

Emergency conflict resolution P.46

SEPTEMBER, 2025

# Psychologies

*You deserve to be happy*

NEW LOOK!

FIVE  
MINUTE FIX

## YOUR INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

AND A NEW WAY  
TO DEAL WITH  
THEM

Why your  
sister shapes  
who you are

17-PAGE DOSSIER

A proven  
step-by-step  
playbook to  
improving your  
inner world

# The ultimate mood-booster masterclass

'I want to  
change the  
world for  
our girls'

Meet Anna  
Whitehouse,  
the legendary  
campaigner  
for flexible  
working



The real link  
between sex and  
housework

13

WAYS TO TACKLE  
PERIMENOPAUSE  
NOW

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SUPPLEMENT  
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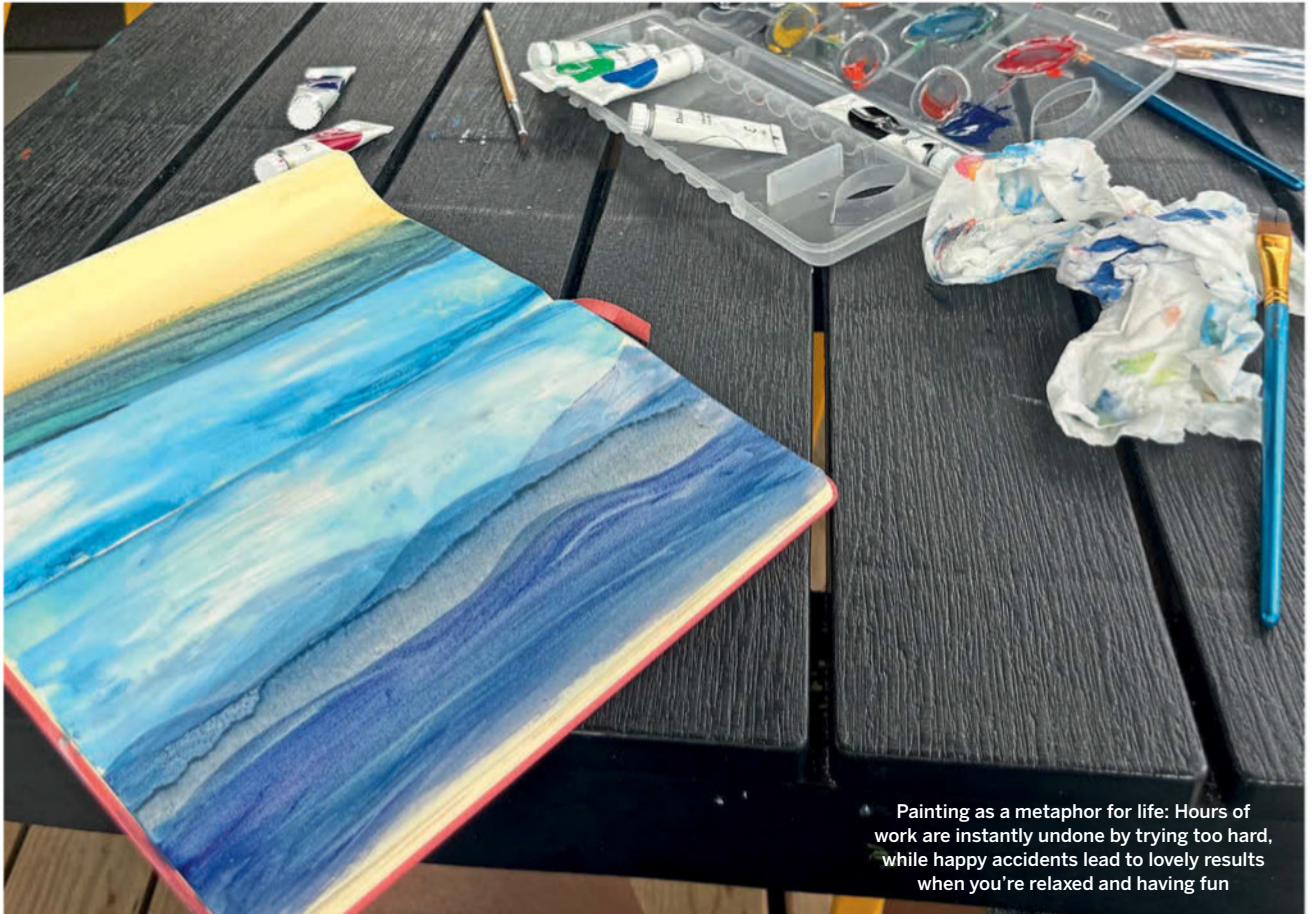


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[fertilitynetworkuk.org](https://fertilitynetworkuk.org)



\*Nielsen GB ScanTrack Total Coverage Value and Unit Retail Sales 52 w/e 19 April 2025. To verify contact Vitabiotics Ltd, 1 Apsley Way, London, NW2 7HF. UK's No.1 pregnancy supplement brand.  
1. Getting enough folic acid is vital from the start of trying to conceive. Supplemental folic acid increases maternal folate status. Low maternal folate status is a risk factor in the development of neural tube defects in the developing foetus. Folic acid also contributes to maternal tissue growth during pregnancy. 2. Pregnacare is the pregnancy supplement brand that is most recommended by midwives. For more information on this research, please visit [www.pregnacare.com/mostrecommended](https://www.pregnacare.com/mostrecommended).



Painting as a metaphor for life: Hours of work are instantly undone by trying too hard, while happy accidents lead to lovely results when you're relaxed and having fun

# Welcome!



I've been dabbling with the paints this month, getting my hands dirty with watercolours and gouache during a holiday to France. It started out a few months ago as supporting my son with his schoolwork, then this trip I bought my own sketchbook and brushes and gave myself permission to have a proper go myself. And I loved it! The end result is absolutely beginner (please don't judge me!), but the process itself is joyful. Speaking of creative endeavours, we've given the mag a little glow-up this month too. We've worked our socks off, hope you like it!



*Sally xx*

Sally Saunders,  
Psychologies Editor

# Psychologies

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[psychologies.co.uk](https://psychologies.co.uk)

Visit now and check out the archive

Discover what's behind lingering grumpiness, and how to dial up the happiness factor



## Your mood-booster masterclass

17 pages of insight, inspiration, and expert advice

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TEST

# Clear your head

Not just this month, but every month

Now's the time to subscribe

Check out  
the deals on page

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# Psychologies

*You deserve to be happy*

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## *Our mission*

We believe you deserve to be happy. Our mission is to give you the inspiration and advice to improve your emotional wellbeing and lower your stress and anxiety. We do this by providing simple, achievable steps to make small changes that add up to a real difference.



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# \* What's new

*And what's coming next*



## *Lower targets, same benefits*

Walking 7,000 steps a day could be enough to reduce the risk of a number of serious health conditions and death according to new University of Sydney research — and is more achievable than the current NHS target of 10,000.

## Is your phone spying on you?

**Apps are accessing your microphone, location and other files on your device, cybersecurity experts say**

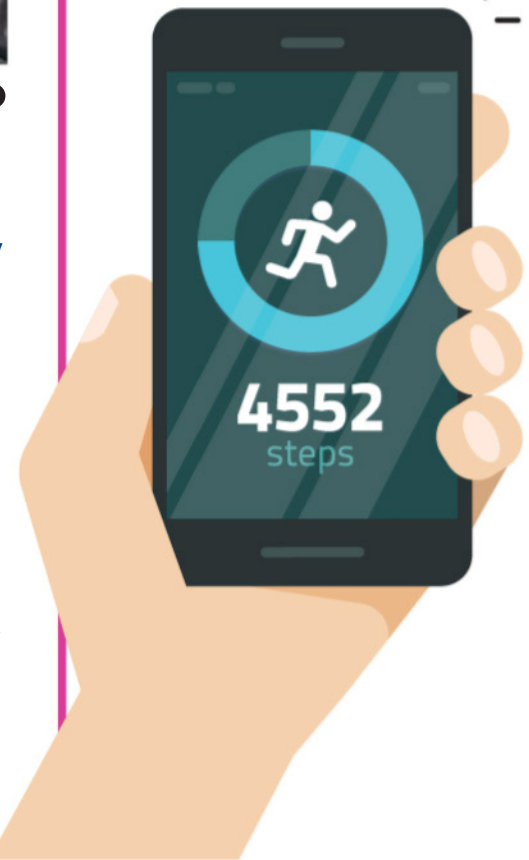
**T**op apps are demanding 'shocking' levels of access to your devices and data in a potential breach of your privacy, experts have warned.

Consumer group Which teamed up with cybersecurity firm Hexiosec to investigate 20 of the most popular apps, including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Amazon, to see which permissions they requested from users.

They found that 15 wanted your location within 5m, 15 asked for access to files, and 14 wanted permission to access the microphone, even when unnecessary. Four also requested to see what other apps you

have recently used, despite Android previously removing this access over privacy concerns. The apps have a combined total of 28 billion downloads, with UK consumers likely to have a handful on their smartphones. If someone had all 20 downloaded, they would have to grant a staggering 882 permissions.

'While many of these apps appear to be free to use, our research has shown how users are in fact paying with their data — often in scarily vast quantities,' says Which editor Harry Rose. 'Our research underscores why it's so important to check what you're agreeing to when you download a new app.'



### TRENDING RIGHT NOW

#### 1 Taking a 'power pause'

Career women are giving a positive rebrand to their downshift to be a stay-at-home mum or take to a less demanding job when work's not working for them.

#### 2 A Big Bold Beautiful Journey

Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie star as a couple thrown together by circumstance who embark on a fantastical journey, revisiting moments from their past and overcoming trauma. In cinemas from 19 September.

#### 3 Visiting the Cotswolds

It's not just British stars like the Beckhams setting up home in this quaint corner of England. American talk-show royalty Ellen DeGeneres has quit LA for its picturesque rolling hills, while JD Vance holidayed there this summer.



The locals can't stop bleating on about their celebrity visitors

# Grape news!

✱ Grapes are often given a bad rap, touted as being high in sugar and a poor relation to the mighty berry when it comes to health. But new research is calling for them to be given superfood status, after finding they are a natural source of over 1,600 compounds, including antioxidants and other polyphenols such as flavonoids, anthocyanidins, catechins, phenolic acids, resveratrol, and more. Polyphenols are credited with the health benefits of grapes, via antioxidant activity and influencing cellular processes. They've been

shown to support heart health, promoting relaxation of blood vessels and keeping circulation and cholesterol in check. But that's not all, studies also link grapes to benefits for brain function, skin protection, gut health, and even eye health. They may also influence how our genes behave, which researchers think could be the key to many of their long-term health effects. As with all unpeeled fruit, buy organic if you can.

Grapes are rich in antioxidants and polyphenols. Just like wine!

## 4 The rise of the handywoman

Demand is soaring for female plumbers and builders as customers feel safer inviting them into their home. Online directory TaskHer has seen a 208 per cent rise in inquiries for tradeswomen since 2022, with demand often outstripping supply.

## 5 BBC Contains Strong Language Festival

This annual celebration of poetry, performance and spoken word heads to Bradford, the UK City of Culture 2025, on 18-21 September. There will be performances and events for all ages, many free. [bradford2025.co.uk](http://bradford2025.co.uk)



HERD THE MOOS?

# \*What's new

*And what's coming next*

LIFE'S A BEACH

*Wish you were here!*

Oh, we do love to be beside the seaside...

## What a trip!

### Seaside tops list of old-school destinations

Being beside the seaside is the location that makes Britons most nostalgic, beating time spent in fields, forests or mountains.

Other watery places, like rivers and lakes, came close behind in the Cambridge University research, while 20 per cent of people chose cities rather than green spaces.

'Our findings add to the growing evidence that blue places are associated with increased psychological well-being,' says study author Dr Elisabeta Militaru.



## *Musical mystery tour*

It's very true that a song from the past can transport you back in time.

Now, artist Stuart Fowkes is using the evocative sounds of global locations to transport you aurally. Online project Sonic Heritage has field recordings from

270 Unesco sites, including crickets chirping in Florence, Tibetan prayers in Kathmandu and the sounds from within India's Taj Mahal. Travel the globe without having to leave your armchair at [citiesandmemory.com/heritage](http://citiesandmemory.com/heritage)

## Peek-a-boo!

Get ready for the disruption caused when the clocks go back by setting yourself up for a good night's sleep whatever time it is, with this stylish sleep mask.

Ethically and responsibly made from gorgeous mulberry silk, it comes in nine classy designs suitable for women or men, and arrives in its own cosy little sleeping bag.

**The Ethical Silk Company,**  
theethicalsilkco.com, £35



### Now that's cool

**\* Aching muscles, injuries and inflammation will cower in the face of Weleda's new natural magic in a bottle. Arnica Cryo Gel has a deep healing and cooling effect on the area it's applied to. With a unique dual topical effect, it provides an initial subtle yet refreshing sensation on first application, followed by a prolonged, soothing deep-freeze effect which delivers long-lasting pain relief – all without the overpowering odour of the usual 'heated' pain treatment creams. Made with 100% natural ingredients and scented with natural essential oils, Arnica also provides natural anti-inflammatory benefits, perfect for those overworked muscles, sore shoulders or other general aches and pains. Bliss!**



£14.95, [Weleda.co.uk](http://Weleda.co.uk)

## Do you get 'message dread'?

Mike Kocsis at Balance My Hormones explains the science behind why notifications, whether from work or friends, trigger our physical and emotional reactions so much.

● **Cortisol spikes:** An unexpected spike can be caused by a notification from work or a loved one whom you feel you need to respond to as soon as possible. After time, consistent cortisol spikes can lead to anxiety, chronic stress and burnout.

● **Adrenaline rush:** The body also releases adrenaline when an unexpected notification comes through. This adrenaline surge is your body's way of preparing you for action, leading you to feel a sense of urgency, causing tiredness when you're not responding to messages and making it difficult to wind down.

● **Dopamine hits:** Some notifications cause dopamine (the feel-good neurotransmitter) to be released, and your brain rewards you with a small burst of joy. This is the reason why we feel the need to immediately respond, even when the message isn't urgent. Constantly checking your phone can cause addictive behaviour, from chasing that dopamine hit.

● **Oxytocin disruption:** When messages are work-related or demanding, the brain perceives a threat. The pressure to respond quickly to work emails or friends can stop you from fully

involving yourself in moments of true connection and peace in the real world, leading to emotional burnout.

● **Melatonin suppression:** One of the most overlooked effects of constant notifications is the impact on sleep. Checking or responding to messages just before bed can reduce the release of melatonin, the sleep hormone, making it harder for you to fall and stay asleep.

### \* HOW TO AVOID MESSAGE DREAD

**Set direct boundaries:** Actively turn off notifications in the evening, or check in only every two hours.

**Be selective with notifications you do allow:** Especially important for apps or groups that aren't important to you, as it reduces the constant pinging that can trigger cortisol.

**Prioritise in-person conversations:** Where possible try to meet with family and friends instead of via messages, to create deeper connections and reduce tech stress.

**Pause before responding:** Taking a few deep breaths will give you a chance to feel your emotional reaction, and calm the adrenaline and cortisol rushes that come with the pressure to respond immediately.

**Limit work-related conversations to certain times of day:** Otherwise

they can easily creep into your time and create stress.

[balancemyhormones.co.uk](http://balancemyhormones.co.uk)

# 76%

of millennials, and 40% of baby boomers experience anxiety when their phone pings.



# \*What's new

And what's coming next

PUT THE  
KETTLE  
ON!

On those days  
when even a plate  
of chocolate  
cookies can't get  
you through the  
4pm slump

## DAILY GLIMMERS

The art of finding tiny joys  
every day of the year

BRIDGET MCNULTY

## Tiny joys for every day

The shimmer of sunlight off of a body of water, the first bite of your favourite dinner, putting on a brand new pair of socks — these are all 'glimmers' — moments of micro-joys to combat, and counteract 'triggers' (which spark moments of anxiety or worry). They're wonderful to experience, yet often easy to overlook. But the good news is you can train your mind to notice them, and this beautiful book features over 1,000 glimmers, many unique, some surprising, and all designed to spark your brain to search for more of them in your everyday with the goal of lowering anxiety and increasing happiness.

**Daily Glimmers: The art of finding tiny joys every day of the year** by Bridget McNulty (£14.99, Watkins Publishing)

## Tired but too wired?

It might be time to switch up your afternoon brew...

Coffee drinkers who value a good night's kip may want to consider moving to decaf earlier in the day after new research shows how caffeine affects sleep. We all know caffeine stimulates the brain and moves it into a state of higher alert and reactivity, which can be useful during the day, but is not so good at night. A new study in *Communications Biology* found that it also increases the complexity of brain signals, especially during the non-rapid eye movement (NREM) phase of sleep which is crucial for memory consolidation and

cognitive recovery. The study also found that caffeine had a striking effect on the brain's electrical rhythms during sleep: it reduced the theta and alpha waves associated with deep, restorative sleep, and stimulated beta wave activity, which is more common during wakefulness and mental engagement. So, even when asleep, a caffeinated brain remains in a more activated, less restorative state in which the brain would neither relax nor recover properly. The biological half-life of caffeine is about 5 to 6 hours in healthy adults, meaning half of the caffeine you consumed remains in your body that long. However, individual variability is high — the half-life can range from 2.5 to 10 hours, depending on factors like liver function, medications, and genetics, so it's worth experimenting with when you have that last cuppa.

### I'm sorry, I haven't a clue!

\* Brits say sorry about nine times a day — to the bemusement of overseas visitors — and also use the word in 15 different ways when they don't really mean it, language site Babbel discovered.

# 64%

of children are using chatbots for help with everything from homework to emotional advice and companionship, with a third talking to one like a friend, according to an Internet Matters survey.



# Charred Cornish Sardines on Toast with Bean Mash & Gremolata

Abby Allen shares a new take on the old favourite

Sardines come and go in mass shoals as the water conditions and available food sources change. This makes them a frustrating or exciting catch for a fisherman, depending on which way you look at it! In the South West, sea temperatures are warming, which means the number — as well as species — of fish that gather around our shores is changing. With greater numbers of sardines, or pilchards as they are called locally, spending more time here, we've also seen the miraculous return of one of the most impressive fish in the sea, the blue fin tuna. I haven't gone as far as to create a tuna recipe for my book, as while numbers are good, it is still relatively early days of their return. We do tend to have a fascination with starting at the top of the food chain, which has led us to wipe out so many apex predators,

changing the natural order of things perilously. Instead, I encourage you to enjoy the sardine, a fish that throughout British history has been a mainstay in our diet.

## Ingredients

- 3 garlic cloves, peeled
- 350g (12oz) butter beans
- 1 teaspoon tahini
- a pinch of chilli flakes, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling
- 2 slices of sourdough
- 2–4 sustainably caught Cornish sardines
- flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

## For the gremolata

- 30g (1oz) flat-leaf parsley, leaves and stalks
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and grated
- 2 unwaxed lemons
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

Light the barbecue and let it get to a nice steady heat. Start with the beans. Finely grate two of the garlic cloves into a mixing bowl and add the butter beans, tahini, chilli flakes, lemon juice and some salt and pepper. Mash the ingredients together using a fork — you want to keep some texture of the beans, so don't overmash. Stir in a drizzle of olive oil, then set aside.

To make the gremolata, finely chop the parsley and garlic cloves, then tip into a mixing bowl. Grate in the zest of both lemons and squeeze in the juice of one. Stir in a drizzle of olive oil to reach your desired consistency, then set aside.

Take the slices of sourdough and drizzle them with olive oil, using your hands to rub it in to ensure the bread is well covered. Place on the barbecue grill and toast for around 1–2 minutes on each side. While warm, rub the toasts with the remaining garlic clove and set aside.

Drizzle a little olive oil over the sardines and massage in a pinch of salt. Place over the barbecue grill and cook for around 2–4 minutes on each side, depending on their size.

Take the toasted sourdough and load with the creamy mash. Pile on the charred sardines, squeeze the remaining lemon over the fish and finish with a generous spoonful of gremolata and perhaps more chilli flakes, if you like a little heat.



**The Farm Kitchen: Seasonal Recipes from Field, Coast and Garden, by Abby Allen (Kyle Books, £30)**

*Time to boost those coffers!*



## Retirement cash crisis looming

**Women facing even bigger shortfall due to huge private pension gender gap**

People retiring in 2050 will be worse off than pensioners today, unless action is taken to boost retirement savings.

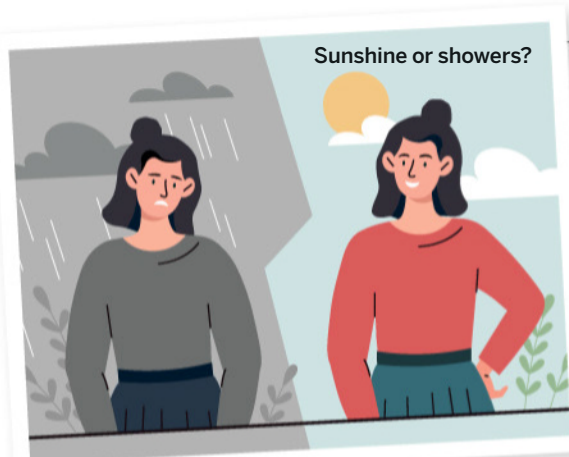
The Department for Work and Pensions is reviving the Pensions Commission after two decades to look at how to tackle the issue, along with a review of the state pension age, which is set to rise to 68 by 2046.

Almost half of working-age adults are not putting any money into a private pension at all, with low earners and the self-employed less likely to be saving, says the government.

