

# Soul Sync

*Talk, Heal, Thrive*

PRACTICAL WISDOM FOR EMOTIONAL WELLNESS  
AND SELF-CARE

ARCHANA MUTHAPPA



BlueRoseONE<sup>.com</sup>  
S t o r i e s   M a t t e r  
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# Preface

I did not set out to write a book.

What began as a single LinkedIn post – nudged into existence by a friend, Jitendra Jha, who insisted I had something worth saying – turned, week after week, into fifty. Each one was written in the pockets of time between client meetings, crisis calls, and the ordinary business of living.

The articles are an attempt to make sense of something I had witnessed, felt, or sat with, be it in my role as a counsellor and a communications professional who watches how people behave – whether under pressure or just going about the ordinary, everyday business of life. This is simply a human being trying to understand other human beings.

I never imagined these scattered reflections would one day sit between the covers of a book. However, as the posts accumulated, so did a pattern I could not ignore: we are, all of us, negotiating an emotional world we were never quite taught how to navigate. We are told to manage our careers, finances, relationships, and the world around us, but rarely are we given the language, permission, or tools to manage our own minds.

This book is my attempt to offer some of that language. In these pages, you will not find grand theories, clinical jargon, a solution or promises of a cure. What you will find are my observations from various aspects of my life – from counselling sessions, workplaces, long journeys, and dinner conversations. It's about panic attacks and people-pleasing, about caregivers who forget to care for themselves, about the

quiet courage it takes to say no, and the quieter courage it takes to ask for help.

Some chapters may feel like they were written for you specifically. Others may describe someone you know – a colleague, a partner, or a parent. That is, in many ways, the point. Emotional struggle rarely announces itself loudly. It hides in fatigue, in irritability, in silence, in the friend who says “I’m fine” one too many times. My hope is that these chapters help you recognise it, in yourself and in others, a little sooner, and respond to it with a little more gentleness.

If there is one thread that runs through every page that follows, it is this: mental health is not a separate, lesser cousin of physical health. It is not a soft indulgence reserved for a crisis. Our emotional wellbeing deserves the same attention, daily discipline, and seriousness we give to our bodies.

I invite you to read this book not as a manual, but as a conversation – the kind I hope we would have had over coffee, had circumstance allowed it. My recommendation is that you pick it up when you feel the need for introspection and awareness. Read it slowly, over time, and take what is useful. Find ways to sit with what is uncomfortable. Come back to it years later and look at how your perspectives may have evolved.

And, wherever you are in your own journey, know that you are not required to have it all figured out. You are only required to keep going – gently, and with kindness to yourself.

Archana Muthappa  
Bangalore, India

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# Part One:

## Understanding Mental Health



*The foundation – awareness, stigma, and when/ how to seek support*

Today, we talk about mental health more than we ever have, and yet, so much of it remains misunderstood. It's wrapped in stigma, reduced to a label, or just dismissed – until there comes a time when it becomes impossible to ignore. Before we can care for our emotional wellbeing, we need to understand it: what counselling actually is, when to reach for help, why panic looks different on different people, and why listening – really listening – can sometimes be the difference between someone staying and someone leaving. This section begins where every conversation about emotional wellbeing should: with awareness, without judgement.

# Chapter 1

## Kindness

I recently came across a reel on Instagram which showed a Japanese experiment on how three beakers of rice treated each with a different emotion, over time – fermented, rotted, or turned black, respectively. To be honest, much of it sounded like mumbo-jumbo to me. Really – how can being kind, or unkind, to grains of rice influence the way they turn out?

While I have no personal experience of how kindness affects rice, plants, or inanimate things, what I can say with confidence, after several decades of living and interacting with people, is that kindness towards those around us can make a remarkable difference.

Just this morning, while loading a suitcase into my car, I accidentally banged my head. It hurt far more than I care to admit. Like the trooper I believe myself to be, I gathered myself and carried on with my day. Yet the physical pain lingered, bringing with it an overall sense of gloom.

As I reached the gate, the security guard looked at me and said, “Madam, what happened? You don’t look okay.” That’s all it took. Someone had noticed. He didn’t solve my problem or offer medical advice. He simply acknowledged that I wasn’t quite myself. He saw me. And sometimes, that is enough.

Kindness does not have to take the form of a grand gesture. It can be as simple as saying hello, offering a genuine compliment, holding a door open, or asking someone if they are okay.

Research suggests that acts of kindness can boost the release of serotonin and dopamine – neurotransmitters associated with feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and well-being. Acts of kindness may also activate the brain's reward centres and encourage the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers.

Who knew that a little kindness could go such a long way – even for ourselves?

Perhaps that is why we often feel lighter, warmer, and more connected after doing something thoughtful for another person. Have you ever noticed that feeling?

And what does kindness do for the person receiving it? It changes their energy by making them feel seen and reminds them that they matter. It fosters a sense of connection, reduces feelings of loneliness, lifts mood, and, over time, helps build stronger and healthier relationships.

So how can we create a culture of kindness around us?

- Look up from your phone or device and make eye contact.
- Say at least one kind thing to someone every day.
- Take a deep breath and pause before responding to a rude comment or message.
- Smile at strangers – you may brighten their day, and they may wonder what has made you so happy.

Kindness is a strength. It reflects a level of comfort and confidence within ourselves that allows us to engage with the world generously and without fear. With just a little more attention to the people around us, we have the power to make a tremendous difference in someone's day – and perhaps even in their life.

## Chapter 2

# Solutioneering

Has this ever happened to you? There's something really bothering you, so you call a friend to share how you're feeling and what's going on in your life. Barely a few sentences into the conversation, the first solution arrives. As the discussion progresses, the focus gradually shifts from how you are feeling right now to how you should manage the situation in the future. Sometimes, you may even find yourself becoming the listener as your friend starts recounting a similar experience from their own life and how much they suffered through it.

Think about it. How did that make you feel?

Often, when we tell someone about the 'suffering' a situation is putting us through, the listener feels that the only way to help is to offer a solution so that we can all just get on with it. Feelings are those uncomfortable, inconvenient little things that make situations unclear. Nothing like clear logic to *manage* a situation and get on with it. But that's not what we are – at the end of the day, we are human because of the range of emotions that we feel, because of the non-logical way in which we react to events in our lives.

Why do we share our feelings? It's because it makes us feel *seen* and, as my clients often say, *feels light*. We are rarely seeking solutions. All we want is to know that there is someone out there who cares enough to listen to what we have to say. Sometimes, the things that get us down may be small and of very minimal consequence from an external point of

view. However, if airing them makes for a happier me, I would be grateful for an ear that listens.

What should you not do when someone comes to you with a 'situation':

- Do not offer a solution.
- Do not cite your own life experiences.
- Do not dismiss the feeling/ situation as inconsequential.
- Do not be flippant about what's being said.

And what is it that you can do? You guessed right – listen, listen, listen!

## Chapter 3

### The Career Road Taken

I came upon my communications career quite by chance. Almost 30 years ago, my degree in Clinical Psychology had very limited value when it came to finding a job. I started out as a counsellor in a halfway home for adults with chronic mental illnesses, but soon realised (mostly, thanks to my father) that the younger version of me simply did not have the life experience required to deal with such profound challenges of the human mind.

That realisation led me to pivot to Communications. I was fortunate to have the support and encouragement of my parents and those around me, and today I am grateful for the opportunity to use both my academic qualifications and the skills I have acquired through my professional journey.

I recently met a young woman who is an engineer-turned-PR consultant. She told me about how hard she had worked to crack the Common Entrance Test, hating every step of the process and pursuing it only because it was her parents' wish. She spoke about her first mind-numbing job in the Civil Engineering department of a large construction company, and the loss of self-esteem and sheer misery she experienced simply by showing up to work each day.

It took a complete breakdown before she could convince those around her to allow her to pursue her passion for Communications. Today, however, she is on a *surefooted path* in her career and thriving in a profession she genuinely enjoys.

Like the young woman I mentioned, and like myself, there are many people who neither possess a natural aptitude for nor a passion for the Sciences. Should they be pushed into becoming doctors, engineers, or rocket scientists simply because those professions are perceived to offer financial security and success? Could this pressure be one of the factors contributing to *burnout* and *mental health issues*?

I believe that, when left to explore their own interests and strengths, young people often find their way to the places where they truly belong. More often than not, they discover satisfaction and purpose in what they do. That sense of alignment can lead to a lifetime of happiness at work, a stronger sense of self, and ultimately, a more balanced and fulfilling life.

## Chapter 4

### ‘Believe’ in Counselling

Someone I met recently told me that he does not ‘believe’ in counselling. “It doesn't work,” he said. “How can I share such deeply personal information about myself with some stranger, who has no context, and, therefore, cannot help.”

The number of people in India who reach out for counselling and therapy is very low. This has, in some part to do with the taboo associated with all things *mental health*. There are several other aspects, including the fact that, as a percentage of the population, there is a dearth of trained counsellors; counselling is also perceived as expensive – by its very nature, it has to be a longer-term commitment than other ‘illnesses’ which could be treated with medication/ exercise.

On the other hand, there appears to be a large number of people who don't think it will be of any use.

First of all, counselling is not a belief, it is a science that many of us counsellors have spent many years, sometimes, even decades learning. It is a school of study, not a religion.

A counsellor uses intuition and empathy – it is not a gut feel based on weather conditions. It is an outcome of deep understanding of the subject and practice.

Some things to consider if you decide to go to a counsellor:

- Counselling is not a magic wand that offers immediate solutions – you will have to do the work yourself, albeit with the support and guidance of a trained professional

- Counselling is not an immediate fix – give it the time to enable it to work.
- Sometimes, the counsellor may not work for you – if you're not comfortable, change your counsellor. However, don't do it on a whim.
- Your interaction with your counsellor is your safe space, and all discussions are entirely between you and your counsellor.

Much like physical health, mental health must be a priority when we feel like we could use the intervention and guidance of a trained professional. View mental health needs much like you would physical ones.

## Chapter 5

### My Parents Scarred Me for Life

Have you ever heard someone say this? They talk about the kind of childhood they had and how it shaped the person they have become today. The scars of childhood often get carried into adulthood, revealing themselves in different aspects of daily life – and we usually focus on the less-than-happy ones.

There is no doubt that our childhood years play a significant role in shaping the adults we become. Our fears, worries, abilities, and even the way we approach life are often rooted in the experiences of our early years. Overprotectiveness or neglect, too much love or too little, parents who are always present or rarely around – all have their own pros and cons, and leave lasting impressions on a young mind eager to understand the world. As children, our worldview becomes coloured by the experiences and influences to which we are exposed.

Parenting is not a pre-loaded skill. It is not something that comes naturally to everyone. There is no universal manual or set of guidelines to follow. Most parents simply do the best they can, relying on their understanding of life, the world, and a host of other factors. Often, we learn how to parent from observing our own parents. Equally, we learn what not to do from their mistakes and shortcomings.

More often than not, we hear people ‘blame’ their parents for the burdens they carry into adulthood – fear, insecurity, abandonment issues, a lack of emotional openness, low self-esteem, or difficulty trusting others.

But is it really that simple?

