

All we need is...

Nature predisposes us to thrive and flourish. Yet more and more people are struggling to find their place in the world, and mental health problems are on the increase. What do we need to reverse the trend and to build health, happiness and resilience into the fabric of our lives?

Consider the miracle of the acorn: a hard little nugget destined to break open and spill out of its shell, to grow and transform into an ever greater magnificence of trunk and branches and canopy of leaves and colours, as it receives from and gives back to its environment. We are no different because we, too, are part of nature and predestined to thrive and flourish, in a continual expression of our innate potential in the world.

Why, then, can it all go so horribly wrong? And is there anything we can do to reverse the upward trend of mental health problems in society that are affecting young and old alike and are evident in education, work and the home?

I believe there is. I think that Maslow and, more recently, the Human Givens Paradigm offer us real answers that are in

keeping with the rules of nature to which we are subject. Rather than looking immediately at stress-related symptoms, they suggest we first take a step back and look at the bigger picture.

Like all other living organisms, we come into the world with needs, both physical and emotional, as well as an innate guidance system to getting them met. If this happens then, like the oak tree, we will be able to thrive, maintain ourselves and play our best role in the bigger web of life. To put it more directly, if your emotional needs are met in balance, you are much more likely to be healthy, feel you are learning and growing and that your life has meaning. They will be healthy, feel that they are learning and growing, and that their life has meaning.

GETTING OUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS MET

Let's look at the nine most essential emotional needs.

As you consider them, I'd encourage you to reflect how well you are getting your emotional needs met in your life today. Perhaps you'd like to consider someone you know who is troubled or even a team, a family, an organisation or a marriage. Irrespective of whether you're dealing with one person or a group of people, the emotional needs of the individual or the group always need to be met in balance for them to be stable, resilient and productive.

PRIMARY NEEDS

Safety

Safe territory, security or the space to grow are a fundamental requirement for human life. Growing up in an unpredictable or abusive environment means the child's survival brain — or fight/flight/freeze mechanism — is permanently switched on. The more agitated the brain, the less room there is for real thinking or the development of intelligence. This is no different for an unemployed or homeless person, or for a creative child in a school where the teaching does not accommodate their learning style.

Control

Particularly in a world as unpredictable as ours, we need to feel that what we do will have an impact on our lives. Without some sense of autonomy we might as well give up. The lasting resonance of US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer speaks directly to this need:

'Lord, grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'



Maybe we should consider loosening up our increasingly stultifying rules and regulations in order for people to feel more engaged. Children and older people, for instance, do well with more responsibilities. Studies show that even when you give older people in nursing homes a say in how the furniture is arranged, or put them in charge of watering the plants, their mental health improves.

Status

We need to feel that what we do matters. We cannot thrive without a sense of significance. Unless we feel sincerely valued, or are recognised and acknowledged, our motivation and goodwill slowly withers. All too often we see that people in organisations are given huge responsibilities but no power, control or recognition to make decisions. Without giving your workforce their due respect they will stop giving generously of their talents or goodwill.

When these basic building blocks are in place there's room to address other 'higher' needs that are required for growth and development. Let's have a look at what they are.

HIGHER NEEDS

Privacy

The recent burgeoning of more varieties of meditation courses is a clear indication of how much we need to (re)learn to switch off from our environment on a regular basis for good mental health.

We all need moments in the day, and perhaps periods in a week, when we are not accountable to anyone and our brains can absorb and integrate our experiences while we potter about on our own, doing our own thing.

Switching off from our thoughts, however, is also an equally important need. Again, we need to (re)learn how to do this. We also have to ask if we are teaching our children how to switch off if we are continuously carting them to extra-curricular lessons or if they always see us attached to a mobile device? They are important questions to ponder.

Receiving and giving attention

The quality of our lives is directly dependent on our ability to pay attention. Once we have topped up on our need to be alone we will have the reserves and spare capacity to connect to someone else through the exchange of good-quality attention.

Giving attention is just as important as receiving it. By its nature the act of being receptive to another person is in itself a gift. We need each other for the exchange of attention. We need to be mutually present for this to be an emotionally nourishing act. Think about how good you are at really being present for others as well as whether or not you are good at receiving graciously.

Being part of a wider community

'No man is an island' wrote poet John Donne in 1624. Certainly we cannot survive without each other. In spite of this urgent need, however, people are feeling increasingly isolated and lonely. This is worrying, especially with more and more people living alone, and evidence suggesting that prolonged loneliness affects health and life expectancy.

To replace the sense of belonging that would once upon a time have come from our families and local communities, we need to look for another kind of kinship group. We urgently need to find a new way of belonging among like-minded people.

Intimacy

We all need to be unconditionally accepted by at least one other person in our lives. Ideally this involves sexual intimacy, but the emotional component is key — to have someone in our lives from whom we don't need to hide any part of ourselves.

Self-worth

Self-worth as it is described here bears no relation to the inflated or smug sense of self-importance that we witness in abundance in today's society.

Self-worth refers to a true sense of one's own value and worthiness and forgiveness of one's own mistakes and misjudgements as part of the human condition.

It comes about by putting in the hours to achieve and gain competence in any given field whether it's playing the piano, knowing how to train the dog, becoming good at sport or dance or roller-blading. The possibilities are infinite.

There is a dignity about real self-worth because it isn't in need of continual reassurance or validation from other people.

The need for meaning

The culmination of a life in which all our needs are met in balance is that it becomes inherently meaningful. If we are able to get our needs met to such an extent that we can give expression to our true nature, relate to others and feel we are playing our part in the world, then we can feel that our life has meaning. That is what gets us up in the morning.

Meaning is derived from the feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves; that our lives contribute to a greater whole. Generally speaking we can say that this is derived from three things:

- **Giving:** throughout time people have gained a deep sense of meaning from putting themselves aside in the interest of others. Studies continually show how generosity gives meaning and satisfaction to the giver.
- **Learning:** this is another way to reach out, to stretch beyond the confines of one's current abilities and to make new connections with the world beyond oneself.
- **Believing:** having faith in something bigger than oneself has always given meaning to people's lives. Whether this is through the local football club, nature, spirituality or religion, our lives become meaningful if we see ourselves as contributing to a greater good.

May you find appropriate ways to get your emotional needs met in balance, so that you will value and celebrate the unique nature and worth of your own life.

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