

Understand your emotions: change your life

How to thrive on the
emotional rollercoaster of life

Keith Walton



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emotional rollercoaster of life



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Introduction

Understanding your emotions changes your life

Do you want to know how your brain really works? Why we feel emotions that seem to come out of nowhere? Why we get painful flashbacks from the past? Or feel stressed by little things?

Would you like more control over how you react and what you do?
Would you like to be more self-confident?

It is our emotions that govern how we think and react – in fact, the logical part of our minds does not make our decisions. Indeed, it hardly has any influence in everyday life.

'You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.'
– Jon Kabat-Zinn, author, mindfulness teacher

If you want to work with your brain, rather than allow it to rule you, this book is for you. I will explain how your brain really works and, importantly, how you can use this understanding to get more out of life. Your brain is not like a computer. Most of how you react to events has been learned. As you learn new behaviours, the wires in your brain – called neurons – actually start connecting in different ways. Your brain rewires itself so that the new patterns of thinking are stronger and faster, and these new patterns can even become so strong that they are used in preference to the older wiring for your unwanted behaviours.

I wrote this book for my patients, who told me about their stress and the difficulties in their lives. I tried out lots of stuff on them, and most times on myself too. This book only includes the techniques that made a real difference.

Are you where you want to be in life?

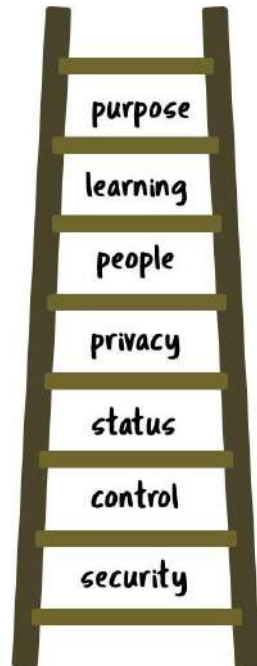
'The aim of living is not to creep through life with the minimum discomfort. It is for each of us to become the person we were born to be; by giving ourselves, bringing into the world the unique gifts of beauty, friendship, compassion or creativity that only we can offer in this time and place.'

– Craig Barnett, *The Guided Life*

If you ask people what they want for themselves or their children, they usually say happiness. After a short period of reflection, they often correct themselves and say, 'That's not quite right. I think something more like fulfilment.'

What would you say? Are you really living, loving and making a difference? Do you feel you:

- have **purpose** and meaning in your life, with goals and expectations, perhaps shared with others?
- are **learning** and growing?
- have good relationships with **people**, are part of a community or team and have someone you can be open with and confide in?
- have **privacy** to reflect and be yourself when you need it?
- have a sense of **status** within social groupings?
- have **control**, are on top of things and can make your own decisions?
- have **security**, with your physical needs like food and shelter being met (this often equates to having enough money to live on in our society)?



Interestingly, if any of the lowest three emotional needs – security, control and status – are not met, we will probably react strongly and emotionally.

If these three, along with privacy, *are* met, we can find ourselves in a very connected emotional state. We can see the bigger picture of our lives and access our emotional intelligence, which will allow us to ensure our highest emotional needs are met.

If you answered ‘yes’ to all these questions about whether your emotional needs are being met, and you feel you are thriving in a well-connected life, you might decide to stop reading now.

If your answers were ‘no’ or ‘partly’ or ‘not sure’, please read on. There may be useful information for you in this book.

‘We will all be sick, suffer loss and hurt, and die. Health is not to do with avoiding these givens, but with accepting them, even making sense of them.’

– Dr Richard Smith, *British Medical Journal*, 2002.

How this book works

Each section of this book – usually a couple of pages long – presents you with an idea about our emotional brain and how it works, or ways we can use its powers, together with more information and explanation.

These ideas are grouped by theme in the parts of this book.

Part 1, **How the brain works**, looks at the central importance of our emotions and how they impact everything we do. This part explains why some circumstances may make us sometimes overreact unexpectedly.

Part 2, **Fixing the basics**, looks at how we can start to change ourselves, especially in respect of past traumas or difficult childhoods.

Part 3, **Moving on**, describes ways you can make your life more fulfilling and more under your control.

Part 4 contains simple **Practical exercises** – things you can do today to help you de-stress and start working on issues you are facing.

Part 5, **Resources**, gives my sources, where you can find out more, and has a glossary of technical words I have used.

The techniques suggested in this book work. They have transformed the lives of many people. I have seen soldiers and others with post-traumatic stress, and people who were abused as children or as adults, have their lives transformed. They work too on those of us who want to make only small improvements in our lives.

If you're ready to make changes in your life, this knowledge and these techniques can help you too.

Please note that neither I nor the publisher can be held responsible for the use of information in this book. Trained professionals exist who can help you. Talk to them first before treating yourself or others.

I'm immensely grateful to my patients for all they have taught me. I hope their teachings can benefit you too.



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Part 1. How the brain works

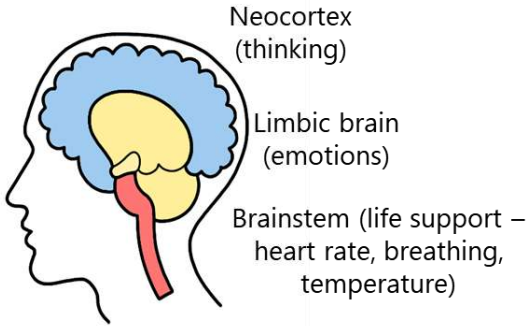
This section paints the background to the rest of this book. It looks at how our brains work, how we are driven by our emotions, and how traumatic events from the past may harm our wellbeing and affect our behaviour.

A diamond does not know how beautiful it is.

Part 1. How the brain works

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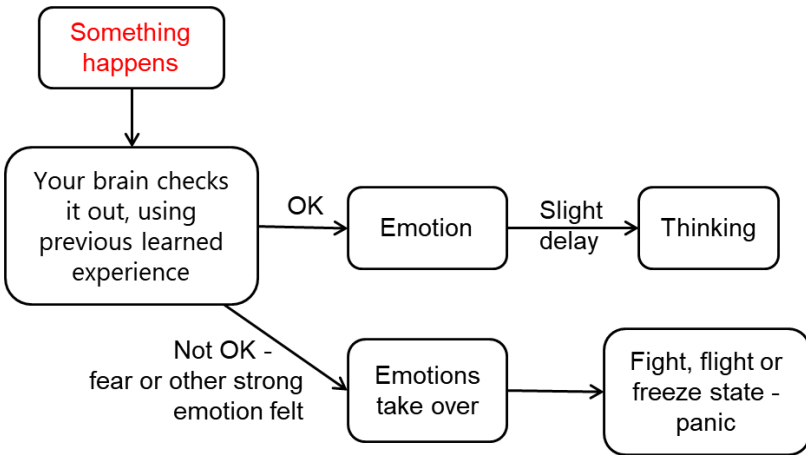
● We are driven by our emotions, not our thoughts



Think of the human brain as being divided into two parts:

- The lower, instinctive parts – the **brainstem**, which controls basic functions like our breathing and our heart; and the **limbic brain**, which is the source of our emotions.
- The upper, conscious part – the smart thinking and imagination bits, the **neocortex**.

How the brain responds



When something happens, your nervous system responds by creating feelings in your body, for instance a 'gut feeling'. It takes about half a second for these emotions to then trigger thoughts in your thinking, upper brain. If you want to look it up, this half-second gap is called the **Libet delay**.

The flowchart shows how we respond to an outside event. Often we don't even notice that the brain has picked up on something until the emotion kicks in.

Emotions make us do what we do in every situation in life. We first respond emotionally, then a fraction of a second later we think. Sometimes our emotions are so strong that they overwhelm us, and we cannot think properly until we have calmed down some minutes later. This is good if we are in danger, as we will then respond instinctively and very fast. At other times this strong emotional response may be inappropriate and unhelpful.

There are always reasons why we respond how we do. When and why did we learn to react so strongly? Our upbringing or a traumatic experience may have taught us to react in the way we do. Finding the reasons allows us to work with them and learn new and different behaviours. Our brains can change, we can change, we learned to behave like this and we can unlearn unhelpful behaviours. Your life does not need to be set in the same pattern or ruined for ever. You are not broken.

In my experience, understanding why you experience particular emotions is not enough – it does not change them. The thinking brain may understand what's going on, but the body does not.

Emotions are fast and imprecise

Emotions are not sophisticated or precise. They are immediate. If a lion walks into the room, you don't think *A lion. That looks dangerous.* Your body responds and you feel an emotion – fear, I expect! Before you know it, you will probably be standing on a table, holding a chair between you and the lion, feeling frantic, breathing hard and looking for ways to escape.



Emotions tell us how to react and they tell us fast. Feeling anxious? Then you sense something is amiss. Feeling angry? You are sensing a threat or an insult. And love allows us to thrive in our group of friends and family.

Emotions are vital. To be creative, we may have to act spontaneously, bypassing our thinking brain. Indeed, we make decisions with our emotions and instincts more than with our logic.

Emotions alert us to things about the world that we may not have spotted. They are quick. They may be only partly right or even completely wrong. Sometimes, when we figure out what is really going on, we may find out that we have overreacted. Very strong emotional misfires like these, such as panics, may mean our emotional system needs recalibrating or reprogramming.



Emotions help us survive

Our emotions are part of our survival kit. Each one has a purpose.

Anger primes us to defend ourselves or someone we love. It primes us to fight. It often has fear or pain underneath it.

Fear makes us want to get away from a tricky situation, creating the flight response.

Sadness is designed to keep us safe when something unfortunate has happened, for example while we get over losing someone or something we loved. Feeling grief and getting over losses can take a lot of time as we adapt to the new circumstances. We may not be as alert to the dangers around us as we would be normally. Staying at home and not doing very much increases the chances of us staying alive until we are ready to face the world again.

Guilt is designed to stop us making the same mistake twice, especially if someone else got hurt or upset by what we did.

Excitement makes us want to repeat something we have done or try new things. It motivates us to learn and develop.

Love makes us feel safe and connected to others who we will look after, just as they look after us. It bonds us in small groups of family and friends and makes us safer.

Notice how all of these emotions help us to survive. They prime us to react in new or difficult situations. Our emotions are not *directly* designed to make us happy – happiness is a secondary emotion. It arises because we are in a good place, feeling safe, useful, loved and fulfilled.

Emotions are tied to our physical selves too. Watch a baby cry or a toddler's tantrum. Their whole body – lungs, arms, legs and face – are used to express their feelings. In adults, emotions can be seen in our face and our posture. Think about the face and posture of an angry

person or of someone who is sad. If you want to make a sad face – try it now – you have to feel the emotion first to do it. Emotions are felt and reflected in our bodies.

Do you listen to your emotions or try to ignore them? There is not enough time in life to work everything out in our thinking brains, and our emotional warning flags can be very informative. They have evolved over many thousands of years and generally work well. Most animals don't have much thinking brain, and they function pretty well in life on instincts rather than thought.

The thinking brain is still vital. It can help us solve problems that our emotions highlight for us. However, emotions happen faster and therefore always beat the thinking brain when we react to a situation.

We often physically feel emotions

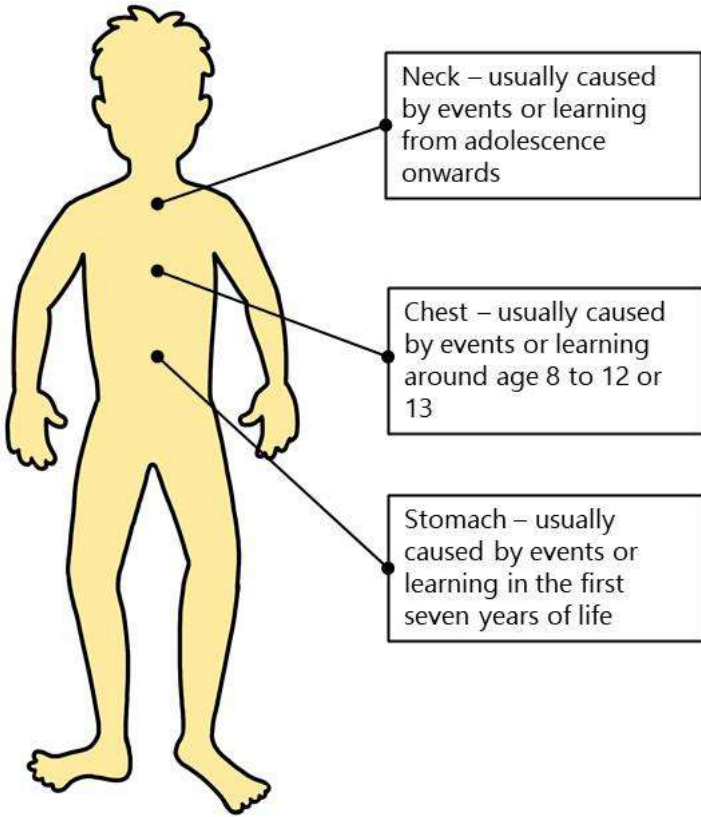
Recall an old memory – perhaps even your first memory. Has it got a strong emotion attached to it – shame, happiness or success perhaps? We often forget everyday events, but we remember our emotional highs and lows.

Indeed, most memories are tied to emotions. You remember your earliest memory because you felt strong emotions at the time that event occurred. Meanwhile, other events from around the same time that are not connected to emotions don't seem to get remembered.

I once called a relative by the wrong name at a family reunion. She got cross with me. I never have any problems getting her name right now; those past emotions make me recall it easily.

If something happens and you experience strong emotions, notice where you feel that emotion in your body. Do you have a gut feeling, or is it in your chest or neck? Where you feel that emotion can give a clue to the age you were when you learned to react in the way you just have, as shown in the illustration on the next page.

If you were abused or bullied as a child and something has just caused you to react in the same way, then examining where you feel this reaction can help show your age and your stage of development when it first happened. These are only pointers, though – this technique seems to work about 80% of the time, so use it as a guide.



Our brains change as we learn new things

Our brains are not like computers. They are not hard-wired with fixed circuits.

Our brains are made up of **neurons**. As we learn, our neurons connect to other neurons – sometimes tens of thousands – communicating with them via chemical or electrical signals.

Neuroscientists say that ‘neurons that fire together wire together’. This means the more you use a neural circuit in your brain, the stronger it becomes. The more you practise piano or speak a language or play a sport, the stronger those circuits get. If you learned to drive or swim, you may have found at first that you had to think consciously of each action you took. As you learned, many of these actions got wired into your brain, so you now do them automatically, without even thinking about them.

As you learn new things, the new connections made by your brain’s neurons are often rather ad hoc and inefficient. When you sleep, your brain prunes many of these connections and builds more streamlined and efficient ones. That’s why sleep is so vital, and also why we often think more clearly or have new ideas after sleeping.

If your brain gets injured, the damage may cause you to lose some of the skills or abilities you used to have. Often these are relearned using different, undamaged areas of the brain.

Your brain’s ability to rewire to enable it to do new things is called **neuroplasticity**.

One evening, a Native American elder was telling a group of children about the battle that goes on inside all people. He said, 'The battle is between two wolves inside us. One wolf is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, and superiority. The other is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth and compassion.'

One of the children pondered about this tale for a few minutes and then asked the elder, 'Which wolf wins?'

The elder replied, 'The one that you feed.'

Getting emotional

Emotions are good. They can alert us to dangers we may not be fully aware of, and they work to ensure our needs are met. Emotions give us the greatest joys in life – think of happiness and love, for example.

Emotions also give us the lows of life, including grief, shame or guilt. These emotions in particular help us survive. If we did not feel shame or guilt, we would be terrible people to be around, and our lack of self-control would quickly lose us all our friends. Grief helps us recognise that a loved one is gone and that we must change our thinking, and perhaps how we live our life, to accommodate this new reality. All this takes time.

Emotions can be contagious as well. For instance, being around stressed or angry people can make us feel the same way.

We are not always very good at recognising emotions. Children have to learn to recognise them. Babies often cry because they are unhappy, but they may not know why. They may be hungry or tired or need a change but not realise what is making them feel sad. Adolescents have to learn to handle new emotions. The changes and challenges of adolescence are not easy, which can make teenagers moody. Elderly people too can get confused by their emotions, thinking for instance that they feel too cold when they are actually anxious or hungry.

If you ever feel sad or grumpy, it can be useful to stop to check what is missing from your life at that moment. At the end of a long day, it may just be that you are cold, tired, hungry or thirsty. Your emotional needs may have to wait until your physical needs are met. Fixing your physical needs may be enough to change your mood, which is why things often don't seem so bad after a good night's sleep.

