DEVOTED TO MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

happiful

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Going through grief

Exploring loss in its many forms

The social network

Try 'pod mapping' your way to better wellbeing support

Are you a glue friend?

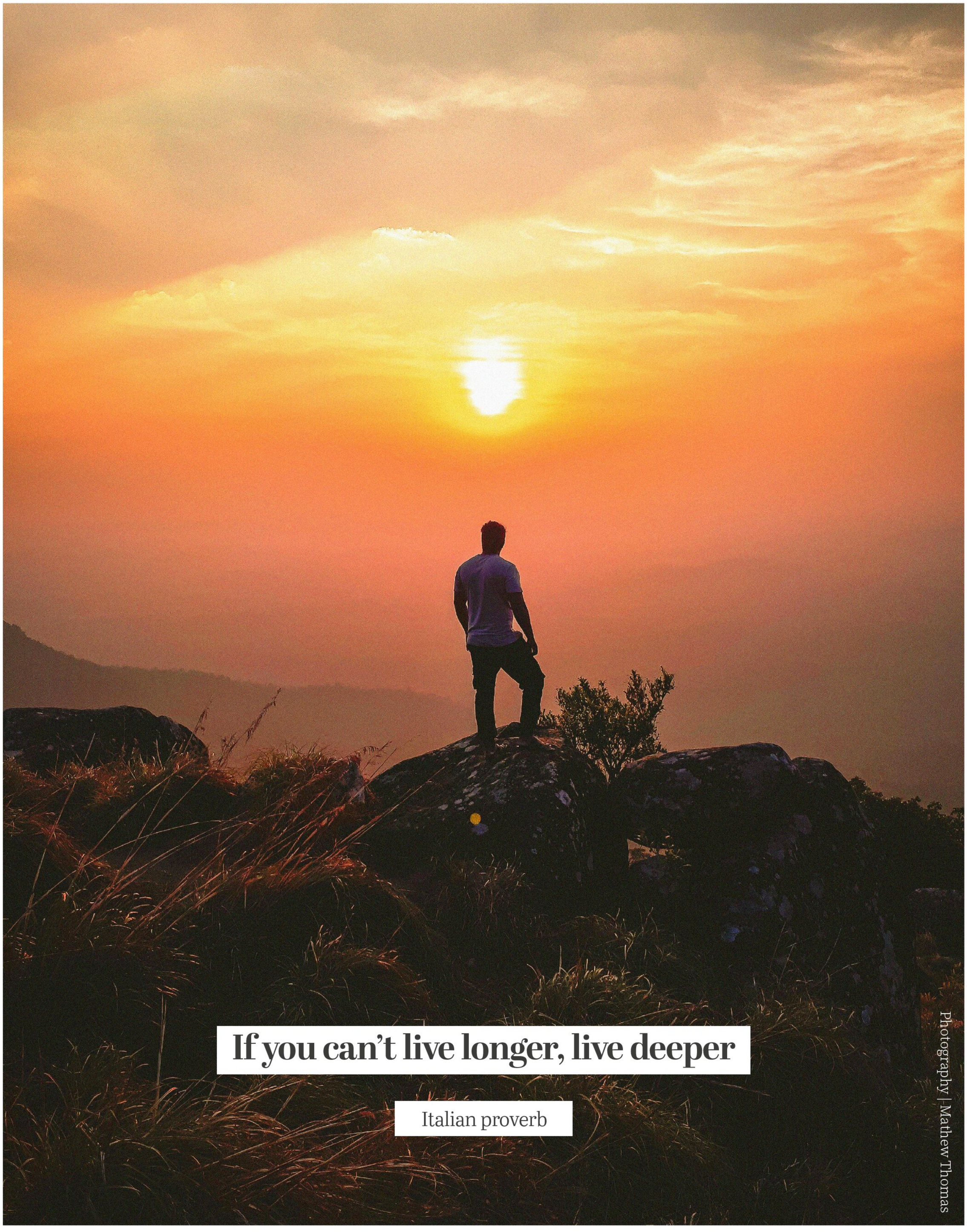
What to do if you're the one holding it all together

EXPERT INSIGHT

Chronically speaking

The emotional weight of chronic illness

ATTACHMENT STYLES | TTC | RAGE FRIENDS



If you can’t live longer, live deeper

Italian proverb

Photography | Mathew Thomas

Invisible string

There's a theory that claims the people meant to be in your life will find you. An 'invisible string' connects you, and fate, destiny, or divine intervention will ensure you eventually cross paths.

It's most often used in romantic contexts, where you finally meet and everything falls into place, and you recall moments and funny coincidences that seem to be a sign the universe has been pushing you towards each other all this time.

But, whether you believe in destiny or not, the power and complexity of human connections is undeniable. And it's something we're exploring from all angles in this issue.

Less of a single string, I like to think of our bonds like the silken threads of a spiderweb: something that seems so delicate, almost imperceptible to the eye at times, and yet holds surprising strength against the toughest elements of the world.

The extraordinary pattern woven between us can appear utterly unique to each person, and yet forms a vital lifeline, support, and shelter. Yet it can also be fragile in places, and at risk of being torn apart – although sometimes for the better.

This could be in the form of the sibling bonds that tie us, and yet may be in desperate need of repair (or finally cutting off) on p26, or recognising how stretched it can feel to be the 'glue friend' always holding everything together on p15.

Then there are the unexpected connections, the ones that provide us with a surprising source of strength. The neighbours and community spirit alive and thriving in projects like the Anansi Theatre Company (p52), or the strangers having more impact on us than we could ever have predicted thanks to incredible initiatives like More Love Letters (p48).

We take this concept of connection more literally with the effective and practical 'pod mapping' exercise on p45, and consider how we connect via our attachment styles on p62.

So, whether you find comfort in the idea of invisible bonds bridging the divide and bringing us together, or recognise that relationships that are dragging us down can be cut off like cobwebs, I hope this issue helps you reflect on your own network and how to make the most of it.

And, if you do believe in fate, just think how that invisible string could be drawing you towards a connection that might just change your life.

Happy reading,

REBECCA THAIR |
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Rebecca portrait | Studio Rouge

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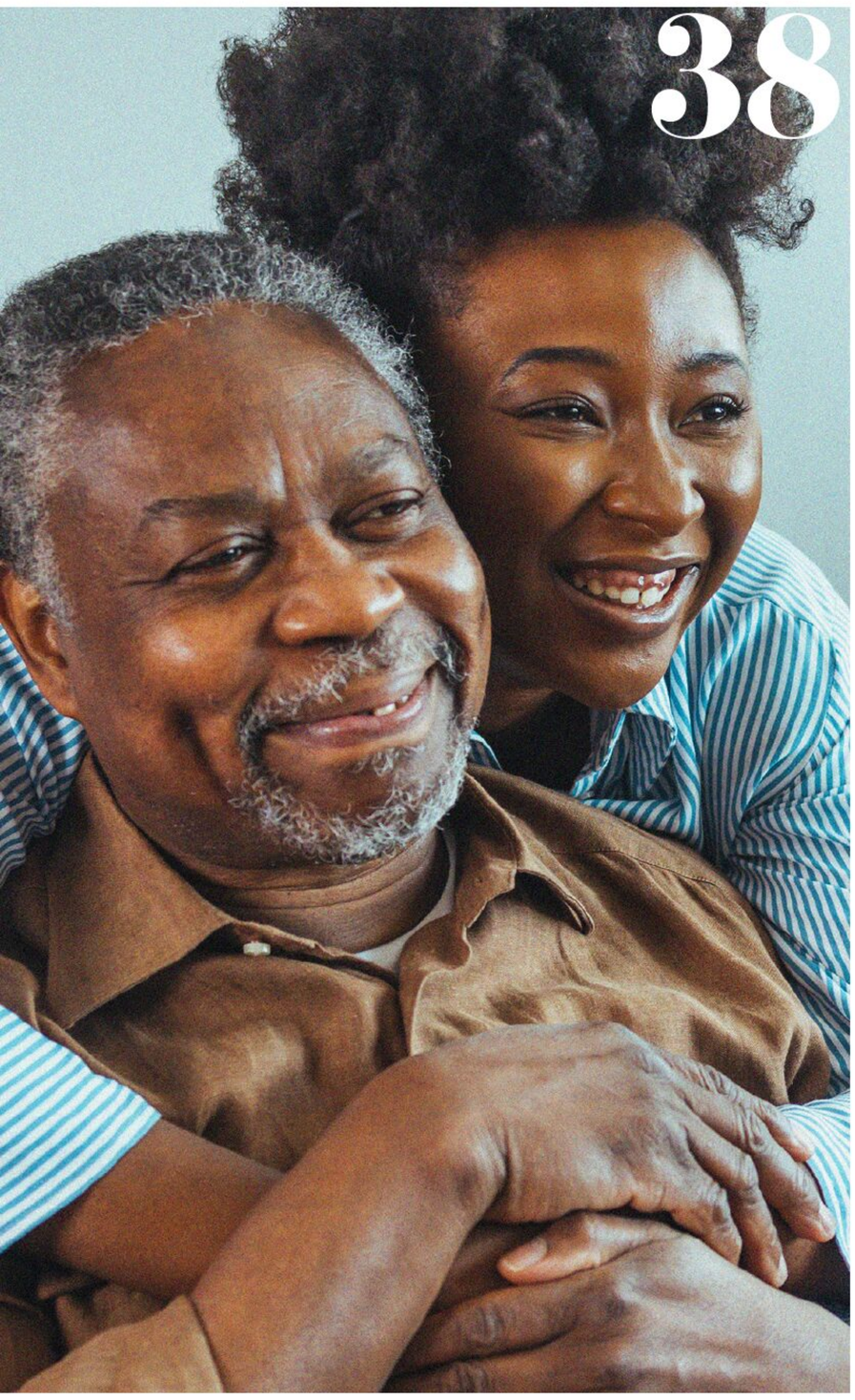

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Expert review

Every issue of Happiful is reviewed by an accredited counsellor, to ensure we deliver the highest quality content while handling topics sensitively.

The relationships we experience in life are so important. After all, we're social beings and our connections with others can strongly influence our wellbeing. However, some relationships can take their toll and lead to negative emotions that are difficult to navigate, such as being the 'glue friend' (p15). It's important to listen to these feelings and understand how to respond in helpful ways. By doing so, this will have a positive impact on yourself, and lead to healthier relationships, too.

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The Uplift

SCIENCE

The sky's the limit: world's first astronaut with a disability is ready for launch

In a first for space exploration, the European Space Agency (ESA) has announced that a Paralympian and surgeon, John McFall, has completed his training and is now medically certified for an international space mission, becoming the first astronaut with a physical disability.

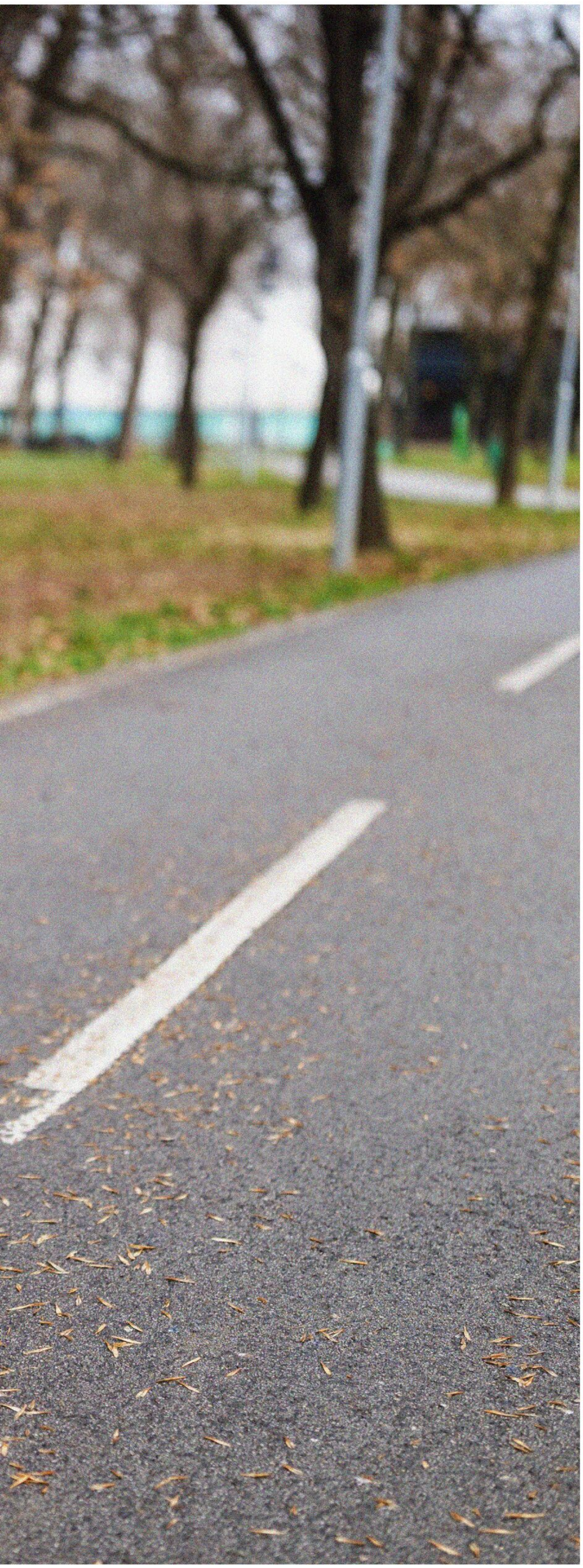
John lost his leg at the age of 19 following a serious motorbike accident. In a video interview posted by the ESA, he talks about how he has always been interested in science and space exploration, and how he didn't think it was possible for an amputee to become an astronaut.

In 2022, he was selected to take part in Fly!, ESA's feasibility study investigating the possibilities of someone with a physical disability embarking on a long-duration space mission. Following a two-year period of extensive research examining potential challenges, it was concluded that it was very much possible.

Speaking in a recent media briefing for Fly!, John said: "I feel hugely proud… What's really interesting is this isn't about me, this is way bigger than that, because this is a cultural shift. This is something that has not been done before…" The next phase is 'Mission Ready', which will involve making preparations for a safe and successful mission, should there be a flight opportunity.

Though John hasn't been assigned to a mission just yet, it marks a huge milestone for space travel and inclusivity, breaking barriers that go beyond Earth.

Writing | Lauren Bromley-Bird



TRANSPORT

£300 million investment to provide accessible travel

Want to get out and about more often, but struggle with local infrastructure? Recently announced travel schemes are set to make cycling, walking, and wheeling much easier. The government funding package totals almost £300 million, and will help local authorities provide high-quality, easily accessible travel pathways all across England.

The finance will support the construction of 300 miles of brand new footpaths and cycle tracks, and fund cycle training for hundreds of thousands of children. Additionally, improved crossings and junctions will be put in place to make walking and cycling even safer and easier.

It's believed these improvements will help people make 30 million more journeys by bike or on foot each year, including encouraging 20 million new walk-to-school trips by children and parents. It is hoped that the increased health benefits gained by more people choosing to walk, cycle, and get active, could decrease the number of sick days taken, and ease some of the pressure on the NHS – while helping people live healthier, happier lives.

The National Active Travel Commissioner, Chris Boardman, comments: "Free exercise, zero emissions, and no risk of getting stuck in traffic are benefits already being enjoyed as standard by our European neighbours. It's time we had the same life-improving choices. This funding will help make our towns, cities, and villages happier, healthier, and greener places to live."

So, get ready to dust off your old bike or lace up your walking shoes, and make the most of these new safer, greener, and more accessible paths that are on the horizon.

Writing | Bonnie Evie Gifford

HEALTHCARE

AI-powered breast cancer screening trial could aid early detection and save lives

Nearly 700,000 women will take part in a new trial to test how Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools can be used to support the early diagnosis of breast cancer.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has announced that Early Detection using Information Technology in Health (EDITH) will be trialled in 30 sites across the country, to assist radiologists in screening patients for signs of cancer.

With 56,000 people diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the UK, women between ages 50–71 are invited to attend a screening every three years. Currently, two specialists are needed per mammogram, but this technology enables just one to complete the process safely and efficiently. If successful, the trial could free up hundreds of specialists to see more patients, tackle rising cancer rates, and, in turn, save lives and cut waiting lists.

Professor Lucy Chappell, chief scientific adviser at the DHSC and chief executive of the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), says: "This landmark trial could lead to a significant step forward in the early detection of breast cancer, offering women faster, more accurate diagnoses when it matters most. It is another example of how NIHR research, shaped and funded by the public, is crucial for rigorously testing world-leading new technologies, such as AI, that can potentially save lives, while reducing the burden on the NHS."

EDUCATION

Major study reveals the best mental health interventions for schools

A major mental health trial, published by the Department for Education, has identified that normalising everyday emotions is likely the best way to support the mental health and wellbeing of school children.

Including two randomised controlled trials, and evaluating five different school-based mental health interventions, the study by University College London (UCL) and charity Anna Freud, aimed to improve mental health awareness and wellbeing in schools, with 30,000+ students from 513 English primary and secondary schools taking part between 2018 and 2024.

By evaluating the effectiveness of different interventions compared to standard practice, the trial found that teaching children about safety and wellbeing strategies, relaxation, and mindfulness techniques, showed the most promise for school-based interventions, when implemented consistently and frequently.

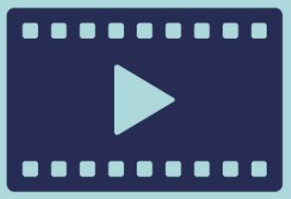
Findings also highlighted that some interventions are best suited to specific age groups. A teacher-led, daily five-minute relaxation session reduced emotional difficulties in primary school children, with particular benefits for children from global majority groups. In contrast, the same intervention led to increased emotional difficulties among pupils at secondary school.

It's hoped these results enable schools to create supportive environments where every child can thrive, not just academically, but emotionally, too.

Writing | Fiona Fletcher Reid

The wellbeing wrap

The **smell of freshly baked pizza can alleviate stress,** according to a study by the University of East Anglia, UK



For the first time in recent history, in 2024 the **percentage of top grossing films featuring a female protagonist equalled that of male protagonists**

Actor **Michael Sheen** has used £129K of his own money to help **clear £1 million of debt for 900 people** in south Wales

India has doubled its tiger population in just over a decade with 3,600+ tigers (75% of the world's total)

APPEALING DISCOVERY

Citrus fruits, particularly oranges, have been linked to a 20% reduction in depression, in new research published in the journal 'Microbiome'. Scientists found a correlation between eating citrus fruits and an increase in Faecalibacterium prausnitzii (a gut bacteria with numerous health benefits). They noted that participants with depression had a lower amount of this bacterium in their guts, and the results were specific to citrus, rather than total fruit or vegetable consumption.

After being hunted to extinction 400 years ago, wild beavers have been released in a Dorset nature reserve for the first time, following government approval to reintroduce them in the UK.

Doctor's orders

Workers' rights are set to be improved, as the government announces plans to boost sick pay for 1.3 million low-income workers. While previous rules meant those earning under £123 a week weren't eligible for sick pay, the new plans (expected to be enforced in 2026) require employers to either pay 80% of the employee's salary, from the first day of illness, or Statutory Sick Pay. This change offers more people the chance to recovery without added financial pressure and stress.

Your second act

Seeking sunnier climes when you retire is an increasingly popular move, but new research suggests that living abroad puts retirees at a greater risk of loneliness. While embarking on a new adventure can be exciting, the study, published in *Psychology and Aging*, highlighted the lack of community support can make it hard to adapt. Add to this the reduced contact with loved ones, and difficulties making new friends, it's not suprising people were found to be 'socially lonelier' than those who remain at home. However, it's not all doom and gloom. Retirees' emotional loneliness wasn't impacted when moving with a partner. Plus, other benefits included being in a better financial position, and being healthier than the control group.

A WALK TO REMEMBER

Hundreds of people, and their four-legged friends, headed to Blackpool Promenade to give terminally-ill guide dog Ian a 'guard of honour' for his final walk. The eight-year-old labrador retriever was recently diagnosed with cancer, and so his trainer, Gemma Fairhurst, said: "Unfortunately he isn't going to get the retirement he deserves... so I decided to arrange this walk for him." With the overwhelming support rallying around them both, it seems a fitting send off for the goodest boy.

Morrisons supermarket has partnered with disabled discount platform Purpl, to provide discounts on the weekly shop for the disabled community – with households able to save £45 per month, or £550 per year!

Parental bereavement leave is being extended in the UK to allow two weeks for those experiencing miscarriage prior to 24 weeks, in recognition of the huge emotional toll this takes.

TRUTH BE TOLD

The Welsh government is putting trust firmly back on the agenda, with a proposal to make it illegal for politicians to deliberately lie, and criminalises making 'false statements' to win votes.

Sworn evidence

It seems like letting out a few expletives could help you reach a new PB – and research swears by it. The study, in *Frontiers in Psychology*, found that cursing during 'short and intense' physical exercises had a positive impact on performance – increasing plank duration by 12%, push-up endurance by 15%, and wall sit duration by 22%! So, swear words might just help you increase reps.

JURASSIC BEACH

A 127 million-year-old dinosaur footprint was recently discovered by fossil guide Joe Thompson, on Shepherd's Chine beach on the Isle of Wight. It's believed the one-metre Iguanodon print was revealed after storms stripped away the pebbles usually covering it. A truly 'pterrific' and encouraging find for fossil hunters – and a reminder to always watch your step!

