

The Marginal Gains Handbook

*Practical ideas to Survive and Thrive
in the Age of Coronavirus*

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Introduction

The idea of marginal gains has been in elite sport for a while. Arguably, Clive Woodward took a marginal gains approach to his World Cup winning rugby team of 2003. Dave Brailsford continued the theme with British Cycling. There are now few athletes in the world who don't think in terms of aggregating small, specific improvements as a way of transforming performance over time.

Yet in business and life we often treat change and transformation as a big event. We talk about turning over a new leaf, New Year's resolutions, forging a better life and changing our lives as though this is a matter of a single decision or a one-off event.

In business we 'turn things around' and we search for fresh blood and a new strategy. But we often miss the extraordinary power we have, right now, to take tiny steps towards something better.

These tiny steps – marginal gains – are rarely dramatic in the short term. But their effect compounds over time, like compound interest. In the medium and long-term the effect can be extraordinary.

We thought that this principle could be applied right now, to a global pandemic. Although there is so much that is not in our control, and so much need for a transformation, most of us can start right now, today taking tiny steps to a better life.

This short booklet is designed to inspire and provoke some thought about where you might start making marginal gains. And if you have your own, we would love to hear them and add them into this booklet over time. After all, publishing this booklet is not a one-off event, but a series of tiny steps to hopefully produce something that for some people might be transformational.

Rob Archer and Alex Jamieson

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A woman with long brown hair, wearing a brown leather jacket over a striped shirt, stands in a crowded, blurred public space. She has her hands pressed against her face, covering her eyes and nose, suggesting a state of distress or anxiety. The background is filled with out-of-focus people, creating a sense of a busy, overwhelming environment.

Dealing with Anxiety

“If carrying some anxiety was a necessary part of the journey towards being the person you would choose to be during this crisis, would you be willing to carry it?”

Dennis Tirch PhD

Dealing with Anxiety

Everyone is anxious right now and frankly, why wouldn't we be? The key to understanding our anxiety is that it's the body's natural response to uncertainty. It is a call to action

Anxiety versus Fear

Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous:

- Fear is the emotional response to a real or perceived imminent threat (e.g. seeing a snake)
- Anxiety is anticipation of a future threat

So while we may be fearful of the coronavirus, anxiety is generated by thoughts like 'will I catch it?', or 'am I washing my hands well enough?' Because anxiety is future oriented, it opens us up to potentially infinite possibilities which we cannot predict or control. And because it is internally generated, some knowledge of how our brain processes information can help.

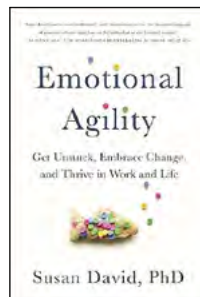
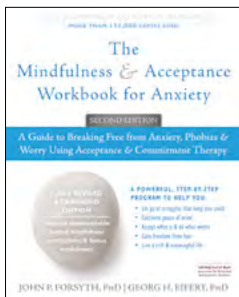
Two Brain Systems: Fast and Slow

When we hear something, the sound is first processed in our older, more primitive brain - this is a very fast reacting brain. Our conscious awareness of the sound only comes a few milliseconds later when it registers in our neocortex - the *slow* brain.

This subconscious pre-processing in the fast brain uses ready-made templates to work out how to respond. If you detect something that fits this template, your fast brain activates your body to respond. It is only afterwards that we become conscious of what's happened.

This is why trying to control anxiety is impossible. It is literally like trying to control the past.

Key text



The Impact of Templates

The templates our fast brain uses are influenced by our life experiences. So if you had a turbulent childhood, you are going to be presented with templates that show the world as not a safe place. As a result, you may be more prone to anxiety.

Understanding Modern Anxiety

Language. the development of language has meant we are able to verbally communicate risks and then plan ahead to mitigate them. This is an incredible tool but it is a double-edge sword: it means we can create anxiety at any given moment - about almost anything. Did you turn the oven off?

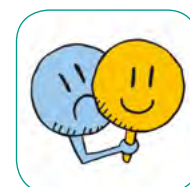
(Social) Media. we have created a world with unparalleled riches, but also unlimited access to worrying news.

Uncertainty. many of us can handle bad news if we know how to respond to it. But uncertainty - 'will I catch this virus? Will my family?' - is especially anxiety-inducing because the fact is **we do not know** and our minds would prefer *anything* to not knowing!

Control. many people see anxiety as something to be avoided or controlled. The problem is, we can't avoid or control it. Imagine I put a gun to your head and tell you not to feel anxious. Could you do it?

By trying to control or avoid anxiety, we can become *anxious about our anxiety*. This may occasionally make sense, but it also risks us avoiding the things that make life meaningful. This is called [experiential avoidance](#), a significant factor in many forms of mental distress because it both diminishes our lives in the short term and makes anxiety worse in the long term.

Apps and resources



Dealing with Anxiety - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Acceptance

The problem with anxiety is that the harder we try to avoid it, the stronger it becomes. We need to stop struggling against it and instead accept it as normal. One technique for doing this is to learn how to [drop the rope](#).

Pivot towards what matters

One way of seeing anxiety is as a sign that something that matters to us is at risk or in danger. Instead of letting the anxiety be the focus of our attention, we can focus on the thing that matters to us instead. How could you do something meaningful in the service of what really matters to you, even when you're feeling anxious?

Be selective about the information you consume

Each time you watch the news or scroll through social media, you risk activating your threat system. Cut out the sources that are most anxiety provoking, set aside 15 minutes each day to get up to date information using official sources and move social media and news apps to the second screen of your phone.

