



Thriving Mind

HOW TO CULTIVATE A GOOD LIFE

DR JENNY BROCKIS

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1

Don't panic, but dinner is burning in the oven

*When caught up in our too-busy bubble we become blind to how
it happened and too time-poor to fix it.*

J.B.

Imagine waking up every morning feeling refreshed, energised and excited for the day ahead, enjoying that quiet sense of satisfaction that all's well with the world. You're happy, healthy and thriving in your work and life.

How wonderful. But what if your reality looks a little different? Like last Tuesday.

You oversleep, so you don't have time to pick up a coffee on the way to work. Some rude jerk cuts you off in the traffic and you get into the office to face an angry colleague who blames you for some document that didn't get sent to the right person.

You've got 10 reminders on your phone telling you you're late for the monthly staff meeting, and you've just noticed that in your haste to get out of the door you blindly picked up a pair of shoes that seemed to match ... but not in colour.

All this along with the usual daily barrage of emails, phone calls, meetings, more meetings and a couple of extra meetings before you can get onto your real work. And always the undercurrent of economic uncertainty, worrying about your job security and chronic work overload. There's no time to scratch yourself let alone take a toilet break or have lunch, and you're feeling more than a little frazzled.

It's been said work is good for us but when did it become acceptable, expected even, that it's okay to dedicate your life, like a sacrificial lamb, on the high altar of work, forgoing all that makes you feel truly fulfilled and happy? How is it that in this time of golden opportunity and possibility, when we are witnessing so much positive change—from new digital technologies to advances in health care, healthy food and education—that it seems nigh on impossible to carve out enough time and energy to engage with all the multiple facets of your life that make you feel complete?

Why are so many people experiencing such high levels of stress that it's impacting their health and wellbeing? Rising levels of mental health issues and burnout are a massive problem in almost every workplace.

The new norm of constant, fast and radical change has resulted in an alarming increase in maladaptive behaviours and thinking patterns. Much of the time we're over-worrying and overthinking, pushing harder all the time to get everything done against a backdrop of chronic fatigue. Little wonder we sometimes get it wrong and end up feeling overstretched, worried and exhausted to the extent that our physical health and mental wellbeing are put at risk and the threat of burnout looms large.

Too tired to care

When overthinking becomes the norm, worrying about making a mistake, meeting deadlines, sorting out relationship conflicts and differences of opinion can weigh you down. When you're time poor, trying to clear the backlog of so many competing thoughts leads you to feeling under continual pressure. No wonder you're tired and stressed.

If you've abandoned self-care — because who's got time for that? — can you remember a different time when you used to get to the gym regularly, always caught up with your friends on a Friday night, and felt in control of your life and destiny?

It can be frustrating if you want your life to be different, better, and maybe you don't like the person you've become: tetchy, irritable and sometimes a little unkind. You may hear yourself saying things in the heat of the moment that are horrid, uncalled for and deeply wounding. Even if it wasn't your intent, you know just how damaging this can be to your relationships.

You know you're better than this, and capable of so much more. But for now you're too busy papering over the cracks, hoping others, including your boss, won't notice.

And what if you *are* the boss? Are others giving you that sideways glance, wondering why you're not delivering on the potential they previously saw in you? Were they mistaken in their estimation of and trust in you?

Most destructive is the nagging seed of self-doubt, knowing that staying on this hamster wheel without knowing how to get off means perpetuating and nurturing this monster of our own making, leading us to an uncertain and unhappy future.

It's time to take a step back to examine what got us here and what can be done to rectify the situation. Because it doesn't have to be like this.

The solution lies in recognising what's been getting in our way and knowing what to do about it, while understanding we'll find no one-size-fits-all answer. The big issues include:

- ❖ **lack of mental wellbeing.** We've lost sight of what makes us happy.
- ❖ **overwork, stress and burnout.** We're not managing our wellbeing.
- ❖ **a sense of disconnect and loneliness.** We're losing real human connection.

Let's take a look at each of these issues in turn.

Lack of mental wellbeing

Your mental wellbeing is what allows you to work to the best of your ability, to cope well with the normal stresses of everyday life, to feel productive and useful, knowing you are contributing towards something bigger than yourself. It's what makes you happy. Which is why in this increasingly complex and demanding world taking good care of your mental wellbeing matters. It keeps you safe from falling foul of mental distress and the risk of developing a mood disorder such as anxiety or depression.

