

(TC: 00:00:00)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Hello and welcome back to another episode of The Food Medic podcast. I'm your host Dr Hazel, medical doctor, nutritionist, author and founder of The Food Medic.

It's currently January 2021 when I'm recording this and possibly when you're listening to this too which means here in the UK we are in our third national lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. My time is currently split between the hospital seeing COVID patients and at home in lockdown on my own. So, this episode is just as much for me as it is for you because it's been a rough old twelve months and it's healthy to talk about it. Today I'm joined by the very clever Dr Emma Hepburn, possibly better known on Instagram as The Psychology Mum. Emma is a clinical psychologist with expertise in neuropsychology who has over fifteen years experience working with and treating mental health difficulties in both the public and private sector. Her illustrative work has been used by a number of organisations including The American Association for the Prevention of Suicide and The Royal Society of Public Health and she recently won a Bronze Lovie Award as well as The People's Choice Lovie for her social media work and has been shortlisted for the Mind Media Awards. She has also written a book titled A Toolkit for Modern Life: 53 Ways to Look After Your Mind which frankly could not have come out at a better time. Dr Emma Hepburn, welcome to the podcast. First of all, I can imagine that you have been out of this world busy this year looking after everybody else. So, I just want to start by asking, how are you and how are you coping?

(TC: 00:02:48)

Dr Emma Hepburn: No, it's a great question and I think psychologists can sometimes be guilty of neglecting themselves which is quite ironic because they're so busy giving advice to other people. So, at the moment I think I'm just, kind of, almost in high threat response mode. In my job in the NHS at the moment obviously the pandemic is rising, the numbers are rising, the staff are stressed, I'm responsible for staff wellbeing so I'm just, kind of, in that high alert mode, ready to go really trying to work out what we need, what we're doing. But yes, psychologists are very busy in a pandemic, very, very busy. So, I know a lot with 2020, some people maybe found they didn't have enough to do. I had the opposite effect, I had to really juggle a huge amount of stuff. So, it really was imperative to look after my wellbeing in the middle of it the whole time and ongoing as well as it is for everybody.

(TC: 00:03:39)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, absolutely and you're so right, it's so easy to, kind of, forget about yourself when you go into autopilot mode and just think about everyone else and I know that as a doctor I often need that reminder as well that, you know, you're only as good if you look after yourself when you're looking after others.

(TC: 00:03:57)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Absolutely and I think because you are in a caring role you get a lot out of looking after other people and because you are so caught up in that you can, like you say, sometimes just forget about

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yourself and sometimes that's not noticing when things creep up or stress levels creep up and sometimes you notice at that point where it's actually quite high stress level, you can no longer ignore it. I think it's the same for doctors, I work with a lot of doctors and I think that's what I hear a lot of the time. I don't know if that fits with your experience?

(TC: 00:04:21)

Dr Hazel Wallace: You just, kind of, wait until it's become, kind of, it bubbles over and then it's an issue and you have no choice but to face it as opposed to seeing the warning signs and, kind of, giving it attention early. So, I'm sure we'll go into this a bit more as we chat. But first of all, I'd like to start by asking my guests a little bit more about their professional background. You mentioned that you work in the NHS but also you work, I know that you lecture and you do lots of other things and obviously you do your wonderful illustrations online. So, I'd love to hear from you about how your working week looks?

(TC: 00:04:56)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Yes sure. So, I work two plus days in the NHS. It's a bit flexible because I sometimes do extra roles. So, I work at the moment with staff support. So, that's supporting staff in the hospital ranging from the intensive care unit to the porters and the cleaners because everybody in the NHS is important. We all have a role to play. It would fall apart without any of these roles. So, I was seconded to that during the pandemic because obviously staff support is absolutely crucial right now. Prior to that I did a range of different roles. Most recently I worked in neuropsychology which is looking at brain functioning, how the brain is being impacted on by various neurological conditions and prior to that I've worked with children in maternity services in plastic surgery services. So, psychologists work across a whole range of different services looking at mental health and psychological functioning. But currently I'm looking after the staff in the NHS which is really important.

(TC: 00:05:53)

Dr Hazel Wallace: I mean, how I came across you is as The Psychology Mum on Instagram because of your wonderful mental health illustrations which I'm sure are going viral at the moment because people need those tools more than ever. How did you end up going from your clinical work to maybe translating that into something that is a bit more easy for everyone to consume I guess?

