

Mentally healthier conditions for councillors and communities

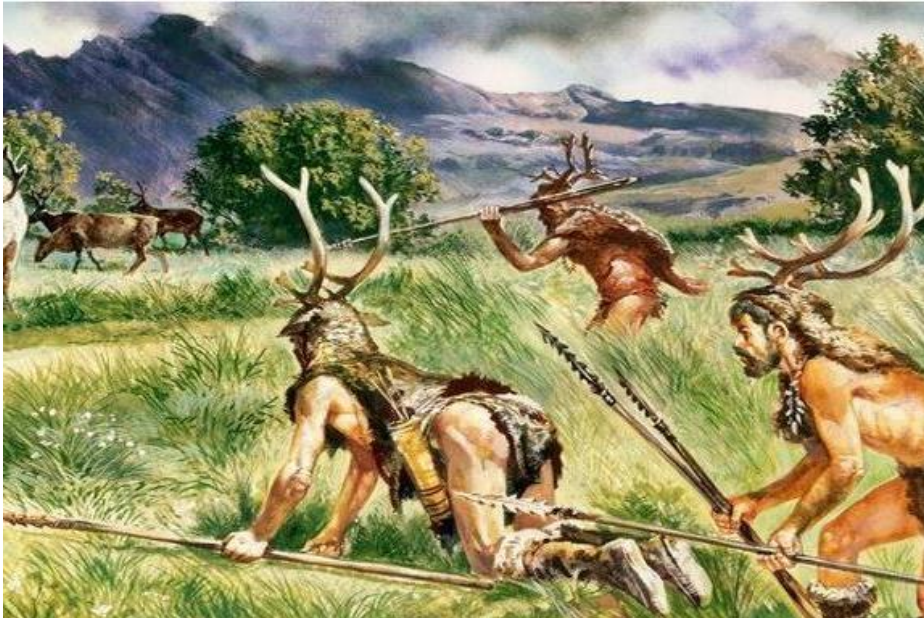
Part one (of two):

Mentally healthier conditions for
councillors

15 March 2021

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How hunter gatherers can adjust to a Lockdown Zoom world



Presenter/author - Councillor Ed Davie

- Recovering alcoholic and depressive
- Benefitted from anti-depressant medication, cognitive behaviour therapy, Alcoholics Anonymous - **there is support - get help if you need it**
- Lambeth councillor since 2010 – swapped AA meetings for council ones
- LGIU award-winning scrutiny chair for seven years
- Cabinet member for three years
- LGA expert peer since 2013
- Health charities including BMA, Mental Health Foundation since 2009
- King's College London public health master's and studied social determinants of health with Professor Sir Michael Marmot at UCL

This is part one of a two-part webinar

In this session we will cover:

- 1. Context of mental health for councillors**
- 2. Look at evolutionary and physiological (how our bodies work) approaches to creating optimal conditions for mental health**
- 3. Social media and real-world relationship management**

- We will not be talking about mental health conditions or illnesses although most advice, like exercise regularly, applies whether you enjoy good mental health or have a diagnosis of most kinds.

- In part two we will look at using local government tools to improve community mental health using the principles we have learned in part one

During this session please write down at least three things you are going to try to improve on (be as specific as you can) for example:

- 1) 'Commute' via coffee shop in morning and park in evening
 - 2) Turn off all my electronic devices at 7pm
 - 3) Call mum every Saturday 10am and best mate Sunday 11am
- **Diarise these actions**
 - **Record completion**
 - **Complete at least 15 times (this creates neural pathways, like sheep tracks in your brain)**

World Health Organisation factors behind health and illness

Social determinants – like poverty and discrimination

Environment - like housing and access to green space

Individual factors – like genetics and behaviours

Being a councillor can be stressful at best of times

- Balancing work, family, council commitments
- Demanding constituents
- Uncertainty of elections and other situations
- Managing cuts
- Managing political relationships
- Traumatic case work

And these have not been the best of times – isolation, back to back online meetings, home school

I've read all these books on happiness science so you don't have to....but you should

Because.....

