

STUDY
SMART

STRESS
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Tips, tricks and techniques to ace your exams and take care of your mental wellbeing

REESE PATEL

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Introduction

The people who get good grades tend to be the people who really *want* good grades. That means that the kinds of people who choose to read a book like this are likely to be the kinds of people who least *need* to, but most *want* to. Weird, right? The people who least need revision advice tend to be the people who most want it.

Nevertheless, for all you crazy nerds out there, I will endeavour throughout this book to go through all the things I did to get virtually perfect grades at school. Maybe you'll learn just one thing, and maybe that thing will make reading this book worthwhile.

Having said that, I'm almost certain the majority of you will not read this book in its entirety. Although I'd love you to, I get that you probably don't have the time. That's why, if you're a certified genius already, I'd recommend taking a quick glance at the contents page and skipping to the sections you think will be most beneficial to you.

I'm not sure I'm selling this book particularly well. I should really be using this introduction as an opportunity to describe how much of an academic mastermind I am. That way, you'll probably take my advice more seriously. I'll appear more credible.

So here we go, here's that bragging you didn't ask for: at school, I got virtually perfect grades. If you're not in the UK this will sound like complete gibberish but in my GCSEs (exams taken at 16) I got 12A*s and in my A-levels (exams taken at 18) I got 3A*s 1A. The A still haunts me to this day. After this, I went on to obtain a first-class degree in Maths and Philosophy from the University of Warwick.

So there you go – if there were any doubts, I hope they have been well and truly quashed. I'm undoubtedly the smartest person to ever exist. And the most humble.

I've often wondered whether I wrote this book because I care about helping people with their grades or because I have cripplingly low self-esteem. Perhaps this book is merely a way to elevate my own self-worth. Through giving studying advice, thereby demonstrating how much of a genius I am to my audience, I can be allowed to feel a sense of superiority. I'd like to think that's not the case – I'd like to think I do all the work I do because I actually care about helping people. But who knows.

This book is split into two sections. The first half (chapters 1 and 2) is on revision techniques and productivity and the second half (chapter 3) is on wellbeing and warding off stress.

I know what you're thinking. Why include a section on wellbeing? Well, there are several reasons. Firstly, I believe that being happy does actually contribute to getting good grades. Secondly, I believe that being happy is arguably more important than getting good grades. And thirdly, I wrote this book for my fifteen year old self. What my fifteen year old self needed more than anything, and what the research seems to

indicate that students, in general, need more than anything, is advice on staying content and not being overwhelmed by all the craziness in this modern world. Borne through my own struggles with mental health, I've tried an insane number of techniques to improve my wellbeing, reduce anxiety and ward off stress. In this book, I'm going to share the ones that have worked best for me.

To clarify, I'm not claiming to be able to solve all your problems. I'm sadly not some kind of magic guru. All I have is my own experience and the psychological literature, and that's where the contents of this book come from. Don't think of this book as a guide. Think of it as a collection of tools I've collected through personal experience that I'm sharing with you. These are tools that you can try and test yourself. What works for me may not work for you but I'm hoping, through reading this, you can arm yourself with enough of these useful tools to survive and potentially thrive in whatever circumstance you may currently find yourself.

1

Techniques for efficient revision

Introduction

Over the course of my student years, I tried and tested hundreds of tips, tricks and techniques to help me revise more efficiently. This chapter is essentially a collection of all the ones that I found to be most effective. Enjoy.

Flashcards

I'm going to begin this book with potentially the greatest revision technique ever created. Flashcards. As well as being the sole reason I got the grades I got, their effectiveness in boosting grades has also been backed by a sizable amount of scientific research [1].

Having said this, flashcards are only as good as the way they are used. Using them to copy massive chunks of textbook information onto is about as effective as reading your textbook upside down.

So that said, how can we create good flashcards?

How to create good flashcards

The key to creating good flashcards is ensuring they are encouraging active recall. The way to guarantee this and the way I'd recommend is by having some kind of question on the front of your flashcard with a fully detailed solution on the back.

I know this may seem like a let-down (how could revision be this simple?), but making the transition from passive learning to active learning is honestly a game changer.

Let's say for example you wanted to remember that:

“Homeostasis is the maintenance of a constant internal environment in the body. The nervous system and hormones are responsible for controlling this.” [2]

Instead of literally copying all this information out onto a flashcard, write two questions on the front of your flashcard:

Homeostasis is the maintenance of what?

What is responsible for controlling this?

And on the back write your solutions:

Homeostasis is the maintenance of a constant internal environment in the body

The nervous system and hormones are responsible for controlling this

Now whenever you want to revise homeostasis, bang, all you need to do is look at the questions on the front of the flashcard, try and write answers on a separate sheet of paper and then cross reference your answer with the solution on the back. And even

if you get the answer wrong the first time, after you've gone through this flashcard enough times, the answer should be imprinted in your brain. Repeat for any topic, writing as many questions as you want on as many flashcards as you want.

This same system can easily be applied to learning quotes in English or learning facts or information in any other subject. Whether you're doing GCSEs, A-levels (British references) or are at university, whenever there is information that needs to be memorised, writing flashcards that encourage active recall like the one above can be a really effective way of helping you do so.

When you create flashcards this way, every time you want to learn, you're essentially forcing yourself to first think about what the answer might be before going through the relevant mental processes to get there, rather than simply reading the answer.

This process of recall is the exact process you're going to be using in your exam so the more you practise using it when revising, the better prepared you'll be come exam time.

Another important thing to note is that even if you think you're a genius and know the answer, you should always turn the flashcard over and cross reference with the solution you have on the back.

Research has found that when students continued to test themselves with flashcards even after getting the answers correct, the overall proportion of answers they got right would increase [3]. A lot of the time, you might think you know the right answer but...you actually don't.

A useful online resource

Now for an online resource I found invaluable for creating flashcards – Quizlet.

I should clarify at this point that this section is sadly not sponsored by Quizlet. I am indeed advertising their platform for free, and that's because it genuinely helped me immensely with my revision.

So...what is it?

Quizlet is an online platform that helps you to learn through flashcards. Not only can you use sets of flashcards that other people have made public (which can be especially useful for learning huge vocab lists for languages) but you can also create your own sets.

I can say with certainty that one of the main reasons I got an A* in A-level psychology was because Quizlet gave me a way of going over my flashcards everywhere. Using the technique I mentioned in the previous section, I created flashcards for every case study with questions on the front and answers on the back, such as the one below (where in this case each question mark represented a word/number that needed filling in).

Get a hint



Levine - The two most helpful countries were (?% and (?%) and the two least helpful countries were (?%) and (?%)



Brazil 93 Costa Rica 91 USA 45 Malaysia 40

Most of my revision then consisted of going over these flashcards over and over until I was able to recall all the information at will. The beauty (if I can call it that?) of Quizlet was that I could go over these flashcards whenever I wanted.

There's a Quizlet app that you can download on your phone which is genuinely amazing. Like a true nerd, on my train journey to school, I'd use this app to go over my psychology flashcards. If I was waiting for an appointment of some kind or waiting for a meeting to start, you guessed it, I'd often whip out these digital flashcards. And just from spending these random five or ten minute periods that popped up during the day efficiently, which I'd have otherwise used to scroll through random rubbish on my phone, come exam time and all the information had been learnt and it felt like I'd barely done any work.

So if you're doing a subject where the answers are generally representable in words or numbers, Quizlet could save you hours of time.

Past papers

The second tip in this section is one you've undoubtedly heard countless times. I'm not going to spend long talking about it because I don't want to waste your time, and it's fairly self-explanatory, but not choosing to use past papers is like not choosing to give yourself a thirty metre head start in a race you have to win.

For most exams, one thing you'll notice when doing past papers (other than being bored out of your mind) is that questions are often rinsed and repeated, perhaps with slightly different wording, over and over. The most important thing is not necessarily the knowledge itself but learning how to express that knowledge in the way the exam board wants you to.

If you know all the content but haven't used past papers to see how the exam board want you to lay out your answers, the likelihood you'll get an A* (or a top grade) is much lower than if you were to instead memorise the structure of the mark schemes these papers use with less knowledge.

I know this sounds incredibly weird but learning the tricks and tips for what the exam boards want is probably more important than learning the content itself.

Now, look, I'm not saying you should be crazy and go into the exam having not learnt any of the content. All I'm saying is that it's super important that you repeatedly test your knowledge with past papers.

