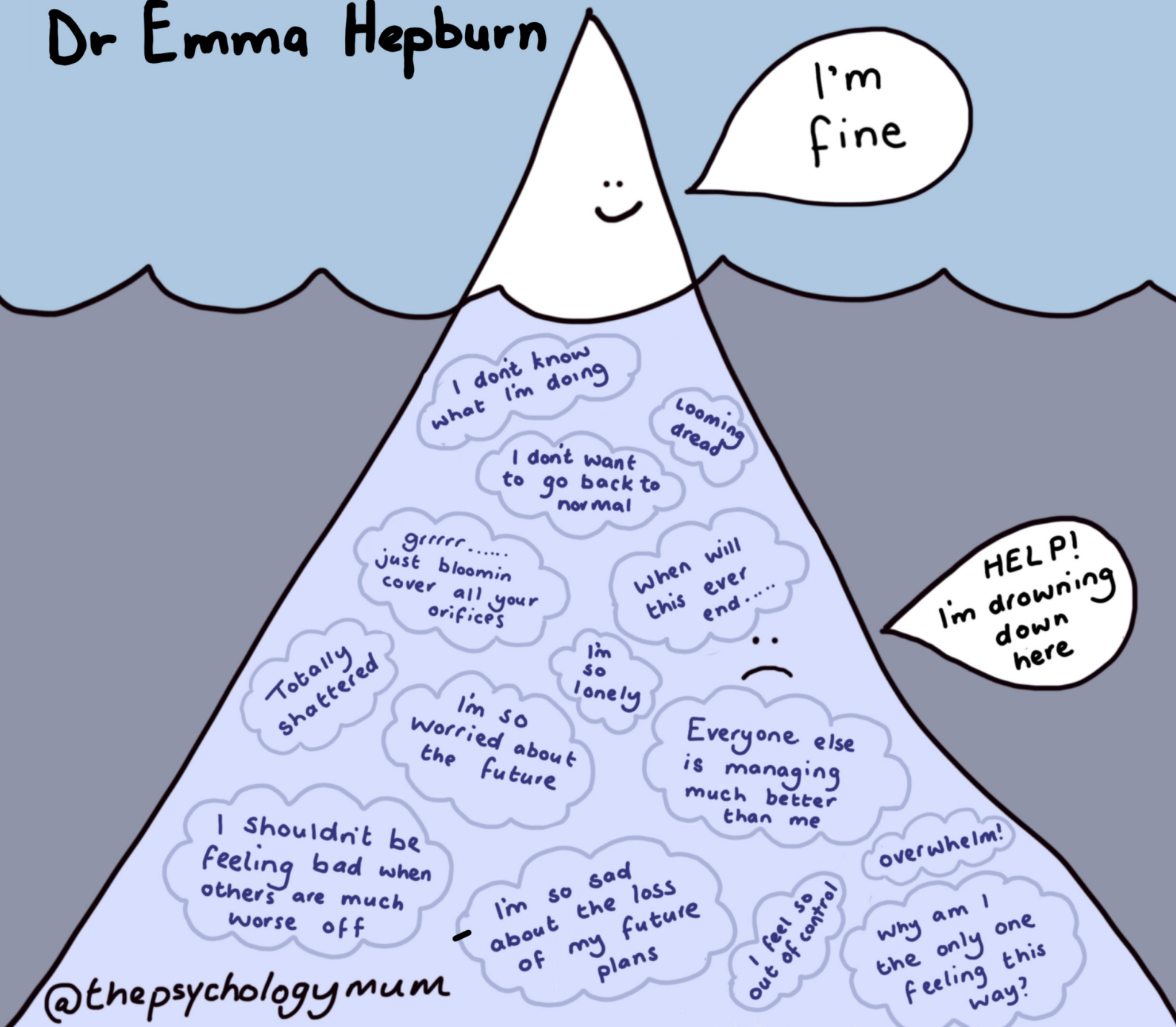


# How to Stay Calm in a

# Global Pandemic

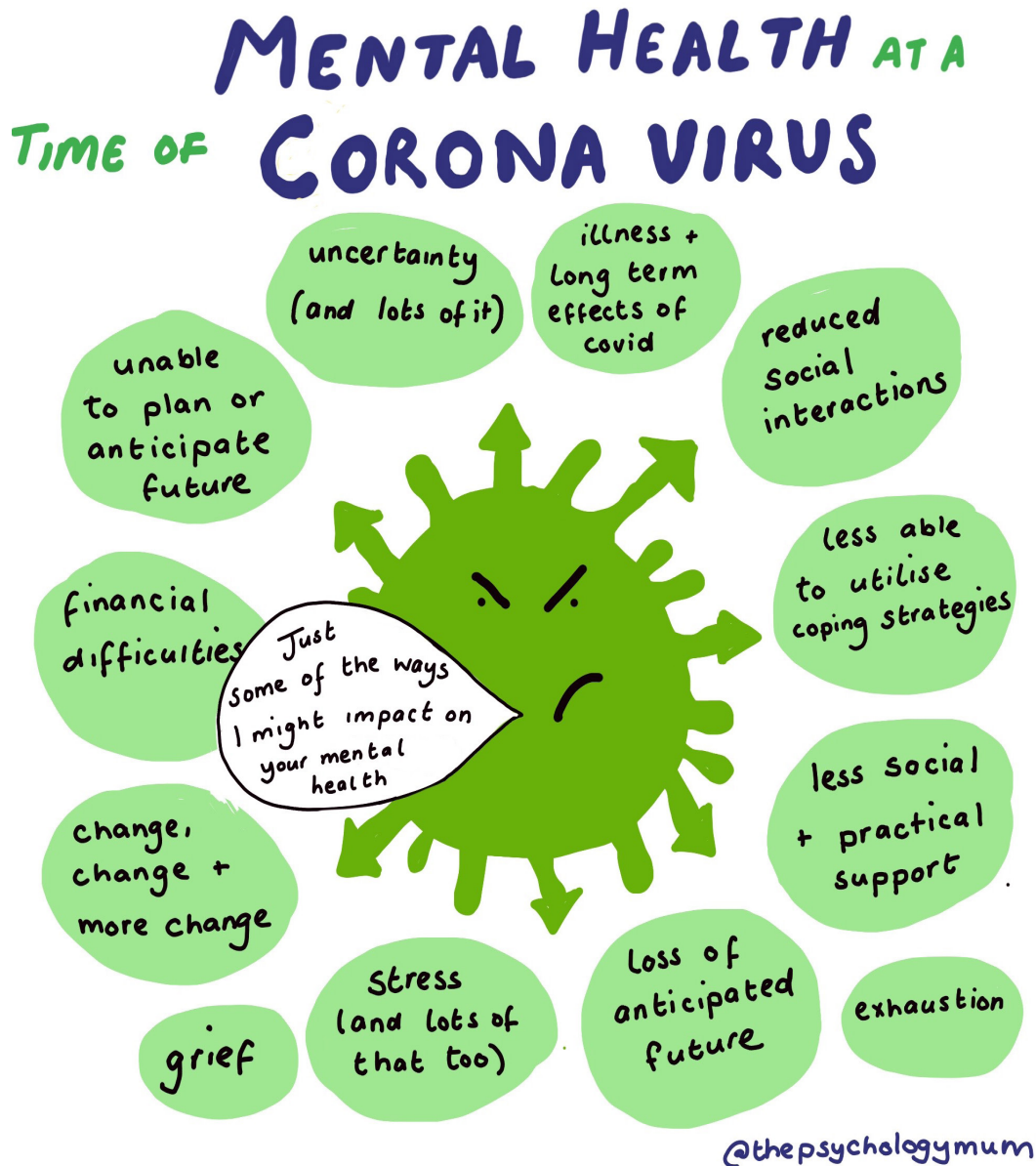
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# MENTAL HEALTH AT A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

