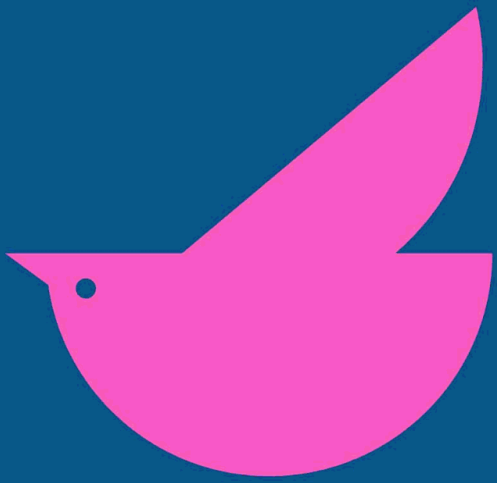
How to Stay Sane

Philippa Perry



THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

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For Mark Fairclough (Dad)

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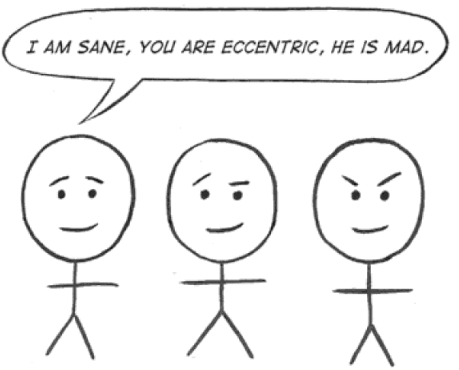


In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the handbook that most psychiatrists and many psychotherapists use to define the types and shades of insanity, you will find numerous personality disorders described. Despite this huge variety, and despite the proliferation of defined disorders in successive editions, these definitions fall into just two main groups.[1] In one group are the people who have strayed into chaos and whose lives lurch from crisis to crisis; in the other are those who have got themselves into a rut and operate from a limited set of outdated, rigid responses. Some of us manage to belong to both groups at once. So what is the solution to the problem of responding to the world in an over-rigid fashion, or being so affected by it that we exist in a continual state of chaos? I see it as a very broad path, with many forks and diversions, and no single 'right' way. From time to time we may stray too far to the over-rigid side, and feel stuck; few of us, on the other hand, will get through life without occasionally going too far to the other side, and experiencing ourselves as chaotic and out of control. This book is about how to stay on the path between those two extremes, how to remain stable and yet flexible, coherent and yet able to embrace complexity. In other words, this book is about How to Stay Sane.

I cannot pretend that there is a simple set of instructions that can guarantee sanity. Each of us is the product of a distinctive

combination of genes, and has experienced a unique set of formative relationships. For every one of us who needs to take the risk of being more open, there is another who needs to practise self-containment. For each person who needs to learn to trust more, there is another who needs to experiment with more discernment. What makes me happy might make you miserable; what I find useful you might find harmful. Specific instructions about how to think, feel and behave thus offer few answers. So instead I want to suggest a way of thinking about what goes on in our brains, how they have developed and continue to develop. I believe that if we can picture how our minds form, we will be better able to re-form the way we live. This practice of thinking about the brain has helped me and some of my clients to become more in charge of our lives; there is a chance, therefore, that it may resonate with you too.

Plato compares the soul to a chariot being pulled by two horses. The driver is Reason, one horse is Spirit, the other horse is Appetite. The metaphors we have used throughout the ages to think about the mind have more or less followed this model. My approach is just such another version, and is influenced by neuroscience in conjunction with other therapeutic approaches.

Three Brains in One

In recent years, scientists have developed a new theory of the brain. They have begun to understand that it is not composed of one single structure but of three different structures, which, over time, come to operate together but yet remain distinct.

The first of these structures is the brain stem, sometimes referred to as the reptilian brain. It is operational at birth and is responsible for our reflexes and involuntary muscles, such as the heart. At certain moments, it can save our lives. When we absentmindedly step into the path of a bus, it is our brain stem that makes us jump back onto the pavement before we have had time to realize what is going on. It is the brain stem that makes us blink our eyes when fingers are flicked in front of them. The brain stem will not help you do Sudoku but at a basic, essential level, it keeps you alive, allows you to function and keeps you safe from many kinds of danger.

