The Marginal Gains Handbook

Practical ideas to Survive and Thrive in the Age of Coronavirus

Dr Rob Archer
and Alex Jamieson

The **Career Psychologist**

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

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

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

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

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

This short booklet is designed to inspire and provoke some thought about where you might start making marginal gains. And if you have your own, we would love to hear them and add them into this booklet over time. After all, publishing this booklet is not a one-off event, but a series of tiny steps to hopefully produce something that for some people might be transformational.
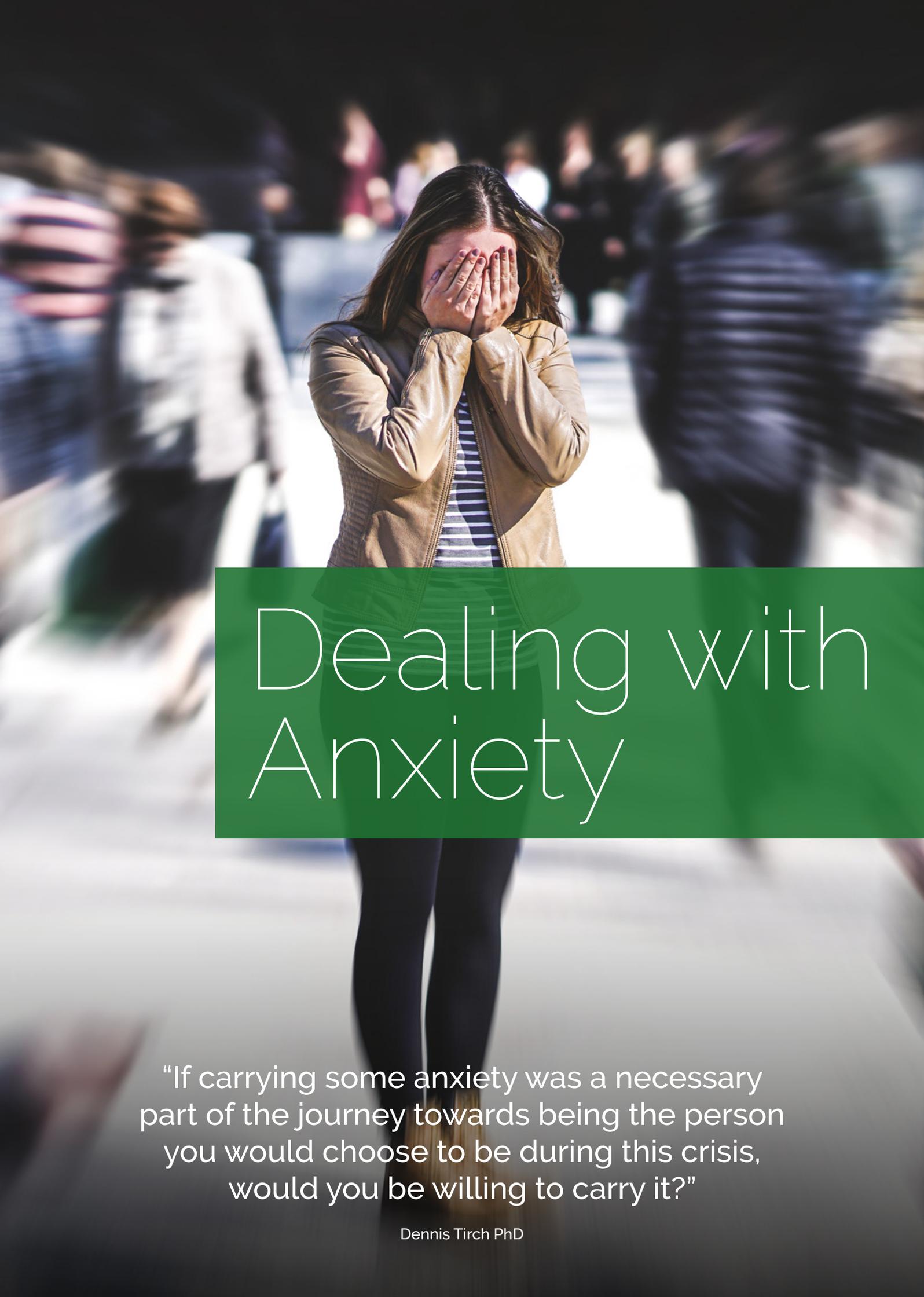
Rob Archer and Alex Jamieson
London, April 2020

