

HACKS for LIFE

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Contents

Confidence Trick	4
How not to be socially awkward	7
Fear of Failure – and how to overcome it	8
Learning to avoid embarrassment is easy	13
Decisions, decisions...	14
Improve your wellbeing – take a nap!	15
Take a break... or two or three...	17
The upside of doing absolutely nothing	18
Think positive – live longer	19
A little exercise will clear your head	21
LESS exercise is the key to weight loss!	24
Going green – the route to better health	26
Think yourself happy...	28
Happiness, wellbeing, and your immune system...	31
It's OK to dwell on past mistakes...	31

Your bad mood can improve your health	33
Perfect posture, and how it helps to smile...	35
A good read will make you feel more alive	36
Positive thinking keeps you young!	37
How to improve your memory	38
Crossword puzzles develop sharper brains and stave off dementia...	40
Coffee could add years to your life... and also help you lose weight	41
Chocolate is good for you after all!	42
Being more resilient helps to prevent future setbacks...	42
A better cure for depression?	43
Beat stress just by breathing...	43
Reminiscing about happy times can beat stress...	44
Performance is the best therapy	44
Swearing makes you feel better!	45
A good cry can activate your reset button	46
Always look on the bright side of life...	47

Confidence Trick

Successful people exude confidence! It's not their success that gives them that confidence – the confidence was already there. They're confident because they believe in themselves – they believe in what they're doing and they always know without a shadow of a doubt that they are right.

Successful people have the confidence to take calculated risks. They understand the business they are in and more important, they understand themselves – they know their own strengths and they understand their own limitations. Most important however is that they can see their goal clearly and have definite ideas about how they're going to achieve it. They have no doubts... on the contrary, they have a vision, a dream if you like, and they set themselves on that path with a determination that is unstoppable.

Their belief in themselves, their ideas and their objectives, rubs off on other people. I often use the example of not needing a degree in psychology to know when someone's flirting with you. Well guess what? No one needs a degree in psychology to work out when a person has confidence or if they're plagued by doubt. So if you're unsure about yourself, you can hardly expect other people to believe in you.

Sure, it requires confidence to reach for new challenges, but life is full of these tests. I believe that we all pass lots of little tests every day, for instance meeting new people, finishing small tasks, making phone calls, saying 'no' to people. So really, you already have confidence, it's just that you become unsure when you're on unfamiliar ground.

People who lack confidence or who are fearful or insecure tend to stay within their comfort zones. The problem is, a comfort zone is a bit like a straight jacket – once you're in one, it's difficult to get out! This is why people lacking in confidence get stuck in dead-end jobs and let valuable opportunities slip past them.

Don't get me wrong... being cautious is not the same as lacking confidence. I believe caution is a good thing! Before embarking on any project, one should always check out the positives and the negatives, always assessing risks against potential benefits. There is common sense in this advice – trust me. Anyone who rushes into a business (or a relationship) like a bull in a china shop is being a trifle reckless!

Making lists, using spread sheets, doing sensible and thorough research are all important, but the one thing that's absent just could be the confidence to go through with something once you've decided it's worth doing. Having the confidence to achieve something special or unique will give you the will to do it.

Understandably, if you don't feel fully confident you are more likely to feel at the mercy of external circumstances. It's sometimes tempting to blame other people or minor obstacles and use these as reasons for not going forward. *Successful people aren't deterred by people or obstacles!* And this is why they succeed.

Without real confidence in yourself, or what you want to achieve, the only person stopping you from achieving it is yourself. It's time to remove that barrier of self-doubt. You *can* do it, and once you have, you will be surprised how easy it actually is!

You can help yourself turn your back on doubt by closing your eyes and using a little bit of creative relaxation. For instance, imagine that each little doubt has a physical constituent,

maybe butterflies in your stomach, a tenseness around the back of your neck or perspiration on your brow.

Next, imagine these physical manifestations evaporating into thin air and being replaced by a warm feeling of confidence and self-assuredness. Give that new feeling a colour – perhaps a favourite colour, or a colour that makes you feel comfortable and safe. Using your own creative imagination, think about how much better that new feeling is – imagine yourself feeling calm, composed, and ready for action! Imagine absorbing the colour and feeling feeling into every cell your body, becoming an essential part of you.

Confidence is one of the crucial building blocks in the formula for success, so here are the 7 Confidence Tricks that will change you forever...

Trick 1

Don't confuse confidence with conceit. Confidence is earned through hard work, and confident people are self-aware. If your confidence outweighs your abilities, then you've crossed the line to conceit and arrogance. It's important to understand the difference. Real confidence is firmly rooted in reality and it's important to have a realistic view of your own abilities. Try to identify areas that could be improved and work on them. Likewise, recognising your strengths will enable you to ignore any negativity that naturally occurs in a competitive environment – the ability to do that will immediately help to build your confidence.

Trick 2

Just say NO. Believe me, you'll start to *enjoy* saying it after while. If you find it difficult to say no, you are much more likely to experience stress and loss of confidence and self-esteem. Practise saying it out loud when you're on your own – imagine you're saying it to someone you would actually like to say 'no' to. See how good it feels? They will respect you for it in the end! Don't pussyfoot around with meaningless phrases such as 'I'll have to think about it.' Just say no and make your intention clear – firm but nice. Now you will have more time and energy for your own *more important* commitments.

Trick 3

A difficult relationship can destroy anyone's confidence, whether it's at work or in a social setting. It's hard to be confident when someone is constantly criticising or undermining you. Try to identify where the relationship is going wrong and decide whether there's anything you can do to get things back on track. If the relationship is truly unsalvageable, it's time to move on to something, or someone, else.

Trick 4

Confident people tend to challenge themselves as well as compete with others. Small victories excite the pleasure centres in the brain, in particular those responsible for reward and motivation. This will further increase your confidence and your eagerness to take on challenges in the future. If you have a series of small victories, the boost in your confidence can last for months.

Trick 5

Finding a mentor, a talented, experienced person and getting them on your side is a good way to build confidence. A good mentor can act as a sounding board for your thoughts and ideas, helping you develop belief in yourself.

Trick 6

Knowledge builds confidence – study articles, read books, or watch DVDs related to your chosen subject. The more you know, the more you can effectively focus on the things that matter. This will also help you be more authoritative – if you're one chapter ahead of everyone else, confidence will come naturally. Knowledge is power! However, don't confuse being authoritative with being authoritarian. The meaning of these two similar words are different. You can assert yourself without being rude.

Trick 7

A study conducted at the Eastern Ontario Research Institute found that people who exercised twice a week for a short time began to rate their body image and self-esteem higher. This had the unexpected effect of improving their ability to communicate more effectively. The immediate release of endorphins from exercise also made a difference. So a little exercise a couple of times a week can start to increase your confidence.

Trick 8

You can boost your confidence just by dressing well, choosing clothing that reflects who you are and the image you want to project. The way you dress – including shoes and accessories and the way you wear your hair – can make you feel better about yourself. This in turn will exert a huge effect on how others see you. Studies have shown that people speak and behave differently when they're 'dressed to kill' compared to when they're dressed casually.

I have found that encouraging clients who suffer from depression to smarten themselves up is a useful and worthwhile first step on the road to recovery.

Remember... your confidence is your own! No one can steal it from you any more than they can steal your soul. Even though confidence must be based on reality, it's your own reality at the end of the day that matters. No one ever told anyone off because they were confident. In fact the converse is true... others will respect you a lot more if you exude confidence. So, memorise these simple rules – one a day for a week – and put them into practice. Go on... I dare you!

How not to be socially awkward

Social awkwardness is thought to affect more than seven million people in the UK to some degree. Being socially awkward can turn fun gatherings into torturous experiences. Even the thought of striking up conversations with strangers is enough to trigger nausea, sweating, heart palpitations and a queasy stomach.

Some people even prefer to feign illness or family emergencies rather than subject themselves to the agony of social interaction. Others find the condition extends into everyday life – putting them off making phone calls in front of other people or chatting to fellow shoppers in a supermarket queue for fear of embarrassment.

Small talk is like the glue that binds human relationships in all walks of life – something we all have to do if we want to interact with people around us. But it is a skill that has to be learned.

The good news is that there are just seven rules for turning social gatherings into occasions to remember, rather than ones to forget

1. Maintaining the right distance

One must be aware of personal space. In Norway, people feel quite comfortable when a stranger is standing around 15 inches away, but in the UK, the preferred distance is about 3 feet. But overall, women prefer being closer together than men and young people are more likely to engage in physical contact than older people.

When you first meet someone, step forward to shake their hand, then take a step back. If they move towards you, then that's a signal they are comfortable.

2. Keep eye contact for a few seconds

Eye contact is an essential part of communication. Too little and you might appear uninterested in what the person has to say... too long and it's likely to be boring.

A 2016 study by scientists from University College London came up with the answer: maintain eye contact for 3.3 seconds. Your eyes convey your level of interest, your comfort levels and how engaged you are in the person and the conversation. But there's a balance. Aim for regular, periodic glances at the other person's eyes as you are talking.

3. The three questions rule

Successful small talk is all about getting the conversation started. Standard getting-to-know-you questions include '*How do you know the person throwing the party?*' or '*What do you do?*' etc. This should open the door to a mutually interesting conversation. For every three questions you ask the other person, pause and then say something about yourself, which gives them the chance to ask questions about you.

4. If in doubt, you can fake confidence

As nervous as you may be, you can just pretend to be confident. Faking confidence will get you through the initial few seconds of anxiety and lead more naturally into conversation. Once you get over that initial hurdle, the rest will flow easily. Just turn yourself into an actor for 60 seconds!

Even a fake smile will help reduce the body's response to stress and lower the heart rate and even lower your blood pressure. And it makes the people you're about to talk to will immediately be more receptive.

5. Joining a group chat

If you see a group of people you'd like to join, then stand on the fringes for four or five seconds, near enough so they see you and sense your interest in joining in, but not so close that you're invading their space. Then move in and say 'Hi' to someone. Relax and smile and say 'Hi... how do you all know each other?'

If you've heard a group talking about something you're interested in, you can quietly move in closer, listen for a few seconds and then chime in with your opinion as soon as there's an appropriate pause.

It's also OK to join a group and just follow the conversation for a few seconds. Just be ready to join in with a throw away line such as 'That happened to a friend of mine once...'

6. Mirror the person you're talking to

Social anxiety is often linked to an underlying fear that people won't like you. One way to ensure they do is to subtly mimic their posture, gestures or speech, as this creates a rapport between you. This is an NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) trick, but don't make your imitation of them too obvious or they may think you're making fun of them.

Some psychologists claim that 'mirroring' makes people trust you more, but be warned – if others notice, they may see it as an attempt at manipulation, especially if one of the group has been on one of Paul McKenna's ludicrous NLP trainings.

7. Don't push it.

If joining a conversation feels forced, it may be a sign you just weren't meant to talk to that particular person – you might not have much in common. Just say you need to go to the bar, and politely move on.

Fear of Failure – and how to overcome it

"Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm." Winston Churchill

"If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right." Henry Ford

The fear of failure is ten times worse than actual failure, because it condemns you to a life of unrealised and wasted potential. People are more afraid of failure than anything else. But given the right tools to confront it can turn your fear of failure into a determination to achieve success. It's easy once you know how. If you can understand the following, it will be a lot easier to make this change work for you.

1. Identify the obstacles

The first thing to do is to identify the things that are holding you back, the hurdles if you like. Once you've done this, then you should visualise them and in your creative imagination, and kick every one of them down one by one.

Imagine every obstacle coming down with a crash and imagine jumping over the wreckage as if they were hurdles on a running track. Jump right over them – all of them. This visualisation is the start of the process and you should do it every day. It only takes a few seconds.

You will find it a lot easier to concentrate your efforts on one thing at a time. Take a look at what's not working for you, and choose just one goal to work on each day. You may not achieve everything all at once, but by giving yourself somewhere to start and tackling one thing at a time will get you on your way!

2. Confront your fear

A fear is not a monster or a dangerous wild animal. Your fear only exists in your imagination – it's not going to turn around and physically harm you! We all tend to be too abstract about our fears, and are too often unaware of what exactly is ultimately holding us back.

Whether it's taking up a hobby to meet new people or banish the fear of speaking in public, you can break up your fears into small steps. With each step you take, you will begin to face, embrace, and eventually, erase the fear of failing, leading you towards your longer-term goal.

