

**1** WHAT DOES  
REAL CALM  
MEAN TO YOU?

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# CHAPTER 1

## DEFINING REAL CALM

## REAL CALM

The concept of calm can seem abstract and elusive. It's a state of mind that tends to conjure up an image of a sunset from a mountain top or a beach sunrise. And yet you crave that feeling on a more constant level. You know that lighting candles and taking long pampering baths offers tranquility, but you're after something deeper.

In the first instance, feeling calm probably means not feeling the way you do right now: worried, anxious, stressed or possibly depressed. All of these states are on a continuum, so although the extremes might be very different, individually they are difficult to distinguish. One thing is for sure, wherever you are on that continuum it doesn't feel good.

If you could somehow not feel *constantly* stressed that would make a huge difference. It's the *constantly* that wears you out – the looping thoughts, the knot in your stomach, the eating too much or not being able to eat, the feeling that you're stuck in a pressure cooker or a boiling kettle. The worst part is having to appear together around other people – like colleagues, bosses or people you manage – and others you have to deal with in daily life, from neighbours to your child's teachers.

In theory you can be honest with friends and family about how you feel, but what if you're too busy to see them? What if you don't want to or can't admit how you feel? What if you don't want to moan or 'bother' them? Or what if you *are* letting off steam or moaning and then feeling guilty?

Modern life is stressful – that's the message we keep receiving, and that's the message we perpetuate. Stress becomes the norm, and if it's the norm and it makes you unhappy then you feel there's something wrong with you. You might be thinking, 'What's wrong with me? Why can't I be calm?' We'll aim to answer these questions in the course of this book.

But let's start with stress. Is modern life really more stressful? Aren't we living longer, finding cures for diseases, looking more youthful and engaging in hobbies and even new careers way into the Third Age (the stage after middle age and before old age)? The answer is complex. Yes, life is better and more advanced in many ways. As stress expert, psychologist and neuroscientist Professor Ian Robertson confirms, life has become less stressful compared to 100 years ago: 'Gone are the days of hunger, daunting high levels of infant and maternal death and diseases like tuberculosis and diphtheria.'

These advances have brought about radical changes. In fact, asking the question whether life is more stressful now than centuries or decades ago is misplaced. How the nature of stress has changed, and how we as individuals and communities deal with stress, are the more pertinent issues.

**“In some ways modern life is more stressful than it was a hundred years ago. We are faced with fragmented communities, broken families, work pressures and ruthless competition.”**

*Professor Ian Robertson, psychologist and neuroscientist*

In this chapter we hope to give a starting point for calm that is relevant to life as we live it. You are unique, and what you need to feel calm is not what somebody else needs. By the end of this book we hope that you will be clear on what calm means to you and how to attain this.

## CHOOSING WHAT REAL CALM MEANS TO YOU

The word ‘calm’ originates<sup>1</sup> from the Greek word *kauma* for heat which became *cauma* in Latin for the sun’s midday heat, the time to rest and be still. It was adopted in late fourteenth-century French as *calme* for tranquility and quiet, finding its way into late Middle English.

When we hear the word calm in relation to people it’s mostly because they need to ‘calm down’ and stop being angry and agitated, or anxious and stressed. In terms of word associations, calm is bookended with two more words to describe a person who is cool, calm and collected. Who wouldn’t want to be described as cool, calm and collected when it’s universally considered a positive description?

When we look at synonyms for calm, the words that come up as qualities in people are self-control and self-possession. Yet if we go back to the origin of the word calm, there’s no control in the midday heat is there? The same sea that is rough can also be calm – absolutely still with not a single wave. If you associate calm with an innate state of mind this leaves you with no leeway for change. Performance consultant and TV coach Jeremy Stockwell reminds us that ‘change is the only constant truth in the universe’ and since we too are part of the universe, inevitably everything about us as human beings changes, down to the cells in our bodies.

