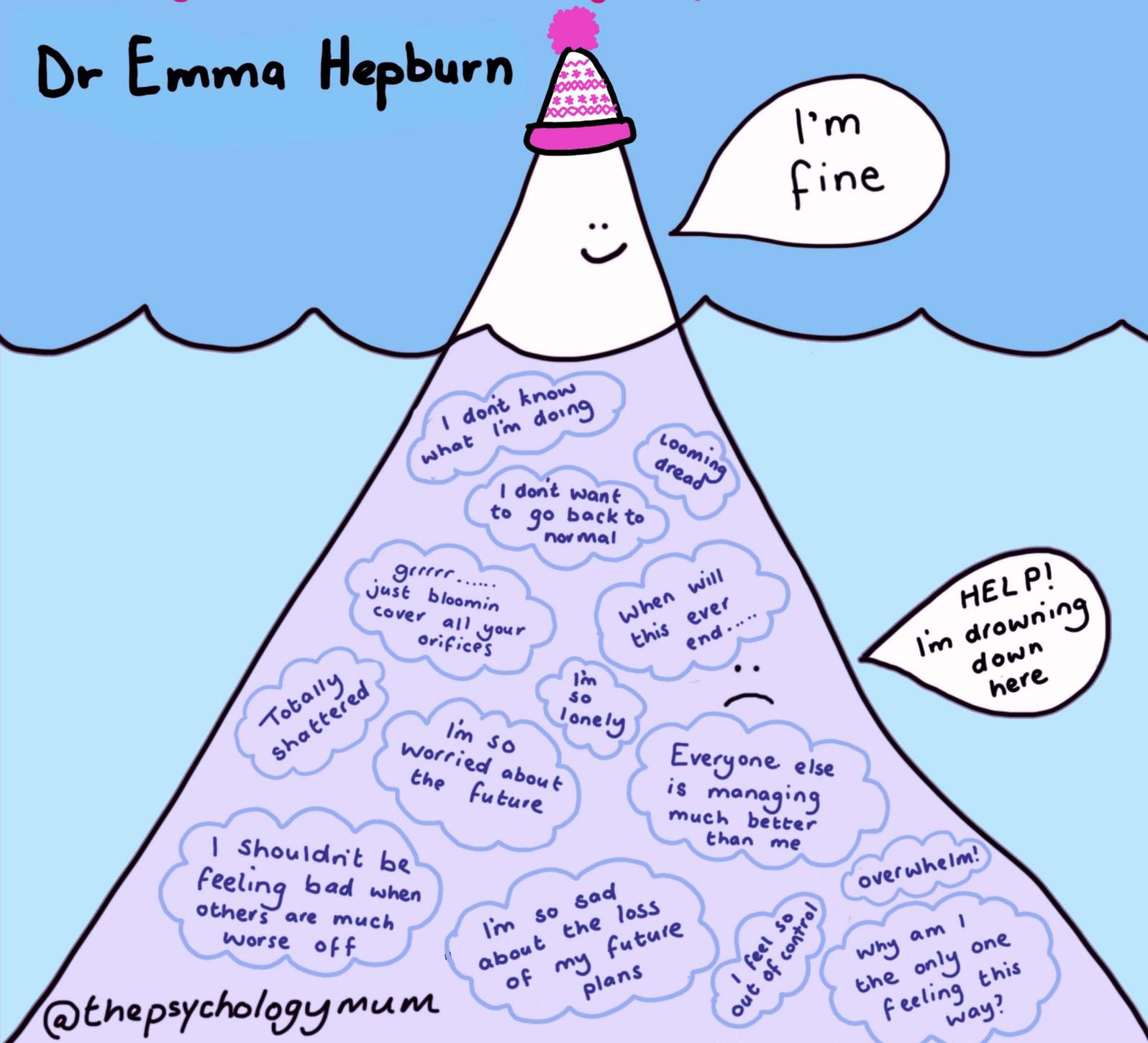


How to Stay Calm in a

Updated
Edition

Global Pandemic

Dr Emma Hepburn



@thepsychologymum

HOW TO STAY CALM IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

BY DR EMMA HEPBURN

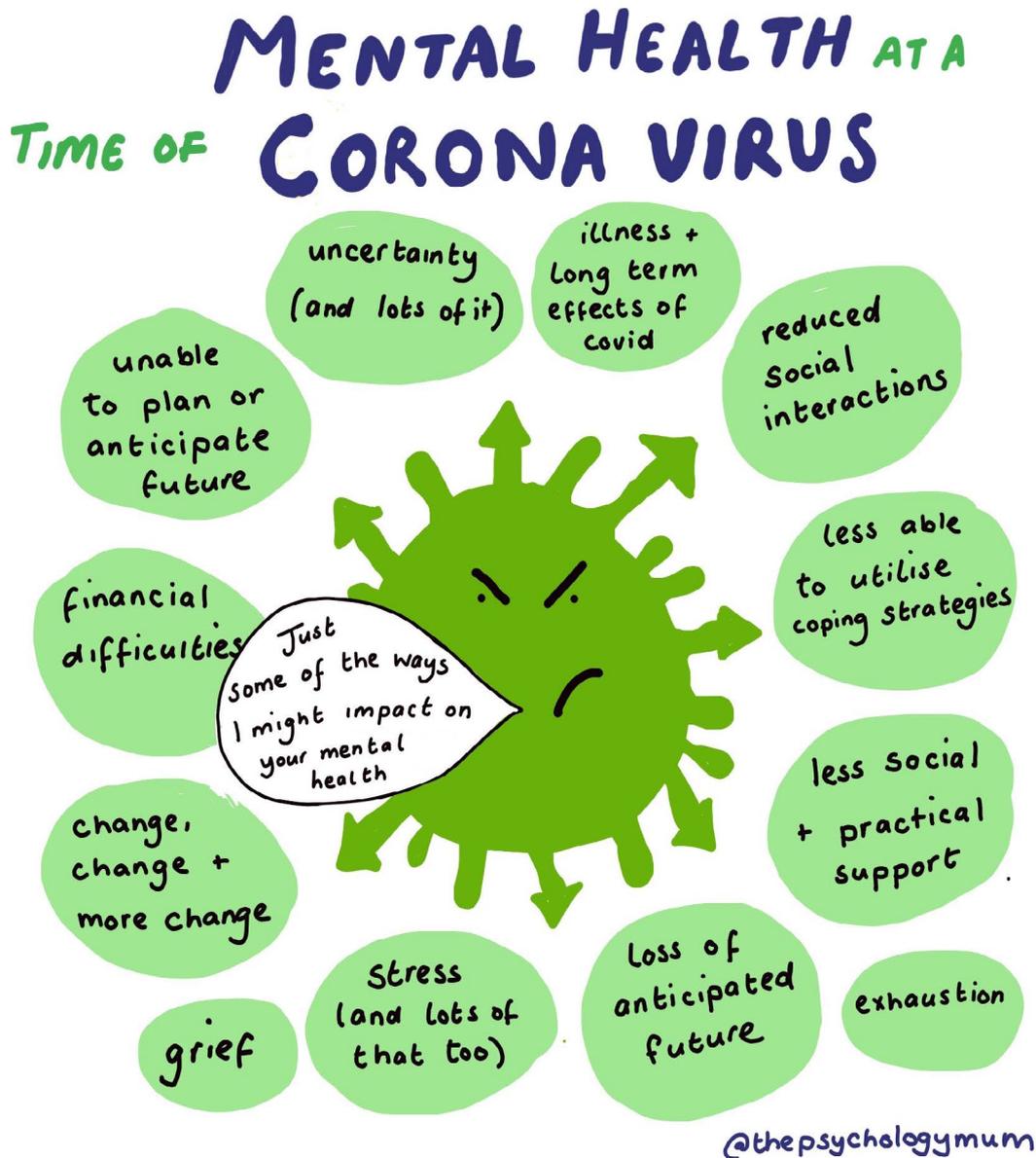
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MENTAL HEALTH AT A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

National data indicates that the current global pandemic is resulting in increased anxiety and reduced wellbeing for many of us. Probably no surprise there. Over the last 18 months, I've taken part in lots of interviews and been asked the same question a number of times: 'How can Covid-19 impact on our mental health?' So I thought I'd answer this in the drawing here.



Although I haven't included it in the illustration, I wanted to acknowledge too that some people (albeit a minority) have recognized that the current situation has impacted positively on their mental health. They have mentioned that reduced choice has allowed for more focus on what matters to them, slowing down and appreciating what they have.

I have now updated my drawing by theming responses from people on Instagram in November 2021.

