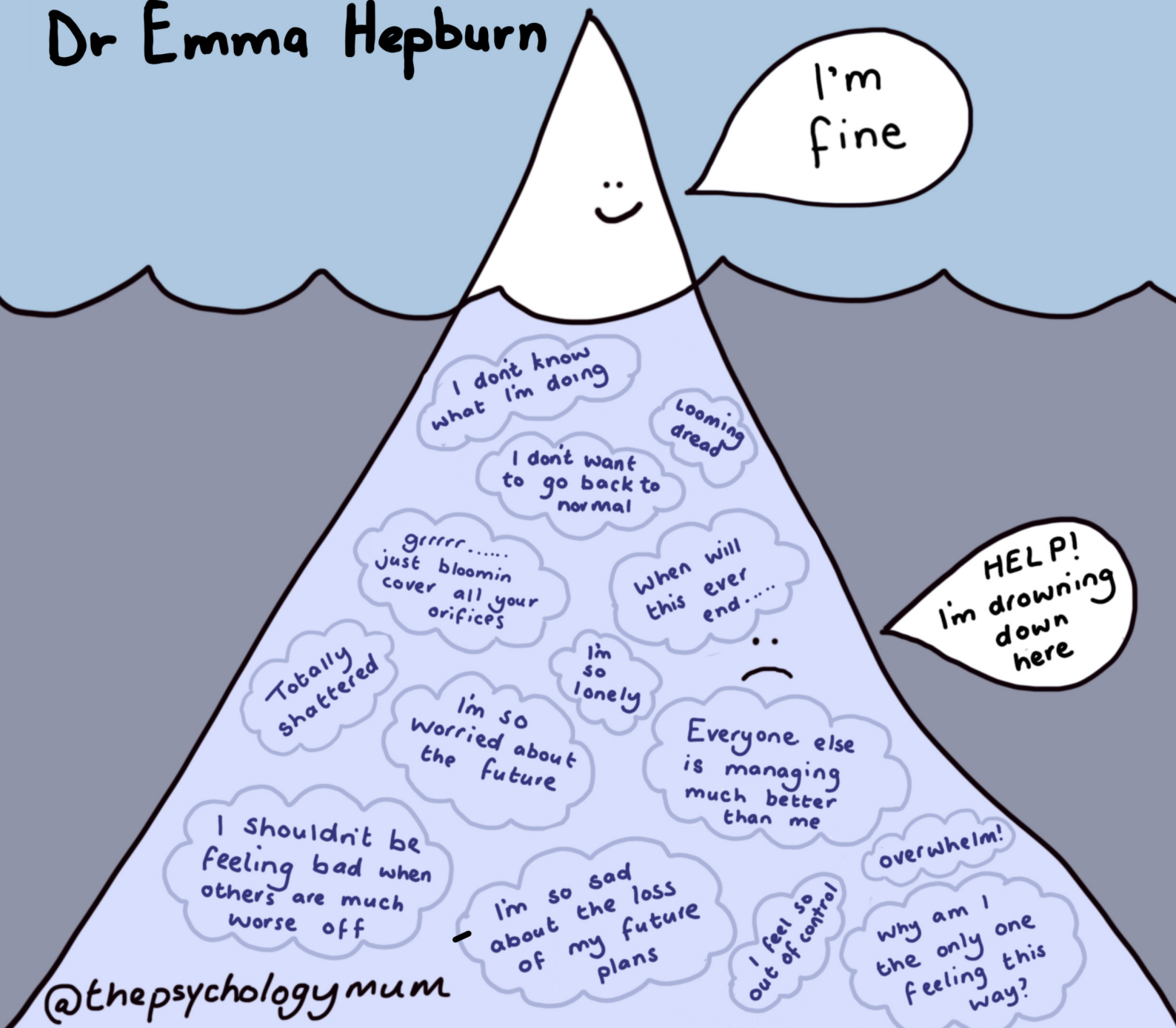
How to Stay Calm in a Global Pandemic

Dr Emma Hepburn



@thepsychologymum

HOW TO STAY CALM IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

BY DR EMMA HEPBURN

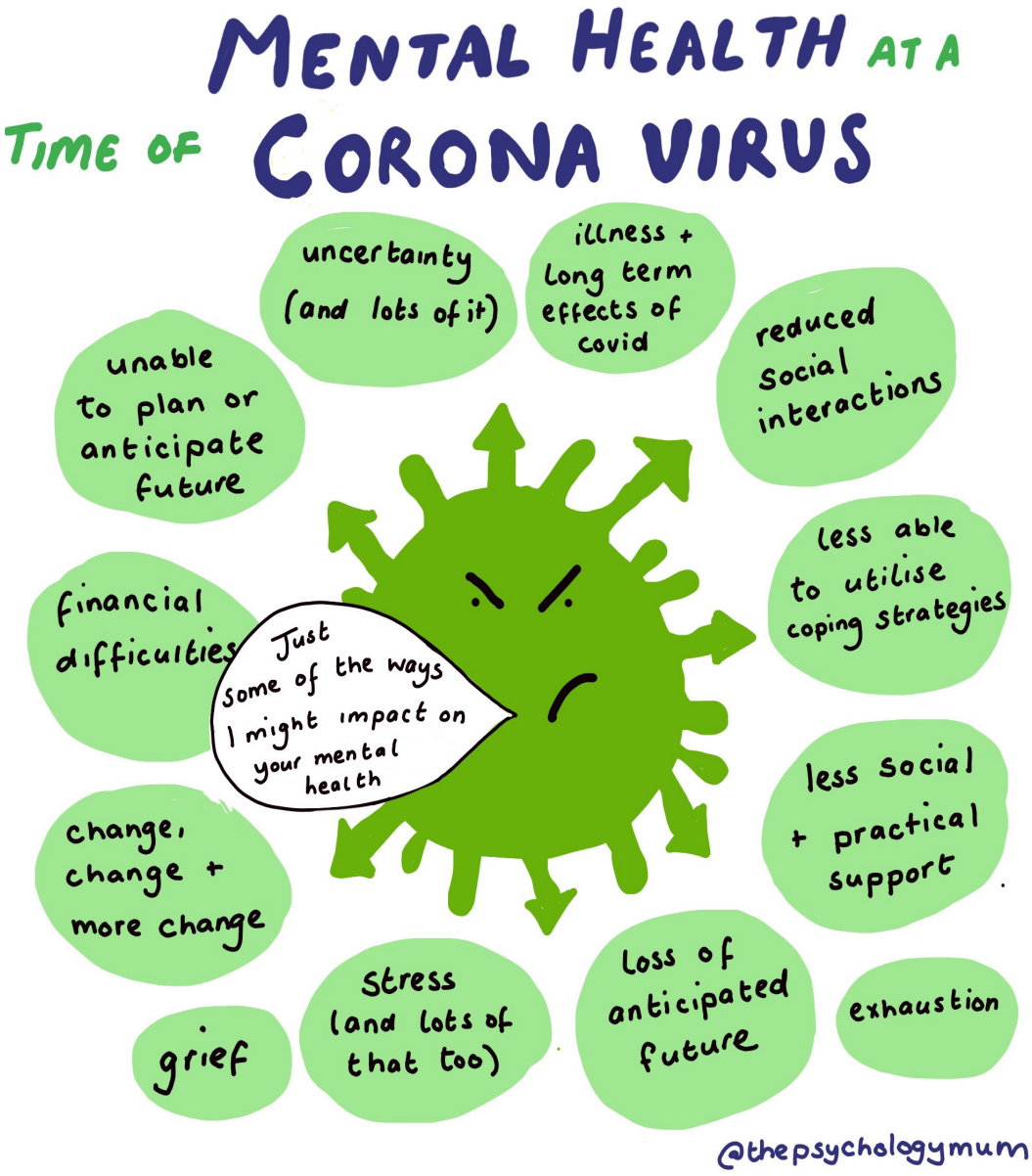
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CONTENTS

- Mental health at a time of coronavirus
- The mental health curve
- The covid capacity cup
- The post high-stress slump
- Why am I finding this so difficult?
- Just some emotions you might feel during coronavirus
- Routes off the anxiety roundabout