The shortfall is worse among women and some ethnic groups, with only a quarter people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi background putting

money in a private pension. Those drawing a pension in 25 years' time will be eight per cent worse off than pensioners today. There is already a 48 per cent gender gap in private pension income.

Head to [pensionawarenessday.com](https://pensionawarenessday.com) for advice on what you should be saving, as well as free webinars on 15-17 September.



## Half full or half empty?

\* Optimists tend to be on the same wavelength but not two pessimists are alike, according to a new study.

Social psychology and cognitive neuroscience experts from Kobe University took 87 people identified through testing as covering the spectrum of different outlooks.

Scans of their brains showed optimists tended to light up in the same way when asked to imagine events — both positive and negative — in the future, particularly in the medial prefrontal cortex. But pessimists had a wider and more diverse range of brain activity as they imagined their worst-case scenarios.

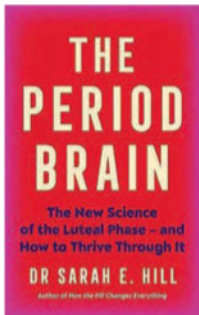
**YOUR  
MIND  
MATTERS**



## Must read

**So Late In The Day**  
by Claire Keegan  
(£7.99, Faber)

Office worker Cathal takes the bus home, facing a long weekend mulling over his lost fiancée Sabine and the future they might have had together. You feel sympathy – until slowly, the misogynist behaviour that drove her away, and the deep roots of it, are revealed. A gripping short story that might be economical with words, but uses each one to devastating effect.



**The Period Brain** by Dr Sarah E Hill (£16.99, Vermilion)

As women, we are taught to accept the hormonal rollercoaster of our monthly cycle — but award-winning researcher Dr Sarah E Hill reveals it doesn't have to be this way. Her insightful book explains the science of why we feel emotional, tired and down during the luteal phase and what we can do to avoid the premenstrual crash. Covering everything from food cravings and sex drive to exercise and motivation, you'll be empowered to approach PMS in a new way.

# Exercise your personality

**Different character traits tend towards specific types of activity, new study shows**

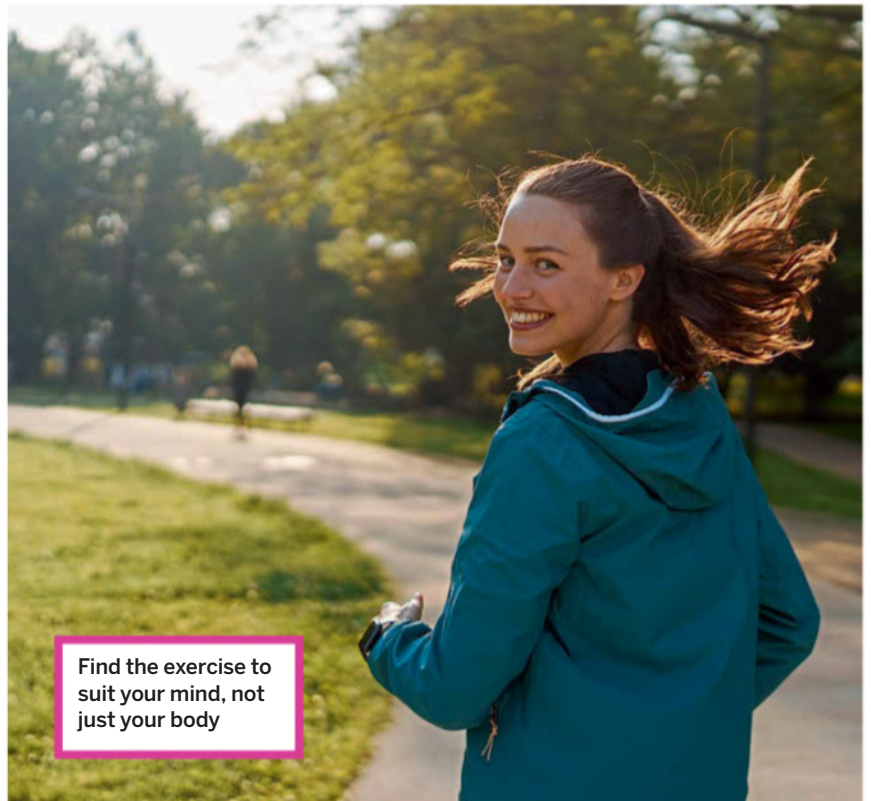
**F**rom chilled out yoga girls to full-on tennis warriors, we know hobbies often stem from personality styles. But now a new study has found we can also reverse engineer this to help us integrate regular enjoyable exercise into our lives more consistently.

The study in *Frontiers in Psychology* examined whether certain personality traits were associated with enjoying specific types of physical activity, how likely different personality styles were to stick to a prescribed exercise routine, and how these factors affected their fitness outcomes.

The findings revealed clear patterns. Extroverted individuals were more likely to enjoy high-intensity workouts like HIIT and

fast-speed cycling, while those with higher levels of anxiety and emotional sensitivity tended to prefer short, manageable bursts of activity, rather than longer sessions.

The more sensitive in the study also preferred to avoid monitoring such as heart rate tracking, suggesting that these individuals might appreciate being given space for independence and privacy when engaging in exercise. However, the study also found that for this more reserved group, there was a particularly strong reduction in stress when they undertook the exercise they enjoyed. This suggests that tailoring physical activity to our own personality styles has the potential to help us to become — and crucially, remain — more active.



Find the exercise to suit your mind, not just your body

# \*What's new

*And what's coming next*

Putting the 'error'  
into 'trial and error'



## If at first you don't succeed

**...keep repeating the same mistake over and over**

**P**eople who persist in self-sabotaging behaviour could be suffering from a subtle but continual failure to connect actions with consequences, a new study suggests.

Neuroscientists from UNSW Sydney used a simple online learning game, where participants were faced with making choices that led to either reward or punishment.

They found that three distinct behavioural types dictated whether

they emerged as winners or losers. The 'Sensitives' made up 26%, and worked out which choices led to bad outcomes and changed their behaviour to avoid them. Almost half (47%) were 'Unawares', who didn't work it out, but were able to modify their strategies once they were shown the error of their ways. The final 27% were 'Compulsives', who continued to make the wrong choices even after being shown where their strategy was failing.

'We found some people just don't learn from experience,' says lead researcher Dr Jean-Richard dit-Bressel. 'Even when they're motivated to avoid harm and are paying attention, they fail to realise their own behaviour is causing the problem.'

The study looked at 267 people from 24 different countries, with varied backgrounds and ages.

### Sounds good to us!

\* Female songbirds are more likely to sing when they have a co-parent sharing responsibility for child-rearing and they live year-round in stable tropical environments, research by the University of the Pacific found. But then, really, who wouldn't feel like singing then, sounds like bliss!

## Counting the cost of the perimenopause

A new survey has revealed the significant toll of fluctuating hormones on peri- and menopausal women's mental health, with 72% reporting poor emotional well-being in the past year, including stress, anxiety and sleeplessness.

According to the survey commissioned by Kalms, one in four (25%) experience stress and anxiety daily, with over a third (38%) saying these struggles have strained their relationships. A massive 70% 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. More than half (58%) frequently feel burnt out, as if they have little left to give, physically or emotionally. And 62% feel moments of sadness and hopelessness, highlighting the need for adequate support.

GP and menopause specialist Dr Rosie Khan says the findings are no surprise. '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 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.'

'Menopause-related mental health symptoms, such as anxiety and low mood, can be managed in various ways. While some women benefit from antidepressants or anxiolytics, lifestyle changes and other approaches may be just as effective. Since everyone's needs are different, speaking to a healthcare professional can help you find the right support.'

'Prioritising self-care is essential — focusing on good sleep, staying active in a way that feels right for you and nourishing your body can all have a positive impact. But if symptoms persist or become distressing, seeking professional help can make a real difference.'

**Find out more about managing the perimenopause on page 78.**

Feeling shattered  
before the fun has  
even started?



## Holiday havoc

### What's wearing us out?

**D**o you feel off-colour the moment you take a holiday from work? If so, you could have a dose of 'leisure sickness'.

A survey of 2004 adults aged 16-65 by IU International University of Applied Sciences in Germany found that more than seven in ten have suffered extreme fatigue, headaches, poor sleep or cold symptoms on days off or during holidays. Experts say this modern phenomenon is growing and that while holidays are good for the soul, the stress of the build-up means we can feel more drained when the break arrives, impacting the immune system.

### Expert advice: *autumn sleep reset*

As we transition out of summer with its hedonistic trips, travels and later nights many of us get that 'back to school' feeling and feel the urge to organise and reset. Here is a sleep reset ritual to help step into a more focused, calmer autumn season...

After a few months of later summer nights and looser routines, a sleep reset can help your body and mind ease into a steadier autumn rhythm. Choose one evening to fully reset your sleep hygiene.

**1** Start your day by getting some morning sunlight during the

first two hours of waking. This helps your body set a clear start time for the day, so that around 14-16 hours later, your body knows it's time to release the sleep hormone melatonin. A lack of natural light early in the day, may delay cortisol release (your natural 'wake-up' hormone) to later in the day, making it harder to fall asleep at night, so early sunlight prevents this misalignment.

**2** Skip caffeine after 2pm, and keep meals on the lighter side toward evening.

**3** About an hour before bed, turn off screens and dim the lights around your home. Prepare your bedroom by tidying and refreshing the sheets, with soft lighting. Instead of scrolling, do an 'analogue' activity like stretching, reading or listening to calming music or an audio book.

**4** The next morning, try to get outside early in the day again for more of that lovely sunlight. Just one night like this can help reset your body clock and lay the groundwork for better rest going into the new season.

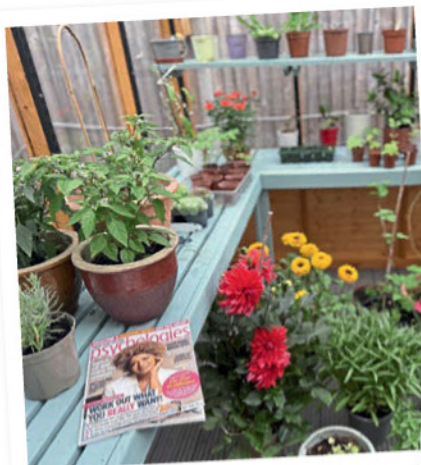
SET YOUR  
BODY  
CLOCK

*"Rejoicing in ordinary things is not sentimental or trite. It actually takes guts. Each time we drop our complaints and allow everyday good fortune to inspire us, we enter the warrior's world."*

Pema Chödrön

# \* Your Letters

*On heroes, holidays and hot nights*



## Write to us!

We want to know what you think, how you feel, and what you've seen!

### Don't spoil our holidays!

I've been a subscriber to *Psychologies* for over 10 years, and your articles always resonate with me (which is why I love your magazine!). But I felt so deflated after reading 'Travel light, or just lighten up and travel' I had to write in.

While I liked the idea of exploring the obstacles to enjoying holidays, and agreed with some of the ideas, I found it quite dismissive of some points.

As a busy working mummy, holidays offer a prolonged period of quality time with my family which I rarely get otherwise. For that reason, they are more important than ever!

Holidays can also provide something precious: time to reflect, reassess and even problem solve, away from the distractions of everyday life. This can allow us to return home with a fresh perspective to tackle issues head on.

Finally, I felt quite uncomfortable at the suggestion of 'bringing our worlds together', especially the notion of doing work while travelling! Pressure to log-on while we're on holiday could be hugely detrimental to some people's wellbeing.

Let us protect the importance of our holidays. Let's connect with ourselves on a deeper level away from the noise. And finally, let holidays give us a much-needed break from work! And with that, I'm Out of Office...

*Lucy Ridgway*

Send your stories and photos to [letters@psychologies.co.uk](mailto:letters@psychologies.co.uk)

## A very happy accident

It's a gorgeously lazy Saturday morning, how is it August already? I've just given my front hanging baskets a nice big drink and delighted to see that when giving the mailbox a cursory glance this month's *Psychologies* has arrived!

Once again — how can you possibly get it bang on every single month?! — the cover headlines tell me you appear to have tailored all content to my exact needs.

I did have great plans today to lose hours in my new greenhouse immersed in my new favourite

pastime but will now, gladly, have to make space for some comfort reading.

Also, mixing two of my faves, I recently had what I considered a very brave moment and went solo to the Happy Place festival and enjoyed a fabulous please-myself day.

Was exactly what I needed and I turned out to be brilliant company! Another person who did was my icon, Fearne Cotton. They say never meet your heroes... I couldn't disagree more.

Keep up the great work.

*Yours, Julie Jones*

### HOW A 'SLEEP DIVORCE' GAVE US A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

\* I was over the moon to see your 'Do You Need a Sleep Divorce?' article. My husband and I both go to the gym before work which means getting up early, so we try to be in bed no later than 9pm. Plus, I'm also going through the menopause and can be very hot and restless during the night which just keeps us both awake.

So a few months back my husband slept a few nights in our spare room — and we both loved it. We both slept straight through the night and felt totally refreshed. We smiled at each other before bed like we had found a secret no one knew about, and both could not wait to get to bed and sleep. I have always thought those who slept apart were

having issues in their relationships, but in fact they were the clever ones making sure they got great sleep and not worrying what people thought.

The intimate side of our marriage has also found a new lease of life. Gone are the nights you both felt under pressure to perform, as we found that the intimacy increases because you have had time apart, and you want to kiss each other good morning and hold/touch each other. We have joked about leaving a sign on our door handles if we are wanting the other person to come in for the night... DIVORCE it is definitely not!

I cannot recommend it enough. Give it a go, I think it will surprise you. *Many thanks, Hilary Green*

With Harriet Minter

## The reality of the 'holiday flu' findings

Just been reading on our news pages that 'leisure sickness' is real? Meet its latest victim...

“I have a cold. I often have a cold at this time of year. The weather is changing, I've finally come to the end of a hectic work period and, most dangerous of all to my body, I have slowed down. The second my immune system senses a break in my diary, it strikes. One day I'm filled with energy, the next I'm coughing and spluttering and drowning in a mountain of tissues.

I don't like being ill. As a child I had chronic asthma and spent a lot of time in hospital, away from my friends, being poked and prodded by doctors. The asthma meant that normal things — running around a playground, going to sleepovers — required much more time and preparation than they should have, and often didn't happen. So I grew up resenting my body for the things it stopped me from doing, the ways in which it restricted my life. And when I get ill now, I feel that same resentment coming to the surface.

For example, yesterday I was supposed to be going on a date but my body just wasn't going to allow it. I really wanted to go and up until the very last minute kept promising my

date that I would be there... but it was never going to happen. So I sent them a grovelling apology and when they replied with a 'don't worry, I hope you feel better soon,' I was genuinely a bit lost for words. Weren't they also annoyed with my useless body? Weren't they angry at me letting them down? Because I felt both of those things towards my body.

When I thanked them for being so kind about it, they were confused. Of course they'd be kind, they said. I was ill, they reminded me, kindness is what's required when someone is ill.

Their response made me cry. I hadn't realised how much I just needed someone to be kind to me, how much I needed that reminder to be kind to myself. For so much of my life my body was the problem that needed fixing. It was the thing that kept me

from my friends, from having fun, from being 'normal', so I got used to being frustrated with it. I normalised being angry at my own body. But asking it to heal while I talked badly about it was never going to work, it needs that gentleness right now. So please excuse me while I take myself back to bed for yet more rest. It's the kindest thing to do.



**HARRIET MINTER**

*Coach, writer and relationship therapist-in-training*

After 15 years as a hard-nosed journalist, she now lives a softer, more woo-woo life with her dog, Blue.

[harrietminter.com](http://harrietminter.com)

'I hadn't realised how much I needed someone to be kind to me, how much I needed that reminder to be kind to myself.'



# *‘We’re battery- farmed humans!’*

It’s time for a revolution in the workplace, if not for us then for our daughters, says Anna Whitehouse

**S**he’s spent the last decade working towards equality for ‘people who happen to be parents’, but after a false dawn during the pandemic, Anna Whitehouse says the current situation is worse than ever, with 74,000 women losing their jobs each year for daring to become pregnant — up from 54,000 in 2016. Here we find out how she’s changing her message to try to get through to businesses, and why she won’t even use the words ‘flexible working’ any more...


‘You grow with what you know,’ reflects the social-media star, best-selling writer and radio presenter, also known as Mother Pukka. ‘Had I not experienced a different way with my first child, I would

By **SALLY SAUNDERS**

never have questioned the status quo in the UK.’ And what a difference her having that experience has made to thousands upon thousands of women in the UK. Whitehouse, who last year was named one of the most influential women in Britain, has made it her life’s mission to level the playing field for her daughters and ours.

‘I have three little girls of my own, and I categorically cannot raise them for that same fall that I faced,’ she says. ‘So every day I wake up and I look at them and I’m telling them to work hard, to think about what they want to do when they’re older, telling them





Whitehouse first came to prominence a decade ago under the name Mother Pukka. She has now been listed among the ten most influential women in the country

*‘Every day I wake up and think, “What can I do to change the landscape?”’*

## *‘It’s not about flexible working anymore. I hardly ever use those words now. It’s about inclusive working.’*

they can do anything and be anyone. But it’s not truthful. I’m setting them up for a fall.

‘Because categorically, when women have babies, they can’t do anything. We get discriminated against all the time, 74,000 of us every single year.’

She’s referring to the number of women who lose their jobs every year for getting pregnant or for taking maternity leave.

‘Every day I wake up and think: “What can I do to change the landscape for them so they are not pulling together the fragments in that postpartum period, wondering who they are and where they’re going.” I would not be here if it wasn’t for them and the abject panic I have within me to try and change this landscape for them, because it isn’t working.’

The landscape was literally different when she had her first daughter, now aged 12, as she was working as a copywriter in the Netherlands at the time.

‘I was living in Amsterdam, where we experienced a completely different way of family life,’ she explains. ‘I had the equivalent of a maternity nurse for 10 days post birth. She was called a kraamzorg, and she would look after me, help me breastfeed, wrap her arms around me so I didn’t have any in laws trying to interfere. I was completely protected in that time.’

‘And then when I came to go back to work, my boss wouldn’t let me come back full time. I was paid full time, but had part time hours, because having a child is another job, so they don’t let parents go back full time. I thought that was the norm!’

She had a very rude awakening when she returned to London a couple of years later and had her second daughter.

### **A new normal**

‘Within 24 hours of giving birth, when I still felt like my stitches hadn’t even been stitched up yet, I was wheeled out of hospital in London, all on my own,’ she recalls. ‘And

I just remember a disconnect happening, a complete disconnect between myself, and myself as a mother. I almost left my body, I think, in shock.

‘Had I not experienced a different way with my first though, I would never have questioned the status quo in the UK. You just grow with what you know. You accept the path that’s been well trodden before by other mothers. You kind of just go, “Well, this is it.”’

But she couldn’t get over the fact that it could be so different — she had seen that fact with her own eyes. ‘Obviously you pay more taxes in Holland, but they also invest in that postnatal, postpartum period because it saves on antidepressants and anxiety meds later on,’ she says. ‘So they make a saving by protecting a woman in those very vulnerable 10 days postpartum, as the mental-health benefit that support has is incredible.’

It’s a point she returns to time and again: businesses being short sighted and prioritising short-term savings over long-term benefits. And she thinks things are only getting worse. ‘In terms of the working world, we’re going backwards,’ she says. ‘There was a moment when the pandemic bulldozed the way that we worked, and people were more connected to their families. You know, you saw CEOs with pictures their children had drawn in the background. It humanised the workforce in a way that I don’t think we had seen before. And that workforce was more motivated, with fewer sick days, with a higher retention rate.’

‘But now you’re seeing in the headlines the PWCs, the Deloittes, the Lord Sugars, the Sir James Dysons, the [Sir] Jacob Rees-Moggs, all saying categorically, “everyone back to the office, five days a week”.

‘Now, that’s bad enough as the evidence shows that hybrid working is far more effective. But the mental-health collateral damage is even worse, as it is actually saying “everyone back in the office, apart from you.”’



**‘When you get rid of us, you’re actively stopping the economy being boosted by the work that we can contribute.’**



‘Now, that “you” is anyone with caring responsibilities, anyone with mental-health issues, anybody with disabilities — and frequently that’s mothers. So right now, it’s probably the worst it’s ever been.’

### A place at the table

She’s pushing back against the idea that her drive to equalise working policy is simply to benefit ‘mummies who want more time with their babies’. ‘Our fertility rates and our birth rates are at their lowest since 1928, so this isn’t a “nice to have”. It’s not like a little bonus ball for companies to suddenly get on board and go “We should really treat the mummies a little bit better,”’ she says. ‘This is a crisis point in terms of population, as well as crisis point in terms of our own mental health.’

‘We’ve celebrated breaking down the nine-to-five model that was born in the Industrial Revolution. But what we’re seeing now is almost smoke and mirrors. There are hardly any jobs on offer or out there that aren’t five days a week in the office.’

‘So my driver, my reason to get up in the morning, the reason I quit my job in 2015, was to change the law on flexible working. But it’s not about flexible working any more. I won’t use those words now. It’s about inclusive working. I’m asking businesses: “Are you including Sally at the table? Are you including Anna at the table? Are you including somebody who can’t physically get to the table? Why does it need to be around a physical table in a boardroom? Can’t it be remote? Why can’t it include everybody else who has a relevant voice in this?”’

She’s infuriated that the business world seems oblivious to the benefits this approach could have. ‘It’s a far more business-focused campaign than anyone might think. I care about businesses retaining their best staff. I care about the fact that if you have 30% or more women at the top in your boardroom, you’re going to make more money. I care about the fact there’s fewer sick days when you allow people to work in a hybrid way. I care about retention. I care about the NHS workers who are burning out.’