A huge part of my revision, in maths and the sciences particularly, came from memorising mark schemes (fun times). Eventually, I'd start seeing the same style of questions crop up over and over again, just worded slightly differently. I could then learn the answer to this style of question, ready to regurgitate in the exam.

It's also worth scanning through the 'examiner report/feedback' document (sometimes) attached to past papers which highlights questions students found most difficult. This can help you to figure out how well you're progressing as well as help you to understand what specific aspects of the marking examiners are looking at. In theory, the better you know how a paper will be marked, the better you'll be at laying out the answers they're looking for.

Lastly, if you're lucky enough to attend a school that gives you 'progress tests' I'd strongly recommend you take advantage. I know these are not past papers, but they're usually equally as useful.

Yes, I know it's so insanely tempting to not revise for these 'progress tests' across the year given that none of them actually contribute to your grade, but trust me, it'll more than often be worth your time.

I hate to say it, but good grades require consistency. A huge body of research has been published which all lead to similar conclusions – spaced repetition is much more effective than cramming [4]. Shocking, I know.

If you're forcing yourself to revise for each progress test, you're simultaneously forcing yourself to learn the content. And spacing out this learning over the course of the entire year is going to be much more beneficial than that last week cram.

Progress tests are also a great opportunity for you to conduct mini experiments where you can test what revision techniques are most efficient for you. Everyone is

different, unique, our brain's wired in a different way to any other person in the universe and so what worked for me or your mate might not necessarily work for you. With almost all educational advice I always say the same thing: experiment. Then when the real exam comes along, you'll know the techniques that work best for you.

Flow state

How many times have you walked into your school library only to see some kid playing a game on a computer, or using a book to conceal a phone? My advice – it's super tempting, but don't be that kid. Separate 'play time' and 'study time'. When you are working, work.

Whether it be sitting alone in the corner of the library or turning your phone on silent mode, try to remove all potential distractions. Revision is best when you enter 'flow state' and that can only happen when distractions are as limited as possible.

When someone tells me they revised for six hours straight, I know the likelihood that those six hours consisted of efficient revision is pretty damn minimal. It's virtually impossible to maintain peak levels of concentration for more than a couple of hours. Someone's six hours of revision could easily be equivalent to two, even one of yours.

What I'm trying to get across in the nicest way possible is this: don't delude yourself into thinking you revised more than you actually did.

If you get to the library at 9am and leave at 12am, don't tell yourself you did three hours of revision if those three hours were punctuated by you scrolling through the news, learning a scarily large number of pointless facts about the world.

Lastly, don't compare how much you're revising to how much people around you are revising. The only thing you need to make sure of is that you're prepared for the exam. How you achieve that is completely unrelated to everybody else and their study habits.

How to revise maths

How to use flashcards for maths

I know I've gone through flashcards already but I want to quickly walk you through how I use flashcards to study maths. I wouldn't do this unless I genuinely did think it was worth your time.

So for both my school and university maths courses and for most maths courses, there should be a main textbook which you do questions from. This textbook should be divided into topics and sub-topics, each of which there are questions for.

The way I'd recommend using flashcards is as follows:

Every time you go over a sub-topic at school and do the relevant exercise in the textbook, note the questions you either struggle with or the questions you feel covered a key idea. A lot of the time textbooks tend to repeat the same style of

question over and over using different numbers. Make sure you've noted enough questions so that every 'type' of question is covered.

Now create a flashcard for each of the questions you've noted. On the front of the flashcard you should have the question written in full and on the back, the solution. Continue doing this for every sub-topic. If your textbook doesn't have solutions, try asking your teacher or a friend. If your teacher is unhelpful or you have no friends, try Google. If Google also refuses to provide answers, resign to the fact you will fail your exam.

Once you've got through the entire course, you should have this huge deck of flashcards with questions on the front and answers on the back for each 'type' of question from every sub-topic in the entire textbook. Now I know this might seem mildly excessive but because textbooks tend to repeat the same style of question over and over, you should end up using way fewer flashcards than you'd think.

Now, using the deck you've made, you should be able to look at the front of a flashcard, write out the solution fully in a notepad and then cross check it with the back of the flashcard which should have the entire solution laid out.

Maybe the first few times you go over the flashcards you get a quarter of them wrong (yes, I'm being optimistic here). You can then set aside this quarter and continue going through them until you are eventually able to understand and answer every question in the pile.

Once all your flashcards have been learnt, you should, in theory, have learnt all the fundamentals from the textbook.

The golden rule

I'm aware the last thing you want to hear in a revision guide is some random guy telling you just about the most cliché piece of advice ever created – don't give up – but when you're doing maths, this is literally the golden rule.

Maths is all about resilience. It's about pushing and pushing, struggling and struggling until you finally get to the right answer, at which point you realise that you're going to have to repeat this whole process again for the next question.

This process of struggling and trying a hundred things that don't work is surprisingly not pointless. If you want to do well, giving up when a question looks too hard is not the greatest way to go.

So what I'd advise when you encounter a difficult problem is this:

Firstly, look up at the sky. If the sky is dark, I'm truly sorry but you're out of luck. If it's bright, wave your hands in a circular motion repeatedly. Do this for sufficient time and you'll find the solution to your difficult problem magically float into the forefront of your mind.

Sorry, I couldn't help myself. This is what I'd actually advise you to do when you encounter a difficult problem:

- Keep trying different things for five minutes, and write down everything you try
- If this doesn't work, take a step back and try and think about other techniques you've learnt that might be relevant
- If you still can't think of anything, just write something down, anything that seems even vaguely related to the question. From experience, I've found that the process of noting a basic formula you already know can help stimulate a thought.
- And if you're still stuck, try and simplify the problem. Think about an easier version of the problem and try and solve that. Is the method you used for this easier problem transferrable to the problem itself?

If after all of this, you still can't seem to figure out what to do, then bow down to the problem, declare its superiority over you and admit defeat. Or, if you want, ask your teacher or a friend for help. But when you ask for help, instead of saying, "I don't get it," you can now elegantly summarise everything you've tried already. Now your teacher or friend knows what specific part of the problem you're struggling with, and so should (hopefully) be able to give you more personalised feedback.

It goes without saying that if you're in an actual timed exam, then don't be insane and spend the entire time attempting to solve a single question. Know when to give up and move on to the next one.

But when you're actually learning the maths over the course of the year, there are no excuses. That's a lie. There are plenty of excuses, but don't use them. You learn through struggle, through getting things wrong over and over before you finally start getting them right. Prepare yourself.

Be curious about how the maths works

From my experience tutoring maths both one to one, and for a large scale tutoring agency, teaching classes up to 8, I've noticed that in most cases, a student's response to encountering difficulty is flipping to the back of the textbook to take a look at the answer and working backwards from there.

Now although I admit this way of doing maths seems incredibly appealing, the more you do this, the lower your mental threshold becomes. With time, as soon as a problem looks even vaguely difficult you'll be turning to the answers.

I know I've kind of already said this but when learning maths, the majority of understanding doesn't come from the five minute write up of the solution for your teacher but instead from the prior hour of trying and failing. So don't rely on just memorising all the methods that are given to you. Spend time thinking about why those methods work.

It's all about curiosity. I'm fully aware that I'm probably starting to sound more and more like your teacher, but the more open you are to learning new material and the more you enjoy the process of problem solving, the easier you'll find the material to consume.

In an exam, it's also fairly likely that topics you've learnt will be framed in an unfamiliar and unseen context. If your revision has consisted solely of memorising techniques as opposed to actually understanding what's happening, you might find these kinds of questions pretty tough.

My advice would be to avoid thinking of maths as a memorisation game and to instead try and actually understand why the concepts you learn work. Oftentimes, if you understand the 'why' behind a specific technique you'll be able to answer most questions related to that topic fairly easily. Might sound harsh but reliance on memorisation usually won't cut it for the really top grades.

Layout your work neatly

Ok, now I'm really starting to sound like your teacher. But wait, hear me out.

This was something I only really started implementing in A-level maths, but something that genuinely changed my grades dramatically. I'm fully aware your teachers annoy you with the same old, "make your work neat, don't just give me the answer," all the time, and I know how frustrating it is, but I can assure you that there's a solid reason (in most cases it's not just so they can see you suffer).

