

# ***The PERMA Model: A Scientific Theory of Happiness***

*Seligman, 2011*

This booklet aims to provide you with *practical* and *useful* information regarding a simple model of positive psychology that anybody can apply to life throughout the current pandemic – for themselves and people that they support.

By Andy Hill, Autism Together, 2020.

## Preface

As we continue to find ourselves living in a vastly different world than any of us could have dreamt of expecting this time twelve months ago, it is undoubtedly more important than ever to make the idea of self-care a priority for ourselves, the people around us and also in our case as care professionals; the people we support.

It goes without saying that the circumstances that have presented themselves to us this year have been truly unprecedented – for many of us, this pandemic has completely flipped the world in which we exist into a strange, often uncomfortable place and derailed the former normality of life in such a way that any prospect of a return to how life existed before can sometimes feel out of any reasonable grasp.

On top of this, the government's recent announcement confirming a second national lockdown has undoubtedly brought around a mix of difficult emotions for a great many of us at this time; feelings of fear, anxiety, frustration, anger and sadness are now hanging over a lot of people's heads as this situation continues.

You may or may not be familiar with the term 'seasonal affective disorder'.

This condition is more commonly known as the 'winter blues' and is a very real condition that causes an increase in depression like symptoms in around 6% of the UK's population over the winter months.

These symptoms can include tiredness, lack of or increased appetite, feeling bleak and hopeless, irritability, lack of interest and (most worryingly) suicidal thoughts, amongst others.

We must consider this potential decline in many people's mental health and wellbeing over winter along with the fact that statistics gathered in the first lockdown clearly indicated that -

- › mental distress (measured using GHQ-12) was 8.1% higher in April 2020 than it was between 2017 and 2019
- › mental distress in April 2020 was 0.5 points higher than expected (on the GHQ-12 scale), after taking into account increases in mental distress since 2013
- › in April 2020 over 30% of adults reported levels of mental distress indicative that treatment may be needed, compared to around 20% between 2017 and 2019

Another lockdown was always going to be hard on people, but we must pay extra attention to the implications of one now taking place over winter when it is cold, dark and gloomy and people's levels of wellbeing and overall mental health are already at risk of declining.

With all of this in mind, we must try more than ever to give ourselves a fighting chance to remain mentally resilient, strong and as positive as we can through the next few weeks.

When so much control has been suddenly taken out of our hands, the glimpse of the freedoms we were afforded after the first lockdown eased are again being restricted and we find ourselves dealing with the most significant infringements on our individual liberties that have occurred in generations, we need to do everything we can to attempt to take as much control as possible over our own happiness and wellbeing.

The idea of spending time looking after ourselves may very reasonably shift down a few places on our list of priorities as we still continue to adjust to what is so often called the 'new normal' – we've probably all heard from people we know talking about their lockdown time spent day drinking or eating a pint of ice cream and falling asleep on the couch with their belly out before 3pm - and indeed while to many of us these probably sound like attractive concepts, they're hardly sustainable in any kind of long run as a

way of helping us live in a way that is happy and healthy!

Trying to limit the amount of news we take in can be an effective starting point; while the gravity of the current situation is undoubtedly a serious one, the media (for the most part) can paint a very bleak picture of the situation which in turn can leave some people feeling quite overwhelmed.

Limiting the amount of media you consume that discusses the virus can be useful if this sounds familiar; try limiting yourself to checking the news just once a day or using the ‘mute’ function available on Twitter and other social media applications to filter posts with certain words to not appear – this will reduce the amount of posts you see that are talking about things you may find upsetting or worrying. It is also worth remembering that not everything you read on social media is true – it is very easy for an unverified or untrue post to spread misinformation and panic quickly as many users will not look to confirm information is accurate before sharing a post they find shocking, negative or that they believe is breaking news.

