



BEN ALDRIDGE

HOW TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

**43 WEIRD & WONDERFUL
WAYS TO BUILD A STRONG
RESILIENT MINDSET**



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enquiries@watkinspublishing.com

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Ben's Disclaimer

Some of the ideas in this book have the potential to be extremely dangerous. I've found myself in some interesting situations as a result of them. Please don't do anything crazy and end up killing yourself. I suggest consulting with the relevant medical-/legal-/skill-specific professional before attempting any of the challenges. Stay safe.

d_r0

For Helen, Mum and Dad

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INTRODUCTION

Lying in Caesars Palace hotel thinking that I'm about to have a heart-attack was not the way I had intended to spend my holiday. Especially in Las Vegas. For what felt like the hundredth time in two weeks, I thought I was about to die. My heart was racing, my body shaking and I was sweating like there was no tomorrow. The worst part was the fear though. The fear was so acute and overwhelming it felt as if my head would explode. Adrenaline surged through my body and I couldn't think clearly. My girlfriend Helen sat beside me and was doing her best to try to calm me down but I was struggling to hear her words. Nothing really registered with me. I felt that the outside world had started to shrink around me as I lay on our ridiculous over-sized bed. I stared up at the ceiling and closed my eyes. What had happened to me? What was going on?

Over the previous two weeks, Helen and I had driven from San Francisco to Las Vegas on what was supposed to be a "relaxing" and "fun" holiday in the States. I managed to inadvertently ruin that. Seemingly out of the blue, I was hit by an onslaught of intense symptoms. At first, I thought this was jetlag but it didn't settle down. As soon as we landed in the States, it began – a concoction of nausea, heart palpitations and an added dose of the shakes. There was also an underlying sense of dread that never went away. At times, it was so severe that I would feel like I was about to collapse. This came in waves and left me completely spaced-out and exhausted. I didn't understand what was happening to me and it was very frightening.

The whole road trip was punctuated with these episodes; there were lots of simple things that would cause my symptoms to become intense. At the start of the holiday we stayed in San Francisco's "Tenderloin" district. This notorious neighbourhood was filled with a mix of drug dealers and users. Being there sent my adrenaline through the roof. Every time we left the hotel we were advised to do a massive loop to avoid certain streets. The characters hanging around the neighbourhood were intimidating, and when people are shouting aggressively or lying unconscious on the floor from a drugs/alcohol binge right next to your hotel, it's easy to feel unnerved. For me, I felt unbelievably stressed and my symptoms got worse.

Another time, I had to navigate an eight-lane expressway in Los Angeles which *totally* freaked me out. I would normally have been fine with this sort of thing but really struggled to stay calm.

I felt so uncomfortable and hated the experience. I honestly thought that I was going to crash the car, which would then explode in a ball of flames killing everyone in close proximity. My mind was tormenting me with extreme scenarios and I didn't know how to deal with it.

At one point I found myself driving our rental car into the heart of an electrical storm in the middle of the Arizona desert. It genuinely looked like the world was ending as the storm covered the horizon with a black curtain of cloud and lightning. It sat in the middle of the road – mocking us. There were no exits on the highway and nowhere for us to turn the car around. The only option was to drive straight into the eye of the storm. Terrifying? Absolutely.

Having grown up in the UK, I wasn't prepared for the intensity of American storms. As the car got closer to the heart of the storm, we drove into pouring rain. The windscreen wipers couldn't keep up and visibility disappeared. I was a nervous, edgy, shaking wreck. To make matters worse, lightning was striking all around us. Several times a minute, huge bolts would light up the entire sky. The whole car was buzzing and we could feel the static electricity in the air. The hairs on my arms stood to attention as we navigated the storm. I'd never experienced anything like it in my life and I was completely terrified.

When we finally broke through the back of the storm and made it to clear skies, I whooped with joy. The intensity of the moment was very real and the adrenaline that raced through my body made my hands shake again. However, the relief was only temporary and my underlying fear quickly returned.

That night I couldn't sleep and I felt the symptoms I had been experiencing getting worse. The fear seemed to be ever-present and I was totally confused by it all. Helen had suggested several times that maybe it was my mind that was causing these problems but I wouldn't entertain that thought for a second. How could my mind be causing such physical reactions in my body? I was convinced that this was *totally* physical and that I had picked up an illness on the plane. I was 100 per cent confident that there was nothing wrong with my mind ... but something wasn't right.

The trip finished in Vegas where I ended up not wanting to leave the hotel room. The holiday wasn't the fun adventure it was supposed to be and I was desperate to escape, to go home. I was convinced that I would be fine when I returned to London. But I was wrong.

After returning to the UK things got worse. I would wake up in the middle of the night with a racing heart and blood pumping furiously through my veins. This made sleeping really difficult as I would wake up at random intervals throughout the night in a total panic. The pounding heart became more consistent, I felt constantly sick in my stomach and I started to look really pale. I didn't feel comfortable leaving the house and would constantly be on edge. Staying inside all the time wasn't helping my situation either and I could feel my world starting to shrink.

My parents had agreed with Helen and suggested that I might be working myself up into these frenzied states. They gently tried to suggest that maybe it was coming from my mental state ... I was still convinced that this wasn't the case.

I don't like going to the doctor (who does?) but I had to do something about my situation. I had to figure out what was going on and became desperate to find a solution. I booked an emergency appointment at my local surgery, determined to get to the bottom of everything. I still thought I

had some kind of physical illness so was genuinely surprised when the doctor recognized my symptoms as anxiety. To everyone else – the doctor, Helen and my parents – it must have been blindingly obvious, but I just didn't see it. I couldn't. For some reason, I was unable to notice what was going on. Perhaps I was so afraid of having something “wrong” with my mind that I had managed to rule out the possibility of it being an option. I feel this was down to both ignorance – I didn't know anything about anxiety – and a fear of being “mad”. I didn't fully appreciate that mental health had such a wide range of conditions. I didn't realize that it was something that could affect anyone at any time. I thought it was black or white and you were either “fine” or needed to check into a mental hospital. Ignorance was far from bliss in this instance.

It took a while for me to process my diagnosis and to accept that I had been experiencing a series of panic attacks and acute anxiety (the doctor's official diagnosis). As soon as I began to come to terms with it, I made an important and startling realization – there were times earlier in my life when I had experienced isolated events that were quite clearly panic attacks or anxiety-related issues. When I was a lot younger, I remember getting onto a plane and thinking that I was about to collapse from fear ... I couldn't breathe properly and started to hyperventilate. This lasted for a few minutes and then it went away. I got distracted and didn't think about it again, but this was clearly a panic attack.

There are several more times similar to this that I can remember – on trains, buses and in shopping malls. It was never as intense in the past, but I had obviously experienced anxiety before. Interesting. I became desperate to understand what was going on and why it had got so bad in America. I'm a pretty laid-back person and this level of anxiety in my life was abnormal. I needed to find a solution.

Anxiety is something that affects everyone and will come and go depending upon circumstances. When we feel worried or afraid, we can experience a series of physical symptoms in the body – a rapid heart rate, adrenaline coursing through the veins, dizziness and light-headedness, sweating, nausea and the feeling of unease/general fear are a few common

sensations. This is part of human nature and is sometimes referred to as the “fight or flight” response. If a bear suddenly climbed into your house through the window, I’m pretty sure you would experience all of the previously listed symptoms. This is to be expected (no, not the bear climbing through the window). Our body’s reaction is essentially our survival instinct and is something for which we should be extremely grateful. It has allowed us to survive as a species for thousands of years and helped us to successfully navigate the dangers we encountered. Unfortunately, this system causes problems in the modern world.

Feeling apprehensive about an event in the future is perfectly normal and we can sometimes experience these “fight or flight” symptoms in response to small or imagined threats. Similarly, most people would experience feelings of anxiety if they were suddenly taken skydiving. However, when you start experiencing these sensations without an obvious cause, or the symptoms become overwhelming, this is what generally is referred to as an “anxiety disorder” and will require you to do something about it. When this happens, you need to develop a way to manage the emotions and sensations you are experiencing.

Panic attacks are slightly different. They are essentially moments of very intense anxiety, where you feel extremely overwhelmed and think you’re about to die (not joking). If you’ve never had a panic attack before and you’re having one for the first time, it’s not unusual for an ambulance to be called because you think it’s a heart-attack ... That’s how intense and scary they can be.

Although panic attacks don’t require you to be rushed to hospital like a heart-attack, they can feel very unpleasant. They can be caused by a specific and obvious trigger, like the bear climbing through your window, or alternatively by something that your mind has blown out of proportion, such as being worried about the bus being too crowded (maybe not as scary as a bear). Panic attacks can be a one-off event or recurring. They normally only last a few minutes but are powerful experiences and the intensity of them can cause extreme physical effects.

Panic attacks and anxiety are the two things that I started to experience on my American road trip. They snuck up on me and knocked me for six. I had no coping mechanisms in place and was very ill-educated on mental health. At the time, I had no idea where this fear/anxiety had come from and why it showed up in my life. On paper, I had nothing to worry about – I had a great job, a wonderful girlfriend of many years, a set of brilliant friends and a loving family. Where was this stress coming from and why was I experiencing such acute fear? All of these questions would ultimately lead me on a life-changing adventure that I'm excited to share with you in these pages. Anyway, that can wait, let's get back to the local surgery and my story ...

The doctor suggested a course of talking therapy as a place to begin. I wasn't sure. I'm quite a private person and didn't think that I needed therapy (maybe my mind was too closed at the time). For some reason I wanted to solve the problem myself. I guess being a bit of a control freak didn't help with this. I always had therapy as a back-up if I couldn't personally help myself and this thought gave me confidence. I like figuring things out on my own and have always been good at getting stuck into projects. Learning about anxiety and how I could deal with it became my new obsession and collecting practical tips/coping mechanisms became my new hobby.

I started reading extensively – countless books on philosophy, psychology, CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), self-help, inspirational biographies and anything that I thought might help. My flat looked like a messy library with half-read books lying all over the place – I really did spend a ridiculous amount of time and money on books in an attempt to educate myself on the human mind. To complement this, I started watching online documentaries and videos to help me understand what I was experiencing. I would take notes on everything I was learning too. I felt like a mad scientist searching for a miraculous anxiety cure (I probably looked like one too). Helen was amazing at finding books and articles that she thought I would like and fully encouraged me to explore everything as much as possible.

Over the next few weeks, I began to build a clear picture of what was happening to me, what was going on with my mind and what I could do to take back control. My research gave me loads of theories and ideas to think about.

One concept that really resonated with me was that of the “comfort zone”. We all have comfort zones and they are likely to look different depending on who we are. In reality, there are as many comfort zones as there are people. Billions. These will all take on different shapes throughout people’s lives as they grow and change. I see the comfort zone as something that is continually evolving – its shape dictated by the experiences we encounter.

Let’s imagine that a comfort zone looks like a circle. (You can make yours look like a banana if you must, whatever works for you.) When you’re in the circle (or banana), you feel safe and at ease. When you leave it though, you feel scared, vulnerable and uncomfortable. This is normal and is the model of explanation that most of us are familiar with. Here’s an example: you might feel comfortable talking with friends and colleagues, but when you’re asked to give a presentation to a few hundred people at work, you start to get apprehensive. This type of event could easily push people out of their comfort zones, whereas a casual conversation wouldn’t necessarily do that.

It’s worth noting that we can all have different comfort zones, depending upon what we are doing. If we’re competing in a sport that we are familiar with, we will likely be well within our own comfort zone while, simultaneously, others might be struggling. It won’t take a lot of searching to find areas in your life where your comfort zones are larger circles and you feel relaxed and comfortable. This might be related to your work, your hobbies or your social life. I’m sure you have some areas in your life that you feel confident in.

What’s interesting, though, is that it’s very easy for us to want to stay within those circles and not explore the “dark and scary” area outside our comfort zones. We’re all guilty of this and it’s something that we have to consciously work hard at to change. To actually stretch the shape of our

comfort zones, we need to leave them. We need to explore the areas that are just past the borders and in the unknown. By doing this we push the boundaries and expand our horizons of what we find comfortable.

My comfort zone got very small after the American road trip and I felt like almost everything pushed me out of it. So many things made me uncomfortable and my world had shrunk. I found this extremely frustrating and debilitating, and the idea of deliberately leaving my comfort zone to reshape and expand it didn't appeal to me at all. That is, until I started reading about the Stoics ...

During my extensive research on what I could personally do to take back control of my life, I came across a group of thinkers called the Stoics. The Stoic philosophers of Ancient Greece and Rome were advocates of practising adversity to develop a stronger and more resilient mindset. They would do this in many ways, ranging from eating significantly less food, embracing the elements and practising poverty to wearing clothes/colours that would deliberately embarrass them in front of their peers. No shoes? No problem. Walking barefoot would be seen as a character-building challenge.

I loved these ideas and was impressed by their boldness. This sort of "Stoic training" inspired me. I'm an introvert and the thought of deliberately wearing something outrageous made me shudder! I hate fancy dress and the idea of intentionally forcing myself out of my comfort zone both intrigued and scared me.

I started to explore these ideas in detail and began thinking of ways that I could personally practise adversity. What could I do to leave my comfort zone? If I started challenging myself, would I gain confidence and overcome my anxiety? Like the Stoics, would I be able to build my mental strength? Would leaving my comfort zone help my world to open up again?

Loads of questions were bouncing around in my head so I decided to try an experiment. I wrote a list of all the things that scared me senseless and created a series of challenges around them. This list then expanded from things that I thought would be scary to things that I would find difficult and challenging. Some of the ideas were ridiculous and I enjoyed playing

around with them in my head and on the page. As I began expanding the list, my mind buzzed with new and interesting ways to push myself out of my comfort zone. The ideas came in floods, and in no time at all I was sat with a huge list of difficult, scary and exciting challenges. In fact, there were hundreds. My brain had gone wild and I now had a list of things I could do to toughen up if I could find the courage to go out and do them. The idea for the project was born.

In that moment I decided to stare fear and anxiety in the face and work through my ambitious list of challenges, all in the name of self-improvement. I didn't know how long it would take but decided that I would try to do as many as possible in a year. I felt that a year would be a good amount of time for me to test out the theory properly and see how my mindset changed. If it didn't work, I could always stop doing the challenges and try an alternative approach. The "comfort zone challenges" were ready for action and I declared this personal project my "Year of Adversity". Cue a *Rocky*-inspired training montage in your head. That's pretty much what happened next. Well, almost ...

Across the course of a year, I threw myself into as many ridiculous and challenging situations as possible. At first, this was really slow as I wasn't in a great place to begin with thanks to my anxious and panicky mindset. In reality, I took about six months to build up to my Year of Adversity as I slowly tested the water with small challenges. At the time, it was difficult to do day-to-day tasks without freaking out so I had to start with baby steps. When I was eventually ready, I began properly challenging myself and used every weekend or possible opportunity to take on my challenges and work through the list. I started off slow and easy but over time picked up momentum and began to try bigger and bolder things. My confidence came back and the panic attacks stopped. Progress!

I felt really proud of the changes I had made in my life and it was clear to my close friends and family that there had been a shift in my mindset. As soon as I could see myself improving, there was no stopping me. I could feel things were changing so I fully embraced the concept and in a relatively short space of time had completely turned my life around. It took

a few months of doing challenges until I finally started to feel in control of my mind again. What a relief this was!

The Year of Adversity was the most important of my life to date. Thanks to those challenges, I now have a selection of unusual hobbies and interesting skills. I've also had a bunch of crazy and wonderful experiences that I won't ever forget. Some of these are fantastic dinner stories and have certainly left me with plenty of great memories. I've achieved so much in my year, from running marathons and climbing mountains to walking over 160km (100 miles) in four days along the Cotswold Way. I can now have a conversation in Japanese and have an official exam qualification in the language. This is something I could never have imagined achieving as I've always felt hopeless at languages. I've learned how to pick locks, solve a Rubik's cube in under a minute and memorize the order of a deck of cards after seeing it only once (the ultimate party trick). I've been swimming in the British sea in winter, taken ice baths and slept on a beach in a bivvy bag in the middle of a thunderstorm (that was a *very* interesting experience). I've done loads of travelling and have eaten some repulsive insects along the way. I've also created a morning routine and rise very early to help me achieve more. With this new time, I've written a book (the one you're currently reading) and have created a meditation routine. These are just the tip of the iceberg as to what this year has done for me.

The greatest result, though, is that I'm no longer filled with fear and I feel mentally strong. My anxiety is different now, and it's something I'm able to talk about comfortably. I have a vast number of tools and tricks to use when things start to get difficult, and the confidence to deal with life's problems head-on. I feel that I know more about myself thanks to this whole experience, and for that insight I feel extremely grateful.

Completing the "comfort zone challenges" has allowed me to develop a way to manage my tougher emotions. As human beings we have a huge spectrum of emotions to deal with. Anxiety and fear are on this spectrum and, as with all emotions, there are effective and ineffective ways to work with them. Exploring these emotions in a relatively controlled environment was the key to a huge amount of personal growth for me. I'd be lying if I

said I don't ever get anxious anymore, but I now have a whole host of ways to cope with this. The sensation isn't as disabling and unfamiliar as it used to be. It's now just another emotion that I have as a human being, just like everyone else on this planet, and experiencing it really isn't a problem.

I write all of this to impress upon you how powerful it can be for us to leave our comfort zones. Even if you're someone who isn't particularly anxious, there is still so much mental strength that you can personally foster by using this method of self-development. Having a coping mechanism for dealing with pressure and difficulties is a wise thing to invest in. In fact, it's one of the most important skills you could ever learn, and it can totally change your life. It certainly changed mine! When the going gets tough and life seems to be throwing multiple challenges at you, having the correct attitude and being in control is essential.

The main purpose of the book is to help you (yes, you) to cultivate your mental strength. I will share with you 43 of the most weird and wonderful challenges I have completed on this adventure and encourage you to give them a try. By tackling these challenges, you will be able to develop a personal strategy for dealing with difficulties and adversity. You can test out all of the tips I'm about to give you in the next section and learn to be as calm as a Zen master in a airport queue.

I also guarantee that you will have some wild and ridiculous experiences if you join me on this voyage of self-discovery. You'll amass a wealth of fascinating stories to share (or brag about) and discover more about yourself as you tick challenges off the list and learn how to function effectively when you're embracing the unknown.

Essentially, this book will teach you how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. I hope you enjoy the journey.

HOW TO BUILD MENTAL RESILIENCE

There are plenty of ways to develop mental toughness – looking at ideas from philosophy and popular psychology is a great place to begin. Philosophy has a reputation for being a dry and academic subject. So much so that I used to think philosophy was only for pipe-smoking, tweed-jacket-wearing, older, bearded gentlemen, until I started reading about it. The reality is that philosophy is the ultimate self-help, mind-training tool there is. The wisdom and insight into the nature of existence that various philosophers have written about is incredible. A lot of these ideas are extremely practical and have stood the test of time. Of course, there is a lot of academic philosophy that discusses political systems, ideologies and the nature of existence, but there is also tons of practical, hands-on advice that can be used to live a better life. There's so much philosophy out there to choose from so I've had to be selective. I've narrowed it down to my two favourites – Stoicism and Buddhism. I'll discuss each one briefly and then give you some handy tips and tricks to take away. Aren't I good to you?

Popular Psychology is a subject filled with easily accessible ideas. The “popular” bit refers to how people with a non-technical background in psychology can access these ideas. The textbooks have been thrown out of the window (not literally) and we don't have to work ridiculously hard to decipher complex and intricate psychology. Popular Psychology is essentially a ready-made meal for our minds. Well, sort of. The two ideas

that we will look at are Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and the concept of “mindset”. These are helpful for us when exploring a lot of the tougher challenges in the book.

By studying these ideas and internalizing them, you can start to build your mental resilience. Cultivating a mindset that handles adversity and challenges effortlessly isn't going to be easy, but these ideas will help you to achieve this.

It starts with practical concepts and ends with challenges. It starts with Ancient Greece and ends up with you sat in an ice bath cursing me. This is my theory. I hope that some of the ideas that follow will inspire you.

Stoicism

Stoicism originated in Ancient Greece around 300 BC. A man called Zeno started the movement after realizing the true importance of self-knowledge, self-improvement and self-discipline. He wanted a philosophy that was practical and could be used daily to deal with life's challenges. What a great guy! The ideas later spread to Ancient Rome and there were many movers and shakers for Stoicism in that period. This lasted a while but was replaced by Christianity. There was then a gap where nothing really happened for the philosophy. Maybe some thumb-twiddling. Stoicism almost had a comeback when Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) tried to merge Christianity and Stoicism but it didn't really last. There was then another big gap in Stoic history and more thumb-twiddling.

If we then skip a long way forward to more recent years, you'll notice that Stoicism has had a real resurgence of interest. It's now incredibly popular and these days you'll hear about National Football League (NFL) teams, world leaders and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs using Stoicism to guide their decisions and thought processes.

There were many Stoic philosophers and you can find tons of books to read on the subject. The three key players (Stoic legends, if you will) are Aurelius, Seneca and Epictetus. These guys are a great place to start and, if you're interested, I highly recommend exploring their work.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC–AD 65), also known as Seneca the Younger (great rap star alter ego name in my opinion), was a Roman Stoic philosopher who produced several significant works contributing to Stoicism. Many of these came in a series of letters offering advice to friends and family. I see Seneca as a Roman “Oprah” but maybe that’s just me. The book *Letters from a Stoic* is a great introduction to his philosophy and offers advice that’s relevant to our modern world. Seneca became the imperial adviser to the notoriously despotic Roman Emperor Nero. It didn’t end well – Nero, in a fit of rage, ordered Seneca to commit suicide. In a controlled and Stoic manner, Seneca accepted his fate and committed suicide as instructed without complaining. No easy feat – I would have had a complaint or two about that!

The next “Stoic legend” is Epictetus (AD 55–135). Epictetus was born a slave but his owner allowed him to study, which is where he discovered philosophy. He later gained his freedom and eventually set up a school for philosophy in Greece. Epictetus’ main work to read is *The Enchiridion*. The book acts as a philosophical road map/handbook for how to live our lives and has a heavy focus on how we respond to situations. Epictetus’ ideas are credited as being highly influential in the creation of CBT, which we will explore later ([see page 15](#)).

Markus Aurelius (AD 121–180) is one of the central figures in Stoic philosophy. He was the Roman Emperor from AD 161–180 and is famous for his book *Meditations*. This book was never intended to be published and was Aurelius’ personal diary where he would outline his ideas on Stoicism. He writes short passages and maxims, making it an easy book to dip into.

The aspect of Stoicism that interests me the most is how the Stoics encourage us to build mental strength. We can summarize this with a nice and concise “golden rule”.

Stoicism’s golden rule: The only thing you have control over is how you respond to external events

This is Stoicism in a nutshell. It's all about how you respond to the world around you – this is your choice. The Stoics accepted that you have little or no control over external events. Life is *very* unpredictable and the unexpected happens all the time. For example, if you drop your toast jam side down, you actually have a choice about whether to get angry and annoyed or not. I know that sounds impossible, as the floor is now covered in jam and your toast is ruined, but you do have that choice. You can choose to play it cool and not get annoyed. You can choose to make a new slice of toast. It really isn't a disaster.

"It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters."

Epictetus

When something bad/challenging/unpleasant happens, you can choose how you will deal with it. This applies to bigger problems than dropped toast too, obviously. Whatever you face, you can easily add fuel to the fire and make it worse by complaining and focusing on the negative. The Stoics tried to focus on the solution instead. Will you choose to remain positive in spite of the perceived problems you encounter? Is there a better way for you to handle this? What's your response to this situation going to be? These are the sort of questions that should get you to analyse your reaction and see if it helps your current situation or makes it worse. This is how a Stoic would look at everything.

It's not easy to do this and certainly takes practice (thus the purpose of the challenges in this project). In fact, the Stoics used to practise their attitude all the time. When Cato, a not-so-famous Stoic, used to wear colours that would make him stand out, he was practising his reaction to feeling self-conscious and embarrassed. When Aurelius was reflecting on his day and journaling in *Meditations*, he was dissecting his reactions to the outside world. He was looking for ways to better himself. This is the Stoic attitude that we want to cultivate when facing difficulties in our lives.

It may not seem like such a ground-breaking idea at first, but after inspection you will notice how empowering this viewpoint can actually be. You are always in control of your reaction no matter what happens to you. This is *your* responsibility and being in control gives you power. Accepting what you can't control and what you can is hugely important. Let's imagine the following:

Example 1: You break your leg. Ouch!

Right, so here you are with a broken leg. Suddenly your world has shrunk and you're feeling sorry for yourself. Maybe you're in pain and feeling annoyed for trying to ride that stupid bucking bronco in the first place. You've been signed off work for a month and your marathon training has been ruined. All of your social plans have been wiped out (in your opinion) and the festival you wanted to go to at the weekend is no longer an option. You hobble into the kitchen and grab the chocolates. You also grab the takeaway menus and then hobble back to the sofa. "I don't care anymore," you think to yourself as you open a pizza menu and scan the options for something "hearty" and at least one foot in diameter. You've been eating healthily for a while now but have decided to abandon that idea. Walking to the health food store is too far away with your broken leg. You've lost the will to be disciplined and you feel rotten. You rip open the chocolate box and prepare yourself for an epic binge to protest your lousy situation. You know you're going to make yourself feel sick and you don't care. You pick up the first chocolate and can smell the richness of it. Your mouth starts to salivate. You lift the chocolate to your mouth but, before you can sink your teeth into it, you hear a crash in the kitchen. You quickly turn around and see ... Epictetus stumbling toward you (he was actually lame and struggled to walk). You're obviously surprised because Epictetus has been dead for thousands of years but then you remember that this is just a hypothetical example, so you relax.

Epictetus slaps the chocolates out of your hands and stares you in the eyes. "Is this how you're going to react to having a broken leg that will heal? This temporary problem! Why are you feeling sorry for yourself? You

have no control over what has happened to you. It's in the past. You need to accept the consequences of your actions and focus on the future. Sitting here feeling sorry for yourself isn't going to change anything! You should be using this time wisely. Start reading! Get your mind strong for your marathon. Focus on your upper body strength. Stay fit and work on alternative exercises. If you eat healthily, it will help you to recover quicker. Walk to the health food store and don't focus on the difficulty. You should also go to the festival. Use the challenge of having to walk on crutches as a way to build mental strength. Go and visit people too. Having a broken leg doesn't mean you can't talk. Do things and *stop* complaining. Imagine how much worse this could have been. Focus on what you *can* do and be grateful for getting this time off work. YOU'VE GOT THIS!" Epictetus keeps staring at you as you slowly nod in disbelief and try to put the chocolate back in the box.

Example 2: Someone is very rude to you

Let's imagine that someone you don't know is extremely rude to you for no reason at all. They say something offensive and it really upsets you. This event is not hard to picture as we've all experienced it. Aurelius might say as we evaluate the situation: "You don't have to respond to this. Their rudeness reflects who they are. This is a test for you. You must not stoop to that level. Maintain the moral high ground and keep your ego in check. This is not the first or last time something like this will happen. Why do you deserve to not experience rudeness? Are you special? This is part of the human experience and it's up to you to choose to not be affected by it."

Upon considering this advice you can either engage with the rudeness and get wound up or you can work with it more constructively. Blowing a raspberry with your lips in their face is probably (definitely) not the Stoic response or Aurelius' preferred option.

These two examples show the kind of dialogue a Stoic might use to challenge their reactions to the outside world. It shows exactly how Stoicism's golden rule can be applied to life and, although it might not feel

natural at first to respond like this, with time you too can be Stoic in your reactions. I'll get the fireworks to celebrate.

We can also take this a bit further and look at extremely demanding situations through a Stoic lens to see how the core ideas still stand up to pressure. There are countless prisoners of war, for example, who have survived horrendous conditions by refusing to let their external situation break their spirit. For an insight into this attitude and experience I highly recommend the book *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl, where he recalls his time spent in a Nazi prison camp during World War II. Frankl was a psychiatrist before the war and used his trained mind to endure the atrocities of the camp. It's an incredible read (although quite heavy, for obvious reasons) and illustrates just how powerful one's mind and attitude can be. Although strictly speaking he's not a Stoic, Frankl's actions very much are. The only thing Frankl could control was how he responded to hell on earth. He talks about how other prisoners dealt with the stresses of the camp and how powerful the human mind can be if used properly. A lot can be learned from this man's story and incredibly strong mindset.

By understanding how these awful events were endured we can learn about mental resilience. It's unlikely that we will have to endure such horrors (I certainly hope not), but being prepared for the disasters that strike us is a sensible insurance policy. None of the challenges in this book will require this level of mental strength, but understanding how people cope in tough times can help us to develop our own strength and give us inspiration.

Stoicism is a great philosophy to explore and I've found it to be incredibly effective in altering my mindset and addressing my anxiety. I've barely scratched the surface but have hopefully whet your appetite.

Before we say goodbye to Stoicism though, I'd like to leave you with two practical tips that you can try. Keep them in your mind when you encounter challenges that really stretch you. The tips will also work well when you face adversity/difficulties in your life or drop your toast jam side down.

Stoic quick tips to try

- 1 **Response.** Try to control/monitor your reaction to external events that don't go well. Apply the Stoic golden rule to the chaos of life and see if you can become conscious of your reactions to things outside of your control. It's not easy but it is an empowering stance to take. Imagine Epictetus charging toward you to give you a serious pep-talk. Now focus on what you *can* do rather than what you *can't* do. This is Stoic gold!
- 2 **Journalling.** To develop self-awareness and build mental resilience, it's important to track progress. Journalling allows us to do this in a practical way. Write down what went well in the day and what didn't. Spend some time exploring and reflecting on how you reacted to external events. Take notes on your attempts to apply the Stoic golden rule to everything you encounter.

Aurelius' book, *Meditations*, was essentially a self-reflective journal that allowed him to keep track of his emotions and reactions to life's obstacles. We are trying to emulate this ourselves by sitting down and regularly writing out our thoughts. There is something incredibly powerful about this practice. Try it and see what happens.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India around 2,500 years ago and spread to China, Korea, Southeast Asia and Japan, where many aspects evolved into different types of Buddhism. It now comes in all shapes and sizes across the religion. There are plenty of rituals and ideas within the practice that vary greatly. At one end of the scale we have the Tibetan Sky burial where dead bodies are pulverized with rocks and scattered in the mountains; at the other end there are Zen "Koans", which are essentially riddles that defy logic. Questions like: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" and "What is your original face before you were born?" can be extremely confusing to those who haven't come across them before. To be fair, they're confusing even if you have. That's kind of the point. In spite of the variety of ideas we can encounter, the foundational philosophy and core of Buddhism is

extremely helpful for us when dealing with adversity. There is also a large emphasis on mindfulness in Buddhism, and the recurring theme of meditation is something particularly interesting for us to explore.

Just so you know, I'm not going to try to convince you to become a Buddhist. I'm not a Buddhist but I love the philosophy. I truly feel the ideas that can be taken from Buddhism would benefit everyone from all different walks of life. Whatever religion you practise (devout to atheist to Jedi), you will be able to use philosophical Buddhism to your advantage. I say philosophical Buddhism because we are only looking at the ideas and philosophies rather than the mystical, ritualistic and religious aspects.

Buddhism is based on the insights of a man called Siddhartha Gautama – he eventually became known as the Buddha – seen by many as a philosopher, leader and wise elder. After years of introspection, he discovered a system to alleviate human suffering. Siddhartha spent the rest of his life passing on this knowledge and wisdom to his students. These ideas have stood the test of time and today Buddhism is practised around the globe by approximately 500 million people, making it the fourth largest religion in the world.

I will focus here on what I consider to be the most relevant of the Buddhist philosophies for us when discussing mental resilience. Let's look at another golden rule:

Buddhism's golden rule: Our mind is the source of our suffering

If something is unpleasant and we're struggling to deal with it, we should blame our minds. Our minds are responsible for how we feel about everything. We can easily create unpleasant situations out of nothing (although it might not seem like nothing in the heat of the moment). Our minds are *incredibly* powerful and we must never forget this.

The interesting thing is that if our minds create our suffering, they can also, therefore, relieve our suffering. In Buddhism there is a systematic way to overcome mental anguish. This is called the Four Noble Truths and is the core structure to the whole philosophy/religion. It looks something like this:

- 1 Suffering exists – you probably knew that though.
- 2 Desire is the source of our suffering – maybe you knew that too, clever clogs.
- 3 This suffering can be alleviated – phew!
- 4 By following a balanced life and working hard, we can overcome anguish – ready to give it a try?

Let me explain in more detail.

The first Noble Truth states that there is suffering in existence. To be alive, we will experience suffering in a variety of different ways. Life equals suffering. This “suffering” can come in many forms, from overthinking a conversation to dealing with actual physical discomfort. You might have made a joke at work that wasn’t very funny and can’t stop analysing if it was funny or not. This is suffering. It doesn’t always have to be stepping-on-a-tack painful for us to experience anguish.

The second Noble Truth explores why we suffer. The main reason for our suffering is through “desire”. This can be broken down further into craving, greed and ignorance as the source of our problems. A craving for material objects or for situations to be different can cause big issues for us. In fact, not accepting how things really are – often referred to as ignorance in Buddhism – can be massively problematic. I find this aspect of the second Noble Truth particularly interesting. Our minds are so powerful and often we make things worse than they need to be by labelling events “bad”, “disastrous” or “awful” when they really aren’t. Our minds can be our own worst enemy and make things far more miserable than they need to be. Focusing on negativity increases our suffering and makes our lives difficult. I’ve wasted so much time worrying about stupid things and have caused

more suffering than was needed on many occasions – this is totally self-inflicted and unnecessary. The perfect example is getting stuck in traffic. If I ever got stuck in traffic in the past, I would cause far more suffering than necessary by running over the problem again and again in my mind. I'm a lot better at getting stuck in traffic now and swear a lot less (to the relief of anyone in the car with me). Thanks to the Buddhist approach, when I start to see myself get wound up I can take a breath and try to become more present. More on this later ([see page 96](#)).

The third Noble Truth highlights that suffering can be overcome. There is hope in the darkness and there is a way for us to rid our lives of suffering. That's pretty good news, right? You have permission to dance. For me, this realization came when I started to become aware of all the things I could do to take back control of my life. This Truth represents the fact that something can be done about unpleasant situations. The computer is broken but the engineer has just told us that it can be fixed. Excellent! How do we fix it?

The fourth and final Noble Truth outlines a path to overcome suffering. This is the solution/cure and is presented in a series of practical steps. These steps are referred to as the "Eightfold Path" and give us a variety of ways to achieve "enlightenment" or freedom from suffering. This is essentially a series of guidelines to follow in order to live a balanced life: things like becoming conscious of the way we speak to others, the way we think, the way we view the world and our actions are all covered in detail in the "Eightfold Path". This is also where you will find a big emphasis on meditation and being present. By meditating, we are focusing on the present moment and are becoming aware of the sensations around us. Experiencing things as they truly are, without labelling them in any way, shows us another side of reality – pure experience and sensation. Things aren't so bad – it's all these labels we give events that seem to cause us problems. By living in the present moment and not focusing on the past or the future, we can truly experience what is happening now.

In my eyes, the "Eightfold Path" is all about finding balance. By living a balanced life and focusing on finding a "middle way", we can experience a better existence. Not over-consuming things, not over-eating (especially

pizza for me), finding a healthy lifestyle with exercise, social and creative goals, etc, is extremely important. Finding balance is a priority. If we follow these steps and focus on developing a present mind we can experience “enlightenment”.

In Buddhism there is a lot of talk of “enlightenment” and how this is the ultimate goal of the religion. This is a loaded term and when I first heard it, I had the picture of someone in an otherworldly trance knowing all the answers. Maybe wearing some kind of colourful hat. The picture I have of this now is very different. I feel this concept is all about alleviating the suffering in your life and becoming a master of accepting things. If you can be content with whatever situation you are in, even if this situation is absolutely awful, then this is an “enlightened” mindset. How successful you are at adopting this mindset is determined by your commitment to working with the ideas within this philosophy. Using, or at least attempting to use, this mindset has been particularly helpful for me.

The lotus flower is the symbol for “enlightenment” in Buddhism. The flower grows in the muddy swamp and represents how something beautiful can come from the murky grime. In other words, in testing conditions where hope looks lost, beauty and life can grow – “strength through adversity”. Even in the most dire situations, there is hope and ways to grow. The lotus symbol can be used to represent exactly what the challenges in this book are here to do. We are trying to grow through adversity and become better at dealing with challenging conditions.

If I ever get a tattoo (don’t tell my mum), I would seriously consider a lotus flower. The symbolism is so powerful and really highlights how we can grow through the difficulties we encounter. Anxiety is my swamp, and this project and what these ideas mean to me are the lotus flower.

The Four Noble Truths can be extremely helpful in a variety of different ways. Becoming conscious of how we can cause ourselves to “suffer” is hugely important. By becoming aware of this, we can start to change the behaviour and things that cause us to suffer in the first place.

It’s quite interesting how similar Buddhism and Stoicism are in certain areas. This is especially noticeable when looking at how we interpret what

we are experiencing. Our minds can make mountains out of molehills or molehills out of mountains. Although thousands of miles apart, a similar conclusion about the aspect of our own suffering was reached by the respective founders of these philosophies.

Buddhism is a huge subject and, again, I've barely scratched the surface but have hopefully highlighted how the philosophical concepts can be of use to you. There are so many great tips and tricks to take away from the ideas within Buddhism. Here are my top two. Test them out for yourself and use the challenges as a platform to play around with these ideas.

Buddhism quick tips to try

- 1 **Breathe.** The first thing they teach you in monk school, according to the wonderful Jay Shetty (check him out online for some serious positivity and wisdom), is how to breathe. Learning how to breathe deeply and consciously can have an incredible impact on our lives. If you have to do something scary, take a deep breath; this can be very grounding. I used this *all* the time when facing fear in this project. A well-placed deep breath can be incredibly powerful. It's simple but highly effective. To take this to the next level, consider exploring meditation.
- 2 **Impermanence.** Another huge concept in Buddhism is that of "flux" or "impermanence", which claims that everything is in a state of change. Nothing will stay the same. Ever. Accepting this is the only way to remove the mental anguish that comes from being attached to things. Embracing change is essential, and knowing that even the most desperate of situations will eventually change is an important lesson to hold on to. I found this idea very helpful as I started working with my anxiety. Knowing that these sensations and emotions *will* change has helped me to not attach so much weight to them. Accepting and embracing the change in my life has been a powerful tool for growth. Knowing that pain will change has also helped me to get through the harder physical challenges and allowed me to embrace discomfort in a

more constructive way – running marathons is the perfect example.
Suffering is a temporary aspect of existence that will always pass.
Practising acceptance of the temporary is profoundly helpful.

CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy)

CBT, short for Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is a therapy used to help you reframe the way you think about a situation. When someone is experiencing anxiety, debilitating phobias or depression, the first recommendation a doctor is likely to make will be a course of CBT therapy. This can be used to treat a whole variety of mental health issues and is what I was offered when I first went to see someone about my anxiety. A patient will likely have several consultations with a CBT therapist to address the specific problem they are dealing with. By the end of the course the patient will have gained a selection of coping mechanisms that they can use to combat their issues. It's quick and effective.

CBT evolved in the 1950s and 1960s and is a combination/evolution of various behavioural therapies and the popular psychology of the time. Its practical nature and relatively quick results allowed it to gain popularity and become the “go-to” therapy for lots of issues.

CBT and Stoicism are very similar. In a way, you can see CBT as a refined version of Stoic philosophy that focuses on altering perceptions. Compare the two and you'll certainly see where CBT has been looking over Stoicism's shoulder to copy its answers.

Let's focus on the core idea within CBT.

CBT's golden rule: Change the way you think and you will change the way you feel

The main ideas in CBT are based on becoming conscious of the way you think about things. The way you see a situation in your head determines your behaviour, and your behaviour can influence the way you actually feel. By becoming conscious of your thought patterns and behaviour, you can attempt to alter any negative recurring patterns. This will then make you feel a lot better about everything you experience. It's all about reframing the situation. Have you heard that somewhere before? Cough, cough, Stoicism, cough, cough.

CBT has two clear steps to help you change your thinking:

Step 1: Become conscious of your thinking.

Step 2: Use logic to challenge your thoughts.

Let me expand on these two steps.

Step 1: Become conscious of your thinking

The first step toward changing something is being aware that something needs to be changed. Becoming conscious of the way you think about things can be revealing. Maybe you're more negative than you think. I certainly was. I didn't realize quite how negative my thoughts were until it led to acute anxiety.

Negative thinking and negative thoughts are normal. Everyone experiences them – this is part of being human. The problem, though, is that it's pretty hard to ignore a negative thought. The more you try not to think about it, the stronger the thought becomes. OK, let's do an experiment. I want you to picture an elephant in yellow swim shorts. The elephant looks ridiculous and the swim shorts don't fit properly. It's trying to play the happy birthday song with its trunk and is failing miserably; it's just making a weird screechy noise. Now stop and try not to think about it. Give yourself a ten-second break and see if you can stop thinking about the elephant in those yellow swim shorts. Exactly. The thought is hard to remove from your mind. This is the same with negative thoughts.

The interesting thing about negative thoughts is that they are like a loose thread on Grandma's hand-knitted sweater. If you start pulling at it, the sweater will unravel in your hands and you'll have a lot of explaining to

do. The more you pick at negative thoughts and feed them with your attention, the stronger they get. The goal is to stop adding fuel to the fire. However, to do this you need to acknowledge negative thoughts and stare them in the eyes.

This is important as you can then start to challenge negative thoughts in Step 2. The negative thoughts are always going to exist but it's how much weight you give them that matters. For example, if I'm out with a friend and then suddenly think, for no reason at all, that maybe I forgot to shut my front door, I have two options: I can dismiss the negative thought and not weight it in reality and continue with the evening (the sensible option). The alternative would be to obsess over the thought, which will then make me not enjoy the evening because I'm so distracted. I might even feel compelled to leave my social plans early to go and check on my house. This is what negative thoughts have the potential to do. Therefore, it's extremely important to become aware of them when they crop up. When you are aware of them, you can start to deal with them using the methods in Step 2.

I can guarantee that you will encounter negative thoughts when you tackle the challenges in this book. You might think something is "ridiculous" or "too hard". The difference between you actually completing the challenge or skipping it will be down to how much weight you give these negative thoughts, so make sure to be on watch for when they appear.

If you're negative about something before it has happened, then this is a classic example of your perceptions and thought patterns influencing the way you feel about a future event. Remaining objective, or at least attempting to, will allow you to view the world slightly differently. This is going to be especially helpful when completing challenges from this book that appear to be particularly laborious/unusual. Trust me, I've been sitting in an ice bath thinking the same thing!

Step 2: Use logic to challenge your thoughts

The goal of Step 2 is not to remove negative thoughts but to drown them in logic. If you drill your negative thoughts with an interrogation to see if they are based in reality, you will start to remove the power that they have over

you. If you question a negative thought enough, it loses its power. And if you do this consistently, you will eventually become so good at it that the process becomes automatic. The next time a negative thought pops up, you won't put any weight on it as you know that it won't stand up to a logical grilling.

Using logic and reasoning to alter your opinion on something is a great way to get to the root of a problem. For example, going to the dentist scared me senseless. Is going to the dentist really a bad experience for me? No. Am I going to die from going to the dentist? No. Is it going to hurt? Not really in the scheme of things. Will it cause me to pass out? Unlikely. Why does it scare me so much then? By using logic and rational self-talk, I can start to control my inner resistance and alter my perception on the process of going to the dentist. I used a similar script to help me deal with this fear and it worked. It's a lot easier said than done but hopefully you get the idea. Note that some things might take a lot of questioning!

Let's look at another example. Pretend that you've just watched the movie *Jaws* the day before a family beach holiday in Spain. That was stupid, wasn't it? You've instantly developed a fear of the sea overnight and can't bring yourself to even dip a toe in the water. What's worse, though, is that you don't want your daughter to go in the water either. "Why did I watch that stupid movie?" you ask yourself. You're filled with anxiety and can't stop thinking about sharks. They're in your dreams and you can't escape them. Luckily, you remember reading about CBT somewhere and how it can help people to overcome this exact type of issue. You look up the process of dealing with intrusive thoughts and take note. You become conscious of the shark obsession, acknowledging that all of these shark thoughts are negative and need to be addressed. Logic and reasoning will help you to defeat this cycle of vicious thinking so you begin to question these negative thoughts. From your pocket you whip out your phone and quickly Google if there are sharks in the Costa Del Sol. You read that there are infrequent sightings but it's really not a popular spot/hangout for sharks. The chances of a shark sighting are *very* slim. You look at the evidence and focus on the overwhelming odds in your favour. You decide to get in the

water and go waist deep. The negative thoughts reappear. You stare at them again and question them. You focus on the fact that you've literally just watched a movie about sharks and this is why they are in your mind. Every time you have a negative thought, you counter it with logic and positivity. You eventually stop obsessing over sharks and start to relax in the water. Congratulations! You've just used CBT to counteract negative thinking.

You can use this exact model to tackle the challenges in this book, and I highly encourage you to use logic and positivity to push back against any mental resistance you encounter. There will be challenges that push you. There will be challenges that are mentally and physically demanding. There will be challenges that you don't take to. It's easy to let negative thinking take over at times like these and this is when you must remember CBT and how it can help you to push back against all of this.

To help question your negative thoughts and keep track of progress, CBT therapists often suggest journalling as a great way to develop a self-analytical mindset. Where have you seen that before? Yes, Aurelius' *Meditations*. Well remembered. It's a practical way to keep track of everything and help you to become conscious of your thinking.

It can actually take a long time to alter the way you think (it certainly did for me) but it is possible. It may be difficult at first but with practice and consistent work, you can develop a system for viewing things objectively, not subjectively.

We don't have to be suffering with anxiety, phobias or depression to benefit from the wisdom that CBT can bring into our lives. We also don't need to have a course with a therapist for us to understand the core principles of the therapy. By reading about CBT you will be expanding your toolbox of tricks that you can use in the face of difficulties.

Reading about CBT may also appeal to you more than delving into Greek philosophy or Buddhism. There are many roads to get to the same destination, so finding an angle that you can relate to is important. Although Stoicism, Buddhism and CBT are similar, the way they are written about and used in the modern world is very different. Exploring them is a great way to find which angle suits you personally.

I'll leave two practical tips for you below. Enjoy.

CBT quick tips to try

- 1 **Challenge your thinking.** Start by becoming conscious of any negative thoughts that crop up in your mind. When you encounter them, blast them with logic. Use Steps 1 and 2 (mentioned earlier) for guidance and eventually this thinking method will become automatic.
- 2 **Affirmations.** Powerful internal dialogue can be truly life-changing. Having a few set phrases that you can repeat when facing difficulties can be extremely helpful. Something like “I can handle this” or “I’ve got this” said over and over in your mind acts like a mantra. This can help you to focus on something positive and shift your attitude. Try it!

Mindset

The last thing to look at before getting stuck into the challenges in this book is the idea of cultivating an empowering mindset. Our attitudes make a huge difference to how we face adversity, so this is an important thing to work on.

While researching how to build mental strength, I came across a wonderful book called *Mindset*. It's by Dr Carol Dweck and is an absolute must-read. She is an incredible writer and has created an outstanding piece of work on how to develop a stronger mindset. The premise of the book outlines how people generally have one of two mindsets, and by choosing to cultivate the more empowering one, they will be able to live a better life in the face of challenges and difficulty. The concept has become extremely popular in schools as teachers try to encourage students to adopt the correct mindset when approaching their studies.

The Mindset golden rule: There are two mindsets – Fixed Mindset and Growth Mindset

The first mindset is called a “Fixed Mindset”. This attitude believes that everything is already set. If you can’t do something now, you won’t ever be able to do it. If it feels difficult, then people with this attitude will often stop to avoid the difficulty. A fixed mindset can also mean an attitude that is closed to new ideas. The type of people who have a fixed mindset aren’t keen to change their opinions and think that they know best. Arrogant? Yes. Stubborn? Yes.

So, a fixed mindset person will only order pizza from one place. The possibility that other places do good pizza isn’t an option. It’s either Sloppy Joe’s pizza palace or bust. There’s no way that a new pizza would be humoured. It’s Hawaiian pizza till death do us part and that’s it. No conversation.

People with fixed mindsets say things like, “No Judith, I will not put the bins out on Thursday night. It’s Friday morning or never!” And, “There’s no way that I’m ever going to be able to ride that unicycle. My dreams of becoming a clown are over.”

This negative approach to life can truly limit someone’s potential. Using words like “impossible”, “can’t” and “too hard” all the time, these people might think of themselves as “realists”, but there’s nothing real about accepting defeat and being overly negative about something before it’s even happened. A fixed mindset will assume that certain things aren’t even worth trying because, “If you can’t do X, what makes you think you can do Y?”

Do you recognize this in anyone you know? Do you recognize this in yourself?

The second mindset is called a “Growth Mindset”. With this attitude, the most important aspect is to keep trying. When things are difficult, don’t stop. The focus isn’t necessarily on the end result but on the amount of

effort you put into things. By trying your hardest, you will be learning in the process and this is the key to progress. The main take-home from this mindset is to understand and look for the lesson in everything, especially difficulties.

People with a growth mindset relish challenges. They don't care that their gazpacho tastes like sweaty armpits and rotten cucumber, they're just happy that they've managed to make it from scratch. They can't wait to try to make it again but hopefully with better results. They want to improve the soup and they *love* the fact that they found it hard.

Growth mindset people look at a challenge and say, "Bring it on!" They're going to give it everything they've got and don't care about mistakes. In fact, they actually want to make mistakes because this will be teaching them valuable lessons. "So what if I messed up the test? I've learned loads in the process."

They will always be willing to try new things and look for ways to improve. They're ready to give stand-up paddle boarding a try without a care for how good they might be. They want to taste unfamiliar food, visit new places and push themselves to the point of feeling sick in the gym. They work hard to better themselves. Constantly. Maybe you recognize this attitude in yourself/people you know/people you admire.

It's pretty obvious which of these mindsets is going to be more empowering to adopt. Cultivating a growth mindset is going to help you enormously – not just with the challenges you encounter in these pages, but also with life.

Some people are more likely to adopt a fixed mindset. Some people are more likely to adopt a growth mindset. This is life. The mindset we naturally lean toward will be largely determined by lots of factors outside of our control: genetics, childhood experiences, teachers, parents, humiliating events, environment, cultural influences, the time Peter got mad at you for trying to glue his Ming vase back together ... you get the idea. Although you may naturally lean toward a fixed mindset, it's important to know that you can change this. Attitudes *can* change and if you've paid attention in

the CBT section, you'll understand how we can use logic to aid this transformation.

It's worth noting that we can actually have both a fixed and growth mindset in many different areas of our lives. We may have a growth mindset at work but a fixed mindset when it comes to exercise. We may think that we're useless at languages (fixed mindset) but we're keen to improve our sewing (growth mindset). This is important and shows that although someone has a fixed mindset in one area of their life, it might not be in all areas.

Becoming conscious of where you have a fixed and growth mindset is essential. This allows you to start to change the way you approach difficulties. The reason I wanted to drill down on "mindset" is because it's so relevant to a lot of the challenges you are about to encounter. Being thrown into the deep end, being a beginner and being uncomfortable can naturally produce a fixed mindset response in us. Being aware of what that looks like, what it can do to you and how destructive this attitude is will help you to recognize if you start to slip into this style of thinking.

I found that as soon as I began to use a growth mindset when working with a lot of the challenges in this book, I got so much more out of the whole process. When things became difficult, I became interested in why they were difficult. I would look deeper into the reason for it being difficult and could create a strategy for dealing with this.

The concept is really worth exploring further and I can't recommend Dr Dweck's book enough. There are plenty of online videos that expand on this too. Just start Googling and I'll see you back here in a few hours. Well, actually, hang on a minute. Maybe Google it later ... It's definitely worth investing time to develop this type of mental attitude though. If you can practise a growth mindset when approaching the challenges in this book, you will learn so much about yourself.

Mindset quick tips to try

- 1 **Search for fixed mindsets.** Start to look for areas in your life where you adopt a fixed mindset. Also watch for it within others and pay attention to how limiting it can be. Now change it into a growth mindset! That's easier said than done, I know, but the difference will be phenomenal when you pull it off.
- 2 **Celebrate your mistakes.** When things go wrong and don't work out, focus on what you can learn from the whole experience. Always look for the lesson and celebrate each time you make a mistake. I give you permission to cheer the next time you break a plate or drop a full yoghurt pot on the floor.

Well, there you have it. You've just been bombarded with philosophy and psychology and you've survived. I've thrown a lot at you in a short space of time but hopefully some of it resonates with you. Using the ideas from Stoicism, Buddhism, CBT and Mindset can be truly life-changing. These concepts have profoundly altered my life and I really hope they do the same for you.

I highly recommend that you explore all of these ideas in more detail. I've given you a taste of the core concepts and if you like any, there's a reading list for you to take things further at the end of this book ([page 221](#)). There are some great reads on the list and I hope you enjoy them.

I'd suggest trying out some of the quick tips as soon as possible. When tackling the challenges, these useful tools can be very helpful. They can teach you how to deal with the difficulties you encounter and get the most out of this whole experiment. When something works well for you, try to then apply it to other areas in your life. For example, if the conscious breathing (Buddhism Quick Tip 1) helps you to feel grounded when facing fear, try to use it in "real life" situations.

Now that you're armed with a variety of tools and tricks to tackle difficult situations, there's only one thing left to do ... Get stuck into the challenges, leave your comfort zone, face your fears and strengthen your mental resilience!

ABOUT THE CHALLENGES

The challenges in this book vary greatly. There are many different types that are designed to test you in a variety of ways. The challenges are also subjective and, therefore, will range in difficulty depending upon who's doing them. I've included ways to make each challenge harder if you feel something is too easy, but don't be afraid to modify a challenge if it seems too hard. The most important thing is to actually do them.

The challenges are divided into three categories: Skill, Physical and Mental. They are all designed to move you out of your comfort zone in different ways.

The Skill tasks focus on developing your ability to learn new things, ranging from practical skills to fun and unusual tricks. This type of challenge will develop and improve your memory and help you to understand the way you learn. You will likely deal with frustration, irritation and many other emotions when trying to learn some of the skills, which is a great way to test your attitude and patience. The skills range in commitment time – some can be learned quickly, others will take longer and require practice.

The Physical tasks focus on physical challenges. This category of challenges will help you to develop a tougher threshold for discomfort and a greater understanding of what your body is capable of. You will be required to try new sports and physical activities that test your coordination, endurance and willpower. Most of these challenges require a commitment

of some sort. They are based on living a balanced and active lifestyle, and some of the challenges will require specific training over time.

The Mental tasks are all about conquering fears and uncomfortable situations. This will really help to develop your mental strength and test your strategies for dealing with adversity. Some of these challenges are quite bizarre and will require an open mind to even begin them. I can almost hear you shouting at me when you read them! The challenges in this section are often one-off events and won't require any prior knowledge or training to complete.

In these three categories there are different sized challenges. Some are over in a flash, whereas others will require steady commitment over time. I've varied the types that you encounter to give a balance to the challenges.

During my Year of Adversity, I made sure to vary my personal challenges. I wasn't able to take on too many epic challenges (due to work commitments, etc), so I thought carefully about which long-term challenges would be good to work on. I ended up with a selection of larger challenges which I then punctuated with quicker challenges that could be completed in a weekend or an hour or two. Finding the balance was tricky, but having a mix of new and unusual things to constantly try, along with my bigger goals, allowed me to test myself in diverse ways. Having this contrast has been great for my overall mindset and enabled me to experience a range of self-inflicted difficulties. It's also helped me to manage my time properly as having too many big goals can be counterproductive.

Some of the challenges may seem unappealing to you. You may read the challenge and think that it's stupid, too easy or too hard. However, I want you to really question what it is that makes you think this. Flashback to CBT and use logic to counteract these initial reactions. Try to see all of these challenges as ways of developing yourself. If you think something seems pointless, try to break down what it is about the challenge that seems pointless to you. The whole idea is learning and doing for the sake of learning and doing. You are challenging yourself and doing these things as a way to develop your mind. Always approach things from this angle and you should have less resistance to challenges that don't seem relevant to you. If

a challenge seems irrelevant, then this is going to be an even better opportunity for you to practise being uncomfortable. You'll have more resistance to work with, thus making it even harder.

I've tried to make the challenges as affordable as possible. Therefore, I haven't put things in here like cover yourself in gold leaf and take a first-class flight to the Maldives (what a weird one that would be!). You should be able to perform the challenges with little or no financial investment. That said, there are several ones that involve trying a new sport or activity where you may encounter a cost. If this is a problem, you will need to get creative to find a solution. See who you know who could come with you and show you the new activity for free. Great places to source some of the challenge materials are eBay, charity shops and car-boot sales or yard sales.

Another great way to raise money is through sponsorships for a charity of your choice. This is extremely popular for races but could easily be extended to include some of the challenges in this book.

The Challenge Structure

All of the challenges have been broken down into 11 sections. Each section will help to explain the challenge and how to go about tackling it. Each challenge has the following sections.

Category: Skill, Physical or Mental

Classification: Epic (an ultimate challenge that will take serious commitment to achieve), Committing or Quick

Difficulty: I've given each challenge a number from 1 to 10, 1 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest. I've tried to give a general difficulty rating but one person's 9 could be another's 2.

Time required: Approximate amount of time needed to complete the challenge.

What: Exactly what the challenge involves.

Why: In this section I try to explain why you should complete this specific challenge (although improving mental strength is the main reason and applies to all of them).

How: An outline of the method will be given here.

Harder: This section offers suggestions to make the challenge harder.

Research: Here are recommendations for fun things to research relating to the challenge, including book recommendations, websites, magazines, clubs, videos, important people, etc.

My experience: My personal account of the challenge and how I completed it.

What I learned: The final section explores what I learned from completing the challenge.

How to use the challenges

There are tons of ways you can approach the challenges in this book and, ultimately, you'll have to figure out what works best for you. Any approach is fine, but the key thing is to actually try some of the ideas mentioned and get out of your comfort zone. This is a practical book after all!

When looking at the challenges in this book, pay attention to things that jump out at you – things that you would love to try and things that you would hate to try are a good place to start. As you read through the challenges, make a note of the ones that you want to tackle.

Deciding on a few big goals that inspire you from the challenges is another solid place to start. When you have a few “epic” goals that will take longer to complete, you can then add “quick” challenges in the space/free time you get. This way you will always be completing challenges but get to keep things fresh by trying some of the quicker ones when you have the time. Balancing everything can be a challenge in itself but that's part of the fun. I managed to do all of these challenges in a little over a year while working a full-time job and maintaining a healthy social life with friends

and family. It certainly became easier with time as I got into the flow and made it a priority to work on my self-development. There is no pressure for you to do all of these in a set amount of time.

If you're feeling particularly brave, why not ask a close friend to select some challenges for you? This probably depends on the friend and how nice you've been to them lately ... Remember when you made fun of them for trying their hand at Norwegian spoon carving? Well, now it's payback ...

If you don't want to give another human being that responsibility, why not ask fate to help you? Open the book on a random page without looking and do the first challenge you see. This means you have no conscious control over what you're picking and no one to blame.

There is an index of all the challenges at the end of the book ([page 219](#)) as a quick reference system. You can mark off the challenges when you complete them and pat yourself on the back at the same time.

In reality, there are lots of methods you can use when tackling the challenges in this book. Some people will want to complete all of the challenges, whereas others will work on a select few. The important thing is to have fun and develop a system for dealing with adversity/difficulty/the chaos of life in the process. You get the idea.

If you walk away having at least tried something new, and pushed yourself out of your comfort zone once, I will feel that this book has been a success. Strengthening your willpower and mental resilience is something that takes a lot of effort. However, it's totally worth it and can be truly life-changing!

Create a set of personal challenges

Before we look at the challenges in the next section, I want you to try a short exercise. Yes, right now; it won't take a lot of time and should be interesting for you to complete.

I want you to start thinking about your comfort zone. What shape is it? What does it look like? What things scare you? Start thinking about what would throw you out of your comfort zone like an ejector seat in a fast jet.

What would make you squeal? What would make you uncomfortable? Spend some time thinking about this.

Now get a pen and a piece of paper, or use your phone, and start writing a list of personal challenges. This should include a mix of things that you would find physically and mentally challenging and things that are likely to make you uncomfortable. How about giving blood or holding a tarantula? What about skydiving or swimming with sharks? Running a marathon or learning an instrument could also make the list. There are so many options. Be creative and take a few minutes to think up ideas.

Not everything on the list should scare the living daylights out of you (some of it definitely should though). Make sure to include things that you would find intimidating/unfamiliar. It's important to focus on things that will be personally difficult for *you*. Think about skill-based challenges. Think about physical challenges. Think about mental challenges. Think outside the box and be as bizarre and bold as you can. Try to think of massive challenges and then smaller, quicker challenges. View it as both a "bucket list" and an "anti-bucket list". The challenges you choose should appeal and terrify you in equal parts. Go on, start writing your list. It won't take long. No paper? No problem. I've left the next page blank for you to jot down your ideas (pen not included).

Your comfort zone is bound to look different to mine so it will be interesting to compare our lists when you read through my challenges in a minute. I wonder how similar they'll be ... I'm confident that there will be some crossover but I'm sure you'll come up with some ideas unique to you.

If you create your personal list of challenges now, you can then mix our lists together (with the challenges you like) to create a series of weird and wonderful ways to leave your comfort zone. This is guaranteed to give you a long list of challenges that will really resonate with you. I'm excited for you!

Here is your blank page. Use this space to write down things that would push you out of your comfort zone. Ready, set, GO!

CHALLENGE TRACKER

Using a diary or journal to write a little bit about each challenge as you complete it is a great way to monitor your progress throughout the whole experience. By taking notes from each challenge, you will be able to develop your own coping mechanisms for difficult times. Remember, every little bit of experience dealing with adversity is making you stronger.

Use the example structure below as a template for how to record your experiences. By completing each section, you will be able to debrief after a challenge (mine or yours) and focus on the lessons learned. You can either write this structure out in a diary or download a free digital version from my website:

www.benaldridge.com

Challenge name:

Date started:

Date completed:

Level of difficulty encountered (1–10):

My experience:

What I learned:

THE CHALLENGES

Are you ready to start? When you begin reading through the challenges, you might think that they appear in a random order. I promise you that's not the case. I've presented them like this to make it easier for you to read them. They've been balanced so there aren't too many challenges of each type together. You can, of course, read them in a random order, but I feel that they work best like this. See what you think.

There are many challenges that I completed that haven't made the cut for the book. The ones that follow are a mix of the most significant, varied and unusual ones that I did in my Year of Adversity. I hope that they inspire you to get out there and leave your comfort zone. With any luck, I have convinced you that getting stuck into these challenges is going to be an incredible experience for you.

Don't forget to use the tools and tricks mentioned earlier to help you conquer the more demanding challenges. These tools and tricks really can make a massive difference to the way you handle tough situations. So, without further hesitation, I present you the challenges. Enjoy!



1. Embrace the cold

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 10 minutes

What: Take a cold shower.

Why: Taking a cold shower can help to lift your mood and boost your immune system. Cold water therapy has been used to treat depression, anxiety and various mental health conditions. It has tons of other health benefits too, from alleviating eczema to improving circulation. Basically, it's awesome and there are loads of reasons to give it a try (start Googling if you don't believe me). However, I feel that the main reason to do this is because getting into cold water is actually really difficult. Therefore, it's perfect mindset training and a great first challenge that is free and easy to complete. Just what we want!

How: The method for taking a cold shower is straightforward.

Step 1: Turn the shower on.

Step 2: Make sure the shower is running cold water.

Step 3: Get in the cold water and deal with it. Try to stay in for at least five minutes as your body will get used to it after a minute or so. You have permission to scream/squeal/squawk throughout the shower.

Step 4: Celebrate with a dance to warm up and consider getting yourself a hot drink to raise your core temperature.

Harder: Take a cold shower first thing in the morning for a week, month or year. You could also try a cold bath. This is very challenging and makes a cold shower seem easy.

If you want to take things to the next level, why not attempt an ice bath? Be creative here by filling old tubs of ice cream/lunch boxes with water and

putting them in your freezer. This will give you several large blocks of ice. It might be easier to buy some bags of ice from the store though. Put the ice in your cold bath and wait for the temperature to cool even further before jumping in. You can then start recording your time spent in the bath and try to beat it as you get better at dealing with the cold.

Or have a go at wild swimming – try to get in water outside as much as possible (rivers/lakes/the sea).

Research: For inspiration, search for the “Wim Hof Method” online to see how “The Iceman” does it. Wim Hof holds multiple cold-related world records and is, unsurprisingly, a big fan of ice baths and cold showers. For one record Wim climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in just his underpants. There are several documentaries online that talk to Wim about his techniques to deal with the extreme cold. His book *Way of the Iceman: How the Wim Hof Method Creates Radiant, Long-term Health* is a great read and will turn you into a master of the cold in no time. Consider attending a Wim Hof seminar or retreat to get his method taught to you in a hands-on and practical manner. His online course is another great possibility.

The book *What Doesn't Kill Us: How Freezing Water, Extreme Altitude, and Environmental Conditioning Will Renew Our Lost Evolutionary Strength* by Scott Carney is another fascinating read that explores the benefits of the cold.

Search online for “Cryotherapy” to learn all about how standing in a giant tin that gets blasted with icy cold temperatures can be beneficial to you. There are lots of places all over the planet that offer this service, so why not give it a try?

My experience: The first time I attempted a cold shower was a noisy event. There was screaming, swearing, deep breathing, and it certainly felt like a testing experience. I stood outside the shower with the cold water running, not wanting to get in. I could feel the chill from the water standing next to it

and it made me nervous. My brain was trying to convince me to ease myself into this challenge with a hot shower first.

Eventually, after a lot of self-talk, I mustered up the energy and enthusiasm to jump straight in. The initial impact of the cold water took my breath away. It required a lot of willpower to stay in the shower but, interestingly, the shock sensation went away pretty quickly. After about two minutes, my body had become used to the temperature and it wasn't such an ordeal to remain in the water. When I stepped out of the shower my body was shivering, but I instantly felt a deep sense of satisfaction for having had an entirely cold shower. I felt energized and awakened by the experience. It took a while for my body to warm up so I made myself a massive mug of tea to raise my core temperature. This worked wonders and returned my body back to a normal temperature.

I decided I would use this as a way to mentally test myself each morning. It's not easy to get into a cold shower first thing in the morning when you are tired, especially in winter, but I have fallen in love with this ritual. I now start each day with a "win" and it sets me up for what's to come. I'll also use cold showers if I need a boost of energy when I'm feeling sluggish or tired. It's a great way to bring me back to the present moment and has really helped with my anxiety.

To really push myself, I started to take ice baths. These are truly challenging. At first, my body violently convulses in the water before eventually settling down. It's an all-encompassing cold/pain that is tough to deal with. After a few of these, my cold showers seem very tame in comparison. My first ever ice bath probably sounded like someone was being tortured in my flat! Masochistic? Probably ...

I also love getting into cold water in nature and this is something I've been doing as much as possible. I remember getting some funny looks from passers-by when I went swimming in the British sea in the middle of January. It was a typical freezing cold winter's day but I decided to get in the water anyway. It was actually a lot warmer than the ice baths I had been taking and I was surprised by how "easy" it was. Don't get me wrong, it was still really cold, but not as brutal as an ice bath.

What I learned: I've learned that the cold can be a great way to push my body both physically and mentally. In modern life, it's easy to avoid extreme temperatures. If we're cold, we turn on the heating. If we're hot, we turn on the air conditioning or use a fan. Our bodies have become accustomed to a mild climate and the nature of our society, generally speaking, keeps us in a moderate temperature range.

Being cold for a short period of time is not a problem, but it's easy to complain and make a fuss about it. Having embraced the cold more in my life, I have found that I'm not so bothered about being too hot or too cold when out and about. That might sound strange, but I feel that my body has become better at adjusting to a wider range of temperatures. I'm no "Iceman" but definitely enjoy experiencing the cold and the endorphin boost it can bring.

I've spent the majority of a year now taking a cold shower every day. I still have to convince myself that it's a good idea just before I get in the shower but slowly that mental resistance is getting weaker and weaker. I always feel amazing afterwards and it's taught me how to keep my mind strong in the face of doubt. Every time I force myself into the cold, I become better at dealing with my mental resistance and this is a valuable lesson for me. It's been a great challenge and has allowed me to practise discomfort easily. When in the cold water, I'm not worrying about anything and am just dealing with it. This is a metaphor for how I would like to deal with the difficulties in my life. Rather than worry about what's coming, I must focus on what is happening now. If I can deal with what I'm facing, then I should, in theory, be able to suffer considerably less. The cold forces us into the present moment and this is something that Buddhism would give the seal of approval to. I'm confident that ice bath meditation will catch on. Well ...

“Every time I force myself into the cold, I become better at dealing with my mental resistance.”



2. Learn a language

Category: Skill

Classification: Epic

Difficulty: 10 (Very hard)

Time required: 1 year

What: This challenge is all about learning a new language. Over the course of a year, you will develop your skills and become proficient in another language. Daily practice is essential to keep this mammoth task on track.

Why: Learning another language is awesome. It takes a huge amount of commitment and discipline to learn, but the rewards are incredible. Your brain will get a real workout and you will continually be pushed out of your comfort zone in a host of different ways. Learning a language every day, or as close to every day as possible, is seriously difficult and at times can be frustrating. This is a great way to test yourself mentally.

This is the first “epic” challenge, so be conscious of this. It’s a big one but can be such a life-changing and mind opening experience. Taking on a challenge like this is a big commitment, but I truly believe that these types of things can teach us the value of consistency, discipline and long-term planning.

How: The secret to learning a language is commitment. If you can dedicate time to learning a language each day, you will get better. Fact. Finding 30 minutes a day sounds like a lot but is realistic if you are organized. The simplest solution is to get up 30 minutes earlier than normal to learn your target language. This would be a lovely way to start your day.

A lot of people give up learning a language when they leave school and claim it's "too hard". This challenge is all about proving them and potentially yourself wrong (maybe you think learning a language is "too hard" too).

Step 1: Decide on a language you would love to learn. Pick a language that excites you.

Step 2: Research the arc of learning a language. There are tons of websites and YouTube videos on how to learn your target language, so my best advice is to get out there and start exploring. Spend some time researching how you will approach your target language and decide on what textbooks, online tools, etc you will use. I recommend the book *Fluent in 3 Months* by Benny Lewis as a great place to start. This should inspire you and outline the journey to fluency.

Step 3: Begin your language journey and start learning the basics. Spend time learning grammar and consider using a basic textbook to structure your studies.

Step 4: Start having regular/semi-regular lessons with a teacher. This will help you in countless ways. You will be able to ask questions and get feedback on your progress.

Step 5: Practise conversation with native speakers (make new friends in your target language) or use the website www.italki.com to get cheap hourly conversation practice with natives. I can't recommend this website enough!

Step 6: Use apps on the go to practise the language when you're out and about. Any spare time you get – waiting for the bus or train, etc – you can pull out your phone and drill a few vocabulary flashcards.

Step 7: Commit to practising every day. Using a stopwatch, time how long you spend studying. This will allow you to track progress and will help you hit your daily target.

Step 8: Visit a country that speaks your language. After one year, you may well be fluent!

Harder: Consider taking an exam in your target language to help you refine your skills.

You may also choose to read novels in your target language or immerse yourself in advanced content. Making a genuine friend who only speaks your target language is another great way to test yourself.

Why not explore slang and regional dialects to push this skill even further?

For the ultimate challenge, learn a third or fourth language.

Research: Flashcards are the key to learning vocab when you're out and about. There are countless types to look at but I find that Anki have a great system and a handy app.

The book *Fluent Forever* by Gabriel Wyner and the Benny Lewis title mentioned on [page 41](#) are amazing at outlining the arc of learning a language. They are packed with tips and tricks and will set you up with the right attitude and study habits. Make sure to read them from cover to cover.

www.italki.com is just brilliant. It allows you to book cheap private lessons with native speakers online at your convenience. The lessons typically take place on Skype but a host of other formats are available. This will really take your language learning to the next level.

Search for “Polyglot” videos on YouTube to be amazed by how many languages some people can speak.

My experience: For this challenge I decided that I would learn Japanese. I knew this was going to be ridiculously hard but that was the whole point of my Year of Adversity. I wanted to seek out hard things to challenge myself with. Having been to Japan twice and fallen in love with the country, it made sense to choose this language. I wanted to create a special bond with the country and learning the language would definitely do that.

I spent a lot of time researching how I would go about tackling this epic challenge and came up with a battle plan. Everything about the language was so different that it took a long time to figure out where to start and how

I should approach the challenge. Japanese is a very difficult language to learn. The grammatical structure is completely different to English – it uses three types of writing systems (one of which has 2,000 essential symbols to learn) with several layers of formal and informal language. This isn't just the odd slang word here and there but a complete change of words and conjugations depending upon who you're talking to. You use different words to speak to your friends, different words for your boss and different words for strangers. Basically, there's *lots* of words to learn. Did I mention that there are dozens, literally dozens, of ways to say "I"? Well, there are. We have one word in English. Japanese has tons.

I quickly became overwhelmed. After a few weeks of studying, I felt totally out of my depth and seriously had to talk myself out of giving up. In fact, this happened several times in the first six months of learning Japanese. Eventually, I became more accepting of how epic this challenge was going to be and began to appreciate each step of the journey.

I've made some hilarious mistakes during my Japanese lessons that have had both myself and my teacher in stitches. The shock on my teacher's face when I told him I was dating a nine-year-old was priceless. I meant to tell him that I had been with my girlfriend for nine years! The look of relief on his face was brilliant when he eventually understood what I meant. Another time, I announced that I had piles when I actually wanted to say that the lesson was nearly over. There have been many more ridiculous mistakes like this and I'm confident that they won't be the last.

After a year of learning, I can now have a conversation in casual and formal Japanese about relatively straightforward topics for an hour without my brain dribbling out of my ears (well, almost). I can understand basic articles and am slowly working my way through the kanji (Chinese characters). I took an exam about six months into learning the language and now have an official qualification, although basic, in Japanese. I've met some awesome people, have made some Japanese friends and have fallen deeply in love with the Japanese culture. I'm so glad that I started learning this language and absolutely love having it as part of my everyday life.

Japanese culture continually surprises me and that's why I love it. The other day I watched a video about a spa in Japan where you can bathe in noodles. Yes, noodles. The spa also offers wine, beer and tea baths. I keep discovering things like this all the time and it makes me love Japan even more. I'm determined to get into that noodle bath one day.

What I learned: Other than the obvious, basic understanding of a very complex language, I have gained many personal insights from studying Japanese. I've become a lot better at enjoying the process as expecting instant results made me frustrated with my progress. As soon as I saw the journey for what it was, and relaxed about how hard it was, I stopped focusing on the difficulties and began to enjoy the journey.

I find that consistency has been king with the learning process. Making a commitment to study every day was really hard but the results were worthwhile. By recording my daily amount of Japanese practice, I now know the total amount of hours I have spent learning Japanese. This allows me to make rough calculations on my overall progress and I've found the increasing number to be very motivating.

One of the greatest lessons I have taken away from studying Japanese is the mindset needed to approach difficult things. Every step of the way there is another hurdle to deal with. This constant struggle has made me get better at struggling. I'm getting more comfortable with being uncomfortable, and I know that I can apply this to other areas of my life.

“I announced that I had piles when I actually wanted to say that the lesson was nearly over.”



3. Complete a long-distance walk

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 8 (Hard)

Time required: Several days

What: Complete a long-distance, multi-day walk.

Why: This can be extremely difficult. Waking up in the morning with an aching body (day two onward) and knowing that you have an entire day of walking ahead of you is certainly a challenge. You will have to manage your exhaustion levels appropriately and watch out for foot problems and blisters. However, you will get to experience some enjoyable countryside in the process and test your endurance in an interesting way.

How: Decide on a long-distance walk that you would like to complete. It should be a multi-stage event and require you to walk for several days back to back. Aim for a walk of around 160km (100 miles) long that will take several days to complete. A quick online search for “long-distance walking trails” will give you plenty of choices. There are so many options across the planet, so do a little research to see which will suit you.

The process of completing the walk isn't that technical but requires determination.

Step 1: Decide on your route and choose the dates for when you will do the walk. Ask a friend to join you if you want company or try it alone to develop your self-sufficiency. Consider accommodation along the way.