When you lay out your solution clearly and concisely, it makes working through a problem with multiple steps much simpler. The chances you'll make a silly mistake reduces massively. And if you do make a mistake, instead of having to scour through that entire scribble ridden page, you can simply retrace your steps and find fairly easily the line where that mistake was made. In an exam especially, this is invaluable.

My advice would be to present your work in such a way that someone who's never seen that certain kind of problem could look at your steps and understand what's going on. Each step should logically follow from the last. Without risking sounding like some kind of weird motivational speaker, improve your layout and take pride in having neat solutions, and you'll quickly start seeing the benefits.

Stop complaining about how maths is pointless

Telling your teacher how "you're never going to use this in real life" is surprisingly not going to change the fact that the content you're learning can and likely will come up in an exam that could dictate your future.

Although, yes, if you don't want to pursue a maths-related degree, you'll probably never use some of the stuff you learn again, and although, yes, maths is usually suffering, that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the problem solving aspect of it.

In life in general, you're always going to have to solve problems, problems of all kinds and maths teaches you how to be resilient and not give up when the solution doesn't immediately reveal itself. Being good at problem solving is a huge asset in any profession.

So don't look at the pointlessness of it all; basically all subjects will be 'pointless' to those not pursuing careers in them. Derive some joy from the process of learning something and having that eureka moment when everything magically seems to fall into place.

Don't just revise

This is the last tip of this chapter. I'll start by asking you to make sure you've read the title of this tip properly. It's not 'Don't revise', although that would be a pretty hilarious title to include in a book centred on how to boost your grades. No - it's 'Don't *just* revise.' The 'just' in the title is very important. Why? Just.

Research has shown that exercise and getting away from that computer screen to enjoy nature and fresh air can actually have a positive effect on exam performance [5]. We're surprisingly not designed to stay cooped behind a laptop, hunched over a desk all day.

Go out, go for a walk, go for a run, meet up with friends, play that sport you love to play. Whatever strange hobby it is you have, make sure you're forcing yourself to get out of your room. Not only are you allowing your brain to subconsciously churn through that information you've learnt, but you're also giving yourself a rest. And rest is super important when it comes to exam performance.

The more relaxed and happier you are, the more likely you are to perform in the exam. To reiterate, I'm not telling you to not revise. Just don't work 24/7. Enjoy life too (more on this in chapter 4).

2

Tricks for staying productive

Introduction

So now you know what techniques to use to revise efficiently, it's time to learn how to motivate yourself to use them. Knowing how to revise is kinda pointless if you can't get yourself to actually sit down and do the work.

Establish good habits

Learning how to establish good habits is the closest you'll get to finding a 'motivation hack'.

What makes habits so insanely powerful is the fact that they can happen without your brain even having to think. When you establish a habit, it requires almost no resistance to carry out, so if you establish good habits, you'll essentially be carrying out productive tasks daily without ever really requiring motivation. Sounds crazy – I know.

But how can you start forming good habits?

To put it simply - repetition. Habits are all about consistency. Being super frenetic and motivated for two weeks only to do nothing for the next few months, while you're 'waiting for your motivation to return' is not going to do you any good.

Time needs to be spent building robust systems so that when unexpected things happen, your brain is always defaulting to these positive habits.

In order to build these systems, you need to commit to doing whatever habit it is you want to establish every day without fail. Now I know that sounds very overwhelming but it doesn't have to be. Let's say you want to get motivated to revise after school at 5pm before dinner.

Every day at this time, do *some* work. It doesn't have to be for an hour. Even if you'd like to work for an hour, if at the start you can only do a couple of minutes, that's good enough. Now there'll obviously be days when you genuinely can't muster the internal energy to get yourself there. Even a couple of minutes might seem like too much. But it's those days which count. Just sit down and work for two minutes. That's all. Two minutes.

And what's the point of this? Well, changing you is all about changing your identity. To create a 'new self', you need to destroy your old self. And so when you commit to revising at the same time daily, even if only for two minutes, you're signalling to your body that you're someone who doesn't miss a revision session. And that's how revision becomes a habit. As James Clear says in his book 'Atomic Habits': "Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the evidence of your new identity." [6]

You have to remember that you're not going to magically change overnight into this motivated revision robot. Be realistic, don't expect rapid results and stay consistent. Get those two minutes in and then slowly start to build up.

Will Smith – “You don't set out to build a wall. You don't say ‘I'm going to build the biggest, baddest, greatest wall that's ever been built.’ You don't start there. You say, ‘I'm going to lay this brick as perfectly as a brick can be laid.’ You do that every single day. And soon you have a wall.” [7]

Optimise your environment

When it comes to effective and efficient revision, the environment you work in can have a huge impact on how much information sticks in your head. In this section I'm going to outline a number of ways you can reshuffle your learning environment to help with establishing habits and improving productivity.

Remove distractions

This one is fairly self-explanatory. It doesn't exactly require much explanation. I'm sure you're well aware of what things you get distracted by when you're revising. Remove them. Put your phone in another room. Block websites you keep going to. Whatever it is that interrupts flow state – get rid of it.

Association

Many of us revise in our bed. The same bed we use to sleep on and eat on and relax on and perhaps do other stuff on. Putting aside the increased chances of physical injury from your body being in an awkward position, bed revision can actually be pretty bad for productivity too.

A good rule to follow is this: every place should be linked to one main activity. Once you do something in the same location repeatedly and for long enough, your brain begins to automatically link that place with the associated activity. And what do you do most in your bed? Sleep.

As you might have figured, trying to revise while your brain has put your entire body into sleep mode is not going to be particularly efficient. That's why a lot of us feel like we're only motivated enough to revise when we go to the library. We associate learning with the library and our brain is fully aware that whenever we're there, we're there to work.

So whether it's the library or the desk in your room, a good first step might be ensuring that that place is reserved solely for studying. Don't play games at your desk if your desk is where you want to work. Fix one space for studying and make sure whenever you're in that space, you study.

If you want to play, fine, but go somewhere else. The idea is that after consistently doing this, the link between that study location and the associated activity will become strong enough so that your brain, in this location, will almost automatically go into 'working mode'.

Revise in silence

Research by Grant et al. suggests that recall is most effective when the environment we learn information in is similar to the environment where we'll have to recall that information [8]. This is known as context dependent memory.

It's an unfortunate fact that almost every exam globally is conducted in silence. This means that to maximise the odds of recalling information you've learnt, you should try and learn in silence too.

I know listening to music is super tempting, but I'd advise against it if possible. But then again, if you're super unmotivated and feel like listening to music is what'll get you in the mood then an hour of revision with music is better than doing nothing at all.

Clean your room

I'm actively avoiding trying to sound like your parent here but the philosopher Confucius said:

“To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order; we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right.”

As annoying as this advice might be, this, in short, is exactly why having a tidy room is so important. If your overarching aim is to be disciplined in your studies, there's much to be said about being disciplined in your own personal life too. And that all starts with putting in order the place where you spend most of your life living. Your environment is nothing really more than an extension of yourself. If you surround yourself with a certain standard of living, you'll become to embody that standard.

Researchers at the Princeton University Neuroscience Institute published a study (The Journal of Neuroscience, 2011) which found that working in a cluttered environment can impact our ability to focus [9].

The research describes how our brain has a limited cognitive load. A cluttered environment, they suggest, subconsciously takes up a portion of our brain's attention. There is then competition with other tasks that require our full attention, revision, for example, leading to reduced productivity.

So what I'm trying to say is this: make an effort to put in order this little confined space in the world you have. And from there you can branch out. In other words: clean room, clean mind. And clean minds - pretty damn useful when revising.

Make things easy for yourself

Although keeping a tidy room can be useful, there's still one more step you can take to really kick-start your internal productivity engines: make things easier for future you.

What do I mean by this? Well, the brain naturally strays towards tasks that induce the most pleasure for the least effort. Clearly, revising generally doesn't fall into the 'oh, this is so much fun' category, so to counter this we want to minimise the number of obstacles on our way to that revision.

The more effort required to study, the less the chances are that you will. That's firstly why a good start, is tidying your room. But beyond that, you could take a step further and arrange your room efficiently.

If you know you want to revise maths tomorrow, open your textbook to the exact page you're going to be working on the night before. Take out your pen and your calculator and lay them neatly on your desk the night before. Have everything ready.

Similarly, if there's some other task you want to do tomorrow, take every possible measure to ensure doing that task will be as hassle free as possible tomorrow. In short, make life easy for your future self.