Amidst all of this, concept of self-care can appear to be deceptively simple (indeed for many people it may well also be simple in its execution) but all human beings are different in what drives, motivates and rewards them – tealights by the bathtub, rolling out the yoga mat or a filling up a huge mug of hot chocolate may well be very effective in providing relief from the stresses of life for some, but there is no universal method of self-care that will work for everyone.

What can be considered universal however is *science* - but fear not, the aim of this booklet isn't to alienate anybody with an onslaught of difficult to understand scientific jargon – the intention here is to introduce you to the PERMA model; a very simple and instantly applicable form of positive psychology that can potentially have immediate beneficial effects on many aspects of your life.

## Martin Seligman

Dr Martin Seligman is the man behind the PERMA model - revered by many as one of the leading researchers in the entire field of psychology.

Dr Seligman is director of the Penn Positive Psychology Center and the Penn Master of Applied Positive Psychology Program and considered a leading authority in the fields of Positive Psychology, resilience, learned helplessness, depression, prospection, optimism and pessimism.

Dr Seligman is also a well-recognized authority on interventions that help prevent depression as well as focusing on building strength and well-being and has authored more than 300 scholarly publications and 31 books.

In his 2011 book ‘Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Wellbeing’ Dr Seligman initially set out his theory of the building blocks of wellbeing – the PERMA model.

The PERMA model takes five simple elements which Seligman believes are fundamental pillars of human wellbeing and highlights how a focus on ensuring these elements are given time, attention and focus can lead to a happier, more engaged and fulfilling life – the model is featured as an aspect of Positive Behaviour Support, a framework which our organisation has fully integrated into our everyday practice, which intrinsically links the application of the PERMA model to our role as care providers to those on the autistic spectrum.

The models focus on highlighting quality of life means that if (support) services such as ourselves were

to adopt the principles of PERMA when designing and creating individualized ‘everyday’ support plans for people who may show behaviour that challenges, then there could well be an overall increase in happiness and quality of life.

It is no secret that many people on the autism spectrum have an enhanced ability to feel affected by the moods of those around them.

As the current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic continues, causing the threat (and actuality) of lockdowns and restrictions to be placed on our daily life, we are in a position where our own outlook on the current situation (or indeed any situation life may throw at us) will directly affect those we support. Many of the people we support may not be able to understand why things have changed so dramatically in their lives or the deeper context behind this ‘new normal’, so the way we as the people who support them deal with these things is of critical importance.

How we perceive things and how we support people are linked, especially in terms of our perspective towards life - no matter how bleak things may seem in the world or in life, ‘when there is very little of a good thing even the smallest addition can be precious’ (Seedhouse, 1989:185)

In other words, however bleak any situation in the world or our own lives may seem; equipping ourselves with the right tools to give ourselves and those people who depend on us a fighting chance to stay positive is crucial; the PERMA model’s simplicity and practical applicability makes it an ideal tool for this purpose.

“

*What is the good life?  
It is pleasant,  
engaged, meaningful,  
achieving, and  
connected.*

”

## The Model

Lets get into the simple and really important stuff.

The PERMA model consists of five straightforward elements; these are –

# Positive Emotion Engagement Relationships Meaning Achievement

Think for a moment about how these five elements of humanity fit into **your** life, as it is today.

How often do you really spend time and appreciating these elements?

Seligman's research implies that a focus on these five elements can help people work towards living a life richer in fulfillment, happiness and meaning.

This is a concept that we can apply straight away to our own lives but also to those of the people we support – how can we work with them to allow them every chance of maximizing the way these elements can enhance their quality of life?

Let us below look at each element in turn.

## Positive Emotion

This element has the most apparent connection to the overall concept of happiness.

A focus on positive emotion isn't just the act of smiling our way through each day (regardless of we may

actually feel inside); it is more based around finding the ability to stay optimistic and to view the events and circumstances that life presents us in a way that is constructive and positive.  
There are several types of positive emotion that all of us have felt at one time or another -

- ▶ Joy
- ▶ Gratitude
- ▶ Hope
- ▶ Pride
- ▶ Amusement
- ▶ Inspiration
- ▶ Awe
- ▶ Love

Take some time to consider these types of positive emotion.

