr Schnack agrees it is natural for us to seek out things that bring us enjoyment, telling me it is the reason why it can be so easy to get caught up in consuming more and more.

‘In my view it can make the brain want to seek novelty and distraction, which then makes it more difficult to maintain attention on other things, that might feel a bit boring in comparison.’ She tells me that the key to breaking this cycle is to stop the constant switching, but even more



***“This creates a vicious cycle, where they feel busy but are not making progress”***

important than that to stop filling every free moment with a digital distraction. ‘Sometimes, just sitting and thinking is better for our brains.’

When I ask Dr Begeti about the consequences of this frequent switching, she explains that this is likely to put people into ‘low power mode’, where the executive brain becomes fatigued.

‘In this state, people become even more prone to distraction, making it harder to focus and get things done efficiently. This creates a vicious cycle where they feel constantly busy but are not making real progress. Over time, this can lead to stress, frustration, and even burnout.’

One of the things that she looks out for when it comes to factors reducing our attention span is lack of sleep, since sleep plays a crucial role in restoring the executive brain and multiple studies showing sleep deprivation reduces self-control, making people more prone to distraction.

Another factor is emotional regulation. ‘The same part of the brain that governs attention is also responsible for regulating emotions. During times of high stress, emotional turmoil, or mental health struggles, people have a reduced capacity to concentrate. I have often seen patients in the memory clinic who report struggling to pay





attention, but it is because they are spending so much mental energy trying to emotionally regulate really difficult emotions.’

Blindly accepting that our attention spans are dwindling and giving in to frequent distractions can leave us feeling powerless, but understanding the role that distractibility has to play can empower us to take back control. Gaining a deeper understanding of this has given me a whole new appreciation for the term, ‘attention economy’. It has made me reflect on value that we place on attention and how it can be a commodity we have agency over when it comes to the choices we make and what we chose to spend our attention on.

Whist it is hugely encouraging to know that we are far more in control of our attention than we may realise, Dr Begeti also calls on us not to be too hard on ourselves, reminding us that it is normal for attention to wane, especially when fatigued. ‘I studied at the University of Cambridge and work at Oxford, where I am surrounded by some of the world’s greatest minds, yet at the end of a long conference, many of them struggle to pay attention. This is not a failure of the brain but a natural phenomenon.’ Sometimes then, the best thing we can do is simply rest.

## How we can reclaim our attention spans

**1 Reframe your mindset** ‘For most people, attention is not depleted, it is being misdirected,’ says Dr Begeti. ‘This is not a permanent issue but something that can be reversed with intentional changes. If you are worried that you are suffering from severe inattention, then it is important to seek medical advice.’

**2 Choose a dedicated location for focus** ‘The brain is an association machine,’ says Dr Begeti. ‘We naturally link locations with specific actions, like associating the bathroom with brushing our teeth. Create a “focus zone” by choosing a desk, library, or coffee shop where you only do focused work. Avoid using this space for distractions to reinforce the habit of concentration.’

**3 Use the 5-minute test** We often interrupt ourselves out of habit when a random thought enters our mind. Instead of acting on it impulsively, tell yourself to wait 5 minutes before switching tasks, says Dr Begeti. Acting on every thought reinforces the habit, signalling to your brain that these distractions are important, which leads to even more random thoughts surfacing. If, after 5 minutes, you are still struggling to focus, take an intentional break away from your focus location to reset.

**4 Set clear boundaries** Dr Schnack encourages us to look out for increased stress or mood changes, as that is a point where we should set boundaries, such as not using our phones after a certain time in the evening and setting a limit on our total duration of tech use. ‘If you’re busy, distracted, overwhelmed, or tired, it’s time to set boundaries. It’s also sensible to just set a daily limit,’ she says. ‘Just like we shouldn’t spend all day watching TV or all day running a marathon, we shouldn’t spend all day using tech.’

**5 Pay attention to self-care** Eating well, making time for physical activity, and sticking to a good sleep routine all help boost our ability to pay attention for longer. ‘Sleep, nutrition, and exercise all play a role in cognitive function, which directly impacts attention, so if you want to reclaim or improve your attention, you need to feed all these needs,’ says Dr Schnack.

**6 Work your attention muscle** ‘Attentional fitness is similar to physical fitness,’ says Dr Schnack. ‘Practising sustained focus on single tasks without multitasking, and gradually increasing the duration of focused attention, can be really helpful’.

Coaching in action



# *Bridges take time to build...*

Award-winning coach Kim Morgan is left picking up the pieces when client Summer's reunion doesn't go quite as planned



IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK, NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED



## Session Three

Between our first and second coaching sessions Summer\* had experienced a significant shift in her thoughts and feelings about her mum. After a lifetime of being embarrassed by her 'hippy dippy mother' she had almost overnight let go of any resentment about her chaotic childhood and for the first time ever, had been able to see her mum with admiration, forgiveness and unconditional love. Summer had left our last coaching session excited about sharing her change of heart with her mum. I had found myself imagining being in her mum's shoes and wondering how she would respond to Summer's change of perspective.

Summer arrived at our next session looking sad and deflated. 'What happened?' I asked gently.

Summer was tearful. 'She didn't take it well.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I said, 'would you be willing to say more?'

Summer took a deep breath. 'I told Mum about our coaching sessions and how I now appreciate and accept all that she is. I apologised for not having been able to see her in all her wonder before. I said I hoped we could have a fresh start in our relationship and make up for lost time. She nodded and listened, but she looked so sad.'

'Eventually Mum spoke. She was upset. She thanked me and congratulated me on having coaching. She said she needed time to process everything I had said because it was so unexpected. I pushed her to say more. I wish I hadn't, but this wasn't working out the way I had pictured in my mind. I asked her to tell me what she was thinking and feeling, and so she did.'

Through her tears, Summer recounted how Angie, her mum, had described their relationship from her point of view. Angie had explained how hurtful it had been to realise that she was an embarrassment to her daughter. She described the pain, envy and loneliness she experienced when she saw other women spending time with their adult daughters. She spoke of the heartbreak and rejection when she was not invited to Summer's graduation. This was the moment she had stopped hoping that things would change. She had built a life around her single friends, where she felt she

belonged. She was not sure she could trust in Summer's sudden change of heart. She feared that it would be short-lived, and if she opened herself up, that she would be hurt again.

'And then she said she had always loved me and always will.' Summer covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

I felt I needed to be patient and present for Summer. I wanted to create a safe space for her to regulate her emotions in her own time. So, I opted for a tried and tested coaching approach — I offered Summer a cup of tea, a biscuit and a box of tissues! She looked up and me, smiling and sniffing through her tears. 'That would be lovely, thank you.'

We sat in companionable silence and drank our tea. I let Summer know that when and if she wanted to say more, I was there for her but there was no rush and no pressure. After about 20 minutes, Summer reached for her journal and began writing furiously, sometimes stopping to think, then writing some more.

'Thank you for giving me time to think. I have written myself a message and I have called it "Bridges Take Time to Build".'

*Just because I have changed, it doesn't mean that Mum must.*

*I am going to be patient with her, and I am not giving up on her.*

*I understand that after all I have done she is experiencing hurt, distrust and fear.*

*I am going to keep demonstrating through my actions (not just my words) that I love and respect her.*

*I hope we can find one another.*

Summer's resourcefulness reminded me of a core principle of coaching — that people are naturally creative, resourceful and whole. A coach's role is to provide a space which allows our clients to access this creativity and think for themselves and find their own solutions.

***'Real help is different. Real help, professionally or personally, consists of listening to people, of paying respectful attention to people so that they can access their own ideas first.'*** Nancy Kline

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



## Coaching exercises

### Knowing me, knowing you

This is a great exercise to do with a partner, friend, family member, or even a colleague. It's designed to explore how well you know each other — the things that matter most, from hopes and dreams to worries, likes, and dislikes. This exercise strengthens emotional connections and often uncovers surprising new insights.

Take turns answering these questions about each other's lives:

- Where were you born?
- What are your favourite and least favourite foods?

- Which charities or causes do you support?
- If you had to leave your home in an emergency, what one item would you take?
- Who do you most admire?
- What would be your dream holiday?
- What do you worry about the most?
- Who is your closest friend?
- What would be your ideal job?
- What hopes do you have?



## WORDS OF WISDOM

*'Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.'*

**Stephen R. Covey**

Revisiting this exercise from time to time can help ensure you stay in tune with each other as life evolves.

### Changing places

It can be helpful to review and replay important conversations you have had. One way to do this is by stepping into the other person's shoes — then seeing the exchange through the eyes of a neutral observer.

#### **Step 1: The Other Person**

Replay the conversation from their perspective.

- What fears or hesitations might they have?

- What more might they need from you?
- How well did they feel listened to?

#### **Step 2: The Observer**

Now, imagine a kind, wise, and neutral observer was watching this interaction.

- What insights might they offer about your role in the conversation?
- What might they say about the relationship dynamic?

#### **Step 3: Back to You**

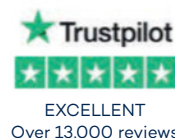
Step back into your own perspective.

- What new understanding do you have about this conversation?
- How might you approach things differently next time?

This exercise can help you build awareness, empathy, and better communication in your relationships.



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cooked with fat,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer, PhD, from FutureYou Cambridge.

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# Hello!

*This issue we're all about letting go of the stress and*

*drama and enjoying ourselves.*

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Sally x

Editor-in-Chief,  
Psychologies

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# Journaling to break the cycle of procrastination

*Discover where your habit of putting things off began, and learn how to change unhelpful habits with this simple exercise, writes Jackee Holder*



A few weeks ago, I caught myself enjoying the process of completing my tax returns. For years, January had been a month of dread: scattered receipts, last-minute scrambling, a chaotic rush to get everything in order. But over the years something has shifted. Last year, as I sat inputting my receipts, I noticed I was relaxed. Was I actually lost in the moment, taking in the patterns of the numbers populating the screen? They no longer felt like an overwhelming mess. Instead, they had a rhythm, almost like tap dancing on the page. And then it hit me, I was enjoying a task I had always procrastinated over.

This wasn't just about taxes. My past resistance to tasks like these wasn't about the task itself, it was about the emotional weight I had attached to it. My dad was self employed, and often

***"It's rarely about the task, it's about what the task means to us"***

scrambled at the last minute to gather his receipts. Funny then, how I found myself doing the same. And that's the thing about procrastination, it's rarely about the task, it's about what the task means to us. Procrastination is not just a bad habit, it's often an emotional and psychological response to something deeper. This month I want to explore this with you. Because getting on top of procrastination isn't just about productivity. It's about freeing yourself to live a fuller, richer, more alive life. Grab your notebook or your notes app as I have some prompts for you.

Let's start with a simple list. Where do you tend to procrastinate the most?

- *Work projects?*
- *Creative pursuits?*
- *Financial tasks?*
- *Health and wellness goals?*
- *Household duties?*
- *Personal care?*





For me, work projects were my biggest struggle. I often juggled multiple creative projects, leaving tasks until the last minute. Does this resonate with you? Of course some people self regulate by finishing tasks well ahead of time and if that's you, that's great. But this is for those of us who struggle with starting and finishing. Maybe you've never stopped to ask yourself why that is.

Looking back, I can pinpoint where my habit of procrastination began. When I was 16, I applied for a newspaper apprenticeship with the National Council of Journalists. I wanted it so badly. But on the day of the interview, I left home late, got lost, and arrived flustered and embarrassed. The test had already started. I sat in front of the exam paper anxious and overwhelmed. I barely made it halfway through before time ran out. I didn't get the spot.

Yes, it was competitive, but instead of seeing it as a learning experience, I internalised it as a big, fat failure. Without realising it, I made an unspoken decision: If I don't give projects and goals my all, then I won't have to face the pain of failing. I held onto that decision for years, leading to a pattern of leaving things unfinished and waiting until the last minute to complete tasks.

Can you trace back to a moment when your procrastination habit started? Was there a specific event, a teacher or experience that shaped this pattern? Write about the moment in the first person as if you are reliving it. Before moving on, pause.

● **How does it feel to acknowledge this moment?**

● **What decision did you make at the time?**

● **How has it shaped your actions since?**

In a recent meditation class, the teacher, Dee Hennesey, said something that struck me like lightning: 'Procrastination is an old brain response to stress. It's a natural reaction to carrying too much for too long.' That was true for me. She also pointed out that we often turn procrastination into a character flaw. But procrastination is not a moral failing — it's a learned response. And that means it can be unlearned.

Author Noah Elkrief takes this idea further. He suggests we think we're unhappy about the task, but in reality, we were already unhappy before we sat down to do it. The stress isn't in the task itself, it's in our thoughts about the task.

Let's put that to the test with some journaling. Choose a task you've been avoiding.

● **What thoughts do you have about it?**

● **What story are you telling yourself about this?**

● **Now ask yourself: Is this actually true?**

One of the most effective tools I've used to break through procrastination is the Pomodoro Method. It's simple but powerful: Work for 25 minutes fully focused on a task. Then take a 5-minute break. Step away. Walk away from your desk. Gaze out of the



window. Don't check your phone. I personally found this the hardest to do. My instinct is always to push through. But those breaks were the key. Why not give it a go now? Pick a task you've been putting off. Set a timer for 25 minutes. Work on it with full focus. When the timer rings, pause for 5 minutes, step away, rest and relax and then begin again.

One of procrastination's biggest traps is that it distorts our sense of progress. We focus on what we haven't done rather than what we have done. A simple journaling exercise changed this for me.

One evening, after a particularly tough day, I journaled in response to a simple prompt: 'On a scale of 1 to 10, how was your day?' I instinctively wrote 4. Not great. But instead of dwelling on the number, I made a list of what made my day a 4. I started with small things — morning meditation, a short walk, finishing some errands. As I wrote, my list grew. I ended up with 13 items. Seeing my day on paper changed how I felt about it. What looked like a 4 in my head was actually filled with moments of productivity and care.

The same applies to procrastination. We convince ourselves we're stuck, but often, we're just not acknowledging our small wins. When we shift our perspective, we shift our energy. And that energy makes it easier to take the next step. Procrastination thrives in avoidance, but change begins with one small step. What's your first small step? Write it down. Begin it now. And next month, I hope to see you here — with a smile on your face.

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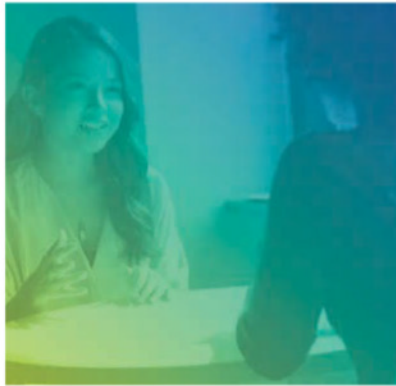
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# WHAT'S HIDDEN IN YOUR family tree?

It's not just our hair and eye colour that we inherit from our ancestors, but also their stress responses, discovers Sally Saunders



A few days ago I was going through some drawers to declutter, and found one of my most treasured possessions. It is a letter from 1907, written to my great grandmother, Harriet. Before she married, Harriet had been in service with a local upper-class family, and it was a note from one of the young ladies she served.

In beautiful handwriting, Miss Emmie, as my

great grandmother knew her, sends Harriet her condolences on the death of her father, and of her child. Both had died in the few months since the pair last saw each other, and Harriet was to lose another child before my grandmother was born a couple of years later (who was named Gladys Emily, after her ladyship).

It's all ancient history, of course, and well over a century later it is little more than an artefact from another age... or is it? Could the events detailed in this letter leave their imprint on me and my family today? Psychologist Dr Rathika Marsh says it's possible.



