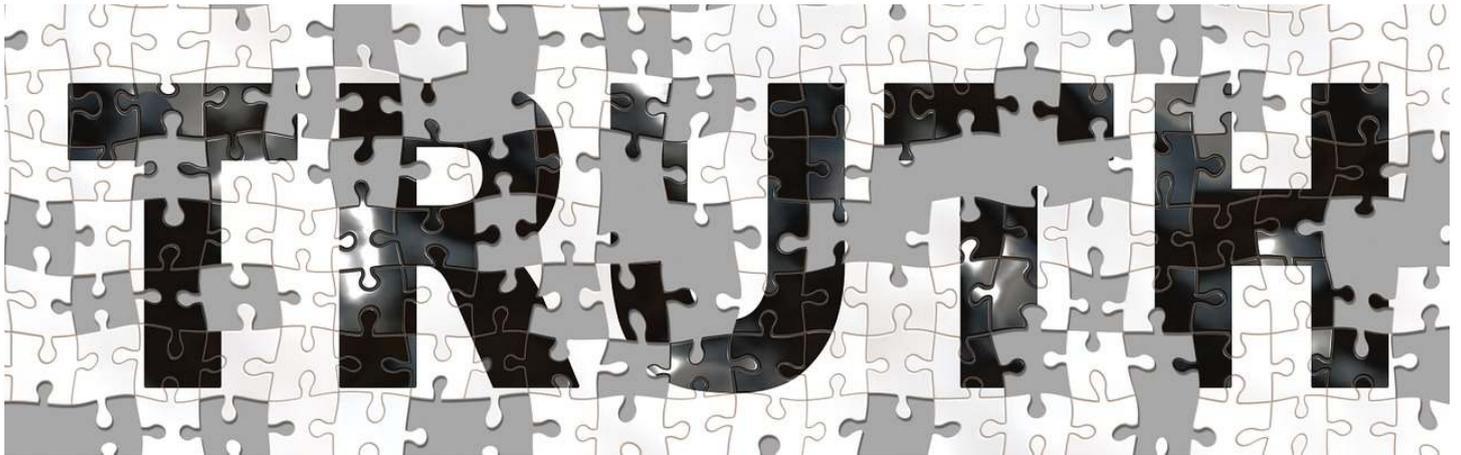


## Whose Truth Is It Anyway? - 20th April 2017



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...

Kleeman, J. 2017. <I>Sleep Problems Mounting in Children.</I> [Online]. [bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39140836). Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39140836> [accessed March 2017]

Gregoire, C. 2015. <I>What Constant Exposure to Negative News Is Doing To Our Mental Health.</I> [Online] [huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com). Available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/19/violent-media-anxiety\\_n\\_6671732.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/19/violent-media-anxiety_n_6671732.html) [accessed March 2017]

## 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 Gethard'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.

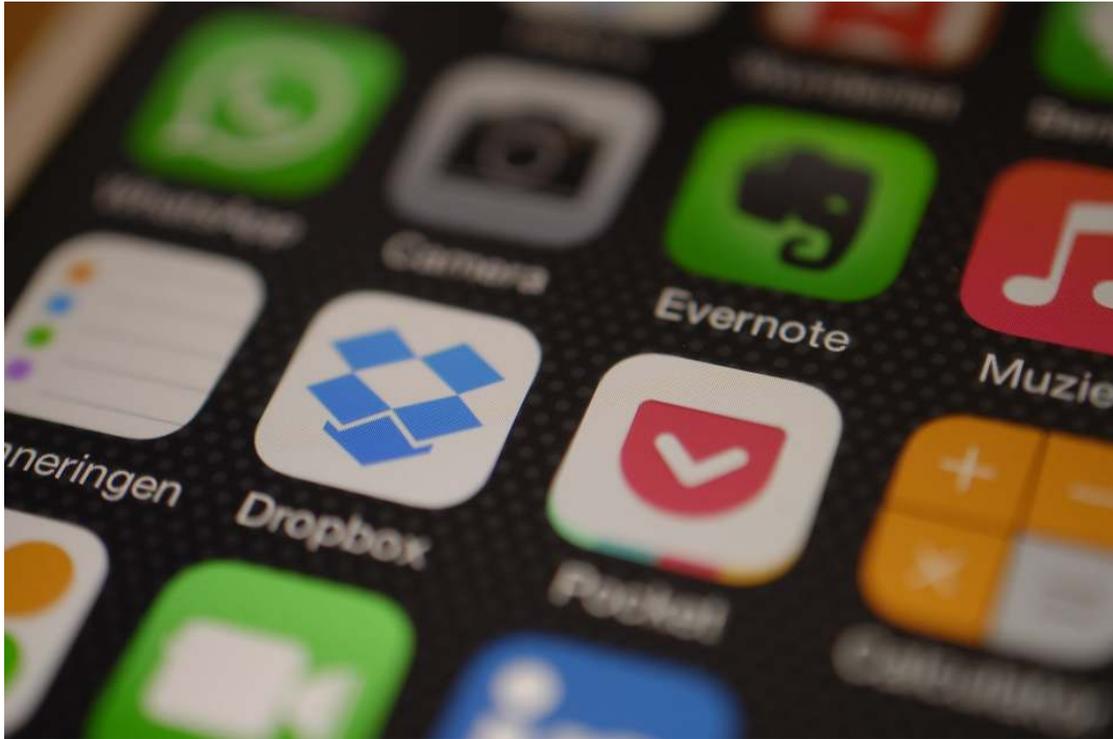
### **Their way is OK too**

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? – 1<sup>st</sup> 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? – 1<sup>st</sup> 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 begin 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.