Are you an *underthinker?*

Always going with your gut can land you in hot water. But can jumping in headfirst ever be beneficial, and how can we strike a balance between under and overthinking?

Writing | **Kai Conibear**

We've all had those moments when we've run head-first into a situation without thinking it through. In my early 20s, I was desperate to move into my own place. I found a flat that seemed perfect and I took it, without considering whether the rent and bills were *actually* affordable in the long-term. I acted entirely on impulse. My desire to have my own home was at the forefront of my mind, and that was that.

A year later, I was in financial trouble, and unbelievably stressed as a result. I had to move in with my family, and felt embarrassed, ashamed, and very silly that I'd made such a massive decision without thinking about the consequences.

Acting on instinct often leads to an aftermath of negative thoughts. Should I have given the situation more thought before taking action? What if I'd done things differently? It can end in a spiral of self-doubt and criticism. I'm sure we've all experienced moments that we question in hindsight, but for some people this is a consistent pattern of behaviour. This is the habit of 'underthinking'.

Who is likely to underthink?

"Underthinking, which means acting without considering consequences, can stem from neurological, psychological, and trauma-related factors," psychotherapist Tina Chummun explains. "The brain's ability to assess situations and predict outcomes depends heavily on the prefrontal cortex, which governs executive function, impulse control, and decision-making. When this region is underactive or overwhelmed, underthinking is more likely."

Mental health conditions can contribute to a pattern of underthinking. People with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more likely to be impulsive due to executive dysfunction, which can affect how we regulate behaviours such as impulse control. People with bipolar disorder may underthink during manic or hypomanic episodes. With post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you're more likely to react from a fight, flight, or freeze response when faced with a decision.

"Trauma survivors often engage in psychological numbing as a defence mechanism, making them less attuned to their own thought processes. This can look like underthinking, but it's more about detachment from decision-making, rather than carelessness," says Tina. "It's also important to distinguish underthinking from a lack of awareness. People who have experienced severe traumas may struggle to fully perceive and interpret social cues, making them appear disengaged or impulsive. They aren't necessarily choosing not to think – their nervous system is stuck in a protective, reactive state."

Are there benefits to underthinking?

Underthinking isn't always a bad tool to have in your back pocket.

Consider situations that demand us to act quickly and using our instincts, like in an emergency. Underthinking stops us from worrying or overanalysing a situation, allowing us to react to a crisis in a timely manner – this could be anything from quickly switching off the water mains when a tap breaks, to jumping in to do the Heimlich manoeuvre when someone starts choking.

Another benefit to being an underthinker is that you're less likely to stew over a dilemma, or agonise over the outcome – wasting unnecessary energy and time on something you *know* how to handle. The decisiveness that comes with underthinking can also allow us to take charge in difficult situations, meaning we may work well under pressure, and inspire confidence in others. In general, underthinkers are more likely to think intuitively and creatively, and focus on aspects of their life that *are* in their control, rather than those that aren't.

What are the cons of underthinking?

The other side to the coin is that jumping in too quickly could have negative consequences in the aftermath. Poor decision-making could lead to stress, as the fallout of our decisions has a negative impact on our life, or causes further issues than the one we originally tried to solve.

In real terms, this might look like excitedly saying yes to going to a concert because you've been stressed and want to blow off some steam, only to become anxious in the lead up when you realise the full cost involved puts you over budget for the month. You might have to cancel other plans to accommodate it, and worry about letting people down.

Relationships can become strained or struggle as a knock-on effect when we put less thought into our actions and what we say, especially when we're navigating complex or difficult times. It might be getting a reputation for >>>

Tina Chummun is a psychotherapist and trauma specialist. Connect via the ***Counselling Directory.***

overpromising and not following through, or accidentally causing offence thanks to careless remarks.

Issues with self-image can also surface as we dissect the lack of planning and forethought of our actions. We might struggle with confidence and self-esteem, and avoid social situations entirely if we begin to not trust ourselves.

How do we manage underthinking, and make it work for us?

Prioritising decisions and putting them into categories of either low or high risk can help. Often, mundane, daily decisions don't need much thought. Deciding what to have for dinner, or what to wear, are examples where we can use underthinking to save our energy for elsewhere. Decisions we need to give more attention to are often those which will have a lasting impact on our lives. How we navigate relationships, financial decisions, and choices about our career or family life, all require introspection and thoughtful consideration before acting.

"Underthinking isn't just about 'not thinking' – it's often a brain-based response shaped by trauma, neurobiology, and mental health conditions," Tina stresses. "Some people underthink because they don't know they *should* be thinking (awareness gap), while others underthink because their brain is wired for survival, and not deep reflection. Recognising these patterns is the first step in building intentional awareness, and making better, more informed choices."

We can help ourselves to slow down, pause, and reflect with a few easy steps:

- **Create clear goals and priorities.** Who and what is important to you, and why? Think about what you really want before acting, and ask yourself questions like: 'What will happen if I *don't* act right now?'
- **Give yourself a time frame to make decisions.** It could be 24 hours, or even a week for big, life-changing ones. But even for smaller things, counting to 10 before responding gives us time to process information first.
- **Journal your initial thoughts.** Or, you might want to write a pros and cons list to help make sense of your choices, and analyse the consequences before committing to a course of action.
- **Explore mindfulness and grounding techniques.** These help you reconnect with your conscious thoughts, such as body scanning (focusing solely your body from top to bottom, acknowledging any and all sensations, such as pain and tension), or tracking (looking around the room, observing objects, and really taking note of all the details).

Sometimes we need a bit more help. In these instances, Tina suggests therapy could help rewire thought patterns.

"Trauma-specialised therapy helps individuals understand their patterns, and build intentional decision-making skills. Neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to rewire – means that even long-standing habits of underthinking can be changed with practice," she says. "If internal reflection is difficult, try talking through decisions with a trusted friend, therapist, or coach. External processing engages different neural pathways, making it easier to see blind spots in your thinking."

Underthinking can have a lasting impact on our lives if left unchecked. But it is possible to use it to our advantage. The most important thing is to recognise moments when we need to be reflective and contemplate our options, and when a gut reaction is safe to act on.

Kai Conibear is a writer and mental health advocate. His first book, 'Living at the Speed of Light', about bipolar disorder, is out now.

How to cope with being the 'glue friend' in your group

Are you stuck holding things together in the name of friendship? Here's how to loosen your grip...

Writing | Fiona Fletcher Reid

Whether it's organising someone's baby shower, making restaurant reservations, coordinating competing schedules, or keeping the peace when conflict erupts, friendships take work. But all those responsibilities aren't supposed to fall on one person.

"I love my friends," says Rachel*, "but occasionally, it would be nice to be able to just turn up somewhere and not feel like I have to be the one to instigate things, and plan them all the time." Rachel is the self-confessed 'glue friend' of her group, and she's well aware of the fact that without her, plans may never be arranged, bonds will weaken, and friends might lose contact altogether. The glue friend holds everything together – but at what cost?

Bonded together

Cultivating friendships is an important aspect of wellbeing. One study, published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, showed that those with friends and close confidants are more satisfied with their lives, and less likely to experience depression. Similarly, a meta-analytic review published in *PLOS Medical* found that those with strong social relationships are less likely to die from all causes, including heart problems and a range of chronic diseases. And yet, often, being the glue friend can come with negative consequences.

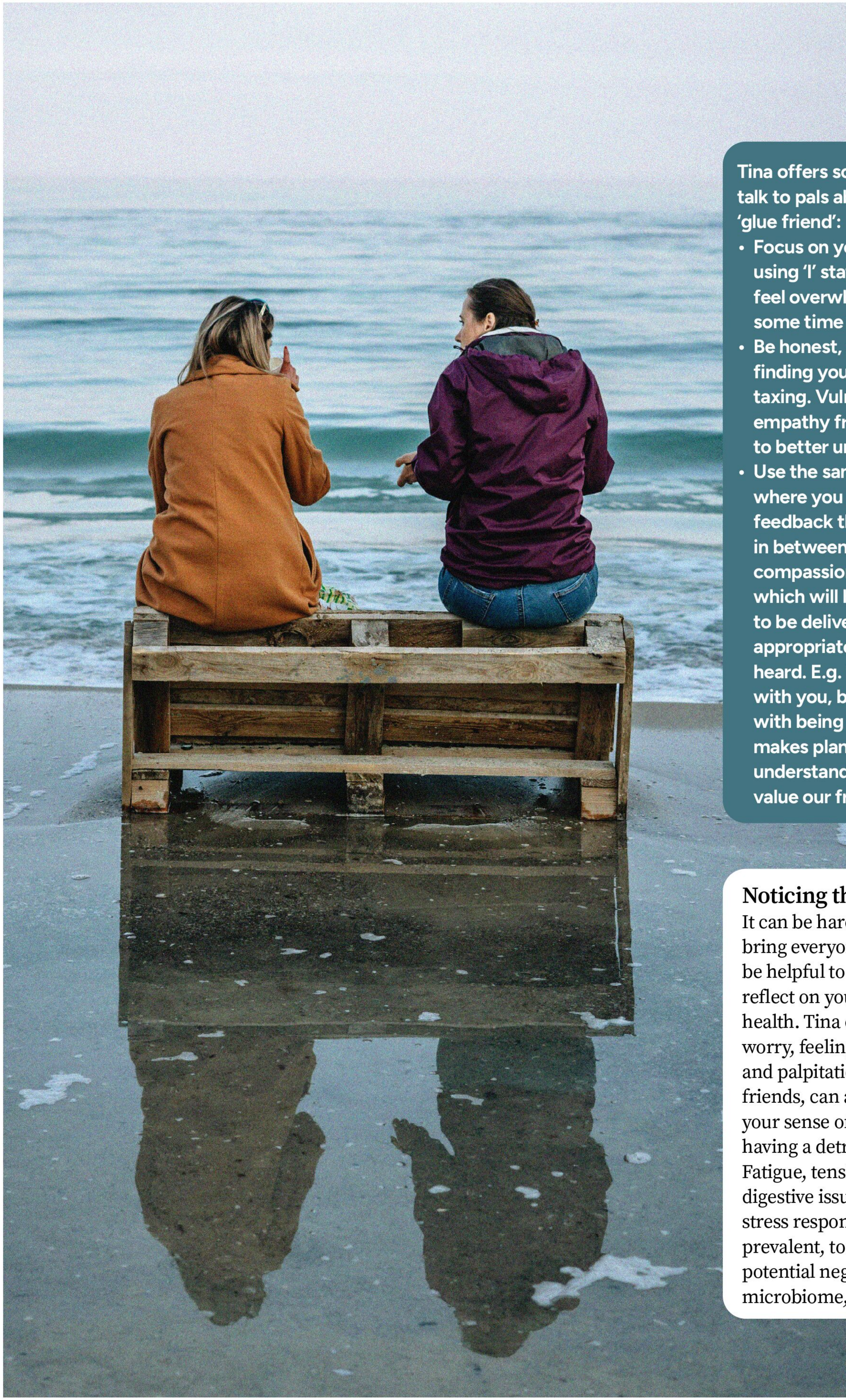
The weight of responsibility

"Glue friends can often act as emotional mediators, ensuring that conflicts are smoothed over, plans stay intact, and everyone feels connected," explains psychotherapist Tina Chummun. "While this role may provide a sense of purpose, it can also lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and chronic stress, because of the emotional responsibility that is involved."

If acting as the group party planner is beginning to feel like a burden, it could be affecting your brain chemistry. "From a neurobiological perspective, constantly being in a state of emotional vigilance can activate the brain's amygdala – the region responsible for processing threats," says Tina. "When this happens frequently, the body releases cortisol, a stress hormone that, over time, can impair memory, reduce immune function, and contribute to feelings of burnout."

Rachel recalls experiencing something similar last December. "I was busy, and not in a great place mentally, and while I would have been more than happy to catch up with my friends, I just couldn't face setting the ball rolling and having to organise it," she says. "So I didn't – and it meant there was no pre-Christmas get together last year." >>>

*Name changed



Tina offers some tips on how to talk to pals about your role as the 'glue friend':

- **Focus on your experience by using 'I' statements, such as, 'I feel overwhelmed and I need some time to recharge.'**
- **Be honest, share that you're finding your role emotionally taxing. Vulnerability can invite empathy from others, and lead to better understanding.**
- **Use the sandwich effect. This is where you provide constructive feedback that is 'sandwiched' in between two gently compassionate statements, which will help your message to be delivered sensitively and appropriately, and therefore heard. E.g. 'I love spending time with you, but I'm struggling with being the one who always makes plans. I hope you'll understand because I really value our friendship.'**

Noticing the symptoms

It can be hard to ignore the urge to bring everyone together, but it can be helpful to take a moment to reflect on your overall emotional health. Tina explains that chronic worry, feelings of resentment, and palpitations when around friends, can all be signs that your sense of responsibility is having a detrimental effect. Fatigue, tension headaches, and digestive issues due to prolonged stress responses, can be prevalent, too. Tina also notes the potential negative impact on gut microbiome, which can trigger

stress-related neurobiological conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

Being the glue can even leave you dreading the social events you've organised, because they take so much out of you. Whether it's managing the logistics of times, places, and activities, or playing therapist to the people who have long-standing beef, you might start to notice that your interactions don't deliver the warm and fuzzy feeling you're so deeply craving.

Ultimately, your dedication to the cause can become overwhelming to the point where you need to step away, but that can be much easier said than done. "The brain's prefrontal cortex (the area responsible for decision-making and impulse control) may become impaired when someone is under chronic stress," says Tina. "As a result, glue friends might struggle to prioritise their own needs, or recognise when they need a break."

> While this role may provide a sense of purpose, it can also lead to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and chronic stress, because of the emotional responsibility involved

Getting unglued

As the glue friend, it's likely that you're the person your pals come to when they're in need, and you probably find it hard to say no. You want that social connection – so isn't being there for others a non-negotiable part of nurturing friendships? Perhaps not. According to Tina, boundaries are essential when it comes to downgrading how much of yourself you give away to others, which allows you to prioritise yours truly.

"From a neuroscience perspective, setting boundaries helps reduce overactivation of the brain's stress response system. By creating time for rest and recovery, the parasympathetic nervous system – the body's rest and digest system – can kick in, promoting relaxation and emotional stability."

Creating space through boundaries will let you care for yourself instead of others, allowing you to show up to your relationships feeling calm, leading to more authentic experiences in the long run.

Tina suggests blocking out certain parts of the day to interact with friends, and similarly, blocking out time to recharge, where you don't get caught up in messages and making plans. "Let friends know that you're not always available to mediate conflicts, or offer advice. For example, say: 'I care about you, but I need some time for myself right now.'"

Tina Chummun is a psychotherapist and trauma specialist. Visit the ***Counselling Directory*** *to find out more.*

Be brave and ask friends to help out more, gently encouraging them to take initiative when it comes to making plans or managing group dynamics. If you're the mediator between two friends who don't see eye to eye, let them resolve things on their own now and then.

Being the glue friend may seem like the only way to maintain meaningful connections, but establishing healthy boundaries is crucial for avoiding burnout, and preserving your own wellbeing. Ask others to take the lead and choose yourself for a change – this way you'll build authentic relationships that bond naturally, without always having to be the adhesive that holds everything together. h

The sponge city evolution

How urban landscapes can be adapted to meet increased flood risks using strategies that work with nature, instead of against it...

Writing | **Fiona Fletcher Reid**

When architect and urban planner Kongjian Yu was a child, he almost drowned in a flood. Did he have any idea that as he pulled himself to safety, using the riverbank's willow branches and reeds, he was planting the seed of a lifelong passion for protecting communities from future flood risk?

Years later, in 1997, Yu led a team studying urban water systems. They hooked on to the metaphor of a 'sponge' to describe how natural wetlands retain floodwater and release it during droughts. This is a notable contrast to manmade flood control strategies, which involve installing concrete walls along riverbanks, and removing natural features like bends, pools, and vegetation – an approach that tends to be expensive, and has a significant impact on the natural environment.

Yu's team proposed that city infrastructure should switch focus from channelling water away, to, instead, absorbing excess water like a sponge. And so 'sponge cities' were born. Not only do sponge cities aim to prevent the effects of flooding, but they do so while maintaining the ecological benefits that healthy river systems and wetlands provide, such as air and water purification, carbon storage, and temperature regulation.

Why do we need them?

One in six properties in England is at risk of flooding, according to the Environment Agency, and it's estimated that by 2050, coastal and river flooding will cost the UK between £1.6 billion and £6.8 billion annually. But climate change isn't the only reason we're experiencing more flooding. The UK government recognises that traditional flood defences, like concrete dams, embankments, and walls, will no longer be enough to protect us. Many cities worldwide, including Copenhagen and Rotterdam, have already adopted sponge city principles to protect against climate change.

How do they work?

A sponge city is made up of natural features that can absorb floodwater. One key component is permeable pavements, which, unlike traditional tarmac, allow rainwater to soak into the ground, reducing surface runoff and replenishing groundwater. They also lessen the 'urban heat island effect' (densely populated city areas can be up to 12°C warmer than the nearby countryside) which benefits buildings, humans, and animals, too.

Another common feature of sponge cities is green roofs. Just like it sounds, these essentially use vegetation to cover rooftops, which not only provides natural insulation, but also absorbs rainwater and releases it slowly. These aesthetically pleasing roofs reduce energy consumption, and offer valuable green spaces for city dwellers to enjoy (and also support their mental health). In Amsterdam, blue-green roofs go a step further, with systems that gather and store water, which is then recycled for the residents to use for watering plants and even flushing toilets.

Urban wetlands – such as rivers, lakes, swamps, and ponds – play a major role in flood prevention within sponge cities, but shockingly, more than 75% of the UK's wetlands have been degraded or destroyed in the last 300 years, as noted in a 2023 study in the journal *Nature*. These wetlands absorb and store

Wetland park and urban skyline in Chongqing, China

water flow by trapping and slowly releasing surface water, rain, and floodwaters. Not only do wetlands reduce the speed of floodwater, and distribute it gradually over the area, but they also offer much-needed recreational spaces for local residents and improve air quality. In Rotterdam, 'water squares' have been constructed for two purposes – to function as community spaces for socialising, skating, and theatre performances during dry periods, and as flood basins when rainfall is high.

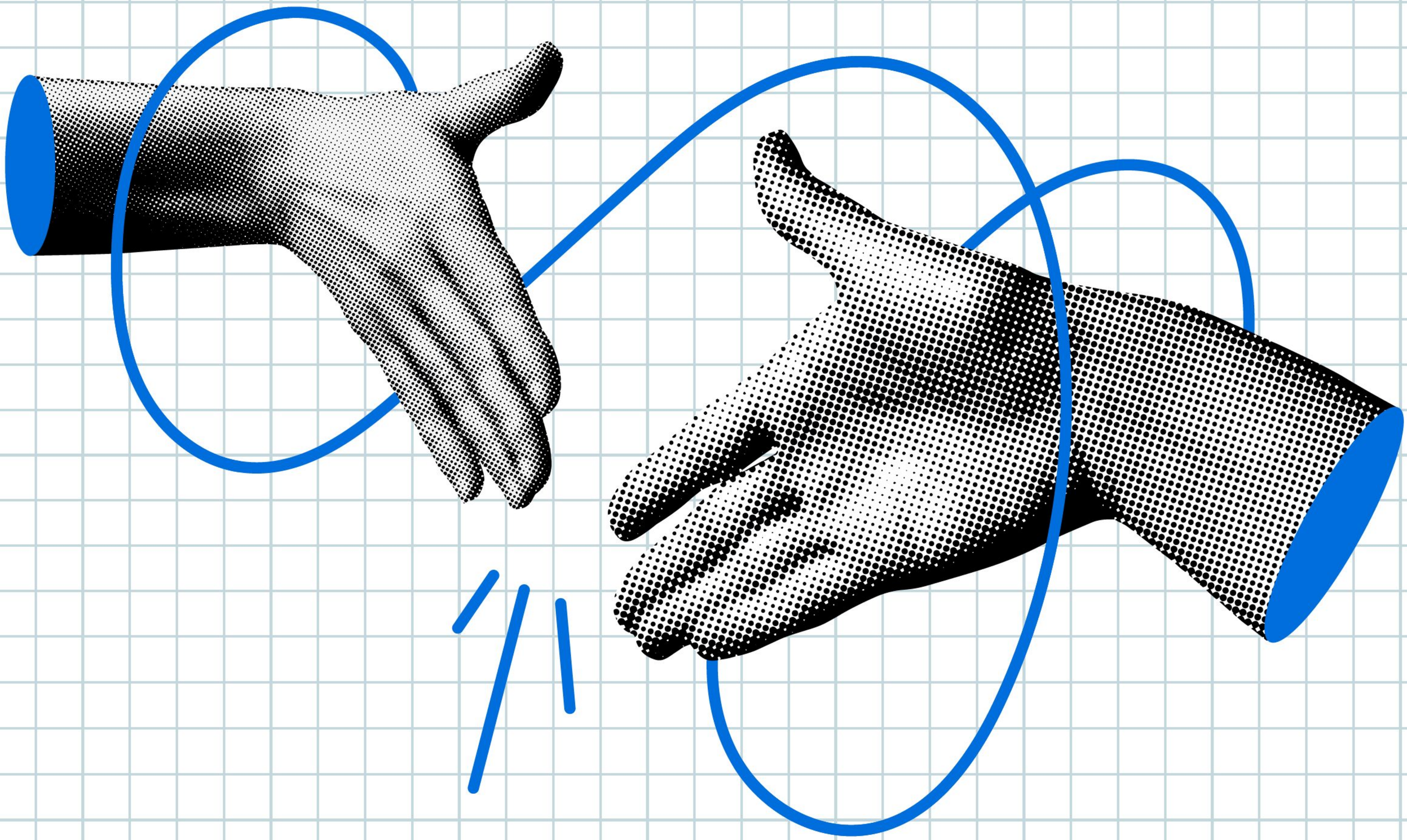
Wuhan leads the way

Although there are sponge cities all over the world, from Auckland to Kenya, China's national government pioneered the concept in 2013, with a multibillion-dollar national policy after substantial flash flooding. Wuhan became a pilot sponge city, and, according to a working paper prepared by the University of Leeds and the Coalition for Urban Transitions, it has proved that natural infrastructure "can be employed both quickly and cost-effectively to increase the resilience of urban areas to a changing climate".