It helps if you can write down your fear, and then flush it down the loo or take it outside and burn it. When you write down your fear – the very thing that scares you the most – it becomes more tangible and easier to deal with. By burning it (and watching it burn) or flushing it down the loo, you take ownership of the fear and destroying its hold on you.

3. If at first you don't succeed, *try again*.

It's about time you started thinking about Number One for a change! (Yes... that's you!) And always be accountable to yourself before holding yourself accountable to others!

Always remember, you are not alone! There are thousands of people pursuing similar goals and who have similar doubts and fears. Everyone you know has had to do that many, many times, and you're no different! Everyone goes through it, so you're not alone.

Telling yourself that it's too late to achieve a goal, or giving in to the fear of failure, is like abandoning yourself on a desert island after steering yourself there on purpose.

When you do fail (and we all do) it's only human. If it's worth achieving, then it will require

effort on a daily basis, so persistence is all-important. It has, and always will be OK to fail and be afraid of what might come next. Welcome it with open arms, instead of letting it overcome your life. You've just learned another way of how *not* to do it.

4. Look at how others have achieved similar goals

Learning about how other people got through their own personal failures can inspire you to tackle your own head on.

Don't let the fear overpower you. It's never too late to face your fears and inch closer to your goals. It just takes time. Positive feedback from friends and family can encourage you along the road to success.

5. It's OK to change your mind and pursue something else

Get yourself together and get ready to start again. Who knows? You might even find you love doing something else more.

Never listen to people who are negative about your ideas. The world is full of jealousy and envy. Psychologists agree that being a bit of a nerd or a dreamer (Silicon Valley is full of them) can make you more creative and better at selling your ideas to others. Steve Jobs was known for creating one of the most successful companies in the world – and for swearing at his employees. However, it was his his unflinching belief in himself that helped him become a success.

People who *think* they're more creative are not actually more creative. Some people have an inflated sense of self-esteem but all that means is that they have total confidence their ideas are better than anyone else's. Yes, they are irritating, but to hell with them. You have a voice too... Use it!

Most important of all, doing something you love is always the best choice. By immersing yourself in your passions you'll open up your mind to more opportunities for success.

6. Don't be afraid of speaking out to get your ideas heard!

People become successful because they pushed their ideas. Yes, they are pushy and sometimes rude, but they get their ideas heard! It is especially important to understand that everyone else is also being pushy!

Even self-centred, narcissistic, conniving, back-stabbing psychopaths harbour their own doubts and fears. The only advantage they have is that they talk louder and are more combative. They want to get what they want, no matter who they have to step on to get it. They're so focussed on getting what they want, they can turn on the charm like a tap. Well, guess what... they're just acting – and you can too!

It's true that those with headstrong personalities are more successful – it's because they know what they want and they're good at devising strategies to get it. But that doesn't mean that they are unpleasant people. Generally speaking, they're not – they're just determined.

However, it's important to know that nice people, those who are perhaps not as headstrong or self-centred, are more receptive to new ideas and new ways of thinking, and particularly more open to positive feedback.

7. Don't focus on the end goal!

Bad news I'm afraid – people who just think about the end goal fail far more often than those who optimistically focus on the individual and separate steps of how to get there.

Admittedly, the consequences of failure can be severe, but in the real world you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself down, and start all over again! It took Thomas Edison 1,000 tries to develop a light bulb that actually worked. When someone asked him how it felt to fail a thousand times, he said, *"I didn't fail a thousand times. The light bulb was an invention with a thousand steps."*

It's this attitude that separates the successes from the failures. J. K. Rowling's manuscript for *Harry Potter* was only accepted after twelve publishers rejected it, and even then she was only paid a nominal advance. Oprah Winfrey lost her job as a Baltimore TV news anchor for becoming too emotionally involved in her stories, a quality that was later to become her trademark.

Henry Ford lost his financial backers twice before he was able to produce a workable prototype of an automobile. The list of failures is almost endless, but then so is the list of successes!

Remember – setbacks aren't failures, so whatever happens, don't get discouraged. The actions you take in the face of failure are critical to your ability to recover from it and have huge implications for how others view you and your mistakes.

There are several things you can do when you fail that will enable you to succeed in the future and allow others to see you positively in spite of your failure. Here is a step by step breakdown:

1. Always break bad news yourself

If you've made a mistake, it is inevitable that people will find out about it. If someone else points out your failure, then one failure turns into two because trying to hush things up just makes people wonder why you didn't say something, and believe me – they're going to attribute this to incompetence or shame... so...

2. Offer explanations, but don't make excuses

Taking ownership of your mistakes will actually enhance your image – it shows confidence, accountability, and integrity. Be sure however to stick to the facts. "I lost the contract because I missed the deadline" is a reason. "I lost the contract because the dog ate my homework" is an excuse.

3. Have a plan for fixing things

What you do next is critical. Don't wait for things to come right on their own (they won't) but offer your own solutions. It's even better if you can list the specific steps you've already taken to get things back on track.

4. Have a prevention plan

You should also have a plan to avoid making the same mistake again. That's the best way to reassure everyone you're well and truly back on track.

5. Get back to it ASAP!

Don't let failure make you timid – that's a very negative mind-set that's not only counter productive, it's exhausting. By all means, take enough time to learn the lesson, but as soon as you've done it, get right back out there and get going. Don't dither – dithering only prolongs negative thinking and increases the chances of losing your nerve.

6. Keep Your Perspective

Using failure to your advantage requires resilience and strength, both hallmarks of emotional intelligence. Things are never as bad as they seem. Engaging in some logical thought will help.

7. Stay Optimistic

Keeping a sense of optimism is vital emotion if you intend bounce back. One British study of more than 500 serial entrepreneurs found that they were much more likely to expect success than entrepreneurs who gave up after their first failure. Each failure is really a building block to ultimate success. Remember Oprah, Edison and Ford!

8. Practice Persistence

Persistence is optimism in action. When others quit and go home, persistent people shake off failures and get on with it. Persistent people always succeed because their optimism never dies. This makes them adept at recovering from failure.

9. Bringing It All Together.

Failure is a product of your perspective. What one person considers a crushing blow, another will see as a minor setback. The beauty of this philosophy is that you can change how you see failure and use it to your advantage.

10. Finally, the most important piece of advice of all:

Never put off until tomorrow something you can (and should) do today!

Learning to avoid embarrassment is easy

The fear of embarrassment is a phobia that can push some people to sidestep seemingly everyday situations.

It's all a question of degree. Some simply fear asking a shop assistant a question that may make them sound stupid, while others may be too scared to take an embarrassing yet potentially life-saving medical test. Embarrassment prevents us from asking advice about what we should do, for example, about our mounting mortgage bills or unplanned pregnancies.

But a new tactic to avoid feelings of embarrassment in awkward situations has been uncovered by scientists who say that viewing your own embarrassing moment as an out-of-body spectator can help you to disconnect from feelings of humiliation.

Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, say that fear of embarrassment affects many people. They suggest training your mind to think of yourself as an observer rather than a participant in these moments to help to alleviate shame and distress.

In order to test the hypothesis that adopting an observer's perspective can reduce feelings of embarrassment, the team conducted three sets of studies in which they asked different groups of students how they felt about a series of situations.

In the first study, the researchers asked participants to respond to an advertisement showing someone accidentally farting in a yoga class. The second tested participants' reactions to an advertisement about getting tested for a sexually transmitted disease, and the third questioned participants about an advert where a man accidentally farts in front of a potential love interest.

One finding was that people who are extremely self-conscious are more likely to take an actor's perspective in embarrassing situations, even when they concern others. Self-conscious people will even feel distressed when watching an advert that depicts an embarrassing moment.

Levels of self-consciousness drop in these people when they are able to picture themselves as observers of a situation, and not as being directly involved, but the research shows that devising strategies to successfully reduce embarrassment is complicated. Consumers will react differently to persuasion tactics depending on their level of public self-consciousness and their amount of available cognitive resources.

Embarrassment-avoidance forms the basis for attempts to motivate you to buy a wide variety of products, from laundry detergents that can shift stains on your clothes your collar, to makeup that hides unsightly spots on your skin. The research is relevant to situations where marketers want to protect consumers against a fear of embarrassment and encourage them to take actions they might otherwise avoid. And of course to make more money.

Decisions, decisions...

What do we want? *An end to procrastination!* **When do we want it?** *We're not sure...*

Procrastination is the thief of time...

We all procrastinate from time to time. Procrastination can be useful if it means you can better perform a task at a later date. But unintentional or long-term procrastination can be problematic – and it's important you deal with it.

Procrastination can exert a detrimental effect on your health if you put off exercise or going to the doctor. It can affect exam performance and results, career choices and interpersonal relationships.

Research shows that people who regularly procrastinate say that it affects their lives and even makes them feel anxious, guilty and ashamed.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is being used to help procrastinators become more decisive. It is unclear how CBT *specifically* benefits procrastinators, but it has been shown to stop people procrastinating by enforcing useful actions.

CBT aims to change problematic behaviours and replace them with more useful ones. It has proved effective for certain mental health disorders, such as phobias and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by teaching people how to cope with anxiety.

Researchers from Stockholm University asked student volunteers to fill out a questionnaire that assigned them a procrastination score on a scale of 1 to 60. procrastinators were identified as those who scored 40 or above. Over a period of eight weeks the researchers tested CBT on two separate groups.

48 participants received weekly online sessions that provided them with reading materials, exercises and advice. Another 44 participants received fortnightly face-to-face sessions in groups of 12 which were conducted by two therapists.

At the end of both types of CBT course, all participants showed great improvement. Scores dropped by around 10 points and by the end of the treatment, 34% of participants stopped putting things off and achieved scores similar to the average population. The participants also saw improvements in their ability to cope with anxiety and improvements in their wellbeing. They also saw improvements in their academic performance.

But... six months later, only those who had received face-to-face sessions continued to benefit, and by a further four points. This kind of group therapy could be more successful because it helps people to hear from, and be supported by, others who have had similar experiences whereas those who had only online sessions slipped back to their original state.

Hypnotherapy is a way of speeding the process up and can often achieve the same result in just one session! Hypnosis is the vehicle why delivers the therapy and the the effect is quick and usually profound.

Improve your wellbeing – take a nap!

It's long been said that 'sleeping on it' can help you make challenging decisions. Guess what...? There's now a scientific experiment to confirm it – having a nap really can help you make clearer choices. Better still, THIS form of mindfulness is natural, healthy, and takes no effort whatsoever!

Scientists at Bristol University led by Dr Liz Coulthard and published in the *Journal of Sleep Research* measured changes in the brains and reaction times of 16 participants before and after they had a brief nap. The results suggest a period of sleep may help weighing up pros and cons or gain insight before making a tough choice.

All the participants – aged between 20 and 91 – were hooked up to an EEG to measure the electrical activity in their brain. They were asked to carry out two tasks.

In the first, they were asked to describe whether they thought a chain of words were either 'good' or 'bad'. In the second, volunteers were quizzed on whether they thought they saw a red or blue square dozens of times on a screen. The participants practiced the tasks and then either stayed awake or took a 90-minute nap before repeating the same challenges.

Reaction times were much quicker in the subjects who had a short sleep – but only in the first task, which required more thought.

It has long been understood that the process of memory is strengthened during sleep. But the study suggests information acquired during wakefulness may potentially be processed in some deeper, qualitative way during sleep.

The benefits of having a nap during the day are similar to those experienced after drinking coffee. Having a snooze instead of a coffee negates the side effects of stimulants like caffeine and disrupted sleep at night can be avoided.

Those who regularly nap report feeling more alert after a brief nap in the afternoon compared to those who only nap occasionally.

Humans are one of the few animals that only sleep at night. Most animals follow a polyphasic sleep cycle – they alternate between sleep and wakefulness several times during the 24 hour day, but the way human days are structured prevents us from sleeping multiple times a day.

We need our sleep. People who are sleep deprived have higher levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. Higher cortisol levels can result in damage to the immune system. But taking a nap can lower levels of cortisol and reduce the level of physiological stress on your body.

Throughout human history, it's been known that armies fight better when they've been rested. In fact any kind of battle is easier won after a good night's sleep – generals need to be on the ball and soldiers fit to fight and the same is true of negotiating in business meetings, playing in sporting events or doing any kind of job. Being properly rested means you can think and function better.

I never go on stage tired – I always get up late on show days and make sure I walk on stage fully fit to perform. I've found by experience that my concentration is sharper if I'm relaxed and in the proper frame of mind to face an audience. No one in their right mind wants to be fighting fatigue when they should be giving their best.