How you show up each day depends on a variety of factors: how well you slept, how much you have on your mind and what's worrying you (did you remember to take the washing out of the machine to dry last night, because you wanted to wear a particular shirt today?). Juggling all these sorts of concerns on your mental to-do list is normal and something you do every day. But this is about recognising when the warning light is flashing on your mental dashboard to indicate you've reached your limit, and we all have a limit.

Avoiding the safety hazards

Identifying and avoiding the multitude of trip hazards that can put your mental wellbeing at risk is a bit like trying to navigate an obstacle course where the obstacles keep changing in size, number and position. Some feel easier to overcome than others; some rarely show up while others pop up every day as if to taunt you.

No two people share the same trip hazard list, but there may be considerable overlap when dealing with mental overload, fatigue, a toxic working environment or a difficult relationship.

It takes courage (and insight) to acknowledge that a problem exists. Reasons for ignoring your trip hazards can include:

- ❧ failing to recognise the level of your mental distress
- ❧ wanting to resolve your difficulties yourself without help
- ❧ stigmatising beliefs such as fear of judgement or being considered weak, or feelings of shame.

The danger here is that failing to get help early enough will delay diagnosis or getting extra support. Your mental wellbeing is something that requires your attention every single day, and it starts with your asking the question, *How am I feeling?*

If the answer is 'not great', then it's time to move into action to remedy the cause and get back on track towards feeling great again. The good news is, there are many strategies you can use to do this. These will be explored in part II of this book.

The agony of anxiety

One of the biggest issues many of my clients face is anxiety generated by the uncertainties of modern life. With overwhelm on pretty much everyone's CV, how do you cope when your usual stress levels just quadrupled because some of your key work

colleagues are on sick leave, you've got a new client who is proving exceptionally demanding, or you've been missing out on sleep because you're worried about your parents' increasing frailty.

Then there's job insecurity. Do you worry about how long it will be before your role is replaced through artificial intelligence, automation and robotics? Another common fear is concern for the future, whether it's about climate change, geopolitical instability or the possibility of economic recession. Not having the answers to these weighty challenges can itself take a heavy toll.

Anxiety can sneak up on you if you're caught in a toxic work environment where you're afraid to speak up or to seek clarification because the prevailing culture will punish you if you're seen as being weak or incompetent. How can you deliver your best when you're unsure what's expected of you? This uncertainty can lead to procrastination and perpetuate an undercurrent of fear. You're stuck, wheels spinning, not getting anywhere fast. Anxiety, especially when accompanied by perfectionism and impostor syndrome, is our number one productivity killer, stymieing success in exams, performance reviews and career progression. Worry about not being good enough, or downplaying your achievements because you're afraid of being exposed as a fraud, is a real bummer.

Anxiety develops when your worries feel uncontrollable and relentless. If this has been happening to you for more than six months and is accompanied by difficulty concentrating, fatigue, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension or sleep disturbance, you may have an anxiety disorder.

What? You thought it was normal to feel like this? The problem is, if it's been happening for a while, it's become your normal. But it's not. Normal, that is. Which is why knowing things can be different can be hugely reassuring. Better still, you get to choose the *what*, know your *why* and, after reading the book, the *how* too.

The darkness of depression

Alongside anxiety the other saboteur of mental wellbeing is depression. Sometimes they turn up together. Depression manifests as a debilitating, unrelenting sense of deep unhappiness that is much more than a case of feeling a bit blue or having a 'bad hair day'.

A diagnosis of depression might be suggested if over the past two weeks you've experienced five or more of the following symptoms:

- ⌘ sadness or a depressed mood
- ⌘ lack of pleasure in those activities you normally enjoy
- ⌘ trouble sleeping
- ⌘ lack of energy
- ⌘ feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- ⌘ difficulty staying focused
- ⌘ a big change in appetite
- ⌘ feelings of agitation
- ⌘ suicidal ideation.

If you think this is you it's time to put your hand up and ask for help, because depression can have many contributing causes, can vary in severity and can require medication or other forms of treatment to get you back to normal.

This is the time to acknowledge that things aren't right and to call it out for what it is. You are suffering from depression. Expressing how you feel can be hard, but sharing your emotions in this way has been shown to reduce its intensity and makes it easier for family and friends to support you more effectively.

Overwork, stress and burnout

Overwork has crept into our culture like a stealth bomber. When you're loving your work, hungry to advance and keen to show your commitment to the cause, you do what's needed to show your capability, working harder than others, pulling out all the stops to ensure your success.