(TC: 00:06:20)

Dr Emma Hepburn: So, no that's a great question. So, actually the basis of what I do was in my clinical work. So, I've always drawn as part of my clinical work. Obviously with children it's very natural to draw emotions, draw what they're feeling, draw their experiences. But I think I used that work, because I worked with children for ten years, I then started to use that creative side with adults as well and people really engaged with it. So, people would go away with this hand scrawled on NHS paper thing that we'd done, something we'd been talking about during that session. They'd go away with it and they'd come back the next week and say I really thought about this and they added something to it. So, it was really the basis of clinical work but they were really scrappy drawings drawn in the moment. But I started thinking-, well actually I bought myself a new iPad, it was a birthday present for myself and I saw the iPad pen and so I thought well, I'll buy one of those as well, that looks quite interesting. I thought I'll try and draw some of

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these a little bit better. I hadn't drawn, I used to love art when I was at school, but I haven't drawn for years and years and years so I thought I'm just going to try and draw these out, see if, you know, I could do it really. So, I started drawing them and I thought well actually one of my passions is sharing it beyond a clinic room. Wellbeing and mental health is for everybody and if we only treat people with mental health difficulties we're only treating part of the population because actually everybody has mental health and everybody needs to look after it. So, I was thinking we can use these principles that I use to treat mental health difficulties and to improve mental health at that stage across the whole population.

So, I thought I'll put them up on Instagram because I think actually I can draw and I think they capture the psychological theory and started putting them up and like you say they got popular or they became popular very quickly. People started sharing them, you know, it's been shared as far as-, one of Michelle Obama's organisations in America shared one of my drawings which was, you know, not something I ever expected. So, people obviously picked up on it and engaged in it really well which I think for me makes sense. I'm a really official person and for me to read two sheets explaining a psychological concept, it's quite hard. I mean, I can do it obviously but it's quite hard to remember. I need to reread it, I need to think about it again. But to recall a drawing is really, really simple.

(TC: 00:08:38)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I completely agree and, I mean, we all learn and take in information differently but I'm a very visual person and I find that it's really helpful and also my drawings are not on the same level as yours but I find when I'm explaining something to a patient that I love to scribble something down. Because it is, you know, by telling something someone and then by drawing something you're reinforcing it and you're more likely to get the message across and I guess, like you said, it's so shareable and it's universally understood when it's a drawing so it's wonderful.

(TC: 00:09:13)

Dr Emma Hepburn: I actually got feedback from people. So, quite a few people said actually, you know, I've really benefited from these because I'm dyslexic so that visual concept, I can remember it better, also I can understand it better. So, I think it crossed a range of people and lots of people are using them with children as well which I hadn't necessarily anticipated but I know a lot of schools are sharing them, high schools and actually primary schools as well. So, I think it crosses, you know, images are cross populations better I think.

(TC: 00:09:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Absolutely and I think that's probably why Instagram is such a great platform for that kind of content. But I just want to circle back to one thing that you mentioned and that was everyone has mental health and I think, I mean, it's a phrase that a lot of us have probably heard already but mental health often comes with a negative context. So, for example, (TC 00:10:00) we will say he or she has mental health problems and I think that often carries a lot of stigma when we're talking about mental health when actually our mental health is just like our physical health and it's something that we should all really be proactive in taking care of. In your book you talk about having a mental jam jar. So, can you talk us through this analogy?

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(TC: 00:10:24)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Sure. So, just to come back to your point about mental health, absolutely I think there is still a lot of stigma around the term mental health because often we only think about that when it goes wrong. But actually, like you say, we all have mental health and we all shift along the spectrum of mental health, or wellbeing which is sometimes a more palatable word for people to think about it along, from flourishing to poor mental health. The mental health jam jar tries to encapsulate that. It's an analogy I actually heard from a documentary called, I think it's Depression and Me by Alistair Campbell where he explored, kind of, the reasoning behind his depression and what factors contributed to it. It was from a genetics counsellor called Jenny Austin who's a professor in America and she uses, as described, genetic factors but as a psychologist I kind of think of all vulnerabilities. So, the concept is we all have a mental health jam jar. So, that's a specific space and then it's filled with our vulnerabilities and in the documentary she spoke about genetic vulnerabilities but I would think about our belief systems, our thinking, our cognitive styles, a whole pile of vulnerabilities that fill that jar. The drawing I use, I draw these as strawberries. So, that fills a jar at a certain point. Then we have life stressors. So, life throws things at us, we can't control that things will go wrong in life. Life will throw stress at us, it's inevitable part of life and if the mix of vulnerabilities and stressors fills our jar at full capacity then that's when distress or mental health difficulties can occur.