## Chapter 6

### Attacked by Panic! What to do?

Why is it that we hear the words ‘panic-attack’ so often these days? While in some people, a faltering relationship or too much work could precipitate a panic-attack, in some others, it could be the passing of a loved one or pet. In the recent past, I have heard of more than a dozen situations that were described as a ‘panic-attack.’ These have been mostly people in their late-20s to early 30s dealing with stress, fear or anxiety related to work or relationships.

It could be a matter of more stress than these young people can handle, or it could well be that, today, the threshold for stress is much lower among young people. I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that in some places, it’s ‘cool’ to have had a panic attack that one can then talk about. Could it also be that 20 years ago, awareness of emotional needs was so low and so ignored that someone having a panic attack was simply told to ‘get on with it’?

A panic attack is, typically, a coping mechanism visible in the form of physical symptoms. It could happen for no ostensible reason. While it’s hard to tell what could cause the onset of an attack, it is usually a situation that is extremely stressful for that individual – one that creates fear or anxiety. What we perceive as stress and our reaction to it is an outcome of our life experiences, how we have learnt to cope and understanding how to deflect in a manner that will enable our lives to go on.

Again, while each of us could have a variety of physical expressions that could be a panic attack, they usually come in the form of a racing heartbeat, trembling, profuse sweating, abdominal or chest pain, uncontrollable laughter or crying, or even just passing out. It's almost like 'the world around me is too much to bear, and this is my way of deflecting and managing the situation.' I want to call out here that most of us have one or the other of the symptoms of a classic panic attack at some point in our lives – this does not constitute a panic-attack.

If we see our colleagues or friends in such a situation, we tend to go into a bit of a flap ourselves – since a lot of us have no training to manage and support such a situation. Here are four things you can do to help someone who is having a panic attack:

- Be present and ask what the person needs in short, simple sentences.
- Move the person to a quiet place.
- Help the person focus – on music, a picture, a view, etc. could help.
- Help the person slow their breathing.

And here are four things you should refrain from doing:

- Do not use phrases like “calm down,” “don't worry” or “try to relax” – it could make the symptoms worse.
- Do not become irritated yourself – be patient and calm.
- Do not belittle the situation or make light of it – this is not the time for humour.
- Do not touch or hug the person, unless you have established that they want to be touched.

Hope this helps!

## Chapter 7

# When is it a Good Time to Meet a Counsellor?

Several of my clients have told me that the journey from ‘I need support’ to actually scheduling an appointment with a counsellor, has been a long and arduous one.

The first step is often acknowledging the need for help. However, the stages that follow can be even more difficult. Thoughts such as “What if people find out?” or “I can manage on my own” often create uncertainty and hesitation about seeking counselling support.

The stigma surrounding mental health remains so strong that many people would rather continue to struggle in silence than risk being judged, whispered about, or labelled with the derogatory terms that society still uses far too casually when referring to those who seek mental health support.

At the same time, most of us encounter difficult periods in our lives. We face setbacks, disappointments, losses, and challenges. More often than not, we find ways to cope and eventually regain our footing. So, when should we consider reaching out to a counsellor?

Here are a few signs that counselling may be beneficial:

- You are struggling to regulate your emotions: Your mood is affecting your productivity, relationships, or overall quality of life. You no longer enjoy activities that once brought you happiness, and feelings of

sadness, anger, anxiety, or emotional numbness have become a regular part of your daily experience.

- You are developing unhealthy coping mechanisms: You find yourself turning to extremes – too much or too little of something. This could include overeating or undereating, excessive exercise, oversleeping or insomnia, overworking, social withdrawal, or other behaviours that feel difficult to control.
- You want to develop greater self-awareness: Counselling is not only for times of crisis. Many people seek support because they want to understand themselves better, improve their relationships, identify recurring patterns in their lives, and grow emotionally.
- You are navigating a major life transition: Significant life events can be emotionally overwhelming, even when they are positive. The loss of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a career change, relocation, marriage, parenthood, or other major transitions can all benefit from the support of a trained professional.

It is important to understand that a counsellor cannot wave a magic wand to make your problems disappear or remove every obstacle from your path.

Rather, counselling provides a space where you can be heard without judgement. It offers the support of a professionally trained individual who can help you gain perspective, increase self-awareness, and explore challenges objectively. Most importantly, it creates a safe environment where you can discuss the thoughts, emotions, and

experiences that may be preventing you from living a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Quality of life matters and we owe it to ourselves to seek the support we need and to give ourselves the opportunity to live the healthiest, most enriching life possible. Sometimes, asking for help is not a sign of weakness – it is one of the strongest decisions we can make.

## Chapter 8

### Suicide: Create Hope through Action

World Suicide Prevention Day is on September 10 each year. It's a good day to call attention to an issue that is fast becoming commonplace. Every other day we see media reports about someone – usually a young person – having opted for suicide as a way out. In 2025, it was the third leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds (WHO, 2026), globally. Stop for a moment and think about how you feel, physically, when you hear of someone having died by suicide – even if it's not someone you know personally. For me, I feel a slight lurch in my heartbeat, and a pit forms in the base of my stomach. The feeling is helplessness. And the questions in my mind are 'I wonder why' and 'how could it have been prevented.'

Each of us could experience this information differently, but the range is likely to be similar. I often wonder what could cause a young person, castigated by a teacher or adult, to take this extreme step. Was the impact of the interaction so harsh that life itself became too much to bear and had to be stopped?

If you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts or emotional distress, help is available. These confidential, 24/7 helplines are based in India and are free to call. You are not alone—please don't hesitate to reach out.

Tele-MANAS: 14416

AASRA: 9820466726

*Note: These numbers are intended for callers within India. If you are outside India, please look up a local crisis helpline in your country.*

More than that, where did the person find the wherewithal to do this? It cannot be easy to take one's own life – there has to be a reason, the means and ability, and most importantly, the resolve – all of this must converge in that perfect moment to ensure that the person sees it through.

Which brings me to a more relevant question – what are we, as a society, doing to push our young people to such a place that they take this extreme step? Or what can we do better or different? Is it that people have more stress than they can manage, or can they manage stress less? Is the support system missing? Is the all-pervasive digital world cutting us off from being able to reach out on an emotional level?

The UN theme for 2024 on *World Suicide Prevention Day* is 'Creating Hope Through Action'. How can we impress upon those around us that suicide does not have to be an option? Can we, through our words and actions, show that we can be a source of strength at a time of need? No matter how big or small, this may provide hope to those who are struggling.

Suicides and suicide attempts tend to have a ripple effect that could leave a lasting impact on families, friends, colleagues and societies.

Suicides are preventable and building awareness of some of these steps could go a long way in the prevention of suicide. Some aspects to consider:

- Let it be known that you are available to support and listen
- Develop socio-emotional life skills in adolescents
- Limit access to the means of suicide for anyone who is affected by suicidal behaviour

Be an ambassador for the creation of awareness, to reduce stigma, encourage help-seeking, and advocate for suicide prevention. Let us collaborate to achieve the SDGs target of reducing deaths by suicide by one-third by 2030.

## Chapter 9

### Labels Are for Jars

“He’s toxic.” “She’s a narcissist.” “I have OCD.” “I’m paranoid.” “I’m depressed.” “Bad.” “Psycho.” “Lazy.” “Dumb.”

Just because a person likes a clean environment does not mean they have Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and being overly worried about something does not automatically mean they suffer from paranoia. Diagnosing conditions such as OCD or paranoia is a complex process and is best left to trained mental health professionals. With proper identification and diagnosis come specific treatments, support systems, and management strategies.

Today, many of these terms have become part of everyday conversation. We use them – often incorrectly – to describe people, situations, and even ourselves. In doing so, we place broad labels on individuals and paint an oversimplified picture with a single brushstroke.

Labels can create a dissonance within us. They shape expectations, reinforce stereotypes, and influence behaviour. For example, a person who repeatedly calls herself “bad” may struggle with low self-esteem, feel unloved, or believe she is not good enough by society’s standards. Over time, this label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, influencing her actions and decisions. When we identify too strongly with labels, they can evolve into identity statements that shape how we see ourselves and how we navigate the world.

Here are a few questions worth reflecting on:

- What labels do you use to describe yourself?
- How do those labels make you feel?
- What labels do you use to describe others?
- Are those labels always accurate, or are they specific to a particular situation or moment?

The language we use – both about ourselves and about those around us – has a profound impact on perception, relationships, and self-worth. It is worth pausing for a moment and considering the words we choose. After all, labels are for jars, not for people.

## Chapter 10

### Listen – You Could Make the Difference

Earlier this week, the media reported that another young person had taken his own life at one of the country's competitive exam coaching centres. I cannot fathom the depths of hopelessness he must have felt to be driven to such an extreme step. While many young people find themselves burdened by the stress of excelling in examinations, a few who struggle to cope with the possibility of failure decide to shut it all down.

If you or someone you know is struggling with suicidal thoughts or emotional distress, help is available. These confidential, 24/7 helplines are based in India and are free to call. You are not alone—please don't hesitate to reach out.

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My thoughts are with those they leave behind – the parents, siblings, and extended family; the friends who may be working towards similar goals. While the sadness of losing a loved one is immense, what about the guilt? The endless cycle of questions: 'What could I have done differently? What did I do wrong?' These thoughts can linger long after the loss itself.

We often become so caught up in our own lives – with work deadlines, family commitments, and the many demands

of our daily rat race – that we fail to notice when someone close to us is struggling. It is often only in hindsight, when it is too late, that the signs become painfully clear.

It is not easy to be constantly aware of the emotional well-being of everyone we care about. After all, we have our own challenges to navigate. However, if we can make it a point each day to ask just one person how they are – and truly pause to listen to their response – that small act of attention could make a world of difference.

Sometimes, being heard, understood, and acknowledged is all a person needs in a moment of despair. We may never know the impact of a simple conversation, a caring question, or a few minutes of genuine listening. But for someone who is struggling, it could be enough to change a decision from which there is no coming back.

## Chapter 11

### You Are Unique...

**...as is your mental health journey.**

Last week, a client said to me, “My friend has been diagnosed with anxiety. We are very similar people, and we react to things in much the same way. Do I have anxiety as well?”

No.

Until you receive a diagnosis from a qualified mental health professional, you do not have a mental health condition simply because someone else does.

Each of our mental health journeys follows a unique trajectory. Our circumstances, reactions, coping mechanisms, responses, and triggers are shaped by our individual life experiences. As a result, our mental health experiences are uniquely our own. Just as siblings raised in the same environment can grow into very different people, two individuals who appear similar on the surface can have vastly different mental health needs.

Because we are all unique, our support requirements are different too. For some, one-on-one counselling may be the most effective form of support. For others, group therapy, peer support, mindfulness practices, or a combination of approaches may work better. The important thing is to claim our space and choose the path that best serves our individual needs.

What matters most is recognising when we need support and reaching out for it without embarrassment, shame, or

hesitation. Equally important is our willingness to support those around us – a colleague, a friend, or a loved one – who may be struggling. Brushing mental health concerns under the carpet benefits no one.

So, while you may have reactions that seem similar to those of someone around you, your emotional needs, challenges, and solutions could be entirely different. Your journey is your own, and it deserves to be understood on its own terms.