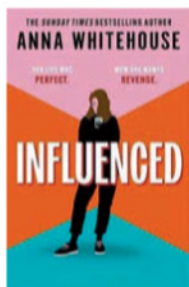
‘This is my wake-up-call for businesses to start to link treating people in a humane way with getting more cold, hard cash.’

‘It’s not a favour you’re doing the mothers that you’re currently kicking out of work because they dare to have a baby. When you get rid of us, you’re actively stopping the

# ANNA WHITEHOUSE PORTFOLIO



Whitehouse's new book, *Influenced*, deals with the highs and lows of social media



*Influenced* by Anna Whitehouse (Orion, £18.99,) is out now

economy from being boosted by the work that we can contribute. It costs the best part of £28,000 to replace a good employee, so stop being so short sighted.

'I'm trying to bring the conversation of mental health and profit margin in the same sentence, because the two go hand in hand.'

## Battery hens and milking cows

Whitehouse has a rather graphic image she calls on to make her point. 'If you look at a photo of an office block with people burning the midnight oil, and you look at a picture of chickens in a battery farm, it's quite uncannily how similar those two scenes are.'

'The battery chickens produce really small eggs. The battery chickens die sooner.

They burn out sooner. They are unhealthy. They're mentally broken.'

'But the free-range chickens, their eggs are bigger. They live longer, they're more productive, they're happier, healthier, able to see their other chickens. It's maybe a quite binary example, but I think it's a really relevant one. Do you know what? We're battery-farm humans.'

'The world is not set up for female biology, and so the collateral damage of that is female predominantly mental health. We need more people to stand up and say, "Why are we putting women in windowless rooms to express milk? Why can't we understand female biology, from periods to menopause?"'

'This structure was built at a time when men went out and earned the bacon and women cooked it. We're now earning the bacon, raising the children and cooking the bacon. And as a result we are a generation of burnt out, tapped out, drained mothers. And something seismic has to change.'

## A lost generation

Growing up in the 1980s, when our mothers' generation was being encouraged into the workforce while also running the home, plays a big part in the way we view ourselves, says Whitehouse. 'We saw our mothers be hyper productive, almost incapable of rest and restoration,' she says. 'So now we see working and over-productivity as a badge of honour. But where's the honour in being completely burnt out, disconnected from your body, incapable of looking after yourself, eating discarded crusts from your child's breakfast, putting yourself so far down that list, because everyone else and everything else is more important than you?'

'Our blueprint was the generation of women who were underpaid or not paid at all, not seen, not recognised, didn't have the choice of what they did with their purpose, or whether they chose to stay at home or not. It was a lost generation of women.'

'And ours is a generation that's now breaking all that down, because no, we categorically do not want it all. But are we doing it all? Yes, we are.'

'My cry to arms now is for us to recognise that, and to start prioritising ourselves. We deserve a place at our own table.' ■



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# \* Coaching in action

With Kim Morgan

## ‘I can still have the life I crave’

Jill is drowning under the weight of other people’s opinions and expectations, until she discovers what is really fuelling her conviction

“Jill had come for coaching to think about the future of her 30-year marriage.

During our first session together, she had said out loud, for the first time, that her marriage had run its course. Hearing herself voice those words had taken her by surprise and left her feeling sad and scared but also excited.

I hadn’t seen Jill for several weeks as she wanted time to reflect

and to talk with her husband before the next coaching session. When she did arrive, I was taken aback by the change in her. The sassy, polished, confident woman I had seen last time was barely recognisable. ‘How are you arriving here today?’ I asked.

‘Confused. Worn out. Deflated. Uncertain. Like I am a villain.’

I asked Jill if she was okay to tell me more about what was behind her feeling all those things.

‘Of course I am okay to tell you!’ she snapped. ‘That’s why I am here — to tell you stuff so you help me sort it out.’ I smiled to myself. I was pleased that the sparky, feisty Jill was still in there somewhere.

Jill said that the conversation with her husband had been a disaster. He had no idea that she wasn’t happy, let alone so unhappy and unfulfilled that she was contemplating ending the marriage. He thought everything was fine between them. He had since sunk into the depths of despair and was begging Jill to stay. He had contacted their adult children (without agreement from Jill) and elicited their sympathy and support.

‘That’s why I feel like I do,’ Jill said. ‘I turned to a couple of my close friends for support, and I didn’t get from them what I hoped for. I got judgement and coercion to stay and keep the status quo. I did wonder whether that was for my sake or theirs.’ As Jill



shared her concerns, I could sense the weight of others' voices — her husband, her children, and her friends — pulling her in different directions. It seemed that while Jill was firm in her own conviction, she was still caught in the turbulence of external opinions and expectations.

'How have all these other voices and opinions affected your thoughts and feelings?' I asked.

'I have been very shaken by other people's voices, but overall, I still trust myself, my judgement and my decision. It has been a long time coming. I know what I want — I want to end the marriage. I have neglected my own emotional fulfilment and self-care for years and I have also forsaken the things which bring me joy and fulfilment. If I don't follow my heart now, I will end my life feeling unfulfilled and resentful. I am still young enough to have more of the life I crave.'

I was struck by the certainty and passion with which Jill spoke. I asked her what was fuelling it.

Jill stopped in her tracks and

shook her head in dismay. 'This is ridiculous, but I have only just made a massive connection! When my mother died I found an orange notebook among her effects.'

'It was full of all her unrealised dreams and regrets about having stayed in a loveless marriage to my father. I don't want to leave an orange notebook behind at the end of my life — that is what is fuelling my conviction!'

'What would your mother say to you now?' I asked Jill.

Jill looked tetchy. 'Could we do this another time? I am exhausted.' She yawned, thanked me, and left.

I reflected on the session and my role in it. It is important for coaches to remain as neutral as possible, holding up a mirror to our clients' thoughts and feelings without imposing our own opinions or biases.

A question I often ask myself is: 'How clean has my lens been in this session? Have I allowed my client's thoughts to emerge clearly, or have I coloured them with



**KIM MORGAN**

*Award-winning and Master Certified Coach and author of The Coach's Casebook and The Coach's Survival Guide.*

**Kim, founder of Barefoot Coaching, has led the coaching field for over 30 years. A pioneer in coach training, coaching supervision and coaching for grief, she draws on her deep personal and professional insights in her work.**

my own perspectives?' As someone who has experienced divorce, I was aware of the potential for my own experiences to influence the conversation. I couldn't be sure whether I had led or coerced Jill even a little bit, so I booked a session with my coaching supervisor for the next day to seek some clarity, and some support and challenge.

***Does this resonate with you? Turn the page for Kim's exercises***



# \* Coaching in action

Try these simple exercises

## Whose voice is that?

**W**hen you have an important decision to make, how often do you get influenced by the feedback and opinions of others? How often do you follow your own instincts and listen to your inner voice? Here are some questions to help you bring balance to your decision making:

- List the people whose opinions influence your decisions. What makes you turn to these particular people for guidance?

- For each of these people, consider whether they ask questions to help you to explore your own thinking, or whether they offer you their own solutions.

- Think about a decision you have made in the past and the feedback you received from others. How much influence did external feedback have on your decision-making process?

- Reflecting on these experiences, when, and with whom, do you feel

that listening to external feedback and opinions adds value to your decision making?

- When and with whom do you feel external opinions diminish your own internal voice?

- Reflect on how you can engage with feedback without letting it overshadow your own inner voice.

- How might you create more space for self-reflection in your decision-making process?



## 10 powerful questions to support decision making

**1** How important is this change to you?

**2** What are you prepared to sacrifice to achieve the change?

**3** What support do you need and from whom?

**4** What will be the benefit to you of making this change?

**5** What will be the cost to you of making this change?

**6** What will be the cost to you of not making the change?

**7** How will this change keep the good things from your current situation?

**8** What would move you from thinking you *should* do this to you *have* to do this?

**9** What is one compelling reason to stay where you are and one to make this change?

**10** What do you need to change in your life to be ready for this change?

### WORDS OF WISDOM

*"The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself."*

Carl Rogers

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# WHY YOUR SISTER

*shapes who you are*



**W**e both love swimming in the sea, cuddling cats, and country walks. We have in-jokes that make us both laugh uncontrollably, much to the bemusement of everyone else in the room. In some ways, now in our thirties, living several hours apart and with huge variation in everything from our lifestyles to world-views, my sister and I have grown into very different people. But it still amazes me how much we have in common, from values and insecurities to our quirky mannerisms and the way we giggle.

By **CAROLINE BUTTERWICK**



Big sister = big spoon — that's just the way it is

If, like me, you have a sister — or sisters — you may sometimes find that you compare yourself with them too. I don't just mean comparison in a competitive sense, but in wondering about who you are in relation to who they are, and how that dynamic might have shifted — sometimes in big ways — since childhood.

I speak with psychotherapist and coach Karin Peeters about how having a sister can shape us. 'I have three younger sisters,' she shares with me. 'I'm the oldest. There's a protectiveness that comes with it — I was always the babysitter, and I really liked that.'

'It made me feel very caring about them, but I think sometimes also it made me feel overly responsible. When I had my first management job and I had a team, I was taking on too much emotional responsibility for their wellbeing in a way that wasn't helpful for

anyone, because I was so used to that emotional care taking, so to speak.'

Our relationships with those we grew up with can influence us greatly. A report from the British Psychological Society shares: 'The intimate knowledge that siblings have of one another as well as the emotional intensity of the relationship means that siblings have the potential to significantly impact on one another's development and well-being.'

It makes me think back to sitting in my sister's bedroom, giggling over quizzes in pre-teen magazines, and talking about the things that mattered to us in a way that felt unique. These shared experiences — those memories of that camping holiday, or of walking to school together each morning — would have taught you about the world through each other's eyes.

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Karin Peeters**

Coach and psychotherapist specialising in increasing self-confidence in relationships.

[vitaliscoaching.com](http://vitaliscoaching.com)

# WHY YOUR SISTER SHAPES WHO YOU ARE

*‘It’s sometimes hard to have somebody who’s already further ahead. This is even harder when it feels like your sister is treated “better” or is the “favourite”.’*

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Other people, like parents or other caregivers, can also influence these sister dynamics, says Peeters. ‘They may have said things like, “help your sister” or “you take your sister along with your friends, because they find it hard to make their own friends, so you take them under your wing.” Parents can set that dynamic up a lot where one needs to caretake of the other sister,’ Peeters explains.

There’s also the idea of social mirroring. This is where we, often without meaning to, mirror someone else’s behaviour. Growing up with a sister, you may well have picked up things from her — maybe that way you both pull the same face at something you don’t like, or the unique turns of phrase you both use.

It’s natural to find ourselves wondering about who we are in relation to our sister. ‘I know from my sisters, it’s sometimes hard to have somebody who’s already further ahead,’ says Peeters. ‘Somehow, there’s that sense of inadequacy, or that sense of comparing and then finding yourself lacking.’ This can be made harder when it feels like a sister gets treated “better” or is a “favourite” compared to us.

‘We can get habituated to certain dynamics,’ explains Peeters. ‘I think it’s quite common with things like one is the confident one, one is the initiator, one is the follower, or one is the active one, one is the pretty one, one is the smart one. We can kind of get divided in some ways. And it’s not always actually true.’

Whether we intend to or not, we use social comparison throughout our life, measuring ourselves against others, both favourably and negatively. It’s understandable that a sister would be a key person we’d do this with.

If you’ve ever found yourself feeling like you revert to your childhood role when at family gatherings, you’re not alone. ‘It’s very common,’ reassures Peeters. Sometimes, this can feel a bit overwhelming, particularly if there are negative traits or dynamics that come up. Peeters suggests, where possible, taking breaks — even things like popping to the shop or going for a walk around the block can give you a bit of headspace.

In these moments, it can be worth reflecting on how you feel. ‘Really come back home to yourself,’ says Peeters. ‘How am I behaving? Am I being who I want to be? Am I myself, or am I getting sucked into these old, habituated patterns? And the best way to catch it is when it’s not yet too far removed. Check in with yourself regularly throughout the event. Even if you’re only visiting for a few hours, or if you’re having a whole weekend, come back to yourself.’

## **Echoing childhood dynamics**

Sister relationships can be difficult, too. ‘When we don’t get along, we need to get the shame out of that and normalise it,’ says Peeters. ‘If that’s mutual, it’s easier, and then you can just relax into it and have a lukewarm relationship that is fine by both. But if she wants more and you don’t want to give it, then it becomes a bit more tricky. It’s really about expressing your boundaries.’

Peeters emphasises that in some situations, it can help to see the behaviour as something different from the person. ‘So if you just don’t get along with your sister, either because she’s dysfunctional and makes you feel awful, or because you simply would never pick her as a friend, you can think about “this is how they behave and I would not





choose this behaviour in my life, but this is who they are as a person. And so how can I have a relationship with the person and protect myself from the behaviour, and to see them separately?”

She gives the example of two sisters where one often asks for help when she could do it herself, something that might be an echo of an old childhood dynamic.

‘You need to ask yourself how can I be with her as a human being, and when she is doing this “please rescue me” behaviour, how can I separate that?’ says Peeters.

‘It can be thinking, “I know that sometimes I find that a little bit tricky, but I love who she is”. And then it becomes easier to spend time together, even if it’s just for Christmas or a wedding. It’s like, “I can look at the person behind the behaviour, and have a relationship with the person and not engage with the behaviour so much”.’

Our sisters can shape us greatly, but they’re not the be all and end all. ‘I think it’s nice that at some point we individuate,’ says Peeters. ‘That’s a word that Carl Jung uses, that we become our own person.’

‘This is around thinking about what the role models are I’ve seen with my parents. This is for my role models of my siblings. But what is my view? What is my idea? Who do I want to be? If I’m not around my sister, how am I different? If I’m with my sister, how am I different, and how do I adapt?’

‘And what do I want to keep because I like it, and what needs a bit of tweaking? How do I develop a level of awareness when I step into an automatic family pattern, or that I do this automatic mirroring, because it’s just what I’m used to and got habituated to. And when do I have enough conscious awareness to decide who I want to be?’

After speaking to Peeters, I find myself reflecting more on my own sister relationship and the ways she has shaped me — and, perhaps, that I have shaped her. I send her a message to ask how she’s doing — complete with a cat meme that I know she’ll love, because I love it too, and that’s definitely one thing we have in common. ■

**‘I know it can sometimes be a little tricky, but I love who she is.’**

# What's the deal with 'MONEY DYSMORPHIA'?

**H**ave you ever found yourself doomscrolling through your socials late at night, then looking around your home in disgust, or mentally badmouthing your holiday plans, your car, your wardrobe...? You aren't alone. The pressure we face to 'keep up with the Joneses' can lead to our perception of financial reality becoming skewed, resulting in intense feelings of anxiety, guilt and stress about spending and saving

By **CAMILLA FOSTER**

'Money dysmorphia', echoing a term more usually heard around our perception of our body, can cause real emotional issues, and lead to both overspending and excessive saving, depending on how you think and feel.

'Money dysmorphia is effectively when the distorted perception of one's financial health, how you feel about your money, doesn't necessarily reflect the reality,' explains Matthew Parden, CEO of money management app Marygold & Co. 'This can be emotionally driven, shaped by irregular patterns or social pressures to keep up.'

'We've worked with anxious savers, avoidant savers and people who like to spend, so there's lots of different types of personality and money dysmorphia can manifest in all of them,' says Parden. 'Feeling uncertain or anxious about money, even though there is no apparent or immediate shortfall in money, could be a sign of money dysmorphia,' highlights Parden. 'It could be that you avoid checking your bank statements or balances and this could be because of stress, or it could be because of a fear of what you might see.'

'Another sign could be fluctuating between periods where you're spending a lot and reining it back and spending a little, so you kind of vacillate between overspending and underspending. Money dysmorphia could be when you are playing down your success, payments or debts and you feel that you've fallen short, that what you have isn't not enough — even though it might be sufficient.'

## Is social media to blame?

'Social media presents a curated version of life, where people are only showing the best side of financial life without providing the context,' says Parden. 'You don't see the debt, the lack of savings, the stress — that is all hidden. It does amplify these "norms" and create unrealistic expectations.'

'It provokes spending which is really emotionally driven and creates a constant pressure to keep up, so that even if your financial footing is secure, you still feel that you've got some way to go. And that in itself

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Matthew Parden**

CEO of money management app Marygold & Co, chartered accountant and qualified financial adviser.

[marygoldandco.uk](http://marygoldandco.uk)



*‘Social media provokes spending that is really emotionally driven.’*

can lead to insecurity and a distorted sense of your own financial situation and reality.’

What consequences can money dysmorphia have? ‘Money dysmorphia can often make people avoid getting involved with money and that means they are avoiding financial planning and organisation of their financial life,’ says Parden.’ This can lead to missed opportunities like having a safety net reserve of cash. ‘You don’t have any savings because you are constantly spending, you may feel like you haven’t ever got enough and will consistently avoid doing it. That in itself can lead to anxiety, a sense of failure and can affect your mental and physical health.’

### How do we tackle it?

‘Take a step back and work out what it is that may be impacting your relationship with money,’ advises Parden. ‘Just start with small, repeatable steps, like taking 10 minutes out of every week to look at your finances and understand what you’re doing and where your money has gone and what is coming up.’

‘If you recognise an issue there, try not to judge yourself. Just do regular gentle reviews of your finances because that helps you start to engage with it and might help reduce the fear. It might also help you move towards bridging that gap between how you feel about your finances and actually what is true in your finances.’

There are also lots of apps available that can give you a good overview of your financial life. ‘If you begin to understand your finances from a behavioural aspect, that could help you identify emotional triggers that cause you to spend or save,’ says Parden. ‘Apps can also help you to not spend or withdraw. On the Marygold & Co app you can set a time lock and other apps have similar tools that can put a bit of friction on your spending before you make payments.’

What are the benefits of having a clearer, healthier financial mindset? ‘If you have a positive financial mindset and the tools, it gives you the ability to actually start saving for those things which are going to help you in your financial life, like building up cash reserves,’ says Parden. ‘Creating a financial plan will also help you meet your short-term and long-term objectives, whether it’s saving for a wedding or for a holiday. Just engaging with your finances can have tremendous long-term benefits.’ ■

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*Sally*

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*'Even a five-minute  
break every hour  
improves wellbeing  
and performance.'*

'Remember to take  
breaks that are actually  
restful. It's all too easy to  
eat at your desk or check  
emails on your phone.'



# READY, STEADY, *rest!*

So often we wish for more hours in the day, because having more hours would mean more time spent getting things done, and it's all productivity, right? But while you probably feel you need to get your foot back down hard on that pedal to meet September head on, what if I told you what you actually need to do to enhance your productivity is to... Do absolutely nothing.

Nada. Zip. Zilch. At least for a little while. Feels counter-intuitive, right? How can not doing anything — actively pausing, and stepping away from our mountain of tasks — equate to an increase in productivity in completing said mountain of tasks? Surely, by spending less time on the things we would like to achieve, we will get less done? It's simple maths, surely?

It turns out, in fact, that being mindful about what we do, and how we recharge our batteries with rest, can be a game changer.

The problem is, we are used to the idea of 'powering through' task after task, keeping our heads down and plugging away, imagining rest to be an exotic, hard-to-reach destination

By **YASMINA FLOYER**

that exists on the other side of a series of items checked off our to-do list. This positions the idea of rest as an indulgence at best and as laziness at worst, since it becomes something that we feel that we can opt out of and relegate to an undefined point in the future, rather than viewing it as core to our wellbeing, a necessary action we must take when our bodies and minds signal it is time to pause. We typically don't view rest as a necessity, which is why we need to acknowledge the consequences of ignoring it.

'Not resting can impact on us physically, >

*‘When we’re tired, the brain will fall into old habits and patterns, making changes or initiating new behaviours or tasks increasingly difficult.’*

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cognitively and emotionally,’ says psychologist and author Dr Emma Hepburn. ‘When our brains are tired, this can impact on more cognitively demanding tasks which require executive function, such as maintaining and shifting attention, inhibiting responses, decisions making, planning and problem solving.

‘The brain will also fall into tasks or routines that are less effortful, so we may fall into old habits or patterns, and making changes or initiating new behaviours or tasks can be increasingly difficult.’

## Burning the candle at both ends

When it comes to how a lack of rest impacts us emotionally, she says this can happen in several ways. ‘It is stressful for your brain to keep on going without the energy it requires, so this creates more stress for your body, which in the long term impacts on you physically and how you feel emotionally.’

She points out how we can also become more irritable and less tolerant, and we may also have difficulty inhibiting our responses to emotions, so we may react in ways or say things we wouldn’t normally do or say. We all know how much more difficult it is to remain patient the more tired we become, and how much harder it becomes to block negativity.

But while it can be easy to tell when we are physically tired, it can be way more difficult to spot when we are cognitively weary. The idea of burning the candle at both ends has become shorthand for sacrificing sleep in order to get things done, but, ultimately, the best way to get things done is to rest our brains, and the best way to do that is to sleep. ‘It is also the time that the caretaker cells in our brain get working mopping up debris, which is why good sleep


leads to improved cognitive function both short and long term, as well as improved mood,’ she explains.

I used to think that persistence was the key to solving a problem, yet I have found the opposite to be true. Sometimes the very thing I need to do in order to get something done is to step away from it. How many of us relate to having our best ideas come to us in the shower, or when we are out walking the dog? I tend to be inundated with creative ideas whenever I take a holiday. Dr Hepburn says there’s good reason for this. ‘During rest, your brain can consolidate what it has learned and make links between what you are doing and other information in your brain, so it can remember this better and use this information more effectively.’