But the reason I like this model is because it shows that we can do things about it. So, we can increase the size of our jar according to this model with our coping strategies so we can give ourselves more space to cope with what's being thrown at us. But we can also of course manage our stressors, how we manage what's thrown at us in life is really important in managing our mental health as well. I guess the model I talk about in psychology is a stress diathesis model where it's a mix of the person and the environment which can lead to mental health difficulties and really we're all vulnerable to mental health difficulties with a wrong mix of person and environment. It's recognising we all have that capacity and we all need to look after it.

(TC: 00:12:36)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes and thinking about how we can make more room in the jar, what are some of the basics that we can think about when looking after our mental health and wellbeing?

(TC: 00:12:48)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Yes, I think, you know, take it back to this divide between physical and mental health. Our brain is a physical organ so all the basics that look after our physical health also look after our mental health. So, exercise, moving your body, it doesn't have to be huge levels of exercise is hugely good for your brain and mental health. What you eat, eaten regularly, drinking, all these really basic things that we probably don't often associate with mental health are really good for it. Sleep is absolutely imperative for mental health. You know how bad you feel with one day of poor sleep. With multiple days of poor sleep we just feel terrible and actually it does have an impact on our brain. So, that's really important for mental health. Connection, there's a really interesting study, a Harvard Adult Study I think it's called, it's a really interesting longitudinal study which shows that the strongest predictor of wellbeing is connection. So, you know, valuable connections with people that you trust, that you feel secure with, are really important for wellbeing and mental health. On a day-to-day basis, being aware of your emotions and being open to thinking about your emotions and how you respond to them is really important. I always say self

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compassion. We're far more compassionate to other people than we are with ourselves but self compassion is really, really important. There's some really interesting videos by Kirsten Neff if you will want to explore this further because it looks at how compassion impacts on the brain and how it improves wellbeing. So, compassion, I think is such a-, it's thrown about a lot but actually it's so important to improve our wellbeing as well.

(TC: 00:14:22)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, I love that, I love that last one. It's really important especially during lockdown which I know for me that, you know, brings up a lot of things but it also means that I might want to connect with people and because I live alone that often means using social media and more screen time and obviously there's lots of positives there because we can stay connected but also there's lots of negatives to constantly being online and scrolling through social media. What are some of the signs that maybe social media is impacting us negatively and maybe we do need to take a step back?

(TC: 00:14:59)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Okay I like what you said there because I think it's important not to demonize social media and demonise the online world because it's really good for us in many ways. It keeps up connections and can make us feel less isolated which is really important for us. But like you say, social media, if you see in the documentary The Social Dilemma it looks at how it impacts your brain and pulls us in. It's designed to pull us in and use as much of our attention as possible. All of us fall in this trap, I'm a psychologist, I know the theory but I fall into the trap. The other night I was sitting looking on social media when I was about to read my daughter a story. I thought why am I doing this? It's important not to beat yourself up about that because it really is how it's designed and it's about drawing on that habitual ability of your brain to fall into the trap. So, recognising when it is causing difficulties is really important so I would say if you can't stop doing it, so in that example I noticed it, I stopped, I put it aside. I put it in another room so I didn't use it again because it was ridiculous. I want to read my daughter a story, I don't want to be on my phone. So, I put it in another room so I couldn't pick it up because it can become very habitual. If you can't stop, if you notice you can't stop, then that can be problematic particularly if it gets in the way of things you want to do. So, in that example, it got in the way of me telling my daughter a story. If that was happening all the time then that's problematic because it stops me doing the things I enjoy.

Also if it makes you feel bad. We all know that social media lends itself so well to comparison and we all know that we're comparing ourselves to a screenshot or a part of somebody's life. But when you're in the middle of it it's not so easy to step back and think that and we get drawn in and we make these comparisons, we think our life is rubbish. So, it's about noticing how it's making you feel and if it's making you feel bad then it's time to think about what can I do about this, how could I stop this? Actually there's some really nice studies on phone use, like even having your phone in the same room as you, so not even looking at it, having your phone in the same room as you distracts you from doing the things you enjoy doing and reduces your enjoyment. So, there's a lovely study which was in a restaurant and people either had their phone on the table, in their pocket or they didn't have their phone on them. Even having your phone on you detracted from your enjoyment of that meal in that restaurant with people you loved. So, sometimes I think it's just a simple as putting your phone away so you can't fall into the habit because your phone is designed to pull you in.

