

A Love Letter To Books - 24th January 2019



The bookshelves in front of me are crammed with books that entertain me, make me laugh, think, help me learn, distract me, remind me of the beauty of the world, or I just need to have the book in my house, even if I'll never get round to reading it - Don Quixote I'm looking at you...

Like many of us I'm all too often distracted in quiet moments by my phone, which brings me the audio visual overload of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Many an hour has been spent idly flicking between amusing videos, half paying attention instead of wallowing in the joy of being lost in a book. But when I do pick up a good book I'm transported into another world, engrossed in the trials and tribulations of the characters, and I remember, this is why I love books.

Each book is its own self-contained world, limited only by the creativity of the author and the imagination of the reader. The author Matt Haig summarises this well:

Aren't bookshops strange, sitting there with quiet menace, as if they were just a shop and not an entry point to 30,000 different universes?

The most widely travelled and open-minded of us will still only experience a fragment of what the world has to offer. A book enables us to catch a glimpse of what remains out of reach. To gaze in wonder at the beautiful places, or to feel the excitement and tension of locations too dangerous to visit in real life. And these are just the books that describe our world now. We can travel back in time, read stories projected into the future, or visit strange places limited only by the author's imagination. The possibilities are endless.

It's not just escapism that books offer us. Stories are important; they're integral to our very nature, the way in which we explain our lives. For those without a narrative thread, life is an unpredictable chaotic mess. To enter into someone else's narrative is a privilege that expands our own horizons.

Reading about other lives, whether real or fictional, grows our ability to empathise with others. It shows us the little similarities that link us all, putting ourselves in their shoes and perhaps shifting our own views.

The stories we read are shaped by the world around us and our common history. Joseph Campbell speaks of the common myths that underpin society and the stories we have told for millennia. Jung writes of the collective unconscious that binds us all, and archetypes, those patterns and images that arise and appear in our stories. To name just one, the 'Wise Man' archetype is played out in the role of Yoda, Gandalf, Dumbledore, and a thousand more characters from the stories we love.

Books have more power than offering a few moments of diversion. The tales we read mix with the stories of our own lives and influence the narrative of our future. The stories we've read stay with us, guide our expectations, strengthen us, and shape our goals. Books, and the stories within them are part of the essential fabric of our lives.

How To Enjoy Christmas If You Don't Like Christmas - 12th December 2018



So the festive season is upon us again. We're surrounded by images of cosy Christmas couples wrapped up warm, and families with beaming children opening large, elegantly wrapped presents beneath a beautifully decorated tree, reminding us all of the way that Christmas 'should be'.

But what if you don't like Christmas? What if for you Christmas is a stark reminder of past losses, of get-togethers that no longer happen? Of friends and lovers you've lost touch with, or those that have passed away. What if you don't care about decorations, trees or sending cards to people you've not spoken to for a decade? What if you can see that it's nice for other people to enjoy, but it just doesn't grab you any more? What then?

It's tough if you don't want to celebrate Christmas, if you just want to move on whilst the world revels in festive cheer. What's important is that you look after yourself during this difficult time. Here are a few ideas to help you manage this time of year.

Take control. In the build up to Christmas, decide which, if any, parts you like. If you like a good sing-song, then go to a carol concert. If you love shopping, then take advantage of the infinite variety of things on offer in town. If you like the cold, crisp weather, put on your hat and scarf and get out and about. If the cold makes you want to snuggle up under a blanket in front of the TV watching 'Strictly Come Dancing' then so be it. If you can't stand absolutely anything about Christmas, then prepare your Netflix list, or get some of your favourite films in as a buffer between you and the Christmas world.

Spend time with your friends. You know, the good ones, the ones that don't care if you don't wish them a Merry Christmas, the ones that accept your grumpy aversion to Christmas hats and terrible jumpers. It can be tempting to isolate yourself from others, but even if you're more Grinch than Bob Cratchitt your friends are still there for you.

Decide what to do with the space the Christmas holidays give you. You may need to suffer family dinners and overcooked turkey, but this only needs to be endured for a couple of days. Many of us are lucky to have a week off for Christmas, so after the cross-country journey and the forced conversations with great Aunt Marge, there's still some time for you. Perhaps it's a space to do nothing but read for a few days, to get out in the countryside, to binge watch Netflix, or to engross yourself in a video game marathon. Amongst the family commitments remember to set your boundaries to ensure there's time for you and your needs during the Christmas holiday.

Remember your friends and family. Friendships and families are often spread across the country, the continent or the globe. Social media has enabled us to keep in regular contact with our loved ones, but the connections are often shallow – a quick call here, a WhatsApp message there. Christmas is a chance to pause and remember the deep connections you have with those closest to you. Sure, some of them will drive you mad, but spending quality time with your loved ones is just as likely to remind you of the good things about them too.

Christmas is a difficult time for many, but you have more control than you think. Make sure you look after yourself, and take the opportunity to decide how you'd like to do Christmas for you.

You Can't Always Get What You Want - 21 November 2018



Recently I was listening to a popular music streaming app, and on came “You can’t always get what you want” by the Rolling stones. Hearing it inspired me to write an article about this very simple concept, as no matter how much you plan, how hard you work, or how much money you have, there will still be times when you can’t get what you want.

It’s almost impossible to watch TV or go outside without adverts encouraging you to want more, earn more and spend more. We live in a consumer society, which makes it important for us to want things. If no-one wanted for anything then all those businesses precariously balanced upon our consumer needs would fail, and perhaps bring the whole system down on our heads. One problem with this system is that it makes us believe we should always be able to get what we want, ideally with next day delivery.

I’m not suggesting we shouldn’t want things at all. A desire to explore, to want growth and change is implicit in human nature. Without it we’d never have sailed uncertain seas, explored uncharted lands, or set foot upon the moon. But it’s also normal that we don’t always get what we want. When Christopher Columbus set off in 1492 he wanted to find a westerly sea passage to China and India. What he stumbled upon was the Americas. He didn’t get what he wanted, but he’s still remembered for his discoveries more than 500 years later. So perhaps Columbus got what he needed.

It can be hard to accept life’s boundaries and limitations, but if we look at children we can see that such limits are important. Has anyone spent any time with a child whose parent or carer hasn’t taught them boundaries? How would it be to raise a child who always gets everything they want, who has never been told ‘no’? This seems the quickest way to create a monster, one that never has to weigh up the views of others, to compromise and consider the perspective of others. Life is a compromise, and learning to accept our limitations helps us develop self-control, patience and tolerance.

The problem with only focusing on what you want is that your attention turns to what you’re missing. You become acutely aware of what you lack, with scant attention paid to the things you have. It doesn’t grow gratefulness in what you already possess. And objectively, we possess so much. Fifty years ago we didn’t need storage units or overflowing garages to store all of our junk, we just didn’t have so many things. You only have to ask your parents or grandparents what they used to own to find out that they survived with far less.

There’s also a difference between what we want and what we actually need. Perhaps you want a great job, a big house or a nice car. Is this because you deeply need it, or because someone else has it? It might turn out that what you really need is more challenge in your current job, a simple home that’s convenient for work, and a reliable car that doesn’t add to your stress on a busy workday. What you actually need is often less exciting than what you want.

Boundaries are important. Life is limited. It's healthy that we don't get what we want all the time. Accepting this fact helps us to be grateful for what we have, to accept what we don't, to mourn our losses, and to make the most of the circumstances we find ourselves in.

You can't always get what you want. Thank goodness.