'If you're thinking about stress and trauma, there's often an ancestral pattern that comes into how somebody is,' she says. 'So for me, for example, my parents were born in Sri Lanka, and there was a certain way of doing things. They had to leave the country because of lack of education opportunities and they were immigrants at a very young age, in their early 20s.'

'And so they came carrying all of this pressure, stress of "I have to survive", and so in my life, that was really projected onto me. And whatever you see of your parents in terms of how they're responding to stress, anxiety, in terms of how their mental health is, you absorb.'

In terms of my own patterns, I know I have anxiety about the health of my children. We have four, and while many people think it must be incredibly hard work my response is usually the same — no, it's all lovely — unless they're ill: that's when my

anxiety goes through the roof. My youngest daughter was hospitalised for a few days when she was just three and a half weeks old, and my younger son had a bad bout of pneumonia when he was three, and now has asthma. I believe it's as a result of these experiences that I have some degree of health anxiety about all four of them. But I'm now wondering, is it more than that? Could the devastation of my great grandmother Harriet losing two tiny children somehow have imprinted itself on my grandmother (Nan), and made its way down the family tree to me?

'You absorb stress even before you're born,' says Dr Rathika. 'So if you're in your mother's womb, and your mother is experiencing high levels of stress, high levels of cortisol, that is impacting on you as a baby. So there can be all of these threads that really go beyond, not just your mother or father, but beyond that, as well even beyond patterns that have been there

for generations before.' So Harriet's sadness and stress, especially happening when Nan was in her womb and during her first years, could have a significant effect, even today. My own parents have always been over-protective of me and my brother and sister, and it's a behaviour I exhibit myself, especially when I'm feeling stressed. Perhaps at least in part it stems from this root?

'It's a little bit like if we look at how are women seen within a lineage, within a culture,' says Dr Rathika.

'So in a situation where the man is number one, and then the boys, and then the woman is seen as third in line, and you've observed that all your life, then you're likely to put yourself down the pecking order.'

'And in terms of how things can get passed down, there's a case of learned behaviour, and mirroring.'

'For example, my husband's grandmother had a lot of OCD patterns. We never really saw it,

*"You get to choose  
a different way"*





we just saw this lovely old lady, but she had a lot of a lot of patterns which are related to anxiety. And his mother presents with high levels of anxiety, so she's obviously been brought up observing fight or flight responses.

'Those responses are telling her "I'm not safe in my body, and so I'm trying to control my environment." That's what she's seen and observed.

'She's then gone on to develop those fight or flight anxiety-related behaviours, because that wasn't identified, she wasn't even aware of it, so she didn't kind of do anything to heal that.

'I guess it's no surprise then that my husband really struggled with anxiety, and he's had patterns of health anxiety and so on, until he's really done

some deeper work around understanding his responses.'

So how do we go about working out if we might be carrying other people's baggage from the past?

'You need to start by trying to understand the patterns that are present for you. So for example what are the things that you get triggered by?' asks Dr Rathika. 'And then, it's a case of recognising, you can have these patterns that are in your lineage, that are generational responses to stress, and also you get to choose to create a different way. You get to choose to change that pattern.'

In my own case, my children's health is definitely a trigger. But using Dr Rathika's idea gives me the chance

to try to change how I respond to it. Yes, my children have had illnesses, illnesses that in my great grandmother's time could have been much more serious. And yes, my great grandmother did lose two children at a very young age. But that was in the early days of the 20th century, more than a hundred years ago, before the discovery of penicillin, before steroids, before Calpol, before pumped oxygen, before immunisations, heck, even before the National Health Service. So while illness will always affect us, and while there can always be problems, I am not living in my great grandmother's world, thank goodness, and the illnesses that robbed her of her children can be immunised against or treated as a matter of course today. And

## Expert advice



*Dr Rathika Marsh, The Spiritual Psychologist, has worked with children and young people for more than 17 years. She has now founded The Academy of Healing, a 12-month Healing Practitioner Training and Certification combining Eastern and Western approaches. [thespiritualpsychologist.co.uk](http://thespiritualpsychologist.co.uk)*





for that I will always be grateful. So the next time one of them gets a cold, or we're fighting a sky-high temperature in the middle of the night, I'm going to try to remember I'm not living in Harriet's world, and keep my challenges in perspective. Wish me luck!

*If you're struggling with stress, here are some more techniques from Dr Rathika to help you break the cycle and keep your calm.*

**TIP 1: Map your stress ancestry** Explore how stress patterns travel through families. Notice how your parents responded to pressure — did they constantly check locks, rush about, or worry aloud? These

behaviours likely became your automatic responses too. Try sketching a family 'stress tree' to spot these inherited reactions. Simply recognising these patterns as learnt behaviours — not fixed parts of who you are — can help you pause and choose different responses when stress appears. You get to learn a new way!

**TIP 2: Create a 'worry time' boundary** Schedule a specific 10-minute window each day (or a few of these if needed) dedicated solely to worrying. Outside this time, when anxious thoughts arise, simply jot them down for your next 'worry appointment.' This technique stops stress from hijacking your entire day

and contains it within clear boundaries. Remarkably, most people find their worries lose power when deliberately scheduled rather than randomly interrupting life. This activity creates a pattern of disruption in your mind. For extra effectiveness, write your concerns down and physically close the notebook when time's up.

**TIP 3: Try colour spotting** When worry strikes, immediately hunt for five specific colours in your surroundings. This simple distraction trick pulls your attention outward instead of spiralling inward with anxious thoughts. What is often needed when we enter these spirals of 'thinking' is a return to what is here in the physical now. The beauty of colour spotting is its simplicity — it requires almost no effort yet effectively interrupts racing thoughts. Try focusing on increasingly subtle shades for an even stronger calming effect.

**TIP 4: Embrace hot-cold contrasts** Something as simple as alternating between warm and cool temperatures can reset your body's stress response. Try switching between warm and cool water for short intervals during your shower. This creates a gentle physical challenge that helps your body practise recovering from stress. The sensation provides an immediate distraction while training your system to bounce back more quickly from tension. Practising this regularly leads to changes in your physiology, which in turn impacts on your overall wellbeing.

**TIP 5: Touch the natural world** Our modern environments keep us disconnected from nature's calming influence. Create brief 'nature moments' throughout your day — run fingers through the soil of a houseplant, carry a smooth stone in your pocket, or touch tree bark during lunch breaks. Nature is a natural healer that we can often so easily bypass. These quick sensory connections with natural materials can ground you instantly when stress builds, with no special equipment or techniques required.

*"I need to remember, I am not living in my great grandmother's world"*



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**I** hold my breath for this delicate operation. ‘Come on, let’s get your shoes on...’ so far, so good. ‘Here they are, come on...’ Then I make the fatal mistake. ‘Come on, or we’re going to be... late.’ BOOM! Explosion. ‘Will the gate be closed? Will I be last in? Will I get in trouble? Ohhhh!’

Ok, so she’s only three-foot something, and four years old, but the drama (and noise) my little one can cause when getting ready for school is worthy of someone twice her size. I try to stay patient, I know it’s not her fault, and she’ll probably (hopefully!) grow out of it. But we all know fully-grown adults who are like this, for whom every little thing that goes wrong is another reason to get stressed and upset, and even when things are going fine, there’s still a perfectly good reason to shout.

There is a part of me that understands at the moment though. While I’m usually reasonably relaxed, I feel more anxious than usual, and am on something of a hair trigger. There’s something natural about it, I tell myself. We are hardwired to look for threats, evolutionarily speaking, and at the moment it’s not difficult to find them. The only difference is, right now it’s more likely to be in the form of worrying headlines on my phone, or how to interpret a message from one of the other school mums, instead of a lion creeping up on me in the desert. My poor brain is finding it hard to tell the difference between these perceived dangers though, so I feel I’m constantly on high alert, and spend far too long thinking about the challenges and problems that could be sneaking up on me.

‘When you’re in an anxious state, you will see risk everywhere,’ explains clinical psychologist and author Dr Emma Hepburn. ‘Your cognitive function becomes narrowed and your attention becomes narrowed, because it’s designed to keep you safe in a risky environment. But if you experience some anxiety in the online world, and that starts to cross over into the real world, you need to be aware of how you are feeling.’

And while that can vary from day to day, it also of course varies from person to person.

‘Some people do have higher levels of empathy, and things affect them more,’ says Dr Hepburn. ‘For some people, seeing news items will have great emotional impact, and it’s important to be aware of that. They’ll have a greater kind of empathy with other people. They’ll have to work more to detach themselves from that. And therefore, it can make life more difficult.

‘But also, things can feel more challenging if it

has got a personal attachment to your own story in some way. So for example, I’ve always found it difficult seeing children in distress, but since having my own family I find it just about impossible to watch children in distress, because it reminds me of my children, so has a greater personal element to it. And if you’ve had trauma in the past, which is related to the news you’re following, that’s going to have a greater impact as well.’

We’re not powerless, though, read on to discover Dr Hepburn’s advice for how to cope better with the constant influx of news. And what about the little niggles, the annoyances that get under your skin and wind you up, until you get so frustrated that you could scream? Don’t worry, we’ve got that covered too, with advice from the brilliant Mel Robbins and Dr Lalitaa Suglani on how to break free and change your attitude for good.

So give yourself a break, discover how to ditch the drama, and set yourself free from some of the stresses, to embrace a calmer, happier you.







# Read all about it?

**A**re you an ostrich or a meerkat? We all know about the poor dusty ostrich, that sticks its head in the sand, hiding from what frightens it and avoiding confronting problems head on. Yes, it might be a myth, but it's an easy thing for us to understand. After all, who's not had days when a situation has felt so overwhelming that all you've wanted to do is stay in bed, hide your head under the covers and wake up again when everything has calmed down a bit?

Or are you more of a meerkat? Constantly looking for the danger, constantly on high alert, constantly rearing up, looking out, wearing yourself thin with worry and stress?

That's how it can feel when we're looking at the headlines at the moment. The news can make the best of us anxious, spiralling into worry and fear when things are seemingly getting increasingly crazy, but it can be hard for us to look away.

'How we perceive the news can really impact and make us feel the world is scary and unpredictable,' says Dr Emma Hepburn. 'Most people usually go around thinking that most people are decent, and the world is a fairly safe place, but if we're seeing these things all the time in the news, that can be quite challenging, and trying to integrate that into our sense of beliefs can be quite hard.'

## Hide or seek?

So are we better making like the ostrich or the meerkat? 'Being curious is a really good thing, and wanting to find out and be informed is a really good thing,' says Dr Hepburn. 'Curiosity and learning is very, very positive for mental health overall, but if you're constantly looking for more information and it's having an impact on you, then it can become detrimental.'

'I would advise remaining informed in the way that's beneficial to you, in a way that doesn't get to the point where it overwhelms you, because then it becomes unhelpful. If the amount of information you're consuming is detrimental to you, and you can do nothing about it because you don't have

enough capacity to process it, then it's too much. So it's about working out, how would you remain informed without it constantly overwhelming you? What is a realistic attitude you can take? What's within your control? What can you do?'

She reflects that it's also not necessarily only *what* we're consuming but also *how* we're consuming it, that could be an issue. 'We do know that social media is designed to try and pull you in, to try and get you to stay there,' she says.

'So that will be using emotional impact news, and then it will roll on to the next thing and the next thing and the next, and you get caught in that loop. You can then get involved in people's opinions and emotions, which can also make you feel more strongly, whether you get more upset or more angry.'

## Time for tradition?

'There are some really interesting studies showing that people who get their news from traditional media find it has less emotional impact than social media,' says Dr Hepburn. 'That makes sense, because if you read a newspaper or watch the TV news, it is time limited. It has a short period of

time for each story, and then it moves on to the next thing. It has got a natural limiting ability to it, which is really interesting, and it sets those boundaries naturally. And there's obviously some opinion there, but it tries to be fact based, not purely based on other people's opinions, and it's not trying to reel you in with an emotional impact.'

'Now, you might not go back fully to traditional media, but can you apply some of those things to social media, or online. So, for example, you might try to read a more in-depth article about a topic you're interested in by a reputable provider of news, instead of flicking through high-level emotional content. With social media it's never actually going to meet your need, so you need to keep on going and going and going and going.'

But sometimes, unfortunately, wherever the news comes from, it can leave you feeling shocked and upset. So what can we do about it?

***"Social media is never going to meet your need, you'll just keep going and going and going."***





‘Seeing this stuff all the time can make us feel out of control, powerless, and we can also develop that sense of learned helplessness as well, but we’re just not sure of what we can do, or how we can do it,’ says Dr Hepburn. ‘It has emotional impact on the stuff itself, and then it also has an impact on us and how we perceive things, and how we feel, what we believe we can do.’

‘And just like some people have a really strong sense of empathy, there are people who have a very, very strong sense of justice. That’s a really, really positive characteristic, but, like all great characteristics, like empathy, like caring, like curiosity, it can become unhelpful if it’s too much.’

‘Injustice can make you really angry. But the key is to understand your anger. Recognise what’s contributing to how you’re feeling, recognise your values. It’s really great to have strong values around justice and fairness and all these things, so how can you use anger to do something to support that? It might just be talking it through with somebody, but it might be taking action. But the important thing is to understand what’s going on, rather than just sitting with that emotion and letting it hurt you.’

‘Anger can be the most positive response to move things on in the world. The Suffragettes wouldn’t have taken action if they hadn’t been angry, and look at everything they changed.’

‘You might take action around a specific thing that you’re feeling terrible about, or maybe something in your local community which relates to the same values. Then you’re using those feelings in a beneficial way, and using the empathy and anxiety to push towards action in a way that doesn’t overwhelm you.’

### Face facts

Another important aspect of dealing with troubling news is to face these issues head on, instead of suppressing them, says Dr Lalitaa Suglani. ‘When we’re watching what’s going on with America, with Donald Trump and Elon Musk and everything they’re doing, it can feel very distressing, and that’s okay, but I think people don’t talk enough about it,’ says Dr Suglani. ‘So then what ends up happening is, we go into the office. We talk about *EastEnders*, we talk about



all these other topics, but we haven't actually spoken about the topics that really matter, that are playing on your mind. Now, if you keep suppressing it and ignoring it, it comes out in other ways, and it will leak out in anxieties. So it is a rather uncertain time right now, and I think it's about accepting that. You don't know quite what's going to happen. But what you do know is you've got to trust in yourself, you have the tools within you that if something does happen, you'll figure it out. You're a smart person, you have a very powerful skill set, and you will figure it out.'

## Build better boundaries

If you do struggle to set boundaries with news consumption, you need to learn to sit with the emotional responses that are coming up before they damage you on a deeper level, says Dr Suglani.

'If you are feeling hopeless, if you are feeling angry, if you're struggling to regulate certain emotions, the body goes into a state of fight or flight. So that might be that we are shallow breathing, we're feeling really anxious, light headed, because when we're shallow breathing, we're not getting enough oxygen. That will all have a knock-on effect on how you're feeling day to day, because you'll be feeling like you're not grounded.

'So grounding techniques can be really helpful. Think yoga, deep breathing, mindfulness, all of these things can be helpful in just giving you back your power in the moment, and just acknowledging these things are going on. It is scary, but you don't have to run away from these feelings, it's okay to sit there and feel them, and acknowledge your fears, but know you will be okay.'

Here are a few more ideas to take control of how you feel from wellbeing expert Ali Roff Farrar...

