

# The art of the MENTALLY HEALTHY CONVERSATION



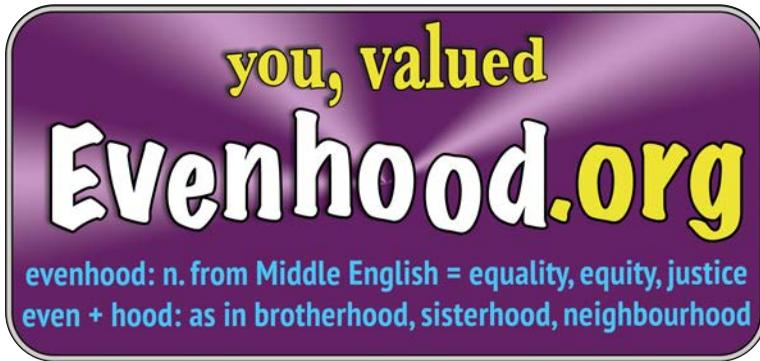
**Jonathan Phelan**



**The art of the**  
**MENTALLY HEALTHY**  
**CONVERSATION**

**Jonathan Phelan**

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Evenhood's purpose is to help people manage their mental wellbeing,  
strengthen their resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.  
Evenhood also helps workplaces, schools and universities improve mental  
health outcomes through the educational provision of Training, Coaching,  
Speeches, Books and Online Materials.

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## Dedications

To Theo: for making your mark on the world.

To Aly and the boys: for your love and support.

To Lauren Ward: for the wonderful illustrations.

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To the fictional Jack and the real others: for being among the greatest teachers in life.





**Jonathan Phelan**

# **THE ART of the MENTALLY HEALTHY CONVERSATION**

## **Dear reader**

I invite you to come on a journey with me. Join me on my quest to find my Holy Grail - which is to discover a better way for me to manage my mental wellbeing, strengthen my resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.

Would you be my boss for a while? Listen to me as I ask for your support with my mental wellbeing and let's see if you can help.

As you join me on this journey, you'll discover that it's a misconception that mental health is all about our mind and that only science, medicine and therapy can help when things are difficult.

Mental health is also about our environment. In the right environment we feel comfortable and can thrive. In more challenging environments we may struggle. Once you discover that, your job as my boss becomes so much easier. All of a sudden, you'll become a mental health expert - because as my boss you can provide me with an environment that supports my wellbeing.

If you can do it for me (and you can) then you can do it for yourself, and you can do it for others. You can be among the growing number of people willing to build a culture of mutual support for wellbeing.

“The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation” will change your mind about mental wellbeing. And then you'll be able to change lives, including your own, for the better.

**All the very best**

**Jonathan**

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# PREFACE

The tardigrade is a creature so minuscule that we would expect it to be vulnerable, weak and utterly lacking in resilience. Yet it has been dubbed the most resilient creature on earth.

Despite its microscopic size, the tardigrade is able to survive the heat of the desert as well as freezing temperatures. It can cope with extreme pressures in the depths of the ocean. It even has the ability to survive the vacuum of space and exposure to radiation.

Somewhere between the first and second editions of this book it was reported in the media that thousands of these tiny creatures were made passengers on a spaceship sent to the moon. As if that weren't challenge enough, the craft that transported them crashed into the moon. Despite that, it's believed that the tardigrades survived.

The seemingly vulnerable, microscopic tardigrade is an illustrative contradiction to challenge what we think of as being resilient.



**Apparent vulnerability can, in fact, achieve great resilience in the right circumstances. That's true for mental wellbeing too. It is possible to achieve great resilience despite having mental wellbeing challenges.**

You are about to join me on a journey to discover my Holy Grail, which is to find a better way to manage my wellbeing, strengthen my resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.

For the duration of this journey, you're going to be my boss - the person I go to for support. And we'll keep plugging away at the conversation until we get it right.

Innumerable studies show that people choose to avoid talking about their mental health because they think they're more likely to receive stigma, than support. Further studies show that when people do attempt a conversation about their mental health, poor outcomes tend to follow.

It's not the studies and statistics though; it's the human stories that concern me. Stories of talented, motivated, capable people who end up carrying a private, painful burden.

People who endure a public humiliation, distress and stigma. People who would surely mention to their boss that they had a physical injury or illness but who go to quite some effort to hide their mental health challenges. More-to-the-point, people whose mental health challenges would be more manageable if they could have a conversation at an early stage.

These challenges would be less likely to progress, if only they could have a conversation that worked. They would be less likely to need medical interventions, if only they could have an early conversation and receive support, rather than stigma.

These human stories aren't just about those with mental wellbeing challenges. Much of my career has been spent in management and leadership roles and this gave me an insight into the other side of the mental health conversation.

It takes two to have a conversation and those on the other side of the conversation have corresponding fears. What on earth are you expected to do as a boss when someone comes up to you and talks about self-harm, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive

disorder, post-traumatic stress and so on?

This is scary stuff. The sense of responsibility is an enormous burden. The lack of specialist knowledge is an obstacle. Surely, unless you happen to be a psychologist, therapist or medically trained in some other way, your chances of being able to help are slim to non-existent. In an instant you shift from being a competent boss to instead being completely out of your depth. You are no longer the person with the answers, insights and opinions; and this doesn't sit well with the perception of your role.

My own encounter with the limitations of my mental resilience came after the death of our son. I hesitated for years over talking about my mental health and how it had suffered following the death of our baby son. So, I didn't talk about it; at home, at work, to friends, family or anyone. But it got to the point when I realised that my condition wouldn't improve unless I started to talk about it.

So, in the end I did talk about it. And what people expect me to say at this point is that I really wish that I'd talked about it sooner because things got so much better. But I'm not going to say that, because it isn't the case and that isn't the point of this book.

The courage it took to talk about my mental health is the first notably bizarre feature. You don't need courage to tell anyone that you have the flu, a broken leg, arthritis and so on. Yet people sense that they need to be courageous to talk about their mental health. Those who speak out about mental health across the media and in social media are widely congratulated for taking a brave step.

I agree. They are brave. But when you reflect on the fact that people who talk about their mental health are considered brave, this is a sad reflection on society and our organisations.

**It's normal to have mental health challenges from time to time. What's not normal is that we have to hide it, for fear of stigma or lack of support. What's also not normal is that we have to be "brave" to talk about it.**

From the moment I first opened up about my mental wellbeing my journey was bumpy<sup>1</sup>. I experienced both stigma and lack of support. In fact, things got significantly worse and my mental health deteriorated rather than improved because of the way some people behaved - so much so that I needed additional treatment and medication that I hadn't needed before. That was an amazing consequence of me opening up about my mental health.

Among the first words uttered in response to my taking what seemed like a brave and tentative step towards getting support were these:

“I'm surprised you can climb into a suit in the morning.”

Perhaps this was intended sympathetically. Perhaps it was an acknowledgement of the enormity of the impact that my experience of death had had on me and my mental health.

Perhaps.

It came across as revealing a view that I was not ill, but weak and incapable - even to the point of not being able to dress for work in the morning; rather than someone who was good at their job, albeit with some mental wellbeing challenges.

All of this bothers me. People ought to be able to talk about their mental health. But many feel that they can't. People ought to be able to get support. But many feel that they don't. People ought not feel the brutality of stigma when they are ill. But many do.

**As problem statements go, this is about as big as they come. All of this goes to show that the way organisations and society handle mental health is in need of a solution. After my experience it became my mission to find the Holy Grail to this particular problem.**

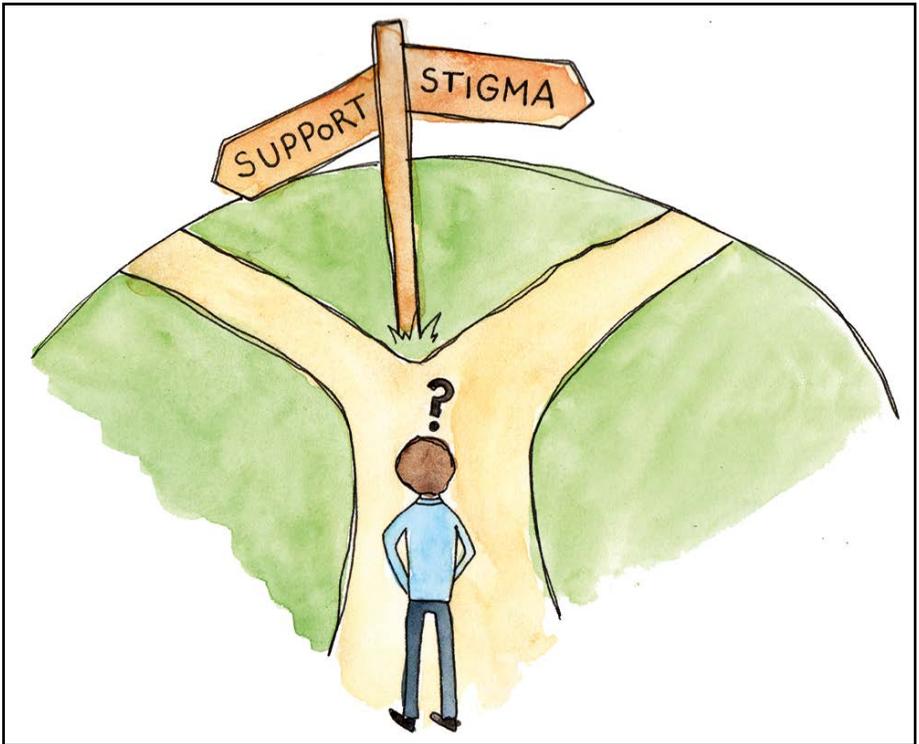
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<sup>1</sup> Since the first edition of this book many have perceptively asked whether this is an understatement. I've been encouraged to “serve the cause” better by calling out the bad behaviour more explicitly. My answers to these points are as follows. Yes, it is an understatement. However, I see no present benefit in diverting attention from the main message of this book by exposing in full detail the treatment I received. That's a different story and I'm not an angry activist. I wish to focus my energy on supporting those in need; not attacking those who behaved as they did.

So, I went on a quest in search of that Holy Grail. How could I make it so that people can have mentally healthy conversations and get the support they need?

Along the way I not only discovered a solution to that problem, I also discovered how we can all better manage our mental wellbeing and strengthen our resilience.

“The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation” invites you to join me on the journey I took in search of that Holy Grail and the answers that I arrived at.



# PART ONE

## Mentally UnHealthy Conversations



This book deals with mental health and that's a delicate subject. So, I just need to start with a small warning. This part of the book in particular covers how mental health conversations often don't go well. To demonstrate why they don't go well I'm going to talk about my own mental health challenges. This means that I'll be going into just a bit of detail about my experience of a child bereavement. Actually, only enough to convey what I need to convey about why mental health conversations are prone to going wrong.

It's appropriate to warn you that this does touch on the stillbirth of our son, Theo, in late pregnancy. And I go into a bit of detail about my subsequent experience of post-traumatic stress disorder and the flashbacks and flashforwards that come with it.

If these subjects are likely to be uncomfortable for you then you may want to weigh up the benefit for you in reading this book, or parts of it, against that potential downside.

My story is covered in some detail in Chapters Two and Four which you may decide to avoid if this could prove challenging to read.

# Chapter 1

## The Fisher King

Before we get to the reality of my situation, let's lay the groundwork by talking about a film called "The Fisher King". This film provides a wonderful insight into how we can find a better approach to mental wellbeing.



The film has two main characters. The first is Parry, played by the great comic actor Robin Williams.

In the film, Parry is a mad vagrant. He sleeps rough in the basement of a building, and probably out on the streets. He wears rags and we see him throughout the film having strange visions of a red knight on horseback, who is breathing fire. Parry is the sort of character that you, and I, frankly, wouldn't want anything to do with, because he comes across as a complete nutter.

There's an irony here - because as you may be aware, Robin Williams ultimately died by suicide having experienced his own mental health challenges in life. I recall reading an article (in The Guardian newspaper from September 2014) about an interview with Terry Gilliam, the Director of "The Fisher King", who commented on just how impressed he was with Robin Williams' portrayal of Parry. It was only after the actor's sad ending to his life, that it became clear that the

madness portrayed through Parry's character perhaps reflected some of Robin Williams' own inner challenges. As well, of course, as his superb comic acting skills.

The other character is Jack, who is played by Jeff Bridges. Jack is completely different to Parry. He's a full-of-himself, know-it-all, Radio DJ who thinks he has all the answers. Jack is the sort of person who bounces through life like Tigger - without an apparent care in the world. He's in the world for himself and he's going to get as much out of it as possible. Jack lives at the top of the tree because he's the alpha male. He's the boss.

The film starts with Jack taking calls from the public on his radio programme. This is one of those problem call-in shows, where members of the public phone in to discuss their problems on air.

The film starts with an incredible dialogue. At first it comes across as a bit of a throwaway, warm-up, comic dialogue. Merely a vehicle to introduce Jack's character. But it is much more than that. You realise later that this dialogue represents the sort of stigma-inducing behaviour that the film was made to shine a light on.

In this dialogue, Jack and a lady caller talk about a problem she has with her husband. She explains to Jack that her husband drives her "crazy" because he "never lets me finish my sentence". And then we see Jack mockingly interrupting every sentence she utters before telling her that someone ought to hit her over the head.

Being perfectly honest; when you don't know what the rest of the film is about; this scene is funny. That is why the dialogue is clever. We don't see what is coming, so we initially side with Jack's comic mockery.

Jack speaks to his callers. He doesn't listen to them. He's not actually interested in fixing his callers' problems. All he wants to do is to speak to them, with this kind of mocking, comic insensitivity; because in reality he just wants to use his callers as a vehicle to entertain his other listeners.

And we, the audience, laugh at this amusing, seemingly innocuous opening scene. But, having sucked us into being one of Jack's entertained fans, we then move up a level of seriousness to the next caller, who is a guy called Edwin.

Edwin reveals his problem - a seeming inability to get any interest

from the opposite sex. And Jack's response is to taunt him, with the same sort of mocking insensitivity.

The audience is then taken to a scene that evening where the euphoric Jack, thrilled by his own power and invincible majesty, is at home celebrating his fame, energised by the adoration he receives from his audience. His euphoria is cut short, however, by a television news flash which reveals that Edwin, driven by Jack's insensitive remarks, went to a restaurant and killed seven women, before turning the gun on himself.

The film picks up the story again three years later. Jack, of course, has lost his job because of that insensitivity which led to such a tragic ending. We see Jack out wandering the streets, drinking. He ends up standing on the edge of a river and we see him tie two bricks to his feet. But before he can throw himself in, two thugs come along and beat him up for being a drunk.

Then Parry turns up. We first see him with the backdrop of the night mist, standing on the bonnet of a car holding a circular metal dustbin lid, like it's a shield. And although he's dressed in rags, he behaves like he's a knight in shining armour and he beats the thugs away and saves Jack.

Shortly after this we find Jack and Parry together in Parry's den. This isn't his home. He has nothing so grand. His den is no more than the shabby basement of a block of flats. It's here where we get a glimpse into just how mad Parry is, because there's a scene where he looks up into the middle distance as if he can see someone. There's no-one there; but he tells Jack that "the little people" (who only he can see and no-one else can) say that Jack is "The One" who can help him find his Holy Grail.

The final introductory scene is where we see that one of Parry's few possessions is a script, for what we assume is a film or a play, neatly typed on loose-leaf paper, with a title of "The Fisher King".

By this point, our expectation as an audience is that the film is going to be a great comic adventure with our mad Parry and the fallen alpha male Jack going on a wild goose chase in search of a Holy Grail that probably doesn't even exist.

But it's not that at all.

While it is a great comedy, it's also deadly serious. Because as the film unfolds it turns out that Parry's search for his Holy Grail is actually his search to get the support that he needs for his mental health problems.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'll come back to the film later. Because in our search for how to have a mentally healthy conversation, it turns out that the solution lies with our mad Parry and a Fool. But we'll leave "The Fisher King" for now, save for one final point, which is this: in just the same way that mad Parry invited Jack to be The One, to help him find his Holy Grail; I'd like to invite you to be The One to help me find my Holy Grail.

I'd like you to be my Jack. Come on a conversational journey with me and help me find my Holy Grail - which is to get the support I need for my mental health condition. I'd like you to be my boss. So, as you read this book, climb into your boss suit and come on this journey with me.



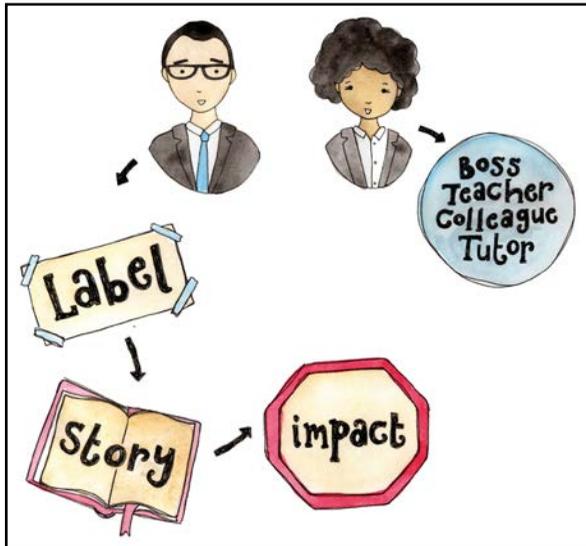
Once you've worked through this experiential and practical role, I assure you that you'll not just learn the theory of how to have a mentally healthy conversation; you will be able to do it. You will be able to talk about your own mental health with others; and you will be able to provide support to others who talk about their mental health with you.

## Chapter 2

### Label and Story

Let's start this conversation. This is the unhealthy version of the conversation. As my boss you're now sitting with me in a meeting arranged for us to discuss my wellbeing.

We'll see later that conversations about mental health don't happen as often as they should. When they do happen, people tend to use the following framework for talking about their mental health. They tell you what they've got (the "Label"); they tell you how they got it or how it arises (the "Story") and they tell you what it does to them (the "Impact").



I'll start with the label for my condition. I have post-traumatic stress disorder. And, when that's really bad, I suffer from depression too.

As for my story; well, my story starts with an umbilical cord.

When you think about it - which I often do - the umbilical cord is an amazing piece of biology. Like some sort of flexible straw, it provides essential nutrients from mother to baby. Each year in the UK

up to a million babies are delivered. A few years ago, one of them; just one in those million babies, had a faulty umbilical cord because it was on the thin side.

It was actually big enough to allow the baby to grow to a perfectly good size. He was practically ready to be delivered. In fact, had he arrived a few weeks early, he would have been fine. But he didn't arrive early; and the cord was just thin enough that when a small clot travelled through it, it got blocked, a bit like a pea getting stuck in a straw.

That one-in-a-million baby is Theo. And he's the first child that my wife and I were expecting.

His death was sudden. His heart just stopped as the nutrients being delivered to his body were blocked. His death was traumatic. It happened during the night, when my wife noticed that the movements appeared to have stopped. At that point I was 200 miles away. I was staying away from home for work.

This was clearly tragic. It turned our lives upside down. Of course, I joined my wife as soon as I could. Jumping into the car in the early hours of the morning I made what became an awful, long and lonely 200 mile drive to be with her. Going straight to the hospital I was met by a midwife who took me to my wife.

We walked down seemingly endless corridors; the end of which held something that I had no idea how to handle and no experience to tell me what to expect.

Even though Theo had died before he was born, I do have two caring paternal interactions with Theo in my memory which I treasure.

The first was late in the pregnancy when I got home one night from work, having been working away from home for a few days. As I came through the door, I could tell that my wife had had a tough day. Probably a tough few days. So, to try and brighten things up I bent down to my wife's pregnant bump and I spoke to Theo, asking him how things were in there. I then placed my ear against the bump as if listening intently to what Theo would say back to me.

My intention was that this daft act would make my wife smile. But I wasn't prepared for what actually happened. Because as soon as I spoke to Theo and then placed my ear against the bump, I felt an

excitable kick to the side of my head, in response to my voice.

I cannot begin to say how thrilling this interaction with Theo was. It was a joy and a delight. It still makes my heart leap with joy even now, years later. That sort of experience would probably bring joy to any parent. A treasured memory among many in the experience of raising a child.

It holds particular joy for me because, as it turned out, this was to be my only, ever, living interaction with Theo.

There are moments in my own madness, when I am even jealous of my wife because she had the pleasure of these kind of moments - the kicks and the wriggles - on many occasions during the pregnancy. While I got just this one chance.



I said that I had two paternal interactions with Theo. My only other interaction with Theo was after he died. Then I got to stroke his cheek, hold his hand, and stroke his hair. I sometimes regret not holding him fully, but I just couldn't handle this emotionally. The offer was there from one of the wonderfully supportive midwives; but I just couldn't face feeling the literal dead weight of him, with no sign of life.

I wanted to remember him, and I do, as a beautiful, full-cheeked, dark-haired baby with fresh baby skin and chubby soft-skinned hands.

Those memories come from the four hours we had with him after he died.

Four hours. That's it. That was our entire life with Theo. We had just four hours because we'd chosen to have a post-mortem to tell us

what went wrong. Theo was our first child together and so we thought we should find out what went wrong, so that we could later make a decision about whether to try for more children. So, Theo had to be taken away within four hours to give us the best chance of getting some answers to the question of what had gone wrong.

We then had to wait seven weeks while the post-mortem took place fifty miles away at a Children's Hospital. Years later I gave a speech about "The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation" to the wonderful theatre-recovery staff at that very Children's Hospital in meeting rooms just a few steps away from where Theo had spent the vast majority of his post-delivery existence. That was an eerie and somewhat emotional experience but also one in which I was able to detect a tangible positive outcome to Theo's all-too-brief existence. Theo had made a mark on the world, for the better. I know this from the feedback I get from people about the work I do through Evenhood to help them manage their wellbeing, strengthen their resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.

Once his body was returned to us, I gave the eulogy at Theo's funeral. I spoke badly. Some pre-prepared words about what we had hoped for, and what wasn't to be. A few thoughts about how this felt and about how those feelings would make us stronger.

During my struggles through the eulogy I saw my father in the congregation take a pace forward on several occasions as if to offer to take over from me. He would have shouldered that difficult burden because he will have wanted to have relieved me of carrying it. Our eyes met several times for a wordless exchange. His saying: "Let me". Mine replying: "No".

This was not a burden that I wanted to be relieved of. I wouldn't be speaking as Theo's dad at any event for him again. I had to do it that one time.

Afterwards my father gave me some advice about how to speak publicly in such awfully distressing and emotional circumstances. That advice was to practise the speech out loud, word for word if possible and over and over again until the delivery is focused only on the people for whom the talk is being given - to convey to them the things they need to hear, unencumbered by emotion or distractions that would

detract from the impact of the message. With sufficient practice, the personal emotion becomes exhausted and your entire energy is focused on serving the audience.

The next time I gave a eulogy was some years later, in the same church, and with a hand on my father's coffin, speaking to a congregation of over 300 people who had been touched over the years by his selfless focus on others.

His advice carries through to this day and it strengthens me when I speak, coach, train and write about Theo and the lessons I am able to convey from my experience of his death. I am often asked how I can summon up the ability to speak about my experience of Theo's death and the mental health challenges it left me with.

There are three things that give me the willpower to do this. First, the strength given to me by my father - how he taught me selfless service for others, both in the aftermath of Theo's funeral and throughout our lives together. Second, the desire given to me by Theo, to give his short life meaning and purpose. Third, the resolve given to me by my experience of stigma and lack of support - to put right the injustice that sees individuals with mental health challenges written-off as if they are weak and incapable.

Having given his eulogy, I then carried Theo, in his little white coffin, down the aisle of the church. I placed his coffin on my knee in the funeral car and then I carried him to be buried. I know it sounds mad that I did this; but I realised at the time that while my wife had carried him for nearly nine months, this was going to be the only occasion on which I would be able to do something for Theo.

Shortly after the funeral I returned to work. I remember my journey to work. I have a poor memory in general; but occasionally there is an event so seminal that I remember every detail. This was one of those occasions - I remember the day, the train journey, where I sat, what the weather was like and so on. It was on that journey that I realised that my mind wasn't the same as the last time I went to work. It was on that journey that I realised that I had been so traumatised by this experience that I now had some sort of problem. It wasn't long before I knew that the impact of this experience on me was that I now had a mental health problem.