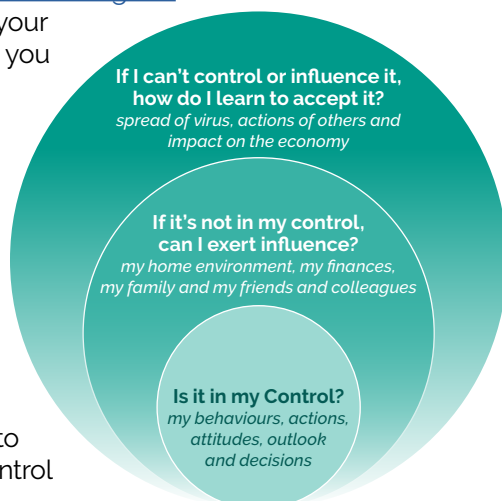
Use daily checklists

Having a [daily checklist](#) can help stop you feeling overwhelmed. Completing one each day allows you to mindfully check in with yourself, identify what's working and what isn't, and embed effective habits into your routines reducing stress and enhancing focus.

Break it down and make a plan

Anxiety is a call to action so we need to respond by *doing something*. [Try the CIA diagram](#):

Control - direct your energy to things you can control
Influence - be realistic about the concerns you can influence
Accept- let go of worries outside your circles of control and influence and revert back to what you can control



Real life marginal gains:

I focus on exercise. I know all kinds of ways to deal with anxiety but the one that is by far the most effective is exercise. I have scheduled a regular run at 11am every day. I have set myself a new target of running 160km (100 miles) each month. I never particularly enjoy the run, but in terms of mental health nothing beats it.

I make a time to worry. I've found the best way to manage my anxiety is by listening to it. I make time twice a day to write down all my worries and then use post-its to brainstorm solutions. When I worry outside of my worry times I write down the worry and leave it ready for my next 'appointment with worry'.

I name it. This can sound a bit silly, but by naming my anxiety, it helps me see anxious thoughts as just one small part of me – it creates some distance between me and my anxiety. I've called my anxious brain just 'Mind'. If my Mind is being really harsh, I will catch it and say 'thanks, Mind'. Somehow it has become a habit and I find it a helpful reminder that I am bigger than my anxiety.

I seriously commit to doing things that bring me joy. These can be simple things such as enjoying my first cup of coffee in the morning, spending the afternoons with my family (even if it means having to work in the evenings) and being able to read regularly. I find that committing myself to doing these things means I'm less likely to sit and ruminate, and therefore I give my anxiety less of a chance to dominate my attention.

Key video:

'The Unwelcome Party Guest' by Joe Oliver



Isolation and Loneliness



“Loneliness is proof that your innate search for connection is intact”

Martha Beck

Isolation and Loneliness

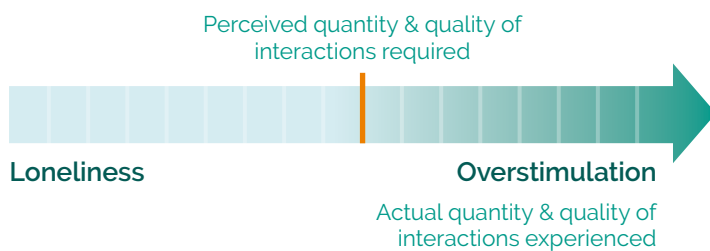
Social distancing, self-isolation and lockdown have left the vast majority of us isolated in our own homes and at greater risk of experiencing feelings of loneliness

Social Isolation

The majority of measures aimed at reducing the spread of the coronavirus are based on social isolation. Although it can be caused by social isolation, loneliness is a different concept: it is a *subjective* experience that is unique to each individual.

Loneliness as a Spectrum

Loneliness is the perceived gap between our *desired* level of social contact and our *actual* level of social contact, both in terms of quantity and quality. If we have less social contact than we perceive we need, our brains will generate feelings of loneliness as a way of forcing us to look for social contact:



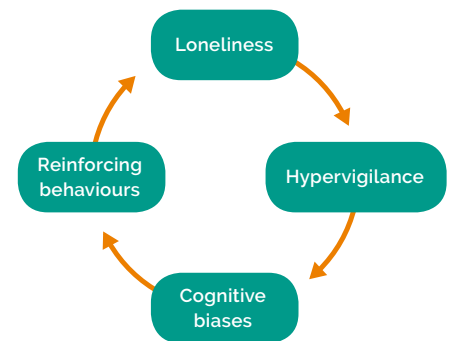
Loneliness is also a function of the shared meanings we experience with others. Therefore seeking out those with whom we share similar experiences, perspectives and tastes tends to reduce loneliness faster than simply seeing more of people.

The Loneliness Cycle

All mammals have evolved to seek solace, safety and, in the case of humans, meaningful connections with others. The pain loneliness causes may once have been used to force us to seek the social connections necessary for our survival. However, loneliness can also trigger a hypervigilance for social threats. When we feel alone and don't have the 'protection' a social group provides, our brains monitor external threats with greater alertness.

This hypervigilance for social threats, combined with our subconscious biases, can mean that:

- We start to view the external world as more threatening than it actually is
- Our expectations associated with social interactions become more negative
- We will tend to recall negative social events from the past more easily



When we feel lonely, as well as urging us to connect, our brains can interpret other people's behaviour in a more negative manner than it otherwise would, actually making it harder for us to reach out to others. The risk is that we start to listen to our minds and avoid social interactions altogether.

Key video:

'The Lethality of Loneliness' by John Cacioppo



Isolation and Loneliness - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Assume Positive Intent (API)

Practice assuming others act with the best intentions to counteract negative thoughts: accept others' true feelings as unknowns, clarify things they've said with open questions if you feel comfortable to do so and then form your own opinion, *assuming* the person has a positive (or at least neutral) intention.

Acknowledge your feelings of loneliness

If you find yourself interpreting others' behaviour in a negative way, see if you can interrupt this cycle and notice this as just a thought. For example, instead of saying 'I feel rejected', say 'I notice I am feeling rejected' to create distance between you and your emotions. Then ask yourself how you choose to respond next.

Help others or volunteer

Helping others is a very powerful mood enhancer and a way to reduce feelings of loneliness. Search for opportunities to volunteer from home with [the NHS](#) for example, or use the [NextDoor](#) app to see if any neighbours need help.

Share small wins and reminisce

Sharing positive news or reminiscing about past events increases connectedness and feelings of validation by others, which can help break negative thought patterns.

