

Sweet Distress

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

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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.

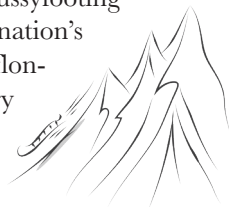


introduction

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>.

learned to think and observe outside the box of our own heads.³ Fortunately, that young man has moved on and is now in a much better place.

But how could someone whose brain is still in the development stage anyway be expected to have a truly balanced view of life when so much of their viewing is of themselves? In such a barely real world, how are we supposed to know genuine friend from online imposter, genuine cause for unhappiness from social media generated emotional confection – or, it appears, taking breakfast from taking life?

Having said all that, time isn't going to go backwards and technology isn't going to be un-invented (much of it is quite simply brilliant, so we wouldn't want to un-invent it). Again, I think the real problem lies in the ways it is being used to promote I, myself and me. It's that obsessive self-interest that is the problem, not the equipment used to endorse and support it.

Self-absorption has been around for quite a while (*Hamlet*, anyone?), but I can't be the only person who secretly suspects that ever since we have been encouraged to express ourselves and talk about feelings, the problem with our mental health seems to have got worse. Not that I think talking is the problem per se – there are many reasons why talking may be a very good thing for mental health (more on this later, especially in Chapter 4). It's the talking about *feelings* that seems to have been the catalyst.

Why? Because talking about feelings is generally taken to mean *my* feelings, which are just about the most individualistic things out there. Self-pleasuring again. What could possibly be sweeter than talking about *my* feelings, *my* sense of injustice, *my* woes, *my* being misunderstood, *my* hard times and so on?



3 There are so many teenage murders happening now, often for no clear reason. It seems that decades of watching animations of various sorts as well as imaginary scenarios in films and video games, together with an acceptance that the 'hot' emotions of the moment matter more than any rational thoughts, have left youngsters unable to comprehend that 'real life' is out there, and that some things genuinely are forever – like death. At some deep level it appears that there are young people who think that death is just another thing you can rewind, time shift or simply walk away from while ordering enchiladas – or more likely wraps of another kind. I will be going into the connection between drugs and states of unreality in Chapter 7 because it's hugely important to mental health.



One of the great beauties of feelings is that no one else can ever deny them (this ‘truth’ is now seemingly woven into British law: if you *feel* offended then someone *has* genuinely harmed you), even though we don’t really have a valid definition of what a feeling is – a lack I will be attempting to address. One thing I’m already pretty sure of, though, is that like many of the sweet substances I’m going to be writing about, the empty calories contained in some feelings have been helping our sense of self-importance to grow fat.

There seems to be an absolute acceptance that if we could just get everyone talking about their feelings, then all would be well. I think we need to be a bit more open-minded (and intellectually curious) and start to question this largely unsubstantiated assumption. I’ve come across many a client who was hugely eloquent about their various emotional states but none the mentally sounder for it.

I introduced the word resilience earlier, suggesting that it was our number one defence against mental health problems. There have been many studies which have shown that having a resilient personality is the key to overcoming the stresses and challenges of life without succumbing to mental anguish. I will be saying more about what goes into the making of a resilient personality in Chapter 10, but for now I just want to observe that a large part of being resilient is having the ability to look beyond the self – beyond I, myself, me – and my feelings. It’s about appreciating and being curious about the wider world; it means being nosy about, not the self, but life itself.

It’s also a form of robust mental exercise, which we’re going to need if we want to compensate for the hothouse internalising lifestyle which has left us with some emotional flabbiness. And, as with our physical weight problems, we can either wait for the powers that be to step in, pathologise the problem and offer us medical solutions, or we can take a long hard look at how we came to be like this in the first place, and then take steps – literal and metaphorical – to trim down any excess from our self-pleasuring past and start to build resilient muscle in preparation for the future.





Chapter 2

A fixation on fixing life?

I'm aware that much of what I'm going to say in this book won't go down well with some, but I don't think that is a good enough reason not to say it, especially as I detect a little emotional obesity in the choirs of sensitive voices which sing, 'You can't say *that!*' There's rather a lot of Violet Elizabeth Bott about them – she of the 'I'll scream and scream and scream until I'm sick, and I can't threat which does so much to upset William Brown's mental wellbeing.



As I said at the start, there's been too much pussyfooting around sensitivities, and we need to consider *all* possibilities when it comes to cause and effect in mental health matters. The self-determined fragility of individuals who shriek 'Na, na, na' with their fingers in their ears whenever something gets said that they don't approve of, is very much part of the problem rather than a response to it.

