

Sweet Distress

how our love affair
with feelings [♥] has
fuelled the current
mental health crisis
(and what we can do about it)

Gillian Bridge



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This book is dedicated to
independent thinkers everywhere.



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Let us not talk ourselves into far greater mental distress, even
as we believe ourselves to be talking our way out of it.

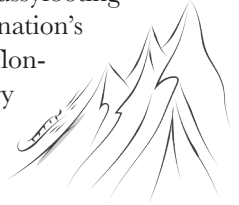


introduction

A Great Big Emotional Wankfest?

I do believe (even passionately, if it helps) that the answer to the above question is a great big YES. Yes, we've been living in a gross-out world of personal emotional self-indulgence and sentiment for decades now: decades which, for all the alluring (and, yes, passionate) rhetoric of celebrities, of pressure groups and of parts of the media, have seen the nation's mental health worsening and not improving, as they seem to imply that it *should* be doing, given how much more emotionally articulate we're supposedly becoming. It's a terrible, and often tragic, irony.

We're actually in a crisis of vast proportions. Youngsters are dying needlessly, everyone seems confused and overwhelmed by often contradictory information and, to me, it all seems as insane as it does unnatural. How can a species that is supposed to be as intelligent as ours be self-harming in this way? Quite frankly, it's getting much too late for the niceties; far too many of us have been pussyfooting around personal and cultural sensitivities, even as the nation's mental health has been racing downhill on a Teflon-coated sledge. It's time for some tough talking. Every way we turn there is increasing evidence that families, schools, universities – the whole societal shebang, in fact – is being overwhelmed by an extraordinary epidemic of mental ill health. And that means real lives, real people who are suffering every day and desperately looking for the help that just can't be made available to enough of us, in a short enough space of time, to make it possible for such lives to be lived as fully and robustly as they could and should be lived.



Notice that I say mental *ill* health, because we have become so 'into' the problem that people have started to use the phrase 'mental health' to mean 'negative mental health', and that surely is one of the most worrying developments of all. We no longer seem to have any real concept of *positive* mental health.

What a bizarre, unnatural mess we appear to have landed ourselves in.

I've already talked at much greater length about the problems we're facing (as well as what we can do about them) in my book *The Significance Delusion*,¹ but that goes into a lot of background, a lot of detail and maybe a tad more science than is needed to get the basic message across – although it is essential reading if you really want to understand the hows and whys of our current crises of identity and wellbeing. This time, because we have no time to spare, I'm going to go straight for the functional jugular.

What I want, what you want, what we all want, is a solution to the crisis, and with as little reference to 'deep science' as we can get away with in order to explain cause and effect. I'm planning to provide that in as straightforward a way as possible.

First, I will be focusing primarily on the mental health of young people – of children and adolescents. By looking at what is going on for them I will, inevitably, be looking at the entire family tree, the whole evolution of mental health, which will include everyone else's, too. I will also, inevitably, be looking at where and how we can all play our parts in making a difference and have a role in improving the lives of those around us. Because we all can and should – no, *must* – if we genuinely want things to change. And that is one of the most positive and empowering things that can come out of the current mental health mess.

And so, by a sort of benign contagion, with viral efficiency, I hope that we can sort out many of the problems fairly swiftly. Pressure groups are constantly demanding huge policy shifts that will effect massive social change. Such things take time and significant resources. Can we wait that long?

It is far easier to make smaller everyday changes that will impact directly on the people we care about, and so spread like a meme – the meme of mental good health.

Let's make that our resolution: to focus on the things that we, that I, can do in small incremental shifts to foster *good mental health* in those we love and in anyone else who comes into our world. By taking on the challenge at a personal level – even when that goes against the grain if we think institutions should be dealing with it – I believe

1 Gillian Bridge, *The Significance Delusion: Unlocking Our Thinking for Our Children's Future* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2016).

that we can end up feeling more in control of our lives. And that is especially important at a time when it can often feel as if we're being overwhelmed and disempowered by external forces taking over so many of the roles we used to assume for ourselves.