**I**f a conversation about the recent antics of world leaders leaves you feeling queasy, take a moment to notice how you feel. Taking the time to label or even jot down the emotions you feel can help create a sense of awareness around them so that you can shield yourself from the actions that cause them in the future. Now you've practised awareness, go on a treasure hunt of positivity. Look, listen and feel around you to find five things that you enjoy or make you feel happy. Lean into them; the feeling of a warm cup of tea in your hands, sunshine pouring through a window, the sound of a someone laughing. Seek out balance.

**2** Yes, you could throw out your TV, radio and phone, live under a rock and talk to no one, and sure, you'd reduce your headline anxiety. But let's be real — we have to live our lives. We can however be mindful about where we get our news and invest a little time in teaching the algorithm what you do and don't want to see. For example, on news feed apps such as Apple News you can block specific channels or topics you don't want to read. On social media, if you see content which makes you feel anxious, use the option to tell the app that you don't want to see content like this. Equally, make sure you tell it what you do like by watching and liking content that makes you smile, or you find interesting.

**3** Keep an on-the-go gratitude diary on your phone's note app. Try to add a few things you're grateful for each day. Add one every time you notice you feel anxious after digesting news content. Use this list as a safe and positive place to refer to in those moments you feel overwhelmed by the 'bad' news, or find you've taken in too many negative stories as a pocket antidote to 'headline anxiety'.





*"You don't know quite  
what's going to happen,  
but you've got to trust  
in yourself. You're a  
smart person, you will  
figure it out."*

*Expert  
advice*



*Dr Emma Hepburn is a clinical psychologist, lecturer, author and illustrator. She has over 20 years' experience of working with mental health and wellbeing. She is author of 3 books, her most recent A Toolkit for your Emotions, and produced the Emotional First Aid Kit with her illustrations to help you look after your mind. @thepsychologymum*



*Dr. Lalitaa Suglani is an award-winning psychologist, coach, speaker and author of High Functioning Anxiety: A Five Step Guide to Calming the Inner Panic and Thriving (Hay House, £12.99) drlalitaa.com*



*Mel Robbins is one of the most respected experts on change and motivation in the world, a best-selling author and host of The Mel Robbins Podcast. Her book, The Let Them Theory: A Life-Changing Tool That Millions of People Can't Stop Talking About (Hay House, £22.99) is out now*





# HOW TO *break free*

**T**here used to be an advert on TV years ago, with the line ‘we don’t make a drama out of a crisis’. I’ve used and abused that line many times, and also been guilty of doing exactly that. But it doesn’t necessarily even need to be a crisis: sometimes we can make anything into a drama, if we come at it in that frame of mind. It might seem a completely reasonable thing to worry about: your partner’s ex getting in touch out of the blue; your boss being funny with you at work; that thing your mother-in-law said about your hair over Sunday lunch... It’s not just earth-shattering worries that can keep us up at night. But particularly when we’re already in a heightened state of emotion, the everyday things can feel more enormous than ever. So how do we release ourselves from focusing so much on these stresses?

‘The first step is trying to understand why does your brain go there?’ says Dr Lalitaa Suglani. ‘Often it does that because we may not be fully content where we are. We might be worried about our kids, our families, the safety, security of others.’

‘We can catastrophise and get caught in that the loop of the overthinking. If you are anxious already, that anxiety is going to be looking for other things to make you more anxious. So naturally, your brain is going to start looking and going “Let me go and have a look at that friend who hasn’t messaged me for ages,” or “Let me go and look at my ex’s messages.” But that’s a form of sabotaging: because we’re already feeling anxious, we end up going further and further into that state.’

## **What steps can we take to free ourselves from this anxiety?**

‘We want to be mindful,’ says Dr Suglani. ‘We need to think, “Okay, when I know I’m in that state, what are my red flags to tell me that I might be anxious right now?” You might think: “Now, today, I’m feeling a little bit vulnerable, so I need to stay away from certain people or certain situations.” It’s important you know what you’re doing, so you’re becoming more aware of your patterns.’

The path to awareness, it seems, is by listening more what’s going on inside than what’s going on outside. Dr Suglani advises me that each morning, instead of going straight on to my phone to see what the world or my friends are up to, I need to see what’s going on with me. How am I feeling? Did I sleep well? What’s my mood like?

‘I know that it’s hard sometimes with kids, and when you’ve got a busy life and you haven’t slept properly, you don’t want to be checking in with yourself,’ she smiles. ‘But I want you to have that little check in and register, “where am I at right now?” You might think, “On scale of one to 10, how content do I feel right now?” And if you put three or four, I want you to think, “Okay, what do I need to give myself today? What do I need to be mindful of today?” The more aware you become of your patterns, the more you’re able to understand, “Okay, I get that my brain’s going in this direction now, how do I draw it back?” Because these are parts of us that are drawn to different things, because it’s allowing us to cope in a certain way and to survive in a world that challenges us.’



# Time to LET GO OF CONTROL?

**T**rying to let go of the drama, and accept things on their own merits is never easy, particularly when we can see things are far from perfect. However, what if striving for perfection — our own brand of perfection, that is — is part of what's causing us anxiety in the first place? We're not talking global headlines here, but what if trying to make our relationships perfect, our careers perfect, our lives perfect, and trying to control everything we come into contact with, is only exacerbating the issues we face?

'I feel like we live in a world that is actually intentionally designed to steal your attention, your time, your energy and your joy,' says best-selling author and podcaster Mel Robbins. 'We have turned politics into entertainment, work is non-stop, and I think we all want to not have the world affect us so deeply, but we don't know how.'

'We're all so stressed out and overwhelmed, and particularly at a moment in time where it's scary. I mean that the headlines make you feel helpless. We've gotten to this point where you don't even realise how it's crept up on you.'

'But the truth is, your life is not about what's happening out there, it's about what's happening inside you. Your power is in your response to it.'

Robbins initially came up with the idea of letting go of trying to control others in order to win back control of herself at her son's high school prom. She says she was being a 'typical, controlling mom, micromanaging everything.' Suddenly her daughter let rip, telling her 'let him get his tux wet. Let them eat where they want. Let her not have a corsage. Let him ruin his sneakers. Let them dance in the rain. Let them do what they want.'

It was the slap in the face Robbins needed to relinquish her need for control over her son's night, but the next morning she realised her daughter's exclamation of 'Let them' might have more power than she realised. 'I was at like a Home Depot, the big garden centre we have here in the US. And it's a

big store, but they'd only got two cash registers open. There were five people in front of me in the line, and it's like, beep... beep... beep...

'Do you know that feeling? That frustration? You feel like a caged animal!'

'And then you're looking around, and you think, "I can run this place better than the managers", and then you're pissed off that employees are over there talking. Stacking shelves. Doing anything other than helping me!'

'But let's unpack this right now. This is so stupid to get stressed out about. The truth is, in that moment, you forget that you actually have power.'

'I can leave the queue. I could pick up the phone and call my mom, because I haven't talked to her in a week. I could stand and close my eyes and take a deep breath in. But no, I'm gonna let this dumb-ass thing steal my mood, and then what happens? Your nervous system now goes on edge, and you carry that with you all day.'

'But what I realised that morning, is that I can say "Let them." "Let them talk, let them stack. Let them." It opened my eyes, but I still wasn't quite there.'

'But then I was driving home, I said "let them" when someone cut me up — because maybe they're having a bad day. And then a friend sends me a text that I'm reading kind of passive aggressive, and I'm like, "let them".'

'I start to notice, "Whoa, there's a lot of things that really annoy me!" There's a lot of things that stress me out, and it's almost always other people and my opinion about the way things should go. And so I started to, like, use this as a lever.'

It was an eye-opening experience for her. 'The first thing that happened for me was that I was saying it so often, and it revealed to me how the world has been stressing me out.'

'And by saying "let them", it's almost like you're starting to put up these barriers between you and the long lines at the checkout, and the traffic, and the inconsiderate emails, and the fact that people





are annoying, or they worry you. Saying “let them” is a way to put up a wall so that all of that stuff out there doesn’t actually drain what’s in here, inside you. And then you start to feel a little bit more restored, because you’re stopping that from happening now, and you now have a little bit of

energy and mental space because you’ve protected yourself.

‘You can’t take control of your own life until you stop controlling everything else, you can’t have the time and energy to focus on what’s important to you, until you stop giving it to all these other things.

‘And it’s a very subtle thing that I’m saying, but I think “let them” reveals to you how casually and unconsciously we’ve

given our most precious resource away to the stress of modern life. The truth is, worrying about it isn’t going to actually change what’s happening. The only thing that changes what’s happening is you protecting the time and energy that you need to figure out what you want to do about it.’



# WHAT'S YOUR WORRY WEAK SPOT?

If you're ready to dial down the internal drama, take our test to identify the mindset keeping you on an emotional rollercoaster

Circle the answers that most closely apply to you, then add up the symbols. Read the section, or sections, you circled most, to find your key to calmer living

## 1 You feel most unsettled by what's going on

- In the world ..... ☐
- ♥ In the near future ..... ☐
- Around you ..... ☐
- ◆ In your head ..... ☐

## 2 You tend to get in your own way by

- Assuming it's not worth trying ..... ☐
- ♥ Setting your standards too high ..... ☐
- ◆ Procrastinating and over planning ..... ☐
- Assuming it's your fault when things are hard ..... ☐

## 3 You get a mood boost when you've made

- ♥ Changes ..... ☐
- ◆ People happy ..... ☐
- A difference ..... ☐
- Progress ..... ☐

## 4 At times you wonder whether you should

- Be more optimistic ..... ☐
- Lower your standards ..... ☐
- ◆ Give yourself a break ..... ☐
- ♥ Let things go more ..... ☐

## 5 You hope less drama will mean less

- ♥ Anxiety ..... ☐
- Uncertainty ..... ☐
- ◆ Overthinking ..... ☐
- Disruption ..... ☐

## 6 After a social event, you wonder

- ♥ Why you worried about it ..... ☐
- ◆ What everyone thought ..... ☐
- Who made the best impression ..... ☐
- Whether you really fit in ..... ☐

## 7 Dialling down the drama will help you

- ♥ Make the most of opportunities ..... ☐
- ◆ Rediscover your direction ..... ☐
- Get a better perspective ..... ☐
- Focus on what matters ..... ☐

## 8 When you make a big decision you

- ♥ Wonder if you've missed something ..... ☐
- ◆ Want everyone to approve ..... ☐
- Feel like no one can help ..... ☐
- Go into procrastination mode ..... ☐

## 9 When you're low you question your

- ◆ Choices ..... ☐
- ♥ Future ..... ☐
- Relationships ..... ☐
- Judgment ..... ☐

## 10 With less worry, it would be easier to

- Do the right thing ..... ☐
- Find the right path ..... ☐
- ♥ Make the right choices ..... ☐
- ◆ Say the right thing ..... ☐

Turn the page to find out what thinking habit is undermining you







# What keeps you on an emotional rollercoaster?

## IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ♥

### *Catastrophising*

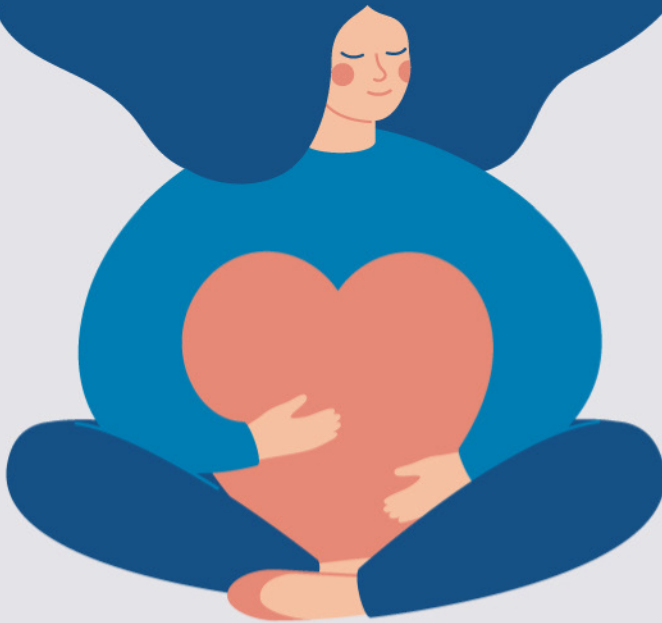
There's a fine line between being prepared and catastrophising, and it's easy to drift across it during times of anxiety or stress. You can also be vulnerable to getting stuck in a worst-case scenario mindset if you're a conscientious type, as catastrophising can masquerade as being mentally prepared. The downside is that catastrophising is rarely constructive and is always a drain on mental energy: you're spending precious emotional resources on something that hasn't happened and, in most cases, never will. When you mentally live in the future, you can miss what's going on in the here and now. Catastrophising can also become a habit, creating a stress response that we rely on to power us through the day, but it undermines resilience. The first step to breaking the cycle is identifying when you've lost perspective and a sure sign is suddenly feeling anxious or stressed. Try to resist the urge to get sucked into your thinking by distracting yourself — change your environment, get moving, do something engaging but relaxing. Your key to stepping off the emotional rollercoaster is to factor in moments of calm throughout the day. You might miss the drama, but you're creating the ideal conditions for more contentment, connections and creative thinking.

## IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ♦

### *Ruminating*

You might be convinced you'll learn something from mentally re-running negative past events, but as rumination lowers mood, it rarely leads to useful insights or even a realistic perspective. Rumination can also churn up emotions yet the irony is it might be what you turn to for reassurance during times of uncertainty. At the heart of a ruminating habit is often concern to keep everyone happy, and worry about being liked and approved of. You might also feel stuck as it's hard to generate motivation for change when your default thinking revolves around moments that make you cringe. Over time, rumination can chip away at confidence, if after every social interaction you have a nagging sense that you've said or done the wrong thing. Breaking a rumination habit takes effort but it starts by acknowledging there is nothing new to be learned from re-hashing past events. If a moment pops into your mind, either let it go or limit your thinking to what you learned from it. Using mindfulness can help resist a ruminating cycle — rather than following your thoughts, try grounding yourself and instead tuning into the sights, sounds, smells and sensations around you. Even brief moments of paying attention to the here and now can create calm and turn down the internal drama.





IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ●

## *Personalising*

The thinking style that creates emotional drama in your life is your tendency to personalise by attributing every negative event to your personal faults and failings. There is such a thing as taking too much responsibility, and personalisation often has its roots in perfectionism, and setting different standards for yourself than for other people. Although it's good to be open to learning and to have the courage to take responsibility when you've made a mistake, underlying this tendency can be a critical mindset. Comparing yourself to others can dial up internal drama and keep you stuck on an emotional rollercoaster by instilling the message that you're not good enough or you need to change. Personalisation can also stop you tuning into what's really going on, and the true dynamics and context that are playing out. Crucially, it can also make you detached from what other people are going through. Changing your relationship with yourself is the key to making life feel less drama-filled for you — accepting that you're only human, and you're doing your best. When you let go of the need to constantly critically assess your behaviour and actions, you can connect more with the world around you, helping you keep a sense of perspective and not get emotionally hijacked when times are tough.

IF YOU SCORED MAINLY ■

## *Overgeneralising*

Overgeneralisers often hyperfocus on isolated events and use them as evidence to confirm pattern or fear. But rather than soothing anxiety, overgeneralisation just feeds it, so everyday life can feel more disruptive and drama filled. An overgeneralising thinking habit can sneak up on you, often taking root when you're emotionally or physically vulnerable. Overgeneralisers often view the world through a negative lens, joining the dots between unrelated events to find patterns that confirm a sense that things never go right for them or that people let them down. Even on a seemingly trivial level, overgeneralisation can impact mood and undermine resilience so that life seems like a series of hurdles to be jumped over. It also can be undermining to relationships if one passing remark can make you question how much you have in common with someone or whether you like them. The end result is that you can end up feeling isolated and different from everyone else. As an antidote to jumping to conclusions or assuming something is true, ask yourself 'what's the evidence?' then challenge yourself to come up with at least three reasons that it might not be the case. Do it often enough and you could find that you naturally start to see events from a more rounded perspective.