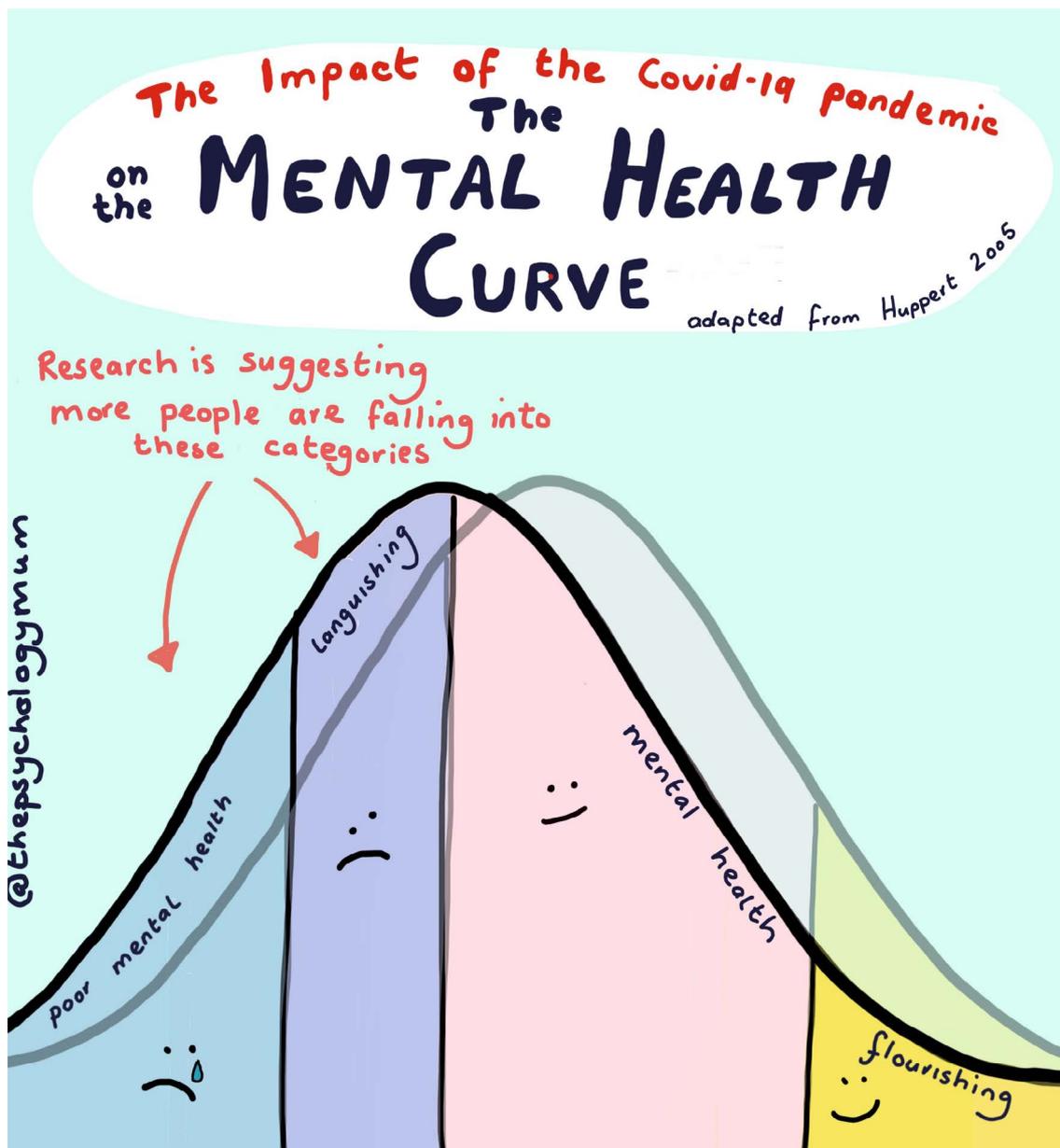
MENTAL HEALTH AT A TIME OF CORONA VIRUS

2021 Edition



THE MENTAL HEALTH CURVE

In the UK we have experienced two massive waves of Covid-19 and may well witness a third. We are an exhausted population whose resources are depleted. The gung-ho togetherness and sunny springtime weather have gone and Covid fatigue is drawing in with the waning light. We all move up and down the mental health curve in our everyday lives, but research suggests Covid may be pushing more of us down the curve. So, here are 15 ideas for how to continue to look after your mental health during a winter lockdown, when you are already feeling drained and run-down.



1. Understand this is not you, or a failure in you. How you are feeling is a product of months of living with high stress, uncertainty and anxiety, along with the inability to use our normal coping strategies. The depletion and exhaustion are a result of our body having its foot on the gas pedal for too long, which leaves us

feeling as if we are running on empty.

2. Hold onto your buoys – the things that keep you afloat when waters are choppy. What gentle activities might you have capacity for? Perhaps make breakfast the night before, make sure you drink enough fluid, let in some daylight or go to bed early. These things don't use up many resources, but not doing them can make you sink far faster when you are feeling bad already.

3. If your normal coping strategies seem too much effort, try to think of a smaller way that you could apply these so they still have some effect. Can't face zooming? Can you text instead? Can't face the gym? Go outside for a walk for a few minutes. Seeing coping strategies as all or nothing can lead you to abandon them, but finding gentle alternatives provides some of the positive impact, which is far better than none at all.

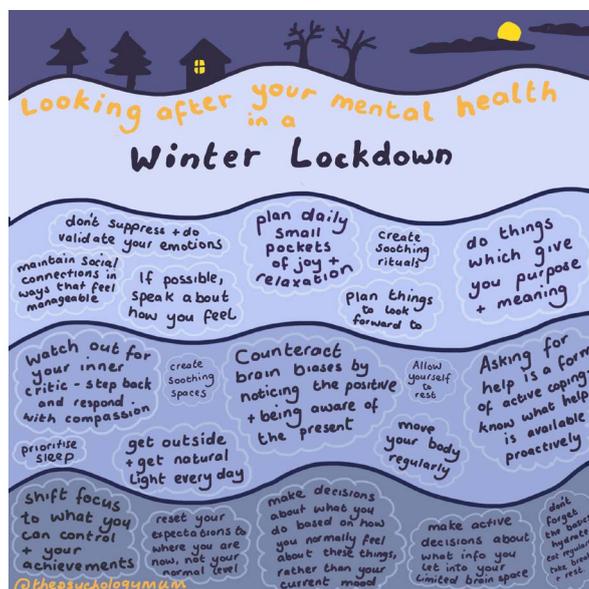
4. Be extra gentle on yourself when we are tired we have less cognitive resources. More things may go wrong, we can do less and we may not function how we expect. This is lighter fuel for your inner critic and your brain can fall into well-worn paths of self-criticism. This is a signal to hold on to self-compassion and not let go, but you may not have the resources to do this. Find ways to remind yourself of your compassionate voice that requires less effort, such as prompts or saved kind messages.

5. Our brain predicts how we *will* feel based on how we feel now. Feeling rubbish means your forecasting is likely to be off and you are more likely to predict you will not enjoy activities. Plan things based on the knowledge that you have enjoyed them previously. This is a better indicator of whether you will enjoy something again than your current mood. A walk outside may feel unappealing, but test it out – go outside for five minutes and see what it actually feels like. If it feels good, keep going, if not, come home and snuggle up.

6. Don't shame yourself for feeling ****. Shaming ourselves for our emotions can lead us to suppress them, which ironically leads to greater stress. You feel bad because it is difficult and you are allowed to feel this way. It seems like you will always feel this way, because it's hard to predict feeling any other way when you feel bad. But no emotion can last forever and our psychological immune system works in much the same way as our physical immune system . . . you will not feel like this always and you will feel differently again.

7. Our brain is drawn towards the negative at the best of times. When feeling bad we are even more likely to focus on things consistent with our mood, amplifying the negative. Try to consciously draw your attention towards things that make you feel good – help your brain notice the good stuff. This can be effortful when you feel depleted, but the initial effort can be worth the longer-term return on how you feel.

8. Remember that none of us can always function alone. We all need extra input at times. Seeking and accepting help is not a failure, it's a basic human need and a form of active coping to help keep us afloat.
9. Plan daily pockets of joy and relaxation. Creating positive affect is imperative right now. Try to plan things to look forward to across the next week and month, so that your brain has something positive to anticipate.
10. Prioritize activities that give you meaning and purpose, as these are inherently good for wellbeing.
11. Create comforting rituals – these can be things you do on a daily or weekly basis. Or create some meaningful new family/friend/workplace rituals to look forward to.
12. Make active decisions about what you let into your limited brain space. Don't allow news, social media and negative information to take up too much of your resources. Decide what it is most helpful for you to focus on right now.
13. Our brains like certainty but think about whether the places you look for certainty are actually creating more uncertainty or making you feel anxious. We check the news, social media or talk about the current situation in an attempt to create certainty, but often these things can actually make us feel worse and more uncertain.
14. Watch out for the myths and societal messages around productivity. We are naturally inclined to want to achieve and society bolsters this belief by rewarding achievements. Then when our productivity drops because we are depleted, we can no longer meet the standards we have set, which means we feel like we are failing. Try to set realistic expectations based on how you are feeling now, not what you are usually like. Allow yourself to slow down, lower the bar and do less, if possible.
15. Reframe the meaning of taking a break and allow yourself to enjoy it. This is essential for your body, brain and wellbeing. Sitting on the sofa watching Netflix for a whole day doesn't make you lazy – if you enjoy it (which you are more likely to if you allow yourself to), it is an activity that helps restore your resources and rest your brain and body. And that's more necessary than ever right now.