Write a list of your important allies

The *quality* of relationships is more important than *quantity*. Instead of trying to form new connections, map your support network on a piece of paper, sketch all the people in your life who you can lean on. Friends and family to call if you're feeling low, professionals that can support you, and colleagues and neighbours who can help you.

Decatastrophise by asking 'what if?'

Sometimes when we are caught in the loneliness cycle we can end up with an exaggerated view of reality. For example, we may not reach out to friends or family for fear of absolute rejection or worrying what they might think of us. In these instances, ask the questions 'what if?' or 'what's the worst that could happen?' This can help highlight how unrealistic that thought process is and that even the worst-case scenario is manageable.

Real life marginal gains:

I try to remember that loneliness can happen even in a crowd. I find this a useful thought especially if I'm going through something that others can't understand. However, this experience is being shared by most of us across the globe. It's given us a real opportunity to tap into our common humanity and I remind myself of that to feel less alone.

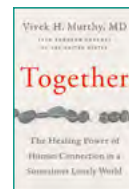
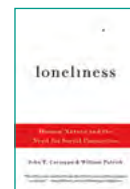
I try to model my values. I try to remember that loneliness is usually a function of whether my interactions are meaningful or not. Given that I value connectedness, I think about the small changes I can make to ensure I give and receive greater connectedness. For example, I open up about my personal concerns with close friends (as opposed to just talking about the latest news developments), and I strike up conversation when I bump into a neighbour. I also value curiosity, so I make a conscious effort to ask more meaningful questions about how friends and family are coping and how they see the future.

I reframe loneliness. Instead of thinking of loneliness as a *negative* emotion, I try to see it as a *signal* emotion: it's my brain trying to tell me something. I use it as a sign that my social needs are not being met and I need to change my behaviour and reach out to friends or family again.

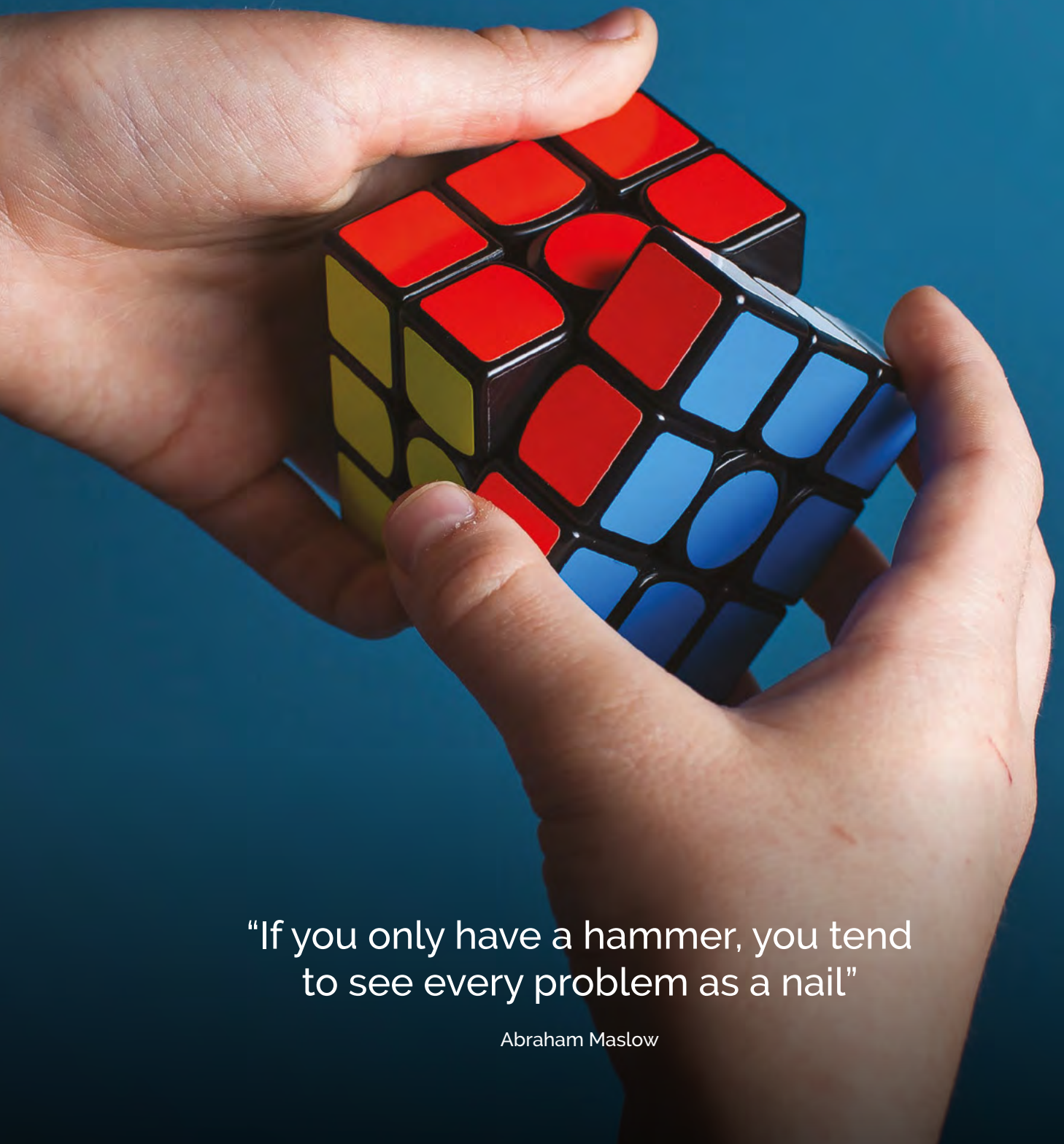
I created a hope jar. Every time I miss someone or something, I write it down and put it in the jar. I'll use this as a kind of bucket list when this is over.

I'm writing letters. I find that handwritten letters create more of a meaningful connection than the digital messages we are so accustomed too. It can be an old friend, a family member, an old teacher or someone whose work you value. Be specific about why you are writing to them.