Get Creative with your commute and improve your wellbeing – 7th September 2018



September is upon us, so for many the commute has returned to the pre-summer crush. The stress and anxiety associated with commuting is well known, and not only when public transport doesn't work as planned. The average commute for workers is around an hour a day¹, and studies show that commuting reduces wellbeing², with longer commutes having a greater impact³. All that time adds up too. Just an hour a day commuting works out at 240 hours per year, the equivalent of an extra 30 working days.

One of the hardest elements of the commute is the lack of control. There's usually just one route to work and one realistic choice of transport. You are at the whim of traffic issues, strikes, breakdowns and signalling failures, and there's very little you can do about it, as changing jobs, work hours, or relocating are unlikely options in the short term.

But there is one choice you can make. Why not decide what you want from your commute? Is there anything you can do to take back control? Whether you want a space to switch off or to feel you've achieved something during your commute, you have the option to choose. It may seem unlikely, but it's possible to meditate during a crowded train or bus journey⁴. There are many guides available online and lots of free meditation apps to guide you through the process.

Perhaps you need to feel some tangible progress, to have something to show for all those hours commuting. A few years ago I commuted for three hours a day, three days a week. I was also studying at University, and found that all the time on the train gave me the space to complete my required reading. As a result my stress about commuting was reduced, because studying during my commute gave me more freedom at other times. If you're not studying, using the commute to prepare for your work day can make you feel more in control and help you deal with a longer commute.⁵

When it comes to finding something meaningful in your commute, you are only limited by your imagination. Commuters have taken up photography, painting, jewellery making, or even writing a novel⁶. Although not compatible with traditional British sensibilities, another option may be to talk to your fellow commuters. A Greek study has suggested that contrary to participant expectations,

people feel better when they talk to strangers on their commute⁷. You don't have to take it as far as the group of commuters who arranged their own Christmas party⁸, but even making a brief connection with a fellow commuter can have a positive effect upon your day.

For many of us, commuting is a fact of life. It can be a source of stress and frustration, but it doesn't always need to be that way. If you accept your commute and choose how to make it work for you, there's a chance to see it as something to look forward to rather than dread.

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Music Is The Closest Thing We Have To Time Travel - 23rd July 2018



Humans have been making music for longer than we have been able to read or write - archaeologists have found musical instruments that date back to prehistoric times. It seems that we've always needed to make music, to tell stories, to communicate and entertain. Whether you're singing out loud, listening to a song or quietly humming a tune to yourself, you're repeating something that we've done for tens of thousands of years, an urge that has long been present within us.

Music is powerful. A song heard on the radio can trigger long-forgotten memories of some event many years past. The song is a key that opens the door to those memories. Through music it's possible to be transported to holidays, student days, childhood road trips, weddings, funerals and any number of significant events in our past. Music is the closest thing to time travel we have ever invented.

There's a song that fits every emotion, an artist that fits every attitude and interest. Whatever your favourite style of music, it will talk about love, loss and hope and all facets of human existence. Finding the right song in the right moment helps us to manage the difficulties of life, to have an outlet for our emotions. Listening to a song that "fits" gives us a safe space, somewhere to express or feel emotions in a more manageable way¹.

Sometimes the lyrics of the right song can express what you're feeling but unable to put into words yourself. And this is the magic of music. After a break up there's no universal song that people listen to that resonates with a broken heart. Depending on your tastes you might listen to Fleetwood Mac's "Go Your Own Way", The Streets' "Dry Your Eyes Mate", Coldplay's "The Scientist", Adele's "Someone Like You" or a thousand others. Our musical tastes come in all shapes and sizes, and although the emotions we feel are the same, the music we use to evoke them will differ greatly.

Music seems to be hard wired to get straight into our heads – that's why businesses spend so much money on advertising jingles. The only reason that I remember that "washing machines live longer

with calgon”, is because I remember the tune, even though I’ve never bought the product. The tune is lodged in my brain somewhere, and the words came along for the ride too.

In the medical world music has therapeutic value too. Studies have also shown that music works to calm anxiety before surgery, and that it helps reduce pain for children undergoing painful procedures². Music has been used to help those with dementia to connect to previously lost parts of themselves. In times of distress and confusion music can bring something familiar to someone suffering, helping them remain calm, Music uses different parts of the brain than language and can still be effective even with those who can no longer communicate verbally³.

Music is something that’s ingrained within us, it can be used to relieve pain, as a bridge to long-forgotten parts of ourselves, to celebrate or console. Music evokes emotions in us, makes us think, and can provide a refuge in a difficult world. It’s a reminder than in world where everyone is talking, perhaps we should listen more.

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All Work And No Play - 24th June 2018



As adults, particularly those with busy and hectic lives, play is too easily consigned to the box marked 'childhood'. Once we reach the age of 18, it's expected that we should grow up and start behaving like an adult. However I think that playing and having fun are important for everyone, and that life would be missing something without it.

The definition of 'play' can be hard to pin down, but in general it can be described as taking part in an activity for enjoyment rather than a practical purpose. What can be tricky is that there's no specific definition or dividing line. Taking sport as an example, some people play for enjoyment, some play just to win, or some make their living from it. Whether it's play depends on the attitude you take rather than the activity itself.

We know that play is vital to children. It's an opportunity for them to explore and experiment with their world, to develop their intelligence and social skills. Through play children get to try new behaviours out, to see what works and what doesn't. They make friends, build relationships and strengthen their sense of who they are and what they enjoy. Not being able to play as a child can be severely damaging. In a range of studies a common factor in the background of violent and anti-social men was an almost complete lack of normal play throughout their childhood.¹

Part of the problem is that within our society play is seen as something adults should fit in round the edges of their life when the 'important' things are complete. With our ability to work from home, or access our work e-mails from our phone, there can be a feeling that the work is never done, as your workplace is stored in your back pocket.

What this perspective overlooks is the obvious fact that play is good for you. For adults play is useful in relieving stress, connecting with others and boosting creativity. A study from Realnetworks Inc.² showed that games help us to reduce stress, support mental balance and aid relaxation. Even former UK Prime Minister David Cameron admitted that he used to play Angry Birds to de-stress.³ When you're absorbed in play you are totally in the moment, focused only on the activity at hand, and play becomes a temporary release from the pressures of daily life.

Play can also be a useful tool in helping us to deal with difficult emotions. A 2017 BBC report⁴ described the lives of enthusiasts who re-create Viking battles, an activity which attracts those who have violence in their past, whether as a victim or perpetrator. Through re-playing the battles

they are able to express themselves in a safe and acceptable way, and build support networks of likeminded people.

When it comes to creativity, Google⁵ has been at the forefront of encouraging play in the office to boost inventiveness and keep employees happy, motivated and productive. Google offer free food, sleep pods, games, and health and wellbeing opportunities. By encouraging relaxed and happy staff, Google ensures that their employees spend more time in the building, and are in the right frame of mind to be creative. More conversations equal more ideas, any one of which could be a new innovation or product worth millions.

Play is vital in helping us to relax, connect and be creative, how about making some time for play in your life?

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The Problem of Procrastination - 24th May 2018



Procrastination is the art of filling tomorrow with the tasks of today. And when tomorrow finally becomes today the process starts all over again. How often do we put off the inevitable, the things that need to be resolved and sorted out? How often do they hang around in the back of our minds, niggling us that they're incomplete? And yet we still don't do them, killing time instead when there's something pressing to be completed.