## Part Two: At Work

*Identity, ambition, and burnout in professional life*

We spend more waking hours at work than almost anywhere else, often with our identities becoming the work that we do. Yet, we rarely stop to ask what that time is actually costing us – or giving us. Is it the paycheque, is it a sense of purpose that work brings, or the identity, without which we would be lost? Somewhere between ambition and burnout, ‘busy’ became a badge of honour, and self-doubt got mistaken for weakness instead of wisdom. This section looks at the workplace not as a backdrop to our lives, but as one of the places where our emotional health is quietly built, or quietly eroded.

## Chapter 12

# Managers Alert! Is Your Team Emotionally Healthy?

Over the last few weeks, LinkedIn has been rife with videos of employees raising their voices as they call out injustices they face in their workplaces. Stress often manifests itself through loud outbursts or other forms of ‘extreme’ behaviour, creating moments that are captured on video, posted on social media, and followed by a flood of comments and debate.

There is, however, a more chronic form of workplace stress – one that develops quietly over time. An employee may face unpleasant situations on a daily basis: being constantly berated by a manager, talked down to, excluded from important discussions, or consistently sidelined. In my role as a communications consultant, I have encountered clients who are incessantly and unnecessarily caustic, often making a barrage of unrealistic demands. Over time, these interactions can create a sense of dread and anxiety.

During my career, I was once part of a team where my manager suddenly decided she could no longer trust me - without any logical explanation. What had been a job I genuinely loved quickly became a situation I dreaded. A deep sadness, bordering on depression, descended upon me. Coupled with self-doubt and sleepless nights, I found it increasingly difficult to go to work. My performance suffered, and eventually, I resigned.

While the physiological effects of workplace stress may be obvious – a racing heart, trembling hands, or excessive sweating – the emotional consequences often go unnoticed.

Is a member of your team losing weight? Do they seem disengaged or constantly fatigued? Do they appear sleep-deprived? Has their work quality declined? Are they taking more time off than usual? Has their personality changed from what it once was?

As a manager, these signs should set alarm bells ringing.

What can you do for a team member who may be struggling?

This could be the right time to sit down with them and understand what is happening beneath the surface. Here are a few ways to help:

- Be supportive – both in word and deed.
- Be sensitive – do not dismiss the person's concerns, however small or insignificant they may seem.
- Assure confidentiality – create a safe space for honest conversations.
- Encourage professional support – help the individual access counselling or mental health resources if required.

Most importantly, do not wait for a crisis to demonstrate your support. Take the time to reflect on your management style and view it through the eyes of your team. Realistic expectations, achievable timelines, and respectful communication go a long way in creating an environment where people can thrive.

At the end of the day, that is what we all want – for our businesses, our teams, and ourselves. When in doubt, rely on the golden rule: treat the members of your team the way you would want to be treated yourself.

## Chapter 13

### What brings you to work?

In the midst of conversations about the prescribed duration of our working day, I got thinking about why I actually show up to work each day. Do I enjoy my work? I certainly do. Do I bring my best self to work each day? I do – well, maybe not every single day, but more often than not. That still didn't answer my question. If it was purely the joy and the best version of myself, I could simply go skydiving day after day after day, and be happy.

No, what makes me do it repeatedly is the money it earns me.

We each show up to work each day, some working longer hours than others, for the monetary benefit it brings us. It is the life we can 'buy' with that money, the education we can give our children, the homes we can live in. We squirrel money away in retirement plans for a time when we can work no more. When we change jobs (other than when there's a toxic manager involved), it's for 'better opportunities,' which, invariably, translate into an improved monetary situation.

Why, then, do we focus so little of our time and energy on spending the money we make? Often, we're so tired from work, that there's no energy to go for a walk by the lake or have that extra cup of coffee while we watch the sun rise.

Maybe, it's time to focus on why that beautiful home you set up has turned into a place where you go to sleep and shower before heading off to another day at the office. We get

so enmeshed in our work lives that it comes ahead of everything in our lives. *I'm so busy* becomes our mantra.

Here is what I have come to believe about work and life:

- Work must be done – to earn money, bring material joy, and keep the mind active and alive
- The perspective of what I am without my work must be understood
- Use the money you earn in your lifetime; do things that make you happy
- Let the work you do not be your only identity; create space for other things

So, what's the point I'm making? I'm calling out here that work is important – of course, it is – but so is life. And life, I believe, is about being joyous about the joy of simply being alive!

## Chapter 14

### You're a star! At what cost?

Earlier this week, I was in a hospital for my annual health check (I'm very pleased that all is well!). While waiting for a test, I ended up reading a notice board that congratulated an employee for going beyond the call of duty, managing a department all on her own and working long hours without a break. She was named a STAR!

It got me thinking about what it means for us as a society, where working excessive hours and managing the work of many is lauded and called out as a wonderful thing! After all, when she was hired, this young lady probably had a set of KRAs and deliverables. What has her life outside of work been like during this time? Has her family missed her? What is the condition of her physical and mental health? Is her name being up there on the notice board taking care of all these human needs?

Not meaning to take away from the celebration of this young lady's achievements, as a Mental Health Practitioner, I understand the importance of acknowledging employees and the work they put in. It is also important to make sure that, as an employer, we do not reinforce messages that turn employees into workhorses at the cost of everything else in their lives.

Over the long term, this often leads to *employee burnout*, a lack of interest in work and a general deterioration of enthusiasm. This, in turn, would have an impact on the all-important bottom line of a company. It makes business sense

to support employee *emotional health* from a prevention perspective, rather than management at a time when there are few other options.

What is your approach to working long hours? How do you manage your *work-life balance*?

## Chapter 15

### A Case for Self-Doubt

You know that boss you look up to – the one who exudes confidence every step of the way; the one who makes every decision with apparent clarity and conviction; the one you aspire to be like when you grow up?

I once had a manager like that. I called him my Fearless Leader. He was decisive and made decisions quickly and efficiently. I had never once seen him hesitate, worry, or doubt himself. I often wondered how he managed it. Was he even human, I would ask myself?

I later learned that his decisiveness was the outcome of decades of experience in the business. Every decision and every display of confidence was built upon a foundation of questioning, reflection, and yes, self-doubt. When the fortunes of an organisation rest on your shoulders and a large team relies on your judgement, life can be incredibly stressful. He had simply learned to internalise the process that led to a decision and make it appear effortless.

Having worked with many teams since then, I have come to realise that self-doubt is often an essential ingredient of good leadership. It ensures that the pros and cons are carefully weighed and that all available facts are considered before a decision is made. Self-doubt encourages thoughtful analysis and enables us to make *heroic* and *critical decisions* – that look so simple from the outside.

What makes someone a leader is not the absence of doubt, but the ability to make a decision despite it – and to

accept responsibility for the outcome. This quality inspires confidence in the people around you. They want to be part of your team because they trust your judgement and aspire to emulate your example.

Self-doubt, however, also has the power to stop us in our tracks. Left unchecked, it can paralyse us and prevent action altogether. The challenge, therefore, is not to eliminate self-doubt, but to learn how to manage it without allowing it to take control.

Perhaps the goal is not to be fearless, but to move forward even when doubt is part of the journey.

## Chapter 16

### Are You a Multi-Tasker?

When faced with an important job interview, we often cite our ‘ability to multitask’ as a positive attribute, displaying ourselves as people who can do many things at once and therefore become valuable assets to an organisation. It makes us appear capable of *getting the job done*.

Interestingly, in an article I read, Mr. Oliver Burkeman (*author of Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*) argues just the opposite. What stayed with me was his observation that multitasking may be our way of making a challenging task feel easier by listening to a podcast or music – to use a distraction that helps us get through it. However, the outcome of juggling multiple tasks may be less than optimal. It can also create an additional burden of Stress.

As someone who once prided myself on being a *high-quality* multitasker, in all aspects of my life, I find myself wanting to rethink that approach. What would happen if I accepted my *humanness* and allowed a few tasks to spill over to the next day? An earlier version of me would have balked at the very thought. Today, however, I find myself increasingly drawn to the concept of *living in the moment*. It has brought a certain calm to my life and enabled me to be less demanding of both myself and the people around me.

In our *fast-paced* lives, multitasking creates the illusion that we are accomplishing many things simultaneously. In reality, while the tasks may get done, the quality of the output – and our understanding of what we are doing – may well be

compromised. It can also create a great deal of stress and dissatisfaction when numerous tasks remain unfinished at the end of the day.

Focusing on one task at a time could also be a way of being *kinder to myself*. By not setting myself up to meet an unrealistic standard, would I feel less stressed and more in control of my emotional well-being? This is still a relatively new concept for me, and I am learning how to incorporate it into my life.

As I write this, I am listening to a podcast on Strategic Autonomy while flipping through a magazine on the side. Perhaps I still have some work to do!

What do you think about multitasking?

## Part Three: In Relationships



*Family, romance, friendship, and the honesty in between*

Every relationship – marriage, friendship, parenting, colleague, even a stranger on the internet – asks something of us: patience, honesty, the willingness to stay in a difficult conversation instead of blocking our way out of it. This is the largest section of the book, and perhaps that is because so much of our emotional world is built in the space between two people. Here are the questions I keep returning to: When do we stay? When do we speak the truth, even when it costs us something? And what does it really mean to show up for someone?

## Chapter 17

### Juggling Couple Goals

A lot of couples today hold full-time jobs. Often, they are both in demanding jobs, stretching time, energy – and emotion. There's barely time to get in regular meals and some form of physical activity. Then there are the children, the parents, the extended family. And what of keeping up with friends and caring for pets of a variety of sizes and hues?

On the one hand, there's an influx of material wealth, enabling access to beautiful things and Insta-worthy vacations, while on the other, more real, hand there's little time and energy to actually do these things. Life feels like it's lived in a washing machine that never stops – just going round and round and round.

Under the circumstances, what about relationships? How do two people who, live together manage to go beyond just being housemates who share a roof and, sometimes, food. With all the stress around us we need the real-ness of human bonds in our lives. We need to know that we are loved, supported, and cared for by someone who we, in return, have the time and energy to care about. After all, is not the reason we work so that we can bring happiness into our lives? We often allow work to become an end in itself – instead, it should be a means to an end.

Situations that give us no downtime tend to create stress – both emotional and physical – that comes in the way of our relationships. They create an environment that is highly charged, often leading to heightened reactions in interactions

that could otherwise be quite regular, with crying or raised voices or, in some cases, even violence.

In counselling sessions, even through a computer screen, the energy between two people is not hard to catch – body language is a dead giveaway. There is a disinterest in the opinion of the other, contradictions – both verbal and non-verbal. And most importantly, an unwillingness to listen to what the other person is saying.

Do any of these things sound familiar? If yes, here are some things that you can consider if you are part of such a couple:

- Listen – be mindful of the needs of your partner
- Communicate – express your needs so your partner knows how you feel about things
- Create the time – much like you set up work-related meetings – it won't create itself. Make the effort to do a scheduled activity together
- Be your own person – enable each other with the space to pursue hobbies, goals, friends, etc.

You have chosen to spend your life with your significant other. A relationship is not an old piece of furniture that you don't really need, but have become used to, so it just lies there. Why not take the time, and give your relationship the energy it needs to blossom? It is your life, why not live it well?

## Chapter 18

### To stay or not to stay...

... that, really, is the question (with due apologies to The Bard).