Apps, resources and key text



Problem Solving



“If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail”

Abraham Maslow

Problem Solving

The coronavirus pandemic is creating complex and novel problems that we need to be able to respond to and solve quickly

With most problems we tend to fall back on tried and tested solutions that have worked in the past. However, to solve novel and complex problems (like so many of us are experiencing now) we need to be able to think creatively and come up with innovative solutions. To do this, we have to be able to *focus* our attention on the problem at hand, whilst also making sure we get adequate *rest* so our minds are fresh. If we can't focus or get the rest we need, we can hit cognitive barriers and be excessively influenced by our subconscious biases.

Focus

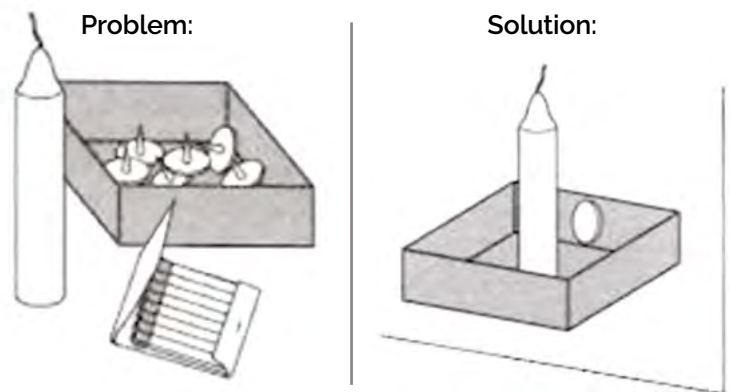
When problems come at us thick and fast, we can feel stressed and overwhelmed. This triggers our flight / fight response, and whilst this may help narrow our focus on the 'danger', it also means we can't assess the situation and the wider possibilities objectively. To solve problems effectively, we need to block out distractions and focus our attention on one issue at a time.

Rest

Even in our brain's resting state, it's still working subconsciously behind the scenes to plug away at our problems using its '[default mode network](#)'. We can't control these subconscious processes but we can plan to allow them to happen, making those 'aha' moments more likely to occur. Learning to decelerate and take a break therefore not only helps recover our energy, but it gives our brains time to process new information and generate creative solutions.

Beware Barriers and Biases

Functional Fixedness. In a [famous experiment](#), people were asked to attach a candle to a wall using matches and a box of pins. The solution is shown on the right – most people fail to see the alternative use for the box because they are functionally fixed on its original purpose.

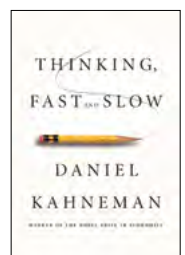
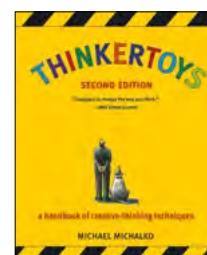
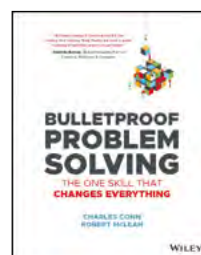


In exactly the same way, many of us get so fixed in our thinking that we fail to think creatively about new problems.

Affect Bias. The coronavirus brings with it a host of negative emotions. When we make decisions in a negative emotional state, we tend to underestimate the benefits and overstate the risks, meaning that we make decisions that we may not have made otherwise.

Confirmation Bias. When we feel under pressure, our minds can latch on to a preconceived solution in the hope of responding quickly. We then only process information supporting this solution and ignore any contradictory evidence.

Key text



Problem Solving - Marginal Gains



Evidence-based marginal gains:

Adopt a 'challenge' mindset

Viewing the problem as a challenge helps focus the mind, whereas viewing it as a threat increases the chance we use our fight / flight response. Ask yourself the following questions: *What steps can I take to transform this situation? How does this problem create a new opportunity? What aspects of this challenge are exciting?*

Be mindful of 'attention residue'

When dealing with multiple problems at the same time, some of our attention will always remain on the *initial* problem. As a result, our performance analysing *subsequent* problems diminishes. To combat this, tackle one problem at a time, break larger problems down into small clear chunks and take short breaks in between.

Separate idea generation from evaluation

Don't prioritise or evaluate ideas until everything is captured as this tends to kill the creative process.

Use a premortem to strengthen your plan of action

Imagine the plan you've made has ended up a spectacular failure. Think of possible reasons for the failure, ask others too, and use these ideas to help manage risks.

Use practical tools to help problem solve, focus attention and generate possible solutions

- For idea generation, use the [SCAMPER technique](#)
- [The Ladder of Inference](#) can help make sense of new situations and prevent you from jumping to conclusions
- If you feel overwhelmed, worried or anxious, use the decision tree below:



Real life marginal gains:

I pay attention to how I'm feeling. I deliberately try not to solve important problems when I'm tired or generally in a bad mood. Instead, I will draft some initial thoughts at the time and then revisit later.

I write it down. This is a very simple one but I find that when I get the the problem out of my head, it stops me dwelling on it and also helps me see what the key issues are.

I minimise decision fatigue. I find my decision making ability deteriorates throughout the day so I address the biggest problems I'm facing first. For problems that aren't as important, I deal with them later in the day and often I force myself to make quicker decisions, accepting the fact I may make mistakes.

Heuristics. For a while now, I've used simple heuristics in my decision making. If I have a non-essential decision to make and am unsure of X or Y, I will split the difference between the two. This saves me loads of time!

I pretend I am offering advice to a friend who is facing the problem. I've found this a useful strategy as it creates distance between myself and the problem.

Key video:

'How to Make Hard Choices' by Ruth Chang



Apps and resources



A man with a beard, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, is sitting at a wooden dining table, working on a laptop. A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a purple sweater, is sitting on the floor in front of the table, drawing with colored pencils. The scene is set in a bright, modern home with large windows and blue curtains.

Working From Home

“This is unprecedented. It may change the workplace forever. Everyone will need to embrace a different sort of workplace behaviour.”