The other two structures of the brain are the mammalian, or right, brain and the neo-mammalian, or left, brain. Although they continue to develop throughout our lives, both of these structures do most of their developing in our first five years. An individual brain cell does not work on its own. It needs to link with other brain cells in order to function. Our brain develops by linking individual brain cells to make neural pathways. This linking happens as a result of interaction with others, so how our brain develops has more to do with our earliest relationships than with genetics; with nurture rather than nature.

This means that many of the differences between us can be explained by what regularly happened to us when we were very little. Our experiences actually shape our brain matter. To cite an extreme case from legend, if we do not have a relationship with another person in the first years of life but are nurtured by, say, a wolf instead, then our behavioural patterns will be more wolf-like than human.

In our first two years, the right brain is very active while the left is quiescent and shows less activity. However, in the following few years development switches; the right brain's development slows and

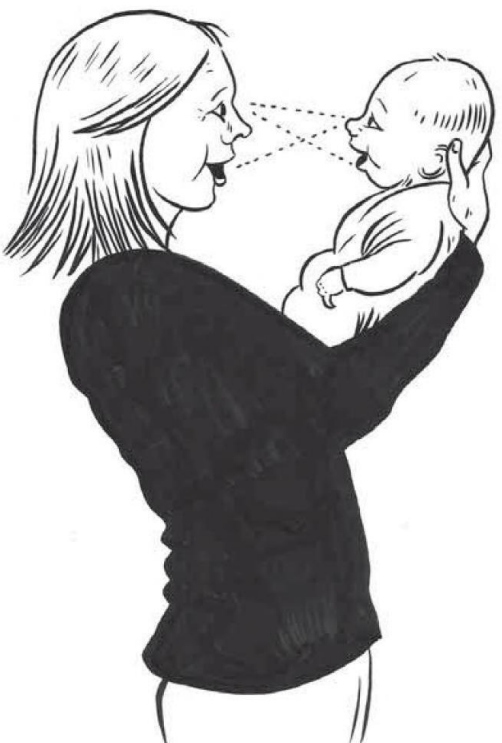
left brain) has the language, but the other part (your right brain) often appears to have the power.

When we are babies our brains develop in relationship with our earliest caregivers. Whatever feelings and thought processes they give to us are mirrored, reacted to and laid down in our growing brains. When things go well, our parents and caregivers also mirror and validate our moods and mental states, acknowledging and responding to what we are feeling. So around about the time we are two, our brains will already have distinct and individual patterns. It is then that our left brains mature sufficiently to be able to understand language. This dual development enables us to integrate our two brains, to some extent. We become able to begin to use the left brain to put into language the feelings of the right.

However, if our caregivers ignore some of our moods, or knowingly or unknowingly punish us for them, we can have trouble later, because we will be less able to process these same feelings when they arise and less able to make sense of them with language.

So if our relationships with early caregivers were less than ideal, or we later experienced trauma so severe that it undid the security established in our infancy, we may find ourselves experiencing emotional difficulties later in life. But although it is too late to have a happier childhood, or avoid a trauma that has already happened, it is possible to change course.

Psychotherapists use the term 'introjection' to describe the unconscious incorporation of the characteristics of a person or culture into one's own psyche. We tend to introject the parenting we received and carry on where our earliest caregivers left off – so patterns of feeling, thinking, reacting and doing deepen and stick.



This may not be a bad thing: our parents may have done a good job. However, if we find ourselves depressed or otherwise dissatisfied, we may want to modify patterns in order to become saner and happier.

How do we do that? There is no foolproof prescription. If we are falling deeper into a rut, and/or deeper into chaos, we need to interrupt our fall – either with medication, or with a different set of behaviours: we may want a new focus in life; we may benefit from new ideas – or from something else entirely (I am being vague on purpose; what works for one person might not work for another).

However in every successful course of psychotherapy, I notice that change happens in four areas: 'self-observation', 'relating to others', 'stress' and 'personal narrative'.[2] These are areas that we can work on ourselves, outside psychotherapy. They will help maintain the flexibility we need for sanity and development, and it is to them that we are now going to turn.