The paper notes that the project was almost $600 million cheaper than upgrading the city's drainage system, and that benefits also include improvements in biodiversity and conservation. The city's Yangtze River Beach Park has been known to register three degrees cooler than in the city, and the value of land in the surrounding areas has more than doubled since the changes were made.

Let that soak in

While sponge cities have many benefits, they can't always keep up with accelerating climate change. Zhengzhou in China spent £6 billion on the sponge city programme and was still unable to cope when, in 2021, the city experienced its heaviest rainfall in history. It has been suggested that London should become a sponge city, as flash flooding has been described as the main environmental risk to people living in the capital, with the London Climate Resilience Review's 2024 report noting the city was "underprepared" for climate change. While progress can be seen in some areas, such as rain gardens in Waltham Forest, and green roofs in Hackney, experts say that the implementation and long-term maintenance of projects in such a built-up area are difficult. However, smaller-scale initiatives – such as incentivising green roofs, restoring urban ponds, and implementing more permeable pavements – could open the floodgates to real change.



Ready to pull the plug on people-pleasing?

Prioritising *their* needs over yours might seem like the easiest thing to do – but putting yourself first can change everything

Writing | **Elizabeth Bennett**

Whether it's taking on extra tasks at work, stretching yourself thin to commit to family plans, or avoiding conflict with a partner, pleasing-people takes many guises. Recognised as a type of behaviour where you prioritise the needs of others at the expense of your own, nearly half of US adults self-identified as people-pleasers in a 2024 YouGov poll – with women (52%) more likely than men (44%) to see this behaviour in themselves.

"While helping others can be fulfilling, constantly doing so without considering your own wellbeing can lead to feelings of exhaustion, diminished self-worth, and even resentment towards yourself or others," psychotherapist, Dr Hayley Trower, explains. If this resonates with you, there are practical steps you can take to reduce these tendencies.

Understand why

First, look at why this pattern is playing out. "People-pleasing often functions as a subconscious protective mechanism, rooted in a deep-seated need for acceptance or validation," Dr Trower explains. Often this can be traced back to

our early years, when approval may have depended on being compliant. "By understanding the motivation behind your people-pleasing, you will be better able to take a pause and try something different that supports your needs," Dr Trower adds.

Reflect on a recent situation where you felt compelled to please others. Intentionally think this over, or perhaps, try journaling with Dr Trower's guidance: "Ask yourself three questions: what was your underlying intention? What did you believe might happen if you didn't? Were there any self-beliefs influencing your behaviour at that moment?"

Practise self-compassion

Self-worth issues are at the heart of people-pleasing. "Those who people-please feel their value depends on how other people perceive them," Dr Trower says.

To develop healthy self-worth, it's important to alter your focus from looking outwards to looking inwards. Once you notice these self-critical thoughts, shift towards something kinder. Dr Trower suggests instead of thinking, 'I shouldn't have made that mistake,' say, 'I made a mistake, but I'm human and I'm doing my best.' "It might feel uncomfortable at first, but, over time, a compassionate inner dialogue can make a difference to the way that you feel about yourself."

Regulate your nervous system

When we do things we find uncomfortable, it can often trigger feelings of guilt, fear, or anxiety. If we have spent our whole lives in people-pleasing mode, a new way of being can, naturally, feel uncomfortable at first. We deal best with these feelings when our nervous system is regulated, so investing in managing this is crucial during this transitional period. Grounding techniques, such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or progressive muscle relaxation, can be hugely beneficial. Dr Trower recommends extended exhales (in for four counts, hold for four, out for six). "This sends a message to your nervous system that you're safe, and can help you to feel more in control," she explains. "By learning to self-regulate, you can approach new situations with greater calm and confidence, even when they feel challenging."

> **People-pleasing often functions as a subconscious protective mechanism, rooted in a deep-seated need for acceptance or validation**

Set boundaries

When you're in a people-pleasing mindset, it's normal to shy away from boundaries. Plus, setting boundaries can be daunting, especially if you're not used to saying 'no'. Dr Trower suggests rehearsing how you'll respond in specific situations so you feel more prepared – and less reactive – when the occasion arises. "Try practising some clear statements in front of the mirror, without needing to over-explain," she says. She proposes phrases like 'I'd love to help, but I'm really overwhelmed with work at the moment,' or 'Thank you so much for thinking of me, but I'll have to pass this time. Perhaps we could do it another time?' "Rehearsing these phrases out loud, or with someone you trust, can help them feel more natural," says Dr Trower. "The more often you set boundaries, the less uncomfortable they will feel."

Embrace discomfort

When you cut back on people-pleasing, you will likely have to accept that you'll start disappointing people more often, something that may not feel easy at first. "It's important to know that discomfort doesn't always mean that you've done something wrong," says Dr Trower. "Often it's a sign of healthy growth. By sitting with these feelings rather than avoiding them, you can begin to build resilience." h

*Dr Hayley Trower is a holistic psychotherapist who works with sensitive women who are experiencing anxiety and overwhelm. Connect with her on the **Counselling Directory**.*

5 myths about dyslexia

Countering false claims and dispelling the unhelpful mistruths about this lifelong learning difficulty

Writing | Samantha Redgrave Hogg

Whether it's being told you need to try harder, the frustration of the words on the page making no sense, jumbling the numbers in your mind, or getting self-conscious about spelling, the struggle for those with dyslexia is all too real – and yet its impact is often underestimated or downplayed.

The truth is that dyslexia is a lifelong learning difficulty that impacts writing and reading abilities, as well as other areas of a person's life, including concentration and organisation. According to the British Dyslexia Association, it affects 10% of the UK population, with some common signs including reading slowly, misusing or forgetting words, and putting letters the wrong way around, but each person experiences their learning difficulty differently.

As a mother of a child with dyslexia, I'm familiar with the challenges of memory retention and processing speed, as well as the emotional toll of watching my son struggle at school, and the anxiety that comes with adapting to change. That said, there are many strengths to dyslexia, especially in the areas of creativity and reasoning.

Despite its prevalence, misconceptions about this learning difficulty can make it hard to grasp what's accurate, and understand how best to support yourself or a loved one. So, let's break down five myths, and set the record straight on dyslexia.

MYTH 1: PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA CAN'T READ

Dyslexia is a neurological difference that can affect reading and writing ability, and makes these more challenging – but it doesn't mean they *can't* read. In fact, while these are the skills most affected (along with others, including organisation), dyslexia is actually about information processing in the brain. This myth might stem from the fact that, often, the first sign of dyslexia is when someone experiences problems learning to read at school. These issues have nothing to do with vision; it's how people with dyslexia decode words. It also doesn't have to do with another common myth that dyslexic people read backwards.

There are many features of dyslexia that can involve communication, multitasking, and organisation. And if literary skills are impacted, it doesn't ever mean to say that a dyslexic person *can't* read. They can become very accurate readers, but may struggle with comprehending or reading fluently, for example. Or it's simply that they read differently from the typical way. There are many variations, and it's important to avoid blanket statements as this can be dismissive and perpetuate untrue stigmas.

MYTH 2: DYSLEXIA IS SOMETHING YOU CAN GROW OUT OF

It's certainly a positive that dyslexia symptoms can improve with the proper support, and people with dyslexia absolutely can thrive, but they do not 'grow out of it'. Working memory and fluency issues may remain difficult, even once an individual learns to read well. Dyslexia is not a case of simply trying hard to read or spell better. It affects the brain in various ways, including verbal processing speed – which means how quickly someone can understand and respond to spoken information.

Because genetic factors play a significant role in developmental dyslexia, as research notes in the *Annual Review of Genomics and Human Genetics*, telling someone who has this learning difficulty to 'try harder' only fuels the myth that it's something you can eventually outgrow, as well as impacting their self-esteem. Often, people with dyslexia are trying harder than others already, because reading and literary comprehension isn't something that comes naturally, and it's exhausting to try to keep up. If you live with someone who's dyslexic, it's great to be mindful of their ongoing daily challenges, and the additional energy it can take to do tasks that might not even cross your mind – like reading a menu, following an instruction manual, or keeping up with a busy WhatsApp group. >>>

> *Many people with dyslexia think differently, and this can be a good thing – amazing, in fact!*

MYTH 3: BEING DYSLEXIC MEANS YOU CAN'T BE SUCCESSFUL

Many people with dyslexia think differently, and this can be a good thing – amazing, in fact! Even though dyslexia can impact education, getting good marks at school is more than possible, particularly with specialist interventions. But it's also worth noting that dyslexia has absolutely nothing to do with actual intelligence, and can affect people from all walks of life.

Many highly successful people have dyslexia, including actor Jennifer Aniston, seven-time Formula 1 world champion Lewis Hamilton, and chef and entrepreneur Jamie Oliver. Even though they may not have enjoyed school, they view their dyslexia as a vital part of their achievements, with Keira Knightley saying: "It doesn't mean that you're stupid... It just means that you work in a different way."

Dyslexia can foster incredible strengths, such as a unique understanding of how things work, solving problems, and thinking creatively. These can benefit entrepreneurial and innovative fields of work, and some companies actively recruit neurodivergent employees for these reasons. There are also businesses helping to educate and prepare others to actively support and get the best out of their staff, such as Positively Dyslexia, which highlights the importance of workplaces ensuring they meet the Equality Act in this area – so it's not just on the individual to make adjustments!

For more information on dyslexia, as well as guidance on where to seek support, visit ***bdadyslexia.org.uk.***

People with dyslexia may find it difficult to:

- Retrieve certain words from their memory
- Read or write with accuracy
- Comprehend the meaning of language
- Meet deadlines or plan ahead
- Follow the order of letters
- Focus if there are distractions
- Accurately remember directions or instructions
- Process the sounds of syllables
- Memorise new words
- Name something with speed
- Match letters to sounds
- Tell left from right
- Remember certain dates
- Take notes or copy words

MYTH 4: DYSLEXIA IS UNCOMMON

An estimated 780 million people in the world have dyslexia, or one in 10, which means there will likely be someone you know who has this learning difficulty. Because of the stigma associated with dyslexia, some may attempt to hide their traits, so we're not always aware if a person around us is struggling.

My husband is undiagnosed, but displays many of the symptoms of dyslexia, and throughout his career, he's always avoided writing in front of others to mask his struggles with spelling.

Many people are also unaware of their learning difficulty, as symptoms can be subtle or don't fit the stereotype of being 'unable to read or write'. With the British Dyslexia Association noting that there's approximately 3.3 million adults in the workplace, and 900,000 children in school, dyslexia is prevalent across the spectrum of intellectual abilities, so we must support others in discussing their difficulties and needs openly. If you're worried about your mental health as a result of dyslexia, it's important to reach out for support.

MYTH 5: DYSLEXIA IS A MYTH

Something that's incredibly unhelpful, and offensive, is the myth where people try to deny the existence of dyslexia all together. Extensive scientific research and evidence proves that dyslexia is all too real. It exists everywhere, and in different languages. There are even different types of dyslexia, including phonological (difficulty in processing the sounds of letters), and rapid naming (difficulty in naming a letter, number, colour, or object with speed). Dyslexia can be diagnosed through a diagnostic assessment carried out by a certified assessor.

Dyslexia is not, however, part of autism or attention deficit disorder (ADD). Other specific learning difficulties can co-occur with dyslexia, however it's crucial that people with dyslexia feel validated in their individual experiences.

An estimated 780 million people in the world have dyslexia, or one in 10

Ending stereotypes caused by misconceptions like these can help create a more inclusive and supportive future for people with dyslexia. Remember, you're very likely to know someone with dyslexia, and if that person isn't you, taking the time to understand it, and its impact, can make a huge difference in showing them the support and validation for an often overlooked learning difficulty.

Samantha Redgrave Hogg is an author whose book, 'Flow: Self-Care Sessions for Your Menstrual, Lunar, Life and Seasonal Cycles', is available now (Watkins Publishing). Visit wombonthebroom.com for more.

How to fix a damaged sibling relationship

Our relationships with our families – and with our siblings – can be complex things. Whether there has been a specific issue that caused conflict, or you've simply grown apart over time, how can we reconnect with our kin or repair our bonds?

Writing | **Bonnie Evie Gifford**

While the meaning of family can take different forms for each of us – from blood relatives and adoptive family, to the people who raise you, or chosen friends and family – the people we grow up with are often there through some of our most formative years. And over time, just as we change, so too can our family dynamics – for better or worse.

Despite potentially growing up in similar environments, at times, our experiences and memories with siblings can vary drastically. One may look back with nostalgia, and recall fun, cherished memories. Another might have always felt like the odd one out, overlooked and unappreciated. Others might vividly remember their sibling as the golden child, while they felt the burden of responsibility. Bonds with guardians or parents might completely transform their perceptions looking back. It might have been a childhood shielding others from difficult circumstances at home, or one where you were pitted against each other. The end result is that our unique experience can colour the way we view our siblings, and interact with them, in later life.

According to one 2021 survey, 51% of adults still argue and compete with their brothers and sisters. The poll of 2,000 adults with at least one sibling, conducted by OnePoll and commissioned by NOW, found that more than half still have a competitive relationship with their siblings, with more than one in four (26%) competing over career goals, and one in five (22%) over home ownership. A further 20% still argue with their siblings over who is their parents' 'favourite'.

Evidently, tension between siblings doesn't just happen – or get left behind – during childhood. Rivalries can continue to grow, and past resentments, if not addressed, can continue to fester. Even as adults, if one sibling feels like they are getting less support than another – be that financial, practical, or emotional help – the bond and communication can continue to worsen.

What can cause sibling conflict?

The types of conflict that can arise between siblings may vary at different stages of life. You might find that you have always had conflict with your sibling, and it has continued on into adulthood, or perhaps strong sibling bonds have faded over time and turned into frustration or resentment. Some prevalent issues that can cause sibling conflict include...

- **Caring for elderly or aging family members.** This can be particularly difficult if one sibling feels like they are disproportionately taking on responsibilities.
- **Seeking more familial support.** One sibling may feel another is taking advantage of how much support relatives are giving, or feels pressured to help pitch in too much. Equally, if extensive support is expected, but doesn't feel appreciated.
- **Feelings of jealousy, envy, or regret.** This could be over career paths, life choices, or progression towards life goals, as you might sense a more direct comparison between you.
- **Unresolved feelings from childhood.** Sensing that there was favoritism, competition for attention, comparing achievements or behaviour, or particularly traumatic incidents.
- **Differing life choices, experiences, or beliefs.** Often family can be more vocal or feel entitled to share opinions on these elements, whether it's asked for or not.
- **Big life events.** Moments like births, marriages, deaths, or illnesses can create tension due to choices that are made and differing approaches.

Whatever the cause of conflict and tension, acknowledging that there may be an issue, and finding ways to talk things through in a safe environment, where everyone can feel comfortable, and able to open up, can be key. But how can we do that if our relationships are feeling strained, or even at the point of breaking, before it's too late? And is cutting off contact ever the 'right' answer?

How do you fix damaged sibling relationships?

Sometimes, the issues causing conflict may only be evident to one of you. What one sibling sees as playful teasing, another might feel is making light of their accomplishments. Where one sibling feels overwhelmed with the responsibility of looking after ailing parents and resentment is growing, the other may not realise the extent of their time, effort, and emotional labour. For others, differing views on a situation may lead you to feeling like you are stuck or at an impasse.

There are a number of things you can try to improve your relationship, by focusing both on your communication, as well as on how you view yourself in relation to your sibling. It can be helpful to:

- **Avoid the comparison game.** The aforementioned survey by OnePoll highlighted that 25% of us believe competition is a healthy aspect of our sibling >>>

Cutting ties

There may come a time when you've made a conscious effort to communicate and address the problems in the relationship, and see either no improvement, things worsening, or your own mental wellbeing deteriorating as a result. Know that it is OK to close the door, and cut things off for the sake of yourself. This is, by no means, an easy decision, but a relationship where only one side is working to keep it afloat, is never going to be smooth sailing. You can't stop the ship from sinking on your own, if they aren't also willing to work on repairing it.

relationships, and nearly two in 10 believe it helps us achieve more in life. However, when we start comparing ourselves to our siblings *all* the time, it can cause feelings of hurt and resentment. Their success doesn't take away from your own, or mean you are a failure.

- **Take blame out of the equation.** To clear the air will require accountability from all sides. For your part, acknowledge and authentically apologise for any hurt caused, and genuinely listen to their feelings and experience. And when sharing your perspective, focus on how things made you feel rather than accusatory statements, which might prompt them to grow defensive.

- **Consider their perspective.** We're all unique – and, naturally, how your sibling sees situations, or what might be impacting their response, could be coloured by external factors. Take a moment to think about what else is happening for them (from financial stress to dealing with grief), as it might help you to better understand their behaviour and responses to you.

- **Set healthy boundaries.** You all will need to gain clarity on where things have crossed the line in the past, and how to respect and reinforce this with each other in future.

- **Be open and honest.** We shouldn't expect anyone to be a mindreader. While your upset can feel so obvious to you, your sibling, with their own worries and concerns, may not see the signs. By talking about how we are truly feeling – positive or negative – we can create an honest, open dialogue, where we feel more able to communicate and connect.

51%

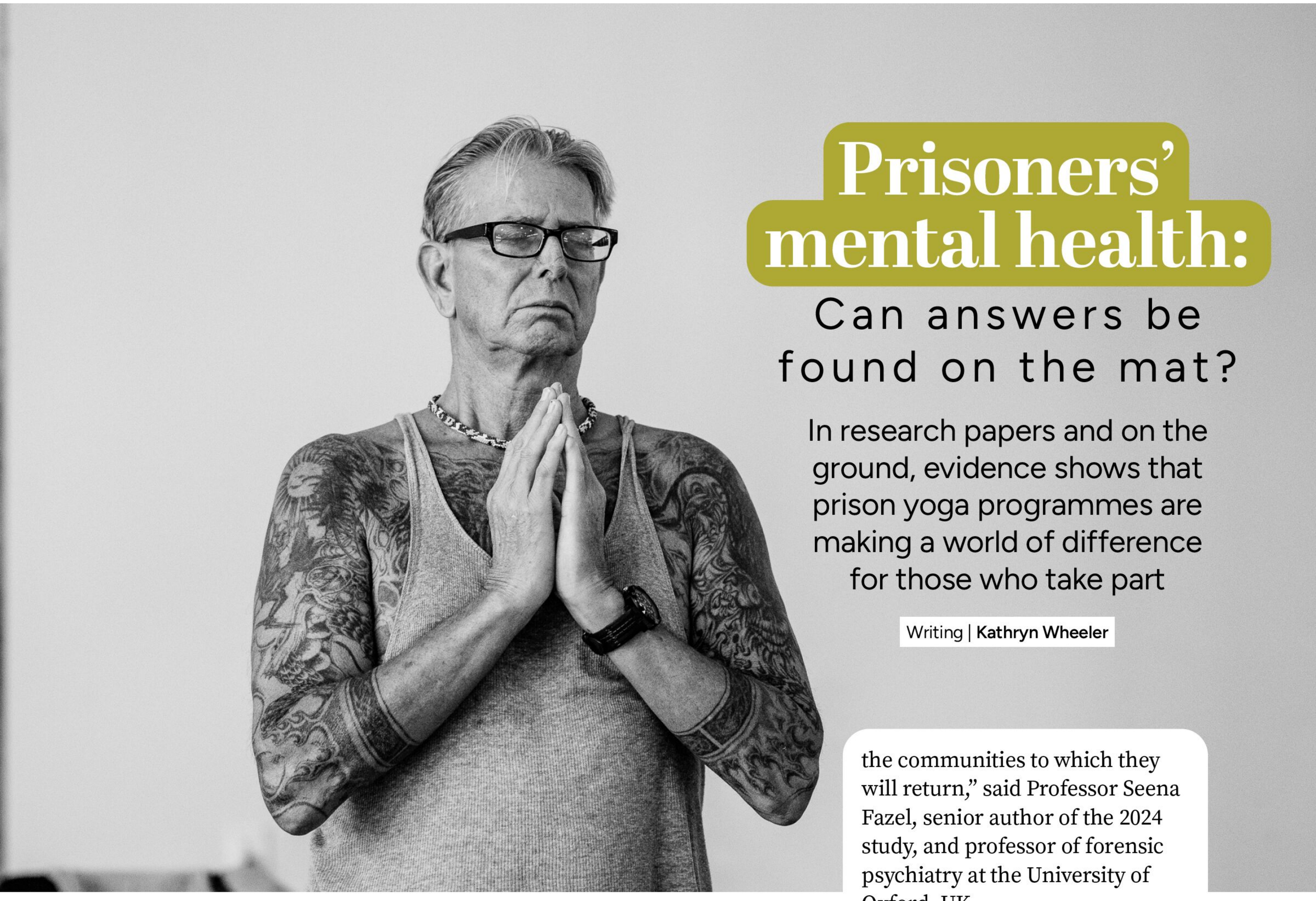
of adults still argue and compete with their brothers and sisters

- **Share the spotlight.** Nobody likes a one-way conversation. If you find discussions tend to swing towards only focusing on the success, trouble, or experiences of your sibling, try offering more information about yourself in return. This isn't necessarily intentional on their part; sometimes, when we are particularly excited or low, we can forget we aren't (or shouldn't be) the only focus of the conversation.