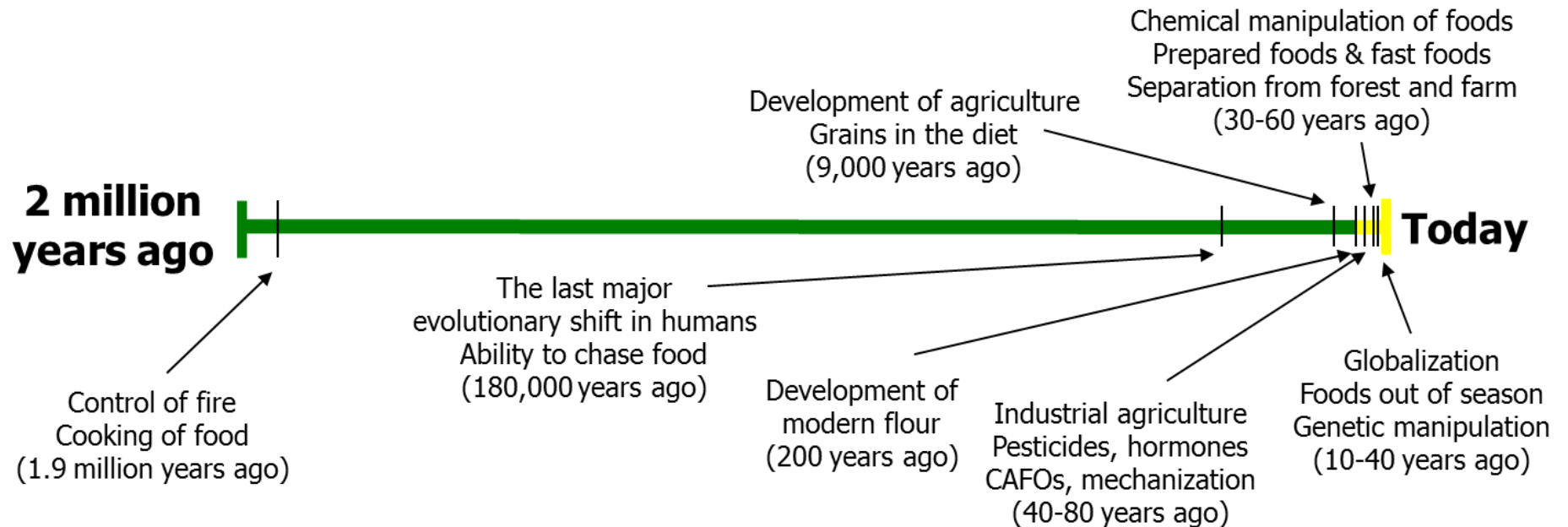


reading and learning:

- Reduces stress/depression*
- Strengthens brain function
- Boosts empathy

*Unclear if council papers count

Evolutionary approach: Human beings have evolved over two million years – mostly as hunter gatherers



Sense of control vital to health

‘For most of their history humans have lived as hunter gatherers in small egalitarian bands of 100 or so individuals with no state structures. In such bands there was no means by which any single individual or elite could exercise permanent coercive dominance over others.’

Tyranny and mental health Riadh T. Abed *British Medical Bulletin*, Volume 72, Issue 1, 2004, Pages 1–13, **Published:** 14 March 2005

Our physiological (how our bodies work) and psychological (minds) processes evolved to be:

- Free from external control
- Physically active, hunting and gathering, a lot of the time
- Rewarded with dopamine for eating sugar and fat
- Stimulated with ‘flight or fight’ hormones when at risk
- In close proximity to our tribe
- Living in the natural environment

In contrast we have created an environment that:

- Controls much of our time and activity
- Minimises physical activity
- Surrounds us with fatty and sugary food
- Triggers ‘flight or fight’ hormones through stress
- Physically distances us from others
- And the natural world

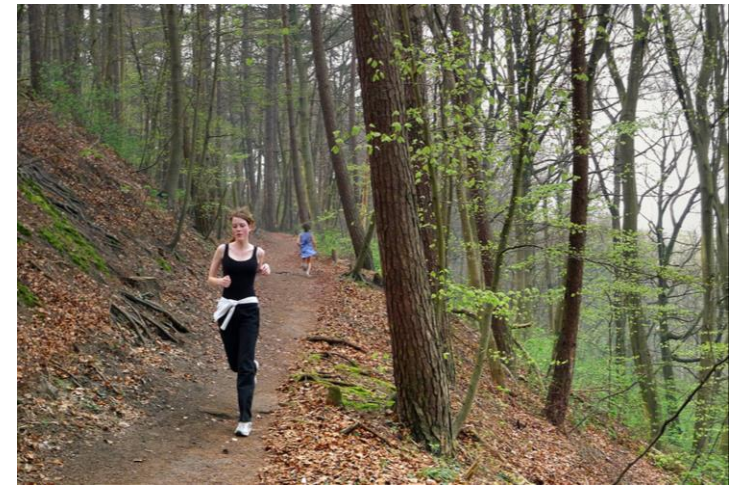
And so it is little wonder we have:

- A mental health crisis costing thousands of lives and over £105bn a year in England alone
- An obesity crisis with 60% of UK adults and a third of children overweight or obese
- An alcohol crisis – 25% drink harmfully
- An environmental crisis – air pollution kills 60k in UK a year, climate change, habitat loss

So we should...