Ask yourself and perhaps jot down somewhere; which things, people, times or other aspects of your life have brought these feelings to you?

Even during a lockdown situation, we can still have valuable interactions with others; family and friends are still readily available via video chat, phones calls, instant messenger and other means for many of us to engage in and share these emotions.

Once you have a clearer picture of the aspects of your life that bring these positive emotions out in you, you can spend time trying to focus your thinking towards making these aspects of your life a priority. We can also start to think in depth about what aspects of life, however big or small, bring these emotions out in the people we support so we can start to ensure that we prioritize these when doing our jobs.

The more difficult aspect of dealing with positive emotion is that as we are all aware, life is not always easy, things change and emotions are not always positive.

To this end, a massively important part of discussing positive emotion is the concept of **acceptance**. By accepting that something negative may have happened to us in the past or may well be ongoing as we speak (a bad day in work, the breakdown of a relationship or a global pandemic, for example!) then we equip ourselves with the abilities to be optimistic and constructive when moving forward with whatever our present and future may hold.

When we set about life embracing positive emotions as best we can, then we will find that our

relationships with those around us improve and other people's levels of mood and engagement in what they are doing will increase; this is massively valuable as care professionals where our role is to help people develop their skills and independence!

## Engagement

We have all heard the expression 'time flies when you're having fun' – this is because when we are actively engaged in doing something that we enjoy, our bodies become actively flooded with endorphins and hormones that elevate our sense of well-being and create a 'flow' of immersion that absorbs us in the activity.

Psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi describes this state of flow as "***being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost.***"

All of us have different ways in which we immerse ourselves in this state of flow; for some it may be pursuits like cooking, baking, driving or perhaps playing a music instrument, video game or a sport. The most important aspect of this is recognizing what activities in our lives bring us to this state of flow, where our bodies are flushed with positive endorphins and serotonin and to ensure that these activities are being given the necessary importance and time to be able to feature regularly in our lives.

Spend some time really thinking about how you spend your time and how you respond to each activity that you perform - which activities make it easiest to be fully immersed in the here and now?  
Which activities leave you feeling most fulfilled and energized?

As a care professional, we can then apply this concept to supporting others.

In our line of work with individuals on the autism spectrum, many of the people we support have passions and interests that mean a great deal to them: by actively working with people and empowering them to immerse themselves in these passions, we can significantly increase the quality of life for people we support.



Positive psychology shifts traditional ideas of psychology away from fixing what is 'wrong', instead focusing on what works for us, on our strengths, skills, and on enhancing the positives in our lives.

## Relationships

Human beings are designed to ‘belong’.

It is a crucial aspect of being human that we allow ourselves to experience feelings of intimacy connection, as well as emotional and physical contact with other people.

This means that the quality of the relationships we form with others around us are vital in helping us live a life filled with wellbeing and positive energy.

Most of us have been in a situation where a relationship of some kind, be it familial, romantic, professional or otherwise has made us feel drained, damaged and led to feelings of isolation or sadness.

It is vital then that we seek out relationships that build us up instead of break us down; by making sure we are conscious of how the relationships we have with those around us truly make us feel inside then we can actively know that these relationships are adding to our own quality of life.

Our relationships and the way we conduct them has been changed in ways we would previously never through imagineable over the last 7 months.

The newly announced four week lockdown means yet again, we are forced to limit our interactions with our loved ones lockdowns and this is obviously is a huge cause of stress, worry and anxiety for most of us at this time.

It is vital to remember however that by reminding ourselves of the importance of having these relationships in our lives, we can truly learn to appreciate them in a way that we've never had to do so before.

