

My Health Score

The list below is an 'a la carte' menu of proven ways to help you improve your health and wellbeing. Each point has been selected from various studies, research, articles, talks, and finally from my previous CareMails. There are 13 points in total, each in turn starting with the first letter of "My Health Score". The more of them you can bring into your life the better you will feel.

As they say "*Rome wasn't built in a day*", and I am not suggesting you try to implement all 13 immediately. On the contrary, every journey starts with a first step so start by choosing just one and see what happens.



- Manage** how much social media and news you are consuming. Think quality not quantity, getting your news from a reliable source. In a time when fake news is rampant and sensationalism has become the dominant currency of the internet, maintaining a grounded perspective on what you read and interact with online is more crucial than ever.
- You matter**– learn to be kind and compassionate to yourself. Self - compassion is scientifically proven to be highly beneficial to our overall mental health and well-being. And if you find it hard to be compassionate and kind to yourself, then answer this one question – do all human beings not deserve compassion and understanding? I hope your answer is yes because no one is perfect, we all suffer, we all have a story and we all make mistakes. Shame and blame are not good companions or teachers, so practice self-compassion and allow yourself to make mistakes and to learn from them. The kinder and more forgiving you are of yourself, the kinder you will be to others. Talk to yourself like you would talk to someone you care about.
- Health** – good health and well-being start with a good night's sleep! It's while you are in deep sleep that your body produces proteins called cytokines that help your immune system fight infection and disease. Some tips for a restful sleep include sticking to a sleep routine i.e. going to bed and getting up at the same time each day, and getting out of bed if you can't sleep, waiting until you feel tired before going back. And try not to think about stressful things when you are lying down; difficult thoughts somehow always seem worse when horizontal!
- Exercise** (especially in the morning) will set you up for the day. Living in an uncertain and scary world has understandably caused us to feel more stress and anxiety. One of the best ways to mop up the excess adrenaline and cortisol circulating in our bodies is to get out and do some exercise and connect with nature.

A 2016 Review in the BC Medical Journal found exercise (in appropriate quantities):



- Lowered all-cause mortality by 20-30%
- Prevents/delays the onset of diabetes
- Gives a 31% risk reduction for having a stroke
- Reduces depressive symptoms by 30%
- Protects against cognitive decline

<https://bcmj.org/articles/health-benefits-physical-activity-and-cardiorespiratory-fitness>

- **Altruistic** behaviour is a form of prosocial behaviour, which is voluntary and has the ultimate goal of increasing another's well-being. Serving and reaching out to help others in need boosts the helpers' neurochemicals that produce positive emotions. Helping others not only gives us a sense of purpose and satisfaction, it also lowers blood pressure and helps you live longer. Bottom line - helping others makes us happier!

In the current climate of physical separation, helping others may include writing a letter to an isolated friend or neighbour, doing a food shop or calling to find out how someone is doing.

Check Out: local charities and national non-profit organizations that serve populations in need and see how you can (safely) help out.



And remember altruism is contagious!

- **Listen** to others, listen to yourself (and your gut) and let yourself be listened to. As my mother used to say to her kids – *“you have one mouth and two ears, use them in that proportion”*.

And as Maya Angelou states *“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”* Allow yourself to be heard. If you don't feel you have people around you that listen to you then start to bring people into your life who will listen and care about you. There are many different ways to meet new people:

1. Volunteer with a local charity
2. Join a local sports team
3. Join an exercise class at your nearest gym
4. Join an appropriate professional networking group
5. Start a hobby or weekend class and learn a new skill at the same time
6. Get involved with your respective religious, spiritual or community cultural centre



Use your strengths to help build stronger more meaningful relationships in your life.

- **Take** care of yourself – you can't give what you don't have. Stop to savour the moment, pause to be grateful, share your smile and give out what you want to come back. Most importantly, learn to banish or at least quieten that judgemental critical voice inside. And let yourself experience a range of emotions, be strong and vulnerable, reflective and reactive, forward thinking and more traditional, flexible but firm. Appreciate the paradox, the emotional dance between stable and grounded and flexible and agile, so you manage contradictory emotions to build your resilience.
- **Hobbies** - keep up with your hobbies as these will distract you from your worries, give you a sense of competence and control and best of all help you to feel you have accomplished something worthwhile.



Question: What hobbies do you have and what new ones can you take up?



- **Strengths** - knowing and using your strengths will help you to make you more resilient. Finding new ways to use your strengths will help you to grow as a person, giving you the confidence to push yourself out of your comfort zone.



To Do: List three strengths you have and think about how you can use them in your everyday life.

- **Connect** - being socially isolated is a disaster for our mental wellbeing. It's really important you connect with others in whatever way you can, share how you are feeling, because rule number 1 is never worry alone, it magnifies the anxiety. We are born wired for connection so it's important to reach out to people to get a sense of belonging and to feel heard and understood. Create time and space each day to talk to others in whatever safe way you can, and make sure you are around people who energise you *and* people who calm you, people who offer empathy *and* people who offer good practical advice.



Fact: being connected to others helps us to recover from stress and upset much more quickly – so get talking!

- **Observe** your emotions and be curious about what they are telling you. Be mindful of when you get a sudden shift in mood. Slow down and think about what might have caused this sudden change, what were you thinking about just before you felt the change in mood? Ask yourself what is underneath my anger, my anxiety, my need to control – is it fear, loneliness? This inquisitiveness with will help you better understand how your thoughts drive your emotions and feelings, and then ultimately your behaviour. Curiosity and thoughtfulness will enable you to better reflect on, and then manage, your inner emotional world.
- **Routine** - ensure you have a routine and structure to your day and also a **goal**, however small. A consistent daily and weekly routine is a way for you to feel more certainty during this unsettling period, helping you to feel more in charge of your life. As Erin Wiley Clinical Psychologist says “In order for our minds to function at maximum efficiency, we must have order and stability”.