Try to replicate the conditions in which we evolved as much as we can

Run like your ancestors

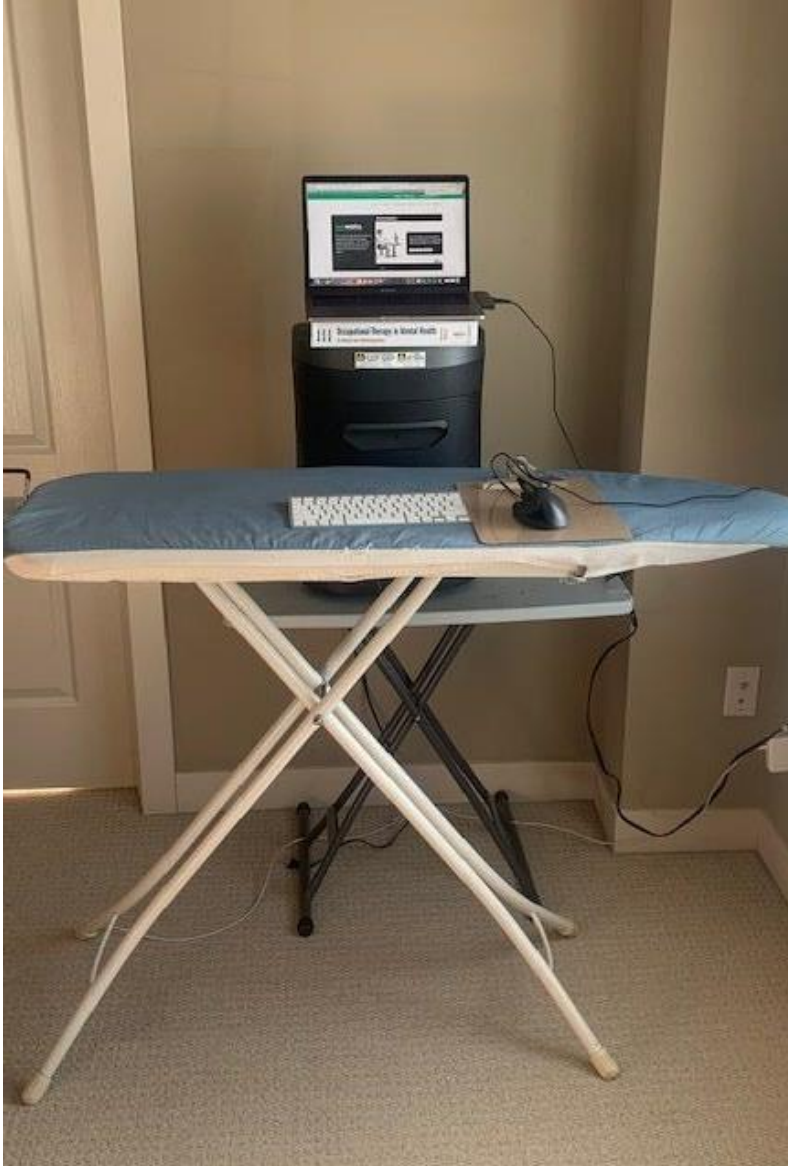


Exercise....

- Releases positive hormones like endorphins and serotonin
- Gets you out, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation
- Shown to reduce stress, depression, anxiety
- Improves sleep – for more on sleep check [Sleep Foundation](#)

Ideally in green space

Studies show that green spaces can have a protective effect on our mental well-being. We're quicker to recover from stress, and less likely to experience depression.



Exercise doesn't have to be running in the forest, gym and sports (although they are great) – build physical motion into your day, every day

- 'Commute' by walking round block to coffee shop
- Buy or improvise a standing desk
- Schedule in 10 minute breaks (50/25 min Zooms)
- Have walking meetings (with one other person)
- Drink lots of of water – you have to walk to get it/rid
- Local shops on foot/bike rather than big car shop
- Cycle round your ward
- Gardening and housework count!
- Take the stairs rather than lifts or escalators
- Get off the bus one or two stops early
- Apps like Couch to 5k
- Self monitoring (step counters) proved to help

Live in the forest – get in the garden, parks, countryside as much as possible:

Even house plants count!



RHS says houseplants:

- Improve mood
- Reduce stress levels
- Increase productivity
- Reduce blood pressure
- Reduce fatigue
- Decreased pain

Connect with your tribes

- Keep in contact with loved ones. At times of stress, we work better in company and with support. Try and keep in touch with your friends and family – these are ‘strong ties’
- But ‘weak ties’ are also important. When it is safe to do passing social contact like talking to neighbours, shop staff other acquaintances – (other councillors!) are also important.

Live in the moment and make memorable moments

Mindfulness

- Reduces depression, anxiety, stress
- Experiences not possessions



HUMAN ENDOCRINE SYSTEM

Organs involved in the endocrine system produce the hormones that regulate a multitude of biological processes from conception to death. That includes growth, brain development and function, metabolism and reproduction, all acting in concert with each other.

HYPOTHALAMUS

A part of the brain, the hypothalamus is the primary connection between the brain and the rest of the endocrine system via the pituitary. Metabolic processes that are largely automatic, such as body temperature, thirst and fatigue, are regulated through the hypothalamus.

PINEAL GLAND

A tiny gland in the brain, the pineal's primary function is to produce melatonin, which helps regulate sleep patterns. The pineal gland may also contribute to the release of sex hormones by the pituitary gland, which regulates reproduction.

THYROID GLAND

Located at the front of the neck, the thyroid gland releases hormones that affect the body's metabolic rate, protein synthesis and blood-calcium levels. A release of thyroid hormones increases the burning of fat and glucose, boosts the heart beat and raises the breathing rate. During fetal development, thyroid hormones play a critical role in brain maturation.

PITUITARY GLAND

Sometimes called the "master gland," the pituitary is a pea-sized structure that takes signals from the hypothalamus and releases a variety of hormones, which in turn trigger hormone secretion in other endocrine glands.

THYMUS GLAND

Important in early development, the thymus stimulates the production of T cells, important to a body's immune response. After puberty, when T cells have reached an adequate number, sex hormones begin to shut down the thymus, which continues to atrophy through adult life.

OVARIES

Besides producing eggs, the ovaries secrete estrogen, testosterone and progesterone. Estrogen is responsible for sexual maturation in females and maintenance of reproductive organs. Progesterone prepares the uterus for pregnancy and helps regulate reproductive cycles. In women, small amounts of testosterone can regulate mood, bone growth and other conditions.