Before the advent of our digital world, it was harder to procrastinate. You had to get up and find a distraction, or make do just looking out of the window. Now most of us can reach for our phones and instantly access a world of news, games, videos and music.

Procrastination often occurs when there are no immediate consequences to avoiding a task, and no immediate benefit from doing it right now. If you decide to eat healthier and do more exercise, the sacrifice happens now, but the benefits will take weeks or months to show, so it's easy to put it off for something with more immediate rewards. We favour instant gratification, so the gap between taking action (or avoiding action) and receiving a response encourages procrastination.

Procrastination is effectively handing responsibility to the future you. Christine Tappolet describes this phenomena as "leaving the dishes to our future self"¹. If you don't feel connected or responsible for your future self it can be easy to let them clean up the clutter later. However what soon happens is that you're knee deep in the mess, wondering why you didn't sort it out sooner.

Perhaps a fear of engaging, of failure or of finding things difficult can stop us even starting. If it seems like its going to be painful, difficult or not fun, there's an incentive to avoid it, perhaps in the vain hope that it will go away. However, this usually doesn't work, and then it still needs to be done, but more urgently than before.

So how can procrastination be managed? One way to begin is by deciding what's really important. Simply, if it's something what 'would be good to do' but doesn't really matter, just remove it from your list. This will leave you with a more accurate, and perhaps less daunting picture of what actually

needs to be done right now.

Another idea is to use the 10-minute rule. The idea is that you start a task you're delaying, but just do it for 10 minutes, then after that time you can stop if you want to. What often happens is that after 10 minutes you're up and running and you'd rather just finish it than start again another time. Sometimes you'll find it only took 10 minutes to complete, and in the worst case you've made 10 minutes of progress.

To help combat the issue of reward and effort being so far apart, set small milestones and rewards to give a tangible link between the two. A friend of mine used to practice yoga because they knew it would be good for their back long-term. However this long-term goal was difficult to relate to the short-term effort every day. To keep their motivation up they rewarded themselves with some chocolate or another small treat after they'd done their yoga. No yoga, no treat. It was just a small thing, but enough to keep motivation up on a day-to-day basis.

Finally, if you know you're prone to procrastination, plan for it! Making it harder to procrastinate will help keep you on track. If you don't need the internet for what you should be doing, turn your Wi-Fi off, or switch your notifications off and leave your phone in another room. If procrastination takes more effort than just getting on with the task at hand, it'll be easier to focus.

Procrastination can bog you down, but by understanding the reasons behind it, and doing a little forward planning it's possible to concentrate on the task at hand and free yourself up for other things you'd rather be doing.

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Is Patience Still a Virtue? - 2nd April 2018



Patience is defined as having the capacity to bear misfortune, suffering and pain without becoming agitated or upset. Patience is important in enabling us to regulate our emotions, to stop and think before acting, and to stay in control instead of becoming angry or distressed.

Our capacity for being patient seems to be eroded by the speed at which life now moves. It seems that we're not used to waiting anymore. From same-day delivery to instant information and entertainment at the click of a button, waiting seems to be an inconvenience we can opt out of. The speed of technological change, and the desire of companies to sell us each new upgrade means that we're often told that the standard we're used to is unacceptable. In the UK, Kevin Bacon's 'bufferface' advert for EE implied that having to wait more than a few seconds for a page to load was some sort of problem keeping us all up at night. Impatience is almost a status symbol. If we can afford to pay for premium access or priority boarding, there's little need to be patient.

Expectations about speed do seem to make us more impatient. A 2012 study¹ showed that after only a couple of seconds people began switching off slow loading online videos, and in just 11 seconds roughly half of all participants switched off. Recently the BBC² noted that the average length of a pop song intro has reduced from 20 seconds to 5 seconds. The reason is that we don't need to be as patient any more. Instead of needing to get up and change the disc, we can skip to the next song at the press of a button. If you're streaming the music you can continue doing this almost indefinitely. For anyone above the age of 35, this will seem a far cry from a childhood spent waiting 10 minutes for a computer game to load...

So if things are getting faster, what's the problem? Why does it matter if we're all more impatient? Whilst it's true that technology is getting quicker, the rest of life just isn't keeping up. The amount of time a barista takes to make your spiced latte is pretty similar to what it was 10 years ago, trains are still (regularly) late, cars break down, people don't call/text/email/WhatsApp/Snapchat when they say they will. Technology doesn't stop all delays. If we expect everything else to keep up, and are impatient with the non-technological world it has a negative impact upon us. Studies have shown that impatience is linked to obesity³, premature ageing⁴ and an impatient 'time is money' approach to thinking has been shown to reduce happiness⁵.

If you find patience difficult, here are some ideas that might help you.

Take control – Feeling that you're not in control of the situation can make waiting more stressful, so take control. Decide what you will do with your waiting time. You have the choice whether to spend the time grinding your teeth in frustration, or enjoying a few moments away from your other commitments.

Practice acceptance – Cultivate an attitude that includes the inevitability of delays. It is normal for delays to happen. It's not unfair, it's just part of life. Having an accepting attitude will help you to maintain realistic expectations and stay calmer.

Give yourself space for what's happening now – If you find yourself struggling to stay focused on your current task, take a few moments to be mindful of what you're doing right now. Try to accept that the next task can wait until this one is finished. If you struggle with leaving incomplete tasks, write them down so that they're safe and won't be forgotten, and remember that you can return to them when this moment is over. There are a wide range of free meditation and mindfulness apps available to help you make space in a busy day.

Breathe – Try breathing deeply into your diaphragm instead of your chest, and then exhaling slowly. Slowly repeating this cycle signals to your body that it's time to calm down and relax.

Have an outlet – This could be a sport or other physical activity, computer games, visiting a counsellor, or even a good friend who you can share your irritations with. Being able to express your frustrations in a safe manner means you'll be less likely to carry them round for use in the next difficult situation.

Patience enables us to accept that things will not always go our way, to bear the stresses and strains of living, and to savour life's pleasures while they are available to us. Although we may not get as much chance to practice being patient these days, it's still as vital a skill as it ever was.

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Are We Neglecting Life? - In Praise of Inefficiency- 25th March 2018



We live in a world so efficient I can use my phone to buy a gift from the comfort of my sofa, and have it appear on my doorstep later that day. I can plan, research and book a trip across the globe from my kitchen table. I can check my tax returns in bed if I really want to. When it comes to more domestic matters, cooking, cleaning and laundry took nearly 60 hours per week in 1900, whereas the range of labour saving devices in our modern day homes reduce this to about 15.

Praising inefficiency may therefore seem an odd position to take, so I should point out that I'm certainly not against the efficiencies that technology has brought us, however I wonder what happens with all of the free time we are left with, and what message a relentless advance towards efficiency sends out.

Many of the efficient systems in our life reduce our physical activity, meaning we're living more sedentary lifestyles. Unless you use your smartphone when running or cycling, or you're still playing 'Pokemon Go', it's likely that a lot of your free time with technology will be spent sitting down. Indeed, one of the unintended consequences of these efficiencies is that for many of us we need to choose to be healthy rather than it happening as a result of all our daily activities. Last year a British Heart Foundation report¹ noted that 20 million UK adults are now classed as physically inactive, that's almost 40% of the population. Efficiency has saved us a lot of effort, but some of that work was keeping us healthy.