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Dealing with Anxiety

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

Dennis Tirch PhD

Dealing with Anxiety

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

Anxiety versus Fear

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

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

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

Two Brain Systems: Fast and Slow

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

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

This is why trying to control anxiety is impossible. It is literally like trying to control the past.
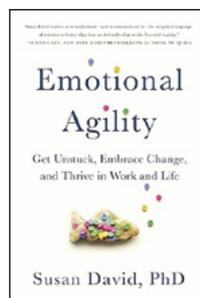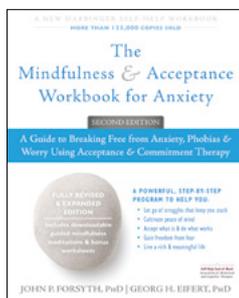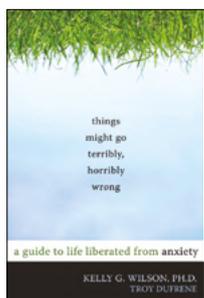
The Impact of Templates

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

Understanding Modern Anxiety

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

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

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

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

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

Key text

Apps and resources

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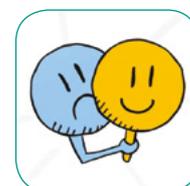
Dealing with Anxiety - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Acceptance

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

Pivot towards what matters

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

Be selective about the information you consume

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

Use daily checklists

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

Break it down and make a plan

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

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

If I can't control or influence it, how do I learn to accept it?
spread of virus, actions of others and impact on the economy

If it's not in my control, can I exert influence?
my home environment, my finances, my family and my friends and colleagues

Is it in my Control?
my behaviours, actions, attitudes, outlook and decisions

Real life marginal gains:

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

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

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

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

Key video:

'The Unwelcome Party Guest' by Joe Oliver

Isolation and Loneliness
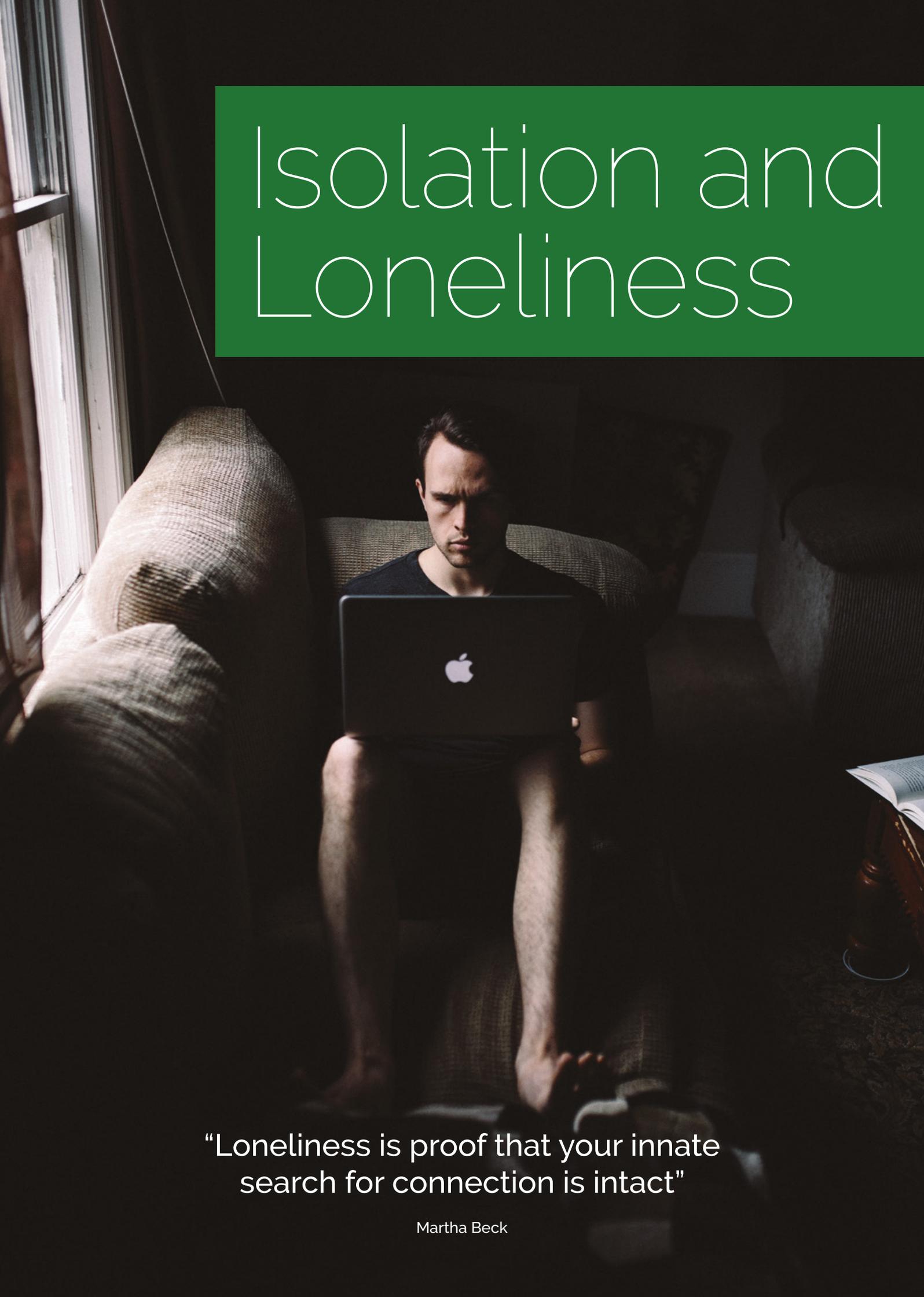
"Loneliness is proof that your innate
search for connection is intact"

Martha Beck

Isolation and Loneliness

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

Social Isolation

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

Loneliness as a Spectrum

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

Perceived quantity & quality of
interactions required

Loneliness   **Overstimulation**

Actual quantity & quality of
interactions experienced

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

The Loneliness Cycle

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

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

- We start to view the external world as more threatening than it actually is

- Our expectations associated with social interactions become more negative

- We will tend to recall negative social events from the past more easily

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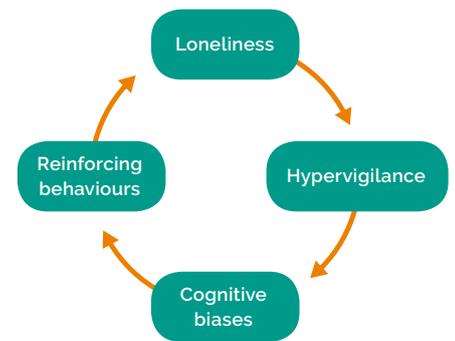
When we feel lonely, as well as urging us to connect, our brains can interpret other people's behaviour in a more negative manner than it otherwise would, actually making it harder for us to reach out to others. The risk is that we start to listen to our minds and avoid social interactions altogether.

Key video:

'The Lethality of Loneliness' by John Cacioppo

The **Career** Psychologist

Isolation and Loneliness – Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Assume Positive Intent (API)

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

Acknowledge your feelings of loneliness

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

Help others or volunteer

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

Share small wins and reminisce

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

Write a list of your important allies

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

Decatastrophise by asking 'what if?'