## Chapter 3

### How Do You Feel?

We're now part-way through our conversation and I just want to pause for a moment to ask how you feel.

So. Boss. How do you feel?

I ask, because I know from my talks that, by this point, there are members of the audience who are feeling the emotion in this. I'd like you to learn from this.

Think about it for a few moments. How do you feel right now, having had the first part of this conversation with me? Because this is often how mental health conversations go. When people pluck up the courage to talk about their mental health, they will often talk about a major event which illustrates their mental wellbeing challenge. Or (as in my case) they will talk about the event that led to their mental wellbeing challenge.

And what do you think? Just pausing right now, having heard my story, do you think you might know of some way in which you could support me? Because that's what you are aiming to do as my boss. Your commitment is to help me find my Holy Grail and get the support I need for my mental health challenges.

Just pause now and reflect on how you feel and what you think. What do you suggest you could do, to support me? Are you brimming with ideas, or stuck?

Also have a think about what your sense of responsibility is. As my boss, how responsible are you feeling right now, for how to support me?

## Chapter 4

### Impact

To complete the picture, I need to tell you about the impact of this on me. The impact is this: after Theo died; every day - both awake and asleep - I relived his death.

I relived standing in the garden at three in the morning with my wife because neither of us could sleep.

I relived the funeral - the eulogy, carrying Theo's coffin and sitting in the car with his coffin on my knee.

I relived that awful drive I'd made from London to the Midlands when I got that phone call that there was no heartbeat.

I relived seeing the lifeless Theo on a scan. When I'm giving a talk about this, my hand often involuntarily and subconsciously reaches out to the point where the screen for the ultrasound scan was. I always reach out to the exact same spot and I see the same lifeless image. The beautiful and wondrous shape of a baby that we'd seen many times before and which had brought us great joy on previous occasions where we'd seen him wriggle and turn. But on this occasion, he was just still. Gut-wrenchingly and painfully still.

I relived going to a sectioned off bit of the maternity suite, the "Forget-me-not Suite" - specially reserved for the parents who'd be delivering dead babies rather than live ones.

And, of course, I relived the delivery - in absolute detail. I see the room, the equipment in it, the people in it, the chairs, the bed, the bed sheets, the colour of the sheets. It's as real now as it was at the time. Every moment. Every thing.

Reliving traumatic memories in this way is called getting flashbacks. And, over time, these involuntary and these intrusive flashbacks form the diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder.

But let me explain this in a bit more detail; because the full impact of this doesn't otherwise come across. Flashbacks aren't just like remembering something. They aren't like merely reading a book. They are far more real than that. They aren't like watching a film, even an immersive and captivating film. Flashbacks are far more real than that.

Flashbacks are full-on, real-time, reliving an experience. This reliving the experience is second by awful second. So, when I get my flashbacks to Theo's death, I can see everything that I then saw. I can feel everything I then felt - my emotional state returns to what it then was. I can touch things that were in that room. I can sense the same smells. The same thoughts are in my head. This isn't just a memory. It is going through the experience again.

It is . . . actually . . . reliving the experience.

If that doesn't sound bad enough, this wasn't the worst of it. By a long way. Because over time I started to get something I call flashforwards. These are where, for some reason, my brain started to anticipate new tragedies for me to live through.

These new tragedies could be in my home life, my work life and particularly to my family.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this. In time we were blessed with two younger brothers for Theo. We have Charlie who is now nine and Oliver who is eight.

Now Charlie and Oliver are particular candidates for these flashforwards. Through my post-traumatic stress, I have watched, heard and felt them die too. Hundreds of times. I've experienced them having household accidents with tools, falling furniture, knives and broken glass. On countless occasions, through my post-traumatic stress, I've given them the kiss of life to try and revive them from a crushing or a drowning. I've watched their lives ebb away. Through my post-traumatic stress, I've felt their warm blood as they bleed out after an accident, until their lifeless bodies go cold.

Again, these flashforwards are as real as if they are actually happening. In my brain they ARE actually happening. The sights, sounds, smells, feelings and thoughts are all very real.

Can you imagine how awful this is? To not just experience one child bereavement; but to have experienced dozens of child bereavements over and over again, day in, day out; week in, week out; year after year. This is on top of other disasters, tragedies and traumas that I experience about other family members, or things happening at home or at work. Sometimes it's big, life-and-death stuff. Other times it's small things going wrong - a piece of work, something breaking or

not working, an illness and so on.

An endless list and recurring living nightmares on top of the recurring sleeping nightmares.

I've even had flashbacks to some of my most horrific flashforwards. On one particularly awful day, during an incredibly difficult time when my career was under threat of an abrupt ending, I experienced Oliver being involved in a car accident. Through dreams and flashbacks to this "event" I can still see the car mounting the pavement and crushing him against a metal railing that I was walking past on my way to work. I know the exact place where this happened. I scooped him up helplessly to hold him while he died and then sat there covered in his blood and remains, unable to move. This flashforward was so very real and occurred in some of my most difficult days that I would later come to experience flashbacks to that event as if it were a real event. I sometimes "remember" the occasion when Oliver died and have to remind myself that it didn't actually happen.

When these flashbacks and flashforwards are at their worst. When they don't just happen several times a day, when they happen dozens of times a day, and day-after-day, then I become so overwhelmed by my encounters with trauma after trauma that I suffer from depression.

Depression hit me for the first time years after my post-traumatic stress started. Indeed, depression didn't come until well over a year after I had been treated successfully for my post-traumatic stress and signed off from my treatment. All that good, hard work from the treatment was unravelled after I experienced a difficult and prolonged period of stigma and negative sentiment. As a result, my post-traumatic stress took hold again and I ended up in a deep, deep depression for which I needed medication as my flashforwards hit me on a regular and increasing basis - that one involving Oliver's car accident being just one of many examples.

As I have come to describing my depression; let me deal with a misconception here. Depression isn't, just, "sadness". Depression is a feeling of utter worthlessness. Like life isn't worth living. Like I have no purpose or benefit. Like the world and my experience of it is entirely negative and oppressive. And it's when you're stuck in a mindset like

this one, that you start to actively contemplate whether life is worth living.

There you go. That's me. You've had the lot now - label, story and impact.

It's because of this that I need your support as my boss. I need your support so that I can get to a position where I'm able to manage my wellbeing and strengthen my resilience so that I can continue to perform and be effective at work.

## Chapter 5

### How Do You Feel? Again.

I'm wondering how you, my boss, feel right now? And what do you think? Do you think you might now know of some way in which you could support me through this?

Pause on that. This is real. This is the sort of conversation that people try and have when they're looking for support.

Label. Story. Impact.

However you feel right now, is how many people feel when they listen to someone talking about their mental health.

When I'm training people on "The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation" we pause here to explore this very question.

What I hear from participants on my resilience training sessions is that they experience a wide range of feelings, emotions and thoughts. These might include a sense of utter helplessness, a desire to help, feelings of responsibility, feelings of raw emotion and personal sadness. Sometimes similar memories are conjured up for people who have had bad experiences in life. Some people become more aware of their own mental wellbeing challenges. Others start to think of ways they can try to fix things or they think about some words of comfort they could offer.

The desire to help is particularly strong. People express an acute sense of responsibility. But this is coupled with a sense of helplessness - of not knowing what to do.

The feelings around "responsibility" are particularly strong. When people reflect on the role of the boss, they realise how it is a central part of this role to provide the answers, to at least express an opinion or an insight or to do something that will help. People talk about feeling incompetent because they don't think that they can fulfil their role. They start to feel guilty at not being able to carry out their perceived responsibilities.

When we go through the exercise of people writing down what they feel when they have listened to label, story and impact, these are the sort of things that they note down. Take a look at the whiteboard.

These sticky notes are real. You'll see some wonderful expressions of humanity, coupled with a lack of certainty on what to do to help.

In short, things are not good at this point for people in these positions of responsibility.



## Chapter 6

### Your Perspective

Let's now start to delve into this in more detail and have a look at this from your perspective. The perspective of those listening. Here are my confused bosses!



To be fair, this isn't easy for you. What on earth are you supposed to be able to do with label, story and impact? This is impossible material to work with.

The label I gave you was “post-traumatic stress disorder”. That's a complex medical condition. How are you supposed to understand that!?! But stepping back a bit; of course, when you first sat down with me to talk about my wellbeing, you most likely had absolutely no idea what it was I was going to tell you.

I could have told you that I am autistic, have chronic anxiety, that I'd had a bereavement, that I'm suffering from chronic stress, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, bipolar disorder or loads of other conditions and challenges.

To add to that long list, there are additional complexities. Some of these are intrinsic conditions that I could have “naturally” from birth, and quite probably a genetic condition. But many of those same

conditions could be reactive conditions - reactive to an event, like mine is.

Also, some of these conditions can be temporary or transitory. Others can last a lifetime.

On top of that, each of these conditions also has a whole spectrum. You may be aware of some people with autism who are high functioning, and then others with autism who find the condition to be utterly debilitating with a need for constant care. It's the same with other conditions. There's a world of difference between mild anxiety or mild depression on the one hand and chronic anxiety or chronic depression on the other. This is the same through the range of other possible conditions I could have presented you with.

If you're going to be able to support me then, you'd need to know a little bit about the science behind each one of these conditions, wouldn't you? You'd need to ask questions to understand severity. You'd need to understand, perhaps even just at a basic level, what the impact of each condition could be on someone, at each level of severity.

Perhaps you're getting a glimpse into the fact that this is a whole spaghetti of conditions and no-one, except perhaps the medically trained, could hope to unravel or understand that lot.

Next, I gave you a story. And frankly, that was bloody emotional wasn't it? The story of Theo's death is a really sad tale. Most stories about mental health are really difficult and emotional stories. Telling the story has an emotional impact on me. Listening to the story has an emotional impact on you.

On my resilience training courses I ask people how they felt, listening to my story. I often hear back that people felt sad, that they became emotional themselves, that they remembered similar feelings from their own life experiences, that they got a sense of my trauma and that they sympathised or empathised with me.

I have a deep gratitude for all these emotions. They are decent and welcome expressions of humanity. The difficulty is that I know from experience that gaining your sympathy is not at all the same as gaining your support. And it is your support that I am in need of here.

Finally, I told you about the impact of all this on me. My flashbacks and my flashforwards. But how on earth could I expect you

to be able to navigate the neurological complexities of why it is that my brain causes these flashbacks and flashforwards.

This is properly complex stuff to do with the inner workings of the brain. The brain is possibly the least understood part of the human body, even by scientists, medics and other experts. So, when I start talking about flashbacks and flashforwards, how can I possibly get your support if the condition is so complex that it is difficult to understand properly?

This must be the same when someone talks about their chronic anxiety, or the emotions that drive them to self-harm, the suicidal feelings at the depths of a depression, the mania or depressive episodes of bipolar disorder; and so on. This is chronically complex stuff.

All it seems that we achieve then by talking about label, story and impact is to fill you, the listener, with negativity, complexity and emotion.

If that's the case, why on earth do we talk about label, story and impact then?

Well I think that it's because we do this all the time with physical health. If we were having a similar conversation about physical health, things would, I think, go much better. If I had a broken leg, arthritis, the flu or some other physical illness; I could give you a label. I could tell you even just a short story about how I got or discovered the illness. And I could tell you just a bit about the impact of the illness on me. And most of the time I reckon that you would be able to support me. You'd know what to do to help me.

This conversational framework generally works for physical health. I assume that is why we talk about mental health in the same way. But for mental health, all you get from label, story and impact is negativity, complexity and emotion.

On my quest for the Holy Grail, my first conclusion is that this way we have of talking about our mental health needs to be reserved for medical professionals and therapists. I don't think it is practical, or desirable, or possible for you as my boss to be trained to understand the range, spectrum, origin and type of mental health conditions.

Do you agree? We need to start again, don't we? We need to find a better way than this of talking about our mental health.

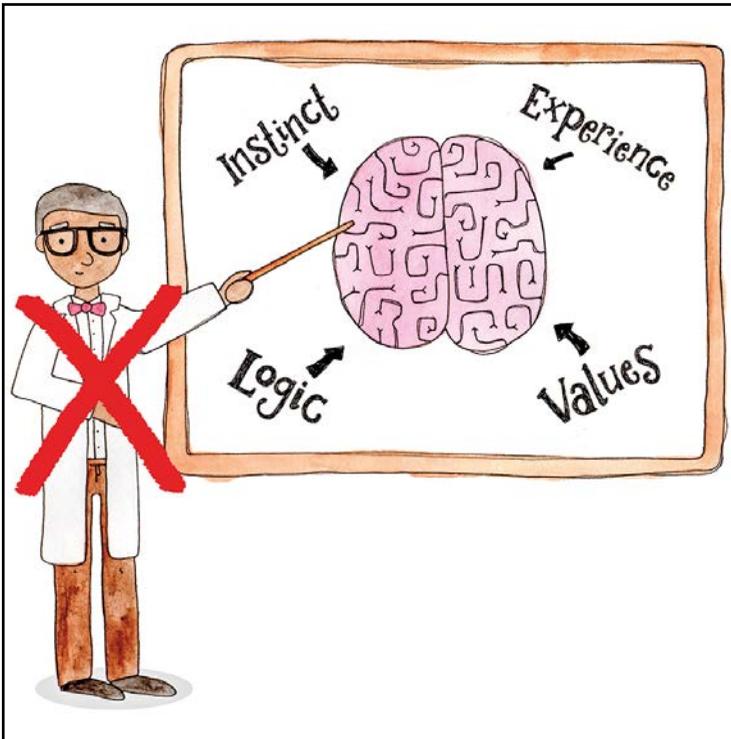
## Chapter 7

### The Four Human Brains

As I continued my quest in search of this Holy Grail, I wanted to understand why the mental health conversations that I'd had didn't go so well. After all, I'd only asked for support because of the impact on me of the death of a child. Surely that sort of conversation couldn't go badly.

Yet it did go badly. Spectacularly badly. Understanding why this conversation went wrong was one of the mysteries I had to solve. Part of understanding why this happened involved looking at how the brain works. And this is truly fascinating stuff.

Now clearly I'm no scientist. So, what you're about to get is my own personal take on how the brain works.



This personal reflection on how the human brain works is not just an important piece in the puzzle to help us understand why mental health conversations often don't go so well. It's also an important foundation stone upon which we can build a solution to this problem. Understanding how the human brain works offers us a new and easier route to managing our mental wellbeing, strengthening our resilience and having mentally healthy conversations.

The way that I'm going to illustrate how I see the brain working is with the help of a plate of cakes.



Let's imagine that a good friend of yours, who I shall call Bob, offers you a cake and you now have to make a decision about whether to eat one or not.

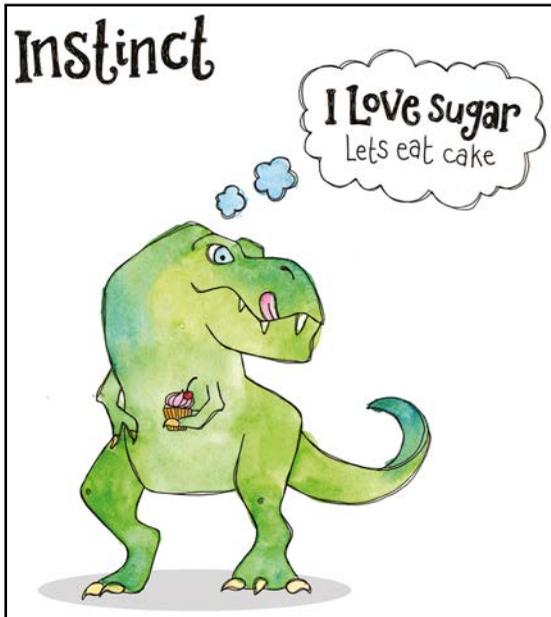
As soon as Bob does this, I say that you have four brains which all kick-in and start to help you work out what decision to make. Your four brains compete for attention in your mind to help you make this decision.

You might not have known that humans have four brains! So, I shall explain to you what they are.

First, we have an **Instinctive Brain** which you might think of as developing in the earlier part of the evolutionary calendar; perhaps illustrated best by the image of prehistoric reptiles. This instinctive brain is the brain that sustains our essential needs. We don't tend to scratch our chins and take some time out to wonder whether we are or are not hungry, thirsty, too warm, too cold, need to sleep and so on. These things are simply apparent to us.

**If you want an easy way of remembering what the instinctive brain does, this is the brain that says: "I want..." or "I need..."**

For you, the sight of those cakes prompts your instinctive brain to help you make a decision.



Your instinctive brain may well tell you that you're hungry, that things which are sweet tasting tend to sustain us well (and that's supposed to be sugars from fruits, not refined sugars - but this a primitive brain, so it can't really work out the difference!). Your instinctive brain may therefore push you in the direction of a decision to eat this cake.

Then we have an **Experiential Brain**. This is the brain that develops from an early age. It helps us learn from the things that happen to us and provides guidance, or promotes desire, or prompts decision-making based on our stored memories. We might think of this brain as developing further along the evolutionary calendar; perhaps illustrated best by the image of early mammals.



I think of the experiential brain as being like having two filing cabinets in your head. Or to bring us more up to date, it's like two hard drives full of memories.

One of these is of our good experiences in life. The other is of our bad experiences. When a decision is required, this experiential brain kicks in. It goes through the filing systems to see whether the same thing, or something similar happened to us in the past. If it did, and if it was a good experience we are prompted to keep going. If it was a bad experience, we are prompted to avoid it. This experiential brain makes us more advanced than prehistoric life, because we're not just acting on instinct, we're learning from our experiences.

**If you want an easy way of remembering what the experiential brain does, this is the brain that says: "I liked this when it happened before, let's do it again" or "I disliked this when it happened before, let's avoid it".**

This might not involve a fully thought-through process. Sometimes you might be aware of the memory. But often it is your subconscious mind<sup>2</sup> that prompts you to indulge in something that you have enjoyed before. Or avoid something that you have not enjoyed before.

Your experiential brain may well recall that you have cakes as a treat, or you have fond memories from your early years of a granny or grandpa who baked you some cakes whenever you visited, or you associate cakes with celebrations and happy events. If so, then your experiential brain might produce a desire for you to want one of those cakes.

On the other hand, things might be different if you have a memory of over-indulging on cakes to the point of being sick, or some other negative experience. Perhaps you suffer from an uncomfortable sugar-high if you eat sweet things on an empty stomach, or perhaps you're gluten intolerant or diabetic and eating cakes has had more severe adverse consequences in the past. In this case, your experiential brain might prompt you to decline the offer of cake.

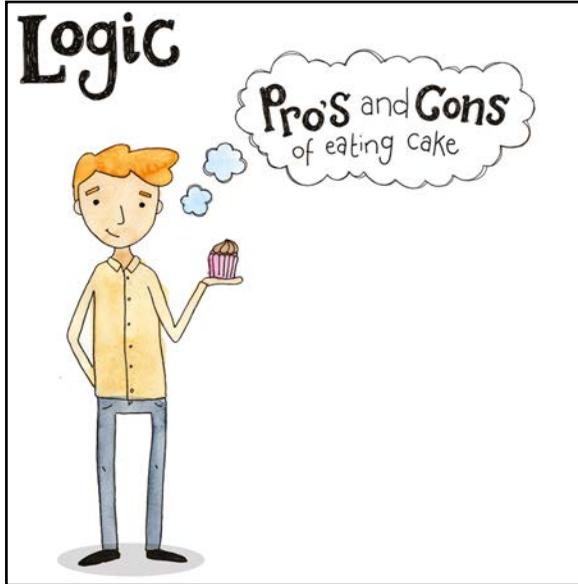
We're currently only two brains in and already we have a possible conflict in your mind, depending on how your instinctive and experiential brains interact.

Moving on around the brain, we next have the **Logical Brain** which moves us along the evolutionary calendar to humanity. This is the thinking brain. We humans don't just react on an instinct. We don't even limit ourselves to making decisions based on whether we think something might be a good or bad experience. We have a logical brain which produces the ability to plan and work things out. In decision-making it is the part of the brain that might result in us coming up with a thought-through list of pros and cons.

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<sup>2</sup> I do realise that the scientists would be calling this the "unconscious" mind. I have read and understand the reasons why. This is where we get "unconscious bias" from. I refer to it as the subconscious because I'm not a scientist and so I'm not constrained by scientific accuracy here. I'm trying to aid understanding, so I talk colloquially, and colloquially we are not unconscious when all this is going on. For any scientists out there, forgive me for sticking with "subconscious".

**If you want an easy way of remembering what the logical brain does, this is the brain that sits like a Judge in your mind and says: “Based on my analysis, and balancing all the pros and cons, the best thing to do is...”**



So, when it comes to deciding whether to eat cake, your logical brain might say to you: “I’ve lost a few pounds recently”, or “I ate a healthy breakfast so a bit of sugar won’t matter” or “I’ve been to the gym so a few calories won’t hurt”. So, if you’re hungry and if you see the cake as a good experience and if you see no logical reason to avoid the cake you might well accept the offer.

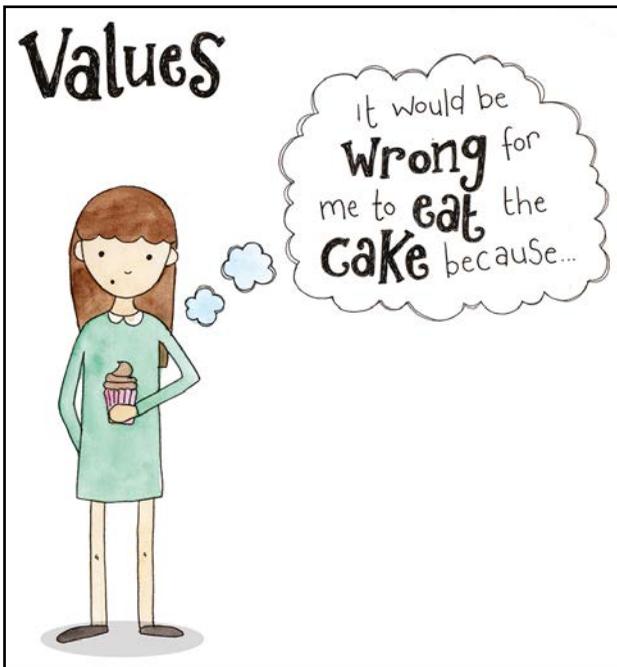
Then again your logical brain might say: "much as I really fancy a cake and despite being hungry, I’m going to avoid it because I’ve already had too much sugar today, it’s not healthy to have more and I’m going out later for a meal with a friend and don’t want to ruin it. So, it would be better to save my appetite for later.”

Now you have three brains in play. These may well be in harmony. But there’s a good chance they could be in conflict - each with different thoughts and opinions on what you should do.

Now, there's a further active brain which comes into play in practical terms as if it's a separate intervention, even if that suggestion has dubious basis in biological fact. If we think about this in evolutionary terms, we really are just looking at our most recent history for the development of this part of the brain.

I'll call it a **Values-based Brain**. For you this might be your personal values, your religious values, your social values, your family values, your ethics, your personal philosophy in life and so on. This brain assesses our decisions and behaviours through a lens of what we think the right thing to do is.

**If you want an easy way of remembering what the values-based brain does, this is the brain that sits in your mind like an inspirational role model, a respected elder, a mentor or a religious leader and says: "The right thing to do is..."**



I'm constantly amazed at how the values-based brain can influence decision-making. Here are a couple of examples.

First, let's say that you really want cake, you see no reason not to have any - you're hungry, cake is fantastic and eating it is not going to ruin a meal later. However, this offer of cake from Bob is to you and a group of friends. You happen to privately know that one of the people in the group has an eating disorder and you know they find it difficult when people openly eat near them. So, you politely decline the offer of cake from Bob out of your thoughtfulness for the other person.

That's pretty impressive stuff. Your values will stop you from doing something you really otherwise want to do.

Here's a second example that I think you'll relate to and see why I find it just as amazing. Let's say that you have no instinct for cake - you're full and have no appetite, you haven't got a particularly sweet-tooth, so you don't really find cake that good an experience. And you're going out for a meal later which you don't want to ruin. Nothing about you wants this cake. However, your good-friend Bob offers you this cake because it's his birthday. Not only that, but he's baked these cakes himself.