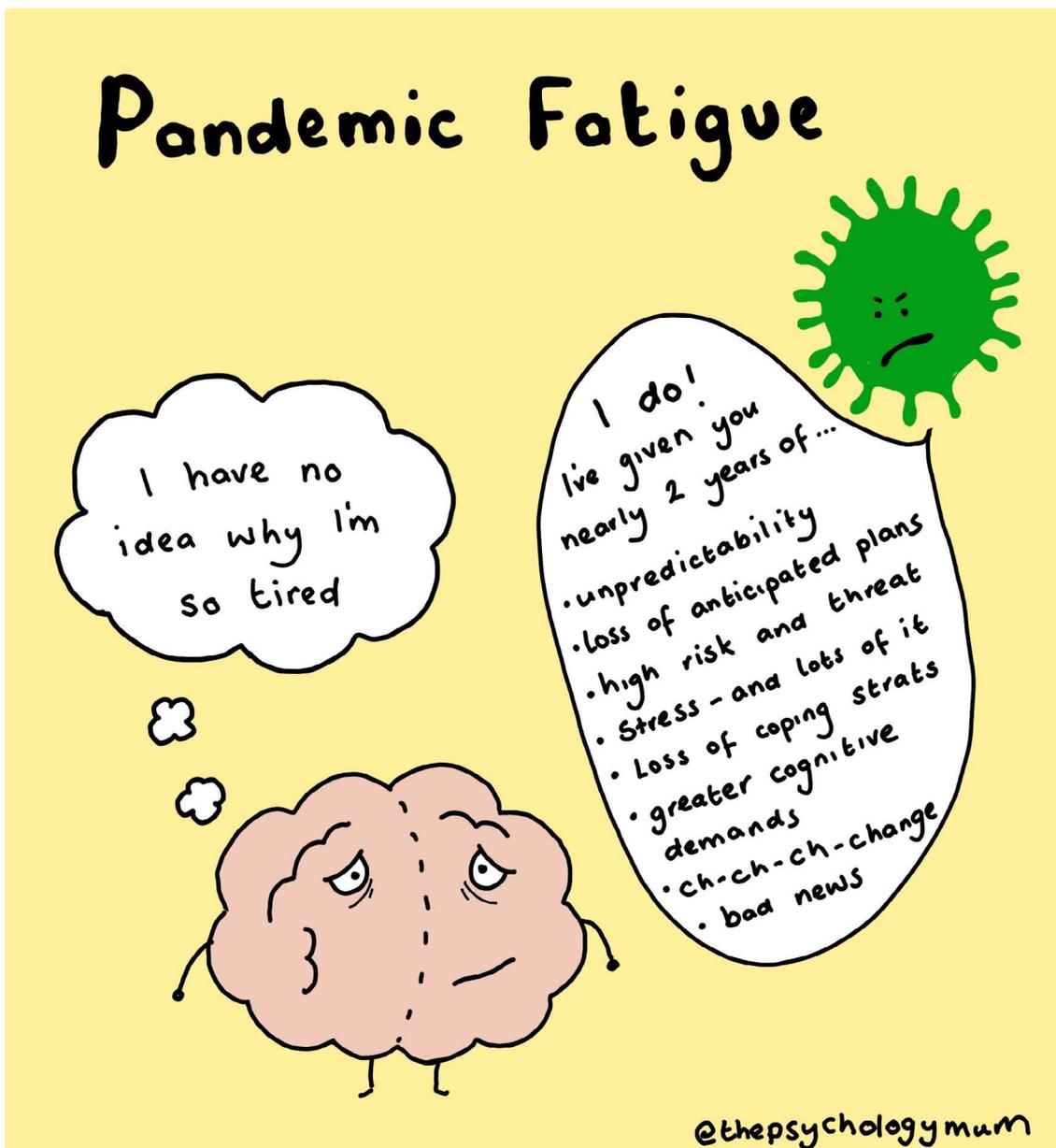


PANDEMIC FATIGUE

I'm tired. Are you tired? It seems everyone is tired. But maybe it's more than tiredness? Are we suffering from fatigue or, perhaps, even exhaustion?

I would describe fatigue as different to tiredness, as it does not resolve with a break, rest or sleep. The NHS website describes fatigue as 'often overwhelming tiredness that isn't relieved by sleep and rest'.

There are many causes of fatigue, including various medical conditions. However, there's growing evidence that the pandemic may be causing increased fatigue. Firstly, Covid itself can cause fatigue and fatigue is a common symptom of long Covid.



However, fatigue can also be caused by chronic stress and people have started to use the term pandemic fatigue to describe the exhaustion or mental exhaustion caused by living through months of uncertainty, stress, unpredictability and change.

This has been a time of high stress and threat, which means we have been using our energy to deal with everything. Our stress response is our body getting revved up so it can be on alert and direct its energy to deal with the stressor. Even after short periods of stress we can feel depleted and tired and our bodies and brains need time to recover from the energy drain.

So, it comes as no surprise that the long-term and chronic stress we are experiencing with little reprieve is depleting our bodies and leaving us fatigued and exhausted. Our stress response has been ramped up for a long time, using our energy and body and brain resources. Combine this with less ability to take time out, to go on holiday or to take proper breaks. Even when we try to, there's still uncertainty and risk involved.

And if it goes on for too long, the depletion we feel can lead to exhaustion, poor health and wellbeing and burnout.

Now, more than ever, proper rest and breaks for our bodies and minds are crucial. Switch off, reduce pressure, plan down time, do things that relax you. Prioritize sleep. Allow your brain and body to switch off. Fatigue won't improve overnight, but allowing your body and brain to have periods to rest will help you stay well in the long-term.

Remember, if you're concerned about fatigue or its impact on functioning please speak to a medical professional.

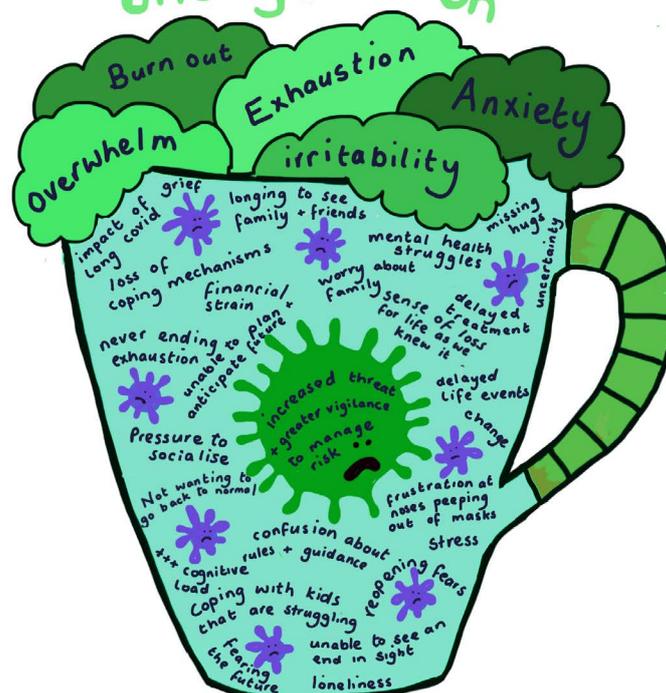
The cup here is pretty full and I've tried to capture them here by theme. The things in your cup are using up your emotional capacity . . . and we all have limited capacity.

It can help to really notice what's in your cup and find ways to manage your capacity to stop it spilling over, if you can. Some key ways to manage capacity are:

- recognize the signs when you are reaching full capacity and break things down so that you can work out what you can tackle.
- don't forget to use your coping strategies.
- seek support when you can.
- kick unnecessary things out of your cup, if possible.
- talk things through with a friend.
- prioritize breaks and rest and recovery periods (even just short ones).
- be kind to yourself and don't beat yourself up for feeling bad or finding things difficult.
- look after the basics . . . eat and drink regularly, prioritize sleep and exercise.

I'm sharing the capacity cup one year on, completed with your responses, as so many of us are still juggling extra demands and stressors at the moment due to the current situation.

The Capacity Cup of Corona Virus Overwhelm one year on



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THE POST HIGH-STRESS SLUMP

It might be worth thinking about how your body's stress reaction affects you and why, as things settle slightly and stress reduces, you can experience a slump.

Your body's stress response is there for a purpose . . . to get your body ready to deal with the stressor, whatever that might be. It does this by releasing glucose into your bloodstream and directing the energy to those places that need it.



This is why stress and anxiety are exhausting, because they use your energy. If it's short term, you will feel exhausted once the immediate stress has passed but recover quickly as your body has plenty of reserves left.

But, if the stressors have been around for a while, your body has had to keep its foot on the gas pedal to supply you with the energy you need. This keeps you

going and you may not notice that your body is depleted, as the stress response keeps you on high alert. Ironically though, this can also disrupt the body's means to replenish – long-term stress can disrupt sleep, interrupt your diet and impact your immune system.