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(TC: 00:17:25)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. I kind of heard about that study and one of the things I'm not super aware of is when I am working from home and writing or researching and even if my phone is, you know, turned over it's just having that awareness that it's there. So, now I have to go airplane mode, phone in a drawer so it's like out of sight and mind. Also just, kind of, in the morning I like to do a phone free hour so that I can do all of my planning without having, you know, whether it's email notifications or at the moment there's a lot of news notifications and they just really pull your attention.

(TC: 00:17:59)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Oh absolutely. Yes and it's designed to because we all have a brain. No matter how much theory you know, if you're a medic, if you're a psychologist, you've still got a brain. That brain doesn't work any differently to other peoples brains and I'm actually the same. I actually now have to put my phone physically in another room because it's too tempting to draw you in. Also I don't have notifications on anything except emails and I should probably turn off that as well because I want to choose when I look at things. It doesn't always work and it's also important to notice. Rather than beat yourself up when you notice these things happening, thinking this is how social media and phones are designed to grab our attention and use our brain. So, it's not necessarily about me, it's about the way my brain functions. So, stepping back and thinking okay, that's happened, I've been pulled in but what can I do about it?

(TC: 00:18:46)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes absolutely. I think second to that, creating boundaries as well with messaging apps so that whether it's WhatsApp or it's email or whatever form of messaging app you use with your friends and family, having boundaries in place so that you don't feel like you need to message right in this moment. If you're busy, if you're in work, if you're doing something that's more important that message can wait and I think, like, I'm definitely guilty where I will want to reply, you know, instantly or I feel bad that I forgot to reply when really, especially emails, they're not intended to be instant messaging apps but we treat them like that.

(TC: 00:19:30)

Dr Emma Hepburn: We treat everything like that now don't we? We treat our phone, because it's so immediate, we feel we need to respond immediately and that's what people who designed social media want you to do. So, really it's about creating as much, kind of, barriers to jumping in immediately that you can. For me, it is switching it off and putting it another room. That's really what stops me doing it but it's also about how you think about it and if you step back and think I don't need to respond immediately. 50 years ago I never had a mobile phone so I would be checking my emails every three days probably. (TC 00:20:00)

(TC: 00:20:01)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Absolutely yes.

(TC: 00:20:02)

Dr Emma Hepburn: So, we never used to feel this urge to respond immediately. The other person-, I don't expect people to respond immediately to me, so we're creating pressure to ourselves saying that I need to respond to everything immediately. But we don't, we just, we just don't.

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(TC: 00:20:15)

Dr Hazel Wallace: No we don't. One thing that you did mention a couple of minutes ago was how we compare to other people on social media. Obviously before social media even existed we as humans are going to compare ourselves to other people, it's just a normal innate instinct. Maybe that's not always a bad thing but I think because on social media looking at this highlight reel and you're scrolling and you can, kind of, get sucked in and feel really bad about yourself. Especially right now because sometimes there's pressure to be super productive during lockdown, you know, bake ten loaves of banana bread or run a marathon. Why do we compare ourselves and how can we break the cycle of doing that when we know it's negatively impacting us?

(TC: 00:21:03)

Dr Emma Hepburn: I think there's lots of theories about why we compare ourselves and we do all naturally compare ourselves, we can't help it. The idea is that we're social animals and to help us be sociable we compare ourselves to people round about us to help us build groups and build in groups and recognise the enemy as well. So, there's lots of theories, evolutionary theories, about why we compare ourselves. So, it is inevitable to an extent but you don't have to let it, kind of, run away with itself. Because as soon as you start noticing you're comparing yourself and that really is key and noticing you're doing it and think about what evaluation you're making with that comparison. So, often what we do is we make upward comparisons. We say this person is doing this and they're so much better than me. It happens all the time with parenting. We see these wonderful parenting pictures online of perfect birthday parties, perfect home schooling, it looks fantastic. I'm not doing as well as that. So, that makes me feel bad, I'm inadequate because I'm not doing as well as that. Let's just stop for a minute and think, is that a valid comparison? Well no it's not because I'm comparing my whole self, how I feel about everything in my world to this tiny little picture of their life. Of course it's not valid. It's like comparing, you know, a whole novel to one page in another novel and that's not valid. You can't make that comparison. It's also being very critical of yourself and I think this is again where compassion comes in. So, recognising how invalid that comparison is but also recognising, you know, it's okay to feel a bit bad about things. It doesn't mean that you're failing or you're not doing well. It's that comparison that's making you feel that way. But really kind of observing your comparisons, noticing it and almost zooming out from them. Because once we get caught up in them it's difficult to, kind of, move away from them. But if we zoom out and say right, hold on, what's happening here, that's a comparison I'm making, it's not necessarily a valid comparison then I think that really helps with it.

