

Keeping Your Spirits Up

Introduction

One of the benefits of being a psychologist now firmly in middle-age is that I get to hear lots of insights and stories about what it means to be at this challenging, complex and often very rewarding stage of life. Despite the rather alarming experience of becoming a higher maintenance person than I have ever been (by which I mean feet, teeth and eyesight rather than anything more glamorous) as the years progress, I would not want to change places with my younger self. The hard won experience is worth something even if it does mean greater expenditure on things like moisturiser. I have a feeling that this is true for many of the people I listen to as well.

Who is this book for?

This book has been written for others of a middle-ish age (we'll leave the definition deliberately blurry – it seems to be more about a certain stage than age). Those who are likely to be well educated, successful in their careers, maybe professionally qualified too. Those who are also likely to have considerable responsibilities outside of work. They may have children, they may care for other relatives or friends and they may have extra voluntary jobs in or outside of work.

They are busy people who are achieving a lot but sometimes feel overwhelmed by their “to do” lists. They may be tired of the amount of change and uncertainty they have to keep dealing with. They may wonder what their next career or life move might be – and whether that move will be their own decision or the result of some possibly threatening change (such as redundancy) imposed upon them. They may even have experienced something of a traditional mid-life crisis (new motorbike or partner anyone?).

A note on mental and physical health

I am an occupational psychologist, not a clinical one. This means I do not specialise in diagnosing or treating severe mental health problems. I deal with people and their performance and well-being at work (which can encompass many factors). I am interested in both individual and organisational perspectives.

I am well aware that if you are experiencing severe depression or complex conditions such as bipolar disorder or chronic fatigue syndrome, this book may not be for you. The chances are you have tried many of the suggestions here and they may not have helped. In fact they may have made things worse by making you feel as if you have

failed to help yourself in some way that you or others may expect, or by leaving you with great disappointment that your difficulties haven't gone away.

The last thing I intend is for anyone to use this book as a new way to beat themselves up for not coping in some way. Dealing with some of the challenges of mental and physical health (and the two are often deeply intertwined) can be a life's work, needing careful support from professionals and people around you and a clear awareness of what you need and what is in your own best interests. This book does not intend to replace any of that, and it is arguable whether any book on its own can be the answer.

What I hope this book *can* do

As an occupational psychologist, I am especially interested in what I call “sub-clinical” mental health. By this I mean that grey and widespread area which most of us experience at some time in our lives where we are functioning in our many roles, and coping. We may not be exactly thriving though.

This can be at an individual level or at an organisational one. Embattled organisations, tired of constant change and struggling with economic conditions can operate satisfactorily; but are probably not delivering truly great or consistent services or products. They may be staffed by people who likewise are working adequately, but may not be firing on all cylinders a lot of the time.

The vast majority of us cope well enough. We deal with work, family, responsibility, unexpected crises, finances, relationships, transition and ageing more or less successfully. We muddle through, we get by.

But we might not be enjoying it much. We might not be getting as much out of our work or life as we could, or contributing in as satisfying a way to our corner of the world as we know (or suspect) we could. There may be a lingering sense of “is this it?”

I should add that this is not about being perfectionist about our lives. I am not suggesting that we should all be operating at our full potential every day of our existence. In fact quite a theme of this book is about giving ourselves a break (literally and metaphorically).

It is easy to get into a vicious circle that means that: first, we realise how challenging things are; we respond by working harder to meet those challenges; we look after ourselves less well in the process; and then ironically become more stressed and almost certainly less productive. We can then find ourselves responding by trying even harder: by working longer hours, setting higher targets, multitasking on a grand scale. It can be a difficult cycle to break. I hope that this book can help to do that.

This book aims to address a whole range of areas that, taken together, can increase the chances of thriving rather than just surviving. Or if you feel as if you are drowning, to help you get to a state of mind that feels more like dry land. A calmer place to be where things are kept in perspective and better decisions can be made.

The book covers many different aspects of life, and aims to draw on research in a practical way. It is unlikely that one chapter alone is the answer to keeping your spirits up. For me, my family and my clients, it seems that a combination approach works best, and it is important to accept that it is an ongoing experiment to find the right combination at any particular time in your life.

It's not about aiming for a perfect balance. There is no such thing to my mind. It is more about being aware of what activities or habits might benefit from some tweaking. To understand more about any particular area, I strongly suggest you go to the books and websites referred to that go into more depth on specific issues.

Why did I write it?

The topics emerged as common ones through the coaching work I have done with people from a broad group of interesting people, often dealing with a great deal of change and uncertainty. I was writing brief “food for thought” articles to support my coaching programme (Creating Focus®) which pointed people to a few other books, ideas or theories that might be helpful in understanding what was going on for them. This book has grown out of those articles.

I began to realise that many of these people (including me as well) experience low to medium level anxiety from time to time. Whilst most present a genuinely cheerful face to the outside world most of the time, they do sometimes feel as if they are carrying quite a complex weight of responsibility and work load. This can threaten to crush their spirits on occasions - even when, fundamentally, they are very committed to and enthusiastic about their job and other aspects of their life. It then seems very common indeed that many of the strategies they have to keep themselves calm, focused, and in good physical and psychological health go straight to the bottom of the agenda.

This book aims to bring them back to the top.

To read more, Keeping Your Spirits Up is available as an e-book or paperback via Amazon and other book retailers.