



How to Stay Sane

Philippa Perry

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Everyone accepts the importance of physical health; isn't it just as important to aim for the mental equivalent? Philippa Perry has come to the rescue with *How to Stay Sane* -- a maintenance manual for the mind.

Years of working as a psychotherapist showed Philippa Perry what approaches produced positive change in her clients and how best to maintain good mental health. In *How to Stay Sane*, she has taken these principles and applied them to self-help. Using ideas from neuroscience and sound psychological theory, she shows us how to better understand ourselves. Her idea is that if we know how our minds form and develop, we are less at the mercy of unknown unconscious processes. In this way, we can learn to be the master of our feelings and not their slave.

This is a smart, pithy, readable book that everyone with even a passing interest in their psychological health will find useful.

How to Stay Sane Details

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From Reader Review How to Stay Sane for online ebook

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Frankie Della Torre says

I've grown fond of the School of Life as of lately, I must admit.

Self-Observation: Socrates once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Examining my life, however, is my source of life—since, without it, life is paradoxically unlivable (I mean that in a figurative and literal sense). But what is this self-examination process? It's, in short, tenderness, understanding, acceptance—of one's thoughts, but more specifically, one's feelings. Plato knew long ago that the human brain is split into three different structures: the appetite, spirit, and reason. Today, neuro-scientists have revealed that Plato was more or less correct: Our brain is split into the brain stem, left brain, and right brain, each of which are in charge and operate different parts of the mind and body. Put simply, the right side of the brain is in charge of emotions; and the left side is in charge of reasoning. Fascinatingly, the right side of the brain is the source and genesis of all brain activity, while the left side works retroactively with the data that's already been given to it by the right side. What this means is that reasoning happens after, and is subservient to, emotions. Emotions come first, and are more basic to human personality and behavior, than reasoning.

What does all of this mean for self-observation? Well, basically, if we can sit and think—meditate, pray, reflect (whatever you want to call it)—for long enough, non-judgmentally feeling what we feel and thinking what we're thinking, the positive effects upon human development and well-being are remarkable. If we can develop pathways from left brain to right brain, if we can make friends of them—friends, indeed, of ourselves—we can stay “sane.” This can be done many different ways: with a therapist, journaling, talking with a friend or spouse. But self-observation is a particular way of examining that takes place with one's self. It is an exercise one does alone. Since the left and right sides of the brain are distinguishable, many of our thoughts and evaluations of ourselves are bound to be harmful to us—much more, they'll probably be unrealistic too. The goal of self-observation is to sit, think, feel and receive our feelings and thoughts without evaluating them too quickly. Of course, the goal is to ultimately change ourselves for the better, but this cannot take place while we're under our own judgmental magnifying glass, ready to cast the first stone at ourselves! Socrates' mandate “know thyself” all of the sudden starts to look a lot less like self-critical appraisal and a lot more like self-care and self-love. Here's a tip: when you find yourself frustrated or mad or annoyed... ask yourself how your breathing is. Most likely, your shoulders and back will be tight and your breath will be short. Take some deep breaths and sit with your feelings for a time, maybe journal about them. You don't need to have any goal or destination while you journal. Just write down your thoughts and feelings, even if their little scribbles that wouldn't make sense to anybody else but you!

Relating with Others: There's a reason why solitary confinement is a form of torture; being alone and lonely is tormenting. That is why being in relationship with others (contrary to a crass Western individualism) is crucial to staying sane. Martin Buber knew that real living is meeting. Carl Rogers knew the same. Being