- **Explore sibling therapy.** Speaking with a neutral party, such as a counsellor or therapist, can offer the space to open up, talk freely, and explore these situations and feelings safely. This may enable you both to see how the issues have developed over time, and to understand each other's perspectives better, along with finding new techniques to communicate and deal with issues moving forward.

- **Be patient.** The relationship between you didn't fall apart overnight, so it's natural that trust, and your connection, will take time to rebuild, too. It can be a conscious effort to check in, spend quality time together, communicate clearly, and respect each other's boundaries, not just in one session of airing things out, but over months, or even years.

Rebuilding sibling relationships can be challenging – but, for some, it can be one worth taking. By opening up, sharing the spotlight, and maybe even seeking some professional guidance, you can work toward a healthier, more supportive bond. Whether you're navigating old rivalries or new challenges, remember: it's never too late to start opening up, and mending fences. With time, effort, and a lot of patience, you can begin to better understand each other, and create a healthier dynamic that works for both of you.



Prisoners' mental health:

Can answers be found on the mat?

In research papers and on the ground, evidence shows that prison yoga programmes are making a world of difference for those who take part

Writing | **Kathryn Wheeler**

There's a mental health crisis happening inside UK prisons. A 2024 study by the University of Oxford, published in the *Lancet Public Health* journal, found that mental health problems were twice as prevalent among those in prison compared to the general population. It highlighted that 11% had depression, 9.8% had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and 38.9% had a drug use disorder.

In the latest *Prison Mental Health Services in England* report, it was also found that one in every seven people were getting support from mental health services in prison (rising to more than one in four among women in prison).

"Given almost all people in prison will be released at some point, improving their health during imprisonment has the potential to improve the health of the communities to which they will return," said Professor Seena Fazel, senior author of the 2024 study, and professor of forensic psychiatry at the University of Oxford, UK.

While the majority of support received by incarcerated people is in the form of talking therapies, the skyrocketing rates of mental health problems beg the question, could more be done? Enter: the Prison Yoga Project.

It began in 2000 in San Quentin, a prison in northern California. Founder James Fox began facilitating yoga sessions in the prison before going on to write a short practice manual, which he sent free of charge to anyone who >>>

Find out more about the Prison Yoga Project by visiting ***prisonyoga.org***

requested it. From there, things grew naturally, and other teachers were attracted to the cause, including Geoff O'Meara.

"I moved to Leicester eight years ago but, prior to that, I had been living in Austin, Texas," says Geoff. "I was a yoga teacher, and I was interested in sharing these practices with people in prison. I started with a local prison yoga programme, and then James came to deliver teacher training for those of us who were interested in furthering our teaching within the prison system." When the Prison Yoga Project (PYP) expanded into Europe, Geoff took up the post of UK Director, training more teachers and facilitating classes in Leicester.

While Geoff saw first-hand the impact that yoga could have on a prisoner's mental wellbeing, it's a method grounded in an impressive body of evidence. Another Oxford University study, in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, found that prisoners who took part in a 10-week yoga course reported improved mood, reduced stress, and were better at a task related to behaviour control than those who hadn't taken part. "Offering yoga sessions in prisons is cheap – much cheaper than other mental health interventions," says Dr Amy Bilderbeck, co-lead of the study. "If yoga has any effect on addressing mental health problems in prisons, it could save significant amounts of public money."

"Given the research that's being done, we can really see the impact that yoga programming has," says Geoff. "In our methodology, we teach trauma-informed yoga and embodied mindfulness – practices that involve physical movement, conscious breathing, mindful awareness, and relaxation. We see those components have a very particular impact on a person's autonomic nervous system.

"In working with people who are incarcerated, you recognise fairly quickly that trauma is the root of the larger disturbances that result in people ending up in prisons. With trauma, and people impacted by trauma, they basically get stuck on the fight-flight side of their nervous system. These yoga practices work to settle the nervous system, and switch a person back over into their parasympathetic nervous system. As research is showing, we have the opportunity to cultivate increased concentration, emotional awareness, and impulse control – all these things that, within a prison environment specifically, lead to reductions in anti-social behaviour, increased character maturity, better sleep, and pain relief. It's a beautiful time for us, the people doing this work."

> ***Prisoners from a 10-week yoga course had improved mood and reduced stress***

Images | RJ Donovan

As Geoff sees it, any criticism of spending time and resources investing in these sorts of programmes can be addressed by considering that the majority of people in prison will be released within their lifetime.

"I always suggest to those who say, 'Why are you giving them yoga? Why are you trying to make it easier for them, or help them relax?' That's not the aim of our service. These prisoners are going to be back in our communities, living with us, so why wouldn't we want them to have a chance to take care of themselves – and change their negative behaviours into positive ones – so they can come out and be contributing members of society again?"

That said, in the eight years Geoff has been working in the UK, he has seen a huge shift in the attitude towards teaching yoga in prisons and, now, prisons like the one he teaches at in Leicester, have regular programmes in place. "People decided it was time. It's been almost three years now that I go in and teach once a week – and it's only become more consistently attended. It's been really inspiring to see the prison system itself start to get behind this, and to offer this kind of programming to serve the population that they have to take care of.

"On a personal level, I see the impact every week. I had a class a few weeks ago where two new guys came in, who had never done any of this before, and made a point of coming up to me after the session saying: 'Wow, I had no idea that this was what it was about, but I can already feel what this could do for me.' That kind of stuff, it keeps us all going. At this point, I don't need any more convincing, but it's really sweet to hear, and to see people take care of themselves in that way."

Within the context of headlines flagging a record-high prison population, as well as devastating levels of mental illness, addiction, and trauma within that population, support schemes that place compassion and self-growth at their core just make sense – bringing calm and compassion to life on and off the mat.

Ask the experts

How do I tune-in to my body's signals?

Emotional freedom technique (EFT) practitioner **Jess Wilkins-Cooke** explores how we can connect more deeply with our body's signals to help release tension

Read more about Jess on **Therapy Directory.**

Q

What are the most common signs of tension in the body?

A Some easy places to check for holding tension include your shoulders. Are they up by your ears? Is your jaw tight, or maybe there's a knot in your stomach? Just noticing these signs can give us the space to let go. Our bodies are unique, and so tension can show up in hundreds of different ways, including gut issues, headaches, and trouble sleeping.

You might also find that your body is adept at telling you when something is too much. Do you have a persistent twitchy eye when meeting a deadline, or an aching back and shoulders when things have been hectic at home? When we build tension in the body, it has to go somewhere, and it's worth getting to know where it goes for you.

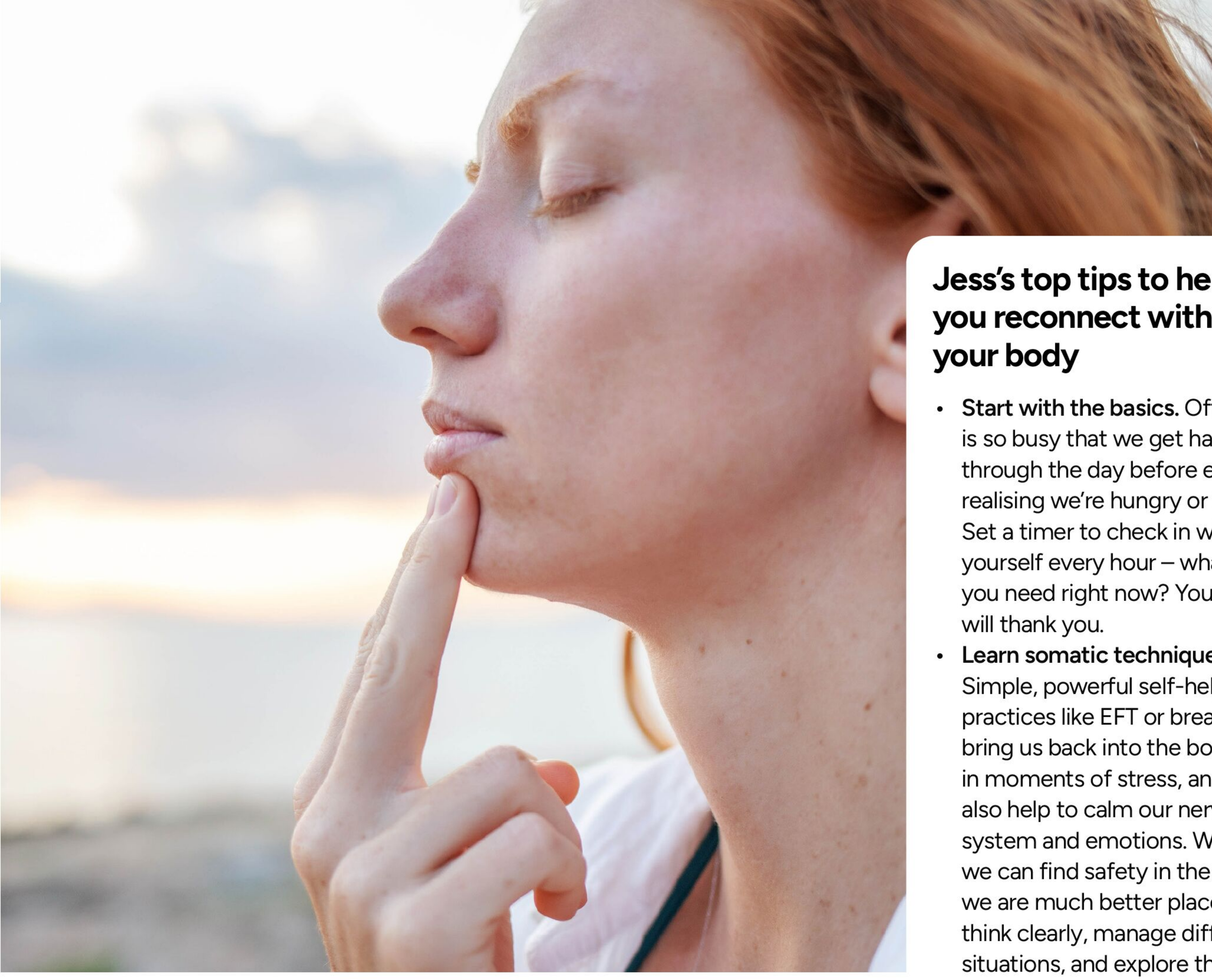
Q

What complementary therapies could help me let go of tension?

A Choose therapies that have an element of communication with the body, such as reflexology, acupuncture, or EFT tapping – which is my particular therapy of choice as both a practitioner and a client.

One of the reasons I love tapping is because of how versatile it is. In sessions, we can use it to break down long-standing patterns of anxiety, chronic pain, and so many other challenges that can become stored in the physical body. But we can also use it as a powerful self-help tool for ease and balance in everyday life.

The reasons why we might carry tension in the particular way we do, or experience it strongly in certain situations, are individual, and often unconscious. With a tool like EFT, we can explore those reasons, and bring safety and ease back to those parts of us that are holding on to tension, soothing the body and mind, and allowing a deeper relaxation.



Jess's top tips to help you reconnect with your body

- **Start with the basics.** Often, life is so busy that we get halfway through the day before even realising we're hungry or thirsty. Set a timer to check in with yourself every hour – what do you need right now? Your body will thank you.
- **Learn somatic techniques.** Simple, powerful self-help practices like EFT or breathwork bring us back into the body in moments of stress, and also help to calm our nervous system and emotions. When we can find safety in the body, we are much better placed to think clearly, manage difficult situations, and explore the beliefs and patterns that might be holding us back.
- **Stick with it, and be kind to yourself.** It's not always comfortable, especially if our chronic stress is manifesting as painful conditions, or as anxiety that has us feeling overwhelmed. Often, our default is to avoid these challenging experiences, but it doesn't help resolve them. Seek support, and check in with how you speak to yourself and your body in these difficult moments. Would you speak to a friend that way?

However tension is showing up for you right now, change is always possible with the right tools.

Q

Is it true that emotions can contribute to physical tension?

A It's more true than we may realise. It is so easy to attribute a physical symptom to circumstance, or even to call it 'just one of those things', not noticing that emotions are a powerful contributor. Everything is connected in our being. We know that when we are depleted physically, it can impact our mood and emotions, and the same is true the other way around.

We can support ourselves by bringing wellbeing practices into the every day, and they don't need to take long. Yoga, mindfulness, and EFT are about connecting with ourselves in the present moment. If we have more of an understanding of where we are, we can better map the route to where we would like to be.

It can also help to connect with what is bothering us, maybe by journaling or sharing with a trusted friend. Where the issue is complex or long-standing, we may need to seek support to unpack it gently and safely.

Letter writing is the only device combining solitude with good company

Lord Byron

Photography | Karolina Grabowska

Quittin' time

Recognising it's time to quit, and knowing what to do about it, are two very different things. Whether it's ditching unhealthy habits, or making room for new romantic relationships, we share what you can do when you think it's time to call it a day

Writing | **Bonnie Evie Gifford**

Making big changes can be daunting. Whether a relationship has run its course, or you're hoping to break unhelpful habits, it can be tough to know where to start. Recognising when it's time to make a change – and that it's OK to stop and do something more helpful with your time – is key.

Often 'quitting' has negative connotations – that giving up is a weakness. But this is definitely not the case. Acknowledging that something is not serving you, and having the strength to let it go, walk away, or make a proactive change, is monumental, and certainly something to be proud of. To help you step into this more positive association with 'being a quitter', we're sharing four key areas where it can be tough to know when quitting could be the answer, and explain how (and where) you can find help for the next steps.

Ending a relationship

If you're struggling to decide if you should end a relationship, ask yourself: do I know why I am staying? Am I in love, or am I afraid of being alone? Do I feel obligated to stay, or do I enjoy spending time with my partner? Is this a temporary low, or have I felt this way for a while?

Sometimes, we put up with things we know aren't good for us – or relationships that we know, deep down, have run their course – because we're afraid of what else is out there, or don't know what our other options are. What's familiar can be comforting, even when we know it's not bringing out the best in us. So, many of us stay, even if, in reality, there are toxic behaviours present, poor communication, perhaps a lack or loss of trust, different life goals, or simply we've grown apart.

Making decisions in the heat of the moment is rarely the answer. Ensuring you have a strong support network of friends and family you can talk with in confidence can be a huge help. Getting an outside perspective can be tough, but it can offer new ways of viewing concerns, and can help you to find the right approach for you. Relationship charity Relate has some great free tools, including simple questions to help you if you are thinking of breaking up, as well as offering free counselling through some partnerships, and reduced fees for therapy for those on low income.

And if you don't feel ready to open up with others yet, you can take time with your own thoughts. This might be through journaling (for your eyes only), where you write about anything that comes to mind when you think about relationships – from your vision of an 'ideal one' to daily behaviours, the future you imagine, or how they make you feel. Reflect on whether this aligns with the current picture of your relationship. If not, could this be attained through communication, or is the divide too great?

Giving up alcohol

There can be a clear moment when you know it's time to give up alcohol. Other times, unhealthy drinking habits slowly creep in, until you realise what was once a conscious decision has become an unhealthy crutch you rely on. If you find yourself hiding your drinking, relying on alcohol after stressful events, or drastically increasing how much you consume, these can be just a few of the signs you might need help. >>>

Online and in-person support groups can help you to connect with others, while giving you the chance to talk about your experiences. Mental health charity Mind has a comprehensive list of alcohol support organisations that provide specialised assistance during this difficult transition.

While not a substitute for professional help, podcasts can complement your journey by offering insights into others' experiences with alcohol. The 'Over The Influence' podcast focuses on candid discussions with those who've re-evaluated their relationship with alcohol, while the 'Club Soda' podcast focuses on drinking more mindfully, and living well. Of course, if you are concerned about your drinking habits, it's always worth speaking to your doctor first for support.

Quitting your job

Whether you feel you aren't being paid enough, don't get along with your manager, or are looking to find something more fulfilling, there are many reasons you might want to change jobs. It might even be that you've always had that one big career goal or business idea you've been too scared to pursue. Giving up your job and knowing when it's time to make a change, can be scary, but sometimes, it can be the best thing you can do.

Start by thinking about why you want to quit. Knowing this can be helpful in deciding your next steps. If your current role lacks opportunities for growth, could a discussion with your manager address this, or moving to another role? If money is the issue, would changing companies guarantee you a higher salary, or is a complete career move required?

Working with a coach or mentor can help you to better understand what you want from your work life, and skills you may need to develop to get there. This person can help you to identify goals, learn about potential career paths that match your skillset, along with guiding you based on personal experience. Some larger employers also offer peer mentoring programmes for employees.

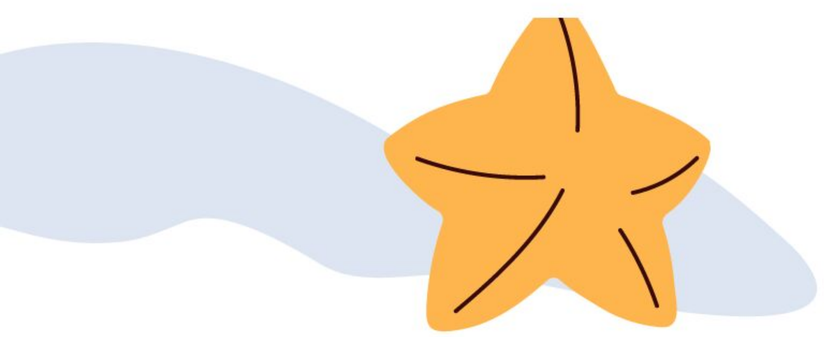
If you aren't sure where you are going, or what your wider life goals should be, a personal development coach can help you develop your longer term aspirations, evaluate life changes, assess your strengths and weaknesses, and rediscover your purpose in life. You can search for coaches who resonate with and could support you on the Life Coach Directory.

Ditching 'diet talk'

From video updates on someone's 'Ozempic journey' to another headline criticising a celebrity's appearance, or simply a friend turning down a sweet treat as they're working on their 'summer body', diet talk is as pervasive as ever. And, the reason it's dangerous is because it's become so normalised that we don't always consciously pick up on it.

A 2020 study, published in *Body Image*, noted that 94% of women and 90% of men experienced at least one form of 'weight talk', with mothers being the prevalent source (85% for women; 80% for men), followed by peers (72% for women; 66% for men), and fathers (54% for women; 57% for men). This highlights a generational cycle that we actively need to break free from.

To start, you need to be able to recognise it. You may want to keep a mood tracker or journal to spot patterns in diet talk, when they arise, and the impact on your self-esteem or choices that day. This can help you pick up on it, and reaffirm why you want to make changes. It may help to plan out a few conversation redirects for when dialogue enters an uncomfortable territory (such as "Actually, I've been meaning to ask you about…"), or statements to set firm boundaries (like "Talking about weight and diets can be triggering for me. Can we focus on something else?").



> ***Knowing when to quit isn't a sign of weakness or failure – it can actually highlight that you've found strength and courage***

Secondly, we need to reframe our relationship with food and our bodies. Rather than thinking of food or exercise as means of punishing ourselves, when we appreciate how incredible our bodies are, it can make taking care of them much easier. That way, you can focus on sustainable changes that support your health in the long-term, rather than falling for fad diets or restricting.

While these tips can help, if you experience persistent negative thoughts about food or body image that significantly impact daily functioning, talk to your GP.

Is it time to quit?

Knowing when to quit isn't a sign of weakness or failure – it can actually highlight that you've found strength and courage to move forward in your life. Whether you're ready to make changes today, or having these conversations and reviewing your position helps you recognise smaller actions you want to take first, this an important step – and shows a huge amount of respect and care that your future self will thank you for. h

6 steps to *living peacefully with parents*

As costs increase, so too has the number of adults moving back home to live with parents. Here's how to make the adjustment a little easier...

Writing | **Elizabeth Bennett**

Whether it's by choice or circumstance, living with your parents as an adult can pose its own unique challenges – and it's something that's becoming far more common. The Office for National Statistics reports that 4.9 million adults in England and Wales are currently living with their parents, with roughly one in every 4.5 families having an adult child living at home, according to the 2021 Census. Understandably, it can be tricky to navigate this new dynamic – which can include crossed boundaries and a lack of freedom. However, with the right mindset and some plans in place, there is potential to make the most of the positive elements of living back home. Here, we're sharing some essential insights to help you find the best way to go about it.