Being able to access work e-mails on your phone may be convenient, and it may enable you to work during your commute, but does that efficiency mean you work fewer hours, or are you spending your commuting time just keeping up? The TUC² reported in 2015 that the number of people working more than 48 hours per week rose by 15% in just 5 years, up to nearly 3.5 million people. If we're so efficient why aren't we going home sooner? Efficiency begets more efficiency. If it was good to complete that task in two weeks instead of three, the question then becomes "Can we do it in one week next time?" rather than "should we?"

The way we know we're efficient is by measuring. The things that are easiest to measure are time, performance and money. A focus on these things undervalues human relationships, feelings and things that are uncertain, as they're not easily measurable. When meeting to organise an event or run

a committee, it would be far more efficient to get straight down to business, and for everyone to go their separate ways straight afterwards. However we chat and pass the time with others because we realise that relationships and people are important, even if they're not efficient!

There's an important place for efficiency. We want and need things in life to be reliable and efficient. However inefficiency has a place too. If we're working 80 hours a week and never have time to relax on the sofa, go for a walk, or read a magazine, we may be amazingly efficient, but an important part of life is neglected.

Inefficiency is defined by the Oxford Dictionary³ as "Not achieving maximum productivity; wasting or failing to make the best use of time or resources". However, I'd like to suggest that doing nothing, relaxing, staring at the trees outside of your window, reading a good book, or just spending time with friends and family can be the best use of your resources if it brings you happiness and contentment.

So where's the balance? Who says enough is enough? The truth is you do. Perhaps if we saw inefficiency as an important counterbalance to efficiency we could embrace it and be more accepting of ourselves when we fall short of the efficient ideal.

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“Kauf Dich Gucklich” – Can You Buy Yourself Happy? - 30th January 2018



Recently I was visiting a friend in Germany, and we went to a café called “Kauf Dich Glücklich”, which means “Buy Yourself Happy”. While I was making my way through an admittedly very tasty waffle, I kept thinking of the name of the café, and how the phrase “Buy Yourself Happy” says much about our society, where we are often valued in our role as consumers, not individuals.

The old adage is that money can’t buy you happiness, and this is a view I tend to agree with. But many of us feel we would be happier if we had an extra holiday, or a bigger home, or perhaps just fewer money worries. However the things that our long-term happiness is founded upon tend to be the relationships around us, who we are and what we do, not what we have just bought or are just about to buy. We get used to the things we buy. They are exciting for a time, then they simply become another piece of clothing, another gadget, another object to be stored away in bulging cupboards with the rest of our once-loved, now neglected items.

There have been criticisms of the view above, and many researchers say that money does make a difference, however a study from Princeton University¹ breaks down ‘happiness’ and makes the situation clearer.

The study suggests that there are two ways of looking at how happy and contented we are; Life evaluation - how we feel about the life we are leading in general, and emotional well-being - how we are actually feeling right now.

The study suggests that, unsurprisingly, income does make a big difference to life evaluation, and there seems to be no cut off point. This makes sense, as the more money we have the more we may feel successful in our lives compared to others, with more freedom to do what we want. However when it comes to emotional well-being, money did have an impact, but once household incomes the UK equivalent of £35,000², increases in emotional well-being levelled off.

I feel the levelling off is because life events that affect emotional well-being can be made worse by a lack of money, but having more money will not simply resolve them and remove the emotional

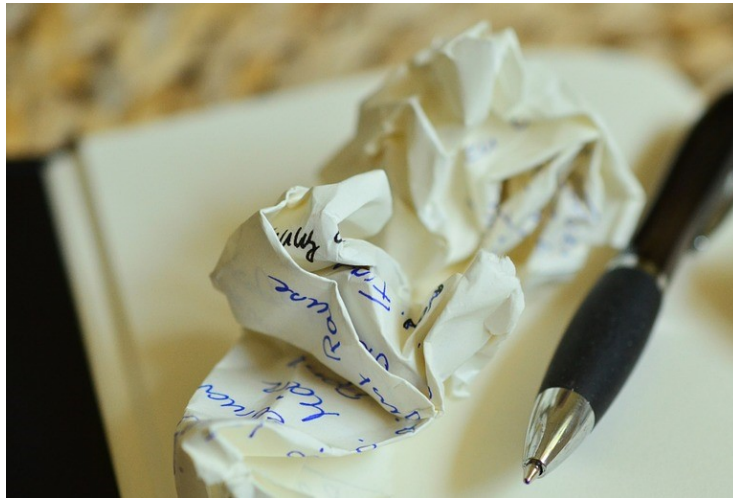
impact. Events such as divorce, disagreements, death and illness can be harder to bear for someone with money worries as the life event adds to an already difficult situation. However having money cannot prevent bad things from happening.

Money does influence our happiness, but it is not the deciding factor in whether we are happy or not. More money can help smooth out the bumps in the road of life, but it can't insulate us completely from the trials and tribulations that living brings. Having no money at all can make us unhappy, but money alone is not the key to a happy and contented life.

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The Problem With New Year's Resolutions - 27th December 2017



The New Year brings with it the opportunity to stop and reflect on ourselves, our feelings about the year gone by and our hopes for the year to come. It's often the point at which we decide we'd like to change something about our lives, with the aim to be happier, healthier or wealthier.

However what often happens is that we decide on the end goal and begin, full of enthusiasm, but the initial eagerness soon begins to subside and our new resolution becomes sporadic and inconsistent, and by March is all but forgotten. Setting New Year's resolutions that fail year after year can have a negative impact on your self-esteem, as it reinforces a feeling that no matter how enthusiastic you are for change you will still fail in the end.

The problem with New Years resolutions is that too often they're New Years Aspirations. We aspire to change our lives, we aspire to do things differently. It's something we really want, but wanting is a long way from actually achieving. Aspiration is to hope to achieve something, whereas resolution is a firm decision to act, to be resolute or determined.

So what can we do about this?

Make sure your goal is a resolution not an aspiration. Make sure it's something you really want, that you're prepared to put the work into, rather than something that would be nice if it happened.

Split the goal into smaller, achievable milestones. If your goals are too large it can be disheartening when it takes a long while to reach them. By having smaller milestones along the way there is a feeling of progress, which can help keep your enthusiasm up.

Get support from others. Friends and family can provide moral support and encouragement, and a friend with a similar goal can be your partner for an activity. It's amazing how often two people will meet up on a cold morning for a run because they don't want to let the other person down, when both would have stayed at home if they were going alone.

Celebrate the successes along the way. Some goals may take the whole year or even more to achieve. It's a New Year's resolution, not purgatory, so celebrate your progress! The small wins along the way will keep you motivated and believing that you can achieve the end goal.

Accept failure. This may seem a strange idea, but New Year's resolutions don't usually work first time, and this doesn't mean you should give up. If you have a wobble in mid February, accept that it happened and keep going. It's OK to re-resolve in March, You will be more likely to achieve your goal if you realise that failures are inevitable. Accept that it will take time and there are many bumps along the way.

If you do decide to make a New Year's Resolution this year, choose something you're determined to do. Get support from your friends and remember: there will be bumps on the road to your goal, so take time to celebrate your success along the way!

5 ways Board games are good for your mental health - 8th November 2017



Board games are experiencing somewhat of a golden age at the moment. I'm not just talking about classics like Monopoly, Scrabble and Cluedo. If you go into your local Waterstones for example, you'll find the type of board games that used to be consigned to the dusty shelves of specialist hobby stores – Settlers of Catan, Carcassonne, and Pandemic are all now hugely popular. The mix of people playing board games is widening, and there's a whole world of youtube channels, web pages and podcasts devoted to the hundreds of new board games released each year.