We've reached a critical state and lives are being lost or compromised, so what I'm about to suggest should in no way be seen as undermining or contradicting that fact. But I have also implied that we are in a situation of our own making when I observed in the introduction that life events which at other times may have been little more than nuisances or inconveniences can now be the cause of genuine psychic pain. I want to stress the word *genuine* because I'm not suggesting that young people are making up their distress – they do genuinely feel it.

However, science tells us that the observer affects the observed (Schrödinger's pesky cat either is or isn't the evidence for that!). In a selfie world in which youngsters are turning the spotlight on themselves, they are perhaps impacting on their own states of mind – that is, experiencing symptoms they might



otherwise not have done, largely because they're focusing so closely on themselves.¹

It's worth taking a look at a recent survey to see how self-determined fragility might well be affecting our perception of what is going on.² The survey was carried out by the NHS, and looked into the psychiatric records of 10,000 young people, not all of whom had asked for help with mental problems. They found that the proportion of under 16s who had experienced any disorder (including anxiety and depression) had gone up from 11.4% in 1999 to 13.6% in 2017. The rise was described as being smaller than anticipated.

Other findings were that 17–19-year-old girls were two-thirds more likely than younger girls (and twice as likely as similar aged boys) to experience poor mental health. There was also a big gap between the rise in referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the number of children who were found to have a diagnosable mental disorder. The NHS deduced from these findings that a large part of the increase was down to more people looking for help, rather than more people actually experiencing mental health problems. This leaves us with the big question: why are more young people reporting that they are unwell?

Some possible answers might be:

- Children and parents are better at spotting problems.
- There is self-reporting of symptoms as disorders, even when not formally diagnosable as such.
- There are blurred lines between clinical and subclinical symptoms (i.e. confusion between anxiety as a reaction to circumstances and a permanently anxious state or disorder).

To sum up: although there is some uncertainty over the actual scale of the increase in mental health problems, there is a small but

1 Psychotherapist and activist Jo Watson and psychologist Lucy Johnstone of the campaign group A Disorder for Everyone (AD4E) suggest that the 'insidious colonisation of counselling and psychotherapy language and practice by medical-model diagnosis' can cause iatrogenic harm to someone experiencing mental distress. See Catherine Jackson, Who needs a diagnosis?, *Therapy Today* (8 February 2019). Available at: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/therapy-today/2019/february-2019/who-needs-a-diagnosis>. 'Iatrogenic' refers to illness caused by medical examination or treatment.

2 NHS, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England* (2017). Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>.

measurable increase, and girls in particular seem to be experiencing a decline in their feelings of wellbeing.

Is this evidence that there is something going on here that could be classified as self-determined fragility? And might there also be a determination to see stats where stats don't really exist – sort of Schrödinger's stats?³ I think all that can be said confidently is that there are quite a few young people (actual numbers probably unknowable) who, at a time when they could be enjoying the limitless health and optimism of youth, are feeling miserable, uninspired and pointless.⁴ Which, if nothing else, is immeasurably sad.

Even if part of the problem is that young people (and girls especially) are identifying their experiences as depressing, traumatic, anxiety provoking and so on, when once they may have regarded them as an inevitable part of any normal life in this vale of tears, that is still a problem. Something has swung too far in the opposite direction if we've gone from being able to tolerate the pretty awful (wars, industrialisation, rural poverty, etc.) to not being able to tolerate life in a world that includes many of the material benefits that past generations would have seen as the answers to their prayers.

I don't want to bang on about this too much, but in the course of this week I've randomly read short articles on the lives of J. R. R. Tolkien, Gerald Finzi and Charlotte Brontë – and what tragedies they experienced! Tolkien lost both parents when he was a boy, and later, when serving in the trenches, all but one of the friends he had fought alongside died. Finzi lost his father at the age of 8, and then his beloved music teacher and all three of his brothers in the First World War. Brontë lost her mother at the age of 5, two sisters in

3 According to an American scientist, machine learning techniques are causing huge problems for research science. Dr Genevera Allen of Rice University, Houston, says that software is now identifying patterns that exist only in datasets and not in the real world, and the results are only occasionally reproducible. It has been suggested that up to 85% of biomedical research is wasted effort and that many experiments are not sufficiently well designed to ensure that scientists don't only get the results they are looking for. See Pallab Ghosh, AAAS: machine learning 'causing science crisis', *BBC News* (16 February 2019). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-47267081>.

