

INTRODUCTION



Hello, my name is Rob, and I suffer from Very British Problems. If you're reading this, and I'll presume you are, then I'll hazard a guess that you too are suffering from this confusing, distressing and often embarrassing malady.

Before we begin, it's important to know you're far from alone in living with this condition; there are millions of sufferers both in Great Britain and, lest we forget, sometimes further afield.* So do come in, sit down, help yourself to a cup of tea and try to relax. You're safe here.

Let me start by telling you a little about how I first came to study this specific area of neurosis. For

years I too thought I was alone in suffering from this strange ailment; debilitated by some sort of severe neurological disorder, some sort of undiagnosed anxiety-related illness – yet no professor, quack, therapist or witch doctor could provide me with a satisfactory diagnosis. So, against all medical advice, I turned to the internet.

You may or may not know that this book, this behavioural study, was born out of a Twitter feed that now goes by the name @soverybritish. Anxious to get to the bottom of things after another long year of awkwardness, I decided, a few days before Christmas 2012, to start posting a few of the strange situations in which my family and I (they are also sufferers, I imagined it was genetic) repeatedly found ourselves.

It was a desperate time. I'm not quite sure what I hoped to achieve. Maybe only that a few people would recognise themselves in the posts and that perhaps we could form a small support group. By the end of January, over 100,000 people were following @soverybritish. As I write, another four months down the line, we've just passed the 300,000 mark. Hundreds of thousands of people, all finding a common bond, all suffering from what I came to refer to as Very British Problems, or as you probably know it by now: VBP.

Bolstered by these extraordinary findings, I

continued to document the common signs of VBP and was soon spotting them everywhere, from the man on the street to historical documents, books, television programmes and films, examples of which are set out in Chapter 19.

When I say you're not alone, I really do mean it.

Many of you may suspect you're only borderline sufferers, and for those in this category there's a test (turn to Chapter 3) which will help you spot the common symptoms and guide you towards a diagnosis. Having said this, I must warn you that tests can prove inconclusive, as people with VBP are often in denial about the severity of their problems.

Regardless of that fact, here's a quick and free consultation to help you decide whether you need this book. If, like me, you: (A) regularly apologise to the person ramming you with their shopping trolley; (B) wake in cold sweats from a nightmare about being invited to 'say a bit about yourself' in a public forum; and (C) are thinking about the weather right at this very instant (don't deny it), then I'm afraid it doesn't look good.

I'm also sorry to have to tell you that there's no cure for VBP. I've often imagined I'm managing

the condition, that I have it under control, only to relapse completely without warning. One minute acting like a completely normal human being, the next crippled by nausea at the very idea of finding my reserved seat occupied at the start of a train journey. A train journey I won't even be due to take for another month.

Very British Problems are nigh-on impossible to treat because they're so ingrained in our psyches – tucked away, hidden behind confusing sayings, strange ticks, bizarre customs and double meanings. (If a sufferer of VBP ever tells you they're 'fine', back slowly out of the room.) We're walking, fleshly sacks of volatile madness, just barely held in check, concealed behind stiff upper lips; ready to burst open and bury the streets in a landslide of terrible rage if, heaven forbid, we ever run out of tea.

Why do Very British Problems occur? I'm afraid this book does not deal with the origins of VBP because, quite frankly, I have no idea. I shall leave that conundrum to experts more qualified than I. Indeed, there are many books already available on this very topic. No, this book is simply a guide to self-diagnosis: a way to aid you in spotting a classic case, to help you to get to know your symptoms

and to create a picture of what the future may hold. Failing the above, I only hope it provides some comfort.

Good luck. And sorry.

Rob Temple, London, 2013

* Spare a thought for those poor VBP sufferers living abroad, surrounded by relaxed, uninhibited extroverts, going about their daily life with barely a single unnecessary apology passing their lips.



1. PLAYING IT COOL



Calling someone ‘fella’ or ‘pal’ and then unexpectedly having to enter into a full conversation, which reveals you’re not actually Cockney at all.

Getting to work early so the least possible number of people notice you’re wearing a ‘trendy’ new jacket.