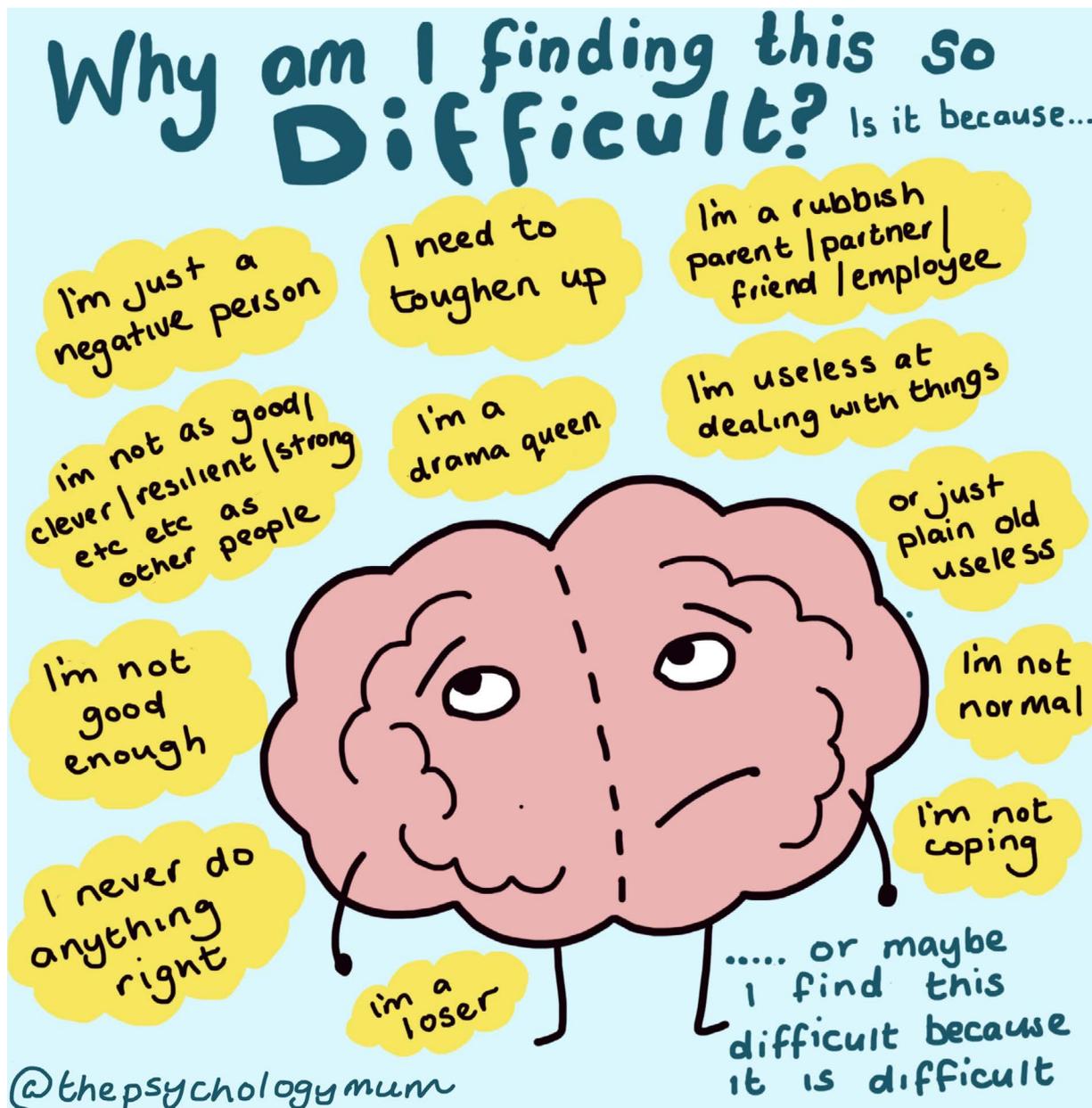
And when the long-term stressor has passed, it doesn't just take one night's sleep or a couple of days for your body to recover – you might need quite some time for your brain to even realize the stress has passed. Your body and brain need to physically recover because they've been functioning at such a high level of energy consumption for a long time. And as the body's stress response drops, it's only then you realize quite how exhausted you are.

So go easy on yourself. If you don't achieve as much as you hoped, or you need to rest more or take things slow, it doesn't mean you are lazy – it just means your body and brain are telling you to take some time to let them recover. Beating yourself up creates more stress and depletes your body more. Try to allow yourself and your body to recover as best you can.

WHY AM I FINDING THIS SO DIFFICULT?

Uncertainty is difficult. Our brains find uncertainty difficult. Normally we manage this by creating plans and anticipating the future with a degree of confidence and assumed accuracy, but that's just not possible right now. Our brains feel stressed because uncertainty and unpredictability is ever present and the future is unknown.

Then on the flip side, our normal coping strategies, which help us deal with stress, are just not available. A relaxing pub visit is an oxymoron right now. A leisurely browse is fraught with tension. Meeting friends has such a degree of added complexity or planning that it's not quite the easy, fun event it should be. Anticipated joy to fill our mind is hard to find, so anticipated dread creeps in instead. As for holidays – the thought of which often keep us going through tough times – well, who knows when they will be back.



It's a double-difficult whammy of increased stress and less availability of coping strategies to deal with that stress. And that is not just double difficult, but exponentially difficult. Often we blame ourselves for how we feel. We think we should be feeling differently or doing better. But sometimes we just find it difficult because it *is* difficult. So, try not to shame the feelings you are having right now, or internalize these to mean something negative about you. Difficult times can result in difficult emotions. That doesn't feel nice, but shaming or blaming yourself just makes it even harder.

Instead, try to recognize and validate how you feel. Everybody's brain is different as are everybody's situation and experiences. Combine these together and it means that how everybody will feel in response to the current situation will be slightly different. Different doesn't mean wrong, differences are the norm with emotions because they are the norm with humans. And difficult emotions are the norm in difficult times, but these need extra care not the additive stress of shame or blame.

JUST SOME EMOTIONS YOU MIGHT FEEL DURING CORONAVIRUS

If only we could fit emotions into discrete little boxes, label them concisely and file them away by category, closing the lid when we don't want them to happen. But this is not how our emotions operate or how we function. Emotions are an integral part of our brain, body and world. We can't always decide what we want



to feel and when. And our emotions don't arrive neatly packaged, one by one, on the conveyor belt that is our lives.

Our emotions can be mixed, contradictory and jumbled. Lots can come at once, bursting out of that box on the conveyor belt. If only it were always as simple as saying 'this happened and therefore I feel this'. Sometimes that is the case. But so many different things affect how we feel that sometimes the emotional jumble can be confusing and difficult to work out.

Whether you can package up your emotions around the current situation into categorical easy-to-understand boxes or your boxes are a jumbled mix of emotions, neither is wrong. Emotions come in a whole range of pick-and-mix colours and feelings are a resulting combination of your individual experiences, thoughts and beliefs, your brain and body functioning and your environment.

Whatever your emotional pick-and-mix looks like, it's not wrong to feel a range of mixed, changeable, overlapping and sometimes contradictory emotions. Emotions can combine in colourful, confusing and sometimes conflicting ways.

ROUTES OFF THE ANXIETY ROUNDABOUT

If we had a graph of anxiety levels at the current time I suspect it would closely follow coronavirus rate graphs – on the rise as cases rise. That's why it's more important than ever for everyone to find ways off the anxiety roundabout.

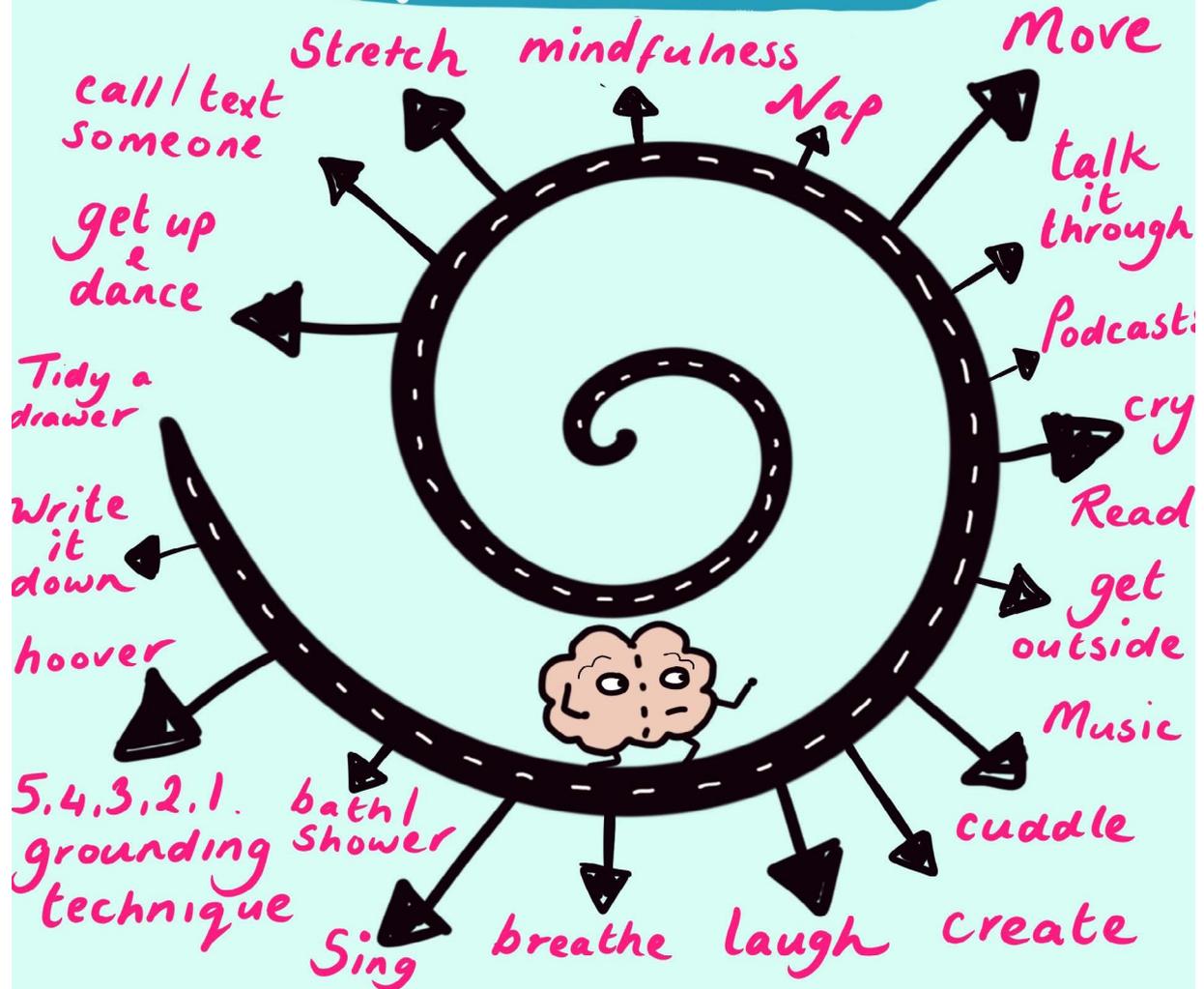
When you're on the anxiety roundabout your body's sympathetic nervous system escalates – adrenaline and cortisol are released to get your body ready to run, hide or fight. This sets off a huge range of physiological sensations – tightened muscles, rapid breathing, shaky extremities, sweaty skin, redness rising, stomach emptying, bowels constricting, burning energy, blood flowing to your limbs. It doesn't feel nice, but it's just physiology . . . it's your body using too much energy and directing this energy in a possibly misguided attempt to be helpful.