PANCREAS

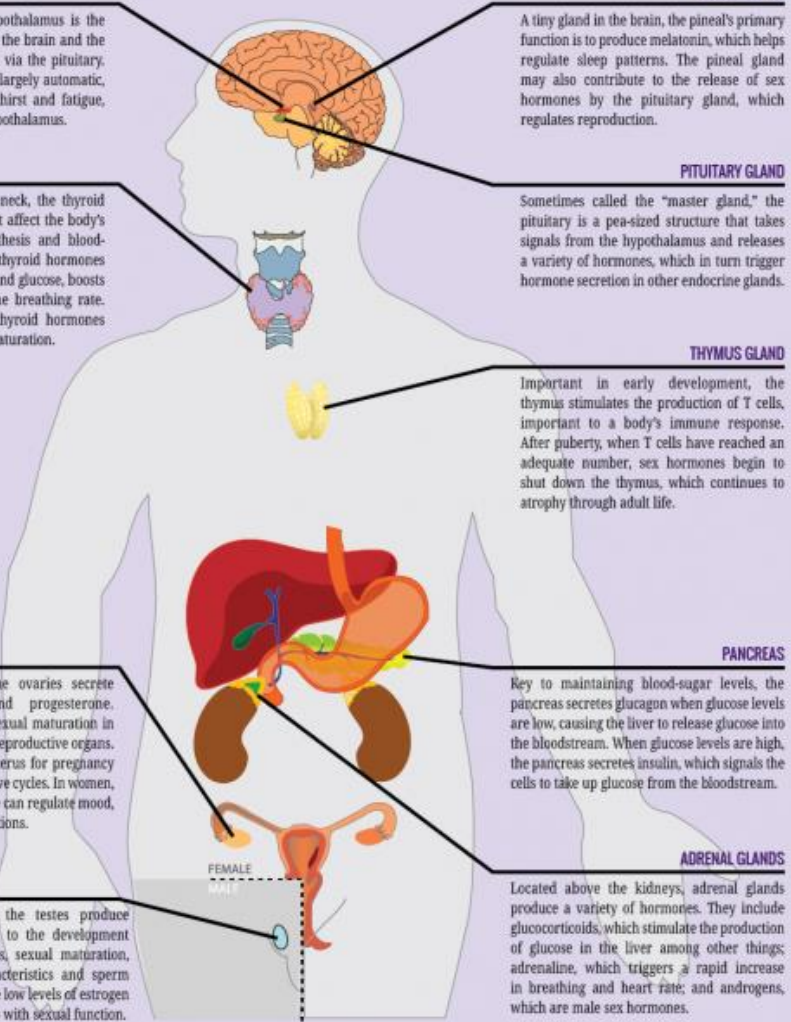
Key to maintaining blood-sugar levels, the pancreas secretes glucagon when glucose levels are low, causing the liver to release glucose into the bloodstream. When glucose levels are high, the pancreas secretes insulin, which signals the cells to take up glucose from the bloodstream.

TESTES

Besides producing sperm, the testes produce mainly testosterone, critical to the development of male reproductive organs, sexual maturation, maintenance of male characteristics and sperm production. Men also produce low levels of estrogen and progesterone, which help with sexual function.

ADRENAL GLANDS

Located above the kidneys, adrenal glands produce a variety of hormones. They include glucocorticoids, which stimulate the production of glucose in the liver among other things; adrenaline, which triggers a rapid increase in breathing and heart rate; and androgens, which are male sex hormones.



Source: UW Puget Sound Institute

Physiological approach: Regulate your hormones-chemical messengers around your endocrine system

Oxytocin: bonding hormone produced when we feel safe, connected, and close to people ...or animals



- Hugging and holding hands with loved
- Being affectionate with friends or family
- Giving compliments
- Preparing and sharing food with loved ones
- Listening to music, singing, dancing together
- Petting pets

Serotonin: 'happiness hormone'

- Sunshine (Also good for Vitamin D)
- Aerobic exercise (that raises heart rate) releases Tryptophan (an amino acid) which your body then converts into Serotonin. Especially in green space.
- Eating Tryptophan rich food (oily fish, poultry, cheese, eggs) with carbohydrates
- Meditation

Dopamine: reward chemical triggered by things like praise, positive outcomes, winning, and food

- Eating your favourite treat (in responsible, balanced quantities)
- Celebrating the little wins in daily life
- Engaging in self care
- Listening to feel good music
- Finishing a task or project you started – ticking off lists

Endorphin - natural pain killer.

- Exercising
- Laughing (especially with others) - comedy
- Eating dark chocolate and spicy food
- Being artistic
- Sex

Social media – hunter gatherers didn't have it....



Social media – what is your: Objective, Strategy, Tactics

What is your objective?

- Be an effective ward councillor?
- Help vulnerable people across your borough?
- Gain promotion and influence in the council and borough?
- Become an MP?
- Maybe all of these?

This should steer what social media you use and how you use it

Effective ward councillor

- Door knocking
- Community events and meetings
- Leafletting
- NextDoor
- Facebook groups
- Whatsapp groups

Higher profile – interested in the wider world

- Twitter

For the younger people and to reach them

- Instagram
- TikTok
- SnapChat
- YouTube

Electronic hygiene

- Tech firms spend huge sums understanding and manipulating the behavioural processes we have been discussing
- Social media and gaming drip-feeds you dopamine hits – see my son playing Fortnite or me on Twitter
- Beware radicalising inflammatory algorithms
- You can turn off notifications
- Set ‘Do not disturb’ modes after certain hours
- Change Twitter settings so they are just newest rather than most inflammatory tweets
- Set privacy limits on Facebook and other settings

More tips (I don't always manage)