Step 2: Plan the route, order a guidebook, make sure you have the right equipment (the correct shoes being the most important factor), and book accommodation. You will also need to plan how you will get to the start of the route and how you intend to get back from the finish.

Step 3: Walk your route.

Step 4: Celebrate and start planning the next one.

Harder: Complete a longer distance walk – you could try something around 800km (500 miles) long that will take significantly longer to complete. The Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain is the perfect example of this type of route. Also consider taking your tent and supplies along the way. This will make things logistically harder and require more planning.

Research: Levison Wood is a British explorer who has completed some incredible long-distance walks. He's walked the length of the Nile unsupported, hiked an unbelievable route along the length of the entire Himalayan mountain range and has many other exciting expeditions under his belt. Wood has several books and documentaries that will no doubt encourage you to put your walking boots on. His documentary/book *Walking the Himalayas* is incredible and truly inspiring.

There are many rambling clubs and societies to join if you are interested in a support network of local walkers. This would be a great way to meet people who are also interested in long-distance walking.

Ffiona Campbell is an English adventurer who walked around the world. Yes, the whole planet! She has many books to her name to inspire you.

My experience: I'd always wanted to do a long-distance walk but had never got around to it. Therefore, I made it a top priority when writing my challenge list and knew that it would be a great way to test myself both physically and mentally.

I decided to walk The Cotswold Way in the UK. The walk starts in Chipping Campden and ends in Bath and is 164km (102 miles) long. I chose to do the walk by myself and focused on completing it in a good time. The recommended walking time is between seven and ten days, but I

decided to ramp things up a bit and aim to complete it in four days. Stupid? Maybe. Ambitious? Definitely.

The first day went well, although it was tough. The route was semi-familiar as I had walked some of the sections previously. The scenery was stunning and I felt excited by the adventure ahead of me. I suffered pretty bad chafing toward the end of the day but had the foresight (or genius) to bring a tub of Vaseline with me. The chafing certainly took me by surprise and caused a difficult last few miles (think bleeding inner thighs). I ended up walking about 45km (28 miles), which was a great first day.

Day two had a bad start. I'd accidentally left my shoes outside and it had rained all night ... Putting on soaking wet shoes at the start of a big day was less than ideal. In fact, it was horrible. Every step I took made a loud squelching sound. My headphones went straight in!

I managed to get on the route by 7am, but it took a good hour for my body to warm up and feel functional again. After about three hours of walking, I felt a pain in the back of my left foot. There was a sharp sensation on my heel that felt like a blister. It wasn't actually a blister, though, and seemed to be coming from my Achilles tendon. I continued to walk but started to get worried about what was going on. Something didn't feel right. After another hour or so, my heel was badly hurting and I began to have doubts about completing the whole route. My mood dropped and I became frustrated, which really didn't help. I took some ibuprofen to ease the pain and decided to push on regardless of the consequences. My foot held out for the rest of the day and I managed to complete a distance just shy of a marathon.

I woke up on day three and my foot pain had eased a lot which was great news. Things didn't get easier though. The challenge of day three was the rain. It rained non-stop for six hours and I was soaked to the skin after the first few miles. We're talking torrential British summertime rain that doesn't give you a break. My waterproof trousers ripped and my legs got soaked. The conditions were miserable, but I kept trying to hold on to the maxim "If it ain't raining, it ain't training". That sort of helped. At the end

of the day, my foot looked like a topographic map of a mountain range/very dirty prune.

Day four was brutal and my body really struggled to find a rhythm. My foot pain became excruciating (it came back with a vengeance) and my body begged me to stop. I put my headphones in, cued a heavy metal playlist for motivation, kept my head down and focused on the goal. It was a painful day and I had to work hard to remove all of the negativity from my mind. This worked and, although it was a battle, I managed to complete the walk on the fourth day.

I walked around 170km (106 miles) in total which pretty much equates to walking four marathons in four days. The total ascent was close to 4,000m (13,124ft), so inevitably I spent a lot of time walking up hills. In a way, it was like climbing a mountain and walking a marathon each day. I was so relieved to finish the walk and my body was really happy with me when I finally stopped. However, it was such a great achievement and something I won't forget.

What I learned: I had totally underestimated what it would take for me to complete this walk in four days. I was extremely fit at the time, having recently run a marathon and been involved in various physical challenges. I felt strong and my body was in good condition. I had assumed it would be a breeze and that I wouldn't have any problems. It was "just a walk" after all. Wow, I was so wrong.

Hands down, this was one of the hardest physical things I've ever done and my body suffered greatly. I gave myself mild Achilles tendonitis in my left foot and couldn't wear shoes for two weeks afterwards.

I really should have done specific training for the walk and built up this type of endurance gradually. It's different from running and I should have trained accordingly. The important lesson here is to approach new things with enough respect for what might be asked of you. I felt my over-confidence had made me complacent. Good preparation is vital when tackling big challenges.

This challenge taught me a lot about pushing through discomfort and I had to dig deep to complete it. The short-term pain was a great teacher and forced me to apply all of the philosophy I had been studying. I'm really pleased that I managed to complete it, though, and feel that I got a lot out of the whole experience.

“This challenge taught me a lot about pushing through discomfort and I had to dig deep to complete it.”



4. Memorize a deck of cards

Category: Skill

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: Half day to full day

What: Be able to shuffle a deck of cards, look at each card once and then recall the order of the entire deck.

Why: This is the ultimate memory test. It's an impressive party trick and will amaze anyone you show it to. They genuinely won't believe that you can do this. To accomplish this feat, you will need to use a specific method. Learning this method will highlight just how incredible the human mind is. It's also really difficult and will allow you to work on your mental resistance to new and challenging things.

How: This sounds like an impossible task, but I can assure you that with practice and the correct method you will be able to do it. By turning each card into a character with an action, you place them in a story (for example, the story can be predefined places on your route to work) which makes the order easier to remember. I'll give you an example of how I do it and things should become a little clearer.

Step 1: Get a deck of cards and block out the time to explore this method.

Step 2: Assign a character to each card. In total you will need 52 different characters, one character per card. These characters can be fictional, people you know or celebrities. It's easier if you break the suits up and categorize them accordingly.

For the hearts suit I use family and friends. The Queen of hearts is my mum, the King of hearts is my dad, the Ace of hearts is Helen and I am the Jack of hearts. I have assigned different family members and friends to numbers that I can link to them. The more obvious the link between the character/person and the number, the easier it will be to remember.

The clubs suit is action movie stars (I love action movies), so they feature characters like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arnold is the Ace of clubs – Arnold – A – Ace. You get the idea.

The spades suit is a musical category and features Michael Jackson, Elton John and John Coltrane. Quite a mix indeed.

The final suit is diamonds and I've used this to symbolize wealth. Any celebrity/famous person with a small fortune can qualify for this category. Characters include the Queen of England and Richard Branson.

Choose who you want to represent each card and try to make a specific link to that character – you need to be creative here. Write down who each card belongs to as you go.

Step 3: Assign an action or item to each character. For example, my action is coiling a climbing rope. Elton John's item is a pair of outrageous sunglasses and Arnold Schwarzenegger's action is lifting weights. Each character has a unique item or action that should be funny or quirky. Write them all down.

Step 4: Create a “memory palace” with 26 locations. A memory palace is a device used to help you remember a long list of things by assigning specific locations for what you want to recall. This can be rooms in your house or a route that you frequently take. By placing items/people in a specific location in your mind, you will find it a lot easier to remember them. I have created loads of memory palaces for different things but have a specific one for remembering the deck of cards. This memory palace is my route to work and has 26 interesting and easy to remember locations along the way. The first location is my front door, the second is the local pub. The third is the bus stop. You now need to create a personal journey with 26 locations. Write them down.

Step 5: After you’ve assigned and learned each card’s character and action and have a memory palace with 26 locations, you are ready to begin. Shuffle the cards, pick one and now place that character in your memory palace at the first location. Let’s say my first card is the Ace of clubs (Schwarzenegger). I will now visualize him at the first location of my memory palace, which is my front door. For the second card I pick, I will take the action of the card and assign it to Schwarzenegger. For example, if the next card is the Jack of hearts (me), I will use my action of coiling a rope. I now have Arnold Schwarzenegger at my front door coiling a rope – hilarious! I won’t forget this as it’s so ridiculous. I will now go through each step of my memory palace as I pick cards from the deck assigning characters and unusual actions/items to them. The first card picked for each new location in the memory palace will *always* be the character. The second card will *always* be the action assigned to the character, as in my example before. The story that is created is unique and often makes me laugh. You can end up with some bizarre combinations. The image of my mum weight lifting at the local pub is hard to forget! Eventually, I’ll have 26 characters with unusual actions at every location and every card in the deck will be memorized. The combining of different actions

with the different characters provides countless options that will help you to be surprised by the story. The more surprised you are, the more likely you are to remember the order of the story.

Step 6: Now I simply recall the story and call out the cards as they appear. At the first location was Schwarzenegger (Ace of clubs) and he was coiling a rope (Jack of hearts). The method continues like this through each location with each unique combination of the cards.

If any of this is unclear, be sure to read other deck memorization descriptions online as having a variety of different explanations can help to create a stronger image in your mind.

At first, the process can take quite a while to complete but with practice this can be dramatically reduced.

Harder: Try to view and then recall the deck of cards in less than five minutes.

Consider exploring other areas of memory recall. Seeing how many digits of the number pi you can learn by heart is another interesting challenge. There's a completely different method for recalling long lists of numbers and these can be explored in the books mentioned on [page 53](#). I've managed 100 digits of pi by heart without too much effort. See if you can beat this. The current world record, at the time of writing, is 67,890 digits set by Lu Chao of China in 2005.

Research: The book *You Can Have an Amazing Memory* by Dominic O'Brien is a great place to start and will help you to complete this challenge. It outlines the method above and gives many other tips and tricks for developing your memory.

Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything by Joshua Foer is another fascinating book on the memory.

Explore the Grand Master of Memory championships (GMM) and the wonderful world of mnemonic devices/memory palaces online. Countless videos and articles are out there for you to discover, so get researching.

My experience: Learning to memorize the deck of cards really didn't take as long as I expected. The method is miraculous. I sat in my living room for several hours working on the characters for each card and came up with my list. When I started testing it out, I was amazed at how easily the characters stuck in my brain.

Once I could see that the method really did work, it only took a little time before I could recite the entire deck. At first, this was extremely slow, but after a few weeks of daily practice I could view and recall an entire deck in less than five minutes. My record is three minutes and this feels quite fast as you only have a second or two to look at each card.

It's a great party trick and anyone I've shown this to can't believe that I can remember the order of the cards. You'll get brilliant reactions from people if you do this challenge in front of them.

What I learned: When I first read about memorizing an entire deck of cards by heart after only seeing it once, I was sure I wouldn't be able to do it (fixed mindset in action). It seemed like an impossible feat and something that I wouldn't have the capacity to do (more fixed mindset in action). How wrong I was! This self-limiting belief was stupid as I hadn't even attempted the technique. Interestingly, it was much easier than I thought it would be and I thoroughly enjoyed the process. It would have been easy for me to write off this skill as impossible and not even attempt it.

This challenge taught me to be more open-minded about learning new skills. Mindset is so important here and it makes me think of the famous quote by Henry Ford – “If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right.”

“This challenge has taught me to be more open-minded about learning new skills.”



5. Acupuncture

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: 1–3 hours

What: The goal with this challenge is to have an acupuncture session. Acupuncture is a centuries old form of Chinese medicine that is now widely practised in the West. An acupuncture practitioner will insert needles into a patient to stimulate energy flow and to help heal/rebalance the patient. The needles are extremely thin and will be placed all over the body according to what the patient needs. And yes, that includes your face.

Why: Acupuncture is perfectly safe, but the idea of having lots of needles inserted into your body can be a daunting prospect. Even if you think it's ridiculous and doesn't work, you can still take part in the challenge from the perspective that you will be having needles put in unusual places. You'll certainly experience some odd and unfamiliar sensations along the way. This is a great challenge to help you overcome a fear of needles.

How: Even if you are in perfect health, you can benefit from a session as there will always be something they can offer to help you with.

Step 1: Research your local options for getting a treatment. Weigh up costs and qualification of the practitioner before deciding where you will go. The more traditional, the better, I say.

Step 2: Book an appointment. Your practitioner will ask you about any health problems and discuss what areas you'd like to address with

the acupuncture.

Step 3: Turn up to your appointment and experience the sensation of becoming a human hedgehog.

Step 4: Celebrate completing another challenge.

Harder: Consider regularly having acupuncture until the experience becomes familiar. You will eventually become comfortable with needles being stuck anywhere.

Another alternative is to explore therapies that are unfamiliar to you. Cupping and the Chinese ear candle are two examples that can put you out of your comfort zone if you've never had them before. There's plenty of fun and interesting alternative therapies out there for you to try.

For those of you who have absolutely no problem with needles and want a really difficult challenge, I suggest colonic irrigation as your therapy of choice. If you don't know what this is, Google it. But be warned, Google images aren't going to be pretty. This will surely test the mental strength of those who fancy a challenge.

Research: If you're based in the UK, the British Acupuncture Council is a great place to start when trying to discover a local practitioner. Use their website to source someone with the right qualifications close by. If you're not in the UK, search online to find your country's regulatory body for the practice of acupuncture.

Five Element Acupuncture is a slightly more traditional type of acupuncture that's worth looking into.

My experience: I had a serious fear of needles before I went for my first acupuncture session but was determined to face this head-on. I had heard so many great things about the therapy, so I was keen to try it out. As I lived really close to a traditional Chinese spa, I decided to pop in and pay them a visit. I knew this experience was really going to test me.

Everyone was very friendly but the standard of English was low. There was lots of pointing and then my acupuncturist took me into a back room. It's safe to say I was a little sweaty. After stripping down to my underwear, the acupuncturist examined my tongue. He made a few notes and then asked me to lie down. I was nervous.

The preparation seemed to take forever. I could hear lots of rustling behind me as the smell of antiseptic wafted in my direction. After what seemed like a lifetime, he approached me with the needles. He started at the top of my head and began fiddling with my hair. I felt the sensation of pressure and then a small, sharper sensation. Not so bad, I thought. Within five minutes I was completely covered in needles. There were needles in my face, arms, legs, stomach, hands and feet and I looked like Pinhead from the horror movie *Hellraiser* (the villain with loads of nails coming out of his face). Great. I was sweaty and still not as relaxed as I would like to have been, but I focused on keeping my composure.

My acupuncturist then put on a CD of traditional Chinese music. He told me he would return in ten minutes and left me alone. I closed my eyes, focused on my breathing and began to pay attention to the sensations in my body. I became extremely relaxed and was on the brink of sleep when something caught my attention. The CD had started to skip. A horrible sound of Chinese instruments clashed over and over while I looked on helplessly. I waited, assuming that my acupuncturist would immediately come and sort out the issue. The clock kept on ticking but he was nowhere to be seen.

I looked down at my body covered in needles and thought better about trying to get up to turn off the music myself. I called out. Nothing. I tried again. No response. After a third time, I gave up. I decided to try the tactic of accepting the situation and seeing it as another layer to the challenge – very Buddhist, right? As soon as I started to see how ridiculous the situation was, I began to laugh. It felt like an ancient type of Chinese torture, only this was totally self-inflicted and there was nothing else I could do about it.

Twenty minutes later, the acupuncturist returned and immediately stopped the CD player. I tried to explain what had happened, but the

acupuncturist didn't understand. He immediately began to extract the needles from my body, which left me with a tingling sensation all over. In no time at all, the experience was over and I was walking back home with another challenge ticked off my list. I felt elated.

In spite of my first acupuncture adventure, I went back several more times after that with the odd cupping therapy thrown in for good measure. It's safe to say that I became a lot more confident around needles and began to relax throughout the process.

What I learned: This experience taught me a lot about perceived pain. I was worried that acupuncture would hurt and the thought of being covered in needles terrified me. Having tried the treatment, I have totally changed my mind. I had worked it up into something it was not and had unrealistic opinions of what would happen. The lesson here is to try to only judge the experience in real time and not work it up into something different.

I also learned that it's important to see the funny side of life. Being stuck helplessly on the acupuncture bed with the CD skipping is quite funny. Being too serious and getting worked up about something like that wouldn't have helped the situation.

After this whole experience, I had to get an injection for a holiday I was going on. I used to get worked up and stressed about having injections, but after having had the acupuncture sessions, I had no issues at all. I was so much more comfortable than I had ever been in the past. Progress!

“There were needles in my face, arms, legs, stomach, hands and feet and I looked like Pinhead from the horror movie *Hellraiser*.”



6. Run a race

Category: Physical

Classification: Epic

Difficulty: 10 (Very Hard)

Time required: Up to 3 months

What: Run an official road race.

Why: This challenge is all about discipline. You will likely need to train for the race, so it's a commitment. Motivation is hugely important here too, so make sure that you keep up momentum with regular training.

Running is inexpensive and represents physical activity in its rawest and most basic form. It's a great base for your general fitness, and dealing with the physical exertion will be challenging. There is also a huge amount of mental strength needed to complete a distance that is difficult for you.

How: Use the Internet to find and choose a race that's appropriate for you (5k, 10k, half-marathon, marathon, ultra-marathon).

Top tip: Be conscious not to over-train and injure yourself. Use yoga and stretching for injury prevention and buy a foam roller to self-massage areas of tightness.

Step 1: Search online to find a race that you would love to run. Choose something ambitious that excites you.

Step 2: Book the race. You may also consider doing the race with a friend and raising money for charity in the process.

Step 3: Find a suitable training programme (online or at your local running club) and begin working toward your goal.

Step 4: Commit to regular runs and see your training plan through to the end.

Step 5: Run the race. Get loads of friends and family to come and support you along the way.

Step 6: Celebrate completing your race by gorging on pizza and booking a massage!

Harder: Try a marathon or ultra-marathon for the ultimate race challenge.

If you want a ridiculous goal, search for the UTMB (Ultra Trail Marathon du Mont Blanc) online, a 160-km (100-mile) race around Mont Blanc that has over 8,000m (26,248ft) of ascent in it.

The Marathon du Sable, a multi-stage ultra-running event through the Moroccan desert, is another outrageous suggestion.

Research: Search for local running clubs and consider signing up. You don't have to be any good to enter and it's a brilliant way to meet training partners and new friends. Joining a club will definitely take your running to the next level.

Buy a foam roller and learn how to use it with online videos.

Look into the weird world of zombie runs. Volunteers dress up as zombies and chase you throughout the race!

The Marathon du Médoc is a marathon-length route through a winery in France, where they hand out wine at each drink station. Sounds like fun, doesn't it?

The book *Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall and *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* by Haruki Murakami should provide plenty of inspiration.

Fun running alternatives could include competing in a range of novelty races (strange locations/rules/themes), fancy dress races, night races and trail races. There are so many options out there, so start exploring!

For some long-distance running inspiration, check out Rory Bosio. She's a wonderful endurance athlete who has competed in, and won, some incredible races. This includes the UTMB mentioned on [page 59](#).

My experience: Running my first ever marathon was an incredible experience. I had done a few trail races in the past as a way to train for

mountain goals but never seriously thought about going for a marathon. It was something I had always wanted to do but never had the confidence to attempt. This went on the challenge list straight away and filled me with a mix of anticipation and pure fear. This would prove to be a great “exercise” in mental training. No pun intended. Well, maybe just the one.

I decided to choose a local race so I didn't have to worry about logistics. I didn't want to get distracted by where to stay, how to get to the start line and how to get home after the race.

It took me a good few months to prepare for the marathon but having a goal kept me focused. I had a few overtraining-related issues – I tend to be a little overenthusiastic at times – but I was in good condition for the actual race. I had hundreds of miles under my belt and I was ready for action.

The race day was a blur, but I had cool conditions to run in so I was grateful. The first half-marathon whizzed by and I felt strong throughout. The training had paid off. However, the second half tested me. Around mile 22 (35km) I began to struggle. Every step was painful and the exhaustion in my body was noticeable. I forced myself to repeat a few affirmations in my head (thank you CBT for that tip) and this really helped to keep me focused.

Miles 22 to 25 (35–40km) seemed impossibly long and all I wanted to do was stop and go to bed. A quick nap, snack, bath, cool drink and some soothing music would have been nice. Not too much to ask for ... I had to ignore these thoughts and keep going. I dug deep and managed to distract myself by fantasizing about my post-marathon carbohydrate binge. This worked but also made me extremely hungry.

The final mile went by remarkably quickly and suddenly it was all over. I was running across the finish line and it felt incredible. I was so exhausted that I could barely talk, but I couldn't stop smiling. I will *never* forget that moment. Ever.

Completing the marathon was draining but exhilarating at the same time and I felt amazing for several days afterwards –even though my legs ached like crazy. The whole experience gave me such a buzz and I can't recommend it enough. It really was a life-enhancing experience.

What I learned: There are so many lessons that I took away from running a marathon, especially about my physical capabilities and how I respond to exhaustion. The gradual increase in my pain tolerance was noticeable and I learned how to mentally detach myself from the efforts of running (mainly by fantasizing about food). Completing the race took a huge amount of mental effort, so I got to test my mindset in many different ways.

The importance of stretching was another extremely valuable lesson to take away from the whole experience. I stretched so much during training and this made a huge difference to my performance. I did yoga and Pilates and this was the number one thing that stopped me from getting injured. This was so important, and if you decide to get into running, having a support system like this will really help you. I can touch my toes now, whereas before I was as flexible as a lamppost. Flexibility has been my saviour!

Running a marathon was a great example of breaking down yet another self-limiting belief. The race showed me that commitment and focus on a task can make something very difficult become achievable. Completing something as significant as a marathon really helped to boost my confidence. I definitely plan to run more marathons and focus on my mental game throughout the race.

“I was so exhausted that I could barely talk, but I couldn’t stop smiling.”



7. Solve a Rubik's cube

Category: Skill

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 1 week

What: This challenge's objective is to solve a Rubik's cube. The Rubik's cube is a famous puzzle that gained massive popularity in the early 1980s. It's a cube with different coloured faces that requires you to twist edges and match the coloured sides. The current world record for solving the cube, at the time of writing, is a stunning 3.47 seconds by Yusheng Du.

Why: Learning to solve the cube requires a good use of memory and will test your ability to follow complex instructions. It's also very impressive to people who don't know how to solve one and can be your new party trick!

How: You need to learn a series of algorithms (in this case a series of twists) to complete the cube. It should come with instructions but following these can be challenging. To solve the cube, you must first solve one face. This is normally done with the white face, but as you become more advanced it can be any of the coloured faces that gets solved first. After solving the first face, you then work your way through a series of algorithms to slowly complete the cube. It sounds complicated but is actually very achievable for anyone to learn. The learning process is a lot easier to follow using visuals. Luckily, there is a myriad of websites that offers clear and precise videos to help you solve the cube. If you want to conquer the cube, follow the method below:

Step 1: Buy a Rubik's cube. You have several options as there are many different varieties. I'd recommend starting off with the official Rubik's cube.

Step 2: Decide on a resource to learn the method. Either an online video or the instructions with the cube will work well.

Step 3: Learn the orientation of the cube by understanding the names of each face. You can then learn what the algorithm codes mean. For

example, F2 is the code used to complete two clockwise rotations of the front face. Again, this will become clear when working with visuals.

Step 4: Solve the cube by following the instructions included with the cube or with a website/video.

Step 5: Commit the algorithms to memory.

Step 6: Practise until you can do the cube every time with ease, without instructions.

Harder: Solve the cube in less than one minute. If you break open your Rubik's cube and use Vaseline/WD40 to lubricate the cube, it will move a lot faster. This should make a real difference to your solving time. Alternatively, consider buying a "speed cube" which has been designed to move quicker than the standard cube.

For a very difficult challenge, try to solve a 4x4, 5x5 or 7x7 cube.

Research: The "Fridrich Rubik's cube method" is an advanced method to solve the cube and can dramatically speed up your solving time. It's the method Will Smith uses in the movie *The Pursuit of Happiness*. This automatically makes it a bazillion times cooler in my opinion.

Tyson Mao has a great instructional video on YouTube. This clear, step-by-step video is a sensible place to start when learning the cube.

Explore speed cubing to have your mind blown by what's possible.

My experience: I had always assumed that learning to solve a Rubik's cube was impossible. This is why it was the perfect challenge for me to throw myself into. I didn't think that I'd be able to do it, so I wanted to explore that inner resistance. I got myself a cube and started to follow the instruction booklet that came with it. After a lot of huffing and puffing, I managed to solve one of the faces. This was an exciting moment for me. Suddenly the cube didn't seem impossible anymore. Solving it might be possible.

Some time later, probably more than I'd like to admit, I sat on the sofa with a solved Rubik's cube in my hand. I couldn't believe it. Persistence had paid off! I spent the next few days repeating the process over and over again until I had committed it to memory. I could now solve the cube without following instructions. Granted, it took me at least five minutes, but it was solved nevertheless. With practice I managed to get my solving time to under a minute pretty consistently. After this, I began to explore other methods of solving the cube and tried 4x4 and 2x2 cubes.

It's been a great skill to have and the odd occasion when someone happens to have an unsolved Rubik's cube knocking around, I've had some priceless reactions when I casually solve it. It's funny how people suddenly think that you're really smart for being able to solve a Rubik's cube. It's actually way easier than most people think, but it's sometimes fun to let them think you're a genius.

What I learned: I was surprised at how powerful my self-imposed negative belief had been. Assuming that solving the cube was too hard had prevented me from even trying in the first place. Pushing through this taught me a lot about how I should approach things that I have labelled as difficult. How do I know it's difficult until I try? This is such a valuable lesson for me. I hope to be able to apply this concept to things that I have always thought to be too hard for me to learn.

CBT is a great one for helping with this. Blasting those self-doubting thoughts with pure logic can make a massive difference. Questioning negative assumptions and trying anyway is the way forward!

“I was surprised at how powerful my self-imposed negative belief had been.”



8. Climb a mountain

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 9 (Very Hard)

Time required: A weekend plus training time

What: Climb to the summit of a mountain.

Why: Mountains represent an uphill physical and mental battle and can test you in many different ways. You also get the incredible view from the summit if it's a clear day.

How: I'd recommend choosing something with little or no technicality to begin with. There are plenty of appropriate mountains for beginners to attempt all over the world. In the UK, Snowdon, Scafell Pike or Ben Nevis are a good place to start. In the USA, you might try Pikes Peak in Colorado or a trek up Half Dome in Yosemite. The list of appropriate climbs is massive so use the Internet to research a local peak that will suit your current ability if you need inspiration.

The mountains can be an unforgiving environment so make sure you are well prepared before you go. Be sure that you take appropriate gear and look at the weather forecast before leaving. If in doubt, consider hiring a guide.

Step 1: Pick your mountain. Do some Internet research to find something appropriate for your current skill level.

Step 2: Find a friend who wants a piece of the action or decide to climb it alone.

Step 3: Choose a suitable weekend. Book accommodation and organize transport to and from the mountain.

Step 4: Buy necessary supplies: a map, compass, first aid kit, whistle, water, food, appropriate footwear and clothing will all be needed.

- Step 5: Travel to the mountain.
- Step 6: Start early so that you have the full day to climb your chosen mountain. Make sure you are conscious of the weather forecast and that the conditions are suitable for climbing. Also, be aware of what you need to do in the case of an emergency and have mountain rescue's number to hand.
- Step 7: Climb the mountain. Remember, when you summit you are only halfway. Most accidents happen on the way down when people are too relaxed, so stay focused. Keep a steady pace throughout and don't start off too fast.
- Step 8: Celebrate when you have safely descended and are back at base camp (car/pub/campsite).

Harder: Go bigger and more technical. Have a go at scrambling, a form of mountain climbing that uses both hands and feet. This is a lot more demanding than just hiking up a mountain and the routes can be very exposed, so take care with this.

You could also try mountain link-ups – in the UK, the Three Peaks Challenge (to climb all three of the UK's highest mountains in 24 hours) is extremely popular. This, or something similar, would be a good option to increase the challenge's difficulty.

You could also try a winter climb if you're an experienced hill walker/mountaineer, or take things to the next level with an alpine climb. You have so many options!

Research: Bonita Norris was the youngest British woman to summit Mount Everest. She's written a wonderful book called *The Girl Who Climbed Everest: Lessons Learned Facing Up to the World's Toughest Mountains*. It's a great place to get some mountain-based inspiration.

The BMC (British Mountaineering Council) is a fantastic organization that offers courses and up-to-date information on the current walking/climbing/mountaineering scene in the UK. Visit their website for

inspiration. If you catch the climbing bug, consider signing up to become a member. The American equivalent is The American Alpine Club. Most countries have their own clubs, so consider researching what's relevant to where you live.

Watch the movie *Meru* (2015) on Netflix to be blown away by modern Alpinism.

Search for Killian Jornet on Google. Thank me later.

The book *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills* by Alun Richardson is packed with practical information and should answer all of your mountain-related questions.

The two documentaries *Free Solo* (2018) and *The Dawn Wall* (2018) are incredible. Although these are more focused on actual climbing, you don't have to be a "climber" to enjoy them. Get ready for some sweaty palms.

There are countless mountaineering courses all over the globe that can help you push your limits and learn some cool skills along the way. See what you can find.

My experience: I've always loved climbing mountains and have spent so much time over the years in Snowdonia and the Alps.

As part of my Year of Adversity, I decided to take my climbing to the next level by doing various courses to become more self-sufficient in the mountains. This would push me out of my comfort zone in many different ways.

Having recently completed a course in Traditional Climbing, my climbing partner and I were keen to put our new skills to the test. The concept of Traditional Climbing is that you protect yourself during a roped climb by placing bits of gear (essentially wedges and loops of webbing) in the rock as you ascend the cliff/mountain. The gear then gets removed by the second climber.

We wanted to have a go at a slightly more ambitious route that had a big mountain feel. We decided we would attempt Dolman Ridge in Northern Wales' stunning Snowdonia National Park. It was a route that would challenge us but not kill us for our lack of experience.

Before getting to the start of the roped climbing, we had to walk for an hour and a half in the rain (a sign of things to come). By the time we got to the bottom of the route, the rain had thankfully stopped. We prepared ourselves to climb the ridge while hoping that the rain was done for the day. This wasn't actually the case and we were clearly way too optimistic for the British weather to treat us kindly.

I led the first pitch (approximately a length of rope) over easy terrain. This meant that I climbed first and then established a sensible place to rest and safely bring up my climbing partner on the other end of the rope. We then alternated this tactic, taking turns to "lead" different pitches. This went really well until we slightly drifted off course. We must have misread the route and ended up veering into more challenging terrain. Needless to say, things started to get a little spicy. The rain and cloud came in, making the whole experience atmospheric (code for very scary) and mentally taxing. The rock was ridiculously greasy and at one point I completely slipped off the mountain and was caught by my gear and climbing partner. This shook me up a bit and I felt my confidence drain away. We readjusted our course and managed to make our way onto the crest of the ridge where at least the route finding would become easier.

The rest of the ridge felt like a mental and physical battle against the elements. It was unrelenting and we had to push ourselves to climb on through these conditions. I was intimidated but knew that we weren't in serious danger and that it was a matter of trying to keep calm in the face of these difficulties – great training! Although that's a lot easier in hindsight. At the time, I certainly wasn't delighting over how great the training was. It was scary.

At the top of the ridge, we were greeted by horizontal rain and gale-force winds. The temporary relief of completing the ridge was replaced with the next challenge – getting off the mountain. Trying to navigate in these conditions was challenging and we made a massive miscalculation that meant we descended the mountain on the wrong side. Idiots! When we eventually dropped out of the clouds, we were relieved to be able to see further than a few metres. We followed our noses to the road in the distance

and eventually ended up in the Snowdon car park, a good 9.5km (6 miles) from where we needed to be (insert your insult about map reading here). Luckily, there was a bus that we managed to catch back to where we had parked the car. I'd never been happier to see a bus. We were both absolutely exhausted by the climb as the mental concentration needed had been so intense. What a day; what an adventure!

What I learned: This experience taught me the value in staying calm, or at least attempting to, in the midst of tough conditions. I genuinely felt the fear at the door when climbing this route, but I managed to keep it there and not let it overwhelm the experience. This was a great sign of progress. I would have *completely* freaked out if I had climbed this route in the past.

My mind was whirring during the climb and I really had to focus. It's amazing how my brain was making me rush and encouraging me to climb faster. I guess it was trying to get me out of what it perceived to be a dangerous situation. The problem with this is that it had the potential to increase the likelihood of a mistake. Rushing can do this. I had to remain present and not create worst-case scenarios in my mind, which is easier said than done. I needed to take my time and slow down. This felt counterintuitive but was a great lesson to learn. When it starts getting intense, keep your focus and don't rush. Thanks Dolman Ridge, I won't forget that!

“The rest of the ridge felt like a mental and physical battle against the elements.”



9. Become an early riser

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick for a one-off challenge; Epic as a daily practice

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 2 hours

What: Get up for work/school/your day two hours before you need to.

Why: The challenge of getting up early is simple but hard to see through when that alarm goes off. This is all about overcoming mental resistance and is an incredible way to build a stronger, more disciplined mindset. You will also have an extra two hours in the day where you can do something useful – exercise, read a book or do one of your hobbies. The list is endless, so start planning.

How: Set your alarm and get up early. If you normally rise at 7am, set the alarm for 5am. If you normally rise at 6am, set the alarm for 4am. You get the idea.

Step 1: Decide on what time you plan to get up in the morning and set your alarm. Setting a back-up alarm is highly advisable.

Step 2: Create a plan for the morning so you don't have to waste any time when you wake up.

Step 3: Wake up and actually get up.

Step 4: Work through your morning routine.

Harder: Try this challenge for a week/month/year. If you need to increase the challenge, try to get up three hours before you normally would.

Research: The book *Discipline Equals Freedom* by Jocko Willink is an extremely motivating book. This former Navy SEAL explores discipline and how to create/maintain it. He gets up early every day and kicks off with a brutal workout. His Instagram feed is quite interesting too. He regularly posts a picture of his watch when he wakes up. This doesn't sound that

impressive but after following him for some time you'll be amazed at his consistency. Waking up at 4am on a weekend takes a serious amount of motivation and discipline.

The author Tim Ferriss has a huge amount of content on morning routines that's worth exploring too. Search for "Tim Ferriss morning routine" and be prepared to enter a rabbit hole of information.

My experience: After reading about morning routines from multiple sources, I decided that I would create my own and try it out for a year. I knew this would take discipline, but I wanted to find a time for me to document my year of challenges in a productive way. Writing about this experience became my personal project and, after some calculating and brainstorming, I was left with the outline for a productive routine that would start my day off properly and allow me to make time for writing. The routine starts at 5am with a cold shower. I then put the kettle on and meditate for 20 minutes. This is followed by approximately one hour of writing and tea drinking. After this, I'm free to get on with my day as necessary.

This all sounds very nice, but the reality is that I really had to fight to make this work. I struggled immensely to make the routine stick at first. Several weeks passed before it felt normal. In spite of the initial difficulty, it's safe to say that this morning routine is one of the best things I've ever done for my productivity. It now sets me up perfectly for the day and I feel ready to take on whatever comes my way. Obviously, I say that within reason. My routine doesn't prepare me for bear wrestling, fire walking and sword swallowing. Maybe my next book will though ...

To increase the early morning challenge, I punctuated the week with an extremely early start. Wednesdays became known as my "alpine start" and my alarm would be set for 4am to create time for exercise before my previously mentioned routine. The reason I called it an "alpine start" is because whenever I have been alpine climbing in the past, it's been necessary to get up ridiculously early to climb on the glaciers. The reason is to ensure the snow bridges (literally bridges of snow over giant holes in the

glacier) remain frozen. As the day starts to heat up the snow, the snow bridges become weaker and the chances of you falling into a crevasse become greater (*see* the movie *Vertical Limit* (2000) for an idea about what that implies). A good chunk of the climb will be done in the darkness on crisp ice and you'll often be done climbing by lunchtime. This is an "alpine start". I like the name so have stolen it for Wednesdays. A normal Wednesday isn't as exciting as alpine climbing, but at least labelling my early start as an "alpine start" makes it *seem* more adventurous. Just me?

There was one morning when I really didn't want to get up at 4am, but I knew that it was forecast to be snowing – I absolutely love snow. The alarm started beeping and I forced myself to have a quick peek out of the window. There was a massive snow storm and everything was buried in snow ... What a treat! I threw my running kit on and headed out into the storm. It was eerily quiet in London as the snow fell heavily around me. I couldn't believe that I was out in the middle of a snowstorm at 4am in the morning on a regular work-day Wednesday. This was a novel experience and I lapped up every minute of it. I would *never* have done anything like this in the past and I loved how much my life was changing thanks to these challenges. The tiredness disappeared and I felt very alive.

The routine has stuck and I love being able to use the mornings to my advantage. It hasn't been easy but has no doubt been life-changing.

What I learned: Carving out time to do something personally important to you is essential. Finding and protecting this time is very difficult, but if you can make the space for your personal projects, your life will greatly benefit. I found that the morning is the easiest time of day for me to do this. No one is awake and there is a stillness to the start of the day that is peaceful and fresh. Although a little sleepy, I find that my mind is a lot clearer in the morning and I'm able to focus on the task at hand.

I've had to fight the inevitable tiredness that comes with getting less sleep and this in itself is a challenge. The odd early morning here and there doesn't have a massive effect, but waking up consistently early can be tricky. I feel the trade-off is worth it, though, as I've had the most

productive year of my life from doing this. I've learned how essential it is to start the day off right, and having a productive morning has been incredible for me. I actually end up having deeper sleep these days because I'm really tired when I go to bed. Bonus.

It's often hard to get out of bed on the first alarm, but I've discovered that if you jump out from under the duvet and immediately get into a cold shower, things will start moving quickly, even if your brain is a few steps behind. You'll be wide awake in no time. Cold water in your face at 5am is going to wake you like a slap in the face with a frozen kipper.

I've also learned how important a second alarm is. If I accidentally fall back to sleep, the second alarm will save me.

“I love being able to use the mornings to my advantage.”



10. Wales' longest train station

Category: Skill

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 4 (Easy)

Time required: 1–2 hours

What:

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch is the world's longest train station name. North Wales is the home to this impressive station and the challenge is to learn how to pronounce it.

Why: This is a fun challenge. It will take focus to learn and you're likely to encounter a few difficulties along the way.

Welsh uses sounds that are often uncommon in the English language and will inevitably require some practice to pronounce correctly. It's a very long name so will test your memory and patience. Yes, mainly your patience.