So, if ‘pumping the breaks’ is the thing we need to maximise productivity, what small steps can we take begin to integrate rest into their lives? If you are anything like me, knowing exactly how to take a rest when a natural pause appears might be enough of a challenge, let alone knowing how to make room for the sort of rest that will sustain your output. Dr Hepburn advises us that preplanning breaks can be an effective way to start, for example deciding that you will work 40 minutes then take a ten-minute break. ‘There’s strong evidence that even taking just a five-minute break every hour improves wellbeing and performance.’

## No more multitasking

The key thing to remember is to take breaks that are actually restful, since we all too often fall into the trap of sneaking in other tasks while supposedly taking time out, like eating lunch at our computer (guilty!) or checking emails on our phone. ‘This keeps us in



‘A cup of tea looking round my flowers in the garden is both restful and enjoyable.’



switched-on mode and doesn't actually let our brain switch off,' says Dr Hepburn. 'An effective break might be getting away from your desk or taking a few minutes to do something you enjoy, going for a quick walk, or stretching, doing some yoga moves. I like a cup of tea looking round my flowers in the garden, which is both restful and enjoyable. Naps can also be effective, and so can just shutting your eyes for a few minutes. It's about doing something that helps you switch off from the tasks you are doing, is restful and recharges your energy.'

Because ultimately, why should we feel that we must complete all our tasks under a

shroud of tiredness? I am realising we won't be rewarded for our effort. Nobody will come along and congratulate us for having done all these things without taking a moment to ourselves. Perhaps we will get things done, but we will also likely be closer to burnout, in which case, we won't be getting anything done for the foreseeable future!

So, next time your to-do list is long, your plate is full and you're trying to figure out the mental arithmetic of when and how you will get everything done, try factoring a decent rest into the equation. It might not seem like it at first, but it will likely help you do better, and, even more importantly, feel better. ■

## Psychologies

*Meet the Experts*



### Dr Emma Hepburn

Dr Emma Hepburn is a clinical psychologist, lecturer, author and illustrator. She has over 20 years experience of working with mental health and wellbeing. Her passion is making science-based information engaging and accessible through her writing and illustration. She has written three books, most recently *A Toolkit For Your Emotions* (Quercus, £14.99).

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# SAY IT

*before you swallow it*

If you've ever bitten your tongue in a meeting with your useless boss, laughed off *another* passive-aggressive comment from your mother-in-law, or been up until 3am rehashing what you 'should' have said to both of them, you're not alone. Most of us were never taught how to handle conflict directly. We were taught to be nice. To smooth things over. To keep the peace, even if it felt 'off'.

By **KELLIE GILLESPIE-WRIGHT**

From an early age, the message is subtle but persistent: being liked matters more than being clear. Good girls say yes. Assertiveness is risky. Discomfort is dangerous.

So when conflict starts to simmer, at work, at home, or anywhere else, something in us reacts before we can explain why. A lump in the throat. A tightness in the chest. We second-guess what we were about to say. That reflex to shrink into ourselves, or to simply clam up, takes over.

According to confidence coach Chantal Dempsey, this isn't a personal flaw, it's learned. 'From a young age, many women are conditioned to prioritise harmony,' she says. 'Traditionally, children model one of their parents, and for generations, the roles were

clear. The father figure was often seen as the authority and the mother as the peacekeeper.

'So, when a girl watches her mother constantly shrink her needs to avoid conflict, she learns that unspoken rule: be agreeable, don't rock the boat, don't be too much,' she says. 'Even now, despite generational progress, those messages still echo. It shows up when a woman bites her tongue in a meeting, when she says "it's fine" but it's not. When she is praised for being "nice" instead of respected for being clear and strong.' But swallowing your needs doesn't prevent conflict. It only delays it, often allowing small tensions to quietly build





'Your body tells the story your words are trying to say. Small adjustments can de-escalate and signal calm and confidence.'

until a minor issue becomes harder to contain. So how can we break the cycle?

Words alone won't cut it. The way we show up matters. Tone, posture, and mindset influence whether a conversation becomes constructive or collapses into tension. 'Your body tells the story your words are trying to say (or trying to hide!),' says Dempsey. 'Research shows that 93% of communication is non-verbal, with 55% body language, 38% tone of voice, and only 7%

words. Small adjustments can de-escalate and signal calm and confidence whilst naturally lowering defensiveness and conflict.' This means delivery matters as much as the words you say. Speaking slower, with a steadier and lower tone, signals that you're grounded. People tend to mirror the energy in front of them, so calm often invites calm. The same goes for posture. Uncrossing your arms, softening your shoulders, and planting your feet shows you're steady, not confrontational.

### Think about your focus

And when it comes to words, start small. If someone makes a dismissive comment that lands wrong, don't be tempted just to brush it off. Try something direct, but grounded: 'That didn't sit right with me. Can we talk about what you meant?' It signals openness, not combativeness, and invites clarity instead of conflict.

But communication isn't only about how we look and what we say. It's about where we place our attention when things get tense. Dana Caspersen, conflict engagement specialist and author of *Conflict Is an Opportunity* (Association for Conflict Resolution), has spent years helping people navigate hard conversations with clarity and care. She urges us to stop fixating on who's right and focus on what matters beneath the conflict. 'By consciously shifting attention away from attack and defence and toward a mindset of curiosity, we can help the

# SAY IT BEFORE YOU SWALLOW IT

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Dana Caspersen**

A conflict engagement specialist, best-selling author, and award-winning performing artist. Drawing on the insight gained from her experience as a mediator and conflict analyst, Caspersen empowers people and organisations to navigate complex situations. Author of 'Conflict Is an Opportunity: 20 Fundamental Decisions for Navigating Difficult Times'.

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**Chantal Dempsey**

Award-winning mindset and confidence coach, NLP expert and master hypnotherapist, known for her transformative impact in the fields of confidence, communication and personal development.

[chantaldempsey.com](http://chantaldempsey.com)

conversation itself shift to the level of what really matters, versus fixating on positions and strategies,' she says. Without that shift, tension lingers. 'When tensions rise but are unaddressed, a pattern often takes hold where people get entrenched in their positions and strengthen their assumptions about the other person's motives. The absence of constructive communication prevents people getting the information they need to understand the situation from both sides.'

### Name your needs

Nevertheless, it's easy to fall into a tug-of-war over who's right. Caspersen notes: 'People often engage in cycles of attack and defence in relationship to their positions. What is missing is an understanding of the needs behind those positions.'

That's why it's essential to clarify what really matters. 'Needs and interests are the key to finding constructive ways forward in conflict,' says Caspersen. 'We can practise naming needs and interests and articulating them in ways people are more likely to hear by describing them without attack or defence, and in relationship to ourselves, as what helps us survive and thrive, rather than as a reaction to someone else.'

'When those needs aren't named, the result is often that one person's position gets pushed through, creating resentment and instability, or a compromise is reached that satisfies no one.'

To prevent that kind of breakdown, Dempsey recommends pressing pause. Phrases like 'Let me think about that for a moment' or 'Give me a second to find the right words' create space to respond instead of react. That same steady approach helps in the moment someone cuts you off. Try: 'I would like to finish what I was saying, then I will hear you out fully.' Or, 'Can I finish?

I promise to hear you out.' These small boundary-setting phrases can shift the energy without raising the stakes.

Sarcasm, too, is best met with clarity. As Dempsey puts it: 'Sarcasm often masks discomfort or passive aggression.' Try, 'That felt like a dig, can we stay on topic?' or 'If something is bothering you, I would rather hear it honestly.'

And if someone goes silent? Dempsey suggests ways of keeping the door open: 'I notice you have gone quiet, I would love to understand how you are feeling.' Or 'If now is not the time, I respect that, but I would like us to revisit this.'

She also emphasises the importance of being direct, without heat, or being clear without being harsh. Phrases like, 'Let me be clear about where I stand,' or, 'This is the part that doesn't work for me,' set a boundary without escalating tension. Even saying no can be kind: 'This is not something I can agree to, but I am open to finding a solution.'

At the same time, people are more likely to hear you when they feel heard themselves. That doesn't mean you have to agree, but acknowledging their experience can open the door. Dempsey suggests phrases like, 'I hear what you're saying and I can see this really matters to you.' That recognition can create space for something more honest to unfold.

### Tweak your language

And once that door is open, what you say matters just as much as how you say it. Some phrases can shut a conversation down before it begins. Avoid 'You always' or 'You never,' which provoke defensiveness. Try, 'I've noticed a pattern, and I want to talk about how it impacts me.'

Similarly, 'If you really cared, you would...' can sound like emotional pressure, whereas 'What I need to feel supported is...' focuses on your needs without blame. And

*'These are subtle changes, but in moments of stress, subtlety matters. They help create safety for both people.'*



If someone goes silent, keep the door open. Try: 'I notice you have gone quiet, I would love to understand how you are feeling.'

while 'I'm sorry you feel that way' might sound polite, it often deflects responsibility. Try instead: 'That wasn't my intention, but I see how that impacted you.'

Even small tweaks, like replacing 'why' with 'how come', or 'should' with 'could', can shift the tone from judgement to curiosity. And instead of saying, 'You do this,' try, 'I feel that when this happens...' to keep the focus on your experience, not their behaviour. These are subtle changes, but in moments of stress, subtlety matters. They help create enough safety for both people to stay in the conversation, rather than shutting it down.

Of course, it's easier to speak clearly when you feel composed. But in conflict, your nervous system may say otherwise. 'When you are in conflict, the amygdala, your brain's alarm system, gets activated,' Dempsey explains. 'Your heart rate goes up, your breathing gets shallower, your muscles

tense. In that moment, your body's priority is survival, not smart communication.'

That's why she recommends starting with your breath. 'Try inhaling for four, hold for four, exhale for four. This sends a signal to your brain that you are calm, and in turn the brain releases calming chemicals into your system,' Caspersen reinforces this approach. 'Our bodies register experience in the form of sensation and image and hold that experience even when we don't register it on a conscious level.' She suggests practicing ahead of time: imagine a stressful moment, notice what your body does, then shift into a posture of ease with an open chest and feet on the ground. Practise moving between the two to build muscle memory for calm.

And if the conversation goes badly? That doesn't mean you failed. Caspersen advises stepping back instead of pushing forward. 'Check if you are making things

# SAY IT BEFORE YOU SWALLOW IT

worse. If you are in attack or defence mode, take several breaths and actively shift into a curious mindset.' Then clarify your intention. 'Even if you're angry or hurt, direct your attention to the needs and interests of the other person as well,' she says. 'Abandon covert intentions to prove yourself right and the other person wrong.'

## Understand the dynamics at play

Once there's space for reconnection, approach it with care. 'Let them know what you regret about how it went last time (from the perspective of your own actions) and what matters to you in the conflict. Ask what matters to them and if they think you're missing anything.' And when power dynamics are involved, Caspersen stresses caution. 'If a situation of power imbalance feels dangerous,' she says, 'first take a step back and assess whether you need to find allies or other support before you engage.'

If it's safe to do so, focus on shared problem-solving. 'Acknowledging the other person's interests (as opposed to positions or

### Read

*Changing the Conversation: The 17 Principles of Conflict Resolution* by Dana Caspersen (Penguin)

### Listen

*How to navigate conflict*, with Philippa Perry, The Liz Earle Wellbeing Show

### Watch

*From Conflict to Comfort: Navigating Difficult Conversations* with Anne-Maartje Oud, on YouTube

strategies) while clearly stating yours without attack or defence puts that important information in the space between you.'


Dempsey adds: 'When you're speaking with someone in a position of power, the stakes feel higher, and your nervous system knows it.' Her advice? Ground yourself in your own worth. 'Take a deep breath and remind yourself that no matter who it is, they are a human being, just like you. They have emotions. They've made mistakes. They are not above you, and their role doesn't change your right to be heard.'

That reminder matters. Because conflict isn't just about being assertive. It's about staying rooted in connection, and rooted to your values, your boundaries, and your voice.

This is what breaks the cycle. Not swallowing your voice, but understanding what's at stake and being willing to say it out loud. Because in the end, conflict isn't about controlling the outcome, it's about fair resolution, and that happens by having your voice heard, even when things get uncomfortable. ■

Ground yourself in your own worth: 'Take a deep breath and remind yourself that no matter who you are speaking to, they are a human being just like you.'





*"All the months are crude  
experiments, out of  
which the perfect  
September is made."*

VIRGINIA WOOLF

# Rehabilitating the BLACK SHEEP



**Y**ou wouldn't quit a show or book because the character hit a low point. You'd lean in to see how they rise. Treat your story the same way. Be curious about your next chapter. You are all of it; story, audience, director, and star.

By **PATRICIA AHERN**

**3** HSPs experience intense emotions and possess a heightened capacity for empathy.

**4** HSPs notice the smallest details others might overlook.

Her work fascinates me in that it highlights sensitivity as a distinct trait, not a disorder or condition to be fixed. In fact, she argues that it offers survival advantages. HSPs are incredibly attuned to their environment, noticing subtle changes others may miss. This heightened awareness can be invaluable in both everyday life and challenging situations. But it doesn't always feel invaluable! Growing up being told you are 'too emotional', 'too sensitive', or 'too overpowering' creates wounds that can last a lifetime if left unaddressed. Ironically, these criticisms of being too much often lead to feelings of being 'less than', along with;

- Not feeling good enough
- Deep loneliness despite appearing happy externally
- Hyper-awareness of others' emotions
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Constant need to prove oneself
- Frustration, anger, and resentment

In a new column, we highlight some of the best ideas being shared on the Barefoot Coaching blogs on [psychologies.co.uk](http://psychologies.co.uk). We will select interesting pieces published by Barefoot alumni to bring you fresh coaching insights. This month, meet self-love coach Patricia Ahern

I always felt 'different' growing up, like there was something wrong with me. But in the past few years, as I have heard more about the Highly Sensitive Person (HSP), it all makes sense. Dr Elaine Aron coined the term, and explains the core traits.

**1** HSPs think deeply about everything, taking time to process information, emotions, and experiences.

**2** Due to heightened sensitivity, HSPs easily become overwhelmed by sensory input such as loud sounds, bright lights, or busy environments.



'It's not about being the same, it's about creating a space where we can thrive, just as we are.'

One of the greatest prisons people live in is the fear of what other people will think: the fear of being judged, criticised, blamed, can be debilitating. For HSPs this fear and pain can make us feel alone and even result in isolation.

Breaking free from cycles of judgment, criticism, and blame begins with self-awareness and self-compassion. Instead of judging, we can learn to discern, applying openness, understanding and curiosity rather than harsh internal criticism. Instead, we can recommend and support learning and communication.

When we embrace our authentic selves, including our sensitivities, we discover that what once were made to seem like weaknesses can actually be our strengths.

The antidote to judgment, criticism and blame is cultivating compassion first for self, and then this will radiate outward to others. The journey to self-love requires:

**1 Practising belonging.** As Brené Brown says, 'Belonging is a practice that requires us to be vulnerable, get uncomfortable, and learn how to be present with people without sacrificing who we are.'

**2 Self-acceptance.** 'Our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance,' says Brown. Practise positive, loving affirmations daily.

**3 Healing emotional wounds.** 'Healing begins when you give yourself the care you always gave away.' Practise being kind, gentle and patient with yourself.

**4 Protecting your positive energy.** Decide whether you will be a reflector, absorber, or transformer of another person's negative energy. As Douglas Horton says: 'No one can drive you crazy unless you give them the keys.'

## Embrace your strength

For those who have always felt different, the black sheep, your uniqueness is your strength. In embracing your authentic self, allowing your inner black sheep to be rehabilitated and even blossom, you contribute something vital to our world that no one else can. As an African proverb wisely states: 'When there is no enemy inside, the enemy outside cannot hurt you.'

The world needs our empathis, sensitive people, and neurodivergent individuals to bring creativity, colour, curiosity, and imagination to the forefront. Your sensitivity isn't a flaw, it's your strength.

Because in the end, it's not about fitting into someone else's box, it's about creating a space where we can thrive, just as we are.

If you want more compassion in the world, be compassionate

If you want more love in the world, find it in you in your own unconditional self-love

If you want more peace in the world, cultivate it within you and spread peace

In a world filled with judgment, criticism, and blame, the antidote is love, unconditional love, empathy, compassion, and forgiveness, first for self and then for others. These are the true keys to healing the invisible wounds that so many carry. By embracing these values, we don't just heal ourselves, we heal the world.

As you continue your journey of self-discovery and acceptance, remember that healing is just the beginning. Once you heal and grow, you gain the power to help others do the same, creating ripples of positive change that extend far beyond yourself. ■

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Patricia Ahern**

**Mental-fitness and self-love coach Patricia is an ICF-certified Business and Personal Development coach, and also an NLP practitioner. She is passionate about the therapeutic value in creative writing with mindful poetry. For more on this topic, listen to Patricia's Mindful Poetic Stories Podcast from May 13 and 20.**

[pacoaching.co.uk](http://pacoaching.co.uk)

## A salve for the soul

Take your notebook on a creative journey,  
as we unleash the power of poetry

“When I was seven, I wrote a poem at school that won second prize in a local library competition. I don’t remember exactly what it was about, only that it was made up of fragments: small moments from my day, my thoughts, and things I had noticed. What I do remember clearly is standing in front of that poem, displayed on the library foyer. That moment changed something in me. For the first time, writing from my own life made me feel good about a life that, even then, carried its challenges. Poetry helped me see that even the ordinary parts of my day were worth something. I knew I wanted to be a writer.

More recently, I was on an early morning train into the city when I missed my stop. My heart began to race. I had only 15 minutes to turn around and catch a train to Wales. Worse, my train ticket was restricted. If I missed that train, I’d have to buy a new one entirely.

I sprinted down the escalator and slipped through the closing doors of the Elizabeth Line. Still breathless and very dishevelled, I avoided eye

contact, staring blankly ahead until my gaze landed on a poster. It was a poem entitled *Daughter* by Mosab Abu Toha, part of the Poems On The Underground series. As my eyes flickered over the words, within seconds, my breathing slowed. The words met me where I was. I softened. A smile even crept across my face.

I caught the train. And the first thing I did once I sat down was reach for my pen and notebook. I copied out the poem by hand, a practice I have been doing for years. Writing poems in my notebook by hand grounds me. It’s the easiest way beyond reading the poem out loud to bring the poem closer to home.

This month I’m thinking about that moment — about the medicine of poetry, and why we need it now more than ever. In an age of artificial intelligence and digital overwhelm, poetry brings us back to what is deeply human: rhythm, language, breath, feeling. On that train, I read the poem aloud in my head. Its words soothed me. That’s what poetry can do.

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*‘I remember the relief I felt reading that poem, which said what I couldn’t put into words. A reminder I was not alone.’*



Poet Martin Newell once wrote: ‘Poetry is a salve on human hurt.’ And yet in this era of speed and simulation, many of us feel cut off from poetry. We find ourselves unsure of how to return to it. But I strongly believe we need poetry more than ever.

Last year, at the abrupt end of a brief relationship, I read a poem that captured so much of what I was feeling, yet felt unable to say. I eventually shared the poem with my ex. The relationship ended anyway. But I remember the relief I felt reading that poem, which said what I couldn’t put into words. A reminder that in a world of hurt I was not alone.

And my experience is not unique.



Poetry brings us back to what is deeply human: rhythm, language, breath, feeling

A growing body of research supports what many of us feel intuitively: poetry can heal.

- A 2016 study found that cancer patients who listened to music and poetry experienced reduced pain and depression, while poetry specifically increased feelings of hope.
- A 2015 study with stroke patients showed that reading poetry improved cognitive function and helped patients better cope with stress.
- A 2021 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that reading poetry helped young people regulate emotions like anger, sadness, fatigue, fear, and worry.
- Poetry has also been shown to support clinicians and caregivers,

helping them process the emotional and psychological labour of their roles.

- Writing poetry has been found to improve memory, increase clarity, and help the writer make meaning from a range of life experiences.
- And perhaps most powerfully: we feel less alone when we read poems that reflect something of ourselves. We're reminded that others have felt this too.

I'm curious which of the research findings resonates with you the most? In her essay, *A Poem of One's Own*, poet Honor Moore offers ways to collect material for poems from the world around us, breaking the myth that poets are only the talented



**JACKEE HOLDER**

a coach, author, interfaith minister and co-founder of The School Of Journaling.

Known for her soulful and practical approach she weaves together creativity, the natural world and the power of the written word to support emotional clarity and personal transformation. Jackee's work appears at the intersection of journaling, well-being, and embodied wisdom.  
[theschoolofjournaling.co.uk](https://theschoolofjournaling.co.uk)  
Instagram: @theschoolofjournaling  
@jackeeholderinspires  
Linkedin: JackeeHolder

# \*You, Write Now

*With Jackee Holder*

and gifted ones. One friend gathers fragments of language like jewellery; another jots down slogans from advertising boards; a third collects sentences and phrases from overheard conversations.

Poetry doesn't always begin in silence, sometimes it begins in the noise. Everyday language is full of potential. We just need to pay attention.