So, your values-based brain prompts you to eat the cake.

What an amazing outcome! Your values make you eat cake that you don't actually want, just so that you don't offend Bob.

You now have the complete set of four brains in play. There's plenty of potential for conflict between these four brains. The reality of life is that most of the time you just work this stuff out, make a decision, either eat or not eat cake and you'll get on with your day. However, sometimes these conflicts can niggle away at us and damage our wellbeing.

\* \* \* \* \*

I want to share some additional thoughts with you on this important topic. These are based on observations that people have made to me over the years about why they find this take on our four brains so useful.

**The first observation is about how helpful it is to be aware of the conflicts between our four brains.**

I agree. Understanding how our four brains interact allows us to be more aware of our subconscious thoughts. You can then intervene

to produce a more comfortable outcome. Or you can just accept that this is how your brain works and train yourself to feel more comfortable with the outcome.

Let's say that you make a decision to do something because it's a good experience, but you feel a bit guilty later. Once you know that the discomfort flows from having one brain (in this case your experiential brain) dominating your decision making, you can intervene. You could decide to give more power to your values-based brain in future, so you don't do things that later lead to you feeling guilty. Or you might decide to more consciously allow your experiential brain to take the lead and you work on feeling less guilty about it.

This can work around the four brains; depending on where you feel the right balance is.

The instinctive brain might, uncontrolled, lead to over-indulgence or even addiction to things like salt, sugar, fat, alcohol, drugs or other stimulants, sex and so on. It's unsurprising perhaps that the items on this list are the tools of advertisers. Dangling these items in front of us can serve to override other parts of our brain and cause us to make a purchase that we might later regret. Or to eat cake! Then again, our instincts keep us alive. Knowing this means you can more consciously choose where a comfortable balance lies for you.

Bad experiences in life can, as I well know, dominate our thoughts with worries, anxieties, obsessions and so on. Then again, our experiences help us avoid bad things and point us in the direction of good things. Knowing this means you can more consciously choose where a comfortable balance lies for you.

When logical thinking dominates us, we become machines that weigh up the pros and cons of everything so that we can find the best answer. This can stifle our expressiveness and creativity, suppress our senses and dampen our enthusiasm for a good experience. Then again, our capacity to reason is clearly an asset, both for us as individuals and for humanity. Knowing this means you can more consciously choose where a comfortable balance lies for you.

When values dominate, we can become judgemental - both of ourselves and of others; we can appear superior, aloof and detached. Then again, values can make an individual shine with humanity,

kindness, compassion and respect. Knowing this means you can more consciously choose where a comfortable balance lies for you.

The values-based brain can be particularly tricky and comes up a lot in wellbeing coaching. People often make significant life choices (what sort of degree to take, what sort of career to pursue, what sort of person to marry, where to live and how to manage finances) on the basis of values. Often, of course, this is both appropriate and helpful.

However, sometimes I'll meet an individual who feels uncomfortable with their own values. They may conclude that their values were more inherited than chosen. When we grow up, we are influenced by family values, perhaps religious values, social values and so on. Sometimes we just keep going with these without really thinking about whether we consciously chose them.

I've often seen some incredible internal conflicts when an individual realises that they don't really subscribe to their own set of values. Sometimes we have to go through a process of re-examining our values and perhaps making some new choices in life.

So yes, an awareness of how our four brains interact can be wonderfully helpful. This self-awareness allows us to intervene to nudge our thought-processes in a direction which produces decisions that are more comfortable for our wellbeing.

**A second observation is that people say they find this approach to understanding our thought-processes to be so personally liberating.**

Again, I agree. Have you ever told yourself off for making a bad choice in life? Have you ever been frustrated at your inability to make a decision? In my work as a wellbeing coach I've often seen this in practice when people are trying to make really important life decisions about their career, a promotion, changes of direction in life and so on. We see similar internal conflicts in our personal lives with some deeply confusing and conflicting views on everything from our personal relationships, to health, hobbies, holidays, personal financial management, and so on.

"I can't make my mind up!" is often the frustrated self-criticism levelled in these situations. This sort of self-criticism and frustration is more manageable when people understand that this isn't down to

indecisiveness, inability to choose, confusion or other negativity - it's more to do with our different brains operating from different perspectives. Each of these brains is driven by different experiences, memories, hormones, instincts, values, thoughts, social influences and logic, each kicking in with different prompts about what the right decision is.

The other criticism that people often level at themselves is, "I don't know what the right decision is!"

**The beauty to this framework for explaining how our brains work is that it produces a wonderful sense of relief that, in actual fact, there are no right decisions. There are just decisions. Each decision is right for some parts of our brain, and wrong for other parts.**

Just pause on that for a moment and consider all those decisions that you beat yourself up for - both before you made them and after you made them.

Consider those occasions where you might have felt regret for past decisions. Consider those moments when you agonised on what decision to make.

Now think about how it would feel if you could rewind back to those decisions and replace that frustration and self-criticism with a calmer reassurance that every decision is right for some part of your mind, even if it is wrong for some other part.

So next time, don't tell yourself off for not being able to make your mind up. Instead, acknowledge that all that's going on here is that you have different competing minds to make up.

**A third observation is that this way of thinking is incredibly useful for diversity and inclusion.**

Again, I agree. This way of thinking does indeed have wider social benefits. When you apply this way of thinking to a controversial subject of your choice - racial diversity, gender diversity, politics, religion and so on, it can be helpful.

You become more aware that we all have an inbuilt instinct to be with those who are like us. In a primitive sense, this is a useful instinct - any animal that lacked this instinct wouldn't last long if it wandered around trying to make friends with all the other animals - eventually it

would get eaten!

But when this instinct dominates our thinking as humans, we end up taking a dislike to anything that is different to us. That might be differences in colour of skin, political thinking, gender, religious beliefs, opinions and so on. This stokes fires, provokes prejudice and drives conflicts.

Allowing this instinct to dominate our thinking is not only reverting to a primitive state in which we think that things that are different are dangerous; it also leads to bad outcomes both for individual wellbeing and the wellbeing of humanity. Once people understand this, they can make sure that other parts of their brain dominate their thinking to produce a better outcome. Humanity really needs to move on from our animal instinct to avoid things that are different.

**Humans only achieve humanity when they embrace differences, value individuality and encourage people to be themselves.**

**A final observation is that this way of thinking promotes acceptance, forgiveness and a desire to value others for who they are.**

Again, I agree. When people make a mistake or behave inappropriately, they often get labelled as if their mistake defines them. The problem with this two-dimensional way of passing judgement on someone is that it fails to recognise that sometimes we may be dominated by instinct, or by past experiences, or by logic (or faulty logic), or by values (or misplaced values); but that doesn't mean that we always will be. We can learn from mistakes or inappropriate behaviour. The brain is programmed to learn from things that go wrong; so, a mistake or inappropriate behaviour can result in improved behaviour later if it is taken as an opportunity for learning.

Furthermore, passing judgement on someone for their behaviour fails to recognise that we are all individuals and not pre-programmed automatons. Passing judgement on someone for their behaviour may, in fact, be as intolerant or offensive as the behaviour complained about.

## Chapter 8

### **Our Brains in Mentally UnHealthy Conversations**

Having explored the four human brains, let's now have a look at what is going on in this mentally unhealthy conversation between you and me.

What's interesting about this is how wildly different our two thought-processes might be.

In the last chapter we explored how one of your four brains might dominate your decision making about whether to eat cake. Well in this conversation, between us we have eight brains on the go, all whirring away in the background having potentially conflicting thoughts.

Clearly much of what I talked about was of my experience of Theo's death. So, from my point-of-view, the information I relayed to you mostly came from the experiential part of my brain. You probably also detected an instinctive fear and a flight response - with me wanting to run away from my perceived dangers.

When I told you my story, this wasn't just my experiential brain dominating the conversation; it was my experiential brain with its very emotional and disturbing memories that were at the forefront of the conversation.

This may well have prompted your experiential brain to kick-in too. You may have called to mind occasions on which you felt similar emotions or recalled your own experience of bereavement or other traumatic experiences.

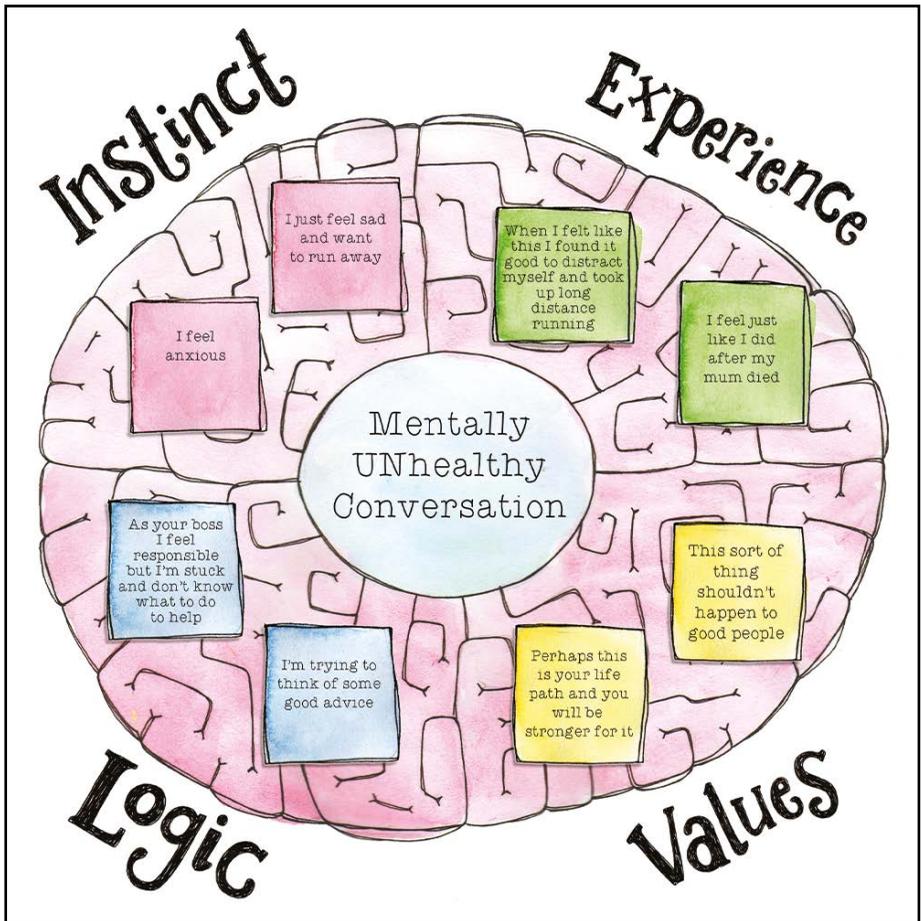
My logical brain was quite lacking in our conversation. This is a feature of my post-traumatic stress disorder. It's not logical to assume that every event in life is going to turn into a traumatic disaster; but that's precisely what the post-traumatic mind does. The experiential brain takes over. It uses that one horrific experience and assumes that it's going to happen again and again.

From your point of view, your logical brain is quite possibly more active, perhaps trying to make up for the absence of my logical brain.

You may well be thinking that my fear that every event in my life is going to turn into a tragedy is just so unlikely that it's not worth worrying about.

You'll recall from Chapter Five that when I'm giving resilience training we spend a bit of time talking about how the participants felt, listening to my label, story and impact. You may recall the whiteboard with the sticky notes.

What we can do now is to take those sticky notes and put them on a map of the brain like this.



We see that the reactions my participants recorded on their sticky notes fall rather neatly into one of the four brains. So, for each person that I talk to, I get a different reaction depending on which part of their brain dominates their thought-processes.

Some people get the flight or fight instinctive response. I've had feedback from people who say that they felt like running away because this wasn't the sort of story that they wanted to hear. Others will have had similar tragic experiences or emotional reactions to events in their lives and this conversation might bring these to the forefront of their minds and influence their reaction to hearing my story.

When we listen to a story about someone else's experience, we subconsciously dive into our filing system of all of our experiences and work out what we did in various similar situations. When we arrive at our best examples, we then give advice, express an opinion or give an insight based on our own experience. That's what the experiential brain does - it produces a steer on what to do now; based on our experience of what happened to us in similar situations in the past.

However, when we do this for other people we may, or may not, produce useful advice. As a result of hearing my story, some people offer their thoughts based on their own experiences. By fortune, some of these people will be able to empathise in a way that works for my state of mind; and that could be helpful. But others will take an approach that does not suit the way my mind works.

Others will find that my mentally unhealthy conversation has left a big "logical" gap that their brain will start to fill in. People often fill this gap with their own solutions, answers, opinions and logic; which may, or may not, be suited to supporting me in my particular situation. They may rightly think that my expectation of everything turning into a tragic disaster is illogical. The odds are so incredibly low. Some people tell me that they simply want to point out how illogical the post-traumatic mind is. They're right; and I wish that were enough to help, but unfortunately it isn't.

Then we get others whose values kick in and they will tend to offer values-based judgements and suggestions, personal philosophies or religious-based comfort. Some of this may be entirely helpful and it's certainly a touching example of humanity and kindness. But sometimes

it isn't helpful and it won't help much if the person speaking has a completely different set of core values.

**What this tells me is that in a mentally unhealthy conversation there's an eight brain pile-up. Eight different brains intervene with conflicting thoughts on the same situation.**

To me this goes a long way toward explaining why this sort of conversation about label, story and impact simply doesn't work. It doesn't produce the sort of outcomes we need.

## Chapter 9

### Stigma

While some mental health conversations may go well, many don't. We'll now take a look at some of the harmful outcomes that can flow from mentally unhealthy conversations.

First, there's the often-mentioned stigma.

The negative language surrounding mental health is really quite extraordinary. There aren't many words for people who are considered to be normal. Look it up. You really won't find much alternative language for "normal".

But then take a look at the opposite of this. I didn't realise this until I encountered mental health challenges of my own, but it turns out that there are lots of words for the opposite of normal. And they are used freely and frequently.

We've got:

**Nutter. Grumpy. Mental. Fruitecake. Lunatic. Irritable.  
Raving lunatic. Maniac. Crazy. Fool. Insane. Whacko.  
Baked. Stupid. Mad. Schizoid. Screwy. Sullen. Fried.  
Loco. Flaky. Unsound. Headcase. Mental health  
patient. Out of your mind.**

Now I accept that sometimes we (the "nutters") are often sensitive to this language. Some might be over-sensitive. We don't live in a perfect world and people often use language that we might find offensive but is not always intended offensively. But I highlight the point that this sort of language can be used inappropriately or can come across offensively, even if it's not meant that way. And this is worth drawing attention to.

The stigmatising language doesn't stop with this long list of offensive words. There's more. You also get a series of phrases to describe us "nutters".

I discovered that people might also say to me that:

**"You're one tile short of a full roof"**

**“The cheese has slid off your cracker”**

**“You’re one sandwich short of a picnic”**

**“Your lift isn’t going to the top floor”**

And then there’s my personal favourite. Because it turned out that I was also:

**“Two fries short of a happy meal”**



With that in mind; pause and imagine how it feels to have your difference highlighted by someone else as if it’s a weakness. Because that is often what is happening here.

Over the years we have made great strides in learning not to label people by their physical appearance. Language that is demeaning due to gender, race, sexuality and disability is frowned upon and the use of that sort of language has dramatically reduced in my lifetime, even though that progress is far from over.

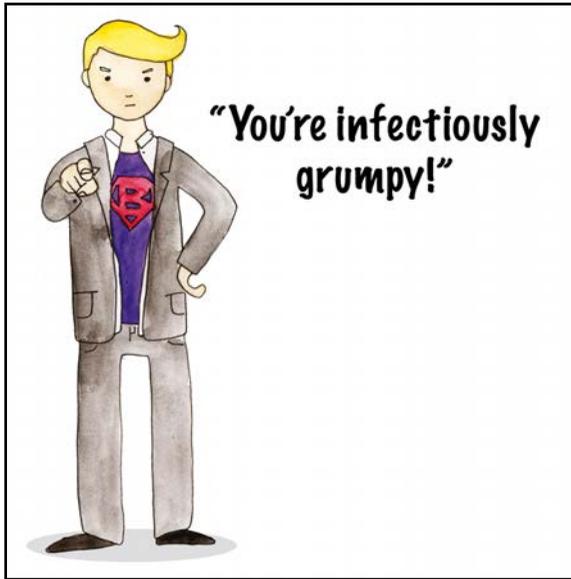
Just like physical differences are just physical differences; with mental health, these mental wellbeing challenges are just differences of

personality. Yet this language is constantly thrown at those who have different personalities and mis-labels them as if they are weak.

People with mental wellbeing challenges find life hard enough; but often they feel beaten-up by having their difference constantly highlighted as if it's a weakness.

Let me give you some examples of what I've come across through my experience, including my work as a wellbeing coach.

We have someone with depression who was told that they were "infectiously grumpy".



Then we have someone who was a bereaved parent. Two months after he buried his son, his boss said that he'd lost his gravitas and authority and may no longer be suited to the role that he then had. By way of some sort of bizarre and threatening compromise, the boss reflected on his recent bereavement and said that she wouldn't take issue with his loss of gravitas "for now".

There's another person, also bereaved. On his return to work his boss had a decent, supportive, engaged conversation with him. Two weeks later he was going through a tough patch and he mentioned this in conversation with his boss. Her reaction however was "we have had that conversation, we don't need to have it again". In that moment he

realised that the support he'd received from the initial conversation had every appearance of just being his boss going through the motions of a "return to work conversation" without apparent sincerity, humanity or real compassion.

Then another person. Someone with autism, although high functioning and in a position of responsibility. His boss asked him to make the effort to become more sociable. As he said to me, "That's like asking a blind man to learn how to see!"

Then we have someone with bipolar disorder. In an appraisal he was praised for delivering exactly what the organisation wanted. He was delighted. He'd worked hard to achieve this. But then the bombshell came. He ended up being both criticised and marked down, simply because he wasn't visible or sociable enough, even though this had no impact on his productivity or the quality of his work.

Then we have someone with anxiety. Far from getting any support, his boss called him a "delicate flower". And his sense was that, coming from his female boss, this was an emasculating label. If the tables were turned, it was a label that would have had clear sexist overtones. As well, of course, as being completely unsupportive.



The list of examples goes on and on. Time and again, labels, judgements, negative assumptions and negative language are applied to

people with mental health challenges.

**While this negative language might not always be vindictive or malicious, it really does hurt. The people on the receiving end of this negative language not only have a mental wellbeing challenge to deal with which, trust me, is hard enough. Now they have to deal with having their difference constantly highlighted as if it's a weakness.**

Think about it this way: you can't go about punching people in the face. It's an assault. It hurts. It causes pain which can last for quite some time. The fact that we shouldn't do this is obvious. You don't even need to write it down in a handbook or policy statement.

Now think about the pain of the stigma. How long does the pain last for? Hours? Days? Weeks? Months? A lifetime? Stigma really does hurt. I'd argue that for most it hurts deeper, longer and harder than a mere punch.

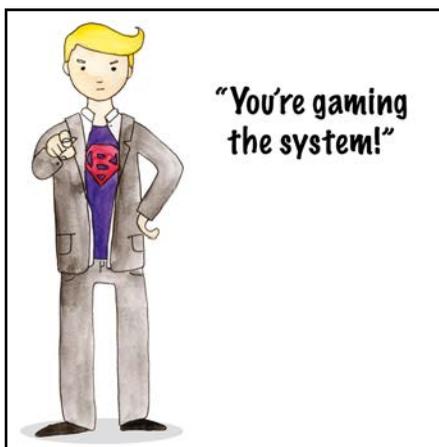
**Stigma, in my view, is an assault.  
As plain as a punch in the face.**

## Chapter 10

### Lack of Support

So, that's stigma. One of the harshest and most often talked-about outcomes, experienced by people who open up about their mental health.

Next there's the lack of support. Through my wellbeing coaching I've met people who have not been sent for a medical assessment, even though they've asked for one. I've seen people who have been accused of "gaming the system" simply because they've asked for an adjustment to help them manage their mental wellbeing.



There's one particular example of this that stands out strongly. In this case a line manager came to me for some wellbeing coaching. She didn't have a mental health challenge of her own. She was one of those wonderful managers who took the initiative by wanting to learn how to provide mental health support to someone in her team. She said that her organisation didn't provide adequate training or guidance on how to support staff with mental wellbeing challenges.

What's more, her own boss, the departmental leader - who didn't even know the employee in question - went as far as expressing the view that she should do nothing, because the employee was simply "gaming the system" to try and gain some sort of advantage to her

employment conditions. This was an incredible judgement to make of someone about whom the individual had no particular knowledge.

On a connected point of interest; when I started wellbeing coaching, I simply expected all my clients to be people who needed support with their own wellbeing. It took me by surprise that somewhere around 40% of my clients are managers who came to me to find out how they could help a team member. They'd taken the initiative because their organisation had no clear approach to providing mental health support.

I've also seen people who have had requests for adjustments turned down. These include adjustments that are recommended by medical professionals - doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and other medical professionals.

There's a turn of phrase that bosses and human resources professionals erroneously believe is a "get out of jail free" card for anyone making a request for an adjustment that the organisation doesn't want to grant. This phrase is that the request for an adjustment "doesn't fit with the way the business is run". Or in other words and as one employer actually put it to an employee - "Sorry, that doesn't fit with the way things are done around here".



Perhaps employers need to think about whether the way things are done around here could change, maybe just a little bit, to accommodate requests like these.

# Chapter 11

## Outcomes for Organisations

These poor outcomes for individuals lead to wider poor outcomes for our organisations too.

One in four people will have a mental wellbeing challenge at some point each year. And one in three people will have a mental wellbeing challenge at some point in life.

More working days are lost to mental health than anything else. When you ask what people think the biggest cause of workplace absence is, they will often say that it is probably musculoskeletal problems - bad backs, arthritis and other bodily aches and pains. And it is right that this is a major, troubling and significant cause of physical pain and workplace absence.

But it's not at all the biggest reason for workplace absence. Mental health takes that unhappy prize.

When this comes up in conversation, HR professionals leap to their own defences; citing statistics from their organisation which show that this must be someone else's problem, because in their organisation rates of mental health problems are far, far lower.

However, their confidence is sometimes misplaced. Often the reason why their mental health absence rates appear to be lower than the average is because in their organisation people fear the stigma so much and have such severe doubt that they will get the support they need, that they don't disclose their mental illness.

So, the message is this. Before you rest on your laurels, look at all your absence statistics. If you have well-above average rates of gastric problems, musculoskeletal problems, the flu or other illnesses, you might have a bigger mental health problem than you think. Because not only are your employees suffering from poor mental health (which your workplace might be contributing to) but the situation is possibly so bad that your employees are having to hide their mental health absences behind other physical health labels for fear of stigma and lack of support.

This point came across strongly in one organisation I worked

with where absences for mental health were so frowned upon that hardly anyone cites it as the reason for their absence. It's a running joke in this organisation that employees have a secret agreement to tick the box for D&V when they are actually off sick for a mental health reason. This organisation probably congratulates itself for its low incidence of mental health problems but is possibly scratching its head about why it has such high rates of Diarrhoea and Vomiting!

What frustrates me is that many employers take preventative action to avoid musculoskeletal conditions. At quite some expense, employees are given ergonomic chairs, desks that have adjustable height, computer screens on arms that move around, ergonomic keyboards and even an ergonomic mouse. That's fantastic. That's exactly as it should be for such a severe problem as this.

My question though is: "why is it that we are not yet solving the bigger problem of mental health?"

I really don't know. I just know that the fact is that we are not anywhere near seeing employers offering the right level of support. Over 50% of people think that their employer is poor at supporting their mental health. The stigma is so severe and the support so poor that around 60% of people with a mental health problem don't even tell their employer about it. And 1 in every 5 people who tells their employer about it loses their job as a consequence.

We get a similar story from universities and schools - with students and pupils complaining that they don't get the right level of support; not just from the healthcare system but also from their tutors or teachers. Annual investment by universities, into mental health support, ranges from around £10 up to about £40 per student.

More students are dropping out of university in their first year, citing mental health as the reason, than ever before. There are more student suicides now than we have seen for decades.