Some people suffer brain injuries that cause them to stop feeling emotions. Interestingly, studies of those people have found that some

find it nearly impossible to make decisions. Our life choices are guided much more strongly by our emotions than by our reasoning.

Warning: emotions are not perfect. They are not precise. They are designed to be fast rather than accurate. They have an all-or-nothing effect: 'Everybody hates me'; 'I cannot do anything right'.

If you get unhelpful negative emotions like these, think how strong the emotion is, and give it a score out of 10. Is it a 7 (pretty bad) or a 9.5 (almost as bad as it can be)? Or perhaps a 3? Asking such questions does two things: it switches you from your fast but imprecise emotional brain to your more coolly calculating, logical one. Using both brains will give you a wider perspective on what is really going on. Secondly, it allows you to properly evaluate how bad the situation actually is.



Our emotions can hijack us

You may have noticed that we're not very good at doing two things at once. Even if we often multitask in our daily lives, it's impossible to focus completely on two jobs at the same time. We have limited brain capacity. When we are highly emotionally aroused, we cannot think clearly. Think about the last time you tried to talk to an angry person. Did it work? Likely not, because their emotions would have completely taken over, so they were unable to pay you much attention.

When we are affected by extreme emotions, we cannot listen. Our senses and our brain are focused on the situation that we perceive as a threat. Our brain is flooded with emotion and is almost incapable of rational thought. Fortunately, this state does not last long, and we typically return to normal after 10 or 20 minutes.

When emotions are in control, we think in a very black-and-white, either/or way. Everything is either great or terrible, with nothing in between. When we are stressed, we tend to see the world as a terrible, hostile place, which of course adds to our stress.

While we are in this survival state, our senses are completely focused on the threat. If you ask an angry person what was going on around them at the time they were angry (ask them *afterwards* of course!), they probably won't know. Beware of this. When we are angry, we can easily misread situations and miss other cues and evidence that are telling us the situation is not as we see it.

For instance, people in a dangerous situation can get so scared that they fight their way out. This happens even when, if they could look at the evidence more slowly, they would see that there was actually little danger or that the danger was over.

It's never a good idea to try to reason with emotionally hijacked people. If you feel threatened, speak gently, adopt a non-threatening body posture and back away. Saying their name as you talk to them

has also been shown to have a calming effect. Most importantly, make sure you are safe – leave the environment if necessary and wait until they calm down.

Emotions always happen first, before thought. In animals, there is usually only emotion and instinct and no thought. Emotions drive almost all of our behaviour too. Here's an example: have you ever tried to persuade someone to vote for a different political party? Or support a different sports team? You are likely to find that, while they have similar life values to yours, your arguments are not making any difference. How can they be so wrong?! Well, their decision is based on emotion, and you are arguing using thoughts and logic, which will not change their mind. Have you ever changed someone else's mind by winning an argument? It rarely happens. You need a different approach.

Think why the other person is so emotionally attached to their viewpoint. Can you change what you are saying so you appeal to their emotions?

People who respect our judgement can also learn over time to react differently by observing how we act or react to ideas and situations. They may change their beliefs as a result too.

Politicians talk using emotional words. They try to win us over to their point of view without giving us a chance to think properly about their promises.

'We will free the people', 'We will make the country stronger' and 'We will make schools better'. Statements like these trigger us because we have strong personal emotions tied to the thoughts of freedom, strength and education being improved. What do these words truly mean, though? Ask them how; ask them how much. Can they explain what they really intend to do?

We need to feel the emotions and then also use our thinking brain to decide whether to believe what we are being promised.



Survival is our strongest instinct

The top priority of the subconscious (or instinctive) brain is to keep us alive. It picks up stimuli – sights, sounds, feelings, smells, tastes – from outside of us and responds based on what it has learned. It decides whether or not to put us on high alert. When it detects a possible threat, it makes us respond quickly to the danger. It is fast and simple. However, it can make mistakes and overreact.

Your subconscious brain is very good at keeping you alive. If you ever get yourself in a pistol duel – fighting your opponent over a matter of honour – it is best to draw your gun second. The first person to draw is thinking; the second is working reactively, driven by their subconscious. This is faster and so you are more likely to win. (I hope you'll never need this life tip!)

Your brain has to learn what is dangerous so it knows when to react and can react fast. Some of this is instinctive (remember the lion coming through the door, described earlier); most is learned. We learn from parents (for example, our genes don't make us fear the dentist – it is learned), and we learn from events (for example, bullying changes how we behave). This learning can be helpful, such as knowing not to touch hot things and to take care crossing the road. It can also be unhelpful, like a lifetime panic response or irrational fear. Some fears, like the fear of a school bully, make sense in childhood but are no longer needed in adulthood, even if we still know that person.

If you've been traumatised by being near a bomb that exploded, another loud noise can trigger a survival alert. If you were bullied as a child, anything that reminds you of that time – even a noise or a smell or a feeling that you may not be consciously aware of – can put you on high alert. Our emotions are all focused on our survival; often nothing else gets a look in. We may panic.

'Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.'

– Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis

A panic attack may start suddenly for no apparent reason. Whenever your subconscious mind detects a possible danger or threat to you, it immediately puts you in a state of high alert. This happens before your conscious mind is even aware of any threat. With your survival at stake (or so your subconscious believes), there is no time to lose.

A panic attack may feel like a heart attack, as your heart will be beating very fast and shallowly, and your breathing will be faster and shallower. This change in your body's state, designed to give you extra speed and strength, peaks after a few minutes and is normally over in around 15 minutes, when the body returns to normal.

And if it turns out later that your subconscious was wrong and made you panic unnecessarily, it does not care. What's your problem? You survived, didn't you? That's better than the alternative.

● We learn from life's traumas to have panic attacks

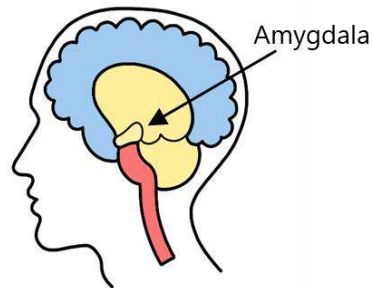
Trauma is often called **PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder** – but it's not really a disorder. It is our survival mechanism kicking in. When an event or series of events is more than we can handle and we are overwhelmed, our brain remembers the danger signals it has experienced and stores them for future use.

Having learned by experience that a particular situation might threaten our very survival, the next time one arises (or our brain thinks one has arisen), our body springs into action to survive. Survival is always our strongest instinct.

This is how it works. At the top of your spine and the back of the neck are two almond-sized bits of your brain, called the **amygdala**.

The amygdala is responsible for ensuring your survival by triggering the fight, flight or freeze response when something dangerous occurs. It monitors our sensory inputs (sight, hearing, sound, smells, taste), and when it spots something that matches a danger memory pattern it has stored, it sets off alarm bells. It makes us act as if the original frightening incident is happening again.

The amygdala learns from our life experiences. If you had a tough childhood, people with similar characteristics to your abusers may trigger the amygdala. If you've been in an accident, a sudden shock might send you into a state of high alert. Even a smell or a colour can do it. If our amygdala detects a threatening situation that we may not be able to cope with, it will put us into survival mode. Afterwards, it



also stores that trauma pattern so that it can react quickly if the trauma happens again. It learns every time we get into a new situation that we cannot cope with.

The amygdala also initiates positive reactions. For instance, if you are hungry and see food, or you spot something you like, it will trigger a suitable reaction for those circumstances.

The sort of trauma patterns that get used by the amygdala are:

- one-off traumatic incidents – for example, physical or sexual assaults, car accidents, bomb blasts
- fears and phobias – such as spiders or dentists
- bad experiences at work – bullying bosses, impossible workloads, threats
- childhood neglect – bullying, unloving or drug-abusing parents, or other abuse; often this type of trauma is caused by the cumulative effect of lots of little events rather than any single event

A particular incident or experience will overwhelm some people and have no impact on others. People with loving, stable and unthreatening childhoods are less likely to be traumatised, as they have been brought up to have stronger coping mechanisms. Anyone can be traumatised, though.

As a child, Mary was criticised and often belittled by her father, which made her feel unworthy. Growing up, this made her react very badly to any criticism, which also evoked feelings of shame and unlovability (the same emotions her father made her feel). To avoid these emotions, she tries to do everything perfectly. Her upbringing has also made it hard for her to feel valued and form stable relationships.

● Adverse childhood experiences impact our lives

Having little love in our early lives – not bonding with our carers, or especially having no one to turn to when we have been abused – can have a severe and long-lasting impact on our lives. It can impair our ability to think, learn and relate to others, causing us to under- or overreact to emotional cues.

Stressful events that occurred in childhood are known as **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**. Research has shown that people with more ACEs are more likely to get heart disease, be overweight or have diabetes, visit the GP frequently, be violent, or have high-risk drinking, smoking or drug use.

ACEs include:

- domestic violence
- being loved conditionally
- being neglected (physically and emotionally)
- having parents who abandon you or disappear, through separation, death, suicide or divorce
- having a parent with a mental health condition, or having to care for a parent
- being abused (physically, sexually, racially and/or emotionally), bullying, racism
- having someone in your household in prison
- growing up with adults with alcohol or drug use problems

The feelings of worthlessness and not being loved impact how we behave later in life. For instance:

We may feel ...	We may give up ...	Or we may become proud we ...
ashamed we exist, are a burden or don't belong	on connecting to others	are loners, do not need others or are unemotional
needy and empty	our needs	always put others first and are indispensable
small and used	trust	are strong, in control or larger than life
angry, rebelling and disliking authority	independence or control	always try to be nice, as we fear disappointing others
hurt, rejected, unlovable – that we can never be good enough	love – being loved and loving others	try to be perfect, do not allow for mistakes or reject others before they reject us

Childhood neglect or abuse is known as **developmental trauma** or **complex trauma**. It need not determine your destiny for ever. Understanding that you had a bad start in life and that your toughness helped you get through that is a good first step. Brains can learn and rewire, and reshape and change the way we act, allowing us to reset our life's journey.

Olivia was sexually molested by a teenage cousin from age eight to ten. She kept this secret for years, fearful that her abuser had the power to hurt her and her family.

As a teen, Olivia used to sneak out at night, drink too much and experiment with drugs. She said that she felt emotionally numb.

Trauma symptoms

How do you know that you might have traumatic memories?

Are there things that make you get emotional very easily? Do you overreact to some triggers? Do you have panic attacks? Are your 'hot buttons' easily pressed?

If so, it is likely that something that happened to you in the past has taught your amygdala that similar events are dangerous and so it needs to trigger a high-alert state in you. Sometimes, especially with panic attacks, you may not even consciously notice what the trigger is. Often, if you later think about the situation you were in, you can work out which bit of your past was so terrible that your amygdala reacted, wanting to protect you from future occurrences.

Unfortunately, trauma survivors often get blamed (wrongly) by others for their situation. People who were raped often get blamed for their plight, being told they were in the wrong place or they were wearing the wrong clothes. Someone traumatised as a child may be made to feel they should have told others much earlier.

At first, this lack of empathy for our terrible experiences from others may seem odd. Such blame is not about us or our experiences, though – it's about how others cope with their own fears and insecurities. We could only deal with what happened in the way we did at the time. If we had known of a better way for us then, we would have taken it.

Trauma symptoms vary by person. Common examples are:

- 'hot buttons' – overreactions or getting triggered by particular, often small, things
- re-experiencing the traumatic event as if it only just happened
- increased anxiety
- hypervigilance – being on constant high alert
- panic attacks, mood swings
- depression
- poor sleep
- tense muscles, physical aches and pains
- sense of failure; feeling tense, isolated or empty
- self-harm, abuse of drugs, gambling
- guilt, shame, embarrassment, self-blame
- avoiding people or places

The brain can relearn how to react to stimuli, so if a previous trauma in life is causing you to overreact, you can reduce or stop its impact. Although treatment can be relatively quick, this is not an easy thing to do. It has to be done correctly or it will just re-embed the trauma.

In Part 2 I look at a powerful technique, called **Rewind**, which can debug and fix your brain programmes.



Our bodies can be in one of three states

Effectively, we have three brains. We all know about the **head brain**, which has around 90 billion neurons (the nerve cells that are the essential working part of the brain). We also have a '**heart brain**', with 40,000 neurons; and a '**gut brain**', with 100 million neurons.

The head brain is our language centre, so it is the easiest to sense and communicate with. However, we also get gut feelings or wonder what our hearts are telling us.

The three brains communicate with each other using the **vagus nerve**, which has three main parts.

- The **dorsal vagal complex** immobilises us in extreme cases, where we are so scared that we shut down or freeze. We go numb and withdraw. Think of a tortoise or a hedgehog, pulling its head and legs in or rolling up in a ball. This is the oldest part of the vagus nerve, which evolved around 500 million years ago.
- The **sympathetic nervous system** fires us into action when we are scared and makes us ready to fight the aggressor or run away. This part of the nerve evolved around 400 million years ago.
- The **ventral vagal complex**, part of the **parasympathetic nervous system**, is used when we feel safe and connected to others. This is the newest part, around 200 million years old.

Polyvagal Theory says that we can be in any of these three states. Our bodies switch between the three modes of working – connected, fight/flight, and frozen or shutdown. Ideally, most of the time we are in the connected state, where we feel good, we feel connected to others and the world is a place of opportunity. We want to know more, to take part. We are curious.

When aroused or fearful, we may switch to the fight-or-flight state. The world seems too much – scary and unfriendly. We need to act fast to survive. We judge others. We feel stressed.

Finally, in extreme cases, we may shut down. We disconnect and disappear from what feels like a cold and empty world. We feel numb, flat or not there. You may have heard of people who, when attacked or even raped, were unable to fight back or scream. They were terrified into this freeze state.

Think of a negative situation in your own life – a minor irritation perhaps. How do you feel about it? If you are in the connected state, how do you feel and react? What are the possibilities? Now imagine yourself in another state – fight/flight or shutdown. Now how do you now feel, and how do you want to react? Examine how you feel in each of the three states, and then go back to the connected state.

Notice how you interpret the same experience differently, depending on your body state. What state are you in most of the time? We have these states to aid our survival. We are social animals, and our survival chances are highest when we cooperate with and feel connected to our friends and family. At other times we need to rely on our own resources, and we switch to the fight-or-flight state or even shut down.

We balance our longing to connect with the need to survive.

When we meet others, we notice what state they are in, to see if they are a threat or not. We look for clues in the way they are acting, rather than what they are doing. We subconsciously check their tone of voice, their breathing rate, the muscles around their eyes or the tilt of their head.

If you notice what state you are in, you can then mindfully make yourself change state to a more suitable one.

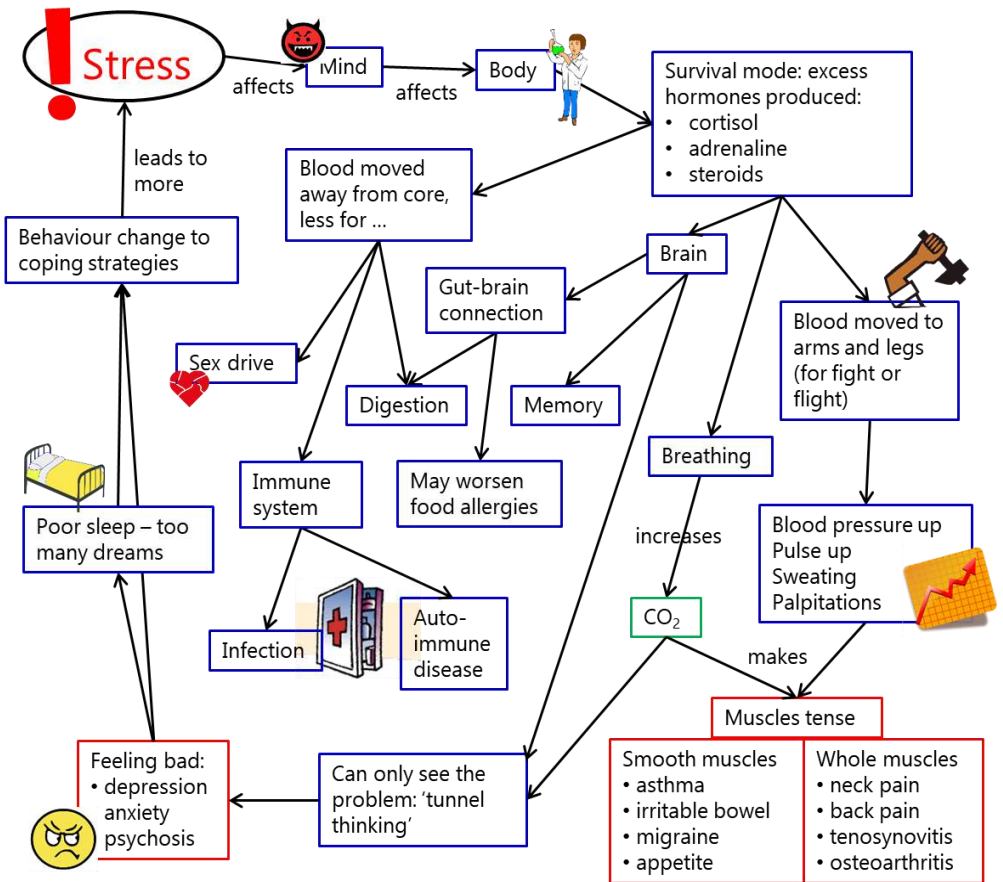
Stress is a vicious circle

When you are stressed, your brain is in a highly emotional state. It is hijacked by your emotions, which make it harder for you to think straight. Stressed brains don't learn effectively.