Personal control over mental and physical health, in particular, is something which some of us feel has been pulled out from underneath us by politicians, institutions and even the media, which is endlessly assaulting us with lifestyle 'advice' and campaigns. Campaigns which often appear to set one shiny new inspirational lifestyle movement against another equally exciting, promising and intoxicating one: clean living; detoxifying your self, your environment, your shelves, your social media accounts, your apps; mindfulness; slow living, slow eating, slow TV and radio, living more like a sloth; green exercise, blue exercise, high-intensity interval training, yoga, aerobics, cold water exercise; playdates for the over sixties, sessions combating loneliness for teens ... and on and on it goes. All these brilliant new ideas, initiatives and innovations! It can feel like there is a new one for every new dawn.

How can anyone 'normal' feel competent to decide what's right, what's best (for them) and what's going to work in the long term, let alone feel as if they are entitled to decide for themselves? And if it's hard to know which celebrity-endorsed approach is going to be most effective in getting any of us from couch potato to triathlete before life finally calls time, how much harder is it going to be to sort out the mental health wheat from the maybe just mental chaff? It's all enough to do your head in!

I want to make it easier for all of us. With a personal back catalogue that includes teaching, lecturing, addiction therapy, brain damage therapy, psychotherapy, counselling, autism specialisation and executive coaching, and with time spent working in organisations ranging from schools and universities to prisons and elite private members' clubs to banks and international businesses, I have been able to gather an extraordinary amount of diverse, occasionally strange but often surprisingly relevant material. This includes the common neurobiological features of addiction, autism and criminality, and the importance of storytelling in avoiding post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), all of which gives me a slightly different perspective on many behavioural problems. And I have worked with a wonderful and colourful selection of living breathing humans who have generously provided me with that material. What I have been able to discover is that people often have far more in common, in

terms of their underlying make-up, their brains and their behaviour, than much academic research (with its inevitably narrower focus) is able to pick up on, which gives me quite a ‘head start’ when it comes to recognising and understanding the links between our behaviour (whether ‘average’ or rather less so), our ways of communicating and our brain health.

Drawing on my experience of prisoners, addicts, teenagers, mental health clients of every age, people on the autism spectrum and those with brain damage, as well as my wide knowledge base, I believe that I’m very well equipped to comment on the main presenting problems of the day, as well as in just about the best possible position to consider one of the most important weapons we have in our fight against them. That is *resilience*, the human quality that above all others keeps us strong when things get tough.

I have seen it all, and then quite a bit more, and that has given me an overview of what is working for those individuals who are able to keep it together, and what isn’t working for those who sadly can’t.

Resilience isn’t wellbeing, it isn’t self-esteem, it isn’t mindfulness, it isn’t happiness. It has been around a lot longer than any on-trend, single solution sound bite might suggest, and it’s both simpler and more complicated than any of them. Without going into a huge amount of detail at this point, I can say that it’s just about as close to being the opposite of self-gratification as you can get.

The Significance Delusion deals with resilience in detail; in this book I will stick mostly to aspects of it that are relevant to some very specific problems – the ones that give us such worrying headlines. Without suggesting any hierarchy of significance, I have put together a list of those problems which seem to be most frequently cited as being sources of mental distress:

- Stress
- Loneliness
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Body image
- Eating disorders
- Social media
- Suicidal thoughts
- Substance and behavioural disorders

- Perfectionism
- Academic pressures
- Bullying
- Fear of missing out (FOMO)

I might have added family structures or the concerns that social commentators and politicians will often point to as being the real underlying problems, such as poverty, or lack of adequate housing, or job insecurity, or, or, or ... But actually I think my list stands (although you may want to add your own concerns to it), and that is because I don't believe that societal issues are *inevitable* triggers of individual reactions. One person's anxiety-provoking situation may be another person's incentive to do something radical and creative in response to it. By keeping my list to those things that are less to do with hard, objectively measurable problems, and more to do with qualitative human experiences, I want to stay in the realm of the personal and stay out of the realm of the pressure group. That way lies true empowerment – of you, of me and of real people everywhere. *We* can make lives better. *They* are absolutely not the only ones with the power to do it.