(TC: 00:23:03)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I agree and that's a nice way of thinking about it. I like the, kind of, book and the page analogy because it's very true and we only see surface level of what's going on in someone else's life. Just kind of following on from that, I think particularly in the last year there is a lot of, I don't know if this is the right term, but I guess comparative trauma. So, for example, feeling like your anxiety or your low mood is invalid because you didn't go through maybe a stressful event that was as significant as perhaps someone else when really trauma is all relative. So, what would be your response to someone feeling like that at the moment? Perhaps feeling like they can't speak up because bigger things are happening in the world.

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(TC: 00:23:47)

Dr Emma Hepburn: It's such a classic response isn't it? I shouldn't be feeling this way, I don't deserve to feel this way or I have no right to feel this way and I often hear people say that. Often, like you say, that is drawn on comparison. It's drawn on, but this person is going through so much worse than me and sometimes I think they're coping or they are feeling bad, whichever way, but it's a comparison saying they've been through so much worse than me. But again, it's a totally invalid comparison because your life situation, what you bring to it, how your brain works, your history, how you experience the world is totally individual to you and your emotions because of that complex mix of the interaction in your environment and your whole system are individual to you. So, your emotions arise because of that mix so we can't really judge our emotions because we can't look at these mixes in everybody and those emotions are valid because those emotions are coming up because of your situation. You can't minimise and say I shouldn't be feeling this way and actually as soon as we start telling ourselves we shouldn't be feeling that way what we're doing is we're invalidating our own emotions. When we invalidate our own emotions we start to shame ourselves and we start to hide it away and what we know about emotions is as soon as we start to shame them and tuck them away we actually make it worse. We increase our stress response, we make our emotions feel worse, they will pop back at times that we don't want them to. So, actually it's really important to say, well this is how I'm feeling now rather than making those comparisons which make you invalidate your emotions. I don't know what's going off with that other person, I can't tell because none of us know really the whole story of somebody life but this is how I'm feeling now and whatever has led to me feeling this way, my story is absolutely valid and this is my emotion I'm experiencing. So, what can I do now with this emotion to help myself best? That's much more helpful than criticising yourself or shaming or minimising your own emotions because that actually just makes emotions worse.

(TC: 00:25:53)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes it does. We're all in the same storm but in different situations or we have different things going on in our life and I think everyone's feelings are valid at the moment and it's okay to feel how we're feeling and echo those feelings and not feel like you need to bottle them down because people are worse off in your minds eye.

(TC: 00:26:17)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Absolutely and all emotional responses are normal and often make sense once you look at somebody's story. Now it's not normal to feel bad for a long period of time, I think we need to emphasise that. It's okay not to feel okay but if you're not feeling okay for a long period of time then that's an indication that you probably need input or treatment of some description. So, again, I think it's important to keep that nuance there as well.

(TC: 00:26:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I completely agree. Just kind of right now, obviously we just mentioned that we're in, we're still in the pandemic, who would have thought? Yes but, you know, there's a lot of debate as to whether, you know, we should be setting new goals or building new habits because it's January but it's 2021 and we had a terrible year but I'd love to know what side of the fence you sit on?

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(TC: 00:27:07)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Well I sit directly on the fence with this one Hazel. I guess, you know, it's a bit of an invalid argument really because, you know, we set goals all the time even if we're not aware we're setting goals our brain is really a goal setting organ. Have you made yourself a cup of tea or coffee this morning?

(TC: 00:27:26)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes.