What you do at this point can push you further round the anxiety roundabout or it can help you to find a route off. To get off the anxiety roundabout you need to find ways to de-escalate the sympathetic system and try to engage the parasympathetic system instead, which helps you rest and digest, and calm things down.

It's about doing something that changes your physiology . . . exercise is great for this as it uses up extra energy and automatically triggers different chemicals that help calm your body down. But there are lots of different ways to do this – usually these involve a change in what you are doing, shifting your attention or doing something to calm your body. What works for you will be unique to you.

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Routes off the Anxiety Roundabout



These are anxious times: we can't stop being anxious (it's human) and we need to recognize how we are feeling (and not shame ourselves for this).

These are the ways you told me you got off the anxiety roundabout and some of the most common methods people use to de-escalate their sympathetic nervous systems and ramp up their parasympathetic system to help change the physiological reactions that are creating anxiety. I hope some of these help you.

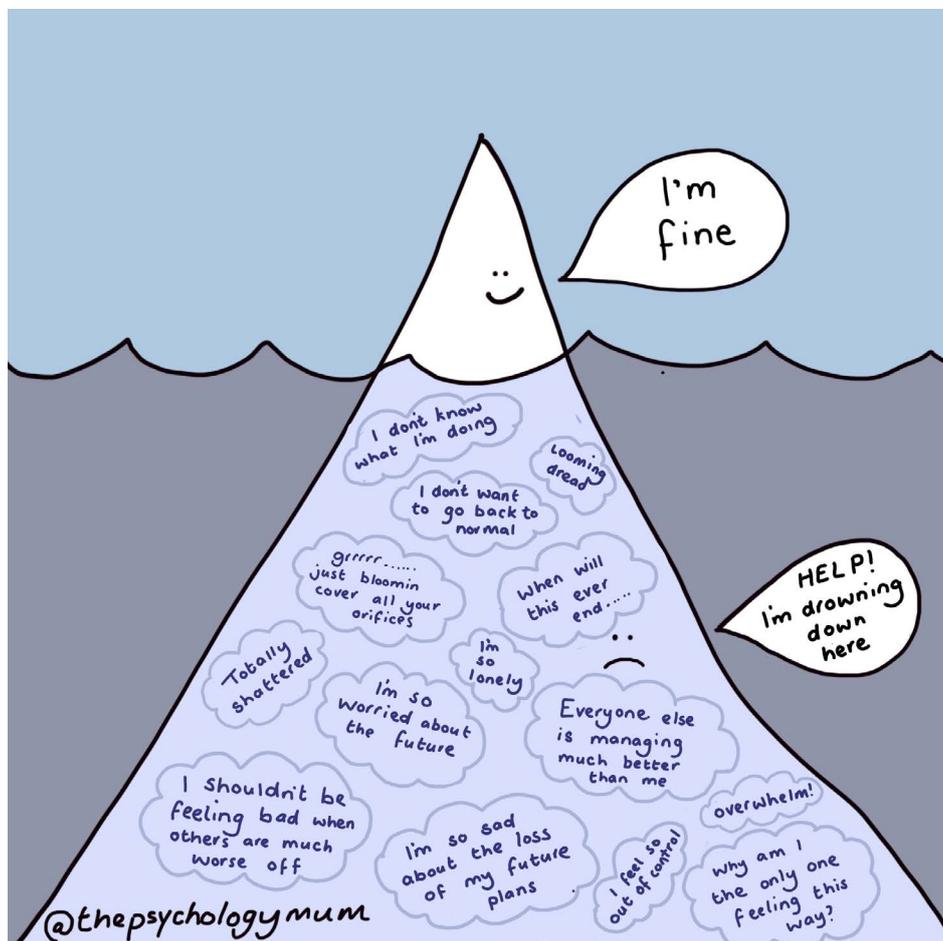
CORONA ICEBERGS

The icebergs are back! But this time it's the Corona icebergs.

We all make comparisons and it can seem we are doing so much worse than those around us. But the reality is we often just don't know what's going on underneath the surface and because of this, we compare our whole iceberg to someone else's iceberg tip, what's showing above the surface. And that's just not a valid comparison.

Not only do we make judgments about ourselves based on these comparisons, but we can make invalid judgments about others too. The person who rudely passed you without saying 'Hi' might be too worried about their financial situation to have the brain space to notice what's going on around them. The friend who keeps turning down zoom invitations might be feeling so overwhelmed by life that speaking to others seems like one step too far. The work colleague who isn't pulling their weight may be so anxious about the potential impact of Covid on their family members that they have to reduce their work duties.

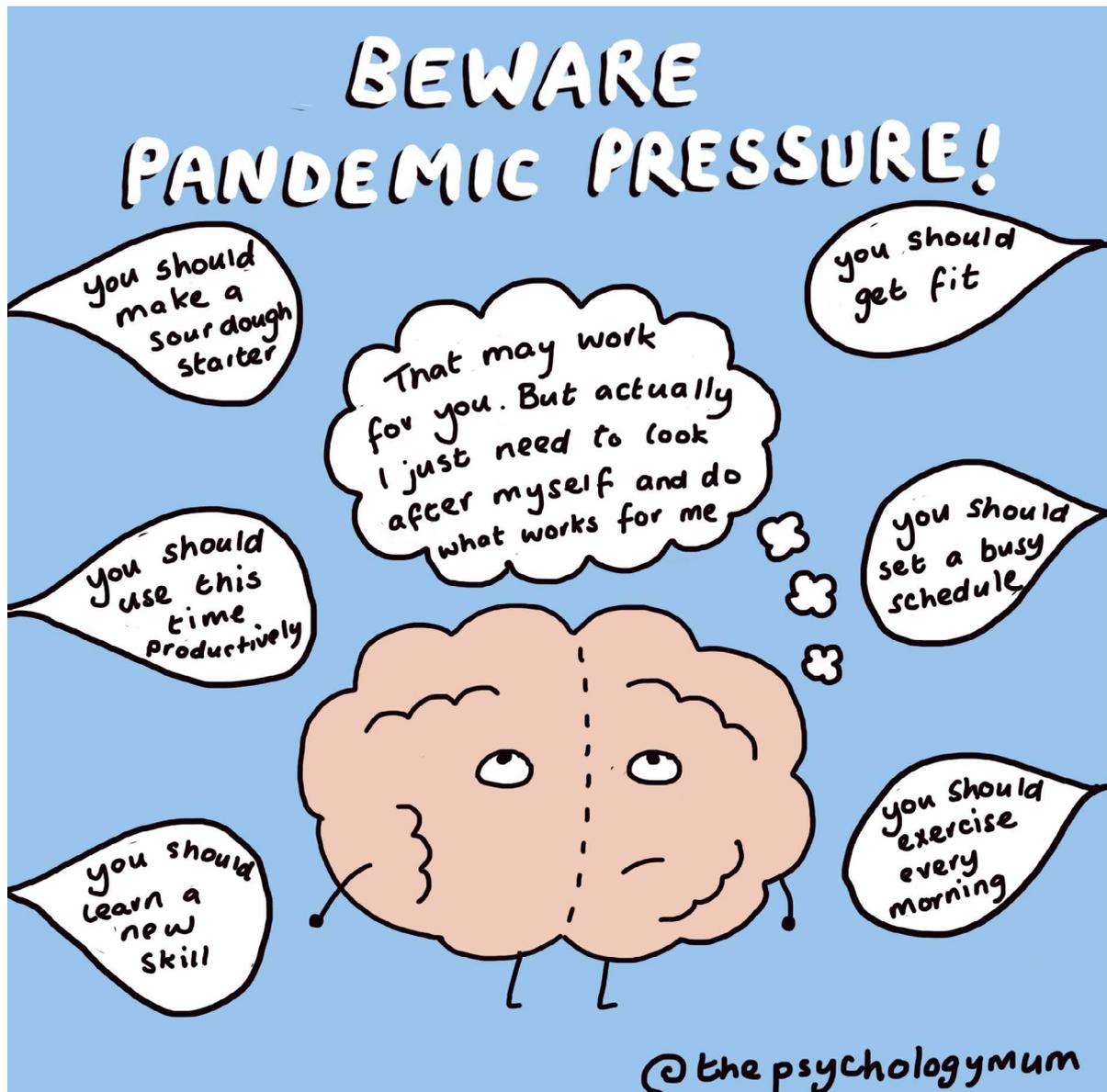
So crush that self-comparison by recognizing you only have part of the picture and widen your compassion by also realizing you only have part of the picture. Because the tip of the iceberg rarely tells the whole story.



BEWARE PANDEMIC PRESSURE

The World Health Organization tells us that not only are we dealing with a pandemic but we are also experiencing an infodemic alongside this. There is so much information out there – some good, some false. Even the good stuff can feel bamboozling as there's just so much of it.