with others—open, vulnerable, naked, real, weak, authentic with another person is central to not only being sane, but to being human. That is why protecting and nurturing our relationships is so important. Our relationships are some of the most sacred, special, and as many of us know, fragile foundations of our lives. But nurturing a relationship takes time and effort, communication and dedication, commitment and passion. The goal is to remain open to one another, able to affect and be affected. On the communication aspect of this, the late Marshall Rosenberg has been helpful in developing what he called “Nonviolent Communication.” It’s important, too, as Carl Rogers knew, to provide the conditions for two people to grow into one another. This is done through fostering a safe place to be vulnerable—by remaining empathically interested in what the other is saying, without evaluating or condemning, but just trying to understand and receive. This is difficult to do, chiefly because oftentimes the people we’re listening to inevitably say things that rub up against what we think and feel, even calling us into question. Three things are important to remember here: Firstly, we, the speaker, need to learn to communicate better. This is why self-observation is crucial: we need to know what it is that we are REALLY feeling and thinking. We’ve all been in fights with our partner about things that really don’t get at the real issue or need. We yell about some insignificant occurrence, all the while avoiding the real thing that is bothering us. So, rather than continue fighting about silly issues, good communication needs to happen—and that can only happen if we understand our inner life, why we feel what we feel, what happened that caused us to feel like we did, etc. Secondly, the listener, when being told that their action(s) hurt their partner/friend should be quick to listen and slow to speak. By this, I mean that what the speaker is saying tells us more about them and their views and their expectations than anything else. Maybe their expectations are unrealistic, and so their needs are entirely unwarranted. Maybe they’re saying they feel like you don’t love them because all they need is a hug! Is that so offensive? A hug? The need for a hug? No, surely it’s not. It’s important to be good listener and hear the needs BEHIND the words and thoughts. Hear the feelings, not the words! Lastly, the goal is not to be right—the goal is to be reconciled to one another in love. Being right, in fact, IS being reconciled. Right and wrong are unhelpful and are barriers to unity. Healthy relationships leave that sort of language behind altogether and instead opt for a much more vulnerable, deep, risky form of self-disclosure. The only hope we have of staying sane, and of flourishing, is to have deep and lasting relationships with people we love and are loved by.

Stress: A little stress is good; too much stress is bad. Good stress comes with taking small risks, trying new things, which make new and deep neural pathways in the brain and boost creativity. This good stress is like healthy exercise for the brain.

The Stories We Tell: We all relate to the world according to the stories handed down to us—particularly the stories from when we were young. Perhaps our father never believed in us. Perhaps our mother divorced our dad when we were young, leaving us feeling abandoned and unwanted. Or perhaps our parents had a very healthy marriage and modelled for us love, affection, and loyalty. The point is this: The stories we tell ourselves, and the stories we’ve received from those around us, define who we are and why we’re here. Moreover, the stories affect us down to our very personalities and behaviors. I take this to be the hermeneutical aspect of our lives—everything boils down to interpretation. How we look at something—unconsciously or consciously—plays an integral part of how we live our lives. Knowing these stories, and rewriting the ones that ruin our lives, is an important part of staying sane.

Jenni Moody says

"Part of staying sane is knowing what our story is and rewriting it when we need to" (Perry 95).

A great, small book that is easy to get into and moves quickly to avoid feelings of being overwhelmed by

ways to fix destructive behaviors. I love Perry's voice, which is very conversational and friendly. She often speaks about her training as a therapist, but in a way that makes her feel more human and trustworthy.

There's an exercise section at the back of the book, and her suggestions such as keeping a journal are not new to me, but the way she presents these exercises makes me - for the first time - eager to try them.

A great, hopeful read that presents concrete examples and suggestions.

Todd N says

If I didn't know better I would say that this is Alain de Botton writing under a pseudonym. It has the same type of clear, calm prose dotted with references to the Western Canon.

But if it isn't written by him it is clearly influenced by him because this is published by the School Of Life, a London institute(?) school(?) refuge(?) co-founded by him.

This is a short, practical guide to the best thinking about how to maintain sanity. (In brief: exercise, keeping a diary, and being a good friend -- none of which I do, incidentally. Make of that what you will.)

It's like a users manual for your brain. It's trying to apply a lot of material to a very broad audience, so it is of necessity descriptive rather than prescriptive. That's just fine with me since it's so well-grounded in our (admittedly nascent) understanding of neuroscience and truths that have tended to emerge from Western Civ.

Put on a disguise, head over to the Self Help section of the bookstore, and check it out. Highly recommended though I know that I will never do any of the exercises listed in the book.