How: Start by breaking the word into small chunks. You can then slowly get used to the sounds and begin to pull it together with practice. Having someone Welsh talk you through it will be extremely helpful.

Step 1: Search online to find a recording of the word. There are so many out there so you won't struggle. This will be your benchmark and reference point.

Step 2: Follow the phonetic guide below to slowly piece together the word.

Step 3: Practise reciting it until you are lightning fast.

Step 4: Find someone Welsh and try the word out on them. Their reaction is bound to be great!

The phonetic guide:

LLAN – Pronounced “Clan” with a guttural “cl”. It sounds like you're clearing your throat or are about to spit. I'll use an * to represent this guttural sound going forward. Listen to a recording to make sure that you are getting the sound correct.

FAIR – This is pronounced “fire” but with a “v” – “vire”.

PWLL – For this you need to take “pu” of the English word “pudding” and then add the LL guttural sound from the first LLAN immediately after: “pu*”.

GWYN – This is “win” with a “g” in front of it. Easy: “gwin”.

GYLL – This uses the English word “gibbon” but changes the “bbon” at the end to another guttural LL. So, we now have “gi*”.

GO – “go” as pronounced in “got”.

GER – Say the word “care” with a “g” instead of a “c” – “gare”.

YCH – Say the word “luck” and drop the “l” so you have “uck”. Now change the “ck” at the end to a “ch” as in a Scottish pronunciation of “loch” with a guttural “ch”. You should now have “uch”. This is a little tricky.

WYRN – This one is easy. Just say “win”.

DROB – Say the word “draw” with a “b” on the end – “drawb”.

WLL – This is the same as the “pwll” seen earlier but without the “p” at the start of the word. “u*”.

LLAN – This is exactly the same as the first part and is pronounced “*an”.

TY – This uses a “t” from the word “twinkle”.

SILIO – Pronounced “silly” with an “o” on the end. The “o” should be pronounced as used in the word “got”.

GO – “go” as pronounced in “got”.

GO – Identical to above.

GOCH – Simply say “go” with a “ch” on the end. It should sound similar to the word “loch” with a thick Scottish accent.

Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch

an vire pu gwin gi* go gare uch win drawb u* *an t silly o go go
goch

And there it is in all its glory. If this is a little confusing, use online videos and articles to help clear up any issues that you've encountered. Be sure to always have a recording to hand to be able to reference the sounds when practising.

Harder: Learn to spell it.

You may also choose to explore tongue twisters and unusual words in different languages. For the ultimate challenge try to learn the following tricky poem in Mandarin. Search for "The Story of Mr. Shi Eating Lions" in Chinese. This tongue twister is incredible. Look for it on YouTube and be prepared to have your mind blown!

Research: Watch the Channel 4 presenter Liam Dutton (YouTube "Liam Dutton") pronounce the train station name live on television for inspiration. This is the desirable speed but will take practice.

My experience: I tried several times to learn this word but gave up because I didn't have a phonetic explanation. I was on a stag do at the time and was being taught how to say it by a Welsh man. The later into the evening it got, the harder it became. I eventually threw in the towel but vowed to learn it as a way to test my memory. It seemed like a nice idea for a challenge.

When I started to learn it with a phonetic description, I was surprised by how quickly it came together. I kept reciting it as I walked around my flat and it began to stick in my mind. Getting the pronunciation and speed presentable took time, but online videos really helped with that.

Whenever I've used this on anyone Welsh, I've always got a lively reaction. It's a fun word to have in the back of your head for the occasions you find yourself chatting to someone from Wales.

What I learned: Seeing this challenge through to the end wasn't easy and neither was being able to pronounce Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch. I mean, look at it! I certainly felt frustrated at times and it proved a real workout for my brain. It required focus and was a great test of my patience. That said, compared to some of the other challenges, this felt relatively relaxing. I actually liked this and felt encouraged by the fact that even small, quick ways to get out of our comfort zones can be found in the most random of places. Quite literally, in this instance!

Challenges don't have to be epic for them to be challenging and that is why I really like this one. The simplicity appeals to me and I love how this has taught me to look for smaller ways to leave my comfort zone. I don't have to be freefalling from a plane filled with snakes to be learning and growing – in fact, that sounds horrific, scrap that. This is all about finding small and fun ways to push ourselves. Small can be powerful.

“I love how this has taught me to look for smaller ways to leave my comfort zone.”



11. Sleep in a bivvy bag

Category: Mental

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 1 night

What: Spend the night sleeping outside in a bivvy bag. A bivouac or bivvy bag is a protective cover for the outside of your sleeping bag. The plastic/Gore-tex shell will keep the elements out and allow you to have a very basic form of shelter for the night. It's a lot wilder than regular camping and exposes you to the elements. You'll feel the breeze on your face, see the stars and know when it's raining; it's a back-to-basics experience to say the least. The goal is to spend the entire night in the bag without complaining.

Why: Sleeping in a bivvy bag is a wild, novel and completely unique experience. At times, it'll be uncomfortable, sometimes scary, and maybe funny but always adventurous. It makes for a great story and is perfect for developing mental strength. It won't be the most comfortable night's sleep you'll ever have, but I can guarantee that you won't ever forget it! You can also bivvy pretty much anywhere from mountains to beaches to parks to riverbanks, so it's a great way to get back into nature and feel connected with the environment. What are you waiting for?

How: Instead of investing in a quality bivvy bag, you can buy a cheap "survival bag" which is essentially the same thing. Place your sleeping bag inside the bivvy bag and you're all set for an adventurous night's sleep. A ground mat will help take the edge off the hard floor and should provide a little more comfort. Take a friend along if you're feeling unsure about bivvying alone.

Step 1: Buy a bivvy bag. You can get a cheap "survival bag/shelter" from most outdoors stores. If you want something a little more substantial, you can invest in a higher quality bag that you will be able to use multiple times. If you're on a tight budget, a few larger bin bags will do the trick (only for the brave).

Step 2: Decide on a night for your bivvy adventure and convince a friend/family member to come and join you.

- Step 3: Decide on a location for your bivvy. This could be almost anywhere, so go with something simple for the first one. Think about finding somewhere with easy access and plenty of privacy. The countryside is a better bet than the city – a field by a river makes a nice setting. You can also wake up and take a morning swim the next day. A local map should help you to identify potential bivvy locations.
- Step 4: Pack your sleeping bag, bivvy bag, warm clothes, food and drink into a rucksack and head to your chosen bivvy spot.
- Step 5: Get settled for the evening and watch the light fade as you tuck into your bag accommodation for the night.
- Step 6: Watch the stars as you drift off to sleep with a smile on your face (probably weather dependent).
- Step 7: Wake up and get on with your day. Hopefully, you will have managed to sleep and now feel refreshed and inspired by your experience of bivvyng.

Harder: Bivvy in winter conditions or somewhere difficult to get to. A mountain summit would be a great option to increase the difficulty.

For the ultimate challenge try to bivvy two nights in a row.

Research: *The Book of the Bivvy* by Ronald Turnbull is a comprehensive guide to the nitty-gritty details of bivvyng. This should cover all the bases for anyone interested in exploring this adventurous pastime.

Search online for “Bivvy bag” to be presented with a huge selection of bags to choose from. The “Which Bivvy Bag Should I Buy?” online article by Alastair Humphreys is a great place to educate yourself about bivvyng. His book/work on microadventures is also hugely inspirational.

If you’re in the UK, a local OS (Ordnance Survey) explorer map should help you to find a great location. Alternatively, use the satellite images from Google maps to find the ideal spot for the night.

My experience: My first ever bivvy was by a beautiful river in the foothills of the Italian Dolomites. My friend Matt and I were on a climbing trip to the Alps and decided to give bivvying a try. I knew that this would be a great way for me to challenge myself mentally, so I had invested in a bivvy bag before we left and promised myself that I would use it.

We followed our noses while driving and ended up parking by a gorgeous river. The location was perfect so we took out our gear and waited by the river for it to get dark. We chatted for hours and the atmosphere was great. Evening turned into night and we became sleepy. After a lot of flapping around trying to figure out which way was best to get into the bag, I found myself lying under a star-studded sky. It felt crazy that this would be my view while in bed and I was so excited about the whole experience. It didn't feel normal and that was a great thing.

I eventually fell asleep, but it was a restless night. I woke up several times and felt the need to look around for a good ten minutes or so. I don't know why, but I was a little spooked by the encompassing darkness. The feeling eventually passed and I fell back to sleep but it kept happening throughout the night. It just felt so strange to be sleeping outside in a bag.

I woke up with a bad back but a sense of pride for having stuck the night out. It was the first time I'd slept in a bag and I was hooked. It wasn't that comfortable, but the experience wasn't hard. However, not all bivvy experiences are created equal ... Later in the climbing trip we had a pretty tough bivvy that would certainly come under the dictionary definition of "character building".

We were catching the ferry back to the UK, so decided to bivvy on a beach in Belgium the night before we were due to leave. The weather seemed fine as we settled down for the night on the beach but that was soon to change. After about an hour of not being able to sleep, my bag started to rustle. Over the course of ten minutes that rustling evolved into full-on flapping. The wind had picked up and the temperature suddenly dropped. I forced myself deeper into my sleeping bag in the hope that this would provide me with more warmth. The next thing I became conscious of was the pitter-patter of light rain on the outside of my bag. Well, at least it was

waterproof, I thought ... Within the space of a minute I could hardly hear myself think because the rain was hammering down so hard. Shortly after this I became aware of flashes outside the bag – lightning. And then rumbling – thunder. At this point I started to hear hysterical laughter from Matt’s bivvy bag a few metres away. The situation was ridiculous and so self-inflicted that you couldn’t help but laugh.

We had a conversation at the tops of our voices, chuckling like idiots about the absurdity of it all, as the rain continued to lash down on us. While this was going on, I kept feeling something wriggling under my bivvy bag. I hate bugs so this made me really uncomfortable. I readjusted my position until it eventually went away. That night was pretty tough in the end and neither of us slept that well but at least we stuck it out. All of this was great mental training and gave me another tick for my Year of Adversity. The Stoics would have been proud.

The next day when unpacking I found some dead shrimp-like beach creature in my bivvy bag. I felt violated. This explained the wriggling.

What I learned: Seeing the absurdity in things and looking for the humour made something that was technically miserable actually really funny. By reframing the experience, it went from being a disaster to a bivvy story I love to share with people. In a way, this is CBT in action. Changing how I viewed the situation and focusing on the “funny” instead of the “bad” made a huge difference to my mindset. Going forward, I’ll try to look for the humour in it all when things don’t go to plan.

“It just felt so strange to be sleeping outside in a bag.”



12. No painkillers

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 3 (Very Easy)

Time required: An hour

What: Don't take painkillers when you normally would. This challenge requires you to deal with "mild" pain head-on. It's all too easy to reach straight for the painkillers when you have a headache/stomachache/flu, etc. I've done it countless amounts of times as the temptation to avoid any sort of pain is great. The objective here is to change your approach and really look at the physical sensations of the pain. By facing it and dealing with it mentally, you will be testing your ability to withstand discomfort.

I'm not suggesting abandoning prescription medication or never using over-the-counter painkillers again – there certainly is a time and a place – but the goal is to eradicate the unnecessary use of painkillers.

Why: This challenge requires you to increase your pain threshold and push yourself through physical discomfort. We all like to be comfortable, and the thought of sitting with a headache or similar for an hour or two can be difficult. If anything, this challenge should help us seek alternative ways to deal with the pain that crops up in our body. What is this pain telling us about the situation? Are we drinking enough water? Have we eaten the correct food? There are many things that pain can teach us if we learn to listen to it. It'll also toughen us up a bit in the process.

How: The next time you feel a headache, stomachache or flu symptoms coming on and you find yourself reaching for the painkillers (paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin), stop! It's a pretty easy process but hard to execute.

Step 1: Become conscious of the fact that you are experiencing a level of pain that would normally require painkillers.

- Step 2: Hold back and force yourself to avoid painkillers. Deal with the pain mindfully and test your threshold for discomfort.
- Step 3: When the pain eventually subsides, celebrate your success for dealing with the discomfort head-on.

Harder: Try to never take painkillers. Only use them in extreme and extenuating circumstances.

Research: Looking into alternative treatments for “mild” pain is an option here. Spending some time reading about the incredible physical feats that Shaolin monks manage to achieve might be of interest to you. These monks spend hours on end in contorted positions and learn how to overcome this pain with their minds. Hint: meditation plays a big role.

My experience: My experience with this challenge is recurring as I continue to assess if I actually need to use painkillers. I now have to be in a pretty bad way to even consider using them and I try to listen to the lesson that the pain is trying to teach me.

I recently managed to endure an entire cold without the use of drugs. This has to be a first for me as I used to opt for the “drug me right now” option. It’s an interesting experiment that I like to test myself with and will continue to do so.

What I learned: I often find that if I listen to what my body is trying to tell me then I can get to the root of my pain quite quickly. When I figure out what is likely to have caused the pain, I try to remedy it ASAP. I find that I sometimes don’t drink enough water and this causes headaches. Other times I’m on a screen too long or haven’t had enough sleep. Occasionally, it’s an exercise headache. The list goes on, but I think it’s important to become mindful of the different types of pain we feel. Before, I would just label all headaches as the same and throw a couple of pills down my throat. Becoming aware of the different types of variables within the headache

genre (sounds like a bad type of music) has allowed me to treat myself accordingly. It's made a difference to how I respond to pain and I now react in a more considered way. At the end of the day, I'm taking less drugs and have slightly increased my pain threshold. Two positives!

“It's made a difference to how I respond to pain and I now react in a more considered way.”



13. Pick a lock

Category: Skill

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A few hours to 1 week

What: The objective of this challenge is to learn how to pick simple locks.

Why: Picking a lock requires an interesting technique. It's not a particularly intuitive process so requires a lot of trial and error throughout. Learning this skill is all about cultivating the ability to stick with the task at hand in spite of the difficulty encountered. At times, you'll want to hurl the damn thing across the room in a fit of rage. There were far too many times like this for me when I began learning, but I managed to restrain myself.

Lockpicking is a useful skill that might come in handy one day. You never know when you will actually need it, but having this skill up your sleeve has the potential to be incredibly helpful. You'll have to understand a bit about how locks work (this can be technical) and deal with the

frustrating process of trying to find the “sweet spot” when picking the lock. Your patience will truly be tested. However, when that lock clicks open, you’ll get a real sense of satisfaction.

How: *A quick note on picking locks ... It’s legal to own lockpicking tools and pick your own locks, but as soon as you attempt to pick someone else’s lock without their consent, you are breaking the law. It’s pretty obvious, but I feel it’s important to make this distinction. All the locks in this challenge must be your own or you must have the consent of the owner to pick them.

The most obvious way to learn to pick locks is by ordering a lockpicking set online. There are plenty of options out there, so search around and see what looks good for you. The set normally has the lockpicking tools and a series of locks for you to pick. The idea is that the locks get progressively harder the better you get. The set should come with an instructional guide on using the tools to get you started. Some lockpicking sets have clear plastic locks that allow you to see what your tools are doing inside the lock. This is especially useful when you first start out and are trying to understand how the lock works.

The alternative option is to use YouTube videos to get a sense of how to pick locks and then improvise your own tools from around the house. For example, a pair of paperclips can be fashioned into a basic lockpicking device. It won’t have the efficiency of a proper set but should get the job done if you’re patient.

The process of picking a lock works best with visuals and a hands-on approach. I’ll outline the theory below, but then I suggest using the Internet to further explore this fascinating pastime.

Step 1: The best place to start is with a simple padlock.

Step 2: The tool you use first is called a “tension wrench”. This is what you will use to apply torque (a twisting force) to the lock where the key would normally go. Insert this into the lock and twist lightly.

Step 3: Now insert the lock pick into the lock and use the pick to move the pins on the inside of the lock.

Step 4: By pressing the pins inside the lock and twisting with the tension wrench, the lock will pop open. This is the fiddly step and can often take time to master.

Step 5: Practise this until it becomes easy.

The process sounds straightforward, and in theory it is, but you really need to experiment to get the feel for how it all works. The best thing is to watch a few videos online as there are many ways to pick the same lock. Hopefully, you now have an idea of the overall arc of picking a lock. With a bit of self-study and research, you will be picking locks in no time.

Harder: Record your times for different padlocks and see if you can beat them.

For the ultimate challenge, see if you can pick your way into your own home. For this you may have to learn a variety of techniques to open different types of locks.

Research: Search online for “locksport” to find a huge community of lock pickers. This unusual hobby is actually surprisingly popular. If you’re lucky, you may be able to find a local club where you can expand on your skills and meet likeminded people.

My experience: Helen had an amused look on her face as she passed me my latest mail-order. Over the past few months she had got used to me doing unusual and absurd things in the name of self-improvement. Having recently witnessed me bathing in the British sea in the midst of winter (this event no doubt convinced her that she was dating an idiot), a shiny new set of lockpicking tools didn’t cause a huge reaction. She gently advised me not to do anything illegal and then carried on with her day. I promised her that I wouldn’t do anything stupid and tried to convince her that lots of people genuinely do this as a hobby. I don’t think she believed me, but she was kind enough to listen.

I opened my new lock picking kit and marvelled at the assortment of unusual levers and tools that sat in front of me. I started to read through the instructions that came with the kit but got a little carried away and tried to figure it out by myself. This really didn't work, so I had to go back to basics and start from scratch with the instructions. As I followed them, I began to get an insight into how fiddly this whole process actually is. I ended up working through the guide methodically until I understood what I needed to do. I then spent a good 30 minutes trying to pick the padlock that came with my kit. It's safe to say that this was an extremely frustrating process. I would hear a few little clicks as I began to align the inner chamber with the lever. Just when I would feel the lock start to turn, the lever and pick would spring out and I would have to start again. This could be as much as five minutes work undone in a second. This repeatedly happened and I could feel my patience running thin. Luckily, I was fully immersed in my Year of Adversity mindset, so I coped with this frustration remarkably well. I tried to focus on accepting the difficulty rather than fighting it, working hard to implement the Buddhist philosophy I had been studying, and I felt that this really helped. The old me would have thrown the whole set out of the window! These kinds of fiddly tasks really frustrate me and require a lot of my mental control to stay calm. Shouting at inanimate objects isn't a great idea. It's stupid and unhelpful. Thankfully, I could feel myself changing as I worked through the frustrations of this challenge. Thank you, philosophy! I owe you one.

And then, suddenly, there was a tiny click and the lock popped open in the most satisfying way. I'd done it! It was incredibly rewarding to have struggled for so long and then break through. I immediately locked the padlock and began the process again. A few hours later, I was "popping locks" in only a few minutes. I became consistent with padlocks and I felt amazed at how easy it became. In fact, it was a little disconcerting how quickly you can learn to pop open simple padlocks.

What I learned: Dealing with the frustration of having to repeatedly start the picking process from the beginning was personally testing for me. This

was exactly the kind of thing that would frustrate the hell out of me before, but looking at things from a new perspective really helped me to stay in control. Seeing how much better I was handling this showed me that I had made considerable progress.

My neighbour recently locked her house keys inside her garage and was distressed about what to do. She didn't have a spare set and needed to access them to get back into her house. I offered to pick the lock to the garage door for her if she was happy to let me. She agreed but was a little surprised as to why I knew how to pick locks. I explained everything to her and she seemed slightly more relieved. Not entirely though. I didn't have my lockpicking kit with me so had to improvise some tools. I approached the garage door with a huge amount of confidence and was ready to be the "hero". It seems like it's obvious where this story is going ...

I tried and tried to pop the lock, but it just wouldn't budge. My improvised tools were terrible, but a good tradesman doesn't blame his tools so I spent an hour trying to pick that damn lock. I failed miserably and had to return with my tail between my legs. Fortunately, her son had spare garage keys and turned up a few hours later.

It wasn't a complete waste of time, though, as I feel that I'd learned another valuable lesson here. If you've learned a skill, you need to keep practising it otherwise it will fade. Regularly checking in with all of my newly acquired skills is something I will need to do if I want them to retain any sort of practical value.

There are lessons to be learned everywhere if you are open to seeing them. The old me would have seen this as a complete failure, whereas I now feel that there is value in everything as long as you seek out the lesson. This is the perfect example of having a growth mindset when facing a pretty clear failure.

“I tried to focus on accepting the difficulty rather than fighting it.”



14. Eat something unfamiliar

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 2 (Easy)

Time required: 5 minutes

What: Try an unfamiliar type of food. The bolder the better, and the more unappealing the food is to you, then the more of a challenge this will be. It's all a matter of being creative and thinking of things that will push you out of your comfort zone. This will vary for different people, but an obvious place to start is with insects.

Why: Food is such a personal thing. This object will nourish you and go *inside* your body. If you think a particular "food" is disgusting, your brain will really struggle to let you eat it. Eating something unfamiliar is a mental challenge and a great way to leave your comfort zone.

How: This challenge can be a lot of fun and you should definitely get friends to help you complete it. It's an easy challenge to try and only requires you to head to your local supermarket. If that doesn't stock anything too unfamiliar, then you should try a world supermarket for other options. You can also order insects from the Internet. Exotic and unfamiliar foods are out there; it might just take a little bit of research to find them.

Step 1: Head to the supermarket.

Step 2: Buy something that you think looks disgusting.

Step 3: Go home and eat it!

Step 4: Repeat the process but seek out more outrageous foods.

Try to complete my list of challenging/unusual foods:

- 1 Oysters (I know these aren't that weird, but I absolutely hate them)
- 2 Snails
- 3 Thousand-year-old egg
- 4 Durian (the fruit from hell)
- 5 Crickets
- 6 Brain
- 7 A whole lemon
- 8 An entire raw onion
- 9 A shot of vinegar
- 10 A variety of different insects – worms/spiders/maggots/scorpions, etc

This list has the potential to be huge and can be expanded for each individual. The key is to be adventurous and try new things. Create your own list and see how many unusual things you can eat in the name of self-improvement.

Harder: Try the Icelandic dish “hákarl”. It’s fermented (sometimes considered rotten) shark that has been cured in a specific way. The smell is overpowering and there is a high chance you will gag when trying to eat it. Hákarl will be hard to keep down and requires determination to eat.

Research: The British chef Heston Blumenthal is a master of pairing unusual food groups. His famous “snail porridge” can be made by those keen to try something different. He has a host of TV shows and recipe books to his name that I recommend exploring for inspiration.

Watching people eat insects at Beijing’s insect market on YouTube is a great way to catch a glimpse of people’s varying reactions to eating bugs. Although this is only unusual to those brought up in a Western culture.

Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern is an American TV series that explores unusual foods from all around the globe. Give it a watch.

Search for James May and Gordon Ramsay eating rotten shark on YouTube. This is both really funny and totally disgusting!

My experience: Over the course of my year of practising adversity, I've kept coming back to this challenge. I love how quick and easy it is to make myself uncomfortable by eating something unfamiliar. It's a great exercise in mental strength and can be extremely fun. I've eaten so many unique and interesting types of food across the year that Helen has become accustomed to me trying outrageous dishes and she loves witnessing my reactions. I'm yet to successfully convince her to get involved though.

The best for her/worst for me was during a holiday in South-East Asia. We were in Kuala Lumpur and had been seeing signs for a forbidden fruit called durian almost everywhere. When we were at the airport, durian was listed as a forbidden item along with drugs, guns and explosives. This should give you an idea of how stinky and offensive durian is. It's also banned from public places like hotels and shopping malls. Oh, and you can't take it on public transport either. I was so intrigued that a fruit could cause such controversy. It seemed like it had to happen. I *had* to have a taste of the forbidden fruit.

We were in one of the biggest shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur and a lady was selling durian sweets. Bear in mind that this was a sweet and not the actual pure durian itself. I was super confident that it was going to be easy to eat so I bought a box. I'd eaten a host of terrible things in the past so wasn't intimidated by this tiny sweet at all. How wrong I was. It took a second or two of having the durian sweet in my mouth before the full extent of the flavour hit me. It was like being punched in the taste buds – I felt like I had sucked on a sweaty foot covered in rotten cheesecake and vomit. It was horrific and by far the worst thing I have ever tasted! I instantly began to gag and could feel sick coming up the back of my throat. I managed to hold it down, but tears were rolling down my face. I needed to spit it out, and fast. I desperately searched for a bin but none were in sight. Meanwhile, Helen is in absolute stitches at her idiot boyfriend running around like a lunatic trying to find somewhere to dispose of the sweet. I

managed to find a toilet after about five excruciating minutes and rid myself of a sweet that only the devil could have created. I couldn't get rid of the taste for a good hour as I tried to mask it with various other things like chocolate and soda.

Alas, that experience didn't end my experimental culinary career. I managed to introduce friends and family to this challenge by bringing a bunch of unusual foods to our Boxing Day family gathering. The list included salt and vinegar crickets, which I highly recommend for their novelty factor, BBQ worms and chocolate-covered scorpions. It got a mixed reaction and a lot of screaming. It was such a lively and fun experience watching how different people dealt with the challenge of eating something disgusting. Some refused outright, whereas others were game. Fun was had by all, even if they didn't personally eat anything disgusting. I can't recommend this enough to liven up a social occasion. It really is a great way to have a laugh and push yourself out of your comfort zone relatively easily.

I'll continue to eat unusual things and hope that I can make Helen laugh in the process.

What I learned: Taste is temporary. However disgusting something tastes, it will eventually work its way out of your taste buds and you'll be set for the next exotic food to try. Often the thought of the food is worse than the actual taste. This is especially true for insects. The majority of the insects I have eaten are so bland and tasteless that it really isn't a flavour issue. It's the thought of eating an insect that repulses the majority of Westerners. Perceptions are often wrong about things and the Stoics would be the first to point this out. Our perception of how that baked tarantula is going to taste is likely to play havoc with our minds. If we can remove our labels of good/bad/fat and hairy-legged and just eat what's in front of us, we will be able to transcend our own limiting beliefs and exercise more control over our minds. It's a lot easier said than done, but I have loved how simple it is to test myself in this manner. If I need a quick mental boost, I'll go and eat a lemon from the fridge.

“I love how quick and easy it is to make myself uncomfortable by eating something unfamiliar.”



15. Complete an obstacle course

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: A morning, plus training time

What: Complete an OCR (obstacle course race). The races/courses consist of various challenges at different points on the run. These range from mud pits to climbing frames, and often test your ability to endure discomfort. Races like “Tough Mudder”, “Tough Guy” and “Spartan Race” are becoming extremely popular and often sell out.

Why: The obstacle course is the perfect way of challenging yourself. It requires all-round fitness, an open mind to new and unfamiliar challenges and the mental strength to deal with discomfort.

How: Find a race that’s local to you and sign up. It really couldn’t be easier.

Step 1: Search for a local course or race that inspires/scares/interests you and sign up.

Step 2: Start training for your race, making sure to balance the types of exercise you will be doing.

Step 3: Complete the race.

Step 4: Celebrate!

It's an easy process, but the actual race is likely to be demanding. Convince friends to join you if you need moral support.

Harder: Find a more challenging obstacle course. Look for longer distances (some can be marathon length) and more extreme obstacles. The "Tough Guy" OCR is often considered to be one of the most hardcore OCRs to complete. Consider this as an option to ramp up the difficulty of the challenge.

Research: "Tough Mudder" has become one of the most famous OCRs on the planet. The race has you plunging into icy water, crawling through mud and getting electrocuted. Sounds like fun, right? Watch a few online videos to get a sense of what the race looks like.

Search online for OCR events local to you to see what your options are.

There are now a huge amount of professional OCR athletes and a massive cross-section of training programmes discussed online. Spend time looking into the scene to get inspired. Need some motivation? Check out Amelia Boone.

My experience: My friend Matt was keen to join me on my first ever obstacle course. We both grew up in the British countryside and were back in the area visiting family for Christmas. It seemed like the perfect time to check out a new obstacle course that had just opened in a local village, allowing me to tick off another challenge from my list.

When we arrived, we were shocked at how ambitious the obstacle course really was. There were huge MDF (medium-density fibreboard) walls and massive watery pits that were icy due to the recent cold snap. A large section of the course went through the middle of a stream and was followed by massive muddy hills with badly-constructed obstacles along the way. It certainly didn't feel like a health and safety-approved course as we inspected some of the obstacles. Nails were poking out at all angles, it was

poorly constructed and looked dangerous. It was totally eccentric, but we loved the idea of completing it.

We geared ourselves up, looked at the course record on the wall and set off at a strong pace with the intent to claim a new record. The first few obstacles were relatively easy and required us to swing on ropes and climb big mounds of tyres. It was a lot of fun and didn't feel too demanding. That quickly changed as we had to crawl through a tunnel filled with icy water and mud. When we emerged, we were soaked through and caked in muck. From that moment on, the obstacles didn't let up. We were confronted by big ladders over mud pits that looked like they would break at any second. There were nails everywhere and we had to be careful not to cut ourselves or fall from a bone-breaking height. We waded through thigh-deep bogs of mud, climbed on dodgy ropes and ran big muddy hills. It was great fun, albeit physically demanding.

It ended up being a tough course and we were both exhausted by the finish line. We were only a few minutes off the course record so vowed to come back and try again, although after considerable rest!

The obstacle course was a success. Having a friend along for the journey brought a different dynamic to the challenge. It became more of a social event and we had a good laugh throughout the experience. I had been used to completing a lot of these challenges alone, so this was a welcome change.

What I learned: Completing an obstacle course was great fun as I had to push myself through some interesting situations. However, I was surprised by how much concentration was needed throughout the course. I am used to zoning out while running, but this was very different and required lots of mental focus. It would have been all too easy to slip, trip and injure myself badly.

Boldness was certainly needed at times and I'm glad that I had the moral support of a close friend. On one particular part of the course, there was a long section of monkey-bars over a mud pit. The bars were muddy themselves and extremely slippery. It was hilarious as we both made our

way across the gap screaming and laughing like idiots, trying not to fall in. This challenge highlights how important others are when dealing with adversity. If we think we are strong alone, imagine how much stronger we can be when supported by the right person. Having Matt there to joke around with made the challenge a lot easier.

On the basis of this experience, I'm keen to get into racing obstacle courses and explore this type of unique challenge more.

“It was hilarious as we both made our way across the gap screaming and laughing like idiots, trying not to fall in.”



16. Meditate

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: 30 minutes

What: Meditating is a way to focus your mind and attempt to slow down all of the thoughts flying around in your head. The objective of meditation is to concentrate on your immediate environment and not get distracted by thoughts. This is incredibly difficult. The challenge is to complete one meditation session of 30 minutes.

Why: Meditation has a long list of health benefits: less stress, a more considered reaction to difficulties, better sleep, more focus and greater self-awareness. There are many, many more benefits that science is just

beginning to understand and explore. By digging into the science behind meditation, even the most sceptical of people should be convinced of its advantages. When you plug a hardcore meditator (a monk) into a computer via a series of neuro-sensors, you'll notice the way their brain works is significantly different to that of someone who doesn't meditate. It's still early days, but I'm convinced that as we research this subject more, we will see some incredible results.

The marines use meditation to train their soldiers to react more calmly under extreme pressure; professional athletes use it to give them a mental edge in their sport; and many forward-thinking businesses like Google are encouraging their employees to meditate. I've also heard of it being taught in schools.

Being more present in life is something everyone could benefit from. By regularly meditating, this is something that will happen naturally. The whole process will increase your attention to detail and help you to develop a more controlled mindset. Meditating is also really hard. It's uncomfortable and highly likely that you'll want to stop. Completing 30 minutes will be very difficult for most people – surely a great reason for you to do this challenge!

How: There are many different types of meditation for you to have a go at. Below is a simple and straightforward form for you to try.

- Step 1: Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Turn your TV, phone, computer, etc, off.
- Step 2: Sit on a cushion on the floor or upright on a chair –whichever is more comfortable.
- Step 3: Pay attention to your posture and make sure that your spine is straight. Search online to get visuals to assist you on correct posture.
- Step 4: Set a timer for 30 minutes.
- Step 5: Focus on your breathing for the next 30 minutes. Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat. You will get distracted. Fact. However, don't worry about this, it's normal. It's really interesting to see how easy

it is to lose focus. Each time you get distracted, bring your attention back to your breath.

Step 6: Repeat this process until the timer rings.

You might find it easier if you follow a guided meditation at first but I feel there is a lot of value in trying the 30 minutes unaided and experiencing the here and now as it truly is. Good luck!

Harder: Meditate every day for one month. Consider completing a morning and evening meditation session each day for this period.

Try meditating for an hour. Too easy? Fine, try two hours. Still too easy? What about a day then? No issues? How about attending a multi-day retreat of hardcore meditating?

Research: There are many types of meditation to explore. A great place to start is with either “Vipassana” or “Zazen” meditation routines.

The book *10% Happier* by Dan Harris is a great read that explains the importance of meditating. Dan is an American news anchor who, after having a panic attack live on air, discovered meditation as a way to bring back control to his life. The book has a secular approach and will be great for those sceptics out there.

Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality without Religion by Sam Harris is another great read that highlights the importance of meditation in our modern world.

Spend some time looking for local meditation communities. There are plenty out there and you shouldn't have to travel far to find one.

Anything Zen related works really well for exploring meditation. *Practical Zen: Meditation and Beyond* by Julian Daizan Skinner is a lovely read that discusses the Japanese Buddhist approach to meditation.

Sam Harris has a guided meditation app called “Waking Up” which is amazing and a really great way to learn how to meditate.

Silent retreats/meditation retreats are becoming increasingly popular. See what options you have close by and consider attending one as a great

way to boost your meditation skills.

My experience: The first time I tried to meditate, I felt a total failure. I spent 30 minutes sat on a cushion thinking about what I had to do that day. I got really annoyed that I wasn't doing it properly, and I would then get annoyed that I was getting annoyed, and the vicious cycle would continue. I couldn't believe how hard it was for my mind to settle. It kept chatting away and didn't give me a break. After 30 minutes of what felt like torture, I was exhausted. Meditation was supposed to be relaxing, wasn't it? That experience certainly wasn't.

I didn't give up, though, as I really wanted to bring meditation into my life. The next time was just as painful and I became aware of how uncomfortable sitting on a cushion really was. The pain was intense and I was desperate for the timer to ring. My mind raced and I couldn't bring any control to what I was doing. I committed to meditating in spite of these distractions and irritations. Eventually, I started to settle after ten minutes or so of meditation. It became almost pleasant and I could feel myself relaxing. But, before I knew it, I was thinking about eating a cheese and pickle sandwich or something totally stupid and irrelevant. I needed some tips to help me, and fast.

I began reading about meditation as much as possible. During my studies, I came across a wonderful book called *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* by Kay Larson. This really changed my thoughts about music/sound and I found the concepts in the book hugely inspiring. John Cage was a famous and revolutionary composer who changed the face of contemporary music. He was a huge fan of Zen Buddhism and tried to bring elements of this into his work. His most famous composition is a piece called "4 minutes 33 seconds". The entire piece is silence. The whole orchestra will sit still and not make a sound for 4 minutes and 33 seconds! It's amazing. Watch the BBC proms performance online to see it in action.

This piece of music outraged many people and at the time was incredibly cutting-edge. The reality is that Cage was making people

meditate without them knowing. He was making people listen to their environment and hear the music of the universe. It's a beautiful concept that has caused many arguments. How can silence be music? Well, sit down, listen and see for yourself. It's very interesting.

Cage would highlight how, if you listen to composers like Beethoven or Mozart, you would always hear the same piece of music. However, if you listened to the sound of traffic, it would always be different. He had a truly inspiring mind.

Using a John Cage-style approach with the next meditation session I did worked wonders. I sat on my stool and listened. I tried not to label anything and really focused on every sound that appeared. The fridge was buzzing, the trees outside were rustling and then my mind would suddenly hear the clock ticking. A car would drive past and then an aeroplane would fly overhead. There was noise everywhere, and as soon as I relaxed and allowed my ears to wander on their own, I found an incredible focus to my meditation. This was a huge shift for me and it felt refreshing. I began using this "focused listening" as my main way of meditating and haven't looked back since. "4 minutes 33 seconds" is now one of my favourite pieces of music.

What I learned: By starting to meditate I have become acutely aware of how easily distracted my mind can get. At times, it can be like a storm of thoughts. Becoming aware of this has taught me so much about how my mind works. If I'm starting to get anxious about something, I can feel the amount of thoughts in my mind start to increase. As they begin to build, I can now see how easily it is to spiral out of control. At the height of my anxiety, I couldn't ever think clearly about anything as I had too many thoughts racing around my head. There wasn't enough space for me to think and this made things worse.

By slowing down and meditating, I began to bring more space into my mind. I read somewhere that your mind is like a snow globe that has just been shaken. This is its constant state. By meditating, you allow the snow to settle and you can start to see what's actually inside the globe. Hopefully, a

lovely Austrian village with pine trees and presents. I must have had a blizzard of a mind before I started on this journey. Meditating was a hugely important part of me changing this attitude, and I am extremely grateful that I have discovered it.

I try to meditate every day as part of my morning routine. If I don't meditate for a few days in a row, I can really feel a difference. I react to problems rather than respond to problems and get worked up more easily. I seem to have less patience when I'm not meditating. It's very noticeable. I recently went a month or so without meditating and I became extremely aware of how my mind feels without its regular fix of space and stillness. I started to crave meditation.

I believe that meditation is essential for all of us. We are living in an extremely busy world that is constantly fighting for our attention. We have cellphones and social media that are attention grabbers and lure us in with pretty colours and relentless notifications. The modern world demands our attention. How can we deal with this? In my opinion, meditation will allow us to carve out space for ourselves and counteract this. It's important for us to have time to recharge from information overload and give our minds a break. It's an excellent mind-training tool and can be extremely powerful. I've seen how life-changing it can be and really hope that it will be the same for you. Convinced yet?

“By starting to meditate I have become acutely aware of how easily distracted my mind can get.”



17. Fold an origami crane

Category: Skill

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A few hours

What: The Japanese art of origami requires you to fold paper into beautiful and interesting objects. For this challenge you need to learn how to fold an origami crane. The crane is a paper bird that supposedly brings good fortune to those who fold it.

Legend has it that if you fold 1,000 cranes, your wish will come true. Sounds like a challenge!

Why: This is a nice skill to have. It requires you to follow awkward instructions and will test your memory once you have learned how to fold each model.