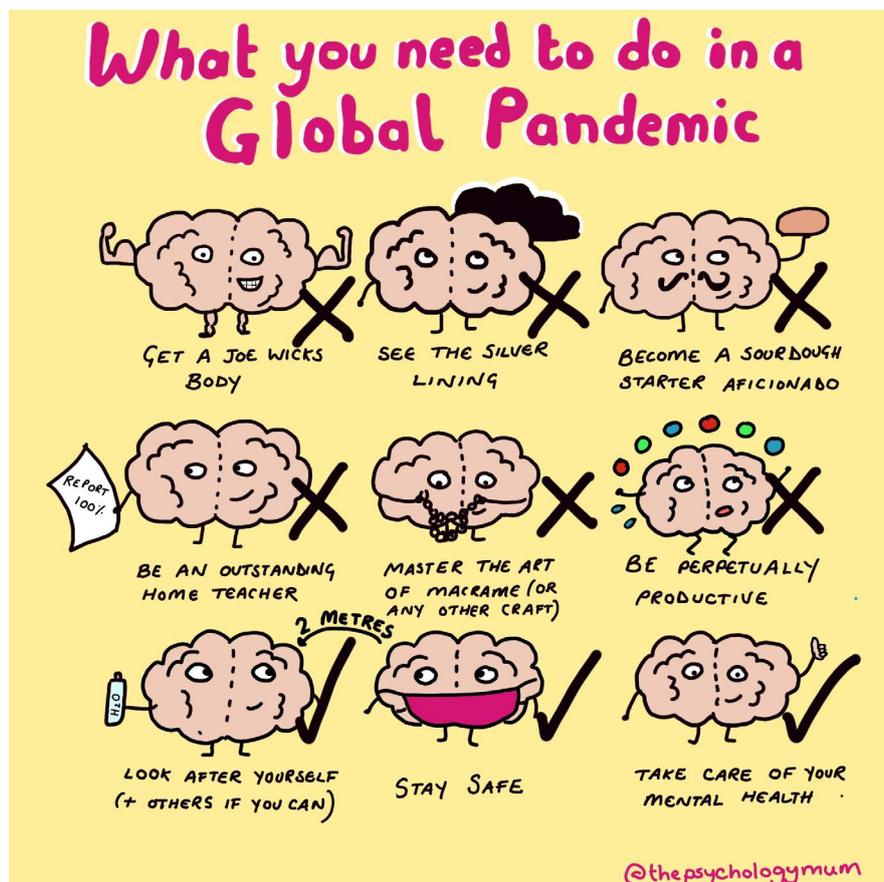
Advice on how to manage and cope can, in itself, become overwhelming. While following the government guidance for COVID-19 is, of course, imperative, when it comes to coping and your mental health, there is NO one correct way to get through this. We all manage and cope in different ways. The priority is looking after yourself, and your loved ones when possible, to help you feel as safe and as comfortable as you can, enabling you to adjust to a different normal. No advice on how to manage can be universally applied and you are not getting it wrong if this doesn't work for you.



WHAT YOU NEED TO DO IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

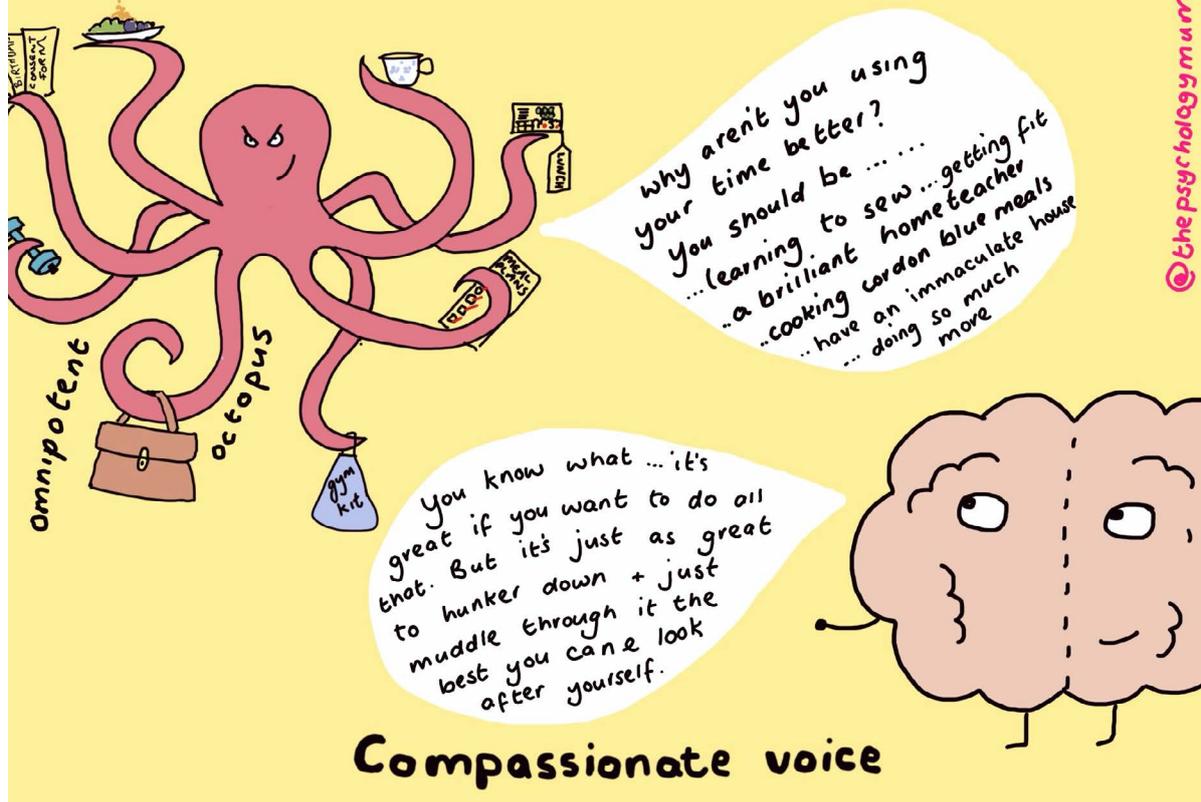
There are many social media posts and articles at the moment suggesting we should be using this time to help others, develop new skills, increase our knowledge and get fit. And there are no shortage of pictures on social media of sourdough starters, fermented food and creative exploits. For some people these activities may be the thing to help them cope and get through this time, and that's great if it is. However, watch out for pandemic pressure – when this type of information leads to comparison and increasing pressure. As @mumologist puts it 'my lockdown is better than your lockdown' or perhaps more likely, you're making the comparison that someone else's lockdown is better than yours.

If you find yourself feeling stressed or overwhelmed about what you SHOULD be doing right now, remind yourself that there is no one right way to get through this time. Take the pandemic pressure off. It is okay to allow yourself time to muddle through and manage as best you can, whatever that looks like. We don't have to emerge at the end of the pandemic as a highly skilled baker with a Joe Wicks body. But we do have to ensure we come through this time looking after ourselves the best we can and feeling as safe and as good as we possibly can, so that we can get to the other side as mentally healthy as possible.



Self-Compassion at a Time of Corona Virus

Inner critic



SELF-COMPASSION AT A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

Coming soon to an Instagram post near you . . . compassion at a time of coronavirus. Set in a dystopian present, featuring your inner critics and starring our superhero, Brian the Brain, fighting against the critics with both compassion and common sense.

At times of high anxiety, like now, feeling stressed or distressed is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. But watch out, because overwhelm and stress are perfect fodder for your inner critic and it likes to insidiously creep in to berate you unfairly when it spots your brain is otherwise occupied. Your inner critic is a threat that triggers your flight, fight and freeze response. Time to oust that inner critic and see it for what it is: a subjective prophet of doom, that feeds on uncertainty and self-doubt and trades in lies, distortions and bending the truth.

Once you've ousted your critic, it's time to fight back with some compassion, using the objectivity we tend to apply to others. We tend to judge ourselves harshly because our view of ourselves is inextricably tied in with our emotions and the stories we hold in our brains about who we are. The subjective nature of your biased brain and beliefs tint how you view your world.

Give yourself the benefit of the objectivity that you tend to give to others. Step back and think. If someone else were in this situation, what would you think about it and what would you say to them? Your levels of objectivity and fairness when viewing another's situation are often much higher than when you view your own.

If you find this is the case, then apply this fairer voice to yourself. Because it is only fair that you have the same level of compassion applied to yourself as you would apply to other people. Compassion calms, soothes and helps you solve the situation.

GRIEVING

Grief has touched so many of us in the last two years and nearly all of us will be touched by grief in our lives.

There are many models of grief. The one pictured here, by Tonkin in 2009, describes the kind of grief that stays with us, and we grow around the grief. We may still operate within grief at times, but increasingly we will be able to experience the life that grows around the grief and live in these circles as well.

Like all models, this is just one description of grief and it will not apply to everyone. However, some people find this model helpful when thinking about grief. If it does not apply to you, this does not mean you are doing anything wrong. There is no one way to experience grief and experiences of grief vary in different people.