# Transform lives – become an Ollie Coach!

Become an inspirational force  
in children's emotional wellbeing

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!

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

## *Comprehensive training*

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.

## *Learn with flexibility*

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 find out more.

## *Connect, grow, and succeed*

Courses are a combination of online and in person, offering the best of both worlds, with a limited number of trainees to maximise learning potential. Visit [ollieandhissuperpowers.com](http://ollieandhissuperpowers.com)



The Ollie therapeutic model has been successfully trialled with the NHS, demonstrating its commitment to improving children's emotional wellbeing across the UK.



## *Get in touch*

Get in touch to train to become an Ollie Coach, find a coach in your area, or book an event. Use the QR code below to visit the website, or email [info@ollieandhissuperpowers.com](mailto:info@ollieandhissuperpowers.com)

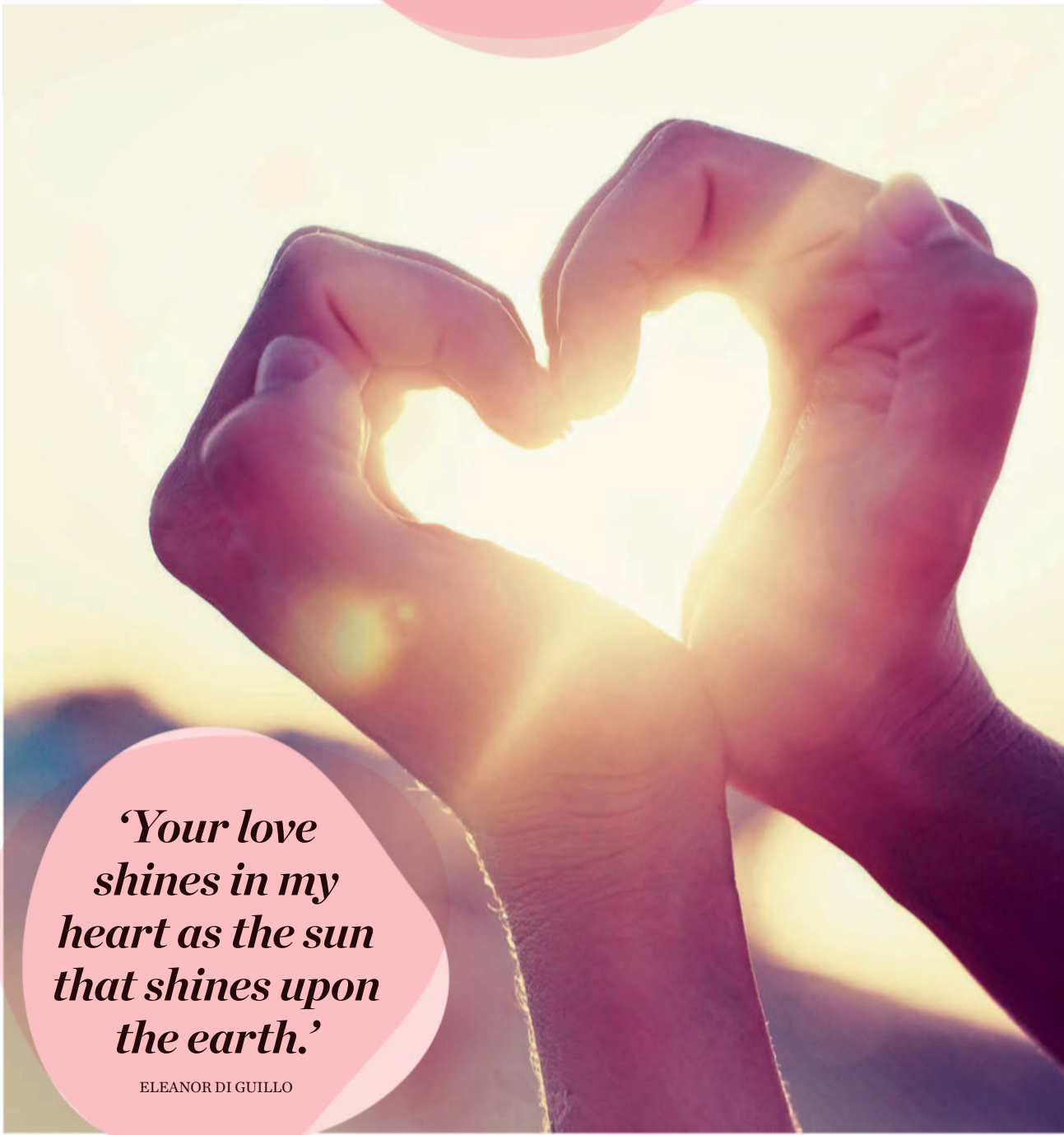




# I Heart

A small line-art illustration of two hands, one above the other, gently holding a heart. The heart is white with a pink outline, and the hands are simple line drawings.

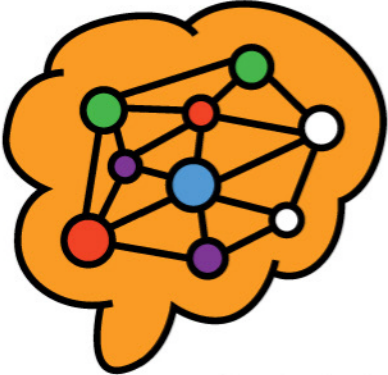



How to connect more meaningfully and enjoy loving relationships with our partners, children, parents and friends

A large photograph of two hands, one from each arm, reaching up and forming a heart shape. The hands are silhouetted against a bright, warm sunset or sunrise sky. The sun is visible through the heart shape, creating a lens flare effect. The overall color palette is warm, with pinks, oranges, and yellows.


***‘Your love  
shines in my  
heart as the sun  
that shines upon  
the earth.’***

ELEANOR DI GUILLO

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



# DIFFERENT : BRAIN SAME LOVE



As more and more people are coming to terms with a diagnosis of neurodivergence, it's time we understood what this means for dating...





Whether it's the virtually sexless relationship of Sheldon and Amy on *The Big Bang Theory*, the complete social awkwardness of the eponymous heroine in the recent crime drama *Prudence*, or some of the more challenging participants on *The Undateables*, if you believe what you see on TV and social media, you've probably been left thinking that having a love life is virtually impossible if you're neurodivergent.

But with nearly 40% of UK adults single (of whom 15% are neurodiverse, according to research), love is more diverse than ever. However, for those with autism, ADHD, or other neurodivergent traits, dating doesn't follow a one-size-fits-all formula.

Dr Selina Warlow, founder of The Nook Clinic and a neurodivergence expert, says the key to neurodivergent dating is understanding and embracing differences. 'Dating as a neurodivergent person — or with a neurodivergent partner — means stepping away from traditional norms and focusing on what works for you.

'It's about creating meaningful connections in ways that feel authentic and manageable.'

## Dating when you're neurodivergent

If you're neurodivergent and are finding it hard to focus on the whirlwind of modern dating, or feel like traditional approaches don't quite fit, you're not alone. Dr Warlow says: 'The key to navigating dating as a neurodiverse person is embracing your authentic self. When you're open about your needs and preferences, you're far more likely to find a connection that works for both of you.' She says

### ● Don't feel the need to mask

It's okay to ask for what you need. If you prefer structured plans over spontaneity, or you need time to process emotions, let your date know. Sharing this openly helps set realistic expectations and allows both of you to enjoy the experience without unnecessary stress.

### ● Lead with your interests

Passionate interests can be a great way to connect. Whether it's art, history, or a niche hobby, suggesting a date around something you genuinely enjoy can make the experience more relaxed and engaging for both of you.

### ● Pick venues that work for you

If crowded bars or loud restaurants feel

## Expert advice



*Dr Selina Warlow is a clinical psychologist and the founder of The Nook Clinic. She is an expert in neurodivergence and has more than 10 years' experience working in mental health services, working in both the NHS and The Priory. [thenookclinic.co.uk](http://thenookclinic.co.uk)*

overwhelming, choose environments where you feel comfortable and can focus on the person you're with. Quiet cafés, a nature walk, or activity-based outings like visiting a museum or playing board games can make connecting easier and more enjoyable.

## Dating a neurodivergent partner

Dating someone who is neurodivergent can be a deeply rewarding experience, but it may also require learning and adapting. 'Dating someone who is neurodivergent is about celebrating their differences, not seeing them as obstacles. The best relationships are built on mutual understanding and respect,' says Dr Warlow. Here are her tips:

### ● Be curious, not assumptive

Neurodivergent people may process emotions or communicate differently, so take time to understand their unique needs. Asking thoughtful questions can go a long way in building connections.

### ● Don't take it personally

A need for space, a lack of eye contact, or a direct way of speaking isn't a reflection of disinterest - it's just a different way of communicating.

### ● Be flexible

Plans may need to adapt depending on sensory or emotional needs. Being open and accommodating shows respect and care.

### ● Celebrate their strengths

Neurodivergent partners often bring creativity, deep focus, and unique perspectives to relationships, which can make for a rich and fulfilling dynamic.

## What if we're both neurodivergent?

When both partners are neurodivergent, shared understanding can create a strong foundation, but differences in how each person experiences neurodivergence can still arise. One of you may prefer structure, while the other thrives on spontaneity; or you might have differing sensory needs. The key is open communication and finding creative ways to balance these differences.

Dr Warlow explains: 'Neurodivergent relationships often thrive when both partners embrace their unique strengths and work together to create a dynamic that supports each other's needs. It's about celebrating individuality while building connections.'



## Jo's story

**JO DONNELLY LIVES IN BRIGHTON, AND HAS ADHD**

'When I moved to Brighton nine years ago, I entered the weird and (rarely) wonderful world of dating. At the time I was undiagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and had no idea that some of the traits I possessed were linked to neurodiversity.

Apart from the usual nerves of meeting new people, my mind would race in all directions which would involve imagining every possible scenario that may occur (catastrophising), which could lead to increased anxiety and feeling exhausted before arriving for the date, (if I didn't talk myself out of it first!) This contributes to my struggle of leaving on time — time blindness is real! So lateness has definitely been an issue...

I have often channelled anxiety or nerves by talking way more than intended. I'm also prone to going off tangent multiple times. I didn't realise that some of the ways I communicated were classic ADHD. Showing understanding by recounting a story of my own which may come across as not connecting to their experience is one good example. It was never mentioned but I was aware when thinking back on it — did I dominate, get carried away, or overshare before I was ready?

My more positive traits that worked well when dating are being open, fun, empathetic (always being told I was a good listener) and sensitive. Also funny, self-deprecating and entertaining. Some dates were amazingly engaging and enjoyable.

However, I also had a lack of confidence and



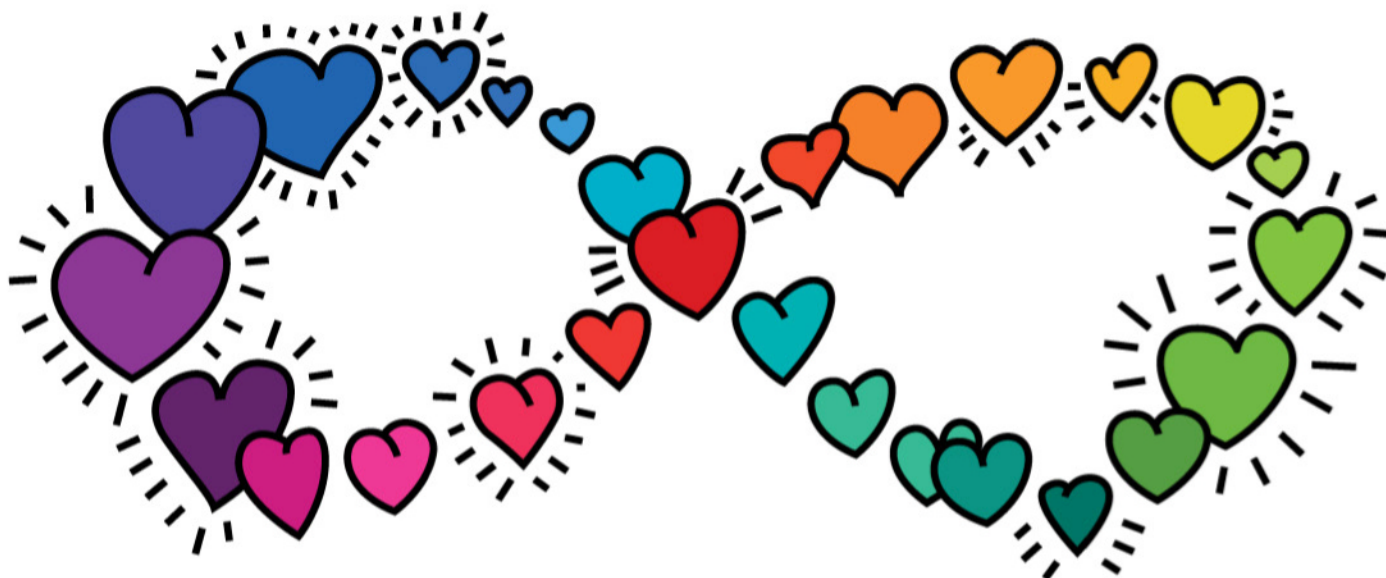
*"I didn't realise it was a lack of dopamine that made me want to thrill seek"*

what I was unaware was rejection sensitivity dysphoria (RSD) — a crushing hypersensitivity to perceived rejection. This meant that the idea of them not liking me would feel unbearable and blurred or blocked the most important thing: whether *I* actually liked *them* and felt they were for me. So, if I actually did take a fancy to someone who didn't feel the same way, it had a hugely detrimental effect.

