



## ‘We are busy about everything’

Claudia Hammond is an award-winning broadcaster, author and psychology lecturer. Her latest book, *The Art of Rest*, examining the science behind our struggles to rest and relax, is published on 5 December by Canongate. Our editor Jon Sutton asked her about it.

**You write ‘What could be more restful than reading a book about rest?’, but actually the first chapter on mindfulness wound me right up. Am I unusual in getting agitated about rest?**

People do seem to have a love hate relationship with mindfulness. Some people wouldn’t be without it. Others feel it’s offered as a panacea without the evidence that it can help everyone. But you are not at all unusual to feel agitated about rest. In the world’s largest study on rest, The Rest Test, devised by psychologists at Durham University which I worked on as part of a residency at Wellcome Collection, when we asked people which words they associated with rest, the results were intriguing. Although some used words such as dreamy or serene, others said guilty or fidgety or annoying. So you are not

alone. Resting isn’t always easy. We need to value it more, to give ourselves permission to rest.

**What has changed around rest?**

In the 19th century, if you were rich, you might indicate that by enjoying a life of leisure in the city and then retiring to country retreat for some more.... leisure. Now when we say we are very busy, it might well be true, but it also conveys status. It shows that we are important and valued.

**The advice to ‘stop fetishising busyness’ struck a chord. One of my favourite quotes is Henry Thoreau’s ‘It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?’**

We are busy about everything. As well as work and maybe childcare, there is also plenty of non-work admin – renewing insurance, wondering whether we’re paying too much for our electricity, even doing something relaxing like going out for meal for friends involves plenty of admin to find a date and book a table. And the moment we get through our to-do list (if we ever do) then there’s social media to catch up with. We turn to our phones and as often as not, we then get more jobs too. It’s no wonder that in our (admittedly self-selecting) sample, two-thirds of people wanted more rest. Time use surveys suggest that in fact we don’t have less free time than people used to have, but it doesn’t always feel like that.

**Can pretty much anything be ‘restful’? You mention football / running... and I do find it interesting that the activity you describe as most restful for you, i.e. gardening – or ‘outdoor housework’ as I call it – would be right at the bottom of my list.**

Bottom? You are missing out Jon!

It’s true that the same activities do not feel restful for everyone. My top three are gardening, going out with friends and running (or maybe watching TV is I’m being honest). But socialising with friends didn’t even appear in our top ten. A restful activity can involve effort. Eight per cent of people told us they found running restful; some say they can’t rest their minds until their body is tired out. So I’ve tried to identify what makes an activity restful for an individual. The ideal activity seems to give you a break from other people, to allow your mind to wander and to distract you from your worries, without making you feel so lazy or guilty that the restfulness is ruined. Sometimes it’s stopping doing another activity that makes you feel rested. So when I run, it isn’t truly restful at the time. Often it’s unpredictably hard, but afterwards it’s lovely!

**Does life inevitably get less restful as you get older? You write about a study where students took a 90-minute bath in the middle of the afternoon, whereas I now tend to divide my life into ‘Jobs / No jobs [i.e. sleep]’.**

I think some young people would disagree! Earlier this year a BuzzFeed article called ‘how millennials became the burnout generation’, explaining why young people were overwhelmed by their to do lists, went viral. People of any age can be confronted with endless list of jobs. Insecure housing where people in their 20s and 30s constantly have to move flats, does of course bring with it huge amounts of admin. Meanwhile parents trying to juggle work and kids have their own very long list of jobs. So I think many of us feel busy – the tasks are just different at different ages.

**‘The Rest Test’ itself forms the structure... but are you confident that was fairly representative of how the population as a whole rest? A whole chapter on baths possibly suggests a Radio 4 slant...**

Because it was launched on Radio 4 I did wonder whether everyone might put down radio as their favourite restful activity. But the survey was widely covered in the newspapers and on TV, as well as on the World Service,

so although the sample was of course self-selecting we did see a wide range of people take part. And of course some of the fanciest new homes have wet rooms with rain showers and not a bath in sight :)

**The book presents a ‘Whatever works for you’ approach, but are there foundations you think everyone should adopt?**

Yes, people can choose whichever activities work for them, but I think there are principles that can be applied. First you need an activity that allows you to give yourself permission to rest. There’s no point in prescribing yourself 15 minutes to lie on the sofa if you’re going to feel guilty and fidgety. The ideal activity absorbs you enough to distract you from your worries, but might also allow your mind to wander. It’s worth thinking about whether physical or mental rest is what you really yearn for, or how they might connect for you.