All kinds of people have all kinds of reasons to continue to stay in a relationship that does not work for them. The relationship could be a marriage, a long-term partner, a business, even a job. We tend to stay in a relationship well past its sell-by date, often from fear of what the alternative could bring. It could be economic – how will I maintain my lifestyle or will I get a job? It could be emotional – will I ever find someone to be with? It could be what will people say? Will I regret it? A known devil is better than an unknown one. The list is, potentially, endless.

No matter what the reason, unfulfilling relationships bring us little joy, little reason to wake up and look forward to an interesting or calm day. They take our *joie de vivre*, making life harder – emotionally – than it ought to be.

While each relationship is unique, and we each have a different reason to stay, a lot of the outcomes of staying in an unfulfilling relationship tend to be similar. Over the long term, a situation like this could lead to *social withdrawal*, depression, anxiousness, or a host of other mental health issues that impact our overall wellbeing.

Am I advocating throwing in the towel the moment something does not go according to your plan? *Not At All*. Instead, here are some things to consider:

- Do you wake up each morning feeling the burden of the day on your shoulders? What requirements of yours are going unaddressed?
- Consider your alternatives and imagine the worst-case scenario.
- Take stock: write the pros and cons – how would your decision impact the lives of your dependents?
- Be practical: are you economically secure and able to manage your existence for at least the next six months?

It is very hard to get out of an established relationship that has familiar patterns and situations – there never seems to be the right time to do such a thing. However, there is a tremendous power in making decisions that put yourself and your emotional needs front and centre.

Choose to live by design, rather than default.

## Chapter 19

### Check in... you could make all the difference.

When was the last time you asked someone the ubiquitous 'how are you' – the thing we tend to say by rote after we say 'hello.' More importantly, when was the last time you waited to hear the response? It has turned into a rhetorical question – where most people tend not to hear the response or are surprised if it is anything but 'fine'!

A friend recently shared a poignant video made by Norwich City Football Club with me.

It is a beautiful callout that reminded me of the importance of being aware of the people around us. It used the setting of a football to serve as a reminder that it may not always be apparent when someone is struggling to cope, and the signs could sometimes the signs are harder to spot. It is important that we check in on those around us.

If you listen to the tone of 'fine' or a person's response to 'how are you' – you will usually find a lot of clues about what's going on with the person. It is also polite, isn't it? After all, having asked the question, why not wait one heartbeat to listen to the response?

People managing mental health issues do not necessarily have to appear depressed or be miserable. Sometimes, they are the life of the party, the ones keeping us all together. It could be that, over the years, they have learned that they can manage without support. They manage and manage until it becomes a part of their personalities. They sometimes manage and manage until they can manage no more.

As we interact with people in our daily lives, we find that some people make it a point to ask about us – our health, our day-off, our weekend, or just some little thing about us. They do not just ask, they listen to our response. It makes us feel seen and acknowledged, which, as we know, is the point of all interaction. As humans, connection is a key part of our existence. While the online world is efficient, just being in physical proximity to another living being enables an energy exchange.

Here are things that could help you support people around you who might benefit from your attention:

- If you haven't heard from someone in a while, check-in on them
- Watch for tone, body language, and words. These give away a fair bit of information about the person's emotional well-being.
- Don't offer solutions. Often, a person just wants an opportunity to articulate their feelings. If required, offer practical support.
- Listen. Listen. Listen.

A lot of people are simply unable to articulate how they are feeling or the things they struggle with. The paramount fear is that people might react badly to their struggles, and prefer keeping quiet about their feelings. They often think that 'it's all a part of life - simply to be suffered until it goes away.' They don't realise that others could be going through similar situations, keeping them to themselves, and suffering silently.

Checking-in with someone can make a big difference, if nothing else, in realising that we are not alone.

## Chapter 20

# When Every Action Does Not Require an Equal and Opposite Reaction

She ignored me, so I ignored her in return. He yelled at me, so I yelled back. Every day, we encounter situations that seem to ‘make’ us react in ways that mirror the behaviour of others. More often than not, these reactions leave us feeling angry, hurt, frustrated, or sad.

There is another option - we can choose to break the chain. What if, instead of responding immediately, we took a deep breath? What if we wrote out our response, saved it as a draft, and returned to it once the initial emotional surge had passed? Often, we would discover that our response has changed.

We are able to think more clearly, respond more thoughtfully, and avoid the rush of words that may feel satisfying in the moment but do little to improve the situation.

Sometimes, a delayed response – or no response at all – can create the space needed for a more amicable resolution. When we take responsibility for our feelings rather than placing the responsibility for them on someone else’s behaviour, we become more capable of responding rather than merely reacting.

At the end of the day, we cannot control how other people behave or what they choose to say. What we can control is how we respond.

So, what are some ways to protect our own *peace of mind*?

- Choose not to react immediately.

- Take a deep breath before responding to something that doesn't sit well with you.
- Write your response and file it away. Tomorrow may bring a new perspective.
- Agree to disagree – gently and respectfully.

Responding thoughtfully does not mean suppressing your feelings or allowing others to mistreat you. It simply means choosing your actions deliberately rather than allowing your emotions to make the decision for you. When we respond in this manner, we retain our power.

And sometimes, the most powerful response is not an equal and opposite reaction, but a calm and considered one.

## Chapter 21

### Block 'Em!

A relatively new way to 'resolve' an online dispute or misunderstanding seems to be to block the other person. Send a voice note or type out everything you want to say, hit send, and then block them.

This could be viewed as a *defence mechanism* in situations involving *perceived harm* or *emotional distress*. The action leaves the other person with no opportunity to respond. My generation's equivalent of blocking was probably slamming a door in someone's face – and keeping it shut.

In both cases, the underlying message is the same: I don't want to hear or see what you have to say. In a sense, blocking creates a boundary, limits conflict and gives the blocker a degree of power and control within the interaction.

Having only recently become familiar with the concept of blocking, I decided to try it. In the middle of a WhatsApp argument, I said my piece and blocked the other person. When he eventually realised what I had done, he was livid (as I said, we're more accustomed to door-slamming than blocking!).

What surprised me most, however, was my own reaction. Initially, there was a sense of power and finality – as though I had firmly shut a door. But that feeling didn't last long. Soon, I found myself wondering whether he had replied, whether I should unblock him to check, and what he might be thinking. I spent a significant part of the day thinking about the interaction and its aftermath.

So much for blocking.

Would I have been better off allowing the conversation to continue and seeing it through to a point where both of us had the opportunity to express our views? As our lives become increasingly digital, blocking often appears to be preferred over confrontation. It reveals quite a bit about our communication styles and coping mechanisms.

For many people, blocking is an easy way to avoid potential conflict and emotional discomfort. It can feel safer than engaging in a difficult conversation, particularly for those who find confrontation challenging. It also offers an immediate way to end unwanted interactions without investing the emotional energy and time that meaningful dialogue often requires.

In a world where intrusion is only a notification away, blocking can feel like an effective way to protect one's *personal space*. That said, I personally find blocking difficult to embrace. In most situations, I would rather have a conversation – even an uncomfortable one – than abruptly close the door. Equally, I know I am likely to have a strong emotional reaction if someone blocks me.

Of course, there are situations where blocking is necessary and healthy, particularly in cases involving harassment, abuse, manipulation, or threats to personal well-being. Boundaries are important, and sometimes blocking is the most appropriate boundary available. However, in everyday disagreements, I wonder whether we are losing something valuable when we choose disconnection over dialogue.

What do you think about blocking people online? Has it worked for you?

## Chapter 22

### The Truth of the Matter

While I am a Mental Health counsellor, my bread and butter comes from the work I do in Communications – a profession I have been part of for more than 25 years.

One of the realities of being a communications professional is that we work with people across a wide range of designations, personalities, and business functions. We learn to *disagree with a smile* while remaining firm in our role as *guardian of the brand*. Of course, that confidence and perspective are often the result of decades of experience.

Over the years, my role has frequently required me to have difficult conversations with people in senior positions – individuals who may not always welcome the message being delivered. Knowing that the person on the receiving end could potentially have a significant impact on my career, I have learned to think carefully about how to communicate difficult truths in a way that gets the message across without ending up *shooting the messenger*.

There are many ways people handle these situations. One approach is to shift responsibility elsewhere: ‘The organisation doesn’t allow it.’ Another is to simply say things exactly as they are and move on. In our attempts to let people down gently, however, we often resort to vague explanations and clumsy excuses that can feel worse than directness itself. Over time, I have come to believe that this approach is fundamentally *dishonest*.

When we avoid telling people the truth, we may spare ourselves temporary discomfort, but we often leave the other person confused, frustrated, or wondering what really happened. What I have learned is that honesty and kindness are not mutually exclusive.

Some of the principles I try to follow when navigating difficult conversations are:

- Have the conversation one-on-one, and in person whenever possible.
- Stay focused on the purpose of the discussion.
- Keep my words gentle; don't make it personal
- Track how the person is reacting; be prepared to course correct

I've found that it is worth taking the time to think through both the words and the potential outcomes before entering such conversations. Difficult conversations are rarely easy. Yet when handled thoughtfully, they can strengthen relationships, build trust, and create opportunities for growth – even when the message itself is not what the other person wants to hear.

What's your approach to hard conversations?

## Chapter 23

### Valentine's Day: Love-ly or Lone-ly?

The midweek celebration of love that arrived earlier this week has become a multi-billion-dollar industry across much of the world. The pressure to celebrate love on this day is unlike any other. Marketed primarily as a day for couples and romance, Valentine's Day can leave those who are not "attached" feeling excluded, sad, and even questioning their self-worth. In the run-up to February 14, there often appears to be a clear demarcation between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' – those in relationships and those who are not.

For the latter, what are some ways to manage the emotions that such social occasions can bring?

- Identify and acknowledge your feelings. It is okay to feel disappointed, lonely, or left out.
- Prioritise self-care. Meditate, eat well, exercise, go for a walk, or simply take time to relax and recharge.
- Talk to someone. Share how you are truly feeling with a trusted friend, family member, or counsellor.
- Challenge the narrative. Remember that your worth is not determined by your relationship status. Remember that love exists in many forms – friendships, family bonds, community, and self-love.

There may not be a formal diagnosis for loneliness, but that does not mean there is no support available for those experiencing it. Left unaddressed, loneliness can influence the way we think, behave, and engage with the world around us, affecting many aspects of our lives.

Perhaps Valentine's Day is not just about romantic love. Perhaps it is an opportunity to reflect on all the relationships that enrich our lives -including the one we have with ourselves.

What is your take on *The Day of Love*?

## Chapter 24

### Just Ask!

Earlier this week, while serving as a panellist at an International Women's Day event, a young woman from the audience asked a question that has stayed with me. She said (and I paraphrase): "Everyone says networking is important, but when I send messages on LinkedIn, people don't even bother to respond. It's very demotivating."

Her question took me back to a time when I felt the same way. As a younger person, I often hesitated to seek help or ask for support because of one persistent thought: What If They Say No? That hesitation cost me countless hours of uncertainty, self-doubt, and confusion.

It was only later in life that I realised the way through this fear was to approach it from a different perspective. I began asking myself: What's the worst that could happen? The answer was simple. They could say "no." Or they might not respond at all.

Even with a negative or lack of response, I would have clarity. The chapter would close, and I could move forward. Compare that with spending days, weeks, or even months wondering whether I should reach out, never knowing what the answer might have been. Worse still, my hesitation could be the reason I missed an opportunity altogether.