- Corona icebergs
- Beware pandemic pressure
- Self-compassion at a time of coronavirus

MENTAL HEALTH AT A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

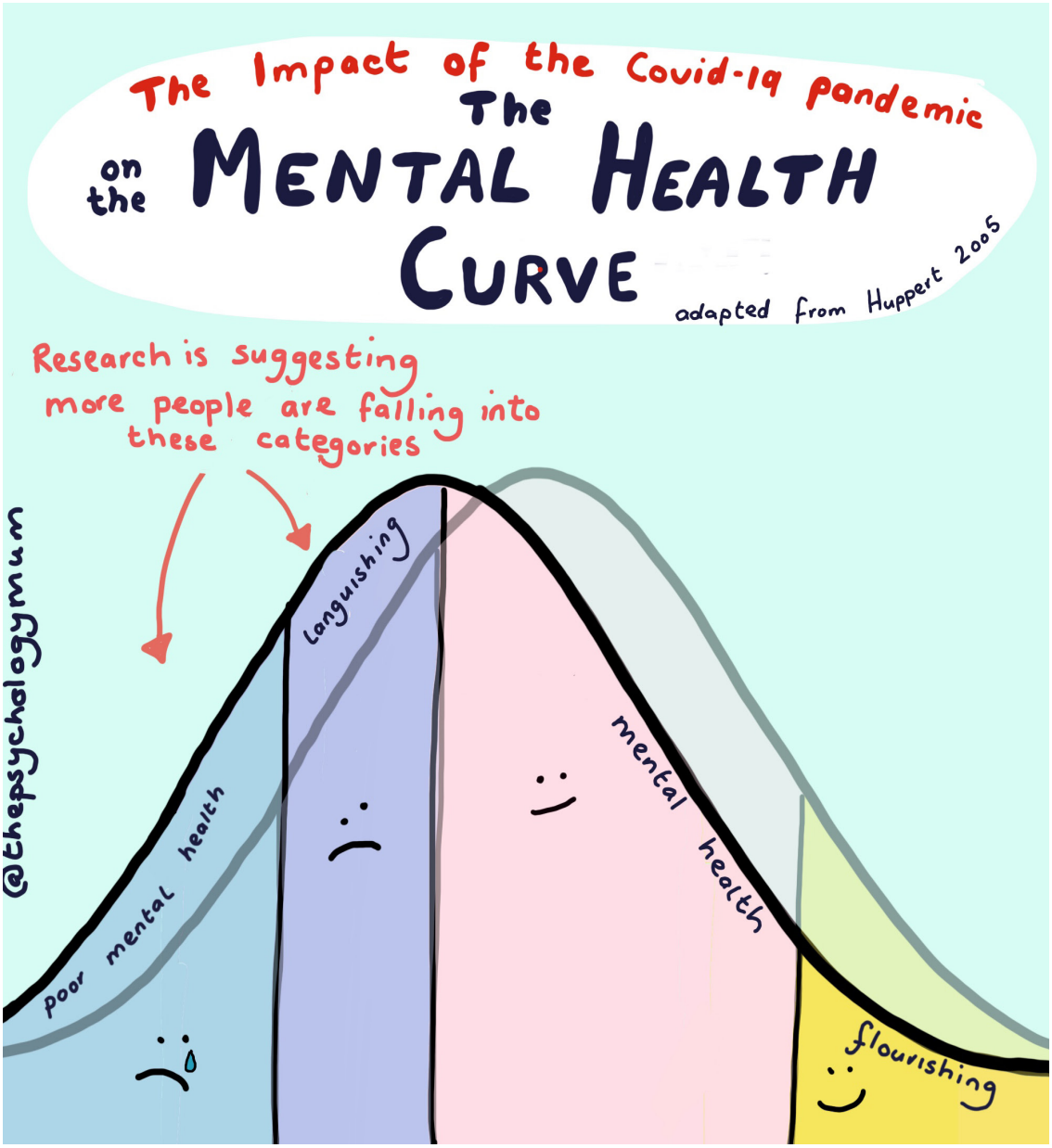
National data indicates that the current global pandemic is resulting in increased anxiety and reduced wellbeing for many of us. Probably no surprise there. Over the past few weeks, I've taken part in lots of interviews and been asked the same question a number of times: 'How can Covid-19 impact on our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