Chronic (meaning ongoing or long-term) stress such as hostility at home, school or work dangerously unbalances your whole system. Your body is designed to deal with short-term (**acute**) problems – when something happens and you respond.

Under chronic stress, you have too much adrenaline – the fight-or-flight hormone – over long periods of time. This may scar your blood vessels and can even cause a heart attack or stroke. The surplus of the hormone cortisol – the stress hormone – can for example damage brain cells, give you acne, make you put on weight or lead to diabetes. With stress comes the feeling that you have little or no control over the problem, that you are helpless.

Emotional stress has a huge impact across society. It affects everything from children's ability to learn in school to adults' productivity at work. Stress messes up our lives in many ways, for example impacting our sex drive and immune systems. It can also exacerbate allergies, and there is some evidence it makes migraines more likely. We have only so much 'brain space', and if it's taken up with stress, we may not have the space to think straight.



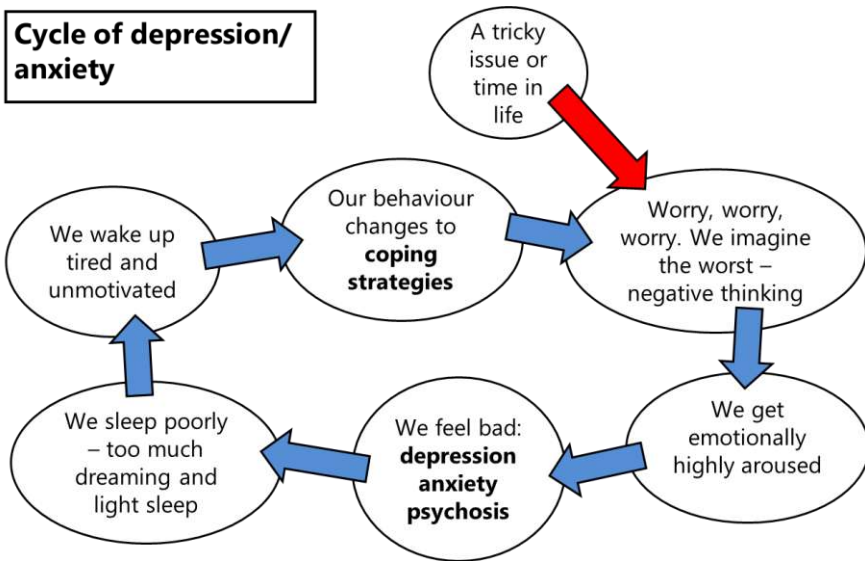
Stress and depression are exhausting

Having depression is a very active thinking state, including lots of worrying. It is not passive. No wonder it makes us so exhausted.

- A setback can cause us to overreact emotionally and begin to catastrophise. We start imagining the worst-case scenario, feeling that *everything* is going to work out badly.
- We start to think of all the things that might go wrong in the future and their terrible consequences. Our thinking gets more 'black-and-white', generating even more emotion and repeatedly turning on the fight (angry), flight (anxious) or freeze (overwhelmed) response.
- This excess worrying means that we go to sleep in a state of high emotional arousal. The brain tries to sort this out in dreaming, meaning we dream more. Depressed people dream an enormous amount.
- Dreaming sleep is not restful sleep, so we wake up tired. This leads, in turn, to physical exhaustion and more worrying.

Grieving over a loss can have a very similar impact to depression.

Cycle of depression/ anxiety



To get better, we have to break the cycle, reducing our introspection (worrying) and getting more high-quality sleep. For some people, medication may help. However, most antidepressant medication becomes less effective with time and may have adverse side effects and the risk of addiction.

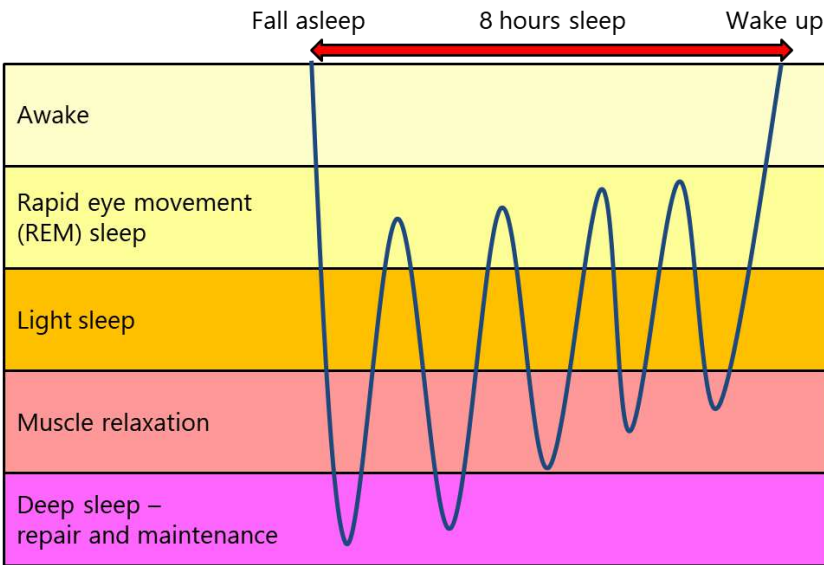
Be warned: talking through any traumatic emotions with friends or with a therapist can re-arouse and strengthen those emotions unhelpfully. These need a different approach; you'll find more on dealing with traumas in Part 2.

You may also like to consider whether there are things you do just for you. You'll find more about doing things that you love and their impact in Part 3 on the **flow state**.

Sleeping – five cycles a night

A full night's sleep lasts around eight hours and is made up of five or six cycles, which go from shallow to deep sleep and back. Indeed, you may wake up sometimes during the shallow sleep, especially early in the morning. Going back to sleep again will allow you to finish off your night's rest naturally.

A typical good night's sleep



Deep – **slow-wave** – sleep allows the mind and body to rebuild themselves after a hard day surviving in the world. In this stage of sleep we make the complex proteins of living tissue, secrete growth hormones to assist with the healing of muscles and repair general wear and tear in tissues, refresh the brain with sugars to restore it with energy, and boost the immune system.

Most of our dreaming is done in light, rapid eye movement (**REM**) sleep. Dreams also help us reset the brain. They sort out the unresolved emotions of the day, calming us down and storing away the experiences for possible future use.

Dreams sort out the day's unresolved emotions

During our dreams, we go through the events of the previous day, keeping the memories and removing the emotions. We are consolidating what we have learned during the day, fitting it in with what we know already, so it is easily accessible when we need it. We remove the emotional arousals that are attached to the day's memories, to free the brain and respond afresh the next day. It's the brain's equivalent of cleaning up and tidying everything away.

Surprisingly, we do this with images of events that are similar to but not the same as what actually happened. This 'metaphorical reprocessing' allows us to keep the memories intact, while detaching the emotional part.

We normally don't remember most of our dreams. If we dream a lot or are awakened during our dreams, we can recall parts. Often you can go back through any dreams you remember and work out which incidents they refer to, although you will need imagination to connect your dreams' rather peripheral approach to actual events.

You will probably find that, unless you go through your dreams again immediately, or write them down or draw them, most disappear from memory. As dreams form during the process of sorting out our emotional arousals of the day before, we have no particular need to remember them. In most cases, we either don't remember most of them or quickly forget them.

Our main muscles are paralysed during dreams so we do not act them out, which could be dangerous. Very occasionally, we may wake up in a dream state 'frozen', and it will take a second or two before the body comes out of that state and we can move normally. It's a bit shocking when this happens the first time, but it is common and nothing to worry about.

Dreaming uses energy; it is similar to being awake. Dream sleep – REM sleep – is not restful. Scans of the electrical activity in the brain show that REM sleep patterns are similar to waking brain wave patterns. You can detect REM sleep in others by watching their eyelids twitch.

If we have had a very emotional day, we will dream more. REM sleep occupies about 25% of a healthy adult's sleep time – about two hours a night. That can become as much as five hours for a very worried individual or for someone with depression. That's a significant loss of restorative and restful sleep, which will lead to us waking up tired.

Note that dreams do not *resolve* traumatic memories. The underlying trauma remains, but dreams will work to remove the emotions from any concerns, trauma or panics you had during the day. On subsequent days, however, some event that reminds your subconscious brain of the trauma can trigger it all over again, causing anything from a sudden start to a full-on panic attack.

We will look more at traumas and how to resolve them in Part 2.

We are our stories



From early childhood, we start to build a story, also known as a **group narrative**, about ourselves. It is how we explain to ourselves who we are – our identity.

Actually, it is two stories: one about who we are, and the other about people outside our group or 'tribe' – people who are different from us.

For instance, we may see ourselves as from a particular ethnic group, as citizens of a part of the world who hold particular values of fairness, respect for others and integrity. We are less sure about those outside our group. Can we trust them? Are they likeable? Would we get on with them and their different view of the world? Do we even want to try?

We may have stronger beliefs. Our story may portray others outside our group as bad people – an enemy that frightens us, whom we need to overcome to preserve our own (better) values.

These stories are so ingrained and so subtle that we often don't even notice they are there. Our stories form the basis of our identity, so

changing them is often hard. Like all learning of new knowledge, finding that parts of our stories may be untrue or only partially true discomforts us. Change can feel risky. Life is often uncomfortable.

If we hear things that might make us question our stories, we often ignore them or selectively hear only the ones that confirm our biases. Ignoring facts that might show we are wrong, and seizing on only those we like, is so common it has a name: **confirmation bias**.

Living in another country or culture can make us reassess what we believe to be true. This has a name too: **culture shock**. For instance, in some countries, the common belief is that only capitalism can deliver efficient services, while in others they say that services such as health or utilities are best under government control. They may both be right in different ways.

These stories are what make disputes so intractable and hard to change. Religious wars, political differences and racism are underpinned by stories – stories we tell about ourselves (with our ‘superior’ values), and stories of how we *think* others see themselves (which is probably not how they actually see themselves, of course). When we start to understand others’ stories – how they perceive themselves and how they perceive us – we can begin to close the gap and accept others for who they are. If we can understand their view of us and of the world, we may find we have much in common.

What is your story? Is there a group you fear or are suspicious of? Have you ever heard *their* stories?

We may need to change our stories

If we want to change, we may need to change our story – our fundamental beliefs – about how we see ourselves. Stories such as:

- I have to be perfect, or no one will love me.
- If I ignore it, it will go away.
- I'm too young, or too old, or too ...
- I don't deserve to be happy.

Sometimes we don't even realise we have a story or a belief that is holding us back or trapping us. If our life has been like that for ever – well, as long as we remember, at least – we may not realise that it could be different. That's the reason a lot of people come to therapy late in life. It can take us many decades to realise that different ways are possible.

How could we change? One way to address inner conflict and fears is to find out what our stories and beliefs really are. Are there beliefs that you hold, without realising that others may have completely different beliefs? Are you nagged by internal critics? Do you try to be perfect? How do others approach their issues? Do they try to be perfect and berate themselves when they fail? Or are they less self-critical?

You may need to be brave and open up about your beliefs or fears to a friend and talk about other ways to see the world. A therapist can help here too.

Sometimes we can address these fears directly and rationally. Often they may be tied up with strong emotions that keep them in place. Here we may need help, as traumas or our upbringing can trap our stories and beliefs in place. We may know why we struggle with a part of our lives, but this knowledge often does not stop the issue impacting us. There are techniques that can help with this and work with the emotional root of the problem – more about this in Part 2.

Sometimes the story becomes the problem. For instance, the thought *I can never get to sleep* can become so big in our minds that we get increasingly anxious about sleeping. It's then even harder to get to sleep because we are so worried about sleeping badly – the initial problem is replaced by our fear of the issue.

You won't be surprised to hear that fighting our problems like this is counterproductive. It is like fighting a part of ourselves. The issue is part of our life and we have to work *with* it to improve. We need to show kindness to ourselves in the same way we want others to treat us kindly and respectfully. For instance, in the case of sleep, we may need to look at the root causes of our poor sleep – why we worry so much – or adopt a gentler routine before bedtime.

Another way to change our stories or beliefs is to act differently so the story becomes redundant. For instance, the belief *I don't deserve to be happy* can be eliminated by doing things we love. Spending time with friends or doing things we love (being in the flow state, as discussed in Part 3) can make us happy.

Getting our emotional needs met can sideline any of our negative beliefs. This can work well even without us having to know what the issue was in the first place.

There are many different types of intelligence

In the Japanese game of Go, the horizontal lines on the board are spaced slightly differently from the vertical lines. The pieces are also slightly oversized, so that they do not align perfectly when played. Perfection is generally considered uninteresting in Japanese culture.

We are all different. Everyone has intelligence. No one is 'thick'. If you worry you might be, you are not looking at the whole you. No one is perfect, either! Have you ever met a very clever person who was not practically minded? I have a delightful and clever friend who I'd rather not get in a car with if they are driving.

American developmental psychologist Howard Gardner came up with the idea that we have several different types of intelligence.

Intelligence types	
Linguistic	Words and language
Logical–mathematical	Logic and numbers
Musical	Music, sound, rhythm
Bodily–kinaesthetic	Body movement, control
Spatial–visual	Images and space
Interpersonal	Other people's feelings
Intrapersonal	Self-awareness

Beware the school exam system – it fails to test many of our abilities. Schools primarily test only for the first two intelligence types shown in the table above. There are no exams, for example, in spatial awareness or whether you get on with others.

Perhaps the most important school learning happens in the playground. Making friends. Sharing. Negotiating. Doing things together.

Every brain is wired differently. What you do and learn in life physically changes what your brain looks like – it ‘rewires’ itself. This is called **neuroplasticity**, and it means that you can change if you want to and if you take the time to learn to act differently.

No two people’s brains store the same information in the same way or in the same places. We have a great number of ways of being intelligent, most of which do not show up on IQ tests. Does it matter whether a great dancer has the best school results?

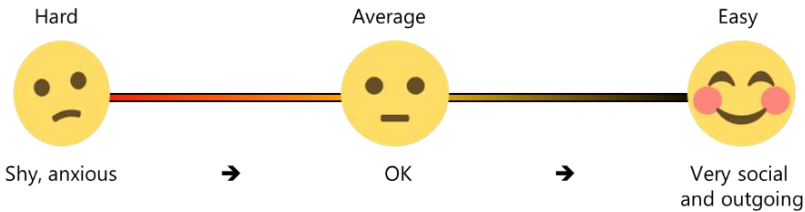
An imperfect pot can still be beautiful.

What are you good at? You may want to ask a friend where they think your talents lie or what they like about you too. This often gives new, surprising and very useful results.

We are all different

Everyone is different. We all have distinct abilities and qualities. I am constantly amazed by just how different we are from everyone else due to our life experiences and outlooks. Each of us is a complex mix of thoughts and emotions.

For instance, people can be very shy and introverted or very social and outgoing. Most of us fall somewhere in between. Where we are on the scale can change over time or depending on the situation we are in. For instance, here is a scale for how easy it is for you to talk to others.



Think of a quality or ability you have. Where do you fit on the scale above? Do you find that it can change according to your mood or how tired you are? Have you noticed an improvement or a deterioration in that quality or ability during your lifetime?

Sometimes our behaviours are more extreme and may even harm us. We probably did not choose to act this way, but felt at the time it was the only choice we had. Such behaviours can be a way of coping with or expressing overwhelming emotional distress.