There's just one problem. Overwork isn't the yellow brick road to success; it's a fast track to poorer performance, stress-related illness, mental mood disorders and in extreme cases even death.



The truth is, overwork is killing us.



Are you working too hard?

Studies have shown that the optimum length of the work week is about 38 hours; some work productivity specialists say 35 would be better. Stanford economics professor John Pencavel found that productivity drops sharply after 50 hours, and that working beyond 55 hours a week is unproductive.

Why? Because your physiology and psychology are optimised to operate at a certain level beyond which no further gains are obtained and you run the risk of blowing your head gasket. If you're consistently putting in many more hours than you're contracted for, the really disappointing news is you're not going to be any more productive than if you were working less. Which makes the pain of putting up with overwork feel even worse.

Flexible work hours with the option of working from home sounds great, but blurring the line between work and leisure hours can also contribute to that sense of always being 'on-call and contactable'.

When overwork is part of the workplace culture, you don't want to be seen as the slacker skiving off because you don't want

to miss your daughter's piano recital or, heaven forbid, leaving because it's knocking-off time. When you fear that saying 'no' could compromise your job security, how do you refuse that request to stay late, again?

The health risks of overwork

In Japan they call it *karoshi*. In China it's known as *guolaosi* and in Korea *gwarosa*. It's death from overwork due to heart attack, stroke or suicide. Australia doesn't collect statistics on stress-related deaths, so it's difficult to gauge the extent of the problem in this country, but how often have you heard of someone who suffered a heart attack or stroke in which overwork was suspected to have played a role? None of us are immune to the risk.

Overwork raises levels of cortisol and adrenaline, our stress hormones. A review led by University College London analysed data from 25 studies involving more than 600 000 people and another 17 studies of 528 000 people and found that those who worked more than 11 hours a day increased their risk of heart attack by 67 per cent compared with those who worked 7–8 hours.

Compared with working a standard week of 35–40 hours, even after accounting for other risk factors such as age, sex and socioeconomic status, the review found that working more than 55 hours a week increases our risk of stroke by 33 per cent and heart attack by 13 per cent.

If overwork is your routine practice, you could end up stuck in the brown-out zone, which as the name suggests isn't the most pleasant place to be.

Brown-out is that horrible sense of being ground down by the weight of too much to do, too much responsibility and too much expectation hanging around your neck like the proverbial albatross. You know that if you are requested to please do more with less one more time you'll have an attack of the screaming heebie-jeebies.

If you're locked down in brown-out while your organisation is experiencing downsizing, a merger or organisational change, you may have noticed how those left behind are now expected to shoulder the burden, to take on extra duties and responsibilities with less backup and support. While this may be manageable in the short term, what happens when there's no Plan B for change for the foreseeable future?

Under pressure you start to cut corners, like choosing not to fact check or scrutinise your work for errors. The quality of your work starts to slide. Your decision making is impacted because you aren't applying critical thinking, and because you're always in a rush you have no time to reflect on how things are progressing, although the knot in your stomach is telling you things aren't as they should be. Sinking further into brown-out you find you've lost your 'mojo'. You're now in the first phase of burnout.

Burnout: It's the real thing

Burnout is devastating for the person affected, while the fallout also impacts their family, friends, work colleagues and the company.

And it's a growing problem.

The rising prevalence of burnout is recognised in the new edition of the WHO's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), which has reclassified it as 'an occupational phenomenon' and defined it as 'a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'.

It's characterised by:

- ❧ feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- ❧ increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- ❧ being less effective in your work.

Let's start out by stating clearly that no one chooses the burnout pathway. If you are suffering from burnout, or feel you are at risk, be assured that it is not a reflection on you as a person. You are not weak, or lacking in resilience or the willpower to succeed, though you may have questioned why you feel so overwhelmed and exhausted when others appear to be managing just fine.

Those who have lived through burnout will tell you it came about because they cared deeply about their work, and wanted to contribute more and to always do their best, but were not supported in their workplace environment, because profits came before people. So the norm was always to do more and go beyond what was reasonable. Alternatively, if you're a solopreneur, startup or small business operator, economic forces drove you to keep pushing harder for longer in order to survive, to remain viable and competitive.

The folly of loving your work too much

If you're thinking the risk of burnout couldn't possibly apply to you because you love your work so much it doesn't feel like work at all, think again. Overwork isn't always something you do out of necessity or because it is expected of you. It can be a choice you make because you're revved up and excited by what you do, forgetting that even the most enthusiastic and dedicated person still needs time out for rest and recreation.