**You say you were surprised that reading came out top of all the restful activities... but were you also pleased? It’s notable how well the book draws on literature (as well as other forms of culture).**

Well, naturally I wanted gardening to come top so that I could do a whole programme broadcast from my garden. But it always nice to see any evidence that reading might be beneficial.

**Were there any omissions from the top 10 that surprised you?**

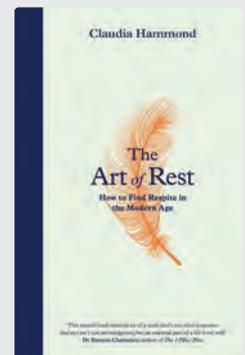
I was surprised that socialising with friends and family didn’t come high, even for the people who scored high on extraversion. We’ve long been told that extraverts gain energy from being with other people. But maybe they just enjoy socialising, rather than finding it restful.

I was struck that the top five activities are all activities people often do alone. There is plenty of research on the psychological value of connections with other people, but maybe as long as we know we have those connections, we still sometimes yearn to be alone. As one person put it to me after our next study, The BBC Loneliness Experiment, the opposite or loneliness is wanting some time alone.

**How are you finding writing popular psychology books in the age of the replication crisis? I notice you had to write ‘The study was far from perfect’ quite a lot!**

I’m fascinated by the replication crisis, but I have to admit that because a book takes so long to write, I’m not delighted when I’ve written many pages describing a particular experiment, only for several failures to replicate to come out a month later. Eventually the book gets printed and each time I see that there’s a new failure to replicate on the BPS Research Digest, I hope that it’s not a study that’s already in the book. Having said that, I want people to know how much good research is still out there, so I’m not giving up on communicating psychology.

**I loved your description of psychologist Russ Hurlburt as a ‘daydream catcher’, and there are real insights into the**



life and work of other psychologists too. How did you find working with academic psychologists in the Hubbub project?

I did love doing research when I was a postgrad and so it's felt like a real privilege to work on research with psychologists in Hubbub and since then on The BBC Loneliness Experiment and a third survey that's coming out soon. But it also reminds me what hard work research is. I get the luxury of doing the fun bits of discussing what to put in it and then talking about the results. The psychologists I work with put in months of hard work in between. I'm not sure I'd have been patient enough to do full-time research.

**Do we differ in our need for rest? You quote Henry Thoreau – 'I, who cannot stay in my chamber for a single day without acquiring some rust.' If so, where do you sit on the spectrum?**

We do seem to yearn for different amounts of rest (which of course might differ from what we need). I constantly claim to long for more time to rest, but I also can't resist saying yes to all the interesting things people ask me to do. From New Year until Easter I worked on my book for both days of every weekend except one in order to get my book on rest finished. So I'm not brilliant at resting, but after writing this book I am trying harder. I'm determined that one day I will go to the cinema on a weekday afternoon, just because I can... one day.

## Case histories revitalised

Leafing through the pages of Oliver Sacks' final collection of posthumously published essays reveals a personal reflection on the life, interests and hobbies of this world-renowned neurologist. Sacks' writing style moved, excited and engaged me, and chapter after chapter I was eager to know more about his personal and professional life.

His love for swimming, chemistry and ferns is beautifully depicted alongside clinical cases examining dementia, schizophrenia and other neurological conditions. While some of these clinical cases are described in previous works, such as *Awakenings* and *An anthropologist on Mars*, there are new, interesting perspectives that delightfully revitalise these case histories. Once again, Sacks has succeeded in outlining physiological experiences including hallucinations and amnesia, and conditions such as

depression, with compassion.