Sasha says

For such a short, cutesy guide, this was far clearer and more helpful than I expected. Not an in-depth read, but the information, suggestions, and exercises are practical and concise.

Tamara says

Short and surprisingly helpful.

Favorite Quotes

Sanity falls into two groups: one of people who have strayed into chaos and whose lives lurch from crisis to crisis, and ones who are in a rut and operate from a limited set of outdated rigid responses. Some of us manage to belong to both groups at once. This book is about how to stay on the path between those two extremes, how to remain stable and yet flexible, coherent and yet able to embrace complexity.

When we become more sensitive towards ourselves and more knowledgeable about our own feelings, we are more able to attune to, and empathize with, the feelings of other people. In short, self-awareness improves

our relationships.

We need to allow ourselves to be open to the impact of others if we are to impact upon them.

Often new behaviours feel false because they are unfamiliar, but an optimistic outlook is no more false than always assuming that nothing good will ever happen,

I worry...about what might happen to our minds if most of the stories we hear are about greed, war and atrocity. For this reason I recommend not watching too much television. Research exists that shows that people who watch television for more than four hours a day believe that they are far more likely to be involved in a violent incident in the forthcoming week than do those who watch television for less than two hours per day.

If we practice more optimism, disasters will still happen - but predicting disasters does not make them more tolerable or ward them off.

So how do we stay sane? We can develop our faculties of self-observation so that we can have the capacity to observe even our strongest emotions, rather than being defined by them, allowing ourselves to take in the bigger picture. Self-observation helps us to avoid too much self-justification and getting stuck in patterns of behaviour that no longer work for us. We can prioritize nurturing relationships and allow ourselves to be open. We can relate - not as who we *think* we should be, but who we actually *are*, thus giving ourselves the chance to connect and form bonds with others. We can seek out 'good stress' to keep our minds and bodies fit for purpose, and we can be watchful of the stories we hear and the belief systems we live our lives by. We can edit our story at any time, to right ourselves if we veer off course either into chaos or rigidity.

Nickolette says

This sanity thing demands effort and time. One should reflect, keep a diary, invest in relationships..., do excersises with their partner, do physical excersises, pick up new hobbies thus keep learning new things. Honestly, who has the time? "If you don't use it you lose it" and "If we do not grow we shrink" are depressing thoughts on a certain level because there are so many things to work on. The day is not long enough to work only on the body, what is left for the intellect, not to mention the 8-hour workday and the overwhelming load of errands. The exercises described in the end of the book are the type of eastern focused attention techniques - on the breathing, on your thoughts, on the mundane things we do (washing dishes, taking a bath, etc.) - and very similar to the relaxation techniques that the yoga practices end up with.

I say the above without any negative connotations. Of course you have to work for the things that are precious. This book is in a way in the category of the self-help books or how-to books but it doesn't offer quick solutions. It lacks the American "everyone can do it", "everybody can succeed". As Alain de Botton put it (most likely he was quoting someone else) "Life is cheerful is the devil's talk".

Conscious, curious and in good company seem to be the keys to a sane and probably happy life, but I want to focus more on the last chapter of the book which is called What's the story? and is concerned with the patterns we have adopted to deal with different situations, the filters through which we look at the world. Sometimes those patterns serve us well, sometimes they lead us to a self-defeating behavior. We can brake those patterns when they don't work in our best interest and edit our story. When thinking about this, a scene came into my mind – one of the most impressive scenes from an overall impressive movie – The Great

Beauty. Rome's intellectuals are sitting drinking on a rooftop discussing art and life. A beautiful mature woman is telling the story of her success. The main character Jeb is irritated by her arrogance and decides to put her down in front of their friends. He tells the same story, but it is glamorous no more. "Stefania, mother and woman, you're 53 with a life in tatters like the rest of us. Instead of acting superior and treating us with contempt, you should look at us with affection. We're all on the brink of despair. All we can do is look each other in the face, keep each other company, joke a little. Don't you agree?"