**“When you are worried, tell yourself: this will change. If you’re feeling stressed, tell yourself a little while later you’ll feel calm.”**

Jeremy Stockwell, performance consultant and TV coach



## GET A CALMNESS APP

When leading psychologist and neuroscientist Professor Robertson says he uses an app every day to keep him calm, then you can be sure it works on the mind. The award-winning Buddhify<sup>2</sup> app has meditations to cover everything from waking up to not being able to sleep, from difficult emotions to stressful situations.

Recently, various calmness trackers have been launched so you can monitor exactly how stressed you are and how well you're doing at de-stressing. Spire,<sup>3</sup> developed by Stanford University's Calming Technology Lab, lets you know through vibration when you're tense, focused or calm by measuring your breathing patterns. It's like a fitness tracker that measures your steps. You can monitor which activities or situations affect your stress levels and there are breathing guidelines to help you learn to take action.

Composure comes from the word 'compose', which originally meant to form something through putting together elements, and then came to mean creating music. If you think of calm as (mental) composure, and composure as creating a positive state of mind from the various elements of you, it becomes more attainable.

Equanimity is a wonderful word that means to be calm and composed especially during a difficult situation. It's a word infused with strength, choice and power. One of the worst things about feeling anxious is that it comes with feeling powerless, that sense

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that everything is happening outside of you and you can't keep up or cope. So if you begin with powerful terminology with equally powerful associations you are empowering yourself.

Once you begin to choose kinder – and in fact more accurate – definitions of calm then it will seem less elusive. So long as it remains a mystery, or something that's always been beyond you, you're setting yourself up for a struggle. And we want to make this as easy for you as possible.

Just as a rough sea will turn calm, so will you.

## FINDING SPACE IN A COLLECTIVE TIME OF TURMOIL

One of psychiatrist-psychotherapist Carl Jung's theories was that we all share a collective unconscious. As one of the most influential figures in therapy, this aspect of his philosophy may be particularly pertinent in the time we are living now. The twentieth century experienced two world wars, but once these were over humanity took many strides forward. The very fact that Europe overcame two destructive wars and united is one of them. In the twenty-first century we have mass global concerns from global warming to terrorism, from mass migration as a result of wars, to recession and financial insecurity.

**“Collectively we are living in a time of turmoil. It's important that as individuals we find a fixed point.”**

Sandra Elsdon Vigon, Jungian psychotherapist



The difference between this time of turmoil compared to previous centuries is that we are too busy as a society to take it all in. When you're perpetually in a state of anxiety and the messages about the world coming at you are anxious also, it's difficult to see either yourself or the world in any positive light. Positive psychologist expert Miriam Akhtar points out that it's necessary to step back, to 'regroup' so that we can see the world as a whole rather than just through 'a red mist'.

Jungian psychotherapist Sandra Elsdon Vigon views individuals in the context of their personal life and of the collective, whether familial or cultural. Collective values today demand that we fill our time with being productive to a point where people feel guilty for taking time out.

**“Calm is space – that place or condition or state of no expectation, just being.”**

*Sandra Elsdon Vigon, Jungian psychotherapist*

When there's pressure to be productive at work, and then self-imposed pressure to fill time outside work productively, there is no space for calm. Just by reorienting your interpretation of calm to mean mental space, whether that's staring out of the bus window instead of scrolling through news on your phone, or standing in a garden for a few moments instead of rushing around the house, means you are shifting mental gears. And if we all shifted mental gears and slowed down, how might that be?

How you begin to find that space on a regular basis is a personal choice, and we hope this book will give you some ideas. There is no prescriptive way, but as Vigon stresses you have to find

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something that helps you. Finding something that gives you mental space is much more attainable than clicking into a state of mind labelled calm.

**“Having time to enjoy the moment is what the word calm means for me personally.”**

Professor Ian Robertson, psychologist and neuroscientist

## STRIVING NOT STRUGGLING

Part of life is striving to achieve something better, whether that's a promotion, running a business, buying one's own property, starting a family or exploring a new country every year on vacation. That's what gives us the impetus to get up and go and that's what makes us interesting. It's a process that can feel good because the excitement is mounting. It's satisfying to set yourself the goal of running a marathon to raise money for charity or learning a dance for your wedding. When you get that job, that house, or hit that target for charity, it's a thrill. When stress sets in, though, it casts a veil on what you're striving for. You start to doubt yourself, to worry, and you feel overwhelmed. Instead of striving you're struggling. When life feels like a struggle every day it's like getting up and being pushed down constantly. When this happens you forget what makes you feel good because those feelings are chipped away, and when those feelings are chipped away so is your self-confidence.

