

# Sane New World



# Sane New World

Taming the Mind

Ruby Wax



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To Ed, Max, Marina and Maddy



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# The Beginning

This book is dedicated to my mind, which at one point left town, and to the rest of humanity, who perhaps at one time or another might have misplaced theirs. Though I personally have gone on a rollercoaster ride of depression for most of my adult life, this book is not exclusively for the depressed. I am one of the one in four who has mentally unravelled; this book is for the four in four. It's for everyone, because we all share the same equipment: we suffer, we laugh, we rage, we bitch, we're all vulnerable, delicate creatures under our tough fronts.

In this book I am going to attempt to give a rough guide for where we (the human race) are at right now and offer some suggestions that might make our time on Earth a more joyful experience. I'm not talking 'everyone in the jacuzzi' joyful, I'm talking about the almost blissful state you sometimes have when time stops, your body feels like it's home and the volume of those internal critics in your mind lowers. I know those voices well and so many people I meet recognize this dictator barking orders in their minds, keeping them up at night with that tormenting 'I should have, I could have' tape playing relentlessly.

Many of us suffer from the pressures in today's world that drive us from burnout to depression. We are slaves to our busy-ness with an insatiable drive for money, fame,

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more tweets – you name it, we want it. The problem is, it's only in the last 50 to 100 years that humans have lived with such abundance. We've gone from scarcity (when we were probably somewhat normal and had appetites to match) to the limitless demands we have today. You could say that multi-tasking has driven us mad; like leaving too many windows open on your computer, eventually it will crash. We are simply not equipped for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It's too hard, too fast, it's too full of fear; we just don't have the bandwidth. Evolution did not prepare us for this. It's hard enough to keep up with who's bombing whom, so we have no room to understand our emotional landscapes; our hearts bleed because we hear of a beached whale while the next minute we're baying for the blood of someone who stole the last shopping trolley.

The reason I decided to devote myself to this inward journey is because I wanted to find some shelter from the constant hurricanes of depression, which left me depleted and broken. Each episode got longer and deeper. I don't want to blame my parents but childrearing was not their specialty. Friends would come over and there my mother would be, perched on the lampshade, a vulture with a Viennese accent, waiting for someone to drop a crumb. When they did, she would swoop across the room screaming, 'Who brings cookies into a building?' Everyone would run away terrified. It got much, much darker later but I am not going to talk about that here. My point is that this is the type of background that usually leads to a career as a comedian or a serial killer; I went for the comedy.

So, after some serious breakdowns, I decided to go back to school to study psychotherapy to figure out exactly what

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they were charging £80 an hour for. I used to leave my shrink knowing exactly who I was, until I got to the tube station and then I'd forget again. Also, as I knew nothing about psychology, therapists could tell me anything, so how could I tell if they were any good? Once, when I was on the couch, I caught the shrink behind me eating a pastrami sandwich, mustard all over his face.

So I went to study psychotherapy. I got a library card and never discussed my previous life again. I thought, 'Let's give something back to the world' (I probably didn't but it's a good line). I've noticed that many women like myself choose to study therapy when they meet the wild surf of menopause; the hormones dry up and they realize the chances are low they're ever going to be hit on again, so they find themselves wanting to care for other people or starting a rest home for stray cats.

A few years later, I decided to go further and learn about what I was really interested in: the brain. My thinking was, if I learnt how my own engine worked it might prevent me getting stuck in the middle of nowhere, shrieking for someone to come and fix me; I would provide my own AA service. I'd be able to lasso this wild beast of a brain, stop it from churning away over the same ground, keeping me up at nights; worrying, rehashing, regretting and resenting.

After much research, I thought mindfulness might help me best as I had heard it gives you the ability to regulate your own mind. (I would say it saved my life but I'll get to that later in the book.) I decided to go straight to the horse's mouth, to one of the founders of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, Professor Mark Williams, who told me that unfortunately I would have to get into Oxford University in order to study it alongside neuroscience.

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I scraped together some old school records and managed to excavate my one or two decent high school grades, but most of all I give great interview, so I got into that masters course. The other 14 students in my class were very brilliant and looked at me on day one as if they were having an encounter with a third kind; but God dammit, I was there.

So after many decades of agonizing investigation, a masters in mindfulness, a degree in psychotherapy and even a small taste of fame, here I am writing this manual on how to tame your mind.

I'll go into detail later but I want to mention one fact right away; the gold at the end of the rainbow is that **YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR MIND AND HOW YOU THINK**. This is called neuroplasticity. Your genes, hormones, regions in the brain and early learning do not necessarily determine your fate.

Scientific evidence has shown that neurons (brain cells) can rewire and change patterns throughout your lifetime as a result of your experiences and how you think about them. So your thoughts affect the physiology of your brain and the physiology affects your thoughts.