The fiddly and frustrating nature of folding origami requires delicacy and precision. Perfect mental training. It can get complicated at times and demands focus ... One wrong fold and your crane can suddenly look like a bird that's had an accident.

How: All cranes are made from square pieces of paper, so be sure to stock up on origami paper before starting. Most origami books will have the crane as the classic test-piece. Search online for videos to help too.

Step 1: Buy some origami paper or make a few squares from standard A4 paper using scissors.

Step 2: Find instructions for folding the crane online or get an origami book with the crane model method explained in it. YouTube is another option. You have plenty of choices here.

Step 3: Carefully follow the instructions.

Step 4: After you have folded your first crane, begin the process of committing it to memory.

Harder: Chase the legend and fold 1,000 cranes.

Origami can get ridiculously hard. Search for “advanced origami” online to be blown away by what people can do with paper. Try one of these yourself if you already know how to fold the crane.

Research: Explore the wonderful world of towel-origami (this can also be done with a tea towel). Learn how to fold a towel into an animal, pattern or object. The towel chicken is a great place to start.

Money origami is another fascinating variation of origami. You won’t believe what people can do with dollars/bank notes that aren’t plastic. Spend some time exploring these possibilities.

Discover potato crisp packet origami. Fold an empty crisp packet into something interesting. The classic crisp packet origami piece is the triangle. By folding the crisp packet in a specific series of folds, you’ll end up with a neat triangle. Use online videos and instructions to master this skill.

Using a paper napkin (toilet paper also works), you can make a rose. By rolling and twisting the paper in a specific way, you can end up with a beautiful paper rose. Look it up for your next romantic engagement and thank me later.

My experience: Learning to fold origami has been a lot of fun, although at times it can be a little frustrating. Following the instructions for some origami models is easy, whereas others require extreme problem-solving skills. The folds aren’t always intuitive and the diagrams can be confusing. Sticking with a difficult piece can be challenging, especially when committing it to memory.

I was given an origami calendar that each day would give me a piece of origami paper and a new model to fold. I loved it and began to develop my skills on a daily basis. The main skills being tested were my ability to work with fiddly things and to not give up when it got tricky. Some of the models turned out like crumpled paper, which would always make me laugh. Investing a good 10 to 15 minutes in completing a complicated origami

model only for it to look like a primary school child's failed project has to make you laugh. What's the alternative? Tears?

After having worked with my origami calendar for some time, I found the crane relatively easy to fold, although there are lots of steps. I learned to fold it by heart and ended up leaving cranes wherever I went. (Probably quite annoying.)

What I learned: When folding origami, your attention to detail is extremely important. Doing a half-hearted job shows and the results are embarrassing. This is a wonderful metaphor for life and one that I want to hold close to my heart. If you're going to do something, do it properly and to the best of your ability. It may take a little longer but you will be giving it your best effort and that has value in it.

The other important lesson is that too much origami lying around the house isn't as awesome as you may think. Although you created it, you don't have to keep every model you make. The look on Helen's face when she came home to me sat on the sofa covered with and surrounded by origami was priceless. It's safe to say they made their way to the bin pretty quickly.

“Investing a good 10 to 15 minutes in completing a complicated origami model only for it to look like a primary school child's failed project has to make you laugh.”



18. Public speaking

Category: Mental

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 10 (Very Hard)

Time required: Up to 30 minutes, but a lot of prep will be needed (one week)

What: Give a public speech to an audience of strangers.

Why: Fear of public speaking (glossophobia) is a common phobia that many people have. It ranks high in the most common fears alongside death, spiders and flying. By spending time practising your public speaking in a controlled environment, you will become more proficient and confident when speaking to a large number of people and develop oratory skills to rival Obama (I can't guarantee this).

This is a fantastic skill to improve and can be applied directly to work-related events (meetings and presentations) and important life occasions (wedding speeches and toasts).

How: There are loads of opportunities to develop your public speaking. Search online to find a local speaking event where you can practise and refine your skills. Usually these events allow everybody in attendance to speak for five to ten minutes on a subject of their choosing in front of the room. "Toastmasters" are a company offering this type of service and are becoming extremely popular. This is a great place to start.

Step 1: Sign up to a "Toastmasters" style event where you get to practise your speaking.

Step 2: Prepare a short talk about a topic you are interested in.

Step 3: Turn up, experience the pre-talk nerves, manage them and then give your talk.

Step 4: Relax and celebrate.

An alternative would be volunteering to give a speech at an upcoming family event or nominating yourself to present something at work. You're

essentially throwing yourself under the proverbial bus in the name of self-improvement. Feeling brave? Good!

If you really can't find a platform to perform your speech, find a busy public area and start talking. This will be hard, though, and *will* take confidence.

To prepare the material I suggest a rigorous mix of rehearsal and well thought-out content. Consider what your audience will take away from your talk and put your attention into this. It's not about you anymore; it's about delivering a message.

Harder: For those who are extremely confident speakers, try talking about a subject of which you have no experience. This might be something technical and require research.

Consider speaking/performing in a different capacity. Stand-up comedy could be an alternative here. An open-mic stand-up comedy night will surely make the most confident of speakers feel uneasy. The expectation that you are supposed to be funny will be intense and make things harder. You could hand out fruit and veg to the front two rows and ask them to start hurling it at you if you don't make them laugh. The pressure is on.

How about karaoke? Giving a heartfelt performance to a room of strangers could be challenging, depending on who you are. You might even take things a step further and sabotage your own performance by deliberately singing badly. This way you can get to practise feeling embarrassed, just like Cato the Stoic (*see [page 5](#)*). One of my friends did a hilarious rendition of Meatloaf's "Bat out of Hell" in front of a stunned karaoke audience. It wasn't the time or the place, and his overenthusiastic performance left the audience confused and probably a little scared. For him this wasn't much of a challenge, but for others, I'm confident that this type of over-the-top performance would be! Why not give it a try?

Research: "Toastmaster" style events should be your first port of call when looking for speaking practice.

TED talks are always great inspiration and represent the pinnacle of public speaking. Start watching a few of these online to boost your motivation and pick up a few tips in the process.

The Pressure Principle: Handle Stress, Harness Energy, and Perform When It Counts by Dave Alred was the book that helped me to improve my confidence when talking to a room full of people.

The book *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds* by Carmine Gallo is another great recommendation.

Look up local breakfast clubs/events that allow people to come and give short speeches. If you can land a gig here, you're all set.

My experience: This challenge tied in nicely with my work and allowed me to practise my public speaking in a relatively familiar setting. If I've ever had to present at work in the past, I've always felt very nervous, found the environment intimidating and wouldn't be able to sleep the night before. This time, thanks to my Year of Adversity, things were different.

I was given the opportunity to present to a room full of strangers quite recently and jumped at the opportunity. I tried to see this as another way to push myself out of my comfort zone and actually looked forward to giving the presentation. I worked hard to prepare my talk and began to feel confident with the material. After a few practice runs, I was ready to give my presentation. I had read *The Pressure Principle* by Dave Alred to help me prepare for my talk and it worked wonders. Dave Alred helped coach the England rugby team and many top golf professionals to perform under pressure. Some of the advice in this book really resonated with me; it allowed me to focus on the "opportunity" of my talk and turn the nervous energy I was feeling into excitement that would help me to remain focused.

The presentation was great. I felt confident throughout and was really pleased with how it went. I was a little nervous beforehand but this was great training for me. After the talk, I felt a real sense of achievement and became keen to push myself further with this skill.

What I learned: One of the greatest pieces of advice that I received when preparing my presentation was from my dad. Having been an actor for the majority of his life, he was used to performing and speaking in front of large audiences. He spent several years in a lead role in the West End, where he perfected this skill along with many other tricks. The advice was: make sure that your tension is not in the top half of your body. If you are nervous/tense, make sure you don't squeeze that tension into your neck, stomach or chest. Putting your tension here will make you look uncomfortable and inhibit your movement and projection. Put all of your tension into your buttocks. This way, no one will see the tension and it will allow you to free up the top half of your body. You will appear relaxed even though you are tense.

Wonderful advice! At first, I thought he was messing with me, but it turned out that he was being deadly serious. And guess what, it works! If you ever find yourself giving a presentation or having to perform, moving your tension into your buttocks will make a huge difference. Try it.

“Put all of your tension into your buttocks.”



19. Read a technical book

Category: Mental

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A week to a month

What: Read a technical or challenging non-fiction book on a subject you are unfamiliar with.

Why: Learning something new and dealing with advanced concepts out of your comfort zone is a great way to challenge yourself. Finding something difficult to understand will be uncomfortable and it may take time before it becomes clear. This is a brilliant way to test your patience and determination.

Reading a technical book can be extremely difficult. You may not understand all of it, but the key is to finish it anyway. Make sure that you choose something suitably challenging. You want a book where you get very confused, frustrated and want to quit. Preferably something that makes you want to throw the book across the room you're reading it in. These are the sensations we want to practise. Reading something difficult and technical can make us feel stupid and, let's face it, no one wants to feel stupid. The Stoics would be the first to advocate practising these emotions and getting over the mental hurdle of feeling like an idiot. From this point on, it's all about what we can learn.

How: The first step of the challenge is easy to complete. The second step, not so much.

Step 1: Go to your local bookstore and deliberately go to the area you are least comfortable with and pick a book you would never normally read. The bigger and more intimidating the book, the better.

Step 2: Go home and read the book cover to cover. EVERY SINGLE WORD!

Harder: Try advanced textbooks on your unfamiliar subject. Anything on a degree reading list should be sufficient.

Research: A good place to start would be *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking. Although this is quite a short book, it's very technical.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is a real brain melter. It reads like an equation and at times is undecipherable (to me anyway). Descartes is famous for the line "I think, therefore I am". After reading this book I feel that Benjamin Hoff's misquote "I think, therefore I am confused" comes to mind.

What about a detailed book on stamp collecting? Surely, staying awake will be a challenge in itself, let alone completing the book (apologies if you're a massive stamp collector).

My experience: For this particular challenge I decided to read *The Quantum Universe* by Professor Brian Cox. It's a technical and demanding book on quantum mechanics. Although this is a well-written book, the content and maths involved is approximately at first-year physics degree standard. For someone not from this background, it was, at times, very difficult for me to keep reading. Occasionally, throwing the book off a cliff into the ocean seemed like a sensible option, although that would have been accepting defeat. There are lots of equations that I struggled with and probably spent too much time analysing. I also spent a lot of time asking myself why I was reading about something I really couldn't relate to and that didn't really provide me with any practical information. All of this doubt was great mental training.

In the end, I completed the book and it actually felt pretty satisfying. It would have been all too easy for me to quit due to the difficulty of the content. I picked up a few ideas along the way, although none of the equations have stayed with me, and managed to not get too frustrated in the process – I didn't burn/shred/throw the book into the ocean. I'll pat myself on the back.

What I learned: I see the value in being out of my intellectual comfort zone immensely. I won't be able to grow unless I am challenging myself and this applies to the technical level of what I read. I don't make a habit of only reading very difficult books, but I will always ensure that I have

something difficult lined up. This may be a field of knowledge I have absolutely no experience of or a *very* technical book on a subject I know really well. Either way, the odd read that makes me work hard is a good thing. Even if I don't take away loads of specific information from the book, the process of trying to understand the content and sticking with the challenge is another great mental hurdle for me to deal with.

“I see the value in being out of my intellectual comfort zone immensely.”



20. Make exercise harder

Category: Physical

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 9 (Very Hard)

Time required: An hour

What: Increase the difficulty of a workout (any workout) by making it harder. This can be done using an altitude mask and a weight vest. Try incorporating them separately to your workout or together for the ultimate challenge.

An altitude mask is a mask you wear that restricts the flow of oxygen to your lungs, forcing you to breathe harder to pull the oxygen through the filters. This whole process simulates your body being at altitude where the air is thinner and everything is physically harder.

A weight vest is essentially a waistcoat filled with small weights. This makes everything you do more difficult due to the excess weight you're carrying.

Why: Sometimes a workout isn't hard enough, right? Well, slap a weight vest on and clip an altitude mask onto your face and you'll be struggling from the get-go. Dealing with the increased physical difficulty of the workout will require you to be mentally strong. It's a quick and relatively easy/fun way to make your exercise harder.

You'll also have the potential bonus of feeling like an idiot wearing a mask at the gym or out running/cycling. People will probably think you're crazy, but we know you're just pushing yourself to become stronger. Hopefully, feeling like an idiot will give you another little bit of mental resistance to deal with.

How: Start carefully when you first introduce these concepts to your workout. Any cardio exercise can be made harder with these additional bits of kit, but it really is tough. Build up slowly so that you don't hate me after five minutes of trying this. It will be very, very hard, so be warned.

WARNING – Exercising with an altitude mask can be very physically demanding. Make sure that you are aware of the associated risks and be sure to ease yourself into this exercise.

Step 1: Order an altitude mask online.

Step 2: When the mask arrives, have a go at exercising with it on. Start slowly with yoga and then build up to a proper workout at the gym or a run.

ALTERNATIVE:

Step 1: Borrow or buy a weight vest to work out in. Finding a gym that has a weight vest that you can use might be a good alternative to investing in one. If you're feeling creative, you can always make your own. A rucksack filled with bricks or a bag of sand is another great option.

Step 2: Complete a workout in the vest.

Harder: Try a long run or bike ride with the vest on.

Try some interval training or a hard run with the mask on.

Try combining the two (vest and mask) for the ultimate challenge.

Research: The “Gorge Fitness Mask” is what I used when completing this challenge, but you really are spoiled for choice. A little research will present you with countless options, so find something that suits your budget.

There are plenty of YouTube videos that show you how to make your own weight vest. Consider this as an option if you want to flex your creative muscles.

There are so many different types of weight vest out there. A quick Internet search will give you plenty of choices for a cross-section of budgets.

My experience: Helen kindly bought me an altitude mask for my birthday. I think she had a chuckle when telling her work colleagues about my current challenge and my unusual present request. I don't blame her. It was a bit weird.

When I first got the mask, I overenthusiastically completed a demanding workout and had to spend an hour in a dark room recovering from the headache from hell. Slowly does it. Lesson learned!

The altitude mask is a great way to make something like yoga a lot more intense and I will often use it when doing a lighter workout. At times, when I want a real challenge, I'll throw on the mask, put some motivational music on and start pushing myself to the limit. It's quick, easy and damn hard. The perfect challenge.

For the weight vest part of this challenge, I started using the weight vest at my local climbing gym. Doing easy routes, pull ups and basic exercises with the vest on makes life a lot harder. You feel so light as soon as the vest comes off and it's a wonderful feeling.

The other day I was in a supermarket and found a weight vest on sale. What luck! I snapped it up and now have the option to use both mask and

vest simultaneously at home. This type of workout is *brutal* and I love how challenging it is. I also look hilarious, which makes me chuckle if I catch sight of myself in the mirror.

What I learned: Learning about my physical limits is something that is a continuous process. The mask and weight vest are a great way for me to push myself in a controlled environment.

I was a little concerned at first about using the mask, but it allowed me to get uncomfortable quickly. At peak discomfort, I get the urge to stop (like everyone, no doubt), so I have learned how to deal with this sensation. By giving myself smaller targets of “just 5 more repetitions” or “30 more seconds”, I can force myself to keep going.

I try to use the Buddhist concept of impermanence as my guiding light here. When I’m physically struggling, I remind myself that this too will pass and I will be able to relax in the near future. Knowing that the suffering will change is an important thing to hold onto. This allows me to push myself. Focusing on the temporary nature of the suffering helps to change my relationship with it.

I used to hate exercise, and while this exercise can hardly be considered “pleasurable”, it certainly helps me to keep a stronger mind. The endorphins after a hard workout are extremely helpful for mental wellbeing and have made a considerable difference to my anxiety.

“The mask and weight vest are a great way for me to push myself in a controlled environment.”



21. Fight a fear

Category: Mental

Classification: Epic

Difficulty: 10 (Very Hard)

Time required: A few hours/up to a year

What: Pick something that scares the living daylights out of you and conquer your fear of it. The list of things that scare people is ginormous and will differ from person to person. I suggest choosing the one that comes to mind and jumps out at you as the obvious one to deal with. The one that your mind shouted at you just now, that's the one.

You may have several that you want to conquer, so write a list and attack the most intimidating first.

Examples of some of the common phobias/fears people have are: flying, giving blood, hospitals, public speaking (*see* the specific public speaking challenge, [page 105](#), for an expansion on this fear), parties, the dentist, spiders, lifts, snakes, the Underground and small spaces.

Why: Conquering a fear will strengthen your mind and boost your confidence. You will be facing something deeply personal and will learn how you can overcome this obstacle in your life.

How: Exposing yourself to what you are afraid of can help you to become desensitized to that fear. For example, if you're scared of hospitals, go and visit a hospital. If you're scared of clowns, go to the circus. If you're scared of flying, book a short flight somewhere. Spend time around what makes you feel uncomfortable and look directly at it. Go and donate blood, hold a tarantula in your hand, take the lift instead of the stairs.

This could be the hardest challenge in this book for you to complete, but with that there comes the potential for *huge* growth. This really can change your life. By attacking the thing you fear the most, you will prove to yourself that you are capable of conquering your worst doubts and phobias.

You will see just how powerful you have the potential to be and you will be ready to deal with anything that life throws at you.

Be careful with this challenge and work through these things slowly. Reading books and spending time online researching how to break down fear patterns will really help you. There is also nothing wrong with seeking professional help to break through a particularly strong fear or phobia. Make sure that you take things easy at first and ask for support from those around you or a therapist. The people in your life will be so proud of you for dealing with your fears and I have no doubt that it will inspire others to start working on their own issues.

Step 1: Decide on the fear you are going to address.

Step 2: Research and devise a battle plan to attack the fear.

Step 3: Start to expose yourself to the thing that scares you most. Begin slowly and increase the exposure as you become more comfortable.

Step 4: Repeat step 3 as you increase the amount of time you spend around your fear.

Step 5: Try to relax around your fear and, before you know it, you will have done the impossible and conquered something that would have previously terrified you. It's a lot easier said than done!

An example with a fear of spiders:

Step 1: OK, I hate spiders. That's my fear I want to deal with.

Step 2: I'm going to the pet store to look at, and then hold, a tarantula.

Step 3: That tarantula is disgusting. Maybe I'll just look at it for five minutes today.

Step 4: OK, round two. Right, so let me see if I can poke its leg without freaking out. I'd better ask a sales assistant if they will get the spider out of the tank. OK, here goes. Ahhhhhh. OK not as bad as I thought. Maybe I can actually hold it. Maybe.

Step 5: The spider is crawling on my hand. Breathe. In and out. Wow, I'm doing it. Better take a photo to document this!

Step 6: I can celebrate now but need to come back regularly so I don't redevelop the fear.

The above example is simple but should give an overall arc to how gradual fear exposure works. By spending time around your fears, they will change. Good luck with this; it's a tough one!

Harder: Look at everything that scares you and systematically go through the list working on those fears.

Alternatively, help someone you know through one of their fears. You can be the one in the clown mask or on the flight with them.

Research: *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers is a great read. I can't recommend this book enough and it will really help you to work through any fears and phobias that you might be experiencing.

There are many unique and unusual phobias. Pogonophobia is a particularly interesting one (a fear of beards). By exploring the list of fears people have, you will see how having fears, common or uncommon, is a perfectly normal part of being a human being. I found this quite reassuring when exploring my fears. I hope you do too.

Mind is a British mental health charity that offers support for many different conditions. There is a section on phobias on Mind's website that is worth exploring. There is tons of fantastic advice on dealing with fears and anxieties here.

The Internet is a wonderful resource filled with incredibly helpful information relating to overcoming phobias. Get exploring.

My experience: Fears and phobias have the ability to shrink your world and make you live a restricted life. About 12 years ago, I had a chronic fear of flying. I was treated to a holiday in Paris and had been bought plane tickets to fly there from London. Because of my fear, I couldn't get on the plane and had to spend a lot of money paying for Eurostar train tickets instead. The trip turned into a nightmare, and a lot of money, energy and time was wasted. It was a horrible experience and I felt so limited by myself. At the time, I just let the fear win. Rather than address the fear, I let

it rule my life. I would have been forever destined to never go anywhere that required a flight if I hadn't dealt with that fear. The way I solved the issue was through constant exposure. I started off with short flights and forced myself to get used to the experience. The more I did it, the more it became a normal part of my existence. With time, I stopped getting sweaty palms and could enjoy the take-off, cruise and landing.

Fast forward 12 years and I have flown all over the planet and absolutely love flying. I find it so exciting because I know it's going to take me somewhere new and inspiring. I've flown to London from Sydney on a 24-hour flight and it wasn't a problem. I've flown to Cusco in Peru, dodging through 6,000-m (19,690-ft) mountains on the most turbulent plane imaginable, and didn't lose my composure. I've completed countless long-haul flights all over the world and I have totally changed my attitude. This change was the result of facing my fears.

During my bout of serious anxiety, my flying fear returned. I had an upcoming trip and I started to worry about the flight. It was only a short European flight, but I could feel myself getting concerned. When I began to practise adversity with the challenges in this book, the way I viewed this upcoming flight completely changed. It became another challenge for me. I'd done longer flights in the past, so I knew I had overcome this fear previously and now it was a matter of "getting back on the horse". This approach worked wonders. Seeing the flight as yet another great way to challenge myself made a massive difference. The flight was fantastic in the end.

After this, I began to search for other fears that had started growing in my mind. I settled on the long overdue visit to the dentist. The thought of it filled me with adrenaline and dread. What did I do? I went ahead and did it anyway. Yet another tick in the adversity box.

After visiting the dentist, I had to go back for lots of fillings. I'd never had a filling in my life and the prospect of going back several times to get the work done made me feel sick. I spent the majority of the day worrying about it before I could finally settle my thoughts. It's incredible how busy my mind became with fear and worry. The Stoic answer was my only

option. I had to accept my circumstances because resisting it was driving me mad and making me miserable. I booked in the work and accepted the challenge. What else could I do?

I was really nervous in the waiting area as I could hear the sound of drilling coming from the dentist's room. It made me feel uncomfortable but this allowed me to practise my techniques for self-control. If I'm being honest, the majority of them went out of the window and I really had to fight to not be overrun with fear. I pulled out *Meditations* by Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher's book that I was rereading at the time. I had highlighted passages in the book that allowed me to revisit parts that really resonated with me (yes, I'm a bit of a nerd like that). The one that jumped out at me was:

"It's all in how you perceive it. You're in control. You can dispense with misperception at will, like rounding the point. Serenity, total calm, safe anchorage."

I was making things way worse than they needed to be. I kept saying this to myself as I was called into the dentist's chair. I was nervous but tried not to add more layers of worry on top of it.

At the end of the appointment, I felt on top of the world. I had managed to do something that terrified me and get through the experience. The endorphins were flowing and I felt real progress. The next time I went back to the dentist, I was a lot more confident and handled things better than the first time. As the experience became more familiar, the fear associated with it diminished. Dealing with things face-on is the way to go.

What I learned: The main take-home from this challenge was staring fear in the eyes. Every time I've been overwhelmed with fear, the best results have *always* come from me attacking it head-on. This is really hard to do but has been the only way I've managed to successfully deal with fear. Avoiding the issue doesn't work and it only makes things far worse than it needs to be.

I wish it was easy for me to take this advice and always stare fear in the face, but it's not. Every time I'm afraid, it's hard. But I now know that there

really is only one way for me to deal with this situation. Facing the challenge ahead is my only option. This really is learning how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable in a nutshell.

“Every time I’ve been overwhelmed with fear, the best results have *always* come from me attacking it head-on.”



22. Whistle with your fingers

Category: Skill

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 4 (Easy)

Time required: A few hours/up to a week

What: Learn to whistle with your fingers in your mouth. When performed correctly it is extremely loud and can be used to get somebody’s attention from a distance.

Why: This skill requires a lot of patience and the alterations you need to make to find the “sweet spot” are subtle. Getting this to work can take a lot of time. Many failed attempts are likely. Get ready to focus on your growth mindset.

It may or may not help you to get your friend’s attention from a distance, but at least you can now hail a cab in New York with style.

How: By putting your fingers in your mouth in a specific way you can produce a loud, shrill whistle. The key to success is folding your tongue in

half and finding the right shape for your mouth. Persistence is really important with this skill as you'll need to experiment until you get the desired sound.

Step 1: Take the index and middle fingers on both hands and make two imaginary guns with them. Yes, like that, as if you were a child.

Step 2: Place the fingers in your mouth, fingernails facing up, on your bottom lip. Your two middle fingers will meet at a 90-degree angle. Confused? Skip this cumbersome description and head online for videos and pictures. For those who want to stick with my description, read on. I'll do my best (this is surprisingly hard to describe without the aid of pictures).

Step 3: Fold your tongue in half and press it down with your fingers (tip of the tongue pushed to the back of your mouth). Your fingers will be up to the first knuckle in your mouth (I hope you've washed your hands before you started this).

Step 4: Tighten your lips around your fingers and blow. This probably won't work. But don't worry, that's exactly what you want to happen. This way you get to practise failing at something. Yippee!

Step 5: Fiddle around with the shape of your mouth while blowing.

Step 6: Repeat until you run out of air and feel dizzy. Now take a break and then come back. Keep going until you get the whistle to work.

Be sure to refer to online videos/images to get a clear picture of the method.

Harder: Try it one-handed or with different variations (two little fingers).

Teach a child how to do this skill. It'll be very difficult for them to perform, so very difficult for you to teach!

Research: Type "how to whistle with your fingers" into YouTube and you will be given plenty of great videos to work with.

Explore similar style skills. For example, you could try to learn the owl hoot (this is another fiddly skill to master). By cupping your hands together in a certain way and then blowing into the chamber, you can create the

sound of an owl hooting. You need to leave a small gap between your thumbs that you will blow across. Make sure that air can't escape apart from the gap in between your thumbs. By blowing across the gap you create the sound of an owl in a similar way to blowing across the top of a glass bottle to get a note. It may take a while to master this skill as you practise adjusting the size of the hand chamber.

Another skill to try would be the duck sound with a blade of grass. Take a thick blade of grass and hold it in between your thumbs. The blade of grass should run along the outside of the thumbs. Make sure that the blade is taut as you blow through the small gap. The noise that is produced should resemble a duck call. This one works in a similar way to the reed used in woodwind instruments. Use videos online to clear up the method, and get ready to make some new duck friends.

Check out the Mexican whistling language of Oaxaca. This entire language doesn't use words but communicates messages through whistling.

My experience: This took absolutely ages to learn. I spent so much energy trying to get the subtleties right that I honestly thought I'd never get there. My dreams of hailing a New York cab seemed to be over. I would blow until I felt dizzy, rest and then try again. It took so long and I was sick of putting my fingers in my mouth.

In the end, after a stupid amount of time, I managed to get a whistle. Persistence had paid off! When I finally managed to make it work consistently, I was over the moon. Something so simple was actually really hard to learn but once I had the correct technique, it became effortless. I can now whip this new skill out in a flash and irritate everyone in a 10-m (30-ft) radius.

What I learned: Never give up. I kept trying to make this work and kept on failing. There is a great saying that states "success is the result of how many times you're willing to fail". This skill was all about that. Trying,

trying and then trying some more. Eventually, it clicked, but it took a lot of work.

Now, how is this making me better? It's all about learning to stick with difficult things and deal with failure in a constructive way (growth mindset). If I can do that on a small and insignificant scale, with practice, I should be able to apply this to the bigger and more demanding things that crop up in my life. The lesson was obvious here and I felt inspired by the simplicity of the challenge.

“It’s all about learning to stick with difficult things and deal with failure in a constructive way.”



23. Fasting

Category: Mental

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 6 (Medium)

Time required: 24 hours

What: Fasting is the process of not eating food for a set period of time. Millions of people fast for religious and dietary reasons every year. The challenge is to complete a 24-hour fast.

Why: Fasting can be a great way to detox your body. It's also hard, uncomfortable and will require you to be mentally strong.

Being hungry can force us into a primal state. We get angry quicker, our bodies make us feel terrible and we crave an immediate solution. All of

these are great things for us to practise working with.

How: Skip breakfast, lunch and all snacks until the evening. Make sure that you drink plenty of water to stay hydrated throughout the day.

Step 1: Decide on a day when you will fast. I suggest a day when you aren't working so that you can focus on dealing with the sensations of the fast.

Step 2: Have an early dinner the night before you start the fast and begin the countdown. Make a note of the time you stopped eating and you're all set. The evening up until bed time should be easy.

Step 3: Wake up, skip breakfast and begin drinking lots of water.

Step 4: Avoid lunch and continue with the water drinking. Take it easy and monitor your condition. You will have to stay strong in the face of discomfort. Be aware that your mood will dramatically change and you are likely to become "hangry". This is a mix of hungry and angry and is all part of the fasting process.

Step 5: Distract yourself as much as possible through the afternoon until you hit the 24-hour mark.

Step 6: Don't have a huge banquet to celebrate 24 hours without food as your body will find this difficult to deal with. Your mind will be tricking you and asking for more, so pay attention to the amount you consume after the fast. Cooking 2kg (4.4lb) of pasta is probably not the best thing to do, even if you feel like you could eat your body weight in fusilli.

Harder: Fast for longer. Be careful and seek advice on what your body can handle. There are some medical centres (fasting clinics) where you can do assisted fasts and stay there throughout the process. Consider this if you want to really push yourself.

A long-term fasting challenge would be to regularly introduce time-restricted eating into your weekly routine.

Research: Explore the “Ketogenic diet” and how going into “ketosis” can benefit your body. This process can be brought about by fasting and is when your body starts to function by burning up excess storages of fat. Rather than functioning on sugars and glucose as fuel, your body will burn fat as fuel. This process is very economic and causes long-term energy release and weight loss. It’s a fascinating topic.

Eating once a day as a lifestyle choice is something that many have done. Wim Hof (“The Iceman”) eats once a day and is a massive fan of this dining approach. Spend some time looking into how you could incorporate “time-restricted eating” into your life.

Fasting clinics are increasing in popularity. Have a look and see what options you have locally.

Look into the “16:8” diet and discover the wonderful world of intermittent fasting.

My experience: The first time I did a fast I couldn’t believe how long I could manage without food. I skipped breakfast, had a late lunch and instantly managed 18 hours. It was almost effortless, although I did struggle toward the end. I drank countless cups of green tea to help fend off the hunger and was amazed at myself. I hadn’t ever considered the idea of skipping meals, let alone doing an actual “fast”. The concept seemed insane to me and something that I would never be able to do. Yet again, I was wrong!

I slowly introduced fasting to my weekly routine and would do longer fasts on Mondays and then slightly shorter ones on Wednesdays and Fridays. It became quite easy for me to go 16–18 hours without noticing a huge difference in my mood.

When I started pushing past 18 hours and began skipping lunch as well as breakfast, I struggled. I found this very challenging and felt the psychological need to have emergency food close by in case I took a turn for the worst. While fasting, I felt an emptiness inside my stomach and a fizzing sensation unlike anything I’d experienced before. It wasn’t so much a painful experience but that of unfamiliarity. I became easily irritated and

my energy levels plummeted. It was amazing how difficult it became as time went on. I developed a bad headache and really had to fight hard to stick with the challenge. Pushing myself like that wasn't comfortable and I had to dig deep to deal with the sensations toward the end of the fast. 24 hours without food felt like a good mental challenge. I couldn't stop thinking about breaking the fast to stuff my face with cheese, doughnuts and crisps. I managed the 24 hours, though, and celebrated by allowing myself to eat. Lots.

I now use fasting as a way to give my system a break if I've over-indulged. I also try to skip breakfast and time-restrict my eating as much as possible. It makes me feel lighter on my feet and I tend to be energized by the process.

What I learned: Forcing myself to fast instantly changed my opinion on it. Yet another classic case of me creating a self-imposed barrier. The experience wasn't what I thought it would be and my body managed remarkably well. If I can dive into new experiences with a "do first, think later" attitude more frequently, I will benefit immensely. It was all too easy to get caught up in how hard I had perceived this challenge to be.

I've also learned how hunger pains come and go. I'd feel that I couldn't possibly last any longer, my stomach would be aching and then the feeling would pass. Remembering this in the height of hunger, though, takes practice. Suffering will always change and is temporary. Where have we heard that before?

It's interesting to observe how my mood changes as I become hungrier. I certainly have less patience and am more likely to get frustrated by trivial things. Becoming aware of how easily my mood can alter has been very helpful. Fasting has shown me directly how my mood is a reaction to chemical conditions within my body. This should be pretty obvious, but it took a hands-on experiment for me to really "get" this concept. This has allowed me to find solutions to feeling "off" quicker and I am now more aware of how I can change my mood. By asking a few simple questions, I can quickly get to the bottom of why I feel funky. Have I eaten recently?

Have I had enough sleep? Have I done any exercise/been outside? Simple problem, simple solution. This was all about developing a more heightened sense of self-awareness and was an extremely valuable lesson to learn.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about breaking the fast to stuff my face with cheese, doughnuts and crisps.”



24. Talk to a stranger

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 2 (Very Easy)

Time required: 5 minutes

What: Talk to a complete stranger and initiate a conversation. See how long you can keep them talking. You get a bonus point if you actually make a new friend out of the encounter.

Why: Approaching someone for a random chat can be embarrassing and challenging. This is great mental resistance to work with, although it depends on how confident you are with strangers. If you’re an introvert, this challenge could be a 10. If you’re an extrovert, this challenge could be a 1. Remember, it’s all relative.

How: This is really straightforward and won’t take long to complete.

Step 1: Find a stranger.

Step 2: Start a conversation. Ice-breakers could include asking questions about the local area or what happened in the news today. Having some kind of opening script might be useful. Also, if you are open and tell people about yourself first, they are more likely to trust you and engage with you.

Harder: Speak to a stranger each day for a week and see what happens.

Try to find a new friend by speaking to random people on the street. This is the ultimate challenge – stranger to friend!

If you are already confident, you can make this challenge harder by doing things that might cause a weird reaction from people. For example, try using an accent that you can't do very well to initiate a conversation with someone. This is pretty cringy and the idea of this makes me feel very uncomfortable. See how people react as you try to embarrass yourself as much as possible.

You could try walking up to someone and telling them how beautiful they look. Not in a creepy way! But doing this will take a huge amount of confidence. Don't worry about the reaction, just focus on saying something nice to someone you don't know.

Research: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie is a book that helps you to develop better rapport with those around you. It should give you a few ideas on how to approach strangers for this challenge.

“How to talk to anyone” is a concept covered by many, many books and articles. Start reading and begin to expand your interpersonal skills.

The book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain is amazing and explores the introvert/extrovert dynamic. If you're an introvert, you need to read this book. If you're an extrovert, you also need to read this book.

My experience: Living in London where people tend to keep themselves to themselves had rubbed off on me. Initiating an unprompted conversation with someone out and about seemed incomprehensible to me (a self-fulfilling prophecy).

No one really talks to each other on the London Underground, and the act of striking up a conversation with someone random is likely to cause the reaction – “Who is this insane human being? They must be on drugs, drunk or trying to scam me out of something.” This was certainly the way I thought about things and I know many who feel the same. Yes, it’s a stupid way to think, but seeing strangers talk on the tube is *rare*. I’ve lived in London for a long time and it really doesn’t happen all that much. Unless it’s really late at night and people are drunk.

During my Year of Adversity, my dad stayed with me as he was working in London. My parents don’t live in London and although they spent a huge amount of their lives living in the city, they are now true countryside residents. In the countryside, people talk to each other. Unbelievable, I know.

At the end of his work day, dad came home and started telling me about all of the conversations he’d struck up with people on the Underground. I sat there speechless. He spent the majority of the journey speaking to strangers on the tube. I could only imagine how Londoners would react to this – pure shock.

My strong reaction got me thinking about how I had created this idea about everyone in London not talking to each other and that speaking to strangers was something that you shouldn’t do. Why was this a thing? Inspired by my dad’s conversations with the general public, I decided this would be a great way to make me feel instantly uncomfortable. And I was right.

I started off small with short exchanges with strangers until I became better at speaking to people I didn’t know. Now this probably sounds like it should be easy to do, but starting an unprompted conversation with a total stranger can require confidence. For me, this was a tough challenge but a great one.

I remember striking up a conversation with a man about the car park we had just parked in (how exciting that sounds), but it actually evolved into a great conversation. I was surprised at how easy communication was after the initial ice-breaking.

Over time, I became more confident at talking to people I didn't know. And while I don't go around talking to everyone I see, I will make the effort to have longer exchanges with strangers. It's certainly a skill that I would like to practise more.

What I learned: Be the first to initiate things. People are a lot friendlier than I had led myself to believe and are usually keen to chat. I had assumed that no one would be receptive to this experiment, but I really did surprise myself.

It all comes down to perception. Although it appeared that everyone was in their own bubble, a lot of this was how I saw the situation. Most people just want to get on with their own business but that doesn't mean that they won't chat to you. I had built up such a personal barrier that I assumed everyone would be the same as me. Not the case. It took me breaking the ice on many occasions to experience this first-hand, but it has changed the way I interact with people. I now find myself speaking to strangers all the time and have had countless random conversations. The old me might have cringed, but I feel that I have more confidence after this challenge.

“Initiating an unprompted conversation with someone out and about seemed incomprehensible to me.”



25. Beep test

Category: Physical

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: An hour including set-up

What: The beep test is a way to determine fitness levels. Sports teams and the military use it frequently as a way to gauge aerobic fitness. The idea is to run between two cones that are 20m (65ft) apart, making sure to get to each cone before the next beep. The beeps increase in speed as you progress through the stages of the test and the whole thing lasts around 20 minutes. To complete the test, you need to be extremely fit.

The objective of this challenge is to see how far you can get in the beep test and record your result.

Why: This is a great way of judging your current fitness and requires a good level of aerobic capacity to achieve a high score.

Changing direction is exhausting but will improve your dexterity. It's a demanding challenge and will take mental strength to complete.

How: There are many ways to go about completing the beep test. The method below is the most straightforward and requires little effort on your part (except for the running of the test).

Step 1: Download a beep test app for your smartphone or tablet – plenty of options to choose from.

Step 2: Now find an empty bit of space (local parks work well for this), improvise some cones and see how far you can get with the test.

Harder: Complete the test twice and beat your previous record.

A score of 16 is the level of fitness needed to be a professional footballer or a member of the SAS (Special Air Service). Aim for this. Get close and you're doing well!

Research: After a quick online search, you'll be inundated with beep test apps to choose from.