(TC: 00:27:27)

Dr Emma Hepburn: So have I. What did you do then? You decided you wanted to have a cup of tea. You set a goal to make that cup of tea. You put a plan in place to do it. So, you have formed a goal that you wanted to achieve and you've done it and did you enjoy your cup of coffee?

(TC: 00:27:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Oh absolutely.

(TC: 00:27:42)

Dr Emma Hepburn: There you go. So, it was a successful goal. So, our brain is ultimately a future planning and goal directing organ. So, we're setting goals all the time. So, if you want to set, take that into your conscious awareness and say, these are the goals I want to set, great, that's okay. If you don't want to this time because it's not right for you, great, that's also okay. This time, there's no right or wrong answer to this, it's what right for you at this specific point. But what I would say with goals and what I often see is people use them to beat themselves up. So, I need to never check my phone again or, you know, I shouldn't be doing this or I'm never going to eat a multipack of crisps again or, you know, whatever. It's a, kind of, I should not be doing this, there's something wrong with me because I am doing this. Now that's just a, kind of, road to failure really because you will never not check your phone and you will probably at some point if you've eaten a multipack of crisps before, do it again. So, it's really shifting to what do you actually want to do and what will make you feel good? It's also about the level you set those at. In those examples I said I'll never do it again. Now that's impossible, that's absolutely impossible because never is such a big thing that it's unrealistic. We all have setbacks, we all have lapses particularly when it's habitual behaviours. So, if you're setting yourself unrealistic expectations and expecting that it will all change immediately with no setbacks, you're going to feel like it's a failure because setbacks are inevitable and ridiculous high expectations are unobtainable.

So, it's about really starting small, building up positively, thinking what do I want to do and if you are shifting away from something, and often we do use our goals to shift away from unhealthy habits, what do you want to do instead? What will you replace that habit with? What will you fill that void which is left from shifting one habit to another one? But again, focus on what you positively want to build and use it as an incentive rather than a de-motivator of all the things you're doing wrong and all the things you need to be different about. Because that's just not helpful for anybody.

(TC: 00:29:48)

Dr Hazel Wallace: No and I think, yes, it's not that it's right or wrong but I guess, like you said, it's shifting your mindset and circling back to what you said in the beginning, having compassion is really

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important (TC 00:30:00) right now. I know that for me having daily habits but on a month or even a weekly basis is something that I've been really focusing on for just a little bit of routine around my schedule because of the pandemic and that really helps me feel calm. But I know for others, they like taking each day at a time and that's completely fine as well.

(TC: 00:30:26)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Absolutely, yes. Like you say, we're all individuals. All our brains are so different, all our experiences are so different. You can't put one social media post out saying this is the right thing to do because nothing will be right for every single person out there. It's about working out what's right for you and that's what ultimately we're doing in the world as we live isn't it. It's working out what works for us and what helps us live our life in the best way we possibly can. In doing so, because we're learning, we will get things wrong and, again, compassion comes in there again because we will get things wrong no matter what we do.

(TC: 00:30:59)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes. So, before I knew that we were going to record this podcast I did put a little box on social media to see what people were really struggling with right now. One of the overwhelming answers was the feeling of uncertainty and feeling like we're unable to plan ahead or look forward to anything. So, what advice would you have for dealing with uncertainty at this time? I know that's been the word of the year, unprecedented, uncertain.

(TC: 00:31:30)

Dr Emma Hepburn: I know, I think we've all stopped saying I hope you're okay in this unprecedented time because it's become such a cliché. But, you know, it really is important. Uncertainty is probably one of our biggest anxiety creators. I mean, the world is actually always uncertain but play has never felt as uncertain as it does now. It's almost that uncertainty has been thrown in our face because it's taken away a lot of the things that help us make us feel like it's more certain. So, uncertainty creates stress and there's a lot of that at the moment and you've actually already touched on something a lot of people find very, very helpful is having some degree of planning and routine. Even if that's on a daily basis, some people might prefer for it to be on a daily basis, or on a weekly basis. We probably can't plan too far ahead right now, we can't have our coping strategies of booking our holiday and that we look forward to which is really difficult. But we can plan the next step, we can plan the daily steps for tomorrow. Again, it's important to have a bit of a flexible structure for a lot of people because sometimes that changes. Having some routine, some schedule, can be very calming for your mind because it creates certainty. I think also planning the things to look forward to. Yes we can't plan big things but we can plan, for example, a call with our friend on a Friday. So, planning the things to look forward to is really important in dealing with uncertainty. It's something that makes us feel good for a start but also anticipation of positive things make us feel even better. So, if it's a week down the line or two days down the line, the anticipation itself is very, very good for wellbeing and it also draws us away from anticipating the void of uncertainty.

