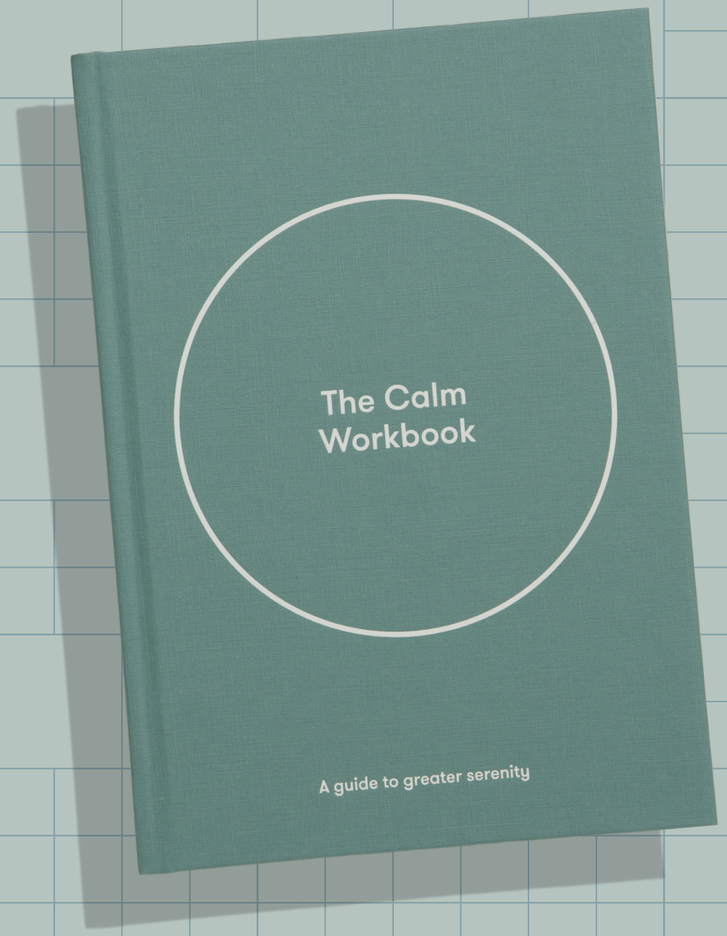
Exercises for Better Mental Wellness

from

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE



16.
Philosophical Meditation

A lot of the reason why we lose our calm is that we have not given ourselves the proper time to think.

We hear a lot – nowadays – about the practice of meditation. In standard meditation, we strive to empty consciousness of its normal medley of anxieties, hurts and excitements and concentrate on the sensations of the immediate moment, allowing even events as apparently minor but as fundamental as the act of breathing to be noticed. In a bid for serenity and liberation, we still the agitations of what Buddhists evocatively term our 'monkey minds'.

But there is another approach to consider, based not on Eastern thought, but on ideas transmitted to us via the Western tradition. In Philosophical Meditation, instead of being prompted to sidestep our worries and ambitions, we are directed to set aside time to untangle, examine and confront them.

It is a distinctive quirk of our minds that few of the emotions we carry in them are properly acknowledged, understood or truly felt; that most of our affective content exists in an unprocessed form within us. Philosophical Meditation seeks to lend us a structure within which to sieve the confused content that muddies our stream of consciousness.

Key to the practice is regularly to turn over three large questions:

What am I anxious about?

We are rarely without a sizeable backlog of worries, far greater than we tend consciously to recognise. Life, properly felt, is an infinitely alarming process even in its calmer stretches. We face a medley of ongoing uncertainty and threats. Even ordinary days contain concealed charges of fear and challenge: navigating through a train station, attending a meeting, being introduced to a new colleague, being handed responsibility for a task or a person, keeping control over our bodies in public settings – all contain grounds for agitation that we are under pressure to think should not be taken seriously.

During our meditative sessions, we need to give every so-called small anxiety a chance to be heard. What lends our worries their force is not so much that we have them, but that we don't allow ourselves the time to know,

interpret and contextualise them adequately. Only by being listened to in generous, almost pedantic detail will anxieties lose their hold on us. At almost any time, a chaotic procession flows without our minds that would make little sense if recorded and transcribed: '… biscuits to the train why earrings deal they can't do it I have to Milo phone list do it the bathroom now I can't do, 11:20, thirty-three percent it a 10:30 tomorrow with Luke why invoices separately detailed why me trees branches sleep right temples …'

But such streams can gradually be tamed, drained, ordered and evaporated into something far less daunting and illogical. Each word can be encouraged to grow into a paragraph or a page and thereby lose its hold on us. We can force ourselves to imagine what might happen if our vague catastrophic forebodings actually came to pass. We can refuse to let our concerns covertly nag at us and look at them squarely until we are no longer cowed. We can turn a jumble of worries into that most calming and intellectually noble of documents: a list.

What am I upset about?