Explore the fitness requirements to enter various regiments within the military. The all-round fitness needed to get in can be very demanding. See which regiments you can currently get into and which ones would prove to be a challenge.

My experience: This was quite straightforward to complete. I downloaded a beep test app on my phone and went to my local park to tackle the challenge. I took two t-shirts as "cones" and measured out 20m (65ft) with a tape measure.

When I first started jogging between the cones, it seemed manageable and my confidence was high. Within a short space of time, that had changed and I was breathing heavily like an asthmatic walrus. Soon after this, I was on the ropes and struggling to keep up with the beeps. It was physically exhausting for such a short test and I was caught off guard by this. I finished the test and had to rest before I could think again. Exhausting is an understatement!

For me, the hardest part about the test was changing direction at the cones. It takes so much energy to constantly stop and start and this really tired me out. It's amazing how the accumulative effect of changing direction becomes so exhausting.

Overall, the experience was difficult but enjoyable. I intend to use this challenge going forward for times when I need a quick physical and mental workout.

What I learned: Taking the beep test was a tough challenge but very useful. I now have a great fitness benchmark that I can use to measure my aerobic strength. In the future, I will be able to compare my results and can monitor my progress.

Although the test was relatively short, it certainly packed a punch. I love these short and sharp challenges that are relatively convenient to

complete but ask a lot of you. Physical challenges like this have been a great way for me to push myself to my physical limit in a controlled environment. This makes use of my self-discipline and willpower muscle, which has been getting a thorough workout across the year.

Every time I push through physical difficulty in a situation like this, I feel my confidence increase. The more challenges similar to this that I perform, the better at dealing with mental resistance I will become.

“I love these short and sharp challenges that are relatively convenient to complete but ask a lot of you.”



26. Driving skills

Category: Skill

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 6 (Medium)

Time required: A morning

What: Learn to control a skid while driving a car. This is done by completing a course on a skidpan. This is essentially a big open space covered with water that allows you to practise controlling skids. Skidpans are often on old airfields and will allow you to work on this skill in a controlled environment. You will have an instructor with you and they will teach you the skills.

If you don't already drive, consider learning as the objective of this challenge. Don't want to drive? What about a go-karting-based alternative? You have options here, so be creative if you need a substitute.

Why: Having experience dealing with an out-of-control car could save your life. This skill may be able to help you avoid a potential accident, so is extremely useful.

It's quite a technical skill to develop and something that would be difficult/stupid to practise on the road.

It's also a great way to push yourself out of your comfort zone relatively quickly.

How: Find a skidpan close to you and book yourself a session. You will be taught how to control skids when driving and learn how to deal with different situations that might crop up.

Step 1: Search online to find your local skidpan.

Step 2: Book a date to attend the course.

Step 3: Complete the course.

The main way to control a skid is to turn your wheels into the direction of the skid. This will seem counterintuitive at first, so will need to be practised. After turning into the skid, you then need to turn back out of the skid to stop the car from spinning out of control. It's a "hands-on skill" that you really need to experience in reality to understand.

Harder: The next step would be to have a go on a race track. You can buy "driving experiences" which normally involve driving a car around a course. You'll have someone in the car with you who can help you to push your speed and teach you what the car is capable of. Each "experience" will vary but should challenge you in different ways.

How about completing a stunt driving course?

Consider getting your HGV (heavy goods vehicle) licence. This will allow you to drive large vehicles (lorries, flatbeds, buses, etc) but requires a fair amount of work. You'll need to do a five-day course and take a host of supporting tests. It may take a while to develop the necessary skills, but at the end you'll be able to drive a lorry.

Research: There are lots of advanced driving courses that cover a range of skills. These include stunt driving, evasive driving and rally driving. Experimenting with different courses will be a lot of fun. See what's local to you and sign up for one.

Go-karting is an inexpensive and quick way to muster up adrenaline in a driving setting. Look for a local track and join a race.

My experience: I was given a gift voucher for my birthday to have a go on a skidpan. The skidpan was something I never would have thought of doing, so it was a wonderful surprise.

After arriving at the airfield, we were given a briefing and safety talk. All of the students were taught how braking and accelerating causes the weight to move around in the car and how this can affect the way the car handles. Lots of explanations and tips were dished out and we all listened carefully to our instructor's words. We were then assigned cars and instructors to supervise us as we practised our skid control.

The area we practised on was marked out by cones and formed a big loop. At the bottom of the loop, closest to the briefing huts, there was a hose pouring water all over the track. This is where we would practise controlling the skid.

The cars queued up and we took it in turns to have a go. The instructors demonstrated what we needed to do and then handed over the wheel. It was intimidating to begin with and I sent the car spinning out of control the first few times. This annoyed me because I used to be amazing at skidding on Mario Kart 64. I guess this was different. Over the course of an hour, I began to get better at controlling the skid. It became a lot easier as I got the "feel" for how to skid properly.

What I learned: The experience was incredible and I got so much out of it. I was extremely nervous before for some reason. However, as soon as we started skidding, the nerves went away. It really was a lot of fun. I walked

away from it all with a new skill and felt that my competence as a driver had really increased.

The fact that this was a challenge that someone else had set for me was very interesting. Having been given this as a gift meant that I had no control over the experience – I just had to turn up and complete the course. I really like to be in control of things, so this taught me about letting go and how going with the flow is important. The Stoic principle that we can only control our reaction to external events comes to mind here.

This challenge also showed me how important the influence of others really is. I wouldn't have come up with this idea by myself and I would have missed out on something really relevant to my year of self-improvement. Collaboration is a wonderful thing but can only happen when you are willing to share your experience with others. Because I had been openly talking about all of my challenges and anxiety, this wonderful gift was given to me.

“It was intimidating to begin with and I sent the car spinning out of control the first few times.”



27. Summon adrenaline

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 9 (Very Hard)

Time required: A few hours

What: Experience adrenaline – the feeling of acid in your chest, a dry mouth and butterflies in your stomach. These are the desired sensations and there are many, many ways to summon them up. This challenge is all about practising your ability to manage adrenaline by exposing your body to those chemicals.

Why: Learning to manage the sensations of adrenaline is important. If you are nervous about something, you don't want to fall to pieces. The best way to develop composure is by experiencing adrenaline regularly. When you learn how your body responds to the chemical, you will be more familiar with the sensations and more able to effectively manage them. With practice, you will respond in a more considered manner and make better decisions when your body is clearly afraid. No more running away from scary situations!

How: There are many ways to cause adrenaline to course through your veins, so feel free to choose something that gets your heart racing. Below are two options, but expand this challenge as you see fit.

Option 1: Visit a theme park and ride the largest, most intimidating ride there. Being in a queue for a big ride is a great way to develop your mental strength and get comfortable with the feeling of adrenaline in your body. A quick online search will provide you with plenty of options. All you need to do now is turn up and scare yourself silly.

Option 2: Jump off a 10-m (30-ft) diving board into a pool. This is very high and should get your adrenaline pumping. Simply find a local pool that has an Olympic diving board (the standard is 10m/30ft high) and take the plunge.

Harder: Complete both options 1 and 2 in a single day.

Want to take things to the next level? Sign up to do a tandem skydive. This can be a local affair or somewhere exotic. Either way, you still have to jump out of a plane.

How about completing a bungee jump? Even those with nerves of steel will struggle with this one.

Research: Canyoning is an activity that will take you through natural plunge pools and waterfall water slides in canyons. It's adrenaline-inducing and will provide you with plenty of opportunities to practise your mental composure. They're all over the planet, so see where your local one is and sign up.

The biggest bungee jump in the world, at the time of writing, is currently in Colorado, USA and stands at 321m (1,053ft).

Watch the *Mr Bean* episode where he's at the swimming pool. His attempt to jump off a 10-m (30-ft) diving board is hilarious. Hopefully, you'll handle it more gracefully than him.

Local skydiving experiences should give you plenty to think about.

Spend some time searching for local theme parks to visit. Worldwide, there are tons to discover.

My experience: My friend James and I were deep water soloing, a type of climbing where you don't use a rope for protection and you let the sea catch you if you fall. It sounds dangerous, and it certainly can be. However, what we were doing was considered an "easy" and safe route. We weren't being reckless and we knew exactly what we had got ourselves into. It still scared me, though, and I really didn't want to fall into the icy cold British sea!

The sound of the sea was overpowering as I climbed the route. The deep and powerful boom that I could feel in my chest made the adrenaline soar through my body. My heart was racing and my mind was whirring as I looked toward the waves crashing below my feet.

We had traversed around a giant pillar that went out into the sea and then back to the beach through an overhanging cave. The cave is where everyone falls off apparently. I was nervous as I entered the darkness and I began to climb faster. The handholds disappeared and I began to grip harder than I should have and started wasting precious energy. The footholds were

greasy and I could feel the strength in my arms fading. I didn't want to fall and my heart was pounding.

I shouted back to James in a half-hysterical, half-fearful tone, "I'm going in," and before I could finish my sentence, I was falling through the air. The sound of wind rushed by my ears and then I plunged into the sea. It was an all-encompassing cold, but an exhilarating moment. I swam to the surface to offer James support, but a few moments later he was off and in the water too. We were laughing as we swam to the beach in a state of child-like euphoria. A sense of relief washed over me as the adrenaline began to fade and we relaxed on the beach. It was an unforgettable experience and one of the highlights of the year.

Climbing has been a great way for me to practise the sensations of adrenaline within my body in a relatively controlled environment. I've experienced so much adrenaline in different settings and this has really helped me to have more control over my mind.

Being a climber, there is a chance that you are going to fall when trying to complete a route. This is a constant part of the sport and something that can be tricky to get your head around. As you advance in your climbing, you will start to "lead climb". This style of climbing is where you climb from the ground up, trailing the rope behind you rather than the rope already being at the top of the route. The reason that this is harder and a lot scarier is that you have the potential to take big falls. These are known as "whippers" in the climbing community. If you want to know what that looks like, do a quick search on YouTube to see compilations of people taking "whippers". Let the sweaty palms commence.

I had found that the fear of falling was really holding back my climbing and had become an issue. It's perfectly safe to take a fall and is an important part of climbing, but I just couldn't get my head around it. When I felt close to falling, my body would start to shake and I wouldn't be able to complete the climb. Managing this adrenaline was essential.

How do you get over a fear like this that's holding you back? Stare it in the face and start practising falling. James and I began taking practice falls. They started off small and over time we built them up. It was a slow process

and each time I was filled with adrenaline before a practice fall. Over time, my confidence sky rocketed with this training. It was an empowering process.

We now start every climbing session off with a few “whippers” to “blow away the cobwebs” as we like to say. We’ve taken massive falls, some over 8m (26ft) long to help build confidence. I still feel the adrenaline but I no longer have such an intense fear of falling and this is all thanks to looking at my fear head-on.

What I learned: Seeing adrenaline for what it really is was a game-changer for me. As soon as I started to view this process as a chemical reaction within my body, I changed my relationship with it.

Fight or flight is the natural response to a potentially dangerous situation. Our bodies pump us with adrenaline to help us run faster than the beast trying to eat us. There’s a joke about this – two men encounter a wild, hungry and angry lion. The first man bends over and starts tying his shoelaces. The second man says, “What are you doing? You can’t outrun a lion!” The second man responds, “I know, but I can outrun you,” and sprints off. Cruel, but it illustrates my point (kind of).

If the adrenaline isn’t going to be used to run away from something, it’s there to help you fight something (fight mode). Just imagine the final scene of a Schwarzenegger movie and you have the right image. This would be a survival instinct in a life-endangering situation.

These days we don’t have these situations to deal with most of the time, but our evolutionary response is still with us. Managing this was a useful skill that I enjoyed developing.

Stepping back and realizing that fight or flight is a natural process that every human being experiences was extremely helpful. I started to look for ways to work with the adrenaline, rather than against it. This is very much the approach I took with my anxiety and it made a massive difference.

The biggest thing I did was change the way I responded to adrenaline. I started to see this chemical as a way for me to enhance my focus. I now pretend that it’s a “magical” power that will help me to perform better.

When I stopped seeing adrenaline as a negative sensation, it all changed. It was like one of those pictures that has two images disguised in one. At first, it looks like an old woman and then suddenly, if you look at it differently, it becomes a rabbit. This is what happened to me with adrenaline.

I now see this chemical as an enhancing drug that will allow me to perform at my best in whatever situation I'm in. It works. Try it.

“My heart was racing and my mind was whirring as I looked toward the waves crashing below my feet.”



28. Queue unnecessarily

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: Up to a few hours

What: Queue for something and then leave as soon as you complete the queue. This can either be on foot or in the car.

Why: This is a horrible challenge! No one likes queuing. In fact, most people hate it. Who wants to queue when they don't have to? Doing something that you hate and find boring/frustrating is the perfect way to test your willpower. The whole point of this exercise is to increase your mental resilience and ability to deal with frustrations.

How: For this challenge you have two options:

Option 1: The next time you see a massive queue, join the end. It doesn't matter what it's for. When you get to the end of the queue, turn and leave. Fake a phone call, pretend you've forgotten something or just walk off laughing. It doesn't matter how you leave as long as you've completed the queue.

Option 2: Take your car for a spin and deliberately go to a traffic hotspot. Wait the queue out while trying not to get angry for agreeing to do this challenge.

Harder: Use Google maps and online traffic alerts to guide you to heavy traffic. Rush hour in most cities is likely to present you with plenty of options.

Complete one entire lap of the M25 in rush hour – quite possibly the UK's busiest and slowest road. If this is too far from your current location, create a similar style challenge in your local area that will frustrate you greatly. Make sure to complete this on your day off so you aren't late for work. Please don't punch me at the end of this.

Join a bigger queue or spend a day queuing for no reason. Popular tourist attractions are a great place to find big queues. This challenge is only hard if there is no reward at the end. If you queue for a sight and then go and experience it, you have given value to your queuing. Abandoning ship at the last minute is the key to making this challenge so tough.

Research: Tourist attractions are usually packed with queues. See what's close by and pay it a visit.

Google maps and traffic alerts will guide you to your next car-based queue challenge.

My experience: I absolutely hate sitting in traffic. Most people do. It's boring and I feel like I am wasting my life looking at the red lights in front of me. Completing a challenge like this was slightly masochistic and I had

to keep talking myself into it. My mum thinks I'm crazy for doing this one and she's probably right.

The first time that I deliberately sought out traffic was on a route home in the car. I Google mapped my journey and was given several options. The logical thing to do here would be to have chosen the shortest journey time. But I selected the longest journey time – the M25 in rush hour, unnecessarily. Why would you choose to travel on Britain's worst road in rush hour if you didn't have to? I kept asking myself the same question as I began to queue on the slip road joining the M25.

I won't bother writing a detailed account of me sitting in traffic because that would be incredibly dull. I'm sure you can imagine the situation pretty clearly though. It was miserable as I crawled at walking pace toward my end goal.

The journey took twice the time it should have done while I got the pleasure of sitting in my car developing my patience. Did it work? Well, it wasn't easy but I think I handled it quite well. Having said that, there's certainly a lot more room for me to test myself with this type of challenge.

I've experimented with lots of unnecessary queuing across the year and it never ceases to be a tough mental challenge. I'm slowly getting better at dealing with the associated frustrations, but it's not easy. Progress is slow, but at least it's progress.

What I learned: Patience. Trying to bring a meditative attitude toward queuing is very helpful. If I can avoid getting worked up about being stuck in a queue or traffic, life is *a lot* better. Practising the Buddhist concept of acceptance is hugely important here. I'm not the greatest at dealing with traffic, so it requires some practical philosophy and serious effort to not get stressed. Having personally chosen to sit in traffic, I feel like it's my responsibility. However, if traffic is forced upon me unexpectedly, this is when I really have to face the challenge of "letting go" and accepting my circumstances. On paper, it's simple to write, but it's the regular use of this mindset and attitude that will make me better at dealing with it.

“My mum thinks I’m crazy for doing this one and she’s probably right.”



29. Learn a difficult yoga pose

Category: Physical

Classification: Quick to learn, committing to use on a regular basis

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: An hour/ongoing

What: Yoga is a physical, mental and spiritual practice that originated in ancient India. There are many different schools that put emphasis on different aspects of yoga. In this context, we will be exploring the more physical side of yoga that focuses on performing poses and routines. Not collapsing into a knotted heap while doing this is the aim of the game.

The objective of this challenge is to learn a hard yoga pose and practise it until you can do it properly. I suggest aiming for a headstand as this will require practice.

Why: Contorting your body into awkward positions can be uncomfortable and challenging. It’s physically demanding and requires plenty of core strength and flexibility. You’ll have to work hard to make the pose effective, so discipline will be required. It’s great mental training.

Yoga is an incredible exercise that can support all of the other activities in your life. Increasing your flexibility will make you more resistant to injury and can further your performance in different sports.

Yoga also has a big emphasis on philosophy and the connection between mind and body. Exploring these concepts and bringing them to your yoga

practice will help you to continue building a positive mindset.

How: You will have to build up your flexibility over time for this challenge as certain yoga poses can be very demanding. Poses that you could set yourself the challenge of learning first might include a headstand or a handstand. The method below is for a headstand and is a great place for you to begin.

Step 1: Make sure that you have plenty of space. It's probably best to move the Ming vase in case you fall over.

Step 2: Get a cushion and place it in front of you.

Step 3: Place your head on the cushion and your hands below your shoulders.

Step 4: Transfer your weight onto your hands and head.

Step 5: Bring your legs and body weight above your head. You will need to engage your core to keep everything in place.

Step 6: Extend your legs and keep breathing. Congratulations! You're now upside down!

Be sure to use a few visuals/videos online to help you figure out the method. It can take time at first, but practice makes perfect.

Having a friend to stop your legs going over might be useful. If you're feeling antisocial, you can replace your friend with a wall instead.

Harder: Any handstand-based pose, the splits or the bird of paradise should keep you busy.

Try a walking handstand, a one-handed handstand or a no-handed handstand.

Attend an advanced yoga class or try something different like Bikram yoga (essentially yoga in a sauna).

Incorporating poses into a yogic routine is a great way to take things further. Turning this challenge into a full workout is a fun way to bring exercise into your life.

Research: The list of yoga poses to learn is expansive, so I'd suggest you search online and find a selection you want to learn. When you've decided on some poses, try to find an online guide or ask a yoga instructor for tips.

Acroyoga involves having a partner and doing different poses together – think acrobatics mixed with yoga. Why not see where your closest class is?

Aerial yoga uses hanging hammocks. Yes, hammocks hanging from the ceiling that you use to perform upside down poses. Sounds interesting, right?

Instagram seems to be overrun with yoga videos these days; spend time getting inspired there.

My experience: I came to yoga as a way to help me deal with running-related issues. When I started training for my marathon, I had severe pain in my knees and was forced to visit a physiotherapist. After some corrective work and a diet of yoga, I was injury free. As soon as I started to use yoga regularly, all the little niggling pains went away and I managed to run my entire marathon without getting an injury.

I'm now a total yoga convert and use it as a support system for both my running and climbing. I've attended classes (although I had to fight a lot of mental resistance here), watched tons of instructional videos and created long and demanding routines that test me. I can touch my toes (before, I couldn't bend down past my knees) and have learned some interesting poses.

Learning to do a headstand felt like a significant achievement for me. It wasn't easy and felt very unusual. The amount of times I crashed into furniture when learning was ridiculous. The neighbours must have wondered what was happening as massive bangs echoed around our flat. A male adult hitting the floor makes quite a noise. Thankfully, those days are over and I can now spend several minutes upside down quite gracefully.

What I learned: Yoga taught me the value of slowing down. I'd been at it like a madman with all of my self-imposed challenges. Going at things hard

was a great way to get things done, but having no balance wasn't. I got injured quite quickly and needed to increase my endurance by bringing stretching and less vigorous exercise into my life. Yoga was the perfect way to do that.

The supporting philosophy of yoga is extremely helpful and reinforced many of the ideas that I had been developing and working with while completing challenges. A lot of these have similarities to Buddhism. It's really interesting and something that I like exploring.

“I'm now a total yoga convert and use it as a support system for both my running and climbing.”



30. Cook a new dish

Category: Skill

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 1-2 hours

What: Cook a technically challenging dish that you've never tried before. Be sure to pick something ambitious.

Why: For this challenge you will have to follow instructions carefully. Depending on the technicality of the dish, this could be very difficult.

On completing the challenge you'll have a new dish that you can add to your cooking repertoire. Let's hope it tastes great and gets made again.

How: This can be a lot of fun. Sharing the end result with someone will be a brilliant way of getting feedback on your cooking skills. Top tip here: If their face looks disgusted but they keep assuring you that it tastes lovely, they're probably being kind to you and "bending the truth".

Step 1: Decide on the dish you wish to cook. Use online articles or cookbooks for inspiration, but be sure to choose something ambitious.

Step 2: Go shopping and buy the ingredients.

Step 3: Follow the step-by-step instructions and construct your dish.

Step 4: Enjoy eating your creation.

Harder: Invite people over to your house and cook them your technical dish. The pressure of having to cook for others is an interesting challenge. Combine that with being a good host and you have a juggling act on your hands. This will be especially challenging if you opt for an ambitious menu for your guests.

Try a Heston Blumenthal recipe. Some of these are incredibly intricate dishes and can take days to prepare.

Research: *Come Dine with Me* is a TV series that is extremely popular. Contestants take it in turn to cook for each other at their houses and they get a score depending upon their performance. Replicate this with friends and see how you get on.

Jiro Dreams of Sushi is one of the most interesting food-based documentaries I've ever seen. The chef and owner of a world-famous sushi restaurant in Tokyo is the star of the show. The documentary explores his daily routine and what he's achieved with his restaurant. It's eye-wateringly expensive and unbelievably popular, with a long waiting list. The restaurant only has ten places but holds an impressive three Michelin stars. Jiro works insanely hard to make everything perfect and has an unbelievable team around him. This man's commitment to sushi is off the charts. It's an absolute must-watch documentary.

Start flicking through recipe books to get inspired. My personal favourites are either by Jamie Oliver or have BBQ in the title.

The Netflix documentary series *Chef's Table* will also get your taste buds watering.

My experience: For this challenge I decided that I would attempt to cook sushi rolls. I'd been learning Japanese and it seemed like a great technical dish for me to try. Sushi is my favourite food so I was excited to make my own. For some reason, I thought I would be great at it. Note to self: just because you like something it doesn't mean you'll be any good at doing it.

I spent time researching what I needed to do and went shopping for the ingredients. After a lot of prep work and time spent in the kitchen, I was ready to start rolling some sushi. Helen thought that it looked like fun so decided to come and roll sushi with me. We both added the rice to the nori (seaweed) sheets and carefully placed our fillings on the rice. I then began to roll. It was really hard and I ended up with a deformed looking sausage with weird bumps in different places – not quite what I had imagined. I went to pick up the knife to begin cutting the sushi sausage into smaller pieces and had to do a double-take. Helen had already finished cutting her sushi rolls up and they were immaculate. They looked as if they had been freshly rolled by a Japanese chef. Maybe mine would look like that after I cut the roll up ...

When we finally finished, we were left with one plate of my sushi and one plate of Helen's sushi. The difference was hilarious! My plate looked like a sushi graveyard filled with deformed sushi that was just awful. The seaweed was ripped, the rice was falling out and it was a total mess. Helen's sushi, on the other hand, was perfect: seamless and beautiful sushi that genuinely looked like it had come from a restaurant. We spent a lot of time laughing about it and I tried not to come up with excuses as to why my sushi had turned out badly. Well, you can't be good at everything.

What I learned: I had assumed that I would be great at making sushi, but it was a total disaster. It's funny how I thought that I would be able to do it so easily before attempting it. My attitude was the direct opposite to my normal thought process with a lot of these challenges. For example, not thinking that I could ever run a marathon and then proving myself wrong by running one. This time, things were different, though, and over-confidence reared its ugly head. So, what's the lesson here? Firstly, don't assume anything until you have experienced it. Maybe it will be hard, maybe it will be easy. There's only one way to find out and that's through direct experience. Perception is the crux here and has ultimately determined my attitude toward challenges before starting them. By becoming conscious of my perceptions and trying not to label things as hard or easy, I will be able to approach new experiences in my life with openness. All of this is easy to say but actually altering perceptions can be tricky.

It's hard not being good at things but handling that gracefully and looking for the lesson was a good experience for me. Helen might have a different account of how "gracefully" I handled that situation, but I did try. Honest!

At the end of the day, my sushi tasted reasonable and I had fun in the process. I learned a lot about making Japanese food and have gained a new respect for sushi chefs. If I want to improve this skill, I will need to focus on my attention to detail. I know that with practice I will be able to make better sushi next time. For now, the all-you-can-eat sushi buffet around the corner is calling and I'm ready to do some damage.

“It's hard not being good at things but handling that gracefully and looking for the lesson was a good experience for me.”



31. Complete a triathlon

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 10 (Very Hard)

Time required: A morning, plus training time

What: A triathlon is a race that combines swimming, cycling and running. The race is divided into three distinct sections. You begin with the swim, followed by the cycle and then the run. There are various lengths of race to try depending on your fitness and experience levels.

The challenge is to select an appropriate distance and then complete the triathlon.

Why: Balancing all three disciplines can be a real challenge when training. It's also a physically demanding race and requires all-round fitness and mental grit.

How: I would suggest a "sprint" triathlon for your first race. This is a 750-m (2460-ft) swim, a 20-km (12.5-mile) bike ride and a 5-km (3-mile) run. Find a local race, sign up and make sure you build up your fitness in each discipline during your training.

Step 1: Select a race that you're keen to try and sign up.

Step 2: Make sure that you have access to a bike and swimming pool.

Step 3: Balance each discipline and follow a training plan to build up your stamina for the race.

Step 4: Complete the race.

ALTERNATIVE:

Go to the gym and work through the distances in each discipline. It couldn't be easier (in theory).

Harder: Compete in a longer race. The categories are: Sprint, Olympic, Half-Ironman and Ironman. Choose something ambitious and begin the training programme. Easy, right?

Research: Look into the Norwegian “Norseman” triathlon for an unbelievably epic event.

Meredith Kessler is an American triathlete who leads an inspiring life. She’s competed in and won many Ironman triathlons. Go and check her out!

Sean Conway is an adventurer who has completed the world’s first length of Britain triathlon. He swam, cycled and ran the length of Britain. After this, he took things to the next level and completed an ultra-style triathlon by circumnavigating the entire British coastline by foot, bike and paddling power. It’s worth exploring his journey and personal account of the whole experience. He has several books to his name and is a truly fascinating human being. He also has an incredible beard.

Triathlons have become extremely popular of late, so you will be spoilt for choice on which one to complete. Spend some time researching local races for inspiration.

My experience: My experience of completing a triathlon was rather unusual – I did it entirely in a gym. Over the course of five weeks, I went from a “Sprint” distance triathlon to “Olympic” distance, all indoors. As you can imagine, I had to deal with a lot of boredom-related training (all great for my mindset). In five weeks, I managed to complete five triathlons, each one slightly longer than the last.

The experience was novel at first and I was delighted that I had completed a triathlon distance but by the time week five had come around, I was finding this style of triathlon monotonous. It seems like a stupid idea to do a triathlon indoors, but it added another level of challenge to the experience.

It’s pretty funny when you’ve spent a really long time on a static bike in a gym. Your mind drifts off to different places to help you make the brick

wall in front of you more interesting. At one point I imagined that I was powering the entire gym by pedalling like a lunatic. I played lots of games in my mind and tried to incorporate interval training to make things a little more interesting. I used the music I was listening to as a way to create intervals – for one song I would pedal harder, the next would be a rest song. This would go on and on until I was eventually ready to move all of 2m (6.5ft) to the treadmill.

What I learned: The main thing I had to deal with when completing the gym/indoor pool triathlons was boredom (mental resistance). I often found the stale environment just as difficult as the physical exercise. This was all great training but not as much fun as I had anticipated. Should have been obvious, right?

Balancing all three disciplines was also tricky and I had to be careful not to burn out too early. I made sure to keep energy for the last section of the triathlon and this worked really well. Although my legs felt like jelly when I finally got to the run, I became good at judging my pacing and endurance. This was a valuable lesson for me to learn and I have been able to take this into other physical activities quite easily.

The next triathlon I do will be outside. I'm confident of that!

“It seems like a stupid idea to do a triathlon indoors, but it added another level of challenge to the experience.”



32. Get naked

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A few minutes to a few hours

What: Certain beaches are reserved specifically for people who enjoy being naked. Visit one of these beaches and prance around with your clothes off. The difficulty of this challenge will greatly depend on how much of an exhibitionist you are!

DISCLAIMER – There are many restrictions around public nudity. Waltzing down your local high street in your birthday suit could get you into trouble, so be considerate about getting your kit off. Go where you are allowed to be naked and you won't encounter any problems.

Why: A lot of people are extremely body conscious and will find the idea of public nudity intimidating. What a great barrier to work with!

How: With a quick internet search, you'll be in the know on your local nudist hotspot. Don't worry about forgetting your swimwear.

Step 1: Find your local nudist beach.

Step 2: Go to the beach.

Step 3: Take your clothes off.

Step 4: Walk about a bit.

Easy-peasy!

Harder: Join a naked bike ride. These are organized events where large groups of people cycle around cities naked. It's an opportunity to get way out of your comfort zone and experience the city in a new light. Search online to find when the next naked bike ride is taking place in a city near you. Sign yourself up and join the mob of people.

Research: Spend some time searching for your local nudist beach and "naturist community". You may be surprised at how popular it is.

My experience: I am by no means a nudist and when I came up with the idea of this challenge, I instantly felt uncomfortable. I know some people are very happy without clothes though. I've seen one of my closest friends dancing naked on a table at a festival to a crowd of a thousand people. He loves being naked and is always getting his kit off at parties (brave or stupid, you decide). The thought of this is my worst nightmare! I had a lot of mental resistance to work with here, so I struggled immensely with this challenge.

I must admit, my attempt at completing this challenge was pretty poor, but I did try. The thought of getting naked in a public place makes me feel extremely awkward. I managed to lie on a nudist beach in Croatia for half an hour, feeling unbelievably concerned that I was being photographed (hello paranoia). I also managed to go skinny dipping. Both of these events were really difficult for me, but it's the taking part that counts, right?

What I learned: It's amazing how uncomfortable we can get without a layer of fabric to cover us up. I couldn't believe how difficult I found this. Clearly the resistance indicates that I can learn a lot from this experience, even if the lesson is that there is a limit to how far I would push myself.

I can imagine Epictetus having a word with me about this challenge and telling me to toughen up a bit. He'd be straight on the naked bike ride shouting at me for not joining him. I'm guessing he would tell me to stop caring so much about what other people think. It's great advice. Anyway, I now have a strong picture of the naked Stoic circling me on a bike, encouraging me to take my clothes off. Yes, that's a pretty terrifying image!

“It's amazing how uncomfortable we can get without a layer of fabric to cover us up.”



33. Try a new sport

Category: Physical

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 6 (Medium)

Time required: A few hours

What: Try a sport that you've never done before. This can either be a solo, team or extreme sport. The important criteria is that you have *never* done it before. The unknown is the name of the game here.

Why: Being a newbie can be tricky and you're likely to feel out of your depth. This challenge will encourage you to practise your ability to communicate with new people, understand instructions and experience something unfamiliar. If you try a team sport, you will have to function as a member of a team and deal with a cross-section of different personalities.

It's probably going to be hard at first and you will be dealing with a lot of mental resistance. Trying new sports can be tough, so this will be a great way for you to test that growth mindset of yours.

How: See what sports are on offer locally to you and sign up for a trial session. Going a few times to understand the basics is a good idea, but the main goal is for you to be in an unfamiliar environment doing an unfamiliar physical activity.

Ideas to try could include: boxing, martial arts, tai chi, badminton, sailing, fencing, gymnastics, water polo, skiing, snowboarding, volleyball or stand-up paddle boarding. The list is massive and will obviously be different for each person. The above sports are completely random examples, so choose something new and exciting based on your previous experiences.

Step 1: Search online for interesting sports that you've never tried before.

Step 2: Sign up for a taster session or two to get a sense of the new sport.

Step 3: Turn up and complete your activity.

Step 4: Repeat a few times until you have a basic understanding of the sport.

Harder: Write a list of all the sports you haven't tried and work your way through completing them. Who knows, maybe one of these will turn into a new hobby for you.

Research: Search your local area for new and unfamiliar sports on offer. The Internet will be able to tell you what options you have.

My experience: For this challenge I decided to have a go at surfing. Having never been before, I was keen to give it a try and see if I could get to grips with the basics. I signed myself up for two morning surfing sessions on consecutive days and hoped that this would give me enough time to get a "feel" for the sport.

My instructor didn't wait around for long and after a five-minute explanation of what to do, we were charging into the sea. I was a little nervous as I looked out at the waves and intimidating swell. I didn't get a chance to think about that for long as I was loudly encouraged to wade deeper. At about chest deep, I got onto the board and lay floating in the sea. The waves battered us from all angles as my instructor turned the surf board around to face the beach. I was told to paddle first and then implement the "pop up" technique he had spent all of two minutes explaining. A wave came, I paddled and off I went. The board moved quickly on the crest of the wave and I immediately thought I had nailed it. I attempted to "pop up" on the board but as soon as I tried to stand, I went crashing into the water headfirst. Failed attempt number one.

This was pretty much the story for the following hour and a half. My instructor would line me up on the board and I'd feel like a child in the process. I was carefully chaperoned to the right spot and then released as

the wave came. I'd manage a metre or so on my feet then fall. I tried and tried but kept failing. It was hard work.

After a while, though, I began to relax and started to get a feel for what I needed to do. Suddenly, I was upright and the balance felt good. It clicked and I rode the wave all the way to the beach standing up. It was an incredible feeling. I managed to replicate my performance a few more times, but it wasn't anything to write home about.

Day two was a mix of mostly failure with the odd successful ride all the way to the beach. This time I was left more to my own devices, so the whole experience felt a lot freer. Knowing that I had an instructor to hand if I had any issues was really helpful, but having the space to figure things out on my own felt particularly beneficial. It was great fun and I began to see how addictive it could be. "One more wave" I would say to myself and then proceed to mess up the following six to seven attempts. The experience was brilliant and it was a thoroughly enjoyable challenge.

What I learned: The sea can be an intimidating place. At times, the beach felt far away and there was a real feeling of isolation. The sea is incredibly powerful and floating on a surf board gave me a sense of insignificance. Not in a bad way, but just a sense that we humans are really just tiny things living on a big planet in a massive universe. Nature is incredibly powerful and surfing is (or at least it appeared to me to be) an attempt to connect with that.

I certainly walked away with a sense of how difficult surfing really is and how much respect for the ocean you need to have if you are a surfer. I was in a very "safe" place under the watchful eye of an experienced instructor. I imagine being out in the ocean in some parts of the world would be extremely dangerous.

Constantly failing at surfing and then getting one or two rewards – rides all the way to the beach – gave the experience value. I couldn't do it at first, but with persistence and determination, I got a small taste of what this sport could be like. Having the right mindset (growth mindset) was essential and

I don't think I would have had that approach before. It's amazing how by changing my attitude, my world opened up.

“I couldn't do it at first, but with persistence and determination, I got a small taste of what this sport could be like.”



34. Juggle three balls

Category: Skill

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 4 (Easy)

Time required: An hour

What: Learn the classic trick of juggling three balls in the air.

Why: Learning to juggle can be a relatively quick skill to learn. It's a great party trick and is a fun activity to develop your coordination, concentration and muscle memory. Juggling will also test your ability to deal with frustration.

How: The most obvious place to start would be to get someone who can already juggle to teach you the technique. This can provide you with direct feedback and allow you to ask questions along the way. Alternatively, using an instructional video on the Internet will give you a visual guide. *See below* for a methodical approach:

- Step 1: Buy or borrow three juggling balls. Lemons/limes/tangerines work well, but remember that you're likely to drop them a lot when you first start. In theory you can juggle anything that you can hold, but it's probably best to skip the chainsaws for now and stick with something small and spherical.
- Step 2: Find a resource that you intend to follow and can help you to clearly visualize the process.
- Step 3: Hold two balls in your right hand and one ball in your left hand.
- Step 4: Throw one ball in an arc about head height from your right hand to your left hand.
- Step 5: As the incoming ball from the right hand approaches the left hand, quickly throw the left-hand ball in an arc toward the right hand. This gives you space in your left hand to catch the incoming ball.
- Step 6: The left-hand ball will now be flying toward your right hand. As it approaches the right hand, throw the ball currently in the right hand toward the left hand in another arc and catch the incoming ball in your empty right hand. Next, catch the ball you have just thrown with your left hand. You have now completed one juggling cycle. Yippee! At first, this will be hard to do, but with practice you should be able to complete the cycle with ease.
- Step 7: Keep adding more juggling cycles until you can effortlessly juggle the balls for as long as you want.

Harder: Juggle four, five, six or seven balls. Knives or fire sticks work for an impressive/stupid upgrade. There are also countless tricks and variations that can be learned to add flair to your juggling.

Consider creating a juggling routine by linking several tricks together so that you have a short act you can perform.

Learn to ride a unicycle (another challenge in itself) and combine this with juggling. You really will be tested with this one!

Research: Contact juggling uses glass balls to create wonderful illusions. The balls remain in contact with your body most of the time, thus the name “contact juggling”. Watch some online videos to get an idea for how this works and consider giving it a try.

Cirque du Soleil jugglers are incredible. Start watching a few videos and get ready to be sucked into the Internet rabbit hole.

Flair bartending is another type of juggling that is worth exploring.

My experience: Learning to juggle came pretty quickly to me. Once I had the initial technique, it was a matter of practising until I could do it. I dropped the balls constantly, but my hand-eye coordination improved rapidly and the skill came together after a short amount of time.

When I could comfortably juggle the three balls, I began to work on a few tricks and routines. This took longer as some of the tricks required considerable practice. It’s been an interesting skill to develop, though, and if I ever decide to run away and join the circus, I’ll have a good grounding to start me off.

I love juggling fruit at my parents’ house, mainly for my mum’s over-the-top reaction. I mean, I’ve only dropped the tangerines three times and bruised a peach once ... What’s she complaining about?

What I learned: This skill taught me the value of persistence. Doing something repeatedly and making small alterations can get frustrating. I spent a lot of time failing at first, and I think that is important to experience. Learning to stick with failure, work with it and, ultimately, turn that failure into success is what I want to do with larger projects in my life. Learning to juggle is the perfect model for developing a skill, albeit a relatively quick one. Four balls or more though ... well, that’s a different story.