We may **self-harm** (that is, we physically or emotionally harm ourselves) to punish ourselves, express our distress or relieve unbearable tension, or a mixture of all three. We may feel anger, guilt, pain, fear, hopelessness or self-hatred. We may physically hurt our body to mask the emotional hurt.

Self-harm is very common – we have all done things that are unhealthy for us in some way. We may have gambled to excess, drunk too much,

worked too hard, binge-eaten or spent more than is wise. We may have done more extreme things as a way we cope in the moment. We can often explain it and justify our behaviour, at least to ourselves.

What is going on? Why do we do this?

Have you self-harmed? Or done unhealthy things? Look for the cause.

On a scale of one to ten, where are you on the scale? If you are on the extreme end of the scale, why? What – or who – was affecting your life when you started doing this? What are or were you struggling to cope with? Talk to someone who knows that we all self-harm, who will understand rather than judge you. Being properly listened to is a start to you getting the help you need.

Listening to our pain

Our body sends messages to the brain using nerves. This is happening all the time. The brain gets lots of messages every second. It classifies most of them as unimportant and discards them. When they are important, the brain brings them to our attention. One way the brain signals to us that there is a problem is to use pain. We then take notice.

Pain is a protector – its purpose is to make us act.

If you feel pain, then your body and brain are sending you a message. Sometimes illness too can teach us things. Is there something that you need to pay more attention to? Your body and brain are very smart and may be sending you a warning. You may need to stop doing something or do it less. You may need to look after yourself more – for example, to slow down, rest, eat better, do something you enjoy or get further away from a toxic situation. What is that pain telling you?

You can take analgesic drugs – painkillers – of course. There are times you should. However, these drugs can over time hijack the brain's reward system – the brain gets to like them so much that the beneficial effects wear off. Eventually, they may even make the situation worse, for example by making you become dependent on the analgesics, with the brain effectively saying it likes them and needs more.

You'll also notice that when you are busy and your mind is concentrating on something else, your pain can be temporarily forgotten. Doing things you love can especially help in relieving pain.

Listen to your pain. What is it telling you?



Working with our emotions

We are emotional beings. Emotions drive us. Our memories are tied to emotions – your first memory will be of some emotional event, not an everyday event.

It is our emotions and not our thoughts that make us do things, from getting out of bed in the morning to eating when we are hungry. Animals live their lives with much smaller thinking parts of their brains, and they get through life pretty well. Just like animals, we are born with natural abilities to survive and make the most of our lives. Our brains are doing their best to help us function successfully in the world. Most of the time they do a great job ensuring our emotional needs get met.

'Everything we do and say is trying to meet a need for wellbeing.'
– Marshall Rosenberg, psychologist

Our emotional brain may behave in ways that our thinking brain does not like or does not understand. We may behave in certain ways in particular circumstances, due to our past. Trauma or prolonged childhood stress may make us react very strongly or even panic when a new event happens, which our brain thinks matches the old danger.

When you are in the grip of strong emotions, you usually cannot think straight. A calm mind is like a placid lake, where you can see the reflections of the mountains and sky – the complete enchanting picture. When the storm of our strong emotions whips up the surface of the lake, it becomes rough and the beautiful reflections cannot be made out.

Be warned, though: often just talking about or understanding our issues – our psychological injuries – is not enough. For instance, trauma is not a cognitive (thinking) problem – it comes from deep within our emotional brain. Only talking about trauma therefore often fails to fix it and can even make it worse. You may convince your logical thinking

brain to do the right thing, but that is not usually enough. It is your emotional brain, which is not great at talking or logic, that controls you and how you react in any situation. We need to be a bit smarter to change our emotional behaviour. Talking about a blocked drain may help you understand how it happened, but you still need to get a plumber in.

'Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.'

– Rumi, Persian poet

Change can be scary. We may need to learn new ways to behave to replace obsolete or damaging emotional behaviour patterns within us.

As it is our emotional brain that guides us most of the time and makes most of our decisions, we need to start by working at an emotional level to change ourselves.

Part 2 explains how we can rewire our brains in the case of trauma – or 'change the software' – making it more resilient and ensuring that our emotional brain does not hijack us when it need not and we can react normally.

Part 3 looks at further ways we work with our emotions to get more from life.

Part 4 gives some practical exercises to help us thrive.

Part 2. Fixing the basics

It's hard to build a strong house on shaky foundations. A tough start in life or other unresolved trauma will make it hard for you to have a satisfying life.

If you want to change, then something has to give. Scary? Maybe. Will continuing to do the same things that you do today change anything?

Shaking the dice harder does not increase your chance of getting the numbers you want.

Let us start with the foundations.

Since sleep is the bedrock of how we feel physically and function emotionally, is there work to be done there?

Secondly, are there traumas in our lives that need addressing?

Once these are resolved, we will look in Part 3 at other changes we may want to make.

Part 2. Fixing the basics

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Getting enough sleep



If you wake up tired, then it's likely you are going to have a tough day ahead.

Worse, it's a sign that your body has not completed the rebuilding of tissue and refreshing of chemicals that your brain will need for the day ahead. A car running on empty does not get very far.

Getting a good night's sleep is probably the most important single step you can take to improve your wellbeing.

As we saw in Part 1, sleep varies throughout the night. In a typical good night's sleep, you will have five cycles, which go between shallow and deep sleep.

Most of your dreaming is done in shallow, rapid eye movement sleep. Deep sleep is used to rebuild body tissue and reset the chemicals in your brain, so you are ready to go the next day.

If you are waking up tired, your body is telling you that it is not ready for the day. This can of course happen because you did not spend enough time in bed. Often, though, it is because you did not get enough deep sleep because you spent a lot of time dreaming.

Dreaming reprocesses – or 'de-arouses' – your worries and memories from the previous day. If you have a lot of worries, you have a lot of de-arousal to do. Dream sleep is not restful. More dreaming means less time to rebuild body tissues and refresh the brain.

We have evolved to sleep when it's dark and be active when it's light, so a sleep routine that makes the most of this is helpful. For some of us poor sleep has become a habit. We can change our routine, or the place we sleep, to break the cycle.

What is your wind-down routine? Start by going to bed at a similar time every day. TV is a stimulant, which purposefully gets us

emotionally aroused to hook us so we watch the next programme. Bright computer monitors or phones signal to the brain that it's not night time yet. Alcohol may make us drowsy, but it also impacts the quality of our sleep. Noise before bedtime can put us on high alert. Limiting your eating, drinking and screen time for the two hours beforehand, will help you go to bed relaxed. A quiet book or a bath are good ways to wind down. A hot non-caffeine drink works for some.

Think of your sleeping place as your cave, a place of calm. Having a quiet, comfy and warm – but not too warm – bed helps too. Cold feet can stop us going to sleep because our bodies cool as we get ready to sleep, so our core temperature becomes lower than our extremities. You could try socks, a hot water bottle or an electric blanket.

Lastly, worrying is a stimulant, and probably worse than caffeine. Stress makes us feel endangered, so we don't want to lose alertness. More on working on your worries in Part 3.

Waking up in the night, probably during a shallow bit of sleep, is very common. If you have been worrying about something, write it down so that you won't forget it in the morning and you can let it go for now.

To help you get back to sleep, think about your breathing – consciously breathe out for longer than you breathe in. Think of a really beautiful, relaxing place you have been to – perhaps a beach or a garden or a forest. Imagine going there. Why not cheat and make it even better than in real life – your powerful imagination can make it everything you deserve. Enjoy the sun on you, the ground bearing you up, the beauty and the sounds of the place. How do you feel? What can you see and hear? What do you smell? Enjoy the calm, relaxing atmosphere.

And if that does not work, get up and do something boring for a while – read a tough book or mop the kitchen floor. Sort your socks out. The more boring the better. And then back to bed. Sweet dreams!

Can traumas be cured?

I have a friend whose leg was smashed up in a car accident. She had to have an operation and then physiotherapy to get it working again.

On most days her leg now works fine and she forgets all about it. Sometimes, however, especially when she is tired or has done too much, she feels a bit of pain and her injured leg reminds her that it is not as strong as the other one.

Pain has a purpose, of course – it's a natural process to warn us when we overdo things. My friend knows when she feels pain that her leg is warning her to be careful. She then takes it easy and does the exercises the physiotherapist showed her, to keep the leg flexible and give it strength. This allows her to lead an active life, working, swimming and playing sports, just as she did before her accident.

Is she cured? She is not the same person she was before her accident, but she has a good life. Her leg is part of her life (and of her), and she has to keep an eye on it. It does not rule her life, though.

Most traumas are the same. They can be resolved, just like the injury to my friend's leg, meaning that everyday life can go on. Some days your trauma may play up, and you may need to take it easy or do some exercises to ease it. However, after the right treatment and some time, you can lead a full life again, without being hypervigilant, without getting the panic attacks or having nights of broken sleep.

Interestingly, many people who have had a severe trauma resolved say that their experience taught them useful things about themselves and about life. They do not want to repeat the traumatic experience, of course. However, in amongst the darkness of trauma, people often gain a greater appreciation of life, higher self-esteem, stronger connectedness to others, and a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

Our experiences make us who we are, and we learn from bad experiences too.

Change can be scary



Firstly, do you actually want to change?

Change takes effort. There is no magic pill that will change you.

There are reasons why some people may not feel ready to change.

We fear the unknown. If we move on from our current emotional distress symptoms such as depression, addictions or anger, what might replace them? This subconscious fear of moving on even has a name: **psychological reversal**.

Some people even like being ill – they get attention, are cared for, get money, or like not having to take responsibility. Doctors are used to people like this; the condition is known to them as **secondary gain**.

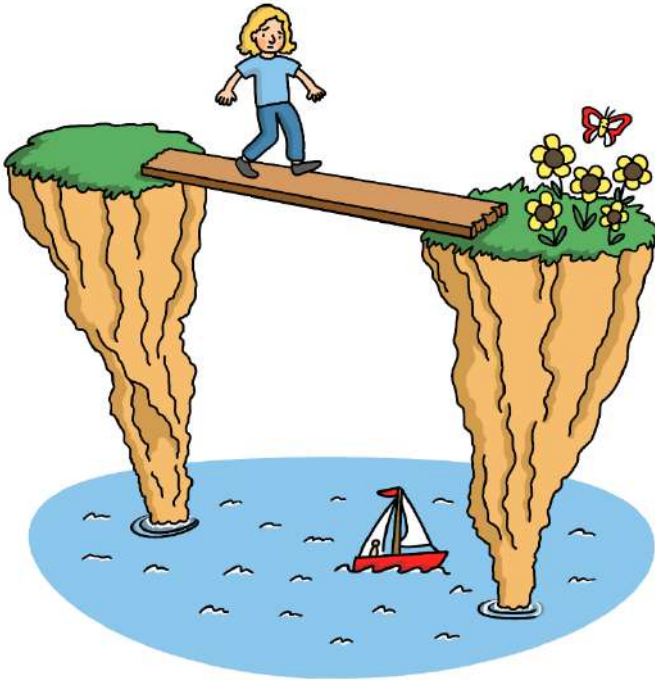
Others think the world should be different, thinking for example *My husband should love me more*, or *My children (or boss) should appreciate me*. They want the world to change to match their thoughts. This is jokingly called '**musterbation**' – but there is no 'must' about it. Most times you cannot make others do what you want them to. You can change how you react to them.

Where do we start when we are ready to change?

Real change happens within the unconscious mind. The beliefs we hold often meet emotional needs for us – they protect us or stop us feeling even worse.

Imagine two big buttons, one next to each hand. Pressing the red one will start you on a journey of change. Pressing the green one means that you do not want to change now and are OK with your life as it is. Close your eyes. Decide which button you would press. Imagine pressing it now.

To change, you will have to do something new or different. You may need to stretch yourself or take risks. To accept that you may have been wrong or you may need to cross the chasm from one mountaintop to another. To be discomforted. If we never take risks or address difficult emotions, are we fully taking part in life?



No one said life is easy. Choose your risks. If it feels as if the journey from the bad mountaintop to the good one is too far, or the dangers are too great ... then get help.

You don't have to do everything alone.

'Insanity is repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results.' – Narcotics Anonymous

Where do our beliefs come from?

There is not time in life to research everything, to go back to first principles and examine the facts from scratch. We take most things at face value, based on what we hear from people we trust. Indeed, for some of our most important beliefs, we have no evidence at all except that people we love and trust hold those beliefs.

Our beliefs are simply stories about reality – they may not actually be correct. How do we know that something is true? Often we have never examined whether something is an honest belief or whether it is really true, based on fact. When we argue with someone, do we know what we are saying is true? Or is it something a friend or a parent told us? And what of their beliefs?

It can be hard to see that our lives might be different. If we have lived with a problem for a long time, perhaps even since birth, we will often think that how we think and act is the norm. It can take us years to see that perhaps there could be alternative ways – improved ways of thinking and acting. Many people live decades before they realise they can change and they seek help.

New facts or ideas that differ from our existing beliefs or contradict them are usually very hard to absorb. Often this is because we react to them emotionally, rather than listening coolly to the reasons behind them. There is even a name for this: **cognitive dissonance**. We try to find a way to resolve the contradictions to reduce our discomfort. If the new information goes against or undermines our stories of ourselves – our core identity – we may even go so far as to reject it entirely.

It is often easier to stick with what we know than to accept a new idea. In the short term, it's simpler to stay where we are. An addict might explain how their addiction actually is helping them, saying for example, 'I'm self-medicating with alcohol'. Perhaps there are more effective ways to get help?

Humans are very contrary. Most of us dislike change, even when we know we need to. When we believe something and our belief is challenged, we can feel threatened. We may try to discredit the challenger because it feels safer than examining if they are right. In the same way, if an attacker tries to grab my wallet, I'm likely to cling on to it much tighter. Sometimes we can feel threatened by even a hint that we may be wrong.

'Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time.'
– Barack Obama

New learning cannot begin unless we are prepared to do the work of examining the new ideas and seeing where we can use them to help us grow. We may need to change our behaviours. Learning can be challenging or even painful. Remember school?

A BBC interviewer asked an elderly man: 'Have you lived in this village all your life?'
'I have', he replied, 'so far.'

Are you ready to take the first step?

Making choices

Life is a journey, where you never know what is around the corner. You never have complete control of your life. You can make choices, though. And only you can make the choice that might change your life.

'By changing nothing, nothing changes.'
– Tony Robbins, author and life coach

Are you prepared to make some changes, to take risks? If so, it is best to start small and also to start soon. If you get an idea and then don't do anything about it for a week, it is very likely you never will. Start small. Start soon. Now is good.

'A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.'
– Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

Often when you think about change, an emotion – perhaps from your childhood – will pop up suddenly. Work out what that emotion is. The emotion is trying to protect you. It is part of you, so do not fight it. Accept it. Thank it for working to protect you. Ask it to step aside for a moment. Ask the protective emotion to observe what you are about to do, and even to step back in if things get too scary.

Another emotion may now pop up. Talk to it too and ask it to step aside and watch. After all, you are older and wiser than when you first had this emotion.

When no more emotions arise, think again about the change you wish to make, asking yourself the following questions:

- What are my best hopes for this journey?
- What needs to happen?
- When I start getting better, what might be the first thing my friends, partner or family notice about me?

Once upon a time, a princess was sitting by a pool. She leaned over to look at her reflection, and as she did so, her crown fell with a splash from her head into the water. She screamed. Her aides quickly jumped into the pool to look for the crown.

Their thrashing about churned up the mud in the pool and the water became very murky. The crown could not be found.

The palace storyteller happened to come by. He sat down by the princess and started to tell one of his stories. Everyone started to listen to his fascinating tales of adventures past.

At the end of the story, everyone, and the mud in the pool too, had settled down. The crown could be seen through the clear water. The storyteller then simply reached into the pool and lifted it out.

A tough childhood is like being born on the wrong side of the mountains

We don't get a lot of choice about our upbringing. Perhaps you were often sick or bullied. Or perhaps your caregivers neglected you – they were too busy, or they had themselves had a bad start in life and did not know how to raise a child properly. If so, you have already had to do a huge amount to overcome your past and get on in life.

An analogy to a tough upbringing is being born on the far side of a huge mountain range. You had to cross over those mountains before you could start real life. And you survived the trip, despite the storms you met on the way. You made it. You must have had great drive to survive, coupled with toughness and tenacity. Many people will not have developed these strengths that you have had to learn for yourself. You can therefore acknowledge that you are already a hero.