This may sound oddly presumptuous, because we frequently have no particular sense of having been upset by anything. Our self-image leans towards the well-defended. But almost certainly, we are somewhere being too brave for our own good. We are almost invariably carrying around with us pulses of regret, loss, envy, vulnerability and sorrow. These may not register in immediate consciousness, not because they don't exist, but because we have grown overly used to no one around us giving a damn and have taken heed, along the course of our development, to recommendations that we toughen up.

Yet a life among others daily exposes us to small darts and pinpricks: a meeting ends abruptly; a call doesn't come; an anticipated reunion feels disappointingly distant; someone doesn't touch us when we needed reassurance; news of a friend's latest project leaves us envious. We are mental athletes at shrugging such things off, but there is a cost to our forbearance. From small humiliations and slights, large blocks of resentment eventually form that render us unable to love or trust. What we call depression is sadness and anger that have for too long not been paid their dues.

During a Philosophical Meditation, we can throw off our customary and reckless bravery – and let our sadness take its natural, due shape. There may not be an immediate solution to many of our sorrows, but it helps

immeasurably to know their contours. As we turn over our griefs, large and small, we might imagine we were entertaining them with an extremely kind and patient figure, who gave us the chance to evoke hurt in detail; someone with whom there would be no pressure to rush, be grown-up or impressive and who would allow us to admit without fear to the many things that have pained and reduced us in the previous hours.

What am I ambitious and excited about?

A part of our mind is forever forward-thinking and hopeful, seeking to maximise opportunities and develop potential. Much of this energy registers as vague tension about new directions we might take. We could experience this inchoate restlessness when we read an article, hear of a colleague's plans or glimpse an idea about next year flit across our mental landscape as we lie in the bath or walk around a park. The excitement points indistinctly to better, more fulfilled versions of ourselves. We should allow our minds to wonder at greater length than usual about what the excitement (it could be a view, a book, a place, an insight) might want to tell us about ourselves.

In a poem written in 1908, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke described coming across an ancient statue of the Greek god Apollo. It had had its arms knocked off at the shoulders but still manifested the intelligence and dignity of the culture that had produced it. Rilke felt an unclear excitement. He meditated upon and investigated his response, and concluded that the statue was sending him a message, which he announced in the final dramatic line of 'Torso of an Archaic Apollo':

Du musst dein Leben ändern
You must change your life

Influenced by German Romanticism, Rilke realised that he had fallen under the spell of an abstruse way of thinking and expressing himself. Now the Greek statue was being recognised by one part of his mind as a symbol of the intellectual clarity of Ancient Greece, which his conscience knew he needed to pay more attention to. By decoding his excitement, Rilke was catching sight of an alternative way of being.

The case may be particular, but the underlying principle is universal. We each face calls, triggered by chance encounters with people, objects or ideas, to change our lives. Something within us knows better than our day-to-day consciousness the direction we may need to go in to become who we really could be.

A period of Philosophical Meditation does not so much dissolve problems as create an occasion when the mind can order and understand itself. Fears, resentments and hopes become easier to name; we grow less scared of the contents of our own minds – and less resentful, calmer and clearer about our direction. We start, in faltering steps, to know ourselves slightly better.

Instructions for a Philosophical Meditation

1. Anxiety

Write down what you are anxious about; find at least eight things.

Each entry should be only a single word (or just a few words) at this point.

Don't worry if some of the anxieties look either trivial or dauntingly large. The mind tends to be an almost comedic blend of the two.

If you're having trouble, search for things that may be anxiety-inducing under the following categories:

- Work
- Relationships
- Children/parents
- Health
- Money
- Things I have to do

Feel the curious release that can come from just making a list of these items. Huge relief can come from what we call 'unpacking' an anxiety. There are two kinds of unpacking we might do around any given anxiety.

There is practical unpacking: talk yourself through the practical challenge. Ask the following questions:

- What steps do you need to take?
- What do others need to do?
- What needs to happen when?

It is very useful to have a calm and sympathetic part of yourself listening in on the detailed description of what needs to be done to address an issue. It's no longer merely an anxiety; it's a set of steps. They might not all be easy, but at least you are clearer about what they are.

There is also emotional unpacking: talk yourself through an emotional challenge or set of doubts.

Describe the feeling in more detail. What do you feel it points to? Imagine trying to piece it together for a considerate friend.

The aim here isn't to solve all anxieties; it's to get to know them and to experience the relief that comes from clarity.

2. Upset

As quickly as you can and without bothering how petty, unreasonable or pretentious it might sound, write a list of current upsets – the more the better. How have others hurt you? What are you sad, distressed, nostalgic or wounded about?

In the present safety of this exercise, allow yourself to be, for instance, furious about the way your partner brushes their teeth (too lackadaisical or too smug); the agents of global politics; your boss saying 'Yeah, right' in a slightly sarcastic manner; the hotel receptionist who implied you might not be a suitable customer; your mother commenting on your new haircut. These are just starting points; every starting point is valid.