“Learning to stick with failure, work with it and, ultimately, turn that failure into success is what I want to do with larger projects in my life.”



35. Induce vertigo

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: 1–2 hours

What: Get high up on a cliff, building or tower.

Why: Many people have a problem with heights. Going to high places will challenge this fear and help you to grow. Aim for something realistic at first and build up your confidence and exposure slowly.

How: A lot of tall towers and buildings have observation decks that offer incredible views. This is a great option for getting up high in a new place. There are also countless amounts of wild places that have vertigo-inducing drops. A quick Internet search should give you plenty of places to explore.

Step 1: Search for your closest tall tower or natural vertigo-inducing drop online.

Step 2: Visit that location.

Step 3: Enjoy the views.

On paper, this is easy and for some people it will be. But for others, this will be a sweaty-palmed nightmare.

Harder: Walk out onto the glass floor of an observation deck. In some places they have installed thick glass that you can walk onto and stand directly above a stomach-churning height. If you suffer from vertigo, this will be very, very, very challenging. Famous examples include: CN Tower

in Toronto, Sears Tower in Chicago, London Bridge's glass walkway and the Grand Canyon glass walkway. This is definitely an uncomfortable experience and will certainly trick your brain.

Some towers/observation decks offer "sky walks" where you pop on a harness and explore walkways on the outside of the building. Give this a try if you're feeling brave.

Abseil off a building or small cliff. Abseiling (sometimes known as rappelling) is when you lower yourself down the face of a building or cliff on a rope with a special device. You can pay to have an abseil experience where everything will be set up for you. All you have to do is turn up and complete the abseil.

Research: Abseiling experiences can be found all over the place. Look online to see where your local abseiling adventure can be found.

Watch a few videos of tourists freaking out on Zhangjiajie Glass Bridge in China to get an idea of how hard this challenge can be for some people.

Search online for local tower observation decks to see where you can experience vertigo locally. Hot air balloons also offer immediate exposure. Why not book a ride to complete this challenge?

Alain Robert is a rock climber who is now famous for climbing buildings all over the planet. His resumé is stunning and includes rope-less ascents of the Empire State Building, the Eiffel Tower and Taipei 101. Watch some videos of his incredible climbs and be prepared to get freaked out.

My experience: Although I'm a climber, I still have an issue with heights. I've had to work really hard to deal with the exposure that comes with climbing. It's an ongoing process and something that keeps me on my toes. Interestingly, one of the most shaky-leg experiences for me happened miles away from mountains.

Helen and I were on holiday in Chicago and decided to visit Sears Tower. Sears Tower is a stunning architectural wonder that rises 443m

(1,454ft) above the Chicago skyline. It has a world-famous observation deck at the top. An interesting feature of the tower is that there are several giant glass boxes that poke out from the top of the building. This allows visitors to walk out onto glass, giving the impression of nothing below them. This seemed like a reasonable goal for me and a great way to practise vertical exposure. Being a climber, I thought this would make the experience a lot easier. How wrong I was! As soon as we got out of the lift, the exposure hit me. As I approached the floor-to-ceiling windows, my palms began to sweat and I felt dizzy. I slowly made my way closer to the edge and peeked down at the distant Chicago streets below. I felt uncomfortable and I wasn't even close to the glass boxes.

We spent time exploring the observation deck while I tried to keep a considerable distance from the edge (to try to stop the sweating). It felt like my brain was tricking me and I kept feeling like the tower was going to topple over. It was a bizarre sensation.

As we approached the glass boxes, I started to feel sick. It was hilarious watching Helen walk straight out onto the glass as if it was nothing. She took a few photos and walked around above the void below so casually. I was determined to play it cool and attempted to walk straight out onto the glass, but my body and brain stopped me. I ended up doing a weird shuffle thing that made me look like I was dancing. I took a breath and placed one foot onto the glass. The drop below was ridiculous and I felt extremely hot. I slowly made my way out toward the glass wall about 1.5m (5ft) from the edge of the building. It was unbelievably difficult and my brain kept playing tricks on me. When I got to the far wall, Helen took a picture to document the experience – I looked like a startled animal! It's actually a pretty funny picture that captures just how uncomfortable I was with great accuracy.

After a few minutes, I came off the glass and my body instantly relaxed. I couldn't believe how draining it was. My legs felt weak and I felt really dizzy. My stomach was churning and I was ready to descend the tower.

At street level, I felt a great sense of relief wash over me. I started to feel normal again and no longer uneasy. I was so surprised by how

overwhelming I found the whole experience. Vertigo got me good!

Since the Sears Tower experience, I still struggle with man-made exposure, and whenever I go up a new tower, I know it's going to be a challenge. It's a great way for me to push myself out of my comfort zone whenever we visit somewhere new that has an observation deck. I know it's going to get sweaty, but I like pushing myself to deal with it.

What I learned: The exposure I've dealt with when climbing feels distinctly different to man-made exposure. I'm a lot better at dealing with it when climbing for some reason, although it's still tough. Tall towers seem to make me experience vertigo more acutely. I guess it could be the severe nature of the exposure that causes my stomach-churning reaction.

Forcing myself to experience exposure is a recurring theme in my life. Whether it's through my climbing or by visiting towers and observation decks, dealing with this experience regularly has been great for my confidence. I know that my body will react in a certain way to the situation, so all I need to do is manage the way I respond. If I get panicky, I am good at talking myself out of it now. CBT to the rescue! It can be hard, but being scared around exposure is a normal reaction. It's essentially a self-preservation technique that I have to attempt to override. Sometimes that's easy to do, and at other times it's not. It's the attempt to override it that matters, though, and I've learned a lot throughout this process.

“Helen took a picture to document the experience – I looked like a startled animal!”



36. Upgrade your diet

Category: Mental

Classification: Epic

Difficulty: 8 (Hard)

Time required: A year

What: The goal for this challenge is to eat healthier food. That sounds a little ambiguous, but the important thing is to become conscious of the food you consume and try to look for healthier options to improve your overall diet. This will depend on how healthy your food choices already are, but the main purpose is to create a decent diet that you can stick to.

Why: Eating properly is essential to living a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Lots of people have an unhealthy relationship with food, so becoming extremely conscious of what you're eating can be tough. It also takes serious discipline to commit to eating well. Dieting is hard. It can be difficult to choose the healthy option – I know it's not just me who struggles with this! Fighting against the urge to eat whatever we want rather than what we know is good for us is testing. Choosing healthy food consistently requires discipline. Discipline requires mental strength. The fact that this is something that we need to do regularly to get results makes it *even* harder. This challenge can be very demanding.

How: Aiming for 80 per cent of what you eat being “clean” and “healthy” is a great way to start this challenge. Look at the food you consume and see how you could replace it with healthier alternatives. Defining what is “healthy” is something that I would encourage you to explore. Taking charge of your own diet is something that only you can do.

Step 1: Look at your current diet and decide on foods that aren't particularly healthy.

Step 2: Replace these foods with healthy alternatives.

Step 3: Repeat until most of the time you're eating healthily.

Changing your diet can be very difficult and sometimes it will be a battle to decide what to eat. Having the odd time where you break your “clean” and “healthy” diet shouldn’t be a problem; just try to ensure that 80 per cent of your diet is the healthy part, not the unhealthy part.

Harder: Stick to your new diet for one year.

Aim for a totally “clean” and “healthy” diet. Cut all sugar and carbs, reduce salt intake and consume less meat-based products. Sticking to this religiously will be *very* difficult.

Explore alternative diets and see what results they bring. See how you get on with vegetarianism and veganism.

Research: *Fuel for Life* by Bear Grylls explores the relationship our bodies have with the modern Western diet. The book provides healthy and tasty recipes to try and gives a great introduction on how to eat the right sort of foods.

There are countless food-based documentaries and articles online that will provide you with a wealth of information. Tim Ferriss’ “slow carb diet” advice is a great resource to explore and a good starting point.

Gut by Giulia Enders is a fascinating read. It highlights how important our digestive system is and how we need to balance it carefully with the correct gut flora.

Supersize Me is an interesting documentary about a man who only eats McDonald’s for a month. It’s truly frightening what this fast food diet does to his body in just 30 days. Watching this documentary is a great way to kick start this challenge and inspire you to steer clear of junk food.

Consider visiting a nutritionist to learn more about your personal relationship with food.

My experience: For this challenge I wanted to take responsibility for everything I ate and make sure that I was giving my body healthy food. I was really keen to upgrade my diet as I had struggled in the past to make

prudent decisions about what to eat. My personal philosophy had always been – when in doubt, order pizza. You can imagine what path that was taking me down.

I decided to visit a nutritionist to help me better understand what foods I should eat and learn more about what a balanced diet should look like. I was apprehensive about seeing a nutritionist and, if I'm being completely honest, I didn't expect to get that much from the experience. However, I was up for trying it so off I went.

The diet advice and insight I got from that session was sensational! I was given a wealth of information to digest and I left feeling totally inspired. I was given books to read and many helpful print-outs. All that was left to do was to change my diet in a disciplined way.

I threw myself into my new diet wholeheartedly and was strict with myself. In a few weeks I had dropped a jean size simply from eating well. Bonus! I was quite fit at the time, but my diet made a massive difference to everything. My energy increased and my performance in climbing/running/yoga skyrocketed. I felt lighter on my feet and the usual sluggishness that I would often feel began to fade. It also really helped with my anxiety.

I stuck with the diet for a long time but started to become a little too obsessive about it. This is where more balance was needed as I would scold myself if I ever slipped. I now have a healthier approach and will allow myself a treat. I try to implement the 80 per cent healthy diet philosophy and this still brings good results. If I feel a little “off”, I can always tighten up the diet and I know exactly what to eat and what results to expect.

What I learned: Diet is so important and making healthy choices consistently is mentally challenging. When people start diets I think they underestimate the mental strength needed to achieve their goals. This is why so many people fall off the wagon and give up dieting. The yo-yo nature of dieting has created a huge industry where fad diets are taking over. Losing weight shouldn't be the end-game, but this does appear to be

the case with many diets. A long-term, realistic and healthy diet is what we all need. Something that works and allows our bodies to function properly.

I was amazed at the difference I felt when I began to eat with a more considered attitude. It was wonderful. And with time, it became easier – after a while I wanted to choose the healthy option.

Choosing the lighter, healthier meal can be difficult at times and certainly tested my willpower in a way I wasn't expecting. Being consistent with this requires constant discipline. And because discipline requires mental strength, I get to practise this with every meal choice. I don't always succeed, but I'm moving in the right direction.

Below are the top four tips that I implement in my diet that have made a huge difference to the way I feel and have created the best results. I hope they are interesting/helpful for you.

Tip 1: Sugar. The main thing to be extremely conscious of is sugar. Sugar is hidden in so many things and is causing a huge amount of health-related problems all around the world. By reducing your sugar intake, your diet will instantly improve. Completely cutting it out would be even better but that's very hard to do. Get ready for the cravings to start. When you come off sugar for a while, you won't believe how sweet everything tastes.

Tip 2: Increase your vegetable intake. Eat more vegetables and focus on variety. Easy.

Tip 3: Carbohydrates. Reduce your carb intake and you won't feel so sluggish all the time. Bread-based products dominate the Western world but aren't great for our bodies. Completely cut/reduce the amount of carbohydrates you eat for almost instant results.

Tip 4: Fresh produce. If it comes in a plastic package, it probably isn't that fresh – just look at the long list of ingredients on the back of the packet. If there's more than three or four, you know it's likely to be pumped with stabilizers and additives. And these really aren't great for us.

“I was amazed at the difference I felt when I began to eat with a more considered attitude. It was wonderful.”



37. Skip like Rocky

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: A few days

What: Learn to skip like a boxer and perform a variety of skipping tricks.

Why: Skipping is a great form of exercise. It develops coordination, aerobic fitness and can increase arm and leg strength. It's a fantastic way to warm your body up and therefore a great exercise to get the blood pumping before other sports. It also requires very little equipment and only a small amount of space to work in.

Learning to skip properly with tricks can take time. You will need skill and precision to achieve smooth skipping and you are likely to encounter frustration along the way. Plenty of reasons to give this challenge a go!

How: Skipping will take a bit of practice to make it feel natural, so be sure to stick with it.

Step 1: Buy a skipping rope. These are very cheap and can either be a plastic cord or a leather rope. Make sure that it's the correct length – it should comfortably touch the floor with excess when your arms are relaxed and holding both ends of the rope.

Step 2: Watch a few online tutorials to get an idea of the technique. Use this as your reference point.

Step 3: Hold the ends of the skipping rope in each hand and swing it over your head (from behind your head forward) and toward the

ground. This should be more of a flicking motion than a big arm movement.

Step 4: As the rope approaches your feet, jump over it. This should be a small step-like jump, not a massive waist-high power jump.

Step 5: After the jump, repeat the process of flicking the rope from behind your head and under your feet until you are comfortable with jumping over the rope. This should become effortless when you get the technique right.

Step 6: Learn a few tricks to spice up your routine. Some basic ones to try include the “crossover”, “skipping on one leg” and the “figure of eight start”. There are so many to discover so spend some time researching new tricks.

Step 7: Use skipping as a way to warm up before other sports.

Harder: Learn more tricks and develop a polished routine. Introducing “double” and “triple” skips where the rope goes around you two or three times before you land on the floor is very difficult.

Try to complete 100 skips without stopping. If this is too easy, try 500. Still too easy? Try 1,000 uninterrupted skips.

Research: Watch the training montages in the *Rocky* movies for inspiration.

Search online for famous boxers showing off their skipping skills. Muhammad Ali and Anthony Joshua would be a good place to start.

My experience: Learning to skip properly took quite a while. It was a frustrating process and tested my patience, but it has been a great skill to develop. I now use skipping as a quick and easy way to warm up before exercising.

The first skipping rope I bought was far too short – it must have been a child’s rope. I spent a lot of time getting frustrated and was forced to take to the Internet for advice. One of the main pieces of wisdom that jumped out at me was about rope length. You wouldn’t ride a child’s bike, would you? I

felt suitably stupid as I had clearly been using a child's skipping rope. I mean, it didn't have Power Rangers on it or anything like that, but it was obviously too small. "Easy mistake to make", I kept telling myself as I immediately went to the store and found an adult skipping rope. Instantly things became easier.

It took a while before I was able to confidently skip without breaking the flow. I started off by aiming for 10 complete skips. When I could do this, I increased my goal to 20. This continued until I could confidently reach 100 without too much trouble. I then began incorporating tricks. The "crossover" was the first one I learned. To do this smoothly took time but allowed me to mix things up a little bit. After this, I started to learn other tricks until I could perform a selection of interesting skipping skills. I have images of me looking like *Rocky* while doing all of this. Maybe you can have this image in your mind too ...

What I learned: Skipping has been a great test of my patience. The amount of times I would be about to hit a new continuous skipping high score and then mess it up was ridiculous. At times, it felt like the skipping rope was cursed and was deliberately teasing me. Nevertheless, I stuck with it and managed to develop my skill in spite of the difficulties encountered.

This skill taught me the value of working with my frustrations rather than against them. The more relaxed I was, the easier it was for me to learn this new skill. When I became frustrated and tense, the process started to slow down. Finding the balance and approaching this skill in a relaxed way made a huge difference to my results.

Skipping has also helped to reinforce many of the other lessons I have been learning across the course of the year. For example, being consistent, remaining positive and dealing with negative perceptions.

"This skill taught me the value of working with my frustrations rather than against them."



38. Digital fasting

Category: Mental

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 7 (Hard)

Time required: 24 hours

What: Spend 24 hours without your phone.

Why: We're so dependent on our phones that they have become an extension of who we are. Taking a break from technology and being off the grid is a way to escape the fast pace of modern life. It won't be easy and you might be surprised at how addicted to your phone you actually are.

I often see people sat down for a meal together, silently glued to their phones. Watching a couple bury their heads into their screens instead of talking to each other is depressing, but this reality plagues the modern world. If it takes turning off the phone for 24 hours to highlight our dependency on this technology and break the pattern, then this challenge is extremely important.

It's also really hard to complete a digital fast. And if it's hard to do something ... yes, you guessed it – straight on the list!

How: Following through with this “digital fast” for 24 hours might be surprisingly difficult for you.

Step 1: Set a 24-hour period where you won't use your phone. The weekend might be more convenient, but this challenge isn't necessarily about convenience.

Step 2: Turn your phone off. Yes, there is actually a button for that. Google how to turn off your phone if you've forgotten ...

Step 3: Don't give in to temptation! Spend your free time enjoying the world around you in the present moment, free from digital distractions.

Harder: Try spending a week without your phone.

Spend 24 hours without any technology whatsoever (this includes electricity).

Go social media-free for one week.

Research: The book *Recovery: Freedom from Our Addictions* by Russell Brand gives a personal account of his battle with addiction and how we can arm ourselves to deal with it. This can easily be applied to modern society's obsession with technology and social media. Give it a read and see what you think.

There are now products on the market that you can buy to lock your phone in for a set period of time. By putting your phone in the box and setting a timer, you won't be able to access it until the timer rings and unlocks the box. Extreme measures indeed ...

There are plenty of productivity apps that can be used to lock your phone or block you from using the Internet. Consider exploring these options if you really can't keep your hands off your phone.

My experience: I recently inadvertently locked myself out of my phone. I don't really know how it happened, but I assume that it must have had something to do with my pocket, my fingerprint not being recognized and some Apple-based sorcery. When I pulled my phone out of my pocket, the screen told me that my iPhone had been disabled and I needed to connect it to iTunes. I literally couldn't use it until I was at my computer at home. Wow. Instantly I was thrown into a world without technology. I needed to send texts and emails, and I had a long tube/train journey ahead of me. No music and no Internet would plunge me back into the dark ages and I wasn't very happy about it. The whole experience got me thinking about how

reliant we have become on our phones as a society. Exploring this as a challenge would be an interesting experiment, I thought to myself while twiddling my thumbs on the train.

Spending time without my phone was surprisingly difficult. It highlighted how the world has changed drastically in such a short time for me. When I was at school, nobody had phones and the world kept on turning. Now, a low battery can send me into panic. It's an interesting dependence and taking a break from it was refreshing.

Throughout the 24-hour period, I would go to check my phone and then remember that I wasn't allowed to use it. It was amazing how frequently this happened! I would think of something really "important" that I had to do and automatically go toward my phone. It was a subconscious and robotic process that was kind of scary ... however, I did manage to resist in the end.

The challenge became very hard on the second day. Even waking up proved more difficult than normal – no phone alarm! Eventually, the 24 hours were up and I allowed myself to reconnect with the digital world. What did I miss? Nothing important. The odd email here and there that needed a reply and a few messages, all of which weren't urgent. It was amazing how twitchy I was without my phone.

What I learned: My phone is a part of who I am. It's incredible how powerful this technology is and how dependent I have become on it. Cutting my phone out of my life for a relatively short amount of time was so much harder than I had anticipated. Becoming aware of how much power this small piece of technology has over my life was fascinating.

I felt pretty good for having successfully managed 24 hours without my phone. It felt like I had more time (definitely an illusion). Normally, there are moments throughout the day when I "quickly" check my phone for something and then end up being caught in an Internet web. Half an hour later, I'll be watching a video of some Russian man swinging from a building on a rope. How do I end up here? I don't even know! These time-

wasting web-binges were replaced with space in my schedule and this created the sensation of more time. It was a nice feeling.

The experiment was very insightful and I believe that there is a lot of value in unplugging from modern technology. Learning about my phone dependence has been extremely interesting, although a little shocking. I will endeavour to unplug more and experience the direct world around me without distractions.

“Cutting my phone out of my life for a relatively short amount of time was so much harder than I had anticipated.”



39. Learn a magic trick

Category: Skill

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A few days

What: Learn to perform a magic trick.

Why: This challenge involves learning a new skill that will require precise and subtle movements. It's likely to need some practice and a lot of charisma to make the trick come to life. Performing the trick may also make you feel self-conscious. All great ways to push us out of our comfort zones.

How: There are countless tricks to learn, but I suggest beginning with a card trick.

A huge amount of card tricks are based on “forcing” a card onto your spectator. When the spectator is asked to choose a card from the deck, you are actually giving them a card that you already know and have pre-selected. Off the back of this, you can do some impressive and spectacular tricks.

Below is a basic trick that includes a simple way to “force” a card onto your spectator:

- Step 1: Sneakily look at the top card of the deck (the face down card) without your spectator knowing. This is now the card you will “force”.
- Step 2: “False shuffle” the deck, ensuring that you always keep the same card on the top of the deck. This will take practice as there are many, many ways to create the illusion of the cards being shuffled. Spend some time watching YouTube videos on how to perform the “false shuffle”, and start practising.
- Step 3: Ask the spectator to cut the deck into three piles. All the while, make sure you know where the top “forced” card is by making a mental note of which pile it sits on top of.
- Step 4: Ask the spectator to point at one of the three decks. If they point at the deck with the “forced” card on top, ask them to take the top card. If they point at one of the other decks, simply remove that deck and ask them to point again. This whole process is done to confuse the spectator. Whatever deck they point at, you will either eliminate it, or let them take the top card if it is the “forced” card’s deck. Charisma will help this part of the trick come to life.
- Step 5: Ask your spectator to look at the card and then put it back in the deck. Make sure that the spectator shuffles the deck thoroughly before they return it to you.
- Step 6: Tell the spectator that you have a great sense of smell and can identify which card they’ve picked by the smell on the card alone. Search through the cards until you find their card – you already know what this is because you forced them to choose it earlier. Sniff a few cards, make it look like you’re unsure and then reveal

their card. Most people will be amazed by this and proceed to spend the next ten minutes sniffing cards. Hilarious!

There are many variations of this trick. The key thing is “forcing” cards onto your spectator. By learning different ways to do this, you can come up with some very funny tricks. For example, if I know that my spectator is going to pick the Ace of hearts, I can pre-place a duplicate of that card in outrageous places. If you’re really sneaky, you can pre-place it in their pocket. They really will be amazed!

Note: Never do the same trick again straight away. Your spectator will be looking extra hard and will over-analyse every step.

Harder: Learn multiple tricks with and without cards and create a routine.

Perform your trick to a stranger.

Research: David Blaine is an outstanding magician who does incredible street magic. He has a whole host of quirky illusions and feats to his name, but his street magic is what I find the most impressive.

The magic circle is a society for professional and amateur magicians. If you find yourself particularly drawn toward magic, you may want to consider joining. It’s not easy to get in and you will really have to develop your skills to pass the entrance audition.

YouTube is an incredible platform for magicians, so have an explore and see what you can find.

My experience: Learning a few basic magic tricks has been a lot of fun. I love how people react and it can be so funny watching them try to figure out what I’ve done. Everyone really wants to know how to do the trick and some people just can’t let it go. They insist that you do the trick again and again. It’s great fun messing with these people and pretending that it’s real magic.

After learning how to “force” a card, I began creating a few interesting trick ideas. When you have a few basic concepts, it’s easy to combine

different elements from these tricks and create your own. It's been quite a creative process and has made me develop an appreciation for the subtleties of magic.

I created one flashy way to reveal someone's card at the end of a trick. Having forced the card onto my spectator, I then pick six cards and ask them to hold the cards in between their knuckles. If I hit the cards just right, they will fly out of my spectator's hands leaving only their chosen card behind. It sounds complicated but is actually quite straightforward to perform. However, it took many attempts for me to get this trick right and I managed to ruin the trick right at the last minute multiple times. I wouldn't give clear enough instructions to the card holder and would then proceed to smack all the cards across the room leaving a puzzled spectator and a frustrated magician. One time, I had my friends in stitches as I managed to mess this finale up three times in a row. The more annoyed I got, the funnier my friends found it. The whole thing was hilarious and we were all in hysterics by the time I finally got it right.

With time and practice, I mastered the finish to the trick and I can now get some brilliant reactions from people when I perform it and get it right. It's been a lot of fun exploring this art form.

What I learned: Confidence is king. All of the tricks I have learned are so simple to perform and don't need a lot of practice, but they definitely require a level of personality. It's all in the delivery, and this is an interesting skill to develop. When all eyes are on you, there is an element of pressure. Getting the trick right and making it seem more "magical" than it is can produce fantastic reactions.

This challenge has encouraged me to be the centre of attention and appear more confident in my own abilities than I actually am. When performing tricks, I've had to execute a skill with precision and confidence to get good results. When it works, it's brilliant, but getting the right timing is crucial.

There was also an element of discipline needed to perfect the tricks I had been working on. Some of the moves needed to be repeated over and

over before I felt comfortable performing them. Creating a loose script to accompany the performance has also been amusing and required creativity. With the correct phrase here and there, the trick really comes to life.

The highlight from this experience has been the interaction that I've had with my victims (people who have been unfortunate enough to have me perform a trick on them). Magic can be a lot of fun and surprisingly disarming. I've had some funny and interesting conversations after performing a magic trick.

“This challenge has encouraged me to be the centre of attention and appear more confident in my own abilities than I actually am.”



40. HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training)

Category: Physical

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 9 (Very Hard)

Time required: 30 minutes

What: A HIIT workout can be done with many different cardio exercises. The idea is to exercise at maximum intensity for a period, followed by a short rest. You then repeat this several times. A HIIT workout is normally quite short and intense.

Why: This is both mentally and physically hard. This type of exercise is brutal and has the potential to make you throw up. It's so damn tough to keep going and a session can totally wipe you out. Am I selling it to you?

How: You can do a HIIT workout with any type of cardio exercise. The main thing you need is access to a watch/timer so you know how long you've been exercising for. A countdown timer is better as you don't have to keep clock watching. Most machines in gyms will have a timer/clock that you can use when completing this challenge.

Step 1: Decide on a cardio exercise that you will use for your HIIT workout. Options include running, rowing, cycling, ascending/descending stairs, swimming or skipping. There are many more options to choose from so don't feel limited by my suggested list.

Step 2: Warm up for five to ten minutes with light cardio.

Step 3: Now do twenty minutes, alternating one minute as hard as you can go (absolute flat-out exercise) followed by one minute of easy (thank God) recovery cardio. The workout ends up being quite short as you are working so hard for intervals. In total, you will do ten minutes of extremely hard exercise peppered with lighter, recovery cardio.

Step 4: Cool down with some light cardio.

Step 5: Recover. Maybe in a dark room.

Harder: This can be made harder by reducing your recovery time to 30 seconds and increasing the overall length of the HIIT workout.

Research: Try joining a HIIT class at the gym or sports club.

There are plenty of online HIIT routines to try, so get searching for inspiration.

Fartlek is Swedish for "speed play" and, although not strictly a HIIT routine, it is a type of interval training aimed specifically at runners. The goal is to create your own intervals based on your environment. For example, if you see two lampposts, you can challenge yourself to sprint between them. Trees, houses, benches all work too. You have so many options and your only limit is your creativity. The goal is to repeatedly

come up with intervals on your run. This can be intense or more casual, depending upon mood. These self-imposed intervals force you to be creative and inject speed into your running. It's a lot of fun and can really increase your stamina.

My experience: This type of exercise is intense. I used it to increase my cardio strength and thought it would be an easy way to get in a quick workout when I was pressed for time. "Easy" was the wrong word.

The first time I ever did a HIIT workout was on a rowing machine at the gym. I set out a plan for how I would divide up my time and started warming up.

The motivational music went on and I began to work really hard. After one minute I was pretty exhausted and welcomed the recovery time. This was probably the only "easy" part of the exercise. Each time I started the intense minute of exercise, it got harder and harder. I only had to do it ten times, but it felt very, very demanding. Pushing myself to the absolute limit took a lot of focus and the minute of recovery wasn't long enough.

Fast forward to the end of the HIIT workout and I was in pieces. I kept being sick in my mouth and my legs wouldn't stop shaking. I had an instant headache and I felt absolutely awful. The workout was so difficult that it took me almost as much time to recover as I had been working out for. Great stuff! Although, that's a lot easier for me to say in hindsight.

I now use HIIT exercises if I want to really push myself and am pressed for time; although the fallout after a session can leave me pretty incapacitated. It's a great way to build explosive power and I'll often use it in my running. I love "fartleks" and think this is such a fun way to spice up a run.

What I learned: It's amazing how such a short workout can be so difficult. Exercising at my absolute limit was so uncomfortable that I had to fight hard not to quit. When you feel that awful, it's easy to want to stop. The

whole experience has been an exercise of willpower and determination for me.

After completing my first HIIT session, I was apprehensive about doing another. This was great mental resistance to work with and allowed me to really put my Stoic and Buddhist philosophies to the test. Trying to remain present and not focus on the brutal nature of what was to come was an interesting experience, especially when you know that you're going to feel awful afterwards!

“I kept being sick in my mouth and my legs wouldn't stop shaking.”



41. Sleep on the floor

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 8 (Hard)

Time required: A night

What: Sleep on the floor next to your bed for an entire night.

Why: This challenge will be miserable and hard to complete. Having the bed tempting you all night should also increase the difficulty. This SAS-style challenge is not for the faint-hearted.

How: This sounds easy but will actually require a lot from you to complete it.

Step 1: Lie on the floor next to your bed. No pillows, no duvets and no inflatable mattresses are allowed.

Step 2: Now spend the entire night here. Good luck!

Harder: Do this challenge in your garden and deal with the elements.

Take a chair, preferably wooden and uncomfortable, and spend the whole night sleeping on it, or at least attempting to sleep on it.

Research: Exploring some relaxation techniques might be a useful thing to do before you attempt this challenge. Sleeping on the floor won't be comfortable, so focus on overcoming the discomfort mentally.

My experience: Sometimes, just sometimes, I think I'm an idiot. Sleeping on the floor beside my bed was unbelievably challenging. I couldn't get to sleep and it was a lousy experience. Why had I agreed to do this? All in the name of self-improvement, I kept telling myself. It didn't make things any easier though.

Sleeping on the floor without bedding and pillows was fine for the first ten minutes, but then it became *very* painful. I had to lie on my back as lying on my side was just too awkward. The night seemed to really drag as thoughts of being an idiot lingered in my consciousness. Eventually, I settled and managed some broken sleep. I would wake up in a lot of pain, get up, walk around, stretch a little and then lie back down. I tried to focus on my breath and attempted to meditate to calm my mind and deal with the discomfort. This worked and allowed me to drift back into yet another restless sleep.

The next day I felt tired all day – the kind of tiredness you associate with very bad jetlag. However, I did have a stupid story, a testing experience and a new-found respect for mattresses to my name. Another challenge had been ticked off the list and I was incredibly pleased.

What I learned: It's safe to say that this was one of the worst night's sleep of my life. I would have been able to guess that before doing the challenge though. It rivalled the bivvy for difficulty, although not having the elements made things a little easier.

Seeing this challenge through to the end was difficult. When I'm tired, I feel mentally weaker and don't have as much control over how I rationalize things. My bed was calling my name all night, and blocking out its incessant wailing was an enormous task. I managed to fight off temptation, but it was no easy feat!

The challenge came toward the end of my Year of Adversity, so I had quite a few tough situations to my name. This brought it down from the impossible realm to the might-be-possible realm. Any earlier in the year and I think I would have failed this one. My accumulative experience had certainly helped me. It showed me that I have come a long way and have made huge progress. Thanks to these challenges, this ridiculous experience was possible.

“It's safe to say that this was one of the worst night's sleep of my life.”



42. Have an outrageous clothes day

Category: Mental

Classification: Quick

Difficulty: 5 (Medium)

Time required: A day

What: Try wearing clothes that will cause people to look at you. The more outrageous, the better! Go for something that is very different from your normal attire and preferably something that will make you feel uncomfortable. This could be as simple as wearing a colour that makes you feel embarrassed (pink/purple/lime green) to wearing an outrageous fancy dress outfit. The Stoic philosopher Cato would deliberately wear things to make his peers laugh at him. This idea isn't new but is a great, quick way to make us feel awkward.

You may choose to go outside in arctic winter conditions in flipflops and a T-shirt or go outside on a summer's day in a ski jacket. The goal is to wear clothes that make you feel uncomfortable and are likely to cause a reaction from the general public. You get a bonus point if someone says something to you.

Why: People will stare, especially if you look ridiculous. This challenge is a great way to increase your self-confidence and take yourself less seriously. Most people don't want to look like an idiot so will actively avoid situations like this – all the more reason for you to seek it out!

How: This challenge can be loads of fun. You can either choose your outrageous outfit yourself or, if you're feeling brave, allow a friend to choose for you.

Step 1: Decide what you're going to wear. See what outfits you can create at home that look ridiculous. Consider the weather as an influencer on your outfit choice. If you don't have anything outrageous at home, go shopping and buy something embarrassing.

Step 2: Get dressed in your outrageous outfit.

Step 3: Walk to your local high street and pop into a few stores.

Step 4: Return home (without sprinting) and celebrate your bravery.

You may choose to document your experience on social media as a way to challenge yourself further. Photographic evidence makes things a lot

scarier!

For a slightly easier version of this, try a subtle alteration. For some women, leaving the house without makeup on could be a hard challenge. For men, why not try leaving the house *with* makeup on? Maybe some lipstick or eye liner? Anything subtle will work; a hat that looks terrible on you, ill-fitting clothes (too tight/too loose) or a bright colour should do the trick and ease you into this challenge.

Harder: Be more extravagant and head out in a fancy dress costume – think banana suits and cowboys/face paint/swimwear. This is guaranteed to turn a few heads.

You may also choose to walk down a busy street. Somewhere like Oxford Street in London, Fifth Avenue in New York or a busy shopping mall at the weekend should be enough to make even the most confident of people wince a little as they walk around in their outrageous outfit.

Research: Pop to your local fancy dress store to see what costumes/outfits you can find.

Charity shops always seem to have a random assortment of clothing. This can be a great place to stock up on fashion oddities.

My experience: The most outrageous item of clothing I own is a giant nylon vest that's way too big with palm trees and the American flag on it. It's from Miami and is absolutely horrendous. I'm a very conservative dresser and opt for muted tones and simple, minimalist clothing. Just putting this vest on feels wrong to me. Leaving the house with this thing on is truly embarrassing; however, I've grown to love how over the top this vest is. It's so different from everything else I own and it makes me laugh whenever I see it. That really was the purpose of buying it in the first place.

Recently, I've been experimenting with wearing inappropriate clothes for the season. I did a massive walk through central London in a T-shirt and shorts in the heart of winter as a way to test myself. I didn't see a single

person wearing a T-shirt the entire day – everyone was wrapped up in coats – and I got several double-takes as I strolled around the city as if it was summer.

I've also been out in a horrific thunderstorm in flipflops and, again, that caused a bit of a reaction. Not a huge reaction, but you can tell that people are looking.

What I learned: Dealing with embarrassment head-on has made me feel more confident. It's easy to worry about people judging you, but who really cares? People will look at you, probably think you're a bit weird and then forget about it. Is that such a terrible thing? Questioning the resistance to wanting to wear something outrageous will help us to break down this self-created worry. Why does it matter what anyone else thinks? We're all so keen to impress people we've never met. This exercise has been great for me to push this idea further and allow me to practise feeling as if everyone is judging me.

“People will look at you, probably think you're a bit weird and then forget about it. Is that such a terrible thing?”



43. Via ferrata

Category: Physical

Classification: Committing

Difficulty: 10 (Very Hard)

Time required: A day/weekend

What: During World War I, one of the front lines was in the Italian Alps. The terrain was technical to move around in so the troops installed metal ladders, wires and bridges to make it easier to travel. These via ferratas, meaning “iron way” in Italian, are now extremely popular to explore and you’ll find similar style ones in many mountain ranges around the world.

The routes allow non-climbers access to incredible terrain with relative safety. The key safety feature is a metal wire that runs along the route. When moving along the via ferrata, you use lanyards specially designed to clip into the wire. If you slip, the lanyard will stop you from falling.

The challenge is to find an easy via ferrata and complete the route.

Why: This challenge has many features – exposure, physical difficulty and exciting obstacles in an incredible setting. Not only will you be challenged physically, but you will be in a mountain setting that will require a strong head for heights and nerves of steel.

How: One of the reasons that this challenge is particularly difficult is that you need to be in a mountain range where there are via ferratas. This in itself requires a large amount of effort on your part but, trust me, the payoff will be worth it! In the UK, there is only a handful of via ferratas, the Lake district and Scotland being your strongest options. There are plenty in America and Europe, one of the best places being the Italian Dolomites in the European Alps. If you’re unsure about climbing via ferratas, then I recommend that you join a guided group. This challenge may be easier to tag onto a holiday or when you happen to be in a suitable mountain range.

An easy alternative that is very close to the via ferrata experience, albeit not as epic, is the tree top adventure parks that are becoming increasingly popular. In the UK, there is a company called “Go Ape” who have a series of courses high up in the tree tops. There are various obstacles, ladders and bridges to deal with at a considerable height. Although not quite the same as a via ferrata, there are many challenging elements involved in a Go Ape experience and it’s a way to make this challenge a little more accessible.

The “leap of faith” will certainly take commitment. Google some images to get an idea about the course obstacles.

Step 1: Find a suitable via ferrata that looks fun. There are thousands to choose from, so be sure to select something appropriate for your level. Some of these are very short whereas others can be a whole day in the high mountains.

Step 2: Decide if you want to hire a guide, be part of a group or go solo. I’d only recommend going solo if you have climbing experience or have spent considerable time in the mountains. A friend who has via ferrata experience could be an alternative to hiring a guide.

Step 3: Book dates to complete your chosen via ferrata and plan the rest of the trip around the route. I assume that you don’t have a via ferrata on your doorstep, so it probably makes sense to turn the experience into a mini adventure. You may even be able to throw in a few extra challenges along the way.

Step 4: Complete the via ferrata. Be sure to take plenty of photos as the exposure can be unbelievably photogenic!

Step 5: Safely return to your campsite/hotel/bivvy site.

ALTERNATIVE: This can be substituted with a Go Ape-style adventure if you can’t get to the mountains.

Harder: Some via ferratas can be extremely difficult and require basic climbing ability. The routes are graded to give you an idea of how hard the climb will be. To increase the challenge, try a harder and longer route.

Research: The Dolomites (Italian Alps) are the promised land for those interested in via ferratas. There are so many incredible routes to try – coupled with a fascinating history, it really is a wonderful place to explore.

Google “Treetop adventures” to see what high adventure options are local to you.

There are also several climbing walls that have indoor via ferratas. A quick search will show you the closest option for your location. This is a great way to get to grips with the basic safety features of the via ferrata.