4 See, for example, Henry Bodkin, Tens of thousands of UK children have PTSD due to bullying and violence, Lancet study finds, *The Telegraph* (22 February 2019). Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/22/tens-thousands-uk-children-have-ptsd-due-bullying-violence-lancet/>; Ed Southgate, Freshers declaring mental illness up 73% in 4 years, *The Times* (22 February 2019); Kat Lay, Self-harm hospital admissions for children double in 6 years, *The Times* (23 February 2019).

childhood, two more as an adult, and her brother was both alcoholic and drug addicted.

These cases weren't particularly unusual back in the day, but now any one of these losses or traumatic experiences would be viewed as a reason for mental health problems. And, dare I suggest it, the *lack* of a traumatised response might be seen as problematic, rather than the other way around.⁵

Of course, they were all deeply affected by what had happened to them, and in their respective art forms each explored themes around innocence and loss. (Tolkien believed that fairy tales are the real stories of life, and that the essence of a fairy tale is the happy ending. After bad events, good will prevail – which is pretty amazing, given his experiences.) I am not suggesting that people in the past were less sensitive to suffering than people nowadays (that way lies a very suspect kind of emotional imperialism and superiority), but I am suggesting that they may have something to teach us about how to deal with what life throws at us. Or, to put it another way, they may have something to teach us about being better adjusted.

Because we seem to have lost the art of being well-adjusted. The phrase carries the understanding that life ain't perfect, that stuff happens and that we have to roll with the blows on occasion. That is to say, we should know how to react flexibly in life, which is another way of saying *with resilience*. We should be well-adjusted to the lives we end up having to lead – especially when, despite all we think we *should* be entitled to, life goes its own sweet way without reference to what we personally want or need.⁶

And that is getting harder and harder all the time, because perfectionism and perfectibility (both of which mitigate against the openness to experience at the heart of resilience) are the order of the day. Tolkien, Finzi, Brontë; they could all shape their experiences and their pain into art, escaping the horrors of what had

5 A case study published in *Therapy Today* contains the following lines: 'but I noted a disconnection between her traumatic experiences and the emotions she expressed. In counselling, we worked on recognising and expressing physical sensations in the present moment and connecting them to her emotions.' In other words, in counselling at least, it is understood that there is an *appropriate* response to trauma, and that a person's responses must be corrected if they don't have that emotionally correct reaction to their experiences. See Cate Harding-Jones, Counselling survivors of sex trafficking, *Therapy Today* (23 February 2019). Available at: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/therapy-today/2019/february-2019>.

6 Can I possibly be alone in thinking that the expression 'my best life' is both profoundly delusional and totally nauseating?

happened to them through doorways into the more magical lands of the imagination which they could order and control. But ordinary, daily, imperfect life still carried on in much more mundane ways; they simply got on with it in relative, outward calm.

However, if they had thought they were entitled to expect lives full of happiness, wellbeing and physical beauty, to name but a few things which rank highly in the 'needs' and expectations of many teenagers today, perhaps, instead of translating their emotions into successful art, they would have realised how unhappy they were and spent their time in therapy instead. Just wondering ...

If I have got a point here, and young people are suffering not so much from worse experiences than their forebears as from a greater mismatch between their expectations and their experiences, then it's necessary to get to the causes of that mismatch before the outcomes can be challenged. Either the disparity stems from a valid set of expectations coming up against experiences that need to be corrected for, or it's the other way around.

As individuals, we can learn to control for one of these scenarios, but it will be a whole lot harder to control for the other. Or to put it more simply: it's easier to adjust our expectations than it is to change the world.



Chapter 3

In which sugar and resilience come together ...

... in a ground-breaking study known as the marshmallow experiment, which originated in work carried out in the 1960s and 1970s by Walter Mischel, professor of psychology at Stanford University in the United States.

Although some of the findings of the marshmallow experiment have been critiqued (not entirely convincingly to my mind) by a more recent study,¹ the fundamental behaviours which are relevant to us here still apply.