- Don't get into rows or respond to criticism - usually snipers have fewer followers and you only draw attention to them
- Try to spread useful, positive messages rather than attacks
- Mute and block freely - it is your channel, you don't have to be available to trolls
- Have digital detox time - everyday, on holidays - be present with family and friends. Set time limits

Relationships with colleagues and constituents

- Be Jackie Weaver - polite and professional
- Think Kamala Harriss not Donald Trump
- Find a calmness mentor and try and ask yourself: 'what would x do in this situation'
- Treat everyone like you'll need their vote one day
- But tell them firmly if their conduct is unreasonable
- Involve whips, democratic services if needed

To sum up

- Seek help and support. Talk about your problems and ask GP if overwhelmed
- Build more exercise into your day
- Eat, drink and sleep sensibly
- Take control of social media and work patterns
- Be present and stay in touch
- Be kind to yourself and those around you

My ideal mentally healthy day

700 - Wake up at usual time - cuddle wife

730 - Prepare healthy breakfast with children listening and singing along to music

830 - Walk son hand-in-hand to school talking to him and other families

9 - Tick off list of useful tasks with lots of water and breaks in garden

1230 – Tryptophan sandwich talking with wife with no screens

1300 - call mum

1330 - productive work with breaks

1530 - go for cycle and run – say ‘hi’ to fellow joggers

1630 - shower with nice soap

1700 - Dark chocolate bar - bit more work

1800 - Spend time with family, spicy dinner – share problems and support

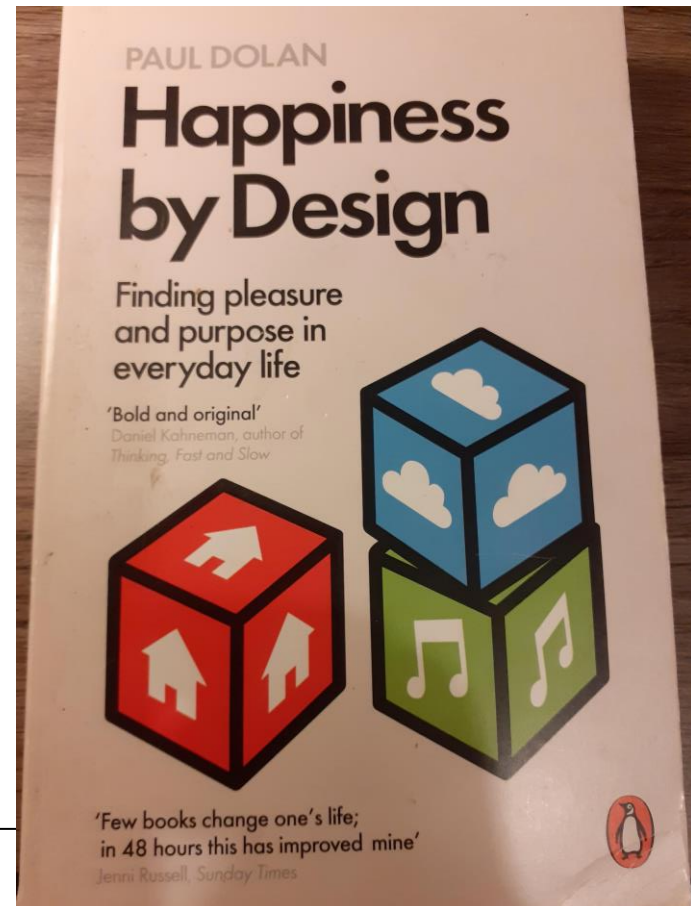
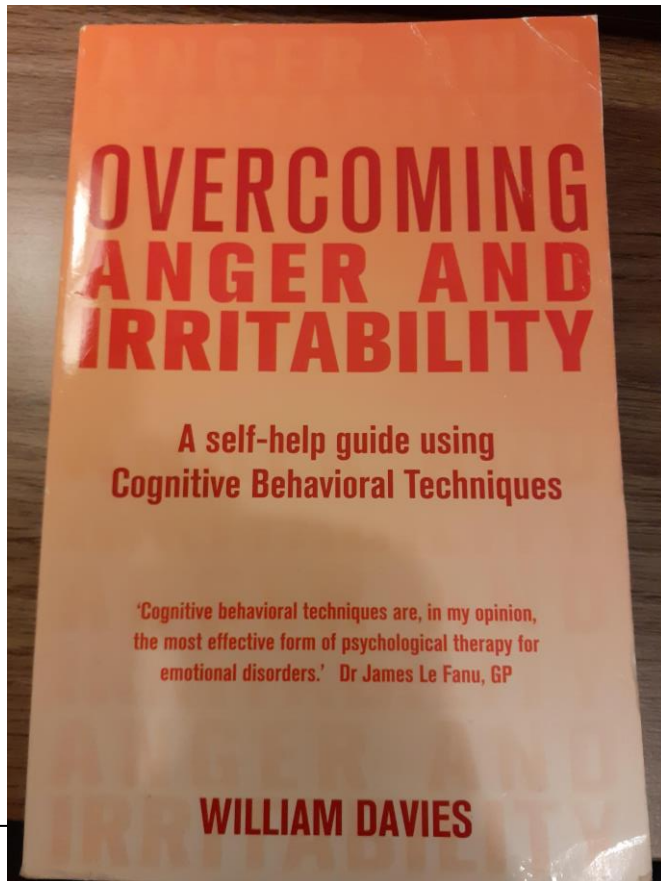
2000 - end screen time - talk about today’s wins, what we are grateful for, holiday plans