<http://slpssm.blogspot.com/2015/07/ho...>

Kotryna says

A lovely read for those in need of instruction (ain't we all?) on how to observe your own feelings, actions, and work on personal growth by becoming more aware of yourself and others around you.

All very positive; in addition to the theory on self-reflection, stress, observing and recognizing own behavioral patterns, working on self-control, relationships, and other human interactions, the book includes case studies of personal change and a few exercises of self-development.

However, I will admit that I couldn't shake off the knowledge of who the author is married to while reading the book. That biographical fact was introduced in first lines of the book, probably as a selling point, but in my opinion, it did a disservice to authors own standing as a talented independent writer with her own thoughts and knowledge to share.

Not a life-changing book, but a little something to read on a bus or think of while having a walk on a snowy day.

Banafsheh says

I enjoyed reading the book. Still working on its helpful and practical exercises.

I guess the main purpose of School of Life which is using psychology and philosophy in daily life is the essence of this book.

Jody says

A friend gave me this book around eighteen months ago, and after a fairly traumatic 2015 I felt it was a good time to finally read it.

I think it's a great book. It's realistic, and accessible - not a dry, difficult non-fiction book at all. There are some truly great insights in the book, as well as a number of different exercises to help you become more self-aware, and to help create new, more beneficial neural pathways. I'll certainly be keeping this book on hand & starting to do some of the suggested exercises.

Laura Youngstrum says

EVERYBODY READ THIS SERIES OF BOOKS

Leo Robertson says

Great! Filled with all-too-recognisable (all me) character studies and advice to avoid negative spirals and achieve your goals!

adriana says

This is just quite simply the first so-called self-help book I have ever read or had the inclination of reading. I must say it has humbled me to the point of no longer so readily writing these kind of books off my list. I have found it both eye-opening at times and comfortingly self-assuring at others. I wish I had read it earlier in life.

Aman Mittal says

How to be Sane written by Philippa Perry is a short, and surprisingly a good book to read. This book is a part of The School of Life series which takes a different approach to introduce self-help genre, in an intelligent way.

Philippa Perry is psychotherapist and in this book she offers some pragmatic insight on observing one's attitude, reactions or thought process. She argues that there are four cornerstones to being sane, to being conscious. Self-observation is one, other being your relationship with others (Man is a social being ~ Seneca), the Good Stress & our own perspective.

She starts with a short introduction to how a human being's mind work, and then takes a reader to a number of pragmatic approaches through exercises that are designed to strength our capacity to recover from adversities. She clearly warns each reader that some of these approaches or exercises may work for some and may not work. It is similar to what is our perspective to the situation or adversity and the approach we take to overcome it.

Sometimes , I get carried away under stress and stop observing my surroundings which results in a sequence of thoughts that conquer my mind and are unrelated to my feeling of that particular situation. This is not a good approach, instead I should stay focused. Well, this book suggest an exercise to stay focus, in general. She calls it, the Grounding Exercise:

To begin with Self-Observing, ask yourself:

What am I feeling?

What am I thinking now?

What am I doing at this moment?

How am I breathing?

Philippa Perry suggests some more exercises which we should consider in forming a habit of. Such as physical exercise, keeping a diary, practising investing in relationships, being keen on to differentiate between Good Stress and bad one, giving attention to your thoughts while doing automated or monotonous work like washing dishes or making coffee, and learning new things. Learning new things is important and useful for the mind.

The last chapter of the book, "What's the story?" concerns with the patterns we develop to deal with a variety of situations. Sometimes, these patterns might serve us well but other times, they may not work at all. In those times, when these design patterns don't work out for us, she suggests that we should edit these patterns, bend them in a way that they work.

I enjoyed reading this book and I think you will too. This book is of the length of a novella and you will comfortably finish it in one sitting or two.

Have a good read.

4 out of 5!

Amir Tesla says

Faaaar better than I expected.

Controlling and maintaining the balance of your mental being is the focus of this book which is fulfilled by examining the four following areas:

1. Self-observation
2. Relationship (quite interesting and insightful chapter)
3. Stress
4. Personal story.

Thorough review soon.