Briefly, the marshmallow experiment found that children who, in the course of research to ascertain the age when self-control can be exercised (they were then 3 or 4), were able to reject a single proffered marshmallow in favour of the promise of two future marshmallows, became much more resilient adults than those who were not. To their astonishment, Mischel and his team found that these children went on to be happier, healthier (mentally and physically), wealthier and more successful adults in every respect than their peers who had not been able to reject the immediate reward – or, as it's more commonly known, delay gratification. Angela Lee Duckworth, a psychologist working with Mischel's fundamental premise, has gone as far as saying that the ability to delay gratification is a far better predictor of academic success than IQ alone.²



The more recent research by Watts and colleagues has questioned how important class is to the whole equation, but whether or not we buy into that, the techniques and strategies used to delay gratification by those who can certainly offer some very interesting insights

1 See Tyler W. Watts, Greg J. Duncan and Haonan Quan, Revisiting the marshmallow test: a conceptual replication investigating links between early delay of gratification and later outcomes, *Psychological Science* 29(7) (2018): 1159–1177.

2 See Jonah Lehrer, Don't! The secret of self-control, *The New Yorker* (11 May 2009). Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/05/18/dont-2>.

into how our brains work to give us self-control, whatever our social status, and also some very interesting connections to the present mental health crisis.

If you're reading this then you're probably an adult, so marshmallows may not be the hottest temptation you can imagine (maybe they aren't for kids either, it was the 1960s). Perhaps for you there are more alluring possibilities: alcohol, Big Macs, a credit card-fuelled shopping spree, an online casino – you get the picture. In the business, such things are called 'hot stimuli' – material things, substances and behaviours that go straight past your higher thinking (and your self-control) and ram into the emotional nuclear fuel bunker that is your amygdala, where they cause an explosion of deep pleasure and satiation.



Which lasts approximately as long as the explosion. And then you want more ...

I once gave a talk to parents of anxious pre-A level sixth-formers at a very prestigious and academic girls' school in London. I described the mechanisms behind resilience as I understood them and talked about Walter Mischel's work. They understood that self-control and delayed gratification could be helpful in building up resistance to the immediate demands of emotionalism (something that teenage girls are prone to in particular), but one mother was left with a big question and came up to me after the talk had finished.

'If what you say is right,' she questioned, 'then why does my daughter have a mental health problem, anorexia, when she so obviously is in control of her appetite and is practised at delaying gratification pretty much all of the time?'

It was a very good question, and fortunately there is a very good answer to it. A hot stimulus can be many different things, but in the case of someone with an eating disorder it can be one of two more or less opposite things. With bulimia (or gorging behaviour) the stimulus (or compelling emotional motivation) is cramming food in, but with anorexia it is the control of starving the body. What that poor confused mum had to deal with was a daughter who was actually giving in to the hot stimulus of starvation, whereas delaying gratification for her would mean putting off the emotional satisfaction that comes with starvation in favour of the 'more sensible' option of eating.

Usually, the stimulus is a clearer indulgence of appetite – being a lovely sweet thing that sits there either begging us to ‘eat me, eat me’, ‘drink me, drink me’ or emotionally to ‘feel me, feel me’, ‘experience me, experience me’.



Now, let's get back to the mechanics of how delaying the gratification of those appetites works ...

What is a man?

What is a man

If his chief good and market of his time

Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,

Looking before and after, gave us not

That capability and godlike reason

To fust in us unused.

Hamlet, IV, iv.

Shakespeare is generally right about a lot of things to do with human behaviour, and what he says here about how we come to be human is particularly relevant to mental health today. We become human when we look before and after – to the past and the future.

What Mischel found in his experiment was that those kids who could delay gratification (i.e. wait to gain an extra marshmallow rather than scoffing the one in front of them straight away) were the ones who were best at distracting themselves, perhaps by looking out of the window, sitting on their hands or whistling. In effect, they were ‘cooling’ the effect of the scorching hot stimulus of the marshmallow.

That may seem like an obvious strategy to you, but it's actually a pretty sophisticated one. It involves being much more than a beast; only rarely do other animals delay gratification of their own accord. It involves looking backwards and forwards, it involves self-determination and it involves taking more interest in the outside

world than in your own immediate emotional desires. In other words, it involves all the skills necessary to be resilient through life.

Looking backwards and forwards in time suggests having context and overview, plus the ability to see yourself as part of a bigger process, as a figure in a bigger landscape which has other actors in it. The child will have memories of other occasions when they needed to wait for something. They will believe that the strategies which distracted them then will work again now to take their mind off whatever it is that is so very, very appealing. And they will also have (and this is hugely important) a pretty strong belief that what is promised will actually come to pass in the future – that the second marshmallow is a genuine offer and worth the wait.