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

THE MENTAL HEALTH CURVE

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



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

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

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

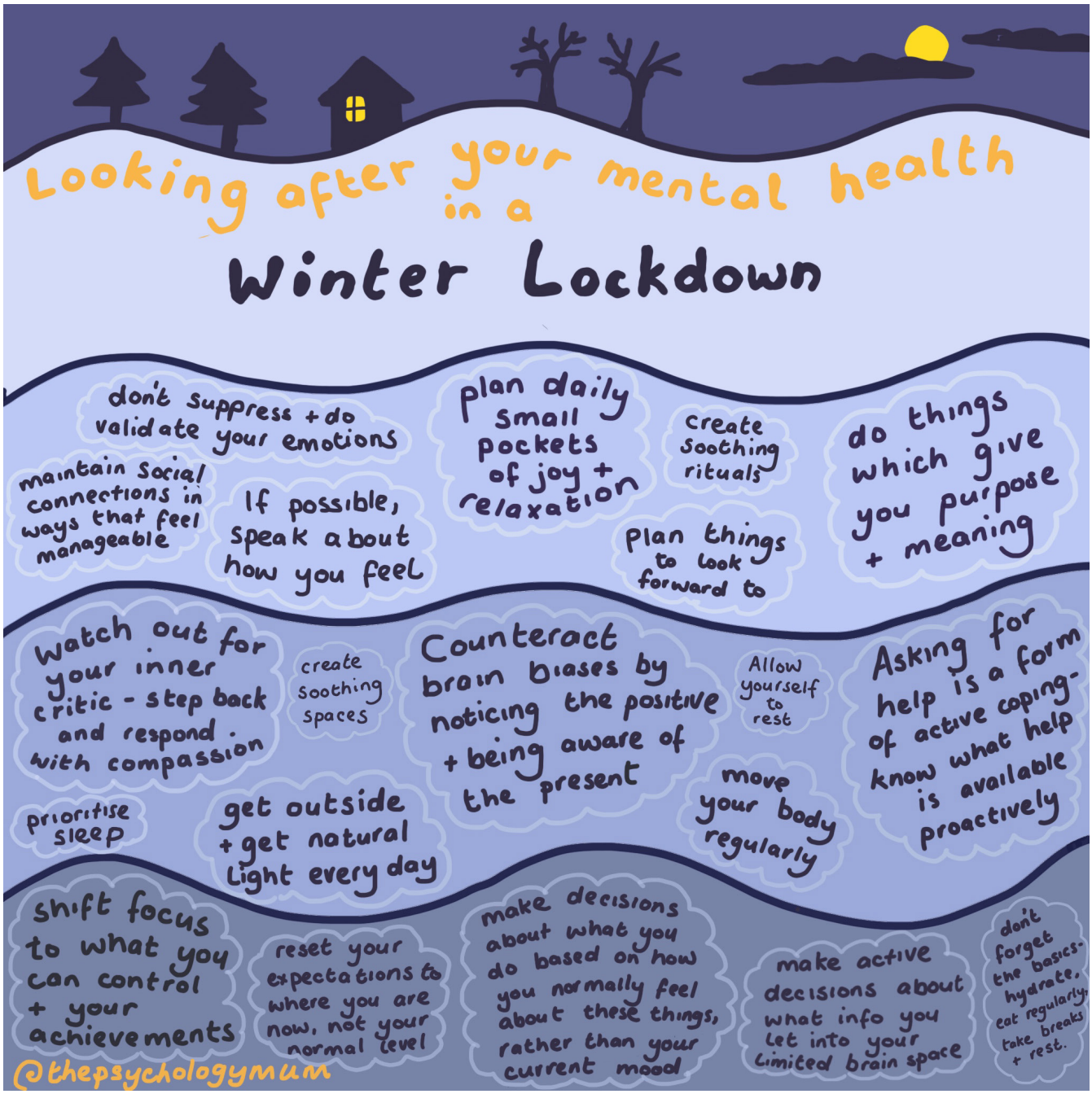
4. Be extra gentle on yourself when we are tired we have less cognitive resources. More things may go wrong, we can do less and we may not function how we expect. This is lighter fuel for your inner critic and your brain can fall into well-worn paths of self-criticism. This is a signal to hold on to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

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

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

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

8. Remember that none of us can always function alone. We all need extra input at times. Seeking and accepting help is not a failure, it's a basic human need and a form of active coping to help keep us afloat.