Create the right systems

I know it's a tired and over-used statement that all your teachers will probably bombard you with about three hundred million times at the start of term but...doing well in exams requires good organisation and hard work.

You're only as good as the systems you create for yourself. You're only as good as the time you dedicate to getting those grades. I know you probably don't want to hear this but unless you're some kind of genius, natural intelligence alone will not be enough to get top grades.

Intelligence will only take you so far. Those kids who tell you they've 'barely revised' and proceed to get top grades - those kids have either found a range of revision techniques personal to them which help them to absorb more information than most in a shorter period of time or... they're just flat out lying. If you want to do well, be prepared to have to work for it.

And look, I get that just telling yourself to work is unlikely to actually lead to you working. That's why the first step to getting more work done is creating structures and systems that make revising more likely to happen. Although compulsively scrolling through Instagram might be fun in the moment, it's not exactly going to bode well for you long term.

So what methods can we use to increase the odds of us revising?

Have a schedule

If you leave yourself to make decisions about what you should be doing to the day itself, from the moment you wake up, your brain will always be straying towards the easiest task, the task that requires the least effort (watching TV, playing games etc.). The way to counter this is by creating that schedule.

One of the main reasons most of us find it difficult to stick to the schedule we create is the fact that we set our expectations far too high. Setting a good timetable requires knowing yourself well. Setting less daily revision but knowing you will stick to it is way better than coming back from school, seeing that two hours of maths you have to do, giving up and collapsing into bed for the entirety of the evening.

So ensure, to begin with, the work you set yourself daily is realistic. Once you know you're able to begrudgingly tolerate that standard, you can start to incrementally increase the workload. For added motivation, if you complete all your work on any given day you could also treat yourself to some kind of reward. Maybe you allow yourself to watch an episode of your favourite TV show that everyone else thinks is awful or to a nice slice of cake.

At this point, the more spontaneous of you out there may be mildly frustrated. But I have good news. If you prefer to operate on a more spontaneous basis, there is still hope.

Instead of creating a timetable, you could also have a long term goal and then tailor each day based on progress made towards that goal. Every evening, plan out the next day, exactly what you're going to do in the morning, afternoon and evening. That way, every day can still be different but you're still simultaneously ensuring there is structure in place daily.

Start early

Yes, you've probably heard this time and time again but I'm basically obliged to say it in a revision guide...don't cram. As I've already said, spaced repetition and active learning are perhaps two of the most important tools when it comes to revision. A huge body of research has shown that these techniques as opposed to cramming are far more effective for learning [10].

Although it's super easy to deceive yourself into believing a huge amount of information can be stored in short term memory, being familiar with a concept is very different to understanding it. And when it comes to acing difficult exams, understanding is key.

So don't be that kid who brags about having spent the entire night before the exam downing fifty cans of Monster to stay alert enough to revise. Learn information throughout the year. Revise for your progress tests. Revise for your mocks. If there's an opportunity to revise and be tested on information across the year, make the most out of it. Trust me, it's annoying, but it'll make your life so much easier come exam time.

Consider why you're even revising

Now for some weird advice on mindset, advice you're fairly unlikely to see in any other revision guide. In my eyes, if you want to excel at anything you need to be able to provide a reason as to why you want to excel. Your brain needs an end goal,

justification for all the suffering and hours of relentless labour you are putting yourself through.

That's why a really important step is establishing a why. Why are you revising? And once you've answered the question "Why am I even revising?" once, don't stop there. Keep asking yourself why until you can't answer. Let me give you an example:

"Why am I even revising?"

"Because my parents told me to"

"Why did my parents tell me to?"

"So I can go to university."

"Why do you want to go to university?"

"So I can get a degree."

"Why do you want a degree?"

"So I can get a high paying job."

"Why do you want a high paying job?"

"So I can support my future family."

You get the point. You have to imagine you're an interrogator; dig as deep as possible.

By the end of your mental conversation, you should have a more detailed and in depth reason for why you're revising and sacrificing your current time. In the example above, instead of the person revising because 'their parents told them to', they have a deeper reason, to support their future family.

The heaven/hell technique

If you're apprehensive about the title of this tip, you'll be pleased to learn that I am in fact not about to tell you that if you don't revise you'll go to hell. Despite the title, there will be no religious involvement.

This technique rests on the idea that to make beneficial lifestyle changes, asking yourself useful questions and laying out answers in a detailed manner can be a super useful tool. The heaven/hell technique encourages you to ask yourself two separate questions, the first of which being:

"If I continue living exactly like I am now and don't make the positive changes in my life that I know I need to make to go towards my goal (i.e. start revising enough), then in three years, what will my life look like?"

The idea is not just to read that question and let it slip through your brain. You have to stop. Think. And after you've done a lot of thinking, perhaps over the next day or two, map out in detail how you think your future might unfold.

Spend a while just writing. What do you think will happen? How would you feel? Would it impact your career? Would it impact your future plans?

The purpose of this question is to create a kind of hell for you to run away from. When the future is cloudy, it's pretty easy to become reliant on things that provide instant gratification. Revision is boring.

But now we have a hell to run from, it would be useful to have somewhere to run towards...

“If I can successfully implement the positive changes in my life that I know I need to make to go towards my goal (i.e. start revising enough), then in three years, what will my life look like?”

Now for the fun part! I know it'd be basically impossible, but imagine you were able to do everything you said you were going to do. Imagine you were able to somehow harness all this internal motivation and turn all your wasted time into productive time. Spend a while thinking about exactly what impact this might have on your life. What would your new life look like? What impact would getting your grades have on your future, on the people around you? How would you feel?

Paint a rough picture – it doesn't have to be perfect. But it's important that you spend a good amount of time actually thinking. Try and avoid just half-heartedly spending ten minutes writing the first things that come to mind. Give yourself a day or two to really think. You're not exactly aiming to create a vision that's realistic. You just want something to aim towards, the best version of what could happen if you focus your mind on the things you know you should.

The idea is that every time you hear your brain telling you to do something unproductive, like scroll through social media, when you know you should be working, you now have something to refer to. Take a quick little peek at your heaven and hell. Which direction do you want to go?

3

Tips for taking care of your mental wellbeing

Introduction

Before I move on to the techniques themselves, I just want to quickly tell you a little bit about why I wrote this section.

In short, growing up, I struggled a lot with my mental health, and that's why when I was about fourteen, I started becoming super interested in psychology, reading countless books and academic articles, desperate to find ways to help myself. I tried like a million techniques to calm my anxiety and boost my mood, and in this section, I've rounded up the ones that worked best for me. If I'm even able to help just one of you who's struggling with a problem I've experienced, that'd genuinely be amazing.

Those of you who are familiar with my work will know I've documented most of my wellbeing discoveries through various articles on my website. I've also spent time doing other mental health related volunteering including volunteering for a helpline/listening service designed to help people with their mental health in the UK as well as at a special needs school in India. My undergraduate dissertation was also on the topic of mental health – I devised a psychological framework to conceptualise suicide.

Having said all this, I don't have PhD in psychology, so please don't treat what I say as advice you *must* follow. As I said earlier, think of this book in general as me giving you a collection of tips and tricks I've personally found to be useful. You're free to either try them out yourself or completely ignore them.

Before I start with the tips, I'll just give you a quick little overview of what's to follow in this section. I've split it into three parts. The first covers various psychological techniques designed to reduce stress and anxiety, the second covers techniques designed to improve psychological resilience and the third covers some basic principles I've found to be helpful for improving overall mental wellbeing.

I really hope you find this section helpful!

Mindfulness

I'm going to open with the technique that has helped me more than pretty much anything – mindfulness.

Now I know when you hear that word, you're likely to roll your eyes and sigh at the thought of yet another uninformed individual jumping on the latest psychological trend. But in all seriousness, mindfulness did genuinely help me hugely. Here's how.

What is it?

Before I go on to tell you how to use it, I feel like I should first give a rough outline of what it is. Just a warning – this next page or so does get a little bit deep, so if you'd prefer to skip it and move straight to the 'how to practise mindfulness' section, feel free.

But for those of you still here, mindfulness, to put it simply, is the act of being fully engaged and completely present with whatever it is you're doing. The idea is to bring awareness to your 'here and now' experience, with curiosity and inquisitiveness.

But why the hell would 'being present' help you?