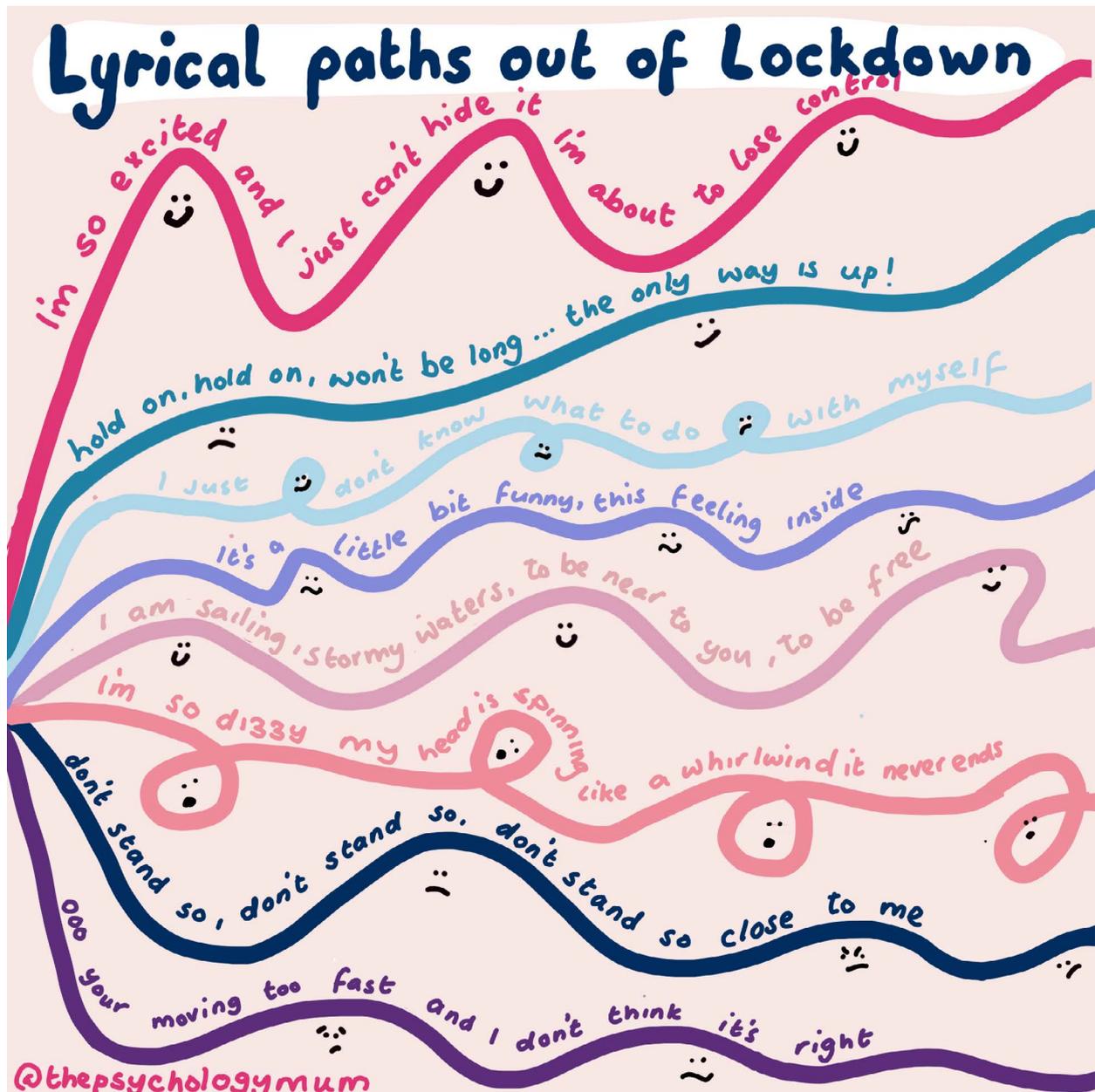


LYRICAL PATHS OUT OF LOCKDOWN

Whether it be . . . 'Hold on, you're going too fast' or 'I'm so excited, I just can't hide it', whatever tune you're singing as restrictions lift in the UK is down to your own personal experiences, preferences and situation.

What I can tell you is that many people are feeling anxious. I've been asked many times in the last few weeks to comment about anxiety on radio and TV shows and for newspaper articles and plenty of people have responded.

Why are we feeling anxious about things that used to feel so normal? Well, we've been living with higher threat levels and with increased vigilance for a long time and it's not so easy for your brain to switch off automatically. Also, many aspects of coping with the pandemic are relatively new, and novelty and uncertainty cause our brains to use lots of resources and



predict risk in new or unknown situations. In addition to this, lots of people have been quite comfortable in their new routine, and some people have actually enjoyed the reduction in demand it's brought, so stepping out of this means stepping out of your comfort zone and that can feel risky (particularly when there is a real risk out there).

So, yes there are many lyrical paths to follow out of lockdown and we may be singing many different songs. There will be as many mixes of emotions and different ways of feeling as there are different people with their personal tastes in music, experiences, personalities and backgrounds. However, these variations don't make you weird or different, because there many people will be singing the same tune as you. It's totally understandable to feel a bit rubbish or stressed (although, if how you feel is getting in the way of life it's always worth considering whether accessing treatment or help would be beneficial to you).

THREE TINY THINGS

Oh, it's all just a bit overwhelming, isn't it?

Balls dropping all over the place because there is simply too much for any human to juggle.

Time expands before us as we find ourselves alone in our homes again.

Our coping strategies have been swiped from us.

We cannot plan too far ahead because we do not know what is coming.

The big picture looks a bit doom and gloom.

It can all feel a bit out of control.

Our heads are all a muddle with all the things our poor brains are having to process.

Capacity cups overfloweth creamola foam style big time.

Stress hangs in the air like an impending storm.

Exhaustion makes it hard to keep on going at our normal level.



We just do not know where to start.

The things we know will improve our wellbeing too much for our motivation.

Our brains feel jaded by the thought of what is to come next.

Attention wanes as our brains feel drained.

We can be unsure how to get through this difficult time.

We get lost knowing where to even start.

I have been thinking about ways to get through tough times. Whatever steps we take, they have to be tiny, because our capacity is at breaking point.

I recently spoke to @thefoodmedic for her podcast and discussed the idea of planning three tiny daily things to get us through tough times such as lockdown.

Tiny things are possible and feel achievable even when we are exhausted, but can still provide structure and anticipation and can impact positively on wellbeing in a range of ways.

So don't aim big. Aim tiny. Each star offers a suggestion for a type of tiny thing that improves wellbeing. The idea is that you choose up to three stars and plan three tiny things to help you achieve the aims of each star. Plan them into your day.

You can plan the night before or in the morning, but make sure your tiny things really are tiny so they feel manageable and achievable.

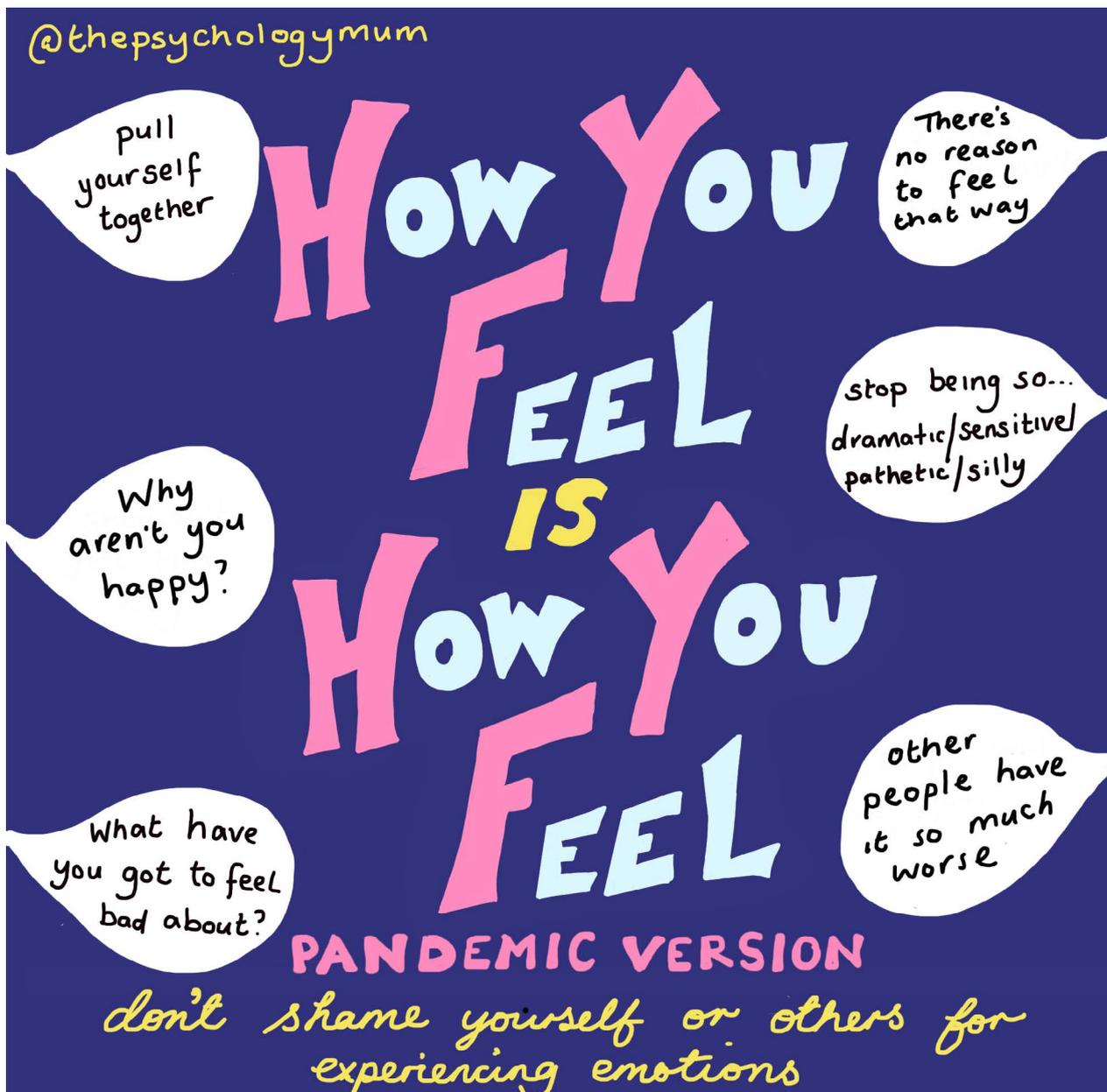
I asked you what tiny things help you get through the day and the most common answers fell into these categories. See my stories for some of these, to get ideas of what you can do in each category.

HOW DO YOU FEEL?

Happy, sad, excited, nervous, hopeful, cautious. There are a million or more different mixes of emotions you might be feeling as a result of the pandemic and potential plans to get out of lockdown in the UK.