I feel that getting together with groups of friends, such as when playing a board game, is supportive of your mental health. BoardGameGeek.com has a depression, anxiety and gaming support group (<https://www.boardgamegeek.com/guild/1648>), where people share their stories and support each other, amongst discussing the board games they love. In this vein I thought I'd look into the benefits of board games from a mental health perspective.

Board Games keep your brain younger for longer

Playing games, especially as you get older is beneficial as an active brain is at lower risk of cognitive decline. A study in the New England Journal of Medicine ¹ showed that playing board games was associated with a reduced risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. The old adage 'use it or lose it' seems to have some truth after all.

Board games help with children's cognitive and social development

Useful social skills can be taught through board games, skills that will can children to lead happier and less isolated lives. Games teach social skills such as following rules, taking turns and sharing with others. Board games support cognitive skills, from simple number and pattern recognition ² to the most complex calculations and estimations. In some games you'll use a mixture of logic, mathematical skills and abstract thinking, whilst also planning out your next moves, and coming up with ways to counter your friends' actions. With so many different types of board games, there are thousands of ways to give your brain a workout.

Board games help reduce isolation

Most board games are designed to be played with a group of people. Having a regular group of people to play board games with helps stave off loneliness, and builds positive relationships with others, all things that are associated with good mental health³.

Isolation has been shown as a contributing factor in worsening mental health, and those with mental health issues tend to report increased loneliness. However, it can be difficult for those suffering with issues such as depression and anxiety to step out and make new friends. Board games solve a lot of these problems as they offer a structured way to meet others. Instead of needing to strike up a conversation from scratch, having a game as the focus of the activity allows friendships to build slowly in a less formal or pressured way. Board Game Cafes are springing up around the country and all you need to do is turn up, talk to the staff and you'll soon find someone to have a game with. Even for those that struggle to leave the house there is an online board game simulator on 'Steam' where you can play hundreds of board games with others online.

Board games help family cohesion

There are now hundreds of board games out there aimed at families, or that are sufficiently well designed to be enjoyed by adults but simple enough for your 10 year old to get to grips with (and then beat you mercilessly).

A board game is an opportunity for the family to take part in something together. Board games offer the opportunity for more face-to-face interaction with others, which in itself is supportive of mental health ⁴. All too often in family situations, while everyone is physically present, the focus is either on the TV or individual mobile phones, tablets or laptops. While playing a board game, whether competing or collaborating you're engaging with each other actively in person. Families who spend time together on enjoyable activities have a better emotional bond, and better communication between family members ⁵.

Board games help to reduce stress

A study from Realnetworks Inc. ⁶ showed that games help us to reduce stress, support mental balance and help with relaxation. I imagine this is because board games offer escapism, a chance to take leave your daily worries behind for a while and do something completely different. You can build civilisations, construct railways, control vast armies, hunt zombies or even try to take over the world. There's no need to worry about the minutiae of life for a few hours, or perhaps the structure of a clear set of rules is a safe bulwark against the chaotic world outside.

Board games are a great way to connect with others, to take you away from the normal troubles of life for a few hours, and to give your brain a workout. Why not see if there's one out there that will suit you?

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Why Everyone Should Read Dr Seuss's "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" - 11th September 2017



I am drawn to Dr Seuss's books as they combine wonderfully surreal escapism with accurate insights about life. Mixing the two together makes his wise advice about life much more accessible. One of my favourites is "*Oh the Places You'll Go*". To me it feels like a slightly off the wall version of the advice a parent would give their child

Early on Dr Seuss writes: "You have brains in your head, you have feet in your shoes; you can steer yourself in any direction you choose" – we have more freedom than we realise, and we're urged to have confidence in our own selves, to be the masters of our own destiny, taking charge of our own lives, to engage with life and do something with it.

But in the midst of the fun, all the excitement and adventure, when you're the "Best of the Best" it all stops, as "Bang-ups and Hang-ups *can* happen to you". He describes being in a slump, and that it's difficult to get out of. Dr Seuss doesn't sugar coat the world by only describing all the wonderful things, it has its ups and downs.

He tells us of "The Waiting Place" with its denizens waiting for things to happen to them, for someone to come along and fix their problems. They're waiting for "a Yes or No... a Better Break... Another Chance", but you're reminded that that's not you, that you'll think for yourself, escape the waiting and go on to better things. However sometimes you'll play "Games you can't win, 'cause you'll play against you". But even in the midst of the self-criticism, fear and anxiety he describes the determination of the reader's character, who is able to work through and overcome their problems.

It's a children's book so [spoiler alert] it ends well, but it ends well *and* includes the bad times. The bad times are part of the journey. So often we're shown how a perfect life should be, and it can become easy to forget that sometimes you won't feel up to it, life will feel like a riddle, a maze, a puzzle, and that it's all part of the journey....

It may take place in a fantasy world of strange beasts, bright colours and ridiculous contraptions, but "Oh, The Places You'll Go!" is one of the most honest and realistic children's books I've ever read.

Is sleep really a waste of time? – 25th July 2017



Thomas Edison, the man who brought us the electric light bulb, thought sleep was a waste of time. We are living in a world that is awake, active and ready to engage 24 hours a day, and it's easy to be tempted to agree with Edison when presented with all the interesting things to do that are accessible every second of every day. Unlike 30 years ago, when TV channels used to stop after midnight (google it millennials, I'm not joking) we can carry on gaming, shopping, chatting, reading, watching or whatever we like 24 hours a day. It may be the small hours of the morning here in the UK, but there's always someone in a different time zone who's awake. An article a few years ago in the Guardian showed that John Lewis had noticed a 30% rise in sales between midnight and 6am, fuelled in part by people having tablets in bed with them. The bedroom has become another place to access the world out there, rather than a restful escape from it.

Sleep is a natural process in the cycle of daily living. Our body tells us when we need sleep, and generally regulates sleeping to the hours of darkness. Over the course of your life it's the thing you will spend the most time doing. Sleep enables the body to power down, to recharge and repair itself. From a physical perspective, those who work night shifts over a long period of time have less effective immune systems and a lower life expectancy. It seems that the body is set up for a natural rhythm and we ignore this at our peril.

The effect of a lack of sleep on our minds is just as important. Studies have shown that a lack of sleep has a wide-ranging impact upon the brain. Those who don't get enough sleep make riskier decisions and are less creative. From a mental health perspective, disrupted sleep can cause the brain to hold onto negative memories instead of positive ones, and it's also suggested that it limits the ability to empathise with others.

A much higher percentage of those who are depressed also suffer with insomnia. Studies are unclear whether one causes the other, but the lack of sleep contributes to and reinforces the depressive feelings and impairs relations to the rest of the world. It is not without reason that sleep deprivation is considered as a torture method in the Geneva convention.

For many, sleep is often seen as a necessary gap in between doing things rather than a relaxing and helpful part of our daily routine. But sleeping is essential for our health, both physical and mental. Not getting enough sleep can affect not only your body, but your emotional health and the supportive relationships around you. The Dalai Lama once said that "Sleep is the best meditation". Perhaps if we fully understood the vital role that sleep plays in maintaining our health we'd be better able to

prioritise it. Although it cannot be a cure for all life's ills, sleep is the foundation on which a healthy and happy life is built.