I will be taking a look at how these matters have come to be the insurmountable emotional problems they are, and I will also be taking a few potshots at some of the things that I think have contributed to turning life events that may, at other times or in other places (perhaps more resilient ones?), have been little more than nuisances or inconveniences into sources of genuine psychic pain. Some of these may seem both surprising and counter-intuitive, but I hope my revelations will eventually make sense and, more importantly, point the way to solutions.

I've given the book, and especially this chapter, titles which I hope may both stimulate some fresh thinking and highlight one of its main themes – that of the self-gratification and self-indulgence of appetites. As it's being written at a time when we're already being asked to reflect on the relative healthfulness of our past lives, it also gels rather sweetly with my take on the relationship between physical and psychological appetites. We're having to accept that sugar – the substance which has tempted and tickled our taste buds for so many years – has been one of the root causes in the downward spiral of our physical health. Now I want us to consider whether our mental health problems may also be



down to sweet and attractive substances which have been just as positively marketed and promoted to us, and also involve quite a lot of self-gratification.

We have finally realised that we must change our lifestyles if we want to live longer and better physical lives, so perhaps we should also learn to accept alternative ways of thinking and living if we want to achieve the healthier and happier mental outcomes of which we're so desperately in need. Even if that means giving up some tasty things we've come to love. I believe that it is completely doable. Although we may have lost touch with the concept of good mental health, underneath it all we are just a species of animal, and like other animals most of us still have a healthy survival instinct. We may be teetering on the entrance to the emergency department of life at the moment, but there is help on the way.

Think of this book as a crash-team approach to mental health – fast, hard and life-saving, but not necessarily comfortable or sensitive to feelings. However, it will focus on offering that help in a practical way, so at the end of Chapters 5–10, which deal with specific issues, there will be sections of particular value to parents, would-be parents, teachers and those in the business of young people's mental health, such as counsellors and therapists. For simplicity I will use the headings 'parents' and 'educators', but I hope these 'takeaway' sections will be of use to everyone, because the bottom line is that we all have a part to play in the mental health of those around us, and we should all take the applause when we start to make a positive difference.

Likewise, towards the end of the book I have gathered together some selected material into 'a call to action' which will reiterate and reinforce some of the most practical and achievable lifestyle advice mentioned in the book. The idea is to make it all as memorable and accomplishable as possible. We *can* make that difference!



Chapter 1

Self-pleasuring in every way

As I write, we are living out the consequences of our longstanding sugar habit, and it's not a very nice place to be. It's not just the physical reality that a moment on the lips has led to a lifetime on the hips – leaving many of us obese and at great risk of debilitating illness – but it's also that the pursuit of instant and accessible sweetness has affected our thought processes and priorities. The bottom line, sadly, is that anything which encourages us to live in and for the short term, and do what gives us immediate pleasure, is bound to trip us up in the longer term. Other animals may get away with living like that, but they don't have to run nuclear plants, manage traffic flow on motorways or take A levels. We have to look after our species' long-term interests, too.

The trouble is that once you're hooked on short-termism, it's really hard to give it up and it becomes a tyranny. Just think about soap operas. Once upon a time a programme like *Coronation Street* could spend weeks on a spat between two middle-aged women who disapproved of one another's dress sense. But now the producers seem to be terrified that if there isn't a murder or a rape in nearly every episode the programme won't grab viewers' attention, or apparently reflect 'real life' (a question of chicken and egg there, I think). And see, I'm now using the word 'terrified' when I originally wrote 'fearful', because I'm terrified that without going to extremes of emotion you won't want to read my book. It's a verbal sugar rush.



We seem to have no time to take time, which is nonsense, of course, especially in the westernised world. Most of us have never had so much time free from basic drudgery, or fighting, or farming. But we want everything *right now*, and we want it all to be simple and sweet; no unnecessary chewing, no exhausting effort. And therein lies one of the main problems at the heart of the current mental health crisis – we have been lulled into thinking that everything should be instant and effortless.