Well, have you ever noticed that your mind has a mind of its own? You're chilling on your bed, trying to revise, when suddenly a thought pops into your head.

"I need to get some cake from the fridge."

You try and push the thought away, convince yourself you don't need the cake. But the more you try convincing yourself, the worse the urge becomes.

Eventually, you have no choice but to give in to the desire. But where did this desire even come from? How could you have dealt with it better? Well, the first thing to acknowledge is this: you don't choose your desires. Let me explain why.

Imagine you're in a supermarket and have to choose between two drinks, say apple juice and orange juice. You'd agree you can freely choose either drink. Let's say you choose orange juice. The question is: although you freely chose the orange juice, did you choose to want the orange juice more than the apple juice? Think about that for a second. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't have decided to want the apple juice more than the orange juice. Sure, to disprove this theory, you might have taken the apple juice but then your want to disprove the theory would have been greater than your want to pick the drink you liked most. And is that something you could have controlled?

The idea is, yes, you can do what you want, but that doesn't mean you can choose your wants. One of the purposes of mindfulness is to ensure those unconscious wants and desires don't control you. Since the thoughts and desires you have are in your mind, it's only natural for you to take ownership of them. After all, they are your thoughts. But just because you have a thought or desire, you don't have to take ownership. The rational portion of your brain didn't ask for that thought or desire to be there; it in a sense bubbled up from a deeper more primitive part.

As William Irvine, professor of philosophy, says, living with this primitive subconscious mind that provides intrusive thoughts is like having a roommate who keeps telling you what you should think, want and feel [11]. You might succeed to get the roommate to shut up for a bit but soon they'll be right back at it, making new suggestions. It's unlikely in reality that you'd put up with this roommate in the real world, except the problem is, you and this roommate are stuck together in your skull until your very last day on Earth.

That's where mindfulness comes in – you need to devise a strategy to deal with this roommate situation because exercising willpower to shut up your roommate constantly is too exhausting. Mindfulness enables you, in the analogy, to know the

dynamics of the situation better. By practising mindfulness, you can learn to cultivate a better relationship with this roommate and realise that although they can tell you what to think, you don't have to listen. You don't have to take ownership of the thoughts this roommate provides. By using the rational part of the mind, you can better deal with the sub-rational part (the roommate).

Despite there being a general framework around which mindfulness tends to revolve, there are actually quite a number of ways to practise it. It's important to emphasise that no way is the 'right way' and you'll probably have to undergo the trial and error process numerous times to settle on a way that works well for you. Here are some of my personal favourites.

How to practise mindfulness (the general principle)

Mindfulness can literally be practised anywhere, but if you're going to do it, it's best to do it alone. You can practise it when you're out for a walk, staring out your bedroom window or even just sitting in bed. The basic aim is for you to become increasingly aware of your surroundings and the sensations on the different parts of your body in context with that surrounding. Let's say, for example, you've gone for a walk. Instead of thinking about what you're going to have for breakfast tomorrow or that horrible presentation you did earlier today, bring your awareness to the here and now. Run through each sense, asking yourself questions.

How does the wind feel against your skin? How does your skin feel against the texture of your t-shirt or socks or trousers? What sensations can you feel in your body when you breathe in? Is the air cold or warm? Become aware of your breath, of the air hitting the back of your throat and filling your stomach – how does it feel?

What noises can you hear? The sound of cars? Trees waving in the wind? Birds singing? Pay close attention.

What can you smell? Freshly cut grass? Litter? Don't attach an opinion to that smell. Just observe. Inhale through your nose and be aware. Being aware means there is no reaction, just observation.

Look around you. Again, just observe. What kind of things can you see? The ripples in a puddle? The moon in the sky? A cloud passing by? Just watch. If a thought arises, that's ok, don't try and push it away but just be aware of its presence and sit with it until it passes.

These are just a completely random set of questions you might ask yourself when going for a walk, but you could ask similar kinds of questions in any setting.

When doing something as boring as brushing your teeth, for example, you could pay close attention to how the toothpaste tastes in your mouth, the texture of the brush, the smell of the toothpaste, how the vibrations of the electric toothbrush feel like in your hand or the sound of the brush hitting your teeth.

The great thing about mindfulness is that it isn't restricted to any specific activity. All we're trying to do is learn to observe the world in all its beauty without our prejudices, opinions and beliefs interfering. And once you learn to do this, to adopt a heightened sense of awareness of the world, it helps you to have a heightened sense of awareness of yourself.

Mindful meditation

Some people prefer to be still when they practise mindfulness and that's when meditation can be especially useful. The idea of mindful meditation is to reach a state of stillness and calm, where you're simply a passive observer. You're aware of the sensations in your body, from your inhalation and exhalation, to your heartbeat, to the rise and fall of your stomach and there is no judgement or opinion; just intense observation.

There's this weird widespread view that meditation is somehow the act of 'not thinking'. But this isn't true. Meditation is not control of thought. As Indian philosopher and author Jiddu Krishnamurti says:

"Meditation is to be aware of every thought and of every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong but just to watch it and move with it." [12]

He goes on to say:

"Meditation is a state of mind which looks at everything with complete attention, totally, not just parts of it."

When you're being mindful, you're devoting your complete attention to the here and now; your mind has emptied itself of the past and the possible future. There are plenty of guided mindfulness YouTube videos online and if you feel like they might help you, I'd recommend trying out various channels until you settle on a voice you're comfortable with [13].

One of the first things you might notice when trying this kind of mindfulness is that thoughts intrude and disrupt the cycle. When this happens, don't try and repress but instead acknowledge the thought until it passes on, like a cloud passing by in the sky, and then return to your breath or to whatever it is you are directing your attention towards. The more you practise, the better you'll get.

The ultimate idea of mindfulness is, to outline a Buddhist idea, for your thoughts "to become like robbers in an empty house". They cannot affect you or hurt you or take anything away from you. You should instead view your thoughts as a kind of consistent and constant background radio noise that you can choose whether or not to pay attention to. You can tune in for the helpful thoughts and simply allow that blur to continue for the unhelpful ones.

Mindfulness can also help you to better deal with your emotions. It's important to remember that negative emotions, just like positive emotions, serve a functional

purpose; they are resources you can use to understand how your brain is feeling [14]. Rather than categorising emotions into ‘bad emotions’ and ‘good emotions’ and trying to ‘push away’ the bad ones, we should instead see all our emotions as useful tools rather than uncomfortable inconveniences. For example, rather than seeing a negative emotion as ‘bad’, we should realise that the emotion could be our brain signalling to us that we need to make a change.

The first time experience

A couple more mindfulness techniques before we move on. If you’re sick of mindfulness already, feel free to skip to the ‘power of gratitude’ section.

But for those of you still here, another useful mindfulness technique is doing any task as if it were the first time you were ever doing it. Imagine you’re reading a book. If you’d never read a book before, you’d probably act fairly weirdly – you’d feel the pages and their texture, smell the book, run your hands over the cover, notice how the words on the page flow. Instead of having your thinking-self dominating, you’d allow your body to revert to ‘observing mode’.

When you’re having a shower, for example, don’t take it for granted. Feel the water on your skin, feel how the droplets roll down your legs, feel how different parts of your body feel warm and cold, listen to the sound of the water hitting the ground, engage the senses. Really imagine you’ve never had a shower before.

I know this might sound crazy but the point of pretending it’s the first time you’ve ever encountered something before is to simulate the same kind of wonder and gratitude that you experience when you genuinely do witness something fascinating for the first time.

Fascination is a feeling that tends to fade and so although a Ferrari might feel amazing for the first three weeks or so, eventually the novelty will disappear and you won’t feel that same wonder you once had. The first time technique offers a way to get around this and remember just how wondrous the small things in this world we take for granted really are.

The last time experience

A technique recommended by neuroscientist and author Sam Harris that might help you to be more present whilst doing activities is known as the ‘last time experience’ [15]. Every time you’re about to engage in an activity, let’s say, for example, going to the gym, remind yourself of two things:

- 1) That there will be a last time you ever do this activity

And:

- 2) That there is a possibility that this time, right now, is the last time you will ever do this activity

It's kind of sad to acknowledge but for all you know, tomorrow you might be involved in a terrible accident or be diagnosed with a certain kind of illness that strips your ability to move as you currently do. This time in the gym may very well be your last. Now take a moment to think about how this consideration might change your workout?