How you feel will depend on your personal mix of experience, situation, characteristic, current life events, support and much more. And because each person's individual mix of circumstances is slightly different, how you feel will be unique to you and your situation. There is no one right way to feel and we should not judge how we or other people feel, because emotions are unique, individual, varied, mixed and complex.

Judging our emotions negatively increases stress. Conversely recognizing and validating emotions helps us process and respond to them helpfully.



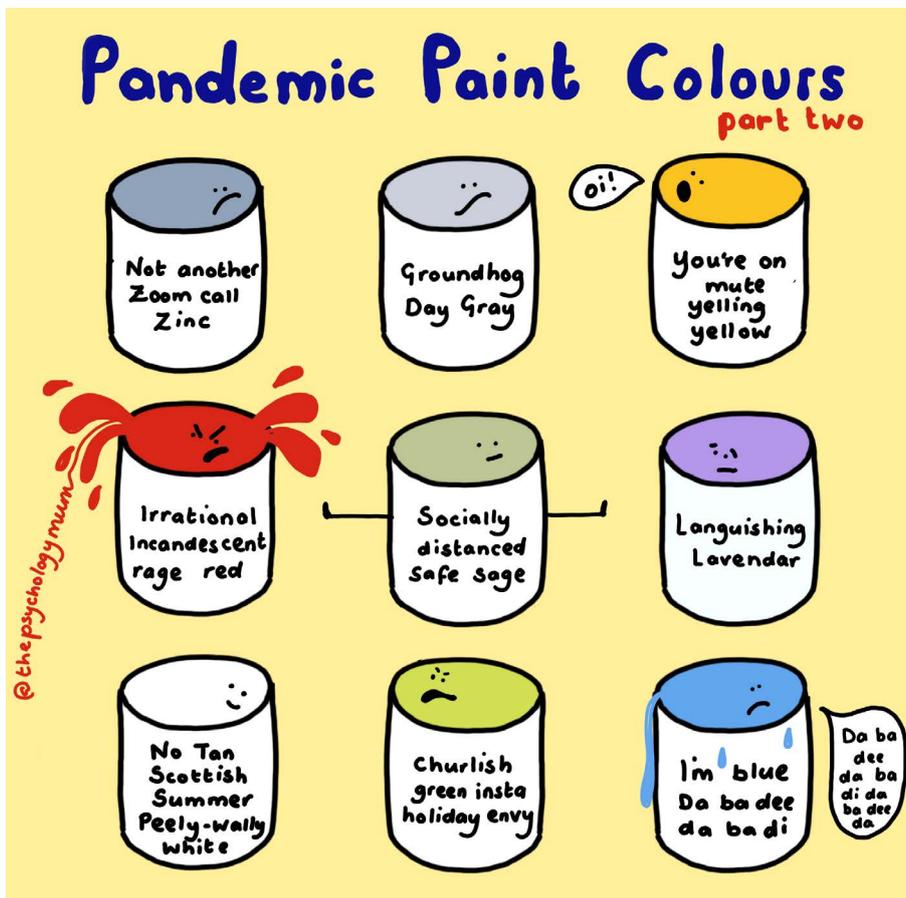
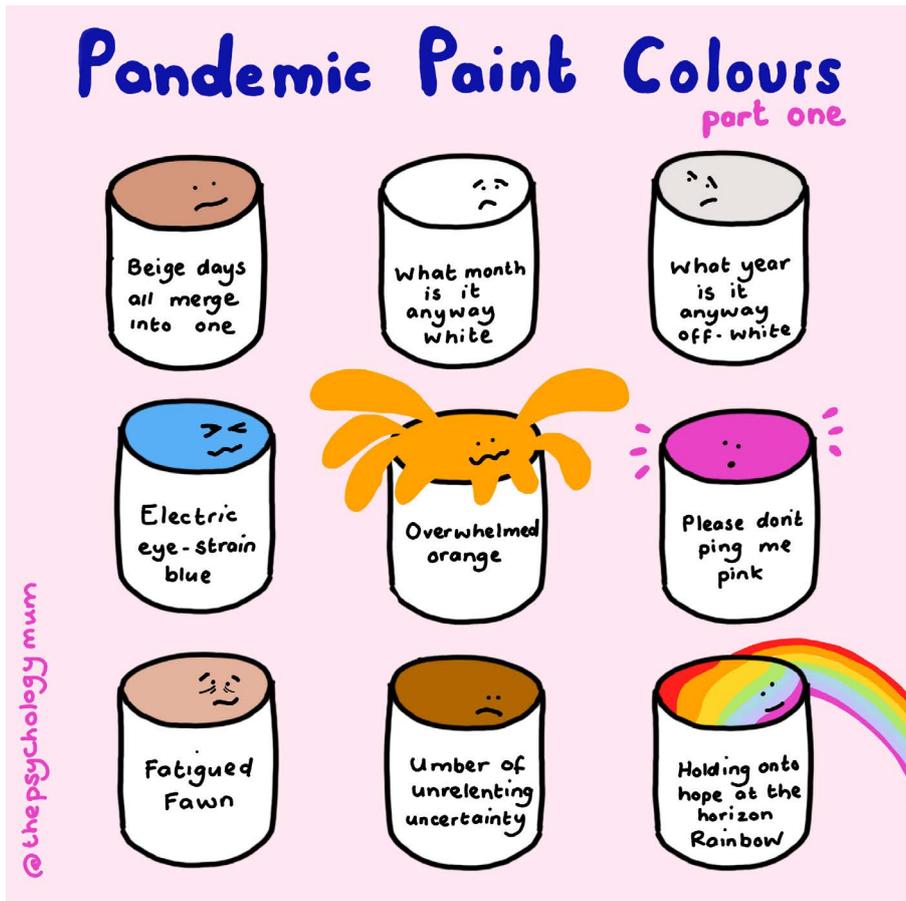
By validating our emotions we are trying to stop shaming ourselves for the way we feel. We're recognizing the emotions we feel and, instead of adding another layer of difficult emotions by criticizing ourselves for feeling this way, we're changing how we respond to our emotions. We're accepting that how we feel is how we feel, and that may be difficult at times but it's okay and we have done nothing wrong in feeling this way.

This won't necessarily make the original emotions better or take them away – that's not what we are aiming to do. But it can stop a negative cycle of beating ourselves up for experiencing emotions (a necessary process our brain has developed over millennia) and halt the cascade of negative emotions that result from shaming ourselves, and our brains for doing what they've evolved to do.

Emotions can sometimes get in the way of life and if emotions do start making your life difficult then you may need some extra help, and that's part of recognizing and validating emotions, too.

There are millions of versions of normal when it comes to emotions, so whatever you feel make sure you don't make yourself feel bad, or worse, for feeling that way. And if it feels difficult, try to use this as a sign to look after yourself instead of a stick to beat yourself up with.

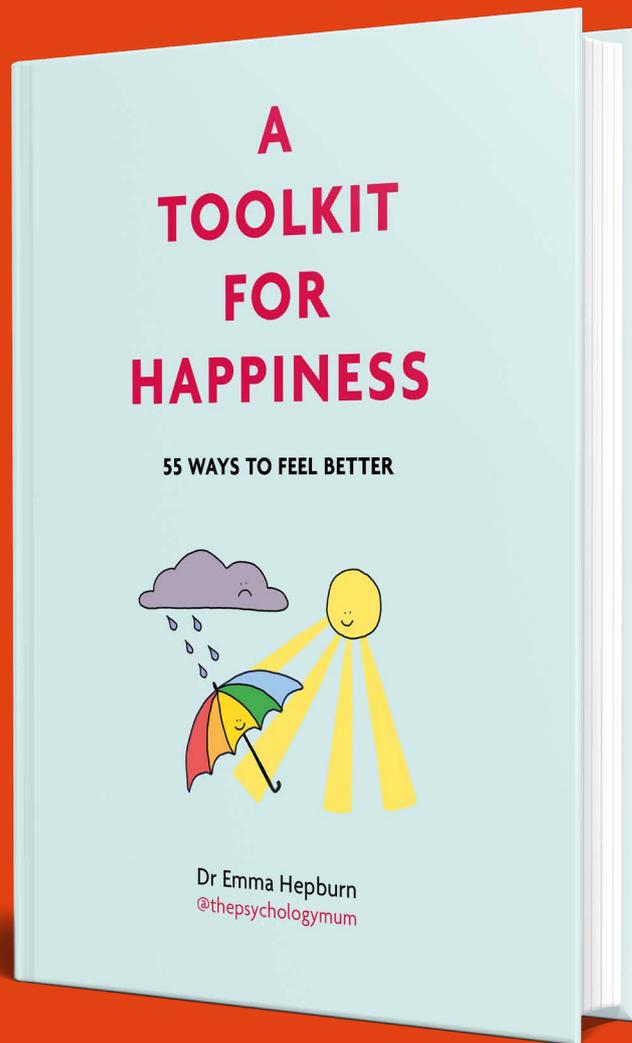
PANDEMIC PAINT COLOURS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Emma Hepburn is a clinical psychologist, with expertise in neuropsychology, who has over 15 years' experience of working with and treating mental health difficulties in both the public and private sector. She is passionate about bringing psychology and evidence-based mental health information beyond the clinic room to a wider audience and encouraging people to proactively look after their mental health. Her illustrative work has been used by a number of organisations including The American Association for the Prevention of Suicide, The Royal Society of Public Health and the Samaritans (India). She writes as @thepsychologymum on Instagram and has recently won a Bronze Lovie (Best of European Internet) award, as well as a Peoples' Choice Lovie, for her social media work, and has been shortlisted for the mind Media Awards.

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