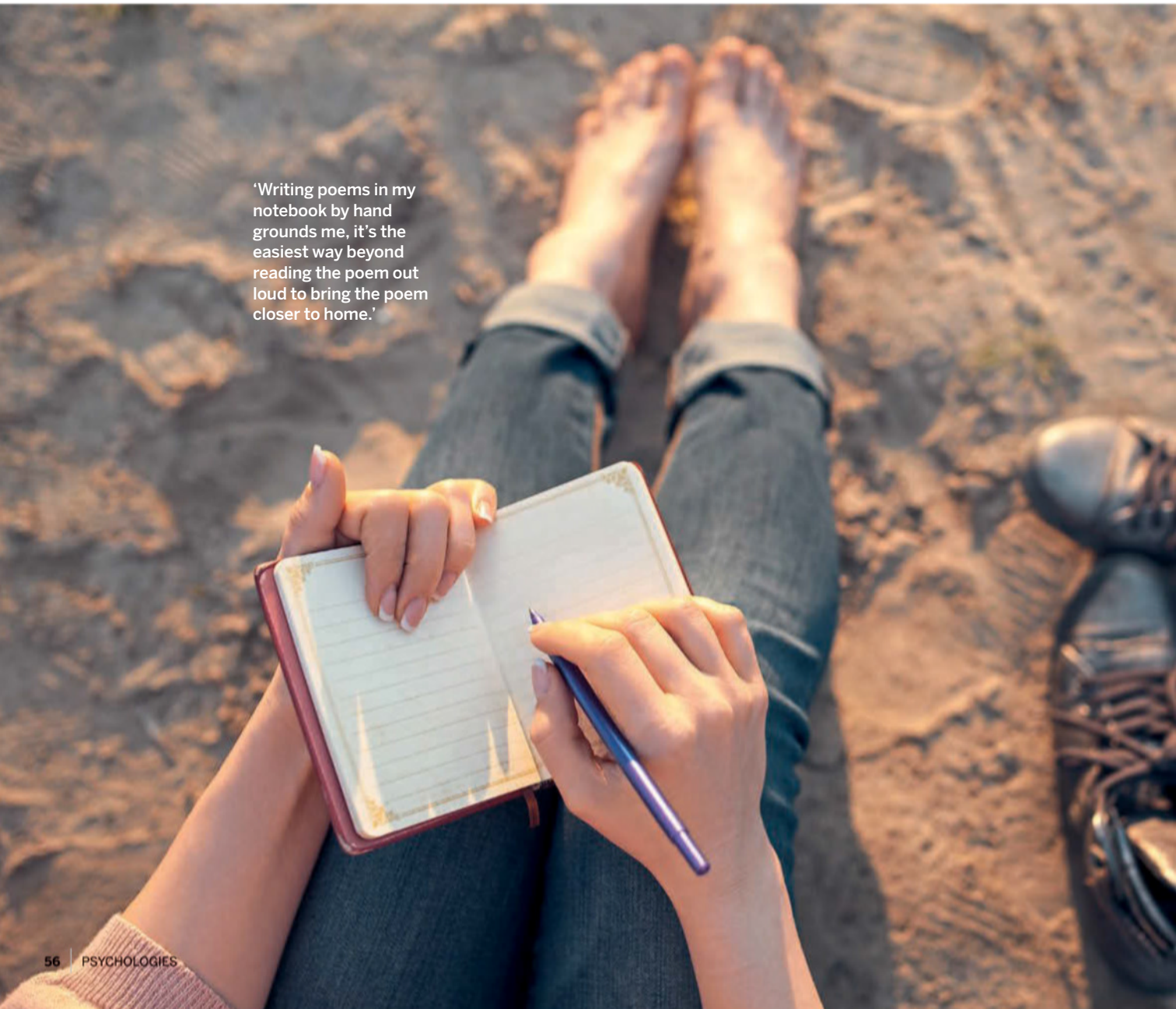
That's why I believe we should carry a notebook as faithfully as we

carry our phones. Noticing things. Writing them down. Whether it's a scent, a phrase, or the look on a stranger's face that moves you. This is the work that keeps us grounded, awake, and human.

I once frequented a restaurant in South London that kept a box of poems near the till. Diners would pick one up with their bill if they wished, almost like a poem to go. Poems on Prescription sounds like a great way to go and in London we've

seen this wave take off with the Poetry Pharmacy on London's Oxford Street. Maybe your doctor won't prescribe poetry at your next appointment (though maybe they should), but you could do this for yourself. Imagine keeping a small box or notebook of poems for when you need comfort, clarity, or just a shift in perspective. This would also be a great resource to share with others.

That's why I love the idea of found poetry, the practice of taking



'Writing poems in my notebook by hand grounds me, it's the easiest way beyond reading the poem out loud to bring the poem closer to home.'

existing language, sentences and ideas and reframing it. The poet William Carlos Williams, also a New Jersey doctor, once scribbled a note for his wife and stuck it to the fridge. Later, when he reread it, something shifted. He rewrote it — and a poem was born. Thus began a movement of poems born from menus, signs, emails, to-do lists.

Found poems are like creative collages, we don't need to invent everything from scratch. We just need to look differently at what's already here.

This month, try writing your own found poem. Use lines from your journal, text messages, fragments

from a conversation, or even the tasks on your to-do list.

One of the simplest ways to build a relationship with poetry is to read it aloud. As Kim Rosen writes in her book *Saved by a Poem*, reading poetry aloud shifts our consciousness. The rhythm might quicken or slow your pulse. The sound of the poem may deepen your breath or alter your tone of voice. In Rosen's words: 'A poem is a physical event.'

Reading poetry aloud brings you into intimate contact with language and with yourself. You don't need to know what you want to write about. Just begin. Prompts can serve as doorways into the poem that's waiting below the surface.

Here are a few starting points stimulated from the everyday:

- List five things you did today, in the order you did them.
- Name three colours in the room or space you're in.
- List five objects that comforted you as a child (transitional objects). Choose one and describe it in detail.
- Write down three things people have said to you in the past 48 hours — as exactly as possible.
- Write a 'forbidden' thought to someone who would understand.
- Write a 'forbidden' thought to someone who would not understand.
- Look at your to-do list and write a poem from the words or mood of it.

And if poetry feels intimidating, here's a reminder: You don't have to write directly into the pain. Start at the edges. Begin with:

- What painful things do I most want to speak about?
- What painful things do I find myself avoiding?
- What can I no longer dodge or deny?
- What am I ready to release from the past or present?

● What am I ready to invite into my life?

Poetry connects us with our vulnerable edges. We often surprise ourselves when we get out of our own way. Writing poetry, especially in our journals, can free up emotional and psychological space. It helps us look at challenges from a different perspective and is a way of deepening your journaling practice. Poetic Journaling as a tool in our journaling practice gets us close to hidden emotions or long-buried truths.

As Honor Moore writes: 'When we transform bits of our lives into poems, we have somehow freed ourselves.'

Poetry helps us hear ourselves and be heard. I am easily and quickly overwhelmed on social media. However when I am with my journal and with poetry it gives language to what we didn't know we needed to say. This discovery is often drowned out by the magnitude of noise on social media. Writing or reading poetry not only offers comfort, clarity, and sometimes even humour in the midst of confusion. It's not all heavy.

I hope that you will see that poetry is a personal expression of you. Poet Jenny Mitchell puts it beautifully in her powerful essay *How Being a Girl Poet Saved my Life* — *The Power Of Poetry*: 'In my workshops I always emphasise that for me, a poem is just a written expression of what we feel deep in our hearts about a subject.'

So this month, let poetry be a companion to your journaling. Let it live in your pockets, your notebooks, and your screens. Let it remind you that your feelings matter and that someone, somewhere, has felt something like this too.

---

*'A poem may deepen your breath  
or quicken your pulse...  
"A poem is a physical event".'*

# Feel better, feel like you again

## Revive Active's Meno Botanicals

Meno Botanicals provides a unique blend of botanicals and essential vitamins to support women through all stages of the menopause. The ingredients, including Ashwagandha, Soya Isoflavones, Sage and Vitamins B3 & B6, have been carefully selected for their traditional use and modern research-backed benefits. Certified Menopause Friendly. £24.95 (one month supply), [reviveactive.com](http://reviveactive.com).



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Kalms offers herbal remedies used to support emotional wellbeing. Kalms Night and Kalms Night One-A-Night are traditional herbal medicinal products used for the temporary relief of sleep disturbances, exclusively based on long-standing use as a traditional remedy. Kalms Day, Kalms Lavender One-a-Day Capsules and Kalms Rhodiola Tablets are traditional herbal medicinal products used for stress and mild anxiety, exclusively based on long-standing use as a traditional remedy.

Learn more at [kalmsrange.com](http://kalmsrange.com). Always read the labels. Available in-store and online at major supermarkets, pharmacies and online retailers such as Amazon.

## Support your joint health

New research reveals that many peri- and menopausal women are interested in supporting their joint health. GOPO® Joint Health is made from specially cultivated natural rose-hip and is the only product of its kind to contain a high level of GOPO® — a key component of the rose-hip. Rose-hips may play a valuable role in the care of joints and joint tissue.

GOPO® Joint Health supplement is also rich in Vitamin C, essential for normal collagen formation, which is necessary for the normal function of bones and cartilage.

GOPO® Joint Health is available from Boots, Holland & Barrett, Amazon and independent chemists and retailers nationwide. Visit [gopo.co.uk](http://gopo.co.uk) for more.



## Feel brighter with HRI

Whilst some stress can be beneficial for focus and motivation, too much can overwhelm your nervous systems and leave you feeling low or anxious. HRI Good Mood contains a high-quality extract of St John's wort herb which can help relieve symptoms of slightly low mood and mild anxiety. Take one or two easy to swallow tablets daily to feel more balanced. Always read the label.

Available at Holland & Barrett, Boots, ASDA, Morrisons and online. £9.50, find out more at [hriherbalmedicine.co.uk](http://hriherbalmedicine.co.uk).

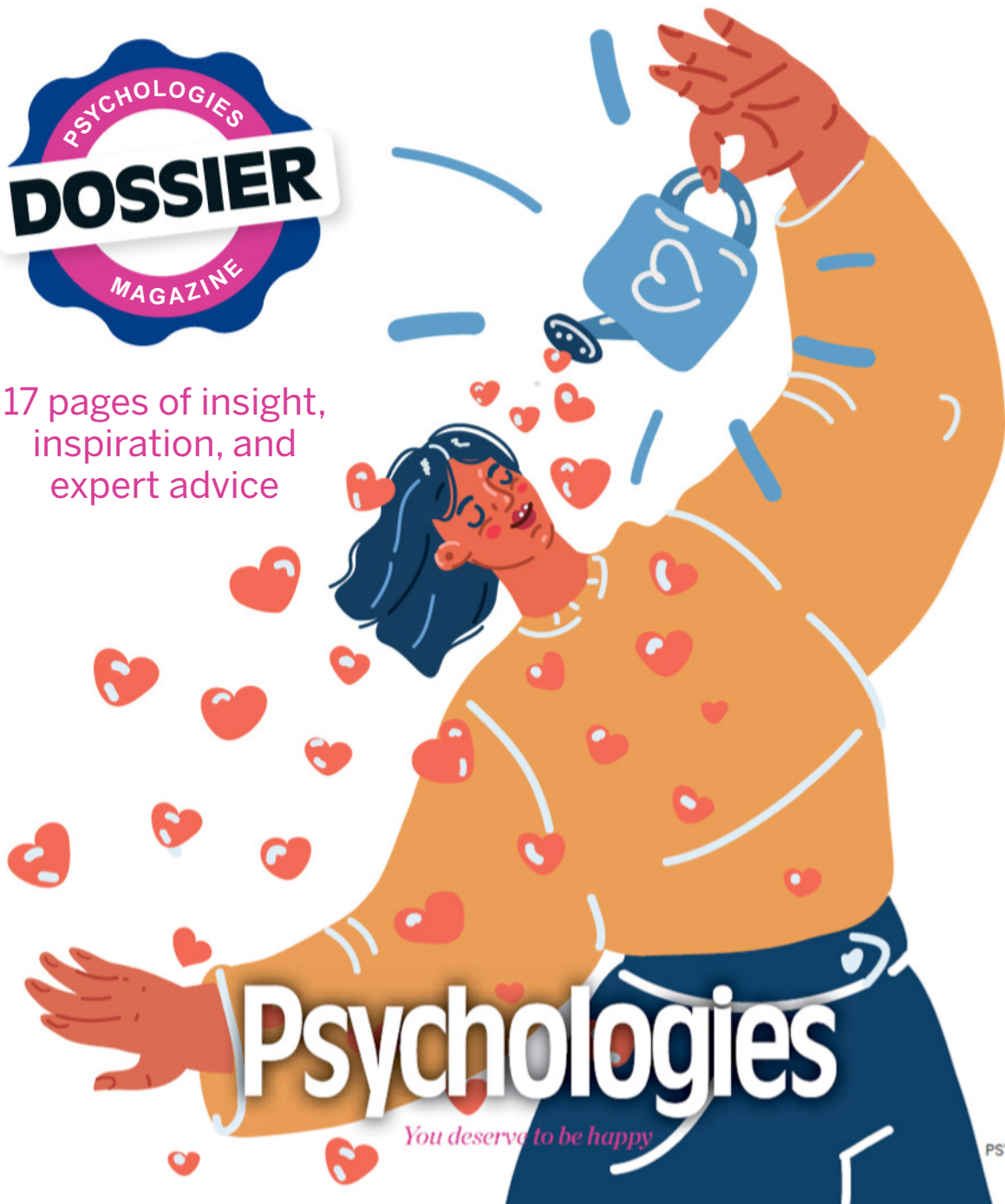


# Your mood-booster masterclass

*Understanding and accepting our emotions is the first step to feeling calm, confident and empowered again, writes Stephanie Fitzgerald*



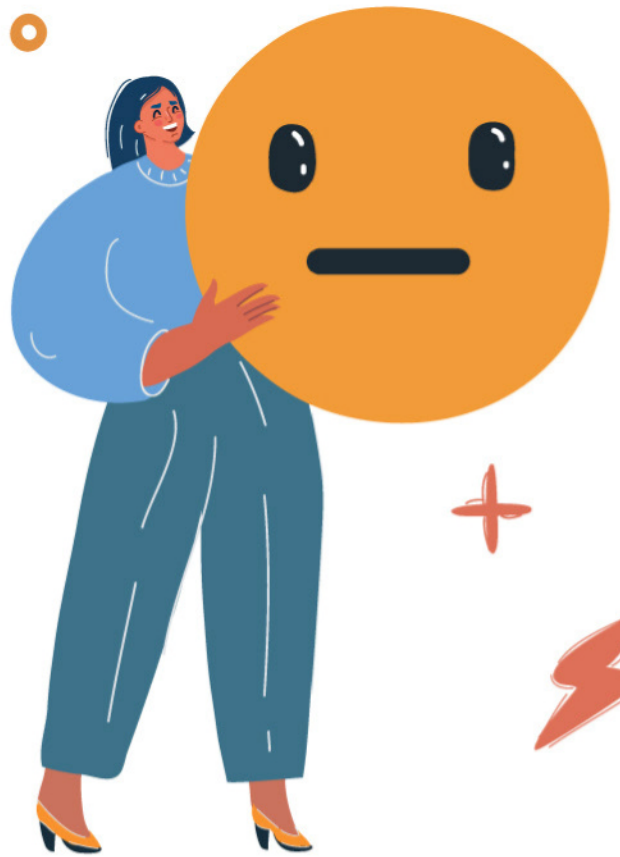
17 pages of insight,  
inspiration, and  
expert advice



*You deserve to be happy*

## YOUR MOOD-BOOSTER MASTERCLASS

Are you hiding how you feel, covering it with bluster or brattishness?



# Let's be honest, are we all just a bit grumpy?



I discovered a new word recently: ‘crumpy’. It means irritable, tired and grumpy and I love the deliciously satisfying sound of it. Not only that, but crumpy seems to perfectly encapsulate how I am feeling at the moment. The word resonated somewhere deep in my soul, and I felt I’d found the perfect way to describe the feeling, which I had been struggling to articulate, both about my own mood and the general mood around me.

Everyone seems to be a little bit grumpy lately. From the woman who loudly complained ‘for f\*cks sake!’ through her open car window at someone daring to take more than 0.8 seconds to park their car, to the person who aggressively barked

‘Move!’ to a lost-looking tourist on the Underground. I look around and see a real lack of humanity, humility and just good old-fashioned manners. What’s happening here? Do I travel on particularly aggressive routes, or is there a general level of grumpiness in the air around us? Are we all feeling a little bit crumpy?

Executive coach and emotional intelligence practitioner, Emma Hossack, has seen it too. ‘I notice the energy when I come into workspaces and in one-to-ones with clients,’ she says. ‘I’m definitely feeling, seeing and hearing a change in mood, and it’s being described to me as a shift in general contentment.’

On paper, one would assume that we’d be in a better place than we were a few years ago, further removed from the pandemic and resulting aftershocks.

But Hossack has observed that the collective mood seems worse than it was three years ago. It seems we are feeling steadily worse, not better.

But actually, is there really any wonder? We have been on a constant rollercoaster of change, with little to no reprieve — and we’re completely exhausted.

‘We’re living in a really uncertain time and change is one of the biggest stressors on our overall wellbeing and resilience,’ Hossack says. ‘This is the biggest contributor to lowering our overall contentment and happiness. So much is out of our control at the moment. We have

world challenges around war and new governments, the cost-of-living crisis, the rapid development of AI.

‘It’s all bringing a sense of uncertainty, and a feeling that things are changing really quickly.’

It seems we’re struggling to keep up. We know that our brains don’t do well with uncertainty. They like a

plan, a structure, a routine. We all approach change differently, with some people embracing it and others moving more cautiously, but even the hardiest of ‘go-with-the-flow’ types could feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of change that we are facing at the moment. This overwhelm soon leads to feeling utterly fed up, and it’s a feeling that’s hard to shake off.

We can try and distract ourselves. Ask anyone what they’re up to and they’ll likely describe being flat-out and moving at full pelt, but this

busyness is frequently of our own making. Rather than confront our grumpiness head on and deal with it, we are trying to avoid it, numbing ourselves with distractions.

‘There’s a disconnect between what we are feeling and how we present to others,’ says Jonathan Coleman, a wellness advocate and fitness practitioner. ‘We would rather pretend that we are okay than

### Psychologies Meet the Experts



**Emma  
Hossack**

A highly experienced, ICF-accredited executive coach, trainer, facilitator, and emotional intelligence practitioner.  
[glowatwork.co.uk](http://glowatwork.co.uk)

*‘We’re living in a really uncertain time, and change is one of our biggest stressors.’*

# YOUR MOOD-BOOSTER MASTERCLASS

admit that we are grumpy. Sometimes there's a lack of awareness of how we are truly feeling, which then manifests as grumpiness.' This makes sense of the impatient parking scene I witnessed. If we aren't stopping and tuning in to our mood, we can't address what is making us grumpy, meaning we take it out on the people around us.

I asked Coleman how he's seeing the grumpiness present. 'There's a lack of energy. The zest and zeal in people seems to have disappeared and taken motivation with it.'

I can definitely relate to that, and reflected on the 'tired' element of crumpsy. Coleman says there's a certain level of self-flagellation that kicks in when our motivation drops. We can be very hard on ourselves, rather than greet ourselves with curiosity and compassion.

'There is an almost bratty child-like response of "Why aren't I getting what I want? I just want to be happy!"' Coleman says, underlining the temper-tantrum grumpiness we can all feel at times, but also the frustration that can come with feeling overwhelmed.

We discussed the impact of outside influences on our mood.

'So many of us reach a stage where we have to stop watching the news for a while because it is frying our nervous system and we are becoming dysregulated,' Coleman says. He says he felt the need to quieten external noise in order to tune in to his mood and learn to trust himself again.

'The news and social media were telling me what I should be thinking, how I should be responding, what I should be angry about in the world. I had to relearn how to shut out external noise and listen to my instincts, otherwise I was handing over total control of my mood to outside sources, and it wasn't making me feel good.'

We can be so impacted by the

sheer volume and scale of change and uncertainty happening around us, that we can physically feel it in our bodies. Hossack pointed to the impact on our physical health, highlighting that the constant stress and challenges of the world will be increasing cortisol (our stress hormone) and decreasing dopamine and oxytocin. This means we physically feel more stressed, irritable and grumpy, and have less of the feel-good available to us. We are literally feeling grumpy in our

bodies and need to make a few tweaks to feel better.

I asked Coleman for his advice and his answer surprised me. 'Admit the heartbreak,' he said. Rather than pretend all is well, covering it up with bluster, or brattish bad-mood, Coleman advises that we sit with and admit the pain we are feeling. We need to let ourselves experience all of our emotions. There is a release and a relief in admitting what is difficult and allowing ourselves to acknowledge

Being open with those around us and acknowledging we are struggling can feel a huge relief



that times are tough, even if we would rather they were different. He also suggests bringing our focus back to what we can control, rather than spiral over what we don't.

'Remain in a space that only you can control,' Coleman says. 'Whilst we can feel very disempowered by the world around us, remaining focused on what you can control and influence will leave you feeling more empowered, calm and confident.' That feels the very opposite of crumpsy to me.

*'Remaining focused on what you can control and influence will leave you feeling more empowered, calm and confident'*



## Psychologies

*Meet the Experts*



**Jonathan Coleman**

A wellness advocate, fitness practitioner and speaker, he offers tools that support cultivating a life where you feel well and enough.

[coletivating.com](http://coletivating.com)

# The difficult thing about other people...

...is that they have their own emotions, and sometimes seem hell-bent on sharing them with you! How can we support and listen without catching negative feelings ourselves?

Connection is a wonderful thing, but there can be a down side



Whilst there is no doubt that wider world events, the news and social media are all impacting on our mood, trainer and coach Dr Jen Surtees believes one source of grumpiness may be closer to home. When considering ‘Why are we all so grumpy at the moment?’ Dr Surtees asks: ‘Are you around lots of other people who are grumpy?’

It’s a good point; we are strongly

influenced by those around us. There can be nothing nicer than getting together with friends and putting the world to rights over a cuppa, and it often leaves us feeling connected and fulfilled.