Kindly set boundaries

When you live with your parents as an adult, the situation is very different from when you were a child – and that can be difficult to adapt to. "What might have felt normal in childhood, like a parent walking into your room without knocking, may feel invasive now," says counsellor Abigail Holman. Setting clear, yet kind, boundaries early on is essential to prevent any confusion, tension, or future upsets. "For instance, ask for privacy in your room or dedicated quiet time, and encourage your family to share what they need, too," Abigail adds. It's also important to remember that boundaries work both ways, so listening to and respecting each other's needs is key.

Acknowledge the adjustment

The transition of moving back home as an adult can create a rollercoaster of emotions. One moment, you feel like an independent adult managing your own household, and the next, you're adapting to someone else's rules in a space that may feel like a step backwards. "This shift can bring up feelings of frustration or loss of autonomy, so it's important to give yourself grace," Abigail says. "Accept that this adjustment takes time, and focus on small actions that help you feel more in control, such as setting up routines or personalising your living space," she adds.

Maintain independence

Living with family can sometimes bring up unresolved issues from the past, making it all the more important to maintain personal space, and a sense of independence. "Designate a space that's just for you, whether it's a desk for work, a chair for reading, or even a corner for a hobby," Abigail suggests. At the same time, staying connected with life outside the family home is essential to retaining a sense of self. "Keep up with friendships, explore local clubs or classes, or find solo activities like walking or journaling," Abigail says. These connections and pursuits can help reinforce your identity as an adult, reminding you of who you are outside the family dynamic, and giving you space to process emotions when needed.

Reframe expectations

It's natural for family members to have different ways of doing things, which can lead to frustration and, sometimes,

conflict. Abigail suggests reframing your perspective: "Try to approach disagreements with curiosity, asking yourself, 'Why might they see it this way?' Using 'I' statements like, 'I feel overwhelmed when dishes pile up,' can reduce blame and keep the conversation collaborative." By taking this calm and collected approach, you can focus on sharing your personal experience without finger-pointing, and encourage problem-solving instead of defensiveness.

Communicate roles and responsibilities

One of the easiest ways to avoid misunderstandings is to clarify how the household will operate. "It doesn't need to be rigid, but having a general blueprint can help everyone feel on the same page," Abigail says. For instance, think about whether you want to do your own grocery shopping, or cook your own meals, or whether tasks like these will be shared. Perhaps, you might agree to cook dinner twice a week, while your parents handle the rest. "These small agreements create structure, while respecting everyone's independence," Abigail says.

Focus on the positives

While you might face some very valid challenges living with family, it can be helpful to acknowledge the many advantages. Firstly, it may offer financial relief, whether you're saving for a mortgage, paying off debts, or living in a part of town that might otherwise be unaffordable. Secondly, there's also the potential for emotional support and shared moments, which can be really joyful. "Practising gratitude can enhance these positives – acknowledge the privilege of being able to live in your parents' home, and show appreciation for their hospitality, even in small ways like saying thank you, or helping out with extra chores," says Abigail.

*Abigail Holman is a counsellor, coach, and trainer. Connect via the **Counselling Directory**.*

ANXIETY ON YOUR MIND
Dan's week

Welcome to **Anxiety on Your Mind**, the series where we explore the reality of living with anxiety. In this edition, Dan Smith, 55, from London, shares how he balances business ownership with family life – while managing his mental health

Writing | **Dan Smith** as told to **Fiona Fletcher Reid**

As a child I was shy, and as a teenager. I always thought I had stomach issues, but looking back, I can see it was probably actually anxiety – and it's been with me my whole life. It went unnoticed until about 10 years ago, when I ended up in hospital thinking I was having a heart attack, when really, it was a panic attack.

Waves of anxiety are familiar now – like the sudden rush I experienced when cooking my daughter's dinner on Monday night. The overwhelm of everything hit me all at once – the juggling of finding enough work to pay the bills, alongside starting a new business, and taking care of the family. When I have an unexpected rush of anxiety, it's really hard not to let it show. My daughter was asking how long food would be, and I could feel myself being somewhat tetchy in my response.

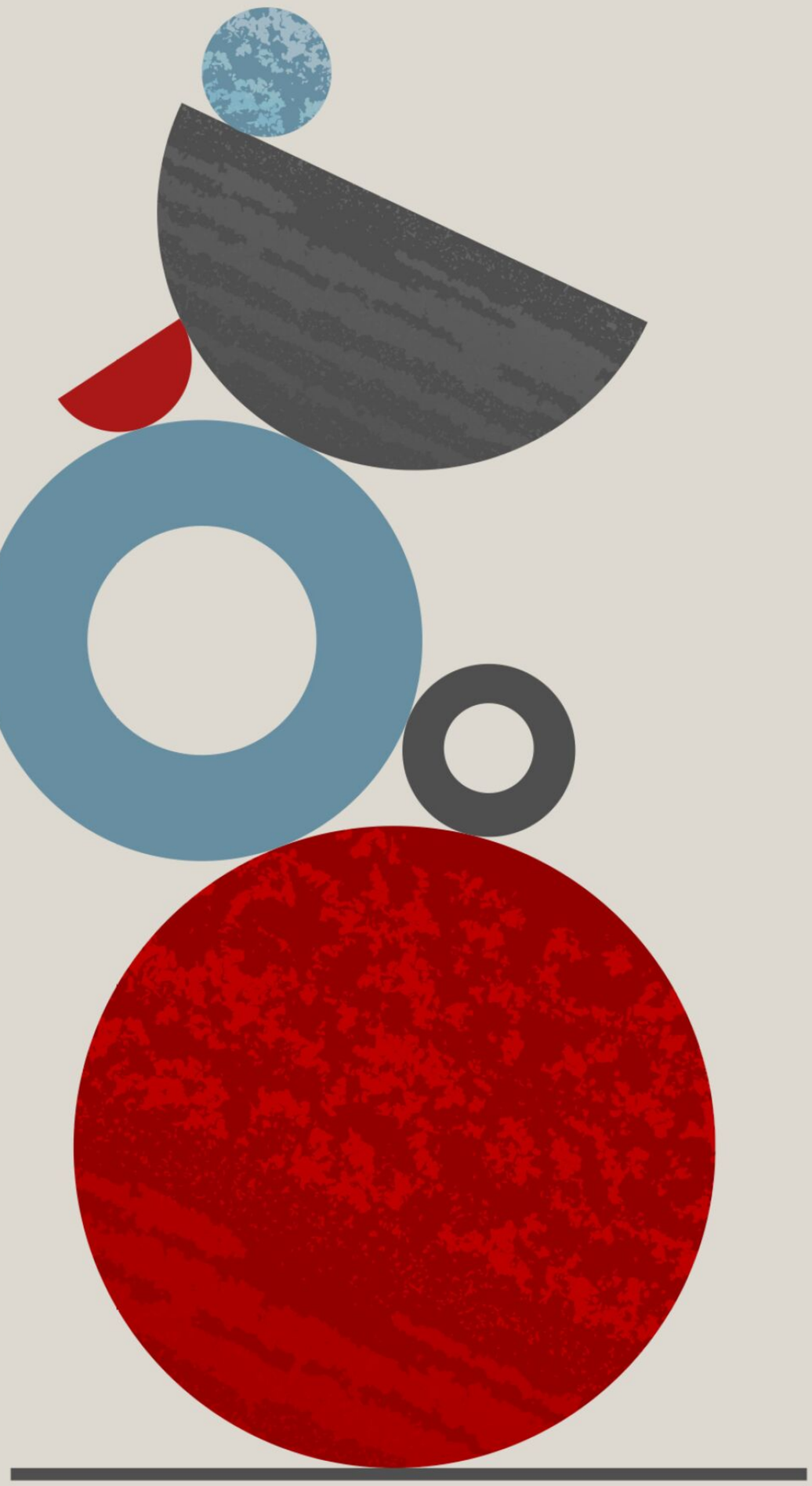
Anxiety can really interfere with your relationships. Alongside my own mental health struggles, my daughter has ADHD, her hormones are changing, and my wife is perimenopausal. So, things can get a little fractious at home, although we are getting better at accommodating each other.

Socialising with friends helps me a lot. When talking to friends on Tuesday evening, I was struck by all the little things others do to make life better, and I started thinking, I've got a guitar next to my desk and I work from home – why don't I ever make time to play it? I'm so preoccupied with work I don't allow myself to make music.

The next day, I was working on a spreadsheet which documents a five-year financial model, and I realised that in five years' time, I'm going to be 61. That was hard to face. I have long Covid, and the experience gave me an insight into what it might be like to be old, and to have more limited physical or mental capabilities. Before Covid, I was pretty fit, but now, I'm not as active, I've gained weight, and I worry a lot about my health. People tell me to rest, but resting with long Covid isn't fun – you're too unwell to watch box sets or listen to podcasts – and I think this has made me feel more resistant to slowing down or taking time off, as well as the guilt I feel for having taken so much time off in the past. I watched my wife pick up the chores and family admin, so now I just want to keep pushing on.

Sleep is very important to me though. I try to get eight hours' sleep a night, and I try to aim for two nights a week where I get 10 hours' sleep. I find that if I do that, then I can cope with most things. But prioritising sleep when you want to spend time with your family is tough – I don't always get as much sleep as I know I need.

Despite the challenges, my work on a new app (*steeev.com*) to address the male loneliness crisis has become a source of purpose. The idea behind my platform is to help men form meaningful platonic relationships by teaching the social skills many of us weren't raised to develop. Something I've learned is that friendships need to be nurtured, and that's a skill that a lot of men



Find out more at ***steeev.com***

It's just a constant juggle between work and family, and, if I'm honest, the thing I need to give more time to is actually myself

haven't been taught. Every time I bump into my neighbour, we say: "We have to go for a beer sometime," and, five years later, it still hasn't happened.

As passionate as I am about getting this project off the ground, it does come with a level of vulnerability that I struggle with. For example, I submitted a business pitch to a competition, and the process involves having my pitch peer-reviewed by up to 300 people. Every time I get a ping in my inbox, I have to build myself up to open the email, because I know there might be feedback in there that will affect my mood. Luckily, I got some positive feedback on Friday, which set the tone nicely for the weekend.

We went to stay with my in-laws, which offered a change in routine and surroundings that I think can help me create space from my daily anxieties. My daughter was a bit hyperactive on Saturday night, which meant she stayed up later than usual, and the whole family was sleep-deprived as a result. It's just a constant juggle between work and family, and, if I'm honest, the thing I need to give more time to is actually myself. But then I think, my daughter is growing up so fast, soon she probably won't want to hang out with me much anymore! I enjoyed our time together this weekend though; we went on a local 'treasure trail', spotting things and noting them down as part of a game.

Looking back on this week, I can see how my anxiety ebbs and flows with the demands on my time and energy. While I'm still working on finding that perfect balance between family needs, business pressures, and self-care, I'm starting to recognise patterns that help me cope better. Creating this app has shown me that my own struggles can lead to something positive – both for myself and hopefully for other men facing similar challenges.

Recharged or running on empty?

How's your emotional, or physical, battery level today?

Energised

Feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, engaged and thriving. You are confident in your abilities, motivated, and able to give your best at whatever you set your mind to.

Active

You're able to function well, with no physical sensations that feel out of the ordinary. You wake feeling rested, have consistent moods in general, and are able to make decisions without excess stress.

Moderate

Certain situations or times might evoke anxiety, or you notice you have to make active choices about where you spend your energy. You might start to crave just a little bit more rest.

Drained

You might experience brain fog and decision fatigue, and find yourself irritable, with muscle tension and aches. You might notice feeling more cynical, and less motivated than usual.

Burnt out

You have nothing left to give. You might experience trouble sleeping, or have physical symptoms like nausea, headaches, and an upset stomach, while feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, and defeated.

5 powerful techniques to challenge anxious thoughts

Call on these tools to help de-escalate anxiety-inducing moments

Writing | **Rebecca Thair**

1. Detective investigator

As anxious thoughts pop up through the day, think of yourself like a detective from your favourite mystery novel. Rather than simply accepting the thought at face value, take a beat and ask yourself a few questions: 'How likely is this to happen?' 'What is a more likely outcome?' 'What is it about this scenario that most concerns me?' 'Is there any evidence to support this anxious thought?' 'What would a best-case scenario be instead?' This can help you get to the root of the anxiety, recognise why it might be appearing, and encourage a more balanced perspective on the situation.

2. Thoughts vs facts

Create two columns on a sheet of paper. When anxious thoughts arise, note down the thoughts and feelings coming up on one side, without filtering or judgement. When you've got it all on the page, take a moment to really read through it all again. In the other column, start to pull out the actual facts – you'll likely notice this is vastly different, and much more reassuring.

3. Visualisation grounding

Reconnect with yourself in the here and now, rather than getting carried away by 'what if' thoughts. Decide on an activity that you've done many times before, that you know like the back of your hand. It could be anything from cooking your favourite recipe to folding fresh laundry from the tumble dryer, or a path you walk regularly. Imagine every step of the process as if you're doing it right now – each action you take, the smells, how it feels. The familiarity of this can help reclaim calm when anxiety strikes.

4. A sour taste

A simple diversion technique to draw your attention away from anxious thoughts before they spiral, can be tasting a sour sweet. The distinct and strong flavour can bring you back to the moment in hand, and distract you long enough for the panic to pass. While this isn't a long-term solution, it can be a handy tool to be aware of.

5. Category recall

Another distraction tool, when you feel panic rising you can play a memory recall game with yourself. Decide on a category (anything from breeds of dogs to films starring a particular actor, or types of pasta) and give yourself 60 seconds to name as many as you can. You can set a shorter time frame if preferred, or play another round with a different topic if needed. But the aim is that by focusing on this activity, whatever was creating the immediate anxiety may have passed, or the pause may allow you to view the situation with a clearer mind. h

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Finding your circle of care

Try pod mapping – the transformative justice tool that enables you to build a solid support system to help your wellbeing

Writing | **Fiona Fletcher Reid**

The systems that are supposed to help us are changing, and not always for the better. Whether that's welfare cuts, lengthy NHS waiting lists, or soaring living costs making essential care inaccessible, many of us lack the support we need. In times like these, we can't always rely on institutions to catch us when we fall – but we *can* turn to each other. Pod mapping is a way to build intentional support networks, ensuring that no one has to navigate hardship alone.

What is pod mapping?

Pod mapping is about harnessing the power of community knowledge and resources for the greater good. Initiated by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC), with victims of violence in mind, creator Mia Mingus designed pod mapping as a way to visually document the people that you would call on if violence, harm, or abuse happened to you or someone you know, or was perpetrated by you. It has since been adopted by various activist communities, such as LGBTQIA+ groups, mental health peer support networks, and climate justice movements, to fulfil the unique needs of each individual.

It's not just about writing down a list of all your friends and their phone numbers – it's a practical map that you can rely on in specific situations. When speaking about the purpose of pods in the context of their work, BATJC notes: "Most people don't call the police or seek counselling, or even call anonymous hotlines. If they tell anyone at all, they turn to a trusted friend, family member, neighbour, or coworker. We wanted a way to name those currently in your life that you would rely on (or are relying on) to respond to violence, harm, and abuse."

We may not all turn to our pod as a result of violence, yet it can help us heal from the systems that may have failed us, offering an alternative care route based in compassion. That's why it's important to include people who you can trust – and to tailor your pod to your specific needs. >>>

Why you should make a pod map

- Mapping out your pod can **reveal unexpected connections**, giving you a deeper sense of feeling supported, easing anxiety about worst-case scenarios.
- Preparing ahead of time gives you a plan, which **can make dealing with a crisis (when emotions tend to be heightened) far easier.**
- You can **be proactive and start communicating** regularly with your pod now, which builds a sense of connection and shifts the responsibility of resilience to the group at large, instead of bearing the full weight on your own shoulders.

How to get started

1. Write your own name in the blue hexagon.
2. In the surrounding green hexagons, write down different people you feel connected to, even if you don't rely on them often. This could be neighbours, colleagues, friends, or family members.
3. Label support roles by asking yourself: who do I turn to for specific kinds of support? E.g. Jane does body-doubling with me, which helps me stay productive; John can accompany me to medical appointments; and Sarah helps me find joy in hard times.
4. The yellow hexagons are for people who could potentially be part of your pod, but might require some work to make this happen. For example, perhaps you need to spend more time with them to build trust, or have a conversation about boundaries in order to feel comfortable.
5. The orange hexagons are for networks, communities, or groups that could be helpful. This could be anything from your local foodbank to a domestic abuse helpline.

Pod mapping as a practice

Once you've developed your pod, remember that it isn't set in stone. Relationships and needs will inevitably shift over time, and that's OK. People can have multiple pods, too – the person you call on when you've experienced medical gaslighting might not be the same person you reach out to when you need financial support. Above all, remember that pods are a space of mutual support, so check-in with your pod family regularly – the more you give, the more you get in return.

Try pod mapping

Use this diagram to visually document your pod

- Your name
- People you rely on
- Potential pod members
- Networks, groups, or communities

The lost art of writing letters

It may be time to ditch the convenience of DMs and write a letter instead – perhaps even to a complete stranger...

Writing | **Fiona Fletcher Reid** Illustrating | **Rosan Magar**

Growing up, Hannah Brencher regularly received letters. Her mother left them everywhere – hidden around the house, slipped into suitcases, and posted directly to her when she left for college. So, when she found herself feeling disconnected while living in New York City, Hannah decided to mirror her mother's habit – but it unfolded in a way that she could never have predicted.

"I was struggling with depression, and, as a way to cope, I began writing love letters to people I saw around the city," explains Hannah, founder of *moreloveletters.com*. "That small act evolved into me blogging about it, and inviting others to request letters if they needed encouragement. I never expected it to take off, but over the next nine months, I wrote more than 400 letters to strangers all across the world."

Since then, Hannah has led a movement that has reached six continents, all 50 American states, and more than 70 countries, delivering countless 'love letter bundles' to people when they least expect it.

Letters of the past

Of course, written correspondence has existed in many forms, and served numerous functions, over the course of human history. Ancient Egyptians wrote letters on papyrus scrolls, whereas in China, letters were written on bamboo strips or silk. English naturalist Charles Darwin, wrote more than 15,000 letters in his lifetime, using them to discuss ideas and gather research to develop his work, such as the theory of natural selection. In 1860, 11-year-old Grace Bedell wrote to presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln, suggesting he grow a beard to appear more electable. Shortly after, Lincoln did just that – later meeting Grace and acknowledging her influence. During World War II, receiving letters from home was considered essential for soldier morale, which led to innovative new solutions to ensure mail was delivered efficiently.

Nowadays, Royal Mail reports a decline in the volume of letters in circulation, with the current figure just 6.7 billion per year (which once peaked at 20 billion). While technology such as texting, video calls, and emails, is often considered more efficient, Hannah is keen to point out that the intentionality is what makes letters so meaningful. "A handwritten letter symbolises something tangible within a digital world. It represents that someone cleared space, took time, and was fully present to show up for someone else."

And while environmental concerns may also play a role, digital communications still form carbon emissions – and this intentionality with forming a letter could mean you send far less back and forth emails in the long-run.

More than just a throwaway piece of correspondence, letters provide a tangible item that can be revisited and treasured. "When we talk to people who have gone through tragedy or a natural disaster, they >>>

often mention a box of letters they grabbed before leaving their home," says Hannah. "Handwritten letters hold incredible power – something that a text or email just doesn't seem to replicate."

Loving letters

So what is it about letter-writing that makes it so magical? Well, one intergenerational penpal project that matches University of Leeds students with older Yorkshire residents, notes its ability to address the loneliness epidemic. Results showed that 94% of students who took part said that writing letters had a positive effect on their mental wellbeing, and 95% of older participants agreed.

Psychotherapist Ellie Rowland-Callanan says that writing letters offers an alternative to superficial aspects of communication that are pervasive in modern culture. "Many clients I work with, who use dating apps, have experienced the false intimacy of constant messaging, only to find that the relationship doesn't translate in person," she explains. "The short form nature of texts and DMs can make it hard to understand the nuances of what the other person is saying, causing breakdowns in communication."

Letter writing provides a more deliberate response. "It offers time and space to choose what you want to say. The psychological benefits of exploring this approach may include reduced anxiety, more self-awareness, and clearer communication of boundaries."

Community words

More Love Letters is unique in allowing you to connect with people you've never met. Every month, several lucky recipients are selected (anyone can nominate someone via *moreloveletters.com*) and the community handwrites letters of hope and encouragement. Then, hundreds of love letters are bundled up and mailed to the nominated individuals.

Nominees are regular people in need of support – from a caregiver experiencing grief, to a cancer survivor whose home was lost in the recent LA

Hannah Brencher, founder of More Love Letters

wildfires. Often, people will see something in the stranger's story that resonates with them, which compels them to reach out via the written word. "To me, that's incredibly powerful," says Hannah. "The idea that we don't need to fully know someone, or understand everything they've been through, to have a moment of connection, relation, and love."