Ann Francke, Chief Executive of the Chartered Management Institute

Working From Home

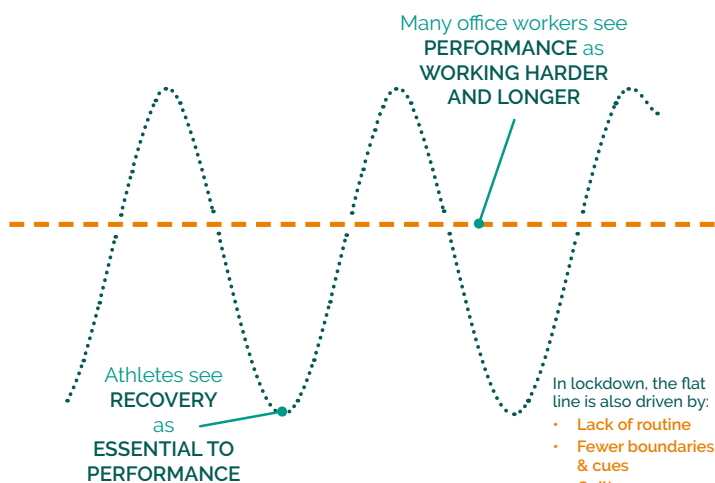
One of the challenges facing people is adapting to working in a home environment. Although there's no commute, there's also more distractions, and our routines need reinventing

The flat line vs the wobbly line

The central foundation of resilience and sustainable high performance is the practice of recovery. This is something that athletes and other elite performers intuitively recognise. Because athletes see recovery as a driver of performance they end up with a wobbly line – periods of peak performance followed by warm down, recovery and preparation.

Yet because the link between performance and recovery is often not explicit in office workers, many people end up on a flat line with little recovery. This has been amplified for many during lockdown, as many of the routines and cues for recovery are missing.

Although the flat line can be effective for a short period, eventually performance gets worse which means that people need to work harder and longer for the same results.

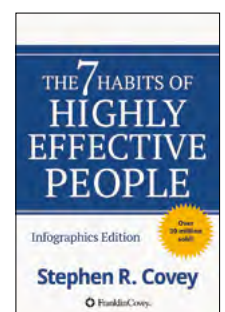
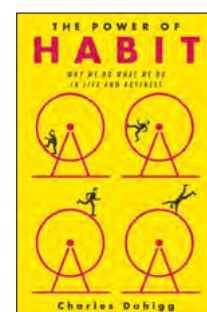
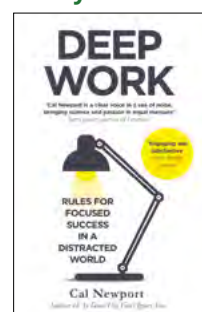


Managing energy through the day

So many of us are feeling 'Zoomed out' as we sit in on our 5th straight teleconference meeting. The good news is, that some relatively simple principles can help. Every day, try to think in terms of a recognisable:

1. **Preparation routine.** Take a few minutes to identify priorities and review your diary.
2. **Period of focus.** Protect some 'deep work' time: high concentration, high complexity, top priorities. Try to do this in short, high-quality bursts.
3. **Warm down routine.** Review what you have achieved, print off your diary and note down the main priorities for tomorrow. A warm down routine before sleep is also ideal.
4. **Recovery period.** Optimal mental recovery rests on activities that offer either variety or joy. Try to think in terms of building mini 'pit stops' into each day, so you can sustain your performance through the day.

Key text



Working From Home - Marginal Gains



Evidence-based marginal gains:

Combat procrastination

- **Commit to the task.** Write down each step and how long it will take to do. Use the [Pomodoro technique](#) to help.
- **Get an accountability partner.** Or use [Trello](#) to manage projects with someone else.
- **Swallow the frog.** Mark Twain said "if you know you have to swallow a frog, swallow it first thing in the morning." The logic being that the rest of your day will be better because the worst is behind you.
- **Minimise interruptions.** Implement a **traffic light system** using coloured paper to show others in your house when you can and can't be disturbed.

Structure your day around motivation levels

Motivation is volatile: it ebbs and flows during the day with our circadian rhythm. Notice when it peaks and attend to the highest priority tasks during this time. Save the less cognitively intensive tasks for the afternoon lull.

Use a checklist

Try our [daily resilience checklist](#)

Create the right work environment

Our environment can send us powerful implicit cues - so attend to your workspace by decluttering, improving lighting and [getting the ergonomics right](#).

Organise and prioritise

Any race is easier when you know where the finish line is.

- Write a [daily to-do list](#) focusing on specific next actions only. The [Todoist app](#) can be a good tool for this.
- Try distinguishing between urgent and important tasks [using the Covey Matrix](#).
- [Personal Kanban](#) is a way of limiting work in progress to reduce feelings of overwhelm and increase focus.

Real life marginal gains:

I still 'commute'. I go for a walk each morning after I've got dressed and had breakfast, and before I start work. This helps me switch from 'home' mode to 'work' mode.

I set workstation rules. For example, I have removed shortcuts to social media from my work laptop and have banned my personal phone from my workspace.

I have a finishing window. I set alarms for 5pm and 5.30pm. In this 30 minutes, I start switching off from work. I say bye to colleagues (virtually!), pack up my workstation, write an 'exit list' of things I need to do tomorrow and I get changed into more relaxed clothes.

I have set meal times, a healthy snack supply and a water bottle. At one point, I found myself continually going to the fridge looking for food unnecessarily. I found that making sure I have scheduled meal times, healthy snacks of fruit and nuts on hand, and a full water bottle reduces my cravings (I find I eat more when I'm thirsty).

I see the positives in working from home. I focus on 'winning the morning' and then reward myself with a proper break with a run and some lunch. Then I start work again around 2:30pm and find this rhythm suits me much better.