Attempting the 'handshake tip' and dropping your £1 coin on the floor. Best left to Americans . . .

Feeling obliged to ask a taxi driver if they've 'been busy?', but then staying silent for the rest of the journey.



Entering into a mild panic if unable to pick the correct amount of change from your hand within three seconds.

Being told an item is 2-for-1 at the till, leading to you attempting to look elegant while running back through the supermarket searching for a second packet of mince.



Wondering what you've become when a goodbye wave accidentally turns into a bit of a cheeky salute.

Avoiding parks throughout the summer, to reduce the chance of a football rolling over to you.

Panicking and thrusting your hand up when there's a problem at the self-service checkout, regardless of the huge flashing light.



Hoping that you'll look like James Bond every time you put on a dinner jacket, only to end up resembling Ronnie Corbett.

Getting dressed at the speed of light the instant the masseuse says, 'I'll just give you ten minutes to relax.'



Looking into having your hands surgically removed after waving at someone who was waving at someone behind you.

The shame of pulling
out of a double-
cheek kiss too early,
then attempting to
re-enter it after the
moment's passed.

Calling someone 'geezer' and knowing you haven't pulled it off the instant it leaves your lips.

Nervously hoping not to be seen trying the cash point by the person who just told you it isn't working.



Pretending to be relieved as you agree with the doctor that you don't need the powerful medication you went in specifically to try and obtain.

Feeling it's the right moment to attempt a cheeky wink, regretting it immediately and trying to pretend you actually have something in your eye.



The challenge of attempting to deal with a sneeze while holding a scalding cup of tea in a surface-free area.

Finding yourself doing the twist if left unsupervised on a wedding dance-floor for more than a minute.

Getting a bit too excited when you see your home town on the news.



Deciding to persevere with
clasping and shaking the whole
appendage when offered a fist-
bump by a youngster.

Looking as if you're practising a solo
waltz while surreptitiously attempting
to remove something unfortunate from
your brogue.

Realising you're in the process of
exiting a busy lift on the wrong
floor and ploughing on regardless.

**Running for the bus, missing
it and carrying on the run for
a short while.**



2. RULES OF THE ROAD



Flashing your indicators to thank a fellow motorist, just in case they missed your mini wave, thumbs-up, arm raise and hazard lights.

Taking tremendous pride in your ability to keep your full beam on until the very last possible second.

Looking through the window to the petrol-station forecourt and saying, 'Erm, number . . . four, please,' when you already know exactly what pump you just used.

**Arriving at a mini-
roundabout at the same
time as another driver and
knowing you'll be there for
some time.**



Circling the car park for an hour
rather than park half a minute's
walk from the entrance.

Unleashing the wave/thumbs-up combo
to indicate you're particularly pleased to
have been allowed to jog over the zebra
crossing.

Feeling genuinely devastated
when someone appears to have
better knowledge of motorway
routes than you.



The dread of flashing a car at night to tell its driver to go first and receiving a flash at exactly the same time, resulting in a flash-off.

Turning to frown and mutter, 'Bloody hell, they were going some,' at any car that drives by slightly faster than the speed limit.

Thanking someone for beeping you when you've failed to notice the lights change.



Feeling the need to indicate despite
being the only car on a deserted B-road.



Getting stuck behind an omni-
speeder who stubbornly drives at
50mph regardless of whether it's a
30mph zone or a 70mph zone.

**Holding your hand up to
your hands-free kit so nobody
thinks you're a lunatic.**



Never, ever being quite sure if it's the right time to use your fog lights.

Feeling guilty for making traffic stop at the lights when you need to cross the road.



The moment you realise you've sat in the front of the wrong sort of taxi, because you didn't want the driver to feel like a chauffeur.

Smashing the hazard button to a pulp every time someone in front of you looks like they may be thinking about braking.



Never once encountering a situation where you have to reverse around a corner since you passed your driving test.

Allowing your car to smash headlong into a truck, rather than relinquish your right of way.



Having an emergency car kit which consists of a tartan blanket, a small box of tissues and a near-empty tin of Victorian travel sweets.