We also think that we have the *right* to those things,¹ but this is because the powers that be (whether Authorities or authorities) are also working to satisfy the same basic desires as the rest of us. They want to be thought of as dealing in the sweet stuff themselves. Rights feel sweet, and they are easy to sell. They do not necessarily depend on effort or input, they are givens – freebies, in fact – which we obviously *deserve* just because we're alive. There is something akin to the thinking of the pre-revolutionary French aristocracy in that, I feel.

But isn't that thinking the remnant, the pretty dream, of an individualistic world in which population growth appeared to be manageable (to most of us, at least) and growth, commercialism and unbounded enterprise were seen as totally positive forces? Now, as we finally recognise that selfish demands on the world's resources have had a devastating effect on matters like climate and biodiversity (as well as on our waistslines), we are also beginning to realise that to save the planet we will have to act together. We will have to work in concert over all kinds of issues, from targets on carbon emissions to single-use plastic bags. Some individual 'freedoms' will just have to be curtailed, however liberating it felt on a personal level to live as spontaneously as we liked.

We may be getting it, but we are still some way off understanding that self-gratifying behaviour (which can come in surprising guises) is just as bad for our species' mental health environment as it is for our physical environment, and that we must also act more in concert, as socially connected beings, to help save our mental health.



Perhaps we need less of 'I', 'myself' and 'me' and more of 'we', 'us' and 'they'. Although this may sound as though I'm contradicting my earlier claim that we should be able to achieve more individual power and control over our mental health, that isn't really the case. It's complicated, but basically it's about prioritising personal *agency* over personal *preferences*.

1 Advertisers are some of the worst offenders when it comes to creating a sense of entitlement to 'goodies'. There is even an advert that tells us we shouldn't have to choose between domestic heating – which is just about the most important and fundamental thing achieved by mankind, after sufficient food supplies – and a skiing holiday for the family. Heating is a boring given, whereas *fun* is what we should be entitled to. Eh, what? Am I missing something here?

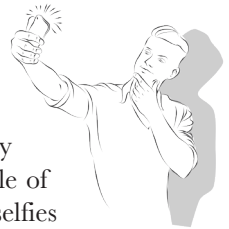
Addicted to self

For so long we have been handmaidens to our own emotional desires, feeding them as if they were little gods. As with any addiction, we have ended up bloated and ever more selfish, without any consideration for the impact we're having on others or on the outside world and how it functions in general. As long as *I* have what *I* desire and what feels good to *me* – lifestyle, opinions, emotions, whatever – that is so much more important than concerning myself with any impact I might also be having on the planet or on my family, friends, neighbours and fellow planet dwellers.



Quite possibly, the ultimate expression of our fixation with the self is the selfie itself. It is also a very good model of what is happening in and to society. As we turn the lens on ourselves, we are literally turning our backs on the outside world and cradling ourselves in our own hands, looking into our own eyes and simpering until we like the look – babying ourselves in our palms.

Recently I went to the National Gallery to look at the paintings. I could hardly get near them for the slow lava flow of tourists taking images of themselves standing in front of (and largely blocking out) the rather more outstanding images in the gallery's collection. Not only did the inconvenience to other visitors not seem to trouble them in the least, but also apparently it didn't occur to the (mostly young) tourists to experience the paintings first hand by simply looking at them. And there, in that seemingly harmless piece of self-absorption, is a perfect example of the connection between the immediate sweetness of selfies and mental self-harm. If I am everywhere, in everything I look at, then the world is going to be ever less about the other and ever more about me.



It's that metaphorical as well as literal focus on the self which has been identified as being behind a lot of negative mental states. I will be going into more detail on this later in the book, but the disproportionate focus on I, myself and me that arises in a selfie culture has been closely associated with greater than normal levels of depression and anxiety, and even with suicidal thoughts. That is a sad thought in itself, but there is also a solution contained within it.