Going to Court? Going for a job interview? Meeting someone important? If you're not alert and awake your performance will suffer! Getting some sleep will do you a lot more good!

If you're taking an exam, last minute revision doesn't serve you well either – but being properly rested will. It will also have a greater and longer lasting impact on your performance! Trying to get some last minute revision done before an exam can be counterproductive, because trying to learn and remember something when you're not properly rested is much more difficult.

Please don't misunderstand this advice... revising makes sense. Revising strengthens and consolidates knowledge. The more you recall a piece of information, the stronger the memory of that information will become. But sleep is also vital for memory retention and a good night's sleep helps our brains consolidate what we've learned in the day.

There are many people who swear by a quick afternoon nap, so if you've got an hour free, is it better to nap or revise?

A team of researchers at Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore set out to compare the two options. The researchers created a real student experience, and recruited 72 volunteers to sit through lectures about 12 different species of ants and crabs. The participants were asked to learn all about these animals, including for example, information about their diets and habitats.

After 80 minutes of tuition, the students were given an hour to either watch a film, have a nap, or revise what they had just learned. This was followed by another 80 minutes of study. Then they all sat an exam in which they were asked 360 questions. The group that used their downtime to take a nap achieved the highest scores.

Then, the researchers called all the volunteers back for another test on the same subject a week later. Again, the group that had used the time to take a nap scored the highest.

When the group who revised took the first test, they significantly outperformed the group who watched the movie. But they lost their advantage in the second test because there was no significant difference in those two groups' scores a week later.

No one is quite sure why taking a nap might be so beneficial. It's possible that giving the brain a short rest helps it to absorb more information by freeing up space or because memories are better laid down during a short sleep, after all, this is what happens when you sleep at night – the brain files away and rationalises information learned during the day. Or it could be that even a short rest makes the brain more alert and more ready to retrieve information.

We already know that in the natural cycle of wakefulness, there is a natural dip in alertness at around 3pm, so that might be a good time to close your eyes and take a quiet break.

In another study, a visual test was given to participants. After the participants had performed multiple rounds, the researchers noticed a decline in performance. When they were allowed to take a half hour nap in the middle, their performance was significantly enhanced. A longer one-hour nap resulted in even better performance.

Breaking up your day with a nap can dramatically increase alertness. Researchers at NASA found there was a 100% increase in alertness in individuals who took a 40 minute nap. In some cases, studies showed how 20 minute naps could provide equal or better increases in alertness compared to being given 200mg of caffeine.

Creativity can dramatically increase if you take short naps. This could also be attributed to the sharpening of senses associated with being well rested. Artist Leonardo da Vinci wasn't known to take multiple naps during the day and minimised sleep during the night.

It is known that working memory is more efficient when people are well rested, because it is involved in tasks that require a lot of attention. It is believed that taking naps can even help you retain memories long term.

Squeezing a quick nap into your day can help keep your senses of smell, taste, sight, and hearing in good condition.

Allowing your body some sleep – or 'downtime' – during the day has shown to benefit sensory perception almost as much as a full night's sleep. For example, keeping senses sharp can make a big difference in how music sounds or how food tastes!

And apart from increasing your ability to manage information, a nap can also improve your mood,

Think about it... How much better do you feel after a few ZZZZ's?

Take a break... or two or three...

Whatever you're doing, taking a break for just 5 minutes every hour will refresh your mind, improve your mood, increase your energy levels, and even quash cravings for food.

Spending hours a day just sitting behind a desk has known consequences for your health, but scientists now say that just a five-minute walk could negate some of the risks.

According to a new study recently published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, researchers found that taking brief, repeated breaks from work to stand up and move around has sustained benefits for mood and energy levels.

The study revealed that the benefits of these hourly five-minute activity sessions were found to last all day, and could even help to alleviate food cravings while you're at work.

In fact the benefits of regular and short activity breaks were found to be better for you than the single early morning workout favoured by some, the effectiveness of which wears off after a time.

After hourly short breaks, participants showed a sustained increase in energy levels as well as improved mood and decreased feelings of fatigue and appetite.

The sedentary lifestyle of sitting in an office all day increases the risks of diabetes, depression, and obesity, and office workers are most at risk. Prolonged and uninterrupted sitting time is bad for you!

In order to find out how different activities affected workers, a team of researchers from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Centre and the Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute, investigated three movement conditions across 30 adults.

They were all first given a number of tests to assess their health, as well as being questioned about their self-perceived energy, mood, and appetite.

In the first test, the participants sat for 6 hours straight, getting up only to use the bathroom. In the second, they started the day with 30 minutes of moderate walking on a treadmill, while in the third they underwent six five-minute sessions of moderate intensity walking at hourly intervals.

The researchers monitored participant's stress hormone levels, and had participants rate their mood, energy, fatigue, and appetite throughout the day.

The experiments revealed a number of benefits linked to the five-minute activity sessions. None of these exercise regimes were found to effect cognitive function.

The results suggest that even a little bit of activity, spread throughout the day, is a practical, easy way to improve well-being.

So maybe you should think about walking to the corner shop, or walking up and down the stairs instead of taking the lift. It's much better for you!

The upside of doing absolutely nothing

In this modern frenetic world, with all its trials and tribulations and hustle and bustle, we have forgotten how wonderful it feels to... simply do nothing... to be at ease with one's own thoughts... to just lie on the sofa... to go for a walk to nowhere in particular... or just stare out of the window and daydream...

Believe it or not, doing absolutely nothing can be hugely beneficial, especially if you're feeling overwhelmed. It takes courage and determination to do absolutely nothing, but doing nothing is the perfect antidote to stress.

Trying to do everything creates stress, not to mention feelings of anxiety, insomnia and irritability... even guilt. Chronic stress can also affect the immune system. Because we can't do everything, our bodies and brains are permanently in a state of high alert, and once our stress responses are activated, it can take a while for them calm down.

Just a few minutes of relaxation every day is enough to lower stress and allow longer periods of relative calm. If there's nothing demanding your attention, you can feel the stress seeping out of you. Less stressed people are more friendly – they smile more because they're happier with their lives.

When neurologist Marcus Raichle at the Washington University School of Medicine, Saint Louis, Missouri used an fMRI scanner to measure brain activity, he was able to study how our brains work when we're not.

The results were surprising – the relaxed brains were more active than those whose owners were given a specific task to do. In fact, the network that lit up when people lay still and did nothing included all the major connections in the brain. It turns out the brain is always active – always ‘on’ – even when you’re not using it.

This is why we’re more productive after a spot of calm relaxation – it gives the brain a chance to reorganise... a chance to reboot. We become better at problem-solving and more creative because our mind unconsciously embarks on a process of problem solving – just like sleeping on a problem and waking up the next morning with a much clearer idea of a solution.

So when we’re taking a shower, sprawling on the couch, or just daydreaming, ideas come together as if by magic. This quiet, seemingly passive work is less obvious, but it’s important... even just a few minutes is enough.

Generally, men find it easier to do nothing than women. Men seem to have more free time than women and they’re better at protecting it. Generally, women protect their husbands’ free time too, even at the expense of their own.

While men and women do approximately the same *amount* of work, generally men do more *paid* work, while women do more unpaid work. From the most primitive jungle societies to modern 21st century cities, doing nothing is practically unheard of among women, even in the most gender-equal countries such as the Norway.

Of course a busy life can be happy and fulfilling, but women also need to slow down! It’s no shame to put some time aside for yourself and do absolutely nothing! Really... all you have to do is absolutely... *NOTHING*...

So forget mindfulness, because it’s too much like hard work. Forget being aware of your body, how you breath, the present moment, or your thoughts. Instead, just escape into your head and start daydreaming. Daydreaming requires no preparation, no training, and no special lighting or weird music.

Instead of making a ‘to-do’ list, make a list of the things you want to *stop* doing. Ask yourself if any of these jobs will really achieve anything, and whether there are any major negative consequences associated with not doing them. Learn to say no to the tasks that don’t move you forward. The time you free up is yours, and yours alone.

Think positive – live longer

Researchers from Stanford University tracked the medical data of more than 60,000 Americans and found that positive thinking could extend life expectancy because just *believing* you are healthy cuts your risk of early death by 71%.

A lot of people openly admit that they are not the healthiest on the planet, but this mind-set could be dangerous for our health and wellbeing. In fact, according to the Stanford researchers, people who view themselves as less healthy than others are at a greater risk of suffering a premature death – no matter how active they actually are.

Their research and results – published in *Health Psychology* in 2017 – are the latest of many studies to show how our thoughts, feelings and beliefs have a direct impact on our health.

The team started collecting and documenting information about participant's health, background, and levels of physical activity as far back as 1980. All participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be physically more active, less active, or about as active as other people of the same age.

The researchers then collated death records from 2011 – 21 years after the initial survey. After controlling for physical activity, age, body mass index, chronic illness and other factors, they discovered that people who saw themselves as less active than others were up to 71% more likely to die in the follow-up period than people who thought they were more active than their peers.

It appears that the health benefits people get out of everyday activities depends in part on their mind-set – in other words, getting actual health benefits from exercise depends whether or not they *believe* they are getting health benefits from exercise. Those who deemed themselves unfit were more likely to remain inactive, fuelling feelings of fear, stress or depression that negatively affected their health.

The researchers also cited the well-understood influence of the placebo effect, where patients who *think* they're getting treatment experience physiological changes even though they're not actually getting treatment. People who believe they're getting healthy exercise often get more physiological benefits from their exercise than those who believe they aren't getting enough healthy exercise.

As the placebo effect is well established in medicine, it is only logical to assume that it also plays a role in shaping the benefits of healthy exercise.

A lot of effort, notably in public health campaigns, is geared toward motivating people to change their behaviour – eat healthier, exercise more, and reduce stress.

An increasing volume of research shows that both positive and negative perceptions of healthy living really do affect health and longevity.

Even with everyday experiences, even simple thoughts and beliefs have very palpable physiological effects – this is the core element of *Suggestion*. For instance, a simple thought or idea can have immediate physical effects. These kind of reactions are experienced regularly. We don't realise just how much our thoughts, our mind-set and our expectations affect our everyday physiology.

In the case of stress – which is so closely linked to our emotions – for instance, a single negative thought that something is wrong can make us sweat or increase our heart rate. These are typical reactions of people who suffer from fears and phobias.

Both positive and negative thoughts, feelings and emotions will have a physical constituent and be expressed in physiological reactions. Someone who suffers from arachnophobia will always experience the same physical reaction every time they see a spider. Hypnotherapy offers a highly effective short cut to eliminating the feelings associated with phobias.

By the same token, a doctor who tells a patient they can expect to make a full recovery is helping that patient far more than saying there will be a long and hard road to recovery.

Being mindful of, and feeling good about activities you do every day – like walking, using the stairs, cycling, or doing everyday chores could be an easy first step for everyone to improve their health. Just as important, *believing* these things will make us healthier is the next.

A little exercise will clear your head

Just 30 minutes exercise can create new neurons in regions of the brain responsible for learning, emotion and memory. Modern research has disproved the theory that once humans start to grow older, their brains cannot make new neurons. A handful of recent studies, including one carried out by the American Academy of Clinical Neuropsychology, have discovered that after a run, new neurons are formed in the hippocampus, the area of the brain associated with learning and memory.

It is now thought that if you exercise so much you sweat, new brain cells will be formed. Athletes often report bursts of mental clarity, enhanced moods and frequently experience becoming lost in their own thoughts long enough to confront external tasks.

Other studies have noted an increase of blood flow to the brain's frontal lobe, the area involved in clear thinking, planning, focus and concentration. This region is also associated with the regulation of emotions, which supports the idea that exercise may help reduce sadness.

Even moderate aerobic exercise increases blood flow to the brain's frontal lobe, but although aerobic exercise can't prevent people getting sad or depressed, it can help with recovery. In fact any kind of exercise can aid cognitive thinking because exercise serves to enhance important adaptive functions – self-reflection, creativity, and attention.

To prove their point, the researchers showed a group of 80 volunteer participants the final scene of the 1979 film 'The Champ' (a tear-jerker of note). Before watching the scene, some of the participants were asked to jog for 30 minutes or perform stretching exercises. Each participant was then asked to report how sad the film made them feel, following which the researcher kept them occupied for another 15 minutes, before asking them again.

Participants who reported difficulties with concentration or who felt overwhelmed by their emotions, were less affected following the 30 minutes of aerobic exercise. They also reported feeling less sad at the end of the study than those who did no exercise.