If someone – a parent, relative, teacher or bully – abused you, writing things down in a letter to them can be very powerful. Feel free to say whatever you want in the letter. Writing things down stops you from going over them in your mind again and again. Don't post it, though – the letter is for you to keep.

One way we cope with a tough upbringing is to blame ourselves. Blaming ourselves is a common emotional reaction. Young children usually think their elders are nearly perfect. Normally, this helps them survive – the child copies the parent and learns how to function in the world. When adults do wrong, though, it does not make sense, so children blame themselves.

Do you feel that you were to blame? Your logical brain probably knows that it was not your fault. Your emotional brain, though, likely still believes it was.

- It must have been my fault that my father did not love me.

- My parents divorced because I did not look after them properly.
- I must have done something wrong.

Nope. You were just a child, and they were (supposedly) adults. It was not your fault.

Would you treat a friend like you treat yourself? Would you blame your friend if an adult abused them? Be kind and look after yourself, because you are worth it. You may want to find out more about your issues and seek support.

'Be thankful for all the difficult people in your life, and learn from them. They have shown you exactly who you do not want to be.'

– Unknown

Traumas can trap us

Are you stuck with a trauma from your past? Do you react very strongly or become extremely emotional in certain situations? Are you sometimes not even sure why? Perhaps you have lived with the trauma for a long time, but as you get older, it becomes harder to keep under control. Does it overwhelm you more often? Do you feel trapped?

You don't have to live with your traumas. Many people believe they are scarred for life by a trauma or a tough upbringing and that there is nothing they can do. Luckily, this is not true.

Learnings that were formed in times of threat or trauma become part of our survival mechanism. You have grown up, but those emotional traumatic memories have stayed stuck. They remain very real and immediate. It seems as if they happened only yesterday. (As only the logical brain understands time, anything emotional has no sense of how long ago it happened.) These learnings are therefore extremely durable, and although they may have been useful in your childhood, they may no longer be useful.

Often we live with the effects of these traumas for many years. As we get older, and perhaps the ways we used to distract ourselves from them no longer seem to work, we may find that they suddenly overwhelm us.

How long have you had your issue? What was going on in your life when it started? Is it linked to a person or a group of people? Sometimes you will already know. Other times you'll need to go looking for the links.

You can often get a clue to when your traumas were formed. Feel where you are holding the associated emotions in your body. As a guide, often emotions in the gut are from traumas formed before you were seven or eight years old; emotions in the chest are from ages eight to adolescence; and emotions in the neck are from adolescence

onwards. Please note, this is only a guide – the emotions aren't always stored in this way.

Traumatic memories do not get processed and stored away like other memories. They remain ready to re-alert your survival mechanism at a moment's notice. There are ways you can get your brain to revisit those memories and move them to the **hippocampus** – the brain's memory store – so they become part of your normal learning. The memories can still protect you, but they don't need to make you fly into a panic attack or other high alert when the brain thinks it has spotted something similar happening.

Ways to fix our traumas

Fortunately, most traumas can be quickly reduced to a manageable size or even eliminated. You can escape their trap. The traumatic memory needs to be reprocessed so it becomes a normal memory of an (unpleasant) event.

To find out where your trauma came from, ask yourself these three questions:

- Did anything particular happen when I first got trauma symptoms?
- Do I still get upset now?
- Does my trauma feel like time stood still, as if it happened only yesterday? (This is a sign that the memories are still in the emotional part of your brain and have not been turned into normal long-term memories.)

Sometimes traumas can be fixed in minutes. For example, if you learned to be scared of a bomb blast in seconds, it is often possible to unlearn that almost as fast. Other traumas can take longer to resolve, of course. The terrible events still happened – we cannot change history – but how you react to the memories can change.

In *theory*, it is simple to learn how to react normally. All that has to be done is to revisit the incident that caused the trauma in your mind and present the memory with evidence that the way you reacted then is not the best way for you to react now. When memories are activated they become malleable. Then, by looking at experiences that contradict or are inconsistent with your old learning, new learning can take place. And so you learn new, more appropriate responses.

Most times this does not work. The pain will probably get worse. Revisiting the trauma in your memory often causes it to activate a full-on panic attack, which hijacks your emotions and stops you from doing anything except panic. This will strengthen the trauma rather than

fixing it. Thus a talking or 'exposure' therapy approach can be a bad way to address past traumas. We need to avoid this emotional hijacking.

One technique with excellent success rates is called **Rewind** (or reconsolidation of traumatic memories (RTM) in the USA). One of the reasons why a Rewind is a good approach to take is that you do not need to talk about the traumatic events if you do not want to. You may keep that part of your past to yourself and the process will still work well.

As with any therapy, it's vital to find a therapist you trust. A Rewind will first take you to a deep place of relaxation, and then get you to look from afar at how you reacted to the traumatic incident. This **dissociation** stops your emotions hijacking you and preventing new learning. You can relook at the troubling past events in a calm way and see them afresh from your wiser, older perspective.

This can be a remarkably fast process, although it is not always easy and has to be done right. Most people feel relieved and lighter at the end of it. It is as if they have laid down a burden that they have been carrying for too long.

The Rewind process was largely developed in its current form by the founders of the Human Givens school of therapy, so if you think you might benefit from a Rewind, I'd suggest you find a Human Givens therapist to help you. (See the resources section at the end.)

Letting go

Carrying grudges around is hard work. A grudge is like a poison that you take believing that it will make your adversary suffer. How could that work?! It has to be time to move on. By moving on, you release others' hold on you and demonstrate that you are greater than them.

'The world is unjust; the universe doesn't care.'
– Liv Boeree, poker player

Not letting go harms you rather than those who harmed you. The best revenge is to turn the hurt you suffered into something good. Learn from those who hurt you. Use them to help you grow and become a stronger and better person. Take your time, be kind to yourself – however hard that is – and grieve.

After you have moved on, ask yourself:

- What positive things have I learned from those who oppressed me?
- Who has helped me?

As part of moving on, wish your adversaries well – sincerely. You do *not* have to forget, agree with or pardon what they have done. Indeed, you can still be angry about it. Forgiveness is not about pretending that a wrong done to you is no longer a wrong done to you – a wrongdoing is always a wrongdoing. But you are going to learn from what happened and become a better person. Wish that they too become a better person and stop acting so badly, which they probably need to.

'Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.'
– Oscar Wilde

Can you imagine yourself in their shoes, and see why they did what they did? Did they have a terrible start in life? Are they hurting and

wounded? This can be hard to do, but it is not your responsibility to fix them. Only they can fix themselves, and then only if they want to. This is their problem, not yours.

Leave them behind. Move on. Break the cycle of hurt that they have passed on to you. That's a big and important thing to do. When you have achieved it, well done!

An offender who wants reconciliation must apologise to you, promise not to do it again, make amends and allow you time. If they don't repent, then accept that they are stuck and that it is for them to unstick themselves. Accept that it is sad they cannot find a way to become a better person and live a more fulfilled life. Move on. Leave them behind.

If *you* were the oppressor or bully, here is what I suggest you might do. Don't ask your victim for forgiveness for what you have done to them. The other person might not be ready and could react badly. Instead, apologise for your past actions. Admit responsibility and express regret.

Do not make excuses. Saying something like, 'Sorry, I only did it as I was bullied myself' sounds like you're not sorry at all. Apologise in their terms. Say instead 'I am sorry I hurt you. It must have been horrible for you. I was wrong to do it'.

'If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.'

- Aldous Huxley, writer, from *Brave New World*

Fixing our minor adversities

Here is a way you can work on minor niggles and worries from the past, like a regret or a relationship you are almost completely over. It's simple and quick. It is not suitable for big traumas. Like learning to drive, start on quieter roads.

You can do this by yourself. Find a quiet room where you will not be disturbed, and you can freely walk 10 or 12 steps back and forth –since most of us do not live in mansions, it is likely that you will need to take very small steps to make this work. Stand in one corner and imagine yourself before the incident or incidents started, feeling OK.

If you are not feeling OK, you need to go back earlier in the incident or extend the time period you are working with. The time period may be minutes or days or even years – use what seems right to you. At the far side of the room is another place of safety – the incident has finished and you know you will survive. You may not be in great shape, but you can see a future for yourself from there.

The first time you do this activity, I think it best to do it with someone who knows the process. They can spot the often-physical symptoms – for example, a change of stance or a change of pace – which you might not notice. These changes usually accompany mental shifts and the helper can assist you in identifying the emotional changes occurring by gently asking you, 'What happened there?'

You are going to walk from the initial place of safety to the end place of safety, and back. You will usually need to do this at least three times and probably four or five times.

- Take the first step. Imagine the incident starting. Perhaps another person who was involved in the incident has come into the scene.
- Take a second step. Imagine the second scene in the incident. Perhaps the other person has started shouting at you, or doing

whatever they did.

- And step into the next scene. What happened next?
- And step into the fourth scene. Recall what happened after that – did you react?
- And so on, until you reach the end of the incident and you are in the place of (relative) safety.

If the emotions become too strong, just take a step forward and see yourself in the next scene. Keep going forward through the incident's scenes – lingering does not help. Spend only a brief second in each scene.

Now walk backwards (and I mean backwards – do not turn round) through the incident. Start at the end and walk back to the start, always facing towards the place you ended up, going through the scenes in reverse order.

Once again, if the emotions become very strong, just take the next step (backwards) into the previous scene. Do not think and analyse any emotions or the process, just let it happen. It is not your thinking brain that we are working on. Just feel. Go right back to your place of (relative) safety at the start.

Do the forward and back walk two or three or more times until you can feel yourself feeling differently about the events and gaining new insights. You may feel both physical and emotional changes that will allow you to see and feel this incident in a new, less overwhelming perspective.

Often, when I work with people on this, on the third or fourth walkthrough I see their body posture change, and they smile or laugh in release.

If you feel up to doing so, and the incident involved someone else, you can do a final walk through of the incident as if you were the other person. This is optional and only for those who feel able to do it. It can give you additional insight, allowing you to see and feel how powerless or messed up *they* were, usually from their own bad start in life. How, because *they* could not cope or did not know what to do, they took it

out on you. This step can change your perspective: although it was a frightening or difficult time for you, it was more a sad story about their inadequacies in dealing with life. They really needed help; they were just not able or brave enough to seek it.



Part 3. Moving on

'Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.'
– Steve Jobs, founder Apple Computers

For most (but not all) people, sorting out the past is just a start. Part 3 looks at what you can do to get more out of life now and in the future.

'Happiness is not a goal ... it's a by-product of a life well-lived.'
– Eleanor Roosevelt, American political figure, diplomat, activist

Part 3. Moving on

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Asking yourself some questions

'Whether you think you can, or you think you can't – you're right.'
– Henry Ford

Let's assume that you want to change your life.

Perhaps you want to move on from a depressed state, or perhaps you want a fresh start. You may want to make some adjustments to your life or even transform it.

In order to make the necessary changes to your life, you'll first need to ask yourself some questions.

- When I move on, what will I need to do to make it happen?
- What needs to be different in my life?
- What do I need to do, and what resources will I need to make that change?

Is there something you used to do, and have got out of the habit of doing, that could help you to make beneficial changes? Like seeing old friends or getting exercise perhaps. Skills and habits don't disappear, although they can get mislaid. Or is there a new skill that you may have to learn?

Do you have what you need to make the changes? What are your resources? You have survived so far, despite all the difficulties in your life. That shows that you are capable of doing some tough things and doing them well. Is there something new that you are not quite sure how to do? Or not quite sure of *yet*? What do you need to do to make it happen? Can someone else help you?

When you first start thinking like this, for your best hopes in life, you might be surprised by how quickly significant life changes start to happen. Mountains can start to budge.



Trusting yourself: Living in the moment

How do you play tennis? Or football? Or do an everyday thing that you may not even think about, like picking up an egg. How do you hold it just tightly enough so you don't drop it but not so hard that you break it?

Think of a tennis or football player making a bad shot. Afterwards, they don't think, 'If I changed the angle by 0.3° , used 2.7 Newtons less force but, say, 0.7 m/s^2 more acceleration, then next time the ball will go just where I want it to go.' They *feel* it. They change the way they hit the ball until they get it right. Perhaps surprisingly, the less they think about how or what they are doing, and the more they watch the ball and trust themselves to get it right, the better they do.

Conscious thinking often gets in the way of achieving. There are many things we do well without thinking. How does anyone ride and balance on a bike?

Conscious thinking is slower and takes longer than just letting your feeling brain react and following its wisdom. As soon as a sportsperson starts to think about their game – 'I need this shot to win' or 'I messed this up last time' – their thinking brain gets in the way and their performance deteriorates. They lose their edge. But if they concentrate solely on what is happening now to the ball and where they want it to go, their subconscious brain and their body do what is needed. This is amazing when you think about it. (Obviously, though, do the thinking later if you want to succeed!)

Worrying about the future can distract you from succeeding in the present.

Sometimes, especially if we are on the road to recovery, we'll get the thought that something will go wrong soon, thinking something like *I'm not the sort of person who deserves happiness*. If this happens, pay attention to this emotion or thought. What (or who) does it look like?

Has it got a shape or colour or texture? Has it got a name? I call mine Andy.

Now talk to wherever it comes from. Be polite, as it comes from a part of you that is still coping with the great strides you are making in your recovery. Help it out. Ask it not to be hard on you – you are still learning, after all. Ask it to watch your recovery and wait.

Happiness comes from doing things you love, not because you do or don't deserve it. It may take 'Andy' some time to learn that. Help it. That part of you is coming on your journey and will benefit from your recovery too.

When we trust ourselves to succeed, our brain and our body work to make it happen.

'When you walk to the edge of all the light you have and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown, you must believe that one of two things will happen. There will be something solid for you to stand upon or you will be taught to fly.'

– Patrick Overton, community organiser and writer



Working on the causes, not the symptoms

If you want to change what you do, it is best to drill down so you work with the root causes of your issues. We often know in our logical brain what the issue is. The problem is that our emotional brain does not 'get' the logical brain's explanation. It does not do logic. It cannot reason. You are going to have to work at the emotional level, in the way your brain works.

We are also creatures of habit, so having addressed the emotional causes, you may also need to change some bad habits that you have picked up. Habits are often tied to triggers, and you may need to remove the opportunity. If you never walk past a pub, then you are less likely to be tempted to go in for a drink. If there is no chocolate in the house, you cannot have a quick nibble.

Sometimes there is no time to get to the cause and fix it. In that case, you may want to start with the symptoms. If someone attacks you with an axe, it may be better to run than to stay and work through their issues. If your issue keeps recurring, though, look for the cause.

It is much harder to make changes by relying on the logical brain to keep you motivated – that makes it both more effort and more at risk of a slip-up. It can seem to get harder and harder each time we try. A dieter working with willpower may be successful for a while and then fail spectacularly. It's like stretching an elastic band more and more – eventually it breaks.

Many issues, such as poor self-confidence, can be traced back to childhood issues. For example, if you were always criticised, however hard you tried, it is little surprise that you still feel of less value or even a bit of an imposter in whatever you do now. Think back to when your issue first happened. Search for emotional clues. What was happening

and who was there? How did you feel? What causes the problem to recur now?

Some may crave relief through a drug or activity such as smoking, alcohol, other drugs or excessive exercise. This addictive behaviour can stop us getting our real needs met. Addicts often want to stop. They may feel shame and pursue their addiction secretly. However, the short-term pleasure and relief make such behaviour hard to give up, despite the longer-term damage to health, wealth or relationships. The addictive behaviour can also provide feelings of value and purpose, numb pain, and give inner peace, excitement or connection with others.

Can you think of a time in your past when you were told that you were inadequate or bullied – a time that makes you feel like you do now? In this way, you can find the root cause of why you feel like you do today. These clues will help you work on the issue.

If it's a severe issue, you may need a therapist to help you revisit its emotional roots. A Rewind, similar to the process for working with traumas described in Part 2, could be a good way to do this.

Less severe incidents may be amenable to the process described in **Fixing our minor adversities** (in Part 2) or **Revisiting difficult people from your past** (Part 4).



Having a growth mindset

Why do athletes, musicians and artists keep training or practising? Do clever people need to practise too? Surely, if people have a natural gift, they could just turn up and churn out the goods? Sadly, no. In Hollywood films someone often seems to get a lucky break and effortlessly goes on to greatness in life. Back here in reality, most of us are going to have to work for what we want. Things in life are rarely free. We need to exercise our muscles if we want to be stronger and fitter.

This belief that our intelligence, skills or talent are not fixed and that we can grow and improve with practice is called a **growth mindset**.

'Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration.'