That shift in perspective changed the way I approached uncertainty. My job was simply to ask in the best way I knew how and then allow the outcome to unfold. When I find

myself in uncharted territory, these are the principles I try to follow:

- Don't be attached to the outcome. Focus on putting your best foot forward.
- Accept what you cannot control. I cannot control how others respond or behave; I can only manage how I respond to the situation.
- View rejection as information, not failure. A "no" provides clarity and allows you to move on.
- Remember that silence is also an answer. It may not be the answer you wanted, but it is still information you can use.

The truth is that every meaningful opportunity begins with a question, a request, or an introduction. Most doors remain closed not because someone said "no," but because we never knocked in the first place.

Are you someone who can handle a *no*? How do you choose to look at rejection and uncertainty?

## Chapter 25

### What Does It Take to Respond?

In my post last week, I wrote: Just ask, and don't be attached to the outcome. This week, I'd like to look at the same situation from the perspective of the person being asked – the askee, if you will.

Over the course of my decades-long career in Communications, I have encountered many potential clients who reach out seeking information 'right away.' Calls and meetings are arranged in a hurry, and proposals are required 'immediately.' Then, suddenly, there is silence. Emails go unanswered, calls are not returned, and messages are ignored. They simply go cold.

The same often happens with head-hunters who enthusiastically pursue candidates when there is an opportunity, only to disappear when things do not work out. And there are countless others who, once they have received the information they need and decide it is not useful, do not bother to close the loop.

Personally, I believe it is a matter of *common courtesy* to respond – even if the response is simply: *no, thank you*. Many of us struggle with saying no or delivering disappointing news because we view these as *hard conversations*. We worry about how the other person will feel, and we filter our response through the lens of emotion. Ironically, in trying to avoid discomfort, we often create even more of it by not responding at all.

The truth is that most people feel better when they receive a response. There may be disappointment, but disappointment is often easier to manage than endless uncertainty. A clear answer allows people to move forward, adjust their expectations, and get on with their lives.

As an askee, here are some of the principles I try to follow:

- Respond to emails, messages, and questions. I probably maintain a response rate of around 95 percent.
- Be polite but clear. When my answer is no, I try to communicate it respectfully and firmly. Sometimes I provide reasons; sometimes I do not.
- Take extra care when the stakes are high. If I believe my response could have a significant impact on the other person's life, I often write it, leave it overnight, and revisit it the next day with fresh eyes before sending it.

Responding thoughtfully is a skill, and like most skills, it can be developed with practice. Perhaps we would all benefit from creating our own response policy – one that values clarity, respect, and closure over avoidance and silence.

How do you handle conversations that require careful thought? Do you have a personal policy when it comes to responding?

## Chapter 26

# Honesty Is a Virtue – Only Up to a Point!

Culturally, Indians are not always known for being *frank* and *forthright*. Our native languages are rich in nuance and subtlety, often leading us to respond to situations in an indirect manner. We frequently say ‘maybe’ when we mean ‘no,’ nod in agreement when we are uncertain, or simply go along with something because that is what we have been conditioned to do.

In corporate India, people often speak with admiration about how individuals from other parts of the world communicate clearly and say things exactly as they are. In theory, we tend to appreciate this style of communication. However, have you ever been part of an *honest* conversation that left you feeling hurt or diminished?

A younger version of me believed that the best approach was to say things exactly as they were and move on. I had little patience for gentle words or carefully packaged messages. While that approach served me well in some situations, I gradually realised that I was often being insensitive to the feelings of others. Without intending to, I was hurting people – and frequently failing to notice the impact.

The person I am today is far more interested in how my words will land. Will what I say hurt someone unnecessarily? Will it diminish them in some way? And, because we live in a world of relationships and transactions, can I still

communicate effectively and get my work done without causing harm?

Here are a few things I try to keep in mind when I need to have a difficult conversation:

- Have a clear understanding of the desired outcome
- Choose words that are positive, respectful, and likely to land gently
- Protect the other person's dignity and feelings, wherever possible
- Be kind and compassionate
- Remember that honesty and empathy can coexist

In the early days of trying to own this approach, it was slow going for me. It required conscious effort and a willingness to slow down before speaking. Over time, however, it became easier to practise.

Today, I find that this way of communicating has not only improved my relationships but has also helped create a gentler version of myself. After all, honesty is important – but the manner in which we deliver it can make all the difference.

## Part Four: Caring for Yourself



*Boundaries, rest, resilience, and self-compassion*

Somewhere along the way, many of us learned that caring for ourselves was indulgent, even selfish. It was something to get to once everyone and everything else had been taken care of. This section pushes back on that idea. It builds on the premise that saying no, resting without guilt, failing without falling apart, setting boundaries even with the people we love, are not luxuries. They are the maintenance work of a whole life. If you take away nothing else from this book, I hope it is this: you cannot pour from an empty cup, no matter how well you've been trained to keep pouring.

## Chapter 27

### Who cares for the caregiver?

I am at a stage in my life today, when caring for ageing parents could, eventually, well become a part of my daily life. As people live longer and longer lives, a balanced life would include how I integrate my parents into my day, each day. It doesn't necessarily mean illness – it could simply be the ageing process that requires support.

For those of us who have been caregivers, we know that it is a never-ending cycle of taking care of another human being, often at great physical and emotional cost to ourselves. The caregiver, often a member of the family, is on call to provide physical and emotional support almost round the clock. They have to be dependable, trustworthy, and compassionate. Almost always, they have to be able to put another person's needs ahead of their own. There's a need to be empathetic and pre-empt the needs of the caree. All this can place a tremendous responsibility on the person, leading to burnout, without the actual option to burnout.

When people call a caregiver, it is almost invariably to ask about the status of the caree. Who, then, supports a caregiver? During the course of the caregiving process, when the caree no longer needs the care, caregivers often find themselves at a loose end. Where, then, do caregivers get their support?

As a practising psychological counsellor, supervision and personal therapy are both mandatory for me. From the former, I get an understanding of how to work more

effectively with my clients, and I go to the latter to work through issues that might come up for me, the resolution of which could make me a more effective counsellor. These are opportunities for me to seek and receive the support I need, and it is a well-established process in the work of counselling.

Caregivers often find themselves unable to make time to care for themselves – both physically and emotionally. They tend to cut themselves off socially, sometimes making caregiving the only area of focus. It could be useful for a person caring for another to take the time and seek out opportunities to speak and interact with other people.

If you know a caregiver who is deeply enmeshed in caring, take a moment to consider their needs. Some things you can do include:

- Check in with them at regular intervals
- Ask them how they are feeling, and listen to what they say
- Show up for them – offer to take their place for a while, so they have some downtime

Let them know that you are there for them; make them feel appreciated with some small gesture. It takes a very special person to be a caregiver. We must be aware that caregivers need care, as well. If you know a caregiver, acknowledge them and show them some appreciation. You could make a huge difference to their lives.

## Chapter 28

### A Case for Selfishness as a Virtue

Every religion in the world encourages its followers not to be selfish — they say selfishness is as far away from godlikeness as can possibly be. Broadly speaking, Hinduism says that selfish intentions are evil. Islam calls it one of the deadliest spiritual vices. Sikhism categorises it as *lobh*. The Bible tells us to place the needs of others ahead of our own.

As a Mental Health Practitioner, however, I encourage my clients to *be selfish*. Put yourself first, I say. Think about your needs and what would work for you. Understand what would help you. This is what I mean by *beingselfish*. I want selfishness to be viewed in a positive light, where making yourself a priority is important because it would mean that you are taking care of yourself – mentally and emotionally, and in any other manner that is important for your wellbeing.

For example, the days that I don't get some form of exercise, my energy feels low. On a day when I have an early meeting, I make it a point to wake up early and get in some form of workout or ensure that I create the opportunity to workout at the end of the day. By taking care of myself in this manner, I find myself in a good mood, in good health, able to think clearly and generally be kind to people around me. If I do not prioritise myself, I end up neglecting my health, leading to poor decisions that could impact both work and relationships. It is important that I create the time and space to *care for myself first*.

This is *Positive Selfishness* – where I put myself first to be better placed to care for and support others. When my energy is positive, I can support those around me with renewed vigour. Some of the most successful people are selfish in this manner – they put themselves first, so that they are in a position to fulfil their dreams, and succeed. To my mind, this is a recipe to get on the path to happiness. I believe that if we were to ever achieve world peace, this would be a good way to get started. For, realistically, which happy person would start a war?!

Here are some of the selfish things that I do:

- Take a vacation – even a short one – because travel makes me happy
- Turn down an invitation to a noisy restaurant – even if it means I miss an evening with friends – because loud noise bothers me
- Walk away from someone who is shouting at me – even if it's a manager – because it shakes up my aura
- Meditate – because I enjoy it.

At a very basic level, these are just some of the selfish things I do to keep my life and energy on even keel. This is my selfishness. Using this as a lens, what are some of your *Acts Of Selfishness*?

## Chapter 29

### The Power of No

Culturally, many Indian children are not equipped to say 'no.' A child who says no is seen as a rebel, non-conformist, even irreverent. In declining, expressing negation, dissent, denial or refusal, a child is called out as disrespectful and impolite. These children, then, grow into adults who find themselves *unequipped to say no* or *respectfully decline*, even when something is unacceptable to them.

We often say yes or maybe when we mean no – sometimes to keep the peace, sometimes to get out of a sticky situation. We are unable to say that little word to a friend in need, often placing their emotional needs ahead of our own. How many times have you attended a meeting that you thought was a complete waste of time, simply because you *could not say no*?

No is a little word, with large impact. This is not 'no' in a negative sense, not an ongoing attitude of negativity. It is no that clearly articulates your choice, your stance in that moment, to that particular situation. There is tremendous value in learning to say no. It ensures that we put our *own needs first* and preserve our *sense of self*. It puts power back in our own hands. When we say no, we reiterate that we understand the situation and take complete responsibility for the decision. It says that I have the power and maturity to manage my life, and choose to exercise it.

Naysayer is a negative word associated with people who often say no and draw a line to call out what is acceptable. On

the flip side, people often talk about the power of 'yes' and the positivity it brings. They say that to say 'yes' shows a positive person, open to a variety of situations. It could also imply a 'yes man', couldn't it?

'No' has a tremendous impact on how we feel about ourselves. Once you get used to saying no and holding that space, you'll see how wonderful it feels. Consider situations in which you have wanted to say no, but found yourself unable to do so. Think about how you felt at that time.

Learning to say no is an act of strength.

## Chapter 30

### Strong is Good – Up to a Point.

In Transactional Analysis, there is a driver called ‘Be Strong’ – this is one of the five drivers identified by American psychologist Taibi Kahler.

Without going into detail on the theory of TA, the drivers we adopt are based on messages that we receive from our parents during childhood that help us problem-solve.

A person who has ‘Be Strong’ as the foremost driver, is great at a time of crisis or when a rational approach is important. They will face the situation, however unbearable, take on the load and manage it. This is a person who has learned that it is not okay to show emotions, no matter what. The need is to show the world a tough side, bottle up the emotions and get on with it. The message to self is that the world must not perceive them as weak, which leads them to manage their thoughts and feelings themselves, often at great *emotional cost*.

Behind a person who is outwardly strong, is usually a sea of emotions that are active. And because of their need to be seen as strong, they are unable to reach out and say *help me*.