'Forest Bathing' - Why the Countryside is good for your Mental Health - 24th June 2017



Recently I spent a day wandering around the Sussex countryside near where I live. It was a hot, muggy day, interspersed with light rain that served to cool my wife and I from the incessant heat. We tramped through the shade of a forest and marvelled at the colours, smells and sounds hidden within a few miles of our home. As we left the woods and stepped into the sun we were presented with a beautiful view of the South Downs.

I was feeling first hand the therapeutic benefit of the countryside. Just simply walking with only the route to think about was wonderfully centring. I remember looking around, seeing only trees and hills, and although I knew my town was at the other side of the wood, another part of me felt I could have been anywhere. The rest of life's worries were left at home, and whilst I was in the countryside they could stay there until I was ready to return to them.

A walk in the countryside has the potential to become a place of freedom, a rest from the issues that life throws up. The physical things in life expand and take up more space. The feel of the ground underfoot, the plants, trees, flowers and streams occupy your senses, leaving less space for other thoughts, problems and worries.

I later found out that the Japanese have been recommending this sort of thing for over 30 years, they call it 'Shinrin-yoku' – 'forest bathing', and many scientific studies have noted that 'forest bathing' helps to lower blood pressure, cortisol levels in the brain, and reduces stress, hostility and depression. A few years ago in the UK, MIND carried out a study which showed that those who participated in 'Green Exercise' had increased fitness, self esteem and decreased depression, anger and tiredness.

I wondered what it was about the countryside that helped with relaxation, and found that studies have shown that in comparison to walking through urban areas, the countryside engages the mind but in a different way, giving the brain a rest. I imagine this is because in the countryside you are taking things in, rather than having things forced at you. In urban areas there are cars, people, signs, lights, sirens, all aiming to get your attention, whereas in the countryside you take it in, you look for the wildlife, listen out for the sounds, choose to take in the views. I imagine this way of being helps counteract the brain fatigue of urban living, giving you a chance to wipe the slate clean and relax for a while before your senses are assaulted again as you arrive back in town.

Our world can seem very small, cramped, and full of people, likely because over 80% of us live in cities or towns in the UK, but these urban areas take up just 7% of the UK's area. I find walking in the countryside reminds me of how large our country actually is. Sometimes we'll walk for hours without seeing anyone at all. This shouldn't really come as a surprise, as there are over 140,000 miles of footpaths and public rights of way in the UK. There's a lot of space out there to explore, and with all the benefits, why not get your boots on and give it a try. What have you got to lose?

Man, It's Good To Talk - 13th May 2017



I few weeks ago I was asked to attend 'Huddle', a fundraising event in Brighton in aid of the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM).

If you haven't heard of them, CALM is a brilliant UK charity dedicated to preventing male suicide. Statistics show that in the UK around 75% of all people who die by suicide are male, and it's the leading cause of death for men under 45.

I was there to be a point of contact for information about counselling and support in Brighton. During my research I was very pleased to find that there were a high number of counselling organisations that offer accessible low-cost counselling – As You Are, Cruse, Rock Clinic, Age UK, YMCA to name a few.

The day was a lively mix of music, art, poetry and puppetry, and what it reminded me was the importance of having an outlet. One of the poets who performed talked to me about how his poetry gave him a way to express his emotions, meaning all of the difficult things he was feeling didn't stay bottled up inside him.

We all need an outlet, a place to express ourselves. It may be something creative, a sport, just being with friends, or at times this may include seeing a counsellor. At the event I was a source of information for where to get help in Brighton, as it's important to have a network of people who will be there to support you when times are hard. The temptation can be to 'man up', to hold onto things and not deal with them in fear of burdening others. However those that support you do so because they are there for you, not because they need you to be OK all the time. Not processing things means that negative emotions build up and have to be carried around, adding to the burden of everyday living. There's no opportunity to get a perspective on the problems, to explore and work it through so that you can let them go.

For men it can be difficult to put in place those support networks – there is a stereotype that men often don't talk about their emotions, particularly not to other men, who can often make up most of their close social circle. This was summed up in the CALM magazine that I was given at the event, being described as "impressing not expressing". The need to show how good you are, whether to impress or just feel good enough, becomes the most important thing. The destructive stereotype that to be a proper man means you are in control at all times, not expressing your emotions as people might doubt your man credentials. Thankfully the work of CALM is helping to change the conversation, reminding men that you can talk about difficult things, that you and your mates are going to struggle at times, as life is hard, and difficult things are going to happen, but you can be a man and get the support you need.

Having counselling as an option is vitally important, however there are a great deal more people in the UK than there are counsellors, so perhaps what is most important is on a day to day basis having that outlet, and with it a group of people you trust to be there for you when you need support.

Whose Truth Is It Anyway? - 20th April 2017



I recently read a quote from the Victorian explorer Richard Francis Burton:

All faith is false, all faith is true:
Truth is the shattered mirror strown
In myriad bits; while each believes
His little bit the whole to own

From the perspective of humanistic counselling and psychotherapy, this is a fundamental reason why the client is accepted as the expert in themselves, and for me one of the reasons why I support clients to explore their own experiences. As a counsellor my opinion is simply my opinion. I can empathise and try to understand and feel what it's like for you, but although I can come close, I can never know for sure exactly how you experience the world. I hold my own piece of mirror, and you hold yours. Over time those experiences can get blurred and become less clear, meaning it can be difficult to remember the truth of exactly what happened. However most important is how you respond to the memories you do have, and how it affects your life now.

I was also struck by how this quote chimed with current events in the world, and the terms 'fake news' and 'post-truth'. It brought to mind the question of how we define 'truth'. For many physical things we can be pretty certain, I am wearing a t-shirt, the sun is shining, it is raining. You'd have to be pretty picky to argue with them. What is far less certain is the non-physical; things like 'society', 'justice', 'innocent', and 'deserving'. Although it's comforting to think you know the truth, it's not a definitive thing. You can't uncover and examine a real life nugget of truth. Truth is more like the build up of silt at the bottom of a river. It slowly builds up and is changed bit by bit over time in the culture you live in.

Once we accept that truth is not this fixed thing to be found and clung onto, it becomes easier to accept that others hold different truths, and that no matter how much we may disagree with them, no-one has a monopoly on the truth. For us as individuals it also gives space for hope that some of the negative truths we cling to may not be so fixed. A person might firmly hold the belief that they must never feel sad, as letting in even a bit of sadness would open the floodgates leading to an overwhelming wave of sadness descending upon them. Through counselling it may be possible to explore these beliefs, where these messages came from, and how they might be reinforced now. Building up self-confidence and re-discovering resources may enable them to explore and perhaps slowly challenge some of the 'truths' that are affecting their mental health. To be open to our own sadness is an important part of living fully, experiencing life and making decisions based on all of our emotions. The nearer we can get to this situation the more open, accepting and healthier we are.

The World In Your Pocket? - 9th March 2017



Does modern life seem overwhelming? Does it seem that everywhere you look there is more information demanding your attention? Not only the daily deluge of e-mails, but a constant stream of updates and notifications from WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest and all those other seemingly essential apps you've downloaded.

Technology is often used as an escape, but in the past it required some effort on your part to stay engaged. You completed the computer game and had to go and do something else, or at least go outside and buy another one. Now if you watch your phone or tablet in your room you're effectively going to bed with a library of everything that was ever written, said, filmed, or recorded – no wonder it's hard to put down! There will always be something interesting to read, look at or watch, only limited by your patience or your battery. Indeed a report by the BBC (Kleeman 2017) last week noted that the use of smartphones and tablets in bed was one of the factors that has led to the huge rise in the number of children with sleep disorders.