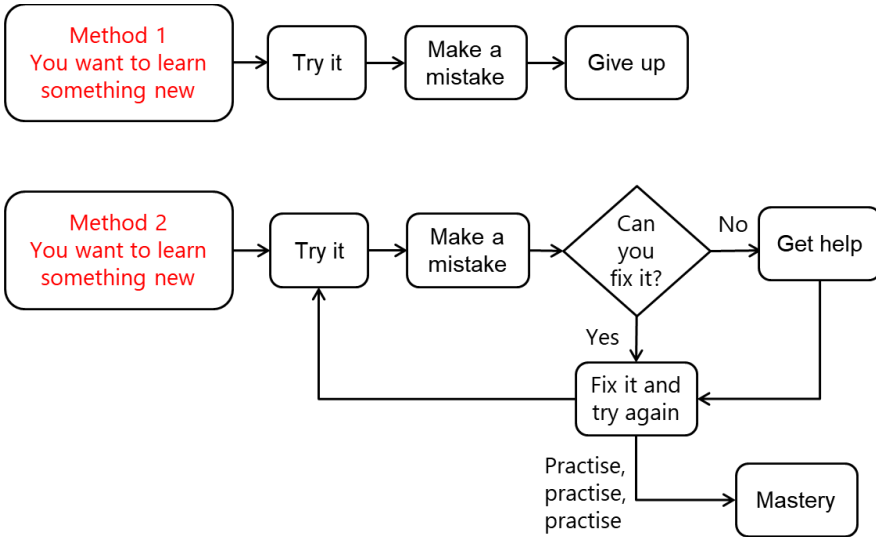
– Thomas Edison, inventor

Intelligence is just like the rest of your muscles – you need to practise to improve. Indeed, brain scans can see the difference – the more you learn and try, the more connections there are between the neurons in your brain, so your brain works better and faster. The brain changes as you learn.

People who became great in their field often started with a teacher who inspired them. And then they practised. Anders Ericsson studied a lot of great performers and concluded that they needed to do 10,000 or more hours of practice to be able to perform so well. And not just any old practice – they needed to question at every step how they could do things better and improve.

Einstein got a boring job so he could focus his waking hours on thinking rather than working. (He also neglected his family.) And like many single-minded people, he did what he did for himself, not to show others how smart he was.

You have a choice over how you react to life's setbacks. You can learn from your mistakes and failures, perhaps with a teacher or a coach, and improve. Or you can decide not to learn.



Practice makes you smarter. Of course it won't work if you think you can't do it or think it too hard, or if you don't want to do the work. You cannot do everything, though. You need to choose what you want to be good at. What have you done already that was difficult but where you succeeded? Learning to walk? Or talk? Or drive? Doing a sport or a hobby well? What have you learned from a setback? What have you learned today?



Stretching yourself

If we're honest, we have to admit that babies can be pretty useless.

If you watch a baby learning to walk, most of the time they just fall over. And yet we encourage them, saying, 'Well done', 'Aren't you clever!', 'Nearly there!'

Why are we harder on older children? As they grow up, we tell them to behave, that we expect better, that their work is not good enough and they must try harder.

What changed?

Childhood is not a time of immaturity, though – it's a time of learning. As we learn, our brains change. They rewire, so that the next time we do the same thing, it's easier. And the more we do something, the more they rewire. Our brains can and do change and learn all the time throughout our lives.

Watch young children play. They take life as it is. They are curious. They copy others. They try things out. They stretch themselves with new ideas, new challenges and new experiences to learn. Young children stretch (not stress) their curious minds.

'If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning.'

– Carol S Dweck, psychologist and author of *Mindset*

We cannot learn if we are stressed, and we cannot learn unless we are stretched. That's why learning is both hard work and also an exciting journey.

We are happier and more motivated when we do something because we want to, and not because we have to or if we will get punished if we don't do it.

Children do not do things for money or fame. The reward is feeling good about themselves, not being told by others they are valued. Often children laugh a lot. A child's motivation comes from inside.

Most successful people don't plan their lives. They look around and find a challenge or a problem or a purpose that summons them. They may join with others. The purpose of life may not be to find yourself. Perhaps it is to lose yourself. Think of children finger painting – they get completely immersed in what they are doing, and you can see their pure enjoyment. They have fun.

You do best in what you enjoy doing. Have fun too.

By the way, are you curious? When did you last play? How do you lose yourself? What do you do that is just for you?

'I have no special talents; I am only passionately curious.'
– Albert Einstein, theoretical physicist



Being kind to yourself

'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.'
– Allen Saunders, writer and cartoonist

Having looked at our emotions, let us turn to look at our thinking.

Emotions happen first, of course, and thinking happens a split second later. We tend to think our thoughts are true, but they often mislead us. You cannot do something? Perhaps it is a case of you cannot do it *yet*. I'm sure you can think of lots of times when you've assumed something and found out later that it was not true.

When we are thinking *I messed up*, we berate ourselves about what we have done. We may think that we did badly or are even a bad person. Why? Stand aside from your thoughts for a second and ask yourself some questions. Is it really true? Perhaps you can think of something else you could have done to make it even worse! You didn't, though. Or something that you did do to stop it from being a total disaster – if you can think of something, then you cannot be completely bad. How bad was it really, on a scale of one to ten? Is what you did something you can learn from?

Self-criticism is sometimes like a dialogue between two sides of yourself, with one part of you attacking, angry and hostile, and the other part of you on the receiving end, feeling upset and hurt.

Sometimes, especially if it's a nagging inner voice, giving the thought or voice a name can help. Or changing the voice, perhaps to that of a cartoon character. What happens when you talk to it in the third person, saying he or she, or John or Jane, thinks ..., instead of *I think ...*? Or dressing up the voice's owner with a red nose and a funny hat? Or having the voice come from your armpit or your bottom?

And then, if the thought *was* true, ask yourself: Is that thought useful? Would I speak to a friend the way I speak to me? Beating yourself up

may not be the best use of your time. (If you do want to beat yourself up, save it all up until 6 pm and give yourself ten minutes – no more – and beat yourself up then. It will save you a lot of time.)

Being kind to oneself and others makes life simpler and better. Smiling helps. Standing up straight helps too. Try it now: stand up, put your shoulders back. Smile. How does that feel?

Some good things will have happened to you today. It didn't rain (or perhaps it did, and you watched the amazing shapes of the splashes in the puddles), or you saw some lovely flowers, or you had a nice bath, or someone smiled at you.

Consider keeping a gratitude diary for a few weeks. Two or three times a week, write down three good things that have happened to you recently. It does not matter what they are. Look at them again from time to time, and enjoy the good memories. Good things do happen to you; it's just all too easy to forget them.



Accepting the future

What happens when we worry about what might happen in the future?

Often when we think about the future, we are concerned that it is going to turn out badly. Not in the way we want. In a way we have little or no control over. That our expectations or our needs will not be met. Sometimes we will imagine several different ways the future could turn out, with most or all of those ways bad for us. The more we worry, the more the brain learns to become a better worrier.

We may have to accept a hard truth in these cases: that we cannot control the future and that we will have little influence on what happens. When we recognise our limited influence over the future, and detach ourselves from being concerned about what *might* happen, it often happens that an extraordinary shift arises in us.

Suddenly, we can stop worrying about the details and the more mundane aspects of what might happen. Our acceptance of whatever the future outcome might be moves us to a different plane of thought. We stop being so concerned about how our status or security could be impacted, and we are less worried about having limited control over the situation. We will probably feel different in our body too. Lighter perhaps.

After we make this shift, we are freed to start thinking about how we might meet our higher emotional needs, which are discussed in the introduction of this book. How might the change fit in with our life's purpose, what can we learn from it, and how can we relate better to others? This can even turn what felt like a threat into an opportunity – new circumstances that we can turn to our advantage.

What are you worrying about? What would happen if you detached yourself from those worries, putting them aside to accept future possibilities?

Studies show that we are very bad at predicting how we will feel when things go wrong. We expect that our happiness will take a major hit for a long time if we fail an exam, or don't get the job we want, or don't get something else we think we need. We also think that good things, like winning the lottery, will make us happier for a long time.

Actually, while our happiness does take a temporary dip (or rise), it normally recovers quite quickly – often within days – to where it was before. This is called **hedonic adaptation**. We often underestimate just how resilient we are and we overestimate how much getting more stuff or a better place to live will help us feel better. Despite what adverts may tell us, happiness is not very strongly linked to material things.

What is worse, we are prone to continue to chase the wrong goals in life – money, fame and material goods – as we mis-predict how good they will make us feel, even though we should know that from what happened last time.



Flow state – doing something you love

What do you love doing? What do you do that is for *you*?

Do you sometimes do something you enjoyed that felt like it only took ten minutes, and when you looked at the clock you saw that you had been busy, in your own world, for nearly an hour? This trance-like state of total absorption and enjoyable concentration is called **flow** or **being in the zone**.

Think of something meaningful to you, that you find challenging and which you enjoy doing. Interestingly, if the activity needs new skills, we enjoy the challenge – it is good to be stretched and learn.

We find flow in many different places. For some it could be a hobby or a sport, making music or reading a book. It may be a creative activity, using the brain and the body together. In flow state we are completely absorbed and our sense of time disappears.

Flow state

'You know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger. And once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake.'

– Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist who coined the term flow state

You can tell if people are talking about something that excites them or gets them into flow state. They'll be grinning from ear to ear as they tell you. They can't help it – that's the mind-body connection working. Our emotions show in how we talk, walk and behave.

What do you do that is for you? Feel the smile or the good feeling as you just think about it.

'Define yourself by what you create, not what you consume.'
– Alex J. Hughes, writer



Looking at your problems from the other side

There are many ways to solve a problem. One is to fight it. This is usually our first response. Often it does not work. It is as if the problem is expecting that and is primed to fight back. Another approach is to sneak around the back of your problem and ambush it, taking it by surprise, like a smart soldier might. Using our imagination and doing something unexpected can make the problem fall over flat on its face.

Managers call this pull management rather than push management. Push is telling people to do things – giving advice. Pull is letting people work out what they need to do. Pull often works better – have you ever tried pushing a rope?

Treat your problems in the same way. You can change the way a picture looks by putting it in a different frame. Reframe your ideas. Instead of concentrating on the problem, turn your thinking upside down so you can find the other side.

John had been off work sick for several weeks and was due to go back, but he was worried that he might not be up to it. What would happen if he failed?

I suggested to him that thinking he might 'fail' was unhelpful. If he was not up to working, it would help his company and his colleagues most if he got properly better, so when he did go back he'd be fully productive. He should see his first day back as a test to honestly ascertain whether he was fit enough to go back. That way, the result would be useful knowledge, rather than an opportunity to fail.

He's back at work now and doing fine.

Imagine someone says something like, 'You look terrible – you need a holiday'. Stop a second. Play with the idea. A holiday could be great. Normally you might say, 'No, I'm fine really, just a bit overworked.' Smiling and saying something else instead like, 'You are so right. Thanks. I'm already looking at brochures,' changes the picture.

Most problems don't last forever, and most don't affect everything in your life. Even if you do cause something to go wrong, you can learn not to do it again. And if you need to, you'll be surprised how fast you can find answers. It's inspiring to see how people who find out that they have, say, only six months to live suddenly achieve so much in that time.

What happens if you turn your story round? Past learning is the foundation for your future. Learning from mistakes is the most powerful form of learning. It is learning that you won't forget. Skills can be like riding a bike – if you have not used the skill for a while, you can easily forget you can do something. Just go out and find where you put the skill you had before, dust it off and polish it up. It may take a short while to become good again, but if you did it before, you can do it again now.

When gamblers or bankers make money, they think they are smart. When they lose money, they think they are unlucky. This may make you laugh or feel cleverer than a gambler or a banker. Actually, you might be surprised to learn that a healthy approach to life is to play up your successes and play down your failures like this.

Beating yourself up is rarely a good use of your time. When the urge comes to berate yourself, change the picture and think instead of some of your achievements in life or good times you have had.



We are community animals

You don't find happiness by looking for it or chasing it. Happiness comes as a result of doing something good, for yourself or for others. Studies show that people who help others are happier and live longer – everyone gains.

'The way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.'
– Mahatma Gandhi, independence campaigner

We are community animals and function best in a group. Doing something for others can give us a sense of value or purpose, make us happier and be rewarding in its own right. A good life involves others. Where are your unique skills going to help?

I was once at a conference on happiness. A Scottish GP and researcher, Lynne Friedli, got up to speak. 'I don't know why you are here,' she said. 'Happiness is not sitting in a warm conference room listening to presentations. It is about doing things *with* and *for* other people. If you do that, you'll be happy. So, go and do that. Go away.'

Nobody moved.

'Go away,' she repeated. 'Go away.'

Still no one moved. She gave her talk. It was interesting. Ten years on, though, the only part I can recall is her telling us to find happiness with others.

We do not need to do momentous things in life. If everyone only did momentous things, no one would go shopping, talk to friends or help those who need it. All we need to do is help the world spin a little bit more smoothly on its axis every day. I find sharing cups of tea a great example – just a little big thing – something that can make a real difference to someone else's day as well as your own.

I have a friend who has to ask for help to get her partner's wheelchair out of the car when she goes shopping. She always parks in a busy car park and then asks someone for help.

Some people are too busy or unable to help her.

Others are very happy to help and are rewarded with thanks and a big smile. They also go home knowing that they are good people – the type that helps elderly ladies in need. Not only that, but they are sure to feel quite a lot happier for the rest of that day.

My friend is performing a public service when she lets others help her!



It's not all about you

Realising that life is not all about you, and that most other people are more worried about themselves than about you, can be very liberating. It gives you more options in how you might act or react to others.

The pursuit of materialism is never satisfied. It's a natural human trait to fear other people's judgement. I do not believe that our main purpose in life should be to spend all our time worrying about whether we are adequate, and obsessing over what we want, what we have and what other people think of us. Do you?

Just as we shouldn't fear other people's judgement of us, we need to try and see the world from other people's points of view too. We do not need to judge others. What happens if you see the world from their point of view, being curious about them rather than judgemental? Why do we need to prove we are better than them?

Imagine you are going to meet some new people – an evening out with friends, a party, a job interview or a new school or job. Are you nervous? It's not a test or a pass or fail exam. It's an opportunity for you and the others to get to know each other better and see if you get on. How can you all get what you need? Perhaps you'll get on fine; perhaps you won't. Either way, it's for all of you to see if there is a fit – not just you. Share the pressure! Being less nervous will allow you to show your true self better.

If you are driving along and a car comes up close behind, the driver flashing their lights, hooting and trying to edge past. What are you doing wrong? Just let them go; it's not about you. Let them have the stress heart attack they are working so hard for!

Are you making your decisions based on what you want or what you think others want of you?

If you don't get what you want, or someone says something unkind, seeing it from their point of view can turn the situation upside down.

They don't like you? Their loss. They ignore you? Perhaps they are busy or distracted or having a bad day or self-absorbed. They don't like your clothes ... are they just saying that it's not their style? Or are they projecting their fears and insecurities or even envy on you?

Some things just aren't meant to be. Some things we set our hearts on just do not work out. Sometimes we try everything but nothing seems to work. In my experience, it's then best if we stop trying and roll with it. There always seems to be something different and better waiting around the corner for us all along.

When we keep pushing at doors that won't open, there may be a reason. We need to find a door that does open to our gifts and talents. A need that we can fill – one that will allow us to shine and help the world spin round a bit more smoothly each day.

It is my experience that some of the best decisions in my life were not made *by* me, but made *for* me by circumstances. I admit that they were not always easy to accept at the time – I do not think anyone likes things being forced upon them. It was only later that I came to see that the right path had opened for me. You never know what is just around the corner in life.



**Summary: It's easy to flood the bathtub
of life**



<p>Water flows in due to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trauma (get it rewound) • toxic environments • distressing events • substance abuse / addiction • losses of any kind • life transitions • illness / conflicts / difficult relationships – any toxic situation eats away at us over time • doing too much • poor sleep • holding grudges • chasing happiness, health or money – they will come when you are in a good place 	<p>Water flows out due to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physical activity • community / good friends • fun and laughter / relaxation / socialising • good sleep – get five cycles each night • understanding what's going on • taking control of what you can control • setting and achieving goals • having a satisfying job to do • eating sensibly (plants, plants, plants) • being in the flow state • counting your blessings • being in the outdoors (apparently people outdoors send kinder and more relaxed texts)
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Is it time to pull the plug out? Or turn off a tap or two?