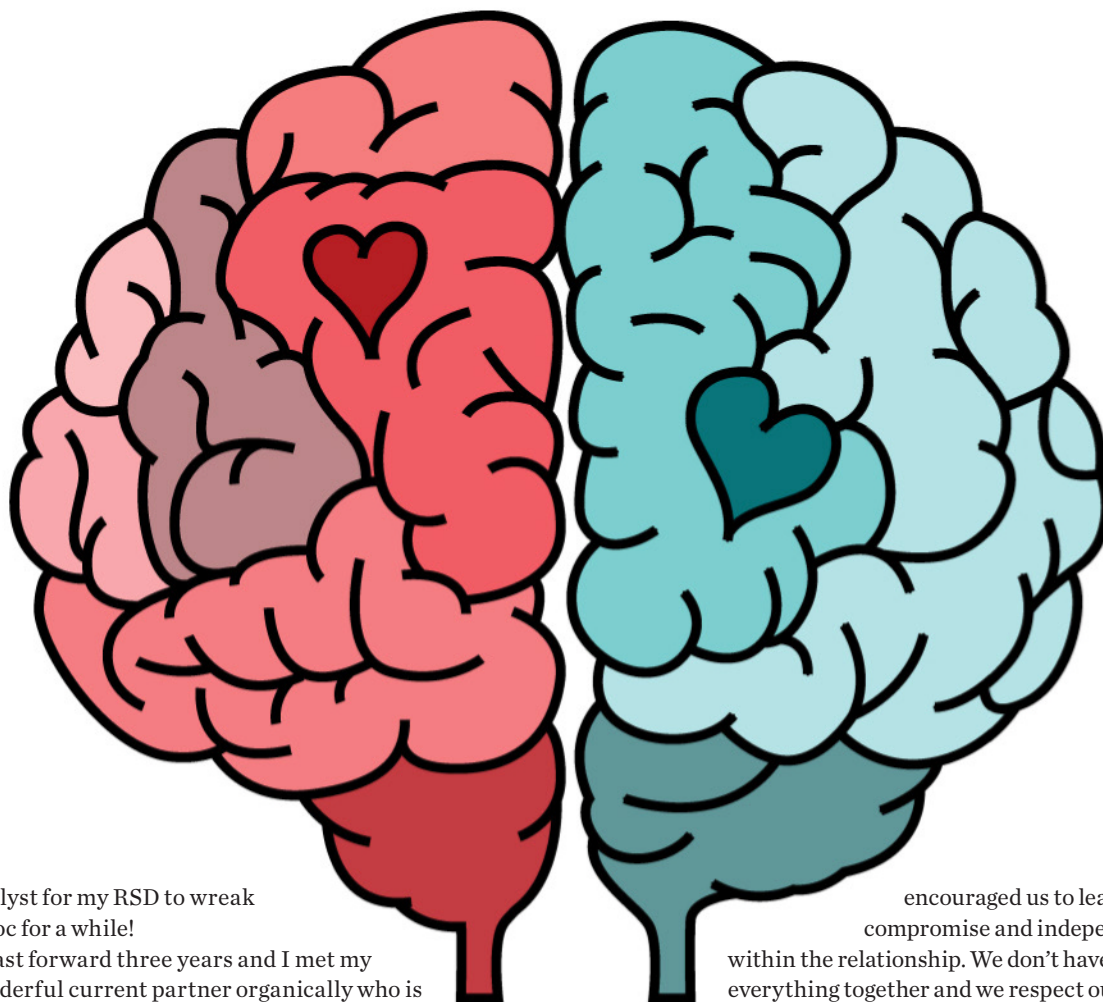
That's without the dreaded 'ghosting'. The first time that ever happened to me I was devastated. It gave my never-resting brain prime material to painstakingly go over every detail of what occurred, wondering what it was that I must have done to be abandoned without an explanation. Eventually it would sink in that perhaps I didn't even like them or see a future of any kind, and my hyperfocus was based on the rejection, fuelling the negative self talk and inner downward spiraling.

What I didn't realise was it was a lack of dopamine that made me want to thrill seek, or act impulsively for some sweet, sweet stimulation. This could mean drinking too much, ending up going home with them or staying up partying — whether I truly wanted to or not. At the time I told myself it was being spontaneous, which sometimes it was, but on reflection, a lot of it was down to looking for a dopamine hit in the moment and not thinking things through.

What was apparent, was that this kind of behaviour (matched and often encouraged by my dates at the time) was then sometimes looked down upon or judged by them. 'I'm not looking for a party girl' was a common piece of highly useful feedback. This highlighted the sexism and hypocrisy in the dating world: being labelled that way felt really shaming, judgmental and totally inaccurate. It was a real confidence crusher, and a







catalyst for my RSD to wreak havoc for a while!

Fast forward three years and I met my wonderful current partner organically who is (probably) undiagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). We've worked together to create some balance and more harmony despite some significant differences. It is of course a work-in-progress, as is life! A lot of the solutions were born from some ferocious clashes, or 'rupture and repair', as they say. For example: He is concise and says what he means. I can verbally go around the world twice, potentially forget my original point or get distracted mid-sentence and not finish what I was saying. In the past I've been told that I can be slightly annoying and impossible to follow, but a gentle redirection from him is usually enough to get me back on track.

For me it is easy to mistake his quietness for being pissed off or annoyed — I blame the RSD. However, open conversations have led to deeper trust and I finally believe that there isn't always an issue for me to uncover by digging and digging (which can sometimes create a massive hole).

We sometimes need different things: I can crave spontaneity and stimulation; he needs time to process changes to plans and likes a level of predictability. I love socialising with a range of mates, meeting new people and raving; he prefers to hang out with a smaller circle and to go to gigs rather than hot, sweaty, loud clubs. This has

encouraged us to learn the art of compromise and independence within the relationship. We don't have to do everything together and we respect our differences. We enjoy our shared interests together, and don't need to drag the other somewhere that makes them uncomfortable or uninterested.

I bring out a more spontaneous side to him and he grounds me, always there acting as a sturdy, reassuring rock in the many storms of existence. And, importantly, we laugh every day: a sense of humour is something we share closely and bond over.'

## JO'S DATING TIPS:

**Own your stuff** Try to shed the shame and explain that sometimes your traits are going to come out. A little understanding goes a long way. It's wise and effective to be accountable, but you don't need to feel ashamed or embarrassed for being who you are.

**Compromise is so key!** Whether you are both neurodivergent or just one of you is, learning to respect each other's ways of being and working together will help you ensure needs are met. Discussing what can and can't be negotiated helps too.

**Humour** It's ok to laugh at each other's ways if the serious issues have been ironed out and there's no underlying unsaid truths. Having a giggle is a great way to bond over differences!



*Coming up for air*

# Keep taking steps among sand dunes

Actions do not need to be accompanied by a fanfare to be meaningful, writes Caro Giles

“ I have noticed blossom in the hedgerows when I drive my youngest daughter to school, the roadsides

peppered with stars formed from tiny petals. As I continue my ongoing dance between the sea and the city, the trees dotting streets lined with tenement flats are also blooming. Pink confetti will soon fall into my hair and onto the pavements I tread again and again until they almost begin to feel like home.

The early months of this year have been defined by two things for me: finishing writing my second book and contemplating a different kind of life for my family. Both seem almost impossible on paper, amongst the challenges of

single parenting four children with varying complicated needs in the middle of nowhere. There have been many mornings, accompanied only by candles and my small grey cat, when I have wanted to hide under my duvet instead of get up and work, hoping that the book would magically write itself.

Several moments when I have wondered if I could settle for a quieter, simpler type of life. But it has only been the act of sitting at the little desk in the corner of my bedroom and tapping words onto the screen that has created another book. And it is wishful thinking to hope that my personality might suddenly evolve from curious and impulsive to resigned and stoic, and that I would be willing to settle for a clipped-wing kind of life.

I found a Carl Jung quote today:

‘Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.’

It made me think about the concept of fate, and how much control we have over our own destiny. For at least the last ten years my life has existed within the confines of a series of systems that have felt rigid, stifling and often unhelpful. I have often been frustrated by my inability to leave the house whenever I want, and by how far I am from the bustle of culture and other people.

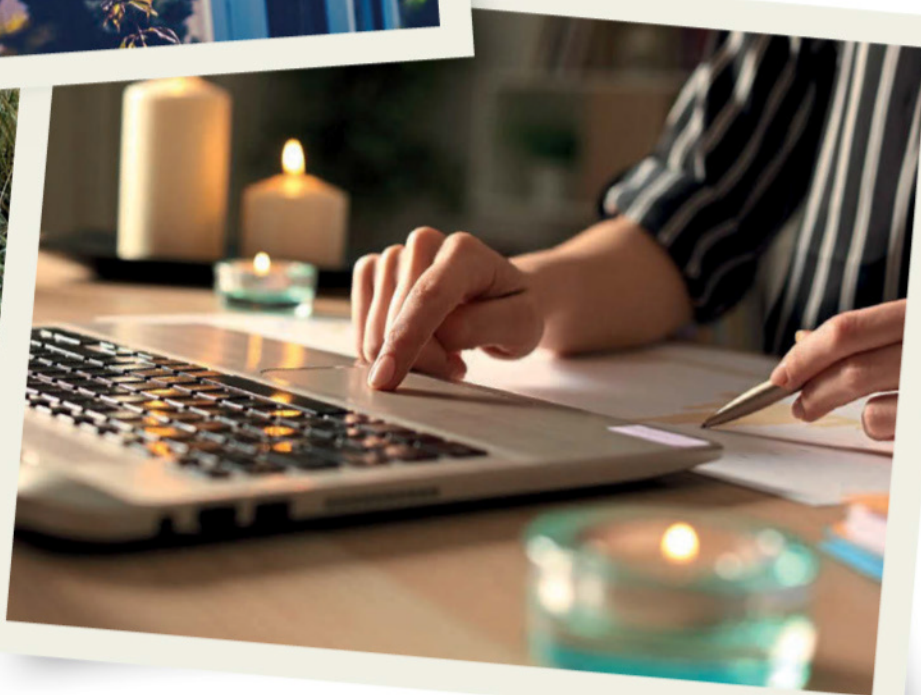
I have been forced to attend endless meetings that make me feel as if my time is rarely my own. And I am living with choices I made years ago, that continue to echo and thump in my ears, reminding me that all of our actions have consequences.

So it has been important to try to seize





*“Dreams are the seeds we plant early on, as we create fertile ground in which they can germinate and take root”*



some control back for myself and grab hold of the key to my own destiny. That isn't to say I am not a big believer in the magical power of dreaming: on the days when my world has felt small and lonely, it has been the simple action of allowing my mind to wonder and wander that has saved me. Dreams are the seeds we plant early on, as we create a fertile ground in which they can germinate and take root.

Windswept walks along beaches, conversations with friends, early morning voicenotes — all of these contribute to the nurturing of a tiny seed. The hard work begins when hopeful shoots emerge from the soil. The shoots are precious and fragile at this point in the process, require regular attention and commitment. If we leave them to their own devices,

there is a strong chance that they will **with**er and die. Like unwritten words on a page, they are simply an empty promise, a shadow of something that could have been beautiful.

That is how I feel about my desire to change my own life, build a bigger world for my family. I can talk about making changes, lie in bed at night and scroll my phone, searching for clues to a different existence, or I can make the unconscious conscious. Holding the lives and emotions of four sweet daughters can feel overwhelming, but I think I am able to tame my wildness when I need to. I can place one foot in front of the other, keep taking steps along the sand dunes, or through the city, until I reach where I

**need to be.** Despite having written often about my love of grand gestures, I am learning that there is value and strength in quiet moments, in actions that are not accompanied by a fanfare. Being bold does not always require us to be loud, but if we want to make changes in our lives, try new things, find out what we are really capable of, we do need to take action.

So while I do believe in a tiny element of fate, in a sprinkling of magic in our lives, and in the power of the passing of time, I think Carl Jung is probably right. In order to really make things happen we have to move beyond the dreams and into our own brave reality.

# RAW WRITING

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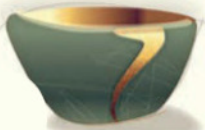
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# Body



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*“If you go to a place on anything but your own feet you are taken there too fast, and miss a thousand delicate joys that were waiting for you by the wayside.”*

ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

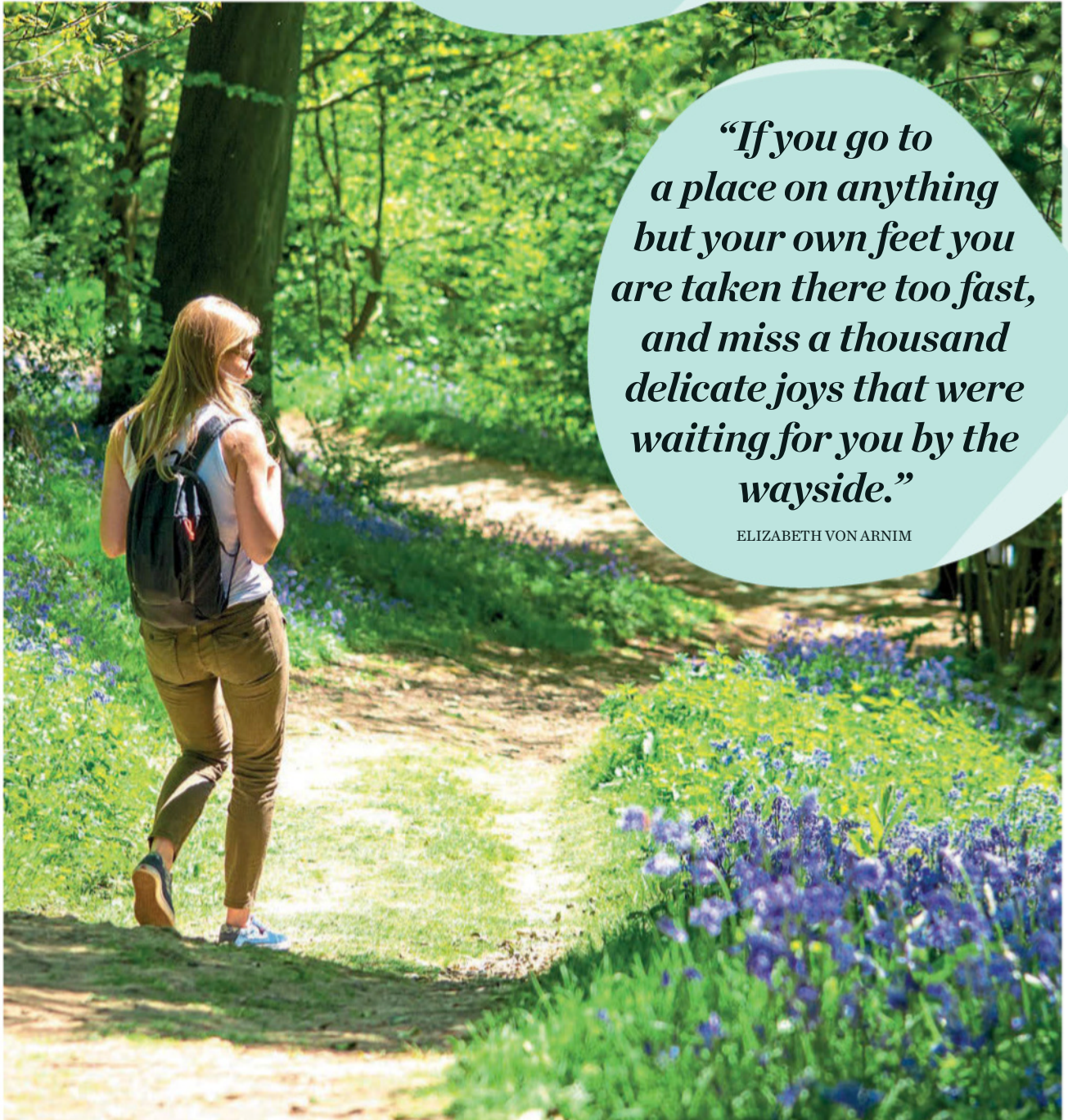


IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



# MINDFUL WELLBEING



Ali Roff Farrar shares expert advice, ideas, stats and the newest research on all things wellbeing, including 5 techniques to get to sleep faster, the verdict on mouth-taping, and flexibility hacks

## Sick of counting sheep?

Discover five simple exercises from mindset specialist and clinical hypnotherapist Aaron Surtees to calm your mind and help you get to sleep quicker...

**1** The progressive relaxation countdown: Engage in progressive muscle relaxation combined with a countdown technique. Start at 10, and with each deep breath, relax a different part of your body. Imagine tension melting away, muscle by muscle, fibre by fibre. By the time you reach 1, your body will be deeply relaxed, ready for sleep.

**2** The floating feather visualisation: Close your eyes and imagine a soft feather floating down through the air, drifting slowly and gently. Sync your breathing with the feather's movements — inhale as it lifts slightly, exhale as it drifts downward. This mimics a hypnotic induction and lulls your mind into a relaxed, sleepy state.