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

Real life marginal gains:

I try to remember that loneliness can happen even in a crowd. I find this a useful thought especially if I'm going through something that others can't understand. However, this experience is being shared by most of us across the globe. It's given us a real opportunity to tap into our common humanity and I remind myself of that to feel less alone.
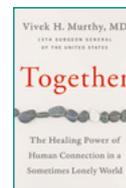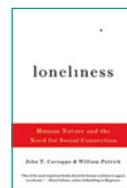
I try to model my values. I try to remember that loneliness is usually a function of whether my interactions are meaningful or not. Given that I value connectedness, I think about the small changes I can make to ensure I give and receive greater connectedness. For example, I open up about my personal concerns with close friends (as opposed to just talking about the latest news developments), and I strike up conversation when I bump into a neighbour. I also value curiosity, so I make a conscious effort to ask more meaningful questions about how friends and family are coping and how they see the future.

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

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

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

Apps, resources and key text

LET'S TALK LONELINESS

loneliness
Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection
John T. Cacioppo & William Patrick

Vivek H. Murthy, MD
Together
The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World

The Career Psychologist

Problem Solving

> "If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail"

Abraham Maslow

Problem Solving

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

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

Focus

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

Rest

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

Beware Barriers and Biases

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

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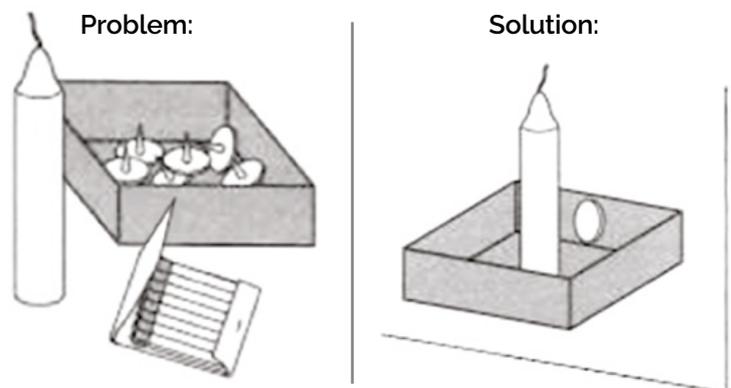
In exactly the same way, many of us get so fixed in our thinking that we fail to think creatively about new problems.

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

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

Key text

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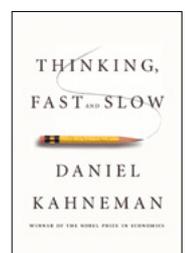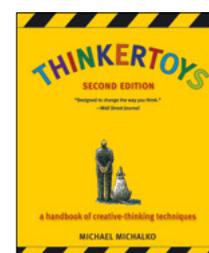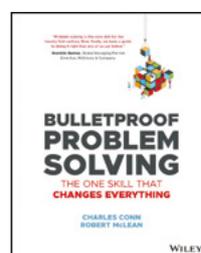
Problem Solving – Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Adopt a 'challenge' mindset

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

Be mindful of 'attention residue'

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

Separate idea generation from evaluation

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

Use a premortem to strengthen your plan of action

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

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

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

IS THIS A PROBLEM I CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT?

YES → Work out what you could do. List out your options

NO → Let the worry go, and focus on something else that is important right now

Is there anything I can do **right now**?

NO → Plan what you could do and when you will do it → Let the worry go, and focus on something else that is important right now

YES → Do it now → Let the worry go, and focus on something else that is important right now

Real life marginal gains:

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

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

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

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

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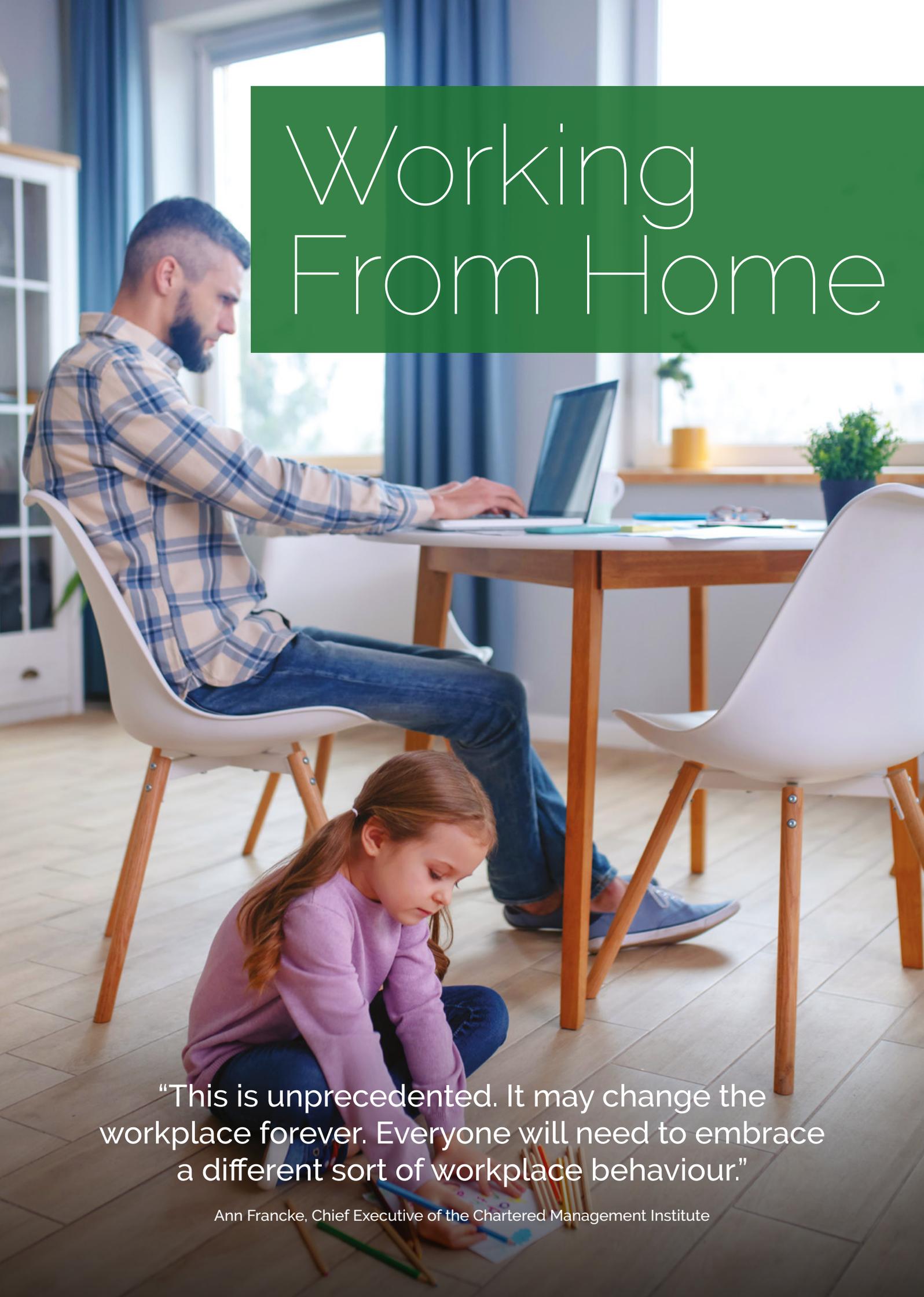
Key video:

'How to Make Hard Choices' by Ruth Chang

Apps and resources

CLEARER THINKING

actcompanion

HEADSPACE

Working From Home

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

Ann Francke, Chief Executive of the Chartered Management Institute

Working From Home

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

The flat line vs the wobbly line

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

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

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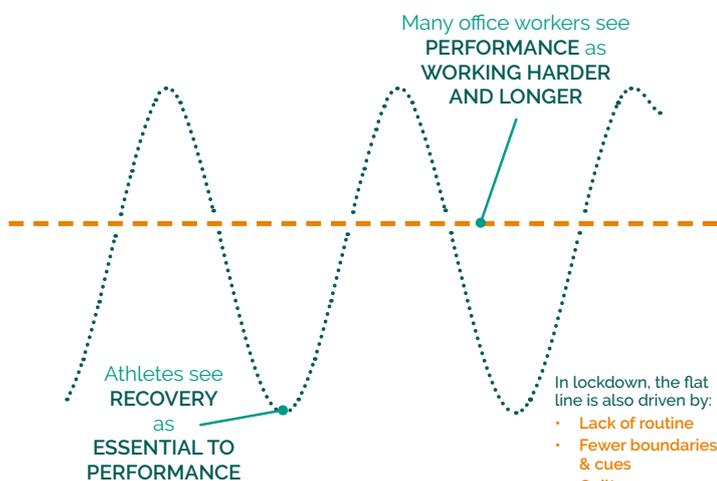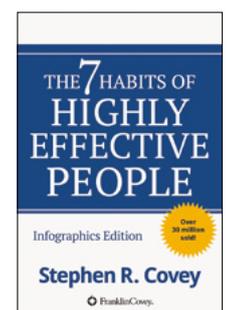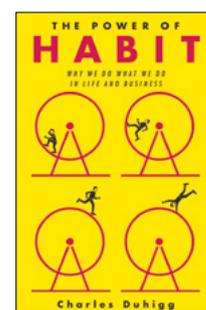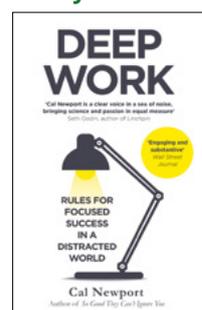
Managing energy through the day

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

1. **Preparation routine**. Take a few minutes to identify priorities and review your diary.

2. **Period of focus**. Protect some 'deep work' time: high concentration, high complexity, top priorities. Try to do this in short, high-quality bursts.

3. **Warm down routine**. Review what you have achieved, print off your diary and note down the main priorities for tomorrow. A warm down routine before sleep is also ideal.

4. **Recovery period**. Optimal mental recovery rests on activities that offer either variety or joy. Try to think in terms of building mini 'pit stops' into each day, so you can sustain your performance through the day.

Many office workers see **PERFORMANCE** as **WORKING HARDER AND LONGER**

Athletes see **RECOVERY** as **ESSENTIAL TO PERFORMANCE**

In lockdown, the flat line is also driven by:
- Lack of routine
- Fewer boundaries & cues
- Guilt

Key text

The Career Psychologist

Working From Home - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Combat procrastination

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

Structure your day around motivation levels

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

Use a checklist

Try our daily resilience checklist

Create the right work environment

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

Organise and prioritise

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

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

Apps and resources

Real life marginal gains:

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

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

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

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

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

Key video:

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

Managing Remote Teams

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

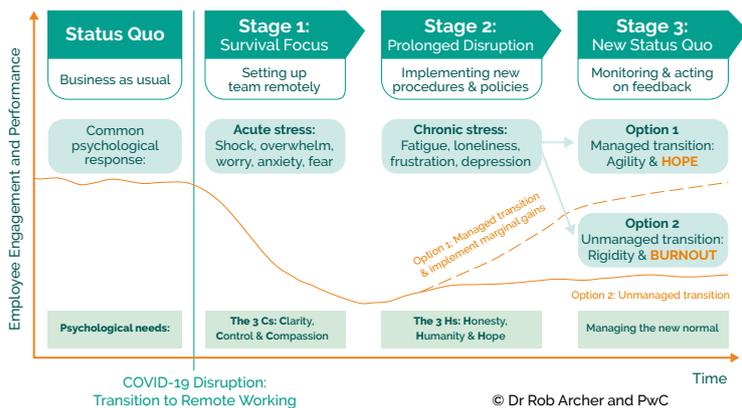Alan W. Watts

Managing Remote Teams

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

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

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

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

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

People have specific psychological needs in each stage:

Stage 1: The 3 Cs

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

Stage 2: The 3 Hs

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

© Dr Rob Archer and PwC

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

Key video:

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

The **Career Psychologist**

Managing Remote Teams - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

Focus on clarity

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

Use scenario planning

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

Set expectations about work hours

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

Show vulnerability

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

Motivational Interviewing (MI) can foster hope

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

1. *What new **opportunities** may arise from this situation?*

2. *Where do you see **growth** emerging post COVID?*

3. *What **resources** can you personally draw on?*

4. *Which of your **skills** are made for this situation?*

5. *Looking back in 12 months' time, what will you feel **most proud of** in terms of how you responded to this period?*

6. *How would you like things to be **different in future**?*

Real life marginal gains:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apps and resources

The Career Psychologist

Parenting in lockdown

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

Gretchen Ruben

Parenting in lockdown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key video:

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

Key Resources

The **Career Psychologist**
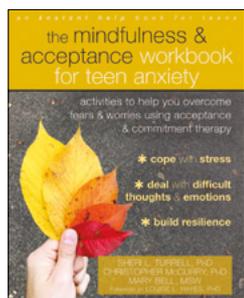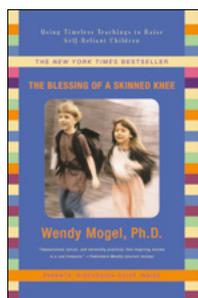
Parenting in lockdown - Marginal Gains

Evidence-based marginal gains:

• **Routines** are powerful partly because they reduce fatigue. So try to at least create a 'shape' to the day that everyone understands. Things like bedtime stories, a specific time for homework, meals; all of this will reduce your mental load by a fraction.

• **Give your kids responsibility**. If you are under pressure, now is the time for them to step up. Giving them responsibility will help their confidence and resilience. Prepare your child for the path, not the path for the child.

• **Insert pauses**. A strong body of evidence shows that just pausing for a few minutes when irritated can lead to better conversations (with kids and others).

• **Enlist others to give you a break**. If there is another adult in your house, work in shifts to cover short breaks. If not try to enlist a Granny to read a story or an Uncle to make your kids laugh, even 20 minutes' respite can work wonders. Ask for help.

• **Manage your energy**. In the brief periods when the children are occupied, do your low-attention tasks (like admin) and when you get a longer (>25 mins) break, tackle the more complex tasks. Or it's time to do nothing. You decide.

• **Beware experiential avoidance**. Many times we aren't present with our kids because we are trying to avoid a thought or emotion. For example, if your kids are playing a game you find boring you may disengage and start scrolling on your phone. This relieves the boredom but it fails to create any joy or connection. Reducing experiential avoidance has been shown to improve wellbeing and mental health.

Real life marginal gains:

• **Turn housework into a game**. The tidy up song is good for this, and so is 'beat the timer', but giving our kids proper tasks to do each day (and using sticker charts to reward them) has definitely helped us lighten the load.

• **Staying present**. Before bed I watch videos with my kids which is a bit tedious, so I often find myself on my phone. This has the function of relieving the boredom but it was no building joy or connection. So now I try to really get present and try to enjoy the moment. I smell their hair and remind myself I won't have too many of these moments in future...

• I try to build a **minute or two buffer before leaving** my work office, and tap into the type of Dad I want to be when I re-engage (i.e. loving, active, joyful, present).

• **Quality over quantity**. I am reconciled to only having short breaks, so I try to focus on *savouring* the small moments of respite and connection that I get and I consciously try to celebrate small wins!

• **I try to connect to my values**. I find it impossible to eradicate the bad bits of my parenting, but I am able to put positive stuff in there. By connecting to the values of how I want to be as a parent, I find I can transform the pressure cooker of lockdown into an opportunity to connect with what matters to me most.

Resources for Children

The Career Psychologist