Part 4. Practical exercises

In this part I describe some practical things you can do to help you thrive. For some, these things may be enough. Other people will need to go further and find a professional with whom they feel comfortable.

If you decide to go down the therapy route, research shows that the two main things that determine whether you will make the changes you want and need are (1) your motivation, and (2) whether you and your therapist get on together. If you and your therapist do not get on – it happens – change your therapist.

Please note that neither I nor the publisher can be held responsible for the use of information in this book. There are trained professionals who can help you. Talk to them first before treating yourself or others.

Asking yourself the right questions can be very revealing. Think about a change you may want to make.

Here's an example: I'm having problems getting up.

Instead of saying 'I cannot get up', I could say 'I won't get up' or 'I don't want to get up'. These different ways to frame this situation have very different effects on how I feel about getting up. This change allows me to see if I really cannot get up or if it's just something I don't want to do right now.

Some things are facts of life, and we cannot change them – try flapping your arms to fly. It's a bad idea to try and fix the things you can't change. Other things are doable, if we want them enough. And if you don't want something enough to make the changes required, don't beat yourself up about it. Go and find something you *do* care enough about.

Your turn. What change are you thinking about? Now say 'I *won't* do ...' (the change you are thinking about). Well? What happened? How much

do you want to change? Does it matter enough to you to put in the effort? Or are you actually happy to live with the way things are now?

Good luck! You are worth it.

Part 4. Practical exercises

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Breathing

Breathing is good. Whatever problem you are facing, it always helps to start by thinking about your breathing.

Every strong emotion we feel has a pattern of breathing to go with it. And vice versa. Every distinct pattern of breathing leads to a particular emotional state. Sighs tell us things about our mood too. Notice your sighs and ask yourself why you sighed.

We breathe shallowly and fast when we do intensive exercise. We also do this when we get stressed. Shallow breathing changes the amount of carbon dioxide in our blood and is part of setting us up for the fight, flight or freeze response we will act out when we feel our survival is threatened. It is not good to breathe like this all the time. It's like revving your car engine up to the max and going slowly, which just wears out the brakes and possibly the clutch and the gearbox too.

If you want to know if you are breathing normally, put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. The hand on your stomach should rise if you are doing normal diaphragmatic breathing. If only your chest hand moves, that is a sign of shallow, stressy breathing.

Here's a way you can quickly work with your breathing, which will help you to relax. Take a good breath in. Let it out, taking more time to breathe out than in. You can do this by counting, say to seven when you breathe in and ten when you breathe out.

Some people like to imagine they breathe in through their stomach and out through a 'third eye' in their forehead. This is known as **Zen breathing**. Either way, consciously breathe out for slightly longer than you breathe in.

When you breathe in, you arouse your sympathetic nervous system, which is the one you use to tense up. If you were going to hit someone, you'd take a breath in to hunch your shoulders and tighten your muscles.

Breathing out arouses the parasympathetic nervous system, which stimulates a relaxing 'rest and digest' response. You de-tense and relax as you breathe out.

After a few breaths, you will find yourself relaxing. Practise this exercise a few times a day, so that when you get to a stressful situation, it will be easy to remember to breathe properly.



Standing up tall

Feel the difference made by standing tall. Stand, puff your chest out and pull your shoulders back and down. Notice how this simple action changes how you feel about yourself. Are you feeling more alert and self-confident? It's a good place to start. Remember you can do this at any time, and it can be especially helpful before meeting a new person or starting a new task, for example.

People who are continually in a state of high alert, or hyperarousal, put extra stress on their bodies. They suffer more illness, get into more disputes and live up to ten years less. This is another reason why you may want to work on resolving any traumatic memories you have.

It is surprising how quickly we can get stuck in our ways. It's also surprising how quickly, once we decide we can escape, that we do escape.

Learned helplessness is the name given to the belief that we are incapable of accomplishing tasks where we think we have little or no control over our environment. The original experiments were done with dogs. Once they'd learned they could not escape, they gave up trying. Some time later the cages were unlocked so the dogs could just walk out, but they didn't even try. This learning happened surprisingly rapidly.

Humans act like this too. For example, a child who performs poorly in a maths test can quickly begin to feel that nothing they do will improve their performance.

Luckily, we can learn resourcefulness equally fast. Once we learn we can do something, we can improve rapidly. It is amazing how fast we can learn to make changes in our lives. Remember how fast you learned to use your first mobile phone. Perhaps you are not stuck or locked in. Perhaps you can escape. Maybe you could ask for help to get out. What will you do when you do?

A wise friend once gave me a brim-full glass of water and asked me not to spill it.

When I picked it up, some of the water lapped over the edge onto the floor.

'Ah', my friend said, 'it's easy. Put it down. Why do you need to carry it around with you?'

Knowing where to start

Many people know what issue they want to work on. Some of us don't. For those who don't, here is a quick way to examine your life.

Do you feel you ...	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
... are secure – you have a safe environment and can develop?					
... have autonomy and control – you can make responsible choices?					
... have a sense of status within social groupings? (Loss of status is the most common cause of depression in men.)					
... can have privacy to reflect and be yourself when you need it?					
... have good relationships with other people – you get attention, feel part of a wider community or family group, or have a good friend you can share your thoughts with?					
... are learning – you are growing and developing?					
... have purpose – you have goals and expectations, often shared with others?					

We all have emotional needs. When these are met, we feel good about ourselves (almost by definition – we are content with how we feel, so we feel OK). When some of our emotional needs are not fully met, we

feel there is a gap in our lives. Completing the table will allow you to see quickly where you stand emotionally.

If the first three of our emotional needs – security, control and status – are not met, we will feel threatened and so we will probably react strongly and emotionally.

When they are met, along with privacy, we can work on our three higher emotional needs – people, learning and purpose. This can be a very connected emotional space, where we are enabled to see the bigger picture of our lives. We are freed to use the resources we were born with and have developed over our lives to meet these emotional needs.

Are you happy with your scores? If there are areas you would like to work on, select one to start with that you feel is important to you. Once you have decided which area you want to work on, let's look at all the resources and strengths you have that are going to help you.



Thinking about your strengths

We all have many skills and abilities. Sometimes we don't even notice we have a particular skill. We take it for granted – it is just something we do. We forget we have other abilities, as we may not have used them for some time. They are still there, though. We might need to dust them off or polish them up, but they are not lost – just mislaid.

Now let's set a goal. What is it you are going to work on? Perhaps it is one of your emotional needs that is not being met today. Make your goal positive, as the brain works better with positive things. For example, rather than thinking about losing weight, make your goal about being thinner and your clothes fitting better.

Some people like to think about possible obstacles that might make their end goal harder, and what they would do if those obstacles arose. It helps them assemble a plan in their minds and avoid any pitfalls. It's up to you whether you do this bit.

Let's break that goal down. What is the very first step to meeting your goal? Think small, one step at a time, and focus on just the first step you will need to take.

Making a list of our skills and strengths is very helpful. You may need a friend (or a therapist) to work with on this. Often others will point out abilities we never consciously knew we had. Qualities like being kind, loyal, organised, social, wise or fun, or just a good person to have as a friend. People who have had a tough start in life often forget that they have had to be tough and determined just to survive – that in itself is a great strength.

Now think of ways you might achieve the vital first step. Are there things you did in the past that you could try again? If you used to be more social, could you now do some of what you did then? You probably need a mix of things you used to do well, with a couple of

new ideas. You don't need to be too specific at this stage. Just assemble some possibilities.

Good examples might be you wanting to meet some new people, or fit into a wider community, or try a new skill, or apply for a new job, or spend more time with your family.

Imagine the first step you need to take. Perhaps it is picking up the phone to talk to someone. Do you need to rehearse what you'd say first? Or perhaps you'd just call.

Now imagine yourself doing that first step of your goal. Practise doing it in your mind.

When top sportspeople want to add a new play or stroke to their game, they often mentally rehearse it. This helps rewire their brains in readiness before they go out on the court, pitch or track.

You can even practise your emotional responses: actors do this in rehearsals so they react in the right emotional way when they act on stage. So when sportspeople or actors perform, their brains are primed, ready and waiting to allow them to succeed.

In your mind, using your senses, *see* and *feel* and *hear* yourself succeeding. Use taste and smell too if they are relevant. Engage your powerful imagination and see and feel and hear yourself doing the task well, using your strengths and skills. Enjoy what you are doing – you can be all-powerful in your imagination.

When you have completed this task, come back to reality. Take your time. Before doing anything else, celebrate! In your mind, go through the bits you did well. Feel good in your imagination about what you did. Congratulate yourself. This also helps the brain rewire, ensuring it is ready when you take the step in real life.



Changing habits: Start small

When you are learning to run races, it is of course best not to start with a marathon.

Whatever you want to achieve, start small, so you have less of a hurdle to overcome.

An example is if you want to get fit. Perhaps you promise yourself you will go to the gym for an hour three times a week. That's a huge change in your life. It will be hard to keep the motivation going. One day you might sleep in – it's cold and wet outside, so you give the gym a miss. Once you have missed the gym once, somehow it becomes easier to decide to give it a miss some other time. And then? Setting big targets makes it harder to succeed.

To make any change a habit, you need to rewire your emotional brain, rather than relying on your thinking brain to motivate (or bully!) you. Change is usually hard, as our identity is tied into how we act and what we do. So start with a small change, and use your emotions to help you.

Think of the change you want to make, for instance de-stressing or getting organised. Start with a small step. Take just a part of what you want to achieve – something that requires no real effort. Choose something quick that you want to do so it makes you feel good. It's easier if the change brings a smile to your face or has a small chunk of fun involved.

Make this change a natural fit in your daily routine. Think of something you do every day. Brushing your teeth. Making tea. Waiting at the bus stop. You are going to use that regular something to remind you of – to 'anchor' you to – your new habit.

Do the new habit afterwards. Anchor, then habit. Examples might be:

- After I put the kettle on, I will exhale and relax for two seconds.
- After I go into my room, I will put one thing away, or read one sentence in a book, or silence my phone, or study for two minutes.
- After I clean my teeth, I will floss one tooth.

Now imagine yourself doing the new habit. Rehearse it in your mind. It helps get the brain ready.

When you actually do the habit, celebrate immediately afterwards, like a footballer scoring a goal. Congratulate yourself. Feeling good about something makes the brain rewire faster. The stronger the emotion, the more your brain rewires. (Think how you feel good when you eat chocolate or have a glass of wine after a stressful day – these habits are easy to learn.)

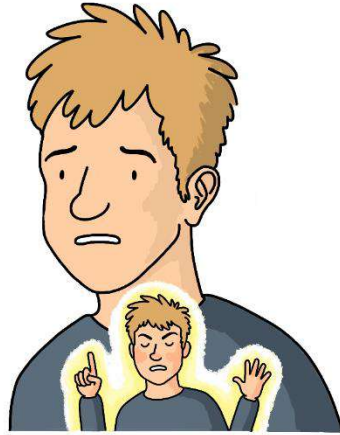
Repeat. Every time you do your new tiny habit and celebrate your success, you are rewiring your brain. This makes it easier to make other changes in the future. Keep going for at least a week and see how it works out.

If it does not work, then either you don't really want the change you have chosen or it was not right in some other way. If it's not working, change your plan. This is so much nicer and more successful than beating yourself up. Act smart. If something does not work out, we need to learn and then do something different.

◆ Talking to your inner critic

Do you have an inner critic? A little voice that doubts you can do something and makes you fear you're going to be bad at it or make a fool of yourself?

First of all, you need to accept that your inner critic is there for a reason. It has evolved as a protection mechanism.



What would happen if you stopped and listened and understood what that voice is doing and why? What if you worked *with* it? There is no point in fighting it, as it's part of you and it's trying to protect you. Your inner critic part wants to keep you safe from failure and humiliation.

Perhaps it thinks that the best way to do this is to prevent you from ever trying anything difficult. How would you find out why it acts as it does and what it is protecting you from? The answer: ask it. Here's how:

- First, find your inner critic in your body. Is it in your head? Your stomach? Or somewhere else? Has it a shape, or a colour, or a personality? Be curious. Give it a name perhaps.
- Ask it: What are you trying to tell me? Wait for the answer. It may take some time.
- Ask: What are you afraid will happen if I do this? Again, wait for the answer.

- Now ask: If I could heal or change that outcome so I'm not so fearful, would you continue to act like this? This answer is usually no.

This may be enough to allow you to work on resolving your issue. It may be that it highlights an issue from childhood or an emotional need that is unmet. Depending on what you find, you may need further support to help you resolve your issue. Knowing what the issue is, though, gives you a place to start.

◆ Making friends with yourself

We are made up of parts, any of which we may neglect or even abuse. If a bit of us does not work, is fighting it going to fix it? It's no good fighting emotions – they are part of us. We often don't listen to our emotions or act on what they tell us, though.

Make friends with your emotions. Find out why they act as they do and what they are trying to protect you from.



Here is an exercise. Inside you, especially if you had a tough childhood, there may be a little, lost version of you, which is probably stuck in time. Why don't you go and visit that younger version of you and see how they are? You could learn from them, reassure or help them. Or you could both just get to know each other better.

Once you decide to go and see this younger version of you, you may well find an emotion pops up. For example, that emotion might be fear. Talk to the fear as if it were a friend. Has it got a name or does it remind you of anyone? What is it wearing? It is a part of you, and it wants to protect you. It is doing its best to do so. Thank it. Apologise to the emotion for ignoring it for so long. Ask politely for it to step to one

side, as you are older and wiser now. It can watch what you do and step back in if it needs to. Don't do anything until it agrees to step aside. Above all, be polite and respectful, and give it time. Be gentle with the emotion; it is a part of you.

Often when the emotion has agreed to step aside and watch, another emotion such as anxiety will come up. Again, thank it, apologise and ask it to step aside and watch. Work with whatever comes up and don't proceed until you get agreement from it that you may. This may take a while. Always be polite and respectful to your emotional reactions, rather than feeling annoyed with them or trying to dismiss them completely.

When you are all in agreement, gently go and look inside again for your younger self. Apologise to them for ignoring them for so long and ask what you might do to help or be friends. You'll need to come back and see your younger you again some time in the future. For now, do what they ask. Hug them, give them the toys or clothes or love they never had. Listen. Promise to come back soon (and do so).

Come back out, and thank any emotions you encountered for their help today and in the past. Tell them that they no longer need to act as protective fears in the way they did before. They can learn a new and more useful role as emotions to help you move on in life. What would they like to do? Treat them as the friends they are. Normally they will be happy to help you – they just got stuck in your troubled past and haven't known how else to act.

Don't forget to talk to those fears again soon, and go back and revisit your younger you. They are a likeable version of you, just a little lost. You are reintegrating yourself and becoming whole again.

◆ Revisiting difficult people from your past

You are not alone. There is a book called *Toxic Parents – Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life*. It has sold over a million copies, and that is just one book of many on this subject. A lot of people have had tricky pasts.

Have you a difficult adult or parent in your past?

Start by thinking of the person you have difficulty with sitting in a chair in front of you, facing away. Come up behind them quietly, so they don't notice you. And imagine massaging their shoulders.

Do a great job, really feeling the stress knots in their shoulders and kneading them until they relax. (I'm not suggesting you actually do this! Just imagine it.)



How is the person in front of you reacting? What is happening? What are they saying? What do you feel?

What do you want or need to tell them? Are there hurts that you'd like to tell them or ask about?

Imagine saying to them what you need to say. And imagine what they say or don't say or what they do in response. They may have no idea that they hurt you, or deny it, or have no understanding. Perhaps their

upbringing meant that they never learned to love, or how to show consideration or affection. Just say what you need to say.

Have the conversation you'd have liked to have had with them when you were younger, although as you are older and more life-experienced now, you can be braver and control what needs to be said.

Complete the conversation, which means that you have taken control of the past. And then move your life on in the way you'd like to.

Sometimes you may even want to imagine doing this to yourself.

- What would you say to your younger self?
- What might the younger you say to you?
- What reassurance would you give each other?



Letting your brain solve your problems

If there is something you want to do, framing it in the positive will make it easier. That's how the brain works. I *want* to learn to dance. I *want* to meet new people. I *want* to paint.

It's easier to run towards something than run away from it. If you run towards something, then you know where you want to get, and you keep going until you get there. If you run away, then how far do you have to run to be far enough away?

'In the dim background of mind we know what we ought to be doing but somehow we cannot start.'

– William James, philosopher and psychologist

The brain is a very creative problem-solving machine. Give it something to solve and it works away, teasing at the edges until it comes up with ideas, often when you are not expecting them. Have you ever had a sudden bright thought in the middle of the night or in the shower? That's what the brain does. It looks for patterns and compares what it sees with what it already knows, even when you are not aware of it doing so.