More intimate reflections include Sacks' trip with photojournalist Lowell Handler who has Tourette's syndrome, and childhood memories of times spent in the library (his favourite place) and the gefilte fish prepared for the Jewish Sabbath.

His recollections and love for nature are described in a clear and uplifting style.

These essays display Sacks' enthusiasm, curiosity and passion for understanding the enigmatic human mind, as well as his ability to effortlessly impart his knowledge of chemistry, biology, music and the arts. 'Everything in its place' is the last exquisite collection of essays that Sacks left his audience, and, like his previous works, it does not fail to inspire.

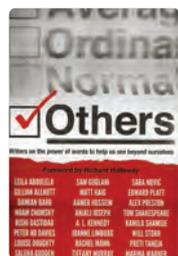
Reviewed by Sara Pisani, research assistant at UCL and volunteer research assistant at KCL

**Everything in its place: First loves and lost tales**  
Oliver Sacks  
*Picador; £20*

## Experiences of otherness

**Others: Writers on the power of words to help us see beyond ourselves**

Charles Fernyhough (ed)  
*Unbound; £10*



*Others* is a collection of works considering 'otherness'; what sets one apart. Otherness can be permanent, like disability, or contextual, like the father at a mother-and-baby group. Here, the authors write on the topic with powerful words (not on as the title suggests). Fernyhough's introduction can't capture the clarity, subtlety, and honesty of the contributors. Some chapters were unbearably touching. Persevere and you will find your own triggers to reflection, value and beauty.

We learn of otherness via routes and consequences. Ho Davies lost a friend, Mann gained a new identity, Hussein experiences distance, Preston plays cricket, Tom Shakespeare welcomes anonymity. It's not relentlessly negative; it's recognising, describing, and compelling us to acknowledge the simple, mundane, insidious nature of othering. It is impossible to read without recognising one's own othering and having been othered. These processes underlie our daily interactions. Most of us, when othered, have various sources of comfort and support. When othering, we don't recognise the consequences. What we perceive as only a brief moment may contribute to a lifetime of marginalisation.

For a flavour of the book try Storr's Original Sin, captured by two sentences: 'We're groupish. And not harmlessly, like starlings or sheep or shoals of mackerel, but violently.' This premise is examined most

poignantly by Shakespeare, who speaks of his underlying experiences of being just like everyone else: 'I speak the same. Hear, the same. Feel, the same.' And yet, he is so used to himself that he is both surprised and othered when his one difference is momentarily or relentlessly the focus of attention.

The experience of othering can be felt by those who see it on behalf of another. Godden writes of her sister, Jo, who lives with Williams Syndrome. Differences are used, possibly unwittingly, to ungroup and separate people. Both Godden and Jo describe how this can result in experiencing the world as more complex than it needs to be, more frustrating, more unforgiving. Godden asks Jo what she thinks people think of her when they first meet her and Jo replies, 'they probably just want to run away', and later, 'people look at you, like weird'.

It is hard not to other. I have done so in my comment on this book's introduction (my apologies), have done so throughout my life, and sadly may well continue to do so. However, this extraordinary collection of works has made me see it, understand it, and hopefully recognise it before I speak or act. That is what makes these words powerful, and more of us need to become empowered.

Reviewed by Simon Duff, Forensic Psychologist, University of Nottingham

## Fired up for change

Before reading this book I thought the crisis in mental health was due to a lack of funding, lack of focus and a dogged dependence on cognitive behavioural therapy. The book did not dispel any of these thoughts. It simply placed them in a larger landscape surrounded by, and connected to, a topography of mental health crises, significantly expanding my understanding of how far-reaching the issues are. For a small book, it packs quite a punch.

The authors set out their research and explanations for two crises in mental health. Why two crises? The book presents a crisis in our own mental health with a wide range of causes, and a crisis in the delivery of care to the people who need it. They argue that the 'McDonaldisation' of provision makes mental health a personal crisis for the population at large and those expected to meet commercial targets in the provision of care. Even the definition of typical and atypical mental health seems to have been distorted by commercial interest.