However, there can be a more negative side. ‘People are having a good moan,’ Dr Surtees observes, when I ask her how she is seeing grumpiness show up around her.

‘There are a lot of people needing to just have someone else to moan to.’ I definitely recognise this and have noticed conversations with friends recently

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Dr Jen Surtees**

**A trainer and coach who weaves together coaching, psychology, and a deep connection to nature, delivering truly transformative experiences on her adventure coaching and nature immersion retreats and workshops**  
[youfully.uk](http://youfully.uk)

have had a negative skew. Whilst we all value a good moan with a close friend now and then, purely negative conversations can leave us exhausted. Even as a positive and upbeat person myself, some chats can leave me feeling as though I’m constantly kicking to the surface whilst other people drag me down.

Dr Surtees encourages us to consider not just the influence of those around us, but also, how we respond to them.

‘Are you naturally someone who absorbs the mood around you?’ Dr Surtees asks. ‘I’m someone who, when

I’m around negativity, I become negative. When I’m around positivity, I become positive.’

It’s not about avoiding negativity at all costs, but rather being aware of potential impact, she says. ‘As good friends, good family members, good people, we want to listen. We want to be there for others and we want to be supportive. But, sometimes, that becomes draining and we have to recognise that. Are we being asked to be supportive and helpful, or merely being used as a receptacle for the other person’s negative feelings?’

It is only natural to get together and have a good chat about the state of the world. A great rant with friends can really clear the clutter of our minds and make us feel validated and reassured. But how can we spot the difference between a cathartic moan and something more >



# YOUR MOOD-BOOSTER MASTERCLASS

negative and potentially damaging to our mood? Dr Surtees tells me that the answer lies in intention. ‘What is the intention behind your meeting up? Is it to have a good old moan about other people or a specific situation, or is there a more positive intention behind the catch up, such as wanting to update each other about events in your lives?’ Of course, it can be both. Often conversations ebb and flow and we can cover a whole range of topics, even over the span of a quick coffee. But, if we are constantly leaving interactions feeling fed up,

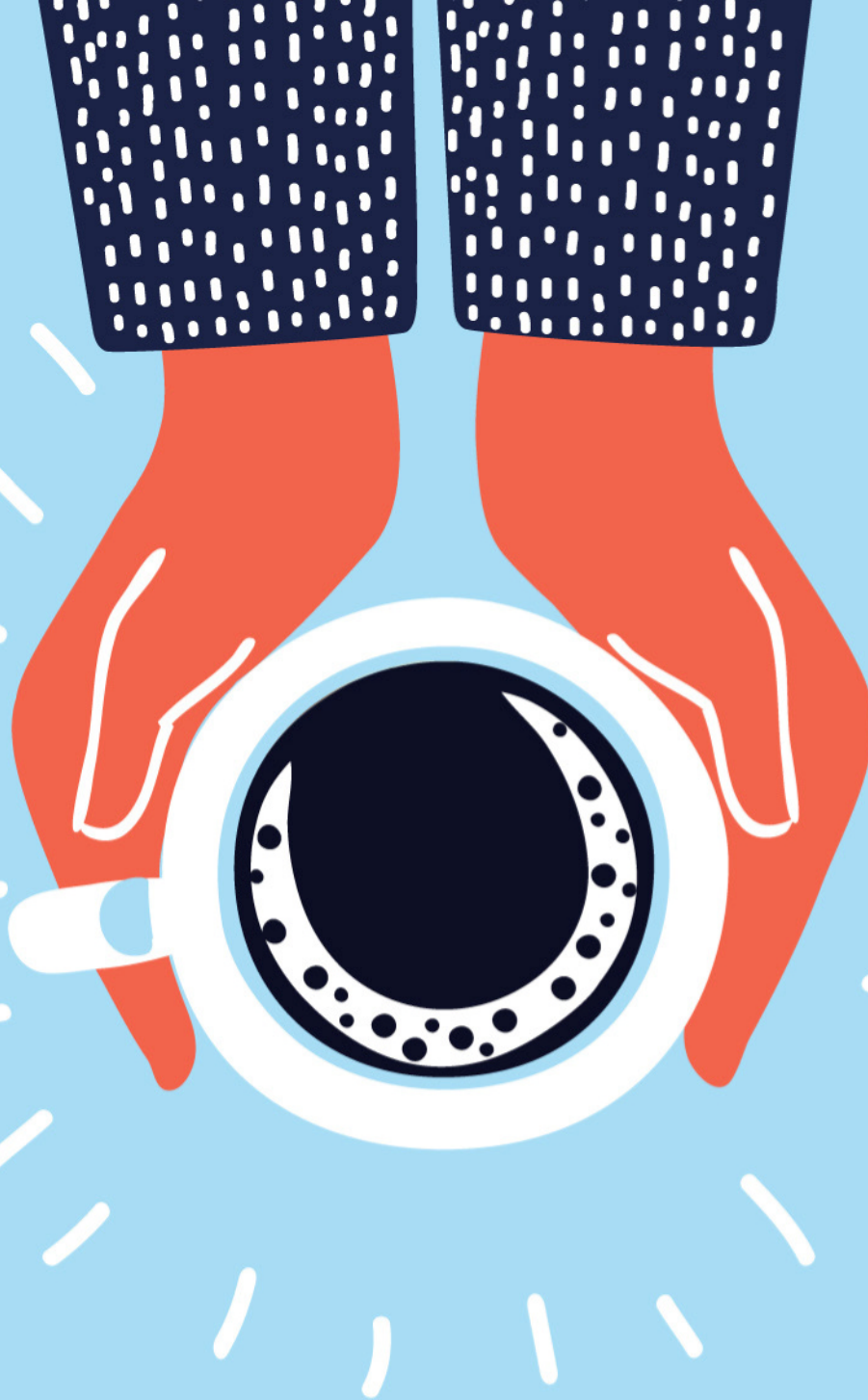
hopeless, or grumpy, then we know those interactions aren’t working for us and something needs to change.

Dr Surtees advises us to control the direction by first setting our own intention. ‘Think about what you’re wanting to get from that interaction before you get there. If you don’t want to leave with that negative feeling, then ask yourself what are you going to do about it? You can be the tone-setter.’ I ask what we can do about conversations where we can

predict the outcome. You know, the friend who we know is going to rant about their boss, or their partner, and whilst you want to be supportive, you’ve heard it all before and aren’t ready for another negative conversation. Dr Surtees says: ‘We can ask a really positive question right from the outset. So instead of asking “How are things?” and being met with “Oh, you know, same old, same old. The children are being annoying, and my boss is a pain,” we can instead ask “What’s bringing you joy at the moment?” or “Tell me what’s making you really



Think about what you want, even if you're just meeting up for a quick coffee



happy at the moment? What have you been up to recently that you're really excited about?" Opening the conversation with a more positive question can direct the discussion and set the tone for a more uplifting chat.'

Self-awareness seems key. If someone starts a conversation by saying, 'I really need to have a good moan about something, are you available for that?' or 'do you mind if I rant about something for a while?' then that's a really self-aware start. It allows you to make a decision

about whether you are in the right headspace to have that type of conversation. It also lets you off the hook from trying to problem-solve or offer solutions as this person clearly just needs to offload. However, if someone leaps straight into an in-depth moan, without being aware

that you may not be up for that conversation, or that it may negatively impact you, that's possibly a red flag.

Wellbeing advocate Jonathan Coleman agrees that self-awareness is essential and adds that we can foster a safe space to address the issue. If you notice that someone is being continually grumpy and it is starting to impact on their wellbeing,

as well as yours, then Coleman advises that we gently address this with them.

Start off by sharing your intention so they know what to expect and they're going to feel supported not critiqued as you share what you've noticed.

We think of our friends as our support mechanism, our boosters and our confidence builders. But, with so much going on in busy lives, it is possible to slip into a negativity habit without noticing.

If we're feeling grumpy, then it's a great time to consider our conversations and our company and work out if it's us being negative, or whether we've all inadvertently become The Grumpy Gang. Whether it's a you thing or a group thing, changing your intention and opening questions can help conversations take a more positive direction, whilst still leaving space for authentic connection and healthy ranting where needed. Changing our focus means we are more likely to look forward to these interactions and less likely to leave them feeling grumpy.

*'Opening conversations with a positive question can set the tone for an uplifting chat' ,*

# Let's prioritise joy, not perfection!

She's dug into how we really feel, and the impact other people might have on us, now Stephanie Fitzgerald looks at how to dial up the happiness factor (and ease anxiety too!)

As a psychologist myself, I am well used to hearing negative associations with the word 'perfectionism'. Research and clinical experience tells us that chasing perfection leads to increased anxiety and depression, as well as social isolation. However, one word I hadn't previously heard associated with perfectionism was 'grumpy'.

Yet when I connected with life coach Karen Roberts, she was confident that striving for perfection was making us all grumpier.

'All through our education and work we focus on performance reviews and appraisals,' Roberts says. 'We focus on where we are "less than", rather than all the things we are good at. This means we're constantly focusing on areas for improvement, and this makes us grumpy.'

She is also convinced that the

rise of social media, and the role that it plays in our lives, has increased our perfectionist tendencies and gets in the way of our day-to-day enjoyment. This isn't just about comparison, but about achievement and measurement. We're back to that appraisal mindset. We've lost the art of doing something just for the fun of it. We discussed how, even unconsciously, if you are making fairy cakes with your children, there will be a voice in the back of your mind wondering if the result is perfect enough to post to social media. It means we're viewing everything through a critical, evaluating lens.

'You have to ask, who are you doing it for?' Roberts says. 'If you're doing it for the public, then you'll want to ice them to perfection. But the child you're doing it with won't care about perfect icing. So, what are you doing it for? The perfect publishable outcome, or bonding and building your relationship with that child, through having some messy, imperfect fun together?'

The idea of pushing a sticky hand away to ensure the perfect shot sits uncomfortably, not least because we can probably all recognise at least a small grain of our own behaviour in these actions. Aren't we all guilty of breaking off a conversation as we're ushered

'If you're doing it for the public, then you'll want to ice them to perfection...'





'...or is it about building your relationship with your child, through having some messy, imperfect fun together?'

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*'The idea of pushing a sticky hand away to ensure the perfect shot sits uncomfortably, not least because we can probably all recognise a small grain of our own behaviour in these actions.'*

# YOUR MOOD-BOOSTER MASTERCLASS

together for a group photo? Of not diving into a gorgeous meal because we don't want to spoil the pic? But as Roberts asks us, what did we come out to dinner for? To be fully present in and enjoy the meal, or to take a perfect photo of it?

This endless push for perfect publication online is spoiling things for us, and it's leaving us grumpy. There is a layer of pressure being added to our adventures so that we can't just enjoy them, we have to document them as well. We're then back to measurement and evaluation, with notifications on likes, comments and reach. No wonder we're feeling a little grumpy, we're part of one long never-ending, public appraisal process!

I ask Roberts how we can break away from these tendencies and start to really enjoy life again, sans grumpiness. 'The way I do it is through looking at values and taking people right back to basics,' she says. 'What's really important to you? What are your values? How do you want to live?'

Reflecting on our values tends to be the focus of deep work, and Roberts estimates that only two in ten of us would really know and be able to confidently state what our values are and how we want to live by them, without first giving it really deep thought and consideration. But

just because we're not regularly tuning into our values yet, doesn't mean we shouldn't start doing so.

Roberts says: 'As long as overall we are aligned with our values, and they are being brought to life across our whole landscape, for example through our relationships, hobbies, work, then we will feel okay.'

'As soon as we are not aligned with them, then we feel grumpy.'

Just over a year ago I discovered the fun in doing something just for joy. I've never displayed a talent for art and it's always put me off painting, even though I yearned to try it, then a couple of years ago I decided I didn't care. I realised that I valued creativity and I wanted to find other pathways to explore it. I picked up a paintbrush and started daubing at easels. I won't lie, my first few attempts revealed a secret disappointment that

I wasn't the next Picasso bursting with untapped talent. However, once I got over it, I found I loved it. I'm not aiming to publish or sell my art, I'm not documenting it on social media, I just aim to create. There is something joyfully rebellious in doing something you know you're bad at, but doing it anyway, and being totally aligned with your values.

Every expert I interviewed raised the importance of values when it comes to improving your mood. There was a core theme of

how paying attention to, and living in alignment with, our values protects our mood, and it makes sense. Our values can be anchors in the storm of life and provide us with safety, stability and contentment, even when the world around us feels chaotic and grump-inducing. Our values offer us a grounding certainty when we feel overwhelmed.

As long as we know who we are and how we want to live, we can move away from chasing the impossible dream of perfectionism. Whilst perfectionism sounds, well, perfect, it is an unachievable idea with ever-shifting goal posts. It also comes with a large side-helping of grumpiness as we feel the frustration and disappointment that follows 'failing'.

We would all be served better by stepping away from publishing our lives and instead focusing on what we want in them. What would really make us happy?

Maybe you'll paint pictures no one will ever see. Maybe you'll ice fairy cakes with childish giggles, smudged toppings and messy kitchens. But as long as you're putting your values in the middle of your life, then you are prioritising joy, leaving little to no space for grumpiness.

**Psychologies**  
*Meet the Experts*



**Karen Roberts**  
A practising qualified life coach, a member of the Association for Coaching, trained in counselling.  
She is passionate about 'values' and living a fulfilling life.  
[vivendus.co.uk](http://vivendus.co.uk)

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*'Ask yourself: "What's really important to you? What are your values? How do you want to live?" As long as you're living a life aligned with your values, then you'll feel okay.'*



Try attracting positivity  
and joy and living in line  
with your values, and see  
how your mood transforms



# What's your personal mood booster?

If it's time to step off the emotional rollercoaster, take our test to find your personal mood management focus. Circle the answers that most closely apply to you, then add up the symbols. Read the section, or sections, you circled most, to find what gives your mood an uplift

## 1 Ideally, you'd most like to be known for making

- ♥ Things happen
- ♦ The most of life
- ♣ People happy
- ♠ A difference

## 2 It makes your blood boil when you feel

- ♥ Misled
- ♦ Misaligned
- ♣ Misjudged
- ♠ Misunderstood

## 3 Deep down, you know you could probably be better at

- ♠ Keeping things in proportion
- ♦ Following things through
- ♣ Not putting things off
- ♥ Letting others do things

## 4 When you've got time to kill, you tend to fill it

- ♥ Messaging a friend

- ♦ Making a plan or list
- ♣ Scrolling or snacking
- ♠ Thinking about a problem

## 5 You're inspired by people who seem to

- ♦ Have found their path
- ♠ Know what matters
- ♥ See the best in others
- ♣ Have an inner glow

## 6 You'd be most drawn to a self-help book about

- ♥ Understanding your relationships
- ♦ Fulfilling your potential
- ♣ Managing your time
- ♠ Believing in yourself

## 7 An ideal weekend would just have to involve

- ♥ A party
- ♦ An adventure
- ♣ A break
- ♠ A reset

## 8 You often get a mood boost when you

- ♥ Meet someone new
- ♦ Learn something
- ♣ Help someone
- ♠ Achieve something

## 9 You tend to get most upset when you feel

- ♥ Left out
- ♦ Bored
- ♣ Guilty
- ♠ Uncertain


## 10 If someone you love feels low, you wonder if they're

- ♥ Not spending time with the right people
- ♦ Stuck in a rut and need a change
- ♣ Not taking care of themselves
- ♠ Worried about something

Turn the page to find your personal mood booster



*Get ready to find out who you are, and what to do next!*

If you scored mainly  you are

## *The* CONNECTION BUILDER

When you thrive on feeling connected, time with people you care about is your go-to mood booster. But the quality of your connections also matters and your mood can take a dip if social interactions don't feel authentic. You may already be aware that low mood is a red flag that you're missing out on quality time with key people. Messaging and social media help you stay in touch but too much time on your phone undermines your mood if you're left feeling isolated and left out. You're not the type to feel comfortable on the edges of a social group so naturally gravitate towards deeper connections and time with people who feel like your tribe. Taking the initiative and creating ways for people to come together can boost your mood, especially when you know it's appreciated. But if your tendency is to go into social overdrive when you notice your mood taking a dip, you may end up overcommitting and a bit frazzled. If you're saying yes to social commitments to avoid spending time alone, socialising can quickly become energy and mood draining, even for you. To boost your mood in both the short and the long term, slow down and remind yourself it's the quality of your connections that really matters, not the quantity.

### Your next steps

**1** Try to put some time in the diary with people who mean the most to you, and focus on deepening the ties you value the most instead of creating new, weaker ones.

**2** Consider taking a break from the digital world — either cold turkey or using helpful limiters — to help you focus on what matters.

Creative projects or journalling are a great way to soothe a grumpy nervous system



If you scored mainly  you are

## The CHALLENGE SEEKER

When you thrive on new ideas and experiences, feeling under-stimulated can quickly undermine your mood. There may be a limit to how long you can tolerate feeling stuck in a routine before it chips away at your emotional resilience. Lack of challenge often undermines mood in people whose core values revolve around learning and personal growth. If you instinctively set yourself a new goal when you're feeling low, you may know from experience that achieving and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone — physically, mentally or emotionally — usually delivers the mood boost you need. But you can resort to quick fixes at times so it's worth pausing and thinking

through your choices to make changes that last. What kind of challenge you need to bring about a lasting mood boost might differ depending on your circumstances and what else is going on in your life.

Next time you feel stuck, rather than going straight into planning mode, try pausing and being curious instead, treating your feelings as valuable sources of information about what needs are not being met. In the meantime, finding small ways to engage your imagination on a daily basis will help support your mood, so stay present and open to micro opportunities to do something different.

### Your next steps

**1** Try journaling about your ideas to see if simply getting them out on paper helps you, instead of jumping at the first opportunity.

**2** If you are thinking seriously about making a change, do some work around your values to help you make good choices that stick.

If you scored mainly  you are

## The SELF-CARE SUPPORTER

If you have a tendency to put other people's needs before your own — or even treat yourself as if you don't have any needs at all — it's easy for self-care to slip down your list of priorities, and low mood can often be the first sign. You may be well aware of this pattern, and know what you need to do to protect your mood, but still struggle to prioritise the basics such as quality sleep, regular exercise and eating well. A red flag for you that your mood is taking a dip can be behaviour that's out of character, such as getting irritated more easily than usual, opting out of social events or feeling disconnected from people you care about. When we feel like this, it's often easier to respond with self-criticism than compassion, and overlook that what we need right now is better self-care. Remind yourself that upgrading your self-care supports your capacity to thrive and manage all aspects of your life, including caring for others. If you feel guilty at the prospect of taking time out to do yoga, go for a walk or simply spend time relaxing, that's a sure sign you really need to do it, not least to protect your mood. It's time to listen to yourself — all the wisdom you need is there.

### Your next steps

**1** Try a little mindfulness or meditation to help you tap into how you're really feeling — understanding what's really going on inside you will make it easier to give your body and mind what they need, when they need it.

**2** Identify the self-care practice you most enjoyed when you were younger, but haven't done in years. Do you love swimming in the sea? Having a fancy facial? Just curling up all Saturday with a lovely new book? Make that your priority this weekend (or sooner if possible!)

If you scored mainly  you are

## The CALM PROTECTOR

When your stress levels go up, your mood takes a dip. You may initially feel energised when your diary is full, you're in the middle of a crisis or facing a big deadline, but long-term pressure can have a drip-by-drip effect on your emotional resilience. Your mood is especially vulnerable if you tend to respond to stress by overthinking. It feels useful at first then after a while you may find yourself craving distraction to give your mind a break from rumination. But sometimes the solution can become part of the problem if the distraction you choose adds to your stress levels, like too much time on your phone or mindless eating. Instead, prioritise time for what will really soothe your nervous system — for some, it's a creative project, for others, exercise, breathwork, yoga or meditation techniques make the most difference. Think of it as emptying a cup that's being filled drip by drip — you might not be able to stop the drips, but you can stop your cup overflowing. When things feel overwhelming, allowing regular moments to simply pause and acknowledge how you're feeling can also give you an instant uplift. In the longer term, building moments of calm into your day has an accumulative effect, topping up your emotional energy tank and protecting your mood in the process.

### Your next steps

**1** Visualisation is a good way to increase feelings of calm — seek out a guided visualisation to help you feel the stress dripping away from you, instead of filling your cup.

**2** Prepare for stressful times by getting helpful questions ready, such as: 'Will this matter this time next week?'

# Still greedy for life

On urgency, impulsivity, and the joy of unexpected recklessness

“September always makes me think of fresh starts. Autumn is well and truly underway, especially in these strange new times when leaves begin to curl and turn brown in July, and blackberries appear in hedgerows weeks earlier than usual. The world is speeding up too fast and we are in a race against time to save it.

My life at the moment feels like autumn in so many ways, if winter is the final season and autumn is its prelude. Of course nature is cyclical, while the human lifespan feels much more linear, a series of mini cycles rolling from beginning to end. In a couple of years I will be 50, and it will no longer be possible to describe myself as ‘young’. I will definitely have tipped over into middle age.

With the benefit of hindsight, I realise now that youth can be defined by a lack of awareness of the brevity of life. That’s why those younger years are often the ones when we take risks. They are sprinkled with moments of caring a little less and lacking the urgency to get things done.

It can feel easier to be aimless in the knowledge that decades of time are stretching out in front of you; plenty of time in the future to worry about growing up.

Actually, I have chased the future down since I was a little girl. I am greedy for life and rarely sit still.

I wish now I had taken time out to explore the world after school, that I had recognised the value of days spent wandering and wondering. I was too scared of being left behind if I jumped off the hamster wheel for too long. A woman I used to work for in my early thirties told me to slow down, that there would be plenty of time to do everything I wanted to do. I didn’t believe her. And middle age brings a new kind of urgency, perhaps even an unexpected recklessness, as the years race in and I try to gobble down new experiences and ride my huge emotions.