It's the fact that everything comes to an end that motivates us to do painful things. But this thought, that there'll be a last time you ever go to the gym and that this could very well be that last time is not a thought many of us want to consider and not surprisingly. It's not exactly pleasant to remind yourself of the fact that one day your capability for physical movement will vanish and that you don't know when that day will come.

But by actively reminding yourself of this possibility before engaging in an activity, you should be considerably more engaged and intrusive thoughts should be much less frequent.

Using mindfulness to help with anxiety

We're almost done with mindfulness – I promise. To end, I just want to quickly cover how I use mindfulness to help deal with anxiety.

When we experience negative thoughts, it can be tempting to want to immediately push them away. Let's say you're about to do a presentation. Your inner voice might be telling you:

“This presentation is going to go terribly. You're going to forget everything you prepared and freeze on the spot.”

The more you try and push this thought away, the more powerful it becomes. Repressing a thought is like trying to push an inflatable ball underwater. No matter how hard you press down or for how long, that ball will still come flying up to the surface, often with even more force than if you were to have simply let it be.

So rather than repressing thoughts, try instead to acknowledge thoughts as they come, question them and determine whether they are actually useful. If they're not useful then just let them be, don't try and push them away, and they should naturally subside.

Let's go back to the presentation example. Instead of giving that thought power and saying to yourself “I'm going to freeze on the spot”, you might say something like:

“Ah, I'm noticing I'm having the thought that I'm going to freeze on the spot.”

The addition of “I'm noticing I'm having the thought that...” is there to remind you that you are not your thoughts. Whatever thoughts your roommate/inner voice feeds you has no bearing on how you must act. You are in complete control of your actions. From then, you can simply acknowledge the presence of the thought and wait for it to naturally fade.

The power of gratitude

I'm not exaggerating when I say this next trick has helped lift my mood on so many occasions. It seems simple, but I've found it to be super powerful.

Gratitude has been demonstrated by a large body of psychological research to be strongly and consistently associated with improved contentment [16]. To millions of people in the world today, you are already living the dream life and learning to recognise this as well as giving thanks and being appreciative of what you have can help you to feel more positive emotion more frequently. So how might you go about practising it?

Using a diary

Gratitude is not exactly something you can learn overnight. It takes time. But it's still a feeling you can learn to slowly cultivate if you make sure to experience feeling it every day. One way of doing this is by using a diary.

Every night, for example, you could write three things you encountered during the day that you felt grateful for. Understandably, at first this might seem like a chore but the more you do it, the more you'll begin to experience the benefits of the routine. You should notice with time that as you go about your day to day business, instead of blindly doing things, your brain will be subconsciously on the lookout for anything you might be able to write in your diary. You are, in a sense, training your brain to automatically search for things to be grateful for.

Some people find that instilling gratitude into their wake up routine can be useful too. For so many of us, we feel a compulsion to wake up and instantly check our phone, that flood of bulletins darting into our minds and inducing stress before our brains even have a chance to properly wake up.

To get around this problem, you could create a routine that involves mentally running through a list of things that you'll likely encounter in the day ahead that you're grateful for. The advantage of practising gratitude in the morning is that it could put you in a better mood for the day ahead. You do, however, miss out on the benefits of reflecting on the day that's just gone. There are hundreds of gratitude diaries online that you can buy to help you with your routine, but if you'd prefer to avoid getting ripped off, a simple notepad will do the trick.

Volunteering

Gratitude and volunteering are kind of intrinsically tied to one another. The more you volunteer, the more grateful you become for what you have. Once you experience first-hand what other people in the world must endure and learn to live with on a daily basis, you naturally begin to feel blessed for the life you have.

Volunteering forces you to consider just how lucky you are not to have been born into poverty or without certain limbs or disabled or with certain mental disorders or with abusive family members. Things that you'd ordinarily take for granted, like sight for example, you suddenly feel extremely appreciative of.

The truth is, if not for an accident of birth you could easily be the people you are volunteering to help. And to a lot of them, you are already living the dream life. Learning to be appreciative of that fact is super important when it comes to feeling content with where you are.

Negative visualisation

As well as creating routines that encourage the feeling of gratitude, there are also techniques you can use during the day when you're feeling down or angry, that can elevate your mood.

One of the most powerful techniques I've found comes from the Stoics (stoicism is a school of philosophy founded in the early third century BC):

Whenever you find yourself stressed or angry or sad (let's say you've failed an exam), take a moment to think about all the bad things that could have happened to you that haven't. The person who you most love could have been stripped away from you today. You could have been diagnosed with terminal cancer today. You could have had a sudden heart attack today and been paralysed from the chest down. You could have been diagnosed with motor neurone disease today.

Now if any of those things would have happened, how much would you be willing to pay to get back into the exact moment you find yourself in right now? You'd consider your prayers answered if you could simply return to this moment...just failing an exam.

Considering the infinite spectrum of possibilities puts life into perspective – is failing this one exam really the end of the world? Yes, your life could be much better but it could also be much much worse.

You could also combine this with the 'last time experience' technique I mentioned earlier. Take a second to pick something in your life that's extremely valuable to you and consider the possibility that the last time you interacted with it was the last time you'll ever interact with it. Imagine you'll never be able to interact with that thing or person again. Imagine what that would feel like. Now, next time you see that thing or person you'll likely feel way more grateful for being able to interact with it than before.

Remembering that each moment could become a memory

Life can be really tough. At times, so tough that it's difficult not to start convincing ourselves we'll never experience happiness. It's easy to forget that even though you might hate the life you are currently living, there is a good chance that in the future you will look back at this time in your life in a wistful state of mind.

Let me ask you this: how many times have you reminisced about going back to a specific period of your life? If only you could go back and relive those teenage years again, you might think. What you potentially forget, however, is that in those earlier years you wish you could return to, you were likely experiencing a lot of pain and at

the time, probably just wanted to move on from that stage of life onto the next. You wanted to be a teenager and thought adolescence would bring joy and contentment. But then adolescence came...

Kids want to grow up and adults want to grow young. Whatever stage we are at in life, it's easy to delude ourselves into thinking that moving to a different stage would make us happy. But this just leaves us in a state of constant unhappiness. Rather than thinking about what could be, it can be useful to realise that this stage of life you're in right now, you'll someday look back on and wish you could return to. There'll come a time when you're in a nursing home, glued to an armchair and dreaming about how much you'd give to live the life you are currently living.

The time will come when you wish you were strong and well enough to do the washing or play with your friends in the park. Next time you're with your friends, think about how much ninety year old you would give to be able to walk around the park and feel the fresh air and the rays of sunshine on his/her skin. Enjoy being however old you are because it's not going to last.

An important caveat

Although practising gratitude is on the whole, overwhelmingly positive, there is one important caveat to mention:

Don't trivialise your own problems.

Just because someone in another part of the world has a 'worse' problem than you, that doesn't mean that your problem is not important. Your problem is just as valid as theirs. Your problem is real and still needs to be fixed.

Gratitude does not mean you are not allowed to feel sad. Being sad is perfectly ok and normal and like any other emotion, it's something that will pass. The idea of gratitude is not to contrast your life with people in worse conditions and proceed to view all your problems as irrelevant.

Rather than focusing on the problems you are experiencing and the negativity in life, focus instead of the positives, on what there is in your life and how lucky and blessed you are to have these things. It's completely possible to acknowledge that you are sad but nonetheless feel grateful simultaneously.

Rabbi Hyman Schachtel - "Happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have."

Improving psychological resilience

Now I've covered various techniques to reduce stress and anxiety, I want to go over some ways to improve your psychological resilience. It's obviously super important to be able to reduce stress, but it's arguably even better to be less affected by that stress in the first place.

The sad thing is, in order to build your psychological resilience, and become less susceptible to stress, you're probably going to have to do some things you'd prefer to avoid.

Why? Well, a natural progression from 'I need to feel good' is 'I must not feel bad'. This leads to something known as experiential avoidance which is essentially the mentality of 'I must avoid all painful feelings'. But this mindset not only strips you of pain but also of joy. Often, things that you're initially anxious about you end up actually really enjoying and you never would have experienced that joy if you'd have been completely discomfort avoidant.

You can't have love without fear of rejection. You can't achieve great things without fear of failure. You can't make friends without opening yourself up to the possibility of your trust being manipulated. You can't get stronger without putting your muscles through pain. Instead of living your life based on running away from all these negative things that might happen, it's arguably better to run towards the things you do want and learn to cope with those negative emotions along the way.