1. Self-Observation

Socrates stated that 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' This is an extreme stance, but I do believe that the continuing development of a non-judgemental, self-observing part of ourselves is crucial for our wisdom and sanity. When we practise self-observation, we learn to stand outside ourselves, in order to experience, acknowledge and assess feelings, sensations and thoughts as they occur and as they determine our moods and behaviour. The development of this capacity allows us to be accepting and non-judgemental. It gives us space to decide how to act and is the part of us that listens to and brings

together our emotions and logic. In order to maximize our sanity we need to develop self-observation to increase self-awareness. This is a job that is never finished.

2. Relating to Others

We all need safe, trusting, reliable, nourishing relationships. These might include a romantic relationship. Contrary to some people's belief, romance is not necessarily a prerequisite for happiness; but some of our relationships do need to be nurturing ones: a nurturing relationship might be with a therapist, a teacher, a lover, a friend, or our children – someone who not only listens but reads between the lines and perhaps even gently challenges us. We are formed in relationship, and we develop and change as a result of subsequent relationships.

3. Stress

The right kind of stress creates positive stimulation. It will push us to learn new things and to be creative, but it will not be so overwhelming that it tips us over into panic. Good stress causes new neural connections. It is what we need for personal development and growth.

4. What's the Story? (Personal Narrative)

If we get to know the stories we live by, we will be able to edit and change them if we need to. Because so much of our self is formed pre-verbally, the beliefs that guide us can be hidden from us. We may have beliefs that start with 'I'm the sort of person who . . .' or 'That's not me; I don't do that . . .' If we focus on such stories and see them from fresh angles, we can find new, more flexible ways of defining ourselves, others and everything around us.

Although the content of our lives and the methods we use to process that content will be different for all of us, these areas of our psyche are the cornerstones of our sanity. In the pages that follow I've examined these four key areas in more detail.

When I advocate self-observation people sometimes assume that it's just another form of self-absorbed navel gazing. Self-observation is not *self-obsession*, however. On the contrary, it is a tool that enables us to become *less* self-absorbed, because it teaches us not to be taken over by obsessive thoughts and feelings. With self-observation we develop more internal clarity and can become more open to the emotional lives of those around us. This new receptiveness and understanding will greatly improve our lives and relationships.

Self-observation is an ancient practice and it has been called many different things. It was advocated by Buddha, Socrates, George Gurdjieff and Sigmund Freud among others. When we become practised self-observers we are less likely to trip ourselves up by acting out our hidden feelings, less likely to repeat self-sabotaging patterns and more likely to have compassion for ourselves and therefore for others.

The ability to observe and listen to feelings and bodily sensations is essential to staying sane. We need to be able to use our feelings but not be used by them. If we *are* our emotions, rather than an *observer* of them, we will veer into a chaotic state. If, on the other hand, we repress our feelings altogether, we can swing the other way, into rigidity. There is a difference between saying 'I am angry' and saying 'I feel angry'. The first statement is a description that appears closed. The second is an *acknowledgement* of a feeling, and does not define

the whole self. In the same way that it is useful to be able to separate ourselves from our feelings, it is also necessary to be able to observe our thoughts. Then we can notice the different kinds of thoughts we have, and can examine them, rather than *be* them. This allows us to notice which thoughts work well for us, and whether any of our internal mind chatter is self-defeating.

To help explain the theory, let's look at this example: how a mother observes her infant in order to understand him or her. She mirrors back to the baby its expressions, its inner states and from what she observes she learns to understand its needs from moment to moment. Being observed, understood and met in this way is vital for the formation of our personality and, indeed, our survival. The practice of self-observation mirrors the way in which a mother observes and attunes to her baby. Self-observation is a method of re-parenting ourselves. When we self-observe it helps us to form and re-form.

It may help to think of our self-observing part as a distinct component of ourselves. It is self-accepting and non-judgemental. It acknowledges what is, not what should be, and does not assign values such as 'right' or 'wrong'. It notices emotions and thoughts but gives us space to decide how to act on them. It is the part of us that listens both to our emotions and our logic and is aware of sensory information.