Indeed, suicide is the biggest killer of people under the age of 45.

On top of this, a 2017 government-commissioned report on mental health in the workplace found that for every 100 employees that an organisation has, it is likely to be losing an average of £140,000 due to mental health. This is through things like lost productivity, increased absence, complaints, grievance and litigation. That's an astonishing

sum of money to be losing.

And although clear figures are not available, I conducted a rough straw poll of organisations who claim to have a positive approach to diversity and inclusion. These are the sort of organisations who have workplace champions; staff policies relating to black, Asian and minority ethnic staff or students; gender equality; and equal treatment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender staff.

Of these organisations with a positive approach to diversity and inclusion, only 1 in 5 could claim to have a meaningful approach to mental wellbeing. That is, an approach with defined policies, a managed system for the disclosure of mental wellbeing challenges, a process for providing adjustments and systematic line-manager training.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is for all these reasons - the lack of willingness to disclose, the stigmatising consequences of disclosure, the lack of support and the clear organisational impacts, that I argue this must be the greatest organisational people-failure of the present day.

That is not to diminish the existence of other organisational failures. In the area of diversity and inclusion, social impact, social mobility, sustainability and so on there are many issues that organisations could improve upon. But by and large there is a conscience about these things, and there are activities (to differing degrees) to resolve these things. In my view that is less the case in the area of mental wellbeing support.

This is a big problem. It needs a solution. And we are just about to find that solution; with the help of a mad man, and a Fool.

## **PART TWO**

### **Mentally Healthy Conversations**

You're on a quest with me, to help me find my Holy Grail. So far, we have only explored the nature of the problem. We perhaps understand it better, but we don't yet have a solution.

We know that mental health conversations often don't go well. In fact, a lot of the time they don't happen at all, because of the fear people have that they will face stigma or a lack of support.

We know that organisations often don't have a supportive approach to wellbeing. The culture isn't right, there's not enough awareness raising and there isn't sufficient desire to support good mental wellbeing.

We also know that when wellbeing conversations do happen there is a clash of thought-processes. The person listening often feels a frustrated sense of responsibility. They want to help, but they're stuck because they don't know how to.

The belief is that only science can help. Mental health seems to just be the domain of medical professionals and therapists. For everyone else the conversation is neurologically complex, emotional and negative.

Understanding the problem in this way helps. If we're going to solve this problem, we need a solution that's more accessible to everyone. Less of a science and more of an art. It still has to be a conversation, because people need support; but it needs to be a solution that doesn't involve the collision of eight brains.

So, let's keep going on our quest for the Holy Grail to see if we can find an answer to these problems.

## Chapter 12

### The Fisher King

In my search for a solution to this problem I returned to our fictional Parry and Jack. So let me take you back to Robin Williams and “The Fisher King”.



I’ll remind you where we were.

Jack, our alpha male radio DJ had pushed his insensitive interactions with his callers one step too far. By goading Edwin into committing multiple murder and suicide, he ended up losing his job and his outlet for his self-promotion. Then we saw him teetering on the brink of suicide himself, until ultimately he was saved by mad Parry.

Parry, you’ll recall, believes that Jack is The One, who can help him find his Holy Grail. At first we, the audience, don’t know what that Holy Grail is. We assume that it’s probably some figment of Parry’s mad imagination, which will send him and Jack on a comic wild goose chase. Later in the film we are led to believe that Parry thinks the Holy

Grail might be a silver cup that he wants to steal. But as the film progresses some more we gradually come to understand that Parry's search for this Holy Grail is a deadly serious search for the support he needs for his mental health.

Shortly after he is saved by Parry, we learn something pivotal. Jack is taken aside by the caretaker of the block of flats where Parry has his den in the basement. What we learn is this: the caretaker allows Parry to sleep there out of sympathy, because some three years earlier Parry used to live in one of the flats, until one night he and his wife went out for dinner. The restaurant that they went to was the very same restaurant that Edwin committed his dreadful crime in. Parry's wife was one of his victims.

So, we learn, and of course Jack learns, that up until then, Parry was sane. It turns out that until that point in his life Parry was married, with a job as a teacher and he was living a normal life. It was only afterwards that Parry didn't speak for a year. He ended up living in a mental institution and then living rough.

As the film moves on some more we start to discover the full horror of Parry's reality. Throughout the film we are faced with Parry's bizarre visions of a red knight on horseback, breathing fire. But as more and more is revealed of the background to Parry's condition, and the reason for it - the murder of his wife in front of his face - we start to see Parry's madness in a different light.

We come to realise that the fire breathed by the imaginary red knight is not just a figment of Parry's imagination. It's his flashback to Edwin's gun firing in the restaurant.

We also come to realise that the red knight's elaborate bright-red headwear isn't just some bizarre rendering caused by Parry's insanity. It's his flashback to the gory detail of when his wife's brains were blown out. And we see brain matter splattered down the wall of the restaurant and all down Parry's face, in what became his last moment of sanity.

So, we come to see that those images aren't a result of pure insanity and madness. They are, in fact, Parry's flashbacks and it was this experience that put him in a straight-jacket and eventually out on the streets.

You'll remember that Parry sees Jack as The One who can help

him find his Holy Grail. You'll also remember that Jack sees Parry as nuts. But given that he now feels somewhat responsible for Parry's condition, having driven Edwin to murder-suicide by his insensitive comments, Jack decides that he wants to try and help Parry.

But Jack's still "The Boss". Deep down he is still the alpha male who knows all the answers. His way of helping involves telling, not listening.

So, what does Jack do?

First, he offers Parry money. But Parry makes it clear that he's not interested in money. He's insulted by the offer - Parry wants Jack to help him find his Holy Grail, he doesn't want a payoff. So, Jack just offers him a bit more money. In doing this Jack completely misses the point and fails to show any willingness to read Parry, to ask him questions, to listen to him and discover what he really needs.

Jack is then horrified when he sees Parry giving the money away to another homeless person. Far from trying to understand why the offer of money was no good, Jack just gets angry with Parry.

Then he has another go. This time he offers Parry advice. He says to Parry that he shouldn't risk getting into trouble trying to steal a silver cup, that Parry thinks might be the Holy Grail. Again, of course, Parry doesn't care much for this type of help. He wouldn't mind getting arrested. He wouldn't mind getting into trouble. If only he could find his Holy Grail.

So, Parry is let down by Jack's inability to help him find his Holy Grail. But this doesn't deter Jack who has one more go. He tries a spot of coaching; telling Parry: "You're only partly insane. People like you can live a semi-normal life."

How dreadful is that? "Partly insane"! "Semi-normal life"!

We can see what's going on here. Jack may be a broken and fallen alpha male. But he hasn't changed his essence. He's still Mr Boss know-it-all with all the answers. He still doesn't listen. He still doesn't ask questions. He still doesn't try to understand.

He dives in there with money, advice and some form of amateur coaching. And none of this works.

Then we get to a scene where Parry is with Jack in a park late at night. With great symbolism we see Parry strip off. Completely naked.

He invites Jack to join him, lying naked, his back on the grass, staring at the black night sky and the twinkling stars. And while this symbolism doesn't drive Jack to join Parry in removing his clothes, it is enough to get Jack to strip away all those things that hide his humanity. Parry invites Jack to reduce himself to his basic essence. Humanity. Without the trappings of the soul-less, egocentric person that he has built himself into.

And so.

Finally.

Jack listens.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is now that Parry tells Jack the story of "The Fisher King". A fiction, within the fiction of the film. Presumably harking back to that script we saw in Parry's den, in the basement of the building. Something we assume that he wrote when he was a teacher and that now resurfaces from the depths of his insanity.

The story of "The Fisher King" is a story about a King who was once wounded in search of the Holy Grail. Over the years the King's wounds grew worse, and his failure to find the Holy Grail persisted. Eventually, says Parry, the King became someone for whom life lost its reason. He had no faith in anyone. Not even himself. He couldn't love or feel loved. And made sick, with his own experiences, the King began to die.

Those words are incredibly powerful. Here they are again - have another read because this sounds just like depression. To me.

The King became someone for whom life lost its reason. He had no faith in anyone. Not even himself. He couldn't love or feel loved. And made sick, with his own experiences, the King began to die.

But then, says Parry, a Fool came along and asked the King "What ails you; my friend?"

And after giving the King a drink of water, from a cup he found lying around, the King felt better. But not only that, the King realised that the cup was the Holy Grail.

"How did you find what I have been looking for, all . . . my . . . life?" said the King.

And the Fool replied: “I don’t know. I only knew that you were thirsty.”

\* \* \* \* \*

And that’s it!

There’s our answer.

That’s how to have a mentally healthy conversation.

For the first time, in his lifetime, the King gets just what he needed. He finds his Holy Grail.

What is it that the Fool did here? Well, the Fool did just three simple things. First, he said to the King: “What ails you; my friend?”



And then? Well then, he listened. He simply listened as a friend, until he found something that he could help with.

And then he gave the King what he needed.

From this story Jack learns that what Parry must need is to be listened to; with humanity, compassion and understanding.

Having referenced what I need to for the purpose of drawing out what we can all learn about how to have a mentally healthy conversation, I recommend that if you want to know what happens in “The Fisher King” you’ll have to watch the film. It’s well worth it.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Mentally Healthy Conversations**

What do we learn from this story for people who want to have a mentally healthy conversation?

Let's start with a preliminary and perhaps most obvious point. Label, story and impact. They didn't feature, did they? They played no part in it. The Fool didn't ask about any of these things. Instead the Fool asked just one simple question: "What ails you; my friend?"

If you're going to support me. If you're going to be "The One" and help me find my Holy Grail, I need you to start by forgetting all about my label, story and impact. They're irrelevant.

Everything I've told you about me so far is only here so that you can see what a mentally unhealthy conversation is and why it doesn't work.

We need to start again, as if you know nothing about me.

Let's see what we can learn from this story and then we can have a new conversation. A mentally healthy conversation.

# Chapter 14

## Lesson One: Listen

The first thing that we learn comes from Jack. Because Jack gets it completely wrong, doesn't he?

Ironically, sometimes the greatest teachers in life are the ones that get it completely wrong. We often look to role models for inspiration on how we should be. But we don't naturally look to anti-role models for inspiration on how we shouldn't be. Yet, I think we can learn a great deal from observing those who don't do things the right way. They are great teachers too. They show us the methods that don't work.

Jack is a wonderful anti-role model. He shows us that when it comes to mental health, it doesn't help to give the answers, offer an opinion or share an insight.

We see him thinking that the solution to Parry's problems lies in giving him money, or in helping him avoid getting into trouble for stealing, or in coaching Parry to think that he's only "partly insane" and can therefore lead a "semi-normal" life.

So, Jack gets it completely wrong with his money, advice and coaching.

When you reflect on these things - money, advice and coaching - you realise that these are the sort of tools that people in positions of responsibility often use to solve a problem aren't they? These are the tools a boss might use. But Parry didn't need any of these things, did he? Neither did the King - he needed to be listened to with humanity, compassion and understanding. And that's exactly what the Fool gave him.

Tell-mode doesn't really work at the best of times. It certainly doesn't work with mental wellbeing as we have seen already. You just end up with that eight-brain collision.

Don't write Jack off as being an extreme example though. We've already explored how a conversation between two people can often involve a collision of eight different thought-processes. How do you avoid that? Well, one way is to listen.

**People often think they can only fulfil a responsibility if they DO something to help - like give answers, opinions or insights. Listening seems like the one thing to not do. It appears to be too passive. It doesn't seem to 'give' anything. Yet listening is precisely what we should be doing when it comes to mental wellbeing.**

When you just listen, you don't make the mistake of offering insights, opinions and answers. You don't put your own thought-processes into the conversation.

When I'm offering my resilience training, sometimes participants protest that they feel a need to offer something that at least resembles an answer, opinion or insight if they are going to fulfil their position of responsibility.

In response, I invite participants to think of it this way. In your conversation with me, we were talking about my mental health. We've already concluded that this is a complex neurological subject. My mental health is governed by the billions of brains cells I carry in my head. And it is impacted by the millions of experiences I've had in life and how they affect the way I think. How can you possibly have an insight into that lot?

You can't. So, let me relieve you of that sense of frustrated responsibility that people feel in your situation. Don't try. Don't try to give the answers. Don't try to have an insight. Don't try to offer an opinion.

This just leaves you with one thing to do.

Listen.

**Listening is the most powerful, and (I think) the least used of all our conversational tools.**

So, when we have this conversation again, in a few moments, just take the role of an active, engaged listener. Relegate your own thoughts into the distant background. Lesson number one, therefore, is this:

**Give them a good listening to.**

# Chapter 15

## Lesson Two: Be Non-Judgemental

Our next lesson comes from the Fool and the one beautiful question that our wise mentor asked: “What ails you; my friend?”

“My friend”, he says. To a King!

He has the audacity to call the King his friend.

It is through this that we, the audience, discover that after all those years of searching for support, the King needed help from someone who didn’t judge him as a King. Someone with a clear mind and no expectations of what it takes to interact with a King.

So . . . who better than a Fool. Just think of all the people who have interacted with the King over the years. His entourage, his teams of advisers, his trusted generals, his political support. All of these with their opinions, answers and insights about what the King might need.

Then the Fool sashays into the clearing and simply asks “What ails you, my friend?” And he listens with a clear mind, and no expectations. He has no judgement about the King. He just regards him as a friend.

Once Parry taught Jack, through this story, to stop behaving like a boss who knows all the answers and instead to behave like a fool, Jack also becomes non-judgemental.

If you are going to have a mentally healthy conversation with me . . . if you are going to be The One to help me find my Holy Grail and get the support I need for my mental wellbeing, then I need you to be non-judgemental.

If, in fact, you are going to sit there from the start thinking that I’m weak or inferior or limited in my capabilities, then you won’t be able to help me, because you will have misjudged me and misunderstood me right from the start.

I’m not weak, inferior or limited. I am equal to you in my humanity. I have evenhood with you.

I’m not weak, inferior or limited in my skills, knowledge and capabilities. I can still be a parent, do my job and fulfil the various responsibilities that I have. I can do these things if I have a physical

illness. I can do these things if I have a mental illness.

I'll happily accept that I'm different because of my experiences in life. But I am bound to be different. I've had a one-in-a-million experience!

I am different then. I have a different personality. But does that make me any less capable? Does that stop me from performing at whatever it is that I do?

You are different to me because you have had different experiences. In a competitive world we might judge people who are different to us negatively, simply because they are different. In an animal world this works well to protect us, because at an animal level something different poses a threat. But we are better than that. If we all do that, all of the time, then in one fell swoop we destroy any sense of diversity and inclusion.

**Diversity and inclusion are about valuing people for who they are. Seeing differences as enhancing rather than restricting, beneficial rather than a barrier, as offering opportunities rather than threats.**

If we didn't have a sense of diversity and inclusion then we would surround ourselves with people of our gender, our culture, our upbringing, our ethics, our experiences, our physical abilities, our intellectual capabilities and so on.

**When people don't rise above the animal instinct to crave similarity for survival purposes then they fail to live up to their humanity.**

If we want to be truly diverse, we need to break down all the barriers that we erect - the judgements we make because people are different. That includes making judgements about people who are mentally different.

\* \* \* \* \*

We've already seen that the fictional Parry came across as a complete "nutter" and someone who, if we're being honest, we would go to lengths to avoid. Then we discovered that Parry actually has a reason for his apparent madness with which we can sympathise. The

big “BUT” though, is that we didn’t have that sense of sympathy or humanity, or compassion UNTIL we had the reason.

Our sympathy was conditional. It needed a reason.

So that’s our fictional Parry; but is it the same in real life? What pre-conceptions do you have about people who have mental health challenges? What do you hear in the news about people with mental health problems? What do you read about people with mental health problems? What are your childhood and family influences on the subject?

You might have preconceptions about me. You might have judgements about people with post-traumatic stress and depression.

Would it be different if you could understand the reason for my strange ways of thinking about risk and trauma and tragedy?

Let me give you some context about me. Let me give you a reason why my brain works in the way that it does. In actual fact, it is just doing something that all of you do every day. It’s as normal as that.

All of you, throughout your entire lives, have learned from your bad experiences. That’s the job of your experiential brain, as we have already seen. We wouldn’t have survived as a race if we took extreme risks. We would have eventually succumbed to those risks and died out. Neither would we have survived as a race if we took no risks at all. Because then we would have been stuck up a tree, or never left the oceans.

So, we are blessed with a balanced ability to take a degree of risk; but also to learn when the risks are too great.

I see this in my children.

Charlie, for example, burned himself on a candle once. He can’t in fact remember doing it. But somewhere along the line, probably in a dream, his brain rewired itself and now he is wary of candles. If he goes near a candle you can see that he’s just a little bit more cautious, a little bit in need of putting on a brave face - even though he can’t remember having burned himself. This comes to him subconsciously because his rewired brain is reminding him that he once had a bad experience with a candle. That’s his experiential brain serving its wonderful purpose.

Oliver too. Now this little guy is always getting into mischief. He’s

always exploring and getting into difficulties. He's more likely to take a bit of a risk. But if something bad does happen to him; if he gets hurt, he will avoid that particular thing again in future. His brain will also rewire itself and he will learn from his bad experience. Again, that's his experiential brain serving its wonderful purpose.

Isn't that great? The human brain is doing exactly what it was programmed to do. Through hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, the human brain has found that the best way to survive is to both allow us to take risks, but to learn from the risks that go wrong.

Edward is Charlie and Oliver's older half-brother, and he has similarly learned from his experiences in life. He's not as risk averse as Charlie, he's not as risk-taking as Oliver. Edward lies somewhere in-between.

They are all different. Just different. Normal.

So, my children have learned from the risks they took that went wrong.

You do this too, somewhere along a spectrum. Your brain rewired itself in your earliest, formative weeks, months and years to learn what was hot, and what was cold, what tasted good, and what didn't, your brain rewired itself to avoid things that caused discomfort, or pain. Through thousands of situations, interactions and experiences, your brain has rewired itself to accept a certain level of risk and to learn from experiences that go wrong.

My brain is doing exactly this. Through my flashbacks it is simply trying to learn from my experience. It churns over my bad experience again and again to try and learn from it. But, how do you learn from a one-in-a-million tragedy like the one I experienced?

Well, my brain's frankly clever solution to this particular problem was to rewire itself.

That's because my brain DID learn something from my bad experience. It learned that one-in-a-million tragedies can happen. On a planet of several billion people, one-in-a-million tragedies can happen with a degree of regularity.

It also learned that my logical brain had failed to protect me from this terrible event. It had disregarded the possibility of Theo dying in this way because it was so unlikely. And for that reason, I was totally

unprepared. The solution that my experiential brain came up with, to avoid this happening again, was to anticipate these tragedies all the time. That's the best way to be prepared for a near unpredictable one-in-a-million tragedy, isn't it?

So, that's why I have my flashforwards to these new tragedies. My brain is trying to anticipate new traumas so that it can protect me from the unpredictable and so that I can protect the people I love. By doing this I can avoid new tragedies and traumas. By nature, these events are nigh-on unpredictable. So, my brain has to be hard at work all the time to help me avoid one-in-a-million tragedies. That's why I now inhabit a world in which I am constantly surrounded by tragedy and trauma.

This is utterly brilliant.

Totally debilitating, I accept. But brilliant and fascinating too. Yet again this is the experiential brain serving its wonderful purpose.

So that's why my brain is hyper-vigilant. It works all-the-time to find tragedy and trauma. In fact, it works overtime to identify things that could go wrong. Workplace tragedies. Home-life tragedies. And particularly tragedies that could happen to my family. This isn't me doing this. This isn't my choice to think about these things. This is one of those things that the brain does behind the scenes, like a computer running in the background.

So, even though this outcome is debilitating, it is also understandable. It is the result of a process that is totally normal. It isn't something that I should be judged negatively for. Yet, before this explanation, my post-traumatic stress disorder probably came across as weird, inexplicable, completely illogical and beyond understanding. With this explanation there's at least a sensible reason why the brain might behave this way after a traumatic experience.

So, you may have changed your judgement of Parry once you discovered his tragic back-story which revealed the reason for his madness. Perhaps you have changed your judgement of people with post-traumatic stress disorder now that you've discovered a reason for the way my brain works.

**Having a reason makes all the difference.  
BUT, being non-judgemental means that you don't need  
a reason.**

We now need to turn this into a leap of faith. We cannot have mentally healthy conversations if we are only prepared to be non-judgemental once we discover a reason for the mental health challenge that we can sympathise with.

**We need to be naturally non-judgemental.  
We need to be unconditionally non-judgemental.  
Just like a Fool.**

My point about being non-judgemental is that we cannot possibly work all of this stuff out, all of the time, for everyone. I've just given you an insight into why my post-traumatic brain behaves in the way it does. But that took years of analysis, largely driven by medical interventions.

The fact is that the reason why our brain behaves in a particular way is often not discoverable or explicable, at least with any degree of certainty. It's often buried deep in a whole mixed-up history of experiences or it's buried deep in currently unfathomable biology. Or, frankly, both.

If we attempt to have conversations which focus on trying to work out why our brain works in a particular way, we'll get tied up in complex and irresolvable knots. And if we don't understand, but make negative judgements based on what we don't understand, that will get in the way of supporting someone.

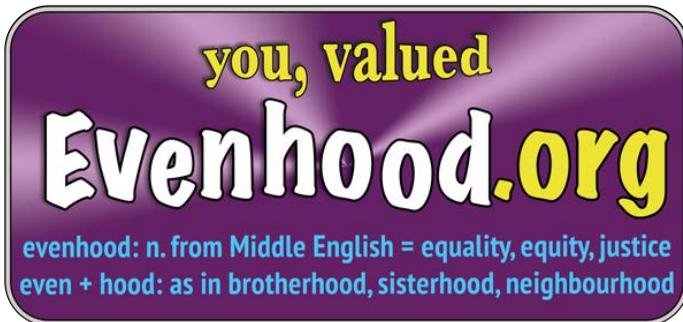
You may recall me saying earlier that someone's reaction to me talking about my mental health challenges was to say: "I'm surprised you can climb into a suit in the morning".

When I got that response, it was a judgement. And it was a judgement that led to me to believe that I was considered weak and incapable; when in actual fact I was ill. The course of conduct that followed this comment more than confirmed this. It's not going to be supportive to have a dialogue which indicates that a person is considered to be weak, incapable or inferior.

**If we are going to offer support, we must be non-judgemental. We need to be prepared to just accept that even though someone's behaviour might be strange or inexplicable, that doesn't mean to say that they're not normal.**

Call me "a fool" if you like, but in my view we are all normal. We are all shaped by our experiences. Our experiences make us who we are. We are all wonderful human beings. You don't have to like everyone else. You don't have to want to spend time with everyone else. That's not what I'm saying. But when it comes to offering support to someone who needs support and asks for your help - you do need to be non-judgemental.

Given that we are all shaped by our experiences then we all must be equal. We are all even. We all have evenhood.



## Chapter 16

### Lesson Three: Explore what you CAN help with

Once we can do this; once we can listen, with a non-judgemental mind, what is it that we should be listening to if it is not label, story and impact?

The answer to this, in my view, comes again from our wise mentor, the Fool, and that one beautiful question he asked the King: “What ails you; my friend?”

“What ails you?” is all he needs to know. After asking that one simple question he then just listens to whatever it is the King wants to tell him until he finds something that he CAN help with. What that turns out to be, is that the King is thirsty. The Fool can help with that. So, he offers the King a drink of water.

And with that, the King gets what he needs. Just a drink of water. Or, perhaps at a deeper level, the genuine love and kindness of a stranger.

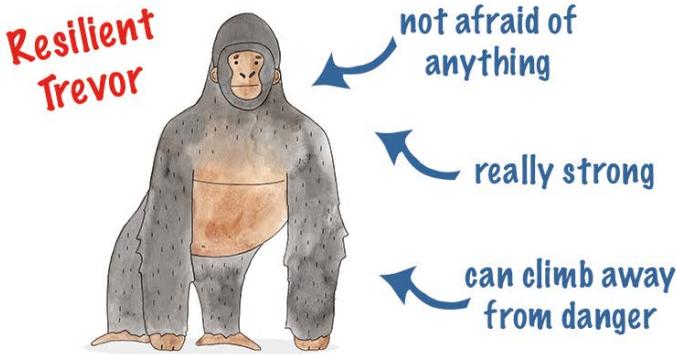
**We're now within touching distance of the Holy Grail.  
This is the lightbulb moment.  
We need to find something that you CAN help with.**

# Chapter 17

## Our Daily Environments

When I'm delivering resilience training I'll often start with this thought experiment. I'll ask the participants to imagine a picture of the most resilient creature they can think of. Anything they like.