9. Plan daily pockets of joy and relaxation. Creating positive affect is imperative right now. Try to plan things to look forward to across the next week and month, so that your brain has something positive to anticipate.

10. Prioritize activities that give you meaning and purpose, as these are inherently good for wellbeing.

11. Create comforting rituals – these can be things you do on a daily or weekly basis. Or create some meaningful new family/friend/workplace rituals to look forward to.

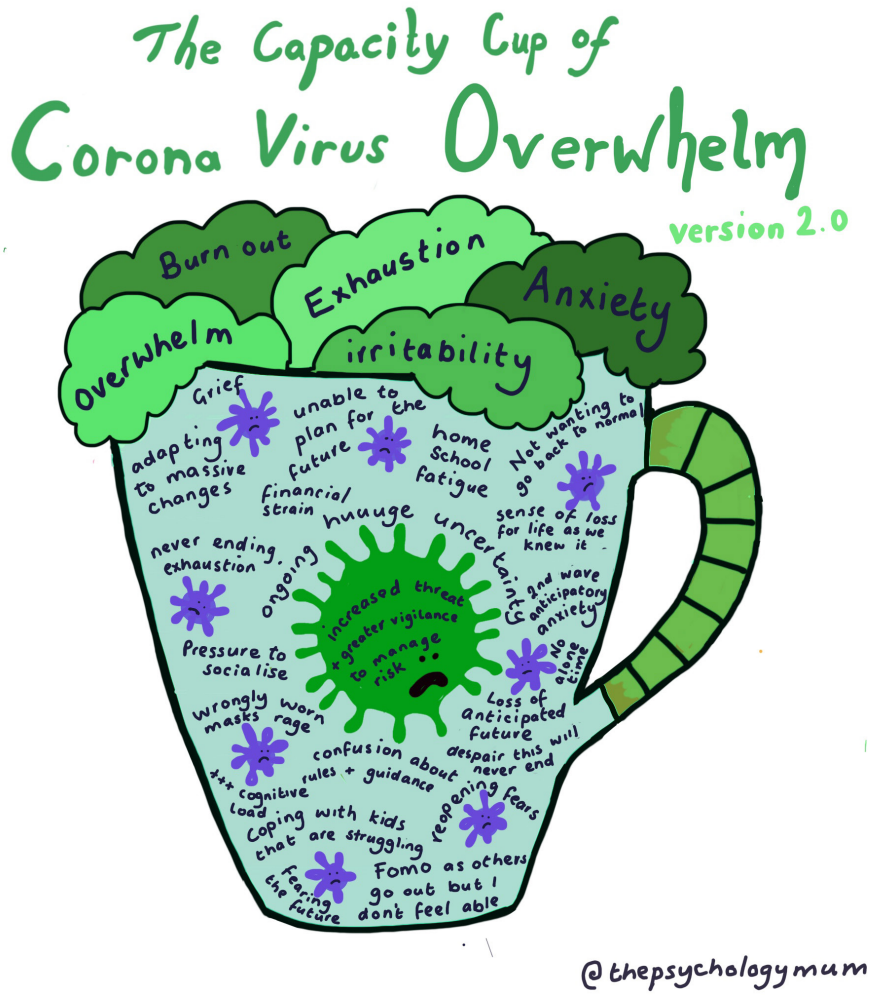
12. Make active decisions about what you let into your limited brain space. Don't allow news, social media and negative information to take up too much of your resources. Decide what it is most helpful for you to focus on right now.

13. Our brains like certainty but think about whether the places you look for certainty are actually creating more uncertainty or making you feel anxious. We check the news, social media or talk about the current situation in an attempt to create certainty, but often these things can actually make us feel worse and more uncertain.

14. Watch out for the myths and societal messages around productivity. We are naturally inclined to want to achieve and society bolsters this belief by rewarding achievements. Then when our productivity drops because we are depleted, we can no longer meet the standards we have set, which means we feel like we are failing. Try to set realistic expectations based on how you are feeling now, not what you are usually like. Allow yourself to slow down, lower the bar and do less, if possible.

15. Reframe the meaning of taking a break and allow yourself to enjoy it. This is essential for your body, brain and wellbeing. Sitting on the sofa watching Netflix for a whole day doesn't make you lazy – if you enjoy it (which you are more likely to if you allow yourself to), it is an activity that helps restore your resources and rest your brain and body. And that's more necessary then ever right now.

THE COVID CAPACITY CUP



Why do I feel so stressed and exhausted? Imagine a dystopian world where we have to be hyper vigilant at all times because of a great level of general threat and risk. Where at short notice, our world and lives have to be unpredictably overhauled to manage that risk. Where uncertainty about what might happen next becomes the norm.

Of course, we don't have to imagine this . . . we just need to remember the last few months and think about what's happening now. We've been running at higher than normal general threat levels for a long time now. Our capacity has been running at full with all the uncertainty, unpredictability, change and stressors we've been dealing with. And that's on top of normal life, which often fills our capacity to the brim anyway.

This means that our brains have been perpetually telling our body to direct energy to deal with that threat. We are exhausted because our body has been in a state of high stress. And ironically that exhaustion itself uses up even more capacity: mustering up the required energy to manage through this becomes

all the harder and life seems more difficult as our capacity cup feels at risk of bubbling over.