Taibi Kahler (1975) identified five common drivers that motivate us, and which can be at the root of dysfunctional behaviours.

These are commonly framed as the Transactional Analysis drivers, although they can be used stand-alone. They are:

- Be Perfect
- Be Strong
- Hurry Up
- Please Others
- Try Hard.

Asking for help is, perhaps, one of the hardest things to do, especially when it is related to emotional health. Asking for help takes strength and confidence. More importantly, when we ask for help, we enable the people who care for us to offer their support and give us the gift of their time and energy.

Being open to receiving help and support often holds a mirror up to our thoughts and actions, bringing fresh perspectives and, often, clarity of thought. This could begin a journey of *self-awareness* that makes the journey of our lives more insightful and meaningful.

There's something to be said about doing *internal work* – where we strive to *understand ourselves better*. It could lead to deeply insightful learning about how some of our go-to approaches to the world are the very things that deplete our *potential for happiness*. We often hurt ourselves or are unkind to ourselves simply because we do not know a better or different way.

Some things to consider about *kindness to self*:

- Ask for support – being strong does not have to mean suffering on your own.
- Accept attention, praise, and love – you are human and deserve it.
- Don't be your own worst critic when the outcome is not perfect – we tend to set our own bar too high.
- Talk to yourself much like you would to a loved one – treat yourself with care and understanding.

And, as I get into the weekend, let me leave you with this thought – If you don't love yourself, why should anyone else?

## Chapter 31

### Me-no-pause!

These days, every day is a ‘day.’ October 18 is World Menopause Day. In a world full of ‘special’ days, what’s one more day? While we could take the view that it’s *just another day*, for a topic like menopause to have its own day, seems very important. Why, suddenly, this conversation?

For a lot of women, menopause is a struggle – the process often lasts about seven years, on average. Because of a lack of awareness, the change in body shape, the embarrassment of hot flashes and mood swings, and a general feeling of poor health lead women to feel *physically depleted*. To add to this, menopause is usually associated with ageing and loss of sexual vitality. Hormonal changes and the end of the reproductive age can lead to serious *psychological impact*.

But, our mothers did it without a whimper! That’s right – they did. There are women across the world today who continue to *manage without a whimper*. However, we must account for the changed circumstances where the joint family system no longer offers a support system, where more women work regular jobs, and where awareness can make life a little easier.

Menopause is a natural part of ageing that affects women, who constitute roughly 50 percent of the population. Yet, it is not part of our healthcare system. The longstanding neglect of menopause and the silence around it must change.

Four reasons why I believe that it is important in today’s context:

- Thanks to developments in the medical field and the care we take of our bodies, for the first time in history, women are likely to spend at least one-third of their lives in menopause.
- The rollercoaster ride of hormones during menopause is likely to leave women depleted, requiring both physical and emotional support.
- With a larger number of women in the workforce, framing workplace policies around menopause would be important for the retention of these women.
- Economic independence among older women enables them to make their own decisions and be a major force in the economy – they are a new demographic for companies to focus on.

It is heartening to note that the conversations have begun. Not long ago, a global bank announced medical coverage for the treatment of menopause-related symptoms. Several organisations have begun the crusade towards a deeper understanding of menopause, which offer discussion, insights, and platforms for women to share experiences.

## Chapter 32

### Failing, Not Flailing

When was the last time you failed at something? What was your reaction to it? How did it make you feel?

Success is never guaranteed. More often than not, the road to what we perceive as success is paved with failures, setbacks, and plans that simply do not work out as intended. These experiences can lead us to question our abilities and wonder whether we are good enough. When failure is tied to an important life goal, relationship, or desired outcome, self-doubt and disappointment often become central themes.

As a child, one of the things my mother wished for me was to be a Bharatnatyam dancer. After many years of classes that I endured rather than enjoyed, she finally realised that dance was not something I was meant to pursue. Traditional dance simply wasn't my area of interest. However, because it mattered so much to my mother, I viewed my inability to excel at it as a personal failure. It was only through introspection that I came to understand a simple truth: not all of us are born to dance.

Failure is central to learning, although it is never the goal. Understanding why failure occurred is an important part of learning how to succeed. Every setback carries valuable life lessons. When we fail at something, it gives us perspective on our abilities – what am I good at, what needs support, what should I not do at all. If there is no process for reflection and new action, then failing really is flailing.

When I am faced with failure, here are a few things I do:

- Apply logic to the situation and understand what happened.
- Write down my thoughts and reflections.
- Discuss the experience with a trusted friend, mentor, or counsellor.
- Use the lessons learned to rework the path or choose a new one.

Failing, like change, is inevitable. The scale and impact may vary, but it happens to every one of us. The key is not to avoid failure, but to understand it. When we take the time to learn from our failures, we equip ourselves to handle future challenges with greater wisdom, resilience, and confidence.

## Chapter 33

### Beautifully Limited

I saw a bonsai tree in a shop window this morning. It was beautiful. There was something captivating about its tiny oranges and carefully crafted form. Yet, as I looked at it, I felt a sense of sadness – almost as though someone had taken the energy out of me. The word that stayed with me was *stunted*.

It got me thinking. This little tree, with its miniature oranges, had so much potential. Planted in open soil, it could have grown into a thriving tree, bearing countless juicy, delicious oranges and stretching freely towards the sky. That artistically constrained bonsai led me to reflect on the things that limit us as human beings.

If I spent my entire life in a small pot, receiving support only in the form of someone clipping back my attempts to grow, explore, and discover what lay beyond the fence, what kind of person would I become? What would happen to my emotional wellbeing?

Anything that limits us can, in turn, limit our potential. How far we go and what we become are often functions of how willing – and how free – we are to reach beyond our current circumstances.

*Frameworks* and *boundaries*, by their very nature, impose restrictions. To maintain a healthy society and meaningful relationships, some limits are necessary. Boundaries provide structure, safety, and order. Yet there is a difference between boundaries that guide growth and limitations that prevent it.

Perhaps the challenge is to recognise when the pot that once protected us has become too small for who we are becoming.

A bonsai is beautiful precisely because it is limited. Human beings, however, flourish when they are given room to grow.

## Chapter 34

### Write it!

#### **... the old-fashioned way**

There's something oddly meditative about the act of writing – putting pen to paper, the way we did it back in the day, when the only way to correct something was to either erase it or draw a line through it.

Whenever in a quandary, I pick up a pencil and reach for my dogeared notebook that goes everywhere with me. The tactile experience of the way the words form on paper brings me a clarity that no amount of typing can. It engages all my senses and ensures that I am completely focused on the task at hand – there's no pinging email or other open documents to look at. My brain seems to process thoughts more deeply when I write.

Looking at my thoughts articulated by my own hand paves the way for thoughts and ideas. This spontaneity often leads to more authentic and original writing. Often, as I write, new direction comes to me – almost like freewriting! The physical presence of handwritten notes also provides a sense of permanence and importance, elevating the significance of the content.

While technology and gadgets have vastly improved our lives and output, there's no replacing writing. It can be therapeutic – a low-cost, easily accessible form of therapy. All it takes is a pencil and the intent to write.

The next time you feel like you need some direction, try this:

- Pick up a pencil and paper.
- Write whatever pops into your head.
- Focus on keeping the writing going, more than the content you are creating – it can be events, thoughts, feelings – just anything.
- Put it away and come back to it later – look at what new thoughts and perspectives it brings.

Writing offers a powerful means of emotional release, self-exploration, trauma processing, and coping skill development. Its value lies in its ability to facilitate healing, personal growth, and resilience in individuals facing a wide range of mental health and real-life challenges.

When was the last time you wrote something?

## Chapter 35

### The Business of Busy-ness

“I’m so busy! There’s just no time for anything!” That is often the response I hear when I ask people how they are doing.

Being busy – or at least creating the appearance of being busy – has become a modern-day badge of honour. In many ways, it is seen as the benchmark of a successful life. If you’re too busy for an impromptu coffee, a quiet meal with friends, or an evening spent doing nothing in particular, it somehow signals that you have ‘arrived.’

We rush from home to work, from one meeting to the next, then to the gym, social engagements, and endless commitments. Before we know it, we are rushing into the weekend, only to fill that with activity too. There is little opportunity to *just be*.

Rushing is often a way of filling time. It creates a sense of movement and productivity, but sometimes it also prevents us from looking deeply at our lives and the situations we face. Perhaps slowing down would force us to confront uncomfortable questions, unresolved emotions, or fears about the future. So, we keep moving. We rush through the difficult moments and, often, through the good ones as well.

Our collective obsession with getting things done – living life according to an ever-growing to-do list – can become exhausting. We measure our worth by our productivity and confuse activity with progress. Yet, entire libraries are devoted to the value of a *slow* life. They remind us of the benefits of

living in the present, appreciating the moment, and finding contentment in simple experiences. Slowing down, however, often comes with an uncomfortable companion: *introspection*.

To pause and reflect requires us to shine a light on our own lives. It asks us to examine situations that may need attention, decisions that require action, or emotions we have been avoiding. When we immediately move on to the next task, there is a comforting illusion of progress, even if nothing meaningful has changed.

When I notice myself becoming immersed in busyness – rushing from one thing to another and from one day to the next – I ask myself a few simple questions:

- Why am I so busy? Is there an aspect of my life that needs attention?
- What keeps me from feeling calm?
- Am I being productive, or merely occupied?
- When was the last time I allowed myself to simply be present?

As the poet William Henry Davies wrote in his poem *Leisure* – my maternal grandfather would often quote these lines to me:

*“What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?”*

Perhaps the real luxury in today’s world is not having more to do, but having the time and presence to fully experience what we are already doing.

So, tell me, are you busy? Or are you free for a *cup of coffee* next week?

## Chapter 36

# Life After Chronic Illness – What Is It Like?

Wearing my Communications Consultant hat, I recently concluded a project with a global pharmaceutical major that was nothing short of high-energy. Over the course of my Communications career, I had never before had the opportunity to work with the pharmaceutical industry. This experience brought my attention to survivors of major diseases, which got me thinking about the mental health aspects of recovery.

How do people who have triumphantly navigated life-threatening illnesses manage their emotional well-being? With all the side effects of medication and the emotional turmoil that disease brings, how do they feel when they finally reach the light at the end of the tunnel?

Thanks to advances in healthcare research and the development of better medicines, more people are, thankfully, able to overcome long-term diseases. However, a large number of survivors find themselves ill-equipped to manage the upheaval that lengthy and demanding treatment creates in their lives. Living in constant fear of pain, recurrence, or uncertainty often fosters an atmosphere of anxiety and negativity.

While they may be physically cured, other aspects of their lives often go unattended, potentially leading to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and emotional distress. Do they ever truly return to being

‘normal’? In many ways, serious illness leaves an indelible mark on the psyche, often changing people forever.

To cope with the long-term physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impact it leaves behind, survivors may find that the resilience tools they once relied upon are no longer enough. The disease that once occupied the centre of their existence is no longer front and centre. This can require major readjustments, including:

- Physical impact – adapting to an altered body image
- Anxiety about recurrence – wondering, “What if it comes back?”
- Survivor’s guilt – the question shifts from “How long do I have?” to “Why was I the one who survived?”
- Dependence and caregiving dynamics – understanding the burden placed on caregivers and the impact illness has on the lives of loved ones

Those of us around survivors are often so relieved by the *clean chit* outcome that we forget the arduous journey they have endured. They need to build resilience to cope with a new kind of loneliness. They need support systems where they can talk openly about the challenges and experiences that each new day brings.