Previous generations who experienced life from a (literally) more objective standpoint had the advantage over mobile phone era youngsters, because once there was you and then there was the outside world (with needs, desires and rights that were different from your own), which you were trying to make sense of in some way, and that might include capturing its ‘reality’ in a photo. Now, you take the photo with yourself in it, often modifying it in some way as you’re taking it – which is really a form of personal editing – and then you’re likely to post it on a social media site, which is another way of reflecting your own image (in both senses) and lifestyle. So, how and when do you ever delete yourself from being your first consideration? It’s like being in one of those halls of mirrors that keep on reflecting more and more images of you, yourself and you.

For many younger people, the so-called ‘outside world’ – mostly a brain’s fiction anyway – is fast becoming even more of a fiction. And it’s a fiction that can’t be called out because, without shared experiences (oversharing on social media after the event is entirely different and demands that the validation is on your own terms), how can anyone be sure of their ground? In a world of one, how do I know what is me and what is outside me? I love the brilliantly surreal ‘spider baby’ episode in *Father Ted* (‘Good Luck, Father Ted’) in which Ted attempts to explain the difference between dreams and reality to Father Dougal using a hand-drawn diagram. It captures the near impossibility of the task better than I ever could!

On a darker, more tragic and terrifying note, a young man named Robert Bragg recently described his experience of being involved in the gang-related stabbing of he didn’t know how many people in the following way: ‘It’s just one of them things: you wake up, you have your breakfast, you stab someone. It’s mad because we’re not actually thinking about damaging a life. We don’t think we’re going to kill you.’²² Does your blood run cold at the sheer lack of humanity implied here? There’s no real sense here that ‘other’ has an actual existence and that his behaviour towards ‘other’ will affect that existence, perhaps for ever. This is what happens when we haven’t

2 Newsbeat, London knife crime: ‘I don’t know how many people I’ve stabbed’, *BBC News* (13 February 2019). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-47211971>.

Cutting its way through the media frenzy, *Sweet Distress* puts emotional resilience centre stage and exposes a key factor in the growing mental health crisis: an overemphasis on talking about feelings and emotions.

Using an approach rooted in no-nonsense logic, author and psycholinguistic consultant Gillian Bridge delves into a range of problems which seem to be most frequently cited as sources of mental distress. These include stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, body image, eating disorders, social media, substance abuse, behavioural disorders, academic pressures and bullying.

The author explores how these issues have led to seemingly insurmountable emotional problems and takes a few potshots at some of the things that have contributed to turning life events that may, at other times or in other places, have been little more than nuisances or inconveniences into sources of genuine psychic pain.

Packed with realistic and effective takeaway strategies for parents and educators, *Sweet Distress* challenges under-researched but over-promoted ideology and shares evidence-based help and advice for anyone wanting to improve the mental health of those they care about.

Suitable for parents, educators, counsellors and therapists.

This book provides a practical and uncompromising assessment of the state we're in and how we might find our way to a tougher and less anguished place.

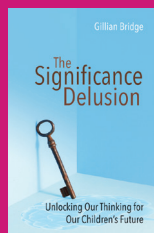
Josh Glancy, *The Sunday Times*

Sweet Distress is funny and witty (and even uses rude words!), so it is easy to pick up and follow. I wanted to write in the margins, make notes to myself and stick them up around my office so that I can remember to *do that thing* the next time I'm in front of a class or giving an assembly.

Heather Hanbury, Head Mistress, Lady Eleanor Holles School

This enjoyable, pacy masterpiece needs to be read by everyone, and we must all act upon its wisdom.

**Mike Fairclough, Head Teacher, West Rise Junior School,
and author of *Playing with Fire: Embracing Risk and Danger in Schools***



Gillian Bridge is a qualified teacher of English, an addiction therapist and a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. She has taught, lectured and coached in the field of brain language and behaviour and has also worked in prisons and on Harley Street. Language is her medium, neuroscience her fascination, and she longs to understand what makes us humans human.

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