The relationships we have cultivated with our families, friends, lovers and others will provide us with nourishment, support and a sense of meaning throughout this and any lockdown situation – I've heard of people calling this situation “*the great pause*” and it is important to remember that this is exactly what this situation is – a temporary pause and **not** an ending to anything.

It is also massively helpful that thanks to advances in technology, staying connected in spite of circumstance is now easier than ever and although nothing will ever be able to replace the feeling of genuine human interactions, we live in an age where someone on the other side of the world is only a video or phone call away.

When it comes to supporting others to develop relationships that are genuine, caring, trusting and sincere, we have a huge role to play as

**‘Very little that is positive is solitary... other people are the best antidote to the downs in life and the single most reliable up’**

Seligman, 2011.

care professionals.

Many of the people we support depend on us not just as caregivers, but as their primary source of genuine connection with other people – we are there to support them not just physically but emotionally; now more than ever it is important that we support people to feel that those around them will offer friendship, respect and are genuine, caring, trustworthy people that will support them to live happy, fulfilling and positive lives.

One positive factor we can try to take from the ongoing situation with Covid-19 is that this is the first time, probably since the Second World War, that we as a nation, continent and world have ALL been going through something so collectively alien and frightening together.

We all share an understanding of the feelings the situation has brought out in us; fear, uncertainty, mourning for both the people and normality we have lost and the changing of society many of us have had to adjust to as our lives have changed so drastically.

This shared understanding can bring us closer together; as individuals and a society – seek out and offer comfort and friendship to others as you and they need it, as nobody in the world right now is truly alone with how they feel about what we are all facing together.

It is important and very beneficial to try to make plans with people you know and do your best to ensure that you and those you care about don't become too isolated from contact with each other.

Scheduling a regular time for a group video call with friends or family, for example, can help provide structure, routine and a sense of having something to look forward to – all of which are vitally important to establish for ourselves, those we care about and support throughout a lockdown situation.

“It’s extremely important that we recognize that anxiety is contagious, but so is compassion.

And there are ways in which we can bring our communities together, even if virtually.

We can take advantage of the technologies that are now at our fingertips.

We can encourage positive community outcomes such as altruistic behavior, social cohesion, volunteerism, reaching out to those who are living alone or who are seniors.”

*Roxane Cohen Silver, Ph.D., Professor of Psychological Science, Medicine, and Public Health at University of California, Irvine*

*‘Desire to care for others leads to compassion satisfaction as a characteristic of the profession through “the ability to receive gratification from caregiving’ (Simon, Price, Roff, & Klemmack, 2006).*

“Love only grows by sharing. You can only have more for yourself by giving it away to others.”

— Brian Tracy

## Meaning

For us to feel that our lives have meaning, we have to feel that our actions are worthwhile and valuable; that we are contributing to something bigger than just ourselves.

We all want to feel that our lives and our actions matter – as care professionals we are lucky in the way that most of us are able to see this take place in front of our eyes every day we are at work.

It is often said that ‘those who work in care don’t do it for the money’ and I believe there is real truth to this.

Care work attracts a certain type of people; individuals with empathy, respect and a genuine desire to help others are instinctively drawn

towards working in our sector and a big part of this is the concept of **altruism** (the principle or practice of unselfish concern for or devotion to the welfare of others).

Something as simple as supporting someone to try something new, assisting someone in carrying out a task that brings them joy or helping them take steps towards their independence can all be incredibly rewarding and brings joy to both the individual in question and the person working to support them.

Many of us will have experienced at some point the positive emotion that altruism can bring us in our role; a feeling of blissful pride flows through your body, butterflies in the stomach, eyes watering – it's a sensation like no other and perhaps one that only those people who have had to care for someone else will ever truly understand.

Altruism in its simplest description a feeling of pleasure gained solely from helping other people.