The exercise of writing to a stranger can foster hope for the sender as well as the recipient. "People are often surprised by how much they personally gain from sitting down and writing letters. It's easy to come across our organisation online, and assume you're signing up to help others. Still, in reality, you become the beneficiary of all the positive effects of letter writing."

Hannah believes that shifting your focus from your own worries to helping someone else is what makes the biggest impact. "When I was struggling with depression, that was huge for me. I didn't realise it then, but every time I sat down to write a letter, I stepped away from my heavy, dark feelings and, instead, poured light, love, and encouragement into someone else's day. That simple act made a profound difference."

Picking up the pen

If you're inspired to take part, you can visit *moreloveletters.com* to get started, but you can also try out the therapeutic approach of writing an 'unsent letter' to someone, such as an ex-partner, loved one, yourself, or even a past event. This is something that Ellie recommends as a tool for processing and understanding thoughts and feelings about an issue, or towards a specific person. "By writing a letter without the intention to send it, we can focus our writing, let out anger, sadness, grief, and a myriad other emotions, as well as read it back and understand our own unmet needs."

To try it for yourself, set a timer for five minutes, and write your letter without editing. At the end of the five minutes, continue for another 10, or until the first draft is written. Read it back, acknowledging any tendencies to be critical, and setting them to one side. Consider the main points of the letter, any unmet needs which have arisen, and your feelings towards the person or issue you wrote about. This might feel uncomfortable at first, but remember it's a personal process where presence is more important linguistic skills.

"Anyone can write a letter; they don't need to be academic or especially verbose," Ellie says. "Remember, you are the letter writer, and, perhaps unlike school experiences, no one is going to tell you off for doing it wrong. The practice of letter writing is about self-expression, not perfection." h

Ellie Rowland-Callanan is a psychotherapist supporting clients with a range of issues. Reach out via the ***Counselling Directory****.*

Stars in their eyes

We're putting community initiatives in the spotlight, and in this issue, the Anansi Theatre Company is centre stage...

Writing | Caroline Butterwick

A belief in the power of art, and frustration at the lack of spaces where women of colour can express themselves, inspired actress, poet, physical theatre performer, and lecturer Lauren Nicole Whitter to set up Anansi Theatre Company. Based in Derby, it is unapologetically run 'by and for' women of colour, offering a range of community theatre opportunities.

"We set it up in 2021, when a lot of Black and brown communities felt alienated and unheard," says Lauren. "Black Lives Matter blew up, and more organisations talked about how they're going to do better, and involve people of colour in decision-making and creative spaces. Since then, it's just fizzled away. A group of us came together and realised, where are the creative spaces for women of colour?

"We decided, and I decided due to my own mental health journey, that it was important to incorporate the effects of racism and discrimination on mental health in our work."

Research shows that 90% of people working across arts, culture and heritage are white – higher than the general workforce figure (85%). And it's not just the creative workforce that lacks diversity – most recent data from Arts Council England shows that in the audiences who participated in their funded projects (which include theatre, dance, music, and literature), only 2% were Black or Black British.

But Anansi Theatre Company aims to improve those numbers, and create real change in its community by using the universal language of art to touch artists and audience members alike. "I love the idea of the audience being in a room together, and we're watching the same thing, but everybody has a different relatability with what they see on stage, a different connection, and then the conversations you have after seeing a show – it's just amazing," Lauren says.

It's not easy of course, but Lauren notes that the sense of fulfillment that comes from working on a performance together is part of why the process is so powerful. "When you're making a show, it's hard work, but you're all coming together, all creative, from different backgrounds, to make this one product is really, really special."

In its community theatre workshops, which include sessions for children and adults, the company often draws on the idea of African storytelling as a way to reclaim voices and pass on stories – something that marginalised communities have done for hundreds of years in the face of cultural oppression. In a world where Black voices have historically been excluded from mainstream books and media, the workshops often use the Anansi Spider Stories from West African folklore as inspiration. "We wanted to emphasise that connection of the heritage, and the connection of the storytelling," says Lauren. "So when we do a workshop, we often use music, we use sound, we use African drumming."

Each session allows people to express themselves in ways that make sense to them, creating a therapeutic outlet for emotions that may otherwise have stayed bottled up. "You can dance it out," says Lauren, "you can write a poem, or make music about how you feel. Some people don't have the vocabulary to say how they feel, or are scared of what might happen if they do." With facilitators leading the sessions, participants have time and space to create in their own unique way.

Individual and group check-ins are built into the sessions, in order to allow participants to connect with their emotions. "I'm a physical theatre artist,

so we might look at where our energy is today, or ask people to express themselves with a facial expression or a word, or movement," says Lauren. "It's about finding different ways for the individual and how they want to express themselves."

As well as adults, Anansi also runs a drama club for girls and young women of colour ranging from six to 14 years old. Terms last around 10 weeks, and focus on skills-based classes, such as creative writing and dance, leading to a piece of work created together – which in the past has included a play and individual monologues. Groups are separated by age, but share a meal together, creating a sense of connection as they enjoy food and conversation in the large hall above Normanton Library.

"They learn a new skill and make friends," says Lauren. "One girl we worked with said that she auditioned for a show at school afterwards, which is amazing. She went on to do drama at GCSE."

Whether those involved go on to pursue performance isn't what matters most. With global majority groups in the UK more likely to be diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, experience a poor outcome from treatment, and disengage from mainstream mental health services, the group can serve as a powerful wellbeing tool.

"I came to the music and art group at Anansi because I was feeling very isolated," says one of the young participants. "It turned out to be the best thing that has happened to me in a very long time. I am so glad that I made myself go, because I have made friends and feel like I have found my little family." The mental health impact of coming together and creating work is important. "For women of colour, we don't feel like we're heard, or that we have the power to change our situations. We're using the arts as a vehicle to empower, to inspire," says Lauren.

The theatre company makes sure sessions are welcoming and inclusive. This includes ensuring members of the team have mental health first aid training, and a mental health champion. "We want to make sure the girls and women we work with understand that they are heard and taken seriously." To make their work possible, Anansi Theatre Company receives funding from a range of sources, including Children in Need, the National Lottery, and Derby City Council.

For those wanting to do something similar, Lauren says: "Go for it. Start with your idea, and find people who feel the same. Find that community, find that need. Be patient with yourself and trust yourself – you know you've got this." h

The emotional weight of chronic illness

Chronic conditions have a far greater impact on a person's life than the physical effects alone. Understanding and validating this experience from all sides is vital, as our expert columnist **Bea Appleby** shares, along with essential tips for navigating this

BEA APPLEBY

Bsc (Hons) Dip MBACP

Bea Appleby is a humanistic counsellor, working with adults and couples. Get in touch via the *Counselling Directory*.

Living with a long-term health condition (LHC) can feel like travelling an exhausting and lonely path. Whether it's chronic pain, asthma, arthritis, or autoimmune diseases, these conditions take a toll on mental health that is often overlooked.

As a therapist, I've had the privilege of supporting individuals with LHCs, and while they show incredible strength in managing their physical symptoms, many are quietly carrying a profound emotional burden. Feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, stigma, stress, and discrimination can increase the risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. In fact, research, published by the King's Fund and the Centre for Mental Health, shows that people with LHCs are two to three times more likely to experience mental health issues. In the UK, more than 30% of the population lives with one or more long-term conditions, and more than 4 million also face mental health challenges.

Mental health and chronic illness are deeply intertwined, and both deserve compassion, attention, and integrated care. In recent years, we've begun to better understand how physical illness can impact mental wellbeing, and how mental health struggles can make physical conditions harder to manage, creating a cycle of suffering for many.

This cycle has real physical effects, and emotional pain can change how we experience physical pain. Research, published in *PLOS One*, shows that higher stress levels make it harder for the body to manage pain. However, it's important to note that just because pain can have a psychological component, doesn't mean a person is exaggerating it. This simply highlights the strong connection between the mind and body – when the mind hurts, the body often does, too.

One of the most distressing emotional responses to chronic illness is shame. I've seen clients with health conditions feel different, unworthy, or even like a burden, often leading to a deep sense of guilt. This shame is often rooted in societal pressures to appear healthy, strong, and self-sufficient. Sadly, there is a deeply ingrained cultural belief that illness is somehow our 'fault' – whether it's for getting sick in the first place, or for not being able to heal quickly enough. This judgement can be painful and alienating.

The impact on a person's sense of identity is, in my opinion, the most difficult psychological aspect of dealing with an LHC. Before a diagnosis, many people define themselves through their work, relationships, hobbies, and abilities – things that may no longer be possible. There can be a loss of independence, too. The grief of losing these parts of who you once were, and the painful shift in how you see yourself, can be heart-breaking. It's a loss that goes far beyond physical health, affecting the core of who you are.

Taking care of an LHC requires a holistic approach – treating both the body and the mind with equal care and compassion. When we recognise that mental health is just as important as physical health, we begin to create a more balanced and supportive path toward acceptance.

If you're living with an LHC, I want to remind you that your mental health matters as much as your physical health. You deserve to be heard, supported, and treated with kindness – especially by yourself. Caring for your emotional wellbeing isn't a sign of weakness; it's a powerful act of strength and self-love. And remember, you don't have to face this journey alone.

For those of you who don't live with a chronic condition, consider reaching out to someone who does. Don't just ask about their physical symptoms, but how they're *really* feeling. Your support could make all the difference.

Tips for managing mental health with an LHC

- **Build your support network.** Talking to others about what you're going through is vital for wellbeing. Whether it's friends, family, or online, connecting with others helps ease feelings of isolation.
- **Find self-compassion.** Be kind to yourself, especially on difficult days. Remember that your worth is not defined by your health, and it's OK to have moments of struggle.
- **Explore mindfulness and meditation.** These comforting practices offer moments of calm and relief when pain or fatigue feel overwhelming. With mindfulness, you can gently shift your focus to what you *can* still do, and the things that bring you joy, and away from thoughts of loss, helping you stay connected to the present moment.
- **Find a therapist who can help.** Look for a therapist who specialises in chronic illness. Many find that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can help in dealing with challenges, and living a meaningful life despite suffering. It's effective for treating conditions like chronic pain, anxiety, and depression, building resilience, and self-compassion.

Take 5

Engage those thinking gears with these tricky brain-teasers

Rebus puzzles

Also known as 'picture riddles', think *literally* to uncover these common sayings and expressions.

gsge sgge
egsg gesg
gges ggse
esgg segg

THOUGHT BUT THOUGHT

Once

EDITION
EDITION
EDITION

TRY STAND
2

SMOKE
G

Cross sum

Use the digits 1 to 9 in the grid to the right in order to solve six different sums. Each number can only be used once, and the operations in each equation (+, -, x, ÷) apply left to right, or top to bottom. Thinking caps at the ready...

	x		+		=30
+		÷		x	
	-		x		=40
+		-		-	
	x		÷		=15
=19		=2		=13	

How did you do? Visit the 'Freebies' section on shop.happiful.com to find the answers, and more!

Let it go: the art of releasing

Taking the shame and stigma out of our bodies' natural functions

Writing | Ilona Cabral

Isn't it strange that we feel the need to apologise for our body's natural functions? It's baffling how much stigma is associated with them. Especially in western societies, we must hide our mouths behind our hands when we yawn. We're told to excuse ourselves when we sneeze. Or, if we've been crying, we feel the urge to hide our red eyes, masking the evidence to avoid others feeling awkward.

Growing up, I was taught to view these actions differently. My mum, a Reiki master, taught us that each function could also be viewed as a way of releasing, both physically and emotionally. Join me as I delve into some of the societal, scientific, and holistic interpretations of these actions, to break down some of the stigmas, and learn to just let them go...

Yawning

Yawning has long been considered a sign of tiredness and boredom, and it is often perceived as rude to openly yawn in company. Many societies dictate that we should politely place our hands in front of our mouths, fighting the irresistible stretch of our jaw.

But, do you know why we actually yawn? Well, there might be a few reasons. Some researchers suggest that yawning is a way to cool the brain when it's getting too warm, as reported in a study in *Physiology & Behaviour*. The act of yawning forces us to breathe deeply, which increases blood flow in our bodies and allows cooler air in. Meanwhile, others believe that yawning can be caused by breathing issues, for example if someone is not breathing 'diaphragmatically' this may cause them to yawn, as noted in 2022 research in *Sleep and Breathing*.

Then there is the age-old question: why do we feel compelled to yawn when we see someone else yawning? This is a widely contested issue, with some researchers suggesting that yawning is an empathetic and social skill, noted in the *International Journal of Applied & Basic Medical Research*, connected to social mirroring, though others disagree.

From a cultural perspective, Ancient Greeks believed that an open mouth could allow good things to escape, such as the soul, and in Islam that yawning could let in evil spirits. Covering the mouth was a way to minimise risks in both these cases.

Adopting a more holistic lens, a fresh way of looking at yawning >>>

What is Reiki?

Reiki is a type of energy therapy that focuses on healing and balance, and comes from the Japanese words 'rei', meaning universal, and 'ki', meaning life energy. Many practitioners believe that energy can stagnate in the body as a result of physical injury, or even emotional pain, which can lead to illness. Supporting the flow of energy during Reiki treatments is believed to remove blocks, in turn improving energy circulation, enabling relaxation, relieving pain, and speeding up healing. Therefore if we approach our bodily functions through the lens of Reiki, we can view them as a way of aiding this release of blockages.

is as a way of expelling stagnant energies, with the belief that yawning during Reiki treatments or meditation could assist with releasing blockages.

Burping and farting

Next up, natural gas. In some societies, burping or farting is seen as disgusting or uncouth, perhaps partly due to the resulting unpleasant odours. We are typically taught to excuse ourselves, and even strangers, after burping or farting. However, there are places where a contrasting view occurs and burping is seen as acceptable, and even a sign of appreciation – such as in China, where it is not

uncommon to let out a (gentle) burp after a good meal.

Speaking scientifically, burping is a perfectly natural way to push excess air from your upper digestive tract. It is a method of releasing excess air so that it does not reach the stomach. Then, farting is a way to release gas out of the intestines. The small amount of swallowed air that is not released combines with the digestive bacteria, and is expelled.

> In China, it is not uncommon to let out a (gentle) burp after a good meal

Yet, burping and farting can also be a sign of emotional release and growth when approached spiritually. Some believe that emotions can be stored in the body, and when we experience them intensely, they can become trapped in our energy field. Burping or farting during spiritual practices can be considered a sign that you are releasing these emotions, and, in turn, may feel lighter and more energised, both physically and spiritually. In Chinese medicine, burping can be connected to the concept of 'qi', the life force energy in the body. Burping is believed to help regulate the flow of qi, and promote good health.

Crying

I like to think that we have become better at dealing with crying in the past few decades. Societies are gradually thawing their frozen perceptions of gender roles, and we are becoming more emotionally intelligent. However, crying is still often something we do in secret. It is the result of an excess of emotion, requiring care or attention, and can simply be a very necessary, cathartic relief. Yet, again, many of us do not fully understand why we cry, or try to minimise when we feel the need to do it.

In 1872, Charles Darwin declared emotional tears "purposeless", and more than a century later, emotional crying is one of the human body's greatest mysteries. Some species shed tears reflexively as a result of pain or irritation, but humans are one of the only creatures who can be triggered by their feelings. In babies, tears have the crucial role of garnering attention and care from adults. But why do we cry as grown-ups?

Some researchers suggest that crying is a process of self-soothing, as emotional tears can release oxytocin and endorphins, as noted in a study in *Frontiers in Psychology*. These chemicals make people feel good, and can ease both physical and emotional pain. Others note distinct types of tears, as referenced by Leo Newhouse on the *Harvard Health Publishing* website, with reflex and continuous tears removing debris and dust, and lubricating our eyes. While emotional tears help to "flush stress hormones and toxins out of our system".

Similarly, 'crying for no reason' can be associated with the way your body uses the eyes as a passageway to release energy and heal. Rabbi Michael Latz offered a spiritual interpretation in his thesis for Hebrew Union College, exploring how tears "cloud your vision until it clarifies it", making us realise what we truly feel, even before we know it. He wrote: "Weeping cleanses the body and soul, and creates the opening for whatever comes next."

In 2021, aspiring clergyman Benjamin Perry took up "crying as a daily spiritual practice" after realising he had become "divorced from his feelings" after not crying in years. Writing for *Religion News Service*, he described how, each day, he found it easier to cry, and eventually believed it recalibrated his "entire emotional baseline" and "changed how [he] related to other people and the world".

Whether you're more receptive to a scientific explanation, enamoured by a fresh cultural perspective, or inspired by a spiritual sentiment, hopefully this exploration of bodily functions can allow you to view your own more kindly, and with less shame. And next time you let a burp, toot, or yawn out at an inconvenient time, remember you're only human and it's perfectly natural! Just let it go.

Faking it till you make it

Are you guilty of going with the flow for the sake of keeping the peace? Or find yourself fearful of saying 'no' because you value others' needs above your own? It's time to ditch 'faking it' for friends, and embrace authentic connections

Writing | **Michelle Elman**

I've always hated the phrase 'faking it till you make it'. Often, it conjures up scenarios of being told that if we project confidence we don't have, we will eventually succeed and find it. But, in my mind, if you *are* doing it, you aren't faking it. This can be infuriating in the false narrative we tell ourselves that we have to 'earn' that confidence – and I don't buy it.

The seeds of self-doubt sown with this phrase go deeper though, teaching us to question our own knowledge of ourselves – or to ignore it. We're taught to plaster on a smile, turn up, and pretend to enjoy the things we don't. Growing up, we're often told to keep trying something, and eventually we'll like it. This could be anything from foods to certain hobbies, and later going to parties, or joining sports groups, simply because our friends like to do these things, or we feel pressure to because it's something 'everyone does'.

This is viewed as a part of adulthood. You can't always do what you want and, more times than you realise, you will have to do what you *don't* want.

Naturally, there is an element of this seemingly inescapable 'duty' in everyday life – whether that's agreeing to plan a social event for colleagues, or organising your household budget to help your future self. But overall, I think we tell ourselves stories about how we are needed more than we are, and therefore we endure more unenjoyable things than we should. In reality, we don't always have to be the ones to sacrifice our time or energy for the greater good. The responsibility doesn't *always* have to fall to us.

Towards the end of my 20s, I learned there is power in being authentic. Recently, my friend was running a spinning class event, and I hate spinning. But I said yes to attending because I wanted to support her, and the community she was building around sobriety. It didn't mean I had to be fake though. I told her: "Oh I hate spinning, but I'm here to support you." When I posted about the event online, I said: "Spinning isn't my thing, but I'm always here for a sober hang, and I love working out with friends."

Essentially, you don't have to lie to be polite. You can be open and authentic about the parts you enjoy, and the parts you don't, and once you become known for that honesty, it actually becomes more of a compliment. The people I met that day found it refreshing when I talked about how I found the cycling seats uncomfortable, and my friend appreciated that I'd come anyway.

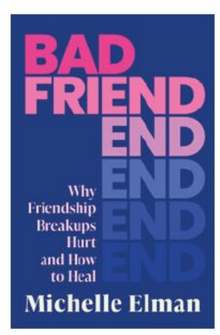
On the other hand, there are times where the response to an invitation is 'absolutely

not'. For me, that's karaoke, and I have turned down many birthday invitations because I know I will have an awful time. Instead, I might suggest that we go for dinner beforehand, or do something else together to celebrate. The truth is people don't want you attending something out of obligation, or if you're going to be miserable. And it doesn't have to be perceived as an all-or-nothing thing in friendships and relationships. It's not a decision between enduring or being a bad person, you can choose the third option – you can choose something that works for *you*. Life is too short to do things that you hate, and someone who loves you would not want you to suffer for their sake.

If you are the kind of person who is so used to overriding what you want or how you feel about a situation, it can feel very familiar to just endure. In fact, if asked, you might not even know how you feel about something, because you are so used to being disassociated from your needs. The first thing to do in this case is to simply insert a step, or brief pause, before saying yes to attending something by asking yourself if you would *actually* like to go. It sounds simple, but more often than not, we just check our diary, see an empty slot, and fill it, because we live in a world that encourages us to be busy and productive. If we are physically available, we don't view not wanting to go as a valid enough reason to decline.

> ***If we are physically available, we don't view not wanting to go as a valid enough reason to decline***

This needs to change, so let's bring an end to 'faking it'! Let's be honest and real about the events we want to attend, where our passions lie, and when our energy needs to go elsewhere. From my own experience, people tend to take your attendance for granted less when you start honouring your needs and being authentic to them, because they know if you show up, it's because you *really* do want to be there! h



'Bad Friend: Why Friendship Breakups Hurt and How to Heal' by Michelle Elman will be available from 8 May 2025 (Renegade Books, £20)

What is your attachment style?

How to recognise the way you form connections with others – for better or worse

Attachment theory, developed by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby, suggests that the relationship we have with our primary caregivers as we grow up influences the bonds we form as adults. He categorised this into four groups shared below – you may not fit 100% into one, or feel like you are a mix between them. However, being aware of the characteristics can help you better understand yourself and the connections you form, along with any unhealthy behaviours and coping skills you may have learned from childhood.