If you're busy justifying to your partner why you need to work every weekend or have pulled out of yet another social invitation because of work commitments, chances are you're a workaholic and, just like an alcoholic, blind to the harmful impact of your behaviour on yourself and those closest to you.

Could you be using your workaholism as a means of escape or, as Josef Pieper suggests in his 1948 classic *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, to justify your existence?

Workaholics feel compelled to keep on working, but it can be an unhealthy obsession. The good news for recovering workaholics like me is that the Workaholics Anonymous World Service Organisation runs a 12-step recovery program based on the approach used by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Remember, overwork and workaholism are both associated with higher risk of heart disease, stroke and suicide. It's one thing to love your work, but it's never worth dying for. As author Jeffrey Pfeffer puts it in *Dying for a Paycheck: How Modern Management Harms Employee Health and Company Performance — and What We Can Do About It*, 'there can be no trade-off between employee wellbeing and profitability'.

Thriving Mind introduces the strategies revealed by science that can make work and life work better.



It's time to replace overwork with
a better way to be happy, healthy
and productive.



Burnout and the brain

From a cognitive perspective, burnout, as its name suggests, has a stark impact on the brain's architecture, a bit like walking through the blackened landscape following a bushfire.

Chronic stress puts your brain under a level of strain it's not designed to cope with. Our stress response evolved to help us deal with immediate, short-lived stressors. When a sabre-tooth tiger parked outside your cave, your brain initiated the fight, flight or freeze response to keep you safe. Once said threat had passed or been dealt with, the stress response could be switched off, allowing you to attend to more pressing needs, like finding your own lunch. Tiger meat sandwich anyone?

The threats we face today are commonly more complex and longer lasting. Having a pack of wolves camped outside your

cave for weeks on end meant you couldn't afford to switch off the stress response. Fundamentally, though, the stress response we employ today is much the same as that triggered by our ancestors.

This shows up as your having to remain vigilant to what might be coming around the corner at any moment while still handling last week's oversized courier delivery of change that has yet to be fully unpacked and understood. There's no time to relax or check in to ensure that your new habits, behaviours and thinking patterns are the ones best suited to your needs.

Inside your head the part of your brain called the limbic system, which is involved in the stress response and emotional regulation, goes into hyperdrive. Levels of stress hormones remain high, resulting in a neuroplastic effect causing the amygdalae to grow in volume while simultaneously weakening the links between the amygdalae and those brain areas used for higher executive function and thought. These parts of the brain (called the anterior cingulate gyrus and the medial prefrontal cortex) help keep you sane and on the emotional regulatory safe track.

Remaining hyperalert to continuous threat means you become more reactive and emotionally labile. How many workplaces do you know of where the threat of yet more organisational change is wearing people out and putting them in a more negative frame of mind?

At the tipping point, the red mist descends. Inappropriate, ill-judged things are said and actions taken until all rational good sense and logical, analytical thought are lost. This is dangerous territory. As emotional intensity increases with your stress, it gets harder to stay focused, solve problems or retain information in your working memory. Worse still, you've lost your creative spark.

Sleep becomes elusive and fragmented. Anxieties accumulate and sometimes you feel very low. As you slip further into the downward negativity spiral it gets harder to see any way out of the deep dark hole you have dug for yourself.

It's now only a question of time before all your remaining resources are exhausted. The danger is that even if you've noticed the change in yourself, you park those insights to one side, because you've got work to do.

Ignoring the danger signals nudges you perilously close to the chasm of exhaustion and burnout, increasing the risk of your seeking solace in temporary, artificial consolations such as alcohol, drugs, high-fat, high-sugar foods, and online shopping. *Do you know how close you are to the edge?*

You can identify your risk of burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, first developed in 1981 and still considered the gold standard test, although newer tools such as the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), developed by Schaufelli, De Witte and Desart, can also be very useful.

A sense of disconnection and loneliness

To belong is to feel loved, connected to and cared for. It creates a place of safety where we can flourish and be truly happy.

Social connection is vital for wellbeing

Having a strong social support network, with close friends and family, has a profound influence on your health and happiness. It's a major factor in protecting you in the tough times, whether you're struggling through a particularly hard day during which everything goes pear-shaped, or dealing with chronic fatigue, stress and overwhelm. Where's that one Powerball when you need it?

The Powerball might not show up, but your friends will. An enduring sense of disconnection is a problem because it impacts everything, including our health, wellbeing and happiness. Having friends matters because they support us as we deal with the frustrations, disappointments and fear when things go wrong.