Key video:

'How to Turn Off Work Thoughts During your Free Time' by Guy Winch



Apps and resources



Managing Remote Teams



“The only way to make sense
out of change is to plunge into it,
move with it, and join the dance”

Alan W. Watts



Managing Remote Teams

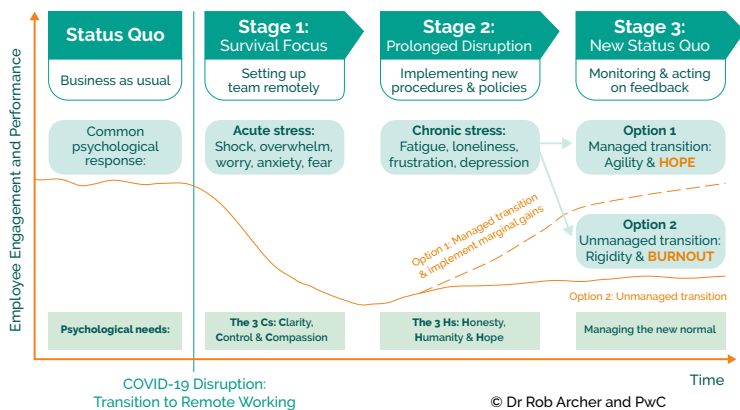
The Coronavirus pandemic is creating a lot of first time remote-team managers and the rapidly changing circumstances have meant that they have had little time to prepare. This is likely going to be the greatest test of resilience and managerial ability in our lifetime

There are three psychological stages that people are likely to pass through during the COVID pandemic:

In **stage 1**, people feel stressed and anxious as they come to terms with the initial shock and uncertainty brought on by sudden change.

In **stage 2**, many have adjusted to the initial shock but are dealing with more prolonged disruption, which in the case of COVID 19 can be accompanied by feelings of loneliness, grief, and depression.

Whether helping themselves or their teams, managers should try to tailor their approach in stages 1 and 2, otherwise they risk a long-term drop in engagement and wellbeing of their team by the time they reach stage 3. In the worst-case scenario, this can lead to burnout:



People have specific psychological needs in each stage:

Stage 1: The 3 Cs

- **Clarity.** The first priority is to create a context in which people can think clearly
- **Control.** Control is the best-known mediator of stress, so think in terms of creating new structures and routines to help drive sustainable high performance
- **Compassion.** People need compassion for themselves and others so they can deal with difficult thoughts and feelings skilfully

Stage 2: The 3 Hs

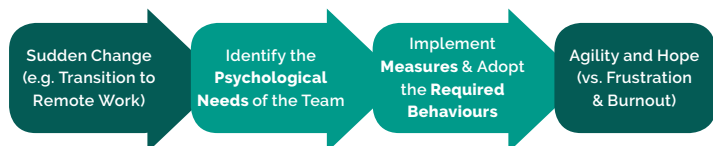
- **Humanity.** The ability to tune into your own needs as a human being
- **Honesty.** This is about being honest with oneself and others about what is and isn't working so that improvements can be made and trust can be built
- **Hope.** At the right time, we will need to orientate ourselves towards a sense of hope and opportunity for the future. Hope is a known factor in reducing post-traumatic stress

Key video:

'Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe' by Simon Sinek



If managers implement the right measures and adopt the right behaviours in stages 1 and 2 of the change process, there is a greater chance of restoring engagement and productivity when they reach stage 3:



Managing Remote Teams - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Focus on clarity

Stress reduces people's ability to process new information and increases the likelihood information is misinterpreted. Give people the news they need to know, focus on the facts and keep communications concise, simple and frequent.

Use scenario planning

It's impossible to provide your team with certainty in terms of what is going to happen. However, if you communicate on the basis of best to worst case scenarios, it demonstrates that you're working within a well-considered range of possible outcomes.

Set expectations about work hours

MIT research has shown that employees' biggest complaint about remote work are managers who lack respect for normal working hours. Find out the best time and means to contact each of your team and understand your team's [resilience factors](#). Try using the delay send feature for emails and put your work hours in your email signature to set an example.

Show vulnerability

Emotional issues require an emotional response: be open, communicate on a more personal level and acknowledge the emotions people are going through. For example, admit when you don't know something or when you've made a mistake. Share your own personal challenges, so that people see a more human side and feel more comfortable talking about their struggles.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) can foster hope

MI is a great tool for fostering change both within ourselves and with others. Try questions such as:

1. What new **opportunities** may arise from this situation?
2. Where do you see **growth** emerging post COVID?
3. What **resources** can you personally draw on?
4. Which of your **skills** are made for this situation?
5. Looking back in 12 months' time, what will you feel **most proud of** in terms of how you responded to this period?
6. How would you like things to be **different in future**?

Real life marginal gains:

I focus on prioritisation. I now spend a far greater proportion of my time focusing on what our top few priorities are and breaking these down into clear attainable tasks, which provide clarity and accountability for my team.

I try to listen more. In times like this, people need to feel like their voice is being heard. I try to listen as much as I talk and I restate what people have said back to them to ensure I've understood their message correctly. Where possible, I'm trying to be open with how decisions are made, asking the team for alternative suggestions and brainstorming ideas together.

I'm normally an impatient person, but have been trying extra hard to be patient. I remind myself that people are adjusting to a lot of upheaval. I also remember that not all my thoughts and emotions need to be acted on and I have a *choice* over how I respond. If I'm feeling irritated, I'll put emails in draft before sending and revisit them later when I'm in a better mood – it's amazing the changes I then make before sending!

I try to balance structure and flexibility. This is a continuous battle as I want people to work asynchronously to suit their personal situation but I also want to provide my team with some structure to their workdays. So for example, I've scheduled team catch-ups for the same time each day but I let people choose their own work windows and break times so they can manage screen fatigue and their home life.

I encourage my team to map out their personal support network. I've suggested they sketch out the people in their lives they can lean on: friends and family to call if they feel low, colleagues that can support them during work and neighbours who may be able to lend a hand.

I show gratitude. I make point of sending thank you notes to praise efforts and acknowledge good work, and we organise virtual social events to celebrate milestones.

Apps and resources



Parenting in lockdown

"The days are long but the years are short."