Something that's been spoken about a lot, which I totally agree with, is planning for what you can control and managing all that mass that we can't control. So, I've got a drawing in my book which is some balloons floating away of things we can't control and holding some balloons in your hand of things you can control.

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Obviously the things we can't control, we can't control what's going on in the entire world right now but we often want to create certainty by watching that or getting drawn into it. So, we might watch the news lots more because we want to know exactly what's happening to kind of get a sense of certainty but actually that almost creates more uncertainty. So, what can you not control? What would you put in those balloons that you let float away right now? But what can you control? The things that you can actually do. We all have limited brain space so if we spend our entire brain space on those things that aren't within our control it makes us feel very uncontrolled and uncertain. So, where do you actually want to shift your focus to at the moment? So, those are just some ideas but uncertainty is hard and it's recognising that we are all in a higher threat and stress mode right now and that's okay. It's also okay to cut that off your normal daily routine and structure. Actually I read a really interesting piece yesterday, a research paper which I think was done in Finland during the first wave of the pandemic, which showed that families who coped well during the pandemic actually almost lowered their standards. So, based on expectations on where they were then rather than their normal standards and for things like watching TV. It's okay for the kids to watch a bit more TV so that really helped families cope and I think that could probably be taken across other people as well.

Base your expectations not on where you were a year ago but on where you are now. What are the most important things you can do or you need to do today rather than have a list of things that you're not going to achieve. Actually just touching back on to what you spoke about before, these little things, having some sort of rituals, nightly rituals, but also maybe having just three tiny things you do through the day to improve your wellbeing. So, what three tiny things am I going to do today which can give you that sense of control and you know you're definitely going to do them and you're going to achieve them can be really helpful as well. So, a whole pile of ideas there and actually one of my next drawings I'm planning to do is three tiny things.

(TC: 00:35:16)

Dr Hazel Wallace: I love that. One of the things that I do is three habits but it's very similar to you and it's really little things. It can be as simple as getting into bed before 10.00pm and, like, I think at the moment it's very easy to distract ourselves and whether that's with Netflix or social media late at night, whatever it might be, and you just put off things that are important for, you know, our basic foundations and one of those things is sleep. So, for me it's just getting into bed before 10.00pm every night and that's been really important and already I feel better for doing that. But I don't think that three little things is such a nice idea.

(TC: 00:35:57)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Absolutely and you're choosing things which you know make you feel good. So, they'll make you feel more in control and also they'll have a positive impact on your wellbeing. But also achieving them, because they're tiny you're more like to achieve them, that achievement also makes us feel good. So, it works in multiple ways so that's a really nice one going to bed before 10.00pm. I should probably try that.

(TC: 00:36:16)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes well you've got kids so. Another word that kept popping up was loneliness and separation from the people we love and care about. So, not just people who are living alone during the pandemic but maybe people who are still living with their partner but they can't see their parents or

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their siblings or whoever it might be. How can we best support ourselves during this time when we're feeling like that?

(TC: 00:36:43)

Dr Emma Hepburn: I mean, connection is so key isn't it? We've never probably realised that more now. Isolation is detrimental to us when it's not chosen. If we're choosing to be by ourselves, it can actually be really good for us but isolation imposed upon us can be really bad for our wellbeing. So, again, I would say about planning connection. Maybe one of those tiny things, maybe not daily, but one of those tiny things is making you feel connected in whatever way. Is that sending somebody a text? Having those Zoom parties was a thing earlier on in the pandemic. I think people are a bit fatigued with it now but what makes you feel good? Is it watching a film together with somebody and then speaking about it afterwards. I do that with my friends, we watch films together and then we have a discussion about it. But other people wouldn't enjoy doing that. So, what makes you feel connected? Sometimes me just sending my friend a message saying how are you, it's not even about checking in with me, sometimes just checking in with them makes me feel good. So, I would say try possibly to make every day if that's right for you or at least some of those tiny things about connection.

(TC: 00:37:41)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes because I think even if it's not your family or partner, a lot of people are mentioning that they even miss their colleagues, just like the banter in the office. I get that because, you know, the days that I work from home, when I go into the hospital I'm almost, like, so excited to see my colleagues to just chat about something, see a person in real life, I'm excited to see my patients. It's just that human contact.