To begin self-observing, ask yourself these questions:

What am I feeling now?
What am I thinking now?
What am I doing at this moment?
How am I breathing?

These simple questions are important because when we have answered them, we are in a better position to proceed to the next question:

What do I want for myself in this new moment?[3]

You may have made instantaneous changes just by reading the questions. For example, when we bring our attention to our breathing we become aware of how we are inhibiting it, and while we remain aware of it we tend to breathe more slowly. Change happens, if it needs to, when we become aware of what we are, not when we try to become what we are not.

I call these questions the 'Grounding Exercise'. If we do this, or something similar, at odd moments during the day and get into the habit of doing so, we can create a space for self-observation. Then if we are going off course we have the opportunity to re-direct ourselves.

When I did the Grounding Exercise myself yesterday, I noticed that, when I asked myself the questions, I felt dissatisfied. I found I was dreaming of replacing all my furniture. What was I doing? I was reading an interior-design magazine and I was breathing shallowly. After I had answered the first four questions I was in a better position to answer the last. What did I want for myself? What I wanted for myself, at that moment, was to exhale, put the magazine down and turn my attention to something different; and so I went for a swim to switch my focus.

Doing the Grounding Exercise helps us to place ourselves in our internal experience. People can be loosely put into two groups, those who *externally* reference and those who *internally* reference. Externally referenced people are more concerned with the impression they

make on other people: *What do I look like? What does this look like?* Internally referenced people are more concerned with what something feels like: *Do I like the feel of this or that better?* Externally referenced people want to get it right for others (so they will be accepted, impress them or be envied by them) but internally referenced people want to get it right for themselves (so they feel comfortable with themselves).

I'm not saying that one way of self-referencing is always superior to the other but I do want to stress the desirability of increasing our awareness of how we reference ourselves, so that we can work out how we place ourselves on the internal–external scale. Too far on the externally referenced side and we lose a sense of ourselves and become off-balance. If, on the other hand, we swing too far the other way, towards internally referencing, we may find it necessary to adapt to society a little more, in order to be a part of it. We can ask ourselves whether the way we manage our emotions is prompted by what we imagine other people are thinking about us, or by what we know will make us feel comfortable.

Let's take an example: two people are sailing in identical boats. One is fantasizing, 'Look at me in my fabulous yacht; I bet everyone thinks I look cool and envies me', while the other is simply enjoying mastering the skill of sailing, feeling the breeze on his face and noticing the feelings that the open seas evoke in him. Two people doing the same thing but enjoying themselves in quite different ways. Many of us are a mixture of these two types; but if we often feel dissatisfied with life, it can be useful to understand how we are referencing ourselves; this in turn will allow us to experiment with change.

Internal or external referencing is one of the things to hold in mind while doing the Grounding Exercise. The Grounding Exercise is about finding out how we are functioning at any one moment. We can adapt the exercise for ourselves. For example, when I do the exercise I check how much tension I am holding in my shoulders, giving myself the opportunity to notice if I am tense, so I can loosen up if necessary.

When I am practising self-observation I also take time to notice what I call post-rationalization, which could also be called self-justification. This describes the way we have of mentally 'tidying up' what is going on inside and outside of ourselves, often coming up with convenient explanations which may be actually be nonsense, to justify our behaviour.

Experiments carried out by the neuropsychologist Roger Sperry have thrown into question the notion that we are rational beings led by our reason and intellect. In the 1960s, Sperry and his colleagues carried out some experiments on people who had had the connective tissue (called the corpus callosum) between the right and left hemispheres of their brain cut, in order to treat severe epilepsy. That meant the two sides of their brains could no longer connect or interact.

When the experimenters flashed the command 'WALK' into the visual field of the subject's right brain (bypassing the left brain completely) the subject got up and walked as directed. When asked why they walked, a question to which the left brain (responsible for language, reasons, labels and explanations) responded, they never said 'Because your sign told me to' or 'I don't know, I just felt an inexplicable urge to do so', which would have been the truth (as the action was triggered by their emotional right brains). Instead, they