Real calm is about being able to feel excited about your life again. It's about reclaiming the you who has lots of options and dreams.

## MIRIAM AKHTAR ON FLOURISHING

*'Feeling at peace with oneself means feeling good in mind, body and spirit. It's about having a sense of wellbeing, which not only comes from feeling good, but functioning well. This is what it takes to flourish.'*

*For most people, flourishing is also about having peaceful, harmonious interactions. Conflict with others disrupts our sense of harmony.*

*The moment you start to experience strong negative emotions, your emotional brain takes over and the rational side starts to shut down – and you can't see your world the way you need to. For this you need to have a sense of calm. If you're in the grip of negative emotions like anger and fear, you're less able to work out how best to navigate the world. Negative emotions are a sign of threat and threat puts us on alert which, when it turns into chronic stress, can get in the way of our flourishing.*

*The more we experience positive emotions like calm, the more we are able to flourish. I like to liken emotions to traffic lights. Emotions act as signals. A negative emotion is a red traffic light which makes us stop and puts us on alert, whereas positive emotions like calm are a signal something is good and we can continue ahead along this road.'*

## UNDERSTANDING THE TIPPING POINT OF STRESS

The key to figuring out how to be calm is an understanding of what happens to you when you are stressed.

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No doubt you've heard of fight or flight – the brain's system of dealing with a threat that will have us putting up a fight when under attack or running for it. The term gets trotted out so much that it's become more of an expression than a scientific term that we need to fully grasp. The brain has an autonomic nervous system which it activates when it registers a threat. A series of neurotransmitters – chemical messengers – are released to alert the body and enable the mind to decide whether to fight the threat or flee from it. When this happens there's high activity in the amygdala, which is the part of the brain that experiences emotions. Anything from a potential car crash to a potential financial problem can activate the entire system.

Professor Robertson explains that 'calmness would be defined as low sympathetic autonomic arousal, low activation of the amygdala and low to moderate levels of [the stress hormone] noradrenaline'. Only it's a lot more complex than that. If we were in this calm state we wouldn't be able to handle life's challenges – good and bad.

Let's say there was a miracle pill and you could permanently be calm. How would you get fired up to go for a promotion at work? How could you motivate your team to win a new client? How could you focus on studying in your spare time for a new qualification? How could you get competitive playing scrabble or a pub quiz or charades?

The fact is we need stress. Too much stress creates health problems and feels wretched, but manageable stress is good for our health and our brain. A recent study<sup>4</sup> published in *Frontiers of Aging Neuroscience* showed that people over 50 who scored highest in having a busy life also had the highest brain function and memory. Studies like this one (by researchers from the Center for Vital Longevity, School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences at the University of Texas and the Department of Psychology at the University of Alabama) are interesting because

they provide a full perspective: how the brain is functioning and how the mind is feeling.

## **PROFESSOR ROBERTSON ON A CALM BRAIN**

*'When you start to analyse the concept of a calm brain in neuroscientific terms you realize it's a complex process. A journalist in the midst of a coup or war has a different calmness to a tourist lying on a beach.*

*Take someone who is able to keep a cool head in a crisis. That person could be described as calm, but the sympathetic nervous system will still be activated – the heart will be pumping away. That person might be operating at the sweet spot of arousal, where their cognitive appraisal of the emergency situation is such that they can, in spite of the activation of arousal systems of the body and brain, function at the optimal level where the brain performs at its best.*

*Feeling able to be in the moment is a better definition of calm than one based on the autonomic arousal, because you can still be performing with high levels of demands without going beyond the sweet spot of arousal, so you can have mindful appraisal of moment to moment events.'*