And, of course, once you're near the top it doesn't take much to make your cup spill over. We can have big reactions to seemingly small things, feel overwhelmed, irritable and completely exhausted. Sometimes it feels as if this happens with no apparent cause because it might have been a tiny thing that used our last sliver of capacity.

I've spoken to lots of people over the last few weeks and the collective feeling, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues, is that our capacity cups are fuller and we are much closer to our cups spilling over. These are just some of the reasons you told me about:

The cup here is pretty full and I've tried to capture them here by theme. The things in your cup are using up your emotional capacity . . . and we all have limited capacity.
It can help to really notice what's in your cup and find ways to manage your capacity to stop it spilling over, if you can. Some key ways to manage capacity are:

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

THE POST HIGH-STRESS SLUMP



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

Your body's stress response is there for a purpose . . . to get your body ready to deal with the stressor, whatever that might be. It does this by releasing glucose into your bloodstream and directing the energy to those places that need it. This is why stress and anxiety are exhausting, because they use your energy. If it's short term, you will feel exhausted once the immediate stress has passed but recover quickly as your body has plenty of reserves left.

But, if the stressors have been around for a while, your body has had to keep its foot on the gas pedal to supply you with the energy you need. This keeps you going and you may not notice that your body is depleted, as the stress response keeps you on high alert. Ironically though, this can also disrupt the body's means to replenish – long-term stress can disrupt sleep, interrupt your diet and impact your immune system.

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

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

WHY AM I FINDING THIS SO DIFFICULT?

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

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

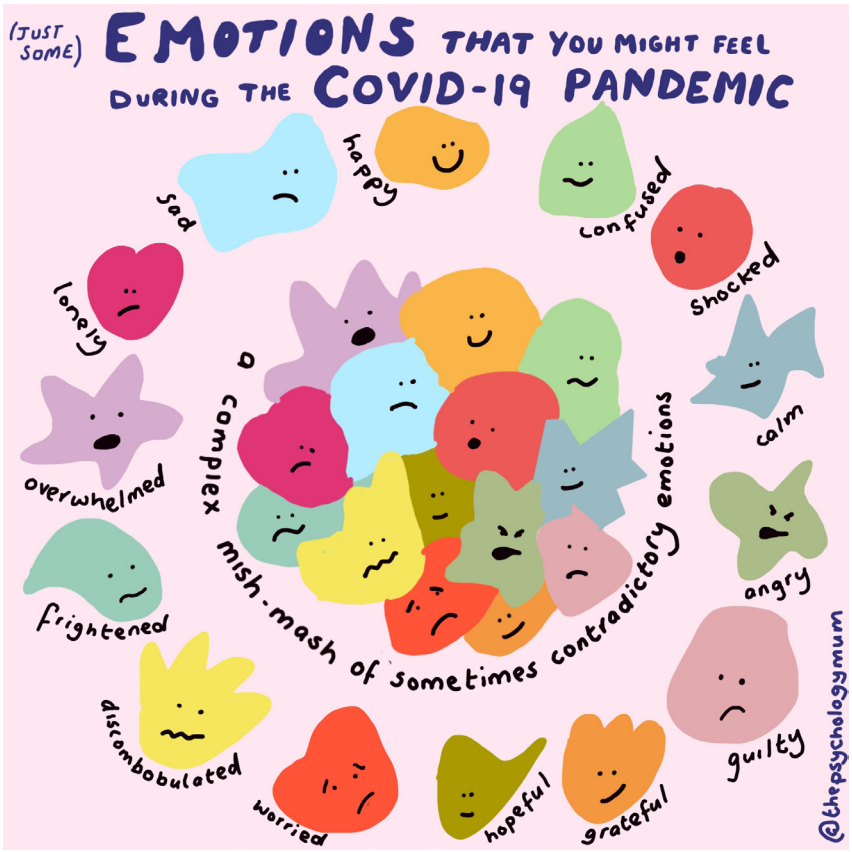


It's a double-difficult whammy of increased stress and less availability of coping strategies to deal with that stress. And that is not just double difficult, but exponentially difficult. Often we blame ourselves for how we feel. We think we should be feeling differently or doing better. But sometimes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