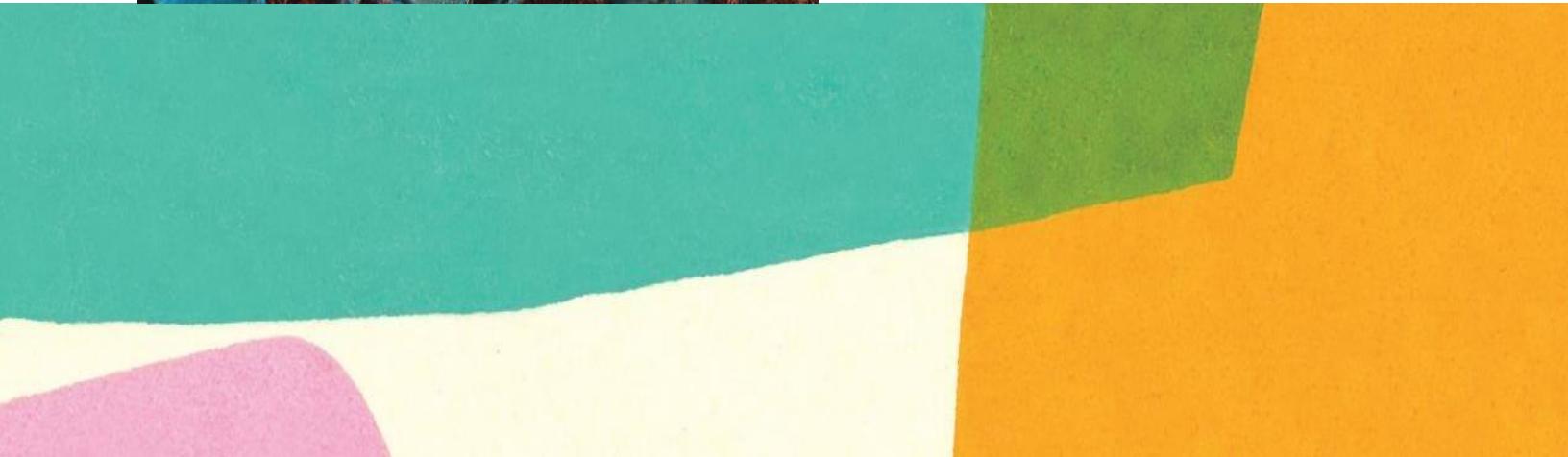
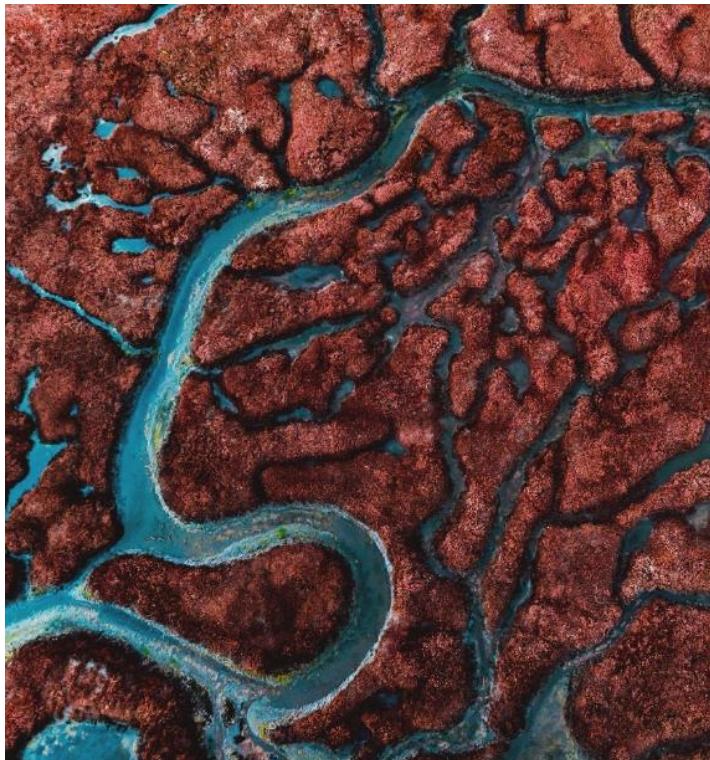
It is similar in many ways to love but is not quite the same – it is perhaps best described as a '**love of humanity**'.