Having constant access to what's going on in the world is pretty amazing, I don't doubt that. The ability to speak and exchange ideas with people from all backgrounds across the world and to stay connected with friends thousands of miles away is a remarkable thing. However this interconnectivity with things happening thousands of miles away affects our perception of world immediately around us. An article from the Huffington Post (Gregoire 2015) notes that as we become closer and more connected to the rest of the world, this also means a greater exposure to suffering and violence, even though in reality we are in no personal danger from it. This leads to a sustained feeling of threat, even though in places like the UK we are living in some of the safest times on record. From the perspective of our own personal safety, if we think of the bad things we hear in the news, how many times has it been from somewhere we've ever visited, let alone somewhere we've ever lived? Whilst it is important to be informed about the wider world, what is deemed newsworthy is usually something bad happening, so our concerns about the world are confirmed when in fact we're only getting half of the story. Having this global access on our person at all times means we can bring the bad things in the world to our rooms and our safe places too.

You may think that hearing about people being happy and content would help, but it needs to be accurate and realistic news and information. A study from Denmark's Happiness Institute showed that those who stopped using Facebook for a short time were happier than those that had continued using it. The study suggests that being exposed to only the sanitised and idealised versions of other people's lives increases levels of worry, anger and loneliness.

Is technology an escape any more? Or is it an open door through which a distorted version of the world pushes its way in? Perhaps in this age of so many different truths we should not forget to look at ourselves and what's going on around us in our day-to-day non-digital lives.

I wonder if this might be why meditation and mindfulness are currently so popular. The rest of the world is kept outside for a few brief minutes, enabling a pause to calm the self and relax, to switch off from everything else for a while before returning to the fray. But remember, if you do use a meditation app on your phone, don't forget to mute your notifications...

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Mental Health - No Laughing Matter? - 9th February 2017



The world of comedy is often seen as an escape from the stresses and strains of daily life, a place where everything else can be forgotten, so what does comedy have to do with mental health?

There is currently a groundswell of new comedians who share one thing in common – they talk in detail about their own lives, and in particular they're open about their mental health. I imagine that if you're a touring comedian who needs to write a new Edinburgh show each year, you continually need to turn over material, and what better source of material than to talk about yourself and your own experiences?

However I imagine that in the past the need to be funny and entertaining and sell tickets for a show meant that the comedian's own pain and troubles were glossed over, as this wasn't what audiences wanted to see. However with mental health issues increasingly being in the news and an open conversation happening, comedians are sharing their stories.

I went to Sofie Hagen's 'Shimmer Shatter' last year, in which she spoke openly about her own mental health and her introverted nature. Most importantly for a comedy gig however, it was entertaining and very funny. It didn't make light of mental health issues, in fact it was very pro-therapy and supportive of people who struggle with their mental health. Sofie shared her own experiences, her worries, her concerns, and of course the amusing things that have happened to her. It was laughing with experiences of mental health, finding the funny in them, rather than laughing at people with mental health problems. Sofie also has a podcast called 'Made Of Human' in which she talks frankly about 'being human' and she and her guests candidly share their lives and their own struggles in a way that to me says "I'm imperfect, but I'm still just getting on with my life."

I also listen to the "Comedian's Comedian Podcast" by the very funny Stuart Goldsmith. As I understand it, the original purpose of the Podcast was to have a place where comedians and interested punters could learn about how comedians come up with their shows. Whilst it does continue to do this, and continues to be very entertaining, many of the comedians interviewed have spoken frankly about themselves, speaking openly about depression, anxiety and a range of other mental health issues. Furthermore Stuart Goldsmith is open about his own experience of therapy, and I love that there is an overall feel from the podcast that as listeners you're all OK, no matter what your mental health concerns, and an overriding message that even if things are tough right now, things can and will get better.

These are just two of many comedians who are being open about their mental health. To name a few more, Chris Getherd's show "Career Suicide" charted his battles with suicidal thoughts, depression

and alcoholism “and all the other funniest parts of life”, and Richard Gadd won an Edinburgh award for his show about his experience of being sexually assaulted. Last year Mind and Comedy Central teamed up and recorded 10 comedians doing stand up about their own mental health concerns. Comedians may not have been the reason for a shift in society towards talking about mental health, but as the proverbial door of mental health awareness is now ajar, comedians are there helping to push it open. If it’s not taboo for comedy, then it’s not taboo for us to talk about.

I know many of them aren’t comedians firmly in the mainstream, perhaps because not everyone is ready for this conversation. Nevertheless I think it’s a massively positive thing that the people we are fans of, that we’re paying money to see, aren’t saying you need to buy this to be OK, or that you need to look like this to be OK. They’re being open and honest and saying that we’re all a little messed up, and you’re OK as you are.

Nice one Comedy, keep up the good work.

Is Commuting Bad For Your Mental Health? - 3rd January 2017



The continuing problems with strikes on Southern Trains have prompted me to wonder about the effect of commuting on mental health, particularly as for nearly a year I was a daily commuter, spending three hours a day getting to and from work.

A study by the UK national Archives in 2014 called “Commuting and Personal Well-being” found that on average commuters who spend more than 15 minutes getting to work have lower life satisfaction, happiness and higher anxiety than the average worker. As the commute gets longer life satisfaction drops and anxiety rises.

I imagine part of the reason for the anxiety is the lack of control. As a commuter you are at the whim of traffic, road works, strikes, damaged rails, and shortages of train crew to name but a few of the obstacles in the way of a smooth commute.

It is often considered that commuting is a trade off, with better pay and a nicer home out of the city at the cost of less time to spend with your family. However studies have shown that the better housing and higher income don't fully compensate the commuter, although it has been pointed out that because the studies look at the commuter, they miss the fact that the household as a whole might benefit, even if the commuter takes the strain.

So what can be done? In the short run the commute is here to stay, so perhaps, we could make something out of the commute, to look at it differently. Forbes magazine (Morin, 2014) comment that we could see it as a break from the other responsibilities of life. I guess if you're jammed up against 50 other people in a crowded carriage there's little else you can do. Of course this can be seen as a very annoying and stressful situation to be in. Alternatively as it's impossible to leave, it's possible to accept there's nothing else you can do. You don't need to be anything else in that moment, just you, living and breathing. Of course you can think about all the things that need to be done when you get home, and all the things you can't do. Or you could be in the moment, free of responsibility (other than not standing on people's toes) just enjoying the space in between the manic world of work and

our busy home lives. My wife for example, likes to curl up in the luggage rack and read. Often it's her favourite part of her day. Whether it's books, audiobooks, podcasts or music, perhaps there's something you can do that you enjoy even when on the train.

Some people do enjoy their commute, I feel these are the people who look at it as their space and make the most out of their time. I'm not saying that this will suddenly make commuting healthy, but if we can make time for ourselves and see it as a break and not a chore, it might just be a bit more bearable.

Morin, A. (2014) *Want To Be Happier? Change Your Commute Or Change Your Attitude*. [online] forbes.com. Available at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/amymorin/2014/12/07/want-to-be-happier-change-your-commute-or-change-your-attitude/#2301de485a73> [accessed January 2017]



Christmas Is Coming: 5 Things To Remember At This Time Of Year - 2nd December 2016

And so Christmas is almost here. This can be a difficult time for many of us. We're surrounded by images of the 'perfect' Christmas, with everyone happily sat around in gaily patterned Christmas jumpers in their beautifully decorated home opening huge, expensive and perfectly-chosen gifts. Often there is pressure from friends and relatives to celebrate Christmas the 'right' way, the way everyone else seems to be doing. That uneasy feeling that everyone is having an amazing Christmas, and you're the only family who isn't, whereas in reality most families are just having another normal Christmas, and can be found asleep in front of the TV by 3pm anyway.