As a single mother with four daughters who rely on me, impulsivity and adventure are probably not the first words that spring to mind when you imagine how I conduct my life.



But I have been tethered to the same place and the same routines for many years now, and I’m itching for something new.

I came to writing relatively late, publishing my first book in my mid-forties after taking a masters online during the pandemic. Lectures for that degree often took place around tea time, or the kids’ bed time, and I would turn the volume off on my computer as children scampered onto my lap demanding pasta and cuddles.

I learned, during those years after the end of my marriage, how much I could achieve in the face of adversity and challenge, and now I’m not sure I know any other way to navigate life. Moving forward into the autumn of

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*“It takes courage to make yourself vulnerable and admit you need help, but there is strength in reaching out”*



'I like to think about plants in autumn, the way they shed their leaves to make way for new growth.'

my life, I am keen to continue to set boundaries and try harder to meet my own needs. This means I'd like to be someone who can lean on others for support. I love my independence, but I wish I could accept help more readily.

I look back on those quiet lockdown days, as I sat at my little table on the landing and lit candles while my babies slept in order to write myself back onto the page, with fondness and pride. But I also know that I was lonely.

Those days made me brave, or probably just showed me that I already was brave, but they also had the effect of forming a shell around me that is both very brittle and very hard to chip away at.

During those years, I believed that I could only really rely upon myself, but I am beginning to understand that there is strength in reaching out. It takes courage to make yourself vulnerable and admit you need help, but it is also such an important way to build an authentic connection with others. One of my dearest friends tells me that seeing me in my most vulnerable state gives her permission to open her heart to me.

If I think about trees in autumn, the way they shed their leaves to make way for new growth, I love this as an addition to the analogy of my life. Perhaps it resonates with you too, this opportunity to let go of

unhealthy aspects of your world and make room for our own continued growth. What fresh starts will autumn bring to you?



#### **CARO GILES**

*Writer, mother, educator, swimmer*

Caro lives on the far edge of the country with her tribe of four daughters. In 2021 she won the inaugural BBC Countryfile New Writer Award. Her new book, *Unschooled* (Little Toller, £20), is a searing memoir about raising her children outside the traditional education system, out September 2.

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



### Dr Lisa Mosconi

Neuroscientist and director of the Women's Brain Initiative and Alzheimer's Prevention Program at Weill Cornell Medical College, where she also serves as Associate Professor. Her research explores how genetics, hormones, lifestyle, and environment shape the female brain across the lifespan. She is the bestselling author of *The Menopause Brain*, *The XX Brain*, and *Brain Food*.  
[lisamosconi.com](http://lisamosconi.com)



# REWIRED

## *and ready to go!*

**P**anic attacks. Social withdrawal. Brain fog. A collapsing tolerance for other people's nonsense. For many women in their late thirties and forties, these are not signs of burnout or mental illness. They are the often-unspoken symptoms of perimenopause, a shift that can last for many years, yet is still treated as a minor inconvenience, if it is indeed acknowledged at all.

Despite affecting half the population, this major life transition remains widely misunderstood, frequently misdiagnosed, and often misnamed. It can last for as long as 12 years, yet is often dismissed as a fleeting prelude to menopause. Instead of real answers, many of us are brushed off with unnecessary antidepressants or labelled with anxiety, ADHD, even bipolar disorder, and still left wondering why we don't feel quite like ourselves.

Even now, in 2025, medical training often overlooks how hormonal changes like perimenopause affect the brain. Instead of investigating, many doctors still reach for the antidepressant pad. Not because they're uncaring, but because the system didn't teach them better. And women are paying the price.

To understand why this matters, we need to get clear on what perimenopause actually is, and why it's so often missed.

Perimenopause is the transition leading up to menopause, a phase marked by shifting and declining oestrogen levels that affect everything from the menstrual cycle to how the brain functions. It often begins in the late

By **KELLIE GILLESPIE-WRIGHT**

thirties or early forties, though many don't realise what's happening until symptoms become impossible to ignore. Periods may change, becoming irregular, heavier or lighter, but it's often the mental and emotional shifts that take us by surprise. Mood swings, anxiety, insomnia and memory lapses can appear out of nowhere. These changes aren't just happening in the body; they're happening in the brain. And that's the part no one prepared us for.

### **'A recalibration process'**

'Perimenopause is a time of profound neurological change, akin to a renovation project on the brain,' says Dr Lisa Mosconi, director of the Women's Brain Initiative at Weill Cornell Medical College and author of *The Menopause Brain* (Allen&Unwin).

'So-called "sex hormones" like oestrogen and progesterone, while often thought of as reproductive hormones, are brain hormones too,' says Dr Mosconi. 'Oestrogen in particular supports memory, mood,

# REWIRED AND READY TO GO

## Read

*The Menopause Brain*  
by Dr Lisa Mosconi,  
(Allen&Unwin)

## Listen

*Perimenopause WTF?!*  
Podcast

## Watch

*Davina McCall:*  
*Sex, Myths and*  
*the Menopause* on  
Channel 4

emotional regulation, and energy metabolism in the brain. As oestrogen levels fluctuate and then decline during the transition to menopause, the brain goes through a recalibration process, adjusting to this new hormonal environment. This can disrupt neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, affect mood and stress responses, and slow the brain's energy production.

### 'It's not a character flaw!'

'While more research is needed, these changes have been associated with symptoms like brain fog, anxiety, and emotional overwhelm,' says Dr Mosconi. 'It's not a character flaw. It's a legitimate neurological transition.' She adds: 'In the field of neuroscience, oestrogen is referred to as the "master regulator" of women's brain health. That's because it plays many roles in the brain. It promotes plasticity, helping brain cells grow, adapt, and form new connections. It also regulates neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and acetylcholine, which influence mood, memory, and emotions.

'Oestrogen even helps the brain use glucose for energy,' says Dr Mosconi.

'When oestrogen levels decline, all of these processes can be affected, leaving some women more vulnerable to cognitive changes, mood and sleep disturbances. However, with the right support, many women adapt beautifully over time.'

Of course, this kind of rewiring doesn't wait for the right moment (whenever that might be!). It happens instead while you're in the thick of life, juggling multiple



responsibilities, raising children, caring for ageing parents, carrying heavy emotional loads. And just as the pressures pile up, the chemical scaffolding that helped you stay steady and strong starts to fall away. And without understanding the hormonal shifts going on within us, many of us are left thinking that we're falling apart. But what gets brushed off from the outside as moodiness or instability, is often a sign of something deeper at work.

Because this is the part that no one tells you: beneath the chaos, something new is taking shape. What feels like a breakdown might be the first signs of a breakthrough. What looks like mood swings could be new boundaries forming. What seems like social withdrawal might be the brain pulling back to preserve energy for what matters most.

In fact, what may feel like decline is often the brain recalibrating. Some old connections fall away, new ones take root, and while the process can feel like everything is collapsing, it's often just the brain finding a new way to function. It is not less capable, it's just differently wired.

'Just as puberty reshapes the brain for

## SUPPLEMENTS OUR READERS PUT TO THE TEST



Dr Vegan Perimenofriend is full of botanicals, phytoestrogens, vitamins and minerals to aid clearer thinking, mood, muscles and vitality.

Reader Suzanne says: 'This has helped with my focus and brain fog, and they're reasonably priced compared to some.'  
£21.99,  
[drvegan.com](http://drvegan.com)

Together Health Menopause is made from whole-food ingredients and is gentle on the stomach and highly absorbed. Reader Sophie says: 'I really like that it's not full of nasties like some brands can be. It makes me feel much calmer.'  
£19.49, [togetherhealth.co.uk](http://togetherhealth.co.uk)





*‘This is the part that no one tells you: beneath the chaos, something new is taking shape.’*

reproductive life, perimenopause reshapes it for post-reproductive life,’ says Dr Mosconi. ‘While there can be some glitches, like hot flashes, brain fog or low mood, this process also opens space for emotional growth and clarity. From a neurological perspective, this makes sense,’ she says. ‘The brain shifts away from reproduction-related functions and can focus on other forms of fulfilment.’

### **‘We need to reframe it’**

But to benefit from these changes, we need to understand what is happening. And we need support from the start. ‘I love this notion and strongly support it,’ says Dr Mosconi. ‘We need to reframe perimenopause as a whole-person transition: biological, cognitive, emotional, and social. Education should start early, well

before symptoms begin, so women know what to expect and don’t feel blind-sided.

‘Support should focus not just on symptom relief, but on tools for emotional resilience, stress management, and lifelong brain health, like mindfulness, exercise, and nutrition,’ says Dr Mosconi. ‘It’s also crucial to train healthcare providers to recognise and validate these experiences, rather than dismissing them as “just hormones” or worse, a pathological state. The goal is to empower women with information about all their options,’ says Dr Mosconi. ‘Both lifestyle, behavioural and medical, so they can make informed, personalised decisions.’

‘Early intervention can make a meaningful difference,’ she continues. ‘Lifestyle factors like regular exercise, sleep, stress reduction, and a Mediterranean-style

**‘Lifestyle factors like following a Mediterranean-style diet have been shown to protect brain health and ease the menopause transition’**

# REWIRED AND READY TO GO



diet have been shown to protect brain health and ease the menopause transition.

‘Hormone therapy, when started around the onset of perimenopause, may also help, particularly for women with severe symptoms or undergoing early menopause,’ says Dr Mosconi. ‘Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and clinical hypnosis are also recommended by professional societies. The key is proactive, informed care. Supporting the brain and body before symptoms escalate, rather than waiting for a crisis.’

## ‘No two brains are alike’

‘That said, this is not true for all women,’ she adds. ‘There’s a wide range of responses to perimenopause, and every woman’s experience is different, shaped by her genetics, health and medical history, environment, and lifestyle. This is why we need a precision medicine approach, one that recognises individual biology and offers tailored support. No two brains, or transitions, are alike.’

That’s why it helps to start paying attention to what’s happening in your own mind and body. You don’t have to wait until breaking point to get support. Start by tracking your symptoms: mood, sleep, energy, memory. Use a journal or app to spot patterns. These records help when speaking to a GP or therapist. When you do decide to

speak to a healthcare professional, go in with clear questions like, ‘Could this be perimenopause?’ or ‘Can we explore hormonal changes as well as mental health?’ Ask for a hormone check, which often looks at oestrogen, progesterone, and FSH (a hormone that helps regulate your cycle), as well as referrals for CBT or a menopause specialist.

Beyond medical care, it’s also important to find supportive spaces where you can feel understood and connected. Whether it’s a local menopause café or online communities, they offer not just information, but a sense of shared experience. The goal isn’t to fix yourself, but to better understand what your brain and body are going through and to seek care that addresses the full picture, not just isolated symptoms.

But that kind of clarity doesn’t arrive by accident. It starts with speaking up, asking questions, and refusing to be brushed aside. Most of all, it comes from advocating for yourself and learning to name what is really happening.

You are not imagining this. You are not overreacting. You are moving through a real, measurable biological shift that deserves serious attention and proper care, and when you can describe your symptoms with clarity and confidence, it becomes harder for anyone, including your doctor, to dismiss what you are going through. ■

‘It helps to start paying attention to what’s happening in your own mind and body.’



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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.

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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.

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Alison Knowles, creator and author  
of Ollie And His Super Powers

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



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# HOU

What extent do mundane domestic tasks impact our sex lives? It turns out, quite a lot!



# *What's the link between* **SEX AND SEWWORK?**

I recall a video I saw doing the rounds a while ago, in which women were asked what would get them ‘in the mood’. One woman in the audience raised the largest laugh after explaining, with perfect comic timing, how much of a turn on it would be if her man sorted the laundry, folded the clothes, cleared the dishes...

By **YASMINA FLOYER**

# SEX AND HOUSEWORK

**'It's a surprise for some partners to hear that the division of labour might be playing a part in their sex life.'**

When we think about the factors which may affect our levels of desire, housework isn't an obvious one. But to what extent do these mundane domestic tasks impact our sex lives? It turns out, quite a lot! I caught up with sex therapist and author of *How Not to Let Having Kids Ruin Your Sex Life* (Headline Home, £16.99) Dr Karen Gurney to find out if there really is something to be said for a partner doing the housework that has us feeling hot under the collar.

She clarifies that while it may well be a turn on for some people, she never heard of it referred to as erotic by any clients that she has seen in sex therapy. 'In my experience this term is more of a reference to the freeing impact that the shared division of labour can have on one person's ability to experience desire or be motivated to experience desire if they have been feeling the weight of that very heavily inequality of household labour.

'It's often a surprise to some partners (and affirming for the person carrying the mental load) to hear that the division of labour might be playing a part in their sex life, but it also provides a potential solution (or at least the foundations of one) for them to look at if they would like things to change.'

It is a fact that within mixed-gender households, the lion's share of domestic work typically falls to women. The Office for National Statistics found that 'women shoulder the responsibility for "unpaid" work' — basically, housework and childrearing — finding that women put in double the proportion of unpaid work when it



comes to cooking, childcare and housework. Whilst this study is a decade old, not that much has changed. According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, the unequal division of labour persists, with 63% of women saying they did more than their fair share of the housework even now, so despite shifts in attitudes towards gender roles, the division of labour hasn't moved much at all.

## FOSTERING DESIRE OUTSIDE THE BEDROOM



The notion of psychological freedom really resonates with me.

Encountering the sultry Jessica Rabbit and her goofy husband Roger Rabbit for the first time on screen as a child, I was confused by the unlikely pairing.

What confused me even more was Jessica Rabbit's response when asked what she saw in her husband: 'He makes me laugh,' she responds, in complete earnestness.

Laughter is a whole-body response; something that can be shared as well as induced. It

is also deeply pleasurable. Now, as a grown woman, I understand something of what she meant.

My husband is not only very good looking, he's also very funny. When he has me cracking up so hard I struggle to catch my breath, I feel desire burning the soft edges of my laughter like paper smouldering at a lit flame, softly catching alight. That sort of laughter is alchemical, conjuring feelings of safety, relaxation both in mind and spirit, qualities that are essential to fostering feelings of desire.

## Carrying the load

Dr Gurney illustrates the connection between this data with work conducted by researchers such as van Anders et al. (2021) who proposed the 'Heteronormativity Theory of Low Sexual Desire in Women Partnered with Men' to explain the process involved from a relational, neurochemical and psychological perspective. 'This theory seeks to explain how the burden of the mental load itself, the time it takes out of one's day or week to address, and importantly, the unerotic dynamic of "parenting" another adult can have on desire. It's been theorised that it's not a coincidence that women in



## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Ilka Kemp-Hall**

A trainee sex and relationship therapist at the Contemporary Institute of Clinical Sexology. She now co-runs Half-Time Oranges, workshops that explore intimacy, pleasure, and connection through creative, inclusive practices.



**Jodie Slee**

A psychotherapist specialising in psychosexual, relational and EMDR therapy, with 15 years' experience helping couples and individuals overcome relationship issues or sexual difficulties.

[sensatetherapy.com](http://sensatetherapy.com)



**Dr Karen Gurney**

A consultant clinical psychologist and psychosexologist, a national expert on sexual wellbeing and function, and author of *How Not to Let Having Kids Ruin Your Sex Life*.

[@these doktor](https://www.instagram.com/these doktor)

# *It's a fact that in mixed gender households, the lion's share of domestic work typically falls to women*

relationships with men carry an unequal burden of household labour/mental load—even when they work more hours — and that women in relationships with men report having concerns about their sexual desire.'

The uneven division of labour in the household can negatively impact libido, sex and relationship expert Ilka Kemp-Hall agrees, meaning that a person's brain can't switch into 'desire mode' when it's still carrying the shopping list, the school schedule, and the emotional thermostat of the entire household. 'Unequal domestic labour isn't just a logistical problem — it's a relational one. Desire thrives when we feel supported, seen, safe, and like our needs

matter too.' In this way, stress in general is like hitting the brakes on your body's arousal system, 'When the stress is ongoing (like managing a household or caregiving or never-ending work pressures) it's like driving with one foot constantly on the brake. Pleasure, connection, and intimacy live in the nervous system's calm, not in overwhelm.'

It makes complete sense then the last thing you may feel like doing is having sex due to the detrimental impact that stress has on our sex lives via a series of neurobiological, cognitive and affective processes. Dr Gurney tells me that chronic high stress can, via high levels of cortisol, dampen our body's physiological response to sexual arousal.

*‘Basic participation shouldn’t be glorified. The fact it is often framed as exceptional points to a deeper issue.’*

‘Stress can also create distraction and an inability to pay attention to sexual cues as other stressors (in the environment, such as piles of washing, or as thoughts in terms of mental to-do lists) feel more salient.’

She goes on to share that in the context of a relationship, a high mental load may be linked to a reduction in the time, inclination or ability to attend to sexual cues in our bodies or environment.

### The desire: labour ratio

Psychosexual therapist Jodie Slee agrees that high stress levels and an excessive mental and emotional load are well-established inhibitors of sexual desire and arousal. ‘From a psychological perspective, chronic stress activates the body’s threat response system, increasing cortisol levels and leaving little room for the parasympathetic processes that support relaxation, arousal, and connection.’

In her professional experience, there is a clear link between the disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic and emotional labour performed by women and a decline in sexual desire, she explains that this is due to:

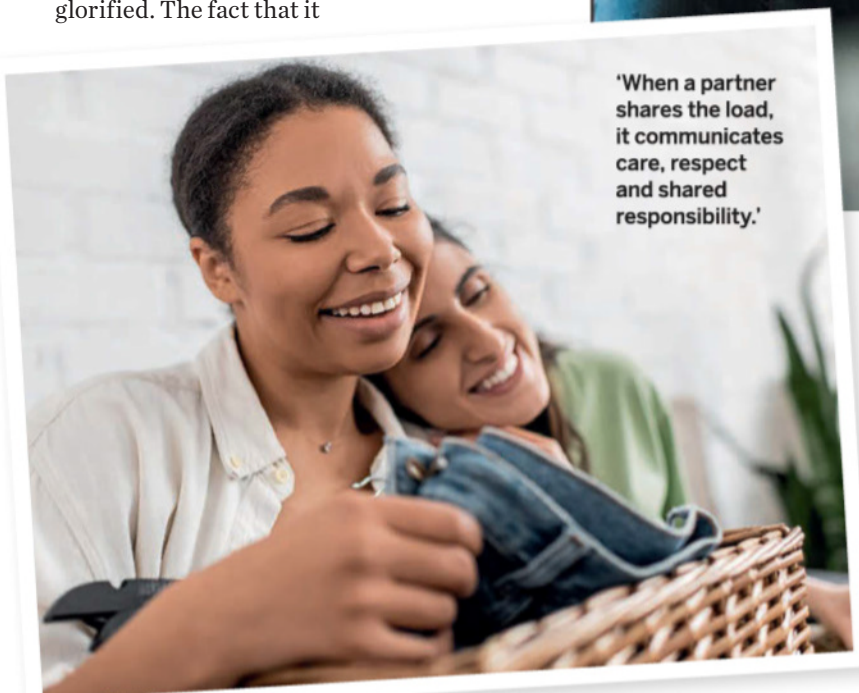
1 Good sex means being able to relax and be present, which is impossible with elevated cortisol levels or a never ending to-do list, and it also results in a lack of psychological space for sexuality

2 Women sometimes feel like they have to take care of their partners as well as the household and kids... some clients complain about feeling like a ‘mother’ to their other half rather than a romantic partner — this isn’t a sexy dynamic to be in

3 When one partner consistently bears the invisible workload of household management, childcare, it often results in fatigue and resentment, which is

like a brick wall for intimacy. Nobody wants to get naked with someone they resent! But how can we address this? The stress caused by managing a house, work and family life can leave people feeling too overloaded to think about adding their sex life to this already full list. However, Slee tells me that in order to address the factors mentioned, couples can benefit from open and non-defensive dialogue about the distribution of household labour. Ideally, they will move towards a more equal share where all forms of labour are recognised in the relationship.

Kemp-Hall reminds us that it’s not just about the dishes. ‘When a partner shares the emotional and physical load, it communicates care, respect, and shared responsibility. Those are the conditions that help many people — especially those socialised to carry more — feel safe enough to access desire. But I’d like to stress that basic participation shouldn’t always be glorified. The fact that it



‘When a partner shares the load, it communicates care, respect and shared responsibility.’



is often framed as exceptional points to the deeper issue around persistent gendered inequalities and low expectations.' Slee agrees that it also involves women making an active decision to prioritise rest and self-care and to vocalise when there is a disparity in the amount of work each member of the couple are undertaking. 'Ultimately, when individuals feel supported and respected in their daily lives, they are far more likely to experience the psychological freedom necessary for desire.' Whilst sharing the load of maintaining the household chores can be one way to address

**'Knowing there is protected time for intimacy can reduce pressure and create space for desire to emerge.'**

the negative impact that housework can have on our sex lives, I am curious about the idea of actively making time for sex. The idea of planning for it may seem counter-intuitive and unromantic, but Kemp-Hall assures me that sex doesn't have to be spontaneous to be satisfying. 'For many people, especially those juggling full lives, families, and work responsibilities, knowing there's protected time for intimacy can reduce pressure and create space for desire to emerge.' I wonder about the potential downsides, whether for some it can begin to feel like a chore, yet another item on the to-do list and something to tick off rather than tune into, then that's important information.

### **No one-size-fits-all solution**

'The line between a chore and a chosen practice is often about mindset, meaning, and mutuality. Is this time about connection, pleasure, play? Or is it about obligation?' Dr Gurney is often asked for her opinion on scheduling sex as a strategy for couples in long-term relationships and her response is equally nuanced. 'The answer is that scheduling sex is rarely a good idea, as it creates pressure to have to feel/do something, and pressure is a block to desire emerging.'