In addition to enhancing each individual's clarity and memory, researchers discovered another benefit of going for a long run – the propensity to daydream or become lost in their own thoughts, something considered important to wellbeing.

Psychologist Jerome Singer of Yale University and his colleagues suggest that positive and constructive daydreaming serves four broad adaptive functions:

1. It assists with future planning, which is enhanced by a period of self-reflection,

2. It enhances creativity for problem solving and attentional cycling that allows the individual to rotate through different information streams to develop and/or advance personally,
3. It provides meaningful goals,
4. It enhances learning through short breaks from external tasks.

The full study and its results were published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

In the meantime... keeping active, along with a balanced diet, is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of dementia, but research conducted by experts at the University of British Columbia in Canada suggests regular aerobic exercise can actually *reverse* the progress of dementia even after it has taken hold. Their findings, published in the journal *Neurology*, add to growing evidence that physical activity can be used to treat cognitive problems.

A clinical trial carried out with elderly people with an average age of 74 found that those who exercised for one hour three times every week, saw an improvement in their cardiovascular health as well as overall thinking skills. They were also able to walk further and their blood pressure levels improved. However, the benefits only lasted as long as they were able to continue exercising.

The important thing is that an aerobic exercise programme may be beneficial for people who already have early memory problems.

According to a recent article in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, researchers from the University of Arizona have claimed that going for a short early morning run could help keep you alert for the rest of the day. A part of the brain responsible for decision-making and planning is activated during a short period of healthy exercise.

The Arizona researchers studied 11 competitive male runners aged between 18 and 25 and another 11 young men who said that they had not exercised in the past year. (They focused on men because it is difficult to study women due to the effects of the menstrual cycle on their minds and bodies.)

The men filled out questionnaires about their physical activity levels and from these, the researchers were able to estimate their aerobic fitness. Each volunteer also took an MRI scan to measure the levels of activity in their brains. The runner's brains showed increased connectivity in areas linked to higher-level thinking, whereas there were not the same levels of activity in the brains of the inactive men. There was also less brain activity in the part of the runner's brains which indicate a lack of focus and 'mind wandering.'

In addition, the research also found running helped to improve memory, attention spans and keeps the senses sharp.

Increased connectivity between brain regions is known to improve memory and the ability to multitask. Running involves complex navigational skills as well as an ability to plan, monitor and respond to the environment. This would also include juggling memories of past runs, and the ability to continue with all of the motor activities involved in running, which are complex.

In fairness, the study cannot prove that running actually *causes* the differences in the men's thinking, only that runners had certain types of thought pattern. It is also unclear

whether running on its own has these effects, or if the effects are duplicated in other endurance sports, like cycling and swimming, which is more likely.

Britain's National Health Service (NHS) recommends that all adults should do at least two hours of moderate exercise per week but science suggests that a lot less could be just as good for you.

Researchers looking at past studies saw that any amount of exercise, even if it was only a short walk, was good for the brains of people between the ages of 18 and 35. Even two minutes of exercise per day could be enough to improve your brain health and your memory.

We know that exercise is good for the brain because it makes nerve cells more active, but it also increases dopamine levels, helping to sharpen focus and memory. Exercise is also believed to increase levels of a protein called 'brain-derived neurotrophic factor' which is thought to be important for memory.

In a series of tests, the effects of short periods of exercise were found to last for at least two hours while intense exercise brought long-term improvement. As well as boosting brain health, exercise at any level has been proved to bring a wealth of health benefits including strengthened heart and lungs, and a lowered risk of long-term illnesses such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

According to a study published in January 2019 and carried out by scientists at Columbia University in New York, going for a short daily walk or bicycle ride can shave 10 years off your 'brain age.' Regular aerobic exercise boosted essential grey matter in all adults, even those as young as 20. Even climbing the stairs improves thinking skills. Not only that, but the positive effect of physical activity increases with age – people aged 40 had the brainpower to match someone 10 years younger, while 60 year-olds seemed 20 years younger.

The study, which involved 132 people, aged between 18 to 35 who exercised by walking, running or cycling at moderate to high intensity, was published in the journal *Neurology* and found that exercise specifically improved the health of nerves in areas that control executive brain function. These relate to a person's ability to regulate their own behaviour, pay attention, and organise and achieve goals. All the participants who exercised showed not only improvements in executive brain function but also increased the thickness in an area of the outer layer of their brain.

After exercising the participants took tests to analyse their brain power, for example remembering a list of 15 words. Those who exercised in bursts of two minutes, 15 minutes, half an hour or an hour, all improved on tests and showed better concentration and problem-solving skills.

Findings from 13 other studies were collated and then analysed by researchers from Jonkoping and Linkoping universities in Sweden and were published in the journal *Translational Sports Medicine*.

The authors reported the systematic review strongly suggested that aerobic, physical exercise, followed by a brief recovery period, improves attention, concentration, learning and memory functions in young adults. The results of the review may well have important education-related implications. Simple exercise might help students to enhance their learning and memory and the improvements might come from a sustained boost to nerve connectivity in the brain.

Exercising is also known to increase levels of the the feel-good hormone, dopamine, which works as a neurotransmitter, helping signals to flit quickly around the brain. The researchers claim higher levels of dopamine may enhance attention and memory.

However, not everyone is a natural athlete or has hours to work out, but the researchers looked at studies exploring this and found any exercise from two minutes to an hour improved memory and thinking skills for up to two hours.

So... what would be the minimum exercise you would need to do to stay healthy?

Adults aged 19 to 64 should try to be active daily and should do:

- at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity such as cycling or brisk walking every week, PLUS
- strength exercises on 2 or more days a week that work all the major muscles (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms)

or

- 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity such as running or a game of singles tennis every week and
- strength exercises on 2 or more days a week that work all the major muscles (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms)

or

- a mix of moderate and vigorous aerobic activity every week – for example, 2 x 30-minute runs plus 30 minutes of brisk walking equates to 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity and
- strength exercises on 2 or more days a week that work all the major muscles (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms)

As a rule of thumb, 1 minute of vigorous activity provides the same health benefits as 2 minutes of moderate activity. A more time efficient way to do the recommended 150 minutes of weekly physical activity is to do 30 minutes a day, 5 days every week.

Source: NHS

LESS exercise is the key to weight loss!

Believe it or not, LESS exercise is the key to weight loss because intense exercise actually prevents your body from burning fat!

Strenuous exercise causes cortisol levels to spike because your body can't tell the difference between exercise stress and normal stress.

High cortisol stops your body burning fat.

WALKING is the best and most natural exercise, but swimming, dancing, gardening & cycling are just as good. Just 20 minutes a day of any of these is all you need.

Your energy levels will be higher – you'll sleep better and feel refreshed in the morning and not tired from exercising. A truly mindful way to lose weight perhaps?

A new study carried out by North Carolina State University has found that mindfulness helped people lose seven times more weight than people on standard diets and that mindfulness is more effective than simply trying to eat healthily.

Mindful eating means:

- Paying attention to feelings of hunger and fullness,
- Planning meals and snacks,
- Eating as a singular activity as opposed to eating while doing other activities,
- Paying special attention to how food tastes and having just one or two bites of special higher calorie foods,
- Savouring the flavour.

80 people took part in the study. Half designed their own diet – they lost 0.6lbs – while half engaged in daily meditation – and they lost 4.2lbs... seven times the first group's average weight loss.

The researchers say this is a staggering testament to the power of meditation.

A 'small changes approach' is a weight management strategy that emphasises a combination of diet and physical activity. In other words, eat less – exercise more!

The results suggest a beneficial association between mindful eating and weight loss.

The North Carolina researchers are currently studying mindful eating as part of a diabetes prevention program.

Being overweight or obese means risking hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, so a bit of mindfulness has got to be better than saving up for the liposuction!

Nonetheless, and cutting through the jargon, it might just be a case of being 'mindful' that you need to exercise a bit of will power.

Scientists at the University of Georgia have found that just 10 minutes of walking – not running – up and down stairs every day will help you lose weight and stay fit.

AND it will increase your energy levels – even more than drinking coffee or soft drinks. It will also result in small improvements in attention, memory and motivation.

If you work in an office, the chances are you won't have much time for exercise and won't feel like going for a walk if it's raining – but you might have access to stairs.

About 700 steps (equal to 30 floors) will do the trick and it takes just 10 minutes. You can drop 2lbs per week doing this – that means losing 1.5 stone in time for the summer holidays!

Remember... walk – don't run!

Going green – the route to better health

Even something moderately energetic, such as gardening, could be beneficial for physical and mental health – pruning the roses and creating something of beauty everyone can enjoy can enhance mental wellbeing, and if you work in a grey office building, spend hours in traffic, or constantly stare at a computer screen, gardening might be the perfect antidote.

Sheffield University's environment expert, Dr Ross Cameron, thinks our busy and sterile modern lifestyle is sapping our spirits. He's coined the phrase 'nature deficit disorder' and he has a point! Dr Cameron believes people notice and appreciate the natural world far less than they used to, and his solution is simple – we need to access the green spaces and get outdoors in the same way previous generations did.

Society is changing and the younger generation especially now spend more time glued to their mobile phones in the virtual world instead of enjoying the fresh air of the natural one. There's the difference – in the past they would go and play in the garden, in the park or in the woodland, and sadly, that's now very rare. We really have lost something important in life. Humans evolved alongside nature, not in concrete cities, and they respond well to nature.

For those who have difficulty getting access to the countryside, the garden is the perfect substitute. Green spaces don't need to be in the wilderness to provide benefits – intimate spaces to engage with are just outside the back door...

Previous research suggests that just half an hour in the garden has long-term benefits for body and mind. Another study found that the sounds of nature – the wind in the trees or the babble of a stream – reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol and lowers blood pressure.

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests regular gardening can reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer and obesity. It also improves balance in older people, helping to prevent falls – a major cost to health services. Gardening can also help dementia patients, with one trial showing that six months of gardening at home resulted in a slow-down of cognitive decline over the next 18 months.

The physical activity involved in gardening helps relaxation, which is good for mental health, and green spaces are stress-busting environments. Even a little bit of greenery in our environment makes us more relaxed – even a collection of indoor plants is good for wellbeing, one reason they're so popular in hotel lobbies, offices and rest homes.

Jogging for half an hour can burn about 240 calories – but doctors are increasingly encouraging people to take up lighter activities they can more easily include in their daily routine. The Royal Horticultural Society claims that half an hour of digging burns 150 calories, raking a lawn burns 120 and pushing a lawn mower for 30 minutes burns 165 calories.

Even tending a miniature 'garden' made up of pots and boxes in the corner of a backyard or in a conservatory can improve mood and wellbeing. Looking after plants gives people

something to live for! It's not just runners that have friends, keen gardeners also make friends.

Humans have a strong emotional connection to the natural world. Walking and running in the country and yes, even gardening, can satisfy that spiritual need. But mental wellbeing and our emotional bond with nature varies depending on the type and quality of nature.

Numerous studies have found that stress levels reduce when people spend time in the natural environment. Time spent in the countryside or at the beach is better for your brain than spending it in city parks.

Researchers at the University of Surrey, University of Exeter, University of Plymouth, Plymouth Marine Laboratory, and Natural England, surveyed 4,500 people who spent time enjoying natural open spaces and discovered that those visiting rural and coastal locations were more psychologically content than those taking a trip to an urban green space.

Visits to protected areas, such as national parks, rural or coastal locations, result in improved mental wellbeing and greater feelings of relaxation and refreshment. Those who spent 30 minutes or more in natural environments experienced a better connection and received greater psychological benefits.

A separate study of 199 women and 200 men aged between 19 and 76 by social psychologists at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge found that people who spend more time outside also have a more positive body image and also higher self-esteem.

It is possible that experiencing natural environments helps boost the feeling of being an important part of a wider ecosystem, meaning people can feel more respect for their own bodies. It also helps people feel further removed from the pressures of the modern world and lessens the need to conform to stereotypes, such as being thin or muscular.

In any event, it is clear that taking part in healthy activities, or simply enjoying healthy environments makes us healthier people in both body and mind.

Numerous scientific studies have shown that green spaces – and trees in particular – are beneficial to our physical and mental health. Being in their presence has been found to accelerate recovery from illness and to lower stress levels.

Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool put the theory into practice and has reoriented itself as the 'hospital in the park,' planting trees and providing green spaces and a more environmentally friendly and healthier place for patients and staff.

Studies also show when people's environments feature trees, their immune defences are enhanced and their levels of inflammation, blood pressure and the stress hormone cortisol are all lowered. These ideas have been embraced in Japan, where the practice of using trees to boost health has its own name – Shinrin-yoku, or 'forest bathing.'