Anxious

- Often self-critical
- Views partners as 'better half', literally
- Feels 'unworthy' of love
- Fears abandonment
- Seeks security and reassurance
- Can seem 'clingy' or 'needy', seeking that attention and confidence from partner

Avoidant

- More critical of others
- Feel they don't need a relationship to be 'complete'
- Independent and self-assured
- Looks to be self-sufficient emotionally
- Might avoid intimacy and forming close bonds
- Seems emotionally distant
- Can hide feelings to avoid conflict

Disorganised

- Typically oscillates between anxious and avoidant behaviours, depending on mood
- Can be confusing, often flipping between pulling you in and pushing you away
- Seeks intimacy, but struggles to trust others
- Avoids forming deep connections for fear of getting hurt
- Behaviours can feel ambiguous to others
- Struggles to recognise and regulate emotions

Secure

- Positive view of self and others
- Not seeking external approval
- Comfortable being honest and open about their emotions
- Confident both in supporting and being supported emotionally by a partner
- Content both alone and in relationships
- Adept at identifying and regulating emotions
- Can support partners in this skill, too

Over the rainbow bridge

The bond between a pet and their owner can be incomparable, so how can you help those going through pet loss grief?

Writing | **Rochelle Hanslow**

The internet has brought countless wonderful things, but arguably one of the best is the endless stream of heart-warming and hilarious pet videos to peruse at your leisure – and which reaffirm just how beloved pets truly are. Research commissioned by SunTrust Mortgage has revealed that 33% of millennials bought their first home with their dogs in mind, not children. A survey by Manypets reports that 35% of owners have an Instagram account for their dog, and, of course, we can't forget the heart-wrenching story hitting TikTok, with more than 3.3 million likes, of Max the dog and his memorial step – if you haven't seen this yet, prepare for tears.

As a nation of animal lovers, we don't want to think about being without our pets, but there lies the issue: as a society, we're unequipped to understand pet loss grief. These animals aren't merely cohabitants, they offer companionship during life's most challenging times, and comfort, familiarity, and routine when we need it most. A study by Cats Protection and the Mental Health Foundation found that 87% of participants felt owning a cat had a positive impact on their wellbeing, with 76% believing they were better able to cope with life thanks to their pet.

And this isn't just anecdotal. Numerous studies have investigated the powerful effects of pet ownership, including reducing blood pressure and risk of cardiovascular disease thanks to the increase in physical exercise, such as with dog walking. One 2024 study, published in *JAMA Network Open*, actually concluded that "strong bonds with pets, especially dogs, may alleviate anxiety and depression, aiding mental health interventions, particularly for vulnerable groups".

The impact on our lives is undeniable, and yet, it's also very evident that pet loss grief often goes overlooked and unsupported. So, when someone you care about is going through this dreaded time and navigating pet loss grief, here are nine tips on how you can show up to support and validate them, recognising the magnitude and heart-breaking nature of this loss. >>>

Don't insinuate timelines

As with any other form of grief, it's important to recognise that the individual needs to process their emotions at their own pace. The most sensitive thing you can do in these circumstances is respect the loss as you would any other – don't expect the griever to 'get over it' quicker than the loss of a person. In most cases, they will truly have shared a bond with their pet, and have potentially spent more quality time with them than even friends or family members, which can make it incredibly hard to come to terms with. It's not just the loss itself, but a complete life upheaval, impacting their entire routine and home life. Grief is an ebb and flow process, with no rules on how long they should feel a particular way.

Be mindful of language

When talking to the griever, steer away from using 'dog' or 'bird' as it can feel impersonal, and instead aim to use the pet's name by saying, 'I'm so very sorry you lost Fluffy,' or 'Bilbo was such a wonderful soul.'

Even if you aren't an animal person yourself, you can still empathise with their situation and feelings, so avoid downplaying it with phrases like 'It was just a dog/cat' – for most people they never were 'just a' anything. Another thing to be cautious around is suggesting getting another pet before the griever has processed their grief. While this can come from a place of good intentions, the griever won't be emotionally available to connect openly with their new pet, or train them, etc., and this may compound the difficult feelings by adding guilt into the mix if they worry they've 'replaced' their pet too soon. There is no right time for this, so allow them to make this decision on their own.

Ask to hear the stories

The bond between us and our cherished pets is lifelong, and it can be the memories that remind us of the unconditional love we received, and our gratitude for it. Allow the griever to share stories, and if they haven't yet, you could prompt the option by asking if they are up to telling you about a special moment with their pet. Thank the griever for sharing these memories too, as this will help them continue to speak up when they are feeling up to it.

Listen without suggesting solutions

Most of the time, especially when dealing with pet loss grief, people just want to be able to talk to someone; they don't expect you to do anything but listen. Give the griever the space to talk openly, and let them know you're there to simply be a sounding board.

Witness without judgement

In the same vein, the griever doesn't want judgement on how they are coping, or how long they are at a particular point in their grief journey. Sometimes the nature of the loss can be incredibly painful – whether it was a surprise, accident, or a long-term illness. Euthanasia is, unfortunately, a common way we lose our pets, and it's the hardest decision to make that comes with a lot of guilt. The griever is probably already judging themselves, thinking back over every decision they've made, and so rather than dissecting this or giving your opinion, focus on simply offering your support.

Be honest, and ask questions

We very often feel awkward and embarrassed if we don't know how to handle situations, and grief is no different. If you're unsure how to approach the griever, that's OK. Be compassionate but honest, and don't be afraid to ask questions. An example might be: "I know you're hurting and I want to help, but I'm not experienced with this. How can I best support you right now?" One question I like to ask is "Sword or blanket today?" Basically meaning, do you want support or comfort?

It's not just the loss itself, but a complete life upheaval, impacting their entire routine and home life

Support for children

A pet loss is sometimes a child's first experience of grief, and realising that death is a part of life. While it can be tempting to shield them from this, it's best to avoid telling a child that their adored pet ran away or went to a farm, as this instils a sense of not being good enough for the pet. Instead, try to be compassionately honest, tell them the pet loved them and didn't want to go either, and that they will always be near. Encourage them to talk about their pet, and ask questions if needed to help them process this.

Encourage rituals or memorials

Something that can be really beneficial during this time, is encouraging the griever to do something special to remember their beloved pet. There are many different and beautiful ways we can celebrate the life of our pets, from planting a tree in their honour to getting a personalised vase, scattering their ashes in their favourite place, or making a collage of memories. One I recommend is decorating a wooden box, and giving them a space to share memories, thoughts, and stories of and with their pet. The griever can write down anything they need to get out, and place it in the box, including trinkets and photos. Participating in these sort of moments, or suggesting them, will often be really appreciated by the griever.

Check in every once in a while

After the initial weeks, many people forget the griever is still on a grief journey. Every so often, send a message or ask in person how they are coping, and remind them that they are loved and supported. Much like with losing people we care about, special events (such as their birthday, the anniversary of their death, or places you visited together) can be particularly painful. Keeping this in mind and checking in around these times can be another kind and compassionate way to show you care.

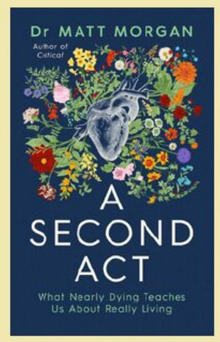
Grief over pets can be as painful and difficult to navigate as that of a person; it's a long, uncomfortable road, and any ounce of compassion, and empathy will go a long way. If you are, or know someone, going through this, support is out there, and it's not 'silly' to ask for help. h

Hope is a waking dream
Aristotle
Photography | Abdullah Ali

Happiful reads...

From a must-read that redefines what it means to be wealthy, to an insightful book about famous artists and their creative spaces, we share our latest top reading picks

Writing | **Lauren Bromley-Bird**



***A Second Act: What Nearly Dying Teaches Us About Really Living* by Dr Matt Morgan**

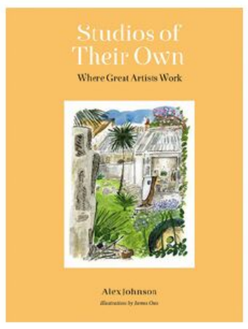
As an intensive care doctor, Matt Morgan has cared for many people who have died and have been brought back to life with resuscitation. He strongly believes that if we should be listening to anyone about how to truly live, it should be from those who have been granted a second chance. These people understand the value of life and what really matters.

Dr Morgan introduces us to some of the remarkable people he has met – from Ed who was struck by lightning at 17, to Summer who sought to take her own life at 25. He shares their stories about what life was like before tragedy hit, their near-death experience and how they were saved, and asks how it has transformed their life now.

Must reads

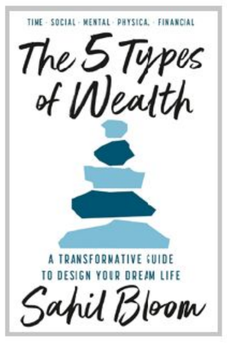
***The Paper Florist: Create and Display Stunning Paper Flowers* by Suzi McLaughlin**

Combining her passion for the natural world and paper, Suzi McLaughlin teaches us how to master the art of paper crafts so that we too can create beautiful, lifelike flowers. You'll find step-by-step tutorials for everlasting home decorations, and unique gifts that don't break the bank, such as table garlands and flower bouquets.



***Studios of Their Own: Where Great Artists Work* by Alex Johnson and James Oses**

Every artist has a space where creativity flows and inspiration grows. From Jean-Michel Basquiat who worked in a friend's stable, to Claude Monet who painted mostly from his garden, *Studios of Their Own* homes in on 50 remarkable artists and the spaces and creative processes that influenced the recognisable art that we see today.



***The 5 Types of Wealth* by Sahil Bloom**

If money is the first (and only) thing that comes to your mind when you think of wealth, you've got a lot to learn. Investor, entrepreneur, and author Sahil Bloom suggests that there are actually five types of wealth – time, social, mental, physical, and financial – and dives into how we can incorporate each one to enrich our lives.

Cognitive shuffling: the sleep hack for overthinking brains

Surprisingly, giving your brain more to think about might just be the secret to falling asleep faster

Writing | **Holly Treacy-West** Illustrating | **Rosan Magar**

We've all been there – lying awake at midnight, replaying the 'shoulda, woulda, couldas' of the day. It's like your brain decides it's the perfect time to write the next great anxiety novel. Spoiler alert: overthinking has never been the secret to falling asleep.

From counting sheep to wishing for just a few more hours, getting a good night's sleep isn't as easy as saying 'lights out'. According to the NHS, one in three Brits suffer from insomnia, and a survey by Nuffield Health shows 74% of us aren't getting enough rest. If that sounds familiar, and you've tried everything to wake up feeling bright-eyed with no relief, this simple technique could be the answer to your exhausted prayers.

What exactly is cognitive shuffling?

Cognitive shuffling is a clever mindfulness technique, dreamed up by Dr Luc P Beaudoin. In one study, published in the *American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society,* Dr Beaudion noted that cognitive shuffling (also known as Serial Diverse Imagining Task, or SDIT) is a practical and effective method for reducing pre-sleep mental activity, and improving sleep quality.

Unlike traditional meditation, which asks you to clear your mind (easier said than done at 3am), cognitive shuffling gives your brain something to do – deliberately scrambling your thoughts to disrupt that endless loop of overthinking.

Part cognitive therapy, part behavioral hack, it's like giving your brain a structured bedtime story to distract it from life's noisy soundtrack. So, if you're tired of tossing and turning, it might be time to shuffle your way to sleep.

According to Dr Jade Thomas, psychologist and founder of Luxe Psychology Practice, cognitive shuffling is a mental exercise which involves imagining a sequence of random, emotionally neutral objects, words, or scenarios. Think of it like playing a solo game with a mental deck of cards. For Jade, this method aims to engage the brain just enough to prevent it from dwelling on worries or anxieties, helping individuals fall asleep more quickly. Ready to start shuffing? Here's how to try it out:

Pick a card, any card

Start by picturing a deck of cards made up of cosy, neutral words – such as 'puppy', 'beach', 'balloon', and 'apple'. In your mind's eye, pick one card. Let's say you draw 'apple'. Now, imagine the apple in vivid detail. Is it red or green? Big or small? Juicy or crunchy? Once you've given it a quick thought, mentally discard that card, and draw another from the deck.

Change the thought quickly

Dr Thomas explains that this clever technique scrambles your thoughts, breaking up that relentless loop of problem-solving and planning that's keeping you awake. So, instead of spiralling into stress, your brain is invited to switch to 'sleep mode' with a playlist of random, stress-free images and ideas. This approach mimics the brain's natural transition into sleep by introducing random, fragmented thoughts, just like the spontaneous, dream-like imagery that occurs as we drift off.

How to make cognitive shuffling work for you

Don't overthink or worry about making sense of the sequence – this isn't a strategy game! Dr Thomas reiterates the importance of focusing on random words or objects with no emotional connection, in order to avoid your mind wandering. However, she reminds us that, if you do notice your mind wandering, simply acknowledge it and return to the cognitive shuffling technique.

Picture this

Like with most things, cognitive shuffling isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. It might not send you into an instant slumber, and that's OK. Dr Thomas recommends pairing it with visualisation techniques, but with a key reminder: keep the imagery neutral and non-stimulating.

Stuck on what to picture? Here are a few calming scenes to get you started:

- A beach with gentle waves lapping at the shore
- Soft sound of birds chirping in a peaceful forest
- A cosy cabin warmed by a crackling fireplace
- Strolling through a park with a happy dog trotting by your side

It's no secret that anxiety and intrusive thoughts are among the biggest barriers to restful sleep. That's why cognitive shuffling can be such an effective tool at bedtime. "Often, when we get into bed, it's the first time all day we've had no distractions, leaving us alone with our thoughts," Dr Thomas explains. "This is when the mind tends to become most active, diving into overthinking, planning, and problem-solving."

Dr Thomas encourages removing the pressure to fall asleep quickly, as this anxiety only makes drifting off more difficult. "When we're in an anxious or stressed state, it's nearly impossible to fall asleep. So, try to release any expectations and just focus on calming your mind."

Dr Jade Thomas is an HCPC registered psychologist and BPS chartered psychologist. Connect via the ***Counselling Directory****.*

Healthy Greek gyros

Savour those Mediterranean flavours in this budget-friendly and super-tasty gyros fakeaway

Writing | Sarah Brown

As we've firmly entered spring, many of us are starting to think about summer holidays and those inviting Mediterranean flavours. So, what better way to get ourselves in the mood than with a traditional Greek dish, the gyro?

Our fakeaway version is a healthier – and cheaper – take on the classic, with all the positives of beautifully seasoned meat and tangy tzatziki, alongside lovely summer veggies.

While delicious, traditional gyros can be high in refined carbs and saturated fats, depending on the preparation. That's why this healthy option keeps all the flavour, but swaps in more nutrient-dense ingredients for a gut-friendly alternative that's high in protein, uses whole foods, and includes a probiotic-rich tzatziki sauce.

Healthy Greek gyros

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the gyro meat
(or meat alternative)

- 500g minced chicken (or your chosen alternative)
- 1 small onion, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1/2 tsp ground coriander
- 1/2 tsp smoked paprika
- 1/2 tsp sea salt
- 1/4 tsp black pepper
- 1 tbsp fresh parsley, chopped

For the probiotic tzatziki sauce

- 1 cup (240g) full-fat Greek yoghurt (or a dairy-free coconut yoghurt with probiotics)
- 1/2 cucumber, grated and squeezed to remove excess water
- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 tbsp fresh lemon juice
- 1 tbsp fresh dill or mint, chopped
- Sea salt and black pepper to taste

For the wrap and toppings

- 4 whole-grain or gluten-free pittas – see below* (or lettuce wraps for a lower-carb option)
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- 1 cup (150g) cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1/2 cup (30g) shredded lettuce or baby spinach
- 1/4 cup (60g) crumbled feta (optional)

***For gluten-free pittas**

- 1 ½ cups (180g) gluten-free all-purpose flour (with xanthan gum, or add ½ tsp separately)
- ½ cup (60g) almond flour (for a softer texture)
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ cup (120ml) warm water
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp apple cider vinegar (helps improve dough elasticity)
- 1 egg (for structure, optional – use a flax egg for vegans)

Method

Prepare the meat:

- Preheat the oven to 180°C.
- In a bowl, mix the ground meat with grated onion, garlic, and seasonings.
- Shape into a loaf and bake for 30–35 minutes until cooked through.
- Let it rest for 5 minutes, then slice thinly.

To make gluten-free pittas:

- Mix the dry ingredients in a large bowl.
- Combine the wet ingredients in a separate bowl.
- Gradually add the wet ingredients to the dry, stirring until a dough forms. If the dough is too sticky, sprinkle in a little extra gluten-free flour.
- Divide the dough into 4–6 equal portions. Roll each into a ball, then flatten into a circle, about ¼-inch thick.
- Heat a dry skillet over medium heat. Cook each pitta for 2–3 minutes per side, until puffed up and golden brown.

Make the tzatziki:

- Combine all tzatziki ingredients in a bowl and mix well.
- Chill in the fridge for at least 10 minutes for flavours to develop.

Assemble the gyros:

- Warm the pitta or prepare lettuce wraps.
- Add sliced meat, onions, tomatoes, lettuce, and feta if using.
- Drizzle with tzatziki, and serve immediately.

The healthy bit

This healthy gyros recipe offers a more balanced and nourishing take on the classic dish by focusing on whole, minimally-processed ingredients. Chicken mince is lower in saturated fats and sodium than traditional red meats, and seasoning with natural herbs and spices reduces the need for artificial additives and flavourings.

The tzatziki provides a light, probiotic-rich Greek yoghurt base, which supports digestion and gut health. Choosing a whole-grain or gluten-free pitta increases fibre intake, promoting better blood sugar regulation, and sustained energy.

Plus, the variety of fresh vegetables (tomatoes, garlic, onion, lettuce leaf wraps and cucumbers) boosts the dish's vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant content, making it not just flavourful, but also a nutrient-dense, well-rounded meal.

So, if you're looking for a taste of summer that will delight the entire family, look no further.

Sarah Brown is a registered nutritional therapist and health coach. Get in touch via the ***Nutritionist Resource****.*

In case no one's told you lately...

You are truly loved, just as you are

You should be so proud of yourself

You don't need to 'earn' rest

You don't have to be 'strong' all the time

It won't always feel this way

Just because you can't see growth, doesn't mean it's not happening

The world is a better place for having you in it

Your boundaries don't need to be justified

DIALLED IN ON RAGE

Could phoning a friend or firing off a vent text be key to unleashing pent-up frustration?

Writing | **Rebekah Crilly**

How many of us have taken to WhatsApp in a fit of rage to offload to our most trusted allies? Perhaps we had to bite our tongue when a colleague challenged us, or our spouse failed to spot the sink full of dishes for the millionth time. When we might not be able to say what we're *really* thinking in the moment, online chats offer us a safe space to unleash the rage – before it boils over.

The importance of venting

Anger is part and parcel of our human experience. While society often condemns it as a 'negative' emotion, the truth is that it's a perfectly natural and valid response to feeling wronged or hurt. How we channel it, however, is where anger can become problematic.

Without an outlet, therapist Georgina Sturmer describes rage as "something that can become stuck or trapped, with the propensity to manifest in other physical or emotional ways. It can lead to anxiety or depression, or we might find our bodies feeling hyper-aroused and primed for outbursts."

By sharing our feelings with others – in the form of ranting or venting – we have an opportunity to gain insight into what has triggered this response, and avert future upset. As Georgina notes: "When we put words to our rage and share them with others, it might feel as if we are releasing some pressure, especially if we are met with empathy and compassion."

The response of the recipient is key in all of this. Research, published in *Evolution and Human Behaviour* in 2024, highlights the social power we wield when we vent. Across multiple experiments, venting consistently caused listeners to like the venter more than the target (AKA the person being vented about). This provides the venter with a sense of support, of feeling heard and validated in their own response, which could potentially alleviate some of the hurt caused.

The move to an ever online world

Traditionally, a good old rant with a friend might have meant meeting for a coffee, but, in our increasingly remote world, we have come to rely more so on our digital conversations to keep us connected. It's estimated that there were 3.03 billion WhatsApp users in 2024, which continues to rise year-on-year, and it's believed that an average of 150 billion WhatsApp messages will be sent each day in 2025.

Kate Mannell, research fellow at Deakin University in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child, Australia, explains how messaging apps can help maintain important relationships that otherwise might not be sustained. "Mobile messaging creates a kind of 'ambient co-presence' where >>>

When we put words to our rage, it might feel as if we are releasing some pressure

Georgina Sturmer is an integrative counsellor helping clients create a more confident life. Find her profile on the ***Counselling Directory.***

we can be in touch across the day through lots of small interactions. In the absence of face-to-face opportunities, we need these kinds of spaces to process things, be vulnerable, and feel connected."

This would tie in with the arguments put forth in the research paper entitled *Everyday dwelling with WhatsApp*, published by the Association for Computing Machinery, whereby all these small, continuous communications amount to an experience akin to togetherness. By checking in with each other throughout the day with titbits, ramblings, and rants, we can reinforce that concept of solidarity.

The beauty of group chats in particular, as Kate describes, is that "the responsibility to reply is shared across multiple people, taking some of the pressure off an individual, especially where venting is concerned".

Georgina Sturmer also recognises the benefits of instant accessibility where "we can release our rage when an offline connection isn't available".

By checking in with each other throughout the day with titbits, ramblings, and rants, we can reinforce that concept of solidarity

Pitfalls to consider

Where the online chat might seem like the ideal place for our pent-up frustration, there are factors to consider. "These types of conversations play a very different role to face- to-face interactions, and might pose some risks if we choose to use them to rant or to vent," says Georgina.