Gretchen Ruben



Parenting in lockdown

Our research has shown that in working families the top source of stress is the blurring of boundaries between work and family life

Of course parenting covers a whole range of other issues and experiences in lockdown, and some of the other key themes from our research were:

The relentlessness. Perhaps especially for [single parents](#) and those with young children, a key element was how relentless it was to combine childcare with work.

A feeling that nothing we do is working. Parents can put additional pressure on themselves by trying to do too much. In her book [The Blessing of a Skinned Knee](#) Wendy Mogel, rejects the idea of making everything for our children easy, of praising them constantly, of parents expecting that their children to be somehow unique and 'special'. *I meet many parents who are trying so hard to be perfect parents, to make everything just right for their children, that they're draining away their pleasure in parenting.*

Lack of buffer zones. One of the toughest aspects of parenting in lockdown is that the small buffers between work and family interaction are squeezed.

Not being present. By constantly worrying about the future and ruminating over the past - we drain ourselves of energy AND deprive ourselves of the little fragments of joy which still appear with children in lockdown.

In terms of parenting strategies there is no one size fits all, however some important principles include:

The need for respite. It doesn't matter what you are doing, you need a break from it. Do anything for too long with too little respite and we start to mentally fray.

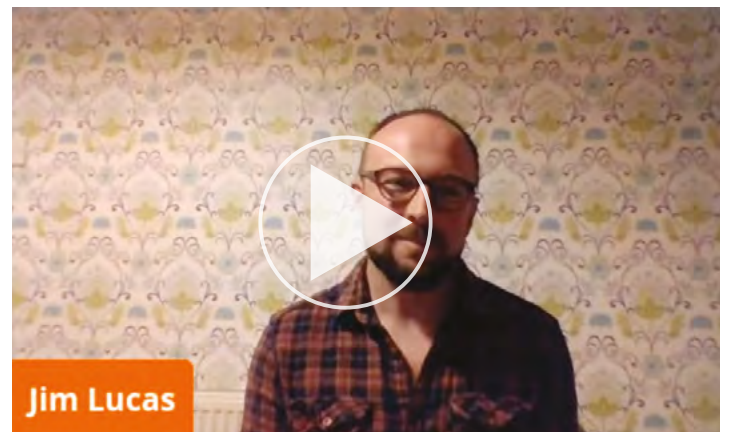
Set some structure. Although it's never easy, but any kind of structure will help alleviate stress and fatigue as it minimises uncertainty and maximises feelings of control.

Beware perfectionism. We all need to lower our expectations a bit, particularly in terms of how we should be feeling and what we should be achieving. As Brene Brown says: *When we hit that wall, sometimes courage looks like scaling it or breaking through it. AND, sometimes courage is building a fort against the wall and taking a nap.*

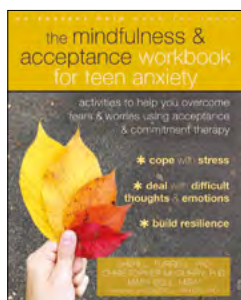
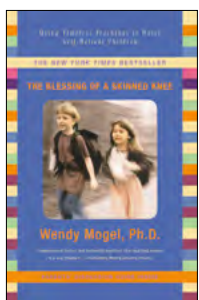
Reframe as chance to learn. When we step back it gives our kids the opportunity to step up. If we expect them to do nothing they will do precisely that. But if we expect them to step up they will do that too, and stepping up is the way to build their resilience and confidence.

Key video:

'Managing confinement with families during the pandemic' by Dr Jim Lucas



Key Resources





Parenting in lockdown - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

- **Routines** are powerful partly because they reduce fatigue. So try to at least create a 'shape' to the day that everyone understands. Things like bedtime stories, a specific time for homework, meals; all of this will reduce your mental load by a fraction.
- **Give your kids responsibility.** If you are under pressure, now is the time for them to step up. Giving them responsibility will help their confidence and resilience. Prepare your child for the path, not the path for the child.
- **Insert pauses.** A strong body of evidence shows that just pausing for a few minutes when irritated can lead to better conversations (with kids and others).
- **Enlist others to give you a break.** If there is another adult in your house, [work in shifts](#) to cover short breaks. If not try to enlist a Granny to read a story or an Uncle to make your kids laugh, even 20 minutes' respite can work wonders. Ask for help.
- **Manage your energy.** In the brief periods when the children are occupied, do your low-attention tasks (like admin) and when you get a longer (>25 mins) break, tackle the more complex tasks. Or it's time to do nothing. You decide.
- **Beware experiential avoidance.** Many times we aren't present with our kids because we are trying to avoid a thought or emotion. For example, if your kids are playing a game you find boring you may disengage and start scrolling on your phone. This relieves the boredom but it fails to create any joy or connection. Reducing [experiential avoidance](#) has been shown to improve wellbeing and mental health.

Real life marginal gains:

- **Turn housework into a game.** The [tidy up song](#) is good for this, and so is 'beat the timer', but giving our kids proper tasks to do each day (and using sticker charts to reward them) has definitely helped us lighten the load.
- **Staying present.** Before bed I watch videos with my kids which is a bit tedious, so I often find myself on my phone. This has the function of relieving the boredom but it was no building joy or connection. So now I try to really get present and try to enjoy the moment. I smell their hair and remind myself I won't have too many of these moments in future...
- I try to build a **minute or two buffer before leaving** my work office, and tap into the type of Dad I want to be when I re-engage (i.e. loving, active, joyful, present).
- **Quality over quantity.** I am reconciled to only having short breaks, so I try to focus on *savouring* the small moments of respite and connection that I get and I consciously try to celebrate small wins!
- **I try to connect to my values.** I find it impossible to eradicate the bad bits of my parenting, but I am able to put positive stuff in there. By connecting to the values of how I want to be as a parent, I find I can transform the pressure cooker of lockdown into an opportunity to connect with what matters to me most.

Resources for Children



A full-page background image of a surfer riding a massive, curling wave. The surfer is positioned in the lower right quadrant, wearing a blue wetsuit and a black beanie, crouching on a blue surfboard. The wave is a towering wall of white water crashing down from the top left. The sky is dark and overcast. A green rectangular box is overlaid on the top portion of the image, containing the title text.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

“You can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf”

Jon Kabatt-Zinn

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Understanding and improving mental health is one of the main challenges we face in the 21st Century

"The single most remarkable fact of human existence is how hard it is for humans to be happy"

(Hayes, Wilson and Strohsahl, 1999).