A 2011 study reported in the *Japanese Journal Of Hygiene* found spending just five minutes in these areas helps patients feel calmer, more positive and more motivated to work on their recuperation. Even having bonsai trees on hospital wards can lower patients' levels of stress and their need for painkillers, according to a study published last year in the *International Journal Of Environmental Research And Public Health* by psychologists at Chiba University in Japan. The researchers scanned the patients' brains and found that there was less activity in the left prefrontal cortex, an area associated with stress responses, after seeing the tiny trees.

Even just viewing photographs of trees can provide curative benefits. A study by Dr Ulrich of 160 patients recovering from heart surgery at a Swedish hospital found that patients who were positioned to see pictures of a tree-lined stream had reduced anxiety and less need for pain medication than those who looked at abstract paintings, a blank wall or a white panel.

All this research supports the 'Biophilia' hypothesis – a theory introduced by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and popularised in the Eighties by Harvard University evolutionary biologist Edward Wilson. They argued that humans have biological and psychological needs for natural stimuli.

It's easy to see why this works. We spent millennia evolving our sensory and bodily functions in wooded landscapes. Since we have started living in cities, these functions have become stressed. If we get unhealthy, we may either need drugs to help our bodies to cope, or we need to rediscover the benefits of the natural environment.

Think yourself happy...

For centuries, philosophers and psychologists have asserted that it is the way we think about what happens, not what happens, that determines our emotions and our behaviours. If you think to yourself that life's challenges have blocked you from your goals, happiness and life purpose, then that is exactly what will happen.

Life is full of challenges and set-backs – which happen to us all – and should be viewed as lessons for the future. Every lesson learned serves to guide us next time we meet a challenge or an obstacle. You might even learn new skills or new ways of doing things which will help you achieve your goal next time. Setbacks and disappointments might even get us to reassess the decisions we have made. It's equally possible that a challenge might even make us more skilled and confident, or even choose a new career.

Of course, thinking positively in the wake of disappointment doesn't stop the experience of pain – the pain will still be there, but thinking positively means you won't be stuck with it! Positive thinking uses the experience to learn, reset our goals and focus on new ways of doing things.

Sometimes the choices are immediately obvious, but they won't always be immediately apparent. Thinking positively gives us the space to start thinking in new ways. Quite often, there will be times when patience will be needed, but you will eventually find solutions, and benefit from them.

1. Make a list

Let's start by making a list of any negative thoughts or the things you frequently say to yourself, all the things that sabotage your happiness and your goals, and STOP saying them. As you identify each one, be determined to banish it. Every time you spot a new one, ban that too.

2. Engage your imagination

Imagine you are walking in a forest, by a river, and you have a backpack on your back and in the backpack are some heavy stones. Each stone represents one problem or one anxiety. Imagine you are reaching into the backpack and taking the stones out one at a time. As you remove each stone, you can drop them into the river, and watch them sink into the deep water one by one, out of sight, each one, each problem, gone for ever... As you do this, the backpack starts to feel lighter, and when you have removed all the stones, you will notice it feels as light as a feather.

Repeating this exercise – maybe on a daily basis – will help you to stop worrying about the problems and give you space and time to this of more positive ways of bringing things together.

3. Be your own best friend

Third, you have to learn to be your own best friend. It doesn't matter if your resilience is being tested all the time – talk to yourself as you would want a best friend to talk to you. Inwardly talking to yourself will help your self-belief, your confidence, and focus.

At an unconscious level, your words, whether silent or spoken, will influence your emotions and instruct your mind what to focus on and work towards. Repeated thoughts, emotions and behaviours also change the structure of your brain, so if you don't consciously create good habits, you can, by default, unconsciously and unintentionally create bad habits.

So from now on, do yourself a favour – become the gatekeeper of all that you allow into your mind, and protect and reinforce your determination to succeed. Once you're thinking positively, you're more likely to recognise your goals and find the motivation to achieve them.

Just changing your outlook can give you a different perspective on what happened and motivate you to want to do something to move forward, or to recover. With meaning, comes strength and purpose. Yet still, we don't always pursue the goals we really want.

4. Identify your goals

A client once told me that her goal was to write a book, but she wasn't getting any closer to finishing it. After some discussion, it became obvious that the book was further down her list of priorities than she recognised. Only once she had realised that expanding her social circle and finding a boyfriend were standing in the way did she start making progress on her book.

If this reminds you of yourself, take a blank piece of paper and divide it into two columns. In the first, write down the important goal, and in the second, why you are motivated to achieve it. Your answers may change as you go through life and you may realise that some will become more or less important over time. The key is to identify your ultimate specific goals, and with a specific date for achieving them by. Review the list at least once a week as it's very important to keep your goals at the forefront of your mind.

5. Choose your friends with care

Positive relationships are always important. People who have good social networks – family, friends, community – are happier, physically healthier and live longer than less well-connected people. People who feel lonely are less happy, tend to have declining health sooner, and die younger than those who have an active circle of friends.

People with low-self-esteem often unintentionally keep unhealthy relationships in their life. But after they distance themselves from negative relationships they start to feel better about themselves. From the moment they ditch the hangers-on and start spending their time with those that are supportive, they quickly build their resilience at such a rapid rate they transform their lives – sometimes in weeks.

6. Ditch the energy thieves

Think about the people in your life who drain your energy, enthusiasm and self-belief. Either minimise your time with them, or – if you have to deal with them – change the dynamic between you so that you start to feel more confident or resilient when dealing with them.

You don't need a degree in psychology to sense when you're being taken for a ride – these are feelings that are easily recognisable from the emotional, even physical sensations you feel inside. Our innermost feelings are connected with our thoughts and emotions, and they can help you to make great decisions.

Celebrities present a false version of life and happiness gurus try to sell you their latest emotional quick fixes.

Happiness as a goal in itself will always be elusive, because the message that we should maximise our positive emotions and avoid our negative ones doesn't work! Worse, it's actually unhealthy!

Feeling down from time to time is normal – one in five people experience depressive symptoms at some time in their lives, yet society is constantly demanding that we should be happy all the time. Believe it or not, depression rates are higher in countries that place too high an emphasis on happiness.

A study of 112 patients who were pressured to feel happy ended up experiencing worse symptoms.

We need to change our attitude to depression if it's to be tackled effectively. Anti-depressant drugs often don't work and many people have been prescribed anti-depressants when they didn't really need them! [Read Dr Irving Kirsch's eye-opening book *The Emperor's New Drugs*.]

The best way to achieve real happiness is to seize every opportunity and live for the day. Oh, and care about those close to you and spend time with them!

Research from University of Melbourne, Published in the journal *Depression and Anxiety*.

Happiness, wellbeing, and your immune system...

There's a connection between happiness, wellbeing, your immune system, a contented life, and improved health.

Conversely, chronic unhappiness is a threat to health – stress and depression can negatively affect your immune system, cardiovascular health, and your ability to heal injuries or fight off disease.

The extent to which a happy, cheerful disposition supports good health is unclear because it varies from person to person, so researchers analysed numerous studies to investigate the link between happiness and health.

Happier people are more inclined to exercise regularly and do not smoke. Generosity and altruistic acts also makes people happier because they trigger areas of the brain linked to feelings of contentment.

Even small acts of kindness are enough to create changes in our brains that make us happier. The magnitude of generosity does not influence levels of contentment – even small acts of kindness produce a sense of wellbeing.

Generosity and happiness improve individual wellbeing and can facilitate social success. This is why people feel gratification from giving, even when it exacts a cost to themselves.

Research by the Universities of Utah, Virginia and the University of Lubeck, Germany, published in the journal *Health and Well-Being*.

It's OK to dwell on past mistakes...

We're often told not to dwell on the past, and especially on our past mistakes. We are told that if we want to move forward with our lives, we should forget the past and look to the future. But a group of eminent scientists say the opposite is true, because the pain of failure encourages you to make more effort to rectify mistakes, avoid making the same mistake again, and perform better in the future. Dwelling on the past just might be a useful part of the human survival strategy...

Conventional wisdom dictates you should not dwell on your mistakes and not feel bad about them. But Selin Malkoc, Professor of Marketing at the Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business, Noelle Nelson of the University of Kansas and Baba Shiv of Stanford University, believe that when faced with failure, it's actually better to focus on your emotions. If you concentrate on how bad you feel and how you don't want to experience those feelings again, you are more likely to try harder next time.

Most people focus on protecting their egos, about how the failure wasn't their fault, or how it wasn't that big a deal anyway. If your thoughts are all about how to distance yourself from the failure, it is unlikely you will learn from your mistakes.

The researchers conducted several studies. In one, 98 college students were asked to price-search online for a blender with specific characteristics, with the possibility of winning a cash prize if they found the lowest price. Before being told whether they had won the prize, half the participants were told to focus on their emotional response to winning or losing, while the others were instructed to focus on their thoughts about how they did.

However, the task was rigged. After the test, all the participants discovered that the lowest price was actually \$3.27 less than the lowest price they found. After writing about their failure, the students were given another chance by taking on an unrelated task.

The researchers were trying to find out whether the effort made by participants in a new task would be related to whether or not they focused on their thoughts or emotions about their failure. Would a similar or unrelated task trigger participants into recalling their unsuccessful attempt?

So this time, the participants were split into two groups. One group were asked to search for a gift book for a friend that best fitted their limited college-student budget – in other words, they would look for the lowest price, just as they did in the first task. The other group were asked to search for a book that would be the best choice as a gift for their friend.

The participants in the second group's emotional responses to failure motivated them much more than cognitive ones. The emotionally motivated participants spent nearly 25% more time searching for a low-priced book than the participants who had only thought about what would be a good choice for their friend, rather than dwell on the pain of their earlier failure. There was no significant difference in effort made by participants when the second task was unrelated to the first.

The researchers confirmed that the task has to be similar enough to trigger the emotional pain of the initial failure. In other words, when the participants focused on how bad they felt about failing the first time, they tried harder than the others when they were given another opportunity.

One reason why an emotional response to failure may be more effective than a cognitive one is the nature of people's thoughts about their mistakes. When the researchers analysed what the participants who thought about their failure wrote about, they found significantly more self-protective thoughts. This is what happens with most people.

In another, similar study, where the researchers didn't tell some of the participants how to respond to their failures, they found that these people tended to produce cognitive responses rather than emotional ones, and those cognitive responses were the kind that protected them rather than focused on self-improvement.

In most real-life situations, people probably have both cognitive and emotional responses to their failures. But, the important thing is not to avoid the emotional pain of failing, but to use that pain to fuel improvement.

Emotional responses to failure can hurt – they make you feel bad – which is why people often choose to think self-protective thoughts after they make mistakes. But if you focus on how bad you feel, you're going to work harder to find a solution and make sure you don't make the same mistake again.

Mistakes cause our brains to pause and take stock, but this pause leads to conflicting advice when it comes to making future decisions. During this pause, the brain gathers

more information to prevent repeating the same mistake, while at the same time reducing the quality of the knowledge and experience it obtains because of its desire to collect as much information as possible. These two actions cancel each other out and decrease the likelihood of making the best choice next time.

It seems that no matter how hard we try, we still struggle to learn from our mistakes, often making the same errors and choices time and time again.

The results of this study appear in the online *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

Your bad mood can improve your health

Bad moods can boost memory, improve focus and stimulate creativity.

We all get them. Sometimes it's just because we managed to get out of the wrong side bed, or because someone has ticked us off at work, or because our spouse has invited a deeply irritating friend round for the evening. It's all relative of course, but the good news is that your misery can actually improve your health.

It has long been recognised that fear, anger, shame and disgust are beneficial emotions because they help us recognise, avoid and overcome threatening or dangerous situations. But according to researchers at the University of New South Wales, being in a terrible mood is good for you because it can work as an alarm signal for the body that promotes more attentive and focused thought processing in difficult situations. More, bad moods can help with problem solving and improve memory.

The people who participated in the study were able to remember details of a shop they had just left more clearly if they were in a bad mood than if they had been in a happier state of mind. The researchers also found that our bias and judgements were less clouded and insecure when we're cross. That's also good news if someone is trying to feed you a line, because you'll be less likely to believe it.

In addition, people who are angry try harder to answer questions correctly in tests. They are also better at persuading others to have certain opinions.

Sadness and depression has long been seen as an extension of artistic creativity – think Van Gogh, Beethoven, and comedian Tony Hancock – and musicians often sing about break-ups and difficult life experiences.