You can make it easier for your brain. Tell it what the issue is. And tell it too what is stopping you from making the change. An example is when you think something like *I want a holiday, and I have no one to go with.*

I want a holiday is just a wish. *I want to find someone to go with* is an issue that can be resolved. Let the brain ponder. It will work away on your issue. Talk to your friends and tell them too. The more brains that work on the question, the better. Prepare to be amazed.

The words 'and' and 'but' have very different effects on our brain. There is a reason why 'and' is often better – the word 'but' can stop our brain making connections.

Here is an example:

*I want to go on holiday, **but** I cannot ...* What does that mean? You don't really want the holiday?

I want to go on holiday [emotional statement] **and** *I cannot ...* [logical statement usually added here]

The 'and' lets both your emotional and logical brain work together on the thought. Working together, they will give you better insights.

Sometimes, if you cannot see what the problem is, it helps to use a different sense to examine your situation. Most of us have a dominant sense – sight, sound or touch. That's the way we see the world. Or hear the world. Or feel how the world is. You might decide to draw your problem, write about it, sing about it, model it in clay or tell someone else about it. Switch off your thinking brain when you are doing this and go with the flow.

No analysis allowed here! Let your emotions do the work. What might you feel when the problem is resolved? After you have finished these exercises, you can talk or think about the result, and enjoy the new insights you have gained.

When you know what the issue is, and you state it properly with the reason it is an issue, you are already on the way to a solution.

Fixing your nightmares

Nightmares do not have endings, as you wake up in the middle of them before they finish. Dreams, though, have happy endings.

What would happen if you completed the story being told in your nightmare with an ending that you liked? It would turn it into a dream, and doing so can stop it recurring.

If you keep waking up in the middle of the same nightmare, when you are awake the next day, give it an ending you prefer. The more enthusiastic you are about the ending, the better this works. Fill it with things you like. Bring in all your senses – taste, feeling, smell, sight, and sound.

Jason keeps waking up from a nightmare where lots of horrible beasties break into his room. It's very unpleasant and scary.

When awake the next day, he decides to invent a better ending. In his new ending, he grabs a net and a broom and sweeps all the beasties into the net. He takes them to the local zoo. The zookeeper is over the moon with Jason's catch. 'We've been wanting some of these for years', he says. 'These are excellent specimens of really rare beasties. Wow! Thank you so much!'

The zookeeper takes Jason out for a slap-up meal to thank him. They have a great time and become firm friends.

Jason now sleeps through the night without remembering any dreams and his nightmare has never reappeared.

Whatever your nightmare, take time out during the day to invent a happy ending to complete the story. Imagine everything as clearly as you can – a whole new, positive ending, which turns it into a good dream. This really can eradicate a recurring nightmare.

Some ways to handle grief

We will all suffer from loss in life, for example the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship or the death of a pet. Everyone reacts differently to loss, and there is no quick fix. You will have emotional wounds to heal. You are likely to wonder how you can imagine a happy life without that person while being true to the memories you shared.

Grief is the way we respond to loss. Many of us are surprised by the intensity of our feelings of grief. We have lost something that is part of who we are and of how we make sense of our life. Grief shares a lot of the same symptoms as depression. We feel shock and numbness – ‘being in a daze’, overwhelming sadness and crying, physical exhaustion, guilt, and anger towards the person we’ve lost or the reason for the loss. Our brains need to rewire and allow us to gradually connect to a new life. This transition takes time and we can feel very alone while it is happening.

Talking to someone else who knew the person or who can understand your loss is a good way to help work through your feelings. You may find that some of your friends find it difficult to talk to you about your loved one. People are often frightened they will say the wrong thing or cause you more pain. However, people being afraid to talk to you can increase your feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Look after yourself, and seek others to support you if there is no one close to you who can. You might want to search for a support group, a therapist or a suitable helpline.

If your grief persists and you still feel angry or guilty or overwhelmingly sad, think about writing a letter to the person you have lost. Writing things down gets them out into the world, and helps stop your brain from going over and over the same thoughts.

Start the letter by apologising for any things you did wrong or were unfinished. Things like:

- I'm sorry I shouted at you the last time we met.
- I apologise for not showing my love for you better.
- I apologise for not realising how alone you must have felt.
- I'm sorry I did not listen.

Then forgive them for any hurts they may have caused you, for example:

- I forgive you for being unfaithful.
- I forgive you for leaving me so suddenly.

Finally, say anything that you wanted to say and could not at the time, or need to say now.

- I would like to say that I always loved you.
- I want you to know how proud I am of you.

It's not a letter to be sent, and probably not ever shared.

It's just an act of love for you and them.

'It's not how long you live, but how broad.'

– Anon

Part 5. Resources

This part contains reference information, such as the sources I have found useful and where you might look if you wanted to find out more. There is also a glossary, with definitions and links to the parts of the text where I say more about the term.

Part 5. Resources

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Getting help

If you want to find help, then I suggest you look for a therapist who can deal with your core emotional issues with guided imagery, metaphor, stories or Rewinds. Talking about things over several weeks, doing talk-based therapy or cognitive based therapy (CBT), helps some. Often it is not enough. For instance, we know overeating will make us oversized, but knowing that and stopping eating too much are very different things.

No single school of therapy is perfect or suits everyone. Indeed, research shows that your motivation and a good relationship with your therapist are the most important factors in getting a good outcome in therapy. Find a therapist that suits you. Ask around for recommendations.

I admit my bias here. Many of the ideas in this book come from Human Givens. In my experience, having learned about a range of different approaches and therapies, and helped lots of people to overcome a range of issues, I have found the Human Givens approach quickly obtains good outcomes for most of its clients.

Human Givens therapists will work with you to ensure that you get back into emotional balance – where your emotional needs are met – and will work on any underlying emotional issues too, such as trauma. They can be found through <https://www.hgi.org.uk/find-therapist?>

Glossary



See also the section on sources, page 132.

		More on page
ACE	Adverse childhood experience	29, 132
Acute	Short-term (when used medically), as opposed to chronic	35
Amygdala	The part of the brain involved in experiencing emotions	27
Brainstem	The oldest part of the brain. It controls vital functions such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature and balance	9
Cognitive dissonance	Feeling uncomfortable when the new information we have just received disagrees with what we thought was true	61
Chronic	Long-term (when used medically), as opposed to acute	35

Confirmation bias	Only seeing evidence that confirms our beliefs and ignoring or not recalling evidence that disagrees. We often even belittle or attack those who present us with evidence that contradicts our position	44
Culture shock	The reassessment of our values and beliefs following experience of another culture	43
Depression	A state of mind where people feel and worry about being unhappy or hopeless	37
Developmental trauma	Trauma caused by childhood neglect or abuse. Also called complex trauma	29
Dissociation	Looking at your thoughts from a distance. This allows you to examine your thought processes in a detached way	70
Emotion	Strong feeling such as love or fear	9, and pages after
Emotional hijack	Emotions taking over so we cannot think rationally	22
Emotional needs	Feelings or conditions that we need to be met to be happy and fulfilled	130
Empathy	Feeling pity or sorrow for someone else	31
Flow state	A complete focus on the achievement of a difficult but satisfying challenge	90
Group narrative	The set of beliefs we hold, or stories of who we are that make up our identity – how we see ourselves. We get so used to our story, we may not know that others have different views and stories	43

Growth mindset	The belief that our intelligence, skills or talent are not fixed and that we need to practise to improve	82
Hedonic adaptation	The tendency for us to quickly return to a relatively stable level of happiness, despite major recent positive or negative events or life changes	89
Hippocampus	Involved in the formation of new memories, learning and emotions	68
Human Givens	A way to treat mental health and behavioural issues by helping people use their innate abilities and resources to meet their emotional needs	130, 132
Learned helplessness	A state where repeated adverse situations make us believe that we have no control over the situation and we give up trying	104
Libet delay	The time that signals take to get from the emotional brain to the thinking brain (usually reckoned to be up to half a second)	11
Limbic system	The part of the brain that reacts emotionally	9
Musterbation	The belief that the world must change, not me	59
Neocortex	The thinking brain – the part of the brain that processes conscious thoughts and language	9
Neuron	The key cells in our brain and nervous system	18

Neuroplasticity	The ability of the neurons in our brain to reorganise themselves so the brain can do new things or get better at existing skills	18
Parasympathetic nervous system	Calms and relaxes us. It slows our heart rate, increases digestion and conserves our energy	33
Polyvagal theory	A theory to explain how we react differently in different circumstances, using our vagus nerve	33
Psychological injury (PI)	The theory that our (social) environment causes us mental distress	134
Psychological reversal	Fear of letting go of problems	59
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder	27
REM	Rapid eye movement – happens in the part of sleep where we dream most. You can see people’s eyelids twitch when they are in this state	39, 42
Rewind	Successful non-invasive method to treat PTSD	70, 124
Secondary gain	Not wanting to get better or change, as being ill benefits us in some way	59
Self-harm	Deliberate injury to oneself, often as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences	49
Stress	Physical or emotional response to difficult experiences	35, 37
Sympathetic nervous system	Directs the body’s rapid and involuntary response to dangerous or stressful situations	33

Sympathy	Understanding or sharing the feelings that another person is experiencing. See empathy	
Trauma	A deeply distressing or upsetting experience	27, 31, 57
Vagus nerve	A nerve that connects the brain to the heart, lungs, and digestive tract	33

Human Givens

'If you are depressed and anxious, you are not a machine with malfunctioning parts. You are a human being with unmet needs. The only real way out of our epidemic of despair is for all of us, together, to begin to meet those human needs – for deep connection, to the things that really matter in life.'
– Johann Hari, writer

Plants need water, air, sunlight and nutrients to grow strong and healthy and reproduce. They have an innate ability to develop roots and grow to make sure these needs are met.

Human Givens recognises that we too are born with physical and also emotional needs. Our physical needs include food, warmth and shelter. Emotional needs can be split into the lower needs: security, control, status and privacy; and the higher needs: people, learning and purpose. When our lower needs are not met, we get fearful or anxious and react strongly. The search to have our higher needs met is more nuanced and thoughtful, involving our creativity and imagination.

Normally we get our needs met. Not all of our needs all of the time, but most of them most of the time. Like plants, we are born knowing how to get what we need, and these capabilities continue to develop during our lives. When we feel a need, such as for food or privacy, we act to get it satisfied. Because our emotional needs are so vital to our wellbeing, normally when some are not met, we use our innate abilities to attempt to fulfil our needs. When this works well, and our emotional needs are satisfied, our lives are good.

When our needs go unmet, we experience stress, anxiety or depression, and perhaps even more severe emotional and mental health concerns. These are signals that we are missing out in some areas of our life.

Because our psychological needs are part of us from birth, we call them – and the innate resources we have to help us meet them – human ‘givens’. They are the givens and drivers of human nature.

The key reasons why our needs might not be met are as follows.

- We live in a toxic environment, such as an abusive relationship, a bad work situation or poverty, that prevents us from getting our basic needs met.
- Our internal guidance system is damaged, perhaps from birth, through an accident or due to trauma overwhelming us.
- We lack the knowledge about how to meet our needs – we may not have learned (yet) how to do things well. For instance, we may not be good at making friends, although it is a skill that can be modelled and taught.

Human Givens provides a practical and insightful model into why we may be unhappy, struggling, anxious or depressed.

Working with a Humans Givens therapist will enable you to clearly recognise your unmet needs. You will then learn ways to use your resources and your natural abilities to get your needs met and put your life back on track.

Sources

If you want to know more about the things in this book, here are some sources to check. Google is a good place to start.

Human Givens – www.hgi.org.uk or the book *Human Givens: The new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* by Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell. Human Givens covers many interesting areas such as why we dream, the need for sleep, depression, Rewinds to treat trauma, how the brain works and what we need for good mental health. It's a long book, but full of great information and useful ideas.

Polyvagal theory – books by Stephen Porges and the work of Deb Dana.

Psychological injury – articles by Eric Kuelker, PhD, RPsych on the Mad in America website, www.madinamerica.com

Growth mindset – the book *Mindset – Changing the Way You Think to Fulfil Your Potential* by Dr Carol Dweck, and her TED talks on www.ted.com

Trauma – as well as in *Human Givens*, above, there is a lot of interesting stuff in the book *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) – the impact of these was discovered in the *CDC-Kaiser ACE study* of obesity started in 1990. Here is a good article on the subject: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6220625

Where you feel emotions in your body – I learned this from therapist Andrew T Austin. It's not always 100% accurate, but it usefully makes us think about the mind–body connection of our emotions.

Emotional decisions – neuroscientist Antonio Damasio studied people with brain injuries that meant they did not feel emotions. He found that made it very hard for them to make decisions, even though they could

describe logically what the decision should be. Other research asked people to press a red button on request. Brains scans showed that here too the emotional brain was in charge.

Tiny changes – look online for TED Talks by BJ Fogg, or read his book *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything*.

'To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children;
to earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;
to appreciate beauty;
to find the best in others;
to leave the world a bit better
whether by a healthy child, a garden patch,
or a redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.'

– unknown, based on poem by Bessie Anderson Stanley

● Afterword – Psychological injury

'All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.'
– Arthur Schopenhauer, philosopher

George Washington was killed by his doctors. It wasn't intentional – they were trying to save the life of the first US President. They believed that sickness was due to an excess of 'humours', or fluids in the body (bile, phlegm, blood, etc). To cure his throat infection, they removed 40% of his blood in 12 hours. He was killed by an incorrect understanding of what caused his illness.

'History shows that it is difficult to persuade the established order to accept revolutionary design change.'
– Bill Summers, inventor

Hungarian physician Ignaz Semmelweis found that if doctors washed their hands before they delivered a baby, then the death rate from infection plummeted from 10% to less than 1%. (Non-hospital babies at the time had a lower than 4% death rate.) Doctors 'knew better' and refused to wash their hands until Louis Pasteur discovered germs. A new explanation changed their actions.

Wrong theories can kill.

Many people believe mental ill-health has biological causes – chemical imbalances in the brain or genetic issues. Research does not support this theory. We have not identified which these chemicals are or how they get unbalanced. We know that stress and other mental problems affect how we think and behave. There is no biological test that can diagnose a mental disorder.

'It is not events that upset us, but our interpretation of those events.'

– Epictetus, Stoic philosopher

If poor mental health is not caused by biology, is there a better theory to explain why we get problems? A theory that would show us better ways to help people?

The **psychological injury (PI)** model of mental wellbeing says that neglect, abuse, disrespect, traumatic events or chaos in our social environment are the causes of most mental health problems. Trauma or difficult childhoods can psychologically injure us, as the study of obese patients that identified adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) showed.

We may not need a medical diagnosis; we may just need our story to be heard. Our brain is not broken, but our spirit may be.

'Facts' change all the time. Doctors used to recommend smoking. Many medical schools today say that half of the medical knowledge they teach student doctors will be shown to be wrong in 25 years. They just don't know which half.

New, better understanding of the brain will come along. Sometimes good, older ideas get lost.

Keep an open mind and keep looking. I wish you every success.

Keith Walton, Author



Keith started his working life as an engineer, spending his days understanding what made things work and what to do when they didn't. He has spent the last 20 years using the same approach and passion to look at what makes us work well. What makes us function well and be happy, and what we can do when we are not in a good place?

He has refined his knowledge working as a hypnotherapist with NHS patients, and as a Human Givens therapist with NHS staff and the public to find out which techniques really can and do make a difference.

Keith has an Advanced University Diploma in Hypnosis and Stress Management and is a member of the Human Givens Institute.

Lottie Brocklesby, Illustrator

Lottie is a freelance artist studying filmmaking at university.

She lives in Surrey and enjoys riding her unicycle.



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Are you stressed, lacking confidence, getting flashbacks or panic attacks?

Life has its highs and lows. We all feel lost some of the time. These emotions are a message from your body: things are not working out for you. It could be time to do something different.

Imagine what life could be like if you could work *with* your emotions to make your life easier. Use smart ways to hear what your body is telling you and act on its wisdom. This book tells you how.

Therapist Keith Walton has helped many people to understand what their emotions are telling them. Twenty years of research – courses, books, seminars and working with clients – has helped him discover what works and what does not. This knowledge and experience is distilled into this short and straightforward book. It is full of simple and practical ways for you to alter your own approach to life and improve your mental wellbeing.

Understanding your emotions changes your life.