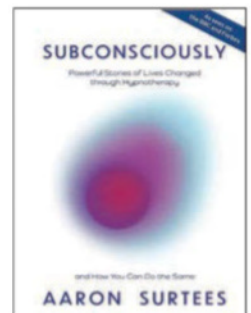
**3** Self-hypnosis sleep cue: Choose the words 'deep sleep' as your nightly sleep affirmation words. Silently repeat the words in your mind while focusing on the sensation of your body sinking into the mattress. Over time, your brain

will associate this phrase with sleep, reinforcing a conditioned response similar to a hypnotic trigger.

**4** The safe place journey: Imagine yourself in your ideal sleep sanctuary — a peaceful beach, a cosy cabin, or a floating cloud. Engage all your senses: feel the warmth, hear the sounds, smell the air. This visualisation technique shifts your brain into theta waves, associated with deep relaxation and hypnosis.

**5** Breath-paced sleep induction: Use 4-7-8 breathing, a technique often incorporated into hypnotic inductions. Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, and exhale slowly for 8 seconds. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system, slowing your heart rate and guiding you into a calm, drowsy state.

**Subconsciously: Powerful Stories of Lives Changed through Hypnotherapy and How You Can Do the Same by Aaron Surtees is on sale now (£9.99).**



## 81% of women

**say a close circle of friends is crucial to happiness in their life\*, and this could be equally as important for your health too, as other research found a healthy social life could protect from dementia, increasing lifespan by five years!\*\***





## Creamy Mango & Passion Fruit

*Mangoes are rich in the antioxidant vitamins C, A and E, which reduce inflammation by neutralising free radicals. In addition, this dessert bumps up your intake of bone-friendly calcium.*

SERVES: 4

PREPARATION TIME: 10 MINUTES

### Ingredients

- 1 large mango, peeled, stoned and cut into chunks
- 750ml (1¼ pints) fat-free natural yogurt
- 1–2 tablespoons agave nectar, to taste

- 1 vanilla pod, split in half lengthways
- 4 passion fruit, halved
- thin biscuits, to serve (optional)

### Method

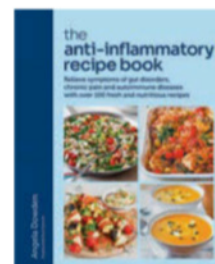
- 1 Place the mango in a food processor or blender and blend to a purée.
- 2 Put the yogurt and agave nectar, according to taste, in a large bowl, scrape in the seeds from the vanilla pod and beat together. Gently fold in the mango purée and spoon into tall glasses or glass serving dishes. Scoop the seeds from the passion fruit and spoon over the mango yogurt. Serve immediately with thin biscuits, if liked.

### For blackcurrant & almond yogurt

Purée 250 g (8 oz) blackcurrants as above and fold into the yogurt with the agave nectar, according to taste, and 1 teaspoon almond essence.

Spoon into tall, glass serving dishes and scatter with toasted almonds, to serve.

**The Anti-Inflammatory Recipe Book** by Angela Dowden is published by Hamlyn, priced £18.99. Photography by William Shaw



## What's the deal with... mouth taping?

You may have heard influencers talking about the benefits of mouth-taping at night — but what on earth is it, and is it worth doing — or a waste of breath? In this case, a study published in the American Journal of Otolaryngology (commonly known as study of ear nose and throat) leans towards the latter. The study\* pulled together a number of papers' findings to conclude that they did find improvements for people who suffer from obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), and snoring improved for patients who did not suffer from OSA when it was combined with other measures. However, the study groups were small, and they found no benefits for asthma. Improvements in jawline aesthetics have also not been scientifically proven. So, while there are anecdotal experiences online of its 'life changing benefits', and it is believed that nasal breathing is better for our health since mouth breathing increases surface dehydration linked to gum inflammation\*\*/\*\*\*, there isn't much evidence to back up mouth-taping itself. If anything, you could even disrupt your sleep more if you find it physically uncomfortable, or the feeling makes you anxious. Specialist tapes are available, but even these can cause discomfort on the skin, especially in the sensitive lip area (and pulling out all those tiny hairs afterwards!). If you *do* decide to give it a go, tape manufacturers advise never to use it if you are unwell with a cold, or an ear or sinus infection; if you have issues with breathing or with your heart or lungs; a BMI over 35; or if you've had alcohol or sedatives. After looking at that list, it's one we're giving a miss...



## The happiness paradox

Have you ever felt stuck trying to make yourself happier, only to end up feeling less happy? This phenomenon is well known and has a name — the 'happiness paradox', yet it's not been understood until now exactly what causes it. New research has found that trying to be happy causes a mental exhaustion which drains our ability to use self-control and willpower. The effort of chasing happiness causes us to give in easier to temptation and depletes our energy levels to do the day-to-day things that lead to real happiness. Unless you're Gretchen Rubin, that is!







\* AMERICAN JOURNAL OF OTOLARYNGOLOGY, VOLUME 46, ISSUE 1, 2025  
 \*\* BRAZILIAN ORAL RESEARCH, (2017)  
 \*\*\* BRAZILIAN JOURNAL OF OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGY (2010)



Move More Burgundy Leggings, £40,  
 Perky Peach, [perkypeach.com](http://perkypeach.com)

## Butter or oil?

A new study\*\*\*\* which looked at over 200,000 people's diet and health over 30 years has found a conclusive outcome when it comes to the choice between butter and oil for health. The researchers found that those who ate the most butter, spread or margarine had a 15% higher risk of dying than those who ate the least butter and spread products. In contrast, those who ate the most plant-based oils, especially soybean, canola, and olive oil, had a 16% lower risk of death than those who ate the least plant oils. A key difference between butter and oil is the types of fatty acids they contain:



butter is rich in saturated fatty acids, while plant-based oils have more unsaturated fatty acids. They took the study further to test what would happen if you started by

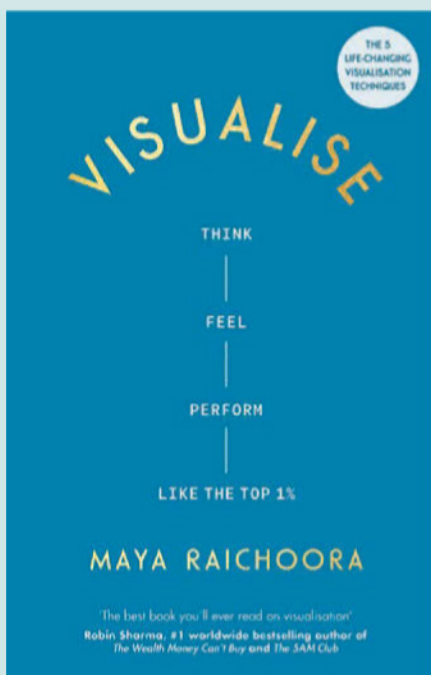
swapping just a tablespoon of your usual daily butter intake with plant oils, and found that doing so could decrease risk of associated death by a whopping 17%!

\*\*\*\* JAMA INTERNAL MEDICINE, 2025

# Activate!

## See yourself succeed

Dubbed as 'the best book on visualisation you'll ever read', it certainly delivers an enticing promise for anyone who wants to understand the powerful neuroscience behind visualising their goals and breaking free from the habits and beliefs that hold us back. Delivering five easy-to-use techniques as well as a 30-day challenge, author Maya Raichoor focuses on helping her readers build 'mental fitness', and seeing as she is an award-winning entrepreneur, founder and CEO, as well as Nike's first ever Global Mental Fitness and Visualisation Trainer, working with global brands such as Gymshark, Asics, Amex and Lego — at just 27 — it seems her techniques just might work!



**Visualise: Think, Feel, Perform Like the Top 1%,**  
By Maya Raichoor (Rider, £16.99)



## Cold-water therapy

A recent study\* found cold water could be a gamechanger for menopausal symptoms — with women who swim regularly in cold water reporting a significant improvement in anxiety (46.9%), mood swings (34.5%), low mood (31.1%) and hot flushes (30.3%), in fact, 63.3% of the participants in the study swam specifically to relieve their symptoms.

\*POST REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, 2024

## Rosy glow

Rosalique's 3 in 1 Anti-Redness Miracle Formula combats rosacea with SPF50 to protect sensitive skin whilst providing a green tint to balance skintone, alongside redness-reducing clinically proven ingredients Bisabolol, Zeolite, Provitamin B5, Urea and Shea Butter.

**Rosalique 3 in 1 Anti-Redness Miracle Formula SPF50,**  
£29.99, Amazon



*"Success is getting what you want. Happiness is wanting what you get."*

DALE CARNEGIE





Embrace spring with this cheerful Wild Flowers Stainless Steel Bottle 500ml £19.95, Rex London, [rexlondon.com](http://rexlondon.com)



## Mind-bending!

Struggle to touch your toes? A new study\*\* looking into how much we need to stretch to actually increase flexibility found that holding a stretch for around four minutes in one muscle or body area has an immediate improvement (hold any longer and it doesn't appear to have increased benefits). But, for permanent improvements in flexibility, researchers found we need to stretch for longer — around 10 minutes per week (per muscle area) for the best improvements, but these 10 minutes need not be in one go. And how 'hard' do we need to stretch, in order for it to work? The researchers found it doesn't matter: stretching to the point of pain and under the point of discomfort both improve flexibility equally.



\*\*SPORTSMED (2024)



# Stress-buster

# SKINCARE

WORDS: LARA OWEN

Experts reveal how to turn your skincare routine into self-care, using ancient beauty rituals...

**T**aking off your make-up or cleansing your face often feels like the last thing you want to do after a long day. But chiselling out time to wash off the day and feed your skin with some much-needed nutrients is a great way to kick off your bedtime routine right — and sneak in some wind-down benefits at the same time. So, here skincare and traditional Chinese medicine experts reveal how you can turn your boring, bog-standard beauty routine into a daily self-care ritual.

## Don't make it a chore...

While it may sound overindulgent, not rushing through your skincare is integral for the health and overall look of your skin.

'In recent years, the world of skincare has witnessed a rise in natural and holistic remedies, with Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) leading the way,' explains Charlotte Yau, founder of Muihood. 'In TCM, the focus is not just on treating the surface of the skin, but on addressing the root causes of issues, which are often linked to internal imbalances such as poor digestion, stress, or hormonal changes,' she explains. 'The skin is viewed as a reflection of inner health, which is why Chinese medicine skincare takes a holistic approach to achieving

healthy, dewy skin. As such, it is important to create a ritual out of your self-care routine and use these few moments in the day as an opportunity to centre yourself and release stagnant energy (Qi) in the body.'

Yau recommends starting to focus on your breathing before commencing with any products. 'Start by being fully present,' she says, 'then use gentle, intentional movements when applying skincare, visualising the movement of Qi and lymphatic flow. You could also incorporate TCM-inspired rituals like gua sha or facial acupressure to create a sense of relaxation and connection with your body.'

## The impact of scents and textures on mental wellbeing

Fragrance and texture aren't just aesthetic choices; they directly impact mood and mental wellbeing. 'Aromatherapy has long been an essential part of emotional wellness,' says Spa Ceylon's skincare and beauty director, Shenuka Fernando. 'Calming wonder herbs like lavender, ylang-ylang and sandalwood help soothe the mind, while uplifting citrus notes energise the senses.' Certain smells can help stimulate circulation, such as invigorating scents like citrus and ginger.

Meanwhile, textures also play a vital role, as





rich, silky balms provide a grounding sensation, whereas light, gel-like formulas refresh and stimulate the senses (meaning these are best reserved for the mornings).

## How skincare can improve sleep

If sleep is the ultimate luxury, then skincare can be a crucial part of the wind-down process. ‘Using skincare infused with calming essential oils and ingredients, such as jasmine and lotus, signals the brain that it’s time to unwind,’ says Fernando. Using hydrating facial serums can help relax facial tension before bed.

Alternatively, if you don’t want to add another product to your routine, warm compresses infused with herbal teas can also release tension. ‘This helps relax facial muscles and prepare the skin for hydration,’ Yau explains. ‘Acupressure on Yintang (between the brows) and Anmian (behind the ear) can also promote deep rest.’

## Techniques to relieve stress

It’s no secret that ancient beauty practices are key to holistic wellness, and Fernando is a firm believer in Ayurvedic techniques like Abhyanga (self-massage). ‘Using warm, herbal-infused oils like virgin coconut helps release tension, improve circulation, and restore energy flow,’ she says.

A more commonly known technique is using a gua sha — a TCM tool that has become increasingly popular for good reason. ‘By gently gliding the stone across the skin, gua sha relieves muscle tension, enhances blood flow, and promotes a lifted, toned appearance,’ says Yau. More than just skincare, it serves as a stress-relief tool, stimulating key acupressure points that help rebalance the body and reduce stress.

Cold therapy is another calming beauty technique you can incorporate.

‘Using cooling tools like cryo sticks or chilled jade rollers can reduce inflammation and soothe the skin while also having a calming effect on the nervous system,’ explains Ultrasun’s Abi Cleeve, founder of SkinSense. ‘It’s an instant way to de-puff and refresh both skin and mind.’

## Simplify your skincare

However, before you add in too many new steps, be advised: a complicated skincare routine can feel overwhelming, and diminish its self-care potential. ‘By curating a minimalist routine with high-quality, multi-functional products, you create a moment of ease rather than obligation,’ says Fernando.

‘A good skincare routine doesn’t need to take more than five to seven minutes,’ says medical



director of Cosmedics Skin Clinics, Dr Ross Perry. ‘A gentle cleanser, moisturiser, and SPF during the day, along with a retinol or vitamin C serum at night, are enough.’ Simplifying your routine also allows for more presence, making the routine feel restorative rather than rushed. But simplicity doesn’t mean sacrificing efficacy. ‘Choosing products with smart, multi-benefit ingredients — like peptides for hydration and firming, or botanical extracts for soothing — ensures you get maximum results with minimal effort, making your routine both effective and enjoyable,’ says nurse and founder of Essence Wellness, Gemma Hornsby-Lofthouse.

## How to turn at-home skincare into a luxury experience

Luxury isn’t all about price tags and heading to a spa for a one-off treatment. ‘Small indulgences can elevate a simple routine into a spa-like escape,’





says Fernando. Warm towels, self-massage techniques or using a facial roller with an aromatic serum can create a sense of opulence. While a spa facial may feel like the height of luxury skincare, you can emulate their techniques at home. 'Face yoga is a powerful ritual that tones facial muscles, smooths wrinkles, and awakens your inner glow,' says Ayurvedic practitioner and co-founder of Magical Medicine, Maria Goutine. 'It boosts blood circulation, delivering fresh oxygen and nutrients to nourish your skin and calm the mind.'

While carving out time to elevate your skincare routine may sound over-the-top, embracing mindful skincare isn't about indulgence but improving your overall wellbeing. And employing elements like lymphatic drainage and breathing techniques can help relieve stress and reconnect with your body's natural rhythm.

After all, beauty comes from within.

**"Small indulgences can elevate a routine into a spa-like escape"**



**Emma Hardie Moringa Cleansing Balm with Dual Action Cleansing Cloth, £28**



**Skinsense Ceramide24 Retinal Silk Night Serum, £46**



**By Beauty Bay Jade Duo, £16.50 (was £22)**



**Mauli Rituals Kansa Acupressure Tool & Serum Set, £30**



**Spa Ceylon Sal & Saffron – Intense Hydrating Night Treatment Facial Serum 50ml, £31.53 (was £48.50)**



**Dr Harris Naturals Ginger and Lemon Moisture Cream 50ml, £21**



**Aromatherapy Associates Intensive Rich Cream 50ml, £57**



# *Quick, easy and healthy* *Indian suppers*

If, like us, you're trying to cut down on both ultra-processed food and the takeaways, it can be hard to find simple, tasty Indian meals. Chef and author Anjula Devi shares her favourite one-pan dishes, using minimal steps and ready in just 15 minutes!