What we don't need is excessive stress. Just like there's good and bad cholesterol and the good cholesterol is essential for the body to function, there's good and bad stress. Excessive stress is bad because you're struggling to cope. Once you are aware that stress is a chemical reaction in your brain, you become more conscious of the ingredients that create the stress. Then you can be conscious

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that it's the level of stress that pushes you over the limit, or the particular type of stress. You can monitor your maximum point. It's a little like understanding how an oven works. And you're the dish or the cake. A chemical reaction happens when we follow a recipe, create something and put it in the oven for a certain amount of time. Too little it's raw, too much it's burnt. More of this ingredient it's more moist, less of that ingredient it's lighter.

**“Calm is a sufficiently diffuse concept that you can craft it.”**

Professor Ian Robertson, psychologist and neuroscientist

As soon as you reformulate your view of stress you can observe yourself and learn not only what triggers you beyond your limit (a burnt you), but what type of situation is best for you (you turn out great). We all need a degree of 'heat' to thrive. You might be feeling that you can't cope well in a competitive work arena, but maybe you love the challenge of learning a language. You might be sick with nerves and have sleepless nights before having to make a presentation, but maybe you're the first one up at karaoke on a night out. You might worry every day about the uncertainty of your future and whether to change jobs or take early redundancy, yet be the fearless joker of your group of friends.

## IDENTIFYING WHEN STRESS IS *NOT* THE ISSUE

When we look at people handling stress calmly, the fight or flight system is still activated and enables them to take action. Professor Robertson gathered ample evidence for his latest book *The Stress Test* to back up his conviction that pressure can be good for us – provided we know our sweet spot. One of the many studies he

drew our attention to was a Chicago University experiment<sup>5</sup> that demonstrated the importance of confidence while stressed. A group of students equally good at maths had to solve problems in front of an audience. Half were confident, the other half weren't. Both groups produced the stress hormone cortisol, but the confident group did better. As Professor Robertson writes 'the more of the stress hormone they produced, the BETTER they performed'.

Gee, thanks, you might be thinking if you're not confident. But the point we want to highlight here is that for the group that didn't do so well, it was not stress that created the problem but a lack of something else. And that something else might be easier to cultivate than an intangible calmness. The question to consider is whether it's calm you lack when you're wrecked with nerves, or something else like confidence. And if it's confidence (as our *Real Confidence* book outlines), you can most easily develop this through focusing on learning the skill you don't yet have, whether it's public speaking or managing a team, or taking maths tests in a laboratory for scientists. Competence can make you calm.



## IDENTIFY YOUR REAL STRENGTHS AND TURN THESE INTO POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

**One of the most common areas of potential stress comes from dealing with people in a more powerful position, like bosses or clients. In these instances, being clear about your strengths and affirming them to yourself can help you navigate yourself through the situation. Before an update with your manager, a pitch to a client, an appraisal meeting with human resources, for example, take time to identify your strengths and repeat them to yourself.**

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The idea of a tipping point in our brain is in fact a cornerstone of psychology. Harvard psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson<sup>6</sup> came up with the concept of an arousal curve in the brain in 1908. They discovered that arousal – which Professor Robertson explains is alertness in the brain – can improve performance, but if the increase goes beyond a tipping point then performance is affected negatively. Scientists have since studied the Yerkes–Dodson theory in different contexts.

Knowing your tipping point, or rather your tipping points for different situations in life, means you can use your brain's alertness to create excitement in your life without going to the point that leaves you feeling unwell, exhausted and unable to manage your life.

That 'thing' that makes humans excited and competitive is in our minds. Too little and you wouldn't be doing much with your life, too much and life is overwhelming.

Once you realize that you don't need or want to be calm all the time, then feeling calm becomes more attainable.