By definition, to get out of your comfort zone, you are going to have to be uncomfortable. But it's necessary. It's suffering for your future self. If you only do what you can currently do, you'll never be more than you currently are.

So how can we healthily get out of our comfort zones and build psychological resilience?

Voluntary psychological discomfort

Small doses of voluntary suffering that are beneficial to your future self are like vaccinations that strengthen your psychological immune system. The more vaccinations you give yourself, the more prepared you'll be when life throws you that storm that might otherwise have been overwhelming. If you're used to dealing and coping with stress on a small scale, it'll be much easier to deal with on a bigger scale.

Through these healthy doses of psychological suffering, you are training yourself to accept discomfort and not run away from it but embrace it. There'll always be that inner voice telling you to take the easy path out and run towards the things you know you should be avoiding. But by engaging in voluntary discomfort you're telling this voice that he/she is not in control. You're in charge.

Let's say you're scared of lifts. Every time you're near a lift, your stress levels shoot up. What can you do?

Well, a common psychological technique used to counter phobias is known as systemic desensitisation, which in short, involves gradually exposing the person with the phobia to the thing they are afraid of. The technique revolves around inducing voluntary discomfort in order to stretch the comfort zone, so the individual can grow and not be as affected by the fear.

In this lift scenario, rather than setting the initial target to be actually standing in the lift, which might seem unattainable, the first goal might be to stand a few metres away from the lift.

From then, the distance from the lift can be reduced, each time the person going as close as they possibly can. They might repeat each distance over and over until they're comfortable with it before moving a metre closer. And even if it were to take ages, the person would eventually get to a stage where they'd feel comfortable in the lift itself. The important thing to remember is this: the task never gets easier. The person just gets stronger.

The same kind of logic can be applied in your life: practise psychological suffering. If you have a fear of failing, practise failing; a fear of public speaking, go on a public speaking course; a fear of rejection, practise being rejected; a fear of parties, start exposing yourself to smaller social situations. In general, if there is something you know you should be doing but are avoiding because you're afraid, then you should probably do it in small doses and try and gradually increase the amount of discomfort as you grow stronger and stronger.

And look, I'm fully aware that all this is so much easier to say than to do. But as long as you are trying, as long as you're trying to improve your psychological immune system, that's all that really matters.

The Wim Hof technique

Whilst we're on the topic of improving psychological resilience, allow me to introduce you to the Dutch extreme athlete, Wim Hof, who's broken sixteen world records, most of which in some way related to cold exposure.

Wim is a huge believer that exposure to cold combined with breathing techniques can help to relieve forms of mental illness such as anxiety and depression as well as improve the immune system [17]. His motivation to help people and evoke real change in others' lives came when his wife tragically took her own life in 1995, leaving him with four children to raise himself. In a documentary with Vice, Wim said:

“Where I got peace was in these breathing exercises, swimming outside in the cold.”
[18]

His aim from then was to translate the methods he'd developed to the modern world to prevent what happened to his wife happening to others. To note just two of the insanely ridiculous things this man has done, he's spent 1hr 53min with full body contact with ice as well as running a full marathon in the Arctic Circle in temperatures close to -20°C, wearing only a pair of shorts. These are what most would consider, sub-human feats.

One of the main things Wim encourages us all to do is take cold showers. And I'm not just saying this, but cold showers, to me, were genuinely a revelation. From investing just a minute or two a day, my wellbeing improved massively.

Research has shown that cold showers contribute to the reduction of stress. Each time you have a cold shower, you are forcing your body to deal with a small amount of stress. This gradual process of encouraging your nervous system to deal with stress helps in situations beyond the shower. This process is known as 'hardening' [19].

There's also another benefit of cold showers – a benefit linked to something we discussed earlier. With a traditional warm shower, your mind is always active – ruminating about that meeting tomorrow or whether you got that job yesterday. There is no time to simply stop and experience the present moment just as it, to simply become aware of the sensations on your skin. Cold showers, in a sense, force you to do this. When you first go into a cold shower, the first thing you'll notice is that you feel like you're dying - you're gasping for air. And so to counteract this, you are forced to breathe deep. You'll also notice your mind starts becoming vacant as you are compelled to simply experience the raw sensations of cold on your skin and notice how it feels for you to breathe in and out. Your brain reverts to a kind of survival mode where intrusive thoughts about the past and future almost disappear entirely. That's why for me, cold showers act as a kind of meditative experience. To counter the pain, you don't try and fight it. You just acknowledge its existence and learn to breathe through it, become one with the present moment in order to endure the cold.

One rule to always bear in mind when taking cold showers, however, is never to force. If you feel like you need to get out then get out. Listen to your body.

Generally, cold showers are extremely safe but if you have any heart conditions, high blood pressure, or are ill or feverish then it would be best to avoid. I'd also strongly recommend checking out the Wim Hof breathing method, a meditative experience that revolves around deep breathing and breath retention. There are plenty of guided YouTube videos online which run through the method that might help start you off.

The fundamentals

I'm going to end this chapter with a few pieces of advice which I like to call 'the fundamentals'. Before I move onto the first fundamental, I'd like to quickly list a few others that are fairly obvious but also very important – getting enough sleep, eating good food and exercising daily. I'm not going to spend an entire section talking about these, but I've found that prioritising these three makes a big difference when it comes to wellbeing.

Now onto the first fundamental which is arguably the most important of all when it comes to living a happy, healthy life. Social connection.

Social connection

Psychologist Robert Biswas Diener conducted research where he found that:

“Having intimate, trusting social relationships appears to be necessary for happiness. Comparisons of the happiest and least happy people show that the dimension in which the happiest people are similar is having high-quality friendships, family support, or romantic relationships; the happiest folks all had strong social attachments.” [20]

Almost all research done on social connection comes to a similar conclusion: social connection is a fundamental part of living a meaningful life. Another study conducted by the Harvard Study of Adult Development followed the lives of 724 men placed in two groups for a period of 75 years. The aim was to find factors that could increase the odds of living a happy and healthy life.

Robert Waldinger, director of the study, said in a TED talk:

“When we gathered together everything we knew about them about at age 50, it wasn’t their middle-age cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old. It was how satisfied they were in their relationships. The people who were the most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80.” [21]

It’s clear that when it comes to wellbeing, there are a whole bunch of factors that can influence contentment. There is no one formula or equation that explains how you can live your best life. Your own personal needs and what makes you content will likely differ from what makes someone else so. But what you can’t argue with and what’s been demonstrated over and over in the relevant psychological literature is that one of the few things you can’t go without if you want to live a meaningful and fulfilling life is social connection.

It’s also worth noting that social connection doesn’t necessarily have to do with how many friends you have. Quality of friends is, perhaps, equally, if not more, important. Having one true friend could be as valuable to someone as having a thousand acquaintances. Having people you truly connect with, people who you know have your back and who always want the best for you is what real connection involves.

Kindness

The second fundamental, and one you are very likely to cringe at – kindness. Before you roll your eyes and close this book, just give me a minute to explain myself.

So kindness, from a purely evolutionary psychological perspective, makes perfect sense – it prevents mutually assured destruction. If you’re not mean to me, I won’t be mean to you. An extension of this: if I’m kind to you and give you something, I’m doing so only to increase the odds of me receiving something I need later down the line. Looking through an evolutionary survival lens, kindness is not motivated by concern for the other person but because it’s the best solution for you long-term. The more allies you had in the wild, the less likely it’d be that you were killed. But, like, thinking of kindness as this purely biologically driven force is, in my eyes, problematic.

Kindness shouldn't be about you. You should be kind to someone because you actually care about them and their wellbeing. An easy test to figure out if an act of kindness is motivated by concern for the other person is by asking yourself the following question:

“Would I still be doing this act of kindness for this person if they never knew it was me who did it?”

Imagine someone breaks their bike and is looking for help. Would you still help if they never knew it was you who fixed it? If you said yes to that, that means the kindness is nothing to do with you. Instead, it's motivated by a genuine drive to help the other person. It's my personal experience that so much of 'kindness' in the modern world and especially in the political realm is transactional, fake. People are kind because they want to be perceived as kind, not because they care about the person or people they are supposedly being kind to. People are kind either because they subconsciously expect something in return or because they want to establish a feeling of moral superiority over others – the kindness is about them and how they look.