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

JUST SOME EMOTIONS YOU MIGHT FEEL DURING CORONAVIRUS

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



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

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

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

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

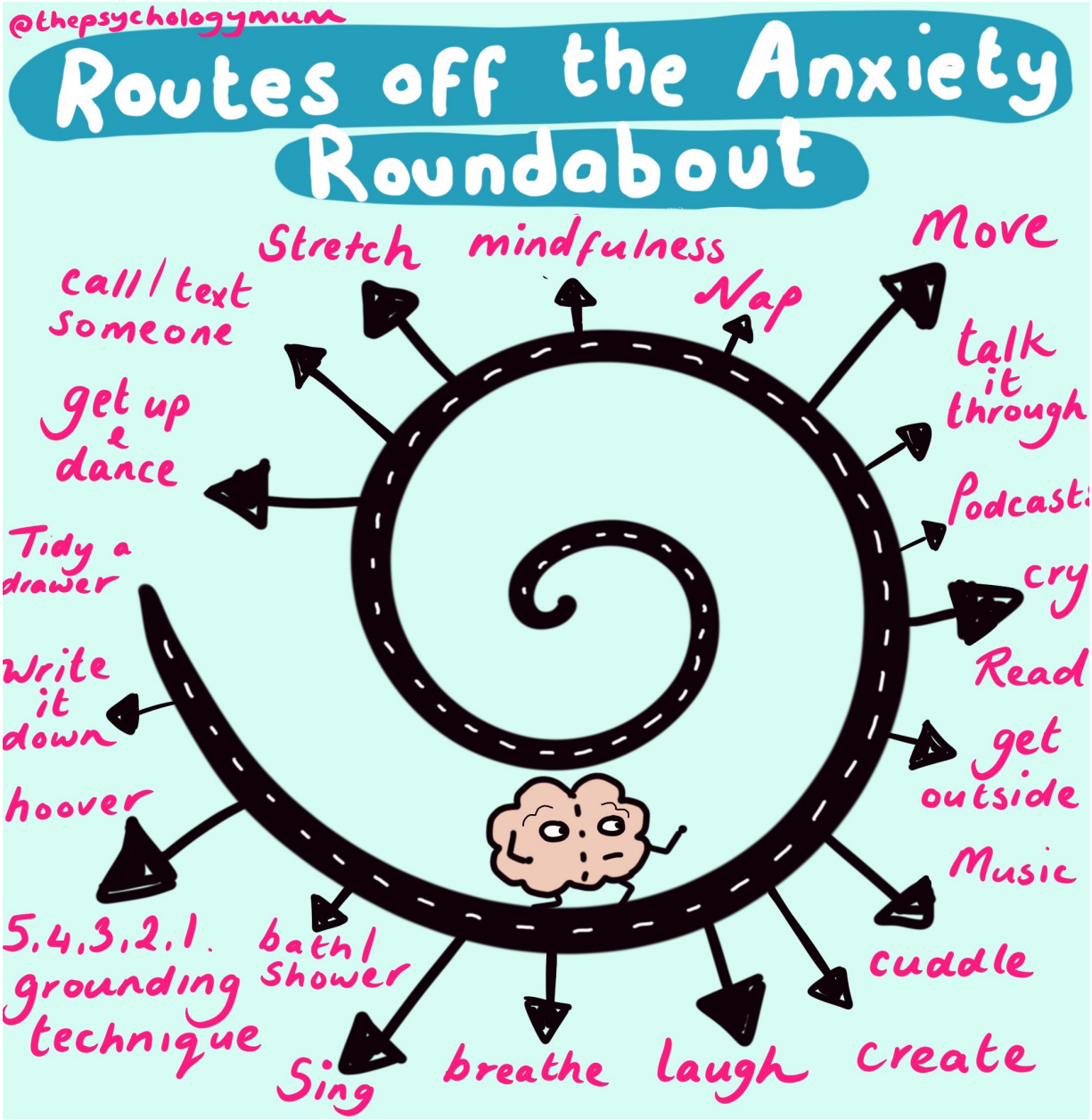
ROUTES OFF THE ANXIETY ROUNDABOUT

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

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

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