These kids actually have teeny-weeny timelines with teeny-weeny narratives inside their heads, and they remember the past as a way of predicting the future.³ There is a world in which self-agency (they can control what happens to them), consistency (they can believe in what is said to them) and outward orientation or interest in the outside world (research has shown that babies who are clingy from the start are less distractible and more focused on their own sensations⁴) are already in place at a very young age. Shakespeare is right, as usual. Having mental maps or charts across time really does make us godlike in our ability to manage ourselves and, as a consequence, our lives.⁵

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- 3 On the role of memory in making us human, Alison George cites the case of a patient who had an impaired episodic memory after a motorcycle accident – ‘he could remember facts, but not personal experiences’. However, as well as impairing his ability to recall the past, the injury had also compromised his ability to imagine the future. Imaging studies have shown that similar brain activity occurs when we remember past events and plan future ones. Eleanor Maguire of University College London suggests that the key is being able to generate ‘scenes in the mind’s eye’. If we are unable to remember previous experiences, our capacity to make well-thought-through decisions deteriorates. George theorises that ‘being able to picture the past [may have] enabled us to imagine the future, and therefore plan – one of the complex cognitive feats that stand humans apart from many other species’. See Alison George, Memory special: do we even know what memory is for?, *New Scientist* (24 October 2018). Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24032010-500-memory-special-do-we-even-know-what-memory-is-for>.
 - 4 John Bowlby’s work on attachment (1969) showed that babies who could rely on the physical and emotional availability of their primary carers became more self-reliant, curious and adventurous than babies who felt more insecure and were either more clingy or more indifferent to everything as a result.
 - 5 Navigation of time and space, which is what both timelines and maps represent, is the job of a brain area called the hippocampus. But it also does another job, one which is almost identical in many ways, and that is to remember what we have done, where we have been and when.

This brings me back to my starting point, because we now have a sketchy outline of what *good* mental health is all about. It's essentially about being resilient – as long as resilience is taken to mean resilience at the deepest level, as a brain behaviour, rather than as a media-generated sound bite. It is not so much about being strong or empowered, as about being able to avoid the temptation to give in to our appetites (which can be to indulge in the sweetness of emotionalism or sentimentality as well as junk food, drink or drugs) or to collapse under stress. It means being able to fail at something and pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and start all over again. And it means having the strength to carry others with us, in addition to keep going ourselves, when the going gets tough.

To do all these things also means having in place mental timelines which take us from the past into the future, and brains which can make ethical and emotional judgements about any decisions we might make. (Science has shown that individuals with brain damage that affects emotional aspects of behaviour find it very difficult to make decisions at all, leaving them almost paralysed with indecision.⁶)

Also necessary to resilience is a resistance to making the self numero uno in planning and decision-making. Although this ability is all part and parcel of seeing the bigger picture, it's worth really putting the spotlight on the huge benefits that come to mental health from ditching I, myself and me thinking in favour of we, us, and they. And, of course, putting others more into the frame is also an outcome of having that other resilience-critical skill – being endlessly curious about the outside world and life in general.



A focus on finding things outside ourselves fascinating (like those young children distracted by scenes outside the window) helps to damp down the hot stimulus of inner sensations, or what we are encouraged to call 'feelings',⁷ and that can only be a good thing in the present highly emotional climate. But the ability to tweak that focus and to make our own sensations into objective curiosities, which we can observe as if they are external to ourselves, also helps

6 Claire Salmond, David Menon, Doris Chatfield, John Pickard and Barbara Sahakian, Deficits in decision-making in head injury survivors, *Journal of Neurotrauma* 22(6) (2005): 613–622.

7 I'm coming to the whole 'trouble with feelings' issue very soon.

with mental health problems; in my opinion, it is the element in both mindfulness and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) which is the most beneficial.

To tidy all of that into a neat, minimal list encompassing what good mental health consists of is:

- Seeing yourself as part of a bigger picture.
- Having the ability to remember the past and predict the future.
- Having confidence in a consistent, stable world (it doesn't have to be a particularly good one).
- Having curiosity about that world.
- Prioritising things other than personal feelings/emotions (although understanding them is important).

Note: It is not about happiness, positive mental outlook, growth mindset or anything as 'now' as that. Some of these outcomes might be both useful and lovely to have, but they are not the foundation stones of good mental health.

There, a nice tidy summary of what it takes to be resilient, which in turn results in good mental health. All that's left is to find out how to become a person with those attributes. A doddle.

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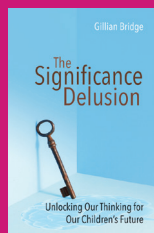
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