Helping people is a very powerful method for increasing personal happiness and allows us the chance to recognise ourselves as beings who are not solely driven by selfish motivations.

Anyone can give themselves the opportunity to experience altruism and help others; with the stress and anxiety of the current global pandemic leaving a great deal of worry and struggling in its wake, lots of people around us – friends, family members, neighbours for example – need support and comfort more than ever.

By giving others this support, whether it is being a voice on the end of a phone or video call or dropping shopping at the door of someone who is nervous about leaving home; we can support ourselves to stay positive and find meaning in the most stressfull of times by engaging in altruistic, supportive acts for those around us.

*'We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'* – Victor Frankl



## Achievement

When we achieve our goals in life, we are rewarded with feelings of joy, pride and accomplishment.

In addition, by setting ourselves goals and achieving them, we improve our sense of effectiveness and wellbeing, which can then motivate us, leads us to set further goals for ourselves, giving us purpose in life and a sense of moving forward.

By regularly challenging ourselves with self-improvement in mind, we can accomplish our goals and progress with new ones that will create a cycle of fulfilment.

This is also true for people we support – although autism often goes hand in hand with a reliance on structure, familiarity and routine, it is natural for humans to yearn for feelings of progression and advancement.

It is very important however, to remember that goals we set for ourselves and goals that we support people to work towards have to be realistic and achievable.

To consider an example that many of us will be familiar with (and guilty of!) we can use new year's resolutions – we've probably all made a resolution that in retrospect was completely unachievable in any realistic capacity;

'I'm going to go to the gym every single day'

'I'm going to write a book by December'

'I'm going to run a marathon in three weeks even though I've never run a day in my life'

Although these things are potentially possible, they are not realistic things that we can achieve with any degree of quality alongside our day-to-day lives.

Most of us simply do not have time to get home from work then spend 6 hours a day writing or we'll make good on our promise to go to the gym every day for a week but then find ourselves completely burnt ourselves out!

We then find ourselves feeling like failures because we feel like we have not achieved our goals – but these goals were never realistic; we set ourselves up to fail!

A helpful acronym to remember when setting targets or goals, for yourself or in collaboration with people we work alongside is **SMART**.

Goals should be -

- *Specific* – target a specific area for improvement.
- *Measurable* – quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress.
- *Assignable* – specify who will do it.
- *Realistic* – state what results can realistically be achieved, given available resources.
- *Time-related* – Plan for when results can be achieved.

When our goals are realistic then we can make honest efforts to achieve them, which will in turn increasing feelings of pride, self-confidence and overall wellbeing in ourselves as well as the people we support to make these achievements.

## In Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet – I hope its contents can prove useful to you in some way, especially as we find ourselves in such unprecedented and anxiety inducing circumstances across the world.

This situation has made learning how to care for ourselves and pursue what happiness we can find in live to be pivotal, perhaps more so then in many of our entire lifetimes.

As we head into another lockdown, trying to make an effort to think about aspects of the PERMA model and how they fit into your life may well help with keeping a positive mental state of wellbeing throughout its duration-

- Recognise the things in your life that make you feel joy, gratitude, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love – try writing a list of these things and review it through lockdown to keep focused on the good thing is life.
- Seek out and take part activities and interests that will keep you busy and allow you to enter a state of flow and engagement – exercise is fantastic for our mental health and even a short run or walk a day can help release endorphins and reduce stress.
- Check in on those around you – even if you are unable to meet them in person, it is vital to stay connected with the people we care about for our sake and theirs.
- Try scheduling video/phone calls with family and friends to give yourself a sense of routine and give yourself something to look forward to.