2200 - reading, cuddles

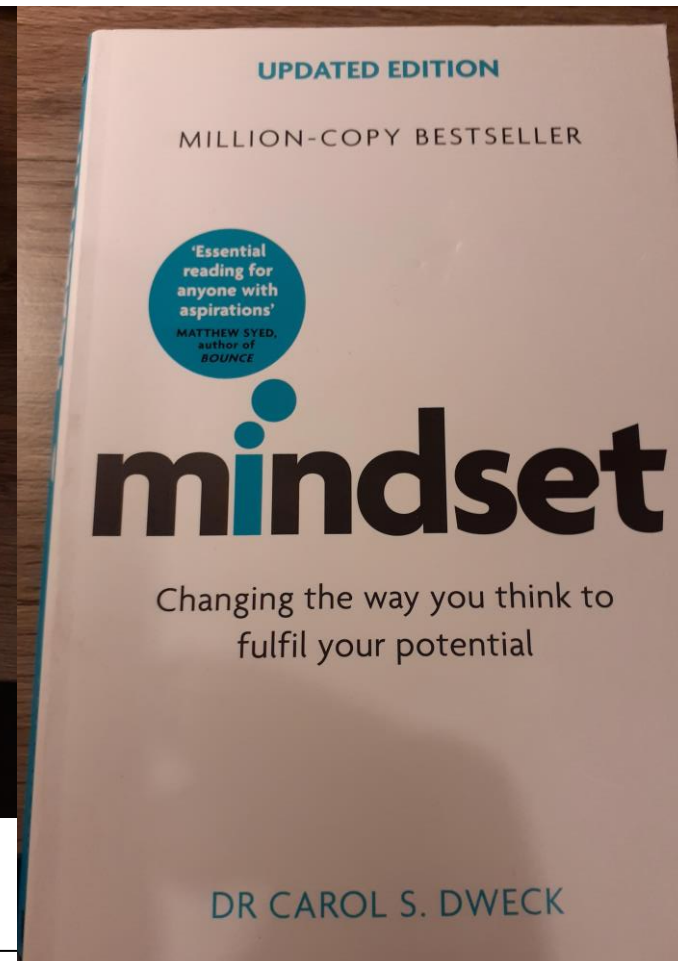
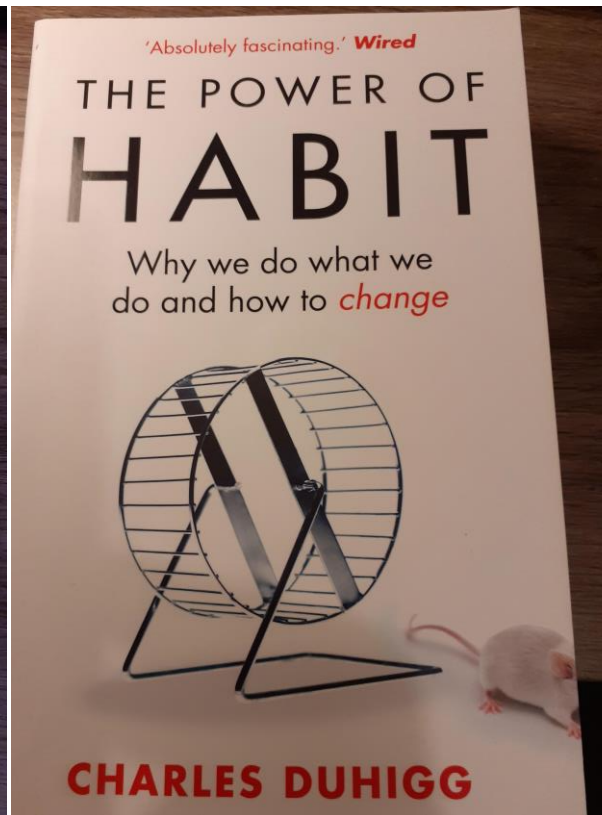
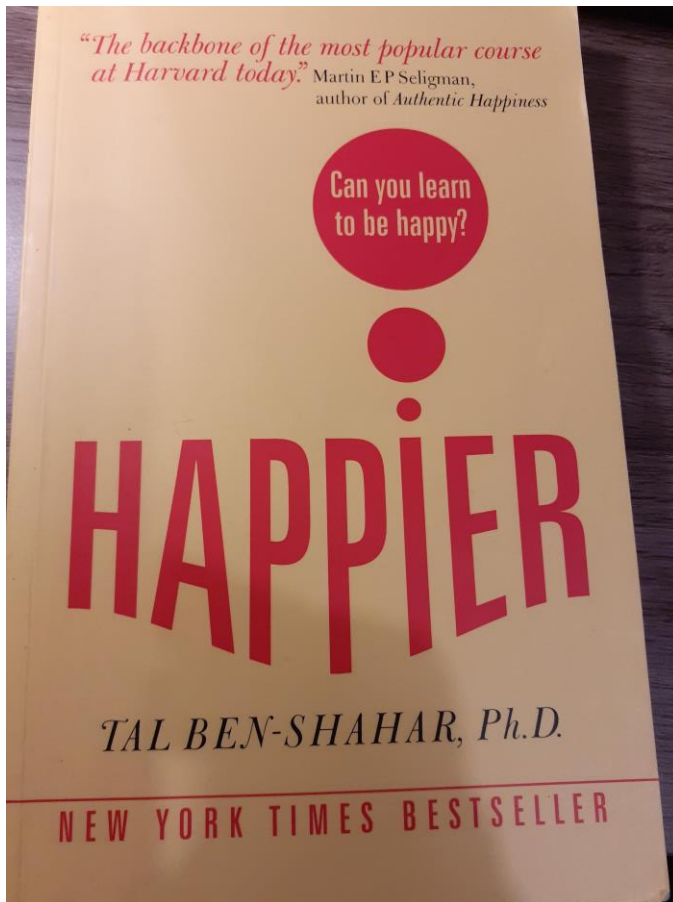
2300 - sleep