'For many years, I have followed the traditional way of cooking Indian food, but I have continually created different flavour combinations and experimented with cooking methods,' writes Anjula Devi in her new book, *15-Minute Indian*. 'These have been

designed to make Indian food more accessible and less time-consuming, without taking away the delicious aromas and flavours from our cuisine.' The trick to only needing one pot, and not a lot of time, is to cut ingredients small and cook on the hob with a lid.





## Beetroot with Indian five spice

PREP TIME: 4 minutes

SERVES: 4

COOKING TIME: 8 minutes

### Ingredients:

- 500g shop-bought cooked beetroot
- 1 hot bird's eye chilli
- Large handful of fresh mint, plus extra to garnish
- 2tbsp coconut oil
- ½tsp fenugreek seeds
- ½tsp brown mustard seeds
- ½tsp cumin seeds
- ½tsp nigella seeds
- 1tsp fennel seeds
- 1tsp garlic paste
- 2tsp ginger paste
- ½tsp ground turmeric
- Chilli powder, to taste
- 2tsp jaggery (or soft brown sugar)
- 1tbsp coconut cream
- Fine sea salt, to taste
- Juice of 1 small lime

### Method:

- 1 Dice the beetroot.
- 2 Pierce several holes in the bird's eye chilli, using a cocktail stick (or toothpick).
- 3 Pick the fresh mint leaves from the stems and set aside.
- 4 Place a wok on a medium heat, then add the following ingredients in this order: coconut oil, fenugreek seeds, brown mustard seeds, cumin seeds, nigella seeds, fennel seeds, garlic paste, ginger paste, bird's eye chilli, beetroot, turmeric, chilli powder, jaggery, coconut cream and salt to taste. Stir-fry for eight minutes, tossing occasionally.
- 5 Switch off the heat, then add the fresh mint and lime juice. Stir well, then place a lid on the wok and allow to sit for two minutes. Scatter over some more fresh mint leaves and enjoy.



## Eggy masala bread

PREP TIME: 2 minutes

SERVES: 4

COOKING TIME: 8 minutes

### Ingredients:

- 2tbsp whole milk
- 1tbsp tomato paste
- 2tsp ginger paste
- 1tsp white wine vinegar
- 2tsp chilli oil
- 1tsp ground cumin
- 1tsp ground coriander
- Fine sea salt, to taste

- 8 eggs
- Oil or ghee, for frying
- 8 slices of brown bread

### To serve:

- Roasted cherry tomatoes, roughly chopped fresh coriander

### Method:

**1** Add the following ingredients to a mixing bowl: milk, tomato paste, ginger paste, vinegar, chilli oil, ground cumin and coriander, and salt to taste. Mix everything together well.

**2** Crack the eggs into the bowl and whisk thoroughly.

**3** Preheat a large frying pan on a low heat, then brush the pan with a little oil or ghee.

**4** Dip two pieces of bread into the bowl and soak them in the egg mixture, then place them both in the pan.

**5** Fry for one minute, then flip over and fry for a further one minute until the bread is golden brown all over.

**6** Repeat to soak and cook the remaining bread slices and enjoy!





## Hariyali monkfish

PREP TIME: 3 minutes

SERVES: 4

COOKING TIME:

7 minutes

### Ingredients:

- 6 monkfish fillets
- 1tbsp coconut oil
- For the marinade:
- 1tsp ginger paste
- 1tsp garlic paste
- 1tsp honey
- 1tbsp coconut oil
- Handful of fresh coriander
- Handful of fresh basil
- Handful of fresh dill
- Handful of fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 2tsp garlic paste
- 1tsp cumin seeds
- 2tsp coriander seeds
- 1tsp fennel seeds
- 1 green chilli, or to taste
- Juice of 1 small lime
- Fine sea salt, to taste

### Method:

- 1 Cut the fish into bite-sized chunks and place on absorbent kitchen paper.
- 2 Put all the marinade ingredients into a blender and blitz until smooth and creamy.
- 3 Pour the marinade over the monkfish and mix well.
- 4 Place a wok on a high heat until smoking hot, then reduce the heat to medium and add the coconut oil.
- 5 Now add the marinated fish and stir-fry for five to seven minutes, or until the fish is cooked through, tossing occasionally.
- 6 Switch off the heat, garnish with fresh coriander and dill and enjoy.



15 Minute Indian by  
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Regeher. Available now

# A MORE MINDFUL MENOPAUSE?

Self-care could offer a more natural route to combatting some of those annoying symptoms, say the experts

**T**he idea of sitting on a mountain doing yoga to take care of yourself when you're experiencing menopause symptoms is a very tempting one, isn't it. Those lovely breezes to cool your flushed skin, the calming sound of leaves rustling, maybe a nice lake nearby to go and jump in to when you're finished; yes, it all sounds rather lovely. But for most of us, the reality is rather different.

A new survey of 1,000 women from Kalms Herbal Remedies has revealed the significant toll of fluctuating hormones on peri- and menopausal women's mental health, with almost three quarters reporting poor emotional well-being in the past year.

- One in four (25%) experience stress and anxiety daily, with over a third (38%) saying these struggles have strained their relationships

- 70% of women rarely get more than six hours of uninterrupted sleep a night, and for more than two-thirds (68%) this lack of rest worsens stress and anxiety, creating a cycle that's hard to break

- Over half (58%) frequently feel burnt out, as if they have little left to give, physically or emotionally

- 62% feel moments of sadness and hopelessness, highlighting the need for adequate support

'During perimenopause, your hormones — mainly oestrogen and progesterone — start fluctuating,' says Dr Naomi Potter, menopause specialist and founder of Menopause Care. And these hormonal shifts can take a toll on mood and mental wellbeing, as well as the body.

'Oestrogen plays a big role in brain chemicals like serotonin and dopamine, which help regulate mood,' explains Dr Potter. 'When oestrogen levels drop, serotonin production can slow down, making you feel lower, more irritable, and more prone to anxiety.'

'These ups and downs can also make emotions

feel more intense, so anxiety can feel even more overwhelming during perimenopause. Poor sleep can make it harder for your body to handle stress and emotions, leading to lower tolerance, brain fog, and heightened feelings of anxiety.'

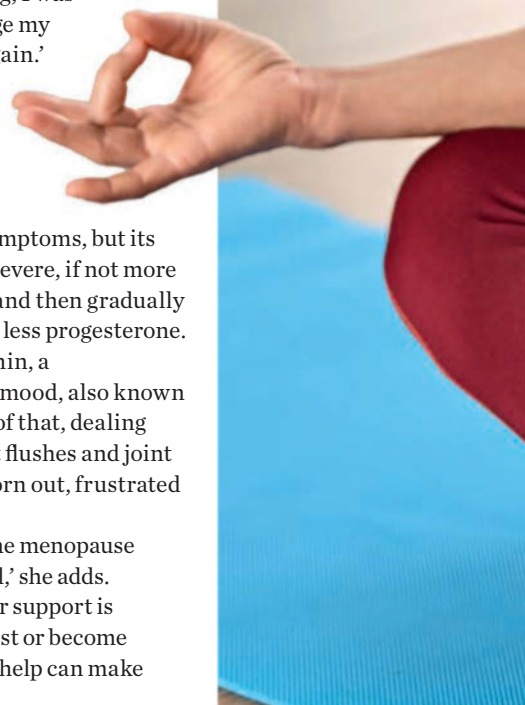
For Elizabeth Joseph, 53, a lack of awareness about menopause symptoms made an already difficult time even worse.

'I didn't realise my mood swings, anxiety and sleepless nights were linked to perimenopause,' she says. 'I thought I was just failing to cope with everyday life, which only made my stress worse. It became a vicious cycle — I was anxious, then exhausted, then even more anxious. Once I understood what was happening, I was finally able to find ways to manage my symptoms and feel like myself again.'

According to Dr Rosie Khan a GP and leading menopause specialist, Elizabeth's experience is far from unique.

'The menopause is often discussed in terms of physical symptoms, but its emotional impact can be just as severe, if not more so. As oestrogen levels fluctuate and then gradually decrease, the body also produces less progesterone. Both hormones influence serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, also known as the "happy hormone". On top of that, dealing with physical symptoms, like hot flushes and joint pain, can leave women feeling worn out, frustrated and anxious.'

'Prioritising self-care during the menopause transition and beyond is essential,' she adds. 'Leaning on friends and family for support is invaluable, but if symptoms persist or become distressing, seeking professional help can make a real difference.'





## EXERCISE REGULARLY

*'Staying active is one of the most effective ways to boost mood,' says Dr Potter. 'Studies suggest that exercise is 1.5 times more effective than medication or therapy for mild to moderate anxiety.'*

## PRACTISE RELAXING

*'Practices like mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing exercises and menopause yoga can help manage stress and anxiety,' says Dr Potter. 'These techniques encourage present-moment awareness, helping to break cycles of anxious thoughts and reduce emotional reactivity, which can be heightened by hormonal fluctuations.'*

## EAT A HEALTHY DIET

*'A well-balanced diet rich in vitamins and minerals can positively impact both physical and mental wellbeing, says Dr Potter.'*

## LEAN ON YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM

*'Talking to friends, family, or a support group can provide emotional relief,' says Dr Potter. 'Knowing you're not alone in your experience can be incredibly reassuring.'*

## MAKE SLEEP A PRIORITY

*'Sleep and anxiety can create a vicious cycle, so maintaining good sleep hygiene is crucial,' says Dr Potter.'*

## TRY THE NATURAL ROUTE

*'There is some evidence to suggest that herbal options, such as valerian root for relaxation and sleep, pharmaceutical-grade lavender oil for anxiety and Rhodiola rosea for fatigue and mood support, may be beneficial for certain women during the peri/menopause,' says Dr Khan. 'However, it's important for individuals to discuss their options with a healthcare professional to determine what might work best for them.'*

## SEEK PROFESSIONAL ADVICE

*'Even mild emotional or psychological struggles during menopause are a valid reason to seek support,' says Dr Potter. 'No one should have to suffer through menopausal symptoms alone.'*



## Expert advice



*Jess Henley has been working as a psychotherapist for the past 10 years and runs her own private practice in London. She believes that the key to learning is to be constantly questioning and that curiosity can enable healing and personal growth in any situation.*  
[henleypsychotherapy.co.uk](http://henleypsychotherapy.co.uk)





# HACK YOUR BREATHING, *calm your mind*

Psychotherapist Jess Henley shares her best advice to beat imposter syndrome and tame your racing thoughts

**A**s with many mental health difficulties, meditation can be extremely beneficial in reducing symptoms of imposter syndrome. With imposter syndrome, you are trying to let go of the thoughts that you're a fraud and a fake and you cheated your way to where you are. Meditation and mindfulness can be fundamental in helping to reduce the impact of these thoughts, by getting you out of your mind and into your body. More crucially, they help teach you to trust what your body is telling you, over what your mind is saying. If your body is feeling calm, and you trust what it is telling you, then any ruminating thoughts will begin to lose some of their power as you'll know that if the

calmness in your body is true, then the thoughts can't be. Remember, your body can't lie, but your thoughts can. Over time, you should start to notice that even though the thoughts might still be coming, they don't seem so loud anymore, they're not as frequent and they don't hold so much weight. Please remember: practise, practise, practise! It really does become easier over time and for most people the mental shift happens very subtly so it's not until they're a month or so in, and looking back, that they can see any difference. Every once in a while, reflect back on how you may have reacted to a certain situation a month, or two months or three months ago, and this will help show you how far you've come. ➤

Build a breathing meditation into your daily routine so that it becomes something that you just do without thinking. If possible, try and do it in the morning so that you are setting your day up with a calm, present exercise. For example, you could add it in after your morning shower. But if that is not possible then it could be part of your wind-down routine, before getting into bed. If you're finding it beneficial, then you can always use it at both the beginning and the end of your day. But I really want to emphasise that it must never become a chore. Rather, it should be something that is doable and then hopefully, one day, enjoyable. Any time that it feels like it's becoming a chore and is taking up too much of your time, reduce the number of minutes back to something that feels more manageable. It's the cumulative effect of meditating regularly that is beneficial, so better to do three minutes every day, than a long meditation sporadically.

## Breathing technique

The following meditation is focussed on emptying your mind and teaching you how to breathe properly. When we have racing thoughts, our breath can be very shallow, only travelling as deep as our chest. Try this before the meditation:

- Hold your hand just below your clavicle and breathe into where your hand lies. What do you notice when you breathe here? This very shallow breathing is short and sharp and it doesn't feel like you're feeding your whole body with air.

- Now hold your hand over your belly button and actively breathe deeply into this space, noticing your whole stomach moving outwards and inwards as you breathe. (If you're finding this difficult, try lying on your back on the ground. As you breathe in, again with your hand on your belly, make sure your stomach is moving upwards with each inhale and flattening with each exhale.) It should feel like your whole body is being fed with air. You might even get light-headed as your body isn't used to getting so much oxygen with each breath.

- Notice how familiar or different the two breathing techniques feel. This will tell you how you breathe naturally. The aim is for breathing into your tummy to become your natural, resting breath. This type of breathing brings a slow, grounded, calm feeling, and general levels of



anxiety and other psychological disturbance should reduce over time.

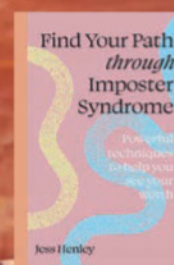
- It can also become something you actively use when you are in a situation that triggers feelings of imposter syndrome or other distress. Bring your attention to your breath and actively bring your breath into your stomach and work to bring your feelings back into balance.

***“When thoughts enter your mind,  
imagine loading them into a hot-air  
balloon that then floats away”***

## Breathing meditation

Set a timer for the length of meditation you want to do. If you're a beginner, start off with three minutes, then once that feels comfortable, gradually add a minute every week or so, building up to five or ten minutes if you can.





**Find Your Path  
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techniques to help you  
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- Sit somewhere quiet and comfortable, with your eyes closed.
- Slowly inhale through your nose and take that breath deep into your body. Notice a place that is two inches (five centimetres) below your belly button and a third of the way into your body, and take your breath slowly into this place. Take four seconds to inhale and four seconds to exhale.
- As you're breathing, notice everything about your breath. Notice the temperature of the air, notice any scents or smells, notice the texture of the air as it travels through your nose, down the back of your throat and deep into your lungs.
- If at any point you have lots of thoughts tumbling into your mind, just notice them and let

them go. You can do this by imagining you are loading them into a hot-air balloon that then floats away, or just label them "THOUGHT" and watch them exit your mind. It doesn't matter how many times you have to do this, just bring your attention back to your breath as soon as you are able.

- Stay breathing like this for the duration of your timer without passing any judgment. Some days will be easier than others. Some days it will be very hard to focus and there will be many thoughts, and some days your mind will easily empty and the time will pass quickly. Remember this is normal, even for the most experienced meditators, so try not to be disheartened and give up. Just know that it takes time and commitment to get results.