Having a goal each day is also important. A goal can be as simple as baking a cake, tidying out a cupboard or starting a jigsaw, it doesn't have to be a big fancy project, but it does have to give you a sense of purpose and a feeling accomplishment. Achieving your goal and ticking it off a 'to do' list can help build your self-confidence, self-esteem as well as realise your strengths.

And remember to keep the activities you do in the day different to those in the evening, keep day and night, work and rest separate otherwise they blend into one and you have no time to recuperate physically and mentally. And ditto for the week and weekend. We need consistency and variety in our life!



- **Empathy** – having empathy for others helps improve our health, our happiness and the world around us. It connects us to others in a deeper, more meaningful way, it is the glue that holds our relationships together. Even better, empathising with others helps us to cope better with our own stress and anxiety because by helping others manage difficult emotions we regulate and take care of our own emotions. And compassionate people (those that feel empathy and have the desire to help others) are happier and experience lower rates of depression and anxiety (BMC Women’s Health – Nov 2018).

So, having completed the health quiz how many of these can you begin to do/practise over the next month?

9 Random Health Facts



1. Optimism is robustly associated with cardiovascular health.
2. Pessimism is more closely associated with cardiovascular risk.
3. Positive mood is associated with protection from colds and flu, and negative mood with greater risk for colds and flu.
4. Tears are healing - they lubricate your eyes, remove irritants, reduce stress hormones, and they contain antibodies that fight pathogenic microbes.
5. Sad people secrete more of the inflammatory substance called Interleukin 6 and this results in more colds.
6. Endorphins are released in the brain when we help others – the ‘helpers high’, these come from the release of oxytocin – which reduces inflammation in the cardiovascular system.
7. People who habitually acknowledge and express gratitude see benefits in their health, sleep and relationships, and they perform better.
8. Bananas can help improve your mood - a banana has approximately 30% of your daily recommended intake of vitamin B6. Vitamin B6 helps the brain produce serotonin, which is considered a mood stabilizer. Serotonin impacts your motor skills and emotions. It is also the chemical that helps you sleep and digest food. Eating a banana can help relieve depression and anxiety by stimulating the serotonin levels in your body.
9. People who don’t get enough sleep are more likely to have bigger appetites due to the fact that their leptin levels (leptin is an appetite-regulating hormone) fall, promoting appetite increase.
10. Smiling stimulates the release of neuropeptides that work towards fighting off stress and unleashes a feel good cocktail of the neurotransmitters serotonin (natural antidepressant), dopamine (stimulant) and endorphins (natural painkillers)...

So smile more! 😊

Quote of the month

"Bravery is not
the absence of fear.
Bravery is feeling the fear,
the doubt, the insecurity,
and deciding that
something else is
more important."

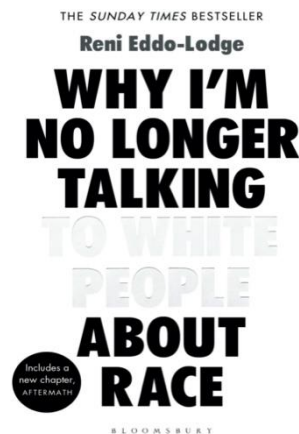
-Marl Manson

These last 6-9 months have been a very difficult, even a traumatic time for many people. But the positive psychology movement talks a lot about PTG – Post Traumatic Growth. As Martin Seligman writes in his wonderful book *Flourish*, “A substantial number of people also show intense depression and anxiety after extreme adversity, often to the level of PTSD, but then they grow. In the long run they arrive at a higher level of psychological functioning than before”

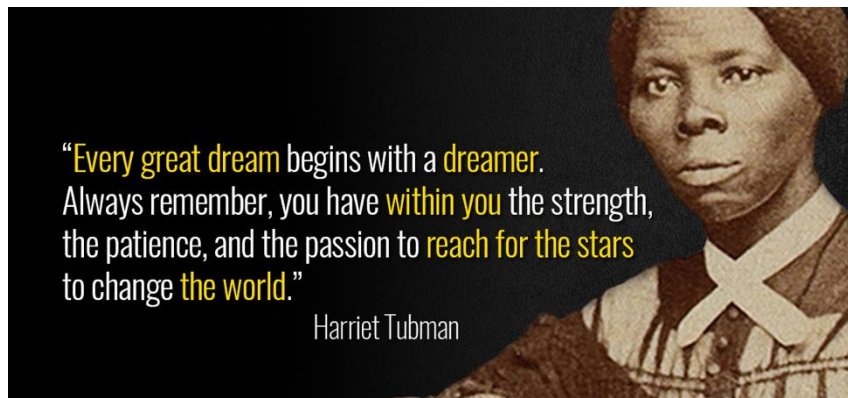
This is not to suggest any of us wants to go through adversity or trauma, but the fact is that trauma often sets the stage for growth.

Shared Space

Given recent events in the UK and around the world, and the continued racism and discrimination experienced by so many people of colour and other minorities, I wanted to learn more about the realities of black history and racial and systemic inequality in all its forms. I recently watched *13* by Ava Duvernay and read *Why I am No Longer Talking About Racism to White People* by Reni Eddo-Lodge. Both are very informative, totally compelling and yes heart-breaking in the way they describe black history and the impact of structural and institutional racism in the US and UK.



And a ‘must see’ movie is *Harriet* - the extraordinary tale of Harriet Tubman's escape from slavery and transformation into one of America's greatest heroes, whose courage, ingenuity, and tenacity freed hundreds of slaves and changed the course of history.



“Injustice is easy not to notice when it affects people different from ourselves”

Nicholas Kristof – New York times