No alcohol, cigarettes, Twitter fights, arguments

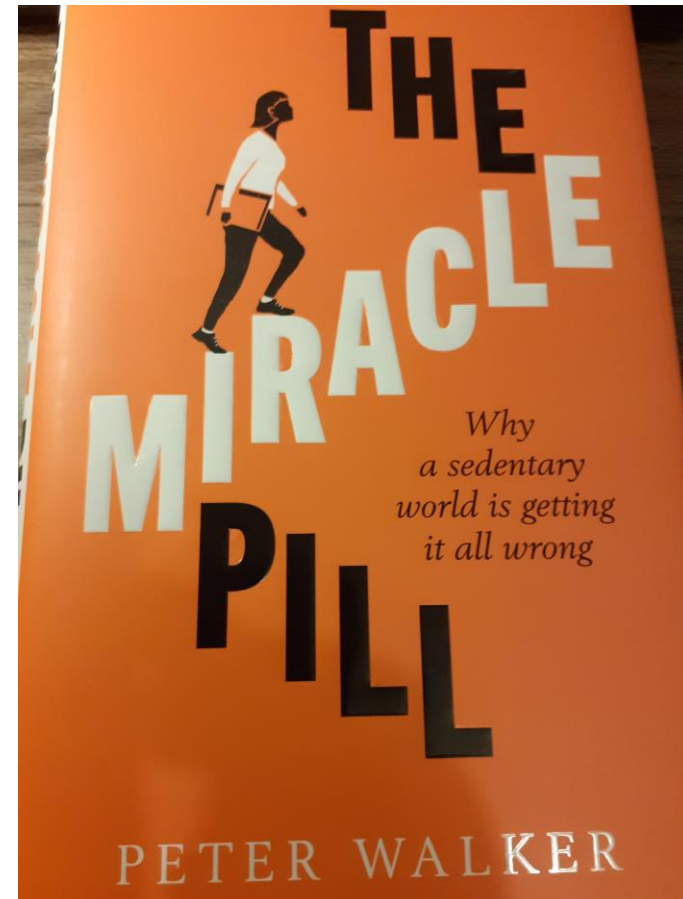
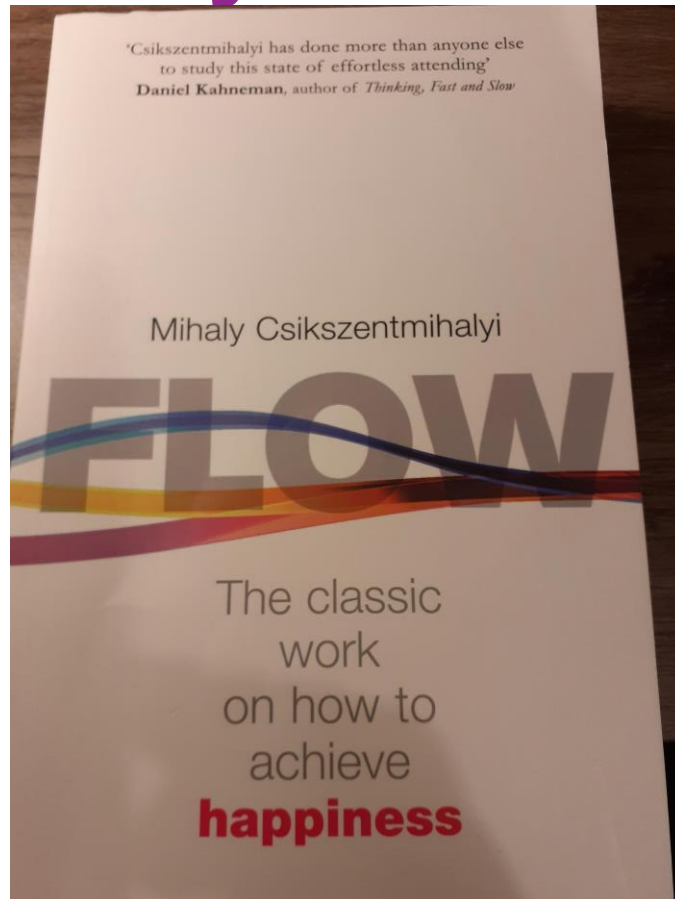
Further reading