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



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

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

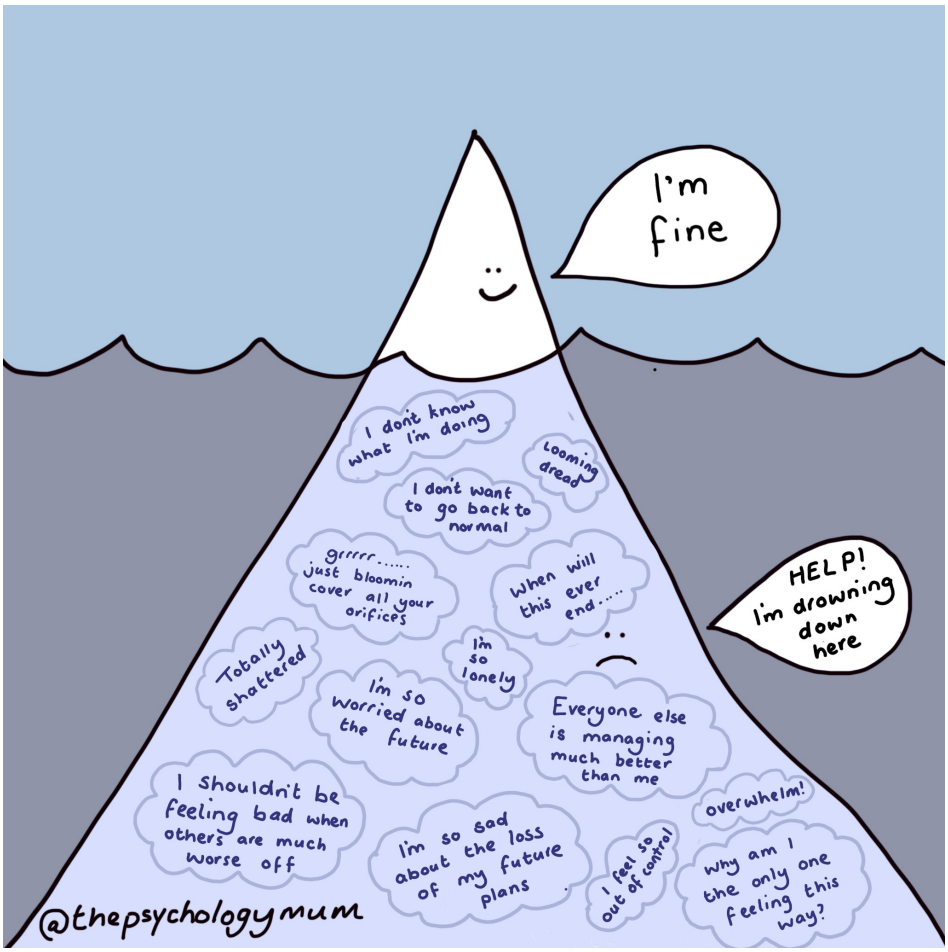
CORONA ICEBERGS

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

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

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

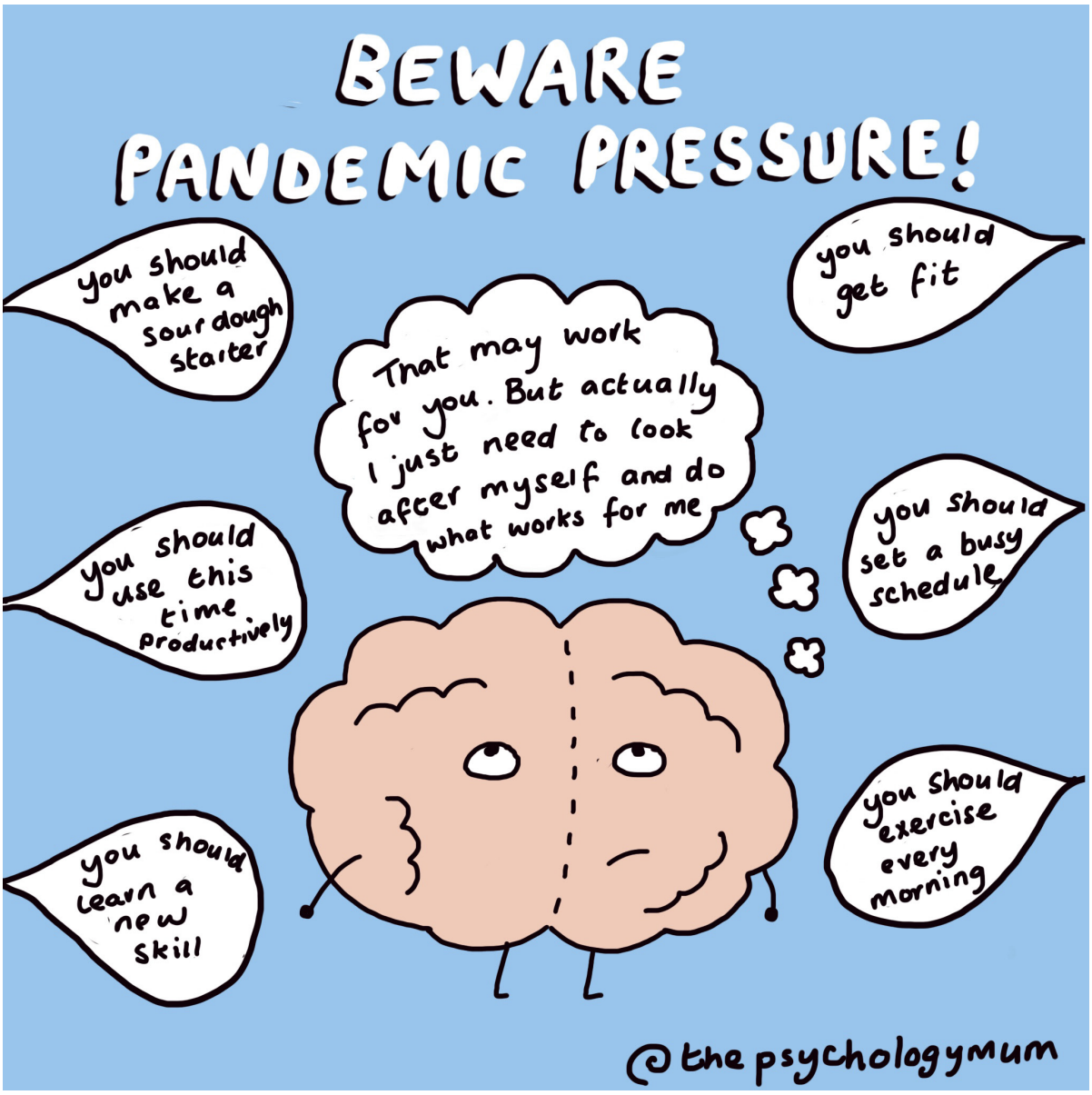
So crush that self-comparison by recognizing you only have part of the picture and widen your compassion by also realizing you only have part of the picture. Because the tip of the iceberg rarely tells the whole story.