(TC: 00:38:10)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Often it's those non-specifics that we've lost in the workplace isn't it because we can still probably do our role but we can't, if we've nipped through to the coffee room for a coffee, have that random chat which actually were really important parts of our day. I've heard some really innovative and creative ways to deal with this. Now some of them are my worst nightmare. So, some people have, I was on a call, and somebody was describing that they work alongside each other. They just have their cameras on. That's not my idea of fun personally but they loved it. But other people have, kind of, informal coffee meet ups. So, they put time in for that, sort of, an informal catch up so let's have a coffee catch up. So, thinking what is it you're missing and how can you gain that now and aren't we lucky this has happened at a time of technology when these things are possible?

(TC: 00:38:55)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I agree. It's nice to hear that people are having coffee breaks and stuff and it's maybe something that workplaces could consider offering as an option. I know that there's been some creative ways that businesses have been trying to support mental health in other ways. Someone messaged me to say that their company, they didn't mention who but they've got thousands of employees, and they bought everyone a subscription to Headspace, the mindfulness app and I thought that was just really nice because obviously not everyone is going to pick it up and it's just a tool and as

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much as you put into it you'll get out of it and things like that. But just helping give people a few more things for their toolbox at this time is really nice.

(TC: 00:39:38)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Absolutely.

(TC: 00:39:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: I guess finally, I mean, we've had a great discussion but there's so much other stuff that I'd love to ask from you and I'm sure people want to know more. But to find you, your The Psychology Mum, just on Instagram? Or is it Twitter?

(TC: 00:39:54)

Dr Emma Hepburn: I am also on Facebook and I am also on Twitter as @EmmaNeuroPsych and I probably need to change that but @EmmaNeuroPsych.

(TC: 00:40:03)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I always find Twitter is about more academic isn't it?

(TC: 00:40:07)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Yes, yes. I joined more for my work, that's exactly my thinking behind it. Also Hazel, you'll probably have seen that I have just released a free eBook which is called How to Stay Calm in a Global Pandemic.

(TC: 00:40:16)

Dr Hazel Wallace: No I haven't.

(TC: 00:40:16)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Okay, well I'll send it on to you. But basically one of my coping strategies during the pandemic has been to draw and my experiences with drawing, also what I'm hearing from other people about their experiences, and I did a whole range of drawings during the first wave and, kind of, afterwards and I just thought do you know what, let's make this into a book and let's make it free so as many people can access it as possible. So, I've put together in a free eBook How to Stay Calm in a Global Pandemic which the irony is of course it's not always possible to stay calm but that's the idea. It's like how to manage when you don't stay calm.

(TC: 00:40:48)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Oh I love that.

(TC: 00:40:49)

Dr Emma Hepburn: So, I can send that through to you and obviously I've got my book which is available to buy, A Toolkit for Modern Life, as well.

(TC: 00:40:54)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes which I have a copy of and I was flicking through it again. I leave it beside my bed because it's one of those books I like to open up and come back to and open up and come back to

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and I opened it up yesterday when I was thinking about our podcast and there's so many useful tools and so many things that are really relevant now. So, I'm sure you were planning on releasing this book for a very long time and didn't actually think a pandemic was around the corner but it is the perfect time to publish this book.

(TC: 00:41:21)

Dr Emma Hepburn: Do you know when I finished it? You'll laugh at this, I started it actually on exactly this day last year and I finished it the day the kids finished or went off school for the pandemic and actually I think, and there was no testing this point, but I think I had a COVID for a week before that. So, yes, so I started it before, I finished it just as the pandemic started. But, like people have said, all these are so relevant for using at this time. In fact, we probably all need it more because there's so much more challenges to our mental health right now that we really need to be upping our game and looking after ourselves and our mental health.

(TC: 00:41:55)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes 100%. Well thank you so much for giving me and everyone else your time and all the time on social media. You're one of the best accounts to follow at the moment so thank you.

(TC: 00:42:09)

Dr Hazel Wallace: That was Dr Emma Hepburn a.k.a. The Psychology Mum. You can find her incredible illustrations and work on mental health over on Instagram and Facebook. If you loved this episode make sure to give it a review, a rating, hopefully five stars and share it with your friends and family. That's all from me, see you again next time.

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