- Remember that the people we support are going through this lockdown just as we are – through our work, we have a unique chance to help others in need get through this situation and provide ourselves with a sense of meaning through doing so.
- Look for little victories every day; maybe you've supported someone to achieve something in work or managed to run a bit further than last time. If you're having a tough day, struggling and feeling low then even something as simple as getting out of bed, doing the washing or phoning a friend should be counted as an achievement – you have these things happen for your own wellbeing, by taking action and being proactive!
- Try to focus on the things, however seemingly insignificant, that have gone right during your day; this is a deceptively difficult thing to do sometimes but it makes a huge difference!
- Try to limit your intake of news and social media where possible, particularly if you are finding yourself feeling overwhelmed by what is happening in the world.

By applying the principles of the PERMA model to your day-to-day life, you are actively equipping yourself and by association the people you support with tools, with which to build yourself strong foundation with which you can try to make the way you perceive your life and the people, activities, places and experiences that fill it as positive as possible.

Be **safe**, be **connected** and try to be as **positive** as circumstances allow – we **will** get through this thing together.

Remember –

**Positive Emotion**  
**Engagement**  
**Relationships**  
**Meaning**  
**Achievement**

*“When we take time to notice the things that go right – it means we’re getting a lot of little rewards throughout the day.”*

## Resources

- Mental Health First Aiders

Autism Together has five mental health first aiders, who are there to talk about any concerns, stresses or worries you might have.

They can just be there to listen, or they can offer advice and assistance if asked for.

Trained and approved by St John Ambulance, our mental health first aiders are Michelle Walklett, Yvonne Smith, Dawn Kirby, Karen Costain, and Elaine Hartley.

If any staff member would like to talk, in confidence, to one of our mental health first aiders, please call or text them on the following numbers, or send an email (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm).

### Michelle

Phone: 07557 858983

Email: [michelle.walklett@autismtogether.co.uk](mailto:michelle.walklett@autismtogether.co.uk)

### Yvonne

Phone: 07900 730698

Email: [yvonne.smith@autismtogether.co.uk](mailto:yvonne.smith@autismtogether.co.uk)

### Dawn

Phone: 07342 999831

Email: [dawn.kirby@autismtogether.co.uk](mailto:dawn.kirby@autismtogether.co.uk)

### Karen

Phone: 07557 858979  
Email: [karen.costain@autismtogether.co.uk](mailto:karen.costain@autismtogether.co.uk)

Elaine  
Phone: 07557 858922  
Email: [elaine.hartley@autismtogether.co.uk](mailto:elaine.hartley@autismtogether.co.uk)

- Additionally, support can always be sought from your line manager, the HR department or the Occupational Health service – there is **always** someone there to talk to if needed!
- **Sleepio & Daylight**

Big Health is offering social care workers across the UK access to free mental health support during the current pandemic.  
For the rest of 2020, they are giving care workers the tools to manage their sleep and anxiety via two online wellbeing apps.

**Sleepio** is a highly personalised, digital sleep improvement programme based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), that gets to the root of poor sleep. There are also tools to help manage any worries and thoughts that make it difficult to sleep and ways to improve your environment and habits for better sleep.

**Daylight** is an app that teaches ways to manage worry and anxiety in life. The programme gives a range of techniques and guides the user through daily practice sessions.

Care workers can access both Sleepio and Daylight via this link: <https://go.bighealth.com/en-gb/national-care-forum>

- **NHS**

In the case of a mental health crisis or emergency, call 111 or 999 for support.

- **Samaritans**

Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Phone: 116 123 (24 hour free helpline)

[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

- **Relate**

The UK's biggest provider of relationship support.

[www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

- **CALM**

CALM is the Campaign Against Living Miserably, for men aged 15-35

Phone: 0800 58 58 58 (daily, 5pm-midnight)

[www.the calmzone.net](http://www.the calmzone.net)