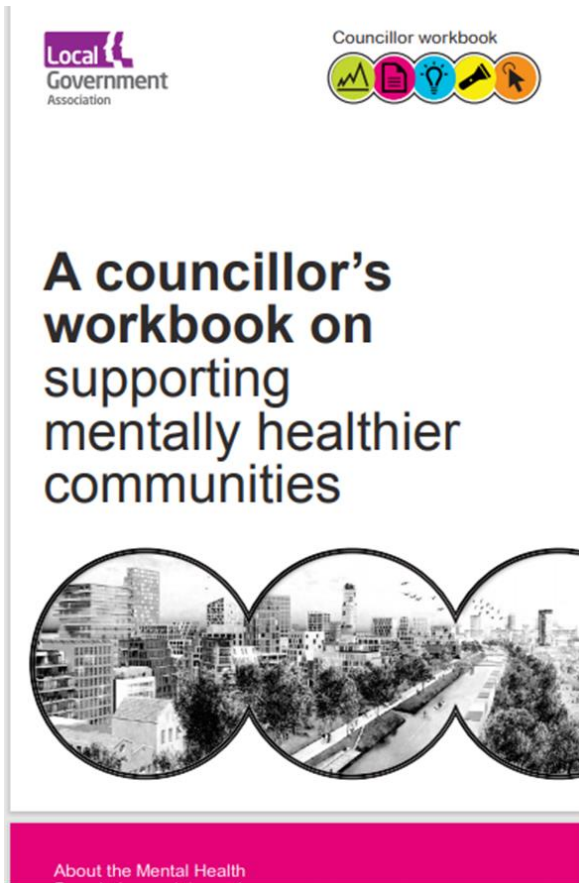
And some more...



Finally...

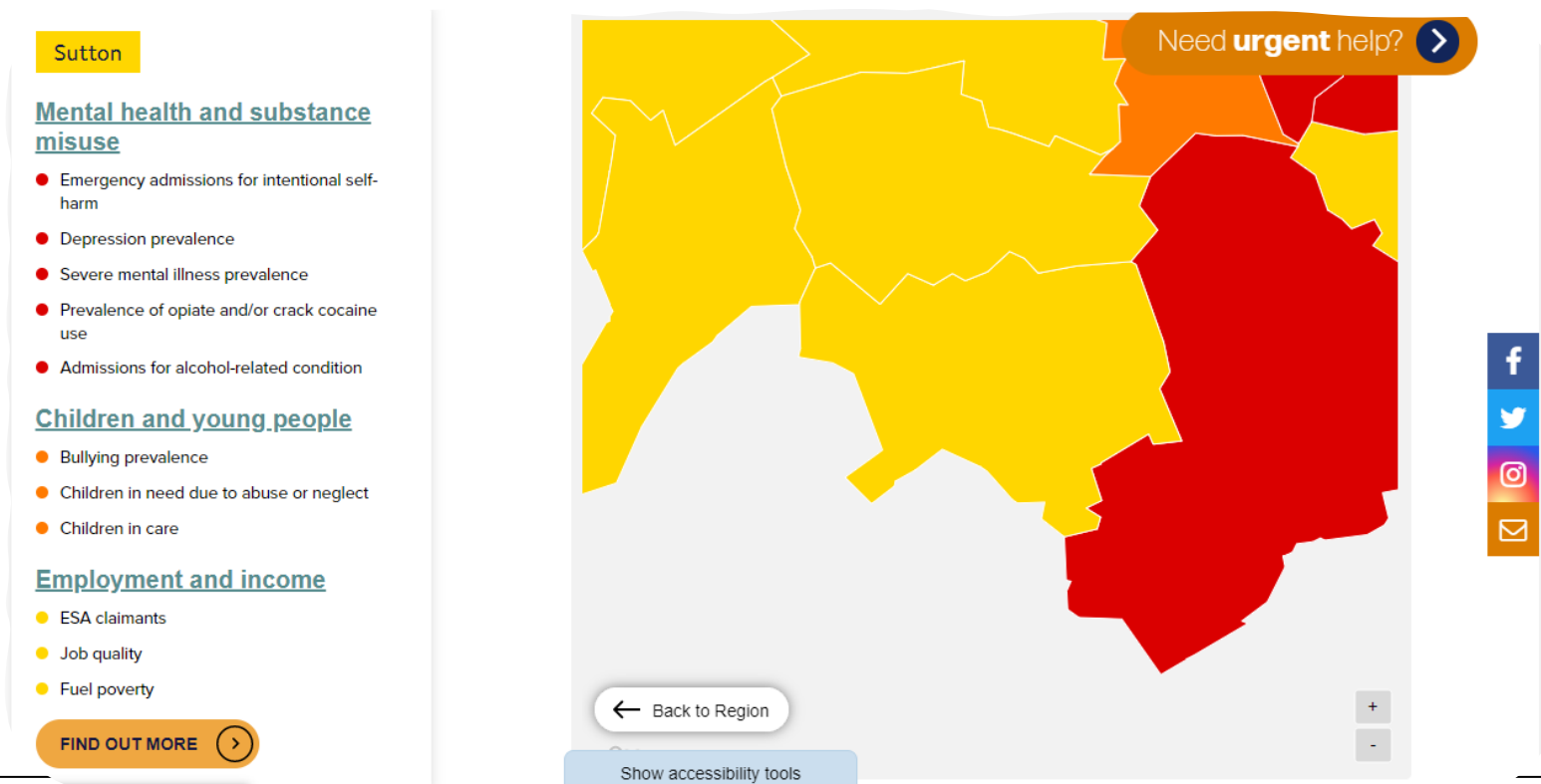


Part two of this training based on:



Cllr's workbook on supporting mentally healthier communities (local.gov.uk)

This training also available bespoke for your council as interactive group sessions



Please complete two minute feedback

<https://s.surveymonkey.com/giT5WvFsd>

- Contact me: edavie@lambeth.gov.uk
- @EdDavie