BEWARE PANDEMIC PRESSURE

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

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

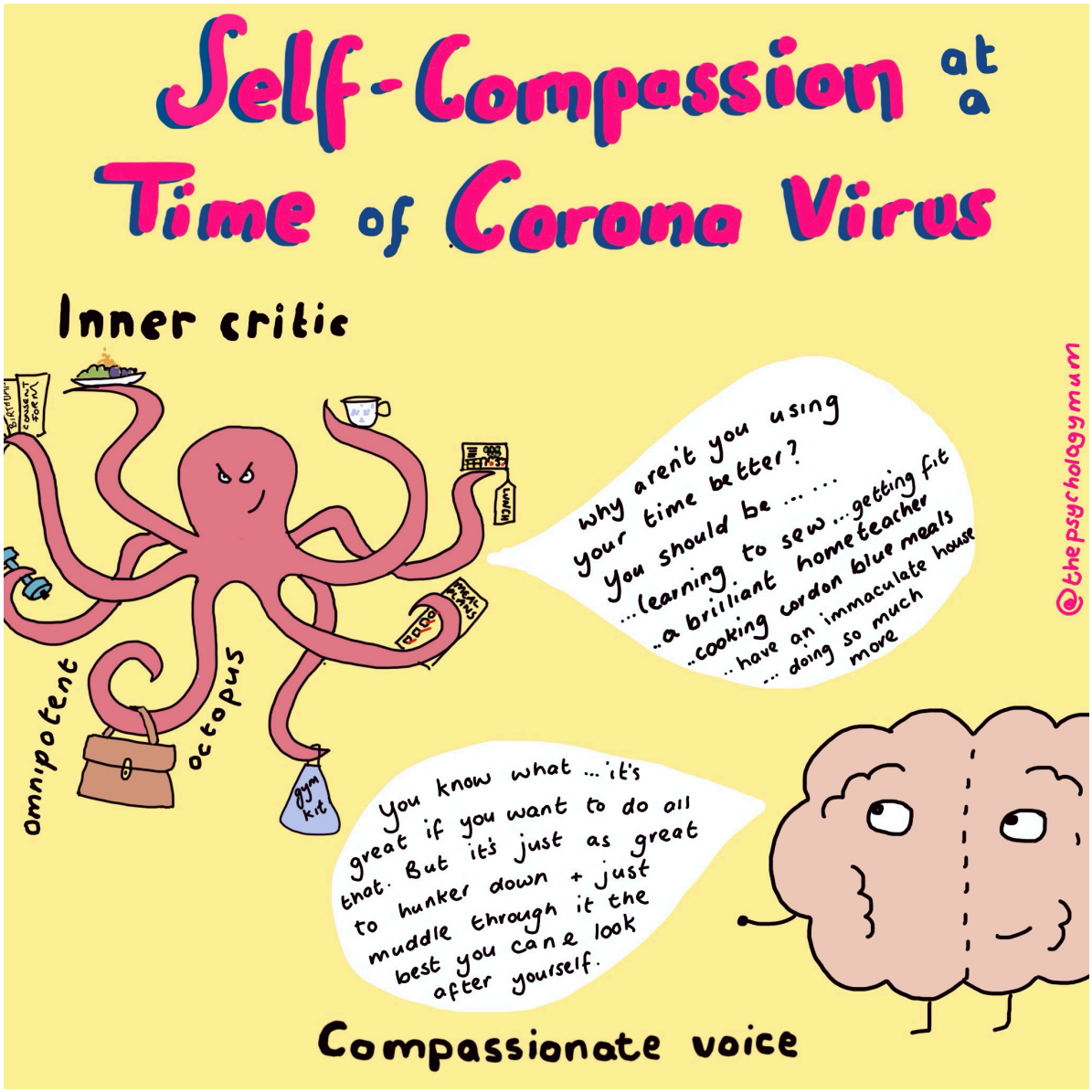


WHAT YOU NEED TO DO IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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

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





SELF-COMPASSION AT A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

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

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

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

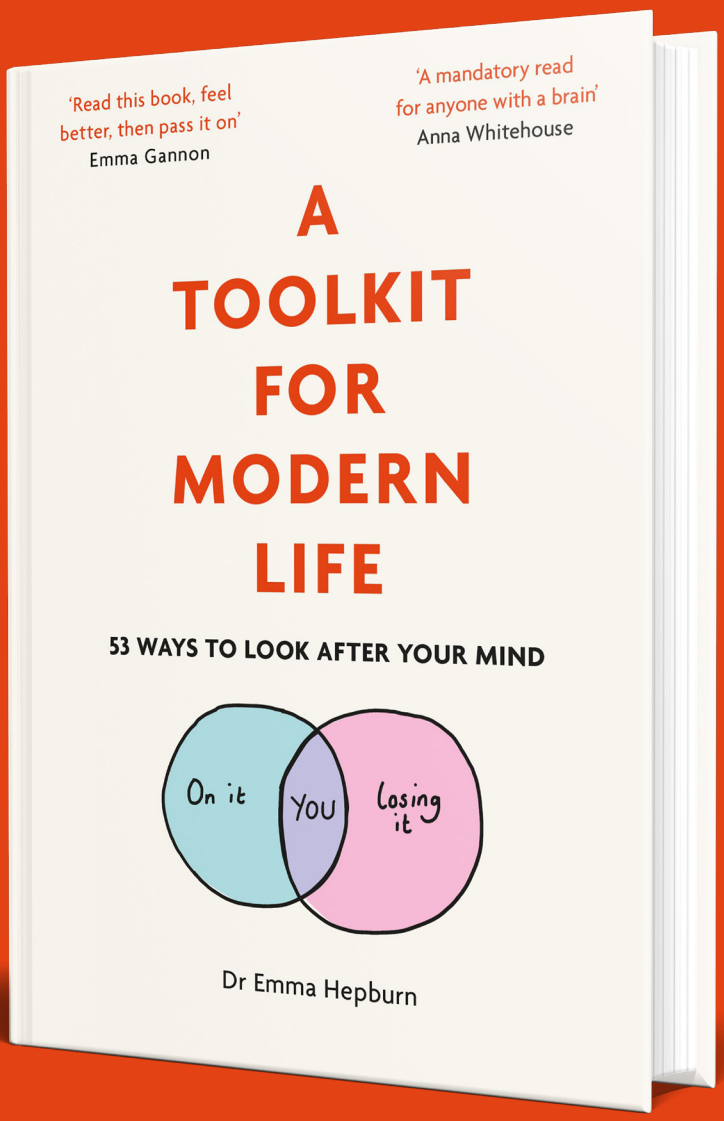
Give yourself the benefit of the objectivity that you tend to give to others. Step back and think. If someone else were in this situation, what would you think about it and what would you say to them? Your levels of objectivity and fairness when viewing another's situation are often much higher than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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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