Humans have more wealth, power, safety and options to pursue happiness than any other species in history. One might expect that this would translate into happiness and wellbeing but the evidence suggests the opposite. We are a species that seems to create and suffer great mental anguish. More than any other species we kill, maim and harm ourselves and others. 1 in 4 of us will have a mental health issue in any given year and 1 in 2 of us will have suicidal thoughts in our lifetime.

If we then add in a global pandemic, in which people have to live with constant uncertainty, disrupted routines, isolation from friends and family as well as health anxieties, we can anticipate that this pattern is being amplified.

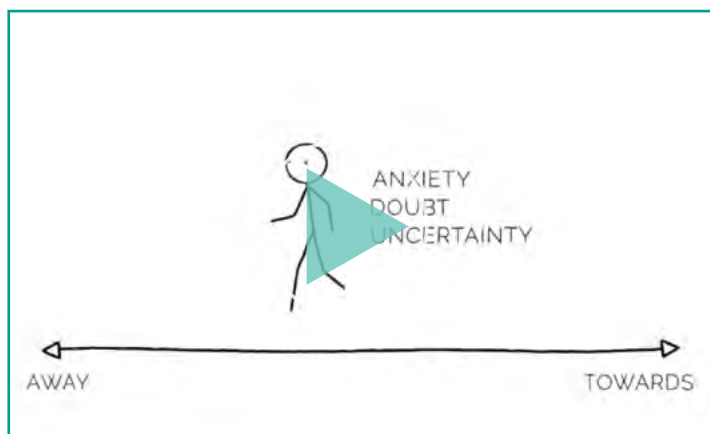
Understanding mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is more than just an absence of difficult thoughts and emotions. The World Health Organization defines mental wellbeing as:

"A state in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community."

Key video:

Understanding Experiential Avoidance



Mental wellbeing is therefore broader than our thoughts and emotions. It is about living consciously, making a meaningful contribution to others and realising our potential.

A new way of thinking about mental health

Many of the barriers we experience when trying to make a meaningful contribution to others are our own thoughts and emotions, for example:

- We don't want to look silly or risk being rejected
- We don't want to push outside of our comfort zone
- We procrastinate because learning takes effort

In other words, it is not our thoughts and emotions themselves that cause a lack of mental wellbeing, but the power we allow them to hold over our *behaviour*. It is our *relationship* to our thoughts and emotions that really matters.

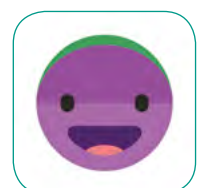
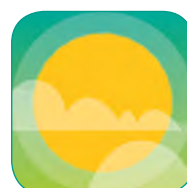
3 steps to improved mental health

Step 1 - start by exploring what a 'good life' looks like to you. In what ways might you make a 'meaningful contribution to others'? What does 'realising your potential' mean to you?

Step 2 - next consider how you can move in the direction of your most important goals and values. This usually means being willing to experience difficult thoughts and emotions, as if we are not willing to experience the difficult things in life, then we start to narrow our lives and minimise the chances of reaching our potential. This is called experiential avoidance (see video, left).

Step 3 - is about committed action. This means getting out there and doing the things that move you towards your main values and goals, *even in the presence of* difficult thoughts and emotions. What does committed action look like for you, even in this global crisis?

Apps and resources



Mental Health - Marginal Gains



We do not suggest that merely implementing 'marginal gains' in the area of mental health is a substitute for getting professional help where necessary. If you are struggling please reach out - some useful resources are listed below

Evidence-based marginal gains: Real life marginal gains:

Clarify what matters to you

Get clear on what matters to you in life. For example your most important [goals, objectives and values](#).

Understanding values

There's a big [difference between values and goals](#). So [get clear on your values](#) and the qualities you want to display each day. Try the [obituary exercise](#) to help you clarify how you want to spend your time and how you want to be remembered by others.

Build commitment

DJ Moran defines commitment as 'action aimed in the direction of what you care about even in the presence of obstacles'. Commitment is therefore something that can be strengthened - try using the [Mindful Action Plan](#) to layout your commitment plan based on your values.

Identify the patterns that derail you

[Mindfulness practice](#) can help us to notice the patterns of thoughts and emotions that can hook us away from our values and goals. Over time this means we can be more conscious of our choices and deliberate about the directions we take.

Workability

Workability is about choosing behaviours that are appropriate for the short-term constraints we face, but that also bring us closer to the life we want to live over time. For example, say you value physical health and fitness, while you may not have time for the long run you were hoping for, you could squeeze in a 10-minute jog as a more workable alternative.

I treat mental health like physical health. For example, I see daily exercise as something I do for my brain not just my body and this framing helps a lot.

I build in buffer zones. In lockdown I often found myself being irritable with my family, especially if I'd just had a bad work call. Now I mindfully pause and think about what kind of husband and dad I want to be before I re-engage with my family.

I stick to the basics. I used to glaze over when things like sleep, diet, exercise and relationships were mentioned, but since the crisis I see them as my absolute foundation and I treat them as daily maintenance for my brain.

Meditation. I've found that meditation definitely helps me to notice unhelpful patterns of thinking, and I often find it calming too which is a bonus.

I try to act mindfully. I don't get on with meditation, but I have been trying to do things more mindfully during the pandemic. So I try to savour things I enjoy, and simply notice thoughts and emotions at other times, like when I'm walking somewhere or sipping my first coffee of the day.

I practice acceptance. I find it useful to remember I don't have much control over my instant reaction (especially at the moment!) and all I can control is my response. Understanding this somehow helped me to let my more unhelpful and self-critical thoughts go.

Giving to others. This isn't meant to make me sound good, but I definitely notice that whenever I focus on helping others I feel better myself.

Accessing professional help

UK:



International:



Key text