The original purpose of the study was to dispel the myth that wealth and happiness are the two easiest ways to achieve life satisfaction. However, contrary to popular belief, being upbeat all the time won't necessarily bestow long term happiness. In fact focusing solely on happiness and denying the virtues of sadness is an unachievable goal and creates more disappointment and even depression.

It may seem contradictory, but more fully accepting and experiencing negative emotions can make you happier and empower you to change your life. The message that we should always feel good and try not to feel bad ends up being toxic and doesn't work well as a strategy for getting through life.

There are so many things that affect our thoughts and emotions, such as the weather, the seasons, politics, what's happening in our favourite soap opera, that we can't control. Neither can we control the behaviour of others – only how we react to it. Relying only on positive emotions as an indicator that our lives are going well, or using positive emotions as a goal is also something that is beyond our control.

When it comes to negative emotions, the more we try not to think about something, the more we actually think about it. Just for a moment, try *not* to think of a marauding band of monkeys crawling over your house. And there you are – the image leaps straight into your head.

We need to improve our ability to recognise exactly what we're feeling in the moment. Anger motivates us to get rid of barriers. If you notice you feel sad, it indicates things aren't going as well as you had hoped – but it could also mean your expectations are too high. Hopefully, it might motivate you to face up to the real world by collating information and discover how to deal with reality in a more effective way.

Feeling down can actually help people to focus, manage their time and better prioritise tasks. In fact being in a good mood may hamper time-keeping and organisational skills. However, this is only true for extroverts – introverts tend to grind to a halt when they feel gloomy.

A study by Tara McAuley, a psychology professor at the University of Waterloo, and Martyn S. Gabel, a PhD candidate explored how 95 people coped with daily demands and stresses, depending on their mood.

The researchers focused on emotional reactivity – the sensitivity, intensity and duration of our emotional responses associated with mood. These things are the defining factors that influence our so-called 'effective functioning' – in other words, our abilities to carry out tasks.

They broke down participants in the study into categories of emotional reactivity – high-reactive people and low-reactive people. High-reactive individuals (extroverts) are people who have rapid, intense, and enduring emotional responses, while low-reactive people (introverts) are more relaxed.

In the research, the extroverts performed better on executive function tasks when they were in a bad mood. Meanwhile, low-reactive people showed the opposite effect – their abilities would grind to a halt when they were in a bad mood. The results show that there are some people for whom a bad mood may actually sharpen the kind of thinking skills that are important for everyday life.

We know that emotional reactivity differs from person to person, that this starts at a very early age, and that these individual differences have implications for mental health later in development. But people shouldn't interpret the results as saying it's fine to fly off the handle or overreact, or to be bad tempered with others.

Further research may explain the relationship between high and low reactive people and mood, but other studies also suggest that high-reactive people are more accustomed to experiencing negative emotions. But our emotions do help us make better and stronger efforts toward the things we care about.

Forget what 'happiness' experts say – their goal in life is to sell you more books! Happier emotions are not the goal. We should think of emotions as tools rather than goals.

If we take the goal of happiness out of the equation, the irony is that we will actually feel happier. Happiness is the obscure object of our desire – complete happiness is rarely attainable, and in any event, happiness is very much like love – it's only when you stop searching for it that you actually find it.

Perfect posture, and how it helps to smile...

In a study at the San Francisco State University, under the direction of Professor of Health Education Erik Peper, 125 students were given a maths test. They were asked to subtract 7 from 843 sequentially in 15 seconds. Half the students were encouraged to sit up straight in their chairs, while the other half were asked to do the test slumped in their chairs or over their desks.

Before the maths experiment began, the students were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking them to rate their levels of anxiety when taking exams or solving maths problems, and describing any physical symptoms of stress they experienced when they took real exams.

No prizes for guessing which group performed the best, but when all the results were in, the experiment proved that where anxiety is present, posture makes a huge difference.

Actors, musicians and anyone involved in public speaking already knows that posture is all important. Even athletes are conscious of the correct posture before and during events. An empowered posture really can optimise your focus, attention and performance. And sitting up properly also helps to banish sore backs!

If possible, you should only sit for around 30 minutes before standing up for a few seconds and even go for a quick walk around. This helps with circulation and helps muscles to flex.

According to co-author Associate Professor of Health Education Richard Harvey, slumping over is a defensive posture that can also trigger old negative memories in the body and brain. While the students without maths anxiety did not report as great a benefit from better posture, they did find that doing maths while slumped over was more difficult.

'You build a relationship with [math] so early – as early as elementary school. You can carry that negative self-talk throughout your life, impacting your perception of yourself.'

The study results demonstrate a simple way to improve many aspects of life, especially when stress is involved, because the way we carry ourselves and interact in space influences not only how others perceive us, but also how we perceive ourselves.

And that's worth knowing...

The power of a smile is not to be underestimated, and scientists have now found that even faking one can make you feel happier. Even just the physical task of smiling activates specific muscles in a person's cheeks and this triggers positive emotions in the brain. This simple exercise has important implications on mental health and could be exploited to help people cope with stress.

Dr Fernando Marmolejo-Ramos, co-author of the study from the University of South Australia, says that when your muscles say you're happy, you're more likely to see the world around you in a positive way. The research found that when you forcefully practise smiling, it stimulates the amygdala – the emotional centre of the brain – which then releases neurotransmitters to encourage an emotionally positive state.

For mental health, the study has interesting implications, because if we can trick the brain into perceiving stimuli as 'happy,' then the mechanism can be used to help boost mental health.

Study participants were asked to hold a pen between their teeth without letting the item touch their lips in order to forcefully trigger the cheek muscles. Then, volunteers from Japan, Poland and Sweden were told to study the facial and features of 11 images of the same face but showing a variety of emotions, ranging from frowning to smiling. Then, they looked at 11 video clips showing the outline of people walking. The study evaluated how people processed this information when they were forced to smile and when their face was relaxed.

For both facial and body analysis, people who were forced to smile found themselves flooded with more positive emotions. These results show that both perceptual and motor systems are intertwined when we emotionally process stimuli.

American psychologists also collated and examined nearly 50 years of data testing whether facial expressions can lead people to feel the emotions related to those expressions. They found smiling made people feel happier, scowling made them feel angrier, and frowning made them feel sadder.

So smiling really can make you feel happier!

The complete findings are published in the journal *Experimental Psychology*.

A good read will make you feel more alive

Ditching self-help books (like this one) in favour of complex works of classic literature can boost brain power and quality of life. People suffering from depression, chronic pain and even dementia are being urged to tackle books by the likes of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen to send 'rocket boosters' to the brain.

Reading the classics allows people to feel more alive and can even relieve symptoms of illness.

Reading a self-help book on the other hand is comparatively boring because simply scanning information doesn't excite the imagination or the emotions. But if the mind is offered something more complicated, the brain really begins to work.

Research has also shown that reading could help preserve your memory into old age. Reading a good book can also have a positive effect on mental health.

Activities involving mental stimulation, such as reading demanding books and doing crosswords at any age could be linked to a slower rate of decline in brain power. Great literature has the power to touch diverse people and illuminate the things that connect us.

It can help with inner life, mental health, and give us a greater and better understanding of the human condition and the world we inhabit.

Positive thinking keeps you young!

Positive thinking may be the key to staying healthy. Optimists who believe their life has meaning walk faster, suffer less pain as they age, and have stronger grips. And over 50's are more likely to judge life worth living if they're married and see their friends at least once a week. The flip side of this is that spending too much time alone, or sitting in front of the television, can make life feel less meaningful.

Researchers at University College London (UCL) questioned more than 7,000 people aged 50 to 90 on how meaningful they felt their lives were. Those who judged life most worthwhile were 16% more likely to be married and 13% less likely to live alone. They were also 13% more likely to see friends at least weekly, and much more likely to be a member of an organisation, from a church to a Neighbourhood Watch or a social club.

Those whose lives held least meaning spent almost twice as much time alone during the day – more than six hours on average. They also spent 50 minutes more a day watching television.

Social engagement is a very important component of living a meaningful life for many people. Being a member of an organisation may be meaningful in itself, but it can also provide social contact. Conversely, finding meaning when you're on your own is more difficult, since for most people, meaning is linked to relationships.

We shouldn't underestimate just how important this sense of meaning is – people who see their lives as meaningful are also much more healthy.

The UCL study asked older people to rate how meaningful they felt their lives were on a scale of 0 to 10. Asking a range of other questions about people's lives, they found those who rated their lives the most meaningful, with a score of 9 or 10, were 10% most likely to be among the highest earners. These people were also around a third less likely to be depressed, less obese, and a fifth more likely to get good or very good sleep at night. They walked faster, ate better, and were less likely to be disabled or suffer from chronic illness.

A sense of meaning can give people the motivation to live more healthily, with those who see life as most worthwhile – and 11% were more likely to exercise. To get that sense of meaning, it's important to spend time with other people. Those who rated their life's meaning between 0 and 2 spent 5 hours and 18 minutes alone during the day, compared to 2 hours and 46 minutes for people who saw their lives as more meaningful.

People were more likely to see their life as worthwhile if they volunteered or did a cultural activity such as visiting a museum or going to the theatre at least every few months. People whose lives were less meaningful spent 4 hours and two minutes watching

television in an average day, compared to three hours and 17 minutes for those who saw life as less worthwhile.

Having a good relationship with others improves people's sense of meaning, which can then lead to more social activities.

The study was published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

How to improve your memory

Our memories seem to be declining these days because of 'digital dependency' which sees more of us relying on our mobile phones and search engines to help us out when we can't remember something. Not only are we outsourcing our memory but also other mental functions to electronic devices. The danger is, as useful as these devices are, people should be aware that they need to be wary of letting them do everything for us – the use it or lose it principle particularly applies to memory!

We used to remember the phone numbers of family and friends, and parents would make us memorise emergency numbers. Ask yourself – how many numbers can you remember Now? Some people even struggle to remember their own! Conversely, at the age of 64, I can still remember my home telephone number and my grandma's telephone number from when I was a child!

Everyone is capable of remembering much more than they already do.

Some people use mnemonics or songs to remember things, but there are other more effective tricks. For instance, simply drawing a picture of what you want to remember will help you recall twice as much information.

Drawing creates a more cohesive memory that integrates at least four components: imagination, visualisation, motor action and pictorial representation. When we change a word into a drawing – a visual representation – we also create physical characteristics of the item (this is known as elaboration.) Then, we have to create a visual image of the thing we need to remember while at the same time engaging the hand movements needed for drawing which also stimulate and create new neural connections.

At the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo, Jeffrey Wammes PhD tested drawing against a number of other encoding strategies – and drawing always revealed the best results.

Wammes' team gave a group of student volunteers a list of simple, easy to draw words like 'pear' or 'balloon.' They were then given 40 seconds to either draw the words or write them repeatedly. Once completed, they were given a filler task of classifying musical tones in order to test the retention process.

The team then gave the students 60 seconds to recall as many words as possible. The experiment showed a significant recall advantage of drawing over writing – participants were able to recall as many as twice as many drawn items than written words. In variations of the experiment where students drew the words repeatedly, or added visual details to the

written letters, such as shading or doodles, the results remained the same. In other words, the memory of drawn words was superior to all other alternatives.

Drawing also led to better permanent memory than simply listing physical characteristics. The quality of the drawings made no difference to participants ability to recall information, suggesting that everyone could benefit from this memory strategy, regardless of their artistic talent – even artistically incompetent volunteers gained a huge advantage in later memory retention, even when they had just four seconds to draw their picture.

I've tried this and I guarantee, it works!

When meeting people for the first time, we tend to be pretty good at remembering faces we've seen because this engages more of the senses. The idea is to activate more areas of the brain, thereby building more connections to the information so it becomes easier to retrieve when you need it.

Remembering names is a problem for a lot of people... How many times have you met someone for the first time, only to forget their name within seconds of them introducing themselves? It's a frustrating (and embarrassing) situation many people find themselves in – but there are some simple techniques you can use to ensure you never suffer those awkward moments again. Once you use the right technique and correct approach to committing things to memory, you'll notice an immediate difference right away.

It's easy to remember the faces of people we met through work or social events, but when it comes to remembering their names, we're not so great. When you are interacting with someone, you always see the face and its features become recorded in our visual memory, but you rarely say their name because as far as the brain is concerned, names are more abstract.