'On the other hand, scheduling physical intimacy for the sake of physical intimacy (a massage, talking and touching each other's bodies in bed, a bath together) is always a good idea, as it is both enjoyable in its own right, and provides the perfect environment for our desire to emerge.'

Kemp-Hall reminds us that there is no one-size-fits-all. 'The key is staying curious and collaborative. Sex can be scheduled and sexy, if it's something you both want, not something you feel you "should" do. Desire, after all, thrives where there's freedom, not pressure.' This has reminded me how much desire is connected to the way we feel in our bodies, how it is impacted by tension we may carry, by the weight of stress, of expectation, of duty even. Perhaps it is these burdens that ought to be tidied away in order to create space within which desire may bloom. ■



*Dealing with*

# UNWELCOME INTRUDERS

**A** while ago, my husband and I were driving to a friend's house for dinner. 'Are you sure the hob is switched off?' I said a couple of minutes into the hour-long journey. 'Yes. And we haven't cooked today. It'll be off,' he said. 'But I don't remember checking it before we left.' I tried for a minute to think of other things, but I kept picturing the hob left on, and then us returning home in a few hours to find the whole place burnt down. Really, there was no reason to think the hob would be on, but the unwanted thought stuck unnervingly in my head. 'Please can we go back and check? Sorry. If I don't, I'll be worrying about this all evening.'



'We were never meant to be subject to as much stimulation as we are.'

By **CAROLINE BUTTERWICK**

We drove home, and I jumped out the car and quickly checked. Yes, the hob was off. And, as I locked the front door, the front door was definitely locked. We were a few minutes late to dinner but, I told myself, at least I wasn't worrying about the house burning down. The problem is, this kind of thinking happens to me quite regularly.

Talking about experiencing intrusive thoughts can be difficult — we may feel confused or upset by them, or think other people won't understand. According to the charity Mind: 'An intrusive thought is an unwanted thought that pops into your mind.' They explain that this thought could be experienced in various ways, such as a feeling or sensation, memory, urge, or mental picture. Sometimes, there may be a trigger, or

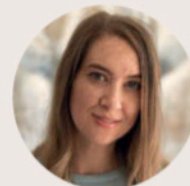
it might occur without an obvious reason. 'We have intrusive, impulsive thoughts all the time, and this is just part of being human,' says clinical psychologist Dr Marianne Trent. 'And of course, we were never meant to be subject to as much stimulation as we are in our very modern worlds that then keep our brains so active and risk us burning out on a daily basis. We're doing our best to get through this world of ours with these complicated, tricky human brains.'

If you experience intrusive thoughts, you're very much not alone. They are a common experience — we have thousands of thoughts a day, after all, so it's perfectly understandable that some of these may appear as confusing or random to us. But many of us don't openly talk about experiencing these thoughts, which can then make us feel more alone or scared.

It's important to note, intrusive thoughts >

## Psychologies

Meet the Experts



**Dr Marianne Trent**

A clinical psychologist and creator of the 'Our Tricky Brain' Kit.

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Save £20 off 'Our Tricky Brain' kit, using code **PSYCHOLOGIES20** at [aspiring-psychologist.co.uk/our-tricky-brain-kit](http://aspiring-psychologist.co.uk/our-tricky-brain-kit)

# DEALING WITH UNWELCOME INTRUDERS

aren't inherently 'bad'. 'Our brains are so influenced by what's around them,' Dr Trent says. 'We experience new stimulation, new thoughts, new feelings, what we overhear in the supermarket, and then our brain will literally shower down multiple thousands of thoughts per day. And that's absolutely fine, so long as we know these are just thoughts.'

Sometimes, intrusive thoughts can be part of a mental health condition like obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). 'With OCD, it's how intrusive thoughts spiral out of hand,' Dr Trent explains. She gives the example of thinking about a loved one, and how you've not spoken to them today, and then thinking, 'Maybe they've had a crash'.

'And then you start to think, "oh, what does that say about me?"' says Dr Trent. 'So you have the thought, but it's the meaning that you make and the meaning that you take from the fact that you've had that intrusive thought. And then it's the behaviour, or the thought cancellation, to "neutralise" the threat, to cancel it out until it feels "good" enough' — this is the 'compulsive' part.

With OCD, some people find they ruminate on their intrusive thoughts. 'It's like laying down that path — the neural pathways become strengthened [when you ruminate on the intrusive thought], and then before you know it, all roads are leading to that thing, because the brain was trying to be

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'We're doing our best to get through this world of ours, with these complicated, tricky human brains.'



# *‘You need to accept and control the thoughts, rather than them control you.’*

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helpful,’ explains Dr Trent. You might be reading this and recognise that you often feel upset by intrusive thoughts, or that you use compulsions to bring relief. Around half a year ago, my husband, gently, suggested this might be what I experience — that things like the unbearable feeling the house is going to burn down unless I turn back and make sure the hob is off, was affecting me. I read up on intrusive thoughts and OCD, and a penny dropped. There was a name for how I felt.

## **Recognition and relief**

With some trepidation, I spoke to a doctor about it. Without giving a diagnosis, she suggested it sounded like OCD. I’m now waiting for therapy. It is still hard to talk about — and I know that therapy itself can be a difficult thing to go through — but I felt such recognition as I read up on OCD and it corresponded with how I feel.

Of course, not all intrusive thoughts are a sign of a condition like OCD, though they can still be difficult. I ask Dr Trent when it might be worth seeking support.

‘If, for example, it’s meaning that your life feels less enjoyable, if it’s taking up more headspace than you might want, or if it’s stopping you from pursuing goals,’ she says.

But for many people, intrusive thoughts — especially once we realise how common they are — are just part of daily life that can seem a little odd at the time, but are part of our human experience.

So how can we manage them? Dr Trent emphasises that it’s not about ‘stopping’ the thoughts, even though our temptation may be to ‘push’ these thoughts away. ‘Actually, what you need to be able to do is to accept and control the thoughts, rather than having them control you,’ she says.

Being able to name a thought as an intrusive thought can acknowledge it without falling into rumination. If we’ve had a thought about something upsetting — like the scenario about a loved one having a car crash, for example — Dr Trent says: ‘Sometimes, we need to, gently, just take a breath and think,

“Gosh, I understand that I’m having these thoughts, and it’s really normal to have them, but it really would be incredibly distressing for this thing to happen. And of course, I know that I don’t want that to happen.”

Dr Trent highlights the ‘54321’ technique to gently ground yourself. It involves noticing five things you can see, four you can hear, three you can touch, two you can smell, and one you can taste. Focusing softly on deep breathing can help too. Dr Trent says wriggling your toes at the same time can keep you feeling present.

Finding a distraction that’s enjoyable and relaxing can be useful. But it’s important that this doesn’t become a form of avoiding or pushing away the feelings.

‘If you’re finding relief [by doing something to distract you], that’s great,’ she says. ‘But it’s when it starts to feel like it might be avoidance, that’s when we might actually want to engage with therapy.’

A frustrating irony is that things to help calm intrusive thoughts can occasionally become unhelpful compulsions themselves. If you feel you ‘must’ do a set exercise or routine every time you have an intrusive thought, this may be a sign this has become a compulsive response, and that it might be worth seeking support.

## **Thriving and understanding**

For many, just knowing what intrusive thoughts are suddenly helps us make sense of our minds. If you’re finding them difficult to deal with, there are some good online resources — the charity, Mind, for example, has some really useful information on understanding intrusive thoughts and what support might help.

If intrusive thoughts are affecting your day or how you feel, it may be worth looking at whether speaking to a qualified therapist who’s used to supporting people about intrusive thoughts could help. You shouldn’t have to struggle.

As Dr Trent says: ‘I genuinely believe that people deserve to thrive.’ ■



# Nostalgic French desserts to make at home

Bring some French patisserie style to  
your home kitchen.

**B**aker and food writer Edd Kimber aims to demystify French baking with his cookbook, *French Bakes Made Simple*. Here's our pick of retro treats to recreate at home.

COOK: 30 minutes  
SERVES: 4-6

*'It might be the  
most basic of baked  
custards, but it  
really is heaven on  
a plate.'*



# Crème Caramel

‘I find this dessert such a simple comfort,’ says Kimber. ‘It might be the most basic of baked custards, but it really is heaven on a plate. Perhaps it is the memories of eating it as a child, or maybe it’s the texture.’

‘Either way it is a delicious, classic dessert that deserves to be brought back from the annals of “retro” and “old-fashioned” to sit proudly on our dinner tables once again.’

## Ingredients

For the caramel:

- 100g caster sugar

For the custard:

- 1 vanilla pod or 2tsp vanilla bean paste
- 400ml whole milk
- 50ml whipping cream
- 4 large eggs
- 125g caster sugar

## Method

**1** Put four 9 centimetre ramekins or six 7.5 centimetre dariole moulds in a roasting tin ready by the hob. Preheat the oven to 150°C (130°C fan/300°F), gas mark 2.

**2** To make the caramel, put the sugar and three tablespoons of water in a small pan over a medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until the sugar has dissolved. Once the syrup is clear, stop stirring (as this can cause crystallisation) and allow the sugar to caramelize.

**3** Once you have a caramel with a dark copper colour, remove the pan from the heat and immediately divide among the prepared moulds. (Be careful that the caramel doesn’t cook too far as it can burn easily.) Set aside while you make the custard.

**4** Cut the vanilla pod, if using, in half and scrape out the seeds. Put the seeds or vanilla bean paste in a medium pan and add the milk and cream. Heat gently over a medium-low heat until the mixture is hot but not boiling.

**5** Meanwhile, put the eggs and sugar in a heatproof bowl and whisk together until pale. Once the milk mixture has come to temperature, remove the pan from the heat and slowly pour the mixture over the eggs, stirring constantly. Using a ladle, divide this custard equally between the prepared moulds.

**6** Put the roasting tin in the oven and add enough cold water so that it reaches halfway up the sides of the moulds. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes until the custards have set around the outside but still have a wobble in the centre.

**7** Carefully remove the roasting tin from the oven. Lift out the custards and put them onto a wire rack to cool. Cover each mould with clingfilm then transfer them to the refrigerator to chill overnight.

**8** To serve, use a knife to gently loosen the custards from the moulds. Put a serving plate on top of each mould, and invert it to turn the custards out. Make sure all the caramel drains from the mould onto the custard.

Will keep for up to three days stored in the refrigerator.

### Chocolate Fondants

‘Sometimes the old-fashioned recipes are the best — and you really can’t get any more retro than this dessert,’ says Kimber. ‘At one point a chocolate fondant was on the menu at almost every restaurant around. Although it’s considered a bit of a cliché now, if you make these for friends at home, I guarantee that they will love them. You can’t help but be impressed when you cut into the dessert and the molten centre oozes out.’

#### Ingredients

- 200g unsalted butter, plus extra for greasing
- 1tbsp cocoa powder, plus extra for dusting
- 200g dark chocolate (60–70% cocoa solids), finely chopped
- 5 large eggs
- 125g caster sugar
- 100g plain flour
- Pinch of flaked sea salt
- Cream or vanilla ice cream, to serve

#### Method

**1** Preheat the oven to 190°C (170°C fan/375°F), gas mark 5 and line a baking tray with baking parchment. Grease six 7.5 centimetre (3 inch) dariole moulds (or small ramekins) with butter and coat with a little cocoa powder, tapping out any excess. Put the dariole moulds onto the prepared tray and set aside.

**2** Put the butter and chocolate in a heatproof bowl over a pan of gently simmering water, making sure the base of the bowl doesn’t touch the water. Stir occasionally until fully melted. Remove from the heat and leave to cool slightly.

**3** Put the eggs and sugar in a large bowl and, using an electric mixer, whisk for eight minutes or

until pale and thick. While still mixing, pour in the chocolate mixture, mixing until fully combined. Sift over the flour and cocoa powder, then add the salt and fold together using a spatula until you have a smooth batter.

**4** Using a ladle, divide the batter evenly among the prepared moulds, then bake for eight minutes.

**5** Remove from the oven and use a blunt knife to loosen around the edge of each mould. Immediately invert the fondants onto serving plates. Serve straight away with a little cream or vanilla ice cream.

The fondants can be prepared a day ahead and chilled until ready to bake. They can also be frozen and baked straight from the freezer – add five minutes to the cooking time.

*‘You can’t help but be impressed when you cut into the dessert and the molten centre oozes out’*



HANDS ON: 12 minutes  
COOK: 8 minutes  
SERVES: 6

# Lemon Madeleines

‘For me, these little cakes are brilliant, because the batter can be prepared a couple of days in advance and then baked in no time at all — the perfect prepare-ahead recipe. They are also really versatile. I have flavoured them in all sorts of ways, from mixing cacao nibs into the batter to using a blood-orange glaze, and even dipping them in tempered chocolate.

‘To get that characteristic shape there are a few things you can do to help. Firstly, chill the batter for at least three hours and chill the tray for an hour before baking. Secondly, don’t overfill the mould, as this will result in a plain, domed madeleine without that classic hump. And thirdly, baking at a relatively high temperature also helps.’

## Ingredients

- 2 large eggs
- 100g caster sugar
- 100g plain flour, plus extra for dusting

- 1tsp baking powder
- 100g unsalted butter, melted and slightly cooled, plus extra for greasing

For the lemon glaze:

- Zest and juice of 1 lemon
- 160g icing sugar, sifted

## Method

**1** Put the eggs and sugar in a large bowl and, using an electric mixer, whisk until thick and pale, about six to eight minutes. Put the flour and baking powder in a separate bowl and whisk together to combine. Sift a third of the flour mixture over the egg mixture, carefully folding to combine using a spatula, then add the remaining mixture in two additions in the same way.

**2** Take a large spoonful of the batter and add this to a small bowl along with the butter, mixing them together to lighten the butter. Pour the butter mixture into the batter and gently fold

together to combine. Press a sheet of clingfilm onto the surface of the batter, then put it in the refrigerator to chill for at least three hours before baking. (The mixture can be chilled for up to two days at this stage.)

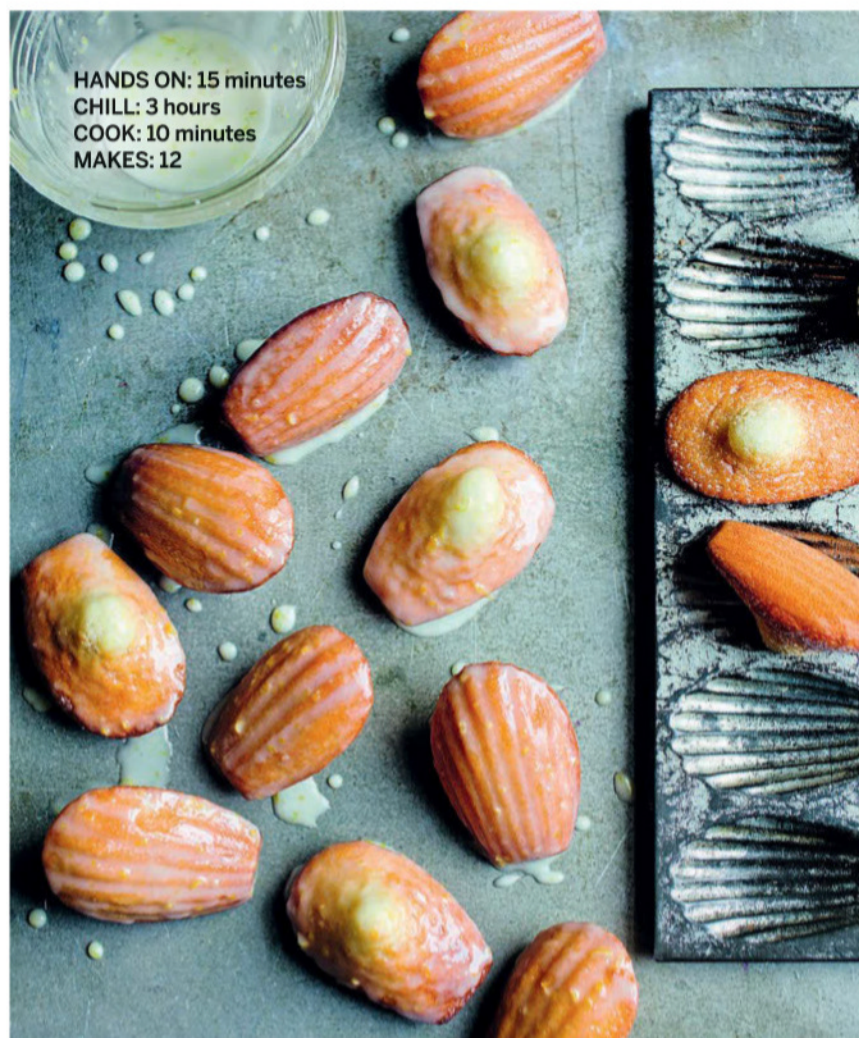
**3** To make the lemon glaze, put the lemon zest, juice and icing sugar in a medium bowl and mix together using a wooden spoon until you have a smooth, pourable glaze. Press a piece of clingfilm onto the surface of the glaze until needed — this will help to prevent it from forming a crust.

**4** An hour before baking, grease a 12-hole madeleine tray very well and dust with a little flour, tapping out the excess. Transfer the tray to the freezer to chill.

**5** Preheat the oven to 220°C (200°C fan/425°F), gas mark 7. When you are ready to bake, spoon the batter into the madeleine moulds. You don’t need to spread it out, as this will happen as the madeleines bake. Bake for eight to 10 minutes until the edges have started to brown.

**6** Remove from the oven and immediately turn out onto a wire rack. Leave to cool for 10 minutes, before dipping into the glaze, coating fully. Allow the excess to drip back into the bowl before setting on the wire rack, set over a piece of baking parchment, to set.

These are best served as close to baking as possible — they are great the day they are baked.



HANDS ON: 15 minutes  
CHILL: 3 hours  
COOK: 10 minutes  
MAKES: 12



*French Bakes Made Simple* by Edd Kimber is published by Kyle Books, priced £25. Available now.

# \* Everything changed when...

*'I started to have therapy'*

## Izzy Judd

Violinist, author, podcaster, and wife to McFly's Harry, Izzy declares 'therapy is one of the kindest things you can do for yourself'

She has had therapy on and off for more than 20 years. And the mum-of-three is hoping that by talking candidly about how much she's gained from it, she'll encourage others to try it, for problems big or small.

'New mums often face their struggles alone, and there's a narrative that plays in our minds saying we should be able to cope,' she says. 'It feels like everyone else is coping, but more than half of new mums struggle with their mental wellbeing. The idea is to seek therapy and remove the stigma that therapy might suggest a feeling of failing, because actually, therapy is one of the kindest things you can do for your mental wellbeing as a mum. That's something I've always felt — it can be transformative.'

Her first experience was in her early 20s when she was suffering with anxiety, which was linked to her brother having a serious car accident that left him with a severe brain injury.

'My family experienced a real trauma,' she recalls. 'That was back in 1997 and no therapy was offered to us at that time. I would've really benefited from being able to talk.'

'Resulting from that, I really struggled with anxiety. I'd always, as a child, had a bit of anxiety, and in my early 20s it got so overwhelming I had my first experience of therapy.'

'As I've gone through life there have been different moments where I've just felt I needed that support. I think therapy is part of the puzzle, certainly for me. Medication is one part, but you need therapy to support.'

Judd, who had her first child Lola, now nine, through IVF and went on to conceive sons Kit, aged seven, and



Izzy Judd has written two books about her becoming a mum and parenting: *Dare to Dream* and *Mindfulness for Mums*

Lockie, three, naturally, says when she was a new mum what she really struggled with was leaving her home.

'I found it really, really difficult leaving the house — I felt safe at home, I could feed my baby, I could walk around in my pyjamas all day.'

'I felt like the other people I'd met and made friends with at NCT all seemed to be coping a lot better. If I could speak to my new mum self it would have been just to say there really is no rush and you can be in this bubble as long as you need to be and it's fine.'

Judd is now supporting the new Positive Steps campaign by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), which was launched after BACP research found 69% of new mums think they're bombarded with advice which adds to — rather than alleviates — the pressures of motherhood. More than half said they found it harder to cope with their mental wellbeing since having a baby,

and 43% had considered having counselling for it, but hadn't accessed it. Two thirds added that social media creates an overwhelming pressure to succeed. Judd agrees. 'With the rise of social media, there's so much more comparison, and opinion and sometimes you can lose your way and not listen to your own intuition, which is more often than not the strongest voice to listen to.'

Of course new mums talking to their partners and family about any problems they may be facing is also vital. 'There's a place for making sure you have an open dialogue with the people around you, especially as a new mum where you can't really express what you're finding difficult,' says Judd. 'As new mums we're really bad at asking for help — it doesn't feel instinctive, because we want to look after and be able to do everything as part of our maternal instinct, but actually turning to your partner to ask for help is absolutely crucial.'

She says it can also be useful to offload to a therapist too. 'They're trained experts,' she points out. 'Sometimes people might think "How is that person going to solve my problems, or I'm going to talk for an hour and just feel like I've opened up, but then what?" But actually, it isn't like that. It's almost like a filing system where you can organise your thoughts and concerns in a clearer way, and the therapist is very good at guiding you through and making sure you're getting the most from your sessions.'

'Sometimes you just need the chance to offload, or to feel the emotions or to have a cry or a shout or whatever it might be.'

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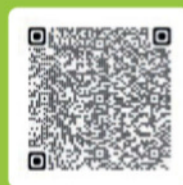
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