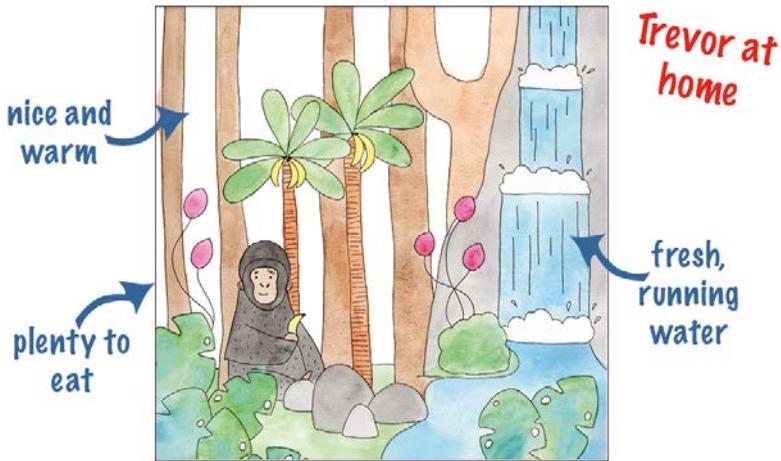
I offer a picture of the animal I'd select if faced with the same question. I show a picture of Resilient Trevor. Resilient Trevor is a gorilla. He's strong and not afraid of anything. He faces few threats in life.



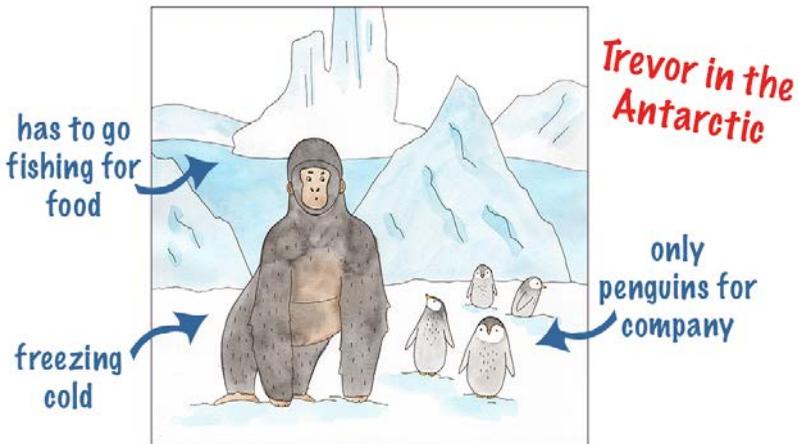
Next I ask the participants to zoom out a bit and imagine the environment that their resilient creature lives in.

I imagine that Resilient Trevor lives in a lush jungle. He's surrounded by plenty of food; clean, fresh water; lots of trees to climb and soft leaves to make a bed with. All these things help his wellbeing.

He is totally suited to his home environment. And his home environment is totally suited to him.



Then I ask the participants to use their imagination to move their resilient creature somewhere completely different. Let's see what happens if we take Resilient Trevor out of his natural environment and place him somewhere completely different. Let's try moving him to the Antarctic instead of his lush jungle.



And finally, I ask the participants to discuss what they think has happened to their creature's resilience in this different, unfamiliar and hostile environment?

I'd have to admit that Trevor is not resilient anymore. In this new,

challenging environment he is weak and incapable. He'd seem scared, depressed and lonely. But is there really anything wrong with his mind? And if we wanted to fix things; would it be easier to work on Trevor's chemistry and biology to help him evolve into something more like a polar bear?<sup>3</sup> Or would it be easier to just move him to a more comfortable environment?

\* \* \* \* \*

What we learn from this thought experiment is that resilience isn't absolute. Nothing, and no-one, is resilient wherever they are and whatever their circumstances. We also learn that mental wellbeing is also very much about your environment.

**The environment you live in is really important to help you stay mentally strong.**

This is where we get our hands on the Holy Grail for the first time. If I need your help as my boss for my mental wellbeing, perhaps we could simply have a conversation about the environment that I experienced today and how it impacted my wellbeing. Then we could talk about how, if my environment was different, maybe my wellbeing would improve.

With you being my boss, you have a certain amount of influence over what my daily environment looks like. This gives you something you CAN do to fulfil your responsibility. It doesn't need any advice, opinions or insights on your part. You can just listen, non-judgementally and discover what it is about my environment that has such a significant impact on my wellbeing. There's no clash of thought-patterns in that. Once you discover something about my environment that has an impact on my wellbeing, then you can do something to fix it.

**And there's our Holy Grail.  
We get to grasp it for the first time.  
What you CAN help me with, is my environment.**

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that Polar bears are ordinarily based in the Arctic, while penguins are based in the Antarctic. I confess to using a bit of artistic licence on this one!

## Chapter 18

### Let's have this Mentally Healthy Conversation

It's now time to have that mentally healthy conversation with me. It's time for you to be The One who helps me find my Holy Grail and get the support I need for my mental health.

Let's try it. Let's say that you've now just asked me:

**“What is it about the workplace that has the biggest impact on your wellbeing - good or bad?”**

In that one question you, as a boss, move instantly from incompetence to competence. This shifts the conversation from complex science and disturbing emotions and turns it into a practical, actionable, supportive mental health conversation.

With this gorgeous simplicity, we are able to have a supportive conversation.

#### **Here's my answer . . .**

I have post-traumatic stress disorder, and this first started after a trauma that took place some years ago. I won't trouble you with what post-traumatic stress is, or how the trauma happened, or what my condition does to me; although if you'd find it helpful to know, I'm happy to tell you.

What would be really helpful is if I can talk to you about my daily environment. There are some things I do each day that make a big difference to my wellbeing.

**There are three particularly challenging situations that make it harder for me to manage my wellbeing.**

The first challenging situation is that I find it really difficult to manage my condition when there is a lot going on at the same time. This is because I have a hyper-vigilant mind that is constantly active and on high alert. It's looking for things that could go wrong; at home, at work, or to my family. When there are several things going on at the same time, I get overloaded, burdened and stressed because I am then

simultaneously bombarded by multiple tragedies and traumas. I find this incredibly draining.

The second challenging situation is that I find it difficult to manage my condition when I have to stay away from home. If that happens, it's usually for work. My hyper-vigilant mind is far more active when I have to stay away from home, and this can be distressing. My mind is far more active in this situation because the trauma that caused my post-traumatic stress happened when I was away from home and it happened to members of my family.

The third challenging situation is that I find it difficult to manage my condition when things are unclear or uncertain. If people around me aren't open and honest with me and don't give me a clear idea of what they are thinking, then my hyper-vigilant mind is likely to be more active. This is because a lack of clarity about what I need to do, or what other people might be thinking, leads my hyper-vigilant mind to perceive a risk that something unexpected could go tragically wrong.

If I have an environment which exposes me to these three challenging situations, then it is harder to manage my wellbeing.

### **I'd also like to tell you about three supportive situations which help me manage my wellbeing and stay resilient.**

My first supportive situation is to have autonomy over my day - so that I can manage my own diary. I can then make sure that I do things calmly, one by one, without unnecessary interruptions, diversions and chaos.

The reason why this helps is because then my hyper-vigilant mind is limited to only being able to look for tragedy in one thing at a time; and this is far less draining. I can deal with this. It's easier than if I have to do several things at the same time and deal with interruptions, diversions and chaos.

My second supportive situation is that I need to be able to commute to work. For me, this is a five-hour daily commute, so this is definitely not something I'd ideally choose to do. But I do find that if I can stay with my family it really supports my wellbeing; because this calms my hyper-vigilant mind. All this means in practice is that I need to be able to plan my day to allow for a long commute.

My third supportive situation is that I need honesty and straight talking from the people around me, so that I know where I stand. I don't actually mind at all if they tell me I'm doing something wrong; because I don't need constant positive feedback. Far from it. What I actually need is honesty and straight talking. This honesty stops my hyper-vigilant mind looking for a tragic outcome from what people might be thinking.

Those are my supportive situations.

If I have an environment that offers me these supportive situations, then I can perform and be effective because I am then able to manage my wellbeing.

**Finally, I'd like to tell you about my skills, talents and abilities. These help me feel purposeful, successful and are positive for my wellbeing.**

I won't run through everything I think I'm good at but I will say that, unsurprisingly, given my particular condition and this hyper-vigilant mind, I have a natural talent for identifying and managing risk. Properly controlled and in a corporate context, this has some very positive benefits. The ability to identify and manage risk is a key corporate skill and I can anticipate the possibility of things going wrong from quite some distance!

## Chapter 19

### How Do You Feel? Yet Again!

That's what a mentally healthy conversation can look like. Instead of dumping science, complexity and distressing emotions on you; I've shared with you the situations in my environment that have an impact on my wellbeing.

You now know the three challenging situations that make it harder for me to manage my wellbeing. You also know the three supportive situations that help me to stay resilient. And you know something about my skills, talents and abilities.

As my boss you are in a position to do something about all those things. You can give me autonomy, the ability to be with my family each day and regular honest feedback. And you can help me play to my strengths so that I can feel purposeful.

None of this is science. None of this is complex, disturbing or emotional. Does that feel any better than the mentally unhealthy conversation we had earlier?

#### **That's the art of the mentally healthy conversation!**

Just as before, when I'm training on this subject, I ask the participants to write down on sticky-notes how they feel listening to this mentally healthy conversation.

Unlike before, we don't now have a jumbled-up variety of conflicting thoughts, feelings and reactions driven by that collision of instincts, experiences, logic and values. Instead, we have clarity on what people can do to help. And so the most overwhelming response is that people are far more inclined to write something like:

**I now know what to do to help!**

## Chapter 20

### Thank You

You've now given me a good listening to. Non-judgementally. Having you, listen to me . . . that's exactly what I needed, because you didn't play the role of the boss who knows all the answers. You didn't impose your opinion on me. You didn't give me your answers, to my problems.

You listened. With a clear mind. Without expectation. Without judgement. You gave me a good listening to.

And by listening, what did you achieve? Well, you now know what ails me. You now know the three challenging situations that make it harder for me to manage my wellbeing. You now know the three supportive situations that help me to stay resilient and to perform and be effective. And you now know my skills, talents and abilities that help me feel purposeful and successful.

So, if you really were my boss, you could go ahead and create the environment in which I can perform and be effective.

What's more; because this is not technical, you can do this for anyone. You can discover other people's challenging situations, supportive situations and their skills, talents and abilities. Then you can give them what they need so that they can perform and be effective.

This is easy too, isn't it? Providing support for mental health simply involves listening; which means that you sit there and say nothing. It involves having a non-judgemental mind; which means that you sit there and think nothing. All you need to do is gently nudge the conversation so that it focuses on exploring someone's daily environment.

So, thank-you, for being The One and helping me find my Holy Grail and helping me get the support I need for my wellbeing.

If we could all just do this, then the outcomes would be wonderfully different. People who need support would get support. Organisations would be rewarded with increased productivity and loyalty; less grievance, complaints and absence and more satisfied employees or students.

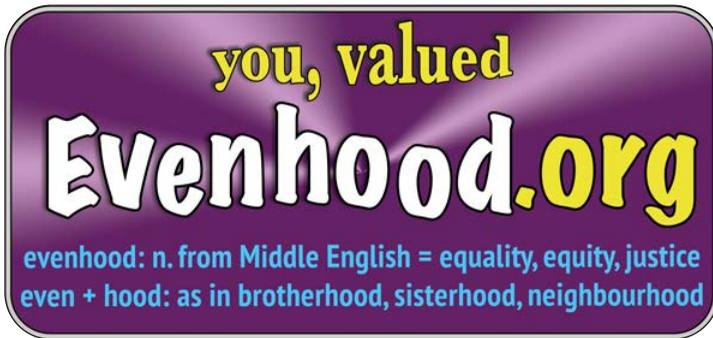
## PART THREE

### Managing your Wellbeing and Strengthening your Resilience

This discovery, about how to have a mentally healthy conversation, felt valuable. So much so that in time I launched Evenhood. Its full name is The Evenhood Organisation Limited (THEO - do you see what I did there?!).

“Evenhood” is a word that fell into disuse in the middle ages. It means equality, equity and justice. It is used in the same way as words such as brother-hood, sister-hood and neighbour-hood. So, it means that we all have even-hood. We should all be equally valued, respected for who we are, treated with equality and not judged negatively.

For me, this word perfectly captured the sort of non-judgemental, listening mindset that we need to have.



Evenhood’s purpose is to help people manage their wellbeing, strengthen their resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.

I provide talks, training and coaching in workplaces, universities and schools based on what I have learned.

I started by enthusiastically delivering talks about my journey; very much along the lines of this book. In these talks I would invite my audience to be my boss and have a conversation with me. First, we would have a mentally unhealthy conversation. I’d then share with the

audience why I think that conversations like this don't work well.

Then we'd learn how to have a mentally healthy conversation. The audience, as my boss, would listen to me talk about "The Fisher King", the Fool and Parry.

I'd then share my story about how my environment has an impact on my mental wellbeing. I'd talk about my challenging situations, my supportive situations and my skills, talents and abilities.

At the end I thanked my audience for doing exactly what you have just done. I thanked them for giving me a good listening to, non-judgementally.

On just the second occasion of giving this talk I got an amazing question. It was from a lady who asked how she could also discover the environments that had an impact on her wellbeing.

This threw me.

Up to that point my whole focus had been on sharing my delight at discovering how we could have more effective conversations about mental health, by talking about our daily environment. It hadn't struck me that it naturally followed from this revelation that people would want to know how to identify the things in their own daily environments that have the biggest impact on their wellbeing.

Part Three of this book continues my journey as I explored how to find a way to help people do this.

Again, I wanted to find something that was practical, actionable and easy to follow. I wanted something that was an art, not a science. I wanted something that would work both conversationally and as a self-help guide.

Here is what I developed. Here are 12 steps to help you discover the things in your environment that have an impact on your wellbeing. This will allow you to manage your wellbeing, strengthen your resilience and have mentally healthy conversations.

On the Evenhood website you'll find a Wellbeing Journal that you can print (it's free) so that you can go through these 12 steps yourself. I'll tell you about each page of the Wellbeing Journal as we go through the 12 steps.

# Chapter 21

## Step #1 - What does “Resilience” mean to you?

There’s a story I’d like to share with you about a senior executive in a large corporate working environment who was extremely critical of anyone who displayed emotion at work. In his opinion every emotion was unacceptable except for a poker face.

His own performance was remarkable. He was enormously successful in many respects - a superb negotiator and influencer. He could command a meeting by allowing others to express themselves about the issue under debate with their displays of excitement, anger, frustration or humour. Then he would interject calmly, without expression or emotion - and succinctly make a purely logical point with just a hint of an undertone that the other attendees had all got a little bit worked up and silly and had missed the point entirely. Through this method, he commanded the room, took control and more-often-than-not, he got his way.

So. Highly effective.

Over the years his top team gradually adopted the same style, as they got feedback from him about their own gravitas, resilience and sense of authority. Those who showed emotion were rebuked for lacking gravitas. Expressing frustration, anger or humour were equally criticised. All received the constant mantra to demonstrate resilience.

Fast forward a few years however and you get a different glimpse into the impact of this constant demand for resilience. As a wellbeing coach I worked with clients from this organisation who referred to the working environment as “toxic”. People who worked in this organisation were having to leave more of their personal selves at home and become increasingly emotionless, fitting the descriptor of the leader’s definition of what it was to be resilient and have gravitas.

This constant admonishment stripped some of the humanity out of the organisation. People became resources. Those who couldn’t cope weren’t wanted. A lack of resilience equated with displays of humanity and emotion. You weren’t allowed a bad day. So, you had to hide your bad days and pretend to be in tip top condition at all times.

So. We have a dilemma. This looked for all the world like resilience. Yet it was not resilience. Quite the opposite, it was burnout. As people strived to fit the definition of resilience given to them, they lost their own resilience. This was toxic. It was the wrong way to work with people. On the other hand, it was highly effective from a business perspective.

So, where does truth lie. If that's not resilience, then what is? And if that is resilience, then should we crave it?

I've witnessed many other resilience conversations. I've seen people accused of lacking resilience because they have changed their mind and not had the "courage of their convictions". But then I've seen people regarded as lacking resilience because they doggedly stick to their opinion and fail to have the flexibility to see the sense in an alternative point of view. I've seen people criticised for lacking resilience when they bring emotional issues from home into work. Yet I've seen people praised for demonstrating empathy and humanity in leadership.

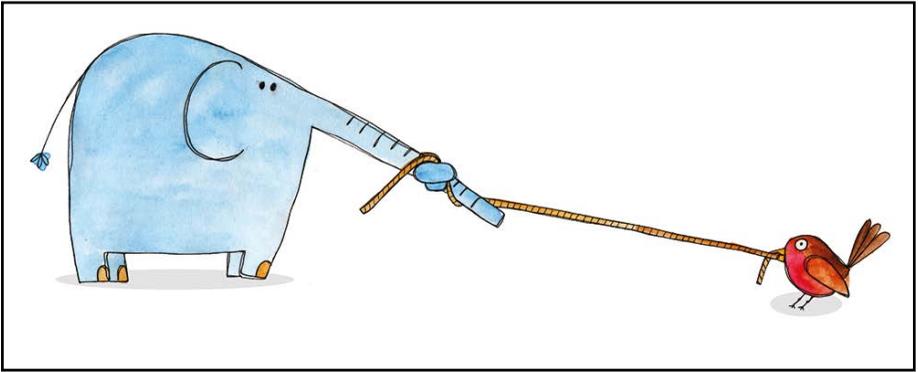
**Resilience therefore seems to be like beauty - its definition lies in the eye of the beholder.**

If I asked you to research "resilience", you'd discover definitions that talk about resilience as being about the ability to recover from a difficulty or challenge; that it's about being able to spring back into shape - by having flexibility and elasticity; that it's about having toughness; being steadfast; having the courage of your convictions and not wavering; that it's about being adaptable; and, that it's about having gravitas and authority.

That's just a confusing list of contradictions.

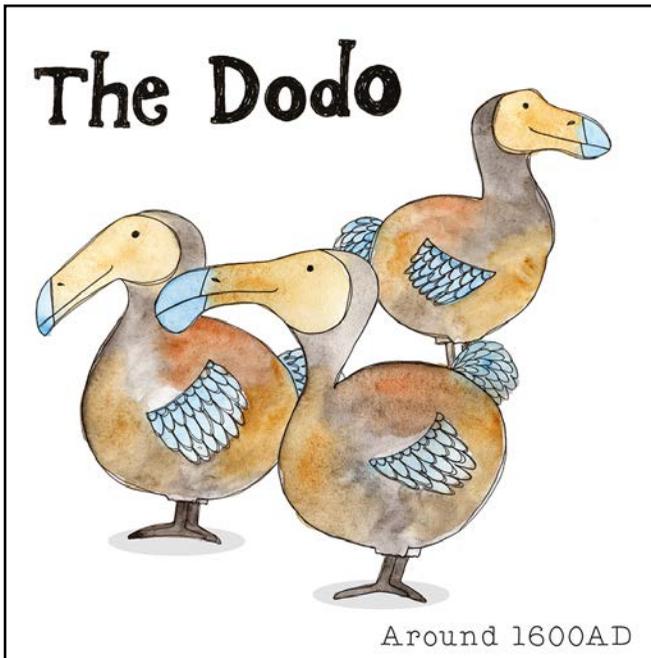
If you look at resilience in the natural world, you'll find another set of contradictions. You may recall Resilient Trevor from earlier in the book and how he becomes weak and incapable when he's moved to the Antarctic.

It's the same elsewhere in the natural world too. What's more resilient between an elephant versus, say, a small bird?



The general consensus is, of course, in favour of the elephant when it comes to resilience. The same goes for a thick-trunked oak tree compared to a poppy, or a whale compared to a goldfish. But take the debate a little further and explore what happens to an elephant versus a bird in a drought, an oak tree versus a poppy in a hurricane or a whale versus a goldfish facing a harpoon. Now definitions of resilience become less clear.

And what about the Dodo?



Surely an example of an animal that's utterly lacking in resilience? But look at it a different way. The dodo didn't do so bad in many respects. It managed to rule the roost and live largely predator free right up until the 1660s when the arrival of humans led to its demise.

Yet there is a theme starting to emerge here. Each of these examples from nature has resilience to a degree depending on the environment that they are exposed to. If the environment changes a bit, they're fine. If it changes a lot, many are fine. If it changes a great deal, only some cope. But if the environment changes substantially or completely, few survive. You might recall how I opened with the most resilient of creatures; the tardigrade. Perhaps it's only this little chap that can survive the harshest of environments.



What all this talk of resilience is building up to, is that I think the first thing you need to do if you want to come up with a plan to manage your wellbeing and strengthen your resilience, is to decide on a definition of resilience that suits you. That's Step #1.

What I suggest you do is decide what definition you feel most comfortable with.

**'Comfortable' is a good word when you're thinking about your wellbeing. It's not a science word. It's not burdened with definition. It's a feeling.**

The word and its opposite work for Resilient Trevor in the lush jungle (comfortable) and the Antarctic (uncomfortable). They work for a dodo on the human-free island of Mauritius pre-1600s (comfortable) and after humans arrived (uncomfortable). And so on through all those examples we looked at in the natural world.

Take a look at page 2 of the Wellbeing Journal and see what definition(s) of resilience you feel more comfortable with. Add your own if it's not on there.

 **What does "Resilience" mean to you?**

**Steadfast**      **ABLE TO BOUNCE BACK**

**Rigid**      **Having the courage of your convictions**

**Able to recover**

**Adaptable**

**Having elasticity**      **STRONG**      **Being willing to change your mind**



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Wellbeing Journal Page 2

## Chapter 22

### Step #2 - Map out your Personal Environment

The next step is for people to really work out what's going on in their environment.

As a wellbeing coach I found that people don't really have a detailed idea of what their environment is like. We're not constantly monitoring the things around us. We know the big stuff; but there's lots of subtle things going on that we really need to pay attention to.

**It's important for you to map out your environment by paying close attention to what's going on around you.**

Have a look at pages 3a and 3b of the Wellbeing Journal below. They capture the very many different environments that you face in life. And there's space to add some of your own that are particularly relevant to you. These environments might be at home, with family, friends or other people; they might reflect what life is like for you at school, university or in your workplace.

On the top row of the first page there's a list of environments that are relevant to everyone. Most of us have broadly similar needs for these aspects of our life.

We tend to need about 8 hours of sleep a night - some a bit more and some a bit less. Our diets and fluid intake are broadly similar. We all need exercise. We all need personal and social relationships with others. And we all need some degree of separation between our personal life and our work, studies or other responsibilities. The extent to which we need these things varies between different people; but these are all things that we need in order to maintain a healthy wellbeing.

Beyond this short list, there is then a much more personal list. Everyone's life is different. What you can do next on these pages of the Wellbeing Journal is to reflect on your daily life and create a map of all the different environments you experience in your life.