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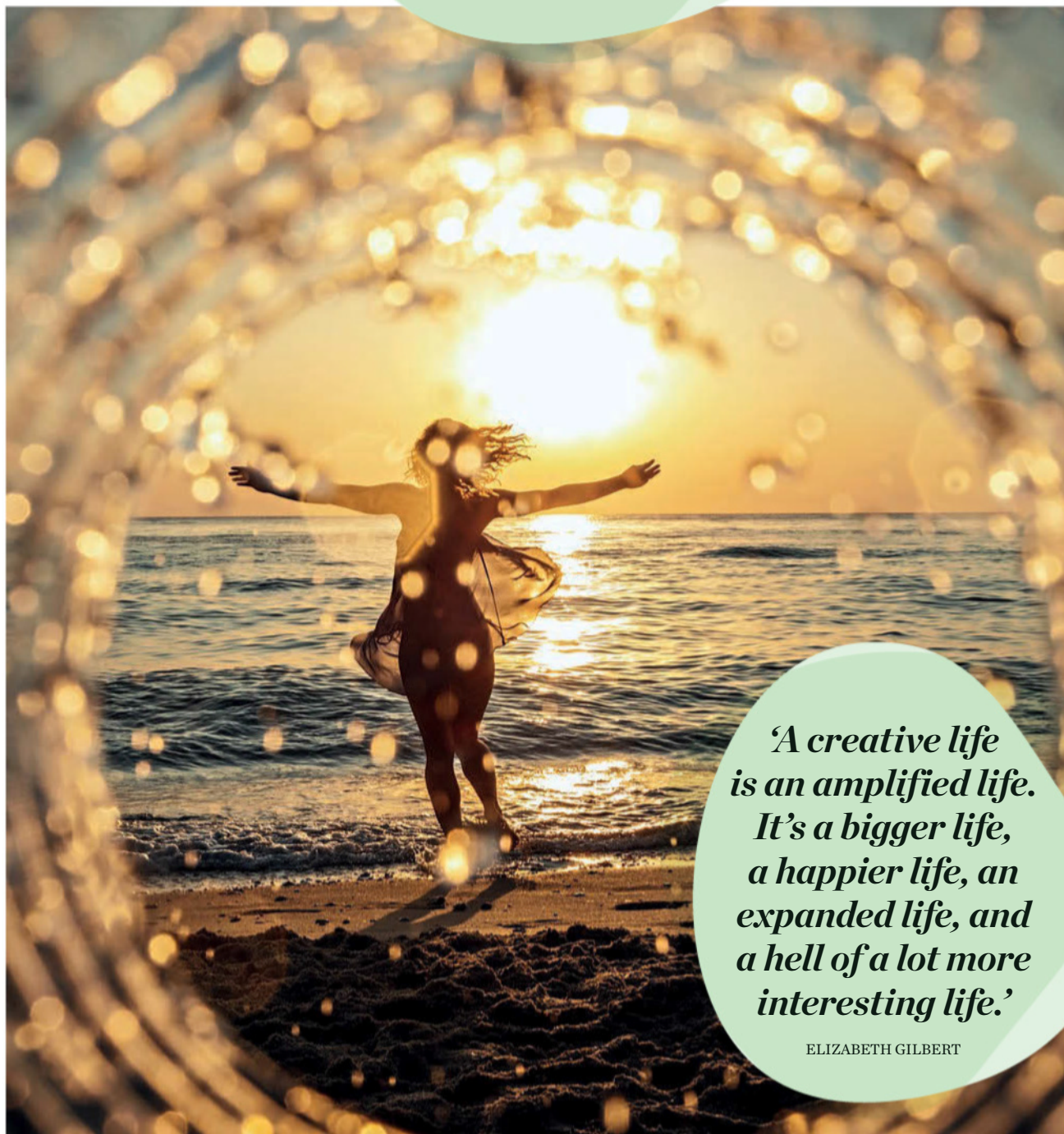
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is an amplified life.  
It's a bigger life,  
a happier life, an  
expanded life, and  
a hell of a lot more  
interesting life.'*

ELIZABETH GILBERT

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



Expert  
advice



*Kate Beckwith is a pioneering psychotherapist, TEDx speaker and writer, dedicated to transforming how we support children and young people's mental health. She is the founder of Kate's Garden, the first practice of its kind in the UK, where she is breaking away from the confines of the therapy room and championing freedom of choice and access to the outdoors and nature. @katesgardentherapy*

# *“Masculinity doesn't need to be TOXIC!”*

In Netflix's critically-acclaimed *Adolescence*, we witness the raw and unsettling truth of what can happen when young people, left to navigate identity alone, go searching for belonging online. It's a bleak picture, but it speaks to something deeper: a hunger for connection, recognition, and a sense of worth, writes therapist Kate Beckwith.





**F**or the first time, a streaming show has become the most watched thing on TV. And what a show it is. *Adolescence* is a devastating portrayal of what can happen when young people are left to navigate the world alone. Many are drawn into the ‘manosphere’, the network of male-dominated online spaces that glorify dominance, emotional suppression, and misogyny. But *Adolescence* is more than a cautionary tale about the dangers of the internet: it holds a mirror to society today — the overwhelm, the anxiety, the blurred boundaries between guidance and pressure. One of the most powerful threads in the show was the father’s shame, quietly passed down in moments as everyday as a children’s football match. Because that’s how it happens. Not in big, dramatic moments — but in the spaces in between.

At the heart of all this is something so human it’s almost easy to miss: every child — every boy — wants to feel liked, wanted, and safe. And yet, we’re raising them in a world that increasingly tells them, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that their very nature might be harmful. Language matters. And when we repeatedly pair the word ‘masculinity’ with ‘toxic,’ we send a message that, over time, becomes very hard to unhear. That’s where this conversation begins. Not with blame, but with curiosity. What are we really saying to our boys? And how can we say it better?

Language is powerful, and the way we use words shapes how we think about the world. Over the last few years, the phrase ‘toxic masculinity’ has become part of the mainstream conversation, and while it serves an important purpose in highlighting harmful behaviours, it also carries unintended consequences — especially for young boys and men.

The issue isn’t the recognition of toxic behaviours; it’s the constant pairing of the words ‘toxic’ and ‘masculinity’. When two words are repeated together often enough, they start to merge in our collective psyche. Over time, it becomes difficult to separate the two, and the

word ‘masculinity’ — which should encompass a broad range of positive traits — is increasingly associated with something harmful or malicious.

For adults, it’s easier to recognise that the problem lies with behaviours, not masculinity itself. But for impressionable young minds, this distinction isn’t so clear. Hearing the phrase ‘toxic masculinity’ repeated over and over again in media and social spaces risks creating an association that masculinity itself is inherently bad. This is where the problem begins.

## The power of language

Language shapes how we see ourselves and the world around us, especially during childhood and adolescence. For boys, who are still learning how to understand their emotions and their place in society, the words they hear repeatedly carry a profound influence.

Take a moment to imagine a word association game. If the word ‘masculinity’ were posed, how many people — adults and teenagers alike — would immediately think of the word ‘toxic’? This pairing has been burned into the cultural psyche, especially in the last five years, through social media, mainstream media, and public discourse.

For boys, this can create confusion. If they hear masculinity discussed in the context of toxicity on repeat, what does that say about their own natural drives, characteristics, and desires? As a child and adolescent specialist therapist, I’ve seen many males who struggle to tolerate the masculine elements of themselves, and I believe this is, in part, because they’ve subconsciously absorbed the idea that being ‘masculine’ is synonymous with being harmful.

I’ve never used the term ‘toxic masculinity’, not in my therapy practice, not at any point in my life. It’s a phrase that has simply never sat right with me, and I would certainly never use it in front of my own children. That’s because I’ve seen firsthand how damaging it can be to boys’ sense of identity. We need to be mindful of the language we use around children and young

*“These words can send a message that their identity as boys or young men is inherently flawed”*



people, especially when talking about behaviours we want to change. Words like ‘toxic masculinity’ can unintentionally send a message that their identity as boys or young men is by its very nature flawed — something no child should have to carry.

## The real-world effects

When phrases like ‘toxic masculinity’ dominate discussions, the consequences extend beyond word associations or debates — they shape how boys and young men perceive themselves and how they think society views them.

As a therapist, I’ve worked with boys who feel confused and even ashamed of their natural drives. They second-guess their desires to compete, protect, or assert themselves, worrying that these traits make them inherently ‘toxic.’ This internalised doubt stifles their confidence and stops them from embracing their full identity.

I see this same struggle in my female clients. The transition from boy to man or girl to woman is already challenging enough. Adding terms like ‘toxic masculinity’ into the mix can create unnecessary fear — fear of one’s own traits, or fear of the opposite sex. This can leave both boys and girls feeling disconnected from who they truly are and uncertain about how to navigate relationships.

The issue doesn’t stop with teenagers. These associations ripple out into relationships between men and women. By repeatedly branding masculinity ‘toxic’ we risk deepening divisions rather than fostering understanding. Social media amplifies this problem, turning what could be thoughtful conversations into polarising debates that push people further apart.

We need to separate harmful behaviours from the idea of masculinity. Doing so allows us to address toxic actions without alienating boys and men — or increasing the fear and division that many are already struggling with. By tying these actions to the concept of masculinity, we risk creating a generation that sees maleness as something to fix rather than celebrate.

## What’s at play here?

The reality is that these actions and behaviours often stem from deeper issues: insecurity, unresolved trauma, or learned patterns of dominance reinforced by peers or societal expectations. These aren’t traits of masculinity; they’re symptoms of a lack of support and understanding. Men who behave badly aren’t being ‘too masculine’ — in many cases, they’re acting out because they haven’t been given the tools to express vulnerability or address their struggles in healthy ways.

We need to find better ways to describe these behaviours without vilifying masculinity as a whole. Phrases like ‘toxic pack mentality’ can be more helpful as they shift the focus to the group dynamics and negative reinforcement that often fuel unhealthy behaviour, especially among young men. Social media, for instance, can act like one big ‘pack,’ amplifying aggressive and harmful behaviours in a way that’s detached from real-world consequences.

By reframing the language, we can better address the real problem: not masculinity, but the environments and pressures that encourage harmful actions. This approach allows us to support boys and men in developing healthier ways of expressing themselves without casting their identity as inherently flawed.

## Celebrating healthy masculinity

Masculinity, at its core, is not the problem — it’s how we frame and nurture it that matters. Traits like strength, protectiveness, and leadership, when expressed healthily, are invaluable.

Boys need to know that embracing their masculinity doesn’t mean rejecting care, empathy, or vulnerability — it means integrating all of these traits to become balanced, confident individuals.

Competitiveness, when nurtured, becomes the drive to overcome challenges and push boundaries. It fosters ambition, self-improvement, and resilience. Physical strength, too, is something to be proud of, a source of pride and capability, especially when paired with kindness and responsibility. These traits, when nurtured in healthy ways, help boys build confidence and connection, rather than conflict.

One of the most effective ways to help boys develop a healthy sense of masculinity is to model it for them. Positive male role models — whether online, on TV, fathers, uncles, teachers, or family friends — show boys that masculinity isn’t about dominance or control, but about standing up for others, taking responsibility, and offering support. This is why language is so important. When boys repeatedly hear ‘toxic masculinity,’ they may internalise the idea that their natural traits — like competitiveness or physical strength — are by definition harmful. Instead of creating shame, we should give boys the tools to channel these traits positively.

Healthy masculinity thrives when boys are given the freedom to explore who they are without fear of judgment. These experiences teach boys to trust their instincts, develop resilience, and navigate failure; a critical part of growing into strong, capable men.





## Flipping the script

It's time to change how we talk about boys and masculinity. Instead of tearing them down with labels like 'toxic,' let's build them up with words like 'strong,' 'kind,' 'brave,' and 'empathetic.' Boys aren't the problem, they're part of the solution. They have the potential to grow into men who lift others up, stand for what's right, and make a real difference in the world.

This starts with how we speak to and about them. Language matters, and so does the example we set. Let's teach boys that traits like strength, competitiveness, protectiveness aren't things to hide or fear. These qualities, when nurtured with empathy and care, become the foundation for confident, resilient, and compassionate men.

Boys also need spaces to explore and grow

without judgment. Let them climb trees, take risks, and discover their own capabilities. Show them that failure isn't the end, it's the beginning of learning. Give them role models who embody healthy masculinity and demonstrate that being a man is about integrity, not dominance.

Most importantly, let's bridge the divide between men and women, boys and girls. Boys who are supported to embrace their full selves grow up to be men who respect and value others, regardless of gender. By celebrating masculinity as a positive and balanced force, we create a better, more connected world for everyone.

Masculinity isn't a flaw: it's a strength. Let's empower our boys to own it, grow with it, and use it to become the kind, thoughtful, and strong men this world needs.

# “I don’t know why I can’t grow up!”

Iconic Big Brother winner Kate Lawler talks post-natal depression, parenthood, and being brilliantly silly, with Ella Walker

Kate Lawler practically vibrates with energy and curiosity, jumping with thoughts, feelings and opinions she has no qualms sharing. Whether it’s the micro-needling she had the day before, her skin still smarting (‘I look a little bit Donald Trump!’), her love of a pisco sour or postnatal depression, she’s frank, funny and really quite dazzling.

You can see why she captured the nation’s attention in 2002, winning arguably the most iconic ever series of *Big Brother*. At just 22, not only was she the first female winner, her cohort also included Jade Goody, Alison Hammond and Adele Roberts. Twenty-three years on and people still stop her to ask about it, and whether she’d do the celebrity version. ‘I always say no, because I had such a great experience, and nothing could top the experience I had of winning,’ she says. ‘People look back at it with nostalgia and really fond memories. As time has gone on and other series have been and gone, you realise what a great series 3 was and what excellent housemates were cast.’

Her current household is made up her four-year-old daughter, Noa, who she shares with husband Martin ‘Boj’ Bojtos, plus her two dogs, Baxter and Shirley. ‘Our daughter’s at a stage where she’s asking for a sibling, and I’m like, “You’ve got two: Baxter and Shirley,” and I’m so sorry, but I can’t do that again,’ she says with a laugh. ‘I don’t know how anyone does it again!’

Lawler wrote about her postnatal depression in her bestseller, *Maybe Baby: On The Mother Side*. A self-confessed ‘oversharer’, Lawler had a great pregnancy and birth. ‘I had this vision of me being on social media, like, “Look at me with my baby, isn’t it great?” I had no idea I would be crying to my Instagram family saying, “Why?



What have I done? Help!’” Sharing what she went through made her realise how many others were in the same position.

‘I thought, if a handful of people in my corner of the internet are going through this, then I need to help other people who might not be aware that postnatal depression is a thing,’ she says. ‘It’s normal, and it’s also perfectly normal to love your child more than anything you’ve ever loved in your life, but also find parenting the most difficult thing you’ve ever done, and to not enjoy aspects of it.’

Three years on from *Maybe Baby*, she says: ‘I absolutely love being a mum and I remember, in that first year, I never thought I would say that — I couldn’t see further than what was right in front

of me.’ She adds: ‘I’m in awe of just how interested Noa is in the world and how pure she is. I’m like, “Oh, bollocks!” but if something goes wrong she keeps saying, “Oh biscuits!” I’m so pleased I had her. I’m so pleased I waited as long as I did as well, because I feel like I’m the best mum I can be because of my age and life experience.’

That said, Lawler seems able to squeeze more silliness and joy out of things than most. ‘Being silly is what makes mine and Noa’s relationship so special. I am silly. I’m like a child actually. I don’t know why I can’t grow up. I just love messing around,’ she says giddily. ‘Boj is more serious, but sometimes he says, “I quite like it because you taught me how to be silly.”’

IMAGE: EDDIE JUDD/PHOTOGRAPHY/PA



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