I know this is getting kind of preachy here but I'd recommend that you try and consider what your motivations for being kind are. I'm not saying 'fake' kindness is not important or functional. I just think true kindness is what'll really improve your wellbeing and what'll make the world a better place.

And look, I'm not saying you should be kind to everyone. If you're kind to someone and they treat you with disrespect, you don't have to be kind to them again. Kindness is a very different thing to being a pushover and opening yourself up to getting manipulated. But I feel like any initial act of kindness should be done without expectation of anything in return.

Making a concerted effort to help people, not simply to look like a good person to others but because you actually care about them and are concerned about reducing the amount of unnecessary suffering in the world is arguably the best solution for all parties involved. It's perfectly plausible that you might meet someone a few days after they've tried to end their own life and simply have no idea at all – to me that's an incredibly scary thought. That's why I view kindness as really so crucial. None of us really have any clue whatsoever about what the people around us are going through; behind the fake smile and the mask, anything could be going on. You lose absolutely nothing by being kind.

The psychological literature indicates being 'other-orientated' can actually help you experience happiness more often too.

Elizabeth Dunn conducted a study where participants were either given money to spend on themselves or were told to use that money to buy something for someone else [22]. When the scenario was explained to people, most predicted that the group spending money on themselves would feel happier. But interestingly, it was the

group who bought something for someone else that reported higher levels of happiness. The results seem to indicate that being kind to others not only benefits others but can positively impact our own wellbeing too.

I should end by reminding you that you should always make sure that you're being kind to yourself too. Don't completely deprive yourself of happiness just to try and make everyone around you happy. However hard you try, you never will. So while you're being kind to others, always make sure you're attending to your own needs too.

Robin Williams – “I think the saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy, because they know what it's like to feel absolutely worthless and they don't want anyone else to feel like that.”

Why you have the capacity to change the world every single day

I want to include this section because I want you to realise how important every action you take is. I've heard so many people talk about how life is inherently meaningless and how nothing you do means anything, and even if in the bigger picture that is true, that doesn't mean your life doesn't have tremendous value while you're alive.

If life is ultimately meaningless, so is the statement that says it is. Life is beautiful and sacred. Although it might not seem like it, you really do have the capacity to change the world on the daily. I know that might seem like an exaggeration. But it's really not and the best example to illustrate why revolves around a simple act of kindness:

Imagine on your way to work, you go to the local store to buy a bottle of water. As you buy the bottle of water, you make an effort to smile at the shopkeeper and ask how he's doing. Then you go about your day, forgetting this interaction ever even happened.

What you don't realise is that this one interaction has a ripple effect. You've inadvertently and unknowingly changed hundreds of lives for the better.

Turns out that shopkeeper was having a bad day until you had that conversation with him. After your interaction, the shopkeeper makes the effort to say good morning and smile at and ask every customer who walks in how they're doing. One of the customers, feeling particularly happy from this interaction, decides to send a good morning message on their work group chat, which inspires some of the people on this chat to say good morning to people they know.

Another one of the customers was having a bad day up to this point too but this interaction with the shopkeeper cheers her up. With this newfound buzz, on her way to work she starts a conversation with a boy who she, in her previous mood, wouldn't have. This leads to them getting married a few years down the line.

The possibilities are endless but the point is, everything that has happened would all be down to you choosing to be kind in that one moment. I'm perfectly aware that this is a fictional scenario but it's not unrealistic by any stretch of the imagination.

There's a ripple effect present in every action you undertake. One random act of kindness can inspire a mini ripple across the world. The average Western human will know about 600 people who in turn will know 600 people who again will know 600 people [23]. Your interactions with every single one of those 600 you know will unwittingly influence the interactions these 600 people will have with the 600 people they know and so on. You therefore easily have the capacity, even just living a 'boring and ordinary' life, to significantly impact the world in a positive way.

If you deem your life to be insignificant and meaningless, you're not looking at the full picture; every action you take is significant. Every interaction you participate in has the capability of altering the world. You have the capacity, just as this one little human being, to influence a huge number of people and that means you need to take responsibility for your actions.

Hope

I want to end this book with a parable I heard.

There are times in life when we might feel as if hope has left us, as if no matter what we do, things won't change. We're so lost, so tied up in the nuances and details of life, that we've lost touch with the beauty of simply existing and experiencing the world for what it is. We no longer feel joy from the small things because we are too consumed by the big things.

If worst comes to worst and something happens that requires you to reshape your entire life, all that's happened is you've been diverted down a new and different path. You don't know whether this path will be better or worse, you never will, but with it will still come an incredible amount of opportunity. In the moment, it might not seem like it, but the truth is, a lot of the time, you don't know whether bad events are really that bad after all.

Now for the parable:

There was an old Taoist farmer who owned a horse. One night, this horse decides to run away, leaving the farmer with nothing.

"What bad luck," the farmer's neighbours say.

"Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day the horse returns with 6 other wild horses. "What good luck!" the neighbours say.

"Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day, the farmer's son is playing with the wild horses, but one of them throws him off and he breaks his leg.

"What bad luck," the neighbours say. "Maybe," the farmer answers.

The next day, a war is announced and soldiers from the nearby town come to conscript men for the army. The farmer's son is rejected because of his broken leg.

"What good luck!" the neighbours say. "Maybe..." is all the farmer replies.

The farmer in this story does not attempt to split life up into good events and bad events. Instead, he is aware that 'bad events' in the present are simply taking you down a different path. And like I said, whether that different path is good or bad – you'll just never know.

Let's say for example that you fail your exams. Not getting the grades you want might seem bad in the present, but the new path you are led down could easily turn out to have been for the better. Grades which you may not be happy with at the time might, for example, lead you to changing to a new career that you end up finding more meaningful or to a new college that you end up loving or to your second choice university which you meet your future partner at. You just don't know. Whatever happens happens and you can make the best out of your new circumstances.

When things feel like they're getting on top of you, a mantra that might be useful for you to repeat is as follows:

"This too shall pass"

Whatever feeling you're currently experiencing, no matter how bad it is, that feeling will pass. Our mood and our emotions are in a state of perpetual change. You might feel bad today, but I promise you, with time, things will get better. As long as you're alive, as long as you're breathing, there's something to look forward to, even if right now you don't know what that something might be.

You have this one opportunity, this one chance to make this one life you've been blessed with as amazing as possible. It's the fact you have a choice, the fact that for the first time in centuries you can actually question your meaning that makes deciding on a meaning so agonising. And to avoid questioning what 'living with meaning' involves, the easy fall back most of us resort to is deriving meaning from what society regards as success – we judge ourselves based on our achievements. We tell ourselves that we have to do something great in order for our life to have meaning. But do we really?

Consider this. There'll always be a gap between what you have and what you want and this gap will make you unhappy. You might think that in order to close that gap, you simply need to achieve what you want. But the problem is: the gap will never close. No matter how much you have, no matter how much you've achieved, it's human nature to want more. The urge to want things doesn't stop when you reach

the things you previously wanted; you'll just come up with new things you need. This means, if you're not careful, you'll spend your entire life climbing a mountain that never ends. You'll tell yourself that when you reach the summit, happiness will finally arrive. But in reality, the summit simply doesn't exist; every time you think you've reached it, you'll see an even higher peak in the distance. That's why, ultimately, people don't live to achieve things or to get famous or to accumulate an obscene amount of wealth.

People live so they can make cake and fall in love and go to concerts and watch their kids grow and surround themselves with the people that make them happy. All the little things are really the big things because they are what shape you into you. We only have a finite number of moments and that's what makes those moments so valuable. Those moments which just feel like fun at the time but later turn into memories you hold on to and cherish forever – those moments are what make your life, your life. There is nothing deeper or more profound than simply acknowledging the sheer wondrousness of being alive to experience this world and its contents. Science estimates the odds of you being born are one in four hundred trillion [24]. Yet here you are. Every day you have the privilege to see a sunset or to pet your docile dog resting on your lap or to gaze up at those distant balls of light millions of miles from you or to feel the hand of someone you love in yours.

There's a tendency to delude ourselves into thinking that life means something more than simply existing, than simply being grateful for the miracle of life. But what if there is no grand purpose for our existence? What if we merely live and die and then disappear as the memory of us slowly fades away until it's extinguished forever? What if the only certainty in life is that we are free, when living, to make our own meaning?

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