# Your Environments

sleep

diet

fluid intake

exercise

PERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS

social  
relationships

separation between  
personal life and  
responsibilities

Leisure time

- personal preference
- preferences of others
- time spent
- quality of time spent
- etc

Work or study environment

- noise
- lighting
- other people
- breaks
- hours
- etc

Working Preferences

- trust
- ability to work things out vs being told how to do things
- ability to manage own day vs being told what to do
- quality of relationship with colleagues
- quality of relationship with boss
- etc

Working style  
teamwork vs working alone

Timetable

Hobbies & pastimes:

- walking
- photography
- art
- crafts
- pets
- sports
- etc

Financial situation

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Wellbeing Journal Page 3a



# Your Environments

Personal energy  
introvert vs extrovert  
(get energy from yourself vs  
get energy from being with  
others)

Decisions  
prefer to choose vs prefer to  
be told

Music

- listening to
- playing
- watching
- preferred type of music
- time spent
- etc

Reading

- preferred reading type
- time spent
- ability to discuss with others
- etc

Feedback

- supportive
- critical
- valuable
- reflective
- timely
- etc

Social media  
too much vs too little

Home environment

- decoration
- lighting
- noise
- comfort
- etc

Indoors vs Outdoors

Ethics, Values, Religion & Beliefs

- strength of beliefs
- comfort with beliefs
- shared beliefs with others
- ability to practise beliefs
- etc

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Wellbeing Journal Page 3b

A lot of the time we don't think about many of the environments we face each day. They just happen in the background and interact with us subconsciously. So do take some time to mindfully reflect on different aspects of your day and think about the environments that you face. Mark those that apply to you and use the empty boxes to create a full map of the situations and environments that are relevant to you on a daily basis.

Maps can be high level or they can be detailed. Aim for detailed if you can. What you're trying to do is to capture every big and little thing that you're exposed to in your daily life.

Don't think for now about whether there's any connection between these environments and your wellbeing. We'll do that later. Just focus on creating a complete map of the environments that you face each day.

Even tiny elements of your environment can make a big difference to your wellbeing. When I work with people in wellbeing coaching it's often the little things that add up to make a big difference to someone's overall wellbeing. So, think about everything you face each day from the big stuff (your job, studies or other responsibilities) right down to the little stuff (lighting, noise, interactions with other people, breaks, the weather and so on).



Most people will fill this in each day. However, I've seen people who choose to do this a few times a day. Others might do it every few days. This is fine - it's all a choice and a personal preference. The only steer I give is to do it frequently enough so that you take it seriously and so that you build up a regular picture of how your wellbeing varies over time.

Let's assume you do this every day. When you mark your score for the day you put a tick in the box that best matches how comfortable you feel about the day.

Again, I deliberately use the word 'comfortable'. The way you score your day is simply about how you feel when you look back on it.

You might score a day in the green zone where you feel comfortable with how your day went. Don't do a great deal of analysis about this. Just think about the day as a whole and give it an overall score. Don't get bogged down in thinking about the individual things that happened that day.

You might mark yourself in the lower yellow zone if you think back over your day and decide you felt a bit low or down, didn't have much energy or didn't feel like doing things. You might mark yourself as being in the lower red zone if you felt really low, deeply depressed or at risk of personal harm.

These yellow and red "low" areas tend to make sense. The opposite "high" red and yellow areas need more of an explanation.

Let's say you have a day where you were full of energy, active and felt like you were in a great mood. When you later reflect back on your day; if you say to yourself that this was genuinely a good day for you, then of course you mark yourself in the green zone. Sometimes though, you could reflect back over the day and you might think that you were high-spirited to the point of taking risks, or you were over-confident about your abilities. Perhaps you were pushy with other people and maybe you upset others with your enthusiasm. Or perhaps you were so energetic that you risk burning out - maybe not in a day or two, but over a period of time. If any of this is the case, you might feel uncomfortable when you look back over the day, even though it felt fine in the moment. If so, you would mark yourself in the uncomfortable high yellow or red zones. This sort of high-spirited, high-energy day

can sometimes lead to wellbeing challenges down the line.

Over time, this exercise enables you to build up a picture of how you feel each day. What you're going to do next is take this one step further by having a closer look at the environments you face each day and the influence these have on how comfortable you feel.

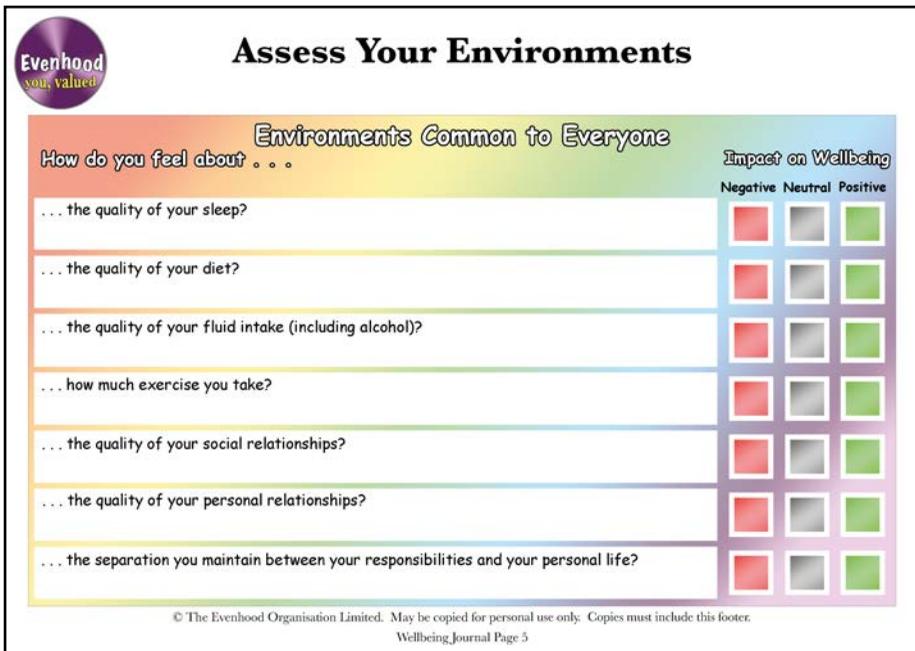
# Chapter 24

## Step #4 - Assess Your Environments

You now have a good idea of what resilience means to you; you've created a map of the various environments you encounter in your daily life and you've worked out what your daily wellbeing is like over a period of time.

The next thing to do is to mindfully reflect on each aspect of your environment to see what sort of impact they have on your wellbeing. You're about to discover the ones that have the biggest impact on your wellbeing.

Take a look at page 5 of the Wellbeing Journal. This page covers those aspects of your environment that are common to everyone.



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### Assess Your Environments

**Environments Common to Everyone**

How do you feel about . . .

	Impact on Wellbeing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
... the quality of your sleep?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the quality of your diet?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the quality of your fluid intake (including alcohol)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... how much exercise you take?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the quality of your social relationships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the quality of your personal relationships?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the separation you maintain between your responsibilities and your personal life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Wellbeing Journal Page 5

Pages 6 to 9 of the Wellbeing Journal help you to examine aspects of your environment that are personal to you. These will mirror the environments that you recorded on your map.



## Assess Your Environments

How do you feel about . . .	Impact on Wellbeing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
... reading; and do you get sufficient chance to read what you most enjoy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... listening to music; and can you listen to the music you most enjoy?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... sports and activities; and do you get the chance to practise them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your ability to make decisions (do you prefer to have choices or do you prefer to be told)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... religion, philosophy, values and ethics; and can you live your preferred way of life?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... whether your environment suits your personality as an introvert or extrovert?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your use of social media, the internet and digital socialising (too much or too little)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Wellbeing Journal Page 6



## Assess Your Environments

How do you feel about . . .	Impact on Wellbeing		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive
... your financial situation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your hobbies and past-times; and do you get chance to practise them?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your home / work / university / school etc environment (light, noise, people interaction, breaks, facilities etc)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your free time; and do you get to do the things you enjoy doing to relax?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... the time you spend indoors and outdoors; and is the balance right between the two?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... your timetable; and do you get to choose or are you told how to spend your time (and which do you prefer)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
... how you are given instructions; and do you have choices or are you told what to do (and which do you prefer)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Wellbeing Journal Page 7



# Assess Your Environments

## Your Personal Environment

How do you feel about . . .

Impact on Wellbeing

. . . your family / friends / partner / others; and do you get enough time together and do the things you enjoy doing?

Negative Neutral Positive



. . . whether you are able to be yourself or whether you have to make an effort to 'fit in'?



. . .



. . .



. . .



. . .



. . .



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Wellbeing Journal Page 8

You have three pages of some suggested environments (pages 6 to 8) and then some blank pages (pages 9a to 9e) so that you can assess and record your personal environment.

On these pages your self-reflection is going to go a bit deeper than before. You're moving on from looking at your overall wellbeing for a whole day. Now you're looking at lots of different aspects of your environment. On the left you can write down a description of each particular situation in your environment. Then on the right you can mark whether that situation has a negative, neutral or positive impact on your wellbeing. You can make some notes to record what that impact is and your thoughts on why. If you like, you could give the impact a score out of 5 to indicate whether it's a big impact on your wellbeing or a mild impact.

Once you do this over a period of days, weeks and months you'll start to notice patterns. You may see that certain things commonly happen on or before a particularly challenging day or on or before a particularly resilient day for you.

The outcome of this exercise is that you will identify a number of

things that have a significant impact on your overall wellbeing. You might find that sometimes things build up, almost unnoticed, and then eventually result in you having a challenging time. Or you might notice a more immediate impact on your wellbeing.

You will also identify a number of things that commonly contribute to you feeling resilient and having a positive sense of wellbeing.

Some of these things might be well-known to you already. However, doing this exercise can be a really big revelation and you might discover some truly amazing things about the little things in life that have a big influence on your wellbeing. You may discover all sorts of things that you never realised had such an impact on you.

This is why it's important to map out your environment in as much detail as possible. I've worked with people who discover a significant impact from things like the noise around them, the sort of light they experience (natural vs artificial), taking breaks, what and when they eat, how they engage with other people and so on. Without mindful reflection, you might not notice the significant impact that these small things can have.

After doing this exercise for a period of time, you will start to develop a list of things about your environment that make a big difference to your state of wellbeing, both positive and negative.

# Chapter 25

## Step #5 - Make Some Choices

Your level of self-awareness should now be a lot higher than it was before. The next thing to do is to start making some decisions about how you want to manage your wellbeing and strengthen your resilience.

**The ability to make choices is itself a positive thing for wellbeing.**

In this next step you will make some choices for yourself. You will choose what to do about the things in your environment that you find challenging. You can also look at the things in your environment that you find supportive and decide how to maximise these things in your life.

Here's page 10 from the Wellbeing Journal.

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### Your Choices

Your Challenging Situations	Your Choices			Your Supportive Situations
	Avoid	Adjust	Adapt	

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Wellbeing Journal Page 10

Using the last exercise, make a list of the major things that you find challenging. Write these down in the column on the left side of the page. On the right side of the page make a list of the major things that support your wellbeing.

For your challenging situations you have three choices. This is important. Most of the time you do not HAVE to expose yourself to challenging environments (just like Resilient Trevor doesn't HAVE to live in the Antarctic). Don't let other people tell you that you HAVE to be constantly exposed to one particular challenge or that you SHOULD get used to your challenges. Most of the time there are choices you can make.

These choices are to: avoid them, adjust for them or adapt to them. Let's give you a short statement about what each means.

**“Avoid” means that you have no or very limited exposure to the challenging environment.**

It might not be complete avoidance. That may not be possible or you might not want to completely avoid the situation. There's a lot you can do to make sure that you are not constantly exposed to something that you find challenging, even if it is quite common in your environment.

**“Adjust for” is where you do something a different way so that it doesn't have such a challenging impact on your wellbeing.**

Sometimes you need to fulfil a commitment or an essential part of your job, studies or other responsibilities. Avoiding the situation may not be appropriate. When you adjust, you find a different way of fulfilling the commitment to lessen or remove the negative impact on your wellbeing.

A common adjustment is to collaborate, team-up or share with someone else who helps you out. Or, if appropriate, they might even do the challenging thing for you (and, in return, hopefully you can find something to do for them too).

As an example, you could be in a workplace environment and the role that you carry out involves exercising five key skills. Let's say that one of those five key skills is something that you find particularly challenging for your wellbeing. You can't avoid it completely because

then you couldn't do your job. And you don't think you can learn to get comfortable with it. On the face of it, this threatens your ability to do your job well.

What you can do is to connect with someone else who has the necessary key skill and you provide each other with some mutual support - with you helping them out in some other way in return. They can support you with the thing that you find challenging; and you can support them with something that they're not so comfortable with.

For example; I've worked with people in management positions who perform well in many areas of their role (motivating their staff, setting clear work goals, giving presentations, collaborating internally and externally etc) but they struggle with, say, managing a process - they don't find it engaging, it doesn't feel like a good use of their time, they have to put a disproportionate effort into getting it right and it frustrates them when they do this. The manager might adjust for this challenging situation by ensuring that they have a good project manager among their team members who takes an interest in and performs well at the intricate day-to-day oversight of workstreams within a project to ensure that they are delivering to schedule and to budget.

In the student world, some students struggle with isolation and therefore have limited motivation for the essential task of revision. They may find this stressful, lonely and ineffective. Now clearly you can't simply have someone else revise for you. This is not a challenge you can properly avoid. But I've done some wellbeing coaching with students who struggle in this area and seen them resolve it by finding like-minded students they can connect with in revision or study groups, so that they can sociably work together.

It isn't always possible to adjust. You can't have someone take an exam for you or do your entire job for you; but as in these examples there might be aspects of your studies, job or other responsibilities that people can help with.

We can do this in family life or in social groups too, where different people play to their own strengths to help each other out.

This approach is refreshing. In the corporate world in particular there is an obsession among some leaders with identifying someone's

“development needs” and then forcibly requiring them to get good at something they are not good at. This is, in my opinion, a weak but all-too-common form of leadership. No-one is good at everything and they never will be. So, it’s easy (and therefore lazy) to identify the thing that someone isn’t good at and then tell them to get good at it.

Better, more compassionate and person-centred leadership comes from supporting someone by helping them learn techniques to adjust for things that they find challenging and are not naturally great at. They can then focus on really performing well with the things that they are comfortable with. Now wouldn’t that be a superior form of leadership - to encourage everyone to play to their strengths and adjust for the things that they are not as comfortable with? Far better than getting everyone to waste their time and get stressed in the process of trying to improve at doing something that they are not naturally suited to.

**“Adapt to” is where you train your brain to think in a different way so that the negative impact of the challenging situation is lessened or removed.**

There are some challenging situations where you decide that this is really something that you want to get good at and find less challenging. So, you decide to train your brain to become more comfortable with it until the extent of the challenge is softened. Brain training might help you get to a position where the challenge disappears entirely and becomes something you actively enjoy. Brain training is something we are going to look at more closely in the next step.

\* \* \* \* \*

Let’s put these choices into an example. Say that you find that speaking to an audience is a really difficult wellbeing challenge for you. So, you could choose to avoid it as much as possible or totally. This might be fine if speaking publicly isn’t an important part of your studies or work. You decide that you don’t need to be good at public speaking to succeed. You’ll do fine without it. So, for the sake of your wellbeing, it’s best avoided or minimised.

Or you might do a task which has several components, one of

which involves speaking. If you avoid public speaking, you simply couldn't complete your studies or do your job. So, you might choose to team up with someone else. Perhaps you agree to help them out with some research or drafting, which you feel more comfortable doing, and they agree to take the main speaking role, with you in a lesser role. Or, if practical, they take on the speaking role entirely.

Or you might say to yourself that you really want to conquer this fear you have of public speaking. So you explore some brain training techniques (that we'll come to in the next step) to help you adapt by having less fearful thoughts about public speaking. You get support from others to help you build some experience with some short, low risk practice, before you take on higher profile speaking challenges.

Now that you know your options, you can start to choose what you'd like to do with your own challenging situations. Don't worry if you're unsure at this stage. Have a go at making a choice. You can always revisit it later and decide to make a different choice.

Once you've done it, cast your eye over page 10 of your Wellbeing Journal where you have captured your choices and just ask yourself: do you feel comfortable with your choices and do they seem achievable? If your reaction is that they might be a bit unrealistic or difficult to achieve, have another think and make sure you feel comfortable with your choices.

Remember - these are your choices. Choose what is right for you - not what you think other people want you to choose.

## Chapter 26

### Step #6 - Brain Train to Build Resilience

Brain training can help you become more comfortable in situations that you currently find challenging.

**In just the same way that gradually building up your physical stamina can help you train to run a marathon, so you can gradually build up your mental stamina and brain train to be more resilient.**

Brain training is simple to explain. It involves becoming more self-aware about the thoughts going on in your mind when you are feeling uncomfortable, stressed and challenged mentally. Often these thoughts happen at a sub-conscious level. You're not aware of them. Once you discover what these thoughts are, you can change them.

You can therefore make your thoughts more comfortable. In turn your mental wellbeing becomes more comfortable.

You may recall that in Chapter Seven we looked at your four brains. We used that to work out why mentally healthy conversations don't work so well. I said at the time that it would also be an important foundation stone which allows us to build a new and easier route to managing our mental wellbeing and strengthening our resilience.

We'll have a refresher on our four brains in a moment. First, I'd like to start by introducing you to the concept of how careful and controlled exposure to a challenging situation can be of benefit in helping you to overcome a challenge.

You may be aware that sometimes people with a phobia of things like dogs, spiders, heights and so on engage in a gradual exposure to their fears. Taking the example of a phobia of dogs; perhaps they start by observing them from a distance, then closer up, then engaging on a gentle basis (allowing the dog to sniff the back of their hand), then with increasing exposure (a pat on the head, a stroke and so on).

I'll offer you an example of this from my personal life when, as a young child, I was bitten by a dog on a family holiday abroad. Not long after getting home, my parents bought a dog - a small, fluffy puppy that

couldn't be perceived as anything other than adorable. From this, my fear of dogs gradually evaporated, so much so that I've had dogs over the decades since then. That act of exposure not only saved me from a lifelong fear of dogs; but actually went further by ensuring that I gained immeasurable benefit from the pets I have since enjoyed the company of.

Brain training essentially involves this sort of careful, gentle and controlled exposure to a challenging situation while at the same time having a mindful awareness of your underlying thoughts. You reflect on which of your four brains is dominating your thoughts and then you can work out why this is having a negative impact on your wellbeing.

You can then gently nudge those thoughts into something that is more comfortable for your wellbeing.

We're getting closer to therapy now and so it's right to point out that where the challenging situation produces a severe response, you may need the support of a therapist or medical professional. But in the right situation this approach can work through self-management or with the support of someone else to talk it through with.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'll give you a bit of a refresher on the four human brains, that you read about in Chapter Seven.

First, we explored the **Instinctive Brain** which sustains your essential needs.

**This is the brain that says: "I want..." or "I need..."**

You'll recall that when it came to choosing whether to eat cake or not, this was the brain that might prompt you to eat cake because you're hungry and things that are sweet tasting tend to sustain us well.

Then we came across the **Experiential Brain** which provides you with that filing system of good and bad experiences. So, when we need to make a choice now, this brain dives into the filing system to see whether the same thing, or something similar happened to us in the past. If it did, and if it was a good experience, we are prompted to keep going. If it was a bad experience, we are prompted to avoid it.

**This is the brain that says: “I liked this when it happened before, let’s do it again” or “I disliked this when it happened before, let’s avoid it”.**

You’ll recall that when it came to choosing whether to eat cake or not, this was the brain that might remind you that cakes are a good experience, they taste fantastic and they are associated with happy occasions. Or it might be the brain that reminds you of a recent episode of over-indulgence, or that you’re gluten intolerant, diabetic or don’t enjoy a sugar high on an empty stomach.

We then met the **Logical Brain** which gives you the ability to plan, work things out and come up with a thought-through list of pros and cons.

**This is the brain that sits like a Judge in your mind and says: “Based on my analysis and balancing all the pros and cons, the best thing to do is...”**

You’ll recall that when it came to choosing whether to eat cake or not, this was the brain that might work out whether eating cake is going to have an impact on your health (are you trying to lose weight, improve your fitness or have a better diet?) or your plans for the rest of the day (could it ruin a meal out later?).

Finally, we looked at the **Values-based Brain** which helps you when you’re making decisions, by reminding you of your values.

**This is the brain that sits in your mind like an inspirational role model, a respected elder, a mentor or a religious leader and says: “The right thing to do is...”**

You’ll recall that when it came to choosing whether to eat cake or not, this was the brain that might intervene to make sure you don’t offend someone, by whichever decision you make.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we looked at these four brains earlier, we saw how they can produce a whole range of conflicting decisions. Often, like in the example of deciding whether to eat a cake or not, we just work out these conflicts and get on with life; but sometimes they can produce

challenges to our overall wellbeing.

In every decision where there's a conflict like this, we eventually have to go-for-it and allow one part of our brain to be more dominant and make the decision. And so, we have to live with the conflict.

However, these conflicts can niggle away at us and damage our wellbeing. So:

- In the spur of the moment we might choose a fantastic experience which we later feel guilty about because it offends our values.
- Without putting much thought into it we might follow our instincts, only to regret it later because it didn't turn out to be the logical thing to do.
- We weigh everything up and choose the best decision, having thought through all the pros and cons; and then we have to live with a decision that we just don't like because it's a bad experience.
- We might make a choice out of a sense of values but find that it doesn't turn out to be a good experience or the best thing for us.

These conflicts often happen at a subconscious level and they can be confusing and uncomfortable. Brain training helps you to raise your awareness of these thoughts, so that you can have a better idea of how and why they have such an impact on your wellbeing.

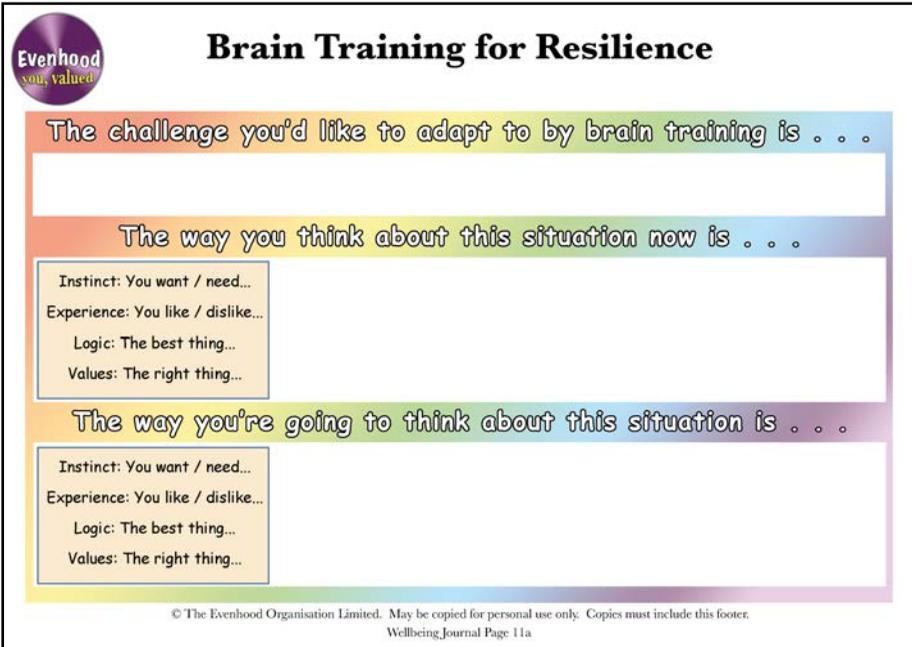
Then you can start to make little changes. You might gradually encourage one part of your brain to have more dominance because this will produce better outcomes for your wellbeing:

- You might, for example, choose to give more power to your values and try to avoid doing things on an instinctive impulse.
- Or (quite the opposite) you might choose to dampen down your values because they stop you from doing things you enjoy and this has an impact on your wellbeing.
- You might choose to put more effort into weighing up the pros and cons before making a decision, because you are prone to doing things that are a good experience at the time, but which you later regret because they weren't the best thing for you.

Think through what your brains are telling you for each of your challenging situations. Which brain is more dominant? Explore some different ways of thinking for each brain. Think about what would happen if you allowed one of your other brains to be more dominant?

To help you do this, page 11a of the Wellbeing Journal enables you to work out how brain training might be able to help.

What you do here is select one of your challenging situations and spend a bit of time thinking about how your brains work in this situation. Put some time aside to mindfully reflect on what your thought-processes are when you encounter it.



The worksheet is titled "Brain Training for Resilience" and features the Evenhood logo (a purple circle with "Evenhood" and "you, valued" below it). The page is divided into two main sections, each with a header bar and a text box. The first section has a header "The challenge you'd like to adapt to by brain training is . . ." and a large empty text box. The second section has a header "The way you're going to think about this situation is . . ." and a large empty text box. Between these sections is a box containing four prompts: "Instinct: You want / need...", "Experience: You like / dislike...", "Logic: The best thing...", and "Values: The right thing...". At the bottom, there is a copyright notice: "© The Evenhood Organisation Limited. May be copied for personal use only. Copies must include this footer. Wellbeing Journal Page 11a".