Christmas can also be a reflective time, it marks the beginning of the end of the current year, for many a time to review things hoped for and not achieved, the things and loved ones lost. Often the images of Christmas we are shown make us think about what is missing rather than what we have.

So what can be done? Below are a few ideas that you might find helpful at this time of year.

Take time for yourself

It can be easy to spend many of your waking hours thinking about Christmas preparations on top of all the normal stresses of daily life. So it's important to make a little space for something different you enjoy that's unrelated to Christmas. To have just a few moments of calm where you don't need to be planning and preparing, where no-one is demanding anything from you can be immensely helpful in giving you a little respite and more energy when you return to the fray.

Spend time with the people who are important to you

Among the many and varied family commitments that many of us face, find some time to be with the people who are important to you. If this is the family you've arranged to have over for the 15th Christmas in a row, great. However if it isn't, try to make some time to be around the people you love and trust, that accept you as you are, not for the presents you've bought them this year. Spending

time with the people you love is the most important gift you give. Presents are always welcome, but most gifts won't be remembered by New Year, however your love and friendship will be.

Your way is OK

Be it constant Christmas music, gaudy Christmas decorations, or one tiny tree hidden in the corner of the room, your way of doing Christmas is just fine, if it suits you and you enjoy it. Everyone does it a different way, and there is no 'right' way to do Christmas.

Their way is OK too

With family commitments we often find ourselves in unfamiliar places with other people's customs, family members and ideas of how Christmas should be. This is probably the way they've always done it, and it works for them. Maybe you'll like some of their Christmas traditions, and if you don't, how about bringing a few rituals with you? From wearing a Santa hat for the entire day, to having to watch the Dr Who Christmas special, they'll give you a bit of the Christmas you love, and maybe the others will join in and enjoy your little rituals too.

New Year's Resolutions Are Not Set In Stone

Whilst writing a list of things to achieve the next year can be motivating, if the end of the year comes and most things aren't achieved it can make us feel demotivated and depressed. The things we resolve to don't naturally fit into yearly boxes. Sometimes things take longer, sometimes things aren't possible - plans are made to be broken. If it's important enough to you, you'll do it whether it's on a list or not. So if you do write a list of New Years resolutions, decide whether they're things you truly want to do, that will make you happier, or whether they're things you feel you 'should' be doing. If the latter, ditch them and go back to your Christmas pudding.

Christmas can be a difficult and stressful time for many of us. Remember to look after yourself, give yourself some space, and that even if you think you've bought the best gift ever, what matters most is that you're there to give it.



Are Mental Health Apps The Answer? – 1st November 2016

The Guardian recently published an article about the rise in the use of smartphone apps to support mental health. I was struck by the irony of using an app for therapeutic means when our mobile phones are a large part of the problem of sensory and information overload that we often experience.

Reading that the NHS are using apps as part of their mental health strategy at first dismayed me as it felt like simple cost cutting. I imagine that part of the reasoning is that once an app is developed it costs very little going forward, and has the potential to reach hundreds of thousands of people. However, there have been studies that show the success of mental health apps such as Sleepio (Fleming, 2016). The danger is that these are part of a massive range of similar apps available. This leads to the problem that so many are untested, meaning that the benefits if any are completely unknown, and may not have been designed with a treatment model in mind (Reynolds 2015).

However what does encourage me is the fact that mental health support is far more accessible to a greater number of people, particularly younger people, who are more likely to have a smartphone and to use Apps. Our youth is full of transitions and changes, pressures and problems, and anything that can support people in a way that is accessible to them is very welcome.

I feel that having mental health resources freely and easily available to the public can only be a good thing. Personally I use a number of meditation apps and have found them very helpful, and frankly having something that reminds and encourages us to take time away from our daily pressures and practice some sort of self-care is a good thing.

But for others it's not enough to have just an app, or a computer program. Often a person in distress needs space to talk through their concerns, fears and worries face-to-face with a real person. The relationship the client builds with their counsellor is an essential and massive part of the healing process. Perhaps a client who struggles with self-esteem will first build trust in the counsellor and use this as the stepping stone to slowly build trust in themselves. This can't be achieved with a computer program. In a relationship with another we are free to explore ourselves, test out behaviours, learn

about the patterns that influence us, be ourselves, laugh, cry, scream at the top of our voice if we need to, and an app just can't do that.

Fleming, A. (2016) Can apps improve your mental wellbeing? [online] Guardian.com. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/sep/12/can-apps-improve-your-mental-wellbeing> [accessed October 2016]

Reynolds, E. How effective are mental health apps? (2015) Wired. [online] wired.co.uk. Available at <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/mental-health-apps> [accessed October 2016]



Can The Doctor Really Give Up Drugs? – 1st October 2016

I recently watched the BBC's "The Doctor Who Gave Up Drugs", a two-part programme about a Doctor concerned about the rise in prescription drug use, trying to work with patients to give them alternatives to just taking pills for their ailments.

I was slightly startled by the statistics he was throwing out about the rise in drugs being prescribed, and I really got the sense that for a GP prescriptions are the obvious option when you only have 10 minutes to diagnose and decide on treatment for a patient. On the other side of the coin, one doctor noted that often people want a quick fix, a drug that will make them feel better, so they can go and get on with their lives.

What really came across to me was that for many of us, our health feels like a constant, consistent objective 'thing' that can be restored with a tablet. I personally feel that our health is an essential part of us, a reflection of us, our bodies, our mind and our habits and patterns. Too often a tablet will help us cope with a symptom in the short term, but for many illnesses doesn't support or improve our ability to cope in the future.

The programme reminded me that when receiving treatment of any sort, the patient/client is an active part, not a passive recipient - whether this is at the doctor's surgery, or a counsellor's therapy room. I'm thinking back to the second episode, and the patient who managed to come off her drugs for

chronic pain. With the right support around her the patient took the painful first step and made the change herself. When it didn't seem like she had any other options she did something new, reaped the rewards and began to get her life back.

Gestalt principles are a key part of my counselling practice. A commonly accepted definition of 'Gestalt' is a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. As humans we are all wholes of mind body and spirit, and pain is part of that whole. For me, a life without some pain is impossible. Pain can be useful, it tells us something is wrong and something needs to change. All too often our desire to be pain free means that we suppress the signal to change rather than try to work on what's causing the problem

It's all about balance. If we are in so much pain we can't do anything, then we're unable to take action to help ourselves. However if we are dulled in a fog of tablets this stops us from acting also. Sometimes we need to take a pill to get over something, to fight an illness. Sometimes we need to get some rest, to stop for a while and recover. However what we always need to do is maintain what we have, to take care of our physical and mental health each day, not just when something goes wrong. Something as simple as exercise has been described as 'The Miracle Cure', able to massively reduce the risk of a huge variety of ailments. Our modern lifestyles mean we spend much of our day sitting down, so our daily routine doesn't include enough physical activity. Simple things like exercise and socialising with other people can have a positive impact on both our physical and mental health. Just from a mental health perspective, the NHS states that those who exercise regularly are 30% less likely to suffer from depression or dementia. If they offered this in a pill we would all be queuing up to take it. I guess, as the saying goes, 'no pain, no gain'. But it's a small pain, and a massive gain.