Not only can it be difficult to 'read' how the other person is responding, a lag between responses can make our rant less satisfying, and leave us feeling unsupported and anxious.

In her extensive research, Kate Mannell has found the etiquette can still be difficult for friends to navigate. We all have that one friend who seems to be attached to their phone, replying instantly and at all hours. Their expectations aren't likely to match someone who is much more aloof when it comes to their digital correspondence. She notes that there is evidence that, in some cases, "too much digital communication in a friendship can become burdensome".

"When it comes to having a 'rage friend' or friends, it's important that all parties know where they stand," explains Georgina. Perhaps one friend finds it difficult to know what to say, or another feels like they have had enough of always discussing another's issues (particularly when they have their own to contend with). We all have limits to what we can tolerate, and it's important to acknowledge these boundaries.

In this sense, we must choose our rage friends wisely. Do they have the traits we look for – compassion, tolerance, empathy – and do they translate online?

It's also worth considering the ease at which we can rant with the use of a device – it removes some of the barriers that might hold us back in real life. This would relate to the 'online disinhibition effect' (described in a study in *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*), which, according to Georgina, can mean that "our words become more intense and magnified" from behind a screen.

How else can you address frustration?

While there is certainly merit in taking to our keyboards and letting it all out, it's important that we use this venting space with caution. The effortless nature of it can lead to us dwelling in negativity longer than we need to. We also run the risk of becoming 'that friend', and must remember that having a 'venting friendship' goes both ways – so you need to reciprocate and be there to listen when your friends vent, too.

Georgina recommends "finding healthy outlets to experience a similar sensation to the ranting or venting effect". This might involve journaling, talking out loud to ourselves, or shouting in an empty room or into a pillow. It's also helpful to consider options that might help to soothe the physical sensations of our rage in a healthy way, such as getting out into the fresh air, regulating our breathing, having fun with friends, and moving our bodies.

"Therapy can also be an incredibly useful space to understand and explore our anger, to consider coping strategies, and to really get to grips with where it might come from," Georgina says. "And, crucially, a relationship with a therapist is different from a relationship with a friend. A therapist offers non-judgemental, confidential support, without bringing their own agenda into the room."

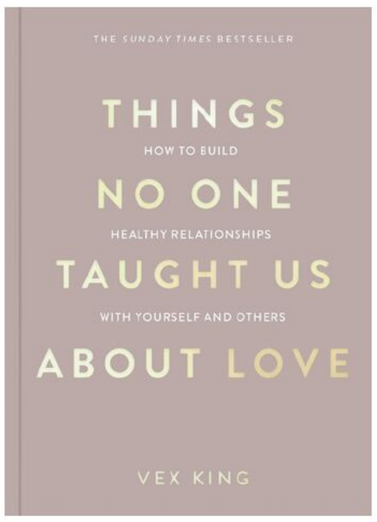
So, next time your anger is bubbling under the surface, consider what outlet would suit best. There's no shame in releasing some rage with a friend, just make sure that's not *all* your relationship centres on. h

Happiful recommends

From an exercise instilling playground nostalgia to an extravagant springtime activity, we have 10 wellbeing recommendations you'll love to try

Writing | **Lauren Bromley-Bird**

1



PAGE-TURNERS

***Things No One Taught Us About Love* by Vex King**

To love someone else, you have to love yourself first. That's the premise for this bestseller, written by self-love guru Vex King. He unpacks the myths around love and relationships, with insightful advice on how to build healthy connections with yourself and others. *(Out now, £10.99)*

2

OUT AND ABOUT

Attend a flower show

We're talking extravagant flower displays, innovative gardens that revolutionalise horticultural design, specialist nurseries that raise new and unusual plants, and much more. Welcome in the floral season by attending one of the UK's most prestigious flower shows, hosted by gardening charity the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). *(Find events at rhs.org.uk/shows-events)*

3

ACT OF KINDNESS

Head down memory lane with a friend

How often have you been left with a smile after reminiscing with a pal about the good old times? Go out of your way to call a friend that you shared cherished times with, and replay your favourite memory with them. It will show them that they are appreciated in your life, and who doesn't love to feel valued?

4

LEND US YOUR EARS

'30 Animals That Made Us Smarter'

Did you know that the wings of a rose butterfly influenced the science behind cheaper and more effective solar panels? Or that a kingfisher's eyelids influenced a design to help prevent soil erosion? This fascinating two-series podcast, opens our eyes to the remarkable animals inspiring humans to create the unimaginable. *(Available now on all podcast platforms)*

5

PLUGGED-IN

Anxiety fitness

Whether you're looking for tips on managing anxiety, or want to educate yourself to support a loved one, follow creator Peter Ruppert. He shares his journey, and tips on what works for him, in the hope that it will empower others to know that they are not alone. *(Follow @anxiety_fitness on TikTok)*

6 LESSON LEARNED

Build a minibeast hotel
Unlike those family members who outstay their welcome, minibeasts are the guests that we want to stay (well, in the garden at least). Building a hotel to house insects allows them to hide from predators, hibernate, and raise their young, and, in return, they help our gardens by pollinating plants and removing unwanted pests. *(Find out how to make one at rspb.org.uk)*

7 TECH TIP-OFFS

Happy Colour
It can be tempting to scroll on social media when you have 10 minutes to spare, but the Happy Colour app is a great alternative for those who want to quash boredom. It's a digital colouring book that features a selection of illustrated pictures which you can paint by numbers, ranging from Disney-inspired themes to nature. *(Available on the apple store)*

8 GET GOING

Jump rope exercise (skipping)
The popular skipping rope, that we thought was strictly for the playground, is actually a full-body workout with some serious benefits. This low-cost, fun exercise can help strengthen bones, sharpen coordination, ease anxiety, and improve your heart health. So, what are you waiting for? Don't skip this... *(Head to youtube.com for guided tutorials)*

9 SQUARE EYES

The Fear Clinic: Face Your Phobia
A clinic in Amsterdam offers an inside look into a relatively new therapy that helps people overcome phobias by confronting them head on. Though this type of therapy isn't effective for everyone, the docuseries raises awareness about misunderstood phobias, and how debilitating they can be. *(Watch episodes on channel4.com)*

10 TREAT YOURSELF

You Are Enough charm
This beautiful charm, engraved with the affirmation 'You are enough', is the perfect buy for those of us who need a sprinkling of self-belief and confidence when we are on the move throughout the day. Attach it to your keys or carry it as a keepsake, and start believing in your worth. *(£8.95, giveyourselfkindness.com)*

WIN ONE 'YOU ARE ENOUGH' CHARM

For your chance to win, simply email your answer to the following question to ***competitions@happiful.com***

The first recorded affirmation was used by French philosopher René Descartes. What was it?
a) I think, therefore I am
b) I am capable
c) I am loved

*Competition closes 31 May 2025. UK mainland only. Good luck!

Are you ready to order?

When 'menu anxiety' threatens to ruin your eating-out experience, try these expert tips for more mindful mealtimes

Writing | Fiona Fletcher Reid Illustrating | Rosan Magar

Plates clatter, steam bellows from the open kitchen door, and waiters with precariously stacked trays move swiftly from table to table. It's a pretty normal scene – a busy restaurant filled with people enjoying themselves. Except you're not enjoying yourself whatsoever. You're staring at the paper menu in your hands, gripped with fear, ears ringing, brow sweating, and now a waiter approaches to ask you if you're ready to order. The panic is almost too much to bear – does this sound familiar?

What is menu anxiety?

A survey of 2,000 UK respondents, carried out by Prezzo Italian restaurant, found that 67% of people had been impacted by menu anxiety, with particular prevalence among gen Z (86%). According to the data, menu anxiety is largely caused by the cost of the meal, not being able to find something you like on the menu, and regretting what you ordered. More than a third of millennials said having too many options was also a trigger.

"The most common trigger is fear of judgement," says psychotherapist Sophia Spencer. "It may be fear of judgement from the waiter, or from the people you are with. For example, if ordering alone, I may get anxiety about pronouncing things wrong in front of the waiter, and coming across as stupid. With others, I may get anxiety about picking something no one else likes, and they think I am weird."

Focus on others and embrace imperfection

When you feel anxiety, it's often helpful to switch your attention from what's going on internally to what's happening externally – such as sounds, sights, smells, or any other stimuli you can latch on to. This is called 'external focus'. "Focus on how the waiter speaks, the colours, their face, the menu, the smells of the food. Bring your attention outward rather than inward," says Sophia.

When you focus on other people, this also provides evidence that things will be OK. "Observe others when they order," suggests Sophia. "Do they always get it perfect? Does the waiter hear them correctly? Do they change their mind? Did anything happen as a result? Try to watch this in other people, and hold it in mind when you're ordering – how non-perfect other people are when ordering, and give yourself permission to be the same."

Another way to find a sense of stability among the mental chaos is to try grounding techniques. "Pay attention to a point of your body that touches the earth," says Sophia. "When anxious, we move into our head, and into the imagined future. By paying

*Sophia Spencer is a specialist accredited confidence and social anxiety psychotherapist. Connect via the **Counselling Directory**.*

attention to our sensations of the earth, we can begin to mitigate this and feel more relaxed."

Try the '5-4-3-2-1 senses' check: notice five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste. Box breathing is another great tool. Simply inhale for four seconds, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold for four. This concentrated effort slows your heart rate and calms the mind. You might also want to try anchoring phrases to reassure yourself. Mentally repeat something like, 'I have time to choose,' or 'There's no wrong choice,' to ease overthinking.

Beware of over-preparing

It may sound counter-intuitive, but preparing too intensely for your restaurant visit may be unhelpful – because this can become a behaviour you rely on, making spontaneous activities more distressing. "Over time, this may lead to less confidence overall in your ability to handle the situation without preparation," says Sophia. She points out that looking at a menu beforehand can give you a sense of relief in the moment, but if you arrive and the menu is different, you will likely feel stressed out.

Be kind to yourself as you navigate menu anxiety, and be honest with friends and when things feel overwhelming. "For example, your friend suddenly suggests to grab lunch, and the next thing you know you're having to order in a busy restaurant," says Sophia. "This can feel like running before walking if you already struggle to order in situations that are less demanding. If this happens, keep in mind, you wouldn't expect yourself to run a marathon before a 5k, and it's normal to feel that this was too overwhelming. It does not mean you are not making progress."

Minding your mental health while trying to conceive

From repeated disappointments or no one to talk to, to intrusive questions, and navigating the emotions of other people's announcements, the mental toll of trying to get pregnant can be tough – so here we're exploring effective ways to help you manage it

Writing | Victoria Stokes

Trying to conceive can be an exciting time, but if your road to pregnancy is proving more difficult than expected, you'll know it can also be an incredibly lonely journey – punctuated by uncertainty, grief, and despair.

Making a baby can quickly become all-consuming, and with so much hope invested in the end goal, the disappointment when the pink line doesn't appear can be devastating.

Another thing that can make trying to conceive all the more isolating? It's rarely talked about. Fertility is still a taboo subject, and many couples like to keep their pregnancy plans to themselves. As a result, you might feel you've no one to turn to when you need an outlet most.

Let's look at the facts: eight out of 10 couples (where the woman is under 40) will conceive within one year of trying, according to a summary of NICE guidance in the *BMJ*, but even when you know that conception often takes time, it can still be heartbreaking when another month goes by without a 'big fat positive' (BFP). So, how can you manage the impact on your mental health?

"A year doesn't sound like a long time to most, but for the person who is trying to get pregnant, every month that passes can erode their confidence," points out Dany Griffiths, the creator of the Freedom Fertility Formula, a programme that combines counselling and coaching to help women and their partners manage the emotional impact of infertility.

It can be a difficult and uncertain time, and Dany says the fear and uncertainty can increase with each month that passes without a positive pregnancy test. "I call this the 'downward cycle of despair' as each month starts with hope, followed by the fear of not getting pregnant again," she notes.

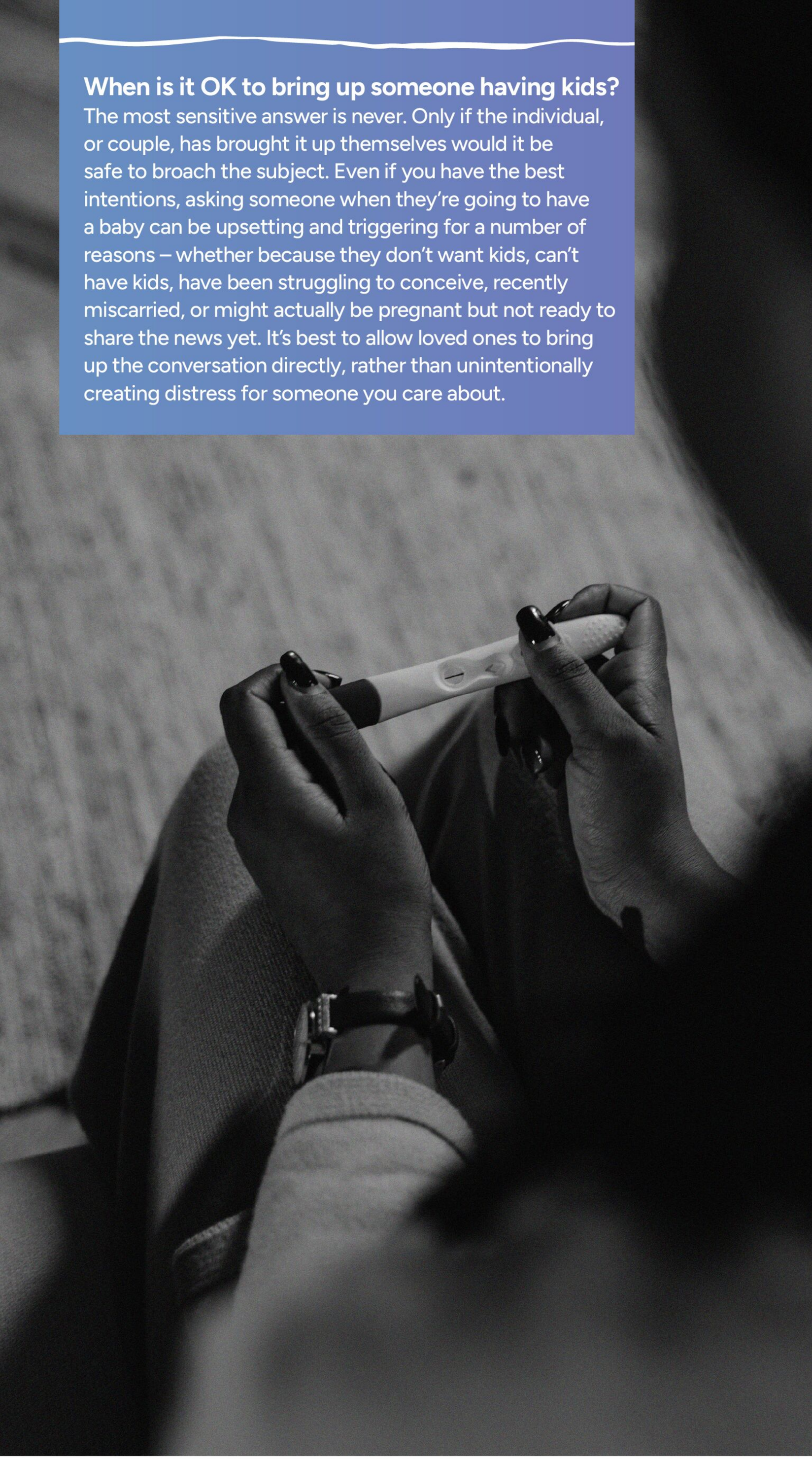
The two week wait

One particularly challenging aspect of trying to conceive is navigating the two-week wait (TWW) – that anxious two-week period between your fertile window, and being able to take a pregnancy test.

Every twinge you interpret as a pregnancy symptom, and as you wait for the life-altering result you're hoping for, you may find it difficult to think of little else. Perhaps a big part of you is reluctant to even hope for the best, because you worry that your hopes will be dashed yet again.

"To help with the not knowing, I have my clients say to themselves 'What I do know right now is that I don't know,' because the survival part of our brain doesn't like uncertainty," says Dany. "Using this statement can 'trick' the brain into believing something is certain," she explains, and may temporarily put your mind at ease as you count down the days.

When is it OK to bring up someone having kids?
The most sensitive answer is never. Only if the individual, or couple, has brought it up themselves would it be safe to broach the subject. Even if you have the best intentions, asking someone when they're going to have a baby can be upsetting and triggering for a number of reasons – whether because they don't want kids, can't have kids, have been struggling to conceive, recently miscarried, or might actually be pregnant but not ready to share the news yet. It's best to allow loved ones to bring up the conversation directly, rather than unintentionally creating distress for someone you care about.



Having something to look forward to could take your mind off things, too. Trying to conceive often means putting a little bit of your life on hold. You might be reluctant to commit to social plans or book a holiday, for example, when you don't know what the future holds, so consider using this time as an opportunity to do more of what you enjoy. Maybe that means going out for delicious brunches with your other half, carving out extra time in the evenings to kick back with a book, or catching up with a friend over a cuppa.

Part of what makes the two-week wait so challenging is that it has enormous potential for disappointment. Anita Guru, a coach and trainee psychotherapist who works for the Fertility Network UK, says the feelings of grief after a negative test can be overwhelming and traumatic.

She believes having an outlet when you get a negative test is hugely important – whether it's talking about how you feel with someone you trust, confiding in your partner, or scheduling in some extra self-care. Ultimately, she says it's OK to feel upset, and even cry. "It's always better to express the emotions you're feeling, so they don't build up and cause deeper mental health challenges," she says. >>>

Managing pregnancy announcements

A peculiar thing happens when you start trying for a baby: suddenly everyone starts announcing they're pregnant. Or, at least, it might seem that way.

Other people's baby joy can feel particularly painful, especially if it's someone close to you who is sharing the news. Anita says the best way to describe it is feeling happy for them, but sad for yourself, and this conflict of emotions can be disconcerting. You might feel guilty for not being completely overjoyed about someone else's good news.

At the same time, you may be wondering: 'Why them, and not me?' When it feels like everyone around you is having an easy time getting pregnant, it can compound those feelings of uncertainty, and cause you to question whether something is wrong.

Anita says all these feelings are normal and valid, and, as hard as it may be, you should try not to judge yourself for them.

It's also important to bear in mind that you don't always know what someone has gone through to get a positive test. It's a very private journey for most people, after all.

While it's good to process these emotions, either by talking it out or reflecting on them in a journal, it's OK to enter self-protection mode, too. Anita says you can skip events like baby showers if, emotionally, you aren't feeling up to it.

And if a friend's online pregnancy updates are too triggering? You might like to hit the 'mute' button for the time being.

Handling unsolicited advice

"When are you two going to have a baby?" "Hurry up and start a family already!" If you've been trying for a little while, you've undoubtedly heard these phrases (or variations) of them from well-meaning friends and family. And you'll know they can really sting.

It's not just probing questions about when your loved ones can expect to hear the pitter-patter of tiny feet either. If you've let people know you're trying, you may find that suddenly everyone is an expert in conception. "Just relax and let it happen," they might say. "Are you eating well to improve your chances?" they might ask. It's easy to interpret these suggestions as: "You aren't trying hard enough."

Anita recommends having a response prepared, so you aren't caught off guard. "This could be as simple as 'We are on a journey and it is private.' You shouldn't feel compelled to talk about private matters; you should only respond with what feels comfortable."

If you're feeling up to it, Dany says you can be blunt when people say something that isn't helpful. You could tell the person that you are trying and it has been difficult, and that their questions and comments are hard to hear.

Not only can this help you regain a sense of control, it may encourage loved ones to think twice about making similar remarks to others in the future.

Your emotions are valid

There are no guarantees when you start trying for a baby. The pain of probing questions, anxious waits, and negative pregnancy tests, may be relatively short-lived, or they may be only the start of your journey. That's part of what makes trying to conceive so emotionally challenging.

It may be some comfort to know that you are not alone. There are countless people on a similar journey, and they know exactly what you are going through. It's a reminder that your emotions – all of them – are valid. h

Where to find help

Looking for support with your mental health?
Here are some places that can help:

CRISIS SUPPORT

If you are in crisis and are concerned for your own safety, call **999** or go to **A&E**

Call Samaritans on **116 123** or email them at **jo@samaritans.org**

GENERAL LISTENING LINES

SANEline
SANEline offers support and information from 4pm–10pm: **0300 304 7000**

Mind
Mind offers advice Mon–Fri 9am–6pm, except bank holidays: **0300 123 3393.** Or email: **info@mind.org.uk**

Switchboard
Switchboard is a line for LGBT+ support. Open from 10am–10pm: **0800 0119 100**. Or web chat: **switchboard.lgbt**

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SUPPORT FOR PTSD
To find out more about PTSD, its symptoms, and its treatment – and discover support, visit ***ptsduk.org***

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INFORMATION ON OCD
Visit ***ocduk.org*** or email via its webform for support and responses within 24 (working) hours.

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POSTPARTUM SUPPORT
Find help at *pandasfoundation.org.uk* or text **07903508334** on WhatsApp between 8am and 10pm

Head to *happiful.com* for more services and support

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