Look at your list. Select two ways that people have hurt you that particularly preoccupy you, without considering the objective merits of your irritation. What is it about these things that bothers you? Go into as much detail as possible. Imagine you are pouring your heart out to a sympathetic and patient friend.

Now ask yourself: if this had happened to a friend, how would you advise them? What might you say?

Again, we're not attempting to resolve these issues as yet. The crucial issue is to get clear about what is actually distressing us. We're moving from vagueness to clarity.

3. Excitement

Your list might (but doesn't need to) include:

- Moments of envy: when you thought that someone else had something you might like to have a version of yourself.
- Daydreams: ideas about how life might ideally be, that you'd maybe feel awkward about telling others, because they might seem far-fetched, greedy or odd.
- How nice someone or something was.
- How thrilled someone makes you feel.

Select two items that have particularly been on your mind. Pass them through a sieve of further questions:

- Describe your excitement as if to a sympathetic, interested friend.
- If you could realistically change your life in certain ways, what would it be to change your life in the light of this?
- This exciting thing holds a clue to what is missing in your life; what might be missing?
- If this thing could talk, what might it tell you?
- If this thing could try to change your life, what changes might it advise?
- If other parts of your life were more like this, what might they be like?

It would help if we could perform a Philosophical Meditation at least twice a week.

1.
A Beautiful Idiot

We spend a lot of time trying to avoid the idea that we might be foolish and even slightly ridiculous. We are terrified of being seen as an idiot – and tend anxiously to reassure ourselves of our dignity and seriousness. And yet, paradoxically, the more rigidly we lay claim to an always-impressive adult competence, the more our (inevitable) lapses from this state must end up agitating and shaming us. In the name of greater calm, it may be the moment to accept with courage and equanimity that we are – in fact – at many points precisely what we have always feared we might be: an idiot.

To bring this idea home, let's try to remember moments of particular idiocy in a range of areas:

Where I have been an idiot

When I've tried to flirt with someone, I …

When trying to impress someone at work, I …

When trying to open doors, I …

Sometimes food has ended up on my …

Let's consider the future. If we were to act on certain of our ambitions, how might we fail and look ridiculous?

Where I might be an idiot in the future

If I …

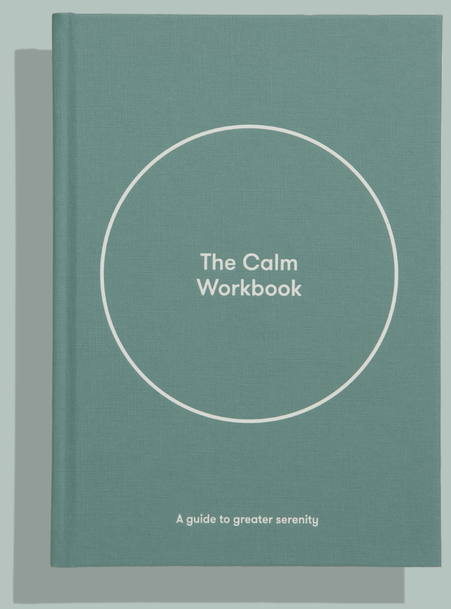
If I …

If I …

If I …

A Beautiful Idiot

6



8.
It Will Go Wrong

The Stoic philosophers of Ancient Greece and Rome invented the term, 'premeditation' to describe a process, normally to be performed once a day in bed before getting up, whereby one looks into one's future and systematically imagines everything that could go wrong. It is a deliberate, artful, ritualised meditation on varied options for upcoming disasters.

The practice is based on the view that our minds do us an enormous disservice through their sentimental, unexamined optimism, leaving us unprepared for the catastrophes that will inevitably come our way. A premeditation constitutes a deliberate attempt to bring our expectations in line with the troubles we might face.

The Roman philosopher Seneca – possibly the greatest of all the Stoics – believed that the greatest service we can pay ourselves is to anticipate disaster. Here is one of Seneca's premeditations as an example:

The wise will start each day with the thought: fortune gives us nothing which we can really own. Whatever has been built up over years is scattered and dispersed in a single day. No, he who has said 'a day' has granted too long; an hour, an instant, suffices for the overthrow of empires. Look at your wrists, a falling tile could cut them. Look at your feet, a paving stone could render you unable to walk again. We live in the middle of things which have all been destined to be damaged and to die. Mortal have you been born, to mortals have you given birth. Reckon on everything, expect everything.

Premeditation doesn't, of course, remove the bad things. But by getting us to admit, frankly and bravely, that we are likely to encounter setbacks in our lives, it can leave us a little less distraught when they eventually come our way.

It Will Go Wrong

15

The Calm Workbook

SHOP NOW

THESCHOOLOFLIFE.COM/SHOP