Connecting with people who have gone through similar situations can help survivors feel understood, supported, and empowered to thrive. It takes courage to share a story that is deeply personal. Having overcome the physical aspects of disease, survivors must also find ways to ensure that their best lives still lie ahead.

## Chapter 37

### What Will ‘They’ Say?

Many of us find addressing an audience extremely difficult. We struggle to muster the confidence to stand up and say what needs to be said. What if I fumble? What if I forget my words? What if I don’t make the impact I hoped for? What if, what if, what if?

And, what if all those things do happen?

We feel embarrassed, ashamed, and inadequate. Notice how all of these are labels that we place upon ourselves. Very few people are born with the kind of stage presence that leaves an audience spellbound. Yet, when we step up to speak, we expect ourselves to be the very best.

The truth is that we place this kind of pressure on ourselves every day, in countless ways. Whether it is speaking to an audience or simply living our daily lives, we often find ourselves setting aside the life we truly want to live in favour of what appears to be the ‘right’ thing to do, often at great personal cost.

Over time, we become accustomed to toeing the line. This could create stress and anxiousness, largely because we become unfamiliar with the person we have become. In trying to meet the expectations of others, we sometimes lose sight of ourselves. Because we live within the framework of society, there are certain boundaries and responsibilities that may not be negotiable. However, can we muster the *courage* to live the best version of our lives within those constraints?

One of the gifts that courage brings is the ability to say, “This is important to me. This matters to my emotional well-being, and I need to honour it.” When we do that, life takes on a different quality, and we begin to own the choices we make and the life we lead. In doing so, life becomes freer, lighter, and easier to navigate.

Whenever I want to do or say something that may fall outside what is generally considered acceptable, I ask myself a few simple questions:

- How important is this to me?
- How will I feel if I do it?
- How will I feel if I don’t?

Looking at the situation through that lens often helps me find a balance between living a fulfilling life and taking responsibility for the choices I make. After all, perhaps the real question is not “What will they say?” but “What will I say to myself if I never try?”

## Part Five:

# Perspective, Meaning & Identity



*The bigger questions: who we are, what matters, and how we see our lives*

Every so often, the circumstances of our life arrange themselves to ask us a bigger question than usual – not what are you doing, but who are you, really? What matters to you when no one else’s expectations are in the room? This final section steps back from the everyday and looks at the wider view: the stories we tell ourselves, the beliefs that anchor us, the years that quietly change us, and the grass – greener or not – that grows on someone else’s side of the fence. It is, in many ways, the section I return to most often myself.

## Chapter 38

# Social Media at the Core of Our Being

How many of us have experienced being unable to stop scrolling through a social media platform?

The feed just keeps going – an endless stream of advice, motivation, opinions, life lessons, entertainment, and everything in between. It is as if we are under a spell, compelled to keep scrolling long after we intended to stop.

When social media first became a part of our lives, it was exciting. We could reconnect with long-lost school friends and acquaintances with whom we had simply lost touch. It gave us a new way to stay connected, and for many of us, life felt a little less lonely. People shared glimpses of their lives – moments they wanted their friends to see and celebrate. Fast forward to today, and social media has become much more than a platform for connection.

We put our lives on display – our new clothes, shoes, fitness routines, holidays, meals, achievements, and milestones – for others to see, like, and comment on. Looking through our feeds, it often appears as though everyone else's life is exciting, glamorous, and filled with happiness.

Millions of young people now use social media platforms as their primary means of communication. They may spend hours chatting through text messages without hearing a voice or seeing a face for days at a time. Conversations happen without tone, facial expressions, or emotional nuance.

As a result, when faced with real-life, face-to-face interactions, some find themselves struggling. Humour,

sarcasm, empathy, and subtle emotional cues can be difficult to interpret without the filters of a screen. And unlike online interactions, there is no option to simply ‘block’ someone who is standing in front of you. For some, this can create genuine anxiety around in-person social situations.

Ironically, a medium that was designed to foster connection may, in some ways, be distancing us from one another. We often become so absorbed in our devices that we barely look up long enough to greet the people around us. At the same time, constant exposure to carefully curated content can leave us feeling that everyone else is living a better life than we are. Social media frequently creates the illusion that others are happier, more successful, more attractive, and more fulfilled.

Advertisers and influencers often reinforce a powerful message: that we are not enough as we are. We must constantly aspire to be better, look better, achieve more, and consume more.

With the rise of GenAI and increasingly sophisticated deepfakes, our social media feeds are likely to become even more complex and difficult to navigate. Distinguishing reality from fabrication may become an increasingly challenging task.

Perhaps the most important question we could ask ourselves is this: If you had the opportunity to be completely authentic on social media, what would you change about the things you post? Would your content look different? Would your life appear different? Or would you simply feel freer to be yourself?

## Chapter 39

### Another Year, Another New Beginning

As the year draws to a quiet close, there's a natural pause that settles in – the world slows, giving us the opportunity for pause and reflection. It's a rare invitation to sit with the year that's passed, not to judge it, but simply to notice it. This is our time to be aware of all that was and all that that was not.

As memories surface – the people who touched your journey, the moments that stretched you, the wins you're proud of, and the ones that didn't quite land – try meeting them all with the same tenderness: *gentleness* and *kindness*. Especially towards yourself.

You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to be willing to look back with a soft heart, and forward with an open one.

Let this season restore something in you. Let it make space for rest, for warmth, for quiet hope.

Here's to closing this chapter with grace and stepping into the new year lighter – carrying growth, good health, and moments that truly matter.

## Chapter 40

# It's That Resolution Time of the Year Once More!

Are you a *resolution maker* or a *take it as it comes* kind of person?

This is the time of year when we are inevitably asked what we have planned for the year ahead. The more cynical among us may wonder why resolutions need to be tied to the start of a new year. After all, why can't we make positive changes throughout the year?

And they're not wrong.

Resolutions can be made on any day of the year. However, there is something symbolic about closing one chapter and opening another. The end of one year and the beginning of the next give us an opportunity to pause, reflect, and begin again with a renewed sense of *hope*, *purpose*, and *regeneration*.

If you're planning to make resolutions for the coming year, here are a few things worth considering:

- Be mindful of your physical and mental health, and take the necessary steps to support both. Seek help when you need it.
- Be kind to the people around you – and to yourself.
- Give yourself permission to prioritise self-care without guilt.
- Listen more – to others, and to yourself.

Using these ideas as a lens, sit down with a notebook and think about what you would like the year ahead to look like. Consider both the practical and emotional aspects of your life.

The most meaningful resolutions are often not grand declarations, but small, consistent habits that accumulate over time. It could be reducing your sugar intake, practising meditation, taking regular walks, reading more, or calling one person each week with whom you've lost touch.

Whatever you choose, focus on creating sustainable habits that will serve you not just for the next year, but for years to come. After all, lasting change is rarely the result of one dramatic decision. More often, it is the outcome of small actions repeated consistently over time.

So, what's your *resolution for the year*?

## Chapter 41

### What Comes First?

*“We are all juggling so many balls. Differentiate between glass balls and rubber balls – and don’t be afraid to drop the rubber balls.”*

*~ Kathryn Cunningham, Carrboro, N.C.*

I came across these words while browsing a website a few weeks ago. I don’t know Kathryn, but her message stayed with me. With remarkable simplicity and clarity, she articulated an ideal way to identify and prioritise what truly matters. I also love the imagery it creates.

Prioritisation is an *essential skill* in creating the best version of our lives. It is the thoughtful allocation of our time, energy, and attention that ultimately determines the quality of our experiences.

Of course, if we simply moved through life reacting to whatever came our way, we would probably still get many things done. But is that really how we want our lives to unfold - rushing from one task to the next, day after day, without intention or direction?

Prioritisation is not just about productivity.

When we focus on things according to their importance, we create a sense of calm and space. We free up energy for the people, experiences, and activities that genuinely matter.

And it is not only tasks that require prioritisation - relationships do too.

Sometimes we hold on to relationships long past their expiry date. We maintain connections with people who no

longer bring joy, growth, or meaning into our lives simply for the sake of history or familiarity.

So, it may be worth asking: Are they glass balls that need nurturing and protection? Or are they rubber balls that can safely be allowed to bounce away?

What are some of the ways I prioritise?

- Make two lists (I love lists!): One list contains the things that absolutely must get done. The second contains things that should get done in the foreseeable future.
- Consider the impact: As I create my lists, I ask myself a simple question: “What would happen if this didn’t get done?” The answer often reveals its true priority.
- Acknowledge guilt – and let it go: Unfinished tasks and unresolved situations can create feelings of guilt. Recognise those feelings, but don’t allow them to dictate your priorities.
- Keep your lists realistic: An endless to-do list is often a recipe for frustration. Prioritisation works best when expectations are achievable and sustainable.

Perhaps the most liberating realisation is that not everything we juggle is made of glass. Some things can be dropped. Some things can wait. Some things can bounce away without causing any real damage.

And when you truly understand the difference between glass balls and rubber balls, you may find yourself letting the rubber ones go – without guilt, anxiety, or sadness. Who knows? They may bounce back into your life one day. And if they don’t, they were never meant to be glass in the first place.

## Chapter 42

### A View on Religion for Emotional Health

In the last few weeks, a lot of the conversation in India has centred around Ayodhya and the consecration of the idol of Lord Rama. While I, personally, am more spiritually oriented than religious, I found myself drawn towards a deeper understanding of how being religious – or not – can impact *emotional* and *mental well-being*; not so much the religious denomination, but whether one is religious or not.

From what I have seen in my work as a counsellor, it cuts both ways.

Religion could be used as a crutch, where everything is god's fault or kindness, therefore, not requiring us to take on any sort of responsibility. It is god's will, and this is how it is. My life is like this because God ordained it such. The belief in the presence of a god enables one to be absolved of the consequence of any sort of action – positive or otherwise. It could even encourage a lack of action. This kind of person needs to take responsibility for nothing, and life's outcomes are always someone else's fault or generosity. Typically, this person has a low sense of self and confidence.

At the other end of the spectrum is the non-believer who is certain that there is no god or other supreme being. The universe is an outcome of the Big Bang and science, and all actions and outcomes are, therefore, to be owned. The responsibility for everything lies within oneself. The buck

stops here. A person with this orientation invariably ends up being tired of the burden of continuous responsibility.

Why am I writing about this?

Like most things that are placed at the extreme ends of a spectrum, there tends to be a loss of perspective. In the former case, there's no ownership, while the latter gives no room to shake off a yoke that could sometimes get too much to bear. Both tend to create stress, leading to situations that are not conducive to *good mental health*.

A measured approach to religion can enable a support system that gives one strength in times of need. It can be the route to awareness of ourselves and those around us. We draw upon religion as a path that helps us find inner peace, manage stress, and overcome emotional turmoil. A relationship with a higher power could help us understand the meaning of life. At the end of the day, we're all seekers – we may seek different things, but the outcomes we seek are similar – peace and happiness. And for this, everything in moderation could well be the path.

## Chapter 43

### The Joy of Ordinary Gestures

I came across a poem called Small Kindnesses (by Danusha Laméris), which reminded me of a poster at the home of an uncle of mine that read: The smallest good deed is better than the grandest good intention.

I have written about kindness in the past, but this poem really spoke to me. At its heart is a notion that deeply resonates with me – we all perform small, unnoticed acts of kindness every day. Just as important, we are also the recipients of such acts.

However, these everyday kindnesses are often dismissed as mere chance, while our hearts yearn for larger-than-life gestures that rarely come our way. We want someone to *know how we are feeling* and act accordingly, often overlooking the friend who simply calls to check in and chat. We dream of being *swept away* on a fairy-tale vacation, barely noticing the island of calm a loved one may have created for us during an ordinary evening.

If we stopped to notice and appreciate the kind things that are done spontaneously and without agenda, we would simply light up. How did you feel the last time a car stopped in busy traffic to let you cross the street? When someone said *bless you* after you sneezed? When you helped someone gather papers that the wind had scattered in the street?

These unconscious acts reveal our innate *humanness*. They remind us that our instincts often lean towards being supportive, compassionate, and kind.

Think about the last time a stranger did something helpful for you or said something pleasant. More importantly, think about how supported, seen, and acknowledged you felt in that moment. Can you feel yourself glow?

## Chapter 44

# The Universe Will Conspire

How many times have you been told, “Keep the faith, it will happen”, or “You have to manifest it”? You do, and then, suddenly, that thing you have been waiting for just happens – almost out of the blue.

In my lifetime, this has happened to me more times than I can count on the fingers of both hands. I often say that I have a *guardian angel* who ensures my well-being. Is it true that the universe conspires to make things happen? This is a question to which we may never find the answer. What, then, is the point of faith and manifestation?

From a mental health perspective, giving the power to make something happen to a source external to us can be liberating. It frees us from the burden of responsibility. Much like we pray to a god we have never seen and believe that ‘it will be done,’ having faith in the universe allows us to relax – safe in the knowledge that someone else will do the needful.

It also gives us something to rant at when things do not go our way, creating a wonderful outlet to let off steam. More importantly, it makes us feel cared for. If someone or something out there is keeping track of my life and working towards my success, then surely, I am cared for.

As humans, one of our greatest needs is to feel loved – it is one of our most basic and fundamental needs. We need to know that we are important to somebody; that someone truly cares about us, wants us, accepts us, and is working in the background to ensure our success. This sense of being valued

contributes greatly to a happy and fulfilling life. These aspects also go a long way in helping us manage stress.

When we doubt that we are loved, we may develop unhealthy behaviours or patterns to compensate for it. Stress levels rise, and the world can seem like a dark place. It is no wonder, then, that religion is so popular. It gives us someone to lean on at times when we find it difficult to find a human being to lean on.

Have you ever experienced a time when you felt that the *universe has conspired* in your favour? What's your guardian angel story?

## Chapter 45

### Who Are You?

Last week, I had the opportunity to attend a breathwork workshop, which I thoroughly enjoyed. One of the exercises that stayed with me involved repeatedly asking the question: *Who Are You?*

While it seems rather straightforward at first, after offering several responses – sister, daughter, professional, friend, and so on (no, I didn’t think “live-er”!) – based on the roles I play, I found myself at a loss. Who am I in the context of myself? Without all these relationships and labels, how do I articulate my existence?

Under normal circumstances, I am able to express myself. I know the words; I can come up with adequate responses. The repeated asking of this question, however, left me wondering who I actually am. How would I describe myself in the absence of the work I do, the place I come from, or the people to whom I am connected?

A large part of our mental well-being is tied to how we view ourselves. Do our relationships and responsibilities make us feel like a cog in the wheel – necessary, yet insignificant? If I am who other people say I am – wonderful, kind, a loser, or weird – how does that shape the way I live my life? Does my identity change when the words people use to describe me change? Or do I define myself by the way my parents and caregivers moulded me?

If the answer to *who are you* lies in the all-encompassing sum of our memories, values, and experiences, can we use that

understanding to shape our view of ourselves? To my mind, this leads directly to questions of self-worth and the image we project to the world.

It can be a valuable exercise to explore how we see ourselves in the context of the world around us, to understand which aspects serve us well and which may be holding us back. It can also lead to a sense of loss when we are unable to define ourselves using traditional labels – much like I felt when I ran out of roles to describe myself.

Sometimes, deep reflection can take us down paths we would rather not explore. However, spending some time thinking about how we view ourselves can be invaluable in preserving our emotional well-being.

It is important to acknowledge that our identities are dynamic. They evolve constantly as our lives progress. There is no single answer – and certainly no one correct answer – to the question of who we are. Understanding the aspects of ourselves that feel genuinely true can have profound implications for how we treat ourselves and, ultimately, how we live our lives.

## Chapter 46

### What's the Colour of Your Grass?

I have often looked wistfully at a peer, colleague, or even a friend, fervently wishing that I had their job, their salary, or their luck. How wonderful it would be, I have thought, to have that opportunity or enjoy that situation in my own life.

When we look at someone who has achieved success, it is usually that one accomplishment or circumstance that stands out. We rarely see the full picture – the emotional struggles, the sacrifices, the missed opportunities, and the unfulfilled areas of their lives. We overlook the fact that they have nurtured and tended their own patch of grass to arrive at the place we, as outsiders to their reality, now admire and covet.

I have learned that, in order to manage how I feel about other people's successes (after all, I am only human), I need to focus on what is happening in my own life. Have I done the things I need to do to improve my relationships, career, and other important aspects of my life? Before I look at someone else and say *how lucky*, can I first examine the areas of my own life that need attention?

While I have no doubt that luck and the universe play a role in the paths our lives take, those paths are almost always supported by hard work, perseverance, and the intention to succeed. I must create the foundations that allow the rest of the building to be constructed.

When I find myself feeling this way, I now:

- Create a list of the things that are going well in my life
- Take an honest look at the areas that need improvement
- Focus my energy on nurturing what matters most to me.

After all, the hot, rainless summers in Bangalore have shown us that without life-giving rain, lawns wither and turn brown. If this is true of nature, should it not also be true of our own lives?

Perhaps the question is not whether someone else's grass is greener, but whether we are taking the time to water our own.

## Chapter 47

# What Have You Changed in Your Life?

Look back at the last six months of your life. Other than achievements at work (which are wonderful), what stands out for you as movement? Not necessarily improvement – movement.

Are you simply living with the rising and setting of the sun, or have you found ways to make your days more interesting? We often say *I'm too old*, *it's too much effort*, or *I don't have the time* when opportunities come our way. Yet, these are often the very experiences that make life exciting and meaningful. They bring an energy and zest for life that is difficult to find elsewhere.

A few years ago, I earned a Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) certification as a drone pilot and instructor. It had nothing to do with my career, my life plan, or any grand objective. I simply did it because it interested me – and I enjoyed the process tremendously.

Today, when people ask me what I am doing with that training, my answer is simple: I am glad I went through the experience. Was it a wasted effort? If it brought me joy, and it certainly did, then there is no question of it being wasted.

I choose to step outside my comfort zone, try new things, and explore aspects of life that I have never considered before. I do so, knowing that if something does not suit me, I can always walk away from it. What I will take with me, however, is the certainty that I gave it a chance and learned something about myself in the process.

What have I learned from this approach to life?

- I don't know what I dislike until I have tried it – at least twice (that is a story for another day!)
- I now know what I am capable of simply because I was willing to try
- Life must be lived in the present, not postponed to some future date
- I have a bucket load of experiences, memories, and achievements that I can celebrate.

Perhaps growth is not always about becoming better. Sometimes, it is simply about moving – trying, learning, discovering, and collecting experiences along the way.

## Chapter 48

# Regulation and Policy in Mental Health in India

I got into a discussion with some colleagues recently about how, suddenly, everyone seems to be a counsellor. It stemmed from an article I read about the growing trend of influencers, homeopaths, dentists, and others presenting themselves as therapists.

With Generative AI making significant strides in changing the way we work, it may appear that all one needs to do is ‘ChatGPT’ an issue and start doling out therapy. It reminds me of those wanting to work in communications simply because they ‘like interacting with people.’

Just a couple of months ago, I met someone who had become a ‘therapist’ because, over the years, all of her son’s friends would come to her with their problems and she would ‘sort them out.’ Encouraged by this experience, she decided to become a professional therapist despite having no formal training in the field.

Today, attractive apps offering free chats are a dime a dozen - typically built by smart tech entrepreneurs looking to capitalise on a growing trend. Then there are social media influencers who leverage large followings to dispense advice on issues that often require far greater expertise and care than a short video or post can provide.

But is it really that simple?

On the one hand, yes. Information is more accessible than ever before. Anyone can gather vast amounts of knowledge on almost any topic. However, what enables a

professional to understand and respond to the very specific needs of a client?

Did she tear up while insisting she was a strong person? Did he avoid eye contact while recounting years of bullying in college? Did the silence between words reveal more than the words themselves?

What makes counsellors and therapists valuable is not merely their ability to identify or ‘diagnose’ a problem. Rather, it is their ability to apply psychological theory, clinical understanding, ethical principles, and human insight within a unique context to support a specific individual.

Regulation and certification must form the baseline for professionals and organisations dealing with mental health, much as they do in other professions. As more people become aware of their mental health needs and seek support, counselling and therapy practitioners should be accountable to a central regulatory body that certifies qualifications and establishes professional standards before someone can set up a practice.

There must also be clear guidelines for training organisations, digital platforms, and mental health apps. A great-looking app does not make someone a counsellor.

Generative AI is undoubtedly here to stay and can play a valuable role in clinical settings – from administering questionnaires to helping analyse results and improving efficiency. However, there is no substitute for a trained mental health professional who can provide empathy, judgement, context, and the human connection that therapy demands.

The need for emotional support is real and growing. It is time that this need is met by people who are genuinely qualified, trained, and accountable for the work they do.

## Endnote

To the readers of this book:

If you're reading these final pages, you've walked with me through what was a full year of reflection – thank you for that. Forty-eight small chapters, each one an attempt to name something true about being human – the quiet struggles, the everyday resilience, the parts of ourselves we don't always have language for. I also looked at the qualities of resilience and regeneration that we each have within us.

I began this journey because someone believed I had something worth saying, and encouraged me to say it. What followed was less a project and more a practice – I was writing not just as a counsellor, but as someone watching, alongside all of you, what it means to move through a life with an open heart. More than this, it was about taking the things that life brought us each day and making the most of them.

I never set out to have every answer. I only hoped to open a door to awareness, introspection, and the possibility that you might feel a little less alone in whatever you were carrying that week.

And now, as this chapter closes, I find myself more certain than ever of one thing: mental health cannot remain a footnote. It cannot be a box we tick beside the more 'visible' markers of a life well lived. Emotional wellbeing must be the point, not an afterthought to career, ambition, or achievement, but woven into the very fabric of how we measure a good life.

To everyone who read, who reached out, who told me that a word or a line stayed with them – thank you. I am deeply grateful.

As you close this book, carry this forward: your mental health is not separate from your physical health. It is your health. Protect it daily and ask for help without being embarrassed when you need it – the same way you would for a fever, an injury, a broken bone. Your emotional wellbeing deserves the same seriousness, the same care and priority as anything else you're building in your life.

Above all – be kind to yourself.