### ED HALLIWELL ON THE STATE OF CALM VS THE SKILL OF CALM

*'There's calm as a state which we maybe think of as a feeling of peace and tranquility, a sense of not being on high alert and an absence of anxiety. It's a feeling of settledness.*

*Then there's calm as a trait – the capacity to manage the inevitable difficulties of being alive. It's important to recognize life as being difficult (as well as having many joys potentially). Then calm doesn't mean the absence of difficulties but instead is a willingness and capacity to be with the difficulties and work with them, rather than trying to fight them and get away from them.*



*Being calm doesn't require a state of calm to be there in your life or even in your mind and body. You can learn how to manage life in a calm way. A deeper calm can come from working with difficulties in life.*

*The difficulty is that if we are defining calm as a feeling, then when we are not completely in control of what comes up in our life, we can't magic a feeling of peace. And sometimes during difficult times calm isn't helpful because actions have to be taken. You don't want to be calm when a bus is coming at you – you need to be hyper alert so that your body gets you out of the way.*

*Calm as a state may be overrated. But a different kind of calm that is a way of relating with life's difficulties is a valuable skill to cultivate.'*

We hope that our approach to defining real calm is one that immediately makes you feel you're not so far from it. If you view calm people as those people you can't be like because of the hullabaloo in your head, then you're tormenting yourself with an unattainable vision. The starting point is choosing empowering interpretations of the word. Just because stress can feel like it's constant doesn't mean that the antidote is constant calmness. Real calm is a skill you call on when you need it. And in a world that's anything but calm we need to carve out space to restore ourselves, to maintain our inner equilibrium.

Real calm comes down to feeling good about life. When you're flourishing in your life, you can handle pressure and are able to thrive on the right amount of stress. Understanding the chemistry of stress, and specifically learning how much you can handle to thrive and where your tipping point lies, can propel you forward to achieve your ambitions and enjoy life. Ultimately real calm is a

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skill rather than a state of mind. It's a skill we hope you are keen to master through reading the rest of this book.

### ASK YOURSELF

- Q What does the word calm conjure up for you?
- Q What is the opposite of calm for you?
- Q What happens in your body when you are not calm?  
What are the sensations?
- Q In which areas of your life would like to be calm?
- Q When are you calm?

TAKE THE TEST

# WHAT DOES REAL CALM MEAN TO YOU?

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You picked up this book for a reason. You know it's time to make changes, but the key to successfully achieving any change is to 'start with the end in mind'. So before you read on, it's worth taking the time to think about what 'being calm' really means to you. What do you hope to gain from changing your mindset? What are the most important changes you hope it will bring? As you work through this book, you will begin to build a picture of how you would like your optimal life to look and feel, and how different it will be from the way you live now. Start by taking this test to identify the most important benefits for you of reconnecting with your sense of calm.

*Test by Sally Brown*

## WHAT DOES REAL CALM MEAN TO YOU?

### QUESTION 1

When the alarm goes on Monday morning, you're most likely to think:

- A. Why do weekends go so fast?
  - B. What is there to look forward to this week?
  - C. If only I could get up and meditate ...
  - D. Healthy living starts today!
- 

### QUESTION 2

On your last holiday, you most appreciated:

- A. The time to unwind and not rush.
  - B. Eating well, being active and getting decent sleep.
  - C. Putting worries and responsibilities on hold and enjoying life.
  - D. The chance to think about the bigger picture.
- 

### QUESTION 3

Finish this sentence. The key to calm is:

- A. Feeling connected, like you belong.
  - B. Living a balanced lifestyle.
  - C. Self-acceptance and self-worth.
  - D. Good physical and mental health.
- 

### QUESTION 4

What do you crave most when you're feeling under pressure?

- A. Time on your own.
  - B. Laughter and lightheartedness.
  - C. Everything that's bad for you.
  - D. Support from someone insightful.
-

## **QUESTION 5**

**What's changed the most since you've lost your sense of calm?**

- A. Your overall mood and mindset.
  - B. Your health and physical wellbeing.
  - C. Your focus and memory.
  - D. Your relationships and social life.
- 

## **QUESTION 6**

**Which of these changes would make you feel more on top of things?**

- A. Regular coaching or counselling sessions.
  - B. Being more efficient about getting things done.
  - C. Spending more time with like-minded people.
  - D. Having more motivation and energy.
- 

