

# WHEN LIFE TIPS OUT OF BALANCE

*In the rush of modern-day life, it's easy to push aside small concerns and fail to notice we're no longer our old, happy self. But it's important to pay attention to life's gradual changes to keep our minds well and stop our lives from spinning out of control*



Don't we all love that effortless feeling of flow? The times when life unfolds with ease and we experience a clarity of mind and levels of energy that imbue us with what seems a permanent sense of optimism and inspiration. I often wish I could bottle that feeling and pull it off the shelf when life seems more of an uphill struggle.

It's curious, though, how difficult we find it to notice ourselves drifting away from that 'happy home'; how long it can take us to realise that our life is out of balance, and in fact, that we're not very well at all.

In some ways it's like the process of ageing. Day-to-day glances in the mirror tend not to reveal the continual but subtle transformations that come with growing older. Then, one day, we're suddenly shocked by our reflection and need to look at a photo from our youth to become aware of the change. Luckily, however, mental rejuvenation and re-inspiration happen all the time.

So, is there a way to recognise — before we actually hit crisis point — that our life is tipping out of balance? And what can we do to realign ourselves?

These questions often come from highly committed people who give life their all and still feel an underlying sense of inadequacy because they perceive

themselves as not being the ideal partner, parent or professional. They see failure.

I will share ideas and strategies that have worked for me, but there are some important principles to absorb first. Then you'll be able to take my suggestions and make them your own.

## Zoom out

Humans are the only species capable of placing ideas and events in a larger context. This skill is like the zooming out of a camera lens. It enables us to devote ourselves fully to parenting, postpone gratification and reinterpret elements of hardship or suffering as opportunities to learn or as part of a bigger, more worthwhile, picture. Changing nappies, for example, is no big deal when we know and appreciate the importance of parenting.

We're capable of feeling joy and finding meaning in the smallest moment, but we're equally capable of elevating the meaningless or 'error' of the moment into a larger, more significant, frame. Mistakes, for example, can offer huge opportunities for new insights.

Intriguingly, we find it difficult to use this zoom mechanism of our lens — through which we perceive what's going on for ourselves and the world around us — on a very regular basis. This is

especially so when we are feeling anxious or stressed. We incline towards seeing only one thing or the other.

We would help ourselves enormously if we make a habit of stepping back and seeing the bigger picture; reminding ourselves of what's really important to us. Someone I was working with recently had become too focused on a person he disliked. But once he chose to see this colleague as an irritating 'mistake' on a much bigger canvas everything changed. He gained a sense of perspective and was able to refocus on what really mattered in his life.

## Busy, busy, busy

Our modern, often urbanised environment has a lot to answer for in masking our ability to notice when things are starting to tip out of balance and we are beginning to become unwell.

The constant appeal to our senses and sheer mental overload it brings has become a fact of life. And it's a situation that's accelerating. It's up to us therefore to learn to disconnect, to rest and digest the volume of information and stimuli that come our way, if we are to lead the gracious, more balanced, lives of which we are capable.

As business psychologist Tony Crabbe points out, this state of overwhelming

busyness is not countered by rest, but by focus. In the fragmentation of our attention we are less and less present and attentive to the communication and language of our own bodies and in our exchanges with the people around us.

Think about how this might apply to you, and what you might do about it.

### Change is the only constant

Although the Greek philosopher Heraclitus gave us the wise words 'change is the only constant' some 2,500 years ago, it still takes us a lifetime to come to terms with this fact. Life, and consequently our individual lives, can be described as a constant process that takes place both in our bodies and in our relationships.

We need to find individual ways to wake up to and notice this process of change as it takes place and not to buy into the bullying cult of permanent happiness. Joy is a fabulous feeling, but we are blessed with the ability to feel so much more. Anger, revulsion, fear, grief and lust — these feelings help us to become wise and compassionate and, ultimately, to experience life as meaningful. Denying their presence by sweeping them under the carpet becomes counterproductive, which leads to insincerity and brittleness.

Being committed to raising our own self-awareness of how we are doing in our lives requires courage. The courage to acknowledge the less comfortable feelings as they arise and the awareness not to turn a blind eye to them. They are as important to us as feelings of happiness and they also need our attention.

By allowing all those different guests, as the mystic poet Rumi calls them, to take places at our table, we develop compassion, tolerance of inevitable discomfort and ultimately resilience. And, hopefully, keep our lives in balance.

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## PRACTICAL WAYS TO RECOGNISE YOURSELF SLIPPING OUT OF BALANCE

### 1 MAKE A COMMITMENT

Perhaps the place to start is to make a commitment to yourself: that you will make time and practise listening to your inner process as well as to how you relate to others.

Cultivate a way of listening and hearing that is kind and generous to yourself as well as curious and open. Stay present, however painful, and try to suspend judgement.

Paradoxically, by accepting our vulnerability as a permanent fixture rather than something we need to work through at top speed, we become stronger and our lives become more deeply satisfying. So, just knowing what state you're in will strengthen you.

### 2 LEARN TO DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION

The quality of your life is directly connected with your ability to pay attention. For all the good that it has brought, the mobile revolution has severely eroded many people's attention span.

There are things we can do to change this:

- Avoid multitasking and attend to one thing at a time.
- Consciously disconnect and redirect your attention when needed.
- Develop a skill or hobby and allow yourself to get totally absorbed by it.
- Learn how to meditate.

However you choose to strengthen your attention muscle, it will sharpen your ability to notice what is going on with your wellbeing.

### 3 CONNECT WITH YOUR BODY

Our bodies very accurately keep score of how we are. This is a fact. You can learn to read and hear its subtle stirrings without having to wait for its cries of despair.

- Do a regular body scan or practise yoga or martial arts.
- Walking is another way to connect with the wider world, the healing

power of nature and with your body. Staying attuned while moving will be very revealing. Remember to leave your mobile at home.

### 4 CONNECT WITH YOUR MIND

Conservative estimates tell us we have 40,000 thoughts on a day with 75 per cent of them being negative. We are predisposed to seek out the bad. By focusing effectively on danger we have managed to stay safe and evolve through millions of years.

The thing is that our environment is not as dangerous as it was but our brains have not got out of the habit, and what you focus on is what you get. So seek out good news, dismiss futile negative thoughts and make firm decisions about the quality of thought you'll commit to because it will keep you buoyant and aware of times when it is more difficult to ignore negative ruminations. And this might just be telling you something.

### 5 CONNECT WITH OTHER PEOPLE

Even the most introverted of us need to interact with other people. We are interdependent as a species. Each exchange with another, even the person behind the till at the supermarket, will change us and we them. Notice the quality of your interactions with others. These can be very telling. Crabbiness, poor listening and lack of generosity can tell me when I'm slipping.

Investing in this form of self-exploration is liberating. The less at the mercy of our unbridled feelings we are, the better. Remain ever curious and accept what you see: whether the quality of your sleep or your physical agility is affected or that your thoughts and interactions are less positive.

Slipping out of balance might even seem attractive at first glance because you might feel able to get by on less sleep, become overly optimistic and hyperactive.

In the end, only you will recognise your language of distress.