A good way to remember names or pieces of information is to change this information into something visual – so Mike becomes a microphone, Alice (in Wonderland) becomes a girl in a flowery dress, and Alex becomes a steaming pile of poo. Or... you could use rhyming words, such as Mark the shark, Robert the robot, or Jane the pain, Agatha the pagatha, and so on. Linking something visually to the name will also help.

Here are some memory tricks that will help you:

- Whenever you are introduced to someone, immediately repeat their name, for example: 'Nice to meet you, Rupert.' We don't always pay attention when someone introduces themselves because our minds are on something else. Repeating it forces you to pay attention.
- Early in your interaction with a new person, use their name to reinforce it in your mind. 'So John, tell me about...' You don't have to keep using their name – that might be a bit weird, just use it once early on and that should be enough to establish it in your memory.
- Take a few seconds to connect the person's name to anything you already know. For example, an actor or character from a TV show or movie, or a friend or family member that has the same name. You could match in the visual idea here as well – link something about that person's look to another visual that reminds you of the way their name sounds, or what they do.

- When you leave the party or meeting, make a point of saying goodbye using their name... 'See you again Bob.' That will help remember more names the next time you see that group of people.
- If you've already forgotten it, there's no shame in asking the person their name again. They won't be offended – more likely they will appreciate that you care enough to remember their name.

There's power in remembering names. Politicians need to know the names of everyone they meet, although in fairness, they are usually briefed on who they're going to meet, what they do, what their partner's name is etc. Of course they're only doing this to boost their own popularity in order to get more votes. But for the rest of us mere mortals, remembering the names of people we come into contact with will just make us more likeable. It may even help us get promoted or open over avenues of opportunity.

Age is not a factor when it comes to memory. People in their sixties and seventies often outperform people in their twenties and thirties. Generally speaking, someone older might not have a memory as sharp as someone younger, but a key factor is how much they use their memory and exercise it. People that keep themselves mentally active tend to be sharper than their younger counterparts.

By keeping your brain and mind stimulated, you can keep your memory sharp at any age. One important thing to bear in mind is that alcohol interferes with the ability to transform information into long-term memory.

But the more areas of the brain involved in building a memory, the more connections there are to the information, the more likely it is you will remember it. All it takes is a little practice.

Crossword puzzles develop sharper brains and stave off dementia...

It has long been known that keeping an active mind can help to reduce decline in thinking skills.

There are significant links between keeping the brain healthy in old age and a reduced risk of dementia.

Researchers at Exeter University and Kings College London analysed data from more than 17,000 participants and found direct relationships between the frequency of doing crosswords and the speed and accuracy of performance in cognitive tasks that assessed a range of functions including attention, reasoning, speed and memory.

Performance was consistently better in those who regularly did crosswords – and their performance generally improved the more they did them.

The Alzheimer's Society recommends adults do a daily crossword to reduce their risk of developing dementia.

Solving crosswords – especially cryptic crosswords – involves several different brain regions working in unison, including memory and visual imagery.

A recent study by Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital showed that although keeping body and mind active doesn't affect the suspected underlying cause of Alzheimer's (a build-up of protein deposits on the brain) keeping mentally fit and doing crosswords can ease the symptoms and still help brains function.

In the meantime, another way to reduce the risk of developing dementia is to keep physically active, avoid smoking and enjoy a healthy balanced diet.

Coffee could add years to your life... and help you lose weight!

A study by Imperial College London of more than half a million people in Europe found men were 18% and women 8% less likely to die from any cause than non-coffee drinkers (based on 3 cups of coffee a day.) Similar results were recorded by American scientists who studied 185,885 people.

It makes no difference whether the coffee contains caffeine or is decaffeinated, because it's the antioxidant compounds in coffee that are responsible for life-extending effects – particularly circulatory and digestive diseases.

Previous studies have suggested coffee can reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, liver disease, and certain cancers.

Coffee Perks:

- Caffeine keeps us awake, improves our mood, reaction time, vigilance, memory and general thinking ability.
- Caffeine raises metabolism and improves athletic performance by more than 10%.
- Coffee reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes by between 23% and 67%.
- Coffee protects your brain in old age by reducing the risk of dementia by 60% and Parkinson's disease by 32 to 60%.

It also lowers the risk of liver cancer by 40%.

Both UK and US studies were published in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Caffeine helps to burn calories by boosting the release of oxytocin, which affects both appetite and metabolism. Researchers have found caffeine significantly reduces food intake and increases energy expenditure.

Caffeine is safe for consumption in doses of up to 400mg (approx. 4 cups) per day for adults.

Studies suggest caffeine may also have a variety of health benefits, including combating liver disease, type 2 diabetes and could even help people live longer.

A Dutch report earlier this year showed that drinking more coffee may help to stave off liver cancer – people who drink just one cup of coffee a day are 20% less likely to develop the most common form of the disease.

Coffee is the world's most widely consumed stimulant and is reported to boost daily energy expenditure by around 5%. Combining 2 to 4 daily coffees with regular exercise is even more effective at keeping the weight off!

A 2015 study showed just a couple of cups a day could help millions of dieters stay trim once they have achieved their desired weight.

Chocolate is good for you after all!

The benefits of eating chocolate are well known.

Dark chocolate in particular is a rich source of flavanol, a natural compound found in cocoa beans that boosts memory and improves brain function.

After a sustained chocolate enriched diet over an extended period of time, test subjects showed that memory, attention, brain-processing speed, visual processing skills and fluency of speech all improved in the hours after eating chocolate – especially in older adults with symptoms of memory decline or other mild brain impairments.

Dark chocolate is also an effective appetite suppressant, but the downside – it also contains calories, some milk and sugar – and caffeine, which is why it can also counteract the effects of sleep deprivation.

Being more resilient helps to prevent future setbacks...

Resilience is an acquired skill and not a fixed character trait – so it can be **LEARNED**. However, it does mean being tough on yourself.

Those who learn from their mistakes develop better confidence, determination, coping strategies, and tolerance for negative situations. So be prepared to overcome adversity!

Here's the important thing – teaching young people to set goals, even after failure, will help them do better in school and generally in life. T

he importance of working on strengths beyond academic or technical achievement will help you cope positively with all the problems and adverse situations you encounter in life.

Reported in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

A better cure for depression?

A daily dose of over-the-counter magnesium tablets significantly improved depression in patients in just two weeks! Magnesium combats the inflammation linked to the condition, but without side effects, whereas antidepressants frequently cause nausea, weight gain and insomnia.

Researchers from the University of Vermont studied 126 adults with mild to moderate depression. Some were given 248mg of magnesium – generally considered a low dose – every day for six weeks while others received no treatment.

Participants were assessed twice a week over the phone. Symptoms rapidly improved regardless of their age, sex or antidepressant use. 61% of the study's participants said they would use magnesium supplements to manage their depression in the future.

Given the great need for more treatment options for depression, the discovery that magnesium supplementation provides a safe, fast and inexpensive approach to controlling depressive symptoms is very encouraging.

The Vermont study was the first clinical trial examining the effect of magnesium supplements on depression in adults.

For further information, read Dr Irving Kirsch's book *The Emperor's New Drugs*. It's a serious indictment of the antidepressant drug industry. I promise you – it's totally shocking!

The results were published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

Beat stress just by breathing...

You can beat stress, anxiety and panic attacks just by practising 'transformational breathing'... in other words, it's an easy way to feel calmer just by controlling the way you breathe. Here's how...

The first step is to be very conscious of your breathing. Take slower breaths and slowly relax your body bit by bit. Imagine your body becoming numb, from your fingertips to your toes, until every muscle, every joint, every nerve, every sinew, every fibre becomes completely relaxed.

Deep and slow breaths can induce a powerful state of calm, lower blood pressure, and sharper and more focussed thinking. The end result is just like the totally relaxed feeling you get after yoga or a massage.

Breathing exercises have been around for hundreds of years. Controlling breathing can shift your consciousness from anxious to meditative, and is a core component of all types of yoga.

Scientists at Stanford University discovered that the idea of slow breathing is not new-age nonsense after all, but actually helps the brain to create a sense of calm.

Shallow breaths send messages to the brain that the body is in survival mode, increasing production of stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline, which can lead to chronic anxiety.

The Stanford study was published in the journal *Science*.

Reminiscing about happy times can beat stress...

Thinking about a time when you were happy is one of the best ways to beat stress.

Remembering the good times can cut your stress response by 85% because it fires up the reward centres in the brain. Even just thinking about happy times – visualising positive things or even dreaming about a happy future works better than simply trying to distract yourself.

The ability to reminisce about the past is important for happiness – the opposite of ruminating on negative memories that can lead to depression.

Researchers tested the effectiveness of pleasant memories on stress on 134 volunteers.

The results showed that those who thought about happy times felt calmer. When their brains were scanned, the participants who remembered happier times showed activity in the circuits linked to reward processing and emotion regulation.

The technique seems to be most effective for people who were already emotionally resilient, but the study concluded that thinking about good memories has a much better effect than [fashionable] mindfulness, which encourages people to focus on the present, rather than the past or the future.

Research by Dr Mauricio Delgado and Megan Speer at New York's Rutgers University – reported in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*.

Performance is the best therapy

We perform better when we have an audience even if we're nervous and get dry-mouth and a rising sense of panic! Singing, playing an instrument or taking part in amateur dramatics is often nerve-wracking. Believe it or not, we perform better in front of people than when we're alone because having to face an audience boosts our motor skills.

In an experiment at Johns Hopkins University, researchers recruited 20 people aged 19 to 32 to play a tricky computer game and paid them a small amount of money based on how well they did.

When they were watched by an audience of just two people, all but two of the participants did better – some up to 20% better than when they played alone. Only two out of the 20 failed to improve in front of an audience.

The players had their brains scanned by an MRI machine and researchers found that when they knew they were playing in front of an audience, they showed increased activity in the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain linked to social awareness and reward and thought to weigh up the thoughts and intentions of others. The parts of the cortex associated with reward also lit up. Together these signals triggered activity in the ventral striatum, an area of the brain that motivates action and motor skills, boosting their controlling motor skills to improve performance. People with social anxiety tended to perform better.

People try harder, and do better, when they're under pressure because they secretly worry about how they present themselves and how they'll be judged. Performing well is seen as increasing social approval, while a poor performance can have an adverse impact on your social standing.

Any true performer or entertainer knows that having an audience makes you feel *alive*, and the whole experience encourages you give the performance your all.

The findings were published in the journal *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*.

Swearing makes you feel better!

So, so far so good. We've looked at meditation, mindfulness, and delved into the murky world of pseudo-scientific nonsense. So the next natural step is to delve even deeper into the unpleasant world of offensive language. Believe it or not, swearing is actually beneficial! Numerous studies have confirmed that using swear words may actually be a sign of intelligence, honesty and creativity, as well as a way to withstand pain.

Although swearing is considered the language of poverty, researchers found well-educated people are better at coming up with swear words than those with a smaller vocabulary. Profanity has also been linked to honesty and creativity, as people choose such powerful words to express their emotions. When this happens, an area of the (creative) right brain is activated.

Timothy Jay, professor emeritus of psychology at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, who has studied swearing for more than 40 years, says '*The advantages of swearing are many.... The benefits of swearing have just emerged in the last two decades, as a result of a lot of research on brain and emotion, along with much better technology to study brain anatomy.*' Professor Jay has conducted a number of studies into the art of swearing and believes there is an evolutionary advantage to using bad language.

A study from 2017 conducted by an international team of researchers found that profanity is typically used to express the person's genuine feelings. That study determined those who swear are honest at an individual level and with integrity at a society level because truth tellers get right to the point and do not think about what they are going to say. Liars on the other hand use more brain power to formulate their stories and are very meticulous in the way they use words.

Swearing appears on the right side of the brain in what is known as the 'creative brain.' [There are a number of cases where patients who have had a stroke on the right side of their brain stopped swearing, even if they had sworn their entire lives.]

Swearing also gives us superpowers by allowing us to endure more pain, both physical and emotional. Researchers from Keele University's School of Psychology confirmed that swearing can have a pain-lesening effect. Volunteers submerged their hands in a tub of ice water for as long as possible while repeating their swear word of choice. They found that the volunteers were able to keep their hands submerged in the ice water for longer when repeating the swearword, showing a link between swearing and an increase in pain tolerance.

Although there are numerous studies of the benefits of swearing. There are those that think swearing can make you seem dishonest and less intelligent than your peers. Even those who are not offended by foul language often hold lower opinions of swearers than non-swearers. As well as being perceived as lacking intelligence and trustworthiness, foul mouthed individuals are also judged as less likeable and more aggressive.