## **QUESTION 7**

**Which of these statements would you agree with the most?**

- A. Physical health is the foundation of mental wellbeing.
  - B. A sense of purpose is the foundation of happiness.
  - C. A busy life is not the same as a successful one.
  - D. Life is short, so it's important to enjoy it.
- 

## **QUESTION 8**

**Which advice do you get most often?**

- A. 'You need to let your hair down.'
  - B. 'You need to learn how to say no.'
  - C. 'You need to take better care of yourself.'
  - D. 'You need to lower your standards.'
-

## WHAT DOES REAL CALM MEAN TO YOU?

### QUESTION 9

What aspect of your life suffers the most when you're not calm?

- A. Your health and eating habits.
  - B. Your sense of direction and purpose.
  - C. Your general mood and sense of humour.
  - D. Your sense of peace and feeling in control.
- 

### QUESTION 10

Which of these brings the most noticeable change to your mood?

- A. Having a really good laugh.
  - B. A meeting or other commitment being cancelled.
  - C. A yoga class or going for a walk.
  - D. Feeling like you've achieved something.
- 

Now, add up your scores from each answer using the following table, and read on to discover what real calm means to you.

	A	B	C	D
Q1	6	8	2	4
Q2	4	2	6	8
Q3	2	6	8	6
Q4	2	6	4	8
Q5	8	4	2	6
Q6	6	8	4	2
Q7	2	4	6	8
Q8	8	6	4	2
Q9	4	2	8	6
Q10	2	4	6	8

If you scored between 20 and 35 ...

### Real calm for you means reconnecting with fun

Losing touch with your sense of humour is a red flag for you – a sign that you are under pressure or feeling out of control. You may be outwardly functioning, but life feels flat, and it can feel like you're just going through the motions a lot of the time. It's only when you experience moments of calm that you find yourself laughing easily again. For you, feeling calm is about reconnecting with your sense of humour and upbeat approach to life.

Something may have changed in recent months – in your working life, family or friendships – which has affected your natural exuberance and enthusiasm for life. There are times when you have to work through a low period, but for you, the catch-22 is that when you lose touch with your sense of fun, you also lose your emotional resilience. It's time to reconnect with calm, and give yourself permission to feel happy again.

If you scored between 36 and 45 ...

### Real calm for you means time slowing down

When you're under pressure, time seems to speed up. It can feel like your life becomes a treadmill and you're using all your energies just to keep up. Days pass by in a blur and, even though you always seem to be busy, you never get through your to-do list. You are craving the chance to think big picture – at the moment, you have no idea what direction your life is taking. Perhaps you picked up this book because you realized that another year had passed without you getting closer to your goals, or even clarifying what those goals really are and committing to them. Instinctively, you have identified that reconnecting with your inner calm is the key to slowing down time and feeling more in control of your life. If you start each day by asking yourself what you need to do that day, try a different question – ask yourself, how do you *want* to feel today?

## WHAT DOES REAL CALM MEAN TO YOU?

If you scored between 46 and 60 ...

### Real calm for you means better choices

For you, being calm is the foundation of good life choices, whether it's what to eat, how much to drink, and how to make time for exercise and other lifestyle choices like mindfulness. When you lose your sense of calm, you also lose control and go into self-sabotage mode, and your lifestyle can quickly become chaotic. When you feel calmer, you tend to compensate by going into super-health mode. But you've recognized that yo-yoing between extremes isn't a sustainable way to live. You're looking for balance. Your first step is to stop resisting the uncomfortable feelings that come up for you when you feel stressed. Try making space for them, ask: 'What are these feelings trying to tell me?' and start to listen.

If you scored between 61 and 80 ...

### Real calm for you means flourishing

You've done a lot of soul-searching of late and come to the conclusion that the key to becoming your best self is feeling calmer and more in control in everyday life. You have instinctively identified that reducing your stress levels will help you think more positively, and feel motivated about reaching your potential. You feel like you're on the cusp of flourishing and becoming your best self, so it's frustrating that it remains just out of reach. Taking a step back from striving and, instead, reconnecting with your inner calm will help you focus and see your clear path forward.