Some chapters are easier to read than others, and the authors' styles vary. The two chapters by James Davies ('Biomedical and Drug Crisis' and 'Diagnostic Crisis') are particularly effective – my view of the DSM 5 and the medicalisation of mental health changed significantly for the worse on reading these. Ron Roberts' style is denser, sometimes convoluted. However, perseverance

is rewarded, particularly in the chapter on Crisis in Academia. His closing remarks regarding the subversion and coercion of academia by political and commercially motivated parties are fiery, determined and direct.

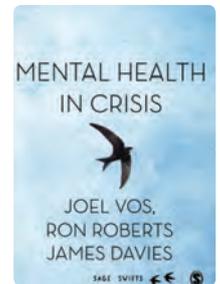
Joel Vos offers his own thoughts in six of the ten main chapters, concluding with a glimmer of hope. The final chapter sets out Vos's vision for the future of mental health care with a call for a more holistic approach. All we need now is a societal and political will for change.

Psychologists for Social Change contributed a chapter on the effects of austerity on mental health, particularly for those marginalised or oppressed. It is a strong call for action against discrimination and injustice.

After finishing the book, I realised how little I had known about the macro issues of mental health. My new understanding of the scale, diagnosis and resolution of mental health issues has left me fired up for change. The impact of this book far exceeds its stature; I expect it to provoke debate and preferably action. The evidence is so compelling that I find myself asking, 'What can we do about this and when will we start?'.

Reviewed by Stuart Hillston, *Coach and Counsellor, The Mindful Entrepreneur Ltd.*

**Mental Health in Crisis**  
Joel Vos, Ron Roberts, James Davies  
Sage Swifts; £45



## Technology changing our emotions

Is airbrushing a behaviour of our digital times, or did earlier generations simply express this behaviour differently? Are we lonelier, more readily bored and more distracted than previous generations? Informatician Luke Fernandez and historian Susan Matt seek to answer these questions in *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid...* They demonstrate great insight into cultural history and how technological developments over the past three centuries have shaped Americans' emotional lives.

There is no shortage of texts depicting technology as a malign force, from toxic online behaviours and social media addiction, to dystopias such as *Frankenstein* and more recently *Zed* by Joanna Kavena. Rather than villainising technology, Fernandez and Matt examine the premise that emotions are not purely innate, stable constructs triggered in response to life events and they have, instead, adapted organically to a collective past. The book offers a refreshing perspective, bringing together two centuries

**Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Changing Feelings about Technology, from the Telegraph to Twitter**  
Luke Fernandez & Susan J. Matt  
Harvard; £25



of letters, memoirs, marketing slogans, illustrative artworks and diverse interviews to contextualise narcissism, loneliness, boredom, attention, awe and anger.

The book illustrates how norms around narcissism changed through the centuries as perceptions of vanity steadily relaxed. In the 19th century it was deemed sinful to be overly preoccupied with one's image, in recognition of the transitory and insignificant nature of life. Yet as photography became more accessible and mirrors were mass-produced, subsequent generations turned their attention ever more towards self-representation.

Options for refining one's image started to emerge. One photographer achieved success by devising false slim ankles that could hang out of ladies' long dresses. Nowadays, we swipe right to pick our favourite Instagram filter and perfect our online image from the comfort of our sofas. Perhaps, the book suggests, heightened concern with one's self-significance has come at the cost

of experiencing awe and wonder in the presence of something beyond the human condition, such as a landscape.

Notions of loneliness, too, have changed. Once seen as an inevitable part of the human condition, technologies have created new expectations around human connectedness. The book also describes a trend towards higher levels of boredom, with less tolerance for moments of non-engagement. Periods of inactivity, once thought useful in fostering creativity, are now targeted by slogans such as 'An app a day keeps the boredom away'.

We now live at the intersection of our online and embodied selves. Fernandez and Matt's impressive debut provides a well-articulated and nuanced analysis of the overlooked symbiosis between the cultural history of emotions and technological developments.

Reviewed by Alina Ivan, *Psychology postgraduate and research assistant at King's College London*