It's immensely reassuring to know you've got someone you can call and talk through your challenges and pain with. But what happens when you lack that social support? If you're struggling to deal with the chronic stress of overwhelm, overwork and constant fatigue, chances are everyone else around you is too. You could speak to your manager or boss, but they're always so busy. Their door is supposedly 'always open', yet it's been firmly shut every time you've passed it.

Your colleagues are probably nice people, but you've never had the time to get to know them. No time is allocated for you to get together over lunch. Everyone works in their own little bubble of busy that prohibits opportunities to speak up, to ask for help or to seek clarification. Not wishing to appear dumb, it's tempting to lie low and just pretend everything is okay so when you're next asked, 'How's it going?' you're ready with your practised response: 'Fine thanks', with a twitch of a smile, hoping they won't pry any further.

Whether working in a team, a large department or solo, we all have to fathom how to get along well with others, to try to make sense of why they think and behave differently from us, and to work out a strategy when having to interact with those we find difficult or different.

The reason we form friendships, tribes or groups or live as a family is because above all else we seek connection. Being ignored, rejected or excluded in any way makes us feel really bad. Despite our new technologies, which facilitate superfast connection virtually anywhere in the world, the modern workplace poses ever greater challenges to healthy human connection. Flexible work options, such as working different shifts or working from home or remotely, interstate or overseas in the company's other offices, can mean missing out on training opportunities, social events and face-to-face conversations with your colleagues or management.

When you feel a bit lost, discounted or forgotten about, it hurts. Being deliberately excluded or ignored hurts too. No one

likes the thought of being bullied, but the pain of exclusion, as shown in a study by the University of British Columbia, is worse because it creates a feeling of helplessness, leading to greater job dissatisfaction, a higher probability of quitting your job and health problems.

Perhaps, like me, you were brought up to believe that if you've got nothing nice to say about a person, it's better not to say anything. Wrong. It's actually better to say something (just tone down the language) because being on the receiving end of the silent treatment leads us to think we're not worthy of *any* attention and can cause much deeper pain.

The source of support

Your social support network is drawn from a variety of sources, including family, friends and colleagues. Spending around one-third of our day at work, we may spend more time with our colleagues than with our partner and family. This is where workaholism and overwork can wreak havoc on relationships, because our partner at home can be the one feeling left out. So love your job, but never at the cost of losing your family.

Friends at work

Friendships matter in both life and work. One of the major reasons we stay in our job (or not) are the people we work with or for. A Virgin Pulse survey reported that 55 per cent of the 1000 respondents found a positive working relationship with their employer helped them to manage their stress and 60 per cent said this increased their productivity and focus.

A Gallup survey indicated that those with a work BFF (best friend forever) enjoyed seven times the level of engagement at work as those without. Turning up each day to this place called work feels a lot nicer when you know you're surrounded by people you like and who like you back. Is this true for you?

Enjoying strong interpersonal relationships and increasing relational happiness promotes collaboration, contribution and

a more positive outlook towards your work and what it provides you. As Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want*, says, 'The centrality of social connections to our health and well-being cannot be overstressed'.

If you're not comfortable with your co-workers, feeling unsupported and generally miserable at work, it's time to address the causes and build a deeper level of connection. By failing to do so you risk an increasing sense of social isolation and loneliness.

With loneliness now recognised as having reached epidemic levels and mental health issues on the rise, it's never been more important to understand how your social brain operates and how to nurture strong interpersonal relationships.

What's making us feel more disconnected?

It all hinges on your perception of belonging and inclusion. You can feel a sense of disconnection despite having thousands of online 'friends' or being strongly connected to a couple of close friends.

Following are some of the contributing factors:

- ✦ **Choosing to live alone.** It's important to stress that this is not an issue *unless* you feel you are missing out on social interaction. Being alone is very different from feeling lonely. You may relish the peace and quiet of your own company, especially if it's a rare occurrence or you're an introvert like me who needs your own space to refresh and restore your energy levels. Whether an extrovert, introvert or ambivert, we all like some time alone and other time with our friends.
- ✦ **Working off site.** While it sometimes feels great to be able to get some good work done at home without all the interruptions and distractions that are a common feature of most workplaces, working remotely or being posted

overseas to a global company office can feel isolating due to reduced opportunities for social interaction, camaraderie and good connection. It's one thing to choose to work off site, and for many solopreneurs and home businesses this is the norm. But being required by changing circumstances to switch suddenly from going to an office to working from home can be a challenge, especially if you have no clearly demarcated work space and you're managing the distractions of children and partner and the loss of connection with the rest of your team.