A good cry can activate your reset button

A group of psychology researchers from the University of Queensland observed 197 female volunteers who watched either a sad or a 'neutral' 17 minute film clip. After watching the film, they were exposed to physical stress by submerging their hand into icy water for as long as they could stand it. Saliva samples were taken four times to measure levels of the 'stress hormone' cortisol.

Women were chosen after a pilot test found they are more likely to cry than men. The heart rates of those who cried during the clip slowed before they started crying but gradually returned to normal as they composed themselves, but they maintained a constant breathing rate during the ice water test. The dry-eyed participants' breathing however, accelerated and became more erratic, but there was no difference in cortisol levels or the ability to withstand the ice water between the groups.

Crying has been shown to facilitate 'coping and recovery,' thought to occur due to the 'psychological changes' that take place when we shed tears. It's thought that crying also gets rid of toxins and brings about some kind of biological change that helps us to deal with stressful or painful situations.

The results suggest crying may assist in generally maintaining biological homeostasis, the process of maintaining a constant internal environment, including heart rate and blood pressure. Crying may also help people 'self-soothe via purposeful breathing' while also regulating their heart rate.

The researchers stress, however, crying may cause different bodily responses in different real-world settings, for instance if someone is mourning a death or the break up of a relationship. The response may also vary if someone is crying alone or with a loved one on hand to offer support.

And for those who find crying embarrassing or feel judged for it, blubbering may do more harm than good. If you believe crying makes you feel worse, these physiological changes are probably not going to make you feel better overall. The researchers published the results of their work in the journal *Emotion*.

Weeping triggers the release of natural anti-stress endorphins that create – wait for it – a feeling of wellbeing. Weeping is distinct from crying (usually a response to pain) while weeping – unique to humans – is an emotional expression of both grief and happiness.

It can also be an appeal to others for empathy and can also stabilise mood. It can occur during intense positive emotional experiences such as watching a romantic film, seeing grandchildren for the first time, or making an Oscar acceptance speech.

Women weep up to four times longer than men.

There are several different historical theories about the origins and purpose of weeping.

For instance it's possible that when prehistoric humans used fire in farewell cremation rites, tears triggered by the smoke became associated with sadness. It's equally possible that people feel better after weeping because tears actually remove chemicals built up as a result of emotional stress.

Research from Siena University Hospital, Italy, reported in *New Ideas In Psychology*.

Always look on the bright side of life...

Always look on the bright side of life... da dum... da dum... da dum, da dum, da dum...

The colours, vocabulary and music of our culture are the unconscious expressions of the range of our emotions, and this includes the difference between good and evil.

I have always said that music is man's finest achievement – it can thrill the soul and take us on a roller-coaster ride of pure excitement. It can also take you to the very depths of loneliness and despair. But music can also aid relaxation.

You don't have to be a fan of classical or popular music to appreciate which does which, but there's a new spin on this well known and well understood philosophy. Psychology researchers have found that uplifting music can also alter our perception of colour, making them seem brighter, and more vibrant than they actually are.

During tests carried out by Psychology Professor Joydeep Bhattacharya at Goldsmiths, London, volunteers who listened to uplifting music judged a grey square brighter than it really was, while sad, downbeat music made the square appear darker.

This has an obvious relevance for therapy because of the effect colour has on mood. For example, red makes children more competitive, whereas different shades of blue affect concentration levels. Shades of green encourage people to think outside the box.

Music therapy is already used to help depressed people feel brighter but Professor Bhattacharya claims that 'brightness is a metaphor for happiness and we have shown music can have a subtle effect on it, depending on whether it is happy or sad.'

For a series of tests, instrumental samples were composed in order to negate the effect of any word-association such as 'dark' or 'lonely' or 'happy' or 'carefree.'

Over three experiments carried out with six different groups of 20 volunteers, the researchers found that even relatively short pieces of music could be used as effective emotional triggers for influencing how bright we judge something to be. The tests demonstrated the powerful way in which music can affect not only our mood but also our bias. Importantly, this is the same bias that's aligned with the way we use and understand metaphor.

With every group, the results were the same, regardless of whether or not the researchers had previously rated the music as happy or sad for the benefit of the participants. They found that merely listening to happy or sad music will affect subsequent brightness judgement – in other words, it is an automatic effect.

A group of Dutch scientists carried out a similar experiment and they rated Queen's 1978 '*Don't Stop Me Now*' as the top 'feel-good' song of the last 50 years – it has just the right tempo and lyrics, and is played in the musical key identified as the most likely to produce a happy feeling.

There's a flow of information between the primary visual cortex and the emotional circuitry of the brain. Given what we already know and have been able to observe, this makes perfect sense. It's also possible that an individual's own personal favourites could enhance the effect.

There's plenty of evidence that proves living a positive and optimistic life can improve both mental and physical health – and also have a big impact on life expectancy. Optimistic people are more resilient, better able to bounce back from stressful events.

In 1975, a team of scientists came up with an ambitious study into ageing by monitoring more than 1,000 people over the age of 50 in a town in Ohio. 40 years after the study, researchers from Yale University tracked the people down and found that those who'd felt the most optimistic about the future had lived, on average, seven-and-a-half years longer than those who were pessimistic. In most cases, mental attitude was more important than almost any other factor.

In a more recent study, published in 2019, researchers from Boston University School of Medicine discovered that optimistic people not only live longer, they are more likely to achieve 'exceptional longevity' – that is, they are more likely to reach the age of 85 or older. They found that the most optimistic people lived, on average, seven to ten years longer than those who were pessimistic. They also discovered optimistic men increased their longevity by around 11% and optimistic women lived around 15% longer than pessimistic women.

This could simply be because being optimistic, they expected to live longer, and therefore had healthier habits, such as staying slim and doing more exercise.

But... the good news is you can learn to become more optimistic! So here are five simple techniques to practice that will to keep you optimistic...

1. Visualise your goals

Visualisation is a powerful tool. Remember, the mind doesn't always work logically – but it does respond well to visualisation and imagination. So let's start by visualising a positive future. Take five minutes every week to write down something you would like to achieve in say, five or 10 years' time – maybe in your career, with your family, or another goal. Believe it or not, imagining a positive future really can make a difference.

In 2018, researchers at Northwestern University, US, asked students either to write something about an event in the past or their imagined future success. Then, they were filmed in a mock interview, followed by a difficult academic test. The result was that the students who wrote about a more positive future showed greater motivation, more confident body language, and put more effort into taking the test.

2. Don't catastrophise

If you expect the worst, or think pessimistic thoughts about the future, then stop... and remind yourself of all the times you thought things would go wrong, and they didn't. Once you reduce your fear, you will begin feeling more optimistic.

3. Challenge your thoughts

Remember, your thoughts are not real, so they can be challenged, after all, your thoughts are just your imagination. Beliefs are not always factual and reinforcing negativity means you start to believe it. It's OK to question your beliefs – especially the ones that hold you back. Remember... the hardest Prison the break out of was created in your own mind! So again, every time you think negatively, remind yourself again of all the times you thought things would go wrong, but didn't!

A good way to do this is to make a list of all the things you like about yourself – and then challenge your own negative thoughts and replace them with positive ones. This is one of the things Cognitive Behaviour Therapy recommends, and it seems to work, although it does require a little concentration.

4. Practise Mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a way of focusing your attention on being in the present moment and being aware of your thoughts and anxieties – *but not engaging with them.*

Focus on your breathing, and your physical body, and allow your mind, your thoughts to wander. It's just like meditation really, so it's easy, because all meditation is simply contemplation, a way of reflecting on things, of mulling over things... and a way of putting things in perspective.

5. Train your brain to look for the positive stuff.

Technically, this is known as Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM), but all it means is teaching your brain to seek out and recognise the positive aspects of your life.

An article in The Lancet in June 2020 credited CBM with a modest but consistent effect of reducing stress and anxiety.

We have all had moments when bad things have happened to us – maybe we've lost a job or missed out on a promotion, or maybe a relationship has failed or a holiday has been cancelled... and we've thought that maybe it's happened for the best, that every cloud has a silver lining, or that time will live up to its reputation as a great healer. Then again, we should also be aware of something called 'toxic positivity'

Dr Dean Burnett, author of *The Happy Brain*, found his father had been hospitalised with Covid 19, his friends tried to reassure him with words along the lines of *'he'll be fine... I'm sure he'll be alright... he'll get through this.'* Sadly, they were wrong. Dean's father died in hospital. And not one of them called back to say they were wrong.

'Toxic positivity,' says Dr Burnett, is when positivity ignores reality or when people insist themselves and others stay happy, even when that advice flies in the face of reality.

Dr Burnett obviously doesn't hold with the modern idea that happiness should be our 'default state' and that if we aren't happy then there's something wrong with us. The other bad news is that the brain doesn't work like that.

In the first lockdown, we were encouraged to make the most of the perfect opportunity to write a book, to learn a new skill or a new language. But that message is not only false – it's dangerous. Author David Kessler, a highly respected expert on grief, says the world is going through a collective bereavement. Kessler says *'One unfortunate by-product of the self-help movement is that we try to squash our negative feelings. We tell ourselves we are not allowed to feel sad because other people have it much worse.'* The result of this way of thinking is that we can put ourselves into a state of denial as we suppress our feelings and emotions.

There are too many people telling us the secret to happiness is to think more positively. If only it was so simple! Despite the nonsensical and unscientific nonsense spouted by self-help 'gurus' like Paul McKenna on an [ironically] depressingly regular basis, such rubbish can lead us even further into depression when it doesn't happen.

Research has shown that suppressing our real feelings is not good for our mental or physical wellbeing. Denying our emotions has also been linked to heart disease, intestinal problems, headaches, insomnia and autoimmune disorders. Research shows that when people with low self-esteem repeat positive 'affirmations' they more often than not feel worse and causes more stress and even lower self-esteem.

Research has also shown that bereaved people who try not to feel their grief take longer to recover. Grief is an important part of the recovery process and it's helpful and healthy to put regular time aside to grieve. It's how we remember the ones we've lost.

All emotions have a purpose. Fear, for example, is there to help us avoid danger. A victim of domestic abuse doesn't need to think positively, she needs to get the hell out of the relationship. People who are lonely won't find a true friend in a bottle. Nor will loneliness be numbed by Facebook. Loneliness is the mind's way of telling us to reach out to somebody. In short, positive thinking delays us from taking the action we need to take.

Simply imagining goals will make you feel worse the moment you discover they're unachievable. The trick is to find a balance between toxic positivity and helpful positivity.

It's important to acknowledge our feelings. We experience both positive and negative feelings and emotions physically. Some people feel it in their chest, in the pit of their stomach, as a headache, increased heart rate, or perspiration, or butterflies, or whatever.

These are the physical clues that we are anxious or stressed and it's OK to acknowledge those feelings. Only then can we begin to deal with them – and deal with them surprisingly quickly.

If you are the proud owner of the kind of brain that tends to imagine doom and gloom, that's also fine. Sometimes, imagining the worst means you won't be disappointed when it happens. Imagine the very worst case scenario and figure out what you'd do if that happened. Now balance it by imagining what you can do to achieve the best outcome. Once you've figured out what you'd do in a disaster, what is there to worry about?

Better still, try to think of what the *most likely* outcome will be – it's almost certain to be less catastrophic than your worse-case scenario. This might sound crazy, but when things do get tough, just let go of what you can't control and put the energy into moving on. Really, you will find it a lot less stressful!

Hypnosis can help you to concentrate, focus, and explore issues. Hypnosis is ideal for reducing, or even eliminating stress and anxiety altogether.

Of all the mind therapies and talking therapies, Hypnosis has been shown to be the most powerful and the most effective.

Hypnotherapy is fast and effective. Courses of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) usually involve weekly one-hour sessions over a period of 10 or 12 weeks. Successful Hypnotherapy will take at most, three or four sessions, but it is possible to tackle and resolve stress and anxiety issues in one session, although the session is likely to be lengthy.

In any therapy session, it's important to identify and isolate not only a client's limiting beliefs, but also the physical feelings that go with them. That is the first and most important step.

Then, working together with the client, we work to remove those negative feelings and emotions and limiting beliefs and substitute positive feelings, emotions, and beliefs.

This can be a time consuming process, but believe me, it's worth it!

Hypnotherapy is a powerful resource for a variety of emotional problems, from PTSD to eating disorders, from stress and anxiety, to body dysmorphia, technology addiction, confidence issues, motivation, fears and phobias and letting go of the past.

Always remember... the past is *not* a life sentence – there's *always* a way out.

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