Think about sex for a minute. That's Ok, I'll wait. Once you get an inkling, a whole cascade of hormones is let loose in your body to get you ready to cha-cha. Sometimes it's the other way around; you're minding your own business, for no reason a hormone switches on in your brain and suddenly your thinking goes X-rated.

When your mind changes, your brain changes and because our brains are so malleable, the sky's the limit. I remind you that I got into Oxford in my 50s even though I failed to get

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a diploma from Busy Beaver nursery school (look it up, that was the actual name) proving really anything is possible. But it takes time to alter your habits of thinking; it won't happen with a weekend workshop on 'How to Tickle Your Inner Angel'. It takes intentional concentration and repetition over time. You can change but only if you make the effort not to do the same old thing, the same old way, day in and day out. You, and the way you see the world, are the architect of how your brain is mapped. This is what scientists are giving us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; way beyond what Psychic Madge can read in your palm.

The brain is like a pliable three-pound piece of play-dough; you can re-sculpt it by breaking old mental habits and creating new, more flexible ways of thinking. Gloria Gaynor was wrong when she sang, 'I am what I am'. She will have to change those lyrics but it won't be so easy to dance to. What rhymes with neuroplasticity?

## The Inner You

If you can look inside your brain and roughly understand where everything is and how it operates, you might not be able to completely know yourself but with practice you may be able to fix yourself. Learning how to self-regulate means you can sense the early warnings before a full-on burnout or depression and do something about it. So much is known about this idea of self-regulation; it may (and I hope it does) shortly become the buzzword of this decade. We can, with certain practices such as mindfulness, actually have some control over the chemicals in our brains that drive us to stress, to anxiety and even

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to happiness. This remarkable organ in our heads holds infinite wisdom but so few of us know how to use it. It's similar to having a Ferrari except no one gave you the keys.

The reality is that the demanding voice in our heads is not who we are, it plays a very small part in the big scheme of things. What's really running you is a million, trillion gigabyte-powered engine room in your brain, managed by your DNA, that instructs hormones, memories, muscles, blood, organs and really everything that happens inside you to ensure that you survive at all costs, and not that stupid inner monologue about why you're too fat to wear tights.

My aim in this book is to show you how to become the master of your mind and not the slave. If you learn how to self-regulate your moods, emotions and thoughts, and focus your mind on what you want to pay attention to rather than be dragged into distraction, you might just reach that illusive thing called happiness. We all have it we just don't know where the 'on' button is. The organ that allows you to realize the world understands so little about itself.

(Yes Oprah, I'm available.)

## Why We Need a Manual

What is our point on Earth? Everyone wants to know. So the question is not, 'To be or not to be?' The big questions are, 'What are we meant to be doing while we're being?' and 'How do I run and manage this thing called "me"?'

Our primary problem as a species (I leave out those with religious beliefs – they have their own books) is we have no manual, no instructions that tell us how to live our lives. Domestic

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appliances have instruction manuals; not us. We're born with absolutely no information, and are reliant on Mommy and Daddy who jam their USB sticks into our innocent hard drives and download their neuroses into us. As I think we've agreed, we're all missing a manual, so I've tried to keep it simple.

### **Part 1: What's Wrong With Us? For the Normal-Mad**

In this part of the guidebook I will examine why we are all in the 'flying by the seat of our pants' school of thought when it comes to living our lives. We assume the next person knows what they're doing; they don't.

### **Part 2: What's Wrong With Us? For the Mad-Mad**

For the depressed, anxious, panic-attacked, OCD'd, over-eaters, drinkers, shoppers, compulsive list-makers, etc. The list is endless.

### **Part 3: What's in Your Brain/What's on Your Mind?**

I will familiarize you with your ingredients: the hormones, neurons, hemispheres, regions etc. so that in Part 4 you'll be able to understand what physically happens in your brain when you practise mindfulness; how it can enhance positive feelings, which ultimately bring happiness.

You are your own cookbook. How you work your brain determines if you're going to become filet mignon or an old kebab.

### **Part 4: Mindfulness – Taming Your Mind**

Think of this part as *Wisdom for Dummies*. I'll show you how to be able to self-regulate your thoughts and emotions to make you the *master* and not the *slave* of your mind.

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### **Part 5: Alternative Suggestions for Peace of Mind**

I would never want to be considered evangelical so if mindfulness isn't for you, I'll give you alternative practices that can change your brain.

I hope this book helps you let go of the image you have of yourself if it's getting in your way; I hope I can encourage you to be brave and know that nothing is certain: life flows, changes and ends. Get over your fear. The only way to find any peace is to let it all go and jump into the unknown. Just jump.