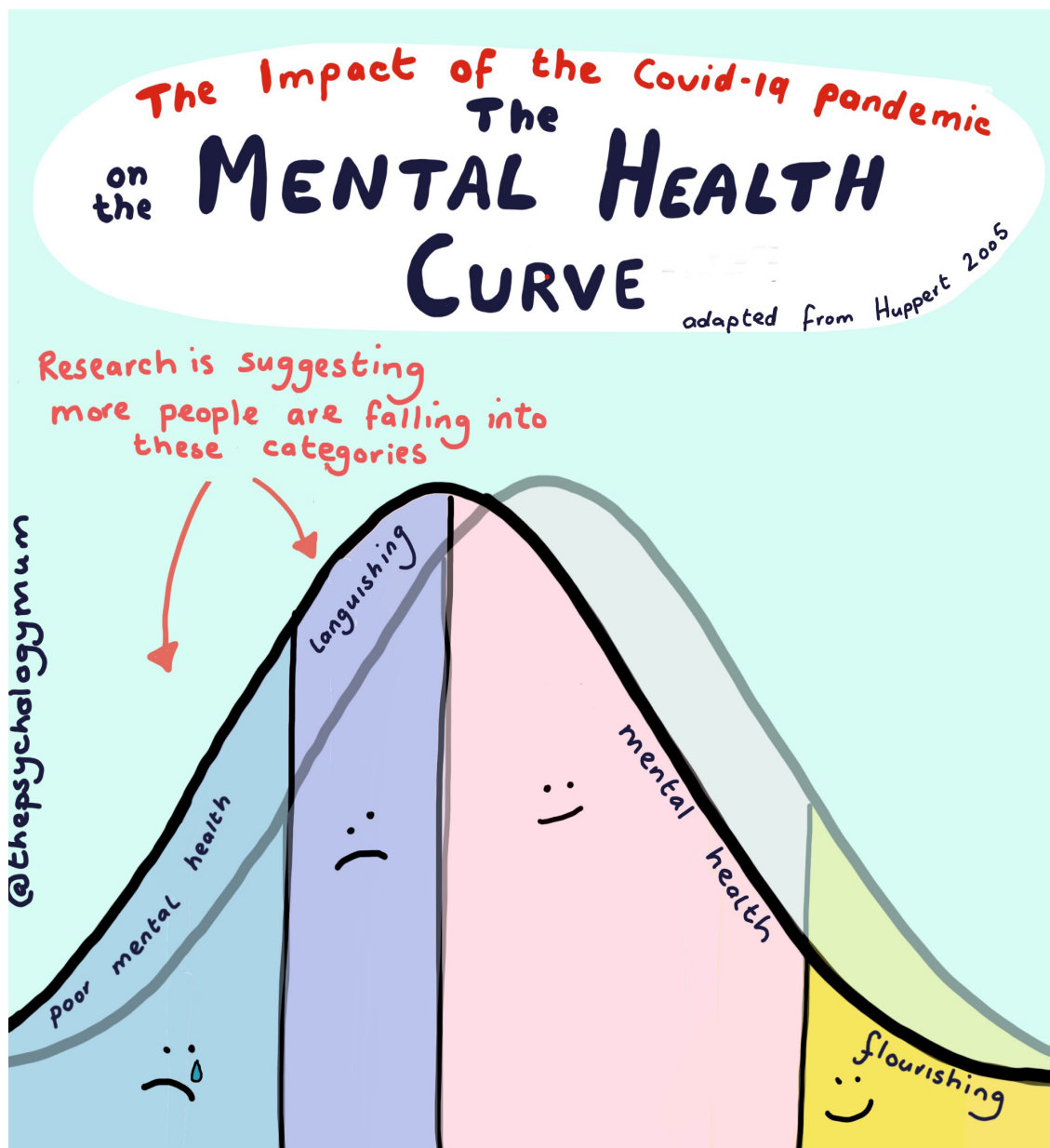
National data indicates that the current global pandemic is resulting in increased anxiety and reduced wellbeing for many of us. Probably no surprise there. Over the past few weeks, I've taken part in lots of interviews and been asked the same question a number of times: 'How can Covid-19 impact on our mental health?' So I thought I'd answer this in the drawing here.



Although I haven't included it in the illustration, I wanted to acknowledge too that some people (albeit a minority) have recognized that the current situation has impacted positively on their mental health. They have mentioned that reduced choice has allowed for more focus on what matters to them, slowing down and appreciating what they have.

# THE MENTAL HEALTH CURVE

In the UK we are experiencing a second wave of Covid-19 with an exhausted population whose resources are depleted. The gung-ho togetherness and sunny springtime weather have gone and Covid fatigue is drawing in with the waning light. We all move up and down the mental health curve in our everyday lives, but research suggests Covid may be pushing more of us down the curve. So, here are 15 ideas for how to continue to look after your mental health during a winter lockdown, when you are already feeling drained and run-down.