My experience: My friend Matt and I were lucky enough to have ten days in the Dolomites over the summer of my Year of Adversity. I wanted a way to really push myself mentally and physically somewhere well out of my comfort zone. This would be a climbing-based adventure that would put all of my skills and physical training to the test. The Alps were calling ...

We had been developing our climbing skills over the year and had been scaring ourselves on all sorts of UK climbing adventures. Testing ourselves in the bigger mountain ranges filled me with a mix of fear and excitement, but I knew I would get a lot out of it. We went without a guide for the entire trip and this was a huge step up for us. All of my previous experience in the big mountains had been with a guide. Taking responsibility for ourselves and making prudent decisions in a dangerous environment would prove to be great mental training for me. However, it did make me slightly on edge.

Along with doing a mix of sport climbing, bouldering, alpine mountaineering and hiking, we had our eyes on a few via ferratas that we wanted to climb. The main one was the “Cliffhanger” via ferrata. This route was made famous by the movie *Cliffhanger* (1993) starring Sylvester Stallone. We both loved this movie so much and really wanted to visit and complete the famous route. Alas, upon arrival the ski lifts were closed due to an unscheduled repair. They would be out of action for the entire summer. If we wanted to do this route, we would have to hike for an additional eight hours or so. We had a small window to complete the route as our schedule for the week was so intense. The route would probably have to be completed in the dark, we didn’t have enough supplies for the additional hike, and the weather forecast was only good for the morning. A decision had to be made about what to do. The route was big and there would have been a serious risk if we had decided to climb. We chose the sensible decision: to skip it this time and focus on an alternative objective. As disappointing as this was, I got to test my “acceptance of things outside

of my control” philosophy. I used the Buddhist/Stoic approach to accept the fact that we wouldn’t be climbing this route. Putting these principles to the test wasn’t easy – I was a lot less angry than I would have been in the past but still bitterly disappointed.

The via ferrata we chose to climb instead was another classic, and in hindsight I’m so glad that we got to do this alternative. The route was called Via Ferrata Sentiero de Luca and was considered relatively easy. We decided we would turn it into a trail run/via ferrata to increase the difficulty.

The route started on a well-established mountain path. However, as we were at nearly 3,000m (9,840ft) above sea level, this “mild” gradient became insanely challenging. We were huffing and puffing within the first five minutes. Honestly, running at altitude is hard! I’d recently run a marathon so was in great physical condition but this was damn difficult.

We eventually got to the start of the via ferrata after 30 to 40 minutes of intense running and we were both dog-tired. This particular via ferrata was very historic and went through various front-line bunkers carved into the side of the mountain. It was a mix of caving and high mountain ridge climbing and something that neither of us were expecting. After some ridge climbing we entered a pitch-black tunnel. The darkness was profound. We both had headtorches but felt nervous entering the tunnel. We slowed our pace and pushed on into the darkness. After a good five minutes of walking up a steep path, we couldn’t see external light anywhere. We both turned off our headtorches but found the cold of the deep mountain rock mixed with the intense darkness too much. It was an unusual experience being in such a wild place. This would have been a daily reality for those on the front line. We were there in the height of summer trying not to freak out and those poor soldiers had to live here year-round. Winter must have been especially tough to deal with. Add to that people shooting at you and it would have been a miserable situation. The mind boggles at the level of adversity the soldiers had to deal with.

Eventually, we saw a pinprick of light in the distance and finally the tunnel came to an end. It was at least 500m (1,640ft) of total darkness and it was a crazy experience. We burst out of the tunnel into the bright sunlight

with a massive death-drop in front of us. What a contrast! We then had to edge our way along a narrow path with nothing but air around us. It felt like the kind of environment that you would only see in the movies. It was truly incredible, although my heart was in my mouth for the majority of the time.

We re-joined the ridge and scrambled on for several hundred metres. This was interspersed with abandoned front-line barracks carved out of the rock – in and out of tunnels, one minute in total darkness, the next minute hundreds of metres of nothing below us. The exposure was extreme, but I felt very alive and alert. We eventually ended up on the summit of a mountain overlooking the three imposing towers of Tre Cime de Lavaredo opposite. The view was stunning. Each tower of Tre Cime is taller than the Empire State Building and completely fills you with a sense of awe. We enjoyed soaking up the experience with a spot of lunch.

The next challenge was the descent. This was a lot easier and less demanding on the lungs than the ascent, so we made rapid progress. We descended carefully as parts of the route were slippery. The wires of the via ferrata provided protection, but you really wouldn't want to fall. The climax of the descent was a tiny tunnel that we had to crawl through on our hands and knees.

After getting off the via ferrata wires, we had an easy descent down a mountain path. We ran back to the car and managed to pick up quite a bit of speed. People tend to look at you like you're mad when you're running in the mountains. I love it! We got back to the car and ate quite possibly the greatest ice cream of my life. After that incredible adventure, the taste was even better.

What I learned: Via Ferrata Sentiero de Luca was hands down one of the best experiences I've ever had in the mountains. In fact, it's one of the greatest experiences I've ever had on this planet. It would have been all too easy to focus on the fact that we couldn't climb the "Cliffhanger" via ferrata and be frustrated by that. But, because we had to change our plans, we ended up having an unforgettable time.

This experience reinforced the premise that when one door closes, another opens. It was so obvious for me to see this concept in hindsight, but at the time it was hard for me to look past the disappointment of not being able to climb our primary objective. Taking this idea into other areas of my life will be hugely important going forward as this won't be the only time that I face closed doors in my life. I'm not always the best at seeing an undesirable outcome as an opportunity, but I must practise acceptance and look forward. There's a lesson everywhere if you're open enough to see it and, with practice, I hope to be able to spot those lessons quicker.

“This experience reinforced the premise that when one door closes, another opens.”

WHAT NEXT?

By now, you should have an idea of how the challenges work and what they aim to achieve. I'd encourage you to turn this book into a practical experiment as you work your way through them. Each time you leave your comfort zone, you are becoming mentally stronger and will increase your ability to handle difficult situations in life. I genuinely think that there is a lot of fun to be had with the challenges in this book. I hope that you will be inspired to try them out and begin to develop your mental resilience.

After working through this book, you may begin to think about what comes next. Luckily, there are several options for you to expand and develop the ideas and challenges you've read about.

The first place to start would be to go back and tackle the "Harder" section of each challenge. This will certainly give you more demanding situations to practise. They will require a lot more effort to complete and should provide you with a suitable number of difficult things to get your teeth sunk into.

You might also choose to further explore some of the ideas you've encountered. Hopefully, a few of the skills and activities have inspired you to pick up a new hobby or two. Spending time developing these interests will be a great use of your energy and provide you with wonderful life experiences.

Keeping things ticking over and continuing the learning/self-improvement process is important. To make use of the skills you've learned from completing challenges, I suggest that you check in with them semi-

regularly. For example, if you've learned how to solve a Rubik's cube, it would be a real shame to forget this skill because of complacency. At first, you may need to solve the cube once a week to make sure that you remember the method. With time and practice though, you won't need to check in that much and can solve it every month or so. I check in with the Rubik's cube occasionally to make sure that I can still solve it. Even if I think I can't remember, as soon as I pick up the cube the method comes flooding back. It's amazing what your memory can do!

The same goes for fitness. I use sports and physical challenges as a way to keep myself mentally strong. Being consistent with your fitness can be tough, but it's worth it in the end. There are many, many reasons to stay in good shape, but I feel that keeping up with regular exercise is essential for a balanced lifestyle. Not only will your mental resilience increase, but your willpower and health will get better too.

Turning the challenges into a social event could be quite a fun way of completing them. Dragging friends along for moral support and encouraging them to take part in your chosen activity will completely change the experience. This will be especially noticeable when working with things that you find very difficult. Having the support of a friend can take the sting out of something scary and make it a memory that you often reminisce about.

If you have children, why not include them in some of the challenges? You can turn a lot of these things into family adventures. The key is being flexible when working through the list and adapting things when necessary. I'm not sure that your 8-year-old will want to fast for 24 hours and this might cause a few arguments! Change things to suit your circumstances and you're all set.

Developing your own list of personal challenges is another great way to take things further. Hopefully, you've already started compiling challenge ideas that are relevant to you. If you combine ideas from my list and your list (how did they compare, by the way?), you should have plenty to keep you busy!

Challenge days

An interesting, although demanding, way to approach some of the challenges in this book is to set yourself a “challenge day”. The goal is to try to complete as many challenges as possible in a 24-hour period. You may choose to do this alone or with a friend/group of friends. This can be done in whatever way suits you personally and will more than likely end up being a bizarre and exhausting day. I’m confident it’ll be one that you won’t soon forget. This may well be the most outrageous day of your life!

Below is an example of a day that completes 14 challenges in 24 hours. With a bit of planning, you can easily create an itinerary that encompasses more than I’ve included in my “challenge day” below. Food for thought. You will probably need to prepare for this day in advance by picking up a few essentials, so start thinking about what you will need.

Challenge day example

Wake up two hours earlier than you normally would and immediately take a cold shower.

Before breakfast, complete a HIIT exercise routine and push yourself to the physical limit (you may need another cold shower post-workout). After this, have a bite to eat and head out for a stroll in an outrageous outfit. Fancy dress or weather-inappropriate should do the trick. Be sure to pop into a few stores dressed in your attention-seeking attire. After shopping, head to a popular tourist attraction and join the back of the queue. Wait patiently until you’re next up and then run off laughing at the top of your voice like an idiot. Now head home. Be sure to stop and chat to strangers on the way.

When you get home, it’s time for lunch. Eat something that you know you dislike and force yourself to try it again. My lunch would be a mix of oysters, durian, leek and potato soup and liver. Lunch would then be finished off with an interesting selection of insects to cleanse the palate. After lunch, the focus will be on learning new skills. Spend time learning to

juggle, solve a Rubik's cube or perform a magic trick. You could also invest time in learning to pronounce Wales' longest train station.

The early evening will be spent giving a short speech at a "Toastmasters" event where participants practise their public speaking. You may want to do a speech about your bizarre day. Post-speech, head to your nearest green space, preferably out of the city, and find the perfect spot to bivvy for the night. Before you go to sleep, cook a new and technical dish on an open fire to finish off the challenge day.

People will think you're crazy when you tell them about your day, but you will have stared fear and absurdity in the face and pushed yourself way out of your comfort zone. You're now officially a Stoic. Congratulations!

Challenge days could also be used as an annual event in your calendar to meet up with friends, complete challenges and do crazy things. It might catch on and you would certainly have a wealth of interesting stories as a result of these days. Suggest the idea and see who's adventurous enough to join in.

Challenge holidays

An expansion to the previous concept would be to go on a "challenge holiday" where you deliberately seek out new and adventurous activities that will push you way out of your comfort zone. This could be going on a homestay programme to be immersed in a new language. You could punctuate this with trying new sports, eating new foods and learning new skills. You might decide to go on a sailing holiday and learn how to sail a boat. You may go horseback riding (even though you absolutely hate horses and they scare you senseless). Or choose an adrenaline-fuelled extreme sports style holiday where you go white-water rafting, sky diving and bungee jumping. The possibilities are endless!

A "challenge holiday" could be as simple as going to a country that you have no knowledge of or are apprehensive about visiting. I had always been a bit worried about visiting India because I'd heard a couple of negative stories about people getting sick there. I'd also seen a few travel

documentaries and wasn't sure how I would personally handle the chaos of cities like New Delhi (talk about a fixed mindset). This seemed like the perfect challenge for me, so I booked flights and set off on an adventure.

I absolutely loved India and had an amazing experience. It was challenging at times and I did end up getting sick. I threw up in a bin by the Taj Mahal (hilarious in hindsight) and was bed-bound for a few days. However, it was fine and all great mental training for me. It certainly allowed me to practise reframing a situation!

I found the amount of people intense and the traffic jams were very different to those in the UK. I mean, there were rogue cows in the middle of the road! I also remember being followed down the street by a young man offering to clean my ears out for a good price. I refused as the metal spoon was covered in wax and looked truly hideous. What a wonderfully unfamiliar proposal.

The country filled me with wonder and intrigue at every corner. It was hot, crowded and there was poverty unlike anything I had experienced before, but it was a truly rich experience that I will never forget. I felt out of my comfort zone at times, but this was a good thing. I find that travelling is such a great way to do this and I love visiting new places, eating new food and meeting new people for this very reason.

The world is your oyster and, equipped with the right mindset and openness to adventure, you can go anywhere and have an extremely life-changing and profound holiday. Deliberately searching out things that scare you and that you've always been too intimidated to try will be a great way to see if the concepts in this book have sunk in and truly made a difference to your life. It may just be getting on that long-haul flight that is your challenge. Who knows? Only you can decide and the possibilities are all so exciting.

LESSONS FROM MY YEAR OF ADVERSITY

I've learned so much about myself while completing these challenges and I have experienced a huge transformation. It's been an incredible year and I feel in control of my mind again. With anxiety levels at an all-time low and my ability to handle difficulties a lot more skilfully than before, I think this project has been a total success. The next step for me is to share this concept with others and hope that it can bring about significant and positive change in their lives (that means you).

It hasn't been an easy year, though, and there have been plenty of tough times that have pushed me to the edge of what I'm capable of. It's been punctuated by failures, surprises, frustrations and disappointments, but this is all part of the journey.

I've thought long and hard about what this year has taught me and I want to share with you the ten most powerful and change-inducing lessons that I have taken away from this project.

Lesson 1: Self-imposed barriers

One of the main recurring things throughout my year of practising adversity was that of self-limiting beliefs. The amount of times I had assumed that I couldn't do something was incredible. Every time I tried something that I thought I wouldn't be able to do, I was always amazed at how different the

reality was from my perceived reality. If I can take away this lesson from my Year of Adversity and apply it to all areas of my life, I will be able to achieve so much more than I could have ever imagined. I never thought I could run a marathon, I never thought I could write a book, I never thought I could complete a fast, I never thought I could take a cold shower and I *never* thought I could learn a second language. The list of things I thought I couldn't do was massive.

This whole project has given me a valuable insight into the way I think. CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) has been hugely influential here and helped me to deeply question my automatic negative thinking. I know I'm not the only one who thinks like this and encounters self-limiting beliefs on a daily basis. If you look around you, this mindset is everywhere! We all self-impose limits on ourselves, but I believe it's important to push through these barriers. By forcing ourselves out of our comfort zones, even just slightly, we can start to break down these barriers. And as soon as those barriers start falling, we'll unleash a world of potential.

You are capable of so much more than you think. Testing this theory out by doing things that you previously thought you couldn't do will show you this. Don't let your false perception of something destroy your chances of success. This was a big lesson that I needed to learn and it only really sunk in after I pushed through multiple self-imposed barriers. Maybe my dreams can become a reality after all.

Lesson 2: Persistence

Repeatedly failing, yet continuing in spite of these failures, was another huge lesson for me. Being persistent and disciplined really did pay off. Seeing the results from this is the most convincing argument for never giving up. This was something that I really had to experience first-hand to truly understand. Direct experience is a wonderful teacher!

A lot of the skills that I developed across the year required me to keep pushing through resistance. Some of the fiddly skills took the longest to learn, but not accepting defeat was the key to success. Learning to whistle

with my fingers was a world of failure for so long until I finally cracked it. And when I did, it felt amazing! Honestly, it took so long to get this skill working for me.

Sticking with Japanese has been very demanding but, again, only through overcoming that mental resistance have I been able to make satisfying progress. I can't believe that I can have a conversation in Japanese now. I have to pinch myself from time to time when I'm chatting away on Skype to my teachers in a second language. It's brilliant!

It really was as simple as throwing enough time at what I wanted to learn. If a certain method wasn't working, I would slightly adjust my approach, but I kept going nevertheless. The important thing is how we work with something that isn't working. Being pig-headed and repeatedly doing the same thing over and over again is not the answer. Persistence should be coupled with the ability to adjust how you approach your challenge. Trying multiple angles is the key to making your persistence work for you. Finding a good balance with your approach and learning from your failures is extremely important.

Never giving up and being persistent was an incredibly useful lesson to learn and has helped me to acquire a selection of awesome skills.

Lesson 3: Obsession

Sometimes I have a warm shower. Don't tell anyone though ...

No, seriously, it really shouldn't be an issue if you give yourself a break from full-on "get after it mode". I found that my Year of Adversity was incredible, but I was very strict with myself, almost to the point of being obsessive. If I didn't manage to hit my daily quota of Japanese, meditation, writing, etc, or if I was forced to skip a workout, I would get extremely frustrated. Letting go and trying to be a bit more relaxed about everything would have helped. The key is not to get obsessed with all of this and become annoying to everyone around you.

I went on a road trip to the north of England with one of my friends to explore the countryside and visit Newcastle. We had never been before and

were excited to see the city. I was in full-on “challenge myself as much as possible mode”, which must have been annoying to be around. I insisted on getting in an icy cold river and lake and was constantly looking for things to challenge myself with. I think stepping back a bit and not being so intense would have been a better attitude to have.

Making a huge change in your life can be extremely empowering and it's easy to become obsessed with that change. It's addictive and can dominate the way you live your life. What I hated, though, was when I wasn't making progress or sticking to the plan. This inflexibility became more of a hindrance in the long run. At first, it facilitated a huge change in my life and allowed me to get stuff done. This was fantastic. However, after a while, if I didn't achieve what I wanted in the day, I would get very, very frustrated. I would focus on the failure of the day. Always looking for the lesson would have been a healthier attitude to adopt and would have saved me a lot of unnecessary irritation with myself.

Sometimes you won't be able to achieve everything you want. Life gets in the way. You will miss a workout, eat the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, get frustrated and feel useless. This is normal. Responding sensibly to this is the most important thing. Stay relaxed, don't worry about setbacks, and keep going. Being hard on yourself is paradoxically both a blessing and a curse. You'll be motivated but feel awful when you don't achieve. Don't focus on this. Look forward to the future, stay positive and always look for the lesson. Not being too hard on yourself is an important skill to have. In Japan, they have the saying “even monkeys fall from trees”. It means that nobody is perfect. We all have faults and it's important to accept them and look for what they are teaching us about ourselves.

I still continue to practise adversity but in a less intense way. I feel I have a lot more balance now and this works well for me. Ultimately, being more lenient with myself will enable longevity and avoid both physical and mental burnout. If I occasionally sleep in or skip a workout, I handle it a lot better now. Just don't tell Epictetus, alright! The last thing I need when I'm settling in for a few extra hours in bed is for him to whip the covers off and give me a massive lecture about being a lazy Stoic.

Lesson 4: Focus on achievement

Focusing on what I have already achieved is something I found extremely helpful. As soon as I started to tackle the challenges in this book, my confidence increased. When I began focusing on the things that I had already managed to overcome, it really helped to propel me forward. The way I focus on what I've achieved is through a specific type of note taking. I recently read about a technique called “the jar of awesome”, which I absolutely love. It was in Tim Ferriss' book *Tribe of Mentors*, which I highly recommend. The concept is that any time something good happens to you, you make a note of it and put it in a jar. The jar could be digital (a note on your phone/computer) or an actual jar, but the key thing is to write down every time something positive happens to you. This could be as simple as someone holding the door open for you to getting a promotion at work. Smiling at a stranger (and them smiling back), a great cup of tea, a catch up with an old friend or telling someone you love them all make the list. The possibilities are endless.

The purpose of this exercise is twofold. Firstly, you are focusing on the good things that are happening to you and thus creating a more positive mindset. If you've had a terrible day, it's easy to focus on all of the horrors, but what about that perfect parking space you found at the end of the day? The exercise makes you always look for the good in things, and this small change over time can have a hugely positive impact on your life.

Secondly, if you do start to feel like you aren't very lucky and things aren't going your way, simply look through the list. You will be amazed at how many brilliant things have actually happened to you. After a few weeks, the list will be massive, and reviewing all of these wonders can be powerful.

I've created an exercise inspired by the “the jar of awesome” and use it as a way to keep a record of all of the challenges I have overcome. I've called it “the jar of adversity”. Original, I know!

For this exercise, I make a note of all the challenging things that I've encountered in the day and managed to overcome. For ease, I write them on

my phone in a folder titled “the adversity jar”. These can be big things like the challenges in this book or smaller things like having an awkward conversation with someone. Any time I’ve managed to handle a difficulty in the day, it goes on the list. This makes me look for difficulties I’ve overcome from small things to big things. Any sort of mental resistance can go on the list. A typical day for me would include all of the morning routine activities that I’ve managed to do, any tricky things at work that I’ve handled, or any personal life issues that I’ve solved. They really don’t have to be big, but like “the jar of awesome” concept, it helps me to focus on what I’ve overcome.

Sometimes I will take notes on the associated difficulties and what I learned from the experience. When I look back through this list, it’s amazing for me to see what I’ve managed to overcome and achieve. Start doing this now and you too will see how strong you are. Once you prove to yourself that you can overcome many small hurdles, the snowball effect will see you through even your biggest and most ambitious challenges.

Lesson 5: Big growth comes from facing your fears

This seems like it should be pretty obvious, but it took me a long time to face my fears head-on. Addressing my anxiety and staring it in the eyes wasn’t my first reaction! It feels counterintuitive to move toward your fears but it really is a wonderfully empowering and life-changing process. On paper, it’s so easy, but in reality, it’s one of the hardest things you can do. And when things are difficult, there’s growth. And when there’s growth, there’s a whole world of positivity and greatness awaiting you.

Facing your fears takes courage and it’s not something to take lightly. Learning about my fears was yet another valuable lesson for me. Often, I would have small fears that would act as resistance when attempting to complete a challenge. For example, the first time I had a Japanese Skype lesson, I was so nervous. I nearly cancelled it at the last minute and I was genuinely scared. However, as soon as the lesson got started, I was no

longer afraid. Granted it's not a huge fear, but it's all part of that "mental resistance" that I want to decrease in all areas of my life.

I had a huge fear of needles and working with that has taught me a lot. Getting acupuncture might seem easy to a lot of people but to me it was a massive challenge. Seeing the other side of fear was amazing and conquering a fear of needles has been rewarding.

Knowing the path to take doesn't make it easy to actually take it. Every time I see a new fear – big or small – I am faced with the same type of resistance to work with. I hope that I can continue to take a persistent and confronting approach to these challenges that will no doubt continue to crop up in my life. Let's hope pizzaphobia isn't one of them though.

Lesson 6: Look for the lesson

There is *always* a lesson to be learned. With failure, success and adversity there is *always* something for us to take away. Learning to find the lesson will sometimes require us to look a little harder but it will *always* exist.

The *Tao Te Ching* – an ancient Chinese book written by Lao Tsu that is the foundational text for Taoism – has a great expression: "Good luck hides within bad luck."

There is always something good within something bad and it requires us to adjust the way that we view things to understand this. This premise forces us to look harder for the positive. Sometimes it may not be immediately obvious but will reveal itself with time. We don't know when this will be, so we need to remain receptive and open to the goodness within bad events. This won't be easy.

By slightly altering this maxim to "a lesson hides within everything" or "good lessons hide within bad experiences", we can look for the take-home from each event we encounter. Every experience on this planet is teaching us something, and learning to listen to these lessons is important.

While training for my marathon, I got a bad knee injury that stopped me from walking. This was a disaster at the time and a direct result of my overenthusiasm. However, as soon as I learned what it was and how to deal

with it, I developed a yogic support system that helped me to push my running to the next level. I also learned the hard way about overtraining injuries. Something good came directly from something that I thought was bad.

Another personal example of finding the lesson has been with my anxiety. At the time, this was the worst thing in the world and I was in bits. Now, though, it has been the best teacher I have ever had and has taught me more about myself and the world than I could have ever imagined. Something initially terrible turned out to be the greatest learning adventure of my life. The lessons are out there, people!

Adopting a growth mindset, inspired by Dr Carol Dweck's book *Mindset*, has been a transformative process. I'm now a lot more comfortable with failure as it is teaching me something wonderful. All of the lessons that I am talking about here are direct experiences that I have had while writing this book and completing challenges. Learning to handle the many failures and disasters along the way has been transformative. The old me would see a failure as a failure. I now see it as an opportunity. The difference is remarkable.

Throughout this book you will have noticed that I've always looked for the lesson. Each challenge has a "What I learned" section where I have reflected on the specific lessons from completing that challenge. This isn't something that came naturally to me and it needed to be developed. With time, I've become better at finding the lessons in everything I do. Keep your eyes peeled and you will find many lessons in unusual places. Adopting a growth mindset is truly transformative.

Lesson 7: Everyone has something they are dealing with

Whenever I share the concept for this project and mention anxiety, I'm always surprised by other people's reactions. They often instantly open up about things that they have been personally experiencing. The fact that I have shared my worries and anxieties makes people feel comfortable

talking about their issues and worries with me. This has been very insightful and taught me that I am not alone in the way that I think. In fact, most people have something that they are dealing with. Some people can hide this well, whereas with others it's blindingly obvious – a bit like someone shining a highly powerful industrial torch in your eyes.

Knowing that most people have an “issue” is actually quite reassuring. We are all in this together, dealing with our different adversities and vulnerabilities. Some land a tough hand and have to learn how to overcome hard times early on, whereas others never get to grips with it. No one is perfect and we all have foibles but it's this that makes us distinctly human. We are vulnerable, and sharing this vulnerability with others will ultimately make us stronger.

As soon as I opened up to friends and family about my anxiety, everything became easier. Don't suffer in silence. Ever.

Lesson 8: Adversity role models

Creating a series of “adversity role models” is a brilliant exercise. This can be a mix of those around you who handle tough situations with style and confidence, and people you don't know who have overcome difficulties in their lives. I have a mix of role models and find that reading incredible biographies of triumph over adversity to be very inspiring. Modelling my behaviour on those that inspire me has been a wonderful lesson to learn and has made me see many of the people in my life in a different light.

My dad is one of the most stoic people I've ever met and I've learned so much from observing how he deals with life's challenges. Until I began practising adversity, I didn't notice this attitude at all. Recently he had a series of health issues that he dealt with gracefully, bravely and stoically. The one example that really stands out happened while he was directing a play. Dad's work is really varied but after having spent most of his life acting, he finds himself directing a lot of plays these days. The night before this particular play was due to go on, one of the actors fell very ill and became unable to perform. The only option was for dad to go on and cover

the actor for a few performances. During the first night's performance, dad made a sudden move and out of nowhere the vision in his left eye disappeared. Complete blackness in one of his eyes. I can't imagine how scary that must have been, but dad carried on nevertheless. He completed the first night (everyone was totally oblivious to his loss of vision) and immediately went to the opticians to find out what had happened. The optician explained that my dad had a detached retina and that he would have to get it surgically reattached. After further investigations, the optician discovered that his other eye was also loosely attached and that this would need to be corrected at the same time. This is rare as most people with detached retinas would only get one eye done at a time. The operation was booked in for the following week and dad was instructed to rest. Did he? No. He carried on covering the other actor until his operation and didn't complain or wallow in self-pity. Unbelievable. I would have struggled with this experience and been truly shaken by the loss of vision, but for dad it was just a "nuisance". He accepted his fate and always believed that it would be fine. He didn't focus on the fact that it would take six weeks (yes, six weeks without vision) for both eyes to recover and he began making jokes about my mum becoming the nurse.

After the operation dad had to spend weeks lying on his back as much as possible to help with the healing process. He never complained and always focused on the future in a positive way. He made light of the situation and even managed to laugh when he squirted ketchup into his lap rather than on his plate.

Dad's vision came back better than ever and his eyes are great now, but seeing how he handled that situation was inspiring and I hope to emulate what I can of this mindset.

As soon as things get tough, we get a real insight as to how mentally strong someone is. Difficult situations can bring out the best in people. For others, it might not be so graceful and they will crumble under the pressure. Becoming conscious of those around you can be very useful and provide you with lots of handy lessons. When someone you know handles pressure, difficulties and adversity badly, pay attention. Use this behaviour as a

benchmark for what *not* to do. This will be very helpful and will highlight the direct end result of this type of behaviour. That alone should help you to not follow in their footsteps.

On the other hand, emulating those around you who handle difficulty well can be inspiring. Ask that person how they managed to remain so in control when things weren't going to plan. Listen carefully to the answer and see how you can bring this into the way you personally deal with difficulty. The key thing to remember is that there is always room for improvement and you never know who will give you a breakthrough lesson.

Lesson 9: Feed the right wolf

I think that for me the most important shift in my life happened when I started reading regularly. By consuming the right kind of content, I totally changed the way that I thought about things. I started reading as a way to better myself and change my mindset. As soon as I viewed reading as having a higher purpose than just entertainment, I became addicted. Every book I read I took notes on. This has given me a wealth of information that I can check in with whenever I need to. It's all content that spoke to me, so I find it extremely interesting and helpful to regularly review it.

What you put in your mind will change the way that you think, so choose carefully. I say reading but, in reality, you could be consuming positive content through audiobooks, podcasts and online videos. As long as it's positive and helping you to grow, go for it! There's so much stuff out there and it's incredible what the Internet/technology has done for us as a civilization. Have an explore and see what you can find. It's not just videos of cats playing the piano, you know!

I heard a wonderful story about developing a more positive mindset that illustrates the idea "you are what you consume". The story explores how good/evil, positive/negative, love/hate and other polarized concepts are cultivated.

The story is of Native American origin and is a short conversation between a small boy and his grandfather. The little boy starts the dialogue:

“Grandpa, why is there evil in the world? Why are there bad people?” His grandfather replies (maybe in a silky-smooth Morgan Freeman-sounding voice), “Inside every one of us there are two wolves – one good wolf and one bad wolf. They are in constant battle with each other and are always trying to win power over the person they are inside.” The little boy thinks for some time and then asks, “But grandpa, which wolf wins?” His grandfather doesn’t miss a beat and replies, “The one you choose to feed.”

The idea that by feeding the more positive emotions inside of you, you will start to become a more positive person is awesome. I’ve seen it first-hand and that’s why I love this story so much. By constantly reading the right kind of books, you will be feeding the part of you that is positive, loving and optimistic. I was someone who chose to focus on negativity, anxiety and fear. By always focusing on that, I became those emotions. My bad wolf was winning the battle. By changing which wolf I fed, my life was literally transformed. I had to change the way I was thinking to be able to complete a lot of these challenges, and this, ultimately, has made a profound difference to how I see the world. Life is now more of an adventure than a scary place with loads of terrible things waiting to happen.

By eliminating the negative sources from my life, I can’t tell you the relief I experienced. Some might say that this is living in denial, but I vehemently disagree with them. I choose very carefully what I focus on and I will always look for the positive. There are many ways to look at a situation and I feel that it’s all too easy to take the darker, cynical path.

We live in an incredible world filled with wonders, opportunity and excitement. Training our minds to see that will be the greatest way to achieve a lasting happiness and positivity. If we consume the right mind vegetables, we will grow healthy and strong mentally.

Lesson 10: How to be comfortable with being uncomfortable

All of this “theory” doesn’t mean anything unless you put it into practice. Leaving our comfort zones isn’t easy but will allow for a huge amount of

growth. I am a very different person now because of the experiences I have amassed. Working with my anxiety and using this as a way to become mentally stronger has been profound.

Most of my lessons have been learned “on the job” when I’ve tested out all of the tools and tricks I’ve been reading about. I love discovering a new “coping method” or “trick” for creating mental strength so that I can put it to the test. It’s great fun and I never know which new idea will really resonate with me.

The reality is that most people work in different ways. The challenges in this book are extremely personal to me and have allowed me to really push myself. I’m sure that there will be a crossover and that they will be testing for you, but no doubt they will challenge you in alternative ways to me.

We all view things from a different perspective and have countless ways of dealing with things. Testing out ideas is so much fun because we learn more about ourselves in the process.

I was recently telling one of my friends who had a real problem with catching the tube about using the video game Tetris as a way to deal with fear. By playing Tetris, you use the side of your brain that requires logic and reasoning and, therefore, disengage the emotional/panicky part of the brain. Research has shown that exposing people who have experienced severe trauma to Tetris relatively soon after the event can cause them to recover quicker (how they measure something like this, I have no idea). I mentioned this in passing to my friend and a few days later she sent me her Tetris high score and told me how helpful this trick was.

This was really interesting and shows us that you never know what little piece of information might help. Will this work for everyone? I honestly don’t know. But, give it a try and you might be pleasantly surprised.

Making sure that you are open to new ideas is essential. If I had thought that any of this wouldn’t work, I would be mapping my own negativity onto what could possibly be life-changing. If I hadn’t got out there and pushed myself in the real world with these challenges and ideas, I wouldn’t have changed. The hands-on experience was magic. It teaches you directly if you are willing to listen.

The two most important lessons from this whole project for me are Lessons 9 and 10. These lessons have given me the biggest learning experience and have taught me the most about myself in the process. Feed the right wolf, consume great and inspiring content and test out all of these ideas in the real world. You'll be comfortable with being uncomfortable in no time and your life will never be the same (for the better, of course).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The world is changing faster than ever. Everywhere we look, we see constant and unrelenting change. To be alive is to experience it. How we deal with this is extremely important and why I believe the ideas in this project are so relevant for all of us.

With the advancement of artificial intelligence, the rapid rate of technological development and the ability to communicate with other humans on a global scale, it really is an exciting time to be alive. Now that we are surrounded by 24-hour convenience stores, there's never been a better time in the whole of human history to buy a packet of salt and vinegar crisps at 1am in the morning. Aren't we lucky?

I can joke about crisps, but we, as a collective civilization, have some major challenges ahead of us. Although the world is changing and advancing in an exciting way, there are still obstacles in front of us. We face environmental, humanitarian and societal issues that we will need to collectively work together to resolve. I'm confident that we can do this, but I believe that it starts on a personal scale first. Before we save the world, we need to save ourselves. You know how parents are advised to put the oxygen mask on themselves before they help their children in that safety video on planes that no one watches? Well, that's what I feel we need to do ...

Before we can dive into a lot of the problems we face as a society, we need to be equipped to deal with a few bumps in the road ourselves. We're all going to face challenges, so it's best we prepare for them. If we start

crying over spilled milk (there's no use in that, apparently) and get in a flap about someone being rude to us in a supermarket car park, we will struggle to face the wider issues we face as a society. If we can't be kind to a waiter, how are we going to be kind to people we can't even see? Developing empathy is important and I truly think that this comes from a better understanding of who we are as individuals. Being kind to other human beings, not rising to little irritations and developing our inner strength is what the Stoics believed in and practised daily thousands of years ago. This wisdom stands true to this day and I believe it can help the human race to move forward, in peace, together.

"Be the change you want to see in the world."

Mahatma Gandhi

I love this Gandhi quote and how it forces us to consider how our actions affect the greater community. If everyone held themselves accountable for their behaviour and worked hard to be the best version of themselves, the world would be a different place. To experience lasting change, we need everyone on board. By setting the example, you don't know who you might inspire, but I feel that this is a chain reaction. Developing character is demanding but can have a ripple effect. When your granny starts jumping out of planes and taking ice baths, her zest for life will be contagious. You might even feel compelled to join her. I believe this all starts with our attitudes and our mindsets. As we become more connected globally, being self-aware is essential for clear and kind communication and can determine the type of future we live in.

The future is exciting if we choose to focus on this aspect of it. It's easy to be afraid when we are bombarded with negativity and horror stories of what might be. And what a lot of that there is! But this has always been the case, hasn't it? By leaving our comfort zones, we can learn how to be ready for the future. Who knows what this will be, and for every single person it will be different, but by preparing in advance we will have a system in place to deal with the difficulties that await.

The challenges and philosophies in this book are here to set you up for the chaos of life. Engaging with these ideas and pushing yourself to become a better, stronger individual is an ongoing process. I wish you the best of luck on this journey and hope that this practice is something that enriches your life and makes you one tough cookie! Bring on the unknown. Bring on the uncomfortable.

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BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

I couldn't leave without recommending some of my favourite books. Along with completing challenges regularly, reading extensively is extremely important. There are so many incredible books to help build mental resilience that span a whole cross-section of genres. By feeding your brain the correct kind of material, you can change your outlook on life and develop a level-headedness that doesn't come naturally to most people.

Below is a recommended reading list that further explores some of the ideas mentioned in this book. I've chosen these because I found them all so personally useful. Enjoy.

Books on Buddhism

Hagen, Steve. *Buddhism Plain and Simple*. Penguin, 1999

Skinner, Julian Daizan. *Practical Zen: Meditation and Beyond*. Singing Dragon, 2017

Watts, Alan. *What Is Zen?* New World Library, 2000

Books on Stoicism

Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. (Gregory Hay's translation.) Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2004

Epictetus. *Discourses and Selected Writings*. Penguin Classics, 2008

Holiday, Ryan. *The Obstacle Is the Way*. Profile books, 2015

Seneca. *Letters from a Stoic*. Penguin Classics, 2004

Books on Psychology

Alred, Dave. *The Pressure Principle: Handle Stress, Harness Energy, and Perform When it Counts*. Penguin, 2017

Dweck, Carol. *Mindset*. Random House, 2006

Jeffers, Susan. *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*. Century, 1987

Peters, Steve. *The Chimp Paradox*. Vermilion, 2012

Wilding, Christine. *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy*. Teach Yourself, 2015

Autobiography/Biography Books

Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Rider Books, 2004

Larson, Kay. *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*. Penguin Books, 2013

Robbins, Christopher. *The Test of Courage: Michel Thomas: A Biography of the Holocaust Survivor and Nazi-Hunter*. Century, 1999

COME AND SAY HI

The whole process of writing a book has been a fascinating experience for me and I've loved every minute of it.

To support the book, I started using social media. Being a private person made this initially very difficult. I was so worried about being open in public and I stressed unnecessarily. This is exactly what the project is all about, though, so I worked hard to embrace my resistance and face the challenge. Ironically, I really enjoy this part of the project now!

I've met some wonderful people online and I have had some brilliant feedback on the challenges. I love hearing stories about people leaving their comfort zones and it's very exciting to hear what everyone has been up to.

It's really nice to be able to have a two-way interaction and social media is great for this. When you read my book, it's essentially me talking at you for a few hours (I hope you're still listening). However, online you can talk back. I'd love to hear how you're getting on with all of this, so do come and say hi.

To follow the project in a visual and interactive way, check out my Instagram: [@dothingssthatchallengeyou](#) and my website/blog: www.benaldridge.com

This will keep you up to date with everything and show you tons of pictures, some ridiculous, some not. I look forward to meeting you.



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