**Brain Training for Resilience**

The challenge you'd like to adapt to by brain training is . . .

The way you think about this situation now is . . .

Instinct: You want / need...  
Experience: You like / dislike...  
Logic: The best thing...  
Values: The right thing...

The way you're going to think about this situation is . . .

Instinct: You want / need...  
Experience: You like / dislike...  
Logic: The best thing...  
Values: The right thing...

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Wellbeing Journal Page 11a

Use this page of the Wellbeing Journal to make a record of what you think about in this challenging situation:

- Did you have an immediate thought, feeling or reaction?
- What does your Instinctive Brain say you want or need?
- What past experiences have you had which might influence how you feel about this situation now?
- What does your Experiential Brain say you like or dislike?
- What are the pros and cons?

- What does your Logical Brain conclude the best thing to do is, when it weighs up the pros and cons?
- What are your personal values that are relevant to this particular situation?
- What does your Values-based Brain say the right thing to do is?
- Which brain is more dominant and does this have an impact on why you find the situation so challenging?

What you then do is work through some different ways of thinking. Ask yourself what other possible thoughts you could have about the same situation. So:

- What would happen if you trained your brain to think differently?
- What if you tried making a different part of your brain more dominant - would this produce a better outcome for your wellbeing?
- Would the situation be more comfortable if you could learn to overcome your instincts?
- Would the situation be more comfortable if you could learn to think about this as a good experience, rather than a bad experience?
- Can you think differently about why this situation was a bad experience for you in the past?
- Would the situation be more comfortable if you weighed up the pros and cons differently?
- Would the situation be more comfortable if you made a decision that was more in line with your values?
- Would the situation be more comfortable if you didn't allow your values to dominate so much?
- Sometimes it's even worth asking: are you comfortable with your own values? Maybe you've adopted values that were given to you or were perhaps imposed on you by other people and you're really not quite so comfortable with them now.

Once you find something that you think might work better for your wellbeing, make a record of it and start to practise thinking differently. If you feel comfortable doing so, you might deliberately, but gently and in a controlled way, expose yourself to your challenging

situation so that you can use this different way of thinking to train your brain while you experience the particular situation.

\* \* \* \* \*

In Step #5 we used the example of public speaking to explore your choices. Let's return to that example. Through brain training, you might discover that your experiential brain is driving your fears, because public speaking was a bad experience for you in the past. As a result of this past bad experience, your instinctive brain now gives you a flight or fight response when you face the prospect of public speaking. Your breathing becomes shallow, you feel afraid, you get hot and sweaty and you want to run away.

Through brain training you might now decide to dampen down your experiential brain. You tell yourself that that experience was in the past, in a different context. You were younger and your skills and knowledge were less developed. Things are different now. You choose to give more power to your logical brain which goes through the pros and cons and tells you that this is the best thing to do, that the people you're with now will respond more constructively and that with practice you'll get better. You can ask others to help you ease into public speaking gently and give you helpful feedback. You decide that when you become confident about public speaking, you'll be able to do things that are important to your values.

This framework for brain training can deliver some really powerful results. It did for me as we'll look at next. And this framework has delivered powerful results for many others that I've coached over the years. It can deliver for you too. Give it some practice and see what it can do to help you strengthen your resilience.

\* \* \* \* \*

You've learned a lot about me and my condition through this book, so I thought you might find it interesting to know how I found brain training enormously useful (and still do) in helping me manage my wellbeing and strengthen my resilience.

You already know that my brain has a tendency to turn a regular event into a traumatic disaster. When I started mindfully reflecting on

those days when my wellbeing wasn't so good, I noticed that my condition was more difficult when there were multiple unexpected demands on my time. So, when lots of things are happening at the same time, I'm overloaded by thoughts about how they could each go wrong or turn into a tragedy. Through this self-reflection I was able to work out that one of my challenging situations is when I have a chaotic day, with lots of interruptions and diversions.

I decided that I couldn't easily avoid or adjust for this sort of environment. I have a job as a leader in a large financial services organisation (that's the job that puts food on the family table - Evenhood is a different business which I run part time and which is focused on support, not profit). My leadership role means that I'm involved in managing significant numbers of people, large budgets and making impactful decisions. By nature, this role necessarily makes multiple demands on my time; and sudden, urgent and unexpected things can happen. So, it's important for me to be able to manage my wellbeing in this challenging situation.

Similarly, at home, my life is busy. I have a wife, three children and two dogs. Things get busy. The children enjoy a bike-ride or a swim or a walk. With a post-traumatic brain that constantly looks for tragedy in events such as these, it can be hard going on my mental wellbeing.

I therefore wanted to adapt and feel more comfortable in these situations. So, I mindfully reflected on what was going on in my four brains in these challenging situations at home and at work.

Over time, I came to understand how and why my brain produced those awful flashbacks and flashforwards. I began to understand that somewhere, deep down, I'd subconsciously worked out that my logical brain had failed me, by discounting the possibility of Theo's death as so unlikely that it wasn't worth worrying about. As a result, I was totally unprepared for it and unable to do anything to avoid it.

So, my experiential brain took over. Never would I be unprepared for a traumatic event like this again. Learning from this bad experience, my experiential brain gave me a hyper-vigilant mind which would hunt for possible tragedies and traumas in everything I

did. As a result, I would be constantly ready to step in, to try and avoid painful outcomes or at least be prepared for them.

My logical brain, having failed me, was muted. My instincts became fearful. My values were hurt and offended. And so I went through life dominated by this hyper-vigilant mind driven by my bad experience.

I grew to really admire how my experiential brain had tried to protect me and my family in this way. It actually impressed me that, somewhere along the line, evolution had reached such a point that we are able to subconsciously reprogramme our brains to help protect us from our bad experiences in life.

Even though this was impressive, I knew that it was also debilitating and it had a damaging impact on my wellbeing. So, I began to work on my logical brain to give it more power and more perspective. This impressed me too. That we have the capacity to consciously reprogramme our brains to help improve our wellbeing.

I worked on giving more volume to what my logical brain might say both about the chances of any particular situation going wrong and, even if it did, how much of a problem it really would cause. I'd also think about what I'd do to cope if something bad did happen. All of this alternative thinking helped to give me a different perspective.

I reached a point where I could calm my hyper-vigilant, tragedy-focused mind by allowing those traumatic thoughts to come up. I found it beneficial to allow those thoughts to happen because then I could respect them, be impressed by them, be thankful for them and study them. I used this to train my logical brain to have more dominance in my thinking.

I'm now in a position where I can cope with a certain amount of chaos, interruptions and diversions in my day. I don't actively seek them out; but neither do I need to completely avoid them.

## Chapter 27

### Step #7 - Identify Your Skills, Talents and Abilities

When I started to build some of these tools, I was very much focused on helping people to work through the things in their daily environment that had a significant impact on their wellbeing.

As my wellbeing coaching practice developed, I kept noticing that clients often referred to how beneficial it was to their wellbeing to do something that they are good at. They reported on how this helped them feel purposeful and successful. Through that I gained a deeper understanding of how beneficial it is for people to play to their strengths.

People would also tell me that when their wellbeing is in a bad place, they often forget what they're good at. The tendency is to feel negative overall.

Other clients would tell me about how they might find themselves in a situation, often at work, where they couldn't play to their own strengths. It's quite a common feature in the workplace that leaders try and encourage (or require) people to get good at something they're not good at. They think that this is how to develop people.

Of course, sometimes this is right - if you want a managerial position, you need to learn managerial skills that you perhaps don't already have. But it's important to not let go of the core skills, talents and abilities that make you feel purposeful and successful.

**I encourage you to always remember to put your skills, talents and abilities to good use. When you do this, you will feel purposeful and that's good for your overall wellbeing.**

Your skills, talents and abilities are personal and unique to you. Page 12 of the Wellbeing Journal was developed to provide some examples that might apply to you. You can look through this and circle any that you relate to. Or you can use some of the space on that page to record some that are relevant to you but which aren't already on

there.



## Your Skills, Talents & Abilities

**ARTISTIC AND CREATIVE**

*Gets things done*

**Good decision maker**

**KIND TO OTHERS**

**lots of experience**

**A good listener**

**ENTERTAINING**

**Good at sports**

**Trustworthy**

**Knowledge**

*Good at coming up with new ideas*

**Helpful**

**good at planning**

**Clever**

*teamworker*

**Spots problems**

**Problem solver**

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Wellbeing Journal Page 12

## Chapter 28

### Step #8 - Create an Evenhood Card®

When it comes to wellbeing, sometimes you might have a particularly difficult and challenging day. When you're feeling stressed or low you might need a reminder of what you've achieved through your Wellbeing Journal. This can help by giving you a boost, or remind you of your plan for managing your wellbeing or it might just encourage you to ride it out knowing that you have a plan to strengthen your resilience which you can come back to when the difficult period is over.

In situations like these, you don't want to have to recall all the work you've done and you don't want to read through pages of notes. What you need is a short, one-page reminder of your wellbeing plan.

To help, I developed an Evenhood Card®. I use this in wellbeing coaching and in my resilience training sessions. The idea is that, by the time you get this far through the Wellbeing Journal you will have put a lot of thinking into your wellbeing; and you'll have made some really good progress. You now need to record the key elements of your wellbeing plan somewhere that is easily accessible and available when you might need it most.

**The Evenhood Card® captures everything on one page.  
You can carry this with you to remind you of your  
wellbeing plan. You can also share it with people who  
have offered to support you.**

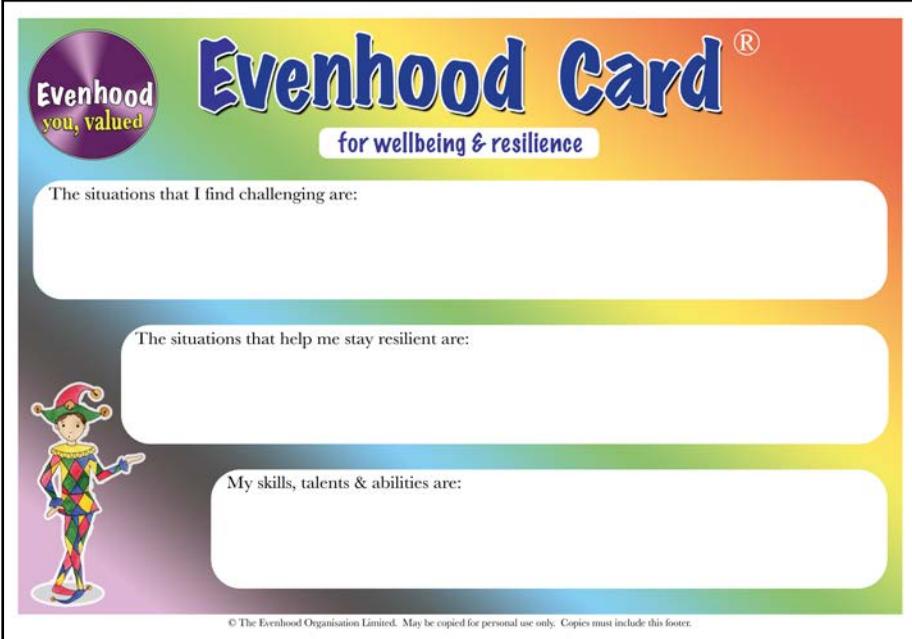
It's available as an A4 page, but of course can be printed smaller. When I give talks I commonly reach into my wallet and show people the reverse side of an Evenhood business card which sets out my own challenging situations, supportive situations and my skills, talents and abilities.

Another use for an Evenhood Card® is that you can hand it to someone that you're having a conversation with about your wellbeing. It provides them with a record of the situations that have a significant impact on your wellbeing. It's useful as a reminder of what you've

discussed. It also helps steer the conversation away from talking about label, story and impact and makes sure it focuses on the things that are useful to discuss.

I know from wellbeing coaching that people find the Evenhood Card® helpful. If you want to create one, I've made them available through the Evenhood website at [www.evenhood.org](http://www.evenhood.org).

You can order some that are pre-printed or download them for printing yourself.



The Evenhood Card is a colorful form with a rainbow gradient background. At the top left is a purple circular logo with the text "Evenhood you, valued". To the right, the title "Evenhood Card" is written in large, blue, bubbly letters with a registered trademark symbol. Below the title, a white rounded rectangle contains the text "for wellbeing & resilience". The card features three large white rounded rectangular boxes for writing, each preceded by a question: "The situations that I find challenging are:", "The situations that help me stay resilient are:", and "My skills, talents & abilities are:". On the left side, there is a cartoon illustration of a jester or clown wearing a red and green hat and a colorful, diamond-patterned outfit. At the bottom center, there is a small copyright notice: "© The Evenhood Organisation Limited. May be copied for personal use only. Copies must include this footer."

**Evenhood**  
you, valued

# Evenhood Card<sup>®</sup>

for wellbeing & resilience

The situations that I find challenging are:

The situations that help me stay resilient are:

My skills, talents & abilities are:

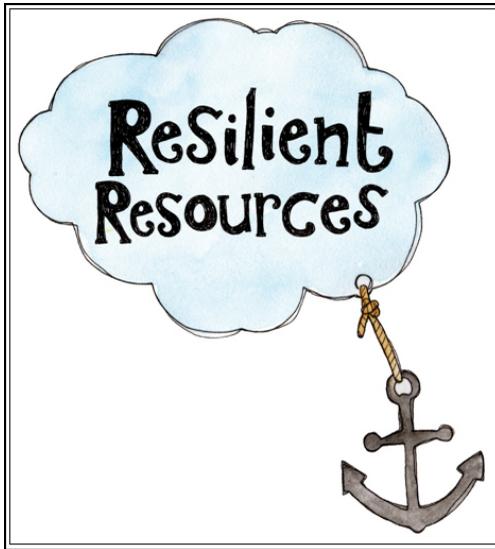
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## Chapter 29

### Step #9 - Anchor Yourself in Your Resilient Resources

I worked with someone once as her wellbeing coach. She spent some time exploring her environment and she identified her challenging and supportive situations. She then made some choices about what to avoid, adjust for and adapt to. For months she stuck to her choices and stayed well.

Then she went on holiday and her environment changed. Her wellbeing plan had been prepared with a work environment in mind. So, she didn't stick to it. And because she was on holiday, she thought it wouldn't be a problem. But it was. She became really quite unwell as her wellbeing challenges re-emerged.



Your wellbeing depends not just on you identifying the things that help you stay resilient. You also need to keep those resilient resources with you; all the time. If you're going to give your wellbeing the best chance possible, you need to make a real commitment to your wellbeing plan.

**Resilient resources are like a food. They are not optional, or occasional. They are a daily food that ensure you remain well.**

I want this step to really stick with participants on my resilience training courses; so there's a story I often tell to illustrate what I mean by anchoring.

On one occasion I was looking after our two young children - Charlie and Oliver - and it was one of those full-on, heavy-rain days. So, we stayed indoors and I suggested making some papier-mâché characters. We gathered some balloons, some glue and some brown paper and stuck away until we had two well-covered, head-shaped, papier-mâché characters.

The next day, when they were dry, we came to paint them. Part-way through the painting session I asked Oliver who he was making and he said, (with a hint of disappointment that I hadn't managed to work it out from his top-quality artwork!): "Stuart".

I asked: "who's Stuart?" I was rather curious, because I couldn't recall any of his friends being called Stuart. I thought that Oliver was using his imagination, which impressed me for his age.

But when I asked who Stuart was, I was met with an even deeper look of disappointment and Oliver said: "Oh Daddy, it's Stuart . . . from the Minions!"



I then turned to his older brother Charlie who had been watching this exchange (and I suspect had detected that I had been temporarily impressed by what I thought was Oliver’s imagination in action). I asked Charlie who he was making and, with a mischievous face, he said: “Tom”.

Well, I hadn’t heard of a “Tom” either. But in an attempt to play it cool and avoid giving rise to further disappointment I said: “Oh. Is Tom from the Minions as well?”

And with a cheeky smile, Charlie said: “No Daddy. It’s Tom. From my imagination!”



As we tried to stand these characters up to paint them, they (being balloon- or egg-shaped) just kept falling over. So, I had to do some quick-thinking and I came up with a plan. All it took for us to give Stuart and Tom a bit of stability was to make a small hole in the top of their heads and then drop a few weights (or stones) in. It worked beautifully. The stones dropped to the bottom and anchored Stuart and Tom to the table so that they could be painted.

At the time I was preparing for a talk on resilience and I’d been trying to think of an image I could use to get the point across that it’s so important to anchor yourself in your resilient resources.

This thing we’d done to stop Stuart and Tom uncontrollably falling over struck me as a perfect illustration of what I mean by anchoring yourself.

What’s more, I had an idea of how I could really get the point

across. So, I made a third papier-mâché character of my own.

I made Humpty Dumpty. And I didn't just choose Humpty Dumpty because he's conveniently egg-shaped. The imagery goes deeper than that.

Humpty Dumpty has been around (apparently) since the 17th Century. So, he has to be the least resilient guy in history, doesn't he, judging by the number of times that he's fallen off that damn wall!?



Who better than Humpty Dumpty to illustrate how you can anchor yourself in your resilient resources.

That's an image that you can keep with you to remember what I mean by anchoring yourself in your resilient resources. Even Humpty Dumpty can overcome his centuries-long challenges by being anchored.

That's what you need to do. Don't just identify the things that will keep you resilient. Whatever plan you come up with to manage your wellbeing and strengthen your resilience, you need to keep it with you, at all times.

**Remember, there's no point having a parachute if you only learn how to use it when the plane is going down. Once you have a wellbeing plan, use it every day and keep yourself anchored in it.**

There is another reason why I very deliberately use the word “anchor”. Anchoring is a well-used coaching technique that is used both in a sporting and general coaching context.

Let me give you the example of how a sportsperson is anchored. The next time you are watching a sportsperson of any sort - a footballer taking a free kick; a long jumper; a javelin thrower; a rugby player going for that conversion kick; a high diver or whoever, have a think through the vast number of processes that need to happen to make a success of it.

We’ll work with someone kicking a football over a twenty metre distance, aiming for perhaps a half square metre gap, or less, believing that this target will ensure a goal is scored. First, there’s the visual measurement, the distance between ball and target. Then there’s the need to calculate trajectory. There may be added complications, like the obstacle of other people over or around whom the ball needs to go. Or whether the goalkeeper is far enough away that the target area represents the most likely area for a goal to be scored. There may be distractions to ignore - both noises and visual; abuse from the crowd, gamesmanship by opposing players. And all of this before we have got to muscle movement. Over two-hundred muscles alone are involved in just running. More will be engaged to manage leg, foot, arm and head movement, maintain balance, create speed, develop power and produce a strike.

Overall, to perform one feat, the sportsperson will have to engage hundreds of individual functions. How on earth can anyone, in just a few moments, remember and execute all of these calculations, assessments and movements in such an accurate way?

We all know that in sport, skill is only part of what it takes to be successful. Keeping a cool head and remaining confident is also a big factor.

Of course, the only way all of this can be achieved successfully is by practice. Practice means that this vast range of functions are first individually raised to a conscious level - each individual step is observed, analysed, repeated and perfected. A sports coach might help to raise awareness of this; pointing out tweaks that can be made to stance, run-up, strike power, strike direction and so on. Then, over

time, and through repeated practice these individual actions become part of the subconscious mind. No sportsperson actually gets out their calculator, performs equations, has to consciously think "I'll use this muscle, then that one, then the next one, then this one . . ." and so on as they perform their feat, each and every time.

Through practice they gradually convert all of these functions into the subconscious. What you'll often then see them do is to kick start all of these functions in one anchoring moment. This anchoring moment is like the push of the first domino. After that, the rest of them fall like, well, dominoes!

When you next watch whatever sporting event you enjoy, make another observation. Watch the sportsperson in the seconds before they perform their feat. Do they do something - clasp their hands together, raise their shoulders as they take a deep breath and exhale, do they pull their ear lobe or stroke their cheek, do they take three steps back and two to the left, do they wiggle their fingers or make some other repeated movement on every such occasion? If you observe anything like this, what you are seeing is a sportsperson who has anchored a massive number and range of functions into one action.

This one anchoring action primes and prompts the subconscious memories of all the things learned in practice to achieve perfection. So now the sportsperson doesn't have to remember hundreds of things; he or she just has to remember one thing, the anchor, and the rest flows naturally.

This can be applied to your resilient resources. If your resilient resources are going to keep you strong in moments of stress, occasions where things are fast flowing, situations in which you are feeling challenged, then you may need to practise in less stressful times. Practice is important. And when you practice you can choose a single private action that could become your anchor to prime your wellbeing and resilience.

The lesson is to not just have an action plan to manage your wellbeing and strengthen your resilience. You also need to practise that plan, learn to use it in less stressful times so that in stressful times you automatically know what you need to do. And above all, stick to that plan every day.

## **Chapter 30**

### **Step #10a - Have Mentally Healthy Conversations . . .**

This next step is something that you're already familiar with. You know how to have a mentally healthy conversation.

As we've now discovered, mental health isn't just about complex science and difficult emotions. It's about the environment you live in every day and the impact it has on your wellbeing. This is something that we can talk about with others and they can more easily help us live in an environment that better suits our wellbeing. In fact, everyone you have contact with every day is an expert in being able to influence your environment. They can all support your wellbeing, if you have a mentally healthy conversation with them.

This step involves talking to others about the situations that have a significant impact on your wellbeing. Tell them about the situations in your environment that you find challenging. Tell them which challenging situations you want to avoid, adjust for or adapt to; and ask them to support you. See if they'll help you have more of your supportive situations and let you play to your skills, talents and abilities.

That's what a mentally healthy conversation looks like. And it's an art, not a science. So, you can have it with anyone. Anyone can help you. For that matter, you can help anyone else.

If you like, share an Evenhood Card® with them so that they have an easy-to-access record of what you've discussed.

## Chapter 31

### Step #10b - . . . with the right people

One of the most common questions I'm asked both as a wellbeing coach and when I'm delivering resilience training is who the best person to speak to is.

I understand why I'm asked this question so often. Unfortunately, the world isn't full of people who want to help. It's nearly full of them, thankfully; but you do have to think about who you're going to talk to before you start the conversation.

Sadly, there are individuals who might regard you as weak or incapable because you find certain situations challenging. Other people might not try to understand - they may tell you that you should be able to do something that you find challenging, or that you ought to be able to do it, or that it is right for you (and everyone else) to be able to do it. There will be people who compete with you, assess you, judge you and try to be better than you, or claim that they are better than you.

There aren't many people like that. Even among those who are, the majority aren't motivated by bad intentions or malice. Most are just simply viewing your world through their own eyes. Their own four brains; their instincts, experiences, logic and values are all kicking in and assuming that you should be like them. They think that because the thing you find challenging isn't a challenge for them, then it shouldn't be for you.

Individuals like this aren't much help.

What is missing in them is a sense of evenhood. As you will have gathered, evenhood is not just the name of an organisation, evenhood is a way of living and seeing each person for who they are - equally valuable, equally wonderful.

**When I regard you with a sense of evenhood, I treat you as a valuable human being. You are entitled to be yourself and I value you for being yourself.**

In evenhood I recognise that you are shaped by your own experiences. You have your own particular instincts, experiences in life

that steer your decision-making in a particular way, you have your own sense of logic and have built up your own values. Who am I to judge this mix of things that makes you, you?

**In evenhood, I want you to be yourself. And I value you as yourself.**

When I say that you need to have a mentally healthy conversation with the right person, I mean you need to have it with the sort of person who will regard you with a sense of evenhood. Someone who gives you the impression that they're happy for you to be yourself. Someone who doesn't expect you to look, dress, behave, act or talk in a particular way; or be anything in particular - except yourself. Someone who is willing to support you, mentor you or coach you to be the person that you want to be.

**The sort of person who has a sense of evenhood is the sort of person who will treat you with kindness, respect and compassion. That's the person who will support your wellbeing.**

So, before you have this conversation, work out whether the person you want to talk to has this sense of evenhood.