1. Understand this is not you, or a failure in you. How you are feeling is a product of months of living with high stress, uncertainty and anxiety, along with the inability to use our normal coping strategies. The depletion and exhaustion are a result of our body having its foot on the gas pedal for too long, which leaves us feeling as if we are running on empty.

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**2.** Hold onto your buoys – the things that keep you afloat when waters are choppy. What gentle activities might you have capacity for? Perhaps make breakfast the night before, make sure you drink enough fluid, let in some daylight or go to bed early. These things don't use up many resources, but not doing them can make you sink far faster when you are feeling bad already.

**3.** If your normal coping strategies seem too much effort, try to think of a smaller way that you could apply these so they still have some effect. Can't face zooming? Can you text instead? Can't face the gym? Go outside for a walk for a few minutes. Seeing coping strategies as all or nothing can lead you to abandon them, but finding gentle alternatives provides some of the positive impact, which is far better than none at all.

**4.** Be extra gentle on yourself when we are tired we have less cognitive resources. More things may go wrong, we can do less and we may not function how we expect. This is lighter fuel for your inner critic and your brain can fall into well-worn paths of self-criticism. This is a signal to hold on to self-compassion and not let go, but you may not have the resources to do this. Find ways to remind yourself of your compassionate voice that requires less effort, such as prompts or saved kind messages.

**5.** Our brain predicts how we *will* feel based on how we feel now. Feeling rubbish means your forecasting is likely to be off and you are more likely to predict you will not enjoy activities. Plan things based on the knowledge that you have enjoyed them previously. This is a better indicator of whether you will enjoy something again than your current mood. A walk outside may feel unappealing, but test it out – go outside for five minutes and see what it actually feels like. If it feels good, keep going, if not, come home and snuggle up.

**6.** Don't shame yourself for feeling \*\*\*\*. Shaming ourselves for our emotions can lead us to suppress them, which ironically leads to greater stress. You feel bad because it is difficult and you are allowed to feel this way. It seems like you will always feel this way, because it's hard to predict feeling any other way when you feel bad. But no emotion can last forever and our psychological immune system works in much the same way as our physical immune system . . . you will not feel like this always and you will feel differently again.

**7.** Our brain is drawn towards the negative at the best of times. When feeling bad we are even more likely to focus on things consistent with our mood, amplifying the negative. Try to consciously draw your attention towards things that make you feel good – help your brain notice the good stuff. This can be effortful when you feel depleted, but the initial effort can be worth the longer-term return on how you feel.

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8. Remember that none of us can always function alone. We all need extra input at times. Seeking and accepting help is not a failure, it's a basic human need and a form of active coping to help keep us afloat.



9. Plan daily pockets of joy and relaxation. Creating positive affect is imperative right now. Try to plan things to look forward to across the next week and month, so that your brain has something positive to anticipate.

10. Prioritize activities that give you meaning and purpose, as these are inherently good for wellbeing.

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- 11.** Create comforting rituals – these can be things you do on a daily or weekly basis. Or create some meaningful new family/friend/workplace rituals to look forward to.
  - 12.** Make active decisions about what you let into your limited brain space. Don't allow news, social media and negative information to take up too much of your resources. Decide what it is most helpful for you to focus on right now.
  - 13.** Our brains like certainty but think about whether the places you look for certainty are actually creating more uncertainty or making you feel anxious. We check the news, social media or talk about the current situation in an attempt to create certainty, but often these things can actually make us feel worse and more uncertain.
  - 14.** Watch out for the myths and societal messages around productivity. We are naturally inclined to want to achieve and society bolsters this belief by rewarding achievements. Then when our productivity drops because we are depleted, we can no longer meet the standards we have set, which means we feel like we are failing. Try to set realistic expectations based on how you are feeling now, not what you are usually like. Allow yourself to slow down, lower the bar and do less, if possible.
  - 15.** Reframe the meaning of taking a break and allow yourself to enjoy it. This is essential for your body, brain and wellbeing. Sitting on the sofa watching Netflix for a whole day doesn't make you lazy – if you enjoy it (which you are more likely to if you allow yourself to), it is an activity that helps restore your resources and rest your brain and body. And that's more necessary than ever right now.
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