- ❖ **The tyranny of distance.** Some projects or work commitments may require you to commute long distances, which can consume several hours of your working day. In some cases it may mean a weekly commute, flying or driving to work on a Monday and hoping to be home by the weekend.
- ❖ **Spending too much time engaged with a screen.** Today the time spent engaged with a screen takes up an average of 10 or 11 hours a day for some, and this significantly reduces the time available for face-to-face conversation. Zoom and Skype can help boost connection by providing a face to speak to at least, but if your work requires countless hours working with data and spreadsheets, you'll have precious little time to interact with others.
- ❖ **Spending too much time engaged with your social media.** It's all too easy to lose time updating and interacting on our social media channels. It's been shown that a tendency to compare your own lived experience with your friends' brilliant, exultant posts can leave you wondering why your life isn't like that and trigger greater levels of disconnection and depression.

- ❖ **Sleep deprivation.** Have you noticed how being sleep deprived makes you less social? If you're struggling with daytime fatigue, it's hard to find the motivation and energy to do your work well, let alone connect with your colleagues or your family when you get home. And you probably can't face going to your mate's party, even though you value their friendship.
- ❖ **Loss of community.** It's not that you don't like your neighbours. You just never get to see them. Working super-long hours means you may go for days or weeks without catching sight of the people next door, especially if they work long hours too. Not knowing your neighbours reduces the sense of community. You'd like to be more proactive, but you don't have the time and you don't know what's on the community calendar.

Disconnection leads to social isolation and loneliness

The most serious consequence of feeling disconnected from other people is the associated sense of social isolation and loneliness that impacts health and happiness. The patients I worried the most about as a GP were those who had little or no social support. Like Margaret, who came to see me every week with a litany of ailments no doctor could keep ahead of. The real reason for her frequent attendance, other than to remind me of my failure to cure the previous week's problem, was she was lonely.

Many GPs and health practitioners I have spoken to have many Margarets on their lists. 'During my years caring for patients,' recalled former US surgeon General Vivek Murthy in a *Harvard Business Review* article in 2017, 'the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes. It was loneliness'.

Loneliness leads to feelings of social isolation, a sense that our relationships (where they exist at all) are not meaningful and we are not understood by others. It's a state of emotional suffering

that can affect anyone, from the CEO, business leader or busy professional to the student or homeless person, and this social isolation and loneliness are now recognised as a significant public health issue and a growing problem everywhere.

Lonely around the world

It's estimated that loneliness affects one in four Australian adults, with 50 per cent feeling lonely at least one day a week and more than 25 per cent suffering on three or more days. In the US 47 per cent of adults report feeling lonely, a rate that has doubled over the past few decades. The UK government appointed its first Minister for Loneliness in 2018 following the work on the problem begun by the Jo Cox Commission, which revealed that 14 per cent of the British population (9 million people) always feel lonely.

Social disconnection is bad for your health

Here are some reasons why:

1. Research from Brigham Young University found that social disconnection and loneliness are as bad for our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, shortening our life span by 15 years.
2. By weakening our immune system, loneliness increases the risk of our catching the local 'lurgy' doing the rounds in the office.
3. The social isolation that means we don't fit in or feel part of the in-crowd leads to a loss of relatedness and being included in decision making or conversations. This is very real and painful.
4. Loneliness can increase the severity of symptoms of depression and anxiety, and make anger management more of a challenge.

If loneliness or a lack of social connection is affecting your health and happiness, there are many ideas discussed in this book that will help you to forge stronger social connections, restore your wellbeing and boost your mood.

Moving towards the light

If you're fed up with feeling unhappy, depressed, lonely or overworked, it's time to bring some positive change to your life. This is absolutely possible and, best of all, you're in control of how you achieve it.

Choosing to thrive is always a work in progress, as we continue to evolve and adapt to our changing world. Luckily this is something you're already good at. The challenge is to move from 'knowing' what needs to happen to making it your reality.

Maya Angelou once said, 'My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style'. Are you ready to be happier, to fully thrive and feel truly connected? Let's take a look at how this can work.

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DR JENNY BROCKIS is a medical practitioner and lifestyle medicine physician committed to improving the lives of others through science. The best-selling author of *Future Brain*, she works with business, government, and academia, to help people live richer, fuller lives.

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