## Chapter 32

### Step #11 - Be an Advocate for Evenhood

I hope this book has served you well. You will by now, I hope, feel confident that you can manage your wellbeing, strengthen your resilience and have mentally healthy conversations. And because this is an art and not a science, you can not only do this for yourself, you can support other people too.

There's one thing you can do for me in return which is to be an advocate for the benefits of living a life based in evenhood.

**Treat other people with kindness, respect and compassion. Our humanity is complete when we embrace diversity. It is lost when we create divisions based on our differences.**

When we see someone behaving or acting differently to us; remember that they are a wonderful human being, made up of their unique mix of instincts, experiences, logic and values. Of course, we might not always like what this produces; but in evenhood we can accept and value others for who they are.

**If we all regard each other with a sense of evenhood, the world will be a far better place for us all.**



## Chapter 33

### Step #12 - Reflect, Journal and Talk

All of this takes a bit of work, but the work is worth it.

**Resilience is a lifelong asset.  
It's wise to invest in resilience, to get one of the best  
assets you can get in life.**

If you are to succeed in this, you'll benefit from setting time aside to reflect. Keep a Wellbeing Journal and talk with others to get their support. Once you do this, you'll be able to manage your wellbeing and strengthen your resilience.

## **PART FOUR**

### **Frequently Asked Questions**

In the next section I've set out the answers I've given to questions I've been asked following a talk, in wellbeing coaching or during resilience training sessions.

## Chapter 34

### **"What's the best thing our organisation can do to improve wellbeing?"**

Let me give you a few important notes first. Not process. Not an initiative. Not training. These things aren't wrong. They can help. It's just that they're not the "best" thing because they don't produce lasting change.

**For me the only thing that produces lasting change is culture; and the right culture for mental wellbeing is a culture of mutual support with a sense of evenhooood.**

Cultures don't grow out of processes, complexity, demands by leaders or technical training. Try asking someone in an organisation why things are done a particular way. If they reply, "because we were told to" or "because I'm following a process" or "because that's how I was trained to do it", then you haven't found something that's part of the culture.

**You know it's part of the culture when people say they do it that way simply because that's the way things are done around here.**

As a child I was told a story that I later discovered is an historic tale that is of such an age that it appears in similar form across multiple cultures, languages, peoples and countries. It is often referred to as the "Allegory of the Long Spoons".

As told to me it went like this: the story is about one person's vision of heaven and hell. This person was shown what hell was like. It was depicted as a great dining room full of people holding long spoons, eating from bowls on the tables in front of them. Then they were shown what heaven was like. It was also depicted as a great dining room with people holding long spoons, eating from bowls on the tables in front of them.

Confused, the person was invited to observe more closely. In hell the people were malnourished and anguished. They were trying to eat,

but the spoons were so long the food fell off before they could get it in their mouths. In heaven they were well-fed and contented, as each individual fed the person sat opposite them.

That simple but lovely story of mutual support has stuck with me.

It strikes me as the sort of mindset based in evenhood that would enable an organisation to have a positive approach to wellbeing.

Evenhood is a way of living. If people throughout an organisation were to live with a sense of evenhood, that would contribute to the sort of culture that organisations need, to develop positive wellbeing.

In evenhood, we regard each other as wonderful human beings. All different, yet equal. In evenhood, we invite others to be themselves. Indeed, we want other people to be who they are; because who they are is the best that they can be. In evenhood, we value each other for who we are. When it comes to the differences between us; those differences are not an obstacle, but an opportunity.

**We show our humanity when we embrace our differences and know that together we create something more powerful than if we act alone or surround ourselves only with people who are the same as us.**

An organisation that develops a culture of mutual support and a sense of evenhood is a wonderful organisation to be a part of.

## Chapter 35

### **“What’s wrong with training and science; why is art and culture more important?”**

There’s nothing wrong with training or with science. I’m not anti- these things. I just think they have their limitations.

Training can be expensive, so it’s not always made available; whereas culture seeps through an organisation. Training is generally only delivered to a few people whereas culture becomes part of the DNA of an entire organisation. With training, some of the people who have been trained will inevitably leave, others may forget some of the technical aspects of what they have been taught. With culture the desire to be mutually supportive and to value positive wellbeing is just part of everyday life and that survives turnover.

Another limitation which is very relevant to mental health is that you could have a highly trained individual standing right next to someone who is in the middle of a mental health crisis; but neither might have the faintest idea that it would help if they got together.

Mental health is often an invisible illness. Indeed, because of stigma and lack of support it’s often deliberately hidden.

Physical health first aiders can see when someone has had an accident, a burn, an injury or has been taken ill. That’s not always the case with mental health.

**What gets two people together more readily is if there’s a culture of mutual support, a sense of evenhood, a desire within the organisation for people to be well, to be themselves and to be valued for who they are.**

To me, that comes more from culture than from technical training.

\* \* \* \* \*

The reason why I have a preference for this as an art rather than a science is because, as a science, mental health is a technical, complex

subject. Science has a significant and highly important role to play in supporting good mental health; so, I absolutely do not have any anti-science sentiment.

Again though, it has its limitations. If science were the only solution, we would have a bottle-neck, where people who need support for their mental health have to wait in line for an appointment.

That is why I had a desire to find a solution that is more accessible. To me, that means making it less technical and less complex. As an art, anyone with the right mindset and the right desire can provide support without lengthy, expensive and complex training.

**Where you have something that ANYONE can do, you have something that EVERYONE can do. And once everyone can do something, it has the ability to become part of a culture.**

## Chapter 36

### **“Does social media contribute to good or poor mental wellbeing?”**

Social media facilitates a wide range of useful functions - the sharing of knowledge, distributing news, maintaining business connections, selling things, buying things, making or reading recommendations, sharing creativity, staying in touch with friends and family and so on.

In view of that range of useful functions it would not be credible to be overly critical of social media. It can be useful for wellbeing by spreading messages of encouragement, affirmation and news of “what works for me”.

Where I start to part company with social media is the harm that flows from the portrayal of perfect lives. Users of social media are bombarded by perfect pictures and perfect stories of perfect days. They don't ordinarily see friends going onto social media to talk about mediocre or difficult days.

Seeing this perfection in the lives of others creates a pressure that gets frequently mentioned in wellbeing coaching. It creates a distorted reality of what life is really like and this can have a damaging impact on someone who is feeling vulnerable.

As social animals we constantly compare ourselves to others; and the danger seems to come when you start to compare yourself to this perfect idealisation of life that you get on social media. Once people start to do that, it chips away at their resilience because it creates a sense of inferiority.

I also see harm in the way social media is used to spread opinions. Extreme views are expressed, often not by people, but by anonymous usernames. Those opinions are often dressed up as facts when they sometimes do not remotely resemble a fact.

I'm not just talking here about the extremely negative, hatred-based and malicious opinions expressed on social media. Damage also comes from the tendency on social media for “grey areas” to not exist. We get storms of polarised opinions with groups forming which claim

their view is the right one and opposing groups with opposing opinions which claim their view is, in fact, the right one. What baffles me is that these angry storms often relate to inconsequential issues; such as being about someone who has expressed themselves poorly, or someone who has disclosed a certain personally-held opinion or belief; or where there's a debate over who should really have won a competition, a tv game show or got an award and so on.

In these angry storms, grey areas of opinion aren't allowed to exist. There doesn't seem to be scope for people to say that they personally disagree with an opinion, but they respect that the different view is a valid one. There doesn't seem scope for people to simply say that they wished an award had gone the other way, but fair enough. Instead we see vilification and angry claims of bad behaviour, conspiracies and fixes. So, rather than just resulting in conversations with fluid exchanges of opinion, they turn into angry battles and expressions of extreme views. This seems to be a product of the relative anonymity that social media offers.

This combination of contrived perfection and consequence-free expressions of anger is a toxic combination that does grind people down, drains their resilience and it has mental health consequences.

Like many things, social media has the capacity to do good, but it also has the potential for inflicting harm. I'd like to see us learning from this and creating a sense of what is socially acceptable and what is not socially acceptable. We should guide our friends, colleagues and children to help them understand the downsides that come with the benefits of social media to help them manage their resilience and not get sucked into this constant comparison with perfection and this barrage of angry, negative views.

## Chapter 37

### **“What HR processes do we need?”**

I have a dislike for processes around mental wellbeing so I'm going to keep this brief. Mental health is about humanity, conversations and mutual support. Not so much about processes.

If I were to make some organisational recommendations for process changes, I'd recommend that you have some sort of process that culminates in a written-down wellbeing plan.

This wellbeing plan should identify parts of the working environment that an individual finds challenging along with the choices they make about how to address these (avoid, adjust for or adapt to). It should identify their supportive situations in the workplace and how having more of these helps their wellbeing. And it should identify their skills, talents and abilities which they should have the opportunity to use, because it helps them feel purposeful and successful.

I would love, in fact, to see organisations do away with the banal annual appraisal which is often just used as an opportunity to tell people what they are not good at and tell them to get good at it. Development would be far better served by something that is more aligned to the individual.

One final point on this is that another advantage of a wellbeing plan is that it can be used as a passport. One of the things that my wellbeing coaching clients often complain about is that when they get a new line manager or move internally within an organisation, they have to reopen discussions about their mental health. This can be awkward and distressing. But more to the point it's totally unnecessary. Some more enlightened organisations use a wellbeing passport so that once an individual has made a mental health disclosure, they don't have to do it again.

## Chapter 38

### **“Why do organisations sometimes have such challenging environments?”**

I get this question a lot from clients who feel constantly ground down by their various environments - particularly the work environment.

Take yourself back to the playground at school. When you enclose hundreds of children in a relatively small space day after day, for years on end, you get to see what happens when a mash of personalities collide.

You get your introverts and extroverts, your sporty competitive types and your quiet contemplative types, you get your bullies and you get your gentle supporters, you get your team players and those who entertain themselves or who enjoy close friendships in smaller numbers. The playground can be a difficult, competitive environment; sometimes cruel. It also provides adventure, sport, entertainment and helps develop social skills.

**The challenges of the playground don't stop just because we move from education to work. Frankly we just move to the “playground of the workplace”.**

What I mean by this is that throughout life and in different environments, including the workplace, you still get some of the same social attitudes and approaches that you find in the school playground. They might be more subtle, but they can be damaging.

Working environments develop their own culture. Workplace culture is particularly influenced by leadership teams. Where you get leadership teams that are competitive rather than collegiate, you get competitiveness between colleagues. You can have leadership teams that are dominant and untrusting of the decisions made lower down the ranks, and this creates a blame culture where colleagues are constantly questioning decisions made by each other and blaming each other when things go wrong. You get groupthink in the workplace where people feel inhibited about expressing a personal opinion

because they feel the need to coalesce around the leader or the dominant or popular personality.

You get competition within teams in the workplace. Often this is better hidden than the more obvious competition between schoolchildren. But it's there. People in teams compete for the distribution of appraisal grades in the same way that pupils want that limited supply of A\* grades; and equally they chase that pot of money at the end of the year for a pay rise or bonus.

You also still get your bullies, your narcissists whose self-interest and self-opinion create a trail of destruction upon which they build their own success.

On the other hand, workplaces can be, and often are, also wonderful environments of collegiate behaviour, with mutually supportive colleagues helping each other to achieve success; with leaders who motivate their people by celebrating success and nurturing talent; inclusive environments where people are not judged by their personalities but by what they deliver.

Given the role I have as a wellbeing coach, I all-too-frequently hear reports of very poor behaviour in the workplace that has a detrimental impact on individuals. The people I meet are often impacted so very heavily by the playground of the workplace; particularly when the working environment is not conducive to supporting people of diverse personality and with differing wellbeing needs.

## Chapter 39

### **“Could I become a wellbeing coach?”**

Some people who come along to my resilience training sessions take an interest in whether they can become a wellbeing coach.

To become a coach, I spent a year training with the Academy of Executive Coaching in London. I recommend that you look into the various options that exist to train as a coach. Also take a look at your career options once you have qualified as a coach just to make sure that any training you take-on will set you on a path that you're interested in following.

For my part, initially my interest in coaching was from a business perspective. I spent several years coaching people mainly in the legal and financial services world - which is my professional background. I switched off my coaching career for a few of years when Theo died because of the difficult time I was going through.

When I returned to coaching, I made a decision to change to wellbeing coaching; and that is now almost exclusively the sort of coaching I practice.

You worked your way through my approach to wellbeing coaching when you read Part III of this book. I ask a client for their thoughts on resilience. We then look at their daily environment. I encourage them to keep a journal of their daily wellbeing scores and their thoughts on how their wellbeing is impacted by the situations they encounter each day. Then we work through their choices and look at how they might build up the resolve to make sure they commit to their wellbeing plan.

I earn great value from seeing a client leave coaching looking visibly lighter, as if their wellbeing plan has set them on a more comfortable path.

As you will also have gathered from this book, my mindset as a wellbeing coach is one of a non-judgemental listener. I don't think of myself as asking questions. I think of myself as intervening in the client's conversation. By thinking of it this way, you become far less inclined to ask a question, because intervening is rude and interrupts

the client.

Another thought I will leave you with is that a good coach acts as a mirror to a client. If you imagine standing in front of a mirror looking at yourself for hours on end, you'd get to know your appearance in intricate detail. This works better where the mirror is of good quality. A poor quality mirror provides a distorted reflection of your physical appearance.

In a very similar way, a good wellbeing coach acts as a mirror to the client's mind - to help them understand themselves better and make choices that enhance their life. Distortions come when a coach offers personal opinions, advice and insights. Any questions you ask should therefore be non-judgemental and free of your own thoughts and designed only to help the client understand themselves better.

If you think you'd like to do this and you'd find it interesting and rewarding then yes, you can be a wellbeing coach. Coaching might well be for you if you feel that you can listen with a (truly) non-judgemental mind and if you can gently nudge a conversation along to explore someone's environment and the impact it has on their wellbeing, and then help them come up with a plan to choose whether they need to avoid certain challenging situations, adjust for them, or adapt to them.

If this is of interest, then do take a look at your options for training as a coach.

## Chapter 40

### **“How do I spot the signs of poor mental health in others?”**

People often hide the state of their mental health because of the fear of stigma or lack of support. People don't want to be perceived as weak or incapable; so, they may reveal nothing of their mental wellbeing.

The real solution to this is to create a culture of mutual support for wellbeing. Once this has been achieved in an organisation, then that fear of stigma and lack of support recedes and people are more open about their mental wellbeing - just as people often are about their physical health.

That's the real answer to the question. But it's a nirvana. This whole-of-organisation shift in culture takes time; and it also takes more than one person to engineer the shift. So, in the absence of a shift in culture, how can we spot the signs of poor mental health among people who may be hiding their mental wellbeing challenges?

I have a slightly confused answer to give you.

The key point to look out for is “change”. A change in start time, leaving time, a change of interests, a change in relationships, becoming more social or less social, a change in going to the gym or pursuing other interests, a change in routine. Or it could be a change in demeanour - becoming more negative, downbeat, depressed and so on. Any of these changes can be a sign that something might be wrong.

However (and here's the confusing bit) bear in mind that if YOU know that change can be a sign of poor mental wellbeing, then the individual probably knows it too. And if they want to hide it because of self-stigma or a (mis-)perception that you or others won't respond well, then it might be that they put an effort into making everything appear normal.

So, you also need to create regular opportunities to check-in conversationally about how people are feeling. You don't have to do this in an intrusive way. Just be genuinely curious and interested in their wellbeing.

You cannot force a conversation, of course. But you can demonstrate that you care. You can make it clear that you're willing to support. And, if you have noticed a change, you can ask about it.

## Chapter 41

### **“How do I find the time to support others with their mental wellbeing?”**

I once had a boss; many, many years ago now, who was monumentally rude and abrasive on a near-permanent basis. He was under a lot of stress himself and he passed this on down the line. I got sick of this behaviour, and at one point and in a career-limiting but honest way I held a mirror up to his behaviour. Somewhat taken aback he simply blurted: “I didn’t want to waste time being polite”.

He hadn’t realised that if he were more polite, then he’d create a working environment that would be more conducive to us all pulling together, rather than working in fear. And if that happened, we’d all have more time.

The point is, that if you make the effort to support the wellbeing of the people you interact with on a regular basis, you’ll not only be doing something wonderful for them; you’ll also get from them their loyalty, respect and commitment.

**You don’t need to find time for wellbeing. If you invest in the wellbeing of the people around you, you’ll get time back.**

## Chapter 42

### **“What should I do if I think someone is at risk of suicide or self-harm?”**

There isn't a global, one-size-fits-all, answer to this one. And we are quite clearly in very difficult territory.

There are a few things to be aware of though.

Asking directly whether someone is safe or is having suicidal thoughts is believed to heavily diminish the likelihood of someone attempting suicide.

Showing that you care and making it clear that you care and are willing to listen and to offer support is also something that can help diminish the likelihood of someone attempting suicide.

A “safety plan” or “rescue plan” is also an important feature for people who may have suicidal thoughts, particularly where they have reached the point of contemplating a method of suicide. A safety plan might be to avoid environments entirely that offer an opportunity for the method of suicide that might be contemplated. Talking to someone about having and following this safety plan is therefore likely to be supportive.

A rescue plan involves having a pre-determined plan in place and ready for if an individual reaches rock-bottom and is at risk of immediate harm. The rescue plan might involve having a number to call (or, preferably, a series of numbers in sequence). It might be a place to go, or something to read.

Clearly in this situation the person is in need of medical assistance and professional, therapeutic intervention. So, making sure appropriate contact is made with this professional support is also vital.

## Chapter 43

### **“Do you have any other tips about how to create a positive wellbeing culture?”**

Here are some notable features of organisations that have a positive approach towards mental wellbeing.

#### **#1 - they develop a listening culture**

I had a wellbeing client once who cried towards the end of the session. We'd had a conversation along the lines of the things I've covered in this book. She told me about the things in her environment that had a significant impact on her wellbeing, the choices she could make about those things and who she could talk to for support. I hadn't said much. Just enough to nudge the conversation towards these topics.

When she cried I wondered why. So, I asked. She told me that no-one had ever listened to her like this.

Then the same thing happened again with another client.

And again.

And so on.

Being listened to is what these wonderful people needed. But they weren't getting it from the organisations that they worked for. What amazes me about this is that being listened to was such a rare event for these people that when it actually happened they were overcome with emotion.

Organisations with a positive wellbeing culture listen to their people.

#### **#2 - they offer autonomy**

Sometimes in organisations (actually, quite often) grown adults lose their autonomy. These are people who lead complex lives and more-often-than-not cope with it perfectly well. People who have been through education, often put themselves through university, managed their own complex finances, formed relationships, bought houses, raised children and so on.

Then, at work, they are reduced to having to ask permission for

the most basic of things; and to have their diaries, work and outputs micro-managed. They feel the finger of blame pointing at them when things go wrong.

Contrast that with a culture where people are treated as adults with a sense of trust, autonomy and self-determination.

An organisation that is prepared to offer a reasonable degree of autonomy is one in which wellbeing is more likely to thrive.

### **#3 - they encourage work / life separation**

There needs to be some separation between work and life. An organisation that is genuinely interested in the wellbeing of its people encourages this separation.

## Chapter 44

### **“Is my mental health challenge a problem if I see it as a talent?”**

This is a difficult subject. As you know from reading my story, my mental health challenge means that I have a hyper-vigilant mind that is always on the look-out for things that could turn into a tragedy. You’ve also read that one of my skills, talents and abilities is that I’m good at spotting risks.

They’re kind-of the same thing. It’s just that from a personal perspective this is incredibly debilitating; but from a work perspective, this is a useful skill.

I’ve seen the same in my wellbeing coaching - with clients talking about both the upsides and downsides of their condition.

This creates a danger that you will cling onto something that’s damaging for your wellbeing, just because it happens to also produce a benefit in a particular context. You need to make sure that you don’t prolong the downside of a thought or behaviour because you see it as beneficial in certain circumstances.

So, for me, it would be dangerous if I didn’t try and manage my hyper-vigilant mind just because it occasionally produces a benefit at work. Instead, it is important that I do manage my hyper-vigilant mind, but I can still harness the core skill and use that to my benefit.

In the corporate world there are some enlightened organisations that actively support people with mental wellbeing challenges to play to their strengths. For example, we see software companies that actively hire autistic employees. This isn’t out of workplace ethics. This is because some people on the autism spectrum are recognised for their ability to think logically and to spot flaws in software programming.

But, as we have already seen, there are some bosses that, incredibly, would ask an autistic employee to “make the effort to become more sociable” and I dare say that there are many more that wouldn’t hire an autistic employee.

Through my work as a wellbeing coach I have come across individuals who have some wonderful skills, talents and abilities that

derive from their mental wellbeing challenge. For example, I've worked with people who have increased interpersonal empathy, as a result of their deeply personal and emotional experiences. This ability to empathise and to understand at a deep level the nature of the human condition is a key skill that can be put to great use in team-working, in leadership roles, or in people management.

I've seen people with enhanced creativity. This is where they have perhaps been driven through stressful times in a highly logical and intellectual profession or highly intellectual academic work - and who have now learned to calm their mind by embracing a more creative side. This creativity can place someone on a different career path entirely or be a positive accompaniment to their current career - giving them a broader perspective on the issues they tackle as part of their career.

Then I have coached people who, like me, have the enhanced ability to identify and manage risk - and these include people with post-traumatic stress, as well as people with other conditions that might make them more inclined to identify and manage risk, such as anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder.

Then I have seen people whose condition may lead them to be introvert in nature, less inclined to social interaction, but who as a result of their condition and their lower need for social interaction, may have an enhanced ability to work logically through detailed and complex processes and spot flaws. This can be useful for the development of new or improved processes, for streamlining current processes, for software development, for audit, compliance, regulatory or other review work.

I have worked with people who, because of their own particular circumstances and especially if they have been impacted by other people's poor or questionable judgements, have an enhanced, logical and ethical approach to decision making. Again, this is a wonderful trait for good leadership - the ability to make robust decisions, backed-up by solid rationale.

So, there you have a vast range of people. People who exist. People who I've met. People who have a wonderful range of enhanced skills, talents and abilities.

Yet, if someone were to look at this same set of people through a different perspective, through the eyes of someone who is judgemental and negatively opinionated about those with mental wellbeing challenges, they would focus on the weaknesses they perceive to exist as a result of their condition. They would focus on different, sometimes quirky, personalities. These people would be mis-judged, written-off and deemed incapable; when all they have are different personalities, but are still perfectly capable.

## **Closing Remarks**

I do hope that this book has helped you in whatever role you have and in whatever part of your journey in life you are at.

I also hope that you have found something to focus on that is positive and useful for you; and that is positive and useful for the people that you come across in your life.

I am constantly learning, so if you have any thoughts or suggestions, a story to share or a challenge to conquer, feel free to get in touch with me through the Evenhood website.

I wish you all the very best.

Jonathan



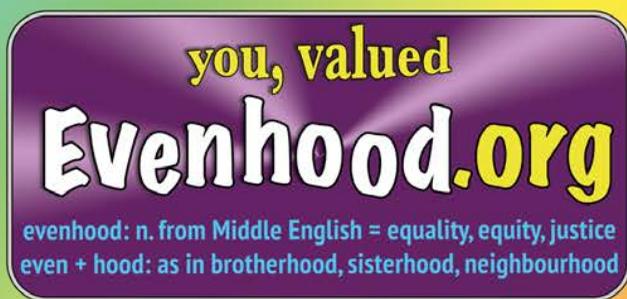
This book challenges the belief that mental wellbeing is all about the mind; and that if things go wrong, the solution lies only in science, medicine and therapy.

Your mental health is affected by your environment too. In the right environment, you feel comfortable and can thrive. In more challenging environments, you may struggle.

In “The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation” Jonathan revisits his quest to find his Holy Grail - which was to discover a better way to manage his mental wellbeing, strengthen his resilience and get support, rather than stigma, from others.

Join him on his journey and explore the amazing things he found. What he discovered inspired him to create Evenhood to help you manage your mental wellbeing, strengthen your resilience and have mentally healthy conversations with others.

“The Art of the Mentally